

**Conversations About Our Future:  
Presentation by Fr Ger Godley,  
Director of Pastoral Development Diocese of Kerry**

Good evening, everybody. I'm delighted to be with you here this evening. I'm based at the moment in Killarney. As the Bishop has said my role at the moment is that I work with the Pastoral Development Team in the Diocese of Kerry. I'm going to use some slides here and hope you can see them.

For several years now we've been exploring how to respond to all the changes and challenges that we are facing at the moment. I'm not coming here as an expert. I'm not coming here – I hate to disappoint you – I don't have the package with the solutions so you can take them home but what I am going to do is just share with you our experience. I just want to present what is our reality and hopefully that in some way might support you and help you in your conversations as well and in your planning ahead for your diocese.



**Present Reality**  
**Looking to the future**

First of all, I want to look at our present reality in Kerry, just where we've been over the last number of years and the work we have been doing around Pastoral Areas. Then I am going to look at the future. Recently, we've been taking stock of the reality at the moment and asking ok, what is the next step? What is the next phase? As the Bishop said, there's been a lot of change in Irish society over the past number of decades and a lot of challenges. Some years ago as a Diocese we reflected on this. The thinking was, yes, we need to respond to all these changes and challenges. We need to come up with some sort of plan to help us, guide us and direct us in the coming years.

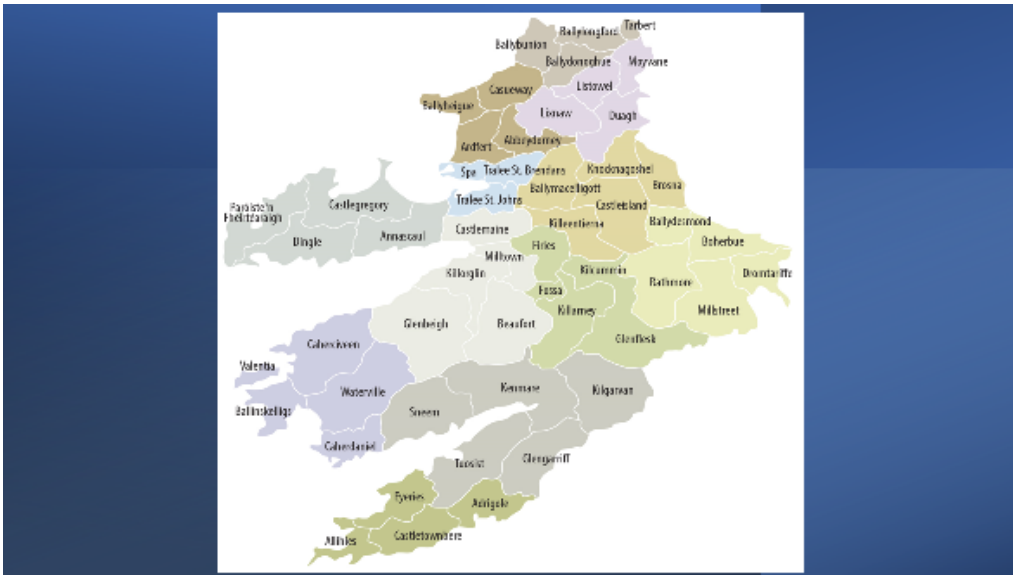
When we started that process of reflection and exploration a lot of focus was on ‘how do we survive?’



How can we keep the show on the road? Very early we came to realize to be honest that is not the correct question. If we go down that road, it will become negative. The language being used at the time was about rationalization, cutbacks and things like that. So we decided, ‘hang on, look, the question we need to focus on is ‘how do we thrive?’ So we began to reflect on how can we enable our parishes to thrive? How can we enable our diocese to thrive into the future? How can we respond to the whatever changes or challenges we are facing at the moment in that way?



So, we devised a Pastoral Plan for the Diocese. It covers a lot of areas like Youth Ministry, to Social Justice to Faith Formation, lots of elements. One main focus though was ‘let’s explore the option of introducing Pastoral Areas.’



