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Ministry Teams – What’s Happening!

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In recent times the accelerated pace of diminishing clergy relative to ongoing pastoral demands has seen dioceses reconfigured into administrative areas or pastoral units. There is a consequent shift towards a number of priests from different parishes being jointly responsible for the whole unit, co-equal in power and accountability. The practice of committees attending to different aspects of Church life e.g. parish pastoral council, liturgy groups, finance committees etc. under the charge of the parish priest is not new to the Church. However, the lexicon and practices are changing here also, with the emphasis on ‘team spirit’ – working corporately and cooperatively (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12).

It might be said *the whole is greater for the sum of its parts*, reflecting the ethos to achieve optimum outcomes. The evolution of parish teams covers a wide range of dedicated services towards agreed goals: baptism, funerals, Eucharistic Ministers, Readers, assisting at liturgy etc. Similar patterns have emerged in religious orders with the move from leadership councils headed by a superior, to leadership teams characterised by more circular, less hierarchical models. Distinct province governance is giving way to join-up administrative areas and ‘community teams’, including a gradual move towards lay members in face of scarce religious personnel.

Such merging and cooperation in organisations are generally considered to enhance synergy, increasing efficiency towards desired outcomes. While the goals of secular organisations are often focused on market logic to maximise output and/or profit, Church bodies are centred more on the reign of God. For the Christian community, team work is not regarded as merely a neat ‘division of labour’, but something *more* – a participation in the mission of Jesus to make known the Father’s Love. Further, that something *more* may well include the hidden catalyst for personal growth and change (conversion). Team interaction offers direct/

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indirect opportunities to open ourselves to others, going ‘outside the self’ to discover self-insights. The routine practice of prayer at the start and close of meetings is a reminder that we are workers tending a vineyard, a vineyard that is not ours to possess.

Since the initial lockdown, I initiated a number of virtual conversations with some colleagues, ministry teams and pastoral units. The conversations centred on transition in these changing times, together with the impact cocooning has had on ministry teams – as one aspect of Church structure. Just as snowdrops, crocus, and daffodils emerge from slumber following the winter solstice intimating that hope is never dead, glimpses of hope were noticed embedded in the challenges of this time.

STRUCTURE

Dedicated ministry teams usually mark a beginning moment when they gather to reflect and agree a *mission statement*, an aspirational compass to guide the group in ways it hopes to function. Cooperative bonds are forged, as strategic goals and pathways are mapped. Individual and corporate tasks are identified and clarified. From the outset, working groups seek to establish a firm bedrock that will withstand turbulent times (Matthew 7:24- 27), sustained by its ethos or *esprit de corps*. Individual commitment is sought to own common group goals, while members are encouraged to stand alone when needs be, humble enough to submit to the corporate process as appropriate. A group will return time and again to review its ethos and revise its functioning. Many would agree that 2020 was a year like no other. Government restrictions unsettled the routine patterns of team building and team work, disrupting plans and closing work/service spaces. With changed work practices and focus somewhat scattered, many teams were in a frenzy trying to regroup and reset the compass. Many have done so, some ups and downs worth recording and commented upon.

Team Work: Learning new ways of being team proved to be a positive experience. Zoom meetings afforded sharper focus, reduced distractions, less emotional entanglement, more efficient use of time. The normal sequence of ‘form <=> storm <=> re-form’ of group process seemed more streamlined. Generosity, respect, patience, kindness, more evident - notwithstanding the challenges of submitting to corporate processes. That these positives might endure into the future was a hope expressed.

Our Common Home: The loss of casual ordinary encounters in the work place, possibly taken for granted before, was missed. A reminder that we are social beings, not robots! Confined as everyone is to their own work spaces, connecting to other people/

team members via zoom or phone meant a full day could go by devoid of any real human contact. Many refreshed their interest in the tenets of *Laudato Si* (May 2015), awakening an attentiveness to the wider ‘community of life’ e.g plants, wild life, eco-friendly practices etc. Practices that expanded in the quest for connectivity – as an adjunct to virtual connections.

