

Working Together To Evangelise Our Diocese



Dear Steward,

Bishop Alan and his Diocesan Strategic Planning Group have read and discussed the feedback from each parish. This is the letter referred to in Bishop Alan's letter and I am writing it on behalf of the Diocesan Strategic Planning Group following that process. The intention is that you should share it and discuss it with your parish priest before sharing the content with your fellow parishioners as you deem appropriate for your parish. For our part we will be making the first part of this letter available on the Diocesan Website from June 15th.

The main part of the letter tackles some issues that are repeated by several parishes and the last part covers the issues that seem relevant to your particular parish. This is one step in our discernment process and as Bishop Alan said in his recent video message, we are in a good discernment process where we are listening to each other, praying together and working together. We remain confident that as people of goodwill do these things together we can find the appropriate response to God's love for us in our second century as a diocese.

My starting point must be to say "Thank You". I am very grateful to everyone who has participated so far. The vast majority of responses have been very positive, thoughtful, prayerful, constructive and encouraging. One parish echoed the views of many when it wrote "I'm truly amazed how much has been achieved so far". So are we and it is our prayer that we can all build on that brilliant start as we work together.

Turning firstly to the issues that occur repeatedly I make the following observations.

A) **ENTHUSIASM AND JOY**

The clear enthusiasm and joy for the Renewal aspects of this work is incredibly heartening. So many parishes have already set about the task of evangelising our diocese and that is really wonderful. Please continue this work.

Restructuring may provide us with a sound base to do this work but it is through this Renewal that together we will support one another and bring others to Christ. It is through this work and prayer that we see improvements in our response to God's love for us; more vocations, more young people coming to Christ and more evangelisation in our diocese.

Parishes right across our diocese are picking up new initiatives and putting them into practice through prayer. Bible study groups, evangelisation cells, Alpha courses, outreach activities, caritas initiatives, prayer groups, people asking questions and exploring new ideas, social activity both in and across parish boundaries bringing people closer together, groups of people working together across parish and deanery boundaries to work and pray together.

All around us people are responding to the need for renewal in amazing ways and looking back over the last year or so it is clear that we have already achieved a great deal. As a Church community we are becoming more active, more dynamic and more attractive. As we continue to build on this brilliant start we will find ever more ways of doing even more because more people will want to be involved. It will move beyond the people who have always been involved to include many new people with ideas to renew our church.

B) RE-IMAGINING HOW WE WORK TOGETHER

Many of you have begun the task of re-imagining how priests and people can work together in the future. This recognises the need to look after one another as well as working for the Kingdom. People have started to explore how certain tasks can be done by people other than priests and although this will take time to roll out, the work has already begun and there are many positive signs that we can all build on in the future. None of this will happen immediately and it may well take different shapes in different places, like many things it will evolve as we work together in new ways.

C) CONCERNS AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT CHANGE

Alongside the enthusiasm for renewal there is quite understandably still some reluctance to accept the reality that we shall face together after we restructure. People often express a recognition of a need to change, but hope that the changes can pass them by. They see that we will have fewer priests but hope that we can manage to keep everything much as it was. Frequently people who express these things also freely express their concern that their parish priest will be overburdened if the changes go ahead. This genuinely held concern does, of course, fail to take into account that if no share of the burden is borne by their parish, then a greater share of the burden will be borne by other parishes. The task facing Bishop Alan will be to restructure our diocese, balancing the share of the burden borne by each of us. This means that all of us must look across our existing parish boundaries and beyond the ways we currently work so as to find the best and fairest response to God's love for us in our diocese. Everyone everywhere will experience changes in the future. This is our common task for the common good and we must all work together for a future that will be different. Of course, "different" does not mean "worse" or "better". What different means for us all will depend on how well we work together for our common good.

D) MASS TIMES

People have begun to think about the fact that Mass times will need to change and the number of Masses will need to be reduced if our clergy are to have good balanced lives. This is important not just for our existing priests but also for when Bishop Alan presents a vision of our diocese to our prospective seminarians. They will need to know that we are working together on their behalf in order to ensure that they will have a good priest's life. Not a life of toil and exhaustion but rather one of prayer, joy and pastoral care that allows them to "celebrate" with us.

E) POPULATION GROWTH

There is a great deal written in the feedback about how the number of Catholic families is going to increase and the number of those coming to Mass is therefore going to increase beyond the capacity of our ability to seat them in church and minister to them. While we very much hope and pray that we are wrong about this, we do not believe that to be a realistic concern. In summary, we believe that additional homes and increased overall population will most likely result in maintenance of the numbers that we have now. This is despite the fact that it is harder to find somewhere in our diocese that is NOT experiencing housing development and population growth than somewhere that is. Historically the Catholic population has averaged about 8% of the overall population but in our diocese the historical average masks extreme variations. Trends of religious practice would lead us to believe that in the short and medium term (as described in the First Formal Proposal) we are likely to see the average decline and we are also seeing a change in the pattern of Mass attendance from the faithful. If anything we would expect to see a slight decline in Mass attendance over this timeframe. This reinforces the fact that it is our task to evangelise and bring people to faith. As and when we find that our churches are full and overflowing, we will all celebrate together and reconsider how we tackle the wonderful challenges that will bring.

