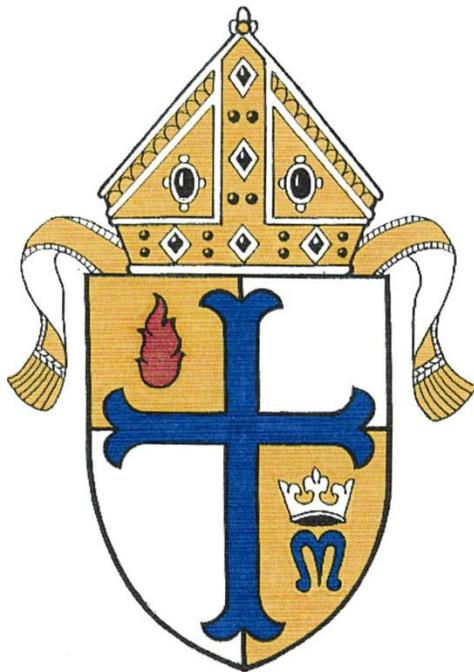
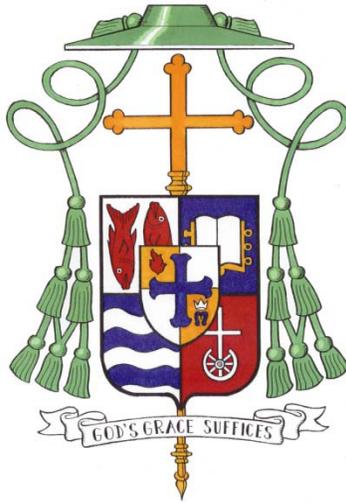


Norms
for
Parish Pastoral Councils



Diocese of Metuchen

Most Rev. Paul G. Bootkoski



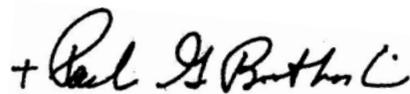
DECREE

On January 31, 2007, I promulgated the norms of the First Synod of the Diocese of Metuchen. Two of those norms address the matter of parish pastoral councils: Norm 26 calls for the establishment of parish pastoral councils in every parish of the Diocese "within a definite timeline;" Norm 27 directs that appropriate resources be made available for "the training and formation of parish pastoral council members" and so that councils may truly enhance parish life.

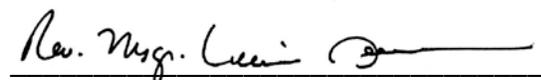
Satisfied that a comprehensive plan to provide the aforementioned resources is now in place through the auspices of the Department of Diocesan Planning, and having sought the advice of the Presbyteral Council in accordance with canon 536 §1 of the Code of Canon Law, I hereby decree and mandate that every parish in the Diocese have a parish pastoral council in place by November 19, 2011, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Metuchen by the Venerable Pope John Paul II.

I further decree and mandate that new parish pastoral councils be established and existing councils be evaluated in accordance with the *Norms for Parish Pastoral Councils*, which I also promulgate with this same decree.

Given at the Curia of the Diocese of Metuchen, on this nineteenth day of November, in the Year of Our Lord 2010, the beginning of the Diocese's thirtieth anniversary year.

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Most Reverend Paul G. Bootkoski, D.D.
Bishop of Metuchen


Notary

Introduction: Mission of a Parish Pastoral Council

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Luke 4:16-21

Every parish and diocesan mission statement ultimately is derived from Jesus Christ's, delivered at his hometown synagogue early in his public ministry. When a pastor convenes his parish pastoral council and asks the question, "How do we more fully implement our Parish Mission Statement?" or "How do we take this parish from good to great?" he is asking how we might more fully implement *Christ's* mission.

The parish pastoral council is a consultative group that asks the question, "What does this mission mean *in this place* and *in this time*? How are we to discern God's will for our parish? How is the Holy Spirit moving among us?"

The word "pastoral" in parish pastoral council is derived from the word "pastor." The parish pastoral council is the "pastor's council." It is the group he engages to reflect on the direction of the parish. The parish pastoral council is the place where the pastor and selected parishioners reflect on current opportunities facing the parish and threats to its vibrancy. It is the place where priorities are set and benchmarks for success in ministry are established. In short, the parish pastoral council is a kind of "pastoral think tank" at the center of a pastor's ministry. The council is involved with practical decisions of consequence because they are the pastor's sounding board. They investigate, reflect, and propose practical conclusions.

