

**HANDBOOK**  
**for**  
**PARISH**  
**PASTORAL**  
**COUNCILS**

**Third Edition**

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©

Archdiocese of Brisbane

143 Edward St, Brisbane, Australia

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## Chapter 1

# Parish Pastoral Councils within the Life of the Church

*(Insert at beginning)*

***Promoting understanding of the Church's mission and encouraging people to explore possibilities for living that mission in all aspects of their lives.***

## WHY HAVE PARISH COUNCILS?

Parish Councils<sup>1</sup> are one of the structures which were strongly recommended by the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council. The purpose of the councils was seen as furthering the work of the Church by fostering the spiritual growth of parishioners and leading them to respond actively to their universal call to mission.

*In dioceses, as far as possible, councils should be set up to assist the Church's apostolic work, whether in the field of making the gospel known and people holy or in charitable, social or other spheres.<sup>2</sup>*

While some Pastoral Councils were in existence prior to the Second Vatican Council, the consequent growth of Pastoral Councils has been part of the post-conciliar movement toward shared responsibility and shared ministry. Pastoral Councils witness to the basic equality of dignity of all members by reason of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, highlighting the role of all to share in the saving mission of Jesus. Consequently, they show forth the reality that all are involved in continuing the work of Jesus which will proceed until God's values of love, justice and peace reign in the hearts and lives of the people of all nations.

## TOWARDS COMMUNITY AND MISSION

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, and even since that time, many people's understanding of participation in the Church contained a strong emphasis on achieving their own salvation. From such an approach came the perspective that lay people were passive consumers of the liturgical, educational and pastoral services provided largely by priests and religious.

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<sup>1</sup> Historically the name *Parish Council* was the original term used. The growing emphasis on the pastoral focus of councils has resulted in the adoption of the term *Parish Pastoral Council*. The expanded name also helps to distinguish it from any other councils operating in the parish, such as the *Parish Finance Council*. Within the text, the shortened term *Pastoral Council* is used in most instances.

<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 26.

At the same time, however, considerable numbers of Catholics, especially those involved in many lay apostolic organisations worldwide, have seen their role as supporting the pastoral role of the Bishop. Their efforts prior to the Second Vatican Council made a significant contribution to the ensuing richness that developed both during and after the Council.

In calling the Church to a new sense of community and mission, the Bishops of Vatican II sought to change the emphasis from passive to active involvement for all members of the *People of God*. Some of the key understandings highlighted were:

- The Church is the *People of God* with whom God communicates in love.
- Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist form a common bond that unites everyone (priests and laity), calling all to active participation in the Church's mission for the life of the world.
- All are called to engage in mission in the concrete circumstances of their lives.
- Each person's contribution to the mission of the Church is unique and indispensable.

The Bishops signalled that, to be relevant and effective in the contemporary world and to be faithful to the mission of Christ, the Church must be concerned not only with its own needs and laws and structures, but also with the concerns and needs of people generally. At the heart of a renewed vision of Church was an openness to listen, to read and to respond to the signs of the times.

*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.*<sup>3</sup>

From the Second Vatican Council the hope was that Parish Councils would become effective vehicles for the promotion of an enriched understanding and an active implementation of the role of the People of God in the mission of the Church.

## **THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

The concept of the mission of the Church is one that is both profound and very simple. The challenge is to describe the mission of the Church in a way that is encouraging and easily related to the ordinariness of day-to-day living.

The mission of the Church, the People of God, can be understood as the continuation of the work of Jesus, which will proceed until God's values of love, justice and peace reign in the hearts and lives of the people of all nations.

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<sup>3</sup> Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1

Four of the basic elements of the Church's mission may be described as:

- **proclaiming** the good news of God's love throughout the world
- **inviting** more and more people into the community of disciples
- **sanctifying** by encouraging the whole community of faith to grow in holiness
- **transforming** the world until justice, love and peace prevail.

The following characteristics are evident, in varying degrees, in a mission-focussed Christian community, conscious of its union with Christ.

Attractiveness: The community is recognised and valued as a source of spiritual nourishment, belonging, healing, meaning, personal transformation and challenge.

Hospitality: Each member of the community recognises and takes on a personal responsibility to welcome newcomers. A deep sense of respect for the dignity and worth of every person is a principle that underlies every action.

Inclusiveness: There is a spirit of inclusion in the community for everyone irrespective of age, personal circumstance, ability, behaviour, ethnicity, lifestyle preference, disability and degree of involvement.

Outward focus: The community actively embraces a life-giving focus directed towards recognising and responding to issues of concern within society generally. Members are encouraged and supported in their efforts to permeate all aspects of life with God's values of love, justice and peace. Working with like-minded people in the wider community, they continually challenge the unjust treatment of people and their environment, locally and globally.

The characteristics outlined form a framework within which Pastoral Councils can evaluate their efforts to build a vital Christian community focussed on living and promoting the mission of the Church.

## **A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

Critical to a practical approach to the mission of the Church for the People of God is the realisation that the baptised followers of Jesus are not simply members of the Church; they **ARE** the Church. The mission of the Church is the mission of the vast majority of church members who live out their lives in the secular world, as well as the bishops, priests and religious women and men working in specific church ministries.



For many people, the mission of the Church is understood to be the work done by bishops, priests, religious women and men, and those volunteers or paid employees who serve in specific ministries of the Church. However, such an understanding overlooks the value of the vast amount of work carried out daily, in God's name, by the majority of Church members. This happens in homes and families, workplaces, community activities, the institutions of society and leisure-time pursuits. It is only through the efforts of all the faithful in these situations, that the Church can be present and active, transforming society like yeast in dough.

In the daily circumstances of life, baptised persons encounter many opportunities to participate in the Church's mission, acting consciously in ways that reflect the love and compassion of God. All people of goodwill live and promote the mission of the Church in their homes and families, in workplaces, at social gatherings and in the wider community when, consciously aware of their call to mission, they:

- show respect for another person's dignity and worth
- build life-giving relationships
- work conscientiously
- deal fairly with clients
- question underlying values
- offer practical help
- share faith and prayer
- celebrate Eucharist
- are generous, kind and/or friendly
- are honest and/or courageous
- listen helpfully
- share joy and enthusiasm
- forgive from the heart.

There are many other ways in which the mission of the Church can be lived and promoted and it is such actions that:

- proclaim the good news, sometimes attracting others to seek an explanation of what motivates and sustains those who follow Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life.
- inspire people to request membership of the Church. How many people seeking adult initiation nominate the faithful witness of a Catholic relative, friend or workmate as the source of their interest in becoming a Catholic?
- assist people to grow in love and compassion for those around them and to seek a deeper relationship with God.
- continue the work of transforming society into a place of justice, love and mutual respect.

Action that transforms society begins with people who recognise their own dignity and worth. Flowing from this recognition comes the realisation of the right to live, work and spend leisure time in circumstances that reflect that dignity.

As individuals discover that their particular concerns or difficulties are shared by many other people who all have the same dignity and rights, the

possibilities for working together to effect change on a wider scale become evident, exciting and challenging.

In the search for ways to build a more just and caring society, the People of God are led to question the causes and structures that bring suffering to significant numbers of people whose dignity and worth are disregarded as they are denied their right to a fair share of the necessities of life.

People who are committed to living their baptismal call in the ordinary circumstances of daily life soon find that they cannot sustain their commitment without regular attention to personal prayer and reflection on their daily activities. All need the help available through sharing Eucharist and studying and reflecting on Scripture, as well as frequent opportunities for exchanging experiences with others who share their commitment. In addition, assistance is needed to develop knowledge and skills that facilitate the connection of lived experience with what can be learned from Scripture and the teachings of the Church.

In summary, the People of God do not have to *invent* their mission or go about searching for it. The very basis of response to the baptismal call to participate actively in the mission of the Church exists primarily in the ordinary circumstances of everyday living. Consequently, it is a key element of the work of a Parish Pastoral Council to consider ways to provide opportunities for parishioners to:

- discover, or rediscover, the personal and community call to mission that derives from their baptism
- sustain their efforts to live as Catholics who effectively transform society.

## **THE REALITY ENCOUNTERED BY PASTORAL COUNCILS**

Any brief survey of parish communities will reveal that the People of God are facing a range of issues that impact on their daily living, affecting their faith commitment and participation in parish life. It might also be noted that parish staff and community leaders do not escape the pressures felt by the people they serve. It is not uncommon to find staff stretched to the limit in terms of time, energy, too few personnel and limited finance, while at the same time trying to deal with similar issues in family, workplace and the general community.

Some of the significant factors impacting strongly on the lives of people who form church communities include:

- overwhelming busyness that characterises much of life today, affecting people's health and their ability to identify and address problem areas in their lives
- increasingly stressful work situations e.g. long hours, demands for high levels of performance, intense competition for available work
- in country areas, the ravages of drought and low commodity prices leading to despair
- unemployment or the fear of retrenchment or redundancy

- pressure on personal relationships often leading to dysfunctional family situations
- the sense of failure experienced by many parents as they watch their children reject treasured values
- the sense of hopelessness, particularly as it affects young people
- alienation from the Church e.g. divorced/remarried, lifestyle preferences
- a sense of there being no place for them in the Church e.g. young people, single adults
- the effects of chronic and/or terminal illness in families
- pressures of caring for elderly relatives and/or children with particular needs
- loneliness caused by illness, death of a loved one, isolation from family or friends, lack of adequate transport, or being housebound caring for small children or the chronically ill or elderly
- the human tragedy caused by illicit drugs, alcohol and gambling
- a sense of helplessness in the face of world-wide suffering
- the failure of 'religion' to address people's spiritual hunger.

At the same time, people are searching for:

- an understanding of the spiritual dimension of life
- a sense of God's presence
- meaning and purpose in their lives
- reasons to hope amidst the seeming chaos and negativity
- real happiness with family and friends
- ways to be sustained in their efforts and in their faith
- appropriate opportunities to be of service in areas of special need.

People experiencing these situations may look to the Church for help to make sense of what is happening to them and to give meaning and value to what they are already doing. Their baptismal call is not intended to be an invitation to a life of endurance where they are simply putting up with life's difficulties. Rather, the invitation is to love faithfully and tenderly, to work with honesty and integrity, to pursue God's values of love, justice and peace in all undertakings, and to leave the imprint of God's goodness wherever they go.

If the Church is to have relevance in today's circumstances, continuing efforts are required to find new ways to assist parishioners to connect their daily experience with the faith they proclaim and their efforts to live that faith each day.

When Pastoral Councils approach their task within the context of the mission of the Church, their focus needs to reflect an understanding of the hopes and concerns of parishioners. Whatever actions are recommended, it is important that they be presented in ways that:

- give meaning to people's lives and value to what they are already doing
- become life-giving rather than an added burden
- respect and value the efforts and experiences of the past
- connect the faith professed with the concerns and difficulties experienced
- offer a sense of empowerment and hope.

## CONCLUSION

When Pastoral Councils experience encouragement and support as a structure integral to Church activity, their capacity to contribute to the life of the Church continues to evolve. In union with Christ, their task is to assist in developing a clear focus for a community intent on living and proclaiming God's values of love, justice and peace.

From such a perspective, Pastoral Councils are challenged to be attentive to the realities of life within society and constantly to search together with the community being served, for where God may be leading. It is essential therefore that Councils be clearly focussed on their role within the context of the mission of the Church.

There is a growing conviction that Pastoral Councils are key bodies in promoting understanding of the Church's mission as they encourage people to explore the possibilities for living that mission in all aspects of their lives.

*(shaded section)*

## STRATEGIES FOR USING THE TEXT FOR ONGOING FORMATION

### **Before the Pastoral Council meeting**

On the prepared agenda, nominate one appropriate section of any chapter of this *Handbook for Parish Pastoral Councils* to be read and reflected upon by all members prior to the meeting. For example, perhaps nominate one of the following:

- Why have Parish Councils?
- Towards Community and Mission
- A Practical Approach to the Mission of the Church
- Pastoral Issues
- Communication
- Individual Ongoing Formation
- The Pastoral Council and the Parish Priest

In addition all members prepare responses to one of the following questions as requested:

- *What did you find interesting, helpful or surprising?*
- *What comments or questions does the content raise?*
- *In what ways does it impact on our work as a Pastoral Council?*
- *What strategies might we adopt as a consequence?*

### **During the Pastoral Council meeting**

Following the opening prayer, spend a short time e.g. five minutes, sharing the above prepared responses in groups of two or three people, so that every person has the opportunity to contribute. On most occasions, a discussion in the total group will then follow.

## Chapter 2

# Role and Function of a Pastoral Council

*(Insert at beginning)*

***Promoting the Church's mission  
to live and communicate the love and  
values of Christ in our world.***

## CONTEXT FOR THE PASTORAL COUNCIL'S ROLE

From the Second Vatican Council, the purpose of Pastoral Councils is described as assisting the Church's apostolic work, whether in the field of making the gospel known and people holy or in charitable, social or other spheres.<sup>1</sup>

As parish communities continue to experience ongoing development in response to emerging needs, the practical expression of the Pastoral Council's purpose in terms of its role and function continues to evolve. It is to be expected that future role descriptions will be enriched by insights derived from the lived experiences of pastoral councillors.

In the quest to understand the evolving role and function of Pastoral Councils, some of the following questions are raised by pastors and parishioners as they work towards establishing or renewing a Pastoral Council:

- What role does the Pastoral Council take in planning for the life and functioning of the parish community?
- In what ways can a Pastoral Council provide encouragement and support to parishioners living out their faith in daily life?
- To what extent does the Pastoral Council contribute towards decision-making for the parish community?
- How does the Pastoral Council coordinate, encourage and draw together the work of all parish groups?
- In what ways does the Pastoral Council manage the affairs of the parish?
- Does the Pastoral Council focus mainly on tasks delegated to it by the Pastor?
- What is meant by *pastoral issues* which are to be the focus of the Pastoral Council's efforts?

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, 26.

## **ROLE OF A PASTORAL COUNCIL**

A Pastoral Council consists of the Pastor together with a group of parishioners chosen by the parish community. The Pastoral Council's role is to promote the Church's mission to live and communicate the love and values of Christ in our world. The Pastoral Council shares in the responsibility for the ongoing life and development of the faith community, working together with parishioners to provide support for their efforts to live as followers of Christ.

## **FUNCTIONS OF A PASTORAL COUNCIL**

A Pastoral Council seeks to:

- enrich the quality of parish life
- provide opportunities for parishioners
  - to grow in holiness
  - to discover and live out their personal and community call to mission to live as Catholics who effectively transform society.

In order to fulfil its role, the Pastoral Council will:

- search out and respond to the hopes, ideas, needs and concerns of parishioners
- grow in knowledge and awareness of what is already happening in the parish
- encourage and support the good work of existing groups within the parish
- evaluate carefully information gathered in order to contribute towards the making of decisions that reflect the values of the gospel and the teachings of the Church
- set long-term and short-term pastoral goals for the parish
- provide opportunities for parishioners to grow in their relationship with God and with each other
- develop, implement and improve parish initiatives that assist parishioners in their continuing efforts to live as effective Christians in society.

## **PASTORAL ISSUES**

Pastoral issues are those that impact on the lives of parishioners in the areas of:

- integration of their faith into everyday life – home, work, community
- nourishment and support of their faith as they strive to live as faithful disciples of Jesus
- outward focus for the development of a vital Christian community, actively engaged in Jesus' mission of service and influence in the wider world.

## PASTORAL COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP AND TASK

While the understanding of the functioning of a Pastoral Council will continue to develop, a number of issues require careful attention.

