

APPENDIX H

PARISH DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP

REPORT 2007

MEMBERSHIP

Rev Des Bain	Rev Canon Cecil Hyland
Rev Kevin Brew	Mrs Carolyn O’Laoire
Rt Rev Ken Clarke	Mrs Helen Groves (Honorary Secretary)
Mr Peter Hamill	Rev Ted Woods
Rev Paul Hoey (Chair)	

The Church21 Parish Development Programme, authorised as a pilot project by the Standing Committee in 2004, is now proceeding towards the final stages. Thirty-three parishes throughout the Church of Ireland have participated fully in the programme.

PREPARATION COURSE

Material designed to enable the parishes to identify their own priorities in ministry was sent to all participating parishes and made available on the website. At its core is scriptural reflection and creative ways of engaging in prayer. Not all parishes used the material as preparation and, in these cases they were encouraged to take it up as part of the programme. The course has also been used by a number of parishes not taking part in the programme and positive feedback has been received from these parishes.

SEMINAR

The highlight of 2006 was the Church Seminar held on 15-17 September at St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Dublin. One hundred and seventy people, including parish participants, facilitators and guides, gathered for a weekend of teaching, exploration, sharing and worship.

The Rev Ian Coffey delivered the keynote addresses which informed, inspired and challenged in equal measure. Although Alan, a Baptist Pastor, comes from outside the Church of Ireland tradition, he demonstrated a sensitivity to and knowledge of our situation in Ireland that was impressive.

Bishop Ken Clarke spoke on *The Life-Cycle of a Congregation*. Every local parish goes through a cycle of growth and consolidation. This can be followed either by decline or, if appropriate action is taken, redefinition, redevelopment and rejuvenation. But it is essential that the parish is honest in assessing its situation. Denial of decline leads only to further decline and eventually, if unchecked, to death. Judging by the response afterwards this exercise proved enormously helpful for parishes in setting their own context.

Throughout the conference video clips were shown from a specially prepared DVD featuring ordinary parishes that have attempted to do something a little bit out of the ordinary. The following scenarios feature on the DVD:

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- Calry, Sligo – Catacombs project (childcare and adult learning)
- Agherton Parish – Ministry teams
- St Matthew’s, Shankill Road, Belfast – Praise and Play Worship
- Dromore Cathedral – alternative all-age worship
- Dolingstown (Magheralin Parish) – outreach through new worship centre
- Clonakilty – The Grace Centre serving the local community
- Willowfield – Servant Evangelism
- Lisburn Cathedral – Building relationships with TEFL teaching
- Kill O’The Grange – Maxpack (links with local school)
- Lurgan – PACT cross community venture
- Magheraculmoney Parish (Kesh) – cell church structure

Each parish has been given a copy of the DVD as a tool to help communicate locally what parish development is about.

Exploratory workshops on the subjects of Developing Youth Ministry, Ministry with Children, the Ministry of Welcome and Worship and Growing Leaders enabled participants to tap into particular areas of development as worked out in a local church.

Canon Alan Abernethy, in conjunction with Carolyn O’Laoire, using the worship team from Ballyholme Parish, led the worship at the conference in a variety of different styles. Many favourable comments were received on how helpful this aspect of the conference was.

Thanks are due to the Conference Administrator, Cyril McElhinney, and his Assistant Maud Cunningham for their part in the smooth and efficient running of the event, and to those who led the worship and the exploratory workshops. The part played by the welcome stewards from Drumcondra Parish is also appreciated.

At the final event of the conference, a gathering-up act of worship, a Eucharist according to *The Book of Common Prayer* took place. Ian Coffey took as the theme of his address Nehemiah 1: 1-11 – How do you eat an Elephant? (Answer – in small bits!). He sent the delegates away encouraged to think that they didn’t have to do everything all at once but that the process of development is one that can be tackled in bite-size pieces and in God’s timing. To make the point a large elephant made up of jigsaw pieces stood at the front of the chapel. A representative from each parish was invited to come and take a piece of the jigsaw back to the parish as a reminder, first, that this process is part of a bigger picture of the work of the Spirit of God in the whole Church and not just our own tiny patch and, second, that every piece is different and that the way of God is calling each parish to develop is different too. As Archbishop John Neill said at the start of the conference, “NO one size fits all”.

