

Hogarth Partnership Pastoral Strategy Response

Method

Each parish nominated two representatives who attended two meetings held in Darlington. The first meeting was a plenary discussion based on Part I of the Pastoral Strategy. After this meeting digests of the parish returns and of the Data pack were prepared and shared with parish reps (see appendix for the digest of the data pack.) The second meeting was conducted in mixed table groups tasked to fill in the Part I sections. At the end of this meeting those present were invited to submit written responses. These were then collated into one text which was shared with all the parish representatives and clergy for responses, edits and approval (or, at least, no objection) and finally submitted as our Response.

At one of our meetings one person challenged the group: perhaps we should be more radical, more unshackled, and ask ourselves what the church of Pentecost would do. This theme is reflected in the response below.

Worship

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

Those who were baptised on the day of Pentecost, we are told, devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2: 42). That is to say, having come to know the God who saved them and offered them new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, they worshipped him through the singing of psalms and the sacramental worship of the Eucharist. This worship remains the first purpose of every Christian Community: to glorify the Lord in shared communion with one another, the whole church and the saints in heaven. Therefore, our goals are:

- To develop our Music ministry - making full use of the talents we have available to serve the liturgy. This means ensuring a variety of styles of church music are available but that all of these aim to sing those parts of the Mass which good liturgy requires and that all lead the congregation in singing and worshipping both through the ancient prayers of the Mass and more modern church music.
- To begin or further develop Children's Liturgy
- To enrich the liturgy - that is, making our worship, in all its ways, as rich as it can be.
- For the laity to participate more in planning (and eventually leading) the liturgy and so to share the responsibility for the liturgy.
- Offer complementary, not competing, worship across the partnership.
- To develop liturgical practices and a Sunday Eucharist which welcomes: i) those who are curious and exploring faith; and ii) those who are marginalised in any way (e.g. recent arrivals from overseas, minority groups, families with neurodivergence).
- To look for opportunities to worship more publicly (as evangelisation) and with other Christians (e.g.s of One Voice Darlington and Good Friday Act of Witness)

How this serves Mission:

- We have confidence that the Church's liturgy, which is both ancient and ever new, meets people's spiritual needs and that the music of the Mass (Mass parts, psalms and hymns) express the faith and vibrancy of a Christian community. It is attractive and uplifting to belong to a church community that sings well, learns new music, and cherishes the old.
- The church must be a community that welcomes all and responds to people's needs, supporting them to worship God.
- The provision of Children's Liturgy communicates to young families that they are welcome. It is appropriate that the Liturgy of the Word is delivered in an age-appropriate manner: introducing big ideas of faith and explaining them to our children; and giving parents and others in the congregation space to reflect and to apply the proclaimed scriptures to their own life and context.

Concrete Steps:

- Identify liturgical formation needs.
- Gather Church musicians from across the partnership for a formation day with input on Singing the Mass, psalm settings and choosing music for liturgy. Develop some Mass settings or psalms that all can learn.
- Gather those currently or potentially leading Children's Liturgy for a formation/ ideas & resource exchange day/ evening. Work on how we can develop and share resources.
- Create Liturgy planning groups where the laity take more responsibility for/greater involvement in what is prepared (N.B. this may be something done better at Parish rather than partnership level)
- Seek volunteers and train people to be lay leaders
- Review the schedule of worship offered across the partnership, to ensure that different types of worship are offered (e.g. with different musical styles) and that the schedule enables people to attend (e.g. with different mass times in different parishes).

When we hope to begin each step:

- Both initial meetings (of church musicians and children's liturgy leaders) to happen in the autumn.
- Establish Children's ministry by the end of the year in those churches where it is lacking or, where this is impossible, consider alternative provisions.
- Work with our church musicians to set realistic targets for learning of new music.

