

A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS



BLESSED SACRAMENT
CATHOLIC PARISH

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MAINTENANCE TO MISSION

FR JONATHAN STEWART

What a difference a book makes!

Reading 'Divine Renovation – Bringing your Parish from Maintenance to Mission' by the Canadian priest Fr James Mallon was a revelation. It transformed my understanding of what could be possible within parish ministry and the priesthood. Attending the Divine Renovation Conference at Twickenham in 2017 confirmed what I had read.

Fr James stood up at the beginning of the conference and in front of 250 people, 70 priests and 3 bishops, said "What we are doing is not working". I sighed with relief. What many of us had been thinking but hadn't dare say out loud had finally been acknowledged.

I was reminded of a line from the documents for the Synod on the New Evangelisation in 2012: 'a "business as usual" attitude can no longer be the case'. Simply repeating what we had been doing in the parish year in, year out was not producing the fruit that we had been promised. It had become demoralising, debilitating and exhausting.

Divine Renovation does not claim to be the solution. Rather it invites parishes and their pastors to ask crucial questions. Why and how do we build and sustain community and preach the Good News of Jesus to the world?

I read the book shortly after arriving at Blessed Sacrament. I quickly realised I was in the right place to begin asking these questions. I wanted this to be the place where the vision of taking a parish 'from maintenance to mission' could be realised.

For a couple of years now our parish has been part of a network of parishes seeking new ways of being Church. I recently had the good fortune to take part in a 'Kickstart' programme with five other priests from around the world. In a friendly and engaging way we shared ideas and learnt from each other. It reminded me that we are not alone. Many parishes like ours are seeking new ways of proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples of Jesus.

I hope that you will find this report a source of hope and joy. I'm delighted that many of our plans have begun to bear fruit. May we continue build a community where the Gospel is proclaimed and where more people come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ.

A PRECIOUS PLACE OF GOD'S GRACE CATHOLIC EXETER

The renewed confidence and understanding of the mission of the Church and the parish that I gained from 'Divine Renovation', was reinforced by a document entitled 'A Precious Place of God's Grace' published by Bishop Mark and his Council in 2021. This document, shared throughout the Diocese of Plymouth, invites us to look at the structure of our diocese and the communities within it. We are being asked to reflect on how this structure could better serve the challenges and needs of evangelisation, both now and in the future.

We are fortunate in Exeter as our two parishes of Sacred Heart and Blessed Sacrament already work closely together, particularly providing pastoral support for those preparing to receive the sacraments. I believe Divine Renovation offers a vision of how we could work more closely together without losing the distinctive nature of our two communities.

Human resources are being stretched to ever greater lengths, particularly with regards to clergy. We need to adapt to be far more inclusive and collaborative, using the gifts and talents of our two wonderfully diverse and gifted parishes. Lay-led ministry has to be encouraged. People need to respond to this call, to be trained and then given the authority to lead and guide others without always having to refer to the priest. Ministry can no longer be about 'doing it for Father', but rather 'doing it in service of the whole community'.

The employment of a Parish Pastoral Assistant came out of this vision and has already proved hugely beneficial. I can only see this initiative and others like it growing and being vital parts of the work of the Church here in our city and beyond. One of the fruits of Catholic Exeter's closer working is that our parish teams, clergy and laity, come together and meet at least fortnightly. We explore, discuss and plan ways that Catholic Exeter can meet the pastoral needs of our two parishes and how the role of the Parish Pastoral Assistant, which is a bridge between the two parishes, supports this.

BLESSED SACRAMENT PARISH THE ROLE OF THE PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL

An important part of the organisational structure of any parish is a Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) and Blessed Sacrament is no exception. As an elected and consultative body, the PPC enables the parish priest to make decisions about strategy and the future as well as administering the goods of the parish. They are a 'sounding board' for me, an opportunity for me to 'listen' to what the parish is saying.

Yet, for the last few years their role has become somewhat diminished. This is due in large part to a lack of understanding of the role of the PPC – on my part and on theirs. I believe Divine Renovation provides a vision for how its role could be strengthened and made more significant. It needs to be life-giving for all involved so that it can help bring life to the parish.

I imagine a PPC – priest and people – looking forward together and asking the question, 'What will our community look like in 5 years' time?' This requires the membership to be visionary and to be able to think and dream big!

It also requires the membership of the PPC to have the gifts necessary to best serve the parish. There is no such thing as a perfectly formed individual but there can be a well-formed group of different individuals offering a variety of gifts and vision.

LEADERSHIP LEADING OUT OF A TEAM

Divine Renovation has three 'Keys' to its understanding of how parishes can move from maintenance to mission:

The Primacy of Evangelisation
Leadership
Reliance on the Holy Spirit

Perhaps the most challenging of these for any parish priest is the second; leadership. Traditionally the priest has 'run' the parish, but as the number of priests diminishes and responsibilities increase, this

model is no longer viable – or indeed desirable. The ‘business as usual’ attitude can no longer be the case.

Jesus called others to join his mission. He ‘co-missioned’ them to go out and continue his work. Why then would we expect the priest to do it all on his own?

Forming a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) has been one of the most exciting and challenging things I have done as a priest. Calling together those I felt had a heart for mission and a desire to challenge the status quo has been enormously gratifying. It has changed my understanding of what a parish can be.

