



Reflections on Renewal

North Essex Parish Partnership (NEPP)

Shaping Our Future –

“Our Vision” (taken from the document published Advent 2018)

“Proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in Essex and East London”

The Church in Essex and East London working better and differently together to evangelise our Diocese. It is a vision of the people of God, here and now, collaborating to use our various Grace given gifts to evangelise our Diocese to the best of our combined ability with the help of God

Our Objectives

1. Maximise the opportunities for evangelisation
2. Maximise Sacramental provision
3. Maximise the opportunities for putting faith into action through charitable works

Reflections on Renewal in North Essex Parish Partnership (NEPP)

The introduction of Stewards of the Gospel, by Bishop Alan, led to the development of regular Stewards’ meetings in our partnership. This in turn engendered both enthusiasm and perseverance amongst the six parishes of Halstead, Dunmow, Saffron Walden, Great Bardfield, Stansted and Braintree. In this way communication between the parishes enabled sharing of evangelical and other planned activities between the parishes, on a continuing basis.

The Brentwood Diocese’s *Vision Document: Shaping our Future* Advent 2018 emphasises **twelve strands of renewal**. Not all the twelve strands match the needs and plans of each parish, such that each parish selects those strands which are appropriate for them at a particular time. We are also aware that the faithful in parishes continue to meet their baptismal obligations quietly, following the injunction: “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew VI 3).

The following paragraphs outline a wide range of activities thus far in 2019 which connect with the strands of renewal and provide a good measure of the efforts and determination of the six parishes to work together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In this draft we have also included a series of discussion points for consultation with our parishes. These are indicated in ***bold italics***.

Young people

All the parishes have catechists working with children and young people to prepare for First Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation. Examples of strong practice include the CYMfed/ Faith Alive group in Great Bardfield, a very strong youth activity group in Saffron Walden, ecumenical youth events organised by Braintree Area Churches Together in which Braintree Parish helps to take a lead; attendance of young people from our Partnership at FLAME2019. A series of partnership-wide Youth Masses, supported by the Walsingham House Team, began in Saffron Walden Parish in September and will continue in Braintree Parish in February 2020.

Limited public transport, distances in rural areas and the many commitments of young people and their families all present genuine challenges to our parishes. We are confident that these can be overcome. Our aim is to work together to set up a joint and structured youth programme, which will complement best practice in individual parishes.

Family

All Parishes are served by Children's Liturgy Support Groups for at least one Sunday Mass. Parents are included in preparations for First Holy Communion. In Braintree, the Steward of the Gospel involves children and young people as "welcomers" and to take the offertory at one Sunday Mass. Some Parishes however report a falling away of families after First Holy Communion. Serving refreshments after Sunday Masses has fostered a sense of community. There is limited involvement of young parents in the wider life of our churches.

Some parishes have seen the benefit of an active social committee which encourages social interaction amongst families and all age groups.

Christian life and worship

How do we share the Good News of the Gospel, and how do we make our liturgical worship as beautiful and appealing as we can?

Several parishes report having dedicated Liturgy Groups: perhaps these could be re-named "Liturgy Support Groups" to avoid giving the impression that the liturgy itself is open to alteration. Saffron Walden Parish initiated a successful "Bring a friend to church" scheme during Advent 2018; Halstead has introduced more and better music to its liturgical celebrations. Braintree and Great Bardfield jointly ran an Alpha course in 2018. Halstead is contributing to an ecumenical Alpha course in autumn 2019. Young people are actively contributing to Youth Masses.

We shall seek opportunities to explore the richness of the Liturgy, including Divine Office and the Rosary, enriching public worship and enabling individuals to deepen their faith and practice.

Prayer and spirituality

We might compare our parish life to an iceberg: there is what you see above the surface, but a much bigger expanse below the surface, consisting of private prayer and devotion and those people who quietly go about their business for God, maintaining the stability of the whole structure.

How can we celebrate this, but also ensure that the different groups are welcoming to new members?

The timing of “events” and “activities” is quite important – linking things together, e.g. Rosary with Reconciliation opportunity, Adoration with Reconciliation / a sort of “two for one” that involves lay and priest (maybe tied into other things such as Holy Days of Obligation). Individual parishes have organised retreats.

All parishes have lay-led Rosary and/or adoration groups. We are using social media to promote online resources such as Thy Kingdom Come <https://www.thykingdomcome.global/> Great Bardfield Parish organised a day of prayer in preparation for Pentecost 2019. Also during 2019 Sister Frances Moore is leading four days of a prayer course, alternately in Great Bardfield and Braintree. Some parishes have a prayer request book which is open to all and taken up to the altar during the offertory at Sunday Masses. Stansted Parish has a Divine Mercy Devotion. Braintree Parish has a lay-led Faith Group which is open to all.

Formation

“is a Lifelong process”. Examples of formation opportunities in Parishes include catechesis of children and young people, marriage preparation, RCIA, faith and prayer groups. Some excellent training is provided by the Vicariate for Evangelisation, but this is not just for Stewards (some of whom feel overburdened).

How do we prioritise which aspects to take further, and encourage others within our parishes to come forward to help?

We need leadership from our Priests and clarity about what it is appropriate to delegate to laity.

Integration and ecumenism

All parishes are working with Christians from other traditions, mainly via local Churches Together groups. Examples include joint youth events offered by Braintree Area Churches Together, Halstead ecumenical Alpha course, Saffron Walden monthly ecumenical prayer; Great Bardfield Prayer Course; Lent lunches; [Ecumenical Stations of the Cross in Dunmow on the first Monday of Holy Week](#), Holy Week walks of witness, etc. Polish Catholics in Braintree have the choice of celebrating Mass in Polish or participating in the regular Parish Masses. Some do both and have held events to celebrate and share their culture. We could do more to appreciate that we are a multi-ritual church by taking every opportunity to become acquainted with other legitimate forms of Mass than the *Missa Normativa*. The Franciscan Convent in Braintree is soon to be taken over by the Coptic Orthodox Church, presenting an opportunity to learn more about their Christian tradition.

