

Diocesan Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils

Diocese of San Jose, CA

Introduction. Vatican II called on all Catholics to recognize and respond to their vocation to ministry. This call includes an invitation to lay people to participate in Church leadership. “By reason of the knowledge, competence or pre-eminence which they have the laity are empowered -- indeed sometimes obliged -- to manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 37). The Council goes on to advise that structures and institutions for lay leadership in the Church be established. (*Lumen Gentium*, 37)

Embracing the (Second Vatican) Council’s vision and in accord with Canon Law, the Bishop of San Jose mandates that each parish establish consultative bodies to foster pastoral activity and assist in the administration of the goods of the parish.¹ At the parish level these bodies would include, but not be limited to, parish finance councils and parish pastoral councils.

(Taken from “Ecclesiology for Consultative Bodies,” Diocese of San Jose)

The purpose of the pastoral council is to act as stewards of the parish mission and to advise the pastor on practical matters of parish life. The council studies matters brought to its attention, reflects on them thoroughly, evaluates them and draws sound conclusions. The council presents these conclusions to the pastor in the form of recommendations. This threefold task of the council – investigating, considering and recommending conclusions – is called pastoral planning.

The pastoral council:

1. Develops, if one does not already exist, and communicates the parish mission.
2. Develops goals and prioritizes them based on the needs of the parish, the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.
3. Chooses the highest priority goals to focus on for a particular period of time.
4. Works collaboratively with parish groups to develop specific plans to achieve the goals.
5. Publishes and communicates about the plan to the parish on a regular basis.
6. Assists parish organizations to implement these plans.
7. Regularly evaluates results and measures success.

For gathering input and establishing priorities, the council reaches out and listens to parishioners on an ongoing basis, e.g., by holding periodic town hall meetings.

Members. It is recommended that pastoral councils have 8-12 members. Council members should be Catholic, committed to the Eucharist and the Word of God. They should be good listeners, be able to envision the future, be good at negotiation and building consensus, and be attentive to details.

¹ Canons 536 and 537

Council members serve the parish for a term of 2-3 years and can serve a maximum of 2 terms. Terms are staggered so that one-third to one-half of the members is rotated each year.

A nominating committee formed by the pastor/Minister of Parish Life (MPL), consisting of both council members and parishioners at large, will discern a list of people to fill upcoming vacancies, giving consideration to the gifts needed by the council, the person's ability to serve the parish, reflective of the overall composition of the parish, and the key goals the council has identified as priorities.

Council members are selected by a process of prayer and listening known as discernment. It is strongly recommended that any current pastoral council member wishing to serve a second consecutive term participate in the discernment process with the other candidates.

Council Meetings. Council meetings are held approximately monthly. The calendar and agenda of council meetings will be readily available, for example by announcing the meetings in the parish bulletin, or on the parish calendar or web site.

Council meetings are either 1.5 or 2 hours in length and begin with a 15-20 minute period of prayer, for example, reading and reflecting on scripture.

Each year a chairperson will be chosen to facilitate the meetings and another council member will be chosen to serve as the recorder. The chairperson is responsible for the agenda, both its development and its implementation. The recorder's role is to generate an accurate representation of the discussion and the decisions made. It is possible that someone other than a Council member could serve in these roles.

Decisions of the council are reached by consensus. Consensus is a process of decision-making through which a group strives to come to a common understanding and agreement on matters of overall direction and policy which can be supported by all.

Meetings are open for parishioners to attend. With at least a week's notice, a parishioner may request to have an item placed on the agenda (time permitting). Notes of the meeting should be published afterwards.

Additional Resources

A. Discernment process for selecting members

One of the greatest challenges – and greatest benefits – is the choice of pastoral council members. Most often in the past council members were nominated and then elected by the parishioners. In many cases people nominated and voted for people they didn't know very well, but whom they saw often at the parish. Nor did the nominating parishioners have a clear understanding of the role of the council.

Discernment brings the power of prayer and openness to God's Spirit to the process of selection of members. Rather than counting votes, discernment reveals where there is a growing consensus about who is best suited to serve on the pastoral council at a particular time. This process demands open minds, open hearts, and clear information

about what is involved in being a member of the pastoral council. The candidates participate in anywhere from two to four sessions as outlined below.

- 1. Invitation to Potential Pastoral Council Candidates.** A letter is sent by the pastor to individuals who have been identified as potential pastoral council candidates. They have been identified as individuals possessing at least some of the skills needed for the work of the council.

A sample letter follows.

DATE

«FIRSTNAME» «LASTNAME»
«ADDRESS»
«CITY», California «ZIP»

Dear «FIRSTNAME»,

As you know, our Diocesan Pastoral Plan speaks about the importance of lay leadership in our parishes. It speaks specifically about such groups as the Finance Council and the Pastoral Council.

I am writing to you concerning the establishment of a Pastoral Council for our parish. The role of the Pastoral Council is to work collaboratively with me to determine our direction for the future. This parish does not belong to me, as pastor, but to the people of our parish. Important decisions about the life and future of our parish should be made after having received input from the people of the parish.