Imagine responding to a suggestion about what we should be doing by saying, ‘Let me talk to the team about that’ rather than worrying about it on my own until the early hours of the morning. It’s been life-changing for me.

We’re not perfect and we have much to learn, but we are committed. It’s not about me having a group of ‘flunkies’ or ‘mates’ who will agree enthusiastically with everything I say. Rather it is a group who challenge me and each other. They support me and each other and have a genuine love of the community and a desire to serve it in the best way possible.

Divine Renovation recommends this way forward. It suggests ways the SLT can work with the PPC to bring vision and leadership to the forefront of parish life. I want to extend the role of the SLT and the PPC to enable them to be truly effective within the community.

We also all know and trust that the SLT can and should be flexible and fluid. It means that those called to serve in this way aren’t expected to do so for the next 20 years! Different times and new challenges will necessitate a change of personnel. I hope and pray that when called, the generous people of our parish will respond.

THE FIVE SYSTEMS OF CHURCH ANALYSIS

Groucho Marx famously commented “I don’t want to belong to any club that would have me as a member”. I don’t know whether he would have wanted to belong to our parish community or not, but I know that Jesus would have welcomed him with open arms.

If you weren’t a follower of Jesus what would we, as Church, need to be like to attract you to explore becoming a Christian?

We decided to explore that question, effectively assessing the health of our parish, by using a recognised five systems analysis. In the same way that the ten systems of the human body need to be working properly for the body to be healthy, so all five systems of any organisation need to be working well for it to be healthy and to be able to function effectively.

So, what are the five systems that we will use as the lens through which we see ourselves as Church? They are:

Worship
Evangelisation
Discipleship
Meaningful Community
Ministry

They are rooted in the great commission – Matthew 28:19-20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (*Evangelisation*), baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (*Meaningful Community*), teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (*Discipleship*)”, and in the great commandment – Matthew 22:37-39 – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (*Worship*). This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself (*Ministry*)”.

In the following pages we will take a look at each of these in turn.

WORSHIP

Gathering for the celebration of the Eucharist at Mass with our minds and hearts raised to God. Worship may include the celebration of the Liturgy, prayer groups, private prayer, prayer and praise and adoration.

Giving Priority to the Weekend (Sunday Mass)

*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
(Psalm 118:24)*

At the time of writing his book 'Divine Renovation' Fr James Mallon realised that the only time he saw 80% of his parishioners was at the weekend. So why commonly, do priests invest only 20% of their time planning, preparing and celebrating weekend Masses? Because, he maintains, much of a priest's time is often spent on activities which only affect a small number of people.

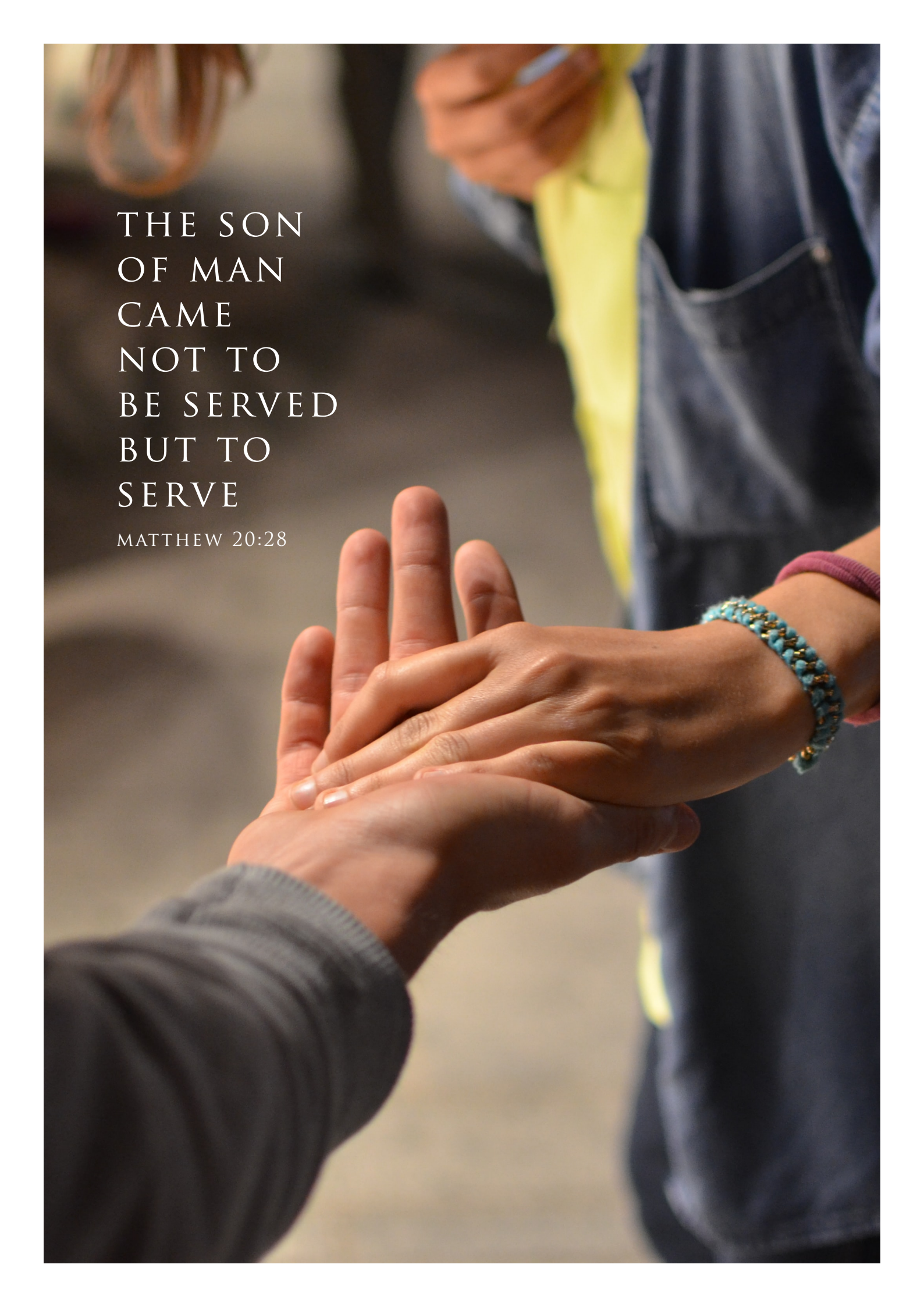
I tested this proposition with the SLT by monitoring how I spend my time and we found there to be truth in what Fr James says. Looking at the various aspects of my work I soon realised that not all of it needs to be done by me as pastor. There is much scope for greater collaboration with the people of the parish who will bring to the work their strengths and desire to serve Christ and the community.

