



## Ingenious Communities: Catholic parishes as creators of social capital

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*The American Catholic parish is one of the most ingenious communities that human skill has ever created. Its overlapping networks of religious, educational, familial, social and political relationships has created ... “social capital”, a social resource in the strict sense of the word because it comes not from individual investments but from relational patterns. To call the overlapping networks of human relationships “capital” is to say that, as with any capital, more can be accomplished because the relationship networks exist.*

- Andrew Greeley (1990), *The Catholic myth*, pp. 154-155

This paper is a summary of my PhD thesis ‘Ingenious communities, Catholic parishes in Australia as creators of social capital and religious social goods’. The doctorate was undertaken at Monash University under the supervision of Professor Gary Bouma, with the assistance of Associate Professor Arunachalam Dharmalingam and Dr Andrew Singleton.

In the thesis, I have created a theoretical framework for an understanding of Australian Catholic parishes by linking together social capital theory, the ecclesiology of communion, and the Core Qualities of healthy churches developed by the National Church Life Survey team.

Parishes have long been seen as creators and repositories of what is now often referred to as social capital, although that term has not been used until relatively recent years. In the thesis, I show why social capital and the related concept of religious social goods provide a productive framework for the study of Catholic parishes and test how well a social capital model of parishes works in practice, using data from the National Church Life Survey, the Australian Census and the National Count of Attendance.

A summary of the theoretical framework is shown in the table below.

### Communion ecclesiology, Core Qualities, religious social goods and types of social capital

NCLS Dimension	Core Quality (Religious social good)	Social capital type
Inward Core qualities	Alive and growing <b>faith</b>	Bonding social capital
	Vital and nurturing <b>worship</b>	
	Strong and growing sense of <b>belonging</b>	
Inspirational Core Qualities	Clear and owned <b>vision</b>	Transformational or catalytic social capital
	Inspiring and empowering <b>leadership</b> Imaginative and flexible <b>innovation</b>	
Outward Core Qualities	Practical and diverse <b>service</b>	Bridging social capital
	Willing and effective <b>faith-sharing</b> Intentional and welcoming <b>inclusion</b>	

## A social capital approach to parishes

Community lies at the heart of the Catholic parish, but it is a notoriously difficult concept to define and measure. In adopting a social capital approach, I make use of two related sociological concepts to investigate the strength and effects of community in Australian parishes. One of these is social capital, the other is 'religious social goods', a concept derived from Weber's notion of salvation goods but extensively developed by Stolz (2006). Linking these concepts helps me to probe the mechanisms by which a community creates social capital.

I also make extensive use of the theological concept of *communio*. Communion (*communio* in Latin) expresses both the sharing of believers in Christ and the bond that links persons within the Christian communities and the communities with one another (Coriden, 1997). Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), theological attempts to articulate the Church's self-understanding have tended to focus on this concept, so that an *ecclesiology of communion* is now the dominant theological perspective on the Church and, consequently, the dominant ecclesiology used in pastoral planning documents prepared by Australian dioceses over the last twenty years or so. These documents typically apply the ecclesiology of

communion to parish life in terms of *building a community of faith and carrying out the mission of the Church*.

Social capital is often characterised as being of two principal types, *bonding* and *bridging* (Putnam, 2000). Linking this concept to the ecclesiological idea of *communio*, bonding social capital can be thought of as the networks, trust, beliefs and behaviours which create and build up the parish community, while bridging social capital is created when the parish lives out its mission through outreach to the wider community. A vital parish can thus be thought of as one that generates and maintains a bountiful supply of social capital, in both its forms.

