



PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL GUIDEBOOK



Suggestions for creating and maintaining effective parish pastoral councils in line with the vision of Renew My Church

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Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset, especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as “collaborators” of the clergy, but, rather, as people who are really “co-responsible” for the Church’s being and acting. It is therefore important that a mature and committed laity be consolidated, which can make its own specific contribution to the ecclesial mission with respect for the ministries and tasks that each one has in the life of the Church and always in cordial communion with the bishops.

— Message of his holiness Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action, 2012

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

WHY DO WE NEED THIS NOW?

The Archdiocese of Chicago is blessed with a proud history of lay leadership and collaboration with clergy. Pastors in the archdiocese have been seeking the knowledge and insight of parishioners and fostering a sense of teamwork between clergy and laity for the betterment of parishes and our local Church for decades. And now more than ever, as the Universal Church is responding to the call to work in a synodal¹ way, this continued collaboration between the clergy and laity is foundational to our parish renewal efforts.

Today, many people do not know Jesus Christ and often reject Christ's Church without knowing who Jesus really is. Some believers in the Church have a weak sense of who Jesus is and what it means to follow Christ as a disciple. We cannot assume that faith will automatically be handed on to a new generation. We must proclaim the Gospel in new ways. While the mission of the Great Commission² is the same, our pastoral methods must change.

To address the challenges of our time, we are called by Jesus to rebuild. Renew My Church is a vision and strategic plan guiding our response to this call for renewal. It's not just the vision of the archdiocese but it is the vision for every parish as well. This spiritual revitalization will reclaim what is most central and sacred to our faith and breathe new life into our methods of sharing the Gospel. In this way, we can provide people a Church and a home for faith that is marked by more faithful discipleship, a loving community and an inspired source for witness.

As we find ourselves in an era where cultural support for religion can no longer be assumed, many of the pastoral methods and practices that we relied on in the past are not as effective as they once were for leading people to faith and building and nourishing disciples in community. We need to recognize that a radical change is required at a personal and communal level for this new, deeper calling to work with the risen Lord to renew the Catholic Church for the 21st century.

This guidebook details the renewed process for lay leadership and active participation in the life of the local parish, which is at the center of Renew My Church. Giving the laity and pastors the tools they need for stronger partnership and co-responsibility is the goal.

“Synodal dynamism must be nurtured in the real contexts of every local Church. What does this mean in practical terms? It means, first and foremost, working for the active participation of everyone in the life of the Church. In this regard, one tool for increasing the vision of the synodal and missionary Church is that of participatory bodies. These help the People of God to exercise fully their baptismal identity, to strengthen the bond between ordained ministries and the community, and to guide the process that goes from community discernment to pastoral decisions. For this reason, I invite you to strengthen the formation of participatory bodies and, at the parish level, to review the steps taken so far or, where such bodies are lacking, to understand what the obstacles are so that they can be overcome.”

— Address of his holiness Pope Leo XIV on the occasion of the Beginning of the New Pastoral Year in the Diocese of Rome, 2025

¹ Final Document for a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. 2024. synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html

² “Jesus approached and said to the eleven disciples, ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.’” – Matthew 28:18-20 NABRE

SECTION II

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

WHY EVEN HAVE A COUNCIL?

The Second Vatican Council first recommended parish pastoral councils.³ The Archdiocese of Chicago added the need for Parish Pastoral Councils in all parishes in 1989.⁴ The roots of parish pastoral councils, however, reach much farther back. Parish pastoral councils reflect the Church's understanding of communion, participation, gifts and consultation. These concepts stem from the origins of Christianity.

Communion Communion leads us to the heart of Christian identity. All Christians form one people. God has called us together to build community. A parish is meant to be a communion that evangelizes. Our communion is the foundation of our effects on behalf of the Church. "For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor 3:9). As Catholics we celebrate this unique call to unity in our celebration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as in our shared belief in the communion of the saints.

Participation Everyone is called to participate. Christians are participant members of the Body of Christ. "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). At baptism, we are made into a new creature, an adopted child of God, who has become a partaker of the divine nature, member of Christ and co-heir with Him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. This is a grand responsibility, yet one we do not do alone, every Christian has a part to play. All of us are to work together as partners in bringing forth God's kingdom.

Gifts As members of the Body of Christ, every Christian has a gift from God. It is given for the benefit of the Church and society at large. "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). All of the faithful should serve God in the Church according to the gifts they have received.

