

DIOCESE OF ARGYLL AND THE ISLES SUBMISSION REGARDING DIOCESAN STRUCTURES

This report is the fruit from Conversations in the Spirit by both the Diocesan Pastoral Council and by the Clergy of our Diocese. Each discernment session lasted more than four hours, not including the writing and scrutiny of the initial reports and then this collated submission for the Bishops' Conference of Scotland.

1 Convergences

Argyll and the Isles ought to remain a separate diocese but we do need to better share resources with other dioceses. Such resources could be financial or expertise in areas such as property management, Health and Safety etc. However, Argyll and the Isles also has much to offer others and we envisage an 'exchange of gifts' as proposed in the Synod of Bishops Final Document.

Mission is the most important value. Diocesan structures are secondary to and must be supportive of mission. However, we do believe that preserving our unique identity is best for promoting mission within our diocese. If we are to merge we would like to see the evidence for why this would improve our ability for mission. Merging alone solves nothing.

We feel that Christ is with us; a personal experience of Christ with me and my community.

The mission is Christ's mission – we must have the same priorities as Jesus' were. Within the diocese there are many signs of mission – it is not restricted to preaching and the Sacraments but service of the kingdom of God. Therefore mission is present: through love, visiting the sick and bereaved, Foodbanks, pilgrimages, silence and beauty, catechesis, seeking justice, witness to family and friends, COVID outreach, outreach beyond Church, Liturgy, Ecumenism, working with a Local Authority to adopt the SCES Sex Education Programme in non-denominational schools, Gaelic culture, evangelising through Gaelic media, writing and publishing as a form of mission.

Our diocese enjoys a vibrant Gaelic and Celtic heritage which enriches our spirituality and religious life. For Western Europe we are also extremely rural consisting principally of small and scattered communities. We have no town with even 10,000 people. How would our needs be understood so that we receive adequate pastoral care if we merged with an urban diocese? Merging with another rural area with a low population would increase our existing challenges.

Our diocese has multiple geographical challenges which are especially exacerbated during the long winter months. The weather, transport costs and travel infrastructure has deteriorated bringing new challenges for mission. Becoming part of an even larger diocese would be unhelpful.

Unique in secular Europe is that many of our parishes are a natural part of their society. We have a presence, basic to our nature as a Diocese. We engage with our surrounding societies which often supports us too. However, more intentional evangelisation beyond presence and celebrating sacraments is needed.

Our bishop is accessible to us, regularly visiting even the most remote areas. Merging our diocese would reduce pastoral interaction between the bishop and his clergy and parishioners. Parishes being swallowed up (we are different from elsewhere in Scotland) would increase isolation for the clergy and for our small communities. This would impact negatively both on mission and at the human level. That our bishop could have care for a second diocese was not seen as realistic or helpful for mission.

We see a welcoming and open Church regarding ecumenism, the incomer, the youth and elderly. We rejoiced in the growth of adult converts and those returning to the practice of the faith. Children were recognised as missionaries of parents.

The role of the clergy is important, especially as they understand the local context. Likewise, the laity in remote places were described as resourceful. Many were faithful in travelling long distances to mass.

The enthusiasm and insightfulness of the recently created (and first ever) Diocesan Pastoral Council is a sign of hope for mission.

Throughout this process our voices must be heard; change must not be imposed on us.

Courage! Don't be despondent. Trust in God.

2 Divergences

Regarding the specific question of mission both positive realities and the need for support and growth were identified.

Many parishes spoke of a strong outreach to the poor through societies such as SVDP and food banks while others spoke of a 'quiet' visiting of the sick and dying. The Diocesan Holyland Accompaniment Initiative was mentioned. However, others thought that their parish could improve their outreach to the poor.

3 Areas for further Study and Discernment

How can we better share good practice and improve cooperation across parishes and the diocese? This should also include financial support for poorer parishes by the richer parishes.

How can we better support clergy?

Increasing lay involvement, especially among men. Formation of laity that will improve the acceptance of lay ministries.

How can we deepen spiritual and catechetical growth of the laity, including our youth?

Can parishes be better prepared for not having a resident priest?

Overcoming a distaste for meetings which negatively impacts synodality.

More information is needed about other dioceses before decisions can be made.

Better use of digital technology.

Conclusion

There is a deep love for Argyll and the Isles. There was both enthusiasm and honesty during both sessions. People see much that is good in their parishes and diocese but recognise their

struggles too. Perhaps this process will encourage self-reflection leading to growth. We need to grow in mission.

The unanimous position is that Argyll and the Isles should remain an independent diocese as this best suited our unique reality and so enable missionary growth. However, we did recognise our limitations and therefore would benefit from better cooperation with other dioceses, better understood as a mutual exchange of gifts.