

Implementing Led by the Spirit's Fruits

Bishop Brian McGee's Response to Phase 3 January 7th 2025

Preamble

Firstly, I want to thank everyone who has engaged in Led by the Spirit (LBS), whether through prayer, participation in the Parish Spiritual Gatherings or the organisers.

My initial reaction is one of hope. I am delighted that so many people – clergy and laity – have listened and shared together so that we can better discern God's will for our diocese. I am especially pleased that we have begun using Conversation in the Spirit. I appreciate that there may be some initial uncertainty about this method but we will increasingly grow into it. During the recent Synod of Bishops I became convinced that the renewal possible for the Church through communal prayerful discernment cannot be underestimated. That Argyll and the Isles has taken the first steps in doing this fills me with hope and joy.

I recognise that some people are concerned about which changes may occur and how they will be affected. The reasons for these concerns must form part of our discernment. I also recognise that many acknowledged the need for change although certain areas would be very complex. Therefore, any proposed changes must be carefully discerned to determine whether they spring from the Spirit or from elsewhere. Relevant preparation, including training and guidance, will be essential for certain changes to unfold smoothly.

As we move towards implementing LBS's conclusions our focus must remain on the Church's purpose – to proclaim Christ. The structures we love and are comfortable with are important and beneficial but they remain secondary to our mission. We will all need to embrace inner conversion.

Action Plan to Implement LBS's Discernment

I have proposed an Action Plan consisting of 4 strategies to address issues discerned during LBS which will also deepen a culture of synodality throughout our diocese. The 4 strategies are complementary because our desire is ambitious. Our intention is not to 'manage decline' but seek renewal in the Lord, which by its very nature will always be open ended.

The proposed Action Plan is a draft and will need development. The Action Plan will play a crucial role in planning the future of the diocese and therefore, during January and February I will first consult before publishing a definitive Action Plan (with timetable) before the end of February 2025. The purpose of the consultations will be to improve the implementation process, which will then begin in March. My various consultations will be:

- Meeting with LBS Working Group 29th January 2025
 - Meeting with Council of Priests 18th February 2025, preceded by Deanery Meetings
- Open online Meeting with parishioners 19th February 2025 6.30pm. To register in advance please click on <https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/dECaux-3TfqkzMKeFnyYxw>

1 Establishment of Six Working Groups to Implement Discerned Priorities

Building on previous consultations, LBS Phase 3 identified a desire to deepen our relationship with God; to develop our understanding of the Common Priesthood discerning which charisms God has graced us with and how they might be best used; to be more missionary and prophetic; to be an open and welcoming Church without abandoning our principles (e.g. supporting Catholic Eastern Church members, ecumenical and inter religious relationships as well as with secular society, reaching out to those who perceive they are kept on our margins); to develop digital communication; discern the appropriate role of online worship; to catechise (all ages but especially the youth); to support both clergy and laity in their particular vocations; to improve transparency without being unduly bureaucratic.

Phase 3 confirmed the conclusions of LBS's initial meetings which had identified 6 key priorities we felt the Spirit was calling us to develop. It is worth noting that these priorities were simultaneously identified by Catholics across the globe throughout the Synod of Bishops. The agreed priorities are:

- (a) Universal Call to Holiness
- (b) Mission
- (c) Catechesis
- (d) Support of clergy and laity
- (e) More welcoming Church
- (f) Transparency, accountability and evaluation

How can we move from talking about these issues to implementing change? I propose that 6 Working Groups dedicated to each priority are established. Our diocese is diverse and one size will not fit all but identifying and sharing distinct concrete steps, allowing parishes to chose which route is most suitable will be helpful. I recognise that a previous attempt to establish such Working Groups in 2019 failed. However, we are now more conscious of synodality, have further discerned these priorities and LBS recognised the value of working together. Crucially given our remoteness, we are now comfortable working online which enables participation across the diocese. I propose that these Groups consist of six people with relevant experience, consist of both laity and clergy and regularly update the bishop of their progress.

2 Reconfiguration of Parishes

Phase 3 of LBS acknowledged that reconfiguration of our parish structures is necessary. This will be complex and sensitive. The process must allow for prayerful, honest and open discussion leading to concrete proposals being presented to the bishop for the structuring of parishes for at least the next 20 years. Many factors must be considered including nurturing faith, number and condition of properties, distance between Churches, heritage, demographics of parishioners and clergy. *However, our priority must always be the Church's mission.* Parish structures are crucial aids in our mission but are secondary to it. How we can best fulfil our mission must remain uppermost in our minds.

- (i) The consultation must have clear aims, process, time limit and comply with Canon Law. The bishop will take the final decision.
- (ii) The process must be synodal, involving consultation with clergy and parishioners.

- (iii) Although the consultations could be by one single but very large group I think that given our geography and people's natural inclination towards local matters I think that subsidiarity is a key element. By this I mean that consultation should be primarily at the local level but always within the context of the entire diocese. Locals understand their circumstances best and those most effected by decisions should be involved in the process. Therefore, discussion would focus, but not exclusively, around the configuration of district arrangements. This will help concentrate on reaching concrete proposals that would be discerned in the light of the entire diocese.

I propose the following parish groupings:

- (a) Western Isles: Castlebay, Northbay, Eriskay, Daliburgh, Bornish, Ardkenneth, Benbecula, Stornoway (8)
- (b) Lochaber: Mingarry, Glenfinnan, Caol, Fort William, Roy Bridge, Kingussie, Skye, Ballachulish (8)
- (c) Rough Bounds: Morar, Arisaig (2)
- (d) Lorn: Oban, Taynuilt (2)
- (e) Mid-Argyll and Kintyre: Lochgilphead, Campbeltown (2)
- (f) Clydeside: Dunoon, Rothesay, Arran (3)

3 Establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council and Parish Pastoral Councils.

The Synod's Final Document, endorsed by Pope Francis, stated that Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils are to be compulsory. It is helpful to understand Pastoral Councils as Spiritual Gatherings where people assemble to prayerfully discern rather than 'business meetings'. Those parishes without Pastoral Councils could wait until after reconfiguration takes place. They will be especially necessary after reconfiguration. The creation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council should begin as soon as possible.

4 Establishment of a Synodality Working Group

This proposed Group would be responsible for encouraging a culture of synodality at every level of diocesan and parish life. One possibility could be for the LBS Working Group to take on this responsibility. If it also took responsibility for priorities 1e and 1f then the number of Working Groups would be reduced from 6 to 4.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CONSULTATION MEETINGS

1 Working Groups.

1a How large should each Group be (e.g. 6,8 members)?

1b The bishop will appoint members but how should they be identified? Obviously relevant skills would be a pre-requisite but should they be nominated or volunteer themselves?

2 Reconfiguration of Parishes

2a Is there a better grouping of parishes than the groupings proposed in 2.3?

2b Each priest and deacon would be members of the consultation groups. Should a stipulated number of laity from each parish be appointed (how many and by whom?) or should the meetings be open to everyone?

2c What is a realistic timeframe for presenting the bishop with concrete proposals?

3 Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils

3a What advantages and challenges would Diocesan and Parish Pastoral Councils bring?

3b Should each parish be represented on the Diocesan Parish Council or a set number of representatives from each deanery?

4 Synodality Group

4a Pope Francis has asked that a culture of synodality be developed within every diocese.

What are our present strengths and what challenges do we face?

Would you like to offer the bishop any other advice about how to best implement LBS across the diocese?