



Women's Advisory Committee

Task force exploring the role of women in church leadership today



Catholic Women in Leadership Study:

Final Report

Maureen K. Day, PhD





OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of San Diego,

In October 2023, following the first General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops session in Rome, I called an advisory committee of women leaders who would further explore women's leadership within the Church today. I asked them to particularly discern the extent to which the Church empowers women as they assume leadership roles. The Diocese of San Diego is proudly spearheading this effort with paragraph 60 of the final synod document in mind, "This Assembly asks for full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women, particularly in those places where they remain underutilized. There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped."

To carry out this initiative, I appointed Marioly Galván, Chancellor of the Diocese of San Diego and Dr. Mary Lyons, President Emerita of the University of San Diego to co-chair this committee along with Dr. Maureen Day, Research Affiliate at USC's Center for Religion and Civic Culture. In total, fifteen women from a variety of racial, ethnic, educational, geographic, age and ecclesial backgrounds were selected to form a consultative body to speak to this current reality within our institutional structures.

Over the last nine months, extensive work has been done to gather quantifiable data to answer this question of women's leadership. The committee prayerfully considered this data through ongoing discussion, discernment, and ideas for future actions.

The following report is a nine-month process which will continue to unfold over the next several months. The information contained within highlights the collective voices and experiences from our presbyterate, parish and school leaders and a variety of women from throughout the diocese.

The report is accessible via www.sdcatholic.org/chancellor, this information will also be made available in Spanish and Vietnamese.

I am grateful for the wonderful work the Women's Advisory Committee has carried out and to all those who participated in the surveys and shared their invaluable experiences, which will undoubtedly help pave the way for greater communion, participation, and mission.

Sincerely in Christ,

Robert Cardinal McElroy
Bishop of San Diego



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The 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality has raised many important questions for us to consider as a Church. Among these are the roles and experiences—both graces and challenges—that women leaders have experienced in our parishes, schools, non-profits and other contexts. To better understand this within the Diocese of San Diego, Cardinal Robert McElroy commissioned a census to ascertain how many men and women were serving in a variety of leadership positions. At the same time, he also sent a survey to the priests of the diocese to learn their experiences with and thoughts concerning women leaders. He then called a Women's Advisory Committee to further explore this question; the next step was a survey to hear from women in a variety of Catholic leadership positions. The Women's Advisory committee contemplated the results of all three of these studies and offered their initial thoughts anonymously to the group. All these deliberations are reported here.

Executive Summary

The following offers key takeaways from each stage of this data gathering process.

1. The parish census revealed that the vast majority of parish ministries are female-majority. There were exceptions to this, but this was the prevailing pattern.
2. The pastor survey demonstrated that a strong majority of participating pastors are appreciative of and value women's leadership. Most claimed that barriers to female leadership within their own parishes either did not exist or had been resolved insofar as possible.
3. The survey of female Catholic leaders revealed that most women have very positive feelings surrounding their experiences as a leader. When asked about the graces they have seen within their role or in other female leaders, the most common responses included the following themes: women have particular virtues or personal characteristics they bring to their leadership contexts, women in leadership are inspirational to other women, and women have particular professional skills or competencies they bring to their role.



When discussing their challenges, many named a general sexism, feeling their authority or voice devalued, unsupportive clergy, being spread too thin (especially with conflicts between ministry, work and family), and unsupportive lay people. When asked where they would like to see a greater presence of female leadership, prevailing responses named deacons or serving in diaconal roles (the most commonly named was preaching, but some also named sacramental duties), more prominent parish and other leadership roles, and expanding the priesthood to include women. When suggesting supportive changes, they offered more educational or formational opportunities for female leaders, relationship and community-building opportunities among women leaders, greater support for women leaders (with pastors playing a critical role for women who lead in parishes), and to be more supportive of family obligations. There were less commonly named, but still important, themes for each of these questions that are expanded within the main body of the report.

4. Finally, the Women's Advisory Committee met to discern next steps given these findings. When discussing the barriers, sexism rose to the top. When thinking about enhancements and other supports for women leaders, opportunities for the education, formation or other skills were most popular as was a desire for clarity as many were unsure about which roles or duties are available to women. When asked about a concrete recommendation to address either a barrier or an enhancement, formational and educational programs for women as well as workshops or conferences were most popular. There were many other important but less frequently named barriers, enhancements or recommendations; these are elaborated in the report.

Recruitment Methods

In April 2024, the diocese sent Flocknotes to the pastors of each of the 97 Roman Catholic parishes in the diocese with links to the two surveys. We explained in a cover letter that the census form could be filled out by either the pastor or someone he designated to this task (e.g., his administrative assistant). We also emailed the census form to principals of the 30 Catholic schools within the diocese. The second form—exploring the pastor's attitudes toward and experiences of working with women in leadership—was to be filled out only by the pastor himself. We sent two reminder emails before closing the survey approximately three weeks after the questionnaires were emailed out. We heard from 56 parishes and schools for the census survey, for a response rate of 44 percent. We heard from 34 pastors for the pastor survey, which is a response rate of 35 percent.



For the third stage of the study—hearing from women leaders themselves—in September 2024, we emailed the survey to 2,182 identified women leaders in the diocese. They lead a wide variety of groups: the Women's Advisory Committee; women religious; Cultural Diversity Communities; the Diocesan Pastoral Council; Parish Council chairs and representatives; leaders at the Office of Life, Peace and Justice; SDDI Instructors; SDDI Certificate Holders; Diocesan Directors; Diocesan Finance Council; Parish Business Managers and Bookkeepers; Family Life and Spirituality and Mental Health Ministry Leaders; wives of deacons; Directors of Catechetical

Ministry and other catechetical leadership, Diocesan Synod Commissions; Cursillo leaders; employees of Catholic schools; employees of Catholic Charities; and leaders of Vietnamese lay groups. After three reminder emails, we closed the survey approximately three weeks after the initial send. We received 445 total responses, for a response rate of 20 percent. We made the survey available in English (414 responses), Spanish (26) and Vietnamese (5).

Census Findings

The census data revealed that a large majority of people involved in parishes and Catholic schools are women. For instance, parishes in the diocese have thirteen people on staff on average; this include both those paid and volunteer. Of these thirteen, typically these would average to five men and eight women. The female presence was also strong among Catholic school leadership. Of the responding schools, twenty-five have a female principal and five are male; there are twenty-one female vice-principals and two who are men. Although the gap was narrow for some roles and very wide in others, the preponderance of female leaders and volunteers was a recurring theme among the various areas we explored and so this will not be elaborated here; if one is curious about particular areas, the full counts are found in the Appendix. We will instead briefly outline the roles that were exceptions in that there was a stronger male than female presence there.

Finance councils were slightly more likely to have more men than women, averaging 4.6 male members and 3.3 female members. Hospitality committees averaged 19.3 male members and 14.8 female members. There are 24 male Liturgy Coordinators across our diocesan sample and 17 who are female. The gap among Choir or Music Directors is quite slim, but there are 23 male directors and 21 female. There are 21 male Parish Council Chairs compared to 12 women serving in this capacity. There are 41 Finance Council Chairs who are men, compared to 13 who are female. Male Coordinator for Hospitality Ministers slightly edge out those who are female, at 25 and 23, respectively. Finally, the gap is most narrow among those heading social outreach efforts, with 23 men and 22 women. Aside from these few exceptions, women tend to be leaders or heavily involved in the vast majority of ministries in our churches and schools.



Pastor Survey

Again, we heard back from 34 pastors of the diocese. For ease of presenting the findings, the survey questions are underlined and then the total number of responses for that particular question; for example, the first question received a response from 31 pastors. After the question, the themes that emerged in the analysis are written in bold, and then some sample quotes typically follow.

Given your current staffing, do you feel women's leadership is adequately represented at your parish? (n=31)

A resounding yes. One mentioned the challenge of getting men involved, as they seem to be underrepresented. This theme emerges in later questions, as well.

How has the involvement of women in leadership roles within your parish enriched the decision-making process? (n=34)

Most responses fell into one of two camps: In this first camp, the most common response was **yes, their leadership has been helpful.** Most are “neutral” about the gifts of women *as women*. In other words, women are present and contribute, but it isn't specified in the survey response that their value comes from anything unique about women. But some do amplify the differences in women's leadership, such as:

“The women I work with in parish pastoral and financial discussions adopt a decision-making approach by engaging in more collaboration and consensus building to make sound decisions and elicit support for a course of action. They also analyze the pros and cons before making any final decision. They consider the rights of others and take a cooperative approach to decision-making to arrive at a fair and moral decision that benefits all parties.”

“Women in leadership positions though is very detailed oriented in implementation, committed to getting the job done, are also interested in building relationships, inclusiveness, and sensitive to people needs. Consensus builders, but results oriented.”

The second camp believed **yes, their leadership happens to be helpful, but gender or other identity factors should not be considered in parish ministry, but simply having the most capable person involved.** This second perspective was much smaller than the first (n=2), but these were present and the responses tended to be more elaborated:



“A leader should be qualified for the demands of the position; regardless of gender, culture, or other factors. With this in mind, our parish is blessed with several women who take leadership roles in the parish. The most obvious impact has been to expand the perspective of decision-making, which leads to better decisions. Our decisions in areas of evangelization and stewardship benefit from seeing the efficacy and impact of our initiatives upon the whole community...how do we recognize and create programs to meet the needs of people in a broad range? We do that by encouraging leadership and input from those very subgroups within a community.”

“The unique qualities of an individual (their talent, their passion, their cleverness, their determination) reduced to any single characteristic (especially something as arbitrary [they did not choose their sex any more than someone chooses their race] and as binary as sex) garners little if anything—as my far as my little experience has gathered.”

Are there barriers that stand in the way of implementing processes that include the voice and presence of women in leadership roles within your parish? In what way are women in leadership roles involved in actual decision-making processes? (n=34)

The idea that there are **no barriers and women are fully integrated into parish leadership** was far and away the most common response.

A few said **there were barriers, but it was implied that these were recognized and had been resolved insofar as possible:**

“Barriers -- the threat of change/doing it differently; working with those who wonder ‘why’ do we need them, have we been doing things so wrong?; don't rock the boat; the culture/attitude that church leaders must be priests/men -- the special relationship the community has with priests, especially ethnic cultures that ‘revere’ their priests.”

“If I were to boil down involvement and leadership to a single dimension like sex, and I would not, then one could say that getting more men involved has a ‘greater barrier.’ However, I would be wary of making such a claim without investigation of the individual instance, since you cannot prove causation by outcome (i.e. the sidewalk is wet, therefore it must have rained). Nonetheless, from what I can tell, the main barrier for men is the same as for women -- fear of commitments, especially of one's time. Everyone is busy. Everyone is tired. Nearly everyone is feeling overwhelmed, and those who do not have better than average support systems (i.e. grandparents who can watch the kids). That's the average story, and that requires more of my attention than ‘am I being heard or not?’ I rarely hear anyone: ‘No one hears me or is listening to me,’ and from what



I can tell the only ones who say such things are unreasonable in their demands -- and they are just that, demands and not questions or concerns.”

