

1. Introduction

Why Pastoral Councils?

A guideline for parish pastoral councils ought to answer two basic questions: first, what do pastors stand to gain by having a council? And second, what do parishioners accomplish by serving on one? Pastors establish councils because they want to awaken parishioners to their responsibilities for the parish and because they need the assistance of parishioners in reflecting on pastoral issues and needs and planning how to meet them. They believe that God's Spirit speaks through their people. They work with councils because they want to know what is wise and prudent. Experts can say what is best in most parishes and as a matter of general principle. But they cannot judge what is best for a particular parish, here and now, because they are not a part of it. Councils offer what no expert can offer: a considered reflection on pastoral issues by those who are part of the parish, and a locally informed judgement about what is right for that parish. That is the pastor's primary motive for having a council.

Parishioners want to serve on councils in order to advise the pastor wisely and prudently. Every leader needs good counsel. Recommendations developed by a pastoral council will be good to the degree that the council reaches its goal. That goal is to investigate pastoral matters, reflect on them thoroughly and, in the light of these investigations and reflection, to work with the Pastor to plan for the future. At times, as part of diocesan planning, pastoral councils may be asked to consider particular issues. However in doing this they will be working out of their knowledge of the local community and will assist the pastor to apply these matters in an appropriate way to their own community. Council members believe that God's Spirit is present in their community. They study the pastoral situation so as to help the parish see it more clearly. They have the satisfaction of doing an important task which contributes to the well-being of the Church. That is their primary motive for service.

This guideline was developed with pastors and council members in mind. It contains practical suggestions to enhance the value of councils. The main value of councils, we said, is to offer the pastor wise and prudent advice. The advice comes from parishioners able to study a pastoral matter thoroughly, reflect on it deeply, and make practical recommendations for the present and the future. This guideline aims to make their task easier. It does so by laying out the basic principles of the pastoral council. Pastors and council members will find in this guideline the Church's reasons for establishing councils and practical advice to bring them to fruition.

2. Called to Serve

The Nature and Foundations of the Parish Pastoral Council

How did parish pastoral councils begin? Why does the Church encourage them? The answer to these questions takes us back to the Second Vatican Council of 1962 - 1965. Pastoral

councils were first recommended in the documents of Vatican II, and that is where we must start.

The origins of pastoral councils, however, are far older. Councils reflect the Church's understanding of participation, communion, gifts, and consultation. These concepts stem from the origins of Christianity. By the end of this section, readers will know about both the immediate origins of the parish pastoral council, as well as its roots in Christian tradition.

Establishment and Nature

Vatican II highly recommended councils as a means to promote pastoral activity. The bishops of Vatican II said that pastoral councils investigate those things which pertain to pastoral works, reflect on them, and propose practical conclusions about them. This teaching of Vatican II was reinforced in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. The Bishop of Broken Bay endorses councils as an effective means for sharing responsibility among the People of God. He encourages pastors to establish councils in every parish.

The Church's official documents give us a number of guiding points about the pastoral council. They begin by telling us about its membership. The pastoral council consists of parishioners whom the pastor consults by reason of their knowledge, competence, or pre-eminence. Through them, a pastor probes the needs and desires of the parish. The pastor consults them in order to know his people more profoundly. Council members contribute by thoroughly studying and reflecting on pastoral problems and by recommending practical solutions. They bring the practical wisdom of parishioners, as distinct from the expert opinion of the parish staff. Councillors are chosen for this wisdom, wisdom they share with the pastor.

What about the purpose of councils? On this point, the Church has made a number of statements. The aim of the council is to make the life and activity of the parish ever more closely conform to the gospel. It assists the parish's apostolic work, and may coordinate various independent lay associations and initiatives. The members offer wise counsel and assist the Pastor in planning a pastoral program which he is able to implement knowing that it reflects the wisdom of the local community. The word "pastoral" does not simply refer to the topics that the council studies, that is, to "pastoral matters." It also refers to the person of the pastor himself. It is he who initiates and establishes the council, convenes and presides over it, and works with it as one who loves the people and seeks their greatest good.

