Consulting the Wisdom of the Parish Community

An Alternative Vision of Council and Commission Effectiveness

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Introduction

This paper presents a vision of how parish councils and commissions might make a more vital, essential and positive contribution to the effectiveness of parish ministry and the quality of community life. It is certainly not the only conceivable vision for council and commission effectiveness, or even necessarily the best. The vision presented in these pages represents an alternative to current council and commission practice in the Archdiocese. Indeed, it would hardly be visionary if it did not. It will therefore appear new and strange and perhaps “impractical” to some. Others, however, may recognize in it modern echoes of the Church’s ancient tradition of consultation, which may help to clarify present confusion and simplify present complexity. In either case, the vision presented here in no way violates the spirit and intent of the conciliar and synodal documents or of church law with regard to the principle of shared responsibility. It therefore poses a valid alternative to current council and commission practice for those who find present practice in their parishes less than helpful or even harmful.

The paper is primarily concerned with values and vision rather than with specific norms and guidelines for implementation of the vision. Those interested in pursuing the vision with a view toward implementing it are encouraged to read my booklet The Consultative Process in Action. This paper should be thought of as the “extract” with which The Consultative Process in Action will make the “orange juice” by showing how the theory can be applied in your parish in greater detail.

Finally, although the vision presented here does not represent current practice across the diocese, there are some few parishes that are currently functioning in a manner that substantially implements the vision. Those who are interested in talking to someone experienced in the implementation of this vision may contact the author for a referral.
An Important Distinction

Each person in the church is called to serve the Reign of God in his or her own way. Each person, therefore, must answer the question “Whom shall I serve?” Different individuals serve in the different personal settings of their lives. Some serve primarily at home for the building up of the Reign of God in the family. Others serve primarily in their neighborhoods. Still others serve primarily in their workplaces to help build up the life of the Spirit there. Some serve as volunteers in hospitals or social service agencies. And some are called to serve the church by taking a formal role in the parish structure in order to serve other parish members and the common life of the parish community in the name of the parish.

In thinking about and talking about parishes as organizations, therefore, it is often useful to make an initial distinction between those people in the parish who are performing services in an official capacity in the name of the parish community and those who are performing all or almost all of their service in the other settings of their lives. The usefulness of this distinction is that it clearly identifies those who serve the parish community in a formal way, often by rendering services in the name of the community that enable those serving in other settings to do so more confidently and effectively.

This distinction divides the total membership of the parish community into two groups: (1) an official parish service organization, which needs to be organized in order to serve efficiently and effectively, and (2) the rest of the parish community, who are serving in other settings and do not need to be organized except for the purpose of being in dialogue with the parish service organization about community needs and goals and the effectiveness of the services currently being addressed to meeting those needs and achieving those goals. The official parish service organization is called an “organization” because parish service requires the systematic use of human and material resources to meet the pastoral needs of the parish community in the most efficient and effective way possible. It is called a “service” organization because it exists to serve, in the name of the parish, those that the parish chooses to serve, both within its boundaries and beyond. It is called a “parish” service organization because its special area of service is to the parish and in the name of the parish. Finally, it is called an “official” parish service organization because it consists of people who have taken a formal role in the parish organizational structure for the purpose of serving in the name of the parish, at the community’s call, and with the community’s support.

The total number of people within the parish service organization will usually be divided into a number of small groups that exist for the purpose of performing a specific task, program, or project. These include
the pastoral staff (usually the pastor, associate pastors, D.R.E., school principal, and so on), and the various program-implementing units such as a worship planning team, a rest-home visitation team, the ushers, the lectors, the organization that looks after the needs of the poor in the parish for food and clothing (e.g., the St. Vincent de Paul Society), the school faculty, or C.C.D. faculty and so on. Every parish should have a listing of such units, together with a statement of the mission of each unit and a listing of the programs or services each offers or performs for the community in the name of the parish.

