Parish Re-organisation in the Archdiocese of Armagh
Initial Consultation Report

November 2007

Prepared for the PALS Working Group in the Archdiocese of Armagh

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Contents

1.0   BACKGROUND

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[1], 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 summary report compiled for the PALS team that aims to communicate, as objectively as possible 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.

The members of the PALS team are, Rev. Oliver Brennan, Bishop Gerard Clifford, Anne Gallagher, Liam McCallion, Sheila McEneaney, Rev. Andrew McNally, Rev. Michael O'Dwyer and Debra Snoddy.

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[1]PALS – Diocesan working group responsible for parish pastoral councils, attending to diocesan and parish structures, leadership and training and parish surveys.

2.0   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.

3.0 Response from the <u>Pastoral Councils/Groups</u> of the Archdiocese of Armagh

a)   Initial reactions

Q.   What struck you in what you read and why did it strike you?

On reading through the initial reactions there was a certain sense of anxiety and fear among many of the respondents in the pastoral councils and parish groups interviewed. There were concerns on many levels, concerns about being without a priest in their parish, concerns of churches closing, and the impact of this on their community life. There were many who said that they didn't like change and were anxious about losing their identity as a parish. Questions were asked around why we had reached this point and whether this was indeed a crisis point? Was it over-ambitious in the timescale outlined? Why had nothing apparently been done over the last ten years? - Cardinal Daly had spoken about this as early as 1995. Many were concerned by the statistics of the aging population of priests and indeed ageing congregations around the diocese. There was urgency expressed by several groups.

Almost all the pastoral councils/groups that responded mentioned difficulties with the nature and

complexity of the document. 'Don't use Church language – lay people do not understand it', was one comment. Many found it too American, too professionalised, too full of 'ecclesial jargon,' which many felt defeated the purpose of a wide consultation. Many felt it should be simpler, less complicated and more practical, particularly if one is to bring it to a wider body of people. There were concerns that the document was based on case studies that were not representative of our particular Irish situation. Although the document clearly outlined for many the reason why the plan was being put in place, the 'how it will be done' was not so clear. The fact that a reduced number of Masses will mean a reduced amount of income was one such practical comment.

There was also a certain degree of scepticism expressed by the pastoral councils/groups, wondering if their feedback would have any impact on decisions that appear to have been already made. Another group asked if this was really a genuine attempt to implement the decisions of the *Second Vatican Council*. One meeting felt that there was a certain amount of defensiveness in the document trying to justify conclusions drawn. Others felt that the document provided information based on a narrow set of solutions with no other solutions being either given or asked for.

Some were surprised by the fact that the promotion of vocations was not mentioned in the document and some questioned the apparent lack of trust and faith in God. Others said the process would not work unless there was a serious evangelisation of the people. There were some worries expressed about the health of priests, the increased workload of priests in a clustering situation and concern as to whether lay people will be available or interested in taking on a greater role. How will these lay people be selected?

On the positive side, there was a warm welcome by most for the greater involvement of lay people in the church and for being involved in the consultation process. Many were excited by the underlying possibilities for moving the Church forward and felt the document needed to be more positive, concentrating more on where the Church is vibrant and succeeding, and less on the problem areas. One group spoke of the African experience of small Christian communities empowering lay people to be active in the Church in the absence of a full-time priest. Another asked whether a cleric needed to be at the top of a clustered structure, or could other creative models be introduced?

b)   Clustering Defined

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;

- 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.

**Q.   What did you like in this definition and what were you uneasy with?
          What would you change, if anything, in the definition?**

The majority of respondents liked the sense of togetherness, which the sharing of resources proposed by the definition. More liked the concept of the laity and priests working together and

many felt it was a sensible direction in which to head. Some felt that it would enable the parish to learn from others and would be a more efficient use of resources, priests, people and facilities. One group mentioned that it could cut out duplication in planning. If it really did lessen the workload of priests there would be real value in it and there could be particular benefit to 'one man' parish operations. One respondent thought one could introduce it slowly by sharing and swapping priests with neighbouring parishes in an effort to break people in gently to the concept.

