

## A LETTER FROM PONTOP PARTNERSHIP

**Father Kevin T Dixon our Partnership Dean writes:**

To give an update on the progress made by our Partnership. In June 2017, the Diocese established 18 new partnerships across the Diocese. Together as a group of 10 parishes we became the new Partnership of Pontop. In the past, some of our parishes were working alone, other parishes had been grouped as a family of parishes, others were working as a cluster or partnership of parishes but for all of us, we were entering into a new partnership that was something radical and new.

### Where has the journey taken us?

The Diocese presented us with guidelines but these were just guidelines. When I think of our journey so far, the title of a spiritual book by Edwina Gateley comes to mind 'There was no path so I trod one', because together we are treading and exploring new territory.

Some may still be asking why partnership? But the reduction in both the number of priests and worshippers makes our existing structures unsustainable in the future. We currently have around 33,000 church goers but this figure is declining by over a thousand each year. Providentially, the priest to the church goer ratio has remained substantially the same since 1980, hovering around 1 to 350. Often people will say to me 'how do you manage looking after 3 parishes, having pastoral responsibility for 4 primary schools and the added workload that comes with being Partnership Dean?' People may feel concerned for us as priests but for me the workload of myself as a priest has changed since I was ordained 23 years ago, but the workload hasn't increased-why? Because of the support of fellow Priests, Deacons, and the laity who are involved in ways that they wouldn't have been involved in the past. The workload is shared. In the Gospels, we are all familiar with the words of Jesus 'The harvest is rich but the labourers are few' for me that paints a picture of the past when the Priest would find himself doing almost anything and everything, involving himself in things that he certainly wasn't ordained to do. But today we can say the harvest is rich and the labourers many because of the way Clergy and laity are beginning to work collaboratively together.

### How, within our Partnership is the workload being shared?

We have a Partnership Development Group, that has been meeting over the last year with a representative from every parish within the partnership, a representative from St Bede's School, a representative from our primary schools and a youth representative.

Following on from our area wide Mission in December, we felt the need to establish a new Youth Development Group. This group has been meeting over the past few months and is working tirelessly to provide opportunities for our young people. In the Spring we took a representative group of children from across our primary schools to a youth event in Hebburn. In June we held a joint youth event within the partnership and would aim to host similar events every term.

### Spirituality and Prayer

Bishop Seamus constantly reminds us of that need to root all things in prayer. Kathryn Turner, Head of the Spirituality Department at the Diocese has led 2 Days of Recollection within the Partnership since the establishment of the Partnership and also facilitated an Open Meeting in the hope that we may be able to establish a Spirituality Network within the Partnership. Our Network has met a number of times to pray together and to discern how best to move forward. This week we hosted a drama presentation that brought the Scriptures alive for people.

### Formation

We recognise Formation to be a key area for development and in the coming months will be looking at formation at every level from Sacramental Preparation, Adult Formation, Lay Leadership, The Ministry of Consolation etc. so that people are empowered and feel enabled to use their gifts and talents.

The work of looking at new Formation has already begun. This week we were one of 3 partnerships within the Diocese who were invited to an evening looking at a new way of preparing our children for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Preparation that would see the parents of our children taking more of a lead in

preparing their children for the Sacraments. In the autumn we will be hosting a Ministry of Consolation course so that as a partnership we can meet the needs of those who have suffered loss.

#### Finance Group

We have opened a Partnership account and have established a Partnership Finance Committee which provides a framework to help parishes within the partnership to work more closely together and to be mindful of finances within the whole Partnership. This again is an important ministry.

#### Liturgy Group

We would also look to establish a Liturgy Group across the Partnership that could perhaps work together preparing joint liturgies and celebrations when necessary.

#### Outreach Group

Our different faith communities are communities that put their faith into action, reaching out in so many ways, SVP, Legion of Mary, Food Banks, Luncheon Clubs, Outreach Groups, Mother and Toddlers, Walking Group, Allotment Project and so the list grows...

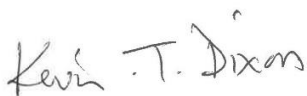
#### Communication

Over a number of months a group of people have been looking at the whole area of Communication, but we recognise the need to form a new group, again with a representative from every parish so that the work of the Partnership is communicated to all. We are blessed in that the Diocese are able to provide support and guidance in all areas of development.

The Partnership Development Group have played a part in building foundations that will carry us into the future, but the Development Group although an important group is just a little cog in a much bigger wheel. Next week the Partnership Development Group will be meeting at St Joseph's Church at 6:30pm for a time of prayer, prior to their group meeting. We would like to invite parishioners from across the partnership to gather with us for prayer at 6:30pm, the Church will remain open until 8pm with the idea that the group will be held in prayer by the whole partnership as they begin to work on the Partnership Development Plan and we would invite those who have gathered in the Church to join the Partnership Development Group at 8pm for a small social gathering. In September, Fiona Standfield, the new Chief Operating Officer for the Diocese will be meeting with the Partnership Development Group to hear something of our vision and support us in our endeavours.

In the autumn we plan to have an open partnership meeting where we will celebrate and share more of the good things that are happening, where we will hear more from parishioners about how they are living out their faith and building up partnership often in quiet and hidden ways and give an open invitation to everyone to be involved in the life of our partnership.

Finally, I would like to thank you all, Father Cornelius, Father John, Father Tom, our retired Priests, our Deacons, all parishioners within our worshipping communities and schools, for the part you are playing in building and establishing our partnership of Pontop.



**Father Kevin T Dixon**

**Pontop Partnership Dean**