

**Questions about Forward Together in Hope  
From the Council of Laity Meeting on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2014**

Group 1      How do we assure people that this process will *change* what we do?

Cardinal Hume used to say; 'When I hear the phrase; 'Something has to change around here...' I always get anxious; because what that really means is that **I** must change.' **Forward Together in Hope** is an invitation to everyone in the diocese to become more aware of the reality of our diocese. The graphs in the leaflet show how the number of worshipping Catholic has gone down from around 100,000 to just under 40,000 in 35 years. Changes are happening around us. The other graph shows that we now have less than a third of the number of priests working in the diocese than we had in the early 1950s. Yet we have many more church buildings.

Change will happen even if we do nothing. **Forward Together in Hope** is the initiative taken by Bishop Seamus to ensure that every one of us has the opportunity to become more aware of the reality facing us, diminishing numbers and income, but equally, to become aware of the power of the Holy Spirit urging us to take the risk to become more committed disciples of Jesus in our changing world.

We can reassure people that we will all be helped to see what resources we have available, and we can all explore how best to use them.

This doesn't mean that everyone will be assured, change is very difficult, leaves us feeling vulnerable, we will have to support each other throughout. Bishop Seamus is committed to looking very attentively to whatever conclusions and recommendations emerge over the next couple of years.

Group 2      How will we resource/put the opinion of young people into practice?

One of the great strengths of the Catholic Church, is that it is most effective locally. It is true that we are blessed with a Youth Ministry Team and everything they bring to us. It is also true, that whatever finance is available within a parish community – it is available to the parish community. In other words, it may be that initiatives supporting the views, opinions, and aspirations of young people can be identified locally, and the local parish/worshipping community be encouraged to help resource them. It is true that one of the major headings in the **Forward Together in Hope** project is about Young People, and how parishes currently encourage and enable young people's views and ideas to be respected. Hopefully the energy and imagination of young people will be highlighted and supported.

One interesting comment from a young person struck home that Saturday afternoon... 'We haven't experienced a declining Church....it had declined when we came into it...' Perhaps the realism behind this remark could inspire older people to listen carefully to what younger people are saying.

Group 3      What is the detail behind the questions? How can you ensure that parishes will be as open as possible? Will there be guidelines to show how the form will be filled in?

The core of the self-assessment process is the 10 headings referred to in the leaflet. Under each of those headings every worshipping community will receive whatever information that is held centrally in our diocesan office about it. There will be a series of questions inviting the community to come together and be as honest and open as they can be in the responses. We intend, in the New Year, to begin some training for lay people throughout the Dioceses to assist parishes as they work through the Questionnaire.

It is conceivable that if communities are wondering about their future, they could indeed make up answers! A bit of native wit, checking things with neighbouring communities and the opportunity to check back on things will at least minimise the possibility – any 'temptation to deviance' will simply delay the future. It makes far more sense for a community that might be struggling to ask for help rather than to deny reality.

There will be a booklet provided after Christmas which will describe, in more detail, the thinking behind the headings – but without the actual questions. This will enable communities to look into the areas that will be explored later in the Spring/early Summer.

Group 4      How do we ensure that we do not spend money now, or in the near future, on buildings, especially on things that cannot easily be deferred such as electric wiring, and then close them down in 3 years' time, or find ourselves forced to keep open the 'wrong' ones having spent money.

Since the Financial Crisis in 2007/8, there has been a moratorium throughout the diocese on expenditure except for emergencies, compliance with the law or safeguarding. This is still the case.

However, it would be very narrow to presume that 'Finance' is the only or the main criterion for future decisions. There is no question that it is crucial, but it is not alone. It is unlikely that money spent now would guarantee security in the future. There may well be comments about 'throwing good money after bad...' but in order to ensure that there is an equitable approach throughout the diocese, emergencies need to be addressed, even in a minimal way - partial re-wiring, for example.

We're conscious that while this is a very perceptive question, ***Forward Together in Hope*** cannot provide solutions to individual queries. It will always be exploring how local communities move toward solutions that fit them, enabling them to be viable and flourish in the future.

Group 5      How do we remain positive and focussed throughout the journey?

Jesus remained focussed on his unique vocation by spending a great deal of time with Abba...As a good Jew he would pray the psalms, know his Hebrew Scriptures. He spent nights in prayer, alone with the Father. He visited the Temple along with his Jewish sisters and brothers.

He also spent an extraordinary amount of time with the outcasts and the sinners. He chose their company, driven by his faith that **every** human being is a son or daughter of his Father. Those who were outcast had their dignity removed from them, Jesus affirmed their dignity.

Jesus also envisaged a way of life, a society, a 'kingdom' in which no one was excluded.

Perhaps we maintain our vision by being open to the Holy Spirit in prayer, appreciating the risks Jesus took throughout his life, recognising his constant movement 'outwards' to other people. This is not easy. We have been brought up to be profoundly dedicated to 'our parish' – the danger is that we have become 'parochial', not looking outwards, not heeding what is going on in our neighbourhood, not taking the risk the Lord is asking of us.

Perhaps the quick response is: 'Pray, and pray alongside the Jesus who leads us into his kingdom, not ours'.

Group 6      How can you convince people NOW is the time?

Very many people have a sense that 'something has to happen'. Indeed most people might realise that – until it comes to affect their own way of life.

If we begin with the premise that this exercise is fundamentally to encourage people to discover how to become more committed disciples of Jesus – then it is always NOW – we're always called to deepen our commitment.

If it is to convince people that we are facing a crisis of personnel, - not just priests, but fewer people as well, then telling them is a very first step The you in the question cannot simply be the two staff driving ***Forward Together in Hope...***the you is just that – every one of us.

But again it demands honesty and openness. The man with the one talent thought he'd done the right thing – by doing nothing – doing nothing is hardly a creative response to the reality in our diocese.

Group 7      What can be done about people who will not 'let go' – who have done jobs for ever?

The Wisdom of Solomon evades me!

Isn't it interesting that it is usually other people who have been in jobs too long! Secretaries of committees, flower arranging, sacristans and so on... Perhaps one way is by example. Pope Benedict certainly led by example when it came to retiring from a rather key post.

In his address to priests and people at Cardinal Hume School on 16 July, Bishop Seamus said: 'The danger is, if you're in a job too long it becomes your territory and you begin to defend it, it becomes 'yours' and no one else's, no one can invade or become involved. The important thing is to encourage other people to become involved, walk with them as they become more confident and then look around to see if there are other initiatives that could be encouraged. In this way, more people are involved and people feel free to become involved. There will always be opportunities for people with energy to make a difference.

(Incidentally, Bishop Seamus' full address is on the ***Forward Together in Hope*** section of the Diocesan website - [www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk](http://www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk) - you may want to check it all out).

Group 8      How is ***Forward Together in Hope*** addressing the issue re Laity/Clergy and their two separate Councils? Is there a canonical problem?

The brief answer is: It isn't. But that's not to say that it isn't a very important question. ***Forward Together in Hope*** has obviously helped trigger this question to be asked once again. It seems that it has been asked in the past, and there have been a couple of attempts to bring the two Councils together (on at least one occasion with the Youth Council) in the past. But it seems they didn't lead to very much.

A couple of people at the Council of the Laity suggested that **both** Councils need to be reviewed so that their purpose can be clarified – and then it may be possible to find a way for priests and people to actually listen to each other in this kind of forum.

To be honest, if there is a Canonical Problem, you'd be better off consulting a Canon Lawyer!

Jim O'Keefe    November 2014