

DIOCESE OF **Hexham & Newcastle**



**Bishop Stephen's Reflection on the
Listening Exercises and The Results of the
Questionnaire for the Dicastery Report.
(February 2024)**

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Bishop Stephen's Reflection

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This Diocesan Listening Exercise was a response to circumstances which never should have arisen, and yet I am inspired by the effort and commitment so many have shown in accompanying one another. People in our diocese have come together in different ways to speak and to listen, to support one another and to reflect on the impact of what has happened. I'd like to offer my thanks to all who have organised and facilitated this and to all who have participated in this first phase of the Listening Exercise. This first phase has taken longer than initially anticipated. Some strands finished sooner than others. I am sorry I have not been able to offer a reply before now, but I have respected the evolving timelines set by those who have been involved. I did not wish to curtail the listening and discernment.

Prior to the Listening Exercises, in early 2023 there was a questionnaire for the preparation of the Report undertaken by the Dicastery of Bishops. Before I was installed Archbishop Malcolm McMahon wrote that the results of the questionnaire would be shared. I have complied with his statement and the results can be found as an appendix. Again, I have respected the processes and timescales chosen by those who undertook this work. I received the results of this large piece of work in February 2024.

As a newcomer to the diocese, I have to say the reflections shared from the Listening Exercises have been far more helpful than the far fewer and much briefer reflections to the set questions in the questionnaire. I realise the two processes had different aims. There is much consistency in content across the two processes, but the Listening Exercise is much fuller and more nuanced. The questionnaire is far more statistical and is a blunter instrument given its question format.

There is challenge and pain in listening to the shock and grief, the justifiable anger and bewilderment of many about past events. My first concern—and I trust this is true of us all—is for survivors of abuse, those close to them and for all who are vulnerable be they children or adults. I am particularly grateful for the courage of survivors who took part in this listening process. As a diocese we need to accompany them on their journey as they live with the effects of

abuse. I have met with several survivors of abuse and will continue to do so. I will always respect their wishes to meet or not.

So many others have been affected as well, and in many ways. It is important to listen to as many voices as possible. Recently a survivor of abuse taught me about the term “moral injury.” It is not easy to define but I offer this: Moral injury is the social, psychological, and spiritual harm that arises from a betrayal of one’s core values, such as justice, fairness, and loyalty. Our diocesan family’s moral injury may I suggest is that a betrayal of Christ and His values has damaged us all. We all feel the pain but please recognise, those of us who have not suffered abuse have only the smallest insight into the pain and betrayal of those who have.

People’s situations are different, the comments shared in the exercises are diverse, at times even contradictory, but some of the reactions to what has happened are widely shared. People are right to be shocked and angry about failures in clerical leadership and governance. I too find it very disturbing and unacceptable that a Bishop would ignore safeguarding advice and the advice of others. I repeat my commitment to seek and follow safeguarding advice. I repeat my commitment that in the highly unlikely situation where I did not follow advice, I would state my rationale clearly in writing so that my decision is transparent, shared and can be audited. It has not happened. I doubt it ever would.

As well as receiving reports from the Listening Exercise and the Questionnaire, since my arrival I have committed much of my time and energy to my own listening. So far, in my seven months with you, I have visited over eighty parishes, schools, communities and groups where they minister. I have met many more people than that, of course. I intend to visit all our communities in due course. Here too, alongside great faith and welcoming people and communities, I have encountered some of the same themes spoken of in the Listening Exercises: concerns about the geographical peripheries of the diocese, about meaningful and respectful communication, issues of trust and understanding between clergy and lay faithful, about the nurture of faith in our young people, about forming people for mission, about being welcoming communities to all, about the growing burdens on fewer priests some of whom feel more isolated and the future use of our buildings some of which are in very poor repair. There are many more issues we will need to discern in the future.

I have experienced the many joys too. Very recently I had the privilege of welcoming 183 people who are to be baptised or received into full communion at Easter. I was very humbled that some of our most hurting parishes were presenting so many candidates. The commitment to evangelisation, to catechesis, to social outreach, to inclusivity and above all devotion to the Lord across our diocese is inspiring and humbling. The Lord is evidently very much alive and at work in our diocese, working in and through us all.

We are ultimately defined by God's love for each one of us. Please never lose that perspective. If we allow others who have fallen short or anyone to define us and our relationship with God, they still have a hold, dare I say possibly abusive hold over us. I realise that is easily said and I respect people will respond in different ways. I make no judgement. But our diocesan family is not defined by failures. It is defined by the Lord. As we pray at every Mass, we recognise evil is ever present. "Deliver us Lord, we pray from every evil and grant us peace in our day... by the help of your mercy we may be free from sin and safe from all distress..." In God's grace we must always be vigilant and never allow evil into our communities, least of all anywhere near our children and those who are vulnerable. That is the safeguarding work of everyone. Not just me, not just the safeguarding team, it is the work of us all.

Some of the issues raised in the Listening Exercise are matters for the worldwide church. I mention four that arose, reform of Canon Law, the process by which Bishops are appointed, the ordination of married men and the ordination of women. This does not mean such issues should not have been raised, or the topics not discussed but they touch on a discernment that is beyond one diocese or one Bishop.

It is a beautiful and inspiring diocese to be privileged to serve. The history, sanctity and the geography merge in our diocese and go back to the origins of Christianity in our country. We are the present custodians of that long grace filled tradition. I am conscious there is much for us all to do. There are further changes that need to be made, further healing that needs to take place and ways of moving forward as a diocese to be found. This further discernment needs to be undertaken now, knowing that the Lord journeys with us and is calling us to holiness and service. We need to discern our vision, our priorities and how with the resources we will have over the next ten years we can be the Lord's Church here and now in the Northeast. With a core group of people from across our diocesan family I have begun that initial discernment before it is shared

more widely. I recognise that much work was done with Forward Together in Hope. I do not propose anything on that scale and its blessings still stand. Its conclusions though may not be the way ahead in all cases.

