

PASTORAL AREA VISITS 2010

A Report

Introduction

As an overture to this report of my visits to Pastoral Areas this year, I'd like to take you back to some words that I wrote in paragraph 54 of *Growing Together in Christ*, the consultation document which started the whole process which led to the Pastoral Plan and to the establishment of Pastoral Areas.

We are embarked on a venture that will take us into deep waters and we are involved in a process of ongoing renewal and change. We cannot get anywhere without the Lord, for without him "in vain do the builders labour."

We need to remember, therefore, that we are in God's time and in his hands, which is why prayer and being a people of prayer is such an important part of this process. We must never forget that because we are baptised, we are God's people – "once you were no people, now you are God's people."

It is God that calls us into *communion* and it is the same God who sends us out in *mission*. We do not go alone or without resources. We are a gifted and graced people and we are empowered by the words of Jesus who says: "I am with you always; yes, till the end of time." If we can but trust in such a promise, we have nothing to fear and everything to gain.

My visits to you all this year have been conducted very much in the context of prayer and with that vivid awareness that the road on which we have embarked as a result of the Pastoral Plan "is of God." Your patience, your prayerful preparation and engagement with the Plan have been both evident and of enormous encouragement to me. I am really delighted by the progress that has been made.

Comparisons

I am not sure what I expected from this year's series of visits, but they were very different from what I experienced in 2010.

You have all, without exception, moved on, but always, because of your prayerful reflection, in ways that are appropriate for each Pastoral Area. If I have learned anything over recent years, it is that this process of pastoral restructuring cannot be forced.

As the implications of the Pastoral Plan unfolded, it became increasingly clear that trying to achieve particular outcomes by prescribed deadlines was not always the best way forward. You have appreciated that I have learned to trust the instincts and understandings of the local Areas. Resisting the temptation to impose strict timetables enables each Pastoral Area to focus on implementing the Pastoral Plan at a pace that is appropriate in their own particular context.

As part of this, I have noticed that important work has taken place across the diocese in the strengthening of relationships between clergy and laity and between the communities that constitute the Pastoral Areas. I was delighted with this and I am grateful for all the prayerful effort that you have put into this crucial stage in the establishment of the Areas.

With the lessening of the emphasis on achieving the goal of Pastoral Areas becoming single parishes within a fixed number of years there has been much more time for constructive organic growth between the communities. I have always said that “relationships come before structures” and the way in which you have all worked in the past year underlines the importance of that principle.

Pastoral Area to Parish

Together with the knitting together of networks of interdependent communities, there is emerging a greater sense of the shared responsibilities within the Pastoral Area and a moving away from the old attitude that saw the needs of individual communities as the only thing that matters.

That Pastoral Areas still work towards becoming a Parish remains my overall aim but, in the light of my experience this year, I know that this cannot be imposed from on high and certain elements need to be demonstrably in place before such an ultimate development can be put in place. To support this, I have mandated a small group to clarify the structures and the actual ways of working together that need to be in place before I will consider the request of a Pastoral Area to become a single Parish.

In the end, this single Parish needs to be a community of communities, held together by a network of relationships which work interdependently for *Communion* and *Mission*. This means that the Parish is one pastoral unit working in harmony with a shared vision.

Area Pastoral Councils

The Area Pastoral Council has a crucial role to play in the Pastoral Area and in the process of the Pastoral Area becoming a single Parish

It is the responsibility of the APC to develop a Plan and a process for its implementation which will enable the Area to become that network of interdependent communities of which I wrote earlier in this document. All this has to be done in reference to the Pastoral Plan as outlined in *Go Out and Bear Fruit*. That document has to be the ultimate blueprint against which all that we do is judged.

The work of the APC has to be coordinated by a small steering group, chosen from within the membership. This steering group is responsible for coordinating the work of the APC and ensuring that agreed actions are undertaken to implement the Area Pastoral Plan. . The APC is not a “parliament of representatives” from existing Parish Pastoral Councils but rather an assembling of men and women whose skills and experience equip them to take the lead in the Pastoral Area.

