



Working Together To Evangelise Our Diocese

DIOCESAN CENTENARY PRAYER

Almighty and merciful Father,

bestow your grace upon the Diocese of Brentwood

as we celebrate our Centenary Year.

We give thanks for the witness of past generations

and pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit

that we may be ever more faithful to proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

Bless Alan our Bishop, the Clergy, Religious and Faithful of our Diocese,

and graciously grant plentiful vocations to the Priesthood,

the Consecrated Life and the Sacrament of Marriage.

Strengthen us in the communion of faith, hope and charity,

united in prayer with our Holy Father the Pope and the Universal Church.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us.

Saints Erconwald, Cedd and Edmund of Canterbury, pray for us.



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PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS FOR DISCUSSION IN PARISHES

Introduction

In his recent Pastoral Letter on the Centenary and Future of our Diocese, Bishop Alan concluded with these words:

“I entrust the future of the Diocese to the care of Our Lady of Lourdes who because she was “full of grace” knew that nothing is impossible to God.”

Let us move forward together with the Stewards of the Gospel initiative conscious that the future is entrusted to Our Lady of Lourdes who is our diocesan patron.

Nothing is impossible to God but quite often things can be difficult for people. Our future is going to present us with many significant challenges that will test us. We will need to be generous to each other and even make sacrifices for one another; we will need to love each other, rely upon and care for each other. We are blessed to have a clear instruction on this: Love one another as I have loved you.

Pope Francis reminds us that any “proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will prove illusory... The important thing is not to walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.”

The Responses to the Questionnaire are a key part of our communal search and those that have come in have been prayerfully read as we start to move from listening to the “proposal of goals”.

The Holy Father’s words guide us as we work together to seek and implement new ways to live our communal church lives. The search is to be communal: that is entered into jointly with our sisters and brothers and our Bishop. The search is to be adequate: it must be thorough and sufficient so as to find the best possible response to the context that we are in. We will try to make the proposals wise and realistic: together we will work hard, pray hard and entrust our work to Our Lady of Lourdes so as to present what we think is in the best interests of our diocese as a whole.

Please remember that when proposals come later in the year; they will be “proposals”. They will not be final decisions. Our pastoral discernment is ongoing and no decisions have yet been made, nor will they be made until next year.



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Thank You

We have received Responses to the Questionnaires (Responses) from the vast majority of parishes. The few who have not yet sent their Responses back will hopefully do so soon so that we can complete the diocesan picture. In this document I set out some feedback based upon my Preliminary Observations for you to consider in your parish.

The first thing to say is simply: “Thank you”.

Thank you to everyone who has put so much into these Responses. They represent a significant investment of the time and talents of people right across our diocese. They also represent a huge amount of prayer and discernment from many wonderful people across Essex and East London. It is plain to see that the Questionnaire has triggered a great deal of very worthwhile activity. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this process so far.

The information you have provided will prove invaluable as we walk together and work together to evangelise our diocese in the next one hundred years!

Preliminary Observations for Your Consideration

Having analysed the Responses to the Questionnaire these are my Preliminary Observations for you to discuss in your parishes.

There are two connected but separate elements to this Stewards of the Gospel initiative.

The first one is finding ways for us to evangelise better at a local parish level and the second is how we can best renew our structures so that communally, across our diocese we find the best way to evangelise and provide the sacraments and pastoral care for everyone in East London and Essex. They are both important and we should try to make it clear to our parishioners that they can progress independently to a large extent.

- 1) Almost without exception the Stewards of the Gospel initiative has provided parishes with a great way for each parish to look at itself. From this “self-appraisal” exercise each parish has realised a lot about itself. Your Responses should be “living documents” that help you to evangelise in your local parish community. They must not be put on a shelf and lie unread but rather they should form a foundation stone in the building up of your parish community. There are so many good ideas in them that it would be a huge shame not to take them forward. I would suggest that every Parish Pastoral Council now has an agenda for the future. Prioritise your own suggestions for what you can do and then



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revisit what you have done: monitor your own progress towards those things that you have identified as priorities and keep track of that progress in your minutes as you go along. I would suggest that you revisit your own good ideas as frequently as you can. For the majority of things that you have discerned about yourselves, you can do this independently of what is going on at diocesan level. Obviously some things will need to be considered across our diocese but many things can and should be followed through right away. By starting this right now you will begin to create the positive environment that will allow evangelisation to flourish.

