

Forward Together in Hope

A New Way of being Church?



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FORWARD TOGETHER IN HOPE

Introduction

In October 2014, about two weeks after the *Forward Together in Hope* project had been set up in the diocesan offices, a priest noticed the book *The Death of Christian Britain* by Callum G. Brown on my desk. The story quickly went around the diocese that ‘they’ve only been on the job a fortnight, and the final report is already published’.

That is a typical example of ‘Church wit’, or dark humour, but it reflected something of the anxiety present in the minds and hearts of many people in the diocese. The story of *Forward Together in Hope* began in January that year, when Bishop Séamus Cunningham and the Diocesan Trustees decided to face head-on the implications of the decrease in the number of people worshipping and the number of priests serving in the Diocese. They had spent four days praying and thinking about what should be done, and the project was born once they had decided to look at every parish in the diocese at the same time and to invite every Catholic in the diocese to: **think again about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a viable and flourishing community.**

This aspiration acknowledged the fact of the decline in numbers, but there was now an opportunity to focus the energy of everyone in the diocese on the more fundamental question about how we witness to the Lord in changing times when the number of worshippers and priests is decreasing – and the number of buildings remains the same.

From the time of his appointment in 2009, Bishop Séamus had taken his Episcopal Council and Chief Operating Officer away for a few days in January each year for prayer, reflection and planning. By 2014 it became clear that something more was needed than the annual discussion about which parishes could amalgamate or cluster together. That approach concentrated solely on organisation and systems. Something much more was needed, something that would invite every community to reflect on its worship, ministry and service, and think about how it might continue to witness in the future.

In the course of 2014 Bishop Séamus decided that the best way forward was to create a small team of three people who could manage *Forward Together in Hope* on his behalf.

This document explores what we tried to do during the three years and hint at what has happened since. It also contains some personal reflections which emerge as a result of the whole experience. I should add that the reflections at the end of the document are my own and aren’t part of the *Forward Together in Hope* programme.

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Section 1

Where did the idea come from?

Forward Together in Hope didn't emerge out of the blue, It developed out of previous initiatives and projects which began around 25 years earlier.

In the early 1990s Bishop Ambrose Griffiths produced a personal reflection entitled ***My Dream of the Church***. He offered it to various Diocesan Councils and all priests and religious. All the discussion that followed pointed to the need for a better understanding of what the local Church was about, what it was for. In the year 2000, a small group worked on and produced a ***Diocesan Vision: Our Future Together***. This in turn was offered to every parish to help parishioners and priests to focus on what it means to be the Church in the local area. It emphasised 3 areas of responsibility:

- Worshipping with Faith
- Proclaiming the Gospel with Action, and
- Serving everyone with love.

In other words: God is worshipped, Truth is spoken and Needs are met.

The emphasis was on reinvigorating individual parishes, though it did say: ***The diocese, the local Church, becomes real and vigorous only when it can draw life from parishes which flourish and which cooperate with each other.***

This was an inspirational document which urged ***priests and laity to be open and trustful with each other.*** It stated that ***lay ministry and lay leadership must be developed and any difficulties with this be addressed.*** So it clearly anticipated how difficult it would be to seriously engage in lay formation and leadership development. There was hope that ***we must learn from each other and look for, and share, examples of good practice.***

At the same time, in various parts of the Diocese some parishes began to explore how to support each other through 'Clustering' arrangements. This approach was reinforced by the decision made by Bishop Kevin Dunn to appoint regional Episcopal Vicars and invite every parish to produce its own Parish Profile. He also urged them to share these profiles with others in the Deanery.

One of the first things Bishop Séamus did after his appointment in 2009 was to take his Episcopal Council and Diocesan Financial Secretary to the Benedictine monastery at Ampleforth in Yorkshire for a time of prayer and discernment. This whole experience was facilitated by a Consultant from the Kinharvie Institute, which enables individual and organisational change. Three priorities emerged from this meeting: Structural Change, Formation for All and Spirituality.

One significant development reflecting 'Structural Change' came about within two years when the diocese became a Company Limited by Guarantee. This enabled lay men and women to become Trustees and thereby indicate that lay people were to be included at every level of diocesan life. Formation for all, and as far as possible together, was an attempt

to ensure that lay men and women were as included in formation as the clergy. Finally, a Diocesan Director for Spirituality was appointed to help integrate the need for prayer and spiritual reflection into everything that happened in the diocese.

Bishop Séamus continued the practice of taking his Council and the Chief Operating Officer of the diocese away every January for facilitated times of prayer, reflection and planning, and it was in 2014 that the decision was taken to engage in a diocesan-wide process of exploration for the future.

A Development Group was appointed to discover how every parish in the diocese could be involved in the whole project. This group appointed from within the Trustees (the Vicar General as chair, a priest as secretary and two lay people – female and male) met every fortnight for two hours, to work out the way forward. I was appointed the secretary to the Development Group. In the course of the next 5 months we looked at the minutes of every meeting of every gathering of priests and lay people from around 2000 as well as projects and processes from other dioceses in the UK and abroad. We felt that while the Diocesan Vision had indeed helped to focus parishioners on what the Church was for, it had not provided a mechanism for change.

For the next three years the Development Group provided a vital support. It provided the wisdom and experience of people totally committed to the project, but who could also offer perspective and caution to those who were to become full-time members of the Team. They were also present at all Trustees meetings and provided an important link between the day to day work and the emerging wishes of the Bishop and Trustees.

What the Bishop and Trustees said they wanted.

The annual January residential meeting of the Bishop and Trustees was always facilitated by a representative from Kinharvie. Once again this was seen as essential to give everyone the freedom to speak honestly about what they felt was needed in the diocese. In January 2014 they were challenged to say what ‘success’ might look like. This was to ensure that we weren’t simply living with vague ideas about what might happen. The Trustees appreciated that what emerged might appear to be just ‘aspirational’ – but they also acknowledged that they needed some criteria to help them decide what the way forward might be. This is what they hoped for:

‘We hope for an increased enthusiasm and openness to the presence of the Holy Spirit through prayer, and an awareness of the many different ways of praying, with more churches open allowing more people to take advantage of silence and peace. It may be that more people will find themselves as members of ‘prayer communities’; more people deepening their friendship with Christ and developing a deeper awareness of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

We envisage a more ‘outward’ looking Church, a community of ‘missionary disciples’. This will be marked by increased outreach from worshipping communities, engaging with marginalised groups: refugees; those seeking asylum; those homeless etc – and doing so alongside people from other people of faith and more generally with anyone of good will. Our communities will be more ‘evangelizing’ and ‘missionary’ – conscious that the Body of Christ is to engage fully with the world with a view to making the world a better place in which to live.

For this to happen we need to develop a stronger sense of community... Fewer priests will mean that every community will need to look to the 'end of the convenience mass' and move towards, wherever possible, the celebration of only one Mass each weekend. This can only help develop a deeper sense of community awareness and provide opportunities for more inclusive and well prepared celebrations.

Priests will carry particular responsibility for future developments... It is hoped that they will feel affirmed in their ministry, become less fearful of change and more trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us all on our journey. They will come to appreciate their fundamental responsibility to 'preach and pray' celebrate the sacraments, and call the community together for worship. The Council of Priests will be enthused and see itself as working very closely with other Councils in the Diocese. As priests begin to 'let go' of their more peripheral tasks, they will become much more trusting of lay people generally and supportive of lay leaders. Priests will develop the capacity to minister collaboratively.

We see lay people becoming more prominent in the community. They will feel more confident in suggesting and exploring initiatives and more confident in taking on responsibility. The community will become a place where the voices of lay people will be heard and respected. We will have a much clearer idea of what we mean by 'Lay Leadership' and be able to envisage how such people can be identified and formed. Lay people, priests and religious will be much more open to working together for the good of the Church as a whole. New models of 'leadership' will emerge which are not dependent on the way leadership has been exercised in the past.

There will be much more awareness of the contribution of Young People at every level of Church community life.

There will be a huge challenge facing us with the increase in the number of buildings available. We will devise a process to tackle this particular responsibility, encouraging the capacity in local communities to address this issue. We will encourage the maximisation of the asset so that the local community can benefit and the Church can be seen to be present in the neighbourhood in a variety of ways. We will seek to offload any building for which a creative use cannot be found.

We have some expectation that there will be clear indications as to what structural changes may be necessary, that we are parishioners in a Diocese where there is financial stability and belong to a community where decisions have been reached carefully, equitably and as transparently as possible.

Finally, we certainly hope that everyone is still engaged in and enthused by our Review Process... that we are seen as journeying together and that there is a sense of Joy and Hope in the Diocese as we move into the future'.

The Beginning of the Project

From the early months of the Project, the Development Group was committed to ensuring that whatever happened over the three years, the intention was that it would be 'formative' rather than 'administrative'. In other words, the whole process itself had to engage with

every Catholic, if at all possible, so that everyone could play a part in shaping the future. The desire was to ensure that all clergy and parishioners would pray and explore and discover together how best we could be Church in the future. We were clear that we were not simply addressing 'the problem of decline in numbers', but were committed to enabling everyone to explore what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a Church where there was a decline in the number of people and clergy serving and worshipping.

It was clear to us that this approach could be described as 'Synodal' in that it does envisage an invitation to everyone in the Church, clergy and lay, to pray and journey, work and plan together. From the very beginning there was an insistence that we pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us discern what would be best for our Diocese. The process would have to be transparent, inclusive and happening in every parish community at the same time.

The review of all the minutes of meetings since 2000 affirmed that '**Something has to be done**' and '**Change will not be easy**'.

We needed a means whereby every Catholic could indeed be invited to engage in the whole process and the idea of devising a substantial Questionnaire for every parish to complete, came from an initiative in the Diocese of Belville in Illinois – they had used it as a tool some years earlier.

There were clear advantages in seeing this Questionnaire as the main platform of engagement. It meant that every community would be expected to complete it. It also meant that the research needed to answer the questions would enable parishioners to create a clear snapshot of their own community. There were 10 headings for everyone to explore:

- Active involvement of people
- Worship and Spiritual Life
- Young People
- Facilities
- Education and Continuing Formation
- The Christian Faithful
- Outreach
- Finance
- Leadership
- Geographical Distance

We saw the Questionnaire as having 3 sections.

The first looked at the reality of the worshipping community. This section would include practical questions which would need clear, factual answers. It would ask how many people are actually involved in all the above facets of Church life. It asked about the age profile of people involved, the income and expenditure of the community, how far away the local church was from its nearest neighbours, how many children there were in schools and so on.

The second section offered open questions under the same 10 headings so that communities could reflect on what worked best for them and how they would like to develop into the future.

We followed the SEE, JUDGE, ACT model of Pastoral Reflection. Let us get a clear picture of what we are doing, make some judgements about what is happening and what we can learn from it, so that in the third section we could ask how each community saw itself in 5 and 10 years in the future.

We also decided that it would be essential for each parish to know what information was held centrally in our diocesan offices. We began to research everything available under the above headings and eventually made it available in a bespoke Data Pack for every parish in the diocese. We gave them a graph of their mass attendance from 1985 and compared it with the diocesan attendance graph; their baptismal, confirmation, marriage and receptions figures since 1985 were made available to them; the number of people with DBS checks per mass attenders was made available, plus as much financial information as possible. We imagined that this would begin to attract a good deal of negative reaction, but in fact, all went quite smoothly. Each parish was given information about the number of Catholic pupils and Catholic teachers in each of their schools. Once again we anticipated some reaction, but once the Education Department was reassured that this was not an addition to a 'League Table' culture, we worked very well together.

This exercise of drawing all of this information together was itself a new development. It meant that almost all the diocesan departments provided information for us. Some were under real pressure because of the amount of information they held (finance and property, for example) but it is true to say that the level of cooperation was excellent. This provided a very firm basis for working together over the following three years.

In July 2014 Bishop Séamus announced the launch of *Forward Together in Hope* and a commitment to the appointment of a fulltime priest/Director a full-time Project Manager and an Administrator. He also announced that the funding of the project would come from outside the Diocese, so that those responsible for the programme would also be responsible for its financial security. I was appointed Director of the programme and given the task of recruiting a Project Manager and Administrator, as well as beginning to secure funding for the three-year programme.

What Actually happened?

By January 2015 Tony Sacco had been appointed Project Manager and Nancy Gash as Administrator and it was then a case of hitting the ground running very quickly. The Team and the Development Group needed to think through a number of issues.

We were very much aware that we were inviting everyone in the diocese to enter into a process of change – which is never easy for anyone.

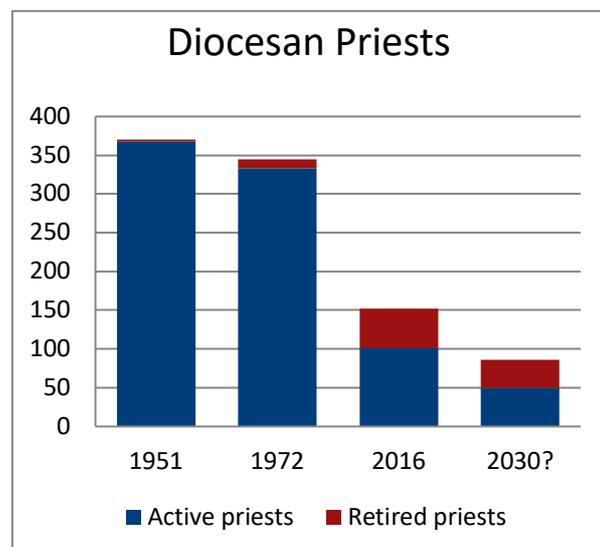
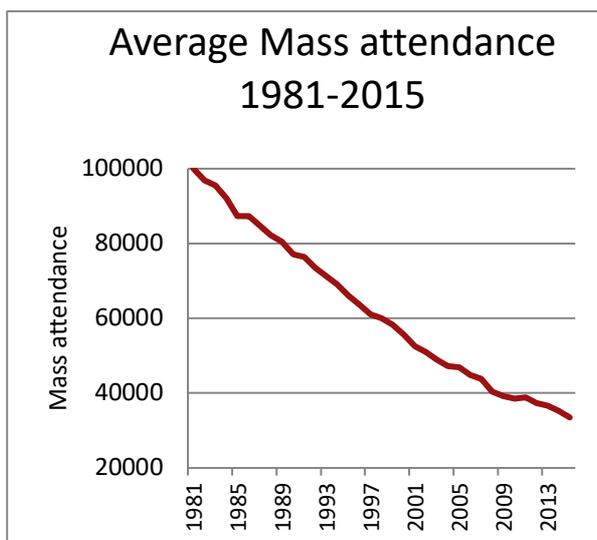
It became clear that we needed to have a clear rationale for what we were about to do. We needed to be prepared to make the case for change time after time, with many different groups of people and in different ways. We were aware that we would have to meet with deaneries, councils of clergy, laity, youth and religious and make the same case for change.

The case for change hinged on the need to ensure that all those who wanted to worship in the future could be part of a viable and flourishing community.

Our key phrase was: **We are inviting every Catholic in the Diocese to think again about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and to explore how we can all be part of viable and flourishing communities in the future.** We were also very much aware that the whole process would only work if the Bishop, Trustees, Development Group and the team at the front end had the trust of everyone. For this reason, we looked to ensuring that there would be a consistent and coherent message coming from all leaders. The Development Group continued to meet every two weeks throughout the three-year programme. **Forward Together in Hope** process provided the main agenda for every Trustees' meeting until July 2017.

We were also very much aware that we would have to absorb the negative reactions that this would all generate. Some people presumed that this exercise was a long, elaborate and expensive way of just doing what the Bishop or Trustees wanted. There was real fear that 'our parish might close'.

We constantly reiterated that there was no final plan in the Bishop's sock draw, and it was not about 'closing' anything – it was indeed an invitation to explore how to be disciples of Jesus and being part of a viable and flourishing worshipping community in the future. We knew that we would have to be realistic.



We were very much aware of the decreasing number of worshippers and priests in the diocese. We knew that there would have to be significant changes over time. We knew that there would be some churches which would not be used for Sunday worship in the future – but this does not necessarily imply the 'closure' of a parish. We never ever used the word 'closure' except to say that we weren't using it! Our constant emphasis would be the drive to explore what it means to be a disciple and to ensure that we could all be part of viable and flourishing worshipping communities in the future.

Once the Team was in place, we assumed the day-to-day running of the programme. We had to ensure that a wide range of things happened at the same time. We decided that the first thing we needed to do was provide a leaflet for every parishioner indicating what would happen over the next three years. This in turn meant that we needed an outline of what would actually happen between January 2015 and July 2017. Our thinking led us to devise the following outline programme.

Forward Together in Hope - Stages of the Journey



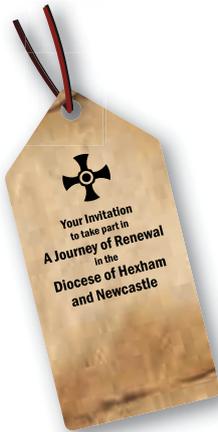
At the same time as the Parish Questionnaire was being created, the leaflet had to be designed and printed and the logistics worked out so that it was made available to every parishioner in the diocese on the same Sunday. Bishop Séamus prepared a Pastoral Letter

for the day and a DVD was prepared with Bishop Séamus and myself giving background to the whole programme.

It quickly became apparent that the Team would have to become a hub holding together a wide range of people and activities. We needed to develop relationships with:

- a representative from every parish to become a contact point for information
- a theologian and a member of the Sociology Department of Durham University who helped us devise and later helped to train volunteers to analyse review and moderate the Questionnaires
- designers and printers
- future funders
- volunteers – a former TV producer was a godsend
- parish priests and deans
- the Bishop, his Council and the Episcopal Vicars
- the various diocesan councils – Youth, Laity, Priests and Religious
- colleagues in the diocesan offices
- the media

We were committed to trying to ensure that every Catholic in the Diocese would be invited to become involved. To help with this we provided a leaflet for every parishioner in the diocese inviting everyone to come on a Journey of Renewal. The leaflet included graphs and diagrams showing how the number of parishioners and clergy had declined in recent years and giving an outline of what would happen over the following three years. On the Sunday it was launched, Bishop Séamus provided a pastoral letter committing the diocese to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and encouraging the involvement of everyone. This was soon followed by a DVD for every parish with Bishop Séamus expressing his conviction that if we committed ourselves to prayer and an open mind, we would be guided by the Holy Spirit as to how best to move into the future. For this to happen we had to work with designers, a retired volunteer television producer, printers and the Bishop!



A Different Way of Being Church

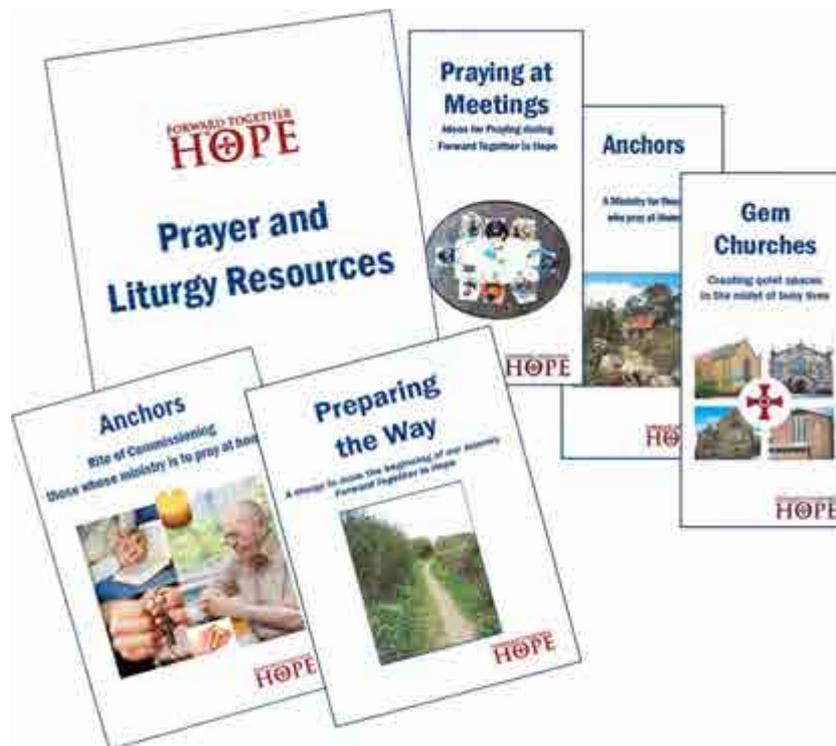
Bishop Séamus and the Trustees were aware that the process itself was an attempt to explore a different way of being Church in the Diocese. It was a real attempt to enable the people in the pews to have a voice in how the diocese was to be shaped in the future. For many, this was a new experience. Many did not expect their views to be heard or respected. 'What is the point of doing this, minds are already made up', was a common comment. When we invited Parish Representatives to meetings in their own right, some did not feel able to respond to the invitation until they had permission of the parish priest. Our constant call on people to contribute, give their views, show that they had indeed been noted and respected, was all a way of affirming the *sensus fidelium*.

We decided on some principles that we thought would guide us throughout the whole time of ***Forward Together in Hope***.

A Firmly rooted in prayer

When he launched *Forward Together in Hope* Bishop Séamus said that it was to be **an emphasis on Spiritual Formation and everything we do is to be underpinned by prayer**. To ensure that this was the case we brought our diocesan Spirituality Coordinator onto the Development Group. The first thing we did was write and print 40,000 copies of a prayer card which was distributed to every parishioner. Copies were made available to every school and the prayer was displayed on our *Forward Together in Hope* banners which we used at all of our public meetings. Most parishes used this prayer at every celebration of mass and all of their meetings throughout the three years. This meant that the whole diocese was praying that the Holy Spirit would pour out **grace and guidance, forming and renewing us**. We prayed that we would be inspired to **live the Gospel, be open to change and move forward together in hope**.

Each of the three phases of the programme, Preparing the Way, Exploring the Way and Pointing the Way, was accompanied by Spiritual and Liturgical resources.



Some parishes used the opportunity to explore whether their church could be kept open during the day with parishioners being present to pray and keep an eye on things. Others made a special effort to include the housebound in prayer for the diocese and encourage the worshipping community to become more conscious of those hidden away at home who could contribute to what was happening with their prayers.

Some parishes and deaneries inaugurated 12 or 24 hour prayer vigils to support the whole exercise. All of these were covered on social media, and it was fascinating to see people contributing to the various ways of praying during the wee small hours. The vigils were often divided into one-hour sections with regular breaks. During the night there would be prayer

for those in hospital or sick at home and it wasn't unheard of for people who were in hospital to add their prayer to that of those gathering in church.

Bishop Séamus called the diocese to prayer and reflection in the five different Vicariate areas and parishes would bring buses of worshippers to the five centres to be part of these gatherings.

As we drew near the end of the whole programme, the small number of people involved would spend a good deal of time in prayer before the tough work of summarising questionnaires or data, and the Trustees, at each of their residential meetings, had a room set apart for quiet prayer, exposition and the celebration of mass.

B Clergy and Lay People working together

We set about finding a *Forward Together in Hope* representative in each parish to help us with future communication and organisation. We wanted to ensure that every parishioner in every parish had every chance of becoming involved. We also wanted to show that it was a totally inclusive exercise by ensuring that there would be a lay person in every parish receiving everything the parish priest received. Our hope was that in every community there would be a joint exercise between the priest and the lay representative ensuring the engagement of everyone. It is only fair to say that in some areas of the diocese – there were 150 parishes in the diocese – this worked very well. In some places it proved difficult to encourage a lay person to become involved. As time went on, the role of the lay representative become more important, much more than someone to distribute leaflets at the back off the Church. A great number of representatives threw themselves into the developing role and became rather surprised at what they were able to achieve in the months ahead.

In the latter part of the programme, when parishes began to explore how they might work more closely together, we provided some guidelines to help communities prepare their meetings. We offered suggestions as to how the meetings might be chaired, how they might be recorded and how every meeting could be influenced by the way the group prayed at the beginning and, occasionally, during the meeting. We envisaged that these tasks would be shared between the priests, deacons and lay people in the area.

Whenever possible, the Team would be seen to work together, to try and model what it was we were talking about and working towards.

C Effective and Consistent Communication

Once the decision had been made that the programme would happen in every parish throughout the diocese at the same time, then we needed to pay particular attention to communication. We certainly needed to work closely with the Bishop, his council, deans, clergy, religious, young people and lay representatives. We were also committed to keeping all the diocesan councils and all our schools aware of what was happening.

We endeavoured to reply to every email and letter within 48 hours. We ensured that any questions asked at any meeting had some kind of a response. At every meeting we invited

written observations and questions. We would note the responses and respond to the questions within a week and ensure that they were all online on a section of the diocesan website dedicated to ***Forward Together in Hope***.

I began to visit every parish to speak at every celebration of Mass about ***Forward Together in Hope***. It took a year and 9 months to cover the whole diocese (177 churches), on one occasion speaking at 10 masses over a weekend, with 3 Vigil masses, 6 on the Sunday morning and one Sunday evening. The intention was to ensure that every community heard the same message, as it developed over time. We also wanted to affirm that the programme was indeed affecting every parish community in the diocese with no exceptions. It was a fascinating experience. The most frequently asked question was why can't we bring priests from Africa or Eastern Europe to work here...?' A fair number of people asked why we don't ordain married men: Why couldn't we let priests marry?' and on a few occasions: 'Why don't we ordain women and nuns?' I offer some reflections on these questions elsewhere in this document. It was a most enlightening pilgrimage through the diocese and enabled some really valuable conversations with clergy and parishioners.

We were blessed with an offer of help from a retired television producer who guided us through the production of three DVDs in the course of the three years. These were made available for use during mass and as a basis for group discussion in parishes.

D Secure Funding from outside the diocese

We were extremely fortunate to acquire very significant funding (£100k) from one particular sponsor. It was clear from the outset that we would need to employ someone at the end of the process to be involved in 'lay leadership formation'. We were also convinced that the number of clergy and parishioners would continue to decline which might well lead to an increase in the amount of unused and underused property in the diocesan portfolio. While the Trustees of a diocese are ultimately responsible for all the property, in practice, the buildings in a parish are the practical responsibility of the parishioners. This is most obvious when a piece of property is sold, the financial benefit goes to the worshipping community. This being so, how can parishes become aware of the responsibility of making use of whatever property they have in the name of the Gospel? If people have a call to witness to the Gospel because of their baptism, why can't property have a call to witness to the Gospel since it's in the hands of baptised people? We felt that there would be a need to employ someone in the diocese to work with the property department, to ensure that communities developed the capacity to seek an 'evangelical/community' use for their property.

We also felt from the very beginning that there was a need for a review of all diocesan communications. This was prompted by our need to create a data base for our Parish Representatives. The ***Forward Together in Hope*** office was in the diocesan curia alongside the Departments for Finance, Safeguarding, Spirituality, Communications, Human Resources, Property, Education and the Marriage Tribunal. Every one of these departments had databases of people and none of these databases could 'speak' to each other. It seemed to us that as the numbers of people declined, we would need more effective communications systems which could include a new website, opportunities for distance learning and new finance accounting methods.

Our original sponsors agreed with all of this and committed some of their initial funding to the future employment of such posts and research into the Communications requirements of the Diocese. In the course of the following 2 years this sponsor granted us a further £150k each year, allowing us to seek co-funding from around 15 other Trusts, Foundations and Individuals. The total cost of the programme was just over £700k with those salaries secure for 3 years. The cost also included the salaries for the Project Manager and Administrator, as well as pretty extensive printing, travel and the cost of meetings.

The Diocese simply could not afford this amount of money on such a project. But even if it did have that much spare cash, there is real value in having to look for external funding. It meant that we had to subject everything we did to external critics with their own criteria for giving. The annual reports to the Foundations and Charities had to justify everything we did in order to be given funding for the following year. It was about transparency, stewardship and accountability. It wasn't easy, but it did mean that everything we did was monitored by people outwith the diocese, indeed outwith the church on some occasions.

E Listening to as many people as possible

By far the biggest listening exercise was in handling the analysing, reviewing and monitoring of the Parish Questionnaire. Over 300 people throughout the Diocese volunteered to be involved in different ways. There were 150 parish representatives and some of these also doubled up to assist with the analysing, reviewing, monitoring and responding to the 149 parishes out of 150 which did in fact complete the Questionnaire. We were blessed with people volunteering from all over the diocese so that they could look at, analyse and review responses from areas they did not know.

It is true, we only achieved a 99.5% success rate with the Parish Questionnaire returns. 64% arrived on the designated day (the First Sunday of Advent), a further 20% by Christmas and the others with a little 'help and support' by the time we were ready to review them all.

This was a formative experience for everyone involved. We are very much indebted to Professor Karen Kilby and Dr Matthew Guest, from Durham University, for their constant guidance and expertise throughout this whole process. It entailed looking carefully at the community responses and taking from them the key ideas. All our volunteers quickly realised that there is no such thing as a 'typical' parish. Every one has its own history, culture priorities and ways of doing things. The volunteers would look at parishes from parts of the diocese away from where they lived or of which they had no experience, so that they could be as objective as possible. Each Questionnaire was looked at by two people, and these two summaries were then looked at by another volunteer who would then moderate the response if that was necessary. This document was then looked at again by one of a small team of three who prepared the final **Observations** for each of the parishes – including the parish which hadn't sent anything in the first place.

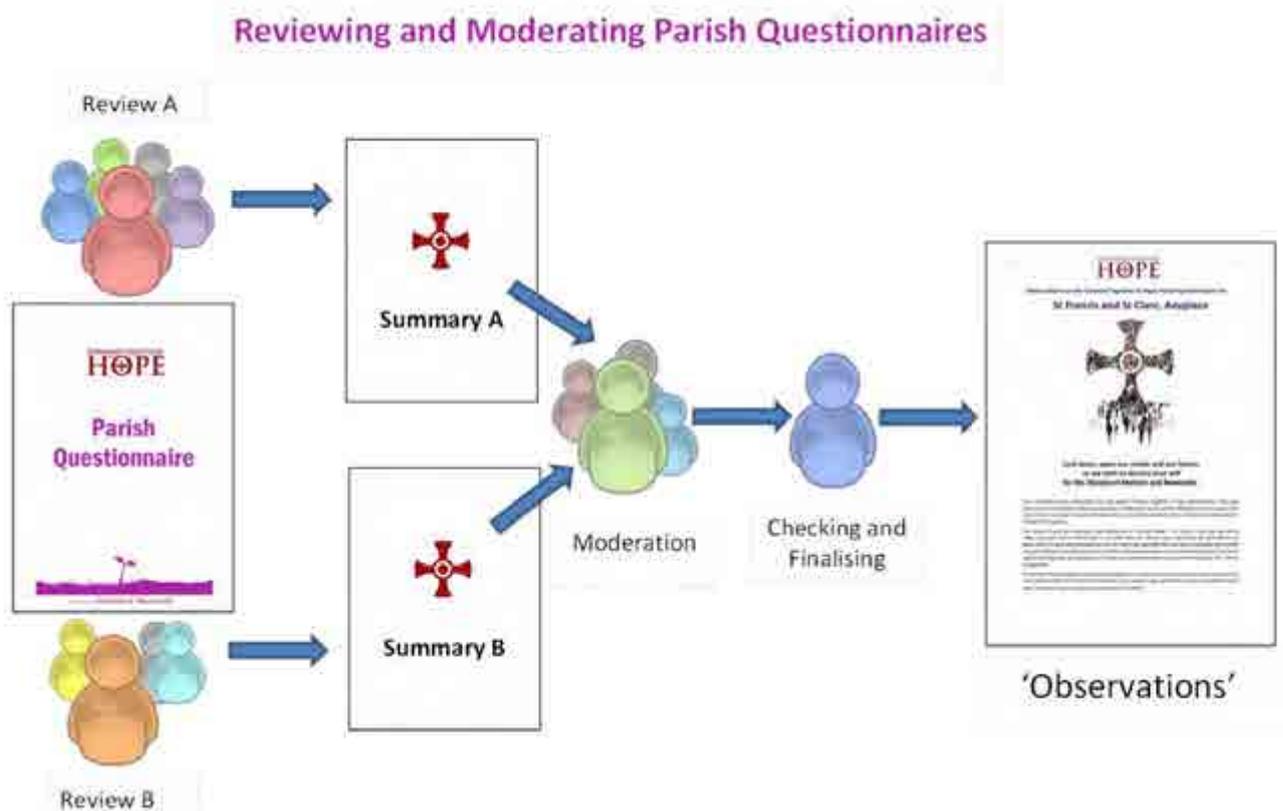
This was a highly intensive period of work, but it was well worth it because each community then had a response to what they had written which allowed them to look at themselves once again with a little more objectivity and challenge.

The *Observations on Forward Together in Hope* document offers thoughts and reflections under a number of headings such as:

- *What your parish appears to be doing well*
- *How thorough and inclusive the process appeared to be*
- *How the parish might fare over the following 5-10 years*

There were comments under each of the 10 headings mentioned earlier, examples of which would include:

- *What realistic ideas there are to sustain and grow the community*
- *What shared leadership seems to be in place*
- *What leadership might be needed in the future*
- *What breadth of worship and spiritual development there seems to be available*
- *What relationships with the local schools look like*
- *How financially viable the parish seems to be into the future*
- *Whether engaging with young people seems to be a priority*



The vast majority of parishes welcomed the *Observations* document and some began to share them with each other.

It was this willingness to share *Observations* and the occasional hint in the Questionnaire Responses which gave us some confidence to push this further. It is perfectly true that in the 2000 Vision document there was reference to the local Church becoming reinvigorated *when it can draw life from parishes which flourish and which cooperate with each other*. It now seemed appropriate to explore this much further.



If someone had asked us at the very beginning of the programme if we would have ended up looking seriously at the development of Partnerships, we would have to say that we did not. There was a suggestion about moving in this direction in the experience of the diocese of Belville in Illinois, but there had been no guarantee that we would come to similar conclusions.

We encouraged parishes to begin to share their **Observations** document with each other, and then invited them to look with new imagination at what could happen in the future.

Three further surveys

We didn't rely on the Parish Questionnaire as the sole source of information about how the people in the diocese saw their parish, the diocese and the Church. We pushed the need to hear what people thought much further. We appreciated that there are people in our worshipping communities who would never feel comfortable in a group. There are also those who would simply not be able to leave the house to gather with others, because of responsibilities at home or work or their own frailty. We were also curious to know how those who had 'lapsed' were 'resting' or 'on sabbatical' from belonging to the local community would feel. We even hoped that others who are not and have never been part of the Catholic community might feel able to become involved in some ways. We did wonder how others see us. We were conscious that the effectiveness of Pope Francis's call to us to be 'missionary disciples' could only be gauged if 'outsiders' offered their observations. To respect the views of all of these people we prepared a different style of questionnaire which could only be completed on line. It was heartening to receive 1720 replies via this means. There is more about what they said later.

We consulted two further groups of people to hear their views. A personal invitation was made to every priest and deacon, active or retired, asking them to respond to half a dozen questions. We also made an on-line survey available to all the young people aged between 11 and 18 in our diocese. We received 5,482 replies (about 25%) of the young people in our Catholic schools in the diocese, and 24% of the clergy responded to the letter of invitation. There is much more about what they all have to say a little later.

We wanted to celebrate what was good about our communities and so we collated examples of good practice from the 150 Parish Questionnaires and made them available to every worshipping community as a way of allowing people to learn from each other.

It was a different way of being Church and it all led to some fascinating insights about how clergy and parishioners saw our church and what mattered to them about it.

So what was said?

1 What our Clergy are Saying.

In December 2015 I wrote to all the priests and deacons of our diocese, those active and retired, whether retired in this country or abroad. We felt that a more personal approach to the clergy of the diocese would be more palatable than anything requiring a box to be ticked, particularly if it was on line! I asked them if they would care to write back to me reflecting on the following questions:

- What has encouraged and sustained you in your ministry as a priest?
- What is it about being a priest that you have particularly enjoyed?
- What have you found frustrating in your ministry as a priest?
- What do you think the priorities should be for our Diocese over the next 15 years?
- What do you feel will enable priests to fulfil their ministry over the next 15 years?
- What anxieties do you have for the priests of our diocese in the years to come?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

There were 36 responses from among the 154 active and retired priests (23.4%) and 7 responses from the then 29 permanent deacons in our diocese representing 24.1% of them. Some people thought this was a poor response. It is interesting to note that when Government polls are quoted in the media, around 1000 people over 18 years of age are chosen randomly throughout the country. There are over 66.5 million people living in the UK – I think we did pretty well.

Responses to the Priests' Survey

The priests' responses to the questionnaire were without exception marked by the expression of strong commitment to the Church and vocation and a deep spirituality. They are also very consistent in conveying a sense of the importance of relationships in the life of the priests. This was the biggest single theme we found, appearing in 24 of the 36 responses. When asked what encourages and sustains them in their ministry as a priest, one responds very simply *the laity* and another *our people*; another mentions *the respect and friendship of lay people*; another *being encouraged by ordinary loving and life-giving people, mainly lay people and religious*; another the *privilege of being invited and welcomed into folks' confidences, hopes, fears, dreams; their sacred moments, celebrations, bereavements, families, their very lives* and of *the utter beauty and mystery of the People of God*.

The importance of relationships with other priests (as well as of prayer and of family relationships) also emerges clearly from the responses. The friendship and support of other priests, *sharing their ups and downs* is mentioned frequently as part of what encourages and sustains priests in their ministry. The flip side of this is quite a strong strand of worry about the isolation of present and future priests - 8 expressed worry about diminished

priestly collegiality: ***I don't think any of my generation***, writes one priest, ***ever expected to spend so much of our lives alone***. Another writes, that ***we cannot afford to become isolated, orthodox eccentrics***. A third observes a ***declining strength in the brotherhood of the priesthood*** over the years. A number write about the importance of working together more, of having more opportunities for getting together and growing in friendship.

A recurring theme is a degree of demoralisation, frustration and anger because hopes for change in the Church have not been fulfilled. At least nine of the respondents write of frustrated hopes, mentioning, for instance, ***slowness and reluctance in implementing Vatican II, or leadership that looks more backwards than forwards***, or a Church that seems to believe ***that She, alone of all other organisations, bodies, groups can be immutable in belief for ever***, or again ***the reluctance in those who lead and manage the institutional church to take change seriously, to resource it and take risks***.

If you would like to read all of what the clergy, including our deacons, are saying, then the whole resume is available as Appendix 1 on page 36.

2 The Way We See It... is the title given to the summary of the 5,482 returns from 22% of the students in our Catholic Secondary schools. This was an online survey and we were amazed at the number of responses we received. There is an active Youth Council in the diocese and we had consulted them at one of their overnight gatherings. The young people themselves made a DVD to encourage others to take part. This DVD was made available to every parish and school and it seems that the Survey itself stimulated discussion in both schools and parishes.

In describing the 'faith journey' of the young people involved, we can identify many places where they lose touch with the worshipping communities they belong to, and also places where we can reach those who are not part of parish communities but are entrusted to our schools.

Following their progress through the Church sacramental events of Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, shows that we lose contact with a large number of young people and their families. The number moving to other denominations or faiths is relatively small.

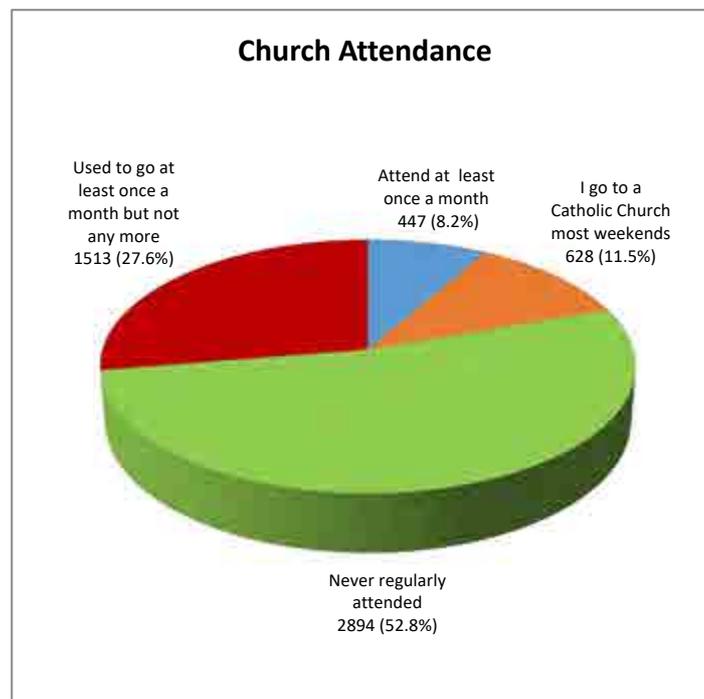
35% of those who were baptised are still practising Catholics at the age of 18. The peak point for ceasing to attend church is around ages 10-11, but the fall away starts as early as 5 and as late as 17. The specific quotes from the young people ranged from:

- ***I am not baptised or have done my holy communion but I believe in God fully and do go to church***, through to:
- ***I don't know what I am. I might be Christian or Catholic***, and:
- ***Severely atheist***.

The main reason mentioned for not continuing to attend is often boredom or lack of interest – ***‘they don’t get anything from it’***.

Those who do go to church feel welcome, and like being part of the Catholic community. They feel valued by their parish, but do not necessarily feel so involved.

- ***My parents make me go***
- ***I help out with things. For example giving out the palm crosses on Palm Sunday. I serve at the altar. Also the people there are friendly and I feel welcome***
- ***My grandad was a devoted Catholic and when he died I wanted to live it for him***
- ***I attend church because I have issues which are hard to discuss and the priest at my local church is understanding towards the problems that I have.***



When the young people were asked what they would like to see less of in the Catholic Church, they were very clear (just under 30%) that ***Unappealing Mass/Liturgy*** was top of the list, with ***uninspiring music*** coming in second. It is fair to say that their responses changed as they got older: ***Scandals, pressure to participate, elitism/exclusiveness*** and ***traditional rules*** see their importance rising with age. For 17-year-olds these last two factors became the first and second most important, with ***unappealing liturgy*** dropping to third. Comments from the young people varied enormously and reflected their individual concerns: ***Not as much judgement about ‘typical teenagers’; guitars; homophobia; less rules and regulations; I wouldn’t change anything because we have a fantastic priest; long, rambling, uninspiring sermons; church is a nice place to go...among many others.***

The young people were asked what they would do if they were the Pope. Again, their responses varied with their age. At 11 years of age, as Pope they would do something about **more vibrant liturgy** (25%) and they would **increase the focus on the young**. The 18-year-olds would want to **modernise the church** and **make it more diverse**. As they move from 11 to 18, the issues of **worship/music type/involvement of young people**, reduce quickly in importance, and more general trends in society begin to dominate. There was little in-depth understanding of the Church's position on many of these issues. A slight flavour of the individual comments would include:

- ***I would scrap it***
- ***I would make sure that everyone, no matter what their sexuality felt welcome in the church community***
- ***I would make priests younger – make them more fashionable (!)***
- ***I wouldn't be pope, I'm not inspirational and I'm a bit of a sinner tbh***
- ***I couldn't be Pope. I'm female, which I think is highly unfair for religious women who want to be a pope/priest***
- ***Get women in charge, allow all aspects of homosexuality, allow divorce, celebrate all individuals regardless of their background or nature and don't discriminate or make them feel outcast.***

If you would like to read what the young people said in full, then please turn to Appendix 2 on page 41

3 Challenges and Hopes... reflects the perspectives of the 1720 individuals who chose to follow up the on-line survey.

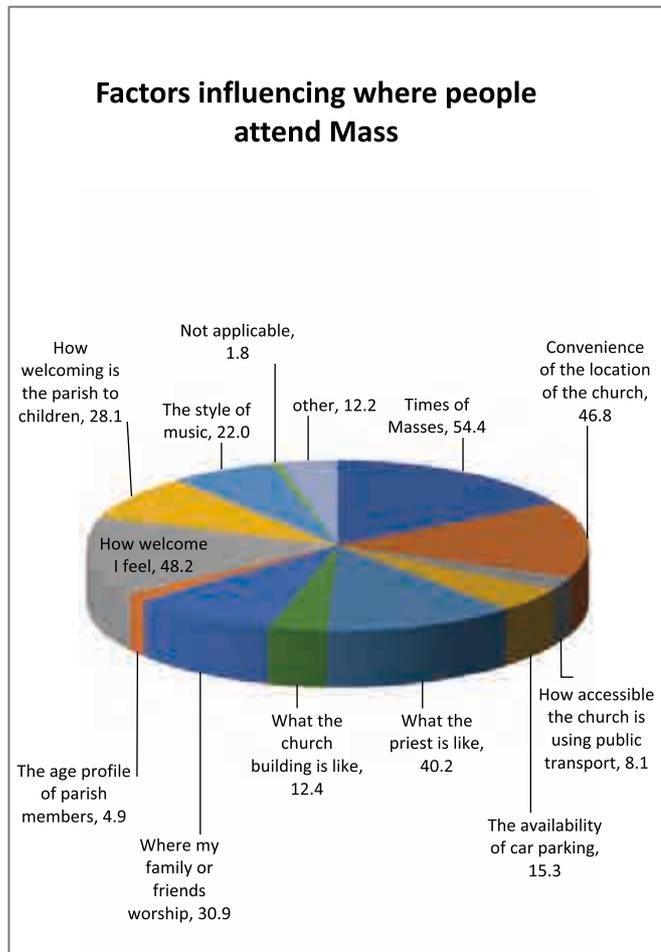
The replies were mainly from practising Catholics who are active in their parishes, but there was also a group of over 250 who are less connected with the Catholic Church - including Catholics, other Christians and those of no faith.

77.8% of participants regularly attend Mass in Catholic parishes at least weekly. 85.3% consider they are part of a Catholic worshipping community, and 77.3% describe themselves as practising Catholics.

Those who indicated that they are part of a worshipping community shared how often they go to Mass. 43.5% attend at least weekly and 35.7% do so more than once a week. 12% attend between weekly and monthly, and 8% only irregularly or never. A higher proportion of the men who replied reported attending weekly or more often (84.9% compared with 76.1% of women).

We were interested in what influenced where people go to Mass. The factors they mentioned most were:

- The times of Masses (54.4%)
- How welcome they felt (48.2%)
- The convenience of the location of the Church (46.8%)
- What the priest is like (40.2%)



The time of mass becomes more important with increasing age. For under 11s, it ranks 9th of the 13 choices given, for 11-18s its 4th. Young adults (19-25) place it at 5th, but over 67.7% of over 70s select it as no 1.

Interestingly, the least important were:

- The availability of car parking (15.3%)
- What the church building is like (12.4%)
- How accessible the church is with public transport (8.1%)
- The age profile of parish members (4.9%)

It proved very difficult to get the survey into the hands, or on to the computers, of people who were not Catholics or well distant from worship. So it is not too surprising that those who replied were reasonably *involved* in the life of the Church. The *most involved* group were in the over 50s, and most of them felt that they were more involved now than they were 5 years ago.

The highest responses from people showed that they were involved in **worship/liturgy** and **social events**. There was a difference in the ways men and women saw themselves being involved in the life of the Church. A higher proportion of men indicated their involvement with **worship / liturgy and finance / governance / coordination and pastoral responsibilities**, whereas women are more often seen in **ecumenical activity, educational work, social events, practical support, spiritual development** and **outreach**.

Ecumenical activity is noticeably low, with only 20 people actually mentioning it in their comments. It is also very clear that it is the 50-70 years age group which forms a large part of those working on the **finance, governance and coordination** dimensions of church life.

When respondents offered comments they said such things as:

- **Parish Council member**
- **Paths, car parks, drains, attending to waste disposal bins**
- **Principally attending mass and other services**
- **I stand at the back of the church and welcome late comers – Listening and sharing with folk after mass and within my local community**
- **I used to be wholly involved, found local politics too unnecessary...you had to be on the pension to be involved...a clique of mostly females**
- **It doesn't appeal to me and, in the past, it hasn't provided me with an opportunity to live my faith. I prefer to engage with the secular world. That's where my faith can make a difference.**
- **The feeling I get is that people either think I'm not 'up to the job' or the current groups are very tight knit and it's hard to get into these easily. It's the same people running ALL the different committees.**
- **For family reasons, I am not always able to participate in events other than Sunday Mss but I support my parish and the wider Church financially.**
- **I have made some fantastic friends that I would never have known if it hadn't been for my priest pushing me on.**

Once again there were gender differences as to why those who responded weren't more 'involved' in church life. The family commitments of women (32.7%) was offered as the main reason, and for men this was second (26.6%) as opposed to work commitments which was their main reason for not being 'more involved' (29.2%).

If you would like to see more of what the people said about our Church, the challenges facing it and what they would like to see differently, please look at Appendix 3 on page 61.

The invitation to all these people, clergy, young people and people at large, to say what they thought was an attempt to fully appreciate the feelings of people and to hear what they had to say about our witness to the Lord in our Diocese. This is a very brief reflection of what they had to say. If you want to read everything gleaned from the surveys, then they are available as appendices at the end of this book. If you would like to read them and much more about what people thought, then please check out the archive at www.hope.rcdhn.org.uk

This was an immense and pretty thorough listening exercise. We often say that we need to 'listen to what people are saying'. Thousands of people responded to the questionnaires and surveys. Some of what they say may be obvious, old hat or 'just what you'd expect'. It became clear to the Development Group, however, that if we do not actually look into what lies behind what people say, then we are unlikely to be moved by what they say. If their words are simply shelved then they have no impact. If they are to have any effect then time and energy needs to be devoted to not just what is said but the implications of what is being said.

F Sharing and Celebrating Good Practice

This was also one of our principles. We knew that really good things were going on in many worshipping communities around the diocese and we wanted to celebrate what was happening. We also wanted to encourage people from around the diocese to be in touch with each other. We sometimes take good things for granted and assume that 'everyone else is doing it' so just keep it to ourselves. Or we might recognise that we are doing something quite special but don't really know how best to spread the news to other areas. We were keen not to simply collect information about what was going on in our parish communities: we also hoped to enable communities to celebrate and share what worked. To this end we had a final page in the already extensive Parish Questionnaire asking each community: **Is there something that your community is involved in which will be of interest to others in the Diocese?**

One of our volunteers took each of these pages and worked at the suggestions in such a way that they fitted under the chapter headings of the Parish Questionnaire.

The final document entitled ***Some Food For Thought – Starting to share our ideas across the Diocese*** included a very wide range of suggestions and initiatives including:

- ***Parish Walking Groups***
- ***Pilgrimages***
- ***Away Days***
- ***Baptism and Marriage anniversary cards***
- ***Parish Lending Library***
- ***Foodbanks***
- ***Various personal 'mission' connections***
- ***Good Friday Ecumenical events/Walks of Witness***
- ***24 hour prayer Vigils***

G Engaging everyone as fully as possible

Towards Partnership

We felt it was important to ensure that every parishioner in the diocese was encouraged to contribute to the discussion and have the opportunity to make some contribution to whatever would happen next. We produced a leaflet entitled *Imagine New Ways*, in which Bishop Séamus reminded everyone that at the launch of *Forward Together in Hope* in 2014 he had said: ***Parish communities might indeed flourish if we become less 'parochial', if we become more aware of our neighbours, more willing to work together and explore new possibilities.*** We asked every single parishioner to imagine that in 5 years' time there would be one less priest in the neighbouring parishes than there was then, and in 10 years' time there would be 2 fewer priests than there were then. They were asked to wonder where people would come together to celebrate mass, who would be responsible for care of the sick, sacramental preparation and parish plant and facilities. On a tear-off slip they were encouraged to say which parishes in the area might be able to work more closely together and what areas of parish could be placed in the hands of lay people.

This slip was to be filled in and given to the local parish representative who would in turn ensure that every suggestion was looked at within the loose 'partnership' meetings.

The purpose of this was to ensure that the opportunity to contribute was offered to as many people as possible. Everyone was encouraged to imagine that there were no parish or deanery boundaries at all in the Diocese. They could envisage any connections they wished. It was stated very clearly that the only fixed boundaries in the diocese were the River Tweed in the North, the River Tees in the South, the Pennine hills to the West and the North Sea to the East. Anything else was 're-thinkable'. As it happens, one of those 'fixed' boundaries was very seriously breached within a few months.

In the Foreword to a document entitled *Exploring the Way with Our Neighbours*, Bishop Séamus quoted Pope Francis saying ***The parish is not an outdated institution precisely because it possesses great flexibility; it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary capacity of the pastor and the community.*** (Evangelii Gaudium para 33).

Look towards your neighbouring communities

With this document we took what might have been the biggest risk in the whole programme. We invited parishes to look around them and see with which of their local parishes they might be able to work more closely in the future.

Some communities looked around and thought there might be a couple nearby with which they could make a good 'partnership'. Others thought it might well depend on how well the priests got on with each other. Some wondered about their neighbours, wondering if they were as 'well off' (financially, that is) as they were themselves. It's not too surprising really that the idea was so difficult to grasp. Some of these communities have roots going back well over 200 years as Catholic parishes. For generations we have stressed how very important the 'local parish' is. Emotional ties are very strong, generations of families

worshipping in this particular building, the shock whenever the time of Mass is changed – and so on. It was a challenging exercise for everyone involved.

One essential element in the thinking was to encourage gifted parishes with a wide variety of ministries and services to support and nurture those which weren't so fortunate. There was an invitation for parishioners to explore a wide range of ways forward:

- ***A shared approach to developing and deploying Catechists, Musicians, Funeral Assistants, Lay Leaders, etc***
- ***Stewardship – maximising the use of buildings, sharing Health and Safety Officers***
- ***Contributing to chaplaincy arrangements in hospitals, prisons, schools and workplaces***
- ***Financial Management***
- ***Looking to ensure that Sunday Mass is accessible to as many people as possible with a variety of Mass times in the area***
- ***Providing wide-ranging pastoral care with particular emphasis on the elderly, sick and housebound***
- ***Offering a wider opportunity for young people to become enthused and engaged***

We did offer some guidelines to help communities shape what might be in the future. So, a partnership would usually have to have at least 6 parishes in it, and would need to have at least 1000 worshippers. This was a real challenge to many communities, given the lack of interrelationship in the past. But it simply is the case that if a potential partnership had fewer parishes or parishioners it would not last for more than a very few years at the present rate of decline, which would only add to more upheaval for communities in the future.

We also encouraged people to look at it all as objectively as possible, trying to set aside the personality of the priests or how long they had served in a particular place. Once again this is not easy, but the task in itself was to enable all the parishioners who wanted to take it seriously to look beyond the here and now, to what might be possible in the future.

The emphasis throughout this part of the programme was on encouraging as many people as possible to become more aware of the communities they belonged to, to become more reflective about their future and to explore how they might flourish in the future. It was a completely new experience for everyone to look seriously at a more collaborative future. Everything was geared to enable clergy and people to look beyond the immediate and the status quo to what might be.

The result of all of this was to invite every parish to work alongside those they thought they could work with between Pentecost and the First Sunday of Advent 2017. We asked them to provide us with the conclusions to their reflections, namely, the names of the parishes they thought would make up a local partnership. This time the deadline was very specific – 12.00 noon on the 27 November. We rather presumed that the extra 12 hours might make all the difference for some communities!

The parishes, with the help of a guidance document entitled ***From Parish to Partnership*** did indeed come together and they did explore possibilities. One or two parishes wondered if they were the Schleswig-Holstein of Hexham and Newcastle, (or perhaps, wondered with which communities they might most easily engage).

This document contained very down to earth and direct questions including:

- ***Please list the parishes that you envisage being involved in the proposed partnership***
- ***Why is this grouping seen as the most appropriate for your area?***
- ***What might get in the way of joint working in this partnership?***
- ***How might these obstacles be minimised?***
- ***Were any alternative combinations envisaged?***
- ***What leadership/co-ordination arrangements are proposed for the partnership area?***
- ***How will developments be communicated to others throughout the partnership?***
- ***What initial thoughts are there for new ways of working?***
- ***Please list each of the churches in the area along with their maximum seating capacity***
- ***Are there any thoughts about the use of current places of worship?***
- ***Are there any thoughts about where priests might live in the future?...***(it is important to remember here that we are looking into the future, not trying 'to oust' priests from their parishes...)
- ***If your proposed partnership is accepted, what support would be most useful from other parishes/partnership/diocese in achieving the next stages of development?***
- ***How widely has this document been circulated prior to submission?***

Quite honestly we were genuinely stunned by the parish returns. By the designated time for all proposals to be in, every single parish/partnership proposal was on time. This was a miraculous 100% return. We are not sure if this was because there was such enormous enthusiasm for the idea, or, more likely, some anxiety that if they didn't get something in on time, then decisions would have been made which they didn't like! Whatever the reason, the return was simply amazing.

We had made it very clear throughout the whole exploratory process that all final decisions would be made by the Bishop. The Bishop and Trustees were also aware that they would only be able to make credible and sound decisions on such a vitally important and complex step forward if everyone had been given the opportunity to voice their opinions. The majority of the people and clergy of the diocese came to respect the process, which in itself gave the Bishop and Trustees the confidence they needed to look at it all very thoroughly.

POINTING THE WAY – a Report from the *Forward Together in Hope* Development Group

This was the final report to the bishop and Trustees for their decisive meeting in January 2017. It was 150 pages long and contained all the viable and possible partnership options gathered from across the Diocese. The 4-day meeting was rooted in prayer, indeed there was a room set apart for any member of the group to use for private prayer and reflection. The final Report was in two parts:

Part 1 *Reflections from across the Diocese*

The first, entitled **Reflections from Across the Diocese**, attempted to capture the hopes and fears, aspirations and concerns of the people and clergy which emerged as a result of the many conversations, surveys, meetings and questionnaires. These reflections only took up the first 30 pages of the Report, but we were very conscious that if the bishop and trustees only made decisions about partnerships and gave no indication of how they would address other burning issues, then the whole exercise would have been seen as purely administrative, with no respect for the vast range of comments offered throughout the three years. This section **Reflections from across the Diocese** has subsequently been summarised and made available to every parish. The key ideas were incorporated into a final leaflet also entitled **Pointing the Way**, made available to every parishioner in the diocese so that they could see how the points they raised had been brought forward to the Bishop and Trustees.

BERWICK

One of the unexpected suggestions that came forward was from the parishioners of **Berwick**, the northernmost parish in the diocese on the mouth of the River Tweed. They suggested that they would like to join the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh. So much for the statement that the only fixed boundaries in the diocese were the two rivers, the Pennines and the North Sea. This point was taken seriously by the Bishops concerned and the parish is now served by a priest from the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh.

ADULT FORMATION AND LEADERSHIP.

Most of the Parish Questionnaires noted the need for an increase in Adult Formation. This was also a key point in the responses from the Clergy. When we began to talk to PORTICUS, our fundamental sponsor, we suggested that there would be a long-term need for investment in the formation of adults. Some of their original funding was therefore ringfenced for this purpose. Throughout the three years we targeted Trusts and Foundations which could assist in securing a full-time post for three years. Our Diocesan Discipleship Coordinator spent almost a year researching what was needed in the diocese and then produced a Menu of programmes and ideas for everyone interested in developing Adult Leadership in the Diocese. This menu can be seen via adult.formation@diocesehn.org.uk

Throughout the whole programme, the Development Group were conscious that there would be no real change or real opportunity for communities to flourish in the future if there was not a very strong emphasis on adult formation and leadership. The Group imagined that lay leaders would begin to work closely with the local clergy to affirm and encourage parishioners to become more intentional in their witness to the Lord in the world. The appointment of someone to spearhead this emphasis was seen as only the very beginning of a change of direction.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Every one of the Parish Questionnaires referred to 'young people and the future'. There is more than a strong hint of sadness, concern and helplessness about how to engage young people. Some of our parishes acknowledged that over 70% of their worshippers were over 70 years of age. There was general respect for the work of the Youth Ministry Team and their work – but an equally general concern about how young people could be brought into the life and worship of the local community. While parishioners respected the work of our Catholic Schools, there was a very strong acknowledgement that there was very little, if any,

relationship between local worshipping communities and our local Catholic Secondary Schools. There was a sharp reminder of the difficulty in relationship between the two when in December, visiting a parish on my 'pilgrimage' around the Diocese, the parish priest wondered where the young musicians were for Mass. I knew him well, we'd been at Seminary together and I suggested that he was just doing what priests did – make excuses for the 'thin' congregation – 'they're on holiday' etc. We later discovered that the local Secondary school were holding rehearsals for the Christmas pantomime extravaganza at 10.00am on a Sunday morning! The young folk who would have provided music at mass were at school. This is just an indication. At the same time, there are very important questions to be asked about what our 'normal worshipping communities' are prepared to sacrifice in order to create space and welcome for young people who are even inclined to join our usual Sunday congregations.

RADICAL HOSPITALITY AND INCLUSION

Many communities have 'Welcomers' at the entrance of the Church. Some see those in this role as simply distributing hymnbooks and bulletins. Some wily communities only distribute the Newsletter after mass, so that folk don't read it during the homily. Other communities see it as not simply handing over books and leaflets, or 'something for young people to do', but more as a role for sensitive, mature adults who genuinely commit to being open and hospitable to everyone. People with good listening skills and memories, who remember faces, stories and concerns. People who actually notice who are new, and who are missing. A small minority of communities wonder more seriously how we actually do work towards welcoming minorities – those of a different race, casual visitors, those who feel excluded because they are poor, those who describe themselves as LGBTIQ, those who would like to come back but are 'divorced and remarried'. We discovered few Churches with 'crying rooms' – but there was a strong feeling that parents with young children are not so welcome. In the Report it was noted that it is one thing to 'notice' all of these things, but another to begin to think how to change in order to make people feel they belong.

OUTREACH

In the Parish Questionnaire there were a number of things gathered together under 'Outreach': Ecumenical relations, Interfaith relations, how we serve those in our local community and how we engage with those in need throughout the world. It was noticeable that there was far more reflection on worship and liturgy, 'attendance' and services, than on the 'missionary' dimension of being Church. There seemed to be more attention given to 'going' to Church than actually 'being' Church wherever we are. The comment of our Bishops' Conference in 1996 in ***The Common Good*** that our commitment to our good citizenship is ***as important as our religious duties***, and indeed is ***part of them*** may yet to be fully appreciated. There is no doubt that in some parts of the Diocese there are close and fruitful Ecumenical relations, Good Friday walks of Witness and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It seems that in fewer areas there are regular meetings of 'Ecumenical ministers' though in those parishes where there is regular contact, people from different worshipping communities do see themselves as real friends.

Occasionally there were comments that 'as practising Christians become *'fewer in our land'* we need to resolve differences and work more closely together to witness to the Lord. There was one comment along the lines of: *It may be that in the future, when there are fewer parishioners to worship and maintain their own 'Church' it might be possible to look towards other communities to share places of worship.* At the present time there are two parishes

who worship in a Church of England church. Only a very few parish communities wonder about sharing buildings in the future.

