



## PRELIMINARY REPORT

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

- \* **How one new gadget could revive your parish...**
- \* **Ways to get your parish to work as a team...**
- \* **Ideas to connect with ALL the Catholics in your area...**

**and much more....**

### Background to the project

The Building Stronger Parishes research project was initiated by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in 2008 to explore how Catholic parishes, in various contexts, use their strengths and available resources to respond to a variety of challenges. The aim of this research was to identify and analyse some of these initiatives in parishes throughout Australia, which could then be implemented in other parishes facing similar challenges. Particular emphasis was given to stories of vitality and hope that bring life to their communities and have an underlying foundation in an ecclesiology of communion.

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee. A pilot study was conducted in St. Francis Xavier's Catholic parish in

Montmorency, Melbourne in November 2010. Research on the remaining parishes began this year and the project, including data analysis and dissemination of the findings, is expected to run until December 2013.

The goal of the project is to provide effective support and resources for Australian parishes, with an emphasis on facilitating the development of practical pastoral strategies. This preliminary report presents some of initial observations from the research conducted in the parishes we visited. It provides an insight into the vitality found in these parishes. At the conclusion of the project, detailed research findings will be presented in research reports, articles, discussion papers and other print and web-based publications.

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**Particular emphasis was given to stories of vitality and hope that bring life to their communities**





## Research methods

Twenty Catholic parishes from around Australia, identified as having developed particular programs or activities of importance, are being chosen for this study. These parishes are identified through discussions with the Project Reference Group, key diocesan staff, especially those involved in pastoral services, and people active in parish life. We have attempted to choose parishes from different contexts to enable us to gain perspectives from a range of parishes in Australia. We have not yet chosen all our twenty parishes as we want to stay open to valuable suggestions that might arise

through the course of the research.

We have finished conducting research in nine parishes so far and we will continue our research in the other parishes in 2012. Although the project allows for in-depth research to be done only in twenty parishes, we are collecting additional information about successful small endeavours in other parishes by phone, by mail and from parish websites.

Our data is collected during visits by a team of researchers who visit the parish over two to three days. We gather data through a number of interviews with the parish priest, other parish leaders and parishioners in general, focus groups, and observations of

liturgical celebrations and other events in the life of the parishes being studied. Other forms of data collection from documents such as Sunday bulletins, parish council minutes, parish website resources, etc. are also used. This method allows us to listen in-depth to the varied and complex stories of participants and obtain very rich, detailed data of a kind that could not be obtained by quantitative means.

Our focus this year has been urban parishes. We have one more urban parish to visit in 2012 with the remaining parishes to be selected from more rural areas.

## Project Reference Group

The Project Reference Group consists of the following members listed below. Most of the members are also involved in conducting research in the parishes.

- ◆ **Dr Bob Dixon** (Director, Pastoral Research Office)
- ◆ **Mrs Trudy Dantis** (BSP Research Coordinator, Pastoral Research Office)
- ◆ **Mr Stephen Reid** (Researcher, Pastoral Research Office)
- ◆ **Mr Michael Brady** (National Church Life Survey team, 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)

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### A guide to reading this report

The aim of the Building Stronger Parishes project is to discover some of the good things happening in Australian parishes. The parishes we have visited certainly have a strong sense of being vibrant and most of the people we met were generally very happy with their parish. We found that they were very willing to talk with us and share their stories of how the parish had shaped their lives.

The parishes presented in this report are not 'best practice' parishes i.e. they are not 'perfect

parishes' nor are they blueprints for other parishes to follow. They are not phenomenal in any way, nor are their resources unlimited or their communities without troubles. They are regular parishes that have found some new (and some old) creative and innovative ways of ministry to connect with their people in a manner that is life-giving and that has the capacity to change lives.