Over one hundred people filled in the conference feedback forms. Of these, 100% rated the conference in the categories helpful to extremely helpful, with the majority of responses in the “extremely helpful” category.

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Typical of the responses received are the following:

It's been so good to know that all parishes face similar challenges but also to realise that we can support each other and share our own ideas.

The amount of education and rethinking that went on round our table was incredible. I wish that many more of my parish could have been there.

This a vitally important way for the Church of Ireland overall to encourage parishes for the long-term.

It has given us hope for the future. We are going back to our small parish convinced that God has a future for us and that we can work with him and with each other to make it happen.

THE FACILITATION PROCESS

Every parish represented at the conference has been assigned a facilitator, someone who will assist the parish as it processes all the ideas and information. Over the next year or so, in a minimum of three meetings, the task is to help each parish to clarify its vision (what is God calling us to do?), its action plan (how is God calling us to do it) and then to step forward into implementation.

There are 26 facilitators from a variety of backgrounds, all with experience in this field. The facilitators came together for a number of training days to agree a process and share tools and ideas. We are enormously grateful to those who have volunteered their time and skills to help with this crucial stage of the process.

At the end of this facilitation stage the parishes will be encouraged to continue the development process under their own initiative. The facilitators will continue to have a monitoring role and be available for advice.

LINKS WITH OTHER CHURCH BODIES

The Working Group is conscious that in its work there are areas of overlap with other bodies in the Church of Ireland. We were therefore pleased to be asked to appoint a representative to the Hard Gospel Committee. Cecil Hyland was appointed with Paul Hoey as alternate.

Those who chair the Commission on Ministry, the Council for Mission and the Parish Development Working Group have agreed to meet together annually to explore ways of working together on common issues.

COMMUNICATION

A series of articles about the programme has been published at regular intervals in the Church of Ireland Gazette.

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The CHURCH21 website (www.church21.info) is the main conduit for much of the material being provided to parishes. The committee wishes to thank Mr George Briggs and his colleague Mr Joe McCormack for their assistance with maintaining the site.

PILOT PARISHES

The contrasting parishes of Kilmoremy (Ballina) and St Augustine's, Londonderry, have been invited to feature as pilot parishes. A profile of each parish will be posted on the website along with a simple outline of the facilitation process – how the parish arrived at its priorities, developed its action plan and what practical difference it has all made.

FOLLOW-UP

All the parishes have been invited back for a day next September to compare notes, share stories and to reflect on the value of the programme. They will be encouraged to bring back their pieces of the elephant jigsaw to see how the beast has grown! The Working Group will also take soundings about what further help parishes are seeking in their ongoing journey of development.

BUDGET

The Working Group wishes to acknowledge the financial provision for the programme, human and divine! Thanks to the generous assistance of the Priorities Fund and the Ecclesiastical Insurance Company the contribution from parishes has been kept to a minimum.

Administrative assistance from the Representative Church Body has helped the committee cope with the workload and is much appreciated.

THE WAY AHEAD

It is a healthy sign that parishes are asking if there will be another opportunity to be involved in a programme of parish development for the Church of Ireland. Church21 is a pilot project but, following the positive responses so far, it is clear that there is a need for something like this on an ongoing basis. It would be a pity if the momentum created were to be lost.

The members of the Working Group have enjoyed and benefited from their involvement in the programme but recognise that it is hardly possible for a voluntary group to sustain such a programme over a longer term. Any weaknesses in this initial experiment e.g. in parishes falling behind deadlines, could more easily have been addressed if there had been an individual or team with an exclusive focus on this area.

Furthermore, the programme has been run with minimal financial outlay. A more realistically funded project would have even greater potential to meet the real needs of parishes in offer targeted training, partnership and resources.

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The Working Group's dream is that parish development would become a permanent part of the life of the Church of Ireland, as it is of many other branches of the Anglican Communion and others denominations in Ireland. We have had an encouraging beginning and the clear message from those who have participated is "please can we have more?"

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