

Tracing the Pulse:
An Investigation into the Vitality of
Australian Catholic Parishes

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the measures of parish vitality and explores the factors that have contributed to vitality.

The purpose of the study is to examine how various measures of parish vitality and contributors to vitality identified in the research contribute to an understanding of the different expressions of vitality found in Australian Catholic parishes today. The research adds to the existing body of knowledge about parish activities/programs and other characteristics of parish life that contribute to parish vitality.

This inquiry into the nature of vitality is based on a theological framework, centred on the concept of Church as communion and the parish as a community with a mission, and on sociological research on Australian and overseas Catholic parishes.

Drawing on these two sources, the theological and the sociological, eight measures are proposed as indicators of vitality in Catholic parishes.

In the empirical research 10 parishes were identified that had been shown to have particular forms or expressions of vitality. Parishes were selected so that different types (large and small, ethnic, multicultural and Anglo-Irish, clergy and lay-led) were included in the study. Equal numbers of metropolitan and non-metropolitan parishes were selected.

Data was collected using semi-structured face-to-face interviews with parish leaders, parish staff and parishioners in general. Other means of data collection included observation of liturgical celebrations, document collection from parishes and statistical reports obtained from the ACBC Pastoral Research Office.

The inquiry revealed that encouraging and empowering parish leadership, diversity in the spiritual, social and outreach aspects of parish life, strong community bonds and a network of lay leadership were some of the major contributors to vitality. There was also a great diversity seen in participating parishes in expressing different aspects of vitality. The research also revealed a critical need for diocesan support to sustain parish vitality through strategic leadership planning and collaboration with parishioners.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I, Trudy Mary Dantis, hereby certify that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution, and affirm that to the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACBC	Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
NCLS	National Church Life Survey
ICLS	International Church Life Survey
NESC	Non-English Speaking Country

CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY AND THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

Catholic parishes in Australia have experienced significant transformations over the last few decades. Parish structures have changed, leadership roles are evolving and an increasing number of innovative pastoral strategies are being tested and adopted. Along with diminishing Mass attendances, declining numbers of diocesan and religious priests, an apparent disparity in the laity's appreciation of Catholic beliefs and morals, and clergy shortcomings, a growing concern for the wellbeing of Catholic parishes has led to an increased interest in the search for the vital strengths that continue to keep them alive, and indeed to flourish.

Parish vitality in Catholic parishes is experienced in many ways, ranging from an enlightening homily given by the priest at a Sunday Mass, to the sense of community among a group of young couples who meet regularly to share their lives. A lack of detailed studies on what constitutes parish vitality in practice has led to a wide gap in the literature in this field. Although a number of parish vitality indicators exist, it is unclear how well any of them are able to measure the variety of activities or programs in parishes. This research is an attempt to bridge that gap, by adding to the existing body of knowledge on parish vitality, through an in-depth qualitative study on the experiences of people in Australian Catholic parishes.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the thesis are:

1. To investigate how various measures of, and contributors to, parish vitality identified in this research are related to the overall quality of parish life.

2. To investigate the different expressions of vitality found in different contexts in Australian Catholic parishes today.

The aim of the study is to uncover effective programs, activities and other characteristics of parish life that contribute to parish vitality that could help facilitate the further development of practical pastoral strategies in Australia and overseas.

To begin the exploration into parish vitality, this chapter examines the nature of the Church, in particular, the concept of “Church as communion” and its role in the understanding of the parish as a community with a mission. As one of the dominant models of the self-understanding of the Church since Vatican II, communion ecclesiology has been widely adopted in Australia.¹ The further sections of the chapter provide an overview of the Catholic community in Australia and describe the current situation of the Catholic population, parishes and active Church participation. Following that, the relevance of effective pastoral planning is discussed, along with the evident need for parishes to continue to remain vital in the community. The concluding section of the chapter describes the organisation of this thesis.

UNDERSTANDING CHURCH AS COMMUNION

The understanding of the nature of the Church is a key element in appreciating its role in the world. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed speaks of the Church as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”. These four “marks”² or “traditional notes”,³ essential features of the Church and its mission, are inseparably linked with each other⁴ and form the basis for any theological discussion on its nature. Many theologians, such as Moltman⁵ and Kung,⁶ have viewed these marks in a variety of ways according to their own

¹ Robert Dixon, *Ingenious Communities: Catholic Parishes in Australia as Creators of Social Capital and Religious Social Goods* (PhD, Monash University, 2010), 29.

² Pope John Paul II, *The Church: Mystery, Sacrament, Community*, vol. 4 (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), 23.

³ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1966), 360.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), n. 811.

⁵ Jürgen Moltman, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977), 338.

⁶ Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Search Press Limited, 1968), 268–269.

ecclesiologies or understanding of Church. Within the Catholic tradition, different ecclesiologies have been developed through the centuries that have shaped its understanding of Church. These ecclesiologies see the Church as Sacrament, as Body of Christ and as People of God, among others. The dominant theological perspective of the Catholic Church at present, at least as expressed in Vatican documents⁷ and in practice in Australia, is an ecclesiology of communion or “communio” that sees the Church primarily as a communion for mission. Principally developed through the documents of the Second Vatican Council, communion is based on the New Testament term “*koinonia*”, which means community, fellowship, or participation.⁸ It expresses “the sharing of the believers in Christ” and also “the bond that links persons within Christian communities and the communities with one another”.⁹ As Pope Benedict XVI writes:

Communion draws me out of myself towards him [Jesus] and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body”, completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbour are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself.¹⁰

Communion ecclesiology “focuses on relationships in order to understand the nature of the Church”—beginning with communion between God and human beings, and then applying the concept to sacrament, ministry, ecumenism, and Church-world relations.¹¹ It is said to be “the fruit and demonstration of love” of God that is showered on the faithful through the Spirit to make everyone one heart and one soul.¹² Within Australia as well, communion ecclesiology has been the dominant ecclesiology used in pastoral

⁷ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, (28 May 1992)

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfcomm.htm> [accessed 19 June 2014], Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Of His Holiness John Paul II (December 30, 1988) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 18, Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “The Final Report”. *Origins* 15, no. 27 (19 December 1985), 448.

⁸ James Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition: History, Theology and Canon Law* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 15.

⁹ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 14.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter. (2005) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html [accessed 20 February 2012], n. 14.

¹¹ Dennis M. Doyle, “Journet, Congar, and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 58, no. (1997), 461.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter (2000) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 42.

planning documents over the last 20 years, understood in parish life as building communion with God and others and engaging in the mission of Christ.¹³

A look at the history of the understanding of Church as communion shows that it existed long before it received the official status it holds today. Dulles attributes the earliest mention of this term to the French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, who saw the Church as a people called together in the Holy Spirit and, in doing so, was the first to foresee a “spirituality of communion”.¹⁴ Congar’s views focussed on a revival of the local Church with the universal Church as a communion of particular churches.¹⁵ His views were supported by another French theologian, Henri de Lubac, whose ecclesiology centred on the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church as the mystical body of Christ.¹⁶ De Lubac pointed out that the Church existed in Eucharistic communities and was a service for the transformation of the human person and the whole world. These ideas on communion were also promoted by the thoughts of the German theologian Romano Guardini who was concerned about how Catholics thought of the Church as something external to themselves and failed to acknowledge their place as a part of the mystical body of Christ.¹⁷

The understanding of an ecclesiology of communion continued to emerge in the 1960’s through the works of Ratzinger and Rahner¹⁸ and gained a significant place in official teaching at the Second Vatican Council. The theological discussions that ensued during this Council “deeply studied” the ecclesiological mystery,¹⁹ bringing about new developments of many Church teachings, using the two principles of *ressourcement*—a return to the sources of Scriptures and tradition, and *aggiornamento*—making them

¹³ For example, see Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Projects Office, *Research Report on Catholics who have stopped attending Mass: Pastoral Strategies*, (Victoria, Australia: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, October 2007) , 5 and Archdiocese of Brisbane, *Let Your Light Shine: Vision, Priorities and Planning for a Vibrant Local Church.*, (Brisbane: Archdiocese of Brisbane, July 2004), 14–15.

¹⁴ Avery Dulles, "Yves Congar, Theologian of the Church," *Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs* 32 (2005), 28.

¹⁵ Dulles, "Yves Congar, Theologian of the Church," 28.

¹⁶ Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 84.

¹⁷ Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 84.

¹⁸ Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 85.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium Et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1965), n. 2.

more accessible to modern sensibilities.²⁰ One of the most influential outcomes of the Council was the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, a document which discussed the nature and concept of the Church essentially as a unique “communio” or communion of persons in the Holy Spirit with Christ as its head. At the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, the bishops presented communion ecclesiology as the key to the proper understanding of the Vatican II documents.

This has an important implication for our understanding of Church, for as Doyle notes, while communion was called “the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents”, the reverse claim can also be applied, that the documents of Vatican II “provide the key to a Catholic understanding of communion ecclesiology”.²¹ In furthering our discussion of Church as communion therefore, I shall treat the four marks of the Church as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”, through their understandings found in conciliar and post conciliar documents and discuss them in terms of an ecclesiology of communion.

The Church is One

At a very basic level, the unity of the Church can be understood as one that has Christ as its centre and extends to the many Christian communities of faith that confess Jesus as Lord.²² However, in Catholic theology, the sacramental nature of the Church constitutes the very basis of that unity. *Lumen Gentium* states that Christ, the one Mediator, “established and continually sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible organization”.²³ The Church is a *sacrament* or a sign both of a close union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.²⁴ The Latin word “sacrament” comes from the Greek word

²⁰ Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 84.

²¹ Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 2.

²² Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 360.

²³ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution On The Church (November 21, 1964), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, n. 8.

²⁴ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1.

“mysterion” meaning “mystery”. A sacrament is “the visible sign of a sacred reality”²⁵ or, as Pope Paul VI defines it, “a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God”.²⁶ The sacramental unity of the Church is seen in the relationship between the local churches and the universal Church in connection with the ongoing presence of Christ and particularly the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of Christian life.²⁷

When seen through the light of communion ecclesiology, the “oneness” of the Church is understood through the visible and invisible bonds of communion which are summarised as follows:

As an invisible reality, it is the communion of each human being with the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit, and with the others who are fellow sharers in the divine nature, in the passion of Christ, in the same faith, in the same spirit. In the Church on earth, there is an intimate relationship between the invisible communion and the visible communion in the teaching of the apostles, in the sacraments and in the hierarchical order ... This link between the invisible and visible elements of ecclesial communion constitutes the Church as the sacrament of salvation.²⁸

This focus on the bond between the local and universal Church has particular implications for communion ecclesiology since it highlights the great diversity that exists within that unity.²⁹ Within the one Church, there are people from a multiplicity of cultures, with various gifts, offices, conditions and ways of life, as well as particular Churches that retain their own traditions.³⁰ This diversity, which was definitively acknowledged at the Second Vatican Council,³¹ does not detract from the Church’s unity but rather adds to its richness making up the “One Body of Christ”.³² And while the Church exists in many places, there are not several churches but, rather, the Church in its entirety is present in each of these³³ forming what Tilliard calls a “Church of

²⁵ XI Ordinary General Assembly Synod of Bishops, “The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church,” (25 February 2004).
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20040528_lineamenta-xi-assembly_en.html#_ftnref111 [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 30.

²⁶ Richard P. McBrien, “Roman Catholicism: E Pluribus Unum,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 1, Religion (Winter, 1982), 76.

²⁷ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

²⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, n. 4.

²⁹ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 76.

³⁰ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 814.

³¹ Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40, no. 4 (1979), 717.

³² Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 33.

³³ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 149.

churches” or a “communion of communions”.³⁴ Communion ecclesiology is thus best seen as “a web of interwoven relationships”³⁵ modelled on the Trinity, and the universal Church thus becomes a people united with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁶

The Church is Holy

That the Church is holy does not mean that the Church keeps itself free from earthly things by involving itself only in “otherworldly” matters, nor is it a withdrawal from material preoccupations of this world.³⁷ There have been many times over the centuries when the Church has fallen short of holiness, in its pursuit of causes or ideas that have worked against sanctification or in the personal failings of its members to live up to its teachings, as in the case of clergy sexual abuse. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the Church on earth is endowed with a holiness that is “real though imperfect” and that being “at once holy and always in need of purification”, it follows a path of penance and renewal for the expiation of sins of its members.³⁸ Thus, holiness must be seen as a constant testimony and encouragement to the reality of *grace* that is present in the Church.³⁹ This grace comes to the Church from Christ who is holy, and who merited for it by his sacrifice on the cross, the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰ Through the Holy Spirit, the Church becomes holy, and by being united in Christ and sanctified by him, it also becomes sanctifying.⁴¹

The holiness of the Church, therefore, is also seen in the ways through which it sanctifies humankind. These means contain in themselves the holiness of Christ and the Holy Spirit⁴² and they primarily consist of the teachings of Christ—the revelation of God’s love and the dual commandment of love, the life of prayer, the seven Sacraments

³⁴ Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, *Church of Churches: An Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. Peaux (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 29.

³⁵ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 12.

³⁶ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4.

³⁷ Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 363.

³⁸ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8, 48.

³⁹ Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 364.

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 25.

⁴¹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 824.

⁴² Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 25.

and the liturgy, especially the Eucharist.⁴³ Through participating in them, and choosing to follow Christ and conform themselves to his image, members of the Church are called to be sanctified and become holy.⁴⁴

An ecclesiology of communion emphasises the need for spiritual fellowship or communion between human beings as the very key to being holy. As *Lumen Gentium* reminds us, God does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, “without bond or link between them”.⁴⁵ Rather, it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, “a people who ... acknowledge Him in truth and serves Him in holiness”.⁴⁶ The Trinitarian spirituality that forms the basis of the divine dimension of communion invites people to share in the divine life of the Trinity.⁴⁷ This call to communion in the holiness of God himself is echoed throughout the Old Testament, in the letters of Peter⁴⁸ and in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁹ Since the holiness of the Trinity is the source of all holiness of the Church and in the Church,⁵⁰ as its members we are called to model that holiness by following Christ’s footsteps in seeking to do the will of the Father in all things and by being moved by the Holy Spirit to worship God “in spirit and truth” in our journey towards personal sanctity.⁵¹

The Church is Catholic

“Catholicity” essentially means universality. The term was first used by St Ignatius of Antioch when he wrote “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church”.⁵² That the Church is “catholic” simply means that the Church is for all people an open society, that unites them as a whole while acknowledging their differences in gifts and vocations. This inclusive “unity-with-diversity” constitutes the catholicity of the

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 25.

⁴⁴ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 12, 40, 42.

⁴⁵ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 9.

⁴⁶ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 9.

⁴⁷ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 175.

⁴⁸ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 135–138.

⁴⁹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 7, 9, 10.

⁵⁰ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 79.

⁵¹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 41.

⁵² Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans.”
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0109.htm> [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 8.

Church as universality.⁵³ Based on the universal power of the risen Christ⁵⁴ and on the universal extent of the Holy Spirit's action,⁵⁵ this dimension of catholicity is possessed by the Church by virtue of its divine institution, and it should not be seen merely as a result of a summation of all the particular churches.⁵⁶

Often, when the Catholic Church in Australia is seen as a part of the "Roman Catholic Church" it is feared by some as representing a power structure that has its centre of authority in Rome to which all other churches in the world are subject. The true meaning of catholicity is greatly suppressed by this view. Boff stresses that these secular organizational structures were assimilated by the Church from the Roman Empire and feudal society⁵⁷ and as Fuellenbach rightly points out that the word "Roman" was probably understood better before Vatican II when the Church prided itself on being "Roman" at all times and everywhere.⁵⁸ With the Second Vatican Council, however, the Church directed more of its attention to the "catholic" side of the scale⁵⁹ and developed a better understanding of the nature of the Church as a world Church. A proper understanding of the Catholic Church in Australia being both "Roman" and "catholic" therefore, requires both terms to be finely balanced in tension with one another. The unification of mankind is a *process* and although the Church has done much to reform its own understanding as a world Church and develop its universality, as Rahner notes, this development will have to continue in many ways in order for the Church to show itself more clearly acting as a single whole in a unified world-history.⁶⁰

In understanding the catholicity of the Church through an ecclesiology of communion, it is important to realise that while being Catholic denotes certain openness to all, it does not mean being "inclusive" to the extent that no one can ever be excluded. The

⁵³ Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 365.

⁵⁴ Mt 28:18

⁵⁵ Wis 1:7

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 27.

⁵⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), 69.

⁵⁸ John. Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 99.

⁵⁹ Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Episcopate and the Primacy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 38.

⁶⁰ Karl Rahner, "Universality of the Church," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Saramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (Mumbai: St Pauls, 1975), 227. See also Maximilian H. Heim and M.J. Miller, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology: Fundamentals of Ecclesiology with Reference to Lumen Gentium* (Ignatius Press, 2007), 324–327.

reason for exclusion however would ultimately depend on a person's own lack of inclusivity. As de Lubac indicates, the two-fold desire of the Church is to "entertain whatever can be assimilated and to prescribe nothing that is not of faith".⁶¹ At the deepest level, however, de Lubac also sees catholicity as anthropological—a radical inclusion of all human beings in all of their depth and mystery, since the Church recognises what lies at the heart of every person.⁶² By "holding-in-tension" the mystery of Christian revelation and the mystery of human nature, the Church upholds the intimate relationship that exists between the two.⁶³

The Church is Apostolic

The term "apostolicity" denotes the extension of the Church through time and its continuity and identity through the ages.⁶⁴ According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church is founded on the apostles in three ways:

- *Firstly*, through its foundation on the apostles and the mission entrusted to it by Christ himself;
- *Secondly*, through the preservation of the apostolic traditions and the guarding of the sacred deposit of faith received from the apostles; and
- *Thirdly*, through being taught, sanctified and guided by the apostles through their successors in pastoral office, namely, the college of bishops, and priests, in union with the Pope as the successor of Peter.⁶⁵

Through an ecclesiology of communion, the apostolicity of the Church is primarily seen in the Church's bond with the apostles and with Christ that is shared by all believers along with their legitimate pastors as one People of God.⁶⁶ Each bishop, representing the apostolic faith of Christ, pastors the people entrusted to him in

⁶¹ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 289.

⁶² Dennis M. Doyle, "Henri De Lubac and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 60, no. 2 (1999), 217.

⁶³ Doyle, "Henri De Lubac and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology," 218.

⁶⁴ Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 367.

⁶⁵ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 857.

⁶⁶ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 28.

ecclesial communion with Christ and with one another.⁶⁷ Thus the whole Church is apostolic by remaining in communion with the faith and life of its origin and by the fact that it is “sent out” in mission to spread the Kingdom of Christ.⁶⁸ The collegiality of the bishops also forms an important aspect of communion. Just as the whole Church subsists in a local Church, so also the universal episcopate subsists wholly and entirely in each local bishop.⁶⁹ The fruitfulness of the apostolate for both ordained and lay alike depends on their communion with Christ⁷⁰—a communion that is inseparably rooted in the Eucharist⁷¹ and that remains “the soul of the whole apostolate”.⁷²

When viewed through a lens of communion, therefore, the attributes of the Church as being one, holy, catholic and apostolic are neither distinct nor unrelated but rather they are so interwoven together that none of them can exist without the other:

The holiness of the Church reflects the mission of the Spirit of God in Christ, the Holy One of God, made known to all the world through the apostolic teaching. Catholicity is the realization of the Church's proclamation of the fullness of the Gospel to every nation throughout the ages. Apostolicity unites the Church of all generations and in every place with the once-for-all sacrifice and resurrection of Christ, where God's holy love was supremely demonstrated.⁷³

Tillard declares that the riches of the depth of communion created by the Holy Spirit, that manifest themselves in holiness, apostolicity, catholicity and unity, lie in the symbiotic knot that ties contrary things together, such as “the visible and the invisible, the communal and the personal, the hierarchical and the charismatic, the local and the universal”.⁷⁴ The understanding of the Church as communion was declared as the “central and fundamental idea” emerging from the Vatican II documents⁷⁵ and Doyle's study of communion ecclesiology lists 17 great theological minds of *communio* who have contributed to its richness and diversity either in shaping Vatican II or

⁶⁷ Michael G. Lawler and Thomas J. Shanahan, *Church: A Spirited Communion*, Theology and Life Series, vol. 40 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 97.

⁶⁸ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 863.

⁶⁹ Lawler and Shanahan, *Church*, 98.

⁷⁰ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 864.

⁷¹ Lawler and Shanahan, *Church*, 98.

⁷² *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 864.

⁷³ Second Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, "The Church as Communion," (1991). http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19900906_church-communion_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 41.

⁷⁴ Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 136.

⁷⁵ Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “The Final Report”, 448.

theologically examining communion in the light of Vatican II.⁷⁶ Despite the many differences between these scholars, four elements remain constant in an understanding of communion:

- First, a retrieval of the vision of the Church accepted by Christians of the first millennium;
- Second, a focus on spiritual fellowship or communion between human beings and God in contrast to juridical structures;
- Third, an emphasis on the need for visible unity, symbolically expressed through participation in the Eucharist; and
- Fourth, the promotion of a dynamic interplay between unity and diversity in the Church, between the local churches and the universal Church.⁷⁷

Among the richness and valid diversity in communion ecclesiology, as the then Cardinal Ratzinger explains,

Ultimately there is only one basic ecclesiology, which certainly can be approached and worked out in different ways, depending on the various aspects that are stressed or highlighted. Nevertheless, every exposition must always take into account the harmony of the various essential elements of an ecclesiology which intends to be Catholic.⁷⁸

THE PARISH AS A COMMUNITY

The theological concept of communion is of no use if it is not grounded in the daily life of the Church. Komonchak argues that the Church cannot be catholic (universal) if it is not particular or local and the particular or local Church is not the Church unless it is catholic at every level.⁷⁹ Similarly, Pope John Paul II taught that the Church needs to be continually developing participatory structures or “instruments of communion” and emphasised the need for communion to be cultivated and extended day by day and at every level in the structures of each Church’s life.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*.

⁷⁷ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 13.

⁷⁸ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 1.

⁷⁹ Joseph Komonchak, "Ecclesiology of Vatican II," *Origins* 28, no. 44 (22 April 1999), 765.

⁸⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 44, 45.

Parishes “re-present” or make present the worldwide Church⁸¹ and are intended to be “authentic replication[s] of the gospel lived out in the twenty-first century”.⁸² The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes the parish as a “definite community of Christian faithful” who gather together in the celebration of the Eucharist, who teach [and embrace] Christ’s saving doctrine and who practise charity through good works and brotherly love.⁸³ Since the Second Vatican Council, official Church teaching has restated and emphasised the Council’s theology of the local Church so that the emphasis on “a community” in the 1983 Code of Canon Law replaces the previous descriptions of a parish as a territorial section of a diocese or a Church building.⁸⁴ Additionally, the focus has expanded from the pastor of the parish to include the people who make up the parish.⁸⁵

The communitarian nature of the parish is firstly manifested in its basic structure and nature. The parish is, as Rahner declares, “the highest degree of actuality of the total Church”.⁸⁶ This is because as the universal Church is not a union or confederation of individual parishes, neither are parishes merely administrative partitions of the universal Church into single provinces or departments. Rather, both the universal Church and the parish are mutually inclusive of each other. In doing so they have, as Kasper explains, two focuses, which make them crucial to the essential structure of the Church:

... the two focuses of an ellipse: *iure divino*, it is both papal and episcopal. Neither of the two poles can be traced back to the other. This unity in tension is the foundation of the union in communion. The communion which is both episcopal and papal is the essential organic expression of the essential structure of the church, its unity in catholicity, and its catholicity in unity.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 45.

⁸² Janet Baker, *The Parish Management Handbook*, ed. Charles E. Zech (Mystic, CT: Twenty-third Publications, 2003), 51.

⁸³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2179.

⁸⁴ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 59.

⁸⁵ Thomas P. Sweetser and Carol M. Holden, *Leadership in a Successful Parish* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1992), 10.

⁸⁶ Karl Rahner, “Theology of the Parish,” in *The Parish: From Theology to Practice*, ed. Hugo Rahner (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1958), 30.

⁸⁷ Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 160.

As well, the communitarian nature of the parish can be understood by its numerous relationships at different levels that link it to other communities. Apart from the relationships that exist within a parish between the parishioners and their leaders, and among parishioners themselves, these other relationships link the parish as a community to other communities outside the local parish. Coriden describes five such relationships:

- The relationship between parish and diocese, with each parish within a diocese forming a community within a family of communities that together make up the diocesan communion
- The relationship between the parish and the deanery or vicariate, when each parish community relates to other parish communities in their neighbourhood, section of town or state in a loose association to form a deanery or vicariate community
- The relationship between two parishes, when they enter into a partnership based on mutual needs and assistance, love, solidarity and a sharing of resources
- The ecumenical relationships that link a Catholic parish to its neighbouring Protestant congregations to foster better understanding and unity and cooperative interaction
- The relationship between the parish and the local community, when the parish community participates in social and civil activities to foster community development⁸⁸

Together this network of “religious, educational, familial, social and political relationships” makes the parish, as Greeley describes it, “one of the most ingenious communities that human skill has ever created”.⁸⁹ In and through a local Eucharistic community, each member of a parish is connected with all other members, whether “local or global, on earth or in glory, human or divine”.⁹⁰

The nurturing of these internal and external relationships in a parish community through collaborative ministry is essential to its growth and development. In this sense, the parish has often been referred to as a family rather than just a community of

⁸⁸ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 101–107.

⁸⁹ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Myth: The Behavior and Beliefs of American Catholics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990), 154.

⁹⁰ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 76.

believers who gather together to worship. Pope John Paul II described the parish in communal language when he noted that it “is not principally a structure, a territory or a building”, but rather “the family of God”, “a familial and welcoming home” and “the community of the faithful”.⁹¹ The parish is said to offer an exceptional example of community apostolate since it unites all the human diversities that are found there and inserts them into the universality of the Church.⁹² However, in order for it to be an authentic expression of communion, it must first develop a “spirituality of communion”, that shapes the process of collaboration and elevates it beyond a simple organisational reality:

... the spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.⁹³

Practising a spirituality of communion means living out of what it means to be in the Body of Christ in the context of everyday life.⁹⁴ This practice, which is brought into being by charity, makes Christ live in us, dissolves the lines between spirituality and ecclesiology, and unites people in the same degree as they are united in God.⁹⁵ *Christifideles Laici* reminds us that a practical way of making a parish truly into a community of Christians is when local ecclesial authorities foster the “adaptation of parish structures according to the full flexibility granted by Canon law, especially in promoting participation by the lay faithful in pastoral responsibilities” as well as “small, basic or so-called “living” communities, where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another”.⁹⁶ In doing so, parishes are able to emulate the earliest Christian communities who borrowed from their surrounding cultures, gradually developed patterns of communion and ministry that endured, abounded in variety and diversity and were fully in communion with each

⁹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

⁹² Vatican Council II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (18 November 1965), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), n. 10.

⁹³ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 45.

⁹⁴ Doyle, “Journet, Congar, and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology,” 475.

⁹⁵ Yves Congar, *The Mystery of the Church*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 86.

⁹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

other.⁹⁷ They become true representations of ecclesial communion and places of evangelisation in communion with their pastors.⁹⁸

Mission and Communion

The Church is missionary by its very nature, since its beginning lies in the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit according to the eternal plan of the Father.⁹⁹ The Son (Christ) is sent from the Trinitarian communion to establish peace and communion between the world and God, and to put into effect God's plan for the salvation and ultimate unity of all people.¹⁰⁰ The Church is called to continue the mission of Christ who entrusted it to his apostles when he instructed them to preach the gospel to all nations.¹⁰¹ Through the centuries, the Church has continued this mission in new and increasing ways by preaching the Gospel, gathering people together in communion and administering the sacraments.

Mission and communion are intimately linked with each other. As Pope John Paul II confirms, "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*".¹⁰² While communion highlights the integrative roles of the life of the Church, mission moves the Church into dialogue, debate and mediation with the world through transformative and operative functions.¹⁰³

Living the mission in communion thus has profound implications for the parish since, as a Eucharistic community, the parish is the place where people are drawn into the Body of Christ in love, by the mission of the Holy Spirit, in order to unite each person

⁹⁷ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 2, 18.

⁹⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

⁹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (December 7, 1965), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), n. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, n. 3. See also Eph 1:10.

¹⁰¹ Mk 16:15, Mt 28:18.

¹⁰² Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 32.

¹⁰³ Neil J. Ormerod, "'The Times They Are A-Changin': A Response to O'Malley and Schloesser," in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David G Schultenover (New York: Continuum, 2007), 175.

with one another and to God the Father.¹⁰⁴ As a participatory community that depends on the contribution of all its members, all people in the parish have a responsibility to contribute to its health and exercise its mission.¹⁰⁵ Strengthened by active participation in the Eucharist and in the liturgical life of their community, the laity are called to share the prophetic mission of Christ by witnessing to the gospel and assisting their parish leader in the apostolic works of that community.¹⁰⁶ This teaching has implications for all parishes, but more importantly for parishes without priests, where the laity are called to play a greater role and need greater formation for leadership.

The fundamental motive for Christian mission is love that is self-giving. The history of the Church has many stories of martyrdom and sacrifice by various Christians in all ages. However, at various times in history the motive of love has often been overshadowed by other motives of power and conquest thus leading to acts of proselytism. Such measures that seek merely to “convert” people and increase numbers in the Church lose the very essence of Christ’s true mission of love and salvation. Macquarie cautions that especially in the current world scenario among secularised Western nations and the ever growing power of materialism, the challenge of Christian mission lies in sharing the mission with the “unloved masses of humanity” rather than merely focussing on their conversion.¹⁰⁷

The importance of love in sharing the Church’s mission has never been more urgent than it is today. Contemporary Church documents are filled with the nature of love and its role in spreading the “good news” of Christ. In the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI states the three-fold responsibility of the Church as: proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the Sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*).¹⁰⁸ The dynamic of love and the encounter with the living God in Christ and his Church form the basis for the faithful in carrying out this mission and the very nature of this love precludes modern connotations of proselytism.¹⁰⁹ By living this love, Christians “never seek to impose the Church’s faith

¹⁰⁴ Anthony Oelrich, "Trinity and the Parish: Some Insights from the Theology of Yves Congar, OP," in *What is a Parish?: Canonical, Pastoral, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Thomas A. Baima (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2007), 166.

¹⁰⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 33.

¹⁰⁶ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 430–450.

¹⁰⁷ Macquarie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 394.

¹⁰⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 25.

¹⁰⁹ David L. Schindler, "The Way of Love in the Church's Mission to the World," *The Way of Love: Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's Encyclical Deus Caritas Est* (2006), 39.

upon others. They realise that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom they believe and by whom we are driven to love”.¹¹⁰ Their witness of love and service to the poor and needy in the parish community becomes a powerful testimony of evangelisation.

A parish that forms a strong community based on an ecclesiology of communion with a commitment to mission is an effective parish. The strengths of communion ecclesiology include its strong New Testament foundation, its primary emphasis on relationships and the guarantee of the spiritual and human growth of the members of a community along with a responsibility toward the world and others with the underlying principles of personal being and interconnectedness.¹¹¹ It meets the human needs for community and it brings together a whole range of theological issues that increases its ecumenical appeal.¹¹² However, its weakness includes a tendency for a community to become too introspective and focussed upon itself leading to the exclusion of others, the potential for its communal character to overcome the institutional dimension by downplaying the need for leaders, a tendency to blur the lines of membership thus diminishing a clear group identity and differentiation from other communities, and a tendency to concentrate on individual growth at the expense of social responsibility and group renewal and reform.¹¹³

The weaknesses of this model can be largely eliminated by keeping in mind the extent to which a focus solely on either commonality or differences can undermine the true Christian experience for community. As Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

For the Christian community is never closed in upon itself. The intimate life of this community - the life of listening to the Word and the apostles' teaching, charity lived in a fraternal way, the sharing of bread this intimate life only acquires its full meaning when it becomes a witness, when it evokes admiration and conversion, and when it becomes the preaching and proclamation of the Good News.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 31.

¹¹¹ Fuellenbach, *Church*, 150-151.

¹¹² Fuellenbach, *Church*, 154.

¹¹³ Fuellenbach, *Church*, 152.

¹¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation (December 8, 1975) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 15.

Tillard warns that “paradoxically, for a Christian to cling tenaciously to one’s difference [that differentiates a Christian from a non-Christian], to the point of seeing nothing else, amounts to excluding oneself from the body, the vine, the dwelling of God”.¹¹⁵ He advocates instead a focus on a unity in which difference flourishes—“to live one’s difference in communion results in giving it full rein ... By causing the common reality hidden under differences to emerge, one manifests a communion, one reveals the riches of unity, one acknowledges the nobility of difference”.¹¹⁶ An example of this can be seen in the rich diversity of spiritual practices that exist in multicultural parishes.

The role of the parish priest is also paramount for safeguarding against the weakness of the communion model since the parish priest’s task “is not limited to individual care of the faithful”, but extends “to the formation of a genuine Christian community”.¹¹⁷ By working in collaboration with other parish leaders, parish priests need to work to keep their community from closing in on itself, discover parishioner’s gifts and share them for the wellbeing of the whole community, and ensure that no essential part of the Catholic tradition fails to be handed on to members of the community.¹¹⁸ In particular, the building up of community and educating in community spirit must grow from the “full and sincere” celebration of the Eucharist in order to lead the community into mission and other forms of Christian witness.¹¹⁹ Vibrant and meaningful liturgical celebrations lie at the very heart of parish life.

¹¹⁵ Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, 11.

¹¹⁶ Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, 9, 11.

¹¹⁷ Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (December 7, 1965), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), n. 6.

¹¹⁸ Fuellenbach, *Church*, 153; Richard Lennan, *Risking the Church : the Challenges of Catholic faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 153, 154.

¹¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 6.

THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN THE AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Religion in Australia is a very diverse phenomenon. In the centuries prior to 1788, an Aboriginal spirituality, expressed in myth, ritual and way of life, prevailed.¹²⁰ However, most of Australia's religious groups trace their origins to Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe.¹²¹ In the early years of European settlement, Catholics and Protestants were the main religious groups.¹²² Over the years however, this has dramatically changed as waves of migration, especially those from non-English speaking countries, have led to a growth in non-Christian religious groups, and a greater diversity of religious affiliations than in previous times.¹²³ Hughes et al. note that between 2001 and 2011, 1.8 million migrants settled in Australia, and while a majority of these were Christian, there were significantly large groups of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and those who declared themselves as having no religion at all.¹²⁴ Added to these changes is a rejection of religion by a large and growing number of Australians. Based on research findings from the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, Hughes suggests that for almost half of Australians, religion or spirituality is so weak that it is not present at all.¹²⁵

What has contributed most to these changes in the religious and spiritual landscape in Australia is a series of significant transformations in Australian culture that have occurred over time. Developments in an atheistic critique of religion,¹²⁶ the importance

¹²⁰ Peter Malone, "Discovering," in *Discovering an Australian theology*, ed. Peter Malone (Homebush, NSW: St. Paul Publications, 1988), 17.

¹²¹ Gary Bouma, *Australian Soul* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31.

¹²² Malone, "Discovering," 17, 18.

¹²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Cultural Diversity Overview," *A Picture of the Nation: the Statistician's Report on the 2006 Census* (2009).
[http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/LookupAttach/2070.0Publication29.01.0910/\\$File/20700_Cultural_overview.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/LookupAttach/2070.0Publication29.01.0910/$File/20700_Cultural_overview.pdf) [accessed 19 June 2014], 40, 42.

¹²⁴ Philip Hughes, Margaret Fraser, and Stephen Reid, *Australia's Religious Communities: Facts and Figures from the 2011 Australian Census and Other Sources* (Nunawading, VIC: The Christian Research Association, 2012), 3.

¹²⁵ Philip Hughes, *Shaping Australia's Spirituality: A Review of Christian Ministry in the Australian Context* (Victoria, Australia: Mosaic Press, 2010), 42.

¹²⁶ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2000).

of subjective, personal experience,¹²⁷ a growing secularisation linked to individualism and consumerism,¹²⁸ globalisation, cultural pluralism and a rapid increase in scientific and technological advances¹²⁹ have all contributed to the transformation of religious culture in Western societies, including Australia. Bouma notes that the transition from rational to experiential authority, in particular, changed both the relative position and internal operation of churches,¹³⁰ leading to a contemporary culture that Lyon describes best as the *disneyfication* and the *disneyization* of religion.¹³¹

The abundance of an increasing plurality of religious and spiritual choices mean that Australians today pick and choose options that suit them best. Some choose to declare themselves as "spiritual" and independent of religious institutional ties, others declare themselves as people of "no religion" and some of those who are religious use individual choice to guide their values and religious practices.¹³² Since 1971, increasing numbers of Australians have described themselves as having "no religion" so that by 2011, this number had grown to 4.7 million or 22.3 per cent of the Australian population.¹³³ Data from the 2009 International Social Survey Program also indicates that 62 per cent of people who were raised Catholic but now have no religion have also stopped believing in God.¹³⁴ Tacey argues that Australians are undergoing a "spiritual revolution" that has overflowed from its traditional containers of formal religions and has led people to turn to more interior forms of spirituality.¹³⁵ Certainly research findings seem to confirm a trend towards a stronger affirmation of spirituality rather than religiosity. In the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, Australians who

¹²⁷ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2005).

¹²⁸ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 10–11; 25–26.

¹²⁹ Philip Hughes, "The Future of Religious Education in the Context of Postmodernity," in *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*, ed. Gloria Durka et al. (The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 352.

¹³⁰ Bouma, *Australian Soul*, 96.

¹³¹ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Canbridge: Polity Press, 2000), 3.

¹³² Hughes et al., *Australia's Religious Communities*, 4.

¹³³ Hughes et al., *Australia's Religious Communities*, 106.

¹³⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "International Social Survey Programme " *Pastoral Research Online*, no. 1 (April 2013). <http://pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/Pastoral%20Research%20Online%201%20April%202013.pdf> [accessed 20 June 2013], 2.

¹³⁵ David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 38.

described themselves as spiritual (47%) exceeded those who described themselves as religious (39%).¹³⁶

Many of the changes in relation to the concepts of religion and spirituality in Australia and in contemporary Western societies in general are due to changes in the fundamental understanding of the two terms. Once seen to be closely related, the two concepts have grown increasingly unconnected. While some contemporary perspectives maintain that spirituality is often confused with religiosity,¹³⁷ various authors have clearly differentiated between the two.¹³⁸ Australia's foremost sociologist of religion, Gary Bouma, has argued that in contemporary Western societies, ultimate authority is to be found in the individual's experiences, sense and feelings.¹³⁹ Some people have distinguished spirituality from religion as essentially a matter of the inner or interior life (as compared to religion being a matter of the outer life), and that therefore spirituality is essentially concerned with private life rather than public life.¹⁴⁰ Kaldor, Hughes and Black describe various forms of spirituality such as *indigenous spirituality*, *New Age spirituality* and *eco spirituality* that are present among Australians.¹⁴¹ Research studies of young Australians show that more and more opt for this interior, individualised "spirituality" rather than a traditional, institutional "religion"¹⁴² and, as Hughes notes, "most young Australians approach religion with a pragmatic "whateverism": whatever works for you is fine".¹⁴³

¹³⁶ Philip Hughes, "Spiritual but not Religious," *Pointers* 22, no. 4 (December 2012), 13.

¹³⁷ For example, see Patricia Sermabeikian, "Our Clients, Ourselves: The Spiritual Perspective and Social Work Practice," *Social Work* 39, no. 2 (1994), 180 and Toni Cascio, "Incorporating Spirituality Into Social Work Practice: A Review of What to do," *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* 79, no. 5 (1998).

¹³⁸ See Dwain Pellebon and Stephen Anderson, "Understanding the Life Issues of Spiritually Based Clients," *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* May-June, no. (1999) and Edward R. Canda and Leola D. Furman, *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

¹³⁹ Bouma, *Australian Soul*, 90.

¹⁴⁰ Owen C. Thomas, "Some Problems in Contemporary Christian Spirituality," *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (2000) 267.

¹⁴¹ Peter Kaldor, Philip J. Hughes, and Alan William Black, *Spirit Matters: How Making Sense of Life Affects Wellbeing* (Victoria, Australia: Mosaic Press, 2010), 37, 38.

¹⁴² See Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution* and Michael Mason, "Methods for Exploring Primordial Elements of Youth Spirituality," Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, August 14, 2004).

¹⁴³ Hughes, *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*, 45.

The majority of Australians still continue to identify with Christianity, and Catholics overtook Anglicans in 1986 to become the largest religious group in Australia.¹⁴⁴ The 2011 Census of Population and Housing showed that around three out of five Australians (61.1%) identified with one of the Christian churches.¹⁴⁵ 25.3 per cent of Australians identified themselves (or their children) as Catholics.¹⁴⁶ But for many contemporary Australian Catholics, the concept of “being Catholic” has dramatically changed over the years. As many of their contemporaries in the West move towards egoistic lifestyles and freedom from obligations¹⁴⁷ Australians too are becoming more individualistic in their thinking and consumerist in their attitudes towards religion.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, the changes brought about by Vatican II and in the years following the Council have had dramatic implications for Catholic self-understanding that still continue to impact the Australian Church even today.¹⁴⁹ The Catholic culture in the West has developed over the last 40 years of the twentieth century into one that implies a degree of intellectual and moral autonomy as indispensable for survival in today’s world,¹⁵⁰ and as Dixon reports, people are now “re-assessing and re-defining what it means to be a Catholic in their own terms, not by reference to official positions”.¹⁵¹ In Australia, these changes, particularly those of a weakening acceptance of some Catholic beliefs and moral attitudes, seem to be largely confined to Australian-born Mass attenders and those born in English speaking countries and Europe.¹⁵² The influx of a large number of Catholic immigrants from non-Western countries and a decrease in Mass attendance rates by Catholics holding beliefs that are not in line with official Church teaching continue to sustain higher levels of traditional beliefs among Mass

¹⁴⁴ Hughes et al., *Australia's Religious Communities*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “2011 Census reveals Hinduism as the fastest growing religion in Australia,” (21 June 2012). <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/CO-61> [accessed 19 June 2013].

¹⁴⁶ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, “A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia,” (March 2013). <http://pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/ACBC%20PRO%20Catholic%20profile%202013.pdf> [accessed 05 April 2013], 1.

¹⁴⁷ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 82.

¹⁴⁸ Philip Hughes, “Factors in Declining Church Attendance,” *Pointers* 20, no. 2 (June 2010), 8.

¹⁴⁹ Dixon, “*Ingenious Communities*,” (PhD), 3.

¹⁵⁰ John Fulton, Anthony M. Abela, Irena Borowik, Teresa Dowling, Penny Long Marler, and Luigi Tomasi, *Young Catholics at the New Millenium: The Religion and Morality of Young Adults in Western Countries* (Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin Press, 2000), 178.

¹⁵¹ Robert E. Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia*, ed. Philip Hughes (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 2005), 121.

¹⁵² Robert Dixon, “What Do Mass Attenders Believe? Contemporary Cultural Change and the Acceptance of Key Catholic Beliefs and Moral Teachings by Australian Mass Attenders,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 90, no. 4 (2013) 457.

attenders in general.¹⁵³ How these beliefs will change in the coming years will largely depend on changes to Australian society in general, the shifting demographics of the Catholic population and their attitudes to the Catholic faith as the identity of the Australian Catholic community is shaped over time.

The Catholic Population and Parishes

The number of Australian Catholics has grown rapidly since the end of the Second World War, from 1.6 million in 1947 to over 5.4 million by 2011 when they made up 25.3 per cent of the total Australian population.¹⁵⁴ Large surges in immigration over the decades have resulted in a multicultural demographic profile with 23.6 per cent of the 2011 Australian Catholic population born overseas.¹⁵⁵ An additional 22 per cent are second generation immigrants.¹⁵⁶ While the Catholic population continues to increase, recent research on the number of Catholic religious in Australia shows a rapidly declining trend. In 2009 there were 8,422 Catholic religious in Australia as compared to 17,029 in 1976.¹⁵⁷ In 2006, the median age of Catholic religious was 73 as compared to 46 for Australian Catholics aged 20 years or over.¹⁵⁸ While these figures do not include diocesan clergy, Australia still has an aging religious community ministering to a relatively younger Catholic population.

In 2014, there were 1,359 Catholic parishes operating in 28 dioceses based on territorial divisions, five dioceses of Eastern Catholic Churches and one military diocese, where the bishop's responsibility is the pastoral care of Catholic members of the Australian Defence Forces and their families.¹⁵⁹ The number of parishes has not grown as fast as

¹⁵³ Dixon, "What Do Mass Attenders Believe?," 457.

¹⁵⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Changes Over Time in The Catholic Population," *E-News Bulletin*, no. 13 (25 October 2012). <http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/ACBC%20PRO%20E-News%20Bulletin%2013.pdf> [accessed 11 March 2013].

¹⁵⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia," 1.

¹⁵⁶ Philip Hughes, "The Impact of Recent Immigration on Religious Groups in Australia," *Pointers* 22, no. 4 (December 2012), 2.

¹⁵⁷ Stephen Reid, Robert Dixon, and Noel Connolly, *See I am Doing a New Thing! A Report on the 2009 Survey of Catholic Religious Institutes in Australia* (John Garratt Publishing, 2010), 6, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Reid et al., *See I am Doing a New Thing!*, 11.

¹⁵⁹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *The Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2014-2015* (2014), 791.

the Catholic population and, as a consequence, the average number of Catholics per parish doubled between 1947 and 2006, from 1,735 to 3,729.¹⁶⁰ Australian parishes are very diverse in terms of their location, size and population demographics. Among the different dioceses, the Archdiocese of Melbourne has the most number of parishes (216) followed by Sydney which has 137.¹⁶¹ In comparison, the Diocese of Broome has only nine parishes. The percentage of the Catholic population of these three dioceses, however, is similar and averages about 27 per cent.¹⁶² The Parramatta and Wagga Wagga dioceses have the highest percentage of Catholic population at approximately 32 per cent.¹⁶³ The largest parish in Australia, Burleigh Heads (Archdiocese of Brisbane) has over 32,000 Catholics in comparison to the smallest mainland parish of Jugiong in the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn where there are only 86 Catholics.¹⁶⁴ Similarly the percentage of the Catholic population in each parish in comparison to the total population of the area varies greatly. In some parishes such as Santa Teresa, Bathurst Island and Wadeye in the Diocese of Darwin, all of which are Aboriginal communities, Catholics make up 86 to 89 per cent of the population while other parishes in the dioceses of Geraldton, Darwin, and Cairns exist in communities that are under 10 per cent Catholic.¹⁶⁵

Active Church Participation

While the Catholic population has increased over the years, Church attendance among Catholics has declined. Figures from the National Attendance Count show that the percentage of Catholics who attend Mass in a typical week dropped from 15.3 per cent

¹⁶⁰ Reid et al., *See I am Doing a New Thing!*, 43.

