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A STUDY OF ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATES
AND PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATIVE STYLE
IN SEVEN PARISH COUNCILS

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the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Psychology at Massey University.

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SUMMARY

An exploratory case study was carried out on 7 parish councils in one Catholic deanery. Parish councils are organisations of priests, religious and laity in which the parish priest acts as an appointed leader, and the council chairman as an elected leader. Councils consist usually of 15 members and their task is to share pastoral responsibility in some way so that the christian commitment of the parish community will be strengthened. They have been established in most Catholic parishes over the last 6 to 8 years as part of recent attempts at renewal in the Catholic Church.

This research assessed the strengths and weaknesses of 7 parish councils and specified some of the educational needs of parish priests in the matter of working with parish councils. It examined the relationship between the organisational climate of the parish council, the priest's attitude to shared responsibility and the priest's leadership or participative style in council meetings.

Measuring instruments included:

- a structured interview with each parish priest.
- standardised observation of council meetings by 2 observers.
- collation of comments from parish council members.
- the organisational climate instrument of Kolb, Rubin and McIntyre based on the work of Litwin and Stringer.
- the measurement of the priest's participative style by Fiedler's A.S.O. score and an observed rating on Schein's friendly helper,

tough battler, logical thinker scale.

Results showed that in these 7 parish councils there is a high level of good-will, in general a satisfactory level of warmth and trust and some efficiency especially in practical and administrative matters. The parish priests have a considerable degree of openness and are likely to accept assistance. They have a particular need to reflect on the meaning of leadership in the context of parish councils and to consider fully the implications of shared responsibility.

The weaknesses of the parish councils centre round lack of clarity in regard to pastoral goals and areas of responsibility. There is a need to strengthen the sub-committee structure, to improve communication with the parish, to increase procedural efficiency and to understand and agree on the meaning of consultation and decision-making.

In this research, "climate discrepancy" was chosen as a criterion variable i.e. the discrepancy between the perceived actual and ideal situation on 7 organisational climate items within each council. A high discrepancy score indicated a high level of dissatisfaction with the actual climate.

Results showed that if the priest is hesitant towards change and shared responsibility there is evidence of a higher climate discrepancy score, and in particular any manipulative tendency on the part of the priest is related to dissatisfaction with the actual climate. A high rating for the priest on the tough battler scale is significantly related to a high discrepancy score for that parish council, a high rating on the logical thinker scale is related to a low discrepancy score and a friendly

helper style is not significant.

Suggestions are made for further research on a wider scale and practical recommendations have been offered to the deanery in question.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF AIM

Even to the casual observer, there is evidence that, in the last ten to twelve years, the Catholic Church has undergone and is undergoing a process of rapid and considerable change. While there is clearly a basis of continuing belief and unchanged "essentials", the Catholic Church now experiences new forms of theology, new attitudes, new expressions of authority, new styles of worship, new teaching methods; and among the fruits of this change has been the growth of new forms of shared responsibility. In a society accustomed to a vigorous and vertical rule of law, the emergence or re-emergence of such bodies as the College of Bishops, Diocesan Councils, Priests Senates and the Parish Pastoral Councils has produced new possibilities - and naturally enough, new problems. It would be misleading to suggest that the existence of these bodies amounts to a total democratisation of the Church, but the change from single to shared responsibility in many fields is a significant reality and one which provides a fascinating field of research for the social scientist.

It is the purpose of this thesis, therefore, to examine one of these new bodies, the Parish Pastoral Council, to assess, through objective research, some of its possibilities and some of its problems.

The establishment of Parish Councils was encouraged in the early 1960s by the 2nd Vatican Council, a gathering of 2000 bishops in union with the Pope, which became the authoritative agent and focus of so much subsequent change. Parish Councils were not given legal or constitutional definition but were envisaged in general terms to be representative bodies within each parish, made up of clergy, religious

and laity who would together share responsibility for the pastoral good of the parish community.

Many issues could be considered in dealing with these councils, and for a complete picture all of these would need to be studied; their organisational structure, real and ideal; the measured effect of training sessions for parish council members and clergy; the network of communication between parish and parish council; the effectiveness of different voting procedures and so on. But after working with parish councils, in session and on training efforts, and after informal interviews with 30 - 40 parish council members (who took no further part in the study) it was decided to make this research an exploratory case study on 7 of the 9 parishes in the Manawatu Deanery of the Wellington diocese, a case study with the following precise aims:

- (a) to assess, by interview, by observation and by written report, the strengths and weakness of parish councils in the Manawatu Deanery, and in particular to assess the educational needs of parish priests in the matter of working with parish councils.
- (b) to test the hypothesis that the satisfactoriness of the organisational climate of parish councils will be affected by
 - (i) the parish priest's theological understanding of and attitude towards shared responsibility.
 - (ii) the parish priest's style of functioning within a group.

In a complex area of study these two issues do allow for some objective measures and statements and they do seem to form an integral and important part of the whole picture. Both have been the subject of comment and decision-making within the last few years, but as yet neither of them has been the object of any scientific research, certainly not in this country. Comments and arguments have been based on personal opinion, common sense and subjective impressions.

It may well be that these opinions and impressions have been both perceptive and accurate and it is readily admitted that they have contributed greatly to the choice of subject matter and the preconceptions involved in this present study; but it is hoped that this research, despite its limited aims and scope, will shed some objective light on the situation, to the benefit of future diocesan or at least deanery decisions.