

GUIDELINES FOR PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS

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NB

- 1 – acting on canon 536/1 this diocese has long since required all parishes to have a Parish Pastoral Council**
- 2 – these Guidelines are to be made available to parishioners when a new council is being formed or new members being sought.**
- 3 – if a parish council has a “constitution” it is to be consistent with these Diocesan Guidelines**

1. What is the fundamental purpose of Pastoral Councils?

Pastoral Councils – whether they are of a diocese or pastoral area or parish – are premised on the teaching that the mission of the Church is the responsibility of *all the baptised*. It involves what Pope Benedict XVI has called a “change of mentality” requiring lay people to shift from “considering themselves as collaborators of the clergy to recognising themselves as truly ‘co-responsible’ for the being and action of the Church” (May 28, 2009) i.e. for what the Church is like and what it does.

This leads to the need for pastoral planning that is carried out *together*, in genuine “collaboration, dialogue and discernment” (cf Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Vocation and Ministry of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, n.25). This is the purpose of pastoral councils at all levels (diocese, pastoral area and parish). The following practical questions focus on *parish* pastoral councils.

2. What is a Pastoral Council’s canonical status?

The *Code of Canon Law* specifies that pastoral councils have only a “consultative voice” (canon 536/2). While that accurately describes a pastoral council’s status in Church law, it is not intended to describe the *whole reality* of a pastoral council, because shared responsibility implies that the charisms and experience of lay people must be allowed to make an actual contribution to pastoral decisions:

The participation of the lay faithful in these councils can give greater breadth to consultation and collaboration – and in certain instances also to decision-making... (ibid n.25).

3. How does this relate to the responsibility of the parish priest?

The parish priest is himself a full member of the pastoral council. So, just as the pastoral council does not formulate policy independently of the parish priest, so too the parish priest does not formulate parish pastoral policy independently of the council.

As parish priest, he does have special responsibilities, and exercises pastoral care under the authority of the bishop (cc 519, 528, 529, 530, 532). But the actual way he does this is in a collaborative relationship with the other members of the parish pastoral council. They help to make his leadership more effective.

If in a particular instance, after listening with an open mind and with “great respect” (John Paul II) to the considered views of the pastoral council he finds himself unable to agree with a given recommendation, he should explain his reasons. This may lead to the need for further discussion at the next meeting of the Council, before he finally makes his decision.

4. Does the Parish Pastoral Council have a governance or a management role?

It is not governance in the normal sense of that term, and nor is it management. It does involve setting the direction and the policies that guide the parish in carrying out its core functions. It also involves evaluating how well the parish’s pastoral plans are being implemented.

The distinction of roles can be expressed as follows:

- To eventually *decide* what has to be done belongs to the person with canonical responsibility for the parish;
- To *implement* these decisions belongs to the appropriate parish ministries/groups/committees ;
- To *evaluate* what is happening, and to *make recommendations* in the light of this, belongs to the role of Pastoral Councils.

Evaluating the implementation of pastoral planning should not be a mere examination of other people’s efforts. Good practice involves them in the evaluation process, and affirms and encourages them. *Together*, those in leadership and those in ministries measure performance against vision and goals. This presupposes a shared vision.

5. Where do the vision and the goals come from?

Every parish is part of a diocese, and the diocese’s pastoral plan is an essential reference point. The Diocese of Palmerston North’s Pastoral Plan links what is done in the parishes, the pastoral areas and the diocese to form a co-ordinated plan for living and promoting the gospel.

6. What is the Parish Pastoral Council’s relationship with the Parish Finance Committee?

The Parish Finance Committee is required by canon 537, which designates its purpose as being “to help the parish priest in the administration of the goods of the parish without prejudice to canon 532” (which speaks of the parish priest’s own responsibility for this.) The diocese has special norms governing Parish Finance Committees.

