

THE FUTURE OF BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN PARISH FOLLOWING BISHOP PETER'S DECISION

Our Parish Vision

Through God's Grace, we are one family in Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, inspired by the Word and sustained by the Sacraments. We welcome and value each person as an individual. We encourage one another to use our talents to serve the Lord, in our parish and the wider community, and to develop and pass on a living faith as we journey together confident in the promise of God's Kingdom.

Background to the Strategy Group's recommendations and Bishop Peter's decision:

It had become clear that it was impossible for one priest to celebrate Sunday Mass in each of the four churches and serve the four communities separately, so maintaining the status quo was not an option. Bishop Peter could not justify two priests serving a Mass going population of less than four hundred people in relation to the rest of the Diocese.

The Strategy Group was set up to make recommendations to Bishop Peter for the parish to operate as '1 parish 1 priest' from 2012 and build a thriving Catholic community. The Strategy Group considered how best to develop the parish as a unified, thriving and growing Catholic community both in the short and longer term and presented its recommendations to Bishop Peter at the end of December. The Strategy Group has now disbanded.

The Strategy Group recommended that, in the short term, the parish should retain Our Lady of Grace church only and that, longer term, a new purpose-built church should be built on the St Bernard's school site. An alternative recommendation for the short term was that St Wulstan's was retained in addition to Our Lady of Grace, prior to the new church being built.

Bishop Peter has discussed the recommendations with the Strategy Group and has considered them carefully. He has decided that St Edmund Campion and St James will close by Summer this year and Fr Innocent has proposed that Masses will be celebrated at Our Lady of Grace at 6pm on Saturday and 11 am on Sunday and at St Wulstans at 9am on Sunday.

Bishop Peter has asked Father Willie and Father Innocent to form a group involving all the church and parish and school communities for this second stage looking to the future growth of the Catholic community for the longer term in High Wycombe.

Answers to questions raised by parishioners.

The following information and feedback has been prepared to help answer some of the questions raised, both during the meeting of 25 January at which Bishop Peter gave his decision, and at subsequent meetings. Written questions submitted during the meeting with Bishop Peter, but not answered then due to lack of time have been included.

Q1. Isn't closure of churches about decline rather than growth? How can we thrive and grow as a Catholic community with fewer churches?

A1. The Strategy Group felt that a clear solution to the need to operate as one parish with one priest would be to have one church which could serve all the current parishioners' needs and allow for growth. None of our existing churches has the capacity to provide that and so the Strategy Group identified so a shorter term solution, to retain Our Lady of Grace church only was recommended for when Fr.Jude leaves us later this year. Having considered this recommendation, Bishop Peter has decided that 2 churches (St Edmund Campion and St James) will close by Summer this year and Masses will continue at Our Lady of Grace and St Wulstans. This will allow us to build on the existing strengths we have. Many parishioners undertake one or more ministries across the 4 churches, moving to 2 churches concentrates this wealth of talent, creating a more unified parish and providing opportunities to share expertise and develop those ministries to the benefit of all. The Strategy Group recommended that consideration should be given to employing a lay Parish Pastoral Worker to support Fr Innocent and assist in integration. This will be for the Parish Service Team to consider in light of available funds.

Q2. Is there any long-term vision to inspire the parish beyond the immediate church closures?

A2. In the longer term the Strategy Group hoped that our parish would become truly unified in a new church but this requires a great deal more detailed consideration and engagement with other interested parties. The Strategy Group did identify one solution for a new purpose-built church to be built at St Bernard's and St Augustine's school in Daws Hill. Amongst other benefits this would enable our parish to make a greater contribution to the faith development of the youth and their families who are our future. But there may be other options and all options would need to be fully considered and costed. That was beyond the scope and remit of the Strategy Group. Bishop Peter has asked Father Willie and Father Innocent to form a new group with wider diocesan membership (see Q25 for details) to look to the future growth of the Catholic community in High Wycombe.

Q3. Why could we not maintain 4 churches? Is this because of money or priests?

A3. Clearly money has to be a factor as we cannot run a parish without it. But this was not the driving factor, the limited number of priests was the over-riding factor along with the need to ensure that they are used to best effect. Bishop Peter was clear that he could not justify 2 priests for a parish of 400 Mass-going Catholics, when other parishes in the diocese of well over 1000 are served by a single priest. Consequently, our parish should operate from fewer centres. Furthermore, Bishop Peter set the appropriate limit as 2 Sunday Masses and 1 Saturday vigil Mass with for any one priest, so the status quo was not an option.

