

14/05 Struggling parishes

(A report from the Standing Committee)

Introduction

1. By resolution 14/05 the Synod requested that the Standing Committee –
 - (a) call upon the regional councils to indicate what strategies and policies have been developed by the respective regional councils to assist parishes who are struggling financially or who are struggling to implement ministry strategies, and
 - (b) provide a report identifying for Synod in 2006 the strategies and policies which have been developed by the respective regional councils to assist parishes who are struggling financially or who are struggling to implement ministry strategies, and
 - (c) incorporate in the report recommendations as to how the personal and physical resources of the Diocese can be more efficiently utilised to implement the successful strategies and policies which have been developed by the respective regional councils to assist parishes who are struggling financially or who are struggling to implement ministry strategies.
2. At its meeting on 12 December 2005, the Standing Committee requested that each regional council –
 - (a) indicate what strategies and policies it has developed to assist parishes who are struggling financially or who are struggling to implement ministry strategies, and
 - (b) make recommendations as to how the personal and physical resources of the Diocese can be more efficiently utilised to implement the successful strategies and policies which you have developed to assist parishes who are struggling financially or who are struggling to implement ministry strategies.
3. A summary of the responses received from the regional councils is set out in the attachment to this report.

Comment on regional responses

What is meant by struggling?

4. It is apparent from the regional council responses that most parishes struggle with ministry and finances in one way or another. The nature of ministry is such that struggle is normal. Some parishes struggle to meet the cost of one minister or basic repairs to their property. Others struggle to meet the cost of appointing or retaining the 4th member of its ministry team or a major refurbishment and expansion of their ministry centre. It is perhaps useful to draw a distinction between –
 - (a) Parishes with a deliberate mission focus which are struggling with finances and ministry strategy as a consequence of growth.
 - (b) Parishes on a plateau, perhaps content with their position and not focused on mission in the numerical sense, where there may not be such a sense of struggle.
 - (c) Parishes struggling to survive as separate parochial units.
5. Synod's request in resolution 14/05 appears to contemplate the third category of parish. Accordingly the regional council responses and the recommendations that flow from these responses focus on parishes which are struggling to survive as separate parochial units.

Role of regional councils

6. The role of regional councils is principally one of facilitating the effective delivery of ministry within the region. In general, councils are required to look at ministry from a regional rather than an individual parish perspective, although the individual circumstances of parishes are relevant to certain functions, for example making grants and loans. This is reflected in clause 6 of the Regions Ordinance 1995 which sets out the general functions of a regional council. These include –
 - developing ministry strategies in the region (clause 6(b)),
 - assessing applications for grants in the region made or referred to it (clause 6(c)),
 - making grants or loans from money (consistent with any trusts on which that money may be held) available to it for distribution or for lending (clause 6(d)),
 - raising and expending money for any purpose connected with ministry in the region (clause 6(f)),

- employing and dismissing persons for any purpose connected with ministry within the region (clause 6(g)),
- discussing matters affecting the region, making enquiries into aspects of ministry in the region or any part of the region and disseminating information in the region (clause 6(i)).

Scope of responses

7. The responses received from regional councils suggest that the strategies undertaken to assist struggling parishes can be broadly divided into 4 categories –

- (a) The provision of targeted financial assistance, often designed as 'seed funding'. This is something the regional council has direct control over, primarily via their application of Synod grant funds.
- (b) The injection of external expertise in the form of specialist consulting or training advice (including fund raising for local ministry) or short term staffing resources. This is something that regional councils may be able to encourage and/or facilitate, but to the extent that the funding required to enable it to happen is outside the councils' control they cannot actually implement much of this work.
- (c) Work to provide support, encouragement, mentoring and training for the ministers in struggling parishes. This work is the domain of the regional bishop and archdeacon to coordinate and deliver.
- (d) Consideration of the broader structural issues affecting parishes in terms of demographics and other external changes that may require a fresh approach to the delivery of ministry in that area. Here the regional council may contribute to the broad strategy and provide some of the resources, but the actual implementation of change through influence, persuasion and gaining the acceptance of the local people is largely the responsibility of the bishop and archdeacon.

Role of bishops and archdeacons

8. The responses from regional councils highlight the key role played by the regional bishops and archdeacons in implementing regional council strategies and policies in individual parishes. It is also apparent that the bishops and archdeacons provide significant support and assistance to individual ministers in ways that go beyond the remit of the regional councils.

9. The role played by bishops and archdeacons is unsurprising. They will typically have detailed knowledge of parishes in their region needing assistance and therefore can tailor assistance to take into account the circumstances of individual parishes. The other members of a regional council would not ordinarily have this level of knowledge and, in view of the functions of a regional council, would not be expected to have this level of knowledge.

Role of the parish

10. Underlying the work of regional councils, bishops and archdeacons in relation to struggling parishes is the reality that most of the initiatives that may be suggested can only happen if the parish itself supports the change. Ministers enjoy a significant degree of autonomy in determining the delivery of ministry in a parish. Churchwardens, under the direction of the parish council, are responsible for determining the use of the finances and property of the parish. Most strategies and policies therefore need the support of the minister and the parish council and churchwardens before they can be applied in a parish.

Evidence based decision-making

11. The value of feedback received by regional councils from their bishops and archdeacons in deciding how to respond to the needs of struggling parishes cannot be underestimated. However the experience of regional bishops and archdeacons in particular cases may not always form a suitable basis for identifying strategies and policies of general application which should be pursued using Diocesan resources. Ideally there needs to be evidence upon which such decisions are based.

12. Some research and analysis is therefore needed to determine what factors are relevant to reviving struggling parishes and to identify what policies and strategies would assist that process. This information could then be used as the basis for any recommendations as to how the resources of the Diocese can be used to support this work in a more efficient way.

Action taken by the Standing Committee

13. Standing Committee has asked the Mission Board to –

- (a) consider making a research priority the identification of the underlying factors relevant to establishing viable and growing ministries in parishes which have previously struggled to survive as separate parochial units, and
- (b) identify what policies and strategies are likely to lead to establishing viable and growing ministries in parishes which have previously struggled to survive as separate parochial units, and
- (c) consider how the personal and physical resources of the Diocese can be more efficiently utilised to implement any strategies and policies identified in (b).

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

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25 September 2006

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Attachment

Summary of the responses from regional councils

Georges River

1. The council has no special strategy or policy for “struggling” parishes as such. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes a “struggling parish”. Almost all struggle financially and many struggle to implement effective ministry strategies. It is of the essence of the Gospel and pastoral ministry that struggle is involved.
2. The Bishop and Archdeacon become aware of parishes that are struggling with financial and ministry strategy as a result of their ongoing pastoral oversight of the region. Detailed knowledge of the particular issues and opportunities is required in each case. A “one size fits all” approach is not appropriate. Where assistance is required, detailed discussions are held involving the minister and parish council (and special vestry meetings if required). Every solution must be linked to a strategy for future ministry growth. Some cases have involved temporary or permanent amalgamations, in other cases grants for essential rectory repairs or short term assistance to get a new ministry established.
3. The annual grant process requires applicants to think through their ministry strategy plans and identify realistic goals to be achieved within the funding period.
4. The overall regional plan is to apply the Diocesan Mission policies to the four priority areas of Youth & Children’s ministry, Cross Cultural ministry, Parish ministry in new areas and Leadership. Grants are targeted to particular (geographic) areas.

Northern

5. A number of strategies and policies are applied to parishes in the region struggling with viability –
 - (a) The council applies money strategically to assist growing churches and does not “prop up” struggling parishes.
 - (b) The council has engaged the Rev Stuart Robinson as a consultant to encourage and resource parishes for growth. Stuart used the principles in the Mission Action Plan, and discounted copies were made available to all parishes.
 - (c) The council has engaged Rosemary Anderson to help develop ESL ministry in the region and acknowledges the contribution of Youthworks’ Louisa Pfitzner as a youth advisor to the Northern Region.
 - (d) When visiting parishes both the bishop and archdeacon provide advice and assistance to do with parish planning.
 - (e) Area deanery meetings provide a forum for mutual support.
 - (f) When they are available Youthworks staff provide training and consultancy in youth and children’s ministry and scripture ministry.
 - (g) Evangelism Ministries provides support and encouragement for clergy.
 - (h) The Church Army provides staff for under resourced parishes.
6. The council made the following recommendations for the more efficient utilisation of Diocesan resources –
 - (a) Standing Committee could establish a special task force to assess struggling parishes, investigate the causes and recommend remedial action.
 - (b) More resources could be given to Evangelism Ministries to enable them to provide coaching for struggling parishes for up to six months.
 - (c) Ministry, Training & Development could develop specific in-service training for rectors in struggling parishes.
 - (d) A training program could be developed to show rectors and churchwardens/parish council how best to raise funds.
 - (e) A team of able and energetic retired clergy could be developed to partner struggling parishes.

- (f) Administrative support could be provided for treasurers.
- (g) More funds could be provided to the regions.

