



# Special Report

Serving Dioceses, Parishes, and Religious Communities Since 1964

Summer 2005

## Understanding the Ministry and Experience: Parish Life Coordinators in the United States

### The Emerging Models Project

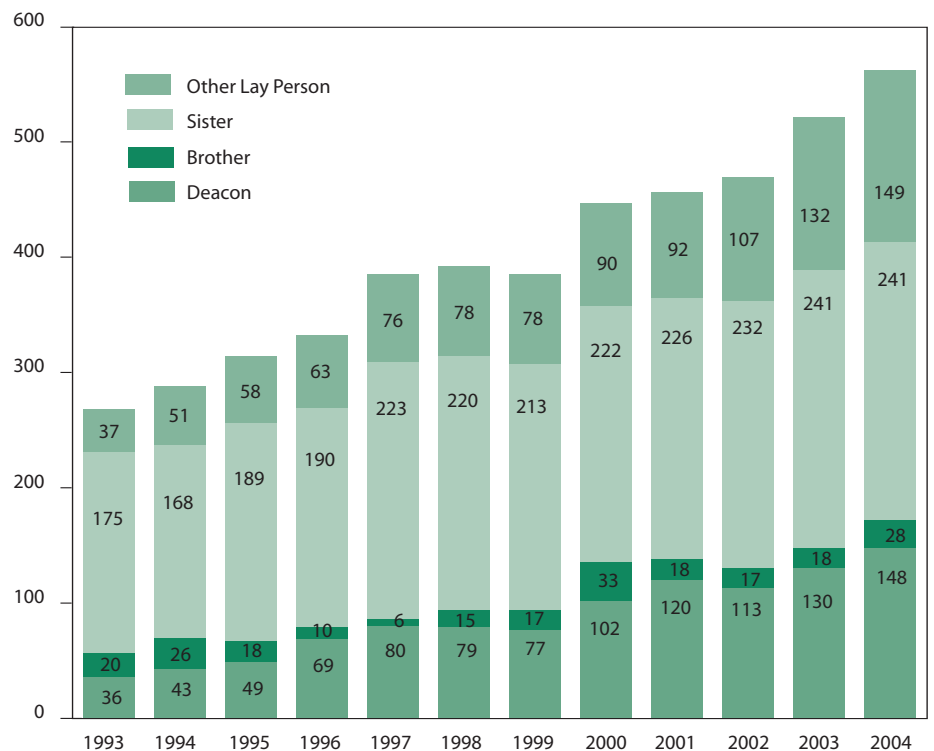
CARA was commissioned to conduct this research about parish life coordinators by six national Catholic organizations brought together through a Lilly funded project, "Developing and Sustaining the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership in the Catholic Church in the United States." These organizations include:

- National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM)
- Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development (CPPCD)
- National Association of Church Personnel Administrators (NACPA)
- National Association of Diaconate Directors (NADD)
- National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association (NCYAMA)
- National Federation of Priests' Councils (NFPC).

The project's focus is to identify and promote emerging pastoral leadership models which nurture and sustain vibrant and empowered Catholic parish communities in the United States. For more information about the Emerging Models Project visit <http://www.emergingmodels.org>

New to the Roman Catholic Church's 1983 Code of Canon Law was the following (517, §2): *If the diocesan bishop should decide that due to a dearth of priests a participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon or to some other person who is not a priest or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest endowed with the powers and faculties of a pastor to supervise the pastoral care.* Over the last decade, the number of Catholic parishes in the United States entrusted to deacons, religious sisters and brothers, and other lay persons has grown from 268 in 1993 to 566 in 2004. Those numbers represent a doubling in the numbers of parishes entrusted to someone other than a priest during this period from 1.4 percent of all parishes in the United States to 3.0 percent.

