Building Stronger Parishes

A place in the sun: Australian parish ministry in context
A review of ideas from
Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location
Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce
Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville: 2008)

Introduction
Every five years, the National Count of Attendance project is undertaken in Catholic parishes throughout Australia. Naturally, there is a tendency for the health of the Catholic Church to be judged by the number of people attending churches on a typical weekend. We have been reading about the 'bad' news since the 1970s – the data collected has shown a distinct pattern of decline.

But does attendance have to be the only measure of church vitality? Are we missing the 'good' news about our parishes? Importantly, if we only focus on church attendance, or the lack of it, what consequences does this have for efforts to enliven already struggling parishes, or for those that will find difficult times ahead as their numbers diminish?

Particularly when we consider the church in rural and isolated parts of Australia, how do we maintain hope in its ongoing existence when church attendances are so small, the availability of priests is dwindling and both of these aspects are will probably continue to diminish? Is location a primary factor in church vitality? Do we use location as an excuse for poor vitality?

What the book investigates
Current US research, especially the US Congregational Life Survey (US-CLS), is utilised in *Places of Promise*. The US-CLS is derived from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) and is part of the International Church Life Survey (ICLS) family of surveys that took place in 2001 in Australia, New Zealand, the US and England.

The book tests assumptions about location and church vitality. It looks at different levels of geographic location from local community to state, and major denominational groups.
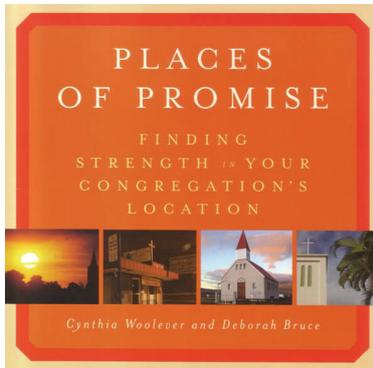
Places of Promise does the following:
- tests the myth that a church's vitality is determined by its community context;
- asserts that *every* church has a dynamic relationship with its wider community;
- provides evidence that *every* church can achieve strength & effectiveness in present location;
- shows extent to which *congregational effectiveness* and *numerical growth* are dependent on the fit between ministry focus and factors external to the congregation;
- demonstrates that churches can fail to achieve high level of effectiveness if their leaders judge some community factors to be powerful when they are in fact irrelevant to *congregational strength*;
- demonstrates churches can fail to achieve a high level of effectiveness if their leaders judge some community factors to be irrelevant when they are in fact powerful in achieving *congregational vitality*; and
- helps leaders distinguish between relevant and irrelevant community factors.

The book points out that the relationship between a church's internal characteristics and its location is usually multifaceted and, therefore, complex. It is important to look at the influence of internal factors (where control is possible) versus the power of community factors (where there is little or no control). The book puts forward the need for a new *situational model of ministry* – where churches need to embrace their location as another God-given strength.

It's not what you've got, it's what you do with it that counts

By identifying the ten important aspects of *congregational vitality* and exploring in what types of communities they are strongest, the book's authors demonstrate that all churches have some strengths with which they can work to improve their health, and these are:

- help their worshippers grow spiritually,
- provide meaningful worship,
- are places where worshippers participate in many ways,
- give worshippers a sense of belonging,
- care for children and youth,
- focus on the community,
- help worshippers share their faith with others,
- welcome new people,
- rely on empowering congregational leadership, and
- have a positive outlook on the future.

The authors were able to link each of the above ten congregational strengths with a unique set of locations and specific internal features of churches. For example, 5. 'caring for children & youth'; this strength is characteristic of churches that are identified as: in rural areas or growing suburban communities, mid-size, match on 18-44 age group, conservative Protestant; conversely, the authors found that this 'strength' is a challenge for churches that are: in economically distressed urban communities or high-mobility communities, small or large, Catholic or mainline Protestant.

When we are designing strategies for pastoral planning or parish mission, it is important to keep in mind that we are dealing with a number of different church communities with different strengths and challenges – even though they are all Catholic. Rather than one model of 'best practice', we need to look at various models to suit a range of contexts.

How can this research project be applied effectively to the Australian context?

We already have a range of useful data: the NCLS series, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) national censuses, and the National Mass Count project figures. NCLS provides us with measures of the vitality of church communities from all around Australia, and an indication of where their strengths lie. The NCLS community variables also closely match those of the US-CLS. The ABS provides demographic information at different geographical levels, and the Mass Count figures give us church attendance on a typical weekend at parish and diocesan levels.

What locations and community types would be useful to explore? The book has a specific set, not always relevant to the Australian context, so we would need to formulate our own. Do we need to look at national patterns by state & territory or diocese? Or do we need to investigate at a more detailed level, i.e. parishes? As pointed out by the Pastoral Project Office's Michael Brady in a recent report on his attendance at 'The Emerging Models Summit' in Orlando, Florida: "We can't always transfer American ideas to Australia without perhaps considerable refinement." He also notes: "There is nothing new about this, but it was impressed upon me very clearly, and it re-emphasised how important context can be."

'Horses for courses': some interesting findings in the book

Myth: effective congregations affiliated with major US denominations provide the same ministries in the same ways in every state. Reality: each congregation ministers as a niche within its specific religious landscape. Therefore, each effective set of congregation's ministry strengths differs from other congregations of its denomination in other parts of the country.

Church viability is about relating to local community. At their best, denominational theologies serve as "cultural handrails" – linking churches to the past but also guiding them to a promising future. Having denominational attributes doesn't mean that churches best serve their communities as 'McChurches'.