“There are barriers: mainly fear of change and some sort of local vision of women to a lesser degree in some areas.”

A few showed some reticence in their response; a call and talents for ministry and leadership must be primary; **does this survey imply we should privilege gender over competence?**

“I believe our greatest barrier to overcome in this effort is a sense that we can solve these challenges by simply focusing on a leader's identity. A person's identity does not guarantee that putting him/her in a leadership role will have a desired impact. I think the first question to ask in looking at leadership roles is to look at the qualifications of the individual to be open-minded, visionary, and disciplined. Too often, we think that a goal is achieved by having a person with a particular identity in place. There needs to be real examination of finding those that are committed to the mission of the Church as defined by Christ. From there, you make decisions about diversity that give a parish better perspective and hence, better decisions for advancing the Mission of Christ.”

In what ways can you implement processes that include the voice and presence of women in leadership roles within your parish? (n=34)

By far the largest theme is pastors **believing that women's exclusion or marginalization is not a problem in their parish, as women are fully integrated:**

“Women are already in all the leadership roles they can be. There is nothing more to add. They are already in all key positions and very helpful to the parish and myself.”

Some identified **areas for growth** in this:

“Women are lacking at the altar during mass. Hence I invite them more to volunteer as altar servers, lectors and ministers of Holy Communion so they can be visible in the sanctuary during the liturgy.”

“1. Personal invitation to join the ranks of leadership 2. Establish personal relations with the women and find out what they need or desire from the church. Then link them up with a mentor/friend/guide.”



One imagined **limitations, but was not sure how to ameliorate** this:

“Short of ordaining women, I am not sure what else we could do to increase their voice and presence, as the few things that they are not involved in as much as men all appear to be things they are less interested in doing. If, for whatever reason, women feel as if their participation does not influence decisions or determine courses of action, it seems that that may be more of a factor of poor communication on the part of the Church of how much power and influence they actually have rather than an intentional exclusion that deliberately cuts them out of the process.”

One seemed **offended**:

“Frankly, I object to the existence of male chauvinism implied in this survey. This is a first world solution searching for a third world problem. Pastors have enough on their plates w/o generating problems where none exist.”

To summarize some of what emerges here, the majority of pastors see the issue of women in leadership through a similar lens. The majority responses typically captured the vast majority of responses, about 85% or greater. The consensus across questions is that women's presence at the parish level is welcome, encouraged and a great grace. Few pastors see any obstacles to the actualization of women's voice and leadership at the parish level. Women are seen as vital to the thriving of the parish. There are a few things to consider. First, while this survey captured one-third of pastors' observations, it is missing the majority of pastors. This might not be a problem if these 34 pastors are representative of the pastors of the diocese as a whole. However, if some pastors who did not participate chose not to participate because they harbor negative feelings about women's leadership, we are missing some important information. If we were to have full participation, would new themes emerge? Along these lines, because this was not an anonymous survey, would pastors who do not work well with women feel able to disclose this in a survey? Likely not.

A second thing to consider is that we are only able to hear the pastors' perceptions of women's experiences. Similar to the above mentioned pastors, do women who have felt slighted or dismissed by men in leadership feel comfortable in approaching the male pastor about this? That is, have women self-censored their negative experiences, and therefore we do not have the fullness of their challenges in participating in leadership accurately represented here? A study that explored these questions with women directly would help illuminate any potential gap here. This was the aim of the final stage of the study in which we solicited the thoughts and experiences of women leaders themselves.



Women in Catholic Leadership Survey

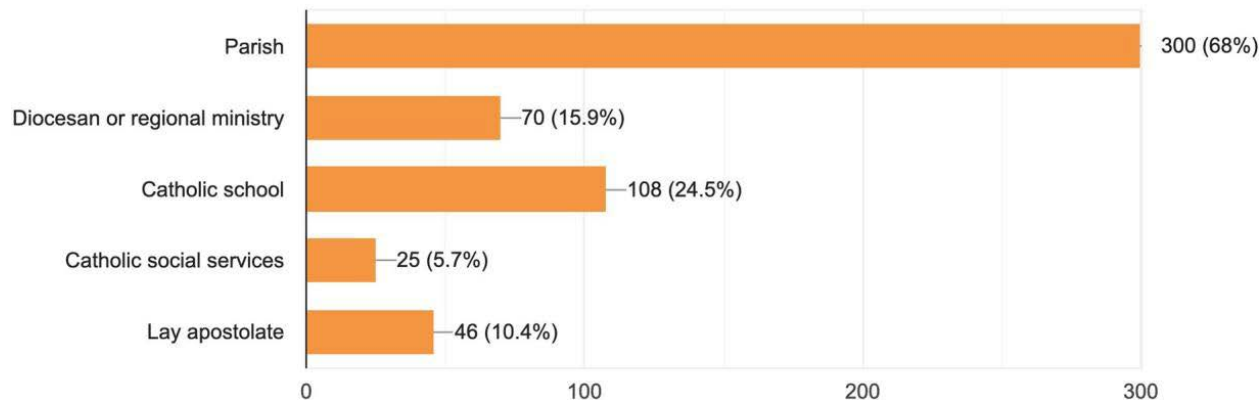
This final stage in our study explored women's experiences through a number of closed-ended survey question and concluded with four open-ended questions. Before turning to these, we will begin by examining the demographics of the female leaders.

Demographics

The vast majority of female leaders are found within parishes, and there are substantial numbers of leaders also in Catholic schools, diocesan and regional ministries or lay apostolates:

In what sort of institution do you serve as a Catholic leader? (check all that apply)

441 responses

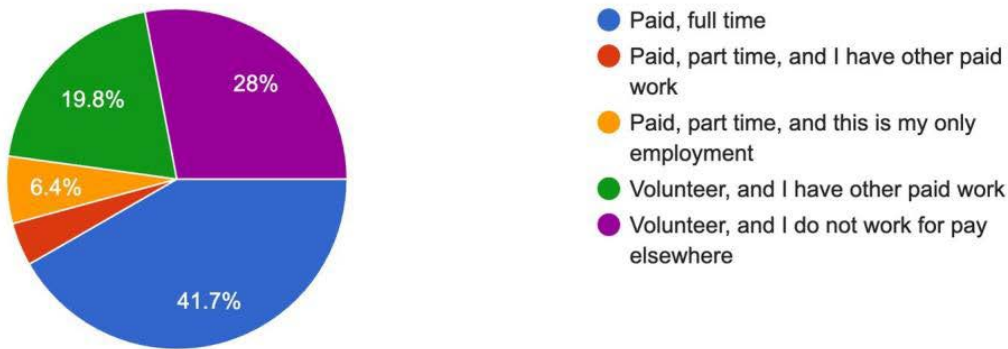


A plurality of women are in their position as a paid, full time employee, and nearly half of women serve as an unpaid volunteer. Roughly half are paid and half are volunteer:



What is your status in your Catholic leadership role?

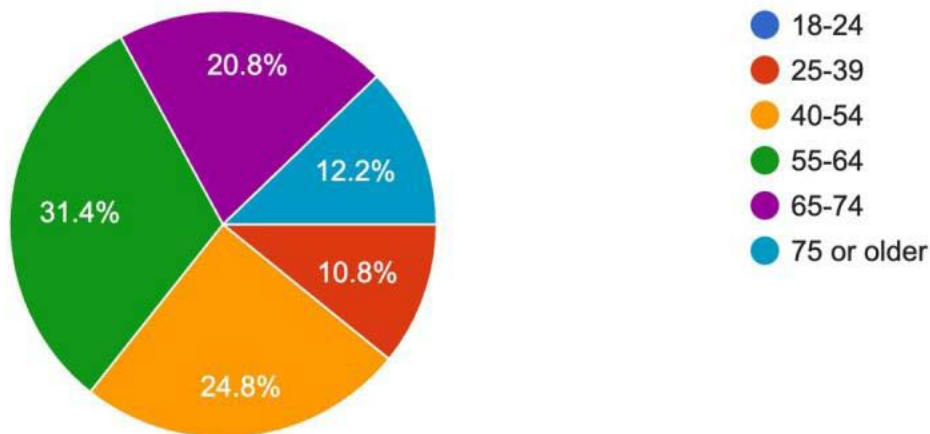
439 responses



Most women who lead are 40-64 years old, but each of our age demographics still broke 10 percent, demonstrating the age diversity of our female leaders. While it was too small to be “captured” on the open-ended portion of the survey, some of the younger women said that being both young and a woman made it doubly hard to be taken seriously. One woman who was older said that her opinions were often dismissed because of her age:

Age:

443 responses

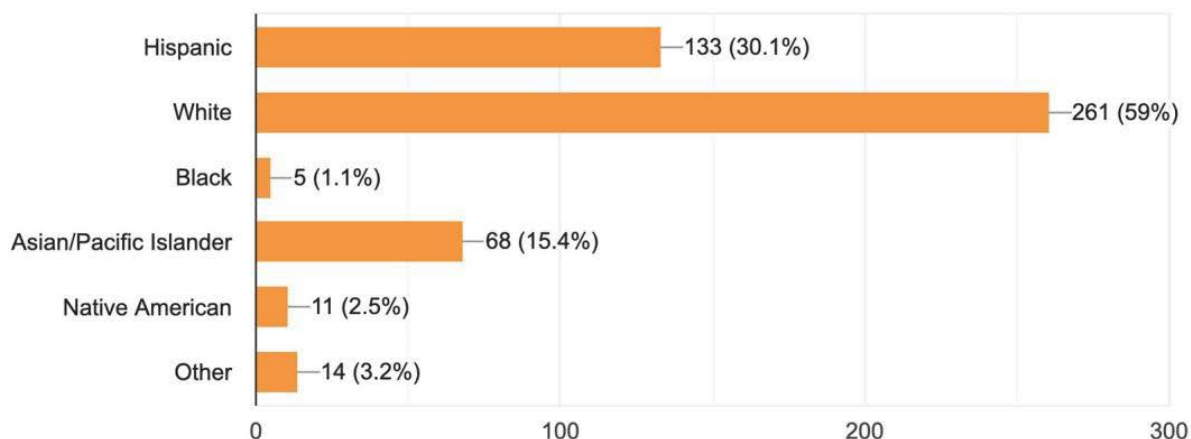




The majority of respondents identified as White, followed by Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Other, Native American, and Black. Like young female leaders, some women noted that their cultural context made it more difficult to be taken seriously as a female leader; these women tended to identify as Hispanic or Asian (and sometimes in the open-ended response mentioned being Vietnamese). These responses did break the threshold and will be discussed further in the open-ended analysis:

Race: (check all that apply)

