



WHAT MAKES PEOPLE FEEL THEY BELONG?

New findings from the National Church Life Survey

New research by Dr Bob Dixon, Director of the Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and Associate Professor Arunachalam Dharmalingam from Monash University on 2006 National Church Life Survey data show that Mass attenders' perception of the leadership qualities of their priests and other parish leaders has a powerful bearing on their sense of belonging to their parish.

Investigating sense of belonging

In this analysis, my colleague, Associate Professor Arunachalam Dharmalingam, and I set out to identify the main factors influencing Mass attenders' sense of belonging to their parish. We hypothesised that these factors might include personal characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, level of education and birthplace, but also attenders' experience of the Sunday liturgy and their assessment of the quality of leadership shown by the parish priest and other parish leaders. We also investigated whether certain features of the parish itself might affect attenders' sense of belonging; these included the location of the parish, its Catholic population, the number of people attending Mass on Sundays, and various characteristics of the Catholic population, such as the percentage of Catholics born in non-English speaking countries. The variables we included in our analysis are shown in Table 1, together with the percentage of attenders who responded to each category. As can be seen in the table, we measured leadership qualities in terms of four attributes and experiences of Sunday liturgy by three variables.

Table 1 shows that the vast majority of the respondents (82%) had a strong sense of belonging, although almost one in five did not. While most respondents were positive in terms of their assessment of the leadership

qualities of parish leaders, there were significant numbers who were not. For instance, only about two-thirds of the respondents believed that they were encouraged to use their skills in the parish, and only about half were aware of and strongly committed to the vision and goals of the parish. In respect to experience of the liturgy, just over half of the respondents said they usually had feelings of inspiration and joy at Mass, and close to three in four usually experienced spiritual growth and had a sense of fulfilling their obligation.

About a quarter of the respondents felt that the style of celebration of the parish priest at Mass was serious and reverent, and that he emphasised the sacredness of the occasion, whereas almost half (44 per cent) said the parish priest's style was warm and personal, with an emphasis on involving all present in a communal celebration. A further 20 per cent said the priest's style of celebration was casual, and the remainder said it was brisk and business-like (4 per cent) or dull (5 per cent).

About two-thirds of the respondents were born in Australia, about one in ten in Asia, and about one in twenty in Britain, New Zealand or North America. One in four had not completed secondary school, but a similar proportion had completed a university degree. Over half the survey participants had been going to church in their parish for at least 10 years.

Parish leaders influence Mass attenders' sense of belonging in a very powerful way, particularly through their ability to communicate a clear vision for the parish, their ability to get people to work together, and a readiness to encourage parishioners to put their gifts and skills to use for the good of the parish.



Almost two-thirds of the respondents were in their first marriage, with another nine per cent being divorced or separated and 11 per cent widowed. The never married category in Table 1 includes a small number of people in de facto relationships (1.2 per cent).

Our analysis is based on a final sample of 28,365 respondents from 213 parishes, representing all 27

participating dioceses, that were part of a national random sample of Catholic parishes that took part in the 2006 survey. The NCLS data was supplemented by data from the 2006 National Count of Attendance and the 2006 Australian Census. Parishes were allocated to one of three geographic categories – major cities of Australia, inner regional Australia, and outer regional or

Table 1: Variables used in the analysis

Variable	Response categories	%	Description of variable
Sense of belonging	No, happy as I am/ wish I did	17.9	Attendees' sense of belonging to the parish
	Yes, strong	82.1	
Leadership Qualities			
Leaders connect people	Agree	80.1	Parish leaders connect parishioners with each other and the wider community
	Disagree	19.9	
Vision	Not aware of one	23.6	Awareness and acceptance of parish vision and goals
	Yes, but not committed to it	21.3	
	Yes, and I am committed to it	55.2	
Encouragement	Encouraged	67.7	Whether respondents feel that parish leaders encourage them to use their gifts and skills
	Not encouraged	32.3	
Style of presider	Serious	27.0	Priest's style of presiding at Mass
	Warm	44.0	
	Brisk	3.9	
	Dull	5.0	
	Casual	20.2	
Attender experience of parish liturgy			
Worship experience	Rarely or never	6.7	Attendance at Mass results in feelings of inspiration and joy, and satisfaction with preaching
	Sometimes	34.9	
	Usually or always	58.5	
Spiritual growth	Rarely or never	3.9	Attendance at Mass results in sense of God's presence, growth in understanding of God and spiritual strengthening.
	Sometimes	25.1	
	Usually or always	71.1	
Obligation	Rarely or never	6.7	Sense of fulfilling obligation by attending Mass
	Sometimes	21.5	
	Usually or always	71.7	