Consultation From the earliest days of the Church, the leaders would take counsel from the community. The apostles and the elders met at the Council of Jerusalem to discuss whether gentile Christians needed to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15, Galatians 2). Consultation ensured that the elders received good advice and that the community remained united.

Pastors also know that they themselves were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire mission of the Church. On the contrary, pastors understand that developing missionary disciples, who will in turn play a critical role in bringing others to Christ and ensuring the vitality of our parishes, is a paramount responsibility for them. Pastors establish councils because they seek advice on pastoral matters and recognize the importance of an individual's calling to service in the Church. They know that God's Spirit speaks through their people who, through the virtue of their own baptism, are called to participate in the priestly, kingly and prophetic mission of Christ. Pastors know that the baptized followers of Jesus are not simply members of the Church: they are the Church and that we are at our best when we come together. Therefore, having a council ensures that the pastor has access to the community's voice.

³ Vatican II, "Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People," *Apostolicam actuositatem*, November 18, 1965, no. 26, translated by "Father Finnian, OCSO," in Flannery, editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 791-2. See Mark F. Fischer, "What Was Vatican II's Intent Regarding Parish Council?" *Studia Canonica* 33 (1999): 5-25.

⁴ Book I **General Norms, Accountability and Ecclesiastical Processes**, §1901 and §1902

SECTION III

PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF A PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL

WHAT DOES THE COUNCIL ACTUALLY DO?

The **purpose** of a parish pastoral council is to foster full participation of the entire parish in the life and vision of the parish and mission of the Universal Church through advocacy and advisory support to the pastor concerning the needs of the faith community. Councils offer what no expert can offer: a perspective about what is right for a particular parish. With them, a pastor discerns the needs and desires of the parish. They bring the practical wisdom of parishioners as distinct from the expert opinion of the parish staff. This practical perspective is a critical piece for pastors and parish leadership teams (when applicable, discussed in more detail later in these guidebook) while they advise parish strategy and vision for growth. Councils are also able to facilitate a space for first encounter and foster a sense of belonging that is necessary for people to feel acknowledged, valued and empowered to exercise their baptismal call.

The members of parish pastoral councils **function** through a unique role to witness firsthand how God is working through them. Additionally, through the personal witness of their own encounter with God, they can awaken the need for God in others. They have the satisfaction of doing an important task which contributes to the well-being of the Church. Pope Paul VI stated that the parish 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 can be brought into greater conformity with the Gospel.”⁵

Examination Whatever pastoral matter pertaining to the work of the pastor and staff, including the well-being of the community, the needs of the parish and any concerns that will need attention in the future, are to be examined. The scope of the council may include everything that relates to the parish’s ministries of evangelization and discipleship, proclamation of God’s word, celebration of the sacraments, care for the faithful, promotion of the mission of the Church to the world and being good stewards of parish resources. *The pastor may not consult on matters of faith, orthodoxy, moral principles or laws of the Universal Church.*

Consideration No council will be satisfied with a dry recitation of the facts and figures about the parish and the local Church. Rather, members of the council want to understand their meaning. The council prays to discern and discover how God invites the parish community to respond. Consideration of any pastoral matter is always done through the lens of accompanying the faithful on their journey with Christ, as shown through the Discipleship Pathway (on page 7), and in line with the parish vision.

Practical Conclusions After a period of discernment, prayer and thoughtful conversations, the council recommends to the pastor (and parish leadership team, if applicable) what it believes should be done to foster the spiritual and pastoral life of the community. The council tries to actively discern where God is calling that particular parish and how the next steps will promote future growth in engagement, formation and active discipleship.

⁵ Canons 514, par. 1 and 536, par. 1. (Canon 514 refers to diocesan pastoral councils). Bold italic emphasis added.

SECTION IV

MODELS AND METHODS OF A PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL

WHAT IS A RENEWED MODEL OF THE COUNCIL?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has thus far refrained from publishing any guidance pertaining specifically to parish-based councils, likely because the Canon Law offers merely the briefest sketch of a pastoral council and grants a great deal of autonomy to bishops with respect to parish pastoral councils.⁶

Council of Ministries Model (Old Model)

The Council of Ministries model was a system of parish standing committees or commissions which the parish pastoral council coordinated, ensuring that all commissions aligned to the parish vision. It drew its members from the standing committees. This model decentralized decision making and spread it out over four to six commissions such as evangelization and missionary discipleship, worship or prayer and liturgy, education or faith formation, community building, outreach or social justice and service, and administration or accountability (or similar breakdowns).

