

### Lancaster Clergy 3

Intro – not expert etc. Trying to make us approach the present moment in a **positive** manner

Short presentation obviously means can be as full as I might like and take a certain amount for granted.

Let's set the scene with a little “compare and contrast” between our 2 dioceses

|                             | 1994   | 2007   | 2012 | 2020  |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|------|-------|
| <b>Lancaster Attendance</b> | 38,000 | 23,900 |      |       |
| <b>Leeds Attendance</b>     | 53,864 | 37,000 |      |       |
| <b>Lancaster Priests</b>    |        | 109    | 70   | 50/60 |
| <b>Leeds Priests</b>        |        | 123    | 95   | 75    |

In Lancaster the Bishop has suggested that people should be brought together in groups of c. 400 which assumes you will have nearer 60 priests in 2020; in Leeds our ratio is 1:500 (which Lancaster will be if you only have 50 priests in 2020).

**This is still a most generous provision.**

We are both experiencing very similar, massive change but we are addressing it in slightly different ways. In Leeds we have two processes, not one, going on: We have separated our approach to renewal and mission and this is covered by our “Come & See” process and our re-structuring process through our “Providing Priests for the People” process. In Lancaster you appear to be addressing the two through the same process.

In Lancaster you have identified the loss of laity as the burning and urgent issue to address in a way that we in Leeds has not. That is reflected in the title “Fit for Mission?” There are 2 parts to that title: firstly, it tells you what you are about; and secondly, it questions whether you are well placed to set about it.

In Leeds we are seeking to adjust our structures to withdraw from maintenance and lay the foundations for a missionary future which, probably short sightedly, we don't yet see as so urgently upon us.

Also In Lancaster you are seeking to take the whole diocese along at the same pace whereas, in Leeds having launched the diocesan project in 2004 setting out our challenges and criteria for change, we are presently moving round the diocese area by area and concentrating our detailed restructuring according to the criteria laid out in one place at a time. Firstly, Bradford, then the Huddersfield area, then Wakefield & Pontefract areas and from September the Leeds

conurbation. This enables us to conduct a lengthy and detailed consultation in each area before the Bishop brings forward a pastoral plan which is then implemented step by step.

I am also conscious that Lancaster is very much more a rural diocese than the Diocese of Leeds whose heartland is to be found either side of the M62 corridor. This is bound to effect the structures and, possibly, lead to a higher degree of priestly isolation in Lancaster.

In *Fit for Mission?* Bishop Patrick is being far more upfront in regard to the burden of property than we are in Leeds<sup>1</sup>. Certainly in Leeds we have enormous property problems and we are indeed seeking to address those issues. However we have been determined that our decisions are pastorally and not financially led and so have sought to keep arguments away from the condition of buildings or the financial liabilities of particular places. We still get accused of “this being about finance” but we have managed to keep such accusations to a minimum and, indeed, we have closed a number of challenging places with little fuss.

Just sticking with the fabric - how is it we find ourselves where we are today? Both our dioceses bring forward a proud history reflected in our buildings. I suspect that we both have our fair share of our large Victorian/Edwardian buildings in the industrial towns of the north which were once surrounded by dense terraces of back to back, one up – one down houses where beds were shared, the loo might be at the end of the terrace, kids played in the street and occasionally the people went to the public bath house to scrub up. Many of these houses were populated by working class, often immigrant, Catholics who poured in their hundreds into those large churches which dominated their neighbourhoods. And these churches are now victims of a world that does not stand still. Post war, new housing estates sprung up, with more than one bedroom, nice kitchens, gardens, fields and play areas for the kids and – perish the thought –indoor toilets and bathrooms (well in Yorkshire you had to have somewhere to keep the coal!). And, we built churches alongside them so it's hardly surprising the people moved away from the big Victorian/Edwardian churches. Of course, their generosity moved with and, because in our own system parishes had to stand financially on their own 2 feet successive parish priests didn't have the income to keep up with the repairs. In the case of Leeds, Bishops Konstant and Roche may have pronounced sentence of closure on a number of these buildings but the decision has been taking itself over the last 50 – 60 years.

