

# **Official Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils**

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

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**Introductory Statement**

- 1. Diocese of Rockford Directive**
- 2. What is a Pastoral Council?**
- 3. The Nature, Purpose and Function of Pastoral Councils**
- 4. The Pastoral Council and the Parish**
- 5. Forming a Pastoral Council**
- 6. Selecting Council Members**
- 7. Pastoral Council Meetings**
- 8. Continuing Education of Council Members**
- 9. Spiritual Growth for Council Members**
- 10. Appendix & References**

## **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.”



## **b. Election Committee Model**

Another popular model of councilor selection involves the establishment of a parish election committee. This model, recommended by Father William Rademacher and Marliiss Rogers, (William J. Rademacher with Marliiss Rogers, *The New Practical Guide for Parish Councils*, Mystic, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 1988) involves the same kind of discernment as the “shared wisdom” model but uses a committee to screen and discern nominees. The committee then proposes a slate of nominees and conducts a general parish election. It involves the following steps.

**1) Forming the Committee.** The Election Committee, which includes the pastor, plans the selection process.

**2) Preparing the People.** The committee informs people about the selection of council members by means of the pulpit, the bulletin and parish forums.

**3) Identifying Nominees.** The committee agrees on a list of qualifications and identifies potential nominees. They are parish committee members, parishioners with distinctive skills, or people nominated by other parishioners or by themselves. The committee contacts potential nominees and obtains their consent.

**4) Orientation of Nominees.** The committee requires potential nominees to participate in an orientation session.

**5) Preparation of a Slate.** Once the committee has determined a slate of nominees, it provides parishioners with opportunities to get to know them. It publicizes their resumes and conducts “meet your candidate” sessions.

**6) Election.** Elections are conducted before or after Sunday liturgies or ballots are mailed to registered parishioners.

## **c. Combined Model**

Yet another recommended model combines open parish meetings and discernment by an election committee. Like the shared wisdom model, this approach uses open meetings to let parishioners participate and like the election committee model, a small team of parishioners screens nominees, conducts orientation sessions and selects the council.

**1) Pulpit Announcements.** The pastor (and, in large parishes, the other parish priests) explains at the announcements following Saturday Evening Mass and Sunday Mass about the Pastoral Council and his expectations for members. He invites the community to write down the name and phone number of parishioners who have the qualities for council membership and drop them in convenient boxes at Church. This process can be extended for two consecutive weekends to inform parishioners and invite greater participation.

**2) Publications.** Special bulletin inserts, newsletters and posters can also publicize the plans for the pastoral council.

**3) Open Meetings.** At one or more evenings of prayer, parishioners pray for guidance and support of the new council.

**4) Election Committee.** In parishes with existing councils, a committee of outgoing council members, together with the pastor, reviews the nominations. Each nominee is contacted by phone. Those who are willing to serve attend one or more orientation sessions for further education about the council and the responsibilities of members. In parishes without councils, an ad hoc group or parish staff can contact nominees and orient them to service on the council.

**5) Orientation for Nominees.** The orientation consists of information and small group process. The pastor expresses his understanding of the pastoral council. The current council chairperson (or another knowledgeable consultant) provides a detailed description of meetings and operation. Participants are invited to state orally and in writing why they want to serve and the skills they could bring to the council ministry.

**6) Selection of Members.** Afterwards, the pastor and the outgoing council members (or an ad hoc group) review what they saw and heard at the orientation. They then discern, by means of prayer and discussion, which nominees shall be selected for service on the council.

## **7. Pastoral Council Meetings**

Essential for successful Pastoral Council Meetings are the pastor, the chairperson and an agenda. The pastor consults the pastoral council and asks for its help. Without the pastor present, there would be no one for the council to advise. The chairperson facilitates the meeting. Without the chairperson, members would not know when to speak and the more talkative members would dominate the meeting. The agenda is the plan for the meeting. Without a good agenda, the meeting would be no more than an unstructured discussion.

### **The Pastor and the Meeting**

The pastor generates the purpose for the meeting. He has a question that he would like help in addressing. He wants the practical wisdom of parishioners, not just the expert opinion of his staff. In using his pastoral council, the pastor implies faith in the members of the council. The pastor and the council are working together to help the parish progress towards its mission and the mission of the Church. The pastor asks the council to focus on "pastoral matters," matters essential to the parish's mission, activity and programs. The council focuses on anything except administration, faith, orthodoxy, moral principles or laws of the universal Church

## **The Facilitator (Chairperson)**

The facilitator is very important to the success of the work of a pastoral council. The facilitator should be someone who has served on the pastoral council and is very familiar with the parish. The facilitator should have positive regard for the pastor and a desire to assist the pastor in his mission in the parish.

