

December 3, 2021

Saint Cecilia Racial Equity Assessment

Internal Memo: Environmental Scan/Document Review



Health Resources in Action
Advancing Public Health and Medical Research

Saint Cecilia Internal Memo: 2021 Racial Equity Assessment Document Review/Environmental Scan

Introduction

Saint Cecilia Parish is a vibrant, Catholic community established in 1888 and located in the heart of Boston. In 2021, Saint Cecilia Parish undertook a racial equity assessment to better understand the Parish's strengths and opportunities to improve racial equity. Saint Cecilia Parish partnered with Health Resources in Action (HRiA), a non-profit public health organization in Boston, MA, to collect and analyze data to develop the racial equity assessment.

The environmental scan also includes salient findings from the assessment in select places to provide additional context where appropriate. The racial equity assessment collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data to document the parish's strengths and opportunities related to racial equity. Qualitative data were collected through seven focus groups and three interviews with more than 40 parishioners. In addition, a parish-wide survey was developed and administered to more than 900 respondents who attend Saint Cecilia Parish. The main findings from the racial equity assessment can be found in the *Saint Cecilia Parish 2021 Racial Equity Assessment Final Report* or [summary presentation](#).

This supplemental memo presents the results of the environmental scan and document review that examined empirical data to identify whether and how the parish's current physical and virtual environment reflects a commitment to racial equity. Individuals' first encounter with Saint Cecilia Parish is generally through its physical or virtual environment. For example, the pictures and decor in the building, images and texts included in the weekly parish bulletin, and music played during parish gatherings send a message to parishioners of the parish's point of view. The environmental scan and document review aimed to observe whether the physical and virtual environment, as well as Saint Cecilia's policies and practices, reflect equity-minded practices that can help advance the Parish's vision of being a congregation where "no one is left or forgotten."

While the findings in this memo are related to those detailed in the assessment report, they are presented as a stand-alone document because of the internal focus on Saint Cecilia's policies, procedures, and communication practices. However, findings from the assessment report have been included throughout this memo where appropriate to provide additional context.

Methods

The environmental scan aimed to systematically identify ways in which Saint Cecilia Parish could increase its commitment to equity, particularly as it relates to racial equity and anti-racism work in line with Catholic Social Teachings. To do so, the HRiA team assessed a selected number of documents, digital content, and communication channels. Given the volume of documents, HRiA reviewed a random selection of ten bulletins and ten homilies released between 2020-2021 to provide a snapshot of the current environment. In addition, HRiA reviewed three job descriptions, ministry and event documents planning documents, and various social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube). Materials were reviewed and analyzed using five equity-minded criteria adapted by HRiA with input from the advisory committee¹:

¹ Center for Urban Education. (2020). Equity-minded inquiry series: Document Review. Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California.

Equity-Minded Practices for Document and Environmental Scan

1. **Welcoming:** To what extent do content communicate through words, images, tone, and design that parishioners are welcomed and cared for?
2. **Demystifying:** To what extent do content communicate Parish values and beliefs in clear and approachable ways?
3. **Validating:** To what extent do words, images, and tone actively support and encourage a wide variety of diversity?
4. **Representative:** To what extent do content and images reflect a range of racial/ethnic identities and experiences?
5. **Deconstructing:** To what extent do content counter the common presentation of dominant white culture as the norm?

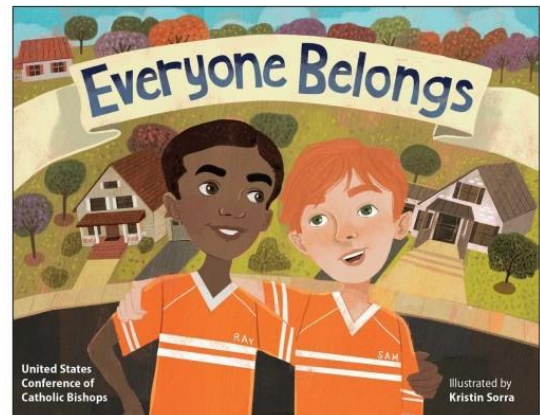
FINDINGS

The following section summarizes the parish's strengths and opportunities related to each of the equity-minded practice criteria described above based on the sources reviewed for the environmental scan. Suggestions and recommendations are included in the final section of this memo.