In terms of the definition itself some did not like the term 'cluster', and suggested a number of possible options including, 'union', 'partnerships', 'regrouping' and 'sharing'. Others had problems with the use of the words 'to empower' suggesting 'to enable', or 'to assist', as alternative words. Some felt that the definition of cluster was fine but there was no clarity in the description of what clustering may mean and how it could be implemented. One group felt that the definition or description of clustering should outline the vision and the purpose of it and provide more detail on the proposed diocesan resources required to make it work. One recommended a rewording of the sentence...'which remain separate entities for the purpose of' which can be read in two different ways. One suggestion was to leave out the bullet points in the definition altogether and amend as follows;

'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) in such a way that priests are supported and lay people are empowered in furthering the mission of Christ in the locality and the world.'

It would be good, some said, if there they could refer to an Irish case study so that people could see what it could mean in practice. One group suggested that a change be made to include a statement that declares that local resources stay under the control of the "separate entity" parish. It was also suggested that mechanisms for dealing with the changes, i.e. sharing of resources, be included in the description as well as possible models outlining how parishes should execute financial control within their cluster. The question was asked whether a cluster would have a decision-making ability and how it would relate to the existing pastoral councils.

Another suggested adding some clarity on the role and responsibility of a priest within a parish before determining the very necessary role and responsibility for any lay leader. The phrase in the definition 'that priests are supported' through clustering was highlighted as being unclear. How would that support happen and who would provide that support? Will the parish be required to appoint someone?

There was concern expressed about a number of key issues. All parish councils appear to be concerned about the threat to their parish identity and are grappling with the concept of separate entities being brought together. Smaller parishes are concerned about being swallowed up, rural parishes about being linked to urban areas, and questions with regard to boundaries and affinities to certain areas which in some cases are historical and geographical. There was much talk questioning the need for clustering with one parish group mentioning that the diocese had 90,000 more people over a hundred years ago and had fewer priests than we have today. There was some concern voiced about who would decide on the clustering, and how. Also there was concern on practical issues like where would the priest reside, and about the disposal of assets. It was felt that there should be input and consultation on this at grassroots level. One group said that it was important to look at the parishes that were expanding, particularly those on the edge of urban areas.

Some felt that clustering would involve more travelling and this could affect the elderly in particular. Another felt that clustering was a quick fix and does not address the underlying issue of vocations. He felt that that there was an element of contradiction in the statements in that on the one hand it was talking about empowering the parish to be stronger through increased lay commitment, whilst on the other hand it was suggesting breaking the already established community ties and structures.

On the subject of lay involvement, it was felt that the consultation must include all the people of the parish and begin with them. Lay training must be thorough and a clear understanding of the various roles and concepts needs to be outlined. What is going to be the formal involvement? What resources are going to be forthcoming from the diocese? One respondent said that we could take lessons from other religious denominations. A number of parishes felt that we need to be careful not to undermine the position of priest and one respondent said that the priest must front the cluster. The majority of respondents felt that the statement provides them with an 'unhappy reality'.

c)   Rationalisation Defined

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 this definition and what were you uneasy with?

What would you change, if anything in the definition?

The whole area of rationalisation caused much debate and concern among the pastoral councils/ groups in this consultation process. Although many had no real problem with the definition as such, describing it as clear, direct, and to the point, there was considerable emotion from the groups around the issues raised. One said that rationalisation is generally unwelcome in whatever context and this is no different. One group, for instance, thought that rationalisation was defeatist and it sends out the wrong message. Another questioned whether the strategy was not more likely to encourage a decline in the faith by reducing the limited resources already in the parishes. Another felt there should be a certain degree of autonomy as 'if something is not broken don't fix it.'

In terms of the definition itself, one respondent thought it could be re-termed as 'reorganisation,' rather than as a rationale for undertaking action that has already been decided. Another suggested that it should appear before the paragraph on clustering in the document. One asked how can a parish 'be prepared' to be without a priest? Is this a formation process or what does it entail? A number of parish groups felt that the definition should include a lot more in terms of the 'how' and not just the 'why.' As a definition of rationalisation it was clear cut, if not too utilitarian for a discussion document on faith and Church. People remarked on the lack of a faith dimension to it

and some had difficulties with its professionalised approach.