What/ Who will be needed:

- People with liturgical expertise (for both music and Children's liturgy)
- Volunteers with musical ability
- Volunteers skilled in working with children
- Some resources: music and books
- Laity willing to lead worship

Who will lead and who will assist:

- Identify key volunteers and clergy to liaise on organisation of days.

Teach

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

The first Christians baptised on the day of Pentecost devoted themselves to the Apostles' Teaching (Acts 2: 42) which began with the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. We have this same Good News to share. The Spirit challenges our apathy and sense of resignation.

Therefore, our goals are:

- To accompany those who approach our parish communities, for whatever reason and in whatever context, towards an encounter with the Lord. Our Good News is primarily relational not propositional: it is first and foremost about a relationship with the Lord.
- To bring more of those who come through our catechesis and sacramental preparation programmes to regular worship, particularly Sunday worship in our churches. This should be less through a legalistic sense obedience to obligation and more through inculcating a love of the Lord encountered in Word and Sacrament, together with a sense that my faith needs the worshipping community and the worshipping community needs my faith.
- To listen more intentionally to those who have gone through our sacramental programmes and reflectively adapt our approach.
- To increase the number of our catechists and to foster in our parishes a culture of accompaniment, journeying with people towards encounter with the Lord.
- To demonstrate and teach a proper sense of reverence. Part of our relationship with the Lord is lived through a healthy reverence, just as part of our loving relationship with a newborn baby or a frail, elderly relative is communicated through gentleness and tenderness. Our love of the Lord is expressed in the way we approach the sanctuary, the ambo, the altar, and the way we receive the Eucharist. This must be part of the faith we invite others to share.
- To improve our relationship with and increase interaction with our Catholic schools, creating more moments to pass on the faith to children and young adults.
- Outreach and Evangelisation to the non-religious/non-Catholic on our doorstep.

How this serves Mission:

- Jesus sent his disciples out to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God to the ends of the world and to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28: 19). When we prepare people for the reception of sacraments of initiation we obey the Lord's command to his church, inviting others to share the grace of faith we have received.
- Good, ongoing catechesis simultaneously fosters more profound prayer and worship, and forms confident and faithful disciples who want to use their gifts with hope and confidence to serve others. They become faithful witnesses to God's saving love beyond parish boundaries.
- Across our parishes the sacramental programmes we run are generally led by a similar cohort volunteers. Succession planning of catechists and brining in newer/younger volunteers to learn from them now and gently/gradually hand the baton on will be an essential part of handing on the faith.

- The programmes for baptism, first communion, confirmation and RCIA are valued and good, but do not always result in active participation afterwards. Actions to increase retention after sacramental touch points and move people's experience from transactional to relational is necessary in handing on and strengthening the faith.
- Handing on the faith to our children and increasing the number of young people coming to Church is vital to sustain the Church and its mission.

Concrete Steps:

- Run recruitment campaigns within parishes for volunteers to join the different catechetical groups, with information on roles/what is needed, and gradually get new volunteers involved. In particular, asking those who lead sacramental programmes to identify and invite new catechists to join their teams with a view to succession.
- In our Baptism and First Holy Communion programmes to invite parents who regularly attend church with their children to share their experiences of nurturing their children's faith with the parents of those to be baptised or make their first communion.
- Design a programme that can be applied around sacramental moments to support and retain those who receive them, and embed them into wider parish life, and share this across the partnership. This could include things like parents and children attending mass ahead of baptisms, family masses for first holy communion children, visits to primary schools after first confession and communion and secondary after confirmation, young adults' masses and events post confirmation, utilising the youth mission team at the diocese, pairing adults who come through RCIA with existing parishioners or directing them into participation in SVP, foodbank etc.
- Reflect on whether particular parishes are doing well in teaching/handing on the faith and in retention of worshippers, particularly following sacramental touch points, and if so, share what they are doing differently across the partnership.
- Increase parish interaction with and outreach to our Catholic schools, at parish level for primary and at partnership level for secondary, utilising the laity as well as priests.
- Create an evangelisation programme of activity to bear witness to the non-religious/non-Catholic on our doorstep.