In summary, the pastoral council is a body of chosen people, studious and thoughtful, reflective of the local community, who work with the pastor to reflect on the pastoral situation and draw from their reflections recommendations as to how the pastoral situation may best be served.

Roots in Tradition

These teachings about pastoral councils reflect fundamental ideas from the Church's tradition. Although the explicit teachings about councils are recent, they are rooted in the beginnings of Christianity. Four particular ideas from the earliest traditions underlie the teaching about councils. They are the ideas of communion, participation, gifts, and consultation.

The first idea, that of communion, brings us to the heart of Christian identity. Christians are chosen and united by God. The First Letter of Peter says this about the Christian communion: "You are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart' to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (2:9). All

Christians form one people. God has called us together. Our communion is the foundation of our efforts on behalf of the Church.

That brings us to the second idea, that of participation. In the Christian communion, everyone participates. Christians are participant-members of the Body of Christ. St. Paul taught, "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many are one body, so also Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). Baptism commissions every Christian to carry on the saving mission of Christ. Every Christian belongs. Every Christian has a part to play. All of us are to work together as partners in bringing forth God's kingdom.

The third fundamental idea from Christian tradition is the idea of gifts. As members of the Body of Christ, every Christian has a gift from God's Spirit, given for the benefit of the Church. St. Paul taught that "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone" (1 Cor. 12:4). Not everyone has the same gift. Pastors have the gift of leadership. They seek council members with the gifts of wisdom and prudence. All of us serve the Church according to the gifts we have been given.

The final idea is that of consultation. From the earliest days of the Church, the leaders would take counsel with the community. The apostles and the elders met at the Council of Jerusalem, for example, to discuss whether gentile Christians needed to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15, Galatians 2). No decision was made until all parties, including Paul and Barnabas, had had a chance to speak. Consultation ensured that the leaders received good advice and that the community remained united. What was important in the first century is no less important today. Pastors consult parishioners in order to receive wise counsel and to hold the community together.

The four ideas of communion, participation, gifts, and consultation are ancient. But they have a relevance for pastoral councils today. Vatican II recommended the establishment of councils in 1965. That original recommendation has been amplified in later official documents. The pastoral council, a new creation of the Vatican II Church, has its roots in Christian antiquity.

3. Purpose and Function

The Council as a Pastoral Planning Body

The foundations of pastoral councils rest in the Church's official documents and in the teachings from Christian antiquity about communion, participation, gifts, and consultation. But what do pastoral councils actually do? The answer, in a phrase, is pastoral planning. Councils help pastors plan the parish's pastoral program. In what follows, we will look at the purpose of councils, their particular functions, and how pastoral planning builds consensus and helps the parish discern the future which God offers.

Purpose

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 may be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel." When we look at this definition, we see that it has three parts. Let us look at each of the three parts in detail.

The first part of the definition states that councils examine pastoral matters. The term "pastoral matters" is very broad. It means, in short, whatever pertains to the work of the pastor, including the well-being of the community, the needs of the parish, and matters that will need attention in the future. The pastoral council identifies these issues and studies them thoroughly.

The next part of the definition states that the council "considers" the matters it has examined. Its aim is to get to the truth of the matter. No council will be satisfied with a dry recitation of facts and figures about the parish. It wants to know what they mean. What do facts and figures say about the faith of the parish? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What problems loom on the horizon? When the council "considers" pastoral matters, it seeks to discern how God is present in the situation. It prays to discover how God invites the parish community to act.

The final part of the definition has to do with practical conclusions. The council has investigated a situation and pondered it. It now has to make a judgment. It has to recommend to pastors what the council believes they should do. It has to judge, not what is right for parishes in general, but what is right for this parish in particular. The goal is to bring the parish more into conformity with the Gospel. The three aspects of Pope Paul's definition express the purposes of the council: to examine, to consider, and to draw conclusions.

The Functions of Planning

The word which best describes the work of the pastoral council is planning. In an early document from the 1970s, the Vatican stated that the study and reflection of the pastoral council enables the community "to plan its pastoral program systematically and to fulfil it effectively."

