

THE  
**GREAT  
CATHOLIC  
PARISHES**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



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## INTRODUCTION

Parish Catalyst recognizes that all Catholic parishes seek to understand the needs of today's world, reflect on those needs in light of the Gospel and our tradition, and respond in ways that serve God's people. We appreciate that for various reasons some pastors and parishes are better equipped than others to find creative and adaptive responses to those needs. Our goal was to identify these "islands of strength," encourage their continued growth and development, and help share their insights with others. This research thus sought to capture the state of the most energized and vibrant Catholic parishes we could find. The study was designed to elicit information from pastors about their parish's greatest strengths, most exciting opportunities, and most pressing challenges.

## PARTICIPANTS

Our final sample consists of 244 pastors, each of whom agreed to participate in a one-time telephone interview with one of our research team members. In three of the interviews, lay Parish Life Coordinators responded to our questions on behalf of their parishes. We knew the pastors we interviewed, because they were selected for their thriving ministries, might not be representative of the larger American Catholic Church. Nonetheless, they resemble typical parishes in many important respects, including average age of the pastor and geographical distribution. The pastors ranged in age from 33 years to 84 years, with an average age of 59.6 years. At the time of data collection, they had been ordained an average of 30.1 years and at their current parish for an average of 9.7 years. Pastors were sampled from all over the United States, in proportions that are similar to the distribution of all U.S. Catholic parishes. One parish in the dataset is located in Canada. Further, like the larger American Catholic Church, our parishes are diverse in terms of size, finances, and racial/ethnic composition. For the full set of descriptive statistics about our pastors and parishes, please see Appendix B.

## DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Between September of 2013 and May of 2014, the Parish Catalyst team recruited pastors at thriving Catholic parishes to interview them for our study. The recruitment and interviewing process was a team-wide effort, involving five interviewers including researchers with extensive pastoral planning backgrounds and doctoral-level expertise in social science research methods, our executive director came to Parish Catalyst with twenty-five years of parish leadership experience as well and research experience for masters and doctoral work, and myself. I personally interviewed 57 of the respondents.

To identify participants for the study, Parish Catalyst reached out to diocesan offices, ministry leaders and pastoral professionals from across the country, asking them to name pastors and parishes that they, as well as other pastors, view as models of highly successful parish ministry. From this process, we assembled an initial list of 100 exceptional pastors and parishes. Members of the research team contacted these parishes by phone and email to invite them to participate. For those interested, an interview was scheduled at a mutually convenient time. For prospective participants who did not respond to initial contact, members of the research team followed up several times.

To increase the sample size beyond the initial 100 respondents, we applied snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique whereby existing study participants guide the recruitment of future subjects by recommending their peers and acquaintances to the researcher. To accomplish this, at the end of each interview, we asked the pastor, “Would you be willing to recommend to us the names of some other parishes we might interview? Parishes, like yours, that are ministering in innovative ways, being successful, and are influential within their region.” The list continued to grow as pastors whom we interviewed offer names of other pastors and parishes that they admire for their energy, spirit and accomplishments. We continued recruiting participants, interviewing them, and recording and transcribing the interviews until we had obtained an interview with at least one pastor from every state in the U.S.

During the data collection period, we contacted a total of 295 parishes, but 51 of those parishes either declined to participate or never responded to our attempts to contact. This yielded a final sample of 244 parishes and a response rate of 82.7%. Stated differently, more than four out of every five pastors we contacted agreed to participate in the study.

Prior to each interview, respondents received a list of the interview questions by email. This gave the pastors time to look up figures such as their October count and annual offertory, as well as an opportunity to reflect on more open-ended and self-reflective questions, such as “Is there anything unique to your leadership that you believe is integral to the success of your parish?”

Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was audio recorded with the respondent’s consent. Pastors were promised confidentiality at the time of the interview. Accordingly, in cases where a pastor is quoted and identified in the text, the research team contacted him after the interview to obtain permission to include his name. It was important to guarantee confidentiality at the time of the interview to encourage respondents to be open and candid in their responses. In addition to recording the conversation, interviewers jotted hand-written notes and impressions during the course of the interview. Each audio recording was then transcribed in full. Transcripts were maintained on password-protected servers to which only members of the research team had access. The interview transcripts were analyzed as described in the “Data Analysis Procedures” section below.

