**QUESTIONS OBSERVATIONS AND RESPONSES**

**Open Meetings at the Lancastrian Suite, Gateshead**

**and Carmel College, Darlington**

**9 February 2017**

**Questions from Gateshead**

1. **Do these new Partnerships supersede the function of the existing Deaneries? When do the new Partnerships / Deaneries take effect?**

**Where more than one Dean is involved in a particular partnership, how will it work?**

The first 28 pages of the **Pointing the Way** Report to the Bishop and Board covered a very wide range of topics which could not possibly be addressed in the three and a half days of the residential meeting. All of the above questions were raised there and the decision the Board made was to establish a group chaired by Fr Jeff Dodds, the Episcopal Vicar in the Cleveland and South Durham area to explore these and other questions. This particular group will also look at the relationship of Partnerships to the Council of Priests and the Council of the Laity as well as other Councils in the Diocese. It is hoped that the first reflections on these questions will be explored with Bishop Seamus and the Board on 7 March and again at an Extraordinary meeting of the Board on 29 March.

We hope that as soon as there is clarity around these questions, we will be in a position to offer some guidance on ‘Early Steps’ regarding the development of Partnerships.

1. **Get on with it and let’s begin to see what it feels like. Pray Constantly. Advertise Mass times so we can visit our new ‘Parish’.**

**Develop an appropriate leadership – consult and keep us all on board.**

Praying constantly has to be a good start, as well as beginning to discover what goes on in other parts of your Partnership. Many parish communities shared the ‘Observations’ we provided in response to the Parish Questionnaires and everyone seemed to benefit from that sharing. In the near future there will be some pointers as to how Partnerships might begin to shape leadership so that communities can work more closely together. It might be important that those initial ‘leaders’ see themselves as beginning to get things going rather than see themselves in that role for all eternity. Many Parish Questionnaires did raise the point that some people have been in leadership roles for many decades, perhaps it isn’t just the clergy who need to reflect on how to ‘let things go’.

1. **How will the priest population be mapped across the partnerships now and over the next ten years?**

**What will be the immediate impact on Sunday Masses?**

**What will be the impact on Mass Centres from a gift aid small donation scheme? (Revenue from the HMRC)?**

**What is the perceived impact on the size of the worshipping community going forward?**

Over the last two years the number of ‘active’ priests in the diocese has gone down from 106 to 96. It is quite likely that there will be less than 50 in 13 years’ time. At the same time, the number of worshipping Catholics in our diocese has decreased at the rate of 1000 a year over the last 3 years. According to the latest Northern Catholic Calendar, the number now stands at 33,464. Bishop Séamus has said on a number of occasions that it is inevitable that Mass will be celebrated less often and that there will be some churches were Mass will not be celebrated on Sundays. He has also said that it is very important that lay men and women become more involved and are trained to lead worship in our churches, that local communities need to be supported and that we need to look to multipurpose use for some of our buildings (on 16 July 2014 at Cardinal Hume School at the launch of Forward Together in Hope).

Ideally, once Partnerships begin to develop their own identity, they could begin to look carefully at which churches would be able to be used for the celebration of Mass depending on the number of priests available in the future. This is a very big ask of local communities, to seriously consider whether their local church might not be one where Mass is celebrated on a Sunday. It is inevitable that in some places (and this has happened twice in the south of the diocese over the last few months) there will be radical reduction in the number of Masses celebrated when a priest dies or is incapacitated and cannot be replaced. It will be very important for Partnerships to begin to plan for reduction rather than have to react to it.

It is impossible to predict the number of worshippers in an area in the future. However, as noted above, the annual diocesan figure is in decline. If parishioners look at page 9 of the Parish Questionnaire (Number 2.16) you will see your estimate of the numbers of people according to their age. When we consider the number of parishes with 70% of parishioners over the age of 70, then it is possible for communities to draw their own conclusions.

Currently, a Gift Aid Small Donation Scheme claim can only be made in relation to a building that hosts six or more relevant activities in a year, with at least 10 people in attendance on each occasion/ For our purposes, ‘relevant activities’ includes the celebration of Mass, the celebration of Word and Communion, and other communal worship activities, but does not include simple social events and Parish meetings. If worship transfers from building A to building B, then a claim may no longer be possible. In relation to building B, it will depend upon whether the existing claim for Building B is already at, or close to, the maximum amount.

1. **How do we get young ones into our parishes?**

**How will our parishes survive looking at the age profile of tonight’s meeting? How many children from our Catholic Secondary Schools attend church?**

If only there was a simple answer to that first question! One of the very many topics noted by Bishop Seamus and the Board was ‘engagement with young people’. In the very near future, there will be a specific project exploring this whole question about young people and their engagement with the worshipping community. We will have to see what the impact of this is in the years to come.

As noted above, the age profile of our worshipping communities is quite high. The information you made available in the Parish Questionnaire will give some indication of what might be happening in years to come. It might be hard for us to face it, but it is inevitable that numbers will continue to decline. This is one of the reasons why moving to work together in partnership with other communities will help our communities to flourish in the future.

In **The Way We See It,** the resumé of the 5482 young people who completed their online survey, we discovered that ‘just over half of those completing the survey (52.8%) have never regularly attended a Catholic Church. 11.5% attend most weekends, while a further 8.2% attend at least once a month. 27.6% used to go to a Catholic Church at least once a month, but no longer go’. This is on page 5 of the document, which is available via your parish priest or parish representative, or you can find it all on line on [www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk](http://www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk)

1. **How do partnerships affect the existing deaneries?**

**Do partnerships ‘trump’ deaneries?**

**Will deaneries have less of an importance?**

A deanery is simply the name for a collection of individual parishes. A Partnership is something very different. A Partnership is a group of parishes agreeing to work together. A partnership looks to the future when all sorts of programmes, gifts, talents, financial and physical resources (like church buildings) can be shared for the benefit of more people. It’ s not so much about ‘trumping’ (an interesting word in the light of what is happening in the USA), more a question of seeking a much more efficient way of harnessing our resources for the good of the Church and so enabling us to become more intentional witnesses to Jesus in our world today.

