

# Building Stronger Parishes



June 2010

## What the literature is telling us

### The Building Stronger Parishes project

The *Building Stronger Parishes* project is being undertaken by the Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. In this project, we will explore how parishes, in various contexts, use their strengths and respond to a variety of challenges. Our aim is to identify initiatives in parishes throughout Australia that bring life to their communities and which can be implemented in other parishes facing similar challenges. We want to understand the positive dynamics that make these initiatives successful and, ultimately, to share our findings with all parishes. One phase of the project will involve, after invitation from selected parishes, visits by pairs of researchers who will talk with parish leaders and others and document successful initiatives. This phase of the project will get underway during 2010.

### Introduction

Each weekend in Australia, over 700,000 Catholics attend Mass. We often lament the absence of the other four million plus who have identified themselves as Catholics in the 2006 Census, but who do not go to Mass regularly, if at all. We can bemoan the empty pews, the lack of priests, secular concerns, the 'Xmas' factor and so on, but we forget about the many parishes known to be vital faith communities, offering spiritual, emotional and, often, practical support to families and individuals. Instead of looking at the "glass half empty", perhaps we need to look at the "glass half full"? Or, more accurately, perhaps we need to re-discover the "leaven" in our faith communities? William Bausch, then, asks us to appreciate where our strengths lie, the treasures that are our local parishes.

There is a wealth of books on how parishes can do better in specific areas: pastoral care, pastoral planning, evangelization, encouraging youth, empowering leadership and so on. This review will focus on research-based material which looks at identifying and measuring factors related to a holistic understanding of parish health and vitality. The review will also look at books which, through narratives, tell us about parishes that have overcome particular challenges or worked toward a new vision.

*The "social capital" generated by faith-filled people is incalculable. Religion is more alive than you think.*

William J. Bausch

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## Healthy churches

The health of a church is multifaceted and complex. First we need to define what it means to be a *healthy and vital parish*. Why and how are these parishes successful? How might these factors of health and vitality relate to other parishes? In other words, are the factors specific to a set of parish characteristics or to local context, or both?

There is a great deal of Australian quantitative data already available and ready to be 'mined' and this will be very useful for creating a 'big picture' framework for our project. Particularly rich sources of data are the National Church Life Survey 2006, the National Count of Attendance 2006 and the 2006 Australian Census.

## An ecclesiology of communion

Communion was the favourite ecclesiological concept of Pope John Paul II, and he frequently referred to it in his speeches and writings. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* ('At the Beginning of the New Millennium'), for example, he wrote that it is a 'spirituality of communion' that 'supplies institutional reality with a soul' (John Paul II 2001: n. 45). In *Christifideles Laici* ('On the Christian Lay Faithful'), he emphasised the connection of communion and mission:

Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other, to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion (John Paul II 1988: n.32).

Elsewhere in *Christifideles Laici*, he noted that the parish 'is not principally a structure, a territory or a building, but rather "the family of God ...", "a familial and welcoming home", "the community of the faithful" (John Paul II 1988: n. 26).

As John Paul II emphasised, the community exists not just for its own sake but for the purpose of carrying out a mission. The concept of communion sees the Church as a participative community that depends on the contribution of all its members; all have a responsibility to contribute to the health of the community and the exercise of the community's mission. In fact, the two cannot be separated; a church community that neglects its mission will not be a true communion. Implied, then, in the concept of communion is the idea that a parish which enacts this ecclesiology will form a *strong* community with a *commitment to mission*.

Communion ecclesiology provides the underlying vision of parish life on which the Building Stronger Parishes project is based.

## Authentic church

In *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology and Canon Law* (1997), James Coriden reminds us that "as those earliest churches formed and spread, they borrowed from their surrounding cultures and gradually developed patterns of communion and ministry that endured." There was no single pattern of parish or diocesan organisation or ministries. "Variety and diversity abounded...Developments took place at different times and under different social and doctrinal pressures. **The parish structures now familiar to us took a very long time to develop. It was not a smooth or simple historical chronology.**"

Coriden reminds us that the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* describes local Christian communities as being deeply rooted in their own cultures, in dialogue with the societies around them and ecumenically cooperative with other Christian groups. Parishes are not franchises like McDonald's outlets, they are local

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churches, fully authentic, as were churches in New Testament times. However, the relationship of local churches is mutually inclusive — they live in communion with one another.