There was certainly a lot of 'good news' happening in the parishes we visited, in various areas of parish life such as the liturgy, community, service and leadership, amongst others. We found that it is rather difficult to

summarise it all in a few short paragraphs. What we have presented in this report therefore are *some* of the positive things happening in each parish. Our future publications will contain more in-depth and critical analysis.


The nature of this project requires us to concentrate on the positive aspects of the parishes we visited rather than their troubles and difficulties. While good initiatives in parishes may be seen as being wonderful by some and not-so-wonderful by others, nevertheless they are signs of hope for all those facing similar challenges.

### 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
Sugarloaf	Maitland - Newcastle
Launceston	Hobart
Bulahdelah	Maitland - Newcastle
Cororooke	Ballarat



*These are regular parishes that have found some new (and some old) creative and innovative ways of ministry to connect with their people in a manner that is life-giving and that has the capacity to change lives.*





## Montmorency Parish, Melbourne

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Inspiring leadership and a caring staff
- PACT (Pastoral Action Coordination Team)
- Parishioners who care

When we first decided to trial the Building Stronger Parishes project we wondered which would be a good parish to do it in. Our Project Reference Group picked Montmorency for its general recommendation as a 'good parish'. We found out very quickly during our visit, that the reason this was so, was because of the warmth and caring nature of the people in the parish community.

One of the key factors of the vitality of this parish is the consistently inspiring leadership of the parish priests over a very long period and the good history of the positive relationships created between them and the parish team. The impact that these priests have made on their parish community is enormous. As one parishioner noted, *"There's a welcoming warmth [about the parish] and it's because of the example given by the parish priests which the people have then followed....it's as if they have been shown how to live out the Gospel."*

Along with the priests, the current parish staff team also lead by example and give freely of themselves to accommodate the various needs of the people in the community. And while this is challenging most times, one staff member commented that it is all about "trying to do the

*maintenance that is necessary and not get bogged down by it while you do the mission, which is what we're there for".*

The parishioners themselves are very engaged in their community in the variety of groups that operate in the parish. People connect with what's going on and want to be involved in it. This is evident from the extent of active participation in the range of church activities. For example, the

*"The more we can share with others, the more we define ourselves by our letting go and the more we can make a difference in whatever way we can to people who have less" - Fr Terry*

current roster for various aspects of the liturgy has over 150 volunteers on it. The people in the community are quick to support a need when they see one. Apart from formal support through various outreach activities, often there is much more done informally by calling on people to help alleviate a current need. As the parish priest, Fr Terry Kean advocates, *"The more we can share with others, the more we define ourselves by our letting go and the more we can make a difference in whatever way we can to people who have less".* The



Welcome Mass for New Preps

genuinely caring nature of the parishioners means that a lot of good things happen in this parish quietly and without fanfare.

One of the most interesting features in the parish is the way in which all the parish groups work together through the PACT (Pastoral Action Coordination Team) group. The PACT team is made up of the leaders of all the parish groups who meet every 3-4 weeks. The aim of the group is to combine resources together to help a greater section of the parish. This avoids overlapping of assistance given to any one area and also helps to gain access to the most needy people in the parish community. Also, groups are able to find support from each other and work towards meeting the parish needs in the best way possible. The PACT group is the reason why a major contribution to the vitality of this parish stems from collaboration between the parish groups and the unique way in which the parish is able to nurture their relationships and hold them together.



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### Kings Park Parish, Melbourne

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Leading through service
- Parish Meeting night
- Liturgical hospitality

Kings Park parish is a large, multicultural parish that encourages and promotes service among all parishioners through active participation in liturgies and parish ministries.