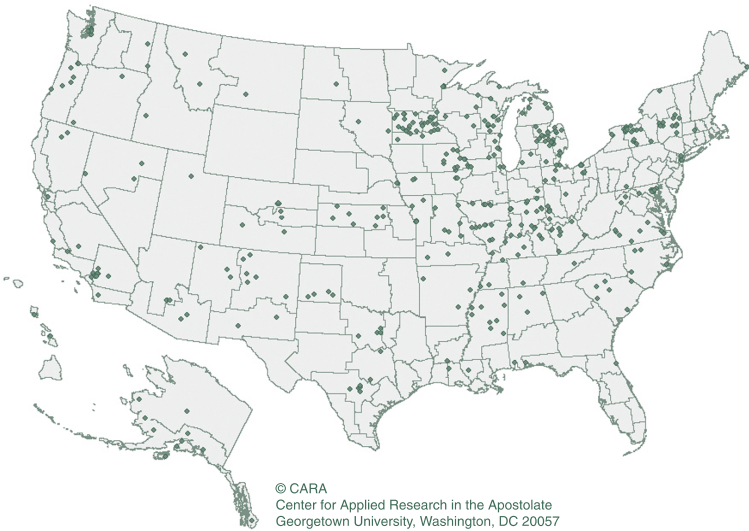
FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF U.S. PARISHES ENTRUSTED TO PLCS BY ECCLESIAL STATUS, 1993 TO 2004



CARA identified 36 unique job titles for these ministers with the most common being Pastoral Administrator, Administrator, Parish Life Coordinator, and Pastoral Coordinator. These ministers, referred to in this report as Parish Life Coordinators (PLCs), have most often been women religious, although the share of parishes entrusted to religious sisters has declined from 65 percent in 1993 to 43 percent in 2004.

The number of parishes entrusted to deacons and other lay persons have increased during this period and a small number of parishes have consistently been entrusted to religious brothers. In 2004, 26 percent of parishes were entrusted to deacons and another 26 percent to lay men and women. Five percent were entrusted to religious brothers. Overall, six in ten PLCs are female.

The largest number of PLC parishes are in the Midwest and the fewest in the Northeast.



Dioceses with the most parishes entrusted to religious sisters include New Ulm, MN; Saginaw, MI; and Albany, NY. Those with the most parishes entrusted to deacons are Charleston, SC; Lafayette, IN; and Louisville, KY. The largest numbers of parishes entrusted to lay men and women are in Fairbanks, AK; Salina, KS; and Seattle, WA. Dubuque, IA has the largest number of parishes entrusted to religious brothers.

## PLC Parishes Compared to Other Parishes

PLC parishes are typically smaller than the “average” U.S. parish as measured by CARA’s National Parish Inventory (NPI) a database of parish life in the United States initiated in 1998 and periodically updated since.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF REGISTERED HOUSEHOLDS

	PLC Parishes	U.S. Parishes
200 or fewer	49%	24%
201 to 549	31	26
550 to 1,200	12	25
1,201 or more	7	25
Avg. No. of Households	401	902

Nearly half of all PLC parishes have 200 or fewer registered households. Only 7 percent have more than 1,200. As one might expect with fewer registered households, on average, PLC parishes celebrate fewer Masses and sacraments than the average U.S. parish. PLCs also have smaller paid staffs than the average U.S. parish. Including the PLC (but excluding sacramental ministers) PLC parishes average four paid staff. In the average U.S. parish, the number of paid staff members is between five and six. In the smallest parishes with 200 or fewer households, PLCs have, on average, between one and two other staff members.

Despite typically not having a resident priest, PLC parishes celebrate several Masses each week. Anecdotally, there has been an impression that these parishes would be more likely to utilize Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest or Communion services. However, these are not widely used at PLC parishes. PLC parishes celebrate fewer Masses than the average U.S. parish—about two Sunday/Saturday Vigil Masses per weekend compared to about four in the average U.S. parish. Nearly all (98 percent) indicate that their parish celebrates at least one Sunday/Saturday Vigil Mass per week.

