



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

BANBURY AND WARWICK DEANERY VISITATION REPORT

JUNE 2024

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How can we be a Synodal Church in Mission?

As part of the preparation for the Synod in October 2024, Pope Francis has called the whole Church to focus on this question: How can we be a synodal Church in Mission? This applies to every parish and deanery, as well as this Archdiocese and the Church itself.

'The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. Evangelii Gaudium 27.'

This question, 'How can we be a synodal Church in Mission?' is answered in a number of different ways across the Banbury & Warwick Deanery.

In the parishes of Sacred Heart, Bilton, Rugby, and English Martyrs, Hilmorton, Rugby their mission is to deepen their commitment to justice and peace, and especially a care for our common home. In union with several of the parishes across the deanery they have achieved the CAFOD Live Simply award. These parishes under the leadership of Canon Gerry Murray offer the parishes across this deanery an example of how the mission of Justice and Peace and Social outreach can become a focal point of parish life, drawing parishioners into a deeper sense of communion and mission.

This is also true in St. Peter's Leamington Spa and Our Lady's, Lillington, where social outreach (an important priority within our diocesan vision) has been united with the parish missionary endeavours. Kindaid, which was started in 1996 to support several charitable projects at home and abroad are celebrating their 50th Anniversary, and over that time have donated many hundreds of thousands of pounds to these projects. The parishioners of St Peter's have reflected deeply upon the mission of the parish and the work of evangelisation, which is the first of our priorities as part of our diocesan vision. It is important that this reflection is rooted in practical action and concrete initiatives.

The newly formed parish pastoral council at St Joseph's, Whitnash may offer a good model of evangelisation. In common with several parishes in the deanery, which lie alongside the M40 corridor, such as Bicester, Banbury and Whitnash, there are major housing developments in the parish of St. Joseph's as the population of this deanery continues to grow. The parish of St Joseph's, Whitnash have reached out to these new developments at Bishop's Tachbrook to invite the new residents into the parish community and to help them to know where the local churches are.

Other parishes such as Banbury, Warwick, Kenilworth, and Bicester ensure that new parishioners, visitors and enquirers find a warm and generous welcome and are encouraged to feel at home, and to be part of the life of the parish. This is very true of smaller parish communities such as Baddesley Clinton, Wappenbury and Wooton Wawen.

Sometimes, it is the Priest whose strong sense of mission seeks to drive the parish forward; for example, at Chipping Norton, Charlbury and Balsall Common. This has led to dynamic parish discussions, as not everyone has bought into the plan, universally.

The newly formed Deanery Pastoral Council can pray and reflect together about the local mission of the Church. It can offer great encouragement to become ever more, a synodal Church in mission, by highlighting and celebrating examples of good practice across the deanery, as well as supporting those parishes such as Balsall Common and Southam who are struggling to respond effectively to Pope Francis' call.

Co-responsibility for Mission.

From the outset, the Archdiocese of Birmingham has highlighted the significance of Co-responsibility, both as an intrinsic means by which we can understand our diocesan vision and unite it with our Synodal Pathway. Our awareness of the significance of Co-responsibility for Mission has grown to the point where it is an integral part of how the Archdiocese of Birmingham understands evangelisation and mission at every level. Co-responsibly has so permeated every aspect of Parish and Diocesan life, that it is now possible to create Parish and Deanery Pastoral Councils in every part of our large diocese, as a new and necessary structure to enable us to reflect together about the local mission of the Church. How Co-responsibility for Mission will continue to shape our Diocesan life cannot be fully perceived at this time, but it is an exciting part of 'Walking Together' on our Synodal Pathway.

I define Co-responsibility as the living out of our baptismal calling in a way that empowers each of us play a mature role in the life and mission of the Church, particularly at the parish level.

'Our vision is to be a Catholic Diocese which is faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly in vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour'.

As an Archdiocese, we have discerned four diocesan priorities and themes. These are Evangelisation, Formation, Liturgy and Worship, Social Outreach, with emphasis on Families and Young People, working in a co-responsible manner.

Our diocesan vision and its priorities cannot be fully implemented by every parish working singularly or alone but is best realised by a commitment to share our gifts and resources to ensure that our parishes are enabled to become vibrant communities of faith.

There are several examples of parishes where a sense of co-responsibility is very active and there is a sense of the parish community in action. This is particularly true of: Kenilworth, Wooton Wawen, Wappenbury; as well as Banbury; Bicester; Brailes, Shipston & Kineton; Shotton & Stratford upon Avon; Warwick & Hampton on the Hill; and Whitnash.

Parish Clusters, Missions or Pastoral Areas

With this in mind, we have created a number of clusters where groups of parish communities can work ever closer together, to enhance the life of the cluster and fully implement the diocesan vision. In some places these are called 'Pastoral Areas' or 'Missions' to keep in mind their purpose:

I would recommend that four clusters or pastoral areas working closely together would enhance the life of the deanery as a whole

Bicester & Banbury Pastoral Area

Bicester, Hethe, Banbury, Chipping Norton, Charlbury.

Leamington, Kenilworth and Warwick Pastoral Area

Leamington, Lillington, Kenilworth, Whitnash, Warwick, Hampton on the Hill, Baddesley Clinton.

Rugby Pastoral Area

Rugby, Bilton, Hilmorton, Southam, Princethorpe, Wappenbury.

Stratford Pastoral Area

Stratford, Wooton Wawen, Kineton, Shipston Brailes.