Q4. Why did the Bishop choose to keep an extra church open when the recommendation was for only one?

A4. Bishop Peter has set out the reasons for his decision in his letter (available on the parish website). He did not specifically say why he chose to keep 2 churches and it would not be appropriate for us to speculate about that. What we can say is that retaining 2 churches was an alternative option presented to Bishop Peter by the Strategy Group. A minority of members of the Strategy Group felt that closing 3 churches would risk losing many more parishioners in the short term, and could also reduce the financial viability of

the parish while increasing the impression of Catholic decline if the growth vision was not realised within 3 years.

Q5. What criteria were used by the SG to make recommendations as to which church should remain open and which close? What was the advantage of St Wulstans over St Edmund Campion's?

A5. The Strategy Group majority recommendation was that 1 church should be retained and so that had to be the largest to accommodate as many parishioners as possible. Our Lady of Grace can hold the largest number of parishioners for Mass so the closure of St Wulstans, St Edmund Campion and St James churches was recommended. The Strategy Group's alternative minority recommendation to keep a second church open is explained in Q4. The choice of St Wulstans as the second church was a difficult one but reasons included the fact that it had accommodation for Fr Innocent. Bishop Peter has decided to retain St Wulstans in addition to Our Lady of Grace. He did not state his reasons in his letter.

Q6. Why did Strategy Group not consult on anything? It would have been helpful to have had the opportunity to comment or make suggestions, not on detail but broad themes.

A6. The Strategy Group did engage with parishioners and asked for input, comments and suggestions throughout the time they were developing their recommendations. A special e mail account was set up for comments and hard copy folders were available at each church and individual members of the group were available after Mass. The Strategy Group also held two parish-wide forums at which comments and questions were specifically invited. The Group also held face to face meetings where requested and with parishioners who had particular suggestions for consideration. All input received was considered by the group.

Q7. What about the future new build that the Strategy Group recommended, where would the money come from?

A7. Bishop Peter has asked Father Willie and Father Innocent to form a new group with wider diocesan membership (see Q25 for details) to look to the future growth of the Catholic community in High Wycombe. The Strategy Group idea for a new build was that sale proceeds from existing churches would be used.

Q8. What happens when Fr Willie retires?

A8. That is a matter for Bishop Peter upon which he may take advice from the new wider diocesan group set up to consider the longer term vision as well as his usual diocesan advisors.

Q9. Will appropriate provision be made for car parking when we have 1 church?

A9. Car parking always has to be a consideration in looking at new sites. Again, the new wider diocesan group will have to consider this.

Q10. Given that Bishop Peter said we can have three Sunday Masses (1 vigil Mass), why did the Strategy Group not consider retaining three churches?

A10. The Strategy Group did consider all the permutations of keeping any 2 or 3 churches open. The majority of the Group felt that there were no functional advantages by retaining multiple locations and that this would not help unify the parish. Focusing the community at fewer locations will make it easier for the parish priest and the Parish

Service Team to focus their efforts on fewer buildings and consequently it should allow for a better service to be provided to parishioners. Maintenance costs will also be reduced.

Q11. Which services will have children's liturgy when we move to the new timetable?

A11. All three Masses will have children's liturgy.

Q12 Will St Edmund Campion and St James be sold? What will happen to the money raised?

A12. Bishop Peter has said that these churches will close. It is not sustainable to keep churches open when Mass will not be celebrated there and diocesan property administrators have indicated that churches cannot be 'mothballed'. We have to use our resources to best effect and maximise their use. Additionally, as stated above, focusing the community at fewer locations will make it easier for the parish priest and the Parish Service Team (PST) to focus their efforts on fewer buildings and consequently it should allow for a better service to be provided to parishioners. Proceeds arising from the sale of any church will be given to the parish.

Q13. Can St Edmund Campion be left open until our 30th anniversary in July – we can then celebrate and close at same time?

Q13. This is a matter that the Parish Service Team will need to consider.

Q14. How will St James be able to continue without the support of the Catholic community?

A14. Bishop Peter has notified the Bishop of Buckingham of his decision and the local Anglican ecumenical officer and county officer have also been notified. Action is in hand to meet with the Anglican representatives and discuss a way forward.

Q15. Some people can't drive, how will they get to churches that are further away? How about asking if St Bernard's School minibus can be used to take people to Mass?

A15. Plans have been drawn up to make sure that we identify parishioners who will need help with the changes and this is one aspect that will be looked at. There is a great deal of work that will now take place to ensure we are ready for the changes in the Summer.

