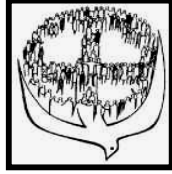


So, you are thinking of developing a pastoral core group in your parish?



“A parish is not primarily a structure or a building but
‘a family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit’¹”

- What is parish pastoral development?

A priest once said that the main reason he wanted a parish core group in his parish was because he was tired of being the only person who lost sleep over the parish!! While there is huge goodwill in parishes, and plenty of helpers: perhaps one person is still expected to be responsible for all decisions, all choices and all planning.

Pope John Paul II has challenged us all to ‘make room’ for each other, and to develop a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God². Creating this ‘room’ might allow others to share our concerns and dreams for the parish that we have all been placed in.

Parish pastoral development occurs where priests and people work together, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, for the development of the Christian community.

In such circumstances, it is possible to create a renewed experience of belonging and of participation in the parish. Everybody is encouraged to share responsibility for the future development of the parish community. A Parish Pastoral Council, (PPC), is simply a practical structure at the service of parish pastoral development.

- Why is parish pastoral development considered to be so important in this diocese?

The Holy Spirit does not create any Christian community, without placing within it all the gifts and talent’s it needs in order to become all God intends it to be. However if:

“...any of us were to imagine that the life of parish or the diocese was meant to be the fruit simply of our (priests) gifts and our ideas and our (priests) way of doing things we would be settling for an impoverished, lifeless community”³

It is clear that, in the Limerick diocese, we are expected to draw forth, and celebrate, the God-given gifts of all parishioners. This understanding of church is entirely in line with theology of *Communio*, as spoken about by both Pope John Paul and by Pope Benedict.

¹ Lumen Gentium 28

² Novo Millenio Ineunte, 45. January 6th 2001.

³ Bishop Donal Murray, St John’s Cathedral, Chrism Mass, Tuesday 22 March 2005.

So, how do we proceed? What structures or programmes are available to help each parish to implement this vision? What is expected of us, as individuals and as a parish?

The main parish pastoral structure available and recommended to us is the Parish Pastoral Council. As we know, the documents of the Second Vatican Council recommend the establishment of parish pastoral councils. They state that Catholics have a right and duty to express their opinion on what pertains to the good of the Church. The documents say that the priests of a parish should willingly consult their people, and use their prudent advice. In fact, by establishing a PPC, we acknowledge the wisdom of our parishioners and we express our desire to share with them our responsibility for the leadership of the parish⁴. A Parish Pastoral Council is:

- a recommended leadership structure in the Church
- for priests and people to share responsibility
- for building a vibrant parish community that reaches out beyond itself⁵

In other words, it is a good, practical way to implement the vision we seek to follow.

• **How would it be of benefit to this parish?**

Today's parish has opportunities for, and expectations of, many styles or types of Christian ministries (liturgical, pastoral, and social). The parish is expected to offer resources and information to many groups. It develops liturgies and reflective opportunities for different age groups, or times of the year. It co-ordinates, anticipates, supports and celebrates all Christian life in its community. In other words:

every parish now expects a lot of varied and skilled resources and leadership to be available to it. No one person can provide all of this leadership and resource.

However, a representative group, mandated to share responsibility with the priests of the parish; can plan and review the progress of the parish so that all the gifts of the community are drawn out and all the needs named and responded to. Such shared leadership, is surely of benefit to the parish.

Some parishes that have developed P.P.C.'s point to the following benefits:

- A new experience of belonging: Parishioners feel a new sense of belonging and being valued; they find nourishment for their faith and they discover that their being there makes a difference to the parish.
- A new sense of community – it takes root slowly, but the fruits begin to appear - a new life and warmth to the Sunday mass; a new sense of welcome; the setting up of various projects to address needs and build community. People feel that their parish is a place where Christ is truly alive.
- A new role for parishioners - A change from the times when the priest was in charge of everything; now parishioners experience themselves in a new way as called to be co-responsible for the life and mission of the parish.
- A new role for priests - Working in partnership with parishioners gives priests a renewed sense of their vocation; leadership now means encouraging others to see

⁴ Mark Fisher. See the Parish Pastoral Councils website: <http://users.adelphia.net/~markfisher/> For further reading, see also 'Parish Pastoral Councils in today's Catholic parish', (Twenty-third publications)

⁵ See Jane Fergusons handbook, 'A handbook for Parish Pastoral Councils', page 52: 'What is a Parish Pastoral Council?'

how they can contribute to building up parish community.