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

We developed an original in-depth, semi-structured interview protocol, specifically for use in this study. Each interview followed this standard protocol. An advantage of semi-structured qualitative interviewing over surveys that ask closed-ended questions with pre-defined options is that respondents are free to introduce new topics that are meaningful to them. While every question in the protocol was asked of every respondent, the interviewer can take a more flexible approach by asking follow-up questions, adding probes, and pursuing relevant topics that emerge unexpectedly during the conversation. The interview protocol invited conversation about the pastors' leadership styles, their staffs, what gets them up in the morning, where they look for new ideas and inspiration. The pastors were also asked to reflect on their parishes' greatest strengths, most exciting opportunities, and most pressing challenges.

<sup>1</sup>In five cases, due to a malfunction of the recording device or poor audio quality on the recording, rather than producing a transcript, analysis proceeded by referring to notes jotted during the interview and listening to the audio recording itself.

## DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The analysis of the transcript data proceeded in three phases: 1) Calculating descriptive statistics for the demographics of the parish; 2) Preliminary Group Analysis of the transcripts; and 3) Qualitative Coding in NVivo.

Demographic questions were asked in every interview, including pastor's age, years ordained, years at current parish, number of weekend masses, number of registered parishioners and households, combined weekend mass attendance, offertory income, the location of the parish, whether the parish has a school. These data were entered into an Access database and descriptive statistics were generated.

To analyze the rich corpus of qualitative data in the interviews, the research team began with an inductive process to identify recurring themes in the data and points of interest. A small set of transcripts (typically four at a time) would be read by all members of the research team, each of whom would independently complete an analysis form where they noted the strengths, opportunities, challenges, and insights that they identified in the transcripts. The research team would then convene to compare answers and discuss differences of interpretation. This inductive process revealed emergent patterns and recurring themes, effectively allowing the pastors and the data to "speak for themselves." Exactly half of the transcripts (122 transcripts) were subjected to this Group Analysis process. The Preliminary Group Analysis process guided the creation of 81 analytic categories, which were defined and organized into a codebook. The transcripts were then loaded into NVivo10 for qualitative coding.

NVivo10 is a qualitative analysis software produced by QSR International. It enables the management and analysis of large bodies of qualitative data such as ours. We coded the full dataset, all 244 interviews, in NVivo10 in accordance with the codebook developed during the Preliminary Group Analysis. Each interview was coded for the presence or absence of each of 81 themes ("nodes"), and passages where each theme is mentioned are marked and recorded by the software. Examples of nodes include: Young Adults, Discipleship, Sense of Community, Abuse Scandal, Pope Francis, Ecumenical Influences, Communication, and Social Media. Each time the pastor mentioned one of the 81 nodes, that passage was coded under (linked to) that category. A given passage could be attached to multiple nodes. For example, in response to a question about opportunities, a respondent said, "We're trying to build a very strong faith formation, and it seemed a good thing to do for a couple years to focus my efforts in Teen Ministry." This statement was coded under Opportunities, Faith Formation, and Teen Ministry. This coding technique allowed us to determine which themes were present or absent in each interview, which themes occurred the most frequently, and where and how often themes co-occurred. Co-occurrence enabled us to identify which of the themes were most commonly described by pastors as strengths, opportunities, and challenges. The use of NVivo was invaluable in data organization and management, ensuring a reliable, rigorous, and systematic tracking of themes as the pastors described them.

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

In this appendix, we present descriptive statistics about the pastors and parishes in the sample. Table A.1 shows information about the pastors we interviewed. The average age of the pastors in our dataset, 59.6 years old, was slightly lower than the average age of all Catholic priests, 63 years old.

**Table A.1 Pastor Characteristics**

	<b>Range</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Median</b>
Age of Pastor at Time of Interview	33 years – 84 years	59.6 years	61 years
Number of Years Ordained	4 years – 57 years	30.1 years	30 years
Number of Years at Current Parish	<1 year – 39 years	9.7 years	8 years

Table A.2 contains data about the parishes we surveys. Though our pastors reported quite a range of annual offertories and registered households, there were more than a few parishes with many families and/or large offertories. Half of the parishes we interviewed served parishes with annual offertories of more than \$1 million, and half served parishes with more that 1,919 registered households. The pastors of our dataset came from larger and better funded parishes than the national average. The average number of registered households per parish for all American Catholic parishes is 1,168, and the average offertory is just shy of \$700,000.