Pastoral planning can take place in many ways, and the Church does not want to hinder the freedom of the pastor to consult as he sees fit. But with that caution, we can readily sketch the basic functions of planning.

Planning begins with an eye toward the future. Every parish has a mission, that is, an end or goal with which God has entrusted it. And while every parish can be said to embrace the same goal of gathering to itself a faithful people, no parish will achieve this in the exactly the same way. So a first step in planning, and the first function of a pastoral council, is to discern how God is calling the parish to fulfil its mission. Every council recommendation should be made with this mission in mind. How the parish can achieve its mission--that is the preferred future which the council envisions.

How does the pastoral council develop a parish vision and clarify the mission of the parish? It begins by identifying the parish's pastoral needs. Every parish wants to develop the gifts which God has given. This desire unleashes the parish imagination. Parishes begin to imagine themselves with a more festive liturgy, greater hospitality, better religious education, physical renovations, an outreach to seniors, greater income, more social services, and so on. The list of potential parish needs is endless. Councils do pastors a favour by helping them to see what the needs are.

No parish, however, can do all the things it would like to do. A parish community can only generate so much income, can only draw upon so many volunteers, and can only stretch its

staff so thin. Once the parish has identified its needs, it must put them into an order of importance.

This is another planning area in which councils can render service. They can help pastors see which needs are urgent, and which are not. They help pastors to discern God's will.

After the council has identified the parish's needs and put them into an order of importance, then its most important pastoral planning task, the task specified in canon law, actually begins. That task is to study how to meet those needs. The good council investigates the parish situation. It consults parishioners and examines what experts say about it. It considers various options and the cost of each. It learns all it can about the matter under consideration.

Why? Because the good council knows that prudence is a form of knowledge. It is knowledge of the right action for the parish to take. It studies and reflects in order to lay the basis for sound decisions.

When the council has sufficiently considered, it makes a recommendation. It recommends what the parish, under its pastor, ought to do. That is where the pastoral council gains its greatest satisfaction. When it has thoroughly studied a matter, when it understands the parish situation, when it has considered what the experts recommend and weighed those recommendations from the viewpoint of the parish, then it has planned well. And whether or not the pastor accepts its recommendation, the council can take pride in a job well done.

Planning, Not Implementation

After the council has presented its conclusions to the pastor, a lot of work remains. The recommendations of the council have to become reality. They must be implemented. But the implementation of council recommendations is not, strictly speaking, the work of the council. To be sure, pastors often ask council members to assume this or that responsibility. And of course council members often accept them and carry them out. But when they do so, they act as volunteers under the pastor's direction. They are no longer performing the council's work of studying, considering, and recommending. They are carrying out the directives of a pastor who has accepted the council's advice and decided to implement it.

Once a recommendation has been made, the planning cycle begins anew. The pastor may well ask the council to assess how well its recommendations have been implemented. Or he may ask the council to turn its attention to other parish needs, prioritising and planning how to meet them. Investigating pastoral matters, pondering them, and making recommendations is of constant importance. The council's work is never over.

This section has defined the purpose and functions of the pastoral council. It defined the council's purpose in the threefold terms of official Vatican documents. They state that the council studies, reflects, and recommends. Moreover, this section has described the functions of the pastoral planning council. Such a council:

- states and clarifies the parish's mission,
- develops a vision of the parish's preferred future,
- identifies and prioritises the parish's needs, and
- draws practical conclusions.

After it has made its recommendations to the pastor, it passes the baton to him. If the pastor accepts the council's advice, he may ask others to implement it. Then the council's work of study, reflection, and recommendation begins anew.

4. Pastoral Council Meetings

Leadership and Principles of Operation

A pastor, a chairperson, and an agenda: each is essential to a good council meeting. The pastor consults the council and asks its help. Without him, 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 agenda is the plan for the meeting. Without an agenda, the meeting would be no more than an unstructured discussion. A pastor, chairperson, and agenda are essential and they must be well-prepared.

