

# Multicultural Ministry in Parishes Today and Important Themes for its Future

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Taken as a whole, the research findings from the Emerging Models in Pastoral Leadership Project provide a detailed snapshot of the current strengths and challenges, the hopes and fears of leaders in Catholic parishes throughout the country. When viewed through the lens of ministry in multicultural, bicultural, and ethnic parishes, the insights offer a tantalizing glimpse into the cultural dynamics of many contemporary parish communities, but they also raise many more questions than they answer.

This summary will synthesize the most important findings of the research, identify areas in which further research will enhance our understanding of multicultural parish ministry, and present important themes and suggestions for improving and expanding ministry in multicultural parishes in the coming years. For a complete analysis of the Emerging Models Project research viewed through the lens of multicultural ministry, see *Ministry in Multicultural and National / Ethnic Parishes*, available online at: [www.emergingmodels.org/reports.cfm](http://www.emergingmodels.org/reports.cfm).

## **Major findings of the Emerging Models Project with respect to multicultural ministry**

- Bicultural, multicultural, and ethnic parishes are fairly common in our Church, and they are likely to become even more common in the foreseeable future.
- Ethnic identity plays a significant role for many Catholics in their choice of parish affiliation, and young adults are no exception. As a result, most parishes and campus ministries are less culturally diverse than the overall Catholic population.
- Most Catholic parishes in the U.S. currently provide Sunday liturgies in only one language—typically English. A significant minority of parishes offers a choice of two languages—most often English and Spanish—and only a small percentage provides three or more language options.
- Pastoral leaders in the regional symposiums generally had some awareness of the gifts and challenges that people of diverse cultures bring to their parishes, and most expressed an ideal that people of every race, language, and culture should be welcome, but few articulated models or strategies for improving pastoral outreach to people of other cultures.
- There is much greater cultural diversity among lay Catholics than among Catholic ministry professionals, both clerical and lay. Nevertheless, our leadership is significantly more culturally diverse today than it was ten years ago.
- It will take a systematic, comprehensive, and intentional effort in our Church to develop a corps of pastoral leaders that reflect the cultural diversity of the faithful.

- The pastoral care of the faithful in ethnic, bicultural, and multicultural parishes is a significant issue facing the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it was not seen as one of the top priorities by the majority of the pastoral leaders in the Emerging Models research.
- The dearth of racial/ethnic diversity among Catholic leaders participating in the Emerging Models research made it difficult to accurately assess the importance of preparation for bicultural or multicultural ministry in our Church.

## Recommendations for future research on ministry in Catholic parishes

1. **Develop a theology for ministry in ethnic, bicultural, and multicultural parishes grounded in an ecclesiology of communion.** The ecclesiology of the parish has received much less attention than that of the diocesan and universal church. In the absence of a guiding theology, many pastoral leaders have taken the “unity in diversity” principle to mean that immigrants and other cultural groups need to be included in every liturgy, every ministry, and every structure in the parish or diocese. There seems to be a widespread assumption that to do otherwise by providing culturally or linguistically tailored pastoral care and services to particular groups creates an undesirable “parallel church” within the parish or diocese. However, employing the “one parish, one community” approach to ministry can also be counterproductive, especially with respect to the most recent immigrants whose linguistic abilities and sociocultural needs usually require a specialized pastoral response.

This situation calls for theological reflection on the unity of the parish and its relationship to the unity expressed in the diocesan and universal church. The communion that is experienced in the parish is grounded in the common baptism of the faithful, the common faith as expressed in the creed, participation in the celebration of the same Eucharist irrespective of the language or time of the Mass, and the pastoral care of one pastor, appointed by the bishop. When particular ministries build on these foundations and draw parishioners into an active participation in the Eucharist, they strengthen the bonds of communion with the parish, the diocese, and the universal Church—whether or not the full diversity of the community is represented in a specific gathering or celebration. Once the nature of the parish as a communion of believers is better appreciated, pastoral leaders will have greater freedom to establish the structures and ministries that are best suited for facilitating instruction, celebration, and deeply living the Catholic faith as disciples of Christ among parishioners of every language, culture, and race.<sup>1</sup>

