



Esgobaeth Wrecsam + Diocese of Wrexham

Registered Charity No.700426

INTO THE FUTURE – 3

REVIEW AND UPDATE NOVEMBER 2023

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for welfare and not for evil,
to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah 29.11

Statistical Information

Every attempt has been made to maintain accuracy with the data, but due to different reporting (statistics and finance) and movement of clergy it is difficult to achieve a totally true one time snapshot.

General:

Area: 8,361 km² Largely rural

Population: <31,200 Catholics (4.1% of c.758,600 total).

Projected population decline (1.5% to 2.00 %) over the next ten years due to
i. migration to more urban areas of GB; ii. falling birth rate; iii. mortality in
above-average aged population. (21.3% of the population is 65 years and over
2021 Census)

Diocesan Structure

Parishes: 29 (30% of which regularly have a Mass attendance of fewer than
100, even between their 2 or 3 churches that can be up to 25 km apart)

Churches: 51

Since 2012 ten churches or Mass centres have been closed a further two since
COVID

Pastoral Vicariates: 4

Mass Attendance:

3,838 (average September/October 2023) (*Updated 26.xi.23)

3,868 (September October 2022)
Pre-COVID c.4,900

6,493 (September/October 2012)

Clergy

Priests (active in parish ministry):

Diocesan Priests: 12 three of whom are above retirement age

Regular Priests: 16 (of whom 2 are above retirement age 14 are from Overseas)

Deacons: 9 Active

Institutes of Men Religious

2 operating Retreat/ Spirituality houses.

1 Religious Brother

Institutes of Women Religious

1 Enclosed

9 Active. 4 communities operate retreat/guest houses

Vocations: Currently there are no candidates in the discernment or formation stages of what is now a seven to nine year vocation journey in priestly formation.

There are currently two men in formation for the permanent diaconate.

Lay Leadership: 2 men in chaplaincy roles, prison (f/t), university (f/t) and one women in pastoral associate (f/t)

Schools

Senior or High: 3 (rolls of c.550 to c.850)

Primary: 14 (on roll <60 to >300)

(Percentage of baptised Catholic children ranging from c.<30% to c.80% depending on the locality and or the year group.

For a fuller National and Diocesan picture cf. the CES Census Digest 2022

<https://catholiceducation.org.uk/images/CensusDigestWales2022EnglishText.pdf>

Review

Since the implantation of *Into the Future-2* (23rd March 2016) and the Re-structuring Plan as laid out in the *Pastoral Letter* (31st March 2016) international events have overtaken us all: the coronavirus pandemic, wars and the world's ongoing financial turmoil

My concerns lie in the viability of the Diocese in the coming five to ten years. I deal below with the three main issues: personnel, finance and property. They are not distinct and stand-alone, they are inevitable interlinked. But first they must be set in the greater context of **Population and Parishes**

The imponderables that are migration rates, new housing developments, visitor numbers, etc. cannot be counted as factors that can permanently change the size and character of local communities. The Local Development Plans (LDPs) of the Local Authorities across the Diocese have a variance of negative through to forty seven percent growth; however the age profile within that growth is as important as the global figure. A fuller analysis of the population local authority by local authority can be seen on the government website 'How the population changed where you live' based on the census 2021 figures

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/howthepopulationchangedwhereyoulivecensus2021/2022-06-28>

'The parish,' Pope Francis reminds us, is not an outdated institution precisely because it possessed great flexibility; it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.' (*Evangelii Gaudium* 23). At this time and for the foreseeable future we are all deeply aware of the need to use that 'flexibility', and with 'openness and missionary creativity' to remodel the parishes and the Diocese. Parishes and communities are to be and will of course be encouraged to be evangelising communities and as they grow I would intend to respond appropriately, similarly if they decline further. The Mass attendance figures

show a steady decrease; if that trend continues there will be little option but to re-structure again. We are well reminded by Pope Francis' message in *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), 'An evangelising community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 John 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads, and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step to become involved!' (24)

Together with the Diocesan statistical information above it makes grim reading that indicates the present arrangement of parish communities can no longer remain.

