

OCTOBER 2008 CONGREGATIONAL LIFE SURVEY AN ANALYSIS

Background Statistics and Methods of Analysis

The 2002 Congregational Life Survey had about 294,000 responses from 2306 congregations across the nation. The supplemental material provided with the 2008 survey was based on that earlier effort. No 2002 documents relating to results for Our Mother of Sorrows were reviewed in preparing this analysis, but the passage of six years would have brought enough change to make a comparison of limited value.

The 2008 Congregational Life Survey reports did not provide information on the total number of responses or the number of congregations. OMOS provided 1653 responses. Rough estimates of Mass attendance here suggest that about 3000 persons age 15 or older (eligible to complete the survey) would be present on a typical weekend. That gives a parish attendee response rate of just over 50%. Since OMOS has approximately 3000 registered families, one might estimate that this would represent about 8000 parishioners age 15 or older. Using this metric, the response rate for OMOS is about 20% of eligible, registered parishioners. By either measure, the numbers are large enough to be representative of all Mass attendees.

The 2008 survey broke congregations down into four categories based on average attendance at Masses/services. Small parishes had 100 or less; mid-sized were 101-350; large were 351-1000 and mega were over 1000. OMOS was classified as "mega" and was compared with large and mega congregations. The gender distribution of OMOS respondents was 61% female and 39% male, exactly the same as the average of all responding congregations. The age distribution for OMOS was slightly skewed toward an older age group although the average age was 52 compared with 51 for the entire population surveyed. There were fewer people with at least a college degree at OMOS (35% as compared with 41% for the survey population). About the same percent of respondents were married as in the reference population although only 45% from OMOS reported having children at home as compared with 55% in the entire survey population. The data on length of affiliation (5 years or less; 6-10 years; more than 10 years or "visiting") fall almost exactly on the national average. For those persons attending less than five years,

OMOS had a higher percentage than the national average of respondents transferring from another Catholic congregation and a much lower percentage of those from a different faith tradition. Many of these data correspond to the widely held belief within OMOS that the parish presently is an older, somewhat less well educated and perhaps somewhat less well off population.

The survey itself consisted of 60 multiple-choice questions. The survey report provided percent of responses to each of the choices. However, in doing their analysis, those responsible for the survey reported the findings in two ways. The first broke the responses into four broad categories and compared OMOS with all congregations:

1. Building Spiritual Connections (two sub-headings)
2. Building Inside Connections (three sub-headings)
3. Building Outside Connections (two sub-headings)
4. Building Identity Connections (three sub-headings)

The second took these 10 sub-headings, called them "Strengths of Congregations" and compared OMOS with large and mega congregations and all Catholic congregations by percent responses. It also compared OMOS with all congregations using percentiles.

Survey Findings

This analysis will concentrate on those items where Our Mother of Sorrows was well below or well above reference groups with respect to a particular quality or characteristic. The first part will concentrate on the 10 Strengths of Congregations.

1. Growing Spiritually – There were five elements of personal growth such as scripture reading, participation in parish activities, etc. OMOS was generally comparable with large and mega congregations and all Catholic churches. However, it was in the 24th percentile for all congregations surveyed.
2. Meaningful Worship – There were eight elements relating to worship. The OMOS picture was mixed. It scored much higher than the average for large and mega congregations and all Catholic churches for "experiencing awe during worship". It was in the 90th percentile for all congregations. OMOS scored lower with regard to boredom during worship and whether homilies were one of the valued aspects of the parish (in the 11th percentile for all congregations).
3. Participating in the Parish – There were five elements relating to this congregational strength. Only with respect to Mass

attendance once or more a week was the OMOS score comparable to large and mega congregations and all Catholic churches. It scored well below these comparison groups with respect to small group study, leadership roles in the parish, participation in decision making and giving more than 5% of net income. In these elements OMOS was below the 10th percentile for all congregations.

4. Having a Sense of Belonging – This quality was measured by claiming a higher degree of participation in parish activities than two years ago, recognizing that most of one's closest friends were in the parish and having a strong and growing sense of belonging. Large and mega congregations, all Catholic churches and OMOS had low scores. OMOS was below the 25th percentile for all congregations.
5. Caring for Young People – In calculating what percent of worshippers were satisfied with programs for children and youth; recognized these ministries as one of the three most valued aspects of the parish and where children living at home also worshipped here, OMOS and large and mega congregations were comparable and scored better than all Catholic churches. The overall score for OMOS was in the 62nd percentile. The Youth Ministry seems on the right track.
6. Focusing on the Community – Although the percent of OMOS respondents noting personal involvement in social or advocacy work in the parish was very low, the parish scored very high (81st and 92nd percentile respectively) against all congregations with respect to valuing social diversity or social justice emphasis as one of the three most valued aspects of the parish. In other words, they liked it, but someone else did it.
7. Sharing Faith – Four elements measured outreach or evangelical activities on the part of the respondent. The percent of respondents was generally low across the board, but OMOS scored in the 56th percentile nationally in response to considering reaching those who do not attend as one of the three most valued aspects of the parish. Clearly RCIA, POF and ACA are held in high regard.
8. Welcoming New Worshippers – This element measured the percent of respondents who began attending services in this parish in the last five years. OMOS was comparable with large and mega congregations and higher than all Catholic churches.

