

Led by the Spirit Phase 3

The Led by the Spirit process is something we have been called to participate in by our bishop, and it reflects the direction of travel towards a synodal approach within the whole Church. If this means going out of our comfort zone, and becoming more missionary in our approach, that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The question;

“How do we live out our ‘call to holiness’ now and in the future in a way that prepares us for a changing diocese? That is, how can we better live out our mission, knowing the potential yet also the limits of our shared Diocesan life?”

Main themes:

Smaller parishes are concerned that they are on the front line when cuts and closures have to happen. They are aware of the need to adapt, to accept change, and to assess the options that are available to them, whether that means more travelling to a Mass Centre, or having services of the Word and Communion, or their church being available for devotions (if their church remains open).

Since services of Word and Communion are likely to become more common, especially in smaller churches, we need to train people, to ensure that there is orthodoxy, consistency and continuity. It was also asked how the obligation to attend Sunday Mass would be affected if there was a service of the Word and Communion instead, or Mass was now much further away.

Many parishes have commented on the Chapels of Ease: some that they should be the first to close if, and when the axe falls; others that they should remain open for prayer even if they will lose their services. This decision will have to be on a parish-by-parish basis. Some chapels of ease are well attended, others not; some are in good condition, others not; some are quite near their parish church and for others there is a significant distance to travel. If a Chapel of Ease has its Mass removed, could it stay open for locals to go and pray, or for occasional devotions.

The need for greater participation by the Lay Faithful in all areas of the Church that are not exclusive to the priest. This can start with lay Eucharistic ministers taking the Eucharist to the housebound in parishes where they do not do so now. We must move away from the idea that the priest must be involved in, and central to everything that happens in the parish (clericalism). This way of thinking must be adopted not only by the priest, but by everyone, in order for us to move forward and grow. De-clericalisation must be managed properly; it must involve a proper discernment of what gifts people have, and how they can be used in the service of the Church.

Lay people can lead a service of Reception of the body, especially in larger parishes, or in circumstances where there are several funerals in a short period of time. But many people would find this a very difficult thing to adjust to.

The baptismal call to holiness which is in each of us. It empowers us if we realise it is there. Some people willingly grasped this idea, as they felt it was their right and duty to become more involved, whereas others felt that many of these things were still the priest's domain. People stated that we must try to follow Jesus and have a relationship with him and be strengthened by the sacraments.

The importance of prayer which underpins all our other activities. Prayer and listening. Listening to the Holy Spirit is essential in this process. Prayer is difficult, and it is easy to lose discipline and become engrossed in the world. Prayer is central to giving us the courage to face whatever may come. It is like the seed that will die unless it is watered. Various forms of prayer can be suggested.

Reaching out to those who have strayed from the Church as well as non Catholics and non believers. We need to humbly share our faith with others. Being a welcoming church (one of the themes of Phase 1) begins with us. This is especially pertinent at funerals, as this is where we encounter many lapsed Catholics, and we need to give them a positive impression, even if they do not return to Church. We need to find ways for those who are not Mass attendees to support their parish (they will want it to be there when they need it).

Several parishes commented on ecumenism. We need to remember that we are part of the Christian community that goes beyond the confines of our own church and our Catholic Community. Other churches are facing the same issues as we are, so there is much to be gained by walking hand-in-hand with them.

There is a tension between remaining true to our traditions and being open to a more modern approach to the Church.

A few parishes commented on the benefits of having a parish council. Some parishes do not have them, so this might be an area for discussion moving forward.

Developing a more digitally accessible Church. Make sure there is access to online Mass within the diocese for people who cannot attend (and this will be especially needed if and when some of the smaller churches have to close). A more digital and online church is more accessible to the young, who live increasingly in that world. There are many resources out there already, but we have to be better at interacting in this area. We have to signpost the young to the resources we know are good for them to access. It was suggested that we promote apps such as 'Universalis', 'Halo', and 'Laudate', and there are many others too. Find, share and utilise the available material on Social Media. But we must also be aware of the harm that Social Media and AI can cause children's minds.

