

ST JOSEPH'S R C CHURCH, BIRTLEY

13th March 2026

Dear Parishioner

DIOCESAN PASTORAL STRATEGY

As mentioned in his recent Pastoral Letter, Bishop Stephen would like all parishioners, throughout our Diocese, to look closely at where we will be in 2035 and to pray, listen, reflect and decide on a way forward. By this time, it is expected that we will have just 42 active priests, so one priest could have 3-4 churches under his care.

To this end, I would like to personally invite you to attend a Parish Meeting where we can prayerfully consider what is going well in our parish, what we need to improve, and where Birtley fits in with its neighbouring parishes, so we can discern how the Church may flourish now and in the future. To enable all parishioners to attend, we will hold two meetings, one in the evening and another during day-time, as follows :-

Tuesday, 17th March 2026, after 7.00pm Mass
Thursday, 19th March 2026, after 12 noon Mass

Both meetings will be held in the Parish Centre, where tea and coffee will be available, and we expect these meetings to last no more than an hour. You will find more information on the attached sheet.

Anyone unable to attend is very welcome to submit their opinions in writing, as soon as possible, either by email to pastoralstrategystjoseph@gmail.com or in the box provided at the back of church. Alternatively, you may wish to submit a joint return from your Parish Group. We are working to a deadline and our Parish Discernment has to be submitted to the Diocese by 23rd April 2026. To enable us to meet this deadline, we would need any written responses by Thursday, 9th April 2026.

If you would like to find even more information before the meeting, please go to the Diocesan Website at rcdhn.org.uk and look for "Pastoral Strategy/Discernment Toolkit", where you will find Bishop Stephen's welcome video (7 mins), some frequently asked questions and a recording of the Diocesan Webinar held on Tuesday, 3rd March 2026 (1 hour).

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who so generously give of your time and talents to help our parish run so well and ask you to join with me in asking the Holy Spirit to bless and guide us all, so we may steward our resources faithfully and build a Church that is vibrant and welcoming for future generations.

God Bless

Fr Martin Wheaton
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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 :-

WORSHIP - Celebrating the sacraments as places of encounter

Reflection

Conclusions and actions

TEACH - Handing on the faith

Reflection

Conclusions and actions

SERVE - Sharing Christ's love in action

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?