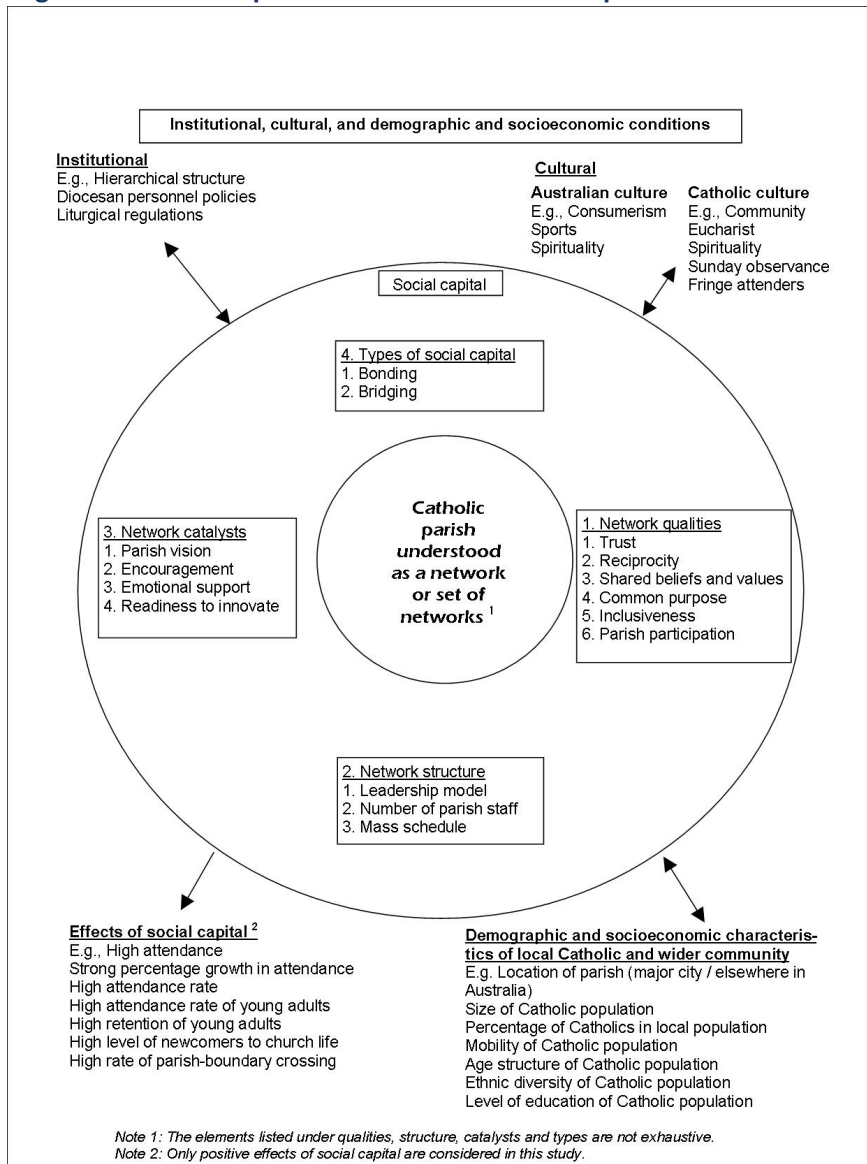
The connection between these theoretical notions and the analytical work of the thesis is provided by nine 'Core Qualities', measures of church vitality derived from National Church Life Survey data. The Core Qualities, although theological in origin, have been operationalised in terms of survey items designed to measure aspects of church life which most Christian denominations recognise as being related to parish or congregational vitality. In my thesis, I argue that the Core Qualities are examples of religious social goods, and that parishes build their stock of social capital by creating and using these goods.

### Some benefits of a social capital approach to the study of Catholic parishes

1. The theory of social capital is ideally adapted to the study of the parish  
Social capital theory provides a means of focussing on the formal and informal networks established between and among parishioners and parish leaders, the shared values and common objectives which help to create and strengthen bonds of mutual trust, and the way that the networks facilitate working together to produce benefits both for the parish itself and for the wider community. The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital allows the theory to give adequate attention to the internal life of the parish community without neglecting the outreach that is part of a vital church.
2. The concept of social capital is in harmony with Christian values  
Although the language of social capital may be unfamiliar in Church settings, social capital theory can be applied to parish life without doing violence to the way community is understood in Catholic ecclesiology. For example, two concepts central to the literature on social capital are reciprocity and generalised trust. What more succinct expressions of these two concepts could there be than Jesus' injunctions to 'Always treat others as you would like them to treat you' (Mt. 7.12) and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt. 19.19).
3. A social capital approach recognises the value of fringe attenders  
Fringe attenders — those who go to Mass on Sundays but are not involved in any other way — have often been scorned as contributing little to parish life, but social capital theory casts new light on the value of attenders like these who have only weak ties to the parish community. A mixture of weak and strong ties is necessary for optimal parish functioning. Parishes where there are only strong ties are in danger of becoming isolated from the rest of their community and of eventual fragmentation.

# Catholic parishes as creators of social capital

**Figure 1. A social capital framework for Catholic parishes**



## Social capital

The social capital framework for Catholic parishes shown in Figure 1 is an adaptation of a comprehensive framework of social capital developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and designed to apply to all types of groups and networks, including families, neighbourhoods, organisations and whole societies (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004).

Figure 1 shows a large circle which represents the social capital of the parish. The social capital has (1) certain characteristics or qualities, (2) arises within the structure of the parish, (3) is generated and coordinated by leaders or ‘catalysts’, and (4) has both inward-focused (bonding) and external-focused (bridging) aspects. The parish is influenced by and, to a much lesser extent, influences an external environment that includes its institutional links to the diocese and the universal Church, and the Australian and Catholic culture. Another aspect of the local environment is the demography of the local Catholic population. The two-way interaction between parish and environment is represented by two-headed arrows in Figure 1.