¹⁶¹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *The Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 2014-2015* (2014), 791.

¹⁶² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Australian Dioceses by Catholic and Total Population, and Per Cent Catholic: 2011 Census*, (Melbourne: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office).

¹⁶³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Australian Dioceses by Catholic and Total Population, and Per Cent Catholic: 2011 Census*, 1.

¹⁶⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Australian Parishes by Catholic and Total population, and Per Cent Catholic: 2011 Census." <http://pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/Parishes%20by%20total%20and%20Catholic%20population%20-%202011%20Census%20-%20for%20website.pdf> [accessed 22 February 2013], 17, 31.

¹⁶⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Australian Parishes by Catholic and Total population, and Per Cent Catholic," 36, 49, 50.

in 2001 to 13.8 per cent in 2006, and 12.2 per cent in 2011.¹⁶⁶ The highest attendance rate was among Catholics aged 70–79 (around 32%), in contrast to Catholics aged 20–29 years, where fewer than five or six per cent attended.¹⁶⁷

The findings of numerous studies on young adults and adults published in Australia and the US show that some of the common causes of dissatisfaction leading to diminished Mass attendance are the Church's teachings regarding marriage and sexuality and the restricted role afforded to women in the Church.¹⁶⁸ This is especially true of those who are single, homosexual, divorced or in a de facto relationship, some of whom do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the Catholic community, while others find Mass boring and so are disinclined to attend. Dixon and his colleagues, who conducted in-depth research in 2007 on mature-aged, long term Mass attenders in Australia who had stopped going to Mass, identified 10 main reasons why people stopped attending, classifying seven as "Church-centred", and three as "participant-centred".¹⁶⁹ The main Church-centred reason was that there was lack of connection between the concerns of the Church and participants' lives that they saw as arising out of both their own changing personal circumstances and a failure of the Church to adapt to changes in Australian society and culture. Along with this, two other main Church-centred reasons included a perceived misuse of power and authority in the Church, and negative experiences regarding the behaviour, personality, attitude or lack of competence of particular priests, usually a priest in their own parish. Participant-centred reasons included family or household related issues, a personal crisis of faith and an attitude that going to Mass was simply not a priority anymore. The researchers' findings place a

¹⁶⁶ Robert Dixon, Audra Kuncionas, and Stephen Reid, *Mass Attendance in Australia*, (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Projects Office, September 2008), 1 and Robert Dixon, Stephen Reid, and Marilyn Chee, *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, (Melbourne: ACBC Pastoral Research Office, December 2013), 1.

¹⁶⁷ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Who Goes to Mass? First Results From the 2011 NCLS," *E-News Bulletin*, no. 18 (6 December 2012). <http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/ACBC%20PRO%20E-News%20Bulletin%2018.pdf> [accessed 11 March 2014], 2.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Dixon, Sharon Bond, Kath Engebretson, Richard Rymarz, Bryan Cussen, and Katherine Wright, *Catholics who have Stopped Attending Mass* (Victoria, Australia: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, February 2007), 8. See also Paul McQuillan, "Youth Spirituality: A Reality in Search of Expression," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (February 2006), 5; Michael Mason, Ruth Webber, and Andrew Singleton, *Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt Publishing, 2007); Dean Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson, and Juan Gonzales, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) and Fulton et al., *Young Catholics at the New Millennium*, 163, 176.

¹⁶⁹ Dixon et al., *Catholics who have Stopped Attending Mass*, 49.

great responsibility on the Church and the local parish to take action in order to reduce the likelihood of current attenders following the same path as those who have stopped attending. While the researchers acknowledge that the Church can influence only the Church-related issues outlined in the research, they note that, nevertheless, these actions would reduce the impact of those reasons and make Mass attendance more appealing, thus resulting in participant-centred reasons becoming less influential as well.¹⁷⁰

Williams and Davidson's study on US Catholics showed that the attitudes towards attending Mass can reflect the attitude of certain age groups towards religion itself.¹⁷¹ However, not all Catholics in a particular group behave in the same way or perceive things in the same manner as Pogorelc and Davidson's study revealed.¹⁷² It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the individuality of each person's faith and the complex interactions between individualistic and social explanations for religious behavior.¹⁷³ While it is difficult to predict levels of involvement or participation among different people or groups within a parish community, what is important is that the parish remains a place where people at any stage of their spiritual journey can experience a community that nurtures their experiences of God and supports their participation in the Body of Christ.

PASTORAL PLANNING AND THE NEED FOR VITAL PARISHES

The growing secular and consumerist culture in contemporary Australia appears to disincline Catholics from engaging with Church in the way that people used to. The Church's significance as the centre of local community life has declined at the same time as people's mobility and reliance on electronic forms of communication has

¹⁷⁰ Dixon et al., *Catholics who have Stopped Attending Mass*, 51.

¹⁷¹ Andrea S. Williams and James D. Davidson, "Catholic Concepts of Faith: A Generational Analysis," *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 3 (1996), 275.

¹⁷² Anthony J. Pogorelc and James D. Davidson, "American Catholics: One Church, Two Cultures?," *Review of Religious Research* 42, no. 2 (December 2000), 155.

¹⁷³ Michael R. Welch, "Religious Participation and Commitment Among Catholic Parishioners: The Relative Importance of Individual, Contextual, and Institutional Factors," in *Church and Denominational Growth: What does (and does not) cause growth or decline*, ed. David Roozen and Kirk Hadaway (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 345.

increased.¹⁷⁴ In addition, the Church's teachings seem increasingly irrelevant to contemporary forms of relationships and do not support an individualistic way of working and living, so that the importance of religion has greatly decreased in many people's lives.¹⁷⁵ The statistics pointing to the seemingly uncertain future of strong participation among Catholics in Australia prompt the question of what must be done *now* to reverse these trends. How can the Catholic faith, life and values that appealed to large numbers of people in the past continue to attract the participation of the younger generations? Hughes makes several suggestions for Christian churches such as re-expressing the Christian faith in ways relevant to the national story, "educating the spirit" (nurturing and forming the spirituality) of young people, focussing on the quality of relationships, integrating and owning various forms of ministry as appropriate expressions of faith and developing newer forms of community alongside locally based Church communities.¹⁷⁶ Much of this responsibility falls on the local Catholic parish which, with its ability to remain stable while acting as an agent of renewal,¹⁷⁷ continues to remain the ideal place from which to initiate changes that will positively affect the local community. As Pope Paul VI once acknowledged:

We believe simply that this old and venerable structure of the parish has an indispensable mission of great contemporary importance: to create the basic community of the Christian people; to initiate and gather the people in the accustomed expression of liturgical life; to conserve and renew the faith in the people of today; to serve as the school for teaching the salvific message of Christ; to put solidarity in practice and work the humble charity of good and brotherly works.¹⁷⁸

The need for Catholic parishes in Australia to be vibrant places in the local community is of paramount importance for ensuring a renewal of faith in the Australian community.

The diversity of Australian parishes makes it ineffective to apply standardized policies of change to boost parish vitality as a norm for use in all parishes. Each parish in each diocese has its own "culture", or many diverse cultures, and will need to adapt in different ways to the changing situation of its local community. Ammerman reports that

¹⁷⁴ Philip Hughes, "Shaping Australia's Spirituality: The Conference," *Pointers* 20, no. 3 (September 2010), 10.

¹⁷⁵ Hughes, "Shaping Australia's Spirituality: The Conference," 10, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Hughes, *Shaping Australia's Spirituality*, 13, 14.

¹⁷⁷ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 106.

¹⁷⁸ Pope Paul VI in Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

although cultural differences such as ethnicity and language remain formidable challenges, churches are able to successfully integrate across cultures by creating an inclusive communal identity that overcomes group boundaries founded on cultural differences.¹⁷⁹ In order to transform a parish, Forster and Sweetser suggest that parishes shift their focus from “in here” to “out there” to concentrate on the people on the fringe of the community and find new ways to bring the parish to the people rather than bringing people to the parish.¹⁸⁰ They also promote the effectiveness of setting up small faith communities, a model that is popularly advocated by many other authors such as Hurley,¹⁸¹ and Baranowski.¹⁸² Pable also advises that evangelisation in a parish should be an integrated vision and activity that includes the diocesan bishop and the whole of the parish community.¹⁸³

Writing from a US perspective, Brennan advocates the need for “creative, life-giving mentoring” to help parishes with their evangelistic responsibilities¹⁸⁴ of assimilating and communicating the Gospel message in a culturally appropriate manner.¹⁸⁵ He believes that Church and pastoral leaders have failed to engage in the “creative conversations” and pastoral planning needed for the effective evangelisation of multi-generational and multi-cultural people, and he argues for a spirit of “servant leadership” to be imbibed by Church leaders.¹⁸⁶ In describing what might help to make a parish healthy, he lists author Jim Collins’ findings (in his book *Good to Great*) about the characteristics of great organisations: humble yet professional leadership; working with the right people; confronting realities without losing faith, practising simplicity in doing what they do best, engaging in whatever they are passionate about and being keenly aware of what is profitable; having a disciplinary culture along with entrepreneurial ethic; and having mission-appropriate technology.¹⁸⁷ For parishes, this would mean

¹⁷⁹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 198–228.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas P. Sweetser and Patricia Forster, *Transforming the Parish: Models for the Future* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 208–210.

¹⁸¹ Michael Hurley, *Transforming Your Parish: Building a Faith Community* (Blackrock, Dublin: The Columbia Press, 2005).

¹⁸² Arthur R. Baranowski, *Creating Small Faith Communities: A Plan for Restructuring the Parish and Renewing Catholic Life* (US: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1988).

¹⁸³ Martin Pable, *Reclaim the Fire: A Parish Guide to Evangelization* (Skokie, IL: ACTA Publications, 2009), 126.

¹⁸⁴ Patrick J. Brennan, *The Mission Driven Parish* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 14.

¹⁸⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63.

¹⁸⁶ Brennan, *The Mission Driven Parish*, 15.

¹⁸⁷ Brennan, *The Mission Driven Parish*, 26–27.

appointing capable yet caring parish leaders, engaging skilled lay leaders in key positions, setting up appropriate and effective parish structures, building on the strengths of the community, being engaged in mission, and open and adaptable in the face of change. Brennan also encourages parishes to form their structures within the parish only *after* they have articulated their vision, mission and heart values.¹⁸⁸ According to Brennan, the future of parish life lies in a radical commitment to spreading the Kingdom of God and a real concern for health of the Body of Christ—the Church.¹⁸⁹

Brennan's arguments for healthier parishes need to put in context to be compatible with the Australian scene. There are some similarities and some differences in the nature and expression of faith as it has developed in the US and in Australia.¹⁹⁰ For example, faith in Australia is not tied to a national identity as in the US, nor are churches in a competitive marketplace to the same extent. Consequently, motivations to express faith and the drivers of vitality are likely to be different. Likewise, Australian parishes operate within their own unique social, cultural and spiritual context that in many ways is similar to, yet different from, that of parishes in the US.¹⁹¹ Australian Catholics do not become formal members of their parish as in the US. Rather, Catholics who live in the area are regarded as "parishioners" whether they attend Mass or not. Australian parishes also have smaller staff numbers as compared to US parishes, and almost every parish has one or more Catholic primary schools. All research in the US on parish life, vitality and faith, therefore, needs to be treated with considerable caution in applying it to the Australian context. Hence, while it may not be appropriate to use a "one-size-fits-all" model, Brennan's ideas nevertheless provide useful tools for beginning to think about what our own approach might be. As many parishes in Australia try to cope with increasingly diverse multicultural populations, the need for effective planning for the future is crucial to their continued success. On the other hand, as many other parishes face radical changes due to decline in clergy numbers and community populations, the urgency for mentoring and support in order to keep their communities alive has never

¹⁸⁸ Brennan, *The Mission Driven Parish*, 77.

¹⁸⁹ Brennan, *The Mission Driven Parish*, 15.

¹⁹⁰ See Philip Hughes, "Christianity after Religion?," *Pointers* 24, no. 4 (December 2014), 5 and Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

¹⁹¹ For similarities between parishes in the US and Australia see Dixon, "Comparison of Catholic Church Attenders in the US and Australia: A First Look at Some Results from the International Congregational Life Survey."

been greater. Ultimately, Brennan's arguments indicate a profound need for an integrated pastoral planning approach in order to help in the revitalization of parishes and, as Dixon notes, this must be a two-way planning process that involves planning *for* change and planning *to* change.¹⁹² For this renewal to be most effective, it would require efforts at a national, diocesan, and parish level in order to encompass the whole Australian Catholic community. It is imperative also that these initiatives be adapted to the conditions of each community and be driven by the local churches to meet the needs of their people:

It is *in the local churches* that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified—goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources—which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture.¹⁹³

Cussen suggests that pastoral planning should be approached as a “theological way of imagining”—using a theological lens to examine our perceptions and conceive possible futures for the Church.¹⁹⁴ Pastoral planners must be open to new faith understandings, new ecclesial visions and new pastoral risks in order to engage with people and learn from pastoral planning reports put out by various dioceses.¹⁹⁵ Thus, pastoral planning is essentially participative and collaborative in nature:

... the planning aims to create a community of faith, hope and love through communal processes. It seeks to build a bond, to foster a communion between people and God and to make that communion the bond between people. It seeks to fulfil the prayer of Jesus: “Father may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you”¹⁹⁶

Cussen's views on the practical aspects of pastoral planning resonate with the vision of the future of parishes as seen by Pope John Paul II, who in an address to a group of American bishops in 2 July 1993 challenged parishes to revitalise themselves in the image of the Church itself as a communion benefiting from the complementing gifts and charisms of all its members:

¹⁹² Dixon, *“Ingenious Communities,”* (PhD), 245.

¹⁹³ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29.

¹⁹⁴ Bryan Cussen, *Pastoral Planning: A Theological Way of Imagining*, (National Pastoral Planning Network, October 1999), 5–6.

¹⁹⁵ Cussen, *Pastoral Planning: A Theological Way of Imagining*, 6,7.

¹⁹⁶ Cussen, *Pastoral Planning: A Theological Way of Imagining*, 3.

The vitality of a parish depends on merging the diverse vocations and gifts of its members into a unity which manifests the communion of each one and of all together with the God the Father through Christ, constantly renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹⁷

Dixon affirms the value of pastoral plans based on an ecclesiology of communion as they are easily accessible to empirical testing.¹⁹⁸ Many Australian dioceses have used “communion” as the theological framework underlying their pastoral planning documents. Examples of such documents include *Going Forward Together, Pastoral Care for Evangelisation 2006–2011* (Diocese of Broken Bay, 2006) and *Bearers of Christ’s Love: Pastoral Plan 2011–2015* (Diocese of Wollongong, 2011). The theological aspects of communion that are found in these documents are predominantly taken from Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter to bishops, clergy and lay faithful, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Beginning of the New Millennium). The most comprehensive recent work is the five year Pastoral Plan prepared by the Parramatta Diocese titled, *Faith in Our Future: Pastoral Plan for the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta 2014–2018*. Initiated in 2011, the process initially involved consulting parish pastoral councils to identify five potential pastoral priorities for the future of the Diocese. These priorities framed further diocese-wide consultations that included parishes, religious institutes, ecclesial and youth movements, diocesan agencies and others. The five pastoral priorities identified in the plan reveal various themes of communion ecclesiology:

- Supporting families and strengthening them in their love and helping them live the Gospel.
- Connecting with youth people to help them grow in holiness and to become leading participants in the renewal of society and the Church.
- Building on and supporting the diverse migrant communities, responding to their needs, and welcoming newcomers¹⁹⁹ to the Diocese.
- Growing and supporting laity and clergy in their vocations, providing opportunities for faith formation and encouraging the development of pastoral leadership.
- Reaching out to those not strongly connected to their parish or the Church and inviting them to rediscover the joy of Christian faith and community²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 122.

¹⁹⁸ Dixon, “*Ingenious Communities*,” (PhD), 247.

¹⁹⁹ Newcomers are those who have recently arrived or recently started participating.

Similar themes that reflect the emphasis of communion ecclesiology can be found in the majority of other diocesan pastoral plans developed in recent years. Such plans can have a tremendous impact on parishes to boost the vitality of their communities if they are actioned in a manner that effects positive change. The extent to which this is occurring in parishes will be investigated as a part of this study.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study of vitality in Australian Catholic parishes, I will examine the following questions:

1. What are the essential elements of an understanding of vitality for a Catholic parish?
2. To what extent are these elements measureable and what measures are available?
3. How are individual measures of vitality identified in this research related to the overall quality of parish life?
4. What are the different expressions of vitality found in different contexts in Australian Catholic parishes today?
5. What are the major contributors and challenges to vitality found in Australian Catholic parishes?

These questions will be explored through an in-depth qualitative study of ten Australian parishes that were recommended for their vitality. The study will involve field research and data will be collected using interviews, participant observation and other methods described in Chapter Three.

²⁰⁰ Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, "Faith in Our Future: Pastoral Plan for the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta 2014 - 2018," (2014). <http://faithinourfuture.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/faith-in-our-future-diocese-of-parramatta-e28093-full-version-7mb1.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2014], 12.

THE ORGANISATION OF THIS THESIS

This chapter presented the background and purpose of this study. The understanding of Church as a “communion” has profound implications for the role of a parish and its mission in society, particularly, within the Australian context. With numerous changes to Australian society, the Catholic population and the beliefs, practices and attitudes of its members remain a diverse mix. Each parish, however, continues to be called to play a vital role in being a place where people can experience God and live out their communion with the Church as the Body of Christ. Effective pastoral planning greatly assists this process in ensuring the sustainability of the parish’s vitality and success.

Chapter Two examines the research done on parish vitality in Australia and overseas. Several studies done at parish, diocesan, national and international levels are examined and in each, the findings related to parish vitality are highlighted. These findings are drawn on to inform the understanding of parish vitality developed for this study. The chapter also discusses the challenges associated with defining parish vitality and measuring it, and in the final section, eight measures are identified and described that can be used as indicators of parish vitality in Australian Catholic parishes.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology for this study. The eight measures of vitality are operationalised and a theoretical framework is developed to suit the aims and purposes of the research. The chapter discusses the sampling processes used for participant and parish selection as well as the methods used for data collection and analysis. It concludes with a brief discussion on the limitations of the study and the ethical issues that arose during the course of the research.

Chapter Four provides a brief introduction to the parishes and participants who took part in the study. The history, leadership structure, demographic information and cultural make-up of each parish are briefly described. Participants are profiled according to their age, sex, ethnicity and roles within the parish.

Chapter Five begins the discussion of the data collected during the fieldwork component of the research. The chapter focusses on examining the participants’

perceptions of their parish and discusses their responses to two key questions relating to parish vitality.

Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, Nine and Ten present the findings relating to the eight measures of vitality identified in the literature. Each chapter focuses on the data involving one or two measures. These chapters have been further sub-divided into themes, in order to provide a comprehensive discussion of all the issues studied in this research project.

Chapter Eleven is the final chapter which draws together and briefly summarises the main findings of parish vitality. The chapter also describes the implications of the study for pastoral planners and parish leaders and suggests recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

PARISH VITALITY: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT

This chapter reviews the literature on Church vitality and present available evidence of the sources of vitality found in Catholic parishes today. Research done on parish vitality from a Catholic perspective is found both in Australia and overseas, with an assortment of research projects done at parish, diocesan, national and international levels. There are also interdenominational research projects that study various aspects of Church life such as worship, identity, organizational structure and programs, in Catholic parishes and churches of other denominations. Some of these studies, such as the National Church Life Survey in Australia, focus on the vitality of parishes.

The first sections of this chapter examine several research projects that discuss the concept of parish vitality. In each of these studies I review how the concept has been referred to and measured. Much of the research done on Catholic parishes is derived from broader datasets constructed for other purposes, for example, youth spirituality, leadership and lay ministry, in which an aspect of Catholic parish vitality is briefly referred to or studied within the particular research context. Other research material available is usually in the form of data obtained from large-scale government surveys, such as censuses, which show religious affiliation, and from Catholic surveys such as Mass Counts and the collection of other Church statistics. In-depth studies of Catholic parishes that study all dimensions of Church life are relatively scarce.

The second sections of this chapter draw on the findings of previous research to inform the understanding of parish vitality developed for this study. The challenges associated with defining and measuring parish vitality are discussed. In the concluding section, eight measures of vitality are proposed, based on sociological research and theological sources that can be used as indicators of vitality in Catholic parishes. These form the basis of the framework that guides the analysis of data collected in the study.

RESEARCH DONE ON VITALITY IN CATHOLIC PARISHES

There is a wealth of information on the identification and measurement of factors related to an understanding of parish health and vitality. Much of the research originates from the United States with a few scattered studies done in other countries. However, there are considerable methodological differences among them. Firstly, not all the research studies discussed here have parish vitality as their central focus. Some studies, such as the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, are sociological approaches to Catholic parishes and the vitality of parishes form only a part of their research. Another difference is the sample size of the various studies. Some studies, such as Paul Wilkes' study of Catholic parishes, concentrate on research done on a few select parishes, whereas studies such as the National Church Life Survey and the International Congregational Life Survey are done on a national and international level. Also, the understanding of "vitality" of a Catholic parish differs widely between each study. With an aim of bringing together findings from all these studies, an examination of parish vitality in overseas studies is first undertaken, followed by the research done on parish vitality in Australia in recent years.

Overseas Research Studies

International and national level research

The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life carried out in the 1980's was an extraordinary study that adopted a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of US parishes. Phase I consisted of a broad probe using mailed questionnaires, followed by a deeper examination in Phase II, which focussed on an in-depth qualitative study of 36 parishes. The final phase included analysis and the publishing of findings, some of which were compiled into a book called *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life since Vatican II*¹ that described life in US parishes twenty years after the Second Vatican Council.

¹ Joseph Gremillion and Jim Castelli, *The Emerging Parish: The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life since Vatican II* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987).

Parish vitality as a specific concept was not defined or explicitly measured in this study, even though the researchers frequently mention it and several aspects of parish life related to vitality were investigated. When studying the extent of parish programs and activities, the vitality of those activities was also examined. Parish administrators and parish priests were asked to list the three activities of the parish that were most well attended by parishioners. Results indicated that apart from Sunday Mass, “Bingo” (a social event popular in American parishes) was most popular, followed by adult religious education and religious education of children among other social and devotional activities.² Again, when asked “What three activities of the parish best exemplify its vitality?”, respondents (parish priests and parish administrators) once again listed Sunday Mass followed by activities such as bingo, children's religious education and parish school activities and sports amongst others.³ Lastly, when parish priests and parish administrators were asked “What factors have contributed to the development of these vital elements of your parish?” the involvement and support of the laity and good leadership were seen to be the common characteristics of vitality.⁴ While the results showed that social activities were a vitalising force in the parish, there were also mention of programs that served parishioners' special needs, directed parishioners to the needs of others, or involved parishioners in parish governance. The researchers reported that since parish vitality is related to a sense of community and relationships, in a post-Vatican II parish, a good social life resulted in an improvement in the congregation's spiritual life.⁵ While the findings of this research are noteworthy, it is important to remember that 30 years have passed since the study was carried out. In this time, the dynamics of parish life, in relation to the culture, demographics and expectations of parishioners have changed in some ways that will affect contemporary perceptions of parish vitality.

The Notre Dame Study sparked a diverse range of research studies in the US, among them the Parish Project, one of the first in-depth studies on parish vitality conducted by the staff of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Parish in the US in 1982. The researchers wanted to study good parishes and alert others to their

² David C. Legee, "Parish Organizations: People's Needs, Parish Services, and Leadership. (Report No. 8)," in *Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1986), 22.

³ Gremillion and Castelli, *The Emerging Parish*, 70–71.

⁴ Legee, "Parish Organizations," 23.

⁵ Gremillion and Castelli, *The Emerging Parish*, 76.

effective practices and approaches.⁶ The methodology used was an “I know it when I see it” approach and participating parishes were identified by asking diocesan representatives to recommend two or three “good” or “effective” parishes in their dioceses.⁷ The resulting list of parishes was a diverse group consisting of large and small parishes, inner city, suburban and rural parishes, parishes whose parishioners had middle, upper and lower class incomes, parishes that had services in a language other than English and parishes with and without parochial schools. This demonstrated that pastoral excellence in a parish was not dependent on its size, locale, language, income or the presence of a school. The parishes were administered a questionnaire to discern how they compared with other parishes around the country. Among the other significant findings, the researchers found that these “effective” parishes were:

- More likely to have a staff that operated as a team
- More likely to have regular staff meetings, organised parish councils and more parish activities than other parishes
- More likely to undertake pastoral planning with the help of outside consultants to lead the planning processes
- More likely to train their leaders and to create “mini-parishes or sub-communities” within the parish to foster a greater sense of community
- More likely to focus on liturgy and liturgy planning⁸

Several research studies have investigated one or two aspects of parish life related to vitality. The Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (2003–2007) was a collaborative effort of six national organizations to research models of Catholic parishes and parish leadership in US dioceses. Researchers found that parish ministry was flourishing, with many clerical and lay people involved, presenting a vibrant and hopeful picture of parish life for the future.⁹ The study described the characteristics of excellent pastoral leaders and leadership as *collaborative* (able to work with lay and clerical ministers), *ethical* (respectful of others and appropriate in their behaviour), *pastoral* (caring and empowering), *prophetic* (ecumenical, evangelistic, justice-

⁶ David DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, (May 27, 2007).

⁷ DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 4.

⁸ DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 7.

⁹ Carole Ganim, *Shaping Catholic Parishes: Pastoral Leaders in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), xiii.

focussed and mission-directed) and *welcoming* (hospitable and inclusive).¹⁰ The research also highlighted the diversity of parishes in terms of their structures and leadership and the importance of healthy relationships and collaboration among people in parishes.

In an attempt to discover how pastorally excellent parishes differed from the rest, the researchers developed 32 marks of pastoral excellence.¹¹ These marks were written as descriptive statements, and in a national survey of Catholic parishes, respondents (mainly pastors) were asked to rate these descriptions against their parishes. The findings reported that the marks of pastoral excellence that respondents said were most descriptive of their parish were:

1. Preaching that connected Scripture to daily life
2. Attending to the needs of the sick, homebound and bereaved
3. Having a pastor and staff energised and enthusiastic about ministry
4. Prayerful, reverent and spiritually moving liturgies
5. Engaging in outreach to the poor¹²

The location of a parish was not a criterion that distinguished pastorally excellent parishes from the rest. As well, there were only marginal differences in size in terms of the number of registered parishioners and weekend Masses, with pastorally excellent parishes having a slightly larger average. However, the analysis revealed that pastorally excellent parishes were:

- Growing parishes that were more likely to have an increase in parishioners and average weekend Mass attendance over the past five years than other parishes. An exception was very small parishes with under 800 registered parishioners.
- More planned and better organised in their ministries. They were more likely to engage in pastoral planning, have written mission statements and a pastoral council that provided formal orientation and training for its members.
- More likely to have finance councils and to promote stewardship in the parish.
- Likely to have more parish activities than other parishes¹³

¹⁰ Ganim, *Shaping Catholic Parishes*, xv–xvi.

¹¹ DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 10.

¹² DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 11.

Studies of vitality have not been confined to Catholic parishes. Several comprehensive joint research studies of Church life have been undertaken. The International Congregational Life Survey (ICLS) was a collaborative research study undertaken in April and May 2001 by congregational researchers in the United States, New Zealand, England and Australia who were concerned about the mission of the Church in the new millennium. Catholics participated in three of the four countries, but not in England.¹⁴ In Australia, the study was conducted by NCLS Research. The study found that across all four countries there were some characteristics that appeared consistently in congregations with higher levels of newcomers. Listed in order of strength, these congregations had higher levels of Church attenders who had the following main qualities:

- A strong and growing sense of belonging
- Inviting others to Church
- Perception that the Church is moving in new directions
- Leadership that encourages attenders' gifts and skills
- Clear vision to which attenders are committed
- Growth in faith as a result of this Church
- Contemporary and uplifting services¹⁵

While these are only some of the main factors listed, the study nevertheless revealed the importance of the internal life of churches and the possibility of improving it to encourage newcomers into the Church. The 2001 survey was also the first time that Australian and overseas researchers developed a single list of 12 vitality measures, named "Core Qualities".¹⁶ These were later refined and reduced to nine, supplemented by three measures of attendance related to vitality.¹⁷ Since these core qualities formed

¹³ DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 18–20.

¹⁴ Robert E. Dixon, "Comparison of Catholic Church Attenders in the US and Australia: A First Look at Some Results from the International Congregational Life Survey," Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and NCLS Research, November 2002).

¹⁵ Sam Sterland, John Bellamy, Phillip Escott, and Keith Castle, "Attracting and Integrating Newcomers into Church Life: Research in Four Countries," *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion and Education* 27, no. 1 (April 2006) 49.

¹⁶ Peter Kaldor, Keith Castle and Robert Dixon, *Connections For Life: Core Qualities to Foster in Your Church* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 2002), 24.

¹⁷ John Bellamy, Bryan Cussen, Sam Sterland, Keith Castle, Ruth Powell, and Peter Kaldor, *Enriching Church Life: A Practical Guide for Local Churches* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 2006), 10.

an important part of the process in measuring vitality in Australian parishes, I will discuss these further in a later section.

Diocesan and parish level research

In his search to find out what makes a Catholic parish “successful”, Paul Wilkes and a team of investigators conducted in-depth research in eight American parishes, focussing on their more thriving aspects that could be reproducible in other parishes. In being models of excellence, these parishes did not have a set criterion that determined their “vitality”. However their vital aspects consisted of many different, successful initiatives and together they touched on most areas of parish life such as finances, devotions, social action, adult education and outreach, amongst others. In the final analysis, Wilkes and his team also found 16 traits common to the parishes they deemed excellent. These "somewhat eclectic characteristics" were grouped under the categories of “approach, institutional life, community, the work and spirituality”.¹⁸ Their book, *Excellent Catholic Parishes*, also included a "Points of Excellence Index" that matched up some of the parishes selected with six areas: worship, education, evangelisation, outreach, spirituality/in-reach and organisation.¹⁹

There have been several research studies done by American dioceses in order to study the vitality of parishes in their area. In 1997 the Rockford Catholic Diocese created a conceptual model of a vital parish on the basis of 34 “Indicators of Parish Vitality” using key Church documents and drawing on models developed by other dioceses.²⁰ An analysis of more than 55,000 parishioner responses to a questionnaire exploring parishioner perceptions of the parish in terms of the indicators resulted in the creation of 16 “indices of quality”, grouped into four main sections and several subsections. These were:

1. Worship: Celebration of liturgy, celebration of Sacraments and spiritual growth programs

¹⁸ Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 157.

¹⁹ Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes*, 169.

²⁰ Michael Cieslak, "The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership," in *The Parish Management Handbook*, ed. Charles E. Zech (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), 125.

2. Community: Hospitality, stewardship of time, talent and treasure, stewardship of facilities, evangelization, and leadership
3. Service: Within the parish, to the local community and beyond the parish
4. Education/Formation: Religious and adult education, catholic schools, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), youth and young adult ministry and ecumenism²¹

The research showed a strong connection between parish size and vitality—the larger the parish, the more likely parishioners perceived it vital. This was surprisingly different from the general opinion in Church-related research that views smaller parishes are more desirable due to their intimacy and the generous nature of their parishioners. Additionally, the leadership index was seen to be the best predictor of parish vitality. Within that index, correlating leadership with encouraging a diversity of lay people to participate in parish ministries was the most important in predicting overall parish vitality.²²

In a similar study in 2002, the Cleveland Catholic Diocese distributed The Vibrant Parish Life Survey (VPLS) consisting of 39 questions to parishioners throughout the diocese.²³ The survey was designed as a parish self-study survey to evaluate parish vibrancy based on the perceptions and actions of parishioners. The main finding of this study was the emergence of five parishioner satisfaction variables that made a vibrant parish. In an exploratory factor analysis of the 39 items, the researchers found five factors—sacramental, sense of community, faith formation, outreach, and stewardship. The dependent variable of parishioner “satisfaction” was calculated as the average of these five factor scores, while improvement in satisfaction was calculated as the change in these scores over three years.

The Parish Vitality Initiative (PVI) conducted in the Diocese of Green Bay was a practical project created to stimulate the growth and vitality of parishes. Four areas—youth involvement, stewardship involvement, evangelisation and missional

²¹ Cieslak, "The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership," 126–127.

²² Cieslak, "The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership," 127–130.

²³ Richard Boyatzis, Terry Brizz, and Lindsey Godwin, "The Effect of Religious Leaders' Emotional and Social Competencies on Improving Parish Vibrancy," *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 18, no. 2 (2011), 196. See also Terrence J. Brizz, *Parish Vibrancy: A Reflection Of Pastoral Leadership On Parishioner Support And Parishioner Satisfaction* (PhD, Case Western Reserve University, May, 2004).

community—were identified as being good indicators of growth and vitality. Initiated in 2007, the project identified three pilot parishes to be the first to receive funding for up to two years to do creative and innovative programs and projects that would enable the growth and vitality of the parishes.²⁴ At the end of the two year program, they found that each pilot parish had demonstrated real growth in each of the four areas listed. The greatest strength of PVI was the unique partnership of parish, funders, and the consultant to realise a vision of parish growth and vitality. It established an innovative structure to address the challenges of parish growth and vitality that would otherwise have gone unaddressed. The challenges were met with a particular focus on quality and effort in the areas of liturgy, preaching and vision, strong pastoral and lay leadership, effective use of technology in communications and worship, and radical hospitality.²⁵

Along with this project, as a part of the total Diocesan Visioning and Planning process, in 2010 each parish in the Diocese of Green Bay was invited to gather parish leaders and invite input from all members of the parish in response to two questions on parish vitality.²⁶ One of these questions, asked respondents to describe the best examples of parish vitality and life in their parish. Parish leaders and parishioners were encouraged to share stories, images and actual quotes to illustrate the points made. In response to this question, in order of priority the parishes listed the following:

- The sense of being a family, a welcoming community of faith
- Their pastor, or parish director
- The music, choir and singing
- Parish festivals, picnics and fundraisers
- The school
- Sunday liturgies
- Involvement of youth and young adults
- The many ways the parish provided service, care, outreach the needy
- The many volunteers serving in various ways

²⁴ Mark Mogilka, *Parish Vitality Initiative: The Pilot Parishes: An Evaluation Report*, (Department of Stewardship and Pastoral Services, Diocese of Green Bay, September, 2009), 2.

²⁵ Mogilka, *Parish Vitality Initiative: The Pilot Parishes: An Evaluation Report*, 18.

²⁶ Diocese of Green Bay, *Diocesan Visioning 2010-2011: Parish Discovery and Dreaming Report*, (Green Bay, WI: Department of Stewardship & Pastoral Services, Diocese of Green Bay, 12 January, 2011), 1.

- The faith formation/religious education program²⁷

The most important goals set by parish leaders and parishioners by a more than two to one margin over any other priority was to strengthen the outreach, welcome, engagement and involvement of youth and young adults in the life of the parish.²⁸

There have been several other research studies in the US (both Catholic and inter-denominational) that have studied one of more aspects of Catholic parishes. Davidson and Fournier reviewed 10 such research studies and observed that a limitation of these studies was the lack of data on the perceptions and experiences of lay people in Catholic parishes.²⁹ Additionally, the political dimension of the Church (which focuses on power relations in the parish or the strength of community or amount of conflict) was largely understudied. There was not much data on the extent to which lay people experience “community” or alienation in their parishes, nor on conflict that the clergy may not be aware of or might not acknowledge. Davidson and Fournier also stress the importance of using language and theological assumptions that are sensitive to and appropriate for Catholic parish studies. Their comments concur with The Parish Vitality Initiatives’ director, Mark Mogilka, who in an evaluation statement commented that parish revitalization strategies and programs need to have a better grounding in Catholic tradition, ecclesiology, proven recognised Catholic “best practices” and responsible social science research. While the consideration and inclusion of resources and strategies from non-denominational and ecumenical sources are helpful, they must always be utilised in ways supportive of the Catholic Church and its teachings and traditions.³⁰

Australian Research Studies

Australian research studies on Catholic parishes are in some ways similar to studies done in the US and elsewhere, while at the same time they take into consideration the

²⁷ Diocese of Green Bay, *Diocesan Visioning 2010-2011: Parish Discovery and Dreaming Report*, 1.

²⁸ Diocese of Green Bay, *Diocesan Visioning 2010-2011: Parish Discovery and Dreaming Report*, 2.

²⁹ James D. Davidson and Suzanne C. Fournier, "Recent Research on Catholic Parishes: A Research Note," *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 1 (2006), 77.

³⁰ Mogilka, *Parish Vitality Initiative: The Pilot Parishes: An Evaluation Report*, 21.

unique Australian social and spiritual context in which Catholic parishes operate. As research tools and methods continue to be developed, Catholic parishes over the years have benefitted greatly from the findings of these studies.

In 2001, Mason and Fennessy explored the leadership of parish priests as a source of influence on parish vitality. Their theory of parish vitality was conceived, on the basis of sociological research and pastoral theological principles, in terms of six dimensions of personal and communal religious life in a parish—beliefs, Catholic values or moral attitudes, active involvement, liturgy, community and spirituality (both personal and communal). Applied to either persons or organisations, their definition of vitality refers to “the possession of the characteristics of vigorous life—the manifestation of strong life-functions”.³¹ Data for their study was collected as part of the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey. The significant finding of the study was that “Symbolic Leadership” (characterised by Weber’s “charismatic” leader, and emphasising Greeley’s “symbolic” and “ideological” functions of leadership) has a much stronger positive influence on parish vitality than “Human Relations Leadership” (characterised by Weber’s “rational” leader, and emphasising Greeley’s “interpersonal” and “organisational” functions of leadership).³² Particularly, when studying the effects on building community, the researchers noted that the crucial influences on belonging were communal spirituality and active involvement in liturgy. While Human Relations Leadership proved to be the more popular form of leadership among priests in Australia, the researchers claim that this style of leadership has less influence on building the communal spirituality of parishioners, and thus on belonging and community building, than the contrasting Symbolic Leadership style.³³

Key research on parish vitality has been done by the National Church Life Survey organization, NCLS Research. In *Enriching Church Life: A Practical Guide for Local Churches* (2006), John Bellamy, Bryan Cussen and other members 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. According to NLCS, “vitality” is about the extent to which churches “help people to respond to the Christian

³¹ Michael Mason and Denis Fennessy, “Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches,” (2001). http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/Otherpap/Lship_and_Vitality_web.pdf [accessed 25 March 2014], 1.

³² Mason and Fennessy, “Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches,” 6.

³³ Mason and Fennessy, “Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches,” 13.

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 and beyond”.³⁴ As a result of over 20 years research into Australian parishes and congregations of many different Christian denominations, NCLS Research has developed nine observable Core Qualities as measures of parish vitality. They are:

Internal Core Qualities

1. An alive and growing faith (as a result of participation in the parish)
2. Vital and nurturing worship
3. Strong and growing belonging

Inspirational Core Qualities

4. Inspiring and empowering leadership
5. Clear and owned vision
6. Imaginative and flexible innovation

Outward Core Qualities

7. Practical and diverse service
8. Willing and effective faith-sharing
9. Intentional and welcoming inclusion

They also developed three measures of attendance that pointed to a church’s vitality. These were:

- Young Adult Retention: the proportion of attenders aged 15–19 years who had been attending their church for more than five years.
- Newcomers: The percentage of people who joined their local church in the past five years and were previously not involved in any church.
- Attendance change: Changes in attendance rates or “church growth”.

This concept of measuring vitality based on the nine Core Qualities has formed the foundation for several later research studies of parish life.

³⁴ Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 2.

In his PhD thesis, *Ingenious communities, Catholic parishes in Australia as creators of social capital and religious social good*, Robert Dixon 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 NCLS team. Parishes were seen as creators and repositories of social capital and the thesis revealed why social capital and the related concept of religious social goods provided a productive framework for the study of Catholic parishes. It also tested how well a social capital model of parish works in practice, using data from the National Church Life Survey, the Australian Census and the National Count of Attendance.

Dixon's thesis presents some important findings regarding vitality in an Australian Catholic context. Results indicate that the concept of vitality of Catholic parishes differs considerably from that of Protestant congregations. The research also shows that attendance rates are not a fair measure of the assessment of parish vitality but empowering leadership and encouraging parishioners to use their gifts and skills greatly influence parish involvement, especially in urban parishes.³⁵ In addition, Dixon also demonstrated that parish vitality is strongly influenced by local contextual factors, such as location, and the percentage of Catholics born in non-English speaking countries or with university degrees in the parish.³⁶

The Building Stronger Parishes research project conducted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference takes a different approach and seeks to understand and explore parish vitality from the grassroots up. Initiated in 2008, the in-depth study of twenty parishes explores how Catholic parishes, in various contexts, have used their strengths and available resources to respond to a variety of challenges and develop their vitality. These challenges can be big or small, and applicable to the whole of parish life or just to one aspect of it. The aim of the Building Stronger Parishes research is to identify and analyse some of the patterns of vitality in parishes throughout Australia, and communicate them in ways that can be implemented in other parishes. Particular emphasis is given to their stories of hope that bring life to the communities and have an

³⁵ This reference is from the summary report of the PhD thesis and not the thesis itself. See Bob Dixon, *Ingenious Communities: Catholic Parishes in Australia as Creators of Social Capital and Religious Social Goods* (Melbourne: ACBC Pastoral Projects Office, June 2010), 8–9.

³⁶ See Dixon, *Ingenious Communities(PhD Summary)* 12.

underlying foundation in an ecclesiology of communion. The concept of parish vitality is central to the study and employs “Communion ecclesiology” as the foundational theological perspective. The understanding of parish vitality is based on the one developed by NCLS Research that contains the nine core qualities discussed above.

DEFINING PARISH VITALITY

Parish Vitality is an ill-defined concept that is found in frequent usage among Catholics, in diocesan documents and research studies. It is a concept that is continuously evolving, as changes in various criteria such as leadership, structure and the culture of a parish affect the nature and form of its vitality. Even though the term “vital” has been widely used to identify and measure “good” parishes, there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes vitality. Many researchers have attempted to articulate it by measuring various initiatives in a parish in many areas such as worship, community and outreach, among others, while only a few have attempted to actually define it. Dixon notes that among the various research studies on vitality, Australian researchers Mason and Fennessy are the only authors who have explained what they mean by it.³⁷ They see parish vitality not only as a structural reality, but as a functional one—the possession of the characteristics of vigorous life and the manifestation of strong life-functions.³⁸ The life-functions of a parish that are described by them are closely associated with the parish’s members and can be measured directly (such as the number and type of groups and activities open to members) and indirectly or inferentially (through their consequences for the quality of the Christian life of the parishioners).

Because of the complexity of parish life, vitality cannot be conceptualised as the measure of a single characteristic. Rather, vitality encompasses a range of aspects that form the life and activity of a parish. Also, vitality is seen not just in the activities that are offered by the parish, but in the outcomes that are achieved in the lives of those involved. A common approach taken by researchers is to define a list of criteria that

³⁷ Dixon, “*Ingenious Communities*,” (PhD), 41.

³⁸ Mason and Fennessy, “Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches,” 1.

will be met by vital parishes, as studies such as NCLS (2001 and 2006) and Cieslak have done.³⁹ A similar approach has been adopted in studies where vitality has been conceived in terms such as “excellent”⁴⁰, “vibrant”⁴¹ or “successful”.⁴² The qualities of the parish that contribute to its vibrancy or success are made up of many attributes. For example, in Wilkes’ study of excellent parishes, “excellence” was determined by a variety of successful initiatives in areas of parish life such as finances, devotions, social action, adult education and outreach, amongst others. “Vitality” therefore is best conceived as a factor comprising several items which cluster together. This is the approach taken in this study. The following sections discuss the items or “measures” that are indicative of vitality in Australian Catholic parishes.

MEASURES OF VITALITY

The measures of a vital parish life developed by the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) team have assisted greatly in understanding parish vitality in the Australian context. The nine Core Qualities developed by NCLS, along with three measures of attendance, provide a comprehensive system for measuring a church’s vitality. The broad definition employed by NCLS, which sees vitality as the extent to which churches help people to worship God and to explore and respond to their Christian faith, and the extent to which these churches are places of love and missionary activity,⁴³ was formulated in order to be applied to a wide range of Christian denominations. Each of the Core Qualities is operationalised and measured by at least two and usually several different survey questions. However, in order to be comparable across all denominations, each Core Quality score is calculated from one specific item.

This method poses a problem for Catholic parishes that often do not score as highly as their other-denominational counterparts due to either a misinterpretation of the language used in the survey that is unfamiliar to Catholics, or due to differences

³⁹ Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 11 and Cieslak, “The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership,” 125.

⁴⁰ Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes*.

⁴¹ Boyatzis et al., “The Effect of Religious Leaders’ Emotional and Social Competencies on Improving Parish Vibrancy,” 192.

⁴² Sweetser and Holden, *Leadership in a Successful Parish*.

⁴³ Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 2.

between Protestant and Catholic theology and practices. In his thesis, Dixon alludes to these differences that result in variations between the vitality of Catholic and Protestant parishes:

The NCLS Research model ... attaches great importance to items about discussing faith with others and inviting others to church, both items clearly understood as part of a congregation's approach to evangelism. Catholic attenders, on the other hand, are far less likely to attach such a meaning to these items, but rather to interpret the first as a merely private measure of their own level of comfort in talking about their religious faith and the second as a matter of hospitality, such as when grandparents are invited to attend their grandchildren's First Communion.⁴⁴

Another example of this discrepancy in measurement is found in relation to measurement of the first Core Quality "An Alive and Growing Faith". The key question asked here is: *Over the last year, do you believe you have grown in your Christian faith?* Attenders are asked to select one of the following:

1. Much growth through this parish
2. Much growth through other groups or churches
3. Much growth through private activity
4. Some growth
5. No growth

The score for this Core Quality is determined by the percentage of people in a parish or congregation who indicate that they have experienced *much growth in faith in the past year through the parish*.

