

IMPORTANCE OF PASTORAL PLANNING

(The materials for the following article are adapted those from the Parish Pastoral Councils in Australia, <http://ppc.catholic.org.au/ppc/prayer.html>)

A Pastoral Plan is not a matter of inventing a “new programme”. ‘The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment ... This programme for all times is our programme for the Third Millennium. But it must be translated into pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community.

... the programme of the Gospel must continue to take root, as it has always done, in the life of the Church everywhere. It is in the local churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified — goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources — which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture.

I therefore earnestly exhort the Pastors of the particular Churches, with the help of all sectors of God’s People, confidently to plan the stages of the journey ahead, harmonizing the choices of each diocesan community with those of neighbouring Churches and of the universal Church.

(*At the Beginning of the New Millennium* by Pope John Paul II - 6 January 2001, [29]) Some suggestions for your parish pastoral planning

Pastoral planning should be the key objective of a Parish Pastoral Council. A pastoral plan helps both priest and parish work toward a desired future that represents a more authentic witness to the reign of God in our local community. When the whole parish community owns a good pastoral plan then this mission of the Church is served visibly in a particular place and time. A good and comprehensive pastoral plan will always include parish adult faith formation. Making a pastoral plan is far from straight forward. Planning first of all involves reflection and discernment and it must be both practical but also draw on theory. It is about “who’s going to do what”, “why” “how” and “by what date”. It must be rooted in and engage with the specific context and make-up of a particular community at a particular time. Above all it must be an exercise in faith hope and love, “and the greatest of these is love” (I Co 13:13) .

What are values, principles and goals of good pastoral planning?

The values, principles and goals of the gospel – compassion, inclusivity, justice, option for the poor, love of neighbour, trust in God and so on are the goals, principles and goals of good pastoral planning.

The spirituality of communion

The spirituality of good and comprehensive pastoral planning is the spirituality of communion. It involves the understanding that all of us in the Church and in our parish community make up the body of Christ, and whatever touches one of us touches all of us. It means inclusivity and openness to each person situation, recognizing their value, their unique gifts which they can bring to our community. It is focused on the interplay

or not of roles and functions within the same body of Christ where we all are bound together in communion with one another. The spirituality of communion dictates that all our pastoral planning should be always a communal and participative process.

Know your community and context

Pastoral planning is not for a faint hearted or for a lone planner. To start planning we have to have all the relevant information at hand. All those who are going to be affected by the plans have to be invited to play a significant part in the process of discussion and discernment. The slogan for effective community exercise might be the following “If it’s about me, then not without me”

Pastoral Planning is...

- Reflective Of The Nature Of Church As Communion
- Essentially Collaborative, Collegial
- Essentially Communal In Both Aims And Process
- Pneumatological - Draws On gift of Wisdom bestowed as the Spirit wills
- Essentially Pastoral
- Never far from Social Outreach

How to do Pastoral Planning? How to plan adult faith formation in your parish?

Pastoral planning can be thought of in terms of five distinct steps. The same steps can be used to develop a whole of parish pastoral plan or to plan for just one area of parish life, such as parish adult faith formation. The steps are: (1) Reality Check; naming the current parish

reality, (2) A Statement of Vision; developing a shared vision, (3) Analysis; Try to decide what can be done now and what must wait, (4) Goals; choose particular goals and devise strategies to achieve your goals and (5) evaluation.

First step. Reality Check: Describe your parish reality or current situation. Answer the following question: What is already happening in your parish and in the wider community? You do not need to cover every detail but it rather means consulting with a variety of people to gain a clear overarching picture. Caution: Beware of cynicism! Sometimes it can be grounded in relevant and valid experience but it can also be destructive and crush fresh hope and generosity.

Second step - Developing a Statement of Vision—. This vision must be shared and owned by the whole parish community. The vision is about what your parish is being called to become today. A statement of vision should be clear and simple. It should capture in one succinct simple sentence an overarching sense of where your parish wants to be heading or to align itself and what needs to happen to realise it. You need to 'discern' the vision and the process of discernment involves reflection, discussion and praying. It is a lengthy process and it can not happen in few hours. You need to think about it from two different perspectives as it is about what people yearn for and what they reject. The vision statement has to come from the heart of your parish community to give the parish direction as it lives out the gospel. The vision statement is to become a benchmark to measure all plans and goals against. It helps keep the parish planning on track when the council or the parish itself is in danger of being inundated with many issues that people believe to be important.

