

# Parish Pastoral Councils

A Framework for Developing  
Diocesan Norms and Parish Guidelines



**October 2007**

**The Commission for Pastoral Renewal  
and Adult Faith Development**



IRISH CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE  
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# Foreword

It is almost twenty-five years since the Irish Bishops first called for the development of parish pastoral councils in line with similar initiatives that had been taking place in the universal Church since the Second Vatican Council. This call has been repeated many times and at various levels within the Catholic Church in Ireland.

In parish communities throughout the country, the life of faith, liturgy and service is being enriched through the work of the parish pastoral council. The many and varied gifts of parishioners are being welcomed, collaboration between ordained and lay faithful is growing and the Church envisaged by Vatican II is emerging.

However, it is clear that effective and sustainable parish pastoral councils require ongoing training and resources for their task. The role of the council in the parish, and in particular its role *vis-à-vis* the role of the Parish Priest and other ordained ministers of the parish, needs to be continually worked out.

The purpose of this document is to offer encouragement and guidance to all concerned with parish pastoral councils. It is not a blueprint for each place. The document offers a framework for developing diocesan norms and parish guidelines. It is our hope that this publication will support the work which is best done in light of local circumstances.

The document represents a commitment on the part of the Irish Bishops to the development of parish pastoral councils. These councils are intended to give visible, local expression to the Church as a living and welcoming community, founded on the relationship of each Christian with Christ and the love that all Christians are called to share with one another. The pastoral council is a primary means by which the parish community can review and plan for its mission to witness to the gospel of Christ and to promote the reign of God.

On behalf of the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development, I wish to thank all who have participated in consultation processes regarding parish pastoral councils over the last two years and, in particular, the task group that has brought this document to its present point of completion.

*Bishop Jim Moriarty*

*Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin*

*Chair of the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development*

*October 2007*

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# INTRODUCTION

‘The ecclesial community, while always having a universal dimension, finds its most immediate and visible expression in the parish. It is there that the Church is seen locally. In a certain sense [the parish] is the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.’<sup>1</sup> The parish is a living cell of the local and universal Church. It is not principally a territory or a building, but rather the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit, a familial and welcoming home, the community of the faithful.<sup>2</sup> This vision of the parish is grounded in a vision of the Church as a communion – the communion of Christians with Christ and with one another. In the first section of this document, the vision of Church as communion is explored more fully, and the parish pastoral council is introduced as a means whereby parishes can express and nourish themselves as a living community.

The mission and context of the parish in Ireland today are highlighted in section 2. There, also, the relationship of the parish with its diocese, and the mission of the parish within its local community and the wider society are explored.

1 John Paul II, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, 1988, 26.

2 Ibid.

## Parish Pastoral Councils

The parish pastoral council itself is the focus of section 3. A working definition is offered, together with an outline of the canonical basis of the pastoral council and a summary statement of its role and function in the parish. Processes which help parish pastoral councils to be effective are indicated. Suggested guidelines are offered for setting up a pastoral council and for its continual sustenance.

Appendix 1 is a summary account of a research project on the experience of some parish pastoral council members in a number of dioceses, together with a reflection on the research findings. In Appendix 2, important aspects of the formation and training for parish pastoral councils are identified. Key elements of a constitution will be found in Appendix 3. Appendix 4 indicates some helpful resources and Appendix 5 comprises a short introduction to the members of the task group who collaborated in producing this framework document. The members of the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development and its Advisory Board are also listed.



# 1. OUR VISION OF CHURCH TODAY

## 1.1 Church as Communion

The Church has its origin in the love shared among Jesus and his disciples. This love is alive and active in the community of disciples throughout time, through the gift of the Holy Spirit: ‘Love one another, as I have loved you ... by this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ (Jn 13:34-35). In this community of love, Christians share life with Christ and with one another. ‘Jesus said: “I am the vine, you are the branches.”’ (Jn 15:5)

The fundamental meaning of communion lies in the union of Christians with God brought about by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> It has ‘the communion of God as Trinity, namely, the unity of the Son to the Father in the gift of the Holy Spirit, as its model and source’.<sup>4</sup> The life of communion between Christians reflects and is a participation in the mystery of God’s love as revealed by Jesus.

The Second Vatican Council did much to bring about a clearer understanding of the Church as communion, and how it may be lived. In this it retrieves a vision that was central in Scripture, in the early Church and also in the Oriental Churches.<sup>5</sup> Vatican II

3 John Paul II, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, 1988, 18.

4 *Ibid.*, 18.

5 *Ibid.*, 19.

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emphasised how this communion is expressed and nourished in the Church through Word and Sacrament, beginning with Baptism and finding its summit and source in the celebration of the Eucharist.

John Paul II speaks of 'a double, lifegiving participation: the incorporation of Christians into the life of Christ, and the communication of that life of charity to the entire body of the Faithful ...'.<sup>6</sup> To help us grasp and live this mystery of communion, Vatican II invited us to contemplate the biblical images of the sheepfold (Jn 10:1-10), the field, 'tillage' of God (1 Cor 3:9), the building of God (1 Cor 3:9-11) and the body (1 Cor 12:1-11).<sup>7</sup>



The Church comes to life in local faith communities of dioceses and parishes when members support and care for one another, proclaim and live by the gospel, celebrate the sacred liturgy and work in charity and justice for the good of the whole world.<sup>8</sup>

6 Ibid., 19.

7 *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* in A. Flannery, (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1975, p. 6.

8 '... Adhering thus to its pastor and gathered together by him in the Holy Spirit through the gospel and the Eucharist, this portion constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is truly present and operative.' Vatican II, *Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church*, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 1975, p. 11.

## Our Vision of Church Today

The Church is the pilgrim people of God on its journey through history. Its 'sacred nature and organic structure'<sup>9</sup> is an invitation to all members to participate in communion with Christ and one another according to their particular gifts and vocations and so make the Church a 'light to the nations'.

### **1.2 The Parish Pastoral Council – living communion**

Structures such as pastoral councils express the shared responsibility of all the baptised for the mission of Christ. However, without real community spirit, external structures will serve very little purpose. Pope John Paul II wrote:

A spirituality of communion ... means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters ...as 'those who are part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.<sup>10</sup>

A spirituality of communion nourishes the different gifts of the Spirit to the members, both of the total parish community and of the parish pastoral council. All have something to contribute. None are so rich that they have nothing to receive, and none so poor that they have nothing to give.

<sup>9</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, 45.



## 2.

# THE MISSION AND CONTEXT OF THE PARISH

### 2.1 Mission

The mission of the parish, a living cell of the communion that is the Church and a community of Christian disciples, is to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. It does this by the quality of the life of its members, its community life and worship, its involvement in the wider community and society of which it is part and especially its solidarity with the poor and needy.<sup>11</sup>

The parish community comprises ordained priests, lay people and, in some places, members of religious congregations. When describing the relationship of trust and collaboration between priests and lay people, the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council assert:

Pastors should indeed recognise and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They should willingly use their prudential advice and confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, leaving them freedom and scope for acting. Indeed they should encourage them to undertake works on their own initiative.<sup>12</sup>

11 Cf. Benedict XVI, *God is Love*, Dublin, Veritas, 2005.

12 *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 37.

## The Mission and Context of the Parish

A later document of the same Vatican Council took this new way of thinking a step further. It called for the introduction of some *institutions* or *agencies* through which this new way of thinking might percolate through the community. *The Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People* called for the setting up of ‘councils to assist in the apostolic work of the Church’.<sup>13</sup> Rather than simply participating in the ministry of the bishops and priests, lay people share in the mission of Christ in their own right as baptised members of the Church.

### 2.2 Parish and Diocese

In Ireland, parishes often trace their origins to localised tradition, for example, a monastic settlement. In our time, the parish is constituted as a community of the faithful within the structure of the diocese.<sup>14</sup> The decision that parish pastoral councils are to be established as a means of fulfilling the mission of the parishes and the diocese rests with the Bishop.

Canon Law establishes the Parish Priest with a significant autonomy in his parish. At the same time, the need for diocesan policies which are confirmed by the Bishop e.g. by means of a pastoral plan, is becoming increasingly obvious. When a pastoral council structure has been established in a parish in line with diocesan policy it is to be expected that this will be continued beyond the death or transfer of the Parish Priest.

Diocesan norms are required, specifying the term of office of parish pastoral councils. These should be such that, within a reasonable time after the appointment of a new Parish Priest, the council will be coming up for renewal as a matter of course. In the ideal scenario,

<sup>13</sup> *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 1965, 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, 1983, 515.

## Parish Pastoral Councils

a parish pastoral council can be of immense value to a newly appointed Parish Priest, in introducing him to the history and culture of the parish.

In practice, it is now evident that the tasks of establishing and maintaining effective parish pastoral councils require training and support. For this, many parish personnel are looking to their diocese. Moreover, in parishes that do not have a resident Parish Priest, the role of the pastoral council can be pivotal. From all of this, it is clear that resources for training and support and also structures for review and accountability at diocesan level are becoming increasingly important.

### 2.3 Parish in Community and Society

Vatican II recognises that if the Church is to be truly local the congregation of the faithful must be ‘... rooted in the social life of the people and to some extent conformed to its culture’.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the important values and characteristics of the present-day social/cultural context on the island of Ireland are as follows:

- In spite of all the progress that has taken place in our financial and social situations, there continues to be a hunger in our hearts for the spiritual to give a sense of purpose to our lives. The parish needs to be at the service of this hunger as a real witness to the presence of Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
- The vast majority of people have completed second-level education. Many have completed third-level education and have degrees in various disciplines, including Theology and Scripture. This calls on a parish to respond accordingly.

15 Vatican II, *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, 1966, 19.

## The Mission and Context of the Parish

- People are accustomed to making their own choices in life in almost every sphere. This carries through to their living of the Christian faith and needs to be addressed as part of today's world.
- People legitimately expect to participate actively in anything that impacts on their lives. The parish needs to be shaped by this if it is to enable its members to fulfil their Christian mission.
- There is in our context a widespread and growing awareness of the equality of women and men. This fact needs to have a great impact on the life of the Church in a parish. As Christians we need to be at the forefront of this development.
- Almost every parish has people who have come from other countries and other cultures. A parish needs to welcome this diversity, and be enriched by it.
- In a time of increased affluence, Christians are called to be aware of their social responsibility, aware of injustice and the reality of poverty and deprivation. This call needs to be taken account of in the parish community.
- Even though there are more time-saving devices now than ever, some people talk about having less time for the important things of life like marriage and family relationships, faith relationships, community etc. The parish is one of the places where they can hear the call to constantly look at their priorities and find the fullness of life.
- People have access to up-to-date information on most events around the world and yet often don't know what is happening in their own parish. They are constantly put in touch with the stories of the lives of others. Their outlook and values are seriously influenced by the media and yet there is little formal adult faith development. The parish has a real responsibility to help people to develop attitudes to life in the light of their faith.

