

# **COMMUNION & CONSULTATION**

## **PASTORAL COUNCIL GUIDELINES**



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# GUIDELINES FOR PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS

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## **GUIDELINES FOR PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS**

### **1. Why Pastoral Councils?**

A guideline for parish pastoral councils ought to answer two basic questions: first, what do pastors stand to gain by having a council? Second, what do parishioners accomplish by serving on one? Pastors establish councils because they seek practical, wise and prudent advice on pastoral matters. Parishioners want to be of service to the pastor and the parish community. Council members have the satisfaction of doing an important task and contributing to the well-being of the Church. Serving on councils provides them this opportunity.

However, having a council that gives advice is not enough. A pastoral council is useful only to the degree that pastors accept and implement its advice. A council achieves the goal envisioned by the Church when its advice is so wise and good that pastors accept it and implement it. The “synodality” of the Church called for by Pope Francis, in which mutual listening takes place and co-responsibility is affirmed,<sup>1</sup> is demonstrated in the existence of pastoral councils. Bishops throughout the United States strongly support pastoral councils. Most dioceses encourage their establishment and support them through chancery officials.<sup>2</sup> The Archbishop of Los Angeles endorses councils as an effective means for sharing responsibility among the People of God, and likewise asks pastors to establish councils in every parish.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles published its first guideline for parish councils in 1976. With the publication in 1983 of the Code of Canon Law, parish councils began to be known as “pastoral” councils, referring to canon 536.<sup>3</sup> The Vatican II Decree on Bishops recommended pastoral councils at the diocesan level.<sup>4</sup> The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People likewise recommended councils at the parish level to support parish ministries,<sup>5</sup> but did not mention specifically “pastoral” councils. The present guideline will follow the pastoral council model presented in Canon 536 and the Decree on Bishops.

### **2. Nature and Foundations of the Pastoral Council**

Consultation is a long-standing tradition in the Church. Today’s councils reflect an understanding of participation, communion, gifts, and consultation, concepts stemming from at

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,” XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Oct. 3-28, 2018 (Rome: Vatican website), nos. 122-123.

<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Zech, Mary L. Gautier, Robert J. Miller, and Mary E. Bendyna, *Best Practices of Catholic Pastoral and Finance Councils* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Code of Canon Law*, Latin-English Edition, translation prepared under the auspices of the Canon Law Society of America (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Vatican II, “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church,” *Christus Dominus*, October 28, 1965, no. 27, translated by Matthew Dillon, OSB, Edward O’Leary, OP, and Austin Flannery, OP, in Austin P. Flannery, General Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, Preface by John Cardinal Wright (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), p. 580.

<sup>5</sup> Vatican II, “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People,” *Apostolicam actuositatem*, November 18, 1965, no. 26, translated by “Father Finnian, OCSO,” in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 791-2.

least the origins of Christianity. Vatican II formalized consultation at the parish level by recommending councils that have a specific focus. Pastoral councils investigate those things that pertain to the work of pastors, ponder them, and proposal practical conclusions about them.<sup>6</sup> This Vatican II teaching was reinforced in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.<sup>7</sup>

Official Church documents also describe the membership of the council. The pastoral council consists of parishioners whom the pastor consults for their knowledge, competence, or leadership qualities. Through these parishioners, a pastor probes the needs and desires of the parish.<sup>8</sup> The pastor consults the pastoral council to better know his parishioners.<sup>9</sup> Council members contribute by studying and reflecting on pastoral problems and by recommending practical solutions. They can offer practical wisdom, as distinct from the working knowledge of the parish staff. Councilors are chosen for this wisdom and share it with the pastor.

The Church has made a number of statements concerning the purpose of councils. The aim of a council is to make the life and activity of the Church conform ever more closely to the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> Council members offer wise counsel so that the pastor may plan the pastoral program systematically and carry it out effectively.