So, I am resolved to apply the 80/20 rule to my ministry time by putting my greatest input into "preparing for and celebrating Sunday Mass, to make it the best possible experience for the maximum number of people" – and that means for you who are reading this now and all those yet to cross the threshold of our church.

Homilies

In recent Pew Research in the United States of America, when Catholics were asked why they had left the Church, the most common reason given was that they were not being spiritually fed. This is shocking, but perhaps not surprising.

We are fed spiritually in many ways, not least by the homily during the celebration of Mass.



THE SON
OF MAN
CAME
NOT TO
BE SERVED
BUT TO
SERVE

MATTHEW 20:28

Fr James writes eloquently about the need for good preaching. Pope Francis has written powerfully and directly to priests encouraging them in this ministry – also giving clear instruction!

I enjoy preaching and I enjoy it when my preaching is appreciated. What I think Divine Renovation has reinforced in my mind is making the homily relevant. The reason I try to greet you as you arrive at church is of course to say hello, but also so that I 'know' the congregation again. It helps me to speak to you as friends rather than simply a group of strangers gathered together. It doesn't always work, of course, and you'll know I've lost the plot when I start in with the irrelevant religious platitudes! Shouting 'Father, sit down' might help! Maybe I'm ignoring my 80/20 rule?

Food for thought

Where do your strengths lie? I'm not inviting you to write a homily but how much more could you share in supporting our worshipful celebration of Mass? Raising your voice more fully in the responses, proclaiming the Word, administering the Eucharist, beautifying the church through the ministries of flowers or cleaning, to name a few?

Enhancing Worship through Creativity, Music and Technology

Recent feedback from the parish synodal discussions captured our parishioners' appreciation of worship in our parish. Throughout the liturgical seasons worship is distinctively and richly enhanced by using resources in a creative way. Showing reflective films and animations, adorning the sanctuary with coloured liturgical cloth to highlight the changing seasons, and displaying objects such as candles, poppies, plants, crowns and crosses are all examples of how the congregation is drawn more deeply, dynamically, and sensitively into the theological treasure of the liturgical year.

Music Ministry

'If the liturgy and our music are to have a missional dimension, our evaluation of music must always include the question of what speaks to the people we are attempting to reach' (Divine Renovation)

Blessed Sacrament has a wealth of talented and generous musicians who serve the parish in different ways. Before the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) took hold, to create a sense of unified

mission, we formed a liturgy group from amongst those currently serving the parish through music. Our purpose remains to work together to creatively enhance those all-important Sunday Masses as well as special feast days, and to offer a breadth of liturgical music. Post-pandemic we will resume our efforts!

Opportunities to worship also include prayer and praise. We currently offer this through our lively monthly “praise and worship” sessions. Over the last two years or so, a home-grown praise and worship band – Stronghold – has come to life. Stronghold gather monthly and these joyful and prayerful meetings are well attended by parishioners and those from further afield. You would be most welcome to join us.

Another enthusiastically received outcome of working together was the 2020 Catholic Exeter Christmas Carol Service. We invited parish priests, readers, and musicians from both parishes to contribute. Using scripture, prayers, images and music we created a film to help people reflect and meditate on the Christmas message and encouraged participation by parishioners at home.

Food for thought

As you experience the music at Mass are you drawn closer to God and inspired to worship, to sing? Maybe you're hiding your light under a bushel. Is music ministry your calling?

Technology – Screen and Projector

The parish investment in the installation of the screen and projector in the church, used intentionally and appropriately, has had a positive effect on our worship.

