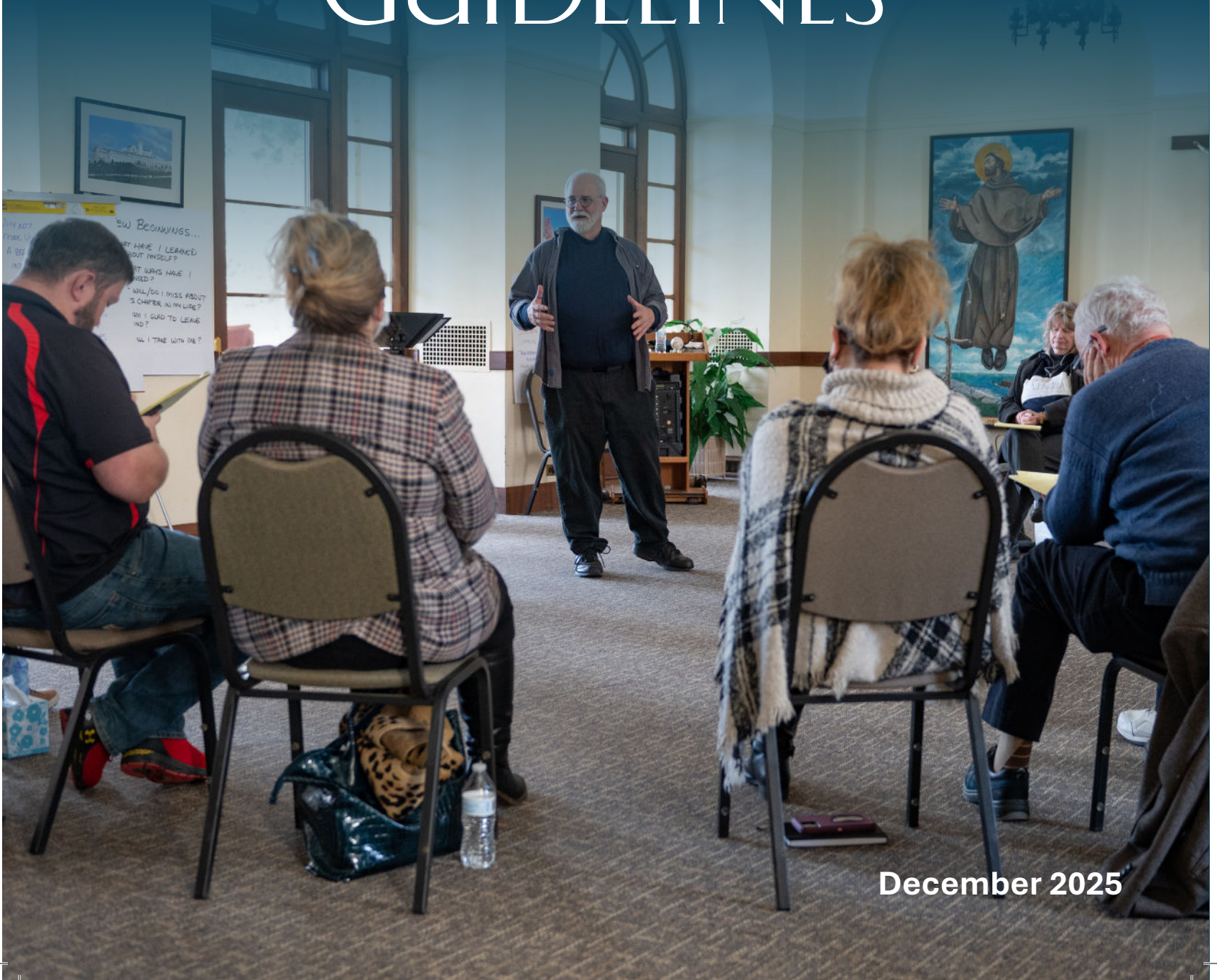




ARCHDIOCESE  
of BALTIMORE

# PASTORAL COUNCIL GUIDELINES



December 2025



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# INTRODUCTION

*“Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them.” (Rom 12:6)*

Christ calls all the baptized to participate in the mission of Jesus as Priest, Prophet and King.

