

## Laity to the rescue

### Parish Practice: Laity to the rescue



Most bishops in Britain are faced with the dilemma of how to respond to a shortage of priests and fewer practising Catholics. Here, a rural parish priest envisages a larger role for laypeople to keep churches open.

Welcome to the (fictional) Diocese of Square. As its name suggests, the diocese is an exact square, 100 miles long and 100 miles wide. Square has 100 parishes, each of them also square, each 10 miles long by 10 miles wide. The Diocese of Square came into being in the nineteenth century, when people walked to Mass and there were plenty of priests to say these Masses. Each parish had several churches – sometimes three, four or five – within easy reach of its non-horseowning parishioners. Priests lived near these churches, which meant that though Square had 100 parishes, there were about 400 churches and the same number of clergy.

Time has passed and the number of clergy has declined – but the number of parishes and churches has remained the same. As we look at the Diocese of Square in 2012, we see that declining numbers of vocations have reduced its clergy count to just 100 active men. Traditional practice would suggest the current ordinary would be wise to place one priest in each of these parishes, but there are other factors he must take into consideration.

Above all else, the bishop is a pastor and he should make the needs of the flock his top priority. He knows that although each parish in his diocese is the same physical size, the population of each varies to an extraordinary degree. Some poor rural parishes have just a few hundred people (and four or more churches) while the urban areas that have developed over the years have vast population densities, but with a historically small number of clergy and very few churches in proportion to their populations.

Common sense would imply that today's Bishop of Square would arrange things so that the now-mobile rural populations might share a priest between several parishes, close some of the churches and concentrate his resources where most of his people are.

However, common sense is not all that common, as the Bishop of Square would no doubt tell you. There are many bishops faced with a dilemma similar to that of this fictional ordinary – and they must be hoping that their people have great reservoirs of wisdom and common sense, as well as a superhuman ability to see the big picture, because faced with falling numbers of clergy, the clustering of smaller rural parishes is not always seen as the obvious solution that a neutral outsider might

imagine.

The problem is that people in small and sparsely populated rural parishes are often the most loyal in matters of faith, and bishops are not inclined to risk alienating them. In addition, people in such areas are sensitive to loss, many having suffered the closure of civil institutions such as schools, post offices, creameries, police stations and other public buildings in times of austerity.

The loss of a priest or a church is seen by such folk as another example of those in places of power discriminating against people on the edge. The corollary is sadly often true: people in heavily populated parishes in large urban centres are less connected to their local parish, and so are less likely to press for the greater number of clergy that their population should require.

The placement of personnel in times when the numbers of active clergy are rapidly declining raises the question of what the Church is for. If its main role is to keep things as they always have been, then change is unlikely to be undertaken at all. However, if the needs of the flock are essential to how a church understands its role, then the Church has to facilitate the flock and adapt its structure to their needs.

I can understand the dilemma. I minister in a small rural parish with a population of about 2,000 people – about a tenth the size of some large urban or commuter-belt parishes. However, this parish traces its origins to the sixth-century founder of Cork Diocese, St Finbarr, whereas those urban parishes might be 30 years old at most. This parish has two churches where Mass and the sacraments are celebrated regularly.

While numbers attending have fallen, the parish is keen to hang on to as large a choice of Mass times and venues as possible, and therefore maintains a weekend schedule of three Masses. I cannot imagine people accepting the loss of their place of worship and travelling to another church (even though they will travel an hour and more to do their weekly shop).

Within me is another voice which whispers to me that the people in parishes like these deserve pastoral care, too. Placing such rural parishes in clusters served by one roaming priest would destroy the traditional closeness between priest and people. It would serve neither, since people would lose the sense of being cared for while the priest would lose the support of an intimate community and be in danger of feeling like a sacrament-providing robot.

Solutions are not easily arrived at in such situations. Preserving and developing small communities is important in both rural and urban contexts; it is the Church's contribution to building the Body of Christ in the local area. Organising large liturgies at central venues where priests are based may not therefore be the best policy, tempting though it is. It would seem wiser to encourage lay participation and leadership in smaller communities.

The solution for urban parishes will be different. Even in the absence of priestleaders, it is important to break the areas down into community-sized organisms, again with a local lay leadership team to keep the community together. This leadership team in each community can form a corporate whole where

the priest finds fellowship and support, as well as providing each team with guidance. The solution will be different from that arrived at by the nineteenth-century Bishop of Square, but it might serve the pastoral needs of people today, as church leaders in the past sought to do in their time.



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