

FAQs & Thinking outside the box (Steven Webb) 35 minutes

*This is the text that Steven used during the meeting of the clergy and stewards of the gospel on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2018. Slight caution is required as the talk was delivered rather than read and what was said on the day might have varied slightly from what is written here. The slide references are to the slides in the accompanying presentation that is also published on the website.*

## Welcome Slide

### Title Slide

My task today is to try to enthuse you to take a message back to your parishes. That message is that our main aim is to evangelise our diocese and our prayer is that they will start to think in new ways to make that happen.

It is exactly a year since I first stood before you as the Director of Development Designate. Although appointed I did not actually take up the role for another seven weeks but in that last year we have all travelled a long way together.

### 3 Q DWP SLIDE

Parishes talked and formulated responses to the questionnaire and fed those back to us.

The Draft Working Plan was published and parishes talked and formulated responses and fed those back to us and then

The first Formal Proposal for the Renewal and Restructuring of Our Diocese was published and parishes are talking and feedback is coming in.

Those are just the formal stages and, perhaps more importantly, in every parish conversations are now taking place regularly about how we should change ourselves in the future.

### 4 VISION

Gradually there is a realisation that renewal is at least as important as restructuring if not more so and gradually people are recognising that change is going to happen. This is not just talk, this is real and our Vision requires us to Evangelise Our Diocese

### 5 OBJECTIVES

### 6 – 9 BLUE PLANET SEQUENCE

I have been taken with the impact that The BP has had on society recently. This wonderful programme highlighted something terrible that humans are doing to our planet. Inspired by pictures of plastic waste and suffering creatures people all over the planet spontaneously

reacted and took up arms against plastic. It was an amazing reaction to a story and a good one.

We've got a better one. Christ died for us and overcame death for us. Our task is to find new ways to convey the joy of that story, that message to get people to react to it by coming to Christ.

The BP story is good but Christ's story is better.

### 10 MOULD

The lovely part of my job is hearing the stories from parishes that are grasping the opportunity for change telling me how they are doing new things and old things better than they were before. Only a couple of days ago I heard from a parish priest telling me that they had found a way to do things differently and he said "By breaking the mould it felt like we had let the light in and new possibilities opened up."

### 11 LIST

I have said it before and I'll say it again, that the work that is going on in individual parishes is bearing tremendous fruit and you must all keep hold of that and tend it so that it multiplies. This week one parish provided a good example:

..and hundreds of other ideas as well as the simple fact that parishes are communicating with each other in ways that they never have.

### 12 DUNKIRK

Some see all of this as a sort of Dunkirk spirit kicking in; everyone pulling together to battle against adversity but I'd like us all to start to think differently and more positively. I think the greatest strides are being made where people recognise that this is our chance to be innovative in the service of Christ and to seek a fresh response to God's love for us.

### 13 NEXT

This is not just us battling adversity; it is us bringing the Gospel to life in Essex and East London and doing it together.

### 14 TRAVEL

All of that said we still have a long and hard journey ahead of us and it is a road that we all travel together.

### 15 T & H

I know for some the pace of change is too fast and for some it is too slow but we have set out a timetable and we need to keep everyone with that timetable.

That means that some of you who are desperately keen to get on with implementing your plans need to be a little patient and those who are still resistant to any change need to get on board for the journey.

## 16 EG

A year ago I spoke to you about the exciting opportunity we had to change so as to build upon all of our strengths and to build the kingdom of God here in our diocese. I remember being optimistic, up-beat and excited about the prospect, so I am more than a little disappointed that I have so far failed to get that message across to everyone with sufficient clarity and urgency. It seems that a year on what many people still want to focus upon is how we can change as little as possible so that we can maintain something very close to the status quo.

But that is not what is being asked of us.....

I fully understand that advocating change in our church is never likely to make a person popular but a year on I am more convinced than ever that change is not only necessary but that it can be very good for all of us and that we need to move beyond saying that we have always done things in a particular way and start thinking quite radically about how we might better use our gifts.

For many people it is difficult for them to get past the idea that ***we have a priest shortage crisis and my parish may not have its own priest in the future***. I don't think that is the right approach and I have some sympathy with a priest who wrote to us saying that actually we don't have a priest shortage we have too many churches for them to serve.

