

# FEATURE

## Survey findings affirm, challenge

By Mike Latona  
Staff Writer

*EDITORS' NOTE: As part of our celebration of Catholic Press Month, the following story features results from a readership study the Catholic Courier conducted last fall.*

A recent survey of *Catholic Courier* readers highlights considerable strengths as well as some challenges for the newspaper's future.

Survey forms were mailed to 3,200 randomly selected subscribers throughout the diocese at the end of September 1999. The number of recipients in each diocesan county was weighted to ensure representation outside Monroe County. Nearly 800 completed surveys were returned, for an overall response rate of 24 percent.

Results were issued Nov. 19, 1999, by the Rochester polling firm Harris Interactive. Conducted by John Geraci, Sarah Fauth and Susan Geraci of Harris Interactive, the study marked the *Courier's* first readership survey in five years.

The survey pointed to significant loyalty among *Courier* subscribers, with more than 73 percent of respondents saying they have subscribed for 11 years or more. Although declining advertising revenues have reduced the average number of pages per issue since the last survey, 67 percent of respondents in both 1999 and 1995 said they spent more than 20 minutes reading a typical issue.

Respondents also said they enjoy reading the *Courier* (83 percent), that it contains information they can't get from other media (72 percent), that it covers controversy appropriately (67 percent), and that they'd miss it if they stopped receiving it (69 percent). More than half said the *Courier* is an effective tool for religious education.

Forty-eight percent said the *Catholic Courier* is their primary source for news of the church and diocese. Parish bulletins were the primary source for 38 percent of respondents. Secular papers and television news together served as the primary source for 12 percent of respondents.

The Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) is seen regularly by 25 percent of respondents. Other Catholic media are rarely used by *Courier* subscribers, the survey showed.

Survey results also showed that the most popular *Courier* features are cover stories (72 percent read "always" or "usually"), diocesan news (67 percent), Bishop Matthew H. Clark's column (60 percent), the opinion/letters page (60 percent), and columnists (57 percent).

"The cover story and diocesan news are moving up in priority, which pleases me," said Karen M. Franz, the *Courier's* general manager/editor, comparing the 1999 results to those of the 1995 survey. Franz noted that the *Courier* staff has invested significant resources in developing cover stories on important issues, and that survey results showed that investment is justified.

Another survey finding was that *Courier* subscribers trust businesses advertising in the *Catholic Courier* more than they do those advertising in other media (42 percent). Few (13 percent) feel the *Courier* contains too much advertising, and 48 percent said there are not enough ads in the *Courier* from businesses in their own regions.

The survey results also point to some significant challenges for the newspaper.

More than half of *Courier* subscribers are 66 years old or older, findings showed. This is a comparatively older subscriber base than the 1995 survey indicated. Only 17 percent of *Courier* readers are under the age of 50. Four percent of respondents in-

dicated that they have children who read the *Courier*.

The survey indicated that some of the *Courier's* least popular features are the monthly parenting and young-adult pages, as well as the advertising content. Franz noted that features for younger Catholics in general did not fare well in the survey, even though some of them were created or revised in response to the 1995 survey.

"We thought we would have attracted some young readers, but the rate is lower in 1999 than 1995," Franz said.

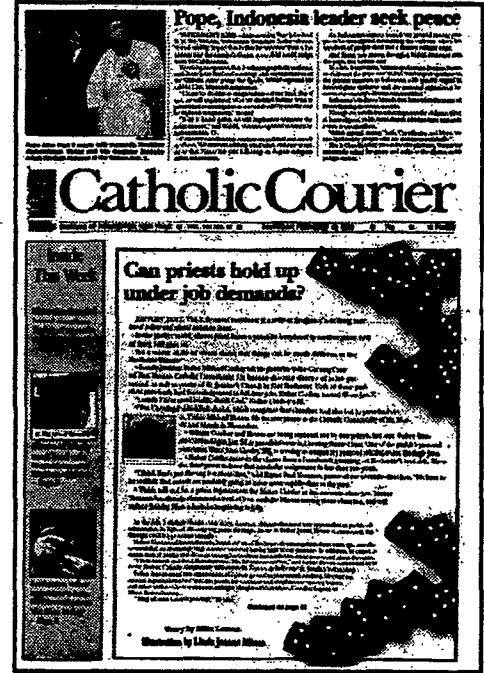
Keeping young people interested in their faith, she said, "is obviously a challenge for the paper and the church at large." She said younger parishioners may not know about the *Courier*, and that new strategies of getting it in their hands would help increase this reader segment.

The top three areas where surveyed readers desired more coverage are: issues facing church and society (61 percent), Catholic teaching and doctrine (55 percent), and activities in their own parish and region (52 percent). Yet only 24 percent of respondents said they desired more coverage of other parishes or regions.

"Those two statistics show the difficulties of balancing coverage in a newspaper that serves 12 counties, unless you have resources to publish a separate paper for each part of the diocese," Franz observed.

The most satisfied *Courier* readers were from the Chemung/Schuylers and Steuben regions of the diocese, an area the *Courier* staff has tried to serve more effectively in recent years.

Of the 3,200 surveys distributed, 1,075 were sent to readers in the Monroe-Livingston region, and 425 each were sent to Seneca-Cayuga, Chemung-Schuylers, Steuben, Tompkins-Tioga, and Yates-On-tario-Wayne. The response rate ranged



from 21 to 29 percent, with Steuben (28 percent) and Tompkins-Tioga (26) showing the highest return rates.

The target response to the survey had been 800, and Franz said she was pleased with the actual response of 782. "We had a heavy response from outside Monroe County," she noted.

Thirty-three percent of respondents said they keep the *Courier* in their house for a week or more, compared to 53 percent in 1995, which Franz said probably related to increasing demands on families' time. However, she said, "Sixty-seven percent said they're spending more than 20 minutes reading it, so they're still spending the time."

Franz noted that some changes are likely to result from a strategic planning process that was initiated by Bishop Clark, the *Courier's* publisher. The process is due to begin this month.

On the other hand, Franz remarked, "I don't think the survey supports any wholesale changes."

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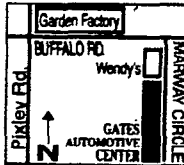
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