HOW TO START A DIOCESAN COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC NURSES

 By Mary Pellizzari, RN and Eula Sforza, RN (Revised 2/27/13)

Here are some suggestions for starting a council based on our experience of starting the Council of Catholic Nurses of the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. Always remember that God is your C.E.O. The Holy Spirit will be guiding you. We have always prayed before every meeting and before doing any work for the council. Prayer has given us strength, guidance, and the assurance that God really wanted us to start a council and be there for our nursing peers. Nurses are always supporting others, and this is a way to support nurses.

First, know the boundaries and the circumstances of your diocese. The Joliet Diocese has seven counties with a larger population of nurses in the northern counties closer to Chicago employment. We focused on this area to reach a greater number of nurses and because we lived there. Contact your bishop through your diocesan chancery office. Eula and Claire Lareau, who were Chicago Archdiocesan Council members, met with our Joliet Bishop Joseph Imesch to explain the purpose and function of diocesan councils and to express an interest in starting one in the Joliet Diocese. He told them he would give his permission if we could find at least 43 nurses who were interested.

Next, plan and conduct an interest meeting, inviting friends, co-workers, and other interested nurses. This meeting can be held at a parish or a hospital. We started at St. Joan of Arc Parish where Mary was a parishioner. Parochial Vicar Fr. Kenneth Zigmond, O.S.B. welcomed the group and led them in an opening prayer. The purpose of an interest meeting is to acquaint Catholic nurses with the concept of a diocesan council and the importance and benefits of having a council. We wanted to provide nurses with spiritual support and information about the difficult medical and legal ethics that many are encountering in our profession today. After introductions and dialogue distribute a questionnaire to gather their names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and input regarding their needs, wants, issues, concerns, ideas, and if they are willing to help. Provide extra questionnaire copies with a return address for them to give to friends not present. If there is interest and hopefully enthusiasm, seek volunteers to be acting officers (President, Vice- President, Secretary and Treasurer) for two years to give the council stability during formation. Let the nurses have an opportunity to donate seed money for initial costs and postage.

The next step is to let the bishop know how the interest meeting went and how many nurses are interested. Ask his permission to form a diocesan council and to appoint a spiritual director who might be a hospital chaplain or have a medical or legal background. Our bishop gave his approval and appointed Fr. Eugene Parnisari who was also an attorney. Bishop Imesch restricted us to only one mass per year as a group. The rest was up to us.

This will be a busy time for your group. Keep everyone informed and involved. During your formation meetings led by your acting officers you will need to name your council, choose a patron saint, a motto, and a logo. The logo should be used on your correspondence and application/ information forms which makes people aware of your identity. You will need to write your bylaws, establish dues, get your EIN (employer identification number) from the IRS, get a post office box or stable address, open a bank account, and plan your first program. The vice- president can be in charge of programs. An office can be set up in one of the officer’s homes to keep the membership data base, correspondence, and other information in a central place.

The first program can be spiritual or educational. Our first program was on burnout and was presented by a psychologist at our President Marlene Rasmussen’s hospital. Tap your resources. God will send you the help and the talent needed. Along with word of mouth, you will need to advertise your existence in your diocesan newspaper, parish bulletins, hospitals, nursing homes, etc. A membership application is a must to recruit new members and to let nurses know you exist. Make use of e-mail, a website, Facebook, and other electronic means. You might even publish a simple newsletter explaining your council and upcoming programs to be sent to nurses responding to your publicity.

We incorporated our council with the state of Illinois for annual fiscal accountability, but this is not necessary. We suggest you keep your bylaws as simple as possible. Be sure to include the duties of each officer, voting and amendment procedures. Contact NACN-USA for copies of other councils’ bylaws. Your dues include membership in the council, NACN-USA, and CICIAMS (the international organization). Keep NACN-USA posted on your progress and if you need help. Send your bishop’s approval letter, names of officers, contact information, your bylaws, and upcoming events to NACN-USA.

The frequency and types of meetings you have are your decision. We recommend a balance of spiritual, educational (hopefully with CEU’s), and social. A newsletter is essential with at least two or more a year. Sending most newsletters by e-mail will save a lot of postage. After you are more established, the monthly Ethics and Medics newsletter published by The National Catholic Bioethics Center could be sent to your members. You have many decisions to make, but all of your efforts will be worthwhile. You are in our prayers. If you have questions: contact Mary Pellizzari, 1414 Old Farm Road, Unit B, Champaign, IL 61821, phone (217)607-1727 or e-mail marypellizzari@comcast.net.

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