The strengths of the parish are the leadership given by the parish priest, Fr. Noel Brady, and the strong sense of inclusiveness and community. Hospitality is one of the key features in this parish and it begins at the parish office itself which is open seven days a week to cater to the needs of the parishioners. The parish community is welcoming and inclusive and this is particularly felt at the Eucharistic celebrations, which are large gatherings of several hundred people, well attended by both adults and children. Large numbers of people are involved in the liturgy in various ways such as in providing music, welcoming people to the parish, as special ministers of the Eucharist, as proclaimers of the Word, as thanksgiving counters and in serving refreshments after Mass. The parish Welcome Desk is a vital aspect of the parish where newcomers can obtain a letter of welcome and ample parish information. It is also the most popular ministry in the parish among the fifty-one other ministries that the parish boasts of. As one Sudanese parishioner

remarked, *"We are very grateful for the support. For us it reflects the love of God"*.

Fr. Noel encourages lay participation and has set up structures through which parishioners are empowered to play a significant role and take ownership of various aspects of life in the parish. The monthly Wednesday night meeting is one such unique arrangement which ensures that there are a great many activities in which people can become involved. By holding all the group meetings on the one night, the priest is able to move freely among the various groups

*"We are very grateful for the support. For us, it reflects the love of God."* - Sudanese parishioner

as needed and it is a great place for people to get to know one another and be aware of all the happenings in the parish. Meetings on the first Wednesday evening of the month begin with a Scripture reading and a short period of reflection led by Fr. Noel. This is followed by an hour in which each group meets separately. Afterwards, people gather together for supper and a chat. Parishioners are encouraged to commit to twelve months' involvement in the groups. In



Hospitality and inclusivity in action

speaking informally to a number of people, it was generally noted that people valued the opportunity to contribute something to the parish. The youth in particular appreciated the inclusiveness of the church, especially in the celebrations of the various ethnic cultures when each group participates in special ways in the Mass and provides their own culture's food and entertainment.

The parish also has an exceptional communication system with its parishioner base through a number of volunteers who hand deliver parish brochures twice a year to all homes in the parish. This is no small feat, with thirty-four thousand brochures being delivered at Easter this year. The high level of enthusiasm about parish life and the strong sense of community among parishioners through small groups are two of the reasons why this parish does so well.



## Narre Warren Parish, Sale

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Strong multicultural nature
- Diverse range of parish groups
- Supportive links with the wider community

Narre Warren parish is one of the largest in Australia, being located on the outer south-eastern suburban fringe of Melbourne. The parish community is largely composed of a diverse range of ethnic groups, many of them recent migrants from India, Sri Lanka, South East Asia and the African continent.

The multicultural nature of the parish community is reflected in the style of worship and devotional life of the parish and the way the different cultures work together to bring out the best in the parish. Diversity, and its acceptance, means that people in the parish feel a strong sense of belonging and a great level of satisfaction to the extent that some remarked that it was like *“their second home”*. Perhaps this is because what migrants know best is that while everything else might be different from things in their country of origin, the church is the same and it is the first thing that new arrivals look for.

Like many large parishes, one of the noticeable characteristics of this parish is the number of attenders at Mass. The 11am Mass had around 800 people, with considerable numbers having to stand. Although the Mass we observed was a “special” Mass (there were 12 children



Multicultural Mass



celebrating First Eucharist), many of the Masses are always filled to capacity and especially at Easter there is a very real concern about how to fit everyone in for the services. The musicians (guitars, drums, keyboard, and singers) at both the Sunday morning and evening Masses were very good and both Masses we observed had balanced proportions of various ages present, although the Sunday evening Mass did have many more teenagers and young adults. The atmosphere during these Masses was warm and exuberant and reflected the multicultural nature of the parish.

*“All the groups are doing well because they are allowed elbow room to grow.” -Parish group leader*

The previous parish priest and current one, Fr Brendan Hogan and deacon have been very supportive and affirming of the many groups in the parish—guiding, but not interfering. As one parishioner declared, *“All the groups are doing well because they are allowed elbow room to grow.”* Hospitality and outreach, prayer and devotion, thriving youth groups and employment

support groups, among others, illustrate the ways in which this parish community seeks to live and proclaim the Gospel. The various group leaders we interviewed spoke of the parish as vibrant, welcoming and accepting. One of them is an Anglican, but, with his wife (who is Catholic) he has been leading the Friendship group (a group for older people in the parish) for about ten years and has also served a term on the Parish Council.