DIOCESAN SERVICES

The ***Forward Together in Hope*** project and team would have faced an impossible task without the active support from all our Diocesan Services. It could not have been easy for them. Many Diocesan Services are very conscious of their responsibility to ensure compliance in relation to all sorts of demands – Finance, Estates and Buildings, Safeguarding, Education and so on. We received nothing but total support from all Departments. At the same time, there was a growing realisation that our Diocesan Services would have to look at themselves and begin to explore how to encourage, support and affirm the new developments in the Diocese. It became clear that if Partnerships were to employ people to help with Buildings, Communication, Health and Safety, Administration, Youth Ministry and so on – then the Diocese would have to look to more personnel to help with it all.

This is a big ask for any Diocesan Central Administration/Curia, but the exploration is still ongoing as to how it can help new local Partnerships to become more self-aware and more confident in being the Church in their local area, while being compliant with everything we need to do in relation to all the demands on a local Church community.

HUMAN RESOURCES

It gradually became very clear that if Partnerships were to explore what was needed locally and that more lay people would be involved, then we needed to look seriously at our Diocesan Human Resources provision. There were all sorts of ideas about Partnership ‘Administrators’ – but much more care needed to be taken to ensure that everyone knew exactly what was needed and what support could be offered. Every new employed person was a Diocesan appointment, so there needed to be great care given to the preparation of every job description, person specification and employment process. So, it meant looking at our Diocesan HR provision.

HOLY ISLAND

The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle is blessed with the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. We wondered how we could enhance the ‘Cradle of Christianity’ and make more of the Ecumenical links on the Island. A special working group was established to make the most of this holy and fascinating place of Pilgrimage.

INNER CITY MISSION

For people who are not aware of our Diocese, the River Tyne can look like the once upon a time Berlin Wall. There are churches across the river which are much closer than those on the same side of the famous river, but there is little relationship between them. As a result of the Parish Questionnaire, a further specific project emerged which offered parishes on both sides of the Tyne to come together and explore how best to serve the most needy people in that part of the Gateshead/Newcastle area. This project is still in the early stages of development.

AN IMPLEMENTATION GROUP

It was not the task of ***Forward Together in Hope*** to put together a Strategic Plan for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. Our task was to explore and describe what the clergy

and people of the Diocese were saying and to assist the Bishop and Trustees as they explored ways forward. We were to describe the terrain rather than draw the map. We were to be as honest as we could be in reflecting the hopes and fears, anxieties and aspirations of the clergy and people of the diocese so that the Bishop and Trustees had as much background as they needed to plan for the future.

Forward Together in Hope came to an end on 7 July 2017, the Bishop and Trustees then appointed this ***Implementation Group*** to continue the work that had gone on before it.

It is now the responsibility of the Implementation Group to take forward the suggestions, implications and priorities identified by the people and clergy of the diocese over those three years of consultation.

PRESENT DEVELOPMENTS

The ***Forward Together in Hope*** programme generated a great deal of energy throughout the Diocese. It was a three-year programme, so there was no escape. Every parishioner was invited to become involved, and every parish did – even the one which managed to avoid the initial invitation. One year on every Partnership is beginning to develop its own identity. At Pentecost 2017 each Partnership was given a new name, different from the Deanery name. Each Partnership was invited to explore whether the name it had been given – after a local saint or martyr – accurately reflected their particular area. There have been minor changes. But then again, why ask people if you don't intend to take their comments seriously.

Partnership Development

We all know that the development of Partnerships will take time. Perhaps a long time – but I suspect we need to work at it sooner than people would like. There is absolutely no doubt that the number of parishioners and priests is declining. One of my local parish priests was appointed the same year as I was ordained – in 1972. We estimate that by 2030 (a mere 11 years' time) there will be only 50 active priests in our Diocese, serving around 17,000 people, at the present time there are 90. In recent weeks, one of the Partnerships has explored how it can become one parish. There has been thorough consultation throughout the whole Partnership, the proposal has been presented to the Council of Priests and Bishop Séamus has decided that this can all go ahead. The 9 parishes will come together to share their finances, develop a single Finance Committee, parish council and so on. It may be that this will indicate the way forward. In some Partnerships, parishes are looking to amalgamate, again as a way of sharing resources and always with a view to how the whole partnership can benefit from such a move.

Finance...a miracle of Cooperation... We all know that parishes are defensive. This is 'our money'. 'We were baptised here, 'had' our First Confession and First Holy Communion here, all our family have worshipped here. And so on. So, absolutely no chance of giving our money to anyone! This is a really 'crunch' issue. We have emphasised affiliation to a 'parish' – bricks and mortar for generations, and it is so difficult to see things differently.

However. Once the suggestion was made that individual parishes were invited to make a contribution to a Partnership Development Fund, they quickly discovered that much more could be done together than could ever be done in a single parish. Partnership Days of Reflection for Ministers (a constant call was for 'things to happen locally and not always in Newcastle') can be paid for from the Fund, with over 100 people attending a Day of Reflection for Eucharistic Ministers in one Partnership, for example.

The Partnership arrangement is flexible enough to enable such developments to take place. It allows parishes to merge or come together in a 'cluster' arrangement – always with an eye to enabling the Partnership as a whole to develop and each community is supported in what it needs to do.

Partnership Development Groups (PDG)... The Bishop and Trustees were convinced from the beginning that the chair and secretary of every PDG should be lay people. The Bishop appointed a priest to be a 'Partnership Dean' and was very careful to only invite priests who were prepared to become one to take on this responsibility. There are representatives of every parish on the PDG and the initial officers were elected for two years. This was to ensure that those with the skills to get something going were in place, with the option after two years to allow others to take over if that was thought to be necessary.

Some PDGs now produce their own Newsletters, arrange days of Reflection for people who minister in different ways. arrange Pilgrimages and create many opportunities throughout the year to come together for worship.

Diocesan Councils... The setting up of Partnerships enabled a review of all the Diocesan Council structure – Laity, Priests, Youth, Deacons and Religious and how they might relate to each other. The slimmed down Council of Priests seems to function much more efficiently and the gathering of all the Councils together has certainly increased and improved communication throughout the diocese.

Property and Community Review... In the near future there will be an opportunity for every Partnership to undergo a review of its church-based property and how it is being used. It is inevitable that there will be an increasing amount of underused and unused property which could conceivably be used in the name of the Gospel. This will mean that worshipping communities will need to become more aware of the needs of the local area and explore whether the property which is not being used to its full potential, can, in some way, be of service.

It is surely early days for the Implementation Group and the Diocese to come to terms with everything that was said. What we all have now is a very thorough description of the terrain, each one of these headings can be taken and explored and individual strategies developed to help us all use the rich resources we have available to us to ensure that we can indeed be viable, flourishing and missionary communities in the future.

Part 2 *Partnership Proposals*

It truly was an intense four days of prayer, reflection and meeting in the February of 2017, and the most obvious result was the decision to create 18 Partnerships. The proposals made up 120 pages of the Report and quite naturally much of the discussion was about local geography, the various demographics and the resources (human and financial) available in each parish. Bishop Séamus and the Trustees developed a number of principles to help with the decisions they had to make, namely:

- ***Partnerships should serve the mission of the Church, helping people to become better disciples and reach out into the world***
- ***Weaker parishes should be supported to flourish – and stronger parishes will gain by offering their expertise***

- **Partnerships should be sufficiently large to work well far into the future – but not so large that communication and collaboration is made difficult. As a rule of thumb it may be helpful to halve the number of priests and the number of people to give an indication of how things may look in 2030. This could mean somewhere in the region of 50 priests and 17,000 worshippers.**
- **While needing to be flexible in terms of size and coverage, there also needs to be a degree of consistency across the diocese as a whole.**
- **Current boundaries and the current location of clergy should not restrict thinking about the future.**

There were some areas of the diocese where the clergy and people felt that in a few years' time it would be possible to merge two partnerships into one. In each case, the Bishop and Trustees decided that **if it could happen in the future it would be better if it happened now**. This decision was made with the encouragement of one proposed area which added the one line directive: **Be courageous and get on with it**.

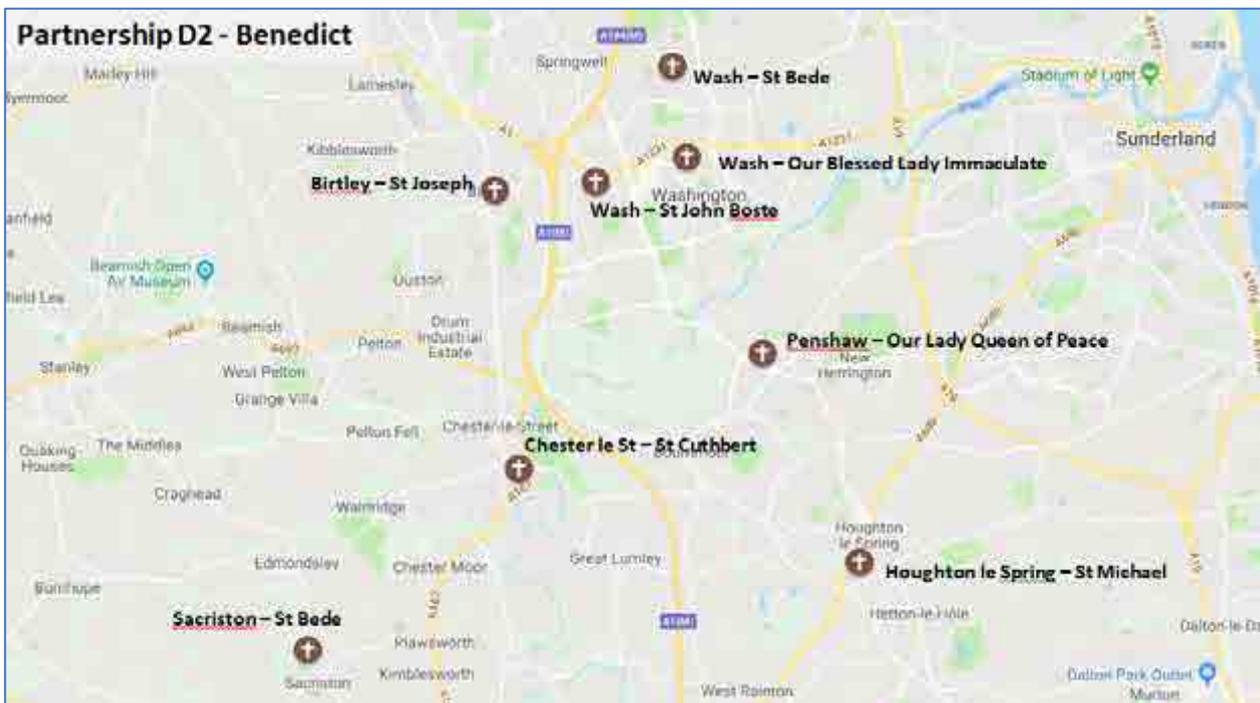
At the end of the meeting the Bishop and Trustees decided that there would be 18 Partnerships throughout the Diocese. The number of parishes in partnerships varied between 6 and 14. All the way through the programme we had been conscious that everyone needed to pay particular attention to the specific needs of rural communities and poor communities, and the range of the number of parishes respects those concerns.

The final decisions made during the 4-day meeting were made known to the Diocese on a very snowy night in February 2017. Around 1600 people attended the launch of **One Diocese, 18 Partnerships, Unlimited Potential** at two identical meetings in different parts of the Diocese. Bishop Séamus described Partnerships as **a group of parishes agreeing to work together, to share resources, both human and material, to become stronger and better equipped for furthering the Kingdom of God**. At that time it was envisaged that new partnerships would offer opportunities to ensure that:

- **A range of formation programmes can be developed, at a more local level, to help communities provide pastoral care for many groups of people, catechesis, marriage preparation and worship**
- **Support can be made available for smaller communities**
- **The gifts, talents and financial resources in a wider area can be put at the service of more people**
- **Responsibility for a range of services such as finance, health and safety, administration and communication can be coordinated across a wider area**
- **Priests can be freed to concentrate on their essential calling to preach, call the community to worship and celebrate the sacraments**
- **A thorough and careful review of property and its uses can be carried out throughout the partnership area**

- ***Opportunities will be found for people to come together across the area to celebrate and worship together***
- ***Leadership teams including priests, deacons and lay people can develop to help everyone deepen their understanding of what it means to be a witness to Jesus in our world today.***

There is no doubt that the majority of people who attended those two meetings were excited and enthused by what was said. Some, however, were very disappointed that they had not been reassured that the particular mass they ‘attended’ could not be guaranteed for all time. Those present were introduced to the new arrangements, the shape of the new Partnership and the names of the parishes included in them. The example below is simply one of the 18 Partnerships.



CONCLUSION

I suspect that the unique feature of *Forward Together in Hope* was that it attempted to engage with every parishioner in every parish throughout the diocese at the same time. We tried to be as 'synodal' as possible. It reflected a very different way of 'being church'. It was met with some suspicion in some areas and some reluctance in others. Some clergy and people found it hard to believe that decisions hadn't already been made and this was simply a long, wordy and expensive way of disguising that. Others simply wanted the Bishop to make decisions and tell them how things would be.

It is also true to say that there was genuine excitement and real hope that it would make a difference. Many people found they had a voice and were able to use it and it could be heard. There was good energy for new ways of praying and reflecting. There was anxiety and apprehension and yet some enthusiasm for looking beyond the local and exploring neighbouring communities.

It is very early days, but at the very least, very many people have come together to pray and wonder, to imagine and now to direct their energy and faith in order to discover how to become disciples of Jesus in this part of the world today.

Section 2 - Three Appendices:

What the Clergy are Saying p36

The Way We See It p41

Challenges and Hopes p61

These appendices are reprints of the copies made throughout the diocese and online.

contradictory expectations, with people who bring to sacramental programmes a consumer mentality,

It's a privilege being invited and welcomed into folks' confidences, hopes, fears, dreams...

or have a **'Supermarket' attitude to Church**, with congregations who respond passively/aggressively **as we try to change and face challenges**.

The problem of overwork, or equally significantly, of being worked in the wrong way, comes through very strongly in the responses. 11 priests expressed concerns for their own future health - or even survival - and for that of other priests, if current patterns and trends continue. One priest warns that **amongst us there are many mental health, addiction and spiritual issues**. Another writes, **I have 30 years of ministry to come before I reach 75. I am frightened that even if things continue with the current level of responsibility I will not see those 30 years**. Older priests express anxiety on behalf of younger. A retired priest speaks of his awareness **of growing strain on ageing priests** and another simply comments **I'm glad I am retired!** Repeatedly the likelihood of burnout is mentioned.

Concretely, there are two things most discussed in connection with the issue of burnout. One is the burden of administrative and financial tasks, commented on in 13 of the responses. One priest writes that the increasing administration **deadens me**, another comments that visiting parishioners - something he enjoyed - is a thing of the past, crowded out by administration. A few mention, in particular, the burden of sitting on school governing bodies. The second issue is the multiplication of sacramental duties, being expected to say multiple masses in multiple locations every weekend. One priest speaks of **becoming a travelling sacramental machine**, another of **being a 'Mass Machine' and parish manager**.

There is a worry that priests will become **clerical functionaries** serving increasingly large clusters a

bit like funeral directors. One priest suggests at 50 he is already tired out by celebrating four masses across Saturday and Sunday, and writes: **At the age of 65, I'm not prepared to be celebrating five or six Masses every Sunday because no one has taken any decisions**. Overall there is a fear on the one hand that individual priests will not survive the demands of their role in the longer term, but will succumb to mental illness, burnout or death; and a sense on the other that many priests experience, and suffer from, at least a partial frustration of what they understand as their priestly vocation (there are indications of such a sense of the frustration of vocation in 10 of the responses).

What is to be done about the situation? Few of the respondents seemed to think themselves in possession of a blueprint for how the diocese should move forward. One says **I haven't a clue where to start**, and writes of the future as **a dark fog** (though one that can be approached in faith, like the cloud of unknowing); another writes **like so many others, I know that things cannot go on as they are, things need to change, but I have no idea what to suggest as a way forward. My 'not knowing how best to proceed' is maybe my greatest frustration of all**.

There are, nevertheless, many affirmations of faith, frequent references to the importance of prayer and allowing the diocese to be led by God, and a range of concrete suggestions for the way forward. The single most consistent proposal in the priests' responses is that lay leadership needs to be developed - this was mentioned, in one form or another, in 19 responses, while only 3 called for a greater focus on priestly vocation. **We need**, writes one respondent, **to educate good laypeople, encourage them, listen to them and their views and priorities**. Another suggests **We priests need to step back, let them get on with it, and realise that there is more to priesthood than just keeping a good show on the road**. A third writes that evangelisation should be **the top of every agenda** but that **we do not have enough time or capacity without empowering our laity**. Another writes that parish administrators should be trained and paid, that lay leaders of worship should be trained to undertake a wider range of duties, and that lay people should be trained and invested in to undertake outreach to the wider community.

One comment that captures the predominant tone of the responses is this: **We are urgently in need of**

a robust lay formation programme - how long will this take to put in place?

Other suggestions vary. There are 6 who make positive reference to ordaining married priests. Some suggest **concentrating resources on a network of vibrant parishes**. Some suggest the need for closures and selling off unneeded buildings. Some suggest lay-led parishes, others the formation of small evangelising communities. Some suggest the importance of teams of leaders, of grouping parishes under the most dynamic priests, or of working with other church communities. Some suggest rethinking the commitment to Catholic schools, whose Catholic character is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. A number suggest initiatives to support and renew priests, and enabling them to support one another. Some underline the importance of opportunities for study and for working in contexts other than the parish. Quite a number suggest the need to clarify and refocus the role of the priest, to bring it more in line with priests' sense of their real vocation, and to strip away other kinds of tasks which priests have acquired.

Something which is marked in many of the responses is a real sense of urgency, of the need for something to be done, matched by a real fear that in fact nothing significant will be done. There are some positive responses to the *Forward Together in Hope* process, including appreciative comments on the parish gatherings it has involved, and the value of doing something other than **manage decline**, but also some fairly sceptical reactions, including 5 respondents who indicate a form of consultation fatigue. One priest is **sceptical that notice will be taken of what I say anyway** and another writes ***I think it is too late and I feel this exercise is just putting off the decision making... I will not hold my breath waiting for something to happen.*** One priest refers to **the depression that hovers around the clergy (and much of the diocese) at this time**, two mention the moving of deckchairs on the Titanic, and a fourth expresses the fear **that we won't have the wisdom, humility and generosity to undertake reform. That we're too old, too tired, too set in our ways to change**—but goes on to conclude ***all must be done prayerfully.***

Some respondents see the current situation as a time of waiting for the new to emerge (one priest compares it to Jesus' passion - ***We have to go***

through it, endure it, but with the hope that something new is coming) but more frequently there is a sense of urgency, of the need for active leadership, of the need for the **diocese to make some radical and difficult choices**. Alongside this is a fairly frequently voiced suspicion that what is urgently needed will not in fact be done (the fear that ***difficult decisions will be ducked or fudged***) and we will only be worse off (***If nothing changes after all this work we will have lost a lot of good will from the people***).

It should be said, finally, that it is hard to read these documents without coming away with a moving sense of the dedication, depth and commitment of the priests of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.

Responses to the Deacons' Survey

The broad picture emerging from the responses is that deacons feel supported by communities, by their families, by prayer, by their sense of their calling to serve people, and, on the whole, by priests. They view the diaconate as having a distinctive role of its own - they do not understand themselves as **'mini parish priests'** or **'lieutenant priests'**. They are deeply committed to their ministry and find it rewarding.

One theme that occurs in several responses is a sense of the privilege of being allowed to share in people's lives in their ministry: ***Pastoral care of the bereaved***, writes one, ***is inherently spiritual and affords a Deacon the opportunity to be part of a family in grief, albeit for a short time. It is difficult to express this feeling.*** For another it has ***been a privilege to walk alongside people in their joy and pains, and to be welcomed into their lives with a great level of intimacy.***

'...to use the skills and talents of lay people to maximum effect... to harness people's professional skills for the benefit of the Church.'



Several speak of their work with the sick, including in hospitals, and of frustration at not being permitted to administer the Sacrament of the Sick.

While most of the deacons feel valued by their parish priest, there is also a certain sense of precariousness. Partly this is because **support for deacons and a recognition of their ministry varies from priest to priest**; partly because, while the current Bishop is encouraging, the flourishing of their ministry in future will depend on his successors. Some deacons mention the need for improved communication, and observe that deacons are at times overlooked at diocesan level. For the future, there are a variety of suggestions: that deacons should be better distributed; that they should be more fully integrated into the pastoral care of their parish; that they should exercise their ministry also outside their parish, in their deanery or beyond (to help build wider communities). One issue on which deacons are united and which appears in most responses is the need for opportunities for peer support, for occasions, after formation, where they have contact with each other.

While the burden of the role does not (yet?) seem to weigh as heavily on deacons as on priests, one deacon outlines anxieties for the future which could serve as a pithy summary of difficulties highlighted in the priests' survey: **Fear of sheer exhaustion. Loneliness. Physical and mental wellbeing/health/lifestyle issues. Concern about an emphasis on 'delivery of the Sacraments' rather than space to build relationships and be part of people's lives.** Several deacons also express concern specifically about the burdens on priests: **I am often worried**, writes one, **about some of the priests I assist as I can see the toll their ministry takes**; another describes care for priests as **less than acceptable**.

Another deacon offers a wide-ranging critique of *Forward Together in Hope* and (what he takes to be) its likely outcome. Since this is the most extended and articulate critical response to *Forward Together in Hope* in either part of the clergy survey, it may be worth attending to with some care. The deacon suggests that the design of the parish questionnaires limits the possibility of change: **Questions are answered through personal experience based against expectations already held. Such current expectations, derived from**

previous practice, experience and teaching in general, will mostly still form the basis of any new vision that may be brought forward - and can be very local and insular.

He worries also that contemporary concepts of 'problem solving' will dominate the process, and that what in his view is the easier option of closing buildings and parishes - which **effectively closes communities but makes the organisation simpler** - will be taken. He is concerned that **we are trying to revive something (a system) which has had its day**. He worries that if individuals prioritise 'mass' over 'community,' communities will diminish, never gather, and while **great efforts will be made to accommodate such circumstances** the end result will be that **the local needs of the community... are lost** and ultimately **the sick, lonely, bereaved, poor, ...all will fall off the radar**.

As in the priests' response, so also here, there is an emphasis on needing to strengthen the role of the laity, to **use the skills and talents of lay people to maximum effect... to harness people's professional skills for the benefit of the Church**. And as in the priests' survey, there is in some of the deacons' responses a sense of the urgency of the need for change and a worry that the *Forward Together in Hope* process will be too superficial. One writes of his frustration when **we continually repeat behaviour/patterns that are ineffective**, and suggests: **We need to look at the form of our communities and ask whether a model (parish) that ...was designed when the world was at a different place is still the most effective form of community organisation. Instead of going larger perhaps we need to go smaller.**

Although there are fewer deacons than priests, and therefore the numbers of responses received has been small, the deacons clearly contribute a distinctive perspective to the process, one which partly overlaps with that of the priests but also enriches and broadens it.



The Process and Acknowledgements

The responses came in a variety of forms, sometimes as general letters to Fr Jim O'Keefe. A group was convened to discuss how they could best be processed (Jim O'Keefe, Karen Kilby, a Catholic theologian, Jocelyn Bryan, a pastoral theologian and Methodist lay preacher, and Mathew Guest, a sociologist of religion). The group agreed that because of the small numbers and the variety of styles of response, it would be inappropriate to attempt statistical analysis of individual questions. In the case of the priests' questionnaire, however, it was decided to do an analysis of the frequency with which themes emerged across the whole of the questionnaires. The group agreed a set of categories for this thematic analysis, and coding was undertaken by Tony Sacco.

In the case of the deacons' questionnaire, the number of responses is too small to make even this sort of statistical analysis sensible. The group agreed that a summary report should be written for each of the two sets of questionnaire responses, aiming to capture something of the range, tone and emphases of the views expressed. Inevitably not everything can be captured, and inevitably there is an element of subjectivity in the selection and organisation of material; the consideration of these responses by a group which includes lay and ordained, Catholic and non-Catholic can diminish but not remove this element of subjectivity. The summaries above were drafted by Karen Kilby before being considered by the group as a whole.

I would like to add my grateful thanks to those named above for their sheer professionalism and dedication and the respect they have shown in helping to produce this very powerful reflection on what clergy of our diocese have said. I am sure that it will be a most valuable insight to help us in our search for the most honourable way forward for the future.

Jim O'Keefe

Diocesan Development Director

APPENDIX 2

The Way We See It

The Findings at a Glance

22% of the students in Catholic secondary schools in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle filled in the survey, which provides a unique window into the perceptions of the faith of 5,482 individuals.

In describing the 'faith journey' of the young people involved, we can identify many places where they lose touch with the worshipping communities they belong to, and also places where we can reach those who are not part of parish communities but are entrusted to our schools.

Following their progress through the Church milestones of Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, shows that we lose contact with a large number of young people and their families. The number moving to other denominations or faiths is relatively small.

35% of those who were baptised are still practising Catholics at the age of 18. The peak point for ceasing to attend church is around ages 10-11, but the fall away starts as early as 5 and as late as 17.

The main reason mentioned for not continuing to attend is often boredom or lack of interest – 'they don't get anything from it'.

Those who do go to church feel welcome, and like being part of the Catholic community. They feel valued by their parish, but do not necessarily feel so involved.

For parishes to help make them feel more involved young people ask for *social activities specifically for them*. They also ask to be more involved in Mass and other liturgies, and to be directly acknowledged and welcomed by adults.

Their responses show a development with age. From around 14 years of age worship and music styles become less important and there is more searching for understanding, particularly with pressure on Catholic values from society at large.

Young people regard the Catholic Church as being a *strong community* and having a *clear*

ethos and moral basis. They would like to see more *direct involvement of young people* in the parishes and suggest various ways that this might happen. As they get older they are challenged more by society and need support in *understanding the church's position*.

The *quality of liturgy* and *vibrancy of community* are key factors in how young people see things.

Where they feel highly valued in a parish, there is a greater likelihood that young people will continue practising their faith.

To encourage them to become involved, or more involved, needs attention to a number of factors, but *social activities with peers* rate highly.

In schools, a variety of faith activities are seen as helpful by young people, especially *retreats*, (which are even more popular with the older students), *school Masses*, and *RE lessons*. These, together with *assemblies* are valued not just by the Catholic students, but also by those who do not attend church.

To help bring their faith alive in schools young people have a wide range of suggestions of which *more varied faith activity* is the most mentioned.

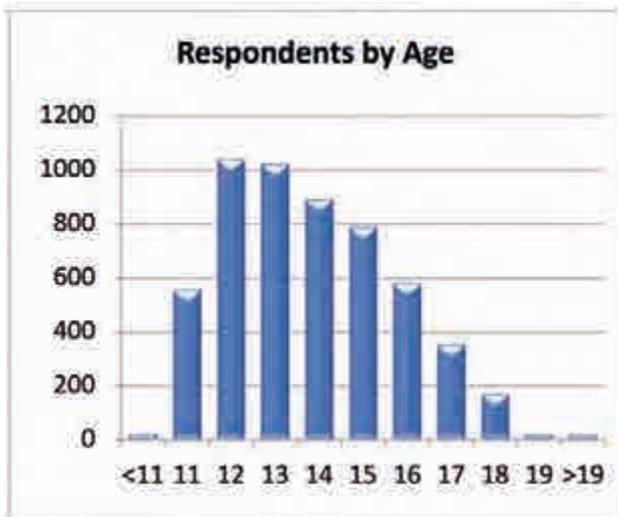
There is a wide variety of diocesan events that are offered to young people, and overall they have a good awareness of these, with awareness of the Emmaus Youth Village and retreat provision reaching over 70%, and even higher with particular groups. Actual involvement is also high in retreat and Youth Ministry Team activities.

The numerical data provided by the survey will be useful in many ways well into the future, but the hundreds of thousands of words contributed by young people in their text responses provide a unique insight into their thoughts and hopes, and will be a valuable resource in helping us to journey with them more effectively.

About this Survey

From November 2015 to February 2016 an online survey was used to collect the views of 11-19 year-olds about the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. A short video and a 'luggage tag flyer' were used to engage young people and promote the importance of the survey.

Catholic Secondary (including Middle) schools, University Chaplaincies and parishes were asked to encourage young people to complete the questionnaire. They certainly did so - and we are really grateful to them for their support. All of the schools were involved to some degree, although responses from individual schools ranged widely - from 1 to over 1,000.



By the time it closed, 5,482 young people had completed the survey, with the vast majority in the target age range; just 44 were aged under 11 or over 19. 53.3% were male and 46.7% female.

98.1% were in Catholic schools in the diocese. Others included 23 university students, 8 in employment and 20 in other schools or colleges.

We estimate that approaching a quarter (22%) of the students in Catholic Secondary schools took part in the survey, so it represents a very comprehensive and wide-ranging view of how they perceive the Catholic Church in our region.

This document presents a summary of the key findings and provides a flavour of some of the many thousands of actual comments made. It also offers a number of thoughts and questions

that parishes and schools might like to consider in looking at how we engage with young people in our parish communities.

It is worth remembering that in trying to understand why few young people are involved with Church on a regular basis we asked questions that prompted them to highlight 'what was wrong' and 'how it could be better'. It is therefore encouraging that a number indicated that much was actually positive and to be celebrated.

We have focussed this report on some of the more challenging aspects to which we feel we will learn the most.

Faith Background

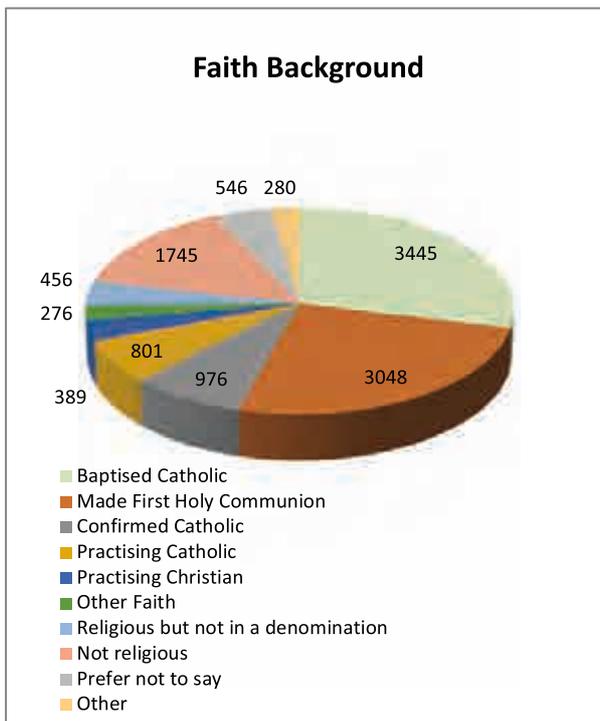
Everyone taking part in the survey was asked to select statements about their faith background. This showed that:

- 62.8% are baptised Catholic
- 55.6% have made their First Holy Communion
- 17.8% have been Confirmed
- 14.6% regard themselves as practising Catholics.

As well as the baptised Catholics who responded, there are 2,039 others who replied to us giving their valuable insights into living alongside our faith.

The data collected gives a detailed picture of the complex range of experiences that young people have between the ages of 11 and 19. It allows us to follow their progress through the milestones of Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation to practising as Catholics.

The chart below shows the number of respondents mentioning each aspect.



Analysis indicates that, on average, around 35% of those who are baptised as Catholics describe themselves as practising Catholics at the age of 18.