The rest of the people in the parish need to have a voice in evaluating how the parish service organization is doing in its attempts to serve the parishioners. The most common strategy for giving the people of the parish community such a voice is to assemble a group of people who represent the wisdom of the community. This group consults with those who are in the parish service organization and offers them the evaluations and recommendations they need to make key decisions that will affect community life and the fulfillment of the pastoral needs of the community. By “pastoral needs” is meant that needs are to be seen in the context of Church, e.g., the need to proclaim, to teach, to celebrate, to serve, and so on. While the parish council is the primary group of this type, there may be others, such as an education commission, a finance commission, or a worship commission. As representatives of the community, members of these groups evaluate the parish service organization by asking the following questions:

- What are the authentic pastoral needs of our parish community?
- Is the parish service organization ministering to those needs?
- Is it doing so effectively, efficiently, and responsibly?
- What recommendations can we make for the improvement of present programs or the development of future programs?

A parish needs both of these kinds of groups: (1) the program implementing groups that make up the parish service organization and (2) the consultative groups that can represent the interests and the collective wisdom of the larger parish community. Both are needed to provide a creative dialogue between those who serve in the name of the parish and those who represent the interests of the community being served. To have only program implementing groups with no consultative body is to run the risk of having those who serve “do their own thing,” drifting farther and farther away from the real pastoral needs of the parish community. To have only consultative bodies and no program implementing groups is to be lost in a sea of possibilities without ever “landing” these in any particular action.

It is also important that the two kinds of groups be kept separate from one another within the parish organizational structure. When a program implementing group tries to guess what the needs of the community are or how well it is doing in meeting those needs, it is
attempting to be its own consulting group. We all have hunches about what is needed and how well it is being provided, but the best way to make those decisions involves consulting the wisdom of the parish community itself through its duly designated representatives. On the other hand, when a consultative group tries to make decisions that a program implementing group must follow, it is trying, if effect, to run its own service program by having another group carry out its decisions. This seldom works, because those who have committed their time and energy to implementing a program want to make the decisions involved in designing and running that program and usually resent having these decisions made for them by another group.

In the vast majority of cases, when parish organizations are not working effectively, it is because (1) no clear distinction is being made between the parish service organization and the total parish community, (2) there are lots of program implementing groups and would-be program implementing groups but no consultative bodies to provide the needed input with regard to what is needed and how well needs are being met, or (3) there are lots of groups that are trying to be both program implementing and consultative groups; that is, there are program implementing groups trying to be their own consultants or there are consultative bodies that are trying to run things, or both.

In keeping with the spirit of the documents of Vatican II and the first point of the new policy governing parish councils, it should be clear that “the quality of parish life is the shared responsibility of the local parish community.” The council documents have made it very clear that lay people in the church have both a program implementing role and a consultative role within the parish structure. Therefore, lay parish volunteers should feel and be free to serve in either of the two kinds of groups, program implementing or consultative. They should be encouraged to make a choice and to serve in the kind of group in which they want to serve. Much confusion and dissension results from frustrated expectations when someone who wants to be involved in running or helping to run programs joins a consultative group by mistake or out of ignorance of the group's purpose and function or when someone who wants to be involved in evaluating the quality of parish life and making recommendations for development or improvement joins a program implementing body where more time and energy are required for taking action. The two kinds of group call for different gifts, personalities, temperaments, time and energy commitments, and points of view. Both are needed for effective and efficient operation of a parish service organization. A parish service organization without consultative bodies is all sail and no wind. Consultative bodies without program implementing bodies are all wind and no sail. The following table summarizes the major points of difference between consultative and program implementing groups highlighted thus far:
Consultative Bodies

- Represent the wisdom of the parish community at large.
- Evaluate the quality of parish life and of programs run and make recommendations.
- Are values oriented.
- Inspire (give spirit to) what is done by surfacing and expressing the hopes, dreams, and beliefs of the community.
- Exercise prophetic or calling power, the call to use resources responsibly in meeting real community needs.
- Deal mainly with broad directions and goals.

Program Implementing Groups

- Represent the parish service organization.
- Make decisions and take action in the process of running programs.
- Are action oriented.
- Incarnate (give flesh to) the hopes, dreams, and beliefs of the community.
- Exercise kingly or executive power, which in the Christian tradition is serving power.
- Deal mainly with specific means and strategies.

