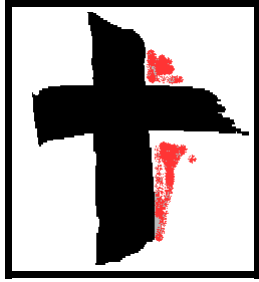


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Frequently Asked Questions about Initial Draft Proposals.

Common concerns and criticisms of the *Fit for Mission?* review that have emerged from the parish and deanery responses received so far to the *Initial Draft Proposals* are listed below with answers which may better explain the 'whys and wherefores' of the *Initial Draft Proposals*. We hope that this FAQ will help those still responding to their *Initial Draft Proposals*. If further comments and criticisms are forthcoming from South Cumbria and North and West Cumbria another FAQ will be produced.

1. Isn't the focus of *Fit for Mission?* really about property and rationalisation of buildings, and not about mission at all?

It is a very human reaction to ask 'Are they going to leave our church alone?' The Core Group are trying to help the diocese and parishes cope with reality, guided by all local information.

The true focus of *Fit for Mission?* is revealed by this fact: 90% of the *Initial Draft Proposals* focus on the parish community, in particular its sacramental and mission life, and only 10% deals with proposals about structural changes such as linking, merging and retaining parishes.

Furthermore, the re-organisation of parishes is just one aspect of our *Fit for Mission? Review*, which also includes *Fit for Mission? Schools*. Both are aspects of one overarching purpose – to strengthen us as a people gathered around the Eucharist, so as to be sent out in mission to serve the world.

2. *Fit for Mission?* is imposing a 'business model' on parishes by focusing on structural and numerical change, when we should be following a pastoral approach which focuses on 'community'.

Fit for Mission? does not impose a 'business model' but necessarily takes the institutional nature of the Church seriously. The *Initial Draft Proposals* recognise that the Church is both a community and an institution.

The *Parish Summary Forms* look at the institutional dimension of the Church, that is the nuts-and-bolts that make parish communities possible, such as the allocation of priests, the numerical viability of parishes, sacramental use, and number of churches

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in a geographical area. They also look at the community dimension of the Church, such as the social life of the parish, its links with local schools, the involvement of laity in its sacramental life, and its provision of a range of missions.

3. By focusing on the allocation of priests, Mass attendance, sacramental use and the location of churches isn't *Fit for Mission*? giving priority to the needs of the institutional Church over the needs of the parish community centred on the Eucharist.

Fit for Mission? understands that the purpose of the institutional church is to serve the needs of the parish community. Recent events in the diocese, such as the financial crisis, may make this hard to believe in some quarters, but in answer to this understandable scepticism all we can say is this is the truth we uphold. Any consideration of the allocation of priests, Mass attendance, sacramental use, and parish location has one purpose, and one purpose only, to enable parish communities to fulfil their vocation of being a people gathered around the table of the Lord, so as to be sent out to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord.

A Eucharistic community cannot exist without a priest as a member of that community, and a Missionary community is not convincing sign without a thriving and sustainable community.

4. How can ceasing Sunday worship at a church building, as part of merging parishes, possibly strengthen a parish community? Doesn't it rather spell the death of that community?

The *Initial Draft Proposals* make no recommendations whatever about 'closing' parish communities. The Core Group is proposing that parishes consider the merits of linking and merging solely in order to strengthen 'communities' so they can successfully adapt to the decline in Mass attendance and the reduction in priests and be a newly strengthened community 'gathered and sent'. These proposals may include the recommendation that a church building ceases to be used for Sunday worship, only on the understanding that the community has joined another community, for the mutually strengthening and enrichment of both.

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5. *Fit for Mission?* is imposing an alien model of the parish, based on an American pastoral strategy, that is totally unsuitable to our diocese.

This misconception appears to have arisen due to a few references in *Fit for Mission? Information paper* and the *Initial Draft Proposals* to the Dioceses of Boston and Buffalo. The universal practise in reports is to reference the work of others when it is being used, but this only refers to the preceding paragraph or section, and not the whole report! The majority of the work presented by the Core Group is original and unique to our diocese, and draws on our combined knowledge of parishes in this country. Moreover the use of the term 'gem church' comes from the Diocese of Salford *i.e.* 'The Hidden Gem' in Manchester and 'Lighthouse' is from the Core Group of our own Diocesan Mission Review.

6. Isn't *Fit for Mission?* unduly pessimistic about the continuing decline in the number of people participating in the life of the Church? If *Fit for Mission?* realises its objective of enabling us to be a more missionary Church, surely the numbers will increase?

Of course we are hoping that by concentrating on mission, participation in our communities will increase. However, over 25 years ago Fr Michael Winters wrote a book called, 'Mission or Maintenance' in which he identified the need for the Catholic Church in England and Wales to become a missionary church or continue its inward-looking, self-absorbed decline. Over those 25 years Mass attendance in our diocese has declined from 65,000 to 25, 000. Last year, there was a further decline of 1,000 regularly attending Mass.

