

## **FORWARD TOGETHER IN HOPE**

**16 July 2014**

**Thank you all very much indeed for gathering here at Cardinal Hume school today. I appreciate that many of you will have had to make alternative arrangements to be here, it is, after all, the last week of the school year. But I've asked you to come so that as many people as possible will hear what I have to say at the same time. I very much appreciate the efforts you've made to attend. Thank you.**

**You may remember that I made a Statement after our Diocesan Directors' meeting in January this year. Let me remind you of what I said:**

**'Myself and the Board of Directors of the Diocese met for two and a half days of prayerful reflection and honest discussion earlier this week.**

**We reviewed the documentation and reflections produced over the last three years including views and recommendations from meetings with priests and laity at St Robert's School, Ramside Hall and elsewhere.**

**The Board agreed practical steps needed to effectively manage diminishment in the Diocese in order to enable a flourishing Catholic Community.**

**It was decided that the proposed meetings of priests and lay people throughout the five vicariate areas are premature.**

**A sub-group of the Board has been established to progress the thinking and decisions made with a view to offering a framework to help develop an active, empowered and engaged Catholic Community in the future.**

**The Board expects to be in a position to present the workings of the group to the Diocese early in the summer'.**

**So, here we are, early in our summer, and I want to present to you how I have decided to take it all forward. I want to say how grateful I am to the sub-group who have led us over the last few months. The members of the group are Fr Martin Stempczyk our Vicar General who has been chair of the group, Kathleen Smith as Chief Operating Officer of the Diocese, Mr Bill Dryden and Fr Jim O'Keefe as Board members. Given our commitment to having priests and people moving forward together, I'd like to note that the working group has two priests and two lay people. I also want to say that they have done a great deal of work, all their meetings have been written up and forwarded to all of our Diocesan Directors inviting their comments and observations. Since April 2013 we have had 4 lay people alongside me who share responsibility for governance in the diocese and I am very grateful for the commitment and dedication of our lay directors. You may remember that**

**'spirituality, formation for all and new structures' were priorities when I was first appointed bishop of the Diocese. So I can say with confidence that I and our whole Board have been aware of everything that the group have been exploring. I know that the advice and expertise of Brother Ronnie McEwan (another of our Board members) has been particularly valuable, so I'd like to thank him for his contribution. I also want to thank our other Board members, Mrs Maureen Bates and Mr Bill Brown and the other members of the Episcopal Council.**

**This group has met every two weeks for two hours since January. They again reviewed all the documentation from meetings over the previous years, including the papers on our Vision Statement in the year 2000. They looked at the processes and documentation from other dioceses, such as Portsmouth, Leeds, Liverpool and Glasgow. They have looked further afield at documentation from one particular diocese in the United States, namely, Belleville in Illinois.**

**What I want to do today is present to you the Framework of our Diocesan Development Plan. I want us to discover how we make the best use of the Spirit filled energy, imagination and resources we have to support a thriving and sustainable Catholic Community in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. We are blessed with committed priests and people. At the same time we have a decreasing number of priests, and congregations are reducing in numbers. I do have challenging decisions to make to ensure that we have a thriving church in the future. We are not alone in facing these decisions, almost all of the dioceses in Western Europe and the US are wondering how we move forward. I am convinced that with good will, trust, and imagination, the Holy Spirit will guide us forward. It cannot be pain free, but it can be fruitful.**

**I want to emphasise Spiritual Formation. Everything we do is to be underpinned by prayer, we must all pay special attention to this.**

**I want us to be both realistic and hopeful. Some of you will be aware that a similar statement to the one I made following the Diocesan Directors meeting in January this year was made by Martin to the Council of Priests (6 March) and by myself to the Council of The Laity some days later.**

**This statement is clear in that what we needed was an equitable diocesan-wide review, and that a central part of which will be to look at what we understand a viable parish to be.**

**I hope this provides enough background to our gathering here today, I've no doubt you're wondering where we go from here.**

**The working group have almost completed a comprehensive document which will hopefully be our 'Working Document' for the next three years. They have prepared a**

framework for a Diocesan wide review, but are also suggesting more than that – a Plan for us to follow over the next three years. I am very conscious that as a priest of this diocese for almost 50 years, I do know the Diocese well, and I am aware of the anxieties and fears of priests and laity alike. I also have a strong sense of hope of what we can do together, and I would like to share that with everyone as we move ‘Forward Together in Hope’.

I hope you’re all still with me, because I intend now to spell out in more detail what I propose.

