

Editorial Note:

This Short Summary of a Diocesan document has no official standing, and is not intended to be a substitute for reading the full original. It has been produced to help and stimulate our lay readers engage with the issues raised therein and to delve more into the detail of the original. As with any summary, there may well be some oversimplification resulting in unintended misrepresentation. Readers should check ‘the real thing’ when they wish to pursue a particular point in further reflection and/or discussion.

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***“A Precious Place of God’s Grace”*: A Short Summary**

Looking to 2025 in terms of parish structures, availability of priests, provision of sacramental life and the resources needed to meet the evangelising mission of the Church in the Diocese of Plymouth

Introduction:

Looking to the future of the Diocese, and to ensure that parishes and communities are prepared and resourced to carry out the Church’s missionary mandate, Bishop Mark aims to establish the most appropriate pastoral structures in the Diocese, and make sure that our communities can respond effectively to both present and future challenges.

“*A Precious Place*” is intended to provide a Vision - specifically for those involved in advising the Bishop on pastoral appointments; but also more generally for local pastoral communities, to reflect on how they can best develop as missionary communities.

The main document has two main sections in addition to the introduction and Conclusion. Part 1 is the most important part, setting out fundamental theological and pastoral considerations. It forms the source from which everything else will flow. It is informed by, and cites the teachings of Pope Francis, instructions and directions from departments of the Vatican Curia, as well as Bishop Mark’s own past Pastoral Letters.

Part 2 sets out a number of key factors in the Plymouth Diocese which bear on decisions concerning renewal of parish structures, together with some main guiding principles and priorities that apply within the Diocese.

“*A Precious Place*” is a work in progress, which will hopefully evolve through the transformative engagement of clergy and laypeople at all levels. It is offered to clergy and laypeople of the Diocese as a framework for consultation, reflection and discussion, so they can be fully involved.

Part 1: Theological and pastoral Considerations

The Call to Missionary Conversion

Referring to Pope Francis’ call for a “transformative” missionary impulse, Bishop Mark reminds us of our primary mission as Catholics to evangelise, expressed through our proclamation of the Gospel, in worship and prayer, and in active loving service. We must therefore reflect on the role that the parish plays or should play in carrying out this fundamental mission of the Church.

The Parish in Catholic Life

Bishop Mark notes that the parish is the place where “Catholics live out their faith; where we build our homes, raise families; minister to the elderly, the sick and bereaved; accompany the young and educate our children.” It is therefore “the precious place of God’s grace” where we both deepen our relation with God and help others to encounter Him.

The parish is said to be a Eucharistic community that manifests the face of the people of God, “founded on the pillars of the word of God, the sacraments and charity”. Born out of missionary expansion of the early Church, the parish structure has faced numerous pressures from social and economic changes in the world. But instead of trying to maintain the status quo, we should

embrace change that emerges from a “process of missionary conversion”, one that presses forward with evangelisation.

The Complementarity and Collaboration of Priests and Laypeople

The parish is not primarily a structure but a community of people called together to praise God and to serve others. The ordained and the baptised have complementary roles; we all have different gifts but we can work together to move things forward.

On the one hand, conversion of pastoral structures should not lead to clericalisation of pastoral activity. The dignity and freedom of the “People of God” must inspire practices and models by which all of us become active participants of evangelisation, as parts of an organic community.

On the other hand, the presence of the priest within a parish remains of central importance for two reasons: first, because the priest is a sign of the intrinsic bond between the local community and the Bishop and with the Pope; and secondly, because the priest exercises the primary care of souls, through preaching the Word, celebration of the Sacraments, and his pastoral leadership. The priest is charged with keeping alive the missionary dynamic. Therefore all pastoral structures at parish level require the ministry of a priest, even when it is not possible to appoint a parish priest.

The Conversion and Renewal of Pastoral Structures

The parish continues to be of value in today’s world, and today’s challenges can be faced using various options for change already available within canon law; and the Bishop may consider creating new parochial groupings or “pastoral units” within deaneries, flexibly structured to better prioritise evangelisation and promote a more effective pastoral care.

