



Building Stronger Parishes

Project update

August 2010

One of the major projects the Pastoral Projects Office is working on this year is the Building Stronger Parishes project, a project which has been funded by the Bishops Conference.

Earlier documents outlining the idea and scope of the Building Stronger Parishes project indicated that it would be carried out in the following four stages.

Stage 1

- Review of literature to do with parish vitality.
- Review of current parish publications, websites, etc.

Stage 2

- Analysis of existing data, including data from the 2006 National church Life Survey.
- Attention to current Australian and overseas research.

Stages 1 and 2 are now substantially complete although, by their very nature, they demand ongoing monitoring.

Stage 3

- Data collection, including field work.

The next stage of the project is the field work that is part of Stage 3. As outlined in the initial project proposal (Draft 4, November 2008), in consultation with bishops, pastoral planners and others, and drawing on the findings of the quantitative stage of this project, a limited number of parishes will be selected and invited to participate in the field work stage of the project. We envisage that around 20 parishes from a variety of types of locations will be visited by a pair of researchers. Each visit will last two to three days and will include a Sunday and at least one meeting with parish leaders. Research techniques will include observation, interviews with key personnel, parishioner focus groups, and other forms of data collection. We plan to begin with urban parishes late in 2010 and extend the research to parishes in regional and rural Australia in 2011. An ethics application regarding the field work will need to be submitted and approved before the field work can begin.

The type of parish I am envisaging for inclusion in the fieldwork would be a parish that has successfully overcome one or more of the challenges it is facing in a way that other parishes facing similar challenges can learn from and possibly adopt. The challenge might be big or small, and applicable to the whole of parish life or just to one aspect of it. What is important is that it is a story of vitality and hope, and that it has an underlying foundation in an ecclesiology of communion. There are a lot of parishes doing things full of vitality and hope. Parishes are, after all, ‘ingenious communities’, to borrow a phrase from the title of my thesis.

Stage 4

- Dissemination of findings.

The four accompanying documents, which are soon to be posted on our website, are the first fruits of Stage 4 of the project. The four documents are:

1. “What the literature is telling us”. This document provides a brief review of some of the extensive literature that the PPO team has examined over the last year or two. It reviews what the local and American research literature is saying about the characteristics of strong and healthy parishes, and also what certain Church documents say about what parishes should strive to be. It notes that an ecclesiology of communion provides the underlying vision on which the Building Stronger Parishes project is based.
2. “They couldn’t give a damn about us”, a report of the 2009 Rural Roundtable sponsored by the Christian Research Association. The report was written by Professor Des Cahill of RMIT University, a member of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research.
3. “A place in the sun: Australian parish ministry in context” is both a review of a book written by two of our US colleagues in the International Congregational Life Survey and an exploration of the possibilities for reproducing their research in Australia.
4. “Ingenious communities: Catholic parishes as creators of social capital” is a brief overview of my now-completed doctoral thesis.

Project reference group

We are in the process of assembling a project reference group that will bring wisdom, experience and specialist knowledge to the project and from which most of our field researchers will be drawn. The group will meet two or three times a year for the duration of the project.

Audra Kunciunas

Unfortunately, the project has been stalled since June following the departure of the previous project coordinator, Audra Kunciunas. Audra resigned to take up a new position as Executive Officer at Social Policy Connections (www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au), an independent ecumenical organisation concerned with social justice issues and based at YTU in Box Hill, Victoria. Audra is the author of two of the enclosures outlined above, and has done a great deal of the ground work in setting the Building Stronger Parishes project on a sound footing.

Bob Dixon
Director.
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