Before the pandemic, we used it regularly at Mass on Sunday. Projecting songs and the parts of the Mass on the screen encourages and increases participation. Words on the screen are more easily read and followed – particularly important for younger children, members of the congregation whose first language isn't English and indeed those who have difficulty reading small-print text. I do!

The screen enables us to use images to enhance the liturgy. It also allows us to introduce new genres of music – it's impossible for hymn books (currently out of use due to COVID) to keep pace with the profusion of exciting new worship music available. Both significantly enrich our Sunday celebration of Mass.

Last but not least, the use of the screen makes liturgies and therefore the whole community, more welcoming. Visitors have given positive feedback on the use of the screen. They commented that it made them feel welcome by enabling them (especially those unfamiliar with Catholic liturgy) to fully participate in the congregational responses, prayers and singing. Hospitality at its best!

Food for thought

Using the screen requires trained slide operators for each Mass. We are already grateful for the involvement of some of our young people in this, many hands make light work. Could you volunteer too?

EVANGELISATION

“The Good News of God’s love revealed in Jesus, and the salvation offered through his Cross and Resurrection, proclaimed to those who don’t know Jesus”.

The Alpha Course

The Alpha course (Alpha) has become our primary tool for evangelisation. Through a series of lively films and discussion the course creates an opportunity for people of all ages and beliefs to encounter Christ for the first time or renew the encounter. They begin to experience what it’s like to belong to a community.

In Autumn 2019 we decided to dip our toes into the water and run a pilot Alpha before deciding to launch it to the wider parish. It was a powerful and encouraging experience and several new volunteers came forward to form an Alpha ministry team. The pandemic interrupted our plans for face-to-face Alpha meetings but, undeterred, we hosted two online Alpha courses in May 2020 and in February 2021. We invited anyone from anywhere to come – practising or lapsed Catholics or anyone yet to have heard about Jesus. Then we offered a face-to-face course and an on-line course in the autumn of 2021 which was well attended and a whole new cohort joined.

For those of us who have already experienced Alpha in the parish, it has been life-changing and continues to be so. Our deepest desire is that everyone in the parish, however young or old, however deeply involved we are or not, will take part in Alpha. In this way we will

grow as a community of disciples, willing and able to draw others into a relationship with the Lord. The words of a couple of our Alpha guests sum up its effect:

“Alpha helped me discover a relationship with God.” – Sam

“I found a wonderful community of people exploring the Christian faith and encouraging each other on the journey, not having all the answers, but gently helping us to discover and share. Listening to others’ stories has been joyful and inspirational.” – Pauline

In spring 2022 we will once again offer Alpha face-to-face or online and we hope lots of people will respond to the invitation.

Food for thought


As Christians, we’re called to follow Jesus. He knows us intimately and wants us to know him, otherwise, how are we to respond to his call? But can you really say you know him? Have you truly encountered him in your life? Do you know what he is asking of you? What does your faith really mean to you? Alpha doesn’t answer all the questions, but it goes a long way, bringing us into a deeper relationship with Jesus and his Church. Could it be for you? Do you know someone you might invite?

Youth Alpha

After the success of our first two Alpha courses the next natural step was to launch Youth Alpha. This inspiring and engaging resource encourages young people to explore their faith and deepen their relationship with Jesus and the Church.

The first Youth Alpha ran in October 2021 and we hope that more young members of our parish family will be encouraged to come along. We also hope that it will be the beginning of catechesis for the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation which we have not celebrated for some time now.

Coming to church might not be the most important thing on the agenda of our teenagers, but we hope and pray that by offering them a sense of belonging, perhaps beyond the confines of the church building, they will grow in an understanding of God’s place in their lives. People often refer to young people as the ‘future’ of the

A photograph of two people from behind, standing on a rooftop or balcony at sunset. The person on the left has long dark hair and is wearing a white and blue striped t-shirt with black suspenders. The person on the right has long dark hair and is wearing a blue denim jacket. Both have their arms raised towards the bright sun, which is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow and lens flare. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds in shades of orange, pink, and blue. The overall mood is one of joy and spiritual uplift.

THEY WERE FILLED
WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT
AND SPOKE THE WORD
OF GOD BOLDLY

ACTS 4:31

Church. I believe they are the 'present' and we need to reach out to them where they are, giving them a voice and listening to what they have to say.

Food for thought

If you're a teenager reading this you may be asking big questions about the meaning of life? In conversation with other teenagers, through the medium of Alpha, you can explore this and other big questions – you're only a call or email away from getting started. As parents and grandparents reading this perhaps you can talk about Youth Alpha with your teenage son, daughter or grandchild and encourage them to find out more?

Growing in Faith Together – Family Catechesis

The parish offers catechetical support for those preparing to receive the sacraments. This is so that they can be well disposed to the sacraments and they can be most effective in their lives.

For many years this took the form of 'courses' or 'classes' where those preparing, or their parents, gathered to learn about the sacrament. We have tried many ways of making this catechesis more effective and meaningful, some more successful than others. What it's really all about is fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating the work of the Holy Spirit in parishioners' lives, whatever their age.

However, administering the sacraments sometimes feels more like awarding a prize to someone once they've completed a required course, rather than offering them the gift of grace and new life which only the Holy Spirit can bring.

