

CLOGHER DIOCESE IN DIALOGUE

Overview of Phase 1 Meetings

Background

The Clogher Diocese in Dialogue process began in the late autumn of 2019 when Bishop Larry Duffy asked fourteen people (clergy and laity) from across the diocese to come together to lead a series of meetings about the future of the Church here. With the help of the facilitation skills of Jim Deeds, Belfast, the group engaged in a series of workshops to establish the key topics that needed to be considered and the approach to be taken. The initial plan and vision may have been for just a series of consultative meetings, but, over time, the need for a deeper reflection and a more long-term vision became obvious.

There was a desire on the part of the group of facilitators that while the focus of the engagement with parishioners and clergy was about the future, there should be a realization of and respect shown to the great work that is currently going on in parishes. This, in turn, gave rise to the emphasis on ‘the living parish’. Therefore, the central piece of work and reflection for the journey ahead became:

To consider how we as a Church continue to sustain living parishes now and going into the future in Clogher Diocese.

The responses that emerged from Phase 1 were varied but, nonetheless, had much in common. In the following sections, we offer an overview of the key elements that emerged from the conversations held on those seven evenings; conversations which included many who love and value the Church community to which they belong. While some are aspirational, many practical suggestions can be addressed, even in a broad sense. This will be for the next stage of the journey. How the journey continues will be a matter for prayerful discernment following the evaluation of the Phase 1 meetings and subsequent events, especially Covid-19.

Meetings

A total of seven meetings took place across the diocese, one in each of the combined pastoral areas. These were held between 2 March and 11 March 2020. The meetings were facilitated by members of the Clogher Diocese in Dialogue Steering Group. The numbers in attendance showed that there was a positive reaction to the bishop’s invitation to dialogue. In total, over 800 people attended these gatherings, ranging in size from approximately 200 people in Monaghan, 150 in Carrickmacross, 120 in Castleblayney, almost 100 in Clones, 75 in

Fintona, over 100 in Enniskillen and almost 70 in Pettigo. In terms of male v female, there was a reasonable representation of both. However, with some exceptions, there was a noticeable absence of younger participants in most of the meetings.

Each meeting followed the same format, using a powerpoint presentation which was agreed upon at group level, with just minimal adaptations.

Questions Discussed

Essentially those attending each meeting discussed three questions:

1. Expectations: What do you want to take away from this meeting?
2. Essentials: What are the essential things that happen in living parishes and who does them?
3. Doing Differently: In the light of what you have learned here tonight what would you do differently in your parish? In some gatherings there was a secondary question of what would happen if the bishop were forced, through shortages of clergy, to leave a parish without a priest or deacon?

This last question followed a presentation to those assembled on the crisis facing the diocese at present in terms of the numbers and age profile of priests. It was highlighted that of the 56 priests currently active in parish ministry, 55% of them were over the age of 65, with 32% being over the age of 75. It was highlighted too that it would be at least five years before there would be another ordination for the diocese. Generally, there was surprise at the gravity of the current situation. This highlighted the greater need for a diocesan awareness, rather than just the most local perspective.

Overview of Responses

(1) Expectations:

- (a) That people's voices will be listened to.
- (b) That parishes would reach out to those whose voices are not being heard.
- (c) The beginning of an action plan for the future of the diocese and of parishes generally. A journey leading to a shared vision with co-responsibility for its delivery.
- (d) Reassurance that we will have a viable Church in the future.
- (e) The beginning of each parish having essential structures (councils / committees) that reflect the participation of the whole People of God locally. That the process would lead to a better use of the talents and expertise available in parishes and across the diocese.
- (f) That the Church locally would be a source of inspiration for people, especially young people. That what we achieve would lead to a strengthening of faith, a bridging of gaps and providing a greater sense of hope. Several suggested that there was a need for us to be strategic in this regard.
- (g) That, as a result of this process, much greater emphasis would be placed on catechetics and religious education and formation at all levels.
- (h) A recognition of the need for humility.

(2) Essentials:

- (a) Sacramental Life – mostly carried out and led by the priests or deacon but with help from laity as required (lay ministries).
 - The lay involvement here included Ministers of the Word, Ministers of Holy Communion, choirs and musicians, sacristans, other volunteers, but also those involved in bible study groups which help people appreciate the Word of God as sacramental.
 - Those who lead the Prayer of the Church (laity).
 - Preparation of the liturgies (where there are liturgy committees).
 - Preparation for the Sacraments is shared between priests, teachers, parents and other lay people where are pre-sacramental groups.
- (b) Prayer Life – Personal prayer, Eucharistic Adoration, Prayer Groups.
- (c) Education – Boards of Management are almost all made up exclusively of lay people (in most parishes); Chaplaincy – some secondary schools have lay chaplains.

