

December 2021

# Saint Cecilia Parish 2021 Racial Equity Assessment

## Final Report

# Road to Social Equity



Submitted to:

Saint Cecilia  
P A R I S H



Health Resources in Action®  
*Advancing Public Health and Medical Research*

**Saint Cecilia Parish**  
**Racial Equity Assessment Final Report**

**Contents**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... i

BACKGROUND ..... 1

    Overview of Saint Cecilia Parish ..... 1

    Purpose and Goals of the Equity Assessment ..... 1

    Catholic Faith and Anti-Racism ..... 2

APPROACH AND ENGAGEMENT PROCESS ..... 2

    Assessment Limitations ..... 3

PERCEPTIONS OF PARISH CULTURE ..... 3

    Parish Strengths ..... 3

    Population Overview ..... 5

    Perceptions of Diversity ..... 7

        Racial and Ethnic Diversity ..... 7

        Age Distribution ..... 9

        Educational Attainment and Economic Context ..... 10

PARISH PARTICIPATION ..... 10

    Facilitators to Participation ..... 11

    Perceived Parish Challenges ..... 13

        Barriers to Participation ..... 13

        Limited Representation ..... 14

        Inclusion and Belonging ..... 14

        Additional Population Groups ..... 16

        Expressing Care ..... 16

        Accessibility Concerns ..... 18

PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ..... 18

    Integration of Racial Justice Issues ..... 18

    Other Perceptions of Racial Equity Efforts ..... 20

COMMUNITY VISION AND OPPORTUNITIES ..... 20

    Advancing Equity ..... 20

        Improving Belonging and Inclusivity ..... 20

        Increasing Diversity ..... 21

Actions to Advance Equity.....	21
Exposure to More Cultural and Ethnic Traditions.....	22
Partnerships with Multicultural Faith Communities.....	22
Economic Commitments to Advancing Equity.....	23
Standing in Stronger Solidarity and Allyship with Antiracism Efforts.....	23
KEY THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS.....	24
REFERENCES.....	26
APPENDIX A. METHODS.....	27

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background and Context

Saint Cecilia Parish is a Roman Catholic Church established in 1888. The parish is located in the heart of Boston and serves a diverse congregation both locally and from around the world, welcoming individuals from all walks of life. Steeped in a rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, Saint Cecilia's is firmly committed to advancing equity in all forms.

In the wake of the uprising for social justice and the nation's reckoning with systemic racism after the death of George Floyd in 2020, Saint Cecilia Parish embarked on an initiative known as "*The Road to Social Equity*." This initiative is part of an effort to examine parish life and culture; to identify blind spots respective to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and set a vision of being a parish where "*no one is lost or forgotten*." To help explore these questions, Saint Cecilia partnered with Health Resources in Action (HRiA), a local nonprofit organization, to help facilitate an equity assessment and planning process. The goal of this effort was to:

- Develop a portrait of the Saint Cecilia Parish climate-related to equity and inclusion, and;
- Establish a baseline understanding of the strengths and opportunities to advance racial justice in the parish.

### FINDINGS

The following provides high-level findings from the assessment process, which are further detailed in the full body of the report.

#### Population Overview

The parish-wide survey was an effort to provide a demographic profile of the parish as well as assess attitudes and perceptions regarding parish-focused racial equity efforts. While survey participants are not considered a full representative sample of the parish, participant demographics help provide insight into Saint Cecilia's reach.

- Overall, most participants surveyed identified as White (88%), over the age of 45 (79%), and female (68%). In terms of sexual orientation, about 15% of respondents identified as LGBTQ+. Additionally, approximately 10% of survey respondents reported having a disability (91%), with most respondents attending Saint Cecilia for more than one year (81%).
- Survey data show that Saint Cecilia has a larger proportion of older adults compared to national averages. Overall, about 69% of all survey respondents were over the age of 55. In comparison, approximately 57% of Catholics in the state of Massachusetts are over the age of 55.
- There is a lower proportion of parents or caregivers at Saint Cecilia Parish (11%) compared to Catholics statewide (24%) and nationally (30%).
- Saint Cecilia Parish survey respondents are highly educated, with 2 out of every 3 having an advanced graduate degree (65%). This is six times higher than the national and state averages (10% and 11%, respectively).
- Saint Cecilia Parish serves a wide range of parishioners that spans geographies; survey respondents represented at least 29 states across the United States.

***More than 1 in every 3 survey respondents participate exclusively online at Saint Cecilia. (38%.)***

## Perceptions of Parish Culture

The assessment process also explored perceptions of the parish culture at Saint Cecilia Parish. The following presents a high-level summary of these themes, which are described in further detail in the body of the report.

### Parish Strengths

*“Saint Cecilia reinvigorated my faith in the Catholic Church.” -Survey Participant*

When asked, *“Why do you come to Saint Cecilia?”* the overwhelming majority of focus group participants described a parish culture that was authentic, open-minded, and inclusive.

- Among focus group participants, a common theme that emerged was the perception that Saint Cecilia welcomed parishioners "as they are" and was particularly welcoming to individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, which comprised approximately 15% of all survey respondents.
- Survey participants described the culture of Saint Cecilia Parish as one with a strong sense of fellowship. For example, when asked to rank the most important aspects of Parish life, the most important were having a dynamic worship experience and a sense of community fellowship.
- Saint Cecilia was also described as a parish with generous parishioners that were quick to support fundraising or charitable events, both with time and financial contributions. *“People here are extraordinary. So involved with kindness, generosity of their time, ministries...it’s very inspiring.”*

## Perceptions of Diversity at Saint Cecilia Parish

Parishioners engaged in the assessment had varied perceptions of the level of racial and ethnic diversity at Saint Cecilia. For example, focus groups composed of majority white participants were more likely to describe Saint Cecilia as a diverse Parish as compared to majority BIPOC groups who were more likely to convey limited racial and ethnic representation at Saint Cecilia. Survey data also indicate varying perceptions of diversity the parish.

### Racial and Ethnic Diversity

- Almost 1 in 5 survey respondents disagreed (18%) with the statement that they see people of many races, cultures, abilities, and backgrounds represented at Saint Cecilia Parish.
- More than one-quarter (26.5%) of BIPOC survey respondents disagreed with the statement that they see people of many races, cultures, abilities, and backgrounds represented at Saint Cecilia compared to about 17% of White survey respondents, a statistically significant difference.
- Compared to national and state averages among adults who identify as Catholic, Saint Cecilia survey respondents were less racially and ethnically diverse. Approximately 88% of survey respondents identified as White, which is higher than the state (82%) or national average (59%). Conversely, only 4% of survey respondents identified as Latino/Hispanic, which is comparatively lower than Massachusetts (14%) or the national average (34%).
- In terms of parish leadership, most survey respondents reported being satisfied with the diversity of Saint Cecilia leadership (62%), while 1 in 10 respondents reported being dissatisfied (12%). Conversely, about 1 in 3 BIPOC respondents reported being dissatisfied with diversity of parish leadership (31.3%) compared to 1 in 10 White respondents – a statistically significant difference.
- Survey respondents and focus group participants commented on experiences as parishioners of color in a predominantly White church, which many described as a common occurrence throughout their time in

the Catholic Church. One participant shared, “As a BIPOC person who grew up attending majority White Catholic churches, I’m used to there not being diversity around.” Though these experiences were familiar for many, they were also described as isolating.

### **Facilitators to Participation**

- Focus group participants described several examples of initiatives that helped facilitate their participation at Saint Cecilia. For example, the New Parishioner Reception, acknowledging new parishioners at the beginning or end of Mass, and the Coffee hours were the most commonly reported gestures that helped parishioners feel welcomed at the church.
- Various examples of personalized touches—whether through an individualized email or sending a small gift home—were also described as important acts that facilitated engagement at the Parish. The greeters and church volunteers were described by several focus group participants as welcoming and engaging.
- According to focus group participants, an unexpected facilitator of participation that came from the COVID-19 pandemic was the transition to virtual activities. For parishioners who lived far or struggled with transportation, the virtual environment made it easier to be connected to a spiritual home. Across all groups, survey respondents identified the livestream Mass as a facilitator to participation (81%), followed by email updates (52%) and bulletin articles (52%).

### **Parish Challenges**

In addition to exploring the strengths and diverse characteristics of the Saint Cecilia Parish community, the assessment also explored parish challenges. They include barriers to participation, inclusion and belonging, limited representation, and accessibility concerns.

### **Barriers to Participation**

- Survey respondents most often identified lack of free parking (19%), the location (16%), and crowded masses (14%) as barriers to attending Saint Cecilia Parish in-person. Focus group participants also described challenges commuting and finding parking downtown, which made it difficult to be involved in parish activities outside of Mass pre COVID-19.
- A theme that came up in focus groups with BIPOC parishioners was that because of limited representation, there is a sense of pressure that BIPOC parishioners will have to “represent” for their entire racial group if they become involved in Parish activities. One parishioner explained, “Everybody acknowledges that representation is key. If I never see somebody who is not White, I’m less likely to want to participate. But there’s a lot of pressure that if I don’t represent, nobody else will.” These experiences are not unique to Saint Cecilia, according to focus group participants—but a larger issue across the Catholic Church as a whole.
- Young people had limited engagement throughout the assessment process. Interviews and survey responses provide deeper insights into the barriers to engaging young people at Saint Cecilia Parish. According to participants, there is a larger trend of younger generations leaving religious institutions as a whole. Quantitative data show that approximately 22% of Catholics in the United States identify as millennials, but that percentage is much smaller across the state of Massachusetts and at Saint Cecilia Parish (14% and 15%, respectively).

- While the majority of participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the Parish culture overall, focus groups also explored areas for improvement, particularly as it relates to feeling included in Parish life. Most commonly, focus group participants indicated that it was easy to get “*lost in the crowd*” in such a large Parish, described by some as “*cliquish*”.
- The theme of feeling unseen or ignored was also common among survey respondents. Survey responses show that almost one quarter of respondents identifying as LGBTQ reported feeling unseen or ignored compared to 15% of straight/heterosexual respondents – which is a statistically significant difference.
- For those with a physical and mental disability, opportunities to improve inclusivity were also identified. For example, those who were hearing impaired described challenges with the sound or audio feedback inside the physical church. In two focus groups, there were discussions related to accessibility concerns for individuals who are neurodiverse. For example, one participant shared that attending Mass could be a challenge for neurodivergent individuals with ADHD or autism.

“Saint Cecilia is a **very welcoming** place, yet, I still **don’t always feel like I belong** here. Yes, people may recognize my face, but do they really know me? Do I really know anyone else in the community?”

-Focus Group Participant

## PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

All assessment participants were asked about their perceptions of racial equity and social justice topics across Saint Cecilia Parish. The following section summarizes key findings from feedback in focus groups, interviews, and the parish-wide survey.

### Integration of Racial Justice Issues

Generally, assessment participants responded positively when asked how well Saint Cecilia Parish is integrating racial justice issues into various aspects of Parish life. Across all focus groups, participants reported racial and social justice issues have been more explicit at the church over the last two years, which was described as a positive change.

- Across all groups, over 90% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that Saint Cecilia has begun to identify and address issues of racism, and 91% strongly agreed or agreed that Saint Cecilia is committed to being an anti-racist community. Survey respondents most often reported that Saint Cecilia integrates racial justice issues well or very well into homilies (86%) and bulletin articles (71%).
- While many participants positively commented on Saint Cecilia Parish’s efforts to integrate racial justice into various aspects of the Parish, differences exist across subgroups. Approximately four times more LGBTQ survey respondents reported feeling that the Parish is not integrating racial justice into homilies very well compared to heterosexual respondents. Similar patterns exist for those who have been at the Parish for more than 4 years.
- Almost 20% of BIPOC respondents reported feeling that Saint Cecilia Parish is not integrating racial justice issues into homilies very well or well at all, compared to 5% of White respondents- which is a statistically significant difference.
- While the majority of assessment participants responded positively to Saint Cecilia conducting this assessment, about 4% of all survey respondents did not agree with the equity assessment and perceived the effort to be politically motivated or not projecting the correct tone.