The Pastor and the Meeting

The pastor is not a member of the council, according to Canon Law, but presides over it. He consults the council because he wants to know the parish more profoundly and serve it more effectively. The better he knows the parish, the better he can help it follow the gospel. The pastor asks the council to focus on "pastoral matters," that is, matters essential to the parish's mission, activity, and program--anything, in effect, apart from faith, orthodoxy, moral principles or laws of the universal Church. Topics for the council may be proposed by the pastor or by the council members themselves, whose knowledge of the parish he should strive to deepen.

The pastor provides the motive for the meeting. He consults the council. The word "consults" implies a great deal. It implies, first of all, that the pastor has a question. He knows that he does not know everything. He wants to know something more. His question may be about the effectiveness of his youth ministry, or how well the parish plant is being maintained, or how successfully the parish is reaching out to immigrants. In any case, the pastor starts with a question. He wants the practical wisdom of parishioners, not just the expert opinion of his staff. He turns to the council because he cannot answer the question on his own.

When the pastor consults the council, he also implies faith in the members. Although he may not be able to answer a question by himself, he believes that the council can help him answer it. They help by undertaking the study and reflection he cannot do on his own. Council and pastor are united by a common faith and a desire to serve the parish. That should be a regular theme of the pastor's prayer with the council. They are trying to accomplish the mission God has given them. In the course of that mission, a question has arisen. The pastor motivates the council by posing the question and supporting council members in their search for an answer.

The pastor who consults his council implies one thing further. He implies that the question is his own. He asks it because he and the parish have an interest in it. No one else's answer will suffice unless he, the pastor, is satisfied with it. By consulting the council, he enters a kind of covenant with it. He agrees to pursue the question with them until he has an answer. If dissatisfied with the answer the council gives, the pastor implicitly agrees to register that dissatisfaction. He explains his dissatisfaction, and asks the council to address the issues left outstanding.

This ensures the honesty of council meetings. Their goal is to get at the truth of a matter and to persist until the pastor can affirm it. The search for the truth is the council's motive. The

pastor has asked a question, and turned to the council for an answer. That is the fundamental dynamic of council meetings.

Facilitation by the Chairperson

The chairperson facilitates, that is, makes the meeting go smoothly and easily. A typical council meeting tries to accomplish a great many things. Under the title of pastoral planning--our term for investigating pastoral matters, pondering them, and drawing practical conclusions--there are a variety of specific tasks. The chairperson is the one who helps the truth to come out. He or she understands the tasks and grasps the what and the wherefore of the agenda items. And secondly, the chairperson knows how to help the council members accomplish the tasks. Under the chairperson, the council achieves its objectives and maintains its cohesiveness. Let us look at how council meetings accomplish the three aspects of pastoral planning under the chairperson's guidance.

The council first investigates pastoral matters. That implies that the pastor has shared with the council a pastoral situation and a question for which he seeks an answer. Investigation begins by understanding the question. The chairperson has to make sure that the council understands what the pastor is asking. Then the chair invites the council to share its first thoughts in a process akin to brainstorming. Council members need an opportunity to express how they would study the matter. In the first discussion, a number of proposals will emerge, proposals for deeper investigation. These may be suggestions for research, consultation, or the drafting of an initial response. The chairperson senses the emergence of a common opinion about the first steps, invites volunteers to undertake them, and clarifies initial responsibilities. In later meetings, as the investigation proceeds, the chairperson calls for reports and facilitates an orderly discussion of them.

The second step is to ponder the results of the investigation and reflect on it thoroughly. At this stage, the chairperson ensures that everyone understands the purpose of the investigation and how it answers the pastor's question. Reference is made to the council's progress as reflected in its published minutes. The chairperson sees that the results of the investigation are available to council members, and that each has an opportunity to express an opinion. In the giving and receiving of opinions, more questions will arise. The chairperson distinguishes between the questions that can be readily answered and those that require further research.

The final step is to draw conclusions. This is the most difficult step, because it requires the council to reach accord. It implies that the council has grasped the pastor's question and is prepared to answer it. Drawing a conclusion presents a challenge to the chairperson. He or she must understand the viewpoints of the pastor and of the various members, and be able to express the truth at which they have arrived. Both the truth and the council are important. The truth of the matter is meant to inform the pastor's decision. The council members must be able to affirm that truth. When they do so the council has reached consensus.

