



Northumberland Episcopal Area

Synod Submission

Heavenfield, St Benet Biscop, and Lindisfarne

the three Partnerships in the Northumberland Episcopal Area
present the fruits of their synodal journey.

We present to Bishop Robert, via the Lay Pastoral Forum, the results of the many gatherings, conversations, discussions and meetings that we have had over the last months. We have provided a summary consisting of bullet points from each partnership which highlight what we consider to be the key statements or issues that we have extracted from the fuller syntheses. These fuller treatments are also included in the document to ensure that the full depth of the contributions made are readily available and can be consulted as needed.

St Benet Biscop

Lindisfarne

Heavenfield

Partnership Chairs

Michael Quincey

Michael McPeake

Joe Ronan

Partnership Deans

Fr Peter Stott

Canon Stephen Watson

Fr Jeffrey Dodds

26th February 2022

Key Point Summaries

Heavenfield

- There is a solid base of people fully committed to the Church, and acting out their calling by showing love and commitment to those around them, and taking seriously the call of the Gospel.
- Technology is a great enabler, and we need to learn when and how to use it effectively for formation and outreach.
- We have had more time to think about God, and develop our prayer life. We want to continue to develop this.
- We are not well organised to keep in contact with people, particularly those on the edges of our communities. We need to develop systems to help us reach them.
- There is a mutual respect between the clergy and the laity, but this does not always translate into effective working together. We want to develop this and make it fruitful.
- We need to understand how better to reach out and meet young men and women, families and the housebound and welcome them, and all we meet as part of our faith journey.
- There are differences between us; styles of liturgy, disagreement with Church teaching etc. We need to learn better how to listen, pray, and talk to each other with a common aim for the good of all.

Lindisfarne

- The Church needs to be more influential on issues such as Climate Change, wars and the search for justice and peace together with helping to find solutions to poverty, famine hunger disease, social problems mental health and the effects of natural disasters.
- We need to take account of the views expressed by many including various movements within the Church regarding married priests role of women in the church and LGBT issues.
- The invitation to the Laity to participate in the Synod is greatly welcomed and it recognises amongst other things that the Holy Spirit works through us all not just the Clergy.
- Many responders would like to see a kinder, more tolerant, more forgiving and more inclusive church emerging; especially in its treatment of divorced Catholics and those who have been baptised but have walked away. This should be a church which is able to embrace radical changes to meet modern challenges. Moreover sharing responsibilities equally between Clergy and Laity will make it more collaborative.
- Love of God and neighbour remains a fundamental law of the gospel and of human existence. As people are drawn closer together by technological advances, it is imperative that human kind increase in love of neighbour. If they don't, life on this planet will be increasingly difficult and with it the survival of the church in the world.

St Benet Biscop

- A recognition that there is no going back, as the world has changed and demands a new way of being, not least in how we organize ourselves, worship and witness to our faith. It is time to examine what draws people to the Eucharist, how to generate a worshipping community that WANTS to be there.
- As an expression of Synodality, can we move from “the experience of authority to the authority of experience”. The Church is exclusive to many, in terms of gender, sexuality, language and marital status. It is time for the Church to seek out how it can best serve all people, a Church that serves the diverse needs of all its people.
- What initiatives could we employ to reach young people through digital platforms? What are the important issues for them? Why do so many of them see the Church as irrelevant?
- It is time to become a Church of grown-ups living out and shaping the faith, rather than a Church of children being told what to do.
- The leadership by lay people during the pandemic has been significant in many areas. Women are key in keeping things going. Women’s voices must not be translated into men’s voices in the synodal process.
- Ensure that all people are treated equally and have equal opportunities within the Church (including the major issues of ordination of women priests and allowing priests to marry). LISTENING is key. We have to learn to listen to each other, particularly laity/clergy, with open minds, in a genuine spirit of dialogue, working out how clergy and laity can work in tandem more effectively.
- Embrace the principles of *Laudato Si’* in serving our local communities
- there is some open scepticism of episcopal collaboration from a hierarchical church structure

Heavenfield Partnership – Synod Response

The six church communities of the Heavenfield Partnership (Minsteracres, St John Haydon Bridge, St Wilfrid Haltwhistle, St Oswald Bellingham, St Mary Hexham and St Peter Otterburn) have all prayerfully considered the questions posed by the diocese. In their individual communities they have met as groups and have prepared summaries of the conversations together with individual written and emailed contributions. These have been synthesised into this Partnership response. We estimate that around 100 individuals have contributed to this process; Our typical combined Mass attendance prior to Covid was approx 550.

