



## PRELIMINARY REPORT: 2012 Supplement

### In this report you will find....

- ★ **How little things make a BIG difference in a parish...**
- ★ **Ways to enliven small parish communities...**
- ★ **Ideas to get parishioners involved in their local community...**

**and much more....**

### Research Update

The Building Stronger Parishes project is in its second stage of fieldwork. We completed research in nine urban parishes last year, and this year we began focusing on regional and rural parishes across Australia.

We completed research in seven parishes in 2012. These were:

- Sugarloaf (Maitland-Newcastle)
- Myall Coast (Maitland-Newcastle)
- Cororooke (Ballarat)
- Harris Park (Maronite diocese)
- Mt. Isa (Townsville)
- Mudgee (Bathurst), and
- Shepparton (Sandhurst)

Each parish has its own set of characteristics that distinguishes it from others and makes a unique contribution to this project. And in every parish we found many people who were sharing in its life through the generous

contributions of their time, resources and talents. We are grateful for their willingness to share their stories with us and for their insights into parish life.

On each of our visits we learned about some of the wonderful things that these parishes were doing that made them vibrant and alive. For example, in Mt Isa we witnessed the significant contributions of the parish through a variety of services in the local community. Similarly, in Harris Park we learned how a number of different ministry groups in the

### Inside this report:

Background to the project	1
Other parishes involved	2
Project Reference Group	2
Individual Parish reports	3
Project website	10
Looking ahead	10
Contact details	11



*...we learned about the wonderful things these parishes were doing that made them vibrant and alive.*

**Research Update *contd.***

parish worked together to cater to the needs of people of all ages in the community. We have written up these initial observations in the reports on each parish in the following sections. More good ideas from all the different parishes can also be found on our project website:

[www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au](http://www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au)

In August, we presented some of our research findings at the PROCLAIM conference in Sydney. These were very well received and we have had inquiries coming in from people in other parishes who were eager to learn about the good things that were happening in parishes involved in the project. We also presented a paper on the project at the SSSR (Society for the Scientific Study of Religion) conference in Phoenix, Arizona in November this year.

**OTHER PARISHES INVOLVED IN THE STUDY**

<u>Parish</u>	<u>Diocese</u>
Montmorency	Melbourne
Kings Park	Melbourne
Narre Warren	Sale
Willunga	Adelaide
Albany Creek	Brisbane
Narrabundah	Canberra
Glenwood-Stanhope Gardens	Parramatta
Summer Hill	Sydney
Launceston	Hobart

**Project Reference Group**

This year we invited two new members to be a part of our Project Reference Group. These were Mr Damian Coleridge, a research consultant from the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and Dr Peter Carpenter, an emeritus professor from Australian Catholic University. We also farewelled Mr Michael Brady who retires from the Pastoral Research Office at the end of the year. Apart from these, our team includes the following members:

- ◆ **Dr Bob Dixon** (Director, Pastoral Research Office)
- ◆ **Mrs Trudy Dantis** (BSP Research Coordinator, Pastoral Research Office)
- ◆ **Mr Stephen Reid** (Researcher, Pastoral Research Office)
- ◆ **Rev Dr Philip Hughes** (Senior Researcher, Christian Research Association)
- ◆ **Dr Marian de Souza** (Senior Lecturer, Australian Catholic University)
- ◆ **Fr Martin Dixon** (Parish Priest, Brighton parish, Melbourne)
- ◆ **Ms Maria George** (Pastoral Associate, Elwood/St. Kilda West parish, Melbourne)
- ◆ **Mrs Sophy Morley** (Diocesan Pastoral Coordinator, Sale Diocese)
- ◆ **Dr Peter Price** (Chair, Department of Theology: Mission and Ministry, Yarra Theological Union)
- ◆ **Fr Maurizio Pettenà** (National Director, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office)
- ◆ **Mr Joe Moloney** (Researcher, Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office)
- ◆ **Mr Bruce Ryan** (Executive Secretary, ACBC Secretariat for Pastoral Life)
- ◆ **Dr Kath Engebretson** (Associate Professor, Australian Catholic University)
- ◆ **Dr Paul Taylor** (Coordinator, Liturgy and Worship, Archbishop's Office For Evangelisation, Archdiocese of Melbourne)
- ◆ **Fr Elio Capra SDB** (Department of Systematic Theology and Pastoral and General Studies, Catholic Theological College; RCIA Coordinator, Archdiocese of Melbourne)

### Mt Isa Parish, Townsville

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Provides a range of community services
- Strong support for Indigenous people
- Multicultural Festival

The Good Shepherd Parish in Mount Isa (a mining town in north-west Queensland) is always a hub of activity. It is involved in many different projects in the area and beyond, and is a significantly vital part of the Mount Isa community.

