

## **Learning from the past**

In January of this year, some seventeen months after taking up his appointment, Archbishop Cushley set in motion a process of consultation in regard to the reconfiguration of the archdiocese in the light of a falling number of priests.

However, the process of strategic planning for the future provision in the Archdiocese was well under way many years before. There will be many examples of good practice throughout the Archdiocese of parish and faith communities working towards a plan for the future.

In an attempt to encourage a gathering of information on the lessons learned over the years, I offer as an example a talk I gave in April 2006. Perhaps a group of people could be given the task of sifting through the lived experiences of the past decade and add them to the current debate and consultation process.

*I speak these words in the context of the Consultation document issued by Cardinal O'Brien.*

*He disclosed some startling facts:*

*that in less than ten years*

*the number of active Priests in the Diocese*

*will fall from 63 down to 33.*

*And yet he was not despondent.*

*He has great faith in the priests and people of the Diocese to meet this challenge.*

*Let me begin with a story*

*you have probably heard before:*

*it's the story of*

*THE GURU'S CAT*

*Each time the guru sat down*

*for worship with his students*

*the community's kitten would come in*

*and distract them;*

*so he ordered them*

*to tie it up to a hook in the wall  
while they were at prayer.  
After the guru died  
the cat, no longer a kitten,  
continued to be tied up at worship time.  
And when the cat died,  
another cat was brought into the community  
to make sure that the guru's orders  
were faithfully observed  
and the cat was tied up at worship time.  
Centuries passed and when there were no cats to be found  
anywhere on earth they fashioned a cat in precious metal.  
And they made a chain of silver  
to tie up the metal cat  
to the hook on the prayer room wall.  
And more centuries passed  
and learned treatises were written  
by the guru's scholarly disciples  
on the liturgical significance  
of tying up a cat while prayers were being said.*

*I wonder if that story rings any bells with you.....*

*The point being that the reason for tying up the cat had gone  
but the ritual was still being faithfully carried out.....*

*At this time when the energy of our diocese  
is being engaged in looking  
at the way forward as a Church,  
I thought it might be useful  
to put together a few thoughts  
and raise a few questions.*

*I want to make clear at the outset though  
that these thoughts are preliminary;  
they are not polished  
and they need to be reflected on.*

*So please don't get upset  
if you find what I have to say  
strange, unusual or difficult.  
It's always a risk to trust  
that people will accept  
unfinished and untried thoughts.  
However, I believe you are worth that risk.*

*It concerns me  
that our starting point  
always seems to be given  
as the falling number of priests  
and the agenda is driven from that point.  
Given that model of reflection,  
we will always find ourselves  
in a perennial depression  
because our starting point  
is increasingly one of diminishing possibilities.*

*I agree with the Cardinal  
that a much more positive  
and healthy starting point  
is to look at  
how we can energise and nourish  
the faith communities we have  
that we call parishes.  
All of us have our own experience in life.  
Some of that shared experience  
is that things have not always been  
the way they are now.*

*In my short life time even.....  
When I was a boy in the fifties  
there were four priests in St Columba's  
When I was ordained in the seventies  
there were four priests in Kirkcaldy  
There's only one in each place now.*

*But that's limited  
to my own personal experience and memory.  
I think we need to recognise  
that the church, as we know it now,  
in this and in the last century  
is **not** the church as it was in the beginning  
or indeed through its  
two thousand plus years of history.*

*So if you'll indulge me  
I'd like to take a wee trip through Church History:*

*I think that's necessary  
if we are to fully appreciate  
where we are now **and** where we are going.*

*After Jesus died and rose again,  
there were relatively few members  
of "the way" as it was sometimes called;  
those people who had been touched  
by the message of Jesus  
and who wanted to follow his way*

*In the early Church  
everyone had great commitment.  
They lived their faith  
by caring for  
and sharing with others.  
As time went by  
the world became more sophisticated  
and almost inevitably, less intimate  
Independence became a bigger priority*

*As people progressed in life  
they became wealthy  
and they wanted to spend more time  
relaxing and enjoying themselves.*

*They subcontracted out  
the bits of their lives that took up valuable time;  
time that they could otherwise use enjoying themselves.  
We still do that don't we  
when we use Nurseries and child minders  
and get someone to do our ironing ?*

*Like everything  
the commitment to the "way" of Jesus  
became a bit routine and familiar;  
and as usually happens  
people tended to become minimalist;  
they would do enough to tick over,  
enough to get by.*

*Up until this point  
the community had met  
in each others' homes.  
Their meeting was social and spiritual.  
The proceedings were overseen  
by an elder  
who was elected to that role.  
With the growth of the church in numbers,  
and the growing sophistication  
and therefore expectation  
of the people to have a good life,  
the priesthood emerged  
to take up the slack  
and fulfil the "duties"  
of the ordinary Christian community members.  
The locus of the gathering also changed  
from the home  
to a place apart: --- a church building.  
The priest became the go-between:  
the middle man;  
fulfilling a church member's role of service  
and in time mediating God's message back to the member.*

*You see, up until the time the priesthood emerged,  
every single member  
of the worshipping community  
was a stakeholder who  
**played an active part**  
in the life of the community.  
The poor were fed,  
the sick were visited and cared for,  
the children were looked after,  
the widows were comforted and made to feel secure;  
and all of this was done by the ordinary person.*

*So you can see  
that the emergence of the office of priest  
who took on these responsibilities for others  
was the beginning of the end  
of **active community involvement**.  
People's participation lessened.  
And of course as time passed  
the priest became very protective  
of what he came to see as "his" job.*

*In terms of the Liturgy, the Mass,  
it eventually got to the stage  
where the priest was conducting  
almost a private dialogue with God  
and people were mere spectators,  
with servers indicating the points of importance  
by ringing bells..*

