

Pastoral Planning



Pastoral planning, rather than reflecting an emergency or panicked response to conditions that are less than ideal, is in fact a proactive response of faith to the call of God to grow the Church and its mission by critical thought, prayer and effort, all the while imploring the graces of God.

The experience of Christian communities, Catholic and otherwise, confirms that making no plans for growth results in little or no growth every time and such complacency even places communities at risk of decline as the surrounding culture changes and becomes less open to the offer of faith.

Far from expressing a bureaucratic ... approach of the Church's life – a suspicion that can be engendered by the language of 'community engagement', 'stakeholders' and 'best practice' – the activity of pastoral planning recognises the Church's existence in history as sacrament. As a spiritual communion and an historical people, baptised and baptising, given as the bearer and mother of faith as well as a forward endeavour, in the words of de Lubac, 'a life that is passed on', the Church is both gift and task, exalted and labouring. In sociological terms, communities need plans and organisation to do things together (we see this in the NT communities in Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-7; 11:1-18).

Consultation of communities in the development of pastoral plans affords the diocese or parish leader an opportunity to witness to a listening and receptive Church and to foster a spirit of communion through dialogue with lay men and women at the grassroots of parish life, ministry and mission. In addition to serving as a form of catechesis on the Church within a theological framework of renewal, consultation invites and challenges participants to concretise their suggestions and hopes within the realities of the contemporary Church.

It is the responsibility of leaders to articulate the rationale for community change, whether that is easily received or otherwise. In the case of our particular Diocese, the handful of structural changes announced are reconfigurations designed to respond to population growth, demographic change and emerging needs. The underlying principles include that all parishioners continue to have access to Mass, other sacraments of the Church and pastoral support to live their baptismal mission, that our diocesan priests are able to serve in areas of greatest need, particularly in the growth areas of northwest and southwest of the Diocese, and obviously to ensure the viability of parishes into the future.

While pastoral planning has a reputation for being focused almost exclusively on structural change and policy, at its best it is from experience and reflection a deeply theological and ecclesial act. In its integrity, it is a part of the Church's stewardship of the gifts, resources, and people that God gives for the sake of his mission.

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