



FADICA



Open Wide the Doors to Christ

**A Study of Catholic Social Innovation
for Parish Vitality**

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Executive Summary

Today's parish communities that are known for their vitality have incorporated the Vatican's Jubilee call to "Open Wide Their Doors to Christ."¹ Both welcoming and missionary, these parishes receive all who knock at their doors while actively forming and sending out parishioners to share in the mission of Christ, doing outreach and evangelization. This is one of the major findings of "A Study of Catholic Social Innovation for Parish Vitality," conducted in 2019 for Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA).

As part of a multi-year initiative designed to explore ways in which the processes of Catholic Social Innovation might be applied to their philanthropic endeavors, FADICA members first looked at the global refugee crisis. Subsequently, FADICA's Church Vitality Working Group focused on ways in which Catholic Social Innovation (CSI) processes might foster vitality in Catholic parishes in the United States. In addition to studying parish vitality in general, the Working Group asked that the researchers look for innovative and best practices in four key areas of parish life: **Welcoming Parishes, Young Adults, Women and Women Religious in Leadership, and Hispanic Ministry.** This study, conducted by Marti R. Jewell, D.Min., and Mark Mogilka, MSW, MA, involved a survey of more than 200 initiatives, websites, and books, plus interviews with more than 65 recognized and recommended pastoral leaders and innovators from across the country. What follows is a summary of the overall findings on the meaning and use of Catholic Social Innovation and the characteristics and practices of parishes with vitality, including summaries of findings concerning the four focus areas.

What is Catholic Social Innovation?

The practice of "social innovation" is a relatively new process developed by leaders in the field of social welfare to help diverse groups of people come together to develop new and innovative responses to difficult social and human concerns. Building on FADICA's 2018 study, *Catholic Social Innovation in the Global Refugee Crisis*, the authors of this study developed a further articulation of the concept of "Catholic Social Innovation" (CSI) as applied to Catholic parishes, ministries and services:

Catholic Social Innovation (CSI): A response to the Gospel which brings together diverse stakeholders and perspectives to address difficult issues. These stakeholders enter a safe space and, open to the Spirit, utilize animating and transformative processes that can unlock and unleash the creative, innovative ability of the group to dialogue and develop new actionable responses.

What is Parish Vitality?

A significant challenge when attempting to define parish vitality is the fact that there is no common understanding or definition of what exactly parish vitality is. As one interviewee noted: "I know a parish has vitality when I can feel it, see it, experience it. You just know." We discovered there are a number of parameters behind this 'knowing.'

Parish vitality is defined in a variety of ways. The level of vitality that one person may find nourishing and supportive, another might find intrusive and unnecessary. Parishioners who are members of an "audience church," one in which members attend mass each weekend primarily to fulfill their obligation, may be highly satisfied with a parish that has very few parish activities. Parishioners looking for a more participatory church may find a less active church cold and alienating. Such parishioners often leave these parishes to seek out a church home that they believe to be more spiritually alive, active, and demonstrates care for those in need in the broader community. "In more than a century of research, sociologists have never found a satisfactory way to measure community [vitality] through attitude surveys: all they can measure is how people feel about "community."²

However, the interviews for this study, collectively, led to a sense that parish vitality is based on a combination of factors that include the kind of **Leadership** present, and a balance of **Word, Worship, and Service** in the life of the parish. Primarily, we discovered that parish communities known for their vitality:

1. Are innovative. Pastoral leaders engage a variety of innovative processes to address the difficult challenges they face. While interviewees did not speak of using Catholic Social Innovation as a formal process, their leadership, grounded in the tradition and basic teachings of the church, is open to and actively seeks out new ways to listen, work with diverse groups, lead, respond, and adapt. They actively engage new solutions to difficult problems so that they can meet the needs in their faith communities and the world around them in creative ways.

2. Have excellent pastors. These are pastors who have the desire, qualities, and skills to work collaboratively and co-responsibly with staff and parish leaders. Pastors who know how to be servant leaders, recruiting, affirming and empowering people, were frequently named as effective leaders. They have the relationship skills needed to listen, to communicate, and respond pastorally. Their adaptability allows them to meet the continuously changing context in which they find themselves.

3. Have leadership teams. Pastoral leaders recognize the essential contribution of the laity to the ongoing life of the church. Leadership teams, usually staff but sometimes active parishioners, share responsibility for the life of the parish with the pastor. This group, when actively collaborating with the pastor, often does creative and innovative brainstorming, can have difficult conversations, provide timely and frank feedback, and assist the pastor in making difficult decisions. The leadership team needs to be reflective of the various cultures found in the neighborhood in which the parish is located; balanced with women and men, young and the old; and open to the changing and complex nature of today's parish life.

“Leadership... is open to, and actively seeks out, new ways to listen, work with diverse groups, lead, respond, adapt...”

4. Have a holistic, compelling vision. Pastoral leaders have a vision for parish life which includes engaging in relational ministry; fostering authentic relationships within the parish community; ensuring the proclamation of, and formation in, the Word; Worship that nurtures one's relationship with God; and Service that reaches both parishioners and the community outside the parish walls. They focus on the faith and spiritual life of adults who in turn are co-responsible for the vision and life of the community.

5. Place a priority on the Sunday experience. Pastoral leaders named the importance of the gathering of the community on Sunday to hear God's word, celebrate and share the Eucharist, and be sent forth in service. Parishes with vitality place a priority on the key elements of the felt experience of welcome and hospitality for all, an uplifting homily that is applicable to the daily lives of parishioners, and quality liturgical music that engages the hearts and voice of members.

6. Foster spiritual growth and maturity. Parishes recognize a wide multiplicity of ways in which the People of God journey to and build their relationship with Jesus. They provide a variety of opportunities or entry points for the parish. In return, they listen to and build relationships with members of the community who are proud of their parish, and who then take ownership for the life and development of the community.

7. Live the faith in service. The community reaches beyond the four walls of the parish to meet the spiritual, human and emotional needs of those who are marginalized, hungry, homeless, hurting, or in need. As parishes live out the call to form missionary disciples, the baptized often respond by reaching out to the less fortunate on the local, national, and international levels.

8. Utilize online communications tools. The parish website is the doorway – the first place that people “check out” the parish. Good, interactive, and culturally sensitive websites are critical, as well as the proper use of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Some parishes and dioceses offer short, daily video blogs or podcasts on the day's readings, or topics of interest. Others make use of available interactive, online catechetical lessons for all ages, or even create their own online programs.

Focus Area Summaries

Interviewees offered many and varied ideas about building vitality in the four areas of parish life that we studied. Some are applicable in any parish setting, others are context-specific. Their efforts came both from extended and well thought out CSI-like processes, as well as from seemingly simple changes that had significant effects. As we listened, the initiatives resolved into recognizable categories which we offer here.

Welcoming Parishes – For parishioners, the need to feel welcome in their parish remains one of the most important benchmarks for parish vitality. Parishes which are noted for their welcoming spirit offer:

- Outreach and invitation initiatives via social media and neighborhood evangelization as the first steps in being welcoming.
- An engaging parish website, the most common doorway into a parish community.
- Trained greeters, and a tangible spirit of exceptional and committed hospitality that radiates from parishioners and staff.
- Systematic procedures for following up with newcomers and the ability to connect them to parish ministries and programs.
- A recognition that feast and holy days, as well as sacramental moments, weddings and funerals, provide special opportunities to welcome potential newcomers.
- Support and invitation to current parishioners as they participate in parish life.

Young Adults – The declining level of engagement of young adults in parish life continues to be an area of deep concern across the country. In order to nurture involvement of young adults of all backgrounds in their faith and in parish life, pastoral leadership places a priority on:

- Listening to young adults, building relationships, and responding to expressed needs.
- Providing dedicated space or time for young adults' needs and interests, while supporting young adults as they organize peer activities.

- Recognizing that young adults often opt for inter-parish activities, joining their colleagues from other parishes.
- Ensuring all ministries and leadership groups of the parish have young adult representation.
- Paying attention to the engaged, young marrieds, and young families.
- Creatively using programs for marriage, baptismal, and first Eucharist preparation, and activities for young families, which are seen as key times for formation and relationship-building with young adults.
- Utilizing social media and face-to-face contact to listen to young adults, build relationships, and respond to expressed needs.