Archetypes: Most people thrive in the company of others. Some, less so. It was noted that a few individuals acted with greater confidence, autonomy, and improved efficiency from a remote working space. However, these individuals also gained the self-insight that reinforcing such habitual social patterns are not always for the better, either for themselves or the corporate synergy of team.

Creative opportunities: Many parish ministry teams ceased or reduced functioning, evoking a sense of ‘not needed/redundant’ in some instances, particularly so among team leaders. A few questioned their on-going commitment, while others embraced the natural challenge to diversify and create innovative outreach. For example, fostering pastoral support interaction by phone, offering presence and support through difficult times of loss such as illness and funerals; doing virtual preparation for First Communion and Confirmation; novenas on grief and loss; virtual prayer guidance, etc.

Universal fulfilment: For some, disconnection while cocooning heightened the sense of flux in global realities, evoking greater interest and solidarity with wider world events. This in turn tempered the growing sense of remoteness people have felt. An awareness and feel-good factor that however removed, I am also an ‘agent of life’ in caring for the universal good of others, beyond my immediate, singular concerns.

Personal Transformation: Being the sole agent of one’s personal time was in many instances attractive – at least initially. Inevitably, even for the best of introverts, company with oneself over prolonged periods can lead to ruminations around life losses. Regrets can surface, personal gremlins may play havoc with thoughts and feelings. Many embraced the moment in an attempt to resolve retrospective personal issues, deferred possibly due to prior, crowded work demands. In general, habitual practices for better/worse became exaggerated, heightening the need to re-vision boundaries – personal, lifestyle, diet, or other. Work practices are now viewed by some from an altered perspective. And, it might be added, healthy individuals make for a healthy team.

Health and Wellbeing: Even without zoom, working alone is stressful for some in the absence of camaraderie. Capacity for prolonged intense work understandably diminishes with age,

a reality widely reported in my exchanges. Anxieties around unfamiliarity or awkwardness with technology was balanced by an excitement in learning something new, expanding horizons. However, ready access to files when needed, relying sometimes on memory, added stress to zoom gatherings; prolonged attention to a screen often energy draining. Many spoke of latent tiredness or exhaustion in the aftermath. A few spoke of altered moods and sleep patterns. Overall, presenting challenges were viewed as an opportunity to revise how they lived and worked.

Interiority: There was a growing realisation that what matters most in ministry is a dedicated unwavering ‘pastoral presence’, characterised by patient attentiveness to the outside world and needs of others, being a channel of security/love. Through a practice of deepening interiority, a measure of confidence/confirmation of *raison d’etre*, is bestowed, unfettering the frantic flurry of ‘doing’.

Conflict resolution: Virtual/electronic interactions can blur non-verbal cues; as a result, ascertaining mood and other bodily signals may be difficult. One can easily miscue, reading things into a more limited array of signals, such as voice tone. Communication can become uneasy, ambiguous, or conflictual. Argumentative or competitive dynamics may be subsumed or overlooked, opting to get the business done with the least strain. Minimising tension can prove counterproductive, should compliance to unhealthy group norms be the result. However, it was noted that the personal space/distance for reflection also enabled the palliation of charged thoughts or feelings, less defensiveness, more openness to learn something from others, to respect differing points of view and legitimate interests.

PRESCIENT SEEDS OF HOPE

The image of a nascent cocooned butterfly carries an expectation that wings will naturally expand and take flight in right time. Analogously, the immediate re-entry challenge for groups may be the balancing of recent lockdown learnings with what went before, adjusting some of the habituated personal and corporate practices for what is to come. A few prompts are offered to enhance *esprit de corps* and *synergy*.

