



CLUSTERING,
RATIONALISATION,
NEW PARISH STRUCTURES AND MINISTRIES:
MOVING TOWARD PARISH REORGANISATION
IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF ARMAGH
2008 - 2011

OUTLINE OF THE WAY AHEAD

Introduction

The need to work toward the clustering of parishes, the rationalisation of pastoral resources and the development of new parish structures and ministries was identified in a diocesan consultation process held in Lent 2005, leading to the development of the diocesan pastoral plan. As a part of its brief, the working team responsible for the development of parish pastoral councils, parish and diocesan surveys, attending to diocesan and parish structures, leadership and training, has slowly and steadily responded to this need. The working team has done so with the support of the bishops and in consultation with priests and parish pastoral councils.

This briefing, created for the priests of the diocese and those who participated in the consultation process held between June and October 2007, outlines the main elements of the plan to move toward clustering, rationalisation and new parish structures and ministries over the next three years.

The steps that have led us to this point include:

- An initial workshop addressing the issues pertaining to parish reorganisation in October 2006
- The creation of a discussion document on parish reorganisation, April 2007
- Consultation on the discussion document among the priests and pastoral councils of the diocese, held between June and October 2007
- The drawing together of the findings from that consultation by Mr. Shane Halpin in November 2007
- Ongoing planning in the light of the consultation
- The adoption of the three-year plan by Cardinal Brady and Bishop Clifford in March 2008.

This briefing will review the main findings from the consultation process, review the primary considerations necessary for parish reorganisation and outline the main elements of the parish reorganisation process over the next three years.

The Consultation Process

The consultation process was honest and enlightening. Clearly it raised fears and anxieties and many questions and it delivered insights and suggestions. It could perhaps be caricatured as follows: We don't like the idea of this happening, we recognise that something has to be done, keep us engaged in the process, move slowly and keep the language simple. Shane Halpin, who drew together the findings from the consultation process, summarised the feedback as follows:

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.

Moving forward

The working team responsible for creating the three-year plan has taken this feedback seriously, has kept it in focus in the development of the plan and hope that the insights and concerns raised will continue to inform the process. There were calls during the consultation process for

- the reinstatement of priests who had left,
- the introduction of married priests
- female priests
- female deacons
- the widening of priesthood to ensure that no community would be without a priest to lead the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist.

The working team are not in a position to respond to these calls but it acknowledges that these suggestions were proposed. The consultations also emphasised the need to promote priestly vocations. This need is being addressed by the diocesan vocations commission and in the *Year of Vocation 2008- 2009* being promoted nationally.

The terms

The meaning of the terms were explored in the initial consultation. In the light of the feedback the following working descriptions have been adopted:

Clustering refers to the bringing together of two or more parishes for the purpose of sharing resources. Each parish will remain a separate entity with its own identity. This is to support priests and empower lay people in carrying on the mission of Christ in the locality and the world.

Rationalisation creates the opportunity to assess the needs of each parish in each cluster and the needs of the diocese. It enables decisions to be made with regard to such matters as:

- *the number of priests to serve in each parish*
- *the resources to be allocated to the employment of lay leaders*
- *the churches to be used less often*
- *the number of Masses to be celebrated at the weekend and on weekdays*
- *the personnel needed to work at diocesan level*

so that the diocese can carry on the mission of Christ.

New parish structures and ministries refers to the need to identify and provide for the development of new structures (for example, parish pastoral councils) and new ministries (for example, parish youth ministry and parish finance administrators) as the need emerges in the parishes, clusters and the diocese.

The reasons

Four reasons were offered in the initial discussion document for embarking on parish reorganisation. While they were listed in no particular order, those consulted stated clearly it was their view that the driving force behind the process was the decline in the number of priests. Perhaps it was best caricatured by one parish pastoral council member who said: *it really is the carrot and stick approach – declining number of priests is the stick, a more vibrant lay involvement is the carrot*. A fifth reason emerged during the consultation.

The most immediate and pressing reason is that we have a declining number of priests in the diocese. The statistics from the diocesan office (April 2008) are these:

- 134 diocesan priests in the Archdiocese of Armagh
- 26 of these are 75 and over (many of them still in active ministry)
- 44 are aged 60-74
- 46 are aged 40-59
- 18 are under 40 years of age.

We are also witnessing declining numbers in our congregations. Renewal of faith is a complex issue that needs to be continually and urgently addressed. A part of that work can be supported by parishes working together in clusters. Clustering can aid the development of lay leadership in parishes and the affirmation of lay people in their role as ambassadors for Christ in their families, communities and society.

If a focus on the sacrament of holy orders provides the immediate reason for parish reorganisation then the sacrament of baptism provides its enduring reason. For the last half century the Church has emphasised that the fundamental sacrament of ministry is baptism. In baptism we are called to ministry. What emerged in the consultation is that this emphasis seems not to have taken root in our diocese. There is a need to train and empower lay people for ministry. There is also a need to engage those already trained.

