

Report of the Diocesan Council of Laity Meeting held in the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation, Poringland, on Saturday 19th November 2011

Father David Bagstaff, Diocesan Administrator, presided over the meeting.

In the Chair – Mr Tony Lawlor who welcomed those present at the meeting.

Attendees – See Annexe 1

Apologies – See Annexe 1

Report of the meeting held in May 2011.

Copies of the meeting, additional to those which had been sent, were distributed. The meeting approved the report as a fair representation of the business of the meeting and it was duly signed by the Chairman.

Introduction

Father David opened the meeting by explaining the process by which he had been appointed Diocesan Administrator and some of his responsibilities within and on behalf of the Diocese whilst awaiting the appointment of a new bishop. He said that the appointment could be another twelve months away due to the fact that three other Dioceses were also awaiting the appointment of bishops. He explained that his principle responsibility was to ensure that all activities in the Diocese continued to operate with the exception of the Council of Priests which is directly responsible to the Bishop. The question of the continued function of the Council of Laity was thought to be positive in the sense that it allowed ongoing communication between himself and parishes in the Diocese and that should the incoming Bishop want to continue with it then the organisational machinery would already be in existence.

At this point, and in the interests of Transparency, the Secretary introduced his wife, Judith, to the meeting. He explained that due to a family arrangement he would not be able to continue to record the proceedings of the meeting after midday but that Judith had made a totally unsolicited offer, which he had accepted, to stand in for him and to record the business of the meeting.

The topic for the meeting to address was Trust and Transparency

In order to kick-start consideration of the topic Father David suggested that it would be good if small adjacent groups could spend a few minutes discussing what they thought the topic meant to them. The discussion produced several key concepts as follows.

Faith and Transparency – it was thought better to have ‘faith’ rather than ‘trust’.

Light in the darkness – being truthful and open about everything.

Conversation and Relationships – The role of the laity, it was thought, differs from parish to parish dependent on the relationship between the parishioners and the parish priest in each parish. It was thought that there was insufficient definition, understanding and acknowledgement amongst the laity and the priesthood about the role of the laity within the parish as set out in the DPP.

Openness – It was pointed out that in secular or civil society where people earned their living, high standards were expected in public life. Reference was made to the 7 Nolan Principles listed in Annex II, i.e.

Selflessness
Integrity
Objectivity
Accountability
Openness
Honesty
Leadership.

The Church should recognise these Standards too as a minimum expectation of lay people in the church. Recent events in the church, by some of those who would be thought of as leaders, have not generated confidence that there is that understanding. Transparency encourages trust in people with whom you are working.

Greater lay involvement and lay leadership – DPP pages 31 &32.

The Diocesan Pastoral Plan encourages that lay people should be given responsibility, opportunity and encouragement and that means more than practical duties such as washing the altar linen, cleaning the church, etc. – although these too are necessary tasks. However, experience seems to show that even people with the skills and knowledge to make a responsible contribution are discouraged from doing so in some parishes.

‘One thing is certain, in every parish lay people should increasingly be entrusted with many, if not most, of the administrative tasks, as well as participating more fully in pastoral care and outreach, etc.’ DPP pp31

Consultation and Communication

It was suggested that improved communication and consultation would be extremely helpful in increasing the cohesiveness within parishes where major changes are made without notification to the laity e.g. Mass books disappearing.

Secrecy

The outside world was looking in at the Church more and more these days and the Church was undoubtedly being scrutinised more and more for hypocrisy. Therefore internal transparency and trust in accordance with Gospel principles were extremely important objectives in demonstrating the integrity of the Church to the world.

It was suggested that all the foregoing points were valid agenda items for debate at Parish Pastoral Council or Parish-in-Council meetings.

Father David commenting on all the points, acknowledged the importance of the relationship between the parish priest and the laity. He explained that many priests managing parishes were trained in a different model of the church than that which exists today. Many priests talk about MY parish where it is not really the priest’s parish but OUR parish.

There is currently a feeling amongst some, not only laity but clergy as well, that the reforms in the Church at Vatican II are being diluted as evidence by the revised translation of the liturgy, and the re-installation of Friday Abstinence, creating the impression that the church is retreating behind the barricades as in former times.