A comprehensive document is in preparation which will help us Move Forward Together in Hope. Two of our original priorities when we met as a Bishop’s Council four year ago were: To look at new structures and to move together (priests and lay people) into the future. This is absolutely essential, that clergy and laity come together especially in Spiritual Formation. I do believe that this proposal will enable us to do exactly that.

Let me remind you again that the three priorities for us are: Spiritual Formation, Formation for all and New Structures.

This document will have a Forward which I will prepare, followed by:

- 1 An Introduction to what we will do.
- 2 A Theological Reflection
- 3 A Statement of where we are as a Diocese at the present time – there will be graphs and visual statements which I have already found extremely helpful
- 4 Signs of Flourishing in a viable Catholic community.– I will say more about this in a few moments.
- 5 The Process of the project over the next 3 years – again I will refer back to that in a short time
- 6 A Conclusion
- 7 Appendices – which will include further background information for us all to think about; Liturgical resources and further reflections.

You might think: ‘Oh dear, this is just another paper exercise’. Let me tell you, I hate paper (and I hate emails). Can I reassure you that facts and information and figures do matter. I do believe that this is a plan for reflection and action. Let me spell out a little what we mean by ‘Signs of Flourishing in a viable Catholic community’

Let me say that the numbers of priests is decreasing, our Presbyterate is aging and congregations are diminishing. I am very well aware of that. During my time as your Bishop I have been assiduous in visiting all our parishes, all our schools and meeting all of our priests individually at least twice. I am very aware of what is happening in our Diocese. I’m also becoming aware that parish communities might indeed flourish if we

became less 'parochial' if we became more aware of our neighbours, more willing to work together and explore new possibilities. So it is in this context that I will consider the following 'Signs of a flourishing and viable Catholic Community'. These are the things every community will be asked to explore:

- 1 **Active Involvement of People** – what is the level of active involvement of people, is there a core/and will there be a core of active lay people willing to move into the future? We will look at the age profile of people to see how many young people are involved in things.
- 2 **Christian Faithful** – How many of them are there? Obviously the faithful are the people of God in your area. Is there a core of members who are truly committed to the Gospel?
- 3 **Education and Continuing Formation** – the huge question around how our Catholic Schools are instrumental in forming future active Christians and how we form adults in relation to their calling as baptised Catholics. I have visited all our schools since I became a bishop, and I am very impressed by what I see happening there. I believe this is an area we need to think more about. Fr Hugh Lavery once said that our task was to be involved in 'inspiration, formation and transformation', we are to enable the hearts of people to be transformed in order to change lives. Schools have a very important role in the mission of the Church, they can go where the priest cannot go. They must be committed to encouraging parent involvement. We must do everything we can to encourage the formation of Catholic teachers.
- 4 **Facilities** – can the community actually maintain the buildings and projects in their care? I suspect this will be a key issue in the future. We must realise that the church is not just the buildings, the Church is the living stones, the people. So perhaps we need to spend more money on spiritual formation than buildings. We might also need to look at finding other uses for our churches, so that they can become multipurpose.
- 5 **Finances** – A sustainable community must have an annual income to cover expenses, developments, and future maintenance. It is not enough to 'have money in the bank' – every community must look towards the future and future maintenance.

- 6 Geographic Distance – given our future projections of fewer clergy – how far away is the worshipping community from their neighbouring Catholic Churches. To be honest, there is no point in avoiding this question if you really do want restructuring and a future viable Catholic community. It is very hard, but we need to be realistic. This can be painful, but there can be no growth without some pain. We may have to look to sharing churches, exploring joint use of Anglican churches. In Corbridge last weekend I was very impressed by the congregation of about 140 parishioners celebrating in an Anglican Church that they have used for around 30 years. They have excellent Ecumenical links. The organ is played by an Anglican or Methodist organist when a Catholic mass is celebrated.**
- 7 Leadership – what is the evidence of collective leadership and collaborative ministry between priests and people in your local Catholic community and how can this be enhanced? This is an extremely important question. The day has long gone when priests could be a one man band. We need to discover how parishes can flourish without a resident priest. It cannot all depend on him. I have often said around the diocese that when a priest stands on the altar, only 2% of the gifts and talents of the community stand with him, the 98% are in front of him in the congregation. We need to see that we are building the Kingdom, priests must identify, identify and use the skills and abilities of the people. Making announcements from the pulpit or in the newsletter is a waste of time, people have to be invited personally to become involved. I was surprised some years ago when I heard Michelle Moran of the Zion Community saying that those lay people who had been in a particular ministry or service for a long time should seek to step aside. The danger is that if you're in a job too long it becomes your territory and you begin to defend it, it becomes 'yours' and no one else's, no one can invade or become involved. The important thing is to encourage other people to become involved, walk with them as they become more confident and then look around to see if there are other initiatives that could be encouraged. In this way, more people are involved and people feel free to become involved. There will always be opportunities for people with energy to make a difference.**
- 8 Worship and Spiritual Life – how many people actually worship in your local church? What variety of worship opportunities are there? Again, this is a very important question. Is your Church which is one only open for an hour a week on a Sunday, or for 30 minutes two or three times a week? Perhaps we need to look much more carefully about how our buildings can serve the community.**

