

## Imagining the future: A diocese in north east England takes the collapse in clergy numbers as an opportunity for renewal

New models for the local Church



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There is no roof on the Priory on Holy Island – there hasn't been for centuries. In the 1790s there were around 200 priests in Sunderland and 100 in Berwick. In 2012, after more than 200 years of service, Ushaw College, that magnificent campus of historic buildings outside Durham, ceased to train men for the Catholic priesthood. The story of the Christian faith in the far north-east of England has been one of change and decay, turbulence and revival.

Can Catholics deepen their faith as the Church appears to be shrinking in size and losing confidence? It's a question the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle is currently attempting to address. Three years ago, on 16 July 2014, the bishop, Séamus Cunningham, announced what appeared to some to be an audacious programme, not of rescue and survival, but of development and renewal.

"I am very aware of what is happening in our diocese," Bishop Cunningham said as the Forward Together in Hope initiative was launched. "I'm also becoming aware that parish communities might indeed flourish if we become less 'parochial', if we become more aware of our neighbours, more willing to work together and explore new possibilities."

It was a bold leap of faith. And over the past three years, every Catholic in the diocese has been invited to reflect on how one can be a disciple of Jesus, and part of a viable and flourishing community, even in the unpropitious conditions of 21st-century Britain.

Hexham and Newcastle is a sprawling diocese, not just geographically but historically and culturally. It stretches from Berwick-upon-Tweed near the Scottish border in the north to Darlington, Stockton and Hartlepool on Teesside; it includes the Holy Island of Lindisfarne – where Saint Aidan founded a monastery in 635 – and the ancient city of Durham; it includes the great industrial cities of Sunderland and Newcastle upon Tyne. The raw statistics tell a gloomy story. Over the past 30 years, the number of regular worshippers in the diocese has declined from 100,000 to just over 33,000. There are 150 parishes; there are just 96 active priests to serve them. By the year 2030 it is anticipated that there will be about half the number of worshippers, and about 50 priests.

Over the past three years, as the director of the Forward Together in Hope programme, I have been on a sort of extended pilgrimage throughout the diocese. I have visited every parish, and I have spoken at Mass in every church, all 177 of them. A small team of three – myself, a project manager and an administrator, guided by a development group chosen by the bishop and the diocesan board of trustees, and with the help of a “representative” in each parish – has engaged as many parishioners as possible in a conversation about the future of the Church in their communities and schools and families.

In the first phase of the three-year programme, Preparing the Way, we gathered all that was known about our schools, our finances, facilities, safeguarding, and all the statistics relating to Mass-going, baptisms and receptions, marriages and funerals and so on, so that we had the fullest and most accurate picture possible of the state the diocese was in. In the second phase, Exploring the Way, every parish in the diocese completed a questionnaire designed to take the pulse of Christian life in the diocese. We also conducted three further surveys, for young people and for individuals to complete on-line, and a written questionnaire for the clergy. Almost 5,500 young people and 1720 individuals participated, and 25% of the priests and deacons in the diocese responded to the questions we provided.

We received expert help to devise and analyse these questionnaires from staff at Durham University. Each of the 150 parishes then received its own unique document, which offered some comments and challenges in response to what they had sent us. This, in turn, allowed each community to think about itself more deeply. They were also able to make some comparisons with others in the deanery and throughout the diocese, and to share information about themselves with their neighbouring communities. They were encouraged to explore with whom they might be able to work “in partnership” in the future.

By the First Sunday of Advent last year, it seemed to me that something miraculous had happened. As well as experiencing a very real growth in self-understanding, every parish in the diocese had come to some agreement about which parishes in the area they could see themselves working with in the future. It was these proposals that Bishop Cunningham and the board of trustees scrutinised during a most prayerful, reflective and intense three and a half day meeting in late January this year. Then, on a very cold and snowy evening early in February, over 1600 people attended two meetings held concurrently in different parts of the diocese, to hear the results of the trustees’ meeting. They arrived with mixed feelings. Some were apprehensive, half expecting to be told that their church would be closing; others came with the hope that, in spite of the gloomy statistics, they might hear evidence of some sort of renewal. In fact, there was no talk of “closing” anything. Instead, people learnt that the bishop and the trustees had decided that the 150 parishes in the diocese would be translated into 18 partnerships, in which parishes would work together and share resources – both human and material – to become stronger and better equipped to further the Kingdom of God.

So, what actually happened in the far north-east of England in these three stretching but enlivening years for the local Church? And are there any lessons that other local churches in England and Wales might learn? We tried to touch every Catholic in the diocese. We hope every Catholic has become at least a little more aware of their Church and what it is for. And even at a time of numerical decline, the process has shown that an administrative or problem-solving approach is not the only game in town.

A “formative” process is possible – even necessary. Catholics in isolated villages, in very mixed inner-city parishes and in relatively affluent suburbs were all invited to imagine the future of their

community in five, ten or fifteen years' time and the ways it could develop and flourish. This was challenging, even a little frightening, for some. The ground beneath their feet is shifting. There is a gradually increasing awareness of the reality of decline. Mass will be celebrated less often and in fewer churches. But what has emerged has been positive. A growing realisation of the need for lay formation and lay leadership. And a deepening understanding that the call to holiness is for everyone.

Has it simply been a rearrangement of the deckchairs? Forward Together in Hope has been an opportunity to look up and look around, to gently move the ship in a slightly different direction, away from a model which relies so heavily on the ministry of the ordained priest, and more towards the exploration of genuine cooperation and the sharing of responsibility.

The number of priests and people worshipping in our churches may be in decline, but there is no doubt that as the diocese journeyed together, as well a great deal of prayer and reflection, and a good deal of learning and discussion, it has left very many people with a real sense of hope for the future of the Church.

Incidentally, by 1801, all but 9 of those 300 priests in Sunderland and Berwick had either returned to France or had moved on to the US or to Canada to continue their ministry. As I said, the story of Christianity in the north-east is ever changing.

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Jim O'Keefe - The Tablet