2. **Identify the parishes that serve sizeable groups of two or more distinct cultures and/or languages,** as well as those whose majority population is not of the mainstream Euro-American culture. In order to identify hidden groups of Catholics living within a parish’s boundaries, the most comprehensive method is to conduct a door-to-door census of the parish territory, giving particular attention to apartment buildings and low-income housing where recent immigrants and other cultural groups tend to be concentrated. A less time-consuming alternative is to examine publicly available census tract data and consult the public schools about the linguistic groups they serve. Of course, not all immigrants are Catholic, but these efforts will inform the parish’s plans for pastoral outreach and evangelization.

An inventory of the particular cultural groups served in each parish should also be readily available, both at the diocesan and national levels. This information is essential for bishops and ministry formation institutions because it identifies the cultural and linguistic skills ministers will need to be effective in their ministry in a particular parish or diocese. Suitable training can then be integrated into their initial and continuing formation programs.

3. **Describe exemplary models of parishes in cultural transition.** Most of the participants in the regional symposiums seemed to agree that bicultural and multicultural parishes should be marked by an experience of “unity in diversity.” However, it was not clear that they all understood the implications of this phrase as it was described in the U.S. bishop’s statement from 2000, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us*. To help pastoral ministers understand this phrase more clearly, Alejandro Aguilera-Titus has developed a nine-step process<sup>2</sup> for integrating two or more cultural groups in a single parish in accordance with the bishops’ vision.

One of the strengths of his process is that it recognizes the validity of the various parish models for multicultural ministry, depending on the history and current circumstances of the cultural groups in the parish, as well as the linguistic and cultural skills of the available pastoral ministers. At the same time, it offers a path and a vision for integration that respects and embraces the richness of different cultures and their religious expressions—unity in diversity—so that parishes can grow beyond the limitations of particular multicultural parish models as the community changes and matures. However, there is a great need for case studies of parishes in cultural transition that have negotiated this process well amid the real-life dynamics of parish life.

Articulating the leadership traits and ministry skills that are characteristic of leaders and leadership teams in vibrant bicultural, multicultural, and ethnic parishes is also necessary. Researchers should be attentive to the specialized characteristics of leaders in the emerging models of parish ministry such as 517§2 parishes, pastors of multiple parishes, and cluster councils. The skills and character traits of immigrant priests who have learned to lead effectively in U.S. mainstream, bicultural, or multicultural parishes should also be profiled, since the importation of priests from other countries is becoming a common approach to meet the pastoral and sacramental needs of U.S. Catholics.

4. **Intentionally include diverse cultural groups in all future research on Catholic parishes and leadership,** both as participants in the design of the research and as well-represented subjects in its implementation. Records should be maintained of the racial/cultural background of the participants and their primary language. Ask questions about language, culture, and their impact on the experience of the particular dimensions of parish life being studied so that the findings can be interpreted in their appropriate cultural context.

An example of how the demographic makeup of the participants in a consultation or research project can affect the results comes from the *National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, held at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota from July 31 to August 3, 2007. Latino leaders were included in the steering committee for this event from the beginning, and the team set an informal goal for a third of the participants to be

representatives of cultural groups other than the mainstream, which they very nearly achieved. When the recommendations were prioritized by the participants, two of the top recommendations were that the USCCB form a national task force to open pathways to lay ecclesial ministry for undocumented immigrants, and that cultural immersion experiences be integrated into all formation programs for lay ecclesial ministers.<sup>3</sup>

From the perspective of Hispanic ministry, one of the greatest successes of the National Symposium was the energy and determination it created among Latino/a leaders to engage in continuing dialogue at the national level with their peers in mainstream and other ethnic ministries. We have much to learn from each other, and we can no longer afford to articulate pastoral visions, develop plans, and set standards in isolation from one another. In order for that to happen, the Church must be intentional about including and measuring cultural diversity in its research efforts.

