

## Aghalurcher Parish Pastoral Council

2 July 2022

Dear Canon Jimmy

Thank you for the invitation to meet with past and present members of the PPC on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

It can be intimidating to walk into a room of people you have not met before and to be the odd one out. I can honestly say that I received a warm and gentle welcome from each person present. A welcome that made me quickly feel at home.

Participating in an afternoon like we shared can be daunting for everyone. However, there was a level of trust within the group and a level of commitment to the Parish that allowed everyone to participate fully.

For myself, it was a privilege to facilitate the afternoon of review and honest reflection and I want to thank each and every one I met who made the afternoon go so smoothly and who ultimately provided all the information that is presented in the following pages.

As facilitator of the process, I have drawn together the contributions to the many conversations of the afternoon. I trust that it is fair and accurate and will be seen such. I hope that the PPC will be able to use the vision clarified in discussion, welcome their gifts and talents, grasp the opportunities and together face the challenges presented being a 'parishioner' member of the Catholic Church in Lisnaskea and Maguiresbridge and in Ireland in 2022.

Yours sincerely

*John Bennett*

## The Parish Pastoral Council

The PPC met on 19 June 2022 in the Parish Centre to both review and look forward. The PPC comes together as a gathering of individuals who are of the people and place that is Lisnaskea and Maguiresbridge. The bonds and connections with the Catholic Parish and wider community are deep and were very evident as each person spoke. Their individual and collective desire for the good of the people and place is at the heart of their willingness to give of their time, talents, faith and experience to the PPC, and other activities in the area also.

As a Faith based group the PPC recognise and acknowledge what has been passed down to them through generations, that contributes to them being who they are today; they want to see the essence of that faith cherished in the present and passed on to the generations following.

Made up of individuals, the PPC is a diverse group that because of age, range of lived experience, and family histories, among many other things, is a group of people who have differing relationships with the Church and their Faith, and consequently will have conflicting views and ideas about what is important, where the emphasis for action should be and how they might like to see the parish thrive.

While diversity can be a source of disharmony it doesn't have to be, so the challenge is to accept the difference, difference that is itself a genuine reflection of the parish community, and to use it for the good of the Parish of Aghalurcher.

Early during our meeting those present identified something of what they believe they bring to this group: youthfulness, a connection with young people and the world of young people, an understanding of the needs of young people, older age and the lived experience that that affords, an understanding of the world of an older generation that have lived through so much change, an interest and care for the place and it's people, a connection to traditional faith, being a 'worker', being born into a family of deep faith, 'newness' (to the group), experience of places without the sense of community we know, desire for inclusiveness.

In the diversity is the richness.

## Mission and Vision

Recognising that the vision the group holds comes from what it understands as its mission, we spent some time looking at how the group understands that mission, asking what its purpose is, what is its reason for being?

Throughout the group's reflection on its mission and vision during the afternoon, a dominant theme was evident; the experience of being part of a changing church and world and parish, something that may have become more noticeable during the experience of the pandemic. Experience of change can and does stir up a broad range of emotions including sadness, nostalgia, grief, fear, anger, joy, or hope, and some of these could be heard as a background to the discussion as we met. The emotions felt are deeply personal to the individual and again are influenced by age, experience etc. While the emotions in themselves are not something right or wrong, they can at times be uncomfortable and can be experienced as a threat or criticism by others.

Change can be viewed simply from a perspective of looking back at what Church was and what is now felt as loss by some. That might simply be looking back to how things were immediately prior to the pandemic or how things were 30, 40 or more years ago. It can equally be viewed simply from a perspective of looking forward; at what Church might be. Yet to simply hold just one perspective is to live in the future or in the past, that is in either a time that is gone or a time that has not arrived. Neither is the present. However, it is in the present that the Parish Pastoral Council exists.

If we accept that we are living in a changing church, that the reality of change is our 'present', we have somehow to acknowledge and accept the often deep and at times uncomfortable emotions that are stirred up within us by change and the common human tendency to resist it.

As a faith-based group who do care for their parish, there is a challenge to each individual when noticing the emotion that is attached to views of fellow pastoral team members, the challenge is to 'listen to understand' as opposed to 'listening to interrupt'. Noticing and being curious about the ideas of each other, in contrast to the more common human tendency of waiting for a pause where I can interrupt with my view.

If we pause to consider it, it's more than likely the case that the differing views, differing emotions, differing lived experiences and the differing responses to change, are indeed a true reflection of the whole parish community and thus the PPC is a true representation of the whole parish community.

*"Catholics must not be afraid of change.....however, people need to discern whether new thinking is from God" Pope Francis, 2018*

Acknowledging being in the midst of this change the group spoke feelingly of a sense of responsibility towards Faith, the Parish and a collective / shared responsibility or ownership of life of the parish. Specific reasons to be an active member of the Parish and the Pastoral Council included:

- To pass on the faith.
- Keep the parish moving forward – to prevent any slide backward
- To create a vibrant Christian community, based on the Catholic ethos
- Having a collective say in how / what is planned and delivered
- To refresh traditional ways
- To share a collective task; not just to be leaving things to the Priest
- Grow involvement of more people – we are the Church
- Promoting ecumenical changes
- Helping to create a church that people want to go to / to belong to
- To strengthen Priest and people working together for the better of the community
- To grow connection between the community and the Church
- Adapting to a changing Church and world
- To make our church more inclusive, regardless of ... (whatever)
- To make the major religious ceremonies more relevant and up-to-date for our younger people
- To represent the opinions of the entire community
- To lead by positive example

- Ensuring faith is alive for the future generations
  - Fearing loss of traditions
  - Adapt but keep the spirituality
- Proactive in meeting community needs
  - Building a supportive community
  - Listening / 'lean in' to new ways of communicating

## VISION

In contrast to the mission, the vision is more descriptive and visual. It creates a picture of where the parish aspires to be. It allows for a sense of 'not being there yet' or 'not having arrived'. The PPC are trusted to 'hold' the vision, though they themselves do not necessarily have to be the ones to implement it through every specific action. The Vision will be kept alive as it adapts in response to the environment, some of which will be welcome and some unwelcome eg, previous achievements; external reorganisation of parish structures; unexpected events (pandemic); Church & Diocesan guidance etc.