Seeing the Old Parish Organizational Units in a New Way

The diagram on the next page presents a visual picture of the units of parish structure as they might be interrelated in keeping with the distinction between consultative and program implementing groups set forth in the table above.
This diagram should make it clear that the parish council is a consultative body, not a program implementing group. Problems with the effective functioning of parish councils over the past ten years have stemmed mainly from false images of the council’s purpose or function, images drawn from the tradition of American corporate enterprise or representative democratic government rather than from the ancient Christian tradition of consultation. Councils have seen themselves as boards of directors, administrative boards, or legislative bodies, rather than as consultative bodies.

Commissions have presented an even more confusing set of problems, since some of them have been consultative only, some program implementing only, and some have tried to be both at once, yet all bear the same name—“commission.” Some Worship Commissions, for example, have confined themselves solely to consulting with the primary...
administrators for worship in matters of parish policy governing worship and the administration of the sacraments. Others have been involved, totally or in part, in planning liturgies and even administering sacramental services, both of which are program implementing functions. Only those who have been involved exclusively in consulting should be considered commission in the sense in which that term is being used here.

If a commission is a consultative body only, it should be subordinated to the parish council in the interest of developing uniform parish vision and policy. If, however, it is a program implementing body only, it should be subordinated to one or more members of the pastoral staff. For example, a group of people running a fund-raising program for the school should be subordinated to the principal of the school, not to the Education Commission. Such a group might be called a program team, project team, or task force, to distinguish it from the commission, which is a consultative rather than a program implementing group. If a “commission” is trying to be both, either it should be given the choice of which it wants to be, or it should be divided into two groups, one to be the consultative body plugged into the council, the other to be the program implementing body plugged into the pastoral staff.

The pastor is given principal responsibility for the leadership of the parish by the Bishop in trust for the people of God. The pastor shares with the members of his pastoral staff his responsibility to implement programs that will meet the pastoral needs of the people of the parish. While it is recognized that the “parish staff” will very often—especially in small or rural parishes—consist of one person (the pastor), it is unfortunate (and a symptom of pastoral inefficiency and ineffectiveness) when that one person comprises the entire parish service organization. A very important leadership goal for a pastor in such a situation is to share his pastoral and ministerial responsibility with others to the greatest extent possible and thus to call forth and develop a parish service organization, however small at the start.

In a situation where the pastor of a small or rural congregation is using his council as a staff or as a parish service organization, the present vision suggests that he call that group his staff or the parish service organization and then develop a separate consultative body. Thus the vision, when appropriately scaled down, can be just as helpful in a small or rural parish as in a large suburban one, without exhausting the available time, energy, and talent of pastors or their parishioners.

Pastoral staff members, in turn, share their responsibility with the various program and project leaders that are responsible to them. These program and project leaders, of course, share the responsibility with their followers, the lay parishioners who have volunteered to serve and who have committed their time, energy, and talent to responsible parish service in the interest of meeting the pastoral needs of other community members.
The members of the congregation share with the members of the parish council and other consultative bodies their responsibility to provide wise counsel for the pastor or a member of the pastoral staff, and through them, for the rest of the parish service organization, while at the same time challenging them and calling them to responsibility concerning the ways in which they expend human and material resources in the effort to meet pastoral needs. In the dialogue thus created between the service side and the consultative side, the consultative side provides evaluation and recommendations regarding the quality of parish life, the broad direction taken by the service organization, and the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of current service programs while the service side provides action to meet the pastoral needs of the community and accountability for their stewardship of human and material resources.

The purpose of the council and its subordinate consultative bodies, then, is to help the pastor and the pastoral staff as the primary administrators of the parish service organization to make decisions and take action in the interest of meeting the pastoral needs of the parish community more effectively, to affirm and support those decisions and actions in the name of the community, and to call these pastoral leaders to accountability.

