

Association of Catholics in Ireland

Exploratory Pilot Study

May 2019

Lay Leadership in Parishes across Ireland

**Introduction**

In May 2019, the Association of Catholics in Ireland (ACI) Steering Group developed an exploratory pilot study. The aim of the study was to explore the extent of lay leadership in the Catholic Church and the role that the laity play in parish leadership. The exploratory pilot study enquired into the role of the pastoral council; the prevalence of Adult Faith Formation; the extent of family catechesis; and the source of and the reading of the Prayers of the Faithful. ACI administered the pilot study to its membership base throughout Ireland through Mailchimp, an email survey tool. The questions that were asked in the study are included in the appendices. This summary document offers an insight into the key themes and findings that emerged through this exploratory pilot study.

**Scope**

The pilot study was conducted on an all-island basis. The nature of church parish boundaries and geographic spread of parishes is such that the study was conducted on a cross border basis. Respondents came from ACI members in parishes in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. A total of 34 people responded to the survey and provided information on 36 parishes. 31 respondents reside in fourteen counties in Ireland. In addition, 3 respondents did not state where in Ireland they reside.

A large number of respondents were from parishes in the Dublin area (12). In the Republic of Ireland respondents reside in Carlow (2), Leitrim (2), Donegal (1), Offaly (1), Sligo (1), Kerry (1), Kildare (1), Kilkenny (1), Waterford (1), Wexford (1), Cork (1) and Wicklow (1). In Northern Ireland respondents reside in Antrim (1), Armagh (1) and Derry (1). One respondent did not identify their county of residence.

**Research Question**

A questionnaire was administered that posited an overarching research question: To what extent are lay people involved in leadership roles in your parish? A number of sub-questions were designed to explore the reality of parish life and activities.

* **Prayers of the Faithful***. The survey explored the extent to which the laity participate in the design, planning and reading of the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass.*
* **What happens in your parish if there is no priest to say a weekday Mass?**

*Are there trained lay people ready to conduct a prayer service with Holy*

*Communion in the absence of the priest? Or does everyone simply go, or stay at,*

*home?*

* **Does your parish have a pastoral council that is working to prepare the parish for greater lay responsibility** – *e.g. to deal with the absence of a priest for weekday Mass?*
* **Does your priest speak of the need for adult faith development in this changing situation, or encourage this trend in any way** *– e.g. by facilitating opportunities for discussion of the encyclicals of Pope Francis (such as Laudato Si’ on our responsibility for the Environment, or Amoris Laetitia on the Family)?*
* **Does your priest ever speak of the need for Family Catechesis** *– i.e. the need for parents or grandparents to take greater responsibility for instructing children in the faith, now that we know that schools alone are not sufficient for this?*

**Key Themes Emerging**:

***To what extent are lay people involved in leadership of your parish?***

In relation to the overarching study question, the responses were varied and nuanced. Respondents pointed to the extent to which the laity are involved in parish groups, whilst not necessarily involved in leadership. The figure below is presented by way of providing an overview of the way in which the laity are actively involved in parishes. Not all of the parishes covered would have all of the groups named below and questions were raised in relation to the extent of the leadership roles that are performed by laity in carrying out their activities.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Liturgy Group  Parish Pastoral Council  Exploring Our Faith Group  Reform and Renewal Group  Inter Church Group  Church Property Management Group | Secretaries  Child Safeguarding Personnel  Baptismal Teams  Funeral Teams  Sacristans  Readers’ Rota | Church Cleaners’ Rota  Eucharistic Ministers Rota  Altar Servers’ Rota  Collectors’ Rota  St. Vincent De Paul |

Respondents highlighted the positive contribution that the groups outlined above are making to parish life. They noted that small groups of people are accountable for certain areas of responsibility and suggested that this type of role allocation can result in a fragmented approach to the contribution made by lay leadership. They proposed that a coordinated approach to lay leadership could yield improved results.

