

My Experience of Parish Clustering

I went to Dublin last weekend
to take part in a Developing Parish Seminar
at All Hallows College.

The theme of the Conference was
"Parish Re-organisation - is clustering a way forward?"

I went along with some of my colleagues
from our Cluster parishes
to check out and learn
what the experience of others was
and whether we are going in the right direction.

It was a very enriching experience
and we concluded
that we have a way to go
but are a good deal further along the way than most.
Perhaps most importantly
we were encouraged
and we were reinforced in our belief
that clustering is not something
that happens and is over
but is an ongoing process
and that no two experiences will be the same.

This reflection is one person's lived experience of clustering.

It is not offered as **THE** way forward
nor do I suggest it as the only
or even the best way to cluster.

It is simply my experience.

I share it with you in the hope that it may ring some bells.

In April 1997 I was appointed to St Catherine's Parish.

A few months later Kenneth Owens was appointed to St John Vianney's.

Throughout the later stages of Jimmy Nicholson's illness we both covered St Gregory's.

We thought that after Jimmy died Keith would not replace him but would join St John Vianney's with St Gregory's.

As it happened Bill McGeedy was appointed to be priest in residence in St Gregory's and Kenneth was appointed Parish Priest of both parishes.

From shortly after the time of Kenneth's arrival (1997)

we took the lead from Keith

who had intimated that he wanted parishes

to consider clustering for the future

because of the falling number of active priests.

We set out to intentionally heighten the awareness of the people in the three parishes

that we needed to share all the resources we could and join together whenever possible

liturgically, pastorally and socially.

This continued with varying degrees of success

but at that stage it hadn't really become *real* to people.

Then in 2000 Gordon Muchall was appointed

to replace Bill McGeedy in St Gregory's

with in addition full-time responsibility for the Royal Infirmary.

Early in 2003 Kenneth announced to the people

that he would be moving on in September of that year.

Kenneth and Gordon had been working together

to plan and coordinate the appointment of a lay coordinator

for Catholic Chaplaincy at the Royal Infirmary.

This came to fruition in the spring of 2004.

In terms of future provision we priests thought that without the burden of the Royal Infirmary and the fast diminishing number of priests it was increasingly unlikely that Gordon would be left with only St Gregory's.

In May of 2003 Kenneth, Gordon and I approached David Gemmell, the City Vicar General, and put forward a proposal for when Kenneth would move on in September.

Our proposal was based on two fundamental principles:

- We needed to plan for a future with a diminishing number of priests and
- we thought it very important to respect the right of each faith community to exist and remain distinct.

Our proposal was that the three parishes should continue to exist, retaining their own traditions, but that the three should become intentionally interdependent.

Up until that point we had increasingly been highlighting the need to share as many resources as we could.

We proposed that from now on we should consider the priests to be resources and so we would be shared.

The proposal was firmed up and we all met with Keith.

Our proposition was that Gordon and I should alternate each Sunday covering the four weekend Masses in the cluster.

This means effectively that we celebrate with the same communities every fortnight.

The weekday Masses were rationalised and we move around ensuring that each parish

has Mass at least four times each week.

Gordon has been nominated Parish Priest of St Gregory's in order to fulfil Canon Law but in fact our practice is to handle situations as they arise wherever that happens to be.

So how has it all gone down ?

There have been undoubted benefits.

One of the main gains

has been the fruitful collaboration of the priests and the members of the pastoral teams.

We meet every two weeks and are in contact almost daily.

There has been a great growth in our relationships and that communicates itself to the people in the parishes.

We have made a point of building in

a social factor to our relationships

and this has added a new dimension to our shared ministry.

One of the huge burdens we have felt has been lifted

is in being able to cover the three parishes for each other for holidays, retreats and illness.

In eighteen months we have only needed

two weekends to be covered by others

and that was because we both needed to be away.

That aspect is particularly liberating

and neither of us now feel the need

to justify taking time away.

If we need it, we take it.

Of course it means being open

and standing down and negotiating

and seeing other points of view.....

something that had become foreign to me
having run my own show for so many years.

But the growth is evident.

My fulfilment is deeper.

My accountability is better.

My energy levels are stronger.

My morale is higher.

