

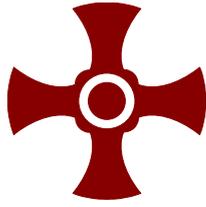
FORWARD TOGETHER
IN
HOPE

Pointing the Way

*Reflections from
across the Diocese*



DIOCESE OF **Hexham & Newcastle**



No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No programme accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

*Attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed while celebrating Mass on 24 March 1980.
Used by Bishop Séamus at the launch of Forward Together in Hope on 16 July 2014.*

Introduction

At the beginning of January 2017, the *Forward Together in Hope* team sent a 189 page Report entitled ***Pointing the Way*** to Bishop Séamus and the Diocesan Board of Trustees. We all know the results of their study of the second part of the document. They decided that the 150 parishes in our diocese would be gathered together into 18 Partnerships, and a great deal of work is now going on to help partnerships develop in the future. The first part, however, a mere 28 pages long, was a summary of what we heard as a result of the external listening exercise our diocese had experienced over the previous two years. We took into account the reflections from the 149 Parish Questionnaire Returns, the comments of over 5,000 young people, 1,720 individuals and the 25% of the priests and deacons who wrote to us. We benefited from the notes from the 18 Deanery and 5 Vicariate meetings as well as comments following the Council of Priests, Youth Council, Council of the Laity and other meetings such as the Heads of Departments, the Curia Staff and many individual letters, emails and conversations. Our extensive consultation revealed real evidence of dedication and commitment from clergy and people and a yearning for a vision to sustain us all into the future during this time of decline in the number of people who gather for worship. What follows is a summary of everything discussed at the January meeting and is endorsed by both Bishop Séamus and our Trustees.



Partnership Development

In recent weeks, Partnership Deans have been appointed and the document ***Pointing the Way – Partnership Guidelines First Steps*** is now available throughout the diocese. By mid-June there will be a fledgling Partnership Development Group assisting every worshipping community to work more closely with others and to share human and material resources, so that we become stronger and better equipped for furthering the Kingdom of God. In the near future there will be more detailed guidelines to support the development of Partnerships.

Formation

Many of the Parish Questionnaires referred to the need for much more ‘Formation’, to help us understand our faith and how to be better Christians, and for it to happen locally. If this is to develop, then there will need to be more people trained to lead. By September there will be in place a ***‘Menu’*** of possibilities open to parishioners to

assist the preparation of leaders to help deliver what is required. Ideally, there will be opportunities for each person to explore what kind of ‘Formation’ is right for them, with the added need for some people to become more immersed in ‘Leadership’ formation. There is a commitment to ensure that more opportunities for clergy and lay people to experience Formation together will be made available, so that we can all grow in trust and deepen our commitment to sharing ministry and responsibility. The emphasis in every Formation Programme is to enable us to become more committed disciples of Jesus. The Board of Trustees is aware that there are financial resource implications for many developments. It is also the case that once Partnerships have initiated their Partnership Account, then more opportunities for formation will become more available to more people.

Clergy

You may have read in *What Our Clergy are Saying* of the anxieties and hopes of our clergy. The move to working in partnership is something very new for us all and some clergy may find this a very new challenge. There is a need to discover what support will be needed for priests, including those who have retired. In the years to come, there may well be a greater focus on the health of priests and support for those who have significant physical and mental health needs. We also need to ensure that priests are released for further training so that we can all benefit from the richness of new experience.

The move from 'parish to partnership' is something unique to the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. Those in formation to be ordained priests in our diocese may need to be appraised of what it is they're coming into. Expectations on them will be very different from previous generations.

Once again, there is an awareness of financial implications in providing all of this support.

Young People

Every one of your Parish Questionnaires referred to young people and the future. There is a sense of helplessness and deep anxiety about how to engage with young people in worship. Given that in some of our congregations over 70% of those worshipping are over 70 years of age, there is a real fear that some communities will not exist in a few years' time. There are many clear indications about what young people themselves think in the report *The Way We See It*, reflecting the views of over 5,000 of them. There was general acknowledgement that the work of YMT is valuable and there is great respect for our Catholic Schools. However there remains a huge question about young people worshipping in the community. It raises the question about what regular worshippers would be prepared to 'sacrifice' to

enable young people to feel part of regular worship. Some people wonder if we will even have Catholic Secondary Schools in the future given the rate of lapsation for young people particularly around the ages of 10 and 11. There was some discussion about the need for some radical fresh thinking about how to engage with young people – and once again, there may be financial implications resulting from this.