The word “pastoral” does not simply refer to the topics that the council studies, that is, to “pastoral matters.” It derives from the office of the pastor. The council studies pastoral matters because the pastor, as leader of the parish, requests the council’s help. He initiates and establishes the council. He convenes its meetings. He presides over them as one who loves his people and seeks their greatest good.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Purpose and Function

The pastoral council has its roots in Christian antiquity and in the concepts of collaboration, charism, and the parish as the local church.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is a new creation of Vatican II, and its function is to engage in *pastoral planning*. Councils help pastors plan the parish’s

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<sup>6</sup> Vatican II, “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church,” no. 27, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 580.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Code of Canon Law*, canons 511 and 536. Canon 511 refers to *diocesan* pastoral councils.

<sup>8</sup> Vatican II, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, no. 37, translated by Colman O’Neill, OP, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 394-95.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Code of Canon Law*, canon 529 par. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* I, August 6, 1966, “Apostolic Letter, written *Motu Proprio*, on the implementation of the Decrees *Christus Dominus*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, and *Perfectae Caritatis*,” no. 16, translated from the Latin text in AAS 58 (1966), pp. 757-758, by Austin Flannery, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 601. This Apostolic Letter refers to *diocesan* pastoral councils.

<sup>11</sup> Canons 514, par. 1 and 536, par. 1. Canon 514 refers to *diocesan* pastoral councils.

<sup>12</sup> James A. Coriden and Mark F. Fischer, *Parish Councils: Pastoral and Finance*, no. 1 in the series *CLSA Pastoral Resources* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2016), esp. chap. 1, “Theological Framework for Pastoral Councils.”

pastoral program. Pastoral planning is the shorthand term for the threefold purpose of examination, reflection, and recommendation.<sup>13</sup>

A pastoral council's first task is to examine matters presented to it by the pastor. These matters can be anything that pertains to the pastor's work, including the well-being of the community, the needs of the parish, and matters that will need attention in the future. The pastoral council may help to identify these issues and, at the pastor's invitation, studies them thoroughly.

The principle that the pastor consults does not mean that council members cannot bring up their own concerns. Although the pastor is the one consulting, the council members should have the liberty to express their own opinions.

The council's next task is to consider the matters it has examined, looking beyond facts and figures to discern their meaning and implications. What do facts and figures say about the faith of the parish? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What problems loom on the horizon? When the council considers pastoral matters, it seeks to understand how God is present in the situation. It discerns how God is inviting the parish community to act.

Finally, once the council has examined a situation and pondered, it must make a judgment. It recommends to the pastor what the council believes he should do. The council judges, not what is right for parishes in general, but what is right for this parish in particular. The goal is to keep the parish in conformity with the Gospel.

The word that best describes the work of the pastoral council is *planning*. Planning is a broad term with a range of meanings. Pastors can consult the council about a single issue or invite the members to develop a comprehensive plan.<sup>14</sup> Pastoral planning can take place in many ways, and the Church does not want to hinder the freedom of the pastor to consult as he sees fit. The priests of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles have endorsed and begun to implement pastoral planning.<sup>15</sup> Archbishop Gomez has stressed the importance of councils, in serving the Church's mission of salvation.<sup>16</sup>

The first step in planning is to discern how God is calling an individual parish to fulfill its particular mission. In consulting the council, the pastor asks it to focus on "pastoral matters,"

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<sup>13</sup> The interpretation of the pastoral council's threefold role has been affirmed by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*, August 4, 2002 (Rome: Vatican website), par. 26; and by the Sacred Congregation for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, Apostolorum successores*, February 22, 2004 (Rome: Vatican website), esp. par. 184.

<sup>14</sup> See Dan R. Ebener and Frederick L. Smith, *Strategic Planning: An Interactive Process for Leaders* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2015), and William L. Pickett, *Concise Guide to Pastoral Planning* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Assembly of Priests Follow-up Committee, *Parish Planning* (Los Angeles: Office of Pastoral Councils, 1995). The archdiocese also affirmed collaborative and pastoral planning at the archdiocesan synod of 2003. See Cardinal Roger Mahony, *Gathered and Sent: Documents of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles 2003* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Archbishop José H. Gomez, address to the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council's Annual Interregional Gathering on Feb. 20, 2015, *Angelus News*, March 06, 2015.

that is, matters essential to the parish's mission, activity, and program – anything, in effect, apart from faith, orthodoxy, moral principles or laws of the universal Church.<sup>17</sup> For example, parishioners may consider various aspects of the liturgy, encourage greater hospitality, desire better religious education, propose physical renovations, envision increased parish income, examine the need for more or different social services, and so on. The list of potential parish needs is endless. Councils do pastors a favor by helping them to see what the needs are and to plan to fulfil them.

