



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

# MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE

## Shaping together the future of the pastoral areas, parishes, and local church communities in our diocese

Greetings to all the people of our diocese. I write this letter to invite your participation in the consultation and planning process our diocese will be undertaking over the next six months.

### **A vision for today**

The following vision statement seeks to address our faith-world of today. Take a few moments to reflect on it and utter a prayer.

*In our world today, God can be forgotten, and the dignity and needs of every human person and the natural world can be ignored. Every human being is a child of God, made in God's image and of the greatest worth. The whole of God's creation - the natural world - is a gift to be cherished. God asks us to "Care for our Common Home", - planet earth and all its people. Jesus has told us that the greatest commandment is "love God and love your neighbour".*

*Our diocese consists of many faith-communities: homes and families, pastoral areas, parishes and local church communities. Together we live our lives sharing faith, hope and love. We are part of the one global family of God the Father into which each of us has been baptised. 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.*

## **The challenge ahead**

I see the life of the 110 local church-communities as a valuable and valued resource for people now and into the future. In the light of fewer clergy, we need to explore how each local church-community can thrive with local leadership acting co-responsibly with the priests ministering to the parishes of the pastoral areas. A church can still be the centre point for community life, even if there is no weekend Mass. Think of your local church community in four ways: a social/friendship community; a caring compassionate community; a praying, worshipping and sacramental community; and a community whose mission is to nourish and develop its faith, and hand it on to the next generation.

## **Our response to date**

For more than fifteen years, we have had a strategy to respond to the reduction in the number of priests. All of us are familiar with our current situation of fifteen parishes without a resident priest which are served by the priests and deacons of their pastoral area. With many priests set to reach retirement age of 75 in the next three years, the challenge is imminent. Greater involvement of parishioners in all aspects of church life has enabled us to adjust well.

There are so many people in all our parishes to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for devoted voluntary service.

*Pause for a moment and reflect: **Who in your local area has been central to the functioning of your parish? Could you or a member of your family make a valuable contribution to the life of your parish?***

We need to review our parish and pastoral area structures so that they can serve us more effectively. Central to this will be a more structured engagement of laity. A key element of our future will be the ministry of lay pastoral leaders, of whom 26 are presently in formation.

## **An invitation to participate**

I have now formed a planning group representative of laity, religious and clergy, and of all ages, to oversee the planning process which will conclude by May 2024. We will work in a synodal manner, which enables people to find their voices, to draw in as many new voices as possible, and seeks to make decisions by consensus, always open to the Gospels and the Holy Spirit.

Our first step in the process is consulting you, the people of the parishes. In February, there will be a gathering in each parish. The invitation is open to all: ***what do you see as the strengths and weaknesses locally, and what are your thoughts on what might be done?***

***The purpose of these meetings is to develop ways to respond to the challenges that lie ahead.***

In parallel with this, there will be a consultation for the clergy. Our hope is that parishioners and deacons will take a structured leadership role in their pastoral areas working in a co-responsible way with the priests of the pastoral area including priests from abroad. This will allow priests to work across the pastoral area in a sustainable manner. We will keep people informed as the process progresses.

## THANK YOU

A heartfelt thank you to all who, by your faith and prayers and your involvement, contribute to the life of your parish community and diocese. A special prayer for anyone who is ill or coping with major difficulties at this time. Thank you to all our priests, in appointments and retired, for their dedicated, loving ministry. Let us thank God for the two priests ordained in the past six years and our two seminarians as we continue to pray for vocations to serve as priests in the diocese. Let us be united and confident as we face the challenges that lie ahead. We have much to be grateful for.

Please remember this consultation and planning process in your prayers. The life of St Brendan is a wonderful testimony to deep Christian faith and to trust in God facing the future. Let us entrust our future to the intercession of St Brendan.

*'St Brendan navigated the seas, ours to tend the home shores.'*



+ Ray Browne

† Ray Browne

6th January 2024 - Feast of the Epiphany