

## Structuring an Open Forum Section for Pastoral Council Meetings

Preparation is key for a positive open forum experience. It is important to set clear expectations and limits before the meeting. These need to be known by pastoral council members and parishioners at large:

- Decide if parishioners who want to speak need to inform the pastoral council chair beforehand or if they just need to show up at the stated time.
- Decide if there is a limit to the time devoted to any speaker—e.g. 5 minutes maximum.
- Decide who will keep time and inform the person one minute before their time ends.
- Decide if the council will accept written statements to be shared with its members in lieu of oral ones.
- Make clear to those wishing to speak and to all parishioners that the subject they are raising will not be discussed by the pastoral council at this particular meeting.
- Make clear that parishioners are welcome to leave after they speak or to stay for the rest of the meeting, solely as observers.
- Identify possible methods of follow up to parishioners' suggestions, observations, comments, questions, complaints, etc. For example:
  - The pastoral council will place the item on their next agenda and discuss.
  - If a question, there will be a written response in the bulletin/on the parish website.
  - If the comment is related to a contentious parish direction or decision by the pastor/pastoral administrator, there will be an explanation of the reasoning behind the decision through a pulpit announcement, bulletin article, etc.
  - Someone should always follow up with the speaker directly.

Regularly have the pastoral council agenda in the parish bulletin/on the parish website, including the open forum time. Usually it is best to have the open forum time at the beginning of the meeting, right after opening prayer/faith sharing.

At the pastoral council meeting:

- The chair should welcome all speakers warmly and introduce them to the rest of the council or ask them to introduce themselves.
- The chair should briefly state the time limit for the open forum section and for individual speakers. If there are a large number of people who wish to speak, the council can decide whether to adjust the time frame for the open forum, schedule an additional opportunity for parishioner comments, or shorten the time limit for individual speakers.
- After each speaker, the chair needs to state what will happen next. A pastoral council member can be designated to follow up with the parishioner.

Sometimes the same person comes to the open forum meeting after meeting. It may be a challenge to continue to be welcoming and listen, but it is still important to be respectful.

Remember that listening carefully and respectfully is not the same as following the wishes of the one who speaks. However, creating an environment where there is good communication between the pastoral council and parishioners in the long term enhances the life and mission of the parish.