



PERSPECTIVES

Priest Retirement Surveys Improve Retirement Readiness Answers Help Dioceses Avoid Unintended Consequences

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Background on Priest Pension Plan Surveys

A critical first step in understanding retirement benefit adequacy is collecting individual data from priests by conducting a pension plan survey.

Since 2011, GRS has deployed a pension plan survey to priests in 15 dioceses. The survey has been proven to be an important tool to help the dioceses understand their priests' retirement readiness. In addition to educating priests about retirement, the survey has assisted dioceses with the management of their benefit policies.

Why Is the GRS Survey Different?

The key difference is that the survey has evolved over time to address and successfully overcome many of the common barriers to conducting a survey of priests. Some of the barriers GRS has strived to overcome include:

- **Credibility** — The original survey was created and endorsed by the Laity in Support of Retired Priests (LSRP) and administered by a professional consulting firm. Over the past decade, GRS has continued to build upon this foundation by working to improve the survey.
- **Confidentiality** — This is a substantial obstacle when conducting a survey for priests. Many are willing to complete a survey, but do not want their personal data shared with the Chancery office or the Bishop. In a focus group meeting with priests, this sentiment

was clearly expressed – “We need to be comfortable that none of our answers or data can be identified to us!” The confidential online surveys ensure that priests are not identified.

- **Length of Survey** — The questions have been streamlined so the survey only takes about 10-15 minutes to complete.
- **Types of Questions** — If there are issues unique to the plan, we collaborate with the diocese to have them addressed in the survey. The survey development is never a “one-size-fits-all” approach.
- **Web-based Deployment** — The survey has been successfully deployed using an online survey program.
- **Cost** — Online deployment helps to ensure that the survey is affordable for small and large dioceses alike.

As a result of our work, priests feel very comfortable responding to the GRS survey. As a testament to being positively viewed by priests, participation rates have exceeded 50% for most dioceses, with a high of 82% (Archdiocese of Milwaukee).

What Can the Survey Help You Learn?

The survey is designed to obtain knowledge about priests' retirement readiness. Specifically, the survey focuses on the following four areas:

- 1) **Background and perception** (i.e., current age,



expected retirement age, knowledge of key retirement issues, personal view of retirement readiness, etc.);

- 2) **Social Security reporting** (i.e., wage reporting to Social Security including a verification step);
- 3) **Personal savings** (i.e., retirement savings during most recent year, accumulated retirement savings to date, savings vehicles, etc.); and
- 4) **Planning for retirement** (i.e., expected living accommodations in retirement, role of the diocese in retirement planning, working after retirement, etc.).

Some Surprising Findings

At one diocese, 50% of the priests responded that the diocese had the entire financial responsibility for retirement, which increased to 75% for priests under age 45. Clearly, this was a significant problem since the diocese had previously communicated that the pension plan was a supplement to Social Security and personal savings.

At another diocese, only 50% of the priests planned to retire at their normal retirement age while 36% expected to retire at the earliest age allowed. Typically, 90% of respondents expect to retire at normal retirement age.

PRIEST PENSION PLAN SURVEY FINDINGS

WHAT PRIESTS ARE SAYING

Spend Little Time on Planning for Retirement

60% Said "NO"

Are dioceses doing a good job providing retirement information?

Feel Retirement is a Shared Responsibility Between Diocese and Priests

Wide Range of Personal Savings

Many Underreport Social Security Income

ALL PRIESTS WANT MORE INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

EYE OPENERS

Adequacy of Priest Pension Plans

"Dioceses cannot accurately assess the adequacy of a Priest Pension Plan without knowing active priests' compensation, their level of personal savings, social security benefits, and cost of housing in retirement."

-Robert Nordin, GRS





Conclusion

For many dioceses, the survey results have become a “call to action.” In response to the findings, the dioceses often initiate and/or provide various retirement education resources.

The key takeaway is that a simple 15-minute online survey can help to shed light on priests’ attitudes and behaviors related to their retirement. By collecting valuable information, the dioceses can help priests prepare for retirement to ensure adequate pension benefits.

TESTIMONIALS

“As a cooperative effort, 10 Upper-Midwest archdioceses/dioceses participated in an online Diocesan Priests Retirement Survey, which was created by GRS. Each participating archdiocese/diocese received its specific results, as well as comparative results from the other participants.

The results provided a glimpse of what the priests know or think they know about retirement planning and saving issues, as well as what they believe their responsibility is for retirement saving. It helps us (the diocese) understand how our communications are being heard (or not) and where we need to commit more retirement education resources. It turns out many of our priests do not know what is available to them or understand the retirement savings options. The comparative results to other archdioceses/dioceses shows that we have a lot in common, and that some archdioceses/dioceses are doing a better job than others. Knowing this, we can reach out for information that is working, without having to reinvent from scratch.

I encourage other archdioceses/dioceses, either individually or as a region, to consider participating in the GRS sponsored Priests Retirement Survey. It provides another arrow (or several) in the quiver for helping our priests with this important topic.”

Scott Hoselton, Finance Officer
Diocese of Fargo

“As we were reviewing the results of GRS’ online survey, it became clear that we had to work on educating our priests about retirement.

To illustrate, when asked how priests viewed our pension plan, 36% viewed it as adequate; 39% as inadequate; 1% as generous; and the remaining 24% reported that they knew nothing about the plan. Armed with the survey information, in November 2015, we sponsored a Priests’ Benefit Communication Day which included a keynote address by Bob Nordin (GRS) followed by workshops on many benefit topics, including retirement. The feedback we received from our priests was very positive.”

Deacon Edward Gain, Secretariat for
Human and Information Resources
Diocese of Brooklyn

“The online survey GRS conducted was user-friendly for our priests and provided insightful information about their expectations of the archdiocese and about how we can best help them to have sufficient assets in their retirement years.

The report we received had clear, understandable findings that were very beneficial for us, and the entire survey process was well received by our presbyterate.”

Ed Isakson, PHR,
Director of Human Resources
Archdiocese of Indianapolis



About the Authors

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About GRS

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