Can they become multipurpose? How do we encourage and enable more lay lead services? I cannot emphasise enough the importance of prayer in all of this. More parishes will have to encourage Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament made available by Ministers of the Eucharist. It is so important for us to engage in silent prayer, gazing at the Blessed Sacrament and the Lord gazing at us. In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament we can begin to let go of our biases and become more open to what the Lord wants of us.

- 9 Young People - what level of outreach and support is there for young people in the community? We cannot leave everything to our Catholic Schools and the Youth Ministry Team. Every effort has to be made to encourage young people to become more and more involved. When I meet with young people and the Youth Council I hear that it is very difficult for those who do come to Sunday mass to do so because the peer pressure not to is so great. Those who do go do not always feel welcome by the regular worshippers. We all need to become more open, more willing to give the reason for the hope that lies within us, more welcoming to young people and their ideas and aspirations.

I fully appreciate that this is very brief outline of one part of the Document that is being prepared – but I want you to know how thoroughly and carefully we are exploring ways to flourish in the future.

At our Board Meeting on 11 June, just over a month ago, I decided that to make this work we needed to dedicate resources, both financial and personnel to drive it forward. It was important that we had time to think and pray about it before any decisions were made.

The recommendations are:

That if I as your Bishop and we as a Diocese really want to take all of this forward, I need to look to appointing a Diocesan Development Officer, working as a Project Manager, and I need to release a priest with experience to take it all forward. This priest will be free of parish responsibility, this is essential. You may be asking: ‘What is he up to, releasing a priest at this time when we have fewer priests than we have ever had?’ I am convinced that for this project to be successful, we need someone to drive it forward.

So, I have asked Fr Jim O’Keefe to be the diocesan priest to help us steer us through this process throughout the diocese over the next three years. His role will be to act as the Diocesan Development Director. As Episcopal Vicar and Diocesan Director he has been intimately involved in this whole process since its inception. He will be working very closely with me in putting this Plan into practice. When he takes up his new post he will

no longer be an area Episcopal Vicar, I will appoint a new Episcopal Vicar for Newcastle and North Tyneside.

One of the reasons for meeting you today is so that the Development Working Group can go ahead with the search for a suitable person in the very near future. I know they are already working at a Job Description for such a person. It may well take 3 months to have someone in place following advertising and interviews. It would obviously be impossible for this advert to be placed without everyone knowing about it in advance.

We need to be aware that the whole Project does depend to some extent on the appointment of the Diocesan Development Officer.

Over the summer Jim will be released from his role as Parish Priest of All Saints and St Michael's and will be totally committed to this project for the next 3 years.

I would be very surprised if you didn't ask: 'Where is the money coming from for this?' Given our necessary stringency at the present time.

I have two things to say about this.

- 1 I have been hearing for some years now, that 'something has to be done', 'decisions have to be made' – so for me as your bishop, this is a priority. I am aware that I have just turned 72 and want to spend the next 3 years as your bishop helping to begin to put our diocese (that I have served since 1966) in a position to face the future with confidence.
- 2 I have also asked Jim to look to find external funding to assist us with the necessary resources we need. Along with Mrs Kathleen Smith, our Diocesan Chief Operating Officer, he has already begun to do so. I am indeed very conscious of costs, and I do hope we can find funding to support what I believe to be a huge step forward. They have both been successful in the past in finding funding, I certainly hope it will be possible in the future. The initial signs are very promising.

I'd like to add some further suggestions.

It is my fervent hope that we can all come together as a Diocese to engage with this plan. One implication is that our Diocesan Departments will be able to make a very positive contribution to it all and I see this as their major focus over the next three years. This will be essential if we are to truly work together for the good of the Diocese.