## COMMUNITY VISION AND OPPORTUNITIES

Assessment participants in focus groups, interviews, and the parish-wide survey were asked for their suggestions to advance equity and inclusion efforts at Saint Cecilia Parish. This section summarizes these recommendations for future planning considerations.

### Improving Belonging and Inclusivity

- A theme that surfaced in the assessment was that many at Saint Cecilia Parish reported feeling ignored or unseen. Parishioners discussed the need for more opportunities for community members to connect in more intimate settings where trust can be built over time. According to focus group participants, knowing and trusting peers is critical to engaging in racial equity work.
- Ministry groups were identified as a natural avenue to have deeper conversations related to racial and social justice, though suggestions were made for ministry groups to ensure their mission statements were actionable and explicit about their values and commitment to racial justice. Incorporating more storytelling from diverse voices was also suggested as a way to build trust.
- Parishioners had several suggestions related to how to improve perceptions of belonging and inclusion across the church. For example, one parishioner suggested a stronger focus on “*radical hospitality*”—or the practice of putting extraordinary effort and emphasis on making people feel welcome by focusing on breaking down barriers that prevent people from participating.
- Survey respondents provided feedback for suggestions to improve a sense of belonging for new parishioners, as well. Several mentioned leveraging the greeters and volunteers, who were described as strong assets of the Parish community.

### Increasing Diversity

- The most common suggestion was that Saint Cecilia be more intentional about targeted outreach to BIPOC communities. More personalized touches, especially for new parishioners and BIPOC parishioners, was described as particularly important to sustain engagement. Suggestions were made to create space for parishioners to connect by affinity (e.g., by racial/ethnic background, gender, age, disability status, family life stage) and relate through common identities and experiences.
- One critical piece of feedback was the importance of not tokenizing parishioners of color in attempts to increase the racial diversity at the Parish. One focus group participant explained, “*My hope is that inclusion means expansion, deepening, and adding -- keeping what makes Saint Cecilia's special while holding space for the broad community. I hope there are resources to support that expansion so cultural diversity is never performative, but authentic, organic, and lasting.*”

### Actions to Advance Equity

Survey responses reflect several suggestions that were made during focus group and interview discussions. Participants were asked to select their top 3 choices of ideas would advance equity based on themes from parishioner focus groups. While these suggestions are not an exhaustive list of possibilities, they provide a valuable list to begin to explore in the next 1-3 years at Saint Cecilia Parish. Increasing interfaith partnerships, exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within the parish, and economic commitments to equity through contracting and procurement practices were most commonly reported.



- Increasing interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities and exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within Saint Cecilia were most commonly ranked suggestions across all groups. Economic commitments to equity were a top two suggestion from survey respondents aged 25-44 and LGBTQ respondents, while partnerships with Catholic parishes with different culture was a top three suggestion across all respondents.
- Several assessment participants gave suggestions to increase the understanding of different racial and ethnic traditions at Saint Cecilia Parish. For example, one survey respondent shared, *“It would be great to see more diversity in the photos of the bulletin and to see saints and feast days that are important to Black Catholics and Latino Catholics celebrated a bit more. Seeing a painting or a banner that represents another culture really enhances welcome, like St. Simon of Cyrene or Our Lady of Guadalupe.”*
- A theme that came up in both focus group and survey responses was the suggestion for Saint Cecilia Parish to focus on economic commitments that will advance racial justice. According to participants, Saint Cecilia Parish can leverage the strengths of the Parish’s financial privileges to disrupt economic injustices caused by systemic racism.
- Lastly, assessment participants frequently described the need to stand in stronger solidarity with organizations and causes doing antiracism work to move beyond discussion into more actionable solidarity. Focus group participants described opportunities for Saint Cecilia Parish to lead by example to demonstrate actions the Parish has taken to dismantle systemic racism. For example, a few focus group participants indicated that Saint Cecilia Parish is a polling place, which was described as a concrete way the church has opened its door to invite the community in.
- According to focus group and survey respondents, standing in solidarity with antiracism also means acknowledging the hurt of the historical erasure of communities of color and their contributions to the Catholic Church. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge the role the Catholic Church has had in perpetuating racial injustice throughout history.

**“We need to seek out the people we are hoping to be part of our community and **show up for them before they show up for us.**”**  
**-Focus Group Participant**

## **Conclusions**

This report summarizes key takeaways from a series of focus groups conducted by HRIA that explore perceptions of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts at Saint Cecilia Parish. Saint Cecilia is strongly regarded as a Parish that is welcoming, authentic, and a strong spiritual home for many. Parishioners spoke overwhelmingly positive about the dynamic nature of Father John, and hundreds provided examples of ways in which Saint Cecilia has positively impacted their lives. Still, opportunities to improve racial equity and social justice efforts across the Parish exist. Key findings from this assessment were identified through focus groups, interviews, and a parish-wide survey that engaged over 900 Saint Cecilia parishioners across 29 states. Findings from this process will be used to develop a collaborative strategic plan for Saint Cecilia Parish in early 2020.

## BACKGROUND

### Overview of Saint Cecilia Parish

Saint Cecilia Parish is a Roman Catholic Church that was established in 1888 and is located in the heart of Boston. The Parish serves a wide group of parishioners locally and from around the world and welcomes individuals from all walks of life. Saint Cecilia Parish is committed to advancing equity in all forms. The church has a long history in Catholic Social Teaching, which guides the way we respond to one another and to the world around us.

There are many ways we live out our commitment to advancing equity—through our care for individuals who are unhoused or experiencing food insecurity or financial instability; by welcoming with open arms the LGBTQ+ community and being supportive allies and images of how much God loves those of us who are LGBTQ+; and by standing in solidarity with those of us who struggle with addiction. In addition to these areas, we are working at becoming a parish that is anti-racist in all aspects of what we do. To move in this direction, we are listening, reading to learn (and unlearn), reflecting together, educating ourselves, and taking actions as a Parish. This equity assessment is one of the concrete ways Saint Cecilia Parish is beginning to take an active role to better understand our role in the fight for racial healing and reconciliation.

### Purpose and Goals of the Equity Assessment

In the wake of uprising for social justice and the country's reckoning with systemic racism after the death of George Floyd in 2020, Saint Cecilia Parish embarked on a mission of self-discovery to examine how the church could further its commitment to antiracism and racial justice. The Racial Equity Team (RET), made up of parishioners, ministry leaders, parish council members, and staff, was developed to explore the parish's next actions. In these early discussions, the RET realized how much we did not know about our own community. *"How racially or ethnically diverse are we?" "Does Saint Cecilia feel like a spiritual home to everyone or are there barriers to belonging?" "Does everyone feel the responsibility and possibility of shaping their own parish community?" "What would it mean to be a truly anti-racist parish?"*

To explore these questions, Saint Cecilia partnered with the nonprofit organization Health Resources in Action (HRiA), to help facilitate an equity assessment and planning process. The goal of this effort was to develop a portrait of the Saint Cecilia Parish climate related to equity and inclusion, and to establish a baseline understanding of the strengths and opportunities to advance racial justice in our parish.

This initiative, known as, *"The Road to Social Equity"* examines our parish life and culture, aims to identify any blind spots when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and lays the groundwork for a strategic plan that will further our vision of being a parish where "no one is lost or forgotten." This effort is in line with the Parish's 2022 Vision, which outlines our goals for the church we strive to be. One that provides a feeling of welcome, a place and space for everyone, and putting the gospel in action. Visit <https://www.stceciliaboston.org/parish-vision-2022/> for more information.

## Catholic Faith and Anti-Racism

Saint Cecilia Parish's commitment to this work also aligns with a history of the Catholic Church advocating for racial justice. In 1958, for example, the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote to condemn the blatant racism found in segregation and Jim Crow laws (UCCB, 1958). In 2015, Pope Francis spoke to members of congress about "the effects of unjust structures and actions that are all too apparent" in our communities due to systemic injustices. Recently in 2020, Pope Francis remarked, "*we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.*"

While much progress has been made in the fight for racial equity, much is left to be done. The Catholic Church has been critiqued for inadequately addressing racial injustices. For example, the growth of the early Catholic Church in the United States benefited from participation in slave trade. By 1838, the Jesuit order owned approximately 300 people, using forced labor and profits to sustain the clergy and build churches and schools (Swarns, 2021a). Though present-day Jesuits have vowed to make amends for these actions by raising \$100 million for racial healing initiatives, descendants of those enslaved by the group have been critical of the plan for inadequately addressing their community's practical needs (Swarns, 2021b). This sentiment was echoed in a June 2020 statement, where nine bishops, including Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C., the highest-ranking Black leader in the U.S. church, acknowledged the Church's failings in addressing racial injustice (Crary, 2020). "*Prayer and dialogue, alone, are not enough. We must act to bring about true change*" (Gregory et al., 2020).

Saint Cecilia Parish is renewed in our pursuit of the 2018 call from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for a "*genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society*" to combat racism in all its forms and to "*walk together humbly with God and with all of our brothers and sisters in a renewed united.*" (USCCB, 2018). We welcome you to learn from our process, continue the conversation, and most importantly—hold each other accountable for our role in the fight for equity and justice.

## APPROACH AND ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The *Road to Social Equity* assessment aimed to engage parishioners from all walks of life to provide a comprehensive and timely portrait of the parish environment. A subgroup of the Racial Equity Team served as the advisory committee for this effort. The group was made up of six parishioner volunteers who met bi-weekly to inform the overall strategy and approach of the assessment. The heart of this assessment included seeking feedback from parishioners at Saint Cecilia Parish. Nine focus groups and three interviews were conducted with parishioners via Zoom. Focus groups were conducted with parishioners from underrepresented groups at the parish, which included: Black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC); young people; the LGBTQ+ community; parishioners with disabilities; and those who attend mass but are not otherwise actively engaged at Saint Cecilia Parish. (n=41). A parish-wide survey was conducted to get a breadth of feedback from the large community Saint Cecilia Parish serves (n= 867). Lastly, an environmental scan, which included a review of existing documents such as human resource policies and procedures, was completed to develop a more comprehensive picture of the organizational climate. **In total, more than 900 parishioners participated in the assessment across focus groups, interviews, and the parish-wide survey.** For more details on each of the methods used in the assessment, please see **Appendix A**.

## Assessment Limitations

As with all data collection efforts, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the equity assessment coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, all data collection activities shifted from in-person to virtual engagement using the Zoom platform, which may have limited participation from some communities. Strong efforts were made to engage a cross-section of individuals across Saint Cecilia Parish; however, some populations had limited participation across methods. For example, while this assessment focused on racial equity, there was limited representation from parishioners who identified as Black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) in the parish-wide survey. This was also the case for youth under the age of 18, young people under 25, and people with disabilities. Because there was limited participation from these important population groups, efforts were made to engage these groups in follow up focus groups and interviews. Lastly, while the data collected for this assessment provide valuable insights, results are not statistically representative of a larger population due to non-random recruiting techniques. Data based on self-reports should be interpreted with caution. In some instances, respondents may over or underreport experiences based on fear of social stigma or misunderstanding of the question being asked. In addition, respondents may be prone to recall bias—that is, they may attempt to answer accurately but remember incorrectly.

## PERCEPTIONS OF PARISH CULTURE

The following section provides an overview of the perceptions of the strengths and challenges of Saint Cecilia Parish's culture.

### Parish Strengths

When asked, *"Why do you come to Saint Cecilia?"* the overwhelming majority of focus group participants described a parish culture that was authentic, open-minded, and inclusive. Having a pastor who was relatable and dynamic was a huge draw to attending the parish, according to participants. One summarized, *"Father John is one of the things that keeps people coming back because of how down to earth [he] is. It's not theological and heady. It's real."* Others agreed and summarized, *"That's why [Saint Cecilia] is different—it feels less about Catholicism and more about Christ."* Saint Cecilia was also described as a parish with generous parishioners that were quick to support fundraising or charitable events, both with time and financial contributions. *"People here are extraordinary. So involved with kindness, generosity of their time, ministries...it's very inspiring."*

A common theme across focus groups was the perception that Saint Cecilia welcomed parishioners "as they are" and was particularly welcoming to individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, which comprised of approximately 15% of all survey respondents. One parent shared, *"My daughter is transgender and at Saint Cecilia I don't have to worry about what she's going to hear from the pulpit or pew. The church follows my values and that resonates with me."* Support for the LGBTQ+ community is also evident in weekly bulletins and through a formal ministry group comprised of LGBTQ individuals and allies, called the Rainbow Ministry. Participants indicated that the large LGBTQ+ population of the Parish is partly due to the closing of the Jesuit Urban Center in Boston's South End, which was comprised of a large LGTBQ+ community that found a spiritual home at Saint Cecilia after the center closed in 2007.