It is very early days, but it may be that what deaneries have been will become far less important over time. It is interesting that there is no reference to deaneries at all in the Code of Canon Law. Bishops can use them if they are a help in managing the work of the diocese.

1. **Can I ask as a mother of two boys with various pressures on them, socially and practically, will there always be Masses available on Saturday evening, Sunday morning and Sunday evening in my area of N?**

**Are there any changes to our primary schools and will partnerships affect feeder schools to Secondary Schools?**

**How will parishes and schools be kept together?**

It will be clear from the above that Mass will be celebrated less often in the future, but it is hopefully also clear that when communities work in partnership there is far more chance of decisions being made which benefit more people in the area. Every Partnership will need to review its capacity to ensure that as far as possible, the celebration of Mass is available for as many as possible.

The move from ‘Parishes to Partnership’ will have no impact at all on either primary or secondary schools. Catchment areas to both will remain the same as they are at present.

It was very clear from the Parish Questionnaires that the relationship between ‘the parish’ and the local primary school was usually good, sometime very good. The relationship between local worshipping communities and secondary schools, however, was often very weak. It may be that the move from Parishes to Partnership will provide an incentive for communities and secondary schools to wonder about how their relationship could be better. It may be that as a Partnership develops there is a commitment to exploring how this relationship could be deepened.

1. **What about priests and deacons?**

**Very worrying time and fraught with difficulty to set up partnerships with unknown personal futures.**

**‘Do it now’ is a mantra – consistent basic principle being voiced.**

As diocesan priests we know that we will move from place to place according to the needs of the people of the diocese and this move results from a discussion with the diocesan bishop. So, in theory, diocesan priests are used to the idea of ‘moving’. Permanent deacons, however, may well have to look much more seriously at stability, taking into account, for example, their needs as regards family and work commitments. The deacon’s role is very different from that of a priest: he is much more likely to have to engage with a new parish priest along with all other parishioners, than to have to move into a new place to exercise his ministry. The deacon is not to simply ‘replace’ a priest if a local community no longer has a resident priest. Both priests and deacons will have an expanded ministry geographically, but hopefully it will become simpler as more people become involved in playing a fuller part in managing the needs of the community.

Bishop Séamus and the Board were very aware of all the facts and figures about the future and how it would be better for us, as a diocese, to take immediate action and grasp the nettle now, looking far ahead, rather than do things piecemeal every couple of years. It gives us all more chance to establish something more appropriate to help us cope in the future.

1. **The Partnership proposals seemed to be directed at managing decline and presented no strategy to address and reverse the decline.**

**Does the Diocese want new vocations to the Priesthood?**

**If so, what is its strategy to achieve that? If not, why not?**

**How does the diocese intend to increase the number of practicing Catholics in the diocese?**

**What is its strategy? If neither of the above are feasible, how small will we have to become before it is dissolved and split between Lancaster and /or Middlesbrough and approximately when?**

What is a Diocese? A Diocese isn’t the Bishop and all the priests, nor the Bishop with senior priests or the Bishop and the Board, or those who work in Diocesan offices. The Diocese is the group of people in a particular geographical area who are baptised in the Catholic Church. In other words, ‘the diocese’ isn’t someone else! WE, collectively, are the diocese. So, really, the very good questions noted above might read:

**Do WE want new vocations to the priesthood?** Indeed we do, and this is far more likely to happen once there is strong sense in our communities that we are all called by God to live as witnesses to Jesus in our world today. In communities where there is a strong sense of calling and witness, then it is far more likely that the seeds of vocation to the ordained priesthood and religious life will be sown and hopefully nurtured.

**What is the strategy**? If we look at it this way, then every individual, every community will become more sensitive to the need for the kind of leaders we call ordained priests. Everyone is a ‘vocations director’. As it happens we have two very dedicated priests in our diocese (Frs David Smith and Shaun O’Neill) who will help to nurture those who feel they may be called to ordained priesthood, but they can only work with what comes to them from our communities.

**How small will we become before it is dissolved and split between Lancaster and/or Middlesbrough?**

Interesting! Might it be a good thing for dioceses to share resources with each other, just as we are exploring how parishes can share resources with each other! Once upon a time there was a Diocese of Lindisfarne and a Diocese of Chester Le Street – so never say never. It is also interesting that the Diocese of Lancaster was created in 1924 when the area of Cumbria was taken from Hexham and Newcastle and joined to parts of Lancashire down as far as Preston on the River Ribble. Middlesbrough Diocese was created in the 1870s when the former Diocese of Beverley was divided into Middlesbrough and the diocese of Leeds. This is simply a way of saying that dioceses also adapt to changes in circumstances.

1. **Who is on the working party groups and where have they come from?**

**What identifies a weaker parish? Does this relate to demographic and involvement of parishioners and not just financial concerns?**

When Bishop Séamus and the Board met in January they did look at how to take forward some of the work which needed to be done emerging from the vast amount of consultation which had taken place over the previous two and a half years. The groups formed during the meeting were:

1. Tony Sacco to look to preparing ‘Practical Guides’ for communities to use to begin to firm up the local partnerships.
2. Amy Cameron to help guide ways forward regarding Formation and Leadership
3. Jim O’Keefe to look towards an Integrated Communications approach in the Diocese
4. Jeff Dodds to look at the reshaping of Diocesan Structures
5. Simon Lerche to look at every topic raised and explore a coherent Strategic Plan for them to address over time.

Since then, other projects have been identified and will be taken forward:

1. Ian Hoskins, the Episcopal Vicar for Northumberland will begin to look at the specific project of Holy Island
2. Simon Lerche, the Episcopal Vicar for Newcastle and North Tyneside will look to the specific project of the Inner City Mission referred to above in N 12 above
3. Colm Hayden, the Episcopal Vicar for Sunderland and East Durham will pick up issues around support for clergy.

At the first meeting of each of these groups, two questions were asked: ‘Are we clear about the Remit of the group’ and ‘Do we have the right people to do the work’? Once again, it is very early days. It will take time for the groups to take root and it is inevitable the more people will be co-opted into the groups when needed. If you think it is all very clerical, then it was only right to nominate people actually at the meetings so that things could get started. Their make-up will develop over time.

