

Parish Pastoral Council

GUIDELINES ON CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? (Luke 14:28)

We invest time to plan for the things that matter most in our lives. God invites us to care enough about the success of the Church to plan for it likewise. The pastoral council is a consultative group that is charged with prayerfully discerning parish needs, setting pastoral priorities, and empowering people to participate in the mission of Christ.

Efficient and effective councils have clarity of purpose and a plan of operation. In some circumstances council effectiveness and efficiency is aided through the use of a constitution and bylaws. A constitution provides the most visible structure for the council. A constitution forms the most foundational set of laws that govern an organization. A constitution sets out the organizational policies. Bylaws function as something of a procedural commentary and elaborate on constitutional laws to provide for greater efficiency and continuity in practice.

Real effectiveness comes less from doing things right and more from doing the right things.

Productive constitutions and bylaws provide the structure needed for a council to stay focused on doing the right things. The greatest danger with constitutions is that they can become unwieldy, and in some cases, actually obstruct the council's efficiency. There are councils who spent an entire year to achieve little more than revising the constitution. That is both inefficient and ineffective. At such times the structure is not serving the organization, the organization is serving the structure.

What are the essential elements of an effective constitution? These often include: name; function and purpose; membership; selection; officers; committees; meetings; amendments and bylaws; and relations with others both within the parish and beyond. *Proposed sample texts are listed below in italics.* Recommendations are listed in plain text.

ARTICLE I: NAME

The name of this organization is the Parish Pastoral Council for [Your Parish]

ARTICLE II: FUNCTION AND PURPOSE

The pastoral council is a consultative group that is led by the pastor and charged with prayerfully discerning parish needs, setting pastoral priorities, and empowering people to participate in the mission of Christ. It is the responsibility of the pastor to call, convene and preside over the pastoral council. The pastor invites the council to join him in careful investigation, prayerful consideration and consensual

recommendations in service to the parish. This three-fold agenda for parish pastoral councils is derived from the role of the diocesan pastoral council (Decree on Bishops, #27) to accomplish the mission of Christ. Pastoral councils are not legislative bodies. The parish pastoral council is a consultative body that plans and coordinates pastoral matters for the parish under the pastor's leadership.

ARTICLE III: MEMBERSHIP

This section should delineate:

1. Size - The council will have between eight and fifteen members, depending on approach taken or parish size. [See appendices A - C of the diocesan guidelines - web reference at the end of this article]
2. Types of Membership – *There are three types of members: 1) Ex-Officio – including: pastor, pastoral staff, lay trustee, diocesan pastoral council or vicariate representative; 2) Selected - typically three to seven members that are nominated from the congregation; 3) Appointed – members named by the pastor to insure for necessary competencies or the broadest possible representation from the congregation.* This is contingent on the approach taken [See appendices A - C of the diocesan guidelines - web reference at the end of this article]
3. Eligibility - *Eligibility for service is limited to baptized Catholics who are registered with the parish and who are active in support of the parish, supportive of Church teaching and open to prayer, study and dialogue. Once a councilor has served one full three year term they are ineligible to be re-nominated for one year.* Other qualifications can include: working knowledge of the parish, possession of time and energy, ability to listen to people with diverse views, desire to grow in spirit, openness to study, reliability, willingness to empower others for action, and desire to work collaboratively.
4. Term of Service – *All seats will be held for a specified term. It is recommended to use three year terms with staggered replacement to insure continuity. It is also recommended that the officers and committee chairs be held for no more than two years.*
5. Vacancies and Forfeitures – *The seat of any vacancy, of any type (appointed, selected or ex-officio) shall be filled for the remainder of a term by the pastor. Forfeiture of any selected or appointed seats will occur after three absences in any council year. Notification will be provided in writing by the council chairperson after two absences. In exceptional circumstances, the executive committee (pastor, chair, secretary and trustee) may excuse an absent member from a third absence if such a request is made to the executive committee by the councilor in question.*

ARTICLE IV: SELECTION

Choose a method of selection that is most consistent with the purpose of the pastoral council [See appendices A - C of the diocesan guidelines - web reference at the end of this article]. The selection process can be described in bylaws.

