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Strangers as Neighbors Toolkit

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Strangers as Neighbors: How Religious Dialogue Can Help Re-Frame the Issue of Immigration

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How Religious Dialogue

Can Help Re-frame

the Issue of Immigration

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Abstract:

This project hypothesized that a faith-based perspective emphasizing humanism and the search for the common good allows for a more inclusive discursive environment, which could shift the dialogue away from the usual polarized atmosphere more commonly found in such a highly charged political discourse as immigration.

Drawing on a cluster analysis and term frequency index from two focus groups held at two Catholic parishes on Long Island, New York (NY), this paper looks at common frames surrounding the topic of immigration and argues that, when framed in terms of religion and local experience, a more positive and empathetic discussion of immigration emerges.

Alternatively, when participants discussed immigration in terms of a government or institutional frame, a qualitatively more negative dialogue develops.

This paper also identifies the tensions that arise for parishioners when priests introduce political issues directly into religious services. This finding indicates broader concerns among congregants related to the separation of church and state that has implications for how the Catholic Church organizes for immigration reform in the United States (US) and invites parishioners into dialogue around hotly contested social and political issues.

Calls for building a wall along the entire United States-Mexico border and deporting nearly 11.3 million undocumented immigrants, still dominate debates about immigration reform in the US despite the fact that most Americans — Republican or Democrat — see both options as unrealistic (Goo 2015). Repeated failures to pass comprehensive immigration reform create the political vacuum in which such extreme policy alternatives gain traction. The Secure Borders, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Reform Act (S. 1348) provided a legal path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the US failed in June 2007, signaling a brief impasse in the coarse and polarizing national debate over immigration. A second attempt at comprehensive reform, The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act (S. 744), passed the Senate in June 2013, only to die in the US House of Representatives. The 114th Congress (2015-2016) has recently turned away from comprehensive reform to legislation such as the Secure Our Borders First Act (H.R. 399).

US President Barack Obama responded to a gridlocked Congress unable to pass any legislation on immigration. He took executive action in November 2014 to prevent illegal border crossings, deport felons as opposed to families, and hold undocumented immigrants accountable for paying taxes and passing criminal background checks. Politicians in Washington DC and on the campaign trail battle over how to fix a broken system while people across the US directly confront the everyday issues of immigration in their religious communities as the "stranger" is now a "neighbor" whether in the next pew or next door.

Religion, often associated with narrow, conservative, and traditional approaches to social order, also acts as a powerful catalyst for change around immigration reform in the US. Pope Francis' historic address to a joint session of the US Congress in September 2015 is indicative of the Catholic Church's influential part in this national debate. Speaking to Congress "as the son of immigrants," Pope Francis stated, "when the stranger in our midst appeals to us, we must not repeat the sins and the errors of the past. We must resolve now to live as nobly and as justly as possible, as we educate new generations not to turn their back on our 'neighbors' and everything around us" (Pope Francis 2015).

The Catholic Church belongs to a broader faith-based movement organized to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform that has had an impact on Congress and the White House. The Bibles, Badges, and Business Coalition, for instance, brings together conservative Catholic and Protestant groups with law enforcement and business leaders to advance its vision of comprehensive reform on a national level. Representative Luis V. Gutierrez (D-IL) responded to the 2007 failure of comprehensive immigration reform. Gutierrez began a national twenty-one cities "Family Unity Tour" that brought together congressional representatives from both parties, religious leaders from all major faiths, and a range of advocates in churches across the country to witness the valuable contributions of immigrants to all sectors of the US, from the military to the economy.

Frank Sharry, Founder and Executive Director of America's Voice, asserts that such grassroots efforts in synagogues, mosques, and churches helped to put immigration reform on the Obama Administration's agenda in 2009 and to keep it there (Preston, "Obama to Push Immigration Bill as One Priority," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2009). President Obama, throughout his administration, has held various meetings that have included religious leaders, joined telephone conferences with faith-based groups across the country, and attended prayer breakfasts where the issue of immigration reform took center stage. Speaking directly to Hispanic evangelicals, President Obama has regularly attended the annual National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast and Conference, where he has identified religious diversity as a strength of the US, and called on those present to "be guided by that simple command that binds all great religions together: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself'" ("Remarks by the President at the Esperanza National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast," June 19, 2009). To garner such national political attention, religious groups from different faith backgrounds, independently and allied with other coalitions, including unions, employ a range of strategies from prayer vigils and welcoming initiatives to protesting and walking picket lines to organize collectively and advocate on behalf of advancing rights and protections for immigrants in the US.

As a nation identified as one of the most religious of Western industrialized democracies (with 77% of all Americans declaring a religious affiliation), it may come as no surprise that religion plays a central role in immigration reform debates (Pew Forum, 2015). Yet, even the most casual scan of the political-cultural landscape reveals that the rhetoric of "law and order" defines the public debate on immigration much more than the "love and inclusion" ethos advanced by religious traditions. The lines on the national battlefield get drawn in terms of "legal" versus "illegal" and "documented" versus "undocumented," categories that beg the question: can a person be "illegal"? A faith-based perspective emphasizes valuing human beings, treating them with dignity, and embracing the outsider, suggesting a powerful humanizing impact as an alternative to the dehumanizing discourse that frames the immigrant as anything but human — a criminal, animal, or invader — in the dominant American political context. Although well-developed faith-driven messages of inclusion premised on the humanity, not the legal status, of the immigrant exist, they fail to "stick" in critical public opinion making venues. Indeed, the public debate on immigration appears to possess a Teflon-like quality that makes it resistant to conceding the humanity of undocumented persons. Why do religiously based pro-immigrant rationales appear to fail to penetrate the public square, especially on mainstream airwaves? "What is lacking in popular imagination, in media representations, and in the policy proposals of our politicians," Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo explains, "is a moral blueprint for doing things different" (2008, p. 3). Why is this the case when such moral blueprints are readily available in American political discourse?

