

## Parish Pastoral Councils – Summary

The parish pastoral council is a consultative body within the parish that is convened by the pastor and from whom the pastor seeks advice and counsel in planning for parish vitality. A pastoral council is not a legislative body. It is advisory to the pastor and charged with prayerfully discerning parish needs, setting pastoral priorities, and empowering people to participate in the mission of Christ. This purpose distinguishes the pastoral council from any other ministry or organization within the parish.

In some ways, each parish is unique as is their pastoral council. At the same time there are discernable trends in council development. One of these is a shift in focus:

FROM	TO
coordinating activities .....	articulating vision
voting on issues .....	building consensus
reports and intramural issues .....	planning and goal setting
selected by popularity .....	selected by competence
parliamentary procedures .....	prayerful consideration

The most Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) about parish pastoral councils include:

- What is the mission of the parish?
- What is the purpose of a pastoral council?
- What does a council do?
- What should a council NOT do?
- What are the popular approaches to organizing a pastoral council?
- Why does the pastor consult?
- How much authority does the council have?
- Who does a council represent?
- How does a council get selected?
- What is the relationship between the pastoral and finance councils?

### *What is the mission of the parish?*

A parish does not exist for itself, but for the Mission of Christ. In a word, the parish exists to evangelize. The parish is an intentional community charged with growing in faith, sharing faith and transforming the world in faith. Every parish has a part in Christ's saving mission. Vital parishes are mission-driven. Gathering at the Lord's Table on the Lord's Day forms us into the body of Christ and compels us outward as his

ambassadors of mercy and reconciliation to all. It is from this table of gratitude that we go out to care for the least of God's children.

### *What is the purpose of a parish pastoral council?*

The work of the pastoral council is to consider, plan and recommend ways for the parish to accomplish the mission of Christ. The pastoral council is a strategic organ in the parish that keeps the parish focused on its divine purpose – love God, love God's people, do God's will and lead others to God through Christ. In fostering parish vitality, the pastor involves his council in careful investigation, prayerful consideration and consensual recommendations.

### *What does a parish pastoral council do?*

Most simply, a *parish pastoral council* is a representative group from the *parish* who offer the *pastor counsel*. The logical question is: give counsel about what?

Pastoral councils are not intended to be a management team for the parish. The purview of the pastoral council relates to matters that impact the spiritual vitality of the parish. In this interest, a pastoral council attends to envisioning, planning, coordinating and empowering all the baptized for fuller participation in the life of the Church. This usually takes the form of a long-range plan.

Canon law defines this as a consultative role (Canon #536, see Appendix J for text). It is the responsibility of the pastor to direct these efforts. It is the responsibility of the pastor to convoke the pastoral council, preside over it and determine the structure, approaches and methods to be used.

### *What should a parish pastoral council NOT do?*

- Because pastoral councils are consultative bodies, they are ill-equipped to either legislate or administrate. As a result, they are ill-equipped to: interpret liturgical norms, repair the roof on the church, administer daily parish operations, supervise staff, decide what copier to purchase for the office, establish financial practices, set or enforce employment practices, choose investment portfolios. Decisions like these that require specialized skills or expertise are best left up to the pastor who will consult with relevant experts (e.g. business manager, pastoral staff, finance council, diocesan departments) as appropriate.

### *What are the popular approaches to organizing a pastoral council?*

There are three that are most popular. Each approach can be adapted to local circumstances. Deciding on which approach is best for a given parish will likely take into consideration several factors that may include: particular local needs, the leadership style of the pastor, leadership abilities in the congregation, the cultural groups present in the community as well as the relative strengths and weaknesses of the approach itself. All approaches presume a commitment to collaborative leadership, unity and parish vitality. The approaches are:

1. The *Planning Council* assists the pastor and staff in intentional planning - prayerful discernment of parish priorities, involving parishioners in shared leadership, consensual decision-making and strategic planning.
2. The *Coordinating Council* is a representative body of leaders from all organizations and ministries that meet regularly to share information and coordinate on the most significant activities in the parish. Smaller parishes use a "community meeting" variation of this approach.
3. The *Managing (projects) Council* is a small group of leaders who manage and pursue particular priorities or implement particular projects as directed by the pastor.

No matter which approach is adopted, there are practical matters that are required for effective council development. These include: creating position descriptions, selecting members, providing training, establishing appropriate committee structures, setting meeting agendas, publishing meeting minutes, reporting to the parish community, maintaining inter-parish, vicariate and diocesan linkages, and ensuring the transparency of council proceedings.

### *Why does a pastor spend time consulting?*

The mission of the Church is not reserved to one person or a few. It is through baptism that all have a share in Christ's mission – priest, prophet and king. Consultation enables the active participation of all the baptized in this mission. A wise pastor consults with the trustees, members of the staff and lay leaders of the parish. One essential partner in parish collaboration is the parish pastoral council.

### *How much authority does a pastoral council have?*

Today, clergy, religious and laity are called to lead together as co-workers in the vineyard, sharing in a ministry that is rooted in service to God's Reign. The pastoral council is "authorized" by the pastor. Therefore, pastoral councils are never convened without the pastor or his delegate, because a pastoral council cannot be separated from the pastor anymore than a body can be separated from its head. Paradoxically, councils which exercise the greatest authority are those whose service is collegial, responsible and prayerful.

### *Who does the pastoral council represent?*

The pastoral council represents the entire parish. This includes all cultures, ages and groups within a parish. It includes those who attend Mass occasionally, as well as the core supporters of the parish; those who have been parishioners for fifty years, five years and five months. In all matters, the parish pastoral council is charged with considering the good of the parish as a whole as it seeks to fulfill the Mission of Christ.

It is important that council members understand their role at the parish level, as well as the need to communicate with similar structures at the vicariate and diocesan levels.

### *How are council members selected?*

There are several possible methods of selection. Regardless of which method is used, it is best to do so in a way that is transparent, and inclusive. The pastor always has the right to appoint additional members to insure the broadest representation. And the congregation should always be informed when openings arise or when there is a significant transition of leadership on the pastoral council. Some popular methods of membership selection include: discernment, random selection, nominations, and general election.

### *What is the relationship between the parish pastoral council and the finance council?*

The Code of Canon Law mandates the establishment of a finance council in every parish (Canon #537). Additionally, civil law requires the parish to have five Trustees, two lay members of the parish in addition to the Diocesan Bishop, Vicar General and Pastor. Canon Law recommends the establishment of a pastoral council. Lay Trustees typically serve ex-officio on the parish pastoral council. While a Trustee may serve on the finance council, the Parish Trustee is not part of the finance council solely by virtue of being a Trustee. And while the finance council is distinct from a pastoral council, their roles are complementary. The finance council insures prudence in fiscal management through consultation and participation, while the pastoral council ensures participation and effective planning for the parish as a whole.