

# Shaping Parish Structures for Mission

(A report of the Standing Committee.)

## Key Points

- The Diocese provides three formal categories of church and parish within the Diocese: Recognised Church, Provisional Parish and Parish.
- There are sound reasons for maintaining a 'parish system' that allows for different types of churches. However, the categories warrant review to ensure they meet the emerging needs of churches within the Diocese. Further, the relationships between categories of church are poorly defined at present.
- A proposal to realign the categories has been agreed in principle by the Standing Committee. Care will be required to ensure the new categories are clearly distinguished and the system well-defined.
- Synod members are invited to comment before the Standing Committee undertakes the work necessary to implement the proposed changes.

## Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to outline a proposed adjustment of the categories of churches within the diocesan network.

## Recommendations

2. Synod receive this report.
3. Synod, noting the report 'Shaping Parish Structures for Mission' –
  - (a) invite members of the Synod to provide feedback to the Diocesan Secretary by 30 November 2024 on the proposed changes as contemplated in the report, and
  - (b) request the Standing Committee to implement the proposed changes in light of feedback received.

## Background

4. Under the *Recognised Churches Ordinance 2000*, there is presently no mechanism for a recognised church to plant other churches. In the anticipation that the Diocese will need to plant churches from new recognised churches planted in the southwest growth corridor in the coming years, it is prudent to consider such arrangements at the present time.
5. Standing Committee constituted a committee to consider suitable amendments to the *Recognised Churches Ordinance 2000*, the *Parishes Ordinance 1979*, and any other ordinances that may be affected by the proposed amendments to the *Recognised Churches Ordinance 2000*.
6. The Committee consists of Archdeacon Anthony Douglas (Chair), the Rev Stuart Crawshaw, Mr James Flavin, Bishop Gary Koo, the Rev David Mears, Mrs Catherine Rich and the Rev Philip Wheeler. Mr Daniel Glynn serves as the Secretary.
7. The following discussion, prepared in light of the report from the Doctrine Commission, "A Theological Reflection on the Parish System", and the Committee's own work, has advanced to a sufficient point to seek feedback from the Synod prior to the work of implementation.

## Discussion

### The background to the parish system

#### *A feature of historic Anglicanism*

8. The parish system has been a part of Anglican ecclesiology since the earliest days of the Church in England, and is well-embedded in our episcopally-structured denomination.
9. At first, parishes represented an area served by a particular church, and did not spread seamlessly across the map. However, the tight integration between church and state in the English context meant that many of the functions of civil government were devolved to the parish level, creating an impetus to see the parish system responsible for every part of the land – albeit in an organic and spontaneous fashion.
10. This comprehensiveness has come to be perceived as a virtue: every single person is to be seen as worthy of and entitled to ministry from a church, as image-bearers included under the Great Commission. The parish system has come to symbolise a commitment to local mission that is owned at the local level.
11. Likewise, the non-uniform expression of parochialism in England lends itself to a felt freedom to tailor a parish's ministries for its own context, at least to some degree.

#### *The purpose of a parish system*

12. Fundamentally, some kind of parish system is a corollary of the growth of any hierarchical denominational structure. A single church will always have a growth boundary beyond which it is impossible to function as a meaningful Christian community, and as related churches multiply, they will necessarily have different contexts within which they operate. What a 'parish' would be understood as may vary, but it will represent a subdivision of the churches' task.
13. As a consequence, a parish system should aim to facilitate ministry and mission, in both directions: each parish church should have ready access to reach out within their community, and each individual should have regular opportunities to hear the gospel through their local church and be saved, and then grow in fellowship.
14. Furthermore, such a system should enable cooperation between parishes, without needless constraint of each or any church's ministries. At this point, it is important to recognise that modern society is highly mobile, and a simple geographic division of territory cannot automatically be presumed to achieve the objectives of a parish system. Indeed, poor structures may inhibit cooperation and introduce inefficiencies.

#### *The parish system within the Sydney Diocese*

15. Anglican ministry within the Diocese has operated using a parish system since the establishment of the Diocese of Australia in 1836, with ordinances (since the establishment of a Synod in 1866) refreshing the administrative procedures every few decades. The current *Parishes Ordinance* dates from 1979, though it has been amended well over a dozen times. The most significant adjustments were affected by the move towards regionalisation in the 1980s and 1990s, but the essentials of the system can be traced back into the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
16. In recent years, there have been two substantial changes made indirectly to our parish structures. Firstly, the *Recognised Churches Ordinance 2000* was created to enable existing churches outside the denomination to join the Diocese. Secondly, the *Department of Evangelism (New Churches) Reconstitution Ordinance 2010* saw the Department both empowered and commissioned to plant new churches, known as fellowships, extra-parochially.
17. In the years since these ordinances came into operation, there has been no method provided to integrate these three types of church structures or to clearly define their interrelationships. From time to time churches have been moved from one category to another, largely by withdrawing from one

category, and being created within another in a legal sense. This process has been needlessly cumbersome.

18. The abovementioned report from the Doctrine Commission concludes that the parish system “will continue to play a significant role”, but also that “it is desirable for parishes to be complemented by other churches”, and there is “no theological reason why these ... systems could not exist alongside each other as parallel strategies for reaching the lost and providing pastoral care within the Diocese”.
19. As we look to the future, it is reasonable to anticipate that the proportion of churches that are not established under the *Parishes Ordinance 1979* will grow, meaning that all three categories (the parish church, the recognised church and the fellowship) will not only need to relate to one another, but also to churches within the same type. Our current ordinances provide minimal clarity for this, and only between parishes.

## Current types of churches – key features

### *The parish*

20. The ordinary parish within the Diocese is generally characterised by –
  - (a) ownership of (at least) a church building and rectory,
  - (b) one or several church sites,
  - (c) geographically-defined boundaries,
  - (d) a presbyter as rector, with tenure, and the right of nomination for his successor,
  - (e) Synodical representation,
  - (f) wardens and parish council arrangements, with financial independence, and
  - (g) the possibility of provisional status, with established procedures for transition to and from that status.

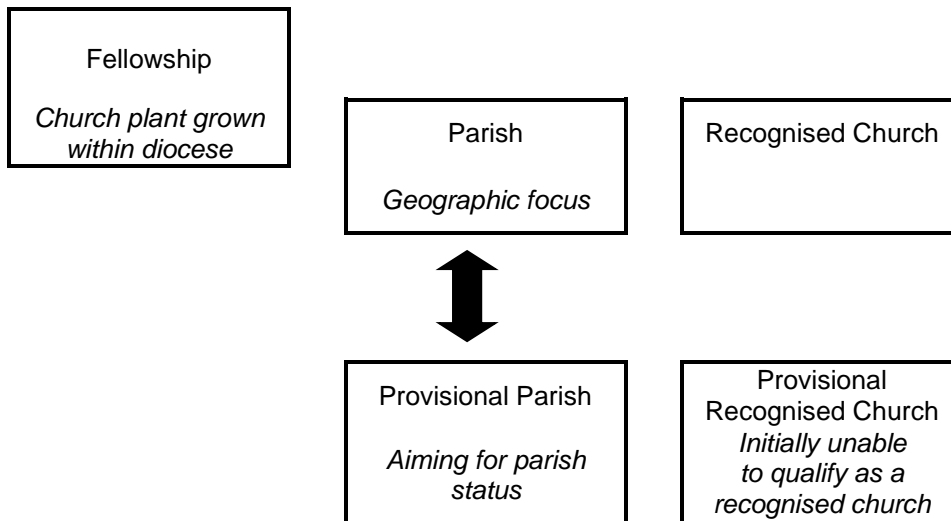
### *The recognised church*

21. In addition, there are a handful of recognised churches, which function in as similar a manner as possible to a parish, but ordinarily –
  - (a) do not own a church building.
  - (b) do not meet in multiple sites,
  - (c) may or may not have geographically-defined boundaries (and by default do not), and
  - (d) otherwise share the same governance and licencing characteristics of an ordinary parish, including the possibility of provisional status.

