

'There are all sorts of service to be done' (1 Corinthians 12.4-12, 27-28)

These are notes from the meeting of the Diocesan Council of Laity on 20th November 2010 which focused on the potential new role of the laity.

Although this had been discussed already under the heading of 'Collaboration and Co-Responsibility' in May 2006, the setting this time was a fresh look at long-term strategic planning, with special focus on the need to consider new forms of lay responsibility and ministry: 'What new forms of lay ministry and service do we need to develop?'

Here are some of the thoughts which emerged from those discussions: there were more questions than answers.

1. There is need for a systematic approach, which includes a larger vision of lay responsibility than simply mundane tasks. What is the clergy's view of such responsibility, and of 'empowering' people for ministry.
2. Good use needs to be made of the pastoral skills of the laity. And of the expertise of the Margaret Beaufort Institute and others.
3. Should we be developing the role of Lay Pastoral Assistants, who are both paid and commissioned? This would involve coordinating other roles. If so, who will pay for this?
4. Such people will need training (perhaps making use of distance-learning opportunities). They would need clear job descriptions.
5. It needs to be recognised however that people already live busy lives, and that priests and deacons already find it difficult to attract extra support and help.
6. On the other hand, others are 'waiting for permission' to step up a gear in terms of active involvement and responsibility.
7. 'Succession planning' will be important. Should we be developing 'understudies', and at least ensuring 'deputies' in key roles.
8. How would pastoral assistants link together and work together?
9. Much already takes place. Such roles include parish secretaries, treasurers, caretaking, etc, as well as more specifically pastoral roles.
10. What would the 'ideal parish' look like with far fewer priests? We have much to learn from parts of the world where far fewer priests have been long taken for granted.
11. Do we need to take far more seriously the financial aspects of this (e.g. through tithing or something similar)?
12. How open and willing are priests to work with lay people in a new way? Parish priests differ greatly in their understanding of co-responsibility and working together in partnership. There has to be a radical shift in the way priests think and act.
13. The size of a parish obviously makes a difference. However numerically large a parish, and the number of communities it may include, it is important to keep a sense of local community and a sense of continuing parish identity.
14. Although the celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) remains the heart of our Catholic life, we may not be far off from considering the place of lay-led services when there is no priest to celebrate Mass.
15. Do we have anything to learn from the situation of the Church of England where one priest may be responsible for many small communities, each with its own church building? Or the Catholic Church in rural France?
16. Do we need a Diocesan Guide on the role of the laity, at least for East Anglia?