Above all in months and years to come we need to focus on walking and working together in Hexham & Newcastle Diocese itself. In some areas there has clearly been a breakdown in relationships. We need to work to rebuild these relationships in our parishes, in our schools and communities, so that we grow together as one diocesan family. For example, my recent day with school leaders reflecting on leading wisely by accompaniment was a first step along the path of discerning the way we will wish to work together. It was a true expression on how I wish to work with our schools.

A few days after I moved to the Northeast, before my Installation, I made a solo pilgrimage to Holy Island. My first ever visit. I read a board in the Anglican Church there about St Aidan. Simply put it read that St Aidan was able to convert the people of the Northeast because they saw Christ in him. Encounter by encounter people met Christ as they met St Aidan. The simple message has stayed with me since before I began my ministry here. We are all called to be Christ for one another. Synodality, accompanying one another is to recognise we walk with Christ, and we are called to be Christ for others. When we are, it works. When we are not, the outcomes can be very ugly indeed. It is for us all to choose how or better still who we wish to be in the future.

All dioceses tend to work in silos. Ours is no different and I have experienced some of that in parishes, schools and across diocesan agencies. We need to break down the silo mentality and serve together co-responsibly. The Lord invites us to be one, a communion, united in our diversity. United in Christ. The other motivation to work together is far more practical, we no longer have the resources to work separately. We must work together.

A diocese is a portion of the People of God entrusted to pastoral care of a Bishop. It is a religious entity. It is also a civil charity. If it were not, it could not function in this country. There will always be a creative tension between the religious and the secular but the two must co-exist. Both are vital. Having listened, in my opinion, one of the major cultural failures this diocese fell into was a culture set or attempting to be set by a bishop that strongly underestimated the importance of appropriate “secular” processes and expertise. I write “secular” as to be frank they are essential to all organisations,

including religious ones. It was a form of clericalism. This culture was expressed at both trustee and employee levels. The outcomes were catastrophic. I have detected some remnants of this culture lingering. It is not healthy and is certainly not in keeping with my vision or, I hope, practice. Employees and trustees are not required, necessary extras. They are essential to the flourishing of our diocesan family. I recognise that some trustees and employees left. I am not surprised, and I am sorry that happened. I thank them for their service. To those trustees and employees who stayed in often intolerable situations I offer our thanks and say I am sorry for what you had to put up with. Never again.

I had already begun to act on some of the needed changes which have also now been identified through the Listening Exercises. I have mentioned already my commitment to follow safeguarding advice, a start of a discernment with school leaders about how we wish to work together and the establishment of a core group looking at mission. In addition, I am leading a diocesan governance review. Like Archbishop Malcolm McMahon before me I greatly value the role of lay trustees and I will be seeking further good lay professional candidates. More generally I am working towards greater transparency and accountability in diocesan processes. I am very conscious that the distance between the “religious” and the “secular” must be closed. Some of this is simply improving communications. It will be more of a cultural change for some. When I arrived, I shared my expectations on conduct with senior clergy and curial employees. Bullying, intimidation, rudeness, and lack of respect are not acceptable. I have re-shared “Caring Safely For Others” with our clergy. It is the national code of conduct, so to speak, for all clergy ministering in England and Wales. It sets clear expectations. It is evident our diocese needs an employee and a volunteer code of conduct, and I have requested that work on these starts. I have amended the diocesan complaints policy and procedures so that complaints against me can be made. The diocesan complaints policies and procedures are fit for purpose, and I will be insisting that formal complaints must follow them, so that all parties can be heard.

When I arrived in the diocese, I said I would take up to two years to discern where to live. My decision to move from the present Bishop's House was made very quickly. It has been more time consuming to find a suitable diocesan, cost effective, property for the next 20 years. I have now identified a diocesan property and all being well will move in the summer when it is free. Details will be given if/when that move occurs.

With my fellow Trustees, I am supervising the delivery of the Safeguarding Action Plan created in response to the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency's (CSSA) report published in full in June 2023, following their comprehensive Diocesan Review. I received a lot of correspondence, rightly, about the CSSA report. Understandably many people think it was a report solely concerning the Bishop and the safeguarding team. In fact, all CSSA Reports are of the diocese as a whole. I share that as it is perhaps another example of the silo mentality we can often have. People often say respectfully, "you have a big job as our Bishop," I always reply now, "yes, we have." Safeguarding is all our business. A flourishing diocese is all our business as the priesthood of the baptised. I have my important part to play as Bishop. We all do, co-responsibly. I thank you all for your ongoing work and ministry.

These initial thoughts and changes can seem bureaucratic "secular" matters, but I believe they are linked intrinsically to the Gospel values of humility, integrity and love of neighbour. This is part of loving the Lord our God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

We now need to be looking to the future more broadly, thinking together about the kind of Church we are called to be in 2024. In recent months I have brought together a Mission Discernment Group to explore at diocesan level our priorities. I encourage all of us to consider our role in the mission of our diocese. As we move into phase two of listening and walking together, I encourage you to come together to pray and discern our shared priorities, asking the Lord for his wisdom as we grow and heal. When we have discerned our vision, we can then reflect on how we organise the diocese, its deaneries, parishes, partnerships to best achieve our mission. This reflection has begun and will continue. Some changes will be required quite quickly as the effects of fewer priests becomes a pastoral reality.

As we look to the future, we do not forget the past. Healing takes time and is part of a longer journey. So, it is important that the listening that was begun before I arrived is not over. I hope we can become a diocese where listening and accompaniment are central for all as we seek to discern the Spirit together and to bear one another's burdens.

Again, my thanks for all that has been done in the Listening Exercise and the Questionnaire, for the clarity they have brought, and for the welcome I have

received. There is one final thing I would like to say in response to the reports I have received and all I have heard. I know that I am a recent arrival, that I am not the centre of it all and was not present when events happened, but nevertheless I am now the Bishop of this diocese. And in that ministry, I need and want to say this, with a full heart:

I am sorry.

Our Lady, pray for us. St Cuthbert, pray for us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stephen' with a stylized initial 'S'.