5. **Ascertain the obstacles to careers in ministry and to the successful completion of ministry formation for immigrants and underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.** Young adults of diverse cultural backgrounds should be a particular focus of this research. The next step would be to find or create pathways to overcome the most common obstacles in formation for ministry. This information should be shared with vocations directors and leaders in seminaries and other ministry formation centers so that they can better advocate for and support leaders of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Undoubtedly, educational attainment and immigration status are significant challenges that will not easily be removed. Nevertheless they are not insurmountable, and the Catholic Church has the resources needed to address them—if it can muster the will to carry out the Vatican's instruction to foster vocations among immigrants.<sup>4</sup> In addition, vocations directors and the staff in seminaries and other institutes of ministry formation should be prepared to identify and address other common obstacles that may appear in individual cases or with respect to particular cultural groups.

6. **Profile effective models of collaboration and support for ethnic ministries at the diocesan, regional, and national levels.** The recent restructuring of the U.S.C.C.B. has resulted in the creation of the Office for Cultural Diversity in the Church to promote ministries with Hispanic, African-American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Native American, and African Catholics, as well as the pastoral care of migrants, refugees and travelers. Nevertheless, the bishops themselves have stated that the creation of offices for multicultural ministry in parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic organizations can be an obstacle to the effective pastoral care of particular ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

Stating that multicultural offices are inadequate only begs the question of what structures are better suited to support the pastoral care of particular ethnic groups in the Church. The downsizing of diocesan offices across the country in recent years while Catholic parishes are becoming increasingly diverse makes this question all the more urgent. Comparative studies of the efficacy of various diocesan models for structuring support for ministry with ethnic communities would provide much-needed guidance to bishops in culturally diverse dioceses for the allocation of their pastoral and financial resources.

7. **Conduct community studies and personal interviews in Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal congregations that serve large numbers of ex-Catholics.** Although leaving

Catholicism to join another Christian denomination is also common among Euro-American individuals raised as Catholics, recent studies have highlighted this phenomenon among immigrants and ethnic “minority” groups.<sup>6</sup> Additional research is needed to identify how an individual’s culture and the cultural dynamics in their parish may contribute to a decision to leave the Catholic Church. Furthermore, many of these congregations have developed models for culturally-informed pastoral care and evangelization that could be adapted for ministry in Catholic parishes. Interviews with pastoral leaders and ex-Catholic congregants in these communities would shed light on what parishes can and should be doing to better meet the needs of their members of diverse languages and cultures.

## **Important themes and suggestions for improving and expanding ministry in multicultural, bicultural, and ethnic parishes**

If implemented, the research recommendations listed above will provide working models, reliable demographic information, and a theological foundation to guide bishops and parish staffs in developing plans for the pastoral care and religious formation of U.S. Catholics in multicultural parishes. In the mean time, the cultural diversity already present in our Church and its projected expansion in the future call for immediate pastoral action and planning at the parish, deanery, diocesan, regional, and national levels. Based on the findings of the Emerging Models research and pastoral experience, there are certain actions that can be taken right away in order to improve and expand ministry in multicultural, bicultural, and ethnic parishes. These actions can be divided into four themes and nine suggestions as follows:

### **Formation and resources for ministry in culturally diverse parishes**

1. **Provide training to increase the linguistic and cultural competence of parish ministers**—clerical and lay, paid and volunteer, women and men. At a minimum, all professional ministers should have basic skills for intercultural communication.<sup>7</sup> Even better would be a cultural immersion experience in a program designed to surface one’s own cultural assumptions from the perspective of the other. Such experiences and trainings should be integrated into the curriculum in seminaries and formation programs for lay ministry, the diaconate, and religious life. In addition, dioceses and parishes should work together to provide intercultural communication workshops for paid parish staff, volunteer workers, and key community leaders (i.e. pastoral council members) in bicultural and multicultural communities. Cultural immersion sabbaticals could also be made available to paid staff members after a certain number of years in ministry.