No parish, however, can do all the things it would like to do. A parish community can only generate so much income, can only draw upon so many volunteers, and can only stretch its staff so thin. Once the parish has identified its needs, it must put them into an order of importance. This is another planning area in which councils can render service. Pastors may ask them to judge which needs are urgent, and which are not.

Next, the council studies how to meet the needs it has identified. The good council learns all it can about the parish situation by consulting parishioners, hearing from experts, and considering various options and their costs.

When the council has sufficiently considered, it makes a prudent recommendation. It recommends what this parish, under this pastor, ought to do. Whether or not the pastor accepts its recommendation, the council has fulfilled its mission.

After the council has presented its conclusions to the pastor, much work remains. For the recommendations of the council to become reality, they must be implemented. The implementation of council recommendations is not, strictly speaking, the work of the council. To be sure, pastors often ask council members to assume this or that responsibility. Council members do often accept them and carry them out. But when they do so, they act as volunteers under the pastor's direction. They are no longer performing the council's work of studying, considering, and recommending. They are carrying out the directives of a pastor who has accepted the council's advice and decided to implement it.

In addition to receiving the council's initial recommendations, the pastor may ask the council to assess other needs. For example, he may ask it to assess how well its recommendations are being implemented. Or, he may ask the council to turn its attention to other parish needs, prioritizing and planning how to meet them. Investigating pastoral matters, pondering them, and making recommendations constitute the entire work of the council.

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<sup>17</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, "Private Letter on 'Pastoral Councils,'" (Circular Letter *Omnes Christifideles*, 1/25/73), no. 9, reprinted in James I. O'Connor, editor, *The Canon Law Digest*, Vol. VII: Officially Published Documents Affecting the Code of Canon Law 1968-1972 (Chicago: Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus, 1975), pp. 280-288. Also published as "Patterns in Local Pastoral Councils" in *Origins* 3:12 (9/13/73): 186-190.

#### **4. Council Operation and Leadership**

Every good council meeting has three essential elements: an agenda, a chairperson and the pastor. All are essential and each must be well prepared.

The agenda is the plan for the meeting. Without an agenda, the meeting would be no more than an unstructured discussion.

The chairperson facilitates the meeting, making it go smoothly and easily, by ensuring that each agenda item is considered appropriately. Under the chairperson, the council achieves its objectives and maintains its cohesiveness.

The pastor — not the chairperson — presides over the meeting.<sup>18</sup> The pastor provides the motive for the meeting by consulting the council. The word “consult” implies, first of all, that the pastor has a question and wants the practical wisdom of parishioners, not just the opinion of his staff. He turns to the council because he cannot answer the question on his own.

The pastor is not the only one, of course, who has questions. Council members may well bring questions of their own to the pastor’s and the council’s attention, questions that the pastor ought to acknowledge.

When the pastor consults the council, he also demonstrates confidence in the members. He is confident that they will help by undertaking the study and reflection he cannot do on his own. A common faith and a desire to serve the parish unite council and pastor. That should be a regular theme of the pastor’s prayer with the council. He is trying to accomplish the mission God has given him. In the course of that mission, a question has arisen. The pastor motivates the council by posing the question and supporting council members in their search for an answer.<sup>19</sup>

The pastor who consults his council implies one thing further. He implies that the question is his own. He asks it because he and the parish have an interest in it. No one else’s answer will suffice unless he, the pastor, is satisfied with it. By consulting the council, he implicitly agrees to pursue the question with them until he has an answer. If dissatisfied with the answer the council gives, the pastor should say so, explain the reason for his dissatisfaction, and ask the council to reexamine the question.

