

# FORMING DISCIPLES TODAY:

## A CONSIDERATION OF BEST PRACTICES AMONG ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISHES IN NORTH AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

The notion of “best practices” remains a staple of business management. Learning from others and adapting what they do best to one’s own context and within one’s own control seems obvious as a valuable approach to being successful.

But talk of “best practices” might appear out of place when it comes to faith. In the Catholic culture, can parishes co-opt corporate concepts when their work is situated decidedly in the spiritual realm? Is a religious mission carried out along the same lines as a corporate one? How does one define “success” when it comes to parish life?

In practice, parishes, even with their other-worldly aim and focus, function in ways similar to any corporate entity. They, too, remain subject to principles of organizational behavior and benefit from understanding all that business management entails. Their “product” may be messiah-driven rather than market-driven, but their “success” also demands the engagement of their stakeholding parishioners.

Embracing both faith and function, the Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) has studied contemporary parish practices from the vantage point of the stakeholders. In particular, CLI research has focused on learning what people, programs, and activities succeed in fulfilling a parish’s chief task, namely leading the faithful to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Now, by conducting a deep dive into data from its longitudinal surveys, CLI endeavors “to discover more about what drives discipleship in parishes” and to identify “what strategies and interventions yield the most significant growth in discipleship.”<sup>2</sup> In the consideration that follows, we first describe the methodologies followed in this research. We then identify seven “best practices” of parishes deemed to be highly successful in the art of disciple-making; each of these practices, comparable to those in the corporate world, is explained in distinct reference to parish life and with examples that might be adopted or adapted elsewhere. Finally, we offer concluding thoughts on the future implications of these findings, in terms of both practice and research.

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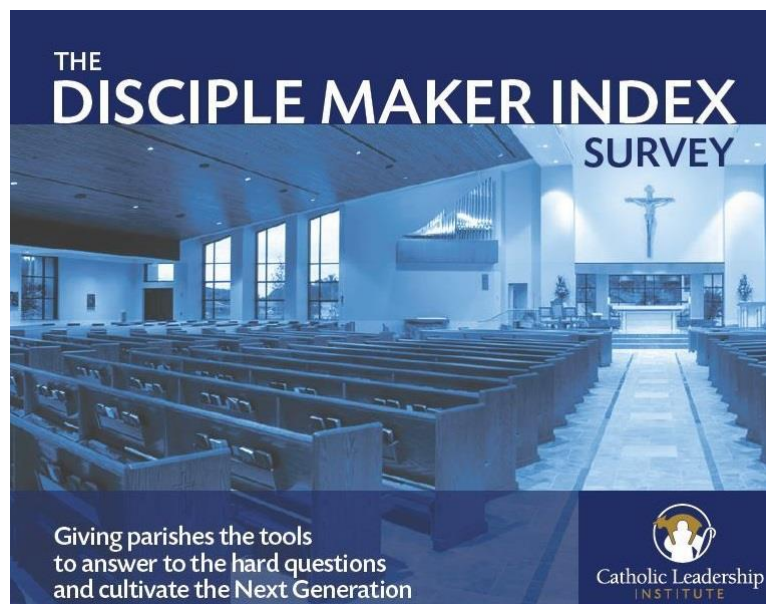
<sup>1</sup> Prepared in response to a grant from the Psalm 103 Foundation to fund “The Disciple Maker Index: Digging into Data to Discover What Drives Discipleship in Catholic Parishes.”

<sup>2</sup> From the description of the CLI project in the above-named grant proposal.

## METHODOLOGIES

The compilation of best practices in parish disciple-making is drawn from “[The Disciple Maker Index](#),” CLI’s continuing survey of parish life through the Disciple-Maker Index. Utilizing a unique, cutting-edge technology, this tool gathers comprehensive feedback about parishioners’ spiritual growth through 75 questions in areas of their attitudes and beliefs, their level of participation in parish activities and programs, and their sense of satisfaction with parish life.