Given the size and rate of growth of the parish, and the fact that it has three large primary schools within its boundaries, the sacramental program is very active, and there are great opportunities for stronger connections between the church and the schools. Commenting on the local population growth, one of the leaders noted that *“it would be disappointing if it [the parish] wasn’t successful”*. The vitality of this parish arises from the fact that it continues to meet the worship and social needs of a highly diverse and fast-growing population. Moreover, some of the groups are connecting with the wider community to make a real difference.

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### Willunga Parish, Adelaide

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Integrated community model
- Excellent parish management
- Ecumenical community links

The historical Willunga Catholic Parish is part of the Southern Deanery of the Adelaide Archdiocese. We visited the Galilee community at Aldinga which is one of the Mass centres of the parish.

Mary of Galilee church at Aldinga was opened in March 2009 and is situated on the grounds of the new Galilee Learning Centre, which currently caters for primary-aged children. In previous years, the church belonged to the Lutheran community and Catholics used the Galilee Church for Mass from the late 1980s up until 2006, when it was transferred to the Willunga Catholic Parish. Galilee has a very amicable sharing arrangement with the Lutheran community who continue to share their facilities and use the building to this day.

Parish priest Fr. Charles Gaucci has developed a structure to promote lay leadership of the community. There is a single council that oversees the Galilee Community, which includes the school as well as the worshipping community and the pastoral care of the community. The school is set up as a community school and this means that instead of a school board meeting, they have a council meeting that includes representatives from the pastoral



Blessing and Opening Stage 2 Galilee Learning Centre, Hall and Op Shop - Sept, 2011

team and the parish community. All decisions are made bearing in mind the interests of the whole community, rather than treating the school and parish as separate entities. This integrated model also thrives on the warm and welcoming community spirit in the parish that has been experienced by older parishioners and newcomers alike.

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Fr. Charles has put considerable effort into developing the empowering structure of the parish. As one of our researchers noted, without that strong leadership this type of empowering structure would not have been able to grow and flourish and hold together. With

the parish set to expand significantly in the coming years, it will be these structures that will be critical to the survival of small communities like Galilee.

The one weekend Mass we attended on a Saturday night in Aldinga was a pleasant and prayerful community-centered gathering. The priest was warm and welcoming and took trouble to include everyone in the celebration, especially during the homily which he divided into two parts to cater to the children and the adults present. One of our researchers met a woman whom he knew who acknowledged that this was a good Catholic community worth belonging to, yet who felt empowered enough to criticize aspects, in fact, felt a duty to do so in order that the parish might continue to develop and grow. Our researcher found this very healthy, as the greatest cancer in parishes is apathy or disinterest. There certainly wasn't any of that here.





## Albany Creek Parish, Brisbane

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Strong Stewardship culture
- Empowering leadership
- Vibrant music ministry

Albany Creek in Brisbane is a parish that has grown tremendously over the years into a vibrant community. Certainly, all the people we spoke to in the parish were enthusiastic about the church and particularly enthusiastic about the parish priest, Fr Ron Mollison, who has been in the parish for a considerable length of time and is much loved and respected. They see him as very approachable and as 'empowering' in that he is willing to delegate and encourage people in the parish to take responsibility for and make decisions regarding aspects of parish life.

Fr Ron does not come across as being a highly charismatic person. However, everyone said that he is down to earth and very 'solid' in terms of his approach to the Christian faith. His homilies also suggest that he is practical in his approach and seeks to apply the Scriptures to the lives of people.

The liturgical services at Albany Creek are simple in style and greatly enhanced by the vibrant music ministry. At the Sunday morning Mass, the music leader was a professional musician (Michael Mangan) who had written some of the music himself. It was folk-type in style and appropriate for the congregation.

