



Pastoral Planning 2025 – 2026: “Pastoral Planning Survey” Summary of Results

Introduction and Background

Since becoming shepherd of the Diocese of Columbus in 2022, Bishop Fernandes identified four pastoral priorities which he saw as important points of pastoral care as he carries out his episcopal ministry in the Diocese of Columbus: **vocations, evangelization, Catholic education and formation, and social outreach**. The many factors influenced that decision such as population growth, increased ethnic diversity and unique opportunity to support Catholic education. In order to help in addressing these pastoral areas, Bishop Fernandes enlisted the help of Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) with the goal to assist him in proposing action items for these priorities and plan for the next five years. CLI has a grant-funded initiative to assist diocesan bishops with pastoral planning in their first three years of a new episcopacy. The initiative includes the formation of a 12-person Envisioning Team of laity and clergy who have been tasked with listening to the faithful by reading their feedback, engaging in frequent conversation and collaborating on eventual action items to recommend to Bishop Fernandes to support these pastoral priorities.

As part of this pastoral planning, the Diocese of Columbus issued an online Pastoral Planning Survey (PPS) which was open from mid-June to mid-October. This open-ended survey sought input from the Christian faithful around questions related to the four pastoral priorities. 1,979 responses were submitted from 22 of our 23 counties as indicated from the voluntary responses. This survey was designed to be a key listening tool to help translate those priorities into concrete, actionable goals. The demographics are further broken down below. In a spirit of accompaniment and co-responsibility, every response was read to better understand the needs, hopes, and concerns of Catholics across the 23 counties of the Diocese of Columbus.

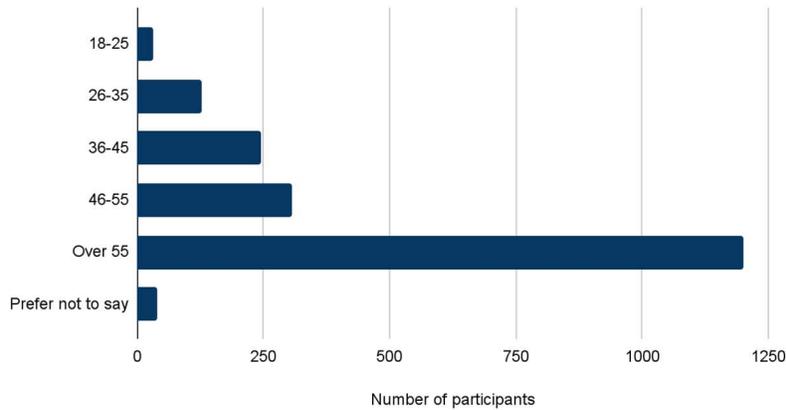
“We want to consult with those in our diocese and want to engage them in this work of pastoral planning as we address the needs of our people,” said Father Michael Hartge, Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia in a July 27, 2025 article in the *Catholic Times*.

More will be reported in the coming months about the very important Disciple Maker Index (DMI) which was administered from November 2025 – January 2026. The focus of this article is the PPS. In addition to the survey, 15 focus groups and 40 individual interviews were conducted, which added feedback from another 227 people to uncover as robust a response to these priorities as possible.

