

**HOLY FAMILY CATHOLIC CHURCH, DAGENHAM**  
**Response to the diocesan proposal for renewal & restructuring**

**Introduction**

Holy Family is a vibrant parish in East London and has about 30 different nationalities that attend mass regularly. In fact, our parish is a mini United Nation. It is a fast growing parish, which bucked the trend of declining worshippers currently being experienced in some parishes. The parish is blessed with a Priest who works tirelessly to look after the growing population of the parish, in addition to his other very demanding responsibilities in the diocese. The parish is also blessed with some parishioners, who put in valuable time to assist the parish in several capacities. The parish has two schools: St. Joseph Primary school and All Saint College. The parish also has two hospitals within its catchment area: Queens Hospital, Romford and King Georges Hospital, Goodmayes.

Sometime last year, the Diocese of Brentwood under the leadership of Bishop Alan began a consultation process to create a new vision for renewal and restructuring of the diocese. To assist with the process, during Advent 2017, the diocese published a document titled "Working Together To Evangelise Our Diocese" which we shall refer to as '**the Vision document**' in this response. The vision document contains detailed plans on how to renew and restructure the parishes and other organisations in the diocese for the next 20-30 years and they were categorised into short, medium and the long term goals. All parishes in the diocese have been requested to respond to the vision document.

In order to obtain the broadest spectrum of views as possible from our parishioners, two parish meetings were held on 28<sup>th</sup> January and 18<sup>th</sup> February 2018, at which parishioners were encouraged to come with their responses to the vision document. Prior to the first meeting Fr. Stephen, the parish priest had made several copies of the vision document, which were distributed to parishioners. For parishioners that have access to the internet, they were giving leaflets which contain the web details of how to locate the vision document on the website of the diocese. At the first meeting, parishioners were giving questionnaires and were asked to respond to the contents of the vision document. Views expressed by parishioners were collated and was presented to them for adoption at the second meeting.

The turn-out for both meetings were very encouraging and the level of interest and participation by parishioners was very good and the responses were of very high quality, which showed that parishioners had taken time to read, pray and reflect on the vision document.

We wish to note that our parish fully supports the vision of Bishop Alan to renew and restructure the diocese. We believe that the only permanent thing in life is change. Indeed as humans, life will become meaningless if we refuse to accept change. However, it would seem to our parishioners that the main factor driving this change is the shortage of priest or the expected shortage of priest in the future. Our parish also believes that not enough emphasis has been placed on how to use modern technology to evangelise our communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particular as it relates to our Youth. We shall deal with some of these

issues in more detail in this response. For ease of reference, we will also adopt the approach in the vision document and divide our response into two: Renewal and Restructuring.

## **RENEWAL**

Our parish agrees with the 12 strands of the renewal as contained in the vision document. It is our belief that if they are scrupulously implemented, the 12 strands will lead to a revival of Christian virtues and evangelisation in our community and in the catholic family in general.

In addition, our parish is of the view that the 12 strands should be implemented in such a manner as to place emphasis on the empowerment of lay members to take on more responsibilities in the affairs of the parishes in the diocese. Thankfully, this is the focus of the vision document.

Our parish is also of the view that if the renewal is to be successful and meaningful, parish priests must be able to carry their parishioners along in this journey. Therefore, an effective communication at the parish level is essential for the success of the renewal process. To this extent, our parishioners have suggested that the following be implemented in our parish:

1. Communication between the priest and parishioners should be improved by setting up small units or groups within the parish, e.g finance committee, cleaning committee, flowers, fundraising, ministers, welcomers, choir, etc and a co-ordinator appointed for each group/committee. The contact details (both emails and telephone numbers) of the co-ordinators should be available in the newsletter so that parishioners who wish to volunteer or who has specific gift or talent to contribute would have a point of contact. The co-ordinators of these committees should meet with the parish priests and steward once every three months to review the activities of the committees and give feedbacks to the priest. It is believed that this suggestion will reduce the workload of the parish priest and allow him to concentrate on the spiritual and sacramental needs of the community.
2. Specifically with regard to evangelisation, the welcoming committee should be encouraged to be proactive in making contact with new parishioners to create awareness of the activities in the parish. From experience, new parishioner tends to be very enthusiastic in their first few months in a new parish but often there is never a follow-up by the parish. We see no reason why welcomers should not be able to contact such members by phone, by email or by WhatsApp to encourage them in their spiritual journey. In this regard, the Catholic church may have something to learn from our brethren in the Pentecostal churches.
3. Use of modern digital technology, like the internet, skype, live streaming of mass, etc should be given more consideration, both in the administration of the parish and in the performance of spiritual and sacramental duties of the priests.