Again, it was practical in expression, and some of it related directly to the Albany Creek parish. In the evening, a large group of young people led the music. Again, this was folk-type in style and was well led.

Apart from the priest and worship, the other strength of the church is in the stewardship model that has been adopted by the parish. Stewardship has been translated into having a wide range of groups operating within

**Stewardship has been translated into having a wide range of groups operating within the parish**

the parish and the parishioners being encouraged to join one or other of these groups. Large numbers of people are engaged in small group activities through which they make a difference to the life of the parish, the lives of people in the parish, and the lives of people in the surrounding community. There are currently 47 stewardship ministry groups operating in the parish sharing time, talent and treasure.



Parish ministries

While it was not possible in the time available to gather much evidence on how these groups were working, certainly there seemed to be an affirmation of them and of the great variety of activities that emerged from them. It was also reported that a large number of parishioners were involved.

At the heart of the vitality of the parish, then, are the structures of groups that have been developed. A second and associated factor is that the priest is happy to encourage these groups to take responsibility for their own activities. Thus, the desire of the priest to empower people within the life of the parish is an essential reason why the parish is such a vibrant community.



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### Narrabundah Parish, Canberra

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Welcoming parish with multiple ministries
- Strong sense of community
- Social outreach initiatives

Narrabundah parish in Canberra was selected by our researchers because it had consistently high scores across the board in the 2006 National Church Life Survey.

Our two researchers found that the parish had a great sense of community. From the time that they arrived for their first round of interviews, and were welcomed by the parish priest, Fr Steven Fletcher and Fr Ken, through to attending the two Sunday Masses and the CAFÉ night hosted by the young people after Sunday night Mass, both of them felt the vibrancy and energy of the parish community.

The hospitality they received in the parish was supplied by many people, from those who were part of the parish ministry team and the parish Eucharist centre, to the greeters at the church door, organisers of the Sunday morning coffee and the helpers at the Sunday evening Café.

The parishioners whom they interviewed credited a large part of the parish's vibrancy to the Missionaries of God's Love and their charism. The MGLs were seen as the best part of the parish and the reason why it has so much vitality. Interestingly enough, the MGL's themselves put it down to

their focus on the evangelisation of the poor and marginalised.

The outreach activity of Narrabundah parish is to be envied. The community of MGL brothers and sisters also plays a significant role in energising the parish and providing witness to

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authentic Christian life.

The willingness of parishioners to be co-responsible with their priests for the good of the parish is apparent. There are always lots of events happening at the parish – talks, retreats, formation and

social events, among others. The parish hosts a Eucharistic Centre that provides many activities and programs for the parishioners.

There are a variety of community groups that are attached to the parish. The parish also boasts a large and vibrant youth ministry empowering youth leadership. Cell groups act as evangelising prayer groups throughout the parish. An impressive factor is also the dedication to Eucharistic adoration which in this parish occurs for over 70 hours a week with plans to make it 24/7. One of our researchers felt that this seemed to guide the people in the parish and keep them focused on their spirituality.



Liturgical celebrations



## Glenwood-Stanhope Gardens Parish, Parramatta

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Respect for cultural traditions
- Adult faith formation
- Youth participation

Glenwood - Stanhope Gardens is a large new parish (established in 2002) in the Hills district of the Diocese of Parramatta. According to the 2006 Census, 30 per cent of the Catholic population were born overseas in non-English speaking countries. At least 33 nationalities are represented among the parish's Mass attenders, with Filipinos being by far the most numerous among the overseas-born. The young age profile, the cultural diversity, and a strong sense of belonging to a new parish and a new suburb give the parish an air of vitality, energy and identity.

