

# Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines

## The Mission of the Church

The Church is the living body of Christ in which all share in various and diverse ways the responsibility for the mission given to the Church by the Lord to:

- Worship God in joyous celebration of the Mass and sacraments
- Proclaim the Word of God to all people
- Witness the love and redemptive healing of Christ
- Serve those in need in both Church and society

## The Parish

*"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" (Canon 515).*

Clergy, religious and laity together form a parish, a portion of God's People whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor so that all can continue the mission of Jesus here on earth. The People of God have different gifts, roles and responsibilities, yet all are under one head, Christ Jesus –sisters and brothers in Him.

## Duties of Pastor

A pastor has responsibilities, which are uniquely his arising from his ordination and appointment to the pastorate by the Bishop.

*The pastor (parochus) is the proper pastor (pastor) of the parish entrusted to him, exercising the pastoral care of the community committed to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share, so that for that same community he carries out the functions of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, also with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful, according to the norm of law.(Can. 519)*

When a priest accepts a pastorate, he becomes the appointed leader of the parish, the bond of communion, the designated head, and the father in the faith to this community of believers. He is also called to be a servant of the people. Moreover, he is to be the animator, motivating his people to work together, and at the same time to be the healer, bringing peace and unity to avert division and anger. Consultation with parishioners, as individuals and as a community, is required for a pastor to carry out his duties responsibly.

## Consulation

The Code of Canon Law insists on consultation at every level of decision-making among all God's people. The Code also makes it clear that pastors have certain responsibilities which are theirs alone.

Cardinal Leo Suenens noted that a misinterpretation of the Council has caused some people to believe that the Church is a democracy: *"The Church is not a democracy and not an aristocracy...but a collegial reality."*

On December 30, 1988, Pope John Paul II, referring to the ecclesiology of communion, said, *"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."*

# Role and Function of the Parish Pastoral Councils

Canon Law provides for the formation of Parish Pastoral Councils in Canon 536 #1.

*"In every parish of the diocese, a Pastoral Council shall be established, if the diocesan Bishop, after consulting with the Council of Presbyters, so decides. The pastor presides over the Pastoral Council. The Pastoral Council is composed of members of the congregation together with those of the parish staff who have pastoral care by reason of their office. The Pastoral Council assists in promoting pastoral action in the parish."*

What constitutes parish staff will vary from parish to parish. Pastoral Team members are those who are involved in the day-to-day ministry of the parish. They may be full time, part time, or volunteers. The Pastoral Team generally has its own unique relationship with the pastor as it endeavors to carry out its responsibilities and ministry within the parish.

Pastoral Team members may be invited to attend some pastoral council meetings when their expertise or training may be of assistance to the council. It is recommended that where applicable an assistant pastor, by virtue of office, be a member of the council. Other ex officio members may be included at the discretion of the pastor. However, their presence should not dominate council meetings or stifle the voice of the general membership.

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative body, pastoral in nature, because it strives to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit among God's people in the parish. A Parish Pastoral Council gives its help to the pastor in fostering pastoral activity; it investigates, under the authority of the pastor, all those things which pertain to pastoral works to ponder them, and to propose practical conclusions about them. It is essential that Council meetings occur in the context of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit, so that at all times the common good will prevail.

Specifically, the Parish Pastoral Council's purpose is to enhance the process of:

- ∑ pastoral planning
- ∑ developing pastoral programs
- ∑ improving pastoral services
- ∑ evaluating the pastoral effectiveness of various programs and services

Although the Council is not a body which makes binding decisions, the recommendations of the Pastoral Council are to be taken seriously when grounded in prayer, discernment and communal wisdom.

The pastor presides over the Parish Pastoral Council. The pastor is responsible for the final approval of Council recommendations concerning pastoral planning, programs, and services for the parish, as well as for their implementation. While the pastor is not obliged to follow the recommendations of the Parish Pastoral Council, it is understood that he ought to do so unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. If there is such a reason, the pastor should share this with the Council.

## Parish Pastoral Council Membership

The process used for identifying new council members will vary from parish to parish, but ought to include some opportunity for parishioners to participate. The entire process needs to be permeated with private and public prayer to the Holy Spirit. The intention should be included in the prayers of intercession at each Mass.

