

Parish Pastoral Councils

The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference has named pastoral planning as “a primary role of the parish pastoral council” for it is “the discipline of intentionally working towards a desired future” (ACBC’s Committee for Laity). Parish pastoral councils are mandatory in the Diocese of Parramatta, generally include elected lay members, are presided over by the parish priest but may be chaired by a layperson.

The purpose of such councils is to foster pastoral action in the parish by proposing, studying and facilitating pastoral initiatives that respond to the needs of the local community. This includes planning for the future with the support of the parish finance committee so that the faith community can grow in holiness and reach out to others with the Gospel. Here are some suggestions on how parish pastoral councils can start putting *Faith in Our Future* into action:

Step 1

Discuss with your parish priest the opportunity to set aside a number of parish pastoral council meetings or a weekend reflection day or time at each pastoral council meeting to discuss and pray about *Faith in Our Future*.

Step 2

Once time has been set aside to focus on the Pastoral Plan, **invite each member of your pastoral council to read *Faith in Our Future* prior to the first meeting** to ensure everyone is familiar with the document. Pastoral councils should read at least the vision statement of the Pastoral Plan (pp.10-12) and the parish actions that are provided in this plan (pp.17-25). While reading *Faith in Our Future*, invite your pastoral councillors to write down or highlight any points or ideas that stood out to them as particularly significant or relevant to the life and aspirations of your community.

Some parish pastoral councils may choose to convene with the parish finance committee for their first discussion of the Pastoral Plan. If so, ensure that each member of the finance committee also has ample time to read and reflect on the document prior to the gathering.





Step 3

The purpose of the first parish pastoral council meeting is to begin a discussion about the present life of the parish and the ways that the community is currently *growing in faith* and *sharing its faith*. It also invites your council to discern and name any areas of parish life that could be strengthened to better achieve these goals.

Begin the meeting with prayer (download and print “*Prayer Sheet #1*” from our website by clicking on “Your Parish” and then “Worksheets & Prayers”).

Then, reflect on the questions below which will help kick-start your discussion. We suggest that each council member spend 15 minutes or so writing down their own response to each of the questions below before discussing them as a group (download and print “*Parish Pastoral Council – Worksheet #1*” from our website):

Note that your parish pastoral council may choose to discuss these questions over *more* than one meeting. What is important is that your pastoral council takes the time it needs to reflect on and name the main opportunities and challenges for discipleship and outreach in your community.

It is strongly recommended that the secretary of your parish pastoral council, or another nominated member, record and collate the group response to these questions, in particular the main opportunities and challenges identified, and take these notes to the next meeting of the pastoral council dedicated to the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.

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1 What struck you about the vision of Faith in Our Future (pp.10-12)?

2 With reference to this vision of a faith that grows and is shared, how is your parish living these goals and what are the signs that your people are growing as disciples and inviting new people to become disciples of Jesus in his Church?

3 What are some of the challenges that the vision of the Pastoral Plan raises for your parish now and in the years to come? What could be *done differently* or improved to better grow the faith of your people and reach out with the Gospel to the wider community?

4 After discussing the questions above, what were the main opportunities and challenges that your pastoral council identified for your community to grow and share its faith with vitality into the future? List these in two separate columns:

