

# FORWARD TOGETHER IN HOPE

## DEANERY MEETINGS

September – October 2015

Questions and Comments



Very many thanks to everyone who helped to arrange and attend the 18 Deanery meetings throughout the Diocese during September-October. Tony and I found them both stimulating and very encouraging, and we hope that those who participated were equally engaged. Over 650 people attended the meetings, parishioners, parish representatives, teachers, deacons and priests. Here you will find a compilation of the questions asked on the Evaluation Sheets, with an attempt to respond to them. We hope you find the questions and responses helpful. I wish there were easy answers to many of them – but I suspect you will agree that if there were easy answers we would have found them before now.

### 1. The Questionnaire

#### **Why so many questions?**

The Development Group spent from January until June 2014 looking at all the documentation from deanery and diocesan meetings beginning in the later 1990s, and attempted to summarise the richness and variety of Church life under as few headings as possible. As you can see, we cheated a bit by including things together to keep the questions down to 10. We put Education and Formation together, and included Ecumenical relations along with Outreach. We simply found it difficult to ensure that the breadth of Church life in the Diocese was respected and valued. We appreciated that we may not have been able to include everything, so added No 11, asking parishioners to point out anything we may have missed. We also want our Diocese to celebrate good practice and so added No 12. The final question is there to encourage us all to look carefully and prayerfully and honestly into the future and imagine how our community will be in years to come.



#### **Are they too complicated?**

They're not easy! But as some parishioners have commented: 'If you ask easy questions, you'll get easy answers'. They are meant to invite us to look honestly and deeply at our community, become aware of the reality of our parish community in Section 1 and then explore how we might be in the future. Some people have observed that as Catholics we rarely 'do homework' before we come to meetings! Very often we come, we talk and we leave. These questions do challenge us and provoke us and offer the opportunity for further questions to be asked and explored.

#### **Why is our Diocese a Guinea Pig? Couldn't another Diocese go first?**

People in most dioceses in the Country – indeed most Dioceses in mainland Europe and the United States – are wondering how to respond to the decrease in the number of worshippers and the number of priests. In England and Wales, other Dioceses have begun to explore how to move forward. Many are looking to reduce the number of parishes to a certain number, or actively seeking to amalgamate parishes. One Diocese in France has reduced the number of parishes to 14, with one of those parishes coping with 72 churches. Our approach is simply different. We're approaching it not so much as an administrative problem, 'How many priests will we have and so how many parishes will we have..' but more 'How can we invite every Catholic in the Diocese to explore what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus and to be part of a viable and flourishing community.' The intention is for all of us to pray and think seriously about the future of our Diocese together.

#### **Have we time to finish it?**

The Questionnaire was made available during the week after the Feast of Pentecost (24 May) and needs to be completed by the weekend of the First Sunday of Advent (29 November). So there is certainly time for it to be completed. Let's be honest, any community can only do the best it can. We are all different, and this is not an exam! It is an opportunity to learn more about our communities both now and into the future.

### 👉 **Is there help available?**

There certainly is. If you require any help at all simply contact us on 0191 243 3304 or [hope@diocesehn.org.uk](mailto:hope@diocesehn.org.uk). In the October Update which is available on line via [www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk](http://www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk) Tony included steps for those who are responsible for making the results of the Questionnaire available to us. This is attached as an Appendix at the end of these Reflections.

**HELP!**

## **2. What about those who don't worship?**

### 👉 **How do we 'get them back'?**

I suspect this is one of the questions to which there is no easy response. Many of the comments coming through the Deanery meetings refer to our communities needing to become more welcoming and hospitable. Not just with 'welcomers' for every mass and personal contact with every new person coming, but more care over how our communities keep in touch with those who have been bereaved, families following the celebration of baptism, closer links between schools and the community around First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion. No one has come up with a simple and easy solution; it always comes down to making and developing relationships. It will be very interesting to see how those who have ceased to worship or who aren't Catholics perceive us. There is an increasing number of people who don't worship regularly completing the on-line survey, we may discover more from what they say to us. Making the most of our 'Welcome Back' Sunday each year and the resources from our Diocesan Evangelisation Team may well be a good start for some communities.

