



This is a reduced account of the original analysis written by Pippa Bonner

Introduction

A survey was conducted with ACTA supporters and feedback available in February 2015. Although the response was low: 23.5% of the sample, it gave a useful snapshot producing ideas for future dialogue. Twenty three churches responded some were clustered.

The majority did not believe they were involved in parish decision making. 66% said they had no PPC. Of those who have a PPC the majority were selected and 20% were either elected or there was an open invitation to join.

Several systems operated in churches which had been amalgamated. 25% of members stayed on indefinitely. The stay in some others was 3 years but in a proportion of those people stayed on if there was no replacement.

Frequency of meetings varied. Areas discussed most frequently in descending order: maintenance, worship, parish community building (not bricks and mortar), different age groups' needs, parish mission, community mission, ecumenical issues, interfaith issues, spiritual events and local issues. Another 25% did not know.

There were some mixed responses about the structure of their parish PPC and there were some positive comments: "an effective body within the Parish"; someone else mentioned that a newly appointed Parish Administrator had made a difference. A website was considered a positive move. : "an effective body within the Parish"; someone else mentioned that a newly appointed Parish Administrator had made a difference. A website was considered a positive move. Some negative comments: "more emphasis on maintenance than mission" and "more like a secret society." The majority who answered did not think the PPC does well, or they were neutral.

Respondents were asked to give a brief outline of
your idea of an effective PPC and the issues/tasks which were the most important for it to consider.

Themes below are outlined in order of respondents' priority, ie Tasks were mentioned the most, but the lists within each theme are in no particular order of importance/ number of times mentioned.

Many respondents gave several themes, and some left this question blank.

Tasks of PPC.

(list of main tasks mentioned in no particular order.)

- An effective council should be concerned with many aspects of parish life: liturgy, ministries, catechesis, school links, finance, care of sick and housebound; events, food banks, local issues including justice and ecumenical issues.
- Evangelisation and outreach.
- More emphasis on spiritual needs.
- Support for Parish Priest, parish groups and parish administration.
- Links with the diocese.
- How to mitigate shortage of priests: lay training; taking funerals etc.
- Lay people being involved in all aspects of church governance
- Being aware of issues like remarriage, single parenthood and how the parish should respond.
- Reasons for people rejecting support should be explored.
- "Thinking outside of the box."



Structure of the PPC.

- Some said PPC meetings should be open to all parishioners, but it was also mentioned that it is difficult to get people involved.
- Some PPC members are either elected, selected, co-opted for their expertise, chosen exclusively by PP, a mixture of ways.
- Should there be a fixed number of members?
- How long should PPC members stay? Fixed term?
- All parish groups should be represented.
- Sub-groups formed for different subject areas.
- The PPC should be transparent and accountable and feedback widely available to all.
- Not to be run by a clique.
- Does the PPC decide the Parish priorities?
- The need for regular meetings.
- Is effectiveness due to some individuals?
- PPCs should be compulsory not discretionary.
- Establish a mechanism for continuity if PP changes.
- Who draws up the agenda: PP only or are people able to contribute? Is it seen by all in advance of a PPC Meeting?
- Who takes the Minutes and are they easily available to the Parish?

Collaboration (including definitions of collaboration.)

Collaborative ministry, consultation of lay people, cooperation, inclusive church empowering lay people; supporting the PP in decision making; the need for an inclusive PP; “most important a PP who wants to listen and consult the laity”; a PPC that encourages lay participation in all aspects of parish life”; PP and laity working together; “open and honest discussion important in the spirit of love so people will voice views and not feel put down”; “PPC of equal benefit to PP and parishioners- where all feel involved and part of the team”; use of people’s complementary skills; “one that genuinely shares responsibility for the life and mission of the parish, especially ongoing formation so that parishioners are confident, motivated and empowered to live the Gospel in the local and wider community.”

Education/formation

One respondent suggested reading Walter Citrine’s work about committee working; requirement of more theological and historical education of lay people; other adult education;

Autonomy

“Autonomy from clergy influences is important but delicate”; elected members by parishioners, not chosen by PP; if PP has sole governance, structures might be abandoned (not sure whether this is because either PP may leave or lay people don’t buy into project?)