Spanish-language Sunday/Saturday Vigil Masses are celebrated with similar frequency in PLC parishes and U.S. parishes in general. Eighteen percent of PLC parishes indicate that they offer Spanish-language Masses. On average, PLC parishes offer significantly fewer weekday Masses—between one and two compared to nearly six in the average U.S. parish. Seven in ten PLCs say it is their responsibility to schedule and arrange for the sacramental ministers that celebrate Mass at their parish.

## Who Are the Parish Life Coordinators?

Religious sisters and brothers are among the oldest PLCs with average ages of 64 and 63, respectively. The average age of deacon PLCs is 60. Lay person PLCs are the youngest with an average age of 57 for lay women and 53 for lay men. In comparison to the ages of PLCs in a 1990 survey conducted by Gary Burkhart that was published by the Institute for Pastoral Life (1992), those PLCs currently entrusted with parishes are older than those serving 15 years ago.

**TABLE 3: WHAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION?**

	PLCs	Lay Ecclesial Ministers	U.S. Adults Catholics
High school graduate or less	<1%	7%	28%
Some college or a two-year degree	8	15	28
Four-year college degree	13	25	29
Graduate or professional school degree	79	53	15

**TABLE 2: MASSES**

	PLC Parishes		U.S. Parishes	
	Average	Median	Average	Median
Number of Sunday/Saturday Vigil Masses celebrated each weekend (any language)	2.2	2.0	4.2	3.0
Number of Spanish Sunday/Saturday Vigil Masses celebrated each weekend	0.3	0.0	0.4	0.0
Number of weekday Masses celebrated each weekend (any language)	1.6	1.0	5.9	5.0

In 1990, 43 percent of PLCs were under 50. By comparison, just 10 percent are under 50 currently (58 percent are 60 or older).

According to comparisons to CARA’s 2002 Lay Ecclesial Ministers Poll and the 2004 CARA Catholic Poll (CCP), PLCs are much more likely than lay ecclesial ministers and the general Catholic population to have earned a graduate or professional degree.

Ninety-four percent of PLCs indicate that they have attended a Catholic educational institution. Those PLCs who have graduate or professional degrees are more likely to be entrusted with parishes that have a comparatively large number of registered households. PLCs in 2004 have slightly higher levels of education than they did in 1990.

Fifty-eight percent of PLCs have or are in the progress of earning Master’s degrees related to ministry, religion, or theology. Twelve percent have or are in the process of obtaining doctoral degrees in one of these fields. Deacons are less likely than all other PLCs to indicate they have a Master’s degree but are more likely than other PLCs to say they have completed a ministry formation program.

Although highly educated, only slight majorities of PLCs indicate that their dioceses have a specific training requirement for PLCs (59 percent) or require ongoing formation and/or education for PLCs (51 percent). Sixty-two percent of PLCs indicate that they have received some sort of specialized training for their ministry position (41 percent before they were entrusted with their parish). Two in three PLCs agree “very much” that they feel adequately prepared for their ministry.

Before being appointed as PLCs, most were involved in general pastoral ministry (47 percent), religious education (22 percent), or they were a PLC in another parish (14 percent). Only 30 percent were in ministry at the parish they are now entrusted with before their appointment. Thus, most PLCs are not promoted from within a parish.

# What Does a PLC Do?

Most PLCs—86 percent—are entrusted with only one parish. However, 10 percent are entrusted with two parishes, and four percent are entrusted with three or more.

Half of all PLCs were entrusted with their parish in 2000 or later. One in ten PLCs indicates that they were entrusted with their parish in 2004. Thirty-eight percent were entrusted with their parish prior to the year 2000 (3 percent prior to 1990).

Eight in ten indicate they have a written job description, but just over half (53 percent) have a contract. While 60 percent say that they had a formal installation ceremony, only half of those ceremonies were presided over by the Bishop.