+Stephen

Contextual Update on the Hexham & Newcastle Diocesan Listening Exercise

On the weekend of the 17th and 18th June 2023, Archbishop McMahon announced a Diocesan Listening Exercise as a pastoral response to Bishop Byrne's resignation. He began by acknowledging the anger and hurt that had already been expressed in the diocese. Archbishop McMahon proposed that now that the two page Executive Summary and Addendum from the Canonical Investigation requested by the Dicastery for Bishops in Rome and the full report from the CSSA Review had been published, a Listening Exercise would be the next phase. Archbishop McMahon wrote:

“I believe that it will be both a useful and necessary exercise to come together, to share where we find ourselves individually and collectively and to look to the future. With that in mind I propose to set in motion a time of mutual listening, a ‘walking together and listening exercise’ involving the whole diocese”.

The Listening Exercise was to be a single exercise for the whole diocese, but organised across a number of strands, with separate processes for priests, deacons, for staff employed in the diocese, for laity in parishes, and for religious. The Listening Exercise was planned in two phases: the first was to be focused on “where we find ourselves individually and collectively” and the second on looking to the future.

Each strand was organised in a way that seemed appropriate for that particular part of the diocese, however Phase 1 has taken longer than originally anticipated. There was no single method imposed across the strands, but, in each of them, the same central questions were asked to encourage reflection and enable mutual listening. These were “How have recent diocesan events impacted you?” and “What does support look like?” The Listening Exercise was intended to be a synodal process, the purpose of which was not to gather information but to find a way to accompany one another in difficult times.

Though different approaches have been taken with the strands, some common themes have emerged. Alongside affirmations of faith and hope, and a reflection on where support has indeed been found and valued, there are strong themes of anger, sadness, shock, grief and disillusionment. From across the different groups in the diocese there have also been discussions of the inadequacy in structures and governance; a sense of failure in leadership; a concern about the absence of transparency; and in more than one strand, a discussion about the negative impact of clericalism.

Bishop Stephen, who arrived in the diocese after the Listening Exercise began, has not been part of the organisation or management of Phase 1. Bishop Stephen is supportive of the Listening Exercise and grateful for all of the reports he has received from the strands.

Just as there was no insistence on a uniform way of managing the Listening Exercise across the different groups within the diocese, templates were not provided for the reports which have emerged. Included here as appendices are the report summaries as they have been received.

(February 2024)

Appendix 1: Summary of the Listening Exercise - Deacons

The Process

Two regional meetings held on the 18th and 20th July which were attended by a total of 22 deacons. A draft account of those meeting was sent to all deacons in the diocese for their comments. 13 responses were received. 11 were satisfied that it was an accurate account. One wanted to reiterate that he had not been personally affected by the events; another offered some additional information.

In addition, two deacons who were not present at either meeting emailed their comments. One stated that he had not been adversely affected by recent events; the other endorsed the criticism of diocesan structures that were deemed not 'fit for purpose'. Neither deacon lived in an area directly affected by recent events.

The meetings focused on two questions:

Question 1 – The Impact of Recent Events

A great deal of anger and grief expressed by most of the participants about what has happened.

Trust has collapsed – everyone is under suspicion, “Who can I trust?”

There is widespread disillusionment.

What has happened is a disgrace to the people of the diocese.

Governance is not fit for purpose in the diocese.

A feeling that people have been deceived by Bishop Byrne, with serious issues being swept under the carpet, and ignored for a long time.

Reading his letter to the Diocese about stepping down all but destroyed the credibility of subsequent preaching, when facts began to emerge about what had actually happened.

One deacon was asked by one of his children, “You know you’re being made a fool of, don’t you? You don’t believe a word you’ve read out. It’s a lie.” As a result of recent events even some close members of family have stopped going to church.

At times people who are hurting in all of this are pointing to deacons and saying, “You’re one them!”

Another deacon said that he has asked himself the question, “What has this church done to me?”

There are different levels of hurt among the group – with those involved in parishes directly affected by events suffering the greatest level of pain and disillusionment.

Issues go much further back than events of the last few months, and more than the last 3 or 4 years.

The heart of the problem was identified as clericalism with all power residing in the bishop and the priests, with little regard for the feelings of the deacons and lay people.

When the word “clericalism” was not actually used in the second meeting the facilitator pointed this out, to be told, “We automatically take it as read that this is a fundamental problem.”

Adult to adult conversation is not part of the culture of the church, because of this clericalism.

A particular failing of the hierarchy and many priests is their attitude to women.

The church is seen as sexist and misogynistic.

There was a feeling that all the diocese is about is “managed decline” rather than mission. There is a pessimism about the ability to effect the changes needed to address these issues but there is a willingness to try to hang on in there.

Question 2 – Where do you find support, where is it lacking?

All found great support from their wives, especially, but also from other members of the family.

A suggestion was made that the wives of the deacons should also be consulted about the work of the deacon in the diocese.

Parishioners had also been a good source of support, as had the spiritual directors of those who had arranged sessions with them.

Some, but not many, priests had also been a support.

Deacons found good support amongst themselves in the network groups they have formed over the years in different areas.

There was a strong feeling of isolation for individuals in the wake of events as they have unfolded.

Support was lacking from priests in general, and it was felt that no support had come from the Vicariate for the Care of the Clergy.

There is also no respect for members of Bishop Byrne's Episcopal Council, in the light of events that have subsequently been revealed.

There was a feeling that job titles and designations in the Northern Catholic Calendar were simply there because it looked good on paper, but the reality on the ground felt very different.

Those parishes which are now staffed by priests from other cultures realise that they are good men, but who have no idea of the pain being felt by people over what has happened and are thus unable to engage with their needs.

There was a feeling that many parishioners are hanging on by their fingertips – not to their faith in God, but to trust and hope of any change in the church.

Because of the wide variety of attitude to the permanent deacons among priests and parishioners, as a diocese there is a need to further define and agree on the role of the permanent deacon.

There is a willingness to engage in the work that needs to be done.