*It was the same with the administration of the community.  
Things had grown considerably  
and there was seen to be a need  
for control and uniformity.  
Again that got out of hand  
and control and uniformity  
became the **end** as well as the **means**.*

*What started out  
as commitment  
by a group of individuals to a way of life  
based on a commandment of love,  
care, respect and hospitality  
has landed up as a huge, bureaucratic,  
multi-million pound,  
multi national corporation.*

*An honest look at history  
can tell us how we got here.....  
but the important question to raise is,  
how on earth are we going to reclaim our roots ?*

*There are some who would say  
that the issues of married priests  
and of women priests  
are off the agenda;  
that they have no biblical foundation.  
I wonder how they square that  
with the fact that almost certainly  
none of the “officials” of the Church  
in the early years  
were Chinese or native North American or Australian.  
Does that mean that **they** can't be priests or bishops ?  
Manifestly not.....*

*I think perhaps the best analogy I can find  
for what happens in our worship  
is to imagine an orchestra.  
Everyone in an orchestra has a vital part to play.  
Even if you are stuck with the triangle.....  
The key to success is practice.  
You need to spend hours practising your instrument.  
When you come along for a concert,  
you are guided through the performance  
by the conductor.*

*The conductor is the one who holds it all together  
getting each section of the orchestra  
to play their respective parts  
at the correct time.*

*I believe that the priest's role  
is similar to that of the conductor.*

*He is called to co-ordinate  
the ministries in the community.*

*The ministries are going on all the time  
just as practice and rehearsals  
are happening all the time.*

*The priest's role in the community  
is to coordinate the ministries.*

*I remember the late Father Eugene Walsh insist  
that if you ever want to reorder your church building  
the first thing you must do is empty it.*

*Start with a blank canvas; an empty space.*

*Then ask what is essential  
for this building to become a space for worship.*

*What is necessary is a Baptismal Font,*

*An ambo from which to proclaim the Word,*

*A table for the Breaking of the Bread;*

*and a chair for the person who presides at Eucharist.*

*That is all you **need** by way of furnishings.....*

*That's when you discover*

*that you have gathered a few guru's cats along the way.....*

*To relate that to our present quest*

*for a way forward as a church*

*I would suggest that the first question to ask is*

*What do the Catholic communities*

*In this part of Edinburgh **need***

*in order to grow as the body of Christ ?*

*I suggest that they need to gather;*

*to gather in order to celebrate;*

*Celebrate one another;  
Celebrate the faith we share;  
Celebrate the Eucharist of Jesus.  
And when we have gathered and celebrated .....  
then we must scatter.....  
scatter to become a leaven in the world we live in:  
at home, in our neighbourhood, at school,  
at work, at the bingo, in the pub and in the club.  
We are called to season our world  
with love, joy, gladness, hope.....  
we are called to season our world  
with the presence of God.*

**Only** when we are doing **that**,  
only when we live out the command of Jesus  
by caring for others,  
lending a helping hand,  
giving words of encouragement;  
**only then** are we really ready  
to come back  
to gather, to celebrate and to scatter.  
It is a never ending cycle.....  
Gathering..... to celebrate..... to be scattered.  
In gathering  
the community needs to be coordinated.  
That is where they need the presence of a priest.

*Earlier this year I predicted  
that within three years  
and very possibly within the next eighteen months  
there would be only three priests  
coordinating the seven communities  
that might form one cluster.  
St John's Portobello, St Gregory's,  
St John Vianney's, St Catherine's, St Mary Magdalene's  
St Ninian's and St Mary's Cathedral.*

*As the Consultation Document shows  
there may be a different set of parishes clustered  
but the bottom line will be the same.*

*In our Diocese most parishes  
will not have a resident priest replaced.*

*Priests will become resources  
that are shared by a number of parishes.*

*All of this change in the church in our lifetime  
finds its origin in the Second Vatican Council  
of the nineteen sixties.*

*I suspect that Pope John the Twenty Third  
must have read the story of the Guru's cat  
because he convened that Council.....  
and the church was never to be the same.*

*One of the constant sayings of the Council Fathers was  
*Ecclesia Semper Reformanda**

*The Church must always be in the business  
of reforming, renewing itself.....  
otherwise it will become redundant.*

*But let's remember that the change  
is all about going back to where we came from;  
it's about rediscovering our roots;  
putting Jesus and his way  
back into the central platform of our lives.*

*The role that **only** a priest can play  
in the life of the church  
is to preside*

- *at the Liturgy of Eucharist and*
- *at the Liturgy of Healing.*

*In the language of the past: that means  
Celebrating Mass,  
celebrating anointing and*

*celebrating forgiveness.  
That's my role as a priest.  
And only that.....*

*The rest has to become **your** business.*

*If the faith is to flourish  
and if the Catholic Christian community  
is to thrive and blossom  
in our corner of Edinburgh  
it will clearly not happen by the efforts of priests.*

*The priest will only be able  
to coordinate the talents that are present.*

*The future of the Church is literally in your hands.  
I will do all I can  
to support, encourage and resource you.*

Fast-forwarding.....  
As I write this in 2015 I can honestly say  
that as a cluster of three parishes we have travelled a long journey.  
The history of how our cluster developed can be accessed on our  
website: - [South Edinburgh Cluster History](#) click on Cluster and  
scroll down to History and Context.

We haven't got it fully right yet.  
It's a work in progress.  
And there are as many ways to cluster  
as there are groupings of parishes.  
We have done it our way and it seems to work for us.  
There may be valuable lessons for others  
who have yet to start the journey.  
It would make so much sense to pool all the experiences  
and add it to the mix of consultation.