We do not believe that excessive numbers of Catholics are likely in the medium term but if it comes to pass we will have monitored it and the plans will be as flexible as we can make them in order to cope with it. It should perhaps be noted with a sense of optimism that if our Mass attendance exceeds expectations then there will be far more lay people able to help in the mission of the Church.

It is also notable that unless other trends change quite significantly an increase of population will not (of itself) lead to an increase in vocations. That is an issue that we must all continue to pray for and work towards quite independently of the population issue. It will be through renewal rather than force of numbers that we will increase vocations.

F) **DIVERSITY OF PEOPLE AND PLACES**

Our diocese is very diverse. That is one of its strengths and it also provides us with challenges. Together the lay faithful across our diocese bring a richness of gifts and voices that we should pause for a moment to value; and then go on to celebrate.

It has been interesting for us to read that “the challenges facing rural parishes are more significant than for urban parishes” alongside “the challenges facing urban parishes are far more significant than for rural parishes”. Putting a value on the challenges each of us face is not possible (I’m sure someone could have a go but let’s not!). It is a natural tendency to see our own challenges as the most significant ones to be overcome (I know; I’ve said it too). The simple fact is that we must all face our particular challenges where we find them and we want to assure people that everyone involved in this process is trying to understand and relate to the challenges brought to our attention and to those we know about already.

However, and this is important; when a few people write that “those people in Brentwood don’t know anything about.....” I can assure them that they are wrong. Bishop Alan, the DSPG members and I are “those people in Brentwood” and we have a combined knowledge

and experience of living and working across a wide variety of places in our Diocese. We have all travelled and worked extensively around our diocese over many years. We have consulted many people across our diocese and we have heard the voices of all who wanted to share their thoughts with us. We would hope and pray that no one and no place is being taken for granted. We are praying and working hard to find solutions that will enable us to fulfil our Vision and our Objectives as set out in the First Formal Proposal and we are trying to do that with everyone and every place in mind.

We know that rural parish churches are separated by more miles than urban parishes and we know that in urban areas travelling short distances by car can take as long as much longer journeys in the country.

We know that village communities tend to be long established and close knit and have stronger ecumenical links than urban parishes and that urban parishes often have more transient populations where a diverse mix of people come together and disperse again. We know that rural areas tend to have an older demographic than urban areas and we know that in urban areas we have more of our schools and young people.

We also know that what we all share in common is far more significant than that which makes us different. Our common faith and our belonging to our universal church are far more important. Seeing the face of God in everyone from a rural or an urban place (and everywhere in between) gives us a common understanding of the respect and value that must be afforded to everyone equally. "Those people in Brentwood" try to never lose sight of that.

G) **TECHNOLOGY**

We have committed to using technology better in order to serve our diocese better. This will evolve over time but there are clearly some simple things that can be done and some things that people are asking for that cannot yet be done. I think it is important for us to be clear about these things from now on.

Firstly, and most importantly; attendance at Holy Mass cannot be virtual.

The rules are complicated but in essence we are required to be present and to participate in the Holy Mass. That cannot be done remotely. We have been interested by the suggestion that Mass celebrated in one church could be linked to a congregation sitting in another church but at the moment that is not permissible either. Non-Eucharistic services can be transmitted and celebrations can be shared but not Holy Mass if it is to meet our obligations. Technology can help in many other ways that are really quite simple. We all know that journey times are increasing as our roads reach capacity. Wasted time sitting in traffic is one of the banes of our modern society. All of us can recognise this and make more and better use of phone and video calls, groups on social media etc.

This will never fully substitute for face-to-face meetings but it can save time and make communication better. It is often far better to have frequent short virtual exchanges than wait weeks for a long meeting when you can meet face to face.

Priests spend a lot of time travelling already. Visiting the sick alone can account for substantial amounts of time. We may need to face the reality that this use of time is a luxury that we need to manage more carefully. A busy priest can have more conversations with more people and more often sitting in his study than he can being out on the road. This may

be unsatisfactory in some people's opinion but I am afraid that we have got to make adjustments like this, and in time and with practice we might find that a more relaxed priest who is not stressed about getting through traffic to his next appointment might actually be better able to minister to his flock either by them visiting him or on a virtual link.

Necessity is often the mother of invention and I firmly believe that we can and will find new ways to use existing technology and the technology yet to come.

