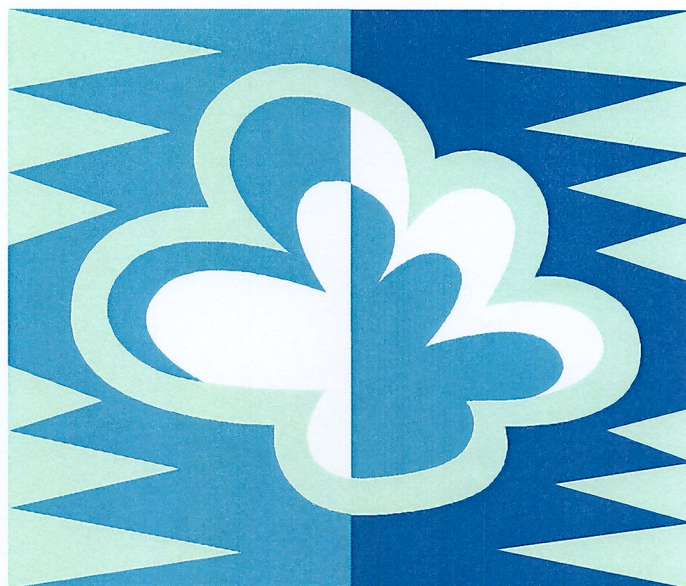


Meaning to Life



A Parish Programme

Based On

Sixmilebridge / Kilmurray

Parish Parenting Programme

Meaning to Life Programme

A Way Forward for Church Renewal

Introduction

I present this programme as a help to other parishes of the diocese. It has worked well in this parish in the recent past and has now resumed after the break in such activities caused by the pandemic. Whilst not designed with the Synod in mind, it could be a useful format for use in the parochial context of Synodal Listening.

The aim of the programme is to enable parents help one another in the various challenges facing them today. It is not faith-centred, but one of the challenges parents will consider is that of rearing their children in a faith environment. Likewise, as parents meet regularly a Christian dimension will emerge to many of the issues under discussion.

In time parents will be able through their own deliberations to find out the values that they feel are the core values they wish to pass on in the rearing of their children. These values will be core Christian values and parents will be playing a part in handing on the Faith to their children in a very real way. I liken it to Thomas Groome's thinking that we bring life to faith and in turn make faith alive in our communities.

Programme Format

The programme is parent-centred and as such is organised and run by parents. They are seen as the prime movers in setting up and developing the programme to suit their needs where they live. They should be helped, facilitated and supported by the parish and diocese in doing this.

The programme is based on group meetings and discussions between parents. It has no fixed agenda or process to follow. Its appeal lies in this “free from” expectation or fixed input often associated with parish or Church led parent programmes. Previously, as a Church we have tended to leave people out of the planning and running of such initiatives and they were left with a feeling of being talked down to and being isolated as a result.

In a very real way, this programme is about parents discovering and utilizing their potential as experts in the field of child-rearing. It will enable them to grow in confidence and to actualise their parenting skills. In so far as former parochial initiatives had the “top down” approach this programme starts where parents are at in their lives and keys in to their specific needs at this time.

At the heart of the Meaning to Life programme is the belief that parents when they meet in an organised group setting will discuss what they care about most. They will bring ‘real’ life issues to the fore and will address them with an energy that will enable them to connect with solutions to the problems facing them. It is my experience that once people get talking they will be keen to continue the process into the future.

Basic Structure of the Programme

1. An organising committee of parents is formed to prepare for the programme. Ideally, this programme should be an initiative of the Parish Council or a sub-group of same. One of this committee's important tasks is to appoint parent-facilitators who will lead the group meetings. Some basic training should be given to the facilitators, but the main emphasis should be on their natural expertise as parents.
2. A general meeting of parents is held to introduce the programme. It helps at this meeting if parents discuss what they feel are their immediate needs as parents. Depending on the number of parents, groups of parents are formed (minimum 5 and maximum 10) and a parent-facilitator is appointed to each group.
3. The facilitator-led groups will meet regularly in the home of the parent facilitator or any other venue of their choosing. They will discuss their needs and gradually grow in awareness of their own ability to help one another.
4. The groups may decide to take more time over a particular issue of concern to them and invite an outside specialist to make a presentation on the issue or issues of concern.
5. There is no set time limit for the programme, but the meetings will normally reflect the seasonal aspects of meetings in a parochial setting. Some groups will meet over a two-year period or more and others may find that they meet for a shorter period. Experience has shown that the programme takes on a life of its own over time. Parents' appreciation of how it helps them leads to a very strong motivation that will keep the programme going indefinitely.

6. If taken seriously, the programme's discussion of issues leading to values will become a pathway to a more meaningful Church.

Personal Conviction

I am convinced that this programme is a way forward for serious consideration by the parish Church Community. I base my conviction on my personal experience as well as being inspired by the pastoral approach of Pope Francis and his emphasis on family as today's mission field of the Church: "If we erode the family we fatally weaken the bonds of belonging on which we all depend".

Pope Francis sees the goal of the Synod as renewal and reform of the Church. This Meaning to Life Programme with its dynamic of people talking and listening to one another is already synodal in approach. The programme will work if priest and people are prepared to commit to the powerful potential of parents interacting with one another in what might be described as a respectful no holds barred discussion.

Priests may find it difficult to let go of the top down approach – we are not good at letting go of the control we are used to having in our parishes. Even though we are now telling ourselves that the old way of ministry is gone, we do not seem to have any strong desire to replace it. Some priests may sadly opt to do nothing with parents. This parenting programme is about our opting in to a new way of renewal of the Church where it is always strongest: parish or local level.

A Crucial Time for Our Church

Throughout the world and here in Ireland there are four crises being responded to in the aftermath of and emergence from Covid-19. The four crises are **Health** (mental, physical and emotional), **Economy**, **Social** (effects on relationships, isolation etc.) and **Spiritual**.

The Church was faced with the Spiritual crisis long before the pandemic hit us. I argue that our failure to fully implement the vision of the Second Vatican Council led to the development of a spiritual crisis in the Church. The pandemic simply highlighted it more and brought home to us the reality that the model of Church we have been working with is well and truly finished. This programme could be an opportunity for debate and discussion among priests and parish Councils that will enliven the Faith of the local Church.

I believe that it is time for us as priests to once and for all let go of the control we exercised in the old model. Let go and embrace a new approach which is radical only in that it is rooted in the message of the gospel that “God **so loved the World** that he sent his only Son.”

This programme presents this new approach by allowing the people of God’s beloved world to engage with one another in renewing and reforming the Church at parish level. It is not a complicated programme and its success lies in the liberating experience of an old approach - people talking to one another and working together - Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Harry Bohan

Feast of All Saints 1 November 2021