Adult Formation and Catechesis: there are many resources and courses people can attend online, so we can promote some of these for adults who are interested in theology or Scripture, as well as for enquirers to the faith. This can extend to teenagers too, and it does not have to be online. It is better for us if we can get groups together. World Youth Days is a good thing for our youth to attend, although it is very expensive. We can have an event in the diocese to coincide with it, as we have done in the past, as well as a 'Scottish Youth Days' event. Also, we need more catechists. Courses such as 'Alpha' and 'Renew' were mentioned.

Diocesan Issues

We need Pastoral Coordination and support between parishes (at deanery level). Priests can do more parish swaps. It allows the people to know more of the priests. Also, it has become clear through this process how little many people know about the diocese. Their world is more localised (after all, the priests move from parish to parish, and they remain in their own).

In some parishes, good practice and initiatives have been begun which the diocese and other parishes could adopt and learn from. Some of these are already in place in other parishes, and the person making the suggestion may not be aware of that. So it is important that we pool our resources.

Do we have enough resources to continue? If not, what needs to change? We may use some as retreat houses or offered to families for rental. We can learn from other churches and dioceses who have already had to close some of their buildings. We have closed a few ourselves in the past.

Ideas were mooted about priests living in the larger parish houses rather than all living alone. This has its benefits, as priests can spend time together, but it will naturally increase their travelling time, and availability to the people in the parish where the priests do not live.

More groups for contemplative prayer and study within the diocese (online?). Pray for Vocations, and for an increase in the faith in our youth. Are we making the most of Craig Lodge? Whilst it is used by groups from outside the Diocese, are we maximising its potential and using it enough ourselves? Can we promote better the other retreat centres that we use, such as Schoenstatt, Conforti and Kinnoull?

As we are a diocese where Gaelic is spoken, we should encourage and promote its use in the liturgy, even if just a small part of the liturgy is in Gaelic, it would show our identity.

How do we continue to integrate people from other rites, such as Ukrainian and Syro-Malabar Catholics?

Does the Diocese need to employ a Youth Worker (as there was in the past), as the lack of youth attendance and involvement is the area of greatest concern in many of the parishes.

Redefinition of parish boundaries: this would ease the administrative workload for the priest in some parishes, with only one set of accounts / Gift Aid / Safeguarding audit for each priest to do. But what difference would it make for parishioners? They still live in the same place, the same distance from their church.

Importance of Safeguarding, including looking after our priests.

Trust among the clergy is essential.

The Church, and its priests, are prophetic signs to the world; signs of God's presence, and signs of hope. We must be encouraged rather than see a gloomy future.

The Future of the Church

Prepare and form our Lay people for their mission; discerning their gifts to enable a process of de-clericalisation.

How do we involve the young more, who are increasingly leaving the Church with no sign of returning? Many children do have faith even though they are not brought to Mass. If there is no religion taught, and no access to priests in the schools, parishes must do something to fill that gap.

Engaging with these groups requires people to be willing to volunteer, as well as undergoing PVG checks and Safeguarding training, which takes time and requires commitment from those involved.

It is time to make some (hard) decisions about future provision, with regard to our properties. We recognise the attachment people have to a particular church building, but we cannot continue as we are.

When there is no resident priest, other people will need to be taught how to lead a funeral service, or at least the reception of the body.

What skills do we have that we are not using? We will need to be willing to offer more of our own resources, our talents, especially moving forward in a changing world/church//diocese/parish.

Recognising a sense of mission is not easy when we are struggling. Our parishes are very used to having their own identity. As such, a sense of mission seems to be quite far from their minds.

Some parishes commented on the role of women in the church. While the bigger issue of women priests and deacons is not in the Diocese's remit, we can certainly encourage women to maximise the roles they are already able to perform, such as leading services of Word and Communion, and taking Communion to the sick. We also note that there are women in important roles in the diocese already (Finance Manager, DSA, and we have women on the Finance board and DSAG).

Reduction of Sunday Masses: whilst in many parishes this has not become necessary, all parishes should promote the 'One Sunday Mass per Parish' idea where possible, to encourage everyone to gather together rather than splitting parishes into 'Vigil' and 'Sunday morning' people who rarely meet. This would be best coming from the bishop and should be applied in all parishes.

An idea was mooted about taking a consultative approach: invite an external body to do an audit of the diocese, which will look at us from the outside and may offer potential solutions or paths going forward that we had not considered ourselves.

The church must continue, and increase its call, led by Pope Francis, to address Climate Change. It is an issue that is morally pressing, and one the Church is well equipped to lead from the front on.

Convergences/ areas of agreement

We are rooted in our traditions, our Catholicity, our baptismal call to holiness, and prayer. We have a rich history, from St. Columba onward. Many of our churches are dedicated to these Celtic saints, and can be focal points for pilgrimages. There are also many ancient holy sites within the diocese, which we can also make pilgrimages to, and learn more about.

We must move away from clericalism, or the Church will die.

This is an opportunity to have more parish events and activities (which do not all need to be led by the priest). This can include Bible Study and devotions. It can also involve more interaction with other parishes. It would be a challenge, given the spread of the diocese, but doable.

Realise that we may be entering a period of difficulty in the Church, but we walk hand in hand with Christ, and with each other, and that includes people outside the Church.

Be positive about change. Embrace the good things that are already happening in our parishes.

Divergences/ areas of discontent

Led by the Spirit is too negative, and is taking too long. Are we switching off the lights too soon?

A service of Word and Communion is unsuitable for Sundays and Feast Days. There should always be Mass then. And the danger with online Masses on Social Media is that people feel that they have engaged while they have not done so fully, and there is no reciprocity; everyone is 'just looking in'.

Many schools (except from the 4 Catholic Primaries in the diocese) do not allow the priest to visit, and are not encouraging Christian values. The values of the Church and society are miles apart, especially on moral issues.

The voice of the Church in the public sphere has become quiet, even silent, and when the Church is mentioned it is either to do with a scandal or an ageing Pope travelling the world.

In some parishes there is a real feeling of despair and despondency going forward; the elderly who have been faithful all their lives blame the church for not stepping into the gap if schools do not teach children the faith. They fear a wipe-out of the faith in some areas.

There is a lack of devotional practices, whether that is Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament or the Divine Office, or Rosary, or other forms.

Some parishes have commented about how difficult it is to get volunteers for certain roles (Health and Safety, Safeguarding, Children's Liturgy) because of the requirements, (H&S modules, PVGs).

Some parishioners are finding it hard to get to grips with the lack of a priest in their parish. But this is the reality when we have 14 priests and 25 parishes! “In a culture where people think the priest is in charge, it is difficult to pass responsibility on to lay people – even willing ones.” People will say that ‘the Church’ or ‘the Diocese’ should do more, without any sense that they are part of it. They are merely customers... and the customer is always right!

Questions

Do we have the resources for 45 places of worship?

If we do close some chapels of ease, what scope is there for house Masses in those places?

Could the Diocese have a list of available priests to cover if our own priest is unavailable?

Can we keep the status quo and still be missionary?

How important is it for parishes to retain their own identity, if they are merged or share a priest?

What about the 80% who do not practice? How do we listen to them?

What outcomes are we expecting? Can we have a final paper with an action plan?

Can we use empty parish houses for retreats?

Can we learn from other denominations if they are doing better than us in any areas?

Conclusions

There is a clear distinction between practical and spiritual tasks. This is an issue for all. Ultimately, our challenge is to trust the Holy Spirit. The Church is not the building and the finances; it is the community. The community will continue. Strength is in the cohesion of the people.

Some parishes were filled with consolation, hope and encouragement, and felt that this process was an opportunity given by God for us to grow in our faith as we joyfully tackle the challenges that we face, and the changes we must embrace. Others not so much; for them change represented a threat and they hearkened back to the ‘good old days’.

Some people were willing to put their hand up and step forward to take on the responsibilities that will enable the change to take place. Others just wanted someone else to do it.