

## **PLANNING GROUP COUNCILS**

### **I. Definition**

A Planning Group Council is composed of representatives from each parish/faith community in a planning group and is responsible for overseeing and guiding implementation of the planning group's approved pastoral plan. Various names have been given to these councils: leadership committee or team, steering committee, unity council, oversight committee, covenant or covenanting council, strategic leadership committee, common council, planning council or committee, regional pastoral council, regional council, executive council, inter-parochial council, inter-parish advisory team or council, implementation team, synergia council.

Three different types of planning group councils currently exist within the Diocese of Rochester. They are the following:

- a) A planning group council in a planning group in which two or more pastors/administrators/chaplains serve two or more parishes, clusters, or faith communities. This is the most typical form and the one for which these guidelines are primarily being written.
- b) A planning group council in a planning group which contains only one parish or cluster under one pastor/administrator. When the planning group council serves as the pastoral council for the entire planning group, it has the same purpose and scope of responsibilities as any other pastoral council with the additional responsibility of overseeing implementation of the agreed-upon pastoral plan.
- c) A planning group council in a planning group in which a pastor/administrator serves a single cluster but with a pastoral council for each parish in the cluster. This is a transitional form, since the diocese encourages clusters to move toward one united council with representatives from each of the parishes of the cluster. The planning council, in this case, functions similarly to the "type a" council. However, there is a slightly different dynamic with only one pastor/administrator serving on the council. Ordinarily the give and take that occurs in the interchange among two or more pastors/administrators ensures that all parishes in the planning group are well represented on the council. In a "type c" council the pastor/administrator must be careful to represent and balance the needs of each community and perhaps to depend more fully on the vigorous participation of the lay representatives from each parish community. Likewise, the pastor/administrator must work especially hard to take a role on the council which does not dominate the lay and staff representatives but, rather, encourages them to share their insights and use their personal talents on behalf of the entire planning group.

### **II. Purpose**

The planning group council is a newly-created advisory group designed to facilitate collaboration among parishes and faith communities. This council does not replace or

override the rights and responsibilities of a pastor/administrator in relation to the parish under his jurisdiction. Nor does it usurp the role of individual parish pastoral councils. Rather it exists to serve pastors and parishes as they seek to address issues and meet needs that are either beyond the scope of any one parish or are better addressed in collaboration with other parishes/faith communities.

The specific purposes of the planning group council are the following:

- to form community as a sign and witness of unity among the parishes/faith communities of the planning group.
- to support parishes/faith communities in the planning group as they work together to carry out the mission of the Church: to proclaim the Gospel, to form community, to pray and worship together, and to serve those in need.
- to promote communication, understanding and collaboration among the parishes/faith communities of the planning group (including parishioners at large, pastoral councils, pastors, staff, and volunteer leadership) and with the diocese and universal Church.
- to oversee implementation of the planning group's pastoral plan after it has been approved by the Bishop.
- to modify the pastoral plan in light of new issues and circumstances.

### **III. Membership**

The planning group council is composed of representation from all of the parishes/faith communities in the planning group. Each parish/faith community is represented by at least one lay person, the pastor/administrator, and possibly a staff member. It is highly recommended that at least one lay representative from each parish also serve concurrently on its pastoral council so that there can be regular communication between the planning group council and the individual pastoral councils. The diocesan liaison to the planning group serves as an ex-officio member.

Members should be:

- baptized and confirmed Roman Catholics in good standing with the Church
- registered and supporting members of their parish
- participants in parish life as well as in the shared activities of the planning group.

Effective members will also be:

- in possession of an understanding of and commitment to the Church in accord with the principles of Vatican II
- committed to the teachings and policies of the universal and local church
- committed to the mission and values of the Diocese of Rochester and the vision of the Bishop
- devoted to prayer, study, listening, and dialogue
- willing and able to give the time needed for participation

- committed to enhancing the wellbeing of both the individual parish/faith community as well as the planning group as a whole.

Planning group council members are in a unique situation. They come to the council because they are parishioners active in the life of their individual parish. They are expected by their parish to represent its interests and concerns to the best of their ability. At the same time, they have a responsibility to the planning group as a whole. To be effective planning group council members, they must develop a broader outlook, one mindful of the needs and concerns of all of the parishes/faith communities in the group. They are expected to make the best possible recommendations and decisions for the group as a whole.

Planning group council members are ordinarily selected by the pastor/administrator/chaplain with input by the parish's pastoral council and parish staff members. Terms are generally two to three years (renewable once) and staggered so that council membership rotates.