When respondents were asked if there were other ways of having dialogue in their parish and what else had been tried, responses were mixed and mostly suggested that communication was via the Parish Priest.

Respondents were asked how dialogue between ministries was managed and how were members of the laity empowered, encouraged, affirmed and challenged. The answers were



ACTA in the Leeds Diocese

a mixed bag of experience, of what people thought constituted dialogue or not, and what worked or not. The answers were mostly negative and suggested there was not dialogue or it was sporadic, informal and done via the Parish Priest or Parish Secretary.

People were asked if they had any other suggestions about how to involve parishioners and how their belief in the responsibilities and equality of all the baptised could be lived out in the mission the parish? A third of responses said no or left this blank and a third of the remaining responses mentioned most: above all that this was influenced by the attitude of the clergy, their formation, shortage of priests and the need for a shared voice.

Summary taken from the themes mentioned throughout survey.

It is important to re-iterate that the sample was small but many respondents gave very detailed and thoughtful answers in this qualitative survey. It has seemed important to honour their work in detail by breaking down responses in to the categories above. Although it comes from a small sample (23.5%) it is an interesting snapshot of current parish life. It is likely that those who are content or discontent with having/not having a PPC are more likely to have responded to the survey than those who are neutral.

There was a significant group who answered a few questions and left the rest blank. The tone was alienated and gave responses of “don’t know” either because they did not know how their PPCs were structured, what was being discussed and did not consider any feedback was being communicated. Some thought a third party was needed ie not the priest or parishioners, to get an effective PPC going. However, despite feeling disconnected, it is significant that they had sent in their survey sheets.

It is clear that many churches/parishes do not have PPCs and where they do exist there is some praise and much criticism of how they are working. There has been mixed success with PPCs where churches have amalgamated. It seems likely that if PPCs are a challenge in one community it may be more challenging to have an effective PPC in a parish that has two or three communities.

It seems from responses that the attitude of the priest has a key part to play in a) whether there is a PPC and b) if it is effective in the eyes of lay people. Many respondents remained anonymous so it is not known how many priests responded to the survey. It is likely the majority of respondents were lay people, as reflected in those who have attended ACTA meetings in the Leeds Diocese (to whom the Questionnaire was sent.)

The attitude of lay people and whether they feel equipped to take part is a theme in this survey too. As in other feedback questionnaires ACTA Leeds have analysed, lay adult education is requested. Also it is clear from the survey many lay people have not been used to participating in dialogue in parish structures.

This Survey suggests that priest and lay education is needed for effective dialogue and collaborative ministry.

The tasks of PPC meetings, structure and collaborative working seems key to the effectiveness of PPC working. Clear, open communication about meetings: agenda and Minutes seem very important in many responses. Who can attend meetings varies. What they are called differs. Some believe that technology: emails and websites can encourage improved outreach and feedback especially in amalgamated parishes.



ACTA in the Leeds Diocese

At a time of priest shortage and amalgamation of parishes, how lay people and priests work together seem crucial for the ongoing life of the Church. ACTA has dialogue as a key aim and how this is managed in churches/parishes whether in PPCs or not, is a crucial issue now and in the future, for each of us.

Two concluding quotations from respondents. Both are from amalgamated parishes.

An effective PPC “needs to be presented as crucial by PP and Laity both. Then steady feedback to parish. Attempt made to address the 3 “legs” of parish: worship; loving communion (community?) building; formation of missionary disciples for mission outwards.” (Parish has a PPC.)

“Perhaps technology will provide an alternative mechanism for communication within parishes where meaningful dialogue is a real problem. However this does not really deal with the problem. In general, it is the diocese which needs to have certain expectations for meaningful dialogue between the ministries within each of its parishes. It is within that framework of understanding that the laity and clergy, in circumstances such as ours, can begin to make progress. This is now more pressing than ever.”

(From someone who tried to get a PPC started in an amalgamating parish, but no PPC as yet.)

Thank you to you all for responding.