



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

PARISH VISITATION

DEANERY OF NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE

July 2023:
The Report for the Closing Meeting.

October 2022 – July 2023
and ongoing.

Introduction

I am very much aware that there is one person missing from our gathering this evening who should be here, Bishop Stephen Wright, our former Area Bishop. The Report and Recommendations that follow owe much to Bishop Stephen's ministry and his engagement with the clergy and people of the Deanery. For this we are very grateful, and he is very much in our prayers as tomorrow he is installed as the Fifteenth Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle.

The aim of the Deanery Visitation was twofold:

- To affirm and encourage the good work that has already begun across the Deanery.
- To broaden the implementation of the Diocesan vision. That Vision being that:

*We are called 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 Vision focuses on four main areas: Evangelisation, Formation, Liturgy and Worship and Social Outreach. During the Visitation process these themes were the focus for each individual parish and Deanery wide. In that process we are very much aware that the future of the Church and its mission is dependent upon the engagement of families and young people. It is within the family context that young people discover the universal call to holiness, and it is the family, especially parents, as the Rite of Baptism reminds us, are 'the first and best of teachers in the ways of faith'. Families are supported in this by Catholic Schools and the Diocesan Youth Services. This model of working together collaboratively and co-responsibly is at the heart of the implementation of the Diocesan Vision.

We have been fortunate that our Deanery Visitation has taken place at the same time as the Universal Church has been preparing for the Synod on Synodality. We are all beginning to learn what it means to be a Synodal Church, of following the Synodal pathway, of prayerful listening to one another but always with an openness to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. That process of praying, listening and discerning under the guidance of the Spirit, has been at the heart of the Deanery Visitation but very much with the understanding that this is ongoing. The active participation and involvement of both clergy and laity co-responsibly discerning the future direction of our parish communities and Deanery as part of the local Church of our diocese, in communion with our Archbishop, will be a continuing process.

The Visitation

North Staffordshire Deanery currently comprises 18 active priests serving 27 parishes with 28 churches and celebrating 43 Sunday Masses. The total church capacity of the 43 Masses is over 10,000 people. At present around 3500 people attend Sunday Mass in the Deanery. All Parish communities and churches were formally visited between November 2022 and March

2023, by either Archbishop Bernard or Bishop Stephen. During the Parish Visitations, parish meetings took place which revealed common themes.

Most of what follows is based upon the observations, reflection and recommendations of Bishop Stephen.

Common Themes

- **Agreement with the Diocesan Vision**

There was agreement with the Diocesan Vision as set forward by Archbishop Bernard. That we are all called to be vibrant, joyful communities inspired by the love of the Lord, called to be missionary disciples. There was agreement that Evangelisation, Formation, Liturgy and Worship and Social Outreach help form our priorities for parish and deanery life in the future.

Parishioners were often unsure what formation meant. Especially adult formation. This points to our cultural inheritance in the Church in England and Wales. When explained, it was seen as a priority and in keeping with the Synodal Pathway responses there was a hunger for catechesis and formation in prayer and spirituality.

- **Acceptance that the Status Quo is Unsustainable.**

On all visitations there was acceptance that the future provision of Sunday Masses will have to change. At times there was anxiety expressed about what that would mean in practice and an understandable defensiveness about a particular Church or Mass time. There were rare comments about parish rivalries or an unwillingness (as opposed to being unable) to travel to another parish for Mass. Overall, though there was an acceptance that change is inevitable and needs to be worked through rather than fought. If closure of churches were to take place, this will be distressing to all and must follow proper canonical procedures and approached with pastoral support.

- **Gratitude for the work of Catholic Schools and a call for closer working relationships with Parishes**

Many school leaders generously gave of their time during the Visitations, even during half terms. Catholic schools were often the very first thing mentioned at parish meetings. Most comments from clergy and lay people alike were very positive about Catholic schools. There were a small number of comments from lay people more than clergy that were not so complimentary. When those comments were explored there seemed to be some confusion about what the role of a catholic school is. Yes, it is there to support families and parishes in the practice of the faith. It is not correct though to hold a school to account if children and more importantly their parents do not go to Mass. The responsibility for the upbringing of Catholic children rests primarily with their parents and with the parish clergy. The school assists them.

