

Archdiocese of Birmingham

Discussion Paper for Parishes Following the Lent 2012 Pastoral Letter on Future planning,

It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up for all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church. I became the servant of the Church when God made me responsible for delivering God's message to you, the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his saints. It was God's purpose to reveal it to them and to show all the rich glory of this mystery to the pagans. The mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory: this is the Christ we proclaim, this is the wisdom in which we thoroughly train everyone and instruct everyone, to make them all perfect in Christ. It is for this I struggle wearily on, helped only by his power driving me irresistibly.

Colossians 1:24-29

God gathered together as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and established them as the Church that for each and all it may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity. While it transcends all limits of time and confines of race, the Church is destined to extend to all regions of the earth and so enters into the history of mankind. Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God's grace, which was promised to her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waiver from perfect fidelity, but remain a bride worthy of her Lord, and moved by the Holy Spirit may never cease to renew herself, until through the Cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting.

Lumen Gentium 9, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Second Vatican Council.

We want this Year to arouse in every believer the aspiration to profess the faith in fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope. It will also be a good opportunity to intensify the celebration of the faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, which is "the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; ... and also the source from which all its power flows." At the same time, we make it our prayer that believers' witness of life may grow in credibility. To rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, lived and prayed, and to reflect on the act of faith, is a task that every believer must make his own, especially in the course of this Year.

Porta Fidei, 9, Benedict XVI, October 2011

(The document *Porta Fidei* introduces the Year of Faith, which will run from October 2012, the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, to the Solemnity of Christ the King, November 2013.)

Background information and Context

The Mission of the Church in the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

The Archdiocese of Birmingham covers the counties of Staffordshire, the West Midlands, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Oxfordshire.

The programme in which we look to the future must be set in this broad context. In each parish the concern may be, primarily, for itself, yet there is a bigger picture which only those working for the needs of the whole diocese may be able to see.

It is important to say that, although the Catholic population has changed in this large area, it is not simply a picture of falling Mass attendance. As well as the arrival in our diocese of many Catholics from abroad, who bring with them a firm faith, there is also the case of a shifting population. Whilst the numbers of Catholics may be declining, at the moment, in places where numbers were once much larger, there are some parts of the diocese where major new housing developments are taking place, and which may require a concentration of efforts to respond to a new need.

The Bigger picture - Chaplaincy Provision

For most Catholics who attend Mass, the parish is the focus of their life of faith. Traditionally, when we speak of the parish, we think in most places of the church and the primary school. Secondary schools serve local areas, and chaplains are provided for them.

There are, however, many other pastoral needs outside the immediate parish structure, which are also served by the Diocese, for example:

Oscott College
The Maryvale Institute
Hospital chaplaincy
Prison chaplaincy
University chaplaincy
Foreign Language & Ethnic Chaplaincies
Armed Forces Chaplaincy
Diocesan Departments, including Education, the Marriage Tribunal, etc

The Diocese also has priests who serve the Church at national and international levels.

The Deanery as the starting point

Whilst it is useful to recognise the diocesan perspective and its needs, it is at the more local, deanery level that you are being asked to consider the need to plan for the future.

Deanery groupings are a helpful way of looking at local needs. In our diocese, the different needs, from one deanery to another, make the work of each deanery distinctive and significant.

At this point, no parish can, any longer, think of itself as being independent of others. Some parishes will need those around them, for the resources and the expertise that they might find there. Large parishes, which might not appear to require the help of others, may be in a position to ask what they have that can be shared with neighbouring parishes in need.

The Parish Community & the Church Building

In any given parish, there will be those who have only belonged to this one parish, as well as those who have, for various reasons, experienced the life of different parishes.

When one looks back a generation, and compares Mass attendance then and now, it is easy for those who are part of a parish today to think of people who still live in the area but who may have moved parishes, or who, for any reason, do not attend Mass anymore.

Everyone tends to associate themselves with the 'place' where they experience and participate in the celebration of Mass most regularly. A greater mobility enables people to travel more and reach a greater number of churches than previously. At times, Mass in a nearby church will be at a more convenient time for you on a given day.

It is still important, however, to have a sense of 'your parish'; the place to which you belong; the place from which you might reasonably expect a priest or deacon to come and visit you in a time of need; or the parish to which you would turn at such a time.