Within the **Bicester & Banbury Pastoral Area**,

It was proposed and accepted at the visitation of Holy Trinity, Hethe, that this parish should be amalgamated with Immaculate Conception, Bicester as the best means by which we can ensure future provision for Hethe.

I also recommend that Holy Trinity, Chipping Norton & St Teresa of Lisieux, Charlbury, should be amalgamated.

Within the **Leamington, Kenilworth and Warwick Pastoral Area**

I recommend that it is time to work on a much broader perspective, bringing the vitality and energy of the parish communities of Warwick and Kenilworth into the Leamington Cluster. Several of our parishioners will be aware of the title of 'Catholic Leamington', to describe the three parishes in this area. Kenilworth can significantly enhance the life of the parish communities around it, and so should be drawn into a larger of Pastoral area with Leamington, Lillington, Whitnash, Warwick, and also Baddesley Clinton which would be served from Warwick.

I recommend that Balsall Common, which is canonically linked with Dorridge Parish, should once again be served from Dorridge.

Within the **Rugby Pastoral Area**

I am very grateful for the very positive conversations which are ongoing across this pastoral area, with particular regard to the pastoral provision across the three parishes in Rugby, as we plan for the future.

Within the **Stafford Pastoral Area**

Stratford upon Avon and Shotton are under the pastoral care of the Benedictine Order. It is natural that they will want to work closely with other Benedictine parishes outside the Deanery, such as Alcester, as well as with their neighbours within the deanery. Both are to be encouraged.

Creating these clusters or pastoral areas is necessary to respond to the practical challenge of falling clergy and parish numbers. By co-ordinating across clusters, Mass Times, sacramental preparation, chaplaincy services (university, hospital and prison), support for our schools and the many other demands of each individual parish, we can create a future where with our clergy and parishioners can by working in full co-responsibility deliver the Archbishop's vision. This is not a plan to manage decline but one to create a platform for growth and renewal.

Deanery Pastoral Councils

Our Deanery Pastoral Council will support the implementation of the Diocesan Vision and in particular the practical aspects of bringing individual parish groups and resources together to raise all parishes up by sharing the experience, skills and best practice that exists in all parishes in the deanery.

Our emphasis on Co-responsibility is found in a recent Pastoral Letter.:

'So that we may ourselves move from collaboration to co-responsibility in the same spirit I am asking every parish and deanery in our Archdiocese - through the parish priests and the deans - to establish pastoral councils. Whether in individual parishes, working closely with our schools, or groups of parishes working in clusters together, as well as in our deaneries, pastoral councils can focus and motivate the Body of Christ for mission, with the Diocesan Vision as our guide'.

'These future gatherings of clergy and lay faithful, assisted by the prayers and participation of our Religious and our school communities, will pray and reflect together about the local mission of the Church. They will act as consultative bodies, informing and guiding the decisions that need to be taken as we look to the future'.
(Archbishop Bernard Longley, Pastoral Letter, March 2024)

Communion, the fruit of our Mission.

This is the area of parish life with which we are most familiar. In particular, the areas of priority such as Formation, Worship and Liturgy, Young People and family life.

I was very impressed with the Young Adults group which meets at St Peter's Leamington & St Joseph's Whitnash, but also includes Mary Immaculate, Warwick and is reaching out to students at Warwick University. This is a good example of young

people working across a larger area to enrich the life of each parish community and to build a sense of spiritual communion for people aged 18-35 years.

Liturgy and particularly musical resources are strong in many of our parishes. Of particular significance is Our Lady, Lillington and St Peter's, Leamington Spa, and Immaculate Conception, Bicester which work very well in this area. I am sure that these are resources which can be offered across the deanery.

I was particularly impressed with a parish lunch at Immaculate Conception in Bicester. There was a great sense of the parish cohesion and diversity as people from many backgrounds gathered together to celebrate St Patrick's day. I remember a group of Nigerians and Irish parishioners joining together to toast their patron saint.

Many of our larger parishes such as Banbury, Bicester, Leamington and Kenilworth have a strong sense of a parish community and communion. It is also evident in many of our smaller parishes such as Baddesley Clinton, Hampton on the Hill, Hilmorton, Kinton & Shipston, Wappenbury, Wooton Waven and Whitnash.

Our Lady's Lillington has a strong tradition in formation, especially for those children at non-Catholic schools.

Looking Forward.

The implementation of the Diocesan Vision is well advanced across the Deanery. Under the leadership of Canon John Batthula, the Dean and lay parishioner Mr Peter Rand, the Deanery Pastoral Council has been founded. This body can support the people and priests of the deanery, to build good practice as well as supporting each parish community.

There will be significant challenges in the future. The age of the clergy in this deanery is above the Diocesan average. Some of our priests will retire, shortly, and may not be replaced. There will need to be serious ongoing discernment regarding the viability of all of our Churches across the Deanery. Constructive conversations have begun to be had with regards to the practical challenges surrounding property and finance; with a recognition that change will be needed to ensure the long-term sustainability of parishes. From these discussions have come the realisation that consideration of future property needs is not only necessary but presents an opportunity to dispose of or repurpose properties to further support the mission of the parish. Parishes are encouraged and empowered to 'dare to dream' and make bold decisions about which properties to keep and which to dispose of.

Pope Francis's challenge – 'How can we be a synodal Church in Mission?' has been heard and is being seriously addressed across this deanery. There is a sense of Mission and Evangelisation; Co-responsibility is very strong and the life and communion within the parishes is heartening.

Canon Paul Fitzpatrick
24 June 2024