

# PARISH PRACTICE

## One more thing needful

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**Westminster's Green Paper was an inspiration to a parish priest in Widnes – but its silence on ecumenism troubled him deeply**

IN A HOMILY following my seventieth birthday just two years ago, I told my parishioners that, even though I am not due to retire until June 2008, I was actually starting to retire that very day, and this was the start of a process in which they would all be involved. "Retirement in this sense", I told them, "is the process of lay people gradually assuming the proper level of ownership and responsibility for the parish that is rightfully theirs." To help along this process we had a series of meetings, but little emerged in terms of practical action.

Last month we decided to try to kick-start the process again.

After the notices at the end of Mass, Gerard, one of the parishioners, invited me to join the congregation in the benches while he addressed us. This dramatic gesture was intended to symbolise the future for the parish without a priest of its own. The question Gerard put to the people was: "How are we going to prepare for this future?" "If it is your parish, it needs to be your plan with your involvement. Do you care?" he asked.

Imagine my enthusiasm and excitement to come in from that experience and almost immediately start reading the full text of the Westminster Diocese Green Paper on the future of the diocese, *Graced by the Spirit*, which I had downloaded just before Mass ([www.rcdow.org.uk](http://www.rcdow.org.uk)). In fact, I had ended my homily with a sentence from the Green Paper quoted in the *Tablet* coverage: "All communities will be affected by the changes, and could suffer unless they have in place already, or can move rapidly towards, a model of complementary ministry and shared leadership." No wonder my reaction was so positive.

When I read the actual text of the Green Paper, some passages leapt off the page. For instance, on page 4: "Everyone, by virtue of their baptism, is called to play their part. While the priest, as the spiritual and pastoral leader of the community, is called to exercise his leadership role in communion with the baptised, all Catholics need to be encouraged to use the charisms given to them by the Holy Spirit in the service of the community, whether these are concerned with quiet discipleship or a calling to more active ministry."

Since I had baptised a baby during Mass, I had stressed the link between the mission and ministry of all the baptised and the commu-

nity this child was being baptised into. So I was able to present the process of preparing for my retirement not as an emergency operation or saving a sinking ship, but rather as the God-given and Spirit-inspired opportunity for people to live out even more fully their gift of sharing the life and love of God's own self. Collaborative ministry and mission are essential not because they are more effective but because they are more truly Christian. If we are truly "graced by the Spirit", we cannot but be committed to planning our future together.

Unfortunately, however, my warm and loud "yes" to the Green Paper was not without reservations. My "but" came from the fact that the Green Paper never mentions the existence of other Christians. Although I am sure this is not intentional, it gives the impression that it is the Catholic Church community who embody the presence of Christ in the Westminster Archdiocese. Consequently, there is no mention of any other Christian Churches, let alone any acknowledgement that they might be struggling with the same kinds of problems and challenges that the Green Paper is trying to highlight.

My unease on this point arises out of my own experience. I am the Catholic parish priest of St Basil and All Saints, a shared Catholic-Anglican church in Widnes, a chemical town very close to Liverpool. I came here seven years ago, as did my Anglican confrère, Guy Elsmore. In fact, we had a joint Induction service led by both bishops. We inherited a thriving ecumenical tradition. Built to serve a new estate on the edge of Widnes, St Basil and All Saints catered for some of the overflow from the south end of Liverpool and from the housing being demolished in the centre of Widnes. After consulting the local people, it was agreed to build a shared church. Naturally this had the full approval and backing of Archbishop Derek Worlock and Bishop David Sheppard. The foundation stone was blessed by Pope John Paul II on his visit here, and two years ago we celebrated the church's twentieth birthday.

Sharing the same purpose-built church gives the Catholic and Anglican parishioners and clergy the grace-filled opportunity of growing closer together as a community. It makes us aware that we cannot think of the Christian presence in this part of Widnes without thinking of each other and our wider church bodies. The Ephesians 4:5 inscription on our common baptismal font is a constant reminder that there is only "one Lord, one faith, one baptism".

We hold shared healing services, remember our dead together in November, pray for each other's sick and are involved in very many

joint social, educational and outreach activities – including support for an Aids home-care project in Livingstone, Zambia, which a joint group from our parish visited last September. As far as our different church disciplines allow us, we celebrate together the festivals of Christmas, Holy Week and Easter. Sadly, at the simultaneous Eucharists permitted since the church's inception, current church law does not allow us to share the joy of receiving Communion together. So we are not spared the pain of being divided as we approach the altar to receive from our different ministers.

The rich experience of our shared church here leads me more and more to see the Christian Church and its mission through an ecumenical lens. And through that lens everything looks different. It brings into focus the challenging Lund Principle, "We should not do separately what we can do better or at least equally well together", commended in the 1982 booklet, *Local Churches in Covenant*, approved by the Bishops of England and Wales. I had the privilege of concelebrating at the Pentecost Mass in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool when John Paul II used the ecumenical lens to focus on the sin of Christian disunity: "The sin of disunity among Christians, which has been with us for centuries, weighs heavily upon the Church. The seriousness of this sin was clearly shown at the Second Vatican Council, which stated: 'Without doubt, this discord openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n.1)."

Nowhere in the 21 pages of the Green Paper is there the slightest indication of any kind of the ecumenical lens. I find this surprising and somewhat puzzling. Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor himself is deeply committed to the whole ecumenical process. I can imagine that the same is true of the writers of the Green Paper and the 20,000 people meeting faithfully over the past couple of years to discuss the questions it now raises. I suppose my basic question is: if we really believe we are graced by the Spirit – all of us as Christians, by the one and the same holy Spirit of God – how can we plan our future *together*, when we all seem to be planning it *separately*? To widen the agenda beyond our own church community adds all sorts of complications. I cannot deny that. But neither can I deny the "but" which has been haunting me since reading this magnificent Green Paper. The Paper seems so right – and yet so incomplete.