



WHY IN-PEW SURVEYS WORK BEST FOR MOST PARISHES

If parish leaders wish to conduct a general survey of those at the parish, distributing the questionnaires at all of the weekend Masses, following a brief homily, is usually the best method. Only parishes wishing to survey a select audience (parents of those with children currently in religious education classes, for example), should rule out using this method.

The principal reason for conducting an in-pew survey is that it works. This is the single best method for obtaining information from the majority of those participating in parish life. In an in-pew survey, a questionnaire is passed out to every adult attending Mass on a particular weekend. In contrast, mailed parish surveys and those passed out after Mass typically have much lower response rates, with those already very involved in the parish the most likely to respond. When a survey has a low response rate, leaders are left wondering how those who did not complete questionnaires would have responded. Further, those who are less involved in the life of the parish are often the very respondents in whose opinions a parish is interested.

Another advantage of an in-pew survey is that it allows the parish to survey all adults involved at the parish rather than just those who are registered. CARA typically finds that about 10 percent of those who regularly attend Masses at a parish are not registered, the bulk of these non-registrants being young adults. An in-pew survey is a survey of Mass attenders at the parish rather than of just registered parishioners. In addition, an in-pew survey better allows the parish to obtain information from all of the adults in a household. Mailed surveys tend to be answered by only one adult in a household, no matter how many copies of the questionnaire are included in the envelope. Even among married couples, those in the same household often have different opinions about parish programs and report different needs. In-pew surveys produce a more representative sample of the parish.

A final compelling reason for conducting an in-pew survey is that it is the most cost-effective and least time-consuming of the methods. Questionnaires are produced ahead of time and are distributed following a brief homily, with about 12 minutes given for those in the pews to complete the questionnaires. A box at the church doors allows those who do not complete their questionnaires to deposit them at any time over the two weeks following the survey. In contrast, mailed surveys require the additional steps of producing cover letters, giving each questionnaire an identification code, stuffing envelopes, sending out reminder postcards, and sending out a second mailing to those who have not responded. Similarly, telephone surveys are time-consuming. The parish must train volunteers to conduct the survey, and the time required to complete a single interview is likely about 10 minutes.

For all of these reasons, an in-pew survey following the homily is CARA's recommended method of choice for most parishes.