Women and Women Religious in Leadership –

Without exception, interviewees noted that women hold the majority of the more than 40,000 full and half-time paid staff positions and are the backbone of parish life. They also noted that while progress is being made, their presence is not always welcomed and at times discouraged. Those who actively encourage and facilitate their leadership may:

- Hire women and women religious, nationally, as executive directors, university and healthcare system presidents, and directors of Catholic Charities.
- Install women and women religious in diocesan positions such as chancellors, departmental director, and diocesan staff, who can then provide counsel to the bishop and service to parish leadership.
- Employ Canon 517.2 which allows a bishop, where there is a dearth of clergy, to appoint “deacons and other persons who are not priests” to provide for the pastoral care of parishes.
- Recognize, support, and affirm women employed in parish ministries.
- Ensure balanced appointments of women and men on councils and committees.

Hispanic Ministry – Nearly forty percent of Catholics in the United States are Hispanic/Latino/a and another ten percent are African-American, Asian-American, or Native American. Among millennial Catholics, fifty two percent are Hispanic/Latino/a. The

need for the Church community to significantly increase the number of programs and initiatives that welcome these communities is critical. Those pastoral leaders who are aware of this need:

- Are adamant about the imperative to provide cultural sensitivity and competency training for both Anglo and Hispanic leaders.
- Note the need to be sensitive to the deep variety of cultures present, both within and beyond the Hispanic population.
- Look for the assets and listen to the unique needs of these growing communities.
- Provide either bi-lingual or Spanish-language Masses.
- Offer websites, printed materials, and faith formation programs in both Spanish and English, as well as culturally specific devotions and celebrations of feast days for the entire community.
- See parish diversity as grace.

Conclusion

This study found that many parishes have vitality. That vitality, however, is not simply the result of doing more of what has worked in the past. Rather, parishes with vitality are open to listening and responding in new ways to the changing culture in which we live and the deep needs found there. Rather than looking only to clergy for solutions, we found lay women and lay men working together with clergy, co-responsibly stepping up and bringing life to the parish. We saw them more welcoming than aloof. We found leaders open to personal, flexible, and adaptive relationships with young adults, rather than bemoaning or blaming the culture. And rather than seeing diversity as an obstacle, leaders welcome it as a grace, embracing our brothers and sisters of every culture and ethnicity.

Above all else, in parishes with vitality, we discovered enthusiastic, welcoming, engaged pastoral leaders who are willing to “Open the Doors to Christ,” literally and figuratively, welcoming all in and then sending people out to follow their baptismal call to serve Christ. We saw creativity, intentional hospitality, interdependence, diversity in communities, conversations, and innovative problem-solving that produced new responses to challenges facing the Church. Though few have ever heard of Catholic Social Innovation, through our study, we were blessed to see its possibilities at their finest.

Introduction

Catholic parishes in the United States are undergoing profound change and challenge in both demographics and structure. Parishes are complex organizations, systems with unique cultures and many interdependent parts. They serve a growing Catholic population with a declining number of clergy in a rapidly changing context. Over the past 40 years, we have seen the shift in Catholic populations in the Northeast, Northwest, and Midwest, lead to merged or clustered parishes; while the South and West are experiencing the growth of mega-parishes. Cultural diversity is increasing. The number and age of clergy and lay ecclesial ministers on parish staff have changed. Many Millennials and Gen-Z'ers appear to have little interest in the Church, while the impact of the abuse and cover-up scandals leads to the loss of Catholics of all ages. In this climate, some parishes flourish while others do not. There are a considerable number of studies, organizations, programs, services, and books focused on parish vitality. Laity and clergy alike are looking for initiatives to improve parish life.

In order to support Catholic parishes, Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA) initiated a study to explore innovative models and approaches to parish vitality, and how “Catholic Social Innovation” might support its growth. The goal of this year-long initiative was to identify parish vitality, surface innovative approaches to fostering and measuring it, and explore questions about vitality in four specific areas:

Welcoming Parishes: How can parishes find a way to receive potential parishioners who place a high priority on finding a parish that is open and welcoming, as well as a parish community with members who are happy to be there?

Young Adults: How are parishes engaging young adults, sustaining their commitment to parish life, and fostering weekly mass attendance which is significantly lower than was the case for previous generations?

Women and Women Religious in Leadership:

Are parishes working with and recognizing the women who comprise the majority of parish staff throughout the United States, engaging women religious whose numbers are minimal and declining, and women parishioners looking for more involvement in leadership?

Hispanic Ministry: How do parishes which are increasingly culturally diverse welcome, engage, and sustain the involvement of the growing Hispanic/Latino/a populations, adapting parish programs, rituals, and traditions?

In the first phase of this study the authors assembled an annotated bibliography with over 100 books and articles on the topic of parish renewal or vitality; a compendium of more than 150 websites from organizations and groups who provide resources and services for parish leaders interested in advancing their ability to foster parish vitality; and explored some 20 different metric tools designed to measure parish vitality. They developed further the concept of “Catholic Social Innovation” and looked for ways in which it has been used in parishes, dioceses, and nationally. To discover best practices for innovation and vitality the authors then conducted over 65 interviews of pastoral leaders from across the United States. Interviewees included recognized national leaders, a select group of bishops, and a sampling of pastors and pastoral leaders known for their innovative leadership in creating parish vitality. Together these leaders provided the snapshot of parish life and vitality offered here. First, we turn to the authors’ understanding of the concept known as Catholic Social Innovation.

“Social innovation” is a relatively new concept developed by leaders in the field of social welfare, designed to help diverse groups of people come together to develop new and innovative responses to difficult social and human concerns. Building on the 2018 Boston College study, “Social Innovation in the Global Refugee Crisis,”³ the authors of the parish vitality initiative developed a further articulation of the concept of Catholic Social Innovation (CSI) as applied to Catholic parishes, ministries and services:

Catholic Social Innovation: A response to the Gospel which brings together diverse stakeholders and perspectives to address difficult issues. These stakeholders enter a safe space and, open to the Spirit, utilize animating and transformative processes that can unlock and unleash the creative, innovative ability of the group to dialogue and develop new actionable responses to those issues.

Catholic Social Innovation, as defined here, echoes Pope Francis’ evolving understanding of synodality that includes a process of deep listening, “a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn.”⁴ Pope Francis has called for a church that listens, a synodal church, as evidenced by his convening the 2014 and 2015 Synods on the Family, and the 2018 Synod on Young People. In 2018, the Holy Father released an apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio, On the Synod of Bishops* which provides guidelines and strengthens the synodal processes of accompaniment, listening and dialogue for future Vatican synods. In the United States, the *V Encuentro* process, 2015 – 2019, is another example of a synodal church, with its listening and dialogic gatherings in parishes, dioceses, regionally and nationally. This initiative shows the potential for high impact as the Encuentro process focuses on the hopes, needs, concerns, and dreams of Hispanic and Latino/a peoples. This innovative, synodal process was most recently used in the Diocesan Synod on Young Adults in the diocese of San Diego. Their bishop, Robert McElroy, was influenced by the Synod of the Pan-Amazon Bishops which he attended as an observer appointed by Pope Francis. He noted:

This process of consultation and discernment gave particular priority to hearing the voices of those who are usually excluded from meaningful participation... in the life of the church... Listening in the synod assembly... was a poignant, hope-

producing, complicated, painful, joyful experience. But it was the experience of a church that is alive and unafraid to ask fundamental questions of reform and renewal, of creative new pathways for moving forward in the present moment, of believing that the Holy Spirit is leading God’s people constantly, lovingly, vigorously.⁵

In interviews with the participants of this study, this deep listening took a variety of forms, as pastoral leaders listen to, and discern, the needs of their communities. Bishops interviewed for this study spoke of listening deeply to needs of their dioceses. They talked about differing geographic areas of their dioceses, and how cultural, economic, or geographic factors make a difference. Pastors and parish leaders showed a pastoral sensitivity to the local culture, and clarity about the cultural and economic needs of the parish. An example of this is a parish in Silicon Valley whose leaders “heard” deep loneliness in the very young IT population of their town and responded with an outreach by young adults.