We must not retreat but face up to the world as it is. We must show the world that we are a confident and open church even though we have suffered a lot of bad press worldwide with child abuse and recent court cases which have revealed that secrecy also, alongside transparency, is alive and well and living in the Catholic Church. However, we must trust in The Lord whatever difficulties we face. We must also try to understand the difficulties that many of our priests are experiencing in a changing world. Most lay people look forward to retiring in their sixties, if not before, whereas priests have to carry out their duties until 75 years of age even if experiencing symptoms of old age. They are also having to cope with situations they have not experienced before like merging parishes, involving more work and responsibility. It would be helpful if the laity could try and support their priests by trying to get closer to them and appreciating how they feel and think. Priests can feel vulnerable and the changes which are being forced on them at the present time are unsettling to many. Therefore it is important that the laity try and understand these pressures and try to reach out to the clergy so that they do not feel isolated. There is a recognition that the laity expect to be respected and trusted and there are a lot of positive situations in different parishes in the diocese. The important thing is to find ways of developing strong supportive bonds between the clergy and laity throughout the Diocese so that the Church in East Anglia becomes stronger and better able to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question of communicating the results of these discussions back to parishes was raised. It was pointed out that some parishes do not send representatives, and some parishes do not have Pastoral Parish Councils (PPC) or Parish-in-Councils (PIC) even though Bishop Michael made it a mandatory policy in the Diocese that they should be established in every parish. The channels exist in many parishes for good communication but it is necessary to understand the importance of installing best practice in every parish to achieve the benefits of good communication throughout the Diocese.

At this point the meeting resolved into groups to discuss what benefits might be discovered in thinking more deeply about the topic which could then be recommended to parishes for further discussion.

The session ended with prayer before the breaking for lunch.

Results of Group Discussions

On the subject of PPC's there was considerable diversity between parishes – some had lively PPCs, some did not have a PPC. The following points apply to all the items discussed

- If PPCs/PICs are mandatory policy throughout the Diocese then each parish should have one, and it should be the responsibility of each parish priest as leader to establish one. PPCs/PICs encourage trust and transparency within a parish.
- All parishes were issued with a copy of the DPP and the review document but there was not much evidence that the Plan was being referred to on an ongoing basis.
- Each parish should have a 'profile' document which sets out all of the information relating to the parish including Mass times, administration, parish groups, childrens' liturgy, etc. and giving contact details for all of these organisations.

- It was thought that parishes should produce their own profile document which, when discussed at the next C of L meeting with other profiles could form the basis for a model parish profile which could be adapted for parish use throughout the diocese.
- A list of mandatory policies are published on the Diocesan website. These will be made available to parish reps. for parishioner information.
- Whilst 'trust' is a two way business, some things in parishes have to remain confidential so it is not always possible to be transparent.
- A question was asked about the Council of Priests. Fr David briefly explained the working and function of the Council of Priests meetings but concluded that because of Bishop Michaels' illness during the 18 months prior to his death the effectiveness of the ideas discussed and formulated in those meetings may not have been communicated so effectively.
- Social functions are an important vehicle for developing good inter personal relationships between priests and people.
- Involving children more in the life of the church and demonstrating that they are valued and trusted members of parishes was especially important as they reach early adolescence.
- Some parishes display photos together with names of Committee members on the parish noticeboard to help those who know faces but not names.
- Welcome packs detailing information about groups, schools people etc. help newcomers integrate quickly. Directories of parish activities, etc. are also useful. One parish holds newcomers tea parties attended by other parishioners also to encourage welcoming.
- Other groups such as Care groups run themselves with the priest involved in an advisory capacity.
- Deanery Pastoral Councils where they exist can be useful for information sharing between parishes

Topic for next meeting :- Parish Profiles. It was agreed that the next meeting would concentrate on trying to produce a model Parish Profile. Representative were encouraged to bring to the meeting any parish resources, e.g. leaflets, handouts, forms etc. which would contribute to achieving the objective

Date of the Next Meeting. Will be on Saturday 19th May 2012 at Poringland

The secretary was asked to contact all priests with a view to updating the C of L database with the names of all current holders of Chair of DPC so that an improved attendance would result at the next meeting.

The Chairman thanked Fr David in his capacity as Diocesan Administrator for conducting the meeting. He also thanked Mrs Sykes for recording the many contributions.

There being no further business, Fr David closed the meeting with a final prayer at 3pm.

R Sykes
Hon. Sec.