

**Combined minutes of Bishop Richard Moth's talks on the future of
the Parish of the Witterings, the Parish of Selsey,
and the Parish of Chichester,
(comprising St Richard's, Chichester and Our Lady of Assumption, Bosham)**

2-6 June 2021

Each meeting began with a welcome and greeting, from Fr Peter Newsam in Selsey and the Witterings and from Canon Tom in Bosham and Chichester.

In Selsey and the Witterings, Fr Peter also expressed his pleasure at being back in this part of the world; he was unfortunately unable to attend the talks in Bosham and Chichester. In Chichester, Canon Tom noted that the date of this meeting, being the Feast Day of Corpus Christ, was apt for the subject of the meeting. Canon Tom reminded those in attendance that the feast is about the spiritual fulfilment of the Eucharist, and the necessity of mission. He also thanked the Polish community for agreeing to delay their Mass to 12.30 to ensure that there was sufficient time for the meeting to take place.

The praying of the Prayer for the Diocese set the tone for the meetings, before Bishop Richard was invited to take the floor.

In Bosham, Bishop Richard began by noting that his visit to Our Lady's to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the church in May 2020 had had to be cancelled so there would be a blessing at the end of the meeting.

In each location, Bishop Richard explained that the session was being filmed and that after the final session, on Sunday at St Richard's, all the films would be available online.

Bishop Richard said that it was a pleasure to be in the south-west corner of the Diocese again.

Bishop Richard said that he wished to update us on the Pastoral Plan and explain where we would be going with the parishes in this southwestern edge of the diocese. He reminded us that we should always be mindful of the mission the church has given to each one of us: Go and make disciples of all nations i.e. we should all be conscious of sharing the Gospel, not keeping it to ourselves and in this task God was always with us, regardless of the challenges.

Bishop Richard began by reminding those in attendance that two to three years beforehand, he had devised his Pastoral Plan. This involved Bishop Richard speaking in each Deanery of the Diocese, listening to the responses to what he had said, and taking these views into account. Once Bishop Richard had drawn up his Pastoral Plan, he presented the Plan in each Deanery.

The Pastoral Plan had three foundational elements:

(1) The Mission the Lord has given us, which is summarised well by the end of St Matthew's Gospel: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." This is something all Catholics should be doing.

(2) Formation: The need to be formed in our Catholic faith in order to further this mission. Bishop Richard noted Deacon Jon Harman's role at Diocesan level in the spiritual formation of the Diocese, particularly noting the *Invited* virtual mission which was held over Zoom and in which drew in 1,200 people twice per week for the six weeks of Lent. The pandemic has given us new opportunities for communication! Further, the Diocese has focused more on the role of school chaplains in the Diocese in the past few years. St Philip Howard Catholic High School has an apprenticeship programme which aims to train young people in the role of school chaplain.

(3) The importance of prayer. The celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of our Catholic life.

The Pastoral Plan had begun to bear fruit before the Covid-19 Pandemic, has continued to bear fruit during the Pandemic, and Bishop Richard hopes that this will continue after the Pandemic.

Bishop Richard summarised his Pastoral Plan as what he plans to be the shape of the Diocese by 2030. He described the Plan as “nuts and bolts,” and structural in nature. Although the target date in the Plan is currently nine years away, for some Parishes in the Diocese the target date has been accelerated by the pandemic to 2022. This was not the case for this parish.

Bishop Richard reflected on the impact the pandemic has had on all parishes in the Diocese. Not only has each parish’s social life been hindered by the pandemic, but parishes have suffered economically and financially.

As part of the Pastoral Plan, Canon Jonathan Martin as the Diocese’s Vicar General has formed a “Clergy Youth Group”, which is for priests who will be 65 or under in 2030. The group has 25 priests. Bishop Richard noted that number may sound bleak but that he does not feel that it is very bleak as we have a strong cohort of students at the seminary and new students are coming forward. However, as the training lasts 7 years, the reality is that we will have to manage with fewer priests.

There are several students in the seminary at Womersley, and Bishop Richard had, the previous day, approved three new students to begin their studies later this year. The feedback Bishop Richard has received from the seminary is very positive, and some of those currently at Womersley have previously been in the Parish on pastoral placement. Currently, Bishop Richard expects to ordain a new priest in each of 2021, 2022 and 2023, and two new priests for the Diocese in 2024. The Diocese also has a small group which fosters vocations across the Diocese. Bishop Richard has however concluded that there will be fewer priests serving in the Diocese in the future.