Of course in the 50's there were an exceptional number of priests and building was reasonably cheap and so we in Leeds – probably yourselves in Lancaster, did 2 things which have now become challenging:

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<sup>1</sup> The third criterion in assessing the vitality of a community is identified as “Sustainability” (*Fit for Mission* p.17 the other 2 being “Sacramental” and “Mission”) and Section 3 of *Fit for Mission* puts buildings themselves into the frame for consideration in a way we haven't in Leeds.

1. we over localized creating far too many parishes, many of which now provide for small numbers
2. and we trebled the property portfolio as every parish aspired to its own church, presbytery, hall, school and possibly convent

I'm afraid, I don't have time to explore today why church going and vocations are down but changed circumstances (which are reflected in the table I first presented) mean that we have to address these two things which people have come to regard as the norm, that it's always been like that, but in our post reformation history that has not always been so. If I might for a moment read from the history of my own home parish

"When the Irish first established themselves in the town they had, of course, no church. They were in the habit of walking to Wakefield or Leeds on a Sunday to hear Holy Mass (and often got stoned on the way, for their pains, by the hooligan elements of the district). Eventually, it became customary for a priest to ride over from Bradford on horseback to minister to the people. But in 1853 there arrived in Batley the man who was to lay the foundations of a thriving parish. He was Rev. Canon James Wells, who came from the parish of Mossley, and performed his first baptism in Batley on 21 December of that year" (St. Mary's Batley 1953- 2003)

I said a few moments ago that many of the Victorian/Edwardian churches had become victims of a world that does not stand still. This is also true of all our structures. What we put in place 100 years ago, or 50 years ago may well have met the needs of their day but these structures are unlikely to meet the needs of our modern world and we would be wrong to canonize the structures of the 50's or 60's. Unfortunately we are not now in the business of adding things and building the property empire which possibly had a tremendous "*feel good*" factor at the time. We don't have the clerical and religious resources of the 50's and 60's and, if we had, one could muse whether they would serve the church well. The temptation to "*feel bad*" at this time is all around us. Some of the language around at the moment does not help – *retreat, decline, crisis*. These are very negative words likely to sap the energy from us rather than the more positive scriptural language of mission.

"Let us go elsewhere to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because that is why I came" (Mk. 1: 38)

"The harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers to do his harvesting" (Lk. 10:2)

"Well, I tell you, look around you, look at the fields, already they are white, ready for harvest!" (Jn. 3:35)

Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, until the end of time." (Matt 28: 19-20)

We live in a very different world to our predecessors and this requires very different approaches to mission. And so the word "Fit" for mission is a good word. How far are we trying to keep the approach of a previous generation going rather than engage with a very different world.

Over the recent years I have been involved in this I really have come to see the process as one in which the Church has become obese – we have put on far too much weight and we are simply coming back into good health. Moving away from the gym into the garden, another way of looking at it is that we became very overgrown and we need to do some pruning. (echos here of John 15:2 "every branch that does bear fruit [the Father] prunes to make it bear even more") And just as shedding the extra stones or cutting back the overgrowth can led to a new lease of life so I believe that a healthier Church coming out of the pastoral process will also experience new life. It's possible, taking our cue from the Prophets and the Psalms, God may be reducing us to a remnant, or taking us back to the desert or to exile in Babylon; this may be a time of cleansing and purification. When we are in the middle of something like this it is difficult to discern. However, we know God to be faithful and He works out his purposes and, as men of faith we should see our present time is a *kairos* moment, a moment of grace for God's church.

