

DIOCESE OF DALLAS  
Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines

**GUIDELINES  
PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS  
for the  
DIOCESE OF DALLAS**

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**Article I**

**THEOLOGICAL AND CANONICAL CONTEXT**

1.1 **Parish**

The parish is a community of believers sharing in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. The 1983 revised Code of Canon Law emphasizes two principles for guiding a parish:

- the authority entrusted to the hierarchy
- the call for shared responsibility

Canon 519 states: “The pastor... exercises pastoral care over 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 therefore carries out for his community the duties of teaching, sanctifying and governing with the cooperation of other priests or deacons and the assistance of lay members of the Christian faithful.”

**Canon 204** states: “the Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God... and have become sharers in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and royal office...”

The documents of Vatican II emphasize further: “According to their particular gifts, their state of life, and their office in the Church, Christ’s faithful worship God in Spirit and truth, proclaim the gospel and care for the needs of their brothers in charity. Within this context, the laity are called to assist the pastor in the pastoral care of God’s people and in the administration of the temporal goods of the Church.” (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity).

These principles, then, call for both clergy and laity to work with the church community so that the mission of Jesus Christ will continue in the world today.

1.2 **Shared responsibility and Consultation**

Shared responsibility is the term used to designate this cooperation between the laity and the clergy. Both share responsibility for guiding the mission to which God calls the Church. In order for the Church to have the fullness of vision, the laity should be involved in decision making through the process of consultation.

Consultation, in the context of Church, requires a structure whereby the Church – clergy and lay – attempt to listen to the Spirit who is leading the Church and speaking to it through gifts and experience, as well as through office and ordination.

**From this perspective, then, the Bishop of the Diocese of Dallas encourages every parish to establish a Parish Pastoral Council, according to these guidelines, through which the pastor can consult regarding pastoral issues.**

### 1.3 Consultative Bodies

The revised Code of Canon Law speaks of two principal consultative bodies for the parish; the Parish Pastoral Council and the Finance Council. Other parish consultative structures exist and will be referred to throughout this document.

#### **a. Parish Pastoral Council**

**Canon 536:** After conferring with the presbyterial council, the bishop can determine that a pastoral council is to be established in each parish. The pastor presides over the pastoral council, although the pastor needs not to serve as a chairperson. Through the pastoral council the Christian faithful give their help in fostering pastoral activity. The pastoral council is a consultative body and is governed by norms determined by the diocesan bishop.

#### **b. Finance Council**

**Canon 537:** Each parish is to have a finance council which is regulated by universal law, as well as by norms issued by the diocesan bishop; in this council the Christian faithful aid the pastor in the administration of the parish goods.

## Article II

### PASTORAL PLANNING

The parish is called to support and nurture the spiritual growth of its members and enable their full participation in the mission of the Church of the world. The pastoral planning work of the Parish Pastoral Council focuses upon how the ministries and the activities of the parish foster the spiritual development of the whole parish and enable its outward mission to the world.

#### 2.1 Steps

Pastoral Planning involves the following steps:

- a. Listening to the needs of the people and conducting on-going assessment of the parish life.
- b. Developing broad directions and priorities for the future, in light of the expressed needs.
- c. Designing flexible strategies that will accomplish the priorities.
- d. Ensure implementation of the strategies.
- e. Evaluating the progress in achieving the priorities.

As decisions are made in these five areas, **communication** to the parishioners is crucial. Parishioners should be aware of the priorities of their parish.

#### 2.2 THE WORK OF THE PASTORAL COUNCIL

The work of the pastoral council, in consultation with other parish structures, concentrates its energies on #a, #b, of the above steps. It focuses on:

- a. ascertaining the needs of the community, and
- b. setting broad directions, priorities, and policies which address the overall mission of the parish and determining the level of the commitment of parish resources: personnel, finances, and material. (The Parish Annual Budget should be established on the bases of these priorities).

