Basingstoke Pastoral Area
Emerging Parish of Our Lady, Queen of Peace

First, a note of thanks. Thank you to Bishop Philip for giving us the opportunity to dialogue on the proposal to create a new canonical parish amalgamating the Basingstoke Churches and others further afield ('The Proposal'). On any take, this is likely to be pivotal in the life of the church in and around Basingstoke. The consultation is synodal. I am grateful for this opportunity to listen, and to be heard.

1. The Logic – Deductive Reasoning

I am extremely trepidatious to begin here, given that our bishop is a philosopher. Yet, I have a vague recollection of my philosophy days when we were warned of the perils that arise when we seek to amend or change a general principle following a particular experience. It seems to me that the discussion before us concerns precisely this: That we might be seeking to change a general principle of what the 'church' is for most - the experience of parish – because of a particular problem; namely, the pastoral challenges that flow from the shortage of priests recruited for the British Isles.[1]

The Proposal contends that the best provision of pastoral care for God's People, critically endangered by this particular challenge will be best provided for by the alteration of the general principle, the tangible experience of Church that is the parish.

2. The Parish – Definition

In England the idea and experience of parish has evolved and been specifically defined over the past 1000 years. The Church of England, pretty much completely, adopted the parochial system following the Reformation, which continues to this day. Manor houses and other landowners created parish churches specifically to accommodate local people under their rule and care. The experience of **local** was crucial in this, as parishes were born out of wider areas served by ministers, abbeys and the like, which were deemed to be too remote and inaccessible for local people. Ever since, the ecclesiastical world has taken on the parish model and adopted it as its own.

Is it therefore possible, etymologically, as well as logistically, to propose a change in the definition of what a parish actually is, given it holds such a precise historical definition as a 'local' entity? Are we in danger of blurring the lines that uphold critical distinction by attempting to redefine that which might not be redefinable? The notion of a pastoral area linking parishes together is coherent and readily understandable, but

[1] '...to serve better the pastoral needs of the People of God, to make the best provision of the sacraments and to enable mutual support and the most effective administration of the Church's goods.' From the Bishop's Consultation Brief

to suggest an area encompassing approximately 245 square miles[2] could possibly be local, even in the modern era of frequent travel, is unreasonable. Is this discussion, therefore, rather more about the demise of the 'parish' model altogether, rather than a re-jigging of it?

3. The Parish – as Church

Whilst it has to be conceded the parish system we experience now is a medieval construct, there is much to suggest the 'local' experience of worshipping communities belongs to the very foundations of the Church. We are reminded of the core teaching of Jesus that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is there. [3] With the greatest respect to the existing parish communities we have, the Lord did not refer to thousands, hundreds or even tens of members when speaking of the promise to impart His Spirit. Jesus clearly had a small, local, personal, even intimate model in mind when he thought of Church. This was born out in the life of the first Church recorded in Acts, where there were few, if any, ecclesial buildings. The people of God met in the local, personal, context of their homes. This is how our faith was founded and effectively transmitted. The Gospel is essentially personal in nature given the invitation is to change our hearts and minds, and frequently. The parish preserves the personal.

The parish has also been THE vehicle for the sacred apostolic ministry of shepherding. These thoughts do not seek to directly address the somewhat catastrophic loss of numbers[4] - the majority - of our people from parishes across the country in recent decades. Yet the relevance of effective shepherding to this discussion cannot be underestimated. Many of the Portsmouth Diocese wide consultations regarding the challenges facing us in recent years revealed a common theme. People leave our midst, most of all, because of the conduct of priests. The Bishop delegates his priests and deacons to act in his name as the Chief Shepherd of his diocese. The Bishop relies upon each, under Grace, to authentically shepherd, but what is authentic shepherding?

We have numerous accounts of how the Lord understood shepherding in the Gospels. Jesus used the image of shepherds and shepherding repeatedly, for good reason. I lived on a sheep farm for seven years. I saw first-hand what this ancient and pretty much unchanged practice actually looks like in the raw. It involves a 24/7 commitment to drop everything to tend the sheep, especially when they're in trouble. It involves physically going out, leaving the comfort of house and home in all weathers, putting the sheep first. It involves knowing the sheep, knowing where they live, knowing their weaknesses, ailments, keeping an eye out for danger on their behalf. It involves putting myself second, which I concede is the vocation of every Christian. Yet those entrusted with shepherding the Church aim to be exemplary in this intensely personal, proximate, commitment to embody the ministry of Christ among God's People.

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[2] Basingstoke and Deane municipal statistics covering broadly the Basingstoke Pastoral Area
[3] Matthew 18:20
[4] Mass Attendance 1960 - 70,000; 2021 – 17,000 - Portsmouth Diocese 'A Time to See' Document 2021 – Slide 3

If we still hold to this essentially Christ imaged model of ministry, the question arises how will the current Proposal assist shepherds to be more effective in this essentially local mission, to be proximate, to know and be known by the sheep? For example, how will a 245 square mile approach to the pastoral care of God's people enhance the present ministry of Fr Paul Leonard, St Joseph's South Ham, who currently geographically serves approximately 25 square miles. [5] Trust between people and their pastors has to be built, over time, consistently providing God's People access to His Grace. This means local, if it is to mirror the Lord's ministry. The maintenance, not to mention the mission, of faith communities is utterly built on this foundation.

I would like to mention of Bishop's Philip's reassuring recent comment to me [6] regarding the position of Sacred Heart, Hook within the Proposal. He writes,

'Hook for many years now has been under St. Bede's, so I suspect that most of the faithful would not notice the difference.'