As you might imagine, there is a fair bit of exploring and discussion going on at present, this is simply a relatively early response to the question there will be further developments in the weeks and months ahead.

You may remember that there were 10 headings in the Parish Questionnaire which we designed to help communities explore their strengths their hopes and future. These headings included: Worship and the Spiritual Life; the Active involvement of People; Education and Continuing Formation; Leadership; the Christian Faithful; Outreach; Finance; Facilities; Young People and Geographical Distance (from other communities). The idea was that communities would take a long, hard and honest look at themselves and make some judgements about how they would be in 5 and 10 years’ time. To be honest, there was a fair bit of ‘aspirational’ writing in many returns, saying what communities would *like to see* *happen*, but not so much practical information as to how things *would happen.*

As we move to the development of Partnerships we will need to be very honest about what is possible. If there are no catechists, servers, musicians etc., etc. in our communities then it will be extremely difficult for them to flourish or even be viable in the future. Finance is not a single issue. It is perhaps helpful for us all to realise that the average ‘surplus’ for a parish across our diocese is just over £5,000, which means that a fair number of parishes are not very secure financially. This more than hints at the need to look to develop partnership with others in order to release funding for the benefit of all.

1. **I belong to a small beautiful church with a small, friendly, supportive congregation. We know that we will have to share our priest in the new partnership and we accept and agree with this. The assurance I seek is that every effort will be made to hold on to our little church and community, even if we have to go to a larger church for Mass and other services.**

There is a very strong call from across the diocese that the identity of small communities must be supported and affirmed. Our Church works best at local level, bringing people together for worship, responding to people’s needs and witnessing in the community to the person of Jesus. There is a deep respect for local identity within local communities. There is also great realism and honesty in this observation. The hope is that people from within smaller communities can become much more comfortable and confident in leading worship and there will be training and formation available to enable people to do so. But it is also certain that some churches (and perhaps not just ‘small’ churches) will not be used for Sunday worship and communities will have to come together with others to celebrate Thanksgiving in the Eucharist.

1. **The rationale of all the decisions has been well thought out. Our concern is for the accessibility of Sunday Mass for the elderly/infirm in view of the shortage of priests – how will they be shared in the new partnerships?**

There is no doubt that the number of priests will decline in the coming years (though it is interesting that the number of deacons in our diocese, although small, is increasing). One benefit emerging from parishes working in partnership is that they will be able to address particular issues, such as how to enable the elderly/infirm to play as full a part as possible in the worshipping community. Sadly, there will be inconvenience for people, but we certainly owe our elderly huge respect, and communities will need to use imagination and energy to ensure that as many are included as possible.

1. **Disagree with St Joseph’s church being included with Newcastle. It is Gateshead’s cathedral and well attended. St Joseph’s is the Gateshead’s people’s Parish.**

Please excuse the rather pedantic comment, but a Cathedral is the place where the ‘cathedra’ of the Bishop of the diocese, – his ‘official seat of office’ - is located. There is no doubt that every one of our churches is held in high esteem by the local parish and our church buildings are looked on with great affection. Many of us have to fully learn that as Catholics it is not so much about ‘going to Church’, it is much more about ‘being the Church’. This is hard for us, but it is what we are called to become.

The reason why St Joseph’s in Gateshead was linked with parishes on the north side of the River Tyne was to explore an exciting new project around ‘Inner City Mission’. It was noted that this ‘Project’ – which is very much at the earliest possible stage of development - actually affected communities from 3 different Partnerships, since St Dominic’s is not in the same Partnership as the others. It is not about merging parishes, it is very much about using our imagination, energy and faith to explore whether the very special inner city presence of these communities could serve those who live, work, shop and worship there is a different way. It could open up new ecumenical opportunities and help strengthen the witness of Catholics and other Christians in a special part of the diocese.

1. **I want to know why not more is made of the lay services: Word and Communion. They have been cut back and no encouragement is ever given by the priests. This type of service has certainly seen a growth in developing countries where a parish can be similar in size to our diocese.**

At the present time, there are three courses each year offered for those who are seeking formation to lead services of Word and Communion, There are up to 30 people on each of them and each course is 7 sessions long. The Courses are oversubscribed. So it is difficult to know where the idea that ‘they have been cut back’ is coming from. There is no doubt that there will be greater emphasis on lay leadership in worship of various kinds, and in the months to come, there will be progress made in preparing and delivering more formation for lay leadership of all kinds. Much has been done in the past, and more will need to be done in the future. There is also a call for ‘Formation’ to be made available more locally. All of this will take time, but there is conviction and commitment behind it all.

1. **Members of the Association of Religious became aware that we were not consulted as a group at any point during this process. We are in two minds about this. 1) That we see ourselves as laity but, 2) Because of our particular ministries we may have something to offer as a group. We do feel that we made a contribution through the consultation in our parishes of course. At a recent meeting of the different councils together, we attended as a group although not a Council. We would like to increase our contact with the other groups and to be recognised as a group with a possible particular contribution to give. I was asked by B Séamus to request this issue to the Team.**

I met with the Association of Religious on 25 April 2015, in the first few months of *Forward Together in Hope.*  We met at St Joseph’s Home in Elswick thanks to the invitation from the Little Sisters of the Poor. There were 4 points raised during the meeting. One was about providing information for people with disabilities, after which we provided the prayer in Braille. The 2nd around the impact of National Pastoral Congress in 1980, and whatever happened to it. The 3rd about how to work with parishes that were not so keen on *Forward Together in Hope*. The result of this was the Questionnaire for every parish in the diocese. The final point was about young people and ‘what on earth our schools were doing’ about young people and their place in parishes.

