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# DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES IN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM: PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS AND PARISH PASTORAL RESEARCH

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## Abstract

American Catholic parishes are in the process of tremendous structural change. This study examines the experience of a Catholic diocese that has sought to use groups of lay leaders called *parish pastoral councils* to help parishes be more active partners in these challenging transitions. After providing a history of parish pastoral councils and the diocese's own efforts to facilitate their development, this study uses a focus group of parish pastoral council members (n=25) conducted within the context of a training session that focused on a key facet of the pastoral planning process: parish pastoral research.

Catholic parishes in the United States are in the midst of tremendous cultural and demographic change.<sup>1</sup> For many American parishes, these changes have also meant parish reorganizations in the form of parish mergers or closures. In the past decade, the Archdioceses of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia have announced significant programs of parish mergers and closures,<sup>2</sup> and this past

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<sup>1</sup> William V. D'Antonio, Michelle Dillion, and Mar L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> John C. Seitz, *No Closure: Catholic Practice and Boston's Parish Shutdowns* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Michael Luo, "At Churches Set to Close, Faithful Dig in for Battle," *New York Times*, January 27, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/27/nyregion/27church.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/27/nyregion/27church.html?_r=0) (accessed May 31, 2013); Erik Eckholm, "Church and School Cuts Anger Catholics in Philadelphia," *New York Times*, June 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/us/budget-cuts-and-abuse-cases-roil-philadelphia-archdiocese.html> (accessed May 31, 2013).

March, a *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that eleven percent of churchgoing American Catholics reported that their parish had either merged or closed in the previous year.<sup>3</sup> In his ethnographic study of the Boston parish reorganization process, John C. Seitz summarizes the challenging dynamics underlying this trend: declining parish populations, financially insolvent parishes, crumbling church buildings, and decreasing numbers of priests.<sup>4</sup> Yet, even as he acknowledges these realities, Seitz notes that the top-down, centralized way in which the Archdiocese of Boston and many other dioceses have often handled parishes can push what is already a traumatic situation to the breaking point. Diocesan approaches can lead to frustration and despair among parishioners, lawsuits in civil and canonical courts, prolonged protests, and, in the case of Boston, parish occupations that damage the institutional health of the Catholic Church while testing the faith of ordinary Catholics.

As American Catholic dioceses and parishes seek to respond to their changing environment, they need new models for parish pastoral planning that are better able to prepare for, negotiate, and overcome the challenges parishes face. In this climate of change, some dioceses have begun to reexamine the potential of *parish pastoral councils*—groups of lay parish leaders who discern the parish’s mission and develop pastoral plans to meet that mission<sup>5</sup>—to create a more responsive, locally driven approach to pastoral planning. These councils have potential to improve how Catholic parishes negotiate change, facilitate communication within the parish and between the parish and the diocese, and potentially avoid

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<sup>3</sup> Laurie Goodstein and Megan Thee-Brenan, “U.S. Catholics in Poll See a Church out of Touch,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/us/poll-shows-disconnect-between-us-catholics-and-church.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed May 31, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Sietz.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Ann Gubish, Susan Jenny, and Arlene McGannon, *Revisioning the Parish Pastoral Council: A Workbook* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2001).

Boston-style crises that could be increasingly common in the years ahead.

This study considers how these groups approach one of the central tasks of parish pastoral planning: parish pastoral research. Using a focus group conducted in the context of a training session for these lay leaders on pastoral research methods, the study seeks to understand how members of councils approach the task of pastoral research, as well as the challenges and opportunities they see in exercising these responsibilities.

## Rationale

### *From the Pastoral Council to the Parish Pastoral Council*

The movement toward parish pastoral councils as a form of lay parish leadership in American Catholicism reflects a long history of struggle within the church over the role of laity in its administrative and pastoral life. Jim Castelli and Joseph Gremillion<sup>6</sup> observe that in the nineteenth century, in which European immigration often vastly outpaced the abilities of dioceses to structure and provide for pastoral ministry, the task of organizing parishes typically fell to the laity. Laypersons would elect councils of trustees who would, in turn, raise money to build the parish church, call and employ parish pastors, and oversee parish life. James A. Coriden<sup>7</sup> remarks that the responsibilities of trustees also extended to spiritual and ministerial activities, such as leading prayer groups and catechetical activities, in the absence of a priest. However, as the nineteenth century wore on and diocesan structures became increasingly established, conflicts erupted between trustees and diocesan bishops. Though the bishops emerged as the ultimate winners, Patrick W. Carey maintains that American Catholicism

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<sup>6</sup> Jim Castelli and Joseph Gremillion, *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life Since Vatican II* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> James A. Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology and Canon Law* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

continues to contend with the legacy of trusteeism.<sup>8</sup> Fearful of the tensions that trusteeism brought into the church, Carey writes, American bishops and clergy adopted a centralized, aloof administrative style that restricted the role of the laity to the most basic of tasks—a mantra often described as “pray, pay, and obey”<sup>9</sup>—while reserving all of the responsibilities for pastoral planning for themselves.