Yet, the latest details regarding the Proposal being circulated suggest the priests of the new parish will be rotated across the communities weekly. The term 'Mass Centre', rather than a distinct family of faith, is also being slowly rolled out when referring to the smaller existing church communities within the area. The trajectory of travel suggests nothing other than a systematic dismantling of the local, the personal, of the hitherto bespoke shepherding model that has been the ideal for generations. We are to do this in favour of a corporate, centralised and depersonalised model.

4. The Parish - Learning from others – especially the Church of England

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of ecumenical matters will be familiar with the complaint many Anglican clergy have expressed regarding the 'uniting of benefices', a policy that began many years ago. In some ways, these processes were born out of a similar predicament, the decline in congregations as well as stipendiary clergy, supplemented by associated income concerns. I have never heard anyone praising the policy for its success, or any research suggesting the amalgamations have achieved their desired aims. Might this be worth researching, if not already explored?

Despite the above, it is worthy of note – perhaps more so – that the Church of England has **not** routinely sought to change its parish boundaries. It is right to say that the same are preserved and protected by statute under English Law, but could it be the case that Anglican dioceses actually wish to preserve, in some sense, the presence of the church in the local community by way of Parochial Church Councils, local Church Wardens, Licensed Lay Ministers and locally retired clergy? Could it be they understand parish is essentially local, that parish cannot be expressed or experienced in any other way?

[5] UK Church Directory
[6] 15th September 2026

Could it be, despite the organisational challenges, they believe God continues to indispensably speak in this context?

Continuing with the Church of England, few would disagree that Holy Trinity Brompton, London, ('HTB') has been pivotal in the re-evangelisation of England, and beyond, these days. This has been principally, but not exclusively, achieved through the inspired Alpha Course, which has ignited and inspired millions across the globe with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Most recently, the HTB brand has been adopted, substantially so, as a rebranded package under the Divine Renovation banner ('DR'). Many aspects of church management, such as Senior Leadership Teams and the like, have been lifted straight out of the HTB stable. I attended HTB for some years whilst living in London during the early days of Alpha. I recognized the DR terminology and language instantly.

Yet the DR concept of amalgamating, even closing small (non-viable) parish communities, in favour of the larger hub model, is starkly absent from the HTB mindset. The HTB model is set on the heart and faithfulness of God, a God who never fails His people. I.e. If God is faithful, and we are faithful under Grace, the Church will grow. Thus, HTB is known for 'church planting', the rejuvenation of existing dwindling, even closed, parish churches. They passionately believe in building the Kingdom locally. HTB's efforts have birthed or helped shape over **200 new or revitalised churches** since the Revitalisation Trust (a HTB platform) was formed back in 2017.[7] Why is the DR Project, to which we appear to be aligned, not promoting the fullness of the HTB model? It has been a hugely successful and unashamedly rooted in the ancient Christian principle of the local Church.

5. Basingstoke – The 2006 Amalgamation Experience

The concept of amalgamation of local communities is not a new experience to the folk of the Basingstoke area. Back in 2006 St Bede's was hailed as the church of the future that would serve the wider Basingstoke Catholic family. No-one could question or fail to celebrate the great numbers who attend Mass there these days, yet many among the congregation emanate from other faithful Catholic nations and cultures who have arrived relatively recently. In practice, the building of St Bede's involved the closure of worshipping communities in Basingstoke Town Centre, Old Basing, Brighton Hill, and Sherfield-on Loddon, possibly more? Other occasional, but regular, Mass Centres, also ceased in the wake of St Bede's, which had been set up in various villages round and about, such as South Warnborough, Upton Grey etc.

I have been in this area for just over three years. I have met with families from each of the 'lost' weekly Mass communities mentioned above. Anecdotally, I am told that many families never managed to migrate to St Bede's, as first envisaged. Some do attend one of the two Basingstoke churches or Sacred Heart, Hook. Some attend their local CofE

[7] HTB + 1 Annual Report 2025/26

churches, but most are suspected to go nowhere these days. Despite the branding of the new church as a focus for a united Catholic community, it represented the destruction of local worshipping communities that resulted in the scattering and loss of many sheep. People are haunted by the experience of twenty years ago to this day. Many have recently mentioned the 'hurt' of yesteryear being resurrected once again in this process.

6. The Base Case

The Ten-Year Plan could not be clearer. To do nothing is not an option. Most would be more than on board with this statement. The question is do what? How does the alteration of a generally tried and tested model, the parish, address the particular concern to ensure the best provision of pastoral care for our people? Where is the evidence for this belief?

The appeal to logic at the beginning of this paper, though relevant, is vastly overshadowed by my appeal to faith. The universal and continuous call for Christians to embrace repentance, for me to regularly stop in my tracks to review heart and mind in the light of Grace, might also apply to our missional strategy? The signs could not be clearer for the Church, generally, in the west. We are not on track.

7. In Conclusion

I propose a re-evaluation of the existing Proposal to amalgamate Catholic Basingstoke and beyond, in a manner that would overtly promote and treasure the local Church. If we honestly and courageously addressed why we are in the state we are – the Shepherding crisis – many, if not most, of our people would be an energized to reconsider their own participation in the mission in the light of such leadership. This could be the beginning of a life-changing turnaround, as always happens when repentance is truly embraced.

Thank you for considering these thoughts. I offer them as a flawed sinner, with absolutely no intent to offend anyone. Please forgive me if that objective has failed at any point.

JC

22.10.26