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This does not mean fighting crusades against the world but rather promoting reflection on the Word of God.

- Western civilisation is seriously threatened by rising levels of violence; injustice is rife in business and social life; the poor are getting poorer while the rich are getting richer; marriage and family life as we have known them are under strain; many of the traditional sources of authority through which people order their lives are now contested. The parish needs to be a community that provides hope for people in times of such uncertainty.



- Global warming and the destruction of earth's resources, as issues of vital importance, must feature in the reflections, plans and programmes through which parish communities live their mission in the present day.

## The Mission and Context of the Parish

### **2.4 The Parish in Partnership**

The witness of the parish lies, primarily, in the quality of the Christian lives of its members in family, community and society. There is, however, a need for visible, public participation by the parish in the organised activities of the local community. Not so long ago the priests of the parish fulfilled this public function, by and large, through their personal involvement. It is no longer possible, nor even to be recommended, that this should continue to be exclusively the case.

The parish as a Christian community is called to work in partnership with all others who are serving the needs and interests of the community. In this the parish should be guided by the values of the Kingdom of God – values of truth, justice, love and peace. The pastoral council is well placed to establish formal connections with local groups and associations. In this way representatives of the parish can have a base community from which they ‘go out’ and to which they return to reflect on what they are doing, in the name of the parish, to help build up their community and society. This is one way in which the pastoral council enables the parish to live out the vision of Church as communion.



### 3.

## THE PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL

### 3.1 Definition

The parish pastoral council is a leadership group through which priests and people work together as partners in furthering the mission of Christ in their own place. It does this through building up a vibrant Christian community that is rooted in baptism and marked by its faith, worship and service.

To fulfil its role the pastoral council needs to be a representative body in which the diversity of the parish community is reflected. It is a means whereby all parishioners can take part in discussions that relate to the parish, its mission and its future development.

### 3.2 Canonical Basis of Parish Pastoral Councils

The *Code of Canon Law* (1983) set itself the task of giving legal expression insofar as possible to the new insights emerging from the Second Vatican Council. Conscious of the very subtle and nuanced way in which these new insights were formulated by the Council Fathers, it *urged*, rather than *mandated* or *stipulated*, that pastoral councils be established in each parish, should the diocesan Bishop in consultation with the council of priests think it opportune. It is worth quoting the relevant canon:

## The Parish Pastoral Council

If after consulting the council of priests, the diocesan Bishop considers it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish. In this council, which is presided over by the Parish Priest, Christ's faithful, together with those who by virtue of their office are engaged in pastoral care in the parish, give their help in fostering pastoral action.<sup>16</sup>

While the Code of Canon Law stops short of mandating parish pastoral councils in every parish it certainly encourages their establishment, seeing this as an inescapable consequence of the vision of Church heralded by the Second Vatican Council.

For a more complete appreciation of what parish pastoral councils are and how they should function we need only look at how our vision of parish has changed since the Council. In a mindset where parish was largely identified with the priest there was neither room nor reason for the existence of a parish pastoral council. It is our hope that this particular mindset is being transformed. There can be no doubt that in establishing and developing parish pastoral councils we are putting into practice a model of Church that the Second Vatican Council articulated and for which it yearned.

### **3.3 Ministry and Processes of the Parish Pastoral Council**

The primary ministry of the parish pastoral council is to collaborate in planning the way forward for the parish at its given time. It does this in context of the circumstances of the parish, in light of the

<sup>16</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, 1983, can. 536§1.

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gospel, the teaching of the Church, the 'signs of the times' and the reflections of the members of the community.

Processes in which the parish pastoral council is involved include:

- *Reflection and Planning* In collaboration with the parish community, identifying their needs and the challenges they face, and reflecting in dialogue with them on what needs to be done.
- *Animation* Enabling the baptised to discover their gifts in response to the needs and challenges of the parish, and developing these gifts through the provision of training and on-going formation.
- *Action* Providing structures that will make connection between the needs and the challenges of the parish with the gifts and resources in the parish and the diocese.
- *Communication* Ensuring that effective dialogue takes place within the parish, the diocese and the wider community.
- *Evaluation* Reviewing the life and activities of the parish so that parishioners might have a sense of a developing dynamic Christian community.

### 3.4 Setting up a Parish Pastoral Council

#### *Preparation in the parish*

It is generally helpful if a committee or working group is established to oversee the process of setting up a pastoral council in the parish. This group may take responsibility for:

- drawing up guidelines, in dialogue with the parish community and in agreement with diocesan norms;

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- arranging for the education of the parish community;
- organising the process of finding members;
- coordinating the presentation of the members to the parish.

