

Towards an Action Plan for the Association of Catholics in Ireland

Over 100 people, comprising lay people, religious sisters and priests met in the Clarion Hotel, Liffey Valley, Dublin on June 1st 2013 to dialogue together on the theme of The Role of the Laity in Shaping the Future of Our Church, and to discuss how best ACI can work towards the change it seeks.

This 'Summary Report' is compiled from the hand-written 'flip chart' sheets and other notes produced on the day and as a result some of the issues raised are covered in 'bullet point' form without any amplification. The intention, however, in compiling the report was to re-produce, as accurately as possible, the views expressed by those present on the day. A y small number of comments had to be omitted because it was not possible to interpret all the hand written notes.

Following a report from the Steering Group and the launch of the ACI website, those present were introduced to the concept of the **"Open Space"** forum. This involved, initially, inviting people to come forward spontaneously to name a discussion they would like to have with others, under the heading **"Towards an Action Plan for ACI"**.

From that exercise, **30 people** came forward to name their discussion themes.

These broadly fell into 6 categories:

7 related to the ACI structures.

7 related to Reform and Renewal, Mission, Focus on People.

3 related to Women in the Church.

8 related to Liturgy and Spirituality.

2 related to Inclusiveness

3 related to Communications.

Following rationalisation of the various themes, **a total of 12 discussion groups were formed**. These met for approximately one hour, during which each group was chaired by the convener. Each group also included a note-taker who recorded, amongst other topics:

- The main points of the discussion
- A maximum of 5 recommendations for action.
- A list of those willing to get involved in taking the actions forward.

- A list of those willing to take a lead.

An important part of this process was that people present were encouraged to use the “Law of Two Feet” and to move from group to group. This provided a critical form of cross-pollination throughout the dynamics of the discussions.

The 12 discussions groups ranged in size at the beginning from over 20 people in one group to 5 in other groups. However, with the ebb and flow of the tide of participants these numbers changed dynamically throughout the one hour discussion.

Initial List of 29 themes named by people.

ACI Structures

- 1: Is the organisation of the ACI too rigid?
- 2: The word of God is alive and active today. How can the ACI make it more relevant?
- 3: How can the ACI help with adult faith development?
- 4: How can the ACI attract more people into encounter with the living God and not just sustain and reform?
- 5: Resourcing the work of the ACI - fundraising, coordinating, volunteering.
- 6: How can we fulfil the mandate to create an umbrella group?
- 7: How can I get a reform group going in my area? What are the obstacles? What resources can we use? What support can we expect?

Reform and Renewal. Mission. Focus on people.

- 8: Church as people of God - Establishing ‘House Groups’.
- 9: Why are you interested in Reform and Renewal?
- 10: To move from ‘apathy to action’.
- 11: The place of different cultural ways to God to be respected.
- 12: Open the door and go out on mission/community where the younger generations are – the Church on mission.

13: Education in the teaching of Vatican II - Separating sacraments from school.

14: Sexuality, marriage and contraception. Where are we going?

Women in the Church.

15: Are Women Catholic or not? Are we members of the Church?

16: Women and the Diaconate.

17: The Body of Christ with focus on women and sexuality/gender.

Liturgy and Spirituality.

18: Relevance of the Liturgy at Mass.

19: Higher spirituality. The 'personal touches'.

20: We have so much to learn from African churches. Why are there no Africans here today?

21: Over-emphasis on penance in Liturgy.

22: Alienation, contemplation, justice. Eucharist welcomes spirituality.

23: Is Jesus about Justice or worship?

24: Where is our church going? How do we avoid a Eucharistic desert?

Inclusiveness.

25: Fear, control, Inclusivity.

26: Feeling included. How do we respond?

Communications.

27: How do we create better communication structures?

28: How do we attain meaningful negotiating status at Church governance level?

29: Longing for an open church where controversial issues can be discussed and be listened to from the top down with respect and consideration.

The themes and titles of the final 12 discussion groups fell into 4 broad categories.

A: ACI Structures

- Adult Faith Development - How can the ACI support this development?
- Is ACI too structured? How can we best fulfil the “umbrella” mandate?

B: Reform and Renewal

- How do we get a reform group going in my area?
- The moral right to lay involvement in the governance of the church.
- Church as community and mission.
- Church as a people of God. Establishing ‘House Groups’.
- Education and preparation for reception of sacraments.
- Sexuality, Marriage and Contraception. Where are we going?

C: Women in the Church.

- Are Women Catholics or not? Are we members of the church?

D: Liturgy and Spirituality.

- Relevance of the Liturgy at Mass.
- Is Jesus about Justice or Worship?
- Irish Spirituality and spaces for encounters with God.

Discussion Points from Each Group and Recommendations for Action.

