

Fostering Pastoral Action

The following information is drawn from the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference website dedicated to supporting Parish Pastoral Councils. <http://www.ppc.catholic.org.au/default.htm>

Parish 'Pastoral' Council

Q: Does the descriptive name "Pastoral" alongside "Parish Council" actually specify something about the role of such a Council?

A: The term 'pastoral' is an important one, because the Parish Council that it describes is called to leadership specifically to foster pastoral action – action that is inspired by the Gospel as well as being centred on its proclamation; action that is intended to build warm human community in which members' faith is nourished and they are enabled to celebrate their lives in liturgical worship as well as witnessing to their faith in daily life. To fulfil this role, which is a sharing in the role proper to the Pastor, the Council will listen to, and explore the hopes, needs and gifts of the community, reflect on them in the light of the Gospel, and come to appropriate pastoral action.

Pastoral Planning

Pastoral planning is the discipline of intentionally working towards a desired future that represents a more authentic witness to the reign of God in the local community. Pastoral planning is the action of leading the parish in planning for the future and organizing itself for the mission of the Church. It is a process of reflection and discernment, but it is not theoretical – it's about this specific community dealing with its reality in these times; it leads to concrete outcomes of who's going to do what, how and by when.

A Participative Process - *"If it's about me, then not without me"*

The values, principles and goals of pastoral planning are the values, principles and goals of the gospel – compassion, inclusivity, justice, option for the poor, love of neighbour, trust in God and so on. The spirituality of pastoral planning is the spirituality of communion - the understanding that all of us in the Church make up the body of Christ, and whatever touches one of us touches all of us; we all have different gifts, roles and functions within the body, and this is part of our strength; through communion with Christ we are all bound together in communion with one another; we all live and act as the much loved children of God. Pastoral Planning is therefore a communal, participative process.

Pastoral Planning is always a community exercise, rather than a lone planner piecing a plan together. Those who are going to be affected by the plans need to be invited into the planning process, given all the relevant information and led into processes of discussion and discernment. "If it's about me, then not without me" is the catchcry for parishioners in pastoral planning. Pastoral planning is an activity best done together.

Pastoral Planning Approaches

There are many ways of doing pastoral planning, many methodologies have been developed and books written about them. At its most basic level parish pastoral planning covers the five steps of the pastoral planning cycle outlined below. They can be used to develop a whole of parish plan or to plan for just one area of parish life.

Step 1: Name the reality

This first step is one of naming what is already happening in the parish and in the wider community. It means spelling out what the current reality is rather than assuming everybody knows. This 'naming the reality' doesn't have to cover every single detail, but it does mean consulting with a variety of people to gain a clear overarching picture.

Step 2: Discern the vision

Often unspoken within a parish community is a sense of what the parish is being called to be in these days, not in detail but in an overarching sense of where the parish wants to be heading. Tapping in to this sense, reflecting upon it, discussing what it's saying and praying about it is the process of 'discerning the vision'. It takes time and is informed by the negatives (what people reject) as well as the positives (what people yearn for). From this process emerges a succinct simple statement to which the parish aligns itself and begins to understand what needs to happen to realise it.

Step 3: Analysis

This is an important step, but it's one that people are often tempted to ignore, wanting to 'get on with it' without delay. Analysis helps us understand what's going on so that we're better able to respond. It revolves around a few simple questions like:

- Why are things as they are and not as we hope they would be?
- Where are the signs of life in our community?
- What resources and strengths do we have to help us achieve our vision?

Step 4: Goals & Strategies

The parish looks at the reality, looks at the vision, and in the light of the analysis outlines steps to move the parish from the current reality to the envisioned reality. These steps are the goals. They are like markers along the journey towards the vision, or steps up a ladder - they are achievable. Once a goal has been named the detail of how to achieve the goal is worked out - these details are the strategies and they deal with questions of who is going to do what? How? When?

Step 5: Evaluation

Are we there yet? Evaluation is important all along the way. Important questions to reflect upon are:

- Is the plan still on track, or have we been side-tracked?
- What has been happening that we didn't expect?
- How are people coping with it all?
- How have we moved closer to achieving our vision?

Once we have achieved our goals we will have changed our "current reality" - maybe a little, maybe a lot - and we may need to reassess what our next steps will be. Finally, in pastoral planning all decisions taken, every step planned and evaluation made are all done in the light of the Gospel.