One of the most important truths that we have to accept, moving forward, and it is not easy so to do, is that our current provision and projections for the future show that it will not be possible, in the next generation, to sustain the number of church buildings we have, and for each to have its own resident priest.

In terms of the ratio of priests to people, we do not have a shortage of priests compared to many parts of the world, but the number of church buildings we have is more than we need. Our focus, therefore, cannot be only the place where we worship God, but the worship itself, which, at one level, is the same wherever it takes place.

In some cases, churches were built to serve a particular need at a specific time. Then larger churches were built, which made the previous churches less necessary. People become, however, very attached to the building of faith that may have gained important associations during their life. No one likes to see a church close, but where the need is no longer as it once was, and where there are not sufficient priests to provide sacramental ministry in every church, then a community may come to see that a particular building has served the purpose for which it was built, and that the future lies within neighbouring churches.

It may be true that no priest or deacon would wish his church to close, or even for his parish to be affected by the coming changes. Naturally, most people would feel the same about their place of worship and the life of their parish. That is why, whilst listening to the views of clergy and parishioners, some difficult and unpopular decisions will still have to be made by Archbishop Bernard and those who work closely with him. Please pray that he be guided in these decisions, which are not made through choice, but by circumstances and as a result of the current situation.

The Mass as the centre of our life of Faith

There is a very important distinction to be made between the celebration of Mass and a Celebration of Word and Holy Communion, whether led by a deacon or a lay person. Whilst it is important for the Christian community to gather for prayer, with or without a priest present, there should never be any doubt about the essential link between the Priestly ministry and the celebration of the Eucharist.

Although it might be tempting to think that a Celebration of Word and Holy Communion comes as a close second to Mass, in fact, there is little comparison. It is not envisaged that there is, as yet, a need to substitute for Sunday Mass a Celebration of Word and Holy Communion, except in an unforeseen emergency. Where there is a need to reduce the number of Masses in a parish, in order to serve the needs of a Deanery, the participation in the celebration of Mass remains the norm for Catholics.

The role of Priests, Deacons, Religious men and women, and the Lay Faithful in the Church's Mission

In the Church's mission, it is clear that the life of Catholic communities is centred on the celebration of Mass. From this flows the prayer life of the parish and that of its individual parishioners, the care of the sick and housebound, the Church's activities for people of all ages and its outreach. This outreach takes various forms: to those who see themselves as Catholics but who do not come to church regularly, to the wider community in which the Church relates to fellow Christians and other religions as well as to neighbours around the parish and the important work of parishes in Justice and Peace, local, national and international charitable work.

One of the most urgent needs in our parishes is that of ensuring that we are able to focus on the Mass and the celebration of the other Sacraments and their place in our lives. It is possible that some of the changes in our current thinking will awaken in some parishioners a greater sense of belonging or a wish to come to church more regularly; you sometimes see value in important things when their meaning changes or their availability is challenged.

Then there is a need for all the baptised to look in a new way at their belonging to the life of the Church. Traditionally, people have looked to the priest to visit sick parishioners. In recent years, deacons have assisted in a special way in the pastoral care of sick and housebound parishioners, and now we are seeing greater lay involvement in which everyone can seek to play a part.

Preparation for the Sacrament of Infant Baptism and, for the Sacrament of Matrimony take place in the parish. The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) is also parish-based. Now is the time to look at these programmes and consider the varied involvement of parishioners, in a way that supports the Parish Priest in his work. We can look again at how neighbouring parishes can co-operate more in the delivery of these programmes.

Our primary schools are the place where much of the preparation for the Sacraments of Reconciliation, the Eucharist and Confirmation takes place. Perhaps one of the biggest gaps in our approach to catechesis at parish level, however, is the follow up to the Sacraments: visiting families in their homes after their child has received one of these Sacraments; showing how the Church still wishes to encourage families to take a full, conscious and active part in the life of the parish. It takes a lot of courage to be such a parishioner, who can go, on behalf of the parish and with the blessing of the Parish Priest, to visit people in their homes, or invite them to sessions after the Sacramental celebrations, but this is a part of the Church's mission that, left to the priest alone, will simply not happen.

Our parishes, first of all, need to be places that believe the Church can and will grow, through the grace of God, and with your enthusiasm for speaking to others of the joy and consolation of your faith.