## 17 ANCHORS

So I want to address nine of the issues and questions that people have repeatedly raised. These are acting like anchors holding people to the past and in some cases they are being used as excuses. I would like to explain why we need to stop looking for ways out of changing ourselves and begin to embrace the need for that change and our part in it.

If we are to travel this journey together then we need to ensure that people are not anchored to the past. We need to dispel the myths that they are clinging to and get them on the journey with us.

## 18 GO

Before I start with the nine issues I want to be clear that my own optimism has not waned. I still believe that we stand at a point in our shared history where we can and will rise to the challenges set before us.

## 19 That WOULD

I see lots of reasons for optimism in front of me and in the work of our Holy Father. I still believe that we have all the resources we need to respond to God's love for us in 21<sup>st</sup> century East London and Essex and I still believe that we can grow God's kingdom in our diocese. I just think it might take a bit longer to get everyone outside this room to believe it!

## 20 9FAQs

So here we go with nine issues, questions or statements that I hear:

## 21 SLIDE

### **1) Our parishes are already thriving communities, everything is fine and we should do all we can to keep things as they are.**

I hear again and again and again something along the lines of "we should leave everything as it is. Things are fine the way they are. We don't want change we think things should stay as they are.

Unfortunately, when people start from the position that everything now is good and should be left alone I think that we may be guilty of a little complacency wrapped up in an understandable desire to stay in our own comfort zones.

Unfortunately, there is very little evidence to suggest that our Church is flourishing and doing just fine nor that it is the best response to the situation that we find ourselves in in 21<sup>st</sup> century diocese of Brentwood.

This is hard to say and hard to hear especially in this room because so many great people including everyone here today is working very hard in our Church.

However, despite all of our combined efforts we are losing people and we are not reaching people.

So when people oppose change in the optimistic belief that we already have everything as good as it can be I believe that those people are misguided. Please do not misunderstand me when I say this. I am not suggesting that we have got everything wrong or that we are doing badly; but I am saying that what we have now is not the best that we can be. The world around us has changed dramatically in a couple of generations and we need to respond accordingly. We need to catch up.

We need to be honest with ourselves and recognise that we are losing people and failing to bring new people into a relationship with Christ. If we can be that honest, perhaps we can begin to accept the fact that what we have, know and love about our parish life is not actually working as well as we would like to think then perhaps

we can get to a position where we recognise that it is not so good that we need to hold onto it at all costs. Let me explain why this is the case.

## 22 IS IT

The Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society at St Mary's University in Twickenham published a report on Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A statistical report based on recent British Social Attitudes survey data

The lead author was Stephen Bullivant

The purpose of this report is very simple: it aims to provide a set of reliable, up-to-date statistics on the overall state of Catholicism in England and Wales and it relates to the year 2014.

- 8.3% of the population identifies as Catholic
- That national average hides regional variations and outer London (as a whole) shows a higher figure of 11.4% while Essex is somewhere between 6 and 7%.
- 13.7% of the population say they were raised as Catholics.

## 23 SLIDE

- 56% of people raised as Catholics identified as Catholic in adulthood. This compared to over 70% in 1993.
- Of those who no longer identify as Catholics over 34% identify as "Nones"
- About 8% of adults who identify as Catholics are converts and nearly all of those are converts from other Christian denominations.
- Of the 8.3% of the adult population that identified as Catholic the frequency of Mass attendance was:
  - 27.5% once a week or more
  - Less often but at least once a month 15.6%
  - Less often but at least once a year 17.8%
  - Never or almost never 39.2%
- Of the 13.7% of the population who identified as having been raised as Catholics the frequency of Mass attendance was:
  - 17.1% once a week or more
  - 9.8% Less often but at least once a month
  - 13.5% Less often but at least once a year
  - 59.6% Never or almost never

## 24 SLIDE

By contrast 19% say they were raised with No Religion (“Nones”) but 48.5% of adults identify as “Nones”

Furthermore, we can state with confidence that:

- Almost 50% of weekly or more mass attenders are aged 65+
- In our diocese numeric decline has been masked by a significant number of immigrants and the general increase of the population in the south east.
- We are losing children and young people at an alarming rate
- Many of your responses to the questionnaires speak of ageing congregations
- According to our Annual Report for the year 2016/17 our Mass attendance fell by 10% in one year. In reality it was less than that but still a decline.

