Clustering Parishes I
– *The Practice*

Eugene Duffy

In recent years most Irish dioceses have begun to think about how best to plan and manage their pastoral activities as the country experiences a profound change in its social and religious landscape. The issues that confront the Church in Ireland are by no means unique and have already been faced in many other parts of the Western world over several decades.[1] Here it is proposed to look at the issue in practical pastoral terms and then to provide a theological rationale that underpins the process. A working definition with commentary will be offered as a starting point. Then various models will be explored, some of which will be more immediately applicable in the Irish context than others. A rationale for clustering will be examined and some concrete suggestions offered as to what pastoral activities might benefit from this arrangement. Finally, but very importantly, a theological underpinning will be proposed, which it is hoped will show that this contemporary challenge for renewal and development is entirely consistent with a sound conciliar theology, especially the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

It may well be argued that the clustering of parishes is simply delaying the application of more radical solutions to the current challenges in the Irish ecclesial landscape. There are other issues such as the removal of the demand of mandatory celibacy for the diocesan clergy, the ordination of women and much better structures of leadership at parish and diocesan levels which merit serious attention. However, in the immediate future these are not likely to be addressed at the magisterial level, the only level that can legitimate such change. In the meantime, it is necessary and appropriate to work with what is both possible and legitimate, but

1. See, for example, K. Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006).

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this should not preclude the other options being discussed and debated at all levels in the Church. The Spirit has been given to all with a view to discerning what is true and best for the community.

A DEFINITION OF CLUSTERING

It may be helpful to begin with a definition of a cluster and then explore some of its implications for current practice. Later, models for clustering will be considered. A cluster is a group of parishes committed to the long term relationship of collaboration to plan and provide for the spiritual, sacramental and pastoral needs of their respective communities. It involves the sharing of personnel, resources, programmes and facilities so that the needs of the constituent parishes or communities can be addressed without straining the resources of individual parishes. It contributes to the strengthening rather than diminishment of the life and ministry of each individual parish or community.

The size of a cluster can vary greatly from diocese to diocese as the number of participating parishes or communities will be determined by a variety of factors. These will include: the availability of ordained priests; the population of the communities being clustered and their financial viability; the proximity of the parishes and their accessibility to one another; the size of the church buildings, the availability of office space, meeting rooms and other facilities; the location of schools; cultural factors, such as language or sporting affiliations. If a cluster is too small, it may lack the dynamism and stimulus to challenge the participants to be creative and courageous in facing the pastoral challenges that confront them. On the other hand, if the cluster is too large, it often lacks any sense of coherence, belonging or responsibility that is necessary if participants are to have a sense of identity and its ministers a unity of purpose.

HALF-PARISHES

In the Irish context, it is very common for parishes, especially in rural areas, to have at least two venues or more for Sunday liturgy. The communities that gather in each of these local churches or chapels often have a deep sense of identity and belonging that has been built up over generations. These half-parishes, as they are sometimes called, are in fact profound expressions of Church and community, which in other parts of the world might be termed 'basic Christian communities'. Often they have their own resident priest and a pastoral council, operating as parishes in everything but name. Therefore, in the context of the clustering of parishes, these 'half-parishes' need to be considered in a way that is respectful of their history and supportive of the sense of commu-

nity they have acquired, sometimes over nearly two centuries. This does not suggest, however, that they should not be challenged to look beyond their own boundaries to work with and support neighbouring faith communities.