Following the extended period of restrictions due to the virus, it was immensely pleasing to be able to gather again, and enjoy the company of others. As such the gatherings to discuss the synod were convivial and helped us appreciate the value of being with and listening to others. The written input as well was heartfelt and expressed a deep concern for our church life and for those around us. Some expressed doubt as to whether the process allows them to be heard, or trusted that their inputs would be considered.

In March 2020, just before Easter, we were deprived of the opportunity to meet and worship together and we felt this dislocation very deeply. This was a time of great challenge. We missed our friends and fellow parishioners, and feared for those who were on the fringes of our community, isolated and alone. The response of the parishes in many ways spoke of great concern for their neighbours. Newsletters were printed off and delivered to those without internet access; phone calls were made to those in isolation, distanced visiting of people, and many other examples of keeping contact with people were noted. In addition practical help with childcare, donations to foodbanks, and support with medical needs were some of the many ways our parishes helped people around them. It was a visible sign of how many in our communities take seriously the call of the Gospel.

A prime resource for continuity and cohesion was the provision of a live stream from St Mary's right from day one of the virus lockdowns. Fr Chris Warren worked tirelessly to ensure that the Mass, the focus of our community, was made available to the partnership live each day. It was an extraordinary commitment by him and greatly appreciated by everyone. Minsteracres too used its resources to make available firstly recordings of Mass, and as the lockdown continued they also provided livestreams. Creativity was shown by musicians and singers in making available recordings, and when possible ensuring live music (even heavily restricted) was able to contribute to continuing services. In this way the whole partnership was able to come together virtually at a time of great stress.

Whilst the streams were not ideal, they did help us to realise that there are many people around us (our 'peripheries') which technology can help us reach. (At the peak of the crisis over 3000 were joining us virtually). We have continued to use streams and video meetings to facilitate parish groups such as Bible study, bookgroups, and other formation activities such as an online 'Sycamore' course during Advent 2020. In Lent 2021 video-recorded reflections through Holy Week by partnership laity helped strengthen the links between our different parishes. We are now committed to exploring how these tools can help us in spreading the Gospel.

Our partnership catechist groups combined their talents and provided contact for the younger parishioners with support and projects, and so enabled some of our children to make their First Holy Communion which was a source of great happiness for all our congregations. Baptism preparation also continued via video meetings but returned to personal contact as soon as it was possible.

Once restrictions were eased and churches reopened parishioners were keen to work together; to assist in cleaning, stewarding and the practical side of enabling worship. Many individuals

contributed selflessly to these tasks, and earned the grateful thanks of many responding in the synod discussions.

For some it was a time of prayer and contemplation and the opportunity to grow spiritually by reading more widely and being able to share thoughts and ideas through parish links. Homilies via the livestream and in the weekly newsletter helped provoke thought and reflection. We have seen how God works through people – there are so many wonderful stories of self sacrifice and love. We have had more time to think about God, and to pray for others especially those suffering in so many ways often alone.

However isolation has also brought challenges of faith to individuals. Being alone has led some to feel strangers in their town, and to question the validity of their faith, or to feel angry and adrift because there seemed to be no clear way of moving forward available to them.

As we emerge from the experience we recognise many weaknesses. Although we have reasonable contact lists, and were able to run regular email news sheets to over 400 addresses we don't have the comprehensive network of contacts that would enable us to be fully aware of our parishioners needs, and may have lost touch with people altogether. We are seeing more people coming back to church as restrictions are eased, but we miss many who we would really like to welcome back, but we may not know where they are. We also need to consider that not everyone finds electronic communication easy, and so need to ensure personal contact stays a high priority.