Welcoming: To what extent do content communicate through words, images, tone, and design that parishioners are welcomed and cared for?

"If you are hoping to find a faith community with whom you can discover God through worship, community, and the service of others, you're in the right place." – Saint Cecilia Parish Website

Overall, Saint Cecilia intentionally communicates a message of being a welcoming Parish based on the materials observed for this process. There are several examples of how Saint Cecilia Parish communicates through words, images, tone, and design that parishioners are welcomed and cared for. For example, the bulletin and homilies regularly acknowledge new members of the Parish and keep members up to date on various virtual and in-person activities, as do social media channels such as Facebook. The physical space also presents several signs that welcome parishioners into the church, as does the bulletin, which includes notes that encourage parishioners to join the Saint Cecilia community.



"We're happy that you're with us! Our community offers a warm, spiritual home for a diverse group of Catholics. We come from many neighborhoods in and around Boston...Please introduce yourself to a staff member, drop in for coffee on Sunday, or fill out a new parishioner form on the website. No matter what your background, please know that you are always welcome at Saint Cecilia." – Saint Cecilia Bulletin

Father John's homilies are also welcoming, which was a common theme that emerged in the racial equity assessment. For example, in one homily Father John shares: *"We're here to remind somebody that they always have room at our inn, with no judgement, and just love, because that is the way He loves us."* This message was echoed throughout several homilies observed in the environmental scan. One homily, in particular, summarized

this overarching message of a welcoming Parish: *“Don’t underestimate your presence here today, in person or virtually. This connection with the Spirit, the connection with each other, this breaking bread at the table, it is significant.”* A few suggestions were noted about how to make Saint Cecilia more welcoming, which are detailed in the assessment report and in the recommendations section of this memo.

Demystifying: To what extent do content communicate Parish values and beliefs in clear and approachable ways?

“For those without the love of family pray for all who have no families, for those who are alienated from or rejected by their families—that they may experience love and acceptance through this Christian community.” – Saint Cecilia Parish Bulletin

“What we share in common is a commitment to the gospel message of Christian love, social justice, and radical hospitality.” – Saint Cecilia Parish Website

Saint Cecilia Parish also generally communicates parish values and beliefs in clear and approachable ways. For example, toward the end of each bulletin, there is a thought-provoking essay written by a parishioner or other Catholic community member. The subject matter varies each time, but some recently covered topics included anti-racism/activism among churchgoers, connectedness in the pandemic, and child abuse by priests. Father John’s homilies also had several examples that communicated the values of the Parish clearly. One homily spoke of the importance of living out the values of the Catholic church outside of Mass: *“We have to go out and love our neighbor, take care of each other. There’s got to be a connection of what we believe, what we do on Sundays, and what we do during the week.”*

The website depicts a Parish that is intentional about engaging marginalized groups, particularly those experiencing homelessness and substance use, which centers the Parish’s values of social justice. For example, the program *Shelter Music Boston*, delivers monthly chamber music concerts to Greater Boston homeless shelters and recovery centers. Homelessness and substance use were also topics addressed in the homilies reviewed for this environmental scan. For example, during the sermon of the ‘Solemnity of our Lord’ on 11/21/21, Father John discusses the housing and substance abuse crisis near Boston’s Melnea Cass and Massachusetts Avenue: *“On Mass and Cass where encampments have sprung up and the opioid crisis is rearing its presence in the worst of ways. Fights back and forth with how to deal with the situation. It’s a place where so many have lost a sense that they are loved. That they have goodness, and beauty and dignity and worth.”* Similarly, issues related to substance use, homelessness, and food insecurity were commonly seen in the bulletin.