American dioceses continue to use this centralized and often paternalistic administrative and pastoral approach. Seitz observes that the Archdiocese of Boston’s consistent portrayal of parishioners as “sheep” or “children”<sup>10</sup> during the merger process was a driving factor in the resentment and cynicism that fueled the protest movement. At the same time, William V. D’Antonio and his co-authors note that large majorities of Catholic laity feel discouraged or reluctant to take leadership roles because they believe that their priests are unwilling to take them seriously in parish leadership positions. Within this context, parish lay leadership often takes the form of what Mary Ann Gubish, Susan Jenny, and Arlene McGannon call a *parish council*, a body focused primarily on working with the pastor to accomplish the pastor’s agenda within the parish. “Members of councils were usually the ‘doers’ in the parish,” they write. “Their presence on the council assured the pastor that things would get done,” and they directed their attention to “programs, successful festivals and fundraisers, well-maintained facilities, and a variety of social events.”<sup>11</sup> While these groups have undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the vibrancy of American Catholic parishes, Gubish and her co-authors observe that in these bodies, lay leadership nevertheless remains constantly dependent

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick W. Carey, *People, Priests, and Prelates: Ecclesiastical Democracy and the Tensions of Trusteeism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Michael J. Cieslak, “Parish Responsiveness and Parishioner Commitment,” *Review of Religious Research* 26 (1984): 134.

<sup>10</sup> Seitz, 179.

<sup>11</sup> Gubish et al., 4.

on the pastor's particular priorities and interests. The pastoral council, comprised of laity selected for their obedience as much as for their skill, remains sheep-like, while constant imposition of the pastoral authority often inhibits, rather than enables, parishioners in affirming their baptismal call as laity.

Yet, two trends make a more robust understanding of parish councils' increasingly important role in American Catholic life. The first trend lies in the sharp decrease in the number of priests available for ministry,<sup>12</sup> which leads to increasing frequency of pastoral leadership changes and a sharp reduction in the tenure of priests in their parishes. Consequently, parish pastoral councils are increasingly vital to sustain the parish's sense of identity and to ensure that the pastoral leadership and staff are kept abreast of the changes and trends affecting the parish's life. Here, as Coriden observes, the pastor retains his canonical authority over the parish—that is, this new assertion of lay leadership does not mark a return to trusteeism—but the pastoral council nevertheless serves as a “vehicle for the expression of lay voice and wisdom” that provides “one way for parishioners to participate in making the policies and decisions that guide the parish community.”<sup>13</sup> Coriden writes that while pastoral leadership may change, robust lay leadership provides a constant reminder that the parish is much more than a church building or an administrative unit. Through prayerful reflection, gathering data on the parish's needs, discerning the parish's mission, and working with parish leadership to achieve that mission, parish pastoral councils exercise stewardship over a particular community of faith rooted in a particular place and time.

Alongside this need for continuity within parish life and ministry, councils of lay parish leaders are increasingly essential in helping parishes respond to

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<sup>12</sup> Richard A. Schoenherr and Lawrence A. Young, *Full Pews and Empty Altars: Demographics of the Priest Shortage in United States Catholic Dioceses* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Coriden, *The Parish*, 63.

changes in their areas and, when necessary, work more smoothly with dioceses as they pursue the delicate tasks of parish collaborations, mergers, or closures. Studies by Melissa L. Ray and by Stephanie J. Coopman and Katherine Bennett Meidlinger observe that while they may be canonically, structurally, and perhaps even financially dependent on their diocesan structures, parishes naturally acquire strong local cultures and senses of identity forged in processes of collective sense making and shared storytelling.<sup>14</sup> The strength of these processes leads Ray to contend that parishes are not docile blocks on the diocesan organizational chart, but rather exist in what she describes as complex and sometimes difficult relationships of *partial alienation* with diocesan authorities, accepting guidance in some areas while resisting or even rejecting it in others. Seitz's work on the Archdiocese of Boston shows how this sense of partial alienation in parishes, which may remain latent in good times, can erupt in much stronger sentiments of resentment, anger, and cynicism in moments of crisis in ways that take dioceses by surprise.<sup>15</sup> In times of change and transition, parish pastoral councils can perform an essential mediating function between parishes and the diocesan structure by facilitating communication and helping to resolve points of conflict. From the side of the parish, parish pastoral councils can help dioceses understand the local parish history and culture, parishioner needs and worries, and essential information about the parish that the diocese's own research might have missed. From the perspective of the diocese, these bodies can also help parishioners to understand diocesan concerns, the potential challenges posed by demographic or financial data, and the parish's options in facing those challenges.

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<sup>14</sup> Melissa L. Ray, "Partial Alienation as Organizational Parent-Member Accommodation: An Urban, Midwestern Catholic Parish," *Sociology of Religion* 55 (1994): 53–64; Stephanie J. Coopman and Katherine Bennett Meidlinger, "Power, Hierarchy, and Change: The Stories of a Catholic Parish Staff," *Management Communication Quarterly* 13 (2000): 567–625.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Seitz, 10–12.

In embracing these tasks, parish pastoral councils can help move parishioners from the status of passive “sheep” or “children” to a more responsive role that allows them to participate in their own change.

Those seeking new lay leadership models have looked toward the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) for inspiration. The council decree *On the Apostolate of the Laity* affirmed the importance of laity working alongside their pastors in the life of the church and advised the creation of “councils which assist the apostolic work of the Church either in the field of evangelization and sanctification or in the charitable, social, or other spheres” (sec. 26),<sup>16</sup> while Canon 511 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* required each diocese to have a pastoral council that would advise the bishop on the exercise of his ministry. Many read these documents as encouraging the development of councils at the parish level as well, creating a new leadership body: the parish pastoral council.

