

DIOCESE OF EAST ANGLIA

LONG-TERM STRATEGIC PLANNING

Our Diocesan Pastoral Plan (2004) included our first thoughts as a diocese on probable and possible mergers of parishes in preparation for a future with far fewer priests. Some of those proposed mergers and others have already taken place: Our Lady of Lourdes and St Peter & All Souls, Peterborough; Sacred Heart, Bretton and St Oswald's, Peterborough; Holy Apostles, West Earham, and the Cathedral; Burnham Market and Walsingham; Sawston and OLEM, Cambridge; Cromer and Sheringham; Hadleigh and Sudbury; Buckden and St Neots. Preparation for the future has also involved reducing the number of Sunday Masses and of places of worship for Sunday Mass (Bottisham, Bowthorpe, Capel St Mary, Comberton, Fulbourn, Great Shelford, Hauxton, Linton, Lynford, Nayland, Stanground, Withermarsh Green, Yaxley). All of this has helped us to try to retain as good a service of Catholics in the diocese as we can, but we know from the figures presented that more radical changes lie ahead (including more mergers, and fewer Sunday Masses and places of worship), not just in the distant future but in the next few years.

A further reminder of those figures: since 2003, 16 diocesan parish priests have either 'retired' or moved on from parish ministry for one reason or another. Of our current 50 parish priests, 10 are due to resign from office between now and 2015 if they all carry on until the age of 75; it is likely to be more than that. Another 6 reach 75 in 2020. Although we have just had our first diocesan priests ordained for 9 years, and a few priests may join us from elsewhere, we have to prepare now for an immediate future with far fewer priests. Between a third and a half of our parishes may well be without a resident parish priest over the next ten years. Some parishes will be affected more than others, but no parish or community can remain totally untouched.

Our 2010 Synod of Parish Priests began the process of a taking a fresh look at long-term strategic planning, based on the figures above and a paper presented by Mgr Philip Shryane. No decisions have been made, but we do need now to begin to move towards making decisions with as much participation in such discussions and planning as possible (at diocesan, deanery, cluster and parish level).

There is to be a 19-month process of discussion and decision-making, from October 2010 until the annual Synod of Parish Priests in April/May 2012 (this meeting may be expanded into a special one-off diocesan gathering, to include priests and deacons holding office, and the Council of Laity).

The fundamental aim is to decide together how we could best serve the diocese with half the current number of priests, and to have in our hands a viable blue-print for changes which would be known by everyone in the diocese and implemented as needed.

Mgr Philip Shryane's paper is provided as a discussion-starter rather than as a first draft, but the issues he raises need to be considered.

Although the final blue-print will detail future structural changes ready for when the number of priests declines, we need to remember that some changes may need to be made even before the end of the consultation process.

Once the plan is agreed, local parishes and deaneries will then need to continue work to prepare the ground for the eventual implementation of such changes.

Over and above such structural changes, we need to consider new forms of lay responsibility and ministry. And what might be the role of our deacons in the future, preserving their distinctive diaconal ministry rather than being used to 'replace the priests'.

P.T.O.

The Process

October 2010 – Easter 2011

Discussion at Deanery level in particular, but also at Parish Pastoral Councils, etc, of how we could serve each Deanery with half the current number of priests. Although focused on each Deanery, the wider area will need to be considered, as some changes may need to look beyond deanery boundaries. Discussion will need to take account of the 'Points to Ponder' below, as well as other comments from the 2010 Synod of Parish Priests. A first draft will be presented to the Bishop by Easter 2011.

Easter 2011 – Christmas 2011

On the basis of that first draft, and after discussion with the Council of Priests, College of Consultors and Council of Laity, Bishop Michael will present a draft plan for further discussion at diocesan, deanery, cluster and parish level. Such discussion should focus on the challenges involved in practical implementation of such a plan, as well as further fine-tuning and revision. Full discussion at parish level, and reports from each parish, will be an essential part of this process. It is vital that we 'take people with us' as far as possible. All reports should be presented to Bishop Michael by Christmas 2011.

New Year 2012 – early summer 2012

After further discussion with the Consultors and Council of Priests, Bishop Michael and others as needed will draw up a Long-Term Strategic Planning document to be formally presented at a diocesan meeting in April/May 2012. After that meeting, a final document with the decisions will be printed & widely distributed.

Some Points to Ponder (this is not an exclusive list)

- ❖ Although we have already learned from other dioceses at home and overseas, is there anything more we can learn from others who have been or are going through the same process?
- ❖ How do we balance our care and provision for both urban and rural areas? There could be a danger of abandoning rural communities. How can the Catholic Church be 'present' in rural areas?
- ❖ What new forms of lay ministry and service do we need to develop? What might be the role of deacons?
- ❖ Many of our parishes are served by religious communities. Their superiors need to be fully involved in this process and in any final decision-making.
- ❖ Several parishes currently rely on 'retired' priests: how would they cope without such priests?
- ❖ Providing transport, especially for older parishioners, needs serious consideration.
- ❖ What do we do with our remaining Mass centres, especially if it is no longer possible to retain weekly Sunday Mass there? This will vary from place to place. Some might retain their value to the community. Can we justify retaining a building which might be used only for an hour a week? Generally, what do we do with properties (churches, presbyteries, etc) which might no longer be used in the same way in future mergers?
- ❖ How do we include our service of institutions (hospitals, prisons, schools, universities, armed forces, etc) in our pastoral provision with fewer priests? It is all too easy to leave them to one side.
- ❖ Some coastal parishes in particular have a more flexible Mass attendance than most, with numbers increasing considerably during the summer months.
- ❖ New housing developments, especially large ones like Northstowe (nr Cambridge), must be kept in mind.
- ❖ As long as we can, how do we make sure that it is the Mass itself (not just receiving Holy Communion) which remains the heart and centre of our Catholic life? This may involve people being more ready to travel. At what stage in the future do we decide that another form of liturgy is acceptable on a Sunday?
- ❖ Other issues needing to be kept in mind include: the size of our churches, parking provision, the age-profile of particular local congregations. In some places, do we need to be ready to move elsewhere?
- ❖ Increasing the size of parishes and the priests' responsibilities also has implications for our fewer priests as they grow older. There may be no small parishes for older priests who wish to continue in office. Rather than combine two parishes into one, with one priest rather than two, are there other more creative options? Perhaps two priests looking after three parishes together, with an older priest having his own house and responsibility within that parish? What might work locally?