Decision-Making and Parish Leadership

Diocesan Research and Planning Office

March 2003

Parish decision-making is often a perilous process, moving between the extremes of: 1) a pastor not allowing any lay input into parish decisions; and 2) trusteeism, where lay people practiced ultimate authority in matters of parish governance. Good decision-making requires effective consultation among the pastor, other priests and staff, if present, and the laity.

The first impediment to good decision-making is inexperience by some parish leaders with a non-confrontational decision-making model. Modern media bombards us with models of conflict: much of talk-radio; "investigative" reporting; Jerry Springer and other similar television programming; local schools boards and city councils; and sometimes even the United States Congress. There are few models of decision-making that do not revolve around someone protecting "their rights," even to the point of belligerence.

Another impediment to wise decision-making is time. It takes time to prayerfully and reflectively listen to others and consider options that are useful for the common good. Society often seems obsessed with instant gratification and "efficiency." Deliberations which do not produce quick results may be judged unproductive.

This report intends to present some helps to parish pastoral councils as they strive to reach consensus on important issues.

Levels of Decision-Making

In *Recreating the Parish*[1] and *Transforming the Parish*[2] the staff of the Parish Evaluation Project present a serviceable outline of different ways of reaching decisions based upon: the number of people involved; the emotional level; available time; available financial resources; and authority to make decisions.

1. Nitty-Gritty: Delegating

Useful when: A decision is about specific details, small issues, limited influence.

How to use: Let those in charge take care of the decisions. Allow freedom of work and movement. The pastor should not micro-manage the staff and the staff should not micro-manage volunteers. The pastoral council must remember that its role is to help discern the parish's mission and create plans to accomplish the mission.

Let those that are in charge of a particular ministry or project make the decisions about such a ministry or project. While this principle may seem obvious, a pastoral council may be tempted to micro-manage affairs beyond its scope, such as: selecting songs for a special celebration; choosing the religious education textbooks; or deciding where the youth group should go for its field trip.

2. **Small Matters: Voting**

    Useful when: At a staff meeting or a council meeting, there are issues with little conflicting emotion; need vote of confidence.

    How to use: Voting is for confidence and support. Help people to take ownership of the decision. There is no need to hang up the meeting over these matters. (*Caution —* if strong emotions are displayed about an issue, potentially dividing the group, move to the next level of decision-making.)

Voting is best used when few emotions are present and the group wants to go on record for supporting a proposal. Examples of reasons for voting include: ratifying the date of the pastoral council retreat; and sending a parish tithe to the local food pantry.

3. **Larger Matters: Consensus**

    Useful when: There are issues about which the group (council or staff) has strong emotions and these issues have the potential to divide the group. The issues need thought and discussion. Time must be available to consider options. Group members must be willing to listen to each other and be influenced by each other.

    How to use: All must state their views on the issue — silence blocks openness. The only voting allowed is a straw vote (with no power) to assess attitudes. Group members must seek out differences of opinion to explore all options. No group member should "give in" just to avoid conflict. The final decision must be acceptable to all, meaning that everyone can "live with it" and support it.

Consensus takes time and effort. Alternatives must be explored in detail and people must be open to share their hopes and fears with the group. Each person in the group must be willing to let go of their desires and seek what is best for the parish as a whole. People must be willing to take the time to explore alternatives until one is found that everyone can live with. The final decision may end up being one that nobody initially favored.

4. **Finding Creative Alternatives: Problem Solving**

    Useful when: There are large issues that need a good group effort to come up with creative alternatives.

    How to use: The group states the need (*not* the solution) and envisions what the ideal future can look like when the need is met. List what is already being done to reach the ideal. Think of all the ways of reaching the ideal. Brainstorm and be creative. Then select the best way(s). Be specific: what?; for whom?; when?; how often?; where?; by whom?; and how much?.

Follow the five-step process of Need, Ideal, What Now, Options, and Choose the Best. First, agree on the need. This is more difficult than it seems because people most often jump to the solution. Second, spend time on articulating the ideal if the need is met. This step gets people thinking creatively and broadens their horizon. Third, list what the parish is doing now to reach the ideal. It is heartening to realize most parishes will not have to start from scratch. Fourth, focus on all possible options for meeting the need. These are alternatives that take the parish beyond its present activities. Fifth, choose the best option, the one about which the group can become excited.

5. **Big Matters: Discernment**

Useful when: One or more issues affect an entire parish community and many will have strong emotions over the outcome of the decision.

How to use: State the problem or situation. Consult with those involved and develop a possible solution by using the problem-solving approach, above. Take time in prayer and reflection and list all the reasons *against* the solution. Take additional time in prayer and reflection and list all the reasons *for* the solution. Eventually the solution will arise from the group. If not, continue the process.

In the discernment process the people are not directly voting for the solution; they are giving their wisdom and insight to a discerning group, e.g., the pastoral council. Expect that opinions will be divided and that some negativity will arise, but also expect that people may come up with new ideas. The discerning group should present a tentative decision to the larger group and test for acceptance. If there is widespread discontent, the process is not finished.

The Crucial Difference: Consulting, Deciding, Informing

In decision-making it is important that everyone realizes the distinction among consulting, deciding and informing. Who are the actual *deciders*? Who is being *consulted* before the decision is made? Who should be *informed* after the decision is made but before it is implemented? Without awareness of where people fit in this C-D-I schema, misunderstandings are sure to arise. For example, in the discernment approach, above, people in the parish community are being consulted; they are not the decision-makers. The discerning group, such as the pastoral council, is the decision-making group.

In many parish matters, especially those about important spiritual affairs, the pastor is the decider. He should, however, consult with appropriate people (pastoral council, liturgical commission) and seek their insights before making changes. He should also inform the parish community about the changes and prepare them for the changes before they occur. If the changes are major the pastor may also wish to consult with the entire parish community.

Clearly articulating the distinction between consulting and deciding is important in the following examples of decision-making at the parish level.

- Who selects the hymns for weekend Masses?

- Who selects the religious education textbooks?

- Who decides the parish budget?

- Who decides where the youth group is going on their field trip?

- Who decides on the requirements for the Confirmation class?

There are many other examples of parish decision-making where lucidity is key. As Sweetser and Forster note, "Whatever parish we work with, we can never stress enough the need to clarify the C-D-I of decision-making." (p. 100)

Notes

---

1. Holden, Carol M., D.Min, Sweetser, Thomas P., S.J., and Vogel, Mary Beth, M.P.S. 1996. *Recreating the Parish: Reproducible Resources for Pastoral Ministers*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward.

2. Sweetser, Thomas P., S.J., and Forster, Patricia M. , O.S.F., 1993. *Transforming the Parish: Models for the Future*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward.