

Facing the Present Situation

Ballarat Council of Priests Meeting – November 2007

by John McKinnon

The present situation

Our current local situation continues to evolve, and needs to be addressed, preferably urgently, and in the light of reasonable consensus (in our case, among us priests).

I believe that God is with us in this current situation:

- ready to enlighten and empower us, as priests, and as a diocese as a whole;
- asking nothing of any of us that is beyond our personal capacity.

We cannot do the impossible, but we can seek to keep tuned in to God.

Discussion:

How We in the Diocese are Handling the On-going Changes.

Process:

1. Introduction – J. McKinnon (3 minutes)

Results of the discussion will be given to the Priests' Council Executive with the expectation that they will keep the process going.

2. Discuss in small groups (10 minutes).

[Groups be composed of three separate age-groups: -50; 51-65; 66+. Individual age-groups may need to break up into smaller ones of about 5/6 priests.]

A. List some of the positive things the diocese has done/is doing over the past couple of years to face the on-going changes? (3 minutes)

B. List some of the things that you would like to see happening, at diocesan or zone level, to handle the developing scene? (3 minutes)

C. Assess the value of this suggestion:

That the priests meet as a body over the course of a few days (or as long as is necessary)

- *to monitor the impact on us of the changing scene;*
- *to explore how our ministry might need to change;*
- *to seek an agreed approach that takes note of each one's capacities and readiness.*

Points in favour of our meeting: (2 minutes)

Points against our meeting: (2 minutes)

3. Groups report back to plenary session: (10 minutes)

4. Groups regroup to discuss how the Council Executive might continue the process
(5 minutes)

5. Suggestions reported to the plenary session. (3 minutes)

Appendix

A General Overview of our Diocese:

1. We have a number of *major centres* that, presumably, will require a resident, fit and able-bodied priest: Cathedral (Wendouree/Ballarat East/Redan/Sebastopol), Warrnambool, Mildura, Horsham, Colac, Hamilton, Swan Hill.
Possibly, these major centres can employ pastoral associates, deacons, or priests from overseas.

2. Some *middle-size centres*, that do not present the same focussed workload of the major centres, but that will still require a resident and reasonably healthy priest (possibly slowing down), able to serve a number of smaller satellite centres. Some middle-size centres may be able to employ full/part-time religious or lay pastoral associates. The supply of suitable religious seems to be diminishing; they would need to be found. [If local lay associates were appointed, they may become more permanent than the priests.]
In the longer-term, for a variety of reasons [size of centre, financial capacity, suitability of personnel, etc], pastoral associates may not be an option in these centres. Certainly, current priorities would need to change.

3. We are left with many *smaller towns* (some of them parishes or former parishes), and numerous *even smaller local faith communities*. Presumably these will be grouped in various (ever-readjusting) clusters.
They may be ministered to by aged (/ageing) priests, younger priests, assisted by full/part time religious or lay parish leaders.

B. Some Observations:

The priestly job description is changing.

1. Some of us will operate largely as we have been used to: resident and work-focussed in major centres, with their limited number of satellites.

2. Others will be asked increasingly to minister to multiple centres, none of which require (or can be spared) a focussed priestly presence and involvement, some of which centres may have full-time parish leaders or part-time parish leaders.

This will probably be a roving ministry, involving an increasing amount of travel. If the clusters are extended, such roving priests might work as a team of two or three, based in the same presbytery, and with a chance, perhaps, to specialise in such things as youth ministry, administration, school support, ministry formation, etc.

3. Others may not be healthy enough, interested in, or equipped for working in either the major centres or the multiple, smaller, and distant-from-each-other, clustered communities.

Some parishes, suitable for such priests, may need to be maintained.

Matters relevant to the smaller faith communities.

Small faith communities cover a spectrum.

- Some have little potential beyond low-level continuation of what they are doing at the moment. They require minimal administration and support, but appreciate occasional Eucharist.
- Some have the potential to undertake (more) intense pastoral activity. For this they may require adequate administration, and the identification, formation and support of key-leaders.

The future of smaller faith communities (as available priests become fewer):

- Some may choose to grow in vitality and spirit. Realistically, they will not have much “hands-on” involvement of a priest, beyond sacramental ministry. To grow in vitality, they will require formation and on-going support – either from their roving priest, or diocesan personnel, or both.
- Some that, for a variety of reasons (e.g. aging members, lack of leaders), do not take the option to become more alive and vital may be allowed to die out slowly, and be given minimal support beyond the occasional Eucharist.
- Some may choose to close down immediately.

While leaving the choice about their future to each community, would there be value in the diocese’s having a preferred option on the continued operation of small faith communities?