Assessment participants described the culture of Saint Cecilia Parish as one with a strong sense of fellowship, and survey responses support these findings.

When asked to rank the aspects of Parish life that was most important to them, a dynamic worship experience and a sense of community fellowship were the most commonly reported factors among all groups. Homilies that address current events was an important factor of Parish life for the majority of groups. ‘Feeling welcomed in my identity’ was reported as a top factor for survey respondents who identified as LGBTQ+.

	All respondents (N=812)	BIPOC (N=96)	Under 25 years old (N=15)	25-44 years old (N=161)	65+ years old (N=375)	LGBTQ (N=104)	<1 year at Parish (N=143)	7+ years at Parish (N=282)
1	Dynamic worship experience	A sense of community or fellowship	A sense of community or fellowship	A sense of community or fellowship	Dynamic worship experience	A sense of community or fellowship	Dynamic worship experience	A sense of community or fellowship
2	A sense of community or fellowship	Homilies that address current events	Opp for prayer and deepening relationship with God	Parish partners with orgs providing community needs	Homilies that address current events	Feeling welcomed in my identity	Homilies that address current events	Dynamic worship experience
3	Homilies that address current events	Opp for prayer and deepening relationship with God	Parish partners with orgs providing community needs	Homilies that address current events	A sense of community or fellowship	Dynamic worship experience	Opp for prayer and deepening relationship with God	Parish partners with orgs providing community needs

**Table 1. Top 3 Most Important Aspects of Parish Life, by subgroup**

Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

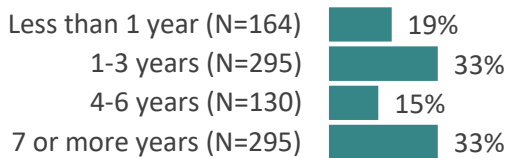
“Saint Cecilia **reinvigorated my faith** in the Catholic church.”  
 -Survey Respondent

## Population Overview

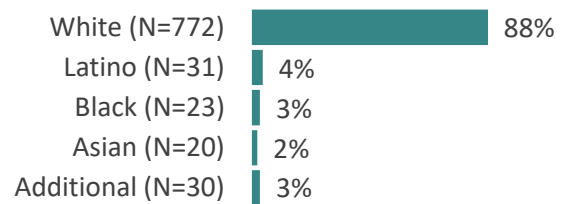
As part of the assessment, Saint Cecilia Parish sought to better understand who represented the Saint Cecilia community. While the Parish serves many parishioners across the Greater Boston area, Saint Cecilia Parish has seen a national and international reach since Masses have been offered via YouTube. Prior to COVID-19, the church welcomed hundreds of parishioners on a weekly basis for in-person worship, and more recently, thousands of viewers who tune in for the weekly livestreamed Mass.

While survey responses are not representative of all who are served by Saint Cecilia, results provide valuable insights into who attends the Parish and how they identify. Out of 860 survey respondents, we saw that:

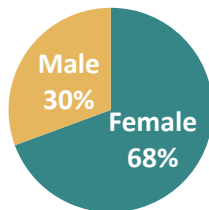
### Most have attended Saint Cecilia for more than one year. (N=720)



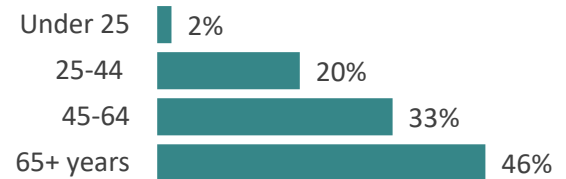
### Most identified as White. (N=772)



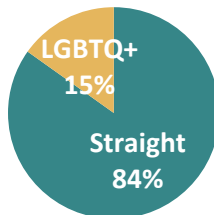
### The majority were female. (N=588)



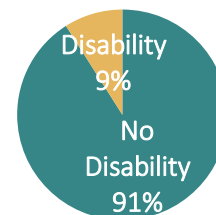
### Those 65 years and older were the largest age group represented. (N=397)



### Fifteen percent of survey respondents identified as LGBTQ. (N=120)

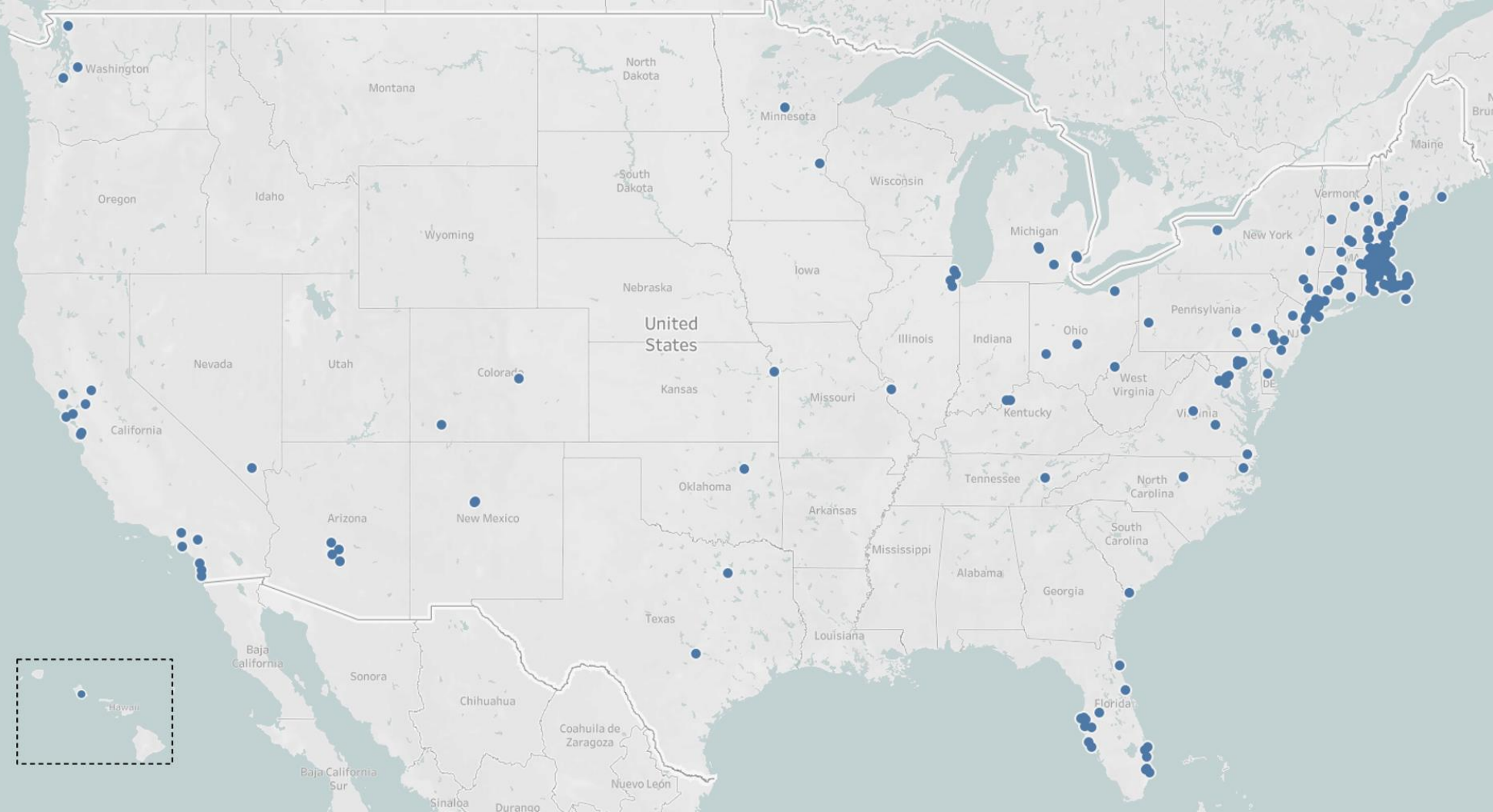


### About 9% of respondents have a disability.



Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021.

**Saint Cecilia serves a wide range of parishioners that spans geographies. The map below shows the geographic reach of the Saint Cecilia Parish survey respondents, which has representation from at least 29 states across the United States.**



Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, by Geographic Location, 2021 (N=866) NOTE: Only includes locations within the United States.



## Perceptions of Diversity

Assessment participants were specifically asked to reflect on the racial and ethnic diversity of Saint Cecilia Parish, which is further described below.

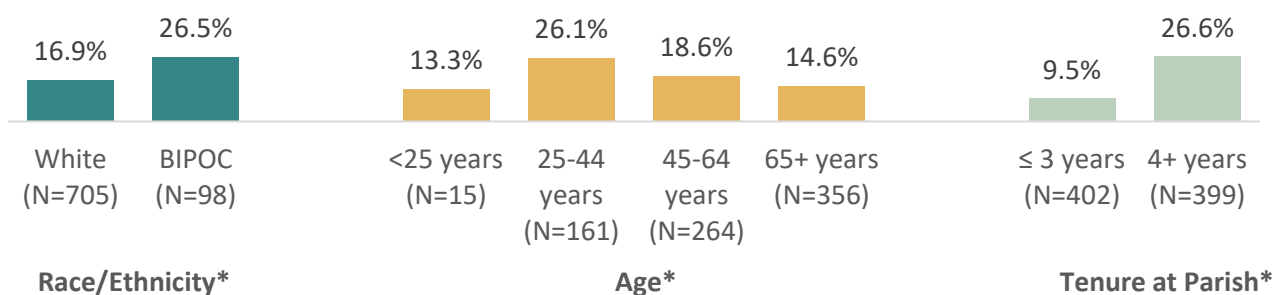
### Racial and Ethnic Diversity

In focus groups that were less racially and ethnically diverse, participants more frequently described Saint Cecilia as a diverse Parish. However, focus groups with BIPOC parishioners more often described limited racial and ethnic representation at Saint Cecilia. For example, one person described, *“I am surprised when I see a person of color greeting or handing out flyers, it makes me think, ‘Oh, they are a leader in this church. But if I don’t see it regularly, I [assume] there are few leaders of color at Saint Cecilia.”*

Survey respondents and focus group participants commented on experiences as parishioners of color in a predominantly White church, which many described as a common occurrence throughout their time in the Catholic church. One participant shared, *“As a BIPOC person who grew up attending majority White Catholic churches, I’m used to there not being diversity around.”* Though these experiences were familiar for many, they were also described as isolating. One focus group parishioner shared, *“There are times when I look around and take stock of where I am, and the [lack of diversity] can feel very isolating. I’m very aware when I see and how I interact with Black and Brown people at the parish.”*

Survey responses support these findings. Almost 1 in 5 of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (18%) that they see people of many races, cultures, abilities, and backgrounds represented at Saint Cecilia Parish.

