

# Parish Re-organisation in the Archdiocese of Armagh

## Initial Consultation Report Summary

By Shane Halpin, November 2007

### Introduction

During the month of June 2007 the priests of the Archdiocese of Armagh met in twelve groupings to respond to the consultation document produced by the diocese entitled *Moving Toward Parish Reorganisation 2007-2010: Clustering, Rationalisation, New Parish Structures and Ministries*. This document was produced by PALS<sup>1</sup>, the diocesan pastoral plan working group, and in it they attempted to:

- Clarify what they mean by clustering, rationalisation, new parish structures and ministries,
- Outline the reasons for working towards this new reality
- Consider some of the difficulties and challenges that need to be faced
- Suggest ways of addressing the difficulties and challenges

In August 2007 members of the diocesan pastoral council also met to respond to the document. In September and October 2007 there was a meeting in each of the 61 parishes in the diocese. These meetings took place with the relevant parish pastoral council or, where there was no pastoral council, a group of parishioners involved in pastoral ministry.

The following is a shortened summary report compiled for the PALS team of the responses of the priests and the responses of the parish pastoral councils/groups as well as the diocesan pastoral councils, and concludes with the main areas of consensus drawn from the meetings. A full detailed summary report has been sent to the Bishops and all parish priests and parish pastoral council/group in the archdiocese.

### Format of the meetings

The meeting was divided into three parts.

1. In the first part, the structure and the main substance of the document was reviewed to get a sense of overall thoughts on the document.
2. The second part dealt with six feedback and discussion questions covering the following areas;
  - clustering
  - rationalisation
  - clarification on new parish ministries and structures
  - convincing reasons
  - commitment
  - capacity/capability
3. The final part allowed those in attendance to add any final comments on the process or anything that had not already been said.

The purpose of the evening was to hear from each group, whether priest or lay, their thoughts and responses on the document entitled *Moving Toward Parish Reorganisation In The Archdiocese Of Armagh 2007 – 2010: Clustering, Rationalisation, New Parish Structures And Ministries compiled* by a working group of the diocesan pastoral plan.

If it were at all possible these meetings were independently facilitated and minutes of the consultations were sent to the PALS team in the diocese during the month of October 2007.

### What was asked?

***Q: What did you like in the definition of clustering and rationalisation and what were you uneasy with? What would you change, if anything, in the following definitions?***

#### Clustering

When we speak of clustering in the context of the Armagh diocesan pastoral plan we mean the bringing together of two or more parishes which remain separate entities for the purpose of:

- *Sharing personnel, resources, training and information;*
- *Offering support to the priests, lay leaders and pastoral councils of each parish;*

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<sup>1</sup> PALS – Diocesan working group responsible for parish pastoral councils, attending to diocesan and parish structures, leadership and training and parish surveys.

- *Creating opportunities for the laity and priest together to investigate, ponder and make decisions about pastoral matters that are more suitably addressed by the group of clustered parishes together; in such a way that priests are supported and lay people are empowered in furthering the mission of Christ in the locality and in the world.*

### **Rationalisation**

Rationalisation in the context of the Armagh diocesan plan will entail an assessment and evaluation of the needs and demands of each parish and the needs of the diocese with a view to deciding: -

1. How many priests will serve in each parish?
2. Which parishes can be prepared to be without a resident priest?
3. What resources are to be allocated to the employment of lay leaders?
4. What churches can be less used?
5. Which parishes are in need of new churches?
6. How many Masses are to be celebrated at the weekend and on weekdays?
7. What personnel are needed to work at diocesan level? So that the diocese can carry on the mission of Christ in the light of fewer priests and an increasingly involved laity.

***Q: What did you like in the following clarification and what were you uneasy with?  
What would you change, if anything, in the clarification?***

### **New Parish Ministries and Structures clarified**

New parish structures and ministries (voluntary and professional) will emerge in the context of the process of clustering and rationalisation that the diocese is embarking on. For the purposes of clarity we adopt the definition of ministry proposed by Thomas O'Meara. O'Meara states: *Christian Ministry is the public activity of a baptised follower of Jesus Christ flowing from the Spirit's charism and an individual personality, on behalf of a Christian community, to witness, to serve and realise the Kingdom of God.*

While it is not clear yet what structures and ministries may emerge we are committed to fostering their emergence through training, formation, and financial support.

***Q: How convincing are the reasons offered to undertake this process of reorganisation?  
What convincing reasons would you add? What, if any, would you take away?***

Four reasons are offered for embarking on the process of clustering, rationalisation, new parish structures and ministries. They are:

1. An expanding theology of lay ecclesial ministry
2. The importance of the Sunday Eucharist
3. An aging and declining presbyterate
4. There are some things that can be done more effectively in clusters.

