

Meeting the needs of a more missionary and community focus- finance, stewardship, clergy numbers

1. Introduction

Our working party was drawn from clergy, parish based staff, parish finance committee members and the curia as follows:-

Mgr Sean Healy - Parish Priest- Beaconsfield

Fr Gerard Byrne -Parish Priest- St Brendan's Corby

Peter Commons - Diocesan Trustee – Finance Committee Chair, Holy Cross and SS. Philip & James, Bedford

Clive Gallagher – Finance Committee Chair Our Lady of Lourdes, Aylesbury

Cilla Fox- Parish Administrator- Our Lady Help of Christians- Luton

Rosemary Johnson- Finance Committee Chair – St Edwards, Kettering

Majella Meehan- Diocesan Finance Manager

Tony McNiff- Chief Operating Officer

Our group has met on four occasions but it has been difficult for all of us to meet together at the same time. One benefit has been that it has allowed more voices to be heard and all members confirmed that they felt able to express their views in an open and constructive manner.

Whilst the subject matter is potentially contentious and can have a tendency for polarised positions, we took time to consider how the Holy Spirit may be guiding us and in that respect we were encouraged to be bold and not be constrained by fear, convention or other norms.

2. What has been said?

- We are not good at communicating with other parishes in our Diocese. Can we match up expertise in local areas to help each other? Pastoral areas are a missed opportunity in that respect and could be used as a more effective means of collaboration.
- Priests can have very different views on how to or even if to engage constructively with local consultative groups
- Do not switch off volunteers, they need to be kept engaged/informed.
- Volunteers/laity may need to step up as they are generally at their parish longer than the parish priest!
- Things become difficult when the solutions are to be found outside the parish boundaries. This can be particularly difficult for priests as it challenges their authority under Canon Law but also for the laity
- We are a parochial church so when we try to centralise/regionalise, parishes tend to become quite territorial in response
- Our Diocese is not big enough to operate as a federation of 69 parishes. We need engagement/interaction/trust between parishes and curia to be one effective Diocese.
- We need to prepare local clergy and laity that hard decisions will be required of priests and parishioners- indeed parishioners are expecting this.
- This group should not just be for the Assembly but needs to continue to help develop its thinking and deliver beyond July- it needs to provide a sounding board
- We need to be on the same side, working to a common



- plan- however firstly we need to know what the plan is!
- The Synod feedback referenced the need for greater financial transparency to help develop a collaborative approach with lay people. In addition decisions made in relation to property and maintenance are given as examples of poor non-consultative governance

3. Where are we now?

- If we were starting the Church today, we wouldn't start from here!
- We are financially challenged
- Local parishioners are generally not well informed about church finances and how interdependent parish and diocesan finances actually are. There is a general lack of interest amongst the majority of parishioners and that can even filter into parish finance groups which results in a lack of drive and determination to present financial information and the current realities to parishioners.
 - o There are still some who believe that the Church is rich and does not need their support
 - o Whilst there is transparency it is not consistent across parishes and sometimes more discussed than actually wanted
 - o Information regarding current financial realities has been made available to Parish Priests and Parish Finance Committees (via their Chairs) on a number of occasions and in recent years several briefing sessions have been held. Last year a briefing paper was provided to all parishes to be delivered to parishioners to explain the current position and to appeal for an increase in donations however very few parishes decided to pass this information on.
 - o Parish Finance Committees have the information required to provide a quarterly financial statement to parishioners which would set out how their parish was performing
 - o One significant issue relates to the funding of Diocesan shared central costs. In 2023 these costs were £2.9m and details of those costs and how they have varied over the last few years is shown at Appendix 1. These costs are largely paid for by the levy charged to parishes. For many years this levy has been around £1.3m but in 2022/23 the levy was increased and generated £1.8m. It can be seen that even with the levy increase it does not cover the costs. Some funds are generated from our schools, investments and from donations from other charities but even then we remain some £600k short per annum. We have considered reducing the central costs and have benchmarked ours against other Dioceses and ours are low, possibly too low to safely support the responsibilities we have as a charitable trust
- There is a territorial mentality and suspicion about engaging with the Diocese
 - o Can be evident in the way that the Diocese is characterised- "what does it do?" (See Appendix 1)
- A genuine fear that parishes where prior generations worshiped may close
- Lack of trust between parishes and the Diocese- this can go in both directions
- Huge variability in both quality of and access to provision, almost a catholic post code lottery

4. How can God's mission be served?

Be radical- Jesus was

A new commandment I give unto you.....

