

1. LEAVING SAFE HARBOURS - THE WAY AHEAD

When Christ asked Saint Peter to “put out his boat into deep water and pay out his nets for a catch,” Peter must have doubted the wisdom of such a suggestion, especially considering that he and his companions had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Despite this Peter's response to the Lord's request is the pattern for all those who aspire to follow Christ in every age and time: “If you say so ... “. For, like Peter, we must be as courageous in our response to the Lord when he asks of us to pull away from the comfort and security of safe harbours.

Recent pastoral letters and information from your parish priests have explained that two years ago I initiated a period of reflection and enquiry, which became known as 'Leaving Safe Harbours'. This initiative was in response to a request emerging from a meeting of the Deans. I invited four different groups, over 9 months, to examine the pressing issues of today. Each group included priests, religious, women and men. Working together, through reflection on the Word of God and a careful reading of the signs of our times, they sought to present a coherent response to the challenges we face. In doing so they offered a great service both to our own diocese and, indeed, wider society.

I am happy to say that at the beginning of July 2006, those involved in this initiative were able to present a broad set of proposals to priests, to a wider gathering of the diocesan family, and I gladly endorsed their wholehearted approval. So in September 2006 we were able, as a diocesan family, to embark on a new way forward.

I will attempt to present you with a clear picture of the way ahead and the reasons behind what is envisaged. I will also be inviting your participation and involvement in helping to shape the way things will develop in your own local area. Together we can face the future with confidence and hope, assured of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Provided that we, like Peter, place our trust in the one who calls us to “pay out our nets for a great catch”

Throughout its history, the Church has always developed rather than stood still - something which reflects the fact that we are, essentially, a pilgrim people. In our days and in our locality there are a number of reasons why managed change is necessary. Some are very obvious while others less so.

Consider, for example, the following statistics: In 1960 the Catholic population of the Diocese was approximately 750,000 people. Of those some 262,000 regularly attended Sunday Mass in 187 churches. At the time there were 461 active priests. Thirty-five years later, in 1995, the Catholic population had declined in number to a figure similar to that we see today - just over 500,000. The number of Catholics who attended Sunday Mass, however, was a proportionally lower figure - about 110,000, although the number of churches had increased to 223. The greatest change, however, was the number of active priests serving the diocese. It had been reduced by well over a half to 215.

By the time we come to 2005, although the overall Catholic population had remained relatively stable - at around 500,000 - the number of those who attended regular Sunday Mass had dropped still further to approximately 67,000. Slightly fewer churches, some 214, were now being served by 180 priests - although not all were available for parish ministry.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Catholic Population</i>	<i>Mass Attendance</i>	<i>No. of Churches</i>	<i>No. of priests</i>
1960	750,000	262,000	187	461
1995	502,945	110,000	223	215
2005	500,000	67,000	214	180

Even a cursory look at these figures is enough to see why many people are concerned. But we have to be careful in our analysis. The obvious reduction in the number of priests is a matter of great concern, but the decline in the numbers of lay people attending Sunday Mass presents us with an even more alarming statistic.

Faced with these realities, how do we respond? What is required, I believe, is not just a restructuring of the diocese but a whole new determination to reach out both to those baptised, confirmed and on one special day first communicants, who now rarely pray with us, but also to those who do not know our Lord at all. That is what we mean by: Evangelisation.

The changes must be shaped to increase our readiness for a deeper response to the call from Christ to establish his Father's kingdom of justice, love and peace and to make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So our Diocesan Mission statement must say: *"Taking to heart the last words of the Lord Jesus, we will go out into the world to proclaim the Good News to the whole of Creation."*

If we are to take this mission, given us by Christ, seriously then some structural adjustments are required in order to make best use of energy and resources. The clustering of parishes in recent years was a move in the right direction but such arrangements are no longer sustainable.

It is important to realise that because of the present age profile of the clergy and the relative shortage of vocations, it is likely that by 2015 there will only be 100 active diocesan priests. Compared with years gone by this shows a considerable reduction in priestly numbers, but it is more than sufficient provided our expectation of priestly ministry and service is real and focused not on past demands but on present realities.