The purpose of the pastoral staff is, in consultation with the council and its subordinate consultative commissions, to set a direction for the total parish service organization, to call forth and enable lay leaders and parish service volunteers, seeing to it that they have or can acquire the working knowledge and skills they need to perform their service effectively, and to steward both human and material resources in such a way as to insure that they are used efficiently, effectively, and responsibly in meeting the pastoral needs of the parish community. Service as a program implementer presumes ability (knowledge, experience, and skills) as well as willingness (confidence and commitment of time, energy and talent) and therefore membership in a program implementing body should never be automatic. The purpose of the various implementing groups is to design step-by-step programs and strategies for achieving parish service organization goals, and to implement those programs and strategies.

In sum, the parish council and its subordinate consultative bodies serve the vital function of representing the wisdom of the community in the process of participating in the decision making of the pastoral leadership. The task of the council and the commissions is to meet with the pastoral leaders and to help them to use the power given on the one hand by the bishop and on the other hand by the community to make decisions that will result in the parish service organization taking action that will meet the community's pastoral needs more efficiently and effectively.
The Use of Power in Parish Decision Making

There are four functions that are needed in the process of using power to make decisions within a parish organizational setting:

Evaluation

An adequate assessment of the quality of parish life needs to be made on an ongoing basis. How is our life together in the areas of worship, education, and service to our parish, our community, and the world? The focus here is on the mission, goals, and programs of the parish organization. Where are we going as a parish people? Is the general direction we are taking helping or hurting the growth of the Reign of God in our midst? What kind of witness are we giving to our neighborhood community and to the larger world? Are our broad goals and the actions taken to accomplish them in keeping with gospel values? Are they adequate expressions of the mission and ministry of Jesus to the modern world? Are existing programs achieving their stated goals? Are they meeting the pastoral needs of those we serve? What isn’t being addressed?

Recommendation

Once the evaluation function has provided a picture of the present situation and identified any gaps between what is and what is to be desired, alternative goals and courses of action may be considered. What new goals should we set for ourselves? What new action should we take? What improvements can be made in the action we are taking now? How can we better worship, educate, serve? What new directions do we need to take? What needs should be serviced first, given our limited resources? How can present programs be run more effectively or efficiently? Recommendations for alternative directions, goals, and courses of action need to be very concrete and specific. It is also important not to proceed to a decision or to a given course of action too quickly. The effectiveness of the decision or of the action taken will depend in large measure upon how wide the range of available options is. Therefore, it is of crucial importance, at this stage in the decision-making process, to explore the possibilities at some length without rushing to a judgment.

Moment of Decision

After the possibilities have been generated, the moment of decision arrives. In church organizations, decisions must be based upon faith values. Alternative recommendations must be weighed, and one must be selected for promulgation, further development, or implementation. In the context of our universal mission to be church, and the values assumed therein, which alternative or combination of alternatives, will
meet pastoral needs most efficiently and effectively? Which alternative or combination of alternatives will be most in keeping with gospel values? What are the gospel values involved, and how can they best be implemented? Which will bring us closest to the Reign of God? Which will give the kind of collective witness to the world around us that we are called to give? If the process has been built thus far upon an adequate base of evaluation and recommendation, the moment of decision will be relatively shorter, easier, and more likely to be productive of an effective and helpful course of action. If the process has not be built upon such a base, the moment of decision will be more likely to be difficult, lengthy, and dictated by knee-jerk responses, special interests, or “what we have always done.”

**Action Taking**

Once a value, direction, goal, policy, or course of action has been selected for implementation, and a step-by-step action plan detailing who will do what by when has been designed, the planned action must be carried out. Once action has been taken, evaluation can begin again by making an assessment of the effectiveness of the action taken and of the quality of the new parish life situation brought about by that action, and the entire cycle described above can and needs to be repeated. This cycle, or some abbreviated version of it, is constantly going forward in any organization attempting to use its power to make decisions and solve problems.

**The Use of Power on the Consultative Side (Parish Council and Commissions)**

It is crucial to remember that the entire cycle of functions described above, and not merely the moment of decision, is required for power-full decision making. As the organizational diagram on page 10 above shows, the parish council and its subsidiary consultative bodies, the commission, make their primary contribution to parish decision making by evaluating and recommending, that is, by exercising the first two of the four power functions described above.