This model ideally empowered lay leaders to make informed decisions about their ministries and prevented disorganization by bringing all commissions under one umbrella, the parish pastoral council. This model required full alignment and a clear understanding of the parish vision by all commission members, so, as they drove their specific ministries, they did so in a way that fostered collaboration, reflected the desire for ongoing formation and called forth engagement of new members. The pastor, as well as the chair of the council, had to ensure that general gatherings of the council were not focused on individual commission reports, but rather that those reports and the work of the commissions were in service to the bigger and overarching vision of the parish. Through years of experience and reflection with this model, more often than not a parish pastoral council constructed in this way defaulted to reporting, with little emphasis on collaboration and service to the vision. Perhaps a group dedicated to the reporting and alignment of ministries is still necessary, however a renewed parish pastoral council follows the Pastoral Planning Model detailed below.

Pastoral Advisory Model (New Model)

The Pastoral Advisory model has worked well in dioceses across the country as well as in parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Rather than coordinate a system of standing committees, it is a representative, advisory body. This model is an extremely helpful resource, especially if the pastor wants the council to help understand particular matters in order to make wise decisions on the parish's behalf. The council is to examine, consider and offer practical conclusions based on a question the pastor asks. Essentially anything, apart from faith, orthodoxy, moral principles or laws of the Universal Church are fair topics for the parish pastoral council using this model to address. A list of suggested priorities for a parish pastoral council in the new Pastoral Advisory model can be found in section IX.

⁶ Canon 536,

§1. Establishment of Pastoral Councils: The canon states that if the diocesan bishop deems it appropriate, and after consulting the presbyteral council, a pastoral council should be established in each parish. The pastor presides over this council, which includes the Christian faithful and those involved in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish. The purpose of this council is to assist in fostering pastoral activity within the parish community
§2. Nature and Governance of Pastoral Councils: The pastoral council is characterized as having a consultative vote only, meaning it provides advice and recommendations but does not have decision-making authority. The norms governing the operation of the pastoral council are determined by the diocesan bishop, ensuring that the council functions within the framework of the Church's broader governance structure

The **responsibility** of the parish pastoral council is to have permanent commitment to the vision and growth of the parish through input, feedback, and discernment of the movements of the Holy Spirit on behalf of the broader parish community and Universal Church.

The pastor invites the council to examine issues of real importance and should consider the council's wisdom when making a final decision. The study and reflection of the parish pastoral council enables the community to engage in long-term pastoral planning 2 – 5 years out and assess its effectiveness in growing an engaged church. The council members are asked to be active researchers of best pastoral practices and facilitators of parish discernment. The greatest advantages of this model are the realistic expectations and clear tasks.

WHAT ARE WORKING METHODS OF THE COUNCIL?

Pastoral Advisory Model

Pastoral advising can take place in many ways. The Archdiocese of Chicago supports pastoral advising through active guidance and insight from the Director of Vicariate Renewal (DVR) and their collaboration with teams in the vicariate office and Department of Parish Vitality and Mission.

DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY

The Archdiocese of Chicago, through research and learnings, has developed a method to define the different stages of our journey in relationship with Jesus and the faith community. This is called the Discipleship Pathway. It identifies four pivotal moments (Explore, Encounter, Grow, Go) that represent a continuous deepening of our own personal and communal discipleship throughout life. But at its core are five elements that guide the rollout of the pathway and ensure deep culture change at the parish level — essential for renewal. A thriving parish pastoral council will use its representative nature to influence and impact culture change in the parish through engagement with the core elements.



NEEDS ANALYSIS

Another method for a Pastoral Advisory council to discern how God is calling the parish to fulfill its mission is through a needs analysis:

1. Identifying needs (perhaps gathered by parishioners, ministry leaders, or staff)
2. Ranking those needs in order of importance and impact
3. Aligning your needs to the pastoral vision of Renew My Church – including evaluation of resources in order to invest in the spiritual growth of the parish
4. Studying how to meet those needs by consulting parishioners and researching what experts say on the subject
5. Making recommendations to pastor for implementation by another parish leadership group

Following either of these methods, a parish pastoral council will support the pastor in developing the pastoral vision and strategy for growth.

SECTION V

PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL FORMATION

HOW DO YOU FORM A STRONG COUNCIL?

