



Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Arundel & Brighton – Saturday, 27th November 2004



“We are here today because we care”

Concern for young people, greater clarity on church teaching and more welcoming parishes were the three priorities for action highlighted at the Diocese of Arundel & Brighton’s Family Listening Day on November 27th at the Friary Hall in Crawley. Unavoidably absent due to the installation that day of the Rev Christopher Hill as Bishop of Guildford, Bishop Kieran Conry addressed participants via videotape. “I’m sorry to miss the day. I know a lot of hard work has gone into preparing it. I hope it will be a fun day for you. It is part of a national project - an attempt to understand what family life means today and for you to share that experience, both good and bad. I’m sure that something very important will come out of it. For the diocese it will allow the new marriage and family life coordinator whom we are about to appoint, to have a much better grasp of what people’s experience of family is today.”

Introducing the day's work, Barbara Wallace, Pastoral Team Coordinator at the Christian Education Centre, thanked participants for coming together in 'faith, fellowship and trust' as the family of the diocese. "Families," she said, "are at the heart of so much of our lives. Every family is different yet we all have so much in common. We are here today because we care." The Listening 2004 process had been a tremendous catalyst for discussion and action on family life in the diocese with over 500 responding in one way or another through their parishes and schools. Anecdotal evidence suggested many more discussed the questions on the Listening 2004 brochure but simply never got round to sending their responses in. The project had followed on from the diocese's own 'Preparing Together' programme and several family related issues were already being addressed as a result of that process. "Our aim today is to establish three starting points for an active family focus in Arundel and Brighton. That's not to say the other priorities won't be addressed but we can't do it all at once."

Participants – who included representatives from organisations such as Worldwide Marriage Encounter, Marriage Care, the Association of Inter-Church Families and the Union of Catholic Mothers – sat in deanery groups to reflect on the feedback from local families. The collation of the responses had highlighted eleven main issues: bereavement, Church teaching, the elderly, family activities and events, inclusive liturgies, marriage support, post first Holy Communion support, the separated and divorced, supporting parents, welcoming parishes and young people. Extracts from the feedback illustrated the comments made by families on these and other issues. Participants were invited to talk about these areas together in the light of the feedback before indicating, with post-it notes, their personal priorities for action.

Over lunch there was also an opportunity to write and post on the wall those various encouraging and discouraging factors that in the experience of participants enabled or disabled action. Listening and communication skills seemed to be very important as well as a spirit of openness.

The afternoon's conversation centred on case studies from the three selected areas: welcoming parishes, young people and Church teaching. Groups were invited to identify the key issues raised in each scenario, appropriate action that was being or could be taken to help and the ways in which parishes could foster a greater sense of inclusion and support in such situations. Comments included: "My daughter found the Confirmation programme uplifting but found the Church lacking. They can't put into practice what they've learnt on courses." "Listen to what young people are saying and DO something about it WITH them not FOR them." "Formation and discussion groups needed on Church teaching as well as on prayer and scripture." "We need more opportunities for listening and a better understanding of relationships." "Be more active in welcoming newcomers - have an information/welcome pack for them." "Hold an All Are Welcome Sunday."

In her concluding remarks Barbara Wallace outlined the resources already available in the diocese to meet the needs of families. Her department had produced a 'resources and courses' booklet, a copy of which was available in every parish, with monthly reminders of forthcoming events both sent to parish priests and published in the Arundel & Brighton newspaper. She drew attention to the Marriage and Family Life Commission, whose

members had worked so hard to prepare for the day and to the vast range of diocesan organisations and support groups listed in the diocesan directory. A report on Listening 2004 within the diocese would be prepared in the New Year, with action points and the resources available to meet them. "I've been inspired by the way in which people have shared, worked together and come together to see what can we do for married life, for family life in our diocese," she concluded. "I'm very, very grateful for that. I promise you that what we've got in this room, whether it be on the wall on the table or whatever you are going to send us in the future, will be considered and given to Bishop Kieran, so that we can really plan to do something and do it soon. Not in 2010 but soon. I promise you that."

Bishop Kieran himself arrived just before the closing liturgy and was able to personally thank all those involved especially the participants, "for the time you've given, the commitment, the energy, and the interest you've shown and for giving up your Saturday as well. This is part of a learning process for the diocese and the Church. I hope we will be able to learn what we can do to strengthen family life and marriage within our church and our country." Bishop John Hine then cut a specially baked Listening 2004 cake to celebrate the end of the Family Listening Day in Arundel and Brighton and the end of this part of the Listening 2004: My Family My Church process in England and Wales.