### *The ENC fellowship*

22. Evangelism and New Churches (**ENC**) includes as one of its objectives the planting of fellowships, which are extra-parochial and operate as ministries of the Board of ENC. They typically –
  - (a) do not own a church building (although ENC may),
  - (b) do not meet in multiple sites,
  - (c) do not have geographically-defined boundaries,
  - (d) may be led by either clergy or lay ministers, and
  - (e) are governed and administered under such arrangements as are put in place by ENC.
23. Although not explicitly required, there is an expectation that ENC fellowships, as they mature, will transition into parishes or recognised churches. However, there is no single defined pathway preferred to determine how this should take place.

*Diagrammatic representation of these types and their relationships*



### Advantages and limitations of the present usage of a parish system

#### *Locus of HR and financial administration*

24. Within the Diocese, the administrative processes associated with the existence of a church as a legal entity are normally devolved to the parish (or recognised church) level. Parish treasurers and wardens manage financial and employment matters, and the wardens are also responsible for the management of the parish's properties. This gives the local church the flexibility to arrange its affairs as best suits its circumstances.
25. These administrative burdens can be significant, leaving parishes with the challenge of recruiting suitable men and women to such positions. As the number of parochial units increases, such volunteer resources can become harder to find.
26. Even when administrative matters are not completely left to individual parishes – as, for example, in relation to the ownership of property by the Anglican Church Property Trust – diocesan governance practices tend to give parishes veto control of decisions.
27. ENC fellowships differ from parishes and recognised churches in this respect, where ENC provides much of the administrative support centrally. This can be very helpful in a fellowship's early life, but potentially increases the complexity of a fellowship 'leaving the nest' and setting up on its own.

#### *Focus of local mission activity*

28. While from time to time, churches have worked together in mission activities (from the level of diocesan-wide campaigns like Connect09 to more localised efforts coordinated by mission areas, like Wollongong's 'Jesus Is\_\_' missions), the default is for each church to feel the responsibility to evangelise in its local area. Such outreach may occur in focused activities, but also shapes the regular ministries of each church.
29. This accords with the theological expectation that believers will naturally seek to share their faith with those around them. Activity at a local level can support them in this: providing training to assist in personal evangelism, enabling events with an evangelistic focus, and offering church services that see the gospel explained (both in special evangelistic services and in the regular services of each parish).
30. There are a couple of potential disadvantages to be alert to. Firstly, each church will need to ensure that they have the right balance between evangelism at a personal level and evangelism through church activities. Secondly, a narrow focus on the geographical delineation of parish boundaries risks obscuring other relational connections within the broader community and thus missing opportunities.

*Cooperation at diocesan level*

31. The Diocese retains a substantial body of staff who provide their expertise in service of the churches centrally. There are numerous areas that require complex and involved oversight that could not be sustained by a single church, and so the parishes have benefited from a shared services model for many years, providing assistance in areas such as property management and insurance, financial services including loans and investment, legal services and more. These central operations are funded by the Synod making use of investments held for such purposes.
32. As well as such instances of administrative cooperation, the churches together through the Synod establish and hold oversight of large service organisations such as Anglicare, and Youthworks. Their activities, while obviously benefiting parishes, also operate beyond the scope of parish ministries. They are an instance of gospel generosity, where parishes together are able to be more effective than they could hope to be alone.
33. There are risks associated with such larger organisations, particularly in critical mission-related areas. Any large organisation can become institutionalised, forgetting its *raison d'être*, resulting in poorer service to parishes, and a lessened sense of ownership amongst the churches. Larger organisations also carry momentum and find it harder to adjust and change with agility. Finally, should an organisation fail, the impact is widespread and may be damaging to the whole denomination.

*Autonomy and flexibility to adapt to local context*

34. In most instances, churches possess sufficient autonomy to govern their affairs and shape their ministries to suit their local context. While the Diocesan structures shape the operating environment of churches to a degree (through ordinances and policies, and also through the range of services offered to churches), there is a strong commitment to the principle of local church self-governance. Furthermore, the parish-based representation within the Diocesan Synod ensures that this autonomy is secure, enabling confidence in longer-term planning.
35. At the same time, there is much that is in common between each church; individuality should not be considered a good end in itself. Churches will benefit from sharing ideas when their contexts align sufficiently, and so good mechanisms for communication and partnership are vital.