A realistic timeframe for the establishment of a parish pastoral council, or re-formation of an existing parish pastoral council, is between three and six months. It is important that all parishioners are informed and consulted at each stage of the formation process. When this is done effectively, there will be a strong sense of ownership of the parish pastoral council by parishioners.

The generalized formation process suggested here has been developed, modified and used effectively with more than fifty parish pastoral councils across a wide variety of settings and circumstances. Very large to extremely small parishes, in many different urban and rural settings have met success with this process. As no two parishes are identical, each parish is encouraged to implement aspects of the process which are appropriate to their local situation.

First-Time Formation

For parishes unifying as a result of the structural renewal phase of Renew My Church, it is recommended that they begin forming their new parish pastoral council using steps 1 – 3 outlined here. The Directors of Vicariate Renewal should then be brought in to provide a Principles and Framework presentation as referred in step 4.

Step One: Form a Preparation Group

To begin the process of forming a parish pastoral council in a recently unified parish (or a parish whose parish pastoral council has been disbanded for a long period of time), the pastor invites six to eight parishioners to form a preparation group. Members of the preparation group will assist the pastor in discerning potential members of the parish pastoral council, communicating the establishment of the parish pastoral council within the community and providing needed support and context within the community. These parishioners may come from previous parish pastoral council's or unification teams. Within the group, there should be diversity within its members. Parishioners should be informed of the membership of the preparation group when planning begins. There should be no expectation or assumption that the members of this group will automatically become members of the parish pastoral council. It is possible that some members of this group will become pastoral council members, in which case the time served on this preparation group should be applied towards their first term. This will help establish staggered terms.

Step Two: Communicate with Parishioners

The initial task of the preparation group is to ensure that parishioners know that a parish pastoral council is being formed and the reasoning behind the decisions being made. The information needed to be communicated to the parish at large is:

1. Names of the members of the preparation group and an explanation of their role
2. Background information about parish pastoral councils and the renewed model
3. Brief outline of the steps being taken and the time frame involved
4. Invitation to provide responses and comments relating to shared materials
5. Arrangements for recommending potential members of the parish pastoral council

Step Three: Invite Recommendation of Possible Members

All parishioners are invited to recommend any number of members of the community who they would consider suitable to serve on the parish pastoral council. The preparation group contacts all persons recommended and invites them to an informational meeting. The affirmation that comes from being recommended and contacted personally is of lasting value and tends to raise morale across the parish. Note that section VI of this guidebook goes into more detail concerning the final selection of members. At this time, it is simply an invitation to learn more about the parish pastoral council that is being extended.

Step Four: Provide an Informational Meeting for Recommended Members

The Director of Vicariate Renewal, with support from the pastor, provides a Principles and Framework presentation for the informational meeting to potential parish pastoral council members. The meeting should begin with a prayer experience. The prayer component is the most important element of this gathering, as it is meant to call upon the Holy Spirit to speak directly to the hearts of those invited as they discern this invitation to leadership. The meeting will also provide historical explanation and context for a renewed parish pastoral council, discuss the purpose, function, and responsibilities of the council. The meeting should be no more than two hours.

Prior to the next meeting, those who were present will indicate, either in writing or orally, whether they would accept or decline membership to the parish pastoral council pending the parish discernment process.

Ongoing Formation

Step Five: Arrange a Formation and Orientation Session

When a new parish pastoral council is established, or when there is a change of membership, significant advantages are gained by including a Formation and Orientation Session at the beginning of each new term of office. In the instance of a new parish pastoral council being created this session will be led by the Director of Vicariate Renewal (DVR), following up on the "Principles and Framework" presentation. As new members are added to an existing council, they themselves will lead the Formation and Orientation Session. Important aspects included in this session are:

1. Recognizing the importance of God's call to this form of missionary discipleship
2. Building of trust and teamwork
3. Focusing on the context of parish pastoral councils within the vision of the parish
4. Stressing the importance of prayer and ongoing formation
5. Understanding general operations and practicalities (i.e. agendas, minutes, meeting times, selection of executive committee).

Step Six: Review Parish Pastoral Guidelines

If a parish pastoral council is to function effectively, the community must have guidelines available to them in a user-friendly **format**, which should include:

- a. Clear statement of the purpose and function of parish pastoral council as relating to the vision of the parish
- b. Responsibilities of members
- c. Contribution to the decision-making process
- d. Accountability
- e. Membership numbers

- f. Eligibility for membership
- g. Process of selection
- h. Term of office
- i. Frequency of meetings
- j. Strategies for ongoing communication with the community.