There has been a good core of lay people here that demonstrated a strong commitment to the parish and partnership community. They have risen to the challenge of keeping the community running and shown that the laity are more than able and very willing to play a key part in the church, complementing the clergy and working with them. We need to build on the mutual respect that has built up between the laity and the clergy and enable their different vocations and charisms to be recognised and fostered, and to ensure that we encourage and nurture this continuing relationship in rebuilding our parishes.

Challenges remain however. We have lost contact with many, particularly the young and those that may not feel safe in public, or those who have drifted away and have not missed the practice of their faith. We need to understand why this has happened, and we need to renew our efforts to welcome people, and to reach out to those around us who experience doubt and fear. We need to more clearly show support, encouragement and fellowship to everyone, in particular young men and women, families and the housebound. Evangelical churches appear to be much more successful in attracting young people enthusiastically. We need to understand and learn from this. Funerals, Weddings and Baptisms are key points where we have the opportunity to meet people on the periphery of our communities, to welcome and engage with them, and invite them back.

As this synodal process coincided with the coming out from a time of isolation and restriction, it has emphasised to us how much we miss each other, and want to work together. There has been a lot of commonality in the responses describing both what we have lived through, and what we aspire to in the future. We have a core of people that work well together and want to be formed and refreshed spiritually so that they can turn outwards and be leaven in the world.

There are also differences. Styles of liturgy are a point of contention; disagreement with the Church, particularly on the subject of women's ordination, was expressed by some. With our new experience being synodal we recognise that we need to continue the praying, listening and talking together, and in that way come to a common understanding of how to work together for the good of all.

Joe Ronan, Heavenfield Partnership

St Benet Biscop Partnership

Dear Bishop Robert,

Reflections have transcended the earlier concerns about whether people would come back to Mass, and what needed to happen to get them back, to a recognition that there is no going back, as the world has changed and demands a new way of being, not least in how we organize ourselves, worship and witness to our faith.

Crises which include climate change, ecological degradation, pollution, increasing social problems, all caused by human activity, have been thrown into stark focus by the pandemic. It is truly a moment of truth for humanity – who are we? What is our purpose? What are our values? How can we learn to live in harmony with each other and the whole of creation? Yet the pandemic, very difficult though it has been, has enabled us to prioritise and ask “The Holy Spirit – what is really important to and for our Church?”

Many people are looking for a new model of Church and a greater experience of community. Too often, “parish” is taken to mean parishioners who attend Mass. It is time to embrace responsibility for all people in the parish, our community. All people who we come into contact with in our daily lives, regardless of who they are, form the community in which we journey together and is not exclusive to any church or religious belief. As society is changing, we are coming across more and more complex, sometimes harmonious, sometimes dysfunctional, family situations and we need to be sensitive to and understanding of others and their situation. We need to be sympathetic, impartial and treat people with dignity and respect, journeying with them rather than judge them. It is no good just going back to the Church as it was. We need to go in a better direction. It is a once in a lifetime chance to look at what our Church is about and seek a better dialogue for the future.

In responding to the signs of the times, the world of the ‘Church’ is too small. It is exclusive to many, in terms of gender, sexuality, language and marital status. It is time for the Church to seek out how it can best serve all people. What is it they expect of Church? How can we serve their needs better? It cannot be a one size fits all solution. We need to build a Church that serves the diverse needs of all its people.

The Church itself is not without significant challenges as priests and parishioners age and younger people are not attracted to or are alienated by organised religion. There is a perception that still lingers from the old style that some people still carry today: A generation which grew up in a church that was formidable, which still has a fear of the church and of the parish priest. Some disagreed with these aspects and won’t come to church, yet are still very spiritual people. Can they be won back? How do we contrive to listen in humility to their experience(s)?

As an expression of Synodality, can we move from “the experience of authority to the authority of experience”.