- (d) Pastoral Care – Visiting of the Sick (priests); Visiting the bereaved (priests and sometimes by members of bereavement groups where they exist); Safeguarding Committees (laity and priests); Helping people in need; Communications (increasingly laity – parish secretaries); pastoral care to schools; being a presence in the community. Inter-Church relations and initiatives (laity and clergy).
- (e) Administration – Parish Office is a big addition to parish life; Finance Committees, Property Committees, Financial Planning, Communications, Maintaining and caring for our sacred spaces, ensuring compliance with charities legislation.
- (f) Good things – some said that, alongside daily Mass, liturgies in the parish without a priest is a good thing; other good things included the John Paul II Awards and many of the essential things mentioned above.

(3) Doing Things Differently:

- (a) Lay Formation / Adult Religious Education / Skills Development – There was much discussion on the laity would take ownership of the parish. What does this mean? It will require a change of mindset on the part of both clergy and laity. It will mean lay people taking on much of what is now being done by the clergy. It will require commitment and a concerted approach to preparation and teamwork. It will require volunteerism and a recognition of the role of volunteers within the Church. It will require formation.
 - Lay formation would require training and ongoing formation, perhaps with parishes cooperating on this in terms of organization of training and renewal programmes.
 - The skills required would have to include planning and development, knowledge of the Church and its liturgy and its teachings.
 - Prayer life of laity is also a central question here too, so ongoing spiritual formation is vital. Comment was made at one meeting that time spent in prayer by members of all committees was necessary once a week. There is a need to protect the place of the Holy Spirit against the danger of power.
 - This leads to the question of ongoing adult religious education and faith development. Both these aspects need to be looked at in tandem.

- (b) Formation of Teams – teamwork is required, whether within a specific parish or across a pastoral area or part thereof. These could include Baptism teams, Funeral Teams, Pastoral Planning teams etc. This is in addition to the routine committees. Again, formation and ongoing support is key here.
- (c) Catechetics and Faith Development for parishioners (especially young people) was mentioned by several speakers. So too was the formation and sustenance of faith groups, prayer groups. The re-introduction of Sunday Schools (in some form) was a proposal which came forward. This will therefore require the training of catechists – another team at parish and perhaps intra-parish level.
- (d) Developing Family Ministry – helps to build the parish into a family of families. Programmes such as Do This in Memory can contribute to this, even if new ways may have to be found in the future to deliver it in every parish on the set dates (due to reduced numbers of priests for Sunday Masses).
- (e) The role of Deacons was mentioned in several of the meetings, including the exploration of the possibility of having women as deacons (not a diocesan function). Where there is a deacon at present, the ministry is greatly valued and has shown how things can be done differently and enable faith communities adapt to different circumstances.
- (f) Parishes working together – instead of each parish doing things on their one and replicating which is going in adjoining ones. This could work in areas such as pre-sacramental preparation or some aspects of liturgy. This is also an aspect which needs to be taken into account in the revision of Mass times, in order to give people more options and to ease burdens on priests. Parishes working together can also help to improve best practice.
- (g) Openness to Vocations – The need for vocations and prayer for vocations was highlighted in all meetings. Use of modern technology, the teaching of the Catholic faith, together with prayer and witness were all mentioned.
- (h) Care for Priests was mentioned at several of the gatherings. Whatever new arrangements are put in place will have to take account of the numbers and age profile of our priests and respect their capacity to take on new tasks.
- (i) Lay-Led Liturgies – This would help people not to be totally dependent on priests. It would also allow for small Catholic communities to maintain a presence in a church and area.

