



FADICA



Open Wide the Doors to Christ

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

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Executive Summary

“Open Wide the Doors to Christ”

A Study of Catholic Social Innovation for Parish Vitality

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:

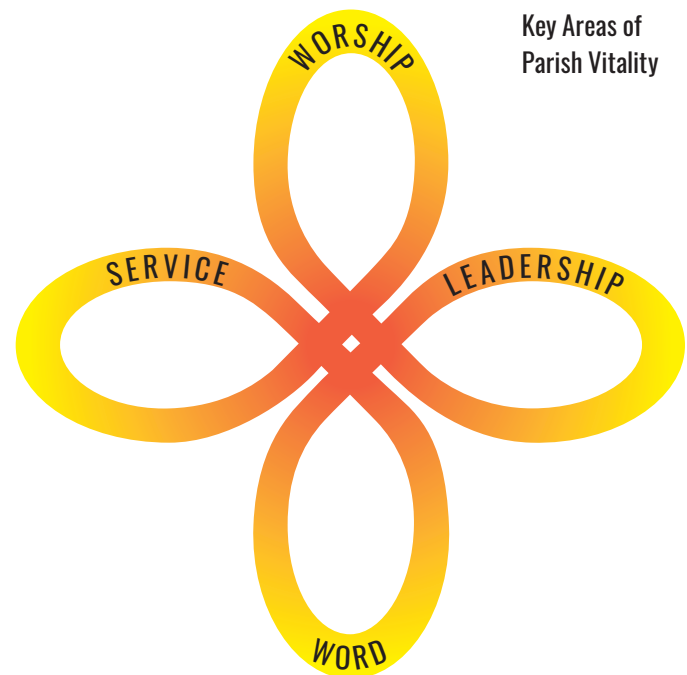
Catholic Social Innovation (CSI): A response to the Gospel which brings together diverse stakeholders and perspectives to address difficult issues. These stakeholders enter a safe space and, open to the Spirit, utilize animating and transformative processes that can unlock and unleash the creative, innovative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

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



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

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.

Endnotes

1. John Paul II, Homily of John Paul II for the Inauguration of His Pontificate.

2. Patricia Wittberg, SC, *Building Strong Church Communities*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2012), 59.

Author Biographies

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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. Haggar 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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Mark Mogilka serves as Senior Consultant for Meitler, a Church planning and management consulting firm located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Prior to his retirement from diocesan ministry in June 2017, Mogilka served for 42 years in diocesan office ministries in three dioceses and served seven different bishops. He has master's degrees in Social Work from the University of Wisconsin and Religious Studies from the University of Detroit. He has done workshops, consulting and planning projects in over 60 different dioceses in the United States and Canada and continues to serve the Church as a workshop presenter, pastoral researcher and consultant. He co-authored a book entitled "Pastoring Multiple Parishes." In 2007 he received the Yves Congar Award for "extraordinary service, initiative, creativity and sharing" from the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development. In 2017 he was given the Rev. Louis J. Luzbetak Award by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA) "for exemplary church research".

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