

THE DOVE

Issue 83: February 2015

St. Columba's, Upper Gray Street

Our Parishes

The number of priests available to the Archdiocese is falling and those we have are aging; the number of practising Catholics is also falling and a fair proportion is housebound; our churches and presbyteries are expensive to maintain; some parishes may have to close. All this we have known for several years.

To address the situation in 2006 the former Archbishop issued a consultation document "*Now is the favourable time*" in which he proposed grouping the parishes in the Archdiocese in clusters, with a designated key parish in each cluster. St Columba's would be in a cluster with St Peter's (the key parish), St Mark's, St Gregory's, St Catherine's, St John Vianney's, and St Albert's, although this was later changed to St Peter's, St Mark's and the Sacred Heart. At the outset this document makes clear that clusters are **not** designed as a first step in amalgamating parishes. On the contrary, it states explicitly that local faith communities must be retained wherever possible: "Our parish communities are our most precious inheritance and we have a sacred duty to sustain them and pass them on as our gift to the next generation." The clusters were established to encourage parishes to support each other and share resources. However, the document does acknowledge that some parishes may become unsustainable – "Wherever a local community of faith becomes unable to sustain itself as an independent parish I will ensure that every effort is made to continue developing its pastoral and spiritual life as part of a larger parish or group of parishes."

The present Archbishop's solution to our problem is to centralise. Far from sustaining the local faith communities the parishes within each cluster would be amalgamated into one single parish, based on one of the churches in the cluster. The other churches would be closed, although some "might be retained as chapels of ease or Mass centres **for a time**." Such an arrangement, says the Archbishop, would have notable spiritual and pastoral advantages. One can see some administrative advantage for the Archbishop; fewer, larger parishes would be easier to manage and control. However the spiritual and pastoral advantages for the people of the Archdiocese are difficult to discern. A parish is a community. If it is disbanded, and the people invited to travel to another church, it will quickly lose any sense of identity. Some of the laity will persevere, but others will give up. Some will find the travelling too difficult; others will find the larger parish too impersonal. Ironically the large parish may eventually end up as a very small parish.

A priest's ministry is essentially to say Mass, administer the sacraments and preach the gospel. If we have very few priests all their time and energy should be employed in this ministry. They should not be expected to be doing anything which could be done by lay people. It is time for the laity to take a much more active role and to be involved in the future of our Archdiocese. How is it that the people most affected by major change have not been included in the discussion until now?

How can our parish communities be preserved? As far as possible they should stay where they are as Eucharistic communities, served by a priest who travels to three or four of them. Our link with St Peter's works well because we stay put and the priest travels. However, as Parish Priest of two separate parishes, he is responsible for much of the administration of those parishes – a heavy burden for one man, and impossible if three or four parishes were involved rather than just two. The Eucharistic communities need to take responsibility for all the parish administration, leaving the priests free to do what only they can do. Like the Archbishop's proposal such an arrangement would involve major change but would keep many, if not all, of our communities intact.

The present parish pastoral councils, currently set up in order to advise the Parish Priest, could form the basis of a community council charged with responsibility for maintaining and developing the community. Such a council may decide to do this using their own resources, or employ a community administrator, or ask for one of the few Archdiocesan deacons to be attached to their community. (We need many more deacons than we have at present.)

There would have to be negotiations about the buildings owned by the Archdiocese. Some communities may want to rent their present buildings from the Archdiocese; others may choose to abandon their church if it is in disrepair and costly to maintain, and find other accommodation locally, allowing the Archdiocese to sell the church; others may decide to share a church building with a local Episcopalian or Church of Scotland church. The priority is the spiritual and pastoral care of the communities; the problem of the buildings is a secondary issue.

Austin Flynn's family have experienced the destructive effect when parishes are amalgamated into one large parish. This is his graphic account:

No doubt you will all be as concerned as I am by the suggestion that our parish may have to merge, and that we may even lose the church. Archbishop Cushley has based the merger consultation largely on the facts that (i) priest numbers are falling; (ii) certain parishes have falling numbers attending Mass and are therefore financially unsustainable; and (iii) some parishes have buildings that are not suitable for their needs. We at St Columba's are fortunate to be thriving, financially stable (profitable in fact) and with buildings that have recently been upgraded.

However, the threat of the loss of our parish is all too real and I have first-hand experience of the effects of such a merger as my parents have been through this process in their parish over the last three or four years. The most upsetting consequence is that their parish community has effectively ceased to exist for any meaningful purpose. Their parish, like ours, was thriving financially, socially and spiritually and yet they now find themselves grieving for the loss of a community of which they were members for almost fifty years, and in which my sisters and I were baptised, made our first confessions, first communions, served Mass, read at Mass, distributed communion, and in which one of my sisters was married. The suggestion that "the spiritual and pastoral advantages would also be notable, in that we would have fewer, larger, stronger parishes with at least one priest at their heart" has certainly not been borne out in my parents' parish's case, although it was sold to them on that basis. Instead of a "larger, stronger parish" (although it is undoubtedly larger", they now have a situation where there is no parish community, and instead, each Mass is attended by an ever-changing mixture of people from all over the area who drop in for Mass, but who have no real affinity with the church and effectively 'shop around' and use whichever Mass is most convenient for them on any given Sunday. My father recently described the former parish communities as having been replaced by a group of itinerant, Mass-seeking nomads. All sense of parish identity has withered remarkably quickly. The Sunday coffees after Mass (the main weekly social event for many elderly parishioners) have stopped, the local Credit Union 'branch' that used the church hall has moved elsewhere and groups of people who used to socialise with each other every Sunday now only do so rarely, and then only by chance (and generally not at church, but in various coffee shops around the town). The only constant is that the church building still looks the same, although the expectation is that the church itself will be closed within the not-too-distant future and I imagine the land will be sold for development. It is a desperate situation and should have been avoided by leaving well alone. However, there is no going back.

My parents also have the unfortunate situation that, so as not to offend the members of either of the pre-merger parishes, Easter and Christmas Masses are not held in either of the beautiful churches available. Instead, those Masses are held in the sports hall of the local Catholic comprehensive school while the churches stand empty. The result is that when I was staying with my parents at Christmas, we had the choice of either attending Mass in the school sports hall or going to a different church altogether (and we chose to do the latter). I am not suggesting that anything analogous would necessarily happen here, but the law of unintended consequences is a strange thing.

My personal view is that because we are currently financially viable there is no need to consider a merger for so long as the priests that serve us are willing and able to say Sunday Mass in the church. The priority here should be the spiritual and pastoral care of our community and I would therefore encourage you all to join me in making written representations to Archbishop Cushley to save our parish. As a thriving community, our role in the current consultation should be to extend a warm welcome to people from other parishes that may have to close because they are not viable and have no means of making themselves so.

Austin Flynn.

What happens in the next few weeks and months is critical. Once the Archbishop starts to implement his plan there will be no going back. We may save St Columba's in the short term but if most other parishes are amalgamated it will only be a matter of time before St Columba's, as we know it, is lost. Many of the other parishes will want to preserve their identity. We need to work together with the other parishes to ensure that the Archbishop listens to the people of the Archdiocese even at this late stage.

If you want to join the debate on the future of the parishes, or to contribute to this newsletter on any other topic, please send your material to Anne Havard, 46 Blackett Place, EH9 1RJ or e-mail annehavard46@gmail.com