### 👉 **Why have people stopped coming to mass?**

Sadly, there's no point in sitting back and hoping for a simple answer to this question. There have been huge changes in our world and in our church since the 1960s, and I daren't try to summarise them, it would take pages. Some people would like to insist that all was well until around the 1960s and it would be best to ensure that we do now what we did then. Others feel that we need to look carefully at the world we live in and seek ways to explore how we bring the values of the Gospel and the message of Jesus to bear on the world we live in now. It has never been easy. The call to be a disciple in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John are very different, the Gospels were written for different communities. We need to explore how we witness to Jesus now and in our area, and ensure that our Liturgical celebrations reflect the hopes and fears, desires and anxieties of the people of our time. There are answers to the question, but they would take more pages than we might want to read – and there are 36,500 Catholics in our Diocese worshipping every week, which isn't a bad witness at all. Maybe if we put our energy into how we witness and worship now rather than worry too much about what has happened, it might make a difference.

## **3. Will all this talk make any difference?**

There were a fair number of questions and observations under this broad heading, some of them were:

### 👉 **Explain the Strategy – what happens next?**

There are 3 phases in our *Forward Together in Hope* Programme.

In 'Preparing the Way' we set out the reasons for the whole Programme, the reduction in mass goers, the reduction in the number of priests, the responsibility for the same amount of property and so on. But behind the facts and figures is a much more important question about what the Church is for. So, we introduced all the documentation providing background to the programme, reminding ourselves of Pope Francis' call to each of us to become 'missionary disciples'. You may well have seen the DVD in which Bishop Seamus introduced the whole programme. We offered thoughts on the story of the faith in our part of the world and we offered some ideas as to what 'Success' of the whole exercise might be. A rich variety of Spiritual and Liturgical resources were made available. All of this is still available on-line in the 'Preparing the Way' Resources Section

We are currently 'Exploring the Way'. The Questionnaire is a way of exploring what our communities are like, and wondering how they will be in the future. There is a brief 'on-line' survey available to anyone at all, though we particularly welcome responses from those who are 'sleeping' Catholics who no longer worship, and those who aren't Catholics or Christians. We want to learn from others and discover how

our Church is perceived by other people in our area. We will explore how young people (11-19 year olds) see us via an on-line survey which will go live early in November, and many primary schools are beginning to find ways of engaging with younger children about it all. You may well have seen a 2<sup>nd</sup> DVD which is encouraging people to look behind the frequently asked questions and explore how we can take the programme forward together. Two surveys are on line, and the DVD can be accessed via a YouTube link on the website.

This phase will continue after Easter next year. Once all the parish questionnaires have been checked and analysed, there will be a response to every parish with an invitation to look further at the future, in conjunction with their neighbouring communities to ensure that we are all looking seriously towards viable and flourishing communities. The responses to us from this phase will trigger the third stage of the programme, 'Pointing the Way'.

At this point, we will begin to bring together all the suggestions and comments from parishes, Diocesan Departments and other groups and begin to formulate some suggestions for Bishop Seamus to look at. We will do this with the help of a group of people from across the Diocese, and with the Holy Spirit guiding us, will try to indicate to our Bishop where we might move on from there.

### **What are the outcomes of all of this?**

If you look at Section 2 of the Preparing the Way document referred to above, you'll see there that our hope is for an increased enthusiasm and openness to the presence of the Holy Spirit through prayer; a more 'outward looking' Church, a community of missionary disciples; a stronger sense of community throughout the diocese; a clearer understanding of the role of priests and people in the work of the church; more openness to lay people sharing their gifts for the community and the contribution of young people; some indication as to what structural changes may be necessary and that as many people as possible are involved in the whole process.

This is what we *hope* the outcomes will be. What they *are* very much depends on how involved we all become.