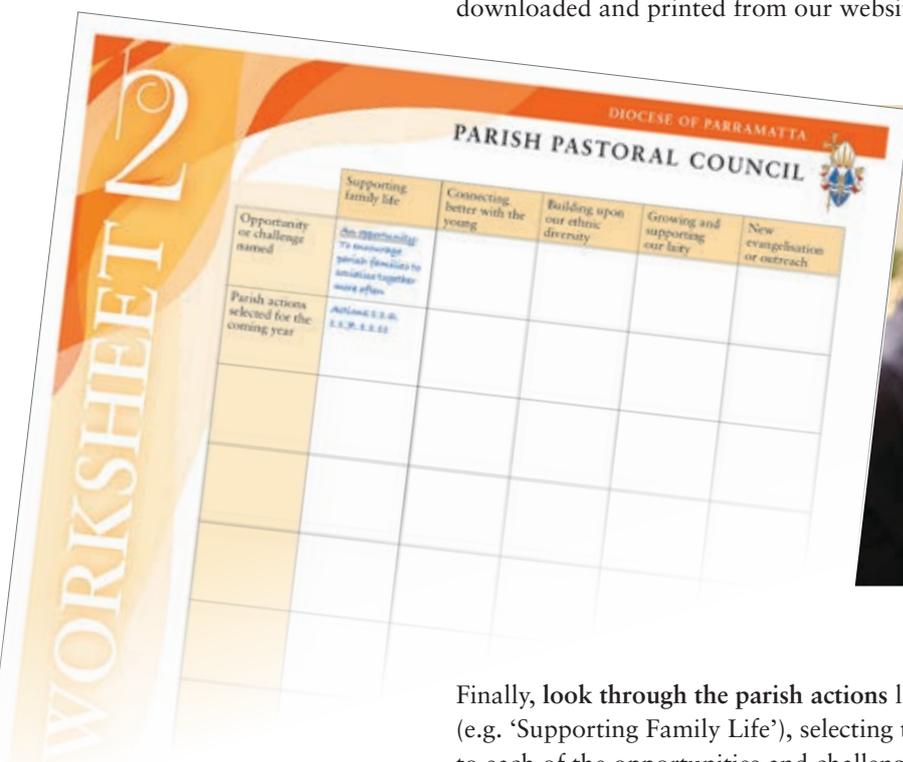
Opportunities	Challenges

Step 4

The purpose of the second meeting of the parish pastoral council is to **discuss and select the actions that your parish can take** to make the most of opportunities and address challenges on the way to a stronger and shared faith.

Begin the meeting with prayer (download and print “*Prayer Sheet #2*” from our website). Then, revisit the opportunities and challenges that were identified at the first meeting of your pastoral council for the parish to grow and share its faith. Review these briefly to ensure they represent the consensus of the group.

Next, using the worksheet below, place each of the opportunities and challenges your pastoral council has named **under the pastoral priority to which it relates** (e.g. An opportunity: ‘To encourage parish families to socialise together more often’ should be placed under the pastoral priority ‘Supporting family life’). Again, this worksheet can be downloaded and printed from our website (“*Parish Pastoral Council – Worksheet #2*”).



Finally, **look through the parish actions** listed in the Pastoral Plan by pastoral priority (e.g. ‘Supporting Family Life’), selecting those that would best help your parish respond to each of the opportunities and challenges identified by your council. Write your selected actions into the box ‘Parish actions selected for the coming year’, directly below the opportunity or challenge named.

Some criteria are offered below to assist your pastoral council in discerning the best actions to undertake:

- i. Will this action assist our parish make the most of our opportunities or meet challenges in growing and sharing its faith? How will it do so?

- ii. Does this action suit the gifts and needs of our parish community?

- iii. If the action is suitable, what resources and people need to be engaged to make it a reality (e.g. a specific parish ministry group or parishioner/s)? With what other groups could we collaborate to bring this action to life?

- iv. What role will our parish pastoral council play in supporting this action and promoting it throughout the community and beyond?

- v. How can we involve as many members of our community in this action as appropriate and possible? Also, how can we engage this action as a means of evangelisation, reaching out and involving those who are not strongly connected to the Church or even not yet a part of our parish?

- vi. Does this action involve any significant costs that need to be raised with the parish finance committee?

- vii. How can local Catholic schools support and help bring this action to life?

- viii. Within what time frame will this action be implemented? (e.g. within 6 months; by the end of 2014; by the end of 2015...)

- ix. How will we review the effectiveness of this action as a pastoral council in growing and sharing the faith of our community? That is, what are the signs that will tell us this action is bearing fruit? How will we share these outcomes with the community?

It is recommended that once your parish pastoral council has discussed and identified opportunities and challenges as well as actions that your parish could take to respond, that these be further discussed and refined with the leaders of your **parish ministry groups** (e.g. hospitality groups, sacramental teams, etc). This ensures wider involvement in the parish planning process.

Parish pastoral councils may also choose to share the outcome of their discussions with the **wider parish community**, through the parish bulletin or handouts at Masses and in schools or a short presentation after Holy Communion. By inviting the feedback of parishioners on the opportunities, challenges and actions identified by your council, the process of discernment is strengthened, ownership of actions is encouraged and a sense of common purpose and direction is fostered within the community.

Once there is agreement on the actions the parish will undertake in the coming year, download and print “*Parish Pastoral Council - Worksheet #3*” shown below. This will help your pastoral council record the details of the actions you have now selected (for example, the key people or groups who will lead the implementation of parish actions and how the pastoral effectiveness of the action will be measured).



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Parish actions selected	Opportunity or challenge to which the action will respond	Primary person, ministry team or group that will implement the action	When the action will be implemented	Resources or costs involved in implementation	Measures of pastoral effectiveness of the action
1. Action: S.S. &... with the offer of coffee after masses	To encourage parishioners to socialize together more often.	parish welcome team	After all parish masses, from Easter to Pentecost	Coffee, table, chairs, table, signage, ensure parish welcome kits available	more interaction, surveys, parishioners, more diversity, more participation to groups, community response to this action.

The process outlined above recognises that parishes constantly change in the challenges and the opportunities they face from year to year. We recommend selecting actions to meet the needs and potential of your parish one year at a time, drawing on this Pastoral Plan for inspiration.

In June and October of each year, parish priests and parish pastoral councils will be asked to review and report on the progress of their community using the **Parish Feedback Form** (pp.69-70) at the back of this Pastoral Plan. The form is to be submitted to the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Office for support and feedback. The parish can then begin the above planning process once again, constantly renewing its life and future aspirations.

Need More Support?

Contact our Pastoral Planning Office on (02) 9831 4911 or by email pastoralplanning@parra.catholic.org.au