The natural tendency of program implementing groups and their leaders is to move back and forth between the moment of decision and taking action (the third and fourth power functions described above) without ever formally doing very much to (1) improve their range of available alternatives for action or (2) evaluate the effectiveness of what they are doing on the basis of feedback. The reasons for this tendency are easily understood. Those who make a decision and take action upon it tend to continue taking the action on the assumption that it is meeting the needs that it was designed to meet. It is a natural tendency to keep doing something once you have started doing it and even to ignore or at
least gloss over the early indicators that it may not be altogether effective. Even when the negative indicators become clearer and stronger, there may still be a tendency to make excuses or even to become hostile or defensive and continue doing it anyway, or to make minor adjustments when what is really called for is a major overhaul or even a whole new start. This natural momentum that characterizes an action-taking program is further augmented by a tendency on the part of those running the program not to want to hear “bad news” about the effects the program is having. The people who have designed a program and are in the process of implementing it naturally want the program to succeed. Unfortunately, personal or group self-esteem, having an image as successful ministers, or even keeping face, can sometimes take precedence over success in the sense of meeting the real needs of parishioners.

When these natural tendencies are allowed to predominate, the members of program implementing groups will tend to lose their responsiveness to the needs of the parish community. There will be a tendency to listen only to positive feedback and to downplay or minimize negative feedback or even to react to it defensively. The end result will often be that “service” groups are designing and running programs not so much because people in the parish community need and want those programs but because those offering the “service” need to do so for reasons of their own—for example, to feel they are “helpful,” to build up their sense of self-worth, or to be known, recognized, and accepted in the parish. Human nature being what it is, pursuit of such goals is natural, but true followers of Jesus will experience Him constantly calling them beyond these. Operating out of these motives is understandable, but ministers can never be content to stay there. If parish life is to be genuinely Christian, it will be concerned with meeting the needs of those being served.

Because program implementers are caught up in the press of making decisions “in the field” and taking action, they have little time and energy left over for evaluating and weighing alternatives. It is precisely here that the consultative bodies can make a highly valuable contribution. Because consultative bodies are not encumbered with the responsibilities and time-and-energy commitments involved in program implementation, and because they are not as personally invested in the success of specific programs and strategies, they can be very helpful partners to the program implementers by providing greater objectivity in (1) assessing the impact of action that the program implementers are taking, (2) making recommendations that will increase the range of options available to the program implementers, and (3) evaluating problem situations that program implementers face and making recommendations for their solution.

If program implementers are really interested in meeting the pastoral needs of the parish community effectively, efficiently, and
responsibly, they will make use of consultative bodies like the council and the commissions. Through these consultative bodies, they will keep themselves responsive to both positive and negative feedback from those being served, because that is the only way in which they will be able to make the needed changes in their programs. They will also keep themselves accountable to the consulters with regard to their progress toward achievement of stated goals and objectives and with regard to the priority of their programs in relation to the programs of other service groups.

Thus it is during the first two phases of the decision making cycle—evaluation and recommendation—that the parish council and its subsidiary consultative bodies can provide a service without which the entire effort of the parish organization to be of service in meeting the community’s pastoral needs will be critically weakened. Commissions offer this service within a more proscribed area of the parish service organization’s activity (i.e., the education area, the worship area, the financial area, and so on). The parish council offers this service for the pastor and the members of the pastoral staff, who represent the parish service organization as a whole.

Apart from their being truly representative of the wisdom of the community and willing to assume their role, council members need no special expertise in a given area of parish service. Commission members, however, will generally need to be persons with certain working knowledge in their area, whether that be education, worship, finance, or whatever, if they are going to be helpful consulters. Thus when the council’s deliberations involve the specific areas of worship, education, or finance, they will need to work closely with the consultative bodies (commissions) involved with those areas in order to (1) acquire the needed background, knowledge, and information with which the commission is usually more conversant than the council, (2) broaden the base of shared responsibility for making evaluations and recommendations in that specific area (principle of collegiality), and (3) keep the evaluations and recommendations as close as possible to the program implementers, who will be using them in that specific area (principle of subsidiarity). It may frequently be the case, then, that the council, a commission, and the pastor or some other staff-level administrator, such as a school principal or parish business manager, will triangulate in the process of developing evaluations and recommendations which affect not only the specific area of the commissions responsibility but also the over-all direction of the parish, which is the council’s area of responsibility.

