

1. Background

The area of our largely rural Diocese of Limerick & Killaloe, except for Limerick and some larger towns, has suffered from significant depopulation, with young people in particular drifting towards the east coast or further afield. This continuing trend affects the whole of society, as well as our local parish communities. Parishes (parochial unites) bear the burden of maintaining ministry over large areas. Historic and beautiful churches cost a lot to maintain, and as numbers fall, parishes find it increasingly difficult to finance both this and full-time ordained ministry. The requirement of compliance with Safeguarding, GDPR, and Charities regulation is an increasingly challenging burden for both Select Vestries and clergy.

At the Bishop's request, Diocesan Council appointed a subcommittee to report with recommendations on how to approach the future of ministry in the Diocese. The subcommittee believes that the traditional response to such problems, that of closing churches and amalgamating parishes, is no longer appropriate. Instead, we should anticipate the need for change by adopting a flexible approach to ministry now and into the future. As such, the subcommittee propose the introduction of Ministry Areas in order to equip and enable effective ministry in our Diocese going forwards. A Ministry Area model would allow those with current and new authorised ministries to work collaboratively in providing pastoral, liturgical and administrative ministry across each Ministry Area. This will include the provision of administrative assistance in due course.

In the interest of reducing the administrative burden on parishes, the subcommittee strongly recommends that grouped parishes move to form a single union of parishes with a single select vestry. It is encouraging to note that a number of parishes have already commenced this journey.

The subcommittee has sought feedback from Diocesan Council, select vestries, clergy, and diocesan readers, all of whom broadly support the approach.

2. Way forward

The subcommittee therefore ask Diocesan Council to pass the following motion, to be put to the next meeting of Diocesan Synod.

"While our parishes and congregations may often be small, the faith and commitment of each is without doubt. By the grace of God, with flexibility about ordained ministry, more lay involvement, and new forms of authorised ministry, our Diocese can face the future with confidence. In this light, Diocesan Council asks Diocesan Synod to approve the proposal to introduce Ministry Areas throughout the diocese, by implementing the principles laid out below."

3. Principles

- a. The purpose of this proposal is to enable effective pastoral, liturgical and administrative ministry in each parish in the Diocese, by linking them into Ministry Areas. The purpose is not to amalgamate parishes or close churches.
- b. We strongly believe that the administrative benefits proposed by this model will entail existing Groups moving to Unions.
- c. We propose that our 16 parishes be grouped into the five following Ministry Areas:
 - Kenmare & Dromod, Kilcolman, Killarney & Aghadoe, Tralee & Dingle (Kerry Ministry Area)

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- Limerick City, Rathkeale & Kilnaughtin, Adare & Kilmallock (Limerick Ministry Area)
 - Drumcliffe with Kilnasoolagh, Killaloe, Nenagh (Killaloe Ministry Area)
 - Cloughjordan & Borisokane, Roscrea, Shinrone (Roscrea Ministry Area)
 - Birr, Clonfert, Aughrim & Creagh (Clonfert Ministry Area)
- d. During the implementation of Ministry Areas, if it becomes apparent that changes to these groupings are desirable, alterations may be made by Diocesan Council.
- e. Five years after Ministry Areas have been implemented, their operation shall be reviewed by Diocesan Council, and any necessary changes shall be brought back to Diocesan Synod for approval.
- f. Existing parish boundaries will remain unchanged and each parish will retain its own identity within the Ministry Area.
- g. Each select vestry will continue to be responsible for managing its finances, paying its parochial assessment, maintaining its church buildings and rectory, etc., as heretofore.
- h. The rector or priest-in-charge of each parish will continue to have overall responsibility for all pastoral, liturgical and administrative work in that parish, including that undertaken by another authorised minister, clerical or lay.
- i. The overall diocesan budget for ministry, including parochial assessments, will continue to be managed by the Diocesan Finance Committee and Diocesan Council, as is the current practice.
- j. Within each Ministry Area:
- (i) Clergy and authorised ministers are expected to meet regularly to discuss ministry within their Ministry Area (and all will meet together at least once every three months).
 - (ii) Clergy within the Ministry Area will normally cover for each other with respect to holidays, days off, illness, etc.
 - (iii) Clergy and lay ministers will seek opportunities to get to know the other parishes and parishioners in the Ministry Area, eg. by exchanging pulpits on a regular basis.
 - (iv) Opportunities will be explored for parishes in the Ministry Area to share special events.
 - (v) Mothers' Union, Girls' Friendly Society, Boys Brigade, etc. may find critical mass in the Ministry Area which may not be possible at parish level.
 - (vi) Where an expertise exists (eg. School Assembly, youth work, nursing home or hospital visiting) this may be shared across the Ministry Area and so widen the variety of roles for ministry, both lay and ordained.
 - (vii) The Ministry Area will seek to widen lay ministry opportunities (eg. lay hospital or nursing home chaplains, school chaplaincy, confirmation preparation, young families, etc.).
 - (viii) In the initial phase at least, as funding permits, effort should be made to appoint a part-time administrator in each Ministry Area, to support clergy and select vestries in meeting their compliance responsibilities with respect to Safeguarding, GDPR and Charities Regulation requirements; responsibilities which can only be expected to increase.
- j. When a vacancy occurs in ordained ministry in a component parish within a Ministry Area, the pastoral, liturgical, and administrative needs of the whole Ministry Area will be explored as well as the needs of the parish. A reconfiguration of ministry within the Ministry Area may be deemed appropriate, as the bishop and diocese together explore options for the way forward.