1. Membership of the Pastoral Council should be open to all parishioners, respecting the reality that each person is unique and has the potential to make a specific contribution. It is the community being served that has the primary task of choosing the members of the Council. While the processes used for this purpose will vary according to the local situation, the actual selection of members is the task of parishioners. When the membership is determined mainly by private invitation, there is very little possibility that the community will recognise and take ownership of the supposedly representative group.
2. Ideally, the members of the Pastoral Council are representative of the whole parish community. Each member aims to take a community view of issues and not an individual or group perspective. All parishioners are potential members.
3. In addition, the Pastoral Council may include two or three ex-officio members, who have been invited to participate because of their role in the community. For example, the Parish School Principal, or representative, is usually a member. In addition, included in this category may be a person from the Parish Finance Council and sometimes the Parish Manager or Parish Secretary.
4. Since each member is a representative of the whole parish community, there are a number of concerns if members are recruited solely on the basis of their current participation in specific parish groups or ministries. The concerns include:
  - A rich resource of people remains untapped, while the people already involved are called upon to do even more. Consequently, those persons are excluded who consider that they could give time to the Pastoral Council, but not to another group as well.
  - It is difficult to maintain an objective overall parish focus while representing a specific parish group.
  - The amount of time and energy required of already busy parishioners often leads to frustration and burnout.
  - The focus of the meetings tends to be limited to sustaining existing activities within the parish. The perspective of the wider mission of the Church may be overlooked.
  - The Pastoral Council does not have a life of its own because most of the meeting time will be used in reporting, reflecting on and reviewing the work of existing groups. The outcome is a rapid decrease in vigorous discussion and continuing vitality.
5. The Pastoral Council is not simply one parish group among many others that make recommendations to the Pastor. Rather than focussing on a



specific perspective, the Pastoral Council operates from a broad overview, promoting a sharing of responsibility for the development of a more vital Christian community. Its underlying aim is to encourage and support all members of the community in their efforts to respond to their baptismal call to participate in the mission of the Church. This goes beyond the maintenance of existing services in the community.

6. The Pastoral Council is not a management or an administrative body. As Pastoral Council members usually meet only once a month for approximately two hours, it is impractical to expect that they can be responsible for everyday administrative detail. The daily issues of management and administration are the responsibility of the Pastor, with the assistance of the parish staff if people and financial resources are available. The staff may include at least one of the following: an Associate Pastor, a Parish Pastoral Minister, Office Manager, Parish Secretary and Volunteer Members.

## **SPECIFIC PASTORAL ISSUES FOR PASTORAL COUNCILS TO CONSIDER**

1. Many church members do not have a keen awareness of the unique and personal invitation they have received through baptism to participate in the mission of the Church. Pastoral Councils can foster the understanding that the ordinary events of daily life provide opportunities for every person to be a conscious transforming influence for good in their homes, workplaces and wider community.
2. The relationships of pastoral councillors with all baptised Church members and attitudes towards them, require careful consideration. Very often much of what is undertaken in a parish is directed towards those who attend Mass regularly, with little effort being made to reach those who, while not participating in weekly liturgy, are still contributing to the Church's mission. The efforts of those who do not gather regularly to worship with the parish community have much in common with all parishioners. They are raising and educating families and contributing with honesty and integrity in workplaces and community organisations, all of which have great value in the enterprise of establishing the reign of God.
3. Since the whole of society is the focus of the Christian call to proclaim the Gospel in action, the challenge for a Pastoral Council is to promote this understanding within the faith community and to develop strategies that support people in their efforts. Broad social issues that relate to people's dignity and worth, e.g. their freedom, issues of justice and well-being and access to rightful opportunities, provide possibilities for mutual action and service by people of goodwill. The hope is that such action will contribute towards permeating all aspects of life (local, national and international) with God's values of love, justice and peace.

4. While every baptised person has received the invitation to participate in the mission of the Church, the awareness of this call requires continued nourishment if it is to be developed and sustained. Catholics have regular opportunities to demonstrate their faith. However, there are few structured occasions available when, in the company of like-minded Christians, they can share the ways in which they see God present and active in their day-to-day activities, and find support in their efforts to respond. Pastoral Councils might encourage the introduction of an element of faith-sharing in meetings of existing parish groups as a practical first step in addressing this need. (See *Chapter 5: Prayer and Formation for Pastoral Councils* for further detail.) Another possibility would be for the Pastoral Council to encourage the formation of small groups within the parish for the purpose of building connectedness and mutual support.

## **PASTORAL PLANNING**

A key task of a Pastoral Council is to plan for the future of the parish community i.e. to do pastoral planning. This is the process of planning for the ongoing life and development of the parish faith community. As with families and in the workplace, there is a need to plan for the future. In fact, if we fail to plan, we plan to fail.

Pastoral planning enables a parish to continue to develop, to be a place of spiritual nourishment, belonging, healing and meaning and so to fulfill its purpose faithfully and well in a changing world. Pastoral planning seeks to determine effective ways for parishioners to be active in the life and mission of the Church, promoting the reign of God in our world.

Pastoral planning is the ultimate responsibility of the Pastor or Parish Pastoral Director. Generally, the Pastoral Council is given the task of developing a pastoral plan which is designed to cover a period ranging from three to five years.

When planning for the future, a Pastoral Council must take into account previous planning initiatives, such as goals set and consultations undertaken, so that work already done is respected. Communication and consultation, in this regard, are of prime importance. Being well informed about relevant diocesan plans, priorities and resources will also be important for the effectiveness of pastoral planning.

### **Consultation**

The manner in which pastoral planning is approached usually determines its effectiveness. Consultation across the wider parish community is an essential aspect of the pastoral planning process. The process of consultation may take many forms such as parish assemblies, written surveys, small group

meetings, discussion in existing parish groups and seeking comments from individuals. Whatever forms are chosen, experience has shown that a simple format is usually the most effective.

Some questions that have generated fruitful responses are:

- *What aspects of parish life do you find helpful?*
- *What aspects of parish life require improvement or development?*
- *What new initiatives would you like to see introduced?*
- *What suggestions do you have for enriching the life of the parish?*

Consultation increases the likelihood that there is:

- clear understanding of the needs of the people
- realistic approach to responding to those needs
- strong sense of ownership of the Pastoral Plan
- enthusiastic commitment to its implementation.

## **Process of pastoral planning**

An efficient way of developing a pastoral plan is to form a small Pastoral Council sub-group that directs the process and provides ongoing feedback to the whole Pastoral Council and then to the parish. Also, many parishes have learned that the outcomes of their planning efforts are significantly improved if an experienced facilitator, from either within or beyond the parish, guides the process.

Initially, pastoral planning involves:

- careful preparation and consultation of the community
- an evaluation of the history and current situation of the parish in relation to demographics, resources, staff and structures
- an ongoing, intentional program of prayer for the whole faith community in order to be attentive and responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit throughout the pastoral planning process.

Preparation, consultation, evaluation and prayer will then form the basis for the establishment of an ongoing cycle of:

- Setting Goals *Where are we now? Where do we want to be?*
- Planning Action *How and when will we get there?*
- Implementing *In what ways are our plans now in action?*
- Reviewing *What progress are we making?*  
*What adjustments are needed?*

A helpful format for the resulting pastoral plan that results might include the following headings: Goals / Strategies (Actions) / Expected Outcomes / Time Frame / Responsible Persons.

Each step in the process involves a clear set of tasks and requires appropriate processes to carry them out. To ensure that the document remains current, the pastoral plan needs to be reviewed at regular intervals, at least annually,

to allow the inclusion of any revisions necessitated by changing circumstances.

## **Essential elements in writing a Parish Pastoral Plan**

### **1. Parish Mission/Vision Statement**

*This is a brief summary of the focus and spirit of the Parish. However, not every parish will have a current statement and may need to develop one.*

### **2. Description of the Parish**

- Brief history of its establishment
- Current demographics
- Resources of the parish (people, finances, property)
- Parish staff and organisational structures.

### **3. Significant parish developments of previous three (or five) years**

- New initiatives
- Modifications of existing structures, groups, property and finances
- Variations in population, community focus, local needs and community involvement
- Changes in pastoral staffing.

### **4. Future directions and goals**

It is recommended that the future directions and goals be grouped under a limited number of headings e.g. Embrace Jesus and His vision, Build communion with God and others, and Engage in Jesus' mission in our world.

For each heading, it is necessary to include:

- specific goals
- implementation strategies
- expected outcomes
- time frames for implementation
- person or groups responsible for implementation
- specific dates for ongoing review.

### **5. Communication across the Parish**

The Pastoral Plan will include an outline of strategies for regular reporting to the community on the progress of implementation of the Parish Pastoral Plan, together with further opportunities for parishioners to offer comments and suggestions.

## **CONCLUSION**

A Pastoral Council with a clear understanding of its role and function has the potential to be a vital and effective body within the Church community, assisting all in their ongoing efforts to live their baptismal call, discovering, embracing and proclaiming Christ within every aspect of life.

## Chapter 3

# ESTABLISHMENT OF PASTORAL COUNCILS AND CHANGEOVER OF MEMBERSHIP

*A strong sense of ownership of the Pastoral Council by parishioners, together with a clear focus on its role.*

## ESTABLISHMENT DECISION

The decision to establish a Pastoral Council can develop from a variety of possible situations. These may include:

- encouragement by the Bishop to Pastors to establish a Pastoral Council in each parish
- a recommendation from parishioners gathered at a parish assembly
- a recognition of the role of all parishioners to share in the Church's mission
- the desire to incorporate the contributions of all parishioners as they share in the responsibility for the ongoing life and development of the parish
- a need arising because of changes in the way the parish is to be administered
- a positive experience with Pastoral Councils by the Pastor or parishioners coming from other parishes.

## TIME-FRAME

A realistic time-frame for the establishment of a Pastoral Council is at least three months. It is important that all parishioners are informed and consulted at each stage of the establishment process. When this is done effectively, there will tend to be:

- a strong sense of ownership of the Pastoral Council by parishioners
- a clear focus on the role of the Council and its place in the mission of the Church
- a deep sense of being called to serve the faith community.

Consultation, inclusion and parish ownership are important components in the establishment process. Where the time allowed for the various stages is severely limited, parishioners tend not to take ownership of what has been established, thus defeating the purpose of the whole process.

## **ESTABLISHMENT STAGES FOR A PASTORAL COUNCIL**

Since the Second Vatican Council, many different processes to establish Pastoral Councils have been used across a wide range of settings and circumstances. Frequently, depending on the approaches used, the Pastoral Councils formed have functioned effectively and fruitfully. However, there have been parish situations where the strategies used for the establishment and functioning of Pastoral Councils have not been life-giving. The resulting frustrations have given rise to the unfortunate conclusion that “Pastoral Councils don’t work.”

The generalised establishment process suggested here has been developed, modified and used effectively with more than fifty Pastoral Councils across a wide variety of settings and circumstances. The situations in which it has been used have ranged from very large to extremely small parishes, in many different urban and rural settings. In addition, parishes working in partnership, sharing a pastor, as well as deaneries and dioceses, have used the process to develop Pastoral Councils that continue to function fruitfully.

In those situations where the suggested steps have been followed within a realistic time-frame, Councils have been established and continue to function in a productive and life-giving way. However, as no two parishes are identical, individual parishes are encouraged to implement only those aspects of the process which are appropriate to their local situation, and also to adapt or develop other strategies which are considered more suitable to their particular circumstances.

In most situations, implementing the following steps should result in the establishment of a Parish Pastoral Council which has ownership by parishioners and a clear focus for future operations:

- Step 1. Form a preparation group
- Step 2. Communicate with parishioners
- Step 3. Prepare *Pastoral Council Guidelines*
- Step 4. Invite recommendation of possible members
- Step 5. Provide an information meeting for recommended members
- Step 6. Organise a prayerful selection meeting
- Step 7. Commission the new Pastoral Council
- Step 8. Arrange an initial formation and orientation session.

### **Step 1. Form a preparation group**

To begin the process, the Pastor invites five or six parishioners to join with him to form a preparation group. Within the group, it is recommended that there be a balance of genders, and some range of age and experience of members. It is important, of course, that parishioners be informed of the membership of the preparation group when planning begins. There should be

no expectation or assumption that the members of the preparation group will automatically become members of the Pastoral Council.

Initially, the preparation group needs to receive current information about Pastoral Councils from appropriate sources e.g. this *Handbook for Parish Pastoral Councils*, other texts, articles and websites. Having been provided with initial background material, the preparation group then plans and directs the process of establishing the Pastoral Council.

The selection of members of the Pastoral Council marks the conclusion of the task of the preparation group.

## **Step 2. Communicate with parishioners**

The initial task of the preparation group is to ensure that parishioners know that a Pastoral Council is being formed and the reasons for the decision. To achieve this end, the Preparation Group needs to provide background information about Pastoral Councils, including their role and function, and the value of having a Pastoral Council in the parish.

Another task of the preparation group is to plan the steps and time-frame for the process to be followed. In order to demonstrate openness and trust, the actual dates for each stage should be published at the beginning of the establishment process.

When planning the communication aspect, it is helpful to use a variety of strategies. Since within any group of people there will be a wide range of learning styles, a varied approach is required if there is to be an effective use of time and effort. Until now, the major part of Church communication has involved the use of written text only.

Within the available resources of any parish, approaches may include: using the Parish Bulletin and Catholic School newsletter, Pastor and/or preparation group members speaking at the weekend Masses, addressing parish groups, arranging focus-group meetings, holding parish assemblies, making effective use of the parish website (if there is one) and preparing colourful posters to outline the process and encourage participation.

The information to be communicated includes:

- Names of the members of the preparation group, and explanation of their role
- Background information about Pastoral Councils e.g. inserts in the Parish Bulletin, appropriate website addresses, names of books, articles
- Brief outline of the steps being taken and the time-frame involved
- Draft *Pastoral Council Guidelines*
- Invitation to provide responses and comments relating to material shared
- Arrangements for recommending potential members of the Pastoral Council
- Strategies for finalizing the membership

- Invitation to all parishioners to pray for guidance e.g. in Prayers of Intercession, at prayer-group meetings.

### **Step 3. Prepare *Pastoral Council Guidelines***

If a Pastoral Council is to function effectively, the community served must have available to them in user-friendly form, details of the following:

- a clear statement of the role and function of a Pastoral Council
- responsibilities of members
- contribution to the decision-making process
- accountability
- membership numbers
- eligibility for membership
- process of selection
- term of office
- frequency of meetings
- strategies for ongoing communication with the community.

When the first Pastoral Councils were established, many chose to develop a *Constitution* setting out aims, objectives, term of office and manner of functioning. As with Constitutions of many bodies in our society, the language tended to be formal and legalistic. The documents would have contained reference to quorums, removal of members because of non-attendance and methods to ensure that an outcome was reached when there was little agreement. All of these aspects might imply that a pastoral approach was not necessarily an important element. In addition, an Annual General Meeting was needed to authorize any alterations, even very minor ones. To contain all the information, the majority of these *Parish Council Constitutions*, were many pages long and because of their size, were not readily available to all parishioners. Once they had been accepted, the *Constitutions* were often carefully filed away, so that regular reference to them was unlikely, except when a concern was raised about the details they contained. In addition, the use of *Constitutions* gave the impression that a Pastoral Council was a legal entity, which it is not.

In the last two decades, the work of Pastoral Councils has focussed more particularly on issues affecting the lives of parishioners, so that pastoral concerns, rather than those of administration, management and finance, have become their primary concern. It is appropriate, therefore, that the formulation of the directives for the Council's operation reflects the change of emphasis.

*Pastoral Council Guidelines* are now being used by many parishes in place of *Constitutions*. The *Pastoral Council Guidelines* express the role, function and operations of the Pastoral Council in a concise, informative, attractive, readily accessible and easily understood format. The presentation of the *Pastoral Council Guidelines* in the format of a two-sided A4 sheet means that the document and the information contained can be made readily available to all pastoral councillors and parishioners.



See *Illustration 3.1. Draft Pastoral Council Guidelines*

Involvement and ownership by the whole community are facilitated when an initial draft of the *Pastoral Council Guidelines*, prepared by the preparation group, is offered to all parishioners inviting their comments and suggestions. Only a small number of parishioners might respond, but it is important, for reasons of openness and inclusiveness, that all are given the opportunity to do so. Helpful insights are often provided by those who have reflected on what has been shared. The credibility of the process is supported when those suggestions, which enhance what has been prepared, are included in the final document. When there is no modification to the original draft, the exercise may be perceived as a pretence at consultation. Ongoing communication with the community is essential.

A simple strategy for consultation is to supply every Sunday worshipper with a copy of the draft *Pastoral Council Guidelines*, together with a response sheet. A realistic closing date is set for parishioners to provide feedback to the preparation group.

See *Illustration 3.2. Response form - Draft Pastoral Council Guidelines*

More detailed assistance in preparing individual *Pastoral Council Guidelines* can be found in the next section of this chapter viz. Assistance with the preparation of *Pastoral Council Guidelines*.