442 responses

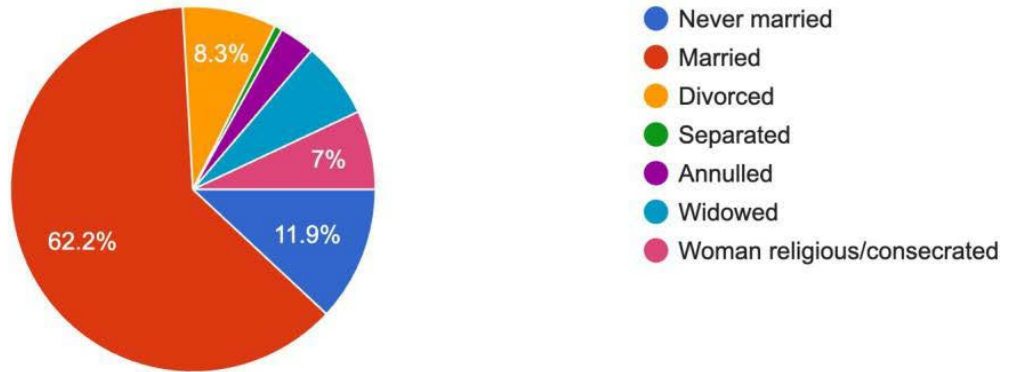


Most respondents are married with nearly 12 percent who have never married:



Marital/Religious status:

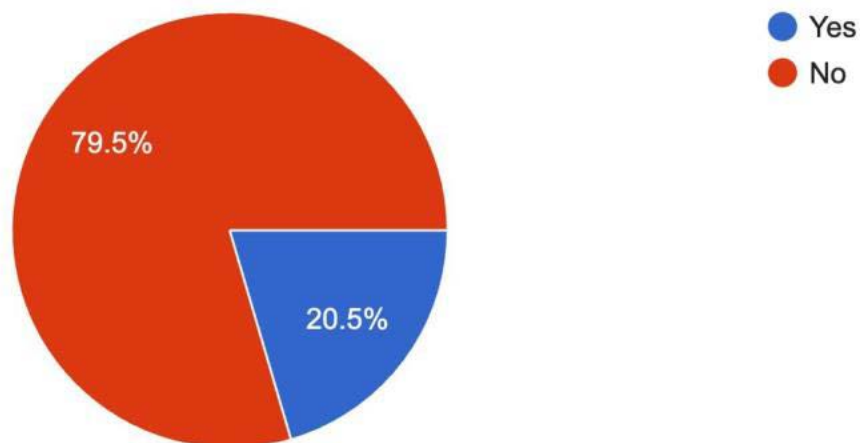
444 responses



The vast majority of respondents do not have minor children, but one in five do. Most have adult children, which is unsurprising given the large number of respondents who were married at some point and that roughly three-fourths are 40 or older:

Do you have children aged 0-17?

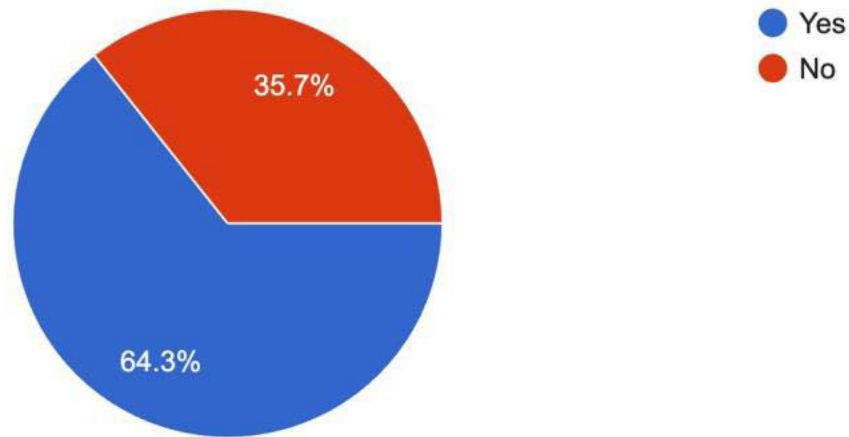
440 responses





Do you have children aged 18+?

443 responses



Experiences in Leadership

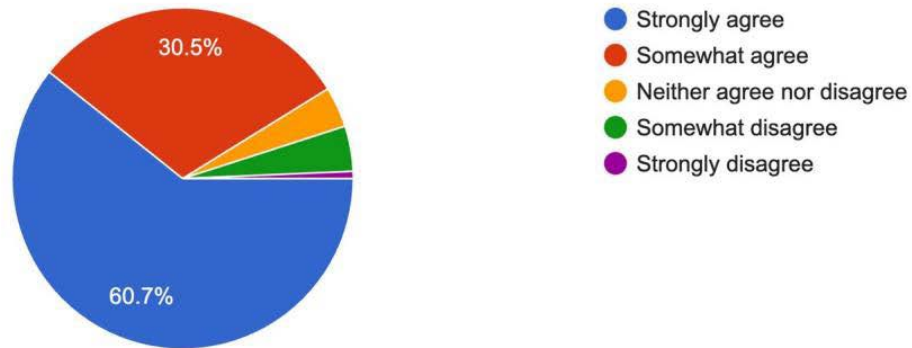
The good news is that the vast majority of those in ministry report positive feelings and experiences across the survey questions; it is only when we prompt for negative experiences in the open-ended section that we really find the challenges in women's leadership experiences. However, something to keep in mind is that the women who have had the most negative experiences in ministry have likely left this field (this is called "survivorship bias" in the social sciences). So while we should be thankful for the positive experiences we see here, we should still pay close attention to the small minorities who report negative experiences and the nature of the challenges that the women later report, even though they may deem these small, infrequent or anomalous.

As we see here, the vast majority of women leaders agree that they are supported, respected and encouraged in their role as a Catholic leader. We would ideally want all our leaders to be in that "strongly agree" group. Those who select "somewhat agree" here and elsewhere are indicating that they have an overall positive experience, even while they also would like to see notable improvements in this area. This is why listening to the challenges named in the open-ended section is so important; even though most leaders are having overall positive experiences, they can still identify challenges and struggles in their ministry context:



I am supported, respected and encouraged within the context of my role as a Catholic leader.

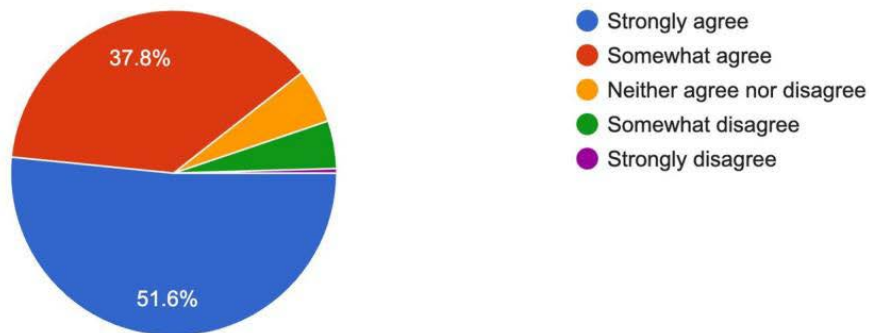
443 responses



Still a majority, but we see a small drop in the strongly agree group when asked if their insights matter:

When I offer ideas to my Catholic colleagues, it seems like my insights matter to them and shape our final decision.

444 responses

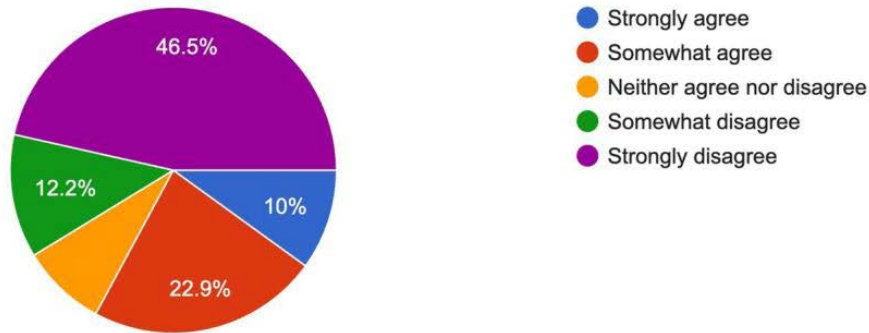


When asked about having felt sexism of differing varieties within their leadership context, unfortunately, one-third of women report having had experienced this (strongly and somewhat agree combined):



I have experienced sexism, felt marginalized or been the target of female stereotypes while serving in my capacity as a Catholic leader.

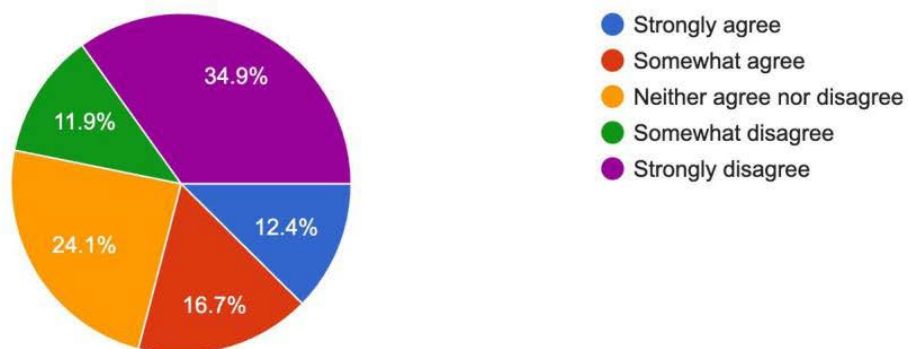
441 responses



Just under 30 percent say that being a female leader in Catholic contexts is harder than in non-Catholic contexts. This question has a fairly large number of responses choosing “neither agree not disagree”:

Being a female leader in Catholic contexts seems more difficult than being a female leader in non-Catholic contexts

444 responses

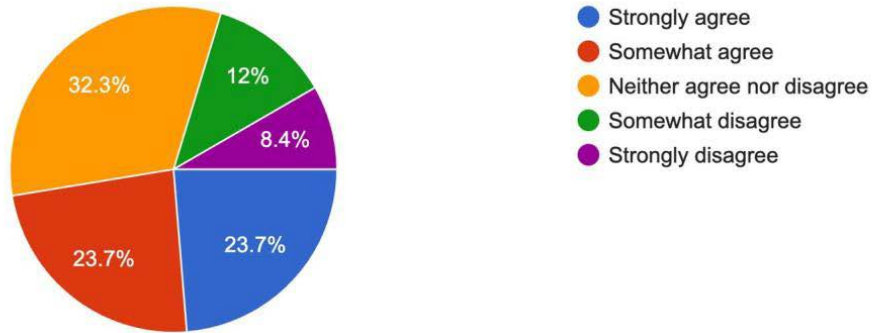


Just under half affirm that those they minister with are explicit about wanting to include women's perspectives. We should note that the “neither agree nor disagree” wedge is one-third of the sample:



I have had colleagues and/or supervisors within my Catholic leadership context say that they want to make sure that a process or discussion includes the voices and experiences of women.