Sadly, receiving the sacraments is sometimes experienced as a cultural or social 'rite of passage' rather than the gifts of God offered to us to bring us into a deeper relationship with him and to support and encourage us on our journey through life. It's not about the fact a child is in year 3 at school, but whether or not they're ready to begin receiving Holy Communion.

GIFT is a process not a programme. Divine Renovation has given us the courage to say, 'enough is enough, what we are doing is not working!'

So now, rather than offering a date when 50 children can get together to receive Holy Communion for the first time (and hoping and

praying that they know what they're doing), we invite them to enter a process. This respects that children develop at different rates and in different ways. It recognises that parents vary in their ability to support their children, as well as in their commitment to Church. And it respects volunteer catechists as ordinary Catholics who need lots of support and encouragement.

In January 2020 GIFT families and catechists met for the first time at St Nicholas Catholic School. We managed three subsequent monthly gatherings before the pandemic hit. The sessions were lively, stimulating, and informative and we had many encouraging comments from parents and catechists alike. Even the clergy enjoyed it!

When the pandemic struck, we had the courage to go online, using Zoom meetings to support parents, coaching them as the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith and offering them high quality resources. The difference has been incredible. Some parents have not understood or accepted our approach, but we are committed to it and know that it does make a real difference.

We hope that as we grow and learn from experience GIFT will develop into whole family catechesis. We imagine Saturday mornings where we come together to grow in faith in different ways; children and families preparing for the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist), young people sharing the challenges of growing up Catholic and looking forward to being confirmed and adults being formed to live as faithful and joyful disciples. All this in a world that is largely indifferent to faith. We're very excited!

What we have really learned, and Divine Renovation teaches, is that you can't catechise those who have not been evangelised. What we do in GIFT is something of both.

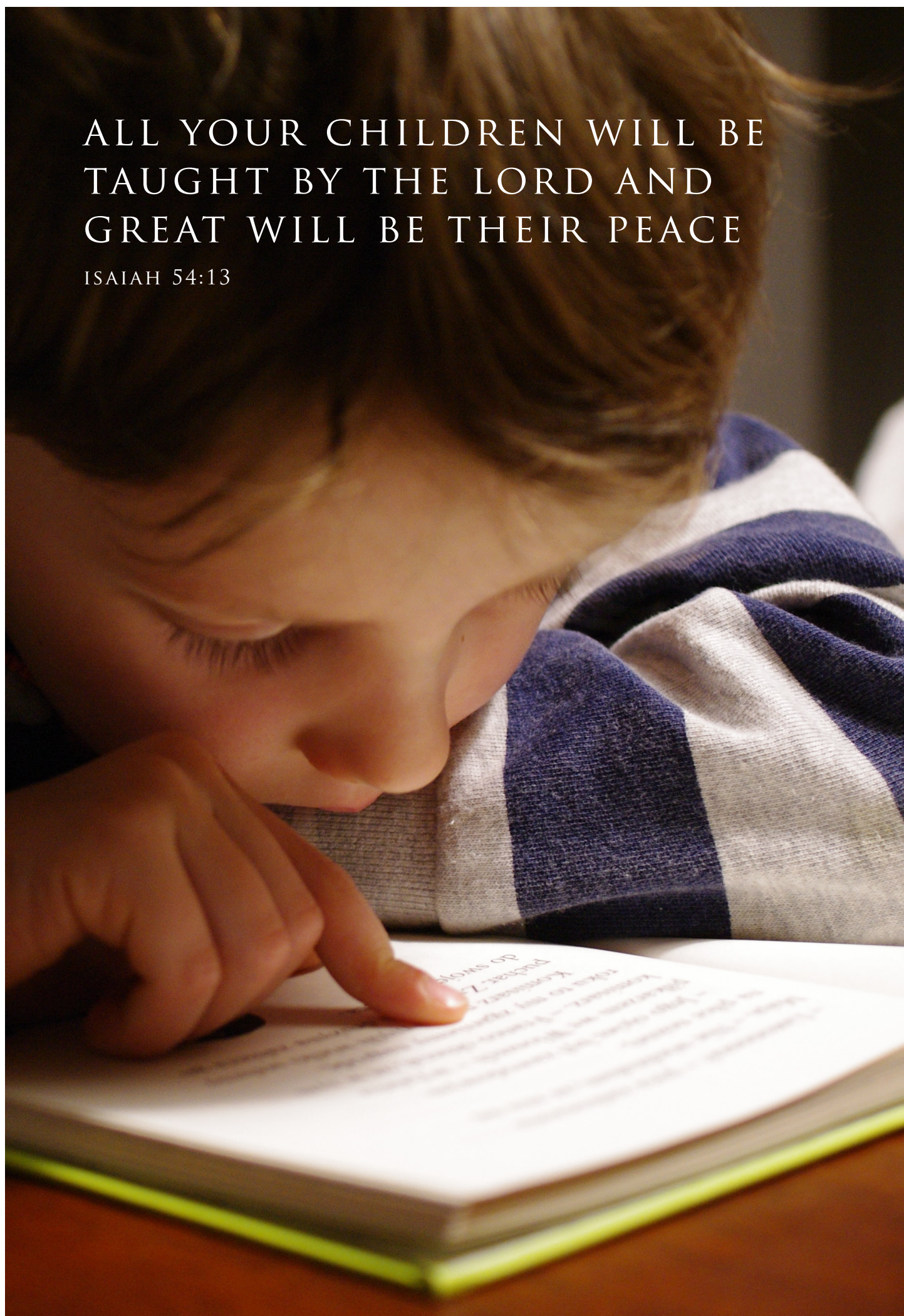
It is Divine Renovation which has inspired us to think about things in a different way and given us the courage to try new methods. This is just the beginning!

