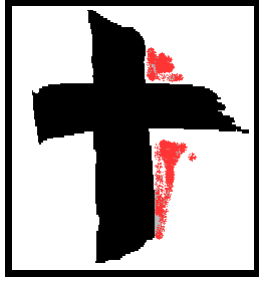


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From: **Mgr Canon Aidan J. Turner,**
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Dear Priests, Deacons, Religious and Laity of the Parishes and Deaneries of the Diocese,

On behalf of the Core Group and Mission Review Team I want to sincerely thank so many of you for the time and energy you have invested in responding to the *Initial Draft Proposals* for the five areas of the diocese. Please be assured that your comments and suggestions are being addressed in preparing the Draft Revised Proposals that you will receive in March 2008. Errors in the *Parish Summary Forms* will be dully corrected and then the *Forms* re-released on the Diocesan website for public record in March.

Suggestions for linking, rather than merging of parishes and for linking with different parishes will be carefully considered and existing links examined to see if they can be accommodated in the revised proposals. However, with fewer priests, it will be important to make sure that they are not unnecessarily over-burdened in any new arrangements.

I think it important that as we begin a new year, we return to the sources of the mission review. When Bishop Patrick launched this consultation in Lent 2007 with the publication of *Fit for Mission? A Guide* he wrote these words which I hope, almost a year later, we can truly take to heart:

“Through God’s providence, each one of us has been sent here to this place and at this time with the gifts needed to proclaim the Gospel to our community. All that is needed is generosity of spirit and a willingness to work together” (*Fit for Mission? A Guide*, p.9).

I imagine that none of us wanted to be the generation that had to face the difficult decisions required from a Catholic community that was becoming a Church of the Little Flock (Luke 12:32). Having said this, many of the responses to the *Initial Draft Proposals* witness to the fact that we have all, to varying degrees, woken up to the reality of the decline in regular Mass attendance coupled with the reduction in young men offering themselves as candidates for the priesthood.

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A few replies accepted the need for change but expressed reluctance to embrace this when it means the sacrifice of some of the resources no longer appropriate for present and future needs.

Not a few responses have reflected the denial, anger, disappointment, and confusion, which have been stirred up by the necessity of facing up to the reality of our situation.

I am convinced that if we are to have the necessary generosity of spirit and willingness to work together we need the wisdom, courage, and holiness that we have prayed for across the diocese for the past year through the Mission Review Prayer. May I ask that we all continue to recite this prayer with renewed commitment and passion in our liturgy and as the subject of our personal meditation.

Having been at the heart of the *Fit for Mission?* consultation and examined the *Parish Evaluation Forms, Parish Summary Forms* and many of the parish and deanery responses to the *Initial Draft Proposals* I have come away with a sense of hope that confirms the Bishop's observation that 'The Kingdom of God is among us now! I see signs of the Kingdom in the fruitful lives of so many who are faithful to our shared apostolic and missionary calling – gathered and sent' (*Fit for Mission? A Guide*, p. 22).

And I repeat the Bishop's words of encouragement, 'keep this hope as our guiding light, our true 'north', as we continue to face the reality of the changes that we will need to make to become a Church that is fit for mission.

Some of the common concerns and criticisms that have emerged from the parish and deanery responses to the *Initial Draft Proposals* have been listed in an attached 'Frequently Asked Questions' paper, which may better explain the 'whys and wherefores' of the *Initial Draft Proposals*.

In preparing Revised Proposals for further consultation from March 2008, the Core Group and full Mission Review Team will, wherever possible, endeavour to meet suggestions for improvements 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

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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.

Conclusion

Please continue with the prayerful support of the Mass and Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament which have become a feature of our diocesan renewal in so many parishes. It is only because we are surrounded by this sea of prayer that we can be confident that Our Lord will help us 'to be truly wise'.

Finally it must be said that the revisions to the *Initial Draft Proposals* will require considerable input, time, and energy on the part of the Core Group of the Mission Review Team. With your heartfelt prayers and support, I know our efforts – and sometimes mistakes – will be used by the Lord and that He will 'give success to the work of our hands'.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Mgr Canon Aidan Turner,
VG, Chairman of 'Fit for Mission'