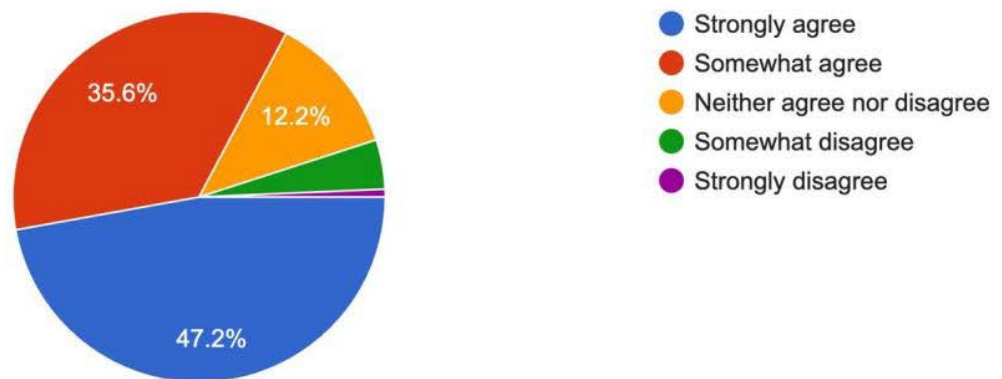
443 responses



Eighty-three percent say that lay people seem open to their leadership:

Lay people seem open to female leadership in my Catholic contexts.

441 responses

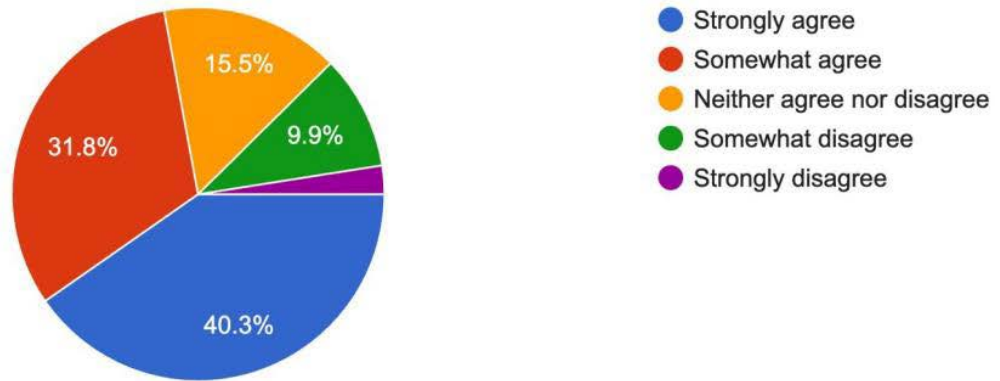


Seventy-two percent say the same of ordained clergy:



Ordained clergy seem open to female leadership in my Catholic contexts.

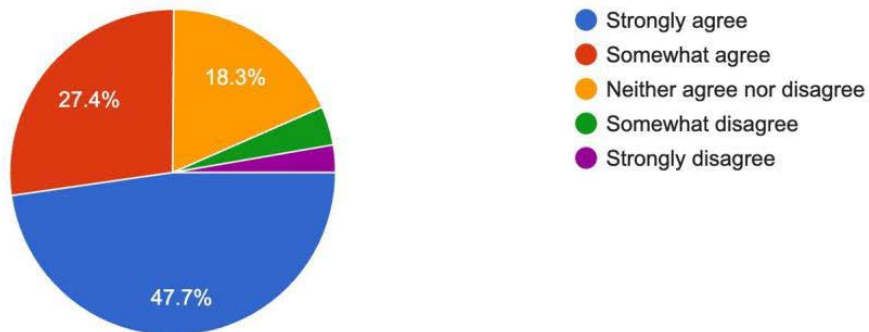
444 responses



Three-fourths say that their efficacy is reliant upon the top leadership's attitudes toward Catholic women leaders:

Whether or not I am heard as a Catholic female leader has a lot to do with the top leadership's (e.g., principal, pastor, executive director) openness to this.

442 responses

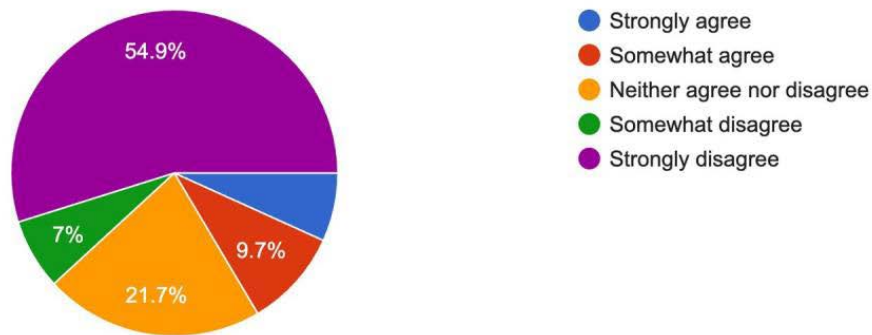




Seventeen percent said colleagues or supervisors who were unsupportive of them as a female leader contributed to their leaving previous Catholic leadership positions:

I have had to leave previous Catholic leadership positions, in part, because I felt that some of my colleagues and/or my supervisor were unsupportive of me as a female leader.

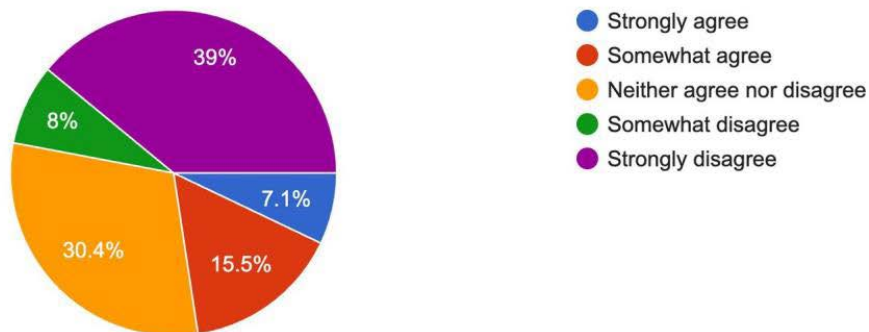
443 responses



Twenty-three percent said being a wife and/or mother pulled them away from previous leadership roles. Note the large percentage of “neither agree nor disagree” here:

I have had to leave previous Catholic leadership positions, in part, because I felt that my duties as a leader did not leave me enough time or energy for my vocation as a wife and/or mother.

438 responses

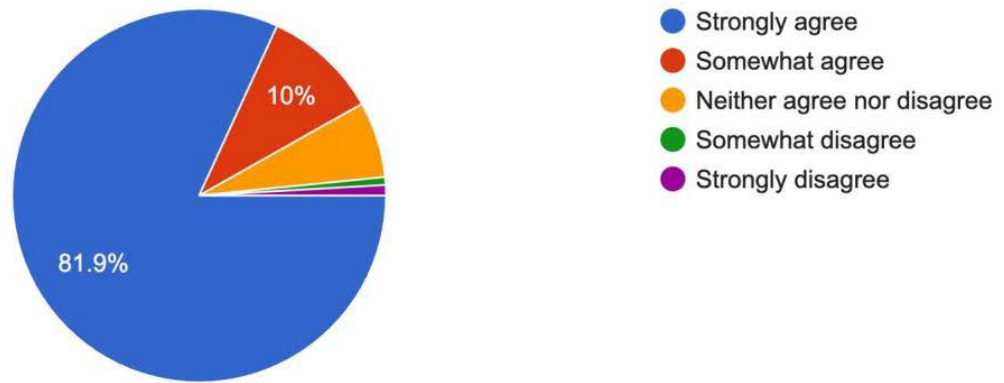




Ninety-two percent—with most of these strongly agreeing—believe it is important to include women in Catholic leadership:

I think it is critical to include women in Catholic leadership.

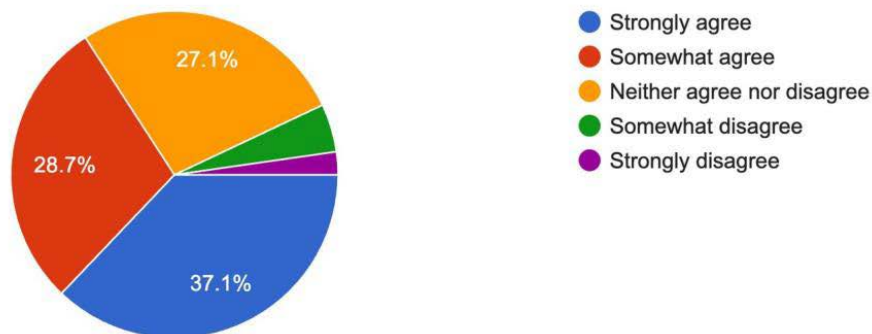
441 responses



Two-thirds say that some people who come to them seem more comfortable approaching them for ministry or other help because they are a woman. Note that only seven percent disagree with this:

There are some people I serve who seem more comfortable approaching me for help, ministry, or other work-related tasks because I am a woman.

442 responses

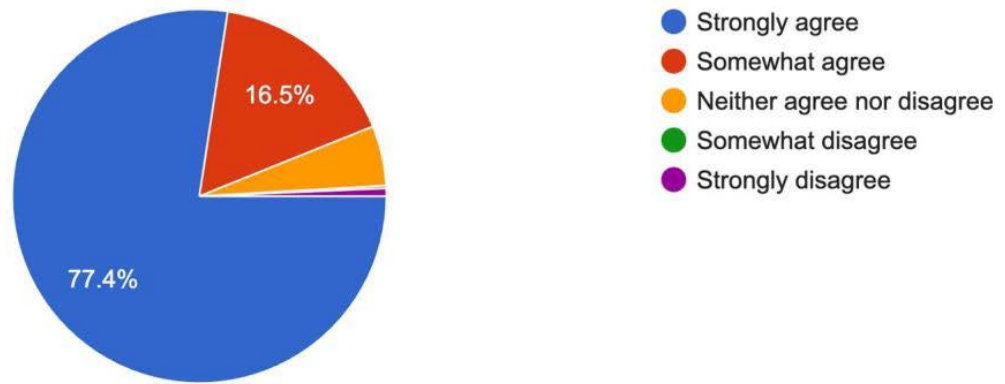




Finally, a huge majority of these women see their work in Catholic leadership as part of their vocation or calling. Less than one percent disagreed with this:

I see my role as a Catholic leader as part of my vocation or calling.

