

Facilitator's Guide

Parish Pastoral Council
&
Commissions



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Introduction

In Mark's gospel Jesus instructs his disciples before sending them into the villages to teach and heal, "to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick." (Mk 6:8). One way of looking at the gospel is to say that a person needs to set aside his/her possessions and material wealth because they get in the way of their call to discipleship. As members of the Pastoral Council or Commissions you might want to reflect on this writing from another perspective. As you enter this new place—serving on the Council or Commissions—you may need to leave behind your prejudices and agendas, your need to control, your need to be right, your unwillingness to listen to another person or your impatience with spending time together in prayer. This manual provides some suggested meeting skills, but these skills will be of little value to the success of your meetings if the members have not done as Jesus asked of his disciples: "take nothing for the journey" (Mk 6:8), i.e., leave behind your agendas and come with an open mind anxious to fulfill God's agenda.

Unless you know what you want to accomplish in a meeting—what you are consulting about—you can only hope that things will turn out well.

Mark Fischer

I. The Environment

Where the Council and Commission meeting takes place, and the manner in which the tables and chairs are arranged will effect the outcome of the meeting. The room should offer both physical and psychological comfort. Our surroundings do effect the way we think and act. The room should have good lighting and good ventilation. The chairs and tables should be arranged so that people can see each other and make eye contact. There should be ample space available in the room so that the members are not crowded, and there space available for visitors to attend. Tables arranged in a U-shape prove to be a more welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for visitors, as well as, providing adequate eye contact with all of the Council or Commission members.

II. The Agenda

Often when people are asked why they find meetings frustrating or non-productive they respond with comments such as:

- It was unclear what the meeting was to accomplish.
- People kept getting off the subject.
- The meeting ran too long.
- There seemed to be a lot of time wasted.

Meetings do not just happen, they require planning. A few hours of preparation and communication beforehand can result in a meeting that works. There are a number of elements that need consideration if a meeting is to be effective.

An important component of any meeting is the preparation of the agenda. Before the closure of each Council or Commission meeting, the members need to identify those issues that will be on the agenda for next month. The Agenda Committee is responsible for finalizing the agenda. The Agenda Committee of the Council always includes the pastor, the chairperson and one other member. The Agenda Committee for a Commission would include the chairperson, the council liaison and the assigned staff member. The agenda should include time in the beginning or at the end of the meeting for prayer and reflection. It is the responsibility of the Committee to have the agenda and other pertinent material mailed to the members at least one week prior to the meeting. In turn, the members of the Council and the Commissions are responsible for spending the necessary time studying and reflecting on the agenda and the materials they have received. Each council and commission member should come to the meeting prepared to share their wisdom on the agenda items. If a member has not prepared for the meeting then they should refrain from participating in any decision item. If the agenda is concise and if the chairperson keeps everyone on track; an hour and one half meeting should be sufficient; meetings should never exceed two hours.

Mark Fischer, author and theologian, states that the Council and Commission agenda is like a contract. When the members, including the pastor and staff, accepts it, the agenda binds them to certain expectations.

A well written agenda states what the participants can expect, helps them to prepare, and expresses a spirit of respect. A poorly written agenda leaves room for un-pleasant surprises, invites no preparation, and expresses nothing of the group's spirit.

Mark Fischer

SAMPLE AGENDA

1 ½ HOUR MEETING

- PRAYER/FORMATION (10 min)
- APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES (2 min)
- APPROVAL OF COMMISSION REPORTS (3 min)
- AUDIENCE TO VISITORS (10 min)
- WORK ON THE AGENDA ITEMS (50 min)
- RECOMMENDATIONS ON AGENDA ITEMS (10 min)
- SETTING NEXT MONTHS AGENDA (5 min)
- ADJOURNMENT OR CLOSURE

This format is used for achieving more at the Council/Commission meetings and for broadening the input from the members. Some initial assumptions:

1. The agenda for the Council meeting should have no more than two major items for discussion. An exception would be three.
2. Commission reports should be written by the Liaison and included in the agenda mailing. At the Council meeting the Facilitator asks only for approval of the reports. Questions should be limited to clarification. It is not the role of the Council to re-do the work of the Commission.

III. The Role of the Chairperson

The Pastoral Council and Commission Chairperson serves as the facilitator of the meeting. To do this effectively the Chairperson must spend time in preparation for the meeting, always keeping in mind the question “why are we having this meeting?” It is important for the Chairperson to not be so rigid in implementing the agenda that the members lack the freedom to contribute to the discussion and decision making. When planning for the meeting the Chairperson should never delete any items placed on the agenda by the Agenda Committee. If the agenda needs adjustment it is made when the Chairperson asks for approval of the agenda.

Don't pretend you are consulting about a decision when, in reality, you have already decided what you are going to do.

Mark Fisher

The ability on the part of the Chairperson to work effectively with a group, such as a Pastoral Council or Commission, is an important factor in facilitating a meeting and enabling collaboration. Loughlan Sofield, ST and Carroll Juliano, SJCJ, in their book titled “Collaborative Ministry” provide some useful hints for the Chairperson/Facilitator:

- Examine your belief about the Council or Commission—if the Chairperson conveys a negative attitude it will affect the work of the group.
- Learn to think of the Council or Commission as an entity. This perspective allows the Chairperson to see beyond the individuals and observe the behavior and work that is reflective of the whole.
- Stay focused on the content and the process.
- The success of the meeting is usually in direct proportion to the amount of time the Chairperson has taken to prepare. The preparation should include time to reflect on the prior meeting—what has happened since the previous meeting and anticipate issues that might arise at this meeting.
- The Chairperson should use direct honesty and gentle compassion in leading the Council or Commission.

IV. Process Skills

Involvement of all the members, not just the Chairperson, is an important factor for a successful Council or Commission meeting. The most critical skills are those that foster attentive listening and respect for one another’s wisdom. Competency in meeting skills not only allows for the wisdom of the group to surface but also allows for the participants to share equally in the meeting’s success.

Meeting skills can be divided into two groups, task and maintenance. Task skills refer to behaviors that are concerned with the group getting the job done. All Council and Commission members need to develop and use task skills.

Task Skills	
Initiating:	Bringing new ideas, questions and suggestions to the attention of the members.
Seeking information:	Requesting facts, ideas, opinions and the wisdom of one another.
Giving information:	Offering information, facts, and suggestions. Each member needs to recognize his/her obligation to share wisdom.
Clarifying:	Interpreting information and ideas, defining terms.
Summarizing:	Pulling together related ideas, restating what has been discussed.
Tracking the agenda:	Keeping the members or an individual on target, keeping the members focused, confronting topic jumpers.
Consensus testing:	Quick survey of each member to see if a decision is near, checking that all of the wisdom has surfaced.

Maintenance skills focus on the process.

Maintenance Skills	
Gate keeping:	Opening gates and helping others to participate in the discussion. Closing gates, by providing equal time for all.
Encouraging:	Supporting and indicating an attitude of respect for another person's vision.
Negotiating:	Considering compromise, identifying what is agreed upon and what is in conflict. Trusting the wisdom of the members.
Expressing feelings:	Verbalizing feelings, trusting the validity of personal feelings.
Tracking the discussion:	Bringing the members back to a point that has been lost or ignored, re-focusing the members.

V. *Communication*

In our communication with others, every word, gesture, expression and impression will be seen and evaluated by the other person. It is important that the image we project is one that will help facilitate and foster open, honest and trusting communication.

Several years ago Loyola University in Chicago concluded in a study on being an effective manager that the most important aspect was being a good listener. There are four general levels into which people fall as listeners:

- **The Non-listener:** The listener makes no effort to hear what the other person is saying. Interrupting the speaker is a common fault of the non-listener and the non-listener must always have the last word.
- **The Marginal Listener:** The marginal listener is a superficial listener. They tend to postpone problems and will look for ways to withdraw from the discussion. With this listener there is considerable room for misunderstanding.
- **The Evaluative Listener:** This listener forms opinions about the speakers words before the message is complete, thus does not understand the meaning of the message.
- **The Active Listener:** Active listening is having the ability to place one's self in the speakers position and seeing things from his/her point of view. Real communication takes place at this level. Through sensing, attention and responding the active listener makes the speaker feel understood.

In their book on *Building Community*, Loughlan Sofield and Carroll Juliano share with the reader that God calls us to community, and it is through community we can be helped to discover our truest and deepest selves. We can assist one another in building community by recognizing the relationship between what is spoken and how it affects the listener; by responding appropriately to each other's feelings and ideas; by incorporating people who feel excluded and by handling problems and issues as they arise within the group.

VI. Managing Conflict

The Church has never been a stranger to conflict. The disciples argued about their place in the kingdom and how to do God's work. Paul was often at the center of conflict both with the local authorities and with his brothers and sisters in the faith. There is still conflict in the Church today as we listen to the disagreement between people at all levels. Conflict seems to happen whenever people feel deeply about an issue. To most people conflict is a negative experience, disrupting and painful. Others would say that conflict is good and that temporary conflict can lead to a greater good.

Conflict is a normal aspect of genuine relationships. It begins when our needs, wants, values and ideas clash with the needs, values and ideas of others. Each individual has a need to be loved and affirmed, to be understood and to belong.

Principles for Dealing with Conflict

- Acknowledge the presence of conflict.
- Help everyone become aware of his or her role in the conflict.
- Assist everyone to understand the position of the other.
- Seek a resolution that does not leave anyone feeling victimized.
- Clarify what is ambiguous. Ambiguity breeds conflict.
- Be sensitive to the capacity of the members to tolerate conflict.
- Help people be realistic. Not all conflicts can be resolved.
- Encourage the participants to be forgiving. Forgiveness is at the heart of a caring community.

"Building Community" L. Sofield & C. Juliano

Conflict allows for the constructive expression of aggressive feelings that, denied or avoided, surface in ways which interfere with communal life. Members feel good when they learn to interact in a non-defensive, and non-judgmental manner.

Conflict as a Positive Experience

- It motivates you to draw on untapped abilities and skills.
- It encourages you to find new ways to deal with problems.
- It stimulates your interest in community and in one another.
- It forces you to clarify your views or re-examine your positions.
- It promotes personal growth.
- It clears the air and brings you closer to others.