The social capital of the parish also produces effects or outcomes, indicated by a one-directional arrow. I argue that parishes that are more successful at producing social capital will perform better in terms of the social capital outcomes such as attendance, attendance rate, attraction of newcomers and level of involvement in parish life, although the outcomes will also be influenced by the demographic characteristics of the local Catholic population as measured by the Australian Census.

## Religious social goods

The analogy with capital and goods in the world of economics suggests that social capital can be used to build a stock of religious social goods, and that religious social goods are used in the creation of social capital. The concept of religious social goods therefore offers insights into how social capital is created, stored, managed and used in a parish.

Religious goods *per se* are not foreign to the Catholic world. Holy pictures, statues and rosary beads are all examples of religious goods in the conventional sense. Treating the Core Qualities as religious social goods feels strange at first because we are not used to thinking of abstract concepts like sense of belonging as goods, and we might even find the idea of talking about the spiritual life of the parish community in terms of an economic term like goods somewhat distasteful. Yet canon law itself says ‘Christ’s Faithful have the right to receive *spiritual goods*, especially the word of God and the sacraments, from the Church’ (Canon 213 in the American translation).

The situation described by Figure 1 is extremely complex, so for the purposes of the thesis, I simplified the framework, as shown in Figure 2. In the simplified model, the internal aspects of the parish are restricted to just bonding and bridging social capital and the network catalysts, together with a single aspect of the parish's network structure, namely its schedule of Masses. The only aspect of the external environment considered is the demographic composition of the local Catholic population. Six social capital outcomes are chosen for examination.

The table below shows how each type of measure in the simplified social capital framework is measured in practice.

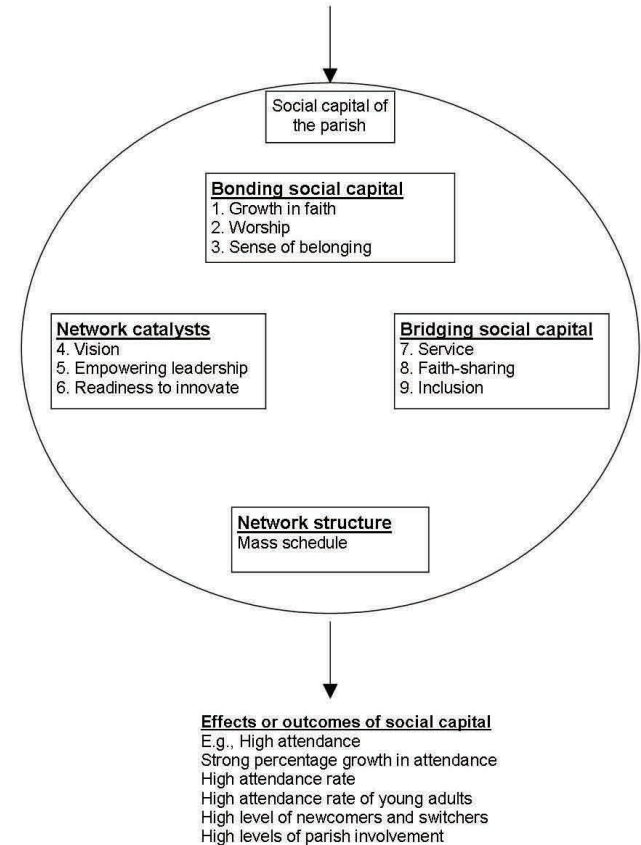
## Research questions

In the thesis, I set out to answer seven research questions. Three of them were as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of the Mass attenders most likely to select each of the Core Qualities?
2. What is the relationship between the aspects of social capital identified in the model and the social capital outcomes?
3. What impact do the local contextual factors have on the social capital outcomes?

**Figure 2. Simplified social capital framework**

**Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of local Catholic community**  
 E.g. Location of parish (major city / rest of Australia)  
 Size of Catholic population  
 Percentage of Catholics in local population  
 Percentage of the Catholic population who have moved into the parish in previous 5 years  
 Percentage of Catholic population aged 0-14  
 Percentage of Catholic population born in non-English speaking countries  
 Percentage of Catholic population with a university degree



Aspect of social capital framework	Measured by
Bonding and bridging social capital and network catalysts	Core Qualities derived from the NCLS attender questionnaire (see page 5).
Mass schedule	National Count of Attendance
Location (major city / elsewhere in Australia)	ABS Remoteness Indicator
Demographics of Catholic population	ABS Census data at parish level
<u>Effects of social capital</u>	
- Attendance	National Count of Attendance 2006
- Percentage change in attendance	National Count of Attendance 2006 and 2001
- Attendance rate	National Count of Attendance & ABS Census data
- Young adult attendance rate (aged 15-34)	National Count of Attendance, ABS Census data and NCLS data
- Level of newcomers and switchers	NCLS data. Newcomers are people who have not regularly attended a church for at least 5 years. Switchers are people who used to attend a church of another denomination.
- Level of parish involvement	NCLS data. The parish involvement score measures participation in parish groups and activities and whether the person has a ministry or leadership role such as reading or singing in a choir.