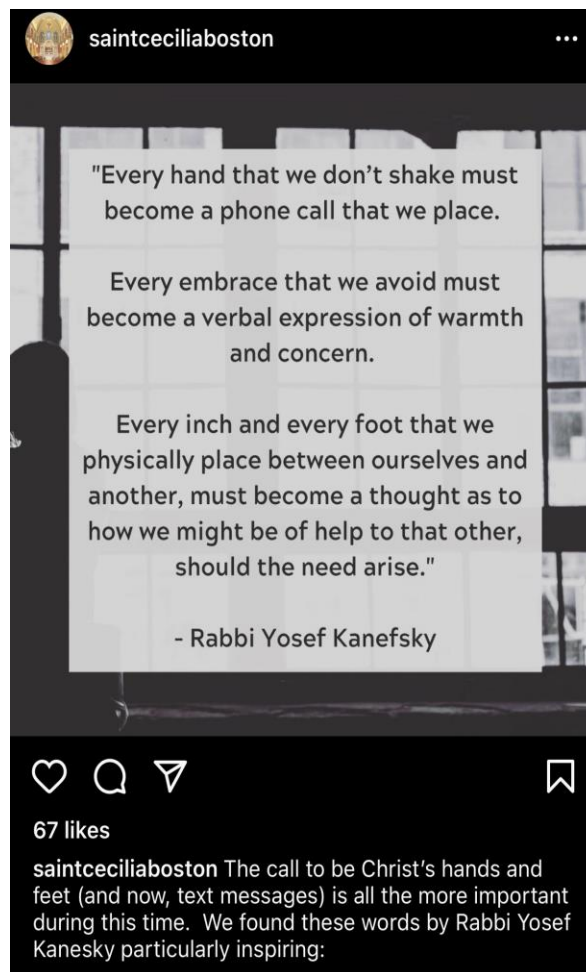
Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Bulletin, 2021

In terms of the Parish’s social media presence, there are various examples of how Saint Cecilia demystifies and communicates in approachable ways. On Instagram, for example, there is a series of informal posts by Father

John and other churchgoers that presents a welcoming environment and demystifies who attends the church. The parishioners featured in these posts represent diverse backgrounds in terms of age, though slightly less racial and ethnic diversity. Posts on Instagram also regularly depict images that speak to the values the Church holds close.



Source: Instagram, Saint Cecilia Parish 2021



Source: Instagram, Saint Cecilia Parish 2021

Validating: To what extent do words, images, and tone actively support and encourage a wide variety of diversity?

"LGBTQ Catholics need a forum in which to share faith experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. We hope people will feel supported, heard, and spiritually nourished. All, including allies, are welcome!" – Saint Cecilia Parish Website

HRiA observed the parish's use of validating words, images, and tone that actively support and encourage diversity in the environmental scan. For example, the bulletin explains Spiritual Communion and encourages those participating remotely to express their desire for the Eucharist: *"It is a long-held Catholic belief that when circumstances prevent one from receiving Holy Communion, it is possible to make an 'Act of Spiritual Communion.'* During this time when we are not able to celebrate the Eucharist together in person, Pope Francis invites Catholics to say this prayer as a source of grace. We can be assured that when we express our desire to

receive Jesus in the Eucharist, God will be with us spiritually in a special way. Here is an Act of Spiritual Communion that we encourage you to pray as you participate in our livestreamed liturgies."

There were several examples of validating content at Saint Cecilia Parish. While the bulletin and website were lacking in racial and ethnic diversity, which is further described below, Saint Cecilia champions diversity in other ways. For example, the bulletin and website make clear that Saint Cecilia Parish has a very open and accepting attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community. On several occasions, there were examples of Saint Cecilia Parish celebrating other religions, holidays, and social events such as Yom Kippur, Juneteenth, and Pride that were addressed in communication materials, social media, and Father John's homilies. One homily related to forgiveness summarized, *"Where can we be more inclusive as we try to understand where other people are coming from, especially those different than us? Where can we be more forgiving with those who are different?"*

Representative: To what extent do content and images reflect a range of racial/ethnic identities and experiences?