Most of the overseas-born people in the parish have a traditional approach to their faith and a strong love for the Church. Sunday liturgies are vibrant and have high levels of participation, and music plays an integral part in all Sunday Masses, with different choirs or ensembles taking responsibility for particular Masses. The 10.30 Mass has a focus on families and includes children's liturgy, while the Sunday evening Mass is particularly designed for young people, who meet with the parish priest, Fr Dave Hume, afterwards for a time of socialising and faith formation. The parish endeavours to accommodate the spiritual needs of people from the various cultures



Parish 9<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Dinner Dance, Oct 2011

by adapting weekday Masses and other devotions for specific groups.

The parish attaches great importance to adult faith formation and parishioners are encouraged to undertake training

**Parishioners are encouraged to undertake training courses in various parish ministries at the Diocese of Parramatta's Institute for Mission.**

courses in various parish ministries at the Diocese of Parramatta's Institute for Mission. It is not uncommon for the parish to have more people enrolled in a course at the Institute than any other parish. The parish pastoral council includes the parish priest, the pastoral associate and the leaders of each of the four main pastoral ministry areas: liturgy, faith formation, community building and social outreach. Each of these areas has an active team of parishioners responsible for its

activities. There is close interaction between the parish and the school (which by next year will have all levels from kindergarten to Year 12), facilitated by the fact that the parish and the school share the same office block, so that there are ample opportunities for informal meetings as well as the weekly scheduled meeting between the parish priest and the principal. Three times a week the daily Mass involves a class from the school; all primary and secondary classes take their turn.

The strong sense of community in the parish is reinforced through regular 'cuppas' after Mass, regular opportunities for couples to renew their marriage vows, 'Father's BBQ' on Friday nights, and a group for the over 55s which organises well-attended monthly outings. The parish is a member of the Sydney Alliance, an alliance that includes the Diocese of Parramatta and other churches and groups such as unions that is looking at the social needs of Sydney with a view to promoting a more just society.



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### Summer Hill Parish, Sydney

#### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Small yet vibrant parish
- Strong sense of belonging
- Family centered ministry

Summer Hill is a reasonably small, cohesive parish in a well-established part of Sydney, not far from Strathfield. According to the 2006 Census, it is in the highest quintile of Australian parishes in terms of family income and percentage of Catholics in managerial or professional occupations and of Catholics with university degrees. About 30 per cent of the Catholic population were born overseas in non-English speaking countries, with the most common source countries being Italy, the Philippines, Lebanon and Poland.

The parish church is a very unusual design, having been a private residence before it was converted into a church. It is light and open, with a number of large modern stained-glass windows, and is almost as wide as it is long, meaning that no-one is a long way from the sanctuary. There are three Masses each weekend. Numerous families with children ranging from babies to teenagers attend the Saturday evening and Sunday mid-morning Mass, while the early Sunday morning Mass tends to be favoured by older parishioners. People arriving at Mass are welcomed and given a parish bulletin at the door, and the sense of belonging to the parish and of participation in the liturgy is tangible.

Fr Gerald Gleeson is the part-time parish priest and also a lecturer at the Catholic Institute of Sydney. He is assisted in leading the parish by a parish council. His homilies at Mass are a great drawcard for several people from the surrounding parishes. There were many we spoke to who said that they came to Summer Hill and got involved in the parish for the sole reason that the liturgies there were very good and inspiring.

*"We only serve great coffee!!"*  
-Fr Gerry

One of the highly successful initiatives started by Fr. Gerry since his arrival is to install a good coffee machine to be used by parishioners after Mass for morning tea. This has now become an opportunity for parishioners to stay on longer after Mass for a 'cuppa' and a chat and Fr Gerry can now proudly boast that at Summer Hill, "we only serve great coffee!"



Coffee after Mass

The parish has large volunteer base that is active in the various ministries in the parish. One of the main ministries is the longstanding and very active social justice group.

In addition, there are several events planned throughout the year for people to get involved in and to meet one another. The parish meeting which is held every two years to plan ahead attracts about 40 to 50 parishioners.

The parish also boasts excellent facilities for the newer, younger families that have come into the area. The large spaces provided in and around the church for various activities make this a 'child-friendly' parish that is appreciated by many.