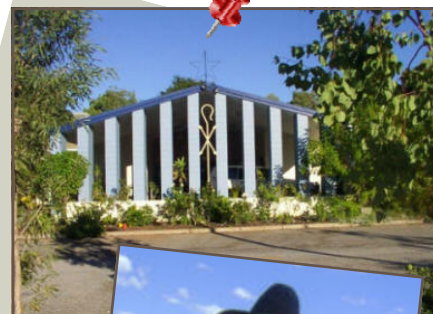
The annual Multicultural Festival originally started as a way of raising important funds for the parish, as well as a way of celebrating the multicultural make-up within the parish and in the wider community. It has developed over the years into a large event hosted by the parish for the local community, and has become a key date on Mount Isa's community calendar with over 4,000 people attending.

The parish is involved in many aspects of social services within the town, particularly with the indigenous people through the North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services (NWQICSS) and the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council (AICC). Under the direction of the parish priest, Fr Mick Lowcock, parishioners have taken up the challenge in providing a range of high-standard yet efficient services to the Mount Isa local community. The parish also has strong

ecumenical connections. Fr Mick regularly attends local clergy gatherings and parishioners are involved in a range of common mission activities with other Christian churches and faiths in the area especially during Easter and through the religious education program in the state schools.

*It is not uncommon for homeless locals to spend a few days – or nights – in the [church] grounds, without being questioned or asked to move on.*

The parish property is well looked after by parishioners. Regular gardening and cleaning by parishioners and the parish priest means the place is always clean, tidy and inviting. The church building remains open most of the day, and the surrounding gardens have a relaxed feel. It is not uncommon for homeless locals to spend a few days – or nights – in the grounds, without being questioned or asked to move on.



Fr Mick and the Church at Mount Isa parish

Fr Mick is energetic and pastoral, and has strong leadership skills which encourage and empower others to get involved. The parish supported young people who went to World Youth Day in Madrid through an innovative fund-raising incentive scheme. Young people were encouraged to be involved in community events whilst raising money for their trip. Fr Mick has a strong sense of the potential for the parish to be involved in making the community a better place. He is assisted by a strong support staff, including a number of Christian Brothers, and is well liked and respected throughout the town, even though he is prepared to 'ruffle feathers' to see fairness and justice done.





## Myall Coast Parish (formerly Bulahdelah), Maitland-Newcastle

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Parish communities working together
- Vibrant community outreach activities
- Strong Ecumenical links

Myall Coast parish consists of three Mass Centres: St Brigid's, Bulahdelah; St Stephen's, Tea Gardens and Our Lady of the Rosary, Karuah. One of the special features of this parish is the way that these three Mass Centres work together as one parish. While they are geographically distant from each other, each Mass Centre retains its distinctive identity and is allowed to develop worship and other programs that are appropriate for the local context. Although they are not dependant on each other, the three Centres support each other and share resources. Tea Gardens, being the strongest of the three in terms of numbers and skills, has been very respectful of the other two Mass Centres and that has been well appreciated.

All three Mass Centres have joint activities during the year, such as a shared Annual Dinner and Pancake Tuesday and Easter activities. In each place, the parish has initiated projects that have been taken on by the wider community. For example, the Samaritan's Christmas Box appeal at Karuah is an activity in which the whole Karuah community shares. Yummies for Mummies is another project which has succeeded in making

contact with young mothers in the community and providing them support. Similarly, the Women's Shed at Karuah provides companionship and support for women in Karuah beyond the frequent attenders at Mass.

*...cooperation between denominations contributes significantly to a sense of wellbeing throughout the whole community.*

The Mass Centres are also very engaged with other local Christian communities and good ecumenical cooperation exists between churches. Within these small communities, such cooperation between denominations contributes significantly to a sense of wellbeing throughout the whole community.

An important factor in the parish is the encouragement given to people to use their skills and initiative. In Tea Gardens, there are many retired people involved in various church ministries who



Parish activities at Myall Coast parish

contribute positively to the Mass Centre. The parish coordinator, Sr Margaret, has been at the heart of both the permission-giving and the encouragement. She has fostered an atmosphere where people have been thinking innovatively and have the freedom to give things a go. This is one of the factors that sets the Myall Coast Parish apart from some other parishes.