Additional comments in January 2024:

Since this original report was produced the Interim Report of the "Synod on Synodality" has been published in which there is a recommendation that the whole Church engage in a reflection on the role of the Permanent Deacon. This recommendation, along with an evolving process of dialogue between the permanent deacons and Bishop Wright, signals that a start is being made to the many of the issues that need to be addressed going into the future in a meaningful way.

(July 2023)

Appendix 2: Summary of the Listening Exercise - Priests

The following is from the priests of the diocese, expressing some of the main elements of their Listening Exercise.

The events that led to the resignation of Bishop Robert Byrne, which affected so many within our diocese, largely affected the diocesan priests in very much the same way. We echo the sentiments expressed in the report of the Listening Exercise with the lay people. There are differences between us in the way we interpret some of those events, however, the emotions engendered of hurt, shame, anger, sorrow and mistrust are common across the diocese. As with the laity, the Listening Exercise for priests reveals that many feel frustration and mistrust towards the broader church, particularly regarding the selection process for bishops.

In a climate of mistrust the Listening Exercise itself occasioned some scepticism, especially when there was a call to move on from the past. The move can feel too easy, too fast and too slick. Some of us felt ready to move on while others felt pressured by those, who, in part, they considered responsible for the situation in which we found ourselves, and did not want to focus on the mistakes that have caused us pain.

That said, we can now say as a whole that the Listening Exercise provided for the diocesan priests has been an opportunity, one that has grown directly out of the circumstances of Bishop Robert's resignation, although we quickly realised that the roots of our problems have their origins much further back. Almost all of the diocesan clergy participated in interviews with an outside facilitator. We recognise this as a privilege which could not be provided to everyone in our diocese and it is one for which we are extremely grateful. We know well from our own pastoral ministry that being listened to attentively is a key part of being cared for and this was a widely appreciated benefit of the process.

As the facilitator reported back to us in a series of regional meetings it became clear that the crisis we have lived through has provided us with a genuinely new opportunity. Priests had shared their experiences, feelings, joys, fears and vulnerabilities with great candour, sometimes shedding tears. In the regional meetings we heard anonymised quotations from these testimonies. It was a deeply moving experience and helped us to reconnect with the love and care that we need to have for one another. It also enabled us to bring into our discussion wider and more enduring issues.

We recognised that the quality of our priestly fraternity has worn thin. Our presbyterate has changed significantly with many priests from different places and belonging to different ecclesial jurisdictions serving in our parishes. Not all priests, including the newly ordained, have felt welcomed into our presbyterate. There are various reasons for this but we recognise that, in part, the factionalism that infects the wider church has also occasioned frictions within our own fraternity.

Many of us feel more isolated and less supported than ever before. We are fewer, are stretched to cover more territory, are busier and frequently find ourselves belonging not to one parish community but trying to lead multiple communities. One consequence is that we live further apart from one another and see less of one another. We find ourselves with less time to meet and check-in with one another, and therefore fewer opportunities to share in appropriate and suitable contexts the pastoral situations that can burden us.

In our meetings we re-connected with our deep and shared joy in preaching the Good News of God's kingdom, administering his sacraments, serving the poor and binding up the wounds of the broken-hearted. However, we recognised a sorrow that many of our parish communities are not as large or as vibrant as they once were. We share sorrow that so many have either not come back to church after the pandemic or have consciously walked away from our church. We share a fear of the future which promises to be one of smaller communities and fewer priests.

In this context we recognised that many of our current structures are so multi-layered that they are not fit for purpose. We have begun to articulate an alternative vision of the presbyterate we aspire to be. This is the opportunity that lies before us. We also realised that to achieve this would require concrete actions and commitment. So we are committed to an on-going process to bring this vision into reality.

We also recognise that a renewed fraternity and structure of support among our diocesan priests is just one of the relationships, that make up our diocesan family. The quality of our diocesan life can be improved only by a Spirit-led commitment to attend to *all* the relationships of which our diocesan family is comprised.

Church is communion. It is nothing other than relationship: with the Lord and with each other. The primary relationship is always with the Lord who calls us to our full stature as co-heirs with him, God's beloved children. No relationship which diminishes or infantilises others is worthy of the household that is his

Church. Our Church must be a place of genuine adult-to-adult relationships which enable us all to flourish. Pope Francis's call to a more synodal Church is a call to embody such life-giving relationships.

Therefore, in our meetings we also recognised the need to strengthen the quality of our relationships with lay people, deacons and the bishop of our diocese and to use the insights we have gained in our listening process to also renew these distinct relationships. With each we share a co-responsibility for the church's mission. In each case this shared mission has the same shape which is: to bless and make holy; to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ; and to walk alongside one another binding the wounds of poor, the marginalised, the broken-hearted and learning from one another. We are committed to renewing our relationships with our sisters and brothers so as to renew the witness and mission we give to the world as the Church of Hexham & Newcastle.

Appendix 3: Summary of the Listening Exercise – Diocesan Employees

All diocesan staff were invited to take part in a confidential one to one meeting or a group meeting with an independent listener to respond to Phase 1 of the Listening Exercises. This listening took place during October 2023, with common themes being fed back to employees in November 2023 and January 2024.

The questions asked of employees focused on: “What has been the impact of diocesan events” and “What does support look like?”. The themes that emerged from these conversations are included below:

The events surrounding Bishop Byrne’s resignation led to many employees experiencing a deep, sometimes traumatic impact. They shared a sense of there being a brokenness in the diocese and they expressed a need for rebuilding trust and developing positive relationships.

Employees shared their feelings about a breakdown of trust with the wider diocese and a feeling of not being valued for the hard work they give. Many expressed a feeling that they experience a distance between priests and employees, which can create an “us” and “them” mentality. They saw a need for a better understanding between one another, about how all contribute to the mission of the diocese.

Employees also shared how they had chosen to stay working for the diocese, seeking to engage in moving it forward despite the difficult time they had experienced. They expressed a deep gratitude for the Chief Operating Officer and a real concern for their colleagues and the diocese as a whole.