The central sacrament in every Christian community is the Eucharist. Parish reorganisation will be necessary in order to ensure that the Sunday Eucharist is fittingly celebrated in each parish of the diocese each Sunday.

There are some things that we can do more effectively by sharing our resources in clusters. Some of these include:

- liturgy and worship;
- parish community life;
- education and formation;
- spiritual outreach;
- general administration.

The Challenge

The initial discussion document raised a number of challenges. Those consulted identified some more challenges. While this list is inconclusive it will be important that:

- the bishops fully support the process
- there is a focus on the complementarity of lay and ordained roles
- there is a commitment to lay and ordained working together
- there is training for lay ministry and on-going training of priests
- the people of the diocese are consulted in the process and that two-way listening happens
- the financial challenges are met
- the historical connection of people to particular communities and areas is honoured
- the changing face of Irish society and culture is accounted for
- the process is well planned.

In Conclusion

From the diocesan consultation with the priests, the diocesan pastoral council and parish pastoral councils or groups there emerged a general acceptance of the need for parish reorganisation. In the light of this consultation the working team has created a plan of action. This plan was presented by the working team to Cardinal Brady and Bishop Clifford. The bishops considered it, amended it and adopted the amended plan.

The Plan

Our diocesan bishops have considered and adopted an implementation plan for clustering, rationalisation, new parish structures and ministries. Cardinal Brady has appointed Fr Andrew McNally and Mr Tony Hanna as the day-to-day coordinators of the plan, supported by the working team that has been addressing parish reorganisation.

The central elements

The process of clustering the parishes in the diocese will happen between September 2008 and June 2009. By the end of June a map of the diocese will be published indicating which parishes are in which clusters.

The rationalisation process will happen between September 2009 and June 2010. It will be work done in clusters by people from each parish in the cluster, supported by the coordinators and finally approved by the Cardinal. By the end of June 2010 decisions will be published with regard to such matters such as how many priests will serve in each parish, what resources are to be allocated to the employment of lay leaders, what churches can be used less often, how many Masses are to be celebrated at the weekend and on weekdays.

The development of new parish structures and ministries will begin in earnest in September 2010 and continuing beyond June 2011. Each cluster will begin to form its new cluster pastoral council or leadership group (which will work along with and not in place of parish pastoral councils). The new ministries will be determined within each cluster as needs arise.

The parish reorganisation process will be launched with a communication from the Cardinal that will be brought to the attention of all parishes on the weekend of 13/14 September 2008.

Clustering

The plan proposes seven steps and a timetable for the creation of clusters in the diocese.

1. *October 2008*: the steps towards the creation of parish clusters are outlined at weekend Masses (11/12 October is suggested).
2. *November 2008*: priests, parish pastoral councils, board of governors/school management boards and seniors school students will be consulted with regard to which parishes their parish might cluster with.
3. *December 2008*: a draft cluster map will be drawn up on the basis of the views expressed in the parishes.
4. *February/March 2009*: each parish will have an open gathering in which all parishioners will be invited to express their views on the draft map.
5. *April 2009*: a final draft of the cluster map will be created and presented to the Cardinal based on the feedback from the parish open gatherings.

6. *May 2009*: the Cardinal will consider and adopt a final version of the parish cluster map.

7. *June 2009*: a diocesan ritual is proposed to celebrate the creation of the parish clusters.

Fifteen volunteers will be recruited to carry out the consultations in the schools and parishes. The map drawing team, led by an independent facilitator, will include a bishop, someone with extensive knowledge of the diocese and someone with experience in clustering in another diocese.

Rationalisation

The process of rationalisation is to take place in every parish in the diocese between September 2009 and April 2010. The plan proposes that each cluster will have a rationalisation team made up of the priests, members of the pastoral councils and other members of each parish in the cluster. The team will meet to discuss and decide how best to rationalise within the cluster. Their deliberations will be supported by the project coordinators and an independent facilitator. Cardinal Brady or Bishop Clifford will meet with each cluster group to review, finalise and approve the rationalisation for the cluster. The decisions will be communicated to all in the parishes by June 2010, coming into effect in September 2010.

New parish structures and ministries

The main focus from September 2010 - June 2011 will be the development of new diocesan and parish structures and ministries to meet the needs of the clusters. The plan proposes that:

- the parish pastoral councils identify parishioners to be members of the interim cluster pastoral group (September 2010)
- the interim cluster pastoral groups meet to consider ways of making available resources identified in the rationalisation stage, including the recruitment of employed lay ministers (September - December 2010)
- the idea of a cluster pastoral council is introduced to the parishes (by December 2010)
- the parishes are invited to identify members for the cluster pastoral council (January 2011)
- a formation programme is offered to cluster pastoral councils (February - June 2011).

It is hoped that there will be cluster pastoral councils functioning by June 2011.

The supporting elements

A number of supporting elements need to be addressed and implemented in order to ensure that clustering, rationalisation and the development of new parish structures and ministries are effective in serving the mission of Christ and the Church. These include:

- sustaining a fruitful prayer process
- establishing and maintaining pastoral councils in every parish in the diocese,
- developing a diocesan aim,
- initiating people into and training them for collaborative ministry based on a participative model of Church,
- ensuring that there is structured support for lay and ordained ministry
- assessing and supplying the necessary resources for parish reorganisation.

