



DIOCESE OF EAST ANGLIA

Diocesan policy on CLUSTERING & MERGING PARISHES

The Diocese of East Anglia faces an immediate future with fewer priests to serve a growing Catholic population. Priests are ordained to provide pastoral and priestly leadership and care through the ministry of word, sacrament and love to a Catholic community which finds the hallmark of its identity in the Sunday celebration of the Mass. It is likely that we will only be able to keep the Mass at the centre of our Catholic life if we gradually cluster and then merge some parishes. It may not be possible to provide a priest in every parish that currently exists in the diocese. The fundamental positive purpose of such clustering and merging is to sustain and promote vibrant eucharistic and evangelising communities, and wisely to steward the gifts of God having carefully read 'the signs of the times'. Our *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (2004) includes the fundamentals for clustering and merging; all but a few parishes are already involved in 'clusters'. This policy should be read in the context of pages 26-29 and 61- 64 of that plan.

'No parish family, therefore, is an isolated self-sufficient unit. Our very catholicity demands an openness to one another, and a sharing of life and mission. There is no room for narrow parochialism in the Catholic Church. Every parish is an integral part, a living cell, of the diocesan family, and every parish must be open in faith and love to all the other parishes, especially neighbouring ones.' (*Diocesan Pastoral Plan* p. 27)

'Our future together is likely to be a two-stage process. Firstly, the 'clustering' of distinct but neighbouring parishes, each with their own parish priest, but gradually working ever closer together, co-ordinating Mass times, and preparing for the time when they might be required to combine into a single parish. Secondly, the combination of two or more parishes into a single canonical parish with one parish priest, assisted when possible by other priests (newly-ordained, temporary visitors from overseas, retired, etc).' (*Diocesan Pastoral Plan* p. 28)

'A fundamental principle is that there are to be no 'priest-less' parishes in our diocese. However we organise our diocese in the future, developing lay leadership of local Catholic communities and enhancing the role played by permanent deacons, every community will be entrusted to the servant leadership of a priest appointed by the bishop as 'canonical pastor'. (*DPP*, p. 28)

A diocese is a portion of the people of God entrusted to the pastoral care and leadership of a Bishop. Each diocese is 'divided into distinct parts or parishes' (*Code of Canon Law*, 374.1). Each parish is by nature an integral part of the diocese. Only the Bishop has the authority to establish, alter or suppress parishes (See Canons 120-122, 515.3).

1. Stage One: clustering with no immediate view to merging

Although some clustered parishes may well be required to merge at some stage in the future, the recommendations for clustering below should not be seen as an inevitable step in that direction.

- 1.1 Parishes within each cluster are to review times of Sunday and Holy Day Masses in each parish, so that one parish priest could cover the other if necessary.
- 1.2 Parish priests of the cluster are encouraged to exchange Sunday Masses on occasional weekends.
- 1.3 Parishes should develop the sharing of resources and personnel. This might include for example:
 - 1.3.1 Annual meeting of Parish Pastoral Councils or equivalent to pursue ways of working together.
 - 1.3.2 Joint sacramental programmes as appropriate:
Baptism, R.C.I.A., First Confession & Communion, Confirmation, Marriage
 - 1.3.3 Joint formation and retreat days for Readers and Ministers of Communion.
 - 1.3.4 Programmes of adult religious education and formation, days of reflection, etc.
 - 1.3.5 Occasional liturgical celebrations and social events together.
 - 1.3.6 Joint J&P Group and other such activities.
 - 1.3.7 Financing together the employment of day-to-day administrative, financial, secretarial, caretaking, and estate management support of various kinds. This can also be done at wider deanery level.

2. Stage Two: clustering with a view to merging by a set date

- 2.1 After a process of open consultation with each parish involved, and with the Diocesan Council of Priests, a date for merging is to be agreed with the Bishop, and publicly announced. The Bishop will write a letter to each parish involved, and either the Bishop or the Vicar General will visit each parish.
- 2.2 Transparency is important throughout the process. Ideally, the time of formal preparation for merging should involve at least one full year before the merger. This will not be possible, however, if a merger is required through the ill-health or early retirement of a priest in a cluster, or of a parish priest elsewhere.
- 2.3 The effective and smooth clustering and merging of parishes is very much dependent on the good will of priests and people together. Each parish priest involved has a central and vital role to play in supporting and furthering the process in a positive way.
- 2.4 It is very important that members of each parish community be kept fully informed throughout the process, and be offered the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and ideas. This might include a Questionnaire with questions such as:
- What are your fears and hopes about future merger?
 - What should the merged parish be called?
 - Where should the new parish priest reside?
 - How should Sunday Masses be divided between the places of worship?
 - What would be the most suitable times for these Masses (not just for individual parishioners, but for all parishioners and the parish priest)?
 - How should weekday Masses be arranged between the places of worship?
 - Have you any suggestions as to how best to bring our communities together over the coming months, spiritually and socially?

Some of these issues require a decision by the Bishop, but he will welcome the considered response of the parishes involved.

