

GUILDFORD DEANERY CONGRESS – MAY 2025

A: SUMMARY OF TABLE GROUP WORK

“WHAT IS ON YOUR HEART FOR THE NEW PARISH?”

Introduction

This document synthesises a comprehensive set of discussions and recommendations aimed at revitalising and strengthening church mission. It addresses a wide array of topics, from spiritual practices and community building to structural organisation and outreach efforts, consistently highlighting both existing challenges and opportunities for future growth.

Methodology

The source material for this work consisted of 43 handwritten A1 sheets. These were photographed and digitally converted to text. Where handwriting was not recognisable digitally, the words were manually added. The whole, some 4000 words, was manually reviewed and then summarised using Gemini AI, with instructions to include text direct from the sheets and create new headings and bullet points. Following this, the document was manually edited to ensure the original meanings remain clear. The Editor maintains confidence that this report constitutes a fair and representative synthesis of the source material.

I. Prayer & Spirituality

1. Core of Faith and Communication: Prayer is fundamentally defined as a direct and constant dialogue with God, emphasising the assurance that "someone is listening." This direct communication is seen as the heart of one's relationship with Jesus.
2. Diverse Forms of Prayer: The document highlights various established forms of prayer, including the Eucharist, prayer groups, Adoration, and Rosary groups, recognizing their importance in fostering spiritual life. It also suggests that "singing is praying twice," acknowledging the power of music in worship.
3. Spiritual Guidance and Growth: The notes advocate spiritual direction and mention Ignatian spirituality as a pathway for deeper faith. They also suggest the use of modern tools like online spirituality and Zoom meetings for spiritual reflection and connection, as well as specific devotions like Divine Mercy.
4. Accessibility and Vocations: A clear call is made for increased accessibility to priests for spiritual guidance, alongside a plea for prayers for vocations to the priesthood, acknowledging the current demands on clergy.
5. Engaging Youth in Prayer: The importance of engaging young people in prayer is repeatedly emphasised, with suggestions such as incorporating prayer in schools and utilising children and youth ministry to foster their spiritual development. Bible study groups and regular Mass are also noted as valuable spiritual practices.

II. Community & Fellowship

1. Fostering a Sense of Belonging: A primary objective is to build a "community of communities" where individuals truly feel they belong, especially in larger parish areas where a sense of continuity and a "homely" atmosphere might be missed. This involves active efforts to welcome newcomers.
2. Inclusivity and Diversity: The document stresses the importance of embracing other cultures and fostering equality within the community, ensuring that all contributions are valued. It highlights how diversity can be enriching but also calls for greater integration.
3. Social Connection and Support: Encouraging social gatherings, hospitality (such as "tea & coffee after Mass"), and maintaining personal contact are seen as vital for building and growing relationships. The notes specifically address the "loneliness epidemic" among young people, suggesting social media and supportive "gatherings around campfires" as ways to connect.

4. Beyond Cliques: The concept of "fellowship, not cliques" is explicitly stated, promoting genuine connection among people and aiming to "bring people together." This involves understanding and accepting differences and maintaining an open mind.
5. Addressing Challenges: The document acknowledges the challenge of building community when "the heart of belonging to parish has disappeared" and when there is "a lot of choice in the area," urging the community to find new ways to engage people.

III. Outreach & Evangelization

1. Targeted Outreach: Specific groups are identified for focused outreach efforts, including migrants, lapsed Catholics, and individuals dealing with mental health issues.
2. Spreading the Message of Salvation: The notes emphasize the responsibility of the entire community to "spread the message of salvation" and to learn how to share faith beyond just sacramental preparation. This includes letting people know "we're on fire" for our faith.
3. Invitation and Impactful Experiences: Creating clear opportunities to "invite" people into the church and providing "impactful experiences" for youth are highlighted as key strategies for attracting new members and re-engaging existing ones.
4. Catechesis for Evangelisation: The document explicitly states the need to be "catechised to evangelise," underscoring that effective evangelisation requires a solid foundation in faith knowledge.
5. Interfaith Engagement: Involvement with interfaith groups and inviting other denominations and faiths to accompany the process are encouraged, recognizing that "God is working beyond our boundaries."

IV. Formation & Education

1. Lifelong Formation: The necessity of continuous formation is a recurring theme, spanning from Baptism to old age, emphasising ongoing learning and spiritual development.
2. Comprehensive Catechesis: The document calls for "good catechesis" for both children and adults, alongside Bible study groups and seasonal programs, to ensure a deep understanding of the faith.
3. Leadership Training and Small Groups: The Alpha model of leadership training is suggested, and the use of small groups (ideally around 8 people) is highlighted as a crucial mechanism for creating safe environments where individuals can feel they belong and can be trained to evangelise.
4. Depth of Formation: While acknowledging the "catchy" nature of programs like Alpha and Life in the Spirit, the notes also express a concern that they might not always be "deep enough," suggesting a need for a "whole parish catechesis" approach.
5. Support for Specific Groups: The document calls for more support for married couples, particularly in their early years, and flexible approaches to family situations to ensure their continued engagement in the church. It also mentions the varying degrees of interest in RCIA and the "appalling" drop-off rate after various sacraments, indicating a need for better retention strategies.

