

Ginger Group meeting 2015-11-28

Present: CMcD, JP, AS, DJ, RD, LW, AW, JB, PB, PM, MF, SF, PoB, JY, JY, PW, FW, DW, SB, RP, Fr.AH

Apologies: ND, MD, CS, PS

Round the table thoughts on expectations and goals for the meeting (and the group)

1. To establish a relationship with DSPG & Fr. Andrew, assist & support Diocesan strategy
2. To develop clarity of our situation, given we have a thriving parish, to see if there's a way forward
3. To be open with each other, to work things out
4. To obtain permission from the Diocese to move ahead & action
5. To grow Gt. Bardfield and Thaxted parish and flourish at the epicentre of the deanery. Other than that - lovely community
6. To build on our existing sense of community; looking for some idea of certainty to enable us to make decisions
7. To develop our ability to improve the churches, keep them running, move forward
8. To keep situation as it is, stability, viable despite criticisms, vibrant
9. To make clear the options, to work towards solution, but if possible to keep Bardfield and Thaxted whilst considering the bigger picture
10. Harmonious parish, would be a shame to damage/fragment it, highly participatory. Small but great parish.
11. To ensure there's a Catholic Church for our children, our- and their future. Have to make sure we provide for the people here now: children, elderly, catechists and everyone in-between. Do see the future as something bigger. Ensure the Catholics of today have a future for tomorrow
12. Hope the Parish & Deanery are the first on a road for spiritual prosperity. Can't be too parochial - must consider the bigger picture - whilst making things more cost-effective. Keep an open mind
13. Service to the smaller towns. Must not forget our mission as Catholics.
14. Already seen the parish grow and become more cohesive over many years. To dispel rumours and obtain clarity & some sort of definitive answers.
15. Still possible to run a parish without parish priest. Community is the most important part.
16. We're in a growing parish, very welcoming and friendly. Active especially amongst children.
17. To ensure the diocese is in listening mode and we're still able to influence. To demonstrate it's not just a numbers game. Thaxted parish church may be a small building but plays an important part in the local mission.

Introduction from Fr. Andrew

Bardfield & Thaxted is not just a growing parish here, but actually Brentwood is a growing diocese - the fourth largest in the country, mostly because of large influxes into Newham, East Ham, Canning Town.

Fr. AH asked to chair the DSPG by the Bishop. The group is aware that every area of the

diocese carries unique qualities and attributes.

No decisions have been made and the Diocese is totally open to listening. Where we (Bardfield & Thaxted GG) have come to already in the process is where everyone needs to be soon. One person in each area ideally needs to be a "change champion" (diocesan wording tends to change from more standard business terms). "Stewards of the Gospel", to find local solutions to the local problems.

There is no specific diocesan vision. Each local church to say what is their vision for spreading the word, i.e. in Bardfield & Thaxted. What these change champions need to do is to talk to their neighbours. In fact there are many churches around which are struggling. If only there could be a great Ginger Group in Dunmow, Stansted, Harlow etc.

Consider whether the parish boundaries are still in the right places? Consider whether the churches still in the right places? Many churches in the diocese were built in the 60s/70s when people were just starting to drive and are simply in the wrong places now. A "mother" church expands, sets up a satellite, builds a school then demographics change. Why, then, is there a church with a third of the attendance for example? Ageing parish priests then often find themselves unable to serve.

It's great that the parish here is growing, but remember to question why - e.g. is it growing because of demographics? (e.g. growth in local housing).

Volunteering time is becoming scarcer - people can't- or don't want to give their time any more. Modern commitments and draws on time are making the Church a very different environment to what it used to be.

So.. What alternatives are there? Why does an alternative have to look like Mass - it might for example look more like morning prayer.

In Ilford for example it can be easier. If a Mass is cancelled, people only need to travel one mile. E.g. Saturday morning with 60 people and continued with 7-8 Masses over two days.

With respect to having or not having a parish priest, surprisingly often parishes without a resident priest do flourish. It depends very much on where a parish is based geographically. There is a need for Sacramental provision in rural locations in the Diocese. It's not easy to get on a bus to go one mile ("What bus?!").

What the DSPG is looking for is for us to come up with a local solution to address our situation. Directly tackling the problems present. At the very least for Health and Safety where the diocesan directors are personally responsible. Places of worship first and foremost must be fit for purpose. DSPG is now listing the places where the work required exceeds five times the annual offertory.

Question: How much (e.g. financial) autonomy is there in the parish?

Lots. It's up to us to propose options and "sell" to the diocese who will be able to back it.

Short term financial requirements highlighted by the Quinquennial Report, running to about £350,000.

This building being owned by the Diocese is actually an anomaly. If we were to sell land, the diocese would be likely to say the proceeds would go to parish funds.

But, £350,000 is a lot of money to spend only to remain relatively static. It's critically important to remember the bigger picture options like selling up and building something new. There's a much greater chance of success if the plan is developed and owned by the local community.

There are different competing logics at play: "if we build it they will come", vs. "why are you building it if there's no priest?" - a chicken and egg situation.

Currently in the diocese there are 83 priests, 10 ordinaries. The average age of clergy is about 64 years old. In 2025 there are projected to be 70 priests total.

Lots of priests are saying they'd like to step back in or near retirement to somewhere like Gt. Bardfield. But their abilities then also raise a question of trying to justify a bigger church.

Parishioners may also come up with a plan which the parish priest doesn't agree with - in these cases the diocese may decide a new individual is required.

Religious orders want to move into the diocese.

There's already a working group discussing retirement expectations and provision with clergy.

[Some discussion of use of existing buildings]

Fr. Andrew encouraged the group to consider a couple of primary options:

Option 1:

- Assume clergy status quo - current parish will always have a parish priest.
- What would we need to do to fundraise, what income would be required

Option 2:

- To merge, for example with Gt. Dunmow. Construct a costed vision for combination
- Would we do the same thing again wrt. buildings or would we wish to sell properties and do something else entirely?

All proposals and decisions need to be backed up by data - demographics and projected demographics for the local area are needed (and the diocese does not necessarily have these).

Assume there is limited financial available help from Diocese. They would likely be able to help with loans as long as we could demonstrate those loans were repayable. The Diocese doesn't have a large pot of funds available.

Regarding construction of a school we would need to show there was a need for new

Catholic school provision and we could obtain help from Essex County Council.
Brentwood would be able to help with bureaucracy, planning, law etc. in engagement with local councils.

"Centralised Banking" service is available for better-off parishes helping with those less well-off.

In principle parishes are free to determine their future. Major financial decisions (> £10k) need to go to the finance board; more than £750k to the council of priests; projects over £1m go to Rome.

Suggested actions -

- **Short term plan:** address immediate concerns, in particular around H&S and accessibility. Assemble a proposal for shoring up finances, may include decoration, refurbishment, letting of flat(s).
- **Long term plan:** vision, inclusive of neighbouring parishes & deanery; may include building & relocation proposals. What other diocesan needs might we be able to address with a longer term plan? Home for retired priests, schools, other?
- **Plans must be supported with data where appropriate.**

We need to engage neighbouring parishes, sharing good practice - come along to other parishes to share experience with other embryo groups.