Personnel

Already it is not possible to maintain many of those structures that underpin the working of the Church. For some years there has been no Diocesan Pastoral Council, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain Vicariate Pastoral Councils and some parishes struggle to maintain a Parish Advisory Council or even mandatory Parish Finance Committees and other volunteers that are necessary for Safeguarding, good liturgy, sacramental preparation, etc.. Diocesan consultative and advisory councils/committees, e.g. Liturgy, Education and Formation, Evangelisation & Mission, Christian Unity, Youth, Family Life, Vocations Promotion struggle to get members and commonly fail to be able to recruit those with particular knowledge or expertise to direct and lead. The same can be said of the diocesan presbyterate and deaconate as well lay faithful. In some cases the personnel resources pool is so small that expertise does not exist in the Diocese.

There are those roles I understand are ideally filled by Diocesan priests that I would no longer be able to make appointment to when the present incumbent retires, become sick, or dies. The Diocesan clergy, suitable, able or willing and in good health to hold Diocesan posts is now at its limit with the few there are already having multiple roles. Accepting normal retirement age for priests, in five years time there will be just eight under 75 years.

My whole pastoral review and plan (March 2016) was with the commitment to do all that I could to uphold a Mass in each church for every Lord's Day. I would do all that I can to uphold the centrality of the celebration of the Mass in each community fifty-two weeks in the year and realised it is a balance of having sufficient number of priests and not excess number of churches. On the data and projections to 2029 I had, the plan was to have between 40 to 45 churches in about twenty parishes that could be served by no more than 25 priests the majority inevitably being from overseas. The plan to be progressively rolled out and implemented as diocesan priests retired or died. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the focus as the number of those attending Mass has dramatically declined and I believe unlikely to return to pre-COVID numbers. Currently three parishes have temporary arrangements due to no priests to appoint necessitating a more permanent re-structuring.

I am most grateful to my neighbouring archbishops, bishops and dioceses for the advice and help they are able to afford me on an as-needs-require basis as many of them are considerably physically nearer than my own Metropolitan and the urban resources of the Province that are some 280km and more away. In the past there have been various attempts at sharing personnel -clergy and lay- resources, but where there needs to be a physical presence and engagement this is just not physically or financially viable.

In the coming months I hope two communities of religious sisters will have been able to establish houses here, this will aid and develop the continuation of pastoral, catechetical and evangelisation work in a number of parishes, work which in part has not been taken up by the lay faithful, sometimes for good reason. Appropriate lay formation takes time and resources to deliver if there are suitable candidates offering themselves in the first place.

Finance.

Since 2020 considerations must now include finance. I had deliberately omitted this in my 2016 considerations, (*Into the Future*) as the intent of the plan was that it was strictly pastoral, based on human resources and catholic population. The focus has now changed.

Financially the Diocese currently has sufficient assets to continue its mission for this projected period as long as there are no unpredicted and major repair

expenses on churches or presbyteries. The schools' development programme does represent a financial challenge and threat as in Wales the Diocese is subject to a 15% of capital contribution. In the longer term, investments would no longer be able to cover such expenditure resulting in the need to sell property.

I having had two seriously contested church closures (common parlance for *reducing a church to profane but not sordid use*), one of which went to Rome on appeal. The appeal was upheld which I would not dispute, I got the process wrong. However I become increasingly cautious to make decisions that have long term consequences although I have the support and agreement of the Presbyteral Council and the Charity Trustees. Without being dramatic about it, the statistics and trends indicate a continued decline which would I presume end with the implosion of the Diocese as it is currently structured. The point will be reached where compliance with the Law (civil or charity) is no longer possible. I am of course open to all suggestions, but cannot foresee the present model of church in this Diocese surviving beyond my term as bishop, seven years all other things being equal.

Some forty-five years ago I elected to be ordained for this Diocese as it was very much perceived and understood to be the 'mission' in England and Wales and like others did not know or see at the time the direction in which that mission would go; though of course we had our hopes. It has dramatically changed and now rather like my namesake, find I am no longer able to go where I would like, but have to follow another way; that I will willingly do although I am uncertain of it, but I need some suggestion, assistance or re-assurance that it is not going to be the wrong way.