**Initiatives**

Some of the key initiatives in parishes as referred to by respondents in relation to Adult Faith Formation included:

* + - Diocesan exploration of the mass, its constituent parts, prayers & structure etc.;
    - Lenten and Advent gatherings;
    - Laudato Si groups;
    - Right of Christian Initiation of Adults sessions;
    - Occasional talks: personal witness and scripture;
    - Part-time pastoral care worker who runs scripture workshops on a regular basis;
    - Ecumenical collaboration and relationship building with Church of Ireland, etc. Joint talks during Lenten period;
    - Exploring our Faith group with laity and clergy of all Christian traditions;
    - Week of Guided prayer run by Diocesan Office for Evangelisation and Ecumenism;
    - Faith for Life Programme in Clonliffe College;
    - Discussion groups in parishes.

Such initiatives were not widespread throughout parishes and were considered by respondents to be dependent upon, in some instances, the encouragement of an ‘open, responsive and progressive Parish Priest who promotes education and faith formation initiatives’. Interestingly, and in contrast, some respondents noted the contribution of a ‘laid-back, non-interventionist priest where the parish is working well’. Such nuances appear throughout the pilot study and suggest the need for further research and a detailed analysis of Adult Faith Formation.

Additional insights into Adult Faith Formation were provided, some respondents referred to the lack of provision and the lack of attention and discussion on Papal Encyclicals organised for parishioners. Others suggested that the timing of such initiatives did not consider peoples working commitments.

‘Encyclicals are read out at morning sessions; these are poorly attended because people are at work’. Others suggest that Adult Faith Formation is a ‘hit and miss affair’ with little uptake by parishioners. Some of the reasons suggested by respondents for the limited uptake or lack of uptake of Adult Faith Formation initiatives include:

lack of participation of parishioners in planning

lack of follow up and momentum

lack of consistency

**Theme 1: Prayers of the Faithful**

***Question in the survey asked:***

***To what extent do the laity participate in the design, planning and reading of the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass?***

**Responses - Overview**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Who Reads?** | **Numbers** | **Percentages** |
| Clergy | 11 | 46% |
| Laity | 13 | 54% |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Source of Prayers** | **Numbers** | **Percentages** |
| Clergy | 11 | 38% |
| Laity | 5 | 17% |
| Unknown | 7 | 24% |
| No Answer | 6 | 21% |

**Theme 2: Prayer Services**

***Question in the survey asked:***

***What happens in your parish if there is no priest to say a week-day mass? Are there trained lay people ready to conduct a Prayer Service with Holy Communion in the absence of the priest? Or does everyone simply go, or stay at home?***

**Summary of responses**

All survey respondents did not address this particular question directly. Those who did respond to the question can be categorised in three groups – ‘Yes’, ‘No’ and ‘Did not Arise’ responses.

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| Prayer Services | Numbers | Percentages |
| Yes | 14 | 52% |
| No | 8 | 30% |
| Didn’t arise | 5 | 18% |

**1. ‘Yes’ Responses.** Of those that did respond to this question 14 confirmed that prayer services with the distribution of Holy Communion did take place where a priest was not available to say mass. However, in 4 cases such services took place only once or were discontinued after intervention by the local priest.

The reason given for the decision to discontinue the services was associated with doubts about the distribution of the Eucharist using hosts consecrated at a previous mass. The reservation of bishops was mentioned as a factor influencing the decisions of local priests.

Those responding with a ‘Yes’ are located in parishes in Dublin, Kildare, Carlow, Antrim, Wexford, Roscommon, Kilkenny, Kerry and Sligo.

**2. ‘No’ Responses**. 8 respondents indicated that no such services were held when the priest was not available to say mass in their parishes. In one case there was an expectation of services in the future as training of lay ministers was underway. In another area where there were two neighbouring parishes one parish did not have services because of the attitude of the Parish Priest [based on concerns about the archbishop’s view] but services were available in the adjoining parish.

Those responding with a ‘No’ to this question are located in parishes in Offaly, Derry, Tipperary, Donegal, Dublin, Limerick, Sligo and Waterford.

**3. ‘Did not Arise’ Responses**. 5 respondents stated that the situation posed in the question did not arise in their parish. This was generally due to the fact that ‘substitution’ arrangements were made when the local priest was not available or mass was available in a nearby parish. Those responding with a ‘Did not Arise’ answer to the question are located in parishes in Dublin, Kilkenny, Armagh.