Variable	Response categories	%	Description of variable
Social-cultural			
Country of birth	Australia	65.9	
	Italy or Malta	5.2	
	India, Sri Lanka, China ¹	9.4	
	NZ, Britain & Ireland	5.9	
	All other Western Europe	2.6	
	Vietnam	1.3	
	Eastern Europe, Former USSR	0.9	
Everywhere else	8.8		
Level of education	Primary & incomplete secondary	26.7	
	Completed secondary school	25.7	
	Certificate or diploma	20.7	
	University degree	26.9	
Marital status	Never married or de facto	15.8	
	In first marriage	64.2	
	Separated or divorced ²	8.8	
	Widowed ²	11.2	
Attendance length	Less than 3 years	11.7	Length of attendance at parish where questionnaire completed
	3-5 years	13.8	
	6-10 years	16.1	
	11-20 years	21.9	
	More than 20 years	36.4	
Parish context			
Remoteness Indicator	Major cities of Australia	66.8	Indicator developed by Australian Bureau of Statistics
	Inner regional Australia	22.2	
	Outer regional / remote	11.0	
Demographic characteristics			
Age	15-34	12.6	
	35-59	40.3	
	60+	47.1	
Sex	Female	61.1	
	Male	38.9	

Notes: ¹ Also includes Hong Kong and the Philippines; ² includes remarried after divorce or widowhood;

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remote Australia – using the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ ‘Remoteness Indicator.’ We used a technique called multilevel logistic regression and our results are shown in Table 2.

Mass attenders who felt that they were encouraged by leaders in the parish to use their gifts and skills were almost three times as likely to have a sense of belonging as those who felt that they were not being encouraged to use their skills.

Leadership and vision

We found that parish leaders influence Mass attenders’ sense of belonging in a very powerful way, particularly through their ability to communicate a clear vision for the parish, their ability to get people to work together, and a readiness to encourage parishioners to put their gifts and skills to use for the good of the parish. Furthermore, we demonstrated that parish priests, in particular, can influence attenders’ sense of belonging by ensuring that Sunday Mass is celebrated in a way that allows people to experience inspiration, joy and a sense of God’s presence, by the quality of their preaching and by their style of presiding at Mass.

As Table 2 shows, Mass attenders who felt that they were encouraged by leaders in the parish to use their gifts and skills were almost three times as likely to have a sense of belonging as those who felt that they were not being encouraged to use their skills. Furthermore, those who thought that the parish leadership tried to make connections between parishioners and to connect them to the wider community were twice as likely as those who did not think so to have a strong sense of belonging.

Feeling part of the parish is strongly influenced by whether parishioners are well-informed about and committed to the vision of the parish. As can be seen in Table 2, those who agreed that their parish had a clear vision and direction for its ministry and mission and that they were committed to that vision and direction were almost twice as likely to feel part of the parish community as those who were not aware of such a vision. Attenders who were aware of a vision for the

parish but were not committed to it were about 25 per cent less likely to have a strong sense of belonging than those who were not aware of a vision at all.

Our research shows that promoting a sense of belonging is not the responsibility of the parish priest alone. Pastoral associates, the parish secretary, members of parish pastoral councils, leaders of liturgy planning groups and other leaders in the parish all influence parishioners’ sense of belonging when they invite people to be involved, encourage them to use their gifts, and work in a way that is clearly and deliberately in accordance with the parish’s vision.

Priest’s style of presiding

Our finding about how the parish priest’s style of presiding at Mass affects people’s sense of belonging is particularly noteworthy. For some priests, the ideal way to preside is to be, in the words of the NCLS question, ‘serious, reverent, unhurried’, with ‘an emphasis on sacredness’, while other priests prefer a style which is ‘warm and personal’, with ‘an emphasis on involving all the people present in a communal celebration’. Our results show that there is no significant difference between these two styles in the impact that have on sense of belonging (See Table 2). Priests adopting either style are much more effective in fostering a sense of belonging than those who preside at Mass in a style which is ‘brisk and business-like’, ‘casual, often humorous’, or ‘dull and impersonal’. Fortunately, only five per cent of Mass attenders rated their parish priest’s style of presiding at Mass as ‘dull and impersonal’.