So far this year the loss of active, i.e. priests in parishes has been devastating – five in as many months, though we have gained one so far. However there are a number awaiting retirement and heroically continuing in ministry until I am able to either provide a replacement or further re-organise parishes by amalgamation. This being done is unlikely to ever be reversed. This is also were now the financial consideration kicks-in. The Diocese simply cannot afford to provide for any more priests. That was a situation I explained in greater detail at the Annual Financial Reporting meeting in October and I am not going to rehearse the situation again here other than to say that I cannot

see that under 4,000 people can sustain the current number of their parishes - with or without a resident priest- and the Diocese with an on-average £6.50 per capita per week contribution. The Levy for Diocesan Central Services is 37% of a parish's income, the shortfall being made up from diminishing investment income, building a growing annual deficit.

I entirely accept that many of the development proposals of March 2016 while optimistic on my part then, are now no longer realistic.

There are generally two different accepted criteria for classifying a parish as 'poor': i. [as defined by the Guild of Ransom] that the annual revenue income (offertory collection, G.A., etc.) amounts to less than £30,000; or ii. that the annual revenue income (offertory collection, G.A., etc.) is less than the revenue expenditure plus £5,000. By the first criteria there are currently 10 poor-parishes. On the second individual parishes would need to do their own calculation.

At this time 17 parishes have an account balance of less than £30,000

At the very heart of the Diocese's life and work is education, principally worked through our schools to which we have a considerable financial commitment. Capital projects are especially challenging as 15% of the build cost has to be paid by the Diocese, but to ignore or reject our schools is i. a betrayal of the Diocese's *raison d'être* and ii. a counter witness to what the Church means to be to the increasingly secular society in which she exists.

Property

The property portfolio of the Diocese falls into three main categories: churches and halls, presbyteries, land. In some cases the church and the presbytery have an integrity in that they are as one building with one supply of utilities, etc. in addition to being of a single architectural design and construction. Civil legislation is becoming more demanding regarding empty properties, the ability to let them or use them for alternative purposes; to sell them at Charity valuation prices; residential properties cannot be left empty without significant costs; detaching presbyteries from churches is itself an expensive action to take. And currently CADW are looking to list a further seven number of churches in the Diocese, about which there is little the Diocese can do; it has

the immediate consequence that repair and maintenance costs rise as surveys, plans and the work itself have to be done by conservation qualified architects and building contractors. Where it is possible and expedient unused residential property that does not have a foreseeable future use to the Diocese needs to be disposed of.

Generally the chances of getting grant funding becomes more and more difficult and is still only a percentage of the total costs.

Ways forward

As was restated at the Clergy Finance meeting on 17th October and was hailed as being the principle priority to the whole Diocese and acknowledged by those present to be the case, the changes that need to be made must be driven by pastoral concern and care of all and that that would involve some hardship and change particularly to those in the East of the Diocese as those in the West had already experienced such change and little more could be done there if the Catholic Church as an institution is to retain a presence - identifiable community, or building, or priest/deacon/religious. As I have previously proposed we ask ourselves, 'What must I do to enable some other person or family to get to Mass?'

I remain committed to the position that where there is a church weekly celebration of Mass is to be retained, but the luxury of a choice of churches (with or without a resident priest) within three to five miles can no longer be the expectation. The Church of which we are part is a Eucharistic community and the continued celebration of the Eucharist is paramount. This means: i. that again I appeal that parish communities that can be accommodated in two not three, or one not two Masses should do so. If this is not voluntarily arranged, I will have to direct it; ii. that having been done, one priest will be able to take on responsibility for two (or more) parishes communities thereby enabling communities to remain Eucharistic and with the focal point of their church, all other considerations being taken into account; iii. amalgamation of Parishes is far preferable to the closure (*reducing a church to profane but not sordid use*) of churches.

