

“We are in this together”

**Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Brentwood.
Sunday, September 12th 2004**

Celebration and fun preceded the Family Listening Day at New Hall School in Chelmsford on Sunday, September 12th. Morning mass concelebrated by Bishop Thomas McMahon and Bishop John Hine was followed by family fun and picnics in the beautiful grounds of the diocesan pastoral centre. In his sermon, Bishop Hine reminded the congregation that being domestic church was not only about prayer but also about forgiveness and acceptance. “This is the spirituality of the family,” he said. “Seeing each other through the eyes of Jesus.”

Later in the day over 70 people gathered to talk about the challenges and needs of contemporary families. Feedback from Listening 2004 suggested that though many families felt welcomed and supported by their parish communities, others did not have that experience. One of the key concerns expressed by parents and parish groups was the struggle within families to keep their teenagers interested in the faith and in mass. They felt that TV, the media, materialism and peer pressure were much greater influences than their own Christian values. Other responses had been critical of the church and especially the teaching on contraception and divorce. There seemed to be a lot of bewildered and hurt people trying to bring their children up in the Catholic faith despite feeling alienated from it themselves. By contrast others wanted to see the Church return to its traditional values. One respondent summed up with a desire for “Doctrines and rules that make it possible to live a Christian life in today’s world; less formality, more real presence and acceptance and understanding.”

The afternoon’s conversation echoed these themes. The majority experienced family as a place of acceptance and unconditional love: “The place where you can be yourself and they will still love you tomorrow,” said one group. For many the traditional family unit was supplemented and in some cases replaced by the parish or school family, or by close friends. Yet, for another individual a bad early experience of family life had affected their ability to accept the wider church as a family.

The media and pressures of work were the most commonly experienced challenges to family life, alongside peer pressure, conflicting values and laws that were experienced as undermining the importance of marriage. For some the church was also part of the problem, overloading individuals with responsibilities rather than sharing the work to be done.

When invited to consider what more the church could do to support families, participants made a number of suggestions. Counselling and guidance for those in difficulty, as well as inclusion and acceptance of families in non-traditional situations was uppermost. The theme of acceptance and welcoming had permeated the conversations throughout the afternoon. It was also felt to be important to include traditional, apparently strong families in these caring services, because they too needed consistent encouragement and

help. More services for the post-confirmation age was another priority, as well as community building efforts, more family-friendly liturgies and appreciation of the impact of the physical environment on the ability of differently-abled parishioners to share their gifts.

In the final plenary session a participant from an inter-church family reminded the gathering that all Christian communities were facing the same challenges. "Look at the solutions that others are finding locally and work together," she urged. Another called for a continuation of the day's dialogue, "There's a need for this feedback to be acted on, with some direction into the various areas. It's been great to see just how many people here today have the same thoughts, the same ideas, the same aspirations - it's just very encouraging." Yet another asked to be involved in the continuation of the process, "If we don't communicate this, send it out and receive what comes back nothing will happen from it. Let us be involved in the next step because I'd love to do all this again."

In his closing remarks Bishop McMahon agreed with the ecumenical dimension of family ministry. "As you know we are very privileged to be the only diocese in the country where the boundaries of the Anglican church and our own church and the Methodist church completely coincide. So we work together at a diocesan level and therefore at the parish level we would like to work together to support Christian family values. We are very much in this together." The Bishop also reiterated the importance of the next step. "A lot of very, very good things have come out of today and it's excellent to see so many people here, and to hear the responses. But it mustn't remain here. It comes back to all of us to see what kind of groups can be formed at local level and especially in the parishes to support marriages that are going well and others that are experiencing difficulties. It is the beginning, as they say, of a process."