

WORKING TOGETHER

the main thoughts from the Diocesan Council of Laity, 20th May 2006

The topic chosen by the Council of Laity for May 2006 was 'Collaboration and Co-responsibility: laity and clergy working together – enhancing the role of lay people in our church'. The main points made during the feedback from the eight deanery groups were as follows:

- 'The Same Faces': it often seems in parishes as if the same people do everything, and have been doing so for many years. Our parish communities are deeply grateful to all who give so much of their time, talents and energy to the life and work of the Church.
- Most Catholics only come anywhere near the church at weekends. An increasing number of people spend much of the week at work in London.
- So - how can we encourage new people to get involved and take on responsibility?
- We need to be more ready to ask people directly! Personal invitation by the parish priest is important. One member recounted the story of a parish where someone was at last asked to take on a role. She had been a member of that parish for 50 years, and never been asked before! Lay people can also ask the parish priest what he would like done. 'Asking' works both ways!
- Unfortunately there is often too much red tape when it comes to volunteering (child protection measures, etc).
- Some parish priests are more responsive than others to the idea and practice of working together in partnership with lay people. Can the bishop do more to use his authority and influence to ensure that the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*, etc, is fully implemented in all parishes?
- Sometimes there is a barrier to be overcome when lay people try to work with their priests. People can feel inhibited with certain priests. There needs to be a long-term commitment by parishioners to work with their priests, to care for them and support them, to love them! The same is true of priests to their communities.
- Parishes also vary greatly. Some parish priests feel very frustrated at the lack of response to their own attempts to involve lay people more at the heart of parish life and work.
- There needs to be a 'change of culture', from 'receiving' to cheerful 'giving'.
- On the other hand, we need to be aware that many people are much busier than in the past. Their life-styles and diaries make it difficult for them to take on extra responsibilities. There are many pressures on people's time. Parenthood is very demanding (and married people's key vocation in the 'domestic church'); some people may need to be set free from work at church to spend more time with their families.
- What are we asking lay people to do? Into what are we asking them to get more involved? Most important is the mission of evangelisation, reaching out into the world with the Good News of Christ and the loving kindness and care of God. We can too easily focus on 'churchy' things when trying to increase the involvement of lay people. There is far more to church life than doing 'churchy' things.
- There is already considerable involvement by lay people in parish life. This happens through existing groups such as the S.V.P., Knights of St Columba, C.W.L., U.C.M., CAFOD, etc, as well as through liturgical ministries (Readers, Lay Ministers of Holy Communion, Music, etc).
- Mundane chores can be taken away from the priest by lay people, freeing him for his role as shepherd, teacher and spiritual leader. (But it is no bad thing for the priest to be seen doing ordinary things occasionally!)
- Every parish would benefit from the kind of 'Needs and Skills Audit' outlined in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* (pages 30-31). The parish should recognise and use people's experience and expertise.
- Such a survey needs to ask not only what the parish needs, and what people are prepared to offer, but also what people are already doing – so that they can be thanked and valued.
- When people are invited to take on responsibilities, they should be asked to commit themselves in small steps rather than see it as a 'life sentence'. The point made on page 33 of the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* about 'limited terms of service' should apply to all positions of lay ministry and service, including Readers, Lay Ministers of Communion, etc. Some people may need to be ready to let go of their roles to allow others to take them on (while themselves, perhaps, finding other ways to serve).

- Some people can be drawn into parish life by being asked to take on a specific one-off action or short-term responsibility, rather than something long-term which may be difficult given their other commitments to family and work. We need to find ways to enable people to commit themselves for short periods: perhaps more *ad hoc* roles and groups with specific tasks.
- Lay people can be involved in home visiting, taking Holy Communion to the sick and housebound, hospital and prison visiting, bereavement support, etc.
- A particular way to develop lay leadership is to adopt something like the ‘Parish Link Scheme’ presented in the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*, page 66). A lay person (or couple) can be given responsibility for coordinating an area of the parish, with a special care for welcoming new-comers and drawing them into church life, visiting Catholic homes, especially of the sick, housebound and bereaved, organising social gatherings, House Masses, lay-led home prayer services, Bible reflection groups, faith discussion groups.
- Drawing people to the life and worship of the parish is a key role for lay people.
- House and neighbourhood gatherings can be organised by lay people. Social events are important, in order to show others as wide and rich a view of the church as possible.
- Any parishes structures for lay participation (Parish Pastoral Council, Parish-in-Council, Finance Committee, etc) need to be efficient and effective, and often better organised than they are. They need a degree of professionalism in order to be taken seriously.
- There can sometimes be tensions between structures and groups, for example between the Parish Pastoral Council and the Finance Committee. This can be off-putting to those who might otherwise get involved.
- Parish groups and committees could well include a Liturgy Group (which is far more than a Hymn Choosing Group!), Transport Committee, Marriage Care, etc.
- A special effort needs to be made to integrate the increasing number of immigrants in our diocese. Some may also have particular cultural and liturgical needs (e.g. occasional Mass in their own rite and/or language), but they should also be helped to feel very much welcome at the heart of the life of the parish, and to contribute their own gifts, skills and expertise. [*This is the key topic for the next meeting of the Council in November*].
- Better publicity is needed for meetings, groups etc. Minutes of PPC meetings, etc, should be made public as soon as possible (on notice-board, etc). Parish websites are a good way of moving forward with communication.
- To plan ahead for the future, young people should be drawn far more into forms of parish ministry and service, perhaps on the model of ‘apprentices’ (e.g. First Communion catechists).
- How do we get more men to offer themselves for service at church? Do we have a ‘difficulty with men’? Women play a vital role in our parishes.
- Neighbouring parishes should share their ‘people resources’ with each other!
- We can learn from our local ‘Churches Together’ about involving lay people more seriously.
- Bishop Michael responded to the feedback by suggesting that perhaps we need to be more radical in developing roles of responsible lay leadership in our parishes. See the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* pages 31-32. This can include full or part-time pastoral assistants, parish administrators, youth workers, welfare workers, roles of pastoral care, etc, all within a truly Catholic understanding of the specific role of the priest and the dignity and ‘full belonging’ of the baptised. How can we develop real lay leadership in our parishes? (cf. the way lay people are involved in the diocesan team which works with Bishop Michael – as Trustees, Financial Administrator, Director of Schools Service, Director of Youth Service, Chairs of Diocesan Commissions).
- For all this to happen, lay people need to be ‘empowered’ for service – through ongoing adult religious education and formation, prayer, etc. They need warm and positive support from priests, deacons, religious and other lay people.
- Much is happening already. Those who offer their time and talents must be recognised and valued by priests and people together. All that is taken on must be done in love. All true ministry and service in the church is a ministry and service of God’s love to his people.

THIS DOCUMENT SHOULD NOW BE USED FOR DISCUSSION & ACTION AT PARISH LEVEL