

# Discerning Parish Pastoral Council Members

## Processes from Two Dioceses

### January 2008

#### **Diocese of Joliet**

Discernment is a decision-making process using dialogue and prayer. It is a reflective process where individuals review their gifts in light of the council's (and commission's) work and self-nominate or accept an invitation to step forward. There are two uses for the term discernment as it relates to the council. Discernment describes how members are selected for the council and describes how members make decisions during council meetings. This section will discuss the selection of council members.

Parish-wide voting where names and pictures are posted in the bulletin is discouraged since the average parishioner often does not have enough information to choose according to the needs of the position. Discerning members within the context of a parish assembly, where the role and purpose of the council are defined and individuals step forward or are invited to step forward because of their specific abilities, encourage a richer leadership base, empowering the council to do its work.

A sample discernment process for member selection is outlined below:

*Step One:* At the end of the year, the council hosts a two-fold public meeting: to report the present state of the parish and to select new council (and commission) members. The entire parish community is told that council membership is open for a specified number of new members. Individuals are encouraged to nominate themselves or others. Note: any description about discernment of council members may be relevant to commission membership, depending on how the parish has structured its commissions.

*Step Two:* The state of the parish is presented: the year's strategic pastoral plan accomplishments are explained; the financial status of the parish is presented and the call for new council members is announced.

*Step Three:* Nominations take place and those who accept a nomination to the parish pastoral council are asked to speak on topics such as: the greatest strengths of the parish, the most pressing needs of the parish and the over all well-being of the parish. They may share their philosophy of church and community. Questions are asked and candidates further discuss their beliefs and values.

When there is a large gathering, nominations may take place only after small groups, in rotating sessions, have had a chance to discuss the primary issues existing in the parish life, have provided time for parishioners to get to know each other and have had their voice heard.

*Step Four:* Prayer is offered inviting the wisdom of the group to stay directed toward the highest good of the parish and its mission. Prayer helps participants set aside personality differences and possible self-serving issues.

*Step Five:* Depending on the number of candidates and the complexity of issues involved, there are multiple ways that the deciding stage of discernment happens. Since this stage works toward consensus, the council wants to make sure the group is ready for consensus that enough information has been gathered, that no issues are left unresolved and no questions are left unanswered. The following describe ways that resolution can take place:

1. Candidates talk among themselves and discern who of them will serve and who will drop out.
2. All present are asked through raising a hand or on a paper ballot, to indicate their interest in the candidates. The results are announced publicly. Once interest in the candidates is made public, each candidate discerns whether he or she will accept the voice of those present or whether he or she will contest and, if so, offer reasons why. After adequate discussion, another count may be taken, making that the determining voice.

*Step Six:* The process ends in prayer with an emphasis on celebration and thanksgiving.

Another discernment method is to begin with an informational meeting, posting an invitation in the bulletin as well as inviting parishioners whose names the council have generated. That meeting would be an educational session for those who attend, covering what is involved in council (and commission) leadership, followed by open discussion on what it takes to be a parish leader. Attendees are given a ministry profile describing the role of a council member. After this meeting, interested parishioners come to a second meeting where they discuss their interests and leadership/communication styles with members of all of the commissions and council. Attendees, in dialogue and prayer, select the new members.

### **Archdiocese of Milwaukee**

The process of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee is very similar to the one advocated by the Diocese of Joliet. Here is an outline of the Milwaukee process.

- A. In March of each year the parish is invited to nominate people to the parish pastoral council. People may nominate themselves or others.
- B. A nominating committee of the pastoral council screens the names, making sure the nominees are members of the parish. The committee also asks people who were nominated by others if they are interested in serving on the council. All nominees are asked to attend a training session.

- C. The training session is led by a representative of the Archdiocese. The focus is on the ministry of the pastoral council and how it fits in the parish life. Nominees are free to drop out if they find out that council work would not meet their expectations.
- D. At another time a discernment process is led by the same representative of the Archdiocese. All people nominated for the council, as well as the existing council, attend. The goal is arrive at a group consensus of the three people who would best serve on the pastoral council *and* affirm the nominees who were not selected. This prayerful process contains the following elements.
1. Rich prayer, which leads participants into a spirit of being open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.
  2. A presentation of the current challenges of the parish and issues that the future pastoral council will likely have to address. This includes the responsibilities of council members. The current council members are active in the discussion, helping the nominees understand the challenges. The pastor is present and may add information to the discussion but he should not dominate. the Nominees are asked to identify their personal gifts and how these gifts could be used in the pastoral council.
  3. Nominees are asked to answer the question: “If you were on the pastoral council, in light of the responsibilities, what would you have to give up to serve?” Nominees share their thoughts and talk out the possibilities. One nominee recognized, for example, that he would have to give up much of his considerable involvement in his son’s sports activities.
  4. Nominees are asked to answer a second question: “If you weren’t chosen for the pastoral council, how else could you use your gifts for the parish?” The nominee mentioned above might not be willing to forego his son’s sport activities but he might be willing to serve on an ad hoc committee at certain times of the year.
  5. Conversation and discernment continues until three people are selected for the council. This discernment process tends to weed out single agenda people.