To be sure, only the most important decisions need be reached by consensus. They should be matters of broad relevance, decisions which must be widely supported in order to be effective, issues general enough for non-experts to decide. There are many issues for which the search for consensus is unnecessary. But when the council achieves consensus, the pastor can be certain that there is wisdom to it. That wisdom is what the chairperson strives for.

Forming the Agenda

The most important item in any council meeting is a good agenda. An agenda is a document which describes in detail what the meeting hopes to accomplish. The pastor, the chairperson, and the immediate circle of council leadership (usually the vice-chairperson and the council secretary) draw up the agenda. It shows the goal of the meeting and the means for accomplishing it. Council members should receive the agenda (and other materials pertinent to the meeting) at least a week in advance so that they can prepare for the meeting. With a good agenda, members know what the meeting will attempt to achieve, and are ready to contribute to it.

What are the elements of a good agenda? At the top of every agenda should be the date, time, duration, and location of the meeting. The agenda should note that the meeting will set aside time for prayer and for the formation of members. This includes an opportunity for the pastor to reflect on the work of the council and the progression of his own thinking about the parish's central questions. The agenda should also refer to the previous meeting and approve its published minutes. After that, the agenda should indicate the various topics to be discussed by the council (i.e., its old and new business), and what the council intends to accomplish under each topic. Finally, the agenda should provide an opportunity for the council to evaluate the present meeting and to clarify the time and place of the next one. For each item, a specific amount of time should be allotted.

The heart of every agenda is the list of the topics to be discussed and the intentions of the council with regard to them. It is not enough to simply list the topic. The agenda must also explain how the council will treat it. Let us say, for example, that the topic is youth gangs in the parish. The agenda should state whether the council is to:

- hear a report about gangs,
- brainstorm about how it can approach the question of gangs,
- refine a proposal about how to consult the parish community,
- take a straw vote about the progress of its investigation,
- debate the merits of two different responses to gangs, or
- finalise its conclusions for the pastor.

Each method requires different preparation. Council members need to know whether they are to listen, brainstorm, refine, take a poll, debate, or conclude. That is what the agenda does. By clearly stating what the council hopes to accomplish, the agenda helps ensure that expectations of the council are realistic and that the members can accomplish the work they set for themselves.

This section has focused on leadership methods and principles of operation. The aim has been to define a successful council meeting. In the next section, the focus will be on the council members themselves-how they are selected, how they form committees, and how they relate to other groups in the parish.

5. The Council and the Parish

Members, Committees, and Relationships

In the last section, we saw what makes a good meeting. Pastors who seek advice, chairpersons who understand what is needed, and agendas which give members a clear plan--these are the essentials. In this section, we will look at the councillors themselves. We want to know what makes a good pastoral council member, including the criteria for selection and the selection process itself. Further, we want to know about council committees (such as the officers or executive committee). And finally, we want to know about the relation between the council and other groups such as the parish staff, the finance committee, and parish organizations.

Membership

The pastoral council should not be too large--only large enough so that it is able to carry out effectively the work that is committed to it. Fifteen members or less are sufficient. But who belongs on the parish pastoral council? In what sense do they "represent" the parish? These are the questions with which we must begin.

Criteria for Selection

Canon Law speaks in very general terms about the members of the pastoral council. They are to be chosen, it says, so as to reflect the wisdom of the entire people of God. Members need the specific gifts of the wise counsellor. These gifts are, first of all, the ability to study, investigate, and examine pastoral matters thoroughly. Secondly, wise counsellors should have the capacity to reflect widely and the patience to ponder deeply. Finally, council members should be able to listen to differing opinions, integrate various points of view, and discern with others what is best for the parish.

In practical terms, this means that the parish pastoral council ought to include a wide variety of people. It is not a "lay" council, but may include priests, deacons, and religious. Members of the parish staff may belong, but they advise the pastor on a regular basis, and so need not sit on the council. Members, however, must all be Catholics in good standing with the Church. They must all be committed to a life of prayer, to the mission and ministries of the parish, and to the Church's understanding of consultation as reflected in this guideline. Finally, they must be willing to participate in continuing education and the council's group process.