We heard how innovation is about taking risks. In the words of one interviewee, “We have a treasure to share. We need to take risks. This is the challenge of our time.” Interviewees named a variety of gatherings that brought together people and groups that have not historically met. Examples include:

- Pastoral teams from across the country
- Diocesan synods
- Leadership summits
- Parish gatherings of persons of different cultural backgrounds
- Meetings with local civic and government groups
- Working with sister parishes in other countries

Whenever the pastoral leaders in the study discussed these conversations, they also expressed hope, if not actual excitement, for the results and the possibilities arising from them, as creative alternatives which were then put into place. Their words mirrored the thoughts of Bishop McElroy who, in reflecting on the recent Pan-Amazon synod, suggested there were four themes that emerged from that experience. Using his words, what arose from these listening sessions is the call to be:

- A missionary church
- A co-responsible and participatory church
- A welcoming church
- A church of harmony and dialogue⁶

Overall Parish Vitality

Opening the year of the Great Jubilee with the theme first mentioned in his inauguration homily, Saint Pope John Paul II called the world's churches to "Open Wide the Doors to Christ."⁷ While the Jubilee year has long ended, this study discovered that parishes with vitality are often those whose doors are "open wide." We begin with a story of a downtown cathedral church that took this call to heart. Its old, heavy, wooden doors had long evoked the feeling of being a fortress. After a period of discernment on the Jubilee invitation, the parish replaced the doors' great wooden panels with clear glass to show all who pass by that a Catholic parish is where all are welcome and "heritage and hope meet."⁸ This parish took seriously the call to "Open wide the doors to Christ!" We offer it as a metaphor for the vitality we encountered in this study.

Many interviewees talked of how the church opens its doors to all comers, whether rich or poor, young or old, long time parishioner or newly arrived immigrant, providing a time-honored sense of sanctuary for people who come to the parish needing to feel safe, understood, and cared for. Today's parishes with vitality are open, providing a "light in the window" that welcomes diversity, whether of age, gender, culture, ethnicity, economic status, or need.

Doors swing both ways. Today's parishes with vitality not only welcome in, but also "send out" parishioners into the world, to share in the mission of Christ, doing outreach and evangelization. Parishes with strong vitality exhibit flexibility and adaptability, two key findings of this study. Parish leaders recognize that we can no longer create barriers or be fortresses, but must go beyond our brick and mortar buildings in order to be present on city streets, in rural towns, or in the cyber/social media world. This openness is present in parishes working with city governments to serve the poor and homeless. It is a hallmark of young adults, who resist being confined to one parish. It marks the presence of an undocumented community. As one pastor noted, "What it means to be Christian happens after church – not in church." Interview responses pointed to a shift in focus of parishes seeking vitality,

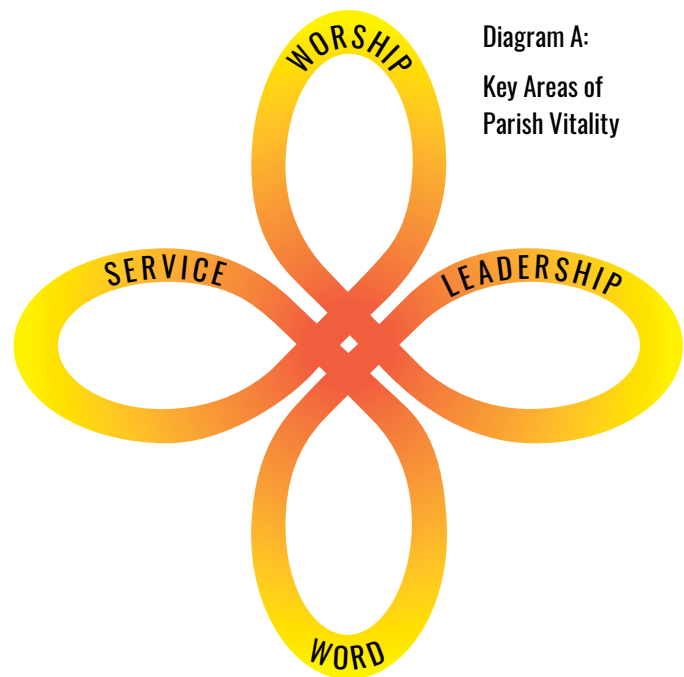
"Doors swing both ways. Today's parishes with vitality not only welcome in, but also send out parishioners into the world..."

letting go of parochialism and opening wide to a new or renewed understanding of the gift and power of parish. In the words of one interviewee, "God breaks down the doors."

Interviewees described the world of parish as a complex 'community of communities' served by pastoral leaders who intermingle the elements of **Leadership, Word, Worship, and Service**. (See Diagram A) Conversely, where one or the other of these elements is diminished, parish vitality itself is diminished. The importance of good leadership and breathing life into all the key areas was addressed by Pope Francis:

Know Jesus with the mind - the study of the Catechism; know Jesus with the heart - in prayer, in dialogue with Him. This helps us a good bit, but it is not enough. There is a third way to know Jesus. It is by following Him. Go with Him, walk with Him. It is necessary to go, to walk along the streets, journeying. It is necessary to know Jesus in the language of action.⁹

Leadership, Word, Worship, and Service – fully activated and fully alive – are evident in vital parish communities that have empowered, empowering, and engaged leadership. They easily flow one into another as they work to serve the parish community and the neighborhoods that the parish encompasses. Diagram A illustrates the overlap between these areas of parish



life. The interviewees described the ease with which they moved from one area to another, often overlapping them, combining them, and through which they moved out into the world.

Leadership

When asked what makes for a parish with vitality, interviewees talked about pastors who, with their pastoral teams, engage, empower, delegate, and collaborate with the community. We heard a commitment to parishes forming themselves in outreach and an intentional commitment to hospitality. There was a recognition of the need for parishioners to have a sense of ownership and feel a sense of pride in their parish. Building relationships was often named as of utmost importance in creating healthy parishes.

Engaged, Relational Pastoral Teams: Interviewees recognized the critical importance of having well-trained, engaged, and relational pastors and pastoral teams. When asked what inhibits vitality, above all else, they noted the lack of these qualities. Interviewees told us that pastoral leaders need people-skills such as listening, engaging, animating, and communicating. Some also addressed the need for specialized training in areas such as intercultural competencies or caring for aging parishes. Further, they expressed a strong call for relational skills-training in seminary and continuing education programs.

Effective leaders also need the ability to discern their unique environment, cultures, and contexts, as well as the skills to minister there. They are learning how to bridge silos at every level, balancing the gifts of the community and its leaders. Co-responsibility is key, and so is pastoral planning. Interviewees emphasized the need to care for leaders. One parish, for example, has an annual retreat for all staff, members of parish councils, key leadership groups, ministries and committees.

“Interviewees recognized the critical importance of well trained, engaged, and relational pastors and pastoral teams.”

Worship

Without exception, pastoral leaders address the Sunday experience as the most critical moment in parish life. They recognize Sunday Eucharist as the key moment of engagement with parishioners, as people come to experience God in the Word, the Eucharistic, and the community. We know that in national studies, after naming a welcoming and open spirit as most significant, the quality of the preaching (62%) and quality of the liturgy (60%) were ranked second and third by parishioners as the elements that most attract parishioners to a parish.¹⁰

Welcoming Communities: Offering an environment of welcome sets the stage for the Sunday experience. Great care is given to the training of greeters and ushers. Some parishes invite entire families to work together as greeters. Many have welcome and information tables in the narthex. Care is taken to prepare the community to be welcoming to newcomers and one another. Newcomers are asked to stand and be welcomed. Presiders remain at the door after liturgy to talk with parishioners. Care is taken to ensure those who attended liturgy feel the warmth of the community.