#### **5. Forming the Agenda**

The most important item in any council meeting is a good agenda. An agenda describes in detail what the meeting hopes to accomplish. The pastor, the chairperson, and the immediate circle of council leadership (usually the vice-chairperson and the council secretary) draw up the agenda.

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<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Code of Canon Law*, canon 536, par. 1.

<sup>19</sup> There are many ways in which a pastor can explore a topic, such as inviting parishioners to share their faith, to reflect theologically, to make decisions in a discerning way, and to plan for the future. See Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1995).



It shows the goal of the meeting and the means for accomplishing it. Council members should receive the agenda (and other materials pertinent to the meeting) at least a week in advance so that they can prepare for the meeting. With a good agenda, members know what the meeting will attempt to achieve, and are ready to contribute to it.

At the top of every good agenda should be the date, time, duration, and location of the meeting. The agenda may note that the meeting will set aside time for prayer and for the formation of members. This includes an opportunity for the pastor to reflect on the council's work and its progress regarding the questions it is trying to answer. The agenda should also refer to the previous meeting and approve its published minutes. After that, the agenda should indicate the various topics to be discussed by the council (i.e., its old and new business), and what the council intends to accomplish under each topic. Finally, the agenda should provide an opportunity for the council to evaluate the present meeting and to clarify the time and place of the next one. For each item, a specific amount of time should be allotted.

The heart of every agenda is the list of the items to be discussed and the intentions of the council about them. It is not enough to simply list a topic. The agenda must also explain how the pastor is asking the council to treat it. For example, if the topic is youth gangs in the parish, the agenda should state whether the council is to:

- hear a report about gangs,
- brainstorm about how it can approach the question of gangs,
- refine a proposal about how to consult the parish community,
- take a straw vote about the progress of its investigation,
- debate the merits of two different responses to gangs, or
- finalize its conclusions for the pastor.

Each method requires different preparation. Council members need to know whether they are to listen, brainstorm, refine, take a poll, debate, or conclude. That is what the agenda does. By clearly stating what the council hopes to accomplish, the agenda helps ensure that expectations of the council are realistic and that the members can accomplish the work they set for themselves.

## **6. Investigating a Pastor's Question**

Before the council investigates a pastoral matter, it must understand the nature and scope of the pastor's question. Once the chairperson makes sure that each council member shares the same understanding of the question, the pastor or chairperson invites the council to share its initial impressions and reactions. Any number of proposals or initiatives may emerge, such as suggestions for research, consultation, or the drafting of an initial response. When a common opinion about the first steps emerges, the pastor or chairperson may invite volunteers to undertake them and may clarify initial responsibilities. In later meetings, as the investigation proceeds, planning may call for reports and an orderly discussion of them.

Next, the council ponders the results of the investigation and reflects on it thoroughly. At this stage, the pastor and chairperson ensure that everyone understands the purpose of the

investigation and its relation to the pastor's question. The results of the investigation should be made available to council members, and each should have an opportunity to express an opinion. In the giving and receiving of opinions, more questions will arise. Some can be readily answered; others may require further research.

The final step is to draw conclusions. A conclusion implies that the council has grasped the pastor's question and is prepared to answer it as a cohesive body. Both the pastor and the chairperson must understand the viewpoints of the various members and be able to express the conclusion at which they have arrived. The council helps the pastor form a judgment by bringing forth the question's many dimensions and unifying them.

To be sure, only the most important decisions need be reached by consensus.<sup>20</sup> They should be matters of broad relevance, decisions that must be widely supported to be effective, issues general enough for non-experts to decide. There are many issues for which the search for consensus is unnecessary. But when the council achieves consensus, the pastor can be reasonably certain that there is wisdom to it.<sup>21</sup>

## 7. Membership

A pastoral council should not be too large – only large enough “so that it is able to carry out effectively the work that is committed to it.”<sup>22</sup> Fifteen members or fewer is sufficient.