Begun in 2014, the index has now generated data from more than 131,600 people in more than 600 parishes in 28 (arch)dioceses in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>3</sup> The resulting insights have proven invaluable in terms of enabling parish leadership to make data-driven decisions regarding priorities that will ultimately help parishioners grow in faith.<sup>4</sup>



In September of 2018, FR. PAUL SOPER<sup>5</sup> undertook a regression analysis on a data set of 72,000 respondents.<sup>6</sup> His study yielded a list of the top-20 performing parishes on every question of the survey. From this list, CLI identified which parishes appeared most frequently, for the purpose of ascertaining how those parishes acted intentionally to drive discipleship.

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<sup>3</sup> Data current as of 4/30/19.

<sup>4</sup> A [series of commentaries](#) being published by Ascension Press offers an ongoing exploration of particular insights from the DMI data.

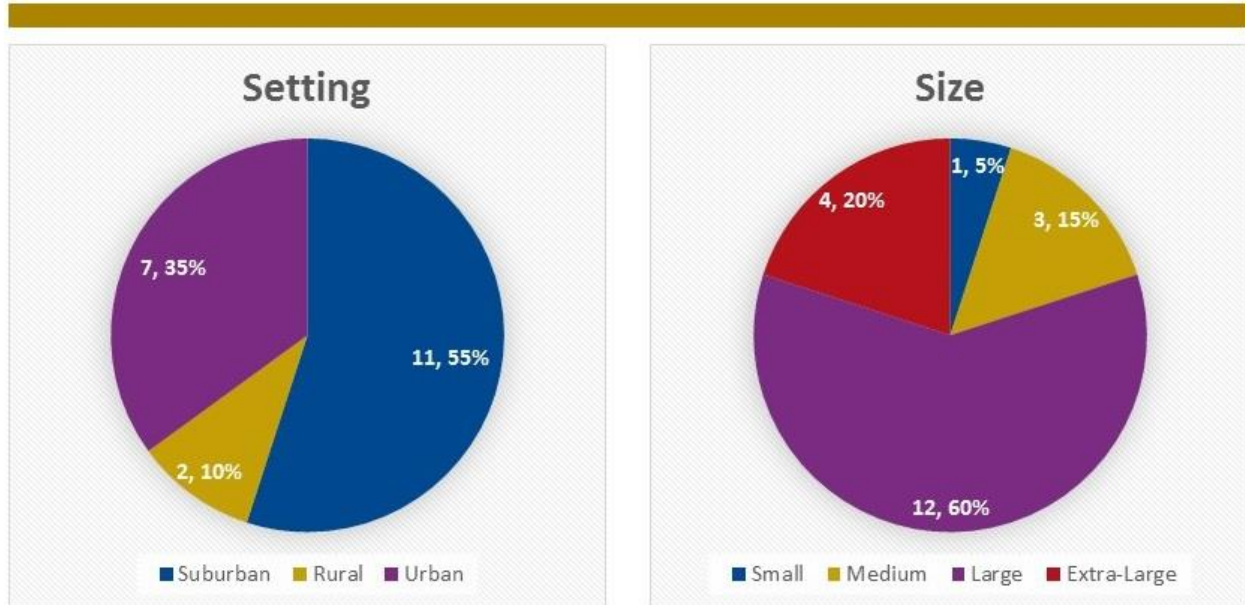
<sup>5</sup> [Fr. Soper](#) serves as Secretary for Evangelization and Discipleship, and Director of Pastoral Planning, for the Archdiocese of Boston; in his spare time, he publishes scientific works with a team from the Harvard/Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics!

<sup>6</sup> The smaller data set resulted from removing first-time results for parishes that completed the survey twice and from removing results from parishes that had fewer than 150 respondents. The resulting data set comprised 72,068 respondents from 200 parishes.

The result of this analysis led to the “top-20 performing parishes” among all those who completed the DMI survey.<sup>7</sup> These parishes are found in ten (arch)dioceses:

Bridgeport, CT	St. Augustine, FL
Denver, CO	St. Petersburg, FL
Houma-Thibodaux, LA	Toronto, Canada
Orlando, FL	Tulsa, OK
Philadelphia, PA	Wichita, KS

The following chart shows the demographic profile of these parishes in terms of setting and size:



What drives discipleship in these parishes? From the DMI data, CLI hypothesized that disciple-making resulted from three key factors: (1) strong leadership, especially from pastors; (2) a vibrant liturgical life, particularly by way of quality preaching and through preparation for and participation in the sacraments; and (3) invested parishioners, as evident through intentional stewardship and active participation in parish faith formation.