What we need is a new way of being a local Catholic community, which not only preserves what is best in our tradition but also holds out the prospect of future development.

Looking at the bigger picture, there was widespread recognition within the four exploratory groups that we have not yet allowed the insights of the Second Vatican Council called together by Pope John XXIII in the 1960s to bear fruit. The present situation offers an opportunity to embrace the aspirations and intentions of that Council to renew the Church in response to the Word of God in a rapidly changing scene.

I hope you will be able to see that the changes we are making are designed to:

- Deepen faith, hope and love
- Encourage a spirit of collaboration
- Help us to do better what we are already fruitfully doing.
- Make better use of resources
- Be flexible to local needs and situations

And all so as to accomplish evangelisation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Where do you see the need for change in your own local experience of Church?

What would be your greatest hope for any changes that might occur?

2. LEAVING SAFE HARBOURS - A THEOLOGY FOR OUR TIMES

Any renewal within the Church must be informed by fidelity to the Word of God, understood with the blessing of two thousands years of wise, holy, women and men. That is, we need a theological basis to carry us forward. I have been greatly encouraged that in the work of Leaving Safe Harbours the theology group began to spell out a vision rooted in all that God has done and is doing for us in his Son by the working of the Holy Spirit, to shape the future of the Diocese. In the near future, through a series of structured meetings, you will all have the opportunity to reflect on this rich, challenging and encouraging understanding of God's ways. But at this point I want to provide you with a brief overview.

Fragmentation and Contemporary Experience

At the beginning of the twenty first century, one of the dominant experiences is fragmentation. We see this fragmentation most immediately in the political, religious and economic divisions that run through the international community. However, the inroads of a culture of individualism and the pressures of life and work in a consumerist setting mean that at all levels of society, right into the heart of family life, people live disjointed and increasingly isolated lives. Many of us frequently experience within ourselves a lack of focus and integration of the various strands of life. Like the tormented man Our Lord once met: our name is Legion - we are torn and our life does not feel whole and at peace. There is a profound sense that life is lived in unconnected parcels, a sense that there is no strong centre to my life where I am at peace with myself and around which I can establish a way of living that is healthy and wholesome.

The Church as a Sacrament of Unity

In the days of the Cold War, when the East and West faced each other with the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction by nuclear weapons, Pope John XXIII's Council taught: the Church, at every level, must be a sacrament of unity for the whole human family. She is called to be an effective sign in the midst of society of what it means to live as members of the Body of Christ and to be the primary means by which that communion is realised. This invites us examine carefully the quality of our community life so that we can then sincerely look outwards with the mission to be a model of reconciliation and peace.

In the future our Catholic communities should become more obviously and effectively places where scattered humanity is drawn into unity in the person of Christ, through the activity of the Holy Spirit. In practical terms this implies, both deep and inspiring liturgy, but also the creation of other forms of engaging with the Word of God and life's joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. One example is small groups gathered for a variety of pastoral purposes, to share, pray, but always under the Word of God. We need to be enriched by thoughtful engagement with the Word of God outside of the Mass. In the new situation I hope for a flowering of all sorts of other spiritual activities designed to help believers and seekers alike grow in love and faith.

Our Common Calling

There is general agreement that, in spite of our aspirations to share our fidelity to our Lord with others, our Catholic parishes easily tend towards becoming inward looking. This is often described as maintenance rather than mission; we maintain what is focussed within the Church family, but forget the task of establishing God's kingdom of justice, love and peace.

