



DIOCESE OF EAST ANGLIA

## **Diocesan policy on PARISH STRUCTURES FOR LAY PARTICIPATION**

It is diocesan policy that every parish must have an effective Parish Pastoral Council or Parish-in-Council. This decision was formally voted on and agreed by the joint meeting of Parish Priests and Council of Priests in July 2004. It is therefore mandatory. This is in addition to the canonical requirement that every parish have an effective Parish Finance Committee (Canon 537), organised in accordance with our diocesan guidelines.

'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.' (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 536)

'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...' (Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26)

'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.' (*Diocesan Pastoral Plan*, p. 36)

### **1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES** *(to be interpreted in the light of the accompanying background document)*

- 1.1 The purpose of parish structures for lay participation can only be properly understood within the Catholic understanding of the nature and mission of the Church, and of the sacraments of Baptism/Confirmation and Holy Orders. Without a truly Catholic understanding of ordained ministry, our Catholicity falls apart. 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 and effectively in our diocese, parishes and smaller Catholic 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. Canon 208).
- 1.2 Although any 'vote' of a Parish Pastoral Council or its equivalent is consultative rather than legislative, such structures are not simply about consultation. Because of their Baptism and Confirmation, all of the lay faithful should be enabled to play their full part in parish planning and decision-making, exercising their sharing together in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ. Making decisions together should be the norm for parish life.
- 1.3 Any Parish Pastoral Council or equivalent should see its role as to facilitate rather than substitute for the active participation of the whole parish community in contributing to the life and mission of the Church. 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'.
- 1.4 No major decisions about the life, worship, mission or property of the parish should be made without adequate opportunities being offered for full and open discussion by the whole parish community. Although the parish priest will also have to weigh other factors, including the requirements of the diocese of which each parish is an integral part, full consideration should always be given to the views expressed by the parish, and to any vote taken. The way of consensus should be sought whenever possible, with ordained ministers and lay faithful working together in partnership. When the Bishop, Diocesan Finance Board, etc, are asked to approve decisions proposed by a parish priest, a full report of the process of consultation and collaboration will be required, along with particularly detailed justification when a proposed decision does not appear to have widespread parish support.  
*[The Bishop will also ask for the views of the local Dean when decisions on major proposals are to be made.]*
- 1.5 When such a major decision is being proposed, an established Parish Pastoral Council or steering group should facilitate an open meeting of the parish to discuss the matter rather than limit discussion to the members. This might simply mean opening a particular meeting of the Council to all parishioners.

## **2. DIOCESAN POLICY**

- 2.1 It is diocesan policy that every parish have an established public *forum* to enable lay participation, collaboration and consultation in parish pastoral life and planning. Each parish is free to organise the precise arrangements for such a forum, within the norms laid down below and with the agreement of the parish priest. This should be decided at an open meeting of the parish rather than by the clergy alone, as should any proposal to change an already established arrangement (e.g. when a new parish priest is appointed).
- 2.2 The alternative options for such a *forum* are the following (or a combination of the same):
- (a) *An established Parish Pastoral Council*, with its members elected, appointed *ex officio*, and otherwise selected as agreed. At least one meeting each year should be open to the whole parish (i.e. Parish A.G.M.).
  - (b) *An open Parish-in-Council* to which all parishioners are invited. This will require a steering group to ensure that recommendations ratified by the parish priest are put into practice.
- 2.3 Any parish *forum* should meet at least twice a year, but preferably more often. Additional special meetings should be arranged when an urgent topic needs discussion. Differing parish circumstances require a flexible approach, but any agreed *forum* should have a constitution or standing orders in keeping with the guidelines given in Section 3 below.
- 2.4 The forum should normally elect a lay chairperson from its midst, who then acts as parish representative on the Diocesan Council of Laity. The parish priest, however, presides over the *forum*; he is ultimately responsible for calling the meeting, should normally be present, and no final decisions can be made without his ratification.
- 2.5 In order to ensure that any *forum* is truly 'pastoral' in nature, the agenda should normally focus on key pastoral issues rather than reports from parish groups, committees and organisations. As with the Diocesan Council of Laity, it may be fruitful to focus on one key issue at each meeting, with clear action points to be implemented. Such an approach requires members with vision and initiative.
- 2.6 It may be also appropriate for smaller communities within a parish, especially those now or once centred on a place of worship, to have their own *forum* for supporting their local Catholic community life. Such a local community and its *forum* should, however, be fully integrated into the wider life of the parish. It is always the main Parish Pastoral Council or Parish-in-Council which is to be seen as the primary *forum*. Local communities could well be represented formally on any Parish Pastoral Council, or take a full part in any Parish-in-Council.

## **3. GUIDELINES FOR A COUNCIL CONSTITUTION OR STANDING ORDERS**

Any Parish Pastoral Council, Parish-in-Council or equivalent should have a basic constitution or set of 'standing orders' to facilitate the harmonious and fruitful partnership of lay faithful and ordained ministers. Taking account of the different requirements for a Parish-in-Council, any new or revised constitution/standing orders should include the following words (3.1 & 3.6) and paragraphs.

### **3.1 Official title of the Council; Objects of the Council; Remit of the Council**

"To facilitate the active participation and collaboration of all parishioners in supporting and developing the life, worship and witness of the parish community, building up the Body of Christ and fostering pastoral and missionary action, as well as working with, supporting and advising the parish priest in his responsibilities."

"Although the Council has no executive authority, and any votes taken are consultative, participation in the Council should be seen as an opportunity to play a responsible role in discerning and implementing the way forward for the parish in partnership with the parish priest who will always give full consideration to the views expressed."

### **3.2 Membership of the Council**

*Paragraphs on who the members are to be: ex-officio members; elected and otherwise selected members; how often elections are to be held; arrangements for elections; rules for co-opting members; voting rights; anyone who is allowed to attend meetings, even if they are not full members; arrangements for any committees of the Council. (n.b. All parish clergy are ex officio members)*

### **3.3 Officers of the Council**

*Paragraphs on the officers of the council/forum; how they are appointed/elected; how long they hold office; how many times they may be elected/appointed to one office; under what circumstances they might be removed from office.*

### **3.4 Meetings of the Council**

*Paragraphs on how often the body is to meet; how meetings are called; how extraordinary meetings are called; who provides an Agenda; how are decisions made, and how will such decisions be implemented; how are meetings to be advertised; who provides and distributes Minutes; what number makes a quorum. (n.b. No meetings can be called without the agreement of the parish priest)*

### **3.5 Amendments to the Constitution or Standing Orders**

*Paragraphs on how amendments can be made; with whose permission; the voting majority required to amend; how often it should be reviewed to evaluate its effectiveness and ensure it remains relevant to parish needs in the light of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.*

### **3.6 Temporary suspension of the Council**

"If, in the judgement of the Bishop or of the Parish Priest (always with the agreement of the Dean and Bishop), the Council ceases to operate in the best interests of the parish, the Council and its constitution or standing orders will be temporarily suspended by the parish priest. The Council will then be reconstituted within two months of any such suspension."

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