There is no typical person that introduces PLCs to parishioners. In fact, one in four PLCs introduced themselves to the parish. Twenty-three percent of PLCs indicated that the prior pastor at the parish introduced them. Only 14 percent of PLCs were introduced to parishioners by their

bishop. Eleven percent were introduced by either an auxiliary bishop, vicar general, or the chancellor. More than a quarter of PLCs indicated that someone not listed on the survey had introduced them.

PLCs vary widely in their liturgical ministry roles during Mass. The most common action performed is speaking at the end of Mass (77 percent) and the least common is wearing vestments (34 percent). Fourteen percent of PLCs indicate that they do all of the things listed. Nearly half preach during Mass, and among those who do preach, on average, this occurs about four times per month.

As one might expect of an ordained minister, deacon PLCs are more likely than PLCs of other ecclesial status to have active roles during Mass. Nearly all deacon PLCs process in with the presider, remain in the sanctuary, preach during Mass, speak at the end of Mass, and wear vestments. However, deacon PLCs are slightly less likely than all other PLCs to offer the welcoming to parishioners.

PLCs are most likely to indicate—three in four or more—that they spend “very much” of their time meeting with their

parish pastoral council, dealing with the parish budget and finances, and on sacramental preparation.

Deacon PLCs are slightly different in that they are much more likely than other PLCs to also indicate they spend “very much” of their time preparing and giving homilies, and preparing for or presiding at baptisms, funerals, Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest and prayer services for the sick. Deacon PLCs are also much more likely than all other PLCs to indicate that they sometimes receive at least a portion of sacramental stipends.

## *Fewer than one in ten PLCs offer Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest.*

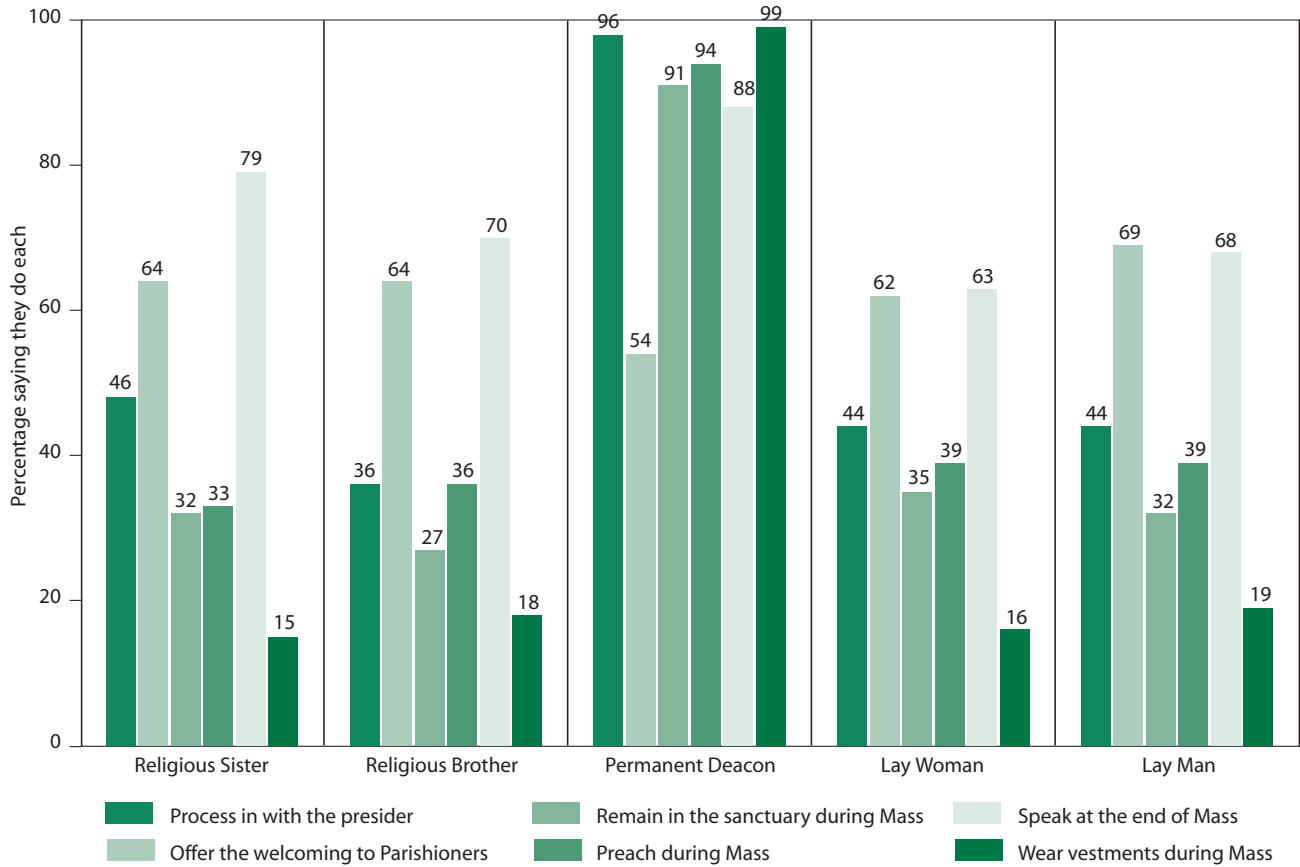
Nine in ten or more PLCs agree at least “somewhat” that they are the “pastoral leader” and “spiritual leader” of their parish. Only half agree similarly that they are the “sacramental leader” and most of those who do agree with this statement are deacons. PLCs that have been entrusted with their parish for longer periods of time are more likely to consider themselves the “pastoral leader” and “spiritual leader” of their parish.