Coriden looks at the principles of the church's social teaching that are foundational to the innate dignity and legitimate authority of local churches: the right of association, the common good, and the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. The internal life of the local church community must be respected, not dominated from outside.

He describes the parish as being an entity within canon law — as having a legal 'personality' — which does not envision parishioners as passive recipients of pastoral care, but encourages them to be fully active and engaged in the life of their parish community. Rights and responsibilities are not absolute, but are conditional and limited by the Church's social teaching.

The beauty of Coriden's book is that it puts the parish into a wider context, historically, canonically, and ecclesiastically. All of these aspects need to be brought into exploring how parishes can grow to be vital signs of the Reign of God.

### Comparing church attenders in the US and Australia

Andrew Greeley once described the Catholic parish as "one of the most ingenious communities that human skill ever created." He was talking about parishes in the US, but what he said also applies to Australian Catholic parishes.

How much do we need to take notice of what is happening in other countries? Does our Church in Australia have unique qualities and, therefore, do we need a different approach to developing strategies? As pointed out by the Pastoral Project Office's Michael Brady after attending the 2008 Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership 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 at the Summit, and it re-emphasised how important context can be."

Yes, there are major differences between the United States and Australia in the nature of society and the place of religion in it, and in the way that Catholic parishes operate. Yet there are also some strong similarities. Comparison of results for Catholic parishes from the 2001 NCLS in Australia and the US Congregational Life Survey conducted in the same year reveals a remarkable, even astonishing, degree of similarity with respect to patterns of attendance at Mass, involvement in parish life, and sense of belonging to the parish community. There are also differences, for example in attenders' experience of worship and in items to do with vision and planning. In many ways, however, results from the two surveys give the strong, and probably correct, impression that a Catholic parish in Australia is much more like an American Catholic parish than it is like the Baptist, Churches of Christ or Uniting Church congregation down the street (Dixon 2001).

Taking these observations into account, we will now have a look at some US publications about parish and congregational life.

## Pastoral Leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (2003-2007) studied pastoral ministry in Catholic parishes throughout the US. It looked at the variety of structural models for parish life, and found that the structure of pastoral leadership is continually evolving.

Despite the various parish contexts, there was a consistency that ran through the stories in one of the first books to emerge from the project, *Shaping Catholic Parishes: Pastoral Leaders in the 21st Century*. All the pastoral leaders involved expressed their sense of vocation, and were responding to a community need and a desire to serve God. What were the key elements? The importance of relationship, both with Jesus and their fellow parishioners — they are interested in people, and they love the Church. Exemplifying the role as servant-leader, they are humble, aware of their weaknesses as well as strengths.

The book is divided up into particular aspects of church life: welcoming, collaborative, ethical, pastoral, and prophetic. Three to five parishes are chosen to showcase each of these aspects, although every parish considered in the book came up to the mark in all five aspects.

Another characteristic of these parishes is the many ways people work together. Coming out of the Second Vatican Council, collegiality has influenced the Church at every level. The revised *Code of Canon Law* emphasises structures and processes that encourage and further collaboration. The language of collaboration is used in some of these stories but the importance of healthy relationships for effective ministry is also illustrated in the way people in these parishes work together.

*...uniqueness most often comes not from a breakthrough idea, but most often comes from the accumulation of thousands of tiny enhancements.*

Tom Peters

As well as the need for hard work, creative solutions, discernment and patience, there is also the challenge of integrating new models into the existing institution. An example given illustrates the need for thoughtful integration of new pastoral workers. Adaptation of diocesan policies may be needed to address these issues.