The first step in this process is to gather a group of people together who are known to have a good and broad knowledge of the people of our parish, people who can see the "big picture" and to seek their help with this discernment. You have been identified as a person who has these qualities.

I would like to invite you to the Information Session which will take place on _____ at _____ pm in _____ (location). This is an information session only. No commitment on your part is required by attending this session.

I would ask further if you would pencil-in the following dates on your calendar: _____ and _____ at _____ (am/pm). Even if you decide not to accept the invitation to become a candidate for the Pastoral Council, your presence at these two sessions will assist us in choosing the members of our council.

Sincerely,

Pastor

- 2. Information Session.** Those who have responded to the invitation to consider council membership first attend a session designed to give them all of the information that they need to enter into their own discernment about their suitability at this time. By attending this meeting the candidates in no way obligate themselves to anything. This session is for information only.

This session is usually facilitated by members of the current pastoral council. An important first step is to have each person in the room introduce themselves and share very briefly why they responded to the invitation to attend the information session.

The pieces of information presented include, but are not necessarily limited to: the purpose of the pastoral council, its role, its functions, the decision-making process used, skills needed at this particular time in the life of the parish, length of term, how many council members are needed at this time, frequency of meetings, time required between meetings.

The prayerful context through which the discernment will take place over the next few sessions is also explained. Time is allotted for questions.

At the conclusion of the information session the candidates are asked to take the next week to pray about whether they might be called to offer themselves as a candidate for the council for the coming term. **Even if some participants discern that they are not being called as a candidate at this time, all participants are asked to return and participate in the prayerful discernment process of the members of the council over the next two to three sessions.**

- 3. Discernment Process.** The process that is described here combines the prayerful discernment of the candidates as well as those other parishioners who have gathered to participate, and a Discernment Committee that has been chosen before-hand. This process and the accompanying prayer service are an adaptation of the process outlined in **Revisioning The Parish Pastoral Council** by Mary Anne Gubish and Susan Jenny, SC (Paulist Press) from the Diocese of Greensburg, PA.

The goal of this session is to narrow down the pool of candidates to a reasonable number. This is determined on a case-by-case basis. For example, Parish A is just beginning its pastoral council and needs 7 members. Fifteen candidates have offered their names. In this part of the discernment process the goal might be to narrow down from 15 to 10.

Parish B already has a pastoral council but due to the staggered terms of its members needs to discern 3 new members. Fifteen candidates have offered their names. In this part of the discernment process the goal might be to narrow down from 15 to 7.

In each case, the Discernment Committee would then interview the 10 (or 7) candidates to see which combination would be the best fit for the parish at this time.

PRAYER FOR DISCERNING PASTORAL COUNCIL MEMBERS

Invitation to Prayer

Leader: Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful

All: And kindle in them the fire of your love.

Leader: Send forth your Holy Spirit and they shall be created

All: And you will renew the face of the earth.

Song

Opening Prayer

Leader: Let us pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit of the living God, and show us your ways. Guide our discernment of the ones who are called to the ministry of pastoral council member. Grant these candidates, and us, the wisdom to know their gifts. Call them to put those gifts at the service of your people. Give them zeal and holy courage to respond generously to your invitation. And grant your grace to all in the parish community as we seek to live out the mission of Jesus. We pray this in his name, who with you and the sustaining Father are one God, forever and ever.

All: Amen.

Reading

Based on the letter of Paul to the Romans (Rm 12)

Now I urge you: do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. For by the grace given to me I tell all of you not to think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think, but to think soberly, each according to the measure of faith that God has apportioned. For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do

not have the same function so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is a leader, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal but be fervent in spirit: the One whom we serve is the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality. Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not be wise in your own estimation. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all.

The word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Reflection

Consider quietly for a few moments and then share with those gathered:

Of all the advice Paul gives us in this reading, what line or phrase seems most significant to you at this time? Why?

DISCERNMENT PROCESS

Those who are being considered to fill the role of council member are asked to address several questions. Respectful listening and continuing prayer to the Spirit mark this time.

Periodically throughout the process all of those in attendance will be asked to identify on a piece of paper the name of one person who they think possesses the needed gifts to serve on the council at this time in the life of the parish.

What follows are some sample questions that can be used in the discernment process for pastoral council members. They are in no particular order.