When making decisions about the parish, PLCs are most likely—nine in ten or more—to indicate that they collaborate “very much” with their parish pastoral council, parishioners, and pastoral staff. Very few (one in ten or less) say they collaborate “very much” with other pastors, their bishop or the chancellor.

TABLE 4: CURRENT PROFESSIONAL INTERACTIONS WITH . . .

	“Somewhat” or “Very” positive	“Very” positive
Parish staff members	98%	84%
Parishioners	98	83
Sacramental minister(s) for your parish	94	79
Priest-moderator	88	68
The arch/bishop	87	60

FIGURE 2. PLC ROLES AT MASS BY ECCLESIAL STATUS



## The Experience of PLC Ministry

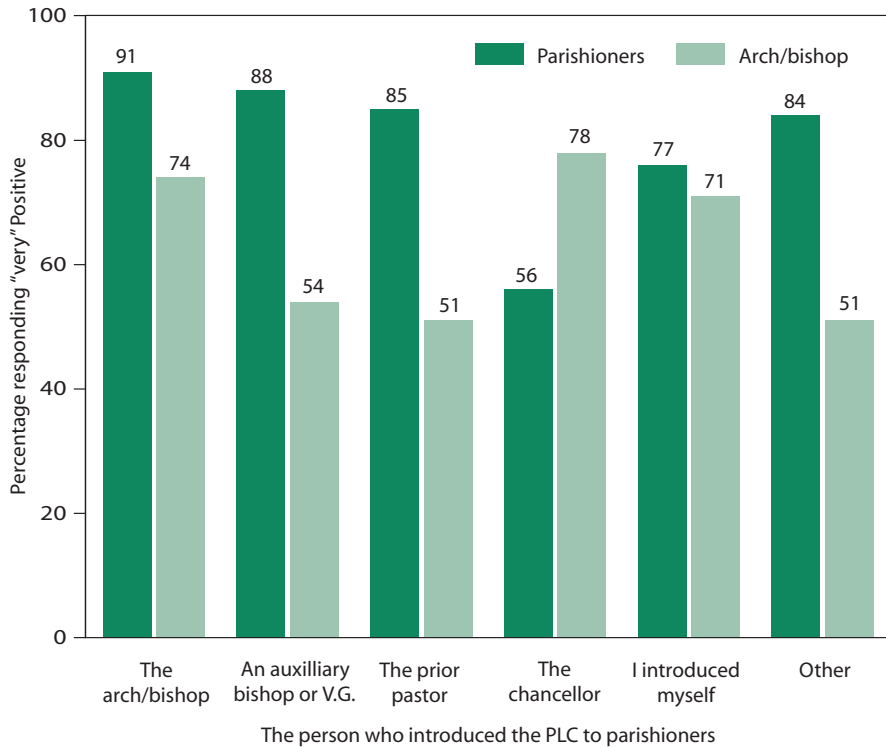
For most individuals and groups, PLCs report substantial improvements in the positive nature of their professional interactions now compared to the time when they were first entrusted with their parish. However, interactions with one’s bishop are slightly less likely to be considered “very” positive now than when they were first entrusted with their parish.

