

# Data & Ministry

We often receive calls in the office that begin something like this, “Hi, I’m the council member assigned to interpret the data...” Most of the time, the person is referring to the 10 minutes data presentation at the parish assembly. He or she was likely assigned to this task due to a particular knowledge of statistics, a day job that requires a calculator, or in a few cases no doubt, drawing the shortest straw. Unfortunately, sometimes the entire burden of data interpretation falls on this one person for the sole purpose of presenting at the assembly, and the data is quickly forgotten. At some point in these phone conversations I try to work in a comment such as, “Will you have the opportunity to study the data together as a council after the assembly?” This elicits anything from “Of course,” to at least one “What? You mean we have to look at these graphs again!?”

We can’t forget that the statistics do not disappear after the parish assembly, as much as the numerically challenged of us wish them to do so. In fact, the deeper we delve into the charts and graphs, seeking to understand what they are saying, the greater the story that unfolds about the people the parish seeks to serve.

As we know, Councils are challenged to look at the seven essential elements of Church and hold it over the parish as a map of sorts for parish activity. Everything we do as church falls somewhere into the interwoven elements of what it means to be church. In a similar fashion, we can take our data and hold it over the activities of the parish, searching for either confirmation of the parish mission or inconsistencies that deserve our attention.

For instance, a pastoral council in Queens found themselves spending considerable time discussing their creative new initiatives for married couples. While these programs are important, the group took the time to return to the data where a previously overlooked pie chart reminded them that almost two thirds of their congregation are either widowed, single or divorced. Their conversation then shifted to programs that include the needs of unmarried people as well as married couples. Their mission to strengthen family was broadened to include the family created within our faith community. The data helped the group to redirect their vision, pointing out who is being unintentionally overlooked or forgotten.

Councils can benefit from talking through the data report together, taking apart the graphs and charts and sharing the stories they tell about the neighborhood and the people sitting in the pews on that one average Sunday. Placing it into this context will help councils compare their data story to the anecdotal way they understand their parish now. Inconsistencies between the two may very well point to an area of need that could be explored or at least encourage conversation topics that might not have come to mind otherwise.

To help in this effort, each data report is accompanied by several pages of questions that are intended to help guide councils in connecting data to ministry. It may be difficult to resist the urge to jump by these pages and move directly to the data. However, these reflection questions aim to not only help councils articulate and clarify current parish values and identity, but they also serve to challenge councils to imagine new ways the parish can increase vibrancy and serve the greater mission of the Church.

Data, therefore, is a potentially valuable tool depending on how much time and consideration is given to unpacking the information presented. The question shifts from “What are the numbers?” to “How will we allow the data to speak to us as a council?” The story it tells will only help councils continue to serve the mission of their Church.

- Ellen Rhatigan