So in summary we currently retain about 56% of those raised as catholic and of those only just over a quarter attend Mass once a week and nearly 40% never attend. In terms of simplistic recruitment and retention this is not a good result.

This is our status quo. This is what we have now and at risk of being controversial I would suggest that this is not good enough to hold onto at all costs.

Christ’s gift to us is the greatest gift and the greatest story ever told. We have been given this greatest gift to share with our own children and with wider society and yet this is our status quo.

I believe that in any environment these statistics should lead anyone to think that an overhaul of how we do things was necessary and I would ask you to remember that this has nothing at all to do with a diminishing number of priests.

## 25 SLIDE

- 2) We cannot afford to have fewer priests in our town/city because of all the development that is going on. We need to be able to accommodate all these new people when they arrive.**

## 26 SLIDE

- Population growth in our diocese is not a new phenomenon. Our population has been growing across Essex and East London for years but even with this significant increase in our population our church numbers have never matched the increase in general population.

- The population of our diocese according to the last census in 2011 was 2,661,600 and in 2017 even by a conservative estimate it was at least 2,826,000. This is an increase of 164,400 in 6 years or 27,400 a year.
- Our overall mass attendance has not increased during that time. It remained steady until 2016 when it started to decline.

## 27 SLIDE

### **3) We do not accept that there is a need to change because we could bring in priests from abroad and that would solve everything. So because “the diocese” won’t do that we won’t co-operate with this process.**

This is not the answer and I think that even if it was the answer it would still leave us with significant questions to answer about our church.

Let’s look at some facts:

## 28 SLIDE

- We already have a significant number of foreign priests in our diocese and for the sake of this discussion I am excluding those priests of Irish heritage who have been with us for a long time.
- 15 of our 87 parishes are run by non-diocesan priests from abroad. That is split roughly in half between those from Europe and those from the Global South . That’s over 17%.
- The main growth area for priests is in the global south of our world. 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the worlds Catholics are in the Global South but only 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total number of priests.
- According to The Pontifical Yearbook 2017 and the “Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae” No of People per priest in
  - Europe: 1,595
  - Asia: 2,185
  - World wide ratio is 3,091
  - America: 5,000
  - Africa: 5,000
- Our European ratio of people to priests is far far better than India or Asia or Africa.
- It may be arguably acceptable for us to accept priests from abroad (including the global south) when those places choose of their own volition to send priests to us

to serve immigrant communities with some sort of National Chaplaincy but it is far more questionable whether it is right for us to actively seek to deprive countries of their priests when they need their priests more than we do.

- Visa restrictions: Each Year we are allowed a certain number of visas for priests to come and serve us. In recent years every one of those has been used. We do not have any margin to bring in many more foreign priests even if it were right so to do.

## 29 SLIDE

- 4) **There is no point in me engaging with this process because it is a sham and the outcome is a fait accompli.**

This is unpleasant to hear but it is also untrue. We are working very hard in order to consult and discern before Bishop Alan makes decisions. I do not think Bishop Alan could have been any clearer about the fact that he wants to hear what parishioners have to say BEFORE he makes the difficult decisions that will fall to him as our Bishop.

A few times I have discussed this issue with people and I hear that because “we” haven’t agreed with “them”, “we” are not listening to “them”. I am afraid this is to misunderstand the nature of a consultation or a discernment process. Listening to people and hearing what they have to say DOES NOT necessarily mean that comments or suggestions will be agreed. Furthermore, even those that are agreed will not necessarily be implemented simply because Bishop Alan will have to look at the big picture across our diocese and do what he thinks is best for all of us.

We are an apostolic church and we recognise the special place of our Bishop and the heavy burden he bears on our behalf. When Bishop Alan says he wants to hear what people have to say he means it.

BUT

Being consulted does not mean that having been consulted you will get your way!  
Our Diocese is an Episcopacy NOT a Democracy!

## 30 SLIDE

- 5) **We do not need to engage with this process but instead we need to pray for vocations.**

I would agree entirely that we need to pray for vocations but not instead of this initiative; it must be as well as this initiative and bear in mind that this initiative also entails working to promote vocations. This is the final paragraph of the public bulletin regarding the 2017 Pontifical Yearbook:

### 31 SLIDE

*Finally, the datum that merits particular attention relates to the progress of priestly vocations. Indeed, the number of seminarians, after reaching a maximum in 2011, has suffered a gradual reduction. The sole exception remains Africa, which does not yet seem to be affected by the crisis in vocations and is confirmed as the geographical area with the greatest potential.*

Note the use of the word “crisis”. The total number of priests in the world has actually increased between 2010 and 2015 by 0.83% (less than one percent). In the same period the number of Catholics in the world has increased by 7.4% on average. However that is only a part of the story because in Africa the growth in the number of Catholics has been 19.4% nearly one more catholic for every 5 existing Catholics and their number of priests has increased almost as quickly by 17.4%.