Each parish will determine the contents of these guidelines, as decided by the parish pastoral council and pastor to suit their specific needs. Nonetheless, these guidelines should be revisited once a year to ensure alignment or offer the opportunity for revision to any of the components.

Step Seven: Commission the new Parish Pastoral Council Members

The public **commissioning** of parish pastoral council members is an important way of connecting this leadership body with the wider parish community.

It is also recommended to publicize basic information about parish pastoral council members in parish media to allow for and demonstrate the opportunity to communicate and share with these community leaders.

When a newly established parish pastoral council meets for the first official meeting, it is optional for the Director of Vicariate Renewal to serve as a facilitator. Having the Director of Vicariate Renewal facilitate this first meeting will help reinforce the co-responsibility of the laity, establish best practices for meetings, and assist with setting priorities (see section IX).

SECTION VI

SELECTION OF MEMBERS

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE EFFECTIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS?

In very general terms, Canon Law speaks about members of the parish pastoral council by saying they will be chosen to reflect the wisdom on the entire people of God. That's daunting! In practical terms, they should be people of faith and on fire for Christ, be open-minded, have the patience to listen and reflect on what is being said, understand the value of various points of view and determine with others what is best for the parish. They should have a deep understanding of the vision of the parish as well as the mission of the Church.

The 8 – 12 members of a parish pastoral council should represent and advocate for the various facets of parish life through their role as active parishioners.

Gifts Discernment It is important to recognize that each person has unique gifts to bring to the council, including the pastor! Every parish pastoral council should strive for a well-rounded representation of gifts. This helps create strong self-awareness, cohesiveness and collaboration.

Ephesians 4:11-12 says, "...he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as shepherds and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...". The APEST test is a gifts discernment tool based on this scripture passage which helps followers of Christ recognize how they have been gifted for the work of building the kingdom on earth. Inviting potential parish pastoral council members to take this **test** may assist them in their discernment into parish leadership by identifying with one of the following:

- Apostles — People who are pioneers, innovators, risk takers, visionaries, explorers, ground breakers
- Prophets — People who are justice minded, questioning, truth tellers, advocates, cause driven
- Evangelists — People who are marketers, recruiters, enthusiastic promoters, connectors, catalysts
- Shepherds — People who are soul healers, nurturers, reconcilers, unifiers, caregivers
- Teachers — People who are historians, lovers of catechesis and concerned with the right doctrine

Each gift does not have to be represented on the council, nor should be used as a requisite for membership. However, knowing what gifts are (and aren't!) present on the council will ensure that the consult being provided to the pastor is being considered from multiple perspectives.

Community Discernment In the Pastoral Planning model, more parishes are moving in the direction of a discernment process of one kind or another and away from parish-wide elections. Although the election process involves the entire parish and thereby highlights the important role played by the parish pastoral council, a particular candidate's visibility in the parish and relative popularity can skew an election's outcome. As a result, elections do not always produce the optimum mix of gifts, abilities, skills and dispositions.

The process of having the community discern who belongs on the council has two components. The first component is general participation. Council members are chosen to reflect the wisdom of the parish community. This is the reason that pastors rely on the help of parishioners to select council members. The second component is informed choice. Unless parishioners understand the parish pastoral council and have a thorough opportunity to judge who is best for the role, their choice will not be informed. When parishioners understand the council's ministry and have an opportunity to discern which parishioners are suited for it, they can contribute enormously to the selection of council members.

The process for selection of members will vary from parish to parish, but it should always involve the parishioners in some way. When the membership is determined mainly by private invitation, there is very little possibility that the whole community will recognize the supposedly representative group.

Council members, once selected, should serve for three-year staggered terms, with the possibility of serving a second term. One-third of the council should change each year. Additionally, the council should complete a **yearly assessment** to measure improvement and highlight areas of opportunity.

SECTION VII

THE PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL MEETING

HOW DO YOU RUN A PRODUCTIVE MEETING?

Agenda The most important element of any parish pastoral council meeting is a good **agenda**.

A productive agenda gives the date, time, duration and location of the meeting. It indicates a time for prayer and for the formation of members. The agenda should also refer to the previous meeting and seek approval of its published minutes. The agenda should next indicate the various topics to be discussed by the council and what the council intends to accomplish under each topic (ie. the purpose of the discussion). 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 meeting. The amount of time allotted to each item on the agenda should also be listed to ensure expectations are the same for all present, and the chair will be assigned to ensure that the council follows the agenda topics and time allotments. Whatever time allocation is agreed to, strict adherence is key. If an agenda item cannot be concluded within the amount of time allotted for it, the item should be tabled until the next meeting.

