

## **MEETING TO DISCUSS THE SOLENT PASTORAL AREA PROPOSAL**

### **TO REPLACE A NUMBER OF CHURCHES WITH A LARGER CENTRAL CHURCH.**

#### **St Mary's Church Hall 15 October 2006**

The meeting was opened by Fr. David Adams with a prayer. Fifty parishioners attended. Limiting the scope of the meeting to those areas that could be addressed without the need for Papal authority, Fr. David invited those present to ask the questions they felt had not been answered thus far. He also drew people's attention to the reasons for proposing a new church for the Solent Pastoral area (as laid out in the purple sheet that was made available at all Masses on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2006).

#### **The following questions were raised:**

1. As the number of people attending Mass and the number of priests available to say Mass is likely to decline, could money be raised from the sale of some and used to repair others?
2. What area of land is to be purchased? As we already have sites that scream out for development could development be a better alternative (St Mary's and St Columba's were the examples)?
3. What are we going to call the new pastoral area and will it conform to Canon Law?
4. As the Bishop promised that Mass will be said in local areas, who will use the new church?
5. How will people get to the new church?
6. Is the assumption that Mass numbers will decline accurate? Stubbington has seen an increase by 16% whilst some London parishes are seeing a rise in numbers as new immigrants arrive.
7. Have there been any alternative proposals from Parish Pastoral Councils?
8. Is there any possibility of attracting priests from abroad?
9. Has the proposal been supported by advice from professionals and was the effect that the central church will have on local outreach programmes given any consideration?
10. Has the proposal been investigated sufficiently to produce estimated costs?
11. Do we have an assurance of Mass in the (surviving) churches?

Fr. David said that they (the priests together with appropriate diocesan personnel) are proposing a course of action which they feel will work. Between now and 2020 the deanery will lose half of the priests (as the retirement age is 75) without taking into consideration circumstances that will accelerate the process. The four priests are just coping by working a six day week. This, of course, means that there is no slack in the system and should one be unable to cover an absent priest's ministry, then it could not be taken up by one of the others and it is likely that there would be no Mass during his absence. There is little possibility of help within the dioceses as all parishes face the same problem. Our retired priests who give generous help can only do so much.

There is also the problem of the fabric of the churches. Energy and maintenance costs are rising and people are no longer volunteering for caretaking duties for entirely understandable reasons; the young are busy with jobs and family commitments and the elderly have less energy at their disposal. This is exacerbated by the declining numbers of parishioners as Gosport currently has around 360 people attending Mass (including children). Clearly maintaining three churches for this low number is not viable, especially as the number is in decline we are already down to the minimal utilisation of each church (i.e. One Sunday Mass & one weekday Mass\* in each church (\* St Mary's has two weekday Masses at the moment).

With only two priests there appears to be no alternative to closing the smaller churches. (Sr Anne countered this forecast by saying that it was not reasonable to assume we would have no ordinations in the Diocese over the next 14 years. However allowance for the current rate of new vocations has been made in arriving at these figures.)

**Question 1: Sell some churches (and the land) to fund the maintenance of the others.**

Closing some churches and concentrating the effort in the main churches would defer the problem in the short term and would 'buy time' to consider the future. Identifying which churches to close caused some debate (that was naturally confined to the three Gosport churches). St Joseph's was considered to be very close to St Mary's (which favoured closing that rather than St Columba's), yet St Columba's was close to Fareham which made that a candidate for closure. However, it was pointed out that not closing most of the churches would be counter to the overall plan and we could lose the opportunity to develop the larger pastoral area in accordance with the Diocesan Pastoral Plan. This caused no problem for some who saw the new church as an obstacle to developing our local communities.

As the number of Masses will be reduced, the size of each church becomes an issue that favours the closing of the smaller ones first, otherwise there would not be enough room to accommodate those who wanted to attend Mass.