There was a common theme of a desire to move forward, a desire for more support and visibility from leadership in the diocese, and an increase in transparency. They expressed a need for a vision that would enable them to better contribute to the Mission of the Church and to changing the culture. Employees all said they wanted to rebuild relationships, especially with priests. They want to enable a better culture of care, compassion and protection of one another.

Finally, there was a sense of needing to acknowledge what has gone before and to look forward developing a plan that takes us to the diocese we want to be in 2024.

Appendix 4: Summary of the Listening Exercise – Religious

The religious of the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle met twice to pray, reflect on and answer the questions posed to them. They began by sharing how recent events in the diocese had deeply impacted them. They have experienced a range of emotions from sadness and concern to disillusionment and isolation. Despite this, there is a strong desire for healing and moving forward. Moreover, the religious were convinced that, despite their relatively small numbers, they can play a vital role in healing and discerning the way forward.

In their discussions and reflection, the religious focussed on the importance of fostering a more supportive and positive culture at all levels: parish, partnership and diocese. This can be achieved through prayer, building stronger relationships within communities, and openly and honestly addressing difficult issues as they arise. The religious also expressed a renewed commitment to living and ministering together, serving others, and collaborating effectively.

Sharing responsibility was another crucial theme. The group felt that in the past a lack of transparency and, in places, clericalism, meant that important information was not properly shared and that there was insufficient dialogue on many important areas of parish and diocesan life. Building a positive culture of shared responsibility will require robust support structures, a commitment to active listening, and prayer. Moving forward, the religious felt the need for greater inclusivity and addressing concerns within the community at all levels.

While being honest about the difficulties the diocese has faced in the recent past and the challenges it faces, the religious were hopeful for the future and saw themselves being an active part of the healing and growth that has already begun. The unique mixture of charisms that the various religious communities bring to the diocese not only form part of the rich tapestry of diocesan life, but can be used to help bring about the renewal everyone is praying for.

Appendix 5: Summary of the Listening Exercise – Laity

From 10-13 July the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle held “lay listening exercises” in Forest Hall, Newcastle; Bedlington; Houghton-le-Spring and Stockton-on-Tees. I estimate that between 400 and 450 people came to the exercises. The focus was on how laypeople were affected by recent events in the diocese, and particularly the resignation of Bishop Robert and the Safeguarding Enquiry Report. I served as facilitator of these events. People were asked to share from their experience, to listen to one another, and to respect the confidentiality of what was shared. We broke into small groups and then leaders of the groups reported back in a plenary session, with some time at the end of each plenary for comments from anyone who felt something had remained unsaid. Leaders of small groups afterwards provided me with summary notes from each of these groups (I received approximately 40 sets of summary notes). Participants were given the opportunity to submit individual comments in writing at the event, or to contact me by email afterwards. About 25 people took up the opportunity to write to me afterwards. I read all letters and emails I was sent, all the notes I was given from the small groups, and all the written comments that were submitted during the meetings. My role, in addition to facilitating the meetings themselves, is to produce a summary report based on what was heard from the laypeople of the diocese, to send to Archbishop Malcolm McMahon and to Bishop Stephen Wright. This report will therefore go to Archbishop Malcolm and Bishop Stephen, and also to anyone who was present at the listening events who has requested to see a copy.

Generally those present did their best to contribute within the guidelines set out. On the third evening it emerged part way through the process that there were two people present who did not agree with or accept the confidentiality principle, one of whom is a journalist as well as a parishioner. One of these two again joined on the fourth evening, and again rejected the confidentiality principle.

I will say more about the listening exercises themselves, their imperfections, and participants’ views of them at the end of this report. In the main body of the report I will attempt to summarise something of the thoughts and reactions shared. Views and experiences expressed differed. While I cannot include everything that was said or sent to me, I will do my best to include in this summary both some of the most common thoughts and reactions, and some indication of the variety of experience and response.

Shock, betrayal, sorrow, anger, disappointment and frustration were widely expressed. People felt embarrassed to be Catholic, or a sense of reflected shame. Many felt a loss of trust in the hierarchy, or in “the church”, and some articulated a suspicion that there are more revelations to come. Many expressed

worry about the safety of their children or grandchildren, worry for Catholic education, and worry about the impact of all these revelations on young people's relationship to the church.

Anger

When reading over the notes from groups and the individual communications I have received, what comes across to me above everything else is anger. I do not know whether this is in fact what is most widely and strongly felt, or whether it is in the nature of anger that it makes itself heard most strongly. In any case, there is no doubt that there was a considerable amount of anger expressed in our meetings.

Many are angry (and frustrated, shocked and disbelieving) about safeguarding failures, about how long problems have gone on, and the failure to learn from previous scandals. Many express anger at the way laypeople, or the grassroots, are treated by the leadership – whether this is seen as “the diocese”, “the bishops” or “the hierarchy” – a sense that they are seen as dupes or fools, and are not listened to, that they are powerless. A number are displeased at only seeing the executive summary of Archbishop McMahon's report, at the use of the phrase “errors of judgment” in that document (which they thought too mild), and at the absence of support and communication during the period of investigation.

There is a great deal of anger around both the appointment process for bishops and the unaccountability of bishops once in office. There is widespread shock among the laity that a bishop can override safeguarding advice. Sharp contrasts were drawn between the levels of care and scrutiny to which laypeople who serve in Catholic schools are subject and the ability of a bishop to act against safeguarding advice. There is also a sense of shock that a priest who is a convicted sex offender is not automatically laicised.

My impression is that the anger of most was not focused on one or two individuals, but on broader failures, whether this was understood as cover up by a range of clergy who knew what was going on, as a failure at diocesan leadership level, or more generally as failures of culture or structure—clericalism, hierarchy, the governance of the Catholic church.

Anger was expressed at neglect and lack of respect towards parishes in both the far north of the diocese and in its south, with a sense that these areas are seen as peripheral, and adequate provision is not made. There was also anger expressed in connection with other particular parish experiences, where diocesan support might have been expected but was not offered (e.g., when a priest suddenly leaves and the parish is offered no help in the interim).