### *Education of the parish*

If the parish pastoral council is to be a true leadership group in the parish, then care must be taken in setting it up. This care will include the formation of all parishioners as well as the members of the parish pastoral council so that everyone will have an opportunity to grow in their understanding of:

- the privileges and the responsibilities of all the baptised;
- the parish as a vibrant part of the Church;
- the role of the parish pastoral council.

Time and care given to the formation of the parish will ensure that the parish pastoral council will be effective in its role in the parish and the diocese.

### *Criteria for membership*

The criteria for membership need to be clear and agreed. To take on the task of the council, members need to be baptised Catholics who participate in the life and the worship of the parish, who have a loving concern for the parish and are willing to be part of a parish leadership group.

The term of the council and of individual members and other matters such as the filling of casual vacancies need to be included in diocesan norms and parish guidelines.

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### ***Representation***

Care needs to be taken that a broad representation of all members of the parish is considered for membership. It is important that the members of the parish pastoral council recognise that they represent the whole parish community and not just a particular geographic area or group.

### ***Composition***

In general, the parish pastoral council should include:

- people who are members because of their roles in the parish; these include the Parish Priest, the curates and other parish staff;
- members selected by the parish in general;
- others co-opted for their gifts and expertise, or to ensure good representation of the whole parish;
- representatives of schools and other relevant organisations.

### ***Size***

Experience shows that membership of not more than fifteen people (including the parish staff) will facilitate the smooth running of the parish pastoral council.

### ***Selection processes***

The methods used for designating members of the parish pastoral council vary between parishes. It is important that the approach taken is in keeping with the size and nature of the parish. It is a

## The Parish Pastoral Council

matter for local discussion and agreement, applying diocesan norms and the guidelines which the parish sets for itself.

In the past, it was common to have a process of nomination and election in each geographic area of the parish. Another approach has been to invite each committee and task group in the parish to select a representative. Each of these methods has its strengths and weaknesses.

At present, there is a move towards more discerning processes. These have been tried, satisfactorily, in a number of ways. Two examples are as follows.

1. When the parish has been well informed of the intention to set up a parish pastoral council, and the role and ministry of the council has been understood, nominations are sought from all parishioners. Nominees are invited to meet, reflect, pray and select from amongst themselves those who are willing and able to take up the role of council member. It would be usual to have, for such a discerning process, a facilitator who has experience of this kind of work.
2. At the end of a programme of formation, those who believe they are called to serve the parish through membership of the parish pastoral council are invited to come forward voluntarily in an assembly of nominees, or of the parish, and seek the approval of the community or its representatives.

All members of the parish community should, in principle, have the possibility of taking part in at least the introductory stages of these processes.

In all cases, the parish pastoral council should be commissioned to its ministry of service by, or in the name of, the Bishop of the diocese.

## Parish Pastoral Councils

### *Formation and Support*

Prayer, reflection, skills training and ongoing catechesis on the nature and mission of the Church is most important for all members of the parish pastoral council.<sup>17</sup>

### **3.5 Roles**

The parish pastoral council is a dynamic body of people ‘in which the complementary and diverse ministries and gifts of all the members ... work together in a spirit of unity and love, in a spirit of communion’.<sup>18</sup> The roles which members take should be clear and agreed. These include the roles of president, chairperson and secretary. Other roles may also be agreed.

### *All members*

All members have an important part to play in the workings of the parish pastoral council. Their role includes:

- actively listening to the needs and concerns of the parishioners;
- attending meetings;
- taking part in discussion;
- offering items for the agenda;
- carrying out tasks to which they have committed themselves.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>18</sup> *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, 43.

## The Parish Pastoral Council

### ***President***

The Parish Priest has been entrusted with the care of the parish by the Bishop. He convokes the meetings and is the president of the council. In his absence he may appoint a delegate to take his place.

The role of the president includes the following:

- encouraging the parish pastoral council to have a pastoral, whole-parish perspective on what they are about;
- ensuring that there is ongoing formation for the group;
- maintaining the connection with the diocese and the wider community.

### ***Chairperson***

The chairperson is generally elected by the group for a fixed period of time.

The role of the chairperson includes:

- preparing the agenda for meetings, with the secretary, the president and other members of the parish pastoral council as agreed;
- chairing the meetings;
- ensuring that agreed parish policies are carried out;
- encouraging all members to be involved in the actual meeting and in the follow-up.

### ***Secretary***

The secretary might be the parish secretary or a member of the council who is elected by the group for a fixed period. Generally it is expected that the secretary:

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- prepares the agenda for meetings with the chairperson and the president and other members of the parish pastoral council as agreed;
- takes the minutes of meetings;
- attends to correspondence;
- distributes minutes and agenda to members before the meeting;
- sends relevant items from meetings to the parish office for inclusion in the newsletter;
- liaises with the diocesan pastoral council where one exists and/or diocesan offices and other groups in the area.

### *Committees/subgroups*

The parish pastoral council is primarily concerned with promoting action through pastoral planning; it is not immediately responsible for implementation of projects but ensures that the projects are carried out. In this way the council enables members of the parish to recognise their gifts for ministry and to use them for the good of the parish and its mission.

Depending on circumstances, committees/subgroups might include communications, liturgy, peace and justice, faith development etc. For particular tasks it may be helpful for the council to nominate a subgroup on a more short-term basis. The involvement of parishioners from outside the council should always be sought for particular projects.