Coherent and Integrated Communication

As the discussion about Partnerships deepened it became clear that there would be need for a much more sophisticated communication system throughout the diocese. This would attempt to ensure a more open and collaborative culture in the way we share information and good practice. There will be a need for better communication between partnerships, a more efficient website and databases that actually communicate with each other. We may well need a platform to help us deliver distance learning and a more coherent approach to the use of social media. The process has already begun to choose a consultant to help discern our needs across the diocese. There is also real potential for training in communication for people in Partnerships. Some funding for the consultation and training within this particular project has been provided by a Trust.

Worship

The 10 headings in the Parish Questionnaire were there to encourage us all to explore how viable our communities were and to help us imagine how they would flourish in the future. It is clear that some communities are blessed with competent musicians and readers, as well as a good number of ministers, catechists, welcomers, members of various councils and committees.



Some communities struggle with no altar servers or musicians. There will be opportunities from now on for communities to become more conscious of the way they support one another. Some people seem to imagine that if we improve the way we celebrate Mass, improve the quality of music, reading and preaching, then fewer people would vote with their feet. On the other hand, if there were flourishing communities, then vibrant liturgical worship would inevitably flow from them. Some communities have no opportunity for Children's Liturgy and there seems to be little opportunity for the way young people worship in a school setting to influence worship in the community.

A great deal of good work is done in relation to formation and training, but if more is to be done to support local communities to develop their worship, especially with Mass being celebrated less often and in fewer churches, then there will need to be specific training and formation to enable it to happen.

Radical Hospitality and Inclusion

As mentioned above, many communities have 'Welcomers' at the entrance to the Church. Some see this role as simply the distribution of hymnbooks and bulletins. Some wily communities only distribute the bulletin at the end of Mass to avoid it being read during the homily! Some have young people helping because 'it gives them something to do...'. Others see it as a role for mature, pastorally sensitive adults who genuinely commit to being open and hospitable to all who attend, and are aware of those who are missing. There is much to be done to make the most of this particular dimension of Church life.

Then there are others who are beginning to ask: 'How does our community offer the compassionate welcome of Jesus to all?' Some communities wonder about how to be '*on the streets*', to use the words of Pope Francis rather than *become unhealthy from clinging to its own security*. These individuals

and communities are wondering how we don't just make our buildings friendly to those with disability but how we all become more welcoming to those who are poor, in 'irregular' relationships, come from other cultures, are part of the LGBT community, are homeless, recently from prison and so on.

Very few churches now have 'crying rooms' – but there is still a responsibility to make families with very young children feel at home. In the world we live in today in our culture, it may be unreasonable for us to expect children to sit still for more than a few minutes.

Outreach

In the Parish Questionnaire there were a number of things gathered together under this heading: Ecumenical Relations, Interfaith Relations; how we engage with those in our local community; how we engage with people in the wider world.

Given that the rhythm of our lives as Christians is to move from being 'in Communion' in worship to being 'Missionary' in the world, there were far more comments about Worship and church affairs than there were about 'Outreach'. Some people noted that 'God so loved the world that he sent his son...'. It is a huge culture shift to move from seeing ourselves as people who 'go to church' to people who 'are Church' wherever we are.

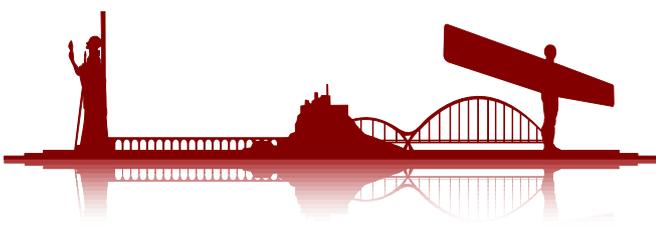


Do we see our civic duties and our commitment to good citizenship to be as important as our 'religious duties' and indeed as 'part of them' as our Bishops said in 1996 in *The Common Good*? Do we believe that we are as baptised in our place of work and in the street as we are when we gather for worship?