There was also, finally, a good deal of anger at the lay listening process itself, and in particular at what was viewed as an insufficient number of sessions and their insufficient accessibility to some parts of the diocese. Many perceived this as a deliberate insult to the laity, or an effort to not allow them to be heard.

Different emphases in different contexts within the diocese.

Different kinds of anger, and more generally different kinds of feelings about the situation, were expressed in different parts of the diocese.

- As already mentioned, from several areas within the diocese there was anger pertaining to perceived neglect or mistreatment for geographical reasons. One person described the succession of priests in their geographically peripheral parish as a form of “spiritual abuse” by the diocese.
- In the Newcastle meeting there was anger at what was felt to be a deliberate avoidance of main centres of population in the listening exercise itself.
- There was a very strong concern, upset and anger from some who have had involvement in the Lourdes pilgrimage. One young person who had grown close to Canon McCoy through Lourdes pilgrimages over the years wrote that “Knowing that there were safeguarding failings for decades has had a profound impact on my relationship with Church”. Others are deeply troubled about the way past concerns appear not to have been properly investigated, and raised questions about the current safety of the pilgrimage, even if it is happening this year without any participants under the age of eighteen. (I have passed on the particulars of these concerns to the Safeguarding Co-ordinator and other diocesan figures.)
- The collective experience of those parishes who have had Fr McCoy as their priest was particularly intense and difficult. There are divisions here: some have not read the report or do not believe what it presents about Fr McCoy; others feel that whole parishes had been groomed by him. They feel in need of a support from outside which has not been provided.

Let down and abandoned

The phrase “I feel let down” is one of the most frequent to appear across the set of notes from small groups I have received, closely followed by mention of abandonment. Who has done the letting down is not always named, but I think the common theme is that people feel let down, and abandoned, by what they understand as the institution of the Church. For some the focus is on a single bishop or a couple of bishops, for others it is diocesan leadership more generally, for others it is clericalism or “the hierarchy” or the systems by which the Church is governed, but in one way or another there is the feeling that the institution has let the laypeople down.

There is one point on which those present were noticeably divided: how they see parish priests. For some priests are clearly part of the institution which has failed, and which can no longer be trusted: in certain cases, parishioners are now looking at their priests with more suspicion than they used to. For many, however, the priests are seen as people who have themselves been let down by the institution, and a good deal of concern and sympathy was expressed for them.

A significant minority indicated that they felt supported by their parish priest, but no one present to my knowledge felt supported by the broader institution of the Church as they perceive it.

Many assumed that only one person, the whistle-blower, had ever stood up against what was wrong, and many expressed gratitude to her.

One brief comment seems to me to catch an important part of why people are feeling let down: “No one has said sorry.”

Sadness and concern

Sadness and concern for those affected was expressed in nearly every small group. Although direct concern for the welfare and support of survivors of abuse did not emerge prominently in the plenary feedback, the notes from small groups make clear that it was in fact present across a range of these groups.

Some voiced their concern in very universal terms—this situation affects everyone, and there was a sorrow for all involved.

The effect on young people was widely mentioned: fear for their safety, fear for Catholic education, and the sense that this makes it even harder for young people to continue as practicing Catholics were recurrent themes.

Many, as mentioned above, expressed concern for priests: priests are not all alike but are all being tarnished by this through no fault of their own; many are hard-working and let down by this; they will carry a huge burden to build back trust. Questions were asked about whether they received adequate pastoral support.

Faith and Hope

There was a frequent affirmation of faith from those gathered. It seems to be the case for many that their faith in the diocese was shaken or destroyed, but not their faith in God.

Many pointed to their faith and prayer as a source of support, alongside friends and family, and, less frequently, parish communities, parish groups and the parish priest. For many faith continues in spite of their experience of the church, rather than being upheld and strengthened by participation in church life, and

some feel they are “hanging on by a thread” to their continued participation in the Church.

For some faith is more directly and centrally affected by what has happened. For instance some survivors and people closely connected to victims and survivors reported in small groups that abuse within the Church had had an impact not only on their relationship to the institution but also on their faith in God, including raising the question of how God could have allowed such a thing to happen.

The focus of this exercise was the present rather than the future: we anticipate a further listening exercise in October to think about the kind of diocese we want to be. Nevertheless, some expressions of hope did emerge at these meetings. There was some hope that these revelations had opened the way for a more transparent and less secretive church (and some praise for the openness of the Safeguarding Enquiry Report) and there was clearly a strong desire to move forward and (for some) to move towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

Others have expressed despair about “the hierarchy” ever changing, or simple bemusement: “Where do you go with your pain?”.

Analysis and proposals

While the intended emphasis of these sessions was on people’s experience and how they had been affected, inevitably various strands of analysis of the underlying causes of the problems in the diocese were proposed, as well as suggestions about what should change.

Many were concerned by standards and procedures in diocesan/church governance. They spoke about issues of management, of process, the need for checks and balances, the need to have good governance rather than a “boy’s club”, the danger of friendship networks of priests who protect each other. They spoke about the need for the hierarchy to be accountable, for priests to be accountable and be appraised, and for the mechanism for appointing bishops to be altered, and generally the need for much greater transparency.

Clericalism and church culture were mentioned, as was patriarchy, the need for married priests and the need for women priests, a desire to get rid of Canon Law and the need for a reform of the seminary system.

The role of the laity was raised by some: we have been too much used to not being treated as adults, not answering back, not having our own opinions. The shepherd/sheep imagery can be unfortunately interpreted to suggest docility as the proper stance of laypeople.

Some specific suggestions included greater visibility of parish safeguarding officers (it was clear that many present had no awareness of who had this role

in their parish), greater clarity about how complaints can be raised, and an open disciplinary process that is not church-led. The need for improved quality of communication with lay people was a frequent theme, including the need for channels to contact the laity that do not rely on the good will of the parish priest. (It was noted a number of times that some parish priests did not publicise these meetings.)