## The Parish Pastoral Council

### 3.6 Meetings

#### *Centrality of prayer, reflection and formation*

The unique nature of the parish pastoral council requires that a spirit of prayer and reflection should pervade the meetings. Since the task of the council involves faith development, it is important that time be taken in each meeting for formation of the members and for nourishing their faith through prayer informed by the concerns of the meeting and the parish, the Church, the world and the liturgical year.

#### *Frequency*

Meetings should take place according to an agreed calendar. Some parishes may choose to meet monthly in order to fulfil their tasks. Others may choose less frequent meetings, especially where subcommittees or working groups are established.

#### *Agenda and minutes*

Each parish pastoral council needs to make arrangements that best serve its purpose, within its own local circumstances.

#### *Quorum*

A quorum must be agreed from the outset. In general the minimum number of members required is a half plus one. A legitimate quorum must include either the president or his delegate.

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### 3.7 The Consultative Process

While the structures of participation are consultative rather than deliberative, this does not mean that they are less meaningful and relevant. The theology and spirituality of communion encourage a fruitful dialogue between Pastors and the faithful: on the one hand uniting them [from the outset] in all that is essential, and on the other, leading them to pondered agreement in matters open to discussion.<sup>19</sup>

The collaboration of all members, ordained, lay and religious, is integral to each stage of the work of the pastoral council. The council, as a body, needs to build up continually its connection with the total parish community. It should develop ways and means to communicate information and to gather the views and wisdom of all. Having discerned, in the light of their local situation and of their Christian mission, what needs to be done, it can then enable community members to develop their gifts and to participate in the pastoral action of the parish, and in this way to respond to their baptismal call.

By virtue of his office the Parish Priest presides over and ratifies all pastoral council processes, leading up to and including final options and implementations. This collegial process respects the role of the Parish Priest who, in turn, takes into account the integrity, expertise and prayerful deliberations of the members of the council and of the whole community.

<sup>19</sup> *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, 45.

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### **3.8 The Relationship of the Parish Pastoral Council with the Diocese and the Universal Church**

Since the parish pastoral council is engaged in the mission of Christ in a particular area of the local Church, it is appropriate that periodic communication be cultivated between the council and the Bishop or his representative, affording opportunity for all to grow in mutual understanding. Diocesan norms should establish the practice of an annual report from the parish pastoral council to the Bishop.

The relationship of the parish pastoral council with the diocese can be fostered by:

- making connections with other parishes with a view to sharing resources, planning joint initiatives and learning from one another;
- engaging the support of various diocesan agencies and committees;
- attending annual gatherings of members of parish pastoral councils, meetings of chairpersons etc.;
- participating in diocesan gatherings, supporting initiatives promoted by the diocese and sharing concerns raised by people in the parishes.

A parish is also part of the universal Church. This means that the parish pastoral council will be interested in different levels of the life of the Church. In practice the pastoral council expresses its relationship with the wider Church when it draws on the wisdom and rich traditions of that wider community, takes interest in the Church's global mission and finds ways to actively support this mission.



## APPENDIX 1

# Learning from Experience: Parish Pastoral Councils in Practice

### **Background**

During the spring and early autumn of 2007, a research project was carried out by Sr Anne Codd, resource person for the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development, with the assistance of Eoin O'Mahony of the Council for Research and Development. The research project was done in tandem with the production of this framework document. The purpose of the exercise was twofold: first, to explore what is being learned from experience by parish pastoral councils (PPCs) and, second, to generate further conversations.

The research design was qualitative in nature. The validity of all experience as well as its mix of uniqueness and commonality are twin planks on which this methodology rests. It is left to the readers to determine the relevance of the findings to their own situations.

### **The conversations**

In cooperation with diocesan pastoral workers in each of five dioceses, Kerry, Waterford and Lismore, Ossory, Armagh and Dublin, representatives of a small number of PPCs were invited to come together within their diocese. The parishes included a mix of rural, town-based and urban.

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At the outset, the purpose and parameters of the research were clarified – principally, that this was not an evaluation exercise, that PPCs are a work in progress and that the far-reaching changes which they represent are only becoming clear with time.

Against the background of their own parish story, participants were invited to talk about:

- formation, training and learning in the PPC;
- their personal surprises, joys and challenges;
- continuity and the sustainability of their structures;
- fruitfulness – the difference, if any, that a PPC is making in their parish.

### **Overall observations**

There is a variety of models of PPCs in operation. In general, the groups represented appeared to be happy with the model they are using. All of them struggle, to varying degrees, with their role, relations and responsibilities and with decision-making. It is remarkable how much time this work takes, but participants seemed convinced that things are best when they grow slowly, and reflection on experience is vital. Guidance and support from diocesan sources are important and greatly valued.

### **Experience and reflections of participants**

#### ***Formation, training and learning from experience***

Initial formation and training are vital. Sessions include the purpose of the council and basic group skills that are required, but also the reason for PPCs – the ‘why?’ question. This means exploring

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baptism, community and mission, and coming to a shared vision of PPC. Ongoing formation – even to the point of having a slot at each meeting – is also important. In this way groups learn how to make the most of the different gifts which the members bring to the table. Sharing experience and learning together in inter-parish groupings are also very helpful.

