

**GUIDELINES FOR PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS**  
**REVISION I**  
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**PROCESS FOR PASTORAL COUNCIL FORMATION**  
**RATIONALE FOR ESTABLISHING PARISH**  
**PASTORAL COUNCILS**

As we come to a greater understanding of Vatican Council II's image of Church as People of God, we recognize that we are still far from living up to that image. (1) If the Church is to thrive, everyone is called to holiness, to respond to the challenge of the Gospel: "Go, make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19) Laity is called to active collaboration with pastors, clergy, and religious and one another in order to be pastorally effective as witnesses to God's reign of peace and justice. (2)

How can this be done? It is at the parish level where we, the Christian Faithful, come to understand basic principles of Church teaching handed down through scripture and tradition. The parish is called to be a "definite community" (3) of faith, witnessing to God's reign of peace and justice through the pastoral care of the people. Pastoral care is defined as the ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing in such a way that parishioners and parish communities see that we are united to other communities in the deanery, diocese, country, and world. It is through the parish (4) that we are welcomed into the Christian community. Through our baptismal commitment we are called and committed to be the People of God in word and action.

The Pastoral Council is a parochial structure consisting of representative members of the parish who form one body with the pastor in fulfilling the Church's ministry. The Council is the means to bring life and service to the parish community. This is accomplished by praying, studying, discerning, advising, and by calling forth the gifts of others to ministry in the parish and wider community.

In doing this, the Council becomes a servant leader with the pastor enabling the whole community to respond to our baptismal call to ministry. (5)

**OBJECTIVES OF PASTORAL COUNCIL**

The parish pastoral council has a threefold mission: 1.) to make an inventory of the needs of the parish and the talents available, 2.) to discern who has what gifts, skills or ministry to put at the service of the parish, 3.) to serve as a planning and coordinating body for creating and implementing a realistic pastoral plan that is life-giving to the parish. (6)

As a body of representatives of the People of God in the parish/mission community they seek:

1. To PROVIDE a witness to the parish community of their unity with one another, and with the Pastor.

2. To ASSESS adequately, with the leadership of the Pastor, the spiritual and material situation of the parish community for both present and future.
3. To FOSTER and support a unified vision of the parish through development of a parish mission statement and goals.
4. To DEVELOP A PLAN and ASSURE implementation of that plan for pastoral renewal according to Second Vatican Council and the teaching and discipline of the Church.
5. To COORDINATE all parish activities in accordance with the mission statement and pastoral plan to best serve the spiritual renewal of the people of the parish.
6. To ENCOURAGE all members of the parish to be good stewards in the spiritual and apostolic life of the parish.
7. To PROVIDE a means for constructive dialogue among all members of the parish and between the individual parish community and the community at large.
8. To PROMOTE and COLLABORATE (7) with programs and activities recommended by the Archdiocese.
9. To EVALUATE the parish plan.

### **NATURE AND ROLE OF PASTORAL COUNCIL**

A parish pastoral council is composed of members of the parish who form one body with the pastor. The Christian faithful share their collective wisdom, gained through life experience. They share responsibility with the pastor for the spiritual and material growth and well-being of the parish. The pastoral council is a reflection and planning group which, through processes of both personal and communal Christian formation, prayer, and discernment, helps the parish community to:

1. Be in touch with its identity and values and to be aware of significant trends affecting parish life. (8)
2. Articulate its mission.
3. Establish achievable goals.
4. Evaluate the life of the parish in light of the Gospel.

The Pastoral Council is consultative to the pastor, as the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council and the Presbyteral Council are consultative to the Archbishop. Consultation by its very definition means to be open and seek the wisdom of; ask the advice of a person or group in order to reach consensus decisions.

The consultative process assumes a basic trust grounded in Gospel values. Consultation results in shared responsibility, subsidiarity, and allows for creative application.

To reach consensus decisions, open and free discussion is necessary pertaining to the pastoral life of the parish. Together, the Council seeks a consensus of thought and action (9) as well as “give and take” of ideas until general agreement is reached.