1. **It is paramount to utilise priests’ time and calling for the benefit of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.**

**The need for young talent is essential when you consider not only the age of priests but also the congregation.**

**It is absolutely right to make these changes now and not wait to do it in 10-20 years’ time.**

1. **What happens if the priests won’t cooperate and still think they can run ‘their’ parish their way? I believe VERY strongly that the parish belongs to the people and not the other way round.**

One of the amazing things about priests is that we’re very much like people! We too find it very difficult to change. It might be worth looking very carefully at **What Our Clergy Are Saying,** the resumé of what 25% of the priests and deacons in our diocese said about how they feel at present and what their hopes and anxieties are about the future. What they are saying is very similar to what very many parishioners are saying. Now that the decision has been made about moving to working in partnership, there is a great opportunity for all parishes to begin to think how they can benefit from the move. Priests and people everywhere will be invited to begin to work together in relation to a wide range of things, and there will be opportunities for parishioners to become involved in ‘cross border’ developments. Some communities will be able to share resources more quickly than others, but what is very clear is that as we move into the future, there will certainly be a need to encourage and affirm lay leadership right across the diocese so that we can make the most of the resources we have. We need to be patient, gentle and resolute if we are to ensure that communities will be viable and flourish in the future.

1. **What is the timescale for Diocese’s University Chaplaincy definitive response to Bede House’s proposals to either:**

**Stay at Windsor Terrace, or**

**Move elsewhere? PRIORITY**

It’s only fair to say that there are three University chaplaincies in the diocese, in Durham and Sunderland as well as in Newcastle, and we also need to remember that there are University Colleges in Stockton which are part of Durham University. It is also fair to say that there are really important discussions going on at present about the Chaplaincy at Newcastle which are ongoing and will need time to come to fruition. I also suspect that everyone feels that their own particular concern is the ‘priority’.

1. **Our Group (B3) includes some very strong parishes. Fr O’Keefe gave an outline of this group possibly ‘going out’ to other parishes: could you enlarge on this please? Is help in the form of either a deacon / priest in the partnership?**

If we reflect in general on this question, rather than relating to the specific area, I’d say again that our Church works best at a local level. It certainly depends in what part of the world we live what we mean by ‘local’, and what Bishop Séamus and our Board have done is try their best to group parishes together, looking into the future, in a way that they can share the resources they have. So, those parishes with rich resources (however we interpret the word ‘resources’) are in a position to share what they have with others.

As the number of priests in our diocese decreases and the number of deacons increases, then it will be very important for us all to appreciate more fully the difference between deacons and priests. Indeed it will become extremely important that we all become much more aware of how God is calling each one of us and for us all to play our full part in the community.

1. **How are we going to integrate with other churches in our Partnership?**

**If Masses are taken off in certain parishes because of a shortage of priests, how do we retain the momentum of the parish family?**

**What are the first steps of coming together?**

In the near future, we will make available some ‘initial steps’ that communities might like to take to begin to integrate with other churches in our Partnership. We also hope to be able to offer something of a more ‘practical guide’ for partnerships before Easter. This will help communities to take the first steps needed to develop partnerships.

Mass will be celebrated less often as time goes on. In our part of the world we Catholics have become used to having the celebration of Mass available to us on many opportunities over a weekend. There will have been people who always celebrated on a Saturday evening who very rarely, if ever, met people who celebrated on a Sunday morning. In some ways, fewer celebrations of Mass might enable us to truly become ‘one’ family in the community.

We will have to face and have much to learn about how to sustain the identity and ‘family’ within communities where there is no Mass celebrated over a weekend. Some people are wondering about the possibility of Mass being celebrated less often, or about the need to explore Celebrations of Work and Communion as a way of ensuring that communities can maintain their own worship. There are no clear guidelines, as yet, about these proposals, though it is true that Celebrations of Word and Communion are possible in case of an emergency, dreadful weather in remote places or if the local priest takes ill very suddenly and there can be no supply. These are new questions for us here in Hexham and Newcastle and in other dioceses in the country and we all need time to explore the best way forward.

1. **How do we support small communities who do not seem to want to cooperate with the proposal?**

**How do we prevent them from becoming ‘sects’ with little reference to the new direction of the Diocese? (I am thinking of ‘N’)**

**How do we encourage ecumenical relationships with other Christian Churches?**

It may not just be ‘small’ communities which find it difficult to cooperate with the proposal! Things take time. It seems to have taken the British public about 30 years to get used to the idea of using seat belts in cars… It may well be that once the benefits of working more closely together become clear, then people (and priests) may find the confidence to become involved. We must be patient with each other, and begin to shift the emphasis from simply keeping what we have had to asking ‘How do we witness more effectively and joyfully to the person of Jesus in the world we live in’. After all, Jesus did not come to create parishes and parish boundaries, he came to encourage us to spend time with the Father, to spend time with the poor and to gather ‘in thanksgiving’.

It is true that one of the strengths of the Catholic Church is that it works well at a local level. It is also true that we have to witness to ‘Unity’ in the Church and the Christian family. It will be very important for each Partnership to become aware of what is going on throughout the Diocese as a whole. Part of the role of the Bishop is to be a symbol of unity in the diocese, so he will be keeping an eye on developments. He will be ably assisted by Episcopal vicars, Partnership leadership teams and diocesan services.

Division within the Christian church must be a terrible scandal to our fellow citizens in the world. We all profess to believe in the same Lord, but have managed, over time, to finds all sorts of ways to create our own ‘special’ ‘right’ ‘exclusive’ way of expressing our faith in the Lord. Once we feel confident enough to actually listen to fellow Christians from other denominations, once we feel we can learn something from them, once we can begin to ask how we can witness to Jesus together in our world, then we will deepen our relationships and gradually respect and love each other. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is one way, joint projects, food banks, Good Friday Walks of Witness – all kinds of things can help us encourage ecumenical relationships with other Christian Churches. Isn’t it fascinating that the most popular Duplo figure this year is that of Martin Luther! 57,000 of them have been sold to commemorate the story of him nailing his 95 theses to the church door.

1. **How do young people fit into partnerships? Will things change for young people?**

One of the most common observations from the 150 Parish Questionnaires was that there is deep anxiety in all worshipping communities about the lack of young people joining them for worship. It is too easy to say that young people fit into partnerships because they are part of parishes. What might lie behind this question is: what on earth can be done to enable young people to truly belong to Sunday worship? Another, very tough question might be: What are worshipping communities prepared to sacrifice to enable young people to feel part of them?’ Are we prepared to let go the hymns we like, the preaching we have, the rigidity of worship (as some young people see it) to enable younger people to feel they belong? There seems to be an expectation among some of us older folk that young folk should change and think, act, worship and so on the same we as we do. Perhaps young people have the right to ask us to change to accommodate something of what they think and feel. This is a tough one. If it was easy, we would have found the answer before now.