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## The Core Qualities

Each of the nine NCLS Core Qualities can be summarised by a single score or key indicator developed by NCLS Research (Bellamy et al. 2006). With one exception, each score is based on a single response category for various items in the attender questionnaire. The exception is Core Quality 7, Service, where the score is based on the mean number (out of a maximum of seven) of informal helping activities engaged in by attenders in the previous 12 months. The items on which the key indicators are based are shown below.

### 1 Alive and growing faith

*Over the last year, do you believe you have grown in your Christian faith?*

- No real growth
- Some growth
- Much growth, mainly through this parish \*
- Much growth, mainly through other groups or churches
- Much growth, mainly through my own private activity

### 2 Vital and nurturing worship

*How often do you experience inspiration during church services at this parish?*

- Always \*
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely / never

### 3 Strong and growing sense of belonging

*Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this parish?*

- Yes, a strong sense of belonging, which is growing \*
- Yes, a strong sense - about the same as last year
- Yes, although perhaps not as strongly as in the past
- No, but I am new here
- No, and I wish I did by now
- No, but I am happy as I am
- Don't know/not applicable

### 4 Clear and owned vision

*Does this parish have a clear vision, goals or direction for its ministry and mission?*

- Not aware of vision
- Ideas but no clear vision
- Yes, strongly committed \*
- Yes, partly committed
- Yes, but not committed

### 5 Inspiring and empowering leadership

*Have this parish's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?*

- Yes, to a great extent \*
- Yes, to some extent
- Yes, to a small extent
- Not at all
- Don't know

### 6 Imaginative and flexible innovation

*Do you agree or disagree? This parish is always ready to try something new*

- Strongly agree \*
- Agree
- Neutral / Unsure
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

### 7 Practical and diverse service

*In the past 12 months, have you done any of the following? (Mark ALL that apply)*

- Lent money to someone outside your family
- Cared for someone who was very sick
- Helped someone through a personal crisis (not sickness)
- Visited someone in hospital
- Given some of your possessions to someone in need
- Donated money to a charitable organisation
- Contacted a parliamentarian or councillor on a public issue

### 8 Willing and effective faith-sharing

*Would you be prepared to invite to Mass or another church service here any of your friends and relatives who do not currently go to church?*

- Yes, in the past 12 months \*
- Yes, but not in the past 12 months
- Don't know
- No, probably not
- No, definitely not

### 9 Intentional and welcoming inclusion

*If you knew someone was drifting away from church involvement, how likely is it that you would take the time to talk with them about it?*

- Certain ^
- Very likely ^
- Likely
- Hard to say
- Unlikely

\* indicates Core Quality measure in each item.

^ For Core Quality 9, 'Certain' and 'Very likely' were combined to create a modified score for Catholic parishes. NCLS Research uses 'Certain' alone.



## Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis in this thesis was carried out on a random sample of 231 Catholic parishes that took part in the 2006 National Church Life Survey. Over 67,000 Mass attenders in those parishes completed a questionnaire.

The analysis was carried out at two levels: attender level and parish level. Attender-level analysis produces an answer to the first research question on page 4: What are the characteristics of the Mass attenders most likely to select each of the Core Qualities? In contrast, parish-level analysis provides answers to Questions 2 and 3, namely, what is the relationship between the aspects of social capital identified in the model and the social capital outcomes? and What impact do the local contextual factors have on the social capital outcomes?

### Attender-level analysis

Attender-level analysis showed that attenders' responses to the Core Quality items were likely to vary according to their sex, birthplace and level of education and, in some cases, place of residence (in a major city or elsewhere in Australia). Respondents born in a non-English speaking country (NESC) were much more likely than Australian-born respondents to select the Core Quality response for every Core Quality except Vision. On the other hand, attenders with a university degree were much less likely than those with no post-school qualifications to select the Core Quality response for most of the Core Qualities.

Local context also influenced the way attenders responded to the Core Quality items. Attenders in parishes where more than 30 per cent of the Catholic population were born in a non-English speaking country were more likely to select the Core Quality response for all but one of the Core Qualities, regardless of where they themselves were born. Similarly, attenders in parishes where more than 15 per cent of the Catholic population had a university degree were less likely to select the Core Quality response for six of the Core Qualities, regardless of their own level of education.

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate particular examples of these effects for birthplace and education. The figures in the tables are odds ratios, that is, how much more likely one event is to take place than another. An odds ratio of 2.0 means that one event is twice as likely to occur as another, while an odds ratio of 0.5 means it is only half as likely to occur. For example, Table 1 shows that a Mass attender born in a non-English speaking country was 2.7 times more likely than an Australian-born attender to say they would follow up someone who was drifting away from church, and, furthermore, that attenders in parishes with high levels of NESC Catholics were 1.7 times more likely to say they would follow up someone drifting away, regardless of where they themselves had been born.