With these ideas in mind, CLI then dug deeper into the data through onsite visits to, and virtual encounters with, key constituents of these parishes. Leadership consultants from CLI interviewed pastors and conducted focus groups comprised of staff, volunteers, and parishioners.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The list of parishes can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>8</sup> For each of the top-20 parishes, interviews were held with pastors and focus groups were conducted. Questions for each group are listed in Appendix B (pastors) and Appendix C (focus groups). Findings from these consultations are provided in Appendix D.

## “BEST PRACTICES”

From the DMI data, the regression analysis, and the consultations with parish personnel, CLI has identified seven (7) “best practices” that characterize the life and work of vibrant communities of the Christian faithful.<sup>9</sup> While comparable to corporate characteristics, these practices have a distinct meaning in a parish setting, where they contribute decisively to the work of “disciple-making” that remains the chief task of any Catholic parish.<sup>10</sup> We promote them here in the hope that other parishes might consider the applicability of these practices to their own contexts, so that the practice of the faith might continue to grow.

### (1) *Strong Leadership*

In any and every organization, [leadership drives success](#). The work of leaders, for better or worse, permeates the culture of a company, sets the tone for the work being done, and guides progress toward shared goals.

In a Catholic parish, the pastor leads as the shepherd of the local flock. More than managerial, his leadership must be both pastoral and ministerial, the former referring to the spiritual care he provides to parishioners, the latter in reference to the ecclesial context of his work. In this respect, the pastor, as the ordained minister given overall responsibility for the life of the parish, serves as a point of reference for all that happens in a parish.



Research on the top-20 performing parishes indicates the critically important role the pastor plays in the life of the parish. In fact, the good work of the pastor appears to be *the* key driver in terms of personal growth and parish recommendation:

Those who express strong agreement in satisfaction with their pastor are four times more likely to report that they have grown as Catholics. Even more, they are nine times more likely to recommend their parish to others.

Among these parishes, both clergy and participants in the focus groups highlight the importance of the pastor's presence; his being visible to and engaged with parishioners through every aspect of parish life is a primary driver in disciple-making.

But the singular personality of the pastor does not suffice for a parish's success in making disciples. As good leadership needs to be embodied throughout an organization, so all who work in and for

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<sup>9</sup> By definition (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 515 §1), a parish is “a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church; the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”

<sup>10</sup> As used here, “disciple-making” is the catch-all term for encompassing what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 2179) describes as the work of a parish: “The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of the liturgical life: it gathers them together in this celebration; it teaches Christ's saving doctrine; it practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brother love.”

a parish are called to lead.<sup>11</sup> This includes assisting priests, paid employees with diverse responsibilities, and volunteer directors of parish organizations.

The work of “[lay ecclesial ministers](#)” – based on the Baptismal mission of all believers rather than on the particular mission conferred by Ordination – plays an increasingly important role in parish life, particularly given the dearth of clerical vocations. Thus, the leadership of a contemporary parish also entails strength in managerial responsibilities, a reality acknowledged by pastors of the top-20 parishes.

Consistent with best practices in any corporate environment, strong pastoral management of a parish begins with hiring and training the right personnel. It entails providing good guidance, especially in terms of clearly defining expectations for staff and volunteer directors. It requires providing them the autonomy to carry out their tasks. And it calls for accountability from all who play a part in the disciple-making function of the parish.

While a majority of focus groups among the top-20 parishes referenced their love of their pastor, the overall DMI data suggests less satisfaction among parishioners when it comes to other parish leaders. Only 39% of respondents strongly agree that they would recommend other priests serving their parish to a friend, while only 40% strongly agree that they would recommend a parish’s staff to a friend.