It is quite likely that Bishop Séamus and the Board will establish a small group of people, to begin to explore much more deeply what lies behind the lack of young people in our Sunday worship. This is a brave initiative and will take some time to explore what might be done. Maybe we have much to learn from other Church communities and from young people themselves. It is unlikely to be a ‘quick fix’ but it is a really good step forward.

1. **Will lay Eucharistic ministers be allowed to deliver services on a Sunday in more areas?**

**This is very important. The Church has to listen to people.**

**The Bishop needs to give special permission for lay ministers to provide services on a Sunday where mass is not possible.**

There are some reflections on this in No 19 above. In fairness to Bishop Séamus or any other Diocesan bishop, it isn’t possible for him to simply change the tradition regarding ‘Sunday Obligation’ on his own without the support of the rest of the Bishops’ Conference or perhaps even some statement from Rome. He can make suggestions regarding emergencies – as mentioned above. Some people might consider the circumstances they’re in as an ‘emergency’ and so decide that this is the only way forward. We are still in very early days regarding this question, and it is an extremely important question. Finding authentic and acceptable ways forward does take time. We in this part of the world have lived with the convenience of regular Sunday Mass, this will decrease, but is still a long way from the experience of our sisters and brothers in many parts of the world.

1. **You mentioned the 5 working groups; have they been formed, how / who / when etc.?**

**Question of too many churches / Masses needs addressing urgently. When will this happen?**

**‘More work on less shoulders of priests’ issue NOT being addressed?**

There is a fairly full response to the question about the working groups under number 9 above. It is also true that there have been further developments and new ideas around how best to take forward topics mention in the Report to the Bishop and the Board – hence the need for an Extraordinary Meeting of the Bishop and the Board on 29 March.

The hierarch was restored in this county in 1850. Mid-19th century migration rapidly increased the number of Catholics in this part of the world. Churches were built to accommodate these Catholics for worship. Our numbers decline, the number of buildings doesn’t. There are all sorts of implications of this, one noted above about how ‘convenient’ is has been having so many churches and priests.

‘Urgent’ is an interesting word – there may be a hope that somehow, and quickly, things will be sorted. We don’t like living with uncertainty and we like things to be clear. Perhaps we need to ask: ‘Even if our church is no longer used for worship – how can we, as a Partnership, see the building develop as a way of witnessing to the Lord in our time’? Bishop Séamus, as noted above, asked us almost three years ago to think about ‘multiuse’ of our property. One of the things Partnerships will begin to explore in some months’ time is a review of property and ways it can be used. Our diocese has recently filled the post of ‘Parish Property Outreach Advisor’ to help us explore how best to use the property we have in order to serve both the Church and the local community. Let us see our property as an opportunity to witness in a very visible way, to the Christian values we have.

Ideally, the number of masses in an area would best be decided in the local area keeping in mind the number of priests and the fact that they have to keep sane and healthy, and all local circumstances. This cannot be easy, we are naturally very defensive about ‘not losing a Mass’. We would rather someone else made the decision, then we can complain bitterly about it and gradually get used to it! However, emergencies mean that some decisions have to be made much more quickly.

At the present moment we have 96 ‘active’ priests in our diocese. Many are anxious that it will all mean more work. You can read what the clergy feel about where we are in the booklet **What our Clergy are Saying,** which is also online. There is no doubt that we will all have to change the way we think about our work. It is easy to say that priests should ‘let go’ – that is perfectly true, but we all have to learn how to do that. Our communities also need lay people to gradually assume responsibility and leadership in so many areas of church life, from finance to administration, property to formation. The ratio of priests to people who worship in our diocese is 1:341. It is not huge, it is 1:10,000 in parts of Africa. But what we have presumed all along is that priests, as they get fewer, simply pick up everything that every other priest has done in the area in the past. This is simply not possible. The two prongs of us gradually realising we don’t have to do everything we’ve always done and lay people assuming what has always been their responsibility will hopefully make a difference in the future.

1. **When will we find out which churches will close?**

It is interesting that the word ‘closure’ has never been used by us throughout the entire *Forward Together In Hope* programme. This is because we have never seen ourselves as having an ‘administrative’ role, more a ‘formative’ role. We attempted to emphasise the question – ‘How can we be disciples of Jesus in the future in viable and flourishing communities’? We have always acknowledged that there would be fewer celebrations of Mass and fewer churches being used for the celebration of Mass. We have attempted to encourage people to believe that it is not just about ‘going to church’ but ‘being the church’ where we live.

1. **Timetable year wise, when due to the reduction in number of priests, when Sunday / Weekend Mass arrangements will be announced?**

I imagine Sunday / Weekend Mass arrangements will be announced when decisions are made about them. The important question is HOW are these decisions made? There are some thoughts about this in numbers 23-24 above.

1. **When are Partnerships going to start?**

**Are they going to be called Partnerships or Parishes?**

**How are we going to get lay people involved?**

**How can the young be nurtured?**

In a way, Partnerships have begun already as we all begin to get used to the idea that we now have a number of local communities about which we need to think in the future. Some areas are more used to this than others through clustering and amalgamations. This is different because it includes every one of our communities.

In the near future there will be some suggested ‘First Steps’ published and then more practical guides made available to assist partnerships to become more firmly established.

The idea behind partnerships is that a group of parishes agree to work together, share resources of all kinds and become stronger and better equipped for furthering the Kingdom of God. The important thing is that we begin to share our resources so that good things can happen. It may be that in some places, some sooner, some much later, a group of communities will decide that they want to become one parish. This may reinforce the commitment and provide more opportunities for the sharing of resources to emerge.

I imagine that all sorts of imaginative ways will be found to encourage lay people to become more involved. Some communities produce ‘job descriptions’ of what needs to be done and advertise them. Other communities simply ask for volunteers, approach individuals for help, get the parish council to ‘put the word out’. It is likely that once partnerships do begin to take shape that they will find new ways to communicate with people about what is needed and will then need to be clear and organised about how they advertise, recruit, select, train, support, supervise people with responsibility in the future. There will also be important questions to ask about paid and volunteer roles and how they are managed in the future. We have much to learn as time goes on.

Our collective concern about young people and how young people are nurtured in the faith is explored a little above in No 21. One of the other clear indications from the 150 Parish Questionnaires is that we have a great deal to learn about how to improve the relationship between worshipping communities and our Secondary schools. If this is to be addressed then it has to be looked at from both points of view: How willing are Secondary schools to take seriously an engagement with local worshipping communities and how willing are communities to become involved with Secondary Schools. Perhaps emerging Partnerships can look at all of this with fresh eyes?

1. **As a Baptismal Catechist, would I be expected to offer this service in another parish? If so how can that work?**

The development of Partnerships will certainly allow much more exchange and sharing of gifts and talents and resources. It will obviously be really important to ensure that people are free and have the capacity to work in other areas, it can hardly be the case that people will have pressure put on them to serve in a way that isn’t possible. Equally, many of us will have to be generous in our approach to sharing the gifts we have.

One area which needs further thought is that of Safeguarding. We need to ensure that those who do work in another area have the necessary checks and the staff in our Safeguarding Office, are aware of the places in which people serve.

1. **What is the situation regarding closure of our churches? Will this be decided in the near future?**

Please see No 24 above.

1. **Is each partnership to have its own area title i.e., The RC Partnership of ……?**

It is certainly envisaged that each partnership will develop its own name. it can’t be the case that we go on talking about B3 or E2 for years to come. How this happens is another question. Do we have enough well known ‘Northern Saints’ to cover 18 partnerships? If anyone has any bright ideas as to how this is resolved, I’m sure Bishop Séamus would love to hear from you.

1. **Your mantra is ‘Be Courageous’ – do it now!**

**God has given us all the resources we need i.e. people to continue the Church. Go ahead and ordain our Deacons to Priests – use priests who have left the Church. Be creative don’t close churches; increase the number of priests by ordaining Deacons.**

There is no particular question here, but it might be worth noting that the ministry of the permanent deacon is completely different from that of the ordained priest. It might also be worth suggesting that the person who made the comment was really referring to priests who were no longer in active ordained ministry rather than ‘priests who have left the church’.

1. **I don’t agree with St Joseph’s being moved to Newcastle because it’s Gateshead’s Cathedral. Newcastle already has St Mary’s. There is a lot of people agree that St Joseph’s should be left in Gateshead.**

It might be worth looking at the reflection on No 12 above, about the idea of a new ‘City Centre Mission’ project. It is probably beyond the power of even a diocesan bishop to actually move St Joseph’s to Newcastle! The purpose of the ‘City Centre Mission’ is to explore how the gifts and energy and imagination of people on both sides of the Tyne could be brought to bear on serving those who live and work and shop and are homeless and in need in the middle of those particular conurbations.

1. **Excellent presentations re geographical areas. Well done. But unless people’s hearts and mentalities are changed there is not going to be ‘renewal’.**

**What is proposed to change people’s hearts and minds in a radical not cosmetic way? It’s vital that this takes place otherwise its deck chairs on the Titanic, a splendid sinking.**

One reason why the Titanic hit the iceberg and was sunk, it seems, is because someone wasn’t keeping their eyes open and rather missed what was emerging out of the mist. Behind Forward Together in Hope is an invitation to actually shift the course of the boat. We’re called to be disciples of Jesus, to share what we have, to become radically hospitable and take risks in relation to witnessing to Jesus in our world today. The most radical challenge around is to believe in Jesus and allow his view to become ours. The choices Jesus made, his total commitment to the poor and excluded is pretty well radical enough to disturb us all – the question is are we open to it? The bishop (Very Rev Kenneth Untener of Sagginaw) who actually penned the reflection attributed to Blessed Oscar Romero ‘ This is what we’re about’, also asked for a question to be put on the agenda of every meeting that took place in his diocese for one year. The question was: ‘How has any decision we’ve made at this meeting actually affected the poorest person we know?’ That might provoke some radical reflection rather than cosmetic change – and it might just shift the direction of the boat ever so slightly.

1. **This meeting has been extremely well prepared and presented, and indeed all of the materials you have produced throughout Forward Together in Hope are very impressive – well done!**

**However, I am wondering how much all of this has cost our diocese – particularly at a time when ‘money is tight’**

From the very beginning of Forward Together in Hope we have been committed to ensure that the funding needed for the programme would put no strain on parishes or diocesan funding. The whole programme has cost no parish or the diocese any money at all. We have been extremely fortunate in being able to benefit from the generosity of 14 different Trusts, Foundations and Individuals. One significant funder has never made a grant to the Catholic Church in the North of England before. What seems to have impressed our supporters is the commitment to engaging every Catholic in the Diocese in the exercise and the leadership from the Bishop and Board in taking being willing to examine every facet of diocesan life. The funding acquired has paid for all printing and publications as well as the salaries of our Project Manager and Administrator for 3 years. It is able to secure the salaries of our Lay Leadership Development Coordinator and Parish Property Outreach Advisor for the next three years. As you can imagine, we are extremely grateful for the support of the Trustees of all these Trusts and Foundations as well as the couple of individuals who made significant contributions.

1. **Surprised and shocked at our partnership, having peeled off our suggested partners of St Charles and Sacred Heart. We have far more to do with area A4 than the suggested parishes toward the river. Will any changes be allowed?**

It was verging on the miraculous that every proposal did arrive in our office by 12.00 noon on Sunday 27 November. Thank you all once again for the immense amount of work that went into it all. All the proposals were taken and worked on over the following month. Everyone was taken seriously and around 50 alternatives presented to the Bishop and the Board. The overall principles used by Bishop Séamus and the Board included:

* Geographic size, something small enough to enable good communication and not too big to make it impossible
* Special attention to rural and inner city areas
* The number of people involved – again with special reference to rural and inner city areas
* Overall financial security – remembering that we expect numbers of priests and people to halve between 2014 – 2030
* Looking to security for many years to come
* Skills and resource sharing

It was not about going back to historical roots, but looking to the future to ensure as much sharing as possible. Any slight change to the structure of a partnership could well have a significant impact on neighbouring partnerships and lead to an unravelling of acceptable neighbouring arrangements.

Any proposed alternative idea needs to look far ahead, have a compelling rationale and be extremely well argued.

1. **Are the development groups already formed and where did the personnel come from?**

Please look at the responses to Nos 9, 21 and 23.

1. **Not a question – just an observation. What a great opportunity to come together tonight. What would you think about repeating this exercise every year or so to let everyone know how things are going?**

So if that’s not a question, this isn’t an answer! Bishop Séamus and the Board wanted the decisions made about Partnerships to be broadcast to as many people as possible and as soon as possible. Having two open meetings at the same time with the same agenda seemed to do the trick. Much of the content was distributed in a leaflet that night and was available on the website later that evening.

If the bishop and his advisors felt that it would be a good idea to repeat the exercise in the future, then it could certainly happen. It might be worth investing some time and energy at a local level, initially, to ensure that partnerships do take good root and begin to grow. There may well be room for the occasional ‘Assembly’ in the future to celebrate all sorts of things.

**Questions asked at Carmel College**

1. **Priest experience: have had help in services in individual parishes and appreciate how it has freed me up. Now we say *Forward Together in Hope* the diocese will not support a secretary or admin assistant, when there is already one parish secretary.**

**In looking out and working together let us not forget how to work with small estates and communities as useful structures for pastoral care and evangelism. How can we continue to serve them or even improve our community outreach?**

One of the fundamental ideas behind ‘Partnerships’ is that energy and imagination be freed up to support local communities. It is not about centralising, it is about supporting people at a local level to discover how best they can witness to the Lord in their time and place.

The question about ‘community outreach’ must be so important. In the 150 Parish Questionnaires, the questions about ‘Outreach’ – which you may remember included Ecumenical and Interreligious initiatives as well as engagement with the local community and those in need throughout the world, provided relatively few responses across the diocese. The famous quote from our Bishops’ Conference (1996) document **The Common Good,** comes to mind: *It is time we reminded ourselves that in the spirit of good citizenship all members of the Catholic Church must accept their full share of responsibility for the welfare of society. We should regard the discharge of those responsibilities as no less important than fulfilling our religious duties and indeed as part of them.* (Paragraph 15)

1. **Who is going to be responsible for ‘discerning’ potential lay leaders in parish / partnerships? Good priests used to do this.**

Hopefully good priests will continue to do so! Every one of us is called to be a disciple, to become increasingly aware of the way we are Church in the world we live in. Perhaps we need to explore new ways of affirming and encouraging different people to consider their leadership potential. There are extremely talented people in our communities and it may never have occurred to them that they could bring this expertise into our local communities. In the weeks and months to come, there will be ideas emerging about how to move forward in partnership. At this point people will be able to think seriously about what contribution they can make. The leaflet available at the meeting, ‘*The most beautiful face of the Church?’* was an invitation to people to consider what leadership might mean in our local church community.

In No 26 above there are some comments on what we might need to think about in the future regarding lay leaders and how we will need to support them.

1. **How will ‘working together’ and communicating across partnerships with large geographical distances work in practice?**

**Will there be appointments of salaried lay people / leaders to take on many of the more time consuming roles within partnerships?**

Lying behind some of the questions is the presumption that there is an easy answer! This may be one of them. In No 23 above there is a reference to a small group beginning to look at an ‘Integrated Communications’ system in the diocese. This approach is to help us communicate with communities and for communities to be about to communicate with each other, much more easily in the future, the development of a new Website, the potential for distance learning and so on. There are programmes of development emerging in Northumberland where representatives are simply used to travelling significant distances in order to be in touch with each other.

One of the reasons for developing partnerships is to enable communities to share their resources including financial resources. As is noted in No 9 above, the average surplus for each parish is just over £5,000 pa. If communities begin to pool their finance, then it is quite possible for there to be enough finance to employ people to do different jobs. Anyone paid a salary will actually be an employee of the diocese, though working in their local area. The whole process of preparing job descriptions etc. will have to comply with diocesan procedures resting with the Human Resources Department. There will be a need for professional standards of supervision and appraisal will be introduced. But it will clearly be possible for salaried posts to be made available in some circumstances which can enhance the presence of the church in a given area.

1. **Will feedback be given to the Partnerships regarding their proposals?**

**Will guidance be given to Partnerships regarding governance within the Partnership and the capacity of these leadership structures to make autonomous decisions about resources, i.e. finance and facilities?**

Initially, the person to ask about the development of a partnership in a particular area would be the local Episcopal Vicar

There will be guidance offered regarding governance within Partnerships, including the idea of having some ‘interim’ arrangements in place to ensure that each partnership explores its development from the same principles. It wouldn’t help to set off with one structure and then discover that it simply doesn’t work in a couple of years’ time.

The Catholic church doesn’t really do ‘autonomy’ at a local level! But that doesn’t mean that local initiatives can’t be fully explored. A Partnership isn’t a ‘mini’ diocese, it is part of a network of 18 partnerships throughout the diocese. There will need to be guidance, as there is at present, about the use of funds, partly to ensure that those areas that are very wealthy can simply outstrip those that are poor. There is no doubt that the sharing of financial resources will enable a great deal to happen, but there will need to be care to ensure a common approach across the diocese.

1. **Please, Please adopt a ‘gentle touch’ as regarding guidance for partnership working. Being prescriptive leads to disengagement by negative individuals.**

Over the last two and a half years when we have been involved in the process of development questionnaires, surveys, guidance booklets and so on we have always ‘road tested’ them with people who will be on the receiving end of them in their local community. We will do the same with the Practical Guides which will be made available. I imagine that there will be a mixture of suggestions and pretty firm guidance, but everything will be looked at by people who will be using them once they are produced.

1. **Is it possible to purchase our parish church / properties to be run by the parish community for the community?**

**This will leave the Priest time to do his priestly duties while allowing our beautiful church buildings to stay at the hub of our community life.**

**Where there is a will – there is a way! If it is Our Blessed Lord’s will it can happen.**

According to civil law, all land and property is held in the trust of the diocesan directors. So directors would have to sanction the sale of any land or property. In church law, the benefits of any sale of property or land remains with that particular community. There really is no need to buy it to enable the local community to benefit from its potential, Bishop Séamus and the Board see it as a huge advantage to use our property as a witness to what our Church is about in serving others.