Beyond the basics of intercultural communication skills and cultural immersion, seminarians and students in graduate ministry formation programs should be expected to specialize in a particular language/culture of their choice. Bishops may provide their own requirements for language studies based on the cultural diversity and pastoral needs in their own diocese. Linguistic and cultural competence are acquired over a period of years in a process that never ends, so this represents a serious investment of time and effort on the part of the ministry student. Nevertheless, the experience can be very enriching to the students, and hopefully they will develop a love for the people, their language, and culture that will grow into a lifelong commitment to be a bridge-builder for a particular cultural group.

2. **Develop high quality ministry resources that build on the cultural and religious traditions of particular ethnic groups**, and make them available in the appropriate languages. Simply translating materials that were developed in English for a mainstream audience is a less expensive stop-gap measure, but immigrants and other ethnic groups—especially those with low income or little academic education—may find such materials difficult to understand because they are out of sync with their sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual experience. In the end, there can be no substitute for materials that express the faith in terms that reflect the history, culture, and religious traditions of particular peoples in their own language. Depending on the size of the population, such materials may have a limited marketability, so it may be necessary for the community to find resources to subsidize their production and distribution.

### **Essential dimensions of pastoral care in culturally diverse parishes**

3. **Establish a parish pastoral plan that:**
  - a. describes the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity of the Catholic faithful living within the parish boundaries
  - b. identifies the fundamental and urgent pastoral needs in the community
  - c. prioritizes pastoral action according to the most pressing needs and the ability of the parish community to respond to them
  - d. fosters the development of leadership skills and ministerial responsibility in every segment of the parish population
4. **Foster specialized ministries for immigrant and second-generation adolescents and young adults.** Many immigrant young people exhibit enthusiasm for their faith and a keen desire to build community with their peers in their own language. They should be encouraged to do so with appropriate pastoral guidance from culturally competent adult advisers. At the same time, second-generation adolescents and those who arrived in the U.S. at an early age often have difficulty feeling at home in either a peer community of the mainstream culture or the cultural setting of more recent immigrants. Such second-generation teens constitute a large and growing segment of the Catholic youth population, and their particular needs should be addressed in a ministerial setting that is welcoming and accessible to them.<sup>8</sup>

### **Pathways to leadership in ministry for underrepresented racial/ethnic groups**

5. **Advocate for and support the recruitment/formation of culturally diverse leaders for ministry in parishes and dioceses.** A number of different strategies may be needed to accomplish this goal, such as:
  - a. Offer scholarships for graduate studies in ministry
  - b. Appoint people of the culture to promote and accompany vocations among particular cultural groups
  - c. Provide training to pastors and set diocesan guidelines for hiring candidates of diverse cultures for ministry positions at the parish and diocesan levels
  - d. Partner with parishes to develop pathways to careers in ministry for promising leaders through diocesan institutes of formation for lay ministry, even if they do not initially have a bachelor's degree

- e. Develop online formation and continuing education programs and offer them in the languages most needed for ministry in the region
6. **Provide financial support to low-income parishes to secure, develop, and retain the human resources they need.** It is often easier to acquire theological and pastoral training than it is to learn a new language and culture. However, when only volunteer opportunities for ministry are presented to people who are not of the mainstream culture, they have little incentive to grow as ministers, and their ministry suffers from a lack of professional training and the rapid turnover of leaders. Therefore, it is necessary to advocate for paid ministry positions in low-income parishes, and financial resources should be allocated so that they can hire and provide training to leaders with the linguistic and cultural skills needed for the pastoral care of particular ethnic groups in their community.
7. **Increase the cultural diversity of leaders in mainstream national ministry organizations,** and seek collaboration with national organizations dedicated to ministry with particular ethnic groups. Until the diversity of parish and diocesan leaders increases, it may be challenging for national organizations to increase the diversity of their leadership, but it is critical that they begin making the effort. Participation in this type of leadership also provides indispensable experiences of formation and networking that positions people to make even greater contributions to the Church at the national level in the future. Collaboration with ethnic ministry organizations will extend these networks even further so that the gifts of the “many faces in God’s house”<sup>9</sup> may be developed and refined through leadership experiences in service to the entire Church.