Jesus has entrusted his Church to the Bishops of the day and to their co-workers the priests (and deacons) in the same way he entrusted his Church to the Aidan's, Cuthbert's, & Augustines who first spread the faith in these isles around the start of the 7<sup>th</sup>. century; in the same way he entrusted his Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries to the John Fishers & Thomas Mores, and more locally Blessed Edward Bamber (1600-1646), Blessed John Woodcock (1603-1646) & Blessed Thomas Whittaker (1611-1646). Jesus has entrusted his Church to the Bishops and their co-workers of the day just as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries he entrusted it to the priests who struggled to provide schools and churches and practical assistance to new waves of impoverished immigrants arriving into new industrial areas. All these people came to the fore to address the missionary challenges of their day – and it cost them dearly. So it must be with us.

The way we respond to the present moment can either inject new life into the Church or sap life from it. Doing nothing, hoping that this will all go away or thinking it is some-else's problem aren't really worthy responses.

So what is being asked of us priests, co-workers with the Order of Bishops on whose shoulders the responsibility for this largely falls?

"As they travelled along they met a man on the road who said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus answered, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head." Another to whom he said, "Follow me" replied, "Let me go and bury my father first." But he answered, "Leave the dead to bury their dead, your duty is to go and spread the news of the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, sir, but first let me go and say good-bye to my people at home." Jesus said to him, "Once the hand is laid to the plough, no-one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9: 57-62)

In many ways I see this passage as a real challenge to our comfort zone.

1. the Son of Man has no where to lay his head "I like the town I work in, I've spent a number of years getting to know the people and I've got them well organized, I've a nice little billet, with a nice double bed to lay my head and an exclusive en suite facility, I get good Christmas & Easter offerings, I couldn't cope with the upheaval involved in a move and so I don't really want to think about starting somewhere else all over again"
2. Leave the dead to bury their dead If this was Leeds there would probably a good half dozen funerals today which couldn't possible have been scheduled for any other day – and some of which were probably fixed 6-8 weeks ago!

Yes the process of pastoral planning and making changes is wearing, pressured and time consuming and through it all we do have to keep the normal rounds of visiting the sick, taking funerals, the sacramental programmes, schools etc. on the road. If I might use an analogy from our modern consumer world: we shouldn't just be in the store serving on the counters or the check outs but we should be "out there" letting people know what is in the store and seeking to attract them in. Surely we priests signed up to be more than shelf stackers and till boys. But too often that is what we are. To use that hackneyed cliché: mission or maintenance?

However, long ago it is, something stirred within us which caused us to give our lives to Christ and his missionary church. We discerned a vocation and responded generously. It is inevitable that our energy levels decline as life slips by – that's fair enough. However, I am very disturbed when I detect that the enthusiasm and the generosity of priests also decline. A couple of examples from across the Pennines

- Reluctance to take a turn on the hospital bleep/out of hours cover (Matt 25)
- Wanting a “nice” parish

We may feel we have done our bit, laboured long enough, we’re on the last lap or we may think that we might be dead and gone by the time things get really tough. However God may be asking more of us.

“The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation.' ...So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. **Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran.** Abram took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions he had amassed and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set off for the land of Canaan, and arrived there.” (Gen 12:1-5)

Gen 17:1 tells us that Abram **was 99 years old** when the Lord established his covenant with him, changed his name to Abraham, instituted circumcision as the sign of the covenant, promised him that his wife Sarai would have child, and changed her name to Sarah. Gen 17: 17 records Sarah’s age to be 90. And Gen 18:11 underlines it: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well on in years, and Sarah had ceased to have her monthly periods.” Gen 21:5 tells us that Abraham **was 100 years** old when Isaac was born.

Perhaps Abraham suffered from high blood pressure or was tortured with arthritis. He may have thought he had done enough and it was time to sit back and enjoy “the possessions he had amassed” He may have felt overwhelmed .by the incredulity of it all – childless, past child bearing age and his descendants were to be as many as the dust on the ground and the stars in the heavens. But he put his faith in the Lord and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (15:6)

Or another apposite passage.