"The good Samaritan reaches out and takes care of the person who has been hurt and injured, and then further takes care. It's anyone who is in need of love, help, concern, aid, encouragement." -Saint Cecilia Homily

The environmental scan also assessed to what extent Saint Cecilia reflects a range of racial/ethnic identities and experiences at the church. Saint Cecilia's digital presence varies from platform to platform, as does the level of representation in each of these communication channels. There are several examples of Facebook posts and digital thumbnails on YouTube videos that depict biblical scenes with racially diverse subjects. The bulletin also has examples of representative art. For example, a bulletin painting posted during the Christmas holiday showed the Nativity scene from a Haitian artist's perspective. This painting showed subjects with much less Euro-centric features. However, photos of parishioners on the Saint Cecilia website are not as racially and ethnically diverse and predominantly feature parishioners who can be visibly described as cis-gendered and White.



In terms of the Parish's physical space, there are various racially and ethnically diverse representations of Saints inside the church, though paintings and decorations depicting Biblical scenes feature historically inaccurate, Eurocentric images. For example, the main depiction of the Last Supper in the physical space and on the website shows Jesus' 12 apostles as White presenting males. In the physical space, da Vinci's Last Supper casts Judas as increasingly dark skinned, while the rest of the apostles are increasingly light skinned.

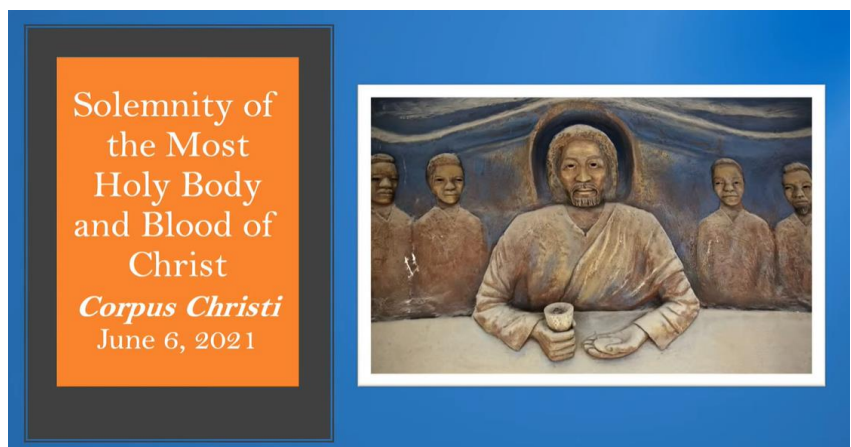


Source: Saint Cecilia Parish

Deconstructing: To what extent do content counter the common presentation of dominant white culture as the norm?

"Speak truth to power...We have a mission in this world. It's to make it a better place, a more just place. No justice, no peace. If we want peace, we have to work for justice. That's the work of the Spirit." -Saint Cecilia Homily

Saint Cecilia Parish has increasingly aimed to present deconstructing narratives that counter the common presentation of dominant white culture as the norm in recent years. Intentional efforts can be seen in the art chosen for the bulletins and for YouTube thumbnails, as depicted in the photo at right from Saint Cecilia's livestream Mass.



In the physical space, there are also examples of ways that Saint Cecilia Parish is actively deconstructing dominant norms. For example, there were children's books in the church regarding topics that focus on anti-

racism and diversity. There was also a poster of a Faith and Film series that covered various topics including systemic racism, homophobia, and the international Jesuit community.

Saint Cecilia's social media platforms also depict a commitment to uplifting marginalized voices and decentering dominant norms. Several posts across platforms address racial justice. For example, on Instagram, there are videos of white parishioners and staff members reflecting on their privilege and ways in which it can be used to advance equity.



Source: Saint Cecilia Parish, 2021

A Journey Toward Racial Justice

During the Lenten season and beyond, we will work toward the rebirth of a more just society for all of our siblings in Christ. Our prayer this Lent is that we are moved to action toward a society that explicitly names racism as evil and one that centers the experiences and perspectives of Black, Indigenous and people of color.

Week 1: What is antiracism?
In order to achieve racial justice in both big and small ways, we need antiracism.

