

DECISION-MAKING AT ST. MARGARET MARY PARISH

THE PRACTICE OF SUBSIDIARITY AND CONSENSUS

In the fall of 1989 the Parish Council asked that a committee be appointed to study the issue of subsidiarity.

For many years SMMP has believed in and tried to work under the principle of subsidiarity, which holds that decisions should be made at the lowest possible level. At the same time, there have been misunderstandings and lack of clarity as to how the principle of subsidiarity is most effectively practiced. In addition, there is uneven practice of subsidiarity within the parish.

During the past year, the Parish Council has had several discussions within the Council, with various Commissions and with staff, regarding how and where certain decisions are and should be made. It was determined that a committee should be appointed to look at the issue of how and where decisions are made, and how SMMP can truly and consistently practice subsidiarity.

The committee was appointed and consisted of representatives of the Council (John Kuchta and Martha Rose), the Commissions (Greg Sacco and Barb Thomas), and the staff (Sisters Esther and Madelyn). John Kuchta (Council President) and Fr. Ted asked Mike Doody to work with the committee as a facilitator.

CHARGE

The committee began to address the issue of subsidiarity and quickly reached the conclusion: for a Christian community that strongly believes in collegiality and collaboration, the concepts of authority, decision-making process, consensus and communication must also be explored.

The committee accepted as its charge the responsibility to return to the Parish Council with a report and recommendations outlining how subsidiarity and consensus can best be practiced at SMMP.

MEETINGS AND PROCESS

The committee agreed to meet frequently and regularly in order to establish and maintain momentum. The committee recognized early that its work would take many meetings to accomplish, because the issues are complex and require considerable discussion for complete understanding and in order to reach consensus on them. The committee also agreed to meet only at those times when all committee members and the facilitator could be present. Finally, it was also agreed that some work and preparation would be required between meetings and in preparation of meetings.

The committee met on: November 5, 1989; November 19, 1989; November 29, 1989; December 17, 1989; January 7, 1990; January 21, 1990; February 11, 1990 and February 18, 1990.

At its first meeting, the committee established certain ground rules for how it would work. Among those ground rules was the agreement that the committee would work by consensus. For the committee that meant that at least 4 of the 6 must agree on an issue, and the other 2 must be "able to live with it". In addition, it was agreed that the

committee's final report and recommendations must be unanimously agreed to by all 6 committee members.

SUBSIDIARITY

In a Christian community which prides itself on its spirit of collegiality and collaboration, close working harmony between the staff, the Commissions and the Parish Council is a very necessary end. It is a goal that requires hard work, lots of communication, as well as a high degree of trust, respect and patience. Subsidiarity is a principle that works well in such an environment. *Subsidiarity is decision-making at the lowest possible level with accountability.*

In the context of this definition the concept of "accountability" means that the group making a decision must use a process to assure people who have an interest or who might be impacted by the decision have opportunity for input.

The committee looked at various articles and other educational materials on the issue. It looked at and discussed how well SMMP has practiced subsidiarity in the past, and talked about how and why that should/could be improved. Although subsidiarity has been a principle of decision-making at SMMP for many years, and although SMMP works hard at practicing subsidiarity with some success – it was agreed that with examples on how to practice subsidiarity, with an improved understanding of consensus and when/how to practice it, and with a renewed emphasis on communication (up, down and across) – subsidiarity could become even more effective at SMMP.

The committee believes it is absolutely imperative that SMMP safeguard the collaborative, collegial spirit that it has. And it views its work as both preserving it and enhancing it.

In light of what has been said about subsidiarity, the committee reviewed a variety of issues that have been decided upon in the past, to identify where the decision should most appropriately be made. Hopefully this can serve as a guide to where similar future decision can most appropriately be made.

(Note: PC = Parish Council; C = Commission; S = Staff.)

1. Charitable contributions
 - Policy = PC
 - Regarding specific contribution = C
2. Worship
 - Announcements at Mass = C
 - Bells/no bells = C
 - Standing/kneeling = C
 - Gospel procession = C
 - Mass schedule = C
3. Establishment of Junior High Ministry = C
4. High school confirmation program = S
5. Sacramental policies = C
6. New administration/educational wing = PC
7. Approval of final budget, including major capital expenditures = PC
8. Creating new staff positions = PC
9. Hiring and firing of personnel = S

10. Approval of financial expenditures (in mid-year) which are not part of approved budget = PC
11. Continuing education programs = S
12. Education program = C
13. Neighborhood Networking = PC
14. Religious education textbooks and materials = S
15. Establishment of Family Ministry Team = PC
16. Approval or amendment of Commission bylaws = C

CONSENSUS

The committee next tackled consensus, which it came to understand was a critical element in being able to fully practice subsidiarity in a collegial and collaborative model.

Consensus is a group decision-making process, using the following steps, by which general agreement is achieved:

- A. Before entering a consensus decision process, the participants will:
 1. Realize prayer is a part of the process. It encourages the work of the Spirit.
 2. Agree upon the percentage of members who will finalize the decision. If those who agree with the decision plus those who “can live with it” add up to that minimum percentage, that will comprise the financial decision.
 3. Develop a timeline for the process.
- B. In entering the consensus decision process, the participants will:
 1. Assume that all those in the group have a piece of the wisdom and are encouraged to express it.
 2. Have an attitude of willingness to compromise. (Participants should come with an open mind, alternative ideas, and a desire to examine and address reasons for disagreement.)
 3. Seek available ideas and input appropriate for each decision.
 4. Educate themselves using ideas and input presented.
- C. After consensus has been reached, the participants will:
 1. All commit to support the decision/action reached by consensus.
 2. Determine how to register the minority view.