The Diocese of Kerry is made up of 53 parishes. Like your own Diocese very much which is quite spread out as well. What we have though are our three peninsulas: The Dingle Peninsula/ Corca Dhuibhne, Iveragh down there. We also help out the Cork boys a bit, they need a bit of support down there. So we have Beira down south and we also go over to Glengarriff, Millstreet and Boherbue – that’s all part of Cork as well.

So it’s quite spread out with 53 Parishes. So, we decided to group parishes together into Pastoral Areas. The reason we went for the idea of Pastoral Areas was that it gave us more flexibility. It meant we could involve more clergy and laity in the structure, whereas the Deanery structure was very much clergy only.

In our thinking in devising Pastoral Areas, the thinking was this African Proverb here:

If you want to go **fast**, go alone.  
 If you want to go far, go **TOGETHER**.  
*African Proverb*



Ní neart go cur le chéile.

So the whole thinking [was about] working together, collaboration. Or as the sean-fhocal says: “*Ni neart go cur le chéile.*” That was really what we were thinking. Through cooperation, working together in that way, there are lots of possibilities and potential.

My presentation this evening is focusing specifically on the Pastoral Areas. I'm not dealing with any other aspects of the Pastoral Plan, just the journey in establishing the Pastoral Areas and where we are at with them now.

## **The Purpose of the Pastoral Area**

### Purpose of the Pastoral Area

- To proclaim the mission of Christ

How?

To plan, coordinate, communicate, share resources and encourage teamwork.

So when we reflected on Purpose of the Pastoral Area, we realized the main reason for them is to proclaim the Mission of Christ. That was really important for all of us, to put that upfront. That is really at the heart and core. It's not about structural change just for the sake of it. It's not about being efficient. It's not about just change for the fun of it and just playing around with things. So, everything we do is measured by that [the mission of Christ]. This is the mission of the Church – is it supporting that?

This mission is supported by our Pastoral Areas. What Pastoral Areas enable us to do amongst the parishes within the Pastoral Area – we could have four parishes some pastoral areas, five in others. At core, it's a way of coordinating with the parishes; it's a way of planning within the parishes, of coordinating activities within the parishes.

It helps communication within the parishes. It also enables us to share resources, particularly parishes with small populations. They can now do things they could not do on their own, just by coming together. And also, about encouraging teamwork – teamwork between priests in the Pastoral Area, teamwork between the priests and the laity. I think the whole area of communication is really important through the parishes.

Traditionally, from a priest's perspective as a parish priest in a parish – “this is my parish almost.” I remember when I was ministering as a *sagart paróiste*, parish priest, in Ballyferriter. When I was there my mindset was – do any of you know where Ballyferriter is, West of Dingle, Slea Head back there, Dún Chaoin. You have Mt Brandon on one side, the Atlantic Ocean on the other side, and you have Milltown Bridge between the parish and Dingle. As far as I was concerned whatever happened at the other side of Mt Brandon or the other side of Milltown Bridge wasn't really my business. I was focused on my patch and working with the community there. I might help out for confessions or something or if someone was stuck but otherwise my responsibility was there. That was the way of the majority of clergy at the time and even parishioners thought this as well. So now it's about breaking that down and how we can encourage greater awareness of communication between the parishes.

There is one particular Pastoral Area I want to use to describe how we are approaching the work at the moment in the Kerry Diocese. As I said 53 parishes, 12 Pastoral Areas. I am going to look at this one the Ring of Kerry. Some of you might have been on it or around that side of the world. There are 5 parishes there around the Ring of Kerry. It's called the Iveragh Pastoral Area – 5 parishes.

## Iveragh Pastoral Area

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- 5 parishes
- 14 church communities
- 10 primary schools
- 1 post-primary school
- 2 nursing homes
- 2 parishes without a resident priest
- 3 priests

In that Pastoral Area there are:

14 Church Communities – some parishes might have two churches, some three.

10 Primary Schools & 1 Post-Primary School

2 Nursing Homes

2 parishes without a resident priest (Valencia, the island, no longer has a resident priest nor has Caherdaniel)

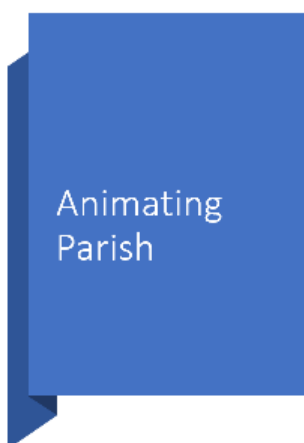
We have three priests ministering in that Pastoral Area.

