



*A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Ray Browne  
to the People of the Diocese of Kerry*

## **MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE**

### **Towards parishes that foster belonging, caring, and faith**

Greetings to all the people of the diocese.

Last January, I invited you to take the first steps in the journey of the future of our parishes, titled *'Moving Forward in Hope'*. Thank you to all who participated in this journey at parish, pastoral area and diocesan level, and thank you to our facilitator who has journeyed with us.

These are very challenging times for us as people of faith - the abuse scandals, the decline in regular church attendance and the shortage of priests. Nevertheless, we have confidence that the Gospel is still Good News today. Let our trust in God's Spirit give us a sense of hope for the future.

***Our faith is the Good News that Jesus Christ is the God of love.***

***Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ accompanies us  
both in this life and in the life to come.***

***To live and to share that Good News is our mission.***

## Our journey so far

During the spring months, we engaged in a series of conversations about the future of our parishes. You may have attended one of the parish meetings reflecting on my Pastoral Letter or taken part in the webinars on the Synod or reflected on the feedback at your Parish Pastoral Council [PPC] meeting. The clergy also met and reflected on the Pastoral Letter. There was great energy at all gatherings. There was a general consensus that the way forward involves greater participation of lay people in all aspects of parish life, and the evolving role of the Parish Pastoral Council.

A vision for the future of parishes began to emerge:

- People described parish as a community of belonging and care, confident in the presence of Christ among us.
- Parishes expressed a desire to retain their individual identity.
- Participants appreciated the particular ministry of priests.
- The need to develop the roles of lay people in parish life.
- People voiced the need to reach out and enable younger generations to participate in parish life.

## Responding to the challenge

A diocesan planning group explored how we could best respond to the feedback from the various conversations.

The feedback clarified our vision for the future of parishes and pastoral areas:

- That the Parish Pastoral Council in each parish, accountable to a named priest in the pastoral area, co-ordinates pastoral activities, and enables parishioners to play an active role.
- That priests and deacons exercise their pastoral and sacramental roles, ministering alongside the other clergy of the pastoral area.

However, priests will not be expected to sustain local management roles, attend all parish meetings etc.

- That as a diocese we will support parishes to deepen their spirit of mission to reach out to all in their community, especially to younger generations.
- That the Area Pastoral Councils will continue to promote and enable cooperation between neighbouring parishes.
- That there will be ongoing promotion for vocations to priesthood, to religious life, to the permanent diaconate and to lay vocations.
- That each parish will retain its identity and its autonomy to manage finance, sacraments, liturgy, mission and so on, involving greater active participation of laity, supported by the diocese.

We asked each of the PPCs to reflect on our proposed vision. This was accepted by PPCs, though some expressed the need for more training if they are to function as envisaged.

## Moving forward

The first steps of a plan of action are in place. The journey involves translating words into deeds.

### **Step 1: Enhancement of the role of Parish Pastoral Council**

*October 2024*

- Recruitment of new members for PPC, as needed
- Training for all PPC members

### **Step 2: Gathering a profile of the parish**

*November 2024*

- Each PPC will profile its parish activity, in order to get a clear overview of strengths and weaknesses of their parish

### Step 3: Pastoral Actions

*February 2025*

- Pastoral team will identify pastoral responses and will support parishes to:
  - Foster involvement of regular Mass goers to play an active part in the parish's mission
  - Engage with hard-to-reach groups in the parish, particularly the younger generations.

These actions will strengthen the role of the Pastoral Councils through practical actions, so that they work with the clergy to foster greater lay participation in the life and mission of our parishes.

I ask God's blessing on all parish communities throughout the diocese. Let us all support this process in the year ahead, by our active participation in parish life, by keeping ourselves informed of its progress, and by our willingness to serve in some practical way at parish, pastoral area or diocesan level.

Our diocesan conversation mirrors what is happening in our Church worldwide. Pope Francis has encouraged us to converse synodally – so that all voices are heard, all aspects of Church life and all situations of the people of God are appreciated and respected, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

*The journey continues. Let us walk together.*



+ Ray Browne

† Ray Browne

8th September 2024