- The faithful exercise their “baptismal priesthood” by joining in the offering of the Eucharist, by celebrating the sacraments, by offering prayer and thanksgiving, by witnessing through a holy life, and by practicing self-denial and active charity.
- The faithful exercise the ministry of “prophet” by proclaiming the Gospel, not only in words, but by living the Gospel and following the message and example of Christ, who taught us to be loving, compassionate, understanding, and forgiving.
- The faithful exercise the ministry of “king,” not in the sense of power and authority, but as servant leaders. For a Synodal Discerning Pastoral Council, in particular, this means to help shepherd, to exercise care as well as lead, as well as guide. Those we are called to serve include every person living in our parish boundaries, including the faithful parishioners, those in our community and our non-Catholic neighbors.

As disciples of Christ, the laity along with the clergy and consecrated religious each have an obligation and a responsibility for the sanctification, teaching, and stewardship of ourselves, others and the world in communion with the shepherds of the church including the Holy Father, the Archbishop, and the local pastor. All the gifts necessary to further the mission of Jesus are present in the community of believers.

*Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. - Acts 20:28*

(c.f. *Lumen Gentium* #31-38; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* #20; CCC #873; 1 Cor 12:4-7)

The three-fold mission and ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king, and the tasks that flow naturally from them, play out at the parish level in the six Core Mission Priorities as outlined in Archbishop Lori's Pastoral Letter, *A Light Brightly Visible*:

- **Liturgy** - to fully and intentionally engage in **prayer, worship, and sacramental life** that flow from baptism and reverential participation in the Eucharist – the source and summit of our faith
- **Welcome** - to practice radical hospitality and **welcome** as Jesus did, seeking out the disenfranchised and vulnerable, and creating a sense of **fellowship** and belonging that is grounded in love for each other and humble gratitude to God
- **Encounter** - to continually experience our own conversion and bring others to experience the same through **evangelization**, revealing the truth of the Gospel and witnessing to others how we ourselves have encountered Christ
- **Accompaniment** - to grow as disciples of Christ and nurture growth in others as we study, share, and live out the teachings of Christ and his Church through **education, faith formation, and by forming disciples**
- **Sending** - to bring Christ to the world, practicing discipleship and encouraging each other through friendship and service as we support the work of the Church, provide for the **material and pastoral care of the poor and suffering**, and advocate for the discernment of vocations in life, especially **priestly vocations** for those who feel called in this way
- **Mission Support** - to enact wise **stewardship** of the gifts God has granted us, the legacy entrusted to us by those who have preceded us in the faith, and the hope that lies in future generations of the faithful, so that our resources may be channeled to support the mission of disciple-making first and foremost



# MISSION

The Pastoral Council provides the pastor with mission-focused recommendations for the faith community it serves. Through extensive prayer, listening, and learning the council assists the pastor in identifying and assessing the gifts and needs of the faith community; to clarify the parish's mission; and to develop and initiate pastoral plans to serve this mission for the Kingdom of God.



*The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”. (Joy of the Gospel, 28)*

- The parish connects an individual's experience of faith with that of the broader community of believers. It is a place where individuals are nurtured into a certain kind of community, one that participates in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.
- Through the life of the parish community, many come to discover their gifts and recognize God's call to use these gifts in the service of others.
- *Evangelii Nuntiandi* tells us that “the parish exists to evangelize” (14). Most fundamentally, the parish reflects how Gospel values are lived out by individuals, by families, and by the community. The parish exists to assist parishioners in their Christian mission as followers of Jesus Christ and to reach out to help others to encounter Jesus, to draw them closer to God and to one another, to make all disciples.

