

## Diocese of Argyll & The Isles – Led By The Spirit Consultation Phase 2

### Collated Report- ‘Our Diocesan Resources’

#### **Resources**

- Our Bishop, priests and Lay Faithful.
- All those people who help out, as Eucharistic Ministers, Readers, Music, cleaners, flowers, gardening, giving people lifts, Pastoral Council, Catechists, Pass Keepers, welcome ministry and more.
- The Sacraments and availability of our churches for prayer.
- Ministry to hospitals, care homes, and schools, and to people’s homes, especially the elderly

#### **What did we learn about our diocese?**

The sheer scale of the diocese, which covers 4 different Council Areas. We noted the physical distance between parishes. We also noted what a small population a parish might contain, as well as the sheer number of churches for a small population.

In many parishes the number of Mass attendees has fallen sharply, and the number of priests has fallen too. We have nobody studying for the Diocese in Seminary at the moment. The falling number of Baptisms, First Communion and Confirmations reflects this trend. The age ranges for priests in our diocese are healthier than that found in many other dioceses.

It was noted that we have Missionary priests within the diocese. This caused us to note we need to look after those priests we have.

The way the laity interact with the priests and bishop has changed. There is more openness, transparency and dialogue.

Many people were not aware of how the parish and diocesan finances interact. People needed to have the Diocesan Levy explained to them. Some thought the parishes were autonomous, others thought we got money from Rome, or from the wealthier dioceses in Scotland. Some people were shocked at the poverty of some parishes (not those in those poorer parishes, of course!). People expressed gratitude at the transparency shown.

#### **Did anything surprise you?**

How small some of the parishes are in terms of attendance. The lack of Mass-goers was seen by many as a bigger problem than the shortage of priests.

Some of the numbers in certain columns caused some queries – such as Glenfinnan – with a very small population, having such a high number of weddings (explanation given).

It was queried as to where the population figures for parishes came from. It was explained this was from the national census returns. The inaccuracy of the parish census concerned many people. The data is unreliable.

Comments were made regarding COVID effects, again this could be explained by not all parishes reopening at the same time, for several reasons. Also the effects of the Cost-of-living crisis, which affects parishes financially. It questions the sustainability of some of our smaller parishes.

Many people were surprised at how many churches are available for Mass. Other denominations have been closing churches with far larger congregations. Also, some parishes have been experiencing far steeper decline than others. Some parishes have seen barely any decline.

### **What are the challenges the diocese faces?**

The greatest challenge is getting people back to church, and this does not mean online Masses. There are other sacramental and spiritual activities that are in decline (Rosary, Eucharistic Adoration, Spiritual talks, prayer groups)

We need to encourage the youth. Many youth appear to be disinterested in religion, and are influenced by secular ideas. Many who would describe themselves as Catholic don't see the need to attend church or make use of the sacraments.

We need to get parents back to church. If they don't go, they will not bring their children.

The effects of scandals, especially of abuse, and various changes in society are all pulling people away from the Church.

We need to support our priests, not just physically, but mentally as well. They need to feel that their work is valuable. And with fewer priests covering the same workload, there is more travelling, more administration, more work in general. And some of this cannot be taken on by the laity, or even by deacons.

Whilst it offers relief in the present, we need to be less reliant on priests from other parts of the world.

It was noted that the geography and size of the diocese poses unique challenges compared to mainland dioceses. For some parishes there is the concern over ferry crossings. What do we do if the priest is ill and can't physically say mass, or the priest is stuck on the mainland and cannot return to provide Holy Mass?

In some parishes, there are regular but not weekly attendees. We have an aging population in some areas, we have lack of travel services – such as local buses, which in some areas, do not run on a Sunday.

We are challenged in a need for vocations, without these or an input from missionary orders, we could be in very dire straits.

The number of Religious in the Diocese has fallen away. In the past they worked very hard in areas like Catechesis and hospitality as well as their own lives of prayer and sacrifice. They are sorely missed. How will we compensate for their absence?

How do we continue to provide Gaelic speaking priests – currently 4 - for a diocese which contains the largest number of native Gaelic speakers – we all want to worship in our own native tongue.

The spiritual challenge of maintaining quality liturgy. It is the source and summit of our faith and should be celebrated well.

We are legally obliged to maintain our properties up to a certain standard, and this takes time and money. Add in to this the everyday costs of utilities and insurance, and it is a costly business. Some parishes are struggling to make ends meet already.

We must take care of 'sleeping' members of our parishes; those who would like to return but do not feel comfortable doing so at this moment. This includes divorcees and those from the LGBTQ+ community. They need to be welcomed too.

We must address the financial challenges of dwindling and ageing congregations along with increasing costs. We may be wise to act sooner and harder than some people want.

It can be a challenge to get into some schools, but also an opportunity once we are invited.

### **What opportunities are there for the diocese and parishes to grow.**

The opportunities reflect the challenges. So, getting the youth and young families back is an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Encouraging Lay people to do more in their parish, and to feel that it is 'theirs'. Promoting the Permanent Diaconate. More prayers for Vocations.

