

Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle Pastoral Strategy for Mission Discernment

Using a synodal process, the Diocese has developed a Pastoral Strategy for the next 10 years. Implementing this will need every parish and partnership in the Diocese to reflect on their Mission and, through discernment, to form a realistic, clear and honest appraisal of where they are and what they need to do. The Bishop has clearly stated that our priority is Mission and that *"we must act now to strengthen our Mission, support clergy and lay leaders, and steward our resources wisely so that now and for future generations we have a Church that is vibrant, sustainable and faithful."*

We have been provided with a 'Toolkit' - a template - to help us to discern and to reflect on our parish mission, community life, ministries and physical resources (including buildings). It includes questions for us to address in our reflections and it gives us data, so that we can make informed decisions. We are asked to listen attentively to the Holy Spirit and to one another.

As parishes and Partnership, we are asked to complete the local phase of this discernment by 23rd April 2026 when our reflections will then be passed on to the Deanery for consideration and consolidation into the Diocesan-wide plan. We will need to involve every part of our parish community and help each other to express our thoughts about local mission, strengths and challenges - and do this honestly and with a view to the future. The Bishop is very clear that the principle behind this discernment is Mission first, structures second. That is, our first task is to look at Mission in all our communities with faith, clarity and courage and then consider the resources we need in place to fulfil that Mission.

The Toolkit is structured in exactly this way. We are asked first to discern our Mission in terms of:

- How we worship
- How we teach the faith
- How we serve
- How we build the family of faith

Then (and only then) we will look at how our resources serve the Mission. This will include:

- Finances
- Buildings
- People
- Sustainability

Discernment is the bedrock of this whole process. The Toolkit gives a helpful summary, reproduced below:

What Discernment Is and Is Not

Discernment IS:

- Prayerfully listening to the Holy Spirit
- Honest reflection on our mission and resources
- A communal process involving clergy, laity and especially young people.
- Seeking truth with hope, not fear.
- Choosing what will help future generations thrive.

Discernment IS NOT:

- A vote on what we personally prefer.
- A strategy to preserve everything as it is.
- A quick fix or crisis response.
- A process for deciding winners and losers.
- A purely administrative or financial exercise.

Discernment is the shared work of the whole People of God.

It is hoped that the results will enable us to be **A flourishing Diocese, alive in the Holy Spirit, where people encounter Jesus Christ, live with justice and compassion, grow as one family of faith, and are formed and sent as missionary disciples for the life of the world.**

Summary of Toolkit Areas for Discernment and Reflection

Mission

Looking at how we...

Serve - Sharing Christ's love in action

Reflection

Conclusions and actions

Worship - Celebrating the sacraments as places of encounter

Reflection

Conclusions and actions

Teach - Handing on the faith

Reflection

Conclusions and actions

Community - Building a family of faith

Reflection

Conclusions and actions

Stewardship

Finances

Buildings

People

Sustainability

What hard decisions today will allow future disciples to thrive here tomorrow?

Summary

What is thriving and must be strengthened?

What should be adjusted?

What drains Mission and may need to be released?

Where is the Holy Spirit prompting bold steps?

Mission Discernment

E1. WORSHIP — Celebrating the Sacraments as Places of Encounter

What is going well?

Where are the challenges?

Prompts:

- *How do people experience our Masses and sacramental celebrations?*
- *How might this change in the next 5–8 years?*
- *How do we support families before and after sacraments?*
- *What helps people stay connected after moments of encounter?*
- *What prayer opportunities exist beyond the Mass?*
- *What will it look like if there were three or two or even one priest in your area?*
- *Where would they live?*
- *What three Sunday Masses could be offered by each Priest?*
- *How might worship continue if we had no resident Priest?*
- *Are we burying more parishioners than we baptise?*

E2. TEACH — Handing on the Faith

What is going well?

Where are the challenges?

Prompts:

- *How are people of all ages in the community growing in faith and understanding?*
- *How might this look in 5–8 years?*
- *How are young people learning, leading, and serving today, and how might we strengthen this over the next few years?*
- *How are we working with our Catholic schools now, and how might that partnership develop in the years ahead?*
- *How sustainable are our catechetical programmes?*
- *How are we preparing future leaders and catechists?*

E3. SERVE — Sharing Christ's Love in Action

What is going well?

Where are the challenges?

Prompts:

- *What needs in the community do we currently respond to?*
- *How do we work with other groups to respond to the needs in the area?*
- *What might these needs look like in 5–8 years?*
- *What concrete social action does your community provide for the area?*

- *Even with fewer clergy and volunteers, how could we maintain and develop our social action?*
- *How well do we include younger generations in service?*
- *How well is lay leadership supporting our outreach now, and what will be needed for long-term sustainability?*

E4. COMMUNITY — Building a Family of Faith

What is going well?

Where are the challenges?

Prompts:

- *How do people experience welcome and belonging?*
- *How do we support the vulnerable and isolated?*
- *What strengthens our resilience and joy?*
- *What might threaten our future vitality?*
- *How are decisions and responsibilities shared today, and what patterns of leadership will we need for the future?*
- *How well do we support Priests, Deacons, volunteers, and staff today, and what support will be needed for a healthy community in the future?*
- *In what ways do we embrace the differences we see in our community?*
- *In what ways are we building community ecumenically and with interfaiths?*