

THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A PARISH COUNCIL

The parish council is both a process and a structure which enables parishioners to accept and to share more fully the task of continuing the Church's work in the parish and neighborhood, of helping to call forth and affirm the many gifts and competencies needed to meet the pastoral needs of God's people, and for more effectively permeating the whole area with the presence of Christ. In order that a parish council successfully serve its leadership role in the parish, we feel that it should possess a number of important characteristics lest it get bogged down in conflicts and clashes that often plague us imperfect human beings.

1. A PARISH COUNCIL IS PRAYERFUL. Its members are to be persons of prayer; that is, they see the value of private prayer for their own personal growth in holiness as well as the value of community prayer for growth in Christ's community of faith and love. The council thus spends time together in prayer and retreat experiences for the purpose of drawing together in love and trust, to heal divisions, and for the discernment of God's will for the community.

2. A PARISH COUNCIL IS PASTORAL. It strives to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit among God's people in the parish for the purpose of investigating and weighing matters that bear on pastoral activities affecting the lives of parishioners, and to formulate in behalf of the parish practical conclusions regarding them. The council decides what specific actions or programs the parish should adopt to perform its spiritual mission, that of making the Gospel known and of helping people in their spiritual journeying. Only then can it determine what resources (people, facilities, money) it needs to carry out those actions or programs, and how to provide such resources.

3. A PARISH COUNCIL IS REPRESENTATIVE. It's a representative body rather than a body of representatives. A council member is not the representative for a particular neighborhood, age bracket, special interest group or organization: each councilor ministers to the entire parish community. Thus, the council represents in a holistic sense all areas of parish life: old and young, men and women, laity, clergy and religious, people with divergent viewpoints and ethnic/cultural backgrounds. All work together in an atmosphere and spirit of trust and openness, merging their expertise, insights and experiences to further the mission of Jesus among all people.

The priests of the parish and a sufficient number of laypersons, with their respective gifts and talents, are to be members of the council. Any religious attached to the parish may also be appropriately represented. Eligibility requirements for council membership are to be reasonable; some form of elective process in which the entire parish is involved seems necessary. All members of the council are voting members.

4. A PARISH COUNCIL IS DISCERNING. Its members participate effectively in the policy-making process for the parish by bringing together the needs and the hopes of the parishioners and of the entire community (neighborhoods) in which they live. Through dialogue and deliberation, it merges the insights, the diverse experiences, the expertise and the faith of the councilors in order to provide vision and direction for the parish community. That vision finds expression in the priorities established and the broad policies formulated.

Four principles are to be observed in this connection:

- a) Only policy recommendations are to be made by the parish council; day-to-day parish administrative decisions are made by the parish staff.
- b) The council's recommendations are to be consistent with faith and morals, civil and church law, and diocesan policies.
- c) The pastor/pastoral team ratifies the recommendations of the Council through his/their presence at meetings and participation in the discussion and refinement of proposals.
- d) Since the pastor/pastoral team is accountable to the Diocesan Bishop for the parish, and as a part of the presbyterate, is responsible for the spiritual life of each parishioner, councilors must be open to reconsideration of a decision in light of this responsibility.

5. A PARISH COUNCIL IS PROPHETIC. As a result of experiencing the fullness of God's Word, it brings a broader, more challenging vision to parish life. It strives to move outward to tackle some of the bigger issues within the Church and in the world, seeking to be a credible sign of concern for justice, peace, reconciliation and practical love, bearing witness to all that the reign of God is already unfolding. It is a group of people who are not afraid to challenge and take risks; who support, affirm, and share their convictions of faith with one another as they strive to build more trusting relationships in the continual process of building up the Body of Christ. Council membership calls people to be sensitive to the anguish and pain of others and to respond in healing, reconciling ways.

6. A PARISH COUNCIL IS ENABLING. It strives to recognize and acknowledge the giftedness in God's people and to enable each person's unique giftedness to surface, to be shared and organized for the upbuilding of the community to faith, and finally to be celebrated. It seeks to help persons discover that for which they were created, and monitors the ongoing renewal of parish life. To aid the council in this challenging task, the council may work with standing committees/commissions that reflect the parish mission.

The council works to promote unity in diversity – keeping the parish together by enabling people to think, pray, work, and play together. At the same time that it unites, it respects the diversity of the community by encouraging each person to bring forth his/her special competence in ministry and service to others.

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