#### **Step 4. Invite recommendation of possible members**

Finding new Pastoral Council members by using a recommendation process has been found to be more effective than the standard nomination process that most committees generally use. The recommendation process described below has been developed as a consequence of working collaboratively with a wide variety of Pastoral Councils. It is a different and generally more effective strategy for obtaining a broader range of membership possibilities.

Those parishes who use the original nomination process expect that parishioners will accept nomination prior to their names being submitted for possible Pastoral Council membership. This approach often results in a limited number of possible candidates because frequently many of those invited to accept nomination decline.

Reasons for declining can be varied. The person nominated may already be well known in the parish and have responded to many other requests for involvement. In addition, those approached often do not have current information on the role and function of Pastoral Councils, nor do they have a clear understanding of their role in the mission of the Church. Consequently, it is difficult to arouse interest and enthusiasm for an additional, unclarified commitment in an already busy life.

The recommendation process for obtaining Pastoral Council members overcomes some of the limitations named above. It is a task of the preparation

group to ensure that the parish community clearly understands and participates in the process being used.

**Process of recommending members:**

- (a) All parishioners are invited to *recommend* any number of members of the community who they consider would be suitable to serve as members of the Pastoral Council. Please note that this is not a nomination because there is no requirement to ask the person recommended for their acceptance. The opportunity to accept or decline will be provided at a later stage.

Since every person in the parish knows at least one person to recommend, a much larger pool of possible members can be identified. In addition, the number of times any one person is recommended has no bearing on the final membership.

*See Illustration 3.3. Recommendation Form for New Members.*

- (b) The preparation group contacts all persons recommended and invites them to an Information Meeting. The affirmation that comes from being recommended and contacted personally is of lasting value and tends to raise morale across the parish. *However, it may be inappropriate for members of the preparation group to view the recommendation sheets that refer to them individually.*
- (c) At the Information Meeting, prospective **members** are given a clear outline of the Pastoral Council's current role and function together with details of expectations and responsibilities of members. Provision should be made to answer any relevant questions raised by participants. Those parishioners who have been recommended are then invited to accept or decline **possible membership**. For all participants, whether they accept or decline **possible membership**, there is significant educational value in attending this meeting.

Parish communities of all sizes who are using this approach have been helped to develop a broadly based membership of their Pastoral Council together with increased enthusiasm and ownership within the parish.

## **Step 5. Provide an information meeting**

The meeting would begin with prayer followed by a brief address from the Pastor outlining why he values having a Pastoral Council.

Also included would be explanations of:

- role and function of the Pastoral Council based on the locally prepared *Pastoral Council Guidelines*
- responsibilities of members
- qualities required for membership
- time involvement.

Throughout the meeting, questions and concerns are invited and answered wherever possible. The meeting would conclude with some quiet time for reflection and prayer after which those present might indicate, either in writing or orally, whether they accept or decline **possible membership**. A maximum duration for this meeting would be two hours.

After the meeting, the names of those parishioners who have accepted **possible membership** are then published e.g. in the parish bulletin, and parishioners are invited to pray for guidance in the selection of members.

When the number of parishioners who accept **possible membership** equals the number of members required, it is expected that they would be approached personally to confirm their acceptance as a member of the Pastoral Council before the membership is finalized. An additional meeting to formalize membership in this situation is not considered necessary.

The number of parishioners who accept **possible membership**, determines the process used for selection. If the number of acceptances is only slightly larger than the number required, the holding of a public process of selection is not recommended, for pastoral reasons. Possible alternative approaches are suggested in the next section.

## **Step 6. Organise a prayerful selection process**

The process of choosing the members of the Pastoral Council may take various forms depending on the number of candidates who have accepted **possible membership, as well as** the size and history of the parish and the preference of the community.

At this stage of Pastoral Council development, there are a variety of approaches **being** used to finalize membership. However, there does not seem to be a process which can ensure that all nominees will be at peace with the outcome of any form of selection, particularly those who have generously offered themselves for **possible membership** and have not been chosen. Consequently, follow-up personal pastoral care for all those (*note omission*) who are not selected is an important responsibility of the Pastor and the preparation group.

Some possible options for finalizing membership of the Pastoral Council are:

- (a) Gather **those who have accepted possible membership** for a process of prayerful selection
- (b) Hold a parish assembly for prayerful selection
- (c) Use a process of negotiation  
(*Note omission here*)

### **(a) Gather the possible members for a process of prayerful selection**

A prayerful selection process involving all those who have accepted **possible membership**, together with the members of the preparation group, is a helpful

option. Each possible member is present as a consequence of a recommendation by parishioners, so the parish community has a direct influence on who is present in the group. In the years that follow the establishment, it may seem appropriate that the previous Pastoral Council members participate. It is recommended that a facilitator directs the process.

A possible outline of prayerful selection

- 1) Time of prayer
- 2) An opportunity to listen to each candidate speaking briefly (two minutes?) on his/her hopes for the parish, together with a self-introduction according to a specific outline
- 3) Time of prayerful reflection
- 4) Choice, by ballot, of the first three (or four) members  
*Note: It has been found helpful to accept those candidates gaining the highest totals. It is not necessary to insist on receiving an outright majority. There is no need to publish actual numbers.*
- 5) Announcement of first three (or four) councillors chosen
- 6) An invitation to all participants to prayerfully reflect and then choose the next three (or four) members to complement those already chosen, whether in experience, ability, age, gender or cultural diversity
- 7) Choice of the final group in a similar way. The pre-determined size of the Pastoral Council will determine how many members are chosen in each round.
- 8) Prayer for all **possible members** of whom some will not form part of the Pastoral Council. Their acceptance of nomination ensured that a sharing of giftedness has taken place and so enriched the parish.
- 9) Prayer for the members of the new Pastoral Council.

### **(b) Parish assembly for prayerful selection.**

While a public process open to the whole parish might seem to be an inclusive experience, it can be a devastating public humiliation for those not chosen and may deter other parishioners from ever considering future possible membership.

To use such a public process, the only time it might perhaps be attempted is when the number of parishioners who have accepted possible membership is more than double the number of places available e.g. twenty acceptances for nine positions. On the other hand, where the number of acceptances is small, a public event used to determine which two or three potential members will not become Pastoral Councillors, could be even more personally damaging to those not chosen.

The steps outlined in (a) - prayer, listening to candidates and choosing by ballot might still be used. Some parishes also choose to include additional elements such as a sharing of the Parish Vision.

*Note:*

- *The process requires the direction of a facilitator whether from within the preparation group, the wider parish or the diocese.*
- *A practical time-limit for the gathering would be approximately two hours.*

- *Pastoral care of those who are not chosen to become members of the Pastoral Council would normally include a personal contact by a member of the Council, or the Pastor, to ensure that disappointment is not creating personal difficulties.*

### **(c) Process of negotiation**

When the number of nominees is perhaps one or two more than what is required, sometimes an individual or a group conversation with the Pastor or preparation group will clarify additional issues, assisting nominees to confirm or decline their membership for now. However, there needs to be obvious openness otherwise it can appear as if there is a manipulative approach involved.

Sometimes, in the event of one or two additional nominees, an executive decision can be made to increase the membership of the current Pastoral Council by that number on this occasion. However, it is unwise to choose to increase total membership by more than one or two, as the repercussions in terms of limited opportunities to participate at meetings will become obvious as the months proceed.

### **(d) Voting for Pastoral Council members at the weekend Eucharist can be unhelpful**

The simple parish voting process rarely produces the positive outcomes expected. The practice of indicating preferences on a voting form, distributed during the weekend Eucharist, is used by some parishes because it is seen to involve a large number of parishioners. What is forgotten is that the possible members have already come from recommendations open to all parishioners.

The problem with the voting approach is that those not chosen may have a sense of being rejected by the whole parish community, which can be very painful. In addition, parishioners who are not known well are not voted for, thus depriving the parish of their potentially worthwhile and fresh contribution to the life of the parish.

## **Step 7. Commission the new Pastoral Councillors**

The public commissioning of pastoral councillors is an important way of connecting the Pastoral Council with the parish community. To assist parishes in designing their own ceremony, samples of Commissioning Ceremonies for Pastoral Councils can be found in the *Appendix* of this text.

## **Step 8. Arrange an initial formation and orientation session**

When a new Pastoral Council is established, or when there is a change of membership, significant advantages are gained by including an initial

formation and orientation session at the beginning of each new term of office. The benefits include: an understanding of the place of Pastoral Councils in the mission of the church, a clearer focus on the Pastoral Council's role and function, the development of mutual respect and teamwork, increased efficiency of operations and specific pastoral outcomes.

The time allotted might vary from a few hours to a full day. Some Pastoral Councils have even managed to schedule a section of a weekend for the purpose, e.g. Friday evening and Saturday. It can be an advantage to engage a facilitator to assist the process, provided he/she has an understanding of the role and purpose of a Pastoral Council.

Important aspects to include in a formation and orientation session include:

- building of trust and teamwork
- focus on the context of Pastoral Councils within the Mission of the Church
- exploration of the Pastoral Council's role and function as outlined in the *Pastoral Council Guidelines*
- importance of prayer and ongoing formation for the focus provided and the faith development that results.
- pastoral planning development and review
- consensus approach to contributing to decision-making
- general operations
- practicalities - agendas, minutes, meeting-times
- selection of office bearers.

*See: Illustration 3.4. Role Statements for Office Bearers*

*Illustration 3.5. Sample Process for Selection of Office Bearers*

## **ASSISTANCE WITH THE PREPARATION OF PASTORAL COUNCIL GUIDELINES**

While the *Pastoral Council Guidelines* are expected to reflect the uniqueness of the community from which they emanate, some aspects will be common to many Pastoral Councils. From the experience of working with a large number of councils, the following ideas have proved helpful.

### **Language**

Simple language is essential if the document is to be of assistance to the community. While it requires more effort to express concepts concisely and clearly, it is advisable to avoid legal or church terms or expressions that are unfamiliar, or not widely understood.

### **Role and Function**

In describing the role and function of the Pastoral Council, ensure that the statement expresses service of the faith community and promotion of participation in the mission of the Church in all aspects of daily life - home, workplace and wider community. In other words, the focus of the Pastoral Council needs to include service both to parishioners and to the wider community.

## **Membership**

Pastoral Councils have benefited from having broad membership drawn from across the whole faith community, rather than limiting membership to parishioners who are already members of specific parish groups. Councillors who see themselves as representatives of the whole community have a different perspective from those who come to the Pastoral Council representing a particular group. If councillors are representatives of specific groups, they may experience a conflict of expectations. On the one hand, they will be promoting the interests of the group they represent, while at the same time they are required to be objective in their approach to the overall development of the parish.

## **Size of Council**

The size of the Pastoral Council is a significant feature. If the Pastoral Council is to work collaboratively and function effectively, the number of members must be restricted. Even for a large community, a maximum membership of twelve is strongly recommended. Many Pastoral Councils are finding that a group of eight to ten members allows maximum participation and produces satisfying outcomes. For very small communities, a group of five or six members can be sufficient.

## **Term of Membership** *(Note: change of name)*

Initially, the general practice was to change half the members of a Pastoral Council each year. When this practice is followed and meetings are held monthly, the Council will have met only six or seven times when planning must begin for a changeover of membership. As a result, just when the trust and efficiency of the Pastoral Council is blossoming, the Council's term comes to an end, which often becomes a source of frustration. In addition, the wider parish community can become wearied with the seemingly endless process of seeking out new members for the Pastoral Council annually.

A strong trend is developing to establish Pastoral Councils that will remain unchanged for a two-year term. At the end of the term of office, the next Pastoral Council can build on the efforts of the outgoing team provided that -

- two or three members are prepared to continue for a second term of two years
- there is a careful changeover process
- there has been an efficient keeping of minutes
- regular reports have been given to the community.

When a Pastoral Council completes its term, there may be concern about which members will continue or retire. Many Pastoral Councils have found that the personal circumstances of members often determine which members are available to continue. In the unusual circumstance where all councillors are willing to serve for a second term, and continuity for the following Council

is an issue, a process of negotiation may be necessary to determine who will retire after the first term.

In contrast, another option being tested is a three-year term of office, which may or may not be renewable. This is the preference of some Pastoral Councils who have taken responsibility for ongoing pastoral planning to establish both long-term and short-term goals for the Parish. In three years, a Council has time to implement significant parish plans. To maintain continuity of information and processes after three years of unchanged membership, considerable time and effort must be expended by the outgoing Council in the changeover process.

In most parishes, the expectation is that many parishioners will serve future terms of office so the opportunity to stand down at the end of a fixed time allows participants the opportunity to be refreshed and renewed prior to returning to serve as a pastoral councillor.

### **Consensus**

The parishioners on the Pastoral Council are in a consultative relationship with the Pastor, contributing towards shaping pastoral decisions in an atmosphere of goodwill and partnership. The Pastor works collegially with the Council members, participating with them in prayer, formation, reflection, deliberation, planning and action for the sake of the parish as it goes about its mission.

The process of recommending a decision can take different forms. Since many committees in society use a voting process to reach a conclusion, it is understandable that many Pastoral Councils have tended to follow this example. If the group is seeking to discover where God might be leading them as a parish, the use of the voting process implies that God is always on the side of the majority. However, a simple reading of the Hebrew 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.

From this perspective, it is recommended that a consensus process be used to make recommendations when considering significant issues which affect many parishioners. Based on the understanding that all councillors have some, but not all, information and wisdom required to decide on a course of action, the use of a consensus approach more truly reflects the belief that God is present in the group and speaks through every person. The outcome will then be one that all members are more likely to accept and support.

### **Review of *Pastoral Council Guidelines***

Since the *Pastoral Council Guidelines* are intended to be a living document, a regular review is necessary to determine the continuing relevance and effectiveness of all aspects. The approach taken can be as simple as the questions: *What is working well? What do we need to modify?* It is recommended that a review be undertaken at the end of each Pastoral Council's term of office.



## **ESTABLISHING PASTORAL COUNCILS IN SMALL COMMUNITIES**

Where a Pastoral Council is to be established in a small community, the steps outlined in the previous section would form the basis for establishing a Community Pastoral Council. An important aspect that should not be omitted is the preparation of appropriate *Pastoral Council Guidelines*.

In a small community, the time taken to complete the process might be reduced because of the smaller numbers of parishioners. On the other hand, isolation and the distances to be travelled might require an extension of time. From experience with small communities, it has been found that at least three months would be required to produce a productive and sustainable outcome. The process of determining the membership may vary considerably depending on the local situation.

## **ESTABLISHING PASTORAL COUNCILS IN PARISHES WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP, SHARING A PASTOR**

When two or more parishes begin to work in partnership, one of the major concerns of parishioners is the fear of possible loss of identity of their specific community. Using the basic establishment approach described above, many different communities have responded to their local situation according to one of the two following options:

(a) **Establish a single Pastoral Council with equal representation from each parish.**

Initial consultation and ongoing communication are needed to ensure the effectiveness of this option. It can lead to fruitful collaboration and a sharing of gifts and talents at the service of the communities. However, efforts will be required to ensure that no one parish is seen as the predominant and directive group.

Since there will be practical issues pertinent to each specific community, there may be a need to set up a small local group in each community to oversee practical issues whether in a pastoral or an administrative capacity or both. Such a group tends to be sustainable and effective if its role and operations are clarified, i.e. if it operates from a basic set of accepted *Pastoral Council Guidelines*. Ongoing liaison with the combined Pastoral Council will be an important element of the functioning of the group.

(b) **Establish or maintain a Pastoral Council in each parish.**

As ongoing communication and collaboration between the different Pastoral Councils is an important issue, this has been addressed in various ways, including one or more of the following:

- There is a sharing of a common set of *Pastoral Council Guidelines*.
- The means by which membership is determined may change with the local situation.
- The Pastor attends all meetings and provides the liaison between groups.
- Minutes and agendas are exchanged.
- The executives of each Pastoral Council meet on a regular basis e.g. bi-monthly.
- Combined meetings of the Pastoral Councils are held several times a year.

## **ESTABLISHING A NUMBER OF COUNCILS IN ONE PARISH**

Some parishes have a number of clearly defined worshipping communities, often separated by significant distances, and sometimes the option has been taken to establish two or more Community Pastoral Councils.