For Gubish and her co-authors, the shift toward parish pastoral councils is a decisive move toward helping parishioners to take this more-active role. They contend that the incorporation of the word *pastoral* is more than a linguistic sleight of hand; in fact, it reframes the entire understanding of what lay parish leadership can and should do. Whereas a parish council focused on the implementation of tasks, parish pastoral councils take a much more substantive role as “bodies which lead the parish community in the discernment and expression of its mission.”<sup>17</sup> While some of the old parish council responsibilities remain—the pastor retains his canonical authority and sacramental ministry, and lay leaders remain responsible for developing and executing programs—

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<sup>16</sup> Second Vatican Council, “On the Apostolate of the Laity,” November 18, 1965,

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html) (accessed May 31, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Gubish, et al., 4.

parish pastoral councils have the added task of understanding and interpreting the parish's mission, setting its agenda, and charting its course. "The role of the parish pastoral council is, through ongoing pastoral planning, to maintain the integrity of the parish mission and the goals and objectives related to it," Gubish and her co-authors write: "Within this new model, programs and events continue to take place in the parish through the efforts of many dedicated parishioners, always in the context of the parish mission and its pastoral plan."<sup>18</sup> The new model requires a shift in perspective and self-understanding that views the task of lay leadership as a form of pastoral *praxis* that blends administrative abilities with prayerful discernment, knowledge of church teaching, and careful stewardship of parish life. Here, the members of the parish pastoral council—who are no longer acting alone but are instead seeking to empower their fellow parishioners to act, as well—move from being the pastor's servants to becoming his partners, cooperating with him to propel the parish forward.

In their description of parish pastoral councils, Gubish and her co-authors offer a perspective that is sometimes missing in current discussions on the future of Catholic parishes in the United States, which often seems to echo the tensions of trusteeism and perpetuate the sense of partial alienation between parishes and their diocesan authorities. Coriden<sup>19</sup> observes that many of the options currently proposed for parishes—assigning teams of priests or a single priest to oversee multiple parishes, appointing non-priests (deacons, religious, or laypeople) as parish administrators, decreasing daily and weekend Mass schedules, merging or closing parishes, and so on<sup>20</sup>—reflect an approach toward parish life in which the

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<sup>18</sup> Gubish, et al., 4.

<sup>19</sup> James A. Coriden, "Parish Communities and Reorganizations," *Studia Canonica* 44 (2013): 31–52.

<sup>20</sup> See D'Antonio, et al.; Charles Zech and Maly L. Gautier, "Catholic Parish Organizational Structure and Outcomes," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004): 141–150.



bishop and his staff impose change from above, regardless of the desires of parishioners or whether these changes actually serve parish vitality. At the same time, research that takes a more grassroots approach to parish development tends to pit parishioners against the institutional church, which is seen as dysfunctional, out-of-touch, and obstructionist.<sup>21</sup> Within this polarized context, Gubish and her co-authors stand out through their understanding of parish pastoral councils seeking to steer between these two points of view. For them, the diocese is not a distant, aloof institution but remains present to offer resources, set limits and establish standards, and remind parishes of their responsibilities to and place within the broader institutional church. But in keeping with the Catholic principle of *subsidiarity*, in which the church fosters institutional flexibility by delegating authority to the lowest responsible level,<sup>22</sup> this authority is intended to be generative and empowering and not stifling of pastoral creativity. The diocese sets limits but gives parishes the freedom to create within those limits.

Still, canon lawyer Mark F. Fischer notes that the transition from parish pastoral councils has been a long and largely unfinished process. He further notes that variations in structure, differing levels of pastoral support, and continuing ambiguities regarding their purpose and role often make it difficult to draw a definitive picture of what a parish pastoral council actually is or does.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, those researching parish pastoral councils also need to understand the

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Mark F. Fischer. "Pastoral Councils: An Empirical Portrait," Parish Pastoral Councils, <http://www.pastoralcouncils.com/councils-today/councils-in-the-usa/empirical-portrait/>, (accessed May 31, 2013); Mark F. Fischer, "What Was Vatican II's Intent Regarding Parish Councils?" *Studia Canonica* 33 (1999): 5–25.

unique ways in which dioceses and parishes define and incorporate these groups into parish pastoral leadership.

### **Parish Pastoral Councils in the Study Diocese**

As the experience of the diocese involved in the current study suggests, the movement toward parish pastoral councils can often be a lengthy transition. In the 1990s, long before the merger crisis in Boston, the diocese had undergone its own aggressive and difficult program parish reorganizations, reducing the number of its parishes by about one-third over a three-year period. Drawing from the painful lessons of this experience—and from the knowledge that parishes were still undergoing significant change—the diocese realized that it needed to find ways to promote strong lay leadership within its parishes. It began to devote resources to supporting and sustaining these groups and, in 2010, issued a set of formal guidelines for parish pastoral councils within its territory that were based in large part on Gubish’s work. Since then, it has sought to invite parishes to develop parish pastoral councils along these guidelines and provided resources and training. To date, the effort is still ongoing: some parishes have completed their transition, others are still in the process of working toward that goal, and others have yet to begin the journey.

