

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The privilege and responsibility to oversee and foster the pastoral life of the Diocese of Rockville Centre belongs to me as your Bishop and chief shepherd. I share that responsibility with my brother priests by appointing them shepherds of the faithful in our parishes.

The faithful also share responsibility for the pastoral mission of the local Church in virtue of their baptism and full initiation into the Church. According to the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* issued by the Second Vatican Council, “the laity has an active part of their own in the life and action of the Church. Their action within the Church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.”

Laymen and women are not merely recipients of ministry. By reason of their baptism, they are called and gifted for ministry, and together with the ordained clergy, share in witnessing the Church’s faith and carrying out the Church’s mission. Vatican Council II made it clear that clergy and laity must develop new understanding and effective ways of collaborative leadership in the parish and in the Diocese. One important way in which collaborative leadership can be exercised in the parish is through the ministry of the Pastoral Council.

Pastors, Associates, and other professional ministers need a vivid awareness of the resource a Pastoral Council can be, and the skills to develop and employ this resource. To this end, and in accord with canon 536 of the Code of Canon Law, I officially promulgate these Guidelines for Pastoral Councils for use throughout the Diocese of Rockville Centre. This document replaces the 1987 Guidelines for Pastoral Councils. The Diocese stands fully behind parish efforts to recruit, train and engage with, plan with, and in all ways, collaborate with dedicated and thoughtful lay leaders through the Pastoral Council. Such collaboration is a vital marker of effective ministry by a pastor.

My prayers and blessings are with all who help to make this vision become a reality throughout our Diocese.

Yours faithfully in Christ,

Most Rev. William F. Murphy
Bishop of Rockville Centre

GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL COUNCILS

A. Mission and Vision

*“A vision without a task is but a dream.
A task without a vision is drudgery.
A vision and a task is the hope of the world.”¹*

1. The wisdom of the above quotation serves as the context in which these Guidelines for Pastoral Councils are being offered. We hope to assist parish leaders to shift their focus from the programmatic and finance-driven concerns that tend to take precedence in motivating parish planning, to the creation of a greater awareness of the centrality that zeal for the mission of Christ Jesus must play in the life of the parish. Without denying the importance of activity and fiscal responsibility, when a parish is more keenly aware of the “larger vision” proposed by the Gospels and taught by the Church, it will find itself energized by a sense of mission and directed to matters that do more than fill the annual calendar.
2. “The parish is a privileged place where the faithful concretely experience the Church.”² Although one’s family of origin generally offers the most intimate and basic formation in faith, the parish is the place where a person first experiences a community of faith and where one is formed and sustained in that faith.
3. The essential mission of every parish is evangelization, that is, proclaiming and witnessing to the Good News of the Gospel. Although all parishes hold that in common, each parish, as a definite community of the Christian Faithful, has a unique mission. So, each parish must prayerfully discern and articulate the Gospel call in its own way.
4. The specific mission of a parish, articulated in the parish mission statement, is determined by the gifts and charisms of the local Church, the needs of the people of God, and the means by which the community can respond to those needs in a spirit of Christian stewardship.
5. The parish mission, then, is a unique and particular way in which each parish places its gifts and talents at the service of the Diocese and the universal Church.³

B. Role of the Pastoral Council

1. The term “pastoral” applied to the Council, reflects its unique role in collaborating with the pastor, and where applicable, with the associate pastors and pastoral ministers, and is a visioning body. The role of the Pastoral Council in this model, as opposed to the political model, is, through ongoing long range pastoral planning, to maintain the integrity of the parish mission and the objectives and goals related to it, not to run the day-to-day activities of the parish. Within this model, the events and programs that take place in the course of a year through the efforts of many dedicated parishioners and pastoral staff, continue, but always in the context of the parish mission and its pastoral plan.
2. The Council serves as a forum of consultation for the pastor and members, primarily by engaging them in ongoing dialogue about the needs, feelings, hopes and reactions of parishioners. The purpose of this interaction is to foster the process of pastoral planning and decisions, in the light of the parish mission and vision.
3. Pastoral planning begins with and is sustained by a process of discernment and assessment. Through prayer, study and listening, the pastor and Council begin to identify and prioritize the ways in which the parish is being called to live out its specific mission.
4. A Council must develop a relationship of trust among its members which reflects the ideal and responsibilities of our faith. This relationship is very important to honest dialogue and earnest care for the parish.
5. The Council has a special responsibility to provide information and advice for long-range planning in the parish. Council members should seek to know the people of the parish well. Consequently, Councils are encouraged to develop ways of formally and informally surveying the parish-at-large in order to find out the peoples’ needs, hopes and dreams and how the parishioners feel about different areas of the parish. Likewise, parishioners should know who the Pastoral Council members are and contact should be facilitated by the parish. Listing Council members’ names in the parish bulletin, posting them on web sites are two advisable examples.