I mention this here because it demonstrates that priests tend to come from the home catholic community and in Africa birth rates are far higher than they are here. One son out of several might be more urged by his family to listen for God’s call to serve as a priest. Our families tend to be smaller these days. Factor in also that we are losing young people (men and women) at an alarming rate and the position is compounded.

### 32 SLIDE

#### **6) We could easily solve this problem by allowing Married Men to be priests. We see no reason for us to change when this is an obvious solution to the problem.**

I set aside the rights and wrongs of ordaining married men and focus simply on the total number of priests that we might expect. So while at first sight this may seem like an attractive argument in numerical terms, one needs to exercise caution because there is no evidence to support it.

However even that is not the main point because it is outside our control.

Some might pray that the Holy Father will allow married men to become priests and some might not but if it was in his heart today it would still take years to bring it to being and once it did come to pass it would take years before any new married priests were ordained. We cannot justifiably plan for a scenario that shows no prospect of coming to pass and even if it did would be years in the making.

### 33 SLIDE

- 7) If we ordained women as priests we could solve the priest shortage and that would mean everything could stay as it is so I won't engage with this process.**

Again the same points arise.

We cannot justifiably plan for a scenario that shows no prospect of coming to pass and even if it did would be years in the making.

### 34 SLIDE

- 8) We appreciate the need for changes to be made but we think that our parish should remain as it is and change should happen elsewhere.**

This is one of the most common things that people say to me and it is simply not a sustainable argument. At worst it is selfish and at best it assumes that "our parish" is more special than "your parish" and should be given preferential treatment. We need to move beyond this sort of defensive parochialism towards an attitude that wants to serve the common good. I would suggest that we need to move beyond thinking of our neighbour as just the people we are friends with and start to love the neighbours we do not know personally.

### 35 SLIDE

- 9) We have a shortage of priests and until we can do something about that there is no point even thinking about renewal.**

Africa and Asia are where our Catholic church is growing the most. They have a priest to people ration that is over three times worse than ours. Every priest in Africa has about 3 ½ times as many Catholics to minister to as a priest has here.

Not only that but the distances those priests have to cover are huge by comparison with ours, with far worse infrastructure and far fewer material resources. Yet it is in Africa and Asia that our church is finding a way to grow and to thrive.

Even if the forecast of having half as many priests as we have today comes to pass we will still have a much better ratio of priests to Catholics as they do in Africa today. We do not have to copy what happens in Africa, indeed I don't think we could or should but we should take heart from this statistic alone.

We can and we should find new ways to use all of our time, talents and treasures for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humanity in our diocese.

So my conclusion is that we need to accept that what we are doing now is not the best response to the new world order that has changed around us. It does work very well looking after the people who are currently living in our existing parishes but to be satisfied with that seems to be very short term thinking.

What we have now is not retaining enough young people in our faith or bringing new people to our faith and into a relationship with Christ.

We are all working hard and commitment cannot be faulted but I would suggest that the status quo cannot be described as something so good that we should hold onto it at all costs.

All the evidence is telling us that we have simply got to change.

### 36 SLIDE

Finally, I would remind everyone that the need for change is not something dreamt up by those appointing me, by Bishop Alan nor even by me personally; neither is it something that we should need to be persuaded about. The Holy Father has asked us to change and to become more missionary and more evangelising. In fact, he has gone beyond asking us; he has exhorted us to do it. Our Pope recognises that the world has changed around us and that we need to change so that we can bring the Good News to that new world. It is we who have to do this. Not someone else: us!

### 37 SLIDE

Pope Francis recognises that we must move away from a mentality that says “we have always done it like that”.

### 38 SLIDE

We too need to recognise that what we now need to change to meet the challenges of our new environment in the sure and certain knowledge that we possess the greatest gift to share.

### 39 SLIDE

Thank you.

SGW

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