### *Surprises, joys and challenges*

Members come to recognise how much goodness and wisdom there is in the group. There was some surprise at how different people are, when known, from how they were previously perceived. It is surprising how much growth and change are needed so that the PPC can actually function freely; how much work is involved in the parish; how much is going on and the energy that can be generated when people come together for parish events.

There is joy in camaraderie, in the openness of priests, in being in a group where faith matters, with people who are ‘committed but not competitive’. There is joy in taking ownership and responsibility in the parish. In particular, the commissioning ceremony itself was very memorable. It is also a source of joy to experience personal growth and the cooperation of parishioners.

The challenges of remaining focused and of finding ways of moving forward were articulated. The challenge of communication came up again and again, as did the challenge of encouraging people to be involved in the parish, and to uphold Christian practice e.g. keeping Sunday as the Lord’s Day.

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### *Continuity and sustainability*

A vision is what sustains. Continuity is important between successive PPCs, but it is also vital that there be new members. While returning to the community for mandate was considered essential in newer councils, there was a noticeable tendency for longer established councils to co-opt new members at agreed intervals. It was felt that guidelines are necessary, for example, to put a limit on the number of terms any one person spends on the PPC. Developing a new council brings its own challenges e.g. how to pass on what has been learned. Changeover of priests is also a challenge to sustainability.

### *The Fruits*

Some thought that the PPC represents 'things being done differently', that the impact of having a council is, in fact, 'powerful'. In other cases it was doubtful if the PPC would be missed! The PPC as a place of prayer and reflection is a source of enrichment for the parish. A proactive Parish Priest is still a hugely decisive factor.

### **Final points**

Members of PPCs need to be both representative of the whole parish and capable of fulfilling their purpose. This mix can be difficult to achieve in practice. Some felt it important that ministry groups be represented.

It takes time for trust to grow, for the PPC as a body to become established and to get to know and be known in the parish. The term of office should take this into account.

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It is essential that the PPC keeps up its connection with the people, groups and services in the parish.

The PPC is called essentially to review, reflect on and plan the pastoral life of the parish. At the same time, it is important that the PPC is actively engaged in the life of the parish. The nature of its involvement will vary depending on the level of activity in the parish before the introduction of the pastoral council. PPC projects can be ‘embryonic events’.

Learning from experience is very important. All concerned, priests and parishioners, are being challenged to readjust their interpretation of their roles and what it means to be a parish.



### Reflection

When Sr Anne gave an interim account of the project to the Annual Convention of Diocesan Delegates in May 2007, Sarah Barry (formerly of Parish Development and Renewal, Dublin, and of the Bishops’ Commission for Justice and Social Affairs) offered a reflection on its findings from pastoral–theological and organisational–learning perspectives. What follows is a synopsis of Sarah’s paper.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The full text is available on [www.renewal.ie](http://www.renewal.ie).

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As new ways of working are being developed (in any organisation, Church included), it seems useful for us to understand how institutions, in general, change in response to new external and internal circumstances and also how they can *learn* to drive that change in response to what the world needs and is calling for *now*.

### ***Culture, tools, and support and sustainability***

Changes in structure, such as that represented by the introduction of PPCs, is always accompanied by cultural shifts. In times of change there is often both a lack of confidence and confusion around roles and responsibilities. The language that is used is often indicative of tacit assumptions which are being lived out in the ways we work and how we think about that work. When cultural shifts are taking place we often find ourselves in a time of transition when our 'mental maps' remain unchanged even though we have created new structures. When this is the case the system continues to recreate its culture in tacit and unreflected ways. We have created the councils; we also need to change our minds to make them successful.

One of the best ways for making changes happen is to *change the way we talk* about our situation and ourselves. Often by simply using a new phrase or question, everything is transformed. Another important means of driving change is learning to work strategically. This means being clear about what it is we wish to achieve and then working out the best plan to reach our goal. Learning how to recognise the fruitfulness that is the result of the labour of the parish

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pastoral council is an important tool that needs to be developed if people are to be kept interested, involved and believing that councils are useful, do-able and fruitful. We have a long tradition of discernment in the Church that we can draw on to develop our ability to collectively listen deeply and become aware of that which may not be obvious at first sight or analysis.

It is important to make sure that councils are sustainable and that those participating in them are supported – a true theology of communion. Councils will be sustained where leaders are proactive in the ways that new members are welcomed, keeping in mind that each time a new person joins a group, that group changes.

Some people think that parish pastoral councils are either ‘talking shops’ or ‘organising committees’; neither is true. We need to think about a new *mode* of ‘doing’. It is a lot of *work* and a concrete *action* to think strategically or to be reflective and, as groups, it is a skill to be learnt. It is equally practical and useful to identify the triggers or levers that will result in changes, giving traction to the efforts of a pastoral council.

### ***Managing/Embracing Change – Some Critical Questions***

At a time of significant change it is good to understand *what* is changing, to know what *needs* to change (in us) and knowing *how* to make that happen. To find that balance between change and continuity implies including everyone in the system. Many parishes are facing already the experience of being a parish without a priest; in this case the questions, ‘How are we Church?’ and ‘Why are we Church?’ take on a

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very deep edge. It also implies becoming aware of *that* which is so essential (to us and our project) that it cannot change; it implies re-evaluating the context in ways that enable us to see with new eyes.