#### 2.3 THE WORK OF PARISH STAFF

The work of implementation and evaluation (#c, #d, and #e of the above steps) are administrative and operational activities done by parish staff and/or volunteers or task forces. Its focus is on the day to day ministries and programs. The responsibilities involve: designing the details of the strategies (programs), implementing programs, recruiting personnel, drafting a budget, and evaluating progress.

#### 2.4 EXAMPLE

After surveying data which shows that there has been a substantial increase in the number of Hispanic families into the parish area, the **Pastoral Council**, in consultation with other parish structures, might make a decision that a parish priority will be the evangelization of un-churched Hispanics. Then the **Pastoral Church**, would decide the level of commitment the parish should make in terms of personnel, budget, and material resources

and might suggest some general strategies for accomplishing this goal. This decision would then be recommended to the pastor for his approval.

**Parish Staff**, in cooperation with volunteers and task forces, would then work out the specific details of this Evangelization program and would be responsible for its implementation. They would establish the program coordinator, the time-line, the dates/places/materials, the method for evaluating the program, etc. The **Parish Staff** would periodically report on the progress of the program to the **Pastoral Council**.

The **Pastoral Council** should avoid direct involvement in the details of administering the strategies. This is the work that the Parish Staff, whether salaried or non-salaried, should perform.

## Article III

### **CONSULTATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER PARISH STRUCTURES**

The Parish Pastoral Council works with existing groups and structures within the parish. The effectiveness of the Council depends greatly upon the vitality and viability of its collaborative relationships with these supporting structures. Some include: Commissions, School Boards, Staff and Finance Council.

#### **3.1 Commissions/Organizations**

Commissions/Organizations denote those groups which assist the Council by developing pastoral plans and priorities in a specific area of parish life. Some commissions/organizations which function in parishes are: Education, Evangelization, Family Life, Liturgy, Outreach/Social Concerns, etc. Generally these are aligned with existing diocesan structures. Within these broad headings, sub-committees may be established. Usually staff persons work in concert with the commission/organization of his/her related area. In order to have direct communication between the Council and Commissions/Organizations, a liaison person should be appointed from EACH. The Parish Pastoral Council should designate in its respective policies the ways that this cooperative relationship can be arranged.

#### **3.2 Local School Board**

The purpose of the board is to serve as the local policy making body under the auspices of the Diocesan School Board and establish all local policies for the operation of the Catholic school. In order to have direct communication between the Council and the School Board, some liaison relationship should be established. The Parish Pastoral Council should designate in its respective policies the ways that this cooperative relationship can be arranged.

#### **3.3 Parish Staff**

Parish Staff (volunteer or salaried), under the direction of the pastor or his delegate, develop and oversee parish programs and ministries which flow from the directions and priorities set by the council's planning process. Staff may also have responsibilities in financial and personnel administration. In order to have direct communication between the Council and staff, some liaison relationship should be established. The Parish Pastoral Council should designate in its respective policies the ways that this cooperative relationship can be arranged.

#### **3.4 Finance Council**

The Parish Financial Council, required by the Code of Canon Law, advises the pastor and pastoral council about effective stewardship of the parish's financial resources. It is responsible for developing and overseeing a parish budget process, as well as conducting long range financial planning.

**a. Distinct Concerns**

**Canon 537** prescribes that the Parish Finance Council be distinct from the Parish Pastoral Council:

The Parish Pastoral Council is to promote the spiritual growth of the parish community and to plan ways for the parish life to carry out the mission of the church. It represents the interests and pastoral needs of the entire parish.

**b. Mutual Concerns**

The two councils are related in their mutual concern for the life and mission of the parish:

The Finance Council looks to the Pastoral Council for a statement of the mission of the parish, a pastoral plan, and parish priorities.

The Pastoral Council looks to the Finance Council for sound financial guidance and planning regarding the resources needed to develop and implement parish plans, programs, and policies.