If more lay people are prepared to become more involved, then the responsibilities that priests have assumed over the years for detailed issues around land and property can be handed over to them. This could well leave him free to become immersed in his pastoral, liturgical and leadership roles.

1. **What support will be available from the Diocese to help us put these partnerships in place?**

There is a genuine willingness and commitment on the part of our Diocesan services to explore how they can be of assistance in helping partnerships develop. We have already received solid support from many colleagues in preparing all the documentation published over the last two and a half years. What support is offered will depend on what support is needed. One of the early stages in the development of partnerships will be the invitation to explore what exactly is needed so that we can work out how best to respond to these needs.

1. **It would have been interesting to know how many priests are serving each area indicated because, with the best will in the world, and even with the formation of lay people, the initial ‘burden’ of leadership will inevitably fall on the local priests.**

**Priests need ‘protection’. They need breaks / holidays. Few priests in an area mean they are often unable to get the break they need. Perhaps (with encouragement from the Bishop) parishes could celebrate a ‘service of the Word and Holy Communion’ on occasions so the priest could take a much needed break without worrying about being back for Sunday Mass!!**

It is relatively easy to discover how many priests are serving in an area by delving into the Diocesan Catholic Calendar. One reason why we didn’t give the number of priests (or people for that matter) in any given area is because we are trying to look ahead at what is possible rather than what has happened and is currently happening. We can no longer presume that it is the priest who is the only one with responsibility.

There is some reflection on services of Word and Communion above in Nos 19 and 22. There is reference there to ‘emergencies’ and it may well be that some would say that to not be able to find a ‘supply’ for a weekend, then this constitutes an emergency. Human nature, being what it is, might well encourage some priests to not make much effort at all to find a supply and take advantage of the ‘emergency’ – this is where it can get tough for a bishop who is trying to accommodate priests in these circumstances.

1. **Could you give more clarification of why Hartlepool was amalgamated with Billingham and Stockton? Little indication was given at the meeting of the detailed reasons for this. When changes were made to proposals in other areas clear reasons were given.**

In both Carmel College and the Lancastrian Suite in Gateshead we followed the exact same pattern for the evening and the same script for describing the Partnerships. By the time we reached Cleveland and South Durham we had already noted that Bishop Séamus and the Board had used the phrase….’If those partnerships indicated that they could come together at some point in the future’, they decided to do it once and to do it now. Exactly the same principle was invoked when they came to discuss Hartlepool, Stockton and Billingham, if it is suggested for the future, let it happen once and happen now.

1. **Lay Leaders and catechists – please distinguish.**

Liturgically speaking, Lay Leaders are people who have been trained over a significant period of time (NB No 13 above) to lead Services of the Word, or Services of Word and Communion. Catechists are people trained to train those preparing for Baptism, First Reconciliation and Holy Communion and Confirmation. They are involved in helping people prepare for the celebration of the Sacraments.

Non-liturgically, the words ‘lay leadership’ are used much more freely to capture a whole range of roles and functions and work that lay people can do in which they exercise leadership.

1. **Justification of why Stockton and Billingham merged with Hartlepool proposal. In Stockton and Billingham proposal it was stated, Billingham only had considered it and that it was a non-starter.**

The brief description given above under No 45 really captures the essence of it. As noted above in No 40 the person to ask about it would be the local Episcopal Vicar.

1. **If we are commissioned as Eucharistic Ministers, lay leaders etc., it was previously for your parish only – so is it now for the partnership? Thank you.**

In No 27 above there is some reflection on this question. Potentially those commissioned can work in other communities. The issues around Safeguarding, however, are important and there may need to be more clarification about that in the near future.

1. **Will partnerships be developed through the years with more emphasis on leadership as the number of priests declines, which brings up the question of declining lay numbers and the necessity for supporting those parishes with few people? Scripture says: Behold, I will not leave you orphans.**

It is certainly envisaged that partnerships will continue to develop through the years with more emphasis on lay people playing their rightful part in local communities. It is anticipated that the number of those worshipping will also decline. Over the last three years the number of people worshipping in our churches has declined at the rate of around 1000 each year. It is certainly one of the hopes for partnerships that they will find ways to support small communities. We have much to learn about how to do this, and we may well learn from other Christian churches who have been exploring this for a longer time.

**There have been 2 longer notes which we have received by post. The comments have been abbreviated but remain true to the original meaning.**

1. **Priests are under increasing pressure and lay people want them to administer the sacraments and to see to the spiritual needs of young and old. Lay people also take on more duties unheard of before Vatican II. Can I make the following suggestions:**

* **Offer ordination to the present deacons working in the diocese**
* **Invite former priests who are now married to once again take up their priestly vocation.**
* **Invite the priests in each deanery to see if there are any suitable men, single or married, willing to train as priests.**

**Nowhere in the Gospels or the Acts of the Apostles did Jesus first ask the Apostles and later the 72 disciples if they were married or single. Jesus only asked them to follow Him and spread the Good News.**

1. **The gathering was impressive, 400-500 people. The meeting was a waste of an opportunity to tell us what this is all about. How it’s going to solve the problem. Two years of work to redraw the map of the diocese – you must be joking. If we go on like this, in ten-twenty years’ time there will be no church in our area as we know it today. A lack of Spirituality, a lack of Catholic formation are largely to blame for this. We have missed the boat. Other more drastic actions are needed. The Deacons are a step in the right direction, but someone still had to consecrate the hosts. Why are children not attending Mass? Priests have been freed from non-clerical duties since parish councils, but many don’t want them. A lot of responsibility must lie with the clergy…spiritual guidance and formation does not seem to be forthcoming.**

A huge thank you to everyone who was able to join us that evening, those who have looked at what was said on the website and those who have given time to read and reflect on the questions above. As Bishop Séamus said in his Introduction to the leaflet **One Diocese, 18 Partnerships, Unlimited Potential:** *I hope that our whole diocesan family will continue to pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us into the future with confidence, a deep sense of mission and a willingness to witness to the coming of the Kingdom of God.*

Jim O’Keefe 21 March 2017