# WHY SYNODAL/DISCERNING PASTORAL COUNCILS?

- The concept of the Parish Pastoral Council emerged from the ecclesiological principles of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church, and the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (par. 26).
- The Second Vatican Council urged active involvement in the life of the Church by emphasizing the principles of collaboration, responsibility, consultation and lay participation. An important structure initiated to foster this collaboration in the mission of the Church by all its members is the Parish Pastoral Council.
- The Second Vatican Council recognized the importance of a pastoral council "to investigate and to weigh matters which bear on pastoral activity and to formulate practical conclusions regarding them." (Documents of Vatican II, Decree of the Bishop's Pastoral Office in the Church, par. 27). Thus, **the primary role of the Pastoral Council is to investigate, reflect, and make recommendations to the pastor on issues that the pastor wishes to have the Council's input** (*Christus Dominus*, 27).
- The Code of Canon Law states that through a council, where it exists, the Christian Faithful and those with offices of pastoral care "assist in fostering pastoral activity." (Canon 536). The pastoral council is thus a consultative organ in which the faithful, expressing their baptismal responsibility, can assist the parish priest (or administrator), who presides at the council, by offering their advice on pastoral matters.
- Synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel. Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working. (<https://www.synod.va/en/the-synod-on-synodality/what-is-the-synod-about.html>)



Following the emphasis by Pope Francis on the necessity of being a synodal, listening church, and Archbishop Lori's call to parishes to embrace a Eucharistic vision, Pastoral Councils are to redefine themselves (*A Light Brightly Visible 3.0, Part IV*):

- From a Body of Leaders to a Leadership Body
- From Representatives of Organizations to a Visioning Body
- From Coordinating Ministries to Articulating the Mission
- From Crisis Management to Pastoral Planning and Discerning Goals
- From Doing Activities to Supporting the Mission
- From Business and Politics to Prayer and Discernment
- From Competition to Collaboration
- From Voting on Issues to Building Consensus
- From Committee Reporting to Active *Synodal* Listening
- From Being Elected to Being Selected according to Gifts and Charisms
- From Constitutions and Bylaws to Guidelines

# FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS AND PRINCIPLES

- 1) **Mature Christian Disciples** - The Pastoral Council should be formed of mature Christian disciples who are called to share their gifts and talents with our parish community. They must be committed to continued spiritual growth and formation. As Archbishop Lori outlines in *A Light Brightly Visible 3.0*, we all must peer into our own hearts and configure our hearts and minds to Christ. The archbishop writes: *As we set aside time to pray each day, read the Scriptures, participate in holy Mass, engage in Eucharistic Adoration and make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Lord continues his redeeming work in us. He creates in us “a new heart and a new spirit.”* (pg. 14)
- 2) **Diversity** - The Pastoral Council should reflect the diversity of the parish. Consideration in discerning those called to serve on the Pastoral Council should consider the different ages and stages of faith of the parishioners, their cultural heritages and those who are on the margins.
- 3) **Attentive to Adaptive Challenges** - The Pastoral Council should be focused on the signs of the times. They consult and advise on topics and issues that are facing the parish. They should peer into the heart of their parish as *“the most important step we must continually take is to renew the missionary thrust of our parishes.”* (LBV 3.0, pg. 15) The paramount goal of the parish is to share with those yet to hear the Good News or with those who have turned away from it for whatever reason.
- 4) **Visioning** - The Pastoral Council is a visioning body that helps to develop and align ongoing strategic planning by identifying genuine pastoral needs and the discerning, forming and calling forth the gifts of people to serve those needs (i.e. collaborative ministry). This requires the “missionary creativity” that Archbishop Lori outlined in LBV 3.0, Ch. 3.

- 5) **Synodal Listening** - The Pastoral Council must be synodal. Rather than acting as a board or decision-making body, the Pastoral Council should have discerning conversations in the Spirit that are rooted in prayer and allow the Holy Spirit to speak through silence and in active listening to each other. This helps the Council to build consensus.
  
- 6) **Advisory** - The pastor is central and essential to “shepherding” the activity of a pastoral council. Pastoral governance is the pastor’s responsibility. The Pastoral Council exists to advise him on the needs of the faith community, clarifying its mission and pastoral plans to serve those needs. The Pastoral Council is consultative to the pastor. The pastor can always seek advice from the greater community at his discretion.
  