To many people in our world, division among Christians is a scandal. As practicing Christians become fewer in our land, it would make good sense to discover how to witness to Jesus together. Some would say there should be no decision about ceasing to use a church for worship in the future without consultation throughout the local Partnership and without discussion with local ecumenical partners. Perhaps we can learn much from each other about sustaining small worshipping communities – and even explore the possibility of sharing premises.

In our world there is a great need for 'People of Faith' to come together to witness to Faith. It is important for us to pray 'in the presence of one another'. We need to affirm religious freedom, defy all racial prejudice and support one another in the right to worship.

There are all sorts of initiatives being taken in our communities, including the work of St Cuthbert's Care and many parish initiatives, and they could usefully be shared across the diocese. It may be that in future some consideration is given to establishing a Diocesan **CARITAS** to help coordinate work across Partnerships. As we come to take *Laudato Si* more seriously, then we will learn a great deal about listening to the cries of the earth and the poor in our part of the world.



Diocesan Services

The *Forward Together in Hope* team has had excellent support from colleagues in our Diocesan Services. Every parish has benefited from the research done to provide all the Information for their parish **Data Pack**. Many Heads of Diocesan Departments and members of staff have contributed in meetings and more informally over the last three years. There is a genuine openness from all to see how they can contribute to the establishment and support of Partnerships. They see themselves as being able to serve communities as well as ensure that our diocese remains legally compliant and constantly professional in all the services it has to provide.

Human Resources

There will be some discussion in the future as to how best the services can indeed contribute to the establishment and support of Partnerships.

There is bound to be an increasing call on this particular part of Diocesan Services. As Partnerships develop and more people volunteer for different roles or are employed with particular responsibilities, the Human Resources Department will undoubtedly be involved to help ensure that the advertising, recruitment, selection, support and appraisal are all in line with proper procedures and employment law.

Spirituality

Every stage of *Forward Together in Hope* has been underpinned by prayer and liturgical resources. Many communities have benefited from 12 hour or 24 hour prayer vigils. The Year of Mercy liturgies helped to bring various Diocesan Services together to encourage reflection and prayer. The Spirituality Network is gradually expanding with room for every Partnership to be represented and so more able to participate and learn from others.

Holy Island

One of the more specific topics that arose during the discussion about Partnerships was Holy Island, and how our presence at this unique spot with its extraordinarily rich heritage can contribute to a deeper understanding of our faith and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. A small working group is already beginning to look at how best to use the resource we have available on Lindisfarne.

Inner City Mission

This is another specific project which grew out of the suggestions made in the Partnership Proposal documents. The parishes of St Dominic, St Andrew, St Joseph in Gateshead, St Mary's Cathedral and the University Chaplaincy are uniquely placed to serve the centre of Newcastle and Gateshead.

The exploration of what might be possible is in a very early stage of development.

Diocesan Finance

There has been mention above from time to time about the recognition that there will be 'resourcing implications' for further developments. In *Diocesan Facts and Figures* published in 2015, we made very clear statements about the financial state of the diocese. Our overall surplus last year was just over £64k, which does not leave too much room for new initiatives. The Trustees are keen to explore current expenditure and how to generate income in the future.

Implementation Group

Any one of these headings could be worked up into a substantial project on its own. It may be that this is exactly what will happen in the future. Now that *Forward Together in Hope* as a separate programme is about to conclude, Bishop Séamus and the Trustees are seeking to establish an Implementation Group to oversee ways in which all of these concerns and ideas can be respected and taken forward.

Diocesan Strategic Planning

It may be that this Implementation Group will be in a position within a couple of years to bring together all of these strands, initiatives, ideas and projects into a coherent plan. If this is the case, then we will all benefit from the stronger sense of direction and willingness to work together in the diocese to actively witness to Jesus in our world today.

We all need to pray for our diocese and for the work of this Implementation Group. It will have a wide range of issues to oversee and help bring together. The purpose of it all is to ensure that we can use our energy and imagination to explore how to be disciples in our changing world.

Who knows, as the number of priests and worshippers declines, it may well be that we become clearer about how we do witness to the Lord and work much more closely with others to identify signs of the Kingdom in our world and then affirm them and celebrate them. We might then show that we too love the world and are committed to making it a better place for everyone to live in.

Jim O'Keefe
May 2017



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