In Catholic teaching, growth in faith means growing in a lived knowledge of Christ, a living remembrance of his commandments, and a truth that must be lived out in daily life.⁴⁵ Through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, through sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross and through prayer, Catholics are called to receive the grace of Christ and the gifts of his Spirit which make them capable of leading such a life.⁴⁶ The responsibility for teaching the faith lies with the bishop who, as the head of the local

⁴⁴ Dixon, "Ingenious Communities," (PhD), 54, 55.

⁴⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Spondor*, Encyclical Letter Of His Holiness John Paul II (1993) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 88.

⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Spondor*, n. 5, 103, 107.

Church (which for Catholics is the diocese, not an individual parish as in some other denominations), has an obligation to ensure that faith and morals are taught in his diocese.⁴⁷ Thus while the parish has a central place in the life of the Church, many dioceses have talks, adult education programs, missions, and youth and young adult activities that all Catholics in the diocese can attend. Additionally, through private prayer or through small groups, Catholics engage in activities such as studying the Scripture, meditating upon the life of Christ, praying the Office or adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. While a parish may have some of these activities, Catholics are not restricted to attending their own parish and could belong to several groups or engage in private activities that increase their faith, while still continuing to attend Mass and participate actively in their own parish. Parish vitality should therefore include both the activities in the parish and the encouragement given to parishioners to be involved in other faith formation activities as well, and may be measured in the growth of parishioners in faith directly or indirectly as a result of these activities.

Thus, while the NCLS survey only includes attenders' growth through participation in *their own parish's* faith formation activities in calculating the growth in faith Core Quality, it fails to score Mass attenders on a range of other activities that attenders participate in. Any study of the vitality of Catholic parishes must allow for these aspects to be appreciated as well. The Core Qualities have been used in prior Catholic research studies⁴⁸ as legitimate measures of parish vitality, with their limitations noted. While not all the Core Qualities are operationalised in a manner that renders them "imperfect" for measuring the vitality of Catholic parishes, nevertheless, there are definitely some changes that are needed if we are to determine and measure the health of Catholic parishes in a manner that accords with Catholic teaching and practice.

The NCLS measures provide one place to start formulating my own understanding of what parish vitality might mean specifically for Catholic parishes in Australia. My understanding is derived from the theological understanding of the parish based on an ecclesiology of communion. The Catholic parish is primarily defined as a "community of Christian faithful" who gather together in the celebration of the Eucharist, who teach

⁴⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Spondor*, n. 114.

⁴⁸ The Core Qualities have been used in Dixon, "*Ingenious Communities*," (PhD) and in the *Building Stronger Parishes* research study,

[and embrace] Christ's saving doctrine and who practice the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love.⁴⁹ A vital parish, therefore, is one based on an ecclesiology of communion, where baptised members form a strong faith community centred on a meaningful celebration and experience of the Eucharist; where parishioners are welcomed and empowered in actively living out their faith; and where diverse outreach initiatives are practised and a commitment to mission is witnessed and encouraged. The vitality of a parish is dependent on the quality of leadership, the adaptability of the parish and the ways in which planning processes are employed to facilitate growth and change. This vision of parish takes into account the communitarian structure of the parish with its internal and external relationships, the practice of a spirituality of communion in the context of daily life, and communion as the source and fruit of missionary activity in the parish. It incorporates both aspects of vitality, the activities of a parish as well as the outcomes of those activities in the lives of parishioners. As a representative of the universal Church, a vital parish is one that is always endeavouring to live up to its true vocation of being "one, holy, catholic and apostolic".

The measures of vitality derived using a theological approach differ from those derived using a sociological approach, in that while sociological measures describe "what is" the case, theological measures imply "what ought to be" the case. In other words, the basis of parish vitality is to be found in theology rather than sociology. The measures of vitality that follow, therefore, are "desirable" aspects of a vital parish based on an ecclesiology of communion that Catholic parishes aspire towards. These measures are closely tied to the NCLS Core Qualities (See Table 2.1). However, they differ to the extent that they are developed specifically for an in-depth study of Catholic parish life with their wording and emphasis developed from Catholic language and Catholic theology.

The Eight Measures of Vitality

The eight measures of a vital parish that were developed for this study are explained in the following sections.

⁴⁹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2179.

Table 2.1: Measures of Vitality Showing Relationship to NCLS Core Qualities

Measures of vitality	NCLS Core Qualities
1. The vocational call of Baptism is nurtured and parishioners are encouraged in their faith	An alive and growing faith
2. Liturgical celebrations offer an experience of God	Vital and nurturing worship
3. Welcoming inclusion and hospitality abound and parishioners are encouraged to share their gifts	Intentional and welcoming inclusion
4. Spiritual fellowship and community bonds are nurtured and parishioners experience a strong sense of belonging	Strong and growing belonging
5. Parishioners are aware of and are formed in their commitment to mission and evangelisation	Willing and effective faith-sharing
6. Practical and diverse service/outreach initiatives are practised	Practical and diverse service
7. Collegial and collaborative leadership is practised	Inspiring and empowering leadership Clear and owned vision
8. The parish is adaptable to changes and is involved in planning for the future	Imaginative and flexible innovation Clear and owned vision

1. The vocational call of Baptism is nurtured and parishioners are encouraged in their faith

Baptism is the door to and the foundation of communion in the Church.⁵⁰ All baptised members are called to ministry and discipleship and to pursue their vocation of holiness. As a “community of the baptised”, the parish is obliged to promote the vocations of its members and help them live out their vocational call:

Its whole pastoral and apostolic effort aims at making all parishioners aware of baptism, so that they may persevere in Grace, that is, in the state of Sons [*sic*] of God and enjoy the fruits of baptism in personal life as well as in family and social life.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 19.

⁵¹ Pope John Paul II, *Homily of His Holiness John Paul II*, Visit to the Roman Parish of San Pancrazio (April 22, 1979) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790422_san-pancrazio_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 4.

Governance of a parish must include not only the cultivation of the vocation of individual members but also that of the whole community.⁵² A vibrant parish is one where all members are encouraged in their call and supported in their discernment and response. And as a community, the parish preserves the baptismal vocation of its members to “recapitulate the life and mission of Christ”.⁵³

Whether it is through adult education programs, missions, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), youth and young adult activities or other programs for persons of various ages, formation in faith is an important part of every aspect of the parish. As Pope John Paul II reminds us:

... we cannot come to the fullness of contemplation of the Lord’s face by our own efforts alone, but by allowing grace to take us by the hand. Only the experience of silence and prayer offers the proper setting for the growth and development of a true, faithful and consistent knowledge of that mystery ...⁵⁴

In response to the call to be “holy”, a vital parish provides many opportunities for parishioners to experience Christ and deepen their spirituality and the sense of being called to love as his disciples. These include opportunities for participation in the Sacraments, for prayer, meditating upon Scripture and studying Church teachings.

2. Liturgical celebrations offer an experience of God

The Eucharist, as “the source and summit of Christian life”,⁵⁵ is also “the creative force and source of communion among members of the Church”.⁵⁶ The celebration of the Eucharist therefore is very important in Catholic parishes. The community must be built up and grow from the “full and sincere” celebration of the Eucharist to lead into charitable and missionary activity and other forms of Christian witness.⁵⁷ Vibrant parishes encourage active participation among their members in the various components of the liturgy such as the music, the breaking of the Word, as Special

⁵² Michael Sweeney, “Can you Tell me What a Parish is?,” in *What is a Parish?: Canonical, Pastoral, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Thomas A. Baima (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2007), 5.

⁵³ Sweeney, “Can you Tell me What a Parish is?,” 5.

⁵⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 20.

⁵⁵ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

⁵⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion*, n. 5.

⁵⁷ Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 6.

Ministers of the Eucharist, as greeters and collectors, amongst others. Homilies at these liturgies are relevant to the lives of the parishioners and nourish and challenge them. The experience of the liturgy is spiritually nourishing and encourages parishioners in their role as Christ's witnesses to the world and in pursuing their vocation of holiness.

3. Welcoming inclusion and hospitality abound and parishioners are encouraged to share their gifts

In an ecclesiology of communion, the parish is far more than just a structure for communal gathering. Rather it is called to be “a familial and welcoming home”.⁵⁸ In order to be truly “catholic” therefore, vital parishes reach out to all their members, taking particular care to welcome visitors and newcomers into the parish and to help them feel at home by finding ways to include them in parish activities. The welcoming attitude of the parish is particularly apparent at the celebration of the Mass when people are greeted on arrival and invited in. Hospitality, manifested in a variety of ways, abounds among parish leaders, staff members and parishioners through a genuinely caring and warm attitude towards one another. There is a positive affirmation of differences, mutual respect for one another and a genuine commitment to include people of different ages and backgrounds. Welcoming parish communities thus become fertile ground for evangelisation and for welcoming back Catholics who have stopped actively participating in the Church or who only occasionally attend Mass in the parish.

Ecclesial communion is characterised by a “diversity and complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities” so that every member of the lay faithful offers their own unique contribution.⁵⁹ A vital parish is one which identifies and invites the skills and talents of its parishioners to be developed in parish activities. Inviting persons to engage in parish ministry and other aspects of the Church's mission based on what they can offer, and empowering and supporting them in their work, increases their sense of ownership and results in greater participation. In addition, a sharing of gifts and skills fosters an environment where innovation and

⁵⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

⁵⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 20.

initiative thrive, facilitating further development of the parish. Vital parishes have a range of activities that encourage this attitude of stewardship as a way of life.

4. Spiritual fellowship and community bonds are nurtured and parishioners experience a strong sense of belonging

In an ecclesiology of communion, each person is essentially linked to others. A conception of a vibrant Church sees the Church as a “communion in divine life”.⁶⁰ As parishioners, all members of the lay faithful are called to “never remain in isolation from the community, but ... [to] live in a continual interaction with others, with a lively sense of fellowship”.⁶¹ To facilitate this sense of fellowship then, parishes must work towards the building up of community by deepening the bonds of communion that are shared by all.⁶² This goes beyond welcoming and trying to include people in parish life. It means creating opportunities to nurture and deepen these relationships at various levels, within a parish—between parishioners and their leaders and among parishioners themselves—as well as outside—to link the parish as a community to other communities. It also includes improving personal and communal spirituality in the parish since, as research shows, this directly leads to stronger community bonding.⁶³

All the lay faithful in a parish are called into communion to a “full belonging” to “the Church and to its mystery”.⁶⁴ Sense of belonging refers to the extent of which people feel that they can belong to and participate in their local parish community. In a vital parish, this sense of belonging is strongly experienced by parishioners through being encouraged and empowered to participate and through building relationships with many people in the parish. They become aware of their special calling of not only belonging to the Church, but of “being the Church”, as followers of Christ, sharing in his mission in the world.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Oelrich, "What is a Parish?," 156.

⁶¹ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 20.

⁶² Daniel Barnett, "Trinity and the Parish: A Response to Anthony Oelrich," in *What is a Parish?: Canonical, Pastoral, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Thomas A. Baima (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2007), 177.

⁶³ Mason and Fennessy, "Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches," 13.

⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 9.

⁶⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 9.

5. Parishioners are aware of and are formed in their commitment to mission and evangelisation

Through Baptism, the members of a parish or “lay faithful” are called to participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ to bring salvation in the world.⁶⁶ They are called, each according to their own measure, to “put to use every Christian and evangelical possibility latent but already present and active in the affairs of the world” in “the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics”, as well as “the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media”.⁶⁷ A vibrant parish is one where members are aware of their mission in the world. The parish mission statement is seen in action in the parish and all parishioners are familiar with it. In addition, the parish is committed to forming them as persons for communion and mission through appropriate activities and programs, in order to inspire “full, conscious and active participation in the Church”, and to strengthen the communion of the parish.⁶⁸ These missionary activities include connections with people of other Christian communities and religions. In doing so, the parish increases the vibrancy of the community and helps bridge the gap between the Church’s vision of the lay apostolate and the lived experience of Catholics.⁶⁹

6. Practical and diverse service/outreach initiatives are practised

The three-fold responsibility of the Church includes: proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the Sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*).⁷⁰ Charity that begins with intra-ecclesia communion opens out into universal service and inspires a commitment to “practical and concrete love for every human being”.⁷¹ There are abundant ways in which the parish can be Christ in the world and act as God’s instrument. Vibrant parishes are able to work together with other agencies to find ways to respond to society’s needs such as homelessness, poverty and unemployment. Members are given opportunities to engage

⁶⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 23.

⁶⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 70.

⁶⁸ Barnett, “Trinity and the Parish,” 179.

⁶⁹ Sherry Weddell, “The Parish and the Apostolic Formation of the Laity,” in *What is a Parish?: Canonical, Pastoral, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Thomas A. Baima (Chicago: Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2007), 181.

⁷⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 25.

⁷¹ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 49.

in works of charity and compassion, while at the same time advocating social justice issues by standing up for the values of the Gospel in society and challenging and questioning values or policies that are not compatible with these.

7. Collegial and collaborative leadership is practised

Leadership is one of the most significant factors that influence the vitality of a parish. Good leadership in a parish has the ability to not only facilitate good management but also generate constructive change to help a parish grow.⁷² Leadership qualities that promote a sense of belonging in a parish include the ability to communicate a clear vision for the parish, the ability to get people to work together, and a readiness to encourage parishioners to use their gifts and skills for the good of the parish.⁷³ Parishes are called to foster a “spirituality of communion”, that shapes the process of collaboration and encourages fruitful dialogue between pastors and their people.⁷⁴ Vibrant parishes promote the practice of collegial and collaborative leadership at all levels in a parish, be it in parish groups and councils or among parish leaders and parish staff. Parish leaders consult with their parishioners and invite their involvement and input in developing the parish community. In doing so, they demonstrate the apostolicity of the Church and help maintain the continuity of “Tradition” and “traditions”⁷⁵ while assisting the community to express it in ways relevant to its context.

8. The parish is adaptable to changes and is involved in planning for the future

A parish is constantly evolving as changes in its size, structure, leadership and demographics affect its vitality. It is important therefore that the parish leaders are open and adaptable to changes in the parish and in society that will occur over time. A vital parish exhibits a willingness to build on the parish strengths, face difficult choices and make decisions for the sustainable future of the parish community. Leaders engage with

⁷² Mason and Fennessy, "Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches," and Cieslak, "The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership."

⁷³ Bob Dixon, "What Makes People Feel They Belong?: New findings from the National Church Life Survey," (September 2011). <http://pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/BSP%2005%20September%202011%20-%20Belonging.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2014], 3

⁷⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 45.

⁷⁵ “Tradition” refers to the body of beliefs while “traditions” refers to customs and practices. See Tracey. Rowland, *Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 48.

their community to manage forthcoming changes by envisioning the future, communicating “the parish vision” clearly to their parishioners and preparing them accordingly.

CONCLUSION

As a community, every parish is called to work towards the mission of the Church. An ecclesiology of communion provides parishes with an understanding of Church that enlivens and enriches them and enables them to work towards fulfilling their mission. The eight measures of parish vitality that are based on this understanding of Church express the life of the Church as it is called to be “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”. They facilitate the means for all people to be drawn into full communion with God and one another. Parishes may choose to express these measures in various ways that are related to their context. Nevertheless, their actions, activities and initiatives will reflect the spirit of communion and their vocation to be truly united in the Mystical Body of Christ. The next chapter will discuss the methods used in the empirical part of this thesis and the theoretical framework developed to suit the purposes of the research.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

While the focus of this thesis is upon vitality in Australian Catholic parishes, international research has been drawn on to inform the research design of the study. This chapter outlines the research design and describes how the research was conducted. It begins with a statement of the research questions and an operationalization of each of the eight measures of vitality that were identified in the previous chapter. Next, the nature of the qualitative research design chosen for the study is explained, followed by a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework that was developed for this study. The methods of participant selection and data collection are also examined and the analytical frameworks used to organise and interpret the data collected are described. The chapter ends with a brief review of the ethical concerns regarding the research process.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research questions of this thesis are:

1. What are the essential elements of an understanding of vitality for a Catholic parish?
2. To what extent are these elements measureable and what measures are available?
3. How are individual measures of vitality identified in this research related to the overall quality of parish life?
4. What are the different expressions of vitality found in different contexts in Australian Catholic parishes today?
5. What are the major contributors and challenges to vitality found in Australian Catholic parishes?

The essential elements and measures of an understanding of vitality for Catholic parishes were identified and developed in Chapter Two. In order to further examine the nature of vitality in Australian Catholic parishes, it was necessary to operationalise these measures. Operationalisation is a step in the research process where one identifies the variables that need to be measured.¹ This step was essential in this study since “vitality” is an intangible concept that cannot be directly measured. In addition, the measures of vitality that have been identified are in themselves too general and insufficient to make the phenomenon of vitality understandable. In order to obtain a measurable form of each of these measures, therefore, the concepts had to be translated into operational terms.

MEASURES OF VITALITY AND THEIR EXPRESSIONS

The eight measures of vitality identified in the literature review indicated what a vibrant parish ought to be like. The operationalisation of the measures was done by listing the practical expressions of each measure—the identifiable and observable events/actions that demonstrated how each measure might be expressed in parishes. Each of the eight measures was reviewed and lists of probable observable actions, events and/or characteristics were compiled, as follows:

1. The vocational call of Baptism is nurtured and parishioners are encouraged in their faith

Observations:

- The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) program is available for parishioners
- Faith formation for all ages is carried out in the parish and participation in diocesan activities is encouraged where available.
- Opportunities for prayer and spiritual formation (retreats, talks, missions, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and Church space available for quiet prayer) are available to parishioners.
- Reflections on the Word, Bible or Scripture study groups exist.
- The parish has a library.

¹ Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 13th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2013), 115.

Documents:

- Church teachings, letters and other informative materials are available for parishioners to take home and read.

Interviews:

- Participants indicate that they are nurtured in their faith and find opportunities for appropriate spiritual formation through parish and diocesan activities.
- Participants indicate that they are encouraged to participate in the parish and find ample opportunities to do so.

2. Liturgical celebrations offer an experience of God

Observations:

- Liturgies are prepared and planned.
- Several Masses are available for people to attend.
- A Sunday evening Mass is celebrated.
- There are many people participating in each Mass in various liturgical ministries.
- Vibrant music and other ministries support the celebration of each Mass.
- The homilies at each Mass are relevant to Mass attenders.
- There is a special focus on the Eucharist at each Mass.
- Lay led liturgies are held when the priest is not available or alternate arrangements are made for other priests to celebrate Mass.

Documents:

- A Sunday bulletin is available for Mass attenders.

Interviews

- Participants indicate that they experience God through the liturgies.
- Participants have opportunities to actively participate in various liturgical ministries.

3. Welcoming inclusion and hospitality abound and parishioners are encouraged to share their gifts

Observations

- There is a Welcome Desk and/or a Welcoming Committee at Mass.
- The hospitality of the parish is evident in parish events such as parish suppers, parish barbeques and after-Mass gatherings.
- The parish has a Parish Council that looks after the needs of all in the parish community.
- Good connections exist between the Catholic school and Church communities.
- Skills and talents of parishioners are identified and encouraged, as demonstrated by stewardship activities and numerous events or occasions in the parish when parishioners participate actively in the community.

Documents

- New parishioner packs are easily available and contain helpful information for newcomers in the parish.

Interviews

- Participants indicate that the parish staff are caring and welcoming.
- Participants indicate that the people who assist at baptisms and other sacramental preparation and funerals are welcoming and hospitable.
- Parishioners indicate they are encouraged and empowered to share their gifts and skills.

4. Spiritual fellowship and community bonds are nurtured and parishioners experience a strong sense of belonging

Observations

- The parish offers a variety of opportunities for interaction among parishioners and relationship building through parish groups, events and other activities.
- Parish leaders interact with the parishioners.
- Connections with the wider community exist at various levels.
- The parish communicates regularly to all its members through a variety of means of communication such as newsletters, websites, parish notices and bulletins.

Interviews

- Participants indicate that they are able to develop good relationships and friendships with others in the parish community.
- Parishioners indicate that they experience a strong sense of belonging by being valued in their participation in parish life.

5. Parishioners are aware of and are formed in their commitment to mission and evangelisation

Observations

- The parish is involved in missionary activities in the wider community.
- The parish is involved in overseas missionary activities.
- Fundraisers are organised in the parish for mission and evangelical activities.
- The parish participates in ecumenical activities wherever possible.
- Parishioners are encouraged to support the missionary works of the parish, diocese and the wider Catholic Church.
- Parishioners are involved in local community connections.

Interviews

- Participants are aware of their missionary and evangelical responsibilities.

- Participants indicate their involvement in missionary or evangelisation activities either on their own or through groups in the parish or diocese.

6. Practical and diverse service/outreach initiatives are practiced

Observations

- The parish has active social work and/or social justice groups that look after the needs of the larger community, and address matters of social concern.
- Parishioners are involved in a range of charitable activities such as St. Vincent De Paul appeals and fundraising.
- Parishioners are involved in volunteering activities in soup kitchens, aged homes, and hospitals.
- Holy Communion is taken to the sick and aged in homes and hospitals.
- Parishioners participate in informing policies in the wider society.

Interviews

- Participants indicate their involvement in outreach activities either on their own or through groups in the parish or diocese.

7. Collegial and collaborative leadership is practised

Observations

- There is a good working relationship among the leaders in the parish.
- The parish staff team has a good work ethic.
- The parish is supported by the diocese and diocesan agencies.

Interviews

- Parish leaders indicate that they are able to work well with parish staff, Parish Council and other leaders in the parish.
- Parish leaders indicate that the parish maintains good working relations with the diocese.
- Parish priests indicate that they receive support from the diocese and diocesan agencies.
- Participants (especially those in leadership positions) indicate that their views are considered in the working and development of the parish.
- Participants (Parish Council/group leaders) indicate that they have a good working relationship with the priest and other leaders in the parish.
- Participants agree that any problems they have had with leaders have been solved amicably.
- Participants indicate that there is no leadership clique in the parish.

8. The parish is adaptable to changes and is involved in planning for the future

Observations

- The parish has worked to overcome challenges faced in the past.

Documents

- Pastoral plans or parish plans are documented.
- The parish vision and mission are formed.

Interviews

- Participants (especially parish leaders) indicate that the parish is involved in planning for the future.
- Participants are aware of future goals/visions planned for the parish.
- Participants indicate that the parish goals are developed and met.
- Participants indicate that parish leaders work with parishioners to prepare the parish for future needs/events.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In order to be consistent with the overall aims of the thesis, the research process chosen for this project was a predominantly qualitative strategy using a holistic design of naturalistic inquiry². Qualitative research situates the observer in the world and consists of a collection of interpretive practices that make the world visible.³ According to Maxwell, the design of a qualitative study is essentially a non-linear process, as research components may need to be reconsidered or modified as other alterations occur:

The activities of collecting and analysing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocussing the research questions, and identifying and addressing validity threats are usually all going on more or less simultaneously, each influencing all of the others.⁴

Similar claims made by Patton show that naturalistic inquiry designs usually unfold or emerge as the fieldwork progresses, and while initial plans may be made to guide the research focus, observations and interview questions, the nature of an inductive design

² Naturalistic inquiry is a methodology that emphasizes understanding and portraying social action such as the meaning, character and nature of social life, from the perspective of social actors. For more information see Thomas A. Schwandt, "Naturalistic Inquiry," in *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 3rd ed., ed. Thomas A. Schwandt (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007) <http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/the-sage-dictionary-of-qualitative-inquiry/SAGE.xml> [accessed 18 July 2014], 206–207.

³ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Sage Publications, 2005), 3.

⁴ Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 2nd ed., Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 41 (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 2.

itself makes it difficult to specify operational variables, set test hypotheses or finalise instrumentation or sampling techniques at the very beginning of the research.⁵

At the beginning of the research project, Lincoln and Guba advocate planning for certain broad contingencies without indicating precisely what will be done with each.⁶ The further elements of the research design can later be refined as the research proceeds. True to the chosen research methodology, therefore, this study began as a “basic research” study whose main purpose, as Patton explains, is to investigate a phenomenon and to understand and explain it and generate theory from it.⁷ The phenomenon under consideration in this study was parish vitality, and further details of the methodology and methods used in research process were formed as the research unfolded.

The differences between quantitative and qualitative research have been well documented by various scholars such as Patton, Maxwell and Corbetta, amongst others.⁸ Particularly apparent in the relationship between theory and research, quantitative research is structured and theory precedes observation, while qualitative research is open and interactive, and observation precedes the generation of theory.⁹ Similarly, in the nature of data collected, quantitative research produces hard, objective and standardised data while the data produced by qualitative research is rich, soft and deep.¹⁰ Thus qualitative methods have the advantage of having depth and detail over the breadth of quantitative research methods.¹¹ For this research study, the nature of the data had to be rich and deep in order to accommodate the aims of the research and to identify and explain the diversity of vital initiatives and practices currently existing in a range of Australian parishes.

⁵ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 44.

⁶ Egon G. Guba and Yvonne S. Lincoln, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 226.

⁷ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 215.

⁸ Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*; Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 1990) and Piergiorgio Corbetta, *Social Research: Theory, Methods and Techniques* (London: Sage Publications, 2003).

⁹ Corbetta, *Social Research*, 38.

¹⁰ Corbetta, *Social Research*, 42.

¹¹ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 165.

Qualitative research is deemed useful when answering questions of “why” and “how” as well as those about processes such as “what is happening”.¹² Similarly, Patton explains that when blended with naturalistic inquiry, this method works particularly well since it encourages a natural flow of genuine openness from an inductive approach to analysis that is “grounded in the immediacy of direct fieldwork and sensitised to the desirability of holistic understanding of unique human settings”.¹³ For this study, the holistic understanding of vitality in Australian parishes was of prime importance. An inductive approach, which begins by collecting materials and then looking for common patterns and relationships,¹⁴ therefore, was best suited in order to uncover the common expressions of vitality that exist in different Catholic parishes and highlight any variations or distinctive features that might exist. In addition to this inductive approach, in the analysis of the data from this study, a template approach as outlined by Crabtree and Miller was also used.¹⁵ This involved using a template in the form of codes to be applied as a means of organising text as part of the larger interpretive process. When using a template, a researcher defines the template (or codebook) before commencing an in-depth analysis of the data. For this study, the template was developed based on the research question and the study of the literature and incorporated the eight measures of vitality that had been identified in the research process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Finding a theoretical framework that could incorporate the desired aims of this research proved to be a difficult task. This was largely due to the ill-defined nature of the concept of vitality and the differences in its expression in numerous situations. Even after an operationalisation of terms, a proper understanding of vitality in a parish would require much more than just a study of observable events. To constrain the study of vitality to rigorous scientific methods alone would restrict the ability to grasp its

¹² Paul Spicker, "Research for Policy," *Social Policy: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Hemel Hempstead: Prenticehall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 2014), 392.

¹³ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 193.

¹⁴ Spicker, "Research for Policy." 387.

¹⁵ Benjamin Crabtree and William Miller, "Using Codes and Code Manuals: A Template Organising Style of Interpretations," in *Doing Qualitative Research*, ed. Benjamin Crabtree and William Miller (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 166.

holistic understanding. On the other hand, not to use any framework at all would lead to mystification and obscurity.

Bell and Newby deliberate between the use of the two ways of knowing—*episteme* and *techne*—in sociological research. Quoting Gouldner, they define *episteme* as that “which embodies awareness of the known, of the knower and of knowing”; and *techne* as that “which consists of the lessons of experience of trial and error, of clever skills refined through diligent practice”.¹⁶ While complete reliance on each of these forms of knowing have their own drawbacks, the authors advocate a balanced approach—both the terms need to be held in tension with a “controllable and creative” dialect between the two.¹⁷ Ultimately, the authors recommend methodological pluralism as the way forward to doing good sociological research, an approach that works extremely well in order to meet the desired aims of this study. Also Creswell notes, mixed method research is one of the main approaches used in social and human sciences.¹⁸ For the purpose of this study, concurrent procedures were used, in which quantitative and qualitative data were converged in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem, with a small amount of quantitative data being nested within a more significant proportion of qualitative data.¹⁹

Crotty describes the four elements of the research process that inform one another in the construction of a theoretical framework. These are epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods.²⁰ I have used these four elements to describe the process that this research follows.

¹⁶ Colin. Bell and Howard. Newby, eds., *Doing Sociological Research*, ed. Colin Bell and Howard Newby (Allen & Unwin, 1977), 18.

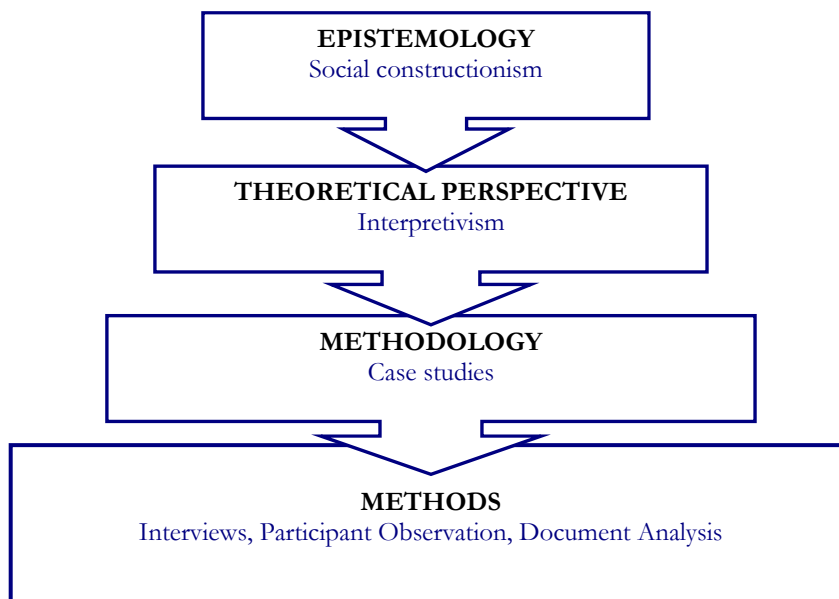
¹⁷ Bell and Newby, eds., *Doing Sociological Research*, 20.

¹⁸ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 4.

¹⁹ Creswell, *Research Design*, 16.

²⁰ Michael. Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 4.

Figure 3.1: The Research Process (adapted from Crotty)



EPISTEMOLOGY

For the purpose of exploring vitality in Catholic parishes, this study employs a constructionist epistemology which is consistent with the nature of the research and its aims and objectives. Crotty explains this approach as one that sees meaning in the interaction of human beings with the physical and social realities of the world. This approach is opposed to objectivism, that sees meaningful reality as independent of either the observer or consciousness,²¹ and also to subjectivism where meaning is imposed upon reality by a person.²²

Constructionism starts from the assumption that truth and knowledge are to a greater or lesser extent constructed by individuals and communities.²³ It emphasises the hold that our culture has on us in shaping the way we view the world and is thus focussed upon “the collective generation and transmission of meaning”.²⁴ Thus our individual

²¹ Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 42.

²² Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 43.

²³ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 35.

²⁴ Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 58.

constructs of the world and those formed in a group through social interactions are shaped by our customs and other social processes, as Schwandt explains:

there is an inevitable historical and sociocultural dimension to this construction. We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth.²⁵

The word “social” in social constructionism refers to the way in which meaning is generated. It does not depend on whether the object that is constructed is natural or social, but as Crotty explains, “the basic generation of meaning is always social, for the meanings with which we are endowed arise in and out of interactive human community”. As a research strategy therefore, this paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (both the researcher and the participant co-create meanings), and a naturalistic set of methodological practices.²⁶

Social constructionism has significant implications for this research study. The concept of “parish vitality” is a social (and theological) concept and therefore its operational meaning is derived from social interactions within a cultural context, in this case, the parish community. Consequently, all understandings and explanations of the phenomenon of “vitality” are contextual; they are relative rather than definitive. They will vary from situation to situation and from community to community and even from individual to individual. Each parish community will construct their version of vitality based on their cultural and social context. Even in multicultural parishes, the parish becomes “a meeting ground, where new, shared stories evolve”,²⁷ and within these parishes, therefore, new and shared cultural patterns that bind the community together will shape their construction of “vitality”.

The social constructions of vitality need to be held together with the theological understanding of the concept of vitality that is foundational to this research. The vitality of a parish cannot be merely understood by social constructions of individuals in a parish or the collective constructions of parish community alone. It would need an

²⁵ Thomas A. Schwandt, "Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Denzin N.K. and Y.S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc, 2000), 197.

²⁶ Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction," 24.

²⁷ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (California: University of California Press, 2005), 269.

understanding of the theological implications of the actions of and decisions made by the participants in order to make them meaningful within a Catholic perspective. In a sense, this study falls within the area of practical theology, one of whose characteristics is that it seeks to interpret “situations, scripture and tradition, [and] Christian practices”.²⁸ Thus the social constructions of vitality by parishioners in a parish need to be understood against the background of the theological significance of the term and these theological concepts must be incorporated with the qualitative research process in order to provide a holistic understanding of vitality in Catholic parishes.

In the debate on the relationship between practical theology and the social sciences, Swinton and Mowat favour a model of mutual critical correlation, called *mutual critical conversation*, which centres on the conversation between the Christian tradition, the social sciences, and a particular situation; and the authors advocate for a position where theology has logical priority over the social sciences.²⁹ Hermans demonstrates that, apart from this model, there are also other types of relationships that can exist between the two different epistemologies. Among the several models he describes, the third model subsumes practical theology under the social sciences.³⁰ In this model, which was called the *practical theology as social science* model by Friedrich Schweitzer in 1999, theological questions and interests are subordinate to social-scientific questions and interests, and practical theological concepts are subsumed under social-scientific ones.³¹ As well, the evaluations of such research are guided by social-scientific theory while seeking a transformation of practices in Church or religion.

Given the nature and aims of this study, I believe the *practical theology as social science* model is best suited to the research process. While the phenomenon under study, “parish vitality”, is a significantly theological subject, the process of inquiring about the phenomenon is a sociological process. This model of study allows for the generation of the theory of vitality from theological sources that has been accomplished in the literature review and inquires about the practice of this phenomenon by using research aims, questions, methodology and evaluations based on social-scientific

²⁸ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 75.

²⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 77, 89.

³⁰ Chris A.M. Hermans, *Social Constructionism and Theology*, ed. C.A.M. Hermans et al., Empirical Studies in Theology, vol. 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), xii.

³¹ Hermans, *Social Constructionism and Theology*, xii.

theory. A social constructionist epistemology allows for the different expressions of vitality that are found in different communities, while not undermining the theological understanding of the concept of vitality, thus being at once both “realist and relativist”.³²

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this study, the broad philosophical stance lying behind the methodology is that of interpretivism. Based on a constructionist epistemology, interpretivism focuses on interpreting the world of meaning in order to understand it,³³ and thus it is an approach that explores “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world”.³⁴ An interpretivist seeks to explain the way in which meanings are constructed by the language and actions of social actors and, as Schwandt explains, “to prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies”.³⁵

Largely developed by Max Weber, interpretivism is an approach that counteracts positivism and is fundamentally in the pursuit of “understanding” (*Verstehen*)—an understanding that seeks to comprehend both the purpose of action and the intentional intent of human behaviour.³⁶ The interpretive perspective includes a range of sub-perspectives such as phenomenology, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism, each having their own unique way of interpreting the world.³⁷ In a general sense however, the interpretive framework enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon through the subjective meanings that the participants assign to it. These meanings may differ when viewed from each individual sub-perspective, but held together they provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study.

³² Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 63.

³³ Thomas A. Schwandt, "Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human inquiry," in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, ed. Denzin N.K. and Y.S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc, 1998), 222.

³⁴ Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 67.

³⁵ Schwandt, "Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human inquiry," 222.

³⁶ Corbetta, *Social Research*, 22.

³⁷ Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 71.

Denzin and Lincoln describe qualitative research using multiple methodologies as a “bricolage” and the researcher as a “bricoleur” or “quilt maker”.³⁸ The interpretive bricoleur understands the interactive process of the research that is shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting, and the interpretations produced in the research are based on associations among the contrasting images that blend into one another.³⁹ Denzin and Lincoln describe the resulting complex, quilt-like bricolage of an interpretive bricoleur as one which represents a montage—“a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation”.⁴⁰ Chenail terms this as a “generic approach” and credits the flexibility it offers as one of its strengths.⁴¹ However, he cautions that it could also turn into a weakness if a project is not produced that is internally coherent and externally recognizable to reviewers. Crotty notes that this research perspective can prove to be very valuable, particularly if such a researcher pays careful attention to the objects of the research:

... research in the mode of the *bricoleur*, requires that we not remain straitjacketed by the conventional meanings we have been taught to associate with the object. Instead, such research invites us to approach the object in a radical spirit of openness to its potential for new or richer meaning. It is an invitation to reinterpretation.⁴²

It is in this general sense that this study seeks to employ this framework, by deploying a range of interpretive practices and methodologies in order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon of parish vitality as constructed through the interactions, interpretations and individual decisions of parishioners in each particular parish. This approach allows room for making meaning of the varied expressions of parish vitality found in the different parishes that participated in the study.

³⁸ Denzin and Lincoln, “Introduction,” 4.

³⁹ Denzin and Lincoln, “Introduction,” 6.

⁴⁰ Denzin and Lincoln, “Introduction,” 4, 6.

⁴¹ Ron J. Chenail, “Future Directions for Qualitative Research,” in *Research Methods in Family Therapy*, ed. D. H. Sprenkle and F. P. Piercy (New York: The Guildford Press, 2005), 194.

⁴² Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 51.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study is an exploratory, multiple case study design with a mixed methods approach. Research using case studies is not new nor does it exclusively belong to the field of qualitative research.⁴³ It has been used increasingly in many fields as a valid research strategy.⁴⁴ As Stake points out, what is crucial to case study research is not the methods of investigation, but that the object of study is a case: “As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used”.⁴⁵

Case study methodology is congruent with a constructionist epistemology and an interpretivist perspective, and within this paradigm, the study focuses on a particular reality of the phenomenon under consideration and is aimed at providing an account that is deep enough to allow analysis.⁴⁶ Yin describes case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”.⁴⁷ The intent of a case study can be exploratory, descriptive, evaluative or explanatory (causal). This study could be categorised as an “instrumental” case study whose purpose, as Stake explains, is to go beyond the case rather than limiting the focus to the case itself.⁴⁸ Grandy describes an instrumental case study as one in which “the case itself is secondary to understanding the particular phenomenon ... the case report focuses less on the complexity of the case, as in the intrinsic case, and more on specifics related to the research question ... [Researchers] use the case as a comparative point across other cases in which the phenomenon might be present”.⁴⁹

⁴³ Robert E. Stake, "Case Studies," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 435.

⁴⁴ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 4.

⁴⁵ Stake, "Case Studies," 435.

⁴⁶ R. VanWynsberghe and S. Khan, "Redefining Case Study," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 6, no. 2 (June 2007), 8.

⁴⁷ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 18.

⁴⁸ Stake, "Case Studies," 437.

⁴⁹ Gina Grandy, "Instrumental Case Study," in *Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research*, ed. A. Mills, G. Durepos, and E. Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2010), 473-475.

Multi-case Study

A case is “a unit of human activity that is embedded in the real world” in the present time, which can only be studied in its context, and which merges with its context in such a way that its precise boundaries are difficult to obtain.⁵⁰ It operates within various contexts, such as physical, economic and ethical conditions, amongst others.⁵¹ This research employs a multi-case study framework, where individual cases are bound together through a common bond, called the “quintain”—the condition or phenomenon to be studied.⁵² The quintain in this study is the phenomenon of “vitality”.

Multi-case studies differ from individual case studies in many ways. To understand the quintain, individual cases are explored both as a group and individually. The individual study of each case focuses its representation of or relationship to the quintain in order to learn about its unique situation and complexity.⁵³ As a group, the cases are not directly compared, but rather, themes relating to the quintain are explored across them. The researcher examines the functioning and activities of the cases which are purposefully selected in order to understand the phenomenon better.⁵⁴

One of the main purposes of a multi-case study is to showcase the different contexts in which the phenomenon is located, especially the problematic ones.⁵⁵ Similarities and differences within and between cases are explored and thus by using comparative analysis, assertions and theories about the phenomenon arise.⁵⁶ Stake emphasises the importance of maintaining the “case-quintain dialectic” in such a research study, which is “a rhetorical, adversarial procedure, wherein attention to the local situations and attention to the program or phenomenon as a whole contend with each other for emphasis”.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Bill Gillham, *Case Study Research Methods* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 1.

⁵¹ Stake, “Case Studies,” 439.

⁵² Robert E. Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2006), 6.

⁵³ Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, 6.

⁵⁴ Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, 6.

⁵⁵ Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, 12.

⁵⁶ Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Stake, “Case Studies,” 444.

⁵⁷ Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, 46.

Using a multi-case strategy allowed for a holistic approach to understanding the concept of “vitality” in the real life contexts of a variety of parishes across Australia. It enabled the opportunity to explore the events, activities, relationships and individuals associated with parish vitality. In each case (parish), the different expressions of vitality were examined through parish activities and programs, the experiences of participants and the structures in place.

Case Selection

Selecting suitable cases (parishes) for this study was critical to achieving the goals of the research. Stake’s criteria for cases selection includes selecting cases that:

- are relevant to the quintain
- provide a diverse range of contexts
- provide opportunities to learn about the complexity and contexts⁵⁸

In addition, Bleijenbergh notes that, especially with an exploratory research question, the cases must be selected in order to maximise the opportunities for developing theories that explain the social phenomenon.⁵⁹ Multiple case study research usually includes only a small number of cases due to the intensive data collection methods. Therefore, selecting an optimum number of cases is important. Both Bleijenbergh and Stake agree that the multi-case study usually accommodates a maximum of 10 cases.⁶⁰ While keeping this in mind, for this study, at least 10 case studies were required to get the breadth of different situations that demonstrated vitality. Too few cases would not have revealed the diverse contexts in which parishes can be vital, while too many cases would have proved to be unmanageable given the depth of research in each parish required for this study.

The selection of parishes for this study was carried out using mixed sampling techniques. Firstly, the parishes were selected using a method of “theory-based sampling” where cases are selected on the basis of their potential manifestation of

⁵⁸ Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, 23.

⁵⁹ Inge Bleijenbergh, "Case Selection," in *Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research*, ed. G. Durepos & E. Wiebe A. Mills (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2010), 61.

⁶⁰ Stake, *Multiple Case Study Analysis*, 22; Bleijenbergh, "Case Selection," 61.

important theoretical constructs,⁶¹ which in this study was being a representative of a “vital” parish. This was combined with “purposeful sampling”, the power of which lies in selecting information-rich cases for study.⁶² A sample of 10 Catholic parishes from around Australia was chosen that had been identified by the *Building Stronger Parish* research as having shown particular forms or expressions of vitality. Additionally, this was combined with “quota sampling”, by selecting at least one participating parish from each of the following types: large and small, ethnic, Anglo-Irish and multicultural, and clergy-led and lay-led parishes. Equal numbers of metropolitan and non-metropolitan parishes were selected.

The twenty parishes initially chosen for the *Building Stronger Parish* research project were drawn from a list of parishes identified by bishops, key diocesan staff, especially those involved in pastoral services, and people active in parish life, as being vital parishes. The main criteria for choosing these parishes were twofold in nature:

1. The parish had to have an underlying foundation in an ecclesiology of communion.
2. It had to be a parish that had successfully overcome one or more of the challenges it had faced in a way that other parishes facing similar challenges could learn from and possibly adopt.

The challenge could be big or small, and applicable to the whole of parish life or just to one aspect of it. Each person who recommended parishes was also asked to write a brief note describing why they thought that particular parish was a vital parish. These notes were reviewed by the Building Stronger Parish Research Team (comprised of academics, researchers and pastoral planners) to select the best varied sample for the study.

An initial list of parishes showed that while these criteria were easily understood, they were also easily misinterpreted. Many recommendations of “vital” parishes were based solely on the population of the parish—the larger the parish, the more vital it was perceived as. Some parishes were recommended for their success in the past when they had once been thriving and highly populated. A few others had been recommended for

⁶¹ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 177.

⁶² Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 169.

the popularity of the parish priest, the location of the parish in a growing suburban area and similar other reasons that had no valid basis for determining the current “vitality” of the parish. However, further investigation into the situation of each parish proved to be a successful strategy in choosing twenty of the most suitable parishes for the study.

From the list of twenty parishes chosen for the *Building Stronger Parish* research study, the 10 case studies chosen for my research based on the quota sampling techniques enabled me to gain different perspectives of the phenomenon of vitality from a range of parishes in Australia. A letter of invitation (Appendix A) was sent to the parish priest of each parish to invite them to participate in the study.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Participant selection was carried out using purposeful sampling methods combined with criterion sampling.⁶³ Once a parish had agreed to be involved in the study, through discussion with the parish leader, I identified a list of people who would be able to provide information on the vital aspects of the parish, and invited them to participate. This process was coordinated with the parish staff. Two criteria were applied to the selection of participants: (a) to ensure that participants were familiar with the vital aspects of their parish, they needed to be adults or young people who had been actively involved (attending Mass and involved in parish groups or other ministries) in the parish for at least two years prior to research participation and (b) all participants had to be over 16 years of age to be able to give their own consent to participate in the research.

Information sheets (Appendix B) were distributed to the participants chosen for the study. The number of participants per parish ranged between six and 19. This number was limited primarily to ensure the manageability of the processes of data collection and analysis in the time available for the project and the nature of the research. Furthermore, a small scale study using information-rich cases was better suited to the in-depth and exploratory character of this research.

⁶³ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 169, 176.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The data collection method for this research was a mixed methods strategy. Mixed methods research is an established strategy that works particularly well with case study research as it allows the researcher to take the rich data from the cases and apply qualitative or quantitative methods to the data.⁶⁴ Maxwell and Loomis argue for an interactive approach to mixed methods research in which each component of the design is considered individually and in relation to each other to provide a design that is efficient, effective and functional.⁶⁵ The selection of methods must be based on what is most useful in a given situation,⁶⁶ with the intention of adding breath or depth to the analysis.⁶⁷

Mixed Methods research is also known as “triangulation”, since multiple methods are used to study the same phenomenon, thus overcoming the difficulties and biases of using a single research method.⁶⁸ However, as Denzin explains, it must be understood that using more than one data source does not mean a corroboration of findings:

“The goal of multiple triangulation is a fully grounded interpretive research approach. Objective reality will never be captured. In-depth understanding, not validity, is sought in any interpretive study”⁶⁹

Thus, the benefits of triangulation arise “from the appropriateness, thoroughness and effectiveness with which those methods are applied and the care given to thoughtful weighting of the evidence”.⁷⁰ Bazeley observes that there are five critical issues for mixed methods research:

⁶⁴ Andrew D. Kitchenham, "Mixed Methods in Case Study Research," in *Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research*, ed. A. Mills, G. Durepos, and E. Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2010), 562.

