

Diocesan Pastoral Strategy – Parish Summary for St Mary’s, Barnard Castle

The Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle is developing a new Pastoral Strategy to guide how our parishes will worship, serve, and grow over the coming years. Every parish has been asked to reflect on its local situation and to contribute to this process through prayer, conversation, and practical suggestions.

This summary provides an overview of the strategy and invites parishioners of St Mary’s to take part in shaping our parish response.

Why is the Diocese developing a Pastoral Strategy?

Across the Diocese, there has been a sharp drop in engagement with the Church. For example, since 1985 Mass attendance has fallen by 77%; and the number of priests has more than halved in the same time. The number of active diocesan priests is expected to fall by a further third in the next decade (from 61 to 42). This can lead to priests being spread too thinly, and communities which are unable to sustain themselves effectively.

Our parish currently has around 54 people attending Mass at the weekend. There have been a number of signs of growth recently, especially with children (who will be the Catholics of the future), and we give thanks to God for that growth and seek to build upon it.

These trends mean we need to plan ahead, working together to ensure our worshipping communities remain strong, sustainable, and mission-focused.

What is the Strategy asking from parishes?

Each parish is invited to reflect on four key mission areas, plus stewardship of our shared resources. The Diocese has provided a Parish Return Form, which we will complete with your input. The themes are:

1. Worship – Celebrating the Sacraments

- How do we pray and celebrate Mass as a community?
- How can we deepen participation?
- How might worship be organised in future if we have fewer priests?

2. Teach – Passing on the Faith

- How do we support faith formation across all ages?
- Are there ways we can strengthen sacramental preparation, catechesis, or adult learning?

3. Serve – Sharing Christ’s Love

- How do we reach out to those in need locally?
- What opportunities exist for new or renewed ministries of service?

4. Community – Building a Family of Faith

- How welcoming and connected is our parish family?
- Are there opportunities to grow relationships and support one another better?

5. Stewardship – Using Our People, Buildings & Finances Wisely

- How do we best use our volunteers and identify new lay leaders?
- Are our buildings sustainable for the future?
- How can we care for our parish resources responsibly?

What does this mean for St Mary’s parish?

Our parish will complete the Diocesan Return Form by **23 April 2026**, summarising our reflections in each mission area. Your thoughts will help shape how our parish plans for the years ahead - what we strengthen, what needs to change, and where we feel called to take new steps in faith.

How can parishioners contribute?

You can share your thoughts via email (stmarysfuture@gmail.com), a Post-it Note board at the back of church, by letter through the presbytery door, by attending one of our parish meetings (date TBC), or by speaking to a member of the Parish Pastoral Council.

Your voice matters

This is an important moment for our parish community. By taking part, you help shape how we worship, learn, serve, and grow together in the years to come. Please keep the strategy in your prayers and consider how you can contribute to this shared journey of faith.