Representation

The pastoral council should include a variety of parishioners because it is a sign of the People of God. Due regard for the diverse communities, social conditions and professions of parishioners, and for the role which they have in the parish, should be shown in choosing council members. That suggests the importance of participation by the entire parish community in the discernment of council members. The Church's official documents state that pastoral councils are to represent the people of God, but not in a legal sense. Rather, council members are representative in that they are a witness or sign of the whole community. They make its wisdom present.

Selection of Members

How is the parish to find wise councillors? There are a variety of methods, some of which are outlined in section seven of this guide. But in general, three principles apply. The first is the principle of gifts. It is the belief that every parish has members with the gifts needed for the council ministry, and that parishioners can recognize these gifts. The second is the principle of clear expectations. The clearer the pastor can explain the work of the council and his expectations for it, the easier it will be to attract suitable councillors. And the third principle is that of discernment. There are ways to discern the gifts of potential council members, and these ways should be employed. Let us look at each of these principles in turn.

The Principle of Gifts

Serving on the council is a ministry. It requires certain gifts. These include, first of all, an understanding of the parish. The mission of a council is to investigate, ponder, and propose practical conclusions about pastoral matters. The potential council member should have the ability to study and reflect, and to integrate the viewpoints of others. Secondly, wisdom and prudence are essential. Potential members should have the gifts which describe the lay person who advises a pastor, namely, a knowledge and competence that are widely recognized. Finally, councillors must have good character. Proven faith, sound morals, and outstanding prudence describe the character of the potential council member.

Clear Expectations

Pastors should explain to the parish what they want from a council. They need to say what the council's major planning focus will be. They need to list the kinds of topics the council will explore. They need to say what they hope the council will accomplish. In short, they should state the questions which have motivated them to create a council in the first place. Then they can attract the kind of councillors who can be of most assistance.

Another expectation is the term of office. Terms may vary from parish to parish, but two- or three-year terms are most common. Most people believe that terms should be staggered. In other words, not every council member should leave office at the same time, but only a few each year. That ensures a continuity in the work of the council. When a new pastor arrives, council members ought to submit their resignations. The new pastor is not, however, obliged to accept them.

Pastors should also describe the commitment they are asking of council members. They should say in advance how often the council will meet and how members will be expected to prepare for meetings. They should state any requirements for in-service training or retreats. The more explicit a pastor can be about his expectations, the better his chances of attracting good council members.

Discernment

Discerning who belongs on the council has two aspects. One aspect is popular participation. Councillors are to be chosen so as to truly reflect the wisdom of the parish community. For this reason, pastors usually rely on the help of parishioners to select council members. There are various ways in which parishioners can help the pastor judge who has the gifts for the council ministry.

The second aspect of discernment is that of informed choice. Unless parishioners understand the pastoral council, and unless they have a thorough opportunity to judge who is best for the role, their choice will not be informed. That is the weakness of popular elections. A popular election by parishioners who do not appreciate the work of the council may not be helpful. Parishioners should know that the pastoral council has a specialized role. It requires people with particular talents. When parishioners understand the council ministry and have an opportunity to discern which parishioners are suited for it, they can contribute enormously to the selection of councillors.

Committees

Almost every pastoral council has committees. They fall into two types: first, a standing executive or agenda committee; and second, a variety of ad hoc committees. These committees are not standing committees, but are formed to do a task and disband after the task is complete.

Executive Committee

The executive or agenda committee is usually composed of the pastor and council officers, i.e., chairperson, vice-chairperson, and secretary. The committee plans the agenda and informs the members about it in advance. The pastor presides and the chairperson conducts the meetings, assisted by the vice-chairperson. The secretary keeps the minutes of the council meetings, so members can judge whether they have accomplished their agenda.

The executive committee determines the council's agenda. Occasionally, however, parishioners will ask the committee to place on the council's agenda items separate from the council's main work. When parishioners submit items for the council agenda, the committee can respond in a variety of ways. The committee may, first of all, place the item on the council meeting agenda, either immediately or at some future time. Secondly, the committee may reply to the parishioner that the item does not belong on the council's agenda. The council may ask the pastor, parish staff, or another parish organization to respond to the item. In either case, the committee should explain its decision to the parishioner.