Where a parish has chosen to establish more than one Pastoral Council, the process can follow closely the steps outlined previously, with each community choosing councillors from among its own local members. Most importantly, each of the Community Pastoral Councils will retain its focus if an appropriate statement of its role and function and expectations of operation has been prepared, i.e. its own *Pastoral Council Guidelines*. When there are two or more Pastoral Councils in one Parish, it is important to ensure that each Council is considered by parishioners to have equal value and influence.

The means used to maintain communication and co-ordination between these Pastoral Councils would be similar to those used when a Pastor administers a number of parishes each having its own Pastoral Council, as described in the previous section.

## **DIOCESAN, DEANERY OR REGIONAL PASTORAL COUNCILS**

Many dioceses choose to establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council. In addition, where dioceses have designated deaneries or regions, the possibility exists of establishing Deanery or Regional Pastoral Councils. These Councils focus on those matters that are of common concern or interest to the diocese, the deanery or the region, rather than with issues that could be addressed directly at parish level.

In the establishment phase, the processes followed would be similar to those outlined for a Parish Pastoral Council and would include careful preparation, consultation, collaboration and ongoing communication. Every Diocesan/Deanery/Regional Pastoral Council would require a set of *Pastoral*

*Council Guidelines* specific to the local situation. The membership of the Diocesan/Deanery/Regional Council may be determined, at least in part, by recommendations by Parish Pastoral Councils within specific regions.

When the link between Parish Pastoral Councils and the Diocesan/Deanery/Regional Pastoral Councils is clearly defined and maintained, a valuable structure for networking and support can be established.

Establishing clear lines of communication will contribute significantly to the continued effectiveness of the Diocesan/Deanery/Regional Pastoral Council. The Parish Pastoral Councils can also be consulted on issues under discussion and invited to provide agenda items where appropriate.

The process of implementation of initiatives proposed by the Diocesan Pastoral Council would be determined in the initial establishment phase and modified as the need arises. Sometimes, this would be left to the deanery/regional group and at other times, the local Parish Pastoral Councils would be utilized for this purpose.

The implementation of initiatives proposed by the Deanery/Regional Pastoral Council would normally be undertaken at the parish level by the Parish Pastoral Councils in that area.

## **CHANGEOVER OF PASTORAL COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP**

When a Pastoral Council approaches the completion of its term of office, it is the task of the members to plan and implement a process for changeover of membership. As in the process for establishing a Pastoral Council, careful communication and maximum involvement of the parish community are essential elements. Sometimes it is preferable to form a small sub-committee of Pastoral Council members to plan and implement the changeover of membership.

The steps involved would be an abridged form of the establishment process as follows:

- Using a variety of approaches, inform the parish that the term of office of the existing Council is coming to an end. Provide a brief outline of the role of the Pastoral Council and also indicate how many new members are being sought.
- Publish the current version of the *Pastoral Council Guidelines*, on the parish notice-board, with individual copies available on request. *The current Pastoral Council would have completed a review of the existing Guidelines prior to this time and have invited the community to comment on any changes proposed.*
- Provide a summary of the achievements of the Pastoral Council during its term of office.

- Invite some members of the Pastoral Council to share, in person or in writing, a brief, constructive statement of their experience of being a member of the Council.
- Invite all parishioners to recommend possible candidates.
- Personally contact all those recommended, sharing the reasons given by those who recommended them, and inviting them to an Information Meeting, or to an individual meeting with a present pastoral councillor, to provide current information about Pastoral Councils. At the end of the meeting, those recommended can choose to accept or decline **possible membership**.
- Organise the Information Meeting.
- Organise the Selection Process and inform the parish of the outcome.
- Prepare and conduct the Commissioning and Changeover Ceremony.
- Plan the initial Formation/Orientation Session for the new Pastoral Council.

## **CASUAL VACANCIES**

During a Pastoral Council's term of office, there will be times when members can no longer continue for various reasons. The usual practice is for the Council to fill the vacancy by invitation.

Possible methods used by the Pastoral Council to fill the position might include:

- Consult the list of parishioners who were recommended for membership previously, including those who initially accepted nomination and withdrew before becoming members. Then, as a group, brainstorm to determine which person(s) might be approached.
- Reflect on the contribution of the departing member and search out a similar or complementary giftedness in another parishioner.
- Determine if there is a significant area of expertise that would contribute to the Council's functioning and seek out a person who might provide this.
- Invite parishioners to recommend a possible new member.

## **CONCLUSION**

By involving the whole parish community, the establishment of a Pastoral Council assists parishioners to take ownership of the process they are experiencing. Significant aspects in achieving a functioning and effective Pastoral Council include careful preparation, consultation, collaboration and parish-wide communication at every stage of the process.

## Illustration 3.1

Draft *Pastoral Council Guidelines*

# Guidelines for our Parish Pastoral Council

## ROLE

Our Pastoral Council's role is to **participate in God's** mission to live and communicate the love and values of Christ in the world around us.

Our Pastoral Council shares in the responsibility for the ongoing life and development of our parish community, working together with parishioners to provide support for their efforts to live as followers of Christ.

Our Parish Pastoral Council seeks to:

- Listen and respond to the hopes, ideas, needs and concerns of parishioners.
- **Generate responses to these identified issues.**
- Encourage and support the continuing good work of existing groups within our parish.
- Provide opportunities for parishioners
  - to grow in their relationship with God and with each other
  - to support and encourage them in their continuing efforts to be a Christian influence in the wider community.
- Set **realistic and achievable** short-term and long-term pastoral goals for our parish community within the framework of diocesan priorities.
- **Oversee the implementation of these goals.**
- Contribute towards making parish decisions that reflect the values of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.
- Provide support for our Pastor, working collaboratively with him and with each other.

## MEMBERSHIP

There will be ten members consisting of our Pastor, and nine members chosen by parishioners. In addition, ex-officio members **may** include the Principal of the Parish School and a member of the Finance Committee.

The Council will have as broad a membership as possible, **with a diversity** of age, gender and ethnic origin. Each **Pastoral Councillor** is a representative of the whole parish community and not a representative of a specific parish group **only**.

There will be a session of formation for all Council members prior to the first meeting of the newly chosen Council and after each changeover of membership.

## TERM OF MEMBERSHIP *(Note: change of name)*

The term of membership is two years. To facilitate continuity, it is anticipated that approximately half the Pastoral Council members will choose to continue for a second term. Anyone who serves **two terms consecutively** will then stand down for at least one term.

## NEW MEMBERS

All parishioners will be asked to recommend other parish members for possible **membership of** the Council. Each person recommended will be invited either to a combined Information Meeting or to an individual meeting with a Pastoral Councillor, to receive current information about Pastoral Councils. At the conclusion of this meeting, participants will be asked to indicate whether they wish to accept or decline **possible membership**.

If the number of acceptances of **possible membership** is more than required, the membership will be finalised by either negotiation or a prayerful selection process.

## CASUAL VACANCIES

The Council may fill any casual vacancy by invitation. **Prior to joining the Council, the proposed candidates will receive a short briefing on responsibilities and expectations as a member. After completing the remainder of the current term of membership for this casual vacancy, the new member will be eligible for recommendation for a second term.**

## RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERS

In a spirit of prayerfulness each member of the Parish Pastoral Council will:

- Attend the regular meetings of the Parish Pastoral Council.
- Provide input to deliberations of the Council.
- Develop a spirit of enquiry and the ability to listen and understand the issues affecting the lives of parishioners.
- Provide prayerful support and encouragement for other members of the Parish Pastoral Council.
- **Actively participate in the implementation of finalised plans of action.**
- Embrace opportunities for personal faith development and for gaining skills to assist with effective participation in the Council's operations.
- Represent the Parish Pastoral Council when required eg other Parish meetings, deanery or diocesan meetings.

## OFFICE BEARERS

The Parish Priest plus office-bearers will form the executive of the Pastoral Council. The office-bearers, chosen by the members, will be chairperson, deputy chairperson and secretary.

The role of the executive is to:

- Reflect on the effectiveness of each previous Council meeting. **What went well? What can we do better?**
- Organise the agenda for each meeting, incorporating input from all pastoral councillors.
- Arrange distribution of the agenda, minutes and all relevant material one week in advance of that meeting.
- Coordinate the business of the Council between meetings.
- Arrange additional formation opportunities outside the regular meetings.

## MEETINGS

There will be a minimum of ten monthly meetings of the Pastoral Council each year.  
**(Section removed from here as it was repetitious)**

## TASK GROUPS *(Note: change of name)*

**Task groups** may be set up **under the auspices of the Pastoral Council** for specific purposes for a definite duration **and will report regularly to the Pastoral Council.**

**(Note: Omission)** These groups **may** include **members** of the Pastoral Council.

## CONSENSUS

The consensus approach will be used in the process of contributing towards the making of parish decisions, with each member offering input towards the final outcome. Majority voting, lobbying, competition and domination are to be avoided.

## COMMUNICATION WITH THE PARISH

The Pastoral Council will report to the parish community regularly. It will seek the input of parishioners through various means, e.g. parish consultations, focus meetings, conversations.

## REVIEW OF GUIDELINES

These *Pastoral Council Guidelines* will be reviewed at the end of each Pastoral Council's term, or more frequently if the need arises. **Consultation with the Parish community will occur regarding any changes to these *Guidelines*.**

*March 2010*

**Illustration 3.2.**

Response Form – Draft *Pastoral Council Guidelines*

**RESPONSE TO  
DRAFT PASTORAL COUNCIL GUIDELINES**

In general, I am happy to accept the draft *Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines*

- YES
- NO

Aspects I found helpful:

Changes I suggest:

Please return this form to the Church or Parish Office by:

**Illustration 3.3.**

Recommendation Form for New Members

**PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL  
Recommendations for New Members**

- *You are invited to recommend as many parishioners as you wish.*
  - *The number of times that any person is recommended will have no influence on the final membership of the Council.*
  - *There is no need for you to ask the person whom you wish to recommend, to accept.*
  - *Every person recommended will be invited to an Information Meeting to receive current information about Pastoral Councils and the responsibilities of members.*
  - *At the end of the meeting all will be asked if they wish to accept or decline possible membership.*
- .....

**I wish to recommend the following members of our parish  
as possible members of our Parish Pastoral Council.**

**Recommended Candidate**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

I consider this person would bring to the Parish Pastoral Council the following qualities, talents and experience:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Recommended Candidate**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

I consider this person would bring to the Parish Pastoral Council the following qualities, talents and experience:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Recommended by** \_\_\_\_\_  
*(optional)*

**Recommendations close:** \_\_\_\_\_  
*(date)*

**This form can be returned by placing it:**

- (a) in the Recommendation Box at the church entrance, or
- (b) on the collection plate, or
- (c) at the Parish Office.



### Illustration 3.4. Role Statements for Office Bearers

Each local Pastoral Council determines the specific tasks of the office bearers and the executive. The executive usually consists of the Pastor, chairperson, deputy chairperson and secretary. In general, the role of treasurer is not included because a budget arrangement is negotiated with the Finance Council when required. An indication of the possible range of tasks of office bearers is outlined below.

#### ROLE OF CHAIRPERSON

- Meet with other members of the executive to prepare an agenda for each regular meeting of the Council, **incorporating input from all pastoral councillors.**
- Study the agenda carefully before each meeting, gathering any information that might be relevant to the topics named.

In chairing each meeting of the Council, the chairperson will:

- Include significant time for prayer and formation at meetings for the Christian focus these provide and the faith development that results.
- Maintain the pastoral focus of the Council, e.g.
  - encourage involvement of all members
  - see that the practices of attentive listening and questioning for clarification continue
  - ensure that there is respect for each person's opinions.
- Monitor the time-frame of each agenda item.
- Work collaboratively to set realistic short-term and long-term goals for the Pastoral Council.
- Ensure there are outcomes for each agenda item.  
Possibilities for action:
  - actually recommend a decision and help plan its implementation
  - share the tasks of implementation among all pastoral councillors
  - assign one or more people to search out additional information on appropriate agenda items
  - communicate with parishioners/parish groups, seeking comments or assistance
  - invite each councillor to ask at least five other parishioners for their ideas or responses in relation to a specified topic
  - include the issue in the Prayers of Intercession.

*Note: The continued action of placing the issue under discussion on to next month's agenda without doing anything else is not considered a helpful response. Such an approach usually results in growing frustration for participants as they see that "Nothing's happening."*

#### Other duties:

- Ensure that there is ongoing liaison with the Pastor.
- Provide encouragement and support for Council members.
- Encourage the participation of all pastoral councillors in working on projects and tasks.

- Ensure that there is regular communication with parishioners to inform them of the work of the Council, including regular updates on important projects.
- Encourage input from parishioners about their hopes, ideas, needs and concerns.
- Liaise with archdiocesan agencies between meetings as required.
- Represent the parish at deanery/diocesan meetings as required.

## **ROLE OF DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON**

- Attend meetings of the executive.
- Provide encouragement and support for the chairperson.
- Assist the chairperson in conducting the Pastoral Council's work.
- Perform the duties of the chairperson in the latter's absence.

## **ROLE OF SECRETARY**

- Provide for the recording of the minutes of regular and special meetings of the Council.
- Arrange for the necessary meeting place and the resources appropriate for the meeting.
- Attend to inward and outward correspondence.
- Distribute information and correspondence to Council members and to parish groups as required.
- Keep a file of records of the Council's minutes, decisions, history, membership and development.
- Liaise with diocesan agencies when required, e.g. advise details of any change of office bearers.

## **ROLE OF EXECUTIVE**

- Take responsibility for the preparation and distribution of the Agenda for each meeting, using input from pastoral councillors and parishioners.
- Ensure that the Minutes and Agenda are distributed at least one week prior to the next meeting.
- Oversee the development of proposals for consideration by the Pastoral Council.
- Reflect on the effectiveness of the previous Pastoral Council meeting **e.g. *What went well? What can we do better?***
- Conduct the business of the Pastoral Council between meetings.
- Represent the Pastoral Council as required.

### **Illustration 3.5. Process for Selection of Office Bearers**

The chairperson, deputy chairperson and secretary, together with the Parish Priest, form the executive of the Parish Pastoral Council. The process for selecting office bearers is the task of the whole Pastoral Council. It may take place during an initial formation and orientation session for a new Council, or at the first or second meeting of a new Council. Where the decision is delayed for one meeting it is more beneficial to invite the Pastor to chair the interim meeting than to allot the task to one person because the latter approach may be seen to influence the final selection unfairly.

Sometimes, owing to the great demands on people's time and energy, it is proposed that the executive roles be rotated at short intervals. Experience suggests that this is not a helpful option because the lack of continuity and the change of group dynamics can build high levels of frustration. A minimum twelve-month term of office seems appropriate.

#### **A SUGGESTED PROCESS OF SELECTION**

Before the meeting, invite all councillors to read the Role Statement for Office Bearers as outlined in *Illustration 3.5*. Then, begin the meeting with prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance.

*The usual practice is for the Pastor to chair the following sections.*

1. **Choosing the Chairperson**

Invite each councillor to write down the names of two people whom they wish to recommend for the position of chairperson. (*Secret ballot*)

2. The Pastor will then collect the written sheets and name the people recommended (but not the number of times each has been recommended).

3. Invite those recommended to indicate whether they accept or decline nomination, giving their reasons for either accepting or declining.

4. If necessary, decide the position by ballot. (*Again, secret ballot*)

5. **Choosing the Secretary**

Initially clarify whether or not there is a minutes' secretary separate from this role. Ask each councillor in turn if he/she would be open to accepting the position of secretary. Usually, simple negotiation will decide the position.

6. **Choosing the Deputy Chairperson**

Ask each councillor in turn if he/she would be open to accepting the position. If negotiation cannot determine the position, conduct another ballot.

7. Thank all who accepted nomination and made the process possible.

8. Thank the three councillors who accepted the positions.

9. Thank the outgoing office bearers for their committed efforts during the previous term/year.

## Chapter 4

# Operations of a Pastoral Council

*(Insert at beginning)*

***Functioning and effective Pastoral Councils maintain their pastoral focus while operating in a professional and productive manner.***

Once a Pastoral Council has been established, the challenge for the Council is to operate in ways that produce fruitful outcomes for the enrichment of the parish community. At the same time, it is expected that the experience of being a pastoral councillor will be one that is life-giving for all involved.