### Criteria for Selection

Canon Law speaks in very general terms about the members of the pastoral council. They are to be chosen, it says, so as to reflect the wisdom of the entire people of God.<sup>23</sup> Members need the specific gifts of the wise counselor. These gifts are, first of all, the ability to study, investigate, and examine pastoral matters thoroughly. Secondly, wise councilors should have the capacity to reflect widely and the patience to ponder deeply. Finally, council members should be able to

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<sup>20</sup> Consensus is often presented as the goal of councils, and it is preferable to a forced decision which is not widely held. But seeking consensus about every matter may dull the council's energies. “Without realizing it, the group [or council] may elect for decision-making criteria that will maintain the peace, rather than opt for a decision which will be mission-oriented and helpful in accomplishing the mission.” Loughlan Sofield, Rosine Hammett and Carroll Juliano, *Building Community: Christian, Caring, Vital* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1998), p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> The search for wisdom is best described by Mary Benet McKinney, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making* (Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987). Reaching consensus is also described in William J. Rademacher with Marliss Rogers, *The New Practical Guide for Parish Councils* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, “Private Letter on ‘Pastoral Councils,’” no. 7.

<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, *Code of Canon Law*, canon 512, par. 2. This passage refers to diocesan pastoral councils which can be a model for parish pastoral councils.

listen to differing opinions, synthesize various points of view, and discern with others what is best for the parish.<sup>24</sup>

In practical terms, this means that the parish pastoral council ought to include a wide variety of people. It is not a “lay” council, but may include priests, deacons, and religious. Members of the parish staff may belong, but because they advise the pastor on a regular basis, their membership on the council is optional. Members, however, must all be Catholics in good standing with the Church. They must all be committed to a life of prayer, to the mission and ministries of the parish, and to the Church’s understanding of consultation as reflected in this guideline. Finally, they must be willing to participate in continuing education and the council’s group process.

### Representation

The pastoral council is a representative body, not a body of representatives. It reflects the wisdom of the people of God, not constituencies within the parish. Council members should not be chosen because they belong to this or that ministry or parish organization. They should be chosen because they have the gifts necessary for the pastoral council.

At the same time, the pastoral council should include a variety of parishioners because it is a sign of the people of God. Due regard for the diverse communities, social conditions and professions of parishioners, and for the role which they have in the parish, should be shown in choosing council members. That suggests the importance of participation by the entire parish community in the discernment of council members. Widespread participation in the selection of councilors not only draws on the wisdom of parishioners, but avoids any suggestion that the pastoral council is composed only of those who entertain a single point of view. The Church’s official documents state that pastoral councils are to represent the people of God, but not in a legal sense. Rather, council members are representative in that they are a witness or sign of the whole community. They make its wisdom present.<sup>25</sup>

### Selection

How is the parish to find wise councilors? Chapter 10 describes three possible methods of selection. In general, three principles apply. The first is the principle of gifts. It is the belief that every parish has members with the gifts needed for the council ministry, and that parishioners can recognize these gifts. The second is the principle of clear expectations. The more clearly the pastor can explain the work of the council and his expectations for it, the easier it will be to attract suitable councilors. The third principle is that of discernment. The gifts of potential council members should be discerned.

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<sup>24</sup> Vatican II, “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church,” no. 27, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 580. This passage also refers to diocesan pastoral councils.

<sup>25</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, “Private Letter on ‘Pastoral Councils,’” no. 7.

## Gifts.

Serving on the council is a ministry that requires certain gifts. These include, first, a love and good knowledge of the parish. Potential members should have a competence that is widely recognized.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, wisdom and prudence are essential. The mission of a council is to investigate, ponder, and propose practical conclusions about pastoral matters; therefore, the potential council member should have the ability to study and reflect, and to integrate the viewpoints of others. Finally, councilors must have good character. Proven faith, sound morals, and outstanding prudence describe the character of the potential council member.

## Expectations.

Pastors should explain to the parish at large what they want from a council. They need to say what the council's major focus will be. They need to list the kinds of topics the council will explore. They need to say what they hope the council will accomplish. Then they can attract the kind of councilors who can be of most assistance.

Pastors should also describe the commitment they are asking of council members. They should say in advance how often the council will meet and how members will be expected to prepare for meetings. They should state any requirements for in-service training or retreats. The more explicit a pastor can be about his expectations, the better his chances of attracting good council members.