Of all those indicating they are baptised Catholic, 26.4% currently describe themselves as *not religious*. This figure reaches a maximum of 37% for baptised 16-year-olds, but falls back to 20% for the 18-year-olds in the survey.

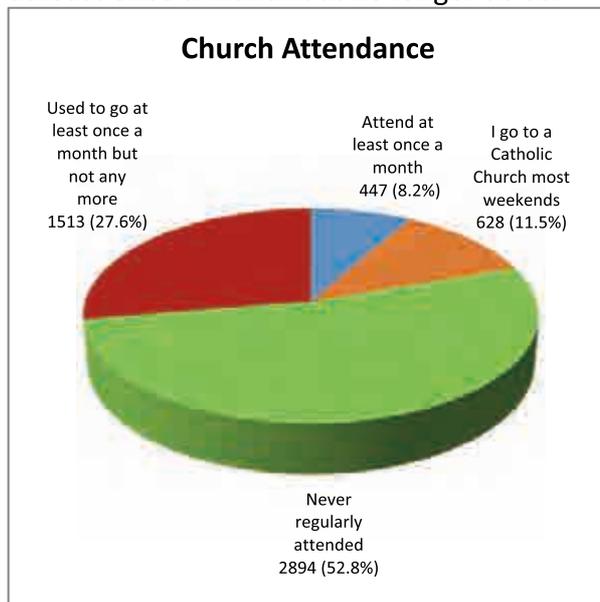
In addition to being able to choose from the main options, young people could select 'Other' and explain their choice more personally. Of the 281 who did so many simply indicated the *Christian Church* or *Other Faith* they belonged to or expressed the fact that they were *Atheist* or *Agnostic*. Others offered deeper insights in their own words.

- *I am not baptised or have done my holy communion but I believe in God fully and do go to church.*
- *I don't know what I am to be honest.*
- *I believe in God not religion.*
- *I don't know if I've been baptised.*
- *Going through RCIA in order to be baptised.*
- *I'm not sure if I believe right now.*
- *Spiritually enlightened.*

- *Don't know what I am. I might be Christian or Catholic.*
- *I have been confirmed but don't believe in God.*
- *Severely atheist.*

Attending Church

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 do so.



The survey sample therefore gives us a very wide cross section of young people. It includes a range of ages; those who have never been to church, and those who are frequent attenders. A substantial proportion are not baptised. It includes young Catholics who have stopped attending church, and those who attend irregularly.

Those Who Attend Church

Why do you go to Church?

Those who indicated that they go to church at least monthly were asked why they do so. A total of 1,076 young people answered this question by selecting all that applied from a given list of reasons. The most frequent replies are shown in the table below.

Reason	Replies
I feel welcome there	568
I like being part of a Catholic community	557
I feel I have to go because my family expects it	406
I enjoy the Mass	382
I like to worship with other people	264
I feel uplifted by the experience	256
I feel that it is a duty or obligation	229
I worry what will happen if I don't attend	111

The top two factors - *I feel welcome there* and *I like being part of a Catholic Community* - were common to all age groups, apart from the 14-year-olds, who showed a higher rating for *family expectations*, and the 17-year-olds who put *duty or obligation* highest with *I feel welcome* second.

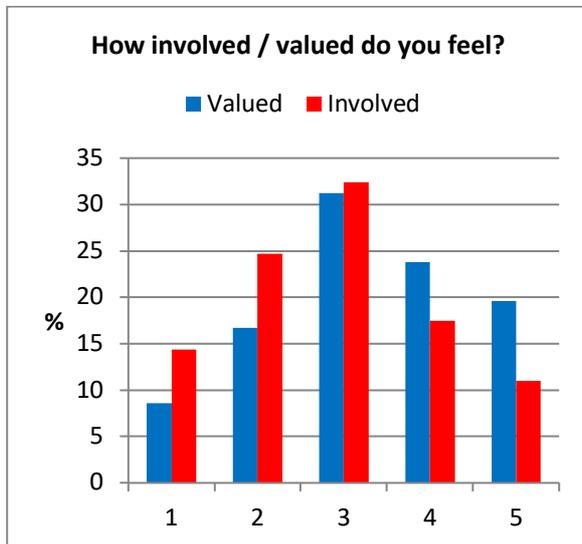
Some of the more detailed observations from young people provide greater insights into why they go to church.

- ✦ *It is a peaceful and reflective environment in a very busy week.*
- ✦ *I feel closer to God.*
- ✦ *My parents make me go.*
- ✦ *It rejoices me inside.*
- ✦ *My mum likes me to go and I like to make her happy.*
- ✦ *It isn't just for adults - they make it fun for children.*
- ✦ *Because I serve on the altar.*
- ✦ *I help out with things. For example giving out the palm crosses on Palm Sunday. I serve at the altar. Also the people there are friendly and I feel welcome.*
- ✦ *I like the priest ... probably the nicest man I have ever met.*
- ✦ *I feel like I can talk to God and share my thoughts and no one will find out but him.*
- ✦ *Friends go there that I don't see at school.*
- ✦ *I haven't been to church in a few weeks because I have been struggling with some of the teachings.*
- ✦ *I attend church because I have issues which are hard to discuss and the priest at my local church is understanding towards the problems that I face.*
- ✦ *Because I have been brought up to respect the Church and to take my time to worship the Catholic teaching. It also gives me a chance to connect with the people that I have lost.*
- ✦ *My grandad was a devoted Catholic and when he died I wanted to live it for him.*
- ✦ *I enjoy the charitable fundraising activities and other responsibilities my part in the community allows me to take on.*



How involved and valued do you feel?

Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 was 'least' and 5 was 'most') how **involved** they felt in their local parish. Overall, more young people attending church score themselves as *less*, rather than *more*, involved.



The largest number (32.4%) selected a middle '3' out of 5. The lowest two values of involvement (1 and 2) covered 39.1% of replies. The highest two values (4 and 5) accounted for 28.5%.

A similar question asked about how **valued** they felt by their parish. This time the replies were more positive. 31.2% chose the middle value, only 25.4% chose the two lower scores while 43.4% chose the higher scores.

So, though young Catholics attending Mass feel slightly under-involved, most of them do feel valued by their parishes.

How could your parish make you feel more included?

Top of the list by far was *providing activities specifically for young people*. This included social events, clubs, parties and trips. 29.9% of the 609 individuals who replied here suggested this.

19.4% of the participants identified *involving young people more in Mass and other liturgies*, which includes altar serving, reading, welcoming, liturgy groups, and services specifically for young people.

Being welcoming (including remembering names, greeting, smiling, talking to, making feel valued) was the third highest selection with 11.5%.

It is noteworthy that 11.2% indicated, without prompting, that they already feel included.

Factor	%
Activities specifically for us	29.9
Involving more in Mass and liturgy	19.4
Being welcoming	11.5
Involving in existing parish events	11.3
Already feel included	11.2
Making Mass more appealing	10.8
Listening to us	5.4
More practical outreach	5.1
More relevant/inspiring music/hymns	2.6
Other	15.9

Many of the actual comments confirm that a good proportion of young people do feel very included: *I feel included as part of my parish already, there are lots of opportunities like reading in Mass, charity work, coffee mornings etc. - I feel as if all the people who attend my parish every Sunday, as do I, are part of my family and I am welcomed into theirs. - I feel like my church does a good job and has a great group of youth and the priest supports us especially in our Lourdes fundraising. - I am an altar server so lots of people say 'well done' to me after the service. - Personally I think my parish makes me feel part of the community because there are people who invite me and who have a very bright personality.*

Others offer specific suggestions for increased involvement in the liturgy and beyond: *There could be more roles for young people every*

week in the parish such as readings, serving and welcoming. Also, once every 6 weeks...all the young people could host an event or lead the majority of the mass. - I could be asked to do readings from the bible or sing a chorus in a hymn or even be asked to hand out cups of teas to the old people. I could do the offertory. - Have more activities that involve younger people and try and stay as up to date as possible with certain things such as social media.

Some comment on the relevance of the liturgy itself: *If it wasn't as boring in the Mass and if the priest didn't hold us in the building for like twenty minutes after the Mass was supposed to have finished. - More modern hymns and some instruments. - The hymns are all sang with a serene and almost bored approach but loving and praising Our Lord should be exciting and energetic and loveable, but it's quite the opposite.*

Others mention the importance of being integrated into the community: *It would be nicer to feel part of one OPEN community where the youth don't feel like a different minority group. It makes us a little uncomfortable although my parish do try to be welcoming. - Not patronising young people through treating them like children and not forcing them to go to every related event for 'teenagers' because it singles us out rather than includes us.*

Several mention practical outreach: *They could give me more tasks to do that challenge me as a Catholic to be even better and that are to do with helping the people and working with them. - Have more opportunities to learn or do something as a group, e.g. visiting care homes or respite homes. - Helping at charities to show Jesus' example. Young people need to see what the church can offer them. - Make young people more involved and give them*

opportunities not church related but as in offering how, through the church, they could help the community.

Others mention being welcomed, valued and appreciated: *Make more of the youth welcome, give time to talk to others, this means that people would want to come to Mass more often. - Stop criticism when we make mistakes, despite all of our hard work. - Be nice to young people. - More outreach to young people from Parish and Church Council...would help me to feel more valued, since I would then have a responsibility in the wider future of the Church.*

Bringing the Faith Alive

We asked young people what else their parish could do to bring the faith alive.

Category	Replies
More varied/vibrant worship	142
More activities for young people	116
More inspiring music/hymns	111
Making people feel more welcome	87
More opportunities to learn about the faith	67
Have a more up to date approach	32
Other	134

The most popular category here was *more varied/vibrant worship*. This covered different styles of worship/prayer, shorter, fun, interactive, more modern/more formal, shorter/longer sermons or teaching. 22.6% commented on this aspect.

The responses to this question showed little difference in the replies of males and females, or between the different ages.

In their own words, many young people expressed their desire for **something different and more engaging**:

Give new modern outlooks on stories from the bible.

It's so boring just sitting there listening to someone talking! Why can't we do something more active and creative?

Don't make the hymns so serious like have a little joy and up beat in hymns.

Teach faith in a more active and fun way.

Use modern but still religious music. More stuff like 'The Source' but closer to home.

Make jokes, homilies shorter, modern hymns, not the same hymns 24/7.

They could relate their sermons more to everyday life and try to make masses more enjoyable so that people will 'want' to attend mass instead of feeling like they 'have' to because they are baptised into that faith.

Some asked specifically for **activities to help them understand the faith better**:

Teach us more about the faith.

I think there should be a group for my age to meet at least once a month to discuss how we can help at mass or in the parish. We could talk about our faith.

Hold groups in which faith is discussed with young people as many do not understand their faith.

They could bring it alive by making us do things that make us practise our faith more and could set us challenges like Jesus did with his disciples.

The relationship with priests was highlighted by some:

During mass or after mass the children could talk to the priest and get to know him and ask him questions.

The priest will usually tell a religious story that has an inspiring moral and he always makes us feel welcomed into the church.

The priests could be more enthusiastic.

They could have younger priests too who have a better understanding of young people today.

Social activities and events were again highlighted:

We could sometimes do trips out, bowling etc. to build up friendship with Catholics.

Maybe something socially for young Catholics on a regular basis not just at times like Youth Sunday/confirmations.

After Mass, there is free food and drinks in the parish centre containing: tea, biscuits, Coca cola, scones etc. It is also a great opportunity to socialise with other church goers. In addition to this everyone is welcomed.

A small number of comments pointed to issues related to **the limited number of young people involved**:

The very few people at my school who DO go to church feel like we have to keep it quiet so we don't get frowned upon by other people at school because going to church is seen as uncool or its for 'goodie-2-shoes'.

I am sure that I would be allowed to go to many parish groups but I wouldn't be comfortable because I would probably be the only teenager.

Once again the **importance of integrating with, and contributing to, the community came through strongly**:

Try and give everyone a certain type of job in the parish, one that will keep them busy, and make them more responsible to come to Mass. Jobs such as youth council, fundraising, financing, and having a rota for readers and welcomers.

Make everyone feel part of the community and have groups and activities so more

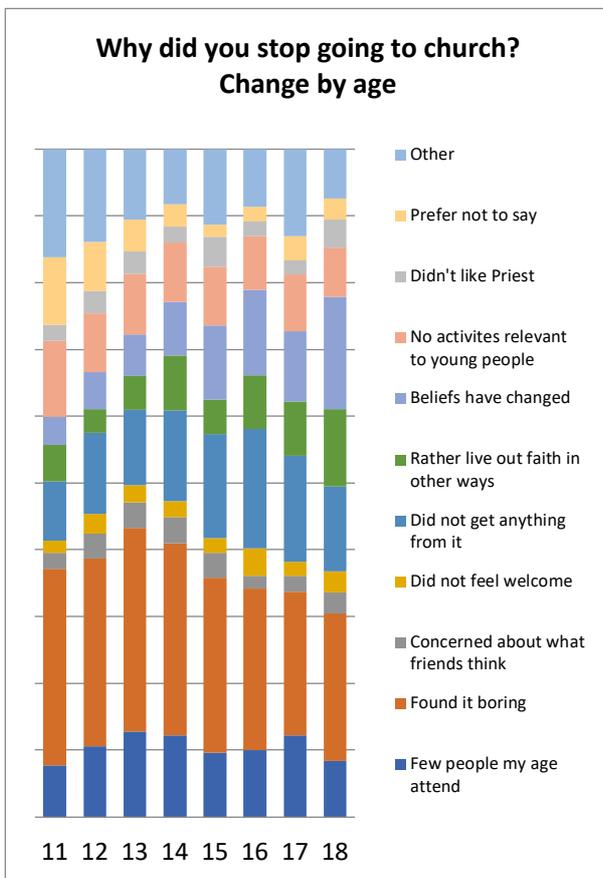


Those Who No Longer Attend Church

Having asked specific questions of those who attend church, the survey then engaged with those who used to go but no longer do so. There were 1,512 young people who gave us responses to this set of questions.

Why did you stop going to church?

There was a very clear answer to this question. They were *bored* (52.1%), and *did not feel that they got anything from attending church* (26.3%).



Few people my age attend was a large factor (21.0%) though peer pressure did not appear to play a great part in their stopping attending – *Concern about what friends think* was selected by only 6.4%.

Other significant responses to this question were:

- *No activities relevant to young people* (17.0%)
- *Beliefs have changed* (16.8%)

- *Rather live out faith in other ways* (12%)

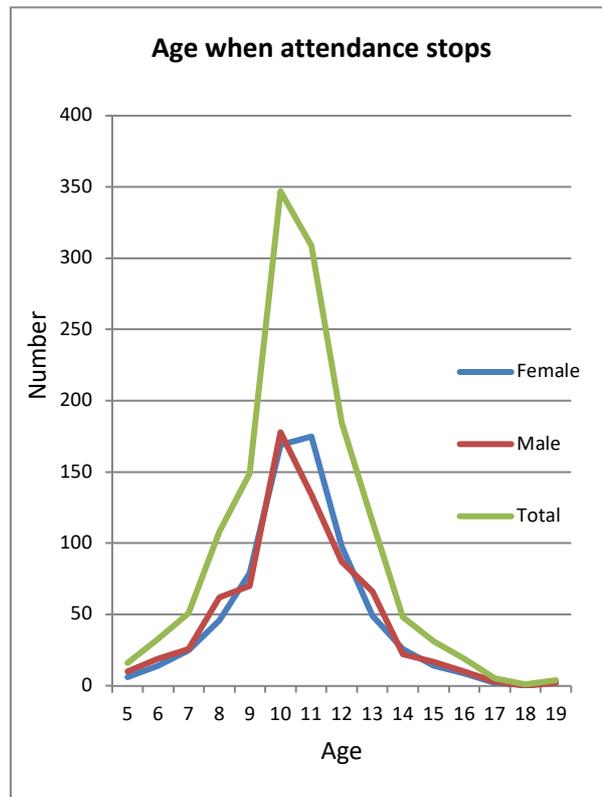
It is encouraging to see that *I did not feel welcome* and *I didn't like the priest*, were selected by very few young people.

The responses to *did not get anything from it*, *rather live out faith in other ways*, and *beliefs have changed* showed a very pronounced increase with age. While, for example, just over 10% of 11-year-olds mentioned *did not get anything out of it*, for the 15-17 year-olds it was over 30%.

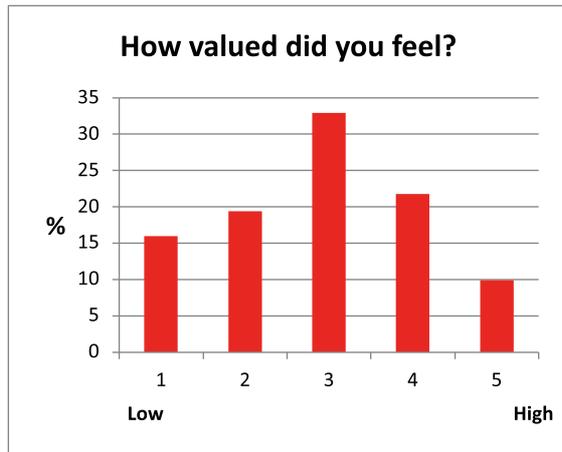
35% of 18-year-olds indicated that their *beliefs had changed* compared with less than 5% of the youngest respondents.

When did you stop going to church?

We asked this group at what age they stopped attending church regularly. As the graph shows, attendance starts to drop off very early. By the age of 9 over 300 individuals had stopped attending. The point when the largest number stop attending is between 10 and 11 years of age. This is slightly different for boys and girls - for girls it is 11 and for boys 10.



How valued did you feel in the parish you used to attend?



We asked this group of young people how valued they felt – this time in the parish they used to attend. Here, 35.4% felt a value in the lower two ranges, while 31.7% felt more highly valued. This suggests that feeling valued is not, in itself, a good predictor of whether a given individual will continue going to Mass. They also need to feel that they gain something from doing so.

How could the parish you used to attend make you feel more included?

With another clear message, the response here is for the parish to *provide more activities specifically for young people*. 40.4% of the replies asked for this, with both sexes and all ages agreeing on its prime importance. Next came *making the Mass/church more appealing*, which included aspects like being more relevant or understandable, shorter, more interesting, more fun, less boring, enjoyable etc. (22.2%). Other factors were:

- *Involving young people in existing parish activities* (10.5%)
- *Involving young people more in Mass and liturgies* (10.6%)
- *Listening to us* (4.4%)
- *More opportunities for practical outreach* (2.2%)
- *More relevant/inspiring hymns* (3.0%)

Many of the actual comments offered in reply to this question cover the same themes as the earlier question asked of those who still attend church. Some which stand out here include:

- *Invite young people to participate in the mass, invite them to read or sing or welcome people, instead of just the adults, we want to feel like we're important too.*
- *The older generations could stop judging the way young people choose to look, dress and speak. And it could be made a little bit more entertaining.*
- *There was a lot of elderly people and not many kids my age so I found it scary to have so many strangers around.*
- *Treat us as adults and not like children.*
- *The priest there is one of the best men I've ever met and is engaging.*
- *I think the Parish could make extra activities that teenagers could help with and make them feel a bit more responsible.*
- *They could do more to help children after school because there is a lot of anti-social behaviour in the area.*
- *They could host a church service especially for teenagers (11-19) at a different time to fully explain things in a less fancy way.*
- *When we go to the kids room, don't make the older kids feel stupid because all we did was have 5 mins to colour in a picture of Jesus.*
- *Their views are a little outdated, the masses are rarely relevant to the things I am going through.*
- *We already have a children's liturgy and our Priest is very kind and he makes us feel very welcome as do the volunteers but I think we should have something that would benefit older kids (13-16).*
- *To convert people you have to understand people.*

Views on the Church Today

In this section of the survey all young people were invited to give their views on the Church in the parish, the school, and the world.

What do you think is good about the Catholic Church?

There are four key areas that young people identify as particularly good about the Church.



It was particularly important to females; 55.8% mentioned this compared with 43.6% of the males. *Community* also increases in importance with age. At age 11 it scored 45.5%, and at age 17 it was 58.8%.

Those who have never attended Church also picked the same set of good things about the Church. In fact they rated *clear ethos and teaching* at 19.4% - slightly above the general figure of 16%.

We've selected a few of the many specific comments offered in response to this question:

It provides a community for people from all over the world wherever they are. It's particularly useful for students ... who may have left home for the first time and may be feeling a bit lost. There's a true sense of community and belonging when one attends a mass and gets involved in the parish.

The way it is present throughout the world. The completeness of its teaching and it is never afraid to confront modern society.

It helps bring many people together and support them in difficult times. It also does a lot to support charities and good causes and finally it helps old people to have a purpose when they are older.

I think the priests are very welcoming and accept everyone.

The Pope. I really like him. I feel he is a kind person who is running the Church. I like how they raise money for the poor and vulnerable. I really like going to a Catholic school. I love RE.

People are welcoming and you get to talk to the elderly as they may be lonely and it is the only chance they get to talk to someone, and it's even nicer if they get to see a young face.

It is very peaceful and a nice place to go if a death has occurred or a family member has died.

It doesn't appeal to me but it does to others. Others like feeling surrounded by God's presence and confessing.

I like how it is one big family.

Community, respect and faith.

Nothing, in my opinion. I feel without religion there would be less discrimination because there would be no 'this religion is better than that' attitude.

When I used to attend church I would like how lovely the priest was and he showed care for everyone. I also like how people can say anything they want in church and nobody will judge them.

They hold events outside of mass available to youths, and trips such as ones to Lourdes to help people explore their faith.

It is a community where we learn to live our faith not just 'go to church'. It teaches us how to be good people.

- It gives people hope if they feel down or that things are going wrong in their lives.
- It is very welcoming, and accepts all.
- They help out local people but also people in the global community - they try and get all generations involved, they provide support and advice and they preach good values.
- When you are a regular, there seems to be a big sense of community within the church.
- Nothing, I think it is boring.
- I feel that idea of the Catholic Church is good as it builds people's morals and gives them a sense of community and belonging.
- There is some link (although weak) between Catholic schools/churches.
- You can admit things you have done wrong and feel forgiven.
- I think that the Catholic Church is peaceful - and a quiet place to respond to God.

What would you like to see more of in the Catholic Church?

There is a clear first choice here. 35% place more involvement of young people top of their priority list. This is well ahead of the second choice better music/hymns (13.5%).

More social activity is next (9.3%), followed by greater acceptance of modern views which is mentioned by 7.0%.

Increased diversity/equality within the Church had a 4.3% response.

These latter two categories scored relatively low within the whole group but, looking at the age breakdown, they were of increasing importance to the older participants. At age 11 they were each rated 2.2%, but by the age of 18 they were rated at 15.9% and 10.6% respectively.

A small selection of the many specific comments is offered here.

Inclusivity and welcoming everyone is clearly an important theme:

- Communication between people and more of a welcoming feel.
- More tolerance of others. More equality e.g. female priests and married priests.
- More accepting of gay marriage.
- More of a liberal view concerning issues like abortion etc. - More involved in community outside of the church also, to show it is open and welcoming.

A desire to make things more vibrant and joyful is also expressed:

- The Catholic Church could make mass more exciting and interactive. Less judging and misery more happiness and spreading joy. I think the Catholic Church should have more humour, to make people feel welcomed and happy.
- A variety in what people do and say and more lively songs. People smiling. It's supposed to be a great moment in people's lives when they receive communion and everyone talks about joy and stuff but never smiles.
- Maybe some more happiness, as everyone's usually aggressively solemn.

Requests for a more modern and informal approach come through strongly too:

- They could apply it more to modern day life. More modern music could also be used.
- For it to be a bit more laid back and not so strict. More modern issues to be spoken about.
- Facilities for young people to take advantage of such as Wi-Fi and being able to sit in the church buildings - More comfy seats.

Many confirm the need to be more involved in Masses and to have more activities that are directly relevant to them:

- More encouragement for younger people to get involved for example art, music, choir etc. More children activities because in my church the children are just hurried off into a separate room just to do colouring.
- Give younger people the chance to get involved with the parish and masses. Maybe give them projects that will keep them interested.
- I think that there should be more activities for teenagers, instead of young children and adults, that don't always cost money such as the Youth Village.

Some make reference to activities to inform and develop their faith:

- I'd like to see some information packs and video clips on what the Catholic Church is all about.
- More beginner-friendly activities for people who don't necessarily know all the prayers and rituals etc. More activities aimed at young people and the teachings explained and delivered on their level of understanding so they can take in the information better rather than be bored tuning out from someone speaking on and on.
- I would like to see more support of teens and young adults who are having a hard time finding time and faith in general in their lives.

The following offers an observer's perspective:

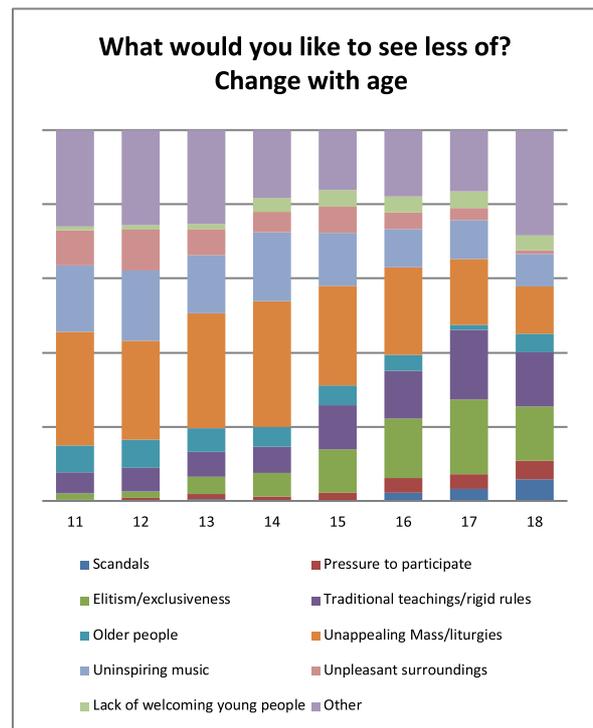
- I think perhaps allowing Church to be a more relaxed environment, where it isn't as formal. Aside from this I don't think I'd want to see much else, the church offers a lot of services and opportunities, and it does good things for a lot of people. Although

I'm not religious, I do appreciate what the Catholic Church does for the community.

What would you like to see less of in the Catholic Church?

Unappealing Mass/liturgy tops the list of what the participants wish to see less of, with just under 30% indicating this. Uninspiring music is next (16.8%).

Other factors rate below 10%. Traditional teaching/rigid rules (9.7%), Elitism and exclusiveness (including homophobia, sexism, discrimination, intolerance, inequality, lack of openness) at 8.1% and unpleasant surroundings (7.7%). A lack of welcoming young people (2.9%), pressure to participate (1.8%) and scandals (0.8%) do not appear to be major concerns of the survey sample. When looking at the different ages however the picture changes.



For scandals, pressure to participate, elitism/exclusiveness, and traditional rules, we see their importance rising with age. For 17-year-olds these last two factors become the first and second most important, with unappealing liturgy dropping to third place.

Individual comments about what people would like to see less of in the Church are again very diverse and we can offer just a flavour here:

Services should be less repetitive and rehearsed as it seems that things are said and done only for the sake of doing them and following tradition, when Christianity is about connecting with God through Jesus.

Medieval attitude to sex and relationships.

Nothing, I like everything how it is in the Catholic Church.

Not as much judgement about 'typical teenagers'.

Guitars.

Homophobia.

Less rules and regulations.

The environment could be slightly less formalised or even a separate service to Sunday Mass to cater for those that feel intimidated by such a deep-rooted practice.

Less of the acceptance of only the regular parish and more welcoming to new members.

People being so shy and embarrassed to go to church because it is not cool enough.

I rarely see or hear of women who have contributed greatly to the Catholic Church, and I would like to see more of that.

Everything is fine and I wouldn't change anything because of the fantastic priest we have.

Have priests who are more excited about their job and don't talk in a monotone voice all of the time.

I would like to see less prejudice towards some groups of people, for example people shouldn't look down on you if you can't go every weekend, school keeps kids busy.

I would like to see less discrimination against homosexuals, women and minorities in the church. I would like instead to see more open mindedness and a greater acceptance of all people

All the quietness and silent praying, I think church should be a loud place full of joy and happiness and that there should be hymns playing and everyone is singing and dancing praising the Lord.

People should talk about what the readings from the bible actually mean because I sometimes don't understand some of the words or the meaning.

Nothing, church is a nice place to go to.

Adults taking a lead role. I think one of the main reasons children don't enjoy church is because they just sit there and don't have a part to play.

The same structure every Sunday, it should be more varied.

I feel that sometimes the Catholic Church can be too forceful on what they expect a perfect Catholic to be and this can make some people drive away from the church.

Less attention on the church building, admin, bureaucracy and more time spent on the things that matter - the parishioners and developing as a parish community.

Long, rambling, uninspiring sermons.

Masses feel very structural, it sounds like people say prayers just because that's what they are expected to do and not because they want to.

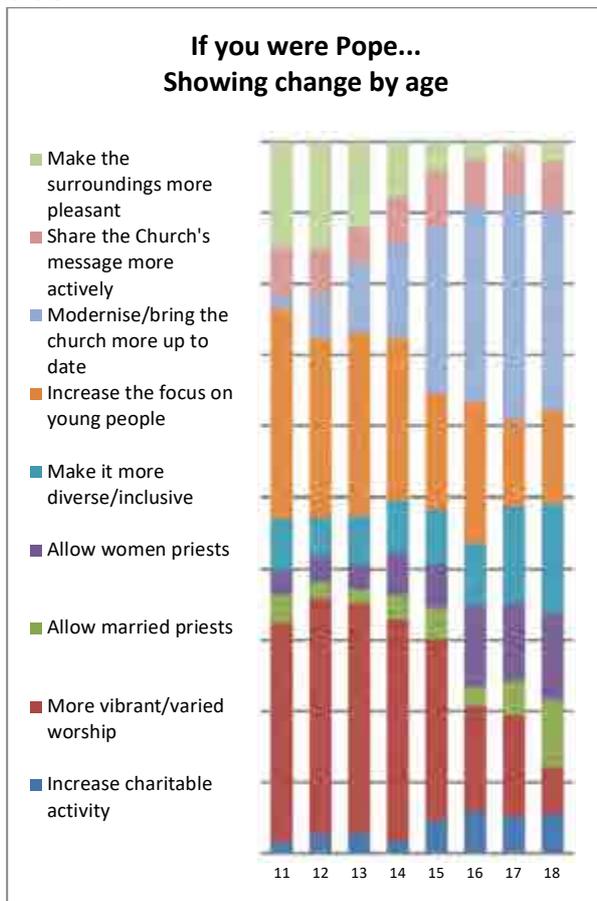
Their views on many matters that are just not up to current times, for example not allowing women to be priests. Jesus was accepting of everyone.



If you were Pope, what changes would you make to the Catholic Church?

This question prompted wide-ranging comments from the 3,627 individuals who made a response. After summarising the comments into a set of categories the most frequently mentioned topic was *More vibrant/varied worship* (23.5%), followed by *increase the focus on young people*. *Modernise/bring the church more up to date* had a 13% response.

As in the previous question, those replying show a marked change in priority as they get older.



At 11 there are just two important factors – *More vibrant worship* (25%) and *increase the focus on the young*. For the 18 year olds, the key priorities are *modernise the church* (28%) and *make it more diverse* (15%).

As they move from 11 to 18 the issues of *worship/music type* and *involvement of the young* reduce quickly in importance, and more general concerns reflecting trends in society begin to dominate. There is little sign in the responses of any in-depth understanding of the Church's position on many of these issues.