These *Norms for Parish Pastoral Councils* supplement the mission of parish pastoral councils by providing structures that have proven effective across many dioceses. They offer flexibility while providing basic parameters for the organization and functioning of councils. The Department of Diocesan Planning stands ready to provide clarification regarding any aspect of these norms, as well as training and formation for individual parish pastoral councils, especially for new councils or those transitioning to the models described in the pages that follow.

Parish Pastoral Councils in the Diocese of Metuchen

The history of parish pastoral councils in the Diocese of Metuchen dates back to 1969 when Bishop George W. Ahr issued a pastoral letter mandating parish councils for all parishes of the Diocese of Trenton. At that time nearly 100 of the 225 parishes of the Diocese of Trenton were located in the four counties which now comprise the Diocese of Metuchen.

While most parishes were faithful to the mandate, there was an obvious practical need for guidelines to assist parishes in their effort to establish pastoral councils. While some parish councils functioned effectively, others floundered and still others had a short life span. In 1977, Bishop Ahr established the Diocesan Commission for Pastoral Renewal whose tasks included developing guidelines and providing guidance and support to parish councils. In 1980 the Commission composed guidelines for parish councils and distributed them to all parishes of the diocese. The Commission also published guidelines for steering committees, which would be given the task of establishing parish pastoral councils.

Shortly after the creation of the Diocese of Metuchen, Bishop Theodore McCarrick established the Department of Parish Council Services to provide diocesan support to existing and emerging parish councils (support for parish pastoral councils is now located in the Department of Diocesan Planning, established in 2008 by Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski). In 1993 Bishop Edward Hughes issued revised guidelines for parish pastoral councils and strongly encouraged their adoption. While this effort boosted the utilization of parish pastoral councils for a time, by the early part of this century, the percentage of parishes operating pastoral councils had fallen to 38%. Parish pastoral councils therefore became a major topic of discussion at the First Synod of the Diocese of Metuchen. Since the Synod, buoyed by Synod Norm 26, parishes have increased that percentage to 72%:

The Bishop is to mandate the establishment of parish pastoral councils within a definite timeline to strengthen the participation of laity in their parishes. The Department of Pastoral Life [now the Department of Diocesan Planning] is to identify parishes that do not yet have parish pastoral councils and help them establish these councils so that all parishes in the Diocese will have a functioning parish pastoral council.

Recently, Bishop Bootkoski completed the implementation of Synod Norm 26 by issuing a decree mandating the establishment of parish pastoral councils in accordance with Canon 536:

§1. If the diocesan bishop judges it opportune after he has heard the presbyteral council, a pastoral council is to be established in each parish, over which the pastor presides and in which the Christian faithful, together with those who share in pastoral care by virtue of their office in the parish, assist in fostering pastoral activity.

§2. A pastoral council possesses a consultative vote only and is governed by the norms established by the diocesan bishop.

A copy of the full text of Bishop Bootkoski's decree can be found on the inside front cover of this document.

Developing a Parish Pastoral Council

Whether you are founding a new parish pastoral council or reinvigorating an existing one, many of the same principles will apply. You will need to determine the council's size, how members will be chosen, and who will serve. This section of the *Norms for Parish Pastoral Councils* explores the process of developing a council.

Size of the Council

Effective parish pastoral councils range in size from ten to twenty members. A council with more than twenty members may have difficulty with effective group interaction. On the other hand, a council with fewer than ten members may find the workload on each member is too heavy and just a few absences will stymie council effectiveness. A council with a very small membership also runs the risk of failing to represent diverse points of view. It also is a good idea to stagger terms, so that only a third (in the case of 3-year terms) or a half (in the case of 2-year terms) of the council turns over during any given year.

Who Should Serve

Discerning who should serve on the parish pastoral council is the most important dimension to forming and re-forming a council. Canon 536 makes it clear that the Parish Pastoral Council is to be comprised of lay members along with the pastor and others who share in the pastoral care of the parish. While the concept of the Parish Pastoral Council results from Vatican II's emphasis on the expanding role of the laity, the Parish Pastoral Council is not to be understood as a lay organization.

