

FORWARD TOGETHER  
<sup>IN</sup>  
**HOPE**

Observations on the *Forward Together in Hope* Parish Questionnaire for

## St Joseph, Birtley



**Lord Jesus, open our minds and our hearts  
as we seek to discern your will  
for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.**

Here we present some observations on your parish's *Forward Together in Hope* questionnaire. They have been arrived at following careful and prayerful consideration of the written information you provided. Each questionnaire has been reviewed independently by two people and their views compared and moderated to produce this summary.

The reviewers and the moderators saw themselves as “critical friends” – or mirrors. Their job was not to judge your parish but to reflect back to you what they saw. Please bear in mind that the observations are based solely on what was presented to us at the end of last year/early this year and it is possible that a parish may have changed and developed since that time. Some parishes may not have presented details of all of the significant things they are doing and, of course, no written document can ever do full justice to the richness of parish life.

We do hope that providing an independent perspective on what you have presented will assist your parish to move forward itself and to enter into discussion with neighbouring communities so that new partnerships of larger missionary communities can be developed in the future.



## What your parish appears to be doing well

*The reviewers of your parish questionnaire highlighted a number of positive aspects including:*

- You work well together as a parish, with a good number of parishioners taking responsibility many areas in parish life.
- You have a flourishing community centre which appears to be well used for the parish and the local community.
- Your parish seems to have some good and realistic ideas on how to engage younger and teenage members of the community and to draw them into church life.
- Your open and honest approach to Forward Together in Hope is commendable.

## Observations on the Parish Questionnaire process

*Reviewers were asked to offer observations about how thorough and inclusive the process appears to have been in your parish.*

***They indicated that the information you have provided suggests*** that this was an open process in which many parishioners were involved. All the reflective questions were addressed fully and thoughtfully. Your parish has identified some interesting examples of good practice and has presented a very detailed response with some clear ideas about its future. Overall your parish appears to have taken a very thorough approach to consulting with parishioners and completing the questionnaire.

***They provided some supporting information for their comments including:***

- There were many open meetings and whole parish sessions during the Sunday Mass.
- There is evidence of a high level of lay involvement and lay leadership.
- The good practice section mentions your church being open from early morning until nightfall every day and the differing styles of the weekend Masses.



## Observations on the 10 key areas

Reviewers were asked to offer observations on aspects of each of the 10 key areas within the questionnaire and these are set out below under each heading. In each case they have also provided some supporting information. This is included in italics below each observation.

### 1. The Christian Faithful

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **Your parish will be in a reasonable position over the next 5 to 10 years in relation to the number and age-profile of worshippers.**  
*Your parish has a great number of older people worshipping there, but there are some younger ones attending too, 57% are over 50 years of age. Mass attendance has declined 67% over 30 years.*
- **Your parish community has some realistic ideas to sustain and increase the number of people worshipping and is starting to implement these.**  
*A priority is the engagement with young people (through increased use of social media and personal invitations) and a more up to date parish skills register which also lists opportunities for people to get involved.*

### 2. Leadership

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **Shared leadership in your parish is very strong and that highly effective leadership structures are in place.**  
*Lay people have taken responsibility for organising the work of Eucharistic Ministers; all liturgical aspects (ministry of welcome, children's liturgy, readers, offertory procession, altar servers, choirs and music group); finance; maintenance of church, church property and grounds; all parish groups and management of the parish centre. Involvement of priest, deacon and lay people working together is apparent. The Parish Pastoral Council is chaired by a lay person, meets often and is having some impact.*
- **Your parish community has some realistic ideas to develop effective leadership arrangements and is starting to implement these.**  
*Your parish has identified particular areas where there is potential for greater involvement of lay leadership, for example adult education; bereavement counselling; working with young people and communication skills (including the use of social media).*

### 3. Active Involvement of People

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **Your parish has been able to engage and involve parishioners well in a wide range of activities.**  
*There is a healthy proportion of people who are actively involved in the lay ministries. There are 18 listed as being involved in delivering parish programmes, and in excess of 80 have non-liturgical roles. You also include a small and important number of young people who are actively involved, working as part of the team.*
- **Your parish community has some realistic ideas to invite and prepare more lay volunteers and is starting to implement these.**  
*Improving communications and making information available about the parish will be a priority task on the work programme of the Pastoral Council and will include, producing a directory/brochure of parish activities, a leaflet drop across the parish, a targeted "welcome" leaflet in the new housing developments in the parish, exploring the use of social media.*