⁶⁵ Joseph A. Maxwell and D. Loomis, "Mixed Method Design: An Alternative Approach," in *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research*, ed. A. Tashakkori & C. Teddlie (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publication, Inc., 2003), 243.

⁶⁶ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 196.

⁶⁷ N. Fielding and J.L. Fielding, *Linking Data: the articulation of qualitative and quantitative methods in social research* (London: Sage Publications, 1986), 33.

⁶⁸ Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 234.

⁶⁹ Denzin, *The Research Act*, 246.

⁷⁰ Pat Bazeley, "Issues in Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Research," *Applying Qualitative Methods to Marketing Management Research* (2004).
<http://www.researchsupport.com.au/MMIssues.pdf> [accessed 19 June 2014], 9.

- Clarity of purpose, basis and substantive focus, giving direction to the study and a logical basis for explanation
- Awareness of the limitations of traditional methods as they are modified in a mixed methods environment
- Appropriate use and interpretation of quantitized coding of qualitative data
- Varied methods of treatment of “error” or “deviance”, and
- Appropriate generalisation, given choice of sample and methods⁷¹

Yin identified six primary sources of evidence for case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts.⁷² No single source is advantageous over the others; rather, they are complementary in nature and should be used according to their relevance in the study. For the purpose of this research, interviews, documentation, including research records, and participant observation methods were used.

Interviews

A significant part of the data collection for this project was accomplished via one or more face-to-face in-depth interviews with each participant. While I conducted 21 of these interviews in four parishes, the rest were conducted by ten members from the *Building Stronger Parishes* research team who visited parishes in teams of two. These interviewers were trained in the research aims of the study and data collecting techniques to diminish interviewer bias. Data from their interviews was used in this research.

The major reason for using interviews was because the data for the study needed to include subjective assessments of different aspects of parish life and the impact they had on the lives of individuals. Interviews are invaluable in this regard since they help researchers learn about a person's interior experiences—what they perceive and how

⁷¹ Bazeley, "Issues in Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Research," 9.

⁷² Yin, *Case Study Research*, 99.

they interpret their perceptions—and how events affect their thoughts and feelings.⁷³ According to Sproull, the advantages of the in-depth personal interview are that it:

- elicits information directly from people
- allows opportunity for probing, finding out why people feel or respond the way they do
- allows opportunity to clarify information as it is given
- allows opportunity to explain complex information
- allows opportunity to clarify previously collected data⁷⁴

The duration of each interview conducted for this study was one to one-and-a-half hours long, and was scheduled at a time and location convenient to the participant. In all instances, this was a room within the parish centre. The duration of the interview gave participants enough time to tell their story and to describe their experiences, thereby providing the information-rich data needed for the research. Participants were also given the option to refuse to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with or withdraw their participation at any time. However, this did not occur at any time during the course of the study.

There was an emphasis placed on listening carefully to what participants said since these skills are of prime importance in qualitative interviews. Wengraf even speaks of “double attention”, which means;

... you must be both listening to the informant's responses to understand what he or she is trying to get at and, at the same time, you must be bearing in mind your needs to ensure that all your questions are liable to get answered within the fixed time at the level of depth and detail that you need.⁷⁵

Patton emphasises the need for neutrality and empathetic personal contact in order to create a more holistic and natural inquiry for the researcher.⁷⁶ Together these qualities

⁷³ Robert S. Weiss, *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 1.

⁷⁴ Natalie L. Sproull, *Handbook of Research Methods: A Guide for Practitioners and Students in the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 162, 165.

⁷⁵ Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 194.

⁷⁶ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 317.

facilitate a rapport during research and discipline the researcher to be non-judgmental and open.⁷⁷ There were three other interview skills that were used in this study:

1. Attempts were made to accurately capture the perceived fact of what participants said or did using the lowest possible levels of inference.⁷⁸ Non-directive eliciting skills, such as echoing, paraphrasing and reflecting,⁷⁹ also helped in this regard.
2. Descriptions of the participants' activities, interactions and settings were obtained.⁸⁰
3. Some direct quotations from the participants were used in the research in order to incorporate the participants into the study. These direct quotations also formed the raw data used for interpretation in the analysis of data.

These skills were useful in representing the participants in their own terms, rather than by imposing "a preconceived or outsider's scheme" of them.⁸¹

McCracken cautions against the commonly used practice of "active listening", that is, the process of reading hidden meaning of speech and gesture and playing it back to the respondent.⁸² This destroys good data while capturing only the investigators own logic and categories. Sometimes, however, this practice comes in useful when checking the data for accuracy. It is necessary to put the researcher's interpretations directly to the respondent for their feedback to check that the researcher has understood the participant's responses correctly. In addition, listening for things such as "impression management, topic avoidance, deliberate distortion, minor misunderstanding and outright incomprehension", and dealing with each problem as it arose, was invaluable to the process of collecting important data.⁸³ Participants were also encouraged to "tell

⁷⁷ Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 317.

⁷⁸ John Lofland, David Snow, Leon Anderson, and Lyn Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2006), 112.

⁷⁹ Joanna Chrzanowska, *Interviewing Groups and Individuals in Qualitative Market Research* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2002), 108.

⁸⁰ Lofland et al., *Analyzing Social Settings*, 112.

⁸¹ John. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971), 4.

⁸² Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview*, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 21.

⁸³ McCracken, *The Long Interview*, 39.

their own stories” to avoid misunderstandings in interpreting their experiences.⁸⁴ Finally, as suggested by Wengraf, the interviews were terminated by thanking the participants for their cooperation and asking them if there were any further remarks that might be relevant to the topic or the interview process.⁸⁵ This sometimes led to the emergence of new areas of information which provided additional insights into the experiences of the participants.

In a few instances in the study, the time and commitment issues of participants made it impossible to interview individuals separately. In such cases, semi-structured group interviews were carried out with moderately directive questioning. These interviews were useful in producing rich data in some main areas, although completing the entire question set was not possible and individual expression was somewhat diminished in this setting.⁸⁶ There were six group interviews with two persons each and one group interview with three people conducted for this study. Three of the two-person interviews were with couples who chose to be interviewed together rather than separately.

The Interview Guide

The interview guide or questionnaire (Appendix G) addressed several aspects of parish vitality. Its scope and content was influenced by the literature review and it was designed to obtain information about individual practices as well as community participation within the parish. The overall nature of the questions reflected an approach of appreciative inquiry, a process that focusses on the positive experiences of participants and is grounded in the participant’s actual experiences.⁸⁷ This approach suited the aims of this research, which sought to understand the strengths and reasons

⁸⁴ Katherine. Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*, ed. S.N. Hesse-Biber and P. Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁵ Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 205.

⁸⁶ Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "The Interview: From Structured Questions to Negotiated Text," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 72–73.

⁸⁷ Anne T. Coghlan, Hallie Preskill, and Tessie Tzavaras Catsambas, "An Overview of Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation," in *Using Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation*, ed. Hallie S. Preskill and Anne T. Coghlan, *New Directions for Evaluation* (Wiley Periodicals, Inc., Winter 2003), 6.

for success of parishes in the study, and was compatible with the theoretical framework of social constructionism.⁸⁸ The main sections of the interview guide included the following:

- Participant details
- Parish Details—Information about different aspects of the parish
- Life in the parish—Information on the participants experiences of life in the parish
- Parish programs and activities—Information on programs and activities within the parish
- Personal information

The questionnaire included closed as well as open-ended questions and directed the dialogue while allowing for spontaneous questions, explorations and the development of responses.⁸⁹ This mix of questioning is useful to overcome the disadvantages of both structured and unstructured questionnaires.⁹⁰ Foddy highlights one common problem associated with open questions – that of obtaining inadequate answers. He suggests using non-directive “probes” to overcome the tendency of respondents to stray from the topic and to reduce the number of incomplete answers.⁹¹ Accordingly, these probes were used in the interviews to obtain complete answers. In addition, “floating prompts” and “category and special incident planned prompts” were used to elicit important information.⁹² As described by McCracken “category” prompts allow the investigator to account for all of the formal characteristics of the topic under discussion, while “special incident” prompts ask respondents to recall exceptional incidents of interest to the researcher in which the research topic is implanted.⁹³

⁸⁸ Coghlan et al., "An Overview of Appreciative Inquiry in Evaluation," 8.

⁸⁹ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1992).

⁹⁰ Robert Louis Kahn and Charles F. Cannell, *The Dynamics of Interviewing: Theory, Technique, and Cases* (New York: Wiley, 1967), 158.

⁹¹ William Foddy, *Constructing Questions for Interviews and Questionnaires: Theory and Practice in Social Research* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 136.

⁹² McCracken, *The Long Interview*, 35–36.

⁹³ McCracken, *The Long Interview*, 36.

Data Processing

The interviews with participants were voice recorded. While voice recordings captured what was said, certain features such as emotions, gestures and other non-verbal forms of communication could not be accounted for.⁹⁴ Notes were therefore added to the interview, capturing a little of the attitude of the person. However, the important content that was needed for the study regarding the general feeling about the parish from the parishioner and their experiences of parish life were not hidden, but contained in the content of their responses.

Participant Observation

The data collection on the celebration of Mass and other liturgical events, such as lay-led liturgies⁹⁵ in parishes was carried out through “participant observation”, a process in which researchers immerse themselves in the field, and observe and record behaviour while participating in it. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte describe this as “the process of learning through exposure to, or involvement in, the day-to-day or routine activities of participants”.⁹⁶ A participant observer strives to learn “explicit and tacit” aspects of routines and culture of the participants,⁹⁷ as they try to “catch the process ... as it occurs” in the experience of those they study.⁹⁸

This method was particularly useful when studying liturgical observations since it allowed for collection of data that was both qualitative and quantitative, and included

⁹⁴ Blake D. Poland, "Transcription Quality as an Aspect of Rigor in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 1, no. 3 (1995), 291.

⁹⁵ “Lay-led liturgies” is a common term for liturgies celebrated in the absence of a priest that usually include Communion. The correct term for such a celebration in Australia is “Sunday Celebration of the Word and Communion,” though different dioceses sometimes use alternate names. More information on such liturgies may be found at Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, “Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest: Directives for the Dioceses of Australia ” (2004). http://www.catholic.org.au/component/docman/doc_download/1266-sunday-celebrations-in-the-absence-of-a-priest-2004 [accessed 26 May 2014], 2.

⁹⁶ S.L. Schensul, J.J. Schensul, and M.D. LeCompte, *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires* (AltaMira Press, 1999), 91.

⁹⁷ Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (Plymouth, UK: AltaMira Press, 2010), 1.

⁹⁸ Blumer Herbert, "Society as Symbolic Interaction," in *Human Behavior and Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*, ed. Rose A. M. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 188.

narratives and numbers.⁹⁹ Additionally, features of the method, such as viewing interactions from the perspective of members of particular situations, locating oneself in the here and now of everyday life situations, and performing a role that involved establishing and maintaining relationships with people, were helpful for collecting the liturgical data in parishes.¹⁰⁰ This was because understanding the experience of the Mass for people in each parish was particularly important for this study. Data regarding information on the setting of the Mass, the ambience, the customs and rituals of the priest and lay people during Mass, and the extent of participation of the community could only be interpreted correctly through direct observation and participation. Also, participating in the Mass helped generate trust and build relationships with interviewees and other people in the parish. Accordingly, a position of “active” participation,¹⁰¹ or “overt observation”,¹⁰² where one openly acknowledges being the researcher and participates in group activities, was selected for this study.

Bernard cautions that while participant observation is about immersing oneself in a culture, it also about learning to remove oneself from that immersion in order to intellectualise what one has seen and heard, put it into perspective and write about it convincingly.¹⁰³ Bogdan sees a participant observer as a mixture of an objective recording machine and an empathetic human being.¹⁰⁴ Deciding what balance to strike between observing and participating is a serious concern and Schutt believes that this can be achieved by taking into account the specifics of the social situation being studied, the researcher’s background and personality, the larger socio-political context and ethical concerns.¹⁰⁵ Accordingly, the context of each parish being studied and the demographics of each parish community were documented, along with care being taken to overcome ethical issues such as researcher bias and other ethical concerns.

⁹⁹ Harvey Russell. Bernard, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (California: Sage Publications, 2000), 318.

¹⁰⁰ Danny L. Jorgensen, *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, vol. 15 (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 13–14.

¹⁰¹ DeWalt and DeWalt, *Participant Observation*, 23, 24.

¹⁰² Russell K. Schutt, *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), 296.

¹⁰³ Bernard, *Social Research Methods*, 319.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Bogdan, *Participant Observation in Organizational Settings* (Syracuse University Press, 1972), 21.

¹⁰⁵ Schutt, *Investigating the Social World*, 295.

Using participant observation as a method along with interviewing had added advantages since this combination is deemed useful when researching processes in complex fields of activity with numerous situations and persons, and in discovering relevant variables of the behaviour of actors and in their relations to an organisation.¹⁰⁶ This perfectly matched the situation of parishes in the study, many of which often had more than one Mass centre, with a range of liturgical styles and activities surrounding liturgical celebrations, and several people participating at different levels in them.

Liturgy Observation Schedule

Participant observation can be prone to errors in observation such as selective perception, overlooking obvious phenomena and faulty reporting.¹⁰⁷ Friedrichs & Ludtke maintain that such errors can be reduced by defining of the lowest levels of observation and perception for every study according to its problem and hypotheses, and through the use of observation schedules, to help a researcher know what and how to observe.¹⁰⁸ Thus, by keeping the area to be examined as narrow as possible, individual observations are likely to be more precise and accurate.

Keeping this in mind, the liturgies in the participating parishes were examined using a “Liturgy Observation Guide”.¹⁰⁹ The scope and content of this document were influenced by the proceedings of several aspects of the Mass, such as the arrangements for the service, the progression of the liturgy and the events that took place immediately after Mass, and it was created to obtain information about individual practices as well as community participation. The main topics covered in this schedule included the following:

- Description of the Church
- Attendance
- Events before Mass

¹⁰⁶ J. Friedrichs and H. Ludtke, *Participant Observation: Theory and Practice* (England: Saxon House, 1975), 85.

¹⁰⁷ Friedrichs and Ludtke, *Participant Observation*, 19, 28.

¹⁰⁸ Friedrichs and Ludtke, *Participant Observation*, 61.

¹⁰⁹ The Liturgy Observation Guide was a data collection tool that was developed for the Building Stronger Parishes project. Further details of this tool are provided in Appendix H.

- Entrance and Greeting
- Music arrangement
- AV and IT
- Children's Liturgy
- Liturgy of the Word
- Homily
- Collections
- Offertory
- Liturgy of the Eucharist
- Communion
- Concluding Rite
- Events after Mass
- Mass Style

The schedule allowed for recording both quantitative and qualitative data. Figures such as the attendance of people at Mass and the number of people participating in various aspects of the liturgy were quantitatively measured. There was also room for qualitatively recording detailed, descriptive notes such as the initial and overall impressions of the Mass, and the experience of the liturgy.

Document Analysis

For the purpose of this study, various documents were used to supplement the information received from the interviews and from observation. These included:

- *Parish documents*, such as parish bulletins and newsletters
- *Diocesan documents*, such as diocesan pastoral plans and newsletters
- *Administrative documents*, such as parish pastoral plans, annual reports, information regarding groups in the parish and other internal documents
- *Research reports* obtained from various research projects carried out by the ACBC Pastoral Research Office

Care was taken to ensure that these documents were relevant, up-to-date and reliable in order to limit the disadvantages of using these as source material for the research.¹¹⁰ In addition, for documents that were not openly published, permission from the relevant bodies was sought for their use in order to gain access to them. For example, a letter can be found in Appendix C from the ACBC Australian Catholic Council of Pastoral Research, granting me access to research data from the ACBC Pastoral Research Office.

DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis was the method used to make meaning of the data collected from the interviews. Holsti defines this as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages”.¹¹¹ Ericson, Baranek and Chan explain it as a process wherein the analyst picks out relevant material for analysis and puts it together to create patterns, sequences, tendencies and orders.¹¹² This method was used in this study to identify common patterns or themes that might be contained within the transcripts of the participants’ interviews. These components or fragments were then expounded on and pieced together to form a comprehensive view of the shared experiences of the participants as the basis for the development of theme statements. May notes that the flexibility of the content analysis method is its greatest advantage since it enables the researcher to not only consider the ways in which meaning is constructed but also the ways in which new meanings are developed and used.¹¹³

A cross-case analysis technique was applied in this study for the purpose of content analysis. It meant grouping together common responses to the interview questions as well as analyzing different perspectives on central issues.¹¹⁴ This method, also known

¹¹⁰ S. Sarantakos, "Documentary Research," in *Social Research* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1993), 209.

¹¹¹ Ole R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Addison-Wesley, 1969), 14.

¹¹² Richard V. Ericson, Patricia M. Baranek, and Janet B.L. Chan, *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media* (University of Toronto Press, 1991), 55.

¹¹³ Tim May, "Documentary Research: Excavations and Evidence." *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process* Fourth ed. (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2011), 211.

¹¹⁴ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 440.

as the “constant-comparative method”,¹¹⁵ requires the grouping or clustering of the data into categories which become the basis for data organization and conceptualisation. Dey notes several resources that are particularly useful to the process of category generation. These are “inferences from the data, initial or emergent research questions, substantive, policy and theoretical issues, and imagination, intuition and previous knowledge”.¹¹⁶ He cautions that in order to utilise those resources optimally, the researcher should become thoroughly familiar with the data, be sensitive to the context of the data, be prepared to extend, change and discard categories, consider connections and avoid needless overlaps, record the criteria on which category decisions are to be taken, and consider alternative ways of categorising and interpreting data.¹¹⁷ These views were taken into consideration when developing the categories for analysis of data.

Data analysis for this study was done with the help of NVivo, a software tool that supports the analysis of qualitative data by assisting in data management, storing ideas, formulating queries, and creating models and reports from the data.¹¹⁸ A research journal was also maintained alongside the software to document the process from initial investigations to the final conclusions. In addition, this was used to record ideas, test coding structures, compare participant responses on various issues and plan various stages of the research process. This process helped created a “log” of the research journey, documenting its various stages.¹¹⁹

Data in the form of documents, interview notes and notes from liturgical observations were incorporated into NVivo and a comprehensive process of data coding and identification of themes was undertaken. Coding in NVivo is stored as “nodes”¹²⁰ and this coding process was carried out in two cycles as described in the sections below.

¹¹⁵ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 7th Reprint ed. (Aldine Transaction, 2009), 101.

¹¹⁶ Ian Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A User-friendly Guide for Social Scientists* (Routledge, 1993), 100.

¹¹⁷ Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 118.

¹¹⁸ Pat. Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 2–3.

¹¹⁹ Lyn Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 25.

¹²⁰ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 73.

The First Coding Cycle

In the first cycle of coding, there were two coding methods used to organise the data. These were:

1. **Structural Coding**, also called “Topic Coding”¹²¹ or “Bucket Coding”,¹²² which applies a conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data,¹²³ and acts like a labelling device to allow the researcher to access data quickly,¹²⁴ was used to broadly categorise the data into the eight measures of vitality identified in the literature review. Figure 3.2 shows a sample of such coding.
2. **Attribute coding**, as described by Saldana,¹²⁵ was used to organise the descriptive information of participants, such as name, age, sex, occupation, qualifications, ethnicity, parish, parish role and diocese. The demographic information of parishes and some basic information of liturgical observations were also coded using this process and stored as a classification system¹²⁶ in NVivo. Apart from being useful in organising such information, this process also allowed for later queries and comparisons between different variables contained within the data.¹²⁷ Figure 3.3 shows a sample of such coding.

¹²¹ Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data*, 96.

¹²² Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 67.

¹²³ MacQueen K. M, McLellan-Lemal E, Bartholow K, and Milstein B., "Team-based Codebook Development: Structure, Process, and Agreement," in *Handbook for Team-based Qualitative Research*, ed. Greg Guest and Kathleen M. MacQueen (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub Incorporated, 2008), 124.

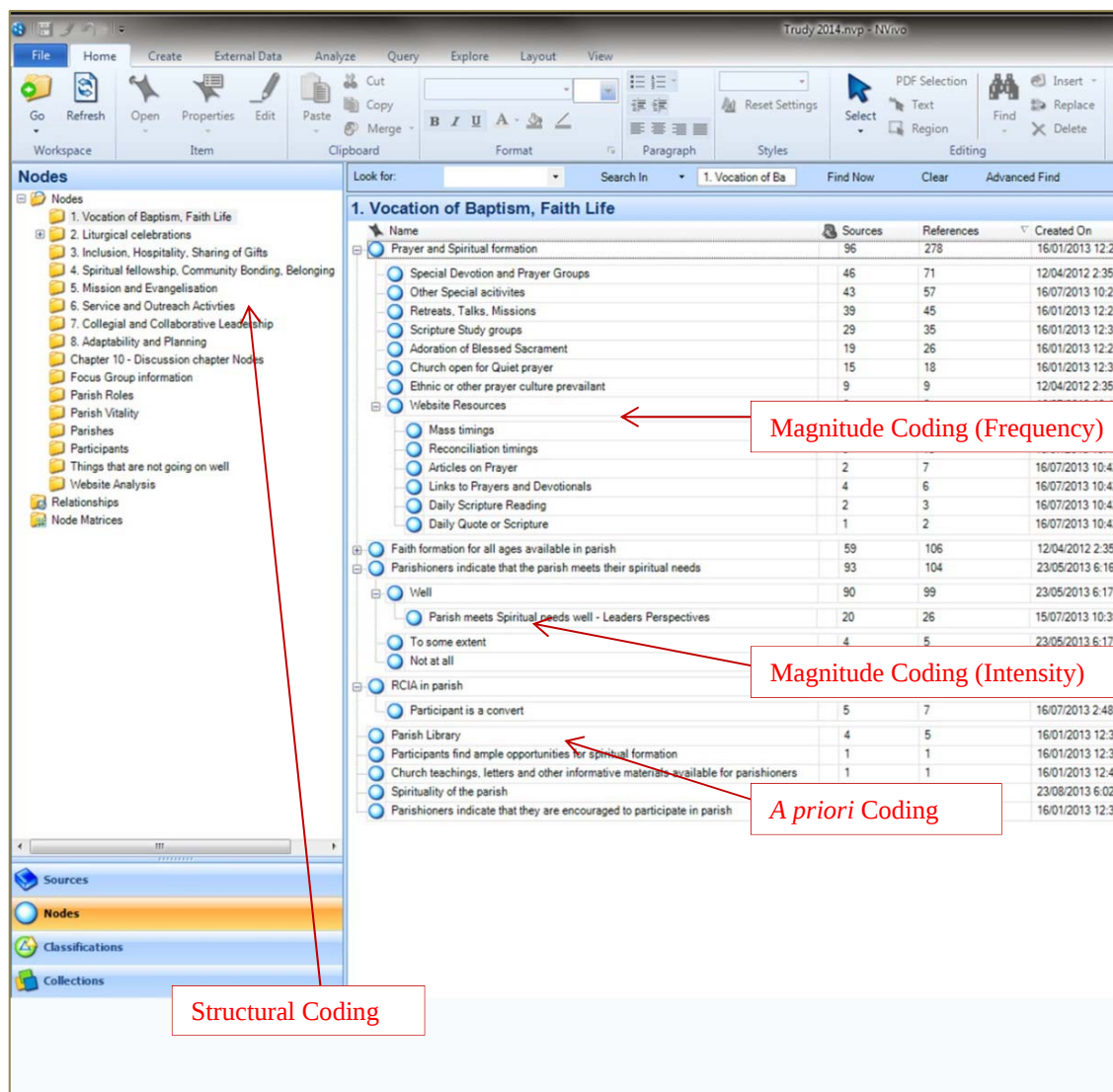
¹²⁴ Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 67.

¹²⁵ Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 55.

¹²⁶ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 100.

¹²⁷ Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 56 and 57.

Figure 3.2: NVivo Tree Node Structure Showing Different Types Of Coding



The Second Coding Cycle

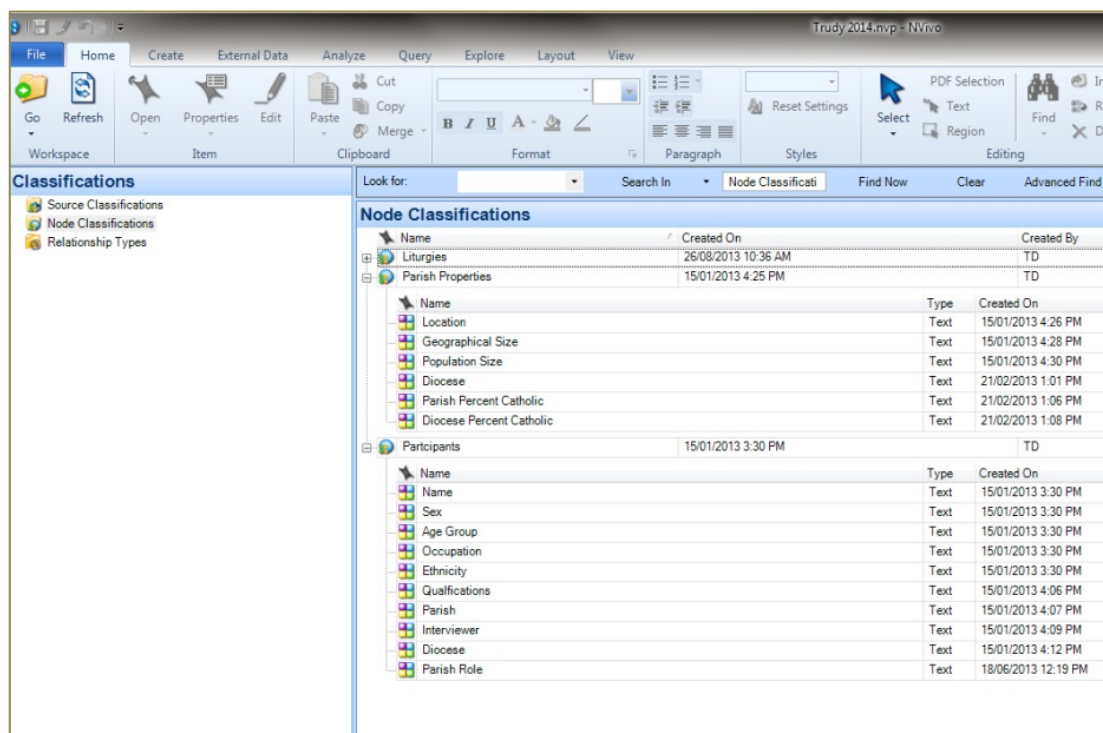
1. ***A priori* Coding, or theoretically derived codes** – This type of coding is used when researchers already have a list of concepts they are interested in exploring, developing or testing with the new data.¹²⁸ The literature review for this study had already revealed several different ideas and concepts within each of the eight measures of vitality that needed to be explored. *A priori* coding was therefore initially used to identify meaningful portions of the data and label

¹²⁸ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 76.

them as “free nodes”.¹²⁹ These were later changed or developed as the research progressed

2. **Tree nodes** – Further coding involved sorting the free nodes into “trees”, a hierarchical structure used to organise the data into higher-level and lower-level categories on the basis of similarities, differences and relationships between items.¹³⁰ This structure was kept fairly flexible during the entire research process. As patterns and associations between different groups of nodes were identified in the research process, the structure was further developed. Similarly, as themes or ideas emerged during the research, these were coded into the tree structure
3. **Magnitude Coding** – This process that employs words to suggest frequency or intensity¹³¹ was used to further explore some of the tree nodes created from the data. Figure 3.2 shows a sample of such coding.

Figure 3.3: NVivo Attribute Coding Sample



¹²⁹ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 83.

¹³⁰ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 83.

¹³¹ Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 58.

Data analysis for this study was also carried out using various NVivo tools used to analyse the data. These were:

- **Classification Tables** – These tables were used to generate data for the charts used in Chapter Four to graphically represent the attributes of participants and parishes in the study.
- **Text search queries** – These are useful in effectively locating all sections of data in which a particular topic has been mentioned.¹³² For example, a text search for words relating to World Youth Day was used, which revealed its importance to community building in Chapter Seven.
- **Word frequency queries** – This tool is used to count the frequency of words in a selected text.¹³³ For example, in Chapter Nine, the Word Cloud of the most common words used by parish leaders to describe their leadership style was created using a Word frequency query.
- **Matrix coding queries** – These are used to create qualitative cross-tabulations of participant attributes.¹³⁴ For example, male and female perspectives on the reasons why the parish is doing well in Chapter Five were formulated using a Matrix coding query.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Several ethical issues arose in the design of this study and are detailed below. An application to the University of Divinity Higher Research Ethics Committee was made and the approval process (Appendix D) was crucial in ensuring that participants were treated ethically. The approval of the Ethics Committee was made known to the participants in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) to ensure that they felt secure about their decision to take part in the study and the confidentiality of the information they provided.

¹³² Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 168.

¹³³ Pat. Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies* (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 111, 112.

¹³⁴ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, 143, 144.

Informed Consent

The issue of informed consent was attended to by providing the participants with information about the process at different stages of the research as well as providing them with the opportunity to withdraw at any of these stages. At the recruitment stage they were provided with an information sheet (Appendix B) detailing the nature of the research, the aims and methods used in the research process and details of their role in it.

Informed consent was obtained at two levels in this study. First, parish priests were provided with a consent form (Appendix E) and asked to give their written consent to allow their parishes to participate in the research. Second, prior to the interview, each person invited to participate was asked to sign a consent form (Appendix F), outlining the commitment involved, their right to withdraw at any stage and my obligation to ensure their confidentiality. This was also discussed with them to make sure that they understood all aspects of the research clearly. Written consent was obtained from each participant before the interview proceeded. Special care was taken to ensure that each participant was aware of his/her rights during the course of the interview. This included their right to turn off the voice recording at any point during the interview and the right to decline to answer any of the questions without any disadvantages, penalties or adverse consequences. They were also informed that once they had been interviewed they had up to 10 days to withdraw their permission for the interview to be used in the research project. Participants were also informed about the treatment of the data obtained from the research. The consent forms included consent for the release of the data and the use of research findings for this thesis and for publications, seminars and conferences on the topic of parish vitality.

Maintenance of Confidentiality

Confidentiality of the majority of the participants was maintained by using participant codes for identification and keeping and storing results separately from lists of names and codes and ensuring that no individual could be identified in any reports and

publication arising from the research. However, given the nature of this study, it was possible that some participants would be identifiable—for example, the parish priests of participating parishes. In such cases, participants were made aware of the fact that they could be identifiable when their consent was obtained prior to them being interviewed. Special care was taken to ensure that no published comment or action could be attributed to them without them being aware of what I intended to publish and without them giving their consent to its publication.

Researcher Bias

It is recognised that the research could be affected by the writer's gender, culture, beliefs and experience. I wish to therefore locate myself as a female, Catholic person of Indian origin in Australia. I realised that this "frame" or "perspective" from which I viewed this topic would affect the questions I asked and the categories used to provide order and give meaning to reality.¹³⁵ Much care was taken therefore at all stages of the research to minimise this bias as far as possible. Nevertheless, this viewpoint also gave the research some specific advantages. I did not have any prior or ongoing relationship to any of the parishes or parishioners participating in the research, nor was I likely to be identified as part of the Church hierarchy. It was important that I be seen as lay person sharing their interest in the vitality of the parishes.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research study on parish vitality was carried out in parishes that were specially recommended for their vitality. It is important to note, therefore, that the findings do not reflect the overall vitality of all Catholic parishes and the Australian Catholic community in general, which continues to face many problems such as declining Mass

¹³⁵ M. Rein, "Value Critical Policy Analysis," in *Ethics, the Social Sciences and Policy Analysis*, ed. D. Callahan & B. Jennings (New York: Plenum Press, 1983).

attendance and disidentification, particularly among young people.¹³⁶ Additionally, the people interviewed for this study were those who were actively participating and contributing to parish life. Their responses therefore do not reflect the attitudes of people in the parish community who do not attend or participate actively and those who have left the parish for a particular reason. This is a natural outcome of the methodology that was developed to draw attention to the positive aspects of the participating parishes. The aim of this study is to examine parish vitality “from the inside” and to explore its strengths and weaknesses from that perspective. These “vital” parishes nevertheless continue to be effected by factors that affect all Australian Catholic parishes in general.

Since the nature of this research was a doctoral study, data was coded and the themes were identified and developed by a single person, and the analysis discussed with two supervisors. This process allowed for consistency in the method but failed to provide multiple perspectives from a variety of people with differing expertise. In order to facilitate a greater richness of interpretation, therefore, when using this method for another study, it would be preferable if the coding of data could involve several people with themes being developed using discussions with other researchers and /or a panel of experts.

There is also a problem of generalisation which is inevitable in the utilisation of a data collection method which relies on data from only 10 parishes. To some degree this was lessened by the diversity that existed among the parishes and participants in the study. The common characteristics of many of the themes that emerged during the course of the research gave some reassurance that the study tapped into issues that might be similar in nature to those experienced by people in other Catholic parishes across Australia. The main gain, however, was that the issue of parish vitality was seen in the context of the overall experiences of participants from each of the 10 parishes. For an exploratory study which aimed at obtaining an overview of the different expressions of parish vitality, and of the ways in which various aspects of parish life contributed to it, this approach seemed not only appropriate, but essential.

¹³⁶ See Dixon, "What Do Mass Attenders Believe?," 455 and Robert Dixon and Stephen Reid, "The Contemporary Catholic Community: A View from the 2011 Census," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 90, no. 2 (April 2013), 145–146.

CONCLUSION

This chapter described the research design and the process of data collection for this study. A qualitative research method was chosen bearing in mind the aims and purposes of the study. In order to overcome difficulties associated with the ill-defined nature of the concept of vitality and the differences in its expression in numerous situations, a special theological framework was developed that included a social constructionist epistemology and an interpretive theoretical perspective. The methodology used in the research was an exploratory, multiple case study design with a mixed methods approach that included interviews, participant observation and document analysis.

The selection of parishes for the study was carried out using theory-based, purposeful and quota based sampling techniques. Participants were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling, and two criteria were applied to their selection, based on their age and familiarity with the parish. Semi-structured, face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out with each participant and the scope and content of the interview schedule that was developed was influenced by the literature review in order to obtain information about individual practices as well as community participation within the parish. The overall nature of the questions reflected an approach of appreciative inquiry. Participant observation was carried out to collect data on the celebration of Mass and other liturgical events in the parish using a liturgy observation schedule. Documents were also used to supplement the other data collected during the research.

The data analysis of this study was done using a cross-case, content analysis with the help of NVivo software. A comprehensive process of data coding and the use of NVivo tools was undertaken for the identification of themes in the data. The chapter also examined the ethical issues that arose during the course of the research and how these were attended to, and concluded with a brief discussion on the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the parishes and the participants who took part in this study. The chapter begins with a list of the parishes and a brief analysis in terms of their location and size. Following this, each parish is profiled and described briefly regarding its history, leadership, demographic information and cultural make up. The subsequent sections of the chapter focus on the parishioners who participated in the study and profile them in terms of their age, sex and roles in the parish.

PARISHES IN THE STUDY

Ten parishes participated in the study. These were:

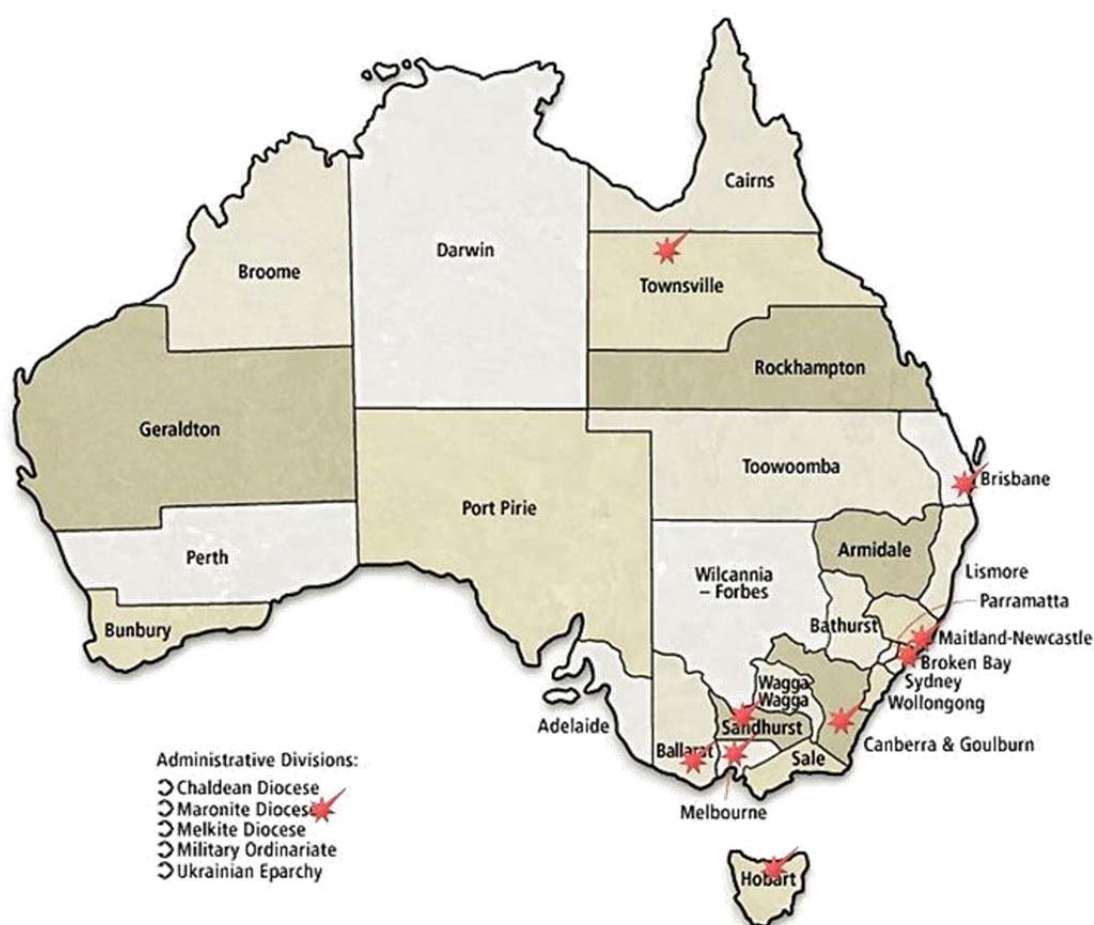
1. Albany Creek Parish (Archdiocese of Brisbane)
2. Cororooke Parish (Ballarat Diocese)
3. Harris Park Parish (Maronite Diocese)
4. Kings Park Parish (Archdiocese of Melbourne)
5. Launceston Parish (Archdiocese of Hobart)
6. Mount Isa Parish (Townsville Diocese)
7. Myall Coast Parish (Maitland-Newcastle Diocese)
8. Narrabundah Parish (Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn)
9. Shepparton Parish (Sandhurst Diocese)
10. Warnervale Parish (Broken Bay Diocese)

These parishes are classified by population, size and location, as described in the following sections. These classifications were necessary since the vitality of parishes can be strongly influenced by their structural makeup.

Parish Location

The region in which a parish is located can have an impact on its vitality. Life in an urban parish and its systems of operation are considerably different from those of a parish located in a rural area. As indicated in Chapter Two, while location does not determine how the parish will operate, it nevertheless can have a strong influence. In order to aid further analysis therefore, the geographical location of participating parishes was examined and parishes were then grouped into categories on this basis.

Figure 4.1: Geographical Location of Participating Parishes



A look at the geographical location of the parishes shows that they are mainly situated on the east coast of Australia. Harris Park Parish which belongs to the Maronite Diocese is also situated close to the east coast in the city of Sydney. While there were several factors taken into consideration in order to select a wide range of 10 parishes from the twenty chosen for the *Building Stronger Parishes* project, geographical spread played only a minor role. There was only one parish in the list of twenty parishes that

was situated on the west coast in Perth. Also, the parishes from the northern region were largely ruled out by the research study due to their atypical cultural make-up which render them less relevant to parish life in other parts of the country.

Geographical Grouping Based on Location

The geographical grouping of the parishes is based on the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) classification for Remoteness which categorises areas as Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote or Very Remote locations.¹ Developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2011, the purpose of this system is to allow quantitative comparisons to be made between “city” and “country” Australia.

Table 4.1: ASGS Classification of Parishes by Location²

Major City Parishes	Inner Regional Parishes	Remote Parishes
Albany Creek	Launceston	Mount Isa
Narrabundah	Cororooke	
Harris Park	Shepparton	
Kings Park	Myall Coast	
Warnervale		

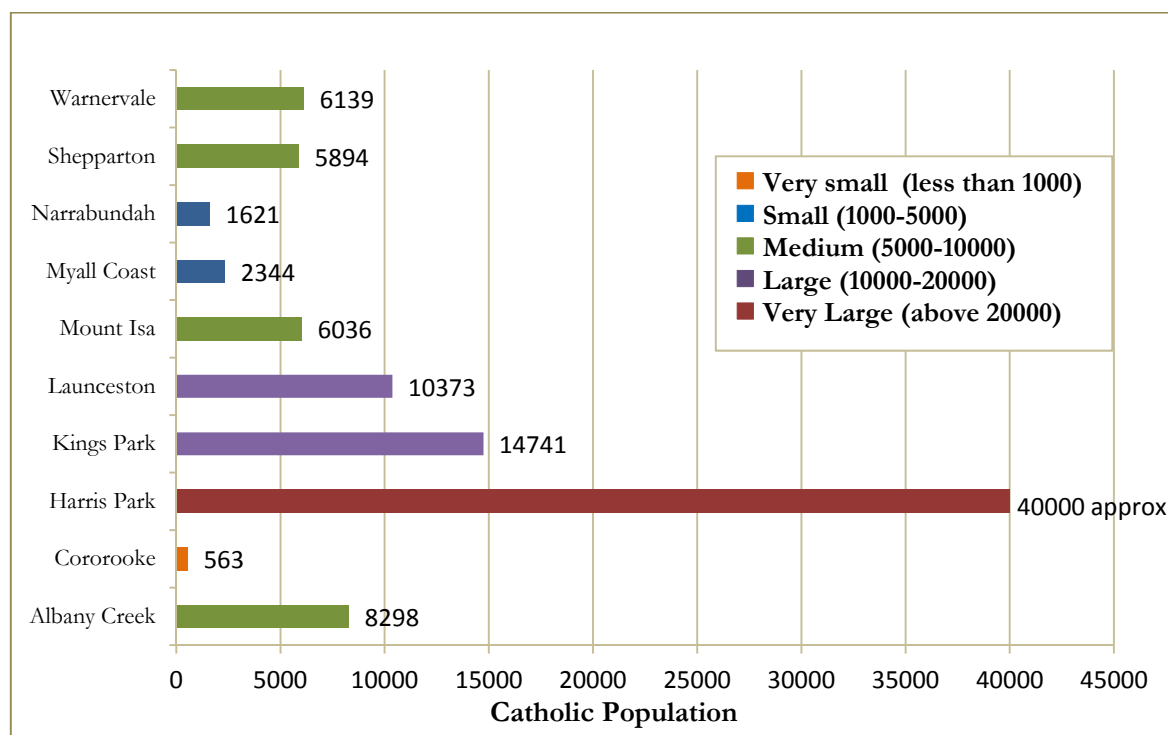
According to this classification (Table 4.1), there are five parishes located in “Major Cities”, four are located in “Inner Regional” areas, and one is in a “Remote” area.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) 2011 Structure and Summary," (2013).
[http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/4a256353001af3ed4b2562bb00121564/c453c497aadde71cca2576d300026a38/\\$FILE/ASGS%202011%20Structure%20and%20Summary.pdf](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/4a256353001af3ed4b2562bb00121564/c453c497aadde71cca2576d300026a38/$FILE/ASGS%202011%20Structure%20and%20Summary.pdf) [accessed 11 May 2013].

² The online classification locator was accessed from the Australian Government Department of Health and Aging Website: <http://www.doctorconnect.gov.au/internet/otd/publishing.nsf/Content/locator>.

Parish Size

Figure 4.2: Classification of Parish Size by Catholic Population



For the purpose of this study, each parish was classified according to the size of its population based on figures obtained from the 2011 Australian Government Census.³ As Figure 4.2 shows, there were four medium-sized parishes, each having between 5,000 and 10,000 parishioners. These were the parishes of Albany Creek, Mount Isa, Warnervale and Shepparton. There were two small parishes, with a Catholic population of 1,000 to 5,000 parishioners, Myall Coast and Narrabundah; and one very small parish, Cororooke, with a Catholic population of only 563. There were two large parishes with Catholic populations between 10,000 and 20,000 parishioners. These were Kings Park and Launceston, and the largest parish was Harris Park which has an estimated population of over 40,000 parishioners.⁴

³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Australian Parishes by Catholic and Total population, and Per Cent Catholic," 8, 10, 17, 23, 27, 29, 31, 39 and 49.

⁴ Figures for Harris Park are an estimate only since Census figures are not available for this parish. The estimate is based on figures provided in Margaret Ghosn, *Young Australian Maronites: Their Response to Australia, Church and Spirituality* (2009), 82.

Albany Creek Parish⁵

- ◆ **Parish Church:** All Saints Church
- ◆ **Parish School:** All Saints Parish Primary School
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
○ Catholic Population	7,792	8,299	507
○ Mass Count ⁶	986	666	-320
- ◆ **Catholics make up 28.8% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicity:** Largely multicultural
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 34 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 3,288
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 2,509
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Family Groups, Majellan Group, St Vincent de Paul Society, Cursillo Movement, menALIVE group, Youth/Young Adults group, among others.