**Question 2: Land development.**

Should the proposal be adopted, the intention is to procure a large site as this is better from a financial point of view. The final size is yet to be decided as there are other issues to be considered. Whilst no site for the proposal has been acquired preliminary enquiries & soundings have been made because it would be unwise to make a proposal that had no hope of implementation and we would also need the consent of the local authorities (who appear to be favourable to the idea in principle). The centre of the larger pastoral area falls in the area North of Lee on Solent and South of Fareham and this is the current favoured location, although it is accepted that there are many who view this as being outside their community (but wherever it might be, some will see it as remote location).

**Question 3. What will the new area be called and will the proposal conform to Canon Law?**

The name of our Pastoral Area is the "Solent Pastoral Area". A name for the proposed new church has not been finalised but it has been suggested that it might be called Our Lady, Star of the Sea.

In terms of Canon Law the parish is recognised as being a separate, though not independent entity. The right of a parish to hold funds and assets for its own benefit is protected by Canon Law. However everything must be in harmony with the Bishop's governance and pastoral care of the Diocese as a whole. The Diocesan Pastoral Plan authorised and implemented by the Bishop envisages the necessity for parishes to group together into pastoral areas. This is because parishes are finding it increasingly difficult to function on their own. It is possible that at some time in the future all the parishes in a pastoral area will be amalgamated into one. Ultimately these issues will have to be resolved and they are currently being addressed by Diocesan officials.

**Question 4: Who will use the proposed new church.**

As the new church would lie at the centre of the larger pastoral area, it will draw people from all of the surrounding areas (most of the Solent Pastoral Area is within a 5 to 6 mile radius of the suggested location). However people will still be able to worship at the retained churches. It will provide a new pastoral focus and its size will allow for larger congregations. Experience from similar developments seems to indicate that, for example, where a good sized group of young people are meeting other young people will be more inclined to join them. However not all shared this view and pointed out the benefit of smaller groups where young people, for example, had opportunity to get to know each other.

**Question 5: How will people get there?**

This is perhaps the most frequently asked question in the debate, therefore there is genuine weight to it as it is of great concern, especially amongst the elderly and those without reliable transport. There is no mileage in reminding people that Catholics abroad may walk many miles to Mass, or face the prospect of a priest only visiting monthly as everybody is aware of this. But where there is a will then there is invariably a way. Perhaps it would encourage a community spirit by requiring those with cars to assist those without transport. Perhaps the community would benefit as people would have to devote more time to Mass to connect to bus services and, thereby, they may be inclined to stay on for a short while after Mass to socialise and make friends. It is clear that this remains an important issue and every consideration would be given to it if the proposal was to go ahead..

**Question 6: Are the Catholic numbers in decline?**

Statistically, there appears to be a downward trend in numbers attending Mass and certain assumptions have been made on this basis. However, being statistics, there are variations. Sister Anne pointed out that the Stubbington parish has actually increased its numbers over the recent period. (However, this may have coincided with the changes of Mass time in Gosport following the move of Fr. Joe from Bridgemary to Leigh Park when a number of people moved because of the loss of a Sunday Mass at St Columba's). There is also a considerable influx of Eastern Europeans into the country, many of whom are Catholic (especially the Polish). Whilst this is currently only really felt in the capital and the larger cities, it could eventually affect local parishes as the immigrants become more established. (There are also Polish Catholic churches being set up in London in order to serve these people and act as a community centre for them).

Almost irrespective of the statistics, Fr. David said that, for the Catholic church to grow, we have to be more 'evangelical' in order to draw people in. This is something that has not been prominent in Catholic culture as we are not used to 'in your face' evangelising. There is also a growing antipathy to established religion in our secular society and some particular bias against the Catholic Church that we have to address. Perhaps a major feature like a new church in a prominent position would allow us to do just that as it would be a bold statement to publicly demonstrate the values we hold.

**Question 7: Have the Parish Pastoral Councils considered any other proposals?**

The short answer is no. However, there have been views expressed by parishioners in letters sent to the Bishop. These are considered to be private with the exception of one that was sent to the Bishop but also copied to the PPC. It was read in its entirety (six pages) and reflected upon at the last meeting of the PPC. It was expressed at the PPC meeting that the Bishop was likely to receive letters opposing the proposal rather than letters from people supporting it (that being part of human nature) However, that is, perhaps, no bad thing as the feelings of the people are being taken into account (although support would be welcomed by those who have invested time and effort in the proposal).