## **RESTRUCTURING**

As noted under renewal, change is a necessary part of life and to that extent, our parish supports the proposals in the vision document to restructure the diocese. However, our parish also believes that such changes must not be done in a manner that it may end up like throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

We note that the vision document proposes to merge Holy Family with St. Peter and have two priests serve the two parishes. It is not yet clear as to where the two priests will reside. The first question among our parishioners is that if the Diocese proposes to have two priests to serve both St. Peter and Holy Family after the merger, then why not allocate one priest each to the two parishes, in which case, the merger will be unnecessary. We also note that at page 23 of the vision document, it was proposed that the two priests in Dagenham will also serve St. Thomas More in Barking. In our view, it would appear that the vision document was in reality proposing to merge three parishes into one, namely; Holy Family, St. Peters and St. Thomas More.

It should be noted that at the moment, Holy Family is currently served by one priest and a Deacon and the Deacon has indicated his desire to remain at Holy Family after his ordination. There is also a retired priest in residence.

After a very detailed discussion and consideration by the parishioners of Holy Family, they made the following observations:

1. As noted above, Holy Family is a growing parish and parishioners believe that the proposal to merge it with St. Peters will impact negatively on evangelisation in our community, as it would be difficult for the two priests serving both parishes to meet the Spiritual, Sacramental and Pastoral needs of the parishioners of Holy Family and the catholic community it serves. Indeed, parishioners believe that the absence of a resident priest that is solely devoted to Holy Family would be counter-productive and will in fact limit the growth of the parish, which will further hinder evangelisation.
2. As also mentioned above, Holy Family has two schools; one primary school and one secondary school. In addition, it also has two hospitals within its catchment areas; Queens Hospital in Romford and King Georges Hospitals in Goodmayes. There is no doubt that the two priests proposed to serve both Holy Family and St. Peters (whether or not resident in Holy Family) would be unable to cope with the heavy workload that may arise from the merger.
3. The proposed merger may unintentionally hinder the renewal aspect of the vision document, particularly as it relates to Children and Youth ministries. If as contended above that the merger would increase the workload of the priests, we can extrapolate that the spiritual and sacramental needs of the children in our two schools will suffer considerable. This will deprive the catholic community of the opportunity to evangelise our young ones and will make the task of retaining our young ones in the catholic faith more difficult than we are currently experiencing,

4. Currently we have three mass every weekend in the parish. Parishioners fear that the first casualty of an increased workload for the two priests will be to reduce our weekend mass from 3 to two or even one. Again this will substantially hinder evangelisation in our local community and thereby defeats the whole purpose of the vision document.
5. In terms of transportation, the proposal to merge Holy Family and St. Peters will create huge challenge for parishioners. As Dagenham is traversed by the District Line within the London Underground network, there are effectively only two crossing points for any person travelling between Holy Family and St. Peters. It is either parishioners cross at Dagenham Heathway or Dagenham East and this will create huge traffic gridlock between the two parishes. The challenge of crossing between the two parishes creates a natural barrier between the two parishes and may make the merger totally unworkable. Becontree Station may be a third option but in terms of traffic, it is not viable too, as it is a longer distance from either Holy Family or St. Peters and the route involves a round-about journey.
6. The transportation challenges identified above would make it very difficult for elderly members of our parish to attend mass regularly, which will again deprive them of the opportunity to meet their spiritual and sacramental needs through regular attendance at mass.
7. As it appears that the projected fall in the number of priest is one of the driving factors for the restructuring, parishioners suggested that the following steps should be taken with a view to increasing the number of priests:
  - (a) In the short term, the Diocese may consider bringing foreign priests from Africa, Asia, South America and Eastern Europe to fill temporary shortage. We are aware that there are visa considerations but it would not be out of place to appeal to the government to increase the visa quota for the diocese;
  - (b) As a long term solution, the Diocese may consider ordaining matured married men as priest and allow women to be ordained as priests. Our parish appreciates that there are huge institutional challenges with this suggestion but that is even the more the reason why we should start the conversation now;
  - (c) The diocese should embark on massive vocational campaign in our catholic schools to encourage students to consider the vocations, instead of the restructuring which is believed to be driven by shortage of priests.