One ready explanation is that Americans continue to support the separation of church and state as a founding pillar of democracy, a position echoed by the fact that between 1968 and 2012, about 53% of Americans consistently reported that "churches should keep out of political matters" (Pew Research, 2012). At the same time, the church, both in the Civil Rights and Christian Right movements, has played a critical role in determining the contours of the political landscape in the US since the 1960s. A disconnect between national politics and everyday practices seems to exist.

This project examines how this disconnection occurs by focusing on two local Catholic parishes in Suffolk and Nassau Counties on Long Island, New York, in order to identify possible strategies for linking the humanistic faith-based discourse to the political issue of immigration as a means of shifting the polarized rhetoric that dominates the national conversation.

This study investigates the hypothesis that a faith-based perspective, which emphasizes humanism and the search for the common good, allows for a more collaborative discursive environment. A faith-based discourse, as such, could facilitate a move in the national dialogue away from a generally polarized atmosphere that intensifies around highly charged issues such as immigration. This study uses a cluster analysis and term frequency index from two focus groups held at two Catholic parishes on Long Island to identify the common frames used by parishioners surrounding the topic of immigration. Based on this analysis, we argue that when immigration is framed in terms of religion and local experience, the discussion is more positive and empathetic in contrast to the qualitatively more negative discussion that arises when framing immigration in terms of a government or institutional frame.

This finding resonates with Americans' general negativity towards national government, with public trust in government at an historic low of 24% (Pew Research Center 2014) and the national disquiet with public policy on immigration, with 56% of Americans disapproving of President Obama's handling of this issue (Pew Research Center 2015). This study, by contrast, finds that the local community at the congregation level expresses a markedly positive response toward immigrants as opposed to immigration policy, a reflection of how humanistic discourse aligns with a faith-based perspective on this tense social issue.

Further, parishioners positively responded to discussing such pressing issues within their local religious community as long as those discussions occurred outside of sermons during the Mass. This finding is of particular interest in the context of faith-based advocacy on comprehensive immigration reform that has often focused on messaging through sermons delivered by priests from the pulpit.
We conclude by addressing how these findings can inform strategies related to how and where to engage people in their local religious communities in humanistic dialogues around immigration and other "hot button" social issues ranging from gay marriage and sex education curriculum to prayer in schools.

Literature Review

Religion, despite the separation of church and state enshrined in Article VI and the First Amendment of the US Constitution, shapes American political discourse, dating back to the nation's Puritan origins when John Winthrop claimed, borrowing from Matthew 5:14, that the Massachusetts Bay Colony represented a "City on a Hill." Winthrop and the Puritans, of course, were immigrants escaping from religious persecution in England.

Their biblically inspired vision of the New World set the stage for American exceptionalism and the American Dream that emerged during the Industrial Revolution, enticing immigrants to search for a better life on US soil. Two massive waves of immigration bookend the twentieth century with the largely European immigrant population growing by 31% or 3.2 million people between 1900 and 1910 alone, and the mostly Hispanic immigrant population growing by 57% or 11.3 million immigrants in the 1990s (Singer 2013, pp. 77-80). Immigrants now account for a near record 14% of the US population and, for the past fifty years, over half of the nation's population growth (Pew Research Forum, 2015a). Within this broad demographic, "Catholics are more likely than other Americans to be immigrants or children of immigrants" as 27% of adult Catholics were born outside of the US and are more likely than other Americans to be Hispanic immigrants (Lipka 2015). Certainly, this demographic fact has had an effect on the Catholic Church's sustained efforts in recent decades to leverage political influence over Congress such as those made in 2013 to pass comprehensive immigration reform (Parker and Shear, 2013).

The Catholic Church mobilizes its leaders and members on this issue using a range of strategies from prayer vigils, potlucks, and pilgrimages to ad campaigns and lobbying representatives that, despite their diversity, often involve a message delivered by priests to their parishioners during Mass. The centralized governance, clear church hierarchy, and well-defined tradition enable Catholic religious leaders to convey a similar message on immigration to congregants across diverse groups in the US. (Djupe and Califano 2013; Dougherty and Huyser 2008). The rapid influx of Hispanic immigrants in the 1990s prompted US and Mexican Catholic bishops to generate their first joint pastoral letter, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope" (2003), that spotlights the extreme vulnerability of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. This letter established the messaging for the US Catholic Church "to truly welcome the stranger among us," a position taken from Mathew 25:35 and supported by key elements of Catholic social teaching such as human dignity, solidarity, and the common good, and firmly set in place the frame for how US Catholics would engage with debates over immigration policy (Scribner and Appleby, On *"Strangers No Longer,"* 2013, p. 315, xiv). The Catholic Church's central role in the immigration debate underscores its analytic significance in terms of this study.