**There is no doubt that our Department for Spirituality will be vitally important in helping us to pray, reflect and be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. I know that the group have in mind that prayers and liturgies will be prepared to help us over the next 3 years. I cannot emphasise enough the need for us to pray for everyone involved in this Project – which is our whole diocese. If we put prayer at the centre of it all, I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit will guide us.**

**All other Departments of the Curia such as Education, Adult Formation, Priestly Formation, Diaconate Formation and Finance may well be able to make a very significant contribution to what is being planned. I see this as the major focus for most of our planning and celebrating and thinking over the next three years. I mentioned it earlier, the importance of praying and getting together to pray together, in silence, with the Lord gazing at us – this is how we are transformed.**

**One of the documents which will be made available to every parish in the Diocese will provide as much factual information about finance, people who are accepted as ministers following DBS checks, statistics re baptisms, deaths, marriages, children in schools and so on – so there will be serious call on Curia staff to assist with a great deal of background information. All centrally held information pertaining to each parish will be made available to each parish.**

**I want this whole exercise to be as open and as transparent as possible. One reason for releasing Jim and appointing a Diocesan Development Officer is so that they will be available to assist parishes and deaneries with what they will need to do, but also to offer as much feedback as possible throughout the years ahead. They won't be stuck in an office all day! They will be as helpful as they can throughout the diocese. I know this will not be easy, but I want to encourage as much engagement and feedback as possible.**

**In a moment I will present an outline of the Timescale for what I have in mind. Let me be very clear about this.**

**I want as many people in parishes to be involved as possible**

**I want to offer as much feedback as possible**

**I want priests and deans to encourage as much engagement as possible.**

**I am very aware that there is a deep feeling that 'something has to happen'. I am also very aware that it is all too easy to 'hope nothing happens that will affect me'. I do remember Cardinal Hume once saying: 'When I hear the words: 'things have to change around here', I get frightened, because it means I have to change'.**



**Let me now spell out something of a timescale for all of this.**

**Here we are on 16 July. In the very near future there will be an advert placed for a Diocesan Development Officer to help Jim with the whole task. It will obviously take some time for him or her to be appointed over the summer. My hope is that we can begin with some urgency at the end of September or early October.**

**There is a great deal of paperwork to be finalised and printed, - this cannot be done until the beginning of October when the 2 posts are in place.**

**Partly to fit in with my next three years as bishop, we're looking towards a three year plan which will allow a time of Preparation (Sept 2014 – 2015) a time of Study and Reflection, (Sept 2015 – 2016), and a time of Analysis and Implementation (2016 – 2017)**

**At some point later in the year, I'd like to offer a Day of Reflection and Prayer for all the priests and lay people in the Diocese. I am very conscious that as a priest of this diocese for almost 50 years, I do know the Diocese well, and I am aware of the anxieties and fears of priests and laity. I also have a strong sense of hope of what we can do together, and I would like to share that with everyone as we move 'Forward Together in Hope'**

**I would like to meet our Deans in October. Our Pastoral Plan will be one item on the agenda of the meeting.**

**Towards the end of November I would like to officially launch the Project. I do appreciate that this needs a great deal of work from the Development Group assisting Jim and the Diocesan Development Officer. There will be a great deal of planning and writing and printing before this gathering. After all, we do have 171 parishes in our diocese, and documentation will have to be available for all of them.**

**In mid-November I will produce a Pastoral Letter to be read in every parish in the diocese about our Diocesan Pastoral Plan. There will be an accompanying one-page leaflet for every parishioner to take home, giving basic facts and figures about the diocese.**

**I have asked that there will be prayers and liturgies prepared for every parish to help everyone approach the future with open minds and open hearts. I sincerely hope that every parish will take seriously the need to pray for our future Plan, and that everyone is open to where the Holy Spirit will lead us.**

**I also believe it to be important for me to provide a DVD for all of our parishes explaining what we're hoping to do in the 3 years ahead.**

**In Advent I'd like to offer a Day of Reflection for Clergy and laity, exploring hope and expectation during our time of waiting before Christmas.**

**Subject to the successful appointment of a Diocesan Development officer, I am hoping that by the 6<sup>th</sup> of November the date when I will meet with our Council of Priests, we will have some of the planned documentation available to guide us through the whole process. The following Saturday, 8 November, the same documentation will be available to the Council of the Laity.**

**Early in the New Year, we will have available, a specific profile for every parish community in the Diocese. I appreciate that this is an enormous amount of work, but what will be available is a comprehensive statement of statistics we have in our Curia, our Diocesan Office, in relation to every parish in the Diocese. This will be part of the self-assessment of every community. Whatever is available centrally will be made available to every parish community, and every parish community will have the opportunity to complete the document and make it available so that I can thoroughly explore how best we move forward in the future.**