The Use of Power on the Program Implementing Side
(Pastor, Pastoral Staff, Leaders, and Ministers)
The pastoral staff and its subsidiary program implementing groups, as the organizational diagram shows, make their primary contribution to parish decision making by deciding and taking action, that is, by exercising the last two of the four power functions described above.

In our performance-oriented society, a natural tendency of consultative groups has been to see evaluation and recommendation as powerless functions and to move away from them in an attempt to gain more control over what is done in the parish. When parish councils and other consultative bodies have failed in the past, it has often been because the consulters and the program implementers have locked horns over the issue of who has the power at the moment of decision, both sides failing to recognize that the moment of decision is literally powerless without the rest of the four functions in the cycle. When the consulters abandon their evaluating and recommending functions and go in search of more executive power instead of remaining content with the calling power that is rightfully theirs, they bring themselves into conflict with the program implementers, who rightfully expect to have a large measure of control over their own programs and resent what they usually perceive as undue outside interference. The longer the consulters and the program implementers quarrel over which has the “power” at the moment of decision, the less real power there is for either of them to have, since power cannot “belong” to individuals or groups. Real power is generated when an individual or group uses human and material resources efficiently, effectively, and responsibly to meet the truest and deepest needs of people. Individuals and groups have power when they are perceived as meeting people’s important needs. When individuals or groups begin to be perceived as locked in a “power struggle,” attempting to own or possess “power,” therefore, and not as interested in meeting the deepest needs of the parish community, the source of their real power dries up.

As pointed out in the last section, pastoral leaders and other program implementers who attempt to exercise their “power” apart from the wisdom of the community as represented by the consultative side, create for themselves a powerless situation because, quickly or gradually, they are perceived as not genuinely interested in being responsive to people’s needs. On the other hand, it must now be said that consulters and other members of the parish community who attempt to exercise “power” by refusing their pastoral leaders or other program implementers support or by trying to undermine them or seize executive power from them in order to run things themselves, create for themselves a powerless situation in which focused action to meet the needs of the parish community cannot be effectively taken because no one has been enabled to organize and to lead for the common good. Consulters and program
implementers in either of these two situations must decide which is more important—the feeling of “power” or meeting the needs of the parish community.

The pastoral staff members and the leaders of program implementing groups will normally decide and take action in the name of the community because it is important that the deciders be the individuals who are either (1) the ones who will themselves carry out the planned course of action, or (2) the ones who will delegate and empower those who are to carry out the planned action in the name of the community. It is crucial that those who are to carry out planned action have control over or at least meaningful input into the decision to adopt a given course of action as well as the planning of the specific action steps to be taken. By “meaningful input” is meant input that is meaningful in the eyes of the implementers themselves. When a consultative body starts handing down administrative decision to program implementers instead of making evaluations and recommendations in keeping with its role, it is depriving the program implementers of the right to self determination in exercising the responsibility that they have been formally given, which they have formally accepted, and to which they have formally committed themselves by inventing time, energy, and talent.

All program implementers should be accountable to the pastor or to a pastoral staff member. If they are consistently or heedlessly ineffective or irresponsible, they should be called to accountability, challenged to improve their performance, and perhaps even removed from parish service, but as long as they are in service and growing in effectiveness and responsibility, their right to decide and take action in their own areas of responsibility and commitment should not be arbitrarily infringed. When the pastor and pastoral staff are not holding program implementers accountable, the consulters should call them to do so, offering their support by means of evaluation and specific recommendations.