There are very good relationships between primary schools and parishes across the deanery. Several parishes have specific school led Sunday liturgies, generally once a month, which are well received, with attendances at Mass rising. In other parishes, post COVID, clergy and

senior school leaders have been reflecting on how the school can better assist parish liturgy and worship at Sunday Mass.

Both schools and parishes should be reflecting on how they can share their resources and creativity in serving the Catholic communities by implementing the diocesan vision. Here there is untapped potential across the Deanery.

- **Priority about attracting young families and children to Mass. Role of the Youth Services**

Every visitation had the same questions raised, “how do we attract the young families with children?” “What are we doing about the youth?” “Where are the young?” Attracting young families and children was a high priority mentioned in every parish community. As such it is worthy of ongoing Deanery reflection. It was noticeable that concrete proposals in response were not so common.

There are perhaps some basic responses to begin with. It was noticeable that parishes that offered children’s liturgy attracted more young families than those parishes where there was no children’s liturgy. Similarly, there were more young families where there were active servers and volunteers to train them.

There was a general unawareness about the Diocesan Youth Service, The Kenelm Youth Trust. That is a cause for reflection for both parishes and KYT. KYT is presently supporting parishes and aspiring youth leaders with its Bethsaida course to kick start what can be offered in parishes. That was not well known or even known across parishes.

There are parish initiatives already taking place. Both Trent Vale and Clayton have started or re-started opportunities for young people to pray and socialise. All parishes need not create their own opportunities from scratch. Many parishes do not have the capacity to do so.

There are opportunities to work together and share human and material resources. Listening to parishioners in this area of ministry is a high priority.

- **Deanery Area Pastoral Council and Deanery Wide Communications**

North Staffordshire is the only Deanery with a Deanery wide Pastoral Council. Most parishes had identified parishioners who attend the Council. Comments about the Council were consistent across the parishes. The Council was welcomed as a means of sharing what was happening in parishes, though its existence and purpose could be better shared and explained in parishes.

Similar comments were made about the need to improve communications and advertising of events and liturgies across the parishes in the Deanery. A new, revitalised, easily accessible Deanery website is recommended.

- **Poor Public Transport**

This is a significant practical issue, predominately for the elderly and was consistently mentioned in parishes. The provision of public transport on Sundays across the deanery is terrible, even in the urban areas. This is a pastoral issue if we are moving towards fewer Masses in fewer churches. Looking at bus routes it appears that getting to Hanley, Newcastle,

Longton, Tunstall and to a lesser degree Goldenhill on Saturdays were the more realistic options for those using buses. This needs to be borne in mind regarding the provision of Sunday Mass times and locations.

Recommendations

The following are the Recommendations put forward by Bishop Stephen. Before he left the Diocese, he had chance to share them with the clergy of the Deanery and to discuss them, now is the time for this to be shared with all of you.

At their heart these Recommendations are attempting to see how we can best utilise all the resources of the Deanery, both in terms of personnel and buildings. We cannot avoid the fact that there is currently and into the foreseeable future, a reduction in clergy numbers, both in terms of age-profile and of recruitment. But this should not make us disheartened, this is a period of opportunity for clergy and laity together, to best utilise all that we have, and perhaps have yet to discover, how we all can enhance the Gospel message to best effect. None of these recommendations are set in stone, they will need further reflection and discussion. Nonetheless in a spirit of cooperation and with a real sense of co-responsibility hard and difficult decisions will have to be made.

The Formation of Parish Clusters

While each parish, seeks to implement the Diocesan Vision, we do not do this alone. In fact, the requirement to work ever closely together, is one shared by the clergy of the Deanery. This will require the formation of clusters of parishes which will enhance the work of Evangelisation, Formation, Liturgy and Worship and Social Outreach. Parishes exist for mission to others, not for themselves. Parishes are called to work together to serve the Lord and society. Parishes will have to be creative in how they serve the Lord and society, today and in the future.

It is realistic to expect a priest to celebrate three Masses over the weekend. Four Masses are possible, however that is not ideal for the priest's welfare, and should not be planned. Mass times should ideally be staggered so that clergy can cover for one another. It is recognised that this cannot always be achieved and finding cover will become more challenging. It will be more common in the future that there will not be the regular Mass on a given Saturday/Sunday, as there is no priest. People will have to travel to another church for that weekend. It is evident from the visits that people are prepared to do so.