**General Comments.**

- The variety of the responses highlights the lack of a common policy or approach across the parishes represented in the survey on the issue of ‘lay- led’ services in the absence of priest to celebrate mass. Policy appears to be set down by the diocese and is strictly followed by some Parish Priests and ignored or not strictly followed in other parishes. The approach to ‘lay-led’ services was also reported in a small number of parishes as changing when the Parish Priest changed. The decision to discontinue services in these circumstances [despite the wishes of the lay faithful] reflects the control exercised by the Parish Priest.

- The parishes where ‘lay led’ services were available regularly were in the main in urban areas.

- In some rural areas week-day masses were scarce anyway and there was no expectation of a service because of the small numbers attending church in mid-week.

- The lack of contingency planning to prepare for the situation where mass is not available in parishes was highlighted by another respondent. ‘Ad Hoc’ arrangements were resorted to as necessary, e.g., ask a priest in a neighbouring parish if he is available when the need arises but no long-term strategy was under consideration.

- The lack of training for parishioners was mentioned by one respondent as a reason for having no ‘lay-led’ services. There was no indication that any training was being considered in this particular parish.

- One respondent who did not answer the question directly did made reference to the lack of proper training for lay readers and ministers of the Eucharist as evidenced by examples of poor practice by these individuals, e.g., parishioners not being able to hear readers and ministers of the Eucharist not using the correct wording when distributing Holy Communion.

**Conclusions.**

Attempting to draw any significant conclusions from such a small sample of respondents is questionable. However, two ‘trends’ appear to emerge from the responses received to this question. The first relates to policy and the second to the role of the Parish Priest.

***Policy*** - It appears that there is no overall policy or approach applying to the conduct and availability of ‘lay led’ services [in the parishes in question] in the absence of a priest to celebrate mass. Different parishes and diocese appear to make their own

arrangements or simply take no action when there is no priest available. Some parishes are very progressive with trained lay leaders to conduct services while in other parishes ‘lay led’ services are not available or are simply not sanctioned by the bishop. Where such services are available there appears to be no consistent policy regarding the training and preparation of the lay leaders.

***The Parish Priest*** - The willingness of the Parish Priest to approve or prohibit ‘lay-led’ services appears to be the defining issue. Based on the responses received a number of Parish Priests approved services despite [in some cases] it seems the reservations of the local bishops, while other Parish Priests refused permission for services based on their bishop’s opposition to the distribution of Holy Communion in the absence of a priest celebrating mass.

In one response, unrelated to the question of ‘lay-led’ services, there was very serious criticism of a newly appointed Parish Priest who appeared to unravel a whole series of progressive changes established under the previous Parish Priest leading to a collapse in morale among a large cohort of parishioners.

**Theme 3: Parish Pastoral Councils**

***Question in the survey asked:***

***Does your Parish have a Pastoral Council that is working to prepare the parish for greater lay responsibility – e.g. to deal with the absence of a priest for weekday Mass?***

Respondents raised issues that require further discussion in relation to the role of Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs). The following issues were raised:

* + General invisibility and obscurity of the PPCs;
  + General lack of awareness about the role and function of the PPC;
  + Lack of information/awareness of who chooses the PPC;
  + Lack of awareness of how the PPCs communicate with the laity;
  + Limited impact of the PPCs in general;
  + Bishops initiative on pastoral plan for diocese are largely ignored;
  + Parishioners are kept in the dark on financial matters.

In response to the concerns highlighted respondents suggested the need for information on who the Parish Pastoral Councils are comprised of and what their role entails. Respondents noted that there is little consensus on how PPCs could operate effectively. They noted that a communication policy is needed; openness and transparency of how PPCs are chosen and where the responsibility lies; the need to identify the function, role and objective of the pastoral councils as well as their responsibility to the parishioners. Respondents highlighted the role of the PPC in speaking out, in finding their voice on key matters of concern to laity.

Overall respondents highlighted the need to convince laity of their participation and to convince parishioners that their voices will be heard.

***Training, Education and Research***

Respondents proposed that there exists a need for training, education and faith formation initiatives. Suggestions included:

* + The need for leadership training in parishes;
  + The need for role preparation of the laity for leadership;
  + Experienced ministers to train others.

In particular respondents suggested that pastoral plans for dioceses tend to be top down in approach and recommend that a partnership approach with laity would better serve their needs.