A developing literature on how politics relates to religion in terms of US immigration identifies the "political ambivalence of religion" that evokes compassion, or positive feelings toward vulnerable immigrant populations, and negative responses linked to "intolerance, prejudice, and xenophobia" that translate into support for restrictive immigration policies and antipathy toward immigrants (Bloom, Arikan, Courtemanche 2015, p. 203). Religiosity, the key element in this literature, is measured in terms of the "Three Bs approach": social behavior, belief, and belonging (Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth 2009; Wald and Smidt 1993; Wald and Wilcox 2006). Despite a few recent studies in this area that continue to present mixed results, "we know relatively little about the impact of religiosity and the role of religious group cues in shaping attitudes towards immigration" (Bloom, Arikan, Courtemanche 2015, p. 218). Recent work in this area "suggests that the salience of religious identity has the potential to influence attitudes toward other social groups above and beyond a salient ethnic identity," meaning that "religious dissimilarities…have a greater effect than ethnic differences on the rejection of immigrants" (Bloom, Arikan, Courtemanche 2015, p. 218). Religiosity then plays a measurable role in determining a religious person's attitude toward immigrants. A shared Catholic social identity, then, should increase the likelihood of native people's positive response to Catholic immigrants regardless of ethnic origins. Some research indicates that native-born American Catholics who perceive themselves as a minority religious group[1] may respond positively to other minority groups such as immigrants, a response that a shared religious identity could intensify (Fetzner 2000; Bloom, Arikan, Courtemanche 2015, p. 211).

Political identification as either liberal or conservative remains a salient variable in determining a devout Catholic's position on immigration regardless of shared religious identity. Liberals express a positive attitude towards immigrants and comprehensive reform while conservatives convey a more negative attitude toward immigrants and a more restrictive position on immigration policies (Bloom, Arikan, Courtemanche 2015, p. 214).[2] Our study focuses more narrowly on a shared religious identity as a foundation for engaging in a humanistic faith-based discourse. Our findings support the research on a Catholic religious identity as decreasing social distance between natives and immigrants more so than ethnicity or race.

This study's most significant contribution to this literature on religiosity and attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy emerges from its finding on the significant impact of the context in which discussions about immigrants and immigration policy occur. Cross-national and cultural studies such as that of Bloom, Arikan, and Courtemanche (2015) that examine Catholics in America, Jewish people in Israel, and Muslims in Turkey find that national, cultural, political, and demographic contexts matter in determining the salience of religiosity. This study moves from this global and national context down to the level of congregations to contribute a micro-level analysis that can inform these macro-level examinations and "street-level" strategies for how Catholic congregations engage with the issue of immigration. To do so, this study takes the current research's view that "the effect of religiosity on attitudes toward immigrants…is sensitive to the informational environment" (Bloom, Arikan, and Courtemanche 2015, 204) and applies it to the congregational level of analysis that turns attention more on the dimension of belonging than behavior or belief, the other two dimensions of religiosity.

Biblicalism represents the language within American political culture that frames how political actors, ranging from citizens and non-citizens to politicians, advocates, and religious leaders, use religious language to navigate through debate, protest, negotiation, legislation, and policy-making in the private and public arenas. Capturing this idea, Rhys Williams states that, "beyond its institutional location and ubiquity, and beyond the fact that many Americans are personally religious, I argue that religion has a cultural resonance in US society. It is deeply ingrained in our national stories and myths and helps form the cultural models with which we think about our national life" (2002, p. 251). Religion provides a public rhetoric that extends beyond the sacred and into the secular spaces of American liberal democratic society. As such, religious discourse can cross partisan boundaries even on contentious social issues. "Religion can be a progressive or conservative force opening or closing public space," Williams continues, "This reflects a crucial aspect of religious language in American culture: it is democratically available" (2002, p. 251).

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[1] Approximately 21% of Americans report their religious affiliation as Catholic, a decline of approximately 3% since 2007. At the same time, the largest increases within the American Catholic Church are from within the Hispanic community (Pew Research Center 2015).

[2] Indeed, one study finds that "the religious compassion prime backfired with conservatives, significantly increasing social rejection…Attempting to retain a well-defined group identity, conservatives often direct their empathy exclusively towards proximal targets or towards their own kin (Bloom, Arikan, Courtemanche 2015, p. 214, Norenzayan 2014; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009).

This project links this culturally available language of biblicalism to parishioners on Long Island through framing, an analytic approach focused on "mental structures that shape the way we see the world" referred to as the "'cognitive unconscious' — structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense" (Lakoff 2004, p. xv). Language acts as the means through which people acquire frames for understanding the world. "Reframing," Lakoff asserts, "is changing the way the public sees the world… Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently" (2004, p. xv). This study examines how religious language may lead parishioners to reframe their thinking about the immigration issue.

Our project takes a congregation level approach by focusing on two parishes on Long Island, New York in the counties of Nassau and Suffolk. "Immigration has been a particularly prominent political topic on Long Island," one report found, "but viewed in national context, Long Island does not stand out as a likely area for immigration to attract special attention" (Fiscal Policy Institute 2012, p. 52). Nassau and Suffolk, on a range of measures from the percentage of immigrants to increases in immigrant population, both fall within the middle range when compared with other suburban counties in the US. Differing from the US as a whole, the 2015 version of the Fiscal Policy Institute's study finds that "Mexicans make up a very small part of the Long Island immigrant population — about 11,000 total, just two percent of the overall immigrant population" (p. 24). No single immigrant group dominates this diverse population, with the top seven countries of birth being El Salvador (14 percent); India (7 percent); Dominican Republic (5 percent); and Jamaica, Haiti, Ecuador, and Italy (4 percent each) (Fiscal Policy Institute 2015, p. 23). This area outside of New York City then appears quite average in relation to immigration populations across the US.

