

## Sharing Vision – the future of church

*Collated by members of the Vigil Group from contributions of all participants. A full account, including this summary, is on <http://tinyurl.com/mwcbpfp>*

*In earlier form it was published in Open House (April 2015).*

*This summary was also sent to Archbishop Cushley on May 1st, 2015.*

On 14 March about 110 people from 20 parishes across the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh came together for an event called “Sharing vision – the future of church.”

The day was hosted by the Vigil Group, in the spirit of its meetings, to pray and reflect on the continuing renewal of the Church including themselves. The date was chosen to meet a need that was made urgent by the Archbishop's proposal to close some 2/3rds of the parishes to match the anticipated number of priests.

The objective of the day was to share and reflect on the visions that each of us has of what church is, and what it can become. To give everyone time to be heard, much of the day was spent in small groups. In the morning the emphasis was on listening and receiving what was said with a moment of silence rather than with discussion.

The day began with Anne Hughes reflecting on the signs of the times. She asked whether the “crisis” in the church is the Spirit shaking us into being something new.

In a time of prayer we were then taken slowly through John 9, the cure of the blind man, to allow the developing story to address us personally.

In our listening groups, we then looked at the things which gave us life in the church today. After that we moved on to what was more draining. Using this balance enabled people to own their thoughts and feelings about what they felt was wrong in the church and to be forthright about them, while being held by the receptivity and silence of the group. The third and fourth questions looked to the future. Each group distilled their thoughts onto flipcharts. There was time to wander to read the flipcharts and have further conversation.

Since the event the flipcharts have been collated. The web page <http://tinyurl.com/mwcbpfp> presents these.

The afternoon continued with a talk by Mark McHugh Pratt on how we can bring about change. In proposing ideas we should seek to preserve community, emphasise the positive, and be prepared to act on the ideas ourselves. We were invited to write answers, not for sharing, to two questions. If I desire real change, then:

1. What do I want to do?
2. What am I going to do?

After a plenary session that included a reminder to blow the dust off the Archdiocesan consultation "Now is the favourable time," we closed with prayer for the continuing renewal of ourselves and the church, including Ephesians 3, which is used daily by the Vigil Group members.

Themes that emerged during the day included:

- The Church, and our parish communities, give us life when they are outward looking, focused on Christ, are not individualistic, are supportive and welcoming, and are responding to local issues (often ecumenically)
- There is need for better integration of hierarchy, ordained priesthood and laity - marked by openness, by mutual encouragement and appreciation of gifts, and re-energised structures (archdiocesan assembly and parish councils with active lay participation)
- Our understanding of church is in an exciting and challenging state of flux, as we seek to better express a theology of holiness, of God in all things, of inclusion, of the Spirit active everywhere, both in and beyond the Church.
- We can make progress now, by forming more small faith communities
- Imposed strategies, in the formation of which the laity have not been adequately consulted, will inevitably fail.

The shape of the day was set to give ourselves an experience of what Church can be when we pray, trust the Spirit, trust each other, share our deepest desires, have structure that enables but does not dominate, and are willing to listen and grow. We were also being held in prayer by people not able to attend.

Comments about the day included:

- "What struck me most was how open-minded, uninhibited, and imaginative so many contributions were. To me this shows that many of the laity care deeply about the well-being and future of the Church, and are open and willing to embrace real change in how we do things in order to achieve what is truly important".
- "The discussions were inspiring and so hopeful. Lets hope they continue."

- "We came away with renewed hope for the future of our Church in our Archdiocese. It was refreshing to have the opportunity to have a free and open discussion with other Catholics and feel able to express our thoughts and have them listened to."
- "We began to realise Catholics are out there willing to participate more in the running of the Church. The argument we often hear from the clergy is that they cannot get lay people to do things. Perhaps this because in some cases the direction of the requests come from the clergy and the laity are not included in their planning and therefore do not feel included."

It is striking that what was drawing us, and what was concerning us expressed joy in the Gospel, and resonated with Pope Francis' words. At the start of the day Anne had closed her reflection with a quote from the Holy Father - this seems a good way to end this summary:

'Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment. Let us not be robbed of missionary vigour! ' (Evangelii Gaudium, para. 109)