C. Membership

1. **The Pastoral Council is made up of** the pastor, (administrator) and eight to twelve parishioners. Smaller parishes may choose to have fewer members, but a minimum of five parishioners is required. Each Council member must have a sense of responsibility for all parishioners not just for a particular group.
2. **Length of Service:** There is no set term that must be applied always. However, for practical reasons, it is recommended that the length of service for Council members be no less than three years (excluding the need for a member to resign), and no more than six years. When making decisions about length of service, it is important to keep in mind continuity and stability, so it is advisable for terms to be staggered.
3. **Criteria for selection:**
 - a] Every Council member should be an active, believing parishioner.
 - b] Each member should be a participant in the ongoing life of the parish, especially Sunday Eucharist.
 - c] Members should see their work on the Council as their major contribution to the life of the parish during their term of office. Members ought not to be so overly involved in the day-to-day parish work that it would interfere with their Council work.
 - d] Each member should accept the responsibility to attend diocesan and parish training programs to enable new members to come to the Council with some orientation and background.
 - e] The Council's nominating and selection procedures should provide a practical way of ensuring a diversity of voices, but it is not necessarily to be done by geographical area or by parish groups.
4. **Additional characteristics** to look for in selecting members:
 - a] "a desire for spiritual growth in oneself and in the parish
 - b] enthusiasm about the future directions of the parish
 - c] willingness to listen, to speak honestly, and work toward consensus
 - d] the ability to inspire and empower others and to delegate
 - e] flexibility and openness with people and ideas"⁴
5. **Process of Selection:** The process used for identifying and selecting members for the Parish Pastoral Council will vary from parish to parish. There is an advantage to be gained by providing some opportunity for the entire parish to be included in some way. This may occur by having parishioners identify potential parish leaders

through communal prayer and a planned discernment process. As a suggestion, the process may include some or all of the following:

- a] “public and private prayer throughout the entire time of discerning new members
- b] education and formation of parishioners on the role of the parish Pastoral Council
- c] explanation of particular qualities and gifts necessary for this leadership ministry
- d] an open invitation to parishioners to identify potential parish leaders, either self or others
- e] an information session for those who have been identified
- f] a discernment session to select new members”⁵

D. The Pastoral Council and Parish Leadership

I. The Pastor and the Pastoral Council

- a] The Pastor has the important task of incorporating a sense of real consultation in the way he leads the parish. To do this well he must establish a good relationship of collaboration with his associate pastors, other pastoral ministers, religious serving in the parish, and his people.
- b] One of the most important ways that the pastor shows respect for the talents and abilities of parishioners is by involving them in the activities and planning of the parish.
- c] By convening a Pastoral Council a pastor is committing himself to the task of including his parishioners in the long-range planning for the future of the parish and the fulfillment of its mission. Their faith, gifts, and wisdom, and their intimate knowledge of the parish and its people, can bring enormous rewards to his ministry and to that of his associates. A Council of Ministries could be recognized as the equivalent of a Pastoral Council.
- d] The pastor should help develop a truly Christian process for selecting Council members, that is, a process developed consultatively and based upon the principles of the Church. The process should involve in some way the pastor’s approval of those who are selected to serve on the Council. If a serious pastoral need arises he must be able to ask a member to leave the Council, but he should discuss with that member the reason why this is necessary.

- e] The pastor should provide opportunities for the Council to grow spiritually. He is encouraged to provide leadership in prayer and avenues for development of the faith of the Council members.
 - f] The pastor may have to provide outside help for the continued training of members or for the better facilitation of Council meetings. In this way the Council members can grow more proficient in their ministry.
2. **The Ministry Staff and the Pastoral Council**
- a] By “*staff*” is meant those who provide leadership in the day-to-day running of the parish. What constitutes “*staff*” may vary from parish to parish.
 - b] The staff generally has its own unique role apart from the Council, and its own relationship to the pastor and his decisions. By virtue of their specialized training and job-responsibilities, staffs execute the professional, practical, and administrative tasks that implement the goals, policies, and programs established by parish. While the staff has its own regular meetings with the pastor, a staff member may be invited by the pastor to participate in a Pastoral Council meeting even when he or she is not an actual Council member.
 - c] It is also advisable for the entire staff to meet with the entire Pastoral Council at least once each year (preferably for a whole day) to discuss areas and concerns of mutual importance. This kind of meeting could be useful for establishing parish goals that focus the agenda of both groups for the year.
 - d] Staff members may themselves ask to be invited to a Pastoral Council meeting whenever they need the Council’s help or have something to discuss which is of importance to the Council.
3. **Leaders of Parish Ministries and the Pastoral Council**
- a] The diverse and often numerous ministries in a parish present a particular challenge to coordination of effort around a parish’s mission and goals. Thus some forum involving the pastor, Pastoral Council, parish staff, and leaders of ministries for conversation about pastoral goals and issues should be established in a form suitable to the character, size, and complexity of the parish.
 - b] The particular concerns of the Pastoral Council in its dealings with parish ministries should be to affirm the gifts and generosity of those who lead and serve in the ministries, and to encourage common and coordinated effort in accord with the parish’s mission and goals.

