

Catholic Parishes and Choice: Risks and Opportunities
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One of the most overlooked influences on Catholic parish life, viability and sustainability is *choice*, that is, the ability of the person in the pew to choose to stay, transfer, share or leave the parish they attend and/or the Catholic Church. These individual decisions are influenced by liturgical style, quality and relevance of preaching, quality of music, worship space, welcoming, hospitality and having drive times of less than 15 minutes.

An Example:

- Three closely located parishes operate with widely varying styles of Catholic practices described as ranging from progressive to traditional to moderate.
- Lakes, freeways and boundaries of cities within these parishes provide physical and cultural “edges” where *differences* matter.
- What is defined as “quality” ministry in liturgy, faith formation, pastoral care, Catholic schools and stewardship greatly differs between the parishes.
- There are differences in leadership styles and practices among these parishes.
- Catholics may cross the “edges” mentioned above to meet their faith needs if the closest parish to them does not.

Probable Risks

While all three of the “example” parishes may effectively meet the broad array of faith needs of Catholic households within the geographic area, if there is change in any one parish, a “ripple effect” will impact the other parishes. This may be related to:

- Changes in pastoral leadership, affecting the existing “balance point” between the parishes leading to growth and loss for any two parishes. This could result in:
 - 25%+ loss / gain of parish membership in as little as six months, with an accompanying loss/gain of revenues
 - Reductions and additions to parish staff and programs to absorb loss/gain
- Any one of the three parishes could experience growth so that they decide to expand

facilities, ministries and take on debt. But this change could lead to:

- 25%+ loss of parish membership in the “expansion” parish in as little as one year after the start of the capital campaign (with accompanying loss of revenues)
 - Need to both reduce and add to parish staff and programs
 - Facilities in parishes shift from being balanced to crowded or under-utilized
- Any one of the three parishes could experience a change in a key staff member who “anchors” ministries, resulting in an increase in parishioner dissatisfaction and the reduction of stewardship, participation and involvement.

Opportunities for Managing Risks

- Conduct annual ‘geo-mapping’ of all three Catholic parishes to analyze stewardship and capital giving to effectively determine the real risks to staff resources, pastoral needs and meeting debt payments.
- Leadership utilizes a reasonable *regional* view that reflects the local reality, rather than a single entity, *independent* view of parishes when making critical decisions on assignment of pastors, loan approval and assessment of long-term risks.
- Ensure that local parish planning factors in the “choice” option being exercised by Catholic households and is conducted with a regional view across both natural and cultural boundaries, based on data, trends, conditions and influences across multiple parishes.

Risks are due more to an absence of information and assessment than knowing “too much.” Therefore, continuous data gathering and assessment of risks will be the most helpful to and will best match the reality in Catholic parishes today. Seeing parishes as a “system” defined by both natural and cultural edges, rather than isolated and independent entities, will lead to a more solid basis for critical, data-informed decision-making.

Newsletter Issue: January 2006