Yet, Long Island came to represent the extremes to which the hotly contested debate over immigration could reach, as nativist groups there took violent action against Mexican immigrants, shifting Nassau and Suffolk counties into the national spotlight. Two key events grabbed national media attention. The first, captured in the 2004 documentary *Farmingville*, emerged in 1999 as an anti-immigration group Sachem Quality of Life began holding meetings attended by leading officials from the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a group listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group in 2007. This anti-immigrant political organizing coincided with various incidents where native males violently assaulted Hispanic workers on the streets beginning in 1999. Police failed to act in response, and local officials such as Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy engaged in "verbal immigrant-bashing," defending the suburban dream and even co-founding Mayors and Executives for Immigration Reform in February 2006, a national group formed to promote immigrant cleansing ordinances (Southern Poverty Law Center 2009, p. 19, 25). From 1999 to 2008 intense confrontations charged the political climate on Long Island as anti- and pro-immigration groups responded to ongoing violent incidents that led to various political forums (Southern Poverty Law Center 2009, p. 21-28). A second event — the murder of Ecuadorian immigrant Marcelo Lucero in November 2008 — punctuated the heated and continuous immigration debates on Long Island, and brought national attention to the practice of "beaner-hopping" that involved white teenage males who called themselves the Caucasian Crew and organized attacks on Latino residents. These intensive, often violent, responses to immigration led Long Island and specifically Nassau and Suffolk counties to be framed within the national discourse as representative of the extreme outcomes of America's inability to navigate this contentious issue.

Examining the impact of local tensions within and national attention on religious communities provides the opportunity for investigating religious discourse among the people in the pews. This project shifts attention from religious activists and social movements to the average parishioner and their framings of immigration in response to their understanding of religious discourse. Locating this analysis more broadly — within the biblical language of American political discourse — further illustrates how a humanistic rhetoric deeply embedded in a faith-based perspective translates into the secular domain of democracy, as well as how the people can reframe social issues such as immigration.

Research Design and Methodology

This project hypothesized that a faith-based perspective emphasizing humanism and the search for the common good allows for a more collaborative discursive environment, which could shift the dialogue away from the usual polarized atmosphere more commonly found in such a highly charged political discourse as immigration. The project engaged members of two Long Island Catholic congregations in a dialogue grounded in religious language. This approach intended to amplify a humanistic dimension that would allow participants to identify better with and include their own personal narratives as part of a newly reconsidered, larger storyline about immigration as reflective of the human experience. In order to engage Catholic parishioners on Long Island, we held two town hall-style meetings at two Catholic churches located in Nassau and Suffolk Counties in order to understand how these two religious communities similarly and differently grappled with "hot button" political issues, particularly immigration. An explanation for the criteria applied in selecting the parishes appears below. A two-fold goal anchored this project: to engage the community in an alternative, inclusive dialogue, and to direct our research towards developing a model for discussing difficult social issues within a faith-based framework that would be transferable to Catholic parishes in other regions around the country.

Our research methodology focused on multiple data collection points and results to provide both a depth and breadth of knowledge and insights. The research design utilized three primary and overlapping methodologies: text analysis of the town hall meetings that served as guided focus groups, qualitative thematic analysis of the town hall meetings/focus group discussions, and follow-up in-depth interviews with four parishioners (two from each parish). Three related factors determined the parishes selected for the focus groups: geography, demographic information, and the availability of a priest willing to mobilize members of his congregation to participate. The research team worked closely with the Rockville Centre Long Island Diocese to find parishes that met the objectives of the study. The Diocese of Rockville Centre was formed in 1957 and covers 1,198 square miles in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. The diocese serves approximately 1.5 million Catholics (total population in both counties is approximately 3.5 million). The Roman Catholic Church on Long Island is comprised of 134 parishes (65 in Nassau County and 69 in Suffolk County) in 115 towns, and is the sixth largest diocese in the US in terms of population (Diocese of Rockville Centre 2015).

Nassau and Suffolk Counties represent the two most eastern counties on Long Island. The other two counties – Kings and Queens – are the western most counties and actually comprise boroughs of New York City. Immigrants comprise 18 percent of the Long Island population overall, constituting 22 percent of Nassau County's population and 16 percent Suffolk County's population (Fiscal Policy Institute 2015, p. 23). The immigrant population in these two counties continued to increase slightly between 2012 and 2015, one percent and two percent respectively. Between 1970 and 2013, Nassau's population stopped growing with a decline in the US born population of 250,000, offset by an increase of 173,000 immigrants into the county (Fiscal Policy Institute 2015, p. 25). Suffolk County, in contrast, during the same time period saw an increase in US and foreign-born populations.

Yet, the foreign-born population outpaced that of the US born (Fiscal Policy Institute 2015, p. 26). As a result, "Long Islanders who grew up in or moved to the area around the 1970s have experienced a very rapid increase in the immigrant share of the population" that increased from 8 percent in 1970 to 18 percent in 2013 (Fiscal Policy Institute 2015, p. 26). These two counties, given the impact of increased immigration and the communities' responses to this change, represent those identified for this study.

Two parishes were selected for participation, and the clergy and support staff at each parish managed arrangements for our research with parishioners. While the names of the parishes are redacted here for purposes of confidentiality, one was based in Suffolk County and one was based in Nassau County. In findings discussed below, parishes are referred to as "Suffolk" or "Nassau." The local Bishop pre-approved the parishes studied and in both locations the parish priest and lay staff were willing to accommodate the research team.

In all, there were twenty-five focus group participants in Suffolk and twenty in Nassau. Each participant completed a pre-test survey that, in addition to collecting basic demographic information, gauged their viewpoints on controversial social topics including immigration, climate change, and the economy. A post-test asking for opinions on the same social issues was issued at the conclusion of the two focus groups. Each participant signed a consent form and a University Institutional Research Board (IRB) approved this research. Names used in reporting of data are pseudonyms and participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. The focus groups were video recorded for transcription purposes, and the same discussion guiding questions were used in both locations.