- 7) **Missional** - The Pastoral Council must look outwards to the changing mission field in their community. This field includes those who have left the church, the lonely, isolated, marginalized, and the changing demographics in our neighborhoods (LBV 3.0). *“Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her DEEPEST IDENTITY. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.”* - Pope Paul VI



# MEMBERSHIP ON A PASTORAL COUNCIL

- Membership on the Pastoral Council should be determined in a manner that encourages representation of the entire parish community and reflects the entire portion of the people of God, including youth, seniors, cultural and ethnic diversity, a variety of viewpoints, and life experiences.
- ***Characteristics of Pastoral Council Members:***
  - Registered and participating member of the parish, in good standing
  - Age 18 or older and a Confirmed Catholic
  - A working knowledge of parish life
  - Ability to listen to the needs of parishioners
  - A desire for spiritual growth and commitment to prayer and the Sacramental life
  - An openness toward study and reflection
  - An eagerness to carry out the parish mission
  - An ease in working with groups – a team player
  - A willingness to empower others
  - A desire to work toward consensus
  - An availability of time and energy



- **Pastoral Council Members** - The work of the Pastoral Council requires that its size facilitates participation, interaction and decision-making. Too few members may limit the good work of the Council, and too many members may hinder its ability to do the work effectively. Ideally, Councils should be no fewer than eight persons and no more than fourteen.
  - Parish staff members and their family members, finance committee members, corporators, family members within the same household (unless they serve as a single representative) should not serve on the Pastoral Council as official members.
  - Ex-officio members may be added at the discretion of the pastor (e.g. staff, corporators, finance committee members).
  - Parishes with large staffs may select specific staff members to serve on the council as ex officio support to the Pastoral Council.
  - All Pastoral Council members should be in compliance with Archdiocesan Child and Youth Protection policies.
  - Term limits for Pastoral Council members should be discerned by the Pastor. Inviting new people to discern onto the Pastoral Council ensures that new voices reflect the current parish community. Terms can be set for 3-5 years with the option to renew for one additional term. It is recommended that Pastoral Council members serve no more than two terms. The discernment of new Pastoral Council members should be staggered so that there is continuity, and forward progress is not stalled by a completely new Council.

## SELECTION PROCESS

- The most effective method to obtain the caliber of Council the parish needs is to call forth those who possess the gifts and talents needed for the parish at this time to fulfill its mission.
- Discernment - the prayerful determination of the best possible choice in the present circumstances - should be a key factor in nominating and selecting members for the council.
- The selection process itself should be reviewed regularly and revised as necessary to be responsive to a changing parish community.
- Use a discernment process like outlined in the document “Discerning New Pastoral Council Members”.

# EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ON THE PASTORAL COUNCIL

Because the Pastoral Council serves as the key group with which the Pastor consults, it is appropriate for the Pastoral Council to select officers who can work more closely with the Pastor on council matters and who can organize the plan for the effective working of the council. These officers can be of great assistance to the Pastor when the whole council is not in session.

- Pastor: Presides over the work of the Council and has ultimate responsibility. (Code of Canon Law, #536). The Pastoral Council cannot meet or act without the Pastor or without his permission.
- Chairperson or Facilitator: Chairs all Pastoral Council meetings and facilitates the work of the Council and its committees
- Vice-chairperson/facilitator: Assumes the role of the chairperson in the chairperson's absence.
- Secretary: Maintains a written record of Council meetings and the work of the Council; Corresponds with the members of the Council, making sure that they receive the agenda in advance of meetings, and handles all correspondence in the name of the Council with individuals or groups within or outside of the parish. A summary of the Council meetings should be available at the request of parishioners and kept on file at the parish office.

This executive committee prepares the agenda for upcoming Council meetings in consultation with the Pastor and distributes this agenda to members at least a week in advance of the meeting. They consult with the Pastor on matters relating to Council business as necessary.



