

INTO THE FUTURE - 2

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil,
to give you a future and a hope. *Jeremiah 29.11*

Over the past three years, via articles in the LINK and Pastoral Messages, I have been preparing the Diocese and inviting response to the necessary prospect of reorganisation of parishes and the pastoral model of the Diocese. Whilst on Visitation to now over half of the parishes in the Diocese I have been able to address the matter directly in preaching as well as in conversation. Additionally there have been meetings and conversations, and a few written submissions. Since September 2015 when I put out the discussion paper *Into the Future* I have had meetings in each of the Deaneries with the priests and deacons to discuss the implications of the principles and philosophy behind my thoughts for reorganisation and rationalisation of the parish structure of the Diocese, particularly as applied to their own deanery. The time has come for resolutions, decisions, and actions and thus the purpose of this Priests' Council meeting.

To restate the position, there are currently three parishes without a (resident) priest where up until recently there had been; there is one priest pending retirement; three Diocesan priests and two regular (religious) priests continuing in parish appointments though they are beyond the age of retirement; HMP Berwyn in Wrexham due to open this time next year (which will be in size as big as half of the parishes in the Diocese) will require a priest chaplain or at least a priest available for weekly Sunday Mass and sacramental ministry in addition to a deacon, religious or lay chaplain. By 2020 there will be only 10 Diocesan priests below canonical retirement age.

There are six different matters to be considered (Can.515§2), the timeline being somewhat dependent on the rate at which the number of priests changes by decrease or increase:

Firstly there are a number of current arrangements, unions of parishes which to the best of my recollection have not been formally established, rectifying that is called for.

Secondly there are a number of alterations of parishes which need to be dealt with now for imminent implementation.

Thirdly there are a number of alterations which are to be made at some intermediate future date for which I want to be prepared to implement when necessary.

Fourthly there are a number of churches to be closed either within the coming weeks or in the foreseeable future, which again I want to be prepared to implement.

Fifthly there are a number of settings where appraisal for new build or extension of churches has to be considered in order to increase the capacity and reduce the number of churches necessary.

Sixthly there needs to be some realignment and possible cancelation of some Mass times to increase the possibility of fewer priests celebrating Mass in the maximum number of churches.

I restate my intention, viz. that in the greatest number of larger churches Mass is celebrated each Sunday of the year and that this is reasonably possible with between 20 to 25 priests - the projected number there will be in the Diocese by 2020.

Other imponderables such as migration rates, new housing developments, visitor numbers, etc. cannot be accounted for as factors that can dramatically change the size and character of local communities. The Local Development Plans (LDPs) of the Local Authorities across the Diocese have a variance of zero to forty seven percent, with the majority being around ten percent population growth in the current period (2012-22)

Parishes and communities are to be and will of course be encouraged to be evangelising communities, and as they grow I would intend to respond appropriately, similarly if they decline further. The Mass attendance figures for 2015 show a decrease of some 300 to just over 6,000 from that of 2014; if that trend continues there will be little option but to restructure again. In this Jubilee of Mercy we are well reminded by Pope Francis' message in *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 'An evangelising community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 John 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads, and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step to become involved!' (24)

In those churches that I propose to close there will be a final Mass, one of thanksgiving for all who have worshipped there over the years and the witness that has been provided to the local community and the service given to visitors. Whilst the latter will inevitably end there is no reason that the former should not continue as families and

groups of Catholics live and witness to their faith in a new way. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages his readers in the same challenge, 'Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.' (Hebrews 10:23-25 ESV)

The resulting new parishes or pastoral territories will in some cases be large tracts of land with still a very small Catholic population, and a different kind of ministry will be required of priests, deacons and lay people. For this we have no recent experience upon which to draw and therefore considerable goodwill and patience will be required from people and clergy alike. Parishes which have been restructured will have to learn and build a new identity as they double in territorial size from what they were before. Priests will have to think of their parishes as being in two or three centers not just the one they were accustomed to with its smaller satellite villages or towns. Where existing parishes are closed they will cease to exist as will the appointment of the Parish Priest, a new parish will be opened, a new appointment made. It will take a sometime to formally redefine parish boundaries, but this will rarely be controversial. To help create a new identity it will be well worth considering identifying parishes in a new way, ie. the parish of 'S. Martyr in Old Town, Garden Village and New Estate.' In due course parish administration and finances too will need to be amalgamated and resources consolidated.

The working details of parishes, Finance Committees (Can.537), Pastoral Councils (Can.536) is to be established at that level, but they are to be for the parish not for parts thereof; remembering all the while that the faithful have the right and duty to do what they can to spread the message of salvation, and to make known to their pastors their views on matters pertaining to the good of the Church. They are consultative and advisory, but parish priests are reminded that in some matters the law requires that consultation.

I have deliberately not introduced any financial considerations, and of course communities will pay for what they want. At some point the financial viability of maintaining under-used buildings, especially if any capital works are required, will become a major consideration and this should not be forgotten.

† Peter

The Rt Rev'd Peter M. Brignall
Bishop of Wrexham

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