



**TOGETHER** IN GOD'S LOVE  
TRANSFORMING LIVES

A STRATEGIC REVIEW OF THE  
DIOCESES OF MEATH & KILDARE

CHURCH  
ARMY  
.ORG

The Five Marks of Mission express the Anglican Communion's common commitment to, and understanding of, God's holistic and integral mission. They are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

We are grateful for the support of the Priorities Fund as well as the Church Fabric and Development fund, which has made this review possible. Also, for the goodwill, time and engagement of all those who have shared their stories and insights.

All text in *italics* in this report is a direct quote from one of our interviews or focus groups.

During 2018, Church Army's Research Unit have been working with the Dioceses of Meath and Kildare on a strategic review.

The purposes of this review have been:

1. To create a conversation within the diocese that creates hope and sense of possibility for the future.
2. To provide a credible basis for an accepted Action Plan within the diocese.



As part of this process, we visited every Union / Group of parishes in the diocese and listened to the experiences of both clergy and parishioners. This report summarises our main findings:

### 3+1 Challenges

- Declining attendance, reaching and retaining younger people, finance
- A culture of keeping your head down

### 4 Sources of hope

- The need for change is recognised, things are changing, a desire to learn, and, favourable demographics

### 6 Areas for potential action

- Make the most of what you've got
- Start some new things
- Take ownership of formation and discipleship
- Share ministry
- Align structures and funding
- Address wider cultural issues

### 1 Guiding vision

Together in God's Love Transforming Lives, the dioceses' vision, speaks powerfully into your context.

## 3 + 1 Challenges

When we visited each union / group, we asked people:

**"WHAT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE YOU FACE AS A CHURCH / UNION OF PARISHES?"**

The most common responses to this question were:



### Declining church attendance

Many of the people we spoke to were concerned about the declining number of people attending church. This was recognised as a major threat that raises the challenging question: *"Who will be going to our churches in 20 years' time?"*

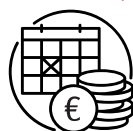
Reflecting on this challenge, one parishioner also offered the sobering reflection: *"We [the church] are merging into the background, disappearing."*



### Ageing congregations

Many of the unions / groups we visited recognised that their congregations contained significantly more older people than younger people. As one parishioner put it, *"we're a very tight bunch but we're not getting any younger"*.

Difficulties attracting and retaining younger people (sometimes defined as up to the age of 50) were also often mentioned as a major concern.



### Financial challenges

The previous two challenges (declining and ageing congregations) also lead to a third, financial, challenge. With fewer and fewer active members, it is becoming increasingly difficult for churches to cover costs. In some unions / parishes, this challenge feels less urgent because of significant financial reserves through previous sales of buildings. But even here, there is acknowledgement that *"our assets are dwindling at alarming rate"*. As one parishioner put it, *"we're living on borrowed money"*.

## A deeper underlying challenge

Behind these presenting issues, there is also a deeper, underlying challenge facing the Dioceses of Meath and Kildare.



### A "head down" mentality.

As one parishioner put it, the default position of the Church of Ireland seems to be one of *"you keep your head down"* and *"try not to get noticed."*<sup>1</sup>

We acknowledge there are complex historic reasons for this: *"people tend to be tribe orientated and not outward looking or happy to share their faith."* But unless it changes, it is difficult to see how the dioceses may see the transformation they desire. We consider this challenge more fully on page 11.

<sup>1</sup> Clearly echoing themes identified in the 2016 report the church of ireland – apologetic for mission <http://missionreport.leprosy.ie/>



## 4 Sources of hope

Alongside the challenges we have identified, our visits uncovered some encouraging sources of hope.



### The need for change is recognised

*"I think we have to evolve as a parish"*

At least some of the people we spoke to acknowledged that their churches need to change and that some of the things they hold dear (like having a full-time Rector or keeping a building at all costs) might need to stop or die. This resonates with the biblical insight that *"unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (John 12:24).

*"...to move from a 'cosy club' culture to getting outside our comfort zone and 'getting our hands dirty'"*



### Innovation, ideas and experiments

Linked to the previous point, there are also people and churches in the dioceses who are open to ideas and willing to try out new things.

During our visits, for example, we met people from unions / parishes who had creatively experimented with or expressed an appetite for:

- Different styles and times of service: *"We should be experimental with our worship. Saturday night service might help."*
- New ways of connecting with children and families, e.g. Messy Church <sup>2</sup>
- Using parish halls and other buildings for the benefit of the wider community e.g. The Charleville Centre developed by the Tullamore Union of parishes (pictured)
- Using technology e.g. 'Circle of prayer' text updates.



The Charleville Centre



### A desire to learn

Another source of hope is that there are people in the dioceses who are willing to learn. For example, one of the Rectors we interviewed offered the honest reflection that *"a lot of us, clergy included, haven't been brought up to talk about our faith"*. He then went on to say that he wanted to learn to do this better. Various other people we spoke to (both clergy and laity) expressed similar sentiments. Later in this report, we suggest some resources that could help with this.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.messychurch.org.uk/>



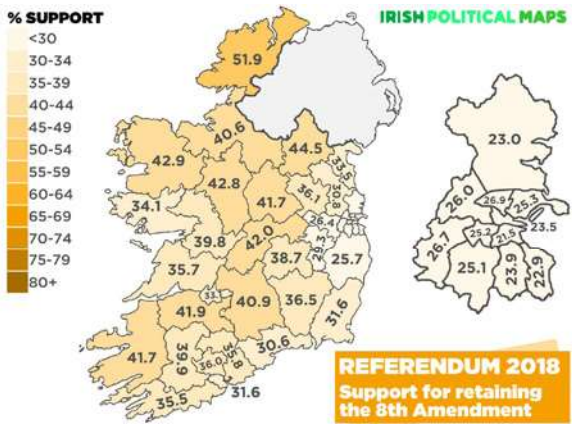
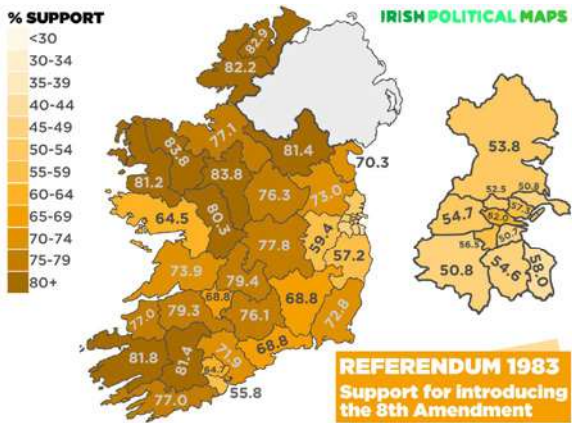
### Demographic and cultural change

Parts of the dioceses are experiencing significant demographic change. Examples include:

- Population growth / expanding towns, particularly around Dublin commuter belt <sup>3</sup>
- Immigration from Europe and a growing proportion from the 'rest of the world' <sup>4</sup>
- Increasing student numbers – e.g. Maynooth now has 13,500 students

Each of these changes gives the church fresh opportunities to reach out and engage with new groups of people.

Alongside these examples of demographic change, it is also important to acknowledge the significance of broader cultural change in Irish society. This is graphically represented in the shifting attitudes around the 8th Amendment over the last 35 years, especially amongst those aged under 50.



<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/construction/newdwellingcompletions/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2017/>

Although there are challenges associated with the fact that parts of Irish society appear to be becoming more 'secular', there are also opportunities. The number of people in their 20s identifying as having 'no religion' has almost doubled since 2011. One in 7 young adults don't label themselves as Catholic, Church of Ireland or Protestant. Instead, they say 'no religion'. 'Catholic Ireland', if it continues its current trend, may be a majority non-religious country within 20 years.

