

Re-structuring – An Appendix

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The following reflections are directed specifically at situations where there is not only no priest but also no religious sister or brother or formally qualified layperson appointed as sole Parish Leader. They should be relevant, however, to other parishes where there is still a Parish Priest or Parish Leader but where the priest or leader could sooner or later be withdrawn. The reflections also assume a familiarity with the points made in my former article: "Restructuring – Looking at the Issues".

We are confronting new situations in an increasing number of places in our diocese. It is a time of opportunity. In responding well to them, parishes may become even more alive. But there are obvious losses as well that need to be owned and possibly grieved. The issue of parishes without priests needs to be addressed, but before a significant solution can be given, a lot of previous preparation and formation of both priests and laity must first take place.

Priest as Sacrament

Priests by ordination have a sacramental role. They are the parish's symbolic point of contact with the broader Church of the diocese. In a sense they constitute it as a localisation of the Church rather than as an unconnected, independent and autonomous congregation. To a lesser extent Parish Leaders who are religious sisters or brothers share that role by virtue of formal appointment by the bishop and particularly their "inherited aura" as religious.

It is difficult to envisage how lay community leaders, whose essential *milieu* is precisely the local community, could embody this "sacramental" role.

Point of Contact with the Diocese

At a more practical level the Parish Priest or Parish Leader has also been the channel through which the spirit and sub-culture of the diocese have been brought to the parish. They have kept it abreast of the ideas, attitudes, policies and practices circulating in the diocese. They have been the living link to the life of the diocese. Without them there is the possibility that the parish community will be cut off from its life source and stagnate. The Parish Priest and Leader have been helped in this dimension of their role by their participation in the Presbyteral Council at plenary and/or zone meetings, in-service weeks and workshops, and by other consultative or informative channels.

In the absence of the Parish Priest/Leader other means will have to be found and exploited to ensure that the parish does not get cut off from the organic life of the diocese. The parish's participation in the Transition Team of the Regional Catholic Community will be essential, but may not be adequate.

The community leaders may have to be personally connected and animated by someone(s) at diocesan level deputed to this task. This could be the role of "dean" or "mentor" or someone with a similar responsibility. It will need to be a "hands-on" role, and certainly not a mere administrative formality. A priest already resident in a parish

could possibly fulfill the role provided that he had the necessary time and skill. But it need not be a priest. It could be anyone else with the necessary skill and appropriate authorisation.

Pastoral Care

The Parish Priest/Leader has also coordinated and overseen the pastoral activity of the faith communities, and been its point of referral and often its chief practitioner. Most of these activities will need to continue in the absence of the resident full-time priest/leader.

It could be helpful to review and categorise some of these activities:

Communication

*maintain the parish census
neighbourhood visitation
regular bulletins and possible newsletter
social gatherings
letters from headquarters
special collections, Project Compassion*

Pastoral & Liturgical

*Conducting liturgical ceremonies:
weekly Assemblies of the Word
funerals: preparing for, conducting and follow-up bereavement support
marriage preparation; administrative and pastoral
CWL and St V de P
bringing communion to the sick
visitation to the housebound
organising: reconciliation & anointing of the sick ceremonies
looking after the church building*

Sacramental & Catechetical

*baptism preparation and follow-up
family-based sacramental programs for reconciliation, confirmation and eucharist
RCIA
liaison with school
catechetics in government schools
reconciliation
anointing of the sick*

Faith Development

prayer groups
discussion groups
scripture sharing
social justice issues
special efforts/lectures etc.

The list can look formidable. Yet many of these activities, to some extent or other, need to happen in all of the separate faith communities. Some of them are already being taken care of by parishioners informally, or could be done without much organisation, particularly in the smaller communities. Yet there needs to be someone who ensures that nothing important is overlooked and that what is necessary in fact gets done.

For some pastoral activities to be done effectively, parishioners will initially need formal training, that may also call for on-going follow-up. This training will have to be coordinated and orchestrated. In some cases some process of evaluation will be necessary.

Whereas in smaller communities, all parishioners will need to be involved to some extent in the communities' activities, it may be necessary to have different people in charge of the different areas to ensure that the necessary tasks are organised. Each of the four major areas of activity listed in the footnote, for example, may each have a designated leader to do the necessary coordination.