Week 2: Racial justice and white privilege
To seek racial justice, we must first acknowledge and challenge the existence of white privilege.

Week 3: Racial justice and incarceration
We see racism play out institutionally in our country's criminal justice and incarceration systems.

Week 4: Racial justice and education
Racism is both shaped and perpetuated through education at all levels.

Week 5: Continuing the conversation
Dismantling racism is a lifelong journey that requires constant learning and unlearning.

Source: Facebook, Saint Cecilia Parish, 2021

In addition to the Parish uplifting diverse art across media platforms, Father John's homilies also embed stories that counter dominant narratives. For example, in one homily he references Archbishop Óscar Romero, a bishop in El Salvador who was declared a martyr by Pope Francis, and later canonized as a Saint. Sister Dorothy Stang, who was a staunch advocate for the poor and environmental justice in Brazil, was also mentioned in the homilies and is another example of deconstructing material.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The document review and environmental scan assessed various aspects of Saint Cecilia Parish using five criteria (Welcoming, Demystifying, Validating, Representative, and Deconstructing). Overall, this process further acknowledged many of the strengths identified in the assessment—particularly that Saint Cecilia is a welcoming Parish that is making intentional efforts to advance racial and social justice. The environmental scan identified the following opportunities for Saint Cecilia to improve its physical and virtual environment, policies, and practices to reflect equity-minded principles:

Website

Opportunities to improve the website include adding more details related to accessibility, simplifying language related to ministries, and diversifying photos of parishioners on the website. These opportunities are further described below.

- While language related to accessibility is visible on the website, opportunities exist to add more detail related to specific accommodations for those with physical, intellectual, mental, and sensory disabilities. For example, it would be helpful to highlight that the Parish has a family room where parents can still engage with Mass if they need to step out. It would also be helpful to include details related to audio assisted devices for those who are hearing impaired.
- Opportunities exist to simplify website language related to various ministries and Parish Councils to increase accessibility. For example, the following Parish Pastoral Council description could be written in plain language: *"No parish exists primarily for itself, but for the good of the whole Church and the parish contributes to the health and well-being of the Church insofar as it is faithful to the Gospel and when it is a source of evangelization both for the lives of its parishioners as well as for those with whom our parishioners interact through the parish's various outreach ministries."*
- While there is strong diversity in the art presented on digital platforms, the photos of actual parishioners posted are limited in racial and ethnic diversity. Suggestions were made to update website photos to be more representative of racially and ethnically diverse parishioners.
- Saint Cecilia Parish addresses social issues on Instagram and should continue posting content that showcases parishioners and addresses social issues, and informal videos with Father John.

Bulletin

The bulletin is a strong reflection of Saint Cecilia's efforts to communicate that the parish is open and accepting. Opportunities to improve the bulletin include attracting more diverse companies for advertising space and continuing to demystify how financial contributions are used.

- There are some examples of the bulletin being transparent about where funds or donations are distributed, and there is an opportunity to continue this practice more regularly to demystify where money is spent. For example, some issues of the bulletin note where special collections will be used, which increases transparency and demystifies financial information about the Parish.
 - *"Today's special collection is used to assist religious communities to provide for the retirement and health care needs of Sisters who have served in the Archdiocese. Please take this opportunity to say thank you to the Sisters who have served the Church of Boston so generously for so many years. Your contribution does make a difference."*

Homilies

Father John's style was described as a strength in the assessment, particularly his ability to relate the homily in ways that resonate with parishioners. Suggestions to improve the homilies include keeping the homilies a consistent length and using language that is more sensitive to those with mental illness.

- The length of homilies varies widely by Mass. A suggestion from this assessment, as well as from focus group findings from young people, is to keep homilies at a more consistent length so parishioners can anticipate the length of Mass.
- It was observed that homilies can be extemporaneous, which was often described as a strength of Father John's style, though in at least two instances, there were examples of using words like "crazy," "insane," or "whack job," which can be hurtful or undermine the experience of people who live with mental illness. Opportunities exist to be more intentional about substituting these words with alternatives that are more inclusive like "wild," "outrageous," or "out of this world."