Another expectation is the term of office. Terms may vary from parish to parish, but two- or three-year terms are most common. Staggered terms are a best practice. In other words, not every council member should leave office at the same time, but only a few each year. That ensures continuity in the work of the council. When a pastor leaves the parish, the new pastor decides whether and when to reconvene the council and whether to retain former councilors.

## Discernment.

Discerning who belongs on the council has two aspects. One aspect is popular participation. Councilors should reflect the parish community. For this reason, pastors usually rely on the help of parishioners to select council members. Chapter 10 describes various ways in which parishioners can help the pastor judge who has the gifts for the council ministry.

The second aspect of discernment is that of informed choice. Unless parishioners understand the pastoral council and have a thorough opportunity to judge who is best for the role, the process of choosing may become simply a popularity contest. Parishioners should know that the pastoral council has a specialized role. It requires people with particular talents.

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<sup>26</sup> Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," no. 37, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 394-95.

Selecting from among parishioners who have a gift for service on the council requires time and a genuinely spiritual discernment, discernment involving dialogue and prayer.

## 8. Committees and the Council's Relation to the Parish

Pastoral councils may have a standing executive committee and one or more *ad hoc* committees that are established to carry out a task and disband after the task is complete.

### Executive Committee

The executive or agenda committee is usually composed of the pastor and council officers, i.e., chairperson, vice-chairperson, and secretary. The committee plans the council meeting agenda and informs the council members about it in advance of the meeting. The pastor presides, and the chairperson conducts the meetings, assisted by the vice-chairperson. The secretary keeps the minutes of the council meetings.

As part of the executive committee's role in shaping the agenda, it may receive input from parishioners, who ask that one or more items be placed on the agenda. The committee can respond to a given request by placing the item on the agenda either immediately or at some future time or by informing the parishioner that the item does not belong on the council's agenda. The council may ask the pastor, parish staff, or another parish organization to respond to the item. In either case, the committee should explain its decision to the parishioner.

### Ad Hoc Committees

Pastoral councils commonly appoint committees to help accomplish the council's work of study and reflection. These *ad hoc* committees may undertake a special investigation, do research, take a survey, poll parishioners, or consult experts. The aim of the *ad hoc* committees is to enhance the main work of the council, the work of investigating and pondering an issue.

However, the pastor-- not the council nor its committees--implements the recommendations of the council. When the pastor accepts the council's recommendations, he may establish other committees to implement them. These are parish committees, not committees of the council.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Loughlan Sofield and Brenda Hermann, *Developing the Parish as a Community of Service* (Silver Spring, MD: LeJacq Publishing, 1984), envision that the pastoral council plans for the parish's mission, rather than coordinate a system of standing committees. See also Loughlan Sofield, Rosine Hammett and Carroll Juliano, *Building Community: Christian, Caring, Vital* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1998), and Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano, *Collaborative Ministry* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1987).

For a contrasting view, see Thomas Sweetser and Carol Wisniewski Holden, *Leadership in a Successful Parish* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), who advocate a view of the pastoral council as the coordinator of parish standing committees. Still more recent is Thomas Sweetser and Patricia M. Forster, *Transforming the Parish* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1993).

## Relationship of the Council to the Parish

The parish staff has a working knowledge in catechesis, liturgy, pastoral care, or education, while the council's gift is practical wisdom. To be sure, council members are encouraged to educate themselves in the various fields of theology and pastoral care. They need not be experts, however, to join the council. Pastors turn to the council not for expert opinion, but for the wisdom of the community. Experts can no doubt judge what is good in general and as a rule. But unless they are parishioners, they cannot say with authority what is appropriate for the parish. Councils are meant to aid in that judgment. They can tell, from among the many possible options, what is right.

Parish staff members may sit on the parish council but are not active members. They serve as the need warrants. Parochial vicars and pastoral associates, however, should participate by virtue of their office. They are associates of the pastor who with him implement the pastoral care of the parish.