Utilising Social media to increase the parish and diocesan profile, with accurate Mass times, parish/diocesan activities. Also, using the normal media helps to evangelise, when we have the opportunity.

Engaging with local communities (even ones without a catholic church) to increase awareness, and offering the church or hall for voluntary groups to use.

Inter-parish events. Pilgrimages and Retreats. Reaching out more to lapsed Catholics. We can do 'parish swaps', as has happened in the past, to allow people to meet more priests than just their own Parish Priest (and it allows for visiting Confessors).

Ecumenical events. This can be focussed round the major feasts, Christmas and Easter to start with, and expanded where possible. These have already been successful in some parishes.

A Diocesan Pastoral Council can be set up which would co-ordinate these initiatives.

A greater use of Zoom/Teams. As well as livestreaming Mass for those unable to attend in person, these platforms can also be used to support prayer groups to help those isolated with their spirituality or to enable parishioners take part in parish meetings. This is already being used for Sacramental preparation of children throughout the diocese.

There are many online resources, but we need to be directed towards which ones are worth sharing.

House Masses are a good way for groups to meet and celebrate Mass, especially in some of the further-flung areas. They also allow housebound parishioners to feel that they are not on the margins.

We can make more use of Craig Lodge.

Being genuinely welcoming to incomers and visitors. Sometimes we think we are being welcoming, but that may not be what people experience. This is a more missionary perspective, and it can help people who no longer attend to find their way back to the practice of their faith.

### **What inspires you about our diocese?**

Our churches are open for worship, and many for private prayer every day.

Many parishes mentioned the leadership given by Bishop Brian, as well as the dedication of the priests who serve us all. They are open and approachable.

The Led by the Spirit process has allowed people to have a voice, and it is good to see openness and transparency coming from the Bishop and the Diocese.

The commitment of the lay faithful who are so dedicated to their parishes is an inspiration for all. Things work well when everybody pulls together.

The history and culture of the diocese, its following of the faith has a long, faithful history. The Celtic saints can inspire us again. Many areas of the diocese were untouched by the Reformation. And this is not the first time the Church has felt itself on a downward trajectory. We can recover again.

Moving around parts of the diocese we see many roadside statues, as demonstration of witness to the faith.

The diocese is extremely rich in natural beauty, enabling us to feel the presence of God in our world. The diocese has many places where we can gather to celebrate Mass or for quiet prayer.

We do well despite our small size, whether that is our liturgies and singing, our generosity, our enthusiasm. We achieve much with little.

In those parishes with Gaelic Liturgy, this is an inspiration to worship. "We are lucky that we can pray and have pastoral care in our own language. The connection between language and faith is strong, and one reinforces the other". It is part of our spiritual and cultural heritage.

### **What gives you hope?**

The people. The Gospels. The Sacraments. Our Faith in God.

Pope Francis' leadership at the recent Synod; genuinely giving everyone a chance to say what they feel about the Church. His vision for the future, and willingness to embrace change.

Bishop Brian has shown courage, and is demonstrating his hope in the future of the diocese by giving us these opportunities to have an open discussion. We hope that the fruit of Led by the Spirit will be for the good of the diocese and every parish.

Our clergy give us hope, as they are open and willing to listen. We are very grateful to the missionary priests who have come to the diocese to help us.

We hope that the work the Catholic Church is doing around the world will help people to move past the news of scandal, which are hopefully in the past.

There is a sense that the Church is becoming less judgemental, more compassionate, and therefore more Christ-like. People still see the Church as a force for good despite recent setbacks and scandals.

Despite the recent problems, the Church is resilient and filled with hope. People really want to share their faith and meet. The lockdowns and restrictions highlighted what we were missing out on when we could not go to Mass.

We see young people attending Mass. More people are returning to worship. We have seen new people joining the Church. Despite obvious signs of decline in many areas, these are signs of hope. The Church is still very much alive in our diocese

Working with other Christian denominations, sharing ideas and services when appropriate. The Holy Spirit working in each of us, will empower us if we trust.

We hope and pray that people, especially the young, will see past materialism and anti-Church media indoctrination and return to their faith. The Church continues to offer hope.

### **Further comments**

Some parishes had a good turnout and a good discussion. People want to have their say. But other parishes expressed a sense of fatigue with the process. Turnout was lower in some of the parishes where it had been good for the Synod, and for Phase 1. Perhaps a different format could be sought for Phase 3 (an online questionnaire?)

Some people just want a decision to be made, whether that is hard or easy, rather than yet another phase of consultation.

16 parishes have contributed to Phase 2. Some parishes have embraced the opportunity, whilst others have not submitted anything to either phase (or to the Synod).

Many of our parishioners are elderly and not computer-literate.

There is a great variation between some of the larger parishes and the smallest ones. Also, it is not the traditionally biggest parishes that seem to be doing the best.

We can look to find new ways to increase revenue; An example offered was to use our car parks to make money during the week, where we have these facilities.