A cluster, like any individual parish, is concerned that the spiritual, sacramental and pastoral needs of its members will be properly addressed. A parish is not primarily a territorial entity nor is it simply a canonical structure. It is a living community of people, more akin to a family than to an administrative unit. The focus in a cluster must be on how the needs of the people that comprise it can be met, not on how priests can be more effectively deployed. Irish parishes over the past 150 years have become accustomed to having a resident priest and have implicitly accepted such a presence as part of what it is to be parish. Now the focus needs to be on the local community and the question asked: how can we as a local or diocesan Church support local communities of Christians in living out their vocations as authentic disciples of Christ in today's circumstances? Any community needs a lot of help and encouragement to do that, including catechesis, sacramental preparation and various programmes of spiritual renewal. They need pastoral care, for example, home visitation, care for the sick and housebound, chaplaincy support for schools, hospitals, nursing homes and industrial campuses, outreach to marginalised groups such as travellers, immigrants, homeless people or those with handicaps. None of these areas of pastoral activity requires an ordained minister. Until relatively recently in Ireland, many of these pastoral responsibilities were undertaken by religious women and men, as well as by the clergy. Since these are areas of responsibility that any baptised person can assume there is a challenge to local communities to see how they can begin to respond to these areas of pastoral need and put the personnel and resources in place to do so. The changed religious landscape now allows all of the baptised to give expression to their basic vocation as it was presented in the various decrees of the Second Vatican Council. The decline that has occurred in priesthood and religious life has opened up a new space so that each baptised person can share a greater responsibility for the overall mission and well-being of the Church. This can only be seen as a positive development in the life of the Church and may well be a corrective action on the part of the Spirit. None of this means that there is not an important role for the unique witness of religious men and women and the service of ordained ministers.

The singular witness, generosity and exclusive dedication of vowed religious people will always act as a leaven within the Church, encouraging all its members to renew their commitments

to live their own unique vocations to the full. The ordained ministry is an essential element of the Church's life providing an authoritative proclamation of the Word of God and a gathering of its hearers to celebrate it in the sacraments. This essential ministry must be made as generously available as possible to each Christian community so that it can be nourished by the Word and with the Body and Blood of Christ.

MODELS OF CLUSTERING
Currently there is no agreed structure for a cluster with the result that the organization and activities of these new groupings vary considerably from diocese to diocese. Here six models will be outlined, thus highlighting the possibilities that are available for those exploring the potential of clustering arrangements.[2]

1. *Separate Parishes Coordinated by Parish Priests and Councils:* In this arrangement each parish retains its own parish priest, curate (if it has one or two), other ministers, parish pastoral council and finance council. The co-operative activities of the cluster are facilitated by a co-ordinating council. Liturgical services, programmes and resources are shared among the participating parishes and these are co-ordinated through the collaboration of the clergy and the members of the coordinating council. A channel of communication and feedback is maintained also with the parish pastoral councils of each of the parishes.
   In this model Mass times can be coordinated across the participating parishes to ensure that an adequate service is maintained if a priest has to be absent from his parish. Other liturgies such as penance services, ecumenical services, special commemorative services and other such events can be organised and celebrated at one venue in the cluster area. Adult faith formation, liturgical formation, youth and family ministries and other programmes can be similarly organised by the coordinating council. This makes for a better use of personnel and resources, especially where local communities are not populous and cannot be expected to provide a wide range of facilities on their own.

2. *Separate Parishes with a Priest Moderator and other priests:* In this model one priest in the cluster acts as moderator and each of the parishes or communities retains its own resident

2. The diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin provides in part the template for these models. See its website: http:/www.gbdioc.org/pdf/pastServMultiParishCluster Model.pdf

priest but none of them holds the canonical office of Parish Priest. In practice it may operate in a fashion similar to the previous model but the moderator has a role of *primus inter pares* and is the person responsible in law for the ministry of the grouping of parishes. However, it is expected that he work for a consensus in all decisions affecting the pastoral well-being of the parishes. A weakness of the model is that sometimes the priests involved in it may sense a loosening of the bonds which they normally have with their parish of residence. This is a model which holds a certain appeal for large urban communities where there is still a reasonable availability of priests to have a presence in individual parishes.

3. *Separate Parishes and One Pastor:* In this model one priest provides leadership, liturgical services and pastoral care for all the communities in the cluster. Meanwhile each individual parish retains its own internal leadership structure through its parish pastoral council, finance council and other personnel who are actively involved in the leadership and pastoral care of the faith community.

This model may appeal to some small adjoining rural parishes. In many instances it is possible for a priest to preside at a Sunday liturgy in two or three communities without being unnecessarily overburdened. Equally, small communities can easily be supported by a non-resident pastor in calling forth and facilitating the variety of ministerial and leadership gifts already present in the communities. As is the case for all parishes in a clustering arrangement, their association with other parishes will help to compensate for any of the deficiencies in their own.

