

Official Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils

**Guidelines for
Parish Pastoral Councils
Diocese of Rockford**

Originally published
September 23 , 1999

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Introductory Statement

Over the years different models of Parish Pastoral Councils have been found to work successfully in different parishes. Some parishes have changed their approach as a new pastor is assigned to the parish.

These Diocesan Guidelines are meant as an aid to parishes no matter which model or hybrid of models are used for a Pastoral Council. No doubt during the next few years there will be additional changes and strategies that some Pastoral Councils will want to adapt. The Diocese of Rockford will continue to provide assistance to parishes with their Pastoral Councils.

It is important that whoever is reading these guidelines should have read the document entitled *Diocese of Rockford, Parish Pastoral Council Norms*.

1. Diocese of Rockford Directive

Canon 536: #1. After the diocesan bishop has listened to the presbyteral council and if he judges it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish; the pastor presides over it, and through it the Christian faithful, along with those who share in the pastoral care of the parish in virtue of their office, give their help in fostering pastoral activity.

#2. This pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.

In accord with the 1983 code of Canon Law, Bishop Arthur J. O'Neill on October 11, 1986, legislated the Parish Pastoral Councils be established in every parish of the Diocese of Rockford. Originally referred to as "Parish Councils", these new bodies represent a departure from the old brick-and-mortar approach to parish planning and maintenance. They are now more intimately involved with the overall spiritual mission of the parish.

Bishop Thomas G. Doran has affirmed his desire that every parish in the Diocese of Rockford should have a pastoral council.

2. What is a Pastoral Council?

There are different models of pastoral councils presently in use in the United States. The three most widely used are 1. The Council of Ministries; 2. The Comprehensive Planning Model; 3. The Pastoral Instrument Model. Some parishes have a combination of the above models that works well for them.

The Council of Ministries Model plans and coordinates standing committees which then implement the plans. Council membership is selected from the parish's standing committees or by general election. Usually there is a representative for every major organization in the parish (ie. Liturgy Commission, Education Commission, Evangelization Committee, Social Service Committee, etc.) and usually a few members elected at large from the parish. A representative from the Finance Commission may be invited to attend Pastoral Council meetings as a liaison between the two councils. There is more information in the appendix about the Council of Ministries model.

The Comprehensive Planning Model plans for the parish in designated areas such as worship, evangelization, service, stewardship and leadership. Planning is done in such a way so that the parish expresses the diocesan vision in areas in their own way. People become members through participative selection or a discernment process, not popular election. This model relies heavily on prayer and consensus. There is more information in the appendix about the Comprehensive Planning Model.

The Pastoral Instrument Model is seen as an organized advisory group to assist the pastor in carrying out his role as pastor for a particular parish. The pastor establishes a pastoral council because he seeks practical advice on pastoral matters and wants to draw on the wisdom and prudence of selected parishioners. Parishioners serve on a pastoral council for the good of the parish. They are willing to investigate pastoral matters and to reflect on them thoroughly so as to make sound recommendations to the pastor. This model reflects the intention of Vatican II and it gives councilors a clear task and prevents them from getting side-tracked by other agendas.

The Pastoral Instrument Model is the recommended model for parishes wanting to establish a council or for parishes wanting to revitalize floundering councils.

The following guidelines are focused on the Pastoral Instrument Model but have applications to the Ministries Model and the Comprehensive Planning Model as well.

3. The Nature, Purpose and Function of Pastoral Councils

a. Nature of Pastoral Councils

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative body which makes recommendations to the pastor.

Canon 519: The pastor is the proper shepherd of the parish entrusted to him, exercising pastoral care in the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan bishop in whose ministry of Christ he has been called to share; in accord with the norm of law he carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing, with the cooperation of other presbyters or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful.

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative body to the pastor. Pope Paul VI stated that the pastoral council is “to examine and consider all that relates to pastoral work and to offer practical conclusions on these matters, so that the life and activity of the People of God be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel.” (Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* I, August 6, 1966, no. 16, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 601)

b. Purpose of Pastoral Councils

The nature and purpose of pastoral councils are closely linked together. The Church has made a number of statements regarding the purpose of pastoral councils. The aim of the council is to make the life and activity of the parish ever more closely conform to the gospel. (Paul VI, *Ecclesiae Sanctae* I, August 6, 1966, no. 16, in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 601) It assists the parish’s apostolic work, and coordinates various independent lay associations and initiatives. (Vatican II, “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People,” *Apostolicam actuositatem*, November 18, 1965, no 26 , in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 891-2.) The members offer wise counsel so that the pastor plans the pastoral program systematically and carries it out effectively. (Sacred Congregation for Bishops, *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, no. 204, p. 105.)

c. Function of Pastoral Councils

The pastoral council is the organization responsible for creating, reviewing and updating the parish mission statement and the parish plan that guides the parish in its mission. The pastoral council investigates pastoral matters under the leadership of the pastor, ponders them and draws practical conclusions.

4. The Pastoral Council and the Parish

It is important to understand the relationship the pastoral council has with other entities in the parish. The following remarks and guidelines primarily concern The Pastoral Instrument Model for pastoral councils. The pastoral council is a representative body, not a body of representatives. It reflects the wisdom of the People of God, not constituencies within the parish. Council members should not be chosen because they belong to this or that ministry or parish organization. They should be chosen because they have the gifts necessary for the pastoral council.

Unlike the parish staff, the pastoral council is not a group of experts in catechesis, liturgy, pastoral care or education. The council’s gift is practical wisdom. The council is made up of parishioners who have a vested interest in the life and development of the parish and want to help the pastor in this regard. Council members should be encouraged to educate themselves in the various fields of theology and pastoral care. This would help with their consultation and overall understanding of the Church.