South Sydney

7. For parishes in the region struggling financially –
 - (a) Where there is no clear present hope of significant turnaround the issue almost always has to do with personnel, in which case the bishop and archdeacon may intervene to facilitate a move or deal with the conflict or other crippling issue.
 - (b) Where there is a strategy in place for a turnaround the council may provide funding support to help with the early stages of recovery.
8. For parishes struggling to implement ministry strategies –
 - (a) The regional council provides short term help in the form of start-up grants to make hiring new staff less difficult.
 - (b) Where the parish has sufficient financial resources the bishop and archdeacon work with the existing parish leadership using the ordinance review process to enable restructuring.
 - (c) In appropriate cases the bishop and archdeacon may lead a restructure that involves bringing in another congregation or ministry.
9. The council made the following recommendations for the more efficient utilisation of Diocesan resources –
 - (a) Additional resources could be used to enable the employment of staff and other resources where the parish has a ministry strategy.
 - (b) Resources could be used to help ministers and parishes deal with conflict – the involvement of the right person from outside the parish (in some cases as acting rector) can help get parishes 'unstuck'.
 - (c) The provision of mentoring and other helpful advice can assist ministers who have lost imagination and focus.

Western Sydney

10. The council noted that there was no definition of what is a "struggling parish" and in one sense practically every parish is struggling both financially and with ministry strategies. However, the council presumes the focus of the Synod resolution is on one minister parishes struggling with financial viability. The strategies and policies are applied to parishes in the region struggling with viability include –
 - (a) Council does not "prop up" struggling parishes with grants, believing this money is more strategically applied to growing churches and those undergoing reinvention.
 - (b) Council offers a "peer consultancy" conducted by experienced clergy and lay leaders on a volunteer basis aimed at helping the minister and/or parish council understand their strengths and weaknesses and making suggestions concerning ministry strategy or finances.
 - (c) The bishop and archdeacon visit and provide advice and encouragement for parish planning.
 - (d) The bishop has some discretionary funds to support clergy struggling financially.
 - (e) The council invites all parishes to submit ministry updates advising of any particular successes or challenges.
 - (f) Youthworks staff provide some (limited) training, strategic thinking and consultancy in youth and children's ministry and scripture ministry.
 - (g) Council has appointed an ESL Co-ordinator who will help struggling parishes in ethnic areas reach the community.
 - (h) Evangelism Ministries provides support and encouragement for clergy.
 - (i) Area deanery meetings provide a forum for mutual support and clergy wives meet for mutual encouragement. The bishop, archdeacon or area dean offer help as appropriate.
 - (j) A regional website has been developed for mutual sharing of ministry strategies.
 - (k) The bishop has provided the Mission Action Plan developed by Anglicare and Evangelism Ministries to a number of struggling parishes.

11. The council made the following recommendations for the more efficient utilisation of Diocesan resources –
- (a) Standing Committee could establish a special Diocesan task force for non-viable parishes to assess the number of such parishes, investigate causes and recommend action to make them viable, where it is strategic to do so.
 - (b) Resources could be directed to Youthworks to fund more regional children and youth workers to provide training, strategic thinking and consultancy in youth and children's ministry and scripture ministry.
 - (c) Resources could be directed to Evangelism Ministries to provide a struggling parish with a consultant/coach for six to twelve months.
 - (d) Ministry, Training & Development could extend its work to in-service training for rectors in struggling parishes.
 - (e) An appropriate Diocesan organisation could provide training for rectors and churchwardens/parish council in how best to raise funds.

Wollongong

12. The council noted that it does not have a set policy in relation to parishes facing financial difficulties, the response has been to address each one individually, seek details and then offer whatever support is needed be it management assistance, extra funding or whatever. Better access to information from parishes audited financial statements would assist in identifying parishes of interest.
13. Few parishes ask for assistance in developing ministry strategies and the Diocesan governance model makes it difficult to intervene unless invited.
14. The council noted that informal strategies to assist struggling parishes do exist and initiatives can be taken but they are hard to define. In all the recent cases of intervention (by the region) the initial action was prompted by questions of leadership, internal conflicts and other matters, although it was recognised that if not dealt with these could have led directly to financial difficulties.
15. The council recommended that the monitoring panel established under the Parish Review (Monitoring Panel) Ordinance 2001 –
- (a) develop and publish guidelines as to the process and best practice for the conduct of parish reviews, along with a requisite budget,
 - (b) notify the council of the names of suitably trained, experienced and gifted review group facilitators and members, accredited by the panel, and
 - (c) convene such review groups, when requested by the council or parishes, and monitor their progress.

The council also indicated that it was interested in encouraging development reviews both as part of the council's assistance to parishes and as part of their process for making grants.