The percentage of PLCs indicating “very” positive interactions with parish staff and parishioners increases from 55 and 51 percent, respectively, at the time of appointment to 84 and 83 percent, currently. PLCs are also more likely to say they have “very” positive professional interactions with sacramental ministers

*PLCs who were formally installed in their parish are more likely than those who were not to evaluate their current professional interactions with their bishop and priest-moderator as “very” positive.*

(79 percent) and their priest-moderator (68 percent) now than at the time they were appointed (63 percent each). The percentage of PLCs rating their professional interactions with their bishop as “very” positive drops from 68 percent at the time they are entrusted with their parish to 60 percent currently. It is important to note that the current bishop for many PLCs may be different from the bishop that appointed them.

FIGURE 3. CURRENTLY, HOW POSITIVE ARE YOUR PROFESSIONAL INTERACTIONS WITH PARISHIONERS? . . . WITH THE BISHOP OR ARCHBISHOP?



PLCs with longer tenures at their parish are more likely to say their current professional interactions with their parish staff and parishioners are “very” positive. However, interactions with the priest-moderator are more likely to be evaluated as “very” positive by PLCs with the *shortest* tenures. PLCs who were introduced to parishioners by the bishop, chancellor, or those who introduced themselves are more likely than those introduced in other ways to evaluate their current professional interactions with their bishop as “very” positive. PLCs who were introduced to parishioners by the chancellor or those who introduced themselves are *less* likely than those introduced in other ways to evaluate their current interactions with parishioners as “very” positive. PLCs introduced by their bishop are the most likely to say their current pro-

fessional interactions with parishioners are “very” positive (91 percent).

PLCs who had a formal installation ceremony when they were assigned to their parish are more likely than those who did not to evaluate as “very” positive their current professional interactions with their bishop (65 percent compared to 52 percent) and priest-moderator (70 percent compared to 64 percent).

Nearly all PLCs agree “somewhat” or “very much” that the priests with whom they work respect their roles and that they feel supported by the sacramental minister(s) with whom they work. Nine in ten agree similarly that they get the services they need from their diocese and that they feel supported by their bishop.

## Security, Compensation, and Benefits

Although nearly all PLCs agree at least “somewhat” that they empower parishioners, that their ministry is a vocation and not just a job, and that they feel free to conduct their ministry in the way they want, the research also revealed some aspects of dissatisfaction and insecurity.

Just over half agree “very much” that they have sufficient job security. Only forty-seven percent of PLCs agree “very much” that they receive adequate financial compensation for their ministry. Nearly a third say they have considered leaving their ministry as a PLC in the last 12 months. Some 2 percent of PLCs serve as unpaid volunteers. The typical PLC ministry salary or wage is between \$25,000 to \$39,999. Sixty-two percent earn an annual parish salary or wage of more than \$25,000. Those PLCs in the largest parishes and lay male PLCs earn the highest ministry incomes.