**When looking across sub-populations, such as by race/ethnicity, more than one quarter of BIPOC survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they see people of many races, cultures, abilities, and backgrounds represented at Saint Cecilia, compared to about 17% of White survey respondents.**



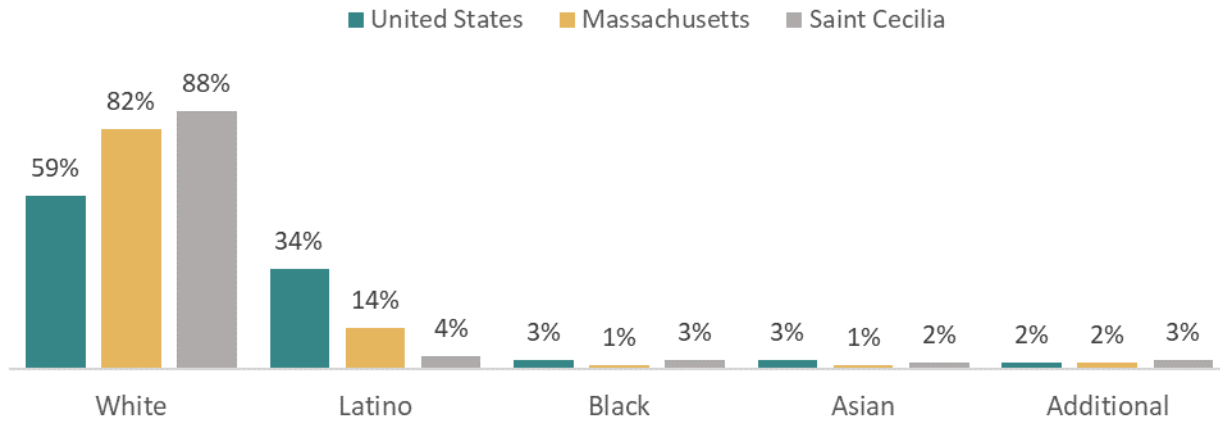
**Figure 1. Percent Respondents Who Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed That They See People of Many Races, Cultures, Abilities, and Backgrounds Represented at Saint Cecilia, by Select Populations.** Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021.

NOTE: Asterisk (\*) denotes where statistically significant differences were seen (chi-square test,  $p < 0.05$ )



While not representative of the entirety of the Saint Cecilia Parish community, the parish-wide survey provides important insights into the racial and ethnic makeup of the church. Compared to national and state averages among adults who identify as Catholic, Saint Cecilia survey respondents were less racially and ethnically diverse.

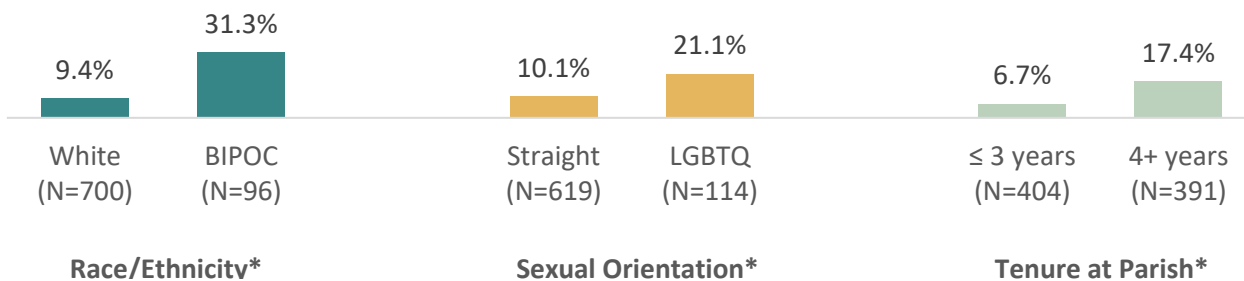
**Approximately 88% of survey respondents identified as White, which is higher than the state and national averages among Catholic adults. Conversely, only 4% of survey respondents identified as Latino/Hispanic, which is three times less than the Massachusetts average and nine times less than national averages.**



**Figure 2. Racial and Ethnic Composition Among Catholic Adults in the United States, Massachusetts, and Saint Cecilia Survey Respondents** Source: Pew Research. Religious Landscape Study, 2015. Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

The majority of survey respondents reported being somewhat satisfied or satisfied with the diversity of Saint Cecilia leadership (62%). Though, 1 in every 10 respondents reported being dissatisfied with diversity of leadership (12%).

**When looking across sub-populations, about one third of BIPOC respondents reported being somewhat dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the diversity of the leadership compared to one tenth of White respondents – a statistically significant difference.**

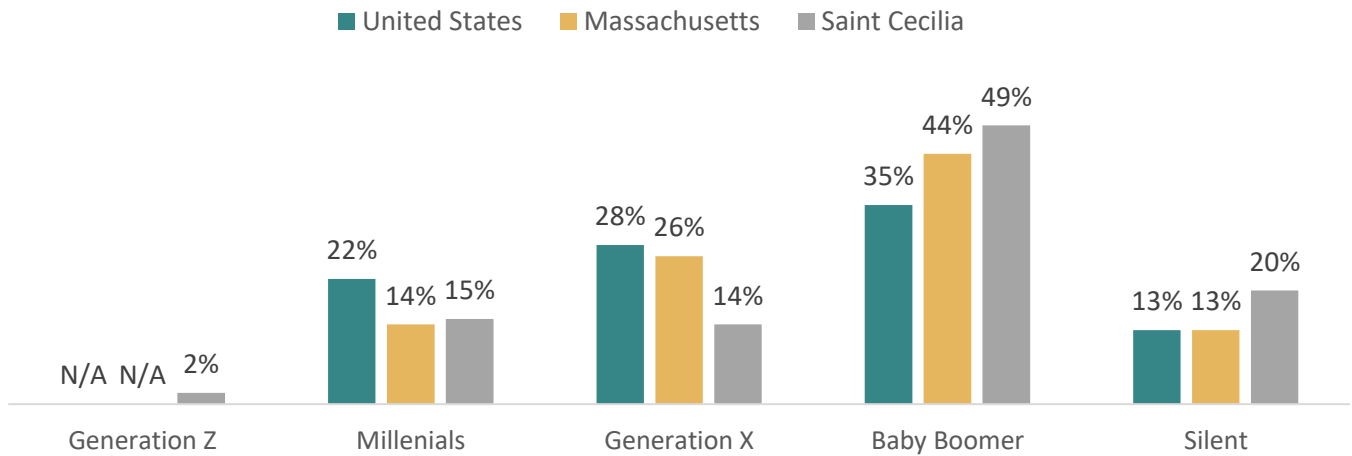


**Figure 3. Percent Respondents Reporting Being Somewhat Dissatisfied or Dissatisfied with the diversity of Saint Cecilia Leadership, by select populations.** NOTE: Asterisk (\*) denotes where statistically significant differences were seen (chi-square test, p<0.05)

Age Distribution

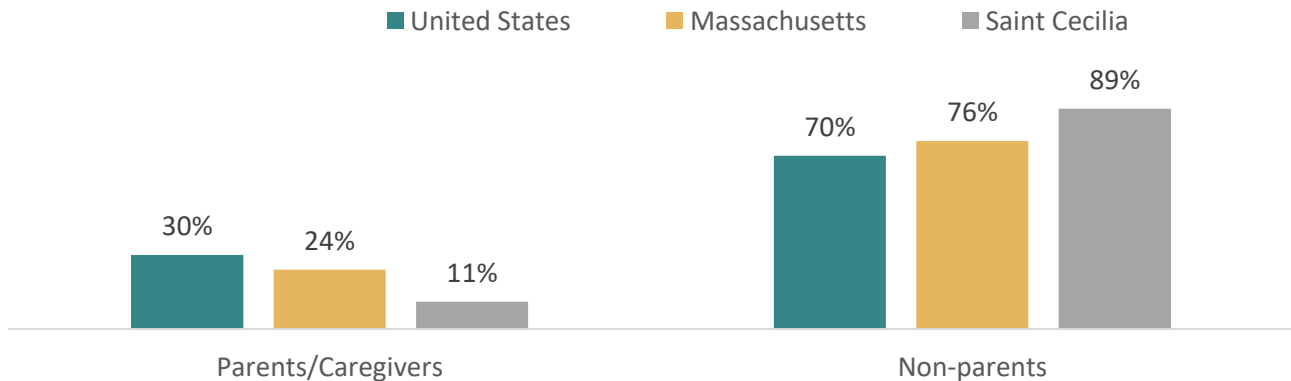
Saint Cecilia Parish’s survey respondent population represents a range of age groups, but the distribution of these ages varies. Overall, about 69% of all survey respondents were over the age of 55, which are classified as the Baby Boomers and the Silent generations. In comparison, approximately 57% of Catholics in the state of Massachusetts are over the age of 55. Parishioners in these age ranges were also more likely to participate in focus groups. Approximately 40% of focus group participants were over the age of 59. Representation was most limited among Generation X (41-56 years old), and Generation Z (25 years or younger).

**Survey data show that Saint Cecilia has a larger proportion of older adults compared to state and national averages.**



**Figure 4. Racial and Ethnic Composition Among Catholics in the United States, Massachusetts, and Saint Cecilia Survey Respondents** Source: Pew Research. Religious Landscape Study, 2015. Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

**Survey data also suggest that there is a lower proportion of parents or caregivers at Saint Cecilia Parish (11%) compared to Catholics statewide (24%) and nationally (30%).**

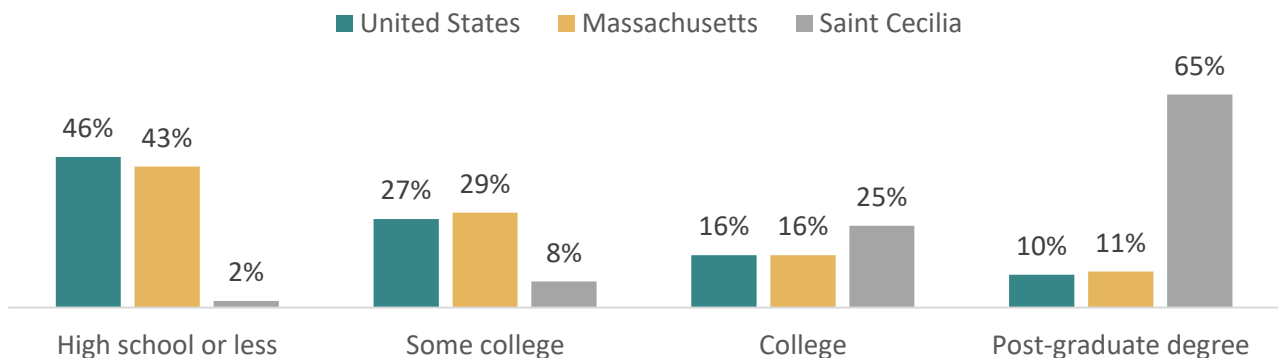


**Figure 5. Racial and Ethnic Composition Among Catholics in the United States, Massachusetts, and Saint Cecilia Survey Respondents** Source: Pew Research. Religious Landscape Study, 2015. Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

### Educational Attainment and Economic Context

In terms of educational attainment and economic context, a theme across multiple focus groups was the perception that most parishioners who attend Saint Cecilia are highly educated and affluent. Survey data support these findings.

**Saint Cecilia Parish survey respondents are highly educated, with 2 out of every 3 having an advanced graduate degree (65%). This is six times higher than the national and state averages (10% and 11%, respectively).**



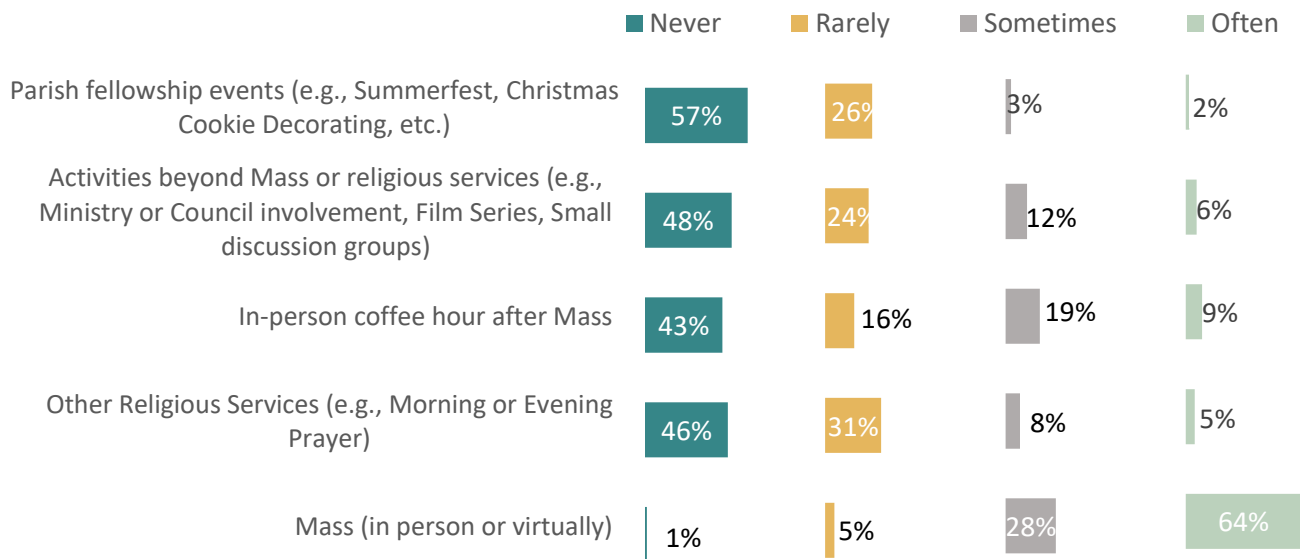
**Figure 6. Racial and Ethnic Composition Among Catholics in the United States, Massachusetts, and Saint Cecilia Survey Respondents** Source: Pew Research. Religious Landscape Study, 2015. Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