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

The Great Commission

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

We need

- Communities that are well served sacramentally, pastorally and socially
- Communities that are bigger and richer than our current perception of parish, possibly families of parishes
- Communities intent on conversion and with the capacity and capability to grow
- Communities that love and help its fellow communities

These communities should be fully serviced with

- Celebratory services
- Comfortable facilities
- Good Catholic liturgy
- Opportunities for faith formation and involvement in social action
- New ways of thinking
- Vibrant Youth ministry
- Excellent and engaging music ministry
- Excellent communication both internal and external

We have a reducing number of Diocesan Priests but no shortage of priests from elsewhere across the Catholic world. Where imported priests work well, parishes prosper but there can be significant cultural difficulties. Our community family could be led by an incardinated Parish Priest but supported by assistant priests who may be from abroad or from a religious order. The team could be augmented by Deacons, Sisters (if available), lay missionaries, all working to a common pastoral development plan. In effect we turn our current concept of parish into all year missionary environments.

5. What are the major challenges?

- Significant variations in the capacity of each community to meet the missionary challenge
- Age and skills of priests
- Age and skills of congregation
- Lack of common purpose
- Significant variation in the facilities/services offered across the Diocese
- Achieving a common recognition that central functions are at the service of the parishes, are essential and need funding as if part of an existing parish
- Parish Priest concerns about erosion of authority

- Some priests may not buy into the direction of travel and therefore undermine progress. However we do not have enough, vibrant diocesan priests?
- Communication- a move to communities must be a positive choice
- Elements of this thinking were expressed as part of “Walking Humbly with God”- we should revisit and bring it up to date for a post pandemic environment- this will help parishes see that current thinking is part of an evolution of thought derived from previous consultative processes
- Such a move will initially cost and will also highlight communities where a church is no longer felt to be appropriate- the proceeds of sale from such assets can help realise a brighter future, whereas the current approach reinforces stagnation and decline
- Such an approach is bold and change will always attract criticism from those most affected
- Can we reimagine part of the mission as ensuring all within a community are supported to access the sacraments and the services we provide – car sharing/buddying/minibus provision/ working in collaboration with schools?
- Trust- parishes do not trust the centre and this makes any initiative that is centrally supported vulnerable to those who would rather not change what they have now

6. What questions do we need to address most urgently and what are our proposals for change?

- Do our congregations want this or is weekly access to the sacraments enough?
- How do we convince existing parishes that change is necessary?
- How do we define the optimum number of parishes and their constituencies?
- How do we decide on the provision that a community must have to ensure that our parishioners are provided with fair access?
- How do we promote this way of thinking?
- Given that we need the proceeds of sale from some of our estate to provide what we need, how do we realise the funds from our existing assets (largely property assets)?

7. Conclusion

Our current parish network has been developed over nearly 200 years at times of significant growth and it has largely served us well in the past. However our needs are changing. We now need places

- to engage our youth
- that are accessible and comfortable for younger families and older parishioners
- that are welcoming particularly for those new to our communities
- that are conducive to formation and lifelong instruction
- where we can gather together in celebration and proclaim our faith as vibrant communities

We also need people capable of supporting our priests in enriching the experience of our faith such that greater engagement becomes a reality beyond that of our weekly duty. Our parishioners also need to be encouraged to contribute on a practical level, using their God given skills to maintain and enhance our new communities.

To achieve this we need to consider the resources we have and seek to deploy them to deliver the future we need.

The contention of this group is that our current model with a large number of parishes each served by its own parish priest and having its own parish facilities dilutes our ability to move

forward inasmuch as it ties up our financial capacity in buildings that our reducing parishioner base cannot afford.

Instead, we suggest

- investing in a smaller number of fit for purpose facilities
- with a baseline level of excellent provision
- possibly supported by paid staff

Such environments could provide support and development potential for priests and be springboards for engaged Catholics to pray, be formed together and engage in collective opportunities to give back via social action outreach.

We dream of engaged communities where parishioners gather in number and where they will know we are Christians.

