

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



*✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle*



Pastoral Letter to be read in all parishes on the Weekend of 15 / 16 November 2014

My Dear People

We are living at a very important and exciting time in the history of our Diocese. When I reflect on the visits I make throughout the Diocese I am heartened by the commitment of clergy and laity to prayer, to service and to the witness of the Gospel. This week we will be praying for prisoners and their families. Next weekend we will be aware of the great work being done by our Youth Ministry Team on what is Youth Sunday. Young people will play a vital part in the project I will outline in a moment.

Today I want to introduce you all to a new initiative which will help every one of us to examine our relationship with Jesus Christ and the way we support one another in our worshipping communities to worship God and be faithful to the Gospel. It will be known as Forward Together in Hope.

Many of us have been saying for years that we are reaching a crisis point in our Diocese. The numbers of priests serving our Diocese is decreasing; we now only have 5 under the age of 40. The number of worshipping parishioners has declined from around 100,000 in the 1980s to around 40,000 now. You will see these facts on a leaflet being distributed to every parishioner in the Diocese today. We could be very despondent about this, but I am not.

The leaflet you will receive today is an invitation to everyone in the Diocese to become fully involved in the development and renewal of our Diocese. It is simply the beginning of the process which will affect everyone in Hexham and Newcastle. You are invited on a journey to explore how we become active disciples of Jesus. The leaflet will be made available to as many people as possible in the Diocese, and you are all invited to make the prayer on it your own, perhaps making it part of your daily prayers. Those who bring Holy Communion to the sick and housebound could perhaps encourage them to pray along with us.

In the late spring of next year, every worshipping community will be given a thorough questionnaire to complete which will help to provide a realistic picture of how each community can flourish in the future. I hope that it will provide an opportunity for reflection and discernment about the future. It will be the same in every parish, except for the unique information held centrally which will be made available to each community. This questionnaire will reveal the viability of each community, how it is planning to look ahead to provide lay ministers and leaders. It will examine finances, buildings and its involvement with young people. It will further help everyone deepen their commitment to the Gospel through prayer and reflection, worship and continuing formation. You will have the opportunity to respond to it all in the weeks and months ahead.

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Pope Francis is inviting all of us to become 'missionary disciples' taking the risk we need to become more involved in outreach to the poor around us and the opportunities there are to witness with our sisters and brothers of other faiths. We will also have to look at numbers in communities and the geographical proximity of other worshipping communities.

This whole initiative will be underpinned by prayer and a call to the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. In time, there will be special liturgical resources made available to open our minds and hearts to the inspiration of the Spirit. I am very struck today by the fact that the man with the one talent simply buried his talent, and his head, in the sand. Today's Gospel is striking in that most of the emphasis is on how the 'one talent man' said 'No' to risk, and 'Yes' to things staying the same. In this parable, Jesus is inviting his followers to say 'Yes' to risk, and 'No' to safety, to say 'Yes' to an active response to God and 'No' to the way things have always been.

The servant who hid his talent, did not commit a sin, he did not do something bad – he simply did nothing at all. Jesus did not see his followers as 'pious observers' of a religion, but as 'bold believers' prepared to see things in different ways. One implication of this parable is to appreciate that to conserve what we have, is to avoid the invitation of God to move on.

I will be leading some periods of prayer and reflection during Advent and invite you all to join me in St Mary's Cathedral on Tuesday 2nd December at either 10.30 am or 6.30 pm, or alternatively at St Joseph's, Hartlepool on Wednesday 10th December at 6.30pm.

We are privileged to belong to a Diocese with an immensely rich heritage which has thrived and flourished over hundreds of years despite many difficulties – including Vikings and Persecution. But we can no longer presume that what has served us in the past will work in the future. Please keep this initiative in your prayers in the coming weeks and months. I firmly believe that the Holy Spirit is with us, giving us the courage we need to move Forward Together in Hope.

With very best wishes

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