

Notes for Meetings with Diocesan Bishops & Managers

In releasing officially the report *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*, the President of the ACBC observed that ‘... many of the matters raised are ones that can be implemented at the local level, rather than requiring national consensus’. He was essentially repeating what he said in June 2020, when he noted that ‘there are recommendations which do not need to wait for the Bishops Conference or the Plenary Council, and individual bishops may decide to act in the meantime’. Concerned Catholics should continue to urge that their bishops engage with the laity on those recommendations in the Governance Report which can and should be implemented now.

To assist in this process, our committee member Andrew Phelan AM has prepared *Notes for Meetings with Diocesan Bishops & Managers*, drawn from recommendations in the Governance Report and from basic principles of good governance. The suggestions in it are self-evidently necessary, sensible and practical. Andrew discussed these suggestions with our archdiocesan officials in June and further discussion is anticipated.

Background:

- Laity significantly invested in diocesan and parish governance.
- Canon Law.
- *The Light from the Southern Cross: Promoting Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia*
- Comments in the Plenary papers.

The following suggestions focus on what should and could be done now. Nothing radical is proposed.

A. Structure & Roles

There should be a diocesan governance structure. This will no doubt comprise organisational elements, such as committees/councils/trustees/offices, with (hopefully defined) roles, relationships and procedures.

Suggestion 1: The structure should be made visible, including on the diocesan website. This should include:

- descriptions of the roles and functions of each element;
- the names of the people in or on it (at least the names and contact details of the people at governance levels); and
- a useful overall description of how the governance of the archdiocese really works, including meeting schedules and (perhaps redacted for publication) minutes for committees and councils.

Suggestion 2: The diocese should establish a diocesan pastoral council and also mandate them at the parish level.¹ The bishop should engage with the laity on councils' terms of reference, composition, membership, procedures and transparency.²

Suggestion 3: The procedures by which the laity, including diocesan and parish councils, can have input to diocesan governance processes should be explained.

Suggestion 4: That a kit of policies and procedures be produced to inform parish governance processes and to enable relevant diocesan governance offices to provide support to parishes in a timely manner.

B. Strategies & Budgets

The strategic direction of a diocese is rarely evident, nor do dioceses generally publish budgets.

Suggestion 5: The diocese should publish a document which sets out its strategic priorities and, supporting that, should publish a budget (perhaps on an annualised five-year rolling basis, adjusted for annual outcomes). This would necessarily be high level but be sufficiently detailed to help garner and maintain commitment. Important initiatives and projects should separately be articulated and costed.

Suggestion 6: The factors and processes, including the input from lay councils, which inform the development of diocesan strategies and budgets, should be explained. In due course, a more inclusive set of regular processes should be devised and implemented.

C. Finances

The finances of most, or perhaps all, dioceses are invisible.³ Each diocese will have prepared financial information for management purposes, and no doubt the statements will have been audited.

¹ Pastoral Councils: It is completely within the discretion of a bishop whether he constitutes a pastoral council. Canon 511 provides that, 'In every diocese and to the extent that pastoral circumstances suggest it, a pastoral council is to be constituted which under the authority of the bishop investigates, considers, and proposes practical conclusions about those things which pertain to pastoral works in the diocese.' Membership of the pastoral council is at the discretion of the bishop, and should consist of 'members of the Christian faithful who are in full communion with the Catholic Church - clerics, members of institutes of consecrated life, and especially laity - who are designated in a manner determined by the diocesan bishop' (512 §1). 'A pastoral council is constituted for a period of time as determined by the bishop' (513 §1) and ceases when the see is vacant (513 §2). To avoid any doubt about the place which the Pastoral Council has in the governance of the diocese, Canon 514 §1 is explicit: 'A pastoral council possesses only a consultative vote. It belongs to the diocesan bishop alone to convoke it according to the needs of the apostolate and to preside over it; it also belongs to him alone to make public what has been done in the council.'

² Online resources to guide the establishment and operations of pastoral councils are readily available: see for example the Constitution for Parish Pastoral Councils of the Archdiocese of Perth at <https://www.parishrenewal.com.au/table-of-contents/function-role-and-responsibility-of-the-parish-pastoral-council/#>.

³ All Australian dioceses and parishes fall within the definition of 'Basic Religious Charity' in the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) Act 2012* (Cth). Because of this, although they have to submit to the ACNC Annual Information Statements (AISs), they do not have to answer financial information questions in their AISs, they do not have to submit annual financial reports and they do not have to comply with the ACNC Governance Standards- so they don't!

Suggestion 7: The diocese should publicly explain, in understandable terms, its current financial position and should do so regularly, especially to maintain lay engagement and to support fundraising and contributions.

Suggestion 8: The diocese should publish its audited financial statements, at least annually. These should include:

- notes and/or textual explanations of the sources of revenues and the objects, projects and programs of expenditure, including abnormal items like property acquisitions, sales and other projects; and
- statements of financial position, including information on financial risks and contingencies.

Andrew Phelan AM
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