8. Action Plan

1. Transparency – Each parish’s annual financial performance will be delivered to its parishioners alongside a short report within 6 months of the financial year end (i.e. by 30th September each year).
2. Training – to March 24 and ongoing- In the light of the limited understanding across the Diocese of the overlap and interdependency of parish and diocesan funding we believe that serious training/guidance is required on to how an effective finance committee can be established and maintained in each parish, collection of parishes or community
3. Consultation- to March 24- Initial period of consultation covering
 - a. the principle of establishing new communities which would initially be groups of existing parishes but which will develop over a period of not more than two years into integrated communities of faith
 - i. what may be the Canon Law implications?
 - ii. the provision that will be required both pastorally and operationally to be an effective missionary community and what that may cost?
 - iii. how such provision may be funded and how resources may be realised to provide the funds to ensure the right provision can be made available?
 - b. What would be a reasonable timescale to implement such a plan?
 - c. Where should we start? We envisage that there will be benefits for a group of parishes to become the pilot community. The investment available could be significant including:
 - i. Property investment to ensure that the chosen environment(s) is appropriate
 - ii. Local staffing – youth worker/ older age support worker/ compliance support worker /musical director?
 - iii. Resource – possible need for a minibus/driver ministry if there is a need to bring parishioners to a church that could be further away?
 - d. Agreement on continued close control of expenditure outside the pilot community during the pilot stage
 - e. The need for representative consultative groups that can effectively communicate to and from the parishes and will have the credibility to provide a basis for future decision making. Effective two way communication will need to be at the heart of each of the steps of the Action Plan and how this

should be delivered needs to be a key part of the consultation process to ensure that voices are heard and trust maintained

- f. The foregoing should result in a detailed action plan (by March 24) which is kept under constant review and is overseen by a regularly updated steering group which could be a development of the existing Synod Working Group.
4. Pilot – April 24 to March 25 Once we have established that there is an appetite for the model of communities we are advocating (or a variation thereof) there will be a need to pilot this in a particular area (see above)
5. Review and Refine – April 25 to September 25
There will be a need to critically review the findings from the Pilot- we would use the representative consultative groups to do this as part of the preparation for roll out
6. Roll out - Plan and Consult – October 25 to March 26
7. Roll Out – Implementation – From April 26

Appendix 1

The Diocesan shared central costs are broadly split as follows:-

SUMMARISED CENTRAL EXPENDITURE £	Actual 2020	Actual 2021	Actual 2022	Budget 2023
Diocesan Schools Service	347295	234155	271303	319364
Pastoral and Commission	402288	300368	336919	496939
Active Clergy	314741	237921	341022	313592
Sick & Retired Clergy	594757	492031	478013	508580
Clerical Education including Student Priests	165610	43194	81872	113322
Diocesan Overheads	779363	658222	897919	1147476
CENTRAL EXPENDITURE	2604054	1965891	2407048	2899273

These costs have varied over the last few years due to CV19 and the associated government support for payroll costs. The costs included in the Budget 2022/23 and the changes from Actual 19/20 can be summarised as follows

Diocesan Schools Service- The department provides advice and support to our Catholic Schools. It has been restructured at lower cost resulting in a lower 2022/23 cost than in 2019/20- the £319k includes £25k for the appointment of a Choral Director- this is covered completely by an external grant from The Hamish Ogston Foundation

Pastoral and Commission- This includes the costs of Safeguarding, Youth Ministry & Formation of the Laity. The increases from 2019/20 relate to Mission Northampton and Caritas Northampton

Active Clergy- This includes the cost of running Bishop's House, the Clergy Welfare Dept and any additional costs associated with those Priests with Curial Functions such as the Vicar General, Bishop's Council and the Bishop's Private Secretary

Sick & Retired Clergy- This relates to the cost of looking after our Sick and Retired Clergy. This includes pension costs and in some cases property payments (either external or to parishes). It also includes the Diocesan contribution to the cost of care for some Priests.

Diocesan Overheads- This includes the cost of the Finance Dept, Property Dept, Communications Office, Legal & Professional Fees and Investment Costs (loan interest/bank charges/investment managers and investment property costs). The increase since 2019/20 relate to staffing increases (additional staff in the Finance and Property depts, new IT Manager & Fundraising Manager), a new finance system as the existing one is no longer supported, interest costs on £3m Bank loans taken out to provide liquidity, higher costs of maintaining our investment properties.