

## DIOCESAN PASTORAL PLAN (pages 30f)

### Working together in the parish

The sacraments lie at the heart of our Catholic life, and these include the Sacrament of Holy Orders by which people are consecrated as Bishops, Priests and Deacons for the service of the Church. However few priests we may have over the coming decades, our priests will remain central and essential to our Catholic communities. Nothing said in this Pastoral Plan about the role of lay people should be seen as undermining the pivotal role of the priest, and especially the parish priest, in the life of every parish. Sharing the ministry of the bishop, the priest is a sacramental image of Christ the Good Shepherd. No-one can replace him in that role. Furthermore, the law of the Church gives the parish priest an ultimate responsibility for all aspects of parish life (including finance and administration, as well as liturgy, catechesis, pastoral care, etc) for which he is answerable to the Bishop and the Diocesan Trustees.

The priest does not lead and serve in isolation, however, but rather in collaboration and partnership with the whole parish community.

“The image of the parish priest as one who “does everything himself” and who is “the king of the parish” must give way to an alternative model of the parish priest “who works with...” despite difficulties and obstacles”  
(*General Pastoral Plan for the Holy Land*, pp.100-1)

“The believing community is the natural place for the life of the priest. It justifies his existence when he lives his identity, vocation and mission in its midst. His life is life within the community, with the community and for the community; and his greatest joy is the accompaniment of the Christian community, patiently, gently and persistently, so that it responds to its vocation and mission. This obliges the priest to reside always and truly in his parish, in order to build it up and make it a community of charity and participation”  
(*General Pastoral Plan for the Holy Land*, p.101)

The primary reason for encouraging and enabling the development in our diocese of greater lay participation is not in order to ‘fill in’ for priests as they become more stretched, but because of the dignity and responsibility which flows from Baptism and Confirmation.

“The Church is not “you” and “us” and “them”, but rather all of us together, each one according to their place and vocation.”  
(*General Pastoral Plan for the Holy Land*, p.110)

Parish and deanery reports suggest there is an enthusiasm and a generous readiness among lay people in almost all parishes to take on many tasks of administration and other forms of leadership so that the priest can focus even more fruitfully on his role as pastor and spiritual leader. Although the parish priest is entrusted by the Bishop with an overall responsibility for the whole life of his parish, which he cannot hand over to others, there is tremendous room for developing the partnership of priest and people in every parish, with lay people being entrusted with the day-to-day administration of much of parish life as well as leadership of local communities within the parish (villages, neighbourhoods, etc), leading Scripture-reflection and prayer groups, catechesis, sacramental preparation, adult education, youth work, sharing chaplaincy work in schools, hospitals, prisons, universities and colleges, social events, welfare work, parish visiting, and ongoing care for the sick, the housebound, and the bereaved. A key role of priests and deacons is to discern the giftedness of lay people and to encourage them to use those gifts, always sensitive to their other responsibilities.

Encouraging lay people to take on such tasks is not simply a matter of helping fewer priests to focus on their vital tasks; it is far more about enabling lay people – women and men - to live more fully their call to active and responsible participation in the life of our Church at every level and in the Church’s mission to the world.

It is essential that the full dignity and equality of **women** be recognised in our diocese, and we hope that lay women will play an ever more fruitful role at the heart of our parish and diocesan life. The development of lay leadership and other ministries (at cluster, deanery and diocesan level, as well as in the parish) should provide opportunities for greater use of so many unused skills and resources, especially the often untapped intellectual and leadership skills of women in the Church.

Lay women are already generally far more involved than lay men in ministry and service in the Church. We also need to ensure that lay **men** of all ages are encouraged and welcomed into forms of leadership and involvement.

It is hoped that the 'Structures for Lay Participation' established on pages 36-37 will provide opportunities for lay women and men to be involved more effectively in decision-making in the parish, cluster, deanery and diocese.

It is all too easy, however, as we seek to involve lay people more in parish life, to put increasing pressures on people who are already busy and burdened, and whose calling may be to live and share the Gospel precisely in their home and workplace rather than by taking on yet more parish activities. Sometimes the best way to enable people to live their true Christian vocation is by reducing rather than increasing the number of 'churchy' duties they so generously take on. The joyful privilege of belonging to God's family involves duty and responsibility, but it should not drain people of their little remaining energy as they struggle to earn a living, bring up a family and cope with the strains and stresses of our world. Many people simply do not have the time to give more of themselves to their local parish, deanery or diocese, and they should not be asked or expected to do so. There are some people who give much of their limited time to the Church who perhaps should be giving some or all of that time to their families as part of their sacred vocation as spouse and parent. It is in their ordinary daily lives, nourished each Sunday at Mass by the Word of God and the Bread of Life, that they live and share their Catholic faith.



### Needs and Skills Audits

Every member of our church communities has God-given gifts and talents for the service of Christ in his Church and the world. Each is a vital member of the Body of Christ. No-one plays the role of the 'appendix' in that Body! Everyone is needed (see St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, ch. 12, verses 4-30).

