

Improving lay engagement with decision-making

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1. Introduction

Many of the individual and parish reports shared a concern for the future of our diocese. It was felt that our current structures are not resilient enough to meet the needs of our rapidly changing world. Provision across parishes is uneven, change is difficult, and often our structures work against one another. There is a need to recover a sense of purpose and mission at all levels, and to develop the gifts of both laity and clergy to build the kingdom in our diocese.

2. Our Synod Listening

The section on decision-making in our diocesan report (Discerning and Deciding) covered a lack of transparency over decision-making at every level in the diocese. There was a concern that the Church does not plan for change, with changes precipitated by an emergency (such as a church closure) often handled badly with hurt still felt years later. On a parish level there is a lack of consistency between priests of different parishes, and from priest to priest in a parish.

There was a call for a strategy to plan for the shortage of diocesan priests into the future and a need for creativity in meeting current challenges. When both clergy and laity recognise the gifts and talents that each bring to the Church we can work together proactively for mutual benefit and respect. This requires being open and honest, looking at the bigger picture, and supporting one another especially in difficult and challenging times.

The national synthesis (34-5, 77) noted that many reports linked a lack of participation of laity, especially women, to our perceived failure to evangelise. There was criticism that parish councils were often concerned with 'business' rather than building up the community and developing the charisms of the faithful, with the potential to be sources "not just of technical expertise but of wisdom and discernment." The Document for the Continent Phase warns of a global concern with clericalism which "isolates clergy and harms the laity" and expresses a desire for renewed forms of leadership that are "relational and collaborative, and forms of authority capable of generating solidarity and co-responsibility" (58-59).

3. Where are we now?

Key themes that arose from our ongoing listening included:

1. The amount of diversity of parish/community provision across the diocese is striking, and makes a one-size-fits-all recommendation difficult.
2. There can be a lack of a sense of purpose and/or real authority for current lay engagement (eg



deanery and parish pastoral councils), and lack of clergy engagement or sense of partnership with some of these structures. They lose momentum and membership when they are not sure why they are meeting. A conversation with PAC chairs and deans highlighted the importance of having the right members – and those members feeling they have the authority to get on with the task at hand.

3. Encouraging lay engagement will change our current structures. This involves understanding how power is held and shared, and how decisions are made across the diocese. It will require all participants to stand aside from their own agenda to work for the common good. How do we cultivate a sense that we are 'all in it together'?
4. This is made more difficult by the range of understandings of lay and priestly vocation across the diocese. Experiences of poor leadership throw a long shadow and can be very challenging for both priests and congregations.
5. There is no consistent sense of what a parish is 'for'. What does a flourishing community look like? What could a baseline expectation be? How can parishes connect more fully with their local community to ignite a new sense of mission and local ownership?
6. Parishes have little sense of 'the diocese', particularly how it functions and how it can better support parishes. There is a confusion as to how the levy is used in service to the parishes, and how the diocese understands and meets parish needs.
7. Some of the more thriving parishes in the diocese have benefited either from a priest with a long-term consistent vision, or from a religious order holding the same spirituality across changes of priests. The opposite is when a new priest in a parish prevents good things from happening, or when there are a number of changes in a short time scale.
8. There needs to be an underlying understanding and practice of leadership and management across the diocese, the clergy and the laity. We need to be aware how our different cultures, beliefs and understandings of leadership impact our ability to work together.
9. There is a need to be realistic about the future: how could new structures better serve the Church as we adapt to changing circumstances and become more missionary?

4. How can God's mission be served?

Our theological reflection on lay engagement is rooted in Scripture, in particular an understanding of a shared baptismal vocation: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." 1 Peter 2:9 This is then amplified in *Lumen Gentium*, one of the core documents of the Second Vatican Council, which speaks of lay engagement as key to "the renewal and building up of the Church" (LG 12).

More recently, the Church has called for the renewal of our community life: "the Parish is called upon to read the signs of the times, while adapting both to the needs of the faithful and to historical changes."^[1] The Synod documents have reminded us of the ancient practice of the Church in which significant change happened on the basis of "what affects everyone, should be discussed and approved by all"^[2] while "humble listening at all levels and proper consultation of

those concerned are integral aspects of a living and lively Church.”^[3] The missionary potential of pastoral councils are highlighted.^[4]

Above all, Pope Francis reminds us of the risks of doing nothing: ““And so the biggest threat of all gradually takes shape: the grey pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small mindedness. A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum”^[5]. If we can overcome this and become outward-looking missionary communities, the opportunities are endless: ““we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a “mystique” of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”^[6]