Ad Hoc Committees

It is common for pastoral councils to appoint committees to help accomplish the council's work of study and reflection. These ad hoc committees may undertake a special investigation, do research, take a survey, poll parishioners, or consult experts. The aim of the ad hoc committees is to enhance the main work of the council, the work of investigating and pondering an issue. Neither the council nor its committees, strictly speaking, implements the recommendations of the council. When the pastor accepts the council's recommendations, he establishes committees to implement them. These are parish committees, not committees of the council.

The general principle is that the pastoral council recommends and the pastor (through his staff and through volunteers) implements. The council may help define the means by which to implement its recommendations, but they remain recommendations.

Relationships to the Parish

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 catechetics, liturgy, pastoral care, or education. The council's gift is practical wisdom. To be sure, council members are encouraged to educate themselves in the various fields of theology and pastoral care. They need not be experts, however, to join the council. Pastors turn to the council not for expert opinion, but for the wisdom of the community. Experts can no doubt judge what is good in general and as a rule. But unless they are parishioners, they cannot say with authority what is appropriate for the parish. Councils are meant to aid in that judgment. They can tell, from among the many options possible for a parish, what is right.

Parish staff members may sit on the parish council, but generally speaking they do not. They serve as need warrants. Assistant priests 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.

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 committee, organizations and other 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.

This section has focused on the members of the pastor council. It has stated general principles about how members are chosen, about its committees, and about the relationship of the council to the parish staff and to other parish groups. The key idea lies in the definition of the council. It has a specific job to do, and its members should be chosen so as to do that job and no other. In the next section, we shall look at how pastors establish councils.

6. Starting Fresh

Steps for Forming a Parish Pastoral Council

When a pastor desires the kind of focused attention on parish matters that only a council can provide, he needs to know how to begin. This section will guide him and his associates through the initial process.

Desire for a Council

The first step in 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. His 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.

Once a pastor recognizes the value of a council, he may want to inquire about how to form one. The staff of the Diocesan Office provides personal consultation as well as seminars and training sessions for parish staff and volunteers. It is ready to share its experience about councils, to assist in establishing them, and to help form new members.

The Parish Staff

When a pastor decides to establish a council, he should involve the parish staff. Staff members will want to know the pastor's motive for consulting a council. They will need to understand the relationship between the expertise they provide and the practical wisdom which non-experts can offer. Councils of non-experts, they should know, give pastoral matters the benefit of practical investigation and analysis. Councils seek to discern, from among the many things which experts judge to be possible and desirable, the wise and prudent course for the particular parish. The work of the council is time-consuming. Few parish staffs can afford to drop their day-to-day activities and perform the kind of study and reflection that councils can.

Pastors will not only want to inform their staff; they will also want to consult the members about the content and form of council meetings. What, for example, are the areas in which the parish's pastoral program could benefit from investigation and analysis? What aspects of parish life (such as worship, education, charity, and evangelisation) need attention? Parish staffs can help pastors define the topics which councils can then explore.

The Steering Committee

Once the pastor has decided that he wants a council, and once the staff understands its relation to that future council, then the pastor will want to 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 may also want to engage a competent facilitator. The tasks of the Steering Committee are as follows:

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; and
4. to oversee the selection of council members.

To achieve its first task, 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. It 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. Here an experienced facilitator can ensure that the Steering Committee understands the role and function of the pastoral council. The facilitator can clarify the various ways in which councils are structured, and help the Steering Committee reach practical conclusions to be recommended to the pastor. Deciding these matters is the Steering Committee's first task.

The second and third tasks of the Steering Committee are to educate parishioners about the proposed council and invite their participation. There are many ways to accomplish these tasks, but the most effective is to invite all interested parishioners to a series of open meetings. In the meetings, the pastor and the Steering Committee state the motive for a

pastoral council. They explain why the pastor wants to establish a council. They also ask parishioners to suggest topics for the future council's study and reflection. In this way, the Steering Committee members educate parishioners and invite their participation.