When we hope to begin each step:

- Recruitment campaigns over summer/autumn – and repeated in 6 months if necessary
- Programme/framework of activity to retain post sacramental touch points to be drafted over summer/autumn
- Next academic year for schools outreach

What/ Who will be needed:

- Existing catechists to advertise/recruit/teach; willing volunteers to join them
- People with faith, a passion for handing it on and the courage to try new things
- Laity willing to go into schools

Who will lead and who will assist:

- Existing catechists, key volunteers, clergy.

Serve

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

The first Christians baptised on the day of Pentecost held all things in common and sold their possessions and belongings, distributing the proceeds to all that had need (Acts 2: 44-45). A Christian community exists not for itself but for others, and to offer God's love in practical and concrete ways to any in need. We are to be the hands of the Lord communicating his tender mercy and building his Kingdom of justice here and now.

- Where activities are already in place in parishes (particularly activities run by the SVP), we need succession planning of leaders and volunteers
- Where there is limited activity currently, we need to start initiatives, but to join up as a partnership and ensure economies of scale.
- To spread familiarity with the principles Catholic Social Teaching and to explore creative ways to put these principles into action.
- Explore Faith in Action awards within parishes and schools.

How this serves Mission:

- The Church's mission to the poor and vulnerable is rooted in the example and teaching of Jesus who responded with compassion to the outsider and the poor, and taught his disciples that to love those in need was to love him (Matt 25: 31-46). Catholic social teaching has built on this foundation to guide and encourage Christians to defend the vulnerable and promote human dignity.
- Preaching the Gospel via our actions is an integral calling of the Church

Concrete Steps:

- Engaging those who have recently come into the church through the RCIA, and those who have come through our sacramental programmes (including youth) into this mission activity in which we serve the needs of others. This will give them a focus and purpose once their programmes are complete,
- widening our volunteer base within parishes, setting out all the different activities that go on and how people can help even in small ways to begin with, bringing people in now to learn from the people leading and to gradually take over those roles
- co-ordinate activity a partnership level – e.g. the existing single SVP for the partnership, a single foodbank effort – by taking an audit of what is happening now and join up groups and individuals where that is not yet happening.
- Invite Deacon Patrick Rutherford to speak with parishes regarding SVP engagement.
- To explore developing Minnie-Vinnies in the parishes.

When we hope to begin each step:

- Recruitment campaigns over summer/autumn – and repeated in 6 months if necessary
- Recruiting volunteers from the next schedule of sacramental touch points – over the next year
- Audit and work of better co-ordination to follow the Parish/Partnership Parish Council discussion – 3/6 months.

What/Who will be needed:

- Existing leaders to advertise/recruit/teach; willing volunteers to join them and lead
- Sharing of information

Who will lead and who will assist:

- Existing leaders, key volunteers, clergy

Community

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

The first Christians baptised on the day of Pentecost devoted themselves to the communion (*koinonia*) which meant the relationship of being brothers and sisters in Christ established and nourished by the sacraments. Devotion to this communion first implied caring for one another locally, but as the Good News spread, and as new Christian communities were established in other cities, the communion also meant maintaining communion through letters and visits. Nurturing our communion, therefore, involves the local, most particularly the diocese, but also the parish and partnership community, and the shared faith and sacramental life that we share with the whole church: the communion of churches that maintain communion with the See of Rome. It also involves building communion with those brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we do not yet share full communion (ecumenism).

Many parish returns describe themselves as a “family of faith”. “And looking about at those who sat around him, [Jesus] said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’” (Mk 3: 34). Faith in Jesus establishes precious familial relationships with the Lord and with one another. Our duty is always to protect and nurture these relationships.

- We need to re-establish a partnership development group. The work of this group is to identify areas in which we can support and resource one another in worship, catechesis, practical witness and community-building activities. We might agree to hold a partnership walking pilgrimage and Mass, or a social event such as a Ceilidh.
- The ministry of welcome in our churches is increasingly important as enquirers and people who have recently settled in our communities, many from overseas. We may be able to develop this ministry at the partnership level.
- A number of responses at the parish stage suggested that we might use the publication of church documents (e.g. *Magnifica humanitas*) as an occasion to offer input and learning. We might profitably do this as a partnership.
- The community of our partnership might be strengthened by hosting days of recollection, possibly for different ministers, in Gainford or Barnard Castle.

How this serves Mission:

- The Church’s fundamental mission is to be the “Body of Christ”, a living supportive communion that extends outward to serve the wider world.

Concrete Steps:

- Creation of a partnership parish council (PPC), but bringing in a wider section of the parishes including younger members (not just existing parish council members)
- Following the creation of a PPC, running a series of partnership events (a mixture of social, worship and outreach)
- Also connecting to the wider church, including the Hexham and Newcastle diocese, Catholic church in England and Wales, and ecumenical connections with different denominations in the town – again probably via a mixture of social, worship and outreach events.

When we hope to begin each step:

- Partnership parish council (PPC) – 3/6 months
- Events – 2027.

What/Who will be needed:

- Willing Members for a partnership parish council (PPC),
- Ideas for events
- Connections/contacts in wider church

Who will lead and who will assist:

- Existing parish council members, new volunteers, parish priests

Finances for Mission

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

- To consider the financial picture at a partnership level with courage, transparency and honesty. Many parishioners have little idea of the state of their parish finances either because financial reports are seldom made or because of lack of interest. However, a healthy community has a sense of what their income, outgoings and balance are and a realistic sense of what the costs of maintenance are.
- The partnership must work together to balance its finances. Some parishes have large savings but also significant annual deficits. As a partnership we need to consider how we can use our resources to generate income so that the mission of the church can continue. This could mean developing a five or ten year plan.

How this serves Mission:

- Making the greatest and most effective use of our resources allows money to be spent on the mission of the church, rather than simply maintaining an estate

Concrete Steps:

- Identify where savings can be made and where income can be maximised across the partnership
- Explore managing our money and resources at partnership level, potentially pooling finances across the partnership and thereby subsidising the more remote/smaller parishes
- To carry out a quick but accurate audit for each parish on likely future costs over a 5/10 year period

When we hope to begin each step:

- January 2027

What/Who will be needed:

- Finance committees of all the parishes

Who will lead and who will assist:

- Parish Councils, Parish Finance Committees and Parish Priests.

Buildings for Mission

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

Rightly, we love our church buildings. They are testimonies in stone, brick and concrete to the faith of our forebears, who gave generously of themselves in offerings, work, creativity, and time to provide us with fitting and uplifting places in which to worship. However, our buildings must serve the Church's mission and not become an encumbrance.

- There is an obvious need for a church in Barnard Castle and while the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham provides a priest for that parish the parish of St Osmund's, Gainford, will remain.
- In Darlington, however, most parishioners recognise that we cannot sustain six parishes. With fewer priests and seeing the changes made in comparable places such as Hartlepool, many can see that Darlington will, at some point, become one parish. For others, however, this will be a shock and a painful loss. While there is much sadness in the face of this reality, for others there is impatience to move on and even enthusiasm to embrace a new reality. If we work collaboratively, sharing resources, leadership and ideas - together with ministry opportunities (such as altar serving/reading/maintenance jobs beyond our 'home church'), we can respond to each other's needs and better respond to the needs of the people of our town. We believe the Spirit is asking us to embrace the future with courage and hope. This means asking how many buildings we require and which of our current buildings will best serve the Church's mission in Darlington.
- To recognise that we have too many, resource-draining buildings and that we can become too focussed on protecting and maintaining 'our church' while overlooking the fact that we ourselves are the church, not the building! Many observe that the burden of maintaining our buildings falls most heavily on the parochial clergy who are taken away from the pastoral duties they were trained and ordained for.
- In facing this reality in which some churches will close, the Spirit is calling us to weigh various factors without prejudice, such as:
 - the geographic spread of our existing churches
 - their position in relation to schools
 - their position in relation to churches in neighbouring partnerships
 - their position in relation to areas that might see development/population growth in the next 5-10 years
 - their position in relation to social need and areas of deprivation
 - their current attendance and capacity.
- To accurately assess the condition of our existing churches and other buildings, and establish the likely cost of maintaining them over the next 5-10 years, in deciding whether to retain them

