



Enniskerry Parish

Incorporating the church communities of:

St. Mary's - Enniskerry, St. Mochonog - Kilmacanogue, St. Patrick - Curtlestown, St. Kevin - Glencree

Parish Vision

"To create a welcoming, growing, compassionate and participating Christian community in a changing world"

PARISH TRANSFORMATION AN ANSWER TO PARISH VIABILITY CONCERNS

Enniskerry Parish Pastoral Council

Introduction

This document outlines the strategy and action plan developed by our Parish Pastoral Council for dealing with the issues that are facing our church as communicated by Archbishop Farrell namely: parish viability involving declining church attendances, shortage of priests and reducing parish income. These issues have been facing us all for some time but now have become critical and need urgent action in the form of further parish transformation.

In this document we set out what in our opinion and based on our experience is an answer not only to the concerns raised above but also to the even more important issue of the survival of our Christian way of life. We first set out our proposed solution that can be applied to parishes in general, and we then describe how we have progressed this solution in Enniskerry Parish so far.

Summary

- The root cause of declining church attendances, shortage of priests and reducing church income can all be traced back to the fact that as a church we have, for a considerable time, been losing the next and younger generations and steps taken so far have not stopped that trend.
If we are to correctly address the above problem we first need to establish and analyse the reasons for this loss. Then based on these findings we need to assess, with an open mind, what changes (possibly radical) should be made in our church and its approach to again begin to become relevant in the life of the next and younger generations. Then we need to outline some practical initial implementation steps some of which our parish has already started to implement. With this further parish transformation we hope to address the archbishop's and our own concerns, namely parishioners participation, reducing parish income and falling vocations. These issues are discussed in some depth further in the document.
- As can be seen from the analysis below, the reasons for the alienation of the next and younger generations are many but one of the main causes is the impact on them of major societal changes magnified by their loss of trust in and respect for church authority. It follows that it will not be easy for the church to renew contact with those generations. Luckily there is one remaining church link that is very helpful and indeed crucial in re-establishing some kind of rapport: namely the emotional family ties that the next and younger generations have with their local church, school and cemetery and its associated usually strong local community spirit.
- Some of the changes suggested in this document are major and may appear daunting. However when put in context it will be found that they are just building on what went before. Our strategy is therefore to continue and accelerate a parish transformation process that started more than 25 years ago during which time our parish has moved in stages from a situation where everything hinged on the priest to the present day where, of necessity, the laity will have to take centre stage with the priest guiding and serving the community.

Over that time span quite a lot has been achieved and the benefits of involving parishioners are evident. What is also clear however is that whatever efforts were made to interest the younger generation, where the future of the church lies, they have not been successful. The younger generations are being lost and if that continues the result will be rather obvious.

- In our view the next stage of our parish transformation process as outlined in this document should result in reinvigorated and growing local communities with the attendant beneficial impact on church function attendances and finance. Our experience with major parish fundraising activity in the past has shown that energised parishioners are happy to contribute to specific worthwhile causes in their local communities.
- As a parish we have already embarked on this next stage of our parish transformation process.

Of course there is also a totally different and more commercial approach to the issues of falling church attendances and parish income, an idea that we have heard mentioned, namely closing smaller churches. This, at first sight, might appear to be financially attractive but in fact it is short term flawed thinking, pastorally inappropriate and defeatist. The results in the end will be closure of more and more churches, inline with the demise of the older generation, decimation of the local community spirit, an abandonment of the next and younger generations and our church becoming less and less relevant. A dismal prospect that certainly does not seem to be in keeping with the mission of the gospel.

Building on what went before

In Enniskerry parish, as probably in other parishes, the transformation process began more than 25 years ago when our then parish priest, the late Fr. Paddy McCabe, asked a few parishioners for help to deal with the mounting parish debt and substantial finance required for essential repairs and Vatican II sanctuary modifications in all our parish churches. That resulted in the formation of a Finance Committee and a Property Committee that succeeded in eliminating the debt and raising the further substantial funds required. The case for involving parishioners in a meaningful way in church affairs was evident.