The pastoral council does not “coordinate” parish committees in the sense of directing them. That role belongs to the pastor. He should make sure that other parish groups (such as the finance council, and other organizations and committees) provide the pastoral council with the information members need to advise him. The council ought to be aware of the activities of other groups.<sup>28</sup>

### **9. Forming a Parish Pastoral Council**

Although most parishes in the United States have a pastoral council, a fair number do not. Some have never had a council. Others once had a council but do not at present. When a pastor desires the kind of focused attention on parish matters that only a council can provide, he needs to know how to begin.

The first step in planning for a council belongs to the pastor. He begins with a desire to consult. He wants a group of trusted and capable parishioners to help him reflect on pastoral matters and offer sound conclusions. His goal is practical wisdom. Through a council, he expects to gain a deeper insight into how the parish can plan its pastoral program thoroughly and carry it out effectively.

Once a pastor recognizes the value of a council, he may want to inquire about how to form one. This guideline has already pointed him toward the principal documents of the Church and toward popular literature about councils. After familiarizing himself with the documents, he may want to draw upon the wisdom of others in organizing a council, such as the parish staff. Finally, he can form a steering committee of parishioners to guide the process of council formation.

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<sup>28</sup> William J. Bausch, *The Hands-On Parish: Reflections and Suggestions for Fostering Community* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989) was the first to advocate that pastoral councils regularly hold meetings of all parish ministers in order to share information. See also William J. Bausch, *The Total Parish Manual* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publication, 1996).

## The Parish Staff

When a pastor decides to establish a council, he should involve the parish staff. The staff will need to understand that councils have a perspective and gifts which complement the work of the parish staff. Councils of non-experts give pastoral matters the benefit of practical investigation and analysis, which may be time-consuming.

Pastors will want to inform and consult their staff members about the content and form of council meetings. What, for example, are the areas in which the parish's pastoral program could benefit from investigation and analysis? What aspects of parish life (such as worship, education, charity, and evangelization) need attention? Parish staffs can help pastors define the topics which councils can then explore. Pastoral councils cannot take the place of a parish staff and dedicated volunteers. But they can help ensure that the parish mission is well thought out and carefully planned.

## The Steering Committee

Once the pastor has decided that he wants a council, and once the staff understands its relation to that future council, then the pastor may establish a Steering Committee. The task of the committee is to steer the process leading to the formation of the council. For this committee, the pastor will want to choose parishioners and staff members who are dedicated to the council idea. The pastor may also want to engage a competent facilitator. The tasks of the Steering Committee are as follows:

- To draft a constitution or foundational document for the council
- To educate parishioners about the purpose of having a pastoral council
- To invite parishioners to participate in the council
- To oversee the selection of council members

To achieve its first task, the Steering Committee must develop a statement of the council's purpose. This will form the basis of a constitution or foundational document about the council. It should state the purpose of councils in general, as expressed in the teachings of the Church. Moreover, it should define when the council meets, the duration of council meetings, and how members are to be chosen. Here an experienced facilitator can ensure that the Steering Committee understands the role and function of the pastoral council. The facilitator can clarify the various ways in which councils are structured, and help the Steering Committee reach practical conclusions to be recommended to the pastor. Deciding these matters is the Steering Committee's first task.

The second and third tasks of the Steering Committee are to educate parishioners about the proposed council and invite their participation. There are many ways to accomplish these tasks, but the most effective is to invite all interested parishioners to one or more open meetings. In the meetings, the pastor and the Steering Committee explain why the pastor wants to establish a council. They may also ask parishioners to suggest topics for the future council's study and reflection. In this way, the Steering Committee members educate parishioners and invite their participation.

The fourth task of the Steering Committee is to oversee the selection of new council members. If a pastor gives parishioners a clear introduction to the importance of consulting, tells them about the kind of people he is trying to recruit for the council, and creates opportunities for them to get to know potential members, then parishioners are well able to help select a new council.

## **10. Three Models for Selecting Council Members**

This final chapter recommends three ways for selecting council members. The first is the so-called “shared wisdom” model. In this model, parishioners learn about the council ministry and, if they feel that they have a vocation to it, they nominate themselves. The second is the “election committee model.” In it, the election committee screens the nominees and proposes the candidates for general election. The third is the “combined model.” It combines the open meetings of the “shared wisdom” model and a small group to screen and select council members from the “election committee” model. All three models educate parishioners thoroughly, invite potential members to discern their gifts, and involve the parish community.