We can utilise the NCLS reports on local community for churches to help identify the characteristics of their 'specific religious landscape'. This can help churches identify what strategies may be useful for ministry in their own context. Given that many of our communities are changing demographically and economically, strategies useful at one time may not be so useful in the future. The 'specific reli-

gious landscape' or characteristics of a community need to be reviewed from time to time. Combined with information from NCLS reports on parishes, we can identify the strengths of each parish to help them keep existing members and attract newcomers to their community.

A 'good match' with community maximises church ministry

'Contingency theory' explores how an organisation adapts to its environment and whether that adaptation might relate to organisational success. Some of the principles of this theory can also be applied to churches, and this approach suggests those churches whose internal features and strategies are a 'good match' with the wider community can achieve the most effective ministry outcomes.

How can we determine what is a 'good match' between a church and its wider community? Using demographic traits, the authors showed that in the US the best matches occurred where congregations were very similar (within 10 per cent) to their community profiles on four traits (age, high and middle income households, being foreign born, unemployment). The biggest mismatches all related to age profiles (adults 18-44, 18-29, and 65 years and older).

The authors also looked at different denominations and their community-congregational match. The main conclusion they came to was that US congregations matching their community in terms of the 18-44 age group must be attracting worshippers in this age range; this says that their mission, programs and leadership are in tune with the community's future and, thus, the congregation's future. Interestingly, the biggest match for this demographic trait was for conservative Protestant churches.

What is related to *more* church vitality?	What is related to *less* church vitality?
Congregational features: • Denomination of congregation (especially conservative Protestant church), • Congregation's numerical growth in the last 5 years	*Congregational features: none*
Location factors: • Whether the percentage of worshippers aged 18-44 matches that in the wider community.	*Location factors:* • High-mobility urban communities • Western region of US • More years at current location
Worshipper demographics: none	*Worshipper demographics:* • Higher % of college-educated

What factors predict church vitality?

After looking at the role that worshiper demographics, congregational features and location played in increasing overall vitality, the authors found a consistent pattern emerging: *by and large, congregational location plays a minimal role in the strength that congregations can claim.* Of the many features studied, just three factors are related to *greater* congregational vitality in the US.

What has *no relationship* to church vitality?

- Worshipper demographics: average age, average income and proportion of women.
- Average number of attenders.
- Location factors: voters preferences for either of the main US parties, located within the 'Bible Belt', percentage of churched population in the county, rural communities, growing suburban communities, small cities and stable suburban communities, & economically distressed urban communities.

Question: can these factors help predict the vitality of churches in the Australian context? And if so, do we need to rethink our strategies for promoting church vitality?

What factors predict congregational growth? *Myth: population growth = church membership growth.* *Reality: at least a dozen factors are involved in numerical growth or decline of churches.* The book notes that 35 per cent of numerically declining congregations are located in growing population areas. A few factors relate to external features but many are dynamics internal to the congregation. *Congregational strengths play a central role in determining numerical growth.*

What is related to numerical growth?	What is related to numerical decline?
Emphasis on these congregational strengths: • Welcoming new people • Meaningful worship • Participation in the congregation • Caring for youth and children • Sense of belonging	*Emphasis on these congregational strengths:* • Sharing faith • Growing spiritually • Focusing on the community
Location factors: • More years at current location	*Location factors:* • Rural communities
Worshipper demographics: none	*Worshipper demographics:* • Higher percentage older worshippers • Higher percentage college-educated

The authors used worshiper demographics, congregational vitality and location factors to look at predicting numerical growth of a church. The results showed that in the US, ***generally, congregational location plays a minimal role in the numerical growth that congregations experience.*** As already noted, many congregational strengths produce numerical growth; those scoring high on five of the strengths (see next table) tend to be growing*.*

What is *not* related to numerical growth?

- Emphasis on these congregational strengths: empowering leadership; looking to the future.
- Worshipper demographics: percentage of female worshippers; average income.
- Congregational features: average church attendance; denomination.
- Location factors: all except rural communities and more years at current location.

Does location, in its many facets, and congregational strengths contribute to growth in the number of church attenders? The authors conclude that numerical growth is not the only indicator of congregational health – ***research shows that congregations need multiple strengths to be effective.*** Churches that are not growing or lack vitality need to look beyond a less-than-ideal location as the cause behind their challenges. ***Church leaders and members can't blame their location for lacklustre ministry.***

We can utilise the NCLS reports on parishes to help identify the strengths of each parish and their demographics, and use mass count data to look at numerical growth.

In summary
The most important dynamics predicting vitality in US congregations are (in order of importance): **the denomination of a congregation** – this points to the importance of theology, values and activities of worshippers that originates from their denomination. Local theology – how the local church applies the historical gospel to its current circumstances – directs the degree to which churches engage with their communities or isolate themselves from certain age or cultural groups.

And, secondly, whether the **percentage of worshippers aged 18-44** matches that in the wider community – making ministry relevant to today's young adults, who are the most underrepresented demographic group in religious life. This generation *needs* the local church for spiritual formation and support, and the local church *needs* their leadership now and for the future.

Overall, the authors found that congregations show signs of strength in all types of communities. These findings offer a challenge to all churches to:

- identify and build on their strengths, and
- celebrate the unique location that is theirs.

Utilising the basic methodology used in this study of US congregations, we can conduct research to suggest strategies that might help strengthen, indeed, transform Catholic parishes in Australia.