"Building Community" L. Sofield & C. Juliano

VII. Collaboration & Consensus

The Pastoral Council and Commissions are bodies that enable the clergy and laity to cooperate effectively in bringing about the spiritual renewal of the parish, through visioning, and planning, and by reaching decisions through the prayerful process of discernment and collaboration.

Loughlan Sofield, ST and Carroll Juliano, SJCJ, noted authors on the subject of collaboration define collaboration as “the identification, release, and union of all the gifts in ministry for the sake of the mission.” Collaboration is based on the belief that all baptized persons are gifted and called to continue the mission of Jesus Christ. Collaboration reflects the notion that the whole is greater than the sum, and therefore, no one person has all of the wisdom. Those who participate in collaborative ministry recognize and believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

If Pastoral Councils and Commissions are to make inroads in the critical issues that affect the lives of the people they serve, then it will require the utilization of the gifts of all the people. People of diverse cultures and race, lay and ordained, men and women, must work together collaboratively to proclaim the Good News and extend the kingdom.

The Pastoral Council members and Commission members, recognizing the gifts and the wisdom of its members, work together to reach a decision through consensus. In a true consensus model a workable decision is reached through dialogue, compromise and modification. The goal of both the Council and Commissions is to make the best decision possible for the good of the parish. Consensus is achieved when everyone can live with the decision. In reality no one achieves exactly what he or she wants, but everyone has had input into the decision. When a consensus cannot be reached, the Council or Commission is frequently in need of additional information or data, and the proposal should be tabled until more information is presented.

Consensus should be used for major decisions affecting parish life. Consensus will not be effective if the Council or Commission is not a genuine faith community, or if it is being manipulated by personal agendas or outside influence.

Collaboration is.....

- A gift.
- A vehicle for ministry.
- Always the mission of Jesus Christ.

VIII. Models for Group Discussion

I. Group Process for Council and Commission Recommendations

At the Pastoral Council or Commission meeting members are asked to select the agenda item that they would like to discuss in the small group. This choice can be made prior to the meeting by including a selection sheet with the agenda packet. The process is as follows:

Round I: Groups of four or five brainstorm possible ideas or suggestions relating to the chosen agenda item. (allocate 10-15 minutes).

At the conclusion of the brainstorming the small group presents a summary of their discussion to the whole Council or Commission. If there is more than one agenda item being discussed in the small group, this would be the time for other Council/Commission members to give their suggestions or ideas for consideration to one of the small groups.

Round II: Using the input from the groups brainstorming session, and the input from the Council/Commission members, recommendations are developed and prioritized for discussion by the whole Council or Commission. The recommendations are approved when a consensus is reached by the members.

II. Small Group Process (Richard Groome: Christian Praxis)

- **Step 1.** **Introduce and focus**—the session on the theology or theme.
- **Step 2.** **Name the experience**—describe how the topic relates to your experience or the experience of others.
- **Step 3.** **Reflecting**—step back and consider what has been discussed. Don't look at just what the group has said, but why.
- **Step 4.** **Vision**—does the vision, expressed through scripture, prayer, worship, parish life and mission, relate to the lives of the people?
- **Step 5.** **Integration**—reflect on your own understanding of the theology or theme in light of the vision.
- **Step 6.** **Responding**—identify the challenges and the action.

VIII. Models for Group Discussion (con't)

III. Town Hall Meeting

Process 1. Rotation of groups.

The town hall process can work with a gathering of 25 and larger. The rotation process would move the participants through more than one topic. Groups of six would be given 15-20 minutes to brainstorm and discuss ideas on a particular topic. From the brainstorming the group would prioritize 2 or 3 recommendations. These would be posted next to the topic that has been placed on a large board by the facilitator. The group members would move to a second topic. The structure of the groups should change at each rotation. The rotation process allows people to have input on all of the topics. An added feature would be that the groups who post recommendations would make a commitment to help with their recommendations. The timeline for this town hall meeting can be adjusted but should not exceed 2 hours.

Process 2. Non-rotation of groups.

This process can also work with a gathering of 25 and larger. Round tables that would accommodate six people would have signs indicating the topic being discussed. The participants would choose a topic of their choice. Approximately 20 minutes would be allowed for brainstorming of ideas. From the brainstorming each group would prioritize 2 or 3 recommendations. This process assumes that there would be several groups discussing each topic. The timeline for the town hall meeting can be adjusted, but should not exceed 2 hours. The posting of the recommendations can be done with this process also, and the members of the group would make a commitment to help with their recommendations.

Additional Comments:

1. The person serving as a facilitator should either have experience or be willing to be trained. Each group should have a capable facilitator and six participants.
2. Recommendations can be combined, but generally not deleted. The facilitator needs to be supportive of the ideas, and capable of leading the small group or the larger group in discerning the importance of each recommendation.

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Office of Parish Pastoral Councils
Anne Verbeke, Director
9292 Broadway
Merrillville, IN 46410
219 769-9292, Ext. 280
averbeke@dgary.org