From the very start, the diocesan guidelines’ focus on pastoral councils simultaneously affirms the importance of lay leadership while respecting traditional distinctions between clergy and laity. A parish pastoral council, the documents<sup>24</sup> emphasize, emerges from the “common priesthood of the faithful” and works alongside the pastor to chart the parish’s future. Unlike in trusteeism, where lay leaders acted as either democratically elected representatives or corporate boards, parish pastoral councils are still under the oversight of a pastor and work within the limits of Catholic tradition. In Fischer’s

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<sup>24</sup> Because the document reveals the name of the diocese and would breach confidentiality, it is not included in the reference list.

terminology, they remain *advisory* and *consultative*, not *legislative* or *executive*, bodies.<sup>25</sup> But their advisory nature does not mean that they are simply passive bodies ratifying the pastor's (or diocese's) wishes. Instead, the diocesan guidelines call upon parish pastoral councils to fulfill three substantive and challenging responsibilities: *developing pastoral plans* and encouraging parishioner involvement, *facilitating ongoing conversations* about pastoral issues within the parish that bring problems to light, and *promoting reconciliation* in moments of change and parish conflict.

### *The Challenge of Parish Pastoral Research*

After distributing the document, the diocese recognized the importance of high-quality research throughout the process that it had proposed. In the past, the diocese had been the primary conductor of such research, and diocesan staff reported that this role had presented a number of problems. First, because of the resources involved, research was almost always restricted to situations in which parishes had to make serious and often painful decisions, such as the closing of the school or the merger of a parish. In these instances, research occurred too late to inform effective pastoral planning that could have avoided those situations in the first place. Second, because the research was driven by diocesan needs and priorities, parishes sometimes distrusted research findings and saw them as diocesan attempts to stack the deck in favor of particular proposals. Third, because it was so focused on particular decisions, parishioners tended to see research—especially surveys—not as a form of inquiry that would help them understand and respond to changing conditions, but as a means of deciding or voting on the parish's future, making the publication of research a politically and emotionally charged event. Based on this experience, the diocese increasingly found that it needed a new way of approaching the research process that would involve

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<sup>25</sup> Fischer, "Vatican II's Intent."

parish pastoral councils not as *objects* of study but as *co-inquirers*. While it would consult and offer assistance, the diocese hoped to empower parish pastoral councils to become the primary investigators of parish life, collecting and interpreting data, communicating findings to the parish, and translating insights into sound decisions throughout the parish planning process. In addition, the diocese hoped that parishes would come to view research not as a politically charged activity but as a continuous, iterative process that established a firm ground for effective decision-making.

At the same time, however, the diocese also recognized that the type of research that it wanted parishes to pursue could be extraordinarily difficult, even for seasoned researchers. Not only can Catholic parishes be organizationally complex, but parish pastoral research also presents unique challenges, especially when those doing the research are embedded in the very situation they are studying.<sup>26</sup> Yet, even though the expectations of objectivity and neutrality that are so essential to social scientific inquiry are often difficult, and even impossible, to maintain in these circumstances, Thomas P. Faase does not conclude that such research is necessarily invalid but rather requires a different research model.<sup>27</sup> In a way that is strikingly similar to Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam, and Diana McLain Smith's conception of action research,<sup>28</sup> which seeks to blend inquiry and practice to transform the lives of those participating in it, Faase outlines an understanding of parish pastoral research that is simultaneously dialogic and transformative in approach. "Church planning," Faase writes, "requires research which flows coherently from theory through to its implementation, which is interpretive and pluralist,

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<sup>26</sup> Castelli and Gremillion emphasize this difficulty.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas P. Faase, "Towards a Model of Research for Participative Church Planning," *Review of Religious Research* 31 (1989): 82–93.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam, and Diana McLain Smith, *Action Science: Concepts, Methods, and Skills for Research and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985).

which emphasizes cultural elements, which takes account of contexts, which is oriented to practical action, which registers discrepancies between the status quo and Gospel values, and which employs an approach that is participatory and transactional.”<sup>29</sup> Following Robert Bellah’s call to view social scientific research as a form of public philosophy that aims at telling, interpreting, and critiquing the stories that define particular communities of memory,<sup>30</sup> Faase frames pastoral research around what he calls a *double hermeneutic* that seeks to understand and to respond to the pastoral, cultural, and organizational dynamics of parish life.

As it provides an inspiring and generative framework for parish pastoral research, Faase’s model nevertheless requires a significant amount of translation to make it usable by an audience of parish pastoral council members with varying levels of experience and education in research methods. Consequently, the diocese worked with a local Catholic university to develop a brief research guide that would establish a set of basic practices and outline a basic approach to parish pastoral research. Written for a lay audience, the diocesan resource has two sections. The first section situates parish pastoral research within the duties of the parish pastoral council and outlines what a parish-based research process should look like, including advice on setting research objectives, selecting research approaches, interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, and incorporating research at every stage of a parish planning cycle. Because of the sensitivities and suspicion that often surrounded parish pastoral research, the diocese believed it was also important to include as a basic statement of research ethics to guide inquiry within the Catholic parish context. The second section focused on several research approaches, including interviews, focus groups, large-

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<sup>29</sup> Faase, 89.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1996).

group parish gatherings, parish histories, demographic research, parish surveys, and parish program evaluations. Because of the nature of the intended audience, the guide was intentionally kept simple, with the intent that the diocese would provide additional training to address any gaps that emerged.

Several months after the publication of the research guide, the diocese again partnered with the university that helped to develop the resource to conduct a training session for parish pastoral council members from throughout the diocesan territory. Because the session presented a unique opportunity to understand how parish pastoral councils were approaching the task of research, the training session was designed to serve also as a focus group to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do parish pastoral council members view the task of parish pastoral research?
- RQ2: What challenges do they see in parish pastoral research?
- RQ3: What opportunities do they see in parish pastoral research?

