

## ‘FROM PARISH TO MISSION’

*(A discussion paper for Deanery Conferences prepared by a working party of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. The paper is to be considered in the context of the document prepared by Bishop Marcus: ‘The Discernment of a Pastoral Plan for the Diocese of Leeds’.)*

The months of the pandemic have placed great strain on our pastoral ministry as we have sought to minister to the people entrusted to our care despite the many physical limitations placed on us. It has been painful to experience being unable to gather as parish communities to pray together and to celebrate the sacraments. Before the pandemic, Bishop Marcus asked the Diocesan Pastoral Council to begin to consider ways in which the voices of all the faithful, clergy and laity, could be heard as we begin to look to the future, renewing our commitment to making Christ known. There is, more than ever, an opportunity and a role for the Church as witness to the Gospel presence in the wider community. Many of the skills, talents, and gifts for achieving this already exist and already happen quietly without much celebration. The development of a diocesan pastoral plan can help, among other things, to promote a deep sense of daily practical prayer, strengthen our parishes as supportive communities for all and develop outreach skills in all the faithful. Speaking of the need for such planning, Pope Francis stated:

“The Church is the home where the doors are always open, not only because everyone finds a welcome and is able to breathe in love and hope, but also because we can go out bearing this love and this hope. The Holy Spirit urges us to go beyond our own narrow confines and he guides us to the outskirts of humanity. In the Church all of this cannot be left to chance or improvisation. It requires a shared commitment to a pastoral plan which brings us back to the essential and which is solidly focused on the essential; that is, on Jesus Christ. To get diverted by many secondary or superfluous things does not help; what helps is to focus on the fundamental reality, which is the encounter with Christ, with his mercy and with his love, and to love our brothers and sisters as he has loved us... We need a plan animated by the creativity and imagination of the Holy Spirit, who also urges us to take new paths with courage without becoming fossils! We might ask ourselves: what is the pastoral plan of our dioceses or parishes like? Does it make the essential visible, namely Jesus Christ? Do the various experiences and features that the Holy Spirit grants journey together in harmony?”<sup>1</sup>

When the diocese was created in 1878, the present geographical area of the diocese was made up of 38 missions served by 64 priests. In 2021, the diocese has 83 parishes with 115 churches

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis: Address to Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, Clementine Hall, 14 October 2013.

served by 71 parish priests and 9 assistant priests; 7 priests working in fulltime chaplaincies and non-parochial ministries; 3 priests temporarily working outside of the diocese; 48 priests of the diocese who have retired from holding office; and 13 permanent deacons assisting in parishes.

There is a danger that we can see our parishes as independent republics. Were we to do so, we would fail to bear effective witness to that communion of love to which we are called. We can fall prey to the individualism that has infected society. Pope Benedict reminded us that:

“God does not make men and women holy and save them merely as individuals without any mutual bonds but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness. In a world in which individualism seems to rule personal relationships, making them ever more fragile, the faith calls us to be the People of God, to be Church, bearers of the love and communion of God for all mankind.”<sup>2</sup>

The call to communion is the call to authentic holiness. It is:

“truly the Good News, the remedy given to us by the Lord to fight the loneliness that threatens everyone today, the precious gift that makes us feel welcomed and beloved by God, in the unity of his People gathered in the name of the Trinity; it is the light that makes the Church shine forth like a beacon raised among the peoples.”<sup>3</sup>

A process of listening will help us all to focus on what enables us to foster that sense of communion and to be effective witnesses to the commandment given to us by the Lord. *By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*<sup>4</sup>

There is always a danger that we continue to do things because we have always done it this way or try to sustain projects beyond their usefulness or effectiveness. We can also attempt to spread ourselves too thinly. Hopefully, a process of engagement will help us to identify what pastoral goals should be prioritised and how we best move towards achieving those goals.

