

Application for funding from the Student Research Committee

Catherine Farrell

Title of project

Searching for a New Way to be Church: Catholic Identity and Community in a Changing Institutional Environment

Letter of Support

Dr. Matthew Loveland, who is conducting this research, has sent a letter of support.

Institutional Review Board and Animal Rights and Welfare Forms

Neither of these forms are necessary for the proposal of this research.

Context of Research

The research that I want to present has been conducted by Dr. Loveland of the Sociology Department. I am a research assistant for him and have helped with data collection and transcription of interviews. I was asked to help present the research at the Eastern Sociological Society's conference this March.

Purpose of Research

Catholicism in the United States is a dynamic social institution. The makeup of the Church consists of everyone in the hierarchy from the highest Papal authority to diocesan leadership to lay catholic parishioners. The desires and viewpoints of these different groups of Catholics clash dramatically when problems arise in local parish reconfigurations. The growing number of parish mergers and closings has resulted in mixed reactions and explanations as to why a reconfiguration must or must not take place. For many, their Catholic identity is shattered by the loss of their parish church and community when the leaders of the Church sell the property that many considered sacred space. With these two very diverging views, the idea of Catholic identity and community is suffering a terrible blow to its very structure.

Contribution and Significance of Research

The reconfiguration of dioceses through the merging and closing of parishes is a growing issue within the Catholic community, and its affects can be seen in our own backyard in the city of Syracuse. Declining numbers of ordained clergy members, such as deacons, priests and bishops, along with the sex abuse scandal, declining church attendance and reports of growing financial problems are cited for the reasons of the closings. Surprisingly little research has been

conducted on this subject despite the timeliness of the crisis. Occurring right before our eyes is not only a reconfiguration of local parishes and diocese, but a possible reconfiguration of the entire hierarchy of the Catholic Church. With parishioners taking roles into their own hands previously assigned only to the clergy, this striking example of lay-activism should be of major interest to those studying social and religious movements. When those at the top of the hierarchy make choices which drastically alter the very heart of the Catholic Church, the local parish, there is bound to be conflict. This conflict between those at opposite ends of the hierarchy should be cause for further study. The research I will be presenting on at the conference will serve as a background for the issues surrounding the new process of Catholic reconfiguration and how it will affect the Church and its members in the future.

Description of Methodology

In conducting this research, many different data collecting techniques were used and will be used. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods has and will assure that the proper statistics and theories are used, as well as presenting an accurate representation of the views of some key informants.

Conducting and later transcribing interviews was a major portion of the time spent on the initial research. Many hours were spent setting up open-ended, face to face interviews with those directly involved in the reconfiguration process. Informants were members of local parishes affected by mergers and closings and some were members of groups such as the council of parishes who strive to stop, or at least assure that parishioners have a voice in the process of church closings. The interviews are currently being transcribed in order to use them for the ESS presentation in March, and in hopes that a research paper may be published on the subject.

Along with interviews, participant observation was a large factor in acquiring the knowledge necessary to understand the communities in each parish. Regular Mass attendance in local churches made it possible to understand how the parish community works and defines itself. Attending local churches and the council of parishes meetings helped to gain insight into what exactly is happening with the reconfiguration process and what each parish's plans are for the future. Attending protest vigils was extremely important in order to see how the church community functions without gathering in an official Catholic space, because many parishes that have been forced out of their church buildings have started to hold services at other sites in order to keep worshiping as a community (Tretler 2009).

Literature reviews from previously publishes articles and books on the structure, identity and community of the Catholic Church will aid in the ability to understand the inner workings of the institution, as well as help to understand some of the decisions made by the hierarchy. Through the research of others, we will try to explain why lay Catholics are so deeply connected to their place of worship and consider it more than just a place, but holy and sacred space (Greeley 2001). In fact, one of the reasons why so many lay Catholics feel such passion about this subject is because just a few decades before the reconfiguration, Vatican II claimed to give more power and authority to parishioners. Part of the confusion for many who were around for the changes brought about by Vatican II is that after they were told lay people were to have a voice in the doings of the Church, the bishops started to close churches without any input from those it

harms the most, the parishioners (Greeley 2004). While Vatican II may have claimed that it gave power to the everyday people of the Church, many would say that the hierarchy of the Church still stands strong and that those on top could not be concerned with those on the bottom (Allen 2004).

I will also give a quick overview of the history of the reconfiguration across the country by using numbers from *The Official Catholic Directory* and from a database I created containing almost a hundred newspaper articles on the subject of church closings. I will concentrate on where and how reconfigurations are taking place and the reactions to them. Generally they are taking place in the north eastern United States although there are other, smaller pockets of concern across the nation (P. J. Kennedy & Sons 2008). The process usually starts with the parish leaders explaining that there is a shortage of funds and attendance and saying that they might cut some programs and merge others with neighboring parishes. This eventually leads to the church closing its doors on the parishioners (Fortino 2009). Some parishes are merged into another neighboring parish and others are dissembled altogether and parishioners are forced to find a new place of worship. Overall, the reactions of the parishioners range from disappointment, to anger and hostility toward the changes (Fortino 2009). The negative reaction of the parishioners and how they put their attitudes about the change into action is why this reconfiguration is so important.

Using *The Official Catholic Directory*, we gathered information on the declining number of the Catholic Church such as baptisms, ordinations and parishes. The numbers show that from the 1960's to present there has been an approximately 19% decrease in the number of ordained priests in the Syracuse area alone and the numbers for the decrease in parishioners and parishes as falling at the same rates. These quantitative measures will give support to what the parishioners and articles saying that the Church is losing its parishes due to a decline in its numbers.

Bibliography

Allen, John L. 2004. *All the Pope's Men: The Inside Story of how the Vatican Really Thinks*. United States: Random House Inc.

Fortino, Stephanie. 4 August 2009. Personal Interview.

Greeley, Andrew. 2001. *The Catholic Imagination*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Greeley, Andrew. 1990. *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Belief of American Catholics*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Greeley, Andrew. 2004. *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wine Skins and the second Vatican Council*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

P.J. Kennedy & Sons. 2008. *The Official Catholic Directory: Anno Domini 2008*. New

Providence, NJ: Jeanne LoGiurato Hanline.

Tretler, Jane. 8 July 2009. Personal Interview.

Current Status

I am currently working with Dr. Loveland of the Sociology Department as a research assistant. All of the research for the paper and presentation has been conducted. An outline for the presentation has been put together and I will be presenting the research at the Eastern Sociological Society's conference in Boston from March 19th as second author on the research.

Budget Request

-Two night hotel stay (\$169 a night)	\$338.00
-Round Trip Train Ticket from Syracuse to Boston	\$ 78.00
-Student Membership of the Eastern Sociological Association	\$ 10.00
Total	\$426.00

History of Funding

I have never before received funding from the Student Research Committee.

** A link to the conference program can be found at the website below. I will be presenting on March 19th at 8:30 am (pg 23 of the program).

http://www.essnet.org/AnnualMeeting_PrelimProg.aspx