Normally, parish staff members are not active members of the council. Parochial vicars and pastoral associates, however, should participate by virtue of their office. They are associates of the pastor who, with him, implement the pastoral care of the parish.

Each Pastoral Council determines the commissions or committees needed for their particular Parish. Commissions or standing committees should be established as necessary for on-going activities in the Parish. Ad-hoc committees can be established for specific tasks. Ad-hoc committees are dissolved when their tasks are completed.

The word “Commission” is used to denote a group which assists the Council by *developing pastoral plans and policies* in a specific area of parish life and then recommending these policies to the Parish Pastoral Council. In order to have direct communication between the Council and Commissions, a liaison person needs to be designated for each Commission.

The word “Committee” is used to denote a group which collaborates with the staff in *implementing plans and policies*. Standing committees deal with on-going areas of responsibility. Ad hoc committees have a specific task and a limited duration of existence.

Some examples of Pastoral Council Commissions and Committees might include:

- Evangelization
- Stewardship
- Education
- Family Life
- Liturgy
- Social Justice
- Spiritual Growth
- Youth Ministry
- Young Adult Ministry
- Mature Adult Ministry

It may be in a parish that not all activities come under the umbrella of the Parish Pastoral Council. The pastor may establish a parish committee (not under the Pastoral Council) to work on specific tasks or goals. Some examples of Parish Committees might include:

- Bingo Committee
- Athletic Committee
- Building Committee
- Welcoming Committee
- New-born Committee
- Funeral Dinner Committee

The pastoral council does not coordinate parish committees in the sense of directing them. That role belongs to the pastor. He should make sure that other parish groups (such as the finance council, and other organizations and committees) provide the pastoral council with the

information members need to advise him. The council ought to be aware of the activities of other groups.

5. Forming a Parish Pastoral Council

The first step is planning for a council belongs to the pastor. He begins with a desire to consult. He wants a group of trusted and capable parishioners to help him reflect on pastoral matters and offer sound conclusions and recommendations. The pastor's goal is practical wisdom. Through a council, he expects to gain a deeper insight into how the parish can plan its pastoral program thoroughly and carry it out effectively.

The formation of a pastoral council should be discussed thoroughly with the parish staff. The staff needs to know what the relationship with the new pastoral council will be. The staff can also be of great help to the pastor in identifying initial aspects of parish life that need attention. (worship, education, evangelization, stewardship, etc.)

Once the pastor has decided what model of council he wants and once the staff understands its relation to that future council, then the pastor should establish a Steering Committee. The task of the committee is to steer the process leading to the formation of the council. The committee recommends to the pastor its practical conclusions about the council. For this committee, the pastor will want to choose parishioners and staff members who are dedicated to the council idea. The pastor engages a competent facilitator. The tasks of the Steering Committee are as follow:

1. To define the purpose of the proposed pastoral council;
2. To educate parishioners about that purpose;
3. To invite parishioners to participate in the council;
4. To oversee the selection of council members;
5. To draft a constitution or foundational document for the council.

The first task is the most difficult part of establishing a pastoral council. The Steering Committee must develop a statement of the council's purpose. This will form the basis of a constitution or foundational document about the council. The statement should state the purpose of councils in general as expressed in the teachings of the Church. Moreover, it should define when the council meets, the duration of council meetings, and how members are to be chosen.

Educating parishioners and inviting their participation in the council can be done by a variety of ways. Bulletin announcements, bulletin inserts and pulpit explanations can help introduce the idea. Mailings to parishioners would be helpful. The most effective way to fully inform parishioners is through the use of town hall meetings. Not everyone will come to a town hall meeting, but those who do are already expressing interest in the idea of a pastoral council.

The fourth task is the selection of council members. The next section addresses this matter and recommends different ways for selecting council members.

The fifth task is to draft a constitution or foundational document for the council. This document should define the purpose and nature of the council for this particular parish. This document should explain the relationships of the council to parish staff, parishioners and organizations in the parish. This document should provide for a method of revising the constitution which will probably want to be done as the council develops and matures.

6. Selecting Council Members

There are different ways to select council members. Serving on a pastoral council should be seen as a ministry in the parish. Potential council members need to know the basic task of the council and the expectations of the pastor. Council members ought to have specific gifts such as the ability to study, reflect on matters, cooperate with other people and reach agreement with other people. The parish should participate in the selection of council members.

There are many ways to put these principles into effect and many ways to select council members. The following three models stress the importance of clear expectations, the discernment of gifts and participation by the community.

a. Shared Wisdom Model

Benedictine Sister Mary Benet McKinney defined the “Shared Wisdom” model. (Mary Benet McKinney, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-Making*, Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing 1987.) The essential features of the model are:

- 1) Information.** Parishioners hear about the ministry of the pastoral council through homilies, parish bulletins, mailings, etc.
- 2) Discernment.** People who are interested in the ministry attend a meeting or a series of meetings. The meetings acquaint people with what service on the council requires. There the parishioners are able to match their own gifts and talents with the needs of the council. This process should not be hurried and should involve conversation, reflection and prayer.
- 3) Self-Nomination and Confirmation.** An individual who feels ready for the council ministry needs to test that insight. He or she should consult the pastor or a staff member.
- 4) Selection.** Once the discernment of nominees is complete, writes Sister Mary Benet, “the process of final selection can vary according to the experience and expectations of the parish or diocese: election, appointment, or a combination of the two.”