From the earliest days of the *Walk With Me* programme, the simplest task was asked of each person: to take one booklet for yourself and pray each day, then to take a second booklet and to give it to somebody who might need or appreciate it, or who might benefit from encouragement in their faith. Eleven years since that initiative began in our diocese, are you someone who has a story to tell about the difference that giving the booklet to somebody made? Are you someone who returned to Church as a result of being given a booklet by a friend or parishioner? Are you someone who never had the courage to give a booklet to anybody, in case you might cause offence?

The Church's mission, given by Christ, to go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News, is as pressing today as it ever was. The need for vocations to the Priesthood, to the Diaconate and to Religious Life, both in its traditional and more contemporary forms, depends so much on the fostering and encouragement of vocations from among our own parishioners, in our families and in our schools. It might be a long time since your parish has given a vocation to the Church in ordained or consecrated ministry. Please make that prayer ever more urgent and fervent.

Ongoing evangelisation - a cause for hope

Blessed John Henry Newman spoke of a Second Spring in the Church. For all of us, there is a need for renewal in our faith, for embracing joyfully the message of the Gospel with a new spirit.

There are many ways of bringing new life to our faith: returning to the Gospels, praying the Prayer of the Church, praying the rosary, spiritual reading, reading more about our faith and its history, its traditions, the schools of thought behind what we believe, meeting for prayer in homes, pilgrimages, prayer in church outside of Mass & before the Blessed Sacrament, experiencing the Sacrament of Reconciliation after many years and so on. These are not new ways, but they can renew the faith that is within us, which, at times, may have a place in our lives that is not necessarily central.

In times of change in our diocese, we will be much more open to this change, far less threatened by it, if our faith is alive, if we are confident in what we believe, if we are able to move beyond what is the norm for many Catholics: 'I know what I believe, but I don't want to talk about it, and if pushed, I'm not sure I'd be confident about what I believe'.

Are there areas of the life of the Church that you wish to know more about? Perhaps, as part of a renewal in your life of faith, you might wish to speak to

other parishioners and friends about aspects of the Church's life, in order to deepen your knowledge and understanding. Perhaps your parish priest, or deacon, or a parishioner might be able to give a talk for the parish; they might wish to invite somebody to your parish who has a particular area of knowledge.

How will the way ahead affect parishes?

The scene has been set; there is a need for change. Parish structures and the provision of priests cannot remain the same. It is important, however, to know that, working within deanery groupings, it will not simply be individual parishes that are affected. Each deanery within the diocese is being asked to look at its life, its partnerships between neighbouring parishes and the delivery of its catechetical programmes.

Where it is necessary to reduce the number of priests in a deanery, parishes will be asked to work together to ensure that the life of the Church remains strong. The priority remains the celebration of the Sacraments, the education of our young people in the faith, the teaching of our faith to adults and the care of sick and dying parishioners.

During the programme of parish visitations, some parish communities reflected on the fact that they have known there would come a day when they would not have a resident priest. In the past, we have been blessed in our diocese by the great number of priests from Ireland, and then by a number of former Anglican priests who have become part of the life of our diocese in the past 20 years. We have welcomed priests from abroad, both diocesan priests and those from religious orders, but we must recognise the need to staff our parishes with our own homegrown clergy, and that is difficult.

We shall continue to look for suitable opportunities to welcome priests from abroad, but we cannot imagine that this will or, indeed, should be the solution to our problems as we go forward.

What can you do to prepare for change, and to shape the future?

As we continue to prepare and to plan for the changes that will come about, we must pray for the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who never fails to guide and give life to the Church, that the future plans we make will be always placed at the service of Christ and the good of the communities we serve.

The first stage is to be strong in our Catholic identity, strong in our sense of where we have come from in our life of faith, and confident in where we are going, trusting in the goodness of God, but making our own contribution to the life of the Church. Each parish must grow in its awareness of neighbouring parishes

and their needs, and in the ways in which they can help you with the needs of your own parish.

This will be a time of change for priests and deacons, and so you are asked to pray for them, that they may be confident and feel supported by you in whatever they are asked to do.

Throughout our lives, the way in which we live our life of faith changes, yet the faith itself does not change. You are asked to be generous in recognising the needs of the Church, which are broader than any individual parish or even any deanery. There is no option for resisting all change, and so we pray that the months and years ahead, though they may be painful as a time of change, will be a time of growth within the Church, of faithfulness to the Lord, and of working through difficult times to see that new ways of expressing and living our faith can be life-giving.