### *Method*

This study was conducted within the context of a workshop designed to help parish pastoral council members to develop a greater understanding and awareness of parish pastoral research. This research design builds on Arygris and his co-authors' notion of *action science*, which seeks to bridge the needs of researchers and the needs of practitioners embedded in particular organizational or group contexts. Such an approach focuses on problem-based interventions that facilitate reflection and discursive action in the context of a particular situation. As participants work together to respond to the issue or scenario presented to them, researchers note the language the participants use and the rationales they provide for their actions and then engage the participants in a conversation that helps them to interpret and reframe their experience in generative ways. In the process, action science seeks to facilitate *double-loop*

*learning*, which helps participants reflect upon not only what they should do but also why they should be doing it. It also offers researchers insight into how participants make decisions and act as agents embedded within a given social, cultural, or organizational context.

Because the information was gathered in the context of a workshop and not a formal focus group, participation in the study was driven by attendant interest rather than a formal selection methodology. Prior to the workshop, the diocese promoted the workshop via a mailing to its parishes, attracting twenty-five parish pastoral council members. In addition to their participation in the session, participants were asked to complete a brief pre-session questionnaire gathering data on their gender, age, number of years as members of their parish, and education level, as well as to indicate their intentions in attending the session and to list three words that came to mind when they thought of parish pastoral research (see Table 1). Following the session, attendees were asked to describe the three most important challenges they saw in conducting pastoral research in their parish (Table 3) and the three most important opportunities they saw in parish pastoral research (Table 4).

The session lasted two hours and used a scenario-based approach designed to generate discussion and encourage participation. To ensure that members of different parishes would have the opportunity to learn from each other, participants were randomly assigned to five groups, with no group having more than one member from a single parish. After a brief introduction to the nature and purpose of parish pastoral research, the session began by asking the groups to consider a stock scenario provided by the diocese about a parish in the midst of significant change and to place themselves in the role of the parish pastoral council. Then, in conversation with the facilitator, the groups worked together to discover areas where parish pastoral research could be required, define a set of potential research objectives, and

outline a potential research approach to meet that objective. Detailed notes were taken throughout.

### *Participant Profile*

In many ways, the participants matched the profile of parish volunteer leadership outlined in Castelli and Gremillion's report on the Notre Dame Study of Parish Life nearly thirty years ago. Though sixteen participants (sixty-four percent) were women—Castelli and Gremillion observed that parish volunteer leadership in the 1980s was still a predominately male domain<sup>31</sup>—the representatives were nevertheless highly educated with long tenures in their parishes. Sixty percent of the attendees had either completed graduate degrees or some graduate study, twenty-eight percent had either completed or attended some college, and only twelve percent had only a high school diploma. Participants had a median age of fifty-seven years (range: twenty-six to seventy-four years), and had belonged to their parishes for a median of twenty-five years (range: three to sixty-four years). The entire group was Caucasian, which was unsurprising given the small size of the diocese's Latino, African American, and Asian Catholic communities.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Castelli and Gremillion, 110.

<sup>32</sup> Following the session, the diocese provided additional background information that offers a profile of these parishes. Of the twenty-five participants, twenty-four indicated their home parish to the diocese. These twenty-four attendees came from fifteen (just over seven percent) of the diocese's parishes, with seven attendees representing just two of those parishes. Though participating parishes represented a wide variety of pastoral contexts, representatives from large, suburban parishes dominated the group: Parishes with more than three thousand members accounted for nineteen (seventy-nine percent) of the attendees who reported their parish affiliation, while suburban parishes accounted for sixteen (sixty-seven percent) of those attendees. Despite the diocese's significant history of parish reorganizations, only five of the fifteen parishes that sent representatives to the workshop—accounting for five (twenty-one percent) of the participants who reported their parish affiliations—had experienced a merger in the past. In addition, eight of the parishes—accounting for sixteen (sixty-seven percent) of the participants who reported their parish affiliations—had completed their transitions to a parish pastoral council, while the remaining seven parishes were still in the process of doing so.



The way in which the session was promoted most likely led to a self-selection bias that seems to have skewed the group's membership. Even so, the group seemed to offer a glimpse into the type of parish lay leader—and the type of parish—that may be the most interested and active in incorporating research into their leadership activities. Lay leaders who have graduate education may tend to be more comfortable with the topic of research in general, and those who live in large, suburban parishes with complex programs may tend to recognize the value of research in making decisions. The histories of these parishes are also illustrative. In the past, suburban parishes in the diocese had often been large and rich enough to avoid mergers, but in the current demographic climate, even suburban parishes would no longer be immune to the need to reorganize or enter into collaborative relationships with neighboring parishes. The session's participants, representing a highly motivated and interested group, may have wanted to get ahead of this trend and take a greater level of responsibility in shaping their parish's future.

### **Focus Group Results**

*RQ1: How do parish pastoral council members view the task of parish pastoral research?*

While some participants noted a general desire to learn more about research or their parishes, participants seemed to be focused on improving their abilities in conducting research, a task that they believed to be important and challenging. When asked in the pre-session questionnaire why they decided to attend the workshop, fifteen responses expressed a desire to improve how they exercised their duties as parish pastoral council members, and another three responses indicated a desire to further their parish's current pastoral planning efforts. One other participant mentioned wanting to overcome past failures in conducting useful surveys. The words that participants associated with the idea of research (Table 1) suggested that they recognized the potential importance of research as information gathering to inform parish leadership and

decision-making, but they also viewed research as time-consuming, challenging, and requiring extensive amounts of work. Yet, despite these initial concerns, participants seemed largely positive or at least neutral on the topic of research. Only one associated research with “fear,” while another—citing a distaste for quantitative methods—responded with a definitive “Yuk!”