In relation to PPCs respondents highlighted the need for further research, they referred to The Parish Pastoral Councils Review (2013-14) initiative, <https://www.dublindiocese.ie/parish-pastoral-councils-review>/led by the Dublin Archdiocese as being a particularly helpful initiative, that needs to be updated and conducted country wide. Respondents also highlighted the need for further research such as The National Church Life Survey 2018 <https://ncls.org.au>

**Responses-Overview**

Of the 34 people who responded to the survey 25 answered the question

* 6 had PPCs that were considered to be effective
* 15 had PPCs which were considered either to be ineffective or not in communication and people had no clear idea what they did. These people commenting were often very involved in their Parish.
* 4 didn't give information one way or the other
* 7 did not answer the above question.
* 4 did not have a PPC

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Answer** | **Numbers** | **Percentage** |
| Yes | 21 | 67% |
| No | 4 | 12% |
| No Answer | 7 | 21% |

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Answer** | **Numbers** | **Percentage** |
| Effective | 6 | 21% |
| Ineffective | 15 | 54% |
| No Answer | 7 | 25% |

**Theme 4: Adult Faith Development**

***Question in the survey asked:***

***Does your priest speak of the need for adult faith development in this changing situation, or encourage this trend in any way – e.g. by facilitating opportunities for discussion of the encyclicals of Pope Francis (such as Laudato Si’ on our responsibility for the Environment, or Amoris Laetitia on the Family)?***

**Responses-Overview**

34 people responded, of the 34 respondents a total of 14 answered yes, 13 said no, 6 gave no answer and 1 stated, ‘not aware’

Yes (14) No (13) No answer (6) Not aware (1)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Answer | Numbers | Percentage |
| Yes | 14 | 41% |
| No | 13 | 38% |
| No answer | 6 | 18% |
| Not aware | 1 | 3% |

**Theme 5: Family Catechesis**

***Question in the survey asked:***

***Does your priest ever speak of the need for Family Catechesis – i.e. the need for parents or grandparents to take greater responsibility for instructing children in the faith, now that we know that schools alone are not sufficient for this?***

**Responses - Overview**

34 responses were provided, of the 34, half (17) stated no, 8 responded yes, 8 did not provide an answer and 1 responded with ‘don’t know’.

No (17) Yes (8) No Answer (8) Don’t Know (1)

**Breakdown of responses**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Answer | Numbers | Percentage |
| Yes | 8 | 24% |
| No | 17 | 50% |
| No answer | 8 | 24% |
| Not aware | 1 | 2% |

**Conclusions from Themes Explored**

* A key feature of the responses received was the reluctance of many respondents to have their names associated with comments in relation to their parishes. Why lay people are so reluctant to speak out about issues which clearly need to be addressed in our church is a question which must be addressed in any future survey. Is this as a result of fear or indifference – or perhaps both? Either way we must find out the reasons behind this reluctance if we are to move forward.
* Our limited study suggests that while the declining numbers of priests can lead some clergy to adopt a ‘hands off’ approach that delegates initiative to responsible lay people, it can also have the opposite effect of leading other clergy to deny freedom of lay initiative on the grounds of the priest’s canonical obligation to oversee and approve everything that happens. In those cases canon law could be deployed to deny co-responsibility to lay people and ensure inertia, for potentially the full term of a parish priest in a given parish.  It would take a thorough survey to establish that this second pattern is not the predominant one.
* This Exploratory Pilot Study [EPS] obviously encompassed a very small sample of respondents. However, the results clearly suggest a number of trends and patterns that give rise to serious concerns in relation to the promotion of the active involvement of the laity in the life of the parish - both in the spiritual life of the parish and the administration supporting the governance of parish affairs.
* We know that a large percentage of the population identify as Catholics. We also know that large numbers of people attend Week-end Masses, First Holy Communion Masses, Confirmation Ceremonies, Weddings and Funerals. What we don't know are the reasons why lay people don't have a greater involvement in church life generally and why they don't identify this involvement as a worthwhile and fulfilling aspect of their everyday life.
* In this Exploratory Pilot Study, the ACI Steering Group have tried to identify some of the reasons for this lack of involvement. There appears to be a disconnect between many parishioners and the full life of their church. If the Church is to flourish and be more important in the lives of Catholics this gap must be addressed by a reformed model of church in the spirit of Lumen Gentium.