How this serves Mission:

- The buildings which we decide to maintain must enable us to serve all the people of Darlington and facilitate people coming to church.
- Making the greatest and most effective use of our resources allows money to be spent on the mission of the church, rather than simply maintaining an estate

Concrete Steps:

- We need to have a further discernment process, including an open meeting, to decide which of our church and other buildings best serve our mission.
- To establish councils of qualified parishioners to take the care of our buildings and grounds off the shoulders of the clergy. These councils would need to have regular meetings, well-defined parameters of operation and good lines of communication to the clergy and diocesan property department.

When we hope to begin each step:

- In the new academic year (September/ October 2026).

What/Who will be needed:

- An outside facilitator might be required for our open meeting which should be based on this Pastoral Strategy Return.
- The discernment process must listen with pastoral concern to the experience of parishioners in all of our parishes. Listening with open hearts and with care will be essential to the process.
- When difficult decisions need to be made we will need to celebrate all the grace that has been given and shared, and the mission that has been exercised in the parish whose church building is to be closed.

Who will lead and who will assist:

- The clergy will lead this process with outside facilitation.

People for Mission

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

- There is an imbalance in the spread of ministers and catechists. We are being called to share skills and expertise. Every community must have within itself the resources to offer fitting worship, to hand on the faith, to witness to the Lord's love in the larger community. But one community can help another to nurture these ministries and acts of service.
- We need to identify and nurture the next generation of catechists, liturgical ministers, and volunteers.

How this serves Mission:

- This approach serves the mission by making sure that smaller, under-resourced communities are not left behind and have the people they need to welcome new members, share the faith, and run essential programs. By working together across the partnership we can nurture the God-given gifts of all our faithful to serve for the flourishing of every one of our communities.

Concrete Steps:

- To support all local churches, the plan focuses on pooling human resources by bringing together large groups of catechists to design a unified, area-wide teaching strategy. By collaborating and sharing in this way we can empower those who feel unworthy or unable to offer themselves in service of their own community.
- An "audit" of sorts to identify who we have and what their gifts and talents are from across the partnership and what we need in terms of training.

When we hope to begin each step:

Once we know the next steps/plans but ultimately, we are all one Church and therefore should be seeking to build up the Kingdom as a collective, whilst respecting, celebrating, and nurturing different communities, their traditions and their gifts.

What/ Who will be needed:

We will need to identify key leads for different areas of ministry (liturgy, catechesis etc.)

We will also need to identify those who can give formation and training.

Who will lead and who will assist:

Our clergy and our lay people, including our young people. Those already actively involved in parish life and those who have yet to share their "definite service."

Sustainability for Mission

Goal/ Key Objective:

What the Spirit is asking us to change?

The Spirit is asking us to face the future with courage and honesty. We cannot sustain our mission as the church whilst our energies are exhausted on maintaining buildings. The responsibility and heaviest burden for finances and buildings falls on our priests as the only full-time employees in our parishes. Our priests are formed to lead worship, to preach, to visit the sick, to accompany the bereaved, and to hand on the faith. We want our priests to minister in these ways and are frustrated and angry when they don't. However, all too often our priests are forced to spend too much of their time and energy on the administration of building and financial resources, and there are ever-fewer of them to meet our pastoral needs. Meanwhile, our finances are challenged by rising costs, particularly the cost of building maintenance, and falling revenue.