I have clustered together related kinds of analysis and proposals here, but there were also a few which pointed in quite different directions. One participant wrote against “liberal and gay priests”. One participant is convinced that a lengthy report is being suppressed. There was a suggestion by some that Bishop Robert Byrne was being scapegoated or over-harshly judged. Some held that Canon Michael McCoy was falsely assumed, because of his suicide, to be guilty, and that this was part of a way the organisation protected itself. One participant wrote that a return to Catechism and Magisterium, and to “teaching the Faith again as per the last 2000 years” was what was needed, and that both clergy and laity needed to accept the counter-cultural nature of the Church.

A few participants were focused on the issue of academisation of Catholic schools in the diocese and felt very strongly that forced academisation has been deeply problematic, and that there needs to be a proper consultation. I will not attempt to capture details here, since I believe it will be dealt with through a different process, but I should record that a strong plea was made for genuine listening to take place on this issue.

Reflecting on the Process Itself

It is important to mention who we did not hear from, or who we did not hear very much from.

- There were those who might have liked to have come but did not have an event close enough or accessible enough to enable them to come, or who may have simply been unavailable on the relevant evenings. Not all parishes advertised the events, so some may have been unaware.
- It was frequently remarked how few “young people” were present—we had less than a handful under 35. One relatively young man took the floor to say that he would do his reading at Mass the coming Sunday and then was not planning to enter a Catholic church again.
- One group we did not hear from are those who do not feel much affected by what had happened. One parishioner kindly took the trouble to write a letter outlining that the situation had not had much impact on themselves or those they knew or their faith, and expressing the view that while dealing effectively and openly with wrong-doing by someone in a high profile position in the Church is important, so is looking at the good that people do: “The approach to condemn is symptomatic of the world we are living in”.

- There were survivors of clerical or other abuse present across the meetings, but their voice and experience were not, apart from in some small groups, prominent. The meetings would likely have needed a very different shape and purpose to enable a greater centring on survivor voice and experience. However, one survivor of spiritual and sexual abuse who participated in the listening exercise sent me a written account of their experience, and has given me permission to append it to this summary.

In my view the process overall worked very well in spite of its difficulties. There were many difficulties. Spaces in which we met were far from ideal for the purpose. We did not know how many would come and had not always sufficient small group leaders prepared. People often arrived already angered that not enough listening events had been put on. Timing was very tight—we did not have long enough for what we wanted to do. Moving people from plenary into small groups and back again into plenary was awkward, especially in some of the spaces. The emergence of two people who would not accept the confidentiality principles articulated at the beginning created an extra element of confusion and difficulty on the final two nights.

My impression is that many people nevertheless found the exercises (including the optional final liturgy) very valuable. If this is true – that many found the evenings valuable in spite of all their flaws – it is a testimony in part to the skill and adaptability of the small group leaders. Above all however it seems to point to the strong desire to share, to listen and be heard by those present. People moved very rapidly into very deep conversations, in a way that was extraordinarily impressive in light of all the obstacles mentioned above.

It is nevertheless worth noting some critical feedback received by letter or email, and suggestions for how such events ought to be done in future.

- One couple wrote to me describing the first evening as “slipshod and patronising” in its organisation, judging it to be a “patting down exercise”.
- One correspondent remarked on my lack of specialism in safeguarding and objected to my emphasis on confidentiality, as did also the journalist/parishioner who was present. On the other hand, there were also many who were clear that the confidentiality in which people’s stories were held was important to them and vital to the small group conversations.
- One correspondent doubted that points would be published without being heavily sanitised, and also doubted the correctness of “listening” as a format.
- Some wished that Bishop Stephen, who was then Bishop Elect, could have been there to listen, and at least one thought the clergy more generally should be there to hear what laypeople have to say.

- One suggested that the whole situation around Bishop Robert's resignation should be discussed in Catholic schools.
- One pair of correspondents suggested that "listening" had for many Catholics of a certain age too passive a connotation, and that it would be better to replace the word with something which suggests "seeking to understand and consider the views and experiences of others". Another problem with listening is that it ignores the experience of the deaf for whom speaking and listening are not modes of communication and understanding. The failure to book a British Sign Language/English interpreter for any of the meetings was noted. These correspondents suggested that a fuller announcement ought to have been made in advance, and a methodology more similar to that of Forward Together in Hope, under Bishop Seamus, ought to have been used.

As organisers we did also receive a range of positive comments, and came away with a sense that the depth of engagement and respect for one another's experiences shown by many on these four evenings—however imperfectly they were organised-- was itself a sign of hope. I would personally endorse the view of one correspondent: "I found it both moving and exceptional. The outpouring of grief, distress and anger but also faith and commitment was extraordinary."

Just as I am aware that the listening exercises were very imperfect events, so this summary is inevitably imperfect and impressionistic, and cannot adequately capture all that was said. I offer my apology for this in advance.

I would now like to give the final word to a survivor of abuse. If listening is at all important in relation to these issues, then listening to the experience of survivors is especially important. Since the design of the listening events was not conducive to putting survivor's voices at the centre, I am grateful to have permission to share this one account-- offered to me in the context of the listening exercises by someone who took part in them-- as an addendum to my overall summary. For clarity I should say that some but not all of what is recounted here happened within the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle.

If reading this summary, or the narrative below, raises painful or personal issues, please consider reaching out for help. Some possible sources of support are:

Safe Spaces Safe Spaces England and Wales – Safe Spaces England and Wales and Survivor Voices Peer Support – Survivors Voices.

[Report by Karen Kilby, Bede Professor of Catholic Theology, Durham University.]

Appendix 6: Summary of Results of the Questionnaire for the Dicastery Report.

The Parish Survey was sent to all parishes and conducted across three weekends. The majority of responses were received online, with paper forms being returned to Bishops House for processing. Approximately 1,900 Mass-goers took part in the survey. The Clergy survey was sent to all Clergy in the diocese and included the same questions as the Parish Survey along with five specific questions which related to matters raised as part of the Canonical investigation from the Dicastery of Bishops. Some 116 Priests and Deacons responded to the survey. The Staff Survey was sent to all employees, both full time and part time. Some 44 responses were received online.

