

USA Catholic Diocesan Natural Family Planning Ministry

A Brief History

In the United States, diocesan Natural Family Planning (NFP) services are understood as a ministry since they are part of the Church's total pastoral care of married couples.¹ Diocesan NFP ministry provides education and evangelization on the Church's teachings on human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood. They present NFP methods as the skills by which married couples can healthfully and morally live God's design for married love.

The history of diocesan NFP ministry in the United States is complex. It includes the work of the laity (married and single), clergy, and religious. A great majority of the early work of NFP ministry began in the 1960s with small, often "unofficial" groups of leaders who organized themselves to help married couples. Some of these efforts grew into national organizations, others became regional associations, and still others became official diocesan programs. An important development for the dioceses occurred after the 1980 Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family called by Pope St. John Paul II.

National NFP Pastoral Planning

During the 1980 Synod of Bishops, the Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Terence Cooke (then Chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities), became convinced that priority must be given to the family apostolate (Cooke, 1983, p. 5). Acting upon his inspiration, Cardinal Cooke invited a priest who was well-versed in NFP science and methods to devise and direct a national pastoral plan for NFP ministry (see Diocesan Plan for NFP, 1981). The priest was Msgr. James T. McHugh, the former director of the bishops' Family Life Bureau and the first executive director of their Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

Cooke and McHugh collaborated on the bishops' NFP pastoral plan. Msgr. McHugh consulted with various NFP diocesan, regional, and national leaders as well as with the Knights of Columbus. By 1981 the NFP educational community was organized into diocesan programs (e.g., St. Cloud, Cleveland, Boston), regional associations (e.g., The New England Association), and national organizations (e.g., Couple to Couple League, Family of the Americas Foundation, and Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction). The Knights of Columbus comprised part of this picture since they had a long-term commitment to pro-life and family life issues. It was the Knights who would fund the bishops' NFP efforts.

In 1981, the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, or "USCCB") formally approved the establishment of the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning (now NFP Program).² As envisioned and designed by Cooke and McHugh, the work of the NFP program is

¹ See Administrative Committee, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1990; third edition, 2010), p. 1. "Natural Family Planning" or "NFP" has been a common term used in the United States. "Fertility Awareness Based Methods" or "FABMs" is another term in use today.

² First established under the authority of the USCCB's Committee for Pro-Life Activities, the NFP Program was moved to work under the direction of the Committee for Laity, Marriage,

rooted in Catholic teaching on God’s design for human sexuality, the virtue of chastity, marriage and family life, and conjugal love and responsible parenthood. Its goals include: the support and strengthening of diocesan NFP programs; the promotion of education in NFP and the relevant Catholic teaching, especially to engaged and married couples; and the evangelization about the truth of Catholic teaching on God’s gift of married love and responsible parenthood.

Diocesan NFP Ministry

Within the national NFP pastoral plan, the primary mission of diocesan NFP ministry is to provide NFP education within the context of Church teaching to Catholic engaged and married couples. A secondary but complementary focus of diocesan NFP ministry is to provide appropriate outreach education on relevant Church teaching and the science and methods of NFP to the faithful. A key project which assists the diocesan bishops with the development of their NFP ministry is the *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*, (hereafter, *Standards*). First published in 1990 by the USCCB’s Administrative Committee, this document describes the basic structure and components of diocesan NFP ministry.³

Diocesan NFP ministry is “integrated into the structure of the diocese with an NFP coordinator appointed by the bishop, as well as NFP teachers who are accountable to and work in cooperation with the NFP coordinator.” (*Standards*, p. 3.) The *Standards* do not specify under which department NFP ministry should reside. That is the responsibility of the local bishop. Consequently, NFP ministry is located in a variety of diocesan departments, including: the office of marriage and family life; evangelization and catechesis; and sometimes in Catholic hospitals. Regardless of where the NFP ministry is housed, it is typically administered by a diocesan NFP coordinator and is staffed by volunteer NFP teachers. Parishes typically do not offer NFP services apart from the program of the diocese.

Although diocesan NFP coordinators may develop their own goals and objectives per their program needs, the *Standards* identify essential program components.⁴ The following provides a sample of some of the goals that are identified in the *Standards*. Many diocesan NFP

Family Life and Youth) in 2008 with the reorganization of the USCCB.

³. For the full text of the 3rd edition (2010), see: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/diocesan-ministry/standards-full-text.cfm>. The *Standards* are divided into four sections: I. Diocesan NFP Ministry; II. Diocesan NFP Teachers; III. Diocesan NFP couple/Client Education; and IV. NFP Teacher Training Programs. An implementation process of review and compliance accompanies this document. The implementation process includes a mentoring component where a Board of Review member shepherds the diocesan NFP coordinator through the process in steps.

⁴. Ibid. Section I, pp. 3-5. For an overview of the process that created the *Standards*, see the *Standards*, “Appendix B: The *Standards*—A History,” pp. 23-26.

programs⁵ work with these goals whether or not they have formally implemented the *Standards* or not.

Beginning with the faith, the *Standards* require that dioceses provide “opportunities for NFP teachers and couples” to “learn basic concepts of Catholic teaching.” (See *Standards*, Section I. B.) All diocesan NFP programs engage in a variety of activities that express this goal since the reason for the local Church’s support of NFP rests upon Church teachings. Typically the diocesan NFP program offers a variety of educational events such as lectures, seminars, workshops, retreats, e-newsletters, and even videos to deepen the faithful’s understanding about Church teaching.

With regard to NFP method delivery, diocesan NFP coordinators are responsible for promoting only certified NFP teachers. The diocesan coordinator has the task of recruiting and reviewing all NFP teachers who work in the diocesan NFP program. In addition, NFP curricula and resources used in the diocese must also be approved by the coordinator. Within a diverse NFP educational community, diocesan NFP coordinators strive to foster respect and cooperation among the differently trained NFP teachers. (See *Standards*, Section I. D. 4. i.)

In addition to on-site NFP classes, many dioceses promote distance learning. Most NFP national providers in the United States offer NFP education either via the Internet or through curricula that is mailed to the student. Some diocesan NFP coordinators are working on developing NFP educational apps to meet the needs of an ever-increasing digitally advanced population.

Diocesan NFP ministry is also represented in programs of marriage preparation. The dioceses do this in multiple ways with some requiring at least an introduction to NFP as part of marriage preparation. In the early 2000s, a slow but steady trend has developed among the dioceses where some require a full course of NFP education as part of marriage preparation.

NFP outreach education is integral to diocesan NFP ministry. This can take the form of lectures, conferences, and workshops. Topics are tailored for the various audiences such as the engaged, married, seminarians, clergy, healthcare professionals, or the general public. In addition, fertility appreciation and chastity education for adolescents and their parents are typically provided.

Diocesan NFP ministry is challenging due to obstacles that include: few resources (including funding); changing ecclesial administrations; the negative influence of culture; lack of formation in the medical community; and generally weak catechetical formation among Catholics. That said, the people who are called by God to participate in NFP ministry are dedicated, competent, and resourceful. They are a blessing to the Catholic Church in the United States.

⁵ The term “program” is used interchangeable with “ministry” to refer to diocesan NFP activities and services.

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Sources

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Diocesan Natural Family Planning National Profile Reports. These annual reports on the activity of diocesan Natural Family Planning programs in the United States can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/nfp/diocesan-ministry/national-survey-profile.cfm>.