



Background material underpinning a diocesan policy on PARISH STRUCTURES FOR LAY PARTICIPATION

St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

'There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways in different people, it is the same God who is working in all of them. The particular way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good purpose... Just as a human body, though it is made up of different parts is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink. Nor is the body to be identified with any one of its parts... Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it...' (2.4-6, 12-14, 27)

See the whole of *St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 2, verses 4-31, but also the following chapter 13 on the primacy of love among all the gifts. They form a challenge to every parish and to each of us.

The Code of Canon Law

'Flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ's faithful. Because of this equality they all contribute, each according to his or her own condition and office, to the building up of the Body of Christ' (208)

'If, after consulting the Council of Priests, the diocesan Bishop considers it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish. In this council, which is presided over by the parish priest, Christ's faithful, together with those who by virtue of their office are engaged in pastoral care of the parish, give their help in fostering pastoral action. The pastoral council has only a consultative vote, and is regulated by the norms laid down by the Diocesan Bishop.' (536)

Diocesan Pastoral Plan: Structures for Lay Participation (slightly revised)

'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.' (p. 29)

'The church is a family, and as in any family, everyone should be as involved as possible in family life, each according to their particular place in the family. In Catholic teaching, bishops and priests – assisted by deacons - have a distinctive and irreplaceable role as making visible the Risen Christ as our shepherd and teacher. But the whole baptised community is the royal and priestly people of God, and our common dignity and equality is the setting for the role of ordained ministers. It is therefore essential that lay people be given every opportunity to play their full part in the life, liturgy and mission of the church in the diocese, deanery, cluster, parish and smaller communities, always in accordance with Catholic doctrine and Canon Law.' (p. 36)

- (1) The purpose of structures for lay participation can only be properly understood within a Catholic understanding of the nature and mission of the Church, and of the sacraments of Baptism/Confirmation and Holy Orders.
- (2) St Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians (see above) highlights the purpose of the different gifts we have: unity in love for mission to the world in the name of the Risen Christ.
- (3) Everything done in a parish must be done in love. Everything a parish seeks to achieve should be seen as a ministry of love. Everything we say to each other and to the world should be spoken in love. All proposed structures, constitutions, guidelines, etc, are there simply to serve the growing together and serving together in love of a parish community, as the family of God in a particular place.
- (4) As Pope Benedict XVI noted in his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, 'As a community, the Church must practise love. Love thus needs to be organised if it is to be an ordered service of the community.' (20) There is no point establishing any structures unless they are seen and used in this context. To echo St Paul, even the most efficient parish council is but 'a gong booming or a cymbal clashing' if it does what it does without love, and it will do us 'no good whatever' (1 Corinthians 13.1-3).
- (5) Without a truly Catholic understanding of ordained ministry, our Catholicity falls apart. The priest acts in the person of Christ as Head and Shepherd of his Body, the Church. Any decision-making structures within the Catholic Church must take full account of the distinctive Catholic doctrine of ordained ministry in general, and of the ministerial priesthood in particular. Bishop and priests, however, are called to exercise their leadership in the image of Christ the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve, and who washed the feet of his disciples. 'Priests have been placed in the midst of the laity to lead them to the unity of charity' (*Second Vatican Council*).
- (6) We also need strongly to reaffirm the fundamental equality, dignity and responsibility which flow from our Baptism, our Confirmation and our regular participation in the Eucharist, and to live out more fully in our diocese, parishes and

other communities the implications of ‘the full belonging of the lay faithful to the Church and its mystery’ (Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 9; cf. Code of Canon Law, 208).

(7) Without such a theological appreciation, discussion of parish councils can all too easily degenerate into arguments between those insisting on the ‘merely consultative’ role of such structures and others advocating ‘executive powers’ difficult to reconcile with Catholic teaching and Canon Law.

(8) Pope John Paul’s words in *Christifideles Laici* are important here:

‘The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather “the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit”, “a familial and welcoming home”, the “community of the faithful” Plainly and simply, the parish is founded on a theological reality, because it is a Eucharistic community’ ... So that all parishes of this kind may be truly communities of Christians, local ecclesial authorities ought to foster ... adaptation of parish structures according to the full flexibility granted by canon law, especially in promoting participation by the lay faithful in pastoral responsibilities...’ (n. 26)

‘The lay faithful should accustom themselves to working in the parish in close union with their priests... The Council’s mention of examining and solving pastoral problems “by general discussion” ought to find its adequate and structured development through a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for “Parish Pastoral Councils”, on which the Synod Fathers rightly insisted.’ (n. 27)

(9) While taking full account of the distinctive Catholic teaching on the ministry of the priest, Catholics might learn something from the way our ecumenical partners involve lay people in pastoral planning and the process towards decision-making. In particular, the Methodist theology of ‘conferencing’ has much to offer.

(10) Although any ‘vote’ of a parish council or equivalent is ‘consultative’ rather than legislative (Canon 536), such structures are not simply about consultation. Because of their Baptism, Confirmation and participation in the Eucharist, all of the lay faithful should be enabled to play their full part in parish planning and the process towards decision-making, exercising their sharing in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ. The establishment of an effective Parish-in-Council or Parish Pastoral Council is but one dimension of working towards a more collaborative parish in which all members of the community are enabled to play their full part in deciding and implementing how the parish is to move ‘Forward and Outward Together in Christ’.

(11) The life of every parish in East Anglia should be marked by a deepening partnership of ordained ministers and lay faithful. The key words are ‘participation’, ‘cooperation’, ‘collaboration’ and ‘partnership’, rather than simply ‘consultation’, while in no way undermining the distinctive role and responsibility of the parish priest in particular. Participation and collaboration of the laity in certain instances of decision-making was encouraged by the 1987 Synod of Bishops and Pope John Paul’s post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (nn. 25f).

(12) Such working together of priests and people should involve a shared vision of where the parish is going, always rooted in the Scriptures and Catholic teaching, and in harmony with the diocese and the universal Church. A commitment to work together in this way requires a readiness by laity and clergy to think and act in new ways.

(13) As befits his sacramental role as shepherd of the parish community, the parish priest has a crucial role to play in the furthering such a collaborative approach to parish life. This is not merely one option for priests who prefer to work in this way; it is essential for the exercise of priestly ministry as understood by the Catholic Church today, both in its official documents and in our own agreed diocesan policy. When exploring the formation of priests as shepherds after God’s own heart, and very much in the setting of the priest as sacramental sign of Christ as head and shepherd of the Church, Pope John Paul II highlighted the need for preparation of seminary students for a collaborative approach to priestly ministry:

‘Awareness of the Church as “communion” will prepare the candidate for the priesthood to carry out his pastoral work with a community spirit, in heartfelt cooperation with the different members of the Church: priests and bishop, diocesan and religious priests, priests and lay people. Such a cooperation presupposes a knowledge and appreciation of the different gifts and charisms, of the diverse vocations and responsibilities which the Spirit offers and entrusts to the members of Christ’s Body. It demands a living consciousness of one’s identity in the Church and of the identity of others. It demands mutual trust, patience, gentleness and the capacity for understanding and expectation. It finds its roots above all in a love for the Church that is deeper than love for self and the group or groups one may belong to. It is particularly important to prepare future priests for cooperation with the laity. The Council says, “they should be willing to listen to lay people, give brotherly consideration to their wishes and recognise their experience and competence in the different fields of human activity. In this way they will be able to recognise with them the signs of the times”. (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 59)