

2032 Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth Planning the next ten years



YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES

Parish Consultation

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts

1:8

1. Reflecting on the information we have shared, are there any priorities you feel we have missed from our Ten-Year Mission Plan?

Change is never easy, especially where a good deal is invested in existing relationships and structures. The inevitable sense of loss and grief over the necessary changes needs to be understood and accommodated. Any indication that parishioners are expected simply to ‘get on with it’ and suppress understandable feelings of loss will alienate them just at the point where their support is most needed. It will take time and effort to rebuild the communities that parishioners value so highly. There may therefore need to be some flexibility in the overall timetable sketched out in the Plan, especially for phase I.

There is no reference to what other dioceses are doing. Surely we have things to learn from them? What is the nationwide picture? The challenges we face are not unique to Portsmouth.

Similarly, what can we learn from how other denominations are responding to similar challenges? In some parts of the country, there are Christian Centres shared between Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists etc, where each group has a different time for its own services. This promotes ecumenism (p50) and allows sharing of costs.

How do the hopes for this Plan differ from the outcome of its 2003 predecessor *Go out and bear fruit*?

How will the formal mid-term evaluation envisaged for 2028 (p57 of the draft Plan) be carried out? What exactly will be assessed? It would be useful to know the criteria at the outset.

The business world, and many large organisations, routinely develop business plans with the aims of managing cultural change, retaining existing ‘customers’ and attracting new ones. The diocese should tap into this experience more. A key skill here is learning to see ourselves as others see us, and learning the art of effective communication.

If one of the overall aims of the ten-year Plan is to reverse the downward trends in participation in church life, can we try to deepen our understanding of why the numbers are falling and what we can do locally about it? There is more to it than simply the circumstances of ‘post-modern’ Western culture (p5). Many people experience the need for a spiritual dimension to their lives, but no longer see the Catholic Church as the place where those needs are met.

The word 'evangelisation' triggers anxiety in people who worry that they may be asked to do something outside their comfort zone. Others do not feel they can confidently invite people to engage with a Catholic Church in this country in which they feel little sense of pride. The Plan needs to acknowledge these realities.

2a. What else beyond what is set out in the plan, do we need to do to realise this plan as a Diocese, as parishes, as individuals?

Christ at the Centre			
	As a Diocese	As a Parish	As Individuals
Mass & The Eucharist			
People of God: Clergy			
People of God: Lay Faithful	<p>Our synodal response highlighted a real hunger among parishioners for greater opportunities for lay formation. This synodal material should be revisited, at diocesan, parish and individual levels.</p> <p>We are already working across our pastoral area in preparing candidates for Confirmation.</p> <p>The falling numbers of priests in the Catholic Church makes it especially important that the role of non-ordained women and men in the Church is reconsidered urgently and imaginatively.</p> <p>The Plan (p57) encouragingly refers to establishing, during 2023, 'the foundations needed to support clergy and lay leaders for the next two phases'. How much local flexibility is envisaged in delineating the role of lay leaders?</p>		
People of God: The Young Church	<p>School communities, chaplaincies etc are key parts of the pastoral areas and need to be involved in developing the local plans in phase I, alongside young people and their families.</p> <p>Retaining the interest and commitment of children when they reach teenage is a crucial challenge. It needs fresh thinking and professional input from those who work with this age group. The same is true for school-leavers.</p>		

2b. What else beyond what is set out in the plan, do we need to do to realise this plan as a Diocese, as parishes, as individuals?

Missionary Communities			
	As a Diocese	As a Parish	As Individuals
Church Beyond Walls			
Responding To Laudato Si			

Christian Voice			
Stewardship			
Pastoral Structures	<p>There needs to be a clear statement of the division of responsibility between the new pastoral areas and the central diocese. What decisions can be made locally? Would pastoral areas be able, for example, to choose to reinstate lay-led communion services when Mass is not available, or to maintain services of Reconciliation with individual absolution if they so wish?</p> <p>Responses to the synodal consultation contain a wealth of material on how to be a welcoming community, how to be a more listening community at all levels, and how to work together in a spirit of co-responsibility. This is a rich resource for making church a good place to be, and directly relevant to implementing the Plan. The synodal responses should be made available much more fully than the brief summary currently on the diocesan website.</p>		

3. Is there anything further we should take into account when considering the shape of parish groupings?

The new pastoral areas will need help from the diocese with financial and other data to help develop their local plans. Without those data, it is not currently possible to comment on the detailed make-up of the new pastoral areas. So the implementation process needs enough flexibility to allow for unforeseen issues.

In the larger rural pastoral areas, some groups (the elderly, the infirm, those without access to private transport, etc) will face particular difficulties in accessing events in distant parts of the area, and local plans will need to accommodate their requirements.

The Plan (pp 40, 53) recognises the value of communications technology, which was prominent during the pandemic in how parishioners experienced church. This will remain important, and pastoral areas will benefit from having access to centralised technical support. Professional help with developing effective parish websites should be another high priority, with one or more experienced individuals at the diocesan centre acting as product champions for this work.

The Plan makes a clear case for selling off some church buildings. How will such decisions be made, and who will be involved? A genuinely consultative process (see p57) in each affected area is vital if rationalisation of the estate is not to drive away existing parishioners. Pastoral care of those feeling disaffected by the loss of cherished buildings will be a priority.

There is a risk that disposal of buildings will reduce the local visibility of the Church, and care must be taken to pre-empt this.

The particular circumstances of a parish supplied by a monastic community, in part using buildings owned by that community, need to be allowed for.

4. Is there any more feedback your parish would like to add?

The Plan implicitly invites us all to be agents of change, not victims of change. It rightly and explicitly recognises that 'the shift to a more synodal way of working ... is crucial' (p8). This implies a culture of co-responsibility, for example in deciding how to establish and operate the larger parish groupings now in prospect. Open dialogue between the diocese and the parish, and a willingness by both clergy and laity to listen to each other as equal partners and to share the work of making and implementing decisions, will be central to making it all function effectively (see also p24).

A degree of mutual tolerance will be key. The diocese faces real challenges, but people will approach them from many different angles and adapt to the changes at very different speeds. We will all need to understand this without rushing to judgement.

Pastoral areas with large numbers of churches will face real challenges in trying to form coherent communities out of previously distinct groups. They will need time and abundant doses of goodwill. They will also need the support of their clergy, whose commitment to the endeavour will be vital.

The selection of images in the draft Plan could be better, and should be improved in the final published version of the Plan. The cover picture seems to contradict the message about declining numbers of clergy, though it does highlight the empty pews; clergy are predominantly shown wearing vestments, which is not how most of their time is spent; and the first image focused on a female parishioner does not appear until p6, where she is shown arranging flowers – a valued ministry, certainly, but perhaps not the most apt symbol of how women can contribute to the Church's mission.

What we currently think of as 'a parish' will change profoundly. We see the need for change, but we also recognise that the loss of local traditions rooted in simple and familiar symbols and buildings will be a source of grief for many.

Woolhampton Parish
8 December 2022

If you would like further support or have any questions please contact the team:

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