

TOM GRUFFERTY

## Stronger together

The creation of pastoral areas – or clustering of parishes – is a subject that causes a great deal of apprehension, much of it arising from misunderstanding. But for the process to be successful, it must make use of everyone's talents and not be rushed

Out of sheer necessity – but not before time – the one-man-band parish has come to an end. With declining numbers of priests and sometimes of congregations, dioceses are having to reconsider how to serve the people. Sometimes that means considering the clustering of parishes. Clustering can make people fearful. They worry that the character of their parish will be lost, that they will be unable to go to Mass in their neighbourhood, and they will lose their priest. But there are advantages too, and what works and what doesn't work need to be considered.

These issues were on the agenda when the priests and deacons of Portsmouth Diocese met for an overnight conference in Bournemouth following an invitation from the bishop, Crispian Hollis. The topic was "pastoral areas" – known in other parts of the Church as "clustering parishes".

The idea of pastoral areas started with a pastoral plan for the whole diocese whereby 102 parishes will become 24 with teams of clergy and laity having pastoral responsibility for each area. There has been widespread involvement of lay people in the process.

In the course of the last five years, some areas made rapid progress while others hardly moved at all. Pastoral areas were encouraged to take the process at a speed appropriate to the circumstances of the particular area. There are now two pastoral areas declared to be parishes according to the Code of Canon Law and two more ready to be made parishes. There are certain criteria that each pastoral area has to fulfil before they become parishes, such as having a viable leadership team of clergy and laity. There should be wide consultation, with good communication.

The process has thrown up fears such as the possible closure of some church buildings and the lack of leadership in small Eucharist communities. There were also questions about what title the priests will have. Some of the priests were fearful of being called "curate" as in days gone by; and one of the

purposes of this year's conference was to advance the process by working on the terminology. At the conference itself, many of the fears disappeared because the clergy involved recognised that, if anything, their ministry is being inspired and affirmed.

Today, priests are called on to work collaboratively with everybody in the parish. I personally have been helped in this work by the stewardship process where the gifts, the talents and the treasure of every individual are acknowledged. Donal Harrington, in his book *The Welcoming Parish* (Columba Press), says that the parish in splendid isolation has no future, as we are a communion of communities. In drawing several parish communities together, it is crucial to remember that each one has its own history, culture, traditions and ritual. These must be respected and integrated with their neighbours in the vicinity. New opportunities will present themselves for enriching the differences each community holds dear to itself.

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### TO DO

**Think** about what you can share with the parishes around you and what you can gain from greater collaboration with them

**Share** facilities, pastoral resources and sacramental preparation

**Ask** the question at least once a year, "Where do I want my parish to be in 10 years' time?"

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A new kind of parish is emerging where the talents of everybody are acknowledged. We felt that we should get the terminology as right as possible for this new kind of parish. While we are in transition, the priest with overall responsibility will be called the "coordinating pastor" while other priests in the area will be called "co-pastors" with everybody being co-responsible – co-workers. There might well be exceptions; some priests (retired priests, chaplains and newly ordained priests) will not fit into either category. When a pastoral area becomes a parish, the coordinating pastor becomes parish priest while all co-pastors become associate parish priests.

While the fears of some might be allayed, the closure of churches is also a big issue. When a community is built on and sustained by the Eucharist, the shortage of priests is a threat to the very life of that community. At present, there is no intention to close churches.

In our pastoral area, we have 14 Masses at the weekend for 1,700 people and the smallest church in the area can accommodate 150

people. In the past 10 years, there has been a gradual decline in the number of people who attend Mass regularly. The reorganisation of the pastoral area might well speed up this haemorrhage unless we become a missionary Church again. Two of the existing communities regularly receive new people into the Church; but they do not compensate for the fallout. On the other hand, new, larger areas could become much more effective at evangelisation than smaller communities, which are diminishing in pastoral activity, in human resources and financially to the extent that they are hardly surviving. It often happens that a diocese is too big while an individual parish is too small but a cluster of five to seven parishes can work miracles. Ideally a cluster of parishes can employ professionals to organise youth ministry, sacramental preparation, adult formation and communications.

We have also discovered that some, if not all, volunteers need leadership training. For example, the person in charge of the readers' rota does not consider herself as a leader; but this is a parish ministry needing leadership. A good administrator is not always a good leader. We are aiming to have a paid pastoral leader for our parish initially and then for the wider area – and we are aiming to have an unpaid trained leader for all the major ministries in the parish by 2012.

There must be greater care of all the priests in the pastoral area. This means that they must take a day off each week and proper holidays. Besides, there must be more attention given to the lifestyle of the priest, who can be isolated and lonely.

In the new kind of parish, there will be risks and challenges but most of all greater inspiration. Our efforts are by no means perfect or ideal, merely an attempt to address a big issue facing communities where the Eucharist is central and needs to remain at the heart of what it means to be Church in the twenty-first century.

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