The Parish Pastoral Council also must understand its representative role. It is meant to be representative of the whole People of God – the entire parish community. The members, however they are selected, must understand themselves as servants of the entire parish community rather than simply as representatives of a particular section, organization or constituency. For Christian concern to be genuine and authentic, it cannot be limited. It must embrace the concerns of the entire People of God.

Lay parishioners who serve on the parish pastoral council help give direction to the faith community, discerning its mission and recommending specific ways for the parish to fulfill its mission. This is important work, and high standards should be set for membership. Parishes and their pastors should look for the following qualities in potential council members:

1. Their faith is alive and active.
2. They are in full communion with the Church.
3. They are creative and energetic.
4. They relate well to others and can both articulate their own opinions and listen well.
5. They are willing to serve a two-year or three-year term.
6. Their family life is such that they are free to give some of their time.
7. They are open to training and willing to be formed as a member of the parish pastoral council.
8. They can work as members of a team and offer support to others on the team.
9. They would give priority to service on the parish pastoral council.

Selecting Council Members

When parish pastoral councils first emerged, many parishes utilized a parish-wide or parish district *election process* to determine who would serve on the parish council. This process gave parishioners an opportunity to vote for persons of their choice. This model was, at least according to American democratic standards, characterized by impartiality and fairness to all candidates, giving those elected a popular mandate to occupy a position on the council.

On the other hand, some parishes reported that the election process brought with it problems: difficulty in enlisting a sufficient number of candidates; hesitancy of potential council members to expose themselves to a public win/lose situation; the danger of an election becoming only a popularity contest; the apathy and lack of interest of many, if not most, parishioners. Some parishes have therefore staggered their elections in the hope that it will prove easier to recruit a smaller number of candidates each year as opposed to seeking candidates for all positions every two or three years.

A second model, *appointment by pastor*, developed early on, in which pastors simply appointed pastoral council members, often after consultation with a selection committee. This method avoided many of the problems associated with elections, but had its own set of drawbacks. Fewer people were involved in the nomination and selection process, so the potential for overlooking good candidates grew.

More recently, *discernment models* (processes to discern the will of the Holy Spirit) have been utilized in growing numbers of parishes. In this third model, the pastor and a selection committee generate a pool of candidates (with room for self-nominations, in some cases), twenty to forty individuals seen as possessing the traits described above. The group attends an information session during which they learn about the council's mission and activities, its purpose and vision. After a period of prayer and reflection, the nominees indicate to the pastor whether they feel called to take their discernment to the next stage. Typically, about half of the group indicates their willingness to advance.

The remaining candidates then may meet to discuss some aspect of parish life. At the end of the discussions, candidates articulate why they wish to serve on the council. Participants are also asked to affirm leadership qualities they observed in others during the conversation. Following this meeting and a period of prayer and reflection, the pastor appoints the new council members. Proponents for discernment models maintain that they are more consistent with our ecclesiastical tradition and that they avoid the problems inherent in the election/appointment methods.

Some parish pastoral councils also include a number of *ex officio* members, who automatically become members of the council by virtue of an office or position they hold in the parish. In addition to the pastor, these may include associate pastors, deacons, religious and lay staff who are in charge of a particular parish ministry. This type of membership is, at times, extended to heads of parish organizations and committees.

All three ways of selecting members are valid. Many pastors combine elections and direct appointment to balance the strengths and weaknesses of these two methods. At the same time, discernment models have been associated with greater effectiveness among parish pastoral councils. To some degree, all parish pastoral councils include *ex officio* members (for example, the pastor), but comprising a council entirely based on offices held is not recommended.

Parish Pastoral Council Structure and Operation

The Diocese of Metuchen recognizes that every parish community is unique, having its own history, demography and distinct characteristics. This individuality must be taken into consideration by those whose task it will be to assemble a structural and procedural framework for the council. Consideration also must be given to the capabilities of those who will have to function within the proposed framework.

Existing parish councils differ widely in their structures and procedures. However, their structures and procedures all appear to address, in some fashion, the following organizational needs:

1. A set of policies which incorporate the council's mission, duties and responsibilities of members.
2. A set of procedures for selecting council members.
3. A delineation of special sub-committees or other subsets of the council structure which meet specific needs.

