

Making a Start: An approach to planning in the St Mary the Virgin Partnership

A 'fly on the wall' account of how we put together the first part of our partnership plan.....not perfect by any means - but it's working for us!

Before the first meeting, the partnership Dean and priests met together to discuss their priorities and their concerns about developing our partnership successfully. They had already scheduled weekend Mass times so that if a priest was ill or on holiday all our parishioners would have access to weekend Mass.

Arranging the first meeting

For our first meeting we invited people from each parish in our partnership who'd expressed an interest, those who'd been with us on the *Forward Together in Hope* journey, teachers representing the primary and secondary education sectors and others representing young people.

Meeting 1

The purpose of our partnership was discussed i.e., at a time of diminishing numbers of priests how to free them from everyday tasks in order to make more time for them to focus on the ministry for which they were ordained.

So our overall aim became to move from 9 parishes to become one partnership. Our theme, which will form the basis for everything we plan and do, is to develop Ministry and Spirituality in our partnership.

We identified key areas for action such as, finance, admin, property and facilities, communications etc., and invited the whole group to form sub groups, each of which would focus on one of the key areas. We asked each group to note down what they felt were the priorities for action in their key area.

We brought the group back together after 20 mins and asked one person from each group to feed back to all of us the developmental priorities for their key area. After this the rest of group was invited to either confirm what they'd heard or add anything else they thought was important. All additional comments were noted.

The meeting ended with one person collecting all the notes and agreeing to put together an outline draft plan. We also agreed to produce a letter to our parishioners updating them on what we were doing. We reassured them that as soon as the draft plan was in place they would have the opportunity to contribute to the plan and/or raise any concerns.

The date for the next meeting was agreed and the focus would be to go through the outline plan, making any alterations necessary

Meeting 2

Our agenda for this meeting included voting rights for the group (i.e. 1 vote per Parish and 1 vote for the representatives of young people); going through the draft plan; communicating with parishioners and setting up working groups.

We gave out copies of the draft plan and went through it together making amendments/alterations we thought necessary.

We decided to summarise the plan for distribution to parishioners but to make the full version available at the back of each church for anyone wanting to go through the whole document.

We also decided to write to parishioners inviting their comments on the plan and for a lay member to read the letter out in church on the same day the plans were being distributed.

Although one person did the paperwork, the whole group had the opportunity to comment on the summary plan and the letter before distribution.

A really useful response from the group was the suggestion that to help us establish working groups we should be inviting people to volunteer their help in the key areas. We developed a form outlining each key area and the kinds of activities we needed help with. The form gives parishioners the opportunity to tell us about the skills and talents they have, together with their areas of interest. We will of course also verbally encourage those to join us who we know can contribute in different ways.

We always stress how much we value those who work in our parishes and reassure them that we don't want to take over what they are doing but simply to share their good practice across the partnership and hopefully involve many more parishioners in the life of the church, both in traditional areas and, with support, in areas where lay people may not previously have been involved.

Well, we've read out the letter and given our parishioners a summarised version of the plan together with a plea for them to become involved in one of our working groups. We have had some volunteers and hope to encourage some more! People have been in contact and made their views known and we have received very helpful, positive responses to our plan so far together with concerns about possible church closures.

Our next stage

When all the responses are in, our plan will move forward from being a draft to being the actual plan. At our next meeting in October we hope to finalise our plan and establish a working group for each key area. **Pray for us and wish us luck!**