- 2) For all that is so positive and informative in the Responses, it is also evident that in relation to the extent of the restructuring that will be needed; the scale of the challenge has been radically underestimated.

This understandable but from now on we all need to be very clear in our understanding of the situation.

There is an overriding sense that most people would prefer their parish to remain as it is. Changing parish communities, even if the change is to a better parish community, is not something that fills people with joy at the moment. Quite understandably the local church that most people experience is their parish and quite naturally the attachment to our parishes is very strong.

However; things cannot remain the same. Change is coming to us all. Our decisions are not about **whether** we should change but rather **how** we will change.

Given all of the information that we have at the moment we must assume that:

by 2025 we will have about 76 priests able to cover 57 locations (one or multiple existing parishes)

and

by 2035 the figure will be about 52 priests covering 33 locations. By 2035 we will have about one half of the number of priests that we now have and they will be living in fewer than half of the locations they do now.

The reason why there is a difference between the number of priests and the number of locations that can be covered is complicated but a large part of it is due to the fact that priests who are part of Religious Orders live “in community” in one place. These priests offer themselves in service to our diocese. We are very grateful for that and we must always respect their individual rules and charisms.



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Therefore, we are all planning for a future that will contain significantly fewer priests in even fewer locations. That will impact on every parish community in our diocese. We all need to work together generously to discern how our diocese will look in the future. So the challenge we have before us is how to structure ourselves in such a way as to achieve three things:

- evangelise,
- provide sacraments and pastoral care AND
- foster more vocations and grow our church and bring more people to God.

This is not simply an exercise in managing how to spread fewer clergy ever more thinly because that exercise will not provide a flourishing environment for our Church to grow in the future.

Instead we need to think creatively about how to do things differently with the very many resources we have. Our proposals should focus not just on how we manage the present but also how we will grow in the future. We must be understanding of the situation and look forward confidently in hope, knowing that the Lord is with us in all we do and will bless our efforts in unforeseen ways.

Our diocese is unusual because while most dioceses are facing the prospect of fewer priests ministering to fewer parishioners; that is not the case for us at the moment. Our parishioner numbers are currently holding steady and even increasing slightly. We have a lot of people able to pray for the future of our diocese and to work in His vineyard. However, our demographics are changing. We have an ageing church population but far longer life expectancy than in the past. We have a much more diverse ethnicity than in the past and we have quite a lot of mobility around our diocese as the population in specific areas changes in its makeup. We have a lot of housing development going on and that should bring in more Catholic families. We also have far more technological resources than past generations and transport links (while tiresome at times) are more comprehensive than in the past.

This also creates an additional challenge to us. Whereas in some dioceses fewer priests are shepherds to smaller flocks that is not the case for us. Our priests, though fewer in number will be shepherds to bigger flocks in the short/medium term. How do we provide shepherds for the flock and ensure that we properly care for those shepherds?

We need to find a way to use all of our resources in a combined way that will both serve our current needs and prepare us for growth in the future. Pope Francis often talks about us being an attractive church. Being attractive is a part of evangelisation. How we live our communal church lives is evangelisation of itself. Attracting people to come to



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our Father through our Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church will (among many other obvious benefits) increase the number of people who might potentially hear the call to a priestly vocation. We plan with the prayer that more people will hear God's call to become priests and so that more priests will be shepherding to even bigger flocks.

One fairly common comment is that it is better to have travelling priests than travelling communities. Is it reasonable to expect this or does it inherently risk the health and wellbeing of our priests? Remember that the average age of our priests will be going up during this timescale.

Arising out of your Responses to the Questionnaire are four very clear specific issues for us all to consider as priorities:

- a) Young People
- b) Adult Formation
- c) Lay Training
- d) Succession Planning

In each of these four areas rest assured that you are not alone in your concerns.