**I can imagine that this will entail a lot of meetings! The parish evaluation is to enable each parish to take stock of where it is and how it sees itself moving into the future – taking account of its neighbouring parishes and developments in the local area and most importantly from my point of view, that everyone, priests and laity alike, has a fair opportunity to be heard in the process.**

**I'd like to emphasise again the importance of looking at how we can work together, between parishes, within the deanery. In some deaneries there is a common preparation for RCIA, Marriage Preparation and Baptism Preparation. This is something for everyone to aim at. If there are no resources for this in one parish, it may be that there are resources in neighbouring parishes. We need to be open to these possibilities.**

**I'm often told that 'decisions have to be made for the future' – I will make them, but only on the basis of thorough reflection, prayer and discernment. Fr Jim and the Diocesan Development Officer will be on hand to help – so long as that is humanly possible! Clearly they can't be in more than one parish at any given time!**

**In the final phase I will be looking carefully and seriously at any necessary restructuring, including: the closure of some church buildings; use of our buildings for other purposes;**

the need to reduce the number of masses being celebrated; how our Curia can offer support to local communities in the future; exploring how our communities can indeed flourish in the future; the development of non-Eucharistic liturgies and so on.

I think that the time is fast approaching when we will not be able to celebrate mass in every parish Church every Sunday. We need to be serious about the circumstances facing us. I never force anyone to retire at 75, we have a conversation about future ministry, and I am now inclined to suggest that after 75 a priest becomes a 'Priest in Charge' of the parish. The majority of priests are inclined to want to carry one if they are well enough to. Let me remind you of the reality in relation to priests in the diocese.

We have 4 priests over the age of 80 who are active parish priests.

75 – 80 there are 7 parish priests

70 – 75 there are 12 parish priests

65 – 70 there are 24 parish priests

60 – 65 there are 8 parish priests

55 – 60 there are 7 parish priests

50 – 55 there are 15 parish priests

40 – 50 there are 16 parish priests

Below 40 there are 7 priests.

It is extremely important that we realise the reality if we are to prepare to manage the future.

I will be assisted in this final stage by my Episcopal Council and our Board of Directors. We will look very carefully at everything that is available to us so that I can make wise decisions for our communities and our diocese for the future.

Let me be honest about this, we are living in a time of 'diminishment' but we do have really committed lay people and priests in our midst. We simply cannot go on the way we are, so there will be very difficult decisions to be made. It may be that decisions have to be made in certain circumstances because of an emergency, but I believe that this Pastoral Plan will provide an equitable way of using our resources more efficiently in the future. Changes will happen even if we do nothing! I do believe that this process will help me make decisions to ensure that we can indeed flourish as a diocese. It won't be easy, but it is necessary.

I am aware that some people expect the same service from one priest in an area where there were three in the past. I fully realise that I am responsible for lay people in the diocese, but I am also responsible for priests, many of whom feel they are over involved,

and if we overburden them they will quickly find themselves unable to cope. We are indeed facing difficult decisions.

I'd like to conclude by saying that I am trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us through the next three years. It won't be easy for any of us. Two weeks ago I ordained 3 men as Deacons. We are gradually discovering how the ministry of the Diaconate can serve us in our Diocese. Earlier this month I ordained 2 new priests for our diocese and their ministry will be very different from mine when I arrived here all those years ago to serve in Brooms parish in Leadgate. I was excited when I arrived there. I hope they are excited as they begin their ministry in the Cathedral with the variety of ministries they will experience. They will learn to work together with lay people to ensure that we can indeed flourish as a diocese into the future.

As I stand here in front of you today, I do have a sense that the Holy Spirit is with us. We are looking very realistically at our Diocese and the resources available to us. We are becoming more aware of the energy and imagination of parishioners throughout the diocese. I am certainly aware as a result of my visitations to parishes and schools that the Holy Spirit will indeed direct us into the future. I want to ask you all to be open to the Holy Spirit, to ask yourselves how to respond to the Gospel calling to look outwards and 'preach to all nations', and to truly believe that the Lord will be with us to the 'end of time'.

We need to the grace to 'Let Go' and let God take over. The days of the 'convenience mass' are now gone.

Thank you once again for coming.

I know that you have made a great effort to be with us today/tonight...Can I ask for a period of silent prayer so that the Holy Spirit may indeed enter our minds and imagination – after which we are happy to respond to questions in so far as we can.