Albany Creek is a large parish which lies on the northern edge of Brisbane, about half an hour from the centre of the city. The parish was formed in January 1986 and over the years it has continued to develop with the new All Saints Church being built in 1996 and the primary school becoming a full two-stream school (now one of the largest in the Brisbane Archdiocese) in the same year.⁷ In recent years, the parish has also opened a new Parish Centre.

The parish is led by a parish priest who has been in the parish for over twenty-five years and has seen it grow from a small shed to the big and beautiful structure it is today. He is assisted in his role by a parish secretary who manages the day-to-day running of the office, and a deacon who was recently appointed to the parish. The parish also employs a part-time youth minister.

⁵ All figures regarding Albany Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Albany Creek Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/16-Brisbane/Albany%20Creek%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

⁶ Mass attendance figures for all parishes are from the 2011 National Count of Attendance, supplied by the ACBC Pastoral Research Office.

⁷ All Saints Parish, "A Short History", All Saints Parish <http://www.allsaintsparish.com.au/History.htm> [accessed 13 May 2013].

Albany Creek is a largely multicultural parish with many overseas born Catholics from countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Italy, Philippines and Ireland.⁸ There are many young families in the parish⁹ and a large number of groups and ministries that lay people are involved in. This is primarily due to the wide implementation of the Stewardship Model which encourages people to give their time, talent or treasure in service of the parish. As a result there are over 47 stewardship ministry groups operating, with the Liturgical group and the Youth group being particularly active.¹⁰

Cororooke Parish¹¹

- ◆ **Parish Church:** St Brendan's, Coragulac and St Joseph's, Pirron Yallock
- ◆ **Parish School:** St Brendan's Parish School
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	549	566	18
o Mass Count	139	100	-39
- ◆ **Catholics make up 31.1% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicity:** Australian
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 38 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 198
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 136
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Liturgy team, Sacramental Team, Bereavement Ministry, Marriage Preparation, Playgroup, Knights of the Southern Cross, Majellan Caring group, Youth, among others.

Cororooke Parish is a small rural community located 10 kilometres from Colac, in Victoria's Western District. It is largely mono-cultural parish with about 95 per cent

⁸ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Albany Creek," 17.

⁹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Albany Creek," 7.

¹⁰ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report*, (Victoria, Australia, December 2011), 8.

¹¹ All figures regarding Cororooke Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Cororooke Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/13-Ballarat/Cororooke%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

Australian parishioners of Anglo-Irish background.¹² The parish was formed in 1984 when St Joseph's Church at Pirron Yallock, which had been part of the Colac Parish, became part of Cororooke, along with St Brendan's Church at Coragulac.

The parish presently consists of two connected yet separate communities, gathered around their two churches, on either side of the Western Highway. There is a lay leadership team consisting of three lay leaders, a visiting priest and a priest as canonical administrator. This model of leadership was developed when the parishioners in 2008, being faced with closure or amalgamation with the nearby Colac parish, made the decision to remain as a separate lay-led community. A retired priest from the Ballarat Diocese says Mass in both churches in the parish every two weeks. The parish's second Canonical Administrator has been appointed by the diocese to sign off on certain administrative decisions.

The parish and its community had been well formed by the previous parish leader who was a religious sister.¹³ As a result, parishioners have a real sense of ownership of the parish and take on responsibility for its survival. There is genuine care and support for one another among parishioners and a high level of involvement in parish life with over 50 per cent of the Catholic population actively involved in some way or other.¹⁴

Harris Park Parish

The Maronite¹⁵ parish of Harris Park is situated in the Western suburbs of Sydney. Founded in 1970, the Church and its surrounding buildings were built to meet the needs of a growing Maronite community who by 2009 were estimated to be about 40,000, making it the largest Maronite parish in Australia.¹⁶ In 2012, a new four-storey Youth

¹² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Cororooke," 17.

¹³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, (Victoria, Australia, December 2012), 7.

¹⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 7.

¹⁵ Maronite Catholics are of Syrian origin, living chiefly in Lebanon and in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. More information can be found at Maronite Eparchy of Australia, "History - Who are the Maronites?", Maronite Eparchy of Australia <http://www.maronite.org.au/index.php?page=who-are-the-maronites> [accessed 22 May 2014].

¹⁶ Margaret Ghosn, *Young Australian Maronites*, 68 and 82.

and Community Centre was added to make room for the many services provided by the parish.

- ◆ **Parish Church:** Our Lady of Lebanon Church
- ◆ **Parish School:** none
- ◆ **Parish Population:**
 - **Catholic Population:** Estimated 40,000. No Census figures available
 - **Mass Count:**

<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
5,041	5,179	138
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicity:** Majority Lebanese
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** No figures available
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** No figures available
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** No figures available
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Maronite Youth, Marian Apostolate, Stewardship, Choir, Altar servers, Vinnies, Faith and Light, Ladies Auxiliary, Sodality, Seniors and Fersan (a program for children), among others.

The community of Harris Park largely consists of first and second generation Lebanese Catholics who live in the suburbs surrounding Harris Park and are spread across over 50 Latin Rite parishes. Mass attendance at the parish is usually strong with over 1,000 young adults regularly attending the Sunday evening liturgy.¹⁷ The main languages spoken in the community are English and Arabic. The parish is led by the parish priest and nine assistant priests. Some of these have been sent from Lebanon to Australian to train for two to three years. Most of them are bilingual and thus are able to cater to the needs of the parishioners. The parish is staffed by many secretaries and a business development officer.

The large number of activities and programs organised by the various parish groups are supported by the parish staff and volunteers and cater for people of all ages.¹⁸ The parish provides a range of spiritual and liturgical services to facilitate the faith development of its parishioners and is also strongly engaged with the local community

¹⁷ Margaret Ghosn, *Young Australian Maronites*, 1.

¹⁸ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 8.

through various outreach services.¹⁹ The community centre is a regular gathering place for meetings and community activities which creates a welcoming and lively atmosphere in the parish.²⁰

Kings Park Parish²¹

- ◆ **Parish Church:** Resurrection Church
- ◆ **Parish School:** Resurrection Catholic Primary School
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	13,317	14,746	1,433
o Mass Count	1,450	1,734	284
- ◆ **Catholics make up 34.7% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicity:** Multicultural
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 35 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 4,934
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 4,133
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** St Vincent de Paul Society, 20 Plus, Step Up group, Y4JT (Youth for Jesus Today), Seniors Group, Stewardship, among others.

Resurrection Parish is one of the large multicultural parishes in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Formerly known as St Alban's West Parish, it has a large number of overseas-born Catholics mainly from the Philippines, Malta, Croatia and Vietnam, with many new arrivals from South Korea, South Africa and Iraq, making it a very culturally diverse parish.²² 45 per cent of the parishioners were born in a non-English speaking

¹⁹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 8.

²⁰ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 8.

²¹ All figures regarding Kings Park Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Kings Park Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/12-Melbourne/Kings%20Park%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

²² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Kings Park," 17.

country.²³ Kings Park is also a relatively young parish with a large number of families with school-age children.²⁴

The parish has one Church and one primary school. It is led by a parish priest who is assisted by a full-time office manager and two part-time support staff. There is a wide range of groups in the community, with over 600 parishioners engaged in at least one parish ministry. The participation of the parishioners is greatly encouraged by the parish priest who has set up unique structures to ensure that many parishioners are able to get involved.²⁵ Hospitality, welcoming and good communication among the parishioners are also key features of this parish.²⁶

Launceston Parish²⁷

- ◆ **Parish Church:** Church of the Apostles
- ◆ **Parish Schools:** St Patrick's College, Sacred Heart Primary, St Thomas More's Primary and St Finn Barr's Primary
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	10,380	10,378	-2
o Mass Count	981	787	-194
- ◆ **Catholics make up 17.3% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicities:** Largely Australian with some multicultural communities
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 39 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 4,122
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 3,568
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Family Groups, Majellan Group, St Vincent de Paul Society, Cursillo Movement, menALIVE group, Youth//Young Adults group, among others.

²³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Kings Park," 3.

²⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Kings Park," 14 and 15.

²⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report*, 5.

²⁶ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report*, 5.

²⁷ All figures regarding Launceston Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Launceston Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/27-Hobart/Launceston%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

Launceston Parish is a large amalgamated parish in Northern Tasmania that brought together the three parishes of Invermay, Launceston and Newstead in 2001. The parish supports three primary schools and one secondary College. Launceston is led by a parish priest who is assisted by two assistant priests and two part-time office staff. While the communities of the three original parishes retain their distinctiveness, the parish has worked hard to build a collective identity over the years. The amalgamation of the parish is seen as a great advantage since it combined the best resources the former three parishes had to offer in terms of building spaces, finances and the skills and talents of parishioners.²⁸

Launceston Parish is a largely Australian parish with some immigrants from countries like the United Kingdom, Philippines and Italy, and recent arrivals from Vietnam, Central and South America and India.²⁹ There are many families in the parish, with 43 per cent of children in Catholic primary schools who speak a language other than English at home.³⁰ The parish also has many single person households of people aged 35 and over.³¹

Mount Isa Parish³²

The parish of Mount Isa was created in February 1930.³³ Located in a town whose development strongly depended on the success of the Mount Isa Mining Company, the Catholic population faced many turbulent years in the early period.

²⁸ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report*, 12.

²⁹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Launceston," 17.

³⁰ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Launceston," 14 and 20.

³¹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Launceston," 16.

³² All figures regarding Mount Isa Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Mount Isa Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/20-Townsville/Mount%20Isa%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

³³ Good Shepherd Catholic Parish, "The History of the Catholic Church in Mount Isa", Good Shepherd Catholic Parish Mount Isa <http://www.goodshepherdisa.com.au/history.html> [accessed 6 May 2014].

- ◆ **Parish Church:** Good Shepherd Church
- ◆ **Parish Schools:** St Joseph's Primary School, St Kieran's Primary School and Good Shepherd Catholic College
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	5,636	6,035	399
o Mass Count	353	468	115
- ◆ **Catholics make up 27.8% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicities:** Mainly Australian with many multicultural communities,
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 30 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 2,133
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 2,628
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** St Vincent de Paul, AICC (Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council), NWQICSS (North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services) and Centrecare Family Services, among others.

The geographical spread of the parish stretches over some 500 kilometres from north to south and 300 kilometres east to west. Over the years the parish structures and its leadership team have changed many times. As part of a large-scale re-organisation of resources in 1985, the three existing schools were opened, along with a new Church and Parish Centre.³⁴ The parish is currently led by a parish priest, assisted by a pastoral worker and the parish Pastoral Council.

Mount Isa is a largely Australian parish with many Catholics of Australian Indigenous origin.³⁵ There are also several immigrant communities with the largest number from the Philippines, and newer arrivals from Chinese Asia, South Africa, India and North, Central and South America, making it a very multicultural parish.³⁶ It is also a very young parish with a greater than average proportion of the parishioners under the age of 50 and many families in the community.³⁷ The parish has always played a significant role in the development of the Mount Isa community and the surrounding areas

³⁴ Good Shepherd Catholic Parish, "The History of the Catholic Church in Mount Isa."

³⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Mount Isa," 5.

³⁶ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Mount Isa," 17.

³⁷ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Mount Isa," 11 and 14.

primarily through its social service and outreach activities. The outreach to indigenous people through the North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services (NWQICSS) and the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council (AICC) has been particularly commendable.³⁸

Myall Coast Parish (formerly Bulahdelah)³⁹

- ◆ **Parish Churches:** St Brigid's Church, Bulahdelah, St Stephen's Church, Tea Gardens and Our Lady of the Rosary, Karuah.
- ◆ **Parish School:** St Joseph's Primary School
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	2,114	2,352	238
o Mass Count	231	159	-72
- ◆ **Catholics make up 21.3% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicities:** Largely Australian
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 50 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 1,033
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 778
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Wrap with Love, Yummies for Mummies and The Women's Shed, among others.

Myall Coast Parish is situated in the town of Bulahdelah, 235 kilometres north of Sydney. Formerly known as Bulahdelah Parish, the parish was formed in 1922 and included the nearby communities of St Stephens in Tea Gardens and Our Lady of the Rosary in Karuah.⁴⁰ Through a process of self-evaluation and renewal, the parishioners decided to change the name to Myall Coast Catholic Parish in 2012.⁴¹

³⁸ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 3.

³⁹ All figures regarding Myall Coast Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Bulahdelah Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/06-Maitland-Newcastle/Bulahdelah%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

⁴⁰ Myall Coast Catholic Parish, "Saint Brigid's Bulahdelah", Myall Coast Catholic Parish <http://www.myallcoastcatholicparish.org.au/index.php/sample-page/saint-brigids-bulahdelah> [accessed 25 June 2013].

⁴¹ Rhonda Bobako, "A New Name and Renewed Focus", Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle <http://www.mn.catholic.org.au/news-events/news/2012/a-new-name-and-renewed-focus> [accessed 25 July 2013].

Myall Coast is administered by a Sister of Charity who is employed as a Parish Pastoral Coordinator. The non-resident parish priest and another priest visit the parish to say Mass every week. Mass is celebrated at each of the three community churches on alternate days every weekend. The parish is largely Australian with immigrants from countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Germany.⁴² The age profile shows that it is an older parish with many people mainly in the 45–75 age group.⁴³

The three communities in the parish have very distinctive identities and work hard to keep their communities viable, with each community organising activities and groups according to the needs of their people. Many of these activities have been beneficial in building networks with the wider, local community.⁴⁴ The parish also has developed good ecumenical relations with other denominations in the area.⁴⁵

Narrabundah Parish⁴⁶

Narrabundah Parish is located in one of Canberra's oldest suburbs. The parish was formally established in 1962 after being a part of St Christopher's Parish (Manuka) and before that Queanbeyan Parish.⁴⁷ St Benedict's Church was built in 1983, and in 1998 the parish was designated as an Archdiocesan Eucharistic Centre for Canberra & Goulburn.⁴⁸ The parish has one primary school that was established in 1955 under the care of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan.⁴⁹

⁴² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Bulahdelah," 17.

⁴³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Bulahdelah," 11.

⁴⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 4.

⁴⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report: 2012 Supplement*, 4.

⁴⁶ All figures regarding Narrabundah Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Narrabundah Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/11-Canberra-Goulburn/Narrabundah%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

⁴⁷ St Benedict's Catholic Parish, "Catholic Community", St Benedict's Catholic Parish <http://www.stbenedictsnarrabundah.com/#!/about/cjg9> [accessed 6 May 2014].

⁴⁸ St Benedict's Catholic Parish, "Catholic Community."

⁴⁹ St Benedict's Primary School, "Our School History", St Benedict's Primary School <http://stbenedicts.act.edu.au/ourschool/ourschoolhistory.html> [accessed 8 August 2013].

- ◆ **Parish Church:** St Benedict's Church
- ◆ **Parish School:** St Benedict's Primary School
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	1,674	1,618	-56
o Mass Count	516	382	-134
- ◆ **Catholics make up 25.5% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicities:** Mainly Australian with many multicultural communities
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 41 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 560
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 556
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Door Knocking group, Ministry to the newly married, Older People of God, Celebrate Recovery, Youth and young adult groups, four different prayer groups and St. Vincent de Paul, among others.

Narrabundah Parish is under the pastoral care of the Missionaries of God's Love, a community of consecrated priests and brothers that was founded from the Disciples of Jesus Community in Canberra in 1986.⁵⁰ The brothers and sisters of this community serve in various ministries in the parish and the Disciples of Jesus Community hold gatherings for young people and families.⁵¹ The Eucharist Centre's activities are separate from the parish but overlap to some extent as well.⁵² Narrabundah Parish is well known for its evangelical and outreach activities. While there are a fair number of families in Narrabundah, there are many single person households of people aged 35 and over.⁵³ The parish's recent immigrants are mainly people from India, Europe, the United Kingdom and Italy.⁵⁴ The parish has a wide range of groups, with some unique undertakings such as the Door Knocking Group and the Ministry to the newly married.

⁵⁰ MGL Priests and Brothers, "The Missionaries Of God's Love Priests And Brothers", MGL Priests and Brothers <http://mglpriestsandbrothers.org/> [accessed 23 July 2014].

⁵¹ St Benedict's Catholic Parish, "Catholic Community."

⁵² St Benedict's Catholic Parish, "Mission Centre", St Benedict's Catholic Parish <http://www.stbenedictsnarrabundah.com/#!events/c1aoj> [accessed 6 May 2014].

⁵³ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Narrabundah," 13 and 16.

⁵⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Narrabundah," 17.

A genuine atmosphere of hospitality from staff and parishioners is another striking feature of this parish.⁵⁵

Shepparton Parish⁵⁶

- ◆ **Parish Church:** St Brendan's Church
- ◆ **Parish School:** St Brendan's Primary School, St Luke's Primary School and Notre Dame College
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	5,655	5,894	239
o Mass Count	866	800	-66
- ◆ **Catholics make up 29.5% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicities:** Mainly Australian with many multicultural communities
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 36 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 2,077
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 1,994
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** Youth groups, Ministry Groups, Charismatic Prayer Group, Gospel Discussion Group, New Arrivals Homework Club, among others.

The parish of Shepparton is located in the Diocese of Sandhurst in the Goulburn Valley region of Victoria. The first Church of St Brendan's, built in 1878, was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in 1900. Further additions and refurbishments were made in 1923 and 2000.⁵⁷

The parish has two primary schools and one secondary college. The older of the two, St Brendan's Primary School, opened in 1891,⁵⁸ while St Luke's was established fairly

⁵⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, *Building Stronger Parishes Preliminary Report*, 9.

⁵⁶ All figures regarding Shepparton Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Shepparton Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/14-Sandhurst/Shepparton%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

⁵⁷ Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst, "History of St Brendan's Church, Shepparton," (n.d.). <http://www.sandhurst.catholic.org.au/index.php/parishes5/item/307-history-of-st-brendans-church-shepparton> [accessed 21 May 2013].

⁵⁸ Shepparton St Brendan's Primary School, "History", St Brendan's Primary School http://www3.sbshepparton.catholic.edu.au./index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28&Itemid=205 [accessed 25 July 2013].

recently in 2005.⁵⁹ Notre Dame College is an amalgamation of two adjacent single-sex colleges and was established in 1984.⁶⁰

The town of Shepparton lies in a multicultural and developing area. The parish has a very wide geographical spread which incorporates new growing areas and old rural regions. A large number of immigrants from countries like India, North Africa, the Philippines and Chinese Asia have changed the demographics of the parish enormously.⁶¹ There are many young families in the area with many children in Catholic primary and secondary schools who speak a language other than English at home.⁶²

Shepparton Parish is led by a parish priest assisted by a Maltese assistant priest from overseas, two secretaries and a pastoral associate. The parish has a wide range of parish groups to cater to the diverse community and a very vibrant youth ministry that is directed by the assistant priest who is a dynamic youth leader. The effectiveness of the parish youth programs has led to their implementation in the wider Sandhurst Diocese as well.

Warnervale Parish⁶³

St Mary of the Cross MacKillop Parish is a new parish located on the upper Central Coast of New South Wales between Wyong and Toukley. The parish, which began in 2003, looks after the many young families and retirees who live in the new housing

⁵⁹ Shepparton St Luke's Primary School, "History", St Luke's Primary School, Shepparton http://www3.slshepparton.catholic.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28&Itemid=205 [accessed 21 May 2013].

⁶⁰ Notre Dame College, "History of the College", Notre Dame College <http://www.notredame.vic.edu.au/our-college/history-of-the-college> [accessed 14 July 2014].

⁶¹ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Shepparton", 17.

⁶² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Shepparton," 15 and 20.

⁶³ All figures regarding Warnervale Parish except Mass Count figures are taken from Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Based on the 2011 Census - Warnervale Parish," (September 2013). http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/2011-Social-Profiles/04-Broken-Bay/Warnervale%20Parish_28_Profile.pdf [accessed 10 April 2014].

developments in the surrounding areas.⁶⁴ Led by a parish priest assisted by an assistant priest, a permanent deacon and two secretaries, the parish also employs a CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) Coordinator and two Family Ministry Coordinators.

- ◆ **Parish Church:** St Mary of the Cross MacKillop Church
- ◆ **Parish School:** MacKillop Catholic College
- ◆ **Parish Population:**

	<u>2006</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>Change</u>
o Catholic Population	5,480	6,138	658
o Mass Count	581	696	115
- ◆ **Catholics make up 27.4% of the total population**
- ◆ **Parish Ethnicities:** Largely Australian with some multicultural communities
- ◆ **Median Age of Catholics:** 37 years
- ◆ **Number of Catholic families:** 2,361
- ◆ **Number of people changed address since 2006:** 2,273
- ◆ **Current groups operating in parish:** St. Vincent de Paul, Youth, Men's group, Bereavement Group, Inter-faith Dialogue, Men's Breakfast, Seniors Group, Sunday Market Group, among others.

St Mary of the Cross MacKillop parish is a unique model in that the Church and the parish school, MacKillop Catholic College, have been built as one community and share a common vision and mission of being "one communion of faith".⁶⁵ As a result, both Church and school work closely together to look after the faith development and pastoral care of the wider community. Particular attention is given to the formation of young people through the school which runs the CSYMA (Catholic School Youth Ministries Australia) program that forms Year 9–12 students in youth ministry and leadership.

Warnervale is largely mono-cultural parish with about 84.5 per cent Australian parishioners. There are some overseas-born Catholics, with newer arrivals coming in

⁶⁴ Warnervale St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, "Mary of the Cross MacKillop Parish, Warnervale 2003–2013", St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, Warnervale
<http://www.dbb.org.au/parishes/warnervale/Pages/Default.aspx> [accessed 21 May 2013].

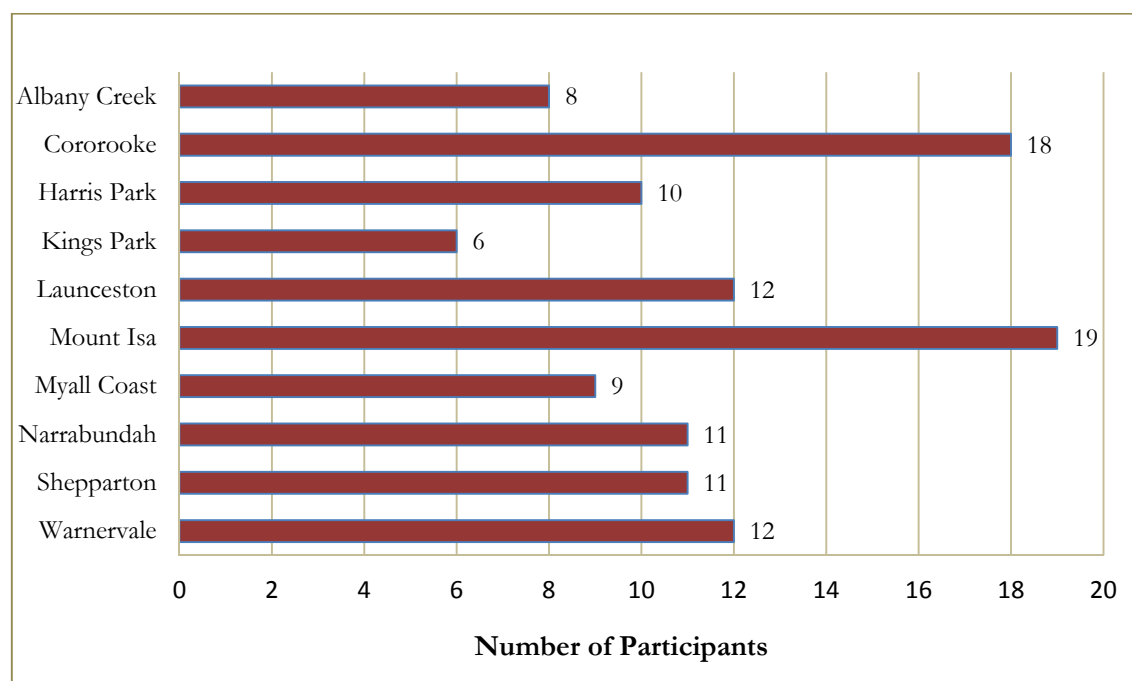
⁶⁵ St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, "Mary of the Cross MacKillop Parish, Warnervale 2003–2013."

mostly from India, Korea and other South East Asian countries.⁶⁶ Italian, Maltese, Spanish and Filipino languages are among the other languages commonly spoken other than English.⁶⁷ There are many young families in the parish, with a large number of couples where one person is Catholic and the other is of another Christian denomination or another religion.⁶⁸

PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

From the 10 parishes, there were a total of a 116 participants interviewed in the study. Figure 4.3 shows the number of participants from each parish. The highest number of participants was from Mount Isa Parish where 19 people took part in the study, while the smallest number was from Kings Park Parish where only six people participated. The participants were further classified according to the sex, age, ethnicity and their roles in the parish.

Figure 4.3: Classification of Participants by Parish



⁶⁶ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Warnervale," 17.

⁶⁷ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Warnervale," 18.

⁶⁸ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "Parish Social Profile: Warnervale," 13.

Age and Sex of Participants

Sixty-four females and 52 males took part in the study. The proportion of females in the study was 55 per cent as compared to the higher percentage of females among Mass attenders which was about three women for every two men.⁶⁹ The majority of participants who took part in the study fell within the age groups of 51–60 years and 61–75 years with more females than males in both groups. There were fewer participants from the younger age groups and just one participant from the 16–20 age group. Participants aged 76 and over were only seven in number.

Ethnicity of Participants

Table 4.2: Classification of Participants by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of participants
Australian	85
Lebanese	9
European	9
Aboriginal Australian	4
Filipino	3
African	2
Indian	2
Canadian	1
New Zealander	1

As shown in Table 4.2, the majority of participants in the study identified themselves as Australians. Apart from these, there were four participants who identified themselves as Aboriginal Australian and belonged Mount Isa Parish. The next largest groups were Lebanese and European. All nine Lebanese participants belonged to the Maronite parish of Harris Park which has a dominant Lebanese culture. Participants belonging to the other ethnicities were scattered among all the parishes.

⁶⁹ Dixon et al., *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, 2.

Parish Roles

Among the participants who took part in the study there were priests, religious sisters, lay people, principals of school and secretaries amongst others. The *Building Stronger Parishes* project classified people according to their roles in the parish. The same four categories were used in this study as well. These were:

1. Parish Leaders – Persons who belonged to the leadership team of the parish and to whom the primary care of a parish is entrusted. These included parish priests, assistant priests, religious sisters and lay persons involved in leading certain parishes. The role of a parish priest bears a greater authority and responsibility for the parish than others. For this reason, while their responses are included in this group of parish leaders (for example in Chapter Nine), their individual responses are clearly identified throughout the study.
2. Parish Staff – Persons who were employed by the parish. These included secretaries, school principals, housekeepers, accountants, and pastoral associates.
3. Parish Council member or Parish Group leaders – Persons who were part of the Parish Council or who were leaders of any other parish group, and
4. Parishioners – People who attended Mass regularly and participated in variety of ways in the parish.

Figure 4.4 shows the number of participants in each of the four categories. Around half the participants were people who were involved in either the Parish Council or were leading some other parish group. The next largest group of participants were parish leaders followed by parish staff and finally parishioners.

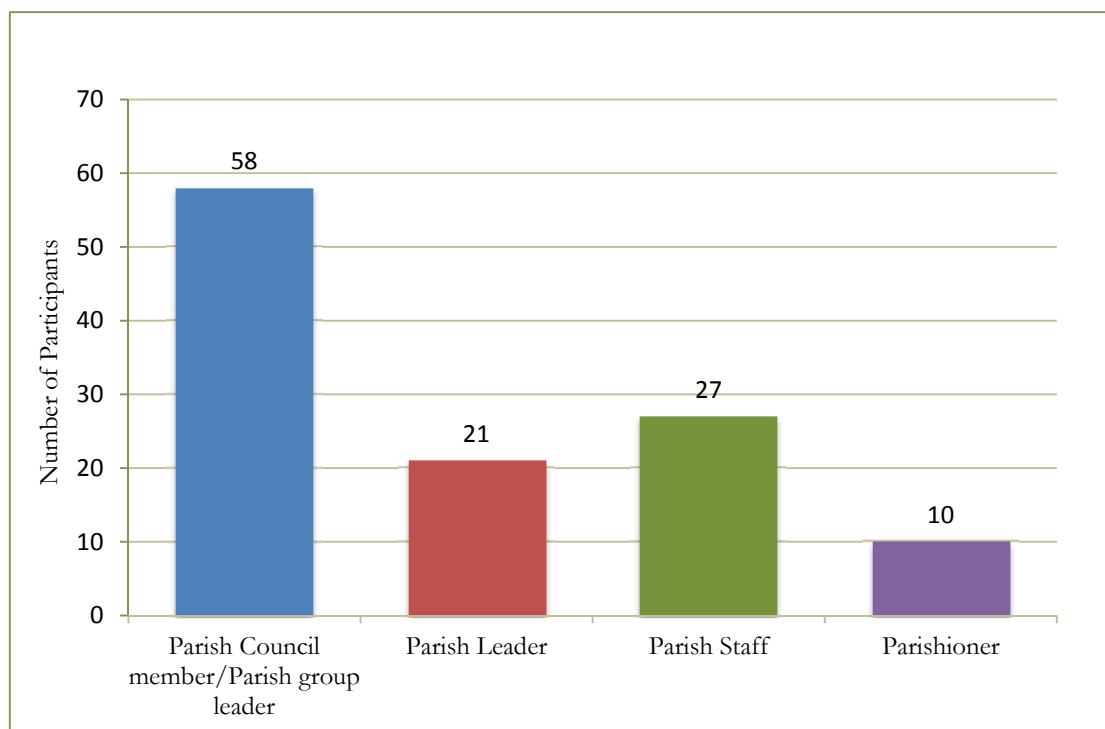
Figure 4.4: Classification of Participants by Parish Role

Figure 4.5 shows the distribution of male and female participants in the different parish roles. There were more female participants as compared to male participants among the parish staff and Parish Council members and parish group leaders involved in the study. The greatest difference was among parish staff where there were only nine males in comparison to 18 females. There were also many female participants among the Parish Council members and parish group leaders as compared to males. However, this trend was contrasted when it came to parish leaders. There were only five females in leadership positions as compared to 16 males in the same role. This was to be expected since most of the parishes in the study had parish priests as their leaders. Equal numbers of male and female parishioners participated in the study.

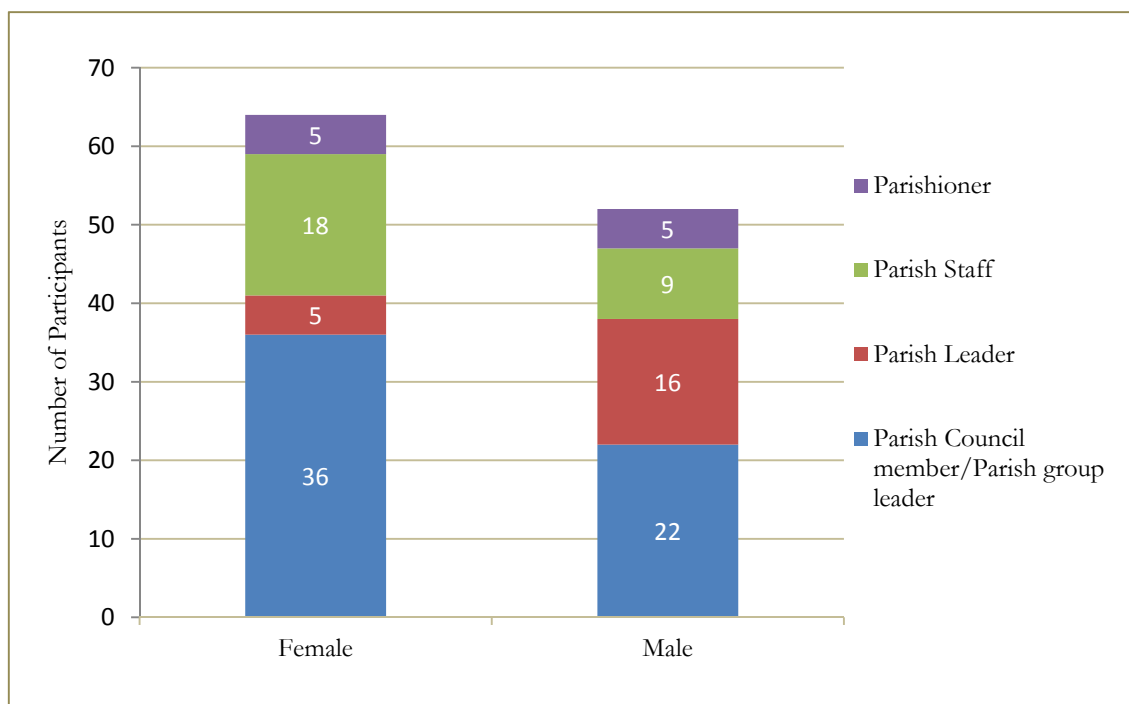
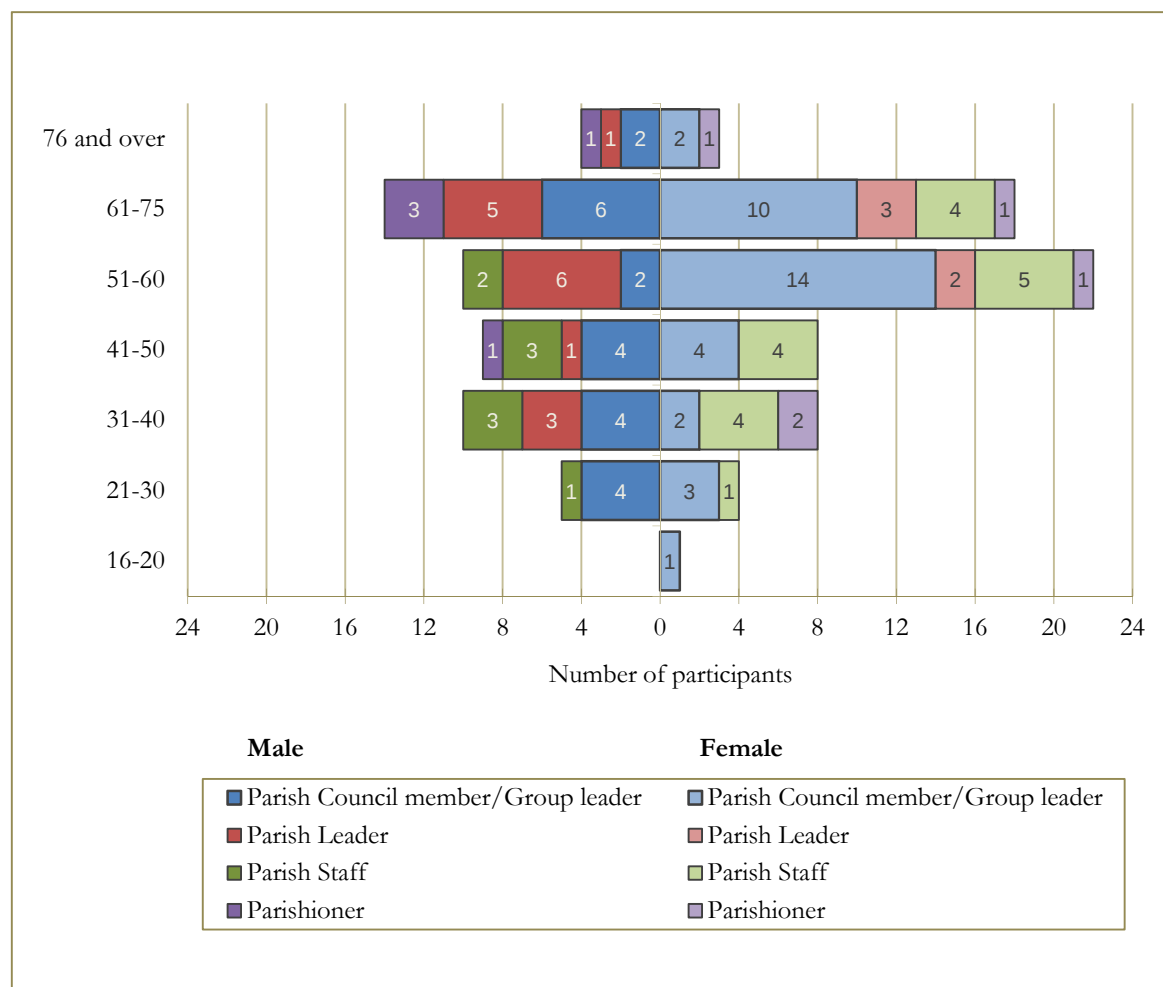
Figure 4.5: Distribution of Participants by Sex and Parish Role

Figure 4.6 shows the age-sex profile of participants along with the role of participants. Female parish leaders (in light red) tended to be much older than their male counterparts represented in dark red. There were a greater number of older women in roles as Parish Council members or parish group leaders (represented by light blue). Similarly, parish staff tended to be largely female (light green) as compared to male (dark green). The chart also revealed several male and female young people, below age 30, in roles as parish staff and Parish Council members or parish group leaders.

Figure 4.6: Age-sex-role Profile of Participants by Role in the Parish

CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the parishes and the participants who took part in this study. The parishes were selected from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas and each parish was from a different Australian diocese. The profiles of the parishes revealed their diversity in terms of size, structure, leadership, demographics and cultural make-up. The participants in the study largely identified as Australian, with a majority aged 51–75 years and a greater number of female participants. The four categories that participants were grouped into revealed that over half were involved in either the Parish Council or some other parish group. The next chapter begins the discussion on the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

INDICATORS OF VITALITY FOUND IN PARTICIPATING PARISHES

There are many reasons why a parish is perceived as being a vibrant community. The value of a parish for an individual varies from person to person according to their cultural and social experiences, their religious or spiritual values, and their perceived sense of belonging and community bonding. These feelings, attitudes and expectations of parishioners determine their assessment of a parish and the value they place on its various characteristics such as parish structures, modes of functioning and various programs and activities. Reports from the 2011 National Church Life Survey indicate that the four aspects of Church life most valued by Catholic adult Mass attenders across Australia, in order of priority, were sharing in Holy Communion, praying for one another, traditional worship or music, and preaching or homilies. In contrast, the four aspects most “hoped for” were strong community, more people attending Mass, a ministry to children and youth and spiritual growth.¹

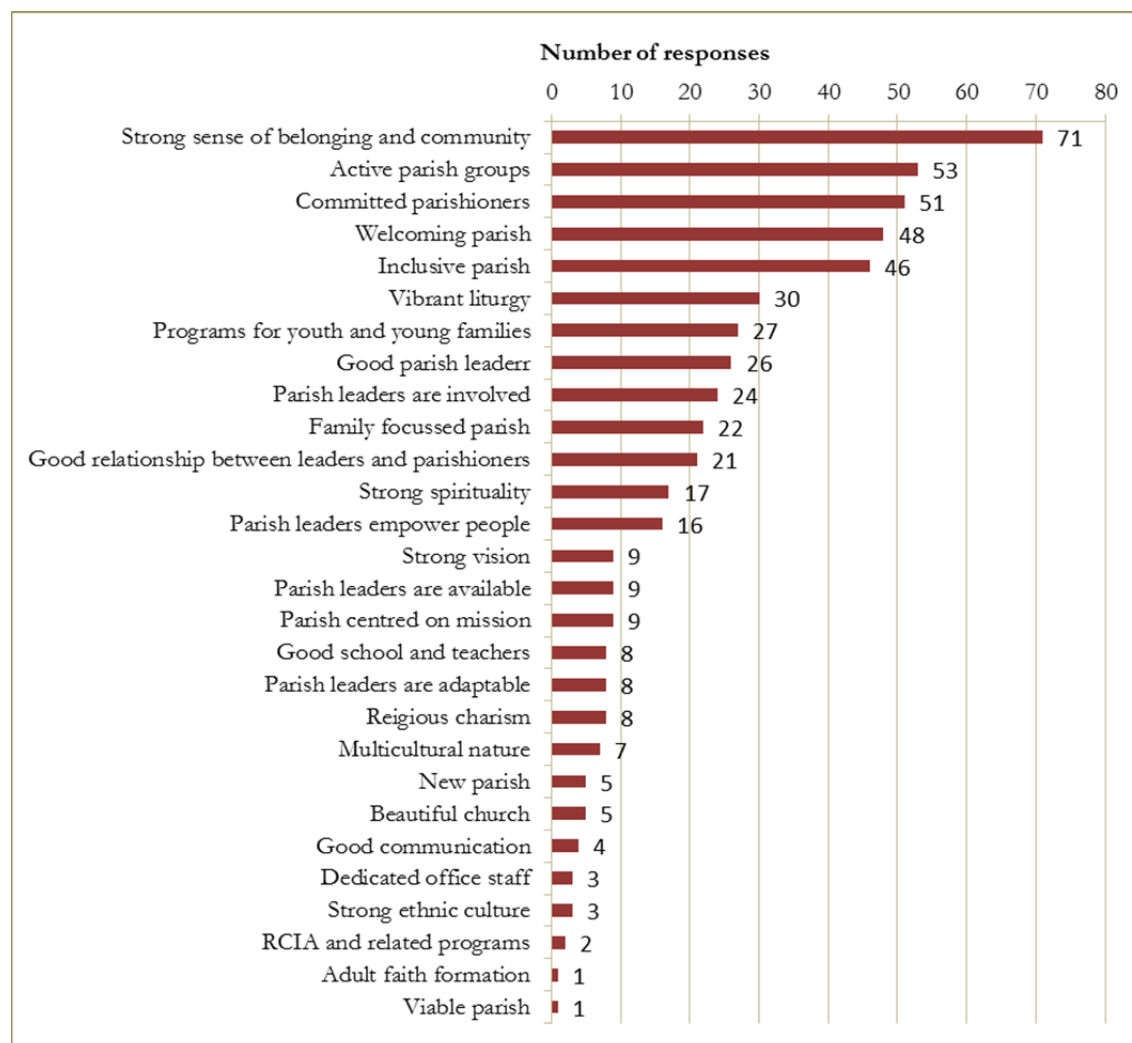
This chapter begins the presentation of a selection of results of this research study. As part of the investigation into parish vitality, participants were asked to indicate why they thought their parish was doing well and to list the best things about the parish. The first sections of this chapter present these findings. The participants in the study are those who are actively involved in parish life. Hence, their experiences of parish life will differ from those who choose not to be a part of the parish, or those who have felt excluded to some extent, and will be reflected in their responses. The participants’ responses in this section are also analysed on the basis of their age and sex. The low number in the parishioner group did not allow for cross tabulations based on other variables such as parish size and leadership role. The next sections explain in detail the eight main reasons given by participations for the vitality of their parish. The final

¹ NCLS Research, "Denominational Church Life Profile: The Catholic Church in Australia," 2011 *National Church Life Survey* (2013).
<http://www.pro.catholic.org.au/pdf/NCLS%202011%20Catholic%20profile%20-%20Australia.pdf>
 [accessed 26 June 2013], 6.

section highlights a few issues arising from these discussions that appear to be significant indicators of parish vitality as perceived by participants in the study.

PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARISH VITALITY

Figure 5.1: Reasons Why the Parish is Doing Well (*n*= number of responses)



Note: Participants could nominate multiple reasons for vitality.

The question put to the participants was: This parish is regarded as a “successful” or “vital” parish. Why do you think it is doing so well? What do you think are the best things about the parish? Is there anything that makes this parish different from other surrounding parishes? There were various reasons why participants thought their parish was doing well (See Figure 5.1). These ranged from parish characteristics such as “

family-focussed parish”, “*parish centred on mission*”, “*religious charism*” and “*good schools and teachers*”, to people characteristics, such as parish leaders who were “*empowering*”, “*adaptable*” and “*available*”. However, the six main reasons given by participants (with 30 responses or more) for the vitality of their parish were:

1. A strong sense of belonging and community
2. Active parish groups
3. Committed parishioners
4. A welcoming parish
5. An inclusive parish
6. Vibrant liturgy

Of these, a strong sense of belonging and community was the main reason given for parish vitality with 71 responses from a total of 116 participants.

There are two important points to note here;

1. Vitality is a complex concept and any attempt to understand it by breaking it down into separate issues for analysis is somewhat artificial. Accordingly, there will be some overlap in the participants’ reasons for vitality as may be revealed in their quotes later in the chapter.
2. The reasons for vitality do not imply causality. While one reason (e.g. a strong sense of belonging and community) may be the cause of vitality in one parish, it is also possible that it could be the result of vitality in another. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that each of these reasons is strongly related to vitality in these parishes, but not necessarily the cause of it.

Male and Female Perspectives

The reasons for parish vitality were further classified into responses given by male and female participants (See Table 5.1). The top five preferences of both sets of participants remained the same. Both male and female participants rated a strong sense of belonging and community, active parish groups, a welcoming parish, committed parishioners and

an inclusive parish as the five main reasons for the vitality of their parish. However, there were some differences. Female participants placed greater importance on a strong sense of belonging and community (circled in red) followed by committed parishioners. Male participants rated active parish groups (circled in red) higher than a strong sense of belonging and community.

This reveals differences in the perceptions of parish vitality from male and female perspectives. It would suggest that women are more likely to perceive the parish to be vital if they feel they are a part of the community and find purpose and support from like-minded parishioners. Men on the other hand are more likely to look for liveliness or vibrancy in the community based on the numbers participating, along with experiencing a sense of community themselves.

Difference in Responses according to Age Groups

Table 5.2 shows the classification of responses according to different age groups. Participants were grouped into three categories, “Under 30”, “30–59” and “60+”. A strong sense of belonging and community ranked highly in all three categories (circled in red), demonstrating that the experience of community life in the parish is valued by people in all age groups, the young and old alike. Apart from that there were a few differences in how people of different age groups perceived parish vitality. People below 30 years greatly valued the presence of active parish groups and the inclusive attitude of the parish. This would suggest that younger people value parishes that are able to overcome differences and work together, creating a vibrant atmosphere through the diverse activities of many different groups.

Table 5.1: Reasons For Vitality: Responses Given by Female and Male Participants (*n*= number of responses)

	Female Responses	Male Responses
Strong sense of belonging and community	44	27
Committed parishioners	33	18
Welcoming parish	29	19
Inclusive parish	23	23
Active parish groups	22	31
Good parish leader	19	7
Vibrant liturgy	15	15
Parish leaders are involved	14	10
Programs for youth and young families	13	14
Family focussed parish	11	11
Good relationship between leaders and parishioners	11	10
Strong spirituality	10	7
Parish leaders empower people	9	7
Good school and teachers	6	2
Multicultural nature	5	2
Parish leaders are adaptable	5	3
Parish leaders are available	4	5
Religious charism	4	4
Strong vision	4	5
Beautiful church	3	2
Parish centred on mission	3	6
Good communication	2	2
RCIA and related programs	2	0
Strong ethnic culture	1	2
Adult faith formation	0	1
Dedicated office staff	0	3
New parish	0	5
Viable parish	0	1

Note: Participants could nominate multiple reasons for vitality.

Participants in the 31–60 age group placed a greater importance on having committed parishioners in the parish. This could indicate the need for support for people within this group who are more likely to have families and are in the stage of building relationships with other like-minded families and people in the parish. This would also indicate why factors such as a welcoming attitude, inclusivity and the presence of active parish groups are also important for such people.

Table 5.2: Reasons For Vitality: Responses Given by Different Age Groups (n= number of responses)

	Under 30	30-59	60+
Strong sense of belonging and community	7	41	23
Active parish groups	6	29	18
Inclusive parish	6	27	13
Welcoming parish	5	28	15
Committed parishioners	4	33	14
Family focussed parish	4	13	5
Good relationship between leaders and parishioners	3	14	4
Parish leaders are involved	3	15	6
Programs for youth and young families	3	18	6
Parish leaders empower people	2	11	3
Vibrant liturgy	2	15	13
Beautiful church	1	1	3
Good parish leader	1	16	9
Good school and teachers	1	4	3
Multicultural nature	1	4	2
New parish	1	3	1
Parish centred on mission	1	4	4
Parish leaders are adaptable	1	6	1
Parish leaders are available	1	8	0
Religious charisma	1	4	3
Strong ethnic culture	1	2	0
Strong spirituality	1	11	5
Adult faith formation	0	0	1
Dedicated office staff	0	2	1
Good communication	0	3	1
RCIA and related programs	0	0	2
Strong vision	0	6	3
Viable parish	0	1	0

Note: Participants could nominate multiple reasons for vitality.

For participants in the category of 61 years and over, the presence of active parish groups was also seen to be important. This could be the case since for people in this stage of life, parish groups provide a means of socialising and interacting with other people. Also, having a parish that has a range of parish groups could also mean that family members are more likely to be able to participate in the parish. It would also explain why factors such as welcoming, inclusivity, vibrant liturgy and committed parishioners are also highly valued by participants from this age group.

EXAMINING THE REASONS FOR PARISH VITALITY

As mentioned above, there were a range of factors in the parish that appealed to men and women of different age groups. The next sections will focus on the six common reasons for parish vitality that were valued by a majority of parishioners. These were:

1. A strong sense of belonging and community
2. Active parish groups
3. Committed parishioners
4. A welcoming parish
5. An inclusive parish
6. Vibrant liturgy

There were a range of different factors involved in each of these characteristics. These are analysed, explained and highlighted in the sections below.

A Strong Sense of Belonging and Community

Having a strong parish community was the chief reason why participants in the study felt their parish did really well. When participants described a strong community, they used phrases like *“a good community where people respond well and where they are many talented people”*, a place where there are *“good people”*, and where there was a *“strong sense of community”* and *“an opportunity to get to know people better”*.

Several participants spoke of having formed strong bonds with other people in the community, leading to firm friendships and lasting support groups and a strong sense of belonging. In some parishes, this was partly helped by parish leaders who encouraged these efforts. For many, the parish felt like *“a home”* or *“a family”*. Participants spoke about *“knowing everyone well”* and looking after one another. As one parish group leader from Harris Park commented, *“People notice when there is anyone missing for Sunday Mass and they will come up and inquire about you”*.

We know each other well and live in town and are in groups together. We are a friendly community. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

There is a real sense of connection and ownership. There is a sense of collective responsibility. There is a lot of bonding between people in the parish community. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

For many participants, the parish was a place where people cared for one another and help was always available when needed. Some participants had personal experiences where someone in their family had been sick and they were grateful for the help that parishioners had offered them through visits, meals and other means. In other parishes, the outreach activities to the wider community also led to an increased vitality in the parish:

The pastoral care for the community is very strong. For example, two students in the college met with accidents and are in hospital so the support from parish and teachers and school parents is tremendous. We've helped organise meals to their families. —Parish staff, Warnervale.

The parish is a town hub where people who need help know they can come as needed. Outreach is significant too ... There's also recognition in the town that they help a lot of poor people down there at St Brendan's [the parish]. There's great respect for St Brendan's. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

There was also a strong sense of ownership that participants felt about their parish. This had come about in two ways, either through collective fundraising for building a Church, or through regularly participating in the activities and events at the one parish Church. There were many responses which indicated a good level of collaboration among parishioners. Primarily, these were between various Mass centres, in parishes that had two or more centres of worship. Combining resources and activities, such as “one office”, “one newsletter”, “an annual parish dinner”, and a good communication system that helped keep all parishioners informed of events and activities, helped foster good relations between different parish groups. Participants indicated high levels of cooperation and help, respect for one another and their different opinions, and an absence of jealousy and other negative feelings.

There was also a high level of “connectivity” that happened in these parishes. Many of these were connections with other people and families that participants made within the parish through the school and through different parish groups that they were involved in. One parish had also built very good ecumenical connections with other denominations in the area and had regular events where people from different church communities interacted with one another.

Active Parish Groups

There were many parishes where a large number of active groups contributed to the vitality of the parish. Participants believed that these groups “*offered a lot more to people*”, “*opened doors to parishioners*”, added to “*the energy and variety*” of the parish and generated “*high levels of involvement*” among parishioners. There were many participants who reported that the very presence of a large number of active groups itself added to the overall vitality:

There are so many people involved. About 145 have volunteered to participate in various groups this year, including 50 new people. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

There’s a lot that goes on—counselling, activities for families and teens. It covers the whole gamut of society. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

There were many different types of groups mentioned by participants. These included outreach activities, liturgical ministries, social and cultural groups, cell groups, different sorts of youth groups and evangelisation activities. However the most widespread range of groups found in parishes were the diverse opportunities available for spiritual nourishment and growth. These included different styles of liturgies, retreats, prayer and adoration groups, involvement in World Youth Days and other similar events for youth and men’s groups such as menALIVE², amongst others. The benefit of having such a range of activities for people was that people became involved in ways that were “deeply satisfying”, which also helped their “spiritual development”. It also enabled a wider range of parishioners to find something that they could be attracted to and be involved in:

The Disciples of Jesus have three youth ministries—junior high school, senior high and a post-secondary group. Healing ministry is strong and evangelising ... We have Friday devotions & healing Mass. There are cell groups strong across the parish. —Parish Leader, Narrabundah.

The parish is very organised. There are different groups and different leaders. There are almost 40 groups in the parish which people can join if they want to. The groups invite people in ... There is a recognised need for fresh members. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

² menALIVE Ministries Inc., "Welcome to menALIVE.org.au", menALIVE Ministries Inc <http://www.menalive.org.au/> [accessed 8 August 2013].

In some parishes, participants were especially attracted by particular parish groups that were functioning really well and which they felt added to the overall vitality of the community:

We have a very active liturgy team which meets every month. Every member is active—in music, drama, the proclamation of the Word and data projection. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

The Spiritual Companionship program could be a good model for other parishes. The people connect in various ways or through groups. The people respond to needs that are in the community. —Religious brother, Mount Isa.

We have a Conversation Group that meets once a month for people who want to come together to share their life journey. The depth of sharing and interaction is wonderful. —Parish Leader, Warnervale.

Committed Parishioners

One of the great influences on parish vitality, according to many participants, was having a good number of committed parishioners. Not all parishes had very large congregations like Harris Park; nevertheless, many parishes had several people participating in numerous parish activities. These were not just people who attended Mass regularly but those who were ready to help out when needed and to see the parish through the difficult times. Participants spoke of their parishes as being “*people driven*”. There was “*great ownership among people*” and a “*collective responsibility*” leading to “*greater participation*”.

We have a very well-functioning liturgy committee, a very strong Parish Council, a 10 year committee. These are full of people who are committed and energetic. —Parish Leader, Warnervale.

People are very involved. They will give of their time and talents e.g. working bees (combined school and parish). We have 18 volunteers for the office for whatever needs to be done from maintenance, accounting, admin or newsletters ... Members will report problems to the office where it will be listed on a whiteboard and maintenance volunteers will do it the following week. It's a continuous process that happens. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

Participants described these committed parishioners as people who “*worked hard and were deeply involved*” in the parish. They were “*ready to step up and keep the parish going*” and were “*committed to making things work*”.

The people in the three centres have stepped up to the plate and gone with something more than they were comfortable with. A lot of it has to come from us [parishioners]. —Parish group leader, Myall Coast.

The overall participation by parishioners was great. People wanted to survive so kept things going. The ongoing survival of the parish was a very important factor in this. —Parish Leader, Cororooke.

...When the children went to high school, us mums started as a social group and we’ve ended up being the group that cleans the Church. I know I can rely on them. —Parish staff, Launceston.

There was considerable admiration among participants for the faithful work that these people did. The willingness of the people to do things and the generosity of parishioners in sharing their gifts and skills was frequently mentioned. At the same time, their awareness of others and their charity to one another was also commended. As the parish leader of Cororooke noted, “*They are welcoming, they are involved; they encourage participation [and] invite others to join in*”. This resoluteness of people “to keep things going” and to “keep the parish alive” was one the reasons why these parishes did so well.

A Welcoming Parish

There were several participants who felt that the vibrancy of the parish was largely due to the welcoming atmosphere that pervaded their parish. They described their parish as “*an open community*”, “*hospitable*”, “*friendly*” and “*down to earth*”, a place that was “*simple, yet inviting*” and where people were “*enthusiastic and welcoming*”.

It [Welcoming] has to do with how people are greeted and how services are offered. There needs to be liturgical hospitality—making it easy for people. —Parish Priest, Kings Park.

There were many ways in which people were welcomed into the parish. In most parishes, the parish leader took an active role in making people feel welcome whether it was at the Church doors before Mass or in their day-to-day dealings with parishioners.

The many ways in which people were welcomed differed from parish to parish as various participants spoke of welcoming several groups of people into the community:

The RCIA is a great part of the parish's life and a prime way of welcoming people into the parish. You welcome people at depth then enable them to get involved. It enables newcomers to commit to something ... The aim ... was to have the parish become an RCIA parish where we are involved and outgoing and try to be more Christ-like. —Parish Council member, Shepparton.

The parish is big on fellowship...building relationships...good at hospitality and welcoming people at the doors. The priest welcomes new people. You go in to Mass and sit next to somebody new (make this a mission). It's a good way to avoid cliques and meet new people. —Parish staff, Narrabundah.

Some participants had personal experiences of this warmth and friendship that had made a difference in their lives. One parishioner recounted her experience of joining her current parish:

At the other parish I never got involved, it was very "cliquey". There were a lot of older people running things and I could never break in. I was there for a long time and I was too scared to put my hand up for anything. Here I knew a lot of people in a lot less time and more closely than I ever did in the other parish ... We were a new parish and we had to be open to each other so we quickly became a community. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

There were many instances where participants mentioned the openness that their parish had to reach out to the people in the wider community. The groups most frequently spoken about were newly arrived immigrants and other newcomers to the parish who had moved into the area or had joined the parish community through the RCIA program. There were also references to other groups of people such as the homeless and the distressed, the elderly, the students and families of parish schools, people participating in the Catholics Returning Home program, children and families involved through the parish Sacramental programs and, in one parish, people of other religions who were invited to use the Church space when their own facilities did not suffice.

Most people were welcomed through the Sunday Mass and other liturgical services where parish leaders encouraged people to greet and introduce themselves to one another. In some parishes, there were different groups and events which provided the

welcoming for different groups of people. One parishioner from Albany Creek briefly described the role of the special “Welcoming Committee” in her parish that looked after receiving new people:

Part of their job is keeping an eye out for anyone new at Mass. The new parishioner’s book is available at the piety stall which people fill in. Someone from the parish rings them up and visits them if they like. We also have a supper every year for new parishioners. Everyone new gets a copy of the Stewardship Book which has a list of all the parish groups and contact names and details.

The welcoming of people did not end at just a greeting but extended to looking after them as well. Many participants mentioned the care and concern for one another found in their parish. This was sometimes accomplished through simple, thoughtful gestures, as the parish housekeeper at Shepparton explained,

Hospitality is No 1. ... you do what you do at home. You look after people like you do at home ... We [people in the parish] do small things really well. When there was a lot of talk about sex abuse in the paper I organised for a bunch of flowers to be left in the hallway with a note from everyone saying how much we love them [the priests].

An Inclusive Parish

Inclusivity means attempting to involve all people who belong to a parish community, irrespective of age, class and culture. It includes making certain that people feel that they belong and that they are valued members of the parish community. Being inclusive had several meanings for the participants in the study, who explained it as “welcoming new parishioners”, “providing for the whole community”, “sharing resources and gifts across the parish”, “supporting one another”, “celebrating different cultures” and “telling people that they are loved”.

Being inclusive also meant providing for the needs of diverse groups of people in the parish. There were a large number of opportunities in terms of programs and parish facilities available for people to be involved in parish life in many different ways. Many participants stated that their parish was able to adjust to the cultural and social needs of parishioners in order to cater for all age groups. “It’s a cradle to grave community” said

one participant, “*where all age groups are taking part*”. Respect for differences among people was held in high value in many parishes with participants indicating that their parish recognised that people were called differently to work in different ministries. There were also opportunities available in parishes like Albany Creek where people could “*switch over and try something new or change leadership*” during the Stewardship Ministry Fair held every two years. Some of the other good qualities mentioned were “*the desire to get things happening*” and the willingness to “*try new projects and keep expanding*”. As the parish priest of Mount Isa explained, “*As a priest, I try to see a need and do something about it. It can be challenging (in a positive way) for everyone*”.

The manner in which inclusivity was achieved differed in each parish according to the demographics and the makeup of the parish community. The presence or absence of a parish school, the number of parishioners with different ethnicities, proximity of the parish to aged care homes and newer housing developments, and the presence of young families are all factors that determine the different groupings of people present in a parish community. This in turn determined the nature and type of inclusivity found in each parish.

Inclusivity between various age groups

Several participants indicated that their parish included children, youth, adults and the elderly in programs and activities held in the community, making sure that all felt at home in the parish:

The parish invites all ages, all walks of life from seniors to the children. The parish provides so much to the whole community. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

There is a large presence of young families. ... There is also a regular morning tea every fortnight. We also have Confession available at these Sunday events for the parents. —Parish Leader, Narrabundah.

There was a particular emphasis on involving young families and children through the sacramental preparation programs when parents bring their children to the parish to prepare them for receiving the Sacraments of Baptism, the Eucharist, Confession and Confirmation:

It's a mixture area—you've got older people who are happy to be involved and also younger people who turn up which adds to the vibrancy and young families through the sacramental preparation programs. And everybody gets on well with each other. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

Inclusivity among different cultural communities

In the multicultural parishes, such as Kings Park and Mount Isa, there was a particular emphasis on involving people of different cultures in parish activities. Especially in working with new immigrant groups, one parish priest remarked, “*the parish makes lots of effort to connect with and to be with them*”. Ethnic inclusivity did not try to make everyone a part of one homogenous group but rather recognised and valued the diversity of each cultural group.

Most parishes included people of different cultures in the various parish groups and in the celebration of the liturgy through various ministries, particularly choirs. They also helped communities to form their own cultural groups in the parish. Some parishes also celebrated the different cultures by marking out special days that focussed on each culture and organising special activities that were important for each community:

It's a very multicultural parish involving Italians, Filipinos, Indians, Sudanese and Congolese. There are activities centred on each community and some [individuals] ... are in [other] parish groups. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

Ours is a multicultural parish. We celebrate different cultures. We have four big celebrations—Maltese, Vietnamese, Samoan and Filipino. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

In Harris Park, which is an ethnic parish which largely caters to the Lebanese Maronite community, there was great enthusiasm in including people from other cultures as well:

Our parish provides services to all ages ... It attracts other cultures as well. People from other cultures come for Mass particularly due to the vibrant youth groups in the parish. It's very evangelical. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

Inclusivity between the school community and the worshipping community

The presence of a school in the parish was seen as a great bonus by many parishioners since the school community added to the variety and vitality of parish life. Many parishes made an effort to include the parents and children of the school community in regular parish activities through special school liturgies. This was also an avenue for parishes to reach out to families in the wider community and build connections with them:

There is a strong connection between the parish and the three schools—two primaries and one secondary. It is a work in progress. [We see] what we can do and how we can support the schools in a healthy connected way. — Parish Priest, Shepparton.

Particularly in Warnervale Parish, where the school is fully integrated into the life of the parish, this connection was seen as a great advantage for the vitality of the entire parish community. An effort was also made by the parish to reach out to children in the surrounding government schools and include them as part of the parish community through the state schools' catechesis program:

The priests and the parish try to have an active link with the life of the College ... I provide liturgy and help out with four twilight retreats a year; I provide the school staff with spiritual formation ... I work with the Religious Education Coordinator on faith formation for the students. We have College liturgies and every fourth Sunday we have a youth Mass ... We also make an effort to include the state primary school and state high school. We conduct catechesis there. —Parish Leader, Warnervale.

Inclusivity between parishioners from different areas in the parish

In Launceston Parish, formed from an amalgamation of three smaller parishes, there was an emphasis on inclusivity of parishioners from the three original parishes. Many parishioners remarked that the amalgamation process had brought them together in numerous ways that strengthened their unity and their vitality:

There has been a sharing of resources—people and buildings. We had more money and resources to draw on. This has enabled the parish to embark on different programs. —Parish Priest, Launceston.

Inclusivity between regular parishioners and transient Mass attenders or other community groups

There were several parishes that reached out to people who lived on the fringes of the parish community, and found ways and means of including them in regular parish life. These were usually people who attended Mass infrequently, but also groups of people who lived in the wider local community. Each parish found a way of reaching out to different sections of their local community. These parishes found that the relationships that formed between members of the regular parish community and people from these transient groups had contributed to the overall vitality of the parish.

Parishioners from Mount Isa Parish, for example, which is located in a mining town isolated from the main coastal city of Townsville (600 km away), attributed its vitality to its friendly links with people from the transient mining population:

Everybody comes and is involved. It is one community—everyone knows each other in the wider community. The isolation of the town makes this community what it is. The parish is like a big family—it is very supportive of each other, it is accepting of all. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

For the Narrabundah parish in Canberra, its links with the L'Arche Community and its close connection with the Eucharistic Centre of the Missionaries of God's Love add to the vitality of the community:

The presence of so many people with intellectual disabilities who are made welcome—the L'Arche community adds to the vitality. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

There is a memorandum of agreement between the Eucharistic Centre and the parish, that the parish not be converted to a charismatic parish ... Parishioners are welcome to take part in the Eucharistic Centre's activities and program ... We have Eucharistic adoration in the Church, and evangelisation. —Parish Leader, Narrabundah.

The Myall Coast Parish in Maitland-Newcastle found a unique way to include young mums in the community through their "Yummies for Mummies" program created especially for this section of the community. As one participant who was part of the group remarked,

A friend of mine said "Yummies for Mummies" was a great way to meet local people. Sr L. understood the need for support. I was able to pass on

information about that particular program to other women. Then I started coming to Mass as well. I had time to reflect on my own and time to be part of the community.

Inclusivity thus played a strong role in contributing to the vitality of participating parishes. While there were many different types of inclusivity, what was common throughout was that parishes were open to welcoming people of different backgrounds and of different ages. There was a genuine effort made to help cater to some of the needs of those who did not belong to the main worshipping community. Parish leaders encouraged the participation of others and supported (and in some cases even spearheaded) attempts made to provide pastoral care to others in the wider local community.

One of the issues of inclusivity that did not occur in the interviews, nor appeared to have any impact on the vitality of the parishes was gender inclusivity. Because the Catholic Church does not allow women to be priests, some Australian Catholics feel that women are not fully included or treated equally in the Church. Certainly, a greater number of participants in the study were women, in various positions of authority, although none of them mentioned feeling in any way discriminated in their parish work and involvement. One reason for this could be because this issue was not directly discussed in the questions in the study.

Vibrant Liturgy

Liturgy played an important role in parish life and many participants commented on the excellent liturgies celebrated in their parish. They described their liturgies as “*engaging*”, “*lively*”, “*well-planned*” and with “*good participation*”, involving many people. The number of liturgies and their diversity were greatly appreciated by most people. As one of the parishioners from Shepparton Parish commented, “*There's a Mass for everyone, ranging from sporty people 6 pm Saturday, to older people 8 am Sunday, to family friendly 11 am Sunday. Plus, there are regular Masses for the Filipino, Indian and African communities*”.

Music played a key role in the liturgy and many parishes had made special arrangements for various Masses with good musicians and singers or choirs:

We have enthusiastic music at liturgies; especially at 11am Mass on Sundays. It is lively and also reflective, with good vocalists and harmonies and a good variety of instruments ... The young people are very attracted to the music and its liveliness has brought people back to Mass. A men's choir is planned, to add to the chorale of singers used for Mass. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

We are creative within the bounds of what we can do in the liturgy. We do use music creatively and also proclamation and drama, so we can enhance the experience of the liturgy. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

Homilies were another aspect of the liturgy that people looked forward to, as many commented on the “good sermons” given by priests in their parish. They found them “meaningful” and “relevant”. These added to the overall vibrancy of Masses in many parishes:

The sense of liveliness and welcome ... Mass on Sunday is a really vibrant event because of the music and preaching. This makes it quite different from other parishes. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

Father Q. has a unique approach. He allows people to try new things ... At Easter we have a wonderful Passion play and people come from a long way away to see that. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

A Youth Mass was a popular event in many parishes, with many youth involved in different parts of the liturgy. Narrabundah Parish had been particularly good at getting young people involved in hosting the Sunday morning tea after Mass:

Sunday morning teas after Mass are a great feature of the parish; Young people do the 3rd Sunday which is great! When the young people host their “cuppa”, it is always held outside in the school playground. They have a cappuccino machine which is very popular and having the playground near means that it attracts young families and their children. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

Young families and children were primarily engaged through the Family Masses that were celebrated by many parishes. These Masses were particularly vibrant and adapted to suit the needs of the children attending. Children were also involved in various aspects of the liturgy, particularly in singing and reading. As one liturgy member explained, “We have a team who plan one liturgy a month. We aim the liturgy particularly for children — music, homily, cordial after Mass. It is the largest-attended

Mass. The feedback from adults shows that what we are doing for the children, is touching them [the adults] as well". In some parishes, children were also involved in regular liturgies through various liturgical ministries such as altar serving, managing the overhead projector and offertory processions. The Sacramental Masses were another way by which parishes widely engaged children and their families.

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE RESEARCH

The responses presented in this chapter highlight a variety of common themes that seem to emerge across the participants in the study. According to participants, these seem to be the principal aspects of parish life that have contributed significantly to the vitality of their parishes.

1. There is a great value placed on **building strong relationships** between people, primarily within the parish and with the parish school, and to some extent, outside the parish community as well. Having a strong sense of belonging and community was highly regarded as a key indicator of vitality by a majority of the participants. As well, ensuring that different sections of the parish community were included was also seen as important.
2. There was a great appreciation for **variety and diversity in parish life**. This was noticed particularly in the broad range of activities and groups available for people to participate in, in various fields like outreach programs and social and community events. Having a range of activities for spiritual growth and development was particularly mentioned.
3. **Welcoming and hospitality** were understood as very important qualities for parishes to have in order for all parishioners to feel comfortable and accepted in the parish.
4. **Vibrant liturgies were one of the main aspects of parish vitality**, especially those that were well planned and involved the participation of people. *Good homilies* and *good music*, in particular, appealed to many participants.
5. **Involving younger members of the parish** community was given great importance. Having a range of programs for children, youth and young families

to be involved in was greatly valued in most parishes and seen as an indicator of vitality.

6. **Dedication and commitment to parish work** by many parishioners was also a key theme that emerged as being essential to the maintenance of a vibrant parish life.
7. There was a great need for **effective leadership** in order to facilitate all these aspects. Having parish leaders who keenly participated in parish life was seen to be of great importance.

All these themes are consistent with the qualities identified by the National Church Life Survey as the four aspects most “hoped for” by Australian Mass attenders, which were strong community, more people at Mass, ministry to children and youth and spiritual growth.³ It would seem that the parishes involved in this study have been able to use their resources to provide well for their parish community and satisfy many of their needs.

These themes also fit in with some of the expressions of the eight measures of parish vitality⁴ identified in the earlier literature review as being central to a vibrant parish life. However, there are still some questions that need to be explored further. Where does each of these themes fit with regards to the eight measures identified in the literature? Which expressions of vitality are more dominant than others? How do different parishes express these measures differently? What expressions appear to be less apparent in these vital parishes? Over the next few chapters, I shall look at these issues in depth through a more detailed analysis of the expressions of these eight measures as I continue my exploration of the participants’ responses and other evidence gathered from the parishes in this study. Findings related to the first six measures have been divided into three groups of two for better organisation of the thesis.

³ NCLS Research, “Denominational Church Life Profile,” 6.

⁴ Briefly described, the eight measures identified in the literature focus on Vocation, Liturgy, Welcoming, Community, Mission, Outreach, Leadership and Planning.

CHAPTER SIX

SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT, FAITH FORMATION AND LITURGY

The previous chapter focussed on the participants' perceptions of the vitality of their parish. Among the various aspects of vitality regarded highly by parishioners, many valued the diverse range of spiritual and faith formation opportunities that their parishes provided them with. This chapter examines the data collected in relation to the first two measures of vitality that deal with similar themes. These are:

1. The vocational call of Baptism is nurtured and parishioners are encouraged in their faith.
2. Liturgical celebrations offer an experience of God.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section explores the diversity of spiritual needs and examines how different parishes meet these needs through a variety of options made available to the parish community. The role of parish groups, spiritual centres and parish websites are also described. The second section investigates the faith formation opportunities provided by parishes to parishioners of different ages. A number of formation activities are described and a few challenges to faith formation are highlighted in this section.

The third section of the chapter examines the role of liturgy in participating parishes and describes the different styles of liturgy celebrated in parishes. It discusses various aspects of the liturgy observed in participating parishes, such as the preparation and planning, the progression of the liturgy and the events after Mass and participation of parishioners. A few challenges to the celebration of the liturgy faced by different parishes are also highlighted. The concluding section draws out some key themes that arise from the findings.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE NEED FOR NOURISHMENT

Christian spirituality has long been associated with churchgoing and other religious traditions and customs, although it has undergone many changes through the ages. As Rossiter explains, if one discussed “spirituality” in the 1960s, it would be commonly understood that one was talking about traditional Christian religious practice. Similarly, if one spoke of “Catholic Spirituality” in that era, it would invariably be linked to the spiritual life of religious orders—being strongly theological and scriptural, psychological and reflective, involving prayer and spiritual input of some sort.¹ In Australia, in the years between 1788 and until the end of World War I, an Irish Catholic spirituality was predominant, whose characteristics included having a communal structure, priests identifying with the people, piety, Mass as a major religious event, the Rosary and Benediction as major devotions, a sense of uniformity in the Church and a personal God who could occasionally even be “harsh”.² In the 1950s, due to the impact of immigration waves from Europe and the strong influence of US styles and customs, there were more public displays and sharing of faith, through events such as the Eucharistic Congress³ and other exhibitions, and through lay movements such as the Cardijn movement and others that involved couples and families.⁴

But many things changed radically after the Second Vatican Council. The Council initiated reforms that encouraged a spirituality informed by Scripture and liturgy.⁵ As Bacik explains, “by emphasising biblical images of the Church such as the People of God and the Body of Christ, the Council prompted Catholics to assume a greater responsibility for the Church and their own spiritual development”.⁶ In addition, liturgical changes fostered a more communal spirituality centred on the Eucharist as the font of Catholic piety.⁷ In the immediate post-Vatican II period, the basic Catholic identity of everyday Australian Catholics which had been assumed to involve Irish descent, working class origins and the one, true and clearly defined faith was called into

¹ Graham Rossiter, “From St Ignatius to Obi-Wan Kenobi: An Evaluative Perspective on Spirituality for School Education,” *Journal of Religious Education* 53, no. 1 (2005), 3, 4.

² Malone, “Discovering,” 18–19.

³ The 29th International Eucharistic Congress was held in Sydney in 1928. Following this. National Eucharistic Congresses were held in Melbourne in 1934 and in Sydney in 1953.

⁴ Malone, “Discovering,” 20.

⁵ James J. Bacik, *Catholic Spirituality: Its History and Challenge* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 33.

⁶ James J. Bacik, *Catholic Spirituality*, 40.

⁷ James J. Bacik, *Catholic Spirituality*, 40.

question, leading to a period of radical change and tensions that emerged between conservative and more radical spiritual practices.⁸ There were developments such as a more informal liturgy and the flourishing of charismatic and other renewal movements, while some Catholics chose to defend the older pious practices such as the devotions to the Blessed Virgin.⁹ In the years following the Council, there emerged many new spiritual insights offered through the works of many theologians such as Rahner and Balthasar who related the Council documents to the lived experience of the Catholic faith.¹⁰ Cunningham also observes that there has been an outburst of “new ecclesial movements” such as the Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation, the Neocatechumenate, L’Arche, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, and other newer forms of religious and spiritual life for both men and women.¹¹

Within the broad Catholic tradition, spirituality means the ways in which people seek to live their Christian lives more intensely, beyond and including ordinary faith practices.¹² This spirituality is expressed most authentically in living out one’s baptismal promises, the heart of which is to reject everything that is not of God and seek to live according to God’s ways.¹³ A renewed commitment to these promises is made possible by grace, and is sustained by the Christian community and supported through engaging in meaningful spiritual practices.¹⁴ The need for Catholics to participate regularly in these practices that nourish and strengthen their faith becomes vitally important in order for them to authentically live out their faith. Pope John Paul II teaches that all Christian spirituality must be based on union with Christ through prayer, and while prayer can take on many forms, the prayer life of a baptised person must involve recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and particularly, participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, which must be the source of their life of faith.¹⁵

⁸ Patrick O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia: A History*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 425–427.

⁹ Patrick O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia*, 426–427.

¹⁰ James J. Bacik, *Catholic Spirituality*, 33–37.

¹¹ Lawrence Cunningham, “Catholic Spirituality: What Does it Mean Today?,” *Commonweal* 133, no. 4 (24 February 2006), 12. A further description of these movements is provided in Appendix I.

¹² Cunningham, “Catholic Spirituality,” 11.

¹³ Colleen Griffith, ed. *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*, ed. Colleen M. Griffith and Thomas Groome (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2012), 3–4.

¹⁴ Griffith, ed. *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*, 4.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 426–427.

Diversity of Spiritual Needs and Practices

The ways in which Catholics practise their spirituality differ widely from person to person based on their cultural background, location, living and working conditions, abilities and inclinations and their personal preferences for a spiritual and apostolic director, or for a certain founder of an order or religious institute.¹⁶ While some people prefer to practise within their local parish and are involved in seminars and Bible study and prayer groups, others prefer to practise their spirituality individually, without any religious commitment.¹⁷ And while some need the company of others to help deepen their spirituality, others prefer solitude to read, pray and meditate. At the core of a person's spirituality, however, is their relationship with God, and in an attempt to deepen that relationship, many people choose to base their spiritual practices on specific traditions rather than pursue such practices in a vacuum.¹⁸

In order to be a place where people can deepen their spirituality, the parish needs to be able to accommodate the wide range of spiritual needs of people within the parish community. All the participating parishes in this study appeared to be quite successful in that regard in meeting the needs of many active parishioners. When the participants in the study were asked if their parish met their spiritual needs, a majority of those who answered the question (71 out of 74) responded affirmatively. This group of participants did not include the parish leaders in the study as they were asked a slightly different variation of the question. While each of the respondents had different needs (which are discussed in more detail in further sections) they found that the parish was able to meet these needs adequately through the range of programs and activities that were available. Many participants indicated that they were able to deepen their spirituality and grow in faith as a result of this:

I am very happy here ... Coming to Mass recharges my spiritual life ... I am in a lot of ministries and I do what I can to help. It is because our liturgies are so good ... listening and taking something from the homily. Being a follower of Jesus and Mary MacKillop as our saint, I take it very seriously. My faith is why I do what I do. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 425.

¹⁷ Robert Burns, *Catholic Spirituality and Prayer in the Secular City* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 8.

¹⁸ Burns, *Catholic Spirituality and Prayer in the Secular City*, 8.

[It meets my needs] very well. Priests are available to talk to, Confessions are available. Prayer groups are there to join every day of the week. There are so many Masses—seven on Sundays and three Masses every day during the week. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

The parish leaders were asked a slightly different version of the question. The question put to them was “How well does the parish meet the spiritual needs of the parishioners?” All the leaders agreed that their parish met the needs of most parishioners very well. This was done particularly through the Sunday Mass, which many leaders took pains to ensure was celebrated well. They indicated that they tried to make the Mass “as rich as possible”, “prayerful”, “relevant, vibrant and welcoming”, with “good” and “relevant” homilies.

However, all the parish leaders declared that there was much more to be done to ensure that spiritual needs of all the different sections of the community were catered for. There were several groups of people mentioned by the leaders whose spiritual needs they felt were not being met adequately. These groups differed in every parish. While many leaders had made attempts to provide programs for these groups, and while some parishes were able to provide for some of these groups better than others, yet, across all the parishes, the groups whose spiritual needs were seen as not being fully met included:

1. The elderly
2. Youth
3. People in prisons
4. People in nursing homes
5. Married couples
6. People who did not attend Sunday Mass
7. New families
8. Some cultural groups

In addition, there were a few other problems mentioned which prevented parishes from meeting the spiritual needs of all sections of the community:

1. Some parish leaders found it hard to identify people's needs and would have liked parishioners to voice their needs better in order for the parish to be able to meet them.
2. The hectic work life of parishioners made it harder for them to attend planned spiritual activities or programs.
3. The logistical problems in terms of planning and implementation especially in large parishes made activities such as home visits to families, harder for parish leaders.
4. There were language barriers in multicultural parishes.

Overall, however, in all the parishes the general trend was that leaders made sure that a range of opportunities were made available for spiritual growth, even if it meant that the number of people participating in any one of them was small. In addition, there were ongoing attempts to try to reach people of different cultures in order to meet their spiritual needs.

The three participants who indicated that their needs were met *only to some extent* cited a range of reasons for this. These included a lack of time due to study and other commitments, a lack of adequate opportunities for faith formation, especially for new families and people from other cultures, and personal difficulties in dealing with the way the Vatican handled certain issues facing the Church.

Forms of Spiritual Nourishment

Spiritual practices are concrete and specific and are “consciously chosen, intentional actions that give a practical purpose to faith”.¹⁹ Within the Catholic tradition, there is an extensive range of spiritual practices that help nurture spiritual life. These range from different prayer practices such as praying the Rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours, and various devotions and novenas, to more contemplative and meditative practices such as Lectio Divina, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and Christian Meditation. There are

¹⁹ Griffith, ed. *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*, 5.

lay spiritual movements such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal²⁰ and the Focolare,²¹ and spiritual practices and lifestyles inspired by leaders of various orders such as the Carmelites, the Benedictines, the Franciscans and the Jesuits. The Archdiocese of Brisbane lists 26 contemporary lay spiritual movements that are currently operating,²² while the Sydney Archdiocese lists 12 such “spiritual organisations”.²³ All these practices help a person to be more open and responsive to God’s grace and to grow in their spiritual maturity.²⁴

The research showed that there were many different types of spiritual programs and activities available for parishioners to choose from in all the participating parishes. Most of these practices were carried out through a variety of small groups. While some of these groups were solely formed for the purpose of spiritual growth, others had social and community-building elements to them as well. The main types of activities for spiritual formation found in the parishes were:

1. **Prayer groups and groups for special devotions** – There were a variety of prayer groups found in all the parishes. Most common among these were groups that met to recite the Rosary, Divine Mercy prayer groups and activities of the Christian Charismatic Renewal group. In some parishes special prayer groups were formed during Lent and Advent. An example of such a group is the Taizé Prayer group in Launceston Parish organised during Lent. Launceston also has two unique prayer groups—the Life Ascending prayer group, developed particularly for senior members of the parish, and the Powerhouse of Prayer, a group for homebound people united by praying at midday every day. There were similar instances like these in other parishes as well where small groups of people came together for prayer. Examples of these include the Italian Ladies

²⁰ Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) is a spiritual movement that emphasises the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer. For more information see Appendix I.

²¹ The Focolare (Work of Mary) is an international movement, inspired by the Gospel, working for unity in all spheres of life. For more information see Appendix I.

²² Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, "Spirituality: Local, Lay, Contemporary Expressions", Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane <http://bne.catholic.net.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=11379&cid=7027&id=1176> [accessed 8 August 2013].

²³ Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, "Other Organisations in Sydney", Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney http://www.sydneycatholic.org/works/other_organisations_in_sydney.asp?order=OrgType [accessed 8 August 2013].

²⁴ Griffith, ed. *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*, 5.

Prayer group in Shepparton, the Padre Pio Prayer group in Narrabundah and the Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop Devotions group in Warnervale.

2. **Scripture study groups** – In many parishes some form of Scripture study group operated. Parishes like Albany Creek (Little Rock Scripture Study Group) and Harris Park (Arabic Bible Study Group) had regular Bible study groups running throughout the year. Similar groups were found in Warnervale, Shepparton, Mount Isa and Launceston parishes. Kings Park and Cororooke parishes held Bible discussion meetings during Lent and Advent. Launceston Parish also ran special “Lectio Divina” sessions during these periods. In some instances, Bible study groups were formed to cater to the needs of certain groups in the community. For example, Harris Park Parish ran special Bible discussion groups for the young people while Warnervale Parish had two special men’s Scripture study groups. Albany Creek Parish also produced a unique book called the Bible Explorers Handbook which advised parishioners of Scripture courses and programs available in the Brisbane Archdiocese.

3. **Meditation and quiet prayer** – Not all participating parishes had special activities for quiet prayer. The usual practice in parishes was to allow people time for quiet prayer before and after Mass. In the Albany Creek Parish, a new ministry—minding the Church—had originated in response to a greater need for more quiet time in Church. The parish had decided to keep the Church open for longer on Sunday mornings between Masses to allow people to stay on, and had formed a special group of volunteers to help look after the Church during these periods. Some parishes regularly kept their Church open for longer periods than just before and after Mass. Participants from the Harris Park spoke about their Church being left open during the day so that anyone could come in for a quiet time of prayer. On Fridays, the Church was left open for much longer. Kings Park Parish offered parishioners “a quiet space” during the busy Advent season. Five out of the 10 parishes had regular Christian meditation groups. Launceston Parish also offered parishioners a monthly “Labyrinth Walk”.

4. **Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament** – The tradition of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was quite common in the parishes although the frequency

and time spent in this practice differed from parish to parish. Participants from the parishes of Harris Park, Warnervale and Shepparton spoke of having small groups of people who participated regularly in this activity for about three hours a week. In addition, Harris Park offered an opportunity for 24-hour Adoration once a month. In Narrabundah, in keeping with the parish vision of building “a powerhouse of prayer for the new evangelisation”, Adoration was a highly encouraged and was one of the main spiritual activities in which many people participated. Parishioners were able to roster themselves for an hour of Adoration each week and the parish had built up a roster of 70 hours of Adoration each week. In addition, the parish also had an Adoration-focussed outreach event once a month. Kings Park and Albany Creek parishes offered Adoration once a month while in Launceston, the Emmanuel Centre located in the parish organised occasional periods of Adoration in which parishioners could participate.

5. **Retreats/Talks/Missions** – All the parishes in the study offered opportunities to their parishioners for retreats, missions or talks in some form or the other. Parishes like Harris Park, Warnervale, Shepparton, Narrabundah, Launceston and Mount Isa regularly organised retreats for different groups of parishioners on a range of topics. These parishes, along with others like Kings Park and Albany Creek, also informed parishioners of talks and retreat opportunities available in nearby parishes or other centres in the diocese. In all the parishes, retreat days, talks and faith discussion opportunities were offered particularly during the periods of Lent and Advent. These mostly took the form of small groups that were organised weekly, and some parishes offered different groups for adults and youth.
6. **Ethnic prayer activities** – Apart from Masses for particular ethnic groups, there was a sprinkling of prayer activities reflecting different cultural traditions found in the parishes. Most evident among these was in Harris Park Parish where a majority of parishioners were Lebanese and the entire culture of the parish was reflective of the Maronite liturgy and tradition. The parish provided spiritual services in both Arabic and English to cater for people’s needs. Among the other parishes, there were some prayer groups developed by certain cultural

groups such as the Filipino prayer group in Mount Isa and the Sri Lankan prayer group in Narrabundah. Mount Isa Parish also organised special retreats and other spiritual programs to cater for the needs of the Aboriginal community and be reflective of their unique spirituality.

The Role of Other Parish Groups in Spiritual Formation

Spiritual nourishment for parishioners was not restricted to the contribution of spiritual groups alone. Many other parish groups formed for other purposes such as evangelisation, outreach, community building or social bonding had a range of spiritual activities to help develop the spirituality of their members. Particularly common among these were the diverse range of vibrant youth groups that engaged in spiritual activities. For example, the Stronger Youth program started in Shepparton Parish runs annual retreats and faith rallies for young people that not only attract large numbers of youth from the parish but also from the wider diocese as well. These events combine fun and enjoyment with talks, testimonies, Mass, Reconciliation, Adoration, praise and worship activities, opportunities for personal and communal prayer, and small group reflection. Similar youth groups were found in the Albany Creek, Harris Park, Narrabundah, Kings Park, Launceston, Warnervale and Mount Isa parishes.

Another group that was particularly mentioned by participants was the menALIVE group that was active in many parishes. This group, formed for men to “renew their faith in God and encourage them to become an active force of renewal in the Church”,²⁵ provided them with many spiritual activities both in the parishes and within the dioceses. Activities and groups run by menALIVE were found in the parishes of Albany Creek, Warnervale, Mount Isa, Shepparton, Narrabundah and Launceston.

²⁵ menALIVE Ministries Inc., "Welcome to menALIVE.org.au."

The Role of Spiritual Centres

The presence of a spiritual centre in the parish was a great advantage in being able to meet the spiritual needs of parishioners. There were three parishes in the study, Mount Isa, Launceston and Narrabundah, that were greatly aided by this additional resource.

Mount Isa – The Western Ministry for Spirituality and Mary MacKillop House

The Western Ministry for Spirituality is a diocesan outreach ministry to the parishes and isolated communities in the west and mid-west of the Townsville Diocese. The aim of the ministry is to provide opportunities for spiritual development for people living in the western region.²⁶ The Ministry offers retreats, spiritual formation, pastoral visits and spiritual opportunities through ongoing liaison with parishes and the wider community.²⁷ In particular, the opportunity for spiritual direction (or spiritual companionship) is greatly valued by many parishioners of Mount Isa Parish. Mary MacKillop House, which is located within the parish, was developed as a Western centre for spirituality that offers a range of spiritual opportunities for people and also serves as a gathering place for community groups and services.

Spiritually there are lots of opportunities for me personally ... I was also involved in Western Ministry prayer retreat— a six month journey with a person who sat with me and spoke about prayer. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

[What make this parish unique is] the Western Ministry for Spirituality in terms of offering the mentoring, the different retreats and Mary MacKillop House at Richmond. —Parish Council member, Mount Isa.

Launceston – Emmanuel Centre

The Emmanuel Centre in Launceston Parish operates through the support of the Sisters of St Joseph. Its outreach activities are ecumenical in nature and include individual or group retreats and spiritual direction, prayer and reflection days, special celebrations

²⁶ Catholic Diocese of Townsville, "Western Ministry for Spirituality", Catholic Diocese of Townsville http://www.tsv.catholic.org.au/diocese/ministries/western_spirituality.php [accessed 8 August 2013].

²⁷ Catholic Diocese of Townsville, "Western Ministry for Spirituality."

and spiritual and pastoral formation.²⁸ There are also several workshops and talks organised throughout the year that are available for parishioners to attend.

I attend spiritual direction through Emmanuel quite regularly and if there is a need to seek support through that, that's what I do. —Parish Council Chair, Launceston.

The Emmanuel Centre probably meets most of my [spiritual] needs. —Parish Council member, Launceston.

Narrabundah – Eucharist Centre

In 1998 the congregation of the Missionaries of God's Love was commissioned by the Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn to build a Eucharistic Centre in Narrabundah Parish, with the aim of facilitating "a missionary Eucharistic communion under the grace of the New Pentecost".²⁹ The centre works separately from the parish with some areas of overlap and there are many spiritual opportunities provided for parishioners such as Masses, faith sharing through cell groups, seminars, workshops, talks, retreats and prayer and adoration opportunities. Through good partnerships between the parish and the centre and also through the links with the Disciples of Jesus community, through which the Missionaries of God's Love congregation operates, there is ample opportunity for the spiritual needs of parishioners to be met.

What makes it [the parish] different is the evangelising element ... the Eucharistic Centre—it's a base to evangelise and equip people to evangelise. The 7pm Mass is focussed on evangelisation ... but now other masses have started to head in the same direction ... Mass is still traditional but the community has a different attitude. —Assistant priest, Narrabundah.

The programs by the Eucharistic Centre are all unique to this parish. —Parish Council Chair, Launceston

²⁸ Emmanuel Centre, "The Emmanuel Centre", Emmanuel Centre <http://www.emmanuelcentre.org/> [accessed 8 August 2013].

²⁹ St Benedict's Catholic Parish, "Mission Centre."

Spirituality through Website Resources

Many parishes used their websites to provide spiritual resources to their parishioners and the wider community as well. All parish websites had clear notices regarding Mass and Reconciliation times. In some cases, there were also notices of various spiritual activities available in the parish. Some parish websites, however, offered many more resources. For example, Harris Park and Narrabundah parishes had devotional and prayer resources available on their site and links to other spiritual resources found on other Catholic websites. The benefit of having these resources available online was that everyone had easy access to them which enabled the parish to reach out to the wider community and not restrict them only to those who attended such events.