So, in that particular Pastoral Area ... three priests ministering in the Area. When we appoint priests now in the Diocese, they are appointed to the Pastoral Area. Yes, resident in a particular parish but appointed to the Team in the Pastoral Area with responsibility to work together to minister to all the parishes, and to do so equally. It shouldn't make a difference whether there is a priest resident in a parish or not; the Team of priests are expected to minister to all.

So what the priests of that Pastoral Area do is they meet once a week or so and they plan the work that is coming up. Based on their particular skills or interests they take different responsibilities. For example, one of the priests is Chaplain in the 2<sup>nd</sup> level school, the man based in Waterville, even though the school is in Caherciveen. One of the priests ministers in the nursing homes, the man in Ballinskelligs works there. They divide up the work.

Also at the weekend, they have a rota of Masses. They move around. There's a structure of Masses in the Pastoral Area that means if one man is away, two priests can cover the Masses. So, they will draw up their rota and move around. The thinking is that by having a rota at the weekends and moving around throughout the Area, the people will get to know all the priests and the local people there so that if there is a funeral or wedding or baptism or whatever, they are not complete strangers.

### **Animating the Parish**



- Parish Pastoral Council
- Finance Committee
- Safeguarding Committee
- Liturgy Group
- Parish secretary

So that's the Pastoral Area. Within the Pastoral Area there are five parishes. And if you have strong parishes, you'll have a strong Pastoral Area. So the question is how do we animate the parishes? The way we do it, and I'm sure it's very similar in your Diocese as well, is that we have

Parish Pastoral Councils,  
Finance Committees  
Safeguarding Committees  
Liturgy Groups  
Parish Secretary.

On Parish Pastoral Councils, what happened during the Pandemic, a lot of activities in the parishes ceased really. A lot of ministries, a lot of committees – so we've given this year to revamping and reviving a lot of our ministry groups.

On Tuesday night, in fact, I was down in Iveragh, down in Waterville. We had training for Parish Pastoral Councils. So, we had all the members of Parish Pastoral Councils [in the Pastoral Area] there, with new members as well. The intention is that all training for Pastoral Councils will be done by the end of March throughout the Diocese. Presently, we are also reviving the Finance Committees in all the parishes, revisiting guidelines, new guidelines. We are contacting all the members of Finance Councils and will have training done by the end of March hopefully.

The training for Safeguarding Groups is quite strong. For Liturgy Groups, we have training next week for Lent and Easter.

A thing that we discovered years ago – we have a parish secretary now in practically all parishes. We've found it a tremendous help. From the point of view of the Pastoral Development Team, sometimes it can be quite difficult to make contact with the priests of the parish – you ring, you get an answering machine or you can send an email and wait for the response. The priests can be quite busy. But we do know that the Secretary is there so we contact the secretary. They are fantastic – part-time, in some larger towns they are full-time. So that is how we are trying to support parishes.

### **Animating the Pastoral Areas**

Regarding the Pastoral Areas & animating the Pastoral Areas, firstly we have a Vicar Forane, the VF as we call it, in each Pastoral Area. In the Iveragh Pastoral Area the VF is someone ye might know. It's Fr Larry Kelly who is the VF there. The VF is a very important role really. It's a leadership role, a coordinating role; it's not the kind of language people would have used in the past – like "he's a super Parish Priest." It's not

like that at all. The role of the VF is to see to it that the clergy are meeting, and work with the Area Pastoral Council and the different groups in the Pastoral Area.



We have 12 VF (Vicars Forane). The Pastoral Development Team and the Bishop meet with the VFs almost on a monthly basis. We have our meeting tomorrow afternoon. We do those meetings online because we are so spread out. It's a tremendous support to keep in touch with the reality of the Pastoral Areas and to support them.