Some parishes are already engaged in making their structures more open and less bureaucratic. The emphasis here is for such new structures to enable expanded participation in the ministries. The aim is to be innovative and creative in implementing an organic and wide-ranging approach to evangelisation.

Maintaining the status quo is not an option. Action that doesn’t impact people’s concrete lives, and is greeted with general indifference, is sterile. It leads to self-referential and fossilised parishes. Change is therefore mandatory.

However, decisions on parish restructuring and renewal should not be based principally on theory and logic and imposed in haste, as this may harm those affected. Plans must grow out of the lived experience of each community, with prior consultation, progressive implementation and verification.

The present pandemic has also highlighted some structural vulnerabilities and lack of adaptability to present-day missionary needs.

The Process for Pastoral Provision

The above considerations provide a context for Diocesan processes for pastoral provision and appointments for the next five years and beyond. Limitations on the number of priests will make it necessary to prioritise key parishes and ministries in the Diocese

New styles of priestly ministry will be needed for new parochial groupings, together with new transitional processes that protect communities from damage and at the same time keep our focus on missionary conversion.

Deanery Schemes for pastoral provision need to set out “categories” of parishes or churches, proposals for “Pastoral Units” and pastoral teams, and plans for evolution of deanery structures. Discernment of parish structures and pastoral appointments involving the Deans will ideally be done hand-in-hand with realistic self-assessment of parishes by each existing parish community, of its ability to fulfil and develop the fundamental aspects of parish life and mission.

Summary (Part 1): discernment of a structured approach to pastoral provision demands that the parish as an institution does not remain static but should look — through collaboration among different parish communities and a reinforced communion among clergy and laity — to better orient itself towards an evangelising mission that is the task of the entire People of God.

Part 2: Some Implications for Diocesan Governance

Note: Part 2 is 11 pages long and contains a wealth of detail that is not included in this Short Summary.

1. Some Key Factors to Aid Discernment

Various factors bear on our ability to carry out the mission entrusted to the Diocese, including:-

- Having an effective and unified focus on mission at all levels
- The number of priests available for pastoral appointments will be fewer, so alternative means of supporting mission will be required.
- The decline in numbers of committed laypeople is even greater than that of clergy, not just within parishes generally but also Catholic lay organisations that were active within parishes
- Demographics of the Diocese are such that it has extreme variations and distributions across urban/rural areas, age, social and economic groupings.
- Legal and regulatory compliance requirements demand more professional and admin attention, which must not be allowed to distract from the essential pastoral and sacramental role of the clergy.
- Diocesan Trustees must ensure that resource allocation matches strategic priorities and properly supports our parishes
- Diocesan and Parish property must be used and invested in, to support the mission (in particular the needs resulting from parish and pastoral restructuring eg offices, meeting rooms and IT resources) while not forgetting the needs of the marginalised.

2. Implications for diocesan government:

Diocesan Trustees have established strategic priorities for decisions on allocation of resources and responses to issues. These include evangelisation, youth ministry, Faith formation & vocations, clergy well-being, buildings, liturgy & the Cathedral, Caritas, education & schools, Diocesan Chancery & Tribunal. Also, specific matters with implications for implementation of these priorities include :-

- Clergy-related matters: formation; welcoming new priests from outside; living arrangements; travelling missions; resignations; role of permanent deacons.
- Pastoral and Admin Support: formation; lay officers; Diocesan Curia.
- Parish and other pastoral structures: parish structures; catholic schools; Universities; Communities in holiday areas; volunteers and employees; buildings.

Conclusion

The document is the beginning of a journey of discernment and development that must involve the wider and active collaboration of the clergy and the laity, feeding into a revised document which leads to practical proposals. It is intended to be a catalyst for real communication and sharing of wisdom. We are reminded of Pope Francis’ exhortation to become a culture of encounter, to “be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone” (*Fratelli Tutti*)

An initial period of consultation is driven by the need to have a framework in place for pastoral appointments to be made during summer 2021, but reflection and formation is intended to continue beyond that.

*“Great changes are not produced behind desks or in offices. This means that everyone has a fundamental role to play in a single great creative project: to write a new page of history, **a page full of hope...**” (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*)*
