

# 'Unfolding God's Plan'

## The Diocesan Vision

### *Session 3.*

#### *The 'Parish' of the future: fit for purpose*

In Session 1, we were introduced to the Archdiocesan Vision Statement.

**Our Vision is to be a Catholic diocese which is faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly in vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour.**

This 'Mission Statement' was presented as a starting point for our prayer, reflection and future planning. The session then explored some of the underlying concepts and terminology:

- **the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ** – discovering our mission in terms of purpose and call.
- **missionary discipleship** - through our baptism we are all called, or mandated, to be disciples, not just to be followers in a passive sense but in an active way of commitment . . .
- . . . and **service** to God and our neighbour.
- **disciples who work together co-responsibly.** Co-responsibility recognises that each of us has a mission which is complementary, not in competition.

In Session 2, the emphasis was on the invitation by Archbishop Bernard in his pastoral letter on Laetare Sunday: "*I am asking you to consider where and how our diocesan priorities of evangelisation, formation, liturgy and worship and social outreach are already flourishing. I am also asking you to notice where they are not so evident and to see how parishes can work together, in one or more of these areas, to strengthen the Church's local mission.*"

As context for the deliberation of the 4 themes the session explored the traditional pattern of Christian initiation, the current programme of RCIA and discussed issues

around the appropriateness of these models for the majority of Catholics who are not initiated as adults, but who are baptised as infants.

The remainder of the session followed a similar pattern, in that:

- each of the four themes was 'defined' [in relation to the '6 Vision Sessions' undergone by the clergy],
- exploration of the theme,
- outlining the work of the appropriate diocesan sub-group
- an activity or reflection based on each theme in relation to how it is 'flourishing' or otherwise, in the parish, and what further may be done.

**Evangelisation:** "Encouraging others to know God's love for them by inviting them to church, to pray and to encounter Christ, and to groups where they can learn about Him. "

Pope John Paul II spoke of the need for a 'New Evangelisation'. Pope Francis outlines three focuses for evangelization ...

- ❖ the *care* of those already committed,
- ❖ *engagement* with those who are lapsed,
- ❖ *outreach* to those who do not believe.

This has significant implications for the growth, development and sustainability of our parishes and the Church, particularly the Western Church.

The stark reality is that:

In the UK, between 2001 and 2021, there was a 25% decrease in people who identify as Christian, let alone practise their faith.

The number of people identifying as Christians dropped by 5.5 million in the past decade.

This is reflected in the statistics for our own parishes, our own archdiocese.

**Formation:** "Growing leaders in our churches, schools and parish communities, by providing both spiritual and pastoral formation and support, to help prepare us for new roles and by helping us to understand more about our faith in order to deepen our personal relationship with God."

The session explored the four dimensions of 'formation': Spiritual, Human, Intellectual and Apostolic.

**Liturgy and Worship:** "Invigorating and deepening our worship and sacramental celebrations so that we share in, and radiate, the divine life of God and encouraging others to join us in prayer to our Heavenly Father."

The sacraments form an effective part of the work of Evangelisation and are a 'gateway' into experiencing the Church for 'outsiders'.

The liturgy is the source and summit of the Christian life.

The fact that Jesus Christ is present in the liturgy and the sacraments, supremely in the Holy Eucharist, means that an encounter with the liturgy is an encounter with Christ himself.

**Social Outreach:** "Building up the common good through our charitable outreach in the giving of our time, our resources and our love to those who need it most and inviting others to join us in our charitable work. "

The Archdiocese has sub-groups working on providing resources and support in relation to these four areas of priority.

In Session 3 the emphasis was on an exploration of what we understand by 'parish' and how our understanding of this will have to evolve in response to the current challenges facing the Archdiocese and how we can be more impactful in "ensuring that parishes are 'fit for the future' in all senses . . . in our mission serve God and grow our Church" [*Archdiocesan Invitation: 'Behold, I am making all things new'*].

A number of factors are at play in defining the nature of 'Parish' and it is the interaction of these factors that give each parish its distinctive feel.

The factors include, for example:

- physical size of the parish,
- location in relation to other parishes,
- socio-economic characteristics
- population characteristics
- bricks and mortar resources
- financial resources
- human resources
- Catholic organisations, sodalities and other groups within the parish
- liturgy and sacramental life
- ethos and culture

In considering the culture of a parish we are reminded of the exhortation in St. Paul's letter to the Christian community in Philippi to live lives in harmony, humility and imitation of Christ:

*There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self effacing.*

*Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of their own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead.*

*In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus.      Philippians 2:1-5*

Extracts were quoted from appendix 5a of the 'Diocesan Vision – Unfolding God's Plan, *How your Culture Eats your Strategy for Breakfast* By Hannah Vaughan-Spruce ([www.transformedinchrist.com](http://www.transformedinchrist.com)).

Discussion ensued regarding how we “ensure a positive culture in our parishes so that they develop as vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour.”

The group was then involved in an exercise to explore the following with regard to the ‘health’ of our parishes:

- What are we doing well?
- What are we NOT doing well?
- What are we not doing that we should be doing?

In setting the context for the final part of the session, a short piece from Pope Francis was quoted in which he spoke about the need for Catholics to take risks as they reach out to others:

*This is God’s call to every Christian: to step out, to take the risk of doing something new and creative in order to spread the Gospel.*

*Whether it is in a large and well-known project, or in the quiet circumstances of everyday life and work, each one of us is called to share our faith and take part in the New Evangelisation.*

The journey being undertaken within this Archdiocese is being replicated across the Church. In the Archdiocese of Glasgow, for example, Archbishop Nolan introduced this journey by saying:

*“It’s time to face facts. Time to work together. Time to plan for a new and better future ... “*

In moving forward, the Archdiocese is involved in two intertwined enterprises which reflect the reality of the Church’s current situation: Mission and Maintenance.

Thus we need to be clear on the following:

- Is it about Church or church?
- Is it about Renewal or rationalisation?

. . . or all of the above? . . . and plan accordingly.

Finally, ‘*Quo Vadis?*’, ‘Where are you going?’

The apocryphal words about the encounter between Christ and St. Peter as he was fleeing from the persecution in Rome.

Echoing the words to St. Peter, it is important to know how we can fulfil our ‘*mission*’ and support the Archdiocese co-responsibly to create ‘*vibrant and joyful communities of faith*’ as further planning and decision-making unfold.

