

Notes from the meeting on Friday 8th 2016 July at Our Lady of Lourdes and St Cecilia, Blandford.

Organised by Maria Armitage and addressed by Fr. Jonathan Bielawski, Episcopal Vicar for Evangelisation, Plymouth Diocese.

In addition to Maria and Fr. Jonathan, also present were Deacon Michael Hughes and Fr. Chacko, 11 members of Marnhull and Gillingham Parish, about the same number from Blandford Parish and 3 from Shaftesbury Parish.

Maria passed round copies of the prayer for Evangelisers, five verses, each ending “..with the Spirit’s gifts empower us for the work of ministry” which we all prayed fervently.

She introduced Fr. Jonathan who told us that he was assuming that we were all ‘graduates’ of Sherry Weddell’s book, “Forming Intentional Disciples” and were all ready to begin evangelising - sharing the Gospel message with others.

He outlined an exercise conducted somewhere in the diocese that he called a Personal Belief Survey, which entailed parishioners going into the street with copies of a questionnaire with only 5 basic questions.

Be natural and authentic. People will see that we are passionate about something and will want to ask questions. People also like surveys and being asked their opinions. We must become expert listeners.

He recommended we form our parish Evangelisation Team and begin monthly meetings, starting with prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. During the meeting, each person should describe one encounter they have had since the last meeting. This is a process of sharing and growing together. He called it a ‘living apprenticeship’. He reminded us of the process we used to study Forming Intentional Disciples, where we all listened unconditionally, to each other for up to 3 minutes, without comment.

He told us that we should examine all the unique features of our parish and build on them.

At this point, Fr. Jonathan asked what we had done since finishing the book. Maria put us squarely in the frame and asked me to describe our recent Flower Festival experiences at St Benedict’s, particularly Annette’s encounters.

I took the opportunity to add Father Martin's idea of visiting the 29 villages of our parish on their local church's saints' days, praying in their church or their pub. (We've prepared a map and listed the churches and will get a notice board put up in the Chapel room at Our Lady's where we can keep track of our progress.)

Fr Chacko told us about the Taize concerts they held at Our Lady of Lourdes' recently where invitations went to all the neighbours of the church and it was a great success.

Fr Jonathan urged us to drop our preconceived ideas and invite people, not making the incorrect assumption that nobody would come. People will always need the human encounter.

I think it was Deacon Michael who said perhaps we could focus on the seasons of the year and Fr. Jonathan said we should be a bit more 'out there' with it, using Pentecost as well as the traditional feasts in the church's year.

He also recounted an occasion when his parish held a celebratory Mass and invited all children who had made their first Holy Communion in the past 4 years, and of course their parents and families, followed by refreshments, just to let them know they are valued.

A member of the Blandford group described the outcome of an invitation to the congregation, (which clearly included non-Catholics), by the priest celebrating a requiem Mass, to light a candle for someone they know or knew who was ill, or had died, or someone that they just wanted to remember. He told us that about 80 people at the funeral lit candles!

Fr Jonathan restated Pope Francis' statement that our churches should be open, not give the impression that 'Catholics did things behind closed doors' and he was currently having glass front doors fitted on his church in Plymouth.

He concluded with the point that we should always include the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady in our meetings.

Following the meeting, Blandford parish invited us to share their tea, coffee and biscuits, where we made some new friends and met Bishop Simon, who was visiting Fr Chacko from India.

Fr. Jonathan encouraged us to network, and support each other.