Secondly priests and deacons must actively encourage lay involvement and lay ministry whether it is formally commissioned by the Church or is undertaken in the current way. Either way, appropriate formation following selection and assessment, and an appointment process is essential. Adult faith formation is essential.

Thirdly, where necessary and other circumstances permitting, churches may be formally closed (*reduced to profane but not sordid use*) and the property sold. For this to happen the correct process has to be meticulously followed and is specific to each particular circumstance; it cannot be generic. For that reason I cannot specify it here.

There must be resolution of the situation regarding the church in Conway

Fourthly, since March 2016 a number of elements of re-structuring have been effected in addition to a number of church closures. The following parishes/communities have been amalgamated:

Overton with S.Annes (Wrexham); Bangor and Caernarfon; Old Colwyn and Colwyn Bay; Saltney and Hawarden; Ruthin, Denbigh and S. Asaph; Prestatyn and Rhuddlan.

Fifthly, exiting proposals: That at the appropriate time Buckley and Mold be amalgamated; thought be given to the use of the church in Newtown due to its general state of (structural) deterioration. For the latter alternatives to the existing model are to be explored including, a sharing arrangement with another denomination or the use of the parish primary school as a parish community hub. Either or other possibilities on a temporary or semi-permanent footing.

Sixthly, further re-structuring: The creation of a single parish of Merionethshire of Machynlleth and Tywyn, Barmouth and Harlech, Dolgellau and Bala, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Gellilydan, and Dolgellau Carmel; the union of Flint and Connah's Quay; Queensferry to be united with Saltney and Hawarden

The resulting new parishes or pastoral territories will in some case be large tracts of land with still a very small Catholic population and a different kind of

ministry will be required of priests, deacons and lay people. For this we have no recent experience upon which to draw and therefore considerable good will and patience and a preparedness to make things work will be required from people and clergy alike. Parishes which have been restructured will have to learn and build a new identity as they double in territorial size from what they were before. Priests will have to think of their parishes as being in two or three centers not just the one they were accustomed to with its smaller satellite villages or towns.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages his readers in the same challenge, 'Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.' (Hebrews 10:23-25 ESV)

The working details of parishes, Finance Committees (Can.537), Pastoral Councils (Can.536) is to be established at that level, but they are to be for the parish not for parts thereof; remembering all the while that the faithful have the right and duty to do what they can to spread the message of salvation, and to make known to their pastors their views on matters pertaining to the good of the Church. They are consultative and advisory, but parish priests are reminded that in some matters the law requires that consultation.

Endnote

Our urgent and immediate discussions cannot be had except in the spirit and wake of the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops -Communion, Participation, Mission- which began with an extended prayer – a spiritual retreat for the participants in which Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP gave six meditations, the titles of and a summary of which I give here as they serve as a reference point for our listening, discussing and expression of a way forward in faith.

First: 'Hoping against hope.' Asking God to free our hearts from fear – the fear of change, the fear that nothing will change. Asking God that we be united in hope and that hope transcends our disagreements.

Second: 'At home in God and God at home in us.' God has come to us and remains among us despite all our weaknesses, wrongs and limitations. We need the Church with its Spirit-filled life giving promise.

Third: 'Friendship based on truth.' Our listening and sharing will be fruitful if it leads us into a deeper friendship with the Lord and each other, based on an honesty about our doubts, and our questions to which there may be no clear answers.

Fourth: 'Conversation and Listening.' As with the Disciples on the road to Emmaus, showing an openness to different viewpoints and backgrounds that lead to new friendship, authentic conversation, and conversion.

Fifth: 'Authority.' Each of us speaks with the authority of having been baptised into Christ. This breeds joy, joy that stems from beauty, goodness and truth.

Sixth: 'The Spirit of Truth.' Guided by the Spirit of truth we will surely argue, sometimes that will be painful, sometimes having to face truths we would rather not, but always in the knowledge we are being led a little deeper into the mystery of divine love; what joy that will be for us and inspiration for others.

For reports of and reflections on the Synod proceedings in full and summary please look to the various websites:

<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/synod>

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/events/synod2023.html#2>

<https://www.synod.va/en/news.html>

11th November 2023