



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

*To be read in all Churches on the weekend of 26th/27th September, 2015,
the Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time.*

My dear brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With schools and Colleges beginning their new academic year, there is a sense of starting anew for all of us. I would like, first of all, to thank you for the very generous interest in, and response to, the consultation earlier in the summer. There were several thousand replies from individuals and groups and some very well considered and thoughtful suggestions, many ranging well beyond the scope of the questions asked. I shall be working on all the responses to produce a report to the priests, religious and people of the Diocese in the next few weeks. It is my hope that the report will be accompanied by a number of appointments in administration and evangelisation so that individuals can begin to take up areas of responsibility. It would be my intention that the report and the appointments will be in place well before Christmas.

There is, for me, something of a sense of excitement in hearing ideas concerning so many different aspects of the Diocese. There is no doubt that we need to change ways in which we live as Church, not least because Pope Francis is repeatedly insisting that we must understand ourselves as a missionary Church, a family here in Salford of missionary parishes. The resources emerging from the recent gathering of Proclaim 15, in Birmingham, should assist us in this. Sometimes change will be welcomed as adopting ideas that have long been seen as desirable, obvious innovations that make sense. But change can also be hard, requiring us to let go of things that are loved and familiar. Such changes can even be painful, launching us into unfamiliar places and new ways of doing things.

Whether welcome or unwelcome, change is needed here in our Diocese and, above all, I must ask for your generosity in embracing change and in finding new ways to work together as the "missionary disciples" that Pope Francis requires us to be. In these first

months that I have been with you I have heard so many people speaking of an understanding that there must be change but I have all too often thought that, while expecting change, people somehow assume that it will be change elsewhere, not affecting me personally or my parish. I think we must all accept that we have all to meet with changes, some rather more demanding than others and generosity will be essential.

There is no doubt that, following a generation which provided an unusually large number of priests, we are returning to the sort of numbers of priests that existed before. That means that we must reduce the number of churches and parishes. I will need to ask some communities to accept the loss of their familiar places of prayer and worship. I must also ask those who will retain their parish churches to be generous and understanding in their welcome of those who will arrive as a consequence of closures elsewhere. I must ask, too, for the full and generous cooperation of the priests of the Diocese in the reorganisation of the parameters of their ministries, requiring some to accept new appointments and to move their own home, often after many years in a given community which has become, in a sense, their family. Of all of you, my brothers and sisters, without exception, I must ask for that generosity to embrace a new way of living our faith, a way which looks outwards, generously, to members of our Faith who have drifted away, and to those in our wider communities who are in need, whether they are people of Faith or not. We must also respond generously, as Pope Francis would have it, to the needs of our common home, the world which we inhabit together, which is suffering because of injustice and exploitation.

As you listen to this Pastoral Letter, you might be feeling that everything is about to change suddenly and radically and we will be left with nothing that is good and familiar. That is certainly not the case. We have our Faith and our traditions. We have our Sacraments and the familiar feasts and liturgies. We have the Scriptures. We have the common bond of one another, in our Diocese. We also already have a well-developed understanding of the needs of many in our communities and the people of this Diocese respond with wonderful generosity to provide for the sustainable livelihoods and dignity of so many people in some of the poorest countries of the world. What we believe, and so many of the priorities that we have, will not change. What needs to begin to change now is the way that we live out and express our faith.

The changes that must come will take time. There will be no sudden closures of churches or departure of priests. There will be no demands insisting on immediate change in the way we live. There will be a plan that will be unfolding which I hope can be understood and welcomed as a plan that will equip us to be missionary in our increasingly secular world. Every parish will have a parish priest. Some parishes may have more than one church. For the moment, it is my hope that we consider the diocese deanery by deanery, making proposals and giving time for consideration and comment before final decisions are made.

My brothers and sisters, I wish that I already had a blue print for all that needs to be done. I haven't. The way that we must go will only become evident through prayer and careful discernment. I am sure that we will succeed if we are sure to be asking that we do the Lord's work, and prepared to be generous in all that may be asked of us. That simple prayer "Stay with us, Lord, on our journey" remains as important as ever for all of us. We must not try to do anything without Him. And, surely, if He remains with us then we can be sure that we are travelling in the right direction, at the right speed, and – with the help of God's Spirit working in us and through us – we will achieve all that He is asking of us.

God bless you, your families, your communities and your parishes. Let's pray for one another for the journey that lies ahead.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John" with a small cross symbol above the letter 'j'.

✠ John Arnold
Bishop of Salford