It is also so good to be able to check out
the many mini crises or relationship clashes
and breakdowns in parish life that can become
so de-energising and debilitating;
to talk things over and be reassured.

It might sound silly to say,
but there is a sense that we feel
we have the right to that time from each other
whereas without the clustering relationship and bonding
it can feel risky or daunting
and even an imposition to reach out to a colleague.

There is no question about the benefits of this move
for the people in the three parishes.

We now have three very effective parish pastoral councils
and representatives at Deanery and Archdiocesan Pastoral Councils
who are increasingly accountable to the parishes
for taking things forward to the other forums
and bringing things back.

Each of the parishes now functions in terms of Church Services
without the intervention of either of the priests.

Responsibility for the Liturgy has increasingly
been taken on by parishioners.

There was always this to some degree or other

but now it is seen not as an option or a voluntary extra but as necessary if the parish is to thrive.

As you can imagine the process has not been without hiccoughs. The introduction of a single newsletter was seen as a step too far but things are improving in that area and time will see it happen.

The question of Mass Intentions became quite problematic. When each of us is celebrating Mass in three different Churches it is obviously a statistical nightmare to ensure that particular intentions were remembered in individual churches and on set dates.

We came up with the solution that every Mass that each of us has an intention for in a given week is prayed for at every Mass celebrated in the cluster parishes that week.

It seems to work.

We pleaded that God wasn't tied to time and space like we are !

In light of the Cardinal's recent request that we try to ensure that our energies are conserved as much as possible we are giving consideration in our Deanery at this time to the reduction of Masses at the weekends and planning it on a deanery-wide basis.

Currently we are looking at reducing the number of celebrations in the Deanery each weekend from fifteen to ten.

In effect this means in our cluster reducing from four to three - one Mass in each parish.

This will inevitably bring angst and anger and hurt and disillusionment and many other feelings no doubt.

Perhaps we need to refocus our vision and perspective.

To remember that we are here to create communities that will herald the kingdom on earth.

If we stick at polling what people **think** or what people **want** without giving them input and to learn what it is we **need**, then we won't make much headway other than to tread water.....

because manifestly the way we have been doing it hasn't worked and isn't working.

Things need to change.

I am aware that across the Diocese there are not too many positive votes being cast for the principle of clustering.

What I hear at meetings of Deans is that pastoral councils at parish and deanery level are proving difficult to motivate; that there doesn't seem to be a felt or perceived need for such structures.

It may seem fanciful but I would suggest
from our experience
that clustering addresses the two principles
we set out as our starting points:
the diminishing number of priests
and the right of faith communities to continue to exist.

But I would contend that the side benefits are even greater.

- The morale and well-being of the priests;
- the spirit of collaboration between priests, pastoral team members and parishioners across the cluster;
- the cementing and bedding-in of parish structures;
- the energy created around being stakeholders rather than passengers;
- the benefits to the three communities in sharing preparation for sacraments of initiation and healing; bereavement support; marriage preparation and ongoing faith formation.
- the emergence of strong and effective pastoral councils.

In responding to Keith's invitation to cluster,
we set out to respect two principles
but the result has been quite beyond our expectation
and in such a variety of areas.
Indeed our experience has been
that clustering embodies and brings to birth
the vision articulated in *Together in Hope*.

Mike Fallon
16 February 2005

Postscript.

One note of caution though.

My perception of the present way ahead
is that closures and linkages or unions of parishes
is the preferred option of many priests.

There needs to be room for another way
where priests can more effectively collaborate together
and support one another
as has been my experience
over the past eighteen months.

This doesn't mean that we live in one another's pockets.

It **does** mean that we share the vision of the future
and help the people in our parishes
to come to be able to sustain themselves
should that become necessary on occasion.

The true benefits for priests of clustering
will be lost if we operate one-man outfits
looking after three, four or five parishes.

If it comes to pass
that either Gordon or I have to move on
because of priest shortages elsewhere,
then I would strongly advise
that another parish or two come into our cluster
along with another priest.

The success of the cluster model I have experienced
stems from priests working together
without necessarily having to live together.

I believe that is a healthy option for me
and I will do all I can
to ensure that I enjoy
that style of collaborative ministry.

Six months later St Ninian's was configured in the cluster.....