In order to have direct communication between the two councils, some liaison relationship should be established. The Parish Pastoral Council should designate in its respective policies the ways that this cooperative relationship can be arranged.



## Article IV

### **STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS OF PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL**

#### **4.1 Membership**

Members should be:

- \* baptized and confirmed Roman Catholics
- \* registered and contributing members of the parish
- \* active participants in the parish
- \* informed about and committed to the church in accord with the principles of Vatican II
- \* committed to prayer, listening, dialogue, and using discernment as a basis for decision making
- \* committed to formation before joining the council, as well as on-going formation
- \* committed to being prepared for meetings and giving the necessary time
- \* able to maintain a posture of Christian love and openness to all perspectives, even during times of conflict
- \* able to maintain confidentiality when necessary

The council should be representative of the parish community to the extent that it can. Ideally it should reflect parish membership, taking into consideration the demographics and the diversity of the parish in terms of age, race, family types, etc. Particular methods for recruiting a representative council should be developed. (Some parishes have found it helpful to have youth who are involved in the life of the parish serve on the pastoral council. Certain factors such as maturity, leadership and communication skills, parent consent should be considered.)

Depending on how the pastoral council designs its liaison relationships, some members of the council will serve by reason of their office (representatives from commissions, school board, staff, finance council) and others will serve as representatives of the general parish membership. Generally it is recommended that at least two-thirds of the council come from the general parish membership. All council members have equal voice and privileges.

#### **4.2 Size**

Since each parish differs in composition and complexity, each parish should determine the size of its own council. Generally, the recommended size is from seven to fifteen members. The size should be small enough to promote a sense of community among the members and yet large enough to reflect the diversity of the parish.

#### **4.3 Term of Office**

Terms of office should be three or four years and staggered every one or two years so council membership rotates. It is advisable that council members serve no more than two consecutive terms.

#### **4.4 Selection**

The preferred method for selecting council members is through the Discernment process. See [Appendix IV.4](#) for a description of this process.

#### **4.5 Steering Committee**

Every council should have a Steering committee composed of the pastor, chairperson, vice-chair, and secretary. The task of this group is to develop an overall plan for the year which identifies the issues facing the council and estimates when the council will be dealing with the issue. The Steering committee should meet before each council meeting to prepare the agenda and design processes for each meeting. The Steering committee needs to be sure that prayer and study are a significant part of the council's deliberations. Additionally, this body should develop methods of identifying and recruiting parishioners to receive training/formation for council service. Because of the important responsibilities of this committee, additional training and resources should be made available to them. (The diocesan Office of Pastoral Planning offers periodic training sessions for council members). See [Appendix IV.5](#) for a list of responsibilities of each officer.

#### **4.6 Decision Making**

Healthy and effective Church governance and effective pastoral planning are dependent upon effective decision making. Decision making is a process which can be carefully thought out or one which is left to unfold haphazardly. Careful attention to decision making can generate commitment and avoid conflict when a decision is finally reached. People's experience of inclusion in the decision making process can often times be a far more important and have more far reaching consequences than the actual decision. No matter the area of pastoral planning, the same steps in the decision-making process should be followed. It is important to note that decision-making in regards to some issues is excluded from diocesan or parish agenda as a result of Church teaching (for example liturgical norms).

#### **Steps in Decision-Making and Planning**

- a. An idea, or a proposal is put forward.  
(See [Appendix IV.6A](#) for a Sample Proposal Form)
- b. Research is done by a committee or individual. Implications should be considered: What benefits will result from this action; What are the possible obstacles; What resources will be needed (personnel, financial, material); Who will coordinate the action, What training will be required of those who implement the action; What is the time-line; What system of evaluation will be used?
- c. These research findings are presented to the Pastoral Council for prayer and discussion. The council determines whether to recommend acceptance or rejection of the proposal to the pastor. (see [Appendix IV.6C](#) for explanation of building consensus around an issue).