While some parishioners are aware that their help will be needed more in the future, as the number of priests and religious in the area decline, many are willing to shoulder the task. Through additional mentoring, it would seem that this parish is in a position to form future lay leaders and continue to grow through that experience.

### Mudgee Parish, Bathurst

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Paying attention to little things that matter
- Empowering leadership
- Building parish connections through numerous ways

Mudgee parish is located in the central west of New South Wales. The main source of the vitality of the parish is based in doing little things very well. People are greeted and made to feel welcome whether at Sunday Mass, on the website, or at the parish school. Once they feel at home, they are often invited into a group where, in due course, they are encouraged to get involved. This in turn leads to greater involvement in the work of the group and the life of the parish. The parish enables them to grow, by supporting the work they do and by encouraging them to attend courses and be part of diocesan-based groups. By welcoming, inviting in and enabling to grow, and doing this across a range of different age groups and interests, the parish enables many people to enter in the life of the Church through a range of different doorways.

The parish priest, Fr Garry McKeown, ably assisted by Sr Alice Sullivan and other members of the pastoral team, together help facilitate this enabling process to start activities and develop leadership in others. As Sr Alice remarks, 'my gift is I don't do anything by myself.' The parish model is very inclusive—

everyone has a part to play and a gift to give and between them the parish leaders help them find that gift. This means there is an ongoing effort to connect people and develop a network of strong relationships across the parish and with the wider Mudgee community.

Two young mothers who help run the playgroup, which is

*"We experience community and we want to share that. It's a great gift" -Young Mothers from the Playgroup*

parish outreach to young families, spoke of the importance of belonging to this parish community: 'We experience community and we want to share that. It's a great gift. We want to open up the playgroup to as many people as possible.' This openness and keenness to invite others to share what they have been given is at the heart of the life of the parish. This is its mission – the source of its vitality.

The town of Mudgee has many young families, almost all of



The many faces of Mudgee parish

whom are without any extended family support. In response, the parish has developed the playgroup, sacramental programs, children's liturgy and a program for school mums called 'Conversations about Catholics', which meets parents where they are and invites them to ask questions. The parish has published a resource book to be used during these conversations, and reminds us that it takes seriously the need to translate the Church's language so that everyone can identify with what the Church has to say. Mudgee parish does this in many different ways whether at Sunday Mass, through the RCIA, Youth ministry events, Vespers and Vино, the prayer group, etc. A number of parishioners have learnt to 'translate the word' and speak a faith language that the locals can hear.



## Sugarloaf Parish, Maitland-Newcastle

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- A strong global focus
- Inspiring overseas outreach programs
- Celebrating parish diversity

Sugarloaf parish is situated on Lake Macquarie in Greater Newcastle. Demographically, it is a fairly average, typical parish; however it has a very engaged and enthusiastic parish community, led by a fantastic priest. Father Peter Rees is very enthusiastic about the parish and enjoys taking on new projects and empowering parishioners to be involved in them. Under his leadership, Sugarloaf parish has developed an energetic and outward looking focus which has significantly contributed to its growing vitality. For example, with Fr Peter's vision of linking a parish in a Third World country to a parish in the First World, Sugarloaf has established strong ties with a sister parish in Vietnam. The strength of this relationship has grown through the years with both parishes benefitting enormously.

A sponsorship program started in the parish that looks after all levels of education for children in Vietnam, currently has 133 students being sponsored by 107 parishioners. This program led to the presence of a young priest and religious sisters from Vietnam who now reside in the parish. Their presence, especially those of the young

nuns, is a real witness to the faith. Their enthusiasm for their work and other people has set a wonderful example for the parishioners at Sugarloaf.

Sugarloaf parish has many activities under a stewardship model, where leaders offer their time for 12

*...the young nuns [are] a real witness to the faith and their enthusiasm for their work and other people has set a wonderful example for the parishioners ...*

months or more and really take ownership of the activity group they are a part of. The parish has developed some innovative ideas and has a large number of interesting groups that parishioners can belong to. One of their outreach activities is 'Mum's Cottage' which was started by Sr Helen, who noticed the need for a centre where



Outreach services and other events at Sugarloaf parish

young mothers could drop in and find some company to talk to or share problems with. Through the parishioners' support, this successful venture also provided an opportunity to work with the local Uniting Church and extend the services to all mothers in the local community.

Another interesting initiative was the use of nametags for parishioners who are encouraged to wear them to Mass on Sundays. This helps people feel comfortable when introducing themselves and getting to know other people over morning tea. Through helping and supporting one another, Sugarloaf has been transformed into a loving, thoughtful and resourceful community.