Still, *the leadership of the **pastor** emerges from the DMI data as the most critical factor in parishioners belief that the parish helps them grow as disciples.* The strength of his leadership, as well as that provided by other priests and parish staff, comes to expression in the next three practices.

## **(2) Clear Communication**

In the corporate world, communication is critical to success; indeed, it may be [today’s most important skill](#). Good communications governs relationships among personnel and accounts for the effectiveness of promoting brands or products.

Not surprisingly, clear communication also ranks among the best practices in successful parishes. But it may be even more critical to a faith community. Given the mandate and mission of the Church – to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19) – communication is not merely one aspect of parish life; rather, it pervades all efforts at disciple-making.

In the top-20 performing parishes, pastors and focus groups alike indicated the critical importance of parish communications. Generally, this calls for transparent interactions that are regularly undertaken among parish constituencies, clearly crafted and delivered, and two-way in direction. Pastors, in particular, noted the importance of working from a strategic plan and keeping the



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<sup>11</sup> Cf. [Chris Lowney](#), *Everyone Leads: How to Revitalize the Catholic Church* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).



entire parish community updated and informed about decisions made relative to that plan. They also viewed feedback as a gift!

More specifically, strong parish communication happens by way of multiple means. While the Sunday bulletin remains perhaps the most popular form, parish communications today also (and increasingly) engage digital media and, to some extent, radio and television.<sup>12</sup>

In today's digital world, an attractive, interactive, and up-to-date website functions as the portal for the disciple-making work of today's parish; more than simply providing information, it offers an opportunity for parish and parishioners to connect and to develop relationships. Top-20 parishes also take advantage of communications technology (e.g., apps), have an active social media presence, and engage in direct digital communications with parishioners (text messages or email) which they use to share information and extend invitations.

Whatever the medium, coordination of communication efforts among multiple ministries is an important way to strengthen the bonds of the parish community. Among the top-20 parishes, making information accessible is a key driver for success; parishioners who value their parish's communications are one-and-a-half times more likely to recommend their parish to others. Making information about the parish easy to find, especially for those "searching" by digital means, is a simple way to connect parishioners to their local community.

### ***(3) Welcome & Acceptance***

For any business to succeed, it needs customers; thus, an emphasis on "customer service" remains high on the list of corporate best practices. Whether in-person or online, succeeding at customer satisfaction leads to praise and loyalty, both of which contribute to a better bottom-line.

While believers are decidedly not customers, nevertheless they are consumers in the sense that they are recipients of the work of a parish. (As we shall see below, they are also protagonists of that work.) Attending to these religious consumers more in terms of salvation than satisfaction, a Catholic parish finds success to the extent that it embraces the challenge to minister to all in its midst. In this respect, the popular hymnic refrain – "all are welcome" – also serves as a best practice for beginning the task of making disciples.



While professing articles of faith and adhering to doctrine, the Church community is rightly characterized as the People of God. Notably, this people gathers together in the recognition that they are all sinners, as Pope Francis himself acknowledged.<sup>13</sup> Thus, an emphasis on persons in the

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory Erlandson, director of the Catholic News Service, observes that "a vibrant Catholic media ... is still the most widespread means of ongoing adult faith education and formation we have today." See his John Cardinal Foley Lecture on "The Power of the Word: Catholic Media and Faith Formation," published in *Origins*, volume 46, number 38 (2/23/17), pp. 600-604.

<sup>13</sup> See the pope's answer to the first question posed to him by Fr. Antonio Spadaro in an interview published worldwide in Jesuit journals.

parish – making them feel accepted and valued and needed – is what the faithful first encounter in their experience of a parish.

The best practice of creating a welcoming culture entails a reciprocal relationship between a personal approach to individuals and a communal support of all/by all in the parish. Focus groups in the top-20 parishes highlighted their parish's strong reputation for being such a friendly community.

How can parishes create this culture of acceptance? It begins with reaching out to new parishioners and meeting with them personally to welcome them and to understand the gifts and talents they have to contribute to the parish community. It continues by following up with those who do express interest in being more involved in the parish. And it is regularly evident in how fellow parishioners, especially those exercising a lay ministry (e.g., ushers), act toward members of the congregation.