“Which of you, with a servant ploughing or minding sheep, would say to him when he returned from the fields, 'Come and have your meal at once'? Would he not be more likely to say, 'Get my supper ready; fasten your belt and wait on me while I eat and drink. You yourself can eat and drink afterwards? Must he be grateful to the servant for doing what he was told? So with you when you have done all you have been told to do, say, 'We are useless servants: we have done no more than our duty'” (Luke 17: 7-10)

So what’s being asked of us: firstly, enthusiasm generosity, commitment. A readiness to see this as our challenge as those 7<sup>th</sup>. century missionary saints saw evangelization as their challenge, as those 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>. century reformation

martyrs saw keeping the catholic faith alive even at the cost of their lives as their challenge and as 19<sup>th</sup>. century priests saw building schools and churches as their challenge. **Attached** not **detached** or **semi detached** co-workers of the Order of Bishops

Secondly, what's being asked of us? I detect that even amongst those priests ready and willing to address the present challenges there is a sense that we are ill equipped and ill prepared; we were trained for a different era and for ministry in a different Church and world; we don't know how to set about the task. I suspect that for many years as priests we've relied on "*Ecclesia supplet*" rather than in service training and, as Bishop Wheeler of Leeds was fond of saying "*grace of state*" rather than induction and initiation training for new ministries. As a profession our approach to maintaining our skills and keeping up to date is impoverished: many, if not most of us, will have done little of consequence since our seminary days. We need to identify training needs and take time out for that training.

Thirdly, we need to address the human aspects of our personalities, dispositions, and characters which can hinder our renewal and sap our enthusiasm for what is being asked of us: Generally, we like to be popular and enjoy the people's affections. It's not comfortable being "piggy in the middle" between those people who want to take our parish away and our own parishioners who expect of us an unfailing readiness to fight their cause. Or it is uncomfortable caught between rival groups of parishioners who are been brought together most unwillingly and who don't want to face up to change. It is also hard to cope with confrontation, anger, hurt, at times nastiness, the continuous tension which can accompany any change. Some of our people may be Catholic to their core but they are not always Christian. We have to learn to have confidence in ourselves, in the decisions being taken in this important moment. We have to learn not to take the anger and hurt as a personal slight or condemnation. We have to learn how to draw people out of their limited grasp to see the bigger picture. At times we will need to thicken skinned, to brave the icy blast and ride the storm. But isn't that precisely what those mentioned earlier - the missionary saints, the reformation martyrs, the ones largely responsible for our present day structures – isn't that precisely what they did? Oh, and isn't that precisely what the Lord and his apostles did?

A quick skip through some of the things that have happened on our side of the Pennines might help to illustrate some of the ways we can fall down or be found wanting:

|                        |                                   |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Abdication             | Bradford<br>Huddersfield          |
| Courting Popularity    | Leeds<br>Bradford<br>Huddersfield |
| Holding out false hope | Bradford                          |

## Ackworth

I've been asked to offer a few words about how in Leeds we have coped with resistance to change. Well, it certainly hasn't gone away all together but I would offer the following as important in minimizing resistance:

1. An even handed approach dealing with people equitably and fairly so that people don't feel picked off or badly done by
2. Good advocacy and presentation of proposals and rationale; it is worth spending on good presentational materials like DVDs etc
3. A readiness to listen and ameliorate or improve a proposal
4. A readiness to grapple with the concept of "community"

It is very challenging to hear heart felt pleas of "you are destroying our community". In Leeds we have not got to the stage whereby we will have priest-less Sundays and, for Catholics, the Eucharist must be at the heart of our Sunday. We have to be brutally honest that we cannot maintain the provision of a previous generation. The destruction of our community is often advanced as a reason for doing nothing. It's often nimby-ism (*something has to happen but not to us*). I think that in this country we priests are in danger of lavishing so much of our energy and resources on preserving Sunday gatherings of whatever size and at all costs that we fail to see more effective ways of proclaiming the Gospel and ministering effectively to all our people, active or resting. We're back to the mission or maintenance question again