It should be noted that Deacon Rick will be ordained in June this year as a priest and he has indicated his intention to remain at the Holy Family.

8. Our parish accepts that we have some challenge with finance at the moment. However we are confident that parishioners will rise up to the occasion to assist with raising more money for the church. In fact, some members are already helping the parish to clear its overdraft. In addition, parishioners in the meeting referred to above, came up with the following suggestions to raise money for the parish:

- (a) The parish should set up a dedicated committee to come up with bold ideas on how to raise more money for the parish. As part of this process, the parish will undertake more fund raising activities like race night, Quiz night, St. Patrick dance, Lotto Bonus Ball;
- (b) encourage more parishioner to sign up for gift aid;
- (c) encourage more parishioners to set-up standing order in favour of the Parish and this will guarantee steady income for the parish, which is good for planning purpose;
- (d) Each family should consider paying a quarterly levy to help the church;
- (e) Our parish has a large hall with 3 floors and the parish is considering renting it to organisations like Scouts, Cubs, Brownies, Yoga class, Pre-school groups, etc to raise more money for the parish;
- (f) Some of the nationalities in the parish have suggested the introduction of thanksgiving during mass or separate mass for thanksgiving, where celebrants and their friends and family members may give generously to the parish;
- (g) Parishioners appreciate that the church hall is old and therefore may from time to time requires considerable sums for its maintenance so as to comply with Health and Safety regulations. Therefore in the long term, the parish may have to take some fundamental decision, in conjunction with the diocese on the future of the current church hall. Selling the current church Hall and using its proceeds to build a smaller but modern church hall which will be more efficient to run, is one of the idea being considered.

We believe that the above will make our parish more financially viable and place us in a stronger position to stand on our own without the need to merge us with another parish. We also believe that a financially viable parish with active parishioners who are willing and able to participate in the activities of the parish will be in a position to achieve the renewal envisaged by the vision documents.

### **Suggested way forward**

Although our preferred position is that Holy Family should not be merged with another parish for the reasons given above, however we are not oblivious that at the moment, the change may be inevitable. In this regard, we believe that it would be better to merge Holy Family with St. Vincent instead of St. Peters, for the following reasons:

1. Holy Family is nearer to St. Vincent than St. Peter;
2. Unlike St. Peter, there is no crossing barrier between Holy Family and St. Vincent. In other words, Parishioners in Holy Family can travel to St. Vincent through several routes

and parishioners in St. Vincent can do likewise. This will avoid the traffic gridlock mentioned regarding St. Peters;

3. Importantly, even before the idea of the restructuring was mooted, Holy Family and St. Vincent have been collaborating for sometime now in several areas like, Baptism, Caliyp (Catholic Initiation of young people), RCIA, etc and the transition between it and St. Vincent will be very smooth. Indeed, it would appear that Holy Family and St. Vincent had envisaged the current proposal for restructuring.

### **Conclusion**

The Catholic faith remains very strong in our community and we have a growing catholic community with potential to grow further and with capacity to evangelise our community and spread the good news of Jesus. We have a parish priest, Fr. Stephen who can lead this process and he would soon be supported by Deacon Rick, who will be ordained in June this year, although it is not yet known if he will be able to remain in the parish. Therefore, our preference is still to remain independent as a parish, as we believe we have what it takes to embark on the journey of renewal outlined in the vision document.

However, we accept and welcome the need for change. Indeed, we see the change as an opportunity to try and do things differently. We believe a merger or an alignment with St. Vincent may work well and achieve the goal envisioned by the vision document.

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