

Pastoral Letter: Families of Parishes: Wigan and Leigh Deanery.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus,

We are all aware that the number of priests serving within our diocese is falling – in 15 years' time we expect there to be roughly one third of the present number of priests serving within the diocese. One of the six visions of The Pastoral Plan of 2021, that came out of the Synod, was the sharing of our parish resources to better serve the Church's mission of spreading the Gospel. One way to do this is to be bold and creative in how we use our parish structures and administer our property to serve the Church's mission. A second vision is to care for our priests whilst a third is to honour the vocation of all the baptised.

The Archbishop has encouraged each deanery to create **Families of Parishes**. A Family of Parishes will include a number of parishes which will work closely together to use their combined resources for evangelisation and mission. Deciding on which parishes can work together has been a long process. For more than 12 months, priests, deacons and members of the Deanery Synodal Council (DSC), comprising representatives from each parish in the Wigan and Leigh Deanery, have worked together to identify which parishes can best support each other. Considerations have been given to, inter alia,

- The number and demographics of **parishioners**, including their volunteering activities
- the state of **buildings**, e.g., long term viability, capacity and running costs, the geographical position and transport links.
- **Personnel**: Priests, Deacons, Pastoral workers and Administrative staff
- **Financial viability**
- **Engagement** for example with the local schools, nursing homes, hospitals, non-Catholic churches, community etc.

At the end of February 2024, the clergy and DSC submitted proposals for families of parishes to the Archdiocese. It is proposed that the Wigan and Leigh Deanery will comprise the following 4 families of parishes:

- **Family 1: covering the whole of Wigan**
St. William (St. John's and St. Patrick's churches), **St. Mary**, **St. Edward the Confessor** (St. Cuthbert's and Sacred Heart churches), **St. Jude**, **St. Aidan**.
- **Family 2: covering Ashton-in-Makerfield and Platt Bridge**
St Oswald & St. Edmund Arrowsmith, **Our Lady Immaculate**, **St. Wilfrid**, **Holy Family**
- **Family 3: covering Leigh, Golborne, Lowton and Croft**
St. Edmund Arrowsmith (St. Joseph's and Sacred Heart Leigh churches), **St. Catherine and All Saints**, **St. Lewis**.
- **Family 4: covering Hindley, Hindley Green, Atherton, Boothstown and Astley**
St. Benedict, **St. John Rigby** (Sacred Heart Hindley Green and St. Richard's churches), **St. Margaret Clitherow** (St. Ambrose Barlow and Holy Family churches).

Do allow your own clergy and DSC reps. to provide you with a more detailed understanding of why your parish is in a particular family and what this may mean going forward.

Over the coming months, these proposals will form the basis of our ongoing work within the Deanery. The clergy and DSC will continue to work together to identify, in greater detail, activities which may be shared within the families e.g. catechesis, training, S.V.P., foodbank, social activities etc. They will also try to identify structures which can be shared e.g. meeting rooms and parish halls and those which are no longer in use, or which are not financially viable, e.g. land and buildings which may be sold/rented/hired. Ideally, we may be able to employ a Pastoral Assistant to be used across each family. They would assist in the work of the Families of Parishes by carrying out activities currently being performed by the clergy.

What we have to say is, this is a starting point. As we are heading into new and unfamiliar territory, we may be at times a little unsure as how to proceed. It may mean getting things right only after heading first down the wrong path; it may mean that we discover that a particular parish and its people would be better served as part of another family. What we do hope to achieve is a new way of working that will continue to serve the needs of all our parishioners and ensure our clergy do not have an excessive workload.

As we move forward, we encourage you to keep this work of the Families of Parishes in your prayers and welcome the change that will occur as we try to work more closely together. Please feel free to discuss any queries with your parish priest or DSC representative.

Linda Morris, Chair of Wigan and Leigh DSC
Fr. Gordon Abbs, Dean