



Save Our Parish  
Community Project  
FutureChurch

# Some Key Findings about Parish Reconfigurations

from the  
Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development's  
2003 National Study of Parish Reorganization

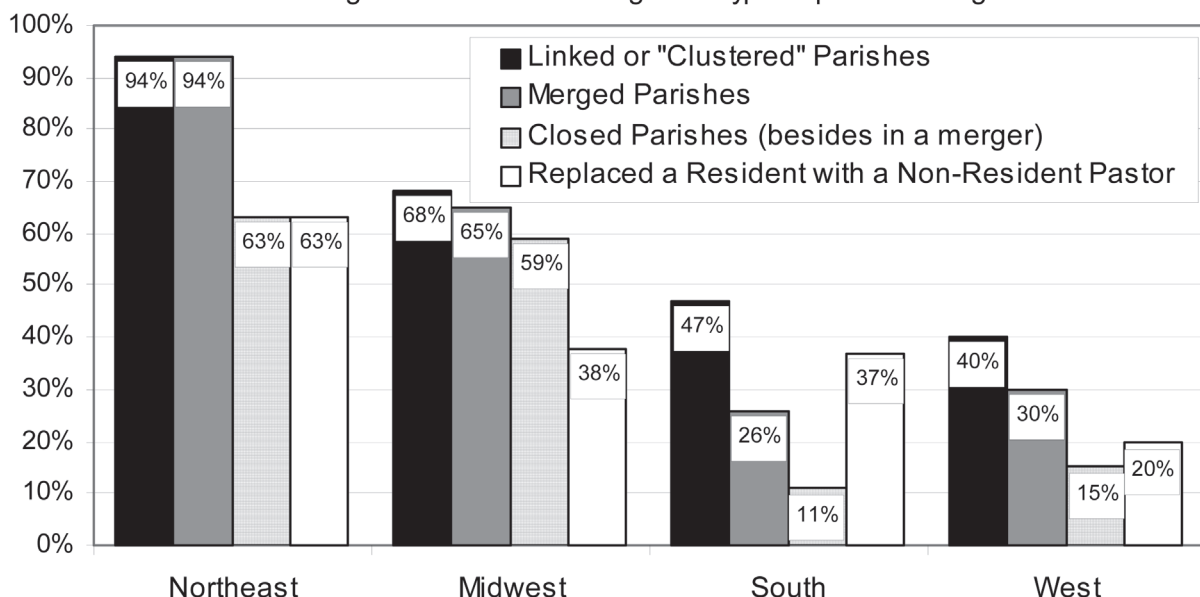
## Introduction

In the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development\* (CPPCD) published the results of its first nationwide survey of dioceses about parish reorganization. One hundred twenty-three of 177 dioceses responded to a questionnaire about their experience of reorganization from 1995 to 2000. Diocesan respondents were then asked to provide names and addresses of priests or parish directors at reorganized parishes. These individuals were sent a second questionnaire inquiring about staffing and ministry issues in parishes that underwent change. Two hundred seventy-three parish survey responses were returned and twenty-five in depth interviews were conducted with selected pastors and parish directors (now commonly called parish life coordinators).

This essay is not intended to be a comprehensive summary of the CCPCD's excellent and extensive study. Rather it presents in abbreviated fashion information that may be of particular interest to ordinary Catholics wishing to participate responsibly in reorganization processes underway in their own parishes. It has been our experience at FutureChurch, that most parish-centered Catholics are unaware of CCPCD's existence, let alone of study findings, hence the need to make this information more widely available.

The complete 2003 study can be purchased from the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development website at [www.cppcd.org](http://www.cppcd.org). Study highlights are also available as a free download. The interested reader is strongly urged to purchase and read the full study. Tables and information in this essay are used with permission.