Community Leaders

This could mean that each faith community has a team of two, three or four leaders, discerned by the community, who together would accept responsibility for overseeing the faith life of the community as a whole. It would be important to aim to have some gender balance among them and that, as far as possible, different age groups be represented. Whereas young people would be encouraged as much as possible to exercise their gifts in the faith community, their youth may well preclude them from community leadership. On the other hand, it would be a pity if all the leaders were elderly.

The leadership in question calls for more than natural organisational ability. Faith leadership is a gift of the Spirit that is not given to everyone. Ministry in faith leadership might be better viewed as a vocation than as a temporary undertaking accepted out of a sense of decency or willingness to take one's turn (as one might do with the local social club). The people discerned for this role may be the only ones in their community with the necessary giftedness. They may need to exercise their role indefinitely with no agreed time limit.

Given the already considerable involvement of many people in a variety of civic, social and sporting activities within their smaller communities, acceptance of leadership in the local faith community may necessitate their giving up some of these other activities. It will also call for a thoughtful and deliberate prioritisation of their faith commitment. The alternative could well mean their ineffectively trying to squeeze something extra

into an already full schedule, which could in turn easily generate a degree of resentment, as well as lead to possible burnout.

It could be helpful for community leaders within each of the various communities to meet together formally or informally from time to time to support each other and to maintain the unity of the community. They may find it necessary to choose one from their number with the responsibility of coordinating their meetings. Opinions differ on whether a team can function smoothly without a clearly designated leader

These leaders from the various faith communities or a delegate from each of them could perhaps together form a core leadership team of the parish

Parish Structures

The structured connection between the community leaders and the parish as a whole needs to be carefully considered.

So far parishes have generally set up Parish Pastoral Councils as consultative and advisory bodies to the parish priests/leaders. In this new and developing situation, who will make and take responsibility for decisions? And who in turn will be responsible to the bishop and the broader diocese?

At least three options suggest themselves:

1. The community leaders work under the guidance of the Parish Pastoral Council and are accountable to it. The Pastoral Council assumes ultimate responsibility for the parish.
2. The Parish Pastoral Council remains a merely consultative and advisory body to the team of community leaders which becomes the responsible decision-maker.
3. The Parish Pastoral Council is dissolved and replaced by the team of community leaders, the core leadership team, who have the power to co-opt other parishioners for specific tasks.

With regard to the first option, one small point may prove relevant: the agenda content of Pastoral Council meetings has often been fed in from the priest; and he in his turn has been stimulated by the situations he encounters in the parish, by his own reading and other personal sources, and by correspondence from various diocesan offices and other bodies. This has been appropriate when the role of the Council has been mainly consultative. One might wonder who would provide the stimulation and direction in the absence of the priest/leader.

Finance Committee

Whatever body is chosen as ultimately responsible for the parish's pastoral concerns, there would be a need to clearly structure its relationship to the Finance Committee.

Possible options are:

1. The Finance Committee acts under the authority of the responsible pastoral body.

2. The Finance Committee is autonomous and has the final word on the financial feasibility of pastoral initiatives.
3. The Finance Committee no longer exists separately in its own right and its activities are taken over by the responsible pastoral body.

Whatever option be made, it might help the local Committee if, in consultation with the responsible pastoral body in the parish, it could work out its budget of income and expenditure annually with help from the Diocesan Finance Office, and then be allowed to work independently within that budget. Further dialogue would be called for only in cases where there was need to deviate from the agreed budget.

Accountability

Mutual Support

The body ultimately responsible for the parish would meet not just to determine parish directions, etc. - though a certain amount of parish coordination would no doubt be necessary - but particularly to support each other through the sharing of their experiences and reflecting on them in the light of the Gospel. The frequency of these meetings would be up to themselves to decide – as often as necessary but no more.

Consulting the Local Community

Local community leaders would be directly accountable to their own different communities whom they might call together in general assembly from time to time to revise their vision and to review their interactions.

Consulting the Parish

Whether there would be value in occasional parish assemblies would be a matter for discernment. In some situations the reason why certain faith communities were grouped into the one parish was not their natural affinity but more the practical requirements of their being serviced by a full-time parish priest. The parish was sometimes quite an artificial construct. It could make more sense in some cases for faith communities to remain fairly independent.

Formation for Leadership in Faith

In the past it has often been difficult to enlist people to take leadership positions in parish life. People who have been prepared to accept office in local bodies such as the bowling club or CWA, etc., have been more reluctant to accept office in the Church. This has been due to a number of reasons, among which one could presume a recognition that:

- So long as a priest was in residence, the Church would still go on without the leaders' involvement
- Real responsibility was not really there because the Parish Priest could always override decisions and initiatives.