5. What are the major challenges?

1. There is a need for skilled leadership formation across the board, but particularly for newly ordained priests, those becoming parish priests for the first time, deans and other senior clerical roles; and deacons and lay people in positions of leadership and influence, including chairs and members of pastoral councils and finance committees and senior members of the diocesan staff.
2. We need a better understanding of and skilled formation in building teams including skills of gracious listening and speaking and discerning.
3. Currently there is no visibility of decision-making in the diocese, eg what is the process to close a parish? What is the process for priest moves? How are new posts in the diocesan staff approved?
4. There can be a lack of stability in parishes, either through lack of a priest, or priests not staying long in a parish (eg overseas or religious priests). The flip side of this is static parishes with little missionary impulse.
5. No clear/agreed concept of what a ‘flourishing’ community looks like, or even a baseline understanding of what parishes could offer.
6. Lack of clarity of purpose and remit of pastoral councils at all levels in the diocese
7. Lack of connection between diocesan central services and individual parishes, not helped by a sense of geographical distance.
8. The need to heal the pain of previous experiences of poor leadership.

6. What are our proposals for change?

1. **Creation of a leadership course and follow-up coaching**, bringing together the best in secular and Catholic thinking on leadership, including: servant leadership, understanding strengths and weaknesses, building a team, and managing conflict.
 - a. Mandatory for all newly ordained priests with one year of mentoring.
 - b. Senior leadership training offered for deans, episcopal vicars and other senior leaders including the SLT.

- c. Leadership training to be offered to all priests, and as the second year of the Called & Equipped pastoral formation course. Mentoring offered to all clergy and lay people in leadership.
2. **Community visions:** each parish to establish a Mission Council (Parish Pastoral Council) with a focus on community building, formation, mission and outreach. The Pastoral Ministry Office will offer support and resources to parishes developing new Mission Councils, with the possibility of an accompaniment programme.
 - a. The Council will work with the wider parish to develop a community vision exploring the needs of the local community: eg is the parish situated in the town centre with a mission to shoppers and office workers? Is there a shared sense of purpose between parish and Catholic school? Is this a rural parish holding the Catholic community over many miles?
 - b. These visions will guide parish budgets and resource allocation, and will be reviewed annually at a parish gathering. Incoming priests would have the chance to read the community vision, and would agree to respect it, not withstanding their own canonical authority and responsibility to lead, and also recognising that these visions could drift or become stagnant over time.
 - c. Community visions would be discussed at Pastoral Area Council level to look for overlaps and gaps, and where parishes can work together in specific areas (eg youth, RCIA, mission outreach).
 - d. Those on the Diocesan Pastoral Council will come with deep knowledge of the needs and strengths of their local area, and will be able to work with other canonical bodies to advise resource allocation and the future shaping of the diocese.
 - e. A programme of formation, support and networking will be offered to parishes developing these new councils, especially for chairs and prayer leads.
3. **Clarification of the purpose of existing leadership structures** (eg Trustees, Council of Priests, Chapter, Council of Deacons etc) and the creation of a Diocesan Pastoral Council. This will work with Bishop David to bring together the recommendations of parish and pastoral area councils, and develop a creative vision for mission for the diocese.
4. As part of this process **a baseline expectation of parish life will be developed**, with support from diocesan departments. Notions of 'flourishing' will vary from context to context, but with a renewed emphasis on the faith life of the community, and their missionary and social outreach in the wider community.
5. This then will resolve the lack of clarity of pastoral councils, giving them a clear purpose and mandate for action.
6. We need **better systems for connecting diocesan central services with parishes**, linked to baseline expectations so that parishes are supported in moving forward. The Diocesan Pastoral Council will advise and even recommend elements of provision from central services to create a more obvious link between the parish levy and diocesan provision.
7. Leadership formation, listening skills and dialogue should enable the **recognition and healing of previous poor experiences**.

8. All this should be **reviewed and measured regularly** to continue to meet the changing needs of the diocese.

7. Conclusion.

By focusing on parish mission councils and local leadership as our key building block of change, we hope to recapture a sense of possibility and purpose in parish communities, together with a new engagement with the needs of the people outside our doors. We will develop co-responsible ways of working to enable the gifts of clergy and laity to flourish. A new diocesan pastoral council will work with Bishop David to develop creative responses to the mission of the diocese.



References

- [1] Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church", 11
- [2] Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church, International Theological Commission, 122
- [3] Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church, International Theological Commission, 126
- [4] Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church", 110
- [5] Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium (the Joy of the Gospel), 83
- [6] Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium (the Joy of the Gospel), 87