In light of this continuing decline, and the inward looking nature of most responses to the *Initial Draft Proposals*, it is reasonable to assume that it will take some time for our parishes to become effective 'agents of mission'.

7. The *Initial Draft Proposals* are unnecessarily prescriptive, and instead should give greater opportunity for priests and people in local areas to influence the way in which the local Church will be structured to provide for the needs of the people.

As explained at the beginning of each *Initial Draft Proposal*, their purpose is to 'get the ball rolling', to start a dialogue between the Mission Review Team, its Core Group and parishes about workable and sustainable solutions to the challenges facing us in providing vital, outward looking communities over the next 13 years. Hence the use of three words for 'provisional' – '**Initial**', '**Draft**', '**Proposal**'.

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The *Fit for Mission?* consultation is a genuine opportunity for priests, deacons, and people to positively and creatively influence the way in which the local Church will be structured. Responses received to the *Initial Draft Proposals* will guide the Core Group in forming the *Draft Revised Proposals* which emphasize this opportunity.

8. The Core Group hasn't put enough work or thought into the *Initial Draft Proposals*.

Members of the Core Group have been working on *Fit for Mission?* for the past 10 months, some even longer. Since the launch of *Fit for Mission? A Guide* in Lent 2007, they have travelled to Lancaster almost every week for meetings that usually last a minimum of 3 hours. Between meetings members of the Core Group have put in 1,000's of hours into designing the *Fit for Mission?* process, evaluating every *Parish Evaluation Form*, composing the *Parish Summary Forms* for every parish in the diocese, drawing up the initial draft proposals, and facilitating the meetings of the Mission Review Team. It should also be noted that members of the Core Group have given their time and services to the diocese free of charge.

Also, the 30 strong Mission Review Team, drawing mainly on the laity from across the diocese, has met once a month to review the work of the Core Group, and make suggestions to improve the *Initial Draft Proposals*.

9. Why has no indication been given about the future of church buildings which may cease to have Mass each weekend, particularly churches 'listed' as buildings of historical or architectural significance and churches in areas suffering from social deprivation?

Early on in the consultation the Diocesan Trustees have reserved to themselves this aspect of *Fit for Mission?* and required the Core Group not to include any proposals about the future of church buildings in the *Initial Draft Proposals* for the five areas of the diocese.

Decisions on the future of property that cease to be used for Sunday worship will not be made until the Bishop has considered and decided on the Mission Review Team's *Draft Pastoral Plan* (final proposals). This will not be until the Mission Review Team has presented the Diocesan-wide plan to Bishop in July 2008 and he has decided to implement it in whole or in part after consultation with the *Diocesan Council of Priests* and other canonical bodies.

All comments about the future of church buildings received by the Core Group from parishes and deaneries will be dully passed to the Bishop and Trustees.

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10. There is a real concern that historic debts of some parishes proposed for merger will impact dramatically on the financial sustainability of the 'merged' parish.

Again, early on in the consultation the Finance Committee of the Diocesan Trustees have reserved to themselves this aspect of *Fit for Mission?* Therefore, the *Mission Review Team* will not be making proposals for the treatment of historic debts in any merger, or indeed for any arrangements which may be needed to give financial support to parishes in poor areas. The Bishop and the Trustees will be dealing with these situations if and when the proposals are accepted.

11. The real motive behind *Fit for Mission?* is to close church buildings so the diocese can sell them off and take the money.

Mission is the real motive behind *Fit for Mission?*, not asset stripping! Under canon law, any money accruing from the sale of the parish's property follows the parish community (not the central Diocese) when it merges with another parish. The assets and liabilities of the merged parishes are therefore shared - in the new community.

12. What happens to our responses to the Initial Draft Proposals for our area of the diocese?

In preparing Revised Proposals for further consultation from March 2008, the Core Group and full Mission Review Team will endeavour to meet many of the suggestions arising from the initial consultation process. Two major changes are being considered:

1. To set out the proposals in *two phases*. ***Phase 1*** would be concrete proposals to provide for the immediate future, relating to the current Mass attendance and Parish priests realistically available up to about 2015. ***Phase 2*** would be provisional to accommodate the possibility of further changes from 2015 to 2020 to take full account of the benefits arising from the current endeavours to stimulate mission activity and keep younger people involved in the practice of their faith.
2. To allow the priests and the people the flexibility to adjust aspects of the proposals to suit local circumstances. Therefore, aspects of the proposals about time-scales for linking and merging, including the dates for ceasing to have a Sunday/Vigil Mass in churches and chapels would be planned locally and then agreed with the Bishop.