#### **IV. The pastor/administrator**

The pastor/administrator represents the parish in all juridic matters and is charged to administer the goods of the parish according to the norms of the universal and particular Church. The pastor/administrator is further charged by the Bishop to share responsibility with him for the whole local Church. Within the planning group council, pastors/administrators share information about their parish/cluster as well as its needs and concerns, provide their own perspective, contribute to the development of collaborative plans and support implementation of these plans once they are approved. If a particular proposal is unacceptable to the individual parish or cluster, the pastor/administrator has the responsibility to state concerns clearly with supporting argumentation.

#### **V. Chairperson**

The chairperson, selected by the council membership, is central to the effectiveness of the planning group council. The chairperson is responsible for:

- organizing and coordinating the agenda and processes of the council
- chairing and facilitating the meetings of the council (the chairperson may delegate facilitation of portions of the meeting to other members)
- encouraging members and committees of the council to fulfill their specific responsibilities and delegations
- establishing an ongoing process of evaluation of the council's effectiveness
- maintaining communication with the diocese through the planning group liaison
- ensuring communication of council proceedings, as appropriate, to parish leadership, staff, and membership.

The chairperson must be the servant of the group. She/he should be an enabler and facilitator of the council promoting inclusion and participation, keeping the meetings on track, being sensitive to conflict and helping to resolve conflicts positively.

## **VI. Secretary**

The secretary prepares summaries of the meetings of the council, maintains the membership roster, assures the preparation and dissemination of materials for council meetings and is responsible for all council correspondence. The secretary may either be a member of the council, selected by council members for this service, or a volunteer or staff member from outside the council membership.

## **VII. The Planning Group Liaison**

The diocesan liaison to the planning group serves as an ex-officio member of the planning group council. The liaison provides leadership, facilitation and professional assistance to the planning group council and to the staffs of its parishes/faith communities. The planning group liaison also helps to ensure effective collaboration and communication between the planning group and pastoral center leadership and staff.

## **VIII. Meetings**

The planning group council should determine its annual meeting calendar prior to the fall of each year. It is recommended that the council meet at least four to six times per year.

Adequate time should be devoted to council orientation, council formation (prayer, community building, etc.) as well as council business. Councils may hold special meetings for internal planning (setting annual goals and objectives), formation (retreats, opportunities to strengthen the ministerial identity and spirituality of the council) and education.

For the council's operations to be effective, it is important for council members to develop an understanding of the components of a successful meeting (clear meeting objectives or outcomes, a realistic agenda and timeframe, consideration of how agenda items will be handled, adequate preparatory materials made available in advance, etc.) and to evaluate the meetings from time to time.

Planning group councils should develop a covenant reflecting the mutual understanding of the role of the planning group council, including:

- name of the council
- planning role of the council
- purposes, functions, and eligibility requirements for membership

- election/selection procedures
- terms for membership and vacancies
- officers, meetings, formulating of agenda procedures, committees, amendments
- role, membership and function of standing committees of the council.

## **IX. Decision Making**

Because the planning group council exists to serve pastors and pastoral councils as they address issues and meet needs beyond the boundaries of any one parish, decision making is a complex process. For effective decision making, good, consistent and clear communication between the planning group council and the individual parishes is crucial.

Issues needing discussion and collaborative effort can be brought from a parish to the planning group council, can originate at the planning group council, or can come to the parishes of the planning group from the Diocese. Depending on the issue, the planning group council may seek input from pastoral councils or parishioners at large before drafting a final proposal for the parishes' ratification.

An example of an issue for which the planning group council would be an appropriate forum for discussion and the drafting of a proposal is a change or reduction in the Mass schedule for parishes within the planning group. Perhaps there has been a reduction in the number of priests assigned to the parishes of the planning group. Possibly the planning group council members have come to the realization that all of the parishes offer identical Mass schedules and believe the parishes could be better served with some adjustments. Perhaps one parish's pastoral council is faced with reducing its number of Masses and wishes to consider the broader context of Masses in the planning group as a whole. The planning group council may coordinate the process of gathering relevant information and input, establish principles upon which a decision will be based, and prepare a proposed revised Mass schedule.

There will likely be many situations in which the parishes delegate to the planning group council the authority to plan or to act. One example would be planning an event for all the parishes of the planning group, such as a joint Lenten mission. Since each parish is represented on the planning group council by its pastor/administrator and usually by a pastoral council member, such efforts streamline the time from proposal to action.

The preferred model of decision making is consensus. Each planning group council's covenant should detail the process it employs.