Many young people were keen to elaborate on what they would change about the Church if they were in the Pope's position:

- ✦ *I would try to make the Catholic Church more down to earth and approachable by speaking to the community through social media and publicity.*
- ✦ *I would make sure that everyone no matter what their sexuality felt welcome in the church community.*
- ✦ *Get women in charge, allow all aspects of homosexuality, allow divorce, celebrate all individuals regardless of their background or nature and don't discriminate or make them feel outcast.*
- ✦ *I would change how the seating is very hard and uncomfortable for the elderly.*
- ✦ *I couldn't be Pope, I'm a female. Which I think is highly unfair for religious people who want to be a pope/priest.*
- ✦ *I would make the church livelier and more welcoming (it's also very cold so I'd make it warm).*
- ✦ *Newer music mixed with older music to meet the needs of all generations.*
- ✦ *Get the church doing more charity work: help out with migrant crisis by sending an army of Catholics! That would give the religion a better name in the media.*
- ✦ *If I were the pope I would change nothing because it is fine the way it is.*
- ✦ *Children being able to go on more trips related to the church so they have a better understanding of the Catholic Community.*
- ✦ *I would make priests younger - make them more fashionable.*
- ✦ *More God Camps to bring people together.*
- ✦ *I wouldn't make any changes because right now the church is a very welcoming and loving environment.*

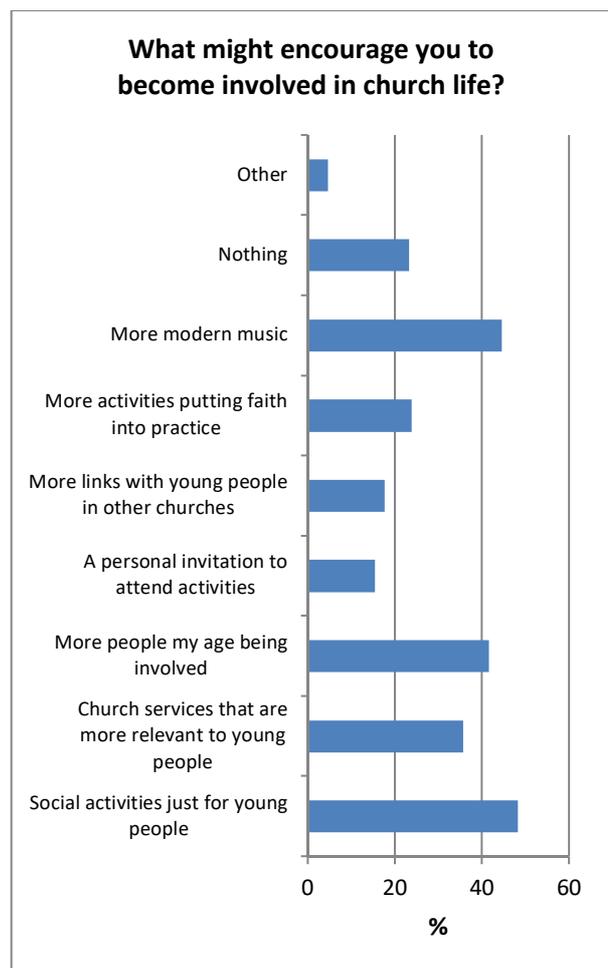
- *I would advertise the church in a more open way, making younger people feel more happy to come to church and not be afraid of what their friends think.*
- *Make a school or place where young people can learn what it's like to be a priest. This would help Newcastle recruit more priests.*
- *I would scrap it.*
- *Make it more technologically advanced.*
- *I would make it a place for young people to show how they feel and get time to spend with the priest to ask for help if they need it.*
- *Embrace the use of technology and modern science to further be able to spread the word of God and appeal to young people.*
- *The YMT, SVP are just a few of what create an actual impact in children's lives and we need to see more of it otherwise there will be no 'Church', in my opinion.*
- *Getting more people involved and making sure that every Catholic Church has at least one priest, one deacon and a couple of altar servers.*
- *The Church actively going out to spread the Gospel to those who haven't heard it. Encourage them. Let them find God through themselves.*
- *It would be loud, full of enjoyment and laughter and there would be food!*
- *More teen activities like the YMT do.*
- *I would make the priests talk about how we can put Jesus' words into our life.*
- *I wouldn't be the pope, I'm not inspirational and I'm a bit of a sinner tbh.*
- *I would change the way the Mass is, I would make it quicker and more fun to be at so more younger people showed up to church.*

What might encourage you to become (more) involved with church life?

Social activities just for young people was the favourite (48.3%), with importance also being put on there being a good number of their peers involved too.

More modern music was high on the list with over 40% of responses.

Social activities were emphasised less by the 17-year-olds (39.7%) than by the younger ages (63.6%).



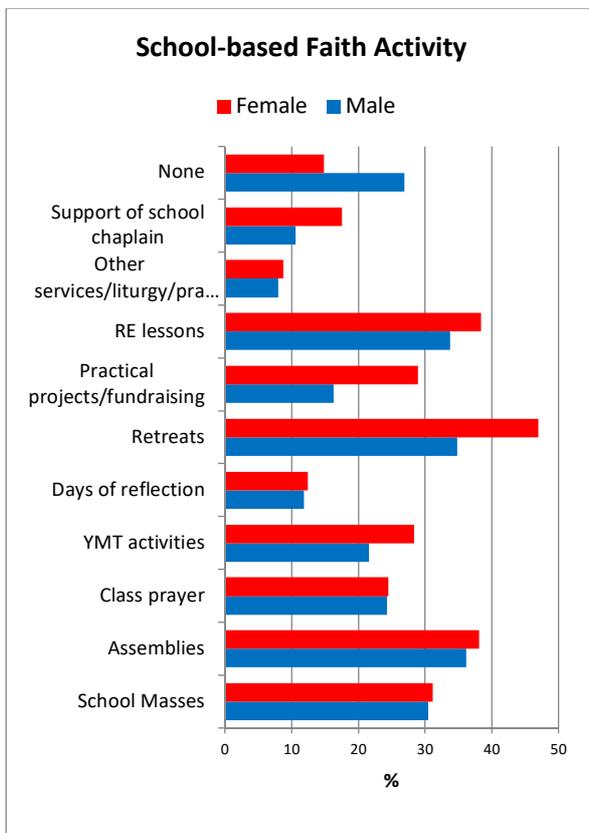
Nearly one third of males (29.2%) said nothing would encourage them to be more involved. For females the figure was 16.4%.

Faith Experience in Our Schools

With school being the key point of contact with the Catholic community for many of the participants, the survey looked at the way young people see school based activities.

What school based faith activities are/were most helpful to you?

The most popular activity was *retreats* with 40.5% selecting this. *Assemblies*, and *RE lessons* were second and third. *School Masses* were the other activity that topped 30%.



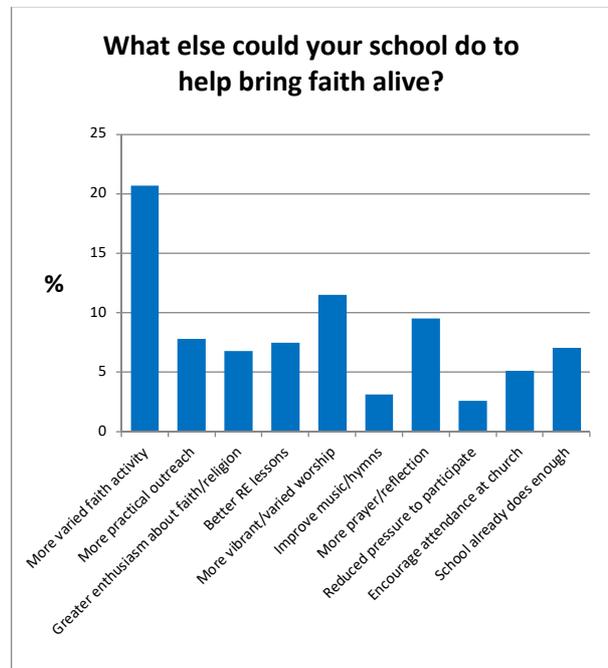
Assemblies were the first preference of males, who scored them just above *retreats* (37.0% against 34.8%), where females had *retreats* at 46.9% and *assemblies* at 38.1%.

With increasing age, *school Masses* and *class prayer* become less important. *Retreats* are the most important for older students.

For those who do not normally attend church, *retreats*, *RE lessons* and *assemblies* rate the highest, although this group also rate *none* highly (i.e. no activity is found helpful).

What else could your school do to help bring faith alive?

Although there were 2,664 responses to this question, none of the categories that the replies were gathered into had a high rating; with the highest being *more varied faith activity* at 20.7%.

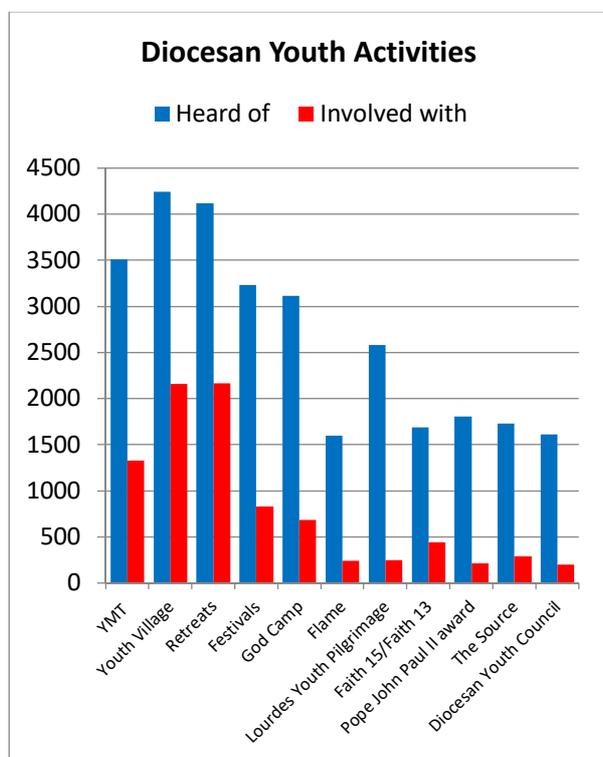


A sample of some of the actual words used in response are offered here to give a flavour of the variety and themes covered.

- Never came across morning or evening prayer of the Church, or was exposed to the writing of the popes in encyclicals until I went to university. Should be more of this in schools.*
- Nothing really, they already do a lot it's just hard for them to bring faith alive for people who don't have belief.*
- I'm sure that if I was a religious person then I would consider the school to have done a decent job in terms of 'bringing faith alive', but I am not so I don't really know what the school could do.*
- Make going to Mass more convenient, as I was never able to have any lunch with Masses.*

Youth Activities in the Diocese

There is a wide range of youth events and activities available for young people in the diocese. The survey asked how many had *heard of* these and whether they had been *involved* with them.



All items listed had at least 30% recognition among the young people. Five of the aspects (YMT, Youth Village, Retreats, Festivals and 'God Camp') had been heard of by over 50%. Many of the events are targeted at specific age groups, and this shows up when we look at the responses of particular ages. Youth Village Retreats and 'God Camp' are recognised by over 80% of the older individuals. As would be expected, the level of *involvement* reported in each activity varies. For the Youth Village and Retreats over 50% of those who have heard of them had also taken part in related activities. YMT events have a 38% involvement; Faith 13/15 has 26% and Festivals 26% with 'God Camp' at 22%. The Source (17%), Flame (15%) and John Paul II Award (12%) are next in order with the Diocesan Youth Council and Lourdes Youth Pilgrimage showing 12% and 10%.

Among its target group of older students, the take up of the *Lourdes Pilgrimage* is higher, reaching 22% among 18-year-olds.

Some of the actual words from young say it all:

- I found the Festivals and God Camp very beneficial and got a lot of young people involved in the church and thinking about their faith.*
- God camp should be put on for all ages in high school. If I had the chance to go every year I definitely would, and a lot of other people would.*
- We went to this god camp like a youth village with the school, like a festival and we thought it may be quite boring but it were actually really good because we sang and danced and did fun activities.*

The Last Word

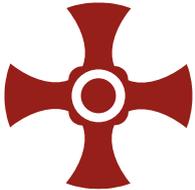
This survey report presents us with many messages - some of these are encouraging and some are very challenging. Yet it is only a short summary of an enormously rich collection of observations from young people in our diocese – a resource that we can all continue to draw upon and learn from as we move forward.

Their responses show that many young people, while expressing dissatisfaction with some of what they see and experience, do want to be fully engaged and to journey with us in faith – as long as we can provide them with the tools to do so. The next page offers some starting points but the words of one young person are more direct:

'I would like you to take on board and think about this survey I have answered and the changes that could be made. I am just giving you some ideas that could possibly increase your community.'

What Next?

...or how might we respond to what this survey is telling us?



This report presents a summary picture of the views of well over 5,000 young people aged between 11 and 19 - the vast majority of whom attend Catholic schools in our diocese. Many

have never regularly attended a Catholic Church. Some used to attend but no longer do so – and some are enhancing and enlivening our parishes every weekend. We have a lot to learn from each of them.

In our schools and parishes we may be able to recognise some of what they are telling us. Perhaps we can all consider their messages and think about how we might respond as individuals, as parish and school worshipping communities, and as a diocese.

Some of the many things we may wish to reflect on and pray about include:

- How do we relate to those who come to us for the Sacraments?
- How best do we involve them in the life of our community in the future?
- How do we welcome young people? How many do we know by name?
- For the young people we have in our parishes, how could we include them more in the parish community - both socially and liturgically?
- How could we make them feel more involved and valued?
- How do we allow them to exercise responsibility and make practical contributions to the parish?
- How can we share a lively and vibrant faith with them?

- For those that are only loosely part of our communities, how might we encourage them to become closer to us? How can we

help them grow in faith rather than drift away?

- Young people are not all the same, and the needs of different ages and sexes can be very diverse. Do we provide a suitable range of opportunities for them both socially and in learning about and practising their faith?
- How do we make provision for helping older teens in meeting the challenges to their faith from society?
- How can we encourage our young people to be involved in the many faith development opportunities we already have? What others should we be providing?
- How do we benefit from, and support, the work of the Youth Ministry Team and other youth activities in the diocese?
- How might schools and parishes work hand-in-hand on these issues?
- Do we smile and laugh enough as a parish community with our young people?

... and, no doubt, there are other areas that you will identify as being important to your own circumstances which warrant thought, discussion, prayer and action.



APPENDIX 3

Challenges and Hopes

The Findings at a Glance

The survey sought views about the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and generated 1,720 responses - mostly from a wide cross-section of interested adults - with a small number from younger contributors.

The replies were mainly from practising Catholics who are active in their parishes, but there was also a group of over 250 who are less connected with the Church - including Catholics, other Christians and those of no faith.

77.8% of participants regularly attend Mass in Catholic parishes at least weekly. 85.3% consider they are part of a Catholic worshipping community, and 77.3% describe themselves as practising Catholics.

Where people go to Mass is influenced by many things, but very important are the practical issues of *Mass times* and *location*, and the more human factors of *being welcomed*, and the *manner of the priest*. For younger groups in particular, their *experience of the liturgy* is also an important factor.

The responses indicate a good level of involvement in many facets of parish life. Some activities, such as *liturgy and worship*, were mentioned by all age groups. Other roles are more specific to particular age groups.

Over a third of those replying regard themselves as very involved already in church life. *Work* and *family commitments* are the main reasons given for not being more involved – although more telling aspects are also highlighted.

The challenges identified for parishes are mainly a concern for *engaging the young*, *falling attendances* in general, and the *pressure on the priesthood*, both as it ages and in the current *lack of vocations*.

There is little difference apparent in the way that men and women see things; both groups have similar priorities.

The younger groups often highlight *unappealing liturgy*, *lack of involvement* and

lack of vibrancy. For the older teens and young adults there is a need expressed for better *faith and spiritual development*.

In addressing the challenges described, many wish to *engage more with young people*, to *reach out and be welcoming*, and to *be more involved as laity*.

For young adults a focus on *prayer and faith development* is asked for.

The most significant challenge from a wider regional perspective is seen as *the pressure on priests*. Clearly many of the laity regard their priests as a precious resource that they care about both in terms of the workload they have, and in the reducing numbers.

For those less connected with the Church the same issues of *dwindling numbers* and *engaging young people* appear, but a *perceived irrelevance* of the Church in the wider community is also highlighted.

Asked about what might need to change in their local church to encourage greater involvement the highest responses asked for it to be *more socially vibrant* and to have more *involvement of the laity*.

For the future, there is a *strong sense of hope* and a wish for a *vibrant and active Church*. Many desire a Church that expresses itself in *caring and welcoming*, and with an *openness to youth*.

As well as providing summary data to show overall trends, the report gives a flavour of some of the many thousands of heartfelt comments from all parts of the diocese. Herein lies a very clear message that people care passionately about the future of the Catholic Church in our region and are keen to add their energy and prayers to ensuring that it flourishes into the future.

Challenges and Hopes

About this Survey

Between August 2015 and January 2016, people from around the North East shared their views on the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. The

majority of participants used an online survey tool but over 200 preferred the hardcopy alternatives provided to parishes or printed in the *Northern Cross* newspaper.

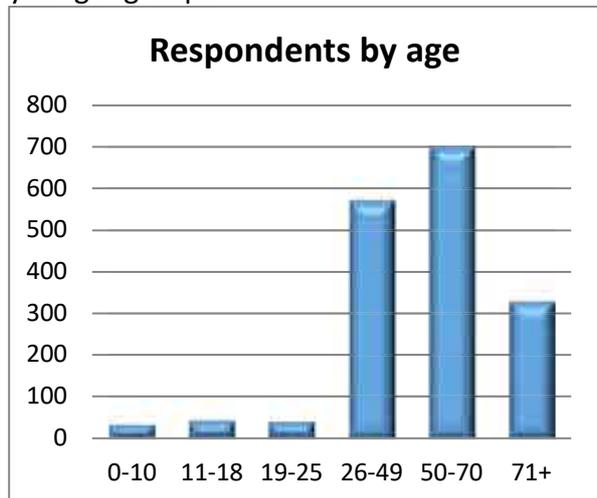
This report summarises their responses and presents them in a way that we hope is helpful in informing the conversations that are now taking place around our diocese as we look to the future.

As well as providing summary data to show overall trends we have ‘dipped into’ the vast pool of written comments to illustrate and enliven the report. Here we have unapologetically focussed on comments that might stimulate and challenge. We feel that to do otherwise is to miss an opportunity for development, growth and new thinking.

We are very grateful to everyone who has taken the time to present their perspectives. We have tried our best, within the constraints of a short report, to do them justice.

Who was involved?

1,720 people completed the survey with the vast majority (93%) aged over 25. 118 questionnaires were completed by those in younger groups.

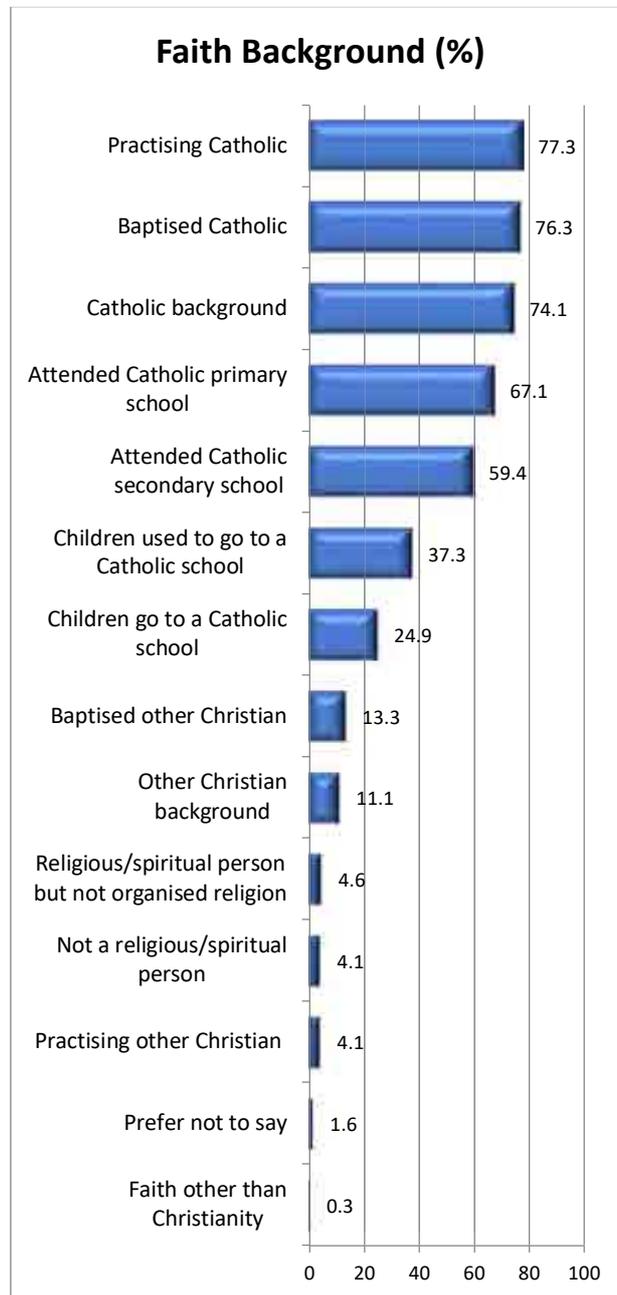


1,123 females (65.3%) and 597 males (34.7%) took part. By comparison the Catholic population in England and Wales is estimated to have a distribution of 59.1% female and 40.9% male.

Almost all of the parishes in the diocese were represented in the responses although the

number of participants from individual parishes ranged widely from 1 to over 80.

Participants were asked to provide details of their background by selecting as many categories as they wished from a given list.



It is interesting to compare the two broad groups that emerge:

- a) Those who describe themselves as having a ‘Catholic background’ (74.1%) are very likely to be baptised (92%) and to have attended a Catholic primary School (83.5%). 74% attended a Catholic

secondary School and 1,054 (82.7%) of the group currently consider themselves to be a practising Catholic.

- b) The 445 people who did not indicate a Catholic background are less likely to be baptised (30.7%), to have attended a Catholic primary school (20.2%) or a Catholic secondary school (16.6%). 62% of this group currently describe themselves as practising Catholics.

A total of 154 responses were from those baptised in another Christian denomination but who now consider themselves to be practising Catholics.

Do you consider yourself as part of a Catholic worshipping community?

85.3% of survey participants identify themselves as part of a Catholic worshipping community and associate themselves with a Catholic parish.

The 253 people who do not see themselves in this way cover a wide variety of backgrounds, including:

- 42 practising Catholics
- 43 practising Christians of other denominations
- 32 who are religious/spiritual but not of any organised religion
- 38 who do not consider themselves religious/spiritual
- 2 from faiths other than Christianity

The Church-going experience

Frequency of attendance

Those who indicated that they are part of a worshipping community shared how often they go to Mass. 43.5% attend at least weekly and 35.7% do so more than once a week. 12%

attend between weekly and monthly, and 8% only irregularly or never.

A higher proportion of the men who replied reported attending weekly or more often (84.9% compared with 76.1% of women).

What influences where people go to Mass?

Participants were given a list of possible reasons that might influence where they choose to attend Mass and were asked to select all those that they felt applied to them. (Hence the percentages total to more than 100%)

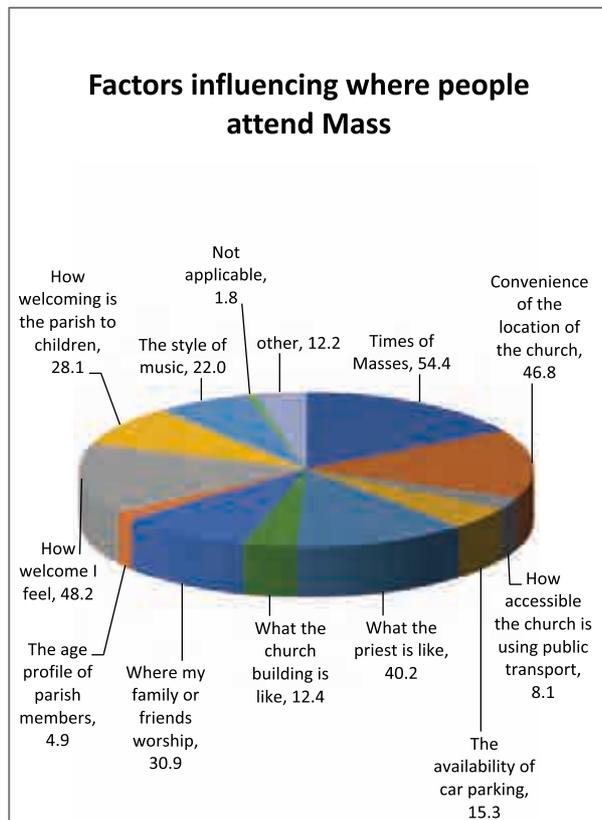
The factors mentioned most were:

- The times of Masses (54.4%)
- How welcome I feel (48.2%)
- The convenience of the location of the church (46.8%)
- What the priest is like (40.2%)

The least important were:

- The availability of car parking (15.3%)
- What the church building is like (12.4%)
- How accessible the church is using public transport (8.1%)
- The age profile of parish

There are some striking differences between age groups here. Whilst *times of Masses* is the most important to participants aged 26 and over, for the youngest groups the *style of music* and *what the priest is like* are equal first choice.



The 11-18s highlight *How welcome I feel* while for 19-25s *What the priest is like* is first choice. *How welcome I feel* features in the top three influences selected by all of the three younger groups.

Times of Masses becomes more important with increasing age. For the under 11s, it ranks 9th of the 13 choices and for 11-18s it is 4th. Young adults (19-25) place it 5th while 61.7% of over 70s select it.

As well as identifying factors from a given list, participants offered thoughts about what else influenced their attendance.

Examples of their comments include:

- *I celebrate Holy Mass to worship God and none of the above would influence my obligation to – or where I would attend.*
- *Mass attendance must go with real hands on Christian commitment - not like getting shoppers to visit your store.*
- *Quality of the sermons and the capacity of the clergy to stretch and challenge me and deepen my faith.*
- *I used to come to mass on a weekly basis but now that we have a new priest that is not so engaging I don't really like to come to mass anymore.*
- *It is important to me that I feel the priest 'breaks the word'.*
- *I attend Mass in several churches. Some of them make me feel very welcome, have inspiring priests, have wonderful music and welcome children and families warmly. In others these are sadly lacking.*
- *I would seek out an Extraordinary Form Mass first to meet my Sunday obligation.*
- *I don't go to church because of what it looks like or to catch up with mates. If I wanted to do that, I'd go to a pub instead. I go first and foremost because God commands us to set aside a day of the week for worship, and I go regardless... because it's God who is the most important - not me.*
- *Able to hear the priest when he's talking – very important!*
- *Churches that do not make simple adjustments for the disabled can be VERY hurtful to those who do not have the transport to go elsewhere. They can also feel extremely rejected.*
- *This is my parish and where I will always worship, irrespective of where the building is located.*
- *...is a welcoming, supportive and a wonderful parish I am proud to belong to.*

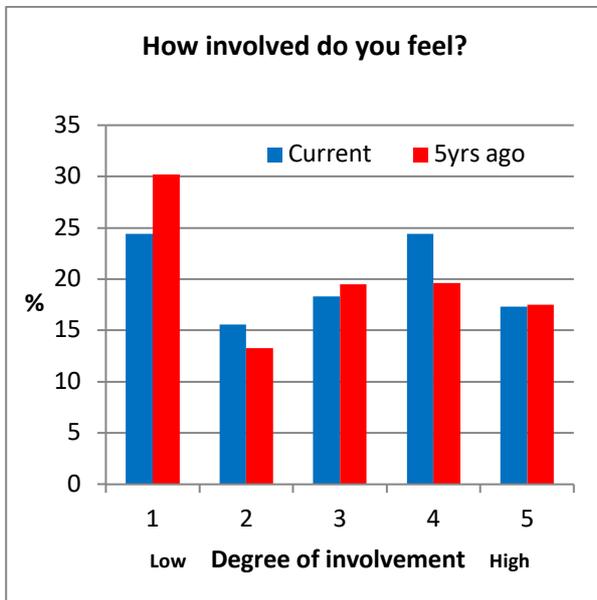
Involvement

To what extent are you regularly involved in the life of this church?

Presented with a scale of one to five (where 1 is 'least' and 5 is 'most') participants were asked how *involved* they felt in parish life.

The replies were spread across the range, with 15.5% feeling that they are *least involved* and 11% feeling *most involved*.

They were also asked how they would have answered the same question 5 years ago. Their replies suggest that, overall, they regard themselves as more involved in the life of the parish now than they did in the past.

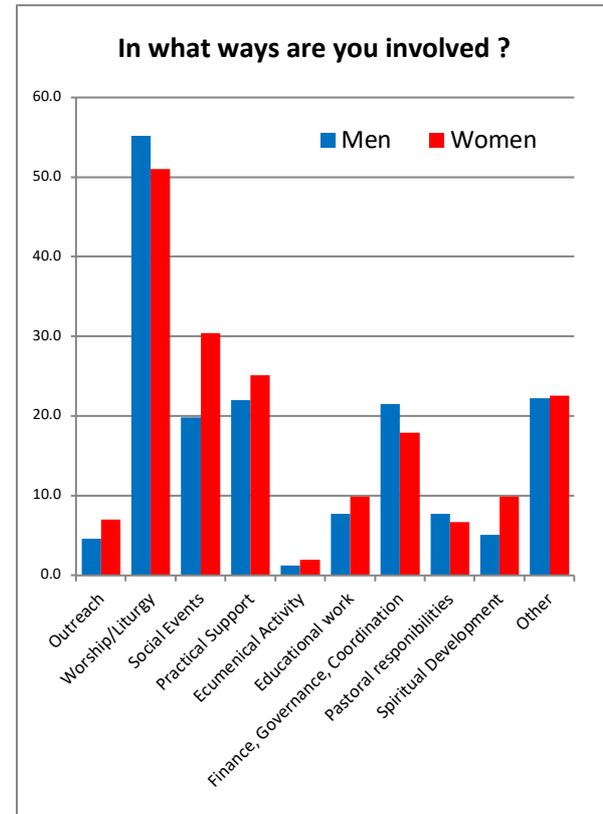


Many younger people place themselves in the *least involved* category. This changes as age increases (48% of the 0-10s, 29.6% of the 11-18s and 25% of the 19-25s). The 'most involved' group is dominated by those over 50.

In what ways are you involved in the life of this church?

When asked *how* they were involved the highest responses were for *worship / liturgy* and *social events*. The pattern of involvement is slightly different for men and women, with a higher proportion of men indicating involvement in *worship / liturgy* and *finance / governance / coordination and pastoral*

responsibilities, whereas women are more often seen in the *ecumenical activity, educational work, social events, practical*



support, spiritual development and outreach categories.

Ecumenical activity is noticeably low, being the lowest category specified, with just 20 people specifically identifying this in their comments.

The *worship and liturgical life* of a parish generally seems to involve a mix of age groups, but other activities are less diverse. While it is not surprising that no children under 11 years are involved in *outreach*, both this very young group and the 19-25s are completely missing from the *spiritual development* and *ecumenical activity*. The 50-70 age group form a large part of those working on the *finance, governance and coordination* aspects.