Table 1: Influence of Catholics from non-English speaking countries on parish life

How much <u>more</u> likely to say ...	Attenders born in NESC (compared to Aust. born attenders)	Attenders in parishes where more than 30% of Catholics were born in NESC *
They grew in their Christian faith in the last year due to their parish	1.4	1.3
They are always inspired during the celebration of Mass in their parish	2.7	1.4
They would follow up someone who was drifting away from Church attendance	2.8	1.7

\* compared to attenders in other parishes, regardless of where they themselves were born.

Table 2: Influence of Catholics with university degrees on parish life

How much <u>less</u> likely to say ...	Attenders with a university degree (compared to attenders with no post-school qual.)	Attenders in parishes where more than 25% of Catholics have a university degree **
They grew in their Christian faith in the last year due to their parish	0.60	0.84
They are always inspired during the celebration of Mass in their parish	0.65	0.86
They have a strong and growing sense of belonging to their parish	0.77	0.85

\*\* compared to attenders in other parishes, regardless of their own level of education.

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## Parish-level analysis

Table 3: Predictors of social capital outcomes in parishes in the major cities

Predictors	Attendance	Percentage attendance change	Attendance rate	Young adult attendance rate	Newcomers & switchers	Involvement
<i>Core Qualities</i>						
Growth in faith				**	**	
Worship						
Belonging						
<i>Vision</i>						
Empowering leadership						***
Innovation					(*)	
Service		*		***	**	**
Faith-sharing						
Inclusion				**		
<i>Mass schedule</i>						
Sunday pm Mass	***	*	***	***	**	
<i>Characteristics of Catholic population of the parish</i>						
Catholic population	***		(*)		*	(*)
Per cent Catholic						
Per cent new in parish since 2001	(**)			(**)		
Per cent aged 0 to 14						
Per cent born in NESC	***		***	***		
Per cent with degree	**		**		***	(**)
Variation explained (%)	66	23	40	53	35	46

Parishes in the major cities = 110. \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001. Negative relationships are shown in parentheses. Shading indicates that the variable was not included in the regression equation for that social capital outcome.

### How to read Tables 3 and 4

Each of the columns in Tables 3 and 4 shows how well the various social capital and demographic variables can predict a social capital outcome in the sample of parishes.

The asterisks indicate statistically significant relationships. One asterisk means that there is only a one-in-twenty probability that the relationship is due to chance, two means a one-in-a-hundred chance, and three asterisks mean that there is less than one-in-a-thousand chance that the observed relationship is simply a matter of chance. In other words, the relationship really exists.

Asterisks in parentheses mean that the relationship is negative, i.e., as the predictor variable increases, the outcome variable decreases. Absence of any asterisks indicates that there is no significant relationship between the variable and the outcome.

The figures at the bottom of the table show the percentage of the variation between parishes that can be explained by the social capital and local demographic variables. Zero per cent would mean that the variables can explain nothing at all about why the outcome varies; 100 per cent would mean that they can completely explain why different parishes have different values.

### What does Table 3 tell us?

Table 3 shows a summary of multiple regression results for parishes in Australia's major cities. In particular, we can see that:

- The model can explain 66 per cent of the variation in attendances between parishes, but only 23 per cent of the variation in percentage change in attendance.
- Other factors, not included in this model, must be responsible for the unexplained variation. In the case of percentage change of attendance, for example, potentially important factors not included in the model include a change in Catholic population since 2001, or a change of parish priest.
- The size of the local Catholic population is a strong predictor of attendances at Mass. That result does not surprise us. We are also not surprised that the existence of a Sunday evening Mass is associated with higher attendances, but the research shows that having a Sunday evening Mass in an urban parish produces higher attendances; it is not simply that parishes with more people are more likely to have a Mass on Sunday evening.

- The Core Qualities have little impact on attendance, percentage change of attendance and attendance rate, but have some impact on the remaining three variables.
- Attendance rate is not a fair measure of assessment of parish vitality, since the Core Qualities have little impact on it, and the major predictors, apart from the existence of a Sunday evening Mass, are local contextual factors that are beyond the parish's control.
- Parishes where attenders feel they have grown in their faith, have high levels of participation in informal acts of service, and are prepared to follow up people drifting away from church are likely to have higher young adult attendance rates than other parishes. The effect will be even greater if they provide a Sunday evening Mass and are located in an area where a high proportion of the Catholic population was born in non-English speaking countries.
- Sunday evening Mass is a predictor of five of the six social capital outcomes.
- Core Quality 5, Empowering leadership, is a very strong predictor of parish involvement. When people agree, to a great extent, that their parish's leaders encourage them to use their gifts and skills, they are very likely to be actively involved in their parish.
- Urban parishes with higher proportions of Catholics from non-English speaking countries and Catholics with university degrees are also likely to have higher attendances and a higher attendance rate. As well, parishes with high percentages of university-educated Catholics are likely to attract newcomers and switchers, but attenders are *less* likely to be involved in parish life.
- In places where there are highly mobile populations, attendances and young adult attendance rates are likely to be adversely affected.