Meeting Agenda Elements

- Welcome
- Opening Prayer and/or Formation Activity
- Review of Meeting Agenda
- Review and Approval of Prior Meeting Minutes
- Pastor's Reflection of Issue(s) or Update
- Element of Learning (something that will foster the growth of pastoral awareness and enable the council to grow in their exercise of pastoral governance)
- Topic(s) to Be Addressed:
 - Pastoral Planning Model: Ongoing Development and/or Reflection of the Issue(s) Being Addressed
- Review of Next Steps with Measurable Outcomes and Clear Ownership
- Next Meeting Date and Time
- Meeting Evaluation: Did the meeting accomplish its goals? Was there movement on the agenda? Did council members truly listen to one another?
- Closing Prayer

Parish Pastoral Council members should receive the agenda (and any other materials pertinent to the meeting) at least one week before the meeting so that they can prepare.

The heart of every agenda is the list of the topics to be discussed and the proposed activity of the council with regard to them. It is not enough to simply list the topics. The agenda must also indicate how the council will treat it. Each activity requires a different kind of preparation. Council members need to know whether they are to listen, brainstorm, refine, take a poll, debate or conclude. By clearly stating what the council hopes to accomplish, the agenda helps ensure that the expectations of the council are realistic and that the members can accomplish the work they planned for themselves.

WHO LEADS THE MEETING?

Pastor The parish pastoral council exists to assist the pastor and represent the parish. The pastor benefits from the knowledge and variety of views of the council members. With the Pastoral Planning model, the pastor chooses the matters to be taken up by the council perhaps based on their recommendation. The pastor decides to accept, modify, defer, reject or otherwise dispose of any practical solutions offered by the council. The pastor should also ensure alignment between the parish leadership team and/or the parish staff and the parish pastoral council. If the parish operates with a parish leadership team, at least one member of that team should participate in the work of the council to ensure pastoral alignment and communication of day-to-day pastoral activity of the team.

Chair The parish pastoral council chair's primary role is to make sure that the meeting proceeds smoothly and adheres to the items and time allocations of the agenda. The chair can best be described as the facilitator of the meeting. The chair ensures that everyone understands the purpose of the agenda item being discussed and re-directs the conversation back to the purpose. The chair also distinguishes between the questions that can be readily answered and those that will require future research.

Vice Chair The vice chair exercises the several "in-meeting" responsibilities in the absence of the chair and participates in the executive committee, described more fully below.

Secretary Parish pastoral council secretaries are responsible for keeping meeting minutes or, at a minimum, a decision register in which all decisions recommended and approved by the pastor are recorded. That said, it is all too easy to reduce the secretary's role to that of a simple "note taker." Effective parish pastoral council secretaries compare what the agenda says the meeting is about with what actually takes place during the meeting. The secretary's reflection in this regard should be incorporated into every post-meeting assessment. The secretary may also help the chair keep the council faithful to its agenda and helping to ensure that the conversation stays focused and relevant to a particular topic.

Executive Committee The executive committee is composed of the pastor, the chair, the vice-chair and the secretary. This committee plans the agenda and informs the members of it at least one week in advance. The executive committee ensures that the vision of the parish is at the center of all agenda items. Task progress and team performance should be assessed on an ongoing basis by the executive committee. The term for the executive committee should be 1-2 years, as determined by each parish when the guidelines are reviewed annually.

WHAT SETS THE TONE OF THE MEETING?

Meeting Prayer The work of the council is carried out best with an awareness of God's presence. The necessity of prayer cannot be overstated. Prayer can be done in any variety of ways, including a lectio divina reflection on a Gospel reading, an extended reflection on a parish's vision statement or any other way the pastor deems appropriate. The key is that prayer not be pursued in an obligatory fashion. "Book end prayer" performed perfunctorily at the beginning and the end of meetings is not adequate. The Holy Spirit needs room to work! Extended prayer creates this kind of space. Being open in prayer to the movements of the Holy Spirit and the needs of each council member will strengthen the team and it's work to build up the kingdom. Making and sustaining missionary disciples starts with authentic encounters with God outside the context of the Mass and extended prayer time for council members can help accomplish this.