FAITH FORMATION

Faith formation is not the privilege of a few Catholics but a right and duty of all.³⁰ Formation in faith is particularly important to help them grow in understanding their role as “baptised” Catholics and to renew their understanding of their vocation as sharing in the three fold mission of Christ as priest, prophet and king.³¹ Doctrinal formation also enables Catholics to bring reason to their faith amidst the problems in the world, and therefore, an organised approach to catechesis that is adapted to different ages and diverse situations of life is recommended in every parish.³² This is especially true for Catholics who have responsibilities in various fields of society and public life, for whom a “more widespread and precise presentation of the Church's social doctrine” is needed.³³

Faith formation is offered through the mutual cooperation of clergy, religious and other lay people in a variety of ways, which include through Vatican documents and teachings and diocesan programs and activities.³⁴ The parish, in particular, has an essential role to play in the more personal and immediate formation of its members and

³⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 63.

³¹ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 10–14.

³² Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 60.

³³ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 60.

³⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 61.

groups since it has direct access to them. It has the central task of forming its members “in hearing God's Word, in liturgical and personal dialogue with God, in the life of fraternal charity, and in allowing a more direct and concrete perception of the sense of ecclesial communion and responsibility in the Church's mission”, taking into account local culture and the diversity of other cultures that may exist.³⁵ Teaching a post-baptismal catechesis to adults and forming families in the faith are particularly important.³⁶

Faith Formation as a Parish Ministry

Kings Park, Myall Coast and Albany Creek were three parishes that had special groups specially formed to look after the faith formation needs of the parish.

Faith On-Going (FOG) – Kings Park Parish

Being in a multicultural parish, parishioners at Kings Park Parish have a wide variety of formation needs. The Faith On-Going group was formed in order to contribute and respond positively to the broad faith education needs of the parish. The main aim of the group was to “educate those who are interested in heightening the quality of their faith life”.³⁷ The group organises a variety of programs to enrich parishioners’ faith journeys. These include retreats, reflection days, seminars, Bible study, discussion groups, prayer times and visiting speakers. The group works alongside the faith development efforts of other parish groups and all parishioners are encouraged to set aside some time each month to attend their activities.

Faith Development Team – Myall Coast Parish

The rural parish of Myall Coast consists of three separate communities with their distinctive identities and different needs. The Faith Development team was organised to create and run formation programs at a parish level as determined by parish needs. For

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 61, 63.

³⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 61–62.

³⁷ Kings Park Parish, "FOG - Faith on Going," in *Resurrection Parish Groups 2012 - 2013* (Kings Park Parish, 2012).

example, at the Parish Assembly in 2012, the greatest need for faith formation was seen to be for readers, ministers of communion, bereavement teams and sacramental leaders in addition to the ongoing needs of faith formation for the general parish community. The team organises regular formation workshops on liturgy, devotion and faith issues, and also looks after the parish library.

Adult Faith Education – Albany Creek Parish

The Albany Creek Adult Faith Education ministry has a threefold mission of developing a knowledge of the Word of God, connecting and building relationships with God and fellow parishioners through sharing faith journeys, and discovering through group discussion and prayer how best to apply God's word to their lives. To achieve this, the group submitted a range of subject matters and courses to the parish priest and pastoral council for approval and then advertised them widely through the parish newsletter. Faith formation sessions were usually planned to take place mid-week for two hours in the homes of parishioners who volunteered for this purpose.

Faith Formation for Young Children

In a majority of parishes in the study, the focus of faith formation was largely youth and children. Particularly for those receiving the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, First Eucharist and Reconciliation all parishes had appropriate and constantly evolving programs in place with dedicated parishioners involved in catechesis. For those who were to be baptised, there were special classes held for the parents to help them prepare for the sacrament. With regards to the other Sacraments, which were usually for school-aged children, there were usually two different programs offered, one for children from the Catholic schools and another program for children from government schools. With the exception of Narrabundah, all the parishes had programs that were "parish and family based". This meant that the children and parents attended special Masses and faith sharing sessions held in the parish out of school hours. The parents and families were encouraged to be involved in the process and to participate along with their children. Narrabundah Parish ran sacramental classes through the parish school, St Benedict's.

Some bigger parishes had employed staff to facilitate the sacramental program while others relied on volunteers. For example, in Warnervale Parish, the two Family Ministry Coordinators looked after the faith formation and pastoral care of the families as well as overseeing the sacramental program and the catechism program to government schools. In Launceston, Kings Park and Shepparton, there were paid staff employed part-time to specially look after their sacramental programs.

In addition to sacramental classes, Harris Park also had an additional faith education program for children called Fersan Al Aadra (Knights of Mary).³⁸ This program which looks after the spiritual formation of children from Grades 1–8 through activities, games and excursions, ran every Saturday for two hours and had about 300–400 young people enrolled with around 120–140 regular attenders. The parish had a trained coordinator with a team of 10–15 volunteers who helped organise and run these classes.

Faith Formation for Youth and Young Adults

In *Christifideles Laici* we read that adolescence and young adulthood are “significant and decisive moments” for young people to discern God’s call and embrace his mission.³⁹ Catholic schools and universities therefore have important roles to play in forming the faith of young people through a “formation community” including parents, teachers, clergy, women and men religious and representatives of youth.⁴⁰ Other Catholic groups, associations and movements also have the ability to offer a formation through a deeply shared experience in apostolic life, through their unique ways of living out the gospel and following Christ.⁴¹

Religious Education is a foundational element of Australian Catholic schools. One of the guidelines for Catholic schools of the National Catholic Education Commission

³⁸ Fersan Al Adra is a branch of the Marian Family Sodality that aims at the spiritual formation of children aged 5–13 years. More information can be found at <http://www.olol.org.au/committees/fersen>.

³⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 58.

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 62.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 62.

states that school communities should assist young adults to integrate faith and life.⁴² However there is some debate as to whether Catholic schools are able to adequately form young people in all elements of their faith without reducing religious education to being solely educational in nature like any other subject on the curriculum. Rossiter advocates a clear differentiation between “catechesis” and “religious education”.⁴³ Hyde suggests that what is needed is a holistic approach that differentiates between, and incorporates, both an educational classroom religion program and the development of the religious life of the school which focusses on the broader ethos of Catholic school and parish community life, with opportunities for prayer, liturgy and worship.⁴⁴ While the data collected within this study did not cover religious education in Catholic schools, the participants’ responses made it apparent that all parish schools in the study were committed to the goal of forming young people in the faith while continuing to meet many challenges.

Having a unique model of a joint school and church parish community, Warnervale Parish had made considerable progress through the CSYMA (Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia) model⁴⁵ developed in their school. The Youth Ministry programs which were gradually developed from Year 6 to Year 12 aimed at forming young people in Catholic ministry and training them to be leaders of the faith. Warnervale College regularly conducted faith formation classes for their students and had retreats, reflections and school liturgies where senior students were deeply involved in the planning and organisation. However, while participation in faith formation and religious activities at school remained high, the parish continued to struggle to get young people to participate in Sunday Mass and other youth activities. A Youth Forum was specially organised with the aim of listening to and learning from young people in

⁴² National Catholic Education Commission, "NCEC Guidelines for Catholic School communities in Post-Compulsory Education", National Catholic Education Commission http://www.ncec.catholic.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63:ncec-guidelines-for-catholic-school-communities-in-post-compulsory-education-1993&catid=36:policies&Itemid=64 [accessed 21 September 2013].

⁴³ Graham M. Rossiter, "The Need for a 'Creative Divorce' Between Catechesis and Religious Education in Catholic Schools," *Religious Education* 77, no. 1 (1982).

⁴⁴ Brendan Hyde, "A Category Mistake: why Contemporary Australian Religious Education in Catholic Schools may be Doomed to Failure," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 34, no. 1 (2013), 43.

⁴⁵ CSYMA is a professional teacher-centred organisation, networking Catholic secondary schools, staff and organisations with the goal of further empowering staff and students in evangelisation. More information can be found at Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia, "What is CSYMA?", Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia <http://csyma.com.au/about/> [accessed 17 October 2013].

order to find ways to meet their needs and offer them a place within the parish community.

As with spiritual nourishment, most parishes met the faith formation needs of their young people through their youth group programs. While offering an environment that young people could be comfortable in and a method of delivery that included fun and activities, faith formation through talks, discussions and retreats was common in all these parishes. For example, in Shepparton Parish, the Stronger program was a great vehicle to meet the formation needs of the youth of the parish. As the parish priest explained,

The Stronger programs for younger people are a classic instance of offering a combination of the social and the spiritual, or “first make a connection and then maybe we can talk heart to heart”. It’s one instance of the social and the spiritual being intertwined in a parish. They’re one and the same thing.

Narrabundah Parish also included forming young people in evangelisation techniques by offering them training in practical skills such as giving talks and testimonies and using multimedia, music and video clips, and also offering them various mission and outreach opportunities to develop their skills and form them in ministry. There was a need expressed by some young people for deeper learning and therefore the parish had also developed a beginner’s theology class for this group.

Faith Formation for Adults

Faith formation for adults was seen to be an ongoing priority in all the parishes in the study. Many parish leaders acknowledged the importance of adult faith formation for, as one priest commented, this was where people got “a bit of vision and a bit of prayer and a scriptural basis for what they’re doing”. A majority of the parishes offered a range of choices of faith formation opportunities available for parishioners to attend, and while all the parishes had developed some specific faith formation activities, nevertheless, there were still many participants who commented that there was great need for much more to be done in this area.

There were several ways in which adult faith formation was provided in parishes. The common approaches were through Bible study groups, retreats, talks and other programs developed for spiritual nourishment. Lent and Advent were seen as key periods for formation and all parishes made sure they offered some programs during these seasons. Along with this, making sure that the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation were regularly available to all parishioners was also a priority. There were also small formation events organised for those involved in liturgical ministries such as readers and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist. In addition to all these activities, the other sources through which the teachings of the faith were passed on to adults were through homilies, academic programs, the RCIA, special courses for engaged or married couples and through the parish library and online resources.

Homilies

Homilies during Mass were seen by parish leaders as being one of the main sources of faith formation for parishioners. Many parish priests believed that the time allocated for the homily was “the key moment to reach adults”. Accordingly, they saw this as their opportunity to prepare, plan and teach their community in a manner that made the faith relevant to everyday life. As one priest noted, “I believe that if you give people a good homily and instruction, you can lead them to something richer”. Similarly, another priest considered the homily as a motivation for adults to live their faith in other concrete ways:

I tend to think that when they come to a Sunday liturgy, they will get ... a reasonably good homily and opportunities to grow their faith through adult education offered throughout the year, through parish prayers groups and things like the SVDP—opportunities to serve.

It seemed like these efforts on the part of the priests were successful to some extent as many participants commented on how they found the homilies at their parish very helpful for their growth in faith:

Homilies—they are pithy and relevant, give us an “injection” each week, the use of personal experiences in the homily are important and this makes it more immediate. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

The homily is meaningful...God changed me through Fr L., and I have growing faith. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

It is important to have a leader who is learned, and who gives homilies that are relevant to daily life which allows you to put the Gospel into practice. Fr I. is like that. —Parishioner, Warnervale.

Academic and other formal faith formation programs

Attending formal courses in faith formation is particularly important for educating those involved in forming others in the Catholic faith.⁴⁶ There are various diocesan and religious institutes around Australia which offer a variety of faith formation programs for teachers, catechists and other adults who wish to deepen their faith through gaining formal qualifications. The formation programs offered in these institutes range from leadership training courses, workshops, retreats and biblical studies programs to fully developed theology courses and lecture series. Many participating parishes regularly informed their parishioners of such opportunities through the parish newsletters. The institutes mentioned by participants in the study that offered such resources and which participants were encouraged to attend were Cairns Ecumenical College, Broken Bay Institute, Catholic Adult Education Centre in Sydney, the Emmanuel Centre in Launceston and courses offered by the Sandhurst Adult Faith Education Ministry. Other courses that were also mentioned as being run in parishes were the Alpha⁴⁷ and CaFÉ⁴⁸ courses.

RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults)

The RCIA is a process of Christian formation offered to those who seek to become members of the Catholic Church.⁴⁹ Those who are unbaptised are prepared to be received into the Catholic Church by the reception of the three Sacraments of initiation, namely Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. There are also previously baptised adults

⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 63.

⁴⁷ Alpha is a course that offers the opportunity for people to explore the Christian faith in a relaxed setting over a series of interactive sessions. More information can be found at Alpha International, "What is Alpha?" (2013). <http://www.alphaaustralia.org.au/> [accessed 9 May 2014].

⁴⁸ CaFÉ is a six to eight session flexible learning series designed to help people learn more about the Catholic faith through group sharing and reflection. More information can be found at Catholic Evangelisation Services, "CaFÉ: About Us", Catholic Evangelisation Services <http://faithcafe.org/pages/about-us> [accessed 9 May 2014].

⁴⁹ Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney Catechumenate Office, "What is the Catechumenate and RCIA?", Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney <http://www.rcia.org.au/index.php/what-is-the-catechumenate-and-rcia-2> [accessed 21 September 2013].

who seek to be welcomed into full communion with the Catholic Church by the reception of the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist.

Seven out of the 10 parishes in the study had formal RCIA preparation courses. However, in each parish, the RCIA process followed by adults to receive the Sacraments varied slightly according to each community's needs and available resources. Kings Park, Narrabundah, Albany Creek, Launceston and Mount Isa parishes ran regular RCIA meetings for about six to eight months with their participants. The meetings included Scripture reflections and a focus topic exploring the sacraments and rituals of the Catholic faith. Shepparton Parish widely advertised their RCIA program using letter box drops and made attempts to do the RCIA within certain cultural groups, since there was a big influx of participants through the African communities and also the parish schools. The assistant priest has also introduced the RCIA for students in the parish high school, Notre Dame College. Shepparton also ran the "Catholics Returning Home" program to assist people who sought to re-connect with the Church.

In Warnervale Parish, the RCIA was run on a personal, needs-based basis by the parish priest. There were no classes to attend but the priest allowed people to work at their own pace and in their own time to prepare themselves and to receive the sacraments when they felt they were ready. If there happened to be more than one person involved, they usually formed a group and worked together. In Harris Park Parish, participants of the RCIA were prepared at the neighbouring Maronite parish of Punchbowl and received their sacraments at Harris Park.

Faith formation through the RCIA is often a complicated process as each individual who comes as a participant has a unique journey ahead of and behind them. Preparing people for the Sacraments therefore needs much commitment on the part of the RCIA team to be willing to walk the journey with them and this can often take time and effort. At least five of the participants in the study had become part of the Catholic community through their involvement in the RCIA process and were now actively participating in their parish. One participant, I., a parishioner at Warnervale Parish, shared her journey of coming to the faith and how her parish priest had helped her through it:

...10 years ago when I began teaching, my first appointment was at a Catholic school; that was my introduction. When we moved up here my now 16 year old son began at the Catholic school ... so I had more experience and I started to attend Catholic Mass sometimes. My son decided to become a Catholic when he was in primary school and I talked to him about why. In my support of his decision I looked more closely at Catholicism. Four years ago I had another child and we went to the Baptism information night and found out that one of us needed to be Catholic for him to be baptised. At that stage I really loved the MacKillop community so I said OK, let's do this. I was already part of the community anyway. My older son was already a Catholic. Because I had been previously married I had to go through the annulment process so it was quite a journey. Fr I. and I had a few interesting discussions along the way. I wasn't passive in my journey; I had lots of questions about the differences coming from the way in which I had been brought up. Fr I. took me through the RCIA and he was wonderfully pastoral. I appreciated his respect of my opinions and the rigorous discussions we had ... I would never hesitate to give him a call if I needed guidance. He supported me through the annulment every step of the way. It took a year...

I.'s story reveals how at different stages of her life the Catholic community played an important role in facilitating her decision to become a Catholic. It is important that this support from the community continues well beyond the stage of the reception of Sacraments if the RCIA members are to grow in their faith. A few participants in the study spoke of ways in which their parish helped RCIA members find a place where they could belong. For example, in Launceston, most RCIA participants went on to involve themselves quite actively in the parish through various groups and ministries while Narrabundah Parish involved their RCIA members in the cell groups. Some of the participants in the study who had gone through the RCIA process themselves remarked on how getting involved in the community had helped deepen their faith:

Through my parish involvement I have a better understanding of my faith; put into touch with the human side of our great priests, and the stresses upon them as they exercise their ministries; I have come to a much deeper understanding of the protocols of the liturgy. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

Coming from non-Catholic background it does [help deepen my faith]; there are "God moments" in the work I do which supports my faith. — Parish staff, Mount Isa.

Two other participants in the study who were part of their parish RCIA group as team members mentioned how being a part of the faith formation process for others helped to deepen their own faith as well:

My teaching others about faith and being questioned by them strengthens my faith. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

I love the RCIA experience ... It is very enjoyable and enriching ... It helps me focus more on spiritual matters. RCIA is also an activity that Q [her husband] and I do together as couple so it helps us both. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

Special courses for engaged and married couples

There were many parishes that had special formation programs for engaged and married couples. Parishes such as Cororooke, Shepparton and Warnervale offered FOCCUS workshops⁵⁰—a Pre-Marriage Education Program which enabled couples to explore key relationship themes. There was also the “Evenings for the Engaged” marriage preparation program offered in Narrabundah Parish where groups of four to six couples met together for about six weeks. This program was organised by the Pastoral and Matrimonial Renewal Centre of the Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn. Warnervale Parish offered a variety of programs for engaged couples. The parish had the “Catholic Engaged Encounter” course which focussed on the couple’s relationship with one another and with God. It also advertised the “Of Life and Love” course organised by the Catholic Adult Education Centre in Sydney, designed to give special emphasis to the spiritual and sacramental dimensions of marriage, along with the more practical aspects. The parish also ran the “Together as One” program that helped couples develop their knowledge and skills necessary to deal with relationship challenges.

Programs for married couples varied from parish to parish. The Teams movement, a lay movement within the Catholic Church,⁵¹ was a popular faith formation tool for couples in Harris Park and Albany Creek parishes. Harris Park Parish had several Teams groups, each with their own characteristics. For example, one group was for older couples while another was for Arabic-speaking Catholics. One participant shared his experience of being a part of the Teams program:

⁵⁰ FOCCUS is a pre-marriage education program to assist couples to think about many different aspects of their relationship. More information can be found at FOCCUS Inc., “Overview of FOCCUS® Pre-Marriage Inventory”, FOCCUS Inc. <http://www.foccusinc.com/foccus-inventory-background.aspx> [accessed 9 May 2014].

⁵¹ Teams Oceania, “Teams: For Married Spirituality”, Equipes Notre-Dame <http://www.teamsoceania.com.au/> [accessed 17 October 2013].

It's [our team] a place where we think outside the box It's all young couples of a similar age ... A variety of topics are discussed. There are good reading materials. No distractions with children around. For us the movement helps our married life not only on the spiritual level but through communicating as well. We meet socially sometimes as well. We see each other for Mass and other parish activities.

Narrabundah Parish also offered a “Ministry to the Newly Married” program for couples within the first year of marriage, where each newly married couple was matched with an adoptive couple with whom they met three times during the year, before moving on to a new adoptive couple in the next year. Along with this, there was also a program called “Days of Growth” organised for deeper marriage enrichment.

Parish library and faith formation resources online

Harris Park, Kings Park, Myall Coast and Mount Isa parishes had libraries where parishioners could access a range of faith formation resources among other reading material. For parishes with well-developed websites, many faith formation resources were also available online for parishioners to access. Parishes like Albany Creek, Kings Park, Harris Park, Narrabundah, Mount Isa, Shepparton and Warnervale had information regarding sacramental preparation online, along with links to other faith formation websites and resources. The Narrabundah website also had a range of audio and video talks available from previous retreats, workshops and other faith formation events organised over the years, and Shepparton and Harris Park parishes shared their podcasts of homilies given by their priests. Having these resources available online meant that parishioners could access them in their own time and at their own pace. Additionally, online resources were more likely to be appealing to young people due to their quick and easy access and the mode of communication that was familiar to them.

Difficulties Faced In Faith Formation

Faith formation in parishes is a challenging task when faced with the diversity of needs of various groups and people in the community. While all the parishes had well-developed sacramental programs, there were some difficulties trying to involve parents

who wanted their children to receive the Sacraments but did not relish coming to meetings. In addition, it was also difficult keeping families involved after the sacramental journey was over. Many parish leaders in the study spoke about the challenges they faced regarding faith formation programs for parishioners.

1. What courses to offer?

Deciding on the type of faith formation program to offer was the biggest challenge of all for most parish leaders. Particularly in bigger parishes, problems such selecting a course to suit the educational level of the people and deciding on the duration and time of the event and the mode of presentation were major issues. Different courses appealed to different people and finding one that suited a majority of parishioners was not easy. As one priest explained,

We started with Alpha and that was really good and then we got CaFÉ which was okay but it was not as enjoyable as Alpha and the next one was less so, so it dropped off ... We will try to start again next year maybe because I think it's important. People might like something on moral theology perhaps? We have Scripture courses, Lent and Advent programs, we have guest speakers sometimes but they are not well patronised.

Many parishes found that offering a range of events was the most logical choice even if the numbers attending these were small. There were a few priests—particularly assistant priests in many parishes—who were continually involved in preparing, planning and organising a range of retreats, programs and Bible studies for small groups of parishioners, catering to each group's interest and level of formation. Employing staff to help with sacramental programs was also a big advantage since they could help identify the groups of people in the parish whose needs were not being met. An assistant parish priest explained how this relationship worked in his parish:

We have recently employed in job-sharing two women to help in organising such occasions. They helped me last year to organise a retreat each term for the women of the parish, especially young mothers. We got about 30 [people] at each of these and they were wonderful. We have built on that now to form a prayer group to meet more informally. I conducted three retreats for seniors last year and they were very successful and this year we are having a retreat day based on Mary (70 people came to that) and later in the year a retreat day on making meaning of suffering in your life.

2. Lack of commitment and time

Many parish leaders found that working around the busy schedules of parishioners was a major obstacle to meeting their faith formation needs. This problem was common in all the parishes in the study. As one parish priest noted, *“Adult education is a great need ... at parish meetings it always comes up as one of the things to be done and then you get frustrated because when you put things on, people don’t come”*. Similar feelings were noted by other leaders as many parishioners found it hard to commit themselves to faith formation courses, particularly ongoing ones, for lack of time or due to the pressing needs of other family or work commitments.

Most parishes worked around this difficulty by offering a range of one day events such as reflection days, for different groups of people such as Eucharistic Ministers or Readers. Organising these events during special times of the year such as Lent, appeared to be more effective in getting more parishioners involved. In addition, as one parish priest noted, *“I sent everyone a personal invitation”* which also helped generate greater participation.

3. Diversity of faith formation needs

Providing faith formation programs for youth, families, adults and for people of different cultures required an enormous amount of time, effort, finance and planning on the part of the parish leadership team, and many parish leaders found that tapping into diocesan programs and courses offered by other organisations and neighbouring parishes was a big help in this regard. Many parishes advertised such programs widely through their newsletters and websites:

We advertise parish talks and people come to listen. —Parish Priest, Harris Park.

The diocese has offered a whole range of things ... So each region has something offered all the time so people travel between parishes to attend these lectures. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

To supplement this, using the resources of other parish groups as well to offer faith formation was a popular choice particularly for young people, as explained in the previous sections above.

THE LITURGY

The celebration of the Eucharist is the central liturgical experience that lies at the heart of every parish. In Australia, the rate of Mass attendance has fallen steadily since the 1950s when at least two-thirds of all Catholics attended Mass every Sunday.⁵² Results from the 2011 National Count of Attendance show that only about 12.2 per cent of the total number of Australian Catholics attend Mass on a typical weekend.⁵³ Out of these about 85 per cent attend weekly while the attendance of the remaining 15 per cent varies from two or three times a month, to monthly or less frequently.⁵⁴ The demographics of Mass attenders have also changed over time. Results from the 2011 National Church Life Survey show that Mass attenders today are older, better educated, more likely to be female and to have been born overseas than the Catholic population as a whole.⁵⁵

While the parishes were chosen for this study because they were showing signs of vitality, Table 6.1 shows that their typical weekend Mass attendance rates varied. Attendances in Kings Park, Warnervale, Harris Park and Mount Isa parishes increased between 2006 and 2011, while the greatest loss was seen in Albany Creek Parish.

⁵² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia," 2.

⁵³ Dixon et al., *Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment*, 1.

⁵⁴ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia," 2.

⁵⁵ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia," 2.

Table 6.1 Catholic Population and Mass Attendance in Participating Parishes, 2006 and 2011

	Catholic Population			Average or Usual Weekly Attendance			Attendance rate (%)	
Parish	2006	2011	Change 2006–11	2006	2011	Change 2006–11	2006	2011
Albany Creek	7,791	8,299	508	986	666	-320	12.7	8.0
Cororooke	547	566	19	139	100	-39	25.4	17.7
Harris Park ¹	--	--	--	5,041	5,179	138	--	--
Kings Park	13,315	14,746	1,431	1,450	1,734	284	10.9	11.8
Launceston	10,380	10,378	-2	981	787	-194	9.5	7.6
Mount Isa	5,636	6,035	399	353	468	115	6.3	7.8
Myall Coast	2,114	2,352	238	231	159	-72	10.9	6.8
Narrabundah	1,674	1,618	-56	516	382	-134	30.8	23.6
Shepparton	5,655	5,894	239	866	800	-66	15.3	13.6
Warnervale	5,480	6,138	658	581	696	115	10.6	11.3

Note 1: Since Harris Park Parish belongs to the Maronite Diocese and is not defined in territorial terms, no population figures from the Australian Census are available for it. Margaret Ghosn in *Young Australian Maronites: Their Response to Australia, Church and Spirituality*, 82, estimates that the Maronite Catholic population associated with the parish is around 40,000.

Source: Catholic Population figures come from the Australian Bureau of Statistics – 2006 & 2011 Census of Population and Housing. Mass attendance figures come from the 2006 & 2011 National Count of Attendance. Both sets of figures supplied by the ACBC Pastoral Research Office.

It is not immediately obvious why such changes take place in Mass attendance as there are several contributing factors. In general, the vast majority of Catholic parishes in Australia have been experiencing declining attendances since the 1950s⁵⁶—a phenomenon affecting Catholicism in the Western world. Vital parishes are not immune to these changes but continue to strive to overcome them. In some cases, it is also possible that declines are due to changes in the population in a parish or variations in patterns of attendance among Australian Catholics as mentioned in the section above. In spite of a decline in their Mass attendances, parishes such as Cororooke, Narrabundah and Shepparton continue to have attendance rates higher than the national rate of 12.2 per cent. Other participating parishes that have experienced losses in attendance also continue to have rates that are higher than their diocesan average. These include Launceston (diocesan rate 7.0 per cent), Cororooke (diocesan rate 11.7 per cent) and Shepparton (diocesan rate 10.6 per cent). Narrabundah Parish, in particular,

⁵⁶ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, "A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia," 2.

has an attendance rate (23.6 per cent) that is significantly higher than its diocesan rate of 10.6 per cent despite it losing attenders between 2006 and 2011.

Dixon has found that factors such as local context, the percentage of Catholics born in non-English speaking countries and of Catholics with a university degree, and the presence or absence of a Sunday evening Mass can all affect attendances, so that in themselves they are poor predictors of parish vitality.⁵⁷ Albany Creek, for example, has a higher than average level of education and an increasingly higher than average level of managerial and professional people among the Catholic population. This then could be one reason for the parish's lower attendance rate. The high mobility rate of parish populations is another significant factor that can affect attendances, as newer families take more time attaching themselves to the local parish. This could be one reason for the low attendance rate in Shepparton Parish, where only 57 per cent of the 2011 Catholic population had lived at the same address in 2006. High rates of mobility may have also contributed to falling attendance rates in Albany Creek (in 2011, 62 per cent of the Catholic population were living at the same address as in 2006), Myall Coast (61 per cent) and Cororooke (68 per cent). Other factors such as changes in parish structures (Launceston), changes in the leadership pattern (Cororooke), a rapid increase in the numbers of aging Catholics and a greater number of people needing assistance with core activities such as self-care, personal mobility and communication (for example, Myall Coast) are all factors that could have affected Mass attendance rates. Since Catholic parish vitality therefore cannot be measured by attendance rates or attendance growth and every vital parish can experience attendance decline, this study focusses more on the provisions made by parishes to provide parishioners with a meaningful experience of the Mass and opportunities to be involved in liturgical ministries, and less on attendance figures.

The liturgies in the participating parishes were examined using a "Liturgy Observation Guide"⁵⁸ that inquired into the proceedings of several aspects of Mass such as the service arrangements, the progression of the liturgy and the immediate events after Mass. While it was particularly difficult to compare the style of liturgy and the

⁵⁷ Dixon, "*Ingenious Communities*," (PhD) 225–231.

⁵⁸ The Liturgy Observation Guide was a data collection tool that was developed for the Building Stronger Parishes project. Further details of this tool are provided in Appendix H.

atmosphere of the assembly of different celebrations in parishes, observations such as the extent of participation of the community, the attention given to liturgical signs (such as the entrance and offertory processions and the distribution of communion), the cultural appropriateness of the celebration and the general awareness of parishioners as being one community were recorded. There were several aspects of the liturgy that stood out as being particularly relevant to this study. These have been explained in the following sections.

Liturgical Styles

At least two Masses in each parish were observed during this study. Most parishes had different styles of celebration to cater for the needs of different groups within their community. In total, the Masses observed included 12 regular general Masses, two regular lay-led liturgies,⁵⁹ three youth Masses, three family Masses and one Charismatic Mass.

General Masses

The number and diversity of the Masses celebrated in all participating parishes were based on the needs and demographics of each parish community. A majority of these were general Masses that are held for all people in the community and do not have any special focus. Being small parishes, Cororooke, Myall Coast and Narrabundah have two to four weekend Masses. In Cororooke, these Masses alternate every week with lay-led liturgies. Narrabundah also has five regular weekday Masses. The medium-size parishes of Albany Creek, Mount Isa, Shepparton and Warnervale had three to four weekend Masses with five to seven weekday Masses. Big parishes like Kings Park and Launceston had three and five weekend Masses and Kings Park also had four weekday Masses. The most number of Masses were held in Harris Park Parish which, being the

⁵⁹ "Lay-led liturgies" is a common term for liturgies celebrated in absence of priest on Sunday that usually include Communion. The correct term for such a celebration in Australia is "Sunday Celebration of the Word and Communion," though different dioceses sometimes use alternate names. More information on such liturgies may be found at Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest," 2.

largest of all participating parishes and with a bilingual community, had eight weekend Masses and 17 regular weekday Masses.

Apart from the regular weekday and weekend Masses, there were also some special Masses held with different groups in various parishes. For example, Albany Creek Parish has a Healing Mass once a month and Warnervale Parish regularly organises Masses in nearby aged care homes four times a month.

Lay-led liturgies

Lay-led liturgies are a prominent feature of Cororooke Parish where Mass is celebrated only every second week. Each liturgy was led by a team of two leaders. In Myall Coast Parish, each of the three Mass centres had a similar “Celebration in Anticipation of the Eucharist”⁶⁰ gathering, instead of Mass, once a month. These gatherings were also led by two leaders who were assisted by six other people who helped with the welcome and reflections.

Children’s Liturgy and family Masses

In all the parishes family Masses were celebrated to commemorate special events like the reception of Sacraments for children. These Masses, which were also called “Sacramental Masses”, were usually organised by special planning teams that included the representatives from both the church and the parish school. Apart from these, regular family Masses are also celebrated at Albany Creek, Launceston and Harris Park parishes. In Albany Creek, a special liturgy planning team looks after the preparation for these monthly Masses. The liturgy, music, homily and after-Mass events are specially planned for the children. As a result, the family Mass is one of the best attended Masses. In Harris Park Parish, the need to cater for young families led to the creation of a special 9.30 a.m. Mass for them. These Masses were also well attended and the parish provided a “family brunch” once a month after Mass, giving young families an opportunity to socialise with one another as well.

⁶⁰ Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, “Sunday Celebrations in Anticipation of Eucharist in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle:Diocesan Guidelines”, Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle <http://www.mn.catholic.org.au/media/84215/SCAEFinal.pdf> [accessed 21 September 2013].

“Children’s Liturgy of the Word” refers to the practice of children leaving the Mass during the Liturgy of the Word and gathering separately to hear the Word in a way more appropriate to their level of understanding.⁶¹ They return later and join in with the rest of the community for the remainder of the Mass. Children’s Liturgy was a new initiative at Mount Isa and Narrabundah parishes and a regular practice at Cororooke, Myall Coast and Albany Park parishes. In Myall Coast Parish, children were actively involved in the celebration of the Mass through altar serving, working the overhead projectors and in the offertory procession, to make them feel included and give them a sense of belonging. In Cororooke Parish, children’s liturgy was led by young people. A few parishioners had initially paid for the children’s liturgy resources to get the program up and running, and the first lot of children who passed through the classes now led the liturgy as young teenagers. Young people also participated in reading, commentating or as Special Ministers of the Eucharist at such Masses.

Youth Masses

Weekend youth Masses are held regularly in Mount Isa, Albany Creek and Harris Park. In all three parishes, a large number of young people are involved in various liturgical ministries during these services. The youth Mass at Harris Park regularly attracts a crowd of around 1,000 young people. The success of this weekend Mass has prompted the parish to start another mid-week Youth Mass which has been gaining popularity among younger members of the parish.

Ethnic or cultural group Masses

Results from the 2011 National Count of Attendance reveal that in Australia, Mass is celebrated in more than 30 languages.⁶² There were a variety of cultural group Masses celebrated in the many parishes in the study. Being a bilingual parish, Harris Park Parish has regular Masses in both Arabic and English. Launceston Parish regularly celebrates Mass for the Polish, Croatian and African communities in their own language and also hosts Masses in the Syro-Malabar and Malankara rites. Similarly, in Shepparton Parish, the Indians and Filipinos celebrate monthly Masses and the

⁶¹ Archdiocese of Brisbane, “Children’s Liturgy of the Word”, Liturgy Brisbane <http://liturgybrisbane.net.au/doctypes/childrens-liturgy/> [accessed 17 October 2013].

⁶² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office, “A Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia,” 3.

Congolese have a French Mass depending on the availability of their chaplain. Warnervale Parish has a Mass in Spanish and a Syro-Malabar Mass.

Liturgical Preparation and Planning

Liturgical preparation and planning was evident in all participating parishes. Mass timings and locations were easily available on parish websites, newsletters and bulletins and all the parishes had liturgy planning teams to look after different aspects of the liturgy. There were also 14 participants who were on such teams in their parishes, or, who participated as lay leaders of the liturgy. Usually, liturgy planning teams looked after organising the music, preparing the readings and prayers, and preparing the rosters of various liturgical ministries, to try to make the liturgy vibrant, welcoming and inclusive. As one liturgy leader explained, “*Giving people an experience of the Mass that is as beautiful as it can be—that’s our challenge*”. Special care was taken in all parishes to plan special events like Easter, Christmas and sacramental Masses.

Due to its large and diverse congregation, Kings Park Parish had several liturgy planning committees, each with its own special focus. One team looked after Baptism Masses, another looked after funerals and a third looked after special events like Christmas and Easter. In Cororooke, where lay-led liturgies were frequent, planning and preparing the liturgies was absolutely essential and involved many different people. The parish Liturgy Coordinator planned the regular Masses which were celebrated every alternate week by a visiting priest and was also involved in sourcing a selection of three reflections for each lay-led “liturgy preparation team”. There were five such teams in the parish and each team had around three members in it. These members would reflect on the readings, prepare commentaries and choose one of the shared reflections for the day. A slightly different set-up was seen in Myall Coast Parish, which also had lay-led liturgies called “Celebrations in Anticipation of the Eucharist” once a month in each Mass centre. Preparations for these services were done by the parish leader (a religious sister in this case) along with the Mass centre pastoral teams.

The Gathering, Pre-service Preparation and the Beginning of Mass

Prior to the start of Mass, there were scenes of welcoming witnessed in all the parishes. People entering the church were welcomed by a team of greeters who were sometimes accompanied by the priest celebrating the Mass. They were handed the parish bulletin, and in some parishes, hymn books as well. Kings Park Parish also had a special Information Desk set up where people could access parish information as they arrived.

The environment before Mass was usually warm and welcoming with some amount of excitement. Quieter Masses usually had a more reverent and reflective atmosphere. Preparations for the Mass were usually made by an acolyte or sacristan along with the priest or lay presider. In some parishes, the altar servers helped prepare the altar, and at family Masses or Masses with children's liturgy, teachers and parents helped prepare the children for Mass. People usually started arriving about 10–15 minutes before Mass, while others involved in various ministries arrived even earlier. Inside the church, people usually greeted one another and a few prayed. The celebrants of the Mass were available in all the parishes before the start of Mass, usually greeting the people and welcoming them. Songs were normally practised by the choir or quiet music played.

Mass generally began on time, with an entrance procession accompanied by the entrance hymn. In some parishes, the hymn was preceded by a short announcement, formally welcoming people, announcing the name of the presider at Mass and inviting people to turn off their mobile phones and join in the singing. The entrance procession included the presiding priest, accompanied by altar servers and/or acolytes, and in some parishes, the Special Ministers of the Eucharist and the readers for the day. There were both male and female servers with a majority of boys and men seen at most Masses. At lay-led services, the lay leaders with their co-presiders and readers for Mass processed in. Most presiders started the Mass informally with a few words of welcome and a few short announcements before proceeding to the formal opening lines of the Mass. There was also an invitation made to people in some parishes to greet one another before the formal beginning.

Community Participation in Liturgical Ministries

According to Pope John Paul II, participating in the celebration of the Mass is an “efficacious sign of unity”, since it binds the whole community into communion with the one Body of Christ.⁶³ All the Masses observed had several liturgical ministries that people participated in, that included:

- Cleaning and preparing the Church
- Flower arranging
- Welcoming and greeting the people
- Serving at the altar
- Reading
- As commentators
- Special Ministers of the Eucharist
- Participating in the choir or the music ministry
- Operating overhead projectors
- Collectors
- Bringing up the Offertory gifts
- Taking communion to the sick and homebound.

During family Masses, Masses with children’s liturgy and Youth Masses there was a conscious effort to involve many more young people as well. In most parishes, the two collections at Mass were usually taken up by older men. Participating in various liturgical ministries was also one of the main ways of involving immigrants, as way of helping them feel part of the parish community, and parishes usually strongly encouraged these attempts.

An overhead projector was used at many parishes and hymns, parts of the Mass and, in some cases, the theme for the day were projected onto screens. There were a variety of people, male and female, old and young, who operated the projector in the different parishes. Warnervale Parish had the most impressive, well-planned slides at their Masses, while in the Maronite liturgy at Harris Park Parish everything was displayed in two languages. The offertory procession was another occasion where many people of

⁶³ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 157.

all ages participated. Children and youth were frequently involved in this part of the Mass.

Music and Song

The parish arrangements for music and song differed from parish to parish. Parishes such as Albany Creek, Kings Park, Shepparton, Mount Isa, Harris Park and Narrabundah had a range of choirs at different Masses. Youth Masses had special choirs as well in these parishes, and in the case of Narrabundah, the Charismatic Mass had a special focus as well. Some parishes like Albany Creek and Shepparton were also fortunate to have professional musicians, as a result of which the music ministry was greatly developed and detailed preparation was done for selecting hymns, gathering musicians and organising choir practices, especially for feast days and special Masses. Smaller parishes like Cororooke and Warnervale had some choirs but relied heavily on CD music as well. Launceston and Myall Coast parishes mainly used hymn books.

At all Masses, the music was generally lively and uplifting and contributed significantly to the celebration. Some parishes struggled to have good music at all their Masses, and in such cases, some Masses were more vibrant than others. The need for good music was felt more significantly in parishes with smaller congregations, in order to support the overall positive experience of Mass.

An important aspect of good music at Mass is that the style of the music needs to match the style of the celebration of Mass and encourage participation by the congregation. This was not always the case in participating parishes. Some well-developed choirs in some parishes tended to dominate the celebration, so that the music was seen as somewhat of a performance rather than as encouraging people to participate. Also, in some cases, CD music was difficult to sing along with. This was particularly observed at some children's Masses, where the fast-paced songs resulted in less participation from the adults, who found them too difficult to sing along to. However, the children seemed to participate more easily since they were familiar with the beat and tune of the music.

The Liturgy of the Word

There were several lay people involved as readers at Mass. There was a general proficiency in reading, as all the parishes had good readers with clear, unhurried voices and good articulation. Both male and female readers and a mixture of younger and older people participated in this ministry. Youth and children's Masses particularly involved younger members as well. In multicultural parishes, the readers were generally of mixed ethnicities. Some parishes also provided the text of the readings in the bulletin. The Prayers of the Faithful usually included the names of sick and deceased members of the parish. There were only a few Masses such as the Charismatic Mass at Narrabundah and the Sunday evening Mass at Warnervale, where people could offer impromptu prayers as well, along with the others read out during this time at Mass.

Homilies

The homily at a Mass is intended to foster "a deeper understanding" of the God's Word, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of parishioners.⁶⁴ At all the observed Masses, the homilies were given by the priest, with the exception of Shepparton Parish, where stewardship was the theme of the day and therefore the homily was replaced by a talk by a member of the parish stewardship team. At lay-led liturgies, the lay leaders of the service read out a reflection on the Gospel. Most homilies ranged from five to 10 minutes, with the majority being nine or 10 minutes long. An exception was the Charismatic Mass at Narrabundah where the sermon was 25 minutes long.

The style of the homilies was usually sincere, warm and informal, with some homilies being more humorous and casual and aimed at the children, particularly, during family or children's Masses. Most homilists made use of the readings of the day, particularly the Gospel, and emphasised an application of the reading to daily life. Some homilists used jokes and stories but many priests preferred using personal experiences. Most

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Post-Synodal Exhortation (22 February 2007) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html [accessed 21 September 2013], n. 46.

homilies focussed on an invitation to action and there was a lesser emphasis on personal and social morality, and prayer and spirituality. The general tone was hopeful and the purpose of the homily was usually aimed at encouraging people in their faith. There was a largely positive response from parishioners at all the Masses and most congregations were generally quite attentive and interested during the delivery of the homily.

The homily is generally aimed at faith formation and evangelisation through the proclamation of the Word of God.⁶⁵ Shannon believes that in order for homilies to actively address the faith formation needs of adults, they must incorporate the ability to both comfort the people as well as challenge them to live the Gospel joyfully.⁶⁶ The observations of homilies at the various Masses suggest that there was a greater emphasis on *encouraging* rather than *challenging* people to live out the faith in daily life. The reflection on the Gospels and the use of personal stories helped parishioners make meaning of the Scriptures and see its relevance to their daily life, a practice that appears to have gained more importance in recent times.⁶⁷ Suggesting ways in which to live out their faith helped people respond to the Gospel more concretely. Faith formation was thus carried out in a meaningful, encouraging and practical manner that seemed to work well in most parishes.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

There were some variations in peoples' participation during the Liturgy of the Eucharist in all the parishes. In most parishes, people knelt throughout the Eucharistic Prayer, while in others, kneeling was optional and people generally stood during this time. At the lay-led services the usual Eucharistic prayer was not said. In its place, was a Prayer

⁶⁵ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (December 4, 1963), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980) n. 35.2 and 52. Also Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, Apostolic Exhortation Of His Holiness John Paul II (1979) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], 48.

⁶⁶ William H Shannon, "Priestly Spirituality: Speaking Out For The Inside," in *The Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest*, ed. Donald B. Cozzens (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1997), 101.

⁶⁷ Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, "Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly," (1982). <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-life-and-ministry/upload/fiyh.pdf> [accessed 9 May 2014], 7.

of Praise and Thanksgiving in a call and response style, with the lay presiders and the congregation sharing the prayer.

There was great participation observed at all Masses during the Sign of Peace. People shook hands in an enthusiastic and friendly manner and some parishioners used each other's names as well. During some of the Masses that had children's liturgy, the children went round the congregation passing on the Sign of Peace to everyone. The Maronite liturgy at Harris Park had a slightly different version of the Sign of Peace. The altar servers accepted peace from the Priest and then went around offering it to the first person in each row who then passed it on to the next person. Rather than shaking hands, here people joined their hands together and clasped the hands of the next person in a sign of passing on their peace.

There was also great participation during the distribution of Holy Communion which was carried out in a very orderly fashion. Most parishes had lay people serving as Special Ministers of the Eucharist. These ranged from one or two people in the smaller parishes, to 10 or 11 in the bigger parishes. Communion was distributed under both kinds in most parishes, but the number of people who partook of the Cup differed. In some parishes, only 10 to 20 per cent of the congregation partook of the cup, whereas in others about 80 to 90 per cent participated. In all parishes, almost everybody in the congregation received Communion and in some cases, children also came up to receive a blessing. Communion hymns were sung during this time while some parishes had quiet reflective music playing. Many parishes also had the opportunity for communion to be taken to elderly people in their seats and to the sick in their homes.

After-Mass Gatherings

Most Masses ended with the formal dismissal by the priest. In many parishes, the period just before the dismissal was used for parish notices, usually read by a parishioner or the priest, to remind people of important things happening during the week. A recessional hymn was commonly sung at most Masses and the priests, altar servers and in some cases, the readers, processed out carrying the Cross and the Bible.

The end of Mass was generally followed by people chatting with one another inside the Church, or in most cases, outside in the foyer or car park where they formed small groups. This was consistently seen at all the observed Masses. Very few people stayed back to pray in the Church or to visit devotional statues. In Narrabundah Parish, the Charismatic Mass had a healing ministry service at the end when people could come up and be prayed over by the priests.

After-Mass “cuppas” were a common feature in many parishes, and in all cases, people greatly looked forward to a casual chat after Mass. Preparing and helping out at the after-Mass coffee and tea service was also one of the ministries parishioners were involved in. A few participants noted that the after-Mass gatherings “*lasted longer than the Mass itself!*” Usually these gatherings were held in the church foyer or a kitchenette immediately outside the church. Usually, tea and coffee were served, along with a few cakes and biscuits. The priest was usually present at these gatherings and mingled with the people. Even at Masses where there was no “cuppa” afterwards, the gathering of people to talk to one another, with the priest or lay presider moving among them, was a common feature seen after Mass.