It is time to become a Church of grown-ups living out and shaping the faith, rather than a Church of children being told what to do. Too much hurt and harm has resulted from the experience of Church authority - with the result that people have left and gone elsewhere. We must listen to their experience. There is a need to move from just maintaining communities to re-educating clergy and people in mission outreach. “Obligation” is pivotal. It is time to examine what draws people to the Eucharist, how to generate a worshipping community that WANTS to be there instead of under threat of mortal sin.

Our young people express interest in spirituality in high school and beyond but this is not translated into parish attendance. They spend a lot of time on the internet. What initiatives could we employ to reach them through social media and other platforms? What are the important issues for them? Why do so many of them see the Church as irrelevant? Although young people coming to church as part of their First Holy Communion journey seem to enjoy the experience, many children and adults don't come because of other, competing 'social commitments'.

Contribution of the laity is vital – it is a great opportunity to expand what they can do: becoming participants rather than receivers. Over the last two years people have found lifegiving ways of praying together. There has been a great deal of creativity and resourcefulness, using technology to access a real breadth of spiritual nourishment. This has enabled people to experience 'Church' in a different way. Many of these new ways of gathering are from the initiative and leadership of lay people. Women are key in keeping things going and a concern is expressed that women's voices will be translated into men's voices in the synodal process.

It is vital to ensure that all people are treated equally and have equal opportunities within the Church (including the major issues of ordination of women priests and allowing priests to marry). With the increasing shortage of Priests, should parish finance committees and pastoral councils not be amalgamated and given the backing of Canon Law? In the process, LISTENING is key. We have to learn to listen to each other, particularly laity/clergy, with open minds, in a genuine spirit of dialogue, working out how clergy and laity can work in tandem more effectively.

There is a need to reinvigorate ecumenical dialogue and build on examples of good practice at parish level. Collaborating with other faith groups and organisations who share common aims would at least signal that the Roman Catholic community sees itself as a partner rather than a self-contained outlier.

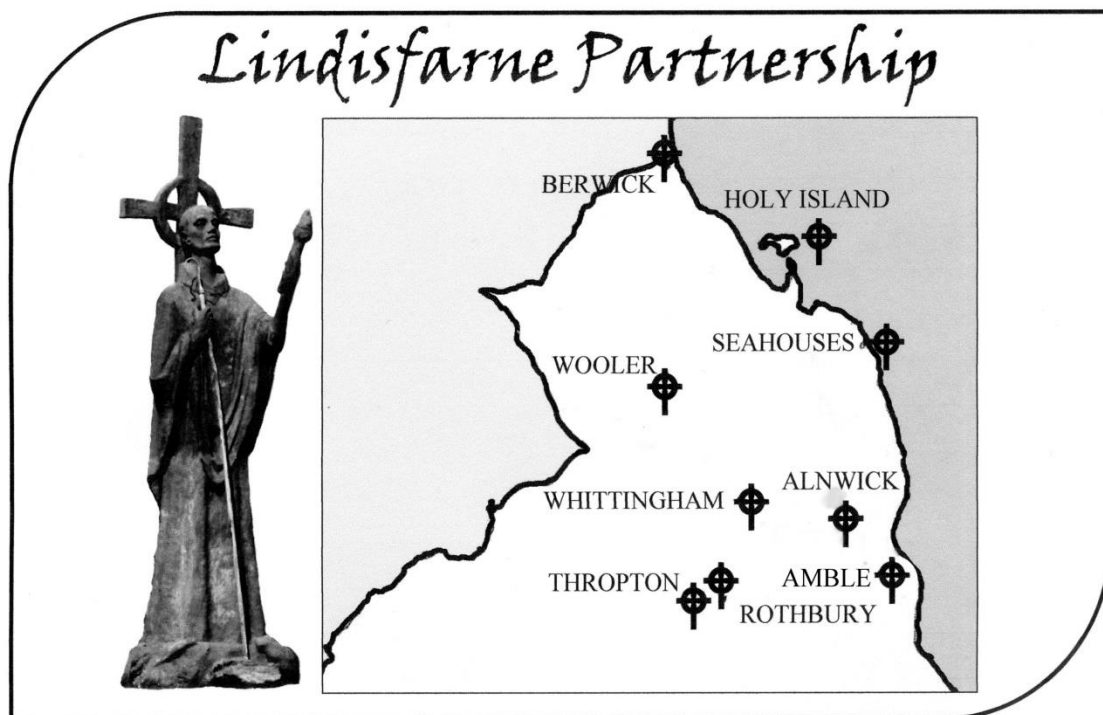
We as a Church can seize this vital time for humanity by living out the message of love and care for each other by embracing the principles of Laudato Si' and serving our local communities; reaching out to people on the margins; promoting a fairer, more equal society; promoting a vision of a fair, just and sustainable society based on love as a more fulfilling way of life consistent with God's plan for humanity and creation. There are many initiatives for justice in most communities. The church at a local level needs to become more coherently and explicitly engaged in that work for justice.