In Approach A – The Planning Council: the pastor needs parishioners who are competent in strategic planning, facilitating change and familiar with the people and needs of the parish. It is fitting that some

nominations come from the congregation to insure broad representation. Sometimes a nominating committee is formed to conduct a search for the needed expertise and experience from within the parish.

In Approach B – The Coordinating Council: In this approach representatives are typically nominated by the organizations which they will represent. The final appointment is made by the pastor. If a parish convenes less formally for a simple “community meeting”, all parishioners are welcome and no selection process is necessary.

In Approach C – The Managing Council: the needed expertise may vary depending on the project. In announcing the project under consideration, the pastor can include an invitation to those with particular interest and experience to contact him. The pastor is free to appoint members or accept nominations from the congregation. The pastor or pastoral council can interview all qualified candidates.

In some parishes the pastor prefers a blend of approaches (e.g. Approaches A and B) which can be effective as long efforts are taken to avoid role confusion for council members as well as for other groups within the parish.

Consider the following as norms to insure adequate representation and effective participation:

- Make necessary appointments to the pastoral council for those groups which are under-represented in parish leadership (e.g. youth, region or ethnic minorities).
- Limit eligibility for service to baptized Catholics who are registered and supportive of the parish; active in the practice of their faith; supportive of Church teaching; open to prayer, study and dialogue; and committed to the success of the parish.
- Specify a term of office for each council member (including appointees). Use a three-year term of service with only two years as a committee chair. Stagger replacement (one third of council members) each year to insure for continuity.
- The pastor makes the announcement of selection results to the congregation.
- Once a term is complete, a council member steps down for a full term before being eligible for re-nomination to allow for broad participation and access to leadership for all the baptized.
- The pastor announces selection results to the congregation and arranges for commissioning of the council at a regularly scheduled parish liturgy.
- State limits to any repetition in term of service.

ARTICLE V: OFFICERS

Selection of Chairperson – The pastor presides over the pastoral council. The pastor can name a chairperson or allow one to be selected from among the council membership. Procedures can be delineated in bylaws. One procedure for selecting a chairperson from the council membership would be:

1. *Open the floor to nominations at a regularly scheduled council meeting.*
2. *Allow those nominated to accept or decline the nomination to identify eligible candidates.*

3. *Provide candidates with a brief description of responsibilities and invite them to express their strengths (and weaknesses), along with their vision for the council in service to the pastor and the parish.*
4. *Dismiss candidates and invite the remaining members of the pastoral council to share their impressions in a prayerful discernment of the needs of the council for a set period of time.*
5. *Once the final field of candidates is clear, a blind ballot can be taken. It is the responsibility of the pastor to confirm and report the outcome of the vote.*

This is an opportune time to hear what qualities are most important to the pastor. And because it is essential that the pastor be comfortable with the person who will chair his council, he should have ample opportunity to voice reservations before the selection is made. Under certain circumstances (e.g. after a parish merger) the outcome of the ballot may be kept confidential (e.g. pastor or executive committee eyes only) to avoid divisive interpretations.

Selection of Other Officers (e.g. secretary, co-chair, or liaison to vicariate council)

1. *Open the floor to nominations at a regularly scheduled council meeting.*
2. *Allow those nominated to accept or decline the nomination to identify eligible candidates.*
3. *Provide candidates with a position description and invite them to express their strengths (and weaknesses), along with their vision for the council in service to the pastor and the parish.*
4. *Candidates are dismissed and the remaining members of the pastoral council are given a set period of time to share their impressions in a prayerful discernment of the needs of the council.*
5. *Once the final field of candidates is clear, a blind ballot can be taken. It is the responsibility of the pastor to confirm and report the outcome of the vote.*

At the discretion of the pastor, the officers may constitute an executive committee that is responsible for setting meeting agendas and arranging for the annual selection process.

Because a parish pastoral council is not a legislative body, the duties of the officers do not have to be included in a constitution. However bylaws can provide the members with a sketch of the expectations for various roles. The chairperson helps to develop meeting agendas and insures leadership for all regular plenary meetings. All committee chairpersons report to the council chairperson. A co-chairperson can take an alternating leadership role for meetings and is generally considered a chairperson-in-training for a subsequent year. The secretary submits all minutes for approval, and manages formal correspondence.