Section 1: Pastoral position

Since 2019, the pastoral position of the diocese has improved?

Parish: 62.5% disagreed and 9.1% agreed, 28.4% neutral.

Clergy: 42% disagreed, 14% agreed, 44% neutral.

Staff: 42% disagreed, 12% agreed, 47% neutral.

The impact of the pandemic is the main reason for the current pastoral position of the diocese?

Parish: 59.8% disagreed, 20% agreed, 20.2% neutral.

Clergy: 56% disagreed, 24% agreed, 20% neutral.

Staff: 47% disagreed, 19 % agreed, 34% neutral.

There is good provision for catechesis in the diocese?

Parish: 38% disagreed and 23% agreed, 46.2% neutral.

Clergy: 34% disagreed, 40% agreed, 26% neutral.

Staff: 14% disagreed, 33% agreed, 53% neutral.

Parish partnerships are working well?

Parish: almost 50% disagreed, 28.2% neutral.

Clergy: 62% disagreed, 12 % agreed, 26% neutral.

Staff: 42% disagreed, 23% agreed, 35% neutral.

The recommendations of Forward Together in Hope have been followed?

Parish: 44.8% disagreed 12% agreed, 43.2% neutral.

Clergy: 62% disagreed, 12% agreed, 26% neutral.

Staff: 35% disagreed, 19% agreed, 46% neutral.

Forward Together in Hope is still appropriate for the development of the Diocese?

Parish: 27% disagreed, 35% agreed, 38% neutral.

Clergy: 40% disagreed, 40% agreed, 20% neutral.

Staff: 21% disagreed, 35% agreed, 44% neutral.

Section 2: The Synodal Process

This went well in my parish?

Parish: 40% disagreed 18% agreed, 42% neutral.

Clergy: 37% disagreed, 21% agreed, 40% neutral.

Staff: 21% disagreed, 26% agreed, 53% neutral.

I have confidence in the synodal process?

Parish: 46% disagreed, 15% agreed, 39% neutral.

Clergy: 35% disagreed, 35% agreed, 30% neutral.

Staff: 23% disagreed, 23% agreed, 54% neutral.

This was a repeat of Forward Together in Hope?

Parish: 22.5% disagreed, 23% agreed, 54.5% neutral.

Clergy: 40% disagreed, 33% agreed, 27% neutral.

Staff: 31% disagreed, 9% agreed, 60% neutral.

There was good feedback on the outcome of the Synodal process?

Parish: 48.6% disagreed, 12% agreed, 39.4% neutral.

Clergy: 41% disagreed, 22% agreed, 37% neutral.

Staff: 28% disagreed, 23% agreed, 49% neutral.

I felt that my views were captured in the synodal process?

Parish: 44.2 % disagreed, 12.6% agreed, 43.2% neutral.

Clergy: 33% disagreed, 28% agreed, 39% neutral.

Staff: 12% disagreed, 21% agreed, 67% neutral.

Section 3: Governance of the Diocese

There is trust and confidence in the governance of the diocese?

Parish: 69.5% disagreed, 12% agreed, 18.5% neutral.

Clergy: 51% disagreed, 17% agreed, 32% neutral.

Staff: 40% disagreed, 30% agreed, 30% neutral.

There is clarity of structures in the diocese?

Parish: 62% disagreed, 16% agreed, 22% neutral.

Clergy: 43% disagreed, 17% agreed, 40% neutral.

Staff: 42% disagreed, 35% agreed, 23% neutral.

It is important to have good policies and procedures to support the safe delivery of the mission?

Parish: 4% disagreed, 91% agreed, 5% neutral

Clergy: 2% disagreed, 95% agreed, 3% neutral.

Staff: 2% disagreed, 98% agreed, 0% neutral.

The diocese has implemented unnecessary policies and procedures?

Parish: 17% disagreed, 31.4% agreed, 51.6% neutral.

Clergy: 20% disagreed, 33% agreed, 47% neutral.

Staff: 42% disagreed, 21% agreed, 37% neutral.

Diocesan officers are working well in being supportive of clergy and parishes?

Parish: 53% neutral *The remaining respondents were roughly equally split between agree and disagree.

Clergy: 18% disagreed, 44% agreed, 30% neutral.

Staff: 9% disagreed, 63% agreed, 28% neutral.

Diocesan officers are appropriately contactable and available?

Parish: 32.8% disagreed, 20.3% agreed, 46.8% neutral.

Clergy: 18% disagreed, 52% agreed, 30% neutral.

Staff: 9% disagreed, 81% agreed, 9% neutral.

Section 4: Academisation

There was good consultation on the conversion to academies policy and programme?

Parish: 52% disagreed, 10% agreed, 38.2% neutral.

Clergy: 52% disagreed, 14% agreed, 34% neutral.

Staff: 26% disagreed, 12% agreed, 63% neutral.

The conversion to academies of schools has worked well?

Parish: 39.4% disagreed, 10% agreed, 50.6 neutral.

Clergy: 37% disagreed, 9% agreed, 54% neutral.

Staff: 16% disagreed, 12% agreed, 72% neutral.

Schools are working better under conversion to academies?

Parish: 41% disagreed, 10% agreed, 49% neutral.

Clergy: 41% disagreed, 4% agreed, 55% neutral.

Staff: 14% disagreed, 12% agreed, 74% neutral.

Conversion to academies has helped with the retention of Catholic senior leaders?

Parish: 40% disagreed, 7% agreed, 53% neutral.

Clergy: 41% disagreed, 4% agreed, 55% neutral.

Staff: 14% disagreed, 5% agreed, 81% neutral.

Catholicity in schools has been maintained or strengthened since conversion to academies?

Parish: 45% disagreed, 8% agreed, 47% neutral.

Clergy: 44% disagreed, 7% agreed, 49% neutral.

Staff: 16% disagreed, 5% agreed, 79% neutral.

End of report.

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