

Reflections on Questions and Points raised at the Northumberland Vicariate Meeting at St Benet Biscop School, Bedlington

6 October 2016

Can we have copies of Amy's 'wheel'?

The wheel was sent to the person asking for it.

The number of parishioners is declining and the population is ageing. Can we not have the celebration of Mass broadcast from the local 'hub' church for those who would like it?

The people and priests of Northumberland have been thinking about the future for quite a few years now – and to some extent have developed their own language to help them to do so. No other deanery is using the word 'hub' to describe a church which may well, in the future, be the central place for worship for a rather large area.

The new challenges will certainly encourage us to explore new ways to help us all deepen our faith and commitment to witnessing to Jesus in our world today. It may well be that we will look in future at such things as the local broadcasting of services in sound and vision. I suspect there will be all sorts of issues around 'licensing' of such means of communication, but there can never be a question that cannot be asked.

There's no doubt that 'being present' is key to worship. Some years ago the US Bishops were asked if a small box of un-consecrated hosts was left near the television during the celebration of a televised mass, would they be consecrated. Answer – NO, because being physically present is essential for true celebration. However, there is no doubt that many people do receive much comfort and support via the broadcasting of religious services.

There is no doubt that in future serious thinking will go on about the need for transport to enable those who have mobility problems to join the community for worship. Communities will have to be careful about 'insurance' when parishioners generously offer to use their cars to bring people to Mass. We will all be faced with new questions. We will have to use our imaginations to ensure that as many people as possible are included.

Without the Sacraments there is no Church and without priests there are no Sacraments. So, ordain married men, abolish celibacy, ordain women and pray that Pope Francis' Commission to look to the ordination of women as deacons is successful.

There are many who say that it is not impossible for any or all of these things to happen in the future. The fact is, however that we live in our time and they are not possible at the present moment.

The ratio of priests to people in our diocese is 1 priest to 362 people. At present, we have 98 active priests and around 35,500 people who worship each weekend. The ratio in parts of Africa is around 1 to 10,000. At the present moment Great Britain is 2nd in the Global League Table of the ratio of priests to people, with Malta/Gozo being League champions.

Bishop Seamus is often noting that we may well still have a surplus of priests and that the real challenge from the Holy Spirit is for us to deepen our awareness of what it means to be disciples of Jesus. Bishop Seamus believes that there will be an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life when we all become more deeply aware of our calling to follow Jesus and that this will happen when we become more committed to prayer in our lives.

Are we restricted to Northumberland Deanery when we explore partnership?

One of the reasons why the diagram on the front of the *Imagine New Ways* document includes the shape of the Diocese is to stimulate our imagination and see the only boundary in the diocese as the diocesan boundary. We can't do much about the North Sea, the Pennines or the Rivers Tweed and Tees. The important thing is that there is as much consultation as possible about which parishes can begin to work more closely together in the future. There is room, and time, to explore all possibilities.

Final decisions will be made by Bishop Seamus – but he will have to hand all the deliberations of every parish involved in discussion between now and (midday) the 27 November.

If there are 5 parishes in relation to one hub church, can the celebration of Mass be rotated so that the same church won't be used every week?

No one yet knows what specific arrangements there will be for the celebration of Mass as the number of priests and people declines. In other parts of Europe there are arrangements in areas where Mass is celebrated in a different church each week. However, I imagine that such arrangements will have been arrived at after much discussion among local people and priests and with the affirmation of the local bishop. In some parts of mainland Europe, in rural France, for example, there are parishes with up to 70 churches served by 2 or 3 priests. Mass is not celebrated in the vast majority of those churches, though some are used by the local community for lay led worship during the week, and occasionally, Mass may be celebrated on the occasion of the Feast Day of the community.

As we seek to develop Partnerships, can we have more ideas about what it means?

Two of the booklets produced in July this year gave some guidance and ideas about how partnerships could help local communities. **Exploring the Way with our Neighbours** and **From Parish to Partnership** were both prepared and distributed to help local communities begin to think about what it all means. The hope is that as communities begin to work more closely together and begin to share their resources, then local communities will be strengthened and inspired to explore how they can witness to Jesus in our world today.

Many Catholics need renewal in the Holy Spirit to bring discipleship alive.

Some people would say that 'Prayer' is the word we use to describe the way the Holy Spirit leads us into the mind-set of Jesus. There are as many ways of praying as there are people who pray and our prayer is a way of coming closer to Jesus who is the body language of God. The more we become people tuned into the presence of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives the closer we will come to living like Jesus and choosing to live as his disciple.

My experience of having helped with the reviewing of some of the Parish Questionnaires has given great insight into how parishes see themselves and can offer models of good practice for others.

Over 50 people from across the Diocese helped with the reviewing and moderating of the 150 questionnaires. We are immensely grateful to them all for the great deal of work they have done and the assistance they gave us. We did pull together all the 'good practice' referred to in the Questionnaires and they are available in the booklet **Food for Thought – Starting to share our ideas across the Diocese**. It is hoped that as we explore what it means to be in partnership with others and as partnerships are established, there will indeed be a more imaginative sharing of good practice throughout the area.

Written Comments and Questions:

Many of the comments were about potential partnerships in the area – some suggestions are a variation on the document available for discussion in parts of Northumberland. The Forward Together in Hope Team are very keen for these discussions to take place locally, we are not in a position to influence how local people see the future relationships between parishes.

In **Our Partnership Proposals** there is room for reflection on any 'alternative' combinations of communities that have been seriously considered. These alternatives will be explored in the process of putting together recommendations for Bishop Seamus and the Board in January.

There is a strong voice expressing the need for **good communication throughout the deanery** – with **reasons being given for every suggestion made**, rather than a statement which looks authoritative but which is really open for discussion.

Could an Administrator across the Partnership not be responsible for communication, 'holding the purse' and building maintenance?

There is bound to be much more exploration in the near future about what exactly lay people can do. It seems that the important thing is to explore how a team of people can begin to accept responsibility for a range of different things. One person doing everything may well be too much and would disable more people being involved in the development of the local church community. The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales produced a very helpful document entitled **The Sign We Give** in 1996, which explores how priests and people can work much more closely together in the service of the Church.

If communities or partnerships are exploring sharing responsibilities with others, then it will be vitally important that care is taken over the preparation of Job Descriptions, Conditions of Service and so on. The Diocesan Human Resources department are more than willing to assist with this preparation.

Jim O'Keefe