- d. If accepted, suggested strategies for implementation are generated by the council and a lead agent (staff person and/or committee) is named who will coordinate the implementation of the action.
- e. Rules, regulations, detailed steps for implementation are developed by that lead agent.
- f. Implementation is carried out.
- g. The action is monitored and evaluated periodically. the action and or strategies may be modified based on feedback acquired from evaluation.

As stated earlier, as decisions in these areas are made, communication to the parish in general is crucial. Parishioners should be aware of the planning being done by the Council.

# APPENDICES

**Appendix IV.4**  
**Selection of Pastoral Council Members**  
**Discernment Process**

Orientation: In order to help people discover their gifts and how they can serve the parish community, roles and expectations must be clear to those who are asked to serve. The Pastoral Council Chair, in consultation with the pastor and other council members, should be set up a Selection Committee. The Committee's first job is to educate the parishioners about the role of the Pastoral Council in order to generate interest in serving as a parish leader.

Good orientation is important for anyone called to serve in a parish ministry, especially for the leadership ministry of the Pastoral Council. The Selection Committee should host an informal gathering for anyone interested in serving on the Council. This meeting should offer information about the Council guidelines, the mission of Pastoral Council, the training of the Council members, the current issues facing the Council, the operations and meeting schedule of the Council, and other relevant data. This also provides an opportunity for potential new members to meet with those who already serve on the Council.

Having been through the Orientation, the individual may submit her/his name for the discernment process.

Discernment: To discern means to come to full knowledge. A process of prayerful discernment is one in which we come to knowledge of the will of God for the parish. The process involves calling upon the spirit to be present, being open to the broadcast possible input from the community, and providing the opportunity for prayer and reflection in each step of the process. Discernment of parish council membership is a process of prayer, formation, and the deepening of people's relationship with the Lord as individuals and as a community of believers.

In the spirit of renewal as a faith community, we recognize that the selection of parish leaders is not a race or a contest, but a CALL – the traditional meaning of election in the Church. Discernment gathers the community in prayer, lifting its needs to God, asking for an openness to God's will for us, and God's presence in our midst and ministry.

In the final phase of the selection of Council membership, the discernment process can be used. Each parish needs to develop the specifics of its own process. The Office of Pastoral Planning in the Diocese is available to assist any parish with this process. The actual discernment of Pastoral council members involves prayer, the naming of the gifts that an individual brings to the parish community, and a sense of the parish community's needs in the context of the issues facing the parish. At the end of the process each nominee, along with the group that has been gathered, with discern who should come on the Council at this time.

**Appendix IV.6A**  
**PROPOSAL TO PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL**

From: \_\_\_\_\_  
(committee, parishioner, group, organization, etc.)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Proposal:

Rationale: ATTACH ALL PERTINENT MATERIALS  
(statement of need, presentation of alternatives, implementation plan)

Submitted by: \_\_\_\_\_  
(name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(council member)

Pastoral Council Action:                      Remarks:

_____	Approved	
_____	Rejected	
_____	Amended	Date:
_____	Referred	
_____	Tabled	

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Pastor's Signature)

## **Appendix IV.5** **Responsibilities of Officers**

**Pastor:** While he normally does not chair the meeting, the pastor presides at all pastoral council meetings, assist in setting the agenda and actively listens to the council's deliberations. When appropriate, the pastor may assist the council in developing a consensus around a particular issue by sharing information, providing his own perspectives, or identifying common elements or areas of agreement that seem present in the council's discussion. The pastor, as minister of governance in the parish is the final authorizer of any course of action. The pastor should set the context for the council's discussion by sharing Church teaching and/or setting the parameters for acceptable alternatives.

**Chairperson:** The chairperson, elected by the council membership, is central to the effectiveness of the pastoral council. The chair person is responsible for:

- a. organizing and coordinating the agenda and processes of the council;
- b. chairing and facilitating the meetings of the council (the chair may delegate facilitation of portions of the meeting to the other members.);
- c. encouraging members and committees of the council to fulfill their specific responsibilities and delegations;
- d. establishing an ongoing process of evaluation of the council's effectiveness.