While most members of a Pastoral Council will be experienced in working with a range of committees and groups, this experience does not guarantee that together they will become a functioning and effective Pastoral Council. Careful attention must be paid to all aspects of the operations of a Pastoral Council including the processes used, the strategies adopted and the focus as outlined in the local *Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines*. When difficulties arise in the functioning of a Pastoral Council, a careful review of basic meeting strategies can often highlight areas for renewed action and helpful development.

Clearly, a number of elements are essential to the successful functioning of a Pastoral Council. Experience and interaction with a large number of Pastoral Councils in a variety of parish situations have provided the framework for the relevant information and recommendations that follow.

## **PARTICIPATION BY ALL MEMBERS**

A Pastoral Council that seeks to work collaboratively has the expectation that all members will contribute to final outcomes. However, it frequently happens that a small number of speakers can monopolise the meeting time. While the assumption may be that the silent majority are in agreement with the viewpoints being presented, the reality may be quite different. Quiet members may be experiencing frustration because they cannot find appropriate openings to make a contribution. When, on a regular basis, members spend the whole meeting listening to the views of a few, interest, energy and attendance are likely to wane.

In order to gather the collective wisdom within the group, a highly productive yet deceptively simple tool to ensure that every councillor's view is expressed on significant issues, is to invite councillors to interact in groups of two or three people. This can take place for short periods of time, such as two minutes, at different stages during a meeting.

In order to ensure effectiveness, there must be a specific and simple focus, e.g.

- *What is your position on this issue?*
- *What is your view about the direction suggested by N's input?*
- *What do you consider are the key aspects of this topic?*
- *What concerns do you have about the direction being taken?*

- *In what ways has this approach impacted on you?*
- *What do you see are the next steps we might take?*
- *What reactions have you perceived within the parish to the issue raised?*

The fruitfulness of this approach is indicated by the increased level of energy and enthusiasm that is obvious during the interaction, because every person has an opportunity to speak and clarify his/her ideas. The quieter members tend to contribute more with this approach because interacting in the smaller group calls forth ease of participation, and can lead to a greater contribution afterwards. It is time-saving rather than time-wasting, as the discussion in twos and threes means that the initial sharing has already taken place. When discussion in the total group follows, the improvement in focus, clarity and participation is evident.

Sharing in groups of two or three can be used effectively at different stages of the meeting. Some possibilities include:

- During prayer. *In reference to a scripture text:  
What word or phrase attracted your attention or relates to your life at this time?*
- When new issues are introduced. *What aspect of this issue concerns or interests you?  
What is your area of expertise here?  
What further information do you believe is required?*
- During stages of major projects. *What aspects have we finalised satisfactorily?  
What needs to be clarified at this stage?  
What do you see as the next step?*
- In conflict situations and to curtail monologues. *What is the significant issue here?  
What is your position on the issue?*

When the Chairperson invites pastoral councillors to use the strategy of sharing in groups of two or three, they will find it helpful if the invitation is accompanied by an explanation of the reasons for its use. To make use of the strategy without providing an explanation may lead to limited acceptance and effectiveness.

Implementing this approach requires planning and effort. However, the large number of Pastoral Councils who incorporate this aspect into their operations, have learnt that the effort to use this strategy effectively is rewarded with a more energised participation by members, an increased contribution to outcomes and greater ownership of plans and projects.

## **PRAYER**

The importance Pastoral Councils place on prayer in the meetings will provide a strong indication of their prospects for continuing vitality, effectiveness and productivity. Some councillors may consider that too much time is devoted to prayer and formation at the expense of the 'business' of the meeting. However, if the prayer segment is shortened whenever there is a full agenda, the outcomes will soon indicate a lack of focus and a loss

of the pastoral dimension in their deliberations. Where Councils are faithful to their prayer and it is planned to be faith-enriching, the agenda and outcomes of the Pastoral Council will reflect the God-focus that is so important. For more detailed discussion of this area, see *Chapter 5: Prayer and Formation for Pastoral Councillors*.

## AGENDAS

Some of the initial questions raised by pastoral councillors relate to the items on the meeting agenda:

- *Where do the items come from?*
- *Who determines what topics are appropriate?*
- *What input does the wider community have?*

Since one of the functions of a Pastoral Council is to be a listening group that searches out and responds to the hopes, ideas, needs and concerns of parishioners, ways must be found to keep in touch with issues of concern to the community. The following questions have been used effectively in many parishes:

- *What are three aspects of this parish that you like?*
- *What are three aspects that you consider need improving?*
- *What are three issues that the Pastoral Council might address during the next term of office?*

Since life circumstances are changing with increasing rapidity, one pitfall for Pastoral Councils is to assume that information gathered two or three years previously reflects current concerns of community members. It is important to maintain ongoing consultation processes throughout the term of the Pastoral Council. Opportunities for consulting parishioners might include:

- parish assemblies
- meetings in small groups (perhaps focus groups)
- meeting/s with existing parish groups
- telephone networks
- personal interaction
- occasional brief written surveys.

Out of respect for the contributions of parishioners, any data gathered by these means needs to be published without delay. It can be informative for parishioners to discover that certain aspects under consideration are considered positively by some and in need of change by others. As the obvious differences within the community are highlighted, an opportunity arises for exploring the rich diversity of experience, opportunities, background and giftedness of parishioners. The hope would be that an increased awareness might lead to growing acceptance of each other, and to action that produces a variety of outcomes.

### Agenda setting

- Agenda setting, incorporating input from all Pastoral Councillors, is usually the task of the Executive, that is the Pastor, Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and Secretary. Many Pastoral Council Executives are choosing to schedule a regular, brief, agenda-setting meeting between Pastoral Council meetings.

- Some Pastoral Councils choose to set aside time at the conclusion of each meeting to allow all members to participate in setting the next agenda.
- The dates for agenda-setting meetings need to be published so that parishioners know when to present their items for consideration.
- Those Pastoral Councils that have taken responsibility for Parish Pastoral Planning will find that the goals and strategies contained in the Parish Pastoral Plan form the basis for the action of the Pastoral Council. Ideally, the Parish Pastoral Plan will clearly state short-term and long-term goals for the future development of the parish community. Where there is a Diocesan Pastoral Plan, it provides the underlying framework for parish pastoral planning. (Suggestions for writing a Parish Pastoral Plan are outlined in *Chapter 2: Role and Function of a Pastoral Council*.) Where goals and objectives have been identified, an initial task of the Pastoral Council is to determine how they can be divided into small, achievable and measurable units. Planning the process for achievement of each goal, step by step, will then form the basis for much of the agenda.
- Additional agenda items are derived from issues raised through consultation with parishioners, together with input from individual parishioners, parish groups or diocesan agencies. The outcomes of each Pastoral Council meeting will also provide some indication of what needs to be addressed at the following meeting.
- A prioritising of agenda items is necessary for the effective use of meeting time.
- Every agenda needs to include up to fifteen minutes for prayer and ongoing formation at the beginning of each meeting to ensure that the faith dimension is incorporated into all Pastoral Council deliberations.
- Pastoral councillors must be realistic about the number of issues that can be addressed within the framework of a two-hour monthly meeting (maximum) of parishioners, who are essentially volunteers. Pastoral Councils frequently try to achieve too much on each month's agenda, resulting in frustration, either because so much is left undone, or because there is a sense that nothing is done well. Careful planning limits the number of larger items on an agenda to a maximum of three or four.
- When it seems that the *Business Arising from the Minutes* for a particular meeting will use much of the time at the next meeting, the number of new agenda items needs to be limited until the unfinished issues have been finalised, assigned to another group for action, or discarded.
- Including an approximate time-frame for each agenda item, ranging from five to thirty minutes, has been found helpful. The group then has an indication of the weighting given to the different topics and members can assist in keeping the meeting focussed. There will be occasions when the time-frame proves impractical. However, good planning and review will ensure that estimates are realistic in terms of the time available and the importance of the topic.
- It is unhelpful to deal with an oversized agenda by extending the meeting well beyond two hours. This course of action demonstrates a lack of respect for members' needs and their commitments to family and work. It is questionable whether, in such

circumstances, adequate consideration will be given to the issues being addressed by the Pastoral Council.

- Many agendas now include after each item the following headings:
  - *Action to be taken*
  - *By whom*
  - *By when.*
- While items will be considered for a number of meetings, some action needs to be taken on each one monthly. Including an item on the next agenda is not considered a sufficient response.

A well written agenda

- states what Pastoral Council members can expect
- assists them to prepare for the meeting
- expresses a spirit of respect.

A poorly written agenda

- leaves space for unwelcome surprises
- invites no preparation
- expresses little of the Pastoral Council's spirit

The Basics of a Successful Council Meeting - *Today's Parish* - March 1999

### **Possible action on unfinished agenda items**

- Actually finalise the decision and plan its implementation.
- Search out more information on the topic through study, consultation or discussion.
- Invite each member to bring to the next meeting two aspects which he/she considers are particularly relevant to the topic under consideration.
- Find out if other parishes are dealing with the same issue and speak with their council members.
- Place some details in the Parish Bulletin, noting the issue of concern and inviting comments.
- Speak at the end of the Sunday Eucharist and seek comments from people as they exit.
- Invite each Council member to ask at least five parishioners for their ideas or responses.
- Request the local Prayer Group to include the issue in their concerns.
- Include the issue in the Prayers of Intercession.

## **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Pastoral Council meeting are a brief record of the issues addressed, together with the outcomes determined. Included in the Minutes will be the name of the person who will take responsibility for the proposed action and the time-frame in which the action will occur. While it is inappropriate to record in detail every person's contribution to



the discussion, sufficient information is needed to allow ready interpretation for future reference.

In addition, it is helpful to establish a system for recording unfinished matters of business from previous meetings to ensure that no item is lost before receiving due consideration. Some Pastoral Councils choose to include with the minutes a *Schedule of Action Items*. This records the date of the meeting when the action was agreed, a short description of the action, who is responsible, expected completion date, and current progress.

To ensure that councillors have a clear record of tasks to be undertaken between meetings it is recommended that the minutes be distributed to members during the week following the meeting. Overall, to ensure that there is time to prepare for the following meeting, it is most important that the agenda, formation material, any other necessary documentation (and minutes if not already distributed), are distributed to councillors at least one week prior to the next meeting. The use of email is now widespread and recommended for all those members who have access.

While it is important that parishioners are regularly given a synopsis of issues raised at a Pastoral Council meeting, the publishing of actual minutes of meetings is not encouraged. The reason for this recommendation is that because the minutes are specific to the meeting context of the particular group, they can be open to misinterpretation by those who were not present. In addition, discussion at the meeting may be less open and the content of the minutes restricted if the understanding is that the document will be made public.

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

As Pastoral Councils continue to flourish, their effectiveness tends to attract increasing amounts of correspondence because they are seen as providing leadership and direction. The way in which correspondence is incorporated into a meeting can be either helpful or very time-consuming. One effective method used by Pastoral Councils to reduce the amount of time required to deal with the correspondence is to divide it into two groupings:

- Information e.g. Updates, seminars, visiting speakers
- Discussion e.g. Specific issue raised by a parishioner
  - Response to request for comment on a specific issue
  - Names of those who will attend an advertised conference.

A brief listing of the correspondence can be provided to each member with the agenda. If any item requires substantial discussion, each member might receive with the agenda a copy, or at least an outline, of the item concerned provided requirements of confidentiality permit. Alternatively, at the beginning of the meeting, a summary of the correspondence may be provided, whether printed or recorded on a whiteboard. Once this becomes the standard practice, members will have the option of coming early to the meeting in order to read the actual correspondence.

Every item of correspondence received does not necessarily have to form part of the deliberations of the Pastoral Council. It is usually the task of the Executive to determine which items need to be considered by the Pastoral Council. For all other items, it is helpful to determine which person or group within the parish, or beyond, might find the particular correspondence relevant and have the time, energy and inclination to make a response.

Alternatively, an item might be included in a Parish Bulletin or displayed on the Parish Noticeboard. In this way, a minimal number of items will be consigned to the recycling bin, thus respecting the efforts of those who wrote to the Pastoral Council.

Whenever there is correspondence from a parishioner to the Pastoral Council, it is important from a pastoral perspective to ensure that a personal response is received by the writer within a reasonable time. An early indication to the parishioner that the issue has been noted and is under consideration immediately demonstrates respect for that person's dignity and worth. After the matter has been resolved, a further communication with the parishioner would be expected. If the secretary's task of taking responsibility for correspondence becomes unduly time-consuming, other members of the Council might assist by providing a draft of the correspondence required.

## **CONTRIBUTING TO DECISION MAKING**

Whether Pastoral Councils make decisions with the Pastor, or offer a consultative voice to the Pastor on appropriate issues, processes used need to reflect the pastoral nature of the Council. The members come together with the Pastor as a group of faith peers whose life experience, wisdom and knowledge can contribute significantly to effective outcomes. While the task of the Council is to search together to determine where God might be calling them to act in the service of the community, it may be difficult for members to move away from the practice of reaching a final position by using majority voting. However, if polarised viewpoints surface, it is difficult to claim that being guided only by the view held by the majority is necessarily the best direction to take, because it disregards the reality that God speaks also through the minority and the lone voice. The use of the consensus approach is strongly recommended.

### **Possible Stages of Contributing to Decision Making**

- a) Identify and define the issue  
*Sometimes the presenting issue may be only a symptom of a greater reality.*
- b) Analyse the issue  
*Consultation and data gathering are important at this stage.*
- c) Generate potential solutions  
*Even the most unusual suggestions may contain useful aspects.*
- d) Select and plan the best solution  
*This is the stage where it is fruitful to use the consensus approach to determine the outcome.*

Once the decision has been finalised, the process of implementation must also be planned. This involves naming:

- a person responsible
- the steps involved
- a specific time-frame
- some form of evaluation.

## **CONSENSUS APPROACH TO CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS DECISION-MAKING**

Shared ownership of outcomes to which all have contributed, is the expected result of using the consensus approach for significant issues. In order to make the expectation a reality, an essential requirement is an atmosphere of prayerfulness, respect, openness and honesty within the Pastoral Council. Using the consensus approach involves seeking substantial, but not necessarily unanimous agreement. Consensus can usually be achieved if there is a desire on the part of all members to arrive at a common conclusion and also a willingness to compromise. Such compromise does not require yielding to an inferior solution or denying one's integrity. In the consensus approach, compromise involves a respectful recognition of the validity of another point of view, even when it is very different from one's own. Members are invited to express a range of viewpoints in a spirit of respect rather than discord. The aim is to reach a decision that all group members can live with and support.

Seeking consensus requires:

- full participation by all Councillors
- focus on prayer and reflection at all stages
- building relationships so that there is an atmosphere of respect, openness and honesty in the group
- valuing the dignity and worth of each participant
- active listening and questioning for clarification
- sufficient time for members to express options and opinions
- adequate background information and possible further education for members
- desire to arrive at a common conclusion
- attention to interests that lie behind one's own declared position of disagreement
- willingness to compromise in recognition of the validity of other points of view
- identification of areas of agreement and isolation of areas of disagreement, to minimise polarisation.

For Pastoral Councils, the consensus approach is best used when dealing with issues that affect the lives of many parishioners. Some examples are:

- introducing a major programme or project
- setting goals and objectives for the parish
- changing Mass times, affecting the routine of people's lives
- establishing new structures within the parish
- determining new uses for parish property.

While the time taken to reach consensus may be longer than is required for a voting process, experience suggests that the outcomes will reflect better the interests of the community members. In addition, the implementation phase is usually speedy because most of the contingencies will have been discussed in the process of reaching consensus.

### **A good test of genuine consensus**

Genuine consensus is reached when each member can say:

- *I believe that I have been heard*
- *I believe that this issue has been given due consideration within our time-frame*
- *I can live with and support the decision in the present circumstances.*

Realistically, there will be times when consensus cannot be reached. However, it is important to keep the whole picture in perspective, reflecting on what will be the importance of the concerns in a few months' or years' time. While it is important for a

person to maintain his/her principles, a pattern of opposing every suggested initiative might indicate the need for further personal development.

The principles of shared wisdom apply, i.e.

*No one has all of the wisdom.*

*Each person has a share of the wisdom.*

*When each person contributes his/her piece of wisdom to the group, the best possible plans and decisions can be achieved.*

McKinney, M.B. (1987) *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-making*. California, Tabor Publishing.