ARTICLE VI: COMMITTEES

A council may choose to form standing committees that best correspond to its purpose. [See appendices A - C of the diocesan guidelines - web reference at the end of this article]. Bylaws can describe the following regarding committees: Committee chairs should rotate every two years to insure for greatest possible participation of all parishioners.

In a *Planning Council* the committees are formed around the steps of a planning process – needs assessment, goal setting, implementation, and evaluation.

In a *Coordinating Council*, committees are formed around the major areas of parish life – community, faith formation, stewardship, justice and service, worship. On coordinating councils, all councilors agree to participate in one of the standing committees.

In a *Managing Council*, the project tasks become the organizing principle for the committee structure.

Regardless which committee structure is employed, the committees maintain representation on the council and communicate through regular reports.

Ad hoc committees can be proposed and established at a general meeting for a specific purpose or event. Ad hoc committees are automatically dissolved at the completion of the assigned task.

ARTICLE VII: MEETINGS

Effective, efficient and enjoyable meetings are a hallmark of a healthy and productive council. Again the format and length will often be determined by the specific purpose of the council. Constitutions need say little more about meetings. Bylaws can define some of the following:

Frequency and Style - State the minimum number of meetings per year and their frequency. State conditions for holding an executive session and name the rules that govern open meetings. Generally speaking the executive committee (including: pastor, council chairperson, secretary) establishes the agenda for each meeting based on the particular outcomes desired. If this is defined, it is best to do so in bylaws.

Quorum - If a particular meeting is determined by the pastor to be deliberative (e.g. revision of constitution or bylaws), the establishment of a quorum (presence of two-thirds membership) may be recommended. Otherwise all meetings are consultative and seek a general consensus for their outcome. This is best defined in bylaws.

Record – There is increasing demand for transparency in church deliberations. Responsive councils establish a method for record keeping and publishing meeting reports that insures for transparency and maintains confidentiality when necessary. The most popular reporting methods include:

1. publish written minutes or a meeting summary to committees
2. make a written meeting summary available to interested parishioners
3. post a meeting summary at the parish website
4. publish a meeting summary in the parish newsletter
5. mention important decisions briefly from the pulpit

Access to the Council Agenda and Open Meetings – it is becoming increasingly important to provide all parishioners with access to church decision making. Bylaws can include how parishioners can submit agenda items to the pastoral council. If parishioners are allowed to propose items to the pastoral council for consideration, it is important that they be advised regarding the disposition of the issue that they submitted. Many times a pastoral council secretary will notify the interested parishioner of meeting time when the item in question will be considered so that the interested parishioner can observe if they so desire. Most councils decline to consider a complaint that is unsigned. This procedure can be defined in the bylaws.

Recommendations and Decisions – Most issues that are placed before a pastoral council do not have a technical solution. Technical questions are best addressed by specialists. Pastoral council members are generalists not specialists who tend to deal with issues that do not have an easy answer but that do have broad impact. A process for arriving at recommendations and decisions should take this into account. When some level of consensus is not possible, a matter can be tabled, allowing for further study and the opportunity to consider more alternatives. If this is defined, it is best to do so in bylaws.

ARTICLE VIII: AMENDMENTS AND BYLAWS

State the number of members needed to amend the constitution or its bylaws.

Amendments to the constitution require a three quarters vote by the council. All amendments and bylaws require approval by the pastor. The full text of a proposed amendment along with supportive documentation must be distributed to all council members at least two months prior to the meeting at which the vote will take place.

It is recommended that amendments also be posted appropriately in the parish (website or bulletin board). It is preferred that such amendments be mailed to the physical residence of each council member (though some council members may elect to receive amendments by email).

Bylaws can be temporarily suspended or changed by a two-thirds vote by the council at any regularly scheduled meeting, providing a quorum is established and the pastor's approval is obtained.