The chairperson must be the servant of the group. She/he should be an enabler and facilitator of the council, promoting inclusion and participation, keeping the meeting on track, being sensitive to conflict and helping to resolve conflicts positively.

**Vice-Chairperson:** The vice-chair serves on the executive committee, assisting the chairperson and assuming the duties of the chair in her/his absence. The vice-chair may also facilitate designated agenda items during the meeting. The council may choose to have two or more vice-chairpersons depending on the size of the council and the complexity of its agenda. Expanding the steering committee in this way allows for more participation in the leadership of the council.

**Secretary:** The administrative secretary prepares summaries of the meetings of the council, maintains the membership roster, assures the preparation and dissemination of materials for the council meeting, and is responsible for all council correspondence. Some parishes have chosen to have non-member volunteer serve in this capacity. This allows all members of the council to participate fully in council proceedings.

## Appendix IV.6C CONSENSUS

Consensus is a group decision-making process which involves reflection, dialogue and consideration of options to seek a solution which is acceptable to the group. Consensus is a learned skill which involves openness, patience and time. This method of decision-making provides for open dialogue in which all participants are invited to offer their thoughts on the specific topic under consideration. Participants channel their efforts towards problem-solving within the context of discerning the will of God in the community.

The development of parish unity and harmonious relationships is one of the pastoral council's primary purposes. For this reason, parish pastoral councils make decisions through consensus rather than voting. Consensus is most authentically Christian when used in the context of prayerful communal discernment seeking God's will in a decision to be made. This process requires adaptability, a spirit of compromise, and openness to changing one's mind on the part of the participants.

In the consensus process, members of the group work to reach substantial, though not necessarily unanimous, agreement on matters of policy and setting a direction for the parish. The group strives to reach a decision that can be supported by all members of the decision-making group. The group involved in using consensus must look upon itself as friends seeking the truth together. This type of decision-making process lends itself to researching options, viewing different perspectives and compromise. The process leads to win-win decisions and therein lies its value.

The idea of consensus frequently runs contrary to our culture which places such a high value on winning in competition. This same attitude normally accepts decisions by democratic vote because the 'the people have spoken'. But just as competition produces winners, it also produces losers who may resent and strongly resist the implementation of 'voted' results. The whole concept of putting something to a vote can in itself create division within an organization. If you think about it, the win-lose scenario is inappropriate for the Church. Although we need to make decisions, we must be concerned that our decision-making process reflects a Christian lifestyle.



## Consensus

While it would be valuable to have as many decisions as possible arrived at by consensus, it is particularly important with strategic or sensitive issues. The more the process is used, the more comfortable participants become with it. At first consensus may take longer than other decision-making methods. However, consensus decisions lead to group ownership, firm support, better implementation and positive community impact.

### Before the meeting:

Each major proposal is submitted in writing (see Appendix IV 6.A) at least a week before the meeting at which it will be discussed, so that the materials can be distributed to the decision-makers who can then read and formulate an opinion before the meeting. Background material, data and other information should accompany the proposal. Alternatives can be included as part of the original proposal. Participants can also think of alternatives or options to present to the group.

### At the meeting:

Members come to the meeting prepared to state their positions on the issue. Each member briefly states his or her opinion with supporting reasons. The chair/facilitator needs to elicit clear responses during this **listening phase**, which is a testing for agreement. During this listening process no discussion or questions are allowed. Members of the group may note questions or points to be raised, additional options or possible obstacles, which can be brought up later in discussion.

After all opinions are initially expressed, the chair/facilitator may sense that there is agreement. In that case the following question is posed: “Do we have consensus that...*restate the proposal*...? If the group concurs, then a decision has been reached. If not, it would be appropriate to call a brief prayer/reflection period for members to spiritually ready themselves before moving to the **discussion phase**.

