Parish pastoral council • Executive summary

- A **parish has two councils**, both of which assist the parish priest in making decisions:
    - A **parish finance council** assists the parish priest in **financial planning and auditing**, and is a **source of technical financial expertise** in this topic
    - A **parish pastoral council** assists the parish priest in **pastoral planning**, and is a **source of pastoral wisdom** for a given parish
- There are broad possibilities for the operation of these councils. Though the parish finance council has a very narrow and specific remit that reflect the parish priest's specific obligations in respect of finance, the parish pastoral council is a body to which the parish priest brings the things that he feels he needs assistance with a process of discernment in order to make a decision.
- However it is constituted in a given parish, **a parish pastoral council is reflective of the social make-up of a given parish**.
- Most importantly, the purpose of the parish pastoral council is to **investigate** and **reflect** upon the pastoral questions that are put to it by the parish priest, and then the council as a whole makes a consensus **recommendation** which informs the decision of the parish priest.
- It's important to make a distinction between such consultative bodies, and any individuals, groups, or executive committees which put subsequent decisions into action, although there may be overlap. **It is not the purpose of a consultative body as a whole to act upon its recommendations** (e.g. planning events), however, naturally in a smaller parish, an individual may be a member of a consultative body who then acts according to guidance in a different capacity.
- In this parish, we will do the following:
    - **The parish pastoral council will meet at least 4 times a year**, and answer questions given to it by the parish priest; such questions will be determined by him according to what he perceives 'comes up' in pastoral ministry, or, indeed, what may have been proposed to him by council members or others;
    - **Members of the parish pastoral council will be made 'known' publicly**, since part of the purpose of sharing their wisdom in the council meeting itself involves knowing other parishioners better, and the pastoral needs and pastoral reality of the parish itself;
    - **Members will be appointed by the parish priest for renewable terms of 3 years**; he will listen to the suggestions, advice and concerns of parishioners in discerning who should be members;
    - **The meetings themselves will be confidential**, which will allow a freedom in the discussion. A document will be issued after each meeting, to lay out what questions have been discussed, and what consensuses may have been reached;
    - **There will be an annual parish pastoral meeting** (similar to the annual parish financial meeting), where the 'state of the pastoral activity of the parish' can be discussed openly.
- This model is a mirror of **modern synodal practice**.
- The meetings of the parish pastoral council will be run according to the principles of 'spiritual conversions' or '**conversations in the Spirit**', which means that each person is free to speak for a period of time, there is respectful listening without arguing, and common themes are discerned during the course of the conversation which can form a consensus recommendation in answer to the question itself.

Parish pastoral council • Preamble

Parish pastoral councils emerged towards the end of the 20th century as a means of consultation and more effective decision-making in respect of pastoral planning in parishes. Being new organs of consultation at the time, their scope and way of functioning varied considerably. They are only *referred to* in the Code of Canon Law (namely, that a diocesan bishop can mandate their establishment in parishes), and are not described in detail. They are, by canonical consensus, a mirror of the *diocesan pastoral council* which, where they exist, are meant to be a consultative body reflecting the social nature and geography of the whole diocese.

For a **parish pastoral council**, then, **membership** should likewise **reflect** the social nature and geography of the parish. In principle, a pastoral council (parish or diocesan) is not by its *nature* a body of lay persons (non-ordained), though, certainly on a parish-level, in most cases all members will be lay persons (e.g. but there may be a parish situation in which an ordained person, such as a deacon, is appointed as a member of the parish pastoral council).

The **parish pastoral council is a positive means by which the parish priest can come to more informed and hopefully effective decisions in establishing pastoral policy, setting pastoral priorities, or dealing with pastoral issues**. It is a source of wisdom, a body of persons whom he trusts to answer his questions wholeheartedly. A parish pastoral council **investigates**, **reflects** and **recommends** to help the parish priest make a decision on a particular question.

It is a mirror of the **parish finance council**, which is the same type of consultative structure in respect of the parish priest's responsibility towards the parish's temporal goods (property, both *money* and *things*). Neither council is 'superior' to the other, and neither council is a decision-making body in itself: both advise the parish priest in their respective areas of competency, though naturally one might see how budgeting decisions can have a pastoral aspect, and pastoral decisions have a budgetary aspect. The **parish finance council provides a certain technical expertise** to the parish priest in its area of competence. The **parish pastoral council provides a certain pastoral wisdom** to the parish priest in the matters brought to its attention for **investigation**, **reflection** and **recommendation**.