1. Adult Faith Development. How can the ACI support faith development?

MAIN POINTS

- Many adults still have school religion/spirituality and have never moved beyond this level.
- Partners in faith are doing good work.
- People are looking for spiritual enrichment.
- Parish Councils should lead.
- First Holy Communion celebrated with community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION.

1. Need for adult faith formation and development – establish faith formation/development groups.
2. ACI emphasis should be on renewal - not just reform.
3. Reception of Sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation at a later age - 18 years of age for confirmation.

2. Is ACI too structured? How can we best fulfil the “umbrella” mandate?

MAIN POINTS

- Reform will require weight of numbers.

- Building numbers in Ireland may take some time.
- Need for panel of speakers prepared to stimulate discussion at parish level.
- Need for cooperative research – more focused discussion areas on website.
- Need to remember that reform is an international issue, and an ecumenical one.
- Keep focus on influencing/persuading Rome.
- Keep parish issues separate from key reform issues.
- The “umbrella” could be an activity of the ACI website. This might mobilise bigger numbers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Firmly focused, monitored discussion areas on reform issues on the website, possibly leading to formulation of reform proposals.
2. Parallel research on the issues above. Possibly asking international experts to contribute.
3. Focus on influencing Rome and the Bureaucracy. Clergy can only support reform at the possible cost of their livelihood.

3. How do we get a reform group going in my area?

MAIN POINTS

- Don't expect it to be Parish based.
- Use religious orders facilities if offered, or any other venue.
- Pick topics that are not “churchy - be imaginative and topical.
- One group began with discussion on Ryan and Murphy report (outside of parish) but eventually had to move beyond that - Studying the Acts of the Apostles, inviting guest speakers, organising talks on Vatican II.
- Use the sermons and speeches of Pope Francis - new and radical statements for discussions.
- Don't wait on church experts - do your own research.
- ACI – draw up templates and give details of groups that are already established.
- Use the ACI statement of objectives to stimulate discussion and interest.
- Use the launch of the ACI as a topic of discussion.
- Not just discussion - try imaginative liturgies. Social action. Select a good name.

4. The moral right to lay involvement in the governance of the church.

MAIN POINTS

- Regime of fear: unjust silencing.
- Laity has more power than we realise.
- Culture of not listening.
- New climate possible with Pope Francis.
- Role of parish councils. Some good examples but much to be acted upon.
- We are here because we believe in the Good News. We won't be driven out.
- Facing the future: Irish church in denial. B Hoban "Who will break the bread for us?"

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. The facts relating to the true situation of the church today should be researched.
2. The moral right of the people of God to be involved in the governance of the church must be recognised and acted upon. Canon 129 is an obstacle, but this is unacceptable.
3. Towards an assembly of the church in Ireland.
4. More work by ACI to develop a professional PR and communications action plan.
5. Encourage more volunteering.
6. Stop the cash. There should be a campaign of refusing to fund the church.

5. Church as Community and mission.

MAIN POINTS

- Shared homilies
- Priestly formation needs to be reviewed.
- Lay people are conditioned to be passive in the church.
- We are human beings and many of us are highly educated - we need to educate ourselves to taking action.
- It's great to have a forum like to-day to discuss this topic.
- 'The ones that are not coming into the parish are not waiting to be allowed'.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION:

1. Laity gifted for mission come forward and claim their place as church in action.
2. Priests need formation – training to dialogue so that the word of God comes across through the congregation at mass (priests don't have all the answers).
3. It's a revolution we need, not just reform.

4. Action – reflective/ spiritual/ prayer/ action
5. Pastoral action inspires prayer – prayer/ action/ in community.
6. We need to educate ourselves to stop being passive and take action.

6. Church as a people of God – establishing ‘House Groups’.

MAIN POINTS

- 1st century- house church meetings -pray/study/discuss (no priests)
- Members of Church should be proactive instead of waiting for hierarchy/clergy to act.
- Congregation has no role in existing liturgy.
- No point in complaining about what we do not like- small local groups are possible and do bring benefits.
- Practical/ organisational questions need to be addressed.
- Examples of communities where this is being done- Belgium, Orlagh and Ballymun.
- Many of us do not attend mass in parishes where we live -prefer to attend mass in parishes/ venues that reflect other ways to pray.
- Clericalism is an issue for laity as well as clergy (barrier to change).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Celebrant of Sunday liturgy should be invited to prepare liturgy in a parishioner’s house with interested members of community.
2. Be more proactive and form our own groups as believers -they could also contribute to adult faith formation.
3. ACI could share success stories of small groups on its website and give basic training to those interested in starting them.

7. Education and Preparation for Sacraments.

MAIN POINTS

- Support for parents needed so that they are confident in faith matters at child’s developmental level.
- Layity/parents take responsibility in parish for sacraments.
- Sacraments when child is ready – not because of age.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION.