**Table A.2 Parish Characteristics**

	<b>Range</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Median</b>
Annual Offertory	\$58,000 - \$5,000,000	\$1,221,761	\$1,000,000
Number of Registered Households	100 – 9,300 HHs	2,386 HHs	1,919 HHs
Weekly Mass Attendance	150 – 8,500 People	2104 People	1,764 People
Offertory / Mass Attendance	\$83 - \$5,600	\$658	\$577
Attendance / Registered Households	0.125 – 4.00	0.98	0.90

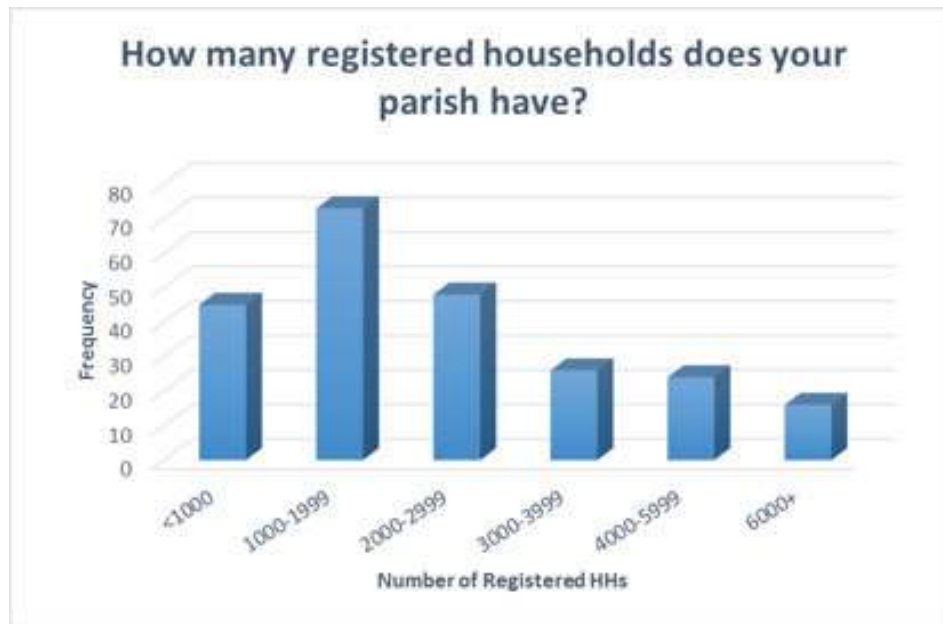
The Catholic Church tends to measure parish size by registered households rather than by individual parishioners. Although some use a general multiplier to extrapolate the number of parishioners from the number of families (e.g. “x 3”) this can be difficult in parishes with, for example, a large percentage of elderly parishioners.



## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

The two graphs that follow illustrate the distribution of registered households and annual offertory more clearly. Parishes of 1000-1999 registered households occurred most frequently in our dataset. Similarly, in terms of annual offertory, parishes with offertories of \$500K-\$999K occurred most frequently, in almost 60 of the parishes we interviewed.

**Figure A.1. Distribution of Number of Registered Households in Dataset Parishes**



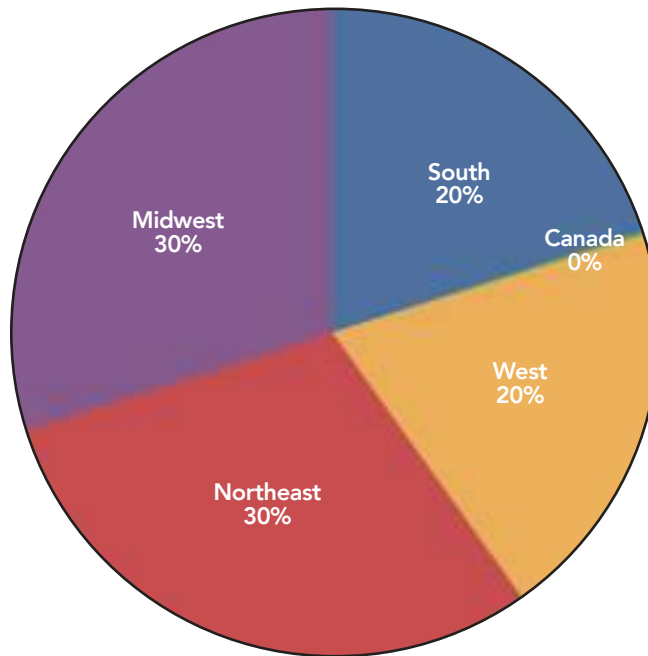
**Figure A.2 Annual Recorded Offertories in Dataset Parishes**



## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Figure A.3 shows the regional representation of the parishes in our dataset, more or less matched parish distribution across the country. The Northeast and Midwest have the largest percentage of parishes, with the South and West splitting the remainder, with 20 percent of parishes each. Per the Official Catholic Directory, 37 percent of all parishes are in the Midwest, with 27 percent in the Northeast, 22 percent in the South, and 14 percent in the West.<sup>2</sup>

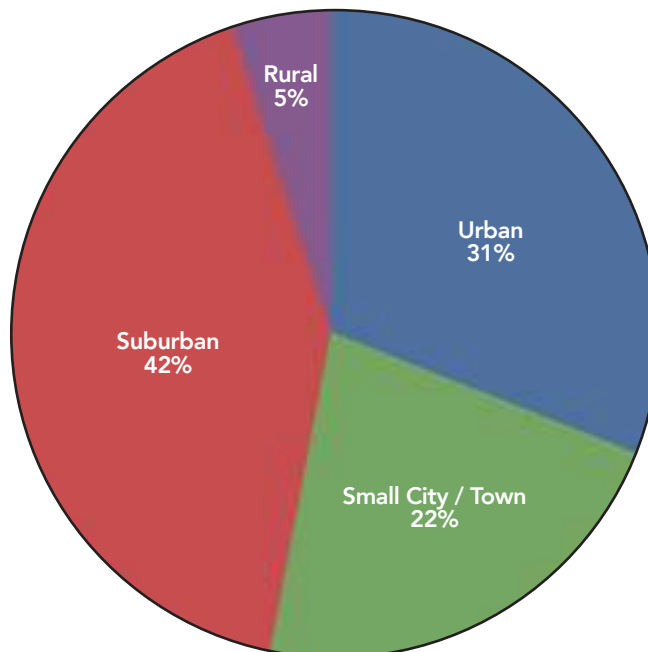
**Figure A.3: Parishes in the Dataset Distributed by Region**



<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

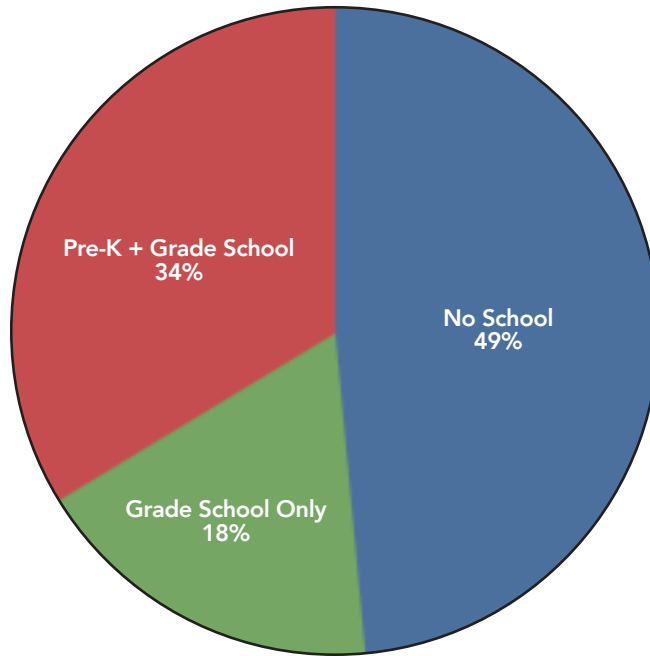
Figure A.4 and A.5 provide additional demographic information about the parishes we studied.

**Figure A.4: Distribution of Dataset Parishes by Neighborhood Type**



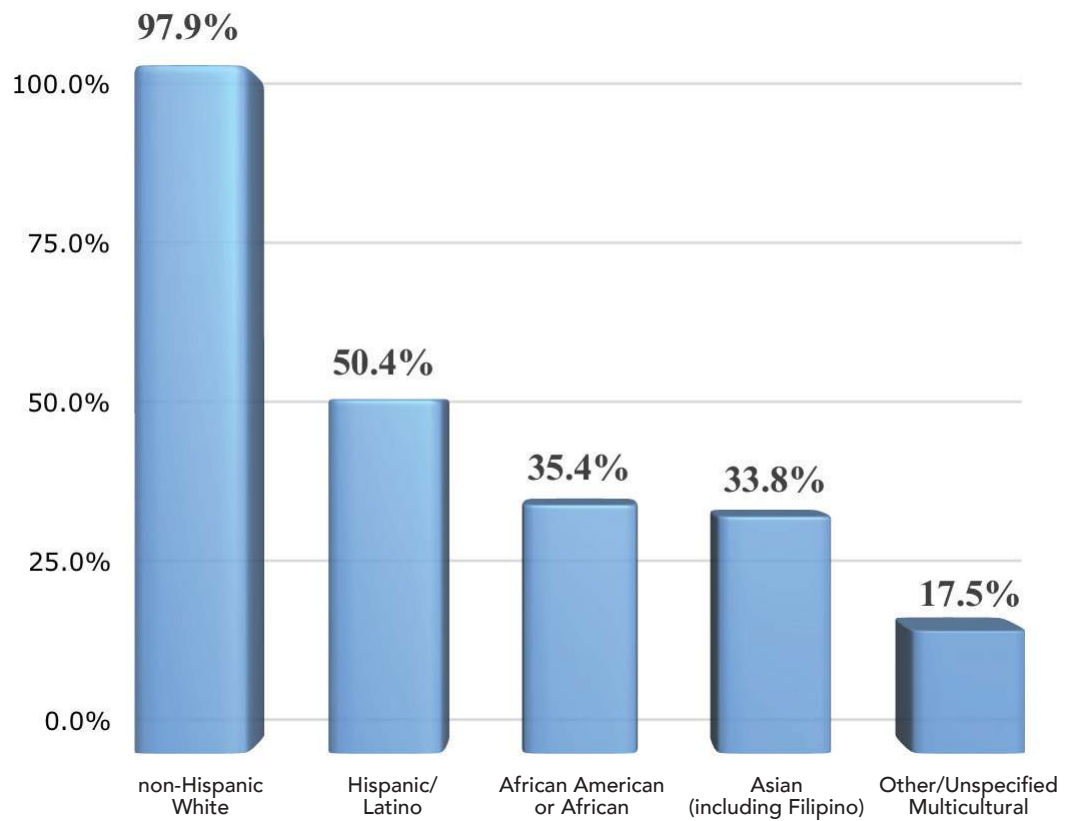
# DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

**Figure A.5: Data and school Affiliations of Dataset Parishes**



## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

**Figure A.6: Dataset of Parishes Reporting on Parishioners Race or Ethnicity**



## STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

Qualitative coding in Nivo10 allowed us to rigorously and systematically track which themes were present or absent in each interview, which themes occurred the most frequently, and which themes were framed by the pastors as strengths, opportunities, and challenges. The percentages given in the following tables indicate the percentage of pastors who considered a particular theme or characteristic to be a strength, opportunity, or challenge at their parish. For example, 90.38% of the pastors considered Spiritual Growth and Discipleship to be a strength of their parish.

The following numbers indicate the percentages pastors who considered a particular theme or characteristic to be a strength at their parish:

<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>%</b>
Spiritual Growth & Discipleship	90.38%
Leadership	80.33%
Liturgy	75.73%
Community	73.22%
Stewardship & Generosity	69.04%
Staff	67.78%
Finances	66.95%
Service / Social Justice / Diversity / Helping poor	63.18%
Welcoming & Hospitality	61.09%
Evangelization / Reaching / Missions	49.37%
Music	47.70%
Facilities & Architecture	46.86%
Young Adults	32.64%
Technology	16.74%

The following numbers indicate the percentages pastors who considered a particular theme of characteristic to be an opportunity at their parish?

<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>%</b>
Spiritual Growth & Discipleship	76.57%
Evangelization / Reaching / Missions	58.58%
Leadership Development	35.15%
Service/ Social Justice/ Diversity/ Helping poor	35.15%
Facilities & Architecture	34.31%
Young Adults	32.22%
Staff	28.03%
Welcoming & Hospitality	26.78%
Stewardship & Generosity	19.25%
Technology	15.90%
Liturgy	11.30%
Music	9.21%

## STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

The following numbers indicate the percentages pastors who considered a particular theme or characteristic to be a challenge at their parish:

<b>CHALLENGES</b>	<b>%</b>
Secularism & Competing Priorities	71.13%
Spiritual Growth & Discipleship	70.29%
Finances	53.56%
Staff	45.19%
Church hierarchy	44.77%
Leadership Development	38.08%
Facilities & Architecture	36.82%
Young Adults	33.89%
Community	32.64%
Service / Social Justice / Diversity / Helping poor	30.96%
Evangelization / Reaching / Missions	26.78%
Liturgy	14.23%
Technology	10.88%
Welcoming & Hospitality	9.21%
Music	7.53%