Officers

The *Revised Code of Canon Law* specifically states that the pastor is to "preside" over the Parish Pastoral Council because he is ultimately responsible for the pastoral care of the parish. This role as "presider" does not preclude another member of the council to be given the responsibility to chair the council's meetings. This member would be given the office of "chair" (some parishes use the term "convenor") instead of president.

The Chair may be elected to that position by the parish at large or elected by the council members from among their number, or he or she may be selected by the pastor through a group discernment process involving all of the members of the council. The Chairperson's primary function will be to chair the meetings of the council and to facilitate the participation of all members in the council's discussions and deliberations.

Other officers may include: Vice-Chair who assumes the duties of the Chair in his or her absence and a Secretary who is responsible for minutes of council meetings, correspondence to members, and reproducing sufficient copies of agendas and other printed materials.

Pastor and chair should meet at least monthly as a kind of "executive committee" to develop an agenda and discuss the council's progress. The entire parish pastoral council should participate in an annual process of evaluation to reflect on the council's effectiveness and discern its fidelity to the Christian mission.

Meetings

Parish pastoral councils should meet monthly, with necessary individual and subcommittee meetings occurring between monthly meetings. Subcommittees should be few, temporary, and directly related to the mission of the council. Subcommittees that seem worthy of permanent status should be spun off of the parish pastoral council to enlarge their membership and keep the council focused on its mission.

Parish pastoral councils also may wish to hold an annual *pastoral planning day* to set priority goals and objectives. The Department of Diocesan Planning is available to facilitate such gatherings. In addition, the council may convene for *formational meetings* to strengthen the ministerial identity and spirituality of the parish council or *educational meetings* to help develop insights and skills relative to certain aspects of parish council life and functioning.

The early days of the parish pastoral councils saw many councils adopting a total and strict implementation of parliamentary procedure as developed and interpreted by *Robert's Rules*. Conventional wisdom and best practices have changed dramatically. The present day trend indicates that more and more councils are seeking and experimenting with an operational procedure and decision-making process consistent with the council's identity as a ministerial community of faith.

Parish pastoral councils have discerned a need for a distinctly Christian mode of decision-making which places emphasis on persons and on the growth of the people of the community rather than simply on getting things done. Councils must be careful that efficiency and productivity not be achieved at the expense of people involved. The parish council must be effective, but its effectiveness must emerge from an organizational culture where people and community growth come first.

Parliamentary decision-making, where the majority rules, where all you need is 51% of the votes, has inadequacies. One of the greatest is the possible alienation of the losers. Such decision-making is feasible where there is not a great stake, as is in minor decisions, or in practical or administrative or program choices.

The parish pastoral council has the fundamental task of discerning mission, vision and goals for the parish. In this regard, a discernment or consensus process is called for. When we talk about consensus, we are talking about general agreement on over-all direction, rather than agreement on administrative decisions or program planning. It is often easier to achieve general agreement on broad directions than it is to achieve general agreement on practical decisions.

In the consensual process, no one who is important to the implementation of the decision should be left out. Every one of the members has an opportunity for input and everyone's input is taken seriously. It is very possible that the insight of one person can be the key to the solution. It is also possible that hearing all the exponents of a given position will be more effective than hearing only one. An even more important concern is in returning to the faith perspective to assure that the council is consistent with its basic identity as a ministerial community of faith.

In this regard, prayer and faith sharing are essential to the effectiveness of councils. Research has demonstrated that significant time in prayer yields greater effectiveness among councils. Thirty minutes per meeting is recommended. This can be placed at the beginning of a meeting or spaced throughout. Prayer breaks also are recommended for potentially contentious discussions.

Some pastoral councils utilize the services of an outside facilitator. This person utilizes skills in group processes and communications to keep the group on-track and functioning well. Typically, outside facilitators charge a fee for their services. A list of qualified facilitators who operate in the Diocese of Metuchen is available from the Department of Diocesan Planning.