Sustaining a fruitful prayer process

A prayer process team will be created in April 2008 from the Diocesan Liturgy Commission and the prayer and spirituality group of the diocesan pastoral plan. The team will develop a prayer process that will include prayers that can be used by individuals and groups, liturgical resources and rituals to mark the various stages of the parish reorganisation process.

Establishing and maintaining pastoral councils in every parish in the diocese

Parish pastoral councils have a pivotal role to play in creating a collaborative approach to the work of mission and evangelisation. It is hoped that a pastoral council be established in every parish. At present many parishes have a pastoral council and others are actively involved in forming one. The Office of Pastoral Renewal and Family Ministry (OPRFM) is presently creating a directory of parish pastoral councils. Cardinal Brady or Bishop Clifford will discuss with parish priests in parishes that do not have a parish pastoral council the possibility of forming a council.

Ongoing support for pastoral councils will be necessary. The plan proposes that in the latter part of 2008 the OPRFM will:

- provide training for presidents, chairpersons and secretaries of pastoral councils
- establish an annual diocesan gathering for parish pastoral councils
- continue to facilitate pastoral council planning and provide training for councils that are beginning new terms
- establish a system for yearly contact with parish pastoral councils to review progress.

The role of the diocesan pastoral council in conjunction with the role of Senate of Priests and the coordinating group of pastoral plan will be reviewed in the latter part of 2009 and will be followed by the integration of parish pastoral councils with the diocesan pastoral council in 2010.

Developing a diocesan aim

The plan proposes the creating a diocesan aim. This can be achieved through six key steps, beginning in September 2008.

1. A team of interested people are gathered to create a draft aim based on the Cardinal's motto and on the diocesan vision and mission statements.
2. The draft aim is sent to key diocesan groups for feedback in November.
3. The aim is redrafted in the light of the feedback.
4. Parishioners, including senior school students, are given an opportunity to reflect on and comment on the redrafted aim at the Masses on a weekend in February 2009 and in schools later that week.
5. The aim is redrafted and offered to the Cardinal for adoption.
6. The diocesan aim is promulgated and integrated into parish life, beginning in May 2009.

Initiating people into and training them for collaborative ministry

Developing a spirituality of collaboration, the skills necessary for collaboration and the vision of a participative Church committed to living as disciples of Jesus will be essential to the process of parish reorganisation. To this end a number of steps are proposed:

- The spirituality of collaborative leadership will be explored at the priests' conference in Bundoran 2008.
- All priests and full-time lay pastoral workers in the diocese will be invited to participate in a three day residential training programme on skills for collaborative leadership. Provisional bookings have been agreed with Dromantine Conference Centre as follows:
 - June 9-11 2009
 - August 25 -27 2009
 - September 15-17 2009
 - October 13 -15 2009
 - A July 2009 session is also being considered but has yet to be confirmed.
- Collaborative leadership in parish and clusters will be the theme at the priests' conference in Bundoran 2009.
- A weekend workshop on a participative model of Church will be offered to each parish in the diocese between January and June 2009.
- A collaborative perspective to ministry will be integrated into training presently available to lay people in the diocese.
- An annual gathering for clergy and lay people to explore and develop collaborative ministry in the Archdiocese will be created.
- In 2011 priests and interested lay leaders will have the opportunity to participate in communities of collaborative learning.

Ensuring that there is structured support for lay and ordained ministry

Some structured support for priests is already in place in the diocese. It will be important to maintain this and to augment it. It will also be necessary to develop good practice with regard to support for lay people working full-time in the diocese. This will include:

- gathering information on job descriptions from home and beyond;
- gathering information on recommendations on good practices in employment and pay scales and pensions;
- gathering information on ways of financing lay leadership
- compiling a diocesan compendium on lay leadership by April 2009.

Assessing and supplying the necessary resources for parish reorganisation

The diocesan finance committee will work toward providing the financial resources necessary for the implementation of the plan. A part of the strategy will be to develop the theme of stewardship which includes the sharing of time, talent and treasure as part and parcel of active personal discipleship. It is proposed that the Cardinal release a pastoral letter on the theme in November 2009. It is hoped that between January and May 2010 the diocesan and parish finance committees will be trained around the theme of stewardship. These committees will then explore ways of financing full-time lay leaders to meet the needs identified by the clusters.

Conclusion

Much work has been done to bring the process of clustering, rationalisation, and the development of new parish structures and ministries to this stage. The working team would like to thank all who contributed to this work and all who participated in the consultation. There is much to do and the success of the process will be dependent on ongoing commitment and dedication of the people of our diocese. We commend the process to the Lord. May the saints of our diocese intercede for us and may all who live in the diocese pray for us.

This plan has been created by the working team of the pastoral plan responsible for the development of pastoral councils, parish and diocesan surveys, attending to diocesan and parish structures, leadership and training.

April 2008.