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Liturgical Experience

Also important for feeling part of the community was a positive experience of Sunday Mass. Experiencing inspiration, joy and preaching that is useful to one’s life,



Table 2: Odds ratios for sense of belonging in Australian Catholic parishes, 2006

How to read Table 2

Figures reported in Table 2 are odds ratios. For each variable, there is a 'reference category', indicated by ^R, which always has a score of 1. All other responses for that variable are compared to the reference category. An odds ratio of 2.00, for example, means that a respondent selecting that category is twice as likely to have a strong sense of belonging to the parish as a respondent in the reference category. On the other hand, an odds ratio of 0.80 means that a respondent selecting that category is 20 per cent less likely to have a strong sense of belonging to the parish than a respondent in the reference category.

Statistical significance is reported in Table 2 at 0.05 or 0.01 level, meaning that there is a less than five in one hundred chance or one in a hundred chance, respectively, that the result under discussion has arisen by chance. A statistical significance level of 0.5 is indicated by *, and a 0.1 level is indicated by **. Results without an asterisk are not statistically significant. This will normally occur when a score is close to 1, meaning that it is not very different from the reference category. Any small difference is likely to be due to chance factors and hence is not statistically significant.

Notes on Table 2

^R Reference category

¹ Includes Hong Kong

Figures in the table are multilevel logistic regression model estimates expressed as odds ratios.

Control variables not shown in the table include age and sex of respondents, and a number of parish level variables including the proportion of Catholics born in a non-English speaking country, number of people attending week-end Masses, Catholics as a proportion of total population in a parish and proportion of Catholics with a university degree. None of these were statistically significant when other factors were taken into account.

Variables	Odds Ratios
Leadership qualities	
<i>Leaders connect people</i>	
Disagree ^R	1.00
Agree	2.06**
<i>Parish has clear vision</i>	
Not aware of one ^R	1.00
Yes, but I am not committed to it	0.75**
Yes, and I am committed to it	1.90**
<i>Encouragement to use skills</i>	
Not encouraged ^R	1.00
Encouraged	2.79**
<i>Style of parish priest as presider</i>	
Serious and reverent ^R	1.00
Warm and personal	0.99
Brisk and business-like	0.67**
Casual	0.83**
Dull	0.58**
Attender experience of parish liturgy	
<i>Positive worship experience</i>	
Rarely ^R	1.00
Sometimes	1.24**
Usually or always	2.02**
<i>Spiritual growth</i>	
Rarely ^R	1.00
Sometimes	1.19*
Usually or always	2.00**
<i>Fulfil sense of obligation</i>	
Rarely ^R	1.00
Sometimes	1.19*
Usually or always	1.49**
Socio-cultural factors	
<i>Educational qualification</i>	
Less than secondary	1.02
Secondary complete ^R	1.00
Certificate/diploma	0.97
University degree	0.91
<i>Country of birth</i>	
Australia ^R	1.00
NZ, Britain or Ireland	1.06
Western Europe	0.87
Italy or Malta	1.46**
Eastern Europe or former USSR	0.68*
India, Sri Lanka, Philippines & China ¹	1.26**
Vietnam	0.85
Everywhere else	1.18*
<i>Marital status</i>	
In first marriage ^R	1.00
Never married or de facto	0.80**
Divorce/separated	0.81**
Widowed	1.23**
<i>Length of attendance in the parish</i>	
Less than 3 years ^R	1.00
3-5 years	1.12
6-10 years	1.60**
11-20 years	2.44**
21+ years	3.54**
Parish contextual factors	
<i>Catholic population</i>	
<=3000 ^R	1.00
3001-5,000	0.84*
5,001-10,000	0.83*
10,001+	0.84
<i>Place of residence</i>	
Major city ^R	1.00
Inner regional	1.01
Outer regional or remote area	1.43**
Random effects at diocese level	
Intercept	1.01
Random effects at parish level	
Intercept	1.04**

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at least sometimes, increased the likelihood of having a strong sense of belonging to the parish community. Those who usually had positive worship experiences were twice as likely to feel part of the community as those who rarely experienced inspiration, joy or helpful homilies. Similarly, those who experienced spiritual growth — a sense of God’s presence or growth in their understanding of God — at Mass on a regular basis were about twice as likely to feel a sense of belonging compared to those who rarely experienced this. Those who felt they were fulfilling an obligation by attending Mass were about 50 per cent more likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their parish than those who rarely or never felt a sense of fulfilling an obligation.

Those who usually had positive worship experiences were twice as likely to feel part of the community as those who rarely experienced inspiration, joy or helpful homilies.

Socio-cultural influences

We also found other factors which influenced Mass attenders’ sense of belonging to their parish, factors which had little or nothing to do with the quality of leadership. Not surprisingly, we found that the longer the duration of attendance at a particular parish the stronger was the feeling of belonging. Those who had been going to church in their parish for over ten years were up to three and half times more likely to feel part of the community compared to those who had been at the parish for fewer than three years.

Marital status also made a difference to whether someone felt a strong sense of belonging to their parish. While those who were in their first marriage or who were widowed had the highest likelihood of feeling a sense of belonging, those who had never married, who were living in de facto relationship, or who were separated or divorced were about 20 per cent less likely than those in their first marriage to feel so. Country of birth was also a factor. Those most likely to report feeling a strong sense of belonging to their parish were migrants from Asia (but not Vietnam) and Southern Europe, followed by the Australian-born, migrants from

other English speaking countries and Western Europe, while the lowest likelihood was among those born in Vietnam and Eastern Europe.

Geographic Location

Another important factor was the geographic location of parishes. People living in parishes that are located in outer regional, remote or very remote areas of Australia were much more likely to feel a sense of belonging than those living in parishes that are in major cities or in inner regional Australia.

Variation by parish

While the overall percentage of attenders saying they had a strong sense of belonging to their parish was 82 per cent, the percentage varied from a low of 66 per cent in one parish — a capital city Cathedral parish — to a high of 100 per cent in six parishes. Our analysis has shown that factors relating to the leadership qualities of parish leaders, the parish liturgy and, to a lesser extent, the size of the Catholic population and its location can account for most of this variation between parishes. The coefficients provided at the bottom of Table 2 show that there was still some variation at the parish level (1.04, statistically significant) but not at the diocese level (1.01, no statistical significance). This unexplained variation is likely to result from parish-specific contextual factors that have not been included in the statistical models.

These are reassuring results for bishops and parish leaders.

Lessons to learn

These are reassuring results for bishops and parish leaders. First, they show that leaders, simply by ensuring that they give prominence to certain aspects of leadership in carrying out their day-to-day responsibilities, can influence attenders’ sense of belonging. While as leaders they can do nothing about the location of the parish or attenders’ marital status or



country of birth, they can do a great deal about the quality of the liturgical experience and the perceived leadership qualities that emerged as such powerful predictors of a strong sense of belonging. They are not powerless in the face of overriding contextual or social factors.

A second reason why these results are reassuring for church leaders is that there is agreement between what the research shows is required to strengthen attenders' sense of belonging and the theological purpose of the parish, in which the celebration of Sunday Mass is the 'source and summit' of the life of the parish. A high quality of celebration is both theologically desirable and effective in enhancing sense of belonging.

So why is a sense of belonging important?

Building Mass attenders' sense of belonging to their parish is seen as an important pastoral priority in many Australian dioceses. The website of the Archdiocese of

Brisbane, for example, urges parishes to 'be welcoming, inclusive communities to which people are drawn and have a strong sense of belonging'.

Further, sense of belonging is recognised as an important component of social capital, the glue created by trust, shared values and experiences, and common purpose that holds a parish together and enables parishioners to work together more effectively for the good of the parish. The literature on social capital reminds us that attenders' sense of belonging is worth nurturing. It is not just about making individual attenders feel more comfortable; it pays off in that it strengthens the bonds between people, contributes to attenders' sense of ownership and co-responsibility for the parish, and fosters greater participation in parish life. In short, when priests and other leaders exercise the leadership qualities discussed here, they contribute to the production of their parish's social capital and the creation of healthy communities.

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