Initiation of the Consultative Process

When the Pastoral Leaders Initiate

Evaluations or recommendations may be requested by the pastoral leadership or volunteered by the council or other consultative body. Most of the time, however, since it is the leadership that is in constant touch with what is going on in the parish service organization on a day-to-day basis, it will be the leadership that initiates the consultative process with a request for evaluations or recommendations. In order for the consultative process to work effectively, therefore, especially when that process is something new in the parish, it will be crucial for the pastor
and other key pastoral staff members who wish to use the process, to provide clear focus on the consulters’ task by asking specific questions and giving pertinent facts.

If the pastor or other pastoral staff member puts clear, concrete, and specific requests along with the necessary supporting data into the consultative process, he or she will tend to get specific, concrete, useful evaluations and recommendations out of it. If he or she puts vague, general, lackluster requests without adequate supporting data into the consultative process, he or she will tend to get vague, fuzzy, unimaginative, unenlightened evaluations and recommendations out of it.

The pastor and other pastoral leaders will not ordinarily be able to assume that the consulters have the same working knowledge of the details of day-to-day operation of the parish service organization which they have. They will need to “prime the pump” by giving the consulters what they need to do a good job.

In sum, when the leaders of the parish service organization are initiating the request for consultation, which, especially at first, will be most of the time, they have to be very clear about exactly what they are asking of the consulters and very careful that the consulters have enough information to be able to give them what they are asking for.

**When the Consulters Initiate**

Consulters should feel free to ask for the working information they need directly related to the evaluations or recommendations which they are being asked to make. They also need to be good listeners and keep an ear to the pulse of the congregation and should show themselves open to any kind of input from those being served regarding the effectiveness of parish service and the extent to which their most important pastoral needs are or are not being met. Every conversation with a member of the community being served should be seen by the consulter as an opportunity to gather information that might be of use in the consultative process.

In this way, sometimes a problem situation or a new and pressing need may come to the attention of the consulters before it comes to the attention of the program implementers or the pastoral leaders. At such times, the consulters may seek to initiate the consultative process themselves, encouraging the pastoral leaders and program implementers to address the situation and make a decision, develop a plan, or formulate a policy, offering their help and support. When the council or other consultative body initiates in this manner, the leadership needs to show itself open and responsive to the initiative.

**Decisions Shared With Consulters**
The kind of collaborative decision making that is described in these pages does not mean that those designing and administrating service programs in the parish will consult before making every decision. To attempt to do so would be a logistical absurdity, since hundreds of decisions are made by program implementers every month in a large parish, many of which need to be made quickly. The council and other consultative bodies would have neither the time nor the interest to make themselves available for constant consultation regarding every decision to me made with regard to the implementation of any and every parish program. Therefore, the pastor and other pastoral leaders need to exercise discretion in deciding which decision to bring to the council or to a commission.

The vast majority of decisions shared with the council or with a commission will be decisions growing out of one or more of the following questions which every program implementing group, as well as the parish organization as a whole, should be answering in consultation with its council-commission structure:

- Who are we serving, and who should we be serving? Who can we best serve, given our resource limitations?
- What are the truest and deepest needs of the people we are called to serve?
- What is our mission to them?
- What long-term, broad goals should we pursue?
- What kinds of program implementing groups will we need to pursue those?
- How well are existing program implementing groups functioning in achieving their stated goals?
- How efficient and effective are the step-by-step means that existing program implementing groups are using to achieve their stated objectives?
- What human and material resources do we need, and how will they be provided?

These are all questions of relatively broad direction and course correction. As noted above, specific means and strategies should, for the most part, be left up to the program implementing units and their leaders. However, evaluations of the specific means and strategies chosen and recommendations based upon these fall, of course, within the purview of the council and commissions.

There are some specific administrative decisions, however, that require a major commitment of human or material resources on the part of the parish community as a whole. Examples would be expenditure of a significant amount of the parish funds, or the decision to undertake a major renewal effort. Such decisions are so important that the pastoral staff would be wise to include a larger number of people (a commission,
the council, various program-implementing groups or their leaders, perhaps even, in rare instances, the whole congregation) in the actual moment of decision.

