

For discussion – ideas for Parish Governance at St Laurence’s

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Current situation

- Pastoral councils are recommended for dioceses and parishes in Canon Law (1983).
- Diocesan [policy](#) (and [background material](#)) encourages lay participation and mandates either a Parish Pastoral Council or a ‘Parish-in-Council’ format, although leaving precise arrangements open. A minimum of one meeting per year must be open to the whole Parish.
- We currently follow the ‘Parish-in-Council’ model with our ‘Parishioners’ Open Meeting’. This became more regular and more focused on practical management of the Parish during the lockdown but is reverting to pre-lockdown arrangements with 4-5 meetings per year as a venue for general discussion, consultation, and updates on Parish activities and issues.
- We also have a Finance Committee (as mandated by Canon Law) that takes care of financial matters and, to some extent, related capital projects (following [Parish Financial Procedures](#)).
- A Facilitation Group is intended to fill the gap between the Open Meetings and Parish office by helping to ensure Open Meetings are prepared for and actions agreed are implemented. The nature of the group is described [here](#) – however, it has no formal status or terms of reference. The Group was particularly active as support for Fr Simon during the lockdowns, but its focus and membership has dwindled somewhat.
- The Synodal Parish Action Group (SPAG) sprang out of the synodal process in our Parish and has provided another vehicle for lay involvement, particularly pushing forward on adult education and faith sharing and plans for a Pastoral Assistant. The group also intends to advance social, communication, and outreach activities.

Weaknesses of the current situation

- Much Parish management and action relies on the same core group of people – this is particularly true of the Facilitation Group – and there is no built-in mechanism to renew and refresh this group.
- The Open Meetings (potentially a large and open group) are good for discussion and engagement with parishioners, but impractical for organising action, agreeing detail, or monitoring progress. The fact that they are the only venue for discussion of routine aspects of Parish life can lead to relatively long agendas and meetings.
- Open Meeting attendance, which peaked during lockdowns, has declined at recent meetings.
- There are some key areas of Parish life – Social activities, Maintenance, Communications, etc. – where lay involvement is key to ensuring action, but there are no clear responsibilities for this. There is thus a lack of proactivity and, when action in this area is proposed, it can stall or fall back on the same group to organise.
- Fr Simon has expressed a need for support or alternative arrangements in the line management of Parish staff. There is no current mechanism to provide this.

Proposal for a PPC

The following is offered as one possible option for new arrangements for lay involvement in Parish governance. The aim is to provide a focus for discussion. Some alternatives are noted in the following section.

1. St Laurence's could adopt a Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) model to support the Parish Priest more effectively in day-to-day management and development of the Parish.
2. We should retain Open Meetings as the primary venue for discussion of and consultation on parish pastoral issues, which would become the primary focus of their agenda. A secondary role would be sharing information and feedback from and to the PPC and other Parish groups. The frequency could reduce, e.g., 3 per year (aligned with school terms).
3. Membership of the PPC will include the Parish Priest and other clergy, a Chair (who also chairs Open Meetings), a Secretary, and the Parish Treasurer. Other members of the Finance Committee may be on the Council, but this is not a requirement of Finance Committee membership.
4. Members of any PPC must be practicing Catholics who are active members of St Laurence's.
5. There would be lower (10?) and upper (14?) limits on the number of PPC members. Places will normally be filled by co-option, with parishioners invited to volunteer or to suggest others who might be invited by the Parish Priest. In the event that there is more interest than places, membership will be determined by the Parish Priest through a prayerful process of discussion and negotiation (or potentially by an election process).
6. Members would commit to a 2 year term, with staggered renewal periods (to avoid large gaps), and with the understanding that they may resign their role if circumstances change. Vacant positions should be filled by co-option within 2 months.
7. In accordance with diocesan policy, although the Chair will usually facilitate PPC and Open meetings, the Parish Priest would be held to be presiding and has ultimate responsibility for ensuring the pastoral focus of the agenda.
8. The PPC should have 4-6 core teams. For example:
 - a. Parish Office and Staff (ideally parishioners with management / HR experience)
 - b. Liturgy
 - c. Catechesis, adult education and faith sharing
 - d. Social activities
 - e. Communications and outreach
 - f. Buildings, grounds and facilities
9. There could be 3-4 people on each core team. All members of the Council should be on at least one team. There should be a limit (2?) to the number of teams in which any one member of the PPC participates. Teams may involve others who are not PPC members in their meetings.
10. The 'Parish Office and Staff' team should assist the Parish Priest (or others with line management responsibility in the Parish) in the management of staff, including objective-setting, progress monitoring, mentoring for staff, and ensuring an appraisal process for each staff member.
11. The PPC would set the frequency of its meetings but would meet at least 3 times per year, alternating with Open Meetings. Meetings could also be called at the request of the Parish Priest. Core teams would meet at least once between each PPC meeting, regularly sharing updates with the PPC and contributing to the Open Meetings. The Parish Office and Staff team would meet at least once every 2 months. Meetings may be online/hybrid, but members should attend PPC meetings in person where possible.

12. The PPC members would operate for a term of two years, with staggered renewal periods (to avoid large gaps), after which vacancies should be re-advertised and new parishioners encouraged to join. Members may stay on the Council beyond two years, but Chair and Secretary roles should change and sub-team membership should rotate such that each sub-team has a mix of previous and new members.

Alternatives

- Retain the status quo. Note, however, that we would need to recruit more Facilitation Group members and/or consider the most efficient way for this group and the SPAG group to work in parallel. It would also be good to have established teams or individuals taking a lead on buildings, social events, and communications. And we need to consider support for Fr Simon in the management of Parish staff.
- Establish and recruit for new teams focused on particular tasks without going the whole way to establishing a PPC structure. We could, for example, prioritise creating a team to support Fr Simon in management of Parish staff and office.
- Phased introduction of the PPC model – i.e., rather than introducing a PPC and using that to organise smaller teams, we begin building up teams with a view to switching to a PPC model in future.
- Other ideas welcome!

References

PPC Handbook (looks to be based on standard for Diocese of Westminster) -

<https://parish.rcdow.org.uk/stalbanssouth/wp-content/uploads/sites/191/2020/10/Handbook-for-St-Barts-Parish-Pastoral-Council.pdf>

Our diocesan policy - <https://rcdea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Parish-Structures-for-Lay-Participation055c.pdf>

Background materials underpinning the Policy on Parish Structures - <https://rcdea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Background-materials-underpinning-the-Policy-on-Parish-Structures61f9.pdf>

Parish Handbook and Appendices (April 2021) - <https://www.rcdea.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Parish-Handbook-and-Appendices-April-2021.pdf>

Code | Parish Pastoral Councils - <https://www.pastoralcouncils.com/bibliography/vatican-documents/code>