Many of the priests in the “Youth Group” have expressed a wish not to live alone. They would prefer to live in small communities for mutual support, rather than each necessarily having his own parish. This contrasts strongly with the wishes priests of Bishop Richard and Fr Tom’s generation had: to have their own “patch” as soon as possible! Bishop Richard said that he was open to community living, in twos or perhaps threes, for those who wished it. He was giving thought to how this could be achieved so that priests could be supported and give their best to the people..

Due to varying population densities across the Diocese, there will not be a universal model for a parish; due to a higher population density in Surrey than Sussex, the parishes in Surrey will be geographically smaller.

In some ways and in some parts of the Diocese (though not here, particularly) the pandemic had brought the 2030 plans forward.

For the Churches serving Chichester, Bosham, the Witterings and Selsey, Bishop Richard has decided that these will form one parish in the future. This will not be a significant change for St Richard’s, Our Lady of the Assumption and St Peter’s as they already share priests, but St Wilfrid’s, Selsey will be brought into the same fold. Bishop Richard feels that with some re-jigging of Mass times in the new parish, the change will not be too difficult and will enable us to continue with all four churches open, supplied by two priests.

He confirmed that he had no desire and no plan to close any of the four churches but believes that they are all needed, both to be a visible witness in their local communities and because of local geographical and transport issues. In particular, the unique geography of the Manhood Peninsula,

in that for both the villages of Wittering and Selsey there is one road in and the same road out and no easy route between them, in addition to the problem of summer holiday traffic, which creates access and travel times problems between the churches.

Bishop Richard noted that both the churches in Witterings and Selsey have bungalows for resident priests. During the transition, Father Maksym Krat will serve at Selsey, but in the long term, these bungalows may be used to house retired priests.

Bishop Richard explained that the retirement of priests presents challenges for the Diocese, and the trustees for the Diocese have placed a limit on the amount they will spend on houses for retired priests of £350,000. The Diocese will usually purchase a two-bedroom house for a retired priest, with room for the priest himself and for any visitors he may have from time to time. With house prices increasing, it is becoming more difficult for the Diocese to purchase new housing within the Diocese; it is now unable, for example, to buy suitable housing in Surrey within this budget.

At the age of 75, all priests in the Diocese are required to write to Bishop Richard asking Bishop Richard whether the priest may retire. Bishop Richard will need to write a similar letter to the Pope when he turns 75.

Retired priests resident in parishes may be able to assist with the celebration of the sacraments, but are not obliged to do so. Bishop Richard gave the example of Canon Tom, who by the time he turns 75, will have served the Diocese for more than 50 years. As such, retired priests should be free to spend more time on their interests outside of their vocation but may help with the workload of the priests serving the Parish if they wish to and are able to.

After the final meeting in our parishes, Bishop Richard will decide on the implementation date of this decision. He will need to consult with the Council of Priests before he can issue the Decree, a requirement in Canon Law to ensure that bishops do not make changes on a whim. Bishop Richard expects the merger to take place in Autumn 2021. It does not, however, mean that all aspects of the merger must be completed by then.

Following the issuance of the Decree, Bishop Richard explained that the communities in the parish will need to establish how to work better together, although some of the communities are not far off from this already. For example, what will happen to Finance Committees, Parish Councils and sacramental preparation programmes. There would be benefits in the change - the skills and talents from one community can be used to help another e.g. First Holy Communion preparation, in order to make the mission of the church stronger.

There is no hard and fast rule for this. As examples, Bishop Richard noted that before he came to the Diocese, the five churches in Crawley merged into one Parish and merged their Finance Committees into one. The four churches in Guildford, on the other hand, kept their four separate Finance Committees for each church, and it was only when Bishop Richard visited them shortly after his installation and suggested it that the churches merged their Finance Committee into one. Several years after the churches in Midhurst and Petworth merged, the two Finance Committees asked Fr Peter Newsam to merge them into one as it did not make sense to remain separate.

Bishop Richard noted that the Parish will have a deacon in DJH and he hoped that in the future other men in the Parish may also be called to be a deacon. Bishop Richard also noted that Pope Francis has recently announced the new “stable ministries” of Lector, Acolyte and Catechist, and so Bishop Richard will need to look how these roles and formation for them will happen.

At this point, Bishop Richard opened the floor up to questions from those attending:

Questions from attendees at St Peter's:

- Q.** A parishioner, an altar server at St Peter's, asked if, when we're altogether as one big parish, will we do exactly the same things at each Mass, or will we share ideas, and then things change? Will we need to learn new ways of doing things?
- A.** Bishop Richard replied that that will not necessarily happen. He explained that in most other parishes in the Diocese with more than one church, the style of things in one place will be slightly different to another. Part of that is imposed by architecture and some of it comes about as a result of the people you have there: one community will have an enormous choir and one community will have a little choir; one community will have hundreds of altar servers and one community will have two or three – and you adapt. And that's all fine. If over a period of time, servers from one church happen to see something at another that they want to import to their own church, that's fine too. Bishop Richard gave the example from Battle Parish, where the church at Northiam and the church in Battle are very different and the liturgy adapts to each. He also gave the example the geography of St Richard's, where the congregation is on more than one side of the church, so the celebrant and servers have to adapt.
- Q.** A parishioner asked what, in the circumstances in which the church finds herself in today's world, does Bishop Richard believe appeals to people coming into priesthood today.
- A.** Bishop Richard replied that he believes that it is the same thing that appealed to himself and Canon Tom when they entered the seminary. He would say that for people of his generation there was a clarity about where they were going. Some of the big moral questions that have hit the world more recently had not hit then. As a canonist himself, he feels for the moral theologians because they are dealing with questions that are constantly moving and changing. And although the message of the Gospel is unchanging and we will be preaching the same Gospel until the world ends, it's a matter of how you bring that Gospel to a world that is ever shifting. Bishop Richard reminded us of the saints and martyrs, who lived in a different world, with its own challenges and problems – the challenges and problems are constantly changing and always will. One of the things about priests – when Bishop Richard was ordained, for the Diocese of Southwark in 1982, the presumption was that it would be 18 years before he became a parish priest. In Liverpool at the time, it was 25 years. That arose because in the years between WWI and the mid 50s, this country saw a huge increase in vocations, to the religious orders and to the secular priesthood. Now the numbers are much lower, at levels more like those before WWI.

Bishop Richard quoted the case of a very dear of his, a Benedictine monk from Scotland who has been dead now for several years. He served in Liverpool during the blitz. Afterwards he said that the only way that he could respond to the carnage was to become a monk because he could not think of anything else that would do any use to anyone. That was a common response from people who had gone through the carnage of the Second World War. So, Canon Tom and Bishop Richard entered the priesthood in the 1960s on the back of that wave of that increase in vocations. History will look back on those times as a bit of a bubble. Referring to the pastoral plan he mentioned that in the years ahead in which he said that the proportion of priests to the people would be not dissimilar to that which pertained in 1900. All of us, he said, have grown in the time of the bubble. Not the Covid bubble but the vocations bubble. Most of us are emerging from the Covid bubble after several months and are asking many questions. All of us in this church know that the answer to all of those questions lies in the Gospel. So we have a golden moment in the life

of the church to present the Gospel of Christ in this very difficult world. But the question that the men entering today are asking is still ‘is the Lord calling me to something very special at a very particular moment in the life of the church?’

Bishop Richard said that there is a challenge here, and some of our young people, when they come forward, are up for the challenge of living the priesthood in what are quite difficult years, that this attracts some. He believes that there is a real desire for the church to do the church’s work as best the church can, and for young people give of themselves in that service.

Bishop Richard continued, that it may be the case that are a few less in number. In his own seminary year, they started with 16, of whom eight were ordained, of whom four are still active. One has died, a priest of this diocese, Michael Walsh. So, you were starting with bigger numbers then. He thinks it is true to say the selection processes at the seminary, although done similarly, are more rigorous than they were, and that that’s a good thing.

He believes that that means, potentially, if three men from Arundel & Brighton start formation this year, there is far more chance of three men from Arundel & Brighton being ordained in seven years time, because the Holy See has increased the training from six to seven years, than would have been the case when he and Canon Tom started. Then, there was a 50%+ attrition rate and they are not seeing that now. Part of the reason for that is that men are going in later.

Bishop Richard thinks people are attracted to the challenge of the Gospel, they are very sure of a deep relationship with the person of Christ and they want to serve. The church’s mission is the same as it was on the day of Pentecost. We’re just doing it in a different world. You could say that about every age in human history. The mission is the same but the challenge is different.

Q. Will we lose our identity as a Parish by going into this?

A. Bishop Richard responded: ‘What I would like you to start thinking about is that you will not lose your identity as a community, because the Witterings is the Witterings. The Witterings is not Selsey and the Witterings is not Bosham and the Witterings is not Chichester. So you will not lose your identity as a community. As Fr Peter said, there will be things that you will do here that won’t be done in the other communities, and that’s fine.