The parish priest himself is not a *member* of his advisory structures (by simple logic, he cannot advise himself), but he is the *president* of these structures. They are not bodies with a separate voice to that of the parish priest, they do not act (or meet) independently of him, and, properly speaking, they cease to exist when the office of parish priest is vacant.

In the running of the parish - in both competencies of pastoral and finance - the parish priest will have delegates (e.g. parish treasurer, parish leads in certain areas), who are executive agents. They are, as it were, 'arms' of the responsibilities the parish priest for which he is accountable. There may be times when it might be useful for such delegates to attend the meetings of parish pastoral (or finance) councils to explain something, but it would not be the ordinary case that such delegates are members of the parish pastoral council in their capacity as an executive officer. This itself would be an example of the parish priest (in the form of his delegate) advising his own office.

In accordance with the authority given to him by canon 536, the bishop of East Anglia decreed (21 May 2006) the that the establishment of a parish pastoral council is mandatory in all parishes in his diocese (this is law). Beyond that, the mode of a parish pastoral council is to be determined by the parish priest, who is to consider the particular parish in question, his own mode of lawful governance, the guidelines (instructions) published by the bishop of East Anglia, and, in our own times, the principles and mode of synodality, which is a wider ecclesial reality of more recent development than the guidelines for parish priests given in 2006 (this is not law).

The parish pastoral council is not a forum in which reports from parish groups are read out to members; indeed, even the diocesan instructions for parish priests also indicate as much. Fundamentally, the parish pastoral council provides a **consensus answer** to **specific questions** brought to it by the parish priest, who then makes a decision accordingly. While the parish priest is not obliged to follow that consensus in making his decision, a basic canonical principle demands that he explains why he makes a decision contrary to the consensus of the recommendation he has sought, if he does so. Another canonical principle obliges the president and members of such a consultation structure to communicate

honestly and openly, and that all relevant sharable information is provided to members in order for them to make a consensus recommendation. They, then, are obliged to be honest and open in their responses to the one seeking advice. Because of the true nature of such a consultation structure, it is not always appropriate that there is a full public disclosure of the course of conversation or content of reflecting in detail, or, indeed, any information provided to members to help with recommendations. The parish priest must make a decision as to the extent (or not) of public disclosure of the meeting's reflection. In contemporary synodal gatherings, sometimes a 'final document' is produced to inform the public about the broad nature of the gathering's reflection and recommendation. A degree of prudence in public disclosure safeguards the integrity of the parish pastoral council's ability to function wholeheartedly according to the need of the parish priest: members must be free to speak openly in a confidential space without fear that their words may make them objects of reproach.

The parish pastoral council's primary relationship is with its parish priest. It exists that he might ask questions of it. But there is also a secondary relationship between the parish pastoral council and the whole parish, as the council itself a sign of the wisdom of the entire parish. The council relates to the entire parish by knowing the whole parish (or getting to know it better). In the course of reflecting on recommendations to the parish priest, members may even seek to gauge wider opinion. The parish pastoral council does not represent *itself* to other parishioners, but rather, it represents parish pastoral wisdom to the parish priest. Neither is it a parliamentary body, delegates of other parishioners speaking on their behalf, in an individual sense, to the parish priest.

The **membership** of the parish pastoral council should be reflective of the social and geographic reality of the parish. A 'parish' is 'the portion of the People of God who are resident within defined boundaries who are in full communion with the Catholic Church'. The term 'parishioners' does not simply mean the people who come to Mass.

Contemporary canonical opinion suggests an election of members from among well-known mass-goers who naturally incline towards putting themselves forward to voluntary activity is not necessarily the best and most fruitful way to populate a parish pastoral council. Rather, a **process of discernment** may be more appropriate, fitted to the circumstances of a place. In a large parish, this might be an involved exercise; in a smaller parish, it may be more straightforward with the parish priest having conversations about membership with parishioners directly, and listening to the advice of others. The parish priest ultimately determines the membership of his council, both its total number of members and the longevity of their membership, as well as the which people or households are actually members.