### **What is the End Game? Is it all a foregone conclusion?**

It will be difficult for some people to believe that there are no foregone conclusions. Absolutely none. There is no secret decision locked away somewhere which gives 'the number of parishes' there will be in 2020 or 2030. Decisions may well have to be made, but they have not been made yet. Any decisions will be made as a result of all of this prayer and reflection. The whole process is much more about formation and becoming aware of what the reality of our Church is which will eventually point to the way forward. The way forward is not fixed.

### **How long will it take to implement things?**

This will totally depend on what needs to be 'implemented'. It is impossible to say at this stage what the 'pointers' will be. We can safely presume that there will need to be more emphasis on lay formation and leadership and more exploration about how lay people can accept responsibility in the future. I suspect that things like this happen gradually and slowly and carefully, there is no 'start' date. Many of these questions presume that it is all about 'closure' of parishes. That is NOT the purpose of *Forward Together in Hope*. It is not the Bishop's desire to 'close' Churches, it is his desire that we discover how to be viable and flourish in the future. It may be that some communities won't be viable in the future, in which case the best possible attempt needs to be made to ensure that parishioners are welcomed into a different community thereby creating something new for everyone. At the end of the 'Pointing the Way' phase, there may well be much more about formation, cooperation and development than administrative changes.

### **When will it end?**

In a way, it may never end. In a way, it never began - it has always been going on! Bishop Seamus did launch *Forward Together in Hope* on 16 July 2014. This is a much more concentrated attempt to look at questions and issues that have been raised for many years. There is a good deal of evidence, and the Deanery meetings are part of this evidence, that parishioners have begun to ask more questions, build links with other communities, are open to others and feel a little less afraid of what is happening – and this need never end.

It is true that my two colleagues have contracts that end on a particular date in 2017, but we all hope that what has begun can always help to shape the Church in our diocese in the future.

👉 ***How soon will we know – it's like waiting for exam results!***

I do suspect that lying behind this question is the fear of a particular church no longer being used for worship. As I've said, this is not the plan. Equally, it is not impossible for whatever reasons, that a particular church building may have to cease to be used, and then great care must be taken for those who have worshiped there. Since the 1960s, twenty five church buildings in our diocese have ceased to be used for worship. The numbers of those who worship has decreased significantly; the number of buildings remains pretty well the same. In the background to the question on Finance it does say that 'a sustainable community must have an annual income that is sufficient to cover its expenses', equally when looking at The Christian Faithful, 'a viable parish needs a minimum number of active members'.

👉 ***What happens when the Bishop retires?***

Well, hopefully, he will have a very long and happy life!

The brief answer is that, in time, the Holy Father will appoint a successor to Bishop Seamus. But I imagine the fear is that a new bishop will come in and take no notice of the huge amount of work that has been done.



No one can foretell what any new Bishop would want to do, but for what it's worth, I cannot imagine a new bishop simply ignoring everything that we are doing. I suspect that every diocese in the country is wondering how to cope in the future, and it is the case that our approach is slightly different to others. Our approach is responding to the voices of people in the diocese for over 15 years and as such has a great deal of credibility.

No harm in praying that any new bishop would take time to appreciate what has been going on, and senses the real value in the approach being adopted. There will always be an opportunity for parishioners to make known their suggestions to the Nuncio as to what the diocese might need in the future, as part of the consultation process after the retirement of any diocesan bishop.

👉 ***How will the results of it all be made known to people?***

We are committed to this being as transparent a process as possible. After each significant meeting we make known the comments made and questions asked, and we do our best to respond to them. I envisage this being the case whenever necessary. Whatever consensus begins to emerge will be made available via the usual channels, on line and on paper if people request it. In addition to this, Bishop Seamus and our Diocesan Board are very happy that we engage with a representative group of people from around the Diocese as we prepare our final reports on everything that has happened. Our hope is that this adds to transparency and to the credibility of what is produced.

#### **4. Young People and Schools**



There were many questions and observations about young people and the involvement of schools in the whole process. Many of the questions seem to express real anxiety about the lack of young people taking an obvious and active part in the worshipping community. It may be worth looking at the most recent DVD where there are ideas about how to engage with young people with the help of a teacher, young person and volunteer with YMT.

👉 ***How can our Secondary Schools become involved with Forward Together in Hope?***

From early in November, there is an on-line questionnaire available to young people between the ages of 11-19. The Youth Ministry Team (YMT) has made a very short DVD with young people which will be sent to all Secondary Schools along with an invitation to young people to engage in thinking and talking about their understanding of 'the Church' and how they can play their part in it. Three weeks ago the Pope John Paul II Award was launched in the Cathedral by the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Mennini. This Award is targeted at young people in 6<sup>th</sup> Forms and is an invitation for them to play an active part in parish life in some way.

A few parish communities in the Diocese are wondering about inviting all the youngsters from their parish to a gathering to listen to them and explore with them how they feel about the Church.

### **What if the parish doesn't have a school?**

All Catholic children have a right to attend a Catholic school, which may not be located in the parish, so those who do may be contacted via the school itself. It may be more difficult to contact children who attend a non-Catholic school. However, it may be that an appeal can be made during mass for people to extend an invitation to these young people to gather for a 'one off' exploration and discussion. These discussions would need to be very carefully planned and open and non-judgemental. They are very much about learning from young people rather than trying to persuade them of something.

### **Can Social Media help with all of this?**

We are keen to utilise the full range of communications methods to get information about *Forward Together in Hope* to different audiences. To date these have included radio, local press, Catholic press and YouTube as well as the usual e-mail and even snail-mail approaches. We have made extensive use of the *Forward Together in Hope* website and try to keep this refreshed regularly as the prime source of all *Forward Together in Hope* materials including the regular Updates.



Our communications plan includes the intention to utilise the benefits of Social Media for the programme too and we are working with Communications colleagues within the Diocese to get look at how best to approach this in a manageable way.

### **Have the parents of children in our schools been invited to participate?**

Many Primary School Head Teachers have written to the parents of the children attending the school to bring the on-line Questionnaire to their attention. Some schools have devised special liturgies in relation to what it means to belong to a Church community.

### **How can schools and parishes work more closely together?**

Question 5b was specifically included to allow communities and schools to explore this important dimension of Church life. Never again will every teacher in the local primary school come from the same parish and be seen in the local parish church every weekend. But the relationship between schools and parish communities is vital. One of the unexpected and unintended consequences of the Deanery meetings was that they created a space where Head Teachers (very often) parishioners and clergy came for a discussion in a non-threatening way. Schools and Education were not the agenda, the Church was the agenda and many fruitful conversations took place. Hopefully there will be many helpful observations and comments returned as a result of conversations around question 5b.

The development of academy structures is raising new questions about the relationship between parishes, primary schools and academies themselves.

Some worried that with fewer priests in the future there would be fewer opportunities for the celebration of Mass with children. If this is the case, it may well once again underline the importance of the deepening of the relationship between the school and the community and the ways they can work together to ensure a wholesome liturgical life for the young people that is appropriate to them.

## **5. The Decreasing number of priests**

This may well be the most frequent topic of conversation raised after masses around the diocese. It is therefore an important topic about which many people have strong feelings.

### **How can we encourage more young men to become priests?**

It may be that the frequent use of the word 'young' when referring to men training to be priests unconsciously harks back to the days of Junior Seminaries. The Junior Seminary at Ushaw was closed in 1972. Men who are chosen by bishops for training in Seminaries come from every walk of life and are unlikely to be straight from school.

For decades our Diocese has had a priest dedicated to 'Vocations Promotion'. At the present time Frs Shaun O'Neill and David Smith lead the work of Vocations Promotion. There is an increasing awareness in the Diocese that every Catholic is a Vocations Promotor and that it is more likely that men will appreciate

and sense the call of the Holy Spirit to explore a vocation to priesthood when we become communities that are committed to discipleship. So it may be that something that each one of us can do to encourage men to explore this particular vocation is to become more aware of our own calling to be a follower of Jesus.

### 👉 **Why do we not welcome more priests from other countries?**

We are blessed by the presence of some priests from other countries in our diocese. They have the gift of introducing us to other cultures, forms of worship and prayer.

