

“The Teaching Church must be a Listening Church”

Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Wrexham – June 19th 2004



More open and welcoming parish communities, clearer church teaching and practical support for families from the cradle to the grave were among the main recommendations of those present in Llandudno on June 19th for the Diocese of Wrexham Family Listening Day. In his

opening address Bishop Edwin Regan said that the feedback from families had already set an important agenda for the diocese. “We are here today because the bishops want to listen. We are here in order that you may speak and the bishops may listen and learn. The teaching church must be a listening church if it is to teach properly.”

In her keynote address, Mrs Anne Ballard, Chair of the Marriage and Family Life Commission in the Archdiocese of Cardiff spoke of the relationship between the family and the church. “Both are sources of the greatest joys and blessings when everything goes right” she said, “but also sources of great sorrow and pain when it doesn’t. In all the dilemmas that face both families and the church, perhaps the church can learn something from families, who keep talking and listening, who keep their doors open even when they don’t condone certain behaviour. How can the church become such an extended family, there for everyone? How can the Church become a community of love that fosters all family life?”

Roberta Canning, Family Life Ministry Coordinator in the diocese, presented the main findings of the feedback from the Listening 2004 brochures. The response rate had been approximately 5% and just fewer than half of all parishes had returned feedback from group conversations of one kind or another. She described the sheer happiness that had come through of just being family. “There’s a tremendous sense of its goodness and also affirmation of lifelong marriage.” However, even those who had mostly positive experiences of being family in church had some critical or difficult questions to ask of the Bishops. “Although many respondents enjoy a rich and supportive parish life, they can see in their children, and in their wider family, people who experience church as less than warm, less than welcoming.”

After lunch the delegates, who represented a variety of family experiences, divided into groups to talk about four key issues identified in the responses: bringing children up in the faith and within the church community; members of the family who no longer worship; the church, marriage and sexuality; and parish care for the family and those isolated, lonely and bereaved, whether living in families or alone.

Their recommendations included more support for parents as first educators of their children; parental faith itself needed nurturing. The role of the parish and school were also important and improved communications would help. Delegates asked that family be seen as more than simply children, and include the aged and single people also. The whole community shared responsibility for passing on faith so more openness, welcome, training and enthusiasm for the task was seen as essential. The same spirit of openness was suggested as one means of encouraging lapsed family members to return. Sacramental preparation in particular was a great opportunity for a friendly welcome back into the community and for nourishing the seeds of faith. Non-Eucharistic services, including healing services, were identified as another way back into the church. Church teaching was noted as sometimes being unhelpful and obstructive to the core truth that God's love is for everyone. Greater emphasis on holiness and spirituality was called for so that a more holistic understanding of faith could be shared.

In the area of marriage and sexuality, there were calls for a less judgemental attitude throughout the church. How can people be judged by external appearance, was a reaction to the question of those divorced and remarried? It was seen as anomalous that the church preached love and forgiveness but often betrayed that by acting to exclude. A process of readmission to the sacraments was requested to enable people to make a fresh start. There was also a feeling that contraception should be possible within stable loving relationships and to prevent the spread of AIDS. In discussing homosexuality, it was suggested that sexuality would be better discussed in a wider context, rather than by honing in on one issue. Compassion was the key word. It was acknowledged that parents need help to talk about the church's teaching on matters of morality and sexuality with their children, but it was also felt that the church as a whole had to re-examine these matters in order to move forward.

In responding to those lonely, bereaved and isolated, a need for welcoming groups was identified, possibly by making use of existing parish groups. Long term bereavement support was identified as a real need as well as support groups for parents of all ages and stages. Credit Unions were mentioned as a possible means of assisting those in debt. Inter denominational projects to support families were recommended. More activities for the young and for families were also seen as essential, not just within parishes but also at deanery level.

As the day drew to an end, delegates agreed that the Listening 2004 project had been extremely worthwhile, with one suggestion made for more frequent gatherings of this kind, possibly in parishes. In his closing remarks Bishop Regan acknowledged both the significance of the occasion and the difficulty of some of the issues discussed. "We just can't let go of what has been achieved this afternoon. It's so very important that it is taken forward both by the Bishops' Conference, the diocese, and at local level. We have got to look at all these questions because they impinge upon our whole way of living as Catholic Christians."