An atmosphere of openness, honesty and trust is essential. The appropriate attitude for decision-makers during the consensus process is a desire to reach a common conclusion and a willingness to find alternative solutions which everyone can support. In that cooperative spirit, conflict leads to a greater sharing of ideas and increased creativity. **Problem-solving** is a group effort as members seek common ground rather than compete with each other’s opinions. The group’s task becomes taking what appears to be conflict and turning it into an advantage. the chair/facilitator’s responsibility is to ‘manage’ the process so all members are heard and an atmosphere of cooperation prevails.

## Consensus

Following the prayer/reflection period, the chair/facilitator identifies points of agreement or disagreement as members share insights, pros, and cons, problems, obstacles and options. Each member's question, clarification or comment should move the group toward a decision. Debate or repetition of already-stated positions is discouraged. Differences of opinion are natural and expected. They need to be dealt with creatively and constructively in a Christian spirit. In exploring those differences, the best course of action will become apparent.

When a majority trend has developed, those in the minority will often present alternatives or alternative components. Those sharing the majority opinion should give careful consideration to such alternatives since they desire the ultimate support of the entire group. The group's efforts should be directed towards **finding a common ground or solution**.

All members are expected to disagree on occasion, but that does not give them the right to become disagreeable, argumentative or unkind. On the other hand, open and honest communication is necessary in developing consensus and members should not 'agree' with the majority simply to avoid conflict. The group may again enter into prayer to remain in touch with the Holy Spirit.

After people have had a fair opportunity to express opinions and options, the desired outcome is a common conclusion which can be **supported** by all members of the group. It is important that all members understand the nature of this support. Consensus strives toward a conclusion that can be supported by all, **even when some may personally disagree** with the conclusion. Consensus **does not mean** there is unanimous agreement. When the conclusion is reached, every member should be able to say, "I had every opportunity to freely express my opinions and to influence the decision. So that, now I am able to support the conclusion of the group because I believe the power of the Spirit was at work in the group's decision-making process."

When the chair/facilitator feels the group has reached the optimal level of support, he or she articulates the consensus that is present, stating the decision as it has been shaped and re-shaped by the group. The chair/facilitator indicates that this will now be submitted to the pastor for his approval.

## Consensus

At times consensus may not be reached, especially if the group has been in dialogue on the issue for more than an hour. In such cases, the following options are available to the group:

1. Postpone the decision until the next regularly scheduled meeting.
2. Refer the issue, its discussion and possible alternatives back to the committee, group or individual who submitted it. Request further information, options, or revisions.
3. Refer the matter to an ad hoc committee to work out a solution.
4. Call a special meeting to deal only with that issue.
5. Try a different decision-making process.

Other decision-making methods may result in quicker solutions but also may foster competition, bad feelings and lack of support. Trust, understanding and group support are the by-products of consensus. These qualities worthy of a little extra time and effort.

*For this command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say, "Who will go up in the sky and get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out? Nor is it across the sea that you should say, "Who will cross the sea, to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out? No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.*

*Deuteronomy 30:11-14*

## Resources for Parish Pastoral Councils

1. Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making.  
Mary Benet McKinney, OSB. Tabor Publishing: Allen, TX .1987.
2. Transforming the Parish: Models for the Future.  
Patricia M. Forster, OSF and Thomas P. Sweetser, S.J.  
Sheed and Ward: Kansas City, MO. 1993.
3. The Ministry of Pastoral Planning.  
The Archdiocese of Baltimore  
Division of Planning and Council Services  
320 Cathedral St.  
Baltimore, MD 21201. (published 1993).
4. How to Make Meetings Work.  
Michael Doyle and David Straus  
Jove Books: New York. 1976.
5. Creating an Effective Parish Pastoral Council.  
Robert G. Howes. Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN. 1991.



