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Pastoral councils are a work in progress

by Tom Gallagher

Mission Management



(Pat Marrin)

MISSION MANAGEMENT

Diocesan and parish pastoral councils have recently been in the news. First, the beleaguered Philadelphia archdiocese announced the formation of its first "archdiocesan pastoral council," as Archbishop Charles Chaput tries to create almost from scratch a well-functioning enterprise.

Then there's the case of Florian Stangl, a 26-year-old gay Austrian man in a registered domestic partnership, whose pastor had prohibited him from serving on the parish council to which he had been elected by a wide margin. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna overrode the pastor and allowed Stangl to serve on the council.

Today, half of the 195 U.S. dioceses have diocesan pastoral councils, while three-fourths of the 18,000 parishes have parish pastoral councils, according to a 2003 survey by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

But what exactly is a parish pastoral council? Where do they come from? What is their mission? And how do they operate?

"The pastoral council is a type of council first recommended in the Vatican II decree on bishops [*Christus Dominus*], with a threefold function: to investigate, under the pastor's direction, some aspect of the practical church reality; to ponder or reflect on it; and to reach a conclusion that can be recommended to the pastor," said Mark Fischer, professor of theology and director of admissions at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, Calif. The decree directed that such councils be formed at the diocesan level.

According to Fischer, the Vatican II Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), which mentions parochial councils, was intended for lay associations, not precisely parish pastoral councils.

In 1973, the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy recommended extending pastoral councils to the parish level through a private or circular letter to bishops around the world (*Omnes Christifideles*).

The 1983 Code of Canon Law recommends, but does not require, that a diocesan pastoral council be established (Canon 511), and that each parish establish a pastoral council (Canon 536). Importantly, the pastoral councils are consultative only, with no legal authority under canon or civil law. Conversely, canon law requires that dioceses and parishes establish finance councils (Canons 492 and 537, respectively).

"The [parish pastoral council] is relevant because we Catholics believe that God's Word became flesh," Fischer said. "We are now Christ's body. So the wise pastor consults his people because he believes that God's wisdom dwells in them.

"If he is to make decisions on the parish's behalf that will build up and unify the body, he must consult its members," said Fischer, who wrote *Pastoral Councils in Today's Catholic Parishes* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2001) and *Making Parish Councils Pastoral* (Paulist Press, 2010), and hosts a website on the subject.

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During a recent conference call with NCR, Sr. Brenda Hermann, a Missionary Servant of the Most Blessed Trinity, and Msgr. James Gaston, a Greensburg, Pa., diocesan priest*, offered a different understanding of parish pastoral councils. Hermann and Gaston coauthored *Build a Life-giving Parish: The Gift of Counsel in the Modern World* (Liguori, 2010).

"Our starting point is both decrees on bishops and on the laity; however, the primary role of the laity is to the world and it's essential for parishes to prepare and support the laity," Hermann said.

"There is a whole understanding in the life of the people of God and no place to bring it [into the church]," she said. "Parish pastoral councils are the place where the mission fields of the laity and the ordained intersect and interact."

"The daily life concerns of the laity are the primary pastoral concerns of the church and pastoral councils," said Gaston, who is also pastor at St. Margaret Mary Church in Lower Burrell, Pa.

Fischer believes that the councils serve the pastor's apostolate, while Hermann and Gaston believe they

serve the laity's apostolate.

"We believe that in a pastoral council there is 'counsel in council,' " Gaston said.

This " 'counsel in council' is the first step before planning and implementation can occur," Hermann added.

Until recently, little research on the practices of parish pastoral councils was available.

To begin to better understand parish pastoral council practices, an in-depth study was undertaken by Charles Zech, director of Villanova University's Center for the Study of Church Management; Robert Miller, director of research and planning for the Philadelphia archdiocese; and Mercy Sr. Mary Bendyna and Mary Gautier, both from Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. The work resulted in the book *Best Practices of Catholic Pastoral and Finance Councils* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2010).

"Parish pastoral councils involve a discernment process or faith-based approach to decision-making," Zech said.

While Fischer argues that the work of parish pastoral councils is planning, "the best parish pastoral councils do both planning and coordinating," Zech said. "I don't believe there's enough planning or coordinating work by itself for councils to actually do."

Fischer, Hermann and Gaston believe that parish staff can do coordinating work.

Some parishes elect council members, others appoint members, and some do both. "It's important to get the best people for the council and this might include the appointment of a parish school principal or youth minister," Zech said.

He cautions against having council members think that they represent a particular parish constituency. This can inhibit the discernment process, he said.

Gaston said, "Potential council members should be vetted."

Membership terms are generally three years, and staggered, with a maximum of two consecutive terms. Councils meet at least quarterly and often monthly.

While Zech emphasizes that decision-making is through a discernment process, he also recognizes that not all decisions have to be discerned. Sometimes a simple vote is sufficient.

Zech also recommends that norms or bylaws spell out the internal operations of the council. "When one walks into a parish pastoral council meeting, the person should know what to expect," he said.

Parish pastoral councils also have a communication responsibility to the parish as a whole. "There can be open meetings, parishioners can be invited to submit agenda items, there can be town meetings to solicit input," Zech said. Frequent reports to the parish are necessary as well, he said.

Fischer cautions that councils are not public relations vehicles.

The experts agree that dialogue in a council meeting is critical and that "wisdom thinking" and "wise and prudent recommendations" need to be developed at such meetings. "Pastoral council members should be free to tell the truth: investigating minutely, reflecting thoroughly, and recommending wisely," Fischer

said.

Parish pastoral councils are still relatively new, continue to be a work in progress, and more needs to be done to better understand them.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR's* Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

* *A previous version of this story incorrectly located Gaston's diocese.*

Recommendations for parish pastoral councils

Charles Zech and his coauthors in their book *Best Practices of Catholic Pastoral and Finance Councils* propose the following seven recommendations that all parish pastoral councils should seriously consider:

- Leadership should be shared. While the pastor is to preside over the council (Canon 536), shared leadership could include sharing the agenda-setting responsibility or naming a layperson to chair the council.
- Establish group norms, such as council bylaws. Rules are needed to regulate the behavior of all the council members.
- Provide parish-based education/formation programs for council members. These programs help the council achieve a level of cohesion, trust and open communication required to be effective.
- Include a member of the parish finance council on the parish pastoral council. To support communication between these councils, at least one member of the finance council, in addition to the pastor, should be on the parish pastoral council.
- Communicate with the parish at large. Parishioners need to receive regular communications from the pastor concerning the activities of the parish pastoral council.
- Match decision-making procedures with the situation. Parish pastoral councils that rely on the discernment/consensus model of decision-making tend to be associated with more effective group processes. But other times, a simple vote works best. The council should work at creating a consensus on how it should proceed.
- Include prayer and faith-sharing as part of the agenda at every meeting. As a faith-based consultative body, the importance of prayer and faith-sharing cannot be overemphasized.

-- *Tom Gallagher*

Additional Resources

Mark Fischer's website on parish pastoral councils

Villanova University's Center for the Study of Church Management

For another view of parish leadership, see the Parish Evaluation Project, co-directed by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Sweetser and Wendy Rappé

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