

Church governance needs to walk the walk

- [John Warhurst](#)
- 25 February 2020

Catholic church governance suffers considerable dilemmas. The clue to its problems comes from the challenging recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to review 'the governance and management structures of dioceses and parishes, including in relation to issues of transparency, accountability, consultation and the participation of lay men and women'. In doing so the RC noted with some approval the approaches to governance of largely lay-led Catholic health, community services and education agencies.



Main image: The Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Mother of God in Sydney (Getty Images/kldlife)

Approaches to governance are in flux within church agencies, sectors, dioceses and at the national level, either driven by the demands of state regulations or in response to the challenging new situation the church finds itself in. There is so much change going on that it is difficult to follow.

Some big national agencies, like Caritas Australia and Catholic Social Services Australia, are rethinking their governance structures. Incorporation is now common. The governance of diocesan Catholic education across Australia is being reshaped significantly. Some dioceses have embarked upon new approaches to consultative governance, like synods and assemblies, leading into the Plenary Council 2020.

The Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons, with eleven members, has emerged as a potentially strong third peak body in the church alongside the bishops and Catholic Religious Australia.

Catholic Professional Standards Ltd, set up in 2017, has taken responsibility for oversight of new child safety systems. Simultaneously the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has undertaken an enormous restructure of its staffing, funding and governance.

Most recently a new body, Catholic Emergency Relief Agency, has emerged to play a potential 'whole of church' agency coordinating role in response to the bushfire emergency.

'The church must not just talk 'good governance' talk but walk the walk. That is the responsibility of individuals with leadership roles across the church. In dioceses and parishes those individuals exercising formal authority are bishops and priests.'

The acceptance in 2018 by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Catholic Religious Australia leadership of the RC recommendation was significant in the setting up of the [Implementation Advisory Group](#) and its subsidiary, the Governance Review Project Team (GRPT). The test will come when the GRPT report is considered by those holding church authority and later discussed by the Plenary Council 2020. Action rather than just words is required. The lessons of secular good governance are clear and long-standing. They include the introduction and monitoring of mechanisms for accountability, transparency and inclusiveness. The GRPT report will likely reiterate the desirability of such civic standards in diocesan and parish governance. Yet these are often absent and/or resisted by some bishops and priests in charge. Making a strong theological case for good governance principles is crucial to their acceptance. That case is based on high levels of overlap between civic and canonical governance. Perhaps the one civic principle seemingly most absent in ecclesial thinking and practice is [transparency](#), though there are some hints in Canon Law.

The relevant ecclesial principles include [subsidiarity](#), highlighted by Pope Francis in his address to the People of God in August 2018, and [stewardship](#), a strong element of the Pope's encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

Another essential principle, synodality, encourages the active participation of all members of the Church in the processes of discernment, reflection, consultation and co-operation at every level of decision-making and mission.

The church must not just talk 'good governance' talk but walk the walk. That is the responsibility of individuals with leadership roles across the church. In dioceses and parishes those individuals exercising formal authority are bishops and priests.

My own experience has taught me that church governance is complex and varied. There are diverse structures and memberships, although, with exceptions like some elected CSSA directors from member agencies, most are appointed and dismissed by bishops or religious superiors. The leadership style of board chairpersons can vary from highly consultative to autocratic. Board members are challenged to be aware of and true to their responsibilities. The senior leadership team, led by the CEO, is crucial to good governance and must be allowed to lead. The board must balance its trust in the management of the CEO with judicious criticism. The same applies to relations with other senior leaders responsible for mission, programs, human resources, finance, audit and risk. The board must independently make it their business to know what is going on deep within the organisation in accordance with good governance principles while not interfering in daily administration.

Within the church the board must support the CEO in their dealings with church hierarchy in a way which is respectful to it without being unduly deferential. The culture of the church, in its day to day practice, is crucial to allowing such good governance to flourish by going beyond mere adherence to church and state rules and regulations.



John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University and Chair of Concerned Catholics Canberra Goulburn. He has submitted an expression of interest in being a PC 2020 delegate from the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn. John will be speaking at a workshop on 'Governance for Mission' at the National Catholic Social Services conference, 26-28 February in Melbourne.

source: <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/>