This is just a first look at some of the most important findings to emerge from Table 5. The table also shows a number of other significant relationships and raises new questions for reflection and further analysis.

Table 4: Predictors of social capital outcomes in parishes outside the major cities

Predictors	Attendance	Percentage attendance change	Attendance rate	Young adult attendance rate	Newcomers & switchers	Involvement
Growth in faith				(*)	***	
Worship	*			**		(***)
Belonging						
Vision						*
Empowering leadership	(*)		(*)			
Innovation					(***)	
Service						***
Faith-sharing	(**)		(*)		***	(**)
Inclusion						
<i>Mass schedule</i>						
Sunday pm						
<i>Characteristics of Catholic population of the parish</i>						
Catholic population	***					(***)
Per cent Catholic						(***)
Per cent new in parish since 2001	(*)		(***)			(**)
Per cent aged 0 to 14			(*)			*
Per cent born in NESC			(*)			
Per cent with degree	**		*		*	
Variation explained (%)	75	6.1	29	20	34	59

Parishes outside the major cities = 121. \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001. Negative relationships are shown in parentheses. Shading indicates that the variable was not included in the regression equation for that social capital outcome.



# Catholic parishes as creators of social capital

## What does Table 4 tell us?

Table 4 is similar to Table 3, except that it is for parishes in regional and remote Australia. There are quite a few differences between the two tables, as well as some similarities.

- For all but of the social capital outcomes, the model explains a smaller percentage of the variation between parishes than it did in the case of urban parishes.
- The Core Qualities have more impact than they do in urban parishes. However, a surprising number of the Core Quality relationships are negative, and not all of these are readily explained.
- The size of the local Catholic population is a strong predictor of attendances at Mass, just as it is in urban parishes.
- The model is particularly weak in predicting percentage change in attendance. It explains only 6 per cent of the variation between parishes, and not one of the social capital or local context variables is significantly related to it.
- The percentage of non-English speaking people and the percentage of university-educated people in the local Catholic population have much less impact than they do in urban parishes, presumably because there are far fewer of them.
- Sunday evening Mass has no predictive power at all in parishes outside the major cities. This is probably because there are fewer Masses and hence less choice about what time Mass to attend and, because

of greater distances, less opportunity to go to Mass in a parish other than the one in which you live.

- Levels of parish involvement tend to fall when there are more Catholics in the parish, and a higher percentage of Catholics in the local population, suggesting that people might be less willing to take on an active role in parish life if they think there are plenty of others around who can do the job.
- The model may be less successful than it is in urban parishes because of greater variation in parish location. Parishes in this geographic category range from those in regional cities like Ballarat to places like Leonora in very remote Western Australia.

Tables 3 and 4 do not show that the geographic mobility variable (the percentage of people who have moved into the parish since the previous Australian Census) is very strongly and positively related to the level of newcomers and switchers. Instead, the two tables show that it was omitted from the model for that particular outcome. This was in order to avoid it camouflaging the effect of other contextual variables. Whenever the geographic mobility variable is significantly related to any of the social capital outcomes the relationship is always negative, indicating that parishes in highly mobile areas will struggle to produce the social capital outcomes, although they do have an advantage in attracting newcomers and switchers .

An alluring question surrounds the unexplained variation in all the outcome variables. Is it due to other elements of the Core Qualities, to structural aspects of the parish, to unmeasured dimensions of parish life outside the social capital model, such as the personality of the parish priest, or to unmeasured aspects of the local context? And is it something that can be addressed by parish or diocesan action, or is it due to things that nobody can control? These are all worthy questions for further research.

The Core Qualities are consistent with an ecclesiology of communion. All nine of them can be found, in slightly different language perhaps, in Pope John Paul II's expression of pastoral priorities for dioceses in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (2001).

## Performance of the Core Qualities

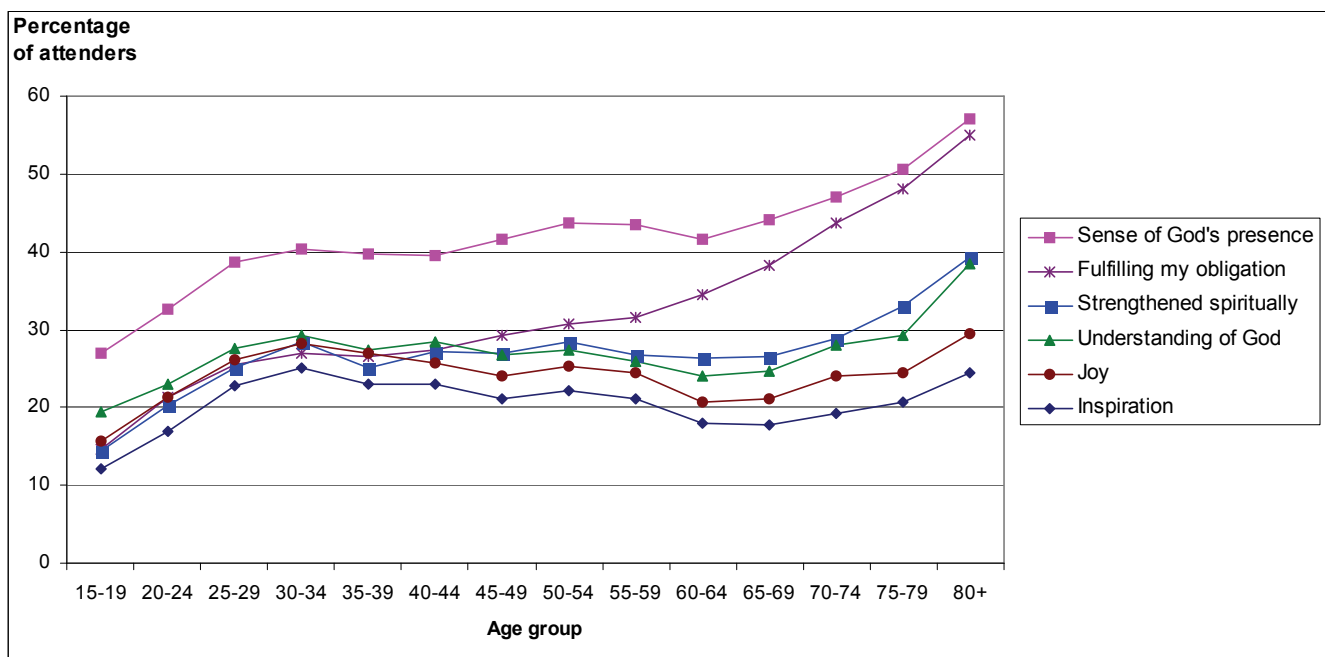
The Core Qualities had moderate power to predict the social capital outcomes in urban parishes when they were the only variables included in the model (these results are not shown here), but their impact almost totally disappeared when the local demographic factors were added in. The Core Qualities undoubtedly refer to important aspects of parish life, such as growth in faith, vital worship, a sense of belonging, effective leadership, outreach and service. So why do they not have a stronger impact on the social capital outcomes, which can be thought of as ‘performance indicators’ of the parish?

There are several possible reasons. One is that I used only a single indicator for each Core Quality. It is usual in sociological research to build up a measurement scale from a number of items related to the same underlying idea. For example, the NCLS questionnaire asked attenders ten questions about their experience of Mass in their parish, but I used only one of them. I did this because NCLS Research, in trying to communicate results as clearly as possible, provides parishes with Core Quality scores based on a single key indicator for each Core Quality (as shown on page 5), even though, in reality, each Core Quality is understood to represent a complex aspect of parish life that can only be adequately measured by using several related questions. I wanted to see if these

single indicators worked as predictors of the performance of Catholic parishes, as they often do in the case of Protestant congregations (Bellamy et al. 2006).

A second reason is that while the Core Quality itself might be important for Catholic parishes, the question chosen to measure it by NCLS Research might not be the most suitable one. As an example, let me take Core Quality 2, Worship, where the key indicator is the percentage of attenders in the parish who always experience inspiration during Mass. Feeling inspired is not an important element in a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, and this is reflected in the responses of Mass attenders. Only 21 per cent of attenders said they always experience inspiration at Mass. In contrast, 43 per cent said they always experience a sense of God’s presence, a much better measure of vital worship for a Catholic community in which the notion of sacrament is so important. Furthermore, as Figure 3 shows, the percentage of attenders who say they always experience God’s presence at Mass is high for all age groups, whereas the percentage saying they always experience inspiration is low for all age groups. This issue of whether the measure used by NCLS Research is the most appropriate measure for use in Catholic parish applies to a number of the Core Qualities. It is a question that will be examined in ongoing research.

**Figure 3: Percentage of attenders ‘always’ experiencing aspects of Mass in the parish**



# Catholic parishes as creators of social capital

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## Empowering leadership

One Core Quality that does have a powerful effect is Core Quality 5, Empowering Leadership. It has an exceptionally strong relationship to parish involvement in urban parishes.

The key indicator for Empowering leadership is the percentage of people who say that their parish's leaders encourage them to use their gifts and skills to a great extent.