### Cororooke Parish, Ballarat

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Skilled Lay leadership team
- Strong Liturgical focus
- A dedicated parish community

Cororooke Parish is a small rural community located ten kilometres from Colac, in Victoria's Western District. Five years ago, faced with closure or amalgamation with Colac, the parishioners made the decision to remain as a separate lay-led community, with the coordination entrusted to three lay leaders - Kathleen O'Donnell, Margaret Allan and Carmel Finlay. The parish had been well formed by the previous Parish Leader Sr. Margaret Carmody sgs, and many parishioners spoke with great gratitude and admiration for the way she had encouraged, trained and empowered them during her time there. The three Coordinators work in specific areas of parish ministry and liaise with the Parish Leadership team to overview community life and make decisions together.

Cororooke Parish consists of two connected yet separate communities gathered around their two churches, St. Brendan's at Coragulac and St. Joseph's at Pirron Yallock. Holding pride of place in the community are the lay-led liturgies, held fortnightly, and alternating with Mass provided by a visiting retired priest, Fr Dan Arundel. Parishioners are proud that numbers at their services are consistent, whether it is a lay-led liturgy or a Mass, suggesting that

the community strongly supports this initiative and the leaders who provide the service. For other community activities, the parish comes together as one, sharing resources and personnel.

The parishioners at Cororooke have an enormous pride in their parish and a real ownership of their responsibility for the parish's

*Parishioners are proud that numbers at their services are consistent, whether it is a lay-led liturgy or a Mass...*

life and indeed its survival. They are committed to their leaders, respecting the personality differences, and understanding that they need and deserve their support. The parish has a high level of involvement in every part of parish life - from liturgies, to youth group, to pastoral care, to maintenance and gardening, etc, with over 50 percent of parishioners actively involved in some way or other.



The Parish Coordinators and parishioners at Cororooke parish

There is a genuine love of this community - from those who were born in the area, and returned sometime later, from those who had never left, and also from those who had moved more recently to the parish. The people are proud of the churches, the facilities, the way young people are encouraged and involved in ministry, and the way older people or those who are unwell are also cared for. Parishioners are realistic that their future may see closure for their parish, or amalgamation with Colac. Indeed, through challenges over the past few years, some thought that this model of lay leadership might be abandoned. However, trust in the model and the process of leadership rotation saw a renewing of energy and commitment, and the parish is once again facing the future with confidence.



## Harris Park Parish, Maronite

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Dynamic leadership
- Groups and activities for all ages
- Strong Liturgical focus

Harris Park parish is a Maronite parish for the Lebanese community close to the centre of Parramatta. Being the largest Maronite parish in Australia, the community at Harris Park is very vibrant and active. Attached to the church building is a large and very impressive community centre which holds the parish offices. Many of the programs run by the parish are facilitated through this centre which has ample room for the numerous activities and events in the community.

The Harris Park parish is unique in the sense that the faith of the community is not only attached to the church but to their Lebanese heritage and culture. The main languages spoken in the community are English and Arabic. Led by an excellent priest, Rev Monsignor Shora Maree, and his team of nine assistant priests, together they ensure that they are able to communicate with and assist people from all sections in the parish.

The vitality of Harris Park is primarily seen in the activities and programs which are very well organised and supported by the parish staff and volunteers. Many parish members and group leaders make their service to the church their top priority and show



The many activities and events at Harris Park parish

tremendous dedication to their role. As a result, the parish has a variety of activities and groups for the young and old alike. These range from outreach and service oriented groups to social and community gatherings.

*Many parish members and group leaders make their service to the church their top priority and show tremendous dedication to their role.*

Harris Park has a great focus on catering to the needs of the parishioners. For example, when the new community centre was built, the parish made sure there were facilities for early childhood groups, school children, high school students, young adults, couples, and the elderly. This was to ensure that people could be a part of the parish throughout their entire lives. As a result, the community centre is a thriving,

busy community hub where people gather regularly for all sorts of meetings and community activities, creating a welcoming and lively atmosphere in the parish.

The parish encourages all parishioners to lead an active faith life and provides a broad range of spiritual and liturgical services to facilitate this. In addition, it also has a strong engagement with the local community, especially through their dynamic parish youth groups that run social events, fundraising activities, blood donation drives and do hospital and aged home visits. Through a coordinated effort by parish leaders and parishioners, the parish continues to remain a place of great vitality amidst many challenges. It provides a much needed link to the Lebanese heritage for the parish community, and is a great source of strength and pride to many who worship there.