Q16. What's covered in these plans? How will St Wulstans and OLG welcome the displaced members of the other communities? Will there be any provision made for a youth worker? What will happen to our sacred objects, furniture etc? Can it be housed suitably? Will parishioners be consulted?

A16. The plans cover a whole range of objectives, all aimed at ensuring we develop as a unified and thriving parish as well as looking at what we need to do between now and the Summer. The Parish Service Team will consider these plans which include the need to support the youth. Any new post, such as a youth worker, will be dependent on securing funding to pay for it as we have to be self-financing as a parish.

For example, actions include those to:

- Ensure parishioners have opportunities to discuss the decision and raise any concerns
- Ensure artefacts/sacred items from closing churches can be re-homed where possible at Our Lady of Grace and St Wulstans.

- Ensure that a range of Masses and music ministries is provided
- Establish a timetable of social events to help build a unified community
- Review charitable giving and identify support needed
- Support the sick and elderly
- Consider the needs of the youth and families
- Create a truly welcoming parish
- Develop links with the Catholic school
- Coordinate catechetical and liturgical provision across the school and the parish
- Develop sacramental preparation
- Develop evangelisation
- Ensure clear, timely and effective communication with parishioners and the wider Catholic community
- Publicise financial accounts and hold finance AGM to consider fund raising requirements.

Q17. Will everything on these plans be done? Can we have a copy?

A17. The plans have been developed by the Strategy Group and support the recommendations made to the Bishop. The Parish Service Team, in conjunction with Fr Innocent, will now have to consider the plans in light of Bishop Peter's decision and take them forward as appropriate. There is a lot of work to be done before the Summer and we should not underestimate the effort and support that will be needed. The Parish Service Team will need to prioritise the actions to ensure that key aspects are done quickly. Parishioner support will be essential. Copies of the plans can be made available on request and hard copies are held at each church.

Q18. Can we have a copy of the recommendations made to the Bishop?

A18. A copy of the recommendations made to Bishop Peter, less some sensitive information, can be made available upon request. A hard copy is available at each church.

In summary, the majority of the Strategy Group recommended that in the short term only Our Lady of Grace church should be retained and that longer term a new purpose built church should be developed on the school site. A minority of the Group recommended that St Wulstan's was retained in addition to Our Lady of Grace, prior to the new build. A fundamental consideration of the Strategy Group was that recommendations must be firmly rooted in the context of "Growth" and not "Decline" of our Catholic Community. The key point now is that Bishop Peter has made his decision and that is what we must all now work hard to implement.

Q19. Will parishioners get an opportunity to comment on the decision and ask questions?

A19. Yes, there are plans in place to ensure that parishioners will get opportunities to comment on the decision and raise any concerns. Parishioners can put comments in books held at each church or raise issues with the Parish Service Team/Fr Innocent.

Q20. What will replace the old Parish Councils?

A20. Fr Innocent has set up two new groups to supersede the previous church councils: **Parish Service Team (PST)**. This replaces the Church Councils and will assist Fr Innocent with the running of the parish as a single entity and in implementing the Bishop's decision regarding closure of St Edmunds and St James. It is a separate

group to the one that Bishop Peter has asked to be set up to look to the future growth of the Catholic community in High Wycombe.

Parish Implementation and Development Team (PIDT). This is a new group whose members will lead and/or co-ordinate the various parish lay ministries (which include finance, liturgy, social activities etc).

Q21. How/what criteria were used to select the Service team groups?

A21. Fr Innocent selected the members for both groups and took into account any suggestions received from the previous church councils, the Strategy Group and other advisors. Members will be appointed for a fixed term and there will be opportunities for other parishioners to take on roles later.

Q22. Equipment for the May Fayre is currently in the loft at St James, where will it be stored?

A22. This will be one of many questions on practicalities that will have to be considered by the new parish teams. New storage facilities will need to be found.

Q23. Why can we not have Fr Innocent living at St Augustine's with Fr Willie?

A23. That is something that Fr Willie and Fr Innocent would need to consider and discuss if they felt it appropriate to do so.

Q24. Are there parish boundaries? If so, what will they be for BJHN?

A24. *Currently, boundaries are undefined.*

Specific questions answered at the decision meeting on 25 January

Q25. What has Bishop Peter decided about the longer term? What's the timeframe for a single church? If the plan is to have one church for High Wycombe eventually, why don't we just close all BJHN churches and use St Augustine's now?