The parish priest has a formal responsibility towards all parishioners - most of whom do not come to Mass and will not be known to him. He also has responsibilities to other Christians, and non-Christians alike. **The duties of the parish priest help inform the scope of pastoral planning about which he may seek to consult the parish pastoral council.** His duties (excluding his duties in respect of temporal goods, which are the scope of the parish finance council) are specifically enumerated in law, and in this order:

- That the word of God is proclaimed in its entirety to all those living in the parish
    - To instruct the faithful in the faith by Sunday homilies and catechetical formation
    - To foster works that promote the spirit of the Gospel, including in the area of social justice
    - To have a special care for the catholic education of children and young people
    - To bring the gospel message to lapsed Catholics and non-Catholics
- To take care that the Eucharist is the centre of the parish's life
    - That all the sacraments are devoutly celebrated
    - That parishioners are encouraged to approach Holy Communion and confession
    - That he leads the community in prayer, and assists families in their life of prayer
    - That there is active participation in the sacred liturgy
    - That the sacred liturgy is celebrated according to law
- To strive to know the Christian faithful in the parish
    - To visit families and to share their cares, anxieties, and sorrows

    - To correct the Christian faithful where necessary
    - To care for the spiritual needs of the sick in a sacramental way
    - To commend the dying with great charity, and bring them the sacraments
    - To seek out diligently the poor, the suffering, the lonely, exiles, and the burdened
    - To assist spouses in their Christian responsibilities in marriage and family life
- To promote the proper mission of the lay members of the Christian faithful
    - To foster religious association (groups)
    - To encourage the sense that parishioners are also members of a wider diocese
    - To promote works which foster Christian community
- To keep an intention at Mass 'for the people' on Sundays and holydays of obligation
- To maintain the canonical registers of the parish (baptism, reception, confirmation, marriage and death)
- To maintain a parish archive of parochial books and diocesan letters and documents to be preserved

This list might serve as a general starting point to determine specific topics and areas of pastoral planning, and, therefore, the areas in which the parish priest may ask the parish pastoral council for its investigation, reflection and recommendation. In this, we can identify a number of broad topics: (1) preaching and teaching the word of God, (2) the sacraments, prayer, and liturgical celebration, (3) communion within the parish itself, (4) supporting the proper functions of the Christian faithful, and (5) pastoral administration.

The parish priest to consult the parish pastoral council over whatever else he deems necessary. Neither is he limited in the people he does in fact consult, and may and should consult more widely than the parish pastoral council itself.

In all this, we cannot ignore the contemporary ecclesial reality of **synodality**, which is essentially a more enhanced and deliberative process of listening and discernment. As well as more effectively assisting in the decision-making process, synodality is about listening, learning and changing, mostly commonly using a method of communication called at this time 'conversations in the Spirit' or 'spiritual conversations.' Synodality is a process of ecclesial growth and the discovery of pastoral realities which may not have been hitherto noticed or understood (especially realities outside the Mass-going part of the parish, or even unspoken needs in the whole parish, including Mass-goers).

Ideally, it is a process that helps (1) individuals know better God and the Church and what is on offers for temporal and eternal happiness, (2) to know each other better as individual children of God, and increase communion, respect and love in our community context, and (3) helps authority figures in the Church 'know' better the people they serve, enabling a more enhanced and specified response to the actual needs before them. Thereby, it all helps the flow of grace to reach real needs. It is meant to facilitate a better experience of being touched by God in a real way in one's own life and circumstances.

To that end, in addition to the parish pastoral council proper, it may be appropriate to foster synodal discussions about specific topics and the regular disclosure of pastoral issues and plans on a regular basis. This is something which can be facilitated in the context of pastoral planning with the parish pastoral council, under the direction of the parish priest.

Considering all these things, I decree on the following pages statutes pertaining to the parish pastoral council of Our Lady & St Joseph Sheringham & Cromer.

Parish pastoral council • Statutes

Article I • Origin & purpose

1. In accordance with the *ius vigens* (current universal and particular law) in the Diocese of East Anglia, by decree a parish pastoral council is erected in the parish of Our Lady & St Joseph Sheringham & Cromer as a consultative structure to assist the parish priest in decision-making in respect of pastoral planning.
    a. By its nature, the parish pastoral council exists as long as the office of parish priest is occupied. In the event of a vacancy in the office of parish priest, therefore, the provisions of these statutes become extinct immediately;
    b. In accordance with the executive instruction promulgated by the bishop of East Anglia on 21 May 2006, the parish pastoral council thus erected may be suspended by the parish priest at any time, only with the consent of the diocesan bishop, to be re-erected within two months. The diocesan bishop, by a singular decree, may, in his capacity as diocesan bishop and not by provision of this decree, dissolve the parish pastoral council at any time, derogate from the particular law of the diocese of East Anglia, or act in any lawful way he deems necessary;
    c. For the sake of ease, 'parish pastoral council' may be abbreviated to 'pastoral council'.

