

# Parish as *Pobal Dé*

The Church is rediscovering its true mission when it understands itself as a community of people linked by faith — not ordered by status. The people of our diocese are asking for the structures of our parishes to reflect a sense of shared ownership and responsibility.

The parishes and communities of our diocese have a rich history of faith and involvement with the Church. The parish is the first and principal point of contact for most people with the Church.

## THE CHURCH AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD

In recent years, parishioners in some parishes have developed a renewed understanding of their relationship with Church. This has happened largely in parishes where the notion of the Church as the People of God has been promoted. Most people who have served in effective parish councils and representative parish assemblies have drawn new light for their faith in experiencing their local parish as “our parish”. They passionately want others to share that experience and to have the same opportunity. This understanding of the Church, which has been at the centre of much of the Church’s teaching about itself over the past 40 years, has been slow to take root because it cannot be taught – it has to be experienced.

Many people have not experienced this particular model of the Church. Few have had the opportunity to become familiar with the language and theology that this understanding of the Church presumes.

## SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

But there are clear signs of hope. In the consultation process undertaken by the DPSC in the preparation of this document, there was a strong call for the sharing of responsibility for the work of building the Kingdom between ordained and non-ordained. Many lay people recognise that the mission of the Church is meant to be shared by all the baptised. That this understanding of the Church should emerge as a central demand is good news because it means our starting point is close to how the Church understands itself today. It also makes it clear that any new structures or

ways of operating are not developed primarily because of a scarcity of priests but because of the very nature of the Church itself.

## POBAL D

At the diocesan meeting in June 2004, one group was asked to consider a suitable title for this chapter, with the theme of 'lay involvement in the Church'. Words like collaboration, co-responsibility, partnership, and lay involvement were considered. These were eventually rejected in favour of the old Irish term, *Pobal Dé*.

This term is deeply embedded in the Irish Catholic tradition and it encapsulates the way the delegates understood the Church. It is an inclusive term for ordained and non-ordained and implies a shared membership and responsibility for the Church. It implies that the Church is a faith community. But, more than that, the Church subsists in the life and activity of each of the baptised. The unity of the Church is found in the relationships of people who are sustained by the same Lord. This same Lord through the Spirit draws our minds and hearts to him and challenges us to go out to the world to 'proclaim the Good News'.

The late Pope John Paul cautioned that this renewed understanding of Church has implications for every aspect of the Church's life and for every member of the Church.

The primary focus of our energy has to be on a new self-understanding for the members of the Church rather than on changing structures alone. A deeper awareness of where God is calling each baptised person will, in turn, strengthen a renewed and vibrant Church. Any changes to structures or local practices will only make sense if they flow from this spirit of service to God and his Church.

This vision has widespread support among the faith community of our diocese and parishes. It is the vision that has inspired the work of this Pastoral Strategy Group and informs the proposals it puts forward.

There are many gifts. There are many things to be done.

*"Let us be under no illusion that unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve little purpose. They would be mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its meaningful expression and growth."*

– Pope John Paul II (1999).

## **SUMMARY**

The corner stone of this document is based on the view that the Church at both universal and local level is a community of faith with a shared responsibility for the building of the Kingdom. It is the view of the Strategy Group that making this vision a reality at parish and diocesan level should inspire all pastoral endeavours. The wide variety of Church documents issued over the last 40 years supports this view. The encouraging news from the widespread consultation in the preparation of this document is that there is a deep hunger among the faithful for such a model of the Church.

It follows therefore that the number one strategy of the diocese must be to facilitate by every means possible the bringing into existence of this model of the Church in our parishes and diocese.

## **PROPOSALS**

With this in mind, we make the following proposals:

1. That the bishop and the diocesan agencies would facilitate the establishment of this model of Church in the diocese. This would necessitate:
  - a) Providing parish pastoral development with the personnel and finances to enable all parishes to put in place and sustain parish assemblies/pastoral councils.
  - b) Ensuring that this model of the Church informs all diocesan decisions relating to deployment of priests and other personnel.
2. That every parish begin a process which will lead to an assembly/pastoral council being in place in all parishes within five years. These assemblies/councils would conform to existing diocesan norms in their formation and operation.
3. That assemblies/councils would help with the establishment of groups which would meet the liturgical, faith development and caring needs of the parishes. This proposal is further developed in Chapter 3 (A Praying and Worshipping Community) and Chapter 4 (Education, Formation, Evangelisation).
4. That, as required by Canon Law, each parish would put in place a finance committee that would assist the parish priest in the maintenance of parish buildings and the provision of funds required to meet the pastoral needs of the parish.