A25. **Bishop Peter's response:** For the longer term, Bishop Peter has asked Father Willie and Father Innocent to form a group involving all the church and parish and school communities for this second stage looking to the future growth of the Catholic community in High Wycombe. Bishop Peter has asked that the Diocesan Trustees be represented on the group by Father Brendan Killeen. Bishop Peter said that it is a big complex vision and needs driving. Bishop Peter felt it was not possible to give a timing to this but assured everyone that there is a commitment to this. There will be a need to involve the whole Catholic community. We need to hold onto this vision.

Q26. St James is a unique situation with a close relationship with the Anglicans, has that been considered? Has the Bishop considered the importance of how we announce to our Anglican partners at St James? What will happen to our joint responsibility to St James with our Anglican community?

A26. **Mgr Healy response:** All were very conscious of the particular circumstances at St James. Bishop Peter has notified the Bishop of Buckingham of his decision and the local Anglican ecumenical officer and county officer have also been notified. Action is in hand to meet with the Anglican representatives and discuss a way forward.

Q27. What is the timetable for closures, changes in Mass times, work to consider the longer term? Why wait until June?.

A27. Bishop Peter's response. A big issue is Fr Innocent's holiday from 10 June to 10 August, this will be a significant factor in determining timelines for the shorter term changes and so changes would need to be in place by May or September. Bishop Peter would like the communities to be involved in the decision on timelines. Perhaps sooner would be better than later.

With regard to the longer term vision, there is no reason why the new group cannot be set up very quickly. Bishop Peter and the Diocese are committed to this work which will involve discussion with other interested parties. Bishop Peter saw the longer term vision as a sign of hope, life and growth.

Q28. How will Ministries be integrated? How will the Masses be configured (i.e. times and location)?

A28. Fr Innocent's response. Fr Innocent made it clear that whatever role you currently play will continue; no-one need stop performing their Ministry. The new Parish Service Team will be looking at this. Roles can continue in the two remaining churches and Ministries will be integrated. As for Mass configuration, this has been designed to meet the needs of the maximum number of parishioners whilst taking into account Bishop Peter's direction regarding the maximum number of Masses to be held (2 on Sunday 1 Saturday vigil Mass). Regarding music – all current music teams will be integrated at St Wulstans and OLG, with an opportunity for the organist who currently provides music at Downley to cover the Vigil Mass. Readers, Eucharistic Ministers etc. will also be integrated.

Q29. Is it a new arrangement that sale proceeds go to the parish, previously money went to the diocese?

A29. Bishop Peter/Fr Killeen's response. Clarification from Rome on this point was received a few years ago. If a church closed and there were no longer any parishioners then money would go to the diocese but if a church was closed and parishioners remained then sale proceeds would go to the parish. Further if the church was built using donor money then the intention of the donor is important and any money raised must be used in a way that the donor intended.

Other questions asked at the decision meeting but not answered due to lack of time

Q30. How are we going to handle the message that goes out about these closures, how will we stop it being a message of decline?

A30. Press releases are planned both for the Vine and local press. This will ensure that a positive message of a long term vision with growth at its heart will be communicated to others.

Q31. Did the Strategy Group look at other church closures to get examples?

A31. Yes, some of the Strategy Group visited Mgr Vincent Harvey in Southampton to discuss his experience at Basingstoke Holy Ghost parish where 5 Mass centres were closed and a new church was built. The new church was co-located with the Catholic school, where all Sunday Masses are now said. There were significant parallels and some differences to our own situation.

Q32. How are parishioners at Our Lady of Grace and St Wulstans going to find a place for all that can be offered from the parishioners of St Edmund Campion and St James? How will others be welcomed? Will the members of choirs and

altar servers and Eucharistic Ministers and children's liturgy be fully integrated into the 2 Mass centres?

A32. Those undertaking any roles will be welcomed and encouraged to undertake those roles at Our Lady of Grace and St Wulstans. The Strategy Group has drawn up plans for the Parish Service Team to consider that include the need to provide a welcome to all. Social and spiritual events are also included in the plan. Our parish vision statement makes a clear commitment that will 'we welcome and value each person as an individual'.

Q33 Why can't we have different Mass times (9am, 10.30pm and 12pm)? Why 2 Masses at Our Lady of Grace and 1 at St Wulstans, why not the other way round?

A33. Bishop Peter was clear that the limit was one Saturday vigil Mass and 2 Sunday Masses. Three Sunday Masses is not an option. Fr Innocent has made the decision on the Mass times to be provided following the church closures.