How can we discover a fresh ecclesiology in practice – a living ‘People of God’ experience? We need an honest analysis of the blocks and exclusions that continue to hamper our efforts to build a more inclusive and participative ministry and practice, we need to learn to name our problems and not be fearful of them. Finally, how can we build connection and coherence within and throughout our system? How can we build links with a world that wants to know of us: What do you stand for? Why do you deserve my attention? What is the unseen gift of parish pastoral councils? How, as a Church, can we learn to contemplate together – our world, ourselves, our faith?

### ***Connections with a wider world***

There is only one world that we in the Church are making just as much as anybody else. The form of Church organisation called hierarchy is being challenged in many ways due to changes in how society bestows authority. Within hierarchical models of organisation, developing a culture of care is problematic since the division of labour separates decision-making from implementation and creates fragmentation in many ways. Hierarchical organisations also seem to have trouble valuing the importance of processes such as inclusion of new members, reflection and learning. It is difficult to build and maintain coherence and connection at all levels. Tasks such as managing emergent direction and ownership of different initiatives are often a challenge.

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In many different disciplines and organisations there are people seeking more participative and relational approaches to working together. It seems that in the complexity and sophistication of a globalised and technologically advanced world there is a desire to readdress the human spirit in the midst of such advances.

All of this requires, in today's world, a more serious engagement with training, tools and methods for managing change. The good news is that the Church is doing this with the setting up of parish pastoral councils and other initiatives. The main message is that organisational models across the board are being questioned and new structures and methods and approaches are being sought. It seems that our response can be to learn about our changing situation by not being afraid to follow our questions, especially the questions we have about power. The way power is knitted into the fabric of our Church relationships is very important and often an issue that we shy away from. It is helpful though to think and talk about power as something positive and good which we all share, moving our thinking about power as something we have *over* others to thinking about power as a resource to act, a 'power-to' make changes together, for example. Finally we can trust our resources: ourselves, our context (the world and time we live in) and our tradition. Maybe the most important thing parish pastoral councils can do right now is to learn to re-imagine what 'consensus' means in practice. It is arguable that model of consensus in pastoral councils is a greatly untapped resource and gift for our Church and the world.



## APPENDIX 2

# Notes on Formation and Initial Training for Parish Pastoral Councils

In section 3.4 above, the importance of education for the whole parish was emphasised.

This formation of all parishioners as well as the members of the parish pastoral council needs to highlight the mission and ministry of Jesus, and of the Church as the community of disciples today.

Experience has shown that once pastoral council members have been designated in a parish, a formation and training programme is essential. There is an emerging consensus that four or five nights are an adequate and probably optimum provision. It is also clear that follow-up/accompaniment for review of experience and ongoing learning is vital.

The style of PPC training sessions is very important. This is a group of adults who will learn best through methods that are based on the fundamental principles of adult education. Training sessions should be as interactive as possible and the gifts, experience and wisdom of all should be respected. The use of visual material and methods that are reflective are very helpful.

Topics for initial training sessions:

- the PPC as a structure that reflects at parish level the nature of Church and the diocesan vision;
- the scope and tasks of the PPC;

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- the spiritual growth of members through their experience of ministry in the PPC – including a sense that God’s work comes to pass in the working of the PPC;
- roles within the PPC and some skills training for effective meetings; orientation towards the first meetings.

While contexts differ greatly, the initial training should encourage PPCs to resist the temptation to become only a project-action group. Since a core ‘activity’ of the council is pastoral planning, the initial and ongoing training that is offered should enable members to understand and undertake this task. The consultation and reflection that are involved in drawing up a parish mission statement provide good training ground.

Helpful training programme materials are available on [parishrenewal.dublindiocese.ie/pastoral\\_councils.htm](http://parishrenewal.dublindiocese.ie/pastoral_councils.htm).

## APPENDIX 3

# Elements of a Constitution for Parish Pastoral Councils

1. The Council shall be called '[PARISH] Parish Pastoral Council'.
2. The Council is a group of people which is representative of the parish community as a whole and whose purpose is the promotion of the mission of the Church in [PARISH] parish.

The Council is a consultative group whose function is to co-operate with the parish leaders in designing ways and means by which the parish can best fulfil its mission.

3. The ordained priests and other pastoral staff shall be members of the Council in virtue of their offices and/or roles.

Parish representatives will be selected as follows ...

[SCHOOLS, OTHER ORGANISATIONS] will each be invited to nominate a representative.

The Parish Priest shall be free to co-opt additional members from the parish community on to the Council to enhance its representative character, or because of their experience and/or expertise. The number of co-opted members and the parish team taken together may not exceed the number of elected members.

4. The Parish Priest shall be President of the Council.

The chairperson and secretary shall be elected by the members, and shall remain in office for [AGREED TERM].

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5. The term of the Council shall be [AGREED TERM] years.  
No elected or co-opted member shall serve more than two consecutive terms, but shall be eligible for membership subsequently.  
Members failing to attend [AGREED NUMBER] meetings without reasonable explanation shall be deemed to have resigned.
6. The normal schedule of meetings shall be agreed annually.  
The Parish Priest or his delegate shall preside at all meetings.  
The chairperson and secretary of the Council are responsible for convening meetings and compiling the agenda. All members may contribute items.  
The completed agenda will be circulated one week before the meeting.
7. The position of the Council on any issue is arrived at by consensus.
8. The Parish Priest as president of the Council may convene and chair an extraordinary meeting should he consider it necessary.
9. This Constitution has been approved by Bishop [...], Bishop of [DIOCESE] on [DATE].
10. The Constitution may be amended by the Council with the approval of the Bishop.



