**Reflections on Questions and Points raised at Gateshead and South Tyneside Vicariate Meeting at St Joseph’s Gateshead**

**29 September 2016**

**Does ‘Participation’ end at midday on the 27 November?**

No! We are all aware of the decline in the number of parishioners and clergy. The very heart of Forward Together in Hope is the call to every Catholic in the diocese to think again about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a viable and flourishing community. Just because a community does not have a resident priest does not mean that it cannot flourish, but if it is to flourish it will need to benefit from having leaders who can work alongside the priest to enable good things to happen. The Forward Together in Hope programme is not just about geography and sorting out which communities could work together, it is also about encouraging lay people to play their full part in the community. So, the whole experience of working together, developing leaders, enabling everyone who comes together to celebrate mass to become active disciples is never ending.

In practice there will need to be discussions between the Forward Together in Hope Team and individual communities to clarify their proposals for future working together. From January 2017 there will be a need for active participation by as many people as possible to ensure the development of fruitful and effective relationships between local communities.

In so many ways, partnership has really only just begun.

**There are 5 parishes willing to work together, do we need to look further ahead?**

Three weeks ago we had 101 active priests in our diocese. We now have 98. We expect that in 14 years’ time, in 2030, we will have around 50 active priests. As we work through this process, we need to look further afield and further ahead. We need to ensure that there are enough resources to enable communities to be viable and to flourish well into the future.

If there are neighbouring parish communities which are reluctant to consider working more closely together, then it’s not likely that they can be forced. However, once all responses are in and we have worked out how each parish sees itself in the future and we prepare the Flexible Partnership Plan for the Bishop and the Diocesan Board, there will be no parishes excluded from it. Every parish will be part of a larger ‘Partnership’. It may take time for some communities to feel able to explore closer relationships with their neighbours, but they will have the opportunity to do so in the future.

Obviously the best thing is for communities to begin to explore how they can work together to share their resources for the benefit of everyone around. In the ‘Our Partnership Proposals’ document, there is room (in Section 1.4) for a community to offer an alternative suggestion about their future partners, and we will certainly look carefully at what is written there. At the end of the day every parish will be seen as part of a partnership and the best way forward is to be as imaginative and as generous as possible.

**What is the role of the Dean in all of this?**

To date we have had three very useful meetings with our diocesan Episcopal Vicars and Deans with Bishop Seamus present at two of them. We have another arranged for 24 November with the Bishop joining us again. The Deans were extremely helpful in September/October 2015 when we arranged meetings in every deanery in the diocese. We see the local deans as co-workers with us in helping the whole diocese move from parishes to partnership. There are now 17 deaneries in the Diocese and we rely on the local dean being far more aware of the local church than we could possibly be in the *Forward Together in Hope* team. The Deans and the Episcopal Vicars can help local communities make the most of the tasks ahead of us in the weeks and months to come.

**Can we have access to the ‘Observations’ of other parishes.**

We are certainly encouraging parishes to share their ‘Observations’ documents with each other. Because we want to respect the fact that all data and information is unique to each community, we won’t simply make this information available to anyone who wants it. But we are more than willing to make it available once we know a parish is willing to share it. So if you want the information about neighbouring parishes please ask them for permission, or ask us to get permission for you and then we can make it available.

Many areas of the Diocese have made arrangements for the Observations to be shared and it makes such good sense to develop a clearer understanding of the gifts and talents and resources available to one another.

**The role of Schools**

One Secondary school suggested that the School ‘a church without walls’ could become a catalyst in bringing communities together and offering opportunities for them to meet to explore the way forward. In a written contribution there is a suggestion that the discussion about Multi Academy Trusts could offer the opportunity for people and priests to come together to explore the future. One School is considering offering its facilities to enable parishes across the deanery to gather for further reflection. This could be an occasion when parishes bring copies of their ‘Observations’ for others to explore.

In the Questionnaire every community worked on this time last year, question 5b asked: ‘How can closer relationships be developed between the worshipping community, the school(s) the young people attend, and families that belong to both?’ The responses from the 150 parishes indicate that there is considerable room for exploration as to how best they can come closer together.

**In the Priest and People partnership arrangements, are there any areas from which people are ‘debarred’ – with particular reference to responsibility for Finance?**

The only committee a parish priest is obliged to have is a Finance Committee. So ultimately he has responsibility. However, good practice would indicate that an active group of informed parishioners are totally aware of all financial activity in the parish with the parish priest and one other member signing every cheque. This is one of the areas where the commitment and expertise of parishioners can relieve the parish priest of a non-essential burden. The priest would need to sign every cheque and know what is being paid for, but can be totally free of the minutiae of parish finances.

**Have there been any geographical changes which would restrict who parishes talk to in relation to future partnerships?**

One of the phrases we have been using over recent months is that ‘the only fixed boundary in the diocese is the diocesan boundary – we cannot mess with the North Sea, the Pennines or the two rivers, the Tweed and the Tees.’ This is to stimulate ideas and discussion throughout the diocese. I am aware that the two deaneries in Northumberland are becoming one deanery. But it may be perfectly possible for people and priests together to explore where their future lies. There may be ‘proposals’ at large about where communities might fit more creatively in the future, but I’m not aware of any firm and definitive decisions being made. The vitally important thing is that there is open and honest discussion and that as much time as possible is taken to make the most sensible suggestions for the future.