You did ask to hear negative/challenging responses: Not all respondents were willing to participate in the collective exercise and preferred to express their views separately. In particular, a strong opinion offered was that you should simply revisit the extensive and often exciting reports from the original Forward Together in Hope exercise. Another group complained of the shortness of time, while being sceptical of episcopal collaboration with the consultation. "The hierarchical structure of the Diocese makes it difficult to confidently voice our opinions" and even then, the Bishops Conference can dilute or ignore what they don't like. . .

Yours in the love of Christ
Michael Quincey,
Chair St. Benet Biscop Partnership

SYNOD 2022-2023

Reflections from the Lindisfarne Partnership February 2022



To: The Right Reverend Robert Byrne CO, Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle.

Please find attached the collated response to Synod 2022-23 from the seven active parishes within the Lindisfarne Partnership. Parishes at Rothbury and Thropton are currently closed.

Process

The process was promoted in different ways in different parishes including group meetings, zoom meetings, telephone discussions and a whole-parish presentation during Sunday Mass. Participants were invited to reflect on where we are as Church and also to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us and what the post-pandemic Church might look like. Group and individual reflections were invited to be submitted either in writing or via the on-line consultation route. The numbers engaging in the process varied from parish to parish with the highest level observed in St Paul's, the largest Partnership parish.

Experience

The process was launched during a particularly active phase of the pandemic and with a relatively short and challenging timescale provided at Parish and Partnership levels. Face to face meetings were not always possible but despite this, the response was surprising in terms of the number of issues and concerns raised and the level of participation achieved. Responses were articulate and well-argued, diverse, often very personal, sometimes critical and there was clear evidence of spiritual underpinning to many of the reflections. With the obvious exception of group meetings, there was probably less listening to others undertaken and more discernment at an individual and personal level. This is very evident in the written submissions received.

Feedback

Responses from all sources were collated into a single document which was discussed at a Partnership Meeting held on 15th February at Alnwick. Observations were divided into three broad categories; Positives, Concerns and Aspirations. There is an element of subjectivity in categorising observations in this way but a broad consensus that the process used had been valid was achieved within the 5th February Meeting. The number of positive observations was surprisingly large and gave great confidence that the Church is spiritually hungry and keen to come together again as vibrant, post-pandemic, faith communities. Unsurprisingly, the number of concerns raised was significantly larger although many of those were seeking positive outcomes to current issues at some future date. Most aspirations were seeking longer-term Church-wide change.

The main positives not covered elsewhere were:

There is great commitment to our faith amongst the Laity. The Church survived the pandemic and the challenges made us more united. Churches are open again for prayer and services but we need to get back to where we were. Our churches are viewed as welcoming and supportive and we continue to work with other denominations to help those who are less fortunate. The use of new technologies such as streaming of services during the pandemic has shown us what is possible. It can hopefully be adapted in the future to reach out to help the sick, the housebound, the elderly, the lonely and those who feel isolated. The invitation to the Laity to participate in Synod is greatly welcomed and presents an opportunity for positive change. It recognises that the Holy Spirit works through all of us not just the Clergy.