In the top-20 performing parishes, those who experience a welcoming and accepting culture are 1.8 times more likely to credit the parish with helping them grow spiritually and 2.1 times more likely to recommend the parish to others.

Still, the overall DMI data bears out the need for parishes to do more in terms of building up the community of disciples. Establishing and developing a close connection with the local Catholic community differentiates those who report practicing their faith from those who do not. Only 26% of all DMI respondents strongly agree that their parish follows up with them when they express interest in being more involved. Only 31% strongly agree that the parish provides a supportive community in time of personal or family need.

#### ***(4) Relevant Preaching***

In a corporate culture, [messaging](#) provides the link between a company and its customers. It tells the world who a company is, what it does, and why it is needed. Messaging makes a product or service known and sets it apart from the competition.

The messaging distinctive to the business of parish life plays out weekly – in the homily preached and heard by congregations. Beyond product promotion, parish messaging constitutes its very mission and purpose. After all, sharing the “Good News” of the Gospel, celebrating that message of salvation, and practicing the charity at the heart of that message are why parishes exist.

Given the centrality of the Sunday liturgy in the life of a parish, during which the largest number of parishioners are gathered in one place at one time, preaching becomes a singularly important opportunity for parishes to communicate that message. Relevant preaching connects the Word of God to the real, daily lives of parishioners. Open and honest preaching offers a personal example in the building up of authentic relationships. Spiritual preaching emphasizes the transformative role of sacramental grace in people's lives.



Pastors in the top-20 parishes recognize the importance of this weekly activity and report spending significant time in preparing their homilies well in advance of the Sunday liturgy. Parishioners, in turn, identify a vibrant Sunday Mass and effective preaching as key drivers in parish life; those who strongly agree that their parish provides these experiences are 1.5 to 1.8 times more likely to report growing as Catholics, and are 1.7 to 2.3 times more likely to recommend their parish to others.

Here, too, as the overall data reveals, parishes would benefit by re-examining their efforts at disciple-making during the Sunday liturgy. Only 35% of all DMI respondents strongly agree that their parish's Mass is a vibrant and engaging experience and that their clergy's preaching connects faith with everyday life. Given the [research](#) on "why Americans go (and don't go) to religious services," and the resumption of a [downward slide](#) in Catholic church attendance, attention to this best practice is a particularly pressing concern.

### ***(5) Intentional Discipleship***

In business, especially retail business, consumer behavior or [customer experience](#) remains a constant corporate concern. Product creation and promotion represent one side of the business exchange, but on the other side, attention to what buyers do is necessary to seal the deal.

Parishes obviously do not sell anything, but the behavior and experience of parishioners do contribute to the parish's mission. Conscientious participation in the Sunday experience, bolstered by active listening to good preaching, remain central to its spiritual task, but parishes also engage parishioners in other ways of disciple-making. Given the universal call to holiness vested in all believers by virtue of their baptism, and recently [exhorted by Pope Francis](#), discipleship demands intentionality and benefits from the support of parish programming.



Intentional discipleship can take many forms, but what stands out in the top-20 performing parishes is a focus on sacraments and spirituality. Focus groups in these parishes speak to having well-developed programs of religious education, with a particular emphasis on preparing their people to participate in the sacraments. Likewise, they emphasize the need for people to develop their desire to be connected deeply with Christ, a desire expressed in the practice of personal prayer. Parishes support this growth by offering a wide variety of spiritual programs, such as Bible studies, prayer or faith sharing groups, parish retreats, and a host of popular devotions (e.g., Eucharistic Adoration, Marian prayers, Novenas, etc.).

The key driver in the cultivation of this intentionality, according to top-20 pastors, is a simple, yet often overlooked practice: extending an invitation. Purposefully inviting people to Mass or parish programs, even simply offering to pray with someone, opens a door to sharing the faith story common to all the faithful.

According to DMI data, how a parish equips parishioners to grow in their faith and share their story drives the development of disciples.



