

We're Speaking About Us!

Listening 2004 in the Clifton Diocese, Saturday 5 June 2004



An urgent need for more effective communication and education were identified as top priorities for pastoral attention by those gathered at the Diocese of Clifton's family listening day last Saturday (5 June): communication so as to build supportive parish communities and education on the Church's actual position on issues that are hurting families such as

divorce and homosexuality. The skills and techniques of collaborative ministry were also identified by many as integral to building a vibrant and family-friendly church. In his closing remarks Bishop Declan Lang affirmed the importance of collaboration and full participation: "When we speak about the Church, we are speaking about us. The things we've talked about today are not just for someone else to do, they are for all of us here to take responsibility for, together."

Over 80 delegates from the deaneries of Clifton, plus representatives of marriage and family life organisations such as Marriage Care, Union of Catholic Mothers, Association of Separated and Divorced Catholics, Teams of Our Lady and Faith and Light, joined Bishop Declan Lang and Bishop John Hine for a day of listening and reflection on local families' joys, difficulties and hopes. The Listening 2004 process in the Clifton Diocese had been piloted within the deaneries of Salisbury, Gloucester, Swindon and Bristol East but plans were immediately announced to extend the conversation across the diocese this autumn, learning from the experiences to date. A particular effort will be made to involve all Catholic secondary school pupils in the conversation using an adapted version of the Listening 2004 brochure.

The day, held at St Augustine's Catholic School in Trowbridge, began with a presentation of the feedback. Dilys Barrell, from St Gregory the Great, Cheltenham, noted the huge generation gap that exists in the church. Some respondents were clearly grandparents, struggling with responding to a younger generation with seemingly different values, experiences, language and attitudes to the Church. Other families were battling with real hardship, yet maintaining an image of respectability in the eyes of their parish. Some families, such as single parent families, expressed a need for practical support and understanding. Others were hurting because of prejudice or lack of compassion. "This really is holy ground we're stepping on," said Mrs Barrell, "People have trusted us and it's important that we listen carefully and respond thoughtfully."

After working together in small groups to reflect on these and other issues, participants identified many practical ways to respond. These included appointing a person in every

parish to take responsibility for marriage and family life support; working to improve links between families in a parish; having available a directory of help and sources of expert advice for difficult situations; encouraging couples to prioritise each other and their relationship; adjusting church timetables to accommodate families stressed by balancing the demands of family life and work; making the home a priority and establishing peer support groups within parishes. Listening was seen as the key to success, and several groups identified the challenge of building safe places and creating opportunities for people to share their stories with one another.

Although the response to the initiative had been good, it became clear during the course of the day that many of those present, even living within the pilot area, had been unaware of the project at parish level. “I think it demonstrates the importance of collaborative ministry not only for lay people but for our priests, who often feel unsupported and overworked”, commented Deacon John Proctor, the local Listening 2004 coordinator. “Today I’ve been overwhelmed by the number of people who have told me how grateful they are to be able to share these matters in an open, honest environment. It has been hard getting people to engage in the process but I think this day has shown how highly rewarding it is. Now we have encouragement to move ahead, building on the connections we’ve made.”

In thanking delegates during the closing liturgy, Bishop Declan pointed out that if anyone wanted an action plan for a diocesan, deanery or parish pastoral council, they need only look at all the different needs and ideas suggested today. He reminded those looking for clearer Church teaching of the recent publication, by the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, ‘Cherishing Life’, which was launched on 26 May 2004. Finally, Bishop Declan stressed the over-arching importance of the two great commandments, “We will not go far wrong if we continue to love the Lord our God with all our strength, with all our might, with all our soul and if we love our neighbour as our self”.