

CONCERNED CATHOLICS CANBERRA GOULBURN

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Background Paper

A National Perspective: The Church Governance Project

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There are now two national perspectives emerging on diocesan and parish church governance. The first, Plenary Council 2020 is now well-known. The first stage of submissions, which featured frequent requests for greater lay involvement in governance, is now complete. Preparations have now reached a second stage, including six Writing and Discernment groups, with one called “Inclusive, Participatory and Synodal” which has a governance aspect. At the same time further Listening and Discernment sessions are continuing over the next three months at parish and diocesan level on the six themes. There is no single group or theme devoted to governance.

The lack of such a focus has concerned the second development at the national level, the Implementation Advisory Group (IAG), which was created by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) to advise them on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The IAG created a little-known sub-group, the Governance Review Project Team (GRPT), chaired by Justice Neville Owen, of which I am a member. This sub-group is tasked with advising on Recommendation 16.7 of the Royal Commission, which called for a review of church governance and culture. GRPT has met on nine occasions between January and November this year.

As there is no full picture available of church governance and structures in Australia, the GRPT has commissioned a survey of diocesan governance to produce a much fuller picture. It has also sought to develop links with the relevant PC2020 processes.

GRPT is identifying principles of good practice in governance including principles derived from secular not for profit entities and ministerial Public Juridic Persons and relating these to the realities of church life. It is seeking to understand not just structures but also cultural practices, and to make suggestions about principles and models for governance and management at diocesan and parish levels. Values such as accountability, inclusiveness and transparency are uppermost in our minds.

While it is too early to predict what recommendations will emerge, considerable attention has been given to the operation of pastoral councils at the diocesan and parish levels. It is likely that the advice will be that they should be mandated at parish level and that the existing mandate at diocesan level, frequently not made operative, should be strictly applied.

Considerable attention has also been given to leadership formation in the church. Cultural practices are deeply embedded in the operation of structures and ingrained in the attitudes and approaches of individuals, clerical and lay. Values such as co-responsibility and synodality often do not come easily and must be the subject of training in seminaries and youth groups as well as continuous adult education in parishes and dioceses among bishops, priests, religious and lay people.

GRPT must report to the ACBC and CRA by March 2020 in order to meet the deadline for consideration for the agenda of the October 2020 PC2020. It will become a public document to inform discussions about governance at the parish and diocesan level.

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