Personal prayer time is most frequent among a majority of parishioners (with 88% claiming they do this), and participation in devotions is fairly frequent (with 42% reporting they have done this in the past year). Less frequent has been participation in parish retreats (only 28% in the past year) and in Eucharistic adoration (only 27% in the past year).

In terms of sharing the story, 73% report conversing about Jesus with someone else during the past year, and 63% report sharing their own personal witness story.

While an active prayer life is obviously essential to growing in one's relationship with Jesus, the role of a parish remains necessary to support this growth. Providing continuing education in the faith and offering a variety of spiritual programs are two ways a successful parish can help the faithful to respond to the Lord's call to discipleship in ways suitable to their particular vocations.

### ***(6) Intentional Stewardship***

Every company, from start-ups to long-standing ones, needs investors. Their contributions make possible what the company does. Their commitment signals support. Their engagement enables progress and development.

Successful parishes are no different in their need for investment. In a parish, however, the distinction between investor, provider, and consumer dissolves; as one People of God sharing the journey of faith, all parishioners are (or should be) engaged in the transactional and transformational work of a parish. In this respect, successful parishes engage in intentional stewardship, a concept inclusive of financial concerns but with a broader meaning to the notion of "investment."

According to the focus groups, top-20 performing parishes put an emphasis on intentional stewardship. They recognize the need to raise money to support the work they do. They are transparent about finances and direct in asking for donations. Whether through traditional collections (weekly or by "block" visits), online mechanisms, or defined tithing, these parishes seek to engage everyone in the parish in the work of caring for the parish.



But they also realize that a disciple's stewardship means more than financial generosity. Every parishioner can "contribute" through prayer. Every parishioner can offer his time or her talent to parish programming. Every parishioner can volunteer to assist with advancing some activity of parish life. Helping parishioners identify what they can do and personally inviting them to contribute in those ways enables a parish not only to maintain its good works but also to give parishioners an opportunity to put their faith into practice.

### ***(7) Community Involvement***

Finally, companies nowadays are putting increasing emphasis on the practice of [corporate social responsibility](#). Analysts may debate the benefits of embracing this activity, but expanding the role

of companies into the life of the community does tend to increase employee and customer engagement.

Catholic parishes view social engagement not as a potential benefit but as an essential responsibility. The Church is, by definition, a community of believers; as such, discipleship is necessarily a communal enterprise. Whether in terms of liturgical celebration, charitable service, or simply social gatherings, parish life thrives when the entire community is involved and engaged.



Top-20 performing pastors acknowledge the importance of identifying and prioritizing community needs. Focus groups in these parishes speak of the importance of being involved in various outreach endeavors. In every case, community involvement is person-centered, need-based, and mission-oriented. To use an image made popular by Pope Francis,<sup>14</sup> the doors of a parish church must open inward to cultivate the spiritual life of the people, but they must also open outward to lead people to lives of evangelical charity in service of others.

Parishes can open their doors to community involvement in a variety of ways. Service to others is always needed, whether offering meals or collecting items to help the needy. Social events of many kinds (meals, fairs, etc.) bring parishioners together outside of the typical “church” activities to forge relationships of affection and/or support.

While this love of God and neighbor, together, form a single commandment for Christian disciples to follow, the overall DMI data suggests that opportunities to do so are less apparent in terms of community involvement. Only 31% of all respondents strongly agree that their parish provides them with opportunities to serve those in need, and only 26% strongly agree that their parish follows up with them when they express interest in becoming more involved. Even on a purely social level, only 14% of parishioners report having participated in a parish social event in the past year.

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## “A LOOK TO THE FUTURE”

Akin to successful businesses, parishes more successful at disciple-making are characterized by the “best practices” described above. Whether, and to what extent, these practices offer the best “[fit](#)” in the specific context of other parishes remains to be determined at the local level.

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, [General Audience](#) (11/18/15): “as the door of God’s mercy is always open, so too must the doors of our churches, our communities, our parishes, our institutions, our dioceses, be open, because this is how we can all go out to bring this mercy of God.” Cf. Richard Gaillardetz and Edward Hahnenberg (eds.), [A Church with Open Doors: Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium](#) (Michael Glazier, 2015).

