

MEDIA RELEASE

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Research project to study the future of lay governance in a Synodal church

Australian Catholic University (ACU) theologians will team up with one of the country's leading governance experts to contribute to the ongoing studies into lay leadership models in the Church, including the successful Ministerial Public Juridic Persons.

Associate Professor Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF and Associate Professor Rev. Jamie Calder SJ from ACU's School of Theology will work with award-winning Commissioner Adjunct Professor Susan Pascoe and researchers at Durham University to explore Church governance models that encourage lay leadership. ACU PhD candidate Lawrence Hallinan also joins the research team.

Findings from the research will be used to understand the role of lay leadership in a synodal Church.

In Australia, the most widely adopted lay governance model is the Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (PJPs). Under the Code of Canon Law, a public juridic person (PJP) is the Church's equivalent of a civil corporation, such as dioceses, parishes or religious congregations, established to carry out apostolate works in the name of the Church. Ministerial PJPs on the other hand are the Church authority for Catholic ministries such as schools and healthcare, made up almost entirely of lay people, to future-proof apostolate works established by religious institutes and congregations or clergy.

Australia has 14 Ministerial PJPs which were previously under the stewardship of Religious Institutes. The most well-known include Catholic Healthcare, Edmund Rice Education Australia, and Mercy Partners.

Assoc. Prof. Heaney, who is joint co-lead investigator, said the research would help to improve ongoing formation of lay leaders through a theological lens.

"As a theologian, I'm interested in exploring the theologies of ministry underpinning these emerging forms and how they interweave and support a synodal Church that involves lay people in discernment and decision-taking. This theological lens will help us identify and provide adequate resourcing and formation for such leadership," Assoc. Prof. Heaney said.

Assoc. Prof. Rev. Calder said lay people who agree to take up ministerial leadership positions needed to understand and identify what the Church expected of them.

“This is where mission formation is crucial because formation is not just a professional development course or a weekend retreat, but continually reflecting on the wisdom of Christian tradition and ethics through a process of discernment in ministering to the world in the name of Jesus and God’s Church,” Assoc. Prof. Rev. Calder said.

“For ecclesial or Church leadership, the starting point is to understand that the role of a canonical steward is a vocation or a calling to exercise the ministry of leadership in the Church as service. Such service is an expression of their baptismal dignity.

“We have already begun consultation research on best practice formation models, including through the AMPJP Wisdom Circles of current canonical stewards, with an initial direction for further work on the theological, ecclesial and spiritual dimensions of such formation to equip lay canonical stewards for this arising role as leaders of the Catholic Church.”

The peak body for Australian Ministerial PJPs, the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (AMPJP), will support the project, which is expected to be completed in 2025. AMPJP Council Chair Moira Najdecki said the project would help the peak body to gain a deeper understanding of lay governance in a synodal Church.

“As the numbers of people in religious life diminish, and the capacity of lay people to take on governance roles increases, there is a logical fit to the move to this more co-responsible model of being Church,” Mrs Najdecki said.

Adjunct Professor Pascoe, who became the first lay woman director of Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and has been involved in the planning of the Synod on Synodality, said the project would help the Church understand how to be synodal.

The work of Ministerial PJPs, and the seamless transition of ministries under the care of Religious Institute-led to full responsibility by lay bodies, demonstrated synodality in the Church’s ministerial works, she said.

“The Plenary Council in Australia showed a strong level of respect and cooperation between the bishops, religious and lay people,” Adjunct Professor Pascoe said.

“Our Ministerial PJPs are one reflection of the expression of shared responsibility, and good decision-taking.

“The *Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church* project will provide comparative information for us to consider and share with others in the Church who are looking to enhance lay forms of governance,” Adjunct Professor Pascoe said.

Photo caption (L-R): ACU PhD candidate Lawrie Hallinan, Associate Professor Maeve Heaney VDMF, Adjunct Professor Susan Pascoe and Associate Professor Rev. Jamie Calder SJ at the launch of the Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church research project.

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