Existing Parish Pastoral Councils will need to be gradually replaced by Working Community Pastoral Groups who will have responsibility for the particular needs of local communities. These are not bodies which are independent of the Pastoral Area. They exist and operate within the context of the Area Pastoral Council and the Pastoral Area. They will always need to act with the overall needs of the whole Pastoral Area in mind and in ways that always promote that growing sense of interdependence which has to be at the heart of the Pastoral Area.

The Clergy

I was delighted with the abundant evidence that priests and deacons are increasingly working and praying together and therefore are supporting one another. This does not happen by accident but is always the result of hard work and serious commitment to the *communion* and *mission* of the Area.

The clergy are more and more playing off one another’s strengths but it is perhaps the responsibility of the APC to make sure that the expectations placed on priests and deacons by laity are realistic and that they respect the core aspects of what these ministries are about.

It is also important – and this is happening – that each priest or deacon has agreed responsibility for a particular area, be that territorial or thematic.

A certain amount of work has been done about “titles” of clergy and a document explaining this is attached to this report.

Other emphases

1. Outreach

With the growing sense of interdependence within the communities of the Pastoral Area, there is an increasing need that the Catholic community thus constituted should seek to be a major player in the secular and political activities of the Area.

2. Catechesis

Catechesis, although often conducted within existing communities, nevertheless needs to be coordinated within the Pastoral Area, with catechists coming together regularly to share expertise and experience. I am happy to say that this is already happening in certain Areas.

3. Finance

Another important aspect of the process of transition from parish to Pastoral Area is the gradual integrating of the finances of the various communities. A first step might be the establishment of a Pastoral Area bank account to which all communities contribute and which can then be used to fund certain Pastoral Area activities. The ultimate aim in this sector as in all others is to achieve a situation in which all financial and property resources are managed centrally at Pastoral Area level. Deacon Stephen Morgan and the Finance and Property Department are always ready to help in any way they can.

Summary

As I wrote at the beginning of this report, I feel that really significant movement towards implementing the Pastoral Plan is now taking place and I want to thank most sincerely all who have been involved. Increasingly, there is the understanding that “this is the only show in town”.

In addition to this understanding, there has to be added the massive act of faith that has been made in the future of the diocese by the many thousands who have pledged financial investment over the coming years. The *Living Our Faith* campaign has been spectacularly successful and as I write the pledged total has now topped £13 and a half million. I believe that it has been so successful because we have a Pastoral Plan and because there is an increasing awareness of *Stewardship* in the spirituality of our people.

Next year will probably be my last as your bishop but I hope to make yet another series of visits to all the Pastoral Areas before I finish. I am confident, on the basis of what I already know, that, because of your support and encouragement and commitment, I will be able to hand on my successor a diocese in which the necessary process of pastoral restructuring is well under way to ensure that we work most fruitfully in the service of Communion and Mission. We are also a diocese which has a “war chest” of about £13 million to facilitate the implementation of the Pastoral Plan. That’s not a bad legacy!

Next Steps

Among the points on which I will want feedback during next year’s visits will be:

- How progress towards a Pastoral Area identity is going – PA events, common newsletter, magazine, website etc
- The ongoing development of the Area Pastoral Council, operating in a way that is consistent with the *Diocesan Guidelines for Pastoral Councils* - a document which you will have received and which is attached to this report
- How the Area Pastoral Council is working with the people of the Area to develop a Plan for the further implementation of the Pastoral Plan *Go Out and Bear Fruit*.

There will be other points too but they will emerge as time goes on.

Bishop Crispian

Appendices

1. Diocesan Guidelines for Pastoral Councils
2. Titles for Priests in Pastoral Areas Sept 2010
3. Role descriptions for priests
4. Pastoral Areas – an article by Fr Tom Grufferty in The Tablet of 10th July 2010.