Before anyone is invited to offer their gifts and talents, each parish community must first explore what forms of ministry and service are most needed for the development of its life, liturgy and mission. What are the gaps in the parish, especially in the light of your local discussions on 'Forward & Outward Together' and this Diocesan Pastoral Plan? **A 'Needs Audit' should precede any 'Skills Audit'.**

Once the needs have been identified, simple but clear 'job descriptions' could usefully be drawn up so that those offering themselves – and the church community they are to serve – know what to expect. Our church communities are full of gifts and talents, and they need to be revealed, discovered and used where possible, always with sensitivity to the limits of people's time and energy. Once generously offered, every effort should be made to follow up and use those skills.

A 'skills audit' of some kind, perhaps linked with a general census, may be the best way of discovering what people have to offer and inviting them to become more involved in the life of the church. Such a questionnaire might well include a general question such as "What specialist skills do you have which you would be prepared to put at the service of the Church?", as well as a 'tick list' of forms of service in which they might be interested, based on the 'Needs Audit' previously carried out. People should be asked to indicate a willingness to train when appropriate for any ministry or service. Not all forms of service require training. Some people will already have the skills and expertise required for those that do.

- (1) We should not always wait for people to volunteer. There are times when it is best pro-actively to **invite people** to offer their time and talents for a particular service.
- (2) **An annual 'Parish Opportunities Fair'**, with stalls advertising various opportunities for service in a parish, can be a fruitful and fun way of encouraging people to sign up for ministries and service. It could be organised on the lines of the beginning-of-year 'Freshers Fairs' at universities, perhaps combined with a parish fete or social activity.



### Greater lay involvement & lay leadership

Lay people need responsibility, opportunity and encouragement. For some, this means deeper involvement and participation in the life of the life, liturgy and mission of the local church community. For others, it will mean sharing in leadership.

Several deaneries and parishes suggested greater use of lay pastoral assistants, coordinators and administrators, but no consensus on this has yet emerged. For some parishes, the possible funding implications are a disincentive, although it should be noted that Brentwood Diocese operates a widespread system of voluntary pastoral assistants with an established training two-year programme.

Once again, flexibility is required. The parishes in our diocese are often very different to each other with regard to the size and average age of the congregation, financial resources and general needs. Some parishes are already well-served by a team of volunteers. A few already have full-time or part-time lay people supporting the life of the parish, including pastoral assistants, parish secretaries, site managers, administrators. One thing is certain, however. In every parish, lay people should increasingly be entrusted with many if not most of the administrative tasks, as well as participating more fully in pastoral care and outreach. In developing job descriptions for those who take on such roles, it is important to distinguish pastoral ministries of evangelisation, catechesis, care, etc from roles of administration. Both are important to any parish; some may well be combined in one person with multiple responsibilities; but they are different roles requiring different skills and different training.

**It is diocesan policy that we develop different forms of lay leadership in every parish and across the diocese.**

Besides the possible use of full or part-time pastoral assistants, administrators, etc, this should include the leadership and coordination of:

- (1) smaller communities within parishes (villages, neighbourhood groups, etc),
- (2) adult formation and catechetical programmes including sacramental preparation
- (3) evangelising teams
- (4) youth work
- (5) pastoral care of the sick, housebound, bereaved, etc

Some concern was expressed in parish reports that such lay leaders should not take over the distinctive role of the priest. This concern is echoed in *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, but any true working in partnership in the Catholic Church will always involve ordained ministers and lay people exercising their distinctive roles, in full harmony and with full respect for each other.

Such involvement by lay people should be as wide as possible in each parish, rather than focused on a handful of key people. 'Working together' is as vital for lay leaders among themselves as it is for priests among themselves and with deacons and lay people.

There are parishes where a few people seem to do everything. On the one hand, their generous dedication should be welcomed with gratitude: most parishes need such people. On the other hand, those few are in an important position to draw others into deeper involvement in the parish community. The more people who are actively involved at the heart of parish life, the happier the parish community will be. The service of the 'faithful few' will only change if everyone is made to feel they are a vital part of the life and work of the church, with their own gifts and talents to offer.

"Lay leadership supported by good training should be key to the overall development of the diocese"  
(*individual response*)

"Lay leadership is crucial and must be taken seriously" (*Costessey parish*)

## **Formation and training for ministry and service**

Prudent selection and careful formation is very important for both lay and ordained ministry.

For some of these services, professional training will be needed. Some parish and deanery responses suggested, for certain forms of leadership and ministry, a formal diocesan programme of training, validation and commissioning.

Because of the nature of our diocese, and the flexibility needed, it may not be easy to develop a simple diocesan programme for formation and training for such lay people taking on key positions of responsibility. We will need to develop a flexible programme which can be of support to people in very different situations.

There clearly needs to be further discussion before we embark on a diocesan programme of any kind. We must identify the areas of need, and develop a programme which is as flexible and user-friendly as possible.