Participants’ interest and sense of professional purpose seemed to propel them throughout the session. After reading the case study, the group saw many opportunities for research in the sample parish that spanned spiritual concerns, programmatic issues, and broader organizational needs (Table 4). Interestingly, despite the difficulties involved in parish reorganizations, the group also actively entertained exploring the possibilities of merger as a part of the pastoral research agenda. The group was particularly interested in research inquiries focused on creating and sustaining parishioners’ involvement and engagement in parish life, as well as the potential for conflict and problems that could arise as the research is interpreted. The vibrancy of the discussion, however, showed that the group seemed to grasp from the start one of the fundamental points that the diocese had wanted to impart: the need to move beyond a reductive approach to research that

looked to research findings as “determining” or “deciding” particular courses of action to a more nuanced approach that saw research as contributing to a broader understanding of the parish’s life—a sort of practical wisdom—that could guide parish decision-making. Moreover, they seemed interested in a proactive, engaged agenda of inquiry that would highlight problems and opportunities early enough for the parish to respond effectively to them. Though they were a small group, the participants seemed to reflect the very sort of parish pastoral council that the diocese wanted to engender in its parishes.

The discussion moved next toward prioritizing these opportunities for research into a research agenda. Perhaps because parish mergers had become a fact of life

within the diocese, or perhaps because participants thought mergers presented a complex and challenging research problem, the group focused on a broad research objective of examining possibilities for collaboration with neighboring parishes as a preliminary step for a possible parish merger. Participants justified the decision by saying that such research would not only be essential in guiding decision-making but would also help develop common ground with potential partners and lay the foundation for more harmonious integration in the future. Like Faase, participants seemed to be viewing pastoral research through a double hermeneutic that viewed inquiry as a way to expand their knowledge about the situation and as a form of pastoral leadership that would advance the health of the parish, as well. In comparing programs, assessing needs, tracking demographics, evaluating facilities, and identifying key stakeholders within the parish and surrounding community, participants saw themselves as understanding their current reality and potentially shaping its future.

*RQ2: What challenges do they see in parish pastoral research?*

Participants noted a number of challenges in pursuing research within the parish. The first and perhaps most important arose almost by accident. One of the participants who discussed the importance of research in approaching a parish merger reported that during her group discussion, she was initially hesitant to raise the topic to the group until one of her peers whose parish had recently emerged from a merger encouraged her to do so. She noted that her reluctance suggested a major obstacle for conducting pastoral research in her parish: the temptation to ask research questions that would ignore or even distract from the elephant in the room, the issues that the parish needs to consider but that might raise the possibility of conflict and division. Decades ago, Castelli and Gremillion observed that “conflict has become a dirty word in the post-Vatican II church” and that “pastors and parishioners seem to live in fear of seeing their parishes divided by differences in ideology

and priorities.”<sup>33</sup> The session’s discussion suggested that this could still be the case. Other participants echoed the concern over conflict, mentioning examples regarding the challenges of dealing with fellow parishioners who would become difficult and combative in the face of even the most minor change. In addition, they raised concerns about the challenges of reporting findings that offered uncomfortable truths or contradicted the status quo. These responses suggest that conflict, or at least the threat of conflict, within the parish remains an important obstacle that could inhibit pastoral councils from engaging in the research they need.

Participants were also concerned about more pragmatic challenges of conducting good research within the constraints of time and money, the difficulty in finding enough trained and competent researchers to conduct research well in large and diverse parishes, and, most important of all, the persistent problem of poor participation in parish research. When asked about the challenges they faced (Table 2), eleven responses indicated concerns that a lack of participation would threaten the reliability and validity of the research they conducted. During the session, some participants reported problems with participation in the past, especially with survey instruments. Again suggesting the intrinsic connection Faase observed between pastoral research and parish leadership, participants felt that a lack of participation indicated a lack of enthusiasm and engagement within the parish, which reflected poorly on the parish pastoral council. For their research agenda to work, participants thought they needed to learn how to develop good research that respected the limits, set manageable goals that would build the council’s confidence in its abilities and parishioners’ confidence in the council’s leadership, and provide a sense of momentum that would carry the parish forward.

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<sup>33</sup> Castelli and Gremillion, 106.

*RQ3: What opportunities do they see in parish pastoral research?*

Despite the challenges they noted, members of the group acknowledged several possibilities or opportunities for research in the parish. Many of the responses in the post-session questionnaire focused on how research would improve the parish's understanding of the community's needs and assist it in making effective decisions. When asked about the possibilities for pastoral research in their parish (Table 3), eight responses indicated the potential of research in developing an accurate picture of parishioners, and six responses emphasized the importance of research in helping to understand the parish's needs. In this sense, participants were seeing research in the way that the diocese hoped: as a strategic tool that would drive effective parish planning, prepare parishes for mergers or other difficult decisions, or respond to their changing environments in ways that could avoid emergency situations down the road. Some participants also wanted to move beyond the rudimentary approach to research offered in the introductory guide to more detailed and complex research methodologies. In the post-session questionnaire, two responses expressed a desire for additional training and workshops, and during the session, participants inquired about appropriate sample sizes and even the applicability of more advanced research methodologies like game theory in understanding the parish context.