Those replying were able to comment in their own words. **They mention a wide range of specific contributions:**

- *Parish Council member.*
- *Supporting events organised by the parish and contributions to charities supported by the church.*
- *Paths, car park, drains, attending to waste disposal bins.*
- *Principally by attending mass and other services.*
- *I stand at the back of the church and welcome late comers - Listening and sharing with folk after mass and within my local community.*

Several indicated that they wear 'many hats':

- *I'm a Catechist, Extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, Lay Leader, summer and Christmas Fayre Co-ordinator, Primary and Secondary School Governor, Voluntary Reader in Primary School, Choir member...*

Others used to be involved but not any longer:

- *I used to be wholly involved, found local politics too unnecessary... you had to be on the pension to be involved... a clique of mostly females.*
- *I used to be an altar server but the new priest put me off and I now don't any more.*
- *It doesn't appeal to me and, in the past, it hasn't provided me with an opportunity to live my faith. I prefer to engage with the secular world. That's where my faith can make a difference.*

Some may get involved if they were asked:

- *Active participation by other members of the community didn't seem to be*

encouraged. Have offered to help but not taken up.

- *No opportunity to get involved in any meaningful way.*
- *I feel totally isolated from the church community even though the priest tries very hard to involve attendees at Mass in suitable events.*
- *I find it difficult to know where I could be best used.*
- *The feeling I get is that people either think I'm not 'up to the job' or the current groups are very tight knit and it's hard to get into these easily. It's the same people running ALL the different committees.*

A number of people highlight practical reasons for not being more involved:

- *I live 35 minutes from church and the bus only runs two hourly and don't drive or I would be there much more often.*
- *I work in a job with demanding round the clock hours and it is very difficult to commit to anything especially after work leaves me mentally and physically exhausted.*
- *For family reasons, I am not always able to participate in events other than Sunday Mass but I support my parish and the wider Church financially.*
- *Not involved at all as unable to leave the house easily.*

Others were prompted to think about how they might contribute:

- *I'd like to be involved with liturgy, catechesis, outreach to the poor and marginalised and just offering my services where they may be required.*
- *I do feel that I could make more of a push to contribute in a less regular way and am sorry that so far I have not.*

Some clearly find their involvement to be a source of friendship and fulfilment:

- I have made some fantastic friends that I would never have known if it hadn't been for my priest pushing me on.*
- My social life revolves around the church.*
- I know a lot of other people who attend and do feel that I belong to the community even though I am not that heavily involved.*

Others see it very differently:

- I have found it to be very unwelcoming at all 3 of the Catholic churches which I attended before I became a member at Easter this year. Many people who are enquirers would probably walk away and not continue to explore Catholicism as possibly being their spiritual home.*

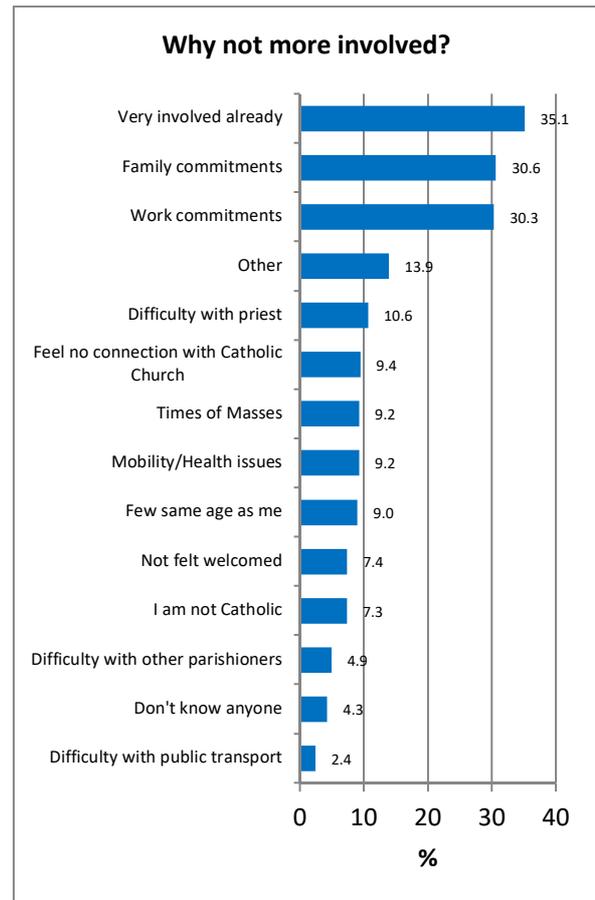
Greater Involvement

All participants, regardless of background were asked

'What would you say are the main reasons you are not more involved in the life of your local Catholic Church at the present time?'

Over a third (35.1%) of those replying already feel very involved in their community. Work and family commitments are given as reasons for not being further involved by over 30% in each case. 252 people (16.7%) selected both work and family commitments preventing them being further involved.

The largest difference in response between men and women here was the degree to which women's family commitments prevented them being more involved. 32.7% of women selected this as a reason (their highest scoring factor) and 26.6% of men (for whom it ranked second to their work commitments at 29.2%).



As would be expected, a high proportion of the 19-25 and 26-50 age groups had work commitments rated high, but the 11-18s also had this at 22%.

Mobility and health problems were an issue for the over 71s (26.5%). Many of this group also reported being very involved already at 55.8%. with the 50-70s reporting 46.2% on this factor. Family commitments were most restricting for the 26-49s (49.3%).

Ways your local Catholic Church could change that might make you want to become more involved

Responses to this question were quite low, with the highest response (for a *more socially vibrant church*) rating just 9.5%. *More lay involvement* was second (7.2%) and *youth activities* the third highest at 4.8%. *A wider variety of worship* is next with 4.6%, and *leadership* and *adult formation* are at the end of the list with little response.

For various reasons my life is rather busy at the moment so it is not easy to get involved. However my wife and I are rather new to the area and would love the opportunity to make friends with Catholics in the region. However we have no idea how to set about doing that.

Just ask me who I am and what I could do to help. I used to do a lot of work.

The same request for a *socially vibrant church* is top of the list for both men and women, and both put *lay involvement* second, but with men giving it a noticeably higher rating. Key areas for the younger groups are *youth oriented activities* for the 11-18 year olds, and *socially vibrant churches* for the 19-25s. These young adults also put a *wider variety of worship* on their list of wishes (12.8%).

I hope that we will be a community of more committed and active disciples that have a deeper love and understanding of the Gospel.

Challenges Facing the Church

Parish Challenges

Those belonging to a worshipping community were asked to identify the three main challenges facing that community, and to give a personal view on how the parish should respond.

Three challenges were particularly common:

- A failure to appeal to the young (38.7%)
- Falling Mass attendance *including a sense that people are engaging less with church life* (28.9%)
- Pressure on the priesthood *including declining numbers of vocations and ageing priests* (26.2%)

The next largest topic, mentioned in 15% of responses, was the issue of *ageing congregations* and their *sustainability*.

Insufficient younger people coming into the church – the average age of the congregation must be around 60.

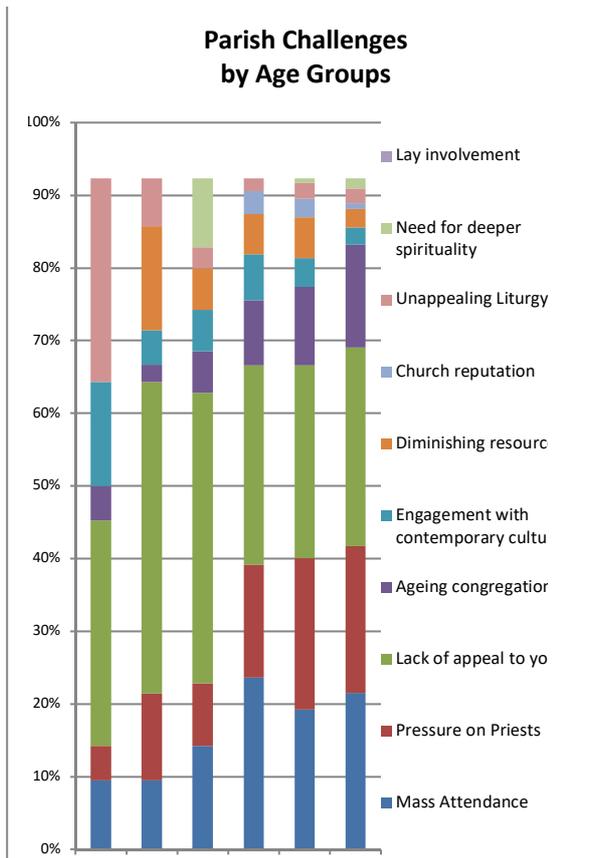
No children at Mass now, no church in the future.

People of my age are not prepared to do as much voluntary work for the church as the older generation are currently doing.

All other challenges were mentioned by less than 8% of participants. These were *Diminishing resources* (7.1%), *Developing lay ministry* (6.6%), *A failure to engage with contemporary culture* (6.4%), *Unappealing liturgy/worship* (4.6%), *A need for deeper spirituality* (4.3%), and *The dubious standing of the Church* (including scandals and wider lack of interest from the public) (3.1%). For all

age groups *Lack of appeal to the young* is a very important factor.

For the youngest (0-10) the most significant factor is *Unappealing liturgy* (45.5%), then comes the *Lack of appeal to young*. They are also the only group to highlight issues that relate to ‘*engagement with contemporary culture*’ in their top three.



The 11-18 year olds put *lack of appeal to the young*, first but rate *diminishing resources* and *unappealing liturgy* higher than other factors, with *pressure on priests* in fourth place.

Young adults (19-25) agree in putting *lack of appeal to the young* first, then comes *Mass attendance*, but they are the only group to rate ‘*need for deeper spirituality*’ in their top concerns.

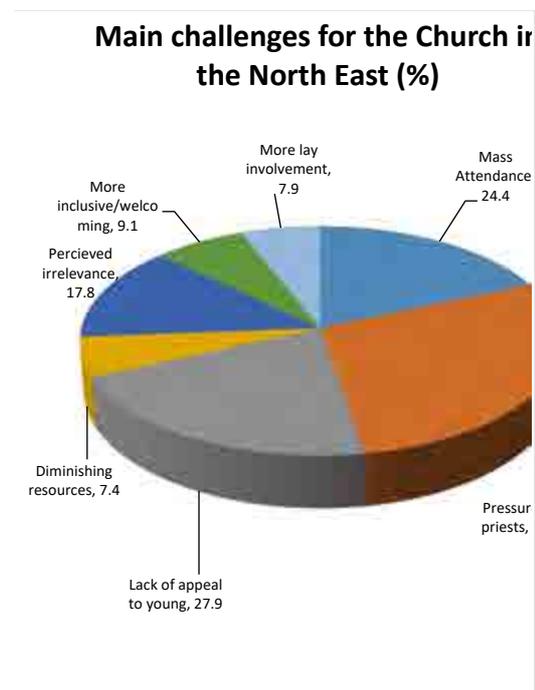
Concern about *ageing congregations* rises in importance as age increases. The over 70s also mention *deeper spirituality* (7.3%). The 50-70 year group most mention a need to develop *lay involvement*, though still at a comparatively low rate (9.5%). For all age

groups *Lack of appeal to the young* is a very important factor.

Challenges facing the Catholic Church in the North East

All participants, whether or not part of a worshipping community, were asked what they saw as the main challenges facing the Catholic Church in the North East. By far the most mentions were of issues relating to *pressure on priests* (38.6%).

Concern about engaging young people has been a constant theme in responses throughout the survey, and it is again high in the ratings here with 27.9% indicating *lack of appeal to the young*. *Mass attendance* (“Falling Mass attendance, including a sense that people are engaging less with church life”) follows closely behind at 24.4%.



Working out the best way to utilise our clergy and promoting vocations to the priesthood, the religious life and the permanent diaconate.

Attracting a younger, wider age-profile.

- *Relevance – why should I believe? Why should I be a Catholic? Why should I go to church? What does the church stand for?*
- *Get people through the door. Or go out and invite them in. Then get them interested by showing how the God can enhance and / or change their life.*

A wider perception that the Church/Faith is irrelevant was a smaller but still significant factor (17.8%) among the full group of participants.

The younger age groups again show different priorities. For the 0-10s almost the only priority was *lack of appeal to the young* (64.5%). This was still top of the list for the 11-18s at 42.4%, and followed by *perceived irrelevance* of the church with 27.3%.

Responding to the Challenges

Having identified the key challenges participants who are part of parish communities were asked “*What is your personal view about how your parish community should respond to these challenges?*”

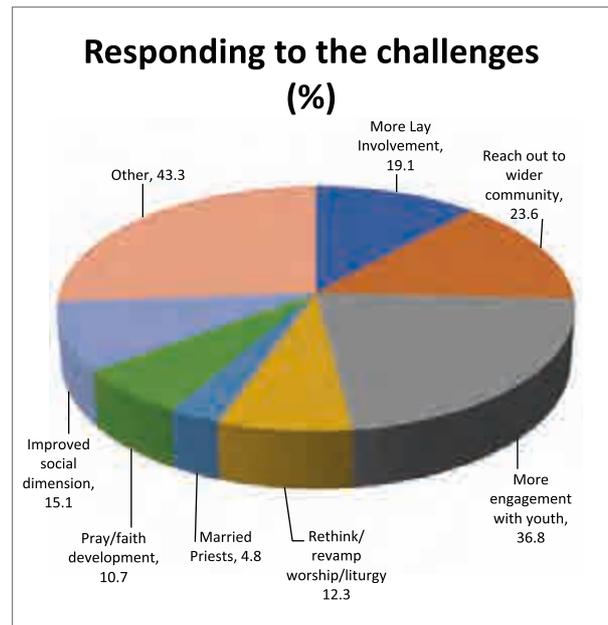
The most frequently mentioned, by a large margin, was ‘*more engagement with youth*’ with 36.8% of responses highlighting this.

Next were *reaching out to the wider community / other churches/ be more welcoming* at 23.6% and *more lay involvement* at 19.1%.

The next most frequent responses were for *improve the social dimension of parish life* (15.1%), *rethink/revamp worship/liturgy* (12.3%), and *prayer and faith development* at 10.7%.

The lowest response was for *married priests* at 4.8% of responses.

The priorities are largely the same for the different age bands, though 11-18 year olds stress *reach out to wider community* and *rethink/revamp liturgy* alongside *more engagement with youth*.



Lay involvement was less important to the younger age groups. The 19-25s stressed *prayer and faith development* echoing the call for deeper spirituality in an earlier question. When asked for suggestions about how some of these challenges might be addressed, **several appear to be ‘scratching their heads’:**

- *I really have no idea. I wish I had a good idea about my response, but I haven't. I think that it is too late to do anything. Once the 60+ generation get past it...then the present structure is finished and we start again almost in a missionary situation like St Aidan. The present structures are finished.*
- *Regretfully I don't think that there is anything that the parish community can do in addition to what it is doing now. If the Parish Priest was to be removed then the parishioners who would take over would be elderly and completely out of touch with the generations that are needed for a vibrant church.*

Yet others were ‘overflowing’ with practical advice. Indeed, one respondent single-handedly provided an ‘ideas manual’:

- *Solid Catholic education programme for young people in school - involve them on PPC. Welcome leaflets, a welcome table, a visitor's book, and*

- Fewer churches, more influence in the hands of the laity. Churches which remain being vibrant and welcoming. Parishes and schools being more integrated. Schools are where our young people are!
- I hope there will continue to be more priests ordained.
- We need to have a married priesthood and encourage those priests who left to get married to return.
- Priests and laity cooperating ever more closely so that the parish will be a better community, where everyone appreciates the work that others do in maintaining the life of the parish.
- I would like more people to view the Catholic Church as a positive force for good in the area and to feel it is somewhere people can go for help and support.
- I hope the John Paul II Award will prove effective in increasing involvement of young people in parish life.
- Vibrant, diverse and inspirational parish communities. Parishioners taking on more active roles of service to support Parish Priests.
- Active youth ministry. Strong links between parish/school/home. Outstanding teachers in our Catholic primary and secondary schools. Increase in number of seminarians. More people 'coming back' to church.
- A personal relationship with God - free from rules that restrict. Working together in collaborative ministry, not restrained by hierarchy. A church which offers a variety of liturgies, attractive to a range of people of differing ages, interests etc.
- Parishes willing to join together for worship, not always sacramental. Communities will focus on helping the most needy, all ages will work together, appreciating the talents they can bring.
- Modernised and diverse.
- I hope it will be a vibrant flourishing community at the centre of society relevant and important to the whole community.
- I always pray for more ordinations and put my trust in the Holy Spirit. I would like to see more families involved in church activities. I would like to see the church as a vibrant part of the wider community being more inclusive of resting Catholics, remarried and immigrant people.
- I hope that the great legacy of Catholicism in the north east thrives and adapts. We should be hopeful and look for ways we can all use our talents. There is greater need than ever to provide witness and ensure that our 16 year olds in catholic schools are the engaged young 30 year olds.
- More people taking an active part in the life of the Parish Community. More young people actively involved in the Parish Community.
- The parish playing a more active role in supporting people in need in the local community. Parishioners working together within Parishes and Deaneries. Schools more involved with the Parishes.
- Full of young people helping the less able bodied to their pews. Lots of young ministers assisting during Mass

I hope that it will be known as a 'community of love' in which all can be welcomed and given a platform to know and love God and, filled with the Spirit of love, be compelled to reach out to others, especially the most vulnerable.



- *Great musicians, mass for children, which it is already in lots of churches I think you are doing great job.*
- *Approachable, friendly and full of joy.*
- *The church needs to be seen as the "hub" of the community, not just for its congregation but for the whole community. The priest (I hope we still have one) should know his congregation and be around for them in times of laughter and sadness.*
- *Married priests, permanent deacons in more parishes. More young people involved in the church. More opportunities for adults to reflect on and grow their faith.*
- *I hope the Roman Catholic Church will put back into the Church the adoration and glorification of God. Whilst the Roman Catholic Church puts people first and God second as it does it will always have problems.*
- *Outgoing, part of young people going out with its own high Street cafe for all ages. Faith to be supported like football or TV shows and talked about.*
- *I would like to see more Catholics practising their faith and to be proud of being a Catholic. I feel that here in the UK they are frowned upon, and the Catholics themselves are shy of their religion. In South Africa, people are proud of their beliefs, and that's how we should be here!*
- *Vibrant and open to new ideas, but with a clear Catholic identity, centred on the teachings of Christ and the values of the Gospel.*

Is there anything else you'd like to say to us?

At the end of the survey we gave the respondents an opportunity to add any other comments that they wished to make, outside

the constraints of answering a particular question. This is a selection of the ideas, comments and thoughts that were contributed.

- *The diocese often seems obsessed by a very dated Vatican II vision of the church, especially in its liturgy and teaching. This has not given the local faithful a sufficient foundation to sustain and grow their faith. Acoustic folk masses may have been daringly modern at one time but now it just makes younger peoples toes curl!*
- *The laity is not the answer. Attracting more men to the priesthood is.*
- *As there is little opportunity to put it "on record" how much I appreciate the tireless work of the clergy of our diocese especially those elderly "retired" priests who contribute so much to so many.*
- *I do feel that the diocese puts a lot of praise on the YMT for its ministry to the youth and yet, at least in our parish, this doesn't translate into Mass attendance.*
- *No theology is being done about homosexuality; what sex is for among older or sterile couples; the difference between men and women (these are worldwide problems). Inclusive language.*
- *Perhaps it would improve matters if everyone accepted the following;*
 1. *I and everyone else are fragile so please handle with prayer.*
 2. *Please be patient God hasn't finished with me yet.*
 3. *I may not be much but I am unique.*
 4. *Treat everyone you meet as if they were Jesus.*
- *I just would like to say that I have been attending a Catholic Church for 30 years and I am not Baptised Catholic.*
- *We are encouraged by the Holy Father to be joyful Christians, yet so many faces I see in the churches in the North East are not full of joy! We should*

seek to give our very best to the glory of God, whether that's as a cleaner, flower-arranger, altar server, chorister...we shouldn't be content with an "anything is good enough" attitude.

The church I attend is a big congregation and it makes such a difference. The people are happy and the singing and band are good. I have been to some churches where that is not the case. It can seem dour and stuffy and would put off a first time attender and children.

Father Y is a wonderful parish priest and I have never seen a priest who can involve and keep the children focused the way he does.

The abuse scandals have undoubtedly weakened the credibility of the church, as never before. Unless the church takes radical, brave, steps to engage with the world, and to transmit the authentic gospel message of love, it will become increasingly less relevant to most people in society and become a sad group of elderly devotees who pray in a miasma of incense and hanker after the old days.

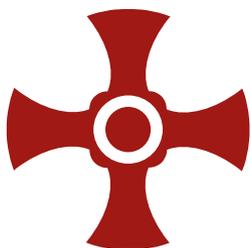
Whilst I am not Catholic I have been made to feel very welcome whenever I have been to church. I personally feel that the community at St. Y's is very welcoming. As a non-Catholic with a non-practising husband it was daunting for me to first attend church. Perhaps a small meeting for new parents at the school would be helpful to take us through what happens at mass and how we should or should not participate. And also an overview of what our role is as parents bringing up a child in the catholic faith. There are various religious ceremonies throughout the year and a 'beginner's guide' from school would help me to understand what my child is learning at school. I am very impressed with how well the school involves parents when it comes to school Masses at church.

My biggest concern is the lack of priests and the extra strain that is being put on the existing ones by making them look after more parishes on a shared basis. This can only add to the stress that they must deal with and affect what they are able to do in each other of the communities that they look after.



'So what?'

...or how might we respond to what this survey is telling us?



This report presents a summary picture of the views of many people who worship in our parish communities – as well as some who are 'looking in' at us. How closely does what is being said reflect

your own experience? Is there anything here that might prompt you to look at things differently?

Perhaps we can all consider the results and think about how we might respond as individuals, as parish communities and as a Diocese.

Some of the many things we may wish to reflect on and pray about include:

Who do we regard as part of our parish or worshipping community? Are there others on the periphery that we could welcome?

How easy do we make it for people to attend our Masses and other worship?

Is our publicity attractive to others?

How do we welcome visitors, strangers and those who attend each week?

How many people in the community do we know by name?

How might we encourage and support both existing parishioners and those new to us to become involved in the parish activities?

Do we personally invite people to join in?

How inclusive or exclusive do we appear?

How well do we share transport?

What does the balance of parish activity look like – or where is most of the energy focussed?

Does it look more like 'maintenance' or 'mission'?

What can we do to reach out more effectively to the wider world around us?

How might we engage better with our young people, both socially and in living our faith?

How strong are parish links with primary and secondary schools?

Are we providing opportunities for responding to the request for better faith and spiritual development?

How can we work with our priests as the workload upon them increases?

How can we lighten their load and nurture and sustain them?

How can we foster vocations?

In what ways will each of us individually contribute to the aspirations voiced of making the church more 'vibrant and populous'?

How well do we communicate both within and beyond our communities?

... and, no doubt, there are other areas that you will identify as being important to you or your parish situation which warrant thought, discussion, prayer and action.



Acknowledgements

A great deal of work has gone into producing this survey report. It started with the idea that we wanted to hear what people in our diocese think about our Church even if they are not actually part of our worshipping communities. God sent his Son into the world because he loved the world, so we wanted to discover how others in the world actually do see us. Some parishes found imaginative ways of introducing this on-line questionnaire to those who do not worship with us – via parents and grandparents of children who attend our Catholic Schools, for example. Around 250 (14.5%) responses were from people either not connected or loosely connected with the Church.

We also wanted to hear from people in the Church who might not be able to join groups in the parishes to voice their views and from people who felt that their views might not be heard in a group. Our hope was that a voice could be made available to anyone from any part / outside of the Church and with different views within the Church.

We had very professional and solid support from Professor *Karen Kilby* and *Dr Matthew Guest* of the Centre for Catholic Studies, University of Durham. They helped us to develop and pilot the survey.

Once the survey 'went live' before Christmas 2015 we had to begin to invite volunteers from around the diocese to help us with the mammoth task of coding all the narrative responses in order to make analysis possible. *Many volunteers* have helped us with every stage of this process, and the names of all those who have helped at every stage are included at the end of the document **Exploring the Way with Our Neighbours.**

All of this had to be input and once again we have been blessed with great assistance from colleagues in the diocesan office. They have

been most generous with their time and expertise. Finally everything had to be analysed and reported upon and *Joe Ronan* has carried out an enormous amount of work to arrive at the summary report you have before you.

Thank you to everyone involved in the collaborative effort that has allowed this initial idea to come to fruition. We hope that you find this summary report of real value as we continue to think, pray and consult about how our diocese can flourish into the future.

Jim O'Keefe, Tony Sacco, Nancy Gash



Section 3 – Some Personal Reflections

*The three-year long **Forward Together in Hope** experience was fascinating. I thoroughly enjoyed working so closely with a small team, exploring new ways of encouraging and enabling clergy and people to engage and participate in a brand new diocesan-wide adventure. But it also gave space and opportunity to wonder about many things. What follows are some personal reflections which emerged from the whole experience. They are my own thoughts. Everything we wrote over the three years was scrutinised by others, sometimes by groups of people. No one else can be blamed for the following thoughts. I will note when I have depended heavily on a single author or piece of work. The piece on 'Discipleship' for example, was initially prepared to help us with some thinking on what we actually mean by the word today. It is not meant to be the final word on it. Nor are the other thoughts: they are really meant to simply stimulate some discussion. There are some indications of possible ways forward in some of them, but not in all...they all invite further reflection and exploration.*

- 1 The Elephant in the Room**
- 2 Young People are not the Church of the Future...**
- 3 Obligation or Engagement?**
- 4 What do we mean by Discipleship?**

1 The Elephant in the Room

It was a real privilege to listen to so many people over the three-year *Forward Together in Hope* programme. It was fascinating to go ‘on pilgrimage’ around the diocese and visit every one of our 177 churches, meet every priest and engage with so many communities after mass. It was both exciting and challenging to attend so many meetings in so many classrooms, church halls, Conference Centres and even one huge Ball Room. I kept notes after every parish mass celebration, trying to capture the fears and hopes of Catholics throughout the diocese. What I want to say from here on is rooted in trying to fully appreciate some of the underlying factors at work in the church after listening to hundreds of people and spending time thinking and wondering and reflecting and praying about it all.

It is rather delicate. I want to share some thoughts about something that I think is seriously hindering and blocking development in our Church. It is an attempt to touch on something that can be seen as threatening to many people – the issue of clerical privilege or clericalism. I am aware that some people bristle when the words are mentioned; we can become very defensive and argumentative about it.

I wondered about trying to imagine what the Church would be like if there was no such thing as clerical privilege. I did try, and after a fair bit of reflection could only come up with the action of Jesus at the Last Supper in John 13:1-11 when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, the constantly prophetic stance of Jesus, his choice of friends and his critique of religious leaders (Mt 23), his constant concern and inclusion of the least, the last and the lost. All of this points to something that is very different from what we experience in our Church today.

I find it so difficult to define or even describe what I really mean by ‘clerical privilege’, possibly because I’m part of it. It is said that it was only when the first sea animals crawled out of the ocean onto the shore and looked back that they discovered water – something they’d taken for granted for ever. It may be that we need to imagine ourselves ‘outside’, in order to get a clearer picture of what goes on ‘inside’.

I’m taking the word ‘clericalism’ to mean the centuries of collective actions, decisions, pressures and unexamined attitudes which come together and support a particular mind-set. This mind-set has helped us drift away from the message of Jesus in the Gospels. This clerical ‘culture’ is not confined to the Church, but exists in any institution which doesn’t reflect honestly and humbly about how it works – be it the medical profession, education systems, the judiciary, security forces and so on.

At the present time we are hearing so much more about the most extreme abuses of power in the Church – the horror and scandal of the sexual abuse of children by priests and religious. There are dreadful stories of this wound in the Body of Christ from almost every country where the Church is present. No level of authority in the Church is free of allegations, including the highest echelons of the Hierarchy. Fortunately, we are becoming more aware of what is needed to ensure that children and vulnerable people are kept safe. However, that is not the whole story and if we think it is we are missing the point. The clerical mind-set affects us all and affects us in so many different ways.

It is perhaps strange to say, but only rarely did anyone mention sexual abuse of children by priests or religious when talking after mass. Among the most often asked questions were along the lines of 'are we going to be closed?' While we were totally convinced that we were involved in a 'formative' exercise, raising questions and hopefully enabling reflection on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, most people presumed we were initiating an administrative process. The next most frequently asked questions were around 'needing more priests', 'ordaining married men', letting those who've left ordained priestly ministry 'back in', ordaining women and 'even nuns', as one person said to me.

Behind these questions lies a deep desire to keep things as they 'have always been' – when we had many priests around. There was rarely any comment about the nature of priesthood.

My sense around what clericalism is, includes the ways in which a particular collection of individuals begins to be seen and related to as a 'class'. This particular group of people are assumed to have access to special powers which aren't available in the same way to members of society in general. These powers are most often associated with a body of knowledge which is special to this 'class'. This knowledge is judged by others to be of great significance to the life of society and so those holding it are accorded status and privilege not shared with others in society.

I have tried to use non-Church language there to show that the problem is not only in the Church but elsewhere. But it can be so easily attributed to the Church, and not simply to the clergy!

When we began the ***Forward Together in Hope*** programme, it was clear that we needed a 'representative' in each parish. By and large, the parish 'reps' who took up the responsibility were excellent. Many had been 'chosen' by the clergy, some volunteered and we envisaged that they would all work closely with the priests in the parishes to ensure that as many people as possible were involved in the whole programme. When we began arranging meetings with the reps around the diocese, it was fascinating how many could not accept the invitation until they had permission from the parish priest. They were invited in their own right and yet could not decide on their own behalf.

The houses we priests live in are 'distinctive' – admittedly many of us living in presbyteries designed for more than one priest and a housekeeper. Our dwellings do rather 'set us apart' from most of our parishioners. We have hidden resources – housing, food and a reasonable amount of disposable income, all of which can separate us from most other people. Some rationalise this by saying: 'Well we deserve all of this because of what we've given up'.

Clergy can, indeed are expected to make a 'Retreat' every year, and many do. This is seen as a 'legitimate expense' on parish funds. That is not unreasonable, broadly speaking it can be seen, in secular terms, as 'in-service-training'. Very few lay people can afford the time or the money to do such a thing, and this in turn can contribute to the aura that the clergy are 'specialists' in the holy.

The dress we wear, whether it is 'clerical' dress or vestments, again sets us apart from parishioner and worshippers. These are clearly not bad things in themselves, but they do add up to support for the maintenance of a very particular 'class' of person.

The way we are addressed, as 'Father', puts us in a very clear 'parental' relationship with others. The converse can also be true, it can mean that parishioners are children who need guidance, permission and direction. The authority and power invested in 'Father' cannot easily be shared by others. In Transactional Analysis terms, if the clergy are seen as Parent, then others are Children which makes it very difficult to work equally with others as Adults.

One priest commented that it is perfectly true that we 'used to infantilise the laity, but now they are becoming more adolescent'. I wonder, I'm not so sure that's true. If there was more of an 'adolescent' feel to the worshipping community, I suspect there would be much more volatility.

Someone once told me that apart from Church services, the only other place where there's real trouble if anyone interrupts the main speaker, is a Court of Law. In our Liturgical role, we are the centre of attention – indeed that is very much our responsibility, to call people to prayer, preside and preach. We are the conduit for so much, the sharing of - it is as though we have access to certain 'powers' not shared by the general church-going population.

Again, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves, but over the centuries we have drawn around ourselves a distinctive, powerful and all-pervasive aura. Many priests commented that there are extremely competent lay people in the community who hold down very responsible jobs, but who never use their gifts and talents within the Church. It may well be, of course, that these people are living out their baptismal calling with genuine missionary intent in their place of work; this is perfectly possible. But it may also be that the culture we belong to does not encourage people to make a significant contribution to the institutional life of the local church.