Questions for discussion within parishes and Deaneries

1) What is your experience of belonging to your present or a past parish?

How many parishes have you belonged to before your present parish? Some people live their whole life in one parish; others move from one parish to another as a result of changing work, moving house, or for other reasons. This will be a different experience from one person to another. People might be prepared to talk about their experiences of settling into a new parish; the amount of time it takes to belong to a given parish; the importance of communities welcoming visitors and giving them a role in the new parish they have joined, and so on.

2) What is your knowledge and experience of the parishes of your Deanery?

Someone can read out, from the Archdiocese of Birmingham Directory, the parishes that form the Deanery to which your parish belongs. As you listen to this list, you will recognise some your neighbouring parishes. It is helpful to know the distances between the churches and the distance from your church to each of the others.

Each person or family can ask the questions:

How many of these churches do I know?

How many have I been inside or in how many have I attended Mass?

Which of these churches do I attend regularly as an alternative to my own?

What picture does this paint of parishes already working together, or at least people's mobility between churches?

3) How do we respond to the reality of fewer priests?

As the reality of fewer priests than church buildings in our diocese sinks in, do you think that there are any immediate ways of responding to this situation in a way that speaks of growth in faith, greater involvement by the People of God, and a spirit of mission? The priest has a sacramental and pastoral role in the life of the parish. Are there ways of working with your priest in these roles, and especially with the administration of the parish, that you might not have considered to be your role in the past?

4) How does our attendance at Sunday Mass fit into our weekend?

In the near future, as the age profile of priests becomes more top-heavy, our focus will need to be on the worthy celebration of each Sunday Mass rather than on keeping the number of Masses we have become used to.

Everyone would probably wish to keep their Mass time and place unchanged. This is the time for thinking about how the shape and priorities of our weekend might change. Increasingly, people find attendance at Mass difficult to fit in amongst the many other activities of a weekend. How do we ensure that attendance at Sunday Mass remains a priority? This may involve a greater awareness of those who do not have transport to get to Mass.

When our faith presents challenges, it is easy to see how Mass can be the first thing to go. But what if it were the first priority? Remember the time when the shops didn't open, and when Sunday was a day of rest, a day for families? There is no reason why Christians cannot return to these principles, which are no longer part of the world around us, but which might give us a chance to witness to family values and to the place of faith in our life.

Another important matter to discuss with your parish priest is his availability to assist other neighbouring priests as a matter of course, and not simply in an emergency. This is an essential part of deanery and parish co-operation. It is not just a question of how many Masses our church would wish to have.

5) What priorities should the Diocese take into account when considering Sunday Mass provision?

The Diocese needs to consider how best to provide Sunday Mass and many other forms of chaplaincy and ministry in the future. The Church does not automatically seek to withdraw from those places that are smallest in number, nor, of course, should the Church neglect those in most need. Where there are larger parishes that can cope without a resident priest, there might be good reason for a more self-sufficient parish to be generous, but there is no easy solution for this situation.

It is not satisfactory to wait, each time, until an emergency occurs. If, therefore, there are ways in which parishes can co-operate better, and share resources more effectively than in the past, preparing the way for further change will be made easier.

6) To what degree does the life of our parish today reflect the mission of our parish?

The mission of every parish is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to the community in which it is placed. This mission was established before any school or church was built. The parish must always address the needs of the present day. If the process of change is seen alongside our mission, then each parish community can ask itself, for example, what are the signs of mission and growth in our Parish today? How many adults have been baptised or received into the Church in our parish in the past 5 years? Are we a parish that invests in its future, in, for example, the visible opportunities for young people; in a clear sense of welcome to newcomers and visitors; in outreach to invite back those who no longer come to church?

What happens next...?

The points raised in this discussion paper, and the questions or areas for discussion, may well not lead to simple or quick answers. For parish communities to come together, however, whether in small groups or in an open parish meeting is, in itself, a good idea, which will foster a greater sense of parish identity. The greater the variety of people at the meeting, however that can be achieved, and the personal invitation to people who might not even think of coming to such a meeting, will make it a more fruitful exercise.

Each parish or chaplaincy is asked to make a written response to this discussion document. It should be sent to the Local Dean.

Although feedback from individuals has its value, the engagement in discussion with others, speaking and listening, is central to what is being asked following the Pastoral Letter, and reflecting on our life in communities of faith.

Thank you for taking part in this process.

Easter 2012