The deliberations and conclusions must be in accord with the Church teaching, law, and archdiocesan policy. Hence it is recommended that the entire membership of the Council avail themselves of opportunities for ongoing education. (10)

The pastor retains the ultimate responsibility within the parish. (11) If the pastor shows within the process that he cannot support the decision, and therefore does not ratify it, he should clearly indicate his reasons to the Council. (12) In decisions where the Council cannot come to consensus on serious issues, help is available through the Office of Pastoral Ministry, i.e. diocesan offices, and appropriate committees. The Council’s decisions and recommendations shall become final and binding only when ratified by the pastor, and shall be implemented thereafter.

### **MEMBERSHIP ON THE PASTORAL COUNCIL**

**Council members must be registered in the parish, have demonstrated a commitment to the parish community, be a practicing Catholic in good standing with Catholic Church, and committed to spiritual growth.** They must commit themselves to skills development as part of the Christian leadership process and be willing to commit the necessary time and energy to offer effective consultation. (13) If these criteria are not met by a council member, the Pastor should to speak to the person and if no change is forthcoming, remove the person for the good of the whole Council.

After duly informing the parish community as to the ministry of the pastoral council, membership will be determined by an appropriate process. (14) A Discernment approach (a method of selection) to Pastoral Councils is the preferred method of selection. Training of Pastoral Council membership should be provided on both the parish and diocesan level at designated times each year. Councils making use of this service should designate the beginning of the terms of office for council members near the time of this training session, which will be held in the Spring and Fall each year. The Pastor may supplement the Council to provide for balanced representation of the parishioners through appointment by him. The number of such appointments may not exceed one-third of the number of members determined by the parish community.

The role of the parochial vicar and deans are distinct from that of staff persons employed by the pastor. It is important that they be present and participate at pastoral council meetings. (*Presbyteral Council, January 9, 2006*)

The Pastoral Council provides consultation and support to the parish staff, (for example: deacons, D.R.E.'s, pastoral associates, etc.). These staff members assist the pastor in the administration of various parish ministries and programs. The staff members should give their opinion if asked, and provide necessary data and information when requested by the Pastoral Council. (*Clarification: "Generally, it was the opinion of the Presbyteral Council, that it can be helpful to have staff in various support roles to the Council, but that they should not be members of the Pastoral Council," Presbyteral Council, January 9, 2006*) The total membership of the Pastoral Council should range between eight [8] and fifteen [15] members. (15)

### **SELECTION OF COUNCIL MEMBERS**

Members shall be selected for terms of not more than three years. No selected member shall serve more than two consecutive terms. After the interim of a term (three years) the member shall be eligible for selection again.

Any vacancy of a selected member shall be filled by the Council with the approval of the Pastor, for the remainder of the unexpired term. Vacancies shall be filled as soon as possible following such vacancy.

Each council shall select from among its membership, a facilitating core and shall determine their specific duties.

The facilitating core shall serve for a term of not more than one year.

Any vacancy in one of the facilitating core shall be filled for the remainder of the term by selection from within the Council at the first meeting following such vacancy.

### **STRUCTURE**

The structure of any Council may vary in detail depending upon the character and population of the parish community. Flexibility and collaboration should be the underlying principles of organization. The Council shall devise the manner in which the areas of ministry shall be provided for. This includes grouping the ongoing ministries of the parish under specific committees. Each council member will be responsible to be a liaison/mentor to one or more committees. He/she facilitates communication between council and committees, and offers guidance and evaluation concerning the fulfillment of the parish mission statement and goals.

The pastor or the representative of the Council has a right to attend meetings of the ongoing ministries or committees.

The Parish Pastoral Council should call for the establishment of those ministries or committees which will assist in the work of the parish. The usual way through which

the Parish Pastoral Council researches data for its deliberations and implements its decisions is through committees. Some committees are standing committees, caring for ongoing needs of the parish such as liturgy and education committees. Other committees are ad hoc, that is, related to specific concerns. Standing committees and their specific responsibilities should be included in the Guidelines.

The Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines should specify the number of times each year the Parish Pastoral Council will meet. The Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines should stress the importance of regularly scheduled meetings so both members and parishioners know when the Parish Pastoral Council meets. It should also specify the position of the Council on the question of open meetings and executive sessions. The number of meetings each year will be determined by the needs of the parish or the amount of work involved in serving the parish well. If a Parish Pastoral Council is uncertain about the number of meetings needed, it can specify a minimum number of meetings each year (e.g., “at least four times each year”), thus providing for a greater number should it be required.

The Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines should express clearly how Guidelines will be amended. Pastoral Council Guidelines need not contain all of the regulations for the working of the Parish Pastoral Council. Amendments can be used for covering details. The Guidelines should include the procedure for the amendment of Council’s Guidelines.

In order to better serve the pastoral councils, a copy of the Mission Statement, Pastoral Plan, and the Pastoral Council Guidelines of the parish should be sent to the Office of Pastoral Ministry. These Guidelines should be reviewed annually by the Pastoral Council in order to reflect on the Council’s mission and ministry. The Pastoral Council will designate a contact person, as liaison to the Office of Pastoral Ministry, who will report any changes in the Pastoral Council Guidelines.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES OF PASTORAL COUNCIL OFFICERS**

### **CHAIRPERSON**

The pastoral council chairperson is someone who can facilitate meetings, foster the talents and skills of others and communicate effectively with the pastoral council, the pastor, the parish staff, and the entire parish. The pastoral council chairperson is a model for other pastoral council members and for all parishioners.

The pastoral council chairperson:

1. Is aware of the tasks and responsibilities of the pastoral council and communicates these to the pastoral council, committees, and parish community.
2. Organizes/coordinates activities and processes of the pastoral council. Develops and maintains an annual pastoral council calendar consistent with the parish calendar.

3. Prepares the meeting agendas in consultation with the pastor and other pastoral council members for publication in the parish bulletin the weekend before the meeting. Submits the agenda to pastoral council members and committee chairpersons at least three days prior to the meeting.
4. Provides formation/education for pastoral council members, utilizing the parish staff and offerings at the deanery and archdiocesan levels.
5. Conducts meetings by assisting the pastoral council members to work together effectively and arrive at appropriate decisions through consensus. Also conducts parish meetings.
6. Facilitates the task of determining priorities and setting goals for programs and activities to be developed with parish guidelines and archdiocesan structures and goals.
7. Monitors implementation of all pastoral council decisions.
8. Ensures that a pastoral council budget is established and communicates budget information to the Administrative Service Committee.
9. Assists the next chairperson in understanding the pastoral council's history, responsibilities, and resources. Transfers all pastoral council materials to the new chairperson.
10. Performs duties consistent with the office as the pastoral council may direct.

### **VICE-CHAIRPERSON**

Basically the pastoral council vice-chairperson:

1. Conducts meetings in the absence of the chairperson.
2. Becomes chairperson in the event of vacancy, with the approval of the Pastor.
3. Performs duties consistent with the office as the chairperson or the pastoral council may direct.

### **SECRETARY**

The pastoral council secretary:

1. Oversees the accurate recording of the minutes of each meeting and sees to it that the minutes and the agenda are made available to the pastoral council members,

- committee chairpersons, and the parish. Provides a condensed report of the meeting for publication in the parish bulletin.
2. Takes attendance at meetings and records absences.
  3. Maintains the official list of all pastoral council standing committee officers and members and their terms, the list of all ad hoc committee chairpersons and members and keeps these lists current with regard to addresses and phone numbers.
  4. Reports to the pastoral council all communication. Handles correspondence for the pastoral council, including agendas, minutes, notification of regular and special meetings, notes of thanks, etc.
  5. Performs such duties consistent with the office as the chairperson of pastoral council may direct.

### **MODEL FOR WRITING GUIDELINES**

The Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines is the document which guides the operation of a particular parish pastoral council. Therefore, it is essential that each parish have a carefully prepared document for its Council. The following information should be included.

1. The Name of the Organization

The proper corporate name of the parish should always be used rather than an abbreviation (e.g., “The Parish Pastoral Council of the Church of Saint John” is to be preferred to “The Parish Pastoral Council of St. John’s Church”)

2. The Council’s Purpose

Here, the focus of the Guidelines is on the Council’s representative nature relative to the parish community in offering counsel to the pastor on matters affecting the pastoral life and ministry of the parish community.

3. Membership

The Guidelines state explicitly how the membership is constituted, and if more than one means is used for establishing its membership, (the proportion of selected members, appointed and/or ex officio members). It should express clearly the term of office of each member. It will also make provision for vacancies by reason of death, resignation, inability to continue in office or some other cause.