CLI is committed to continuing analysis of these important trends in disciple-making. In particular, we plan to incorporate additional data on the top-20 parishes and compare this with an analysis of the bottom-performing parishes to confirm what works best and what does not. In this way, we hope to develop a library of best practices open to all parishes.

In terms of emerging areas of study, a larger sample size in the DMI would make possible an examination of the potential connection between sacramental Confession and parish life. Beyond the existing data, cross-referencing the DMI with related leadership programs (e.g., “[Good Leaders, Good Shepherds](#)”) could offer an additional means of understanding the impact that top-performing pastors have on parish life.

In the longer term, research will benefit from a longitudinal analysis of the DMI data in conjunction with parish realities such as sacramental trends, staffing, and finances. Additionally, the “best practices” could be used in conjunction with demographic information on community engagement (e.g., through [MissionInsite](#)) to identify target-specific ways in which parishes can best employ their resources in fulfillment of their mission.

That mission is never-ending! Forming disciples for Christ is the goal of every parish. Identifying and implementing the best ways to achieve that goal is a work that the Catholic Leadership Institute offers for the good of the Church, now and in the future.

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## APPENDIX A

## Top 20 Parishes from the Regression Analysis

<i>(Arch)Diocese</i>	<i>Setting</i>	<i>Size</i>	<i>Parish</i>
Bridgeport	Suburban	Small	<b>Holy Spirit</b> <a href="http://www.holyspiritstamford.org">www.holyspiritstamford.org</a>
Bridgeport	Suburban	Large	<b>St. Matthew</b> <a href="http://stmatthewnorwalk.org">http://stmatthewnorwalk.org</a>
Bridgeport	Suburban	Large	<b>St. Pius</b> <a href="https://www.st-pius.org/">https://www.st-pius.org/</a>
Denver	Suburban	Extra-Large	<b>Immaculate Heart of Mary</b> <a href="https://ihmco.org/">https://ihmco.org/</a>
Denver	Suburban	Extra-Large	<b>St. Thomas More</b> <a href="https://www.stthomasmore.org">https://www.stthomasmore.org</a>
Houma Thibodaux	Rural	Large	<b>Holy Cross</b> <a href="http://holycrossmc.org/">http://holycrossmc.org/</a>
Houma Thibodaux	Rural	Large	<b>Sacred Heart</b> <a href="https://htdiocese.org/sacredheartcutoff">https://htdiocese.org/sacredheartcutoff</a>
Houma Thibodaux	Urban	Large	<b>St. Joseph (Co-Cathedral)</b> <a href="https://www.stjoseph-cc.org/">https://www.stjoseph-cc.org/</a>
Orlando	Urban	Medium	<b>St. Andrew</b> <a href="http://www.standrew-orlando.org/">http://www.standrew-orlando.org/</a>
Philadelphia	Urban	Large	<b>Holy Innocents</b> <a href="https://www.holyinnocentsrc.org/">https://www.holyinnocentsrc.org/</a>
Philadelphia	Suburban	Large	<b>Queen of the Universe</b> <a href="http://www.quparish.com/">http://www.quparish.com/</a>
Philadelphia	Urban	Medium	<b>St. Raymond of Penafort</b> <a href="https://saintraymond.net/">https://saintraymond.net/</a>
St. Augustine	Urban	Medium	<b>Christ the King</b> <a href="https://www.ctkcatholic.com/">https://www.ctkcatholic.com/</a>
St. Augustine	Suburban	Extra-Large	<b>St. Joseph</b> <a href="https://www.stjosephsjax.org/">https://www.stjosephsjax.org/</a>
St. Augustine	Suburban	Extra-Large	<b>St. Elizabeth Ann Seton</b> <a href="http://seaspcfl.org/">http://seaspcfl.org/</a>
St. Petersburg	Suburban	Large	<b>St. Catherine of Siena</b> <a href="https://scosparish.org/">https://scosparish.org/</a>
Toronto	Suburban	Medium	<b>Our Lady of the Airways</b> <a href="http://www.ourladyoftheairways.com/">http://www.ourladyoftheairways.com/</a>
Tulsa	Urban	Medium	<b>Christ the King</b> <a href="https://www.christthekingcatholic.church/">https://www.christthekingcatholic.church/</a>
Tulsa	Urban	Medium	<b>St. Anne's</b> <a href="https://stanneba.org/">https://stanneba.org/</a>
Wichita	Suburban	Medium	<b>Blessed Sacrament</b> <a href="https://blessedsacramentwichita.com/">https://blessedsacramentwichita.com/</a>