Well-developed Homilies: The need for high quality, uplifting, and life-giving homilies applicable to the daily life of parishioners is well recognized. Interviewees talked about the critical need for ongoing homiletics training for priests and deacons, suggesting that such training should be more than additional theological or scriptural study. Many spoke of the importance of reflecting on the upcoming readings with parishioners at parish meetings or prayer groups, or inviting staff members to offer input on the upcoming homily. These opportunities provide priests and deacons with stories and insights on how the Scriptures speak to the daily lived experiences of parishioners, which can then be woven into the fabric of the homily preached.

“Pastoral leaders addressed the Sunday experience as the most critical moment in parish life.”

Inspiring Liturgical Music: The quality and use of liturgical music was very important to interviewees. Some suggested offering different musical genres as critical. They work hard to engage the musical talents of parishioners as cantors and in choirs. One pastor mentioned having musicians on staff.

Word

Catechetics and faith formation are intrinsic to parish vitality. This is such a critical area in parish life that it inevitably arose in many of our interviews. No longer confined solely to children's catechesis, parishes recognize that creating many avenues for forming parishioners of all ages leads to vitality.

Internet Outreach: One frequently mentioned area of formation is the need for internet outreach. The parish website is the doorway – the first place that people “check out” the parish. Good, interactive, and culturally sensitive websites are critical, as well as the proper use of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Some parishes and dioceses offer short, daily video blogs or podcasts on the day's readings, or topics of interest. Others make use of available interactive, on-line catechetical lessons for all ages, or even create their own online programs.

Intergenerational Events: Some of the parishes we looked at create opportunities designed for multiple generations. These might take the shape of monthly faith-formation gatherings. Some combine these gatherings with weekly online lessons to do at home. Others host fun events for children that include formation for their parents.

Sacramental Preparation: A critical time for reaching youth and young adults is when they come for sacraments. One parish offers “Confirmation Boot Camp,” a week-long retreat for confirmandi that involves the pastor, a presentation by the bishop, and includes parents in some of the events. Another parish offers marriage preparation in a weekend retreat format where the pastor and sponsor couples get to know the engaged couples in a causal setting as well as offering needed information.

Discussion and Faith-sharing Groups: Small group sharing continues to be a significant avenue for formation in many parishes. Interviewees support faith-sharing groups and book discussions, Alpha groups, theme-focused discussions, and cross-cultural groups. Some go beyond parish group experiences to the formation of neighborhood Small Christian Communities.¹¹

“No longer confined solely to children's catechesis, parishes recognize that creating many avenues for forming parishioners of all ages leads to vitality.”

Service

The area of parish life which seems to get the least attention is service.¹² This is changing, driven by need and expectations. Interviewees described service as intrinsic to the life of the parish, requiring a deep listening to both parishioners and the neighborhood context in which they find themselves. Some have embraced the needs of their geographic areas as their responsibility, believing that the mission of the parish community extends beyond its boundaries, meeting the needs of the poor and the marginalized. Others are intrigued by the connection of Eucharistic liturgy and service. As one interviewee noted, “Coming to mass is like getting together in a huddle before executing a play in football – we gather, get encouragement, and then go out there to live a life of faith and witness.”

Outreach to the Community: According to one pastor, “We must take the sacristy into the streets.” This sentiment is seen in the parish that, one Friday evening a month, sends 75 people and the pastor out for a walk in the community. As they go they greet people, reaching out to those in need, and cleaning up the neighborhood as they go. Interviewees spoke of the need to get out to the peripheries, both physical and existential, whether reaching out to the homeless or welcoming in lonely young adults, sometimes connecting with young adults via social media. Parishes, noting the lives of undocumented immigrants, assist them in developing plans for an uncertain future.

In order to encourage direct face-to-face service, parishes showed their efforts in meeting pastoral needs by staffing and supporting food pantries, community gardens, and serving meals to those in need. One parish serves 250,000 meals a year, all made in their own kitchen. Others partner with Catholic Charities to offer a variety of services.

Care for the World: Interviewees also recognized the need to actively care for creation. One parish, in the process of building a new church, read *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis' 2015 document on care for the environment, and consequently decided to ‘go green’ by installing geo-thermal energy for the new church. We also heard of a few dioceses who had developed resource manuals for parishes interested in becoming environmentally sensitive and aware. We learned from many parishes how they commit to worldwide outreach, serving foreign missions as they are able, sending money and personnel, establishing hospitals and schools in many parts of the world.

“Coming to mass is like getting together in a huddle before executing a play in football – we gather, get encouragement, and then go out.”



Neighborhood evangelization

Opportunities for service & social justice

Build awareness of opportunities for women in diocesan, national, global roles

Community outreach

Embrace diversity

Pathways to

Parish Vitality

Intentional hospitality

Connect newcomers with ministries

Formation of greeters

Outreach through sacraments

Host community events

Website & social media

Welcoming Parishes

Alternative times for worship

Focus on singles, engaged, young families

Listen to young adults

Represented in ministries & leadership

Website & social media

Young Adults

Provide meaningful roles for women

Women at decision-making table

Ensure gender balance on staff, councils & committees

Make parish roles for women more visible

Women in Leadership

Bridge cultures via small group gatherings

Cultural feast day celebrations

Meet people where they live & work

Listen

Bilingual "mirror" websites

Hispanic Ministry

Vitality in Specific Focus Areas

Welcoming Parishes

Studies, such as the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, have long found that the element that most attracts people to a parish is an open and welcoming spirit (68%) and the sense of belonging members feel there (64%).¹³ Yet, in order to talk about welcoming, many of the pastoral leaders we interviewed found it important to first talk about outreach. In the past we have simply waited for people to come to the parish just because it is there. Those days are generally gone. Welcoming must begin with intentional outreach to the community.

Just as the downtown parish replaced the wooden panels in its church doors with glass, the first step to ‘opening wide the doors’ is providing parish outreach. Interviewees explained that in order to establish a welcoming parish, there must be a clear priority for effective engagement of adults both within and outside the parish community, focused on the growth in their relationship with God the Father, with Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit, and on their service to those on the margins.

How approachable and accessible parishes are was a topic of interest to our interviewees. Parishes utilize a variety of approaches including visually welcoming and culturally sensitive websites. They realize finding a parish online is a first step for many seekers who are looking for its presence on social media – so critical in welcoming young adults. Once people walk through the doors, the quality of their reception is important.

Outreach and Invitation: Interviewees described many ways in which they reach out to people in their community. Along with evangelization, parishes recognize there are multiple access or “landing” points for people. For some, it is welcoming the neighbors. One inner city parish has basketball courts open to the public. Another hosts free parking-lot concerts with popular local bands. Others sponsor community blood drives, block parties, and social gatherings, creating open, safe spaces for parishioners and potential, curious newcomers.

Some interviewees talked of the need for high visibility at local sporting or civic events so that people can get to know them. One parish hosts regular town hall meetings, inviting all from the neighborhood, asking “How can we serve you better?” Another shared his belief that

“Everyone who lives in this neighborhood is our parishioner.” Many interviewees spoke of the opportunity for outreach provided by key moments in people’s lives such as sacraments and holy days. These are significant moments to reach out to those who are new to the church, or who had not been to church lately, inviting them to come back and visit again. And yet, for all our understanding of the importance of welcoming, the Catholic Parishes in the 21st Century study discovered that only 38% of parishioners gave parish outreach to visitors an excellent rating, followed by outreach to new parishioners (29%) and outreach to inactive Catholics (19%).¹⁴ We have much work to do.

Exceptional, Committed Hospitality: Once people arrive, what they find is critical. Parishes are developing what interviewees called “radical hospitality.” These are parishes where, in the words of one interviewee, “People attend because they want to be there – they are not checking off the boxes or there to fulfill their obligation.” According to others:

- “Here spiritual fellowship and community bonds are nurtured.”
- “Parishioners feel a strong sense of belonging.”
- “After mass people don’t just rush home.”

Many parishes believe that welcoming is the responsibility of all parishioners. For example, one downtown parish helps parishioners understand the history of their church so that they can be ‘tour guides’ for curious visitors whether college students, the poor, conventioners, or sports fans. Another parish invites people from the hospitality industry to instruct parishioners on being welcoming. A third brings in community organizers.