V. Role of Clergy & Laity

1. Shared Responsibility and Delegation: Acknowledging the challenge of "not enough clergy" and the "demands on the priests," the document strongly advocates for the laity to "step up more" and take on greater responsibility. This delegation is seen as crucial for affirming the laity and releasing priests for more spiritual work.
2. Redefining Priestly Role: The ideal future role of the priest is metaphorically described as a "gardener" – planting seeds, watering new growth, and pruning – rather than an "architect" who attempts to do everything themselves. This shift aims to "take pressure off clergy" and allow them to be "joyful in ministry" rather than being bogged down by maintenance issues.
3. Empowerment and Trust: The document emphasises the importance of empowering and trusting the laity, encouraging them to see volunteering as an act of discipleship and a living out of their Baptismal vocation. Volunteer template documents are suggested to build confidence, governance, and trust.
4. Inclusivity in Leadership: There is a clear call for a "greater role for women in the Church," including more prominent leadership positions, and for training and enabling them as required. Provision for individuals with special needs/disabilities and offering them roles are also mentioned.
5. Addressing Clergy Well-being: The notes touch on concerns about clergy "not having fun" and needing to be careful about "giving off a sense of wariness," suggesting that more lay involvement would be appreciated and allow clergy to communicate a "life of fun."

VI. Structural & Practical Improvements

1. Efficient Stewardship: The document addresses various aspects of stewardship, including property, HR, health & safety, safeguarding, and GDPR compliance. It emphasizes pooling expertise and resources to "gap-fill" and optimise operations.
2. Enhanced Communication: Improving communication is a key concern, both internally ("top down & within hub") and externally ("cross parish communication"). Quarterly/biannual updates and a directory of activities are suggested.
3. Adaptation and Flexibility: The notes highlight the need for the church to adapt to changing times, including demographic shifts (e.g., new homes being built) and the need for new ways to engage people. It encourages embracing change and being flexible in approaches.
4. Synergy and Resource Pooling: The hope for a "synergy of strengths and expertise" across the larger parish is expressed, along with the idea of using the "best resources" and pooling them.
5. Strategic Growth and Identity: The document calls for identifying new initiatives and opportunities for new parishioners, building a sense of identity and external presence in the local community, and planning for future growth. It also mentions the "huge fishing ground" of opportunity and the potential for "gentle improvements" over time to lead to great achievements.

B: SUMMARY OF "TRIPLES"

"WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS WE NEED TO TAKE AS A PARISH?"

1. Youth & Family Engagement:

- **Focus:** Creating and sustaining robust programs and support for children, youth, and young adults, ensuring their active participation and continued faith journey within the parish. This includes age-appropriate groups, young leaders, and making churches welcoming for families.

2. Adult Formation & Spiritual Growth:

- **Focus:** Providing diverse and accessible opportunities for adults to deepen their understanding of faith, engage in spiritual practices (like Bible study and prayer groups), and receive guidance for their spiritual development. Emphasis on relevant, simple language.

3. Fellowship & Community Building:

- **Focus:** Fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and supportive parish community through increased social events, cultural celebrations, and practical support initiatives. This aims to create a "real-life community" where social needs are met and people feel connected.

4. Communication:

- **Focus:** Establishing clear, consistent, and effective internal and external communication channels across all parish hubs. This includes developing a central website, utilizing digital tools, and ensuring all parishioners are informed about activities and resources.

5. Lay Leadership & Clergy Support:

- **Focus:** Empowering lay parishioners to take on more responsibilities and administrative tasks, thereby freeing up clergy to concentrate on spiritual works. This involves training, recruiting, and trusting volunteers, and appointing "champions" for key areas.

6. Outreach & Mission:

- **Focus:** Actively engaging with the wider community, including non-Catholics and lapsed Catholics, to understand their needs and share the Gospel. This involves community events, publicizing parish activities, and creative evangelization initiatives.

7. Parish Organization & Management:

- **Focus:** Streamlining parish operations, clarifying structures, and ensuring efficient management of resources and premises. This includes centralizing certain administrative tasks, defining roles within a moderated parish model, and establishing standard procedures.

8. Liturgy & Sacramental Life:

- **Focus:** Enhancing the quality and relevance of liturgical celebrations, including Mass and Eucharistic services, to be uplifting and engaging for all ages. It also includes exploring provision for traditional forms of Mass.

9. Clergy Roles & Accessibility:

- **Focus:** Ensuring priests can dedicate more time to spiritual works and are accessible to the laity for guidance. This also touches on the potential for more specific training for lay ministers and broader discussions about clergy roles.

10. Financial Stewardship & Investment:

- **Focus:** Strategically allocating financial resources to support parish initiatives, particularly those related to youth and leadership development. This includes identifying and addressing financial needs to enable growth.