Apps are being trialled that will provide people with real time information on where the nearest/ closest in time Mass is being celebrated. Parish websites that contain good real-time information can be a better source of information for some people and save time as well.

People who know each other from church can communicate via social media and email and telephone very effectively.

We have already started the Bishop's Certificate in Catechesis that is being done online and if that proves to be the success we hope it will then we see no reason why similar programmes cannot be created for different audiences. Again this sort of thing can be supplemented by online communication between participants.

We have also been taken with the idea of a Virtual Mission: central resources available for use in parish/ local community of parishes bringing people together in prayer and worship but remaining in situ in their own locality. Adele and her team have recently taken part in such an exercise in Brentwood that was screened around the world.

Subject to what the law allows we should embrace these things and even turn them into opportunities to evangelise. I frequently hear that "not everyone has a computer or a smart phone and many old people don't use them". Leaving aside for the moment that my experience of older people is very different from that, let's assume it is true.

This provides us with a wonderful opportunity for evangelisation. More tech savvy parishioners helping less tech savvy parishioners to use smart phones, computers, tablets so as to reduce isolation, integrate parishioners who are unable to travel and enable them to access the already vast array of high quality online Catholic materials. Those parishioners might then feel better disposed to the idea of a Skype or FaceTime call with Father rather than having him trek miles across town or country; and other parishioners might "virtually visit" them as well. The result? Less loneliness, more access to faith-based materials and more involvement in their parish achieved by using technology with the aid of fellow parishioners they may not previously have known.

The other thing I hear is that not everyone can afford the technology. Well, we can solve that together. When we upgrade our phones or tablets or computers we could help someone else. We could even have a group of volunteers to help with it. 21st Century evangelisation based on two thousand years of tradition of looking out for one another.

H) **COLLABORATION**

As we strive to work better together I see that some people have (perhaps in their enthusiasm) got a bit carried away. There is sometimes a misunderstanding about the idea of collaborative ministry and how it can work in our sacramental church. It is reflected in several comments made in feedback documents. I offer the following for reflection.

Collaboration means working with someone. It does not mean working in substitution for someone. In our context collaboration means lay people working with and in support of a priest; it does not mean lay people doing things that only a priest can do.

This is relevant to many areas of life in our sacramental church. Priests are called to the sacrament of Holy Orders. There are things that only a person in Holy Orders can be or do. A lay person cannot be a substitute.

That said, there are very many ways that a lay person can work with and support a priest in areas of work that are not reserved for those in Holy Orders. We can and must maximise how lay people work with our priests in this way. This is collaboration.

In particular, we would like to clarify one area where we believe there may be some misunderstanding, namely; that a Service of the Word with Communion distributed from the reserved sacrament is not equal to a Holy Mass and attending such a service cannot be substituted for attending Holy Mass.

I) **DIVERSITY OF CLERGY**

During the process we have all become more aware of the different types of clergy we have serving our diocese. We are blessed to have them all in Brentwood Diocese. The challenge of accommodating the needs and obligations of different parishes when those parishes are served by a mixture of secular diocesan priests, priests belonging to (various different) religious orders and priests of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, is not without difficulties, but they are difficulties we are very pleased to have and ones that people of goodwill working together in prayer can overcome. We will overcome them together. Sometimes accommodations will need to be made by all of us in order for people who live and worship side by side to work together.

J) **WOMEN AND MARRIED MEN AS PRIESTS**

A frequent request is made for women and married men to be permitted to become priests. The simple fact is that as far as we know there is no likelihood of either of these things happening. They are beyond our control and regardless of whether people think it may or may not be something that is desirable, it is simply not something we can do and there the matter ends. We will not be factoring in the possibility of women or married men becoming priests.

K) **PRIESTS FROM ABROAD**

Several mentions are made of the possibility of importing priests from other countries and sometimes this is supported by a story about how a priest in part of the western world has brought in priests from eastern Europe or the southern hemisphere. We will continue our previous policy of accepting priests from abroad when they are offered to us, have the requisite entry permissions into the UK, safeguarding clearance and are considered suitable by Bishop Alan for ministry in our diocese. This has proved very successful in the past and we hope and pray that it will continue to be so. Religious orders and foreign dioceses sometimes offer priests for reasons that are mutually beneficial and we are continuing to explore these possibilities.

However, we will not be undertaking a more widespread search for priests from abroad for two main reasons:

Firstly, it is highly questionable whether it is ethically right to do it. Our diocese, in common with most of western Europe still has a better ratio of priests to people than most parts of the world and it seems to us to be wrong to adopt a policy of depriving other Catholics of priests that they have trained because we do not have as many as we used to have. Secondly, we cannot adopt a policy that could detract from the urgency of us finding men to answer God's call from within our own diocese. Bringing in priests from abroad cannot replace our own responsibility in this regard.