Ordinarily, the composition of the Council should be a balance between members:

- Σ nominated and elected by the parish at large
- Σ appointed by the pastor

The number of council members should consist of not less than 6, or more than 15 members. Councilors are to be chosen so as to truly reflect the wisdom of the parish community. When parishioners understand the Council ministry and have an opportunity to discern which parishioners are suited for it, they can contribute enormously to the selection of councilors.

Serving on the council is a ministry to the whole parish. When considering membership on the council, the following criteria should be kept in mind. Potential candidates should be:

- Σ of proven faith,
- Σ with sound morals,
- Σ demonstrating the gifts of wisdom and prudence,
- Σ willing to commit their time, talent and wisdom in a consultative and collaborative manner.

Council members should have the ability to study and reflect prayerfully, and to recognize and respect the viewpoints of others.

Official Church documents state that the Pastoral Councils are to represent the people of God, but not in the legal sense. Rather, council members are representative in that they are a witness or a sign of the whole community. They make its wisdom present. (Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, *Private letter on Pastoral Councils*, # 7).

The Pastoral Council is a representative body rather than a body of representatives. A council member is not a representative for a particular neighborhood, age bracket, special interest group or organization.

Members are required to attend monthly meetings of the council (from September until June). Considering the responsibility entrusted to them, Parish Pastoral Council members are expected to participate in an ongoing formation process.

Ongoing formation at the parish level may include an annual evening of recollection and other prayer experiences. In addition, the diocese will also offer regular presentations on pastoral planning, goal-setting, visioning, conflict resolution and discernment.

## **Meetings/Agenda**

The Parish Pastoral Council Constitution needs to explain how items may be proposed and placed on the agenda. The pastor is the primary selector of the Council's agenda, inasmuch as he is the president. However, any member of the Council may raise items for the agenda. Ordinarily, the Council meets monthly or at least nine times a year for one to two hours.

Minutes should be recorded by the Parish Pastoral Council Secretary and archived as part of the parish permanent record.

## **Terms of Service**

It is recommended that Council members serve a two-year term, renewable once; or one three-year term. Further details regarding operation of the Council should be specified in the Parish Pastoral Council Constitution.

The Council does not deal with acts of administration which are distinct from pastoral policies and planning. Acts of administration concern the daily operations of the parish, which includes the implementation of the pastoral plan and policies, parish programming, budgeting and personnel

matters.

The pastor has the responsibility for these matters and for the staff. Some elements of administration belong to other groups, such as the Parish Finance Council.

Following are some of the pastoral activities which could constitute agenda items for the Parish Pastoral Council:

- instruction in the full range of the faith and catechetical formation
- programs promoting gospel values, including issues of social justice
- responsibilities to people with special needs
- Catholic education of children and young adults
- outreach to alienated Catholics
- evangelization
- programs of sacramental life and preparation
- promotion of Eucharistic devotion
- enhancement of programs for the sacraments of penance and Eucharist
- inculcation of prayer life, especially within families
- effective participation in the liturgy
- methods of acquaintance with parishioners
- the welcoming of newcomers
- home visiting
- efforts at building community
- motivation of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy
- efforts of special care for the sick and dying
- tangible concern for the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, the exiled
- fostering of solid Christian family life
- promotion of the lay apostolate
- strengthening of extra-parochial relations with the bishop, diocesan-pastoral efforts and a worldwide Catholic identity
- special role with parish stewardship activities
- outreach to and inclusion of youth and young adults in the life of the parish

## **The Essential Elements of Parish Life:**

- **Worship**
- **Word**
- **Service**
- **Community**
- **Leadership**
- **Stewardship**
- **Sunday Eucharist**

The essential elements of parish life relate to the basic mission of the parish and will become the foundation of the parish's dialogue and reflection when creating a pastoral plan for the future.

Parish Pastoral Council members are encouraged to learn about these elements, reflect on them in their own experience as a parishioner, and develop strategies and methods to engage the larger community in a reflection around these elements and taking responsibility for their implementation.

## **Vacancy of the Office of the Pastor**

When a parish becomes vacant due to death, resignation, or transfer of the pastor, the Parish Pastoral Council ceases. In the interest of continuity in the parish's work and mission, the new pastor/parochial administrator/parish steward will establish the Parish Pastoral Council anew within

two months of the date of installation.

**Resources:**

The Diocese of Sacramento "Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines"(November 2005)

Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn - Office of Pastoral Planning "The Essential Elements of Parish Life."

"Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council" Mary Ann Gubish and Susan Jenny, S.C. with Arlene McGannon