

EXPLANATION OF THE PROCESS FOR DISCERNING FUTURE PLANNING FOR MISSION IN THE DIOCESE OF ARGYLL AND THE ISLES

“Mission is not merely one of the Church’s many tasks. It is her very reason for existing and thus, it also becomes the criterion that guides our discernment. When we learn to listen to one another, to share responsibilities, and to recognize the action of the Spirit in the various Churches, we are not merely improving the way we work: we are becoming a Church that is better able to engage with the men and women of our time and to bear witness to them of the joy of the Gospel”.

Pope Leo’s Opening Address at the Consistory, 26th June 2026.

1 Purpose

To discern how the Church’s mission can best be served in the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles today while also preparing for the future. Our Diocese knows both challenges and opportunities and we are obliged to prayerfully discern together how the Lord is calling us to deeper fidelity to the mission entrusted to us.

2 Methodology

Our method will be synodal, therefore communally discerning where and by what means the Lord is calling us to grow mission. A synodal approach is natural for the Church, follows the teachings of Pope Francis and Pope Leo¹ while developing our experience gained by *Led by the Spirit*. The bishop will take the necessary decisions when he has received advice from the priests, deacons and laity.

3 Deepening and not Repeating Discernment

Decisions must be taken regarding the support of both clergy and laity for mission as well as the appropriate parish structures for mission today. Parish responses to *Led by the Spirit’s* Phase 3 touched on these issues but not with sufficient depth. Therefore, we will not be repeating previous conversations but rather deepening them to enhance the likelihood of good decisions.

¹“I also ask you to uphold, each within your own Church and in your own ministry, this style of ecclesial discernment. I know that it requires patience and sometimes raises questions. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the Lord is teaching us a more evangelical way of living out together the responsibility he has entrusted to us. The credibility of our witness and the fruitfulness of our mission depend on this”. Pope Leo, Consistory 26th June 2026

Led by the Spirit discerned six diocesan priorities. Interestingly these mirrored submissions from across the world during the Synod of Bishops: (i) Universal Call to Holiness (ii) Mission (iii) Catechesis (iv) Support of Clergy and Laity in their vocations (v) Accountability in the Church and (vi) a Welcoming, Open Church. Furthermore, in Phase 3 we discerned that our parish structures had to change. In this new stage we will not be re-discussing the above – they have already been discerned – but rather discern *how* they can be implemented in an appropriate manner for our unique diocese. In other words, we will not be going over territory already discussed but rather deepening and making concrete what we have prayerfully learnt together.

The consultation has a deliberate structure. It begins with a broad reflection about mission at present in local areas before gradually moving to discern mission for the future and which structures will be necessary to support this new reality. The consistent requirement for any proposal is: *“Will this make us more missionary”*

4 Discernment Topics

The topics allocated for each of the sessions are as follows:

(i) Mission is Core to the Church.

Which works of mission, carried out by clergy and laity, can you identify in your deanery and diocese? What are your local challenges to mission, including for the future? (For example, number and age profile of clergy and parishioners, finance, amount and condition of buildings, geography etc)

(ii) Missionary Witness of the Christian Community.

Apart from Sunday Mass in which ways and how often does your parish community witness to Christ? Witness can be by individuals or communally. If the parish or Chapel of Ease community seldom gathers outside of Sunday, why? Is this credible for mission? How can your community widen its missionary work?

(iii) Mission of the Clergy.

List the workload of the priests in your parish and deanery. Can you identify tasks priests do which are superfluous to the priestly calling? How can clergy be better supported? Isolation: with our geography how can priests enjoy deeper bonds with and support from each other?

(iv) Mission of the Laity.

What do you understand by the ‘common priesthood of the baptised’? Should laity be involved in Church life primarily to help priests in their ministry or because it their right and duty through baptism? Which roles and tasks are lay faithful already fulfilling? Which

ministries or tasks could laity do but presently do not? What can encourage more effective lay involvement in mission, including its acceptance by clergy and laity?

(v) Mission and Structures.

The Church's purpose is mission and her structures exist to support her mission. For most people the most important structure is their parish. Reflecting on demographics of people and clergy, condition and amount of properties, finance etc are our local present structures sustainable and, more importantly, best for mission? Is there a need for restructuring across the diocese which will be more relevant for today's mission?

(vi) New Models for Contemporary Mission?

With what we have learned so far are different structural models possible for our parishes? Examples could include, where feasible, clergy living together in urban parishes while travelling to minister in surrounding rural areas. Commissioned laity (under authority of the non-resident Parish Priest) could have a leadership ministry in remoter rural areas where the priest can only visit infrequently. Reimagine your deanery.

(vii) Tentative Proposals to Enhance Mission.