Finally, is this study of any use to us in Australia? The project was designed to review and evaluate parish leadership and organisation; what models will we discover? Do we need to use a multi-disciplinary approach? This type of commentary can help put our local stories into a larger framework, providing us with a litmus test for the research — do the changes happening in parishes represent “an adaptation in our age that is responsive to the signs of the times and faithful to who we are?” Through qualitative research we will be able to present “the real people of the church, in their own voices”.

## Renewing parish culture

Piderit and Morey (2008) describe Catholic religious sisters as “the most effective transmitters of Catholic culture in the United States”. The authors look at the strategies used by these women to successfully cultivate and transmit Catholic culture in specific institutional settings. They apply insights from the cultural legacy of religious women’s congregations over the past two

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hundred years and come up with new ways of nourishing parish life today. They also base this study on extensive interviews conducted in forty parishes.

The general analytical framework applied throughout this book is made up of four specific principles for success that historically marked the institutional approach of religious women. **Narratives** were used to help institutional participants make sense of Catholic culture. These women's congregations also established and enforced clear **norms** or standards of behaviour for all those involved. Spiritual and real-world **benefits**, such as high quality education and health care, were provided by women religious. Numerous small **practices** or rituals were used to reinforce Catholic cultural beliefs, values and norms.

*Renewing Parish Culture* analyses the key areas that define parish culture: Eucharist, the sacrament of reconciliation, prayer, loving service and education. The authors also develop the four historic 'principles for success' of women religious to help evaluate current and proposed new practices for parish cultural renewal.

The authors make the point that cultures can only change if cultural components (content, symbols and people) change and change *slowly*. Also, because parishes are still in a period of great change, it is difficult to predict what they will look like in the future — but they must make changes in a way that attracts people to the parish.

In Australia, Catholic religious have succeeded in difficult circumstances. What crucial factors laid the foundations for their success? Can those factors still be validly applied in parishes today?

### Finding strength in your church's location

Particularly when we consider the Church in rural and isolated parts of Australia, how do we maintain hope in its ongoing existence? Is location a primary factor in church vitality? Do we use location as an excuse for poor vitality?

Current US research, especially the US Congregational Life Survey (US-CLS), is utilised by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce in *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location*. 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 across the United States.

The authors point out that the relationship between a congregation'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 (over which the congregation has little or no control). The book puts forward the need for a new *situational model of ministry* — where congregations need to embrace their location as another God-given strength.

This approach to contextual research could be applied to the Australian situation, because we already have the necessary data from NCLS, the Australian Census, and national Mass attendance figures.

*More details about the findings discussed in Places of Promise can be found in a separate PPO occasional paper.*

### The mission-driven parish

In *The Mission Driven Parish* (2007), Patrick Brennan writes that there are many creative pastors and pastoral ministers, and many models of excellence in parishes in the US. What is needed is creative, life-giving mentoring to help parishes with their evangelistic responsibilities.

In the US, parishes that have closed often had very large proportions of different cultures within them: “Church leaders and pastoral leaders have not engaged in the creative conversations and planning required for the effective evangelization of people of multi-generations and cultures.” Brennan also notes that often what is missing is a spirit of ‘servant leadership’.

If parishes are going to be effective in the future, Brennan argues, there are deeper realities for people to which the church needs to attend. The church is in a special position to support people in finding deep happiness through faith and spirituality, genuine community, gratitude, support for our grief, family and friends. Brennan suggests that parishes should be places where we can enter into genuine communion with God and each other (and the natural world). In this book, he tackles this potential in all parishes.

Brennan begins looking at what makes a parish healthy by describing a secular approach. In the book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins’ writes that **the greatest enemy of an organisation is complacency**. Among Collins’ findings about what makes a great organisation are the following: leadership with a paradoxical blend of humility and professional will; leadership that is working with the right people (“First Who, Then What”); confronting realities of the situation, yet never losing faith; practising simplicity in doing what one is best at; engaging in what one is

passionate about; being sensitive to what drives the ‘economic engine’; having a culture of discipline together with an ethic of entrepreneurship; and having mission-appropriate technology.