Some years later this parishioner involvement increased further with the establishment of a Parish Pastoral Council. Great care was taken to ensure that, as far as possible, the PPC was representative of each of the 4 local church communities.

A parish Vision Statement *“To create a welcoming, growing, compassionate and participating Christian community in a changing world”* was then developed. The Vision statement clearly set out our goal and the need for a more outgoing, welcoming, compassionate and inclusive approach. That vision is still very relevant today.

At different times surveys were conducted to find out the views, needs and desires of parishioners. From each survey it was evident that the next and younger generations showed little or no interest in getting involved e.g. almost 100% of the survey responses were from the older traditionalist generation. This continuing lack of interest obviously has to change if we are to attain our vision and prevent the continuing decline in the numbers involved in church activities and associated financial contributions.

While we have not yet succeeded in solving that problem fully, fortunately we now know what has not worked, and can use that to inform our progress.

On the positive side much has been achieved in our parish by our communities in that 25 years. Local charities have been set up such as SVP, Charabanc (helps the elderly), the Wren Boys (supports the elderly), etc and more recently the new Enniskerry Welcomes initiative that aims to help an immigrant family to settle in Enniskerry. All these initiatives were supported by our local parish communities, our excellent local church choirs and local talented musicians via church concerts, sale of locally recorded Christmas Carols CDs, Christmas carol singing in local golf clubs, etc..

Over the years we have been blessed with a number of excellent parish priests who, in close cooperation with parishioners, have succeeded in forging very close links with our Church of Ireland fraternity. There is now a growing bond between the two traditions with joint celebrations when the occasion arises such as the Stations of the Cross procession on Good Friday in Enniskerry which starts at St.Mary’s Catholic church and moves up the hill to the St.Patrick’s local Church of Ireland church.

In addition over the period in question local football clubs have been set up and are now thriving. No wonder there is such a wonderful community spirit in the whole area! We now only have to build on this. Priestly vocations have, of course, been declining in Ireland for many years. This started to impact us some years ago when our parish lost its permanent curate. Now the situation is becoming critical and it is clear that the time has come for the laity, once again, to increase their involvement in church matters, this time in a major way.

The main problem to be resolved is that of the next and younger generations' apathy. It obviously requires a new approach. To see what form this should take we first need to analyse the current situation.

Analysis of the problem

There are several factors that are relevant, some positive and some negative:

- It would appear that the next and younger generations' apathy arises from the rapidly changing culture and attitudes of modern society. This particularly affects these generations as they are increasingly influenced by a secular society and have lost trust and respect for Church authority stemming mainly from the abhorrent sexual abuse scandals. A contributory factor is a generally more educated population and the instant availability of information both good and bad at the touch of a button. The era of blind faith is over. All this of course has also contributed to the lack of priestly vocations.
- Even though generally the next and younger generations do not practice in the traditional sense, they still have strong emotional family ties to their local church, school, cemetery, football club and local community reflected in the strong community spirit experienced in small church communities. This is a major asset that needs to be recognised as a means of reengaging the next and younger generations.
- It is also important to note that the phenomenal growth of meditation is one indicator that there still is a strong spiritual desire in the broader sense and that this presents an opportunity provided it is approached in the right way.
- Social media with their "Like" and "Dislike" choices as well as the effects of COVID19 lockdowns have highlighted people's strong need for a feeling of community and belonging. This suggests that our new local community based approach is the correct one.
- In relation to the next and younger generations there are two further factors.
In general they find:
 - the current form of the church ceremonies boring
 - they cannot relate to the current cliched form of church language.

All of the above needs to be taken into account in constructing our new approach.

New approach

The emotional ties of the next and younger generations to their local church, school and cemetery and local community as well as the strong local community spirit would seem to be the best basis on which to further develop the Christian community.

