

First Cluster Group Meeting (St Cuthbert's, 22 September 2016)
Report
Discussion Groups Feedback

Question 1: What works/could work well in parish cluster?

1. Sacramental preparation.

There was considerable agreement that this could be delivered on a cluster basis, with a number of advantages:

a. Children

- While the role of the primary schools was acknowledged, it was felt that a cluster approach would allow children to meet, become familiar with clergy and the "host" church on an ongoing basis.
- Those children who do not attend Catholic schools would share equally with other children in Sacramental Preparation.
- Sacraments of Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation could be celebrated in one church for all cluster children.

b. Marriage

- Marriage preparation could easily be delivered within small groups on a cluster basis, saving repetition of provision.

c. RCIA

2. Joint Social Events.

There was considerable support for the idea of joint social events such as Senior Citizens' Parties, St Patrick's and Burn's celebrations, Ceilidhs, etc. These would enable parishioners of all cluster parishes to come together and build community, dispelling any feelings "them and us".

3. Joint Faith Events.

- Events such as retreats, pilgrimages and prayer services/groups could be organised as cluster events, rather than being duplicated within individual parishes. These could become more viable, both financially and in terms of participating numbers.
- Joint Penitential Services were agreed to be desirable and successful.

4. Parish Ministries

Some groups felt that parish ministries could be carried out on a cluster basis. These included

- Bereavement Group
- Music Ministry
- Liturgy Group
- Fabric and Finance Committee
- Parish Pastoral Council

- Justice and Peace
- Mary's Meals and other charities
- Ecumenical Group

5. Other Points

- Sharing of priests
- Staggered Mass times

Question 2: What should continue within individual parishes.

1 The following points were asserted by one or more groups, with the first three receiving considerable support and emphasis:

- Each parish should have at least one Sunday Mass.
- Eucharistic Services should be promoted and developed within each parish.
- Parishioners should be encouraged and trained to undertake duties which do not need to be carried out by a priest e.g conducting Eucharistic Services, finance, maintenance etc.
- Positive links with local schools.
- Children's Liturgy within Sunday Mass.
- Funerals, weddings, baptisms and parish celebrations.
- Special Occasion celebrations e.g Easter, Christmas, Funerals.
- All parish groups should be retained within their parishes e.g SVP, Music and Liturgy Groups, social events etc.

2. Other points seen to be important were

- Visiting sick and housebound.
- Separate Parish Councils with forum for joint meetings.

3. Suggestions.

If a decision were taken to close parishes, land should be sold to pay for the building of a new church to provide a "level playing field" – each parishioners beginning afresh as a member of a new parish with a new identity.

Note

The final paragraph above - "Suggestions" - was drawn from the "jotters" each group at meeting No. 1 was asked to complete. The suggestion does not fall within the agenda for meeting No. 1, but it may be relevant for meeting No. 2.

Second Cluster Group Meeting (St Joseph's, 3 November 2016)
Report
Discussion Groups Feedback

Current Resources

There was a consensus across the groups that we have considerable resources in terms of people and plant. Finances are also relatively stable although two groups raised queries regarding the quoted overall figure, asking if each parish had a deficit or if some were in credit. It was suggested by one that it would have been preferable to have each parish's finance listed separately. There was some concern, again from two groups, regarding the deficit as it was not clear if this was an annual pattern or referring only to the last financial year.

All groups highlighted the numbers attending Mass on a regular basis although two disputed the overall figure, also stating that numbers rose at "peak" times in the year e.g. Christmas, Easter and children's sacraments. One group stated that these numbers were too low to sustain the number of parishes within the cluster while another stressed that numbers across the parishes were too high to be accommodated within one church. Four groups raised some concerns regarding the numbers receiving sacraments of Marriage and Baptism, feeling that these should have been higher.

Concern was voiced in all groups regarding the low numbers of young adults and older children attending Mass or becoming involved in parish life. Much emphasis was laid on the need to attract young people to church together with providing opportunities to take part in and have authority/responsibility within the parishes.

All groups clearly emphasised that our greatest resource is our parishioners, a number of whom are active within their own communities. Much discussion had taken place regarding the need to encourage and empower more people to become involved. This, together with the need for evangelisation appeared to take up a considerable amount of group time and was felt to be extremely important, both currently and for future development of the cluster.

