



PARISH IN FOCUS

Upper Creggan Parish Archdiocese of Armagh



Sacred Heart Church, Shelagh (1838)



St Brigid's, Glasdrummond (1932)



St Patrick's, Crossmaglen (1835)

History, Structure and Maintenance

Upper Creggan Parish was established in 1795 when the original historic parish of Creggan, a hugely expansive geographical area, was sub-divided into ourselves and a somewhat smaller parish, called Lower Creggan, our friendly neighbour and, in recent years, our cluster partner. Despite this subdivision Upper Creggan itself has an extensive territory stretching across South-West Armagh in the main but also a part of County Louth towards Dundalk along the main Castleblayney-Dundalk road almost as far as Hackballscross. We are thus both an inter-county and even an inter-provincial parish with churches, schools, football clubs and vibrant communities on both sides of 'the border'.

The parish is largely rural in character with about half its c. 1750 families (c. 6,500 souls) living in and around the largest village, Crossmaglen, and the other families located mainly in the Silverbridge / Glasdrummond, Culloville and the Shelagh, (Co Louth) districts.

The parish is served by three priests: Fr Joe McKeever PP, Fr Liam McKinney CC (both based in Crossmaglen) and Fr Barney King SM, CC, based at our other parochial house in Glasdrummond. The parish office is located in the main parochial house block in Crossmaglen and operates Monday – Friday under the watchful eye of our greatly valued parish secretary, Mrs Una Garvey.

The parish has three Churches: St Patrick's Crossmaglen (erected 1835, capacity 750); Sacred Heart Shelagh (erected 1838, capacity 200) and St Brigid's Glasdrummond (erected 1932, capacity 500). While we are proud of all our three churches and work hard to maintain them to a high standard, St Brigid's, opened in 1932, year of Ireland's first International Eucharistic Congress, is considered an outstanding architectural gem and draws many interested tourists and visitors especially in the summer months.

The parish has five primary/national schools and there is also a secondary school, St Joseph's in Crossmaglen which has some 600 pupils drawn from the three parishes in the neighbourhood Upper Creggan, Lower Creggan and Forkhill/Mullaghbawn. All six schools are under the patronage of the Archdiocese/Archbishop and are managed and chaplained by parish clergy each with an active Board of Governors drawn from the local community. In total some 1,350 pupils attend school in the parish and presently some 150 commute daily to schools elsewhere, mostly in Newry. The parish offers six Sunday Masses and ten week-day Masses as well as a choice of four times monthly for baptisms. Despite increased emigration trends from among our young people the parish population is slowly rising with over 100 baptisms annually in recent years. Unemployment and under employment are prevalent throughout the parish with little or no industrial

development locally (not a new phenomenon) and many having to commute to larger urban centres for work. Until the recession of recent years many young people with trades in construction commuted daily as far as Dublin for work and sadly this group became perhaps the hardest hit by the emigration of recent years. Notwithstanding this the people of Upper Creggan are resourceful, industrious and generous in their support of the parish. A prudent finance committee and stringent budgetary control combine to keep the parish financially solvent despite the economic pressures recession has visited on so many parish families. As is the experience elsewhere revenue has fallen, especially in the past two years, but we hope this fall is 'bottoming out' and that, through time, things may improve a little again. Along with a few other parishes our annual accounts are overseen and audited by the diocesan financial directorate under a pilot scheme for which we volunteered a few years ago. Upper Creggan, with families in both the north and the Republic, draws its income in both sterling and euro currencies, (and banks in both) a 'dual currency' parish one might call it.

Pastoral Life, Pastoral & Community Groups, Mission

In some measure the day to day 'mission' of our parish is shaped (driven) by various of the forces listed above and pursued, as in many parishes, by a combination of our

priests **and** of a band of co-workers / activists from the parish's apostolic groups who collaborate with them. Though many of these groups are a given in most parishes (and their roles self-evident in their names) even a listing of them is perhaps instructive ... the Pastoral Council, Parish Safeguarding Committee, Appointments Committee (for all salaried posts), Finance Committee, Buildings Committee, Collectors, Collection Counting Teams, District Distributors (annual parish envelopes), Baptismal Preparation Team, Pre-Marriage Course Leaders, Ministers of the Word, Ministers of the Eucharist, Eucharistic Adoration Rota, School Governors, Altar Society / Church Cleaners, Marriage Tribunal Auditors, St Vincent de Paul Society, PTAA, Lourdes Committee and Apostolic Work Society (about 250 volunteers in all).

