

Parish Development Strategy – Homily for 16 August 2026

Sometimes the Lord asks a great deal of us, and we don't know how or if we can do what he asks: it may feel too much, we may be afraid, we may not want to do what he asks, and so on. I wonder if that's how Mary felt at first when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. I wonder if it's how Jesus felt in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died.

As a diocese, a deanery and a parish, a great deal is now being asked of us too. We've reached a point we've talking about for years. The change we've witnessed in recent decades of ageing and shrinking congregations, fewer clergy and higher costs has brought us to the point where we have to act – there simply isn't the money to sustain all the buildings we have, there aren't the people to fill all the buildings we have, and there aren't the numbers of clergy there once were.

To help us, the Archdiocese has put together the Parish Development Strategy which we launched here in Warrington in January. The strategy aims to lead us in a process of discernment, i.e. asking our Lord what he wants us to do? First and foremost, we need to remember that it's our Lord's Church – we need his guidance as his custodians and disciples.

The Lord also expects us to use our 'nouse' in this process! Therefore, the first part of the strategy has been to carry out an audit of each parish – its buildings, finances, personnel, pastoral outreach, and so on – to provide the facts and figures of our current situation. The audits in our deanery took place in the first part of this year.

The next stage is twofold. The Deanery Synodal Council is undertaking a process of discerning the Vision and Mission of the Church in this area in the coming years. Meanwhile, the steering committees of each Family of Parishes are analysing the information from the audits.

Later this year and next, it is planned to invite parishioners across the deanery into this discernment process using the Vision and Mission discerned by the Deanery Synodal Council together with the facts and figures from the audits. This should give us a real picture of where we are and help us to begin to suggest ways of moving forward toward a workable plan for the future.

None of this is a secret. I shared it with you at the beginning of the year and have kept you updated with various documents which I've suggested you to pick up from the back of church. You can find these on the front page of the parish website (just scroll down the left-hand side).

I want to clear up two rumours. First, there's a rumour going round that St Benedict's is closing. Even last week's Newsletter update about building works at St Oswald's was mistakenly seen as confirmation of this. The rumour is not true. There are no plans to close St Benedict's. In fact, like St Oswald's, building works are scheduled for St Benedict's which you can read about in next week's Newsletter.

The other rumour concerns St Oswald's. Since work to repair the roof is about to begin, the rumour is that St Oswald's won't be one of the churches that might face close in the coming years. Again, the rumour is false. At this stage, there are no plans to close any of the churches in our deanery so urgent works continue.

It is true that we will probably have to close some of our churches at some stage for the reasons I've already mentioned. That will be very hard, but we do it together and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the essence of synodality – journeying together along a path of discernment where every voice is welcomed, heard, and valued. It is by listening deeply to one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we can confidently shape a shared plan for the future.

But this process is not just about buildings. It's bigger than that. It's about rediscovering our mission as our Lord's Church in this area, which is to proclaim Jesus Christ to all peoples, and then working out what resources we need and can afford going forward.

Just as our ancestors made brave decisions to build the churches we've inherited for this mission, we must now have the courage to ask God what he wants us to do for those who will come after us.

It's a big ask. But we can do this if we do it together and care for each other.

A Prayer by Canon Christopher

God our heavenly Father,
we seek guidance from the Holy Spirit,
as we move forward in proclaiming the mission you have given us to do
in bringing Jesus to the people who need him.
Give us the courage to work together in making difficult decisions
and grant us perseverance to endure the challenges that lie before us.
May we continually focus on Jesus, nurture our bond with him daily
and pray for the strength to complete what we have to do
with unwavering dedication.
All these we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen