**Reflections on Questions and Points raised at the Cleveland and South Durham Vicariate meeting at St Augustine’s, Darlington**

**12 October 2016**

**Can we make a decision about a partnership area as a lay group only?**

It’s fair to say that what we’re looking for is a proposal from each area. At the end of the day it will be the Bishop who makes decisions.

If the question is about who makes the decision about what is in the proposal, well that certainly needs to be done at a local level. Ideally priests and people together are looking at and considering what the local partnership might be. It would be just as unhelpful for priests to try and sort it alone as parishioners trying to sort it out alone. The engagement of lay people with their priests and deacons is very much part of moving from one model of the local church to one which is hopefully more collaborative where responsibility is shared. If there are differing ideas about what the local partnership could look like then there is room in Section 1.4 of the **Our Partnership Proposals)** document. The fact that there can be tensions and different views is no bad thing, the important thing is that we try to work through it all with respect and openness in a prayerful atmosphere.

**It would be useful if we had a shared Website so that we could all share ideas about what the local partnership could look like.**

There is no doubt that the sharing of the **Observations** document with neighbouring communities can be very useful when exploring what a local partnership can look like. Many areas have already taken that step and we can help with the sharing of information so long as we have permission from all communities concerned.

In looking at local partnership it is so important to take a long view. We need to imagine what is possible beyond the first thoughts we have which might make us feel comfortable. With fewer than 25 priests under 50 years of age at the moment, we will have to take a long view, think beyond the comfortable and look more widely than we at first imagine.

We can take the idea about a shared website, though we have to remember that many of those actively concerned with future proposals may not be totally au fait with websites…

**When will we hear about which partnership we’re in – so that we can begin to meet with them?**

No partnership has, as yet, been defined or decided on, and none will be until after Bishop Seamus and the Board have looked in January at the proposals you are all working on at the present moment.

This is just the very first stage of a long process of beginning to explore how we can develop closer relationships in the future. We are asking every Catholic to think and pray about it and make their contribution to the discussion about who might become closer neighbours in the months and years ahead. That is what was behind the **Imagine New Ways** document. Once decisions have been made, we will look in more detail at what areas of discussion need to take place to take everything forward.

**There has been very little help from the Diocese when it comes to the provision of training courses**

It is quite likely that once parishes do begin to work more closely together and there is a renewed emphasis on lay leadership, then one great advantage will be the provision of programmes at a local level. It may be that some things are best made available in a venue more central in the diocese, but much more could be devolved to the local groupings.

One of the ideas driving the move towards partnerships is that there can be a team of leaders across the area who are conscious of their role to serve the local worshipping communities. There are great gifts and talents in our communities and we would do well to encourage those who can to help train and support others.

***There was less time for questions in Darlington from the floor because of the need to move from Church to Hall and back…. And busses moving off at 9.00pm***

**Written Questions:**

**After 31 December, what is the timescale for decisions around partnership areas?**

Bishop Seamus will meet with the diocese Board from 17-20 January. We cannot really predict the outcome of that meeting. It may be that everything is clear and that it is possible for a statement to be made that covers the whole diocese. It may be that there are some areas where there is a need to consult further with people and priests and that it takes longer to come up with a Flexible Plan to cover the whole Diocese.

It is important to appreciate that Bishop Seamus and the Board will not only be discussing a geographic ‘Flexible Plan’ but all sorts of other issues which affect our Diocese.

One suggestion to the Board will be that a reflection on the whole Document could be made available to the whole diocese. This will take a little longer so that a document can be prepared in a way that is accessible to everyone.

**Is there a working model/format for the Proposal Form?**

We are very conscious that every parish is different, every deanery is different and every partnership will be different. We did not feel that it was possible to **prescribe** what a partnership would look like, though there is a pretty thorough reflection on what the remit of an area partnership might be in the **From Parish to Partnership** document that was made available before the summer. Page 4 of that document might be of some help when exploring what is possible.

Throughout the whole *Forward Together in Hope* process we have been encouraging people to explore what is best for them in their local area. To this end, in the **Your Partnership Proposals** document, in 1**.4** there is room for everyone in each area to suggest what the format could be for them.

**Is it one Partnership Proposal per parish or from a Deanery**

The idea is that by midday on 27 November a proposal will arrive from your area, electronically, which we can then consider with proposals from throughout the diocese. The proposal will come from ***the group of parishes,*** rather than from ***one parish at a time.*** This means that parishes will have had to come together in some way to agree their own prepared partnership area.

When we work through the partnerships that are suggested we will see if there is anyone who is missed out – and then check with that community how they see the future. If it seems impossible for that community to make a suggestion for whatever reason, we will simply make a judgement about where it might best fit in. Hopefully that won’t happen, but by the end of the year every parish in the diocese will be identified as belonging to a new partnership. It might take some years for that particular parish to become more fully involved, but there is no real alternative if we are to ensure the best way of sharing resources so that communities can flourish and individuals can deepen their awareness of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

**What happens if we don’t get it sorted in 45 days?**

The previous paragraph gives a pretty strong hint that if groups of parishes cannot come up with a proposal, then we will have to make a suggestion based on all the data you provided through the **Parish Questionnaire** and after looking at the **Observations** we offered back to the parish along with the one page **Profile.** Hopefully this won’t be necessary – but it can’t be that a parish or parishes are not part of a Partnership no matter how long it takes for them to fully appreciate what it might mean.