Q34. Why did it take the Strategy Group so long? This could have been decided a year ago.

A34. The recommendation made by the Strategy Group was more radical than the changes Bishop Peter announced. In recommending 3 church closures in the short term and a new build church for the longer term, the Group undertook a great deal of work and research first identifying the parish vision, against which all options needed to be measured, then looking at all the permutations of church closures including identifying ministries undertaken by parishioners at all 4 churches, the individual facilities available at each church and potential site values. This was in addition to holding a number of parish forums to explain and seek parishioner views. A large part of the group's work was focused on the long term vision which they felt critical in their deliberations in order to build a thriving and growing Catholic community in High Wycombe. A read through of the group's substantial proposal to Bishop Peter (available on request) will give more information on all the aspects covered by the group

Q35. Is the 400 parishioner census figure less than a few years ago?

A35. Our parish Mass attendance has been steadily declining falling below 600 in 1995, below 500 in 1996, below 450 in 2006 and below 400 in 2010. It was the vision, hope and plan of the Strategy Group that the changes now taking place should mark the start of a renewal within the parish which will reverse this decline.

Q36. Does the Church in the UK foresee the resurgence of practising Catholics or not?

A36. We can't answer this for the UK but the Strategy Group certainly saw this as essential in our local area but unlikely to happen purely by chance so their recommendations and action plan were crafted to work hard to achieve this.

Statements made by parishioners at the decision meeting

Parishioners:

- When the first temple was destroyed, people said the second temple wasn't as good. The Lord said that the glory of the second would be greater than the first. This change is the opposite of struggling on, it offers us a great opportunity. We have to take this opportunity – referring to possibility of building a new church.

- When referring to the three 'C's (Connections, Conversation and Confidence), principles of Walking Humbly with our God strategy, don't forget Conscience.
- I feel conned and unloved.
- I am distraught that my community is about to be disbanded
- As a stranger to the parish, I found it was a 50/50 process, you have to meet each other half way. What you get depends on what you put in.
- Some people feel they will be overwhelmed. There will be lots of helping each other to do.
- Closure of the ecumenical church in this area – what a message this sends
- A hope for sharing talents and social events across the parish.
- All BJHN will work to support each other.

Bishop Peter brought the meeting to a close with the following:

- He reflected long and hard on the pain caused and is very conscious of this
- He wants us to know that decision was not taken lightly
- He thanks us for the maturity of our faith and our response
- We belong to the Catholic church, not individual buildings, and in our pain should hold on to that
- We are all going to be involved in helping our communities and being as upbeat as possible

Statements made by parishioners at meetings following all Masses on 28/29 January

- Proposal – keep St EC building not as a church, but as a community resource for hire (thus retaining income) and a social resource for BJHN parish, until sale is agreed. This would avoid problems with vandalism. Small group of current community could be responsible for managing this.
- Current EC hirers will need to be informed about closure and may need a period of notice to be given. However if it can be deconsecrated and retained for community and parish use we need to ensure we do not lose hirers.
- Mass times need much more thought – we had been told there would be consultation on them. 9am Mass very difficult for many older people. Consultation should now be undertaken as it would help process of accepting change
- All expected this but it is still a severe emotional shock.
- Why wait, make closures soon.
- Focus should not be all on money. The diocese should help us out.
- The Strategy Group should have engaged with St Augustine's 18 months ago.
- There are travel problems for EC parishioners to attend OLG/St W
- The Daws Hill site should not be the only one under consideration for long term vision
- Strength at EC is ability to have a seamless coffee/tea following Mass – nearly everyone stays and chats. Must look at ways of achieving this at St W's
- Must form a **new** community – integrate communities fully to form a new one

- Identify what defines each community, then reconcile the differences, emphasise the similarities
- Can't see any advantage of St W's over St EC in terms of which should be retained and which should have closed.
- Importance of supporting our youth in the future is paramount.
- Don't want to be forced to go to a particular Mass (regarding music provision)
- Benches at St W very uncomfortable especially for elderly people
- Will we feel included, we weren't told of children's liturgy arrangements at the church we visited.
- A number of people commented that they were really pleased with the long term proposals made in doc
- Prior to closure, St W & St EC congregations get together and have a joint Sunday Mass (maybe on several successive weeks) at St EC say at 11am. This would have to be when Fr Jude was back and before Fr Innocent goes on holiday.
- Several compliments were made to the Strategy Group for the professional nature of their report. The hard work required was acknowledged also.
- A number of parishioners commented that they were really pleased with the long term proposals made by the Strategy Group.