

Governance: stewarding the mission

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I have been privileged to attend the forums that we have held, and are still holding, to discuss the governance of parish and diocesan schools. In launching our governance process, Archbishop P Comensoli focused on ‘stewarding the mission’, which is a theme that has resonated strongly in each of the forums on governance we have held to date.

This article focuses more on the role of the parish priest because, at the time of writing, we have held most of our forums for the clergy, but are not quite through the series of our forums for principals.

Role of the parish priest

The sense of commitment that parish priests have to the mission of Catholic education in their parish was tangible in the forums for the clergy. Any change we make to our governance structures must ensure that this mission is preserved, even strengthened, by the arrangements that we put in place.

Parish priests do not want to become chaplains in their own schools. They want to ensure that they are playing a vital role in its pastoral life and in the shaping of the priorities that preserve its Catholic identity.

While the changes that we are required to make in our governance structures present parish priests with the opportunity to relinquish some of the administrative burden of running a school, there can be no diminishment of the priest’s role in pastoral leadership.

Being in communion and reading the signs of the times

The relationship between the priest and the principal has been a focus point in the clergy forums. This relationship is pivotal in terms of ensuring that the Catholic school locates its identity in the parish (or parishes), who not only founded the school but provides its Catholic lifeblood and soul.

A fundamental principle of canon law is that you cannot be Catholic on your own. To be Catholic is to be in communion. The relationship between the parish priest and the principal is a deep sign of this communion. When the relationship is working well, the Catholic school understands itself to belong deeply to the parish, to the point where the language is not ‘school *and* parish’ but ‘school *in* parish’.

The Catholic school is undeniably an educational institution and needs to fulfil all of the requirements of any school in Victoria, but it is also undeniably Catholic and this catholicity is drawn from the strong relationship that the school has with its parish.



Similarly, the principle of communion is evident in many of our secondary schools, which are governed by parishes or the Archdiocese itself. These schools' deep roots and identity are grounded in the life of the parishes in which the parishioners' hopes, resources and commitments originally founded each school. Any changes that are made to governance arrangements must respect and foster these fundamental principles and relationships if the schools are to remain faithful to their identity and mission.

Just as many schools founded by religious orders have undergone significant changes in their governance over recent decades, our regional and diocesan schools are following similar paths. We must read the signs of the times reflectively and corporately as we discern the best way forward.

Listening, subsidiarity and solidarity

Listening has been a keyword in the planning and experience of the governance forums to date. We need to listen to each other because governance has many facets to it. There is no one person that has all of the knowledge and perspective that is required for us to grasp governance in its fullness, understand what is essential and understand the implications of any changes that are being contemplated.

Although the aspiration to listen is easy, designing a process to ensure that listening happens when so many stakeholders are involved is complex. With 292 schools and associated parishes affected by the governance change, the scope of the listening and consultation is daunting.

However, we are committed to providing spaces where stakeholders have the opportunity to be heard, and their ideas and concerns can be expressed and actively considered, respected and acted upon. An important role of the governance steering committee is to ensure that we achieve the highest standards of stakeholder engagement as the process moves forward.

Two more keywords are *subsidiarity* and *solidarity*. None of us wants to create a monolithic system for our schools, where the community that animates them is submerged under governance structures that do not respect subsidiarity. The central authority should only perform tasks that cannot be performed effectively at a local level. There are certain responsibilities that need to be discharged at a state or diocesan level and in many ways these responsibilities are being managed without incorporation. For example, when it comes to acquitting public monies or ensuring consistent standards of child safety, we already have structures and processes in place to ensure that we meet the requirements of various regulatory authorities. Solidarity is also important. We need to calibrate the structures and delegations that we put in place carefully so that we stay joined, as we must, and free to respond to the gospel as we are called.

What to recollect during the governance journey

As we move forward in stewarding the mission, we have the opportunity to clarify what we mean by *governance*, *leadership* and *management*. We can also clarify what we mean by *mission*, *pastoral vision* and *relationships*, as well as *school identity* and *culture*, which necessarily grow from these concepts.

When we do make changes to administrative positions and functions, we need to be careful that our management practices do not cut across roles or responsibilities that are essential in the pastoral domain. Similarly, management structures cannot drive pastoral vision and mission. Rather it should work the other way around, with our administrative and management structures serving the mission, not mastering it. While governance is important – and it is critical that we put the right structures and protocols in place – our Catholic faith is even more important.

Our Catholic faith is the reason we exist as a community of schools. We will remain true to our Catholic faith if we listen to the many holy women and men who give faithful service in very diverse ways as they lead our parishes and schools. This faithfulness, surely, gives us good reason to hope as we move forward in stewarding the mission.

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