Our current **Pastoral Council** took up office in 2008 after a comprehensive four week training programme attended by 40 parishioners. The Council was drawn up from these and comprises some who volunteered with others deliberately approached to ensure that various districts and age groups were represented. Most councillors are active in other parish groups so that the Council represents a pooling of all our resources. As such the Council convenes to discuss and plan key initiatives as they arise. It never meets just for the sake of meeting. The Council has been involved in planning and resourcing a parish Mission (2010), our annual parish Novena (each year), special anniversary events at two of our churches, producing/selling a parish magazine and promoting a parish response to IEC 2012.

In the months ahead the Council will busy itself preparing for an all-parish Mission to mark the Year of Faith (hopefully just after Easter 2013) and a parallel 'mini-Mission' week-end planned for youth. It will help promote and host a planned diocesan pastoral council event for Ministers of the Word (Feb 2013). Since its inception only one of the Council's seventeen lay members has stood aside (personal commitments) and there are no plans to re-vamp the current membership until **after** the Year of Faith.

Currently two other features perhaps deserve special mention. Upper Creggan hosts its own **annual pre-Marriage Course** prepared and delivered by a local team of seven. These are the parish priest plus three married couples who undertook Accord training some years ago. The course takes place every Spring and can accommodate thirty



St Patrick's statue

local couples. Power-point presentations combine with short inputs and questionnaires/worksheets completed by the couples as couples. The course is delivered over one full Saturday, starting in early morning. Evaluations tend to be, almost invariably, positive. The witness-value of three local married couples actually directing the day is strong and the practical appeal of one full day rather than shorter sessions spread over a few evenings is favourably commented on. The course fee is kept to a minimum (£50) as all the speakers are voluntary so real expense is kept to a minimum. The course content is topical and practical but also has a prayer/spiritual input which most participants view favourably.

The parish has a small community facility (actually called **the parish rooms**) which hosts an AA branch weekly, the local Lourdes group weekly and also Eucharistic Adoration one day a week. Other groups use it less frequently. Last year an initiative to provide some group and even individual counselling services in it was explored by an ad-hoc group of local priests, professional counsellors and a local GP. Though the group decided **not** to pursue this for the present (as it was perhaps duplicating other such services) a parish bereavement group is still contemplated. Meanwhile the parish co-sponsored a leaflet campaign, delivered to all homes, listing agencies which help with depression, addiction and related issues. This joint venture was co-partnered alongside the **four GAA clubs** in the parish. Mentioning sport, it may seem unusual to have four thriving GAA clubs in one parish and yet

in Upper Creggan that is the case. These clubs are truly a blessing for our parish and each serves splendidly in its own local district with facilities and outlets for youth **AND** others. Each is run by highly committed volunteers who promote not just football but also a wider care ethos for the local community and maintain regular contact with the parish. I cannot overstate the force for good of their efforts. (One of our clubs also likes to win All-Irelands.)

Conclusion

Any parish invited to put its life and operations 'in focus' for a wider readership does well to acknowledge that there are many challenges still to be met for its people. As a parish, Upper Creggan can easily fall into the cul-de-sac where maintenance (what we do) takes precedence over mission (what we need to do). The lines of demarcation between maintenance and mission can too quickly become blurred as priests get older, their numbers decrease and their faithful co-workers fewer and fewer. The challenge of an increasingly secular society where 'the volunteer' is in ever shorter supply threatens those who would have the **People of God** appropriate their own identity as **Church**. The same challenge applies to our need to broaden the appeal of Liturgy, in particular our Sunday Liturgy, for the youth of the parish whose attendance could be better. Upper Creggan is not immune from such challenges but there is always room for hope. Last summer before the IEC in Dublin 150 of our parishioners gathered for an evening to renew their commitment to serve in their parish. These good people, the salt and light of every parish, are constantly reminded and encouraged that 'what they do for others they do for Christ' (Matt:25:40). Two dozen of them also attended the *Statio Orbis* in Croke Park (without their priests who still had to preside at Eucharist on the home front). As the Year of the Congress yields to the Year of Faith we remain challenged as a parish (as a Church) to cling to the Lord's promise to reserve 'a future full of hope' for us if we but put our trust in Him, in Upper Creggan and beyond. With many others we can cry out in the words of the Breton Fisherman's Prayer ...

*'Lord, your sea is so big
and my boat is so small'*

Parish website www.uppercreggan.co.uk