1. Research into people’s understanding of the Eucharist – link with community.

2. Research into why people are alienated from church.
3. Discussion at parish level on the choice of opting in or out of sacramental preparation.
4. Giving parents a real choice as to whether or not they want their child to be baptized.
5. Raise the age of First Communion to Confirmation age, and Confirmation to 18 years or over.

8. Sexuality, Marriage and Contraception. Where are we going?

MAIN POINTS

- Sexuality: celibacy, contraception, homosexuality -open discussion -second relationships
- Hypocrisy of church leadership approach
- Scarcity of priests -do we need ordained?
- Using Eucharist as a weapon.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Bring this 'Open Space' exercise back to our own parishes to promote open discussions and discern level of agreement.
2. Parish community & ACI groups should support small groups in their area. Set up groups to involve and support those who feel excluded and discriminated against in the institutional church.
3. Energize parents of gay people to speak out.

9. Are Women Catholics or not? Are we members of the Church?

MAIN POINTS:

Women in the diaconate -same as men - Respond to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin.

Dare ACI to promote women priests?

Many excluded: women/ gay/ separated

Dialogue with Bishops on sexism in the church.

Structures are dysfunctional.

Invite Bishops to meet and discuss.

Every woman to refuse to attend mass on one Sunday.

S. Africa: Bishop met women of Soweto 'Don't let celibate priests interfere with our daughters.'

Promote Document 'Justice in the World' -1971 Synod.

Can't wash women's feet- then no Eucharist for women?

Are women colluding with their own oppression?
Seminarians separated -away.
Women excluded from church structures
ACI to make a statement and meet Bishops.

Language to change- 'Ontologically different'.
Education: Mary of Magdalene the first witness....
Women must support women: Stand up and be counted.

Acknowledge sexism in the church is a sin and abusive.
Bishops deny there is any sexism (which is a sin).
The Furrow/ Reality/ Doctrine and Life/ newspapers/ media
Website: womenpriests.org: promote it.

Need new non-sexist structures.
Don't want to be priests under current 'set up'
Early church: women deacons -Phoebe

Patriarchal fear of women taking over.
'You want our power'
Peter the first witness of resurrection – stated by a priest at Knock!!
Women's bodies in Christ's image?
Some cannot see Christ in a woman.
God is God; spirit; neither man nor woman.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Road map for dialogue with Bishops.
2. Promote document- 'Justice In The World' 1971 (re role of women)
3. Language to change and be inclusive.
4. Acknowledge sexism as a sin and abuse in the church
5. Need new non- sexist structures – faithful to our baptism.

10. Relevance of the Liturgy / Mass

MAIN POINTS

- Current liturgy not relevant -especially to young people
- Difficulty with words in the mass and with the structure
- Inclusive language required - represent everyone
- Children being deprived of the power of the mass
- Mass becoming ritualised

- Other Churches (Evangelical) doing it better
- Boils down to Christian formation
- The importance of the teacher
- How relevant is the Old Testament?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. Need better education/ faith formation
2. Make liturgy more relevant to the marginalised.
3. Promote other forms of liturgy
4. Liturgy that expresses/ relates to the heart

11. Is Jesus about Justice or Worship?

MAIN POINTS

- Currently much emphasis on sacraments, little on justice.
- E.g.- one parish has 'Fair-trade' policy.
- It's a function of capitalist system.
- What can be done at local, parish level?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. 'Fair Trade' policy at parish level.
2. Social justice groups at parish level.
3. Focus on a local need.
4. Adopt a developing world project.
5. Adopt a home- grown project e.g. an addiction service.
6. Get involved in politics.
7. Be ecologically aware and active.

12. Irish Spirituality and spaces for encounters with God.

MAIN POINTS

- How to create spaces for real encounters with God

- Lots of good things 'going on' - meditation, faith groups, etc.
- Potential to encourage/ educate people about what we can do; church cannot block/control.
- Allow people to have spaces for 'meaning making'.
- Mass too noisy: need for silence/reflective space
- ACI to be an organisation saying we are people who have adult faith/ real communion happening

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

1. ACI to be a source of information about what is going on.
2. Arrange a spiritual day, not just planning.
3. Educate/ encourage people about what can be achieved.
4. Create a space for 'meaning making' to develop own liturgy.
5. Promote a 'new story' of what it is to be a believer/Christian.

Appendix 1 - Additional points from discussion groups

Several of the discussions group fed back points additional to those recorded above- these are listed here:

4. The moral right to lay involvement in the governance of the church.

ADDITIONAL INPUT FROM THIS DISCUSSION GROUP

As committed lay members of the Church, we are gravely concerned at the current crisis in the priesthood and we believe that without radical action we are in serious danger of being a priest-less society before the middle of this century. We are therefore calling on the Irish hierarchy to immediately enter into dialogue with the ACP and the ACI in a national Church Forum, in which Bishops, clergy and lay representatives, male and female, have open and frank discussion about the problem and agree a positive way forward to ensure Ireland does not become a Eucharistic desert. We are heartened and encouraged in this initiative by the words of Pope Francis who this week strongly advocated that those who approach the Church should find the doors open and not find people who want to control the faith.