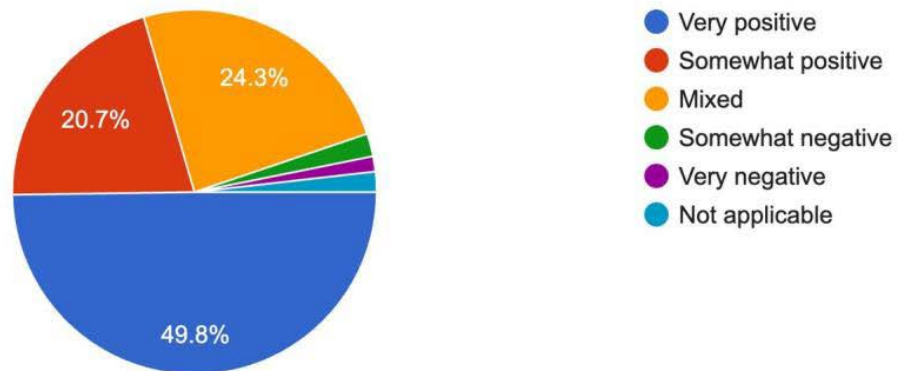
443 responses



Seventy-one percent report positive experiences working with priests:

How has your experience as a female Catholic leader been when working with priests?

444 responses

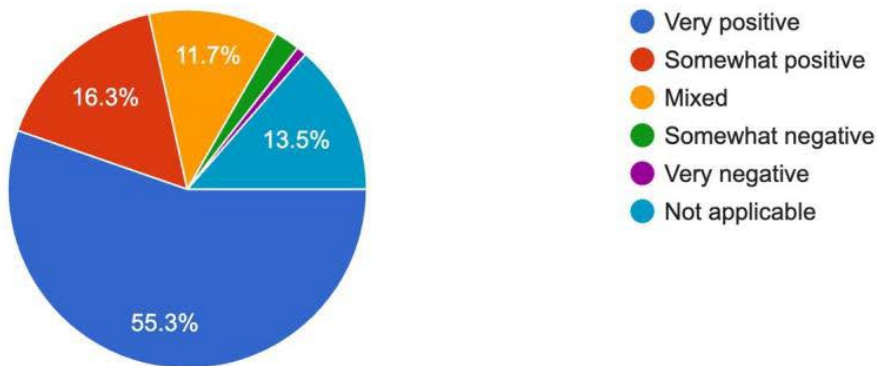




Seventy-two percent say the same of deacons:

How has your experience as a female Catholic leader been when working with deacons?

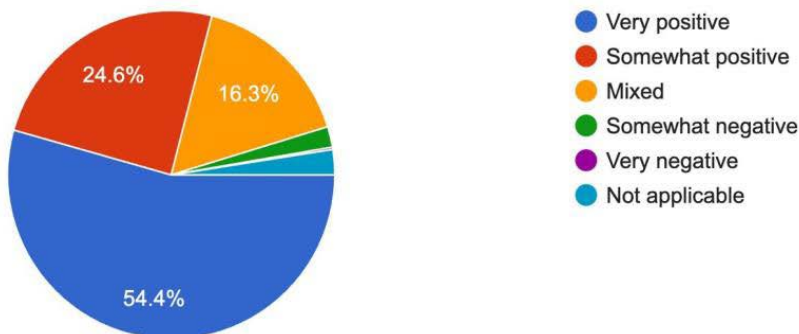
443 responses



Seventy-nine percent say the same of their lay colleagues and supervisors:

How has your experience as a female Catholic leader been when working with lay colleagues and/or supervisors?

443 responses

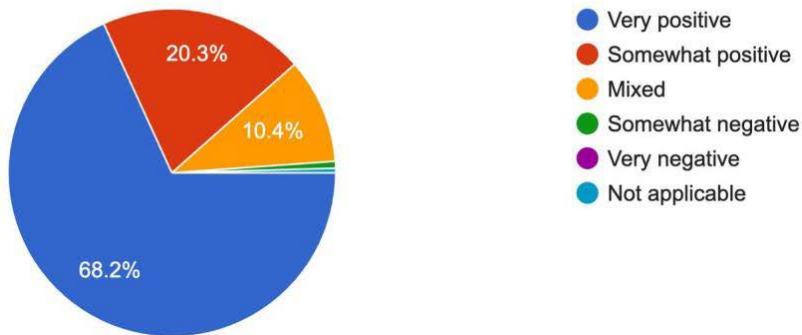




And a full 89 percent say they have positive experiences in serving their ministerial community:

How has your experience as a female Catholic leader been when working with the community you serve?

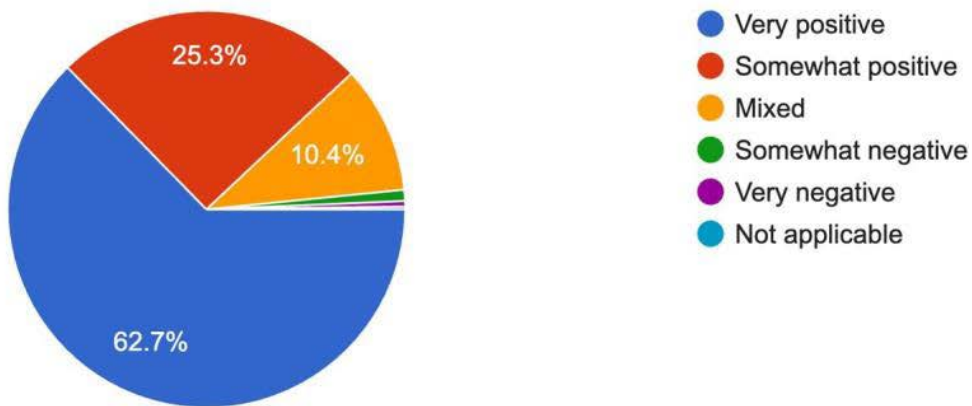
443 responses



Social scientists have found that overall measures tend to be over-inflated. That is, people may rate a restaurant a 4 for cleanliness, a 3 for value, a 5 for service, a 4 for quality of food, 3 for décor, but then rate their overall experience as a five. We observe a similar pattern here; despite all the potential negatives they may have just recalled, their overall sense of being a Catholic leader is a remarkably positive one:

Overall, how positive is your experience as a Catholic female leader?

442 responses





Open-Ended Responses

After the closed-ended portion of the questionnaire, the respondents were invited to respond to four open-ended questions. A brief word on analytical methods is in order here; those wanting to move straight into the findings may skip to the first subheading below. These analytical techniques are rooted in “grounded theory,” that is, an inductive method of finding themes in the data. The researcher did not go in with pre-fabricated categories that were accepted or rejected depending upon what was found. Instead, the coding themes emerged from the participants themselves. This method required a slow and careful read for the first third of each set of responses; typically the categories are quite clear beyond this point. Only once did a new theme emerge later in the analysis and the researcher returned to the beginning of the responses and incorporated the new theme into the codes. With this method it is easier to start with too many codes and need to merge them later

than to realize you began with too broad of a code and that you need to go back and refine them. For instance, in the second question regarding challenges women leaders face, some mentioned lay men, others named lay women, and additional respondents identified lay people broadly as a potential challenge. However, later in the analysis, it became clear that lay people broadly was the dominant theme among these and the three codes were merged into a single code of lay people generally. This method helps ensure that as many responses as possible are captured in the final report as well as that these themes are discussed by a substantial number of the respondents; all themes discussed in-depth in this report are at least approaching ten percent of the total codeable responses for a given question.

To quickly explain “codeable responses,” participants were free to answer or not any question on the survey. However, in an open-ended survey, a valid response is slightly more complicated than whether or not a person answered the question. Some answer the response in a straightforward manner and these are easily codeable. However, others skip the question, some write “NA” or similar, still others reference a favorite saint quote but is it not obvious to the researcher how this connects to the question, some share they have not had this experience (and so effectively are an “NA”), others thanked the diocese for asking their opinions and so on. These latter examples are all treated, for analysis purposes, as non-responses. So when the report states that a particular question has a certain number of “codeable responses,” this is the number of participants who 1) answered and 2) answered in a way that communicated a response to the survey question that “made sense” to the researcher. Each response could have been coded with multiple themes and so the total number of responses across all codes within a given question will exceed the total number of codeable responses for that question. We now turn to the four questions.



Question One: Please share some of the graces or fruits you have seen or personally experienced in having women in leadership in your Catholic context (e.g., parish, school, etc.).

There were a total of 319 codeable responses for this question. The most common theme, voiced by 83 female leaders, was that **women have particular virtues, dispositions or emotions that they bring to their leadership contexts:**

“Women in leadership often bring a unique perspective of empathy and care, which can deeply enrich the pastoral and educational environment.”¹

“Women in leadership are sometimes more caring and open to change and what others have to say.”

Fifty-three highlight that **women in leadership are inspirational to other women:**

“I think the woman principal at the Catholic school has been a wonderful example of leadership.”
“Seeing women in leadership positions is inspiring to me, particularly since my immediate Catholic context is in the Vietnamese community wherein Vietnamese women are typically in supporting roles. When I work across cultural communities and see women teaching and leading, it makes me feel confident in the role of lay women in ensuring the Church thrives.”

Fifty-one say that **women have particular professional skills, attitudes or competencies:**

“I have seen that women are more dedicated and organized at the school setting.”

“Higher employee engagement, inclusive workspace culture, diverse perspectives, better and more open lines of communication.”

Another 51 say that a fruit of women's leadership has been the **growth of the community that benefitted from her service:**

“I see the fruit of the Spirit working every day to bring our community closer to God and to each other.”

“I truly love being able to share my faith and have open discussions with my students who may or may not be Catholic.”

¹Some quotes are edited lightly for spelling/grammatical errors, readability or to preserve anonymity.



Forty-six say that **women leaders are supportive and collaborative:**

“Being an integral part of community formation where everyone's input and ideas are respected and fostered.”

“Our school has been led by women for the many years I have been teaching there. Women tend to share responsibility and lift one another up.”

Thirty-five reported that **women leaders are especially insightful for concerns relating to family or youth:**

“Women's leadership tends to understand the demands put on women and have more empathy around the roles of women as professionals and wives/mothers.”

“I think being a mother and now working in Religious Ed. has many benefits. I can work with kids and teach in a fun creative way as I have the experience of teaching my own children.”

Thirty-four say that the **relationships they have made or the community they have fostered** has been a real grace:

“Great sense of belonging.”

“A welcoming and committed environment focused on supporting the Mission of the Church while creating a culture of friendship in Christ.”

Thirty-three name **their own growth** as an important experience in their leadership:

“I have been working with the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth from a young age in Vietnam and continuing in the U.S. That experience has helped me stay close to my faith and helped other young people to have opportunities to grow in their faith as well.”

“Personal enrichment, satisfaction of answering and being obedient to God's call.”

Twenty-four say that **women are very pastoral and/or good listeners:**

“Sometimes women are more compassionate and better listeners than men.”



“The willingness to listen and to take heart in what we have to say or are feeling.”