4. Facilitating Core

The Guidelines should designate the officers of the Parish Pastoral Council, the manner of their selection, term of office and general responsibilities.

5. Meetings

The Guidelines should specify at least the minimum number of meetings each year and their regularity, as well as the principles governing open meetings as opposed to executive sessions.

6. Committees

The Guidelines should name the standing committees and their responsibilities.

7. Amending the Guidelines

The Guidelines should describe clearly the requirements to be fulfilled to amend the document. For example, amendments may include further information that governs the deliberations of the Council, selection of members, the conducting of meetings, etc. They may also be used for covering details and the procedures.

### **FOOTNOTES**

1. "Call and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity". U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1983.
2. "As sharers of the role of Christ, the Priest, the Prophet, and the King, the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church." (Decree on Apostolate of Laity, No. 10.)
3. Code of Canon Law 515:1 A parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular Church. The pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.
4. Throughout this document, the parish refers to the mission where there is the possibility of having a Council.
5. Code of Canon Law 536:1
6. NOTE: The Office of Pastoral Ministry offers training to prepare Councils to fulfill their mission.
7. NOTE: To collaborate means to work together as a common project or effort, i.e., developing a mission statement or pastoral plan.
8. Documents of the Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution", No. 4.

9. *Christi Fideles Laici*, No. 27: “The Council’s mention of examining and solving pastoral problems ‘by general discussion’ ought to find its adequate and structured development through a more convinced, extensive and decided appreciation for “parish pastoral councils”, on which the synod fathers have rightly insisted.”
  
10. Code of Canon Law 279:1 Even after their ordination to the priesthood clerics are to continue to pursue sacred studies; they are to strive after that solid doctrine which is based upon Sacred Scripture, handed down by their predecessors and commonly accepted by the Church and which is contained especially in the documents of the councils and of the Roman Pontiffs, they are to avoid profane novelties and pseudo-science. 279:2: In accord with prescriptions of particular law, priests are to attend pastoral lectures which are to be held after priestly ordination; at times determined by the same particular law they are also to attend lectures and theological meetings or conferences which afford them opportunities to acquire a fuller knowledge of the sacred sciences and of pastoral methods. 279:3: They are likewise to pursue a knowledge of the other sciences, especially those which are connected with the sacred sciences, particularly insofar as such knowledge contributes to the exercise of pastoral ministry. Canon 231 No. 1 Lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly and to carry it out conscientiously, zealously, and diligently.
  
11. Code of Canon Law 519: The pastor is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him, exercising pastoral care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share; in accord with the norm of law he carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful.
  
12. The New Practical Guide for Parish Councils by William Rademacher, page 78: “In the normal course of events, withholding ratification will be rare. This is especially true if the council uses the discernment/consensus model. If a pastor or lay administrator feels he or she cannot ratify a council decision, he or she needs to explain why to the full council. After hearing the reasons, and after further discussion, the council can, by a new discernment/consensus process, appeal to the appropriate diocesan office or committee to resolve the dispute.”
  
13. Code of Canon Law 512:1 The pastoral council consists of Christian faithful who are in full communion with the Catholic Church; clerics, members of institutes of consecrated life, and especially lay persons, who are designated in a manner determined by the diocesan bishop. 512:2 The Christian faithful who are appointed to the pastoral council are to be so selected that the entire portion of the people of God which constitutes the diocese is truly reflected, with due regard for the diverse regions, social conditions, and professions of the diocese as well as the role which they have in the apostolate, either as individuals or in conjunction with

others. 512:3 No one except Christians of proven faith, good morals, and outstanding prudence are to be appointed to the pastoral council.

14. Four Ways to Build Effective Pastoral Councils, Edited by Mark F. Fischer and Mary Margaret Raley. This book offers ideas that are helpful in establishing Pastoral Councils. Copyright, 2002. Order from Twenty-Third Publications.
15. Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary, ed. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, 1985, page 411. “The determination of the number should be based on the need to fulfill the council’s work of studying pastoral questions effectively, deliberating on them on a collegial manner, and forming practical recommendations.”

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