As a result of its in-depth study and discussion of consensus, the committee made two very important decisions about consensus:

- Consensus is not the required or appropriate decision model for all decisions. In those cases a process by which general agreement is achieved is appropriate.
- When consensus is required, it is most appropriate at the final decision-making level.

The committee also suggests that whenever the consensus model is used a facilitator should assist in the process, if at all possible.

The consensus form of decision-making is not an efficient form. Most democratic processes are not efficient – they were not meant to be for they serve other important purposes. However, as mentioned, not all decisions need a consensus model. Some decisions need to be made more expeditiously than consensus will allow. Some decisions are not significant enough to warrant the time and effort required of a consensus model.

At SMMP, preserving the collegial/collaborative spirit is not dependent upon using consensus for all decisions. Open, thorough communication about issues, their impact, their importance, and alternative approaches to solving the issue – that is what is most important and what makes a group “consensus-minded”. To the extent that it is “consensus-minded”, a group can more readily identify when consensus decision-making is appropriate and can enter into the process more effectively.

At the beginning of each year each group (e.g. the Parish Council, each Commission, staff, etc.) should establish what percentage of the group or of those actually participating in a decision, constitutes a consensus. Remember, it is not necessary (permissible yes, but not necessary) to have 100% to have a consensus.

The committee discussed, at some length, the occasional past practice of the Council to change significantly the recommendation(s) of a Commission or committee, which has spent a considerable amount of time studying the issue, which often times is a very complex issue. The Council, and other decision-making bodies, might consider limiting its action on complex recommendations coming from another group, to either approval or referral for further action. In essence, on such complex recommendations, the committee believes the process and the Parish are best served if the ultimate decision-making body does not rewrite or change such recommendations.

GUIDELINES FOR DECISION-MAKING ON IMPORTANT POLICY ISSUES

Regardless of where decisions are made – at the Parish Council, in a Commission, by the staff – when those decisions establish major programs, impact a large number of people, add a new dimension to the parish, a deliberate, multi-step decision process should be undertaken. The Committee believes that by adhering to such a process, the decision-makers will help insure that all affected and interested parties have had a chance to participate in, or provide input into the decision.

At SMMP there is a greater importance on how decisions are reached, than on the ultimate decision itself. Toward that end, the SMMP decision-making process should include some or all of the following:

- Decisions should be made in a collaborative spirit; collegiality is important in how decisions are reached.
- When a controversial issue (i.e. Confirmation) arises, a subcommittee should be formed to undertake a deliberative process to reach a proper conclusion. The subcommittee should consist of equal representation of the Parish Council, the appropriate Commission, and staff.
- At the point in time when it is determined that an important issue needs study and evaluation, the Parish Council should determine who has authority to make the final decision (e.g. the Parish Council, a Commission, the staff, etc.)
- There should be ongoing sharing of information on the issue with all concerned parties.
- It is necessary that all interested and concerned parties be properly educated about the issue.
- At the beginning of the process, the group should determine if the decision is ultimately to be decided by consensus. If it is to be decided by consensus, what percentage of the group is necessary for consensus. (One hundred percent is not

necessary for consensus.) If consensus is to be the decision mode, the guidelines on consensus decisions contained in this report should be followed.

- There should be a determination, at the beginning of the process, if and how the minority view will be represented.
- The principle of subsidiarity should be followed.
- A timeline for the decision process should be established and followed.

These guidelines are intended to identify an approach to decision-making. Not all issues will necessarily fit within these guidelines neatly. The guidelines are intended as guidelines. One should not feel a need to be a slave to them. However, it is important that the spirit of the guidelines and the principle of collegiality in decision-making be followed, even at the expense of expediency.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions and recommendations reached by the committee are:

- SMMP should do everything necessary to preserve and safeguard the collegial and collaborative style of decision-making that has become a hallmark of this parish.
- The Council should receive and fully endorse this report. It should see that the report is widely distributed.
- The Council should adopt the following definition:
Subsidiarity: making decisions at the lowest possible level with accountability.
- The Council should adopt the definition of consensus, including the steps of that consensus process, as contained herein, for use by the Council, Commissions, staff and all other Parish units.
- The Council should endorse the fact that not all decisions need to be made by consensus and that consensus is most appropriate at the final decision-making level.
- The Council should establish the following criteria for decisions it makes:
The Council, in the spirit of subsidiarity as discussed in this document, should make only those decisions which:
 - **Have a major effect on a large number of people**
 - **Have a major financial impact**
 - **Establish a new ministry or significantly change an existing ministry**
(In this context, the term “ministry” is defined as “a public activity of a baptized follower of Jesus Christ which flows from the Spirit’s charism and the individual personality on behalf of the Christian community, to witness to, serve and realize the kingdom of God.” [Thomas O’Meara])
- The Council should approve and adopt for use at SMMP the guidelines for decision-making on important policy issues.
- The Council should commit to establish the percentage of “votes” necessary for consensus at the Parish Council level at the beginning of each year, and recommend that all Commissions and other groups within the Parish also establish their consensus percentage.
- The Council should assume responsibility of assuring the annual education of all Parish Council, Commission and staff members as to the contents of this document, its implementation and implications.