Thus our new strategy is to further invigorate, broaden & grow local church communities with emphasis on the next and younger generations, building on the existing local community spirit and the emotional ties that people have to their local church, school and cemetery. This will require changes to what we as a church can offer so as to rekindle the interest of the next and younger generations.

It is in effect the next phase of our parish transformation.

Further parish transformation - The next phase

It needs to be noted at this point that in our Enniskerry Parish this further transformation process is already well underway as described under "Further Enniskerry Parish transformation - Progress to date" further below.

First step

To commence the further transformation process the PPC needs to:

- a) Establish a Parish Transformation Working Group as a subgroup

b) Initiate the setting up of proactive Local Church Community Groups

a) Form a Parish Transformation Working Group

This should consist of PPC members prepared and able to initiate the formation of the Local Church Community Groups and drive the parish transformation process as agreed by the PPC. Therefore PPC membership needs to include the chairpersons of the Local Church Community Groups who should also reside in their respective local community.

b) Initiate the setting up of Local Church Community Groups

Such local groups have the major advantage that, through their many local contacts, they have the finger on the pulse of what will interest their local community and its next and younger generations and they are motivated by the local community spirit.

In initiating the formation of these groups it is essential that the relevant members of the Parish Transformation Working Group consult extensively and widely with their respective local community. It is critical that these Local Church Community Groups are fully involved in the parish transformation process so that they feel ownership and become the drivers of the process in their local church community under the guidance of the Parish Pastoral Council.

The Local Church Community Groups will have to:

- be representative of and draw its member from all sections of that local community e.g. Both weekly and occasional church attenders, the next and younger generation, people linked with the local school and cemetery, people with business experience, etc.
The chairperson of the group should be or become a member of the PPC
- be self reliant, open to change, friendly, welcoming, outgoing and use language that engages the next and younger generations.
- take a leading role in their local Church activities, with the PPC/priest providing a guiding and supporting function.
- ensure that the needs of both our traditional church community and the next and younger generations are catered for. This will require an openness to see and appreciate each other's point of view.
- actively cooperate with the other Local Church Community Groups and the PPC and swap ideas so as to further the aims of the parish as a whole in line with our Parish Vision and "Four churches One faith community" concept.
- ensure that local charities, the marginalised, infirm, etc. are always actively supported.
- take the necessary steps so that local church helpers, irrespective of their role, feel really valued and appreciated. This is critical.
- use all the latest means of communication including social media to spread the good news.
- be self financing asap.

Next steps

The task of the Local Church Community Groups is to conceive and start implementing relevant new ideas. What exactly these should be may vary from one Local Church Community Group to another depending on local circumstances. New and creative ideas will be required to widen interest in local church activities. This will be greatly facilitated through the use of local knowledge, contacts and occasions where opportune.

The following are some examples that could be considered. Obviously some of these could only be introduced post COVID. What is important is that they all drive our further parish transformation.

- Local church celebrations should be available on Sundays in the form of a Prayer Service with communion when a priest is not available and celebration of Mass is not possible.
- Further enhance the feeling of friendliness and welcome experienced in each of the local churches.
- Build on the already strong links with the local school, parent groups, football club, cemetery, etc.
- All church celebrations to be made much more welcoming, interesting, friendly and family oriented
- Encourage whole families to become involved in the Mass or Prayer Service on a particular special occasion for them e.g Anniversaries.