'You can't argue with our priest...he's always right about everything', said one parishioner and her friend backed her up saying: 'He doesn't just argue that black is white, he reckons everything is white'. Of course we all have our own stories to tell about priests, how some treated 'mixed marriages' so badly, some who refuse to anoint the sick if s/he is divorced and remarried, or is gay and so on. These hopefully rare events today more than hint at a culture where the priest felt that he was very much in control and would brook no opposition. I'm sure it was Henry VIII who said that in 'A Man for All Seasons'?

The unexamined attitudes which prevail might well include the presumption that those who belong to 'the clergy' are credible – and people are encouraged to trust them. They/we have been through a reasonably long period of training and formation, which increases the credibility afforded us. There are, of course, all sorts of presumptions about the training and formation of clergy and how it prepares (or not) those going through it for the very different world they will live in. Without wanting to get too nostalgic, somewhere in the cloud is a YouTube copy of the 1960 Midnight Mass broadcast from the Seminary I attended. I was 12 years of age, and the narrator informed the viewing public that the college (Ushaw) was '**self-sufficient, with its own farm, hospital and post office**'. I think it is just a wee bit over the top to describe the box of aspirin, crepe bandages and weird (possibly opium based) cough medicine available to us as a 'hospital'- but it does say something about the isolation and what some refer to as 'privileged abandonment' style of formation of some future priests.

As clergy, we are very reluctant to become involved in any kind of 'Appraisal'. In 1999 there was an attempt to encourage Clergy Appraisal with the Final Report of a working

party to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. **Supporting Ministry** was an initiative suggested by the National Conference of Priests, but it never really took off. There seemed to be a sense of 'who are they to judge us?' around. This leaves the clergy in danger of being presumed to be experts in religion, spirituality, holiness and worship.

Again, as clergy, we are inclined to be very protective of one another. The extreme example referred to earlier, when priests were moved from place to place having abused children, is a prime example of this. The reputation of the Church and the 'good name' of the priest were both being protected, with disastrous results in the lives of children and families. 'He was just silly', was the comment of one priest when a colleague was sentenced for fraud.

When all of this is brought together it does point to a very distinctive culture which can contribute to a sense of superiority about it. We may use 'service' language, but our unexplored attitudes more than hint at a presumption by both clergy and laity of superiority.

In all of this I am not saying that priests are not very good men. It is more that we rarely reflect on what it is that makes us 'different'. There is the famous phrase in *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 10: ***Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.***

When Cardinal Hume was asked what this meant, he would reply by saying that we should start with what we have in common and proceed to make distinctions after that. He was convinced that if we begin with trying to define the distinctiveness first, we would never get it right, but if we began with what we have in common 'we might get it right' – he would say. It is interesting to note that many of the clergy in their response to the questions we put to them are really afraid that they will have to work harder as they get older, some priests feel threatened by the emphasis on lay leadership, adult formation and 'leadership teams' of which they would be one member – in case they will have nothing to do! Some priests want to explore 'the identity of the priest today', possibly to get clear what makes them different from those who aren't priests. This drive to know the difference contributes to the 'clerical' ethos and separation from others.

In his book ***CLERICALISM – The Death of Priesthood***¹, George Wilson SJ explores the way we use language to confuse what it means to be a 'priest' as opposed to being a 'cleric'. He wrote his book as a response to the sexual abuse scandal in the American Church in the early years of this century and the frequent use of the words 'clerical culture'. He says:

'... the identification of priests with clergy involves mixing – confusing – two radically different orders of reality. 'Priest' is a religious term, pointing us to the transcendent or numinous or sacred dimension of life, to the holy. 'Clergy' is a sociological term that names the fact that society recognises a certain segment of its members as having recognisable social features and norms that

¹ *CLERICALISM – The Death of Priesthood*, George Wilson S.J. Liturgical Press, Minnesota 2008

distinguish them from the rest of society.... Priestly – sacred – activity is the preserve of the ordained; laity need not apply. (p. xv)

He seems to be implying that 'priestliness' is rooted in baptism, not ordination to the priesthood. Clericalism is partly about those who are ordained incorporating into themselves 'priestliness', which is the 'common' priesthood of Jesus Christ; all the baptised share in it.

We have grown up over centuries with so much that seems to differentiate the ordained priest from the rest of the Church, it may be that we need to reflect more carefully on what we mean by 'priestliness' and come to a fuller appreciation that this is indeed about Baptism rather than Ordination. It may be that the 'royal priesthood' portrayed in Scripture (1Pet 2:9) has been interpreted as something merely metaphorical over against the **real** priesthood embodied by those who are ordained. Once we designate any individual member a 'priest' in a way that distinguishes him from the other members of the holy community, or elevates him above them (which is one of the tendencies of any clerical system) then we have distorted the nature of the Gospel. 'When Jesus says, 'Come, follow me,' he is not talking about climbing a ladder to heaven, Jesus is heading among the poor, the oppressed and those who have lost their way in life, and it's along that road that he invites us to journey with him.

The visual impact of Concelebration is extremely powerful. Our former Dean of St Mary's Cathedral in Newcastle, Canon Tommy Murray, allegedly said after his first experience of Concelebrated mass: 'It'll never catch on, but it's cheaper than flowers'. It is certainly seen by many people as very clear statement of differentiation and superiority. It can be seen as a very clear statement of where power lies in the Church. It is hardly a statement of servanthood.

The pageantry surrounding the rite of ordination is a clear statement – but of what? Trumpet fanfares more than hint at triumphalism rather than service. This is not a call for joyless liturgy, not at all, it is an invitation to crawl out of the ocean and look around at what we have taken for granted for so long and wonder about it. Celebrations of Ordination to Diaconate, Priesthood and Episcopacy are a very, almost totally, male experience. Some people may say that this is absolutely inevitable. Perhaps we could ask and explore, use imagination and wonder how else these key moments are celebrated. The way we celebrate these events can only reinforce the 'special class' feeling of those called to service in our Church.

These thoughts are only scratching the surface of the issue of 'clerical privilege' or clericalism in the Church. It may be that we need a surge of imagination to explore such things as:

- If the Diocese has a Board of Trustees – what is the gender balance? What is the ratio of women to men? How are Trustees appointed? Could the post be advertised?
- How transparent are National and Diocesan Finance systems? There is inevitably 'tension' between Civil and Canon Law, but how open to the professional advice of Financial experts are those who eventually take decisions?

- How can lay men and women be introduced to the presumed all-clerical committees – such as the Chapter of Canons, Bishop’s Council and so on. This will look completely absurd to some people – but once upon a time slavery was seen as a good thing.
- Are parish Finance Committees properly constituted? Is there genuine debate and dialogue - how are decisions made and how transparent are the deliberations?
- And so on.

Ever since Vatican II with the emphasis on co-responsibility, shared responsibility, mutuality in ministry and the universal call to holiness we have been invited to look towards a different way of being church. Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that: ***Pastoral Ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’. I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goods, structures, style and methods of evangelisation in their respective communities.*** (paragraph 33).

What this reflection is meant to do is invite us to tug away at our understanding of the ***goals, structures, style and method*** of becoming missionary communities, wherein there is much more shared ministry and mutual respect and responsibility.

It may be that clericalism is really the collecting and gathering and appropriating what is proper to the charism of baptism and all the baptised into a clerical caste. We have assumed into our role, whatever is holy, whatever is proper in relation to God and we have simply not allowed people to develop their rightful sense of responsibility. So many people simply do not believe that they are called to be holy, to be missionary, to be ‘spiritual’, they see it as the job of the professionals, and are more than happy to leave it to us.

There is also a danger that this kind of clericalism and the non-involvement of people can creep into the relationships of lay people who begin to accept responsibility in the Church. ***Who does s/he think s/he is? What right has s/he to get into that? Shouldn’t the priest be doing that?***

If, by virtue of their baptism, all Catholics are called to holiness and mission, to the task of witnessing to Christ, to evangelizing, to maturity – in short to being missionary disciples – clericalism is ultimately a suppression of baptismal identity. Priests and nuns become the super-Christians who have the superpowers to do what ordinary Christians cannot.² This can only lead to the isolation of the clergy and the immaturity or infantilisation of the baptised.

I have wondered what examples there are of us as human beings ‘crawling out of the ocean and looking back’. Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have condemned the death penalty, with Pope Francis seeking to be absolute about its condemnation

² *Divine Renovation* Fr James Mallon Twenty Third Publications 2014 p74.

– with serious criticism coming from other high-ranking members of the Church. In this country are we eventually coming to realise that the map of the world is no longer 50% red, we are no longer an Empire? Perhaps the 19th century surge in the direction of the end of slavery? Though it has a long way to go yet. All of these things need courageous and determined individuals to clean our lenses so that we can actually see things as they are.

‘The ground under our feet has shifted...There needs to be an attitudinal change at every level, a conversion of mind and heart that conforms to the spirit of the Gospel, a new wine in new wineskins, not merely cosmetic change or worse, a retreat into restorationism...The priesthood no longer enjoys the prestige and the power it once had. For a lot of young people, it is no longer surrounded with the aura of mystique and fascination...unless we genuinely repent of our sins and face up to the task of reclaiming the innocence and powerlessness of the servant-leader we will have failed the test of our integrity, discipleship and mission.’³

Pope Francis is constantly decrying the clerical attitude of many in the Church. He sees it as almost diabolical. It may be that we simply do not crawl out of the water often enough to fully appreciate how deeply we are affected by it. The title of George Wilson’s book, **Clericalism – the death of Priesthood** might be provocative, but then again, it might be right.

³ National Catholic Reporter Dec 13 2017 <https://www.ncronline.org> Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen of Parramatta Australia

2 'Young People are not the Church of the Future...they are the Church of the Present'

This reflection emerged after looking very carefully at all the comments from the Parish Questionnaires about the relationship between our worshipping communities and our schools. I believe the comments provide a solid basis of proof for the need to urgently explore not just this relationship, but what we truly mean when we say 'the School is part of the Church' and what we can all do to enable the faith development, not just of young people, but everyone who professes to be a Catholic.

One of the 10 headings in the Parish Questionnaire completed by 149 of the 150 parishes in the diocese was **Education and Formation**. In it we explored the relationship between the local primary schools and the local worshipping communities. We looked at how primary schools might be involved in the formation of the parents of the children in school. We also explored what relationships there were between our primary schools and the parish in relation to preparation for the Sacraments. Finally, we asked about joint Eucharistic and non-Eucharistic worship and shared buildings and facilities.

By and large, there is some relationship between the vast majority of our worshipping communities and the local primary school.

We asked exactly the same question in relation to our Secondary schools, and there is a marked difference. In general, the relationship is very poor.

In response to: ***Please describe how the secondary school(s) and the parish work together to prepare young people for the sacraments***, there were 41 replies out of 149 so 108 offered no comment at all. Of these, 4 said there was no joint preparation. Among the replies we read:

- ***The schools sends a letter to Yr 9 inviting them to consider Confirmation***
- ***There is a new Diocesan programme in 2014***
- ***Catechists from the parish prepare for Confirmation along with the Chaplain***
- ***There is a unit in Yr 8 RE***
- ***A teacher is a member of the team...***
- ***It happens in the Deanery/Parish***

How is/are the secondary school/s involved in the adult formation of the children's parents? Including any joint work with the parish. There were 27 replies, so 122 offered no response. Of these 4 said 'nil', one of which had no secondary school in the Deanery. The 23 replies included:

- ***Whole school masses with the Youth Ministry Team***
- ***Occasional invites to start of term masses***
- ***Invitations to the Christmas Carol Concert***
- ***Through pastoral care of students and families***

Please give details of any joint parish/secondary school celebrations of the Eucharist. Please include frequency and location. There were 31 responses, so 118 did not reply. Three said 'nil' so the remaining 28 included:

- **Leavers' Mass**
- **Beginning/end of year masses**
- **The local priests take turns to say mass**
- **2 times a year there is mass**
- **Carol Services**

Please give details of any joint parish/secondary school non-Eucharistic celebrations. Please include frequency and location. There were 27 replies so 122 made no response. Of those who did reply, 3 were 'nil'. Among the 24 comments there were:

- **Special liturgies i.e. Remembrance Day Service**
- **'The Source' in the school chapel**
- **Christmas lunch**
- **Annual Carol Service in the local church**
- **Open invitation to Thursday lunchtime mass (!)**
- **Twenty students and two staff gave up a Sunday afternoon to take part in a very successful Songs of Praise Service.**

Please describe any ways in which the school and parish share their buildings and other resources. (e.g. Hall, meeting rooms, minibuses etc.) There were 24 responses so 125 made no comment. Of the 24, 6 said nil. Of the final 18 the following comments were made:

- **The school is used by the Deanery for Confirmation preparation**
- **The school is used for diocesan planning sessions such as Youth Sunday preparation**
- **An exhibition in Church with Secondary school displays**
- **Parish Centre has been used to promote fund-raising for pupils attending Lourdes**

It is only fair to say that teachers from the local schools were urged to be part of the parish groups which completed the Parish Questionnaire, but it is clear from the small number of responses that the secondary school/s is/are not much on the radar of the worshipping community.

Earlier in this document I mentioned the experience of one parish priest who, in early December, noted that there were none of the youth group present to assist with music during the celebration of Sunday morning mass. I suggested to him that he was simply making excuses and that there were probably very few teenagers joining the community for mass. He was rather annoyed and insisted that there were usually three or four and that they were very committed members of the parish. We later discovered that the local Secondary School were scheduling the Christmas pantomime rehearsals at 10.00am on a Sunday morning, These talented young people felt obliged to join their colleagues and the staff at the school to practise. This does hint at the 'divide' between the school and the local worshipping community.

When we look at all of this in conjunction with the responses from the young people's survey *The Way We See It*, which revealed that 35% of those who responded claim to be still practising at the age of 18 (so 65% don't), and the peak point for ceasing to attend church is around ages 10-11, though the fall away begins as early as 5 and as late as 17, we are facing a very serious problem.

Every Parish Questionnaire noted that ***we need to do something about young people, or where are the young people?*** There is deep anxiety in very many parishes about the lack of young people worshipping, and so there is anxiety about their future existence.

The Catholic Education system in England and Wales is a powerful and very effective institution – if by institution we mean the Education System. It is indeed 'part of the Church', but it does seem that the time is very much approaching when serious questions need to be explored locally about how the local school 'institution' actually fits into, belongs to, becomes more evidently part of the local church. This also means that the local worshipping community will have questions to ask of itself about how it accommodates young people and the world and culture they live in.

Every year when the GCSE and A level results are published, there are praiseworthy comments in the Catholic press about how well Catholic schools have done and how the results are better year-on-year. In the parish in which I live (with 4 churches) there were 40 baptisms within the first 4 months of the year. The chances of meeting those children again before nursery or school admittance are very slim. There is extraordinary energy around the celebration of First Holy Communion, with a very small minority of those children/families present with the worshipping community in the following weeks and months. We have only got ourselves to blame for this. We have concentrated on 'numbers', the number of people in the parish, in our schools, celebrating first Holy Communion etc. We have really paid lip service to enabling those who wish to be baptised or to have their children baptised to actually 'belong' to the worshipping community. Those of us who were part of the church 50 years ago will remember that we simply were part of the church, we gathered, we prayed, the church was part of the social fabric of our lives. The teachers in the primary school probably all lived in the parish and the school was probably next door to the church. We 'did' church. Now we 'don't'.

- ***What ways and means are there to ensure that these baptised children and families continue to be 'active' members of the Church?***
- ***How do we respond to the needs of the children and families who prepare for First Reconciliation and Holy Communion so that they too continue to be more 'active' in the Church?***

It is not the job of the Catholic School to ensure that children 'go to' mass. The Vatican II decree on Education makes it very clear what the Fathers of the Council thought it was about: ***The sacred Synod earnestly exhorts the pastors of the Church and all the faithful to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools to become increasingly effective, especially in caring for the poor, for those who are without the help and affection of family, and those who do not have the Faith.*** (Declaration on Christian Education, 28 October 1965, paragraph 9).

The sense behind that statement is that everyone, the Pastors and the faithful together, are to focus on ensuring that Catholic schools become increasingly effective – but effective in what? I suspect it isn't about being effective in creeping higher up various league tables by whatever means, but more about enabling young people to become young people of faith.

The history of Catholic Education in these islands is one of risk, courage, political astuteness and dedication. The commitment to build schools before churches from 1850 after the Restoration of the Hierarchy set out a very successful pastoral strategy for the Church in this country. It may be that this strategy was never reviewed, and the energy was focussed on ensuring the successful building and maintenance of schools and the place of Religious Education within them.

Perhaps it is now time for some new reflection, both within the Catholic Education System and in our worshipping communities. It may, only may, be too simple to say that our schools have hit all the targets but missed the point. It may be that our parishes have not seriously considered what is possible in relation to young people.

The title of these thoughts is from a young person who contributed to a DVD encouraging young people to engage in their own Survey for **Forward Together in Hope**. If we look at it literally, then we have a pretty well non-practising Church, if by Church we mean the gathering of people together to celebrate the Eucharist and then see themselves as missionary disciples in the world we live in. Over the last couple of weeks I've asked the congregations in the various churches I've celebrated mass how many young people aged 11-18 were with us. One Sunday evening there were 246 people at our 5.00pm Vigil mass and when I asked, four hands were raised, and I'm pretty sure that it was the eleventh birthday of one of the young people so he was really keen to let us know he was there. The following morning at 8.30, there was one person in that age group.

It has been said that **The School is the Church of Young People**. I suspect this is a slick phrase which is left unexamined. It isn't! If by Church we mean the gathering of people centred around the Eucharist, becoming the Body of Christ in the area, if it is the gathering of people celebrating the sacraments and becoming closer to the person of Jesus Christ and witnessing to him in the world, then it can't be. We don't celebrate Baptisms or Weddings in school as a way of engaging the community of young people.

Maybe we presume far too much of 'the school' when it comes to the faith development and spiritual formation of young people. Do our teachers feel competent and confident in their own faith development to be of service in this particular area of the lives of young people? We occasionally hear of peer pressure on young people to not join their families and others for worship. I also heard, during my pilgrimage around the diocese, of anecdotal evidence of pressure being put on teachers to not join the Sunday community for worship.

Equally, there are serious questions to be asked of our worshipping communities. Some of our parish communities have 70% of their members who are over 70 years of age. It cannot be at all easy for people used to their own style of worship, music, preaching and liturgical expression to delight in the prospects of totally different music, imagery, movement and liturgical expression. But it must be an important question to ask **what are our clergy, regular parishioners and worshippers prepared to**

sacrifice in order to make space for younger people to feel at home among them?

There is no doubt that there is imaginative and inclusive worship and liturgy within school settings. It is more than likely, however, that these celebrations do not include the celebration of the Eucharist. Given that most 'parish' celebrations are 'eucharistic' then there is a wide gap between the liturgical experience of young people and those who are regular worshippers. It also implies that most of the music in school liturgy is not oriented towards Eucharistic celebrations.

Some of the clergy in the Diocese feel very dissatisfied about 'Catholic Secondary Education'. Some doubt we will have Catholic Secondary Schools in 25 years' time. This may be because they believe that the purpose of the school is to ensure that young people continue to 'worship', to ensure that there are bums on seats in our churches in the future. This attitude does not reflect the aspirations of the Fathers at the Council. However, the Council Fathers presumed a close and strong relationship and common mind among 'the faithful' and those responsible for education. My clergy colleagues may be right, because it looks as though this relationship does not exist to any great extent.

We estimate that there will be 50 active priests in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle by 2030, in 11 years' time. At present there are 90. The best evidence we have is that we are losing around 1000 active worshippers a year, and have done so for the last 6 years. The present 31,900 (in 2016) may be around the low 20,000 by then. It is extremely unlikely that there will be priests on the Governing Bodies of Schools. Given there are 135 Infant/Junior, 1 Middle and 20 Secondary schools in the diocese, there will not be enough to go around. Some urgent questions might be:

- ***What can the relationship be between the local priest and the local primary/secondary school in the future?***
- ***How can whatever the priest-Governor brought to the table be maintained and developed?***
- ***What are the implications for Foundation Governors?***
- ***As the number of worshippers continues to decline, how low does the critical mass need to go before there are serious questions about the viability of Catholic secondary schools?***
- ***Who needs to initiate the fundamental questions about the relationships between worshipping communities, schools and families who 'belong' in some sense, to both?***

The ***Forward Together in Hope*** programme was taking place against the backdrop of the move towards Academisation. There were interesting parallels as both schools and parishes used similar language about ***Partnership*** and the sharing of resources. It was early days, but there were some anecdotal concerns that the development of

Academies and Multi Academy Trusts would draw primary schools into their orbit and weaken the relationship between the local primary school and the local worshipping community.

- ***If there is any truth in this fear, where can it be explored and who is responsible for managing the discussion?***
- ***What opportunities are there in the move towards Academisation for there to be a serious and fundamental discussion and decision making about the above observations?***

If there is no agreement about the key issues and no initiatives taken to explore other ways of being Church in relation to young people, then, quite obviously we continue as we are – and there can be no expectation of a change of direction. Once again we cannot go on doing the same thing over and over again and expect a different result.

3 Obligation or Engagement?

In the attempt to speak at every mass in every parish in the diocese within as short a time as possible – it eventually took a year and 9 months – I would sometimes speak at the beginning of one mass and then take off for a neighbouring parish to address the parishioners at the end of their celebration. The most intense weekend was in Stockton on Teesside where there were 10 celebrations over the weekend, 3 Vigils, 5 on the Sunday morning and 1 on Sunday evening. The Sunday evening mass was the only one I was able to ‘attend’ in its entirety.

It was a fascinating experience to arrive at a Church sometime between the Consecration and the Lord’s Prayer. I would be looked at with evident suspicion, clearly being ‘very late for Mass’. I could see and feel the judgement in the eyes of those inhabiting the back seats of the Church as I arrived among them.

I noticed over the almost two years that there were some parishioners across the diocese who would leave the church as soon as the priest had received Holy Communion. There were many churches where parishioners would leave the church once they had received Holy Communion themselves, genuflecting and making straight for the back door. There were even more churches where people left as soon as priest or deacon had uttered the final words of dismissal, and a few where the priest had to battle his way through the crowds to get to the back of the church to greet the few who were still there and left the church behind him.

I seem to remember learning as a child that I would have **fulfilled the obligation to attend mass** if I was present from **the Offertory until after the priest’s communion**. It may be that those who left the church after the priest’s communion had this particular phrase in their DNA and felt almost obliged to live it out weekly. It may be that I was subject to a particularly lax upbringing. I have just consulted **Hart’s Student’s Catholic Doctrine**, given to me when I went to Ushaw in 1959. It was given to me by our parish priest, Dr Leo Hart. It was written by his father, the Rev Charles Hart – yes these things happened in those days – for the students of St Cuthbert’s Grammar School where he had taught. He states very clearly in his book: **Now to hear mass is it is necessary to be present where Mass is being celebrated, and in such a way as to form part of the congregation, and so to attend with the mind as to join in the act of Divine worship. We are obliged, moreover, to hear an entire Mass; so that wilfully and without cause to absent oneself during any part of the Mass is wrong; and to be absent during a considerable portion of the Mass, for example, from the beginning till after the Offertory, or during an essential part of it such as the Consecration, would be a mortal sin.** No wonder I received such fierce looks when I arrived very late.

Charles Hart’s **Catholic Doctrine** was published in 1958, 4 years before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. The language is fascinating, urging us to ‘attend’ and ‘hear’ Mass. These words are still very much in use among our congregations, along with such phrases as **Where will we get Mass, Have you been to Mass** and **Father, where will you be doing Mass?**

This language, and perhaps the mind-set that goes with it, is still very prevalent today. We were extremely successful in our teaching about the obligation to keep holy the Sabbath day that we rather missed the point as to why we might want to keep it holy.

Actually, we weren't so bad at teaching why we had to keep it holy either, because if we deliberately did not 'go to' mass, and died during the week, then we would go to Hell for all eternity – no questions asked.

There seem to be so many things intertwined in this business of 'fulfilling the obligation' it might be worth trying to unravel a few of them.

1 **A God of Love or Fear**

I suspect most priests in this country at the present time will receive far fewer people for the celebration of reconciliation than they did decades ago. But those same priests will no doubt hear people say that they have 'missed mass'. It may be that there was no church in striking distance on holiday in the Egyptian desert, or a prolonged time in hospital meant that someone was totally incapable of joining their local community. It is quite likely that those in hospital for a time will have been able to receive Holy Communion from a chaplain or Minister of the Eucharist – but mass was still missed. Is it that the God we were introduced to when we were children was a fearsome God? Is it that we really did believe that the only one significant thing which marked our belief in God and marked us out as committed Catholics was to 'attend' mass? Many of us will have heard horror stories about how children were introduced to their 'First Confession', the fear, the list (which can last a lifetime), the threats about not completing 'the penance' before you left the church, and so on. It seems that so much of the celebration of forgiveness was shrouded in fear, control and a sense of foreboding.

The consistent message underlying weekly confession was that we were sinners (no doubt about that, we are) and the only way of being sure of heaven was to regularly confess and most certainly confess if missing mass was concerned. The emphasis seems to have been on fear and threat rather than the unquestioned and reckless compassion and mercy of God.

There are those of a certain age who do remember the Role call on a Monday morning in school when the teacher would ask who had been at mass the previous day, and there are stories of children being punished for not being there. Even if you were a regular attender, the sight of others being punished would hardly conjure up the image of an all-loving and all-compassionate God whose very essence is to continue creating us.

The relationship this encouraged was not with the action of the celebration of mass, it was more with the event of mass. We were encouraged to watch rather than participate, to hear rather than engage, to 'get' rather than feel part of a dynamic memorial of the Last Supper.

It may be that part of this abrupt and brief presence at Mass is a result of the pressure to be at Mass rather than to be engaged with the celebration. To be present meant that we were safe from eternal damnation, at least for another week.

2 Did we ‘thingify’ the Sacraments?

There was a sense that God had a huge ledger for each of us in heaven which contained all the sins we’d ever committed, all the masses we had never attended, and on the positive side, all the benedictions and novenas we’d experienced. The emphasis seemed to be on attending or receiving. There was some language about ‘growing in love of God’ and ‘becoming holy’, but this seemed to come about as a result of receiving and attending, rather than engaging, wondering, reflecting, becoming more open to the presence of the Spirit and exploring our faith together. The emphasis was more on the sacraments as commodities, and the more we had of them the better we would become.

Those of a certain age who recall their preparation for First Holy Communion will remember the emphasis on the huge privilege it was for us as individuals to receive the Body of Christ, or Corpus Christi as we would have known it. We were to be very quiet, concentrate on Jesus, realise that Holy Communion is about ‘Jesus and me’, and not in any way be distracted by anyone or anything else. The emphasis was on ‘worthy’ reception.

Going to Confession was meant to be at least fortnightly, preferably weekly. We knew the words, the formula and we had to ‘do the penance’ before we left the Church. We were introduced to the ‘firm purpose of amendment’, the commitment to not do the same things again, though the way we celebrated never grew with us, the same formula and sins, very often, are repeated decades later.

The ‘Last Rites’ – the language of ‘Extreme Unction’ first used in the 12th century – was replaced by the Sacrament of the Sick in the early 1970s. But the earlier mentality is still very much in evidence. Many people want the priest with them or their loved ones very close to or at the point of death in order to ‘administer the Sacrament’. This mentality maintains the position of the priest as someone absolutely crucial in being able to ‘mediate’ the presence of God at a particular time, the person dying is seen as being certain to achieve heaven if the priest is there to administer the Sacrament.

In 2010 I checked the Confirmation Register of what had been an extremely ‘busy’ parish in the West End of Newcastle. I was looking for evidence of Confirmation so that someone in Ireland could be married. I noticed on one particular Sunday afternoon in July, the Bishop had confirmed over 500 young people. The Church could hardly accommodate 1500 people – 500 children with 2 parents. But then of course, people would be ‘sponsors’ for more than one person. It is also quite likely that the bishop had celebrated the sacrament of Confirmation with a similar number of people elsewhere in the diocese the afternoon before.

My mother didn’t attend my baptism in 1948. She wasn’t against it, she was very ill and given I was baptised three days after I was born, she could never have made it. The same thing happened with my sister 3 years later. All those years ago, children had to be baptised the Sunday after we were born – in case we died and were confined to Limbo until the end of time. We did not seem to accept that our God is a totally loving and compassionate God.

The celebration of Marriage, if there was someone involved who was not a Catholic, could be grim. The memories of grim weddings are still in the minds and hearts of

many people, and the stories of them have been passed down through the generations. No flowers, no music, no entrance through the main door of the church – use the side door, etc. No preparation and no real celebration.

Why bring all of this up now?

Because it may be that this is part of the reality of so many people's lives who do feel such an 'obligation' and don't want to be particularly engaged. It is fascinating that the first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy on 4 December 1963, five years after my edition of Hart's Catholic Doctrine. Very early on (paragraph 14) it ***earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people' (1 Pet.2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.***

It may be that, despite all attempts at adult formation, continuing formation of clergy, in-service training of teachers, Renewal Courses and emphasis on Spirituality, we have either not done enough, or have not done the right things. Maybe we haven't emphasised enough that formation is really about a personal relationship with the person of Jesus? Maybe we've been more concerned about the externals of Liturgy and not enough about what it all means? Maybe we have still not fully realised that our God loves us unconditionally and we don't have to earn it.

So many maybes. So much to ponder and explore.

3 **Maybe they have a bus to catch?**

I doubt it – except in very exceptional circumstances...

It is true, some people think that mass is too long. What is that about? It may just be about... 'Let me get through this as quickly as possible so that I've fulfilled my obligation'. I truly fear that this maybe it. We have not managed to introduce worshippers into a relationship with the person of Jesus, the emphasis on 'being there, fulfilling it and leaving' is too strong. Entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was never the emphasis before (and perhaps for some years after) the Second Vatican Council.

It may be that for over 50 years we have simply put up with a rather minimalist culture, which has colluded with the 'thingification' of the Sacraments and the 'Obligation' mentality. If people have been coming, turning up and paying, we've been happy.

The comments above do hint at the mentality that asks: 'How little can I get away with and still feel that I've done what I have to do?' Even 'How much of the mass can I miss and still get away with it?' Somehow, we need to enable and encourage people to move away from a mentality that it is about 'convenience' and 'getting away with it', to a sense of belonging and a relationship with Jesus. It is very interesting that when we asked people on the Online Survey: ***What influences where you choose to attend Mass?*** (we did use the word 'attend'), and they were asked what applied to them, the answers were:

- ***The Times of Masses – 54.4%***
- ***How welcome I feel – 48.2%***
- ***The convenience and location of the Church – 46.8%***
- ***What the priest is like – 40.2%***

The least important were:

- ***The availability of car parking – 15.3%***
- ***What the church building is like – 12.4%***
- ***How accessible the church is using public transport – 8.1%***
- ***The age profile of parish members – 4.9%***

Let's be honest. We've a lot to do if we really do want our parishioners to become more fully engaged, more 'intentional' disciples. What we have been doing has worked for some, but perhaps not for the majority?

If priests remain on their own in their parishes and not gather with lay people and other priests to explore what is going on, then there will be no change. Perhaps there needs to be some different thinking and strategy with priests and people coming from different places and different attitudes to ask – how do we move from Obligation to Engagement?