It is also true that the wishes of everyone cannot possibly be fulfilled, there will be contradictory suggestions and decisions will be made. But in every case, the reasons for decisions being made must be given to help people come to terms with the decision.

**We came looking for information about which parishes will be ‘closing’ – we have not heard anything new…**(applause from some people present**). In a written submission it was noted that the process has been too slow and repetitive and ‘we need to know with whom we will be in partnership…**

It seems that the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle is unique in its approach to what to do in the face of the decline in the number of priests and parishioners. From the very beginning of the process (two years past July), Bishop Seamus said that he wanted it to be ‘transparent’ and take place in every parish in the Diocese at the same time. There are 150 parishes in the diocese and no two are alike. Some areas of the Diocese feel they are ‘further ahead’ in thinking and planning. Other communities feel that they are not fully aware of what has being going on for the last two years.

We have been totally committed to a process in which as many people as possible in our diocese are helped to become aware of the circumstances we are facing. Every parish was given every piece of information about itself held in our central offices and every parish had the opportunity to share all of this information with all parishioners. An enormous amount of ‘new’ information has been made available to everyone over the last two years.

In other words we are trying to respect the need for everyone to be involved at the same time. This inevitably means that some feel frustrated because they want to move more quickly, others are left wondering what is going on.

Everyone needs to know that major decisions have **NOT** been made. Of course there are emergencies, when a priest dies, for example, then something has to be done more quickly.

After the three and a half day meeting of the Bishop and Board in January, there will be communication about what has happened. No one can predict what the conclusions will be. We will all just have to be patient and await what happens.

Written Questions.

**If there are new partnerships how will they affect school admissions?**

This question has been easily resolved when two or more parishes have come together to create a new parish. A formula of words along the lines of ‘the area covered by the former parish of ‘St so and so’ seems to be enough to delineate the area for school admission.

**In Partnership is it a good idea to share resources, talents, administration, finance etc? How will this support training and who will be responsible for funding initiatives?**

The basic idea behind Partnership is to encourage all the communities in an area to come together to look at how they can support one another and to ensure that worshipping communities can be viable and flourish. It would certainly be worth looking at how communities can share ideas, resources, programmes. If a group of parishes decides that it wanted someone to fulfil a particular responsibility, then the usual work around person specification, job description, conditions of service and so on would have to be done. In fact people who are employed with church responsibility are actually employed by the Diocese, so there would be need to work with the Diocesan Human Resources Department.

Once it is clear what kind of leadership is needed in an area, then it will be possible to explore what kind of training and support will be needed.

**Would it help if we had external facilitators?**

At the present moment many parishes are at very different stages in exploring Partnership and Leadership. There is a rather tight timetable for discussion among communities to prepare for the 27 November deadline. However, once a whole diocesan plan has been prepared and there is as much acceptance of the plan as possible and final decisions have been made, it may well be that the use of facilitators would be a very good way to help all move forward. They may also be able to contribute to enabling communities live with the changes that are inevitable in every part of the Diocese.

**When might we know about churches where mass will no longer take place?**

Over the last two years every parish community has had the opportunity to look at itself and explore how it can flourish in the future. This has included asking every parish to look to the future and show how it can ensure that it has enough parishioners, planning for future ministers and leaders, ideas about future worship needs and finance. It may be that a community comes to the realisation that it will not be able to manage on its own and will seek to work much more closely with a neighbouring community.

It is possible, however, that a parish community is faced by an emergency, with a priest becoming seriously ill or retiring. If a major decision is to be made about a particular community and its Church, then there is a thorough process involving the local Dean and Episcopal Vicar ensuring that the whole community has the opportunity to explore what it all means in practice.

As regards the Forward Together in Hope process more generally, Bishop Seamus and the Diocesan Board are meeting in January. This will be the first time they will have the opportunity to consider suggestions and proposals from right across the diocese. I imagine that after that meeting there will some indication as to what might be possible in the future, including suggestions about our churches and how they can remain centres of worship even if it is not possible for Mass to be celebrated there on Sundays.

**Due to its complexity we feel the timescale to instigate a viable partnership is unrealistic. What help is there to speed up this process?**

It is true that the deadline of midday 27 November comes closer. What is required for that deadline is a proposition from possible ‘partnership’ areas of the parishes that see them themselves working more closely together in the future. The suggestions made will be looked at very carefully by Bishop Seamus and the Board in January. It is only then that different partnerships can actually begin the very early stages of exploring how they can work more closely together. Some areas may develop quite quickly, others may well take much longer. The November date is simply the time when the first proposal is identified. It isn’t far off, but it is only the very first stage of the process.

The local Dean may well be best person to help and encourage communities to take a long view. We need to remember that we have fewer than 25 priests under 50 years of age and at present 3 students in training for the priesthood.

Jim O’Keefe