The most basic part of the Reign of God is the local church and family. Being conscious of family relationships challenges us to consider *social context*, the network of wider relationships of which a person is part.

Brennan reminds us that once a parish had articulated its vision, mission and heart values, it must then find structures to help it achieve these. Too often, we begin with structures and then try and squeeze them into “the wrong dress size”.

Throughout the book we consistently see words like: creative, re-imagining, and relationship. Brennan tells us that the future of parish life is radical commitment to the Reign of God. Is there a sense of entrepreneurial spirit at work in parishes that meet their particular challenges? Also, what makes the parish unique compared to other organisations? What happens when we take the parish out of the community equation? These are issues for qualitative methodology to explore.

### The emerging Catholic parish

The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, a seminal work of unprecedented scope carried out in the 1980s, adopted a multidisciplinary approach to the study of US parishes.

*The Emerging Parish*, a book based on the Notre Dame Study, describes American parish life some twenty years after the Second Vatican Council. It reveals that the

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Catholic Church in the US had undergone an historical shift during that period: 83 per cent of parish leadership (paid or voluntary) was made up of lay people; in 64 per cent of parishes surveyed, leadership was a collaborative effort between ordained and non-ordained; in about 10 per cent of parishes, someone other than a priest, such as a married deacon or a group of lay people, had the main role of leadership; nearly half of all those who attended church took part in some activity outside Mass; active parish members tended to 'pick and choose' from Church teachings; and American Catholics had internalised Vatican II changes and wanted more from their parishes.

The world has changed and the Australian situation differs from that in the United States, but the Notre Dame Study remains an excellent model for the study of parish life and so to some extent the methodology of the Building Stronger Parishes project is based on it.

## Excellent Catholic parishes

Paul Wilkes calls his book a 'survival guide', a pattern for successful parishes. *Excellent Catholic Parishes* (2001) profiles eight American parishes, representing various types from across the country, that grew by meeting their challenges with vision, energy and hope. Wilkes' focus is on what successful aspects of parishes are *reproducible*. This is an important reminder for any practical project. Will other parishes be able to use these examples?

Reading the stories about these Catholic parishes, you notice that they are courageous, unafraid to do what needs to be done, but also mindful of tradition. They are examples of *communio ecclesia*, looking outward as a mission church, taking the time to understand and

develop relationships with their wider community and the other cultures in their midst. These communities of faith are very welcoming. They do not take on new ways of being church for the novelty or to be heroic pioneers, rather, they see new and current needs and try to meet them. The excellent Catholic parishes in Wilkes' book seek to be authentic, Spirit-guided communities of faith.

Wilkes makes the point that the investigators whose reports led to the writing of the book were not social scientists assembling data, but were lay people interested in observing parish life. The Building Stronger Parishes project team has the advantage of being both social scientists *and* lay people interested in parish life.

## Australian studies

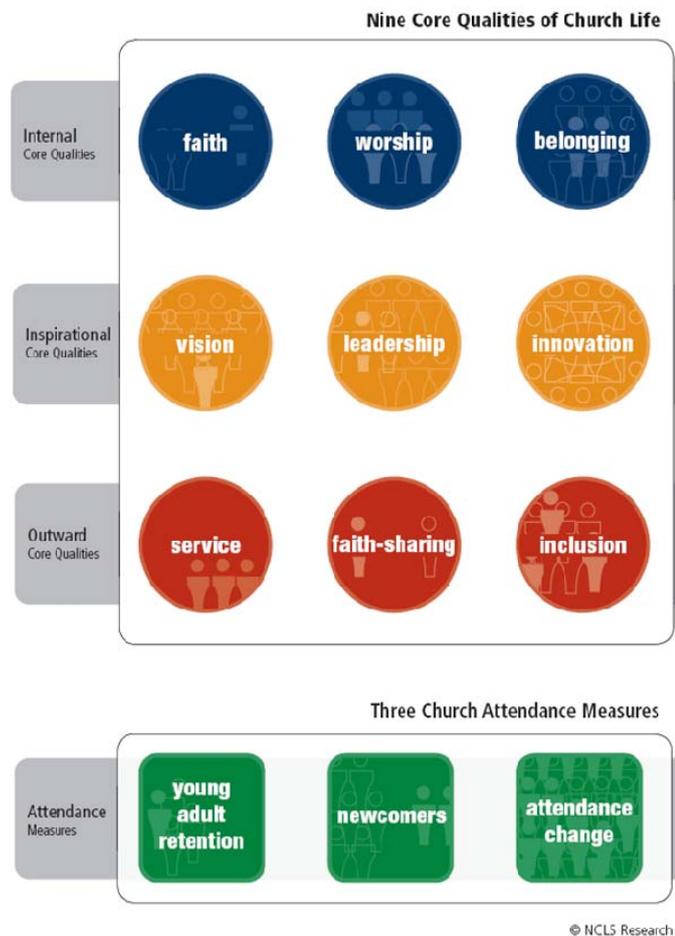
### Enriching church life

In *Enriching Church Life: A Practical Guide for Local Churches* (2006), John Bellamy, Bryan Cussen and the rest of the NCLS team have shown how the results from the National Church Life Survey can be used by parishes as a tool for identifying and developing their strengths.

In *Enriching Church Life*, vitality is understood as being about the extent to which churches 'help people to respond to the Christian faith, to worship God and to explore the implications of faith in everyday life'. It is about the extent to which churches are 'communities of believers, places of love and acceptance ... places where people can be caught up in God's mission to the wider community' (Bellamy et al., 2006, p. 2).

The exploration of vitality in this book is based on the nine Core Qualities of church life identified and developed by NCLS over 15 years of research. These

Core Qualities refer to internal aspects of local church, to aspects related to outreach, and to certain characteristics of leadership that energise and inspire the community. These are supplemented by three measures of attendance that are also related to vitality. The whole scheme can be summarised in the figure below.



Bellamy et al. make it clear that they do not regard church growth as the pre-eminent measure of church health (2006, p. 10). Nevertheless, in their analysis of data from churches of all denominations that took part in the 2001 NCLS, they found that churches with strong attendance growth in the period 1996 to 2001 performed better than churches with a strong decline in attendance on eight of the nine Core Qualities (Bellamy et al., 2006, pp. 30-36).

### The Catholic parish and social capital

Parishes have long been seen as creators of *social capital*, although that term has not been used until recent years. In his PhD thesis *Ingenious Communities: Catholic Parishes in Australia as Creators of Social Capital and Religious Social Goods*, Bob Dixon has employed the NCLS Core Qualities of healthy churches as measures of the social capital produced by a parish.

Dixon's thesis involves an investigation of the relationship between the level of social capital as measured by the Core Qualities, and selected outcomes of social capital, such as attendance or attendance rate, and levels of parish involvement by attenders. He also gives attention to the question of the impact of contextual factors such as location and the demographics of the local Catholic population on the social capital outcomes.

Dixon found that, in parishes located in the major cities, local contextual factors, and whether the parish had a Sunday evening Mass, tended to be better predictors than the Core Qualities of the social capital outcomes. In regional and remote areas, the picture was less clear-cut, but the Core Qualities appear to have a stronger effect than they do in the cities.

In urban parishes, the existence of a Sunday evening Mass was positively related to five of the six social outcomes examined in the thesis, but it was not related to any of them in rural parishes. In the cities, by far the strongest predictor of higher levels of involvement in parish life was Core Quality 5, Empowering Leadership, measured by the extent to which Mass attenders feel they are encouraged to use their gifts and skills.

A summary of Dixon's work on thesis is available from the PPO as a separate document, and the full thesis is available on request.

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## Rural church life

Today, even though the number of people attending churches in Australia has decreased, rural churches still dot our broad landscape. However, many rural communities are now facing unprecedented levels of change. How will they survive prolonged drought? How do they cope with the vagaries of international markets for agricultural products? If Australian farmers are suffering then everyone living in rural areas will be suffering to some degree, including local parishes. The drought, along with unemployment, decline in services and local businesses, and a decline in both the wider population and church attendances create anxiety for all rural church leaders.

Recently, the Christian Research Association conducted research, both quantitative and qualitative, on rural church life. Although the churches studied were Uniting and Anglican, some members of local Catholic parishes and non-church people were also interviewed. These projects, then, provide an opportunity to look at how rural churches are faring within the context of their wider faith and secular communities. They also provide useful background in the development of the methodology for the Building Stronger Parishes project, by helping us to ask the right questions in the context and dynamics of rural church life.

The rate of rural church decline in the Uniting and Anglican churches is reflected in the patterns of leadership and organisation, and in the financial situations of these congregations. When we look at the demographics, we see rapidly aging congregations compared to their wider rural communities and to urban churches. About half of the congregations studied have a single ordained leader, while another third have

mixed leadership teams. Almost two-thirds of these rural church leaders have two or more congregations or parishes. Something like 45 per cent of rural parishes have undergone some structural change such as amalgamation, clustering, sharing of ordained leaders, or having non-ordained leaders.

Over the past two decades, various models of church organisation and leadership have emerged in the Anglican and Uniting Churches in rural Australia, including the following:

- *Ecumenical Ministry*: the joining by covenant of two or more congregations from different denominations.
- *Area Team Ministry*: a team of ordained and lay people minister to a number of small towns throughout a large area.
- *Resourcing Ministry*: in order to free a number of small congregations with lay leadership teams from the burden of administration, scarce resources, and financial burden, churches form clusters around a larger regional centre. Each cluster is overseen by an appropriately trained Resourcing Minister who acts as an educator, facilitator, catalyst and mentor for the group of congregations.
- *Rural Chaplaincy*: the aim of rural chaplains is to support churches in community building, working intensively with, say, ten communities to support and enhance the work of other service providers and provide pastoral care as needed; to develop gifts and capacities of individuals across financial, social, emotional and spiritual areas; to affirm and advocate for rural people; and to support any church-based disaster response.

While all models were found to have some weaknesses, and no one model was best in all contexts, there was a sense that these faith communities had found some hope for the future. For some, the new way of organising church was very fruitful, for others it was simply helping the community to survive a little longer.

Rural Catholic parishes are affected by many of the same factors as these Anglican and Uniting churches, and they are facing the same challenges. Mass attendance rates, for example, tend to be lower in the rural and regional dioceses than in major city dioceses. There are problems for Catholic communities with some of the solutions adopted by Anglican and Uniting congregations, such as sharing Eucharist in combined services with other denominations, but other solutions relating to problems of leadership and organisation have adopted strategies and ideas that Catholic parishes can implement either totally or with suitable amendments. Rural communities are experiencing changes that will probably never be reversed and in response new models for sustaining faith communities must be developed. The Building Stronger Parishes project will use the CRA work on rural congregations as a springboard for examining some of the vital things that are happening in Australia's rural Catholic parishes.

Following the completion of the research, CRA organized a national Roundtable on Rural Church Life, which was held in Geelong in June 2009. A report on the Roundtable stressing its relevance for the Catholic Church in rural areas, and prepared by Professor Des Cahill of RMIT University, is available from the Pastoral Projects Office.

## Conclusion

The books and other works reviewed here are part of a large treasury of resources that add to our theoretical and practical understanding of the way Catholic parishes work, and in doing so provide information that parishes everywhere can use to improve their own quality of community life and effectiveness in mission.

The problem is that parish and diocesan leaders often do not have time to read the available books. One aim of the Building Stronger Parishes, then, is not to produce more books that pastoral leaders won't have time to read, but to find helpful ideas and successful initiatives, and present them in a condensed way so that they can inform the thought and actions of people actively engaged in parish life. This review of some of the existing literature is one way in which the project has already begun to do that. Other print resources will follow, and the Internet will also play a powerful role as the project develops.

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