

Strain and Resilience: Volunteering in a Catholic Parish

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Before the pandemic, St. Paul's Catholic Parish (pseudonym) – a 40+ year-old, growing, multiethnic parish in an urban center in Western Canada – was home to over 4,000 attenders across six weekend masses and over 1,000 volunteers. These strong numbers reflected a combination of internal and external factors: a parish merger; no nearby Catholic parishes to “compete” with; immigration; stable and respected leadership; a significant building renovation; a core focus on spiritual formation; and a hospitable community where laity were invited into volunteering roles and leadership.

Between July 2021-2022, our research team studied St. Paul's as part of a larger project with twelve congregations across Canada. Our activities centered on interviewing paid and lay leaders, attending masses and mid-week gatherings, touring the building and property, surveying congregants, conducting a community demographic analysis, and performing a content analysis of St. Paul's historical records, bulletins, and website.

Like many congregations during the pandemic, St. Paul's encountered several challenges that included a reduction in staff, fewer weekly attenders, challenging financial circumstances, a dwindling youth ministry, and a decline in volunteers. Despite these obstacles, St. Paul's was quick to adapt, innovate, and thrive in the face of adversity – a marker of its flourishing. For instance, St. Paul's offered twenty-two “speed masses” in the initial weekend of the pandemic, where fifteen people attended, then cleaning occurred before welcoming the next fifteen people, and so forth. Father James (pseudonym), the lead priest, also learned the technology required to livestream services and update the website, before training others in the parish to provide leadership moving forward. Later, when attendance limits increased to just over 200, adaptations to safety protocol and related volunteers, materials, and training proved critical to welcome an average of 1200 parishioners to weekly in-person mass throughout 2021. Here is how one interviewee captured the adaptations and pulse of the parish during the pandemic:

We bent over backwards to stay open, get as many people as possible in as many services ... I give Father James, our pastor, the credit for that! He really drove that ... through the entire COVID period, we had kept everything running and made it as available as possible. As well as having ... an online service ... Father James, he did whatever he could do. Worked a tremendous amount.

Numbers have since crept up in many of the aforementioned areas. Overall, St. Paul's has been a resilient congregation, attributable to the dynamic interplay of leadership, innovation, and structures and processes. Still, St. Paul's has encountered what sociologists refer to as "organizational strain," the gap between organizational demands and capacities. In fact, both strain and resilience arose within the same areas of parish life, such as with volunteers. This observation leads to an important reminder for church leaders:

Flourishing is not static. Some areas flourish today and flounder tomorrow, while areas once floundering may now flourish. The same area of congregational life may simultaneously undergo strain and resiliency.

Our discoveries at St. Paul's opened the door to investigate further the ways that congregations attempt to convert *potential* resources (e.g., volunteers) into *actual* resources. Below are three considerations, accounting for the links between volunteer strain and resiliency.

Volunteer Strain

Organizational strain can be the result of many variables, ranging from societal influences to denominational or individual factors. Here are some of the volunteer **strains** experienced at St. Paul's:

- Priest to affiliate ratio – 2.5 priests for 4,000 weekly attenders;
- Provincial restrictions reduced volunteer needs, with fears of volunteers not returning;
- Older demographics, where research shows volunteers are most likely to arise from, reduced volunteer activities for fear of contracting COVID-19;
- New pandemic-related volunteer needs where expertise was lacking (e.g., technology);
- "Super volunteers," those volunteering more hours in added areas of need, burned out.

Some of these strains created opportunity for new volunteers to rise to the occasion during the pandemic especially. As one person told us, “*Our parishioners and our volunteers, when something important is happening, they step up.*” We witnessed this.

Why Volunteer?

Consistent with past research on volunteering, St. Paul’s appealed to three motivations for volunteering – **individual, group, and religious motivations**. In the following description on St. Paul’s website, note how these three motivations are called forth along with a reference to the strain of too few volunteers:

Volunteering is a rewarding experience [individual] and builds our faith community [group]. It is also a wonderful way to practice good stewardship of the time and talent that God has entrusted to us [religious]. Our church is always looking for volunteers [strain] who are interested in all our Ministries. The various Ministries that we have are carried out by volunteers who graciously share their time and talent. Every volunteer makes a difference [group]. We invite you to share your time and talent with us [group]. Consider this as your gift to God [religious] and our Parish family [group].

Our team saw evidence of St. Paul’s leadership appealing to one or more of these motivations in many other contexts too. Of course, clearly articulating why parishioners might volunteer is necessary but not sufficient to nurture potential volunteer resources into actual ones. This is where systems and structures were a strength at St. Paul’s.

Systems and Structures

The key to St. Paul’s resilience with volunteers included clear and intentional systems and structures for volunteers. Here are examples of how they **recruited volunteers**.

- Priest personally approached parishioners with requests to volunteer;
- Lay leaders personally asked fellow parishioners to volunteer;
- Priest gave broadcast exhortations for members to volunteer;
- Parish hosted a volunteer fair two times a year;
- Those going through Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults were encouraged to stay engaged in the life of the parish by volunteering;
- Weekly bulletins featured a “Missionary Discipleship Spotlight” along with invitations for others to volunteer;
- The parish website included 1-2 minute video summaries with lay leaders on ways that people could volunteer, along with a place to sign up online.

Once volunteers were recruited, St. Paul's went to great length to **train volunteers**.

- Clear role descriptions, responsibilities, and accountability structures for all volunteers;
- Volunteer coordinator (15 hrs/week) who oversaw all volunteers;
- Potential volunteers were interviewed to help align 'good fit' with volunteer skills and needs;
- Volunteer received annual training with senior church leaders on the mission of the congregation and how ministry areas connected with that mission;
- Volunteers were trained with an eye toward becoming future leaders.

Finally, **retaining volunteers**. We heard of the emphasis on caring for volunteers as individuals beyond their roles, plus showing appreciation for volunteers. The assumption was that if individuals were cared for personally, they would continue to volunteer. In addition, several weekly bulletins included words of thanks for volunteers from the priest, staff, and Diocese: *"We are incredibly grateful to God for you [individual] and your loving service to the Church and the community [group]. Thank you for answering God's call [religious] to love and serve Christ in one another."* The religious call to serve that undergirds this note of thanks both affirms those who currently volunteer and possibly reminds others that they should volunteer as per God's call, reiterating the strain of needing more volunteers.

For more on volunteering in congregations, click [here](#) for four short videos with research and practitioner reflections. For more information and resources, visit www.flourishingcongregations.org.

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