- (j) Improved communications at all levels – within parishes (including schools, primary and post-primary), between parishes and within the diocese as a whole. Continue to develop new ways of communicating and outreach. For example, each parish should have social media platforms today. A review of present methods would be useful. Seeking feedback from parishioners can also be very useful; it nurtures involvement. Also, communications will play an important part in faith formation through online means and social media, as well as outreach to the lapsed.
- (k) Children's Liturgies – The need for greater provision for children's liturgies was highlighted at some of the meetings. In doing this, provision will have to be made for lay-led approaches and safeguarding.
- (l) Social Dimension – It would help to build community if some social events could be organized after Mass, from time to time. Other social events could also be arranged.
- (m) Youth – The report from one gathering in particular mentioned the excellent contributions made by younger people who were involved in Clogher don Óige. The involvement of youth in the faith, liturgical and social life of the parish was highlighted everywhere. The absence in many of our parishes of anything for teenagers and those in their 20s was also a concern. So too was the absence of young people from the sacramental life of many parishes. How is it that so many of them contribute so generously to sports organisations and don't feel as welcome in the parish? What do we need to do differently at parish level? Young people need to be consulted on their concerns and the feeling is that they would bring to the conversation issues and questions concerning justice and care of the earth in a way that the local parishes don't. Is there merit in a more concerted diocesan or even national approach to this question? Above all, we need to learn how to engage with young people today in terms of faith and linking faith with justice and the environment.
- (n) Lapsed – Reaching out to those families and individuals who have lapsed in the practice of the faith has to be a priority for any diocesan plan. How this is done may vary from parish to parish and cannot be dependent on the clergy alone. Nonetheless, faith programmes and parish activities need to always be configured in such a way that the invitation to be part of the faith community is always to the forefront.
- (o) Administration – Parish Offices, where they exist, have become a great hub and resource for parishes. Some parishes do not have the resources for such facilities. However, given the increased level of compliance

needed for legal, financial and other purposes, it is perhaps worth considering having some way of sharing these resources between parishes in a way that is financially viable and resourceful.

Conclusion:

The enthusiasm with which people shared their ideas and the sincerity with which concerns were expressed was one of the hallmarks of these meetings. Above all, the meetings showed that the Diocese of Clogher has parishes that are alive and active. Yes, these parishes will require changes in the way in which they operate at present in order that they can continue to be places of faith, hope and love; sacred spaces where the joy of the Gospel can be proclaimed and the Lord's great sacrifice of love celebrated and where the love and mercy of Christ is made present through the sacraments and pastoral care into the future. Reaching out to those whose practice of the faith has lapsed and to young people needs to be a priority.

These gatherings have highlighted that there is a need for people to be trained to take up a variety of roles in pastoral ministry; from the celebration of the Church's liturgies and other prayer moments to catechetics and sacramental preparation, to mention just a few. Changes in the methodologies used to deliver pastoral care and services is one thing. But renewing and sustaining a sense of Church, of Christ's living presence in a fast-changing world, is another. This has been brought into stark relief by the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact, positive and challenging, on the Church and wider society.

Another consideration must concern young people and their desires and expectations of the local Church. Had a separate survey been carried out among young people, what different types of issues would have emerged? A focused engagement (survey or otherwise) with young people needs to be considered as part of this dialogue process.

All of this allows us to reflect; that dialogue must continue, in whatever form is possible. It is important therefore that the information flow which this phase has produced should continue to be shared with those who took part and reflected on accordingly, so that the next steps of this journey may be shared in a spirit of togetherness as we walk along 'in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God' (Col. 1:10).

Appendix

Covid-19: Experiences and Questions for discerning through dialogue

1. Spiritual/Pastoral

* what new ways and ideas have we identified for sharing the mercy of God and bringing to all people the hope that comes from the Risen Christ? How to satisfy people's hunger for God.

- the challenges and opportunities given to us by online access - the insular v the community
- The impact of social distancing?
- Funerals - what have we learned?
- Spiritual Communion - a renewed emphasis and the resultant possibilities
- Bringing Christ to the streets the communities and sports grounds? New ways...
- time to move to celebrating liturgies without a priest...
- Outreach to those marginalised
- Accompanying those children (and their families) who are preparing for the sacraments
- Others...

2. Organisational structure

- Parishes living beyond boundaries
- Diocesan / Parish - a living collegiality for the future? What's needed to sustain it?
- Priests - support, health, care, and ongoing capacity in sharing ministry - where is the future?
- Laity- from periphery to the centre? What lessons from Covid?

3. Communication/Technology with a view to the peripheries

- the value of prayer and spiritual communion
- how can we continue to connect with people where they are and connect them with the life of the parish?
- negotiating the insular v the community
- how can we use reach schools and younger people better through use of ICT?
- can working from home and less travel allow us to meet and work better?
- care of the earth...

4. Financial implications and future opportunities

- implications of not having congregations for a lengthy period
- maximising the potential of online donations
- old-fashioned appeals by letter to communities at home and abroad
- new ways of fundraising for when we have a target market
- solidarity with those in need
- are there areas of expenditure and practice we can review?