#### **Advocacy and services for the holistic development of underserved racial/ethnic groups**

8. **Create a coordinated national initiative to improve the education provided to Catholic immigrants, their children, and other underserved racial/ethnic groups,** both in Catholic and public schools. Catholic schools should make it a priority to increase the cultural diversity of the students they accept, developing creative ways to facilitate access and affordability. However, the vast majority of Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and African-American Catholic students will continue to enroll in public schools for the foreseeable future. Therefore, parishes should partner with parents to advocate for better instruction, materials, and extracurricular programs in their schools, and to provide support to students so that they can stay in school and aim for a college education. Immigrant parents should also be provided with workshops to help them guide their children to a higher education, and many parishes could offer college scholarships to students in need, perhaps in partnership with a sister parish in a wealthier area of the diocese.
9. **Join local and national efforts for comprehensive immigration reform grounded in the principles of Catholic social teaching.** The U.S. bishops have already made advocacy for immigrants a priority, but this has not translated into concrete action in many parishes or through Catholic political and social action groups. The Church as a whole needs to muster the will to stand in solidarity with immigrants who are making vital contributions to our society and who deserve to be treated with dignity in an immigration process that works for them, for the U.S.-based employers and industries that need their labor, and for their families.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, and priorities will vary from parish to parish and diocese to diocese according to local circumstances. Nevertheless, taking these steps would go a long way toward increasing the Catholic Church's ability to provide pastoral care in its racially/ethnically diverse parishes. It is critical that working toward long-term objectives, such as #8 and #9 above, not be overlooked in favor of more immediate pastoral needs; only by overcoming the obstacles to higher education and legal residence will Catholics of every race and ethnicity find opportunities to respond to God's call in ministry. Given the demographic changes that are occurring in parishes across the country—and are expected to continue for the foreseeable future—these are tasks that the Church cannot afford to neglect.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed discussion of this issue can be found in Carmen M. Cervantes and Ken Johnson-Mondragón, "Passing the Faith to Latino/a Catholic Teens in the U.S.," *Pathways of Hope and Faith Among Hispanic Teens: Pastoral Reflections and Strategies Inspired by the National Study of Youth and Religion* (Stockton, CA: Instituto Fe y Vida, 2007), 332-337 and 346-352.

<sup>2</sup> Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, "Youth Ministry in a Culturally Diverse Church," *Origins* 36 (October 12, 2006), 281-282.

<sup>3</sup> See the Formation and Workplace table recommendations, available online at: <http://www.csbsju.edu/sot/symposium/presymposium/recommendations.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* (Rome: Vatican, 2004), §45.

<sup>5</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Encuentro & Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002), §69.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Roberto Suro, et al., *Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of a more comprehensive approach to theological education for multicultural ministry, see Faustino M. Cruz, "Ministry for a Multicultural Church and Society," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 27 (2007), 43-60.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the religious and cultural challenges in ministry with immigrant and second-generation Hispanic teens, see Ken Johnson-Mondragón and Carmen M. Cervantes, "The Dynamics of Culture, Faith, and Family," *Perspectives on Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry, Publication 5* (Stockton, CA: Instituto Fe y Vida, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> "The Many Faces in God's House" was the theme of Encuentro 2000, the U.S. Catholic Church's jubilee celebration of its cultural diversity in the new millennium.