- How would it benefit me, as a priest of the parish?

It has been said that, there was a time when all a priest needed to do his job was his alb and stole, holy oils and an order from the Bishop telling him where he was to be stationed! He often performed, essentially the same functions, regardless of location or of the community's need. At the same time, many expected our priests to be a business manager, a doctor, a care-taker, a teacher, an administrator, a judge and a financial guru. Now, however, "...parishioners ... want to liberate clergy from the burden of administration and duties which are perceived as non-core in parishes so that they will have time for pastoral and spiritual leadership. They want priests to be *visibly* available in parishes"⁶.

The Second Vatican Council and its emphasis on baptism and giftedness has challenged us to return to a deeper understanding of Christianity, parish and ministry. For some this meant that, if much is expected of our parishes: then much more is expected of our priests (alone)! However, this is not what Vatican II meant at all!! We know that the Holy Spirit has placed enough gifts and talents in your community, so that the plan God has for this parish can come to fruition. We know that we are expected to help all parishioners to share their gifts. Well planned, and motivated committees can bring welcome clarity to many difficult and time-consuming decisions and areas; allowing our priests to concentrate their energies as they see fit.

A Parish pastoral council is a body made up of priests and parishioners who take responsibility together for these increased expectations of parish leadership. With parish priest as its presider; this group models the vision it proposes for the parish. That is, one where all people bring their gifts to the table, to share in word and deed the Good News that we have heard. This model allows a priest both the time and the energy to choose and to concentrate on the ministry he has been called into: pastor, shepherd, priest

- If I choose to proceed, how do I begin?

You can of course proceed alone and create your own training, support and facilitation for a group of people you choose to gather in your parish. However, in conjunction with the normal busy workload, you might find it difficult to source and resource all the material needed. You might also find it difficult to state your own needs and expectations, if you are expected to chair or facilitate training sessions.

In this diocese, your work as pastors is supported by a number of diocesan teams and committees (youth, liturgy, pastoral etc). The work of parish pastoral development is supported by the Pastoral Development team: Fr Noel Kirwin and Noirin Lynch.

Noirin and Fr Noel are usually contacted by a priest wishing to speak about Parish Councils. We always begin by asking to come out for a visit. In our experience, most priests have a lot of questions, and we also need clarity about what is being requested. Such conversations have no expectations or pressure. At this point we would offer a

⁶ Diocese of Cork & Ross, 'Pilgrim Steps', diocesan consultation – like our Limerick listening process.

parish, via its priests, some information on topics like:

- Resources for speaking about collaboration / parish pastoral councils in your parish
- Resources for newsletters/ homilies and access to other information
- Some ideas on how to gather / elect / nominate a parish pastoral council
- The training involved and how to put that training in place
- On-going or related parish issues, as appropriate.

- Can I change my mind or stop the process if I have genuine concerns, issues or needs?

Martin Kennedy once said that the authority of a parish pastoral council is directly related to the trust that exists between the priest(s) and the people. Similarly the most important aspect of this process is trust. Therefore honesty and clarity at each stage prevent misunderstandings and confusion.

Yes, having heard all the information, you may choose not to proceed. Yes, you may choose to gather a group, to undertake training, and to then, *as a group*, decide not to proceed. It is more important that this process is done well, then that it is 'just done' for the sake of it'. *Its not about what we are doing, its about what we are becoming*
Clearly, as diocesan policy expects every parish to have a PPC; further conversation would then take place to see how the parish's needs for parish pastoral leadership could be best put in place.

However, it is obviously not fair, for a person to enter into a relationship of trust with others, and to disrespect that relationship. Therefore, once a group is established, it would be important to discuss any change-of mind with the group in order that there is clarity as to why the PPC might no longer be the most feasible option for the parish. You will find that parishioners are very eager to support their priests and are very understanding of pastoral concerns. Such an honest dialogue is always of benefit to the parish, and to its leaders.

- What support will I have if I choose to go forward?

The diocesan pastoral team offer practical help like resources, information, training courses, and other workshops. We also offer regular workshops for all established groups. We are available, where possible, to visit any parish group when invited. We seek to help parishes to support one another, by sharing resources, training and ideas. Our role is to enable you to do what you are being asked to do, in a way that is good for you and for the whole church. No one is alone in this process. No one is left behind.

It is in the local churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified — goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources — which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture⁷.

⁷ NMI, 29