Of course, all our pastoral activity has as its ultimate goal communion with Christ and with one another. *That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us.*<sup>5</sup> In the Instruction, ‘The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Evangelising Mission of the Church’, the Congregation for the Clergy reminds us:

“If the Parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelisation, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilised, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI: General Audience Wednesday, 31 October 2012

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI: General Audience, 29 March 2006

<sup>4</sup> Jn 13:35

<sup>5</sup> 1 Jn 1:13

flavour and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups. The renewal of evangelisation requires a new approach with diverse pastoral proposals, so that the Word of God and the sacramental life can reach everyone in a way that is coherent with their state of life.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important that the clergy of the diocese are enabled to enter into this period of discernment rather than experiencing it as, yet another burden placed on them or another work for them to do. In order to ensure this, a steering group under the auspices of the Diocesan Pastoral Council will coordinate listening exercises with the clergy, religious and laity, bringing awareness of the excellent work that already happens in our parishes and deaneries and seeking to identify the hopes for the future; reviewing and appraising diocesan resources (clergy, finances, properties, etc) as well as gathering accurate statistical information to help us plan for the future mission of the diocese. There is a need to engage and empower all the faithful to be “salt” and “light” in the world with the emphasis on looking outward not parochially inwards. This must lead to the laity having a more profound relationship with God; sound faith experiences; increased linking between faith, daily life and social engagement; and a deeper theological knowledge promoting a transformational loving relationship with Jesus and our neighbours.

The Listening Sessions are a key strategic component of what needs to be done. They will need to be conducted in an appropriate way to maximise clarity of purpose, representation, engagement, collaboration, transparency, and effective communication. The engagement of the clergy is, of course, of paramount importance but there is also a need to engage with other groups within the diocesan family, such as parish and deanery groups, school communities and diocesan pastoral organisations. It is important that everyone is enabled to engage in this process.

The pastoral conversion of structures implies the understanding that the faithful Holy People of God are anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit; therefore, when we reflect, think, evaluate, discern, we must be very attentive to this anointing...As a member and servant of the People of God entrusted to his care, the Priest cannot supplant this discernment. The Parish community has the ability to propose forms of ministry, to proclaim the faith and to bear witness to charity.<sup>7</sup>

The Listening Sessions will have three broad objectives:

1. Where are we now in the life of our parish and the diocese, and what is working well?

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<sup>6</sup> Congregation for the Clergy: The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church, 20 July 2020. 17 - 18

<sup>7</sup> Congregation for the Clergy: The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church, 20 July 2020. 37, 39

This will be addressed by a data collection and an analysis exercise which will be delivered both digitally and paper based for those with no access to the internet.

2. Where would we like to be? This will be addressed by the listening sessions and subsequent analysis of the findings.
3. What do we need to do, to get to where we would like to be?

It is anticipated that trained facilitators will lead the listening sessions across all communities of the diocese. The scope of that exercise needs to be sufficiently broad yet focused and manageable. Therefore, all sessions should begin with a substantial period of prayer and address a limited number of questions, e.g.:

- What is done well in our current practice?
- What would our parishes and diocese look like if our Catholic faith was being fully lived?
- What needs to be done to make this a reality?

These could be answered following the areas outlined by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

*“The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach.”<sup>8</sup>*

We are basing our listening exercises around the principle of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed in 1987 by two university professors (David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva) and now used world-wide to assist organisations in bringing about positive change.

In the past, most methods of assessing and evaluating a situation were based on a ‘deficiency model’ which predominantly asked questions such as ‘what are the problems?’ or ‘what needs to be fixed?’ Instead, AI focuses on what works already and on what people really care about, and is followed by the collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and has people’s commitment. The overall aim of AI therefore is to identify and develop what already works, rather than trying to fix what does not.

In addition, Cooperrider and Srivastva argue that if you ask the right positive questions, that change actually begins to happen through the conversations themselves. They argue that if conversations are carefully structured and facilitated, that the emphasis will be positive and invigorating for those taking part.

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis: *Evangelii Gaudium* 28

Typically, AI uses four consecutive steps:

1. **Discover** - The identification of what already works well and what is important to people.
2. **Dream** - The envisioning of what could/would/will work well in the future.
3. **Design** - Planning and prioritising how to move forward with which ideas.
4. **Deliver or Deploy** - The implementation of the new ideas.

Our listening exercises will start with Steps 1 and 2, after which we will re-group and, looking at the stories and data we have, will decide how to move forward with Steps 3 and 4.

The years ahead will present many challenges for us in the pastoral ministry and there will be a need for generosity in letting go of some of the models and structures that we have held dear. However, there will also be an opening up of new opportunities for us and the people we seek to serve to come to know Christ more intimately, to serve him in new and courageous ways and to bring others to him. It is important that we engage positively with one another and with our wider community and listen to one another that we may better discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, building on what our forebears have passed on to us, *inspired and sustained by the spirit of truth*<sup>9</sup>, we will foster a true sense of communion with one another and be effective witnesses of the Gospel in our time and place.

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<sup>9</sup> Lumen Gentium 12