Pope John Paul II described what is needed in these words: *“The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.”* (Chapter 17 of Pope John Paul II on the Mission of the Lay Faithful)

In ordinary lives of ordinary people Christ is made present. Like Christ, every baptised Christian is to proclaim the Good News, to worship God and to serve people. Because all are called to worship God we rightly speak of the priesthood of all the baptised; because the Holy Spirit is sent to us that the face of the earth may be renewed we *have*, all of us, a mission to the world. In the light of this what is the role of the ordained minister? Listen to what the catechism has to say: "*While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace - a life of faith, hope, charity, a life according to the Spirit, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal graces. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted through the sacrament of Holy Orders.*" (1547)

The Priestly Vocation

Priests can fear that pastoral areas we are establishing will just multiply demands made on them. Yet the catechism article suggests a new way of thinking. The bishops with the priests, as one body, and the deacons, are to be seen primarily as those who sustain and release the gifts of each and everyone. Priests are called to encourage, to enable, to discern and guide. This does not mean that priests around the Bishop cease to share in the mission of our one Good Shepherd and merely manage and co-ordinate the pastoral activity of the laity. That is not the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed during ordination. We must be ministers of the table of the Lord's word and the Lord's body, to sustain the church as the body of Christ~ and that means they must be ministers of unity, because there is one Lord, one baptism, one Body, one Spirit, one Church. As ONE all go out together to serve the Kingdom. My role as your Bishop is to serve this call to unity. The image of Church as sacrament of Unity has to be made visible by truly being one diocese. At its heart I must accept my vocation always to proclaim, build up and facilitate unity. I must be transparent to the one Lord, the one Good Shepherd, the icon and visible presence of Christ as the one Head. The pallium I wear as Archbishop reminds me to keep us all in communion with the successor of Saint Peter and so with the universal Church.

I am named at each Mass not because I am good and holy, which I am called to be, nor because I need prayer, which I do. It is because no Mass is the Mass of this community in isolation: we are always, many parishes, but by receiving the One Body and One Cup, one diocese, one with the whole Church. Especially out of love for our divided world I must build up a positive sense of diocese, with many gifts, but one in Christ. This will be expressed in many ways but there will be a special link between myself and those priests I have invited to become Pastoral Area Leaders. This communion with one another shall also be the clear purpose when Bishop Williams and I visit the pastoral areas and seek to form a deeper sense of the diocesan family. We must recognise and confirm what is happening in each place, but always keep every enterprise, every initiative one with every other sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit: one body, many members: all needed by each other and all in need of each other.

A People at the Crossroads

The proposed move to larger local structures places each Catholic community at a crossroads. The changes envisaged must be a springboard to redress the natural tendency to echo the fragmentation of broader society. The call for each one of us, Bishops, priests and people, is to have a sense of collective ownership and responsibility for the development of the Church and her mission to the wider society.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

Where do you see signs of fragmentation?

How could our local Catholic communities become more attractive and welcoming places?

Where is Christ made present in our lives?

3. LEAVING SAFE HARBOURS - NEW PASTORAL AREAS

The most obvious change initiated so far is the creation of new geographical units within the Diocese. Each unit we are calling a "Pastoral Area". In September 2006, twenty-four new Pastoral Areas replaced the previous deaneries. Covering approximately 8 present parishes they are all of a similar size with about 20,000 Catholics. The expectation is that in the future each one will be served by one priest to every 5,000 parishioners. In many places the change from Deanery to Pastoral Area might look nothing more than a change in name. This would be a serious mistake. This change points to a whole new set of relationships, attitudes and ways of working.

Teams of Priests In the foreseeable future priests will continue to be assigned to particular parishes within the Pastoral Area with most of their time spent in direct contact with a particular congregation. But the situation requires a new sense of partnership and collaboration between priests. Working as a team, under a Team Leader, they will work out their specific roles and personal responsibilities in the light of local needs and conditions.

Lay Collaboration and Involvement Another characteristic of the future I envisage is a new sense of collaboration between priests and people. Enshrined in new local structures the whole people of God will act together for the building up of the church in their locality. People from different parishes will learn to collaborate with each other, working together on matters of mutual concern. Sharing life and faith both with each other and the wider population we will create communities of life-giving conversation and encouragement.

Adult Formation The deepening of life in Christ for the diocese and increased readiness for evangelisation will only be accomplished through an on-going programme of adult education and formation. Supported by a new Pastoral Formation Team, this will be delivered within each pastoral area.