4 What Do We Mean by Discipleship?

*In the course of the **Forward Together in Hope** programme we talked much about 'discipleship'. It is not so easy to define. I prepared some initial thoughts for colleagues and used as a basis for my thoughts the book by Roger Walton 'The Reflective Disciple'. In fairness it must be noted that there are many other books on the same subject!*

This Reflection is sparked by our frequent use of the phrase **How can every Catholic in the Diocese explore what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus in a viable and flourishing community?**

From the time of the Vatican Council, lay people were invited to become disciples of Jesus. So, what does this word mean? Pope Francis wants us to look seriously at being 'Missionary Disciples' – what could this mean in our place and time?

It seems that isn't such a simple question. The following Reflection simply invites further exploration:

What do the Gospels tell us about being a disciple?⁴

It very much depends on which Gospel we read. Some of the texts in the New Testament were written close to the life and death of Jesus and probably drew on oral and written records that were closer still. Others, such as the Gospel of John, were written to Christian communities a long time after the first Apostles were dead, in order to pass on the good news of Jesus and to help Christians live out their calling to follow Christ in their particular time and place. So what did discipleship mean to the 2nd generation of Christians?

Mark

The oldest Gospel, both Luke and Matthew probably had access to it. There is the wonderful description in chapter 3 about the disciples being with Jesus and then being sent... 'he summoned those he wanted, they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his companions and to be sent out to preach..' (3:13-15). They are sent to preach the Good News and overcome evil – establishing the kingdom. This is brilliant in its simplicity, highlighting their relationship with Jesus and the commission to become immersed in the world they live in.

In Mark 8:22 and 10:52 there are two blind men healed. One in two stages and the second, Bartimaeus, sees clearly and follows Jesus to Jerusalem 'on the way' – a phrase indicating the way of discipleship. In the passages in between, Jesus mentions three times that he will suffer and be put to death. It is as though those who follow Jesus come to a gradual understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The clues we are given in Mark's Gospel is that a disciple:

⁴ Indebted here to Roger Walton, *The Reflective Disciple*, SCM 2012
And James D.G. Dunn *Jesus' Call to Discipleship*, CUP 1991

- Lives with Jesus (3:13)
- Is sent by Jesus to preach and establish the kingdom (3:14)
- Understands the significance of Jesus' death (8:31 and others)
- Knows that following Jesus involves denial of one's own ambitions, and being determined to follow him until death (8:34)
- Must be prepared to let go of possessions (10:17-31)
- Does not seek for rank or status but serves others (9:33-37)
- Belongs to an open and inclusive community (10:38-41)
- Cannot set aside a marriage commitment (10:1-12)
- Affirms women and children as significant people (10:13-16)

There is no mention of sinners and tax collectors...

Mark is probably writing for Christians in Rome between 66-70, persecution was well known and threatening again. The readers are struggling with what faces them in the long wait for the second coming. They are coping with people who seem to want leadership and its importance and how to respond to the threat of persecution.

Matthew

In Matthew the disciples, as in Mark and Luke are called by the Sea of Galilee. In John they are near Bethany, near the Jordan, 'where John was baptising'. The first four are fishermen – as someone once said: 'People who are used to looking below the surface of things...'. The 'true disciple' is 'not those who say 'Lord, Lord', but 'the person who does the will of my Father in heaven'. (Mt 7:21)

The 'true disciples' in Matthew's Gospel were those who witnessed and then learned from:

- Jesus curing the leper (Mt 8:1)
- Jesus curing the centurion's servant (Mt 8:5-17)
- Jesus curing Peter's mother in law (Mt 8:14-15)
- Jesus curing the demoniacs at Gadara (Mt 8:28-34)
- Jesus curing the paralytic, eating with sinners, curing the woman with the haemorrhage, raising the official's daughter to life, curing two blind men and a dumb demoniac – all in Matthew chapter 9.

It is interesting that at this point in the Gospel Jesus asks his followers to 'ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest' (Mt 9:37). The next thing Jesus does is summon the twelve disciples, give them authority over unclean spirits with power to cast them out and to cure all kinds of diseases and sickness (Mt 9:1). '...these twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them as follows...' (Mt:10:5). The disciples become missionaries, who will be persecuted, are to be fearless and to renounce themselves (Mt 10:17-39).

It seems that Matthew was writing for a mainly Jewish community at a time, after the revolt in 70AD when some Jewish groups were looking to affirm their own identity. The

Pharisees were in ascendance and sought to clarify mainstream Judaism, hence Matthew's awareness of the dangers of persecution and being true to the message of Jesus despite real opposition.

Luke and John

Luke and John go in very different directions. Luke puts additional stress on the poor and the danger of wealth when looking at discipleship. John, however, hardly ever mentions poverty and makes no reference to Jesus's teaching about giving away one's wealth.

Where Luke tells repeatedly of the good news for all and inclusion of Gentiles, tax collectors, sinners, women and children, John puts the emphasis on the disciples loving one another. While Luke retains the emphasis on the kingdom of God and fills out what it means, John only uses the phrase on one occasion where he makes no reference to the good news for the poor, release for captives or sight for the blind (Lk4:1ff), but to do with spiritual birth from above: 'I tell you, most solemnly, unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' (Jn 3:5). Rather John has Jesus making a series of statements about himself beginning 'I am...' (7 of them) of which Luke appears to know nothing.

For Luke, discipleship means taking up the cross daily, in John there is no mention of taking up the cross. The material peculiar to Luke (especially in Lk 9:51-19:27, his 'journey to Jerusalem') stresses the virtues to be practised in discipleship: loving and helping others; persistence in prayer; humility; concern for the lost and shrewdness in one's affairs. In John, the centre of discipleship is an intimate relationship with Jesus expressed in such images as the vine and the branches (Jn15) and embodied in the anonymous 'beloved disciple' who rests his head in the bosom of Jesus at the Last Supper.

Luke emphasises listening and doing. In the story about (10:38-42) Martha and Mary is the invitation to listen in the presence of and at the feet of, and the Good Samaritan (10:29-37) is about doing.

Both Luke and John made reference to the Holy Spirit. In Luke the Spirit empowers disciples for mission and prophetic proclamation, in John the Spirit leads disciples into truth, reminds them of Jesus's teaching to convict the world and to glorify Jesus. If we only possessed one of these Gospels to help shape how we understand discipleship, then from Luke we would think immediately that following Jesus was about mission and outreach, spreading the Gospel far and wide and inviting everyone to receive the Good News. It would involve practical care for the poor, the marginalised and those in need. For this we would need to be a person of prayer, not distracted by possessions or wealth, have an empowering experience of the Holy Spirit and in taking up our cross daily we would be nurturing humility, compassion and obedience.

If we only had John's Gospel, we would probably decide that discipleship hinges on a personal relationship with Christ, knowing, believing and abiding in him. We would seek to practise loving others in the Christian community as a sign of belonging to Jesus and we would witness to Jesus as the one who came down from heaven and

was raised high on the cross. We would be very conscious of being distinct and different from other groups, such as the disciples of John, for example, or 'the Jews'. We would profess that Jesus came from the Father come what may.

Once again, a key factor in how the different communities understood the message of Jesus is the lived experience of the people.

For the Gentile readers of Luke the Good News has spread through the whole world. The Acts of the Apostles (not a separate 'book' of Acts originally) describes how the good news has spread through the whole world. The Gospel is preached 'with all boldness and without hindrance' in Rome, the centre of the Empire and the known world (Acts 28:31). The majority of Christians are Gentiles rather than Jewish and the task of the disciple is to continue the missionary work of the apostles and St Paul. To do this, disciples need to hold on tightly to prayer, humility and concern for the lost. It was important for these disciples to wonder how they are to be Christians in an expanding Roman empire and Roman world.

John's community, however, had to survive being expelled from the synagogue (Jn 9:22; 12:42, 16:2) and the people are experiencing a deep sense of alienation from their roots. The Temple is destroyed and they are cut adrift in a hostile environment. Jesus comes from above and his disciples too are born from above (Jn 3:7). If a member of this community was asked: 'What is the very core of your belief?' they would have to answer: 'My personal faith in Jesus Christ who is the Way, Truth and Life'. They would seek to maintain a united community and try to explain the offence of previous believers in Jesus (Jn 6:66).

In each of the Gospels we see that the picture of discipleship is shaped by two forces: the person of Jesus and the tradition that is passed on about him, and the context and presenting issues of those disciples for whom the Gospel is written. The Good News is presented in a way that will help the second generation disciples of their respective church communities to practise their faith in situations in which they find themselves.

So, is Christian discipleship always the same?

Yes, it is always focussed on Jesus: his life and death and resurrection define the essence of discipleship.

No, since discipleship is never exactly the same in any two places and times. There can be radical differences.

What can the New Testament tell us about Discipleship now?

There seem to be some basic indicators from the New Testament about what discipleship is:

- 1. Getting to know the person of Jesus.** Each of the Gospels, and indeed the whole of the New Testament, presumes a deep faith in the person of Jesus. It is interesting that the letters of Paul, and those letters attributed to Paul – many of which were written before the first Gospel – never refer to the actions of Jesus. They are all reflecting in some way on the impact of the faith of the first believers in the resurrection of Jesus.

- 2. Prayer – spending time with the Father.** Jesus will inevitably, as a Jew, have been steeped in the Jewish prayer tradition, personal and communal. He would know the psalms and worshipped in the Temple and Synagogue. He also spent time with his Abba, alone and with others.
- 3. A call to recognise the Kingdom of God.** Some people have a problem with the word 'Kingdom'. It is too territorial. It does not capture what is meant by the difference there would be in the world if God's will prevailed, if 'relationships were right'. The patterning of God's justice, peace and truth was, said Jesus, at hand and among us. This called for an urgent response. Repentance is more than a change of mind – it is a fundamental reorientation to this command. It is an unconditional and comprehensive reappraisal of how each one of us lives. Disciples are those who can see this reality of God breaking in and are committed to its spread.
- 4. A call to be alongside the poor and sinners.** James Dunn says the kingdom was announced to two groups in particular: the poor and sinners. In the Hebrew Scriptures the poor were the materially impoverished, the economically and politically powerless and those who recognised their own weakness and looked to God. God's people were to provide for the poor, to condemn the oppression of the poor and affirm God as the champion of the poor. Jesus pronounced the poor as blessed by God and declared that the poor have the Good News preached to them (Mt 13). Disciples were thus called to be with Jesus alongside the poor, giving to the poor, protecting the dignity of the poor and celebrating with the poor the signs of the kingdom. It must have been a real shock to them to discover that this is what it was – and is – about.

The disciples were to live by different values from the rest of the world where material possessions and power were a distraction from the task. Those who do nothing to help the poor are condemned by Jesus – the Rich man and Lazarus, the Last Judgement in Mt 25.

As well as the poor, his disciples were to join Jesus in welcoming sinners – those who have broken or disregarded the law. The law was seen as an expression of the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel – so breaking the law was violating this Covenant and setting oneself apart from God and the people of Israel. So, Gentiles were sinners because they were outside of the Covenant and any Jew who broke the law was a sinner. Jesus was a 'friend of tax collectors and sinners' and let an unclean woman wash his feet. Jesus took a stand in opposition to the narrowly defined views of the law and this gave rise to fierce opposition. Jesus taught that forgiveness is to be given over and over again and said that in the kingdom of God the one who serves is the greatest.

- 5. A call to participate in God's kingdom community.** There is for the disciples a way of living together that in itself points to the kingdom. For example, there was no hierarchy within the community save that Jesus was the leader. Disciples were not

in any sense in an intermediary position. Anyone had direct access to Jesus and any attempt to restrict them was rebuked (Mk 10:13-14, Jesus and the children).

This community was a missionary community – the twelve were sent out to preach. Others remained at home, they prayed and offered hospitality. They were missionary in the quality of the lives they lived, they were salt and light in the world around them (Mt 5:13–16).

What can we learn from this?

Discipleship means different things for different groups of followers of Jesus represented in the New Testament.

For the first disciples it meant being with and assisting Jesus in his proclamation of the kingdom of God. It meant hearing the call and calling on others to turn around, to trust God and live a life of faith.

For second generations Christians, discipleship meant a variety of beliefs, actions and practices.

Two things are clear – the person of Jesus is central, and the context in which we live shapes our appreciation of how we are to learn to follow Jesus. David Brown says: 'Discipleship is both a matter of locating ourselves within Jesus's story and acknowledging the way in which our situation differs significantly from his. Christian discipleship needs to be aware of these differences if it is not to make impossible demands upon the Scriptures or judge later developments by the wrong criteria'.⁵ Perhaps we have to look at two things: How we understand the person of Jesus and what is going on in the world we live in. It seems to me that these two questions are fundamental if we're to discover something of what it means to be a disciple today.

Who do you say I am?

Around 1961 Bernard Bickers, a priest of the diocese of Leeds wrote from the Junior Seminary at Ushaw and asked his dad for £1.00 to buy a Bible. 'What do you want one of them for?' was his dad's reply – though come to think of it, he was a Yorkshireman. Catholics don't have a good track record in reading the Bible. We're getting better, but we've a bit to go. What are our favourite stories about Jesus and why? What image of him do we have? Do we sense/experience Jesus as someone with us every moment with whom it is possible to have conversation? Is it the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' that prevails (despite the serious lack of Scriptural evidence for it, more the hymn of Charles Wesley) or the angry man who drove the money changers out of the Temple, the man who wept over the city of Jerusalem, the man who agonised in the Garden or who was crucified and rose and kept on giving his followers more opportunity to get to know him?

⁵ David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth*, OUP 2000 p 8.

Or is it none of these? More the person referred to during Mass but with whom we don't have too much of a relationship?

What is our image of God?

Jesus is God made flesh – but what image of God do we have? How do we appreciate the Trinity, the community of persons we call God. A community in which there is no division, no tension, no domination or subservience. A community within which 'relationships are right'. Or is our God still the one up in the heavens who judges, condemns and has an amazing capacity to remember everything we've ever done wrong and is lying in wait to get us for it? Perhaps God is love, the all compassionate, all forgiving all merciful Father whose entire job is to look upon every single one of us, all murderers and child molesters included, and the whole of creation, with affection?

Much has been and will be written about our image of God, both the one we profess and the one that is unconscious within us, harboured in us from very early childhood. This matters, because the way we appreciate who Jesus is for us is dependent to some extent on how we imagine God. If Jesus is the body language of God, God made flesh, the God who 'pitches his tent among us' then our relationship with Jesus of whom we want to be disciples, does depend to some extent on how we imagine God and who God is for us.

If we imagine God to be the loving active presence behind everything that is happening in the world, then Christian disciples are people who become familiar with the character and person of God, who trust that God is working in the world and want to join in. God is the prime mover. Christian disciples are disciples of the person of Jesus Christ who is God made flesh; they are not primarily disciples of, or ambassadors for, a particular Church or religious movement. God is not absent from the world and is not captured by the Church. In Jesus's teaching the completion of the kingdom of God is in the future, but he also emphasised the present reality of God's activity. Christian disciples need to recognise that the object of God's love and activity is in the first instance not the Church but the world. It is the 'world that God so loves' that he sends his Son.

For a disciple, Jesus is not a small, tribal Catholic God, but the saviour of the world. A disciple will see God in all things, or will eventually lose the basis for seeing God in anything.

So, discipleship is about knowing Jesus, the flesh of God, and appreciating the presence of this God in the world in which we live. What, then, is the world we live in like?

What is the World we live in like? What is our context?

I am now going to do the wrong thing.

It's easy to avoid this bit, which is what I'm doing. I suspect we think we know the world we live in, so don't have to think much about it, and that is dangerous. One reason why the evangelists had different things to say about discipleship is because their contexts were very different. The same must be true today. The true disciple,

however, is one who is able to enter into the dialogue between who Jesus is for him/her/them, and the world they live in. It isn't really possible to be a disciple without doing this.

A Few Pointers

Multiculturalism: when well over 20 of your almost thirty altar servers are non-white British, then it dawns that we live in a multicultural world. There are a fair number of children in our primary schools who do not have English as a first language. In parts of our country there are schools with dozens of 'first' languages being spoken. Every nurse I saw in Ward 41 in the RVI last night was non-white. There are more migrants in our world today than there have ever been. In our part of the world there is rapid movement of goods, services and people, mixing up cultures, which makes us think, act and relate to each other in different ways. That's not even mentioning Brexit. It is a long time since you could only buy olive oil in the chemist to cure ear ache. Woolworths does not exist, but there are many Polish, Eastern European, Asian and Far Eastern shops in Newcastle...etc etc.

From The Encyclopaedia Britannica to Wikipedia: No longer is 'knowledge' in the hands of experts, be they medics, lawyers, professors or parents. This is simply a symbol of the question 'where does authority lie?' It is said that after the Vatican Council, Catholics began to move from 'the experience of authority to the authority of experience'. In other words, the 'word' of the priest/teacher in relation to matters of faith began to wane, and the experience of people came to the fore. The story of the impact of *Humanae Vitae* (1968) might well illustrate this.

Communication: hardly bears thinking about. The speed and variety is phenomenal. Raising the question about the relationship between information and wisdom. I'm hardly one to offer any comment on this...

'Post Christian Britain': In the last 100 years Britain has moved from a 'highly religious society' where 'nearly every person would claim some attachment to a religion' and 'very few with a faith were non-Christian' to a nation in which the Christian Church has few members, a falling attendance rate, little or no influence in civil society and is peripheral to the lives of most people.⁶ Some denominations are predicted to disappear before the middle of this century. The age range of Church goers is heavily weighted towards the elderly. Some people have hope that Generation X (those born between 1960-1980) might continue to show some interest, the next generation however, does not appear to share much hunger.

It is hard to know exactly how un-influential Christianity is in our country. How can it be measured? Some commentators would say that the current decline is simply the end of 'Christendom'. Christendom being the era that began with the Emperor Constantine who established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire and ushered a period of wealth and influence for the church. It marked the beginning of a succession of forms of alliance between state and Christianity that ensured the continuance of power and authority for the Church.

⁶ Callum G Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain*, Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2006, p 317.

There are those who think that it is a good thing that 'Christendom' is coming to an end; it gives the Church the opportunity to think again about what it is for. Some think that we are still in the very 'early years' of the Church, and that in centuries to come our fellow Christians will wonder what on earth we were up to arguing about whether women should be priests or not!

Christendom-type thinking has been around for a very long time, it is deep in the DNA of the Church and its structures, policies and laws. Is it even possible for us to let go of Christendom-type thinking and discover a more authentic way of being disciples in the world today?

How brief and inadequate is all of that?!

So, what does it mean to be a disciple?

How can we be disciples in a busy, complex demanding and confusing world? How do we make connections between our faith, on the one hand, and our family, culture, leisure, politics, ethical issues and life in general, on the other?

In her book *All Are Called*⁷, Ruth Etchells begins with Jesus's somewhat contrasting views of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, according to Jesus, the kingdom is obvious for all to see, like a city on a hill or a lamp on a stand giving light to everyone in the house. Sometimes, it is hidden. It is like leaven in bread, active but invisible, like salt unseen but bringing out flavour or like a mustard seed, imperceptible but able to grow into a mighty tree. It is in its hiddenness that there is power to transform reality.

Sometimes the witness of the disciple is there for people to see; at other times it is unseen. A follower of Jesus can live as a public disciple when gathering to witness in liturgy and in prayer, and at other times s/he is hidden, unseen in the life of work, home and family life, school, leisure, shopping, community involvement and politics.

We have language like: 'going to Church', 'raising money for the Church' - which makes 'church' sound like any other organisation to which we belong and give some of our time and energy to. This is about belonging to an institution, its worship, social gatherings or councils.

The Church of Christians dispersed throughout the world is just as much Church – in a different form, scattered, invisible and unnoticed by others. This is what the Bishops of England and Wales meant when they wrote: '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'⁸. This is also the approach of the French Jesuit Jean Desautelles who used to say: 'Use the media to evangelise and evangelise the media. The first is easier than the second, but the second is more important in the long run'.

⁷ *All Are Called* Ruth Etchells, London: CIO Publications (Church House), 1985.

⁸ The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *THE COMMON GOOD and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*, 1996, Trafford Press, p 7.

In his book *The Reflective Disciple*, Roger Walton suggests the following features in what he calls the rhythm of discipleship:

- 1 **Vocation: Disciples are 'sent'** – when we move from being gathered (in our worship) to dispersed mode we do so as a sent people, commissioned by God, who go out into the world and work with the missionary God at large in the world. Through this sense of being sent, some people discover what it means for them to have a vocation, a realisation that they have been called by God to witness to Jesus in the world through the person they are. Wherever we go, God is there before us, the disciple is aware of this and cooperates with God in every moment.

- 2 **Formation: Disciples are shapers being shaped** – those who participate in the rhythm of discipleship are dispersed to be actors in the great drama, not audiences watching the performance. Disciples are to shape the world and its life. They shape it by challenging taken-for-granted values. To tell the truth to power is to be prophetic in our world. 'Wherever people suffer innocently or for a just cause, one can expect to find the presence of Christ, wherever forgiveness occurs or truth is told, however truth telling may be, there is Christ. Wherever the abuse of power is being challenged or creativity blossoms, or people renounce reliance on wealth, these are the places where Christ may be said to be present and may be encountered and through these epiphanies is moulding us for purpose.'⁹

It is through the gathering together in the Eucharist with the breaking of the word and sacrament, the welcome and prayer, the preaching and the caring that we catch a fresh vision of God. We meet God in the gathering and we are sent out in the name of God to bring about change. We are both shaped and become shapers. We are shaped in gathering and dispersing, we are in communion and we live mission.

- 3 **Translation: Disciples are bilingual** – we move between two different ways of being church. We gather and are dispersed, we are visible and invisible, known and unknown. Disciples have given great thought to how to speak in both contexts. They know how to pray, how to use language appropriate for liturgy and worship – but they know how to speak of God in the language and with the images and pictures and stories of others. They know how to interpret and to explain. We don't impose our 'faith language' on our work place, we use language which expresses the truth of faith in the work place. Disciples can also bring stories and metaphors and images from their work place/family/leisure/politics to challenge and enhance the faith community.

⁹ Walton p 95.

- 4 **Disciples are go-betweens** – disciples are to carry the world in their hearts – God so loved the world – and they bring it into their faith gatherings and worship. They also carry the Lord in their hearts into the world: ‘That is why through gathering together with fellow believers can be a resting place, a refreshment and solace, its real power is never fully effective until it is allowed to play on, probe and irradiate those concerns of the world which are each lay person’s territory’.¹⁰

This rhythm of discipleship is explored by people in different ways. Most emphasise the need for **REFLECTION**. Reflection is more than just ‘sitting thinking’. There is a dynamic to it which might include:

- 1 **Reading Scriptures, lectio divina, prayer.**

There are as many ways of praying as there are people trying to pray. But to be a follower of Jesus it makes sense to get to know Jesus through the Gospels. It also makes some sense to seek to be informed about the historical context in which Jesus lived and acted and spoke.

- 2 **Reflection coming out of life experience.**

Wondering how God is at work at any given moment, in any conversation for during course of action. Asking, from time to time, what is the Spirit saying to me at this moment, through these actions.

- 3 **Reflection needs time and resource**

We know it is easy to be too busy. It is possible to form habits of reflection, but usually through being led to do it – taking time away with people, making a regular commitment to a study/reflection group for a period of time. We are disciples through the lives we live, but we become effective disciples as we discover how to live our lives differently, to think and perceive and to reflect differently.

- 4 **Reflection works through facts, imagination, images and words.**

It is about slowing down, wondering what things mean, enjoying the world around us and seeing all as gift, as an expression of the loving, creator God we worship.

- 5 **Reflection can lead to acting and living differently**

‘When all is said and done, there’s a lot more said than done...’ Reflection can lead us to act differently, but not necessarily doing more things – just doing what we’ve always done, but doing it ‘intentionally’ rather than unconsciously and in an unthinking manner.

Much of it is about practising being ‘attentive’ to what is going on, what is being said, listening carefully to the meaning behind the words, gestures and actions.

¹⁰ Etchells, *Set My People Free* p. 133

How can our Church support 'Discipleship'?

At this moment I feel a bit like the Irish response to the English question: 'How do I get to Dublin from here?' Reply: 'I wouldn't start from here...' It is perhaps not too surprising that our Church has rarely nurtured 'intentional' or 'reflective' disciples, it may be because we're not so much of an 'intentional' or 'reflective' Church. Perhaps we are, unconsciously, too rooted in the Constantinian/institutional/Christendom model. In the words of Roger Walton 'If we are to nurture *courageous openness*, [his emphasis] we need church communities that encourage friendliness and generous hospitality, outgoing attitudes and boundary-crossing, risk-taking, adventurous initiatives.'¹¹ There are examples of such attitudes in our diocese, but few and far between.

We might need to become a Church within which there are groups of people truly open to praying the Scriptures, faith sharing and a willingness to risk sharing fear and hope, questions, ideas and vision.

We might need to become communities of true hospitality and welcome, where there is a positive effort to make space for all minorities – we are woeful in being seen to welcome people who are LGBT, pretty poor in relation to those who are married and divorced and with no track record of welcoming those who have served prison sentences or their families. This is not to say that individuals don't do this, it is to say that as 'Church' we don't.

So, it's pretty tough breaking into the risky business of being 'intentional' about discipleship.

We have no real idea what the Church will look like in our diocese in 50 years' time, but much of what is happening brings to mind the Einstein quote referred to earlier: *if we continue to do the same thing over and over again and expect different results, then we are insane*. At the heart of *Forward Together in Hope* is indeed the call to each Catholic to think again about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, but which Jesus and at what cost discipleship and how do we learn a new way of being one?

Jesus called his disciples to follow him and they began to belong to a new community – one in which there was no hierarchy, where greatness was accorded to those who serve, to those who do not look for power as the world understands it and where, eventually, everyone was introduced into a new understanding of a God who loves, not one who demands adherence to religious laws. The Holy Spirit came among them when they were (according to the book of Acts) in community, in fear and in the upper room. This community became a sign of God at work in the world. This may sound ideal, but it does offer an alternative vision to the way we've become. It is likely that for most aware disciples the first experience or glimpse of the life of the kingdom will be in some form of Christian community and it is here, over time, that they learn to see the world in a different way. It is in and through the experience of becoming and being the body of Christ that we gradually are reshaped by the reality of the kingdom.

¹¹ Walton p 143.

So discipleship is nurtured in community – but only in certain kinds of community. Discipleship is nurtured when this community sees itself as a missionary community, not one that is defensive, cosy or self-perpetuating.

There are brilliant examples of missionary communities and individuals throughout the history of the Church – what will it look like in Hexham and Newcastle in the years to come? Perhaps if every meeting in every parish/Partnership over the next 12 months had as a PS at the end the question: ‘How has any decision we’ve made at this meeting affected the poorest person we know’ – we might begin to shift our focus outside, towards those we claim to serve. It is unlikely to be taken seriously, but it could be a step in the right direction.

Perhaps we’re looking for a Church that is conscious of the need to become:

- A kingdom community – not one perpetuating what we have
- A missionary community – less anxious about perpetuating what we have
- A community that is inspired by the Spirit and personal relationship with Jesus whom we are committed to know more clearly
- A community that consciously nurtures ‘reflective’ ‘attentive’ ‘intentional’ disciples.

Whether we like it or not, it is not so much that the Church is called to ‘do’ religious education, our Church **is a form of** religious education. We unconsciously nurture what we are...if we are to nurture something different we need to **become** something different. Formation in faith and the business of becoming disciples cannot be left to chance, we do indeed need to think how to form one another as disciples and perhaps the really hard bit is to be convinced that what we do at present does not in fact produce the goods.

Roger Walton suggests some basic approaches.

Foundations: ‘In order for any building and shaping of the kingdom community to happen, some basic elements need to be put in place. The kingdom is unlikely to grow where there is no desire for it, no love of the Gospel story, no willingness to accept its claim on our lives, no willingness to listen to others, no place for conversation and reflection and no openness to change and growth.’¹²

Adults, by and large, learn informally and in small groups – somehow we need small group learning about scriptures, church, ‘followship’ and mission. It is about gradual transformation.

Focus on events: where events in the life of the Church intentionally become the focus for the gathered community to reflect and deepen their sense of who they are and what they are called to be – seasonal events, occasional events, pilgrimage moments, unexpected events etc. So much depends on the attitude of the celebrant along with the wisdom and insight of those preparing the celebration with him.

¹² Walton p 161

Education for Worship: given that most potential disciples gather for worship, the quality and preparedness for worship is key. How do we support whatever formation is in place at the present time?

Learning about mission: could even begin with mapping what is going on in the local parish/partnership area. How many residential homes are there? Could we visit them? How do we learn to visit? What provision is there for homeless? What do other Churches, faiths, do about it? Have we visited the local mosque/s, synagogue, URC church? Have we spoken to anyone about any of this?

How do we serve without feeling superior? What have we to learn from those who are the least, the last and the lost? True partnership is not a hand-out, that is being superior. The real question is: how do we become friends? Giving to CAFOD (there are other equally important charities on the market...) can be avoidance, using a middleman to salve our conscience. How do we become agents of a totally compassionate God?

Conclusion:

There are all sorts of proposed programmes to help 'form' disciples - lots of examples at the end of Sherry A Weddle's book *Forming Intentional Disciples*.¹³ She includes: RCIA, Alpha, CaFé, Life in the Spirit Seminars etc.¹⁴ All of these programmes depend on some initial blowing on the dim flame of faith, some watering of the seed of the Gospel within each one of us. Perhaps what we're looking for first of all is the grace to sense, see and sensitively identify when the flame and the seed are ready to be nurtured and then wonder how best to do it?

If I am to become a disciple then I need to be willing to:

- Spend time in the presence of the Father
- Spend time getting to know the person of Jesus in the Scriptures
- Spend time wondering and musing how the world could be different
- Spend time with people who are searching for something similar
- Spend time seeing God at work throughout the world – 'Kingdom Spotting'
- Spend time with the poor, disadvantaged, excluded, the fragile
- Spend time welcoming the stranger, the unexpected
- Spend time delighting in all sorts of things – friendship, laughter, the world we live in
- Spend time celebrating the good things in people's lives

¹³Sherry A. Weddle *Forming Intentional Disciples – The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus Our Sunday Visitor*, Huntingdon, NI, 2012

¹⁴ Weddle p 224

- Spend time appreciating the love of others
- Spend time thinking of other things we could be spending time on if we are to be disciples of Jesus.....

These thoughts are simply to stimulate further discussion. That discussion may never end, but that's fine, so long as we become more aware of the need to become more 'intentional' disciples of Jesus.

Afterword

It feels right to me to end with some reflections on Discipleship – admittedly freely taken from Roger Walton and others – because this is what the Development group and the Team imagined we were doing: inviting everyone in the diocese to think again about what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus in our time and place.

Whether it all worked is up to all of us.

The real work is yet to be done: a huge commitment to lay formation and leadership; a willingness from fellow clergy to engage in working together with lay people in formation and leadership; a commitment to a more ‘synodal’ approach to how we organise ourselves in the future; an increasing openness from all of us to the risk and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Just a brief word of genuine thanks to everyone who was intimately and energetically involved with ***Forward Together in Hope***. It was truly exciting, and may not really come to fruition for some time!

Thanks to Bishop Seamus, all clergy and colleagues and the very many enthusiastic, energetic and so keen parishioners from around the diocese who contributed so much in so many ways.

Many thanks to parishioners of the parish of St John XX111 who have been immensely patient with proof reading and final suggestions. I’d no idea it was such a skilled job.

Pope Francis has very clear things to say about ‘clericalism’ and ‘the call of everyone to holiness’ – it may be that these two thoughts lie behind so much of what comes before.

Jim O’Keefe

24 March 2019 – the Feast of St Oscar Romero...and four days after the ‘proper’ Feast of St Cuthbert – Patron of the Diocese.