Fifty-two percent of PLCs live in the parish rectory—and most of these are reli-

TABLE 5: WHAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR ANNUAL PARISH SALARY AND WAGES?

Percentage responding as follows:

No salary; volunteer	2%
Less than \$10,000	5
\$10,000 to \$24,999	31
\$25,000 to \$39,999	44
\$40,000 to \$59,999	16
\$60,000 or more	2

gious brothers and sisters. Of those PLCs not living in the rectory, 12 percent are provided some other form of housing and 22 percent are given a housing stipend.

One in ten PLCs have a job outside of ministry—most of them lay males and deacons. More than a third of those PLCs that have outside jobs indicate that these positions are full-time.

## Trends: Past, Present and Looking to the Future

CARA's analysis of trends in PLC appointments during the 1993 to 2004 period indicates that dioceses with fewer priests than parishes and those that also have relatively longer distances between parishes are among the most likely to entrust some parishes to PLCs. This is especially the case where large numbers of Catholics in the diocese make it unfeasible to close parishes.

However, these factors are not sufficient in themselves to explain the existence of PLC parishes over time. Although these factors may do well in measuring the "dearth of priests" mentioned in Canon 517.2 they do not get at perhaps the most important factor noted in the Canon which is "if the diocesan bishop should decide." There are a number of bishops that have decided to appoint PLCs before their diocesan situation is so dire as to meet some statistical definition of a "dearth of priests." There are other bishops that have large numbers of non-resident priests being used and no PLCs have been appointed.

**TABLE 6: ARE ANY OF THE BENEFITS LISTED BELOW AVAILABLE TO YOU FOR YOUR PARISH MINISTRY?**

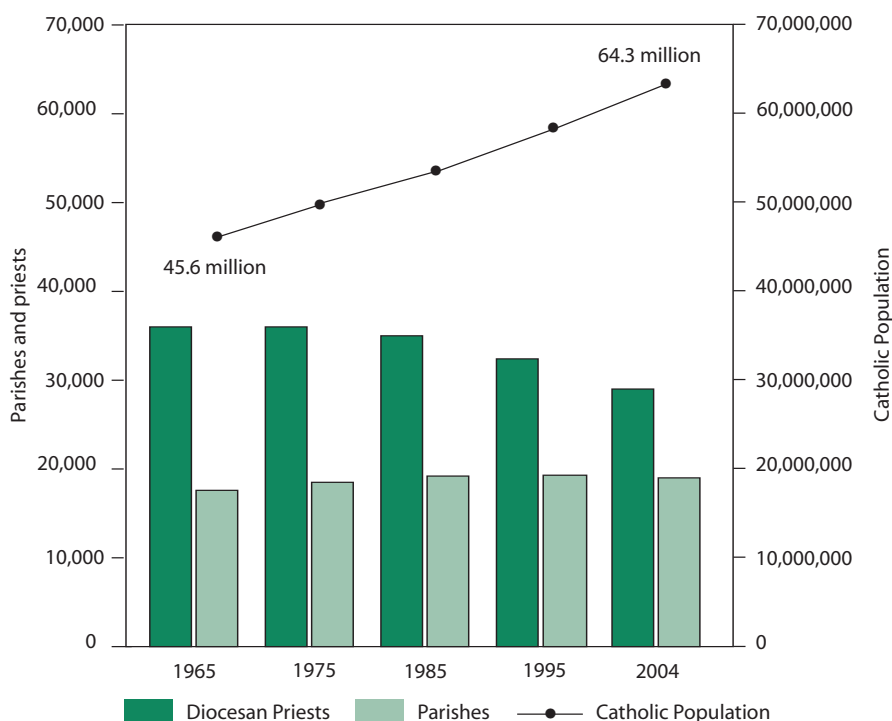
Respondents could check all that apply	
Health insurance	82%
Retirement	76
Paid vacations	68
Paid retreats	56
Dental insurance	54
Tuition assistance	27
Child care	0
"Other"	7

Since 1993, the total number of PLC parishes in the U.S. has increased each year with one exception, 1999, and in the year that followed the number of PLC parishes increased by 16 percent. Although this growing trend could change at any time, there are other well

known factors that suggest continued growth in PLC parishes may occur in the years to come. Since 1965, the U.S. Catholic population has increased by 41 percent and the number of U.S. parishes has grown by 8 percent, while the number of Catholic diocesan priests has decreased by 19 percent.