The focus group was described to participants as a town hall meeting "on important social topics of the day," and the discussion was a moderated and structured one that lasted in both locations for approximately ninety minutes. Both group meetings took place on church property, but not in sacred spaces; rather, in community meeting rooms or multi-purpose spaces owned by the Church. The moderator was not affiliated with the parish, and was introduced as a researcher not from Long Island, who was interested in understanding the opinions of Catholics in the area.

To encourage more spontaneous participation, the discussions at both locations were introduced first by the parish priest before turning the conversation over to the moderator. While an interview schedule was developed prior to the focus groups, participants were encouraged to participate in a conversation and, thus, could help drive the discussion. However, the vast majority of questions asked were identical for both groups, thus allowing for a direct comparison between both counties. Participants were encouraged to speak openly and candidly and were reminded that the conversation was taking place in a "judgment free" zone. The participants' age, income, gender, and political viewpoint varied widely. Notably, despite the many points of diversity among the participants (so many that reporting any means or even modal data points is largely not useful), they were familiar with one another as members of the same parish.

Data analysis took on two forms: computer-assisted text analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. The research team first analyzed transcripts from the focus groups using the text analysis software CatPac®, which facilitated identifying the most recurrent terms and themes within each group's and participant's discourses, and the way such terms and themes relate to one another in framing immigration issues. A cluster analysis was used to discover frames prominent among the participants and the sematic relationships between various clusters. associated with the researcher's subjective identification of frames and of the methods chosen to address them" (Stewart, Gil-Egui, Tian, & Innes Pileggi 2006, p. 739).

Transcripts from the focus groups were further analyzed using thematic analysis. After transcription, discussions were coded and segmented into "data clumps" that were then subject to further analysis and description (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). We interpreted the clusters of terms emerging from the software-assisted analysis in light of the researchers' qualitative observations during the focus groups. This method provided a refinement of the interview schedule for the remaining focus group discussions and subsequent in-depth interviews.

After completing the analysis of focus group data, in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with two parishioners from each parish: one immigrant and one non-immigrant. These interviews involved only one parishioner at a time, and lasted about thirty to sixty minutes each. The conversations took place over the telephone, and were recorded and transcribed. The in-depth interviews were used as a means of obtaining data that could be contrasted against information generated by the focus groups. We deemed this an important step in probing the degree to which the testimonies emerging from the focus groups are generally representative of the community's views, as minority individual perspectives may have been silenced due to the presence of other parishioners with contrasting views. Verbatims and citations from both the focus groups and in-depth interviews are used interchangeably throughout the following results section. While reliability measures are always suspect with qualitative data, the fact that in-depth interview responses closely mirrored focus group data corroborates the strength and accuracy of this project's data and design.

Results

Computer-Assisted Text Analysis of Transcripts from Focus Groups

Data for the text analysis of the transcripts from the focus groups was processed by generating word frequency lists and identifying association patterns among the terms most frequently used by participants. Subgroups were created during the data analysis phase to show differences between various sets of participants. Specifically, different word frequency lists and clusters of terms were identified for (1) all participants (2) non-immigrants (3) immigrants (4) residents who have lived in the parish for 0-20 years (5) residents who have lived in the parish for 21 years or more (6) white participants, and (7) non-white participants. Table 1 below summarizes specific points of difference in terms of discursive constructions, both between the two parishes and the various participant sub-groups within each parish.

Table 1: Suffolk Word Frequency by Sub-groups

	All Participants	Non-Immigrants	Immigrants	Residents 0-20 Years	Residents 21 years or more	White	Non-White
Agree	13	9	8	8			6
American				5			
Better	12	7			8	9	
Border		7		6			
Born				5			
Certain							6
Child							6
Church	22	7	15		19	18	6
Coming	11	7			9	10	
Community	16	7	8		13	12	
Country	15		12	7		10	
Department				5			
Different	14	7				12	
Everyone				7			
Feel	25	17	10	20		20	9
Good	12		9		10	10	
Government	12		8		10		8
Hear			8	7			
Help	31	21	12	10	22	24	8
Illegal	14		13	9			10
Immigrants	11			15			7
Immigration	33	12	22	14	20	17	22
Jesus	16		11		12		9
Laws	11	9			11	11	
Legal							7
Mass		7				10	
People	71	32	45	24	52	47	30
Person	16		11		14		12
System		7					
Talk	21	10	15	9	17	16	14
Thing					11	10	

Table 2: Nassau Word Frequency by Sub-groups

	All Participants	Non-Immigrants	Immigrants	Residents 0-20 Years	Residents 21 years or more	White	Non-White
Accepted			4				
American			4				
Catholic	34	28	6	22	15	14	23
Church	29	22	7	12	20	18	14
Community	34	24	11	6	32	27	12
Country			5				
Different	15	12		7			7
Difficult			5				
Family	13	12					
Far	11				10		
Feel	13		4		13	11	
Hear				6			
Home	15				13	13	
Immigrant				6			7
Immigration	20	18		13			12
Issues	31	28		11	26	26	10
Love	17	15		8		12	8
Mass	25	21	4		24	23	
Parish	24	22	5	13	21	22	12
People	62	52	21	21	54	48	26
Person	18	18		8	11	12	8
Someone			5				
Spanish	25	14	11	7	22	14	15
Struggle			6				7
Thing	11			8		13	10
Time	16		5		13		
Understand	19	19		7	14	14	

Significant differences emerged between the two parishes. While both the Suffolk and Nassau parishes had similarities in terms of multiple references to religion and religious discourse, Nassau's participants used 11 unique terms not used frequently by those in Suffolk: "Catholic," "family," "far," "home," "issues," "love," "mass," "parish," "Spanish," "time" and "understand." In general, there was an abundance of terms related to the local and to religion in Nassau versus Suffolk. Nassau also had more markers of sameness (terms such as "family," "community," and "parish"). In Nassau, only "Spanish," "different," and "immigration" emerged as discursive markers of "difference." Nassau also showed more similarities between the complete group and the various sub-groups in comparison with Suffolk. In Suffolk, as an example, the term "illegal" emerges as a most frequent term in three of the six sub-groups: immigrants, residents of 0-20 years, and non-white participants. Likewise, "different" shows up as a most frequent term among the white and non-immigrant sub-groups in Suffolk.