Also, there is a Team of clergy in the Pastoral Area. It's crucial that you have a strong team. Working as a Team is something we clergy are not great at. We were formed to work on our own, to go out there and do the job. So the idea of working with other priests, working with a team, working with lay people is something new to all of us and we have to learn it. But it's essential to the Pastoral Area going forward that we nurture that whole sense of teamwork among the clergy.

Then you have the Area Pastoral Council. It is in a way like the Parish Pastoral Council with representatives from different parts of the parish. An Area Pastoral Council in the same way, is made up of representatives from each of the parishes of the Pastoral Area. Let's look at the Area Pastoral Council in a bit more detail.

### **The Pastoral Area Council – How It Works**

The membership of the Area Pastoral Council is the Vicar Forane, the clergy of the Area – they all attend. It has taken us a long time to get the Area Pastoral Councils up and running. At the earlier gatherings of the Area Pastoral Councils, it was a question of well, 'why are we gathering?' 'Why are we here?' 'What will we do?' 'What's this all about?' But over time, especially when it arose that we have parishes in Pastoral Areas without resident priests, it began to make a lot more sense, and a lot more planning and cooperation being realised. People valued that.



In fairness to our clergy, they would all attend all the Area Pastoral Council Meetings in their area. And you have representatives then from each of the Parish Pastoral Councils. Sometimes, it would be representatives from each of the church communities within the Pastoral Area.

## Area Pastoral Council

### Membership:

Vicar Forane, clergy of the area and lay representatives of each parish pastoral council

### Role:

To respond to the pastoral needs of the parishes by working together and enabling new developments to take place

So, the role of the Area Pastoral Council is:

1. To respond to the pastoral needs of the parishes.
2. By working together, to enable newer developments to take place.

Initially, all we wanted to do with the Area Pastoral Councils from the very early days was 'can we just meet?' 'Can we just sit down?' 'Can we hear about your parish; can we hear about each other's parishes? That is all we wanted to do. That was in the very early stages. 'Let's just get talking, get a relationship going so that we can get working together. ' It's slowly beginning, I'm sure similar to your own diocese, a solid foundation, getting people working together.

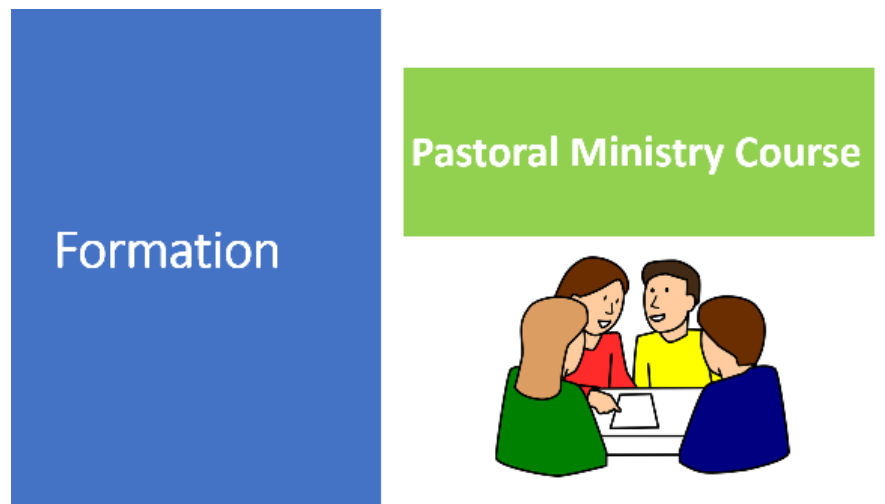
## Formation

### Training for:

- Parish Pastoral Councils
- Ministers of the Word
- Ministers of the Eucharist
- Liturgy groups

Now training for Parish Pastoral Councils, Ministers of the Word, Ministers of the Eucharist, Liturgy Groups etc all happens together at local level. We do it in

conversation with the Area Pastoral Councils and Teams. It might be decided we need training for Ministers of the Eucharist & Ministers of the Word. One parish might host it, inviting other parishes to attend and members of the [Diocesan] Pastoral Team come to deliver it. That is ongoing all the time.