In terms of how this rationalisation should take place, some were very welcoming of the opportunity for an independent needs assessment within parishes, but questioned who would undertake this and who would have input into this. The same group felt that the definition, therefore, needed more qualitative and quantitative criteria for such a needs assessment. Others felt strongly that they needed to be involved in any process of rationalisation. Others believed that it was ultimately the decision of the Bishop and not for the laity.

There were a lot of particular questions asked highlighting anxiety amongst many of the respondents. For instance, why were they not consulted before this document was produced? Has the diocese looked at other structures from other denominations, for example, the Presbyterian Church? What formula will be used to determine who gets a priest and who doesn't, and what churches may have to close? Are we going to employ lay administrators/pastoral workers? Where is the money coming from? What parishes are in need of new churches and why? What are the plans for deacons? In priestless parishes who will chair the pastoral council and make decisions with regard to maintenance and other issues? What about the collection of dues and vacant parochial properties?

A number of respondents talked specifically about the usage of the existing church buildings. Some asked how we could make more effective use of the building, perhaps creating a multipurpose option for the parish. Another suggested the use of oratories as opposed to full churches. Although most objected to the closure of any churches, one respondent suggested that we should rather close all but one church in a cluster so that we don't have one parish feeling more privileged than another. 'This would create hostility,' he said. Another suggested that the laity should continue to use the church building in the absence of a priest, inferring that these churches at risk could be used to train lay leaders to undertake pastoral services for the parish.

Many of the respondents were looking for clarity on roles and responsibilities of priests and lay people. Some felt that the assessment should look in particular at the personnel needs of the future and how lay people can be incorporated into the structures, one adding that one can't expect the priest to do everything anymore; we must do our share and allow priests to get back on the beat. Others mentioned what they saw as 'the diminishing role of the priest', and questioned whether there were 'any lay people either willing or worthy to serve.' Some felt that the introduction of paid lay people could spell the end of volunteers and another questioned whether a lay leader would get the respect from the people in a parish. Another said 'there is so much wisdom and experience in parishes that is not being used and we must use it.'

The issue of communication was high on the priority for the pastoral councils. Many were wondering how this message was going to be conveyed to the people. There was some concern about the role of the PPC in carrying out or being involved in this function for fear of being seen as presenting a 'select view' of the parish to the diocese. Many stressed the need for wider and clearer consultation, using simple and effective language. One had a fear that all this consultation would be carried out and nothing would happen, pleading for clear action in this new chapter in the life of the Church in Ireland.

    d)   **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. **What did you like in this clarification and what were you uneasy with?**

What would you change, if anything, in the clarification?

There were a number of pastoral councils who, although they had no real concerns about the need and rationale for the proposal, had difficulty with the wording of this clarification. In particular, many cited O'Meara's definition as confusing, foreign, and hard to understand. The term 'lay ministry' relating to lay involvement in the Church was also confusing for some. One or two requested a rewriting in more simple language. One parish recommended the use of visuals and a flowchart to illustrate new structures and ministries. One group said that the definition of new and emerging ministries described in greater detail in the main document (p.11) provided greater clarity. Another group proposed that the wording in the definition be changed from 'may emerge' with 'will be developed as needs emerge,' emphasising the need for a parish consultation process to arrive at a consensus on what new parish ministries are needed. One respondent urged the inclusion of leadership development in the definition.

There were general questions as to what these ministries could be saying and that the definition was not clear as to what is being proposed. One group mentioned that on the one hand we are trying to remain 'separate entities' yet on the other we are merging to find new structures and ministries. It was felt by one group that it was important to acknowledge that existing parish structures are already working in many cases and that reorganisation does not have to be from scratch.

One group said that the level of lay involvement currently depends on the attitude and openness of the priest. New models and structures may help to change this obstacle. Another council felt it important not to suggest that being 'professional' is better than being a 'volunteer' within a parish. One respondent liked the concept of parish management if it relieved the pressure on the priest. Another felt that one of the big problems currently is the small turnover of lay people involved in the Church and there is a need for a rotation of people involved to avoid cliques and bring in new life. Others questioned if this meant a new role for women, a role for deacons (female deacons) and foreign priests in this development.