Physical Space

The physical church space contains several depictions of diverse figures. Suggestions to improve the physical space relate to historical portrayals in the art in the church, and better accommodations for those who are hearing impaired or physically disabled.

- As previously discussed, there are various depictions of racially and ethnically diverse Saints inside the church, though some of the historical portrayals and decorations depict more Eurocentric images.
- As previously mentioned, there is an opportunity to improve audio accessibility in the church for those who need hearing accommodations. One example raised by a focus group participant was that Saint Cecilia explore hearing loop technology, which is the preferred assistive listening system by many with telecoil-enabled hearing aids and cochlear implants.
- Similarly, there were suggestions to be more intentional about handicap accessibility so that parishioners in wheelchairs do not feel “othered” by having to sit in the back of the parish. Recommendations include exploring potential alternatives or increasing areas in which those with physical disabilities can join the rest of the Saint Cecilia community.

Job Descriptions

HRiA also reviewed three job descriptions and time away from work policies for this process. Job descriptions and paid time off policies were generally welcoming and demystifying. Specific suggestions for improvement related to job descriptions include being more explicit about Saint Cecilia’s commitment to equity in job postings, as described below.

- Job descriptions could explicitly mention the parish’s organizational commitment to equity, and the parish could implicitly or explicitly include equity principles in the duties and responsibilities of job descriptions. For example, job descriptions could explicitly include outreach and engagement to diverse populations and organizations serving these populations (e.g., for liturgical choirs and musical partnerships, recruitment, business development/funders).
- As part of the Director of Finance role, offertory and charitable giving responsibilities seem like low-hanging fruit for incorporating more equity-related language.
- Director of Faith Formation has a critical role that could address all five racial equity criteria (welcoming, demystifying, etc.). More explicit equity-related language can be added to this job description in areas related to outreach to new members, collaborating with community partners, sourcing equity-focused articles for the bulletin, representing diversity in written and visual media, etc.

Ministry and Events

Lastly, HRiA reviewed documents related to the various ministries at Saint Cecilia Parish and accompanying information related to Parish events. While several of the suggestions described below pertain to the website, they are specific to ministry and event details.

- There is an opportunity to simplify some of the language describing the Development Committee on Saint Cecilia’s website. The committee description currently reads:
 - *“No parish exists primarily for itself, but for the good of the whole Church and the parish contributes to the health and well-being of the Church insofar as it is faithful to the Gospel and when it is a source of evangelization both for the lives of its parishioners as well as for those with whom our parishioners interact through the parish’s various outreach ministries.”*
- Similarly, the language describing accountability within the Parish Finance Council & Development Committee can be clarified. The language currently seems contradictory as it is written.
 - *“Every parish is required by the Code of Canon Law to establish a Finance Council – a consultative body of parishioners whose purpose is to assist the pastor and parish staff in planning the annual budget, in overseeing the financial affairs of the parish, and to ensure*

accountability to the diocese...The Parish Finance Council is accountable to the pastor who has the responsibility for all final decisions."

- Opportunities exist to simplify the language on the 'Our Councils' tab of the Saint Cecilia's website to lead with the purpose of the councils and replace "consultative bodies" with wording that is more approachable. The leading sentence currently reads:
 - *"Saint Cecilia has three consultative bodies whose members are parishioners and parish staff."*
- Also, on the 'Our Councils' tab, opportunities exist to simplify language after the "Read More" section. This section currently reads:
 - *"We read about the seemingly egalitarian embrace of all the members of the community, even in the earlier day with its many proscriptions for human behavior, welcoming and using the gifts of the community—men and women alike."*
- The proceeding section of the website can also be clarified, particularly by removing language that acknowledges systems and structures, but places blame on the individual. For example:
 - *"A very limiting climate and an environment of separation between clergy and laity became the norm for life in the Church. That environment and the structures it spawned have caused the faithful to seriously undervalue their true place in the Church—their privilege and obligation as baptized members of the Body of Christ."*