Some ask newcomers to stand before or after mass to be greeted. One parish offers to take a Polaroid photo of visitors which are then posted in the entrance so that greeters and parish ministers can learn their names and make special efforts to greet them when they return. Another parish places “crazy cards” in the pews with a poem that begins: “No matter who you are, you are welcome here.”

“No matter who you are, you are welcome here.”

Formation of greeters and hospitality ministers is key in many parishes. There is training in awareness for serving persons with disabilities or welcoming persons on the margins. Downtown parishes open doors to the homeless during the day. Parishes recognize the importance of these touchpoints by providing special training to receptionists and staff. Most interviewees said good relational skills are essential, recognizing this is a time for intentionally building relationships, and not a time to ‘market’ the parish or recruit people for parish ministries.

Empowerment and Engagement of

Parishioners: Hospitable pastoral leaders look for ways to create a “sticky church.”¹⁵ Once a person reaches out, great care is taken in many parishes with how they are welcomed. One diverse parish always has a “live” person answering the phone. Pastoral leaders know that when a newcomer registers is the time for significant contact. Interviewees spoke passionately about the need to be present, to listen, and to follow up these moments, some making sure they ask what they can do to meet the newcomer’s needs. The key, then, is to follow up on the requests. Pastoral leaders work to find ways to say “Yes!” to these requests.

They also find ways to provide early and immediate entry into parish programming and ministries. One parish sends personal notes to newcomers. Another assigns mentor couples to accompany the new families. Some interviewees reported ensuring that newly registered parishioners receive a personal call from the pastor or staff member, strongly encouraging them to attend a six-week welcome and formation class. Some parishes host a quarterly dinner or special mass followed by a cocktail hour or a meal; others invite newcomers to a meal with the pastor in the rectory. Parish size, of course, effects how new parishioners are incorporated, but in all this invitation is important.

It is not just newcomers who need to feel welcome. Interviewees spoke of intentionally committing to ongoing communication with all the members of the parish. Christmas and Easter cards and monthly email blasts are among the many ways pastors and staff reach out. Several parishes offer tools for discovering your gifts, such as “Strengthfinder.”¹⁶ These tools assist parishioners in finding how their talents can be matched to appropriate parish and community involvement opportunities. Others work very hard at bringing together and

acknowledging diverse cultures, ages, or economic groups. Returning Catholics also need attention and welcome. One pastor spoke of an “Alienated Catholics Anonymous” group that begins on the Mondays following Christmas and Easter. Children are made to feel welcome, especially at mass. One pastor offers a live Zoom video conference meeting once a month for anyone in the parish interested in conversation. Another parish reaches out to families enrolled in the parish school. Yet, respondents to a recent national study also gave low ratings to outreach within the parish, with excellent ratings of only 26% for outreach to married couples, 22% to widows and widowers, 19% to those divorced and separated, and 17% to single adults.¹⁷

Interviewees noted welcoming includes all members of our faith, as well as those of other traditions. It includes groups that have not always felt welcomed, such as the economically disadvantaged, the divorced, the remarried, members of the LGBTQ community, and persons with disabilities. Each of these groups were mentioned in some way by the interviewees as members of their community deserving of attention and outreach.

This ministry is not easy. At every level, interviewees talked about their struggles. More than ever, parishes are faced with the challenge of the current abuse and cover-up scandals that have permeated the church in the US. Mentioned often in the interviews, these scandals are seen as a cloud that hangs over the church right now. One interviewee spoke of the need to reframe the situation, cautioning Catholics “not to run but to embrace the pain.” A variety of healing efforts were named such as healing masses, pilgrimages, small groups, admitting what was wrong, owning that we are wounded healers ourselves. Conversations held in safe places, developed over time, allowed people to ask the difficult questions they need to ask. In the words of one interviewee, “We heal by healing others.”

Also mentioned were technical and financial challenges, significant ones including the need to provide expensive up-to-date IT, websites, Facebook pages, cultural translations, and so on. Some mentioned significant financial debt as a challenge to vitality. A 2014 national study discovered 24% of parishes operate at a loss, and 8% receive diocesan subsidies.¹⁸ It should not come as a surprise that some pastors pointed to the ability to lower their debt as a sign of the parish’s vitality!

Young Adults

An area of deep concern for pastoral leaders across the country is the ability to engage young adults in parish life. The Church is facing a significant challenge, both for today and for the future. Statistically, only 14% of millennials (born in 1982 or later) attend Mass on a weekly basis.¹⁹ We know that “twice as many pre-Vatican (41%) as younger generations (16-20%) are highly committed Catholics. This is by far the steepest cross generational decline of any Christian denomination in the United States.”²⁰

There were varying responses to this critical moment in the life of the church, one pastor noted, “It is a messy ministry reflective of their messy lives.” Over and over, interviewees told us they didn’t have the answer for how to engage young adults, yet we heard much wisdom from them. They showed us a need to reframe our understanding of parish so that it goes beyond the parish campus, out into the neighborhood, world, and digital communities.

The phrase ‘young adults’ means different things to different people. Some reflect on the needs of singles in their twenties. Others include young marrieds in their thirties and those with young families.

Some intentionally engage young adults in the life of the parish community, on parish councils and other committees, as parish staff, and in liturgical ministries. Many parishes directly correlate their success in the engagement of young adults based on the extent to which the parishes serve their families through parish schools and faith formation programs. Others realize that working with young adults’ demands initiatives that extend beyond the parish, whether cross-parochial or in the world of social media.

Relational Ministry: Frequently heard in our interviews is the need for face-to-face ministry to young adults. Yet young adults are not going to be found, as were their parents and grandparents, faithfully tied to a given parish. Many no longer even go to Mass, nor are they expected to return to the parish after they settle into family life, as generations before them did. Their

questions and concerns are significantly different. Although a few interviewees blamed culture and the secular world for young adults moving away from church life, most believed parishes must proactively adopt a priority for engaging those twenty and thirty-year olds who need to feel a sense of welcome from the parish community. They have learned to practice accompaniment: being authentic, respecting young adults where they are, and treating them with dignity.

We heard from a variety of people that there is a need for a deep listening to the experiences, needs, and longings of young adults Catholics, noted in studies²¹ as well as by the Vatican’s Synod on Young Adults.²² Interviewees spoke of hearing questions from millennials such as:

- “Am I welcome here?”
- “What’s my experience, here?”
- “How am I treated?”
- “Does anyone here look like me?”
- “Does anybody even know I exist?”

We were told that young adults are looking for a way of life more than for an institution and have very clear hungers. Interviewees believed that young adults are seeking meaning and purpose, connection and belonging, justice, holiness, and recognition. And more than just listening, leaders understand the importance of respecting their ideas and taking them seriously.

To engage young adults, parishes use a variety of approaches. According to the interviewees, initial visits to the parish are via its website or social media pages. The quality of these portals, and the welcome found there, help young adults determine whether to take the next step and visit the parish. One pastor noted that it is important to get young adults involved in some type of service or social activities first, and then worry about getting them to come to church. Similarly, recognizing many want more than social activities, some parishes give preference to those under 35 in their hiring practices or committee assignments. Others have found that Sunday night liturgies are especially popular, where all liturgical ministers are required to be under 35. It is not unusual for these late masses to be followed by a social or a meal, comparable to Sunday morning’s “Coffee and Donuts.” These offerings do not just appeal to singles; parishioners who work on Sundays, or have children in Sunday morning sports, are very grateful for the evening services.

“It is important for young adults... to see other young adults [on] its website... as greeters, liturgical ministers ...on councils, committees, and staff...”

Flexibility, Variety, and Adaptability: Key concepts in working with young adults include flexibility, variety, and adaptability. For those who have grown up in the world of social media, the idea of belonging to just one parish or being with just one group of people is felt to be limiting. Some young adults resist institutions, altogether. Others, raised in a church that embraces the tenets of social justice, are confused by perceived intolerance and political stances. In the words of one interviewee, young adults are “intolerant of intolerance.” They are very concerned about the treatment of their LGBTQ friends and families, of women, and the environment. Many young adults have also come to appreciate a more devotional spiritual life and long for more formal liturgies and Eucharistic adoration. Ministering to differences such as these, interviewees noted, is essential for effective engagement of young adults.

Outreach to Singles: In general, parishioners do not find their parish does much in outreach to young adults, with only 27% of parishioners in a national study giving their parish excellent ratings in this area.²³ Yet as pastoral leaders recognize young people come to the parish in hopes of finding other Catholic singles, they work to develop programs and events that will appeal to this cohort. Familiar programs like “Theology on Tap” are offered along with new and creative events. Such activities are often organized by the young adults themselves, using social media as both a way to announce gatherings and as a form of community. Many programs, however, flow between parishes or across deaneries, or parishes gain the reputation of being magnet or “young-adult parishes.”

Parishes are looking for ways to provide Eucharistic Adoration, a growing interest to some young adults as well as older parishioners. Others put creative twists on traditional spiritual practices. One parish offers a neighborhood stations-of-the-cross using bicycles to move from “station to station.” Another goes to local malls to distribute ashes on Ash Wednesday. Some interviewees also talked about the need to reach out to young adults who have not gone on to college and need a place to gather.

Knowing how to minister to young college graduates provides a unique challenge. According to a study conducted by the USCCB Secretariat of Catholic Education, young adults are formed by how campus ministries are conducted.²⁴ The study indicates that

external organizations which minister on secular campuses tend to focus on piety, evangelization, and spirituality; whereas Catholic colleges are more likely to promote service and social justice. Each of these approaches appears to appeal to different portions of the young adult population and, according to interviewees, attention must be paid to both.

Engaging the Engaged: Interviewees speak of the importance of focusing on key moments in the life of young adults, such as when they ask for the sacrament of matrimony. One pastor spoke of building relationships and working with engaged couples as a priority in his ministry. His parish offers a weekend couples’ retreat as part of marriage preparation, where the first part of the weekend is devoted to building community and socializing with other engaged couples, sponsor couples, and the pastor, followed by more traditional marriage preparation sessions. Another does “Dine with Nine,” where four couples at a time are invited to a dinner in the rectory cooked by the pastor. One pastor indicated the most important question to engaged couples during marriage preparation is, “What do we need to do to keep you coming back?” Some dioceses have even begun allowing “destination” weddings within the diocesan boundaries. Other parishes employ fulltime wedding coordinators who work with wedding planning, supporting couples and their families on the day of the wedding.

Creativity with Young Families: Once young adults begin forming families their needs change. Parishes offer a variety of on-site experiences such as family fun nights or Sunday afternoon events that weave theology into activities that are fun for the children while formation-al for their parents. Parishes host “Date Nights” where couples start their evening at the parish which provides childcare, and then the couples go out to dinner. Many offer Cana Dinners and Gala dances. Another parish offers weekend retreats for the entire family.

Women and Women Religious in Leadership

Almost without exception, national, diocesan, and parish leaders cited the work and ministry of women as critical to the life of the Church. They spoke of the need for women leaders who are empowered and respected, and about how their gifts, voice, and leadership are not always welcomed, sometimes even actively discouraged. It was noted that while progress has been made, in too many situations women are still not at the table of the inner circles of key diocesan administrative bodies or national gatherings

National and Diocesan Opportunities: On the national level, while some parish renewal programs focus solely on pastors, others require the involvement of parish teams, often women, in their programming. It appears that some are more intentional about including women than others. Today, women hold many leadership positions in Catholic institutions beyond the parish and diocese. Increasingly, they serve as presidents of Catholic universities and Catholic healthcare systems, and as executive directors of national and local Catholic Charities organizations, as well as of national ministerial associations. There also seems to be a growing trend towards women as directors of charitable and family foundations.

On the diocesan level, women lead agencies and sit on diocesan tribunals. A frequently named position held by women is that of diocesan chancellor. The latest National Catholic Directory identifies 58 women chancellors in US dioceses.²⁵ Thirty-eight percent of the members of the Catholic Association of Diocesan Fiscal Managers are women.²⁶ Additionally, women serve as superintendents and principals of Catholic schools. To emphasize this, one diocese posts a monthly video interview of diocesan women leaders on its homepage.

Women Employed in Parish Leadership: Nearly 80% of all parish staff roles are held by women.²⁷ Studies show their deep involvement and contribution to US parishes, but how this is empowered, along with the vocations to pastoral leadership of both lay and religious women, is a significant question for today's parishes.²⁸ These findings are reflected by our interviewees who named women as the driving force in keeping parishes alive and healthy, so much so that an occasional

interviewee opined it would be nice to have more men on staff. The roles that women hold extend to every dimension of parish life: pastoral, catechetical, administrative, and educational. Some pastors look for ways to include women more deeply. For example, we heard support expressed for giving women appropriate liturgical leadership roles such as preaching at non-Eucharistic liturgies or inviting women's insights in the preparation of homilies.

Some women serve as parish directors or parish life coordinators under Canon 517.2 which allows a bishop to appoint "a deacon or some other person who is not a priest," i.e. a lay woman or man to administer a parish when there are not enough priests available. It should be noted, however, that despite the growing number of parishes without a resident priest pastor (3,363 out of 17,007 in 2018) the number of dioceses using this option is declining. When US bishops began using this model they often installed women religious to care for the parish. However, there is a growing preference for appointing permanent deacons to this position. An alternative to Canon 517.2 allows bishops to assign pastors to multiple parishes. These pastors then may employ women to direct parish life in one or more of their assigned parishes. They then have similar responsibilities but without the authorization of Canon 517.2.

However, studies also show that the average age of parish staff is over 55.²⁹ Those who watch statistical trends believe that as young adults drift further away from parish life, these positions will have fewer and fewer applicants. One interviewee noted the "talent pool for parish lay ministers has now become a puddle." Interviewees also suggested, under the shadow of the recent abuse and cover-up scandals, that they are seeing a decline in the overall commitment of women to the authority of the hierarchy and participation in parish ministries. Finally, it should be noted, that although there has been a commission appointed to study the possibility of women being ordained to the permanent diaconate, there was almost no discussion of this leadership possibility in our interviews.

"They speak of the need for women leaders who are empowered and respected, and about how their gifts, voice and leadership are not always welcomed."

Women Serving in the Parish: Interviewees noted that women’s involvement in parish life is changing. Pastors talked of empowering the leadership of parishioners, especially women, with more than a few requiring gender balance on committees and councils, and among chairpersons. They want to ensure women are well-represented on committees, particularly committees that traditionally lack female representation, such as the parish pastoral and finance councils. Furthermore, they call for the removal of barriers and tokenism in leadership roles.

Time-honored groups such as Women’s Guilds and Altar Rosary Societies want to do more than provide hospitality and are willing to tackle significant issues. And yet, more than one interviewee expressed concern that these traditional women’s groups are aging and losing membership. There is an “inquietude,” in the words of one, at the loss of the wisdom and work that comes from these groups. Statistically, studies show that “*the women are even more alienated than the men.*” They are now less likely than men their age to say that the church is an important part of their lives, slightly less likely to say that they would never leave Catholicism.”³⁰ All interviewees worried about the impact of the abuse and cover-up crises on continued participation in parish life.

Women Religious in Parish Life: Fourteen percent of parish positions are held by women religious and “[a]bout four in 10 women religious serving in parish ministry are a pastoral associate or pastoral minister. One in five is a director or coordinator of catechetical ministry for the parish, 8% are parish life coordinators [Canon 517.2].”³¹ Because of the diminishing number of women religious on parish staffs, all interviewees were asked to speak about their presence in today’s parishes. They were consistent in their responses to this question. The pastors interviewed told us there are no women religious on their staffs, though some did mention having one or two women religious who are long-time teachers in their schools. The one exception seems to be parishes that recruit women religious from Central and South America. Spanish-speaking Sisters are particularly welcome in parishes with large Spanish-speaking populations. Interviewees also raised concerns about this approach, noting that it required careful consideration of the impact on the local church and congregations in “sending” countries, and on women religious in the United States.