**2.2: Parish Reorganization by Geographical Region**  
Percentage of dioceses making each type of parish change



## Selected Survey Findings

### Who Responded and Who Was Involved?

- \* Eighty-nine of 123 responding dioceses conducted some form of parish reorganization from 1995 through 2000. Overall, fourteen percent of all parishes from responding dioceses were involved in reorganization.
- \* All major geographical regions were represented, with parish changes having taken place in the majority of responding dioceses from each region.
- \* Sixty-six percent of restructuring dioceses reported that parishes were consulted “very much” in the reorganization process. In the Northeast and Midwest, dioceses were more likely to have involved all parishes in the reorganization efforts. Parishes were more likely to have been consulted where the diocese included all its parishes in the process.
- \* Nearly 90 percent of the 273 parish survey respondents were in the Northeast or Midwest. Most respondents were priests; one in seven were not.

### What Kinds of Changes Were Made? (Between 1995-2000)

#### Clustering vs Merging vs. Closure

- \* Sixty percent linked or clustered parishes.
- \* Fifty-four percent merged parishes.
- \* Fifty-one percent established new parishes.
- \* Thirty-nine percent closed or suppressed parishes (not in a merger).

#### Change in Parish Leadership

- \* Forty-two percent replaced a resident pastor with a parish director (under provision of Canon 517.2).
- \* Thirty-eight percent replaced a resident pastor with a nonresident pastor.
- \* Eight percent replaced a resident pastor with a team of priests.

<b>2.1: Types of Parish Changes Made (Dioceses Reporting Each Type, Among 95 Dioceses Having Made Changes)</b>	
<i>Changes in Parish Structures:</i>	
“Linked” or “Clustered” Parishes*	60%
Merged Parishes	54%
Closed Parishes in a Merger (included in previous figure)	45%
Established New Parishes	51%
Closed or Suppressed Parishes (not in a Merger)	39%
Closed Parishes but Maintained Physically as Chapels or Missions (included in previous figure)	12%
<i>Changes in Pastoral Leadership:</i>	
Replaced a Resident Pastor with a Parish Director**	42%
Replaced a Resident Pastor with a Non-Resident Pastor	38%
Replaced a Resident Pastor with a Team of Priests***	8%

\* “ Linked” or “clustered” parishes are those that are organizationally connected by the diocese for purposes of staffing and/or ministry. The most common types of this arrangement include: sharing a pastor, sharing staff, joint ministry programs, and joint planning efforts.

\*\* Dioceses use many different titles for religious, other lay persons, and deacons assigned to parishes under Canon 517.2. These titles include pastoral or parish administrator, parish or pastoral life coordinator, and parish director. In general, the term “parish director” is used in this study.

\*\*\*The proportion of dioceses using a team of priests for parish leadership is probably overstated. Subsequent pastor/parish director responses from several parishes identified by dioceses as having this form of leadership indicate that they actually are linked, have a non-resident pastor, and/or have a parish director.

### Factors Impacting Reorganization

- \* Eighty-two percent of respondents named “a declining or aging presbyterate “as one of the three most important factors leading to reorganization. (55% ranked this “most important.”)
- \* Fifty-five percent of respondents named “declining or increasing attendance” as one of the three most important factors leading to reorganization. (19% ranked this “most important.”)

\* Fifty-three percent of respondents named “shift in Catholic population within the diocese” (e.g. urban to suburban) as one of the three most important factors leading to reorganization. (11% ranked this “most important.”).

\* Eighty percent of respondents named the goals of having the Eucharist available every Sunday and avoiding over extending priests as important criteria for reorganizing.