The Spirit is saying that what pertains currently is unsustainable. So what future can we imagine that is sustainable? A sustainable future is one which is discerned and agreed by all.

So how do we change? It would be wonderful to employ someone to administer our buildings but the reality is that we don't have the finances to do this.

What is clear from our discussions is that we need to restructure our community in Darlington. There was broad acceptance/ agreement that Darlington needs to be one parish with a few church buildings. Some suggested we should have three church buildings, others four.

We have not yet managed to go further in our discernment and it would be unfair to ask the parish representatives at the Partnership Pastoral Strategy meetings to make decisions such as these. A principle of Roman Law readily adopted by Church fathers and medieval theologians alike states, *quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus approbetur* (what touches all must be approved by all). For our discernment to lead to a sustainable solution that respects the faith of individuals and communities it must respect this principle. We suggest it should include the following elements:

The publication and dissemination of this Partnership Pastoral Strategy Return throughout our parishes.

A process of consultation that reaches as many people as possible. The discernment must be a consultation of the whole Darlington Catholic community. It should begin with an open meeting. Some consideration should be given to who should chair the meeting. The meeting should have an element of table discussion and, so far as possible, each table should have each Darlington parish represented on it. The meeting also needs to have a plenary element of open discussion to ensure no voice is stifled. Due to the size of the population two open meetings might be necessary. A planning group should decide three open questions to focus discussion and an emphasis must be placed on listening to and honouring the experience of those in other parishes from our own.

Open meetings alone, however, cannot attend to every voice and our aim must be that no voice is excluded. So, the open meetings must be followed by a period in which written

submissions are made. On the basis of the open meeting the planning group should formulate a questionnaire so that people are made aware and can express their feelings about some of the major decisions which we face.

For good decisions to be made, information needs to be shared with transparency. Every parish, without exception, has great gifts and strengths. However, every parish, also without exception, faces challenges. Some of these involve personnel, others, the cost of maintenance. We need our eyes open to reach decisions to which we can all be reconciled and which we can live with integrity.

We know that some churches, which have hosted vibrant and grace-filled parish communities, will close as a result of this process. That will be painful. The whole process needs to be one which allows the stories of every community to be heard and celebrated. No community should be dishonoured for God has been at work in each. When the decision is made to close a church the community that has worshipped there must be given time and space to tell the story and celebrate what the Spirit has done in that space and with those people. The other parish communities must go with open and grateful hearts to listen and celebrate and also to lament as an important chapter comes to an end.

For now, this is as far as we can see towards a sustainable future for our church.

Appendix

School	Buildings & their Condition		Running Costs Surplus/ Deficit	Deposit Account	Catechists	Deaths	RCIA	Confirmations	First Holy Communions	Baptisms	Car Parking	Seating Capacity	Mass Attendance	
St Mary's BC	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Good Fair - N	£10.5k	£23k	1	4	0	0	2	0	2	156	54	27/103
St Osmund's	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Good Good Good Poor/Fair	-£81k	£289k	3	0	0	0	0	2	26	160	32	N/A
St Augustine's	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Good Good Good Fair	-£27k	£110k	29	24	5	91	40	67	93	440	360	156/212
St Teresa's	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Fair Fair - N	£3.4	£174k	7	39	0	15	25	28	20	250	101	188/330
St Thomas's	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Good Good Good	£6.8	£259k	16	29	1	10	27	41	50	260	155	135/314 see St Anne's
Holy Family	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Fair Fair Fair N	£35.6k	£82.9k	27	22	0	10	26	21	30	300	153	181/226
St Anne's	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Good Good Good N	£3.8	£25	0	9	0	5	0	6	30	200	58	135/314 see St Thomas
St William's	Ch Pres Hall Rental?	Good - -	£1.5	£28	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	300	No Return	N/A