**Recommendations for Action in Response to Exploratory Study.**

* As a result of the findings in the Exploratory Pilot Study the ACI calls on the ICBC to commission a countrywide comprehensive professionally designed and administered survey with a view to identifying the key issues which will have to be addressed to ensure the survival of the Christian ethos in parishes across the country in the context of the diminishing numbers of priests and an ageing cohort of lay faithful attending church on a regular basis.
* This survey should include questions which seek to establish why lay people are so reluctant to become involved in parish councils and other parish groups.
* The survey must include questions which address the core issue of the ‘flight from the faith’ of young people. This ‘flight’ used to take place after Confirmation but are there early signs emerging that this threshold is now moving in the direction of children who have received their Holy Communion? This surely constitutes a new crisis for the church and another reason to act now.
* A full Diocesan Synod should be carried out in every Diocese across the country similar to that conducted in a number of Diocese, including the Limerick and Killala Diocese. A natural ‘next step’ would be to call a National Synod with the full involvement of the baptized lay faithful to discern a way forward which will seek to guide the church in Ireland in the years ahead, with the blessing and support of the Holy Spirit.
* Initiatives, irrespective of their origin, which are proven to contribute positively to the life and growth of the Christian Community in parishes should not be endangered by the transfer of existing clergy and/or the appointment of new Parish Pastoral Councils or new clergy, in particular the appointment of a new parish priest.
* Communications between parishes must be improved to facilitate the exchange of ‘best practice’ parish initiatives. Successful initiatives must be shared across parishes and dioceses throughout the country.

**PLEASE ACT NOW BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE**

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**Please See Survey Questions Below.**

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| --- |
| **Who in your parish prepares and reads out the ‘Prayers of the Faithful’, heard after the Gospel and Homily at weekend Mass?**    As the crisis of the Irish Catholic clergy becomes more intense, some bishops are sounding the alarm and calling for 'co-responsibility' – but we in ACI are also hearing that many priests are still making little attempt  to prepare lay people for the greater responsibilities that must fall on us quite soon.  Trying to get a clear overview of this situation in Ireland we in the ***ACI Steering Group*** are asking all members of ACI to report back to us on the progress of lay responsibility and activity in your own parish.  Our headline question above seems a good place to start. The **Prayers of the Faithful** were always intended to be the prayers of those attending Mass on that day – not prayers prepared just by the celebrant or chosen by him from some book or other source.  If parishioners are not being trusted to prepare and then to read out these prayers at Mass, what does that tell us about the readiness of clergy to prepare their people for greater responsibility, for awareness of the meaning of scripture, and for change?  **Other key questions:**   1. *What happens in your parish if there is no priest to say a weekday Mass? Are there trained lay people ready to conduct* ***a prayer service with Holy Communion*** *in the absence of the priest? Or does everyone simply go, or stay at, home?* 2. *Does your parish have a* ***pastoral council*** *that is working to prepare the parish for greater lay responsibility – e.g. to deal with the absence of a priest for weekday Mass?* 3. *Does your priest speak of the need for* ***adult faith development*** *in this changing situation, or encourage this trend in any way – e.g. by facilitating opportunities for discussion of the encyclicals of Pope Francis (such as* ***Laudato Si’*** *on our responsibility for the Environment, or* ***Amoris Laetitia*** *on the Family)?* 4. *Does your priest ever speak of the need for* ***Family Catechesis*** *– i.e. the need for parents or grandparents to take greater responsibility for instructing children in the faith, now that we know that schools alone are not sufficient for this?*   **Please take the time to report back to us on as many of these questions as you can.** We lay people must show that we are ready for the responsibilities that must fall to us soon if our Irish church is to renew itself and overcome this crisis. The **ACI Steering Group** needs to be in a position to inform the Irish Bishops Conference of the true state of affairs if ACI is to fulfil its potential for leadership in a situation that becomes more critical day-by-day.  Fortunately, there are signs that some clergy and some religious orders are ready to assist us lay people to develop our own gifts for responding to change.  Everything you tell us will empower us to advise such leaders – to hasten the emergence of a co-responsible Irish church at long last.  To respond, email us at [info@acireland.ie](mailto:info@acireland.ie) or write to us at  *The Association of Catholics in Ireland, c/o 41 Woodcliffe Village, Howth, Co Dublin.* |