Nineteen claim **women offer a different perspective**:

“Women offer a different viewpoint from men. It is always fruitful to learn others’ perspectives.”

“Good counterbalance to clergy point of view, which is masculine. Both perspectives are needed.”

Seventeen believe that **some people would prefer to approach a woman** with certain questions or concerns:

“For a person who has been harmed and betrayed by a man and within an institution of male leaders, a female church representative is experienced as a safer and perhaps a more compassionate person sensitive to their needs.”

“Our outreach seems to bring people out of a dire situation (for a little while) by providing a hot shower, warm food, clothing and a listening ear. They find the women who volunteer less authoritative and more like a mom or sister when it comes to asking for help.”

Finally, 15 of the respondents preferred to **minimize the importance of gender**:

“I think good, compassionate, strong leadership transcends gender. Jesus Christ knew this, but this truth seems to have gotten lost over the centuries.”

“Feels sexist to comment on ‘having women in leadership roles.’ I work side by side with men and women to serve the broken and needy. I am in charge and respected, but a male could easily replace me and be just as effective. We respect each other and are blind to race and gender. Please be respectful of this.”

Question Two: Please name some of the challenges or obstacles women in positions of Catholic leadership face.

There were 273 codeable responses for this question. The most common challenge named was a **general sexism**, voiced by 102 respondents:



“I have been told that I should stay home and raise my children and not work. My children are all school age and I work during school hours. This would never have been said to a man. This is sexism.”

“I have found that some male colleagues tend to have their own agenda and feel that my voice may not be as ‘important’ as theirs.”

Sixty-eight reported that women in leadership may find that **either they are diminished or their authority or voice is devalued:**

“Being heard, having to ask permission, being expected to do the nitty gritty rather than lead.”

“There’s very few women in the highest positions of leadership. They are often passed up at the highest levels, opinions are discounted, women are not protected and often made to feel unsafe when speaking out.”

Fifty-six say that **unsupportive clergy** are a challenge. To be clear, many of the respondents noted that most of their experiences with clergy are overwhelmingly positive. However, the priest or deacon holds considerable influence and authority and can have a significant impact on a female leader. Even if these negative interactions are far rarer than positive ones, they leave a lasting mark:

“Some priests are uncomfortable with women in leadership positions. I have been in several parishes and served with many priests. Some were wonderful, others less so.”

“Power struggles with priests who feel that they have all the answers and do not want to allow women with decades of experience exercise their wisdom.”

Thirty-four discussed the challenge of being spread too thin, with **conflicts between work and familial obligations:**

“Having to juggle time to fulfill family responsibilities and volunteering at church organizations.”

“Feeling like having to sacrifice between family and ministry. Actual issues with balancing ministry life and home life.”

Like the unsupportive priests being few in number, but nevertheless having a big impact on the respondents, 33 said that **lay people** could be a challenge to their leading:



“I think there are some lay people that still expect males to have certain roles. For example, a communion service when no priest was available was led by a woman. The woman leading it did a great job, but I heard comments from someone attending they thought it should have been led by a man.”

“The biggest challenge I believe women have is with lay parishioners viewing women in positions within the parish. They are so used to the traditional male roles that some have questioned women's roles on occasions.”

Twenty-seven said **clericalism** was a challenge to their ministry. Clericalism poses some analytical problems. For a faith tradition that only ordains men, experiences of clericalism can be difficult to disentangle from sexism in these short responses. Often, if a response was coded as expressing clericalism, it was also coded for sexism; so it is somewhat safe to think of clericalism as a subtype of sexism that involved issues of ordination. And it is also important to note that clericalism is different from unsupportive clergy; a clericalist attitude can come from the laity:

“A challenge for both women leaders and their pastors is parishioners who insist on going directly to the priest or pastor rather than the responsible person. This behavior must be squelched by our priests and pastors.”

“I have been called to give talks or lead a spiritual session with a group. Men have openly indicated that it would me nice if ‘the deacon could give them a talk instead.’”

Twenty-one asserted that a **pay or hours gap** (the latter meaning that women would often work longer hours than their male counterparts) was a challenge to women in ministry:

“There is still a huge pay grade difference between male and female employees.”

“I also believe that men are paid more in Catholic schools, so creating some sort of salary schedule based on experience and education is important.”

Fifteen referred to an **ethnic cultural challenge** in exercising their leadership as a woman:

“In my experience, one of the significant challenges faced by women in positions of Catholic leadership is the pervasive influence of ‘machismo.’ This cultural mindset often reduces women to traditional roles, such as caregivers and homemakers, rather than recognizing them as individuals with equal or greater capabilities, ideas, virtues, and strengths compared to their male counterparts. I have observed instances in parishes where women in leadership positions are not



afforded the respect and consideration they deserve from their peers and superiors. This lack of recognition undermines their contributions and hinders the potential for a more inclusive and effective leadership dynamic within the community.”

“In my Asian culture (especially in Vietnam), women usually don’t have the opportunity to be in leadership roles in Catholic environment. After moving to America, I felt that I was looked down upon sometimes, because I am a young adult who serves the youth and also a woman. Some would doubt my decisions because I’m just a ‘kid’ or a ‘girl’ who is trying to learn to be a leader.”

Another fifteen saw a sort of **general power problem** as they led:

“Often we do not communicate who the existing leaders are along with the scope and depth of responsibility they hold. Without this stated clarity, people may feel they have the option to decide for themselves whether the woman is or is not empowered.”

“Women are never in the ultimate position for leadership/decision-making in parish or diocesan settings. Always under male leadership/authority.”

Eleven wanted to see **women more active within the Mass**. While a small number mentioned an occasional pastor did not allow female altar servers, most said they wanted to **hear sermons or reflections from women**:

“The biggest challenge is the lack of a woman’s voice from the ambo. It would be wonderful to truly hear a woman of God speak/reflect on the Gospel during the Mass.”

“Not believing that women can teach/preach about faith and Scripture.”

Question Three: What are some additional roles in which you would like to see more female leadership and why?

This question received 211 codeable responses. Named by 94 respondents, the most common role or tasks that women wanted to have expanded to include them was that of **deacon and the accompanying duties this involves**. As to the specific tasks, while some mentioned the sacramental duties of baptism and marrying couples, having women in a **preaching** capacity was the most named task when any were specified:

“Giving homilies/reflections at church; more presence in the life of the parish.”



“The restoration of a female permanent diaconate. The People of God will benefit from the participation of women recognized and active in liturgy, proclaiming the Gospel and preaching the other half of the image of God from a holy and uniquely feminine perspective. The female diaconate is already present and serving the Church, but it has not yet been given the full authority of office and voice. The Church needs to recognize this poverty of Spirit, to unleash the power of a renewed Spirit, inviting the whole story to be told with new and exciting relevance. Young women especially are leaving the Church at an alarming rate. Why should they stay with no representation, no voice?”

Also receiving large support, 74 said they would like to see **more women in higher leadership roles or leading parish life**, such as through pastoral administrator/associates (the most popularly named role), more presence on committees, more visible leadership and in other spiritual and administrative leadership roles:

“I like to see more women (staff or volunteer) in leadership at each parish like chairwomen, head of finance & accounting, liturgy, significant events.”

“In principal positions at the high school levels, president roles, director roles.”

“Pastoral associates—lay people with theology, ministry, business, etc. practical skills to complement the priest's role in these areas. Male or female lay leaders would be helpful in all, but better balance and almost certainly more awareness of how parish decision making affects women and families with women in these roles.”

Thirty-two wanted the **priesthood to be expanded to include women**:

“When I trained (Clinical Pastoral Education) to work with the dying and the bereaved, I encountered several ministers and priests (Lutheran) who were excellent, serving in their vocations. I absolutely never felt that I would be called to that elevated position; however, I have encountered so very many Catholic women who could (should?) serve in the glorious vocation of deacon or priest.”

“Deacon, priest, parish administrator with the authority of a pastor. We have a shortage of priests. Women are doing much of the work of priests and deacons without being given the respect that comes with the title.”



“I believe that women as leaders in the Church (i.e. priests and deacons) would make the Catholic faith more relatable and feel less harsh. The Catholic faith needs to mirror real life and become more relevant in order to survive the tests of time and change.”

Thirteen would like to see **more women in business and finance roles:**

“Parish Councils and Finance Committees: While women are often active in ministries, their presence on parish finance committees or councils could ensure that more voices are heard in discussions about parish growth, resource management, and pastoral planning.”

“On the board of directors at our Catholic school and in our parish and finance councils. Making decisions that help affect the finances of the parish.”

Another thirteen specified that they **did not want to see new roles for women to include that of ordination:**

“First and foremost, priesthood is for men. The woman’s role in the Church is like that of the Blessed Mother. A mother and child. Let’s reflect on The Station of the Cross: the women crying (what did Jesus tell them?), Veronica wipes the face of Jesus, Jesus meets his mother, Jesus died on the Cross, Jesus was taken down on the Cross...the importance of the presence of women, (not necessarily to be in the leadership role just to be said there is no discrimination. That is Wokeism ideology). That applies as well to the young adults and children to be heard.”

“I am a female Catholic who happens to also be traditional and would find it difficult to accept female priests. However, I would hope that women are considered for any other position based on their experience, knowledge and merits.”

After this, the responses are fewer in number, but to mention these briefly as they may spark ideas: nine would like to see **more women in public-facing leadership** (e.g., authors, influencers, speakers at large conferences); another nine said generally that **women should be present in every role possible or allowed**; seven wanted **more women leading in social justice, politics, civic engagement or partnerships**; six wanted to see **women involved in formation or ongoing formation of priests and deacons**; three wanted **spaces where women leaders could be the final authority**; and another three wanted **women leaders to have a more global or national voice**, perhaps advising national episcopal conferences and Vatican offices.



Question Four: Finally, please tell us some of the insights that might better support women in Catholic leadership positions.

This question received 191 codeable responses. The most commonly requested source of support—suggested by 61 respondents—was **more educational or formational opportunities**:

“Respect for women who feel called to serve in ministry. Parish support for partial tuition help for women taking classes in ministry. I received such help when in three-year program for spiritual direction.”

“More management training. Many of us either are hesitant to use authority or overcorrect.”

“More educational opportunities and the ability to achieve a degree or more in Catholic teachings. Perhaps more online classes that can help us obtain certifications.”

Next most requested—with 42 responses—was **relationship and community-building opportunities**, such as mentorships, networking events, retreats and other spiritual and relational opportunities:

“Women are busy throughout the year in their service to the Church in their ministry. I think that at the parish level, an annual Mass/breakfast/retreat would be a welcomed break to get to know one another.”

“List of diocesan resources/events for women in leadership roles at a parish level.”

Thirty-two named **greater support for women leaders in whatever Catholic context they are leading**, whether parish, diocesan, school and so on. **Pastors** were seen as playing a critical role for women who lead in parishes:

“Men have to believe we are good enough to respond to a call from God.”

