

COMMENTS ON THE DIOCESAN TEN-YEAR PLAN

A draft of the response to the diocese on its ten-year Plan is given on the following pages, using the pro forma supplied by the diocese for the purpose. We will be sending it in with a cover note, of which a draft is shown below in italics. Please let the parish office have your comments on both response and cover note by the end of Sunday 4 December, so that we can finalise and submit the response by the diocese's deadline of 15 December.

Draft cover note to send to diocese with response

I attach some comments on the draft diocesan ten-year Plan, You will be my witnesses, using the pro forma as requested. I hope they will be helpful to the team finalising the Plan, though I note the very tight schedule allowed for that purpose. The comments have been prepared through a process of face-to-face and online consultation of the members of Woolhampton parish, and is submitted on their behalf.

We hope the diocese will provide feedback on the responses to this consultation when it publishes the final version of the Plan. It should also highlight how that version differs from the draft now under consideration.

Meanwhile, the diocese is to be congratulated on recognising that the declining numbers lead inexorably to difficult decisions having to be made, and on starting down the line towards those decisions.



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. It will take time and effort to build 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?

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) be carried out? What exactly will be assessed? It would be useful to know the criteria at the outset.

If one of the overall aims is to reverse the downward trends in participation, 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.

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 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.</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		School communities, chaplaincies etc are key parts of the pastoral areas and need to be involved in developing the local plans, alongside young people and their families.	

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>		

	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 and relevant resource for making church a good place to be.
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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.

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 implement 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 work (see also p24).

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. 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.

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

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