Cluster analysis in Suffolk shows that religious and local references helped participants discuss immigration in a more positive way (for example, the term "immigration" appears in the same cluster of frequent words as the terms "feel," "church," "talk," "community," and "people"). Negative references to immigration are most closely linked to a frame of a "broken system" where the government (and not individuals) drives the negativity (for instance, a cluster that includes the words "illegal" and "immigrant" also comprises the terms "laws," "agree," "coming," "country," and "different").

Consistent with this national governmental institutional dimension, the terms "border" and "system" emerge with greater frequency in Suffolk's non-immigrant sub-group. While national and institutional references had a negative connotation, terms clustered around the notions of community and religion had a more positive one, suggesting a general tension around the topic of immigration. In other words, immigration, when framed in terms of national government, registered as a negative issue whereas discussions about the topic centered on more local references became more positive.

Among the immigrants sub-group in Suffolk, the term "talk" emerges tightly clustered with other terms related to the community and church, indicating a frame of empathy and openness when discussing immigration as a conversation within the context of the Church. Similarly, explicitly religious terms such as "Jesus," "help," and "person" cluster together indicating a specific frame of religious discourse emphasizing a humanistic care for others as symbolized by Jesus that can be used to contextualize the issue. Taken together, across all participants in Suffolk, three key frames arise as relevant in discussing the immigration issue: institutional/government, local/individual, and religious/spiritual.

In the case of Nassau, four key frames emerge: humanization/tolerance, church/social, family/home, and community/multiculturalism. The sub-groups in Nassau, as noted above, more closely aligned with the overall results from all participants, indicating a more cohesive community. Notably, in Nassau, this can partly be explained by the fact that the parish also invoked religious terms more frequently. When immigration issues in Nassau were discussed, cluster analysis shows a spatial association between terms linked to immigration and terms such as "Catholic," and "church."

Terms related to otherness in Nassau belonged to a very loose cluster indicating a not very strong or persuasive frame. Even among Nassau's non-immigrant sub-group, potentially negative terms such as "different" are balanced in a cluster with terms such as "love," and "person." This finding suggests a more humanizing tone of discourse within that parish. Nassau participants mostly discussed problems in relation to solutions, many of which could be found by turning to a frame of local and religious discourse. Clusters in Nassau were more closely grouped, indicating that distinct frames were not dissociated from one another. Put simply, more similarities than differences appeared in Nassau as compared with Suffolk. Even among those residents living more than 21 years in the area, the Spanish speaking community in Nassau was seen as a type of sub-community that belongs both to the larger local community (i.e. English speaking) and, more importantly, to the same parish community.

Contrasting Findings from Computer-Assisted Text Analysis with Findings from Qualitative Theme Analysis and In-Depth Interviews

Cluster analysis and frequency counts for words used in the focus groups showed several competing frames for discussing immigration in Nassau and Suffolk. When discussed in terms of an institutional/ government frame, immigration represented a much more contentious topic than when the issue came up in terms of either a local/individual frame or a religious/spiritual frame. In fact, in Nassau, where religion and local identity were more readily discussed, immigration was a less contentious topic because of the frames relied on by participants. This is not to suggest, however, that some tensions around the topic of immigration did not arise. One Spanish-speaking immigrant in Nassau, for example, offered the following reflection during one of the focus groups:

Maria: I have to tell you that sometimes the Spanish community feels that we are not included on all the activities. Sometimes someone comes to me and says, "this is going to happen and would you like to participate?" so we get together and participate. But in reality, as a Spanish community, and it's a big Spanish community in [name of community], I don't think we belong anywhere.

Interesting discussions also arose around the question of whether or not Spanish masses help or hurt the integration of the parish community. One white non-immigrant said:

> John: But what it may be doing [having Spanish language masses] is keeping us divided. Maybe it's time, since we've had some changes over the summer due to heat, maybe we should take those and move forward and eliminate…some of the masses are multilingual and maybe that's what we need to make everybody feel together.

While the group did not reach consensus around the question of Spanish language masses, it is critical to note the empathy with which this discussion happened. Questions of immigration, difference, and otherness were generally discussed in relation to the parish and the Catholic Church. An immigrant participant in one of our in-depth interviews in Nassau explained that she moves easily between the Spanish and English-speaking communities based on her schedule:

> Anna: Usually on Sundays, we go to the Spanish mass. The other days when they have activities like for Easter or something like that, they have a bilingual. I go to the bilingual. Sometimes I go to the morning mass and it's in English… The parish tries to make it like only one family. We try to enjoy the English-speaking people and Spanish. We go together. Sometimes, we do something together like coffee or mass. There's no difference right now. We try to integrate both communities.

