

Pastoral Letter for the Solemnity of the Epiphany 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On this Feast of the Epiphany we celebrate the revelation in Christ of God's eternal plan of salvation for everyone and we, like St Paul, are called to make the Light of all Peoples known to others. How we do that changes in every era.

Five years ago, in Advent 2018, we published the **Diocesan Vision: Shaping Our Future**. It remains prominently on our website and we owe it to all those who took part in the Stewards of the Gospel process to see that vision come to fulfilment.

Shaping Our Future is a discerned response to God's love for us. It came out of a process where clergy, religious and lay people came together to pray, think, discuss and reflect about how best to evangelise our diocese in the future.

My prayers and continued discernment have served to reinforce my commitment to implement the Vision Document: Shaping Our Future. I recognise that in the years spent in the grip of the pandemic, followed by difficult times in a cost-of-living crisis, parishioners and clergy have all borne a heavy burden.

In that context, I have given much consideration as to how far and how fast to push the implementation of Shaping Our Future and up to now I have taken a light touch in deference to the toll recent times have had on everyone.

In 2024, I am changing that light touch to a more urgent exhortation to implement the Vision. I want everyone: clergy, religious and lay people to help me to move forward with this.

During the latter part of 2023, I held several meetings with different groups of people and I was reminded that radical decisions need to be made now. As Pope Francis has said: *"we are not living in an era of change but a change of era"*.

Since publication of Shaping Our Future, the Vatican published a 2020 document entitled: *"The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church"*. It reflected many of our own conclusions about the very real and present need to change the way we do things.

I am also minded that since the publication of that document the Universal Church, under the guidance of the Holy Father, has embarked on a Synodal Journey emphasising the need for change and the need for co-responsibility between clergy and lay people. This echoes much of what is in Shaping Our Future when it stressed the importance of us all working together to evangelise. I want to go further than I have done thus far by echoing the words from the Vatican document-

“The current canonical norms leave it to the diocesan Bishop to decide on the establishment of a Pastoral Council in Parishes, but in any case, they may ordinarily be considered as highly recommended... . Pope Francis [also reminds us that] the purpose of such a Council ‘should not be ecclesiastical organisation but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone’”.

The same document also reminds us that pastoral councils can be used flexibly within parish partnerships, “It is possible... to establish a single Pastoral Council for several parishes”.

All of us should long for the “*missionary aspiration of reaching everyone*”- How we organise ourselves and how we convey the Good News of Jesus Christ in East London and Essex must meet the challenges of the new era. I ask you all to rise to that challenge with me during 2024 and beyond.

I remain extremely grateful to all who contributed to the Vision Document: Shaping Our Future and bringing us to this moment in the history of the Diocese. We live in a rapidly changing world - since the Vision document was published some clergy and Stewards of the Gospel have moved parishes, retired or died; numbers attending Mass and many other circumstances have changed post pandemic.

So I am now asking that in your parish partnership, you build on whatever work was done before the pandemic and adapt that work to the context of current circumstances which have undoubtedly made the implementation more urgent.

I ask everyone to share in the recognition that change is necessary; and “we have always done it like that”, is not a reason for continuing to do things that way. In the words of Cardinal Newman “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

In the next days I will be writing to your Parish Priest asking him to join me in this endeavour and I will provide instructions and guidance on how he should work with you to that end. As your bishop I commend the Vision Document: Shaping Our Future to you and ask you to implement it in your parish and parish partnership, working together to face the challenges of our changing world.

In today’s first reading St Paul says that “This mystery ... was unknown to... past generations.” Let us not let Christ, the Light of all Nations, remain unknown in this one!

Yours in Christ and Mary,

+Alan Williams, sm,
Bishop of Brentwood