

My Parish in the Future : Preparing for Mission

Weybridge Deanery Meeting – 6th February, 2016

Introduction

Dear Friends, we shall shortly be distributing a Deanery newsletter to every parish to offer some follow-up on the very useful morning that we spent together at Chertsey on February 6th, but we felt it was important to report back to everyone who attended ahead of that. This hasty report can only offer an impressionistic sketch of our discussions but will, I hope, help you to continue to reflect and to continue the conversation with your fellow parishioners and clergy locally. As usual in life, challenges and opportunities are inextricably entwined, but we have started on a journey and I am sure the Lord will guide us on our way. I take the opportunity to thank Janet Hale (who worked through the many work sheets collected at the end of the session to edit this account) and all the members of the Change Management Support Group who organised our meeting – but to thank especially yourselves for contributing so generously to our discussion. Wishing you every blessing.

Fr. Rob Esdaile (Dean of Weybridge)

Note of Proceedings and Discussions

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Nearly 200 participants from across 11 parishes met on 6 February to discuss the future of Weybridge Deanery and our respective roles in shaping the future. Father Rob Esdaile guided the meeting which was set in the context of Bishop Richard's 'tripod' of **Mission, Formation of Mission and Prayer**. Facilitators then animated discussions around a number of questions, given below. Most powerful in the messages delivered by Father Rob were: Pope Francis' call to be 'missionary disciples' (with implications for all we do) and Bishop Richard's proposals for our own future ministry; the critical shortage of priests and the future shape of the Deanery; working together and coming together as supportive communities, for each other and for those outside the church; modernising our thinking – the most redolent image being the door of mercy in both its dimensions: the invitation to enter and receive, and the commission to set out, empowered by the gift of discipleship.

The influence, formation and involvement of the Deanery laity, working across parish boundaries and supporting the clergy, would provide a framework for going forward and the development of a Deanery wide plan.

One member of the audience said they were particularly inspired by Father Rob's reminder that **our Baptismal call is 'intrinsic'... the call to serve Christ in all we do, to express a missionary heart to all whom we meet. How much better could we do this as a larger/more-collaborative/gift-sharing local church?**

A reading of Lk 5.1-11 was used for our opening prayer, with a pause for reflection, a powerful reading about the call of the first disciples which was used by Pope John Paul II at the Millennium to call the Church to 'put out into the deep'.

Section 1 – Success Stories – Our Parishes/Our Deanery

Delegates were asked to write down and articulate their thoughts on what is good in their parishes – i.e. what they value and appreciate. Ideas were exchanged with co-delegates within each table grouping and some inspiring thoughts were articulated – it is clear that we value our parishes very much and equally clear that there is so much activity and goodwill amongst the Deanery's communities. Here are a few extracts:

- A sense of belonging as you walk through the doors of the church – warmth, concern for others – inclusiveness and trust
- Opportunities for us to come together – courses, prayer
- Seminars, pilgrimages and ministries for the sick and for those in care homes
- Friendship, community support, prayer and spiritual support – village of faith – intra/inter-generational
- Social and faith activities which build our community
- Our parish priest is a great strength/leader – friendly and warm parish priest
- The sense of fulfilment that we have in being involved in Parish charities and the social and societal benefits that our activities generate
- Supporting each other – our prayer group is a good example
- Looking after the housebound and enabling those with mobility disabilities to attend mass and functions
- Support for the family and feeling of family
- Being with people who hold the same beliefs and values
- Children are very welcomed – activities are excellent – they are cared for and loved
- Involvement in prayer, liturgy groups, Alpha courses
- That our parish exists – a vital community – we ask each other for help – the parish is there for me
- A group which holds it all together – with individuals taking responsibility and using their gifts
- Lively, vibrant, engaging the young
- So many great volunteers – holding the parish together
- A non-judgemental parish priest who understands the issues of living, understanding how we live with and work with our faith
- Adoration – private time is so worthwhile
- Opportunities to work with, and be involved with, others
- A dedicated Parish Council
- Daily Mass and sacraments and spirituality – the power of healing that resonates
- Children's liturgy, youth, sacramental programmes, social events after church, bereavement care, choir and musicians

Section 2 – What does the Future Look Like? – Working Together – Formation and Addressing the Practical Issues

Imagine that it is the year 2020 and we are living in a renewed Deanery, following a successful change process. The discussions sought to draw out our needs for the future, how the important

role played by the laity could increase and how we can all be inspired to work towards unity within our Deanery – common purpose, common faith, common aims – towards prayer and mission. The very critical question of our formation towards mission – and prayer – is fundamental within discussions – we are on a journey towards discipleship and engaging others, cementing our own faith and enabling the Church to reach out to all and be inclusive of all. Some very practical issues were also raised. The questions posed were (imagining that we've reached 2020 and successfully changed our ways of working together):