That may change when there is no longer a Parish Priest/Leader. In the new situation, however, another factor comes on line. Whereas most people would feel and in fact be

competent to take office in local organisations, they would probably not feel competent nor would they necessarily be competent to take leadership in the faith community. Responsible leadership in the local faith community would call for adequate formation in a number of areas.

Sense of Church

Leaders would need some knowledge of how the Church sees itself and acts. Priests and religious to some extent absorb this “sense of Church” through their professional belonging and their particular interests over a long time. Most lay people have not had the same exposure to Church thinking and “politics”.

The more isolated the faith communities are and the less help there is from the Pastoral Planning Office or some figure such as a “dean”, the more necessary it will be for local leaders to be given a more adequate sense of Church. They will need some form of basic ecclesiology presented intelligibly and engagingly, enough to put things in proper perspective in this perplexing time of change. In today’s Church some polarisation occurs in *de facto* attitudes to Church-related issues. The diocese as a whole will need to make a definitive choice and clearly propagate and implement its own ecclesiology at all levels of its life and structure.

Sense of Gospel

Perhaps even more important is a sense of the Gospel. Some people in fact have very worrying ideas about God and God’s will – though this is not restricted only to the laity. A good sense of the Gospel cannot be presumed. In addition, because faith community leaders will at times have to make decisions affecting the life of the faith community and the attitudes of individuals, they will also need some facility in discerning the will of God. For this they will need basic spiritual formation.

Other Skills

Along with this, it would be helpful if they could be helped with the human skills of listening actively, resolving conflict, group dynamics, etc.. There may be local resources that could look to serving these needs.

Parish Culture

Parishioners as a whole, when they no longer have a full-time Parish Priest/Leader, are facing a quite new situation. Whereas considerable effort may have been made to prepare them for change, most people seem reluctant to move until faced with the *fait accompli*. The new situation provides an optimum opportunity to learn, indeed an absolutely necessary opportunity. Attitudes assiduously inculcated over the decades do not change easily. Despite more recent efforts to educate, many parishioners still do not understand the practical meaning and consequences of their needing to accept ownership for the vitality of their faith community, to discover and to exercise their own unique giftedness and to collaborate with each other. It will not be enough to foster the formation of local community leaders unless all members of the community are formed at the same time to embrace the new situation. They will need both education and motivation.

Parish Mission

It could make real sense, before anything is set in place, to conduct some kind of “parish mission” that exposes them to the new sense of Church and its consequences for themselves. The *José Marins Workshop* will no doubt be one instance of the assistance available in this regard to those leaders who will be able to attend, but the whole parish needs to be exposed to their ideas. To reach all the people the “parish mission” could well be mounted in each of the different faith communities and adapted to the unique situation of each.

Follow-Up

In addition to an initial undertaking such as the “parish mission”, some organised follow-up would probably be more than worthwhile. This could take the shape of one evening a month dedicated to some aspect of on-going formation.

Conclusion

If we keep going in the direction in which we are heading, we shall certainly get there! And not many of us really want that. It is of vital concern that practical ways be worked out to assist parishioners to adopt different models of being Church, and that these methods be implemented immediately. The necessary transformations are probably beyond the unaided resources of the parishes themselves. Perhaps some Regional Catholic Communities may have the necessary personnel and resources, but that cannot be presumed. The primary responsibility belongs to the Pastoral Planning Office, working directly itself or by deputing other personnel.

Yet the unfolding future is asking of the diocese questions on which it is important to have some general consensus. If too many wrong directions are taken, it may be difficult to reverse them in the future. In times of change consensus may be difficult to reach. But we must make the effort. We are in time of genuine crisis. The opportunities are wonderful. Perhaps for the first time we are finding people ready to change and to take ownership of their own future. But it is also a time of risk. It may seem too hard, and we may recoil from the challenge facing us. In the midst of our busyness occasioned indeed by the changing scene and the presenting problem of the shortage of clergy, we need to prioritise and have the courage to make choices. We will have to face our mini-deaths so that there might truly be resurrection, whatever shape it may take. Resurrection and success are not necessarily synonymous. Whether our expectations are met or not, our own faithfulness to the lead of the Spirit is the only way to life to the full.