It is the Pastoral Council that sets the pastoral priorities of the parish, not the Finance Committee. But parish pastoral councils will want to do this in a way that is realistic and realisable. This requires a collaborative relationship with the parish finance committee.

A joint meeting, say once a year, could be a way of helping to ensure good mutual understanding.

7. What is the Pastoral Council's relationship with the Board of Trustees?

The school is an arm of the parish's life, with a special focus on formation in faith. The "Catholic character" of a school is inconceivable outside of its relationship with the parish(es). The school should encourage its students and parents to participate in the life and mission of the parish, and the school is entitled to the support of the parish. This includes the parish's willingness to give the children and young people roles in the parish Sunday Masses.

The Board of Trustees is a statutory body under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Regarding the use of school premises by the parish:

The Integration Agreement gives the Board of Trustees the exclusive right to occupy the school property of integration schools. However, the Agreement provides that the parish may use the school premises outside school hours with the approval of the Board, whose approval will not be unreasonably withheld. It is reasonable for the parish to pay for any costs related to such use, e.g. for heating, lighting, and a reasonable amount for wear and tear. (*Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils*, Archdiocese of Wellington, 2006, p.17).

Boards of Trustees are to have Proprietor's appointees, usually four, or in very small schools possibly two. They are nominated by the parish priest or lay pastoral co-ordinator, who should normally consult the pastoral council before making the nominations.

8. How many members should a pastoral council have, and for how long?

The number should strike a balance between adequate representativeness and ability to function as a team, and ensure a quorum.

Priests and lay pastoral co-ordinators are automatically members of the pastoral council.

A term of 2-4 years is a common practice, with the option of extensions of one or two terms. It is helpful to have a regular turnover with a portion of members retiring each year to ensure continuity and to keep the council before the parish's mind.

9. How should new members be sought?

Given the important role of the Parish Pastoral Council, it is equally important to ensure that the right people are chosen for this service. We need to test the suitability and the claims of people who offer themselves for service of any kind, (cf 1 Cor 12:10; 1 Jn 4:1). We also need to encourage those who may be unsuspecting of their own gifts and suitability.

Combining these two needs is *not easily achieved by a simple election process*. It is better to form a pool of nominees, from which the required number is then chosen. All parishioners have the opportunity to make nominations – not just names but profiles and reasons supporting the nomination. Then a team of three (which includes the parish priest) makes the final selection.

The selection team will have regard to such considerations as candidates' prayer life, and their proven or potential ability to "collaborate, dialogue and discern". The

selection team will also have regard for inclusiveness of age, gender and cultural background.

Members do not represent groups within the parish. *All* members represent *all* the parish.

Formation should be provided for new members, included spiritual formation and training in skills.

The key to attracting new members is to be clear about:

- what the council is for – “is it worth my time?”
- how knowledgeable they need to be – “will I understand what they are doing?”
- how much time is involved – “do I have the time for this?”
- for how long they must make the commitment – “will I be able to get out of it?”
- how the council operates – “how often and on what day does it meet?”
- how it fits in with the parish priest, staff, existing groups – “what difference can it make?”
- what previous pastoral councils have achieved – “are we moving in circles?”
- how they will be appreciated, supported and affirmed – “will I be thanked for what I do?” (*Guidelines for Parish Pastoral Councils*, Archdiocese of Wellington)

So that prospective members can be clear about such questions, the Pastoral Council’s activities should be regularly reported through parish bulletins/newsletters, and the Council’s minutes made available.

It is also helpful to display photographs, names and contact details on the parish notice board.

A new Council should be installed at a Sunday Mass, thereby giving the parish the opportunity to “own” and prayerfully support its parish council.

10. How often should the Parish Council meet?

Once a month is reasonable.

Meetings should be chaired well, and started and finished on time.

Prayer is not just a prefix and ending to meetings. Rather, the meetings should be carried along by prayer and occasional faith-sharing. We are, after all, the community of Jesus’ disciples with him still in our midst.