In terms of implementation, there were concerns among a few respondents about the training and the roles and responsibilities of lay pastoral associates. One group had concerns that the transfer of moral authority to an individual may be problematic and suggested a pastoral support group to be considered within parishes. 'Would a lay leader be respected?' they asked. Others had worries about heresies being propagated and that protection mechanisms needed to be built into this process. Another asked 'where will these ministers come from, the parish?' One respondent argued that it was important that the priests pioneered this process from the pulpits adding that there was a need for positive and proactive position to be taken.

In summary, there were concerns about the clarity offered by this definition and need for greater detail as to what is envisaged, how it could it be afforded and how it could develop.

e) Convincing Reasons

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 convincing do you find the four reasons for parish reorganisation?

What convincing reasons would you add?

What, if any, would you take away?

Many felt that the four reasons given were indeed the crux of the matter, although some felt you only needed one reason and that was to ensure that Eucharist is maintained. As a result, many of the groups questioned the order in which the reasons were given. Many felt that there would be no movement to introduce change if it were not for the decrease in the number of priests in the diocese. However, many of these same groups felt that lay ministry should be promoted and encouraged, regardless of priest numbers.

Some felt that there was no hope offered in the current wording, and that there is an opportunity to evangelise and to get active and be part of something rather than paint a pessimistic and depressing picture. 'This', one said, 'is a fantastic opportunity for the development and expansion of lay ministry.' One mentioned that their group was part of a huge network of communities stretching from the far North to the South built up over many hundreds of years and full of possibilities as an expanded Catholic network.

Others had difficulty with the term 'ecclesial ministry,' which they found confusing, and felt should be stated in less technical language. Another asked if was being optimistic to say that this ministry was expanding, looking at the decreasing numbers attending Mass. Another felt that the word 'presbyterate' should be replaced with 'priesthood' – this could be misinterpreted and 'is unnecessary use of a more difficult word.' Another felt that the word 'Sunday' should be dropped.

A number of suggestions were put forward on what they saw as *other* convincing reasons to act.

- Importance of involving lay people in the life of the Church as promoted by Vatican II
- Answer those who are searching for meaning in life.
- Opportunity to attract new people to Mass and to taking on more responsibility in the Church: i.e. youth
- Opportunity to reach out, for faith development, for healing in communities
- Reconciliation
- Outreach to foreign nationals
- Benefit from the richness of ministry that comes from clustering

A number of parishes said that the reasons put forward are convincing for change but did not necessarily see how clustering could assist. Another said that these statistics demand action.

f) Commitment

How committed are we to parish reorganisation?   The document offers 11 global obstacles and seven local obstacles to collaboration. The global obstacles are from Sofield and Juliano[2]:

- 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 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?

As the document outlined, the step from conviction to commitment is a difficult one for many varied reasons and the parishes were asked to consider a selection of blocks, obstacles, and indeed challenges to achieving commitment for this process within the diocese.

There was general consensus that most of these obstacles (some people suggested that 'challenges' would be a better word) were relevant in some way or other to every parish. One group said that this list of obstacles covered the whole human condition and that it was very overwhelming to have it all listed in this manner. Another felt that the tone of this section was insulting - suggesting people have psychological issues if they object rather that simple misgivings about the process. A number felt that this section should focus more on the positive and one made reference to page 18 of the document where it said:

"The essential elements of the process include
- *Creating a climate in which people feel free to discern their gifts*
- *Developing a method for sharing and clarifying the individual gifts*
- *Examining ways these gifts can be used in ministry"*

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[2]Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano, Collaboration: Using Our Gifts in Ministry (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2000

One group said that people would always find reasons not to be committed to something and felt that discussion on these reasons were irrelevant.

The section did, however, give people an opportunity to reflect and think about some of the challenges that they could envisage working towards reorganisation in their local parish and within the diocese as a whole. The new additions, some of which are nuances of those already provided, are as follows:

1. The need for listening – a two-way process
2. Fear - fear of change, of the unknown, of ridicule and begrudgery and fear of loss of identity.
3. Lack of prayer
4. Negativity – this will fail attitude
5. Christian formation not happening effectively at school and upwards.
6. Financing the changes, accountability and transparency.
7. Laziness, selfishness among the people.
8. Unwillingness to recognise the new reality.
9. Lack of clear vision.
10. Need to include a multicultural perspective to this commitment, people of all nations and races.
11. Conflict that will arise between unwilling partners in cluster situations, personalities, priests and people.
12. Conservatism particularly among newly ordained priests
13. Need to include young people to get their commitment
14. Need spiritual leadership of clergy and somebody to take responsibility for process.
15. Lack of charisma among certain priests, unable to motivate people.
16. Modern media is seen as antagonistic
17. Imposition of a solution without consultation and agreement
18. Alienation and disillusion with Church, e.g. child abuse scandals, separated and divorced, and other alienated groupings within the Church.
19. Increased materialism resulting in no need for God.
20. Inability to commit to anything.

g)   Capacity and Capability

The fourth step is capacity or capability. This part outlines a process and timeline for parish reorganisation as follows (pages 22-27):

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.

Q.   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

In this section, the parish pastoral councils were asked to reflect on the proposals put forward by the working group with regard to the *capacity* and the *capability* to make this plan a reality. It included a timeline of activities with proposed dates.

Many of the parish councils were surprised by this section and were concerned that it was a *fait accompli,* as it appeared that detailed strategies had been already determined and agreed upon. However, many of the facilitators referred them to the full document where it clearly states that these are *proposed* elements of a process of parish reorganisation and the PALS team are clearly asking for feedback on the wisdom of the proposals outlined.

Many were surprised at the urgency of the plan and others at the speed in which it hopes to implement. Some, therefore, thought that the timeline proposed was too tight. Others thought we should implement immediately and start drip-feeding the information to the parish and not wait till 2008. Many thought it was too ambitious a project to carry out by 2010. One or two groups felt it should be organic and allow to grow with flexibility as needs develop. Others recommended that this is an opportunity to develop individual parish charters and plans in line with the diocesan overall objectives.

A number of groups spoke of the key issue of parish pastoral council development and were again surprised about the lack of such structures in the diocese. How come this has been allowed to happen? 'Surely', they said, 'this is the first and most important step in the process.' Others said that they were not informed about any of these issues in their training and it adds considerable burden on their shoulders. Others felt that this plan is huge and questioned the availability of trained personnel in the diocese. 'Who is going to implement this plan?' There is an urgent need to upskill people to assist in its implementation. Another respondent felt that more care and discernment is now required on the part of the diocese in making clerical appointments to make this process effective.

Many spoke about communication and the need to handle this professionally from day one, getting the right people in place at diocesan level, planned, promoted and orchestrated with the widest consultation possible. They stressed the need for the launch to be properly marketed with effective handling of the media (to the advantage of the diocese), and a strategy, perhaps from a recognised PR company, on how best to get the message out there. Future literature, they said, 'should be simple, user-friendly, positive documents spelling out the advantages of the process, effectively a sales document'. One group said that 'much of the document is fine on paper but will it work in reality?' Several parishes commented on the use of modern media to get the message across including the use of website, CD or DVD dissemination, email and other such methods. They also expressed the importance of timely information being provided to the parish pastoral councils when it comes time for dissemination to the wider parish. Others mentioned the importance of communicating with schools and getting the messages to young people and keeping them in the process. One group discussed the concept of a junior parish pastoral council to bring along new blood into the process of decision making and planning in the parish.

All agreed it was vital that any plan had 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.' Many were encouraged by the prayer process mentioned and hoped that it would be guided and led by the priests in the diocese.

A number of parish councils were again concerned about the financial aspects of this proposal asking whether it has been costed and whether a full financial appraisal has been carried out. Others asked if there were going to be an 'opt out clause' built into this process and what about resistance to clustering, for example, from priests and people? 'Is there a fallback solution?' Another said it would be useful to know 'what are the current problems in the diocese to give a greater understanding of the present reality.'

One parish highly recommended on-going evaluation to be carried out during the process at parish level to ensure the desired results are being achieved.

h)   Any other comments

The last section of the meeting gave the members of the pastoral councils an opportunity to add any further comments for the consultation process.