***Q: How committed are we to parish reorganisation? What obstacles are you aware of that have not been addressed here? What obstacle named here is not relevant to us? Which do you see as the primary blocks to parish reorganisation in the Archdiocese of Armagh?***

The document offers 11 global obstacles and seven local obstacles to collaboration:

- low self-esteem;
- arrogance and self-righteousness;
- burnout;
- hostility;
- inability or unwillingness to deal with conflict;
- lack of forgiveness;
- unwillingness to deal with loss, termination, and separation;
- a lack of integrated sexuality;
- a lack of knowledge of one's own gifts or the gifts of one's co-workers;
- an unwillingness or fear of sharing faith;
- learned helplessness

The local are from the Office of Pastoral Renewal and Family Ministry:

- increasing secularisation;
- a culture of apathy;
- clericalism;
- a status quo mentality;
- underdeveloped spirituality;
- fractured community;
- poor capacity.

***Q: What are your comments on the timeline proposed? What stood out for you as most significant in this section? Which proposals are key to the success of this process? What would you add or take away from this process for parish re-organisation to happen effectively in our diocese?***

The fourth step is capacity or capability. This part outlines a process and timeline for parish reorganisation as follows:

1. initial consultation May – September 2007;
2. forming parish pastoral councils, ongoing until June 2009;
3. creating a prayer process – October 2007;
4. launching the parish re-organisation process – First Sunday of Advent 2007;
5. initial formation 2008 – 2009;
6. parish assessment and consultation January 2008 – Easter 2009;
7. unveiling the recommendations Pentecost 2009;
8. preparing for parish re-organisation July – Advent 2009;
9. the cluster assembly day Advent 2009;
10. forming the cluster commissions and the cluster pastoral council 2010.

## **Key areas of agreement from the priests and lay people**

Having reported on the feedback from all the groups, a number of key areas of agreement have come up. These are:

### **Communication**

- Need for simple clear English when communicating with the wider parish. Documents can be detailed, if necessary, but must use everyday terminology to avoid confusion and alienation.
- There is a need for communication that has to be professional and convey a message that takes into account the needs and aspirations of the people where possible.
- All modern methods of communication to be used, not just the traditional directive from the pulpit. (It was worth noting that several of the consultation meetings reported the fact that a number, if not all of people in attendance, had not read the document.)
- Should be a positive message.
- Listening and hearing the people is vitally important.

### **Consultation**

- It is vital that any plan has at its backbone the agreement of the people. Those in favour of this strategy said that it must be inclusive, professional and promoted for positive reasons.
- Any decisions relating to closures must have the agreement of people on the ground and must be seen as a last resort.

### **Implementation**

- There was general consensus that the document did not offer any real understanding to either group how it intended to implement the plan. Who was going to make the decisions and on what basis were these decisions going to be made?
- There is a need for the development of a clear and costed implementation plan based on the needs assessment of the individual parishes.

### **Education and Formation**

- There was consensus that a huge effort has to go into the evangelisation and catechesis within the diocese of both priest and lay person.
- There is a need for education on Ministry in all its various forms and what it means in the context of parish. Many lay people agree with the priests that there is a lack of understanding of the concept of Christian witness, and of the concept of ministry in general.
- There are needs around the role and involvement of women in the formal ministry of the Church.

### **Prayer**

- One of the key areas of consensus among all respondents was prayer and that this needs to be a Spirit-driven strategy. All groups emphasised the importance of the Eucharist in all of this and requested that considerable discernment and prayer went into the making of these important decisions.

### **Identity**

- Many in both groups raised the issue of identity. What is my role as a lay person and what is my role as a priest? What about the role of the diaconate? If new structures are to emerge they all believe that a clear understanding must be put forward as to roles and responsibilities, job descriptions and reporting structures.

### **Workloads**

- There were many in agreement with the need to do something about the workload currently existing in parishes and although there did not appear to be a consensus on what should be done all were accepting this reality. Many felt that there is only so much a priest can do and others felt there is only so much a lay person could do.

### **Driver**

- There was a general consensus also that this process needs a clearly defined driver who will be seen to take the process through from start to finish. A call for the Bishop to become more visible in the process was also apparent.

### **Urgency**

- There were many from both groups who felt that this process of engaging with lay people should have happened before this crisis but there is a consensus from the consultation that something has to be done.

- Timescales for many respondents appear to be too tight. It is perhaps difficult to judge on the timescales allocated, as many are dealing with this issue for the first time and will need to be eased into the new reality facing their parishes. I would imagine that flexibility will be called for, but in general terms people must be held to accountability. Otherwise nothing will be achieved.

## **Conclusion**

Having read all recorded submissions from the diocese, I believe that there is now a greater understanding of the challenge facing the diocese in the years ahead. It is generally believed by those consulted that the process, if we are honest with each other, has been undertaken primarily because the number of vocations entering the priesthood has dropped. It is also the general consensus that this proposed strategy outlined in the consultation document, although not explicit, has for the most part already been decided. There is also a realisation that the 'how' and the mechanisms to enable this process are not in place yet and people are interested to know what is waiting for them.

Finally, there were many respondents from all sections of society embracing fully the concept of a more involved laity and recognition that all are called to the 'royal priesthood.' There were many too, in favour of any strategy that had the agreement of the people and most were thankful for the opportunity to be consulted and encouraged by the future challenges that can be faced together. *S.H 2007*

### About the author:

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