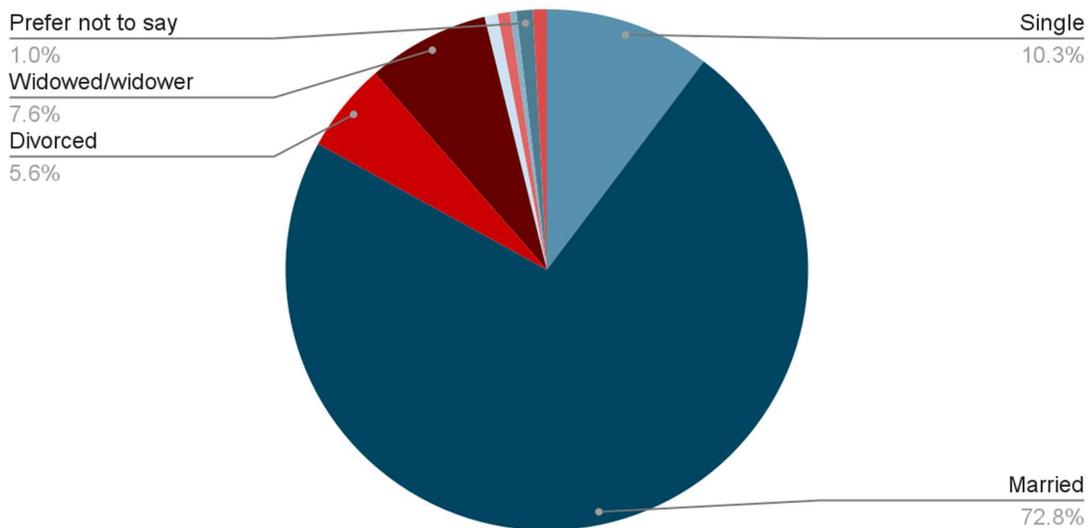
Who participated in this survey?

Survey participants were 64% female and 34% male and composed of the following demographics:

Age of Survey Participants



Participant Perspective (May be more than one, for example married deacon or religious priest)



Additionally, there were surveys completed by members of the diocese from the following counties:

Coshocton	8	Knox	63	Pike	2
Delaware	291	Licking	201	Ross	27
Fairfield	3	Madison	14	Scioto	9
Franklin	917	Marion	19	Tuscarawas	67
Hardin	8	Morrow	5	Union	31
Hocking	10	Muskingum	31	Other	11
Holmes	3	Perry	23		
Jackson	7	Pickaway	2		

In addition to the survey, CLI also facilitated focused discussions with the following groups:

Empty nesters and 50+	Catholic Charities
Non-Practicing Catholics	Young Adults
Multicultural	Elementary School Teachers
Permanent Deacons	High School Teachers
Missionaries (such as Damascus, SPO)	Parish Finance Council Members
Appalachian Catholics	Hispanic Catholics
College-aged	Priests (3 groups)
Youth	

Priority – Vocations: Strong Recognition of Renewed Focus on Vocations

Survey results show that many Catholics recognize a renewed emphasis on vocations within the diocese and attribute tangible progress to Bishop Fernandes’ intentional leadership. Respondents consistently described a healthy vocational culture as one that is relational, family-centered, intentional, and deeply rooted in prayer.

Feedback was quick to point out many current diocesan initiatives are already working successfully, such as the Melchizedek Project, Quo Vadis Retreats, Open Houses at Josephinum, Serra Club sponsored vocations lunches, Marian Dinners, Knights of the Altar, and the increased presence of religious orders in the diocese.

Parents, godparents, priests, teachers, and parish communities were frequently identified as critical influences in helping young people discern God’s call. Many respondents emphasized that priesthood and religious life should be presented not as rare or distant paths, but as realistic and joyful possibilities. “Speak to the kids about religious life as a possibility for them,” one respondent wrote, “and give them the practical information, not just the personal discernment aspect.”

While affirming the progress made, respondents also identified clear opportunities for growth. Chief among them was the need for more targeted and consistent promotion of vocations across all parishes and regions of the diocese, including rural communities and those outside Franklin County.

Suggestions included integrating vocations into school career days and guidance counseling, utilizing Catholic media more purposefully, providing tools to families, and helping parishes better understand their own demographics when planning outreach. Respondents also stressed the importance of vocational witness in the sharing of stories of priests and religious who model confident leadership, spiritual fatherhood, and joyful service. “Show that becoming a priest or sister is cool,” one response noted. “Have opportunities where people can meet priests and seminarians in everyday settings.”

