

Listening Sessions in May and June 2023

Put Out into Deep Water -

BUILDING THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE

It's not always easy to look to the future, and sometimes looking back can be a lot more comfortable than looking ahead. The same applies to making the move into that future – a future often unclear and unfamiliar. But we need to begin 'put out into deep water' (Luke 5:4) and in doing so to understand our shared baptismal calling and the promises made on that day. What do these promises amount to? What does baptism call us all to? How can we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us of what the Church in Kildare & Leighlin might look like into the future?

These were questions that underpinned a series of evening meetings across the Diocese in May and June.

Gathering in our newly formed clusters of parishes, these evenings were about letting the Holy Spirit speak to us in a new and fresh way, and to form us as communities in service of the Gospel now and into the future.

In August 2023 it will be ten years since the appointment of Bishop Denis to the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. In those ten years he has buried 23 of our priests. In those same ten years he has ordained 4 priests: two for the diocese, an SVD priest and a Jesuit. Doing the sums, twenty-three dying in ten years replaced by two doesn't make for good sums.

Our diocese is challenged by the rising age profile of our clergy, men in their late seventies and some well into their eighties who are very generously administering parishes.

These men are held in deep love and affection by their parishioners and indeed by all of us.

In addition over the past ten years we have welcomed in many priests from abroad who generously serve here: four from Romania; two from Poland; two from China, one each from Brazil and Sri Lanka and two from India.

Over the last number of years, working alongside the Diocesan Pastoral Council and the Council of Priests, with the help of both Julie Kavanagh and Jim Deeds we have engaged in this process called: 'Put out into Deep Water', inspired by the story found in Luke 5:4-4. We invite you all to hold this Gospel story close and pray with it often as we navigate our way into the deep water of the future.

At each meeting of our clusters of parishes in May and June we presented a map with the outline of the new clusters each parish sits in. These evening meetings provided a time of fellowship, prayer and conversation together. They marked our first step on the way to 'putting out into deep water' together, going and growing where the Holy Spirit is leading us. Practically, the meetings gave those who attended a chance to reflect on the new clusters and to begin to imagine how they might work in the coming time.

The meetings were facilitated in the spirit of prayer, using scripture & small group conversations as our process.

While each meeting had its own 'flavour', three main themes emerged as being those which the Spirit might be calling us to attend to.

Change

'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.' (Hebrews 13:8)

These are challenging times for the Church, not only in Kildare and Leighlin, but also right across the country. Most, if not all, Dioceses are undergoing processes like our own; processes that call for parishes to work closely together and, in time, to share resources. We heard people express worry and anxiety about the future. Some were not in full agreement with the clustering of parishes. Others knew that change was coming and was inevitable and, even with the worries and anxieties that were expressed, they were willing to embrace the change. Indeed, we are at a point where change is not just coming; it is here. While 'how' we are as Church changes, what it means to 'be' Church does not - we are God's people on God's mission. Changed times, call for changes in how we go about that mission.

What people said in prayer on this theme:

- Let our nets down in new waters
- We have a lot of faith and fear – don't let fear win over
- If we feel that God is urging us to do something and we are brave, we won't be disappointed

Identity

'...he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and on earth.' (Eph1:10)

There are over 2,500 parishes in Ireland. Within every parish there are several faith communities. There are 56 parishes in our diocese, with at least 117 distinct faith communities. Parish boundaries determine our football club, our hurling club, the school we attend, the church we receive sacraments in and the cemetery where we will be laid to rest.

During our meetings, we heard that people were keen to hold on to their identity as being from a particular parish. Some were concerned that their parish identity would be subsumed into another parish. This was often expressed by people who came from smaller, more rural parishes. Conversely, we also heard from people from those parishes, that greater co-operation with other, larger parishes could strengthen their own parish as resources could be shared. Parish identity is indeed very important. At the same time, we are now called to adopt additional, new identities as friends in clusters of parishes; indeed as members of the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. Where do we draw our real identity from as Christians, one might ask? As communities of faith, we draw that identity as followers of Christ and as people in need of the nourishment that only the Eucharist can bring.

What people said in prayer on this theme:

- There are no spectators – we are in this together
- Having two boats involved was mutually beneficial for both boats – more were nourished
- Go on with others, not on our own

Action

“There is a variety of gifts, but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways in different people’ (1Cor12:4-6)

In our conversations during May and June we heard often the comment that ‘we have been here before and done nothing about it’. Many people called for action to be taken now, rather than spend too much more time on planning. Other voices we heard called for more time to be taken in prayer and conversation, getting to know what God is calling us to, and getting to know each other. We took a both/and approach to this theme. We will continue to meet, pray and talk. We also asked parishes and clusters of parishes to set realistic first steps. Here is a sample of the kind of actions that were agreed,

- A write up of the meeting to be shared at all Masses
- Parish Pastoral Council members from all the parishes in the cluster to meet
- Priests from the parishes in the cluster to say Mass in neighbouring parishes
- Parishioners from all the parishes in the clusters to be invited to a joint pilgrimage day
- A joint training day for Ministers of the Word to be held
- The map of the cluster of parishes to be put up in church porches

These are action points from a number of clusters. Not all clusters felt themselves at the point to be able to set action points over the summer months, but committed to coming back in September to continue the conversation.

What people said in prayer on this theme:

- There is abundance with God, accept the challenges
- Cast out the nets, keep trying and we will get results
- Nothing is impossible if you have belief

Principles to Guide our Journey

As part of our evenings, we asked people to suggest principles that would guide us in our decision making and our action. We heard many great ideas. Here is a synthesis of the principles people suggested

- There are no spectators – we are in this together
- Bring the Gospel to speak to people where their lives are
- Pray together - keep Christ at the centre
- Cast the net wide, trusting and respecting one another
- Be open to accepting the changes that are going to come
- Value and respect each other
- Ensure the broadest participation and input from all
- Rediscover youth participation
- Remain hopeful, the Spirit will help
- Have courage to let go – be not afraid

Listening Sessions in May and June 2023

Put Out into Deep Water -

BUILDING THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE

What's next?

The Synodal pathway which Pope Francis so beautifully invites us on and models every day is pivoted on a praying, listening and discerning Church where every voice matters, every voice counts. Our 'putting out into deep water' is an outworking of this Synodal pathway. Working together we hope that we will continue to determine some simple road-markings that allow us to shape the next steps of our onward journey; a journey which we share because of our anointing at baptism.

Practically, the production of this report and its dissemination to all of the parishes of the Diocese will be a first step. Please share this report with your family and friends. Talk to each other about it and about the process we are engaged in, listening to how the Spirit will want to shape us as a Church in the future.

There will be a second series of meetings in September, to continue the conversation and to plan for more Spirit-inspired action.

Already, we can see that there are important issues that will require action in the coming months. For example:

- We will source and provide training and formation for lay people and clergy on leadership skills.
- We will provide formation for lay people in leading communal prayer and liturgy. Always mindful that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our liturgical life, our lay led liturgies will not replace the Eucharist; rather they will enable the community to gather and pray together, preparing the community for the Eucharist when it is celebrated.
- We will gather the clergy later this year for them to be built up, nourished and readied for this next phase in their ministry.

All of us, priests and people,

are called to be really present in the field hospital that is the Church today.

The field hospital that is our parishes, all modelling a new way of ministering together.

This is the beginning of writing another chapter in the story of the Good News, in Kildare and Leighlin Diocese; a chapter centered on sharing our co-responsibility.

Setting out on that journey, we can be strengthened and consoled by these powerful last words of Jesus in St. Matthew's gospel:

'And look, I am with you always till the end of time' (Mt.28:20)