Food for thought

*Is your family looking for support to grow in faith together?
Then GIFT is probably for you. Come and join us.*

ALL YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE
TAUGHT BY THE LORD AND
GREAT WILL BE THEIR PEACE

ISAIAH 54:13



DISCIPLESHIP

“To become a follower of Jesus Christ is to be his disciple. Jesus said, ‘This is the will of my Father, that you should become my disciples’ (John 15:8). A disciple literally means ‘one who is learning.’ Learning and growing are lifelong tasks.” (Divine Renovation)

Adult Formation – Reigniting Faith

As a parish, we subscribe to Bishop Robert Barron’s online ministry ‘Word on Fire’ which produces fantastic, high quality faith formation videos and engaging talks.

In winter 2020, many parishioners gathered once a week to watch the six-part Word on Fire series ‘The Mass’ and to engage in small group discussion. Together we discovered, encountered, and appreciated anew or for the first time, the beautiful mystery of the Mass and our dynamic relationship with it.

After the enforced hiatus occasioned by the pandemic, we have finally been able to restart this style of learning and growing together. We are now offering fortnightly adult faith formation meetings making use of the extraordinary films in a series called ‘Catholicism’. We come together with a cup of tea or coffee, watch a film and then discuss the application of the content in our own lives. It’s a great way to learn, to grow and to share our faith with other ‘disciples-in-formation’.

Food for thought

Sadly, for many Catholics faith formation stopped after we were prepared to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation or even earlier. Maybe this is your opportunity to learn and grow? Or if you’re feeling confident in your faith, come along and share it with in the discussion time. The films alone make for a good night out.

Wednesday Word

In September 2019 we introduced the weekly hour-long Wednesday Word experience, moving online in April 2020 due to the pandemic. Each week Wednesday Word meetings offer an opportunity to read and reflect on the coming Sunday’s Gospel.

We explore the Gospel and share our personal reflections. We then have an opportunity to discuss these thoughts and respond to each other. The group has gone from strength to strength and has become a 'precious place of God's grace' where faith and community is nurtured, strengthened, and deepened.

Wednesday Word is a friendly group of faithful followers, not a panel of experts. Everyone is welcome and the format allows people to drop in and out weekly as their schedules permit.

Food for thought

Will you come and nurture and strengthen your faith?

You will be most welcome.

MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY

Praying with and for one another

One Sunday after we had been inviting people to partner for prayer at Mass for a few weeks, a parishioner emerged from church at the end of Mass and introduced a complete stranger to me saying, 'Father, this is 'so and so', my new prayer partner, we're going for coffee.'

Building community is one of the cornerstones of Divine Renovation, creating a sense of meaningful belonging. I knew at that moment that it wasn't me that had fostered this new friendship, but the Holy Spirit who had been at work.

One of the saddest things about the restrictions caused by the pandemic has been the isolation we have all experienced. Not being able to encourage prayer-partnering at the beginning of Mass or making a physical sign of peace has been a real challenge. I can't wait until we can start again.

On the last day of that first Divine Renovation Conference in Twickenham we were invited to get into groups of three, men together and women together and we were gently coached and guided about how to pray for one another. It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. As most of you know I'm a weeper, so as soon as the prayer for me began the flood gates opened. All I could do was whisper 'Come Holy Spirit'. I know others experienced the same power and emotion.

During our recent Stronghold evenings of prayer, praise and worship in the parish we have followed the same tried and tested pattern of offering prayer. It really works.

We want to begin offering this prayer ministry at the end of Mass on Sunday. It probably won't happen at every Mass in the first instance, but certainly at some. We know that the Holy Spirit wants to communicate his love, his support and his strength to people, and this, we believe, is one of the best ways of doing it. We will need people with gifts of love, joy and compassion as well as open hearts to come forward to be trained for this very powerful and important ministry.

Food for thought

I can hear all those negative thoughts now: "I'm not worthy", "I don't pray well", "please not me, anything but that....". Try asking the Holy Spirit about it. He might have a prayer ministry plan for you.

Connect Groups

As each Alpha course draws to a close we invite guests to join the Connect Group. This group meets online and in person every fortnight. It's a bit like a large house group. Connect members continue to grow in faith regardless of where they are on their faith journey. The meetings are run by the group members and over time everyone is invited to share their testimony or present a topic. These are sometimes supported by film clips including, for example, a series of interviews with well-known Christian author Pete Grieg on the many-faceted subject of prayer – including the tough question of unanswered prayer.

For many, Connect is a safe place to lead prayer for the first time or to give their first 'talk' on an aspect of their faith life. In this way, we are encouraged, equipped and called forth to use our gifts.

The time spent together at Connect is greatly enjoyed. The group is going from strength to strength, building community and a welcome sense of belonging. We hope that as more people wish to be connected in this way, more groups will form and grow.