## Launceston Parish, Hobart

### POINTS OF EXCELLENCE

- Strong parish leadership
- Vibrant Sacramental program
- Encouragement of gifts and skills

Launceston is an amalgamated parish that has three distinct worshipping communities, with additional Mass centres at the Carmelite Monastery and St Patrick's College Chapel. It also has three primary and one secondary school.

The amalgamation of the parish is seen by many to be the greatest strength of the parish, as it has brought together the best resources in terms of building spaces, finances, and the skills and talents of the many people in the three former parishes. As a result, Launceston now provides many programs and activities for the parishioners that only a large parish can. The parish-based sacramental program is seen in an extremely positive light by the leaders in the parish. In addition, the RCIA program and other programs such as the marriage preparation and youth groups set it apart from the neighbouring parishes.

The priests in the parish, Fr Mark, Fr Richard and Nigerian priest Fr Kene, are well liked by the people and are seen to be involved in many aspects of the parish. All the parishioners we spoke to were aware of a strong leadership and vision. The ordination of Deacon Paul Crowe has also been seen as a great bonus for the parish and a great support for the parish leadership team.

The current focus of the priests is on getting the parish to work together as one large parish rather than as three separate

communities. Most of the leaders also desire stronger ties between the communities, although they do not necessarily see that each has to give up its distinctiveness. The undertaking of the discernment of gifts in electing the parish council, which was strongly promoted by the parish priest, Fr Mark Freeman, was seen as very affirming of people, and seems to be working well. Many of those we interviewed also

**The amalgamation of the parish is seen by many to be the greatest strength of the parish**

talked enthusiastically about the mid-year parish dinner, seeing it as one means by which to help strengthen links between the three main worshipping communities. They also view the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the parish amalgamations (to be held next month) in a similar light.

The parish has a youth group which meets monthly, and Fr Richard in particular is quite involved in leading the young people. One of the leaders we spoke to mentioned the



Ordination of Deacon Paul Crowe

struggle in getting the young people in the youth group to attend Mass regularly. In general, it seems young people are mainly absent from Mass in the parish, except for at the regular youth Masses, and this was recognised as a challenge for the future. However, there has been a growing connection between the schools and the church and much time and effort has been invested in the building of relationships between the two. A monthly family Mass has also been held since early this year, and has slowly been attracting more families.

While there is cause for thanksgiving for magnificent facilities in the parish (some of the buildings are heritage-listed), there are concerns about the financial burden and restrictions they may pose in the future. Nevertheless, the parish continues to have parishioners that are engaged and willing to serve. In addition, it is utilising its priests across a large area, and through many Mass centres in greater Launceston, and successfully linking many families in the schools with the parish via the sacramental activities.

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### Project website

A website has been developed that will be the primary source of information on the project throughout its duration and beyond. While it is still in the development stage, the website has many academic and research-based resources available, along with practical ideas that parishes can implement. The intended audience are bishops, diocesan pastoral planners, parish priests and other parish leaders and all those interested in creating vital parishes throughout Australia.

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

### Looking ahead...

As we move into 2012, we will continue our research in the remaining eleven parishes. Of these, one will be an urban parish (Sugarloaf in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle), and the rest will be selected from rural or semi-remote areas. 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.

**The website has many academic and research-based resources available, along with practical ideas that parishes can implement.**

The resources available on the site will be updated and expanded over the course of the project. We are working on making it more interactive and

user-friendly and it is our hope that it will be rich source of information for parishes that wish to increase their vitality.

Screenshot of the project website



Next year and in 2013, there will 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, photos, video 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. Nevertheless, there will still be a place for the printed word in the form of reports, newspaper and journal

articles, and possibly a book or two. As well, we also expect to see at least one doctoral thesis emerge from the project. As this 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.

While the website is already live, we will publicise it early next year by 'launching' it with an updated range of resources and research findings.



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