A common theme for the final comments among many of the groups consulted was a concern that their views would not be taken on board and given a hearing. There were also many requests for urgency and an appeal for simple language to be used for any future communication. Although there were many varied comments offered, this report outlines for the most part those that have not been mentioned already in the main feedback.

One parish group asked whether the right questions have been asked in this consultation, 'querying definitions and not really focusing on the major concepts enshrined in the paper.' This, they said, 'makes one question the integrity of the process.' 'Clustering', one respondent said, 'is not the most important issue, more basic matters need to be looked at.' Another group suggested that before any recommendations are made, regarding the decision to cluster, a survey of all that is already happening be undertaken in every parish recognising the variety of ministries, activities and other voluntary services. A survey, they said, would also be able to determine the present pattern of Sunday worship over a period. With reference to the document itself, one respondent felt that the thought process was unclear, in that 'the solutions were offered before the problems were enunciated.' Another felt 'we should think outside the box more often.'

Another grouping referred to the need to halt the process altogether and forget new structures and new ministries, emphasising the need for evangelisation of our homes, our parish communities and our diocese. They felt that rather than destroying existing structures, we should look to come together 'that through togetherness comes strength and with strength comes the power to overcome any challenges.'

Several of the councils brought up the issue of priests and one asked 'do they really want change?' This person indicated that this process would be difficult for both priests and lay people. Another parish said that we should be looking to 'a new system of priesthood in order to carry on the Eucharist and we need a new presentation of sacraments to cater for present day challenges.' Another believed we should reflect on what it means to be a priest and indeed a layperson in the 21

century. Another group believed that the whole deployment of priests should be carefully looked at, for example: with three priests between two parishes, it would seem preferable to have one parish priest and two curates. Another asked about the ordered priests, and asked whether there are plans to invite them into the running of parishes.

Another queried whether we have talked to those who have 'left' the Church? 'What have they to say? Are we looking after ourselves in this situation of need and will measures be put in place to reach out to "lapsed" Catholics?' One group suggested a programme of parish visitation, where people can be told in their own homes of the reality regarding clergy numbers and this is a way of educating people.

On the subject of clustering, another group said they would not be in favour of splitting up parishes. 'Keep the parish entities intact and merge wholes together. Preserving the concept and awareness of parish boundaries is important for succeeding generations in terms of history, ancestry and sense of place.' Another group queried whether the concept of regionalisation was more appropriate than clustering. Another proposed that we put forward possibilities of names for clustered parishes. Another respondent was worried whether clustering meant the reorganisation of parish schools.

There were a number of comments about the need to get all the people on board. There was an emphasis on the young in particular who need to be part of this process. One suggested a spiritual revival and suggested the use of seminars as a way of speeding things up. Another recommended that the Bishops visit the parishes more often and importantly keep the people informed of the changes. Another felt that a PowerPoint presentation could be developed and used in parishes to promote this.

The issue of gender equality also featured in the comments with one or two requesting that the role of women needs to be equalised with men in the church. For the record, there were also several comments made by respondents concerning the need for women priests, married clergy, and for both male and female deacons.

Most of the respondents chose the final comments to thank the facilitators for the opportunity to discuss the document, which they found helpful. In the words of one parish, 'It is amazing what can be done in the diocese if we set our minds to it!'

4.0 Response from the <u>Priest's vicariate</u> meetings of the Archdiocese of Armagh

a)   Initial Reactions

Q.   What struck you in what you read and why did it strike you?

The initial reaction to the document from the priests ranged from apprehension and fear to a cautious welcome and some excitement. Some expressed sadness and seriously questioned whether all other possible avenues had been exhausted.

Many felt that the document, although very comprehensive, needed to be simplified for use in parishes with particular attention to use of language. It was generally accepted that the document was produced as a result of the declining presbyterate in the diocese, the statistics of which surprised many of the clergy involved. Many spoke of the changing Ireland in which they were all working. All spoke of the considerable workload involved both in the current running of parishes and the anticipated workload and other challenges as a result of the planned changes within the diocese.

