

Roles of a Diocesan Pastoral Council

John McKinnon 2003

I gather that the DPC has the feeling that it has lost its way. Most people in the diocese seem to care little about it or its activities. It is proving increasingly impossible to get people to take membership. Parishes are not interested to provide possible candidates, people are not prepared to accept nomination, those that do may not necessarily be the most suitable but simply the most willing. Perhaps the DPC itself wonders what it has achieved.

I think it good that it has requested an evaluation. The experience of the last few years can be an opportunity to reflect and to learn. It is important that we ask the right questions.

I have a thousand questions running around in my own head. What follows will be an opportunity to pin some of them down in the hope of sorting out the important ones.

The Initial Dream

What were the hopes when it was founded? Perhaps that might be better phrased: what different people had hopes? What were the hopes of the bishop? What were the hopes of interested laity generally across the diocese? What were the hopes of those who offered themselves for membership of the Council? I expect that they may be different hopes.

From the bishop's point of view.

I suppose that in some quarters of the Church, to have a DPC would look like having a method of shared responsibility, shared for the purpose of drawing on broader experience and therefore wiser decision-making, and also as a way of countering a clericalist/triumphalist model of Church, and facilitating the voices of all constituents to be heard, and in the process to gain broader and more willing acceptance of decisions.

While agreeing with these hopes, I am not sure that the DPC measured up to the hopes, or even could have measured up to them.

I think it is important for the bishop to clearly state what he is seeking.

Does he want advice to help him in the directions and decisions he takes? Does he want to look "democratic"? Does he want to feel that he is not alone when he makes decisions but has the support, as far as possible, of the diocese as a whole?

- In fact, in some issues at some times, he simply needs to be directive, irrespective of what the rest of the diocese thinks, perhaps because of urgency and restraints of time or because of the nature of the matters needing his direction.
- Other decisions are more administrative, not involving acceptance by the diocese, but needing to be well made all the same.

- At other times, he may need to acquire as broad a support as possible of the members of the diocese, and has the necessary time to work towards that. That support may be a factor of their feeling part of the process of consultation and decision-making.

I presume that a body such as the DPC would be of assistance only in the third instance. He does not need it in the first, and it may not have the competence in the second.

As far as the second option is concerned. Ultimately the bishop is the one who makes the decisions, or who ultimately bears the responsibility for decisions taken. So, at most, a DPC is essentially consultative. In that case, the bishop needs (or seeks) advice.

Advice

What sort of advice does he need for decisions to be well made? He needs information: of needs, of what is happening, of how people may feel about certain issues and possibilities.

He also needs (or could benefit from) help in evaluating the scene as presented, and making sense of it. He needs to be helped to discern what he could well encourage and what he should possibly discourage, as well as what he might just let continue to happen to see what eventuates.

Information

For information: what sort of people and what sort of structure could best serve this purpose? If it is to be a small group able to be convened easily and regularly, obviously people with their ear to the ground, and who cover the broad spectrum of attitudes and experiences of people in the diocese. But another structure could also literally give everyone the opportunity to feed in, as happened to some extent through the Assembly process, though such consultation can be done only irregularly.

Personally, I think that a system involving periodic Assembly processes of consultation and prioritisation would give a sound sense of where people are. What would be then needed would be some further structure to make happen what was prioritised, to be able to report back to the diocese, and eventually perhaps to evaluate outcomes and make suggestions for follow-up or improvement. This structure would need to be held accountable, possibly at the next Assembly.

This group would need to be authorised by the bishop and be given the necessary authority to talk with heads of department, etc. They would hold departments answerable to the bishop (and perhaps to the Assembly – at least as far as reporting on performance).

Evaluation

For evaluation of what is happening around the diocese: what sort of people or structure could best serve this purpose?

Personally, I think such people would need wisdom, a sense of what the Church sees as important. They might also have a good sense of human nature. Perhaps people with a vested interest in outcomes might also be included, such as heads of the various diocesan departments (though I am not sure of this). The bishop would need to trust them, and for that purpose they might be best chosen by him directly, or chosen by him after seeking nominations from around the diocese.

Those on this body would not be there to forward the interests of others. They would speak out of their own experience and expertise.

This analysis is based on some assumptions.

- We live in a time of change. There will not be unanimity of attitudes around the diocese, and consensus on many things will be difficult to achieve and even then only on fairly unsatisfactory levels, if at all, given the degree of polarisation of some groups and individuals. General ownership of non-necessary matters will be impossible. It would be up to the bishop, on advice, to decide what is officially encouraged and what is not.
- Since we live in a time of change, on many issues it is impossible to know what is the best way (or ways) forward. Visions that energise and empower will not be generally accepted, and will probably be few and far between. In order for such visions to enthuse, they may need to be propagated by fairly charismatic individuals – people who are leaders not by virtue of authorisation from above but who can engender enthusiasm somehow themselves. I do not believe that such visions and charismatic persons are generated by elected Councils and consultative groups.

My personal view is that, after some evaluation by wise persons, the best way for the bishop to exercise his delegated leadership is to give room and possibly encouragement to others who have a vision and the energy to promote it. It will appear messy, but it will probably be alive. We do not live in a time when all people will be prepared to march in unison to the same tune, however attractive that might seem to some.

- I believe that the idea of representation is seriously flawed. It is impossible for one person to represent the views and attitudes of a parish, much less a region of parishes. The thought of representation can weigh as a burden on those given the impossible role. And a representative cannot present with the appropriate verve and enthusiasm the view of another, particularly if they do not personally share it or understand it thoroughly.
- The process of election, in the absence of great general interest, does not necessarily come up with the most suitable people. People generally do not know many people well, particularly in a bigger parish. Without wishing to judge present incumbents, I do not know if I personally would feel confident

in the competence of those presently on the DPC. Given that feeling, I would not necessarily support their decisions.

In the light of these comments, I think that the present Vision and Role Statements of the DPC are most inadequate.

Vision Statement

1. Whatever might have been the original intention, the DPC is not in fact elected by the people of the diocese. Most would not the least idea who is on the DPC, and also probably do not care all that much.
2. It is impossible for any group of people to represent in any meaningful sense the parish communities of the diocese.
3. An elected group cannot promote and engender hope and enthusiasm. Someone fired by the Spirit might be able to engender hope in a few like-minded people. I don't want to hose down interest, just to keep the vision realistic.

Role Statement for the Council.

1. An elected group can be authorised by the bishop, but that does not empower them to lead. Leadership cannot be authorised from above. Genuine leadership is given from below. (Unless we are talking of leaders whom no one necessarily follows).
2. A sound knowledge of pastoral needs is a factor of discernment, not simply of observation. Elected persons do not necessarily have the gift of discernment.
3. To develop an appropriate response to identified needs calls for expertise and familiarity with many things.
4. I do not understand this role.

Role Statement for Members

1. Elected members will not necessarily be either visionaries or leaders.
2. Certainly they can communicate to those they (allegedly) represent, but only in the sense of handing on information, not in engendering hope and enthusiasm.
3. There are no easily available means of listening to what people want, and what they want is not necessarily what they need. Discernment can detect the difference. But discernment is a gift and presupposes a familiarity with the ways of God.
4. I wish them all the best.
5. If the bishop is a member of the Council (Vision 2), I find it hard to know how the individual member becomes accountable to the bishop. There are no adequate structures for elected representatives to be accountable to those they presume to represent (nor are most people interested in hearing).