

Partnership News – February ‘21

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Partnership Chairs meetings

Throughout the various restrictions and close-downs that we’ve suffered over the last months, representatives of the Partnerships have been meeting as a group regularly by video links to share experiences with each other, and to hear about a number of diocesan initiatives that may create opportunities for us all, both in our current restricted state, as well as helping us to plan for when we are free to gather again.

In July we were joined by Catherine Joyce who gave us a very helpful update on the Data Protection regulations that apply to parishes, particularly addressing how they applied to the track and trace programmes which were put in place for the churches opening under the Corona virus regulations.

In November Chris Smith spoke to us about the various services available in the Diocese to help with bereavement and loss; a really big issue to us all when our traditional ways of helping the bereaved are so restricted.

Tony Lawless from the Youth Ministry team joined us in January and gave us a comprehensive update on how the YMT has handled the shutdown, and the many ways in which they are using technology to continue their outreach to schools and young people. Tony also explained how they are planning ahead to make sure that at the earliest opportunity they can resume their face-to-face work with young people.

Here are some of the initiatives that have been taking place in the individual partnerships:

Heavenfield Partnership

Right from the beginning of the virus restrictions we have used various technologies to keep in touch with our parishioners. We have livestreamed Mass daily since March whenever public Mass has not been possible. Using existing parish records and email information we have kept in touch with as many people as possible with a weekly newsletter and generous individuals have been taking copies to those who can’t access it online.

In November we ran a partnership wide online faith discussion group via Zoom which was very well received. Our very successful online Christmas carols were viewed by over 1400 people. We are currently running short videos from the Sycamore Project straight after our Sunday live

streamed Mass, which are being watched regularly by hundreds of viewers. A bible study group is working through the Gospel of Mark, and we are making plans for Lent and Easter with streaming of Stations of the Cross from a couple of the partnership churches, and scripture readings and reflections during Holy Week.

The social side of our partnership community is also catered for, with a virtual antiques fair being planned, as well as quiz nights. There are plans for some festivities to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of St John of Beverley, and the 300th anniversary of Mass being said at the site of St Mary's Church in Hexham. This is also year of jubilee for the Passionist congregation at Minsteracres, with activities both spiritual and social to join in with.

Finchale Partnership

Parishes in the Partnership have actively used their web sites, Zoom and social media (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) during the various lock downs and membership of parish Facebook groups across the partnership now exceeds 400. Online activities include rosary, prayers and reflections on the gospel readings of the day. Web sites and social media have also been important for providing weekly bulletins, keeping in touch with parishioners via virtual coffee mornings and hosting weekly prayer groups.

A Journey in Faith programme has commenced on line which has been well attended (the sessions are on Zoom and there is an associated Facebook Group to share material and for the group to discuss questions between sessions) and we have also been running a series of talks on the "Spirituality of the Religious Orders". Since Christmas 2020, St. Cuthbert's, Durham, have been live streaming Mass daily.

All parishes have also made provision for contacting vulnerable parishioners and those without access to the internet or social media by regular phone calls and the distribution of printed bulletins, "prayer packs" delivered by volunteers. At Christmas, the "prayer packs" included a DVD of Christmas music and readings.

John Ingram Partnership

All our churches bar two are closed and have been for quite a few weeks. Our Priests continue to send Parish News, Prayers for the individual feast Days and also have begun to send items that deal with Lent. More video's and prayer aids are to be sent daily during Lent. Wherever possible printed copies will be delivered to anyone who has made it known to our Priests that they request one. These copies will be delivered to the homes by A Parishioner who lives nearby and has the facility to print them off.

Blackfriars Partnership

Since the beginning of the lock down the PDG have continued to meet monthly to offer encouragement, support and to share what each parish has been up to.

Throughout the difficult time we've really tried to keep going to establish a network of contacts and provide each other with ideas and discuss what we've learned and what we need to change in the future.

What we have done:

The schools and the churches liaised with each other and the children received their first Holy Communion during Sunday Masses. Feedback from parishioners said it brightened their day.

Our Youth group and catechists prepared the confirmation group meeting via zoom. Confirmations were held at St Charles, English Martyrs, St Robert's, and St John Vianney's during Sunday Mass before Christmas. The priests coped admirably with their new role of confirming the delegates too.

Our Churches remained open as much as possible and we heard and witnessed how people have come together to support the priests, church and each other and what it meant to have some form of contact even at a distance.

The Disciples In Pursuit 2020 Group continue to meet monthly using Zoom with a "drop in" every Monday

In some churches, parishioners were contacted using the parish census to ensure they were ok and this was well received. To this day some parishioners are still being contacted on a regular basis. Bulletins have been hand delivered by volunteers or sent via email creating a valuable link to the community. The parishioners loved being contacted and those who needed further support from a priest were put in touch with each other.

Cards were delivered to care homes and to the housebound.

Donations were given to the various local charities and Foodbanks to help those that were less fortunate.

Our spirituality group delivered an event via Zoom.

Live streaming of mass went ahead to reach those that couldn't come to church.

What have we learned?

We've learned that we need to update and promote the parish census to reach those that we don't know or who don't come to church. If this is done, we could have reached more people.

We wished we had a Partnership website so that we had one source of information for all the parishes, and parishioners which also provided a contact point for people to reach out.

What's changed?

The income for each parish has reduced which could make it difficult in future.

We need to adapt to change and recognise that some form of online capacity may remain in the future. Parishioners' outlooks may have changed and even though we may want it to return to normal, it might not.

Ovingham Partnership

Members of the PDG are resuming, during Lent, their weekly practice of lectio divina. The group began this practice during Advent last year and participants decided then to take up this prayerful reading of the Gospel during the Lenten season. Sessions are limited to half an hour in order to fit in with peoples' busy lifestyles, and as much prayer and silence as possible is built in. The text chosen weekly is the Gospel for the next Sunday, which lays down a good foundation for careful listening during the Mass. It is hoped that the numbers involved will widen in the fullness of time.

The PDG has also organised a virtual celebration of the Stations of the Cross during Lent, when each of our constituent parishes will conduct and live stream a session for parishioners to view.