**Where do schools fit in?**

The staff of our schools and the pupils who learn in our schools are all part of parishes. Ideally they can play a full part in their parish discussion and exploration about Partnership. At the present moment, all of the schools in our diocese are also exploring ‘partnership’ and how they too can work together more effectively for the good of the children who attend them. It seems to be the case that almost every one of the 150 parishes in our diocese are wondering how to build closer links with (particularly) secondary schools. This is a very important time for us all to think about our schools, how they work together and how parishes and schools deepen their relationship with each other. It is clear that priests will gradually cease to be Governors of schools, there will simply not be enough of them to go round – so how can the basic relationship between schools and parishes be developed? Perhaps this is one of the questions to be explored at Partnership level in the future.

**Can Partnerships employ an Administrator?**

One of the exciting things about the stage we are at present is that all sorts of things can be imagined. If parishes come together and are willing to share their financial resources, then they have more opportunity to look to employing people to do all sorts of things. That would be up to them. It would also be really important for partnerships to look very carefully at what they really want to include in ‘Administration’ – it can include all sorts of things and make up an impossible Job Description. The Diocesan HR department could well be of assistance with this and other suggestions in the months and years ahead.

**Does the Diocese anticipate a significant rationalisation of parish property?**

At the present time the Diocese has a portfolio of over 500 properties. There are some properties which are unused and some underused. It is important for us to remember that property in a parish, while technically belonging to the Diocesan Directors, in practice belongs to the parish community, not the Diocese. So, if, for example, a property is sold, then the money from the sale belongs to the parish community. If, for whatever reason that parish community became part of a new parish, then the money would go with them into that new parish community.

It is inevitable that in the future there will be a potential increase in unused and underused property. Some communities may decide that they cannot support the property they have, be it the church building, presbytery or parish rooms, for example, so there will be a need to explore further use for these properties.

Many parish communities are not aware of their responsibility to care for and make the most of the property they actually own. We have not really enabled parish communities to fully appreciate that the property they have is an asset which can be used to further the work of the Church in the area. To help communities make the most of their responsibility, we will be advertising a post in the New Year entitled ‘Property Outreach Development Officer’ who will assist parishes to make the most of the property they have when it becomes available. S/he will work with the community to explore the best use of the property to serve the parish and the local community.

So any ‘rationalisation’ of property won’t be happening ‘top down’, it will hopefully be because the local partnership community will have arrived at the point when they appreciate something different needs to happen and have accepted the responsibility to see it through. Of course there can always be an emergency (a health and safety issue, for example) when a decision has to be made by someone outside the parish, but that will, hopefully, be very rare.

**If a ‘new parish’ had surplus buildings will the diocesan directors allow local administration to manage sales/rentals?**

It is pretty clear from the previous comment that property belongs to the local community and so it has responsibility for it. There may be just a hint in the question that there could be some ‘tension’ between the diocesan directors and any ‘new parish’ in relation to the future management of property. There is certainly no need for it if that is feared. The point of diocesan services is to serve the local community. They have a substantial responsibility to ensure that the Diocese is in line with Company Law and Charity Law and are in a position to point out the best way to do things so that we comply with legal requirements. Again, the best way forward regarding any future negation regarding property would be for discussion and engagement between those who have some oversight in the diocese and those who are responsible on the ground.

**How can the Ordinariate fit into the new structure?**

At the present moment there is only one parish in the diocese in which the Ordinariate is present. Who knows, there may be more in the future. The only real response to the question is ‘through discussion and exploration’. The word ‘catholic’ means ‘Universal’, it more than hints at enabling difference and embracing diversity. Many of us in this part of the world presume that the only Catholics are ‘Roman Catholics’. The Catholic Church also embraces a range of other ‘churches’ such as the Orthodox and Uniate Churches of the East. There are so many new and important questions being raised by the move from parish to Partnership, to a wider ‘Communio’ – to use a very traditional Church word to describe the coming together of people in the Church, and our relationship with the Ordinariate is only one of them. Discussion and exploration and an opening of mind and heart to that which is a little bit different would be the most productive way forward.

**Will funding for new leadership structures be made available?**

One of the earliest documents produced in the Forward Together in Hope programme was **Diocesan Facts and Figures.** In it we looked at all sorts of statistics in relation to the Diocese. It was a very honest and open document, still available on line [www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk](http://www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk). Section 3 is entitled **Financial Background** and at the bottom of page 8 there is a graph which shows that 70% of the worth of the Diocese belongs to parishes (the rest is made up of Central Services and Restricted Funds). In other words, there is a great deal of money available within parish communities. It is also true to say that the ***average*** annual surplus per parish across the diocese is just over £5,000. In other words, again, some parishes have much more available at the end of the year than others.

So, if parishes begin to work together and share resources there may well be significant money available for the funding of people to help with a wide range of services and ministries. A great deal of care and thought will have to go into the employment of people, but the actual funding to enable lay leadership to happen could well be there for new communities to use for this purpose.

Jim O’Keefe