*Mission Areas and neighbourliness*

36. Such was the intent behind the establishment of mission areas. The impact that they have had in promoting cooperation has no doubt been blunted by the unfortunate timing of the global financial crisis soon after their creation, and it is likely that different mission areas have done better or worse for various reasons, including size, geographical spread, demographic coherence, and theological alignment. Nevertheless, the principle of cooperation is worth pursuing.
37. The Diocese, having grown up with a parish system, has made use of parish boundaries in various pragmatic arrangements. Special Religious Education, for example, is formally the responsibility of the parish that students live in. This becomes impossibly difficult when students may travel across multiple parish boundaries for secondary schooling. Functionally, parishes have tended to take a common-sense approach, working out amongst themselves who is best placed to take up such mission responsibilities.
38. If, however, the context shifts so that most churches do not operate with parish boundaries, such arrangements become less clear, and a better method for ensuring missional effectiveness needs to be developed.

**A future for the parish system**

39. With no theological reason why the Diocese should move away from a parish-based system, and sufficient advantages to such a system as explored above, it remains to work out what weaknesses arise in the Diocese's current implementation of a parish system, and how they might be addressed or mitigated.

*Clarity of categories and their purpose*

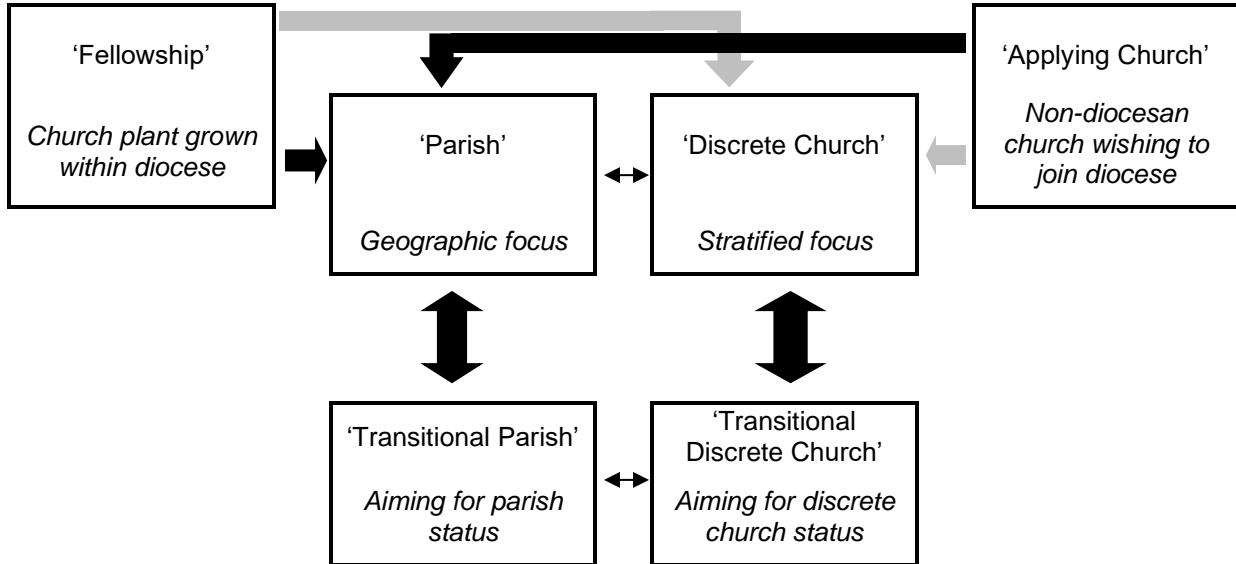
40. It is readily apparent that the three categories of churches in the Diocese are oddly defined. The concept of the recognised church was initially created to enable the absorption of an already existing church into the Diocese's parish system, but has come to be used for churches that don't own property. The current crop of recognised churches are thus defined by a fuzzy combination of historical and financial features. ENC fellowships are distinguished as being newly-planted churches, but over the passage of time this descriptor is no longer appropriate.
41. If the purpose of any system is to provide pastoral care and reach the lost, these ends should determine the usefulness of categorisation. Obviously, any church will provide pastoral care to those within the body, so the pertinent question is how to use any categories to enhance missional effectiveness.
42. Once that point is observed, it is clear that the *possession* of property is largely irrelevant. Certainly, property ownership provides a stable foundation, and will keep a church more grounded within a particular location – but every church will be gathering somewhere, and reaching out to the community it gathers within.
43. Even more clearly, the historical origin of a particular church has negligible significance for its evangelism. Granted, a small proportion of the population will feel a loose connection to their 'family church' – but not all church buildings will have such a connection, and in any case such connections have been weakening in recent years.
44. What is more meaningful is whether a church is seeking to reach the lost within a particular geographic area ('Geographic focus'), or within a particular demographic stratum (such as ethnic background, occupation, or family structure, for example) ('Stratified focus'). The former will naturally have a stronger connection to place, and the latter will likely draw more widely.
45. It follows that it is worth considering the virtue of distinguishing two different categories of churches. The more common would operate within a particular area, and therefore have a parish boundary – and would most likely own property, or seek to own it over time. The other category might work more broadly, and would be encumbered if such churches had to care for a specific local area also.
46. In passing, it may be worth noting that the 1972 report 'Looking into the Parish' had already begun to notice the likely desirability of excising some contexts and communities from the work of the ordinary parish. It is no longer controversial to see chaplains at work in schools, hospitals and prisons, for example, but the scale of such things was only beginning to be grasped half a century ago.

