



# **DIOCESAN PASTORAL PLAN**

## **Five Year Review 2004-2009**

### **Bishop Michael's Report**

In August 2004, after well over a year of discussion, debate and fine-tuning at parish, deanery and diocesan level, the Diocese of East Anglia published a Diocesan Pastoral Plan, with a proper insistence by the first Synod of Parish Priests and the Council of Priests that the implementation of its provisions and recommendations would be monitored and the whole Plan reviewed after five years. This review was launched in January 2009, with an extensive questionnaire being completed by Parish Priests, Parish Pastoral Councils, and others. The results were discussed during the following months at the Council of Laity, College of Deacons and the annual Synod of Parish Priests. I am very grateful to all who took the trouble to contribute to this process. In many cases, this involved very helpful discussion at parish level before the questionnaire was completed. The notes which follow attempt to summarise briefly the main points which emerged from the review.

It should be said from the beginning that there were mixed reactions to the review process. The questionnaire was very long, as it sought to be comprehensive and thorough. Some saw it as a welcome opportunity for self-review; others found it rather intimidating and depressing. It was certainly not intended to be the latter, and I am sorry if it came across as such. It has given me a much better sense of each parish (complementing my Visitation Reports), and an overall sense of the life of the diocese and where we are going together, as well as being a most helpful contribution to the compiling of our diocesan *Ad Limina* report to Rome for January 2010.

One of the most important questions was asked at the very end of the questionnaire: 'Are you content that the diocese continues for the next five years, implementing and building on the Diocesan Pastoral Plan?' Of those who replied, all but two Parish Priests and one Parish Pastoral Council were happy to do so (with the proviso that certain issues needed revisiting and revising). The view of the 2009 Synod of Parish Priests was that we did not need a new edition of the Plan, but rather that we should issue supplementary documents and revisions as needed. This is especially the case with the proposals for clustering and merging parishes at the end of the Plan.

Like most dioceses in England, East Anglia is a widely-scattered and varied diocese, a mixture of rural and urban. Most of our parishes are rural; most of our Catholics live in the urban parishes. Each parish is different, and that needs to be recognised. The Diocesan Pastoral Plan was not designed to be 'one shape fits all', and flexibility was built into the Plan from the beginning (cf. the Foreword). The policies included in the plan (and those developed separately) are of course mandatory for all parishes, as integral parts of the diocese; the recommendations are not all suitable or possible in every parish (given the nature and size of the parish, number of volunteers, etc). It needs to be stressed that much was already going on in parishes long before the publication of the Plan, which is primarily a drawing together and sharing of examples of good practice from across the diocese.

### **Section 1 – A Community of Welcome**

A great deal of work has been done by most parishes to make their life even more welcoming to all, including newcomers, the 'lapsed', migrants, people with disabilities or special needs, older people, the sick and housebound, etc.

A major change since the publication of the plan has been the influx of migrants from Eastern Europe following the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Some groups have not integrated as well as others, but this process is ongoing and needs more time.

Welcoming children and young people is an area where parishes have tried hard, with varying degrees of success. The increasingly-demanding safeguarding requirements can make it difficult to recruit and retain adult helpers for youth activities, and small parishes often do not have enough young people to make activities viable. Both potential adult leaders and the young people themselves have increasingly busy diaries, with more demands and pressures on them than in the past.

The Diocesan Youth Service (basically a one-man band supported by dedicated volunteers) has developed a range of events over the last five years, including diocesan youth events and the work of the Youth Mission Team (which runs school and parish retreats, etc). The Diocesan Youth Council (comprised mostly of 16-21 year olds) is a very fruitful and active diocesan agency. The annual pilgrimage to Taizé, and the recent World Youth Day in Australia, show a spiritual vitality among young adults when they can be touched by such opportunities. As with all activities in such a geographically large and scattered diocese, long distances and transports problems hamper what can be achieved at diocesan level. There is a desire for more deanery events, better and earlier communication giving details of these events, and more pro-active and effective encouragement and enabling at parish level of participation in diocesan youth events.

## **Section 2 – A Community of Mission**

Mission is recognised as a challenge and a priority. A lot already goes on (RCIA, Café, work in schools, ecumenical activities, making use of civic and public opportunities, involvement in issues which affect the wider community, care for those in need, working for justice & peace, etc), but it is recognised that there is little 'outward' movement in the sense of reaching out in an explicit way with the Gospel to those who are unchurched, lapsed, etc. There is still need to explore how we can be drawn into the work of evangelisation, being St Felix and St Fursey for the people of East Anglia today. The diocesan Learning Together programme has laid on several training days on this topic; it remains a responsibility at the very heart of the nature and mission of the Church. As Pope Paul put it, 'Evangelisation is the Church's deepest identity'. It is not easy – but it is essential.

Evangelisation includes communicating the Good News through local media (newspapers, radio, TV, internet, etc). We have not yet been able to establish an effective network of parish communications officers, supported at diocesan level, but this remains something to work towards. It is already working well in some parishes.

The warmth of joyful and loving welcome shown to all in the worship, work and life of each parish is central to the Church's mission. This is the responsibility of every member of each parish community.

An increasingly important dimension of the 'outward' reach of our diocesan life has been the 'Building Bridges' double twinning with the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Apostolic Prefecture of Battambang, Cambodia. This has been developed at diocesan, deanery, parish and school level. Some have been understandably dispirited by the lack of communication from their twin communities, but overall the links have brought a deepened sense of the Catholicity of the Church, and of solidarity and friendship with people in other parts of the world, without in any way undermining or detracting from the generous support given to CAFOD across the diocese. When asked whether they were happy for the diocesan double twinning to continue for another five years, all Parish Priests and Parish Pastoral Councils who answered the question did so positively.

## **Section 3 – Together in Trust and Partnership**

This is seen as one of the more problematic areas. There have been significant and effective efforts to draw together communities within parishes (different places of worship, different congregations in the same place).

Clustering parishes has been a slow process, however, despite the general recognition that this is essential for preparing for the future; in some cases, the distance between parishes is a problem; priests are already all too busy; there is some resistance to looking beyond one's own parish boundaries. In some places, however, efforts have been made to adjust Sunday Mass times so that they can be covered by neighbouring priests when necessary. There is need for a clear yet flexible long-term strategy and a change of mentality.

Looking towards future mergers, we need to learn from the experience of those which have already taken place. Sensitivity is needed towards each parish involved; each needs to show patience, consideration, openness, love, and 'give and take'.

Few lay people see much value in the deanery structure, despite excellent events such as the Deanery Days in Bury St Edmunds and elsewhere. Most priests see the value of the Deanery for mutual support and as a forum for discussion and for active participation in diocesan decision-making.

There are already many forms of responsible lay leadership in most parishes (leading prayer and Bible reflection groups, chairing Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Committees, Children's Liturgy Group, and so many others). A key role is that of catechist, and this will be increasingly important for our future (as it already is in so many countries); we need to develop the role of catechists, with proper initial and ongoing training and formation. We still need to give more serious consideration to developing the roles of Lay Pastoral Assistants, Parish Administrators, etc.

As one review reply put it, we must not return to the days of 'Leave it to Father'. On the other hand, several priests noted that it is increasingly difficult to find lay people to take on leadership roles, at precisely a time when the need for this is very much recognised and accepted. There is a reluctance to take on such roles, partly perhaps because of a fear of being 'lumbered for life' but also because so many people are already very busy. Many responses affirmed the major need for appropriate training.

Along with the renewed 2-year CCRS course available from the diocese through the Margaret Beaufort Institute, the main contribution to adult religious education and formation has been the Diocesan 'Learning Together' programme. Despite the widespread publicity available (annual leaflets and termly information and registration forms distributed to parishes, full details in the diocesan newspaper and on the diocesan website), more personal and local encouragement is needed at parish level by parish priests. Once again there are inevitably problems with distance and transport, but the general view is that the study days are of good quality on a wide range of topics, and are well received by most who attend.

The Diocesan Council of Laity established in May 2005 is generally seen as an improvement on the old Diocesan Pastoral Council, as it has a distinctively pastoral slant and is not merely a 'talking shop'. Its full effectiveness depends on having a representative from every parish (ideally the lay chair of the Parish Pastoral Council) and the report from each meeting being fed back for discussion and implementation by parishes.

Little value is seen in restoring the old Deanery Pastoral Councils, but several deaneries have now established regular meetings of Council of Laity representatives. This is to be encouraged.