ARTICLE IX: RELATIONS WITH OTHERS WITHIN THE PARISH

The parish mission belongs to the parish. The pastor administers the parish and presides over both the pastoral council and the finance council. It is the responsibility of the pastoral council to enable the participation of the entire parish in setting priorities and implementing a parish plan of action. Once the parish has developed a pastoral plan, the pastor consults with the finance council regarding feasibility and funding questions. Pastoral councils collaborate with the parish finance council both for effective planning and in the evaluation of parish programs.

Effective communication is essential to maintain healthy relationships within a parish system.

The following are recommended for inclusion in bylaws:

1. establish a policy regarding ways that parishioners can submit items for council consideration
2. provide parishioners with access to the contact information of parish council members
3. conduct meetings that are open to parishioners who want to observe
4. submit the goals of the pastoral council to the parish for comment or approval
5. host an annual parish meeting at which time parish priorities are discussed and proposal can receive comment
6. obtain committee reports and provide them in advance of council meetings
7. publish written minutes or a meeting summary to committees
8. make a meeting summary available to interested parishioners
9. post a meeting summary at the parish website, or in the parish newsletter
10. mention important decisions briefly from the pulpit

Relationships worth special note:

NON-ORDAINED PASTORAL ADMINISTRATOR - Parishes can sometimes be placed in the care of a non-ordained pastoral administrator who manages the parish day-to-day. This administrator can also be delegated to preside over the pastoral council. This may require a period of reorientation and adjustment. The parish retains its own pastoral and finance council and there are no changes needed in the constitution or bylaws with the exception of noting "or his delegate" whenever the pastor is specifically mentioned.

PARISH STAFF – The pastoral council is charged with supporting the pastor and working alongside his staff in service to the parish. *Staff members are appointed to the pastoral council by the pastor and have an ex-officio (non-voting) role.* Still their expertise and experience is invaluable for council planning.

Role confusion can arise for members of the pastoral council who have other parish involvements beyond membership on the council. In these other involvements they are accountable to the staff person that coordinates the various parish ministries. Pastoral council members acknowledge the technical expertise of professional staff members and collaborate with them. They cooperate in setting parish priorities. They partner with staff in planning for the future. They collaborate in facilitating communication and encouraging the participation of all parishioners in various parish events, ministries and organizations.

OTHER COUNCILS - The diocesan pastoral council and vicariate council representative is a vital communication link and an advocate for cooperation in each parish. Parish finance council and diocesan pastoral council representatives have an ex-officio (non-voting) role on pastoral council. The parish finance council presents an annual report which is reviewed by the pastoral council and sent to the Bishop. See more in article on "Pastoral Council and Finance Council".

ARTICLE X: RELATIONS TO OTHERS BEYOND THE PARISH

Typically the parish pastoral council has little interaction with leaders from another parish. For this reason it is recommended that the pastoral council name a liaison to the vicariate council. This changes when a parish operates in a cooperative cluster, is led by a pastoral administrator or decides to merge. At such times the function of a pastoral council can be affected significantly.

PARISH CLUSTERS - When parishes form a cluster, they still retain their independence. In such relationships, the pastoral councils operate independently though they are more attentive to the plans and activities of the other members in the parish cluster. There is little impact on the constitution or bylaws except for the addition of a representative from the cluster.

PARISH MERGERS - In the case of a planned merger, there are stages in the process which begin with the sharing of a pastor and an increase in inter-parish cooperation. As merger plans develop, a transition team may be formed to coordinate parish activities. The transition team can be granted standing as an ad hoc committee of the pastoral council.

As a merger progresses, there is considerable energy spent on communication and coordination between parishes. A transition team may be formed out of the membership of the respective pastoral councils to help bring the process to completion. The pastor may also reorganize various structures,

policies and procedures in anticipation of the merger to bring them into alignment with each of the respective parishes. This realignment may necessitate amendments to the constitution.

At the completion of a merger, a new pastor is usually assigned. At the discretion of the new pastor, the existing pastoral councils are dissolved. Pastoral councils can serve as a unifying factor during a merger, working together with staff throughout the process to foster cohesion and clarify any misunderstandings that may arise in the process.

For more help with pastoral council development contact the Office of Parish Life at parishlife@buffalodiocese.org or call 716-847-5531.