4. *Separate Parishes with one Parish Priest and Several Pastoral Leaders:* In this model there is one priest available to the cluster and each of the participating communities is assigned its own pastoral leader, who may be employed full-time. This person could be a deacon, a member of a religious community of men or women or any baptised person. Thus each parish or community may be under lay leadership, retaining its own parish pastoral council, finance council and other lay ministers. However, the priest appointed by the bishop has a duty of oversight, as provided for in Can 517§2.

In this model the priest's sacramental role is obviously increased and his pastoral activity is seriously curtailed. His role as servant leader can come more into focus but the other ministries of leadership and pastoral action are also given much greater scope and greater visibility in the respective communities. The coordinating council for the cluster, too,

will inevitably play a greater role than in the first model and so will the pastoral councils in the individual communities.

5. *Merged Parishes with one Parish Priest:* In this model all the pastoral councils, parish committees, finances, sacramental records, etc., are merged together to create a new canonical parish. Everything is now centralised in the one place, except the places of worship. This is a very radical step, but one which may be necessitated in some instances where parish populations, material resources and the availability of ordained ministers dictate the move. In fact, many parishioners fear that this is the inevitable direction in which the clustering agenda is moving.

6. *Close existing Parishes and Build a New Parish:* This model is a step further than the previous model and obviously more radical. It means that the existing parish buildings, churches, halls and residences are closed and sold to finance the building and equipping of a new parish complex. This will only be necessary in relatively rare situations, especially in an Irish context, given the attachment there is to traditional parish churches and properties. The new parish will then have one parish priest, pastoral and finance councils, an appropriate team of lay ministers and other resources to meet the pastoral needs of the newly created parish community.

These models are indicative of the range of options available for those involved in the task of clustering parishes. Whatever option is chosen, it has to be recognised that the move from the familiar arrangements in a parish to one where greater sharing of personnel and resources is called for will always be difficult for all concerned. Therefore, it is a transition that calls for great sensitivity on the part of those planning for the future pastoral resources of a diocese or pastoral area. It calls for prayerful discernment, open dialogue, attentiveness to various local circumstances, histories and sensibilities so that all the genuine concerns can be heard and addressed as sensitively as possible. Otherwise, the end product may be a series of grieving and divided communities who are unable to witness to the communion of life to which the disciples of Jesus are called.

RATIONALE FOR CLUSTERING

The issue of clustering has come to the fore in recent times as the numbers of ordained ministers and religious decline dramatically in the Western world. Not only are they declining numerically, but their age profile is increasing significantly as well. The result is that greater demands are being made on a group of people whose

energy is in decline and who cannot possibly respond adequately to all the demands being made upon them. If the demands being made upon them continue to increase then they will not be able to endure the strain; exhaustion will precipitate an even bigger crisis. Therefore, if the present trend is allowed to develop the Church will experience ever greater problems, the quality of parish ministry will be weakened and pastoral resources will not be in any way adequate to meet the demands that are made upon it.

The situation in Ireland at present is not as drastic as in many other parts of the world. It still has one of the best ratios of priests per head of Catholic population anywhere in the world. However, this actually strengthens the case for addressing the inevitable problems now because failing to do so may well allow future circumstances to dictate responses that may be less helpful. It is better to plan well for the future than to have to react in panic when the crisis moves beyond manageable proportions. Sometimes the fear of falling into some kind of semi-Pelagianism seems to deter Church leaders from facing the realities that confront them and in their own bewilderment they convince themselves that the Holy Spirit will take care of the situation even while they remain inert. Such a theological vision or spiritual outlook is not that of the Church which has always been willing to plan for the building up of God's Kingdom, while totally cognisant of the fact that it is ultimately God's achievement.

While current demographics of those in ministry may be forcing change, the new situation can also be seen as a blessing in disguise. It presents a radically new opportunity for a renewal and regeneration of the Church in Ireland. Among the priests themselves, it creates a new sense of a diocesan presbyterium, challenging them to work in a more fraternal and collaborative fashion, rediscovering rich sources of personal, spiritual and professional enrichment. It spells the end of the era of clerical individualism when a parish priest might view his parish as kind of personal fiefdom over which he alone presided. Not only is the pastor challenged to work more collaboratively with his neighbouring priests, he is also challenged to seek out more actively those capable of ministry in his own parish, to recognise their gifts and call them into the service of the community.