A forum for lay participation in pastoral planning and decision making at parish level is required by diocesan policy (either a Parish Pastoral Council or Parish-in-Council). These vary in effectiveness, and work best when they are as open as possible rather than a hand-picked group.

#### **Section 4 – Together in Prayer – Living the Sacraments**

There has been much focus on developing prayer and spirituality in parishes. Most parishes now have regular times of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and many celebrate the Divine Office (especially Morning Prayer). Scripture-reflections groups are growing.

The diocesan Baptism policy is generally being implemented, although there remains room in many parishes for better Baptism preparation courses led by lay catechists. This is more difficult in small parishes with few annual Baptisms.

A significant minority remain unsure as to the best age and stage for Confirmation, and it is clearly a contentious issue for some people; some would prefer a younger age, others an older age. The majority (over two thirds of parish priests) are content to continue with the current policy (Year 10, in which young people reach the age of 15). There are still many parish priests and catechists who seem not to know of the Diocesan Confirmation Pack, which was sent to all parishes when first published; it is available on the diocesan website under 'Catechesis', along with the diocesan guidelines for sacramental preparation for Baptism, First Confession and First Communion.

Many parishes have reduced the number of Sunday Masses over the last five years. The size of some churches makes such a reduction very difficult. Nearly all parishes have Holy Communion under both

kinds at all Masses, although there is still much work to be done to encourage people to receive the sacrament in this way.

There is strong support for the current programme for the commissioning of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (practical training in the parish; teaching input and commissioning by the Bishop at one of three annual Commissioning Days).

### **Section 5 – Finances, New Structures, etc**

All parishes state they have implemented diocesan policies on finance, and that they publish parish accounts, although difficulties continue to emerge in a few parishes.

Several parishes responded creatively to the suggestion that building a larger church allowing for a single Sunday Mass at some stage in the future might in some cases be a good way forward. It has quickly been discovered that this can be a very challenging and expensive exercise, especially in the wake of a major economic downturn. Unfortunately, the diocese has very limited financial resources even to offer as loans to cover funding gaps; the Charity Commission requires prudent decision-making.

The Cathedral has been highlighted as the Mother Church of the diocese, with more diocesan events taking place there, and the appeals for the Narthex and Re-Ordering projects gaining support. As with most cathedrals, however, there remain barriers to St John's being seen as a natural 'home' for all Catholics from across the diocese; these include distance, problems with parking and the cost of coaches. It has been suggested that each deanery take on responsibility for a specific area of the Cathedral. Hopefully the Centenary Year (2010) will give further focus to the Cathedral.

More thought needs to be given to the chaplaincy of institutions, to deanery cover for priests on holiday and when sick, to why there are fewer vocations to the priesthood (although we now have six seminarians rather than the none we had six years ago), and to the vital role of our Catholic schools.

### **General Comments on the Diocesan Pastoral Plan (DPP)**

Overall, the DPP is regarded as a good and realistic route plan for the present and future, normative but flexible. Parishes vary enormously, and we need to be realistic about what is possible in our large scattered diocese. The DPP can seem somewhat overwhelming in its detail, but it is 'a valuable resource and helps set us on the right road even if we don't get too far along it!' There is no need for a parish to feel a failure if it has not implemented everything, or a parish priest to feel depressed if every box cannot be ticked. The DPP does, however, help to promote consistency, and is a tool for self-evaluation and future planning. It should help to give a greater sense of being a single diocesan family. The DPP sets out how we should be doing things together, and how we are to move 'forward and outward together in Christ'.

Clearly, a brief report such as this cannot include all the comments and suggestions made at the meetings of the Synod of Parish Priests, College of Deacons, and two meetings of the Council of Laity. The minutes of the two meetings of the Council of Laity (May & November 2009) given over to discussion of the results of the Five-Year Review should be fed back into Parish Pastoral Councils and equivalents, and the ideas given there should be considered.

I am very grateful to all who have taken part in the review. The general response seems to be that the Diocesan Pastoral Plan is a valuable document, guiding us forward to our future together and helping to create a greater sense of cohesion as a Diocese of which each parish is an integral and essential part. It provides a firm but flexible foundation for long-term strategic planning, and should remain at the heart of pastoral planning at parish, deanery and diocesan level.



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