To facilitate this the following are suggested informal clusters of parishes, some of which already exist, where both clergy and people collaborate and share resources, such as sacramental preparation and social outreach.

- Our Lady & St Benedict, Abbey Hulton; St Martin & St George, Birches Head; St Mary's, Norton. The recommendation is that this pastoral area will eventually become one parish, with St Martin & St George as the parish church.

- St Giles, Cheadle; St Thomas of Canterbury, Tean; St John the Baptist, Alton. The recommendation is that this pastoral area will eventually become one parish, with St Giles as the parish church.
- Our Lady & St Werburg, Clayton; St John the Baptist, Ashley; St Teresa, Trent Vale. The recommendation is that this pastoral area will eventually become one parish, the parish church to be decided.
- English Martyrs, Biddulph, St Joseph, Goldenhill; St John the Evangelist, Kidsgrove. The recommendation is that the four parishes become one, with St Joseph, Goldenhill as the parish church.
- St Augustine, Meir; St Filumena, Caverswall; St Mary, Cresswell. For the present to remain as they are, under the care of the Pauline Fathers.
- Holy Trinity, Newcastle; Sacred Heart, Silverdale; St Wulstan, Wolstanton; St John, Chesterton. The recommendation is that the merger of Newcastle and Silverdale as one parish be completed and that Wolstanton and Chesterton also be merged as one parish. Eventually this pastoral area will itself become one parish, with Holy Trinity as the parish church.
- St Mary, Leek. Because of geographical isolation Leek is hard to cluster. However, the recommendation is that Sunday Masses across the Staffordshire Moorlands be altered to allow ease of supply.
- St Gregory, Longton; St Maria Goretti, Bentilee. The recommendation is that the two parishes become one, with St Gregory's as the parish church.

New Clusters

- Sacred Heart, Hanley; Our Lady and St Peter in Chains, Stoke and Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, Fenton. This cluster will be in the care of the Spiritan Fathers, who will also take up responsibility for Chaplaincy at the Royal Stoke Hospital.
- Sacred Heart, Tunstall, St Joseph, Burslem. Although this cluster already exists, this will now be in the care of the Syro-Malabar Eparchy but English Roman Rite Masses will continue to be celebrated.

These new clusters will come into existence over the next few months.

Closure of Churches

We now come to the most difficult and sensitive of the recommendations – the closure of churches. People will always have an emotional attachment to their parish church. In many cases they and generations of their families will have celebrated the most significant moments of their lives in these buildings. It is hard for us to let go of places that have meant so much to us. Nonetheless, difficult decisions need to be made. After much reflection and discussion with the Deanery clergy, the recommendation is that the following churches be closed.

- St John the Evangelist, Kidsgrove
- St Patrick, Packmoor

These closures will follow all canonical procedures and the pastoral care of the people of these communities will continue be met by the Parish Priest of Goldenhill.

A further recommendation is that the celebration of Sunday Mass in English at Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, Fenton cease. The pastoral care of the Catholic community in Fenton will be met by the Spiritan Fathers based in Hanley. Funerals and other occasional liturgies in the church could still be celebrated and any use by the primary school could continue.

Conclusion

Some of the recommendations may have come as a shock to many of you but none have been made lightly. I say again that they are not written in stone and prayerful discernment of both clergy and laity needs to be ongoing.

We are very much aware that the Catholic communities of North Staffordshire have a long and a proud history, and it is in trying to ensure the future of the Church and its mission in this area that these recommendations have been made. The Diocesan Vision reminds us that we need to be, *'vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour*. But these need also to be sustainable communities that make the best use of all the God-given gifts and resources that we have.

Bishop Stephen did want me to pass on to you his thanks for the welcome and openness he received on the parish visitations. In particular, he wanted to express his heartfelt and genuine thanks to the clergy and to the witness that they give.

Change is difficult but it is also an opportunity, an opportunity for growth and revitalisation, of discovering new ways of being Church and following Jesus Christ. Christ is the Rock, He is the centre of our lives, while all around may change, His love and His call in our lives never does. May our prayerful and mature commitment to Him and His Church truly bring others to discover the joy of the Gospel!

May Mary Immaculate and St Chad, the patrons of our diocese and Bl Thomas Maxfield, the priest-martyr of our Deanery, pray for us!