‘But it will be one parish. And it will take a while to get used to that idea, and that’s fine. If you go to Guildford today, or to Redhill, where 3 parishes were brought together: Reigate, Redhill and Merston, the Reigate people see themselves as Reigaters and the Redhill people see themselves as Redhillers and the Merston people see themselves as Merston folk. It’s one Parish, but there are still three communities and that’s fine.

‘But in terms of the administration and the service of the priests and deacon (currently one deacon but who knows...!), priests and deacons across this part of our diocese, doing that as one. If you just think about the opportunities you will have to share resources and talents, to bring expertise from one place into another, it will make that much easier.

‘Therefore the mission of the church in this part of our diocese can become ever more effective because it will be easier for us to share resources, personnel, skills and talents. And that’s always a winner.

‘To give you an example of that: the Cathedral and Storrington, you might say there’s quite a distance between them, the great big lump of the South Downs, but they now do their sacramental preparation together. And that is working really well, it’s not a problem at all. So, things like that.

‘If you think as one parish with a number of communities in it, then sharing of resources, over time, becomes easier and easier to do, it just becomes second nature. It’s easier if you gently, gently, gently start to think of yourselves as one parish with a number of communities within in.

‘I said yesterday we’ll see the fruits of this, probably after you’ve put me in a hole in the ground at Arundel and that doesn’t bother me at all: these things take time. And what we do will benefit not just ourselves but the generations that will come after us. We need to start thinking down the track a bit.

‘And change is always hard, whatever you do, it is never easy. I will go away and decide, probably a bit later this year, because I have to do some canonical procedures to bring parishes together. I have to consult the Council of Priests of the Diocese, that’s required in church law, so that the bishop doesn’t have a whim one morning and do all kinds of strange things, I have to check it with my Council of Priests, which is sensible. I don’t think I’m doing a strange thing, by the way, but just in case I was, there are some checks and balances in the process. So, I will need to do that first, and if the Council of Priests of the Diocese thinks this is actually good sense, then a decree can be issued. And then you can say to yourselves “all right, the Bishop has said it and here we are, let’s all be one parish together and now we can start work on hammering this out.” And that can take... a bit of time. And we can talk about that and work it through gently. But that’s the direction of travel.’

Q. A parishioner offered a comment on how pleased she is that none of the churches is actually closing. She feels for the priests because it includes another church but thinks it is a real opportunity, specifically because this is an ageing demographic area, that we will have an opportunity to move forward and work together with others, to plan ahead. She observed that it is nice to have this parish and it is lovely that that they all know each other, but they are all getting older and maybe there will be opportunities to combine, on the simple things like, as the Bishop had mentioned, ordering candles in four places rather than one, which seems a waste of time when they could be concentrating on other things. For those reasons, she thinks it is wonderful. The parishioner also observed that she will probably be in a hole before the fruits are seen, too but that it is nice to think of planning these things and having a real opportunity to forge ahead. And she is glad that none of the churches is actually closing.

A. Bishop Richard thanked the parishioner for her comment and responded: ‘As you know, there are some parts of the diocese where I have closed churches, and I suspect you were thinking “What’s he going to say when he turns up this evening?”’ The reasons for those closures have been many and varied. Some of them have been massive fabric problems with the building and the lack of capacity to sustain the building. We had, when I first came to the diocese, a church where there had been no Sunday Mass for two years and the closest church, on the edge of Eastbourne, even on bus was about ten minutes away. And you think “this doesn’t actually make sense. Because this building is a burden on the parish and it obviously isn’t needed because it hasn’t been used for a long while.”

‘So there are many reasons why we have closed churches and I don’t like doing it. We’ve only done when it has been absolutely necessary to do. And down here, partly because of the geography... We were joking last night that the quickest way to get from Selsey to here is by Royal Marines Rigid Inflatable Boat but I don’t think Canon Tom would enjoy that very much. So the transport thing down here on the peninsula means that keeping the four churches makes good sense. It does mean that we’re going to have to look at Mass times, there will have to be openness to a bit of change here and there but we can work that out as we go.’