Most were encouraged by the greater involvement of lay people, favouring a more democratic model of church with greater sharing of responsibilities. Others asked quite directly whether this lay involvement would be forthcoming. Others felt that lay people would be shocked by the proposals and would need time to readjust. Some mentioned the need to recognise declining attendances at Masses, which compound the challenge. Some were concerned about the reaction of the laity to the proposed changes and others spoke of the urgent need for education through evangelisation and catechesis within the diocese. Some felt that they themselves needed to re-educated and prepared for the changes.

The initial response to the proposed timeline for implementation varied, some feeling that the process must be taken more slowly, others believing that it needed to catch up.

b)   Clustering Defined

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;

- 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.

Q.   What did you like in this definition and what were you uneasy with?

What would you change, if anything, in the definition?

Almost all the priests welcomed the concept of clustering if as a result it created a true sharing of resources, particularly covering for the priest in the event of a sickness or absence. The concept of

the parish remaining a 'separate entity' within the cluster was welcomed as it took into consideration the different aspirations of parishes within the diocese. Some felt that the clustering would enable the parish to see outside its own borders and be stimulated by the activities and expertise of other groups.

However, there were concerns about whether parishes could remain as 'separate entities' within a cluster and how this could be administered; what resources were to be shared and whether there would be a willingness on both priests and laity to cooperate in such a cluster. Some thought that parishes were fragmented as they were even before considering clustering. Some felt the pastoral councils were only finding their feet and that this would be a major responsibility for them. They felt there is a need for greater formation and training to support the process. Others questioned the practicality of the cluster and asked if it would reflect the existing makeup of the vicariates within the diocese.

c)   Rationalisation Defined

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 priest and an increasingly involved laity.

Q   What did you like in this definition and what were you uneasy with?

What would you change, if anything, in the definition?

The concept of rationalisation within the diocese perhaps understandably raised considerable emotion and depth of feeling among the priest respondents. Many expressed concern that the closure of churches was highly emotive and should be a last resort. Any such consideration should be done in a consultative approach with the people on the ground. The commitment to rationalisation, they believe, requires a named leader, someone, presumably the Bishop, who is prepared to stand over the process and see it through. There was a clear request for consultation and discernment to be carried out from grassroots level up before any major rationalisation is undertaken. There was a request that the Bishop, as part of this listening process, visit every parish in the diocese.

The priests were concerned about their own health in the event of undertaking major rationalisation decisions, as they will form the buffer between the parish and the diocese. The priests, however, wished to endorse lay leaders and again called for increased education among lay people and an explanation of the demands of our Christian witness.

Some spoke of a need to give more recognition and responsibility to lay people through the conducting of communion services and parish chaplaincies quite independent of the priest. Others commented favourably on the issue of permanent deaconate. Others called for the reintroduction of married priests and some for an invitation to priests from other countries.

d) 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   What did you like in this clarification and what were you uneasy with?

   What would you change, if anything, in the clarification?

There was a varied response from the priest respondents in relation to this definition. Although one vicariate did feel that the whole definition should be thrown out on the basis of creating a collision course in relation to the sacramental ministries, most had a cautious welcome for the proposal. There were concerns voiced about the language used, and whether or not O'Meara's definition of ministry was relevant to the Irish situation. Some also thought that the term 'Ministry' is confusing and perhaps a new term is required. There was a concern voiced by one that the nature of training and formation that laity will receive could have potential tensions when brought back to the parish.

There was anger expressed in some quarters about the reference to married deacons and the failure of the Church to recognise married priests. There was an appeal to open the discussion on the issue of optional celibacy.

One vicariate thought it important to mention existing ministries that were working well within the Church and make specific reference to our links with Celtic Spirituality, small Christian communities and house churches.

With regard to lay people in particular, there was an urgent need voiced to develop an understanding of ministry in line with the diocesan objectives. Another vicariate said that there was an urgent need to identify lay people with the gifts now and to support them financially for the future of the diocese.

e) Convincing Reasons

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 convincing do you find the four reasons for parish reorganisation?

   What convincing reasons would you add?

What, if any, would you take away?

Most felt that the four reasons given were convincing although there were a number of issues with each. All felt that the Sunday Eucharist was of prime importance and should be the number one reason for action. One of the respondents felt that fewer masses would result in richer liturgies and another felt that he would have more time to prepare.