It is also true that Great Britain is 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Global League Table of the ratio of priests to people, top spot goes to Malta. In other words, if we were to welcome priests from other countries to serve us here, we are, in a way, taking from communities that are poorer than ours. We are taking from countries with fewer priests per members of the population, than we have. If we were to divide the 36,500 thousand active parishioners in our diocese by the 103 active priests, we come up with one priest for 354.36 people!

But perhaps lying behind the question is a presumption that our witness to Jesus in our world depends on having many priests. If it is true that the fundamental question for us is how we become more responsible and more aware followers of Jesus, then, while the ministry of the ordained priest is vitally important, it isn't the only thing for us to think about.

It may also be that we are harking back to a time when we felt comfortable with more priests, mass being celebrated at times that suited every possibility and a security that it would always be the same. It may be that the Holy Spirit is inviting us to explore new ways to discover how to be Disciples of Jesus.



Incidentally, we did include a 'Diocesan' Prayer for Vocations with the Spiritual and Liturgical Resources at Pentecost this year.

### 👉 **Why can't we have married priests and women priests?**

It is true to say that we do have married priests in our diocese, colleagues who have become priests of the Roman Catholic Church following their time as priests in the Church of England.

This could be a very long answer – but it won't be. A decision could be made whereby men who are married could be ordained as priests. Some bishops in England and Wales think it is likely. Others say if it does happen, the decision will be left to Bishops' Conferences, in which case it is hard to justify (given the figures above) for this part of the world when other parts of the world are desperately short of priests. Perhaps it should be said that there's not much point in sitting around waiting for something that might or might not happen. Our responsibility is to explore how to be followers of Jesus in the circumstances in which we live now, not as they were or may be in the future.

Some people wonder if those men who have been ordained and left the priesthood could be welcomed back to live as active priests.

It may be that at some time a decision is made for this to happen. What it does is increase the number of priests. It may be that *Forward Together in Hope* is constantly pushing us to explore what it means for us to be Church now, rather than try and find ways of getting back to the number of priests we had in the past.

There is debate about the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, though it seems some people are under the impression that there shouldn't be debate. I suspect there is a very long way to go before the subject is allowed full and fruitful discussion. So, in a way, we're back to the point above, how do we respond to the call of God to be disciples now?

### 👉 **What is the best model for priesthood in the future?**

I don't know of anyone who has the answer to this question, though it is extremely important. Some years ago the (now defunct) National Conference of Priests debated how to **Set Priests free to Preach and Pray**. It is an even more important question now. Whatever model it is, we cannot imagine that men who are getting older and fewer will be able to maintain the amount of services, masses, travelling, attendance at meetings and so on that many people would want. There will have to be a great deal of 'letting go' of all sorts of practical things so that priests can concentrate on more central responsibilities like calling the

people together for prayer and worship, identifying and encouraging the gifts of lay men and women, young and old, and breaking the Word and Bread in a way that is life enhancing and experienced as true worship of God.

If anyone has a quick answer to this, we'd love to hear it.

### 👉 **Can some of the work be 'devolved'?**

There is no doubt that much can be 'devolved'. For it to be successful, two things need to happen. The priest needs to be confident that he is still a priest when not doing the things he has always done, and, lay men and women will have to take up more responsibilities. These will vary from place to place and go far beyond cutting the grass.

All sorts of things from much more involvement with Facilities, Finance and Accounting, coordinating programmes of formation between parishes and across deaneries, organising rotas for goodness knows what. There is a great deal of scope for more collaborative ministry between priests and people, and more scope for actual lay leadership of programmes. All of this implies training for all of us concerned.

### 👉 **Will priests be 'Ofsted'?**

Needless to say, priests are not perfect!

Priests are affected by change as much as anyone else and it is just as hard for priests as it is for anyone else. I wonder if lying behind the question lurk questions about accountability, transparency, styles of leadership, use of power and so on. These are big questions, and it may be that in the coming years these questions will be explored by priests and people together. For that to happen we will have to grow in trust, mutual respect and patience.