In a context where increasing numbers of people say they have 'no religion', it becomes more appropriate for parishes to see the whole town / village as mission field (not just the small percentage of the population who identify as Church of Ireland).

The growing presence of Pentecostal and Black Majority churches, even a Brazilian group, are a reflection of how this reality has been grasped by others. This is a recent shift, as was observed during our visits: *"Just five years ago Youth for Christ's presence simply wouldn't have worked."* Further signs of this cultural shift are the growing acceptance of inter-marriage with Roman Catholics and their significant presence as regular worshippers (in some places 10% of the congregation).

It is clear that the ground has shifted. Also, that a rapidly growing number of people in many parts of Ireland have never been part of the Church. The good news is that a growing proportion of this group, especially young adults are open to an encounter, but only if the Church goes to them.

669,000

POPULATION OF THE DIOCESES' COUNTIES

51,500

POPULATION IN THE DIOCESES' COUNTIES THAT IDENTIFY AS HAVING NO RELIGION

This number has nearly doubled in the last 5 years and the increase appears to be accelerating especially amongst the 15-34 age group.

10,750

POPULATION IN THE DIOCESES THAT IDENTIFY AS CHURCH OF IRELAND

5,200

POPULATION THAT THE DIOCESAN CENSUS REPORTED IN 2016 AS WORSHIPPERS

(at least 3 times outside Christmas and Easter)

1,100

THE NUMBER THAT CHURCH ARMY'S SURVEY OF THE DIOCESES REPORTED AS 'TYPICAL SUNDAY ATTENDANCE'

This figure is based on independent responses to Church Army's survey from both clergy and laity. The Church of Ireland Census poorly reflects the dynamics of congregational life in the dioceses.

1,100

THE LOSS OF WORSHIPPERS BETWEEN 2008 AND 2016 AS REPORTED IN THE DIOCESAN CENSUS

## Potential Areas for Action

Over the following pages, we sketch out six potential areas for action that arise from reflection on what you've shared with us. Discernment will be needed to determine which of these should become priorities, for whom, and, how they should be implemented and in what time frame.

### 1 Make the most of what you've got

*"Lots of people are looking for connection, belonging, community. The church has got that. Once you're in, it's great."*

One of the real strengths of the diocese's churches is the clear sense of community that exists among active members. As the parishioner quoted above put it, *"Once you're in, it's great"*. But to an outsider, local churches are not always as accessible or as visitor-friendly as they might be. Many of the buildings we visited were difficult to find (due to not being clearly labelled on Google maps). And when we arrived, we often found them with locked gates and limited signage.

Addressing these barriers would be a quick and relatively easy win. Potential ways of making churches more open / accessible to outsiders include:

- Enhancing / maximising digital presence via Google Maps
- Improving signage and accessibility of church buildings
- Working on welcome and hospitality

Another way of 'making the most of what you've got' concerns churches' engagement with the 'Occasional Offices' (baptisms, marriages and funerals) and Confirmation. Some people we met on our parish visits told us *"A lot of people just use the church for hatch, match and dispatch"*. Although this could be seen as a problem (people

using the church but not being willing to commit), the occasional offices also provide significant opportunities for ministering to people at key moments in their lives and making lasting connections with new contacts. In England, the church has developed a series of practical resources to support mission and ministry through the Occasional Offices.<sup>5</sup> It may be that some of these could be adapted and used within an Irish context.



<sup>5</sup> See <https://churchsupporthub.org/>





## 2 Start some new things

*"I'm so busy doing what I have to do as Rector that I don't have time to engage with other projects"*

How do you start new things when in a geographically dispersed Union with significant pastoral needs you just don't have time to engage with another initiative or project – let alone exercise a fully optimised, excellent ministry?

Perhaps, 'you' don't! Rather in starting new things you develop a 'mixed economy' that combines conventional parish ministry (as above) with some pioneering new mission initiatives that engage with people the parish model is less likely to reach. The dioceses' vision starts with the word 'Together'. This is prescient as it is suggestive of working in partnership and/or releasing others into ministry.



Ballina Centre of Mission

Some candidates for pioneering initiatives may include:

- A student/young adult congregation – possibly in Maymoath (Ireland's fastest growing university) and supported by Fusion Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Remember this demographic is relatively more likely to be open to questions of faith.
- A youth congregation – aimed initially at young people from existing churches but with the potential for enabling them to invite their peers. Your youth are literally your future. They are thin on the ground and isolated from one another.

*"I do feel sorry for some of the young people... we're running [the church] for ourselves 'cause that's what we like, we're used to and it's comfortable and easy but I think we should give them the chance to do it [take ownership of a youth congregation]."*

- A Centre of Mission with the aim of inspiring and resourcing local churches in outreach and mission (based on Church Army's experience of developing these in the dioceses of Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh, and, Tuam, Killala and Achonry).<sup>7</sup> Additional resources and experience in networking geographically dispersed youth (Xplore),<sup>8</sup> and the over 30s, making use of social media and Skype are also present in the wider team.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.fusionmovement.org/ireland>. For more on mission opportunities in newer / expanding universities, see our case study of St Paul's Weston at [www.churcharmy.org/youngadultsresearch](http://www.churcharmy.org/youngadultsresearch)

<sup>7</sup> <https://churcharmy.org/centresofmission>

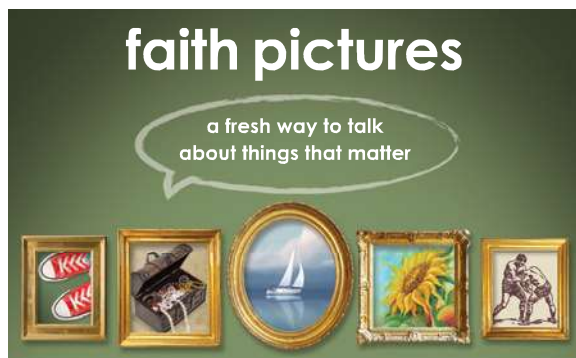
<sup>8</sup> <https://www.xplore.org.uk/>

### 3 Take ownership of formation and discipleship

*"People have lots of zeal for the fabric of the buildings, less for prayer and bible reading"*

If the diocese is to talk with conviction of 'God's Love' then resourcing the faith development of current church members needs to be an ongoing priority. This is not simply an issue about holding on to children post confirmation:

*"There is a massive need to develop our ability to articulate matters of faith in our own words and through our own experiences. Outside the comfort of the prayer book, people find it hard to open their mouths to speak of God, faith or religion. It's hard to see how we can have a conversation about being missional when we can't even talk to each other about our faith."*



Here, it would be good to build on the experience of running the 'Pilgrim' course in Lent 2017 and consider what further resources / approaches would be most appropriate for local churches. One possibility to consider in this regard is a free resource developed by Church Army called 'faith pictures'.<sup>9</sup> This is a short course designed to help Christians talk naturally about what they believe. The heart of the course is about helping people to identify a single picture or image that embodies something of their faith.

We often heard of discipleship being someone else's job, along with an implicit critique that they weren't doing it. This centred on mixed experiences and understandings of the role of the Rector and their relationship, or its absence, with the local Church of Ireland school and especially with its Principal. Much praise was heaped on Emma Rothwell's contributions in this area and the value of a central diocesan resource. However, whilst comment was made that *"confirmation classes were excellent,"* it was also noted that there was *"poor attendance afterwards"* and *"post-confirmation there's nothing for them"*.

There is a challenge for everyone in the diocese to consider how discipleship, i.e. nurturing one another in following Jesus, may move from someone else's to everyone's job.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.faithpictures.org>



## 4 Share ministry

*"The Rector does that, the Rector, yes the Rector, and that..."*

The dioceses' vision, *Together in God's Love Transforming Lives*, doesn't simply apply to the Rector. And yet: *"The Rector does that..."* was a repeated refrain when focus group participants were asked to describe who was engaged in various of the Anglican Communion's five marks of mission<sup>10</sup>.

We all, as disciples, have a responsibility to support one another in our given opportunities for service. It's not all up to the Rector.

There are signs that this culture may be changing, in part as a consequence of vacancies that have in places undermined the idea that the Rector has to do everything: *"Over the past few difficult years [without a Rector], I think we have come closer as a union and taken up the challenge to maintain and grow our unity."* In addition, the need is more proactively recognised: *"To be open to lay people taking*

*the lead in some areas and not always being something the clergy have to do."* Nonetheless, some strong voices, lay and ordained, subscribe to particular ideals of clerical ministry (see further 'small church' dynamics, below).

Indeed, the challenge to share ministry isn't simply about clergy. We've heard clearly of the fear of letting go, lest no one else pick it up: *"I've been in the church for 20 years and seen the same people in the same jobs."* The same people *"the doers"* end up doing it all, *"it can be a deterrent for some"* – will I get caught in that trap? One answer suggested to us was: *"less could be more"*.<sup>11</sup>

In this season, not least as you start to appoint local ordained ministers and take greater responsibility for discipleship, it may be timely to start a conversation about the role of Rectors as enablers and not simply doers of ministry. Experience in other parts of the Anglican communion, and the Church of Ireland in the Republic, points to the potential of laity (not necessarily licensed or authorised) to be agents of God's transforming love in their communities.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> The Church Urban Fund has produced a set of excellent resources about working well with volunteers: <http://www2.cuf.org.uk/working-volunteers>

## 5 Align structures and funding

*"Often we get caught up in maintenance matters."*

Most of the congregational life in the dioceses is 'small', i.e. it fits into the classic description of a 'family church'. The available literature on the dynamics of small churches, i.e. those with congregations of approximately 50 adults, describes the challenge of attempting to manage any transition into a larger community.<sup>12</sup> This is principally a function of the overwhelming pressure on the Rector to serve as chaplain to the congregation. If they seek to disrupt this dynamic, they are frequently sabotaged in their efforts by a matriarch or patriarch; Rectors come and go, the 'family' remains. We observed some of this at play in our focus groups, including some candour: *"We're getting better. We're not as critical as we used to be."*

This dynamic may also help account for the reticence of some to engage in a review process perceived to be inherently disruptive.

Three areas warrant attention for focused, and potentially additional, investment:

- to help larger congregations with an appetite for growth and supportive demographic features, i.e. communities with a relatively high population density and a younger age profile, to transition from 'family' (<50) to a 'pastoral' church (→50-150)
- to continue the development of local ordained ministry, which is ideally suited to addressing the dynamics of small churches, i.e. being 'local' as a form of ministry it is less prone to sabotage

- to support small congregations to multiply rather than transition to something larger, e.g. through a pioneer minister, using indigenous lay leadership to set up fresh expressions of Church

We were greatly encouraged that the dioceses are already strategically allocating resources by making the central appointment of a Youth Officer. However, the funding arrangements for the dioceses and their relationship to the church census do not appear to be well understood and there is a clear danger of misunderstandings leading to perverse incentives: *"We're charged per capita so want to keep the numbers low."*

Typical weekly attendance is a much more reliable indicator of congregational health and its capacity to change than the present church census numbers. Timely and credible data on ministry demographics and congregational health are currently not readily available. It will be important to have these in place in order to understand the impact of any additional investment.



<sup>12</sup> E.g. Dudley, Carl. Unique Dynamics of the Small Church Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1977.



## 6 Address wider cultural realities

*"The good news of secularisation has shaped a generation."*

The wider cultural realities seem almost overwhelming:

- Sport is the new god
- Shopping is the majority religion
- Scandal of child abuse is the elephant in the room
- Dublin commuters are either not present or simply too tired

The demographics of many parts of the dioceses suggest that young adults won't be returning to church simply because they don't live in your parishes. In others, the challenge is that they're a generation marked by a decline in religious affiliation, less deference and more questioning attitudes. The frequently stated expectation that they will *"come back when they're older"* doesn't appear born out in the dioceses' own data or wider evidence of social attitudes.

The good news is that there are opportunities to respond creatively yet faithfully to the changing place of Sundays in Irish society, including the centrality of sport. Examples of creative ways of engaging could include: Sweaty Church<sup>13</sup>, DNA Football<sup>14</sup> or Futsal (Brazilian indoor football) played at the Ballina Centre of Mission<sup>15</sup>.

The key movement is from 'come back' to 'go to' and to create multiple opportunities for people to make connections.<sup>16</sup>

There's more good news in that there are people with imagination and energy to make such connections: *"Interesting that the environment is 5th [Mark of Mission] yet it might be the easiest one to get started on as a parish or youth project."* This was an area where the laity reported a significantly greater interest than clergy, perhaps indicating potential just waiting to be released!

<sup>13</sup> <https://sweatychurch.wordpress.com/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://dnanetworks.org/community/dna-fc/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://churcharmy.org/Ireland>

<sup>16</sup> <https://churcharmy.org/youngadultsresearch>

## ‘Heads up’: Addressing the Church of Ireland’s culture and identity

*“As Church of Ireland we felt very alone and kept our heads down.”*

History has been an ever-present companion in this review. It has been repeatedly cited as a reason for disengagement (or a hyper-sensitivity), eroding a proper confidence in the Gospel and the grace-filled church communities that we have had the privilege to visit.

Meanwhile the dioceses are in the midst of a period of profound change:

- Church culture has become less tribal
- The wider culture has become both more secular and

more open to engagement with questions of faith, especially amongst millennials

- The dioceses have experienced a decade of decline, in both affiliation and attendance

History (or perceptions of it) should not be allowed to lock the dioceses into inertia and become the master of its future. It is no longer appropriate to view just the small percentage of the population who see themselves as Church of Ireland as your mission field. Indeed, it is a practical imperative that you break out of this paradigm and seek out the whole community.





## Together in God's love transforming lives

*"A lot of energy has gone into the financial side, fundraising etc. We are only beginning to come out of that situation and we should probably take time to refocus."*

We have set out a series of potential areas for action in this report. We have also stated that discernment will be needed to determine which of these should become priorities and for whom.

The espoused diocesan vision **Together in God's Love Transforming Lives** is potent with meaning, each word individually and collectively speaks into your context. It may perhaps be more intentionally appropriated as a means of reflecting on the relative merits of competing priorities.

### Together:

You shared with us your heart for the young.

Who could you enter into partnership with in order to help you to better engage with your missing generations (e.g. page 8 on starting new things)?

### In God's love:

You shared with us your desire to be better able to talk about your faith with each other, and others.

Confidence in the Gospel comes from knowing who you are and whose you are. What steps could you take together to grow in that confidence (e.g. page 9 on discipleship)?

### Transforming lives:

You shared with us how you valued the common diocesan focus offered by 'Good for the Sole' as *"something we could all get behind"*.

What initiative might you next get behind that could help you make clearer connections between your evident heart for the well-being of your local communities and God's love?<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> You could use or adapt a resource like: <http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/resources/bible-study-material.html>

# Church Army's Research Unit

Seeing and sharing what God is doing in mission

## What we do

Church Army's vision is for everyone everywhere to encounter God's love, and be empowered to transform their communities through faith shared in words and action.

Our Research Unit exists to help the Church in Ireland and the British Isles more fully realise how God is active in mission and to grow in understanding as to why churches' participation may falter or flourish. We work towards this through the provision of excellent and innovative research and consultancy that seeks to address these questions.

## What we've done

In conducting this review for the Dioceses of Meath and Kildare, we have completed:

- A desk-based review of diocesan literature and external statistics (e.g. national census data)
- An online survey completed by 29 ministers and 138 lay people in the diocese
- 17 visits to Unions and Groups of Parishes, with each visit including an interview with the Rector and a focus group of parishioners

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