- 2.5 The two or more Parish Pastoral Councils should meet together as an opportunity to know each other and to plan the way ahead together. They are to prepare the way for a single Parish Pastoral Council or equivalent, with each place of worship appropriately represented, from the date of merger.
- 2.6 For practical purposes, a small working group or committee from each parish (e.g. four from each) should meet together with their parish priests on a regular basis, probably monthly. Such frequent dialogue should help towards a positive merger of the existing parishes into a single parish.
- 2.7 Particular care and attention needs to be given to the ongoing spiritual life of each merging parish, especially when a local Catholic community is to lose its resident priest, daily Mass, etc.
- 2.8 Finance Committees are to meet regularly and work towards one Finance Committee and one Parish Bank Account from the moment of merger.
- 2.9 Finance Committees should discuss what assets may need to be disposed of, leased or otherwise used after the merger, for presentation to the Bishop and Diocesan Finance Board for agreement. As far as possible, the intentions of founders and donors must be respected (cf. Canons 1267.3, 1284.2.3, 1300). When two or more parishes are merged into one, the merged parish owns the goods and patrimony of the pre-existing parishes and assumes their obligations (cf. Canon 121). Financial matters can all too easily become a cause for concern and tension, especially if parishioners from one parish come to think that their parish's assets are being taken and used for the benefit of the other.
- 2.10 A proposal needs to be presented to the bishop as to where the new parish priest is to live. The general principle is that the parish priest should live 'in the parochial house, near the church' (*Canon 533.1*), with the presumption that this means the parish church.

- 2.11 Careful consideration needs to be given to the place of religious communities, deacons and lay pastoral workers within the merged parish.
- 2.12 If the merging of several parishes is to involve the closure of one or more churches, the Diocesan Policy on Redundant Churches (pages 27-28 of this folder) must be carefully followed.
- 2.13 Occasional celebration of Masses and preaching by parish priests in the other parish or parishes. Where two parishes are involved, a monthly exchange of Sunday Masses would be appropriate.
- 2.14 Exchange of news in each other's weekly bulletins. Each parish to coordinate and publish parish events, and invite each other to those events.
- 2.15 The ideas suggested for Stage 1 clustering should be continued and further developed during the process towards merger.

3. The day of merger

- 3.1 The Bishop will issue a decree of merger as required by the particular circumstances.
- 3.2 Ideally there should be a celebration of Mass at which all members of the merging parishes can gather together. This may need to be in a venue other than one of the merged parish's places of worship. The Bishop is to be invited to celebrate the Mass. The date needs to be planned in liaison with the Bishop with as much notice as possible, perhaps at the beginning of the final year of preparation for merger. The Dean and other local clergy should be invited, along with civic and ecumenical guests.

4. General Norms for the newly 'merged' parish

- 4.1 Every bringing together of two or more parishes into a single canonical parish will be different, and 'one size does not fit all'. Flexibility is required. The following points are normative for the establishment of any merged parish, but they are subject to exception by the Bishop when a strong case can be made for a different approach.
- 4.2 **A new parish priest:** when the other needs of the diocese allow, a parish priest will be appointed to the new parish who has not been the parish priest of any of the parishes involved in the merger. This may help to give a fresh start to the Catholic community, and to lessen the sense of one parish being 'taken over' by the other. We also need to be very sensitive to increasing the demands and pressures on a priest who may find it difficult to cope with additional responsibilities at a time in his life and ministry when his burdens may need to be lightened rather than augmented. A merged parish may require additional levels of energy and pastoral commitment.
- 4.3 **A new name for the parish:** the Bishop will consider proposals for the dedication of the parish which might both give a sense of new beginning while also taking account of the different places of worship in the merged parish community. *(This is most easily done when a completely new church has been built as a replacement for the previously existing places of worship, but this is generally unlikely in a rural diocese like East Anglia, especially given the limited financial resources of most parishes.)*
- 4.4 **A single Parish Pastoral Council or equivalent, and a single Parish Finance Committee.**
Any such structures must ensure truly adequate representation from each of the merging parishes. They should be new structures, rather than simply adding to an established council or committee.
- 4.5 **A new set of parish registers, records, finance books, etc:** all registers, etc, from the previous parishes should be transferred to the new parish church. A new set of registers should be prepared.
- 4.6 **One parish church:** most merged parishes will be single parishes with multiple places of worship, some of which will have formerly been parish churches. Although sensitivity and care will be needed to help each community towards a sense of full involvement in the new parish, one church needs to be designated by the bishop as the parish church.
- 4.7 **A single set of Holy Week services, etc**
Rather than attempt to duplicate the key liturgical celebrations, above all the Holy Week liturgy, only one celebration of each liturgy should take place within the parish, perhaps with particular celebrations in different churches.

Although easier said than done, especially when there is more than a little distance between churches, members of the new parish should be encouraged to see each church in the parish as 'theirs' and to feel 'at home' there.

4.8 New Sunday and Holy Day Mass times

A parish is strongest when it gathers for Sunday Mass, and no parish should be unnecessarily divided by multiple Mass times. Ideally a church should be filled for each Sunday Mass to at least $\frac{3}{4}$ its capacity. A priest may say no more than two Masses on a Saturday (including the Vigil Mass) and two Masses on a Sunday (or three when there is no Saturday Vigil Mass).

Any merging of parishes almost inevitably requires a reduction in the number of Masses, and changes in the times of those Masses. This also calls for generous flexibility on the part of parishioners regarding the time and place of Sunday and Holy Day Masses. After full consultation with those parishes to be merged, a proposal needs to be presented to the Bishop for his approval.

4.9 Weekday Masses: unless there is more than one priest in the merged parish, daily Mass will not be possible in each of the former parish churches. Normally, one parish Mass should be celebrated each day, but in the various main churches in the parish.

4.10 Transport: encouraging fellow parishioners to offer one another lifts to Sunday Mass is important in all parishes, but particularly in merged parishes when people may need to travel further to Mass without the necessary public transport or their own vehicles. Preparing to form a merged parish is an opportunity to highlight this need. Ideally, no Catholic should need to travel more than half-an-hour by car in good weather to reach their nearest Catholic church.

5. Monitoring

The process of merging will require ongoing monitoring by the Bishop and the local Dean, before, during and after merger. When the local Dean is directly involved in a merger, a neighbouring Dean will be asked to contribute to monitoring.

6. Review

This policy will be reviewed every three years by the Bishop in consultation with the Council of Priests.

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