Article II • Members

2. Members of the parish pastoral council, all of whom must be members of the Christian faithful in full communion with the Catholic Church, are determined by the parish priest. In making a determination, the parish priest obliges himself to the following definitions:
    a. Members are to be domiciled or quasi-domiciled in the parish of Our Lady & St Joseph Sheringham & Cromer;
    b. Members serve for a term of three years from their date of appointment, renewable;
        i. In accordance with canonical norms, unless a specific termination of appointment date is decreed in writing, the term of three years expires when the member is informed by the parish priest that the three-year term has expired;
    c. A member may be an individual person aged 16 or over;
        i. A parent or curator of a minor who is a member must also be a member and attend with them;
        ii. Members who are parents are able to bring their children to the meeting, who, if the person is 14 or over, is able to participate in the spiritual conversation;
        iii. For the purposes of balancing the membership of the parish pastoral council, multiple members resident in the same household are to be counted as one;
        iv. Only members have voice in a vote.
    d. The parish priest will consult existing members before appointing a new member;
3. In deciding to appoint new members, the parish priest obliges himself to the following restrictions, where reasonably possible:
    a. That the parish pastoral council should be evenly balanced between male and female members;
    b. That, in respect of regular Sunday Mass-going where applicable, the parish pastoral council should be evenly balanced between both parish churches; if Sunday Mass-going in one parish church is not regular enough to determine a pattern, then they are to count as regular Sunday Mass-goers at both parish churches;
    c. That, in addition to Sunday Mass-going locations, a certain geographic balance is also to be considered that includes membership of
        i. at least one member from Holt or its environs;
        ii. at least one member from among the inland villages;
    d. That a balance is to be maintained in respect of personal characteristics and broadness of experience;

4. A member may declare their resignation from the parish pastoral council to the parish priest. The resignation does not require the acceptance of the parish priest to be effective. The parish priest will inform the other members of the parish pastoral council that the resignation has come into effect.
5. An individual member of the parish pastoral council is to be the moderator of the parish pastoral council, who communicates with members in respect of planning the times of meetings, and, if necessary, to act as a conduit of communication between members and the parish priest;
    a. The moderator is appointed by the parish priest, having heard the members of the parish pastoral council about the appointment;
    b. The moderator serves for a term of one year, renewable;
    c. The moderator ordinarily leads individual meetings, ensuring that agenda items are followed and meetings run smoothly;
    d. For the purposes of the 'diocesan council for the laity', the moderator acts as the 'parish representative' when summoned to the said 'council' by the diocesan bishop.
6. A member of the parish pastoral council may be dismissed by the parish priest with or without a cause. This, as with any administrative act, is subject to recourse by the person affected.

Article III • Meetings

7. The parish priest obliges himself to summon a meeting of the parish pastoral council at least four times a year, though he may summon more meetings;
    a. Since by nature a parish pastoral council is consultative, a quorum is not necessary, except by provision of these statutes.
    b. Meetings are to take place in person;
    c. The parish priest provides the agenda to the moderator, who then circulates the agenda among members;
        i. Alongside the agenda, the parish priest is also to provide to the moderator for circulation among members any information that members would require for proper consultation;
        ii. The moderator is obliged to raise any concerns about the agenda to the parish priest before circulation, in case amendments are required;
        iii. The agenda is formulated into a single question or several questions for the parish pastoral council to investigate, reflect upon, and give recommendations;
        iv. Members may at any time throughout the year directly raise issues for the attention of the parish priest which he may decide to formulate into a question for the parish pastoral council; this may include matters raised in an actual meeting, which may then be formulated into a question for the parish pastoral council for a subsequent meeting;
    d. The parish priest may determine that persons other than members are to be admitted to the spiritual conversation on an *ad hoc* basis because of the subject matter, and the expertise or experience of the person-to-be-admitted would lend itself to a more fruitful discussion. Such persons contribute to the spiritual conversation, but the recommendation itself is given by members.
    e. Each meeting is to open with a prayer led by the parish priest, and to close with the same.
    f. During the course of a meeting, each member is to be heard fully, and members are to engage in active listening in spiritual conversation;
        i. Members are to speak freely and without interruption (except if the moderator determines that the member is speaking imprudently, immodestly, or with undue length; then the moderator may instruct the member to stop speaking);
        ii. First, after preliminary acts, members are each to express their initial reflections on the question to be investigated for a maximum of 4 minutes each, followed by a moment of prayerful silence;
        iii. Second, members are to reflect on the things that have been said in that initial reflection, noting any further reflections arisen in them as a result of what has been heard, which, likewise, is limited to a maximum of 4 minutes each, followed by a moment of prayerful silence;