To make your vision a 'living' statement then it needs to be very brief so that it's easy to remember. In a short phrase or sentence it needs to capture the essence of what the parish hopes it could be.

Examples of such a vision statement might be:

'X Parish, being a sign of the Kingdom of God in the community'

'Y Parish, becoming a community reaching out to all in Jesus' name'

'Z Parish, making the mystery of God's love present in our village/town'

From this vision statement can flow statements outlining how the different areas of parish life (adult faith formation, liturgy, catechetics, outreach, youth, etc.) hope to help the parish achieve its vision.

Caution: This vision must be shared by the parish priest

who is responsible for all pastoral activity.

Third step - Analysis - This is an important step. You can not achieve good results without a good analysis. Analysis is not a waste of time. It is intended to help us to 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 and our programmes/activities/projects? What resources and strengths do we have to help us achieve our vision? When it comes to adult faith formation the following questions have to be asked: What groups of adults are already involved in adult faith formation initiatives in the parish? Who is left behind? What are the programmes or initiatives in place already? What purpose do they serve? Are they successful?

Fourth step – Working Together Towards Particular Goals

Consultation is about discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit in what we already do in the parish and on how to achieve our vision. There are two major components of discernment of the movement of the Holy Spirit. We do this through prayer and through consultation because the Spirit moves clearly in the lives of all God's people.

Consultation is hard work. It is not enough to simply call a meeting or issue a survey. Many people will not be interested. However, the parish council or pastoral planning group has to consult with the parish as widely as it can whenever appropriate, firmly believing the consultation will lead to a better decision being made regarding all areas of parish life and especially when it comes to adult faith formation.

The process of consultation has to be transparent and not to serve someone's personal agenda. However consultation is the action of seeking advice and is not the same as taking a vote. The parish council or a planning group for adult faith formation still has the responsibility for making the final recommendation – the final decision always rests with the parish priest. The process should be done in a way that encourages parishioners to own that decision as well as puts some accountability on a planning group/parish Council.

From the wide consultation we can expect to develop goals for main areas of parish life including adult faith formation and some strategies to achieve those goals. These goals must be clearly stated and be realistic and achievable. In the first year it is important not to be too ambitious. Setting a goal and then being seen to have achieved it will often bring more parishioners onboard. Goals are concrete steps towards the vision in a particu-

lar area of parish life. They are like markers along the journey towards the vision, or steps up a ladder - they are achievable. For example the goal for adult faith formation might be 'To reach out those who adults who are looking for meaning in their lives and may be God and do not attend our parish' or/and 'To deepen Catholic faith and life in those adults who regularly attend Sunday service'. 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?

The council or adult faith formation planning group will lead the whole parish towards being involved in the mission of the Church, empowering parishioners to collaborate in different ways in achieving particular goals. 'Collaborate' means to work together, side by side, without one lording it over the other. That means empowering and encouraging people to use their gifts in the work of the parish, trusting them and ensuring they have the necessary resources, authority and opportunity to do what they are being commissioned to do. It also means trusting that God might use the efforts of the faithful in ways the parish council or adult faith formation planning group/committee had not planned for. It does not bring a contradiction although one of the aims of pastoral planning is control.

There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that "without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. Jn 15:5). (At the Beginning of the New Millennium) by Pope John Paul II - 6 January 2001

Pastoral planning seeks some measure of control in areas such as our resources, our environment, development and future of pastoral initiatives, programmes, events, etc.

However, one of the key elements of pastoral planning is trust. It works on all possible levels in the parish. For example, the parish council oversees many parish groups and committees, yet it should not seek to control them or micromanage their activities, rather it must trusts them to carry out their role for the good of the parish, supporting and encouraging them so that their efforts may be in harmony with the parish vision and the thrust of the council's plans that flow from it. The same applies when it comes to adult faith formation planning group. We have to put our trust in people who run adult faith formation initiatives and programmes and to help

them in ways they ask us to do so rather than doing a job instead of them. It is much easier 'to kill' any good initiative than to build the trust and empower people to carry on good work and to use their gifts and creativity.

Fifth step – Evaluation. Evaluation is important all along the way. Is the plan still on track, or have we been sidetracked? 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 may need to reassess what our next steps will be.

