

Parish Councilsⁱ

Parish Pastoral Councils and Finance Councils originated with the Second Vatican Council, 1963-1965. Bishop Raymond Gallagher, returning from the Council, was determined to implement it in North Central Indiana.

Consultative Bodies

The reason for the existence of consultative bodies in the church is not just to insure the right of the (lay) members of the Church to be heard, but to counsel the pastor on the actual pastoral ministry of the church. The existence of consultative bodies assumes the authority of the pastor and should operate from the principle of consensus building.

Consultative bodies of these types are pastoral in nature. In other words, they are not legislative (policy-making) bodies, nor are they administrative (policy implementation) bodies. Rather, these councils are convened to engage in prayerful and informed discernment with regard to the pastoral life of the parish, including the areas of worship, religious education/formation, service, outreach and more.

Both prayer and study should form a major part of the business of a consultative body. Procedural norms should be kept as simple as possible. The pastor is not a member of the consultative body... Practically speaking, the most desirable approach is for the pastor to set the agenda with the collaboration of the chair of the consultative body.

The scope of these councils should be focused rather than comprehensive... Although these bodies are responsible for the overall pastoral and financial well-being of the parish, it is not therefore necessary for them to attempt to deal with the entire parish in any one meeting. It is much more desirable for a council agenda to be taken up with two or three items dealing with major concerns than with seven or eight items dealing with more specific details.

Parish Pastoral Councils

Organized according to Canon 536, the Parish Pastoral Council was envisioned as a forum for review of parish activities, exchange of ideas and opinions, submission or proposals, and hearing the parish budget.

The responsibilities of the Parish Pastoral Council include:

- Becoming/being aware of the composition and personality of the parish community and serving as a body that is representative of the identity;
- Prayerfully discerning parish needs and possible responses to these needs;
- Becoming informed on issues which affect the pastoral ministry of the parish, through resources such as Church teaching in Scripture and tradition, conciliar and other official church documents, and contemporary commentaries on the topic at hand;
- Identification and calling forth of members of the parish community with the gifts and talents to respond to parish needs;

- Prayerfully discerning an overall parish response to needs from outside the parish community, e.g. needs of the Universal and Local Church and the local community, ecumenical concerns, social justice needs, etc.

More specifically, the council is responsible for meeting regularly to study the current state of parish ministries, to evaluate these ministries, and to make recommendations for future goals and priorities, in the context of advising the pastor. The council is also charged with setting forth goals and objectives of the parish for long-term planning. Along with a regular assessment of other parish ministries, the council should make a general review of the parish budget, as prepared by the Parish Finance Council, in light of parish goals and priorities.

The Parish Pastoral Council is not representative of the parish in terms of constituencies, special interests, parish factions or groups, etc. Nor is the council to serve as a form for complaints about the pastor, any staff member, program leader, or program within the parish. The council is not a personnel committee, charged with hiring and dismissals, or with major input into hiring or dismissals. While the council is to make a general review of the parish budget, the council is not to serve as a finance committee, approving budgets, reviewing monthly expenditures, etc.

There is no one “correct” model for Parish Pastoral Councils. Generally, the Parish Pastoral Council should number about eight people. These people should be fully initiated members of the Church through the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, and active members of the parish. The qualities needed for council members are openness, prayerfulness, a willingness to take time to study and discern both the needs of the parish and the responses to those needs. There are three basic options for selecting new members: election, appointment, and lottery. Three positions need to be filled: chairperson, vice chairperson, and recording secretary.

Parish Finance Councils

Organized according to Canon 537, the Finance Council is a consultative body, which provides the pastor with advice concerning the stewardship of parish fiscal resources. It is to serve the goals and priorities set by the Pastoral Council.

The Pastoral Council assists the pastor by:

- Conducting long-range financial planning;
- Developing and overseeing a parish budget process which results in an annual parish budget;
- Provides financial analysis of current fiscal status reports;
- Provides for proper financial control procedures;
- Provides fiscal analysis of proposed goals, strategies and programs;
- Provides the parishes with periodic (no less than annually) reports on the financial position of the Parish (cf. Canon 1287, 2).

While the finance council has significant responsibility for the stewardship of parish financial resources, it is not the role of the finance committee to recommend directions, priorities, or

programs other than those related to its delegation: fiscal stewardship. Membership criteria and selection are similar to that of the Parish Pastoral Council.

Summary

It is important that the work of these two groups take place in a coordinated and integrated manner. Adequate time should be devoted to formation (prayer, community building, etc.), as well as council business. Parish Councils tend more towards recommendation of goals and priorities (consultative), while Finance Councils are advisory. Both give parishioners the opportunity to participate more fully in their parish.

The strengths of group problem solving tend to be easily recognized:

- There is more information in a group than in any of its individual members;
- A group develops a greater number of approaches to a problem than do individuals;
- Since group problem solving permits participation and influence, it will be likely that more individuals will accept solutions when a group solves a problem than when an individual solves it;
- Group decisions tend to be easier to implement than individually arrived at solutions.

Group problem solving liabilities tend to be more subtle and can be lessened or negated through the skills of a good discussion leader:

- Social pressure tends to encourage conformity;
- It is possible that a vocal minority can win acceptance of a decision by actively pushing it;
- A dominant individual can emerge and capture more than his/her share of influence;
- Power people will try to scare the group;

It is very important that committees relax together, get to know each other, exchange personal experiences and pray together... The responsibilities of these groups is enormous we must not settle for any less than the best conditions under which to operate. The spirit of cooperation must be intense just as the prayer must be intense.

Formation for Council Members

If the role of the pastoral or finance council member is to be seen as a ministry, it is appropriate that experiences and processes of formation appropriate to the ministry support it. This formation should not only take place as a person is becoming a member of the council, but in an ongoing way throughout the life of the council.

Members of the pastoral or finance council ought to take primary responsibility for their own ongoing formation. This might take the form of involvement in a small group in RENEW, participation as a sponsor in the RCIA, attendance at catechist formation sessions (ELM), personal study of Scripture or current writings on relevant topics in the Church, etc.

ⁱ Summary of “Parish Pastoral Council and Finance Council Guidelines Local Church of North Central Indiana” sections II-VIII.