Schools and Colleges Catholic schools are vitally important for the renewal of the local church. They are recognised as places of formation and education for our children, often outstanding in what they offer. But they are also the points of contact for many parents who have, for various reasons, become detached from their religious home, the Parish, and from the source and summit of our Christian identity, the Sunday Mass. These proposals hold out the opportunity of deepening the home-school parish partnership with the shared development of pastoral initiatives designed to encourage growth in love and faith. I will be encouraging team leaders to work closely with head teachers and chaplains.

Ecumenical Partnerships In many places throughout the diocese there is a long tradition of ecumenical partnership. As each pastoral area plans its own development strategy, it will be important not to ignore this important aspect of our common life.

Implementation It is clear that the proper establishment of the pastoral areas will not happen overnight - there is a significant amount of preparation required. The newly established Vicariate for Evangelisation has been given the task of supporting the required changes. I have deliberately given it the name: Evangelisation: nothing has value which is not true to the call: "Go and make disciples."

Over a period of years each pastoral area will move through three stages: called Pastoral Areas in Preparation, Pastoral Areas in Transition and Pastoral Areas in Development. Let us look briefly at each stage:

1. Pastoral Areas in Preparation

All our 24 pastoral areas are now Pastoral Areas in Preparation. The main intention during this stage is to enable people in the pastoral area to prepare themselves for the new arrangements and to begin to set up the structures necessary to work in a new way together. This first stage will take different

amounts of time depending on local circumstances. Because of limited human resources at the level of the diocese, it is thought prudent to plan that every year five pastoral areas will move on to the transition stage. Five years from now I hope that every pastoral area will have moved in this direction.

2. Pastoral Areas in Transition

The central objective during this transition stage is for the pastoral area to draw up its own development plan - the implementation of this will only begin when the proposal has been considered by me and others, to make sure it is not at odds with what is happening across the whole diocese. An isolated plan would eventually collapse. We are asking each local area to shape its future but never in isolation from the overall picture and without consideration of our responsibility to the whole Church in this country and elsewhere. You will know the resources that you have and, together with me and others whose role is to keep aware of the whole picture, each local pastoral area will put forward its vision for the future. I am committed to this way of working. The transition stage may last as long as three years. It is important that this process is not rushed, but thoughtfully and prayerfully undertaken.

3. Pastoral Areas in Development

In this third stage, the agreed development plan will start to be implemented. This is not the end of the process but the beginning of a new way of thinking, planning, relating and growing.

Help and Support All that is envisaged will undoubtedly require on-going diocesan help and support. This assistance, particularly necessary as the pastoral areas move from one stage to the next, will be provided by:

The Vicariate for Evangelisation;
The Vicariate for Formation;
The Vicariate for Finance and Development.

Though, of course, other diocesan departments and agencies will also offer their own expertise and encouragement.

Closing Remarks As I look now at the process of change we have embarked upon, informed by prayerful reflection and discernment, *change in attitudes is our greatest challenge*. Many of us are not used to working collaboratively and the journey we have begun may well expose areas of great sensitivity. Mistakes will be made and not all we hope for will be realised without significant personal cost. All I would ask is that we try to be patient with each other, listening carefully and responding gracefully in a spirit of resolved unity and communion one with another. We will go far beyond mere toleration of each other or any forms of compromise. The place we have reached is not the end - this is a work in progress and there is much that remains to be learned, both from one another and those we encounter in wider society. Nevertheless, we travel together in hope and expectation. The Lord is always with us, as He promised, calling us on to new and greater wonders. **I invite you to work and prayer for the renewal of our diocese so that it may be a more authentic sign of God's love in our fragmented world and I invite you to play your part locally in making suggestions for the right way forward.**

Please join me in saying this prayer used at every meeting of 'Leaving Safe Harbours': *Holy God, whose presence must be made known in any structures we build and renew, establish us as a community of hope, never seeking to contain your mystery, but willing to be led, by the Holy Spirit, beyond safe harbours into new and sacred waters, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

What advantages can you see in organising the local Church into Pastoral Areas rather than independent parishes?

How can you "shape the way things will develop in your own local area"?