

PASTORAL COUNCIL AND FINANCE COUNCIL

Pastoral council and finance council are two distinct leadership teams in a parish that collaborate in the service of parish excellence. The diocesan bishop encourages every parish to have a pastoral council, provides guidelines and allows pastors significant flexibility in its operation. Canon law requires the pastor of each parish to assemble a finance council which works within the norms, policies and procedures established by this Diocese.

Some pastoral council members have expressed confusion over what seem to be overlapping functions between the two groups. Despite some notable similarities, these groups are very different in purpose, membership and procedures. Among the similarities both groups are convened by the pastor. Both collaborate with parish staff members in areas of mutual interest. Both are becoming increasingly collaborative and strategic in their policies and practices. Both are attentive to confidentiality, appropriate access and transparency regarding their deliberations. Both function best with clarity of function, accountability, organizational policy, procedural norms, and relationship with other parish organizations. Still there are fundamental differences in the purpose and function of these two parish leadership teams.

DISTINCT IN PURPOSE AND MEMBERSHIP

A 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. This group collaborates in pastoral planning with members of the staff and other ministry leaders including the finance council. In most parishes it is a representative group that advises the pastor on broad matters of spiritual welfare and parish excellence.

The best pastoral councils know that the parish mission belongs to the parish. As a result the pastoral council sees their role as enabling 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.

The parish finance council assists the pastor in administering the material resources and funds of the parish. The finance council provides sound financial advice regarding budget, accurate accounting and compliance with diocesan policies and procedures. The finance council assists the pastor in formulating and managing the parish budget. This group monitors expenditures and may also be asked to assist in various aspects of facility management. On occasion, finance councils can be asked to oversee a capital campaign.

As a result, finance council membership is typically reserved to parishioners who possess the necessary technical expertise in accounting procedures, relevant laws, fundraising, investment, and other related business skills. The scope of responsibility for a finance council is significant even in a relatively small parish. Still, the finance council is an essential partner to the pastoral council and staff in planning parish priorities, determining the feasibility of strategies, considering facility capabilities for events and evaluating program outcomes and sustainability.

DISTINCT IN MEETING AGENDA AND PROCEDURES

Some of the other differences between these two councils are evident simply by viewing the agenda of their respective meetings. Pastoral council meetings usually include time for: prayer, planning, policy recommendations, in-depth discussion or education, consideration of committee reports, team building and evaluation. Canon 212 invites parishioners to respectfully express their needs and to advise the pastor on matters which pertain to the good of the church. Pastoral councils are attentive to the view from the pew. In their efforts to listen deeply, some pastoral councils host open meetings where parishioners can observe, and when appropriate, participate.

The best pastoral councils know that when it comes to significant matters that impact the life of the whole parish or its future vitality, they are not the voice of the faithful. Rather, they are stewards of that voice. In some parishes, parishioners are invited to submit agenda items for council consideration. In such cases, the pastoral council responds in a timely fashion regarding the disposition of any issue brought forward by parishioners. Pastoral councils can notify interested parishioners of the meeting time when an item of interest is being considered. Pastoral councils are also free to invite interested parishioners to attend the meeting and observe if they choose. The best councils are accountable to the pastor and responsive to the congregation.

The pastor, preferably with the assistance of the Finance council, is charged in Canon 1287.2 to render an accounting to the faithful concerning the goods offered by the faithful to the Church in accordance with norms determined by church and civil law. The finance council is required by diocesan guidelines to meet quarterly. For a variety of reasons, including legal restrictions, contractual arrangements and confidentiality, the parish finance council does not enjoy the same freedom to allow open access to its meetings and deliberations. Parish finance councils insure adequate transparency through regular financial reports to the pastoral council and the parish. Their accountability is directly to the pastor who answers to the bishop.

Finance council meeting agendas are more structured and technical than those of pastoral councils. These meetings can include a financial review, budgetary recommendations, consideration of issues related to internal controls, assessment of parish buildings and other assets, as well as the formulation of an annual report. In larger parishes, finance councils accept budget requests from various groups in the parish, prepare a preliminary budget, approve the budget, monitor its administration and submit annual reports. Still, finance council meetings also benefit from prayer, clarity of agenda and regular evaluation of meeting outcomes and the satisfaction of participants.

Both types of councils have significant tasks that are distinct in terms of purpose, membership, procedural norms and accountability. The best pastoral councils are adept at prayerfully considering matters that affect the entire parish and provide the pastor with a broad base of support for plans and policies. The best finance councils support the parish mission, anticipate financial issues, and advise the pastor on business matters that will impact the success of parish priorities and plans. The difference in function justifies a unique membership.

The difference in charter justifies independent accountability. The difference in task justifies differences in meeting agenda and procedures. The Diocese of Buffalo has guidelines for parish pastoral councils ([link](#)) including a new guide for pastoral council constitution and bylaws. The Diocese has significant resources that address the practical questions related to financial governance, reporting and controls which are available by calling 847-5571.

For more about how parishes can best utilize these groups, consult *Best Practices of Catholic Pastoral and Finance Councils* by Charles E Zech, Mary L. Gautier, Robert J. Miller and Mary E. Bendyna, RSM (Our Sunday Visitor, 2010)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Consider the following about your own parish pastoral and finance councils:

Do your pastoral council and finance council understand the distinctiveness of their role in the parish?

Are both councils articulate about the unique and evangelizing mission of the parish?

What procedures will insure effective communication and collaboration between the parish finance council and the parish pastoral council of your parish?

What consistent norms can be adopted to insure cooperation between these two groups?

How can communication be improved?

Are all meetings grounded in a prayer?

Do members regularly evaluate meetings for satisfaction with outcome and process?

by Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life

For more help with pastoral council development, contact: Office of Parish Life at 716-847-5531 or email to: parishlife@buffalodiocese.org