The general consensus appeared to be that, at present, we are well resourced in terms of plant, finances and people with the most imminent challenge being the diminishing number of clergy.

Implications for the Future

The majority of groups emphasised the need to involve and attract more people to the church. It was clearly seen to be a priority to encourage and attract young people back to church, together with enabling them to take on roles of responsibility within parish communities, as, without them, we will have no church in years to come! Here, again, evangelisation was highlighted, together with the need to provide training for lay ministers and apostles, both young and older adults. Youth Ministries were also advocated. One group stated that the church must review its views regarding women and, indeed, married clergy. This was underpinned by a second group which believed that, in order for the church to be sustainable, there must be a fundamental shift in its position regarding the role and position of laity within the church. Many groups stated that it is more essential than ever that parishioners take on responsibility for efficient parish management, given low numbers of clergy.

A range of opinions were held regarding plant and finance issues. While some groups believed that all parish buildings are currently sustainable, others felt that, in order to make a judgement, more information regarding income and expenditure was required. Some groups stated that parishes could be merged, either into a smaller number of parishes or, indeed, one larger parish while others voiced considerable concern over the effects this may have on more vulnerable groups such as elderly or less mobile parishioners. Here, too, concern was voiced over the possible effects this may have regarding the sustainability of current relationships with primary and secondary schools, especially those currently linked to a parish. This debate extended to provision of Mass and sacraments with some advocating joint sacramental celebration while others saw this to be a disadvantage. Suggestions included rotation of Sunday Mass around cluster parishes with Eucharistic Celebrations on the remaining Sundays. The possibility of joint ministries within the cluster was also mooted as a viable approach.

Finally, the need to be proactive in setting up new cluster initiatives was a common theme. These could incorporate existing groups and also enable new volunteers to advocate fresh and even innovative approaches to both support and revitalise individual parishes and/or the cluster as a whole. These could also encompass forms of evangelisation.

Third Cluster Group Meeting (St John Ogilvie's, 8 December 2016)
Report
Discussion Groups Feedback

Question 1. What Makes Parishes Vibrant? Currently?

There were a variety of suggestions under this heading:

The Eucharist was the prime factor for three groups, while another two suggested that welcoming families was of great importance.

Involvement in the parishes, in many guises, was seen to be crucial by a number of groups. This ranged from SVP to social activities.

One group stated that vibrant liturgical music was very important, in celebration of liturgy and in attracting and retaining parishioners, especially young people.

One group felt that having a priest for celebration of Mass was of vital importance.

EVANGELISATION

The recurring factor in evangelisation was the importance of outreach. Celebration of all sacraments, together with the wider liturgy, was seen as crucial. A number of groups stressed the value of active groups, for example Justice and Peace, SVP, Mary's Meals etc as important forms of evangelisation, both for participants and the wider community. Ministering to refugees and homeless people also contributed here.

Work with and within schools was cited within this category. This referred both to school and church based activity.

LEADERSHIP

Parish groups were seen to be a strength. Focus here tended to be on difficulties rather than strengths, with issues such as lack of young people, lack of confidence/self - worth seen as barriers to leadership.

CATECHESIS

In this category, Sacramental Preparation, both adult and child, was seen to be paramount. The importance of engaging and involving children and young people was consistently emphasised together with the need to support parents. Children's Liturgy was felt to be a good way to engage children. The value in the use and training of the laity to lead and participate in liturgical events such as funerals was recorded by one group.

OUTREACH

Community activities were seen by most groups to be of paramount importance as means of outreach, both locally and within the wider community. These, again, ranged from Justice and Peace to social events. Work with schools, Sacramental Preparation and the need to empower young people were highlighted here.

STEWARDSHIP

The need to develop community by allowing people to use their skills and talents was felt to

be important by one group. The idea of being eco-friendly parishes featured twice while setting realistic goals was mooted by one group.

Question 2. Further Goals for Action?

- Youth development – form a Cluster Youth Ministry Team.
- Develop strategy and training for Lay Leadership.
- Joint Parish Council meetings.
- Cluster Prayer Group for spiritual development.
- Visit and learn from other denominations.
- Visit and share resources with other parishes.