Finally, a prayerful “timeout” is sometimes needed when deliberations over a challenging topic break down or are stymied in some way. Council members can be invited to ask, “What would Jesus do in this circumstance?” The chair should be alert to the need for these kinds of timeouts.

Consensus Decision Making Since the council is seeking to discover where God might be leading them as a parish, using the voting process to make decisions might imply that God is always on the side of the majority. However, a reading of the Scriptures reveals that there were many occasions in which God also spoke through a single person or small group, often without support from the wider community. Jesus was often the minority point of view! From this perspective, using the consensus process to make recommendations when considering significant issues which affect many parishioners works best.

A significant majority of parish pastoral councils adhere to a consensus process of one kind or another as their decision making strategy. Voting makes little sense when the pastor reserves the right to accept, reject, modify, table or otherwise dispose of a council's recommendations. A consensus decision, in short, is one everyone can live with. It is not unanimity.

In the case of complex, contested and/or consequential questions, one of four decision positions should be formally solicited by the chair when trying to reach consensus:

1. Active agreement (“I endorse the proposal in its entirety.”)
2. Agreement with reservations (“I generally support the proposal, but, nonetheless, harbor one or more reservations.”)
3. Non-support (“I do not support the proposal because I have unresolved concerns, but I do not choose to block it. I can live with it.”)
4. Block (“I cannot live with the proposal for the following reasons...”)

This kind of polling may sound a lot like voting, but it is intended to guide further deliberations or discernment. If there is a lack of a clear consensus on a complex, contested and/or consequential question, the chair may need to call a timeout in order to provide council members with an opportunity for further reflection and prayer. In some instances, a question may need to be tabled if a consensus cannot be reached. Pushing forward with a decision without consensus is asking for problems down the road.

In addition to the parish leadership team, members of the staff may be invited to attend the parish pastoral council meetings a couple times a year, but since they inform the pastor on a regular basis, they need not have recommendation making authority.

Accountability The success of the parish depends on trust between the council members, the pastor and the parish leadership team, and each entity holding the other accountable. If members are not living up to the requirements of participation on the council (excessive absences, disrespecting another's differing point of view, leaking confidential information to the parish community before the council is ready to share it, etc.), consequences must be firmly established and communicated.

SECTION VIII

THE PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL AND THE PARISH

HOW DOES THE COUNCIL RELATE TO THE OTHER MODELS OF PARISH LEADERSHIP?

Parish Finance Council (Consultative Model)

The parish finance council, mandated by Canon Law⁷, is separate and distinct from the parish pastoral council. Communication between the two councils is essential. In order to ensure this communication, a member of the parish finance council should serve on the parish pastoral council as an ex officio, non-decision-making member. Pastors should distinguish between the technical questions that require the expert opinions of the staff or finance council and the more pastoral questions directed to the parish pastoral council. The Director of Vicariate Operations (DVO) can be very helpful in addressing questions pertaining to the parish finance council and providing training following these **guidelines**.

Parish Staff (Positional Model)

Parish staff members are a helpful resource for the parish pastoral council. To encourage unity and integration, and to foster a close working relationship among the parish groups and the parish staff, the parish pastoral council should meet with the parish staff at least once a year to celebrate achievement, cast long-term vision, clarify direction and ensure alignment.

Parish Leadership Team (Collaborative Model)

A parish leadership team is a group of four to six members who share responsibility for the success of the parish with the pastor. The composition of the parish leadership team will depend on the size, nature and makeup of the parish but will likely include some mix of key senior staff members who oversee major areas of responsibility and key parish leaders. They will be mature, trustworthy, influential and capable of having strategic conversations. The parish leadership team meets weekly or bi-weekly and co-owns, with the pastor, the implementation for parish vision and strategy for growth. The members of the parish leadership team participate in the governing responsibility of the pastor by supporting day to day parish missional operations.

Does your parish have a parish leadership team or are you interested in beginning one and wondering how it works with and is distinct from a parish pastoral council? See the table on the next page for an illustration of how a Parish Leadership Team relates to the Parish Pastoral Council.

The Parish Pastoral Council as described in this guidebook follows an Advisory Model.

⁷ Canon 537

"In each parish there is to be a finance council which is governed, in addition to universal law, by norms issued by the diocesan bishop and in which the Christian faithful, selected according to these same norms, are to assist the pastor in the administration of the goods of the parish."

Parish Leadership Team

Parish Pastoral Council

Purpose



The purpose of a Parish Leadership Team is to support the pastor in shared leadership with discerned team members that provide operational and strategic assistance in order to advance the vision of the faith community and assist in proactive decision-making, communication, and management of parish missional operations, therefore providing the pastor space and time to perform pastoral responsibilities.

The purpose of a Parish Pastoral Council is to foster full participation of the entire community in the life and vision of the parish and mission of the Universal Church through advocacy and advisory support to the pastor (and parish leadership team when applicable) concerning the needs of the faith community.

Scope & Responsibility



The scope and responsibility of a Parish Leadership Team is to be perpetual vision carriers for the parish community. To provide ongoing priority setting with regards to the needs of various areas of parish life. To be the primary short-term strategic planning and executing team; 3 – 24 months out.

The scope and responsibility of the Parish Pastoral Council is to have permanent commitment to the vision and growth of the parish through input, feedback and discernment of the movements of the Holy Spirit on behalf of the broader parish community and Universal Church. To engage in long-term pastoral planning; 2 – 5 years out.

Members, Terms & Meeting Cadence



The members of a Parish Leadership Team (4 – 6 ppl) serve to balance and enhance the leadership gifts of the pastor through normative, positional representation as selected by the pastor, either as parishioners or staff with their own gifts and expertise. Their terms are undefined, however a yearly assessment of the team is recommended to evaluate success. Body meets as determined by the pastor, either weekly or bi-weekly.

The members of a Parish Pastoral Council (8 – 12 ppl) represent and advocate for the various facets of parish life through their role as active parishioners, either nominated or elected, however always determined through prayerful discernment by the pastor and potential council members. They serve in staggered terms from 1 – 3 years, perhaps in leadership roles. Body meets as determined by the pastor and council: either monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly.

SECTION IX

SUGGESTED PRIORITIES, QUESTIONS, GOALS

WHAT SHOULD THE COUNCIL DO?

A parish pastoral council formed in line with the vision of Renew My Church should consider the following matters when realizing their active, representative role in the parish. Each priority has two accompanying questions to help guide the work of the parish pastoral council towards the identified goal, but the methods in which the questions are answered will be dependent on the parish pastoral council. These priorities, questions, and goals are simply meant to be the starting point of discernment for parish pastoral council areas of focus.

Prayerful discernment of the needs of the community and movements of the Holy Spirit should be taken into account when determining the adoption of one of these suggested areas of focus, or any other that is deemed necessary by the parish pastoral council.

Priority	Questions	Goal
Understanding Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Who is here? (internal)- Who is around? (external)	Using data to be conscious of the full community
Fostering Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What ministries support the work of the parish?- What micro-communities are present within the parish at-large?	Aligning all to the call of missionary discipleship
Including Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What methods of communication allow input to the parish from the PPC?- What methods of communication allow input from the parish to the PPC?	Ensuring pastoral decisions are informed by communal values
Examining Hospitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Who are the new parishioners?- What keeps existing parishioners here?	Extending welcome and engagement to every parishioner
Exploring Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What other faith communities can collaborate with us?- Who provides outreach services in the surrounding community?	Developing relationships with neighbors

SECTION X

CONCLUSION

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

To carry out the mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ and building up the community of the faithful, the development of effective structures is necessary in order to align the various efforts of all who are involved in this endeavor. Through the creation and continuation of an effective parish pastoral council, the clergy, religious and laity can join together to create a vision and set goals leading to the successful implementation of the mission of Christ.

Your parish is not alone on this journey! We are blessed to be a part of the Archdiocese of Chicago with resources to lean on and guide us. If you have questions about parish pastoral councils or this guide in particular, reach out to your Director of Vicariate Renewal.

“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.”

— **Evangelii Gaudium (Joy of the Gospel); Pope Francis**



RENEW MY CHURCH PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you speak to us today,
as you spoke to holy men and women
who have gone before us.

In every age and in our own time,
you call to us and say: Renew My Church.
Pour out the gift of your Holy Spirit upon us,
and so enable us

- to hear you clearly
- to listen to each other attentively
- to imagine our future boldly
- to discern your direction wisely
- to persevere in your holy will courageously
- to stay together in charity
- to surrender our own plans readily
- to embrace the greater good
- to hand on your gifts to future generations.

May we remain in the holy company of
the Blessed Virgin Mary, the apostles and all the saints.

May their example and presence
inspire us with patient confidence
in the work of your grace.

We ask this of you who live and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, forever and ever.

Amen