Using words that evoked a feeling of what that might be, the PPC articulated their vision drawn together in the following:

*Our Vision is for Aghalurcher Parish to be one where*

- *There is a feeling of celebration, of community and joy*
- *There is a feeling of genuine welcome where all parishioners feel included equally*
- *There is a valuing and respect of the elders, an active reaching out to the young and a genuine visible care for the vulnerable.*

Repeatedly, the experience of the Family Fun Day and the Children's Liturgy were spoken about as examples of extremely positive implementations of the vision. Among the many other practical ways to live the vision included reaching out and connecting with other existing groups in the community, revisiting and refreshing Church Services, strengthening connection with schools and the ongoing preparation for the Mission.

## Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats

A final exercise of the afternoon looked at the what the Pastoral Council recognises as their strengths and weaknesses as a group. This was an honest self-evaluation that acknowledged significant gifts and talents among the group that are put at the service of implementing their vision.

The dominant recurring theme among the weaknesses is the possible over reliance on the Parish Priest to be the leader, to have the responsibility for ideas and to be the one to 'make change happen'. The role and place of the Parish Priest within the PPC and the Parish was throughout the day seen to be understood and Fr Jimmy as the current PP a greatly appreciated and valued member of the Parish and the PPC. However, it might sometimes seem unfair that some responsibilities that could be shared were too quickly passed on to him.

Another issue raised was general awareness and visibility of the PPC. This was seen to be linked with communications, particularly inward from the wider community to the PPC.

Addressing the opportunities allowed the group to name and voice the positive that is already there waiting to be built on and further developed alongside opportunities that need to be approached with new eyes, an open mind and an open heart and in this regard young people were mentioned frequently.

Paying attention to real or perceived threats to the Parish or to the Pastoral Team clearly raises fears, just as threat raises fear in any life situation. And we can suppose that the same perceived threats and fears shared during the gathering are reflected among the whole parish community. Among those highlighted was that of external decisions that can be made over which the local community have little influence, in particular the potential for a change of Parish Priest, of Canon Jimmy and the implications in that situation in addition to the smaller number of priests to serve parishes.

The complete list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified by the group is follows.

## **Strengths**

Strong team players

- Good communication

- Very enthusiastic and willing

Achieve goals set

Co-operative for the good of the community

Practical and proactive

- Involve new people

Committed and hard working

Adapted to change as and when

- Eg. Covid: adopting practices and processes

Group working as a unit for an agreed purpose. Having the same agreed purpose is essential. If not this could turn into a weakness.

Diverse team

Same outcomes wanted by everyone

Regular meetings and access to minutes

Talents and skills

Two parish Churches together

Similar mindset with a common purpose

Broad variety of skill sets

Have links back to many other important organisations in the parish

Togetherness

The Pastoral Team is helping to bring the two ends of the parish together

Parishioners are providing 'honest' feedback to members of the Pastoral Team

Synergy of purpose and vision

Positive about the future

Established group – evolved and evolving



## **WEAKNESSES**

Haven't taken ownership

rely too much on Parish Priest guidance, need to lead the meetings more

Difficult to get volunteers so end up 'doing' what's needed ourselves – not our goal

Reluctance to voice opinions at times

Trying to find a balance of change – older people can be less receptive but change needs to happen.  
How do we go about that?

Everyone pulls the same weight on the team, not just left to the same people

Everyone's opinions taken into consideration – no decision made until everyone voices their thoughts

Can the team carry on the vision with potential future change?

Possibly too dependent on direction from the clergy

Not enough direct links to other important groups in the parish

Similarity of profile of members

Lack of diversity; not representative of the wider community

Need to identify skills we are missing

Action: Audit of skills and talents within our parish

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

Build on connections already established and continue to grow them

Eg Children's Liturgy: youth involvement

Our skill set as a team is an opportunity to develop and promote our purpose

Strengthen the team

Communication from team to parishioners in a more informal way

Community groups

Family fun day – annual event

Mission

NET Team

Children's Masses / Liturgy

Youth involvement – see schools

Get younger people involved

Get involvement from local clubs/groups that already exist

More focus on 'celebration', less on 'obligation'

To pass the faith on to the next generation

Keep focusing on children / youth

Involvement of more people / different people

Build on success

Family Day

Children's Mass

Stewards – pandemic

To plan for a changing church; build resilience

## **THREATS**

Criticism

Lack of faith

No involvement of the next generation

Future of the Church

Number of priests – (and when there is none)

Reduction of Masses

Change of Priest

Overpowering thoughts and views

Not everyone being on the same wavelength

Not having enough future members / representatives from both Churches

Apathy

Too much negativity

Lack of willing volunteers to 'row in' behind the main team

No Priest, no figurehead

Parish without a Priest and potential for disintegration of the Pastoral Team

Loss of youth into the future