



Listening 2004 in the Diocese of Leeds – Saturday 13th June 2004



“A vision for changing society and the world?”

“Is the family the seed for changing our society and the whole world? Could that be our vision?” asked the Rt. Hon. John Battle, MP, at last Sunday’s Family Listening Day in the Diocese of Leeds. “Supporting and deepening commitment in our relationships and fostering an ethics of care is precisely what our church’s mission has been about for two thousand years, and more. We have the vision and the world needs it.”

Over 60 representatives of parishes and diocesan organisations joined Bishop Arthur Roche and Bishop John Hine at Mount St Joseph’s Convent, Leeds for a morning of reflection, followed by family celebration and fun. “What you do in your family life is very close to the heart of the Church and therefore to the heart of Christ.” Bishop Roche told participants in his opening remarks. “I want to thank all those involved in the building up of marriage and family life, bringing life to one another.”

In his keynote address, John Battle pointed to four family areas of particular concern: the need to support parents in bringing up children (“please can we compare notes because it’s hard for all of us”), children’s need for parental support well into their twenties, care for elderly relatives (“we’re splitting up families because of the care home arrangements”) and bereavement support. He announced the findings of a report just published by the Economic & Social Research Council called *Rethinking Families*. “The research has shown that it’s no longer enough to foster a work ethic. We must as a society put just as much energy into supporting people’s commitment to each other and fostering an ethic of care in all our institutions and for all our citizens.”

Breda Theakston, Coordinator of Family Life Ministry in the diocese, presented the results of the Listening 2004 conversations. Over 500 responses had been received, covering a wide range of issues. At home families were experiencing difficulties related to time, money, their relationships, passing on the faith, loss and loneliness. The highpoints were those moments of togetherness, enjoying children, grandchildren extended family and friends and experiencing God’s presence in it all. They hoped for happiness, health, financial security, continued family unity, success for children and to persist in the faith.

In their lives in the world, families were hurt by pressures of work, consumerism, the media, lack of respect for family life, peer pressures and lack of Christian values. They were blessed by family, friends, schools, hospitals and other services, technology of improved communication, faith and their church community. They hoped for support, encouragement, acceptance, tolerance, community support, friendship and to feel valued.

Within the church, families experienced difficulties such as passing on the faith, lack of support for young and old, lack of understanding the reality of family life, lack of clarity in teaching, practicalities of Mass times etc. Difficulties in couple relationships were also expressed, including breakdown, remarriage after divorce and differences in faith. The church helped families by providing an experience of community, moral leadership, prayer, Mass, sacraments, faith sharing, children’s liturgy, peace, comfort and a sense of belonging. Families hoped for greater community support, more services and events for young and old, for families and youth, for greater lay involvement, for welcome, for unity, for clearer support for Family Life Ministry and for a re-examination of the priestly role.

After reflecting on the feedback participants made a number of suggestions for future action: counselling and information about services and sources of help; opportunities for young people to gather post-confirmation; a welcoming ministry in every parish; healing services; more resources devoted to preventive work; creation of an ‘experience register’ to facilitate peer ministry; an annual sermon to remind families of the support that is available; an adopt-a-granny scheme; social events to connect old and young, and a recognition that everyone faces loss and loneliness at some point in their life, not just the aged. A priority was the appointment of a family life ministry contact in every parish to enable information sharing and to act as a resource. Fr Donal Lucey, Episcopal Vicar for Marriage and Family Life agreed that this was the only practical way forward. “We have coordinators now in 56 parishes but we are still working on this. We do need someone in every parish to spread the word.”

Bishop Arthur Roche acknowledged that the responses from families “had made interesting and very provocative reading – provocative in the best sense of the word. They are a wonderful start in the journey we must make, because family is the cement of society, the cradle of the church.” After the conversation had concluded, participants left to meet up with families in the grounds of Hinsley Hall, for Mass and an afternoon of entertainment and fun.