- Broaden the use of the local church also on weekdays for other appropriate activities of interest to a broad section of the local community particularly the next and younger generations so that the local church becomes a real community focal point and helps drive the growth of the local community spirit.
- Engage young people in Charitable activities e.g. a Vincent de Paul Youth Group or establish a Youth Group that would assist the elderly with gardening, house cleaning, shopping etc
- Engage in some further activities with our Church of Ireland Christian Community with a view to building a stronger cohesive Christian community
- Initiate activities to seek out people in the margins of our Parish, those who feel cut off for many reasons such as poverty, alcoholism, drugs etc
- Find ways of supporting the Enniskerry Welcomes initiative that is endeavouring to house a refugee family in our Parish.
- Establish a Parish Visiting Team. Members of this Team would visit the elderly or housebound and build a connection between them and the rest of the Christian community.
- Seek new creative occasions for group prayer, linked to community and family events and using social media. Encourage meaningful participation and inputs from families and all age groups.
- The growth in the practice of mindfulness and of private and group meditation points to a way of supporting private prayer and spiritual growth. Build on this in imaginative ways to elicit interest from a wide section of the local community.

Further Enniskerry Parish transformation - Progress to date

Even though seriously hampered by the COVID restrictions, good progress is being made.

At Parish Pastoral Council level

Parish Transformation Working Group

- Our Parish Pastoral Council has set up a Parish Transformation Working Group that is initiating the setting up of 4 Local Church Community Groups that will be responsible for driving the parish transformation process locally.
- This working group will be supporting and guiding these local church community groups in their endeavours.

Parish Social Media Development Group

- A working group has been formed at parish-level to review and update the existing social media channels. The goal is to increase our presence in social media with the following over-arching structure: Enniskerry Parish - Four Churches One Faith Community.
- The social media framework envisaged will allow each of the four churches in the parish to update social media with relevant updates as they pertain to their local communities, while also allowing the parish staff to update from an administrative point of view and giving the clergy access to encourage a direct spiritual dimension.
- The Parish Website is being updated to facilitate updating of information both centrally and at local church community level so as to be a valuable source for up-to-date relevant news, articles of interest to the community, etc.

At local church level

Good progress has been made by the majority of the 4 local church community groups.

St. Patrick's Community Group - Curtlestown

This community is blessed with a beautiful old church as well as an adjoining cemetery and adjacent very popular local school. No wonder it has such a wonderful local community spirit.

A very enthusiastic St. Patrick's Community Group, Curtlestown, was formed and is active since December last with some encouraging initial success.

This Group comprises of a cross-generational team comprising of various members of the local community who have been actively involved within the church, local schools, and local businesses. The various age groups

within the Group ensure that the voices of many different household types within the community are represented.

- Before the COVID-19 lockdown Mass was celebrated in the church every Sunday.
- To date, the Group has prepared a Covid-compliant Communion celebration to enable the celebration to take place locally in St. Patrick's, as well as a number of innovative Prayer Services which were produced and recorded for Christmas, St. Patrick's Day and Easter. These recordings were made available to the wider community via social media and can be viewed here:
 - <http://Bit.ly/CurtlestownChristmasPrayerService>
 - <http://Bit.ly/StPatricksCelebrationCurtlestown>
 - <http://Bit.ly/Easter2021Curtlestown>
- While Prayer Services were pre-recorded due to Covid-restrictions, the Group has actively sought and received support from Three Ireland Ltd. giving St. Patrick's viable internet access which can be used to broadcast future activities in the church.
- A draft Calendar of Activity has been drawn up to inform how St. Patrick's might be used each Sunday of a month. For example:
 - Week 1 - Mass
 - Week 2 - Prayer Service
 - Week 3 - Children's/ Family-focused Prayer Service
 - Week 4 - Prayer Service
 - Week 5 - Private prayer
- It is envisaged that, as the lay-led approach grows in support and confidence, we will be able to broaden the Calendar of Activity to include additional suitable community activities.
- Active recruitment has been taking place in Curtlestown to increase the number of lay people who are interested in participating further. This included those who participated in the choir, in the readings at Masses, and those who have diligently contributed to the general upkeep of St. Patrick's church. The response to this has been very positive and we already have a core group of people.
- The Group has received very positive feedback from the community both on their new initiatives to date, as well as on their new ideas on which they are working.
- There is already wide community participation in Masses & other Liturgies at Easter & Christmas times with the Curtlestown Church Choir and very talented local musicians.
- Plans are underway to reactivate the annual celebration of Mass at the nearby Mass Rock.
- There is huge interest in the annual Blessing of the Graves ceremony and we have an active local team that maintains the cemetery.