Priests, clergy and people; leaders and leadership

These are inextricably combined. We very much value the attendance of our priests and deacon at NEPP meetings, their prayerful contributions to discussion and the insights they give us into their lives. As stated in the *Vision Document* we are very grateful for their guidance in learning “together about how we can work better and differently”.

On a general point – what “training” or preparation have the clergy had from the diocese to take on the changing roles? Some clergy may be “lukewarm” or even opposed to the types of changes that we may be dealing with – their engagement, involvement, co-operation and commitment is essential if we are trying to frame new “scenarios”.

We have observed that effective leaders have emerged from the faithful in parishes challenged by infirm priests. Divine Renovation <https://www.divinerenovationuk.org/> is a possible model of shared leadership and evangelisation which advocates priests setting up leadership teams of trusted people who can work together respectfully but are unafraid of challenging one another. It is essential that the parish priest initiates any such development, but other resident faithful, including deacons, are able to provide continuity and momentum in a parish.

Examples of leadership and initiative in our Parish Partnership include

- www.groundswellprayer.uk set up by a **Steward of the Gospel** in Great Bardfield in response to clerical abuse;
- different models of Parish Pastoral Councils, notably those which have provided continuity and leadership when priests have been ill;
- **Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist** who, where appropriate, come forward to lead worship;
- senior altar servers helping to train others.

While many people take on roles there is a concern that the same people volunteer for everything and attracting “new blood” is an issue. The roles for lay people can be more closely defined so that the emerging “structures” can prepare people to fill in the “jobs” that need to get done when we have only three priests. Some direction about “job/role” descriptions would help.

Vocations to the Priesthood, permanent Diaconate and Religious Life

We celebrate and affirm Rev. Des Connors’ recent ordination to the permanent Diaconate in Stansted Parish. We are so grateful for his generosity in accepting this vocation.

We propose inviting our priests to speak to us about the roads they have travelled towards their vocations. Great Bardfield Parish holds a monthly Rosary for Vocations before Mass. And let’s not blindly target only the young, or men. This could be a wellspring of people into the religious life.

What support would there be for new “vocations” to the Diaconate and what would be the role of Deacons in the newly emerging scene? Age limits (if any), previous education background and accreditation of prior learning (APL) and work experience might help.

Charity, justice and social action

Examples provided include supporting Braintree foodbank, Mary’s Meals (Great Bardfield) and the Rosary Project (Halstead). Parishes hold regular retiring collections, as they always have, throughout the year. Individual parishioners and groups within parishes fundraise for good causes with sponsored events or social activities. Communication within the Parish Partnership has encouraged us to share in one another’s initiatives. The new Caritas Brentwood website provides the opportunity to link with others and avoid duplication.

In addition to supporting initiatives by our individual parishes we shall also develop an over-arching project for the partnership.

Education

Saffron Walden Parish maintains close links with St Thomas More School. St Francis School in Braintree invites parishioners to their special termly Masses. There is no Catholic Secondary School located within the Parish Partnership. Families wishing to send their children to Catholic Secondary schools incur considerable transport costs. This is unaffordable for many, especially large families.

Material Assets

This is something of a grey area as ultimately financial decisions rest with the Diocese. Some parishes in our partnership have made more progress than others in auditing resources. One example is the best use of our presbyteries, many of which were built with accommodation for several priests. How can we best maintain the comfort and privacy of our priests – already “living on the job” – but also create flexible space for other uses, such as small group meetings? Great Bardfield Parish is refurbishing their (unoccupied) priest’s house for possible accommodation for retired priests; Halstead has recently refurbished their parish hall. Thaxted (Great Bardfield) is in discussion with the Diocese about the long term future of their Mass centre. Braintree is fundraising to renovate the church organ. At Halstead the Priest lives upstairs (although the kitchen is downstairs as you would expect). It means that they have a functioning Parish Office with a meeting room that provides a venue for prayer groups, first Holy Communion etc. as well as meeting parishioners, bereaved, marriage, baptism etc.

A tenet of our response to restructuring is that we find ways of enlarging the capacity of some of our existing churches to enable priests to say fewer Masses to larger congregations. This clearly has major financial implications.

As parishes merge, link or work more closely together they will need to plan their human resources so that there is a fair distribution of expertise in, for example,

administration and general maintenance. Economies of scale are likely to be possible. As people move around to Masses outside their home parish ways must be found to ensure their 'home' parish gets their planned giving envelopes, local newsletters etc. How do we increase our financial resources? What employees do we need to share across the partnership? To some extent a standardised method suggested by the Diocese would be welcome.

Summary and conclusions

North Essex Parish Partnership was formed with the specific task of responding, by Advent 2019, to the Brentwood Diocese *Vision Document: Shaping our Future*. Since the partnership covers the same group of parishes as our Deanery there will already be a structure in place to advance, subject to our Bishop's approval, our ideas for renewal and restructuring. We would like to recommend these objectives as a starting point in our shared renewal:

- to produce a joint and structured youth programme throughout the Deanery
- to put together a programme to explore the richness of our Liturgy
- to hold one or more events when our clergy will talk about how they discerned their vocation – and the continuing journey
- to instigate a joint project for our Deanery, with time-limited, measurable outcomes, to advance charity, justice and social action.