Some focus group participants commented on the perceived wealth at the Parish and how it could impact feelings of inclusivity for those with lower socioeconomic statuses. For example, one focus group participant shared, *“We have fundraisers where individuals will donate \$1 million dollars; that’s the kind of person that goes to Saint Cecilia.”* This level of wealth, shared discussion participants, could be perceived as ostentatious by external community members. One summarized, *“I heard from someone outside the Parish describe Saint Cecilia as self-centered. We have all of this wealth but the communities around us are poor, sick, hungry, and homeless.”* Material upgrades to the church were also described by some as an example of the church’s wealth. A focus group participant expressed, *“We have this huge church that’s rarely completely full and so much money has been spent on it.” “We are building fancy coffee machines downstairs. I understand wanting to beautify and that it’s good to see God’s beauty, but is it without feeding God’s children first?”*

### PARISH PARTICIPATION

Prior to this assessment, there was not a clear understanding of the level of participation among parishioners in Parish activities. The parish-wide survey showed that approximately 64% of survey respondents attended Mass at least once a week, though, there were some significant differences between age groups and tenure at the church. Those who joined Saint Cecilia less than a year ago were less likely to participate in activities outside of Mass compared to those who attended for more than one year. More than 65% of survey respondents who joined Saint Cecilia less than one year ago (2020-2021) reported never having participated in activities beyond Mass and parish fellowship events. Most survey respondents indicated that they attended the Sunday 10:00am Livestream Mass (53%), followed by the Sunday 11:30am Mass (20%), and the Sunday 9:30 am Mass (16%).

**The majority of survey respondents never or rarely participated in other religious services or activities beyond Mass.**



**Figure 7. Level of Participation by Parish Activity, All Survey Respondents, 2021 (N=875);** Data in chart show percent respondents reporting they never participate; rarely participate (a few times a year); sometimes participate (1-3 times per month); often participate (at least once a week or more than once a week)

Facilitators to Participation

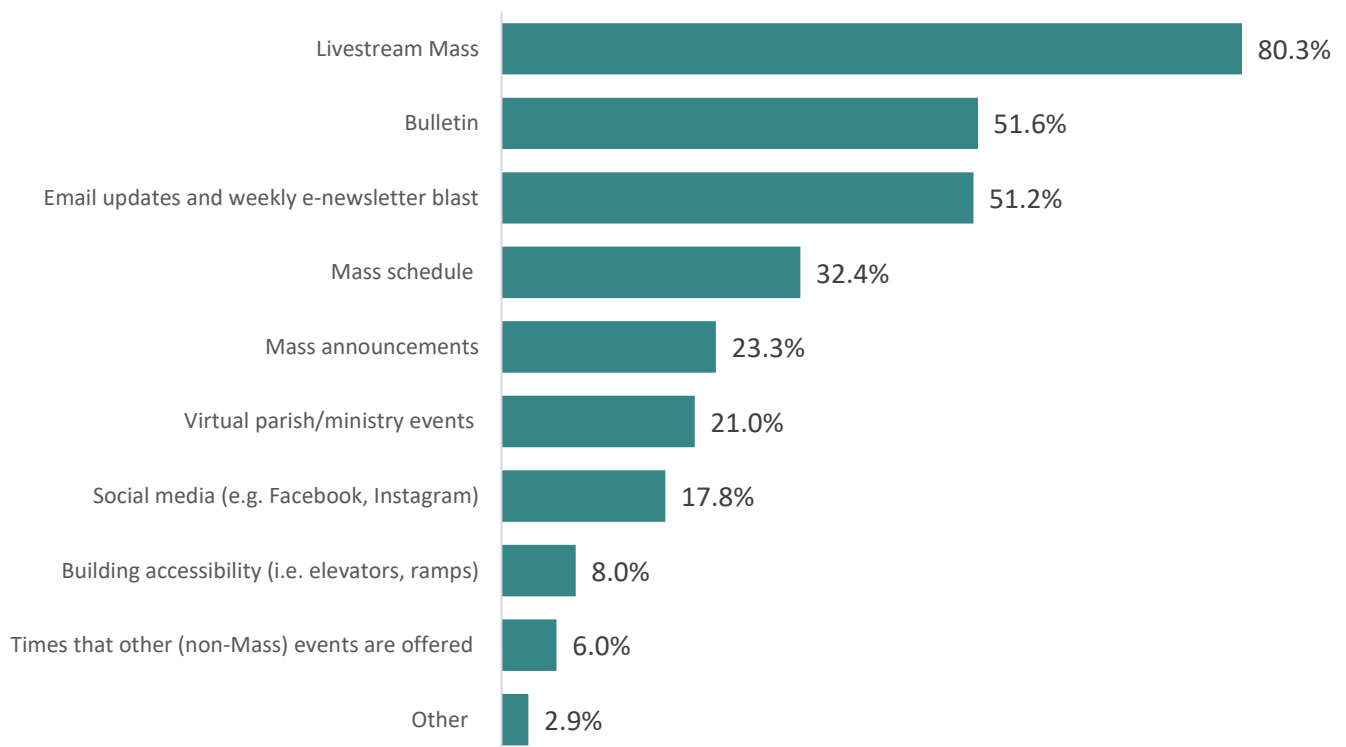
Focus group participants described several examples of initiatives that helped facilitate their participation at Saint Cecilia. For example,

- The **New Parishioner reception, acknowledging new parishioners at the beginning or end of Mass, and the Coffee hours** were the most commonly reported gestures that helped parishioners feel welcomed at the church. Various examples of **personalized touches**—whether through an individualized email or sending a small gift home—were also described as important acts that facilitated engagement at the Parish. The greeters and church volunteers were described by several focus group participants as welcoming and engaging.
- **Virtual activities:** According to focus group participants, an unexpected facilitator of participation that came from the COVID-19 pandemic was the transition to **virtual activities**. For parishioners who lived far or struggled with transportation, the virtual environment made it easier to be connected to a spiritual home. Focus group participants reflected on the increased accessibility of virtual options, sharing, *“Joining virtually makes [participating] easy. Post COVID I wonder if it would be possible to have meetings still be remote or having the option for people to join in remotely if they can’t make it [downtown].”* Survey respondents reported examples of things that helped facilitate engagement virtually such as Mass cards and engaging with parishioners across geography via the chat. One survey respondent shared, *“The livestream has kept me sane during COVID. Being able to request Mass cards by*

*email and then forward the link when we hear the names has been an exceptional way to share comfort with those who have lost a loved one.”*

Half of parishioners who completed the survey are participating in both online and in-person Mass services (53%). Survey data show that increasingly, Saint Cecilia is becoming a hybrid parish whose reach spans geographies. As one survey respondent explained, “*Livestreaming Sunday Mass has redefined who belongs to the Saint Cecilia community.*” **More than one in every 3 parishioners participates exclusively online (38%),** and approximately 8% participate only in-person.

**Across all groups, survey respondents identified the Livestream Mass as a facilitator to participation (81%), followed by email updates (52%) and bulletins articles (52%).**



**Table 2. Facilitators to Participation at Saint Cecilia Parish, by subgroup populations.**

Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

“Being able to livestream mass has been a gift for me during COVID-19.”

-Survey Respondent

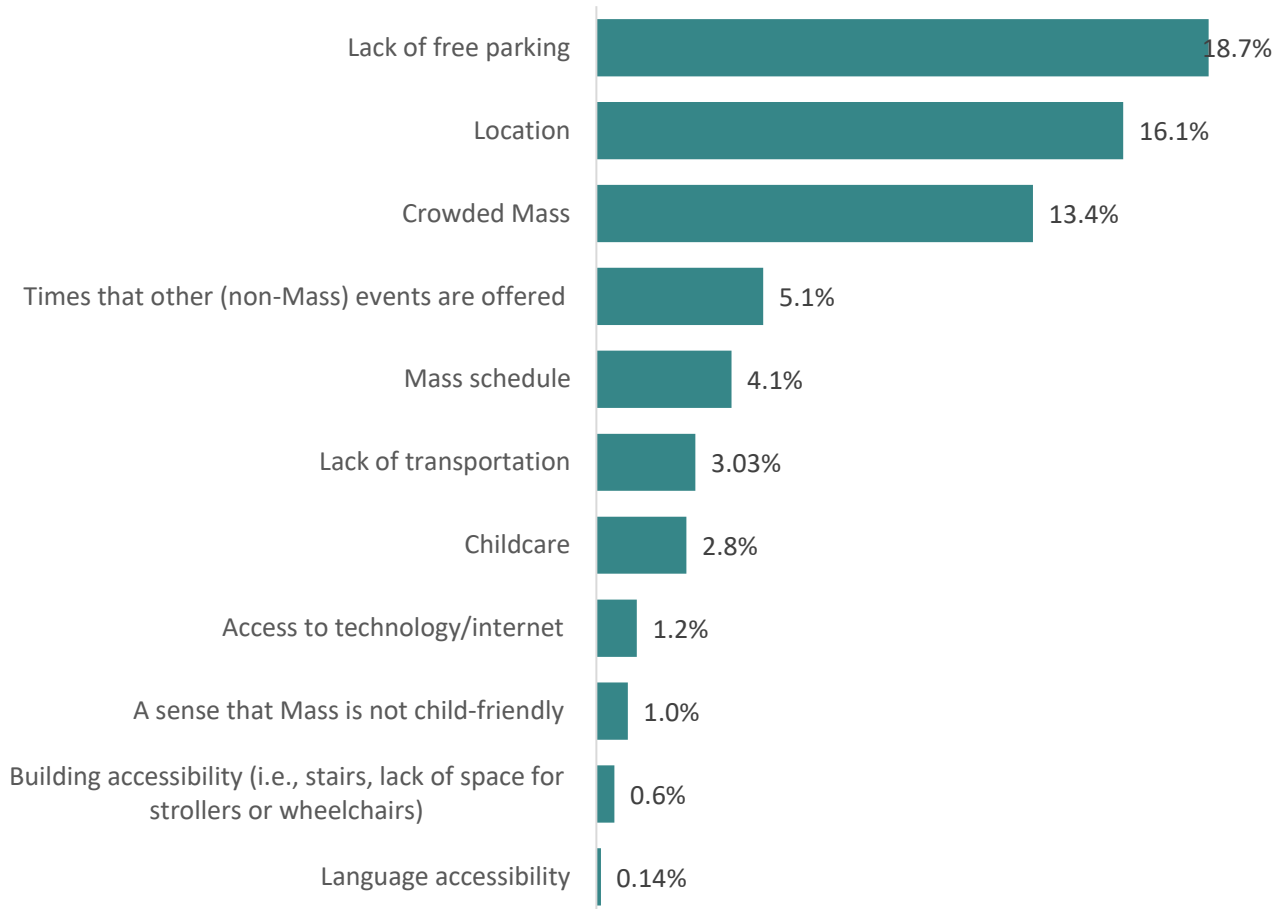
## Perceived Parish Challenges

In addition to exploring the strengths and diverse characteristics of the Saint Cecilia Parish community, the assessment also explored Parish challenges, which are described below. They include barriers to participation, inclusion and belonging, limited representation, and accessibility concerns.

### Barriers to Participation

Focus group participants described several examples of barriers to participating at Saint Cecilia. They included:

- **For in-person participants: survey respondents most often identified lack of free parking (19%), the location (16%), and crowded Masses (14%) as barriers to attending Saint Cecilia Parish.** Focus group participants also described challenges commuting and finding parking downtown, which made it difficult to be involved in Parish activities outside of Mass pre COVID-19. One participant summarized, *“I would love to be more involved in some of the ministries but being in the city and finding parking makes it more challenging. If you can’t attend ministry groups, it’s hard to be involved.”*



**Table 3. Facilitators to Participation at Saint Cecilia Parish, by subgroup populations.**

Source: Saint Cecilia Parish Survey, 2021

### Limited Representation

Focus groups with specific identity groups across the parish provide deeper insights into barriers to participation. For example, a theme that came up in focus groups with BIPOC parishioners was that because of limited representation, there is a sense of pressure that BIPOC parishioners will have to “represent” for their entire racial group if they become involved in Parish activities. One parishioner explained, *“Everybody acknowledges that representation is key. If I never see somebody who is not White, I’m less likely to want to participate. But there’s a lot of pressure that if I don’t represent, nobody else will.”* These experiences are not unique to Saint Cecilia, according to focus group participants—but a larger issue across the Catholic church as a whole. One participant explained, *“There are a lot of roots between the Catholic church and people of color, where POC have not always felt so welcome.”* Quantitative data show that approximately 3% of Catholics in the United States identify as Black. In Massachusetts and at Saint Cecilia Parish, Black parishioners make up approximately 1% of survey respondents.

Young people also had limited engagement throughout the assessment process. Interviews and survey responses provide deeper insights into the barriers to engaging young people at Saint Cecilia Parish. According to participants, there is a larger trend of younger generations leaving religious institutions as a whole. Quantitative data show that approximately 22% of Catholics in the United States identify as millennials, but that percentage is much smaller across the state of Massachusetts and at Saint Cecilia Parish (14% and 15%, respectively). According to focus group participants, younger people are more likely to reject larger institutions such as the Catholic church because of historical examples of the church causing harm. This was also true for younger generations such as Generation Z. Quantitative data for teenagers in Generation Z, though one parent explained, *“I have two strong, opinionated, active [teenagers] who do not want to be part of an...out of touch [institution]. They want to be associated with a [church] that is inclusive and are doing the work. We and they love Fr. John’s homilies because he talks directly to these issues, not just skirting around them.”*

### Inclusion and Belonging

While the majority of participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the Parish culture overall, focus groups also explored areas for improvement, particularly as it relates to feeling included in Parish life. Most commonly, focus group participants indicated that it was easy to get “lost in the crowd” in such a large Parish, described by some as “cliquish”. Participants who attended Mass but were not otherwise engaged described this perception in more detail. One shared, *“If people haven’t experienced a large community like Saint Cecilia, it might be harder to integrate because you have to sit up front. People are not going to seek you out like in small communities.”* Another participant agreed and added, *“I’ve heard from older parishioners that have an abiding concern about how we keep track of each other; that people leave, or something happens to them, and nobody knows. We’re too big to have that intimacy.”*

The theme of feeling unseen or ignored was also common among survey respondents. The table below shows how often respondents reported experiencing different types of negative situations at Saint Cecilia Parish. The majority of respondents reported never having experienced discrimination at Saint Cecilia Parish, though almost one quarter of all respondents reported to have had at least one of the following incidents happen to them at least once in a while (22.9%). For LGBTQ parishioners, this number was significantly higher with more than 36% reporting to have experienced an adverse situation at Saint Cecilia Parish, compared to 20% of survey respondents who identified as Straight.

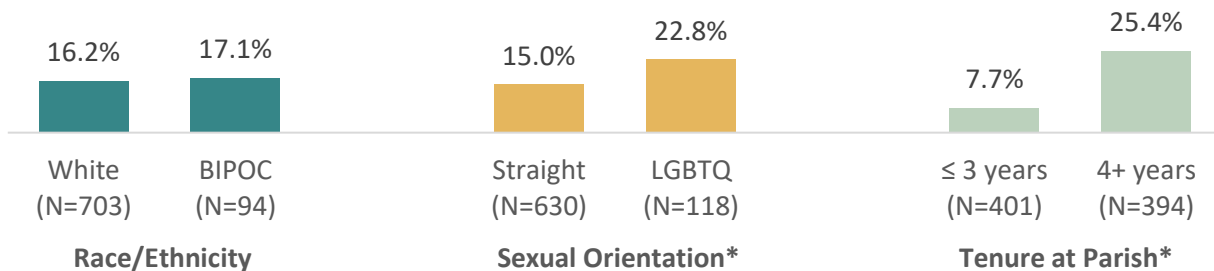
**Respondents most frequently reported feeling unseen or ignored and people acting as if they are better than them at least once in a while (13.4%, and 11.1%, respectively).**

	Never	Once in a While	Fairly Often	Very Often	NA/Don't Know
You are treated with less respect than other people are. (N=803)	67.9%	5.7%	0.8%	0.8%	24.9%
You feel unseen or ignored. (N=799)	59.6%	13.4%	2.1%	0.9%	24.0%
People act as if they are afraid of you. (N=799)	71.8%	1.9%	0.6%	0.1%	25.5%
People act as if they are better than you are. (N=800)	61.9%	11.1%	1.1%	0.9%	25.0%
You are called names or insulted. (N=798)	74.8%	0.8%	0.0%	0.4%	24.1%
You are threatened or harassed. (N=794)	75.6%	0.6%	0.1%	0.1%	23.6%

**Figure 4. Percent Respondents Reporting Experiencing Discrimination, At Least Once in a While**

Survey responses show that almost one quarter of respondents identifying as LGBTQ reported feeling unseen or ignored compared to 15% of straight/heterosexual respondents – which is a statistically significant difference. Additionally, respondents who have been with the Parish for longer periods of time more often reported feeling unseen or ignored compared to respondents who were newer parishioners. One survey respondent commented, *“The only time I haven’t felt welcome was when a longer-term member of the church implied that I was new to community, when I had already been here for 5 years at that point. Part of that is because I’m not as involved in the community outside of Mass, but that did put me off.”*

**About 1 in 4 LGBTQ respondents and respondents who have been a part of Saint Cecilia Parish for 7 or more years reported feeling unseen or ignored at least once in a while at the Parish.**



**Figure 8. Percent Respondents Reporting They Feel Unseen or Ignored at Least Once in While at Saint Cecilia Parish, 2021**  
 NOTE: Asterisk (\*) denotes where statistically significant differences were seen (chi-square test, p<0.05); Data in chart show percent respondents reporting they feel unseen or ignored at least once in a while at Saint Cecilia Parish, by select populations



### Additional Population Groups

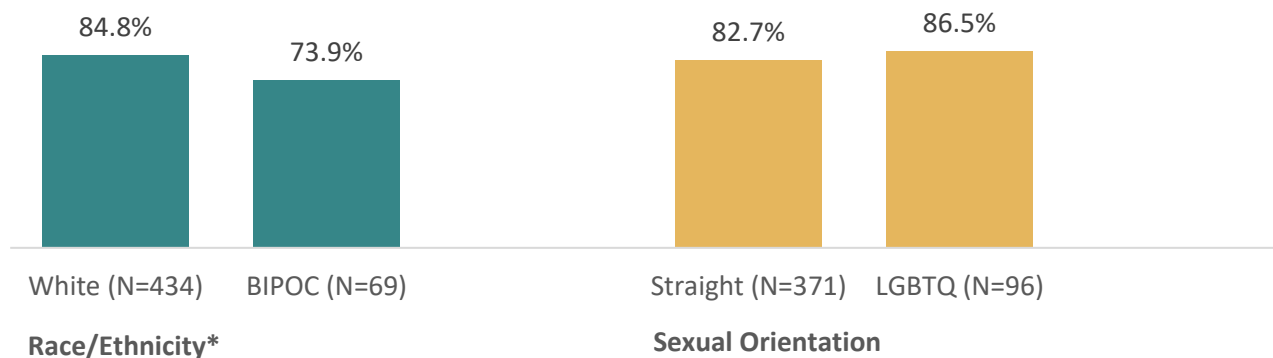
Feedback from the parish-wide survey also noted specific population groups that could benefit from additional outreach, particularly women, young families, and single/divorced individuals. One survey respondent commented, *“While I completely understand, appreciate, and attend Saint Cecilia because of the focus on racial issues, I do feel like a second-class citizen as a woman in the Catholic Church. I wish more would incorporate the injustice of sexism ALONGSIDE injustice of racism and other bases of discrimination.”*

In terms of families, one parishioner shared, *“I am a new parent, and I think this is a major growth area for the for the parish to build up the Young Families ministry. Now as more Saint Cecilia Young Adult members are getting married and having children, we would like more church-support in building a new parents’ community.”* Other parishioners mentioned specific needs for young families and shared feedback via the parish-wide survey. One shared, *“I want to voice my frustration with the ways the needs of young families have largely been ignored / feel forgotten by parish leadership during the past year. This was an issue that predated COVID, but it feels like the pandemic only exacerbated it. For too long the parish has relied on parents themselves to run programming for fellow young families, which is not a sustainable model. If programming for families is to be a priority in the coming years, parish staff support will be essential to make it happen.”*

### Expressing Care

A key component of the Saint Cecilia Vision 2022 is A Feeling of Welcome where “no one feels on the fringes as newcomers.” As such, it was important for Saint Cecilia to explore how parishioners feel cared for and how often they express care. About 83% of survey respondents reported that others in the Parish express interest and concern in their wellbeing at least once in a while. When looking across sub-populations, the majority of respondents report this as well. A smaller proportion of BIPOC identifying respondents reported that others express interest and concern for them at the Parish compared to White respondents – which is a statistically significant difference.

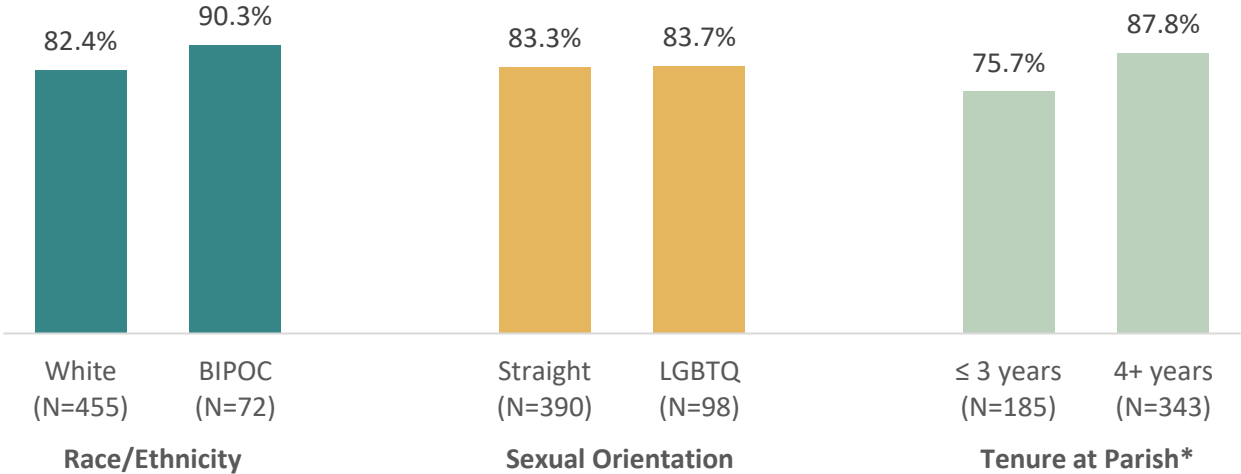
**A smaller proportion of BIPOC survey respondents reported someone at Saint Cecilia Parish expresses interest and concern in their wellbeing at least once in a while compared to White respondents.**



**Figure 9. Percent Respondents Reporting Someone in the Parish Expresses Interest and Concern in Their Wellbeing (Other Than Family) At Least Once in a While, by Select Populations.**

Similarly, the majority of all survey respondents reported that they show others in the Parish that they love and care for them at least once in a while (83.4%). Respondents who have been with the Parish for a longer time more often reported showing love and care for others at least once in a while at the Parish, compared to respondents who have been with the Parish for shorter periods of time. Although not a statistically significant difference, about 90% of BIPOC respondents reported showing others love and care at least once in a while compared to about 82% of White respondents.