### The Shared Wisdom Model

The essential features of the Shared Wisdom<sup>29</sup> model are:

- Information. Parishioners hear about the ministry of the pastoral council through homilies, parish bulletins, etc.
- Discernment. People who are interested in the ministry attend a series of meetings. The meetings acquaint people with what service on the council requires. There the parishioners can match their own gifts and talents with the needs of the council. This process should not be hurried and should involve conversation, reflection and prayer.
- Self-Nomination and Confirmation. An individual who feels ready for the council ministry needs to test that insight. He or she should consult the pastor or a staff member.
- Selection. Once the discernment of nominees is complete, “the process of final selection can vary according to the experience and expectations of the parish or diocese: election, appointment, or a combination of the two.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Benet McKinney, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-Making* (Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987), p. 81. See also McKinney’s Appendix I, pp. 140-143. Father Michael Parise also recommends a “shared wisdom” model, and reports on it in an article entitled “Forming Your Parish Pastoral Council,” *The Priest* 51:7 (July 1995), pp. 43-47.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



### Election Committee Model

Another popular model of councilor selection involves the establishment of a parish election committee. This model<sup>31</sup> also includes a discernment process, but uses a committee to screen and discern nominees. The committee then proposes a slate of nominees and conducts a general parish election. It involves the following steps:

- Forming the Committee. The Election Committee, which includes the pastor, plans the selection process.
- Preparing the People. The committee informs people about the selection of council members by means of the pulpit, the bulletin, and parish forums.
- Identifying Nominees. The committee agrees on a list of qualifications and identifies potential nominees. They may be parish committee members, parishioners with distinctive skills, or people nominated by other parishioners or by themselves. The committee contacts potential nominees and obtains their consent.
- Orientation of Nominees. The committee requires potential nominees to participate in an orientation session.
- Preparation of a Slate. Once the committee has determined a slate of nominees, it provides parishioners with opportunities to get to know them. It publicizes their résumés and conducts “meet your candidate” sessions.
- Election. Elections may be conducted before or after Sunday liturgies, or ballots may be mailed to registered parishioners.

### The Combined Model

Yet another recommended model combines open parish meetings and discernment by an election committee. Like the shared wisdom model, this approach uses open meetings to let parishioners participate. And like the election committee model, a small team of parishioners screens nominees and conducts orientation sessions. However, unlike the election committee model, the combined model does not include an election. The combined model includes the following features:

- Pulpit Announcements. The pastor (and, in large parishes, the other parish priests) explains at the announcements following Sunday Mass about the Pastoral Council and his expectations for members. He invites the community to write down the name and contact information of parishioners who have the qualities for council membership and drop them in convenient boxes at Church. This process can be extended to two consecutive weekends to inform parishioners and invite greater participation.
- Publications. Special bulletin inserts, newsletters, posters, and electronic communications also publicize the plans for the pastoral council. Nomination forms are provided to nominate a parishioner for council membership.

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<sup>31</sup> William J. Rademacher with Marliiss Rogers, *The New Practical Guide for Parish Councils* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), pp. 120-128.

- Open Meetings. At one or more evenings of prayer, parishioners pray for guidance and support of the new council.
- Election Committee. In parishes with existing councils, a committee of outgoing council members, together with the pastor, reviews the nominations. Each nominee is contacted by phone. Those who are willing to serve attend one or more orientation session for further education about the council and the responsibilities of members. In parishes without councils, an *ad hoc* group or parish staff can contact nominees and orient them to service on the council.
- Orientation for Nominees. The orientation consists of information and a small group process. The pastor expresses his understanding of the pastoral council. The current council chairperson (or another knowledgeable consultant) provides a detailed description of meetings and operation. Participants are invited to state orally and in writing why they want to serve and the skills they could bring to the council ministry.
- Selection of Members. Afterwards, the pastor and the outgoing council members (or an *ad hoc* group) review what they saw and heard at the orientation. They then discern, by means of prayer and discussion, which nominees shall be selected for service on the council.