- *How do you see the role of the Pastoral Council in this parish?*
- *What moved you to offer your gifts to the work of the Pastoral Council?*
- *What gifts and talents would you bring as a member of the Pastoral Council?*

- *What can the Pastoral Council do to empower more people to have an increased sense of ownership and participation in the life of the parish?*
- *What is the greatest stumbling block to moving the parish forward? Why?*
- *What do you think is the greatest need in the parish? Why?*
- *What is your long-term (5-10 year) vision for the parish?*
- *How can the Pastoral Council implement the Diocesan Pastoral Plan within the context of the mission of this parish?*
- *How can the Pastoral Council foster greater communication within the parish?*
- *How should the parish welcome newcomers to participate in the life of the parish?*
- *How can the Pastoral Council foster a sense of stewardship in the parish (time, talent, treasure)?*
- *What can be done to further integrate school families into the life of the parish?*
- *How can the social justice teaching of the Church be integrated into the life of the parish?*
- *In the area of social justice, how can the Council bridge the gap for some between justice and charity?*
- *What would it look like to have youth and young adults exercising an active role in shaping the future of the parish?*
- *What part of the parish mission statement is most challenging to you?*
- *How should the Pastoral Council respond to the ethnic diversity in the parish?*
- *If you become a member of the Pastoral Council, what changes will you make in order to make this your primary ministry?*
- *What experience do you have in developing and/or executing a long range plan?*
- *How will you work toward consensus and the common good?*
- *Is there a burning issue for you? If so, what is it?*
- *What do you think are the key challenges facing the parish, and how would you suggest approaching them?*
- *By what means would you measure the success of the various parish ministries?*

Once the candidate pool has been narrowed down, a final affirmation of consensus is voiced and a closing prayer of blessing and gratitude is offered.

The Discernment Committee then interviews each of the remaining candidates (at another time) and determine which combination would be the best fit for the parish at this time. All of the members of the pastoral council then sign the “Willingness to Serve Form.”

Willingness To Serve
(Date)

I have prayerfully considered the ministry of leadership. I believe I have the understanding and the needed gifts to commit myself to such ministry at _____ Parish. I pledge to do my best to live up to the expectations involved in this ministry: to be a person of prayer, a good listener, enthusiastic about our future as a parish and concerned for the good of all. I agree to serve according to the requirements of Parish Pastoral Council membership.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray:

In gratitude for your presence with us, O Holy Spirit, we bring you thanks and praise.

Now bless these, your servants, as they assume the ministry of leadership among our parishioners. Give them unity, vision, wisdom, and a great love for you and your people. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our model and our shepherd, now and forever.

All: Amen.

B. Consensus process for decision-making

Consensus implies working together as a team. It implies working toward agreement (which is not necessarily the same thing as compromise). Voting connotes winners and losers, individuals lobbying for their position to be the winning position.

By approaching decision-making from the point of view of consensus the members of the pastoral council approach their work with careful and open-hearted listening, leaving their own agendas at the door.

The description that follows was developed in 2005 by Kevin Dincher, Stewardship Development Project Manager at St. Julie Billiard Parish in San Jose.

Decision-making Based in a Process of Consensus and Discernment

Respecting the baptismal grace given to all members of the parish community, making decisions for the life of our community is rooted in the process of consensus and discernment.

Consensus and Discernment

Consensus is a process of decision-making that is built on prayer and is governed by discernment. Discernment is a process of using prayer, study and dialogue to explore possible options in order to make a choice among those options that we believe most fully conforms to the will of God for the community

Consensus does not involve majority rule, and no votes are taken. Conversely, no one can “veto” a decision after consensus has been reached.

The goal of consensus is not compromise. Participants are not asked to negotiate or give something up in order to gain something. Participants are not engaged in competition, and so there are no winners or losers. Rather when it is time for a decision, instead of taking a vote, the group attempts to reach a general agreement opinion. This does not require that each person come to 100% agreement with the decision, but only that each person is able to support the decision that is made.

Steps of a Consensus Process

1. Input: Issues are stated clearly. Background information is presented. Participants are given an opportunity to seek clarification.
2. Discussion: The facilitator introduces the issues and participants are given the opportunity to respond. The facilitator works to keep the discussion on the issues. When most viewpoints have been expressed, the facilitator tests for consensus.
3. Prayer and Reflection: Does what is being proposed support the Gospel? In light of the parish mission statement, will this be good for the entire parish? Can each of us live with this and support this?
4. Review: Summarize the issue, basic background, areas of agreement and disagreement. Provide a statement of the consensus reached. If there is no consensus, continue to discuss problematic areas.

Sometimes reaching consensus can be difficult. If the discussion seems to be “going in circles” the group should drop the matter and return to it later. If there seems to be missing information, then the group needs to research the matter further before trying to complete the consensus process.

If a member of the group finds herself or himself outside the circle of agreement, that person needs to ask:

- Am I considering what is best for all?
- Do I understand all the data presented?
- Have I carefully justified my reasons for disagreeing?
- Can I say, “I don’t agree completely, but I see the validity of your position and I can live with that”?

If after several genuine attempts of listening and dialogue the group cannot come to full agreement, and the person(s) not in agreement with the rest of the group cannot “stand aside” on this issue, the group may agree to allow the leader or chair to make the decision – provided the leader has been present through the deliberations. The group agrees to abide by the decision of the leader.

The Value of Consensus

Using consensus and discernment as a basis for making decisions can seem cumbersome and not geared toward efficiency. But discernment seeks to remain faithful to the fundamental belief that each person has something valuable to offer to the life of the parish. Every person is able to fully, actively and consciously participate in the life of the parish.