L) **DISCERNMENT**

I occasionally hear that some people still think that the whole discernment process is a sham and all decisions were made before this process started. All I can say is that it is not and they were not. Indeed, final decisions have not yet been made. When they are it will be clear that the proposals made have evolved as a result of the discernment process that we are undertaking together.

M) **RENEWAL WITH RESTRUCTURING**

Some people tell us that they think the process is really only about Restructuring. This is not the case. I think that if this were true we could rightly be accused of merely managing decline and I do not believe that is what we are about.

What we are about is finding the right response to God's love for us in 21st century Diocese of Brentwood. The world around us is changing and changing fast. We would be foolish not to catch up with the changes around us and to prepare for that changed world. It is this world that we are aiming to evangelise.

The work of Renewal is about us finding ways to evangelise Essex and East London in this ever-changing scenario. In doing that work we will bring more people into a relationship with Christ and His Church. Through that we hope and pray that souls will be saved.

However, in finding the right response we must look to the resources we have at our disposal and the work of Restructuring will help us to use our resources as well as we can in service of our Vision. Restructuring recognises that a part of the changing scenario will be fewer priests. I hope that we will be able to find a way for those priests to serve to the best of their ability in a restructured environment that also cares for them.

Turning to the issues specific to your parish I would add the following:

Having read your parish feedback and also having met with your steward and those of the other parishes in your area, we are aware that your parish has entered into this process with positivity and in recognition that the work "is of the utmost importance".

We are pleased that you feel aligned to much of the Renewal section and also that you recognise the need for all of us to do more. That's wonderful.

The large number of volunteers in your parish is a credit to you but also raises the question of how to maintain that in future and how important it is to ensure continuity across generations. The possibility of paid roles is one that will need to be explored in the coming months and years and we

doubt that a single answer will find approval across all of our diocese. It will be necessary for parishes that are working together to determine what they need, what they can afford and how to share the cost but we will work with you to find the solutions to those challenges.

We share your keenness not to portray this exercise as managing decline. We do not see it in that way but we understand the potential for others to do so. This must be an exercise devoted to the very positive Vision and Objectives at the start of the First Formal Proposal where Restructuring actually serves them and does not take precedence over them.

The possibility of a “Hub” church may well prove to be a longer term solution and where that is can be the subject of discussion between you and your neighbours. It may well be that there is competition for the role but that should be viewed in a positive light.

It may also be a good idea to explore a new church. There is clearly some merit in that idea and the potential to find a site that meets people’s needs should be explored.

As we have been going through the feedback it has become increasingly apparent to me that not everyone is going to get exactly what they want. Despite that, I want to assure you that you have been heard and listened to by Bishop Alan and his DSPG, and we hope that you will engage with us as we move forward working together to evangelise our diocese. Bishop Alan continues to entrust the future of our Diocese to Our Lady of Lourdes and continues to pray for you and everyone in your parish. Please continue to pray for him as he makes decisions about our shared future.

At Walsingham on 26th May Bishop Alan commissioned our Stewards of the Gospel for two more years. We have been impressed to see the way the Stewards have grown and worked together over the last two years and their service to our Diocese is not to be underestimated. They will play a vital role as we come to the end of the beginning of this exercise and move towards our Vision as we go forward together.

I must also say a few final words about our clergy. Times of change and uncertainty cause disquiet for our priests just as much as for all the lay faithful. I am grateful for the many constructive conversations I have had with our priests over the last year. I see an overall willingness to work to achieve the best change that we can but recognise that it is tinged with anxiety about what that changed future may look like. We pray for them regularly and ask that you join your prayers with ours as we seek to support our priests in a new future.

It is worth noting here that in our diocese we are blessed with a diversity of priests. This is not just diversity based on their individual gifts but also based on whether they are secular or religious, Ordinariate or priests from other dioceses. Each brings a richness to our diversity and our worship and we are very grateful to all who serve our diocese as priest.

Over the summer and Autumn Bishop Alan, his DSPG and I will be working together to produce a Vision for the future of our Diocese. This will bring together all our prayers and all our ideas and our work together and I think that you will see how both have helped to move us from the First Formal Proposal to the final document. In November we will publish that Vision Document and then we will

gradually begin to implement it. During this time please pray for us as we pray for you and please keep doing all of the great work of renewal and evangelisation that you have started.

“I’m truly amazed how much has been achieved so far” so just imagine what we can go on to achieve together with the help of God.

Kind Regards

Steven Webb

Steven Webb

Director of Development
For and on behalf of the DSPG

June 2018

Our Lady of Lourdes ... Pray for us
St Edmund of Canterbury.. Pray for us
St Cedd.. Pray for us