<b>2.9: Most Important Factors Leading to Reorganization (Among 87 Dioceses Reporting or Planning Changes)</b>			
	Most Important	2nd Most Important	3rd Most Important
Declining or aging presbyterate	55%	14%	13%
Declining or increasing attendance in some parishes	19%	21%	15%
Shift in Catholic population within the diocese (e.g., urban to suburban)	11%	27%	15%
Overall decline or increase of Catholic population in the Diocese	9%	9%	7%
Inability of parishes to support themselves financially	1%	8%	13%
Problems with church building(s) (e.g., in disrepair, too large, too small)	0%	2%	13%

### Goals and Criteria Guiding Reorganization

\* Access to Sunday Eucharist, priest workload, travel distance, preservation of parishes with a "viable number of parishioners" and provision of complete ministerial program were important criteria for reorganization efforts.

<b>2:11: Importance of Various Goals or Criteria for the Reorganization Effort (Among Dioceses Having Made or Planned Changes)</b>		
	“Somewhat” or “Very Much”	“Very Much” only
Each parish would celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday.	80%	59%
Priests would not be over-worked/over-extended.	80%	39%
No Catholic would have to travel an unreasonable distance to attend Mass.	72%	30%
No parish with a viable number parishioners would close.	67%	36%
Each parish would have a “full service” or “complete” ministerial program.	61%	33%
No parish would close.	54%	33%
No financially viable parish would close.	43%	26%
Each parish would have a resident pastor.	21%	9%

### What Happened Afterward?

*[As reported by Pastors and Parish Directors’ Surveys]*

#### Merged Parishes Decrease Parishioners, Parishes with Parish Directors Increase Parishioners

\* More than 40 percent of merged parishes reported a decrease in size (number of households) while only one in seven parishes that were linked, shared a pastor or assigned a parish director reported a decrease in size.

\* Parishes assigned to a parish director were most likely to have experienced an increase in number of households.

<b>3.10: Change in Number of Households by Type of Parish Change</b>			
	Merged	Linked or Shared a Pastor	Parish Director
Decreased 11 to 99%	27%	5%	3%
Decreased 1 to 10%	14%	8%	11%
No Change	21%	49%	31%
Increased 1 to 10%	10%	14%	29%
Increased 11 to 99%	20%	21%	26%
Increased 100% or More	8%	3%	0%

## Impact on Parish Staff and Workload

- \* Parishes that shared a pastor were much more likely to share other staff as well.
- \* Most respondents reported that time dedicated to administrative responsibilities increased with reorganization. Half also reported that the willingness of parishioners to volunteer also increased. Taken together, the responses indicate an increase in the complexity of parishes and pastors' duties.
- \* Respondents whose parishes shared a pastor, or were linked with another parish were especially likely to say that time spent on administration increased. These respondents identified pastoral assistants and business managers as potentially the most helpful.
- \* Overall, parishes that were linked or shared a pastor appeared to have significantly more difficulty than average. Parish directors and pastors in new parishes reported less difficulty.

## Impact on Ministry/Pastoral Effectiveness

- \* Although reorganization often included a reduction in the level of priestly staffing, respondents were twice as likely to indicate an improvement in meeting parish needs as opposed to a diminishment in meeting needs (18% to 9%). Improvement occurred most often where a parish director was assigned.
- \* Seventy-five percent agreed that parish finances were currently healthy and that ministry in general had been enhanced.
- \* Nearly 90% of respondents believed the reorganization was carefully planned and in dioceses where the diocesan pastoral council was involved, respondents were more likely to report that their parishes have a greater sense of purpose afterwards.

## About the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development:

The Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development (CPPCD) promotes and advocates consultative processes that foster effective planning for the pastoral life of the Church.

CPPCD values:

- conciliar structures grounded in shared leadership and dialogue,
- research and pastoral planning,
- theological and professional development, and
- relationships with other church affiliated organizations.

CPPCD serves pastors, lay leaders and diocesan staff with:

- research, theories, skills and models
- opportunities for theological and professional training, and
- resources for information and sharing and networking.

For further information about CPPCD activities or resources, contact [info@cppcd.org](mailto:info@cppcd.org) 856-722-1174 or CPPCD Suite 635-A Country Club Pkwy Mt Laurel NJ 08054



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