## APPENDIX B

## Questions for Pastor Interviews (n = 10)

*These are guiding questions for the facilitator. The facilitator should use pastor responses to generate additional follow up questions.*

1. Why do you believe your parish is so successful in xxx areas (mention a few of their high scores from the DMI report)?
2. What was most helpful about the Disciple Maker Index survey?
3. How do you go about making decisions?
4. In what ways does the parish, parishioners, staff support you?
5. How do you invite others into leadership or volunteer roles?
6. Do you have a strategic plan and goals? (if so, can we have a copy?)
7. How do you talk about stewardship with your people?
8. How do you prepare for your homilies?
9. How often does the parish offer the sacrament of reconciliation? How is confession promoted/talked about in the parish?
10. Does your parish offer any type of small groups or faith sharing opportunities? If so, how often, how many and how are they organized?
11. What is the process for those who want to be married in your parish?
12. How does your budget support a priority around forming intentional disciples? What investments in people, materials, or programs are you making/have you made?



## APPENDIX C

## Questions for Focus Groups (n = 10)

*These are guiding questions for the facilitator. The facilitator should use participant responses to generate additional follow up questions.*

1. What draws you to this parish? Why do you keep coming here/working here/volunteering here?
2. What does your parish currently do that feeds you/parishioners spiritually?
3. How does the parish meet people where they are at different places on their journey?
4. What does your parish currently do to make people feel welcomed and accepted?
5. Describe the Pastor's leadership style.
6. How does the parish staff provide high-quality "customer service" to parishioners?
7. What ministries or activities does your parish have that are most successful at engaging people in leadership/volunteerism at the parish?
8. What about Fr.'s homilies feed you spiritually? What do you like about them?
9. How does the parish equip you to share your personal witness story and/or talk about Jesus with friends and family?
10. What is the process for sacramental preparation at your parish?
11. What is the parish's practices around confession?
12. Why is stewardship important and how is it approached/communicated to parishioners?
13. Are there other things that you want to share about the parish that we didn't discuss?

## APPENDIX D

## Findings from Parish Consultations

### Findings from Pastor Interviews

- Five (5) of the pastors noted that being present, engaging, and visible to the community is imperative.
- Four (4) of the pastors focus on communication that is regular, clear, and two-way.
- Half of the pastors interviewed specifically noted the importance placed on the strategic plan and involving the community in updates and decisions.
- Half of the pastors interviewed spoke to the need for clearly defining expectations with staff and key leaders, and then stepping back to allow for their autonomy.
- Top performing pastors are able to identify and prioritize community needs.
- All pastors interviewed prepared for homilies well in advance of delivery. Their preaching typically includes one or both of the following:
  - a reference to current news to make the homily relevant and actionable;
  - a tie-in sacraments.
- These pastors view feedback (such as the DMI) as a gift and use it!

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### Findings from Focus Groups

- All seven (7) groups spoke of the need for intentional prayer and desire to have a deep connection with Christ. This is often lived through participation in discipleship programming.
- All seven (7) groups talked about the parish's strong reputation of being welcoming, accepting, and friendly.
- Five (5) parishes are notably involved in the community and outreach endeavors (service, social, etc.).
- In four (4) parishes, a leader's being visible and engaged (staff and/or ministry leaders) was important.
- Half of the parishes practice intentional stewardship.
- Half of the parishes take advantage of technology including social media.
- A majority of the parishes had well-developed sacramental preparation programs.
- A majority of parish focus groups referenced their love of the pastor.

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