

What's the Agenda?

None of us are clean slates. We all come to public life, to church life, with our agendas and our own interests. This seems to be the way we are made. We gravitate towards communities that appeal to us and we spend ourselves in ways we find meaningful. Agendas are not bad, they just are. What can develop is our awareness of our own agendas. At times we are called upon to suspend our own agendas so that we can be open to others, but this is only possible if we first learn to recognize our own assumptions and the motives that bring us to engage the world.

Parish Pastoral Council members are asked to accomplish a difficult task. You are asked to suspend your agendas, to become open to the agendas of others, so that your consultation is a transparent window into the interests of the wider community. This is accomplished by first recognizing and attempting to suspend your own agenda and secondly by bringing the concerns and hopes of other parishioners to the forefront. Each tool within the pastoral planning process invites you to listen with openness to the views of your fellow parishioners and bring those ideas to your pastor.

- One-to-One conversations allow you the opportunity to listen to individuals you may not know.
- The parish assembly provides a space to listen to all parishioners and to have them listen to one another.
- The reflection groups allow parishioners to pray together, listen to the world of the Church and brainstorm together.

All of these activities provide you with the opportunity to bring the needs of the parish to the attention of the pastor so that the activity of the parish can reflect the needs of the people in light of the church's mission.

One of the greatest shifts between a parish council model and a pastoral council, or pastoral planning model of council is this question of agenda. Whose agenda is heard? Whose voice becomes the focus? Pastoral Planning assumes that the voice of the wider parish is the key to successful consultation. Pastoral Planning assumes that articulating the needs of the parish is the primary role of the council members.

In the classic parish council model, the meeting begins with committee reports. During these reports, the head of each organization reads off a list of activities that have occurred in the parish followed by a list of activities that are planned. These reports can often take up most of the meeting. They almost always have a deadening effect or a sense of competition between groups as they tout their accomplishments.

A parish pastoral council begins the meeting with a different agenda. Instead of committee reports being the first, the meeting begins with the "Needs of the Parish." Committee reports are typed up and handed out ahead of the meeting, allowing the meeting of council members to begin with an activity that defines them – sharing the sense of the faithful.

Parish Pastoral Council members are encouraged to share what they have heard from parishioners. This includes the good news and their concerns as well as the way in which the pastoral plan is addressing needs or is in need of adjustment.

The Parish Pastoral Council exists to provide transparent consultation to the pastor and assist the pastor in creating a plan to address the needs of the parish and live out the mission of the Church. Beginning each meeting with prayer and an open space to share the sense of the faithful ensures that council members are staying true to their call as servants to the People of God and open reeds where the wisdom of the Spirit may be revealed despite our many agendas.