For every question that is presented to the pastoral council, there are essentially three steps to be taken: 1) investigating the question; 2) pondering the question; 3) drawing conclusions about the question.

Investigation begins by understanding the question. The chairperson has to make sure that the council understands what the pastor is asking. During the discussion a number of proposals will emerge, proposals needing further investigation. If necessary, suggestions will be given for research, consultation or the drafting of an initial response. In subsequent meetings, as the investigation proceeds, the chairperson solicits reports and facilitates an orderly discussion of them.

The second step involves pondering the question. The facilitator makes sure that everyone on the council understands the question and the information gathered to address the question. Everyone should have an opportunity to express their opinion on the matter.

The final step is to draw conclusions. The council needs to reach agreement on the solution to the question that it wants to recommend to the pastor. On important matters, the council needs to reach a consensus with its recommendation to the pastor.

## **The Agenda**

The agenda for each pastoral council meeting is very important. The agenda is usually set by an executive committee made up of the pastor, the chairperson, the vice-chairperson and the secretary. (May include others if desirable.) The agenda is a document that describes in detail what the meeting expects to accomplish. Council members should receive the agenda and any other pertinent information at least one week before the meeting.

A good agenda would contain the date, time, duration and location of the meeting. The agenda will state that time for prayer and reflection will be part of the meeting. There will be reference to the previous meeting and approval of minutes. The agenda should indicate the various topics to be discussed (old and new business) including the manner by which the topic will be addressed. It is not enough to simply list the topic. The agenda should explain how the council will treat it. Let us say, for example, that the topic is youth ministry. The agenda should state whether the council is to:

- hear a report about youth ministry in general
- listen to a presentation by a member of the Diocesan Youth Ministry Office
- view a video on youth ministry
- brainstorm how it can approach the question of youth ministry
- finalize conclusions and recommendations to the pastor

By clearly stating what the council hopes to accomplish, the agenda helps ensure that the expectations of the council are realistic and that the members can accomplish the work they planned for themselves.

## **8. Continuing Education of Council Members**

Pastoral Council Members should undergo an orientation about Pastoral Councils and the specific council for their parish as soon as they start serving on the council. During their tenure on the council, opportunities for continuing education on topics relevant to serving on a council should be made available. There are many forums for on-going opportunities. The Council Chairperson (or someone appointed to the task) should make councilors aware of opportunities during the year for continuing education.

Following is a list of potential topics that would be beneficial to council members:

Reaching consensus

How does a pastoral council function?

Resources available for pastoral councils

Developing Parish Mission Statements

Indicators of parish vitality

Pastoral Plan - developing, reviewing and updating

Surveying the parish

Structures in the Roman Catholic Church - Vatican, Country, Diocese, Parish

Different Models of Pastoral Councils

Parish Pastoral Council Spirituality

Establishing a New Pastoral Council

Reviving a Pastoral Council

Pastoral Councils in Large Parishes

Pastoral Councils in Small Parishes

One Pastor - Two or More Parishes

Models for selecting members to be on a Pastoral Council

Parish Ministries (Pastoral Associates, Ministry Formation Program, DREs, etc.)

Trends in Contemporary Church Life

Developing a Constitution for the Council

Setting Goals and developing Objectives

Decision-Making (Nitty-Gritty: Delegating; Small Matters: Voting; Larger Matters: Consensus; Problem Solving: Finding Creative Alternatives; Big Matters: Discernment)

## **9. Spiritual Growth for Council Members**

Serving on a Pastoral Council is a ministry. If ministries are not rooted in prayer and reflection, the real spirit and life of the ministry will be lost. The Pastor and Chairperson have an obligation to provide opportunities for spiritual growth for council member. This can be done a variety of ways, among which are evenings of recollection, retreats at the parish or at a retreat house, spiritual growth readings and reflections and spiritual direction.