“Equipping clergy members, especially those that are not active collaborators in the diocesan planning and mission, to see the value in the gifts, talents, and real contributions of women leadership.”



“Pastors placing them in ministry leadership roles and stating why to those under her and that she has his support, because of her experience and trust. So that those under her leadership will also have respect for her leadership role.”

Twenty-six said that **Church ministries needed to be more supportive of family obligations:**

“Understanding the duality of women—mothers as well as professionals.”

“Childcare.”

“Women can add great value to the Church as a whole, but sometimes the daily challenges of motherhood and the wife role don’t allow time for leadership positions. Maybe we need to start looking at dual women leaders in ministry, sort of a tag team approach. This might be like a part-time leader roles. This would empower women to say ‘yes’ to leadership roles without putting a strain on home relationships. I see so many women who are trying to balance 2-3 church ministries and home life...in the end both suffer, as well as the physical and emotional well-being of the woman.”

Another 26 participants think that **better education and formation of Catholics** would broaden the support of female leaders:

“Aside from resources, I think that the change has to happen from within the community that is so engraved in old traditions and thinking. Having our male counterparts realize the amount of work that is done by women, and how their “authority” in the minds of traditional minds, impacts how serious women are taken during difficult decision-making situations. Those that want things to go their own way, undermine the choices the leader makes, jump over them, and go directly to a male authority figure (typically a priest) to try and get their own way to happen.”

“Men in leadership roles ought to validate the thoughts of women more by being less defensive—even sometimes hostile. Men may not know they can sometimes ‘show-up’ in this manner. Learning to differentiate thoughts from feelings, better listening skills, and communicating with more tenderness would help tremendously.”

Twenty-three think that **clergy need better formation, on-going formation, and/or need to be more supportive:**



“It’s all about the clergy in the parish setting. I cannot imagine having a pastor who was not supportive of women, and I have worked for three so far. That would be so difficult, and I know it exists. But I think they have figured out how important women are in the Church. I hope they get training on that.”

“Over the years there has been outstanding support of women, and then a new pastor has a different approach. Very discouraging.”

“Training for priests on the role of women in the Church.”

Twenty-two believe that **women’s experiences and input must be solicited and elevated:**

“Knowledgeable women need to have their voice heard at the parish level. Women can contribute and be helpful in ministries such as parish councils, financial councils.”

“Better listening to us and valuing our opinions, especially by our priests.”

“Every parish council, financial committee, and decision-making group should include women.”

Twenty say women would be better supported through **more opportunities and roles** for women:

“Much of what our pastors do in running a parish is not inherently priests’ work. Administration that can be done by lay people, can be done by women.”

“Provide more women with opportunities to preach and teach at the parish level and in academia.”

Sixteen suggested that **raising the profile of women leaders** would support them:

“Change may prove challenging for some, but elevating women in our church is for them, too. It’s important to face a willingness to discriminate based on gender or race—to deny God’s plan for us. People who harbor such feelings of exclusion need to see that women are not second- or third-class workers for the Lord. We belong, and we respond when our Church calls for workers in the vineyard. Let us pray for our Church to a truly be listening, learning, and discerning Church.”

“Share stories of women who have successfully navigated leadership roles within the Church. Highlighting their achievements can inspire others and demonstrate what is possible.”



Thirteen say that having more **equal or just pay** would be supportive:

“Wages comparable to like duties in secular arenas.”

“Fair pay based on the talents and gifts and knowledge women offer.”

Ten state that **ordaining women** is important in supporting women's leadership:

“Ordination. Until then, unless the entire structure changes, we remain in subordinate positions. This can be very discouraging and a cause of resentment and counter productivity.”

“I think the acceptance of women deacons would greatly improve the overall perception of the value of female leadership within the Church.”

Finally, nine say that women will be more supported when they **embrace their lay and more supportive role**:

“Women should educate themselves in the teaching of the Church and seek to serve rather than be served, to understand rather than be understood, to give than to receive. Women should seek holiness. Women should study the lives of the women saints and try to follow their example starting with our Blessed Mother, and countless saints and female doctors of the church. They did not seek leadership (per se) but all for the Glory of God. Women should be strong leaders in their homes, especially mothers. They need to teach the faith to their children and be a good example of a Catholic wife, mother, daughter.”

“We also need to stop pushing for progressive things that make us look Episcopalian and instead work to honor women in their roles without demanding they do the same things as men.”

Summary

In thinking about the varied viewpoints represented throughout the survey and the social science literature on contemporary Catholic women in the United States, the women who participated in this study appear to represent the spectrum of highly-engaged Catholic women in their experiences and attitudes. A big takeaway is that the experiences of women leaders within our diocese are generally quite positive. We should rejoice in this! At the same time, many of the challenges or obstacles women describe are internal to the Church. Many of these have to do with a general cultural attitude that women's roles within Church life—broadly defined—are secondary to those



of men's. This is not unique to the Church; there are countless studies that have found that women in leadership face significant challenges that their male counterparts do not. But it is especially hurtful when damaging experiences happen in a context of faith and within a place of refuge and care, and to those most generous and dedicated to the Church. We should listen prayerfully to the varied thoughts, experiences, suggestions and requests for supportive change that emerge from this survey and discern how the diocese might act upon these. One of the worst things that a person can do is share her experiences in the hope of change, and then nothing ever comes of this. She moves from thinking, "People just don't know" to "People just don't care." Feelings transform from hope to isolation and abandonment. An uncodeable theme that emerged several times in the open-ended section was a gratitude for the survey and a curiosity and hopefulness for what might happen next. Clearly the women have enthusiasm for what might come next.

Discerning Next Steps: Themes

The Women's Advisory Committee agreed, at the invitation of Cardinal Robert McElroy, to continue to meet to think through and pray about the various themes and ramifications that are woven throughout the findings. The members of the committee decided to first identify the most salient themes present in the findings. Next, they would offer preliminary thoughts for several diocesan initiatives designed to magnify the gifts of our women leaders as well as diminish the obstacles that they face. It was their hope to honor the many voices of those who participated in a way that brings new life to the diocese's women leaders as well as the whole of the diocese and its many parishes, schools and organizations.

To begin this process, we used Vevox software to anonymously answer three questions that were sent to the members in advance of the meeting. These questions were designed to help us think through how our findings might point the ways to insights or initiatives. There were thirteen women present at this meeting and their discernment is reflected in what follows. Due to the small sample size, it is important that every thought is captured, which is why—as in the pastor survey sample—even sentiments that were voiced by only one member are offered below. Some responses contained thoughts that were beyond the scope of the core of the question and these ideas were not categorized—this is also true of later responses that veer from the central question—but all responses address the central idea in some way and so none were totally excluded from analysis. Some women identified multiple issues within their responses and these were categorized and counted for each idea they presented.

What does the data and all that we have done throughout this synodal process say to us about the barriers that inhibit the growth of women's leadership?



Although the women's survey showed that their experiences are quite positive, it is important to also identify and reduce or remove—insofar as possible—any barriers that impede their full and thriving leadership.

Seven believed there can be **sexism** that, while not a part of official Catholic tradition, nonetheless affects the way some lay and ordained Catholics think about and treat women:

“Together, this [the women's and pastor's surveys] seems to signal that there is a need for the tacit assumptions or outright hostility of those (both women and men) who harbor attitudes of female inferiority to be addressed. In other words, the biggest barriers reported by the female leaders are not the explicit exclusions in canon law that bar all laity from certain tasks or roles, but a pervasive and theologically errant culture that resists female leadership and authority. We need to educate and form ourselves to be aware of these biases.”

“It would seem that barriers are situational and driven by the leadership they encounter in their particular environments much like in the workforce at large.”

“It has shown there are structural and cultural barriers but with some progress made.”

Two suggested that particular **roles for female leadership might be beyond the scope of most women's theological imagination** and that awareness of the various roles that are open to women would facilitate their leadership discernment as a Catholic woman.

“It's important for us women to understand that we can take on more of the leadership roles as well.”

Two said that an important barrier is the **lack of structural support for women who care for a family** as well as hold important leadership roles:

“As a Church we are doing good work in San Diego, but we need to take care more on the tension between vocation as mom/wife and work, so women don't have to leave a position of leadership... for the lack of help (part-time work, childcare support, good salary, scholarships for after-school programs that usually are expensive). We as a Church should support family life.”

Two recognized the **diversity of barriers**, implying that some women could face one type of barrier and never, necessarily, experience another type of barrier that is central to another woman's context:



“After analyzing the data, I feel a sense of belonging. I feel that I am not alone and sympathized with many of the barriers. I also recognized that in different ages, or different stage of life, women face certain difficulty. For example, young women feel their voice is not heard, women with family struggle finding balance with family, work and volunteer duties, ethnicity barriers.”

One pointed to canonical or other **de jure prohibitions** as barriers to women in leadership:

“Some barriers are due to church law, procedures, regulations, or in some cases chauvinism.”

One said that many women leaders would **benefit from more training**:

“In part, the lack of proper formation, ongoing training and information for those currently serving in various leadership capacities.”

Another felt that women leaders would grow if they had **mentorship and better connections with colleagues**:

“Women leading women and having a strong support system with male counterparts.”

One said that the women who desired women's ordination was a false barrier, insofar as it misses the **theological importance of an exclusively male clergy**:

“It seems that many women in the San Diego Diocese perceive the ordination of only men as a barrier within the church, rather than a beautiful tradition rooted in scripture, tradition, and the imitation of Christ.”

What enhancements can be made to existing educational and formational structures to further equip the laity in assuming leadership roles?

Eight wanted to find ways to **increase the education, formation or other competencies of women**:

“Maybe we need to promote more formal education for women who serve at Church.”

“Once the requirements for various leadership roles for women are clearly defined, the existing educational programs of the diocese, the Franciscan School of Theology, and of USD might be



harnessed to design and offer programs (formative and educational) to prepare candidates for those roles. This initiative would require resources be directed to create and sustain the programs.”

“Education on church leadership will be very important to lead the church.”

Three thought that Catholics needed to know what **roles are open to women** that they may not be aware of:

“We must begin by being transparent in what roles are needed and available for laity.”

“Noting that the roles women can partake in are widely unknown, an enhancement would be to provide a list of roles and responsibilities along with a description and the necessary formation to hold that position. This could be any role from volunteer to paid.”

Two look to creating **mentorship and networking opportunities**:

“Programs that create supportive environments for learning... networking with others in like roles and mentors to promote development and fulfillment.”

Two looked to **incorporate Catholic teaching on the equal dignity of women** into other formation opportunities:

“Marriage prep will amplify the shared dignity of the spouses... Formation classes at the diocese should include questions about gender (e.g., look at important women in Scripture)”

“Putting an emphasis on the specific virtues of women and how those are necessary in the life of the Church.”