A number of priests questioned the expanding theology of lay ecclesial ministry and asked whether it was happening on the ground. Another asked whether it was recognised as being a necessity by the majority of priests in the diocese. Many talked about a complete lack of understanding of the Christian witness among the laity. One described this as 'an endemic ignorance'- opting to focus their efforts on the committed Catholic – those that want to be at church.

On the aging and declining presbyterate, it was pointed out that they are two different, albeit related, issues, but for all, the challenge of age was indeed a convincing reason. Many felt that the presbyterate also needed formation and ongoing support and evangelisation, as some are recognising low morale and the possibility of burnout.

The fact that some things can be done more effectively in clusters was confirmed by a number of priests, one or two of them citing joint Confirmation as one such event in the year.

A number of points were added including, the need to involve young people for the future, the need to support the role of women in the Church and the need to focus on the family - the Domestic Church, as a building block for the future faith of the diocese.

f) Commitment

How committed are we to parish reorganisation? The document offers 11 global obstacles and seven local obstacles to collaboration. The global obstacles are from Sofield and Juliano[3]:

- ☒ 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 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?

There were a number of obstacles to commitment that the priests felt were not addressed in the list, these being a) the refusal to accept married priests, b) the realisation that rural boundaries are very strong having been built up over many years, c) the role of the media which has been antagonistic in the past, d) the political reality where the Catholic faith is now one of many, and e) the question that nobody is answering, the issue of financial remuneration for lay involvement.

Most felt that all the obstacles were relevant some to a greater degree than others.

On the question of primary blocks to reorganisation, the replies were consistent with previous questions; highlighting their concern about lay readiness, lay formation and apathy. The role of the Bishop was raised as someone who needs to show the way with his commitment and take the initiative. There was general concern about the logistics and the need for a well thought out plan of action and not just wishful thinking. There also needs to be clarity on roles and responsibilities and reporting structures.

It was recommended that this commitment could be best voiced at an all day workshop with the priests of the diocese, as it was felt imperative that all involved 'buy in' to the process.

g) Capacity and Capability

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[3]Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano, Collaboration: Using Our Gifts in Ministry (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2000

The fourth step is capacity or capability.   This part outlines a process and timeline for parish reorganisation as follows (pages 22-27):

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.

Q   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?

All the priests were very positive about the consultation process between the diocese, the priests and the people. It was important that this consultation process continues and that all the people are included not, as one priest put it, 'a parish clique' deciding for everyone.

All felt that there was a huge amount of work already done to get the process this far but they also realise that there is still so much to be done. All seemed to be in favour of a plan of action. However, some felt that the timeline was too rushed. One felt that we should 'let the Lord fix the dates' and not be so rigid. Some were surprised at the deadline set out to organise a pastoral council coincided with the plans for rationalisation and clustering.

Various groups addressed the issue of who should do the work. 'What becomes of the pastoral councils in clustered entities, for example?' The need for capacity building through education and formation of both priests and laity was strongly underlined. Some requested that young priests from countries like Poland are encouraged to take up positions within the diocese and be role models for young people. Others stressed the on-going promotion of vocations as a key issue to be addressed at parish level. Another mentioned giving consideration to the vicariate model limiting the impact on existing parish structures and boarders.

There was a strong sense of needing the practical steps to be clarified so that it can 'cut to the chase.'

h)   Any final comments?

Most of the final comments made at the various vicariate meetings were made to repeat key points for emphasis. One priest commented that he felt it was a predetermined process and that he was being asked to agree to it. Another voiced his gratitude to the team for the hard work in developing the document.

There were one or two practical issues raised concerning how the consultation should be conducted with the pastoral councils and parish groups. It was recommended that the document should be

simplified and be facilitated by a professional outside facilitator who needs to be objective. Several commented once again on the need for positive leadership at diocesan level to drive the process.

Overall, the general sense of the final comments were indicative of a clearer understanding of the task at hand and a somewhat nervous but guarded optimism that this process is in the right direction.

5.0   Consensus and Conclusion

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 deaconate? 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*

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