

## **Diocese of Norwich Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils**

### Introduction

One of the most important concepts to emerge from the Second Vatican Council is the notion of God's people working together to accomplish the "saving mission" of Christ. This concept pervades all the Council documents, but most especially the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the *Decree on the Lay Apostolate* and the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*. As these documents stress, there is "one mission and many ministries" within the Church. Given this, the Church is continually faced with the practical challenge of mobilizing and integrating the ministries in such a way that they work effectively toward the one transcendent end of continuing Christ's "saving mission" on earth.

One way to do so is through the pastoral council. For most people, the parish is the focal point of the Church's sacramental and non-sacramental life, and the point around which much of the Church's work is organized. As such it is a natural setting for carrying out the Council's teachings, a place where God's people can come together and dedicate their energies and talents to the fulfillment of Christ's mission on earth. Although the pastoral council is obviously not the only way this can be done, at present it is one of the more promising and practical means of implementing the Council's vision.

### What is a Pastoral Council?

The Parish Pastoral Council is an advisory and consultative body for the pastor. Its purpose is to promote community, to be a sign and witness of unity, and to assist the pastor in pastoral planning. The council performs its function of pastoral planning by listening to the parish community and formulating broad priorities, goals and policies which articulate and foster the mission of the parish.

The basic requirements for parish pastoral councils in the Diocese of Norwich are:

1. The pastoral council is an advisory and consultative body.
2. Parishes will develop and implement bylaws for the pastoral council. Bylaws will set forth the purpose of the council, its role and function, criteria and expectations for membership, selection procedures, and operational procedures.
3. A majority of the pastoral council will consist of lay persons selected by the parish. In addition, there will be representation from the full-time clergy and professed religious assigned to the parish.
4. A member of the parish finance council will serve on the pastoral council to facilitate communication between the two groups.
5. The pastor presides over the pastoral council and the chairperson conducts the meeting.

## What Councils Do

The council has a responsibility to:

- Prayerfully discern the needs of the parish;
- Formulate a simple mission statement;
- Be aware of needs and priorities of the universal church of the diocesan church and of the local church and community;
- Establish goals and objectives for the parish and plan for implementation;
- Coordinate parish activities to ensure that stated goals and objectives are implemented;
- Serve as a vehicle for constructive dialogue within the parish community;
- Coordinate apostolic activity within the parish;
- Deliberate and act upon its responsibilities in an atmosphere of mutual trust and Christian love;
- Identify and call forth gifts and talents of parish members.

The council, together with the pastor, shares the responsibility for policy decisions that will further the mission of the church in the individual parish. The parish pastoral council is responsible not to itself alone, but to the entire parish community and to the larger church. Its decisions must be in conformity with church teaching, Canon Law, diocesan policy and sound pastoral judgment.

There is a difference between administration and policy making. The council proposes policy in harmony with the parish mission statement and diocesan norms. The pastor and parish staff members are primarily responsible for the implantation of policy in the administration of the parish. The pastor is the chief administrator of the parish and the representative, accountable to the Bishop, of the teaching authority of the church.

The work of the council is primarily that of sharing responsibility for developing policies and setting goals and objectives. The members need skills in problem solving and decision making. In situations demanding decisions regarding major problems where commitments must be made, *consensus* has been found to be the most effective manner of problem solving. Voting sets up a win/lose situation, which reinforces divisions within the group. Consensus allows everyone to have the opportunity to be heard and the proposal to be reshaped as a result. Consensus has been achieved when all members can live with and support the final decision. It takes more time than parliamentary voting, but it results in the growth of the group, in better working relationships and in fuller ownership of decisions.

## Council Bylaws

Each parish will adopt bylaws, within the parameters set by these guidelines, that meet local needs and ensure smooth and effective operations. In each case, the bylaws will contain the following components:

1. Statement of the purpose of the council
2. Description of the council's role and function
3. Description of the composition of the council
  - Number of members  
*Recommendation: 7-18 members*
  - Ex officio members  
*Recommendation: Pastor, parochial vicar(s), deacon, representatives of religious assigned to the parish, representative of parish finance council, representatives of major parish committees*
  - Members at large  
*Recommendation: baptized and confirmed Catholic; registered and active member of the parish; willing to participate in ongoing formation. Expected to participate fully in council deliberations; share information and data regarding the pastoral needs of the community; assist in developing the parish pastoral plan, goals and objectives; communicate effectively with the entire parish*
  - Appointed members  
*Recommendation: include provision for appointment of one or two members by the pastor to ensure balance within the council membership*
4. Provision for council operations
  - Process for selecting members at large and/or appointed members, to include education of the parish about the purpose of the pastoral council; its role and function; qualities desired in council members; expectations of council members (attendance, committee service, length of term, etc.). It should also provide for orientation and discernment by candidates prior to their selection by ballot or other process.
  - Terms of members; length, possibility of reappointment  
*Recommendation: 2-4 year terms, renewable once; Council membership ceases with the change of pastor*
  - Officers
  - Frequency of meetings
  - Standing committees; ad hoc committees
  - Decision making procedures
  - Expectations for attendance; declaring/filling vacancies
  - Provision for parishioner involvement
5. Procedures for amendment of bylaws  
*Recommendation: distribution of proposed amendment(s) with the agenda for the meeting at which the Council is to act on those amendments*

## Summary

Pastoral councils come in many varieties and, as in most organizations, there is no single model or formula that most effectively and efficiently promotes the ideal and purposes of the council. Those who organize the council, however, should keep in mind the duality of its nature. On the one hand, it is intended to serve as an instrument for sharing in Christ's mission, proclaiming His word, building His community, celebrating His liturgy and serving His people. On the other hand, it is to be a collaborative and supportive body sharing with the pastor the responsibility for the material as well as the spiritual well being of the parish. Within its area of competence as an advisory body, the Council is expected to initiate, plan and implement programs for the parish and the community.

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Diocesan Resources: available at [www.norwichdiocese.org](http://www.norwichdiocese.org)

Guidelines for Clustered Parishes  
Guidelines for Yoked Parishes

### Other Resources:

Four Ways to Build More Effective Parish Councils, M. Fischer and Mary Raley, eds.  
23<sup>rd</sup> Publications, 2002.

Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic, Matthew Kelly, Beacon Publishing, 2012.

Tools for Rebuilding, Michael White and Tom Corcoran, Ave Maria Press, 2013.

Rebuilt, Michael White and Tom Corcoran, Ave Maria Press, 2013.

### For further assistance:

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