**Responsiveness of Pastoral Leaders to Consultation**

Obviously, it makes no sense for the pastor and other pastoral staff members to set up consultative bodies for the purpose of taking advantage of the wisdom of the community by securing evaluations and recommendations from representatives of the congregation and then to ignore, disregard, or make light of the evaluations and recommendations those bodies submit. Therefore, a promise implied by merely establishing such structures as a parish council or a commission is that the pastoral leaders and administrators will not only listen to the consulters’ evaluations and recommendations but will also carefully and prayerfully weigh and consider them and even that, for the most part, their final decisions will reflect their attention and responsiveness to the wisdom of the community as represented by the consulters’ evaluations and recommendations. Neither the pastoral leaders and program administrators nor the consulters would regard the consultative process, then, as “merely” advisory. Leaders and administrators who approach the consultative process with the idea of manipulating it in order to get the decisions they wanted all along anyway, or with the idea of throwing a sop to the consulters in order to keep them happy by giving them the illusion that they are having input, are obviously subverting the very purpose of the consultative process. Victims of such manipulation are seldom deceived for very long, and the result will inevitably be a shortage of able people who are willing to serve on consultative bodies. In order for the consultative process to work powerfully in the parish, the leaders and administrators must show themselves not only open to the evaluations and recommendations of the consulters but also responsive to them in making their final decisions. Otherwise, the consulters will understandably and quickly lose interest in the process.

On the other hand, it will not always be possible or even desirable for the leaders and administrators to accept the consulters’ evaluations and recommendations uncritically. When, after careful consideration and prayerful reflection, the leaders are unable to accept a given recommendation, particularly a recommendation with a high degree of consensus behind it, it will usually be for reasons of fidelity to the gospel or church teaching, or because of a perception of reality that the leaders believe the consulters do not see or are refusing to face. When this happens, the leaders or administrators on the program implementing side are expected not only to report out their decision to the consulters, which
they would be expected to do anyway, but also to set forth a clear rationale for the decision and even to show themselves reading and willing to enter into further dialogue with the consulters regarding the decision up to the point where it becomes apparent that nothing further is to be gained in terms of achieving a compromise or reconciliation. Obviously, all of this should be done before the final decision is promulgated. Consulters should not become discouraged, therefore, when the pastoral leaders or program administrators fail to act favorably on their evaluations and recommendations in every instance. Their primary job is to provide wise counsel and the call to responsibility and accountability and not to guarantee the leaders’ response to the counsel or challenge. Leaders who consistently ignore wise counsel and refuse to be accountable and responsible in making decisions affecting the quality of life of a parish community bring ruin upon themselves in the fullness of time. And, of course, the usual courses of appeal, whether at the parish or the diocesan level, are always open.

**Selection of Consulters**

Where parish council and commissions operate as consultative bodies, as described in these pages, new options open up with regard to how people get onto and off of council and commissions. The currently standard method of election of at-large members would continue, of course, to be a possibility, but other methods might be developed. Consulters, like jurors, might be selected by lot. Everyone in the parish might have the opportunity to serve as a consulter by having people called to that service in rotation. A process of prayerful discernment might be used in place of the more political election by secret ballot. Some council members might be elected and others appointed. Each of these strategies, of course, has its assets and liabilities, its advantages and limitations.

Whatever method is used to select consulters, the key issue in their selection is to make certain that each potential candidate for consulter knows exactly what the role of consulter entails and has an opportunity to discern for himself or herself and with the pastoral leadership whether he or she is able and willing at this time to accept the responsibilities of that role. Many unfortunate situations in the past have developed because people were elected to consultative posts for the wrong reasons. That is, they were not elected to represent the wisdom of the community but because they were popular or because they were active in the parish or because they would press for a special interest or plead for a special cause, or because they would “stir things up,” and so on. The role of consulter requires a certain degree of freedom from personal axes to grind, residual anger about how things are going in the parish, and psychological maturity, as well as a good deal of interpersonal skillfulness.
and ability to address and work through problems. It is not a job for everyone, and candidates should be made aware of what they are getting into and have the opportunity to screen themselves as well as to be screened by the pastor and the chairperson of the consultative body in question on specific criteria specified in advance before being added to the list from which a selection of consulters is to be made.