

Why a Parish Pastoral Council?

You have probably heard about parish councils. You have probably known some people who were part of a parish council. Why are parish councils important for our parish? Why add the word “pastoral” to the traditional way we have referred to parish councils? Let’s talk briefly about the reasons for a parish pastoral council.

Vatican II gave a big push and support to the establishment of parish pastoral councils. The bishops said that “pastors should promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the church.” They further advised “priests to listen to the laity...” so that with them they would be able to read the signs of the times

Further, Vatican II reminded the laity that through baptism they are called to ministry and service of God’s people. By baptism and confirmation all share in the ministry of Christ. The laity do not need anyone’s permission to participate in the ministry and mission of the Church. They have full rights to participation directly from Christ, into whom all have been baptized. This includes the right and responsibility to participate in the decision making process of the Church.

Parish pastoral councils act as the “wisdom community” of the parish, where people learn to be stewards of the gifts of God given to all at baptism. They are also listeners attentive to the needs of all the people. Through the process of attuning themselves to the needs of others and through continual consultation, the parish pastoral council builds up the faith community.

Like the first communities of Christians, parishioners can become involved and active in the direction of their faith community through the agency of the parish pastoral council. Like those first communities, a parish can be an adventure in shared and mutual responsibility for the future planning and direction setting of the community. This responsibility involves the active participation of all in the decision making process of parish life. The parish pastoral council, with the pastor, activates and makes possible this active participation by all.

The parish pastoral council is a team of Christian faithful who come together regularly to vision and to develop a pastoral plan to address the needs of all parishioners. Parishes with councils that are alive and effective become more aware of the needs of not only their parish but of the larger Church, the civic community, the surrounding neighborhood and the world.

In the context of a parish pastoral council, pastors and parishioners work hand in hand, becoming aware of what the other is about and how each can help the other in continuing to carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus. Both clergy and laity work collaboratively to promote effective leadership in the parish, mutually setting a common direction and a pastoral plan for the entire parish. In this fashion, the gifts and talents of all can be utilized and activated.

What is a Parish Pastoral Council?

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative body which unites laity and clergy together in a community of prayer, leadership, service, and pastoral planning. The PPC is the instrument of parish visioning and planning, enabling the laity to accept more fully their responsibility, through baptism, of sharing in the work of Jesus. Through baptism, the laity have the responsibility to continue Jesus' mission of service to others. They are empowered, if not obligated, to manifest their perspective on those things that pertain to the good of the church. The pastor consults and works collaboratively with the Pastoral Council to address the major pastoral concerns which affect the life and mission of the parish. In this fashion, the council strives to achieve consensual agreement upon recommendations which affect future parish directions for spiritual growth and pastoral activity. Thus the PPC is the structure which enables all to share the responsibility to participate in the decision making process which leads to the building up of the parish faith community.

Parish Pastoral Councils are prayerful, pastoral, representative, discerning, prophetic, empowering, and collaborative. These seven qualities are essential ingredients for an effective and dynamic pastoral council. Each quality gives us clues to the kind of people and the necessary gifts needed to carry on the work of the pastoral council.

1. **“Prayerful”** best characterizes PPC members. Prayer focuses the work of the council, as well as provides the primary intention with which the work is to be accomplished.
2. **“Pastoral”** challenges PPC members to be attentive to the needs and concerns of the entire parish community. This means that the care and concern of the whole people of God should be a primary agenda of the council.
3. **“Representative”** means that the council has members that speak not in the name of a particular group or constituency, but rather are attuned to and speak for the whole parish community.
4. **“Discerning”** is the open-minded and open-hearted attitude of being attuned to the promptings and directions of the Spirit. As the members go about the work of the council, this discerning quality fosters the ability to be flexible and open to wherever the Spirit might lead.
5. **“Prophetic”** essentially communicates the fact that council members have to be willing to take a stand and make decisions based on Jesus and gospel values. At times, such decisions might not be so popular or so well accepted by all. But Jesus values and principles must always dominate the decisions of the PPC.
6. **“Empowering”** points to the fact that council members are willing and able to call forth the gifts and talents of others to share in the ministry of service to all. The council does not do it all but empowers others to take their responsibility in furthering the mission of Jesus in this community.
7. **“Collaborative”** means working together in such a manner that each person's gifts and talents are valued, and are coordinated with the gifts and talents of other council members. This leads to effective decision making, allowing the council to become more than the sum of its parts.

How a Parish Pastoral Council Works

In order to create an effective and informed PPC, training and education is essential, not only for potential council members but also for the entire parish community. Adequate material is made available to the whole parish, explaining what a Parish Pastoral Council is and how it operates. Parish members are invited to consider whether they have the time, gifts and desire to be part of this ministry. All are asked to submit names, either themselves or others, whom they think would make good council members. Training sessions are held for all on the current theology and understanding of the church, especially in the area of working collaboratively, along with how effective shared decision making can happen in the church.

Along with the theological and ecclesial background, there is training on group skills, facilitation, and the dynamics of decision making with a focus on consensus and discernment. The needs of the parish are examined along with the skills and gifts needed to address those needs. Those who have gone through the training and think that they would like to explore this ministry further are asked to enter a discernment process, where needs and gifts will be factors in determining the selection of council members. Only those who are willing to be discerned on to the council should enter the discernment process. Through a process of prayer, discussion, and spiritual discernment, 6-8 members are discerned to be the Parish Pastoral Council. They are presented to the parish, and commissioned in the name of the parish to undertake this important ministry.

Along with the pastor, they meet on a regular basis with agenda items clearly stated, discussing and functioning in accordance with consensus norms and mode of operating. They establish a mission statement for the council which focuses primarily on being a planning, visioning and direction setting council. In order to do this primary task effectively, they usually begin by doing a "needs assessment" of the parish. This gives them the proper information base to begin addressing parish needs and priorities. The Parish Pastoral council is attuned to the needs of the entire parish. Their decisions are done in a consultative manner, setting directions for the parish only after listening to all the needs and paying attention to what is best for the whole parish. They propose a vision for the parish that is presented to all. They give that vision time to germinate and then evaluate how things are going. If adaptations or modification need to be made based on new perspectives or information, they are explored and acted upon.

A typical Parish Pastoral Council agenda is devoted to prayer, education, discussion of the prioritized issues that need visioning and planning, along with an opportunity to pay attention to the tasks and relationship aspects of the council members.

The work of the council is further enhanced through the empowerment of ad-hoc groups who would address particular issues or needs. These groups would work collaboratively with the council to address the overall planning needs of the parish. The expertise of parish staffs are also a great source of help in the council's planning needs. Two way communications is essential to the effectiveness of the council. On a regular and consistent basis they communicate to the parish what they are about and ask the parish for feedback, continually open to new ideas, perspectives, or ways to approach an issue.

Through prayer, continual education and study, dialogue, communication and openness, the Parish Pastoral Council becomes the effective leadership body that it is envisioned to be.