

# THE POWER OF THE PARISH SURVEY



BECAUSE VIBRANT  
CHURCHES MATTER



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**A**s parishes begin the process of reopening their doors, there will be many things staff will need to decide. Do they keep the same Mass times, or add more? Do they move religious education classes back to a physical building, or keep having Zoom gatherings on Tuesday nights? Do parishioners need to wear masks, or can it be mandatory?

When your decisions affect so many people, it's best to get opinions from the people who will be most affected. Rather than virtual town halls where only the most vocal are heard, another option is to conduct a series of surveys. This will not only allow parishes to reach many members but will also allow them to analyze the answers and come to a logical conclusion based on the results. Following are some great tips to planning and implementing the perfect parish survey.

## 1 Choose Your Words Carefully

One thing you'll need to keep in mind is to make sure that bias does not show within your survey. It's only natural that many of us feel we know best. That is why choosing your words and phrases carefully when planning your survey is vital to getting not the answers you *want*, but the answers you *need*.

A well-written survey will allow your respondents to answer truthfully without being pulled to one side or the other. In other words, the questions shouldn't leave them feeling confused about which option to select.

Consider the following two phrases — which do you think might be a cause of confusion?

- A. How would you describe the music ministry of St. Alphonsus?
- B. Should concerned parishioners be worried about the music at St. Alphonsus?

Obviously the first question is straight forward and simply asks for an opinion, while the second option infers that if they consider themselves to be involved (i.e., "concerned") then they *should* be worried about the lack of live music. In this case, Question B is a leading question and should be reworked.

## 2 Keep a Consistent Set of Choices

Rather than a variety of answers from which to choose, consider offering the same choices for all close-ended questions, such as:

1. Very helpful
2. Somewhat helpful
3. Neither helpful nor unhelpful
4. Somewhat unhelpful
5. Very unhelpful

### 3 Ask One Question at a Time

Known as a “double-barrel” question, it’s a way of asking too much at one time. Each question you put forth needs to be about one issue at a time. For example:

- A. How would you rate our religious education class for adults and teens?
- B. How would you rate our adult religious education class?

The first question asks about two completely different classes, meaning that it would be nearly impossible to figure out which class they are rating, or even if they have the experience to rate both questions. Rule of thumb is to keep your survey as short as possible to encourage completion, but not by doubling up on the questions.

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### 4 Plan Your Survey with Intention

Let’s face it — it’s hard to get people to take a survey even when they do have a stake in the outcome. That’s why intentional planning is key to getting the best results. Choose your questions carefully when deciding what to put in, and what to leave out.

You may feel that it’s important to find out exactly what time your parishioners would prefer confession, but rather than coming up with a bunch of ways to phrase it, try this:

- A. I would prefer a confession time in the morning (8-11:45 a.m.)
- B. I would prefer a confession time in the afternoon (12-3:45 p.m.)

Instead of:

- A. I would prefer a confession time at 8 a.m.
- B. I would prefer a confession time at 9 a.m.

Obviously, you can’t please everybody when it

comes to the decisions you’ll be making, so keeping questions as general as you possibly can will help to get respondents to give their preferred answers.

### 5 Use Only Essential Open-Ended Questions

According to SurveyMonkey, the chances of someone completing your survey is directly related to the number of questions. This means you need to be mindful of your respondents’ time. While there is no hard and fast rule when it comes to the number of questions you should be asking, generally a survey should take less than 10 minutes to complete. Choose only your most essential questions.

What’s most important for you to know *right now*? Should it be the Mass times that parishioners prefer, or would it be the theme of next year’s capital campaign? Is it to decide whether there is a need for a young adult ministry program, or whether this summer’s festival should serve a Friday Fish Fry or a Sunday Chicken Dinner? Make sure that what you choose is essential to what your ministry needs to know.

### 6 Give Respondents an Incentive to Answer

Unless there is a good reason to fill one out, it’s hard to get people to take and complete a survey. However, there are several ways to remind members of your faith community that their voice is valuable to the life of your parish.

In addition to a formal request via email or pulpit from the pastor, another way to get people to take and complete a survey is to offer them something for their time. This can be done in a number of ways, but the most common are a sweepstakes incentive (where people are entered into a drawing for a prize, such as a \$100 gift card) and an individual incentive (where each person who completes the survey is rewarded).

When offering something, you do need to keep in mind that you will need to collect information from each respondent, so survey answers won’t be anonymous. This may hinder the types of answers you get back, if they are sensitive in nature or controversial.

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