iv. Third, members are to express common themes which have emerged in the meeting, and give a personal recommendation based upon what has been said and heard, and, if they feel unable to give a recommendation, ask for further time for reflection on the question;
v. Finally, the parish priest together with the moderator determines if a consensus has been achieved, or, if a consensus is not obvious by what has been said, a vote on a consensus answer may be taken, or a consensus may determine that the consensus recommendation be deferred to a later date;
vi. Members are not to 'confront' directly other members, the president, or a guest in a meeting, because they have a hostile or critical response to what the member has said feely; each member is entitled to express themselves without fear of reproach, although a disagreement with what has been said may be spoken in order to better discern a path to consensus;
vii. The moderator is to ensure that the course of the meeting follows the principles set out in these provisions;
viii. If a meeting has strayed from these provisions, the meeting is to be paused by the parish priest, and led in prayer by him;
ix. Members are required to maintain confidentiality about the details of a discussion except what may be published in the form of a summary document. This enables members to be more open in sharing their reflections.

g. After each meeting, the parish priest or his delegate, having taken note of the course of the meeting, will produce a summary document which will then be circulated to members by the moderator;
i. If no objection is raised to the summary document after circulation, the document will be published by the parish priest on the parish website and posted on the church noticeboards for a period of time determined by him;
ii. If a reasonable objection is raised, the summary document is to be rewritten in such a way that there are no longer any reasonable objections. The parish priest determines whether an objection is reasonable, and he is to provide a justification for this determination to the moderator. The moderator is obliged to give their own opinion to the parish priest about the objection's reasonableness before he so determines;
iii. Within the summary document must be an indication as to the date of the meeting, and the names members who actually attended the meeting;
iv. Such a summary document is to be maintained by the parish priest in the parish archive, even if a summary document is not published, as well as a record of activity concerning membership, and a register of attendance of each meeting, and any other pertinent documentation.

h. Questions may also be posited to the parish pastoral council by the parish priest outside a meeting by another form of collective communication (e.g. email) in order to facilitate answers to those specific questions that arise spontaneously; if such questions are posited in this manner, a summary of the question, the recommendation, and the decision of the parish priest (if there is one) is to be recorded by the parish priest and attached as an appendix to the following meeting's summary document;

i. At the start of the meeting, the parish priest may inform the parish pastoral council about any decisions made as a result of the recommendation of a previous meeting, unless it has been made obvious in another way prior to that meeting;
i. If the parish priest's decision is contrary to the consensus recommendation of the parish pastoral council, he is to explain his reasoning to the parish pastoral council in the meeting following the decision, unless those reasons have been made obvious in another way;
ii. As a result of the recommendation or the decision, the parish priest may ask the question again in the same or in a different form.

8. In answering questions, the parish pastoral council is to come to a consensus recommendation after investigating and reflecting. Before a meeting takes place, after the agenda has been received, members should begin

investigating and reflecting upon the question itself. It may be the case during the course of the synodal discussion that a recommendation needs to be deferred to a subsequent meeting;

a. The parish priest obliges himself to bring all relevant public information in respect of the question to members for their reflection;
b. Members are obliged to investigate the question diligently and to reflect with an open-heart. In doing so, they may need to ask questions of other people to facilitate a more informed reflection;
c. In order to achieve consensus, members are to vote at a meeting on the recommendation to be given to the parish priest. The moderator and the parish priest together determine whether a consensus has been achieved in the meeting. If the moderator and parish priest do not agree about whether a consensus has been achieved, a consensus has not been achieved;
d. All members, including the moderator, are to take care that their own potentially different personal opinion is not confused for a lack of consensus; likewise, the parish priest is to take care that his potential disagreement does not mean that consensus is achieved in the parish pastoral council's recommendation.

9. In order to facilitate wider parish engagement in pastoral decision making, an annual pastoral meeting is to be held, in a manner determined by the parish priest, which could be facilitated by the parish pastoral council. It would be fitting that such a pastoral meeting follow synodal principles, and that a decision on such a format be determined by the parish priest having consulted, in the manner described above, the parish pastoral council. This meeting mirrors the annual parish financial meeting, insofar as it aims to disclose to the public pastoral planning, and also a way to foster communion and conversation.

Article IV • Amendment or revocation

10. These statutes may be amended or revoked by decree, the circumstance of 1.a. notwithstanding.
11. If the decree is made by the parish priest, then he is to first consult the members of the parish pastoral council on the proposed amendment or revocation using the meeting method described at a meeting attended by a two-thirds majority of members or more. After the conversation has concluded, a vote is to be taken by members as to whether a recommendation should be made for the proposed action.