**Question 8: Is there a possibility of attracting priests from abroad?**

This solution has been used by other organisations and professions. However, other parts of the world do have greater problems (with regard to shortage of priests) and greater needs than the United Kingdom. We are still supported by more priests per head of (Catholic) population than every other country except Malta. The situation is made more complex by the different cultural and economic conditions. A priest in Africa for example has a high social status and it is quite understandable that many are attracted to that life. A few years ago a Polish missionary, a friend of Fr Jozef (formerly assistant priest at Bridgemary & now at Leigh Park) recounted how his missionary order had brought over to Europe a large number of candidates for the priesthood. Unfortunately once they had got their academic qualifications they all left to follow secular careers.

There is also the question of affordability. With a decline in the number of Catholics attending Mass, the accompanying penalty is the income that the church derives from them and, bluntly, local parishes may not be able to support sufficient new priests to make the difference.

**Question 9: Has the proposal been supported by professional consultation?**

Apart from discussions with members of the Diocesan Finance Office professional consultation has not been used to date as it was considered that this would be premature and expensive. The debate then considered who would make the decision and whether any lay people were involved in this decision making process. Those present were reminded of the enormous effort the Diocese made getting the community involved via the growing *Together In Christ* process. The Bishop was at pains to make the whole process of debate transparent. This concluded with the Diocesan Conference at Reading University and was followed up by face to face meetings both at the cathedral and around the parishes. The debate continues and whatever is said or written down in letters to the Parish Pastoral Council or the Bishop will be taken into account. So the bottom line is that lay people have been involved since the outset and continue to be involved. This is precisely why we are holding this meeting. We are seeking your views and ideas on the challenges that face us all.

**Question 10: Has the proposal been costed?**

Some felt that it was not possible to proceed without knowing the financial implications of the proposal as there is likely to be a figure that is too big to proceed beyond. Also, irrespective of the cost of a new church site, the two 'listed' churches have to be maintained and money for their repairs and refurbishment needs to be 'earmarked' and assured.

Fr. David explained that costing was a complex issue and the proposal certainly was not cheap. If the project were to go ahead we would try, as far as possible to meet the cost of the development by the sale of property assets, as already indicated. Once a broad consensus had been reached in favour of the development then full and appropriate costing exercises would be carried out before the final go-ahead could be given. Of course the longer we delay then the more we will have to spend on existing churches, perhaps only to see the money wasted as they are then disposed of.

**Question 11: Do we have an assurance of Mass in the churches that remain.**

The projections ( of available priests & churches) that were given out at the meeting showed that as long as there were sufficient priests in the pastoral area a Sunday or weekend Mass would be celebrated at the remaining churches. The rest would be celebrated in the new church.

**Closing discussion**

The general consensus was that closure of some churches will have to be accepted by the community. One person said that there was no time to 'wishy-washy' around and that there was a need to go for something whilst another reminded the meeting that we have a responsibility for the next generation and they surely deserve something that will endure.

Sister Anne asked what the message from this meeting would do, and to whom would it go. Certainly the Bishop will receive this transcript of the meeting and all of those who care to read it can, of course, express their opinions to the PPC, to Fr. David or directly to the Bishop.

Jean Watson (who runs the catechetical programme for young people) questioned the five Masses proposed for the new church and she felt that St Mary's could run a children's programme just as well as one run by a central church.

Although the meeting was asked not to discuss the question of a solution to the shortage of priests being overcome by allowing married clergy, this issue was inevitably raised. The short answer is that it will not happen within the timescale of this proposal and, if ever it was discussed, then the remark earlier on about affordability of new priests becomes more pronounced.

### **Voting**

Although the number of people at the meeting was not enough to take a representative vote, the meeting closed with a survey being conducted anyway. The question asked for those in favour of developing and using the existing main churches rather than going for a new build.

Thirty three voted to use the main churches, none voted to keep them all and seventeen voted for a new church.