

DIOCESAN TEN-YEAR MISSION PLAN

Notes on a Parish meeting, 10 November 2022

Twenty-six parishioners met at Douai on 10 November to discuss the draft diocesan ten-year mission plan, *You will be my witnesses*. A summary of the Plan had been pre-circulated and was available at the meeting. A booklet with some key statistics, a summary of priorities, and the proposed new pastoral structure was also distributed at the meeting. The full 68-page Plan was available online [<https://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/our-mission/planning/ten-year-plan/>], but understandably only a few participants had had the opportunity to read it all. References to the full Plan are therefore included below.

The meeting and the Plan were introduced by the Parish Priest, Fr Alban. Peter Collins reported on a recent meeting of the Diocesan Pastoral Council where the Plan had been presented and discussed. Participants then formed into four breakout groups, which were invited to consider various aspects of the Plan. Each group had a facilitator and a note-taker, who reported back on the discussions to the full meeting and later provided a written account of the key points.

There was, necessarily, overlap between the various breakout discussions. In order to avoid repetition, this summary records the key points from those discussions under three broad themes, and incorporates points raised in the discussion at the end of the meeting. Not everyone present agreed with every point made: divergences of opinion can be particularly valuable in this sort of situation.

General

1. The Plan, rightly, has two elements: the mission itself ('putting Christ at the centre'; and 'building missionary communities'), and the new pastoral organisation intended to deliver that mission. Much of the discussion naturally focused on the latter, with all its implications for existing parish structures; but the Plan devotes most space to the former. Both, of course, are important, and inter-related. How will the new structures facilitate the mission better than existing structures?
2. The diocese is to be congratulated on recognising that the declining numbers lead inexorably to difficult decisions having to be made (pp18-20, 41 of the full 68-page Plan), and on starting down the line towards those decisions.
3. The short period between the deadline for replies to this consultation (15 December) and the proposed date of publication of the final Plan (5 January, ie promptly after Christmas) could be taken to imply that the diocese does not expect to make any significant changes to the draft Plan at this stage. Participants expressed some concern about this.

4. We hope the diocese will provide feedback on the responses to the consultation when it publishes the final version of the Plan. It should also highlight how that version differs from the draft now under consideration.
5. Change is never easy, especially where a good deal is invested in existing relationships and structures. The inevitable sense of loss and grief needs to be understood and accommodated. There may need to be some flexibility in the overall timetable sketched out in the Plan.
6. The Plan implicitly provides us all with the opportunity to be agents of change, not victims of change, 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 form and operate the larger parish groupings now in prospect: a willingness by both clergy and laity to listen to each other as equal partners and to get involved in making and implementing decisions (see also p24).
7. The Plan recognises (p40) that responses to the synodal consultation earlier this year explored, among many other matters, the issues of 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. Those responses therefore contain a wealth of material relevant to taking the diocesan ten-year Plan forward, and can be usefully revisited in that light. They carried the hopes, discernment and enthusiasm of many parishioners.
8. The Plan makes no reference to how other dioceses are dealing with the similar challenges that they, too, face. It would be helpful to see more of the national picture. Does our diocese have something to learn from other dioceses? Are dioceses with similar problems working on any cross-diocesan initiatives that should be referenced in this Plan?
9. We wondered what specifically the plan was intended to achieve. For some of the priorities enumerated in the Plan (nurturing young people, working ecumenically with other Christians, etc. etc) we have had similar initiatives in the past. The Plan needs to explain how, this time round, things will be different and be even more transformative. If the aim is to increase numbers, perhaps we should also try to deepen our understanding of why the numbers are falling and what we can do locally about it.
10. How will we judge whether the Plan has been a success? Is it expected to bring people closer to Jesus Christ, to reverse the downward trends, to balance the books, or all of these? The Plan should make this clearer and explain how the proposed actions will achieve the desired outcomes. The Plan does include proposals about how the diocese and the new pastoral areas or 'missionary communities' might be in ten years time (pp 28, 44), but not in a form that will allow ready comparison with how things are at the moment. Something more precise will be needed for the formal mid-term evaluation envisaged for 2028 (p57), and ideally should be available at the outset.

11. The selection of images in the draft Plan could be better. The cover picture, for example, seems to contradict the message about declining numbers of clergy; clergy throughout the Plan 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 an apt symbol of how women can contribute to the Church’s mission.

Mission

1. The Plan (eg pp 8, 34-35) stresses the importance of personal spiritual renewal and deepening as the pre-requisite for reaching out to others and bearing witness. Our synodal response highlighted a real hunger among parishioners for greater opportunities for lay formation. This, too, should be revisited.
2. Personal growth can be supported at many different levels. For example, in our area preparation for Confirmation is already carried out by a team of four catechists from three different churches working with candidates from nearly all the church communities in our new pastoral area.
3. The word ‘evangelisation’ triggers anxiety in many people for differing reasons. For some it is caused by worry that they may be asked to do something out of their comfort zone, for others it is because they 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.
4. What can we learn from how other denominations are going about their missions? Do they face similar challenges to those experienced in the Portsmouth diocese? The Plan (p50) rightly encourages working ecumenically with those who share our values. If we focus more on what unites us than on what separates us, it improves our effectiveness as witnesses.
5. 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. The point here is that we are all Christians and the costs of running such centres are shared.
6. Some participants felt that we are not addressing the real question, i.e. why are so many people leaving the Church? Many people experience the need for a spiritual dimension to their lives, but don't see the Catholic Church as the place where those needs are met.

Forming and operating the new pastoral areas

1. It would be helpful at the outset to have a clear statement of the division of responsibility between the new pastoral areas and the central diocese. What decisions can be made locally? And what has to be managed centrally?
2. The new pastoral areas will need a wide range of financial and other data to help develop their local plans. This will take time to acquire unless it is already available centrally. In the absence of the relevant data, it is not really possible to comment on the detailed make-up of the new pastoral areas. However, phase I of the implementation process may show up better ways of assigning existing parishes to the new pastoral areas. There should be enough flexibility to respond to such issues when they emerge.
3. School communities, chaplaincies etc are key parts of the pastoral areas and need to be involved in developing the local plans (p44).
4. If the intention is to make the pastoral areas a way of spreading scarce resources more expeditiously, how will this work? Are we likely to have Mass only on some Sundays in any given area? Will pastoral areas be able, for example, to reinstate lay-led communion services when Mass is not available, and reintroduce services of Reconciliation with individual absolution? 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?
5. 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.
6. Some of the predominantly rural pastoral areas will be very large. In those circumstances, it will take time and effort to build the communities that parishioners value so highly. Moreover, 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.
7. 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.
8. Technology: Mass services were streamed during the recent pandemic. Learning from this, we need to continue using technology to communicate better with people in rural areas, including pastoral care for individuals, prayer groups, discussion groups, etc. The Plan (pp 40, 53) recognises the value of technology. The pastoral areas would benefit from having access to centralised diocesan support in operating communication technology.

9. 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. 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. As mentioned earlier, pastoral care of those feeling disaffected by the loss of cherished buildings will be a priority.
10. The particular circumstances of a parish supplied by a monastic community, in part using buildings owned by that community, need to be allowed for.
11. Above all, we expect that what we currently think of as 'a parish' will change profoundly. We see the need for change, but we recognise that the loss of local traditions rooted in simple and familiar symbols and buildings will be a source of grief for many.

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