Mentoring: Timely appraisal of the current state of team morale and synergy can help to reset the compass. The leader’s role may need rebalancing, alongside the need to gently subordinate individual members’ personal need for prominence relative to the corporate matrix - often a sensitive, emotionally charged dynamic in real-time meetings. Also, group dynamics tend to have an uncanny effect in unexpectedly returning us to roles and styles we

adopted in our early family stories. For example, we may have been visible/invisible, forefront/background, silent/talkative, vulnerable/rescuer, etc. Mentoring may invite revision of these archetypes in the interest of personal change.

Best in us: Jesus and his disciples model aspects of team which reflect conflicting elements and foibles of the human condition. Teams are known for drawing out the *best* and *worst* in us. Dedicating time to identify and strengthen anchors, that help each individual part be their best selves, in the interest of the whole, makes for generous team encounters.

Faith: Strengthening the practice of seeing God, or God seeing us, in the midst of everyday bits and pieces, are graced opportunities to recognise and give glory and praise to God (cf. Ps 9:1; Ps 69:30; Ps 86:12). Or, fired by a sense there is a hidden treasure of meaning in this field of bewilderment (Matthew 13:44) that is ours to find, clutch and satisfy.

The Spirit of the Magnificat: Things hardly ever unfold quite in the way we expect, leaving us somewhat unsettled. There is need to remind ourselves we are limited, that we can only do our best. Forgiving our inadequacies allows us to rejoice with gratitude for being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). Such a turn of mind counters losing heart in face of missed opportunities or disappointments.

Bearing with: Many of us might identify with Luke's woman, bent over and weighed down (Luke 13:11) in overwhelming times. There is implied solace of not bearing such weight on our own in Deut. 33: 27: '*Underneath you are my everlasting arms*', but also the implied paradox of a spirit of detachment – a disposition of carrying, yet not carrying.

Webs of Humane Care: The heightened awareness of the fragility of life urges us to be alert to opportunities to express appreciation of fellow team members, their acts of kindness in thoughts or deed. Being present to their 'stories' opens up hospitable spaces to accommodate the joys and sorrows of the time, even if these may be different from ours. Such a disposition is not amiss in the stewardship of teams.

Communication: There can never be enough! Communication requires unceasing attentiveness to patterns and practices. There are always some among us who either may be, are, or feel excluded – real or imagined. Accidentally or not, a dreaded sense of being an appendage, that one is not important or inexpendable, can preoccupy a team member.

Laughter: An average adult laughs seventeen times a day, a child three hundred times! *A laugh a day keeps the doctor away.* Try to include light-heartedness, buoyancy.

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Imagination: Speculative imagination is brought alive with a burst of ‘*what if*’ questions. *What if* the ‘doing’ of ministry were to better attend to some of the observations regarding interiority (noted above)? *What if* single administrative areas, with their constituent parishes, might strive towards a more collaborative, cooperative and unified approach to Sunday liturgy and other significant Church celebrations. For example, a composite representative team might rotate responsibility to create a template for Sunday Liturgy, which would be applied across all parishes in the administrative area. *What if* such inclusive lay ministry teams were to be a norm into the future? *What if* the local administrative area, as part of a wider diocesan strategy, were to be responsible for dialogue with priests and laity (nothing about us, without us) to evolve desired changes?

CONCLUSION

There is an invitation in this time to re-think and revisit our way of being Church¹. The enduring inspiration of the cocooned butterfly is that hope is never extinguished. For the faith-filled, wings will unfurl and expand as dedicated groups of people arise in a spirit of fraternity and cooperation, blending their gifts to further the reign of God – the essence of ministry teams. Perhaps innovative pathways, cast in the mould of more open, participative structures, might better purpose-fit diverse, flexible practices in the spirit of St Paul, ‘*all things to all people....*’ (1 Corinthians 9: 19-23).

1 See, for example, Malphurs, Aubrey. *Advanced Strategic Planning: A 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry*. Ada, Michigan: Baker Books (3rd Edition), 2013 and Hartwig, T. Ryan and Warren Bird. *Teams that Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership*. Westmont, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015.