## APPENDIX 4

### Resources

- Dalton, William, *Parish Pastoral Councils*, Dublin: Columba Press, 1990.
- Deegan, Arthur X. (ed.), *Developing a Vibrant Parish Pastoral Council*, New York: Paulist Press, 1995.
- Doherty Johnny CSsR, with Oliver Crilly, Frank Dologhan, Paddy Curran, *Think Big, Act Small, Working at Collaborative Ministry through Parish Pastoral Councils*, Dublin: Veritas, 2005.
- Ferguson Jane, *A Handbook for Parish Pastoral Councils*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2005.
- Fischer Mark, *Pastoral Councils in Today's Catholic Parish*, Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2001.
- Gubish, Mary Ann and Susan Jenny S.C. with Arlene McGannon, *Revisoning the Parish Council, A Workbook*, New York: Paulist Press, 2001.
- Howes, Robert G., *Creating an Effective Parish Pastoral Council*, Collegetown, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Sweetser, Thomas P., S.J., *The Parish As Covenant: A Call To Pastoral Partnership*, Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001.
- Sweetser, Thomas P., S.J., *Keeping the Covenant: Taking Parish to the Next Level*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007.

## APPENDIX 5

### Members of the Task Group

#### **Fr Liam Power**

A priest of the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore, Fr Liam is currently Diocesan Director of Pastoral Development. Formerly lectured in Theology in St John's College, Waterford and St Patrick's College, Carlow.

#### **Sr Mary Kenny PBVM**

Formerly a teacher and School Principal in the West of Ireland including the Gaeltacht area of An Cheathrú Rua, Sr Mary is currently a member of the team in the Western Theological Institute. She has wide experience in pastoral facilitation and training, including setting up parish pastoral councils.

#### **Fr Ed Grimes CSSp**

Currently Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies, Fr Ed's missionary experience includes seventeen years as Director of the Gambia Pastoral Institute. He has taught Theology and Canon Law at the Kimmage Mission Institute.

## Appendix 5: Members of the Task Group

### **Ms Sandra Garry**

Sandra is a member of the administrative staff of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference at Columba Centre, Maynooth.

### **Ms Jane Ferguson**

Resource Coordinator with Parish Development and Renewal in the Archdiocese of Dublin, Jane is author of *A Handbook for Parish Pastoral Councils*. Jane has trained and supported pastoral development in a wide variety of settings.

### **Fr Johnny Doherty CSsR**

Currently Rector of the Redemptorist Community in Esker, Athenry, Co. Galway, Fr Johnny has spent many years as a Parish Missioner, a Retreat Director, leader of Marriage Encounter and Marriage Specialist with ACCORD. Formerly a Director of Veritas Parish Renewal Resources, Fr Johnny is co-author of *Think Big, Act Small: Working at Collaborative Ministry through Parish Pastoral Councils*, Dublin, Veritas, 2005.

### **Fr Willie Dalton**

A priest of the diocese of Ossory, Fr Willie is currently Parish Priest in Callan, Co. Kilkenny. Formerly, he taught Theology and Canon Law at St Kieran's College, Kilkenny and St Patrick's College, Carlow. He is author of *Pastoral Councils, A Handbook* and editor of *A Parish Pastoral Directory*, Dublin: Columba Press, 1995.

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### **Mr John Colgan**

A former teacher and School Principal in Northern Ireland, John now works as an educational and pastoral adviser. He has widespread involvement in diocesan and parish planning, and in training parish pastoral councils. He participates in the International Convention of Pastoral Planners and Trainers of Pastoral Councils.

### **Sr Anne Codd PBVM**

Currently resource person for the Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development, Sr Anne has been involved in school-based education, in parish pastoral ministry, in education and training for ministry and in facilitating pastoral development.

### **Commission for Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development**

Bishop Jim Moriarty (Chair), Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin

Bishop Bill Murphy, Bishop of Kerry

Bishop Frank Lagan, Auxiliary Bishop of Derry

Bishop Donal McKeown, Auxiliary Bishop of Down and Connor

### ***Advisory Board***

#### *Armagh Province:*

Sr Suzie Duffy, Kilmore and Mr Brian McKee, Down and Connor

#### *Dublin Province:*

Sr Anne Frances Carroll, Dublin and Fr Lar O'Connor, Ferns

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### *Cashel Province:*

Sr Emmanuel Leonard, Cloyne and Fr Liam Power, Waterford

### *Tuam Province:*

Sr Mary Kenny, Western Theological Institute and Fr Muredach Tuffy, Killala

### *Catechetics Commission of Irish Bishops' Conference:*

Mr Brendan O'Reilly, National Director

### *Conference of Religious of Ireland:*

Sr Marianne O'Connor OSU, Director General

### *Irish Missionary Union:*

Sr Joan Murray OLA, Executive

### *National Conference of Priests of Ireland:*

Fr Frank Bradley, Executive

### *Knights of St Columbanus:*

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