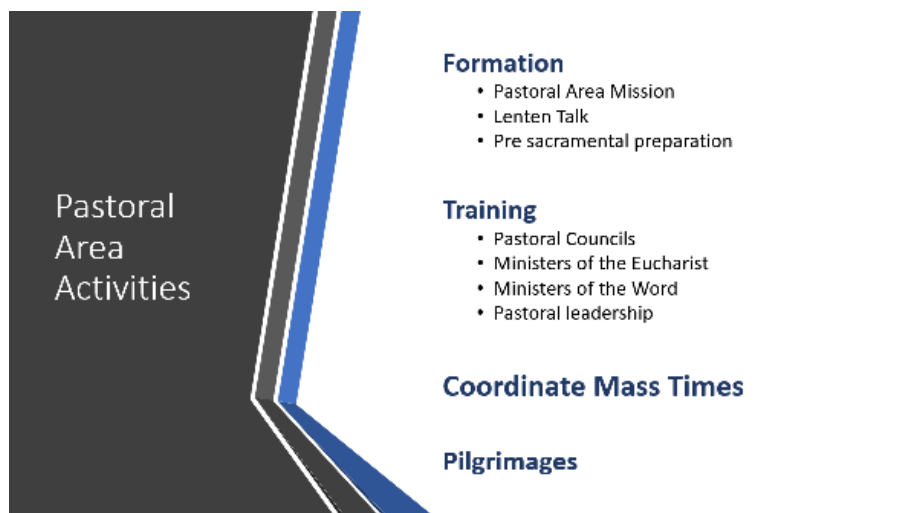


The other bit of work we did over the past number of years was what we called the Pastoral Ministry Course. A twenty-week course with one- or two-day sessions. The purpose of it was for people already involved in ministry (locally) to enable them to deepen their understanding of Church and their faith and to give them a language to express it. What we realised was that people on liturgy groups or parish pastoral councils didn't really have an understanding of Church so we have to help them and enable them to enrich that understanding.

Again, it was by invitation. We put it out to the Pastoral Councils and to the Area Pastoral Council who discussed it. They were invited to identify a host parish in the Pastoral Area. They managed the whole thing; we provided all the formation. Twenty weeks and we went out to the different areas, up to North Kerry in Listowel, to the Castletown Beara, to Caherciveen, to Millstreet. Almost 500 people participated in that programme in the last few years. What help has it been? It has helped the conversation. The level of conversation has improved a lot in the sense that people have a better understanding of Church and their role and their responsibilities.

### **Activities that Happen in the Pastoral Areas**

The kind of activities that happen in the Pastoral Area at the moment. I've already said about Formation.



As Pastoral Areas we ask: ‘what can we do together that we can’t do on our own?’ An example is a Pastoral Area Mission. Right now, in the Tralee Pastoral Area, the three parishes are putting a lot of work into a Pastoral Area Mission, working with the Redemptorists and they are doing it as a Pastoral Area.

Lenten Talks are another example. A Pastoral Area says we will work together on Lenten Talks. For example, Fr Peter Mc Verry will be down in one Pastoral Area, Mickey Harte is coming to the Killarney Pastoral Area and they are hosting a talk there. Br Richard Hendrick is going to the Killorglin Pastoral Area. The initiative comes from within the Pastoral Area. They say, ‘we would like something in faith formation for our people’. They manage everything. We help source speakers and support them in that way.

### **Pre-Sacramental Preparation**

In the Killorglin Pastoral Area recently they said ok, for Confirmation, some of the smaller parishes were struggling with numbers and with getting speakers for parents. So they hosted a Pastoral Area Gathering, invited a good speaker and they got all the parents to that venue. It was a lovely gathering with a sense of meeting other parents, a nice occasion with a good speaker.