Participants also seemed to be interested in the ways in which research could be used as an opportunity to invite a spirit of inclusion within the parish. Echoing the observations of several researchers who suggest a strong correlation between parish vitality and an inclusive parish culture, many participants seemed to see in research the potential to improve the connectedness of the parish and promote an environment of inclusion.<sup>34</sup> In the post-

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<sup>34</sup> Cieslak; Katherine Disalvo, "Understanding an Outlier: How Parish Culture Matters in a Highly Participatory Catholic Church," *Review of Religious Research* 49 (2008): 438–455; Sandra Yocum Mize, "Lay Participation in Parish

session questionnaire, eight responses indicated a hope that a research agenda would help their parish become a place that is *alive* with the Holy Spirit, six responses directly emphasized a belief that research could serve as a form of outreach to elements of the parish that were underserved within the parish, and three responses suggested that research could help the parish work together and move forward as one family of faith. For these participants, parish pastoral research not only served as a planning tool but also provided a medium of communication that would foster an ongoing conversation about the parish and its future. In becoming a way of life, the practice of pastoral research would become a central part of what it meant to possess an inclusive parish culture.

## Discussion and Implications

The Greek root of the word *parish*, Coriden notes, has a double meaning, referring not only to a community of Christian believers living in close proximity to each other but also to a pilgrim people of “resident aliens, settled foreigners, nonnative sojourners.”<sup>35</sup> In his history of Catholic parishes in the northeastern United States, Joseph J. Casino reminds us that American parishes have always reflected this journey of faith and urges us to recognize that Catholic parishes today are not dying or in crisis but are merely moving to a new phase of growth.<sup>36</sup> Yet, what this new phase entails is often unclear, and as Seitz establishes, the path is fraught with difficulty as ordinary Catholics, parish leaders, and diocesan administrations struggle to respond to change, meet pastoral needs, and perhaps even redefine what it means to be Catholic today.

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Life: Little Flower Parish, South Bend, Indiana,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (1990): 419–432.

<sup>35</sup> Coriden, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph J. Casino, “From Sanctuary to Involvement: A History of the Catholic Parish in the Northeast,” in *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present*, ed. Jay P. Dolan (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 7–116.

This study has explored how one diocese is approaching this challenge by establishing parish pastoral councils as consultative bodies charged with pastoral research and planning within the diocese's parishes. In urging parishes to develop these bodies, the diocese hoped to create a vital link not only between the parish and its pastor, but also between the parish and the diocese. Through chronicling their parishes as communities of memory,<sup>37</sup> these bodies would interpret the collective wisdom of its people to establish a sense of mission and identity, create the "ground" to inform solid decisions, and set the stage for a vibrant, dynamic parish life. In other words, the diocese was seeking to move beyond the administrative style of the past. Instead of passive "sheep" or "children," it was seeking active participants who could take greater responsibility for their parishes' destinies.

In many ways, the diocese can take encouragement from the group involved in this study. From the very start, participants in the session showed their willingness to accept the responsibilities of parish pastoral council members, and they saw parish pastoral research as an important part of that role. While they remained concerned about lack of participation in their research and the possibility of conflict when reporting and interpreting their findings, they nevertheless saw in inquiry tremendous potential not only to improve how their parishes met pastoral needs but also to revitalize their parishes as inclusive and participatory bodies of Christ. Though the diocese's effort is only in its initial stages, it suggests a readiness and a willingness in at least some of its parishes to move to a more active and responsible relationship with the diocesan church. And in what may be a far more important detail, its effort also suggests that at least some parish lay leaders are willing to follow the diocese's guidelines when welcomed as partners in parish life and given the proper support, training, and direction.

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<sup>37</sup> Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*.

While the current study highlights important issues, the small size of the focus group and the lack of quantitative measurements make it impossible to generalize the study's findings. The self-selected nature of the group suggests that the participants could have represented high-functioning and engaged parish pastoral councils. Moreover, the predominance of members of larger, suburban parishes might have skewed the group's composition toward people with professional experiences and educational levels that made them more receptive to the concept of research as a leadership function. In fact, one of the participants reported feeling "ahead of the curve" in comparison to other parishes in the diocese, but how far ahead was unclear. Given the continuing debate regarding the nature and purpose of parish pastoral councils, differing levels of diocesan and pastor support, and the uniqueness of each parish's history and development, understanding the capabilities and interests of a typical parish pastoral council has its challenges.<sup>38</sup> Though the complexity of this task, even within a single diocese, requires a level of data collection that is beyond the scope of the current study, such research will remain essential to move beyond the anecdotal and episodic to establish a complete and nuanced account of parish pastoral councils and their function within American Catholicism.

Yet, despite these limitations, this study suggests a number of paths for additional research. One of the most interesting themes of the group was the concern about parish conflict and how it can influence the course of pastoral research and the ways in which a parish encounters change. Though Seitz's work—as well as the vast majority of press accounts of Catholic parishes facing the prospect of mergers and closures—foregrounds the struggles between the parish and the

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<sup>38</sup> Fischer's work emphasizes the crucial role that pastors play. See Mark F. Fischer, "Dysfunctional Pastor, Dysfunctional Council," Parish Pastoral Councils, <http://www.pastoralcouncils.com/council-management/the-pastors-role/dysfunctional-pastor/>, (accessed May 31, 2013).



diocese, the worries of the parish pastoral council members suggest that conflict within the parish over parish reorganizations could in fact be far more important and even drive tensions with the diocese. Indeed, Seitz mentions that despite the volume and intensity of the criticism in the Archdiocese of Boston, the dissidents who mounted protests and occupied church buildings represented only a portion of parishioners, many of whom accepted the changes out of either stoic resignation or perhaps even support for the plan. Consequently, while Seitz importantly argues that a diocese's handling or mishandling of a merger or closure process plays an important role, Castelli and Gremillion's concern that parish leaders' reluctance to see disagreements as potentially healthy for their parish might be even more essential. Instead of avoiding disputes until they erupt in unexpected and potentially destructive ways, Catholic parishes in a moment of change need to find constructive ways to engage in and resolve conflict, and research in this area will become increasingly important.