In 1965, there were just over 500 U.S. parishes without a resident pastor. Currently, there are more than 3,100 of these parishes amounting to about 16 percent of all U.S. parishes. Seventy-six U.S. dioceses currently have ten or more parishes administered by non-resident pastors. In 2004, five dioceses had more than 70 of their parishes administered by non-resident pastors, including Fargo, ND; Dubuque, IA; Springfield, IL; Rapid City, ND; and Sioux Falls, ND.

**FIGURE 4. U.S. PRIESTS, PARISHES AND THE CATHOLIC POPULATION, 1965-2004**



In 120 U.S. dioceses, parishes outnumber diocesan priests in active ministry. In 2004, 100 U.S. dioceses had at least one parish entrusted to a PLC (57 percent of the 176 territorial Latin Rite dioceses in the United States). In future years, as the pressure of declining numbers of priests available to serve as pastor continues to grow, U.S. bishops may consider appointing PLCs in greater numbers.

*For information about obtaining reprints of this Special Report, please visit the Emerging Models website at [www.emergingmodels.org](http://www.emergingmodels.org)*



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**TABLE 7: SUMMARY—NATIONAL PROFILES OF PLCs BY GENDER AND ECCLESIAL STATUS IN 2005**

	Female		Male		
	Religious	Lay	Deacons	Lay	Religious
Average age in 2005	64	57	61	53	63
Married (%)	—	45	91	80	—
<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>					
Non-Hispanic White (%)	93	91	83	96	100
Hispanic/Latino (%)	3	5	6	4	0
Black/African American (%)	2	3	11	0	0
Asian Pacific Islander (%)	0	0	<1	0	0
<b>Formation and Education</b>					
Has a ministry formation program certificate (%)	26	42	34	19	18
Has a bachelor's degree (%)	100	92	73	88	91
Has a graduate degree (%)	95	77	41	77	91
Master's degree in ministry, religion, or theology (%)	53	67	17	54	36
Had specialized training before starting as a PLC (%)	45	49	29	27	36
<b>Appointment</b>					
Appointed before 2000 (%)	46	31	26	25	45
Introduced to parish by the arch/bishop (%)	15	13	15	8	18
Introduced self to parish (%)	30	14	24	35	18
Had formal installation ceremony (%)	70	73	35	52	27
Has a contract (%)	59	46	44	50	64
Has a job description (%)	85	87	66	92	55
<b>Parishes</b>					
PLC in more than one parish (%)	17	14	14	4	9
Average number of registered households	343	515	414	523	208
Average number of Sunday/Saturday Vigil Masses per weekend	2.0	2.5	2.2	2.7	2.1
<b>Collaboration with Others</b>					
Consulted with Parish Council (%)	96	98	98	100	60
Convened Advisory Groups/Committees (%)	76	86	75	92	44
Convened Listening Sessions/Assemblies (%)	57	61	55	56	60
Surveyed Parishioners (%)	45	52	59	62	50
<b>Compensation and Benefits</b>					
Median range of ministry salary and wages	\$25K-39K	\$25K-39K	\$25K-39K	\$25K-39K	\$10K-24,999
Volunteering as a PLC (%)	0	3	6	4	9
Has health insurance as a PLC (%)	86	84	76	69	64
Has retirement benefits as a PLC (%)	78	89	63	73	64
Lives in the parish rectory (%)	71	31	32	27	70