Now people do not attend Mass in order to receive encouragement. Only eight per cent of attenders selected, as one of their two most important reasons for attending Mass, 'I need encouragement and inspiration'. But it makes a big difference to their involvement in parish life when they feel that they have been encouraged to use their gifts and skills. Among attenders who felt encouraged to a great extent, 33 per cent had a maximum score for parish involvement, although another 30 per cent were not involved. On the other hand, among those who felt they received no encouragement, 74 per cent were not involved at all and only four per cent had a maximum involvement score.

Even if people felt only a little encouraged, it made a difference to their response to every one of the other eight Core Qualities. The more encouragement they felt they had received, the more likely they were to have selected each of the Core Quality responses. It is probable that part of this result was due to people with a highly positive view of the parish and who were already involved reporting that their efforts were affirmed retrospectively, but it also indicates that creating an environment of encouragement is one of the most effective things that any parish can do to increase Core Quality scores and promote parish involvement.

The efficacy of encouragement can be emphasised by noting that people who come to Mass on Sundays but who have no other role are more likely to select the Core Quality responses than those who do not feel encouraged. Parish leaders often worry about the non-involved, but the non-involved contribute more to the parish's social capital than the non-encouraged. The non-encouraged have generally less positive views about the parish, and it is they who are more likely than the non-involved to convey a poor impression of the parish to the wider community. The ability to encourage people to use their gifts and skills is thus a crucial element of effective leadership.

## Sunday evening Mass

In urban parishes, there is a moderate to strong positive relationship between the provision of a Sunday evening Mass and five of the six social capital outcomes. It is true that larger parishes (which are mainly found in the cities) tend to provide more Masses on a weekend in order to accommodate all those who attend, so that more timeslots are filled, but this does not account for positive relationships between the provision of a Sunday evening Mass and the other social capital outcomes.

Dixon and Bond (2004) demonstrated that young adults are attracted to Sunday evening Masses, resulting in a boost not only to young adult attendance rate but also to the general attendance rate as well. The current study also confirmed Dixon and Bond's finding that in urban parishes which provide a Sunday evening Mass, a higher proportion of attenders live outside the parish than in parishes with no Sunday evening Mass.

Urban parishes with a Sunday evening Mass were also more successful than other urban parishes at attracting newcomers and switchers. These were much younger on average than attenders in general. To Dixon and Bond's (2004) note that 'a parish which discontinues its Sunday evening Mass risks losing its best opportunity of contact with young adults', we can now add that it also risks losing its best source of newcomers and switchers. At least part of the reason for higher numbers of newcomers and switchers attending Mass in parishes with a Sunday evening Mass appears to be that young adult attenders in those parishes invite their friends to accompany them.

On the other hand, in rural areas, the Sunday evening Mass variable is not significantly related to any of the social capital outcomes. There are several reasons for this. One is simply that Sunday evening Masses are not as common in rural areas. Parishes tend to have smaller overall attendances, so there is not as much need for as many Masses as in a large city parish. Another is the move of young adults to the cities, resulting in a relative dearth, compared to urban parishes, of young adults among attenders. A third reason is the fact that in many parts of Australia Mass times are constrained by the large distances priests have to drive between several Mass centres in the parish, so that if there does happen to be a Sunday evening Mass, it is the only Mass available that day for many miles around and therefore people do not have a chance to prefer one time for Mass over any other.

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## Insights for parish leaders

The findings of this research, briefly summarised in this paper, can inform parish leaders and pastoral planners in relation to a number of aspects of parish life. Some of the findings with pastoral implications are:

- The effect of local context on parish life.  
One of the most important findings in this study is that the way parishes function is affected by local contextual factors such as location itself, and the percentage of Catholics born in non-English speaking countries or with university degrees. However, while local context has a strong influence on a parish, it does not *determine* how it operates. Context is neither an advantage or a disadvantage; it is a fact.
- The value of encouraging parishioners to use their gifts and skills.  
One of the positive findings from this study is its revelations about the power of encouragement. Core Quality 5, Empowering Leadership, has an extremely strong relationship to parish involvement in urban parishes, and just fails to achieve statistical significance in rural areas. The message is that people will tend to get involved if they are encouraged to do so, and if they feel their

contribution is appreciated. Even if people feel a little encouraged, it makes a difference to their response to all eight of the other Core Qualities. The most productive thing that parish leaders can do to promote involvement is to encourage people to use their gifts and skills.

- The impact of Sunday evening Mass in urban parishes.  
This research has shown that it is very important that urban parishes that provide a Sunday evening Mass continue to do so if at all possible.
- The contribution of fringe attenders.  
Another insight that comes from this research is a better understanding of how fringe attenders contribute to the creation of a parish's social capital through their generally positive view of the parish, a view that they take to the wider community. Their contribution is often undervalued or not recognised at all by parish leaders and more involved parishioners. This insight is especially important in light of the fact that fringe attenders make up around 50 per cent of Mass attenders.

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