**While the majority of respondents across different groups reported that they show others at Saint Cecilia Parish love and care at least once in a while, a higher proportion of respondents who have been with the Parish for a longer period reported so compared to other respondents.**



**Figure 10. Percent Respondents Reporting Showing Love and Care for Someone in the Parish (Other Than Family) At Least Once in a While, by Select Populations**

“Saint Cecilia is a **very welcoming** place, yet, I still **don’t always feel like I belong** here. Yes, people may recognize my face, but do they really know me? Do I really know anyone else in the community?”  
**-Focus Group Participant**

### Accessibility Concerns

A theme that came across in two focus groups was related to accessibility concerns for individuals with a disability or those who are neurodiverse. For example, one participant shared that attending Mass could be a challenge for neurodivergent individuals with ADHD or autism. They explained, *“Church can be very sensory overwhelming. One thing I’d like to see is having conversations at the parish about neurodiversity and other forms of disability and how that many be present. We need to create the space—both in physical and mental community sense—for different expressions and flexibility for what we consider to be reverence in Mass.”*

For those with a physical and mental disability, opportunities to improve inclusivity were also identified. For example, those who were hearing impaired described challenges with the sound or audio feedback inside the physical church, suggesting that the church look into hearing loop technology, which is the preferred assistive listening system by the majority of people with hearing aids and cochlear implants. One participant shared, *“There are churches where those who wear hearing aids can click a function on their device and be looped into the sound more clearly, and it’s something Saint Cecilia can consider, especially with the aging population.”* Those with physical disabilities identified opportunities to increase accessibility in the physical space, particularly with regard to seating and access to the lectern. One parishioner shared, *“I think visibility matters. If you’re putting all the folks in the wheelchairs in the back, it’s difficult to feel included.”* Another survey respondent expanded, *“Having an area with space for wheelchair users so they don’t have to choose between leaving their chair or sitting apart from the rest of the community.”*

## PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

All assessment participants were asked about their perceptions of racial equity and social justice topics across Saint Cecilia Parish. The following section summarizes key findings from feedback in focus groups, interviews, and the parish-wide survey.

### Integration of Racial Justice Issues

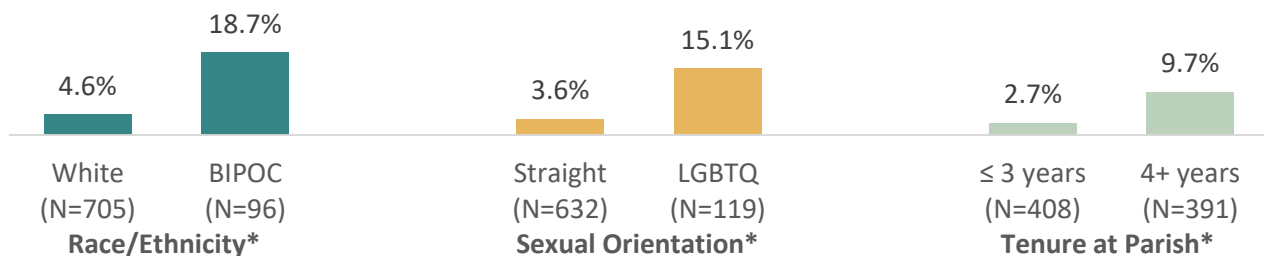
Generally, assessment participants responded positively when asked how well Saint Cecilia Parish is integrating racial justice issues into various aspects of Parish life. Across all focus groups, participants reported racial and social justice issues have been more explicit at the church over the last two years, which was described as a positive change. One participant shared, *“[Racial] and [social justice] issues are definitely integrated in the homily, at least since the beginning of the year; it’s loud and clear in a good way.”* Survey respondents support these findings. **Across all groups, over 90% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that Saint Cecilia has begun to identify and address issues of racism, and 91% strongly agreed or agreed that Saint Cecilia is committed to being an anti-racist community.**

Survey respondents most often reported that Saint Cecilia integrates racial justice issues well or very well into homilies (86%) and bulletin articles (71%). One survey respondent commented, *“This is the only parish I’ve belonged to that specifically and thoughtfully addresses hot cultural and social issues in the homily and consistently guides us back to the social justice mission of the church. I am now attending Mass almost weekly because the homily helps me process the difficult challenges of our time and gives me suggestions based on our faith for how I can make a difference.”*

Many also positively commented on the Parish’s willingness to be explicit about racial equity, which survey respondents described as courageous. One survey respondent explained, *“The very fact that we as Parishioners are being asked to answer and speak on these issues, says everything about Saint Cecilia and the kind of caring and forthright community it wants to be and serve.”* Another shared, *“I have been impressed with the expression of the commitment to social justice for all people regardless of race, gender, differing ability, or sexual orientation and feel the spirit of this commitment in the homilies of Father John and in the work of the members who are engaged in this vital exploration.”* Comments like these resonated across many assessment participants, who shared positive messages about the Parish’s willingness to embark on this process of self-discovery and reflection.

While many participants positively commented on Saint Cecilia Parish’s efforts to integrate racial justice into various aspects of the Parish, differences exist across subgroups. Approximately four times more LGBTQ survey respondents reported feeling that the Parish is not integrating racial justice into homilies very well compared to heterosexual respondents. Similar patterns exist for those who have been at the Parish for more than 4 years.

**Almost 20% of BIPOC respondents reported feeling that Saint Cecilia Parish is not integrating racial justice issues into homilies very well or well at all, compared to 5% of White respondents- which is a statistically significant difference.**



**Figure 11. Percent Respondents Reporting They Feel Saint Cecilia Parish is Integrating Racial Justice Issues into Homilies Not Very Well or Not Well At All, by Select Populations** NOTE: Asterisk (\*) denotes where statistically significant differences were seen (chi-square test,  $p < 0.05$ )

Focus group and interview participants described opportunities to better integrate racial justice issues into Parish activities. Most often, focus group participants spoke of the importance of being mindful of messaging when discussing issues of race or racism. For example, one survey respondent shared, *“I’d love to see more thorough preparation of homilies that will be speaking of sensitive topics related to racism... Spontaneous/improvised comments on current events can come across as under-prepared and land awkwardly.”* Others commented on the messaging for the equity assessment itself, explaining that there are opportunities to be more thoughtful about how the Parish communicates about the Road to Social Equity initiative. One focus group participant shared, *“We want to be mindful of our messaging and tone because these impressions last*

forever. When we actively create spaces just for DEI it can seem alienating in and of itself and the intent can sometimes seem transactional.”

### Other Perceptions of Racial Equity Efforts

While the majority of assessment participants responded positively to Saint Cecilia conducting this assessment, about 4% of all survey respondents did not agree with the equity assessment and perceived the effort to be politically motivated or not projecting the correct tone. For example, one survey respondent shared, *“I am older and my faith has helped me through many hard times and much sickness. I do not like any of the political issues at church. I was taught religion and politics should never be discussed. It will destroy families and their views. I am sorry I cannot change. I feel all this racial talk is dividing our country and families worse than ever. I need my spiritual time when I am at Mass. Sunday Mass should be a time of prayer.”* Other survey respondents commented on the perceived political nature of racial equity work, sharing, *“Go back to being normal church. Separation of church and politics. Please cater to regular people and not the very few with chips on their shoulders.”*

## COMMUNITY VISION AND OPPORTUNITIES

Assessment participants in focus groups, interviews, and the parish-wide survey were asked for their suggestions to advance equity and inclusion efforts at Saint Cecilia Parish. This section summarizes these recommendations for future planning considerations.

### Advancing Equity

Focus group participants shared a variety of suggestions for improvement equity and inclusion efforts at Saint Cecilia. Suggestions most often included improving belonging and inclusivity at the Parish; increasing diversity through more intentional and authentic outreach efforts to BIPOC community members; strengthening partnerships with interfaith parishes; committing to practices that advance equity through contracting and procurement; and being in stronger solidarity and allyship with groups on the ground doing anti-racism work were among the most common.

### Improving Belonging and Inclusivity

As previously mentioned, a theme that surfaced in the assessment was that many at Saint Cecilia Parish reported feeling ignored or unseen. Parishioners discussed the need for more opportunities for community members to connect in more intimate settings where trust can be built over time. According to focus group participants, knowing and trusting peers is critical to engaging in racial equity work. Ministry groups were identified as a natural avenue to have deeper conversations related to racial and social justice, though suggestions were made for ministry groups to ensure their mission statements were actionable and explicit about their values and commitment to racial justice.

Incorporating more storytelling from diverse voices was also suggested as a way to build trust. One member explained, *“Father John did a wonderful thing of having a [disabled person] give a moving personal reflection on the impact of what would happen if the Affordable Care Act went away and what that meant to him”* and encouraged more opportunities like this, where parishioners could hear first-hand from members being impacted by certain circumstances and experiences.

Parishioners had several suggestions related to how to improve perceptions of belonging and inclusion across the church. For example, one parishioner suggested a stronger focus on “*radical hospitality*”—or the practice of putting extraordinary effort and emphasis on making people feel welcome by focusing on breaking down barriers that prevent people from participating. They explained, “*There’s a difference between saying ‘you’re welcome here’ and ‘let me go find you’.*” Examples of this emphasis on radical hospitality included more targeted outreach through smaller events or affinity spaces; more personalized touch points to acknowledge new members via email or more frequently at Mass; and smaller organized events like coffee chats, cultural or language exchanges, or community service events for specific affinity groups who share common experiences. Participants also noted the importance of having these events digitally accessible to include the growing virtual community. One survey respondent explained, “*I would love to see a group organized specifically for those of us in the virtual community. Perhaps a private Facebook page where interested people can join, or some other way for those of us who attend remote to feel a [sense of] closeness.*”

Survey respondents provided feedback for suggestions to improve a sense of belonging for new parishioners, as well. Several mentioned leveraging the greeters and volunteers, who were described as strong assets of the Parish community. One survey respondent explained, “*A special cadre of greeters (not those tasked with greeting people at the start of Mass) could be tasked to meet new people and introduce them to the parish, and introduce them to other parishioners, and possibly give them a welcoming brochure. At this time, the coffee hours are very unfriendly places for someone who is new to the parish, since people congregate in cliques, and ignore people they do not know. This could be a place for greeters wearing identifying name tags to be on the look out for people standing alone and greeting them and introducing them to other parishioners. Perhaps volunteer parishioners or greeters could stand at an information table in the narthex and at coffee hours. I really feel that there is a serious need to develop a sense of community in most Catholic parishes.*”

### [Increasing Diversity](#)

The most common suggestion was that Saint Cecilia be more intentional about targeted outreach to BIPOC communities. More personalized touches, especially for new parishioners and BIPOC parishioners, was described as particularly important to sustain engagement. One focus group participant summarized, “*We need prioritization and intentionality. There should be more community outreach to BIPOC [individuals] and scheduling meetings with BIPOC members for ongoing feedback.*” Suggestions were made to create space for parishioners to connect by affinity (e.g., by racial/ethnic background, gender, age, disability status, family life stage) and relate through common identities and experiences. One critical piece of feedback was the importance of not tokenizing parishioners of color in attempts to increase the racial diversity at the Parish. One focus group participant explained, “*My hope is that inclusion means expansion, deepening, and adding -- keeping what makes Saint Cecilia's special while holding space for the broad community. I hope there are resources to support that expansion so cultural diversity is never performative, but authentic, organic, and lasting.*”

### [Actions to Advance Equity](#)

Survey responses reflect several suggestions that were made during focus group and interview discussions. Participants were asked to select their top 3 choices of ideas would advance equity based on themes from parishioner focus groups. While these suggestions are not an exhaustive list of possibilities, they provide a valuable list to begin to explore in the next 1-3 years at Saint Cecilia Parish.