Selection of Members

The fourth task of the Steering Committee is to oversee the selection of new council members. In the last section we identified the general principles which underlie councillor selection. These were the general principles about the need for gifts to serve effectively on a council, for clearly-stated expectations from the pastor, and for allowing parishioners to share in the discernment of council members. Each one is important. If a pastor gives parishioners a clear introduction to the importance of consulting, tells them about the kind of people he is trying to recruit for the council, and creates opportunities for them to get to know potential members, then parishioners are well able to help select a new council.

The next section recommends three ways for selecting council members. The first is the so-called "shared wisdom" model. In this model, parishioners learn about the council ministry and, if they feel that they have a vocation to it, they nominate themselves. The second is the "election committee model." In it, an election committee screens nominees and proposes candidates for general election by the pastor. The third is the "combined model." It combines the open meetings of the "shared wisdom" model and a small group to screen and select council members from the "election committee" model. All three models educate parishioners thoroughly, invite potential members to discern their gifts, and involve the parish community.

Pastoral councils can have a big impact on the parish staff and on the congregation. Pastors who want to establish a council need to plan for it. Such planning should begin with the Church's vision of councils and should draw upon the wisdom of experienced practitioners. Pastors should also consult their staff members. When the parish staff understands the role of the council, staff members can help identify the pastoral matters which the council will study and the way in which the council will approach them. The nuts and bolts of establishing the council, however, belong to a Steering Committee. Such a committee clarifies the operation of the council, educates parishioners and invites their participation, and oversees councillor selection.

In this section, we have shown how to cultivate a new council. The steps are somewhat laborious but worth the effort. The pastor who plants his council in well-tilled soil will reap a harvest of careful investigation, thorough reflection, and sound advice. The members of such a council will have the satisfaction of putting their gifts at the service of the parish--gifts of patient study, careful consideration, and practical recommendations. Pastoral councils cannot take the place of a parish staff and dedicated volunteers. But they can help ensure that the parish mission is well thought out and carefully planned.

7. Selecting Council Members

Recommended Models

The general principles for selecting council members were laid out in section five. 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, and reach agreement with one another. In the selection of council members, the parish should

participate. They should have the opportunity to discern which parishioners are suited for the pastoral council.

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.

Shared Wisdom Model

The "shared wisdom" model was defined by Benedictine Sister Mary Benet McKinney. The essential features of the model are:

- A. Information. Parishioners hear about the ministry of the pastoral council through homilies, parish bulletins, etc.
- B. Discernment. People who are interested in the ministry attend a series of meetings. The meetings acquaint people with what service on the council requires. There parishioners are able to match their own gifts and talents with the needs of the council.
- C. 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.
- D. 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."

Election Committee Model

Another popular model of councillor selection involves the establishment of a parish election committee. This model, recommended by Father William Rademacher and Marliss Rogers, 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:

- A. Forming the Committee. The Election Committee, which includes the pastor, plans the selection process.
- B. Preparing the People. The committee informs people about the selection of council members by means of the pulpit, the bulletin, and parish forums.
- C. Identifying Nominees. The committee agrees on a list of qualifications and identifies potential nominees. They may be 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.
- D. Orientation of Nominees. The committee requires potential nominees to participate in an orientation session.

E. 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 resume and conducts "meet your candidate" sessions.

F. Election. Elections may be conducted before or after Sunday liturgies, or ballots may be mailed to registered parishioners.

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.

A. Pulpit Announcements. The pastor (and, in large parishes, the other parish priests) explains at each Sunday Mass 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 to two consecutive weekends to inform parishioners and invite greater participation.

B. Publications. Special bulletin inserts, newsletters, and posters also publicize the plans for the pastoral council. A tear-off slip of paper is provided to nominate a parishioner for council membership.

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

D. 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 session 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.

E. Orientation for Nominees. The orientation consists of information and small group process. The pastor expresses his understanding of the pastoral council. The existing 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.

F. 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.

Acknowledgement: These guidelines are based on the *Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines – Archdiocese of Los Angeles 1999* and adapted to suit our Australian context.