Week 6: Parish Structures and Mission

Purpose of Session Six
Determine the present reality of our parishes across the entire diocese and their likely trajectory. This involves, but not restricted to, examining the demographics of clergy and parishioners, amount and condition of Churches, financial situation, missionary endeavours as well as any new trends which are emerging.

Participants will then reflect on (i) the necessary requirements for a parish to be feasible and (ii) whether our present parish arrangements are best for mission today.

Criteria for a Parish to Exist
Canon 515 states that only the bishop can erect, alter or close a parish. He must first consult the Council of Priests although it is now expected that he would also consult the parishioners. Canonical commentaries suggest that the same principles for establishing a new diocese are useful when considering the establishment of a new parish. These principles would include that any proposed parish would have sufficient inhabitants, that it would have sufficient human resources (e.g. active parishioners) and sufficient funds and property. St Mary's on Skye was the most recent parish to be erected in our diocese in 2000. John Watts' history of the diocese records that successive bishops had wanted to establish a parish on Skye but didn't do so because they were not convinced that it would be viable. Only when there was sufficient confidence was the parish established.[1]

Therefore, great care was taken before parishes were erected in our diocese. It is worth noting that twenty of our twenty-five parishes were founded at least one hundred years ago and many much longer. Each parish was created to respond to the needs of a particular locality at a precise point in their history. Realities change and therefore great care is needed to ascertain if the present parish arrangements are truly responding to our contemporary realities.

It makes sense that if sufficient inhabitants along with sufficient human and temporal resources form part of the criteria for establishing a parish then they should also form part of the criteria for determining if parishes remain feasible. Agreeing a standard criterion would be a just and sensible method although other factors would need to be taken into consideration such as geography etc.

Detailed Background Information
Please visit the 'Reference Library' section on the Led by the Spirit website. This contains up to date information about our diocese and parishes. Please read the information carefully, probably several times. There is a lot of information and nothing

[1] A Record of Generous People by John Watts, page 264

has to be learned “by heart” as it were but gaining an overall understanding of present realities is necessary.

Statistics and much less only one type of statistic (e.g. finance or the number of practicing Catholics) will not be the only factor when discerning our parish structures. Other factors such as history, culture, geography, emotions etc will also be taken into consideration. However, when statistics are taken as a whole they do provide a credible depiction of our parishes as well as their trajectory (at least as much as can be reasonably expected). When planning it is important to take into consideration not only the present reality but also how things are likely to develop.

In the Reference Library there are four sections you should read:

1 Synopsis of the Diocese which provides a short history and information about our clergy and diocesan administration etc.

2 Parish and Deaneries listing our three deaneries and which parishes are in them. It also records which parishes have Chapels of Ease and/or rent Protestant Churches or other buildings for Sunday Mass.
This section finishes with the number of Sunday Masses offered throughout the diocese and similar relevant facts.

3 Diocesan and Parish Finances where you can study annual parish income, expenditure, whether there was a surplus or deficit, the balance in the bank account but crucially whether it has loaned money to the diocese or has borrowed money from the diocese so that the last column reveals each parish’s accurate financial position. The figures cover seven years, from 2018-25, thereby providing a comprehensive overview. Our most recent audited accounts are for 2025.

The Diocesan financial figures are also available from 2018-25. The Dioceses’ primary income source is the levy which is paid by the parishes. The Finance Manager calculates the levy which is then approved by the Diocesan Finance Board. The levy is based on the annual budget proposed by the Finance Manager and approved by the Diocesan Finance Board. The diocese’s objective is to meet its obligations while breaking even, which it does each year.

4 Worship which reveals the numbers attending Sunday Mass and receiving the Sacraments from 2018-25. The figures from the year 2000 have also been included to highlight the sobering change which has occurred across our parishes over the past quarter century. In the 2022 civil census10,308 people, across Argyll and the Isles, self-declared as Catholic: 5,351 on the mainland and 4,957 on islands.

Some Important Factors to Note
Distinction between Parishes and Chapels of Ease
The diocese has 25 parishes, each with a Parish Church. There are a further 16 Chapels of Ease which for various reasons were built to serve an area within the parish, thereby

complementing the Parish Church. Chapels of Ease are not separate parishes but part of the parish. Care must be taken to properly make this distinction when both reflecting before and during the Conversation in the Spirit.

Personell
An obvious factor is the number of diocesan priests. Presently we have no seminarians.

However, the number of parishioners - and the number of those able and willing to be actively involved in the running of the parish - is an equally important factor. A Parish is more than a place to celebrate Sunday Mass, central as this is. For example, the Church requires a parish to be missionary, that various ministries be undertaken and to have a Finance Committee while expecting a Pastoral Council.

The decrease of practicing Catholics affects most of Europe but we are especially fragile due to our rural nature with its small and often scattered communities.

Finance and Fabric
Is a parish financially solvent? Can it pay its bills and look after a priest? What is the condition of the parish properties? Are they safe and legally compliant? Is maintenance work required?

Financial assistance is given to the poorest parishes. These subsidies are given under the Small Parish scheme but because the diocese has little funds this money is raised from the other parishes via the levy. This is the Christian thing to do. However, if the number of parishes looking for assistance increases the levy will need to increase and this could drag other parishes into financial difficulties. While sharing resources builds communion, thought must also be given to what is best for mission and acknowledging when spending money on certain projects may endanger the overall mission. It is also true that wasting money has moral implications.

Is it helpful for the long term future of a small parish community if the congregation is spread across two church buildings at double the cost (e.g. each building is separately insured, occurs energy costs etc)?

Changing parish structures does not mean abandoning people but establishing alternative structures which are better suited for us today. The Church provides several models of parish and not just what we are used to. These alternatives will be our focus next week.

Role of Representatives
As well as all the clergy two representatives were invited from every parish to participate in this process. The primary reason was to ensure that every area of the diocese would be represented. However, participants are not representing their parish (especially in a defensive or protective manner) but form part of our diocesan effort to discern the best way for promoting mission into the future. We need to remember that God founded the Church to spread the Good News and that structures, however deeply

loved, are always secondary to the mission because they exist precisely to support the mission.

Reminder of this Session's Remit

In Session 6 you are being asked to help establish principles regarding what makes a parish feasible today. You are not being asked to name any parish or community for potential change. This week only concentrate on (i) the principle of feasibility for parishes and (ii) if our present parish arrangements are still best for mission.