NEW IDEALS, TALENTS, ENERGIES

In a situation where priests and other members of a pastoral leadership group begin to work together new energies are released and a potential emerges that could never be possible when a priest or even a single parish pastoral council works alone. Now new ideas can surface. Broader perspectives on the pastoral needs and more

creative responses become possible. Given that a number of parishes are working collaboratively, there is a bigger pool of talent on which to draw. All of this provides a fresh opportunity to engage with the mission of the Church in a more enthusiastic and spirited fashion.

The clustering of parishes facilitates a better stewardship of the resources in a pastoral area. Many of the services that an individual parish may have struggled to provide can now be done collectively. A group of parishes working together may, for example, be well positioned to engage a youth minister or a director of music or liturgy, whose services would be paid for by the participating group of parishes. Similarly, programmes in adult faith formation, training for ministries, liturgical formation and other educational services could be provided more effectively and efficiently if groups of parishes work in a spirit of partnership. Not only will it cost less, but those who participate in such activities will have a wider cohort of peers with whom they can confer and from whom they will draw support in living out of their own particular ecclesial vocations.

Administrative burdens can be shared and many of the routine expenses involved in the running of a parish could be much more efficiently handled if parishes worked in closer cooperation. Most rural parishes in Ireland were structured to accommodate people when transport to and from places of worship was by foot and the era of telecommunications had not yet dawned. Sufficient attention has not been paid to these factors in contemporary planning and redistribution of resources. In this context, too, it may be worth considering the living arrangements of the priests serving parish clusters. There are many social, pastoral and financial advantages to having central accommodation units from which priests travel out to their communities. Such an arrangement would address the isolation that many of them feel living independently of any real peer support. It would also mean that older priests would not be isolated from their familiar surroundings as they moved into retirement.

The sharing of personnel and resources that clustering involves requires a certain humility on the part of the communities and individuals concerned. All have to recognise that very few parishes have all the skills and talents that are required to meet their pastoral needs, but every parish has a range of gifted people. So, if these needs are to be adequately met there has to be generosity in sharing resources with other communities, and perhaps even more challengingly, there is the need for receptivity to the gifts that can be offered by another community. It is often easier to be a generous giver than a humble recipient. One of the great

advantages for the Church in Ireland at the moment is the very significant number of people who have taken courses in theology and specialised areas of pastoral ministry and who are willing to put their skills at the disposal of their communities. Indeed it is sometimes overlooked now that there are more people today taking courses in theology in the country than when the seminaries were full of students preparing for the priesthood. Not only is there a great reserve of talented people with the knowledge, skill and competence to serve local communities but they also have the right and responsibility to exercise their proper roles in the life of the Church.

The goal of any clustering arrangement must be to ensure that each local Christian community is as well resourced as possible to live out its mission to the full. The focus has to be on the needs of the communities in the first instance not on the needs of the clergy or their distribution. Provision must be made for the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Sunday Eucharist. Then, all other pastoral needs have to be considered and the personnel put in place to respond to them. If the cluster is working well, there is no reason to fear that this will not happen as the pooled resources in terms of imagination and creativity, personnel and finances will be much greater than has heretofore been exploited. Thus the clustering of parishes offers an exciting opportunity for a genuine movement of renewal in the Church at this moment. However, this is not something that can be easily legislated. It will require leadership and encouragement simultaneously at the diocesan and local levels. It will require genuine discernment and openness of heart on the part of all those who are affected by the process.

Joiners. Young people not only demonstrate higher energy levels than older ones, they also typically are 'joiners' and the Church needs to evangelize the young by making the faith community into something people might actually want to join ...Worship that is disconnected from our daily lives and the struggle for a better world will not only not appeal to the young; it will not appeal to God either.

— PAUL LAKELAND, *Church*, (Minnesota, Liturgical Press) p. 90.