### Shepparton Parish, Sandhurst

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Strong liturgical focus
- Welcoming and hospitable in numerous ways
- Vibrant youth ministry

Shepparton is widely known as a welcoming' parish, and this welcome has two aspects to it: inviting people in and going out to meet them where they are. The schools are a good instance of this dual movement—the priests are always visiting the three schools which make use of the parish church on a regular basis. Similarly, the forty parish groups reveal this welcoming nature. There are many different ways for people to be involved in the life of the parish. Parishioners engage in a wide variety of special works, based upon a model of 'co-responsibility'—"it is our parish and we must work together as we are responsible for the Church". This involves many people and the flowering of individual gifts in many ministries. The key role of the Parish Priest, Fr Joe Taylor, is to "let this happen" and this encourages people to take initiative, leading to a tradition of lay leadership in the parish.

The commitment to welcoming is also evident in a number of ways, through the *Faith and Light* program for the disabled; the active St Vincent de Paul conference and the Bereavement group; the special Liturgical arrangements made for the Sudanese and Congolese parishioners; the deep involvement in the Inter-Church

Council of the area; and in the long-standing ministry of visiting the sick and the elderly within the parish.

The parish takes great care with its liturgies, ensuring they are at its heart. The emphasis on adult faith formation and the scripture sessions run by the priests ensure there is an ongoing deepening of the gospel vision. This is the prime means of connecting up and grounding parishioners; and the rhythm of the liturgy—we are invited in so we may be sent out—is the rhythm of parish life.

*"Hospitality is No. 1. You look after people like you would at home." - Parish housekeeper.*

Shepparton is also renowned for its youth ministry, with the assistant priest being a key player in the development of the 'Stronger' program across the Sandhurst diocese and beyond. The parish takes seriously the need to re-imagine how it might meet young people and invite them into the life of the parish and the development of local young leaders is central to this work.

Another way in which relationships are built is through the parish house, which is a welcoming place,



The celebration of the Liturgy at St. Brendan's in Shepparton

whether at the front door or in the kitchen. The housekeeper plays a key role in the life of the parish and beyond that of the Sandhurst diocese. *'Hospitality is No 1. You look after people like you would at home'* is her motto, and like the parish, she does the simple things very well. Out of this experience she has initiated events and groups, like the annual diocesan dinner for housekeepers and priests and the Friday night 'Fish and Chips' group in the parish.

A crucial factor in Shepparton's vitality is also the way in which the parish has managed the transition from the departure of the previous parish priest, who was dynamic and much loved, and the advent of a new parish priest via a period when the assistant priest was in charge. The parish has met this challenge with great energy, resilience and maturity, in the process revealing a deep faith that has been nurtured over the previous years, and that is open to change and new life. Joyous liturgical celebrations, vibrant music and the hospitality of parishioners make Shepparton a "powerhouse" in the diocese.



### From the Building Stronger Parishes website:

While our website is still in the development stage, we have many academic and research-based resources available, along with practical ideas that parishes can implement. Here are some features you might find useful.



[www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au](http://www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au)

To source some innovative programs and activities that can be started in any parish, check out our list of new ideas on the website.

There are many wonderful activities/programs/initiatives happening in parishes all over Australia. Perhaps you know of something inspiring that occurs in your parish or in other parishes around you. You can now fill in a form online and send this information to us.

You have to be a registered user to do this. Registration is FREE and EASY and only takes a few minutes.

*A Tale of Vitality*  
Send us your ideas and news about the wonderful things happening in your parish

### Looking ahead...

As we move into 2013, further research visits will include parishes in the dioceses of Toowoomba, Broken Bay and Perth. Some of these have already been chosen and arrangements have been made to visit them, with the result that our field work will begin again in early February next year.

In 2013, there will also be an emphasis on reporting and publication of our findings. The project website will be the focal point of our publications. Reporting via our website means

that results can be published quickly and updated as required. Along with this, photos, videos and other media can be easily included, and all the materials can be accessed by priests and people in parishes without having to wait for or buy print publications.

We will however, also publish our finding through print media in the form of reports, newspaper and journal articles, and possibly a book or two. Also, as noted in 2011, we expect to see a doctoral thesis emerge from the project.

As the project is a significant study that has attracted attention from Catholic researchers around the world, members of the research team will also present our findings at Australian and overseas conferences.

We look forward to your comments and suggestions on the project. Please feel free to contact us at the details given alongside. Also, please feel free to distribute this publication who whomever you think could benefit from the study.

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