When pressed with which mass she was most comfortable, she acknowledged the Spanish language mass, but solely because that was her first language and not because she felt the Spanish mass attracted a different sub-set of the parish. Perhaps not surprisingly, while the language barrier was a point of debate among adults in the parish, programs within the Church aimed at youth (such as religious education and sacrament preparations) were more integrated. This integration was explained both by the fact that younger church members were more likely to be more comfortable with the English language, and also that resources (space and personnel) were unavailable for parallel programs in religious education in the same way that masses were offered in different languages.

This framing of difference in terms of religion led to more positive discussions than when these same questions of otherness arose in relation to the government or national politics. In Suffolk, for example, white non-immigrants who participated in one of the focus groups discussed the "problem" with immigrants in the US, explaining:

> Ray: People who cross the borders, illegally, you know, they unfortunately, for the people who are coming here for a better life, and trying to work, and trying to get their families here. All right? They are being wrapped up with the people smuggling drugs. So they are getting involved in that. The laws…you have to enforce what laws you have. If they're not working, then you have to change those laws…The system is broken.

> Monica: So, no matter what, now it's hard to see that because the child was born here, and the father has no papers, they need to be separate. So what the illegal woman has to do… they have to think to a certain way, but they broke the law when they come illegal to the borders. I agree with that, but once they're here, and have the child, the system must have something to, well, make a family stay here.

The discussion, as we see in these two examples, became more empathetic and positive in both parishes when immigration issues were framed in terms of either religion or the local community. When discourse about immigration moved away from the "broken system" and focused on religious or local frames, the tone of the discussion shifted greatly. One white non-immigrant in Suffolk articulates how the parish is a place where immigrants and non-immigrants alike can "come together":

> Elizabeth: I feel like here [the Church] has always been an oasis. So like growing up and seeing like kids on the bus tease the Hispanics for standing on the corner at 7-Eleven and then coming to church on Sunday and hearing about not judging and, this is a place where it was like everyone is always welcome. We have a Spanish mass, we have a Portuguese mass, and should you come to another one, you know, or we have trilingual holiday mass, it's always somewhere where you come together…I feel like here it's always so easy to forget the secular world...I think it's like, in seeing the community and being involved in this parish, it made all the issues like not less important but less so. It was easier to turn away from stereotypes, I think.

Another Suffolk parishioner who participated in one of the in-depth interviews, an immigrant herself, explains that faith is a true common denominator among the various populations of the church community:

> Iselle: Yes, it does seem like that but they do share the same faith. That's what brings them together. Yes, there are two different Masses – well, three because of the Portuguese as well - they are another big population here in [the town]. So there is separation between those three groups. However, the faith is one… we all greet each other regardless of if you're a Spanish/American/ Portuguese. That doesn't matter. You always greet each other. So people do feel that unity even if they are from different groups.

Respondents even acknowledged some internal tension they had with these competing frames around immigration. A white non-immigrant in Suffolk explains the tension between the government and "doing their job" in the "outside world" and the non-judgmental and loving world of her Church:

> Donna: But I think politically, it's very frustrating. It's the whole process, you know… whether the government's doing their job or not doing their job, and the laws, if they're clear or if they are enforced, the process that we go through, so I think it's… I think it's just a difficult place to be… you know? That… I think that we all want to help everybody. It doesn't matter about their race or their religion, their age, their anything. If people need help you help them. And I think just that when we step outside and live in the outside world, it could be difficult.

A white non-immigrant in Nassau was similarly succinct in explaining how the Catholic Church's teachings literally help him frame his understandings of immigration:

> Bill: Getting back to, again, the immigration issue, I just can't leave it because I think it is connected to this and there should be no stranger in a Catholic Church. In the sense that anybody who crosses the threshold is one of us. I just don't see that immigration, in and of itself is an issue, and I think that is what you were trying to say before, is that it should be the person that we are focusing on not in fact where they came from.

Both Donna and Bill convey the humanistic dimension of the religious/spiritual framing in which the sense of belonging to the Catholic Church and faith transcend the everyday world of political, social, and economic differences.

Interestingly, many immigrants were more likely to situate immigration as one of many competing issues that the government "gets wrong" and that deserves the attention of their fellow parishioners. Anna explains: "Right now like the Congress and the senators, they're passing a lot of laws, which I don't agree with that. They haven't done anything with the immigrants, but they approved the [gay] marriage and the same-sex couples." She went on to discuss abortion as another issue that, unlike immigration, is more likely to unite rather than divide a parish community heavily populated by immigrants.

Not surprisingly, the parish priest played a large role in setting the tone for a particular parish community. One of the key factors in making a parish community a place where the Catholic Church can facilitate conversations that are normally treacherous outside of the faith-based community, was the leadership provided by the local priest. One immigrant previously cited explained:

> Anna: I feel great about my parish community. We have a tight community at [name of parish]. I used to live in [name of town] for so many years. I'm part of them – even when I moved, I feel going there every day because I think it's a great community. We have a very nice priest and pastor and fellow workers. We work together. We try to keep in touch.

A non-immigrant who participated in one of the in-depth interviews and has lived in the parish for over 35 years shared this sentiment in Suffolk County:

> Mike: Well the changes that we've had just most recently had been under [the parish priest] really, was the introduction to more Spanish like a welcoming. Not that we weren't doing it before but it just seems like we were opening up even our hands wider to the Spanish community, which is great. One quick example was at the Easter Vigil Mass this year. We had a couple of readings done in Spanish. Now that was never done before to my knowledge and I've been here a long time. It was just a wonderful thing to see that up to here, see other members of our spiritual community go up there and read in their own language and how receptive because I was there and how receptive the people of the parish was that attended that mass.