It was in the 60th percentile for all congregations. This suggests either significant parish turnover or net growth but the survey does not discern which it might be.

9. Empowering Leadership – Four questions looked at how parishioners feel about how their own gifts are recognized and used and how they feel about the pastoral leaders. OMOS respondents generally scored about the same as large and mega congregations and all Catholic churches. However, there was a more favorable response compared with all Catholic churches with respect to the goodness of match between the parish and the pastoral leader. OMOS was also in the 53rd percentile of all congregations on that point.
10. Looking to the Future – Two of the four elements of this strength were not included in the survey used in many Catholic parishes, including OMOS. For the other two, OMOS compared favorably with large and mega congregations and better than all Catholic churches with respect to awareness of and commitment to clear goals for the parish. It compared favorable with all Catholic churches and less so with large and mega congregations with respect to current movement in new directions. In both of these elements, OMOS was below the 50th percentile of all congregations surveyed.

The second part of this analysis will look at the results in terms of the four areas of connection building – spiritual, inside, outside and identity.

1. Building Spiritual Connections – This linked items 1 and 2 above. OMOS was right on the national average or within 2-3 percentage points with respect to private spiritual activities, growth in faith and the meeting of spiritual needs. However, 56% of respondents felt that OMOS helped with everyday living as contrasted with 45% in the national average. This is something to build on.
2. Building Inside Connections – This linked items 3, 4 and 5, above. With respect to church school, prayer or bible study and clubs or fellowship, the OMOS responses were well below the national average. Similar findings were noted with respect to liturgical or educational roles, a *growing* sense of belonging and close friends in the parish. OMOS was almost half the national average in percent who give 10% or more of net income to the

- church. OMOS and the national average were in agreement at the 84-85% level that there was a good match with the pastor
3. Building Outside Connections – This linked items 6 and 7, above. The emphasis was on inviting others to attend services, caring for neighbors and welcoming new people. Relative to the national average of responses, the findings for OMOS were mixed. OMOS respondents were less likely to invite people to Mass who do not attend yet are somewhat more likely to take part in parish activities that reach out to the wider community though not with community service or advocacy groups.
 4. Building Identity Connections – This linked items 8,9 and 10, above. Churches responding were categorized as small, mid-sized, large and mega. OMOS was one of the 3% of churches surveyed that fell into the mega category. The age, gender, education and related items were dealt with in the background statistics section of this report.

Commentary

The first thing to note is that the survey seemed skewed toward fundamentalist or Pentecostal congregations, many of which are quite small. In the survey, 54% of congregations had no more than 100 persons attending. The common wisdom is that these smaller congregations, by their very nature have greater individual involvement, higher gifting, greater emphasis on fellowship and personal relations within the congregation and a higher percentage of persons in leadership, education or comparable roles. The number of Catholic parishes in this survey directly comparable with OMOS was probably very small. This weakens the value of the survey results as a potential guide for OMOS.

What might one draw from all these data? The following seem evident:

1. Our liturgies are effective in bringing participants into contact with the Almighty. (item 2 under Strengths)
2. Our homilists are not connecting effectively with the hearers. (item 2 under Strengths)
3. Most of the lay roles in liturgies, education and leadership fall to a very small percent of the participants at Mass. (Item 3 under Strengths)
4. Financial support of the parish lags comparable groups and 10% of respondents noted no contribution at all. This may

- be partially the socio-economic demographic of OMOS or it may be cultural. (Survey results and item 3 under Strengths)
5. OMOS seems to have connected well with youth. (Item 5 under Strengths)

What Next

The survey results can certainly serve as a basis for leadership discussions about resources, strengths, needs and short-term goals. Obstacles to needed change are many. Congregations typically like the status quo. There may be staff or financial limitations that need to be addressed. There can be a "fear of failure" and an unwillingness to take the necessary risks in order to move in a different direction. In the book, "Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations", from which some of this material is taken, there is a good discussion of myths, tightly held by congregations, that impede growth and stifle innovation.

The next steps might be the following:

1. Based on the survey, identify the top 3-5 strengths of the parish.
2. How can these strengths be connected in new ways to build more effective ministries?
3. What areas are in critical need of new insights, strategies or actions? Raw material for this might be where OMOS was at or below the 20th-25th percentile nationally.
4. What is God calling us to do as a parish?
5. Who should supply the leadership and what timetable might be suitable for taking these steps?

R.A. Scala
June 2009