

importance of leadership which in the absence of a priest could be provided by a deacon, religious or lay person. ♦Consider recruiting more men for the permanent diaconate and commission suitably trained lay leaders where needed. ♦Consider how, in practical terms, to keep parishioners when churches/centres are closed. ♦Consider the role of parish leadership and the demands placed upon it.

MAINTENANCE AND MISSION

With regard to planning for the future, the data gathered shows that a place of worship has more than one purpose. It is not just a centre for the 'Mass led' community but it is also a mission centre. There are indications that the presence of a Catholic church in a rural village acts as a beacon for Catholics to settle there. This obviously would end if the church closed. This suggests an incarnational understanding of place. It also highlights the significance of the church building in missionary activity.

On-going work: ♦Look for any *hidden* impacts before closing a particular church or Mass centre. ♦Consider keeping a church building open to provide a centre for evangelization, even when the regular provision for Mass is not practical. This may be especially significant in rural areas to maintain a missionary presence. However, it is also relevant to urban areas. ♦Explore the relationship between maintenance and mission in practical terms – they are not mutually exclusive or opposed. For example, keeping a church building in a rural community is an act of maintenance. However, the building is a sign and a reminder of the Church as a whole and so keeping it is an act of evangelization which is an essential part of the Church's mission. Conversely, closing a church can be an act of maintenance because it helps to pool resources and so maintain other churches. At the same time, the closure can open the way for new types of missionary activity.

Pastoral Area team - October 2013

PRAYER



Almighty God and Father,
We praise and thank You for all that is
being accomplished, by Your grace,
in the *Walking Humbly* process
through conversation and connections
in our Pastoral Areas.

As we lay before You all our hopes and plans,
may Your Holy Spirit, guide and direct us.

By the power of Your Spirit, may we grow
into truly thriving Catholic communities,
confidently and humbly proclaiming
the Good News of Your Son, Jesus Christ.

This we ask through
the same Christ, our Lord. Amen.



LOCAL PASTORAL AREA
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NORTHAMPTON SOUTH & WEST PASTORAL AREA

The Catholic churches and schools of south and west Northampton, Aston-le-Walls, Daventry and Towcester

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION SUMMARY OF THE NORTHAMPTON SOUTH & WEST PASTORAL AREA

In March 2012 a team from the Northampton South and West Pastoral Area Council, Diocese of Northampton under the guidance of the team from Action Research: Church & Society (ARCS), Heythrop College, University of London embarked upon a theological reflection entitled: *How changes to the availability of churches and Masses within the Pastoral Area have affected the understanding of being members of a parish.*

Data for developing a theological understanding of practice was gathered in two stages. The first consisted of a questionnaire, entitled *Our Faith*, which many parishioners throughout the Pastoral Area kindly completed. The second stage consisted of focus groups. The Pastoral Area team then met with the team from Heythrop and discussed the findings. What follows is a summary of a fuller document which gives the reflections of the Pastoral Area team. There are five areas. For each area there are observations and suggestions for on-going work. The on-going work that is listed does not mean that it is not already taking place. However, its importance is being highlighted. *The fuller document, of which this is a summary, is freely available to those who are interested.*

The full document of the Theological Reflection may be downloaded from our Pastoral Area website:

www.northamptonswpa.btck.co.uk



YEAR OF FAITH 2012
2013

MASS LED

The Mass is seen to be the focal point of the parish community – which is formed from attending Mass. There is a spiritualized sense of community. That is, an emphasis on the community as a worshipping community – not as a social community. Comments on weekly habits such as seeing the same people and sitting in the same seats enforces the interrelationship of Mass and the community.

The focus on the Mass means that Mass is sought elsewhere if it is not available locally and people are prepared to travel a distance.

On-going work: ♦Explore the dynamics behind people's decisions where to attend Mass. ♦Foster other forms of prayer and worship that build upon devotion to the Mass and enhance it.

UNDERSTANDING OF THE MASS

People do see a difference between the Mass and a service of Word and Communion but cannot articulate what the difference is. This is also the case amongst extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. This is also more common in the younger age group.

Most are aware of their obligation to attend Mass even if they do not always live up to this expectation. The actual fulfilment of this obligation is stronger in the older age groups. It is difficult to evaluate whether it is love of the Mass or guilt for not fulfilling the Mass obligation that brings this older generation to Mass. In the younger age groups, practise of faith is at times 'postponed' due to lifestyle pressures and cultural norms from their peer group.

The distinctive nature of the Mass compared with the Eucharistic worship of other Christian traditions is recognized but not always fully understood. Also, in villages the Church of England church is a local focal point for the community and so rural Catholics tend to have more ecumenical links.

On-going work: ♦Teach and explain the unique nature of the Mass compared with other forms of worship. ♦Consider the theology of Word and Communion Services.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Most of the people who participated are proud to consider themselves to be part of the Universal Catholic Church. Allegiance to the local parish does not seem to be strong. All age groups pick and choose where they attend Mass if Mass times are not convenient in their own parish. Most travel by car. Public transport does not seem to be a viable option and very few walk. However, once they find a church or Mass centre there is loyalty and more than half state that they are actively involved in the communal life of that parish/church. Indeed, many identify their parish with the place they attend Mass. The feeling of being part of an extended family is often expressed in regard to attending a particular church. Also, family links, historical

links and memories are cited as contributing to this sense of belonging but the aesthetics of the building rarely are.

Some Catholics feel isolated. This feeling could be because they lack the confidence to engage with others. However, there are indications of underlying reasons related to age and ethnicity. Also, it seems that parish communities are unaware that some attending Mass each week do feel excluded.

On-going work: ♦Promote awareness in the congregations of membership of their parish and the need for everyone to be inclusive and outreaching to all who attend. The Church needs to be acutely aware of the isolation felt by: some regular attendees at Mass; the 18 to 35 minority age group; ethnic groups. ♦Many of those who responded have a clear sense of belonging to the global Catholic family. In fact, modern society itself is becoming global. Thus, consider whether local pastoral provision also needs to mirror the global.

CONNECTIVITY

The responses of those who participated suggest that the way in which change is managed has a major impact on the connectivity of both a community and its individuals. Where the reasons for a church or Mass centre closure have been made clear and there is a transitional period, the parishioners are generally embraced by a receiving parish community. This is helped if there are already established links with the receiving community. Some worshipping communities may not even realize they have acquired new regular members through changes elsewhere. Transparency and prior consultation help to alleviate the loss and grieving that can occur in breaking up a community.

What is also expressed is the significance of the leadership of the parish priest within the community. The personality of the parish priest is often remarked upon in relation to the strength of a community and, especially, in managing change. The parish priest is looked upon to be the cohesive force when communities are formed or adopt new members.

On-going work: ♦Recognize that the celebration of Mass creates connections which are important and are often lost when a church/Mass centre closes. ♦Ensure that parishioners are informed, consulted and involved in any process of change. This in itself develops a sense of being connected which helps to mitigate the sense of disconnection that can occur later when there is a change or loss of Mass provision or church. ♦Similarly, a heightened awareness of our common baptism can help counter a sense of being isolated. ♦Ensure that when a church/Mass centre needs to be closed, that there is consultation with parishioners from the receiving church/churches and not just the prospective closed church/Mass centre. This facilitates a smoother transition of new members so that all are made to feel welcome and part of the new community. ♦Prepare and support priests for the new larger areas of parish ministry which are formed when parishes are merged. ♦Recognize the