

Response to the 'Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese' document

The Our Lady of Compassion Catholic Church, Saffron Walden, strives to be a mission church. The Catholic community of Saffron Walden entered enthusiastically into the 'Stewards' of the Gospel process – believing in the truths of *Evangelii Gaudium*, and our need to work towards its vision.

We believe that the work in the renewal section of the 'Working Together to Evangelise our Diocese' is of the utmost importance, and will help us drive the diocese into the 21st century in a spirit of optimism and hope.

Renewal

The proposed work in the renewal section already encompasses much that we are already doing. Could we do more? Of course we could, and with the help of the support and training offered as part of the renewal programme we hope to do so.

The Catholic community in Saffron Walden centres not only on the church, but also St. Thomas More Catholic School. The church provides not only financial assistance but a committed team of governors and a close partnership. The presence of the school and the town demographics is reflected in that of our congregations. Our First Communion programme is one in which we take considerable pride. Our small but dedicated team of catechists would benefit from the proposed formation programme mentioned in step 5 in the renewal section and would hopefully have their numbers added to. Our committed governors team would benefit from the assistance suggested in step 3 (as many of us benefited from the outstanding support provided by Msgr. George Stokes, the very much missed Diocesan Director of Education, and Sister Brenda previously). The governors' team were judged to have outstanding knowledge of the school and governance at the last inspection – with this suggested programme we would be keen to improve on this vital work.

Saffron Walden's Catholic community has wide representation from many nationalities, ages and abilities. Our superb SVP conference has, for many years, helped to include the older and less able. Our altar servers team, youth choir and music ministry has done amazing work to include the young. We are currently working with the BCYS to provide a youth group to further strengthen the links between the young and our community.

We have a large team of volunteers – some 40 or 50 people – all providing help of various kinds, according to their means and abilities. We very much believe in a partnership between priests and people, and think that step 7 and step 10 would assist greatly in this. There are many of our people who are keen to assist in the work of the church. In order for this to be a meaningful partnership we would like to explore the possibility of a greater sharing of decision making. We would also like to look at having certain roles as paid roles – particularly administration – in order to remove this considerable burden from the priest and have the parish run in a regulated, accountable and professional manner.

Prayer has been, and remains, the very core of this work. Our Sunday evening prayer, prayer request box and greater communication on prayer via social media are the beginning of this work – but we strive to grow in this area and welcome the proposed support.

Restructuring

The restructuring section clearly offers more challenge to rural communities. We are keen that this process is not seen as decline. Saffron Walden is a fast growing town, even without our planned evangelisation programme we would expect our numbers to grow because of the growing numbers in the town. Our community and welcoming teams have been effective in retaining those who have come our way, but we have lost others (particularly the young) as they move away due to extortionate house prices. Our attendance fluctuates, but does not show decline. We have had to extend the church at least twice before – the last time in 2004/5 and expect to have to do this again at some stage due to growth.

The physical position of the North Essex cluster of churches lends itself to some fairly obvious partnerships. We are keen to discuss and explore how we can make the best use of the available resources in our area, within some fairly generous guidelines.

Each church is its own community. Loss of any of them would be a severe disruption to that community and would, without question, lose parishioners. To this end a model where a travelling priest provides less frequent Mass at a number of churches would seem to be the best solution. It has advantages in:

- Less likely to be seen as decline
- Keep communities together
- Better for environment (less people travelling)

But each individual Mass time tends to be an individual community. The travelling priest model would mean fewer Masses. The Saffron Walden church regularly has weekend attendance of 350 and more – with a capacity of 150, and three weekend Masses at present, this means that the loss of a Mass would mean that there was no longer room for our regular worshippers. This, again, would mean a loss of people. In addition, buildings are a huge drain on resources: both for upkeep and administration. Larger churches in a partnership are likely to have their resources sucked into the maintenance of smaller buildings. We feel that a clear decision needs to be taken as to whether this is the best use of resources.

We are aware that it will not be possible to tell people where to go to church as part of this process – people will make that decision for themselves. If attending a Catholic church within the diocese becomes too inconvenient then people will attend elsewhere – or not at all. The proximity of Cambridge with seven weekend Masses should be noted, indeed the parish of Saffron Walden is surrounded by the counties of Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Suffolk. With the possible loss of Masses there is a great danger that some of the congregation will migrate to parishes outside of our diocese. Loss of those people and their contribution may start to make the position of even some of the larger churches non-viable, and that would be a disaster.

The Catholic community of Saffron Walden believes, for the reasons outlined, that a hub church would be the only viable medium term solution. Saffron Walden would be in a good position to offer this hub in the medium term:

- We have a larger building with some spare capacity
- Our building is well maintained – and with significant recent investment
- The church building has a covenant that the building can only be used as a Catholic church – making disposal awkward
- Well maintained presbytery on site
- Church hall on site

- A high contributing parish
- Enough available free parking, within a short walk, for all weekend attenders – and more limited on street parking right next to the church
- Drop off space for the less able

In the longer term the Saffron Walden church may not be big enough. At this stage it may be necessary to consider the construction of a larger, purpose built church with capacity for all.

Our priority remains the provision of available Masses and a hub for the Catholic faith for as many people as possible – both those currently attending and beyond. We offer this proposed response because we believe that it best embodies this priority. We do however, remain open to other ideas and suggestions – and also remain very much a part of this process.

Summary:

Short term: Renewal and evangelisation

Medium term: use of Saffron Walden as a hub church, with renewal and evangelisation

Long term: if needed the construction of a larger church, with renewal and evangelisation.