St. Mary's Community Group - Enniskerry

St. Mary's is another historic church with adjacent local school serving Enniskerry village and surroundings. There is a community group that can draw on the many very dedicated and active parishioners that are engaged in various activities in St. Mary's. Further work needs to be done in this area.

- Prayer Services are taking place each week.
- A very successful and unobtrusive Web Cam facility has been installed that is live streaming Masses and Prayer Services.
- Parents and children are involved in planning and celebrating a series of First Holy Communion & Confirmation Preparation Masses
- A Baptism Team helps parents and assist at the celebration of the Sacrament
- Annual Summer picnic for Sacramental recipients (i.e. First Holy Communion, Confirmation & Baptism) - usually after Sunday Mass close to Corpus Christi
- Annual Week of Guided Prayer
- Education (e.g. Guest Speakers; Lenten Talks & Advent Talks)
- Annual Mass for those who died in the past year
- Annual Mass and celebration for all who volunteer in Parish & Community activities (hasn't happened every year but is an intention)

- Annual Mass for all who are sick in the parish (again, is an intention but may not have happened every year)
- Daily Rosary before Morning Mass
- Novena of the Miraculous Medal every Monday
- Organise special celebratory events e.g. Flower Festival for 160th Anniversary of Church
- Promoting Parish Outings - we plan these as annual events. We had a very successful visit to St. Mel's Cathedral and also to the World Meeting of Families
- An increasing number of Ecumenical activities have been introduced with our Church of Ireland neighbours - Good Friday Way of the Cross; Holy Family Walk with Donkey at Christmas time from St. Mary's to St. Patrick's Church of Ireland; Lenten Talks.
- There is wide community participation in Masses & other Liturgies at Easter & Christmas times.

St. Mochonog Community Group - Kilmacanogue

St. Mochonog is a very old church with adjacent local school, cemetery and a vibrant local community spirit.

A community team has been established with a broad selection of parishioners involved including the principal of the local school. Further work on this is ongoing.

- There is wide community participation in Masses & other Liturgies at Easter & Christmas times.
- A Wifi upgrade has enabled the transmission of Zoom Masses and celebrations.
- Easter Sunday Mass has taken place with the new Papal Nuncio on Zoom from our beautiful church.
- Lay prayer services have been held with approximately 6 parishioners already trained and 4 more available for training.
- Advent preparation service held
- Lent reflections service held.
- Since re-opening re-opening of Church we are offer the Mass on live Zoom link, which has also proven popular with our local priest Fr Hyacinth's friends within the Nigerian community.
- Looking at projects we are planning the celebration of St. Mochonógs bi-centenary and its part in the original Camino to Glendalough.
- Sacramental preparation has been ongoing over Zoom during lockdown and we have a Sacramental celebration programme ready to go as soon there is a decision on dates for Confirmations & First Holy Communions.
- We also have a very active team who maintain both the old and new cemeteries.
- We have a Refreshments Committee who (when times allow) organise tea & coffee after Mass.

St. Kevins Community Group - Glencree

This is another historic church. It is adjacent the well known Glencree Reconciliation Centre made famous by the historic visits of Princess Grace, Mo Mowlam and the part it played in healing the divisions in Northern Ireland. The centre caters for conferences, hikers and cyclists enjoying the surrounding countryside.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown a Mass was celebrated in the church once per month.

It is also adjacent to the well known German cemetery. Every year the German community hold an ecumenical service in the church which the German ambassador attends to commemorate their military personnel that died in Ireland as casualties of the world wars. The Curtlestown choir has performed at some of these commemorations.

There is huge potential for building on these foundations.

A small informal community group exists but further work is required.