**Another Area of Work is Coordinating Mass Times and Pilgrimages.**

Over/

## Looking to the Future

As we look to the future, recently we've been exploring this and planning leadership. Recently at the launch of a leadership programme that we have, Bishop Ray said

**"The future Church will be different,  
not better or worse!  
Our trust is in the Risen Lord, present  
and at work through the Holy Spirit"**

*Bishop Ray Browne  
March 2022*

Again, as we look to the future we went back to the question how do we thrive? We keep going back to that question rather than how do we survive?

How  
do  
we  
thrive?



We also realise that there are three different experiences of parish. As you know parish is a very busy place. All different experiences go on there.

The  
'Provided for'  
Church

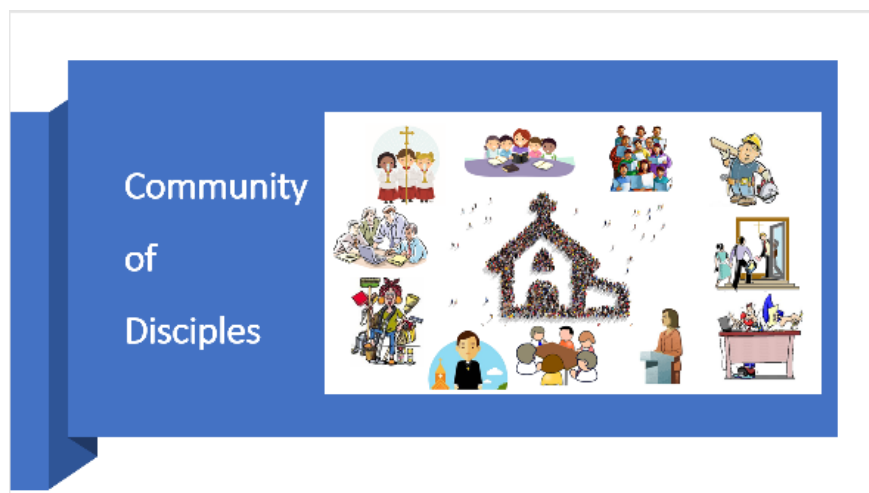


One experience for a lot of us when we were children is one where the priest was at the centre and heart of all parish activity. You could call that the 'provided-for-Church'. The priest did everything. If the heating wasn't working 'Father, why isn't the heating working?' If the roof was leaking 'Father, what are you going to do about the roof of the Church?' The 'provided-for Church.'

Another model is one which I think a lot of us would say is common today. There are a lot of people involved in Church but again the priest is very much at the centre of that and it depends on the priest to make everything happen. People will get involved and come along at the invitation of the priest, to help him. That we could describe as 'the Church-of-helpers'.



The vision of parish of Church which we need to look forward to is one of the Church as the People of God – very much language formed and shaped by Vatican II. Here people are involved, not because Father has asked them; people are involved because they realize that is how a faith community works. They get involved because of their baptismal call; they get involved in the various activities in the parish. This is the 'Community of Disciples.'



Looking to the future, informed by that, really what is crucial there is that we nurture the local Christian Community. This has become a big thing for us. How can we nurture and support the local Church community?



Within the Pastoral Area you have the parishes. Within the parish you have the local Church Communities – you know what I mean by that. Usually around the church you will have a local Church Community. An example of local Church Community for me is Ballyferriter, Baile and Fhirtearaigh. I was there as curate one time and I went back as Parish Priest as well. There are three Church Communities. One is Dún Chaoin itself, Dún Chaoin Faith Community. They call it Dún Chaoin Parish or Paróiste Dún Chaoin. In that faith community of Dún Chaoin, the Church is the place where people gather for baptisms, for funerals, for Mass. Last night actually the Chairperson of the Dingle Pastoral Area said that 30/40 people gather there for Mass in Unchain.

Also, in that area you have the school in Dún Chaoin. The interesting thing about the school is that in the 1960s the Department of Education said they would have to close the school completely. The people walked all the way to Dublin and they sat in the street in O'Connell Street, protesting. They came back to Dún Chaoin but still didn't have a school or a teacher. They went away and employed a teacher. In fact, the teacher in the school was actually working there for months for nothing.