## **A practical process to assist in reaching consensus**

A useful method for reaching consensus is to use cards of three colours - red, green and orange - similar to traffic lights, one set for each Pastoral Councillor. When appropriate information has been obtained and considerable discussion has taken place, the direction of the discussion can be clarified at different stages by asking members to use their cards to indicate their position on the issue.

- *Are they able to support the option being proposed? (green)*
- *Do they consider there is need for further discussion, or are they unsure? (orange)*
- *Are they unable to support the approach being taken? (red)*

The chairperson would then invite the people with orange or red cards to present their areas of concern for further clarification. This is not an attempt to coerce people into agreeing but seeks to determine those aspects that are contributing to the different responses. It can happen that all may change from one colour to another as a result of the discussions.

Even if all cards are green at the first attempt, it is necessary to check if there are any other aspects that have not yet been considered. Obviously, this is different from majority voting because each person's viewpoint is heard, respected and considered.

Pastoral Councils that have developed their skills in the area of consensus decision making, recognise and value the effectiveness and pastoral dimension of this process. However, constant attention to the ongoing development of necessary skills is required.

## **USING CONFLICT PRODUCTIVELY**

Wherever a number of adults work together as peers, significant differences of opinion will occur, reflecting the great variety of talents, life experiences and opportunities of the people concerned. If these differences are not being expressed, it is possible that the meeting situation lacks the freedom to allow open and frank sharing.

Conflict that may result from a vigorous expression of differences, calls forth a variety of reactions in participants. Experience suggests that much energy is expended on conflict avoidance. However, if conflict is viewed as an opportunity to be utilised for the growth and development of the group, fruitful outcomes can be expected.

Usually, concern about conflict is not that there will be differences but rather, how these differences are expressed and received. Many people carry memories of painful experiences of acrimonious sharing of opposing viewpoints. Certainly, one expectation of a Pastoral Council meeting will be that a variety of viewpoints are expressed, some of which will be strongly contrasting. The challenge is to use the differences constructively for the growth of the group and the individual members, while at the same time producing effective action in service of the community.

Any strategies that enhance the development of trust within the group will be of real assistance. A basic principle in addressing differences constructively is to maintain respect for the dignity and worth of each person. This is demonstrated by:

- listening carefully to viewpoints being expressed
- acknowledging each contribution
- asking questions in order to clarify the position taken by the speaker, and only then
- offering one's own different perspective, if appropriate.

When there is an acceptance that every member has a worthwhile contribution to make to issues under discussion, there can be an openness to the rich variety of outlooks being expressed. Since topics that have a religious dimension touch into one's deepest beliefs and attitudes, it can be challenging to believe that approaches different from one's own may have validity. Rigidity of outlook and a judgmental approach to differences may actually produce harmful conflict. When there is an emphasis on openness to where God might be leading the group, differences are more likely to be used constructively.

Pastoral councillors will have developed a variety of conflict-management skills in their professional and home life, and may be aware of numerous ways of dealing with conflict. The following outline is offered simply as one approach which Pastoral Councils may find helpful on specific issues.

- Define the problem. Ask: *What is the problem?* Avoid asking: *Who is the problem?*
- Clarify what solutions have already been tried.
- State what you would like to be different. Be precise, reasonable and specific.
- Brainstorm creative solutions. *At this stage, do not judge any suggestions.*
- Consider the likely outcome of each suggestion.
- Decide which suggestions all members can accept or at least live with and support.
- Plan the steps required to carry out the proposed resolution.
- Review the effectiveness of the resolution after an agreed period of time.

The process outlined above can also form the basis for contributing to decision making.

## **IMPLEMENTING CHANGE WITHIN THE FAITH COMMUNITY**

The Pastoral Council's operations will involve implementing changes which have been deemed necessary for the future life and growth of the community being served. As a preliminary step in managing change, it is very important that the initial and ongoing formation for the Pastoral Council includes an emphasis on building trust and teamwork. Since most change tends to disrupt teamwork, those groups that can stay focussed during a significant change process will have more likelihood of succeeding.

Since there are many possible change-management approaches, the following ideas are offered only as a guide:

## **Practical aspects for the Pastoral Council**

### **1. Planning**

- Carefully consider the information which determines what changes are considered necessary and the reasons for the proposed changes.
- In planning initial proposed outcomes, include a focus on the knowledge and skills needed to bring about the change and the strategies required to provide ongoing support of the change.

### **2. Communicating with parishioners**

- A significant amount of time and effort needs to be expended communicating with parishioners so that they are informed and consulted at all stages to assist them to take ownership of the need for change and the possible outcomes. While there will always be a great range of degrees of acceptance of any change, if a major change is imposed on parishioners without warning, there is little chance of a ready acceptance of it by the majority of members.
- For the initial communication with parishioners, plan the information-sharing with an awareness of the extent to which the community is aware of the reasons or need for change. The emphasis here is on sharing what aspects are seen to be in need of change and the reasons supporting the changes, but not the proposed final outcomes of the change.
- At different stages of development, involve parishioners in careful consultation to consider their viewpoints and to gather their suggestions for possible responses and outcomes. A variety of approaches can include small-group and large-group meetings, facilitated parish assemblies, group presentations, written surveys and regular feed-back.

### **3. Finalising the change**

- Clearly outline what form the change will take and provide a clear time-line for the implementation
- Ritualise the end of what has gone before, bringing obvious closure in ways that involve as many parishioners as possible
- Make clear reference to the reality of a transition period of unsettlement during which there can be a sense of loss of focus, frustration and emptiness
- Launch the proposed change in whatever ways seem appropriate, incorporating parishioners' suggestions. Include reference to the strategies that will provide ongoing support of the change
- Plan short-term and long-term reviews of the effectiveness and outcomes of the introduced change.

### **4. Accepting the change**

Within the community, people will respond to change in a variety of ways.

- A very small number will quickly embrace the change with enthusiasm.
- A larger number will accept the change after some information and education.
- The majority of the community will be prepared to accept the change eventually.
- A very small percentage will continue to resist change, regardless of any efforts to encourage acceptance.

## **Additional strategies for dealing with change**

## 1. Focus on feelings

- **Recognise that change produces a *heartache rather than a headache*.**  
An important aspect of change is the sense of loss involved, which often relates to feelings, rather than to the intellect. The temptation is to believe that, if people have sufficient information, the pain of loss will go away. In reaching a decision that involves significant change, there must be careful communication of all data used in the decision-making process. However, other aspects are involved. Just as much attention needs to be given to the task of dealing with the wide range of feelings that will surface.
- **Expect a wide range of feelings, talk about them and accept them**  
The feelings may include anger, frustration, hopelessness, powerlessness and emptiness.  
Denial of feelings tends to produce unresolved loss. Providing further information is not necessarily helpful.  
*Avoid telling people what they should or should not feel.*  
*How comfortable do we feel with people expressing their feelings?*
- **Validate the range of feelings using significant people**  
*For example, there are occasions when a visit by a Bishop, or the Pastor, may be used to confirm that people's disappointment, anger and distress are valid.*

## 2. Allow time to grieve

People take different amounts of time to deal with grief. The time needed cannot be programmed, so there is risk involved in trying to curtail the time needed for grieving. In addition, the way in which people grieve is varied so there is no one correct way to respond.

*Think about what expressions of grief are acceptable in our culture. For women? For men?*

*Learn to recognise the ways that people tend to hide their grief. Some examples include the use of humour, changing the subject and increased busyness.*

## 3. Encourage movement to the next stage

Assist people to move into the future through forgiveness, openness to new possibilities, and the welcoming of new people into one's life or group or situation.  
*Some people tend to become set in their grief situation and will not move on unless they are helped to do so.*

## 4. Be aware of the effects that a significant sense of loss can have.

Some aspects to consider include the following:

- **Loss is situated both in the present and in the past**  
The pain resulting from unresolved issues of the past adds to the pain being suffered in the present.  
*Changes to times for Masses imposed without consultation in the past will add to the pain of adapting to altered parish practices being proposed in the present.*
- **Loss entails a process of death and resurrection**  
The pain is often the prelude to new life.  
*When two parishes are required to share a pastor, the pain of losing their sense of identity as separate communities is later offset by the enrichment of working collaboratively in new and exciting ways.*

- **Unresolved grief and anger are frequently projected on to the next person or situation**  
*The anger or confusion that arises when a pastor leaves without explanation can be projected on to the new pastor in the form of rejection, or unwillingness to accept different ways of operating as a pastoral leader.*
- **People react to loss in different ways**  
The behaviour of people is often directed towards meeting personal needs.  
*Expression of anger may be a plea for someone to listen to their pain.*  
Feelings about the loss may be expressed in varying degrees.  
*What some people experience as mild concern, others will express as deep hostility.*  
There can be an experience of a loss of identity.  
*Celebrating the Eucharist with a particular community at a particular time each week develops a specific form of identity. When change is introduced, a part of one's sense of identity can be lost.*
- **Symbolism is incorporated in loss**  
When an inordinate amount of energy and opposition is focussed around an inanimate object, this can indicate that the object has far more meaning than its simple existence suggests.  
*When it is proposed that a very old statue be removed from a church, strong objections may indicate that, for the people protesting, that statue is associated with a significant event in their faith life.*
- **Institutions usually do not deal well with loss**  
Institutions, including the Church, rarely have processes in place to deal with loss. Often people avoid talking about the loss because it triggers unfinished business from the past. However, unresolved loss can continue to influence future growth negatively.

## COMMUNICATION

### Communication from the Pastoral Council

Since the Pastoral Council is accountable to the community of which they are members, the way in which communication with parishioners is handled can determine how, and whether, the Council is fulfilling its role. There are numerous ways in which people receive and share information, so it is important that a variety of means of communication be used by the Pastoral Council.

If the Pastoral Council seems to have little to communicate about what they are doing, there may be a need to review the meetings in order to improve effectiveness and productivity. On the other hand, if the Pastoral Council is attaining various goals, and maintains ongoing communication about what is being achieved, parishioners are more likely to take ownership of the Pastoral Council and cooperate with efforts to build a more vital Christian community.

After each meeting the community needs to know what issues were discussed, what decisions were reached and what aspects are receiving further consideration. Of course, prudence must be exercised if any matter is confidential at a particular time. However,



withholding information from the community unnecessarily suggests an unethical use of power.

### **Ways to facilitate the sharing information**

- Use a variety of means e.g.
  - 1) Publish what needs to be shared in some of the following - parish newsletters, parish website, parish magazines and the local school newsletter  
Speak to the congregation at the end of the weekend Eucharist.
  - 2) Send a copy of the reports to parish groups, if appropriate.
  - 3) Prepare posters perhaps containing a brief outline of issues under consideration or seeking responses on a specific topic.
  - 4) Provide occasional information in the local free paper. *The latter will often accept information if the topic is local, has a broad community focus and is accompanied by a photo.*
- Ensure that Pastoral Council Reports are interesting, succinct and inviting.
- Provide a short series of brief key points rather than long written or spoken presentations. . A helpful approach is to use bullet points to share: *Three issues considered at the last Pastoral Council meeting were...*
- Incorporate an interesting heading or opening question to provide a focus.

The publishing of actual minutes of meetings is not encouraged, because the minutes are specific to the meeting context of the particular group and can be open to misinterpretation by those not present. In addition, discussion at the meeting may be less open and the content of the minutes restricted if the understanding is that the document will be made public. In practical terms, observation suggests that very few people take the opportunity to read printed minutes displayed on a church notice-board or parish website.

Within the Pastoral Council it may be helpful to review the effectiveness of communication between members. The ability to listen attentively and respectfully is an essential skill for all members. Sometimes the sharing of information about communication skills can provide the grounds for increasing the effectiveness of discussion and decision making.

### **Communication from the Parish Community**

The sharing of the issues and outcomes from a Pastoral Council Meeting is information giving, which is only one dimension of communication. Clear lines of communication need to be established between parishioners and members of the Pastoral Council. Strategies to facilitate interactions between parishioners and Pastoral Councillors include:

- organising parish assemblies that involve parishioners in identifying goals for the Parish
- using surveys and phone-networks
- allocating Councillors to liaise with various parish groups on a regular basis
- each councillor contacting five (or more) parishioners at random, seeking comment on issues being considered by the Pastoral Council.

To assist communication within the parish the following practical aspects are recommended:

- dates and times of agenda meetings and Pastoral Council meetings are published regularly,
- names and photos of the Pastoral Councillors are displayed on a church notice-board,
- Councillors wear identifying badges and are available to speak with parishioners after some weekend Masses.

Finally, if one means of communication is found to be fruitless, its effectiveness will not necessarily increase by repeating the same process more often. One expression of foolishness is to continue to do the same old things in the same old way and expect a different result. Simply repeating an ineffective action more often has little or no prospect of providing a new and different outcome.

Creative variety in communication is necessary if the interest of the receivers is to be maintained and positive outcomes are to result. Pastoral Councils are encouraged to search out the people within their communities who have special communication skills, and invite them to contribute their expertise towards developing more effective communication strategies.

## **PROCESS OF PERIODIC REVIEW**

Periodic evaluation and review are useful tools for assisting the Pastoral Council to develop and maintain ongoing effectiveness. The expectation is that a regular review of efforts, outcomes and operational processes will contribute to continued learning and development. Commitment to a process of review will assist the Pastoral Council to function as a vital organism rather than one that is inflexible and unresponsive. If there happens to be even one unhelpful meeting, it is recommended that action be taken immediately to change the situation by looking at ways to improve. Suffering in silence and doing nothing else, rarely produces fruitful outcomes.

The key to using a process of review in a fruitful way is simplicity. The following basic questions are recommended:

*What was effective? Why?*

*What difficulties did we encounter?*

*What have we learned?*

*What alternative approach might we take in future to improve outcomes?*

### **Within meetings**

Periodically invite Councillors to indicate their evaluation of one of the following aspects of the current meeting: focus, time management, agenda content, outcomes, mutual respect, attentive listening, openness, energy. Perhaps invite Councillors to indicate by a show of hands, using a score ranging from 1 (not effective) to 4 (very effective), how they experienced one of the above named categories. Be sure to accept each person's evaluation with respect. The next question might be: *What are some suggestions for improving our operations?*

### **After each meeting**

The executive can review each meeting using such questions as:

*What went well?*

*What could we do better?*

It is recommended that individual members are encouraged to do the same.

### **Each year, at least**

Invite all Councillors to record their answers to the following and then share and collate the outcomes:

- Issues and projects which we have considered/acted on in the last year include:

- Apart from projects undertaken, three (3) things we have done well as a Council are:
- In the process of functioning as a Pastoral Council, three (3) aspects we might modify or further develop are:
- What I have gained from the experience of being a Pastoral Councillor is:

### **Areas for possible review:**

- Actual decisions and their implementation
- Pastoral planning
- Events organised by the Pastoral Council
- Communication with the community
- General meeting process
- Prayer and formation
- Content and organisation of agenda
- Listening skills
- Decision making
- Participation of members - the reality, the possibilities
- Dealing with differences and conflict
- Duration of meetings
- Use of time within the meeting and/or outside the meeting
- Pressures on members from outside the meeting.

## **REVIEWING PARISH PASTORAL COUNCIL GUIDELINES**

*Parish Pastoral Council Guidelines* also require regular review. An appropriate time to undertake the task is at the end of the Council's term of office. Since the *Guidelines* are designed to be a living document, a regular review can determine their ongoing relevance and effectiveness.

Questions such as the following can form the basis for a review:

- *What has our Pastoral Council achieved in its term of office?*
- *What aspects of the Guidelines have been helpful?*
- *What modifications are required?*

Any significant changes ought to be shared with the community for comment and final affirmation.

Faithfulness to the process of regular review of all aspects of the life of the Pastoral Council will help to ensure accountability, viability and relevance.

## **CHECKLIST FOR MAKING MEETINGS FRUITFUL**

- Each pastoral councillor comes to the meeting well prepared, having studied carefully the minutes, agenda and any other material included. If it seems necessary, he/she will gather any information that might be relevant to the discussions.
- The meeting begins and ends on time.
- The chairperson keeps the meeting focussed and inclusive, and all members assist.
- Prayer and ongoing formation are valued for the focus provided and the faith development that results.