- a) People are unsure how best to keep our young people in the faith but everyone recognises that it is essential for us to do as much as we can in this regard. Quite a few parishes mention the possibility of a Youth Worker while others have considered local initiatives delivered by parishioners and others think that simply integrating young people into parish life more and giving them roles and responsibilities is the way forward. Your thoughts on how your parish feels about this will be helpful.
- b) There is an almost universal desire for us to be better informed about our faith and practice. Catechesis is thought to be not good enough. We need better formation to enable us all to better pass on our faith and in order to be able to defend our faith with confidence in the public arena. How do you think this will be best achieved in the future? There are on line and video based programmes that can be delivered in parishes, there is the possibility of training either locally or centrally or you may prefer discussion groups.
- c) Similarly, there is a strong feeling that we need to have training for lay people. Most people think that if lay people are to properly work alongside our clergy and fellow parishioners in the new reality of fewer priests, then we need to have more training of lay people. It should also be noted that our priests may also



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require help in this regard as new ways of running a parish evolve. We need to set some priorities for the areas where training is thought necessary and then how best that training can be given. It may be best done locally or in clusters or it may be best done centrally. It will almost certainly be delivered differently for different areas of practice. Your thoughts on specific areas where training is needed and how you would like it to be delivered will be helpful.

- d) Succession Planning is finding a way in your parish to ensure that when those people who are currently doing things stop for whatever reason, that there is at least one new person ready, willing and able to take over. A lot of good work and momentum can be lost in a parish if things stop and no one else steps up to take on the role. Many Responses recognise that older people currently have responsibility and they worry about who will take over in future. May I suggest that one of the best things you and your parishes can do in the immediate future is to begin to think about practical ways to ensure the succession of roles. There is no right and wrong way to do this. In one place it may involve a committee or group of people working together so that no one person has to take overall responsibility, in another it might involve a “buddy” system where one person does things and a new person is involved and knows what is going on so that they can step up in due course and in another it may be that an older person works with a younger “apprentice” so that in time the apprentice is ready to take over while the older person currently doing the work steps back and helps in the background. Now is the time to decide how best to ensure succession in your parish.

Given that these four topics are so widely mentioned and so clearly important to the future shape of our diocese I would ask all parishes to look at them again and feedback your ideas through your Steward of the Gospel.

I have reflected that each of these topics may well have been anticipated even before the arrival of the Responses on my desk. They are not specific to our Diocese and on revisiting the words of the Holy Father in *Evangelii Gaudium* you can find them all referred to. I would encourage everyone to read the whole document and it is available on line at

https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

These three extracts from *Evangelii Gaudium* reflect the concerns raised by your Responses:



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105. ... Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures. As adults, we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand. For the same reason, our efforts in the field of education do not produce the results expected. The rise and growth of associations and movements mostly made up of young people can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, who blazes new trails to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality and a more real sense of belonging. There remains a need, however, to ensure that these associations actively participate in the Church's overall pastoral efforts.

160. The Lord's missionary mandate includes a call to growth in faith: "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*Mt 28:20*). Hence it is clear that the first proclamation also calls for ongoing formation and maturation. Evangelization aims at a process of growth which entails taking seriously each person and God's plan for his or her life. All of us need to grow in Christ. Evangelization should stimulate a desire for this growth, so that each of us can say wholeheartedly: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal 2:20*).

102. Lay people are...the vast majority of the people of God.... We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith. At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making. Even if many are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society. The formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge.

We are not alone in our challenges but we are the ones challenged to find a way forward in our Diocese, and remember that challenges exist to be overcome!

Once you have discussed these issues with your parishes can you please send me one coordinated response for your parish. These will be helpful in formulating the proposal that will follow in the autumn. Your response may be a reflection or a practical suggestion for what we might do. It does not need to be a long document and bullet points are fine.

Finally, may I thank all of the Stewards of the Gospel for their valuable contribution to our communal church life both locally in your parishes and at a wider diocesan level.

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Stewards of the Gospel Prayer

**Merciful Father, author of creation,
your Spirit enriches our world.
Through your Son, who shares our humanity,
you have called us to participate in your divine creativity
and to build the kingdom of God here on earth.
Form us, we pray, as one community
under the leadership of our Bishop Alan,
to serve the people of our Diocese of Brentwood.**

**Inspire us to discover new ways
to spread the joy of the Gospel.
Open our eyes to see Christ in others,
especially the poor, the sick and the marginalised.
Empower us to be the hands and feet of Christ
in our parishes and communities.
Help us to welcome all into His embrace.**

**Guide us in our discernment.
Give wisdom to our Stewards of the Gospel
who will help us in each parish
to see new paths of possibility:
for a spirit of mission that invigorates our every effort;
and for the strength to be unafraid of what is new.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.**