- **How does it feel to work together across Parish boundaries?**
 - **How are we working together to greatest effect?**
 - **How are we working fruitfully as a Deanery at this stage and what areas can we develop further?**
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- Use of laity in parishes and across the deanery – accreditation for and delegation to spiritual leaders to 'lead professionally' in spiritual and administrative roles;
 - Resources for catechists – there are many resources available – used (to be recycled), unused within the deanery that could be drawn on. Schedules are needed to commit and encourage participants;
 - Increase the participation of the laity in services – based on formation of those willing and able to commit – and consider the role of women in relation to reducing the work of the clergy;
 - Youth engagement/empowerment was seen as critical – particularly across the Deanery – although promoting engagement more generally is central to mission and involves us all;
 - Building a Christian community helps to ensure that faith is not seen in a narrow context, particularly by those of other faiths, or those outside the Church, although the Eucharist is the particular and outstanding embodiment of our faith;
 - Socialising with others, eg through the Alpha Course, brings people together and aids trust;
 - Knowing what we have within our deanery/parishes is very special; thus being willing to travel or to make particular events/times – part of the business diary for all – not just the priests;
 - Clearly communicated timetables and scheduling of events – eg mass timetables across the Deanery;
 - We work in communities but grow and develop in groups that we have interest in – e.g. scripture groups, Lourdes, charities, pilgrimage;
 - Essentially we become one big parish – with different nuclei – e.g. small areas holding coffee mornings, etc. open to all faiths – emphasis on social interactivity to create inclusive culture
 - We have all practical and necessary activities covered – Eucharist, sacraments, etc;
 - It is important to have a parish close by, while taking forward cross deanery groups – e.g. youth, catechists;
 - Individual communities remain important; social activities to connect with others are key;
 - Shared charities, cross membership parish councils/parish meetings, sharing hospital chaplaincy visits.

Areas to be addressed:

- Do we spend money on the right things – i.e. do we employ skilled people in the context of Youth work and people development, rather than buildings, for example?
- Can we really afford to maintain parish boundaries and what purpose do they/will they serve in the future? Should we focus on promoting groups first and foremost within our parishes and start there?
- Clusters and groups supporting particular interests or groups with a wider outreach/community focus (e.g. to aid travel to services across the Diocese) could aid moving forward;
- Gradual build up to reach out, extend, share and co-ordinate – too little is happening at present;
- More full time workers in the deanery to provide support services – a deanery HQ! This leads onto structuring – professional input, secretarial/administrative support/shared resources and enablers;
- Greater leadership role for the Dean/more empowerment with proper support;
- Opportunities for friendship and extending a hand to those not so fortunate, e.g. unable to travel – take the face of the church to them through kindness and company (laity);
- Sharing of the Parish Priests' workloads – and taking this challenge on to develop ourselves;
- Remembering that the church has no walls – we need to move in the direction that will fulfil the needs of the deanery congregations, while ensuring that vulnerable groups are well supported;
- Positive action – rather than talking about plans – positive action will motivate and encourage – lead by example on one or two initiatives that involve, say, 2 – 3 parishes in close proximity on a particular project. However, a plan with milestones is essential;
- Communication across the Deanery needs to be strong; it must be decisive, yet inclusive, with much better use of technology and media to suit different groups;
- The need to, or the perceived or actual barrier of having to, travel to a church service or function could create tensions or persuade those 'on the fringe' to disassociate or decide not to engage. Broadcasting the Mass would take the Church to all.

Encourage and do more of:

- Youth club, schools, churches together, sharing parish responsibilities;
- Deanery wide groups for certain functions – eg SVP;
- Core groups for specific activities – avoiding cliques – and broadening groups on an ongoing / regular basis, eg catechist groups and combining activities in adjacent parishes;
- The central Deanery website – as being key to all activities – good access to information;
- Community driven church that listens;
- Increased school chaplaincy; family groups; youth groups; 20-30 groups;
- Being energised by 'educated' leaders who use the resources already in existence for e.g. scripture courses/learning from each other;
- We have a long term plan for ministry within/across the deanery;
- Assess and stem shortages in areas where resources are lacking;
- A central meeting place for deanery gatherings;
- More deacons – shared – particularly for sacramental development/formation (except reconciliation);

- A few individuals are undertaking multiple roles – there need to be more informed volunteers and hands to spread the load;
- Time is always an issue for us all; how can we do what we can and realistically deliver something that will be meaningful – and avoid over-committing?
- We each need to do something personally – so that the load is spread.

AND: Do we need to consider the traditional concept of priesthood for meeting the future, and the role of women in the Church?

Section 3 – Missionary Discipleship - What does this mean?

The following questions were addressed:

- **What does Missionary Discipleship mean to you / your parish / the wider community?**
- **What are the possible challenges ahead and how might we meet them?**

Discussions brought forth the following points, although issues around Mission and formation had been discussed at length – what remained, in terms of discussion concerned the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ (more practical and spiritual/doctrinal/policy issues) some of which need approval by a higher authority:

- Formation, Mission and Prayer are the key tenets of Bishop Richard’s message to underpin the new framework for outreach and working across boundaries;
 - The parishes need to talk as a community – friendships enable the formation of a common purpose;
 - We need to create an environment to enable fulfilment of individual mission – eg prayer groups, youth groups which can develop across boundaries;
 - We need to prepare for the unexpected or the changing shape of our Diocese- and to think of solutions that are sometimes radical – e.g. the role of women in the church, married priests, the role of Deacons. We must pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us;
 - The Mission revolves around giving time and love to those we meet;
 - Can the attendees to the Deanery meeting be charged to share the messages and output in our parishes?
 - It is important to view Mission and the future as being above us, rather than to be pulled down to current circumstances – this will enable vision to be fulfilled.
 - Groups should be formed on needs, demographic and other bases – to include access to sacraments – working across parishes to provide specific and critical functions – marriage preparation, confirmation, reconciliation, etc;
 - Engagement across demographics – age and other dimensions – is critical;
 - Outreach and welcoming all to the church is a central and core function to embrace the disengaged through positively encouraging inclusiveness – we can all extend our arms to welcome others;
- We should look to examples in Canada and France to assess how the laity and clergy are organised across large areas: Sharing with a wider group of Christians, showing respect, tolerance and respect to each other.

Father Rob thanked all participants for their work and for the value of the discussions. Outputs from the meeting will be disseminated on the Deanery website and followed up by Pastoral teams.

Father Rob then led a closing prayer.

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