I guess the quick answer to the question is: No!



### 👉 **What if the priests don't agree with it all?**

Rather like people, priests will respond to changes and new challenges in a wide variety of ways. Some embrace it and some will find it really difficult. It is in nobody's interests for priests to be isolated and to not have their fears acknowledged and respected. The same question could be asked of lay people and communities, and the same response must be valid – fears need to be acknowledged and respected.

Change can be very painful for any of us. It means we have to grow in trust and patience. Our prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit is central to this whole exercise and the more we pray it may be that we come to appreciate what a risky person Jesus was, and still is in the Body of Christ today.

## **6. Becoming Missionary Disciples**

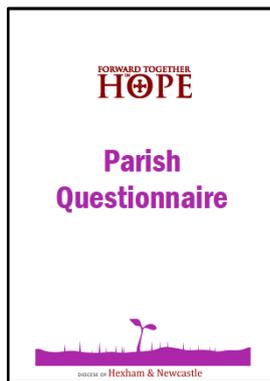
There were some questions about how to become more involved in Outreach and how to become Missionary Disciples. In many ways this is what the whole programme is fundamentally about. It is an opportunity for us to ask and explore these questions. I suspect that in the next phase of the programme, there will be more opportunity and perhaps more pointers offered in what we might mean by Discipleship in our time and in this place. But the important thing for the moment is for each community to begin to explore what it means to them. We can always learn from the good practice of each other and look for inspiration from stories from other Churches, Faiths and Countries.

I hope this accurately reflects the breadth and depth of questions asked. Some of them already have libraries written about them, so please excuse the brevity. The purpose behind feeding back is so that the wealth of discussion can be respected and opportunities offered for further reflection.

Thank you again for your involvement with what were good meetings, some people even want more of them...

*Jim O'Keefe*  
10 November 2015

## Returning the Parish Questionnaire



The completion of *Forward Together in Hope* Parish Questionnaires is now well underway and the target date of 29<sup>th</sup> November for returns is starting to look a lot nearer than it did before! This note sets out how the questionnaires are to be returned. The ‘good news’ is that we’ve tried to reduce the amount of work at parish level by deciding that completed questionnaires are simply returned by email (rather than using a more involved online system). To ensure safe receipt and acknowledgement of your questionnaire we would be grateful if you could follow the steps below. If any aspect of this is even slightly unclear please get in touch to

discuss.

- a) Enter all information into the Word version of the Parish Questionnaire. This is available on the Exploring the Way Resources CD and through the *Forward Together in Hope* Website ([http://hope.rcdhn.org.uk/resources/exploringway\\_main.php](http://hope.rcdhn.org.uk/resources/exploringway_main.php)). Please note, those using older versions of Word may find that it is better to use the version of the questionnaire specifically designed for older versions. Again, this is available using the link shown above. If you are uncertain about this – just get in touch.
- b) Once you are happy that you have completed all relevant sections of the questionnaire and that this has been agreed within the parish, save a final version and attach this to an e-mail. Those parishes that have more than one church site will need to complete a supplement (*Parish Questionnaire Supplement for Sections 8 & 9*) for each site and these will also need to be attached to the e-mail.
- c) Please use the following subject line in your e-mail **Parish Questionnaire for PARISH NAME, LOCATION** - Where PARISH NAME is replaced by the name of your parish and LOCATION is replaced by the Town or Area.
- d) Within the body of the e-mail please identify **a specific contact person with their e-mail address and telephone number** who we can contact if we have any initial queries.
- e) Send your e-mail with attachments to [hope@diocesehn.org.uk](mailto:hope@diocesehn.org.uk). The receipt of your Parish Questionnaire will be acknowledged personally by e-mail within one working day. If you do not receive an acknowledgement please get in touch with [tony.sacco@diocesehn.org.uk](mailto:tony.sacco@diocesehn.org.uk) or phone Tony on 0191 243 3304.

Any questions or concerns whatsoever about this please do get in touch.

