

A LETTER FROM OUR PARTNERSHIP DEAN, FATHER KEVIN T DIXON

LISTEN THEN... KEEP AND OBSERVE WHAT WILL MAKE YOU PROSPER AND GIVE YOU GREAT INCREASE, AS THE LORD GOD ... HAS PROMISED YOU, GIVING YOU A LAND WHERE MILK AND HONEY FLOW.

Today, across the partnership I would like you to reflect on our journey together so far. To pause for a while to take stock, to count the blessings that have been ours, blessings in abundance that we have received from the Lord and each other since the establishment of our partnership. Ours is a partnership where milk and honey flow.

Just for a moment let us recall some of the blessings that we have shared in since the launch of our partnership, those times when milk and honey have flowed:

- Our partnership Flower Festival
- Our partnership Mission
- The fruits of the Spirituality network
- Blazing Grannies
- Shared days of Recollection
- The Healing Service
- Different prayer gatherings
- The forming of the new Youth Development Group
- The recent Youth Event prepared by our young people
- The wonderful work that happens daily in our schools
- The Eucharistic Congress in Liverpool attended by representatives from across the partnership
- Pilgrimages to Holy Island, Walsingham and Poland
- Partnership Walks
- Various Outreach gatherings and events
- Christmas Party, Ceilidh and other shared social events
- Partnership-wide celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation
- The ordination of Peter and Paul, our newly ordained Deacons
- And a welcome to Fr. Cornelius and Deacon Chris into our Clergy Team

For all of us there have been grace-filled moments where we have enjoyed a taste of the milk and honey provided by God.

In this whole process of change from parish to partnership and amidst the blessings, for all of us there have been times of struggle, for change is never easy. We have seen a reduction in Masses, a change in Mass times which for many has meant a move from a familiar place of worship to another worshipping community, perhaps because Mass is at a more convenient time. It is wonderful to see for most, fuller churches, something to celebrate. But for some, there may be that feeling that worshipping communities have lost something of their old identity, sometimes there can be a struggle that comes with the sharing of roles and responsibilities.

So yes, we can acknowledge the blessings since the launch of the partnership and it is right that we acknowledge our struggles too. But as we journey through those struggles together, hopefully the relationships that we share individually with each other and within our faith communities will be strengthened, making us stronger and more faithful disciples journeying together towards the building of the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel we heard those encouraging words of Jesus to the scribe who was trying his best to do right: ***You are not far from the Kingdom of God.***

Now, if we try our best to do what is right and move closer to the Kingdom, what will be the challenges that we'll face? The challenges will be many but one of the first things we need to do is to grow in love as the commandment of Jesus says. Our love for God – a love that deepens as we pray and as Bishop Seamus often reminds us, all things must be rooted in prayer. Secondly, we are called to love our neighbour – a love that will grow as we welcome and include everyone. This means everyone will feel at home and have a real sense of belonging wherever they come to worship or at whatever partnership event they attend.

The values of the Kingdom are very different from the values that we tend to uphold in life. For in the Kingdom, the last shall be first, the weak shall be strong, the poor shall be rich, and the leader shall be the servant. This calls for a radical change in our ways of thinking and relating to one another. It will also help us to feel that it is in the giving of ourselves in love that we'll not lose out in anyway. But, rather we'll receive more than we can ask for or ever imagine because we can never outdo the generosity of God.

Partnership is a term that may have been used in the past when a group of parishes were working together but Pontop our new partnership is something more radical and newer. It takes us away from becoming inward looking and

self-serving to being inclusive and self-giving. Our partnership also opens for us new opportunities to work together as one wider faith community, sharing gifts, talents and resources, sharing all that we have within our possession so that the needs of all within our partnership are met.

At present the partnership is served by nine clergy – four priests and five deacons and by yourselves, good and faithful lay people of all generations who have answered that call to become an active disciple, all sharing your gifts, talents and time so generously for the building of the Kingdom and for the good of our partnership. We have ten churches, nine Primary Schools, and one Secondary School within the partnership and links with other schools and establishments. Facing the future, we need to accept the reality that things will change.

The number of priests serving the partnership will fall over the coming years, and we know when we look at the age profile of our worshipping communities across the partnership that unless there is a radical change and upturn, then our numbers within our worshipping communities will become much smaller, and so we have to face the question - for how long will the maintenance and upkeep of 10 churches be viable?

We can hold on to what we have got at present but by holding on to how things are in the present and have always been, is there the danger that we become a church of maintenance rather than mission and we are being called to be a missionary outreaching church. So how can we prepare for the future?

What are some of the things we need to do now?

The Partnership Development Group is working on a development plan that looks at the following areas:

1. Prayer and Spirituality
2. Formation
3. Young People
4. Outreach
5. Communication
6. Human Resources
7. Finance and Property

Alongside this we need to consider the possibility of mergers and amalgamations of some or all of our parishes. This is already taking place in

other partnerships across the diocese. Mergers and amalgamations could see perhaps two or more parishes coming together to form one new parish serving a wider area. This would see streamlined administration, less duplication, shared finances with the pooling together of resources, talents and ministries.

In the coming weeks every parishioner will be invited to share in a conversation about the possibility of mergers and amalgamations. If mergers and amalgamations are to be the way forward, which parishes and areas would you see coming together to form new parishes? Would you see 2 or 3 new parishes or could you see the partnership becoming one new parish serving the whole area?

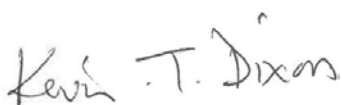
For some perhaps there is that need to move from thinking of the church in terms of buildings to thinking of the church in terms of people and are people not more precious than any buildings? Yes it's right that we look after the bricks and mortar but let it not be to the cost of meeting the needs of the people we are called to serve.

As we ponder over these thoughts, we pray for an openness of mind and heart so that the Spirit of God will enlighten and inspire us to be ready for change. Let us keep in mind the words of John Henry Newman; "To live is to change, and to change often is to become more perfect." May we offer this prayer everyday for the intention of the partnership so that we may prosper and grow:

Lord, we thank you for the gift of Pontop Partnership and for all that you are doing to guide us as we seek to glory you and serve our community.

As we reflect on our journey so far, may we celebrate all that has been achieved and acknowledge the challenges that lie ahead. Help us to discern your will and to move forward confidently with you at our side.

We ask this in the name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen



**FATHER KEVIN T DIXON
PONTOP PARTNERSHIP DEAN**