Meetings should generally include at least 10 minutes of prayer and reflection at the beginning of the meeting. This sets the tone for the pastoral council ministry and provides on-going opportunities for spiritual growth for council members.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

On January 25, 1983, Pope John Paul II promulgated a new Code of Canon Law for the Roman Catholic Church. It marks a major step in the continued implementation of the Second Vatican Council.

The 1983 Code, again reflecting the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, describes a parish as a definite community of the Christian Faithful established on a stable basis within a particular (Diocese) Church (Canon 515).

After the family, the parish is the most important form of community within the diocese. In the parish, Christ's faithful are gathered together into one under the leadership of the pastor, who represents the Bishop among them, to fulfill their Christian mission. Each parish, then, truly represents the diocese and therefore, the Catholic Church throughout the world.

The pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor, under the authority of the Diocesan Bishop (Canon 515). This pastoral care includes the responsibility to preach the Gospel and nourish the Christian Faithful with the message of salvation, to celebrate the sacraments and to lead the parish community in prayer.

In order to foster the unity of pastor and Christ's faithful of the parish in carrying out Christ's mission, the 1983 Code of Canon Law legislates that, after consultation with the Presbyteral Council and in accord with his pastoral judgement, the Diocesan Bishop may direct the establishment of a pastoral council in each parish of the diocese (Canon 536, n.2).

The Parish Pastoral Council is to take its direction from, and be governed by, norms given by the Diocesan Bishop (Canon 536, n.2). The diocesan norms then are to be adapted to the particular circumstances of each parish according to the parish's size and needs.

**Norms Governing  
Parish Pastoral Councils  
in the  
Diocese of Rockford**

- I. The Name of the Structure is the Parish Pastoral Council.**
- II. Parish Pastoral Councils are consultative in nature.**
- III. The Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Finance Council are distinct consultative bodies in the parish.**
- IV. Membership of the Parish Pastoral Council is to be truly representative of the parish.**
- V. The Code of Canon Law prescribes that the pastor presides over the Parish Pastoral Council.**
- VI. The Parish Pastoral Council may establish commissions and/or committees which will directly assist in the work of the parish.**
- VII. Each parish should develop a Constitution which governs the operation of the Parish Pastoral Council.**
- VIII. The Constitution of a Parish Pastoral Council should be presented to the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate for confirmation.**



## **NORM I: The name of the Structure is the Parish Pastoral Council.**

The 1983 Code of Canon Law, Canon 536, designates the parish council as the “Parish Pastoral Council” as a means of describing its broad responsibility. It parallels the Diocesan Pastoral Council, which advises the Diocesan Bishop, the pastor of the Diocesan Church, on matters related to pastoral ministry within the diocese. Because the Parish Pastoral Council participates in responsibility for pastoral ministry within the parish and not just the administration of the parish, its purpose and goals are extensive.

The Parish Pastoral Council should research the needs, the ideas, the hopes, the life and activity of the people of God, so that the whole parish community can effectively carry out the mission of the parish and fully participate in the ongoing conversation that is central to its life.

The Parish Pastoral Council should constantly evaluate the parish in its conformity to the Gospel and those constitutive elements of the Gospel which call for understanding the implications of justice. In this sense, the Parish Pastoral Council shares in the decision-making process which assists the pastor in carrying out the leadership role that is his within the parish.

## **NORM II: Parish Pastoral Councils are consultative in nature.**

Canon 515 describes a parish as a definite community of the Christian Faithful established on a stable basis within the Diocesan Church, with the pastoral care of the parish entrusted to a pastor.

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative body (Canon 536, n.2) by which the Christian faithful of a parish, together with those who have pastoral authority in the parish, “give their help in fostering pastoral activity” (Canon 536, n.1). Its work is to be informed and inspired by the vision of the Church, exemplified in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The ways by which it fulfills its shared responsibility are:

1. The spiritual enrichment and growth of its members.
2. The study of the Christian life of the People of God with special attention to their Christian vision, needs and hopes.
3. The discernment of the relationship of the pastoral activity of the parish to the legitimate needs and hope of the parish community.
4. The help in establishing priorities among the various aspects of the pastoral activity of the parish.
5. The formation of policy and the development of programs of pastoral activity.

The clear distinction between policy formation (the proper work of the Parish Pastoral Council) and administration (the proper work of the pastor and parish staff) should be maintained. At the same time, members of the parish staff should offer to the pastoral council their knowledge and judgement regarding questions under discussion.