

# Leadership in A New Way of Ministry

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Do we want to thrive or merely survive? This is the question facing parishes at this time. With the decrease in attendance at regular services and fewer ordained clergy, each parish and faith community is faced with the question, ‘How will we live our church life to the fullest?’

We could naively hope to restore the old version of the parish, blaming the clergy or those who don’t come to church for the way things are. Or we could listen anew to *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council’s dog-

matic constitution on the Church: ‘The lay apostolate is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation all [lay people] are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord himself’ (LG, 33). This is our mandate as communities, as the People of God. How will we respond?

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organisations. Often in parish life this involvement and ministry has been one of helping the priest but not really sharing responsibility for the mission. This left responsibility for the mission with the clergy, who may or may not have wanted to let others share in ministry in a meaningful way. Yet, as far back as 2009, Pope Benedict spoke of the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God and the need to ‘improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted’ (‘Opening of the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome on the Theme: “Church Membership And Pastoral Co-Responsibility”’, 26 May 2009). Our parish and faith communities belong to all of us – how do we share responsibility for them?

Early in his papacy, in his address to the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Pope Francis spoke of the need for lay people who take risks, who soil their hands, who are not afraid of making mistakes, who move forward. Responding to this call, in 2022 the Diocese of Kerry invited people to come forward and undertake a new ministry, that of lay pastoral leader. The role would be of animator or co-ordinator of

pastoral activity, working with the clergy and lay people in the pastoral area. After an initial period of formation and discernment, the group of twenty-five women and men, bringing their individual life experiences and learnings and skills, embarked on a two-year journey of formation. Facilitated by the Certificate in Pastoral Ministry accredited by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and by diocesan workshops and accompaniment, the pastoral leaders deepened their understanding and knowledge of themselves, their faith and the Church. Along the way, they embarked on pastoral placements that enabled them to explore ministry and their parish and pastoral areas.

Commissioned by Bishop Ray Browne on 9 February 2025, these men and women are now ministering in various parts of the diocese, exploring the outreach and support of parents and children seeking the sacraments, offering a pastoral presence in the nursing homes and care facilities of the diocese, exploring funeral ministry and how the local community can pray with and support the dying and their families, initiatives around prayer with Scripture and with music, facilitating pastoral councils and lay involvement. They have taken the first steps to serving their local faith communities; the road will emerge by walking it.

So are parish communities thriving? The commitment and passion for their faith brought by the new ministers are providing fresh energy. Their presence on pastoral councils brings support to those already working in these ministries. The ministry of pastoral leader is a part of the jigsaw, one step along the way. Now let’s see what other pieces are needed for thriving parish communities.