Overall Style and Celebration of the Liturgy

The celebration of the Mass reveals a lot about the life of the parish. In thriving parishes, Masses usually have many people attending and participating in the various liturgical ministries. There is joy, enthusiasm, fellowship and a strong sense of spirituality. People are happy to be a part of the celebration. All these qualities were certainly seen in many of the Masses observed in the parishes in the study. With respect to the priest’s style of celebrating the Mass, the two most popular styles observed at the different Masses were “serious, reverent and unhurried” with an “emphasis on sacredness”, and “warm and personal” with an “emphasis on involving all the people present in a communal celebration”. This was followed by the “casual, often humorous” style, with an “emphasis on putting people at ease”, which was particularly seen at Masses such as sacramental Masses, where there were larger numbers of children and people who did not attend Church regularly. What is interesting to note is

that previous research has shown that priests who adopt either of the first two popular styles are much more effective in fostering a sense of belonging among people in their community.⁶⁸ This could be one reason why these parishes are more successful than others in this area. Further aspects of community building and the sense of belonging and their relation to parish vitality will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Overall, most Masses in the different parishes were prayerful with good pauses for silence and reflection. They had a good balance between the ability to build connections with one another and with God. Many had lively music and the Masses for children were planned and organized very well. The lay-led liturgies particularly exhibited the great support that parishioners had for their leaders and the faithfulness of the community to one another. The Charismatic Mass was observed to be more spiritually uplifting than others.

LITURGICAL CHALLENGES

In spite of having generally vibrant Masses in their parishes, there were many participants who remarked that the liturgy was one of the main items on their parish agenda that needed further improvements. There were several challenges that were being faced in various parishes in respect to the celebration of the liturgy, among which were:

1. Attracting the participation of more young people – People in parishes that did not have a youth Mass were keen to start one. Other parishes were working on getting more young people involved in liturgical ministries. A young member in a regional parish also remarked about the challenges that some young people faced in getting transport to attend Mass, since their families did not attend and many could not rely on the irregular public transport. This was a challenge that the parish leaders would have to address if they wanted greater participation from younger members.

⁶⁸ Dixon, "What Makes People Feel They Belong?," 3.

2. Providing Masses for certain immigrant groups, particularly, for those for whom English was not a first language. This was a real difficulty faced by multicultural parishes, especially with parishioners from Africa who spoke a variety of languages and who were culturally very different.
3. Providing more training for people in liturgical ministries, particularly in theology and faith formation.
4. Developing the music ministry in some parishes so that there was less reliance on CDs and slides.

There were also several challenges that were faced particularly by rural parishes that relied heavily on the availability of priests and lay leaders for liturgical celebrations. These challenges included:

1. Finding supply priests to fill in for Mass when regular priests were not available
2. Training more lay people to lead the service when regular priests or lay leaders were not available
3. Having the continued support of the diocese and the bishops for lay-led liturgies to continue to grow and develop
4. Coping with liturgical changes, such as the adoption of the new text of the Mass, particularly when lay leaders had to lead the service
5. Facing and planning for a very real possibility of a future without priests and the celebration of Mass in the parish. One parishioner suggested the possibility of having the Mass telecast live from the city to the parish chapel so that parishioners could at least participate in the Mass from afar.

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY, FAITH FORMATION AND THE LITURGY IN ENHANCING PARISH LIFE

The vibrancy of parish life is greatly strengthened when parishioners are formed in their faith, and opportunities to grow and deepen their spirituality abound. The investigations into these qualities in participating parishes showed that the following common themes emerged from the findings:

1. The diversity of spiritual practices greatly contributed to the vibrancy of the parish.

Overall, both rural and urban parishes appeared to be very good at meeting the spiritual needs of many of their parishioners who attended Church regularly and participated in parish life. This was largely due to the variety of spiritual groups, activities and opportunities for spiritual nourishment available in the parishes which suggested that parish leaders were generally willing to allow parishioners to use a range of resources to deepen their spirituality. Some parishes were greatly assisted in this regard by religious or other spiritual centres that existed within parish boundaries where parishioners could access additional resources.

2. Spiritual activities were developed according to parishioners' needs.

Every parish had developed and used spiritual resources that were appropriate to the culture of a majority of their parishioners. While this helped to cater for many parishioners, there was a definite need seen in most parishes to identify and meet the spiritual needs of parishioners from different cultures, as language and cultural differences created challenges. Additionally, there were also some smaller groups of people identified in each parish who tended to get overlooked and whose needs did not appear to be met adequately. Many parishes had already identified these groups and efforts were being made to try to develop resources to meet their needs.

3. Ongoing faith formation for all ages was seen as a priority and was being continually developed.

While spiritual opportunities for people abounded in parishes, faith formation, particularly for adults, was greatly underdeveloped in many parishes. Homilies at Mass, the RCIA, academic courses and programs for engaged and married couples were the main ways through which adults were formed in their faith. Nevertheless, this was a priority and parishes were continually trying to improve their resources and programs in this area. Most parishes used most of their resources to cater for children and young people receiving the sacraments. Parish youth groups were good at meeting the faith formation needs of young people in the parish as the environment and mode of delivery suited them. A few parishes had developed special parish ministries to look after the faith

formation needs of parishioners and these groups tried out a variety of programs and workshops to suit different people's needs. Even so, the major obstacles faced by all parishes in this regard were deciding what would be the right program to offer, coping with the diversity of needs of the parishioners and managing the time and commitment constraints that were a constant challenge.

4. Parish liturgies were well-planned, inclusive and vibrant.

There was a great vibrancy and depth of spirituality seen at most of the liturgies in all the parishes. Liturgies were usually very well-planned with a variety of liturgical styles available to suit people's needs. Children were well looked after through the family Masses or children's liturgy. However, regular youth Masses were available only in three parishes in the study. There were a small range of Masses in different languages celebrated depending on the cultural mix of parishioners in a parish. The homilies at the Masses were generally suited to the audiences in most cases, and there was a general correspondence between the way priests viewed the purpose of their homilies (to teach or as faith formation) and the way their homilies were received by people in the congregation. There was a large effort made by homilists to encourage people in their faith. After-Mass gatherings were a very big success in community building and fellowship, and most parishes organised some sort of a "cuppa" at a few weekend Masses. The liturgies at all the parishes usually had a good balance between prayerfulness and fellowship, seriousness and conviviality.

5. Liturgical ministries facilitated greater participation among parishioners.

Active participation at Masses was greatly encouraged in all parishes with a wide range of people involved in the various liturgical ministries. There were equal opportunities provided in all parishes for both men and women, young and old to be involved. The welcoming ministry was particularly well-developed in most parishes. There was also great proficiency seen in the proclamation of the Word at the Masses. While there were great variations in the parish arrangements for music and song during Mass, which differed from parish to parish and liturgy to liturgy, the musical arrangements at all Masses generally supported and, in many cases, enhanced the celebration of the liturgy.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the data collected in the many parishes in relation to the first two measures of vitality that deal with nurturing the vocational call of Baptism through spiritual growth and faith formation, and allowing parishioners to experience God through the liturgical celebrations. Most parishes had developed both these aspects to a great degree and provided well for many of their parishioners who participated regularly in parish life. A few areas of faith formation and liturgy that needed further improvement were identified. Overall, parishes were keen to help people in their journeys of faith by meeting their needs in the best way possible. Participation in spiritual and faith developmental activities, and particularly in the celebration of the Mass through various liturgical ministries, was greatly encouraged by parish leaders. The next chapter will look at these encouraging and welcoming aspects of parish life, the sharing of gifts and skills, and community building among parishioners in greater detail.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COMMUNITY AND HOSPITALITY

The previous chapter discussed the first two measures of vitality that deal with various aspects of spiritual nourishment and faith formation needs of parishioners as well as the celebration of the Mass. This chapter examines the data collected in relation to the third and fourth measures of vitality:

3. Spiritual fellowship and community bonds are nurtured and parishioners experience a strong sense of belonging.
4. Welcoming inclusion and hospitality abound and parishioners are encouraged to share their gifts.

As a “definite community of the Christian faithful”, the communitarian aspects of a parish are fundamental to its identity.¹ In its role as “the Church inserted into the neighbourhoods of humanity”,² the local parish community is a group of unique individuals that exists in a particular place and time, and that is enculturated into the culture, context, geography, history and environment of its specific setting.³ As Wittberg observes, this community changes and grows or decays through time, both internally and externally, as it moves in the process of being either closer to or further away from its vocation of imaging the Triune, communal God.⁴

The communitarian nature of the parish was briefly explored in Chapter One and was seen to consist of a web of interconnected relationships that exist at different levels, both internally and externally. Internal relationships exist between parishioners and parish leaders, between members of various parish groups and among parishioners themselves. External relationships exist between the parish and other communities such as any neighbouring Catholic parishes, the diocese, the deanery, the neighbouring

¹ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 60.

² Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 27.

³ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 49–50.

⁴ Patricia Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities: A Sociological Overview* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), 28.

Christian congregations and the local community.⁵ Chapter Five discussed the indicators of vitality found in participating parishes and the data showed that a strong community and a strong sense of belonging were associated with vitality in many parishes. Various participants indicated that they were able to form strong bonds with other people and there was a general feeling of being welcomed and accepted as part of the parish community. There was also a strong sense of ownership and a high level of connectivity among parishioners. Several participants also noted the strong sense of support, in that people cared for one another and help was always available when needed.

The present chapter primarily focuses on internal relationships that exist within a parish, among parish leaders, staff and parishioners. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section investigates the aspect of community and discusses the various expressions of community spirit that are evident in different parishes. The role of community building in parishes is examined and the opportunities available for parishioners of different ages to build relationships with one another are reviewed. Following this, the experience of a sense of belonging among parishioners in participating parishes is explored. The participants who were interviewed for the study were those who were actively involved in parish life. Hence, it is expected that these will feel a greater sense of belonging than those who choose not to be a part of the parish or those who have felt excluded to some extent. Nevertheless, the data still gives some indication of what has led participants to feel a strong sense of belonging, and this is what is examined in this section.

The second section of the chapter looks at the welcoming and hospitality aspects of parish life. The ways in which parishes welcome people into the community and the manner in which they convey a sense of hospitality to their parishioners are presented. The aspect of inclusiveness found in parishes is also explored and the role of good communication is discussed. The last section looks at the ways in which parishes encourage a sharing of gifts and skills among parishioners, and the chapter concludes by drawing out some key themes that arise from these findings.

⁵ Coriden, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition*, 101.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT IN THE PARISH

Measuring “community” is a hard task since different people have different perspectives, and the level of community desired by one person might be intrusive for another.⁶ In addition, the sense of community in a rural town differs from that of an urban area.⁷ In spite of these differences, Wittberg notes that what one can definitely evaluate is how people *feel* about their community and whether they find it satisfactory.⁸

When participants were asked to indicate if they experienced a strong community spirit in the parish, a majority (92 out of 110) agreed that this definitely was the case. A further investigation into the ways in which this strong community spirit was evident showed that each parish had different ways of expressing this spirit. This varied according to the size and location of the parish and the demographics of the parishioners and the wider community:

- In **large parishes** like Harris Park, Kings Park and Launceston, community spirit was seen predominantly in the variety of parish groups working together, in the co-operation among parishioners, especially at parish events, and through the many social events planned for parishioners and the wider community:

There is lot of sense of where can we help? How can we help? What else is there to do? Everyone pulls together—like for this building [the Community, Youth and Pastoral Centre]. There is sense of everyone wanting to do something not only for our own benefit but for future generations as well. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

- **Multicultural parishes** like Shepparton and Mount Isa expressed a strong community spirit through a large variety of opportunities presented to people of different cultures to be involved in the parish, and along with parishes like Narrabundah and Harris Park, through strong outreach programs to the wider community:

⁶ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 59.

⁷ Philip Hughes, Alan Black, Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, and Keith Castle, *Building Stronger Communities* (University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 180–194.

⁸ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 59.

There is a strong community spirit whose signs include the number of parish groups involving young and old, male and female, the vibrant Sunday liturgy, the life of the parish schools, the hospitality of the parish house, the work with immigrant groups to welcome them, the involvement with the wider Shepparton community and the other faiths in the town, the RCIA program and the Stronger programs for young people. All these are signs of new life, the spirit at work in the community. —Parish Priest, Shepparton.

- In **rural parishes** like Myall Coast, Cororooke and Mount Isa, a more close-knit community spirit prevailed, which was expressed through the support of parishioners for parish leaders and the lay-led liturgy in the parish, in the concern and care that parishioners had for one another, in the willingness of people to offer their help at occasions such as funerals, weddings and working bees, and in the regular communication and contact between the homebound and other parishioners:

[There is] practical care for people like visiting those who are lonely and in need. People are invited to help out. Parishioners keep an eye out for each other. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

- In **amalgamated or combined parishes** like Launceston and Myall Coast, each individual Mass centre had their own distinct sense of strong community. However, fostering a common community spirit throughout the parish was of paramount importance in order to unite people to form a cohesive parish identity. These parishes therefore expressed their strong community spirit primarily through shared events and celebrations, which brought people from the different Mass centres together:

[Community spirit is] seen in the different communities but we are trying to encourage one-community celebrations which is working very well. Also the reducing of Masses especially at big events like Easter and Christmas and the 10 year anniversary celebrations and getting the choirs together helps encourage that spirit. The deacon's ordination Mass also brought the parish together. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

Community spirit was also expressed in other ways such as through the welcoming attitude of greeters at Mass in parishes such as Narrabundah and Albany Creek, and their role in making newcomers and all people feel a part of the community; in after-Mass conversations in parishes such as Cororooke and Shepparton, when people lingered on to meet and engage with another; and through strong links between the school and worshipping community in parishes such as Warnervale and Kings Park. In

most parishes, a strong community spirit usually pervaded all aspects of parish life and was entrenched in the everyday routines through the inclusive, supportive and welcoming attitudes of parish leaders, staff members and parishioners in general. A staff member at Warnervale Parish described how this worked in his parish:

The liturgy is welcoming [through the] Power Point and responses; [there is] good guidance through the new translation; the music, photos, all the senses are involved ... There are active groups doing all kinds of apostolates across the age groups in the parish. When people are in trouble people do something about it, just quietly, but we have dedicated people who are there whenever people need help ... People are empowered to take leadership, and trusted, and there is a prophetic wisdom in with that; there is genuine trust that people will do the job.

The responses of the participants clearly showed that in each parish, parishioners were able to experience a strong sense of community through various opportunities being provided to them to build strong relationships with one another and by being encouraged to participate in the life of the parish. There was definitely a strong sense of inclusivity felt in all the parishes.

However, this is not to say that *all* parishioners in every parish felt the same. The experience of community largely depends on each person's sense of belonging and how closely they feel affiliated to the parish. There were a few participants who felt that a strong community spirit existed *to some extent only* in their parish and that there was a need to develop it further so that more people could feel part of the community. The reasons for this perceived lack of cohesiveness were largely due to certain challenges in building community that were unique to each parish. For example, Warnervale Parish, being a new parish, struggled to build closer connections with young families in the area. As one parishioner noted, “[Community spirit] is evident among a reasonable group of people. But there are a large number of young families that are not seen at Church but who believe that the school will see to the faith needs of the children”. Similarly, the parish priest believed that closer ties and support were needed to deepen relationships between these families in the parish:

People say there is [community spirit] but I'm not satisfied, I think it borders on passivity ... I think it needs to be more spirit-filled—where they are able to care a little bit more for each other and connect and support each other ... We're on the journey. At least now they feel welcomed. Their

definition of community would be at least I'm not excluded—I may not contribute but at least I'm welcomed.

A slightly different scenario existed at Launceston Parish, where getting parishioners to form one community was an ongoing challenge as people in each Mass centre still tended to continue associating only with members of their small community. A Parish Council member believed that the expression of community spirit depended on the occasion— *“For special events there is [community spirit]. Also, there is [a strong community spirit] in each individual setting (each church). But we need more enthusiasm though”*. The parish secretary, too, voiced similar concerns:

I sometimes wish there was more [community spirit]. We've tried to get care and concern groups going, we've got people to take communion to the ill, [we have] two family groups (have a range of old and young people), we have a cooking roster within the family group ... If and when we hear about someone who needs help we can do it—like cooking or driving lessons for the Africans. But Tasmanians tend to keep to themselves so it lacks a good community spirit. Within the Mass centres people know each other quite well. They still see themselves as part of the small parish rather than the one big one. That needs to be broken down a bit I think.

In Narrabundah Parish, the parish priest spoke about the struggle to build cohesiveness among the transient population in the parish:

Community spirit is strong but it could be better—there is a fair way to go. The challenge is to address the transient population in Canberra ... One-third of parish attenders are territorial—they live in the area. These numbers are reducing. Two-thirds attenders come from further afield. Newer families don't have direct connections with the parish but usually indirect—through children at school or parents in nursing homes.

These challenges show that building community within a parish is never an easy job. As Wittberg argues, this needs time, energy and financial resources, and requires sacrifices of personal comfort, friendship networks, finances and customary routines on the part of parish leaders and members, for the benefit of the whole parish.⁹ Despite this, the responses of the majority of participants indicate that the parishes in the study have been successful to a great extent in finding ways to build community among a significant proportion of the parish community. The next section will explore these activities in greater depth.

⁹ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 145.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Building community starts by building relationships among parishioners in the parish. Hughes, Black, Kaldor, Bellamy and Castle note that there are three types of relationships that are important for community life: 1) *bonds* – close friendships or family ties, 2) *bridges* – less intense relationships, and 3) *linkages* – individual connections with organisations or between organisations.¹⁰ One of the main ways in which community was built was by creating greater opportunities for these relationships to be developed and strengthened. As the leader of Myall Coast Parish noted, “*Part of building community is also forming community and I am working hard on offering parishioners as much variety as possible in the hope that different things will touch different people. I think that’s very important*”. In addition to offering variety in parish life, forming a common identity, facing and resolving conflicts and attracting and incorporating newcomers are other ways in which a parish community can be strengthened and maintained.¹¹ This helps create a stronger sense of belonging among members of the community that leads to greater satisfaction and better participation.

Sunday Mass is another important way in which parishes are able to foster a sense of community, when parishioners gather together in a common celebration of the Eucharist, visitors are welcomed into the parish, people participate through the various liturgical ministries and relationships are built and strengthened through fellowship at the after-Mass events. Apart from regular Sunday Mass however, there were many activities and programs in participating parishes that helped build community, as indicated by the responses of participants. These were:

- **Special liturgical events**, especially Family and Children’s Masses, special Masses such as the November Mass of Remembrance and sacramental Masses, Christmas and Easter celebrations and feast day Masses
- **Spiritual and faith formation programs and activities** such as retreats, missions, reflection groups organised during Advent and Lent, the RCIA and Bible study groups

¹⁰ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 46.

¹¹ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 114.

- **A variety of parish groups and their activities**, including care and concern groups, liturgical ministries and various cultural groups
- **Social events** such as parish dinners, after-Mass “cuppas”, Trivia nights, men’s breakfasts, working bees and parish feast celebrations
- **Outreach programs to the local community**, including soup kitchens, playgroups and the activities of groups like the St. Vincent de Paul Society
- **Joint school and parish activities** such as fetes, parish festivals, joint school and parish Masses and other school events that parishioners were invited to
- **Small community groups** such as cell groups, family groups, conversation groups and other small groups that meet in parishioners’ houses
- **Fundraising activities** such as bake sales and barbeques
- **Ecumenical activities** such as prayer days and social justice events

Most parishes had more than one way of building community, and while creating a range of events and activities could often be challenging and required a tremendous amount of time and resources, many parishes had been able to overcome this by involving volunteers and parish groups in the process. The parish priest of Harris Park, a very large urban parish, described the various community building activities developed in his parish:

On Tuesday night, we have the Divine Word Family. On Wednesdays, we have youth Bible discussion. On Thursdays, we have Adoration hour. On Friday, we have the Maronite Apostolate of Mary. On Saturdays we have the Fersan group for children from 1–3 pm. We have many social events—Dinner dances hosted by the youth every year (600 plus attending) and lunch for the disabled. We also have the Parish Festival Week which is a weeklong festivity in which all age groups participate. We get about 12,000 going through here during that week. We do Market Day, bread-baking, lunch for elders and a Feast Day barbeque with traditional food. We also have faith and other cultural events.

In rural parishes and smaller parishes as well, having different groups and many people involved in community building activities helped build relationships among a larger percentage of the parish population. In Mount Isa for example, a medium-sized remote area parish, the mix of community building activities was similar to that of Harris Park, although the types of programs and their frequency were developed to suit the needs and abilities of people in the community:

We have spirituality programs and different prayer groups—Charismatic, Filipino, Islander and Indigenous groups but we come together for celebrations and there’s always a morning tea or barbeque after. During the Multicultural Festival we pick a [cultural] group each year to focus on and that brings people out of the woodwork. [There are] opportunities to come together with the four Masses. This is important given that the nature of work in the area is shift work. [We also have] World Youth Day activities like the barbeque at Kmart or Bunnings, raffles, peeling onions before the Rodeo and watchhouse activities. There’s a hope that in the 12 month lead-up to World Youth Day that this involvement will stick afterwards too ... [We also ask] families if they would like to be rostered on for the preparation of the gifts at Masses to keep them involved after the program is over. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

This mix of large and small activities in a parish is seen an effective way of forming community. The larger events serve as a point of contact and bring people together and the smaller groups then build on those connections and strengthen relationships between people.¹² Apart from this, these activities also help parishioners share in the common identity and the “story” of the parish. This “story” is usually characterised by the unique character that each parish has through its liturgy and song, its shared activities, projects and celebrations, and emotions attached to art, symbols and places.¹³ Being able to involve more people in telling the story of why the parish exists, how they understand themselves and what they hope to accomplish together as a parish is an essential factor in forming a parish into a distinct community.¹⁴

Building a shared story is especially harder in multicultural parishes where people do not share a common inherited culture, and as Ammerman notes, it therefore requires a greater effort to be able to have as many “common conversations” as possible,¹⁵ in order to bring people together and help them feel a greater sense of belonging. Organising a range of parish events and activities that attract different people in different ways is very helpful in facilitating easier channels for them to feel a part of the parish community. As the parish priest of Kings Park Parish pointed out, “*What is important is that people feel part of something*”. In an effort to do that, his parish has tried to involve whole groups in participating regularly rather than focussing on individuals:

¹² Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 194.

¹³ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 114.

¹⁴ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 115.

¹⁵ Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith*, 269.

The Samoans play volleyball together almost every day of the week. The Sudanese meet on Friday nights. We are hoping to get a Sudanese choir going. They won't get lost in that context. They need a corporate identity.

This approach works well since it creates social bridges for different cultural groups to be a part of the parish community and empowers them by building trust and giving them a strong identity within the parish.¹⁶

While all parish activities involve people into the shared story to some extent or another, small community groups within the parish are able to facilitate this to a greater degree. Small groups help in building trust and goodwill among people that are important for developing strong bonds and they are particularly effective in urban areas.¹⁷ Faith-sharing groups, such as the Cell Groups in Narrabundah Parish and the Passionist Family Groups in Albany Creek, are examples of groups that are “consciously oriented toward community building”.¹⁸ As one Cell Group member explained, “people can get to know each other and share with each other outside of Mass ... share the living of Christian life. The Cell Groups offer prayer, song, Scripture and social aspects”. Apart from faith-sharing groups, across all the parishes there were various other small groups that played a major role in forming and deepening relationships among their members:

We have a Conversation Group that meets once a month for people who want to come together to share their life journey. The depth of sharing and interaction is wonderful. —Conversation Group member, Warnervale.

The RCIA is a key factor in the building up of community. The aim is for the parish to become an RCIA parish, “open to everybody, all inclusive”. It is a sign of the parish being able to welcome others into its midst. And in the process more and more parishioners are able to deepen their faith. —Parish Council member and RCIA member, Shepparton.

The Women's Shed is an opportunity to provide a place for meeting people, mostly to just sit and have a yarn and get to know other people. One person does china painting, and we all do it. Sometimes we make cards, sometimes we just yarn. —Pastoral Team member, Myall Coast.

¹⁶ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 74, 77.

¹⁷ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 55, 56, 194.

¹⁸ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 33.

Community Building for Children and Young People

In most parishes, building bonds among children and young people usually happens through parish family activities, through the school or at combined school and parish events. Parish fetes and festivals were generally well-attended by families from the parish and the local community as well. Children's activities such as games, rides and stalls were specially planned for such events. In most parishes, family Masses, Masses with Children's Liturgy, Sacramental Masses, and activities around these events, such as after-Mass "cuppas" or barbeques, were also very popular. Parishes like Myall Coast and Warnervale also had regular playgroups where very young children and their families could socialise in a comfortable environment. In Harris Park Parish, the Fersen¹⁹ faith education program catered for the social and community building needs of the children, through camps, excursions and other social activities. As one parent remarked, "*Fersen helps children to feel a sense of belonging deeper than a Mass can bring*". Making children (especially those who did not belong to the parish school) feel welcome at the Masses and other events and trying to include them and their families in liturgical ministries and other activities were the main ways in which parishes were able to build good relationships among and with them.

For young people in the parish, youth groups were generally the most successful in helping them build community bonds with one another. Many parishes ran successful youth groups that allowed young people to socialise and build friendships amidst an atmosphere of fun, sharing and learning. Fr P. discussed some community building aspects of the youth program at Launceston Parish:

There are two groups—the main one is for Years 7–12 ... and the other for young adults. The 7–12 youth group has a four day camp once a year. It's a basic level—trying to build relationships, bushwalking, having fun. There were lots of kids who came to Mass in different centres and thought they were the only ones. It was big eye-opener the first time—kids had sat next to one another at school and never knew that the other went for Mass. This has shifted massively over the years. Kids are proud of going to Mass and taking part in Church activities. We have a youth Mass once a month, youth group meetings and different activities each month. On a youth activity day

¹⁹ Fersen Al Adra is a branch of the Marian Family Sodality that aims at the spiritual formation of children aged 5–13 years. More information can be found at <http://www.olol.org.au/committees/fersen>.

you have about 50–60 kids. If we can strengthen the faith of those who are there, giving them ownership of the community, it's good.

Similar programs involving a range of groups for young people were also run at other big parishes and multicultural parishes such as Kings Park, Albany Creek, Harris Park, Narrabundah and Shepparton, and were the main sources of relationship building among young people. As M, a 16 year old youth group member from the “Stronger” program at Shepparton Parish exclaimed, “*For me, they're more of a culture than a program*”. In parishes that had regular youth Masses, there was a further opportunity for young people to extend these relationships to other parishioners in the community, through participation in various liturgical ministries and by regularly sharing in the life of the worshipping community. These bonds between young people and the rest of the parish community are important for the continuing success of any parish so that it sustains its vitality into the future through ongoing community participation.

Martinson, Black and Roberto found that youth ministry is the strongest when the whole Church community is involved and affirming of young people in the parish.²⁰ In many parishes, one of the key occasions for this intermingling between the youth and the rest of the parish was during the period leading up to World Youth Days when young people fundraised for their travel and parishioners helped support and encourage them. These activities had helped many parish communities to come together, and several participants spoke of the impact World Youth Days had on their parish:

[In the parish] World Youth Day 2011 has built community with all the ages getting involved to support the young people. —Parish Priest, Mount Isa.

We took a group of 13 to World Youth Day in Madrid and the support we received financially [from the parish] made this possible. [We are] now preparing for World Youth Day in Rio and preparations [are on] for this—making a contract, attending Mass, formation, fund raising so that nearly 30 are coming to Rio. Everyone has an activity —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

In 2005 World Youth Day Cologne the parish had more youth than any other parish in Australia. In Toronto ... per capita we had twice as many as Melbourne. That's had a significant impact on the parish as well in preparation and planning and afterwards as well. At the Sydney World Youth Day there were lots of families from the parish not just kids. —Parish Leader, Launceston.

²⁰ Roland D. Martinson, Wesley Black, and John Roberto, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry* (EYM Publishing, 2010).

These responses not only demonstrate the impact that organising and participating in World Youth Days has had on building community in these parishes, but also reveal the opportunities that exist during such events for bringing different people and different groups together to develop and increase their ties with one another and build on their connections to the parish. The activities of youth groups need not be seen solely as age-appropriate activities only, but some of them can often be developed to be important community building events for the whole parish. For example, in Harris Park, parish youth activities play an integral part in forming the strong community that exists. As the youth leader explains,

There is an indestructible community spirit in the parish ... especially when you talk of the activities of the youth. There is the Vinnies' van and their monthly visits to the nursing homes. They organise blood donations drives that they do every two weeks because there are a large group of donators. There are Bible discussions, games nights and other social activities planned by the youth ... They do fundraisers to support the parish. They have four fundraising events a year, like dinner dances and harbour cruises. They also have ... pizza and football night ... and a lot of other stuff to make the parish vibrant.

Using similar occasions and activities such as these to build community in a parish helps young people feel valued and appreciated and increases their sense of belonging—an important and distinctive aspect of community life.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Sense of belonging can best be described as the glue that “holds a parish together and enables parishioners to work together more effectively for the good of the parish”.²¹ This glue is created by mutual trust, shared values and experiences and common purposes that bind people together.²² Having a strong sense of belonging to a parish not only makes a person feel welcome and valued, but it also strengthens relationships between people, contributes to a parishioner’s sense of ownership and co-responsibility for the parish and fosters greater participation in parish life.²³

²¹ Dixon, “What Makes People Feel They Belong?,” 6.

²² Dixon, “What Makes People Feel They Belong?,” 6.

²³ Dixon, “What Makes People Feel They Belong?,” 6.

In Chapter Five, where the best aspects of parish life were discussed, experiencing a strong sense of belonging and community was the most favoured aspect chosen by about half the participants. This indicated that participating parishes have been highly successful in developing this quality among many of their parishioners. Several participants shared their experiences of the deep sense of belonging that they felt in their parish:

[One of the best things about the parish is] the feeling of belonging—I don't call it a parish, I call it a family. The liturgical celebrations and the social celebrations are very welcoming for everyone to be part of. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

[The parish has] always been a welcoming place where I can belong, my children can belong, where other people can belong and international visitors can walk in and belong—e.g. visitors from Denmark who came for four weeks. Everyone belongs. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

I get so much out of the parish. It gives me something to look forward to—belonging and that sense of community and parish life. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

[Our parish] looks the same as every other but there is something about the sense of belonging, welcome, we miss you when you're not there that is special about this parish. It is home. —Parishioner, Warnervale.

Research done by Dixon and Dharmalingam on Australian Mass attenders' sense of belonging found that it is greatly influenced by parish leaders through their ability to communicate a clear vision for the parish, and to get people to work together, and their readiness in encouraging people to use their gifts and skills in the parish.²⁴ In addition, celebrating Mass in a manner that allows people to experience inspiration, joy and sense of God's presence, quality preaching and the style of presiding at Mass also enhances this feeling of belonging.²⁵ However, the researchers also noted that promoting a sense of belonging was not only the responsibility of the parish priest alone, but also that of pastoral associates, the parish secretary, members of the parish pastoral councils, leaders of liturgy planning groups and other leaders in the parish, through their welcoming, encouraging and empowering attitudes towards parishioners. This aspect of sharing the responsibility of promoting a sense of belonging is a very important criterion for developing the vitality of a parish. Different people touch the lives of others in different ways, and the greater the number of people in a parish who

²⁴ Dixon, "What Makes People Feel They Belong?," 3.

²⁵ Dixon, "What Makes People Feel They Belong?," 3.

are able to encourage, motivate, and empower others in a life-giving manner, the more will be the number of people who feel valued as an integral part of the parish community.

This importance of sharing the responsibility of promoting a sense of belonging in a parish was strongly reflected in some of the stories of the participants as they explained how they came to develop strong feelings of belonging to their parish when their lives were touched in positive manner by different parishioners. E's story is good example. E. is a parish group leader in Mount Isa Parish and she shared her story thus:

When I first came to Mount Isa I got involved in Aboriginal Health through CatholicCare and my son was born that year ... there were little bills [to pay] and I had to walk to the hospital. Once a little Sister (a nun) pulled up in her car and took us and dropped us off at the hospital. Later she showed us where they lived and said if we had any needs we could come and see her. I was an Anglican then and when I had to get the children prepared for their Sacraments, I felt I belonged here and I got their Sacraments done here. It was the welcoming that made you feel like you were part of the family, like you belonged.

E further explained the impact that being involved in the parish has had on her life:

It's very big. It changed my family. My husband used to drink a lot and there was domestic violence. This place held us together. The retreat, the one-on-one with C. my mentor, the nuns, all made a big impact. I had all the parishioners and Fr L. praying for my family. There was big change in my home. I haven't filed for domestic violence in 10 years now. We are a positive, happy family.

E's story clearly demonstrates how one person's life is affected by many people in a parish and when all these relationships are positive, it greatly assists in increasing a person's sense of belonging. The more bonds a person is able to build with others in the parish, the greater is their experience of a sense of belonging.

There are several people in a parish who are able to influence such changes. Primarily, these are people in leadership positions and those who have important roles such as group leaders and parish staff. But there are also others who may have smaller roles, such as group members or regular parishioners, and who, while seeming to be less important than others, nevertheless play a crucial part in the overall experience of parish life. A good example of this is Shepparton Parish, and the stories of two

participants N. and D., who belong to the parish. Their work is usually done quietly and without fuss, but they nevertheless have indispensable roles to play in contributing to the overall vitality of their parish. N. is a Parish Council member, while D. is the parish housekeeper. Each of them has their own ways of improving parishioners' sense of belonging and building up community through the work they do:

N: I work with the African communities in particular which can be hard going, but is a key element in building up the community. I've come to know the families and where they live and pick them up to bring them to Church or to take young people to the YCS (Young Christian Students) meeting. 20 of the young Africans belong to YCS—some of them not Catholic—and it's a social justice group that they have made their own.

D: I just chat and talk to people and provide food and drink to those who come in to or stay in the parish house ... I see the parish house, and the "Fish and Chips Group" ... and the annual diocesan dinner for housekeepers and priests as ways to build up community by connecting up people and inviting everyone, in many different ways, into the life of the Church.

Through N's work with the Africans and D's work with the people she encounters at the parish house, Shepparton Parish is able to affect the lives of these people. And along with similar work done by many other people in the parish, Shepparton continues to develop and improve a sense of belonging among parishioners and other people, build community and grow in its vitality. As a parish staff member rightly observes,

The parish has a cascading set of ministries flowing down from the liturgy. Each layer builds community. The liturgy plus the ministry to the elderly plus the involvement of children in the Mass, as well as the outreach to youth through Fr I.—he visits schools to run a Mass every couple of months so that it is their Mass and their parents will come, even if not "churched"—plus the various groups that gather under the umbrella of the parish all develop the community of St Brendan's.

Similar stories of a deep sense of belonging and community among many parishioners were noted in all the other parishes, so that there was a great degree of satisfaction among the participants in the study. A majority (66 out of 69) answered that they were generally satisfied with their parish, with a large number of respondents indicating that they were "very" or "extremely" satisfied:

I enjoy the sense of community—the hugs and the greetings. —Parishioner, Cororooke.

[The best thing about the parish is] the community and sense of belonging. I've been involved in the primary and secondary schools in a social way and through the school parents and friends have been able to build connections. —Parish group leader, Warnervale.

We are all welcomed and feel part of the community. It is one of the reasons I moved back to the area ... I could get involved if I wanted to, and I didn't feel like I was stepping on anyone's toes. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

All the parish leaders also agreed that the main core of participating parishioners were generally satisfied with the parish, although there were still many others who did not participate and greater work need to be done to include such people in the community. What is important to remember however, is that the development of such relationships, whether they are internal or external, are to a great extent facilitated by two qualities that are particularly important for parishes to have—being welcoming and hospitable, and being inclusive and encouraging a sharing of gifts and skills among parishioners. These two aspects that are critical for improving a person's sense of belonging are studied in greater detail in the following sections.

WELCOMING AND HOSPITALITY

The Catholic parish is a place where Catholics from different walks of life gather to worship. It is important therefore that people are made to feel welcome if they are to begin to feel a sense of belonging to the parish community. Being welcomed is particularly essential for people who are new to the parish, migrants and refugees, visitors, single parents and other individuals for whom the parish plays a vital role in their social network. For such people, welcoming helps facilitate the creation of social bridges into the parish community.

Being welcoming was an approach that participating parishes were really good at as indicated by the responses of participants in Chapter Five that discussed the best and most vital aspects of parish life. Many parishes had made conscious choices in developing a welcoming attitude to all people:

To welcome people is central to the parish mission statement. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

[The purpose of our parish is] to make welcome and include everyone who comes to Mass. —Parish Council member, Albany Creek.

[The purpose of our parish is] to develop sense of community, to welcome people and to be open to all. —Parishioner, Warnervale.

There were many ways by which people were welcomed into the parish, but the four main ones found in most parishes were through:

1. **Welcoming at Mass** – The weekend liturgies are usually the best attended regular events in a parish and this is a place when visitors, newly-arrived immigrants and new parishioners are most likely to be encountered. All the parishes apart from Harris Park had welcoming committees or greeters who stood at the entrance of the Church and greeted people as they came in to Mass and offered them a bulletin. In Harris Park, this ministry was not apparent though the parish usually had ushers for larger Masses. In Albany Creek Parish, part of a greeter's job also included talking to new people after Mass in order to get to know them better, introduce them to other people and help them find information on parish life or access parish services. As one greeter at the parish remarked, "*[Hospitality] starts with a cup of tea after Mass ... people just stop for a chat and you can then get talking to them and get to know them better and you can introduce them to other people so they feel welcome*". Kings Park Parish had a special Welcome Desk in the foyer that was manned before and after every Mass, where people could obtain information and newcomers were given a Welcome Pack with a letter of welcome and parish information. New parishioners were also invited to a lunch with families who had been there for some time so that they could start making friends in the parish.
2. **The RCIA program** – The RCIA program was another way through which people, who wanted to learn more about the faith and the parish community, were invited in. As one parish group leader at Shepparton noted, "*It's a prime way of welcoming people into the parish. You welcome people at depth, and then enable them to get involved. It enables newcomers to commit to something*". In most parishes, people who were welcomed through the RCIA included people of other Christian and faith traditions, including parents of

children in the parish schools and people preparing to marry a Catholic and baptised Catholics who wished to complete their Sacraments.

3. **Sacramental events** – The reception of Sacraments and special celebrations such as Christmas and Easter are occasions when families gather together and attend Mass, even if they are not regular participants in parish life. Marriage, Baptism, illness and funerals are also among key moments of welcome. In most parishes, there were various ministries developed around these Sacraments such as the Baptism preparation groups, Marriage preparation groups and bereavement and care and concern groups. The members of these groups often took great care to help people participate in and feel a part of such events. This was very evident in some of the participants' responses. As one group member at Mount Isa remarked *"The sacramental program is a lot of work but taking 60 children through Sacraments in a parish and family based program facilitated through the schools rather than an isolated thing in a classroom is rewarding"*. Similarly, a parish leader at Warnervale explained, *"All the preparation for sacraments, Baptism, Confirmations and Eucharist is much more interactive—family centred and parish based—which has increased vitality"*. Another parish staff member at Warnervale Parish who volunteered on the parish sacramental program described her experience, *"I also want to let state school children feel as comfortable in our parish as our school students. That's why I love the voluntary sacramental preparation work so much. That's my passion—making them feel at home"*.

4. **Social and community events** – Parish events such as fetes, dinner dances and other social gatherings were other ways by which parishioners welcomed and interacted with people in the community. As a staff member from Warnervale Parish explained, *"We run a big Family Fun day once a year. It runs off a Year 5 Mass and afterwards we have rides and stalls and things like that. We need lots of support for that and we get parents and parishioners to help out It's not a fundraising day but a community building day ... We get a lot of people from the community and having the Mass is good too. We get a greater attendance at that Mass"*. Some parishes had special events set up to help new people integrate into parish life. The parish priest at Kings Park Parish described the

events at his parish, *“For the prep families there is a welcome barbecue and opportunities to mix and meet. New parishioners are invited to a lunch with families who have been here for some time. We have “coffee hospitality”—encouraging people to go and sit with new people.* Similar special gestures of welcome and hospitality could be found in most of the other parishes.

Several participants said they had felt drawn into the life of the parish by being welcomed into the community through different activities and events. All of these participants were now contributing regularly to parish life through different activities, which demonstrated how the welcoming attitude of parishes had been successful in translating into forming strong bonds with these parishioners:

Coming into the parish I always felt invited to be involved ... There is no conflict. It's happy, friendly, welcoming, vibrant ... a beautiful feel ... unique because we are so far out here. People don't have families. And unlike other parishes where people have social groups outside the Church and the parish has lost that, here it's still a social hub. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

The Friendship Committee welcomes everyone to Church—A (my wife) and I experienced that at both the Masses we attended—and there is a monthly lunch for new parishioners put on by the Friendship Committee. —Parishioner, Shepparton.

The greeting and welcoming was a big thing for me that made me come in and kept me coming ... It was because of my teenage daughter I came in through the sacramental program ... Because I was welcomed into the parish, I want others to make that connection and be welcomed in as I was. I had been away from Church for a long time and would just go home after Mass. But here it was different, very friendly. The greeters at the door, getting to know the people and Fr I. making sure everyone greets everyone before Mass. That makes you get to know people. —Parish staff, Warnervale.

We have a formed a committee—the Sudanese Welcome Group—to help people to settle, to share information and give encouragement ... We have our own choir. Most families have children at the school. They receive help from the school in relation to fees. —Parish group leader, Kings Park.

Welcoming and hospitality is not meant only for new members, but it also must be extended to regular parishioners and all people in parish community as well. Continuing to treat parishioners in a warm and friendly manner ensures a building of stronger bonds among parishioners. As a staff member at Shepparton Parish remarked, hospitality is *“being open to anyone who comes along and looking after them, and*

providing occasions for people to get together and care for one another in different small groups round the parish”.

It is particularly important for parish leaders and parish staff to have a hospitable attitude in their daily dealings with members of the parish community. This makes parishioners want to return to the parish and participate more. There were many ways through which participating parishes were able to convey this sense of hospitality and caring to their parishioners and each parish had developed its own special ways in making them feel cared for. Some of these included:

1. **Accommodating children and people with special needs at Mass** – For example, at Albany Creek Parish, the welcoming committee would help guide people with walkers and wheelchairs to their places.
2. Making sure that the parish house was a hospitable place **and that visitors who stayed or visited there were made to feel welcome** – This is was a special initiative at Shepparton Parish which had several diocesan meetings held at the parish house due to its central location.
3. **Through parish morning teas, dinners and barbeques** – Some parishes had regular dinner for certain groups in the community. For example, in Kings Park, the parish priest has a dinner for the grief group and there was another regular barbecue with the Plus 22 group four or five times a year. Similarly, in Warnervale Parish, the students studying hospitality at the college would sometimes cook a morning tea for the mothers and children in the playgroup in order to build bonds between the school, parish and the people in the local community.
4. **Through providing food for needy families** – There were many parishes that had special parish groups or volunteers who would cook food for families that needed it. For example, Cororooke Parish had an informal food bank set up with meals provided for families who were bereaved or who had sick children.

5. **Making sure the parish itself was cared for and looked inviting** – Many parishes had volunteers who would help fix up things around the parish to make it look presentable. As a parish member at Kings Park Parish remarked, *“For us hospitality and welcoming means a lot of sharing, a lot of support for people. People will stand up and take note of what needs to be done and then just do it”*. Similarly the parish secretary at Mount Isa explained, *“The look of the place is important. If you have a good tidy ground people want to come to it ... We take care to make it look loved ... people will then walk in”*.

In most parishes, parishioners were very happy with the parish staff and found them caring and welcoming. A majority (87 out of 116) of participants reported good relations with staff members in their parish. They generally saw their staff members as being “friendly”, “patient.” and willing and available to help:

The parish secretary is part of the school office staff and so is connected administratively. We share all facilities with the parish, right down to photocopying the parish bulletin, providing meeting rooms for all the parish needs and the facilities of the school to support the liturgies. — Parish school staff, Warnervale.

It's [the parish] doing well because the staff and people who work here are very welcoming. People are more able to open up and say, “How are you? How was your day?” And people come because of that and they know assistance will be given to them. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

Hospitality in the parish helps create reciprocity and altruism which are two important factors in community building that strengthen social bridges.²⁶ Due to the welcoming and hospitality they received at the parishes, parishioners were generally quite happy to participate in parish life. Most participants believed that their social needs were being met through the many parish events and activities that were regularly organised. The most common social activities found in the parishes included after-Mass “cuppas”, parish dinners or brunches organised for special groups of people, social nights, dinner dances and other social activities organised by the parish. Special social groups had been formed in some parishes, for example, the Mothers For Teenagers (MOTS) Group in Launceston Parish or the “Fish and Chips” group in Shepparton Parish. Social activities for young people included excursions, camps, retreats and other youth group activities.

²⁶ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 74–75.

Several participants indicated that they had been able to form good friendships and meaningful relationship through their interactions with other people in the parish. These were generally people who had been involved in the parish for some time:

I have been able to make lots of friends. There are lots of older people ... and they love to get to know you and you get to meet more people as well.
—Parishioner, Albany Creek.

I came here with no real role and gradually got to know people. I found that the Conversation Group was just what I wanted because it gave me a chance to get to know people at a deep level, to be in the community as a person, not a worker. The Conversation Group is my community, my family.
—Parish staff, Warnervale.

In general, it was noted that:

- People of similar cultures were able to make friends and build relationships more easily. This is why a greater number of people in Harris Park Parish reported higher levels of connectivity and belonging. In multicultural parishes, there was greater effort needed by people to meet and get to know people from other cultures since people of different cultural groups generally tended to mingle with people from their own culture.
- People who attended the same weekend Mass regularly were generally able to make friends with other people who also attended that Mass regularly.
- The social needs of young people in the parishes were met to a large extent by youth groups and their activities. This created a problem for young people in parishes that did not have youth groups, who tended to feel left out.
- Across all the parishes, there were very few social activities for young adults in their 20's or 30's unless there was a parish young adult group or if the parish had special activities planned for this age group (for example, the special after-Mass brunch for young families in Harris Park Parish).

INCLUSION AND A SHARING OF GIFTS AND SKILLS

Being an inclusive parish is very important so that all people within the parish feel valued as members of the community. In Chapter Five, participants viewed the inclusive attitude of their parish as one of the main reasons that contributed to its