There was a similar feeling in Suffolk County about how a priest could help change the culture of the parish with relatively minor adjustments. Jimmy, a non-immigrant who also participated in one of our in-depth interviews, explains: "We have a priest that speaks Spanish and the growth in the Spanish Mass is unbelievable. So I would say faith brings — by nurturing their faith, by welcoming them to our parish and they could worship God and all the other things that go on. We have adoration."

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on focus groups conducted at two different parishes on Long Island, this study found support for the notion that, when framed in terms of either religious/spiritual discourse or local/individual discourse, the topic of immigration is discussed more empathetically and more positively than when it is discussed in terms of government, laws, or systems outside of the Church more generally. Participants drew on Church teachings and examples from within their parishes to discuss immigrants as opposed to immigration in a much more humane way. This finding suggests the possibility that the Catholic Church can serve as a catalyst and host for discussions that may help reframe conversations about immigration in other parishes across the US.

Of course, limits exist in terms of how, when, and in what ways the Catholic Church can raise and address political issues such as immigration. Research participants, remained divided as to whether or not the Church and local priests should engage the parish community in discussions related to politics. Many stressed a need for a separation of church and state. Others felt these discussions had a place within the Church community, but that the space should be outside of the traditional Catholic Mass and that the message should not be delivered from the pulpit. As one Nassau non-immigrant explained, part of it has to do with the sacred nature of the liturgy and part has to do with extending Mass beyond one hour. In other words, to have Mass and a meaningful discussion about a complicated social issue would take longer than most people were willing to give up on a Sunday morning:

> Michael: I just don't think the pulpit at Sunday Mass is the place to hammer out the social issues. That's going to take you an hour to do. People are not going to be receptive… Because if you really was serious about tackling some of these social issues, in my opinion, you could still do it from the pulpit but you need a different forum. You would need something separate from the Mass. The Mass is God's word that's concentrating on the blood — body and blood of Christ. I mean that's what you come there for.

Proximity, however, matters. Sitting in the pews during Mass with the different members of the parish community, including immigrants and those who speak Spanish as their primary language, transforms a policy issue and its accompanying stereotypes into human beings with families who share a faith tradition and a space in the local community. Participants in both focus groups indicated that separate Masses for different constituencies of the parish may recreate the boundaries that divide people and prevent them from getting to know each other. The Pew Research Center reports that Americans who belong to congregations where many or most members of their congregation are immigrants "are far more favorable" toward them than those with fewer immigrants ("Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environmental Views," 2010). While parishes and other congregations cannot determine who lives in their geographic proximity, leaders of those communities can explore how to bring different groups into the same Mass or other forms of worship and develop projects to engage members with immigrant communities either in their own or the local context to increase proximity to those categorized as "Other" and to reframe them as human beings.

This study, in addition to spatial proximity, also finds that the informational environment affects how religiosity impacts attitudes toward immigrants that takes into account, here at the congregational level, the dynamic socioeconomic variables contextualizing the experience of parishioners in both counties. These variables, including race, ethnicity, and economic status, impact the sense of belonging noted by researchers as a critical factor in determining religiosity. The Suffolk parish is located in a town where 88% of the population identifies as white, 3% as black or African American, and 10% as Hispanic.

This racial dynamic indicates other factors in determining why fewer similarities appeared in the content analysis and why immigration represented a more contentious issue (United States Census Bureau 2010). The much smaller minority community in Suffolk experienced less belonging in the local community due to this demographic variable that then impacts the parish context where any population shifts caused by immigration would register as significant for the native white population. The Nassau parish is located within a town where 94% of the population identifies as white, .9% as black or African American, and 7% as Hispanic (United States Census Bureau 2010). Given the similarities to the Suffolk parish, this racial dynamic suggests that other variables may be impacting the greater amount of similarities in the content analysis and why immigration is a less contentious issue than in Suffolk. Another critical factor may be how national attention focused on Suffolk County as a location of intense segregation that propelled vehement debate over immigration in the US. Framings such as these shape how local communities continue to engage with critical issues that help us understand the differences between the Suffolk and Nassau parishes.

Delivering positions on immigration from the pulpit fails to have an effect on how the people in the pews think about this issue. Only 7% of American adults report that religion influences their views on the issue of immigration (Pew Research Center 2010). Our study reflects this broader view as focus group participants in both counties expressed a clear opposition to their parish priest conveying explicitly political messages during the Mass. This particular context, many conveyed, allowed them to transcend the material world of politics and enter another spiritual place. However, these parishioners also expressed a deep desire for and interest in discussing the social issues confronting the US outside of the Mass, but within the parish community. The focus groups represented such an opportunity for members of both parishes where they could engage as a faith-based community to discuss "hot button" issues. Local parishes and other religious communities may want to explore developing such facilitated discussion groups for members of their congregations. While some approaches may integrate more directed strategies, opportunities for dialogue about social issues among members of religious communities may represent one of the most effective approaches to addressing the polarized discourse characterizing the American polity.

Further research into the structure and nature of such discussion groups is needed to determine their effectiveness in meeting the needs of faith-based community members. A range of options exist from informal "rap" sessions that engage in a range of topics and focused issue-based dialogues facilitated by community members to "Welcoming the Stranger" initiatives that include toolkits designed by and for specific religious communities to discuss immigration. One thing remains clear: people in the pews are looking for options that engage them in these dialogues outside of the formal religious framework, though within its communal context. A shift from delivering messages from the pulpit toward engaging parishioners in dialogue with each other and across lines of difference, represents a viable strategy for meeting the needs of American people to deliberate on the difficult issues confronting our society with a focus on the humans impacted by national policies.

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