Hispanic Ministry

Diversity is a hallmark of many US parishes with vitality, especially with respect to the Hispanic/Latino/a communities, the largest growing cultural groups in the US Church and a key focus of this study. It is essential to note, however, that interviewees regularly reminded us that cultural diversity goes far beyond one ethnic or cultural group. When directed to parishes noted for vitality we also met those who lead parishes which are primarily African American, Polish, and/or served other cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Some dioceses designate certain parishes as Hispanic or Latino/a parishes, with Spanish and bilingual masses. Other parishes reflect the cultural diversity in their immediate community. The reality of shared or parallel parishes³² in which different cultural groups share facilities and staff but otherwise stay separate happens across the country but were not discussed by our interviewees.

Interviewing pastoral leaders about multicultural ministry was both rewarding and challenging. We encountered a wide range of experience and response, with comments from Hispanic leaders at times differing from those from Anglo leaders with either limited or considerable experience or understanding. Proximity and experience with a cultural group seemed to make a difference in how our questions were answered. Some interviewees reported that there are few Hispanics in their parish or neighborhoods and hence no opportunity to serve this group. Others frankly told us that they have no idea how to work in multicultural ministry. And yet, there were many interviewees who are deeply involved in this ministry. Regardless of experience, many mentioned the V Encuentro, the largest episcopal gathering focused on Hispanic ministry to date, and they expressed a desire for recommendations about implementing the results; few provided examples of how they are doing this.

Welcoming and Inclusion: Interviewees who work with Hispanic parishioners were clear that their work is not solely a matter of parish outreach or welcoming immigrants into their parish. Many parishes have had Hispanic/Latino/a members for generations. It is very clear to parish leaders that, like anyone else in the parish, Hispanic/Latino/a Catholics are fully members of the church. The goal is to form unity in diversity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, seeing each unique person and culture as a grace. In fact, those parishes embracing diversity as a grace speak of finding new life. As one pastor noted, “Anyone who lives in this neighborhood is a parishioner –

registered or not – Catholic or not.”

People spoke of the need for parishes to be sensitive to, and inclusive of, life situations, culture, rituals, and traditions. They were emphatic about the need to go out to meet people where they live and work, whether in neighborhoods, barrios, or migrant camps. Interviewees spoke of the importance of not stereotyping Hispanic parishioners. Hispanic/Latino/a Catholics come from a large variety of countries and cultures, and reflect socio-economic diversity as well. Age and generation matter. Younger Hispanic Catholics, especially those who are second or third generation, are primarily English-speakers and less likely to want Spanish masses or events. Even so, leaders recognize the critical need of producing catechetical and formation resources in Spanish.

This also applies to much discussion by our interviewees about which designations to use, such as Hispanic or Latino/a. The decision often depends on the context and/or part of the country in which one ministers. Some communities dislike these labels altogether and prefer to be referred to by their country of origin, i.e.: Brazilians, Guatemalans, Peruvians, Mexicans, etc. Whenever in doubt, the best advice we received is to ask the people in the community how they would like to be identified.

Listening, Attention, and Acknowledgement:

People, of all ages and cultures want to be seen, recognized, and heard. We all bring our needs, longings, and desires to the Church. Interviewees stressed the importance of relationality and listening. The best advice we received was from a Hispanic ministry leader who told us, “The way you will know what is the best approach is to listen. Ask people what the best way is for the parish to serve them.”

We learned that traditionally Anglo parishes which are truly welcoming, incorporate the rituals and symbols of the changing and growing communities in their neighborhoods. Areas that need deep attention include learning the particulars of a given community’s unique culture, significant feast days and traditions, popular piety and faith formation needs. For example, we were reminded that it is important to recognize that Hispanic Catholics share diverse titles for the Blessed Mother, Mary (e.g., Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico), Our Lady of the Angels (Costa Rica), Our Lady of Peace (El Salvador)), and there is also great diversity regarding the importance of her different feast days. Another challenging question for leaders is whether to provide bilingual services and liturgies. While some expressed pride at the multicultural and bilingual nature of their parish, others suggested bilingual liturgies

do not work and can lead to declines in Mass attendance.

Some interviewees spoke of the importance of predominantly Anglo parishes learning how to work across diverse cultures and the importance of mutual cultural exchange. They also need to be aware of the high value placed on the importance of family in different ways across cultures. Parishes have found it critical to create opportunities for listening. One parish hosts “Third Thursday,” a series of monthly gatherings for parishioners of the different cultures. The evening begins with liturgy and dinner, and then goes into facilitated conversations. Over the course of the year participants gain a deeper understanding, respect, and appreciation of one another.

Building Bridges: As the number of different ethnic and cultural groups grows in our parishes, pastoral leaders are learning the need to build bridges between cultures. An important event in the life of one parish is the 3-day fiesta with hundreds of volunteers from both the parish and broader community. The organization and hosting of intercultural small groups is another way that some parishes help to bridge cultures. This is happening on Catholic campuses as well as in parishes where intentional efforts are in place to bring diverse cultures together.

Dioceses are looking for ways to develop training in intercultural competencies. They host Hispanic ministry leadership institutes, and Spanish radio programming. Many offer “mirror websites” accessed by a button or tab on the main page of their website. These are in every way identical to the English website but in Spanish, or the predominant cultural languages of the audience. These efforts, when culturally sensitive, can go a long way in introducing Spanish-speakers to the resources available through the parish.

Another interviewee talked about how they used a former convent to provide temporary housing for immigrants and refugees. Discerning the needs of young families in one’s context is also critical and opens new possibilities. One aging Appalachian parish came to realize local migrant farm workers had their families with them and that these young parents were seriously in need of assistance. The parish reached out and partnered with these families and this bridging of cultures and generations brought the parish back to life.

“Diversity is a hallmark of vitality in U.S. parishes with the Hispanic/Latino/a community the largest growing cultural group.”

Conclusion

This study found many parishes with vitality. That vitality, however, is not simply the result of doing more of what has worked in the past. Rather, parishes with vitality are open to listening and responding in new ways to the changing culture in which we live and the deep needs found there. Rather than looking only to clergy for solutions, we found lay women and lay men working together with clergy, co-responsibly stepping up and bringing life to the parish. We saw them more welcoming than aloof. We found leaders open to personal, flexible, and adaptive relationships with young adults, rather than bemoaning or blaming the culture. And rather than seeing diversity as an obstacle, leaders welcome it as grace, embracing our brothers and sisters of every culture and ethnicity.

Above all else, in parishes with vitality, we discovered enthusiastic, welcoming, engaged pastoral leaders who are willing to “Open the Doors to Christ,” literally and figuratively, welcoming all in and then sending people out to follow their baptismal call to serve Christ. We saw creativity, intentional hospitality, interdependence, diversity in communities, conversations, and innovative problem-solving that produced new responses to challenges facing the Church. Though few have ever heard of Catholic Social Innovation, through our study we were blessed to see its possibilities at their finest. ❧

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Metric Tools For Assessing Parish Vitality

“You can’t manage what you can’t measure.”

Attributed to Peter Drucker

“In God we trust – all others must bring data.”

W. Edwards Deming

“I know a parish has vitality when – I can feel it, see it, experience it. You just know.”

Parish Vitality Study Interviewee

The biggest challenge to the identification of metrics or tools for measuring parish vitality is that there is no common definition of what parish vitality is. There are authors who have written about, and proposed, metrics and measures for vibrant parish “community,”³³ and have written and developed metrics and tools to measure “high performing parishes.”³⁴ Others have developed tools that assess items such as: parish organizational structures, aspects of specific parish ministries, parishioner engagement, parishioner evaluations and needs surveys, parish leadership self-assessments, disciple making, parish demographics, etc.