The main concerns not covered elsewhere were:

Provide stability of spiritual leadership in Parishes. Too many parishes have seen frequent and regular changes leading to a loss of continuity. The shortage of priests currently and the Diocesan emphasis on short-term solutions such as mergers and closure of parishes is a major concern. We need to protect our existing clergy and to reduce their workload to enable them to carry out their pastoral role in the best possible way.

We also need to address the historical legacy issues from abuse carried out by members of the Clergy.

The increasing age of our congregations and worries about who will replace us is a concern. We need to make our services feel safer and more comfortable to encourage the return of long-term absentees.

The Church needs more volunteers and we also need to harness the talents of those in our community. We need to improve contact with families, especially those with young children and not simply leave teaching the Faith to our schools. We need to attract and retain young people in our churches and provide the opportunities through Youth Groups and Youth Leaders to encourage their participation in Church activities.

Does our behaviour and our evident compassion and the expression of our Catholic belief make us appear as missionary and are we sharing resources in the best way possible?

The Church needs to be more influential on issues such as climate change, wars and the search for justice and peace and also finding and implementing solutions to poverty, famine and disease.

Is Canon Law fit for purpose? Many, though not all, believe we need a major overhaul of traditional Church theology and the current rules to enable these to be applied to modern times.

When will Vatican II be fully implemented? In our Diocese we appear to be implementing a strategy that fails to recognise that going back to the former ways of being Church does not meet the spiritual needs of many Catholics who may be forced to seek answers elsewhere.

Will our Bishops listen to the Laity? Many believe that this latest initiative will not bring about real change and some have voiced concerns that editorial control of the final Diocesan submission rests with the Bishop.

The main aspirations not covered elsewhere were:

Improve pastoral care for the dying and allow Deacons to administer the Sacrament of Penance.

Re-build our care of the housebound and the sick involving the whole Parish community.

Re-kindle the spiritual life of our community and place greater emphasis on prayer and re-build the family tradition of attending Mass together. Promote the involvement of children in the Mass e.g. as altar servers. Improve Catechesis in our churches and make greater use of Penitential Services and General Absolution.

Assessment

There is clear evidence in the reflections received that the process has started a debate about where we are as Church currently and what our direction of travel should be. There is, however, great unease about clericalisation within the Church and that the real power to make decisions within the Church is being concentrated in the hands of a small group of elderly men. Women are under-represented and many feel ignored and marginalised. The Laity in general should be given a greater role in the decision making processes.

The current model for the Church is not sustainable and its traditional role in western society is in decline. We have become more secularised and must now embrace significant change and not be afraid of it. The Church of the future must be more outward facing, more inclusive, more open and transparent, more accountable and identified by its community focus rather than its buildings. We need to remove the boundaries which prevent us from reaching out and reduce the emphasis on slavishly following rules. There is a real danger that unless we change, our churches could simply become museums in the longer term.

A small but significant group of respondents from two rural parishes took a different view on some issues arguing that the views of women were well respected and valued by the clergy. They also espoused the value of traditional, orthodox, creative and compassionate Catholicism and the attractiveness of the Latin Mass and would not wish to see any significant change to current Catholic theology and core beliefs.

Future Growth

There was very little in responses on the Church's future growth and more emphasis on getting back to where we were before the pandemic. We need to consolidate before we can start to grow again. Going forward, the majority of respondents would like us to continue to be a welcoming church but also kinder, more tolerant, more forgiving and more inclusive especially in its treatment of divorced Catholics and those who have been baptised but have walked away. We need to encourage each other to listen more, to be more reflective, more eager to discuss issues and less eager to criticise others.

This Church of the future should be able to embrace radical changes to meet modern challenges and become more collaborative. If the Church is to grow in the mid to long-term, we must have more priests including married priests and women priests and stronger and more sustainable communities.

Michael McPeake,
Chair, Lindisfarne Partnership.