*Sub-classifications worthy of consideration*

47. Our current ordinances include a second dimension within the parish system: the concept of 'provisionality'. For parishes, provisional status can result from a parochial unit being newly created by the Archbishop, or it can reflect a full parish that has been through extended financial difficulties. While these represent two very different scenarios, the common feature is a degree of fragility, and consequent uncertainty over whether the provisional parish will be able to grow to security, or need to be folded back into a neighbouring parish. A similar approach applies to recognised churches, though in that instance provisional status is considered at the point where a church has applied to be recognised.
48. The concept of provisional status is capable of being both negative and positive in impact. Negatively, it could be perceived as an existential threat hanging over the church's independence; positively, it could serve as a flag to draw additional support (of many different possible kinds) intended to give the church what it lacks in order to grow. There is value in retaining the concept for this positive goal. It may be that the system would be better served by replacing the term 'provisional' with something like 'transitional' to make the intention clearer.
49. The ownership of property has been used at times as a *de facto* distinguishing characteristic between standard parishes and recognised churches. While the distinction remains a necessary consideration when it comes to certain aspects of diocesan services – insurance costs, for example – it is likely that it will become increasingly unhelpful if used as a marker of a particular church's missional intentions.

*Principles for future arrangements*

50. Consequently, a realignment of the current structure that provides greater clarity for the future needs of the Diocese would look like the following diagram. The darker arrows represent more likely types of movement between the different types, and the size of the arrows represents the likely frequency of such movements taking place.



51. This structure provides for –
- (a) parishes to move back and forth to a 'transitional' status as needed,
  - (b) Discrete churches to likewise move back and forth to a 'transitional' status,
  - (c) new churches grown within the diocese under ENC to mature to parishes, or in some cases, to discrete churches,
  - (d) new churches wishing to join the diocese 'from outside' to be placed in the category most suited to their current mission focus – most usually, as parishes, and
  - (e) the rare situation of a church shifting between parish and discrete church, if the way that its membership and ministry grows suggests such a change is appropriate.
52. There are a number of tasks that follow on from this realignment –
- (a) define clearly the different types of churches,
  - (b) outline the process for transition between each of the types of churches, including triggers, oversight and timeframes,
  - (c) specify the distinctions in governance, ministry oversight, and financial responsibilities for each type of church, including relationships with Diocesan bodies,
  - (d) describe the nature of the relationships between churches of each type (both same type, and different type) to ensure clear communication and appropriate cooperation, and
  - (e) identify consequences for Diocesan systems and ordinances that may need adjustment and funding.
53. It is anticipated that the Standing Committee will proceed with this work in the light of feedback from members of the Synod.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee.