

Study finds divide exists in how Catholics read church news

WASHINGTON – A Catholic Press Association-commissioned study showed that 26 percent of adult Catholics had read a print copy of their diocesan newspaper or magazine in the past three months, but only 4 percent had gone to their computer to view the online version of the publication.

The study also revealed that readership of Catholic newspapers has held steady over the past six years, a far cry from the daily newspaper business, which has recorded continuous declines in revenue, readership, advertising and employment.

One area that showed a drop was Catholic readers' awareness of nationally distributed Catholic newspapers and magazines. But, counterbalancing the low numbers of Catholics going to the Web to read their diocesan newspaper, there was a marked increase in the percentage of Catholics visiting their parish's website, up from 9 percent in a similar study in 2005 to 14 percent in the 2011 study.

Both the 2011 and 2005 studies were conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. The 2011 study was funded with a grant from the Catholic Communication Campaign.

"The differences between some of the religious market and the secular market was something we were curious about, and readership patterns showed up very strongly in the print publications," said Tim Walter, CPA executive director. "I was hoping that it would be verified, so I was pleased with the results."

The study gives solid evidence that Catholic newspaper readers are loyal to the print format. CPA leaders have wrestled with how to approach the hypothetical diocesan chief financial officer who would argue that "you can put this newspaper online and we can save a lot of money and it can be just as effective," Walter told Catholic News Service. "What it verified is that if you take away this print product, you don't have another communications tool to reach them."

He said one surprising aspect of the study was a finding about "millennials," those

born in 1982 and later. “We were more likely to reach them by pushing a print product in their home than by inviting them to come to our website,” he said. “If you don’t put a print product in the hands of a younger Catholic adult, you have no way of reaching them, because you can’t force them to come to your browser.”

“Younger folks are really not looking to the Web for religious content,” said Karen Franz, a past CPA president and editor/general manager of the Catholic Courier, diocesan newspaper of Rochester, N.Y.

The CARA study also showed, Walter said, that Catholics will spend nearly five times as much time perusing a print product than a website – 17 minutes with print vs. three-and-a-half minutes on a website.

Franz said the study needs close review by diocesan officials who say, “We’ll look to the Web and abandon print and this will solve all our problems.” Instead, she added, “it will make some new problems.”

“It’s certainly good news for those of us who are in the niche of Catholic print journalism,” said immediate past CPA president Penny Wiegert, editor of the Catholic Observer, newspaper of the diocese of Rockford, Ill., and director of communication for the diocese.

Mark M. Gray, principal author of the CARA study, said the jump in the use of parish websites “could be related to more parishes going online. You’ve got more Catholics who aren’t attending Mass regularly, or attending the parish as much as in the past, finding out about Mass times or what they need to do to get married in the church. Parishes are providing (on their websites) an enormous amount of information.”

He noted that one question, asking respondents their reaction if they were told that the diocesan newspaper would stop publishing and all information being relegated to the diocesan website, more than twice as many answers were negative than positive (39 percent to 18 percent) to such a scenario. Eighteen percent had neutral responses. “I think I was surprised” by the response, he said.

Gray said questions were asked in the study about the use of social media. One key finding is that Catholics rarely included their religious beliefs. “It’s an interesting

thing,” he noted, since Facebook, the most popular social networking site, offers its users the chance to list political party, workplace information, marital status and others, but Catholics don’t include their religion, “given that the option is there for everyone.”

Matt Warner, who writes the “Fallible Blogma” blog and is CEO of Flocknote.com, which helps Catholic parishes and organizations enter the digital age, had a different interpretation of the CARA study results.

“One of the things I would hate for people to take from the study is that Catholics aren’t taking advantage of Catholic new media as much as they would like to,” he told CNS. “They’re not really using Catholic old media either,” he said, adding there was only “a slight preference” by respondents for Catholic “offline material.”

Walter said the study provides a snapshot. “This may not hold up as true 10 years from now,” he said, “but I was looking for information that would be true for 3-5 years.”

Even so, many Catholic newspapers have established a Web presence and are making initial forays into social media. “We have a pretty heavy investment in Facebook and Twitter and what comes next,” said Franz. “Justifying all that is tough with staff time and energy is something you have a gut feeling is not paying any dividends. We don’t know at what point people are going to start looking to the Web or social media for religious content. And we have to be there when that time comes.”

“We want to constantly be a welcome visitor to someone’s home with our books and our newspapers and our magazines,” Wiegert said, “even with our apps and whatever else it is we decide to do.”