**Increasing interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities and exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within Saint Cecilia were most commonly ranked suggestions across all groups. Economic commitments to equity were a top 2 suggestion from survey respondents aged 25-44 and LGBTQ respondents, while partnerships with Catholic parishes with different culture was a top three suggestion across all respondents.**

	All respondents (N=731)	BIPOC (N=94)	25-44 years old (N=52)	65+ years old (N=117)	LGBTQ (N=119)	<1 year at Parish (N=135)	7+ years at Parish (N=279)
1	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities
2	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities	Economic commitment to equity through contracting and procurement practices	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish	Economic commitment to equity through contracting and procurement practices	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities	Exposure to more cultural/ethnic traditions within our parish
3	Partnerships with Catholic parishes with different cultures	Partnerships with Catholic parishes with different cultures	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities	Partnerships with Catholic parishes with different cultures	Interfaith partnerships with multicultural faith communities	Partnerships with Catholic parishes with different cultures	Partnerships with Catholic parishes with different cultures

Figure 8. Top 3 suggestions for advancing equity in 1-3 years, by select populations.

[Exposure to More Cultural and Ethnic Traditions](#)

Several assessment participants gave suggestions to increase the understanding of different racial and ethnic traditions at Saint Cecilia Parish. For example, one survey respondent shared, *“It would be great to see more diversity in the photos of the bulletin and to see saints and feast days that are important to Black Catholics and Latino Catholics celebrated a bit more. Seeing a painting or a banner that represents another culture really enhances welcome, like St. Simon of Cyrene or Our Lady of Guadalupe.”* *“We have immigrants from other countries in our parish and it would feel welcoming and enjoyable to include some mention of the celebrations from their countries - celebrations of Mary come to mind. We could enhance a feeling of welcome by highlighting and learning about devotions from their countries. What countries are represented in our parish? It enhances our joy and our appreciation for God.”* Similarly, participants suggested incorporating more diverse music or traditions into Saint Cecilia to celebrate different cultures. One interview participant shared, *“I would love to learn about how Mass happens in different countries and see the commonalities and differences between the way we pray on Sundays. Maybe we could pick a culture that’s attending our Parish, and we introduce one element per pass from their way of worshipping...either a song, a custom, a prayer.”*

[Partnerships with Multicultural Faith Communities](#)

Survey respondents and focus group participants identified partnership with multicultural faith community as an important consideration in Saint Cecilia Parish’s equity efforts. Participants identified opportunities to engage across faiths to partner in the fight against racial injustice, and for parishioners to continue engaging around



these topics across communities. One survey respondent explained, *“To engage those who are not currently a part of the community right now though (especially non-white and what often feels like people from higher socioeconomic status), it would be helpful to have a chance to talk with other groups and engage with other groups. It does not necessarily need to be with the eye to “recruit” them to St Cecilia. Rather, I think it’s important to have a dialogue with people who are different in multiple different settings in order to gain more insight and empathy to different struggles. Otherwise, it’s ivory tower musings.”*

### [Economic Commitments to Advancing Equity](#)

A theme that came up in both focus group and survey responses was the suggestion for Saint Cecilia Parish to focus on economic commitments that will advance racial justice. According to participants, Saint Cecilia Parish can leverage the strengths of the Parish’s financial privileges to disrupt economic injustices caused by systemic racism. One survey respondent explained, *I would most definitely select the option of making an economic commitment to equality in the criteria the parish uses to select contractors and vendors. I would also suggest that identifiable groups of parishioners stand and march in Black Lives Matter rallies; patronize Asian and Pacific Islander businesses and offer parish space for nonviolent defensive training workshops; reach out to a nearby synagogue and/or mosque to learn how St. Cecilia’s parish can provide tangible support to their congregations; continue to stand in solidarity and welcome with our LGBTQ Catholic parishioners and others seeking a spiritual home.”* Suggestions were also made for Saint Cecilia Parish to leverage the physical church space to support organizations and causes working to advance racial justice.

### [Standing in Stronger Solidarity and Allyship with Antiracism Efforts](#)

Lastly, assessment participants frequently described the need to stand in stronger solidarity with organizations and causes doing antiracism work to move beyond discussion into more actionable solidarity. One parishioner summarized, *“I do feel like we talk about a lot of things but don’t necessarily live it all the time. We talk about [these issues] but more action is needed.”* Focus group participants described opportunities for Saint Cecilia Parish to lead by example to demonstrate actions the Parish has taken to dismantle systemic racism. For example, a few focus group participants indicated that Saint Cecilia Parish is a polling place, which was described as a concrete way the church has opened its door to invite the community in.

This modeling is also about the learning and unlearning that is critical in racial equity work, shared participants. That addressing systemic racism is a long-term process and not a “check all” process to be completed. One survey respondent summarized, *“I think there are many people like me with white privilege who want to do more to advance social justice/equity -- but don't know how. If the parish could take a leadership role -- i.e., action within the community -- that would give people like me a specific “part” to play in this work -- would be helpful in engaging people of white privilege more. While all these issues are important -- I think prioritizing racial, gender/gender identity, and socioeconomic justice would be the smartest place to start.”*

**“We need to seek out the people we are hoping to be part of our community and **show up for them before they show up for us.”****

**-Focus Group Participant**



The importance of interpersonal growth and accountability will be essential as Saint Cecilia Parish continues to embark on equity work, according to participants. Focus group participants suggested that the Parish commit to educating its community on contributions of Catholics that are Black, indigenous, or people of color. That sermons that address racism are well-thought out and communicated about from a place of sensitivity and historical accuracy. There is an opportunity to create more spaces for prayer about these topics, which was reported as a top three aspect of Parish life for survey respondents. In other Catholic Churches, this has looked like hosting a Novena for Racial Justice, or developing a [detailed call for antiracism](#) work such as at Saint Joseph's Parish in Maplewood, New Jersey.

According to focus group and survey respondents, standing in solidarity with antiracism also means acknowledging the hurt of the historical erasure of communities of color and their contributions to the Catholic Church. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge the role the Catholic Church has had in perpetuating racial injustice throughout history. According to focus group participants, *"Acknowledging the historical Catholic Church's perpetuation of genocide (against indigenous peoples in what is now the US, in Africa, and across the world) is important. Working to welcome worshippers of color is important. But I also think that Saint Cecilia's might move forward even more successfully by engaging in directive action: joining protests against police violence, offering reparations, etc."* Focus group participants suggested the Church use strategies similar to those that have been used to acknowledge the shortcomings of the Catholic Church and its handling of sexual abuse. One shared, *"The church is doing something around the sex scandal to acknowledge the church's shortcomings and have something in remembrance so we don't forget but can move forward. It's important to acknowledge the history of these pains so people can work through it, own up to it, and move forward."*

**"When you recognize this is coming from a deep-rooted area, there has to be an acknowledgement that [racial healing] is a long-term process."**

**-Focus Group Participant**

## KEY THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS

This report summarizes key takeaways from a series of focus groups conducted by HRiA that explore perceptions of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts at Saint Cecilia Parish. Saint Cecilia is strongly regarded as a Parish that is welcoming, authentic, and a strong spiritual home for many. Parishioners spoke overwhelmingly positive about the dynamic nature of Father John, and hundreds provided examples of ways in which Saint Cecilia has positively impacted their lives. Still, opportunities to improve racial equity and social justice efforts across the Parish exist. Key findings from this assessment were identified through focus groups, interviews, and a parish-wide survey that engaged over 900 Saint Cecilia parishioners across 29 states.

Findings from this process will be used to develop a collaborative strategic plan for Saint Cecilia Parish in early 2020. Key themes that arose from this process include:

**Parish Culture:**

- Saint Cecilia Parish was viewed as diverse, welcoming, and inclusive by a majority of assessment participants, most of whom identify as White, over the age of 45, and have a graduate level education. Compared to the U.S. and Massachusetts, Saint Cecilia's parishioners are less diverse, older, and highly educated. BIPOC and LGBTQ participants were significantly more likely to identify opportunities for the Parish to increase the diversity of its membership and leadership compared to their counterparts. A dynamic worship experience and strong sense of fellowship are considered important aspects of Parish life; however, Parishioners experiences vary.

**Parish Participation:**

- The assessment showed a high level of participation among parishioners in weekly Mass and a low level of participation outside of Mass. Facilitators to participation included events, such as new parishioner receptions and coffee hours, and the ability to participate virtually. Limited representation and feeling unseen or ignored emerged as key barriers to participation, particularly among BIPOC and LGBTQ participants. There were also concerns raised about the accessibility of Mass and other activities for those with a physical and/or mental disability.

**Racial Equity and Social Justice**

- Recently, Saint Cecilia Parish has begun integrating racial equity and social issues into homilies and other communications, which was viewed positively by most assessment participants. Participants identifying as BIPOC and LGBTQ were significantly more likely to identify opportunities for the Parish to improve integration of racial justice issues into homilies.

**Community Vision and Opportunities:**

- To advance equity, assessment participants recommended building trusting relationships with parishioners and community partners as well as making economic commitments. At the parishioner level, this included conducting personalized and focused outreach as well as facilitating opportunities for parishioners to connect informally and formally, particularly among those who are less represented. At the community-level, increasing multicultural and interfaith partnerships as well as exposure to diverse ethnic and culture traditions was considered important. Economic commitments to advancing equity and standing in stronger solidarity and allyship with those doing antiracism work was considered critical in the equity work moving forward.

## REFERENCES

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

Taylor, R., France, L., September 2020. Racial Healing at the Parish Level, Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Accessed at <https://catholiccommonground.org/racial-healing-at-the-parish-level/>

The Catholic Call for Antiracism Work, St Joseph's Parish, August 2020. Accessed at: [https://www.sjcmplewoodnj.org/uploads/1/3/2/5/132563986/sjw4j\\_statement\\_on\\_blm\\_and\\_anti-racism.pdf](https://www.sjcmplewoodnj.org/uploads/1/3/2/5/132563986/sjw4j_statement_on_blm_and_anti-racism.pdf)

United States Catholic Bishops, Discrimination and Christian Conscience, 1958. Accessed at <https://www.usccb.org/resources/selected-quotes-discrimination-and-christian-conscience>

## APPENDIX A. METHODS

### *Primary Data*

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the racial equity assessment. As a result, all data collection activities shifted from in-person to virtual engagement using the Zoom platform. The notes from each focus group were coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software and then analyzed thematically for main categories and sub-themes.

### *Exploratory Focus Groups*

Exploratory focus groups were conducted with various population groups among the parish that included: Black indigenous, people of color; parishioners who attend Mass but are not otherwise engaged; parishioners who have been at the church 7 or more years, and LGBTQ identifying parishioners. The exploratory discussions aimed to understand perceptions related to the concerns, strengths, and areas of opportunities that would advance racial equity across Saint Cecilia Parish. Between April-June 2021, four focus groups were conducted via the Zoom platform and lasted 60 minutes. In this initial phase, approximately 27 parishioners were engaged in semi-structured discussions. The majority of participants were female (62%), identified as White (65.5%), lived in Boston (45%), and were between the ages of 24-82 years old.

### *Parish-wide Survey*

Focus group findings guided the development of a parish-wide survey by informing question topics, response options, and appropriate terminology. The survey was then developed in collaboration with the advisory group, who provided input on the content and flow of the survey. The Race Equity Team at Saint Cecilia Parish then piloted the survey before administering it online over the course of four weeks. The final sample comprised of 867 participants after data cleaning. Survey findings providing baseline measures of the current parish environment around Parish culture around racial equity as well as elicit feedback on future racial-equity related efforts that would be salient to audience needs. Survey findings were also used to identify topic areas for further explore in follow up qualitative data collection.

### *Follow Up Discussions*

Several follow up discussions were conducted after the parish-wide survey to further explore initial themes that came up. A total of six discussions were held with population groups that were not adequately represented in preliminary groups or in the parish-wide survey, or groups who required additional follow up based on preliminary themes. These included: young people under the age of 18; young adults aged 18-25; BIPOC parishioners; and parishioners who have been at the Parish for 7+ years. In addition to group discussions, a total of three key informant interviews were conducted with additional parishioners who were interested in providing feedback.

### *Environmental Scan/ Document Review*

As part of the assessment, HRiA conducted a scan of the parish's current physical and/or virtual environment related to racial equity. The scan also included a review of existing documents such as human resource policies and procedures, marketing materials, website, and other pertinent documents in order to develop a more comprehensive picture of the organizational climate in relation to Saint Cecilia Parish's goal of racial equity. The environmental scan is presented as a stand-alone document and is available upon request.