Now the school is thriving, two teachers, fifty pupils and it is really thriving. What I am showing you [on the slide] is what is interesting. It is in the school. It's the statue for the Blasket Islands. When the bell would go for Mass when it was on in the Church, the people of the Blaskets would gather at that statue and pray the rosary. That is a rich faith community. There is an absolute richness there. And if we do not somehow connect with that, support that, holding on to all that richness we are going to lose something incredible. We will be impoverished losing our local faith communities if we don't support them. So that is a challenge for us going forward. How are we going to do that? In the context of all the change, this is one of the great challenges.

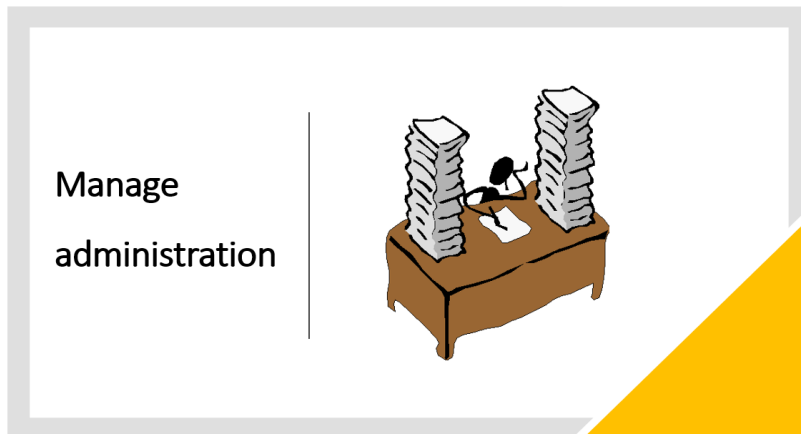
### Developing Pastoral Area Leadership Teams



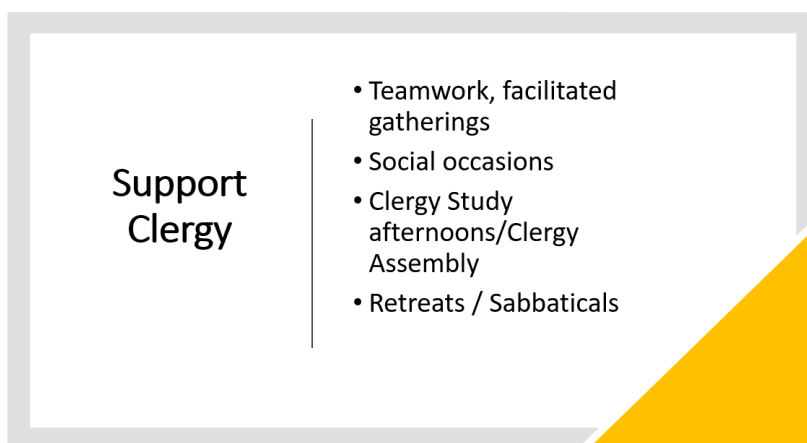
Similarly, to yourselves in Killaloe, where we got a lot of learning and support, we are developing lay ministry around this. We are doing a training programme in Mary Immaculate College around this. Very soon in each Pastoral Area there will only be a priest in each Area, outside of the towns of Tralee and Killarney. The way we are approaching it is that in each Pastoral Area the intention is that there will be a well-trained group of pastoral lay ministers. That they can take responsibility for pastoral ministry in the Pastoral Area going forward.



We are presently looking at the Ministry of Funeral Teams and looking into that.



Manage Administration – what can we do at central level without taking from the local Church faith community, but rather strengthening it and supporting it. So you could have a Pastoral Area newsletter. You could have a central place where baptisms are co-ordinated from, an administration base. You could have a Pastoral Area social media page. So, we are exploring all of that.



Support for clergy is another big area especially as they get older and get fewer. We are very conscious of that. Only a few months ago one of our relatively young men died. Nearly every year we have something like that where one of the men dies. We are very conscious of the whole thing of encouraging team work, pastoral support, supporting our clergy.

And backing and supporting all of this is the Diocesan Pastoral Development Team which I am part of. I will leave it there.

(Fr Ger Godley, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2023, Abbey Court Hotel, Nenagh)