#### 4. Worship and Spiritual Life

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **Your parish community offers a range of forms of worship and prayer and there is some lay involvement in developing/leading these.**  
*Mass is celebrated 6 days a week, and there is a weekly rosary group. Exposition is celebrated 3-monthly. Stations of the Cross are on offer in Lent and there local and international pilgrimages available.*
- **Your parish community has ideas to encourage a deeper spiritual life among its members which are yet to be fully implemented.**  
*The parish would like to re-introduce the bible study group and prayer group which were facilitated by sisters who are no longer in the parish and to improve communication to encourage new people to join the volunteers for the lay ministries.*



#### 5. Education and Continuing Formation

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **The links with primary schools are very strong and that there is a wide range of joint activities between primary school(s) and your parish.**  
*There is evidence of co-operation between parish and primary schools (weekly Mass in each of the two schools; joint fundraising for projects and charities; Mini-Vinnies). Catechists have input in the sacramental preparation of the children.*
- **Some parish/secondary school links are present and there are plans for developing these further.**  
*Your parish has a Year 7 school reunion to enable pupils to stay in touch with friends from the parish primary schools and is hoping to get involved in the JP11 award.*
- **Your parish community is starting to encourage continuing formation activity.**  
*Your parish has put forward some ideas about what kind of formation they need which include a parish mission, RCIA or Alpha, discussion groups.*

#### 6. Outreach

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **There are close and effective links between your community and neighbouring Christian communities.**  
*Your parish shares worship and hospitality within Birtley Churches Together, including shared pilgrimages and liturgies in Lent and Advent.*
- **There is very little involvement between your community and other faith communities.**  
*Though there are opportunities via the Remembrance Service and a one off event at Durham Cathedral.*
- **Your community is very involved with the quality of life of others in the wider local community.**  
*Your parish supports local charitable projects, Gateshead Foodbank, the regional Asylum Seeker Project, People's Kitchen and other projects financially and through volunteering.*
- **Your community has some involvement with the quality of life of others in the wider world.**  
*Your parish supports CAFOD, Let the Children Live, Mission and a project in Uganda.*



## 7. Finances (See also the document entitled 'A Profile of Your Parish in Numbers')

**The information you have provided suggests that:**

- **Your community has sufficient income to meet expenditure now and into the future.**  
*A significant proportion of the offertory income comes from a relatively small number of very committed members of the congregation. As a result of a number of recent legacies, the parish has healthy reserves deposited with the Diocese which will presumably increase with the sale of the former convent. You anticipate spending of up to £70k, though expect Heritage Lottery Funding and SITA Trust funding to finance this.*
- **Your community seems very open to the prospect of sharing resources with other communities.**  
*There is strong (though not totally unanimous) support in your parish for sharing of your resources with other parishes and in other parts of the diocese.*

## 8. Facilities

**The information you have provided suggests that:**

- **Your community's facilities are fully utilised.**  
*A wide range of activities takes place in the parish centre on a weekly or twice weekly basis – from Brownies to Martial Arts.*
- **Your community is making good use of its facilities for the benefit of the Church and the wider local community.**  
*Your parish centre is regularly used by various groups from the parish and the wider community. You also see the parish centre as a potential venue for fundraising activities for specific purposes.*

## 9. Geographic Distance

**The information you have provided suggests that:**

- **Your community is very open to the possibility of developing closer relationships with neighbouring communities.**  
*Your parish is largely positive about linking up with other parishes. 'We need to accept that change is inevitable and respond positively'. Some parishioners presume that St Joseph's would be the centre of whatever might be created.*
- **There is some willingness in your community to welcome others and share skills and resources with others when necessary.**  
*There is strong support for developing stronger links with neighbouring parishes, in some cases building on the links that are already there.*



## 10. Young People

*The information you have provided suggests that:*

- **Engaging with young people is a very high priority in your community.**  
*Your parish encourages young people to join the Lourdes Pilgrimages and fundraises to help them and also to attend the Source, the CYMFed Flame Congress at Wembley.*
- **There are some opportunities for young people to play a part in the community.**  
*Young people are encouraged to get involved in all aspects of parish life and a number have been encouraged and financially supported to become involved in overseas projects and gap years.*



*We hope that this has been a useful reflection of your questionnaire and that with the other information and resources provided it will help you look ahead to the future within your own community and with your neighbours.*

*Thank you.*