From what has been discerned previously make tentative proposals of structures which will enhance mission e.g. lay formation for ministry, clergy support, parish structures etc

(viii) Present Concrete Proposals for Mission.

Having reflected on your tentative proposals during the past week submit concrete proposals regarding (i) clergy (ii) laity (iii) parishes and (iv) any other suggestions to invigorate mission. Please explicitly explain how each individual proposal will encourage missionary growth.

5 The Discernment Sessions

(i) All the sessions will be held online due to our diocesan geography.

(ii) The process will last for nine sessions: one introductory session followed by eight sessions to discuss an allocated topic. Sessions will be held weekly, beginning on Monday 5th October and finishing on Monday 30th November 2026. The process will be intense but time limited and demand commitment.

(iii) During the Introductory Session on October 5th the bishop will explain the process, take questions and finish with an experience of Conversation in the Spirit.

(iv) Participants will be clergy in active ministry and two parishioners from each parish. The Parish Priest will appoint the two parishioners following consultation and ensuring they are truly representative of the parish. Retired clergy are most welcome to participate.

Participants must be aware that a two month commitment is involved. If a participant cannot be present for a session, in order to maintain the harmony of the Small Group, no one else takes his or her place.

(v) Prior to each session participants will receive background information regarding the topic.

(vi) To instil a wider sense of diocese throughout the process, there will be only one session per topic at which every participant from across the diocese will be present.

(vii) The sessions' timetable is:

6.30pm	Lectio Divina
6.45pm	Bishop's Input
6.55pm	Small Group Session 1 <i>'My thoughts on the topic....'</i>
7.20pm	Small Group Session 2 <i>'What touched me....'</i>
7.30pm	Small Group Session 3 <i>'Open Conversation'</i>
7.55pm	Plenary
8.10pm	Small Group Session 4 <i>'Agreeing the report'</i>

(viii) Following the bishop's input the IT Host will separate participants into their allocated Small Groups. These Small Groups will be deanery based allowing for local discussions. Argyll and Western Isles deaneries will have 3 Small Groups, while Lochaber will have 4 Small Groups. Each Small Group will have between 6 and 8 members. Parish participants will be allocated across their deanery's Small Groups.

(ix) To build trust and cohesion the Small Groups will retain the same membership throughout the process.

(x) Towards the end of each session the IT Host will bring all the Small Groups together for a Plenary so that the entire diocese can hear what has been learnt. After the allocated time for the Plenary the IT Host will again separate participants into their Small Groups for the completion of their reports.

(xi) Each Small Group will have a facilitator who will be responsible for ensuring that the Conversation in the Spirit unfolds properly.

(xii) Each of the 8 main sessions will last roughly 2 hours.

(xiii) Each Small Group will agree on their report which is to be submitted to the bishop that same evening.

(xiv) The sessions should be seen as spiritual encounters since their purpose is discernment and not as business meetings. Participants should have an open, reflective and prayerful

disposition and familiarise themselves with the background information provided in advance of each session.

6 Technology

- (i) Each participant must have access to their own electronic device. The same appliance cannot be shared as parishioners will be allocated distinct deanery groups.
- (ii) Zoom will be used. When participants register via the Google Form they must submit the exact email address they will use for the sessions.
- (iii) Participants do not need a high level of IT literacy – basically to be able to click on the Zoom link - as the IT Host will separate participants into their allocated groups.
- (iv) Participants will register through a Google Form. Clergy will receive their link for this registration Form. Parish Priests will share the link with the two parishioners he has selected. Registration should be completed by 21st September 2026.
- (v) When registering participants will be required to provide their name, parish, deanery and email address. This information will be deleted after the final session.

6 Final Comments from Bishop Brian

Internal Openness

The Groups are not debating chambers but places of discernment. Openness to the Holy Spirit through prayer, God's Word and to others will be essential.

The sessions will be held weekly. I appreciate that some will find this intense. The frequency of sessions was carefully discussed and weekly was preferred to build momentum and deepen trust through regular experience of Conversation in the Spirit.

I also know that some may consider this process to be uncomfortable or too tedious. I ask for your internal openness and full hearted engagement and I am confident you will experience great benefit from it.

After the Consultation

Once the sessions are concluded I will need some time to reflect on your proposals before I make decisions. I don't want to corner myself by a strict timetable which does not allow me sufficient reflection for complex decisions. However, I do intend to make decisions as timeously as is feasible. I know that if this includes the restructuring of parishes a canonical process must then be followed.

We are all aware that our diocesan structures in Scotland are also currently being discerned. However, whether or not any changes are made to the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles I believe that it is essential that any decisions regarding parish structures are taken by people who minister and live within Argyll and the Isles and understand our circumstances best.