In addition, participants in the discussion, as well as representatives from the diocese, clearly wanted parishes that were alive with the faith, even as some recognized that they had a long way to go toward achieving that goal. In the process, participants affirmed the same values and expectations that have long been the norm in U.S. Catholicism. "To an increasing degree since Vatican II, many pastors and church officials, religious, and lay leaders conceive of and deal with the parish as an integrated, life-giving community," Castelli and Gremillion write. "With its own history, self-awareness, and future, the living parish of Vatican II animates lay participation and communal purposes throughout the People of God and similarly enlivens secular society."<sup>39</sup> Though pastors still retain authority over the parish and continue to influence how (or whether) a parish engages its parishioners, and a new pastor can easily reverse the

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<sup>39</sup> Castelli and Gremillion, 209–210.

direction of the old, the members of the study group clearly showed a willingness to accept responsibility for their parish's well-being and vitality, even if it meant the respectful resistance of their pastor's wishes. Consequently, additional research exploring the roles parish pastoral councils are playing in their parishes and their relationships with their pastors seems warranted.

The role of ethics in parish pastoral research is also an important area for additional inquiry. While the diocese recognized that maintaining the ethical integrity of parish pastoral research not only reflected their Catholic faith but also increased the likelihood that parishioners would participate in parish studies and accept research findings, the statement of research ethics included that the pastoral research guide might be insufficient to help parish pastoral councils negotiate the risks involved in parish pastoral research. Parishioners, especially those engaged in difficult parish reorganization processes, might face considerable risks of unwelcome conflict or even retribution from other parishioners for raising opposing points of view. In addition, parishioners may be uncomfortable raising or supporting points of view that they believe (rightly or wrongly) differ from the views of their pastor, diocesan authorities, or church teaching. Consequently, additional reflection helping parishes to develop simple, practical informed consent and confidentiality procedures is important.

Finally, the study group raised a number of interesting and potentially important research questions (Table 4) that offer fruitful opportunities for scholars and practitioners interested in conducting action research at the parish level. As participants voiced concerns spanning pastoral, programmatic, and organizational issues, they offered numerous opportunities for partnerships with academic researchers interested in anything from charitable giving and tithing, to building relationships with visitors and "seekers" interested in Catholicism, to program analysis and evaluation. These studies, in the spirit of parish pastoral research, would see the parish pastoral council members not as objects for study but as

co-inquirers, requiring professional researchers to adjust their approaches and methodologies to meet the unique needs of the parish context. In the process, such research would provide an invaluable opportunity to understand Catholic parishes from the inside, and most important of all, offer the research the chance not only to observe but also to inform American Catholic life in a moment of tremendous change.

**Table 1**

Please provide three (3) words that come to mind when you think of parish pastoral research:

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<b>Clusters of Terms*</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Insight/Discernment	7
Work/Hard Work	5
Time/Time-consuming	4
Information/Data	4
Parish Census/Inventory	3
Vital/Needed	3
Assess/Evaluate	2
Communication	2
Difficult/Challenging	2
Guide/Lead	2
Listen/Listening	2
Planning	2

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*\*Terms mentioned only once were omitted.*

**Table 2**

What are the three (3) biggest CHALLENGES you see in parish pastoral research?

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<b>Theme*</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Encouraging cooperation and participation among parishioners	11
Interpreting data, especially when interpretations conflict or the results are unexpected	6
Training/Competency of researchers	5
Limited time to do research effectively	5
Limited financial resources	3
Inexperience in survey design	2

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*\*Themes mentioned only once were omitted.*

**Table 3**

What are the three (3) biggest OPPORTUNITIES you see in parish pastoral research?

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<b>Theme*</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Creating a more vibrant parish	8
Increasing our knowledge of parishioners and the parish	8
Improving how we meet the parish's needs	6
Improving participation and engagement	6
Learning to move forward and become one family	3
More training and resources for parish research	2

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*\*Themes mentioned only once were omitted.*

**Table 4**

Opportunities for Parish Pastoral Research Suggested by Workshop Attendees

#### Spiritual

- What are the basic spiritual needs of parishioners?
- What is the ratio of visitors to parishioners? How can we welcome and invite visitors to stay?
- What are the expectations of the “seekers”? What is the common ground with current parishioners?
- Are we inviting and supporting faithful vocations to the priesthood and religious life, as well as to marriage and the single life?

#### Programmatic

- What's going on in the community within and around the parish territory? What are its needs?
- What service opportunities exist currently and what are unmet?
- How can we keep old members and involve the new ones?
- Are there opportunities to share programs with neighboring parishes?
- How can we begin to engage young people in the parish? What are their needs?

#### Organizational

- How can we engage in less labor-intensive fundraising?
  - How can we break down the barriers between the “cliques” in the parish?
  - What are the leadership needs (clergy and lay) of the parish?
  - Looking inward, are we a merger candidate?
-