

Our Lady and St Cuthbert Church, Prudhoe

Response to Ovingham Partnership Consultation Meeting 3 May 2024. Present 18 Parishioners.

It has been proposed by the Partnership Development Group that we prepare for the future based on forming two new parishes, each served by one priest, from the following groupings of parishes:

Tyne Valley Crawcrook, Prudhoe and Stella parishes.

Derwent Valley Blaydon, Chopwell, Highfield and Winlaton.

1. The meeting considered that we are here discussing nothing less than the future of the Catholic Faith in our part of the Tyne Valley: it is that important and should be treated as such. This being the case, simple binary questions are not useful.

2. The meeting agreed on the need for radical change to the Partnership, its structure and operation. In Prudhoe this had been long obvious, and publicly expressed by Parish members, pre-Forward in Faith and pre-Covid, but NOT addressed.

3. There has been a significant drop in church attendance post-Covid (exacerbated by, but not primarily caused by it), with an ageing profile of clergy and laity likely to accelerate over the next 2 years: we cannot afford to prevaricate and temporise in the face of the inevitable as we have in the past.

4. We [parishes, partnership and Diocese] are now faced with the need for urgent action, because of inaction and lack of foresight over more than a decade.

Parishes, partnership and Diocese must now learn the lessons of the past and make decisions without delay, but openly, objectively and with integrity.

5. The first consideration that **must** be applied is the relevant statistics of each of the churches involved:

- seating capacity of each church
- lay population of each church

- lay attendance at weekend and daily attendance numbers and trends over the last 5 years.
- car parking capacity at each church (with locations)
- the financial position in each parish, income, expenditure savings, debt. Other relevant core statistics.

6. Special factors, eg each parish's mission, Catholic schools and the existence of crypts, applying to each Church and parish in the partnership should be considered, but as secondary, not primary considerations.

7. It is imperative that any plan for the Ovingham Partnership should be made in the knowledge of the principles being applied for Diocesan reorganisation as a whole, addressing the publicly-known deficiencies in structure, operation within, and future of the Diocese and the Catholic religion in our Diocese. Further change as a result of a new Diocesan development plan on top of changes made now, could irreparably damage the Faith in our partnership area.

8. In order to achieve their objective, changes made now must take into account human factors, namely the capacity and willingness of clergy to actively support and fulfil the increased responsibilities within a more diverse and extended group of lay members. We must all consider ourselves members of a single body, not in competition with other parishes. Clergy must all be considered, and consider themselves, as partnership clergy, rather than parish priests.

9. Similarly, lay church members should also consider themselves as part of a wider community in the partnership, and take on greater responsibilities across the partnership. This needs to be recognised, supported and encouraged by partnership clergy, as entirely within the concept of a 'shared priesthood' promoted by the Church. We have to recognise the inevitable demands made upon an ageing priesthood by necessary rationalisation of the partnership (and more widely) and have their health and wellbeing at the forefront of Diocesan decision making.

10. Finally, in line with the need for openness and inclusivity, changes necessitate much better communication within the partnership to and from members of clergy and laity. One way of signalling this is a change from Parish

newsletters to a partnership newsletter, as has happened elsewhere in the Diocese. Information of partnership and diocesan activity will promote inclusivity.