Many respondents noted the decline of Catholic marriages and expressed a desire that marriage as a vocation should be promoted. It is from healthy marriages that religious vocations are discerned, as one respondent wrote, “We need to emphasize that we need strong marriages and faithful families to have religious vocations. Remind all that we each have a religious vocation as a baptized person, whether single, married, consecrated, or ordained.” Additionally, “Promoting ALL vocations. There

isn't just the vocation to the priesthood. I think we need to dive deeper in the vocation of marriage and marriage formation, AND the vocation of being a sister/ nun/ cloistered religious, and then the single life, too. I think those are often the forgotten one. Marriage isn't a 'fallback vocation.'"

A strong call also emerged for shared diocesan prayer practices, including diocesan prayers for vocations, designated days of fasting, and opportunities for families and parish groups to spiritually support seminarians.

Priority – Evangelization: Equipping the Faithful to Evangelize

Survey responses consistently affirmed that evangelization is most effective when it is rooted at the parish level. Some pointed to youth and young adult ministries, OCIA, retreats, conferences, and campus-based initiatives as places where faith is most clearly taught, modeled, and shared. Programs such as parish youth groups, Damascus, and Buckeye Catholic, SPO, FOCUS, Catholic Men's and Women's Conferences were frequently cited as strong examples of evangelization that equip people to speak about their faith with confidence.

Many Catholics expressed a broad, service-oriented understanding of evangelization, frequently equating it with works of mercy. "Evangelizing is best accomplished through works of charity...that is evangelism," one respondent wrote. While this reflects a strong instinct toward lived faith, the feedback also suggests an opportunity to more clearly articulate how service, catechesis, and invitation work together as a unified evangelizing mission.

Visibility and communication emerged as critical drivers of engagement. Respondents strongly supported an increase in diocesan public presence at parishes, schools, community events, and ministries, noting that the visibility helps Catholics feel connected to the broader diocesan Church and the community. Catholic radio, diocesan publications, and social media were repeatedly cited as effective tools for evangelization when used consistently and strategically. "It has been wonderful to see Bishop Fernandes engaging with so many different communities," one participant shared.

At the same time, the survey revealed confusion around evangelization efforts. Many expressed uncertainties about the respective roles of the diocese and individual parishes, with some feeling unsupported or disconnected from diocesan initiatives. Parish closures and restructuring were cited by some as undermining evangelization, particularly when changes were not clearly explained or pastorally framed. Strong emotions surfaced in several responses, underscoring the need for careful communication and trust-building.

Finally, there was an overwhelming call for parishes to be more welcoming and intentional. Respondents emphasized that hospitality is foundational to evangelization, particularly for those who feel marginalized, wounded, or uncertain about the Church. As one respondent stated plainly, "Our church must welcome EVERYONE! Especially those who have been ostracized," noting that first impressions often shape whether individuals feel comfortable returning to parish life.

Priority – Catholic education and formation: Forming Intentional Disciples in our Catholic Schools and Faith Formation Programs

Feedback related to Catholic education and formation reflected deep gratitude for what is working well, alongside concern for long-term sustainability and access. Many respondents emphasized the

importance of financial assistance programs (EdChoice vouchers, Emmaus Road scholarships, and parish subsidies) in making Catholic education attainable for families. These programs were widely praised for opening doors to families who otherwise could not afford tuition. “Tuition assistance is essential. Let’s have more of it,” one respondent urged, particularly noting the challenges faced by lower-income and rural families.

Catholic identity emerged as a central and unifying theme. Respondents repeatedly expressed a desire for schools to be unapologetically Catholic, with faith integrated across curriculum, culture, and daily life. Theology classes, regular prayer, sacramental life, and faithful teaching were seen as essential, not optional. Many praised recent efforts to strengthen curriculum and diocesan leadership, noting that schools “are becoming more Catholic” and increasingly focused on truth, beauty, and goodness through a distinctly Catholic lens.

Beyond Catholic schools, there was a strong call for expanded faith formation for children in public schools and for adults at every stage of life. Respondents highlighted the growth and effectiveness of OCIA, Bible studies, and family-based catechesis, while also identifying gaps in PSR programs and adult education opportunities. Family faith formation models were especially well received, with many noting that faith is more likely to endure when parents and children are formed together. “The odds for a child continuing faith for a lifetime greatly increase when all family members participate together,” one respondent observed. There is an openness to family-based catechesis. However, some respondents expressed a lack of support for this initiative. Parishes could do a better job of supporting them in this initiative because many parents feel ill-equipped to carry this out.

Teacher quality and leadership support were identified as critical to the success of Catholic education. Respondents emphasized the need for well-formed, faith-filled educators who actively live the faith and are adequately compensated for their work. Concerns were raised about teacher retention, inconsistent hiring practices, and insufficient formation. Many called for ongoing catechetical training, professional development, and clear diocesan standards to ensure alignment with Church teaching.

Finally, respondents stressed the importance of visibility and engagement, strongly encouraging greater promotion of Catholic schools and formation programs through diocesan media and parish communications.

Priority – Social Outreach: Serving Others in our Community and Beyond

Acts of charity (food pantries, outreach to the poor, and service in the community) were described as powerful and authentic witnesses to the Gospel, tying Social Outreach to Evangelization. Initiatives such as Holy Family Soup Kitchen, Bishop Griffin Center, St. Vincent dePaul, St. Lawrence Haven, in addition to the visits to bring Christ to those who are homebound or in hospital were highlighted as positive acts of charity.

Survey responses revealed a significant gap in awareness regarding diocesan social outreach efforts, indicating they were largely unfamiliar with diocesan initiatives or offices dedicated to serving the poor, elderly, imprisoned, single mothers or marginalized. However, many expressed a strong willingness to help, “I want to serve but do not know where or how to get involved beyond donating money.” There was a clear desire for hands-on opportunities that foster both human connection and

spiritual encounter. “Donating money is OK,” one respondent wrote, “but it is not going to enliven anyone’s faith...like hands-on help would.”

Respondents consistently emphasized that Catholic social outreach must be distinctively Christian, addressing both material and spiritual needs. While some questioned whether the Church can compete with secular NGOs, many affirmed that the Church’s strength lies precisely in combining service with evangelization, dignity, and accompaniment. The need to balance compassion with accountability and helping without enabling was frequently mentioned, particularly by those with lived experience of poverty or marginalization. As one response indicated, “As someone who was previously poor, marginalized, homeless, and suffering, I am intimately acquainted with what the needs of these groups are and also are not. There is a fine line between assisting and enabling, and we need to focus on how to help without encouraging entitlement.”

Geographic inequity emerged as a major concern. Rural communities and areas outside Franklin County often feel overlooked, with respondents calling for greater diocesan presence, resources, and partnership. Suggestions included larger parishes “adopting” ministries in rural areas, expanding outreach to the homebound and elderly, and increasing support for mental health initiatives. Bishop Fernandes’s prison visits were widely praised as a visible and powerful example of pastoral outreach.

Across responses, there was a strong call for clearer communication and collaboration. Respondents want to know what services exist, how funds are used, and how they can participate. Many emphasized the role of priests, deacons, and seminarians in calling parishioners to action through preaching and example. As one respondent summarized, “If you explained the needs to the people, how they can help, and where the money is going, you will get more assistance.”

Looking Ahead

This feedback is the basis, along with the help of the DMI, for identifying goal areas focused on Bishop Fernandes’ four pastoral priorities. This feedback serves as an awareness that there is a call for highlighting current diocesan initiatives in all areas, improving diocesan communication, maintaining strong social media engagement, and strengthening parish-diocese collaboration. These goal areas will eventually lead to actionable, measurable goals. Those goals will be further translated to opportunities that individual parishes will discern how best to accomplish them at the local level. This should ideally demonstrate that parishes can engage with wider diocesan goals at the parish level according to need. To that end, future consultations with diocesan curial offices and the Presbyteral Council to better understand how these goals might be executed will be planned.

The findings reflect both encouragement and challenge: encouragement that renewed leadership and intentional focus are bearing fruit, and challenge to ensure that momentum is sustained, shared, and clearly communicated across every corner of the diocese.