Questions from attendees at Our Lady of the Assumption:

- Q.** A parishioner asked if loneliness is an issue for retired priests, because of concerns about loneliness among older people.
- A.** Bishop Richard replied that a retirement home was not generally a popular option among priests. The more active retirees liked to help out in the parishes. Residential and nursing care are currently covered by St Joseph’s in Littlehampton, a retirement village in Heathfield and the Grace and Compassion Sisters in Brighton.
- Q.** A parishioner asked if the priest at East Wittering was active.
- A.** Bishop Richard replied that he says mass for the sisters at the Servite convent but was not able to actively participate in parish life. Tina also asked what we should do about the mission. Bishop Richard replied that this was a complex question because it varied depending on the area. In Crawley the Augustinian community looked after 35 churches and several schools, whereas in our own more rural community the geography of the peninsula carried challenges but smaller communities also gave opportunities e.g. where people know everyone it is easier to be welcoming and to work together to go out to others. The pastoral letter this weekend is asking us to invite people back to mass and also to invite non-churchgoers who may be seeking something more. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to open up and evangelise others. In poorer areas of the diocese the church has acted practically e.g. with food vouchers for families. In summary we evangelise in different ways in different areas.
- Q.** A parishioner asked whether the two priests would be as visible and available once the parish is enlarged.
- A.** Bishop Richard replied that inevitably they would be slightly less available but with adjustment of mass times the affect would be lessened. It was important for priests to know their people and informally chatting after mass was an important way to achieve this.
- Q.** A parishioner mentioned that Pope Francis had written a great deal on how he would like us to respond once the pandemic was over. What did Bishop Richard think we should do?
- A.** Bishop Richard said that it wasn’t just about Covid, there were common themes to many of the documents. We recognise that evangelisation takes time - we may not always see the fruits of it. In addition we should reach a point in our diocese where we are forming continually throughout our lives so we are better able to pass our faith on to others. In Fratelli Tutti the parable of the Good Samaritan is broadened out - what would it be like if the whole nation behaved like this to the rest of the world. What can we do in our diocese to be a Good Samaritan to the rest of the world - e.g. helping with projects for refugees or people trafficking. We can also look at what our parish or deanery could do if it looked through the eyes of the Good Samaritan. The Care of Creation agenda is being developed

in schools. As a parish we should think how we do evangelisation in the situation we are in, and individually we should take responsibility for evangelisation.

- Q.** A parishioner asked about the mass times and pointed out the importance of mass times e.g. for families.
- A.** Bishop Richard said that he was very open to suggestions on this! He expected that there would be a working party to examine it. Fr Maksym will be at Selsey until at least next spring so this should give time for things to be worked out.
- Q.** A parishioner wondered if the Bishop had thought of having one central church in the parish.
- A.** Bishop Richard said he had been asked to consider this in other parts of the diocese but such projects are very challenging financially, in particular buying a new site particularly with the number of parking spaces required. There was strength in small communities which we lose at our peril. Distances present problems and also the very presence of a church in a community evangelises.

Questions from attendees at St Richard's:

- Q.** The parishioner asking the question is a local councillor who is involved in the development of the new Local Plan, which will lead to the building of 7,000-8,000 new homes being built within the new Parish. The parishioner has taken away from Bishop Richard's speech that the Parish will be serving more people with fewer priests.
- A.** Bishop Richard remarked that with approximately 10% of the UK population being Catholic, approximately 700-800 of those houses will be Catholic households. This will not just mean that there will be more people who will need serving, but also mean that there will be an additional 700-800 who can help the Catholic Church in its mission.

The churches within the new Parish will be a good size for the communities they are serving, although Bishop Richard commented that if he were building St Richard's Church today, he would probably have built it bigger.

Bishop Richard also noted that the Parish will also have St Richard's Hospital and the University of Chichester within its boundaries, which could affect the number of parishioners within the Parish in the future.

- Q.** Another parishioner is concerned with the pressure Bishop Richard's proposal will have on the priesthood. The parishioner also remarked that the current and previous assistant priests for the Parish are both Polish, and so there is no guarantee they will remain. The new Parish cannot be run with fewer than two priests.
- A.** Bishop Richard thanked the parishioner for her concern and confirmed that the Parish will have two priests since the transport infrastructure means that it is difficult to travel between Selsey and the Witterings, and the Witterings and Bosham. In Surrey, however, because the churches are often closer together, it would be possible for one priest to serve a Parish of this size by himself.

As for foreign assistant priests, the length of time the priests spend in the Diocese will be determined by the wishes of the priest himself, the bishop in the priest's home diocese, and Bishop Richard. Some foreign priests, however, have decided to settle in the Diocese

permanently, and Bishop Richard gave the example of the newly-appointed priest for Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, who is Ukrainian and has lived in the UK for ten years.

Q. Will the role of the Eucharistic Minister increase?

A. Bishop Richard noted that he did not know precisely how extraordinary ministers are used in the parishes at present, for example, whether they take Communion to the sick, but thought that their role would not be changed by the creation of the new parish. There are already extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion at each of the four Churches, and this will not change after the merger.

Questions asked at St Wilfrid's, Selsey, will follow, as soon as possible.

Individual minutes from the talks at each Chichester and Bosham are available on request.