

Kerry diocese makes history as lay people step up amid growing priest shortage .

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As the Catholic Church across the country struggles to balance the loss of ageing priests through death and retirement, with a shortage of younger men devoting their lives to the priesthood, the Diocese of Kerry is putting its fate in the hands of lay people. Last month saw the initiation of 25 pastoral leaders into the church during a ceremony in Killarney.

The Diocese of Kerry is the first to introduce this historic change, allowing lay people to take on roles traditionally carried out by a priest, in a bid to bridge the gap caused by the declining numbers of priests.

The diocese, which is made up of 53 parishes ranging from North Cork to Valentia Island, is one of the largest of the 26 dioceses in Ireland.

With more than 139,000 Catholics in the diocese, there is a significant shortfall in the number of priests to administer to parishioners, with just 46 working priests last year.

Records show 28 priests incardinated in the diocese have since retired or work outside of the diocese.

The ministry of pastoral leaders marks a new milestone for the diocese and will involve the coordination and support of pastoral ministry in parishes.

The leaders will work with the clergy and parish secretaries on a voluntary basis and carry out tasks such as bringing Communion to people who are housebound.

Making history.

Tipperary native Dermot Walsh is one of the 25 pastoral leaders making history within the Catholic church, although he admits his spiritual journey has not always been plain sailing. The retired bank manager, who has lived in Caherciveen, Co Kerry, for the past 26 years, said he had embarked on a long journey to find his faith, having grown up in a traditional Irish family where his perception of God was enveloped in a sense of fear.

Mr Walsh said he grew up in a church-centred household, where Mass, devotions, and the rosary were to the forefront. He is both 'daunted and excited' to take up his new role.

His memories of the Catholic Church as a child revolved around a “rule-based society,” based on reward and punishment. “You would keep the rules and the rules will keep you. If you don’t you were in trouble,” he said. “It was a god of appeasement and fear”, he said.

The father of five, and grandfather to 14 children, now considers himself a person “often with doubt but continuing the search in faith for truth”.

Mr Walsh came across the pastoral leader role by accident one Sunday evening when reading the parish newsletter. After much deliberation, he decided to take part in the course, attending a meeting in Killarney, where “the rest is history”, he said.

One of the aspects of the pastoral leader course involves a faith formation programme, which is accredited by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and takes two years.

The intensive course, consisting of monthly meetings in Killarney and two-hour lectures online each week, gives the participants an opportunity to study the Bible and further deepen their faith. Mr Walsh said these lectures helped give him an “education in Catholicism that I just didn’t have before”, admitting as Irish people, “we don’t pick up the Bible to read it”.

One aspect he found interesting was an investigation into the spiritual aspect surrounding the afterlife. Mr Walsh, who has been appointed to the Iveragh pastoral area, said he was both “daunted and excited” to take up his new role.

The pastoral area — comprised of five parishes, including Valentia, Caherdaniel, Caherciveen, Ballinskelligs, and Waterville — is now only served by three priests, one of whom is retired but is staying on to help with parish demands. Mr Walsh said there was no end to the roles they may be asked to undertake as pastoral leaders, which they must serve for three years. “The Pope suggested don’t be afraid to make a mistake, and one of the things that it makes clear, and, of course, the last thing I want to do is make a mistake. I’m very cautious as well,” he said. Mr Walsh, who has previously held roles as an eucharistic minister and on the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council within the church, said the changes he had been a part of within the church had been incredibly positive.

We’re no longer priest helpers. We’re co-workers. We’ve co-responsibility for the parish.

Having previously held roles as a eucharistic minister and reader in her local parish, there was little wonder retired teacher Maureen Williams was gently nudged towards the role of pastoral leader. The retired English and Religion teacher, who moved to Kerry from London five years ago, admitted she feared the commitment at first, before deciding to give the course a go. “The parish priest approached me and said, ‘you could do this’. As I looked at it, I realised it was going to be a very interesting course,” she said. “The academic and theological training was exceptionally high quality with Mary Immaculate College.”

Strong faith.

Ms Williams, who has lived in Fenit, Co Kerry, for the past five years, has always had a strong faith. She was raised by Catholic parents and involved in the faith formation of staff and implementation of the Catholic ethos in her school.

She described the process of returning to study as a “blast from the past”, although she said she thoroughly enjoyed the calibre of the modules on offer.

“A lot of the work was on pastoral reflection, theological reflection and made us think very much about the specific context of the church in Ireland today. It has gone through massive changes in the past few decades,” she said.

Ms. Williams will help with the planning of special events and Masses, including Christmas, Easter, and Masses in the lead-up to State examinations.

Although the pastoral role varies within each diocese, Ms Williams said her specific role within the Spa diocese would involve visiting elderly people and working with the liturgy group. She will help with the planning of special events and Masses, including Christmas, Easter, and Masses in the lead-up to State examinations.

Although much of the diocese will understand the need for lay people to assist the priest, she acknowledges some elderly parishioners may not accept a lay woman administering the eucharist. “It’s a process of change,” Ms Williams said, adding “we will explain to people that the priest can come as well if they need the sacrament of the sick or I can bring them the eucharist to their homes, or I can come and say prayers with them, or just come and chat.”

She feels the introduction of lay ministers within the Catholic church will be positive for the parish, adding the parish priest will no longer be responsible for everything.

I think more people will see that the church isn't just a building and it's not just the priest in the building — the church is the people.

“The church is about us being together and acknowledging the presence of God, not just the traditional ways of the church.”

Although the pastoral leaders are the first to participate in these roles, there is great comfort in the relationships they have built with one another throughout their two and a half years of training.

The 25 leaders consist of five men and 20 women, ranging from retirees to parents juggling young children and everything in between.

“It's people from literally every corner of the diocese, from Cork to the end of the Dingle Peninsula to North Kerry,” Ms Williams said.

She said this bond and shared experience within the group provided great comfort and confidence going forward in their position. “It's lovely to have that network of people,” she added.

“That bond was really important, as it is a new role, and knowing that there are lots of other people that you can just go to and share experiences and prayers with.”