

## **THE SOLENT PASTORAL AREA - MAKING IT HAPPEN**

### **A letter from the Solent Area Pastoral Council<sup>1</sup>**

*(approved by the Bishop and the Diocesan Financial Secretary)*

Since the discussions last autumn about the implementation of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan in the Solent Pastoral Area (SPA), a Steering Group of laity representing each of our four parishes and the Pastoral Area Council has been working with the clergy to propose a strategy for realising the diocesan vision. We here in the Solent Pastoral Area have the advantage of building on parish communities which are already strong, holding a sense of place and belonging. The strength of these existing worshipping communities gives us something very good to build upon.

The work has been guided by the acknowledgement of four key factors which will drive the development of the Catholic Church in the SPA:

- The centrality of the Sunday Eucharist as the underlying principle of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.
- The formation of pastoral areas as the means for realising the mission of the church.
- A recognition of the need to provide pastoral care to individual Mass communities in the new Pastoral Area.
- An assumption that the number of priests is likely to decline in the next few years.

The principal conclusion of the Steering Group was that progress towards addressing these factors is largely dependent on you, the people of the SPA developing a shared sense of community – and then actually becoming a new community. The simple truth is that we cannot build a Pastoral Area as envisaged by the Pastoral Plan unless our congregations are able to identify with it just as they currently do with their present parish.

The Bishop entirely supports this approach and has asked us all, clergy and laity, to have faith. As Jesus instructed Peter, we must now “put out into the deep” so that we can grow the church in the Solent Area. He wants us to start doing this now, with enthusiasm and commitment. This means that we must think beyond the boundaries of our own parish, or even of our smaller Mass community, and start to act together, involving people from across the Pastoral Area by pooling our talents, treasure and time. It means working together, worshipping together, sharing resources, and getting to know each other – clergy and laity alike.

What does this mean in practice? Firstly, our clergy will continue to develop as a team, and we can expect to see them more frequently in each others parishes. Meanwhile, and only where appropriate, some of the activities that we currently do on a parish basis (such as our catechetical programmes, liturgy planning, justice and outreach work and much else besides), will start to be coordinated across the pastoral area. In many cases it makes sense to do such things together so that we don't duplicate effort. However, this will not always be so, and where it does not apply we will not impose a solution on individual parishes. We started looking at the advantages of doing things together in early 2006 when over 100 people from across the area met to discuss this topic. We now have to start realising some of the benefits they identified in our future work together.

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<sup>1</sup> The SAPC comprises: All parish priests and deacons; Parish Pastoral Council representatives plus other parish reps.

What of the proposals mooted last year concerning our church buildings? It is clear that the likely reduction of priests from 4 to 3 or even 2 is a significant driving factor in the development of the Church in this area. Whilst the bishop has been pleased to appoint Fr John Cooke to Park Gate, he told us at a recent meeting that he does not expect to be able to provide 4 priests for much longer than 3-4 years (possibly less if unforeseen circumstances elsewhere in the diocese further reduce the number of available priests). Before long, therefore, we will not have sufficient priests to support our 9 churches. In the face of this stark reality, decisions about the future provision of churches must be based on the needs of the whole Pastoral Area. Our existing buildings were built to serve a set of circumstances now long past – and we now need to decide where best to site our churches in the future if the whole Pastoral Area is to be served by fewer priests. Being able to answer this question from a Pastoral Area viewpoint is one of the main reasons why we must develop the sense of area-wide community.

This issue of church buildings is undoubtedly one of the most contentious and emotional that we will need to address as we establish the SPA. There are many options for us to consider, ranging from closure, to the re-building of existing churches, to the possibility of a new building. No decisions have yet been taken to progress with any of the options, although work is being undertaken to keep all the options open.

So where does this leave us? After some uncertainty and hesitation there have been discussions involving the Steering Group, clergy and representatives of the Solent Area Pastoral Council, following which the bishop has given clear direction for the implementation of the Diocesan Plan in our Pastoral Area. Put simply, our four parishes now have to develop as a broad-based community which goes beyond our parish boundaries. This is not a task for our priests and deacons alone – it must involve all of us, for we all have a responsibility for the life of the church (something termed “Collaborative Ministry”). One way in which we can get involved is through the Stewardship Programme already in place in one parish in our Pastoral Area and being introduced in others later this year. This programme encourages us to realise that sharing our time, talents and treasure is fundamental to our mission as Christians, both in our own relationships with Christ and also with other people. We will soon begin to ask for help in identifying specific actions and in taking them forward.

One action that has already been identified is the need for better communication on this whole project – and this will be the first of a regular series of such letters.

The Bishop’s vision is for a diocese of vibrant Pastoral Areas; our mission is to make the Solent Pastoral Area a reality. We look to you all for your continued support as we strive to make this happen. More importantly, however, we look for your involvement in this exciting project which offers one of the best opportunities for us to exercise the Collaborative Ministry of laity and clergy.

We would like to acknowledge all your enthusiasm and commitment over many years to building Church and community in this part of the Diocese of Portsmouth. All your skills, talents and enthusiasm will be needed as we together seek to ‘go out and bear fruit’ in response to the challenges we face as set out in the Diocesan Plan.