Amalgamating several thoughts:

1. Concern about future direction.
2. Equal voice; entitled to a voice; Genuine participation in decision-making.
3. Means of communication in the church, hierarchical not involving. Canon 129 needs to be changed.
4. Barriers to progress in this:
 - Can we get in?
 - Priests fear of being threatened.
 - Culture of fear prevents leadership, threats of excommunication
 - More power than we realize
 - If roles reversed: would want to know who is making the accusation
 - Priests being silenced

No listening, things being laid down as law; refuse to discuss issues: open dialogue without fear fundamentally required.

Cardinal Martini/Bishop Edward Daly re celibacy

Sean Fagan/ Donal Dorr

'How to remain in the Catholic Church after the Murphy Report' - Kevin Egan.

Fear of book being pulled by the Bishops: self-censor/culture of fear.

Parish dialogue: no discussion

Parish council: can advise only

Parish Priests : Can veto Parish Council

S. African experience: PP can veto but this would be open to spirit of discussion/ consultative spirit.

How do we bring involvement to reality?
How do you feel in the Parish Council?

Dundrum: secret ballot for election to the chair
Changing the culture

Leave if you don't like it

Value the community/ hold to the good news
Clerical control has to be confronted

Model of Dundrum: energy, leadership, persuasion
Against the money argument but in favour of with-holding SHARE contributions.

Malahide parish

Shortage of priests/married priests

Suggestions for actions
Stop the cash
Negotiate our way to points of relevance

Brendan Hoban's book: Who will break the Bread for us?
Denial a fact of life
Irish Catholic Church in denial.

Eucharistic desert; do research i.e. situation in parishes.

Action

1. Sponsor research: get the facts
Retiring priests not replaced.
Real conversation regarding what we can do.
Get the hierarchy to believe and understand that we can help-win win.
Agenda needed
Get allies.
2. Canon Law: Lay people can't share in governance, but there is a moral right.
3. Build on the opportunity provided by Pope Francis - opportunities for change. Novena in Carlow
4. 'Towards an Assembly of the Church in Ireland' - as a prelude to Vatican III.
5. P.R./ Communications strategy for ACI
6. Volunteerism
7. Stop the cash: 'SHARE'

5. Church as Community and mission.

ADDITIONAL INPUT FROM THIS DISCUSSION GROUP.

- Resources are not there to form a community around a parish.
- Overworked priests- especially retired priests.
- Benedict's decision to step down as a leader is an example to older priests.
- We don't hear the word of God from the congregation – only from the priests; Sunday after Sunday.
- Basic Christian communities can be vulnerable and 'pounced on' by Bishops. (e.g. Africa)
- The Church should be able to introduce its best parts to society.
- Too much emphasis on masses and liturgy. : Less mass- more bible.
- What you live is more important than what you do.
- Shared homilies – but people don't know how to share.
- Making spirituality relevant to everyday life. Action- Prayer- Action
- Formation for priesthood needs reviews.
- Priests don't have a support community.
- 'Not learning that they don't have all the answers'.
- 'We are conditioned to be passive in the church'.
- We don't recognise ourselves in the church.
- 'It's revolution – not reform!'
- Frustrating for younger women in the church.
- People with qualifications in theology are ignored/underemployed.

6. Church as a people of God. 'House Groups'.

ADDITIONAL INPUT FROM THIS DISCUSSION GROUP.

Small Christian Groups

Prepare the mass in a family home.

ACI could offer basic training/ support to those interested in small groups.

ACI should share success stories of small groups on its website.

We should be proactive and form our own groups as believers.

We should recognise role of small groups in adult faith formation.

7. Education and Preparation for Sacraments.

ADDITIONAL INPUT FROM THIS DISCUSSION GROUP

Re sacramental preparation:

Support for parents.

When child is ready/ understanding

Community link

Look for good examples – what works well
Research – why people come to church or don't
What they understand of Eucharist
Alienation from church - research.

Separating education in faith from schools.
Need for formation of adults/ parents.
Support for parents needed.
Baptism link to option for Catholic school -same for other sacraments.
Hand over to lay parents to organise.
Should be taken by family at time when child is ready.
Advantage to school preparation - complex family situations.
Individual being ready.
Possible to be inclusive.
Change age.
Tied in with parish.
Progress- community.
Look for what works well -attempt to connect child with community.
Engage with people who have turned their back -why?
Research- take initiative in parish.