By-laws

Some parishes, reflecting their own individuality, prefer terms such as “articles of establishment” or “rules of procedure” to “by-laws.” The document, whatever its name, should be designed in light of the nature and purposes of the parish which adopts it and it should reflect clearly the faith context and Gospel values embodied in the parish. The purpose of the constitution is to put down in understandable language a description of the structure and rules of procedure which a group of people agree are suitable to enable them to achieve their purpose, over a period of time, through an orderly process of making decisions for action.

Working out a document which describes the council structure and procedures is a valuable educational experience and an important endeavor. Council members must approach the task prepared to devote sufficient time, thought, discussion, and prayer to it.

A number of parish pastoral councils, especially those which utilize an annual pastoral planning process, have been assisted in their attempts at revitalization by an annual covenant or annual charter of accountability. The covenant concept is, in essence, a pledge or formal commitment of the parish council to the parish community to strive to achieve specific goals in a given year. The covenant concept has a great value for parish councils which are seeking to strengthen their sense of identity as a Christian leadership community, as well as their sense of mission. The covenant concept also can enhance the quality of the relationships and interaction of the parish council. Finally, informing the parish community of the covenant and formally celebrating the covenant within the context of a parish liturgy can do much to raise the awareness of the parish community-at-large to the identity and the ministerial efforts of the parish council.

Terms

Most parish pastoral councils utilize terms of either two or three years, renewable once. When founding a new council, however, it would be important to stagger terms. For example, one-third of the council could serve an initial term of one year, another third could serve an initial term of two years, and one-third serve an initial term of three years. Adopting initial staggered terms insures that only a third of the council moves off at any given year.

Frequently Asked Questions About Parish Pastoral Councils

Is the Parish Pastoral Council an advisory or decision making-body?

The Parish Pastoral Council is a consultative structure of the church. As such, it is an advisory body. In the 1960's and 1970's, parish pastoral councils were described as *either* being advisory *or* decision-making bodies, either deliberative or consultative: the two roles were regarded as mutually exclusive. The experience of parish pastoral councils indicates that when these terms are taken in isolation, they are not adequate to the reality of church life as projected by the Second Vatican Council.

The Revised Code of Canon Law explicitly states that parish pastoral councils “possess a consultative vote.” The ultimate responsibility for the pastoral care of the parish rests with the pastor. However, while the pastor cannot abdicate or transfer his canonical authority, he is to use that authority to foster a collegial and participatory approach to policy-making and decision-making, an approach consistent with and reinforcing of the spirit of shared responsibility. The pastor's authority cannot be viewed as personal power but as genuine service to the Christian community exercised with prudence and sensitivity. Experience and research both indicate that parish pastoral councils will be ineffective if their well-discerned recommendations are not taken seriously by the pastor. Consultation enables the pastor to minister effectively and to make good decisions. And practically speaking, if the council reaches consensus on an issue (with the pastor presiding), then the pastor has made a decision after consultation with his parish pastoral council.

What is the relationship between a Parish Finance Council and a Parish Pastoral Council?

The parish finance council is a relatively new structure, described in Canon 537 of the *Revised Code of Canon Law*. Every parish is to have a parish finance council; it is not optional. The Bishop provides specific norms which parish finance councils are to follow for their structure, purpose and functioning. The finance council and the parish pastoral council are distinct structures. The former has a responsibility limited to the financial affairs of the parish. The latter's scope includes all aspects of the parish's life and ministry. It would be practical for the chairperson of a finance council to be an *ex officio* member of the Parish Pastoral Council to insure good communication and coordination among these two structures. In fact, research indicates that some (but not complete) overlap in membership is good for both bodies. Diocesan norms for the functioning of Parish Finance Councils are available from the Office of Finance.

What is the relationship of the parish staff to the Parish Pastoral Council?

This is a very important question in view of the number of parishes employing lay persons, deacons and religious to direct one or more parish ministries. These include directors of religious education, directors of social ministry, liturgy directors, as well as pastoral assistants who carry out a wide range of pastoral ministries. If the parish pastoral council is going to be engaged in formulating ministry-related goals and objectives for the staff, parish staff members would contribute greatly to this process. On the other hand, conversations about reorganization would best be done without staff present, because of potential conflicts of interest. In some parishes, it may make sense for one or more staff members to be *ex officio* members of the parish pastoral council.

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