- Short-term and long-term goals are set which are realistic within the available time-frame.
- Attentive listening and questioning for clarification are standard practices.
- Efforts continue to be made to get to know each other, building an atmosphere of mutual trust.
- Differences are expected, and addressed constructively, respectfully allowing each person an opportunity to present his/her point of view as a valued contribution to the discussion.
- Each councillor takes responsibility for ensuring that no member tends to dominate discussion. *For example, after acknowledging an initial (extended) contribution, invite all members to indicate their perspective either in turn around the group, or in groups of two or three, before sharing in the larger group.*
- To ensure that every councillor's view is expressed on major issues, time is taken to discuss possibilities, in groups of two or three people, before there is total group sharing. This can occur at different stages of a project's development as issues are raised and information shared.
- Contributions to major decisions are made by using the consensus approach rather than voting, in the belief that God speaks not only through the majority, but also through the minority and the lone voice.
- There are clear outcomes to the meeting with a genuine sharing of tasks.
- Meetings are evaluated periodically, perhaps every three months, e.g.  
*What are we doing well?*  
*What have we learned?*  
*What can we do better?*

## CONCLUSION

At Pastoral Council meetings, it is important that a pastoral focus is maintained and that the proceedings are conducted in a professional and efficient manner. Good-heartedness is not enough to ensure that each member contributes effectively and that there are productive outcomes. Attention needs to be paid to meeting procedures and operations that truly reflect the spirit and direction of the *Pastoral Council Guidelines*.

## Chapter 5

# Prayer and Formation for Pastoral Councils

*(Insert at beginning)*

***Sustaining a pastoral focus and enhancing the faith development of Councillors.***

Pastoral councillors share responsibility for the continued building of a more vital Christian community, whose members consciously live and promote God's values of love, justice and peace. As a consequence, councillors are encouraged to seek out opportunities that assist in the development of their own relationship with God and with one another, so that they are better able to respond to the hopes and needs of parishioners.

In planning a Pastoral Council agenda, time should be set aside for prayer as well as for ongoing formation. The latter would be focussed on deepening understanding of the Church and her mission, as well as team building and skills development. Many Pastoral Councils have acknowledged the value of setting aside at least fifteen minutes for prayer and ongoing formation at their regular meetings. When the inclusion of prayer and formation becomes an accepted practice, the rewards are evident in the shared vision, commitment, role-focus and task achievement of the Pastoral Council.

## PASTORAL COUNCIL PRAYER

Prayer at Pastoral Council meetings takes many forms depending on the experience, ability, preference and expectations of the group. Sometimes the approach used is life-giving for members, while on other occasions it can be an exercise in endurance.

Perhaps the most common form of prayer used at any religious meeting consists of a traditional prayer recited at the beginning and end of the gathering. While such a format may be inspiring and familiar, it can also function like a set of bookends. Prayer can become a simple marker of the start and finish of the meeting without necessarily requiring any personal engagement by the participants.

In order to provide opportunities for growth in faith for all participants, it is very helpful to include in any Pastoral Council prayer format three key aspects. These are a Scriptural focus, time for silent personal prayer, and an opportunity for faith interaction.

Pastoral Council meetings usually occur at the end of a day, which for members has been filled with activity and challenge, so a Scriptural focus can assist to refocus one's mind and heart on the mission of Jesus. Then, a time

of silence allows councillors to become conscious of God present and active within their own hearts and within the whole group. Finally, through a simple form of faith interaction, personal faith is enriched as members grow in appreciation of the value and worth of one another and the mutual wealth and variety of experience within the group.

Initially, the prospect of faith interaction might be daunting to many. This is understandable because there are very few, if any, opportunities for parishioners to share their faith in a manner that is life-giving but not overwhelming or uncomfortable.

Usually, it is the way in which the faith interaction is conducted which determines its effectiveness or otherwise. It is important that the approach used contributes to growth of each person's relationship with God and with other councillors. Effective faith interaction can be as simple as choosing a scriptural text or other appropriate writing and inviting participants to respond to the question: *What phrase or sentence attracts your attention or has meaning for your life at this time?*

Such a question ensures that there is some personal engagement with the text by every person present. Participants can choose the level of disclosure that suits them and are not required to enter into either a revelation of their innermost thoughts or a studious discussion of the possible meaning of the text.

It is recommended that the interaction takes place in groups of two or three members so that all have an opportunity to speak and to listen in a setting that is not threatening. Usually, the result is energising, personal and involving of every member of the group, all of which are important aspects of the process. On the other hand, when interaction takes place in the large group only, often few members will readily contribute.

After a short time spent sharing in small groups (3-5 minutes), an opportunity can be given for some brief interaction in the total group.

### **Suggested prayer format**

Scripture is the most appropriate resource for Pastoral Council prayer. It is acknowledged, however, that there are numerous passages in literature that can provide a basis for prayer. Increasing numbers of Pastoral Councils are choosing to use a Scripture reading from one of the Sunday liturgies following the monthly meeting. The hope is that the prayer and sharing will enrich the councillors both at the meeting and again at the Eucharist when the text is proclaimed.

The following format may be of assistance to councillors who offer to be the prayer leader for a Pastoral Council meeting.

- Begin with a short prayer composed by the prayer leader.  
*Prayers from the Mass can form a helpful source of inspiration.*

- Invite a member to read the chosen Scripture passage.  
*It is important that all present have a copy of the text being read. The text can be distributed with the agenda and minutes prior to the meeting so that prior reflection can take place.*
- Spend a short time of reflection on the Scripture passage (3-5 minutes). The inclusion of a brief commentary on the passage from an orthodox source can enrich the time of reflection.  
*Use a helpful focus question, e.g. Which word or phrase attracts your attention or has meaning for your life at this time?*
- In groups of two or three people, invite members to speak of their response to the question (2-3 minutes).  
*This is not primarily a discussion time but simply a sharing of responses.*
- Invite members to speak briefly to the whole group on what was shared within their small group. *This step is not essential on every occasion.*
- Conclude with one of the following:
  - a) Personal prayers of petition.  
*If this form of prayer is to be included, it is preferable to tell people of the expectation before beginning the whole prayer, so that they can do some preparation.*
  - b) A specially prepared prayer or a traditional one.
  - c) A hymn of the prayer leader's choice.

## **ONGOING FORMATION FOR PASTORAL COUNCILLORS**

In addition to the prayer at Pastoral Council meetings, an ongoing formation segment at each meeting, or at each alternate meeting, is strongly encouraged. As well, individual members may wish to undertake further faith-enrichment studies whenever possible.

### **During Pastoral Council meetings**

The inclusion of an ongoing formation segment at meetings (perhaps for ten minutes) aims to contribute towards at least one of the following:

- continued faith enrichment
- deeper understanding of Scripture
- greater knowledge of Church teaching
- personal growth
- development of group skills to work as an effective team.

Whether the focus of ongoing formation is faith development or team building, they go together as two parts of a single reality. In placing such a strong emphasis on ongoing formation, the expectation is that the pastoral councillors become better equipped to respond to their role of service and are enriched in their living of the Christian life.

A practical approach to formation is to include a brief article or book section reference with the agenda and minutes. The circulation of material prior to the meeting allows councillors to study and reflect on the topic in preparation. The use of questions to focus the discussion is recommended e.g.

*What did you find interesting, helpful or surprising?*  
*What comments or questions does it raise?*

At the Pastoral Council meeting, the process of speaking first in small groups of two or three, and then sharing with the total group, facilitates maximum participation.

## **RESOURCES FOR FORMATION AT PASTORAL COUNCIL MEETINGS**

- Formation material in the areas of scripture, theology, spirituality, skills-development and current issues can be found in parish resources and publications to which the parish subscribes.
- *Handbook for Parish Pastoral Councils (3rd Edition)* contains many sections suitable for formation.
- Website: Parish Pastoral Councils in Australia - *available from June 2007.*
- Articles and resources are available from the workplace, diocesan resource centres and members' own professional and personal situations.
- Councillors, parishioners and diocesan employees, who have specific expertise in a required area, may contribute material.

## **ONGOING FORMATION TOPICS**

Topics suitable for further study and reflection for Pastoral Councils include:

- The dignity and value of the human person
- The mission of Jesus
- Scripture studies
- The nature of the Church
- The importance of Baptism and its call to mission
- Church teachings of current interest
- The personal and group call to ministry as members of the Pastoral Council
- The importance of personal and communal prayer
- The leadership role of the Pastoral Council in the parish community
- Ways of deepening mutual trust and understanding among members
- Development of good communication skills
- The use of effective and productive meeting procedures
- Pastoral planning skills.



## INDIVIDUAL ONGOING FORMATION

Theology and Christian ministry courses are available from a variety of sources, some of them online. Courses which are available in the Brisbane Archdiocese include the following:

*Beginning Theology, Foundations, Foundations Two* – open learning courses. Details available from [ife.fl@bne.catholic.net.au](mailto:ife.fl@bne.catholic.net.au)

*Serving God's People*- Certificate III & IV in Christian Ministry. Details available from [mcl.fl@bne.catholic.net.au](mailto:mcl.fl@bne.catholic.net.au)

*Degree Courses in Theology and Christian Ministry* – Brisbane College of Theology: [www.bct.edu.au](http://www.bct.edu.au)

## REVIEW OF PRAYER AND FORMATION PROGRAMME

At regular intervals, Pastoral Councils need to review their prayer and formation experience. Some questions that might assist this review are:

- *In what ways have members been enriched by their experience of prayer at meetings?*
- *What aspects of meeting prayer require modification?*
- *Which formation segments have been helpful? Unhelpful? In what ways?*
- *What would assist in improving the effectiveness of the formation provided?*
- *To what extent has trust and mutual acceptance of differences been enhanced as a result of prayer and formation at meetings?*
- *What formation topics could be included in future meetings?*

## INITIAL FORMATION AND ORIENTATION FOR PASTORAL COUNCILS

When there has been a change of membership, or when a new Pastoral Council has been established, an initial formation and orientation session is strongly recommended. Incorporating this session into the time-table will provide great benefits in terms of shared focus on role and mission, establishment of trust, efficient meeting procedures and effective pastoral outcomes.

Pastoral Councils that undertake an initial formation session at the beginning of each new term of office save themselves months of time, which would otherwise need to be spent on clarifying issues, deciding on details and developing strategies to assist with achieving desired outcomes. Without such a formation session, members who are new to the council will often take many months to determine how the group operates and what is expected of them, thus limiting the effectiveness of their contributions. The length of time for the initial formation session may range from a few hours to a full day or an

overnight experience, separate from regular meetings. Some Pastoral Councils have found it helpful to invite an outside facilitator, who is familiar with the role and functions of a Pastoral Council, to assist with the session.

### **Important aspects to include in an initial formation and orientation session:**

- Building of trust and team work through getting to know each other better
- Situating the Pastoral Council within the context of the Mission of the Church
- Clarifying the role and function of the Pastoral Council as outlined in the *Pastoral Council Guidelines*
- Focussing on prayer and ongoing formation
- Pastoral planning i.e. short-term and long-term goal setting
- Consensus approach to contributing to decision making
- General operating procedures
- Practicalities – agendas, minutes, times
- Selection of office bearers

Each Pastoral Council will expect to continue to develop the work done in the initial formation session during the monthly meetings, particularly through the ongoing formation segment and general interactions. If members identify a need for an additional formation session, perhaps for review or revitalisation, the Pastoral Council is encouraged to include the required session in their planning calendar.

## **FORMATION SPECIFIC TO SIGNIFICANT OCCASIONS**

In the life of a Pastoral Council, occasions arise which are very significant times for Council formation:

- Appointment of a new Pastor
- Appointment of new members to the Parish Pastoral Team
- Times of crisis or disrupted expectations
- Times of major decision making for the parish community.

Depending on the situation, there may be a need to review and renew the parish vision and goals, or provide opportunities for prayer, listening and healing. On these occasions, the Pastoral Council may require a special formation session either apart from the regular meeting or in its place. Whatever choice is made, careful attention to the specific needs and readiness to respond appropriately will enrich the life of the Pastoral Council and the parish community.

## **CONCLUSION**

The knowledge, experience and understanding that Pastoral Councillors need to work effectively do not come automatically with a commissioning ceremony. For each member, a commitment to faith development and ongoing education is necessary. The effectiveness of a Pastoral Council's operation will be significantly enhanced if members pay appropriate attention to regular individual and group prayer and formation.

## **PRAYER TO CLOSE A PASTORAL COUNCIL MEETING**

Gracious God  
you are the source of all life:  
we praise you.  
You are the source of our rich diversity:  
we delight in you.

With grateful hearts, we acknowledge  
the dedication of all those men and women  
upon whose efforts we continue to build.  
May your guiding presence give us courage  
to face the challenges that lie ahead.

Grant us enquiring minds and listening hearts  
that we may deepen our understanding  
of the concerns of your people.  
Help us to discover new opportunities  
for leadership and service  
as we seek to live and promote  
your values of love, justice and peace.

Hear our prayer  
that, in walking the way of your truth,  
we may leave the imprint of your goodness  
throughout the world.  
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Chapter 6

# Relationships of Pastoral Councils

*(Insert at beginning)*

***Respectful partnership, trust,  
and mutual goodwill based on  
union with Christ.***

Pastoral Councils work in collaboration with a large number of individuals and groups within and beyond the parish. In order to build productive relationships with all the people involved, it is important to recognise that the primary relationship for members of Pastoral Councils is their union with Christ. The hope is that councillors' deepening union with Christ, sustained by mutual encouragement and support, will be evident in all interactions with the People of God.

## THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND THE PARISH PRIEST

The Parish Priest is an integral member of the Pastoral Council. Appointed to the parish by the Bishop of the Diocese, the Parish Priest exercises his leadership and service of the faith community in collaboration with parish members. This conforms with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that Parish Priests were not meant by Christ *to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church toward the world.*<sup>1</sup>

At Pastoral Council meetings, along with all councillors, the Parish Priest participates in prayer, formation, discussions, planning and action for the sake of the parish as it goes about its mission. This is in accordance with Canon Law which describes the Parish Priest as presiding over the Pastoral Council in which *Christ's faithful, together with those who by virtue of their office are engaged in pastoral care in the parish, give their help in fostering pastoral action.*<sup>2</sup>

In a spirit of collaboration, the Parish Priest contributes to the agenda, raises matters about which he is seeking advice and contributes his perspective on parish life, drawing in the wider Church dimension when appropriate. Similarly, in an atmosphere of goodwill, trust and mutuality, all Council members also raise appropriate agenda items and contribute to deliberations.

The Parish Priest and the other councillors work together on issues and projects, share advice and develop appropriate responses and recommendations. In these ways, they give practical expression to the spirit of

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, 30

<sup>2</sup> The Code of Canon Law 1983, Canon 536.1

the directive that the *Pastoral Council has only a consultative vote, and it is regulated by the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop*<sup>3</sup>. While the Parish Priest is responsible for the actual taking of any decisions, he will have played a significant role in formulating recommendations, contributing background information, respecting both the advice offered and the careful and prayerful reaching of consensus. Consequently, rarely would he reject what has been proposed.

The need for the Parish Priest to attend Council meetings regularly and work in collaboration with the other members is an important one. Intermittent attendance by the Parish Priest prevents the Pastoral Council from exercising its role effectively, with the result that, unlike other groups in the parish, it will no longer have any meaningful purpose or life.

Note: In those dioceses where Parishes have been placed in the care of a Pastoral Director, it is essential that the Pastoral Director is an integral member of the Pastoral Council.

## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND THE PASTORAL STAFF/TEAM**

Many parishes have salaried Pastoral Staff or a Pastoral Team who are responsible for providing services and responding to parish needs that arise on a daily basis. The Pastoral Staff/Team usually meets regularly, often weekly, with the Pastor to share information and plan appropriate responses. In terms of focus and operations, ideally the Pastoral Staff/Team works within the framework of the Parish Pastoral Plan established in collaboration with the Pastoral Council, and within the budget set by the Finance Council.

The establishment of effective avenues of continued communication between the Pastoral Staff/Team and the Pastoral Council is a significant issue. A mutual understanding and clarification of the roles of both groups will contribute towards an enrichment of service of the parish. Ongoing communication helps facilitate the contributions by all members to the processes of planning and prioritising. If it should happen that the Pastoral Council is neither consulted nor considered, or is strongly directed without consultation by the parish administration, its effectiveness and energy soon wane.

## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND PARISH GROUPS**

The Pastoral Council, while providing support and encouragement to existing parish groups, does not have a specific or directive role in the life of those groups. Parish groups are accountable to the Pastor not to the Pastoral Council. In the main, parish groups provide opportunities whereby individual

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<sup>3</sup> The Code of Canon Law 1983, Canon 536.2

parishioners can express in a practical way their service of the faith community.

Considerable knowledge and expertise reside in the membership of parish groups. Consequently, a wise Pastoral Council will acknowledge and affirm this rich resource by:

- fostering regular communication and liaison between the Pastoral Council and the various groups
- acknowledging the contribution of parish groups to the life of the faith community
- seeking the input of group members in consideration of any issue relating to their specific area of ministry and/or expertise.

In this way, groups are given the means to contribute to parish planning and often become major contributors to the implementation of the Parish Pastoral Plan.

## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND THE PARISH FINANCE COUNCIL**

A group with a special role to play in Church life is the Parish Finance Council. Its purpose is to assist the Pastor in the administration of parish financial resources in order to carry out the mission of the parish. Members of the Parish Finance Council are appointed by the Pastor on the basis of their expertise in finance-related matters. The Parish Finance Council operates according to the guidelines set down by the diocese. It is a separate and distinct body from the Parish Pastoral Council as required by Canon 537:

*In each parish there is to be a Finance Committee to help the Parish Priest in the administration of the goods of the Parish, without prejudice to Canon 532. It is ruled by the universal law and by the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop, and it is comprised of members of the faithful selected according to these norms.<sup>4</sup>*

Pastoral councillors often find that the roles of the Pastoral Council and the Finance Council are unclear and that functions appear to overlap. The relationship between the two Councils warrants careful attention and clear definition. Both Councils can foster cooperative relationships through regular communication and other strategies. For example, many Pastoral Councils choose to have a Finance Council member as an ex-officio member of the Pastoral Council or have a pastoral councillor represent them on the Finance Council. Other Pastoral Councils schedule occasional combined meetings with the Finance Council to assist in formulating pastoral decisions that are informed and realistic.

The Parish Finance Council looks to the Pastoral Council for -

- a statement of the mission of the parish

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<sup>4</sup> The Code of Canon Law 1983, Canon 537

- a pastoral plan
- pastoral priorities.

The Parish Pastoral Council looks to the Finance Council for -

- sound financial guidance
- adequate finance for agreed pastoral priorities
- planning regarding the resources needed to develop and implement parish plans, programmes and policies.

## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND THE PARISH COMMUNITY**

As stated previously, a Pastoral Council is called into service by the larger parish community. It is essential that councillors bring to their deliberations an understanding of the views of all parish members rather than simply representing their own opinions. Collectively, Pastoral Council members have a responsibility to listen to the hopes and needs of parishioners, to consult them on appropriate issues and to communicate the outcomes of Council deliberations.

At the same time, the existence of the Pastoral Council does not relieve other parishioners of responsibility for enhancing the faith life of the parish. Both individually and as members of parish groups, parishioners will continue to respond to opportunities to live and promote the gospel. In the context of the Pastoral Council, members are called to specific leadership and service, while parishioners are encouraged to offer information, insights, concerns, constructive feedback and proposals for action. Pastoral Councils thrive in an atmosphere of ongoing community interaction, encouragement and prayer.

### **Information sharing**

The relationship with the community is enhanced when Pastoral Councils:

- report to parishioners regularly on issues under consideration, and on outcomes reached at their meetings
- publish dates and times of agenda-setting meetings and Pastoral Council meetings and invite contributions
- roster councillors to be available for consultation after specified Masses
- display names and photos of the councillors on a church notice-board
- provide councillors with identifying name-badges.

### **Consultation with parishioners**

Approaches used by Pastoral Councils to consult with parishioners include the following:

- organising parish assemblies and focus groups
- councillors speaking about an issue at the end of the weekend Eucharist and actively seeking out responses afterwards
- raising issues in the Parish Bulletin, the Parish Website and occasionally the local School Newsletter, and inviting comment

- rostering councillors for liaising with various parish groups
- using brief surveys, phone-networks and suggestion boxes
- every councillor contacting at least five people for their comments on a particular issue raised at a meeting.

## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND ALL CATHOLICS IN THE COMMUNITY**

A less often talked about relationship, but one of great significance and potential, is that between the Pastoral Council and the members of the community who do not participate in parish life. These include those who do not gather regularly to celebrate Eucharist, as well as those who have little more than a nominal link with any Catholic group. There is a great challenge for Pastoral Councils to lead parishioners in reaching out to all, establishing whatever helpful links are possible, and providing support for the conscious living and promotion of God's values of love, justice and peace.

The majority of these Catholics will not be reached by conventional methods that rely on contact through church activities.

As well as encouraging all church-goers to reach out to others, another challenge for the Pastoral Council is to use whatever means are available to provide helpful and relevant information on church activities and pastoral services to the wider faith community. Some parishes have made effective use of:

- local free newspapers
- word of mouth
- parish/deanery websites
- school bulletins
- notice-boards
- community radio stations
- letter-box drops.

Hopefully, the information provided might act as a stimulus for encouraging some people to keep searching for meaning and purpose in life. For others, the information received may act as the seed that gives rise to a closer relationship with God. It may eventually attract people to the church community as a place of nourishment and belonging. The power of personal invitation should not be under-estimated. Whatever means are utilised for reaching out to the wider faith community, it is often the simplest methods that are actually productive. Experience suggests the most effective influence is exerted through the personal interactions of daily life.



## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY**

An important dimension in the life of a Christian community is its willingness to be attentive to what is happening in society generally. This involves dialogue with people of goodwill to raise awareness and seek responses particularly to those issues relating to the unjust treatment of people and their environment, locally and globally.

Any response to identified needs will be far more fruitful when like-minded individuals or groups from across the wider community, work in partnership. The consequent mutual interaction enriches all those involved, while providing service and support to people who would otherwise be significantly disadvantaged.

The Pastoral Council can provide the focus for developing a sense of unity and purpose within the faith community by raising appropriate questions, e.g. *What are some issues of major concern in the wider community of which we are part?*

*Who are the people affected?*

*Who are the other individuals or organisations sharing our concern?*

*What is already being done?*

*How can we work together to address any of the issues raised?*

Out of these enquiries, the Pastoral Council may initiate or encourage appropriate action as part of the ongoing commitment of all parishioners to be agents of transformation in response to the Gospel message.

## **THE PASTORAL COUNCIL WITHIN DEANERY AND DIOCESE**

The Parish is not complete without its relationship to the Deanery and to the Diocese. The Parish is not an independent Church in as much as all parishes make up a single community of faith under the leadership of the Bishop. As an integral part of the diocese, all parishes are striving to carry out the mission of the local Church, communicating the Christian faith to the people of the diocese and beyond.

The Deanery and Diocese provide structures for the mutual exchange of information and coordination of activities on issues affecting parishes. More specifically, the deanery structure exists for the purpose of mutual support between parishes, joint planning of key elements of pastoral life and mission and sharing of resources.

In the pastoral planning process, the Parish Pastoral Council uses the framework of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan, where one exists, and also collaborates with deanery plans and projects. Where there is a Diocesan Pastoral Council and Deanery Pastoral Councils, careful communication is

needed so that there is a congruence of efforts in the service of the community. The extent to which the efforts and the decisions of Pastoral Councils at any one level impact on the functioning of other Pastoral Councils in the Deanery or Diocese, has to be clarified and subjected to ongoing review.

A Parish Pastoral Council expresses its relationship with the wider Church by participating in Deanery and Diocesan gatherings, and providing support for initiatives promoted at these levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

Fundamentally, all of the Pastoral Council's various relationships described above are collaborative and must be underpinned by frequent and effective communication. Therein lies an enormous challenge for Pastoral Council members, who are themselves generally busy people. Effort needs to be directed towards ensuring there are structures and processes in place which maximise the flow of information between all individuals and groups within and beyond the parish, thus sustaining life-giving relationships across the faith community.

## Chapter 7

# The Brisbane Church: Promoting Pastoral Councils

*(Insert at beginning)*

***Every Parish encouraged to establish a Pastoral Council and provide resources for ongoing development.***

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Parish Pastoral Councils have been operating in the Brisbane Archdiocese since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. In March 1974, when Archbishop Francis Rush called the first meeting of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, at least 40 parishes had established Parish Pastoral Councils. Archbishop Rush made clear his wish that every Parish would have a Parish Pastoral Council. His expectation was that the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council would become the forum for bringing representatives of all Pastoral Councils together regularly to address issues of importance to the mission of the Archdiocese.

People working within the network of Pastoral Councils have contributed significantly to the life of the Church in the Brisbane Archdiocese. Their efforts have included involvement in the successful introduction of many important initiatives, programmes and groups. A major contribution has been in the consultation and preparation for Synod 2003, as well as participation in the Synod proceedings, and continued involvement with the implementation of the Synod outcomes. More recently, pastoral councillors have assisted with the *Let Your Light Shine Review* of Synod initiatives, which has provided an overview of the wide range of good works being done across the archdiocese together with a review of what has been achieved so far.

Ongoing Pastoral Planning within the archdiocesan and deanery framework provides a clear focus for the good works throughout the parishes across the archdiocese. Earlier Pastoral Council contributions were made through involvement in the establishment of Care & Concern Groups, involvement with the *Shaping and Staffing our Parishes* project, as well as in the areas of liturgical reform, ecumenical and interfaith programmes, programmes to assist the unemployed, outreach to migrants and refugees and ministry to young people. As different facets of these areas continue to evolve, pastoral councillors are actively participating in their development.

Pastoral Councils also continue to play an important role in the task of helping parishioners to understand what it means to be active in the life and mission of the Church, and have provided opportunities for them to contribute their

particular gifts, skills and experience in the service of the community. The focus of Pastoral Councils has shifted away from issues of administration and governance of the parish. Now their attention is directed towards the pastoral concern of ensuring that parishioners have available to them all they need to discover, or rediscover, and live out their call to mission, both personal and communal. The members of Pastoral Councils are now effectively sharing responsibility for building more vital Christian communities that support all in their efforts to live and promote God's values of love, justice and peace.

Building on the good work already begun, the incumbent archdiocesan leader, Archbishop John Bathersby, has continued to encourage and support Pastoral Councils, frequently voicing his wish that every parish have a functioning and effective Pastoral Council. In parishes where there is not yet a Pastoral Council, Archbishop Bathersby has promoted establishment with enthusiasm. The Pastoral Councils of the Archdiocese are considered to be an integral part of parish life, contributing significantly to the life of the local Church.

## **RESOURCING PASTORAL COUNCILS**

A significant factor in the development of Pastoral Councils in the Brisbane Archdiocese has been the employment of full-time staff at the service of Pastoral Councils. In 1988, a Coordinator for Parish Pastoral Councils was appointed, and in 1994, a Development Worker was added to the staff. Currently, as an outcome of a restructuring process, there is a full-time Ministry Development Officer for Pastoral Councils. The role of full-time staff is to provide support, resources, consultancy and assistance for all Pastoral Councils within the Archdiocese. The provision of services to promote the growth of Pastoral Councils, usually delivered within the individual parish setting, has provided much of the impetus for the rapid development in recent years. In 1988, there were approximately forty (40) parishes with Pastoral Councils. Currently, approximately one hundred (100) parishes have Pastoral Councils. In addition there are Deanery Pastoral Councils and an Archdiocesan Pastoral Council.

Because of the range of situations encountered across the Archdiocese, it has been possible to develop approaches that can be adapted for particular circumstances. The diversity of situations includes inner city areas, large and well established older city communities, burgeoning outer suburbs, two or more parishes sharing a pastor, parishes with several worshipping communities and churches, coastal communities attracting large numbers of holiday-makers and retirees, large country towns and isolated small rural communities.

Regular ongoing formation and development sessions are provided in the parish setting, at the invitation of the parish. An increasing number of Pastoral Councils are scheduling an initial formation session each time there is a significant change of membership. In addition, some choose to incorporate a meeting for review during their term of office. These sessions

either take the place of a regular meeting or are held on a date apart from the monthly gathering.

Assistance is available to Pastoral Councils to address whatever challenges arise through the network of support that exists, facilitated by the full-time Ministry Development Officer. This resource person coordinates Pastoral Council efforts and is readily available to respond to concerns and queries of councillors as they arise. On the other hand, Pastoral Councils are encouraged to develop their own initiatives wherever possible.

## **SECRETARIAT FOR PASTORAL COUNCILS**

The Secretariat for Pastoral Councils contributes significantly to the ongoing life and development of the Pastoral Council network. The role of the Secretariat is to maintain regular contact with Pastoral Council chairpersons in their respective deaneries. The purpose of the contact is to provide support and encouragement to chairpersons, and also to assist in identifying emerging needs and trends in Pastoral Councils. In addition, the Secretariat members provide the chairpersons with information and reminders about current activities for Pastoral Councils organised within the Archdiocese.

The membership of the Secretariat for Pastoral Councils consists of one parishioner from each of the thirteen deaneries, as well as a representative of the parish pastoral ministers and the ministry development office for Pastoral Councils. An important condition for membership is recent experience on a Parish Pastoral Council. This group meets monthly.

A second major aspect of the Secretariat's role is to plan and organise the presentation of the three annual Archdiocesan events for Pastoral Councils as outlined in the following section.

## **ANNUAL ARCHDIOCESAN EVENTS FOR PASTORAL COUNCILS**

Each year, three official Archdiocesan events are organised for members of Pastoral Councils. They are:

- a) *Mass of Commissioning of Pastoral Councils*. It is celebrated in St Stephen's Cathedral by the Archbishop for all Pastoral Council members and their families. At this Mass, each councillor is commissioned by the Archbishop for service on the Pastoral Council for the next twelve months. In addition, each chairperson receives a candle, with a colour and design specific for the year. The candle is lit during prayer at each Pastoral Council meeting, to provide a symbol of the unity of Pastoral Councils across the Archdiocese.

- b) *In-service for Chairpersons of Pastoral Councils*. This meeting focusses on a specific aspect of their role of leadership. The gathering also provides an opportunity for chairpersons to develop a network for personal contact and mutual sharing.
- c) *Archdiocesan Gathering of Pastoral Councillors*. Each Pastoral Council is invited to send two members to the event. A specific topic is developed and discussed each time. These topics vary with needs perceived or expressed in relation to the work of the Pastoral Councils within the Archdiocese. The agenda includes input, interaction and a mutual sharing of experiences and ideas. Most importantly, efforts are made to ensure that suggestions for practical responses are included in the input so that participants return to their Pastoral Councils with possible strategies for action. In this way, a rich variety of ideas, possibilities and challenges is disseminated.

Some of the topics addressed at these Gatherings in recent years have included:

- Living Our Everyday Mission
- Parish Pastoral Planning Principles
- Communication as Service, in the light of the *Jesus Communion Mission Vision*.
- Liturgy for Life
- Pastoral Leadership in Parishes: Hope-filled Possibilities
- Synod Outcomes: *Jesus, Communion, Mission*
- Where is God in All of This – busyness, insecurity, changing relationships, loneliness, ill-health. A Spirituality of Reality
- Lights! Camera! Action! Evangelising Our Culture
- Hope for Tomorrow's Church
- Synod 2003 Overview and Preparation
- Facing Change: Planning Transitions in Ourselves and our Church
- Young People and the Church
- People of Faith. People of Justice. People of Peace: The Issue of Social Justice
- Cultural Diversity: An asset or a liability?

## CONCLUSION

Pastoral Councils are flourishing in the Brisbane Archdiocese due to the commitment of the diocese to their establishment, ongoing support and development. This commitment has been expressed in the continued Episcopal encouragement given to Pastoral Councils and in a practical way, through allocation of the resources of personnel and finance.

Pastoral Councils give recognition to the reality that the greatest resource of the Church is the People of God. They also provide avenues for the expression of deeply held longings of parishioners to integrate their faith more effectively into all avenues of daily life.

Recognising the significant leadership role of Pastoral Councils in promoting the mission of the Church, parishioners have responded to the opportunity to serve on Pastoral Councils with energy, enthusiasm and competence.

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