Food for thought

Are you growing in your faith? It can be hard to do this alone. Why not do it in community with others, either through our fortnightly faith formation evenings or through Connect or both? If you're already a member of Connect, do you have ideas for its development? Could you feed in your ideas or offer to be on the leadership team? What's your calling? What are your gifts?

MINISTRY

Jesus said, 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.' (Mark 10:45) The essence of the Christian life is to serve God and one another. In this way we give witness that the Church is the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

We've already mentioned several ministries under the Worship, Evangelising and Meaningful Community systems. There is, of course, overlap across the systems. Here are some more, important ministries:

Ministry of Hospitality

A dictionary definition of hospitality is, 'generous and friendly treatment/reception of visitors, strangers and guests or hospitable treatment.'

'If Jesus is in your heart, please notify your face!' What do our faces reveal about us as followers of Jesus? Do we appear welcoming and hospitable? Are we outward or inward facing?

We've always tried to be a welcoming parish and with a small band of men and women Welcomers at the door to the church we've done our best to be hospitable.

Divine Renovation shines a light on our understanding of hospitality as a ministry – bringing with it new aspirations. Having reflected, we find we've perhaps been blinkered in our understanding. It's been especially hard for newcomers to find a way to belong to our community. Parish registration forms were offered but not accompanied by a genuine personal invitation to belong.



LOOK TO THE LORD
AND HIS STRENGTH;
SEEK HIS FACE ALWAYS

1 CHRONICLES 16:11

The pandemic and restrictions on public worship required us, in any case, to take a fresh look at the role of the person greeting at the door. Our response was to form a team of Stewards. This happy band have a menu of responsibilities – including welcoming people by name (who'd have thought that Track and Trace requirements would provide this opportunity to get to know a person's name!) and then gently leading them to a seat. This kind of basic hospitality is having a remarkable effect on the stewards and on those coming to Mass.

We're determined to build on our new understanding of hospitality ministry. It is a high priority. After all, the face that greets you at the church door may inform your first impression of us as 'Church'.

We've some ideas of our own: a well-supported hospitality ministry team; reshaping the welcome space in our church building; an informative welcome pack and social gatherings to get to know newcomers; sharing expectations of belonging to our parish, and more. Our aim is to build relationships and create a true sense of belonging. To carry out our mission we need your ideas as well as 'workers in the vineyard'.

Food for thought

Is this your strength? Could you be part of the team welcoming and getting to know newcomers? Could you be the 'face of Church'?

Ministers of the Word and Holy Communion

Before the pandemic, as Catholic Exeter, we offered two separate formation days for these two valuable ministries. The first in March 2019 offered Ministers of the Word (proclaimers) and Ministers of Holy Communion an opportunity to hone their skills, ask questions and receive further instruction.

The second formation day, held at St Nicholas School focussed purely on faith formation. Together we watched Bishop Barron's Eucharistic Congress Keynote Address and broke into small groups for discussion. By deepening our understanding of the Liturgies of the Word and Eucharist, we deepened and strengthened our understanding of our ministry and the call to serve the Church.

As people return to church and our pews fill up again we'll be turning our attention to the best way to develop these critical ministries for the celebration of Mass.

Food for thought

Do either of these ministries awaken in you a desire to serve? Perhaps you can talk to God about your own talents and gifts and where you can best serve Him and the community?

Leadership Within Ministry

All of us are called to evangelise, to share the Good News, and some are called in a special way through Alpha. Taking part in an Alpha course has a profound effect on a person's faith and we have already seen people's hearts being drawn to greater commitment to evangelising by becoming Alpha leaders. For others the Holy Spirit's call will be to become active in other ministries – existing and yet to be formed – as we seek to open wide our church doors and go out to meet those unaware of God's love and mercy.

As Christians, we are called to serve. We are also uniquely created and gifted by God so that we can serve God and our community according to our gifts. Through Alpha we want to raise up and support leaders not only for our own parish. We welcome guests from other parishes to experience Alpha and encourage them to lead it successfully in their own parish.

The call to leadership and service also extends into catechesis. As our understanding of formation is renewed and reinvigorated we need more people to support, encourage and coach those who are growing in faith. We actively invite and involve those who have been evangelised and have encountered Jesus to respond to the Lord's call to serve as catechists for sacramental preparation and to pass on the faith they have received. With training and development, we want catechists to grow in confidence and fulfilment as they engage with and make more disciples.

Food for thought

If you've enjoyed the Alpha course, perhaps you could pray about whether you're being called to serve on Alpha's leadership team. Or perhaps you can respond to the call to serve as a catechist to support others' growth in faith?

THE PANDEMIC A CALL TO ACTION

We've mentioned the pandemic several times in the context of it prompting us to change how we do things. It's been said that the only constant in life is change. And that can make life challenging. There's a quote from *The Shack* (by William Paul Young) God speaks; "*Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies*". For sure, God didn't orchestrate the tragedy of the pandemic, but equally certain is that some good has come from it.

HYBRID CHURCH

The pandemic forced us to be Church in a new way. As we could no longer gather in the church building, we had to find ways to reach out to the community.