While still having limitations for the study of parish vitality, there was one noteworthy approach among the resources and tools reviewed, developed by Dan Ebener. In his approach a “high-performance parish” is defined as:

“A vibrant faith community where people are growing in faith and in numbers. It is a place where all are welcome, where the Spirit is present, where people of all ages are involved, where leaders call forth the laity to participate, and where volunteers reach out to others in the parish and the community.”³⁵

Ebener and diocesan leadership in the diocese of Davenport, Iowa, then developed four models with various metrics to measure high-performance parishes³⁶ that include:

- Measures of Parish Life – strategic, operational, behavioral
- Servant Leader Behavior Categories – serving, recognizing, empowering
- Behavioral Mechanisms – invitation, inspiration, modeling, affection, cultural, structural, strategic
- Models of Parish Size – family, community, teams

As seen in the work of Ebener, with regard to the measurement of parish vitality, we believe that to measure parish vitality requires more than a single survey or tool to be able to measure the varied and complex interplay of variables that demonstrate parish vitality. Measurement of parish vitality requires a mixture of approaches that include, but are not limited to, basic demographic and fiscal data collection, leadership self-assessments, parishioner surveys, direct observation and ranking by outside observers, and focus groups, to name a few of the modalities. The following is a representative listing of metrics and parish assessment tools.

**Those items with an asterisk are deemed especially noteworthy.*

Please note: websites are subject to change.

Books with Measurement Tools

1. Ebener, Dan E. *Servant Leadership: Models for Your Parish.* (187-216). Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2010.*
2. Wittberg, Patricia. *Building Strong Church Communities: A Sociological Review.* (141) Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2012.*
3. Zech, Charles and Robert Miller. *Listening to the People of God: Closing, Rebuilding, and Revitalizing Parishes.* (61-65). Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2008.

Metric Tools For Assessing Parish Vitality

Measurement Tools

1. Assessment Tool of the Liturgical Life of the Parish – Evangelium Consulting Group
<https://evangeliumconsulting.com>
2. Catholic Leadership 360 – Leadership Roundtable
<https://leadershiproundtable.org/>
3. Catholic Social Teaching Assessment Tool and the Parish – Archdiocese of Cincinnati
http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/paris_assessment_tool1.pdf
4. * Catholic Standards for Excellence – Program for Parishes – Leadership Roundtable
<https://leadershiproundtable.org/>
5. * Disciple Maker Index (DMI) - Catholic Leadership Institute
<https://www.catholicleaders.org/>
6. Leadership Survey and Parish Mission Planning Checklists –Diocese of Green Bay
pastserv@gbdioc.org
7. * ME 25 - Member Engagement Survey - The Gallup Organization
<https://www.gallup.com/topic/FAITH.aspx>
8. Parish Assessment and Renewal (PAR) – Parish Evaluation Project
<http://www.pepparish.org/>
9. * The Parish Life Comparative Report - Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA)
<https://cara.georgetown.edu/>
10. Parish Ministry Assessment Tool – Leadership Roundtable
[http://theleadershiproundtable.org/churchepedia/docs/Parish%20Assessment%20Tool%20\(2008\).pdf](http://theleadershiproundtable.org/churchepedia/docs/Parish%20Assessment%20Tool%20(2008).pdf)
11. Parish Self-Assessment – Diocese of Superior
<https://www.catholicdos.org/parish-self-assessment-study>
12. * Pastoral Snapshot Report and Tools for Planning – Archdiocese of Galveston Houston.
<https://www.archgh.org/media/11441/pastoral-snapshot-sample-parish.pdf> and
<https://www.archgh.org/media/11438/app-tools-for-planning-2019-02-18.pptx>
13. Promise 2020 – Vibrant Parishes and Schools for the Future Criteria for Parish Vitality - Archdiocese of Omaha
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lB5dsk6lkz6BifKS37Fa2zg63rCoVmBE/view>
14. * Renew Parish Assessment – Renew International
<https://bemywitness.org/en/resources/parish-assessment/>
15. Status Animarium – Official Catholic Directory (actual data collection tool varies from diocese to diocese)
<http://www.officialcatholicdirectory.com/OCD/home>

**Those items with an asterisk are deemed especially noteworthy.*

Please note: websites are subject to change.

Highlighted Books, Organizations, and Websites

The authors of this report have provided the following following sampling of books, national organizations, and resources that provide programs and services to assist parish and diocesan leaders in their efforts to foster parish vitality as well as a focus on the areas of welcoming, young adults, women, and Hispanic and multi-cultural ministries.

Please note this list is not exhaustive and websites are subject to change.

Developing Parish Vitality

Books:

Holmes, Paul A. *A Pastor's Tool Box: Management Skills for Parish Leadership*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017.

Jewell, Marti R. and David A. Ramey. *The Changing Face of Church: Emerging Models of Parish Leadership*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009.

Zech, Charles, Mary Gautier et al. *Catholic Parishes in the 21st Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Organizations and Websites:

Catholic Extension Society: www.catholicextension.org

Catholic Leadership Institute: www.Catholicleaders.org

Divine Renovation: www.Divinerenovation.net

See also: James Mallon, Divine Renovation.

Leadership Roundtable: <https://leadershiproundtable.org>

See also: Paul A. Holmes, A Pastor's Toolbox.

Parish Catalyst: www.parishcatalyst.org

See also: William Simon, Great Catholic Parishes.

Rebuilt Parish Association:

www.rebuiltparishassociation.com

See also: Michael White and Tom Corcoran, Rebuilt.

Renew International: www.renewintl.org

The Amazing Parish: www.Amazingparish.org

Welcoming Parishes

Books:

Pratt, Maureen. *Salt and Light: Church, Disability, and the Blessing of Welcoming All*. New London CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2018.

Upchurch, Catherine. *Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger*. Collegeville: Liturgical press, 2017.

Wittberg, Patricia. *Building Strong Church Communities: A Sociological Overview*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2012.

Organizations and Websites:

Catholic Divorce Ministry: <http://www.nacsd.org/>

Landings International: <https://landingsintl.org>

National Catholic Partnership on Disability: <http://www.ncpd.org>

Young Adults

Books:

Day, Maureen K. *Young Adult American Catholics: Explaining Vocation in Their Own Words*. Mahweh: Paulist Press, 2018.

McCarty, Robert J and Vitek, John M. *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2017.

Ospino, Hoffsman. *Our Catholic Children: Ministry with Hispanic Youth and Young Adults*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2018.

Organizations and Websites:

Busted Halo: <https://bustedhalo.com>

Young Catholic Professionals:

<https://www.youngcatholicprofessionals.org>

Highlighted Books, Organizations, And Websites

Women and Women Religious in Leadership

Books:

Gaunt, Thomas. *Pathways to Religious Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Hendricks, Kathy. *Parish Life Coordinators: Profile of an Emerging Ministry*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009.

Zagano, Phyllis. *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions About the Diaconate*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2014.

Organizations and Websites:

Global Sisters Report: <https://www.globalsistersreport.org>

Women of the Church – A Catholic Leadership Conference – Center for Spirituality - St. Mary's College, IN:
<http://womenofthechurch.org/>

Hispanic Ministry

Books:

Hoover, Brett. *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of US Catholicism*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.

Ospino, Hoffsman, Elsie M. Miranda, and Brett Hoover, eds. *Hispanic Ministry in the 21st Century: Urgent Matters*. (Vol. 2 Bilingual Edition). Miami: Convivium Press, 2016.

Wittberg, Patricia. *Catholic Cultures: How Parishes Can Respond to the Changing Face of Catholicism*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016.

Organizations and Websites:

V Encuentro: <https://vencuentro.org/>

LaRED: <http://www.laredpjh.org/>

Southeast Pastoral Institute (SEPI): <http://sepi.us/en/Default.aspx>

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Dr. Marti R. Jewell, Associate Professor Emerita, served as an associate professor of pastoral theology in the Neuhoff School of Ministry at the University of Dallas and was named the University's 2017 "Michael A. Hagggar Scholar." She directed the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, a national research initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment designed to study excellence in parish leadership, and was a diocesan director in the Archdiocese of Louisville. Her books include *Navigating Pastoral Transitions: A Parish Leaders' Guide*, *The Changing Face of Church*, and *The Next Generation of Pastoral Leaders*. She received the Called and Gifted Award from the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry for her contributions to the field of lay ecclesial ministry, and the Lumen Gentium award from the Conference for Pastoral Planners and Council Development for her work and research with parishes and pastoral leaders. She continues to write, consult, and teach. Dr. Jewell holds a doctorate from the Catholic University of America.

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