One woman hoped to **raise Church leaders’ awareness** of the struggles that women face:

“Start with the leaders... priests, deacons and lay ministers should be made aware of the variety of struggles women face in leading. This report is a start, but panels or other listening sessions would be very helpful. Ideally, participants walk away with a different outlook; even women who themselves have not hit a barrier will know that others have and that this is antithetical to the teachings of Jesus... Homilies will challenge Catholics to let go of prejudiced assumptions of our sisters.”



Another thought that **invitations from current leadership** would help inspire women to serve in a leadership capacity:

“In general I feel that communication and invitation from those currently in leadership roles is key. Often time it takes an invitation that will open the doors to finding others that can use their gifts and skills to improve our parishes.”

One member of the committee wanted to ensure that **financially-struggling women were not inadvertently excluded from leadership opportunities**:

“Reaching out to communities where women don't have the economic resources to get an education or formation classes to leadership. Asking what is keeping them besides money, childcare or house-care.”

Another hoped to **raise the profile** of what women were already doing and be **intentionally inclusive** of women:

“Mass announcements might include a congratulations to a major ecclesial event led by a woman, like a speaking engagement or work with the diocese... and female/male and lay/ordained collaboration should be practiced whenever possible... When there are diocesan events or major parish events, having both men and women leading portions of the day is important.”

One woman thought that **invitations from current leadership** would help inspire women to serve in a leadership capacity:

“In general I feel that communication and invitation from those currently in leadership roles is key. Often time it takes an invitation that will open the doors to finding others that can use their gifts and skills to improve our parishes.”

Another wanted Catholic ministries or **organizations to be more self-critical**:

“Organizations that have been male-headed for the last three or more executives should ask themselves why.”

One suggested that we **connect the synodal efforts of the diocese** and parishes to this effort to strengthen women's leadership:



“We can start by the diocese asking for the laity to become fully vested in the synodal church and explaining all that is available to the laity to start to make a difference in their communities.”

Another woman desired to have **guidelines for Catholic organizations** within the diocese:

“Diocese of San Diego have a voting guideline for organizations within our Diocese. We could potentially add in guidance within the Voting Structure to share more about equality.”

Finally, one said that we needed to discover ways to **support women leaders who have family demands**:

“As was said a few times in the previous question, having the support necessary for women to balance family life with service to the church.”

Provide one recommendation that would either resolve the barriers for women's leadership or provide a catalyst for women's leadership in the Diocese of San Diego.

Five suggested more **formational and educational programs** for women:

“Good formation for women leaders. If the women at the top are well formed in their theology, this naturally flows down to the rest of the Church through mentorship and example. Having strong Catholic women will shape the future of our Church.”

“More promotion and programs on formal education for women.”

Four wanted to see **workshops or conferences** that would provide training, formation, community and/or mentorship for women in ministry:

“Host women's leadership days around the diocese geographically so that all can participate. The day can be broken into sessions for various areas of leadership encompassing both those that are paid positions and volunteer. From those form mentoring groups that carry on after the leadership days with ongoing development opportunities throughout the year. Most of the Church's most successful communities are due to the consistent support of lay people to lay people.”

Three suggested **better formation of all Catholics**:



“It is important to begin ‘socializing’ the people of our diocese to know and embrace more deliberately their own call of ‘sharing in the priesthood of Christ’ through synodal discussions, use of media to highlight what women leaders (and lay men) are already doing.”

“Ensure our policies and practices emphasize a more collaborative and inclusive leadership model rather than a hierarchical and authoritarian model for women who prefer a more participatory and relational approach to leadership,”

Two said that **changes needed to happen at the parish** level:

“We can start changing the culture within the parishes by sharing to the pastors about the importance of women in leadership. The pastors need to share to the Pastoral Council and to all the ethnic communities within the parish.”

“[People need to know what roles are open to women]. Maybe it’s a post in the bulletin, or an announcement from the priest... I feel that there are some lay men that need to understand that YES, in fact, women can not only hold these positions, but can thrive.”

Once the roles or tasks that are open to women are established, one wanted to see **invitations going out to capable women**:

“As we progress and define additional roles for women, issuing invitations to prospective candidates is a good start.”

Another desired to see the **strain between work and home** life mitigated:

“We need to be more aware on women that are struggling between their work and vocation, offering options like part-time jobs, childcare support, afterschool programs scholarships for their children.”

One believed that **greater role clarity and knowledge of leadership positions** are needed:

“We need to make it known what leadership roles can be held by women... If more people are aware of that information, I think more women would be more apt to volunteer.”

Lastly, one member of the committee believed we need to be more **intentionally inclusive** about having women in leadership positions:



“Employ more women in board or council bodies of governance wherein decision-making is action-oriented.”

Synthesizing Thoughts

There was a great deal of hope and enthusiasm as women shared their diverse insights on the barriers, enhancements that can be made to existing educational and formational structures, and recommendations to resolve a barrier or provide a catalyst for women's leadership. Sexism rose to the top as an important barrier. Increased education and formation as well as a greater awareness of the roles open to women were named by many as important enhancements. And the most popular recommendations were having greater access to formation and education programs, having women-centered workshops and conferences, and a better formation of Catholics broadly. However, the ideas noted here are simply those most commonly named; there are important insights offered in smaller numbers as well and it would be wise to consider all ideas as well as new ideas that emerge later in the process.

There are two overarching observations worth noting. The first is that there are ideas, concerns and recommendations that aim to remove barriers for women leaders and others that aim to enhance their leadership capacities. Another way of thinking about removing barriers is to “reduce friction” and another way of thinking about new enhancements is “adding fuel.” Both reducing friction and adding fuel are necessary in the flourishing of women leaders. If we simply reduce friction, the barriers are removed, but the desire for better training and ongoing support is lacking. If we only add fuel, we have better equipped female leaders who are prevented from fully maximizing their talents. A perhaps even bigger danger to a fuel-only response is that conferences or educational opportunities in the absence of a removal of barriers risks appearing purely performative, as words of encouragement without real change (cf. James 2:16). An approach that takes seriously both reducing friction and adding fuel will be especially effective. To neglect one or the other will prove to be ineffective and frustrating for all involved.

The second observation borrows from an ancient saying of the Church, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*” or “the law of prayer is the law of belief”; how we pray shapes what we believe. Taking this notion in a slightly more expanded direction, what we do as Church and how we gather as Church shapes our beliefs. These data and the reflections of the committee show the ways various ideas from both secular culture and Catholic tradition can shape the way we think about women leaders within the Church. The committee is committed to ongoing prayer and dialogue to discover how the findings might illuminate ways to remove barriers and provide enhancements for women leaders.



In thinking about the role of women in liturgy, in Catholic schools and other organizations, their leadership in parish and diocesan events, we need to realize that their presence and active participation shapes Catholic attitudes about women's leadership more broadly.

Appendix – Diocesan Census

Summary of Parish Census (n=56)

Question	Response (yellow is average per parish, blue is sum within sample)
How many people—both paid and volunteer—are on your parish staff?	12.96
How many are men?	5.09
How many are women?	7.98
Is your school principal male or female?	5 men, 25 women
Is your school vice-principal male or female?	2 men, 21 women
How many school teachers do you have?	16.52
How many are men?	2.16
How many are women?	14.35
How many people—both paid and volunteer—are on your school staff? (Including faculty)	32.03
How many are men?	4.81
How many are women?	28.1
How many people are on your parish council?	12.6
How many are men?	5.86
How many are women?	6.98
How many people are on your finance council?	7.81
How many are men?	4.57
How many are women?	3.25
How many people serve as Lectors?	33.02
How many are men?	12.71
How many are women?	20.96
How many people serve as Extraordinary Ministers of Communion?	56.34
How many are men?	19.98
How many are women?	37.83
How many people are on your hospitality committee?	33
How many are men?	19.29
How many are women?	14.76
How many people are on your catechetical ministry team?	17.2



How many are men?	4.84
How many are women?	12.67
How many faith-formation coordinators/Directors for Catechetical Ministry do you have?	2.38
How many are men?	0.84
How many are women?	1.57
How many catechists do you have?	25.25
How many are men?	6.3
How many are women?	19.5
How many people are on your OCIA/RCIA team?	5.51
How many are men?	2.82
How many are women?	2.91
How many people are in music ministry?	30.26
How many are men?	12.13
How many are women?	18.31
How many people serve in social outreach?	20.72
How many are men?	7.81
How many are women?	12.9
Director for Faith Formation	
Sum Director for Faith Formation Men	5
Sum Director for Faith Formation Women	43
Youth Minister/Confirmation Coordinator	
Sum Male Youth Minister/Confirmation Coordinator	20
Sum Female Youth Minister/Confirmation Coordinator	29
Pre-Baptism Coordinator	
Sum Male Pre-Baptism Coordinator	18
Sum Female Pre-Baptism Coordinator	30
Liturgy Coordinator	
Sum Male Liturgy Coordinator	24
Sum Female Liturgy Coordinator	17
Choir/Music Director	
Sum Male Choir/Music Director	23
Sum Female Choir/Music Director	21
Wedding Coordinator	
Sum Male Wedding Coordinator	6
Sum Female Wedding Coordinator	32
Bereavement Minister	
Sum Male Bereavement Minister	5
Sum Female Bereavement Minister	35
Sacristan	
Sum Male Sacristan	26
Sum Female Sacristan	29



Business Manager	
Sum Male Business Manager	6
Sum Female Business Manager	27
Bookkeeper	
Sum Male Bookkeeper	4
Sum Female Bookkeeper	41
Catholic School Principal	
Sum Male Catholic School Principal	5
Sum Female Catholic School Principal	25
Catholic School Vice-Principal	
Sum Male Catholic School Vice-Principal	2
Sum Female Catholic School Vice-Principal	18
Parish Life Coordinator/Pastoral Associate	
Sum Male Parish Life Coordinator/Pastoral Associate	4
Sum Female Parish Life Coordinator/Pastoral Associate	8
Parish Council Chair	
Sum Male Parish Council Chair	21
Sum Female Parish Council Chair	12
Finance Council Chair	
Sum Male Finance Council Chair	41
Sum Female Finance Council Chair	13
Coordinator for Ministers of Extraordinary Communion	
Sum Male Coordinator for Ministers of Extraordinary Communion	18
Sum Female Coordinator for Ministers of Extraordinary Communion	32
Coordinator for Hospitality Ministers	
Sum Male Coordinator for Hospitality Ministers	25
Sum Female Coordinator for Hospitality Ministers	23
Coordinator for Lectors	
Sum Male Coordinator for Lectors	21
Sum Female Coordinator for Lectors	31
Laudato Si- Sustainability Efforts	
Sum Male Laudato Si- Sustainability Efforts	4
Sum Female Laudato Si- Sustainability Efforts	8
Social Outreach (homeless, food distribution, care for the elderly)	
Sum Male Social Outreach (homeless, food distribution, care for the elderly)	23
Sum Female Social Outreach (homeless, food distribution, care for the elderly)	22

Respectfully submitted,
 Maureen Day, PhD



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