Securing Lottery funding enabled us to live-stream the celebration of Mass and other services from the church. This proved to be invaluable and is something we will continue to do. The camera is going nowhere! Being able to include Godparents in a baptism when they are unable to be physically present has been a Godsend. Celebrating the funeral of a young person when only 30 people were allowed to be in the church but over 800 people joined online was incredible. It's not the same, but then nothing ever will be, will it?

Maria Quinn, Pastoral Assistant for the Exeter parishes, quickly learnt how to produce, and became very accomplished at producing, online resources for our families including catechetical films, bedtime chats and wonderfully supportive and encouraging emails.

One of the joys to come out of the pandemic was the creative flourishing of our Children's Liturgy team. As we closed the doors of the church the 'Gill Girls', Ellen, Amy, Clara and Ivy delighted us each week with their films exploring the themes of the readings from scripture. Inspired by them, others joined and soon we had a group of leaders who helped the younger members of our community understand and appreciate the Good News in ways that were accessible and filled with hope. Uploading the films to our parish YouTube channel meant they were available for anyone to watch.

The Exeter Marriage Preparation Team also went online to provide wonderful days of preparation for those preparing to be married. I was filmed answering some questions about the sacrament of Matrimony and these short films are included in the preparation days. I'm no film star, but it was great fun and adds to the variety of delivery. I'm hugely grateful to the team for the fantastic work they do. We've had some really encouraging comments from couples who have taken part.

Another success has been taking the Baptism Preparation sessions online. Catechists and parents meet on two consecutive Saturdays for 90 minutes and parents of young children and babies have appreciated the ease of meeting online in their own homes. Creative new resources and dynamic planning anchors the sacrament of Baptism in everyday life, offers opportunities for parents to reflect on their experiences in the light of faith and encourages them to share their responses with each other. From the comfort of their homes using Zoom, parents engage with our priests as they explain the Rite of Baptism, listen and learn from Bishop Barron's Word on Fire Ministry and get to know other like-minded Catholic and non-Catholic parents living in Exeter.

Food for thought

Have you seen what's on offer online? There's a whole new world waiting for you. You might feel there's something for which you could use your talents!

MAXIMISING SOCIAL MEDIA

Good communication is paramount – the more so during the pandemic lockdown and restrictions. We're grateful to those whose creativity and dedication helps us overhaul and splendidly refresh and maintain the parish website and Facebook pages.

Both of these 'windows' into our parish are now visually attractive, welcoming and, importantly, easy to navigate. The website is a go-to centre for news, to find out what's going on in and across Catholic Exeter and when and how to get involved. The parish newsletter is published there and the embedded links take you, with one click or tap, to a world of images, information and detail.

A paper version of the newsletter is available by post. This is especially appreciated by those who don't have access to the internet.

The new method of sending Catholic Exeter News by email allows us greater flexibility and creativity.

Food for thought

If you can but haven't already looked at the website or the Facebook page, please do. We think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Why not receive Parish News by email, and when you receive it, open it! Do you have skills which could benefit the parish; communication, social media, IT? Get in touch and let us know how you'd like to help.

NEXT STEPS

The health check of the five systems of our parish has revealed some gaps, especially in our outreach to the poor and needy and to the people who haven't yet come to know Jesus and his saving grace. There's still a lot to do!

I'm interested to receive and listen to any feedback or ideas on any of the contents of this report. Please do get in touch by email, or if you don't have email you could always write a letter. The address is on the back of this report.

The next step is to create a five-year plan. Identifying our priorities will help us create a strategy to deliver our vision. I'm sure the Parish Vision Day will have highlighted some of the things we should be thinking about.

Finally, I'll take you back to the very beginning of this report. We recognised that the old ways of working were not producing the fruit we were expecting. That prompted much of the activity recorded here. Initiatives and innovations were introduced only after prayer and reflection. We hope and believe that everything we do is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is at the heart of everything. So please pray; for the parish and everyone in it, for your families and for each other especially those in need, and for those in our city who are searching for meaning in their lives. You could use the Prayer for Parish Renewal on the following page, it's a good start. And please pray for me.

I offer you this report and invite you to continue to journey together as a parish family. Let us work for the mission to build and sustain our community and preach the Good News of Jesus to the world.

God bless you all.

Father Jonathan Stewart
Parish Priest

With grateful thanks to those who contributed to the compiling of this report: Fr Jonathan Stewart, Ola Godbeer, Lesley Hooper, Sheila Hosker, Gary Martin, Jane Martin and Maria Quinn.

April 2022

PRAYER FOR PARISH RENEWAL

Almighty God,
source of power and life,
pour out the grace of your **Holy Spirit** upon our parish.
Renew our **hope**, that your light may shine in the darkness.
Renew our **courage**, that we may confidently proclaim your
Good News.
Renew our **joy**, that we may sing a new song to you.
Renew our **gratitude**, that we may rejoice in your gifts.
Renew our **wonder**, that we may appreciate the beauty
of your creation.
Renew our **love**, that we may experience yours.
Renew our **faith**, that we may walk in your ways.
Renew our **hearts**, that we may build your kingdom on earth.
Make us a community built on the foundation of your love
to be a sign of your presence in the world.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

I WILL MAKE YOU
A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS
OF THE WORLD
TO BRING MY SALVATION
TO THEM TOO.

ISAIAH 49:6

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