4. **The Planning Cycle and the Pastoral Council**

- a] The Pastoral Council should be involved in an appropriate way in the setting of long-term parish goals. The report prepared by the pastor for the visitation of the Episcopal Vicar is an especially suitable instrument for this collaboration.
- b] The Council should collaborate in the preparation of the report (at the pastor's direction), along with other parish leadership.
- c] The meeting of the Vicar with the Pastoral Council should be considered a major part of his visitation, and suitable time should be set aside for a significant conversation about the parish's mission and goals, and about its experience in seeking to meet those goals.
- d] Under normal circumstances the report prepared by the Vicar after his visitation should be presented by the pastor to the Pastoral Council to help it in its evaluation of the parish's activities and in its own long-term planning and goal setting in collaboration with the pastor.
- e] A review among pastor, staff, and Council of the parish's progress in meeting its goals and addressing the Vicar's concerns should take place at least annually.
- f] An annual summary of this review and of any modifications to goals can be a helpful resource in evaluation and planning. Pastors, Councils, and staffs may usefully consider preparing such a document each year.

5. **The Pastoral Council and Parish Transition**

- a] While the pastor's leadership exerts an undeniable and necessary influence on the life of a parish, a parish's mission and long-term goals, if well-designed, can ordinarily be expected to remain relatively stable from the administration of one pastor to another. When a pastor dies, is transferred, or resigns, it is up to the incoming pastor to appoint a Pastoral Council. In the interest of continuity in the parish's work and mission, the new pastor is strongly urged to ratify the existing Council membership for at least one year.
- b] Thus the Pastoral Council, having had a significant role in the fostering of the parish's mission and establishment of long-term goals, can be a valuable resource in a time of leadership transition.
- c] When a change of pastor can be expected, and possibly even at other times, a pastor can usefully invite the Pastoral Council to reflect on and describe the qualities sought in any successor-pastor. This information could be forwarded to the Vicar, Director of

Priest Personnel, and Dean, who play some role in the selection of the next pastor.

- d] When a change of pastor is planned, the Pastoral Council can similarly be invited by the outgoing and incoming pastors to aid in the transition in whatever ways they both consider useful and appropriate. Another option is for the outgoing pastor to create a Parish Transition Committee whose task would be to facilitate the period of transition, to work with and support the departing pastor, help the parish community to say goodbye to him in ritual and celebration and to act as a resource to the new pastor during the initial stages of the of the new pastorate.
- e] The Council (or Transition Committee) should, in such circumstances, be considered a special source of understanding of the mission, core values, and long term goals that have directed the ministerial activities of the parish up to the time of transition.
- f] Recognizing its advisory role, the Council should stand ready to assist an incoming pastor in whatever ways he finds most suitable in his collaboration with them. An incoming pastor should likewise give evidence of his appreciation of the wisdom and experience of the Council and of its sense of the parish's mission, goals, and sensibilities.

E. Evaluating the Pastoral Council's Effectiveness

1. The Role of Evaluation

- a] An effective Pastoral Council is vital to effective parish ministry. Just as every aspect of parish life can benefit from regular evaluation, so the Council's work should be reviewed to ensure its effectiveness.
- b] Similarly the members of the Council are entitled to careful and wise use of the gifts of time and talent that they contribute. Evaluation should be presented and used in the expectation of mutual benefit to the Council members, to all parish leaders, and to the work of the parish as a whole.

2. Types of Evaluation

- a] *Ongoing self-evaluation* is the primary mode of evaluation, and is the hallmark of responsible ministry. Each Council participant, pastor and member, should be aware of the impact of his or her own activities in the Council, and should invite and graciously receive appropriate feedback from other members;

- b] *Annual evaluation* by the Council of itself can be a useful exercise. The Council might use part of its final meeting each year to ask itself what it has accomplished and whether its time is well spent.
- c] *Special evaluations* at times of parish or Council transition, or in preparation for the Episcopal Vicar's visit, can improve the Council's effectiveness, and should be undertaken when the pastor or the Council deems such an exercise desirable.

F. Policies, Procedures, and Practices

1. The Pastoral Council may be established and run in any form which is essentially in agreement with these basic guidelines.
2. The Council should put into writing its basic policies, procedures, and practices. This written document and any later changes to it must be submitted to the pastor for his approval and recommendations before it goes into effect.
3. The procedures should be reviewed on a regular basis and updated to meet the needs of the Council and pastor. When a new pastor assumes his office the written document of policies and procedures should be reconsidered and submitted to him for his acceptance and possible changes.
4. A written copy of the procedures is to be sent to the appropriate diocesan office so that it can be kept on file. These written procedures may then be shared among the parishes of the diocese to help in the exchange of ideas and practices.

*Promulgated for the parishes of the Diocese of Rockville Centre.
The Most Reverend William Murphy
Bishop of Rockville Centre
December 8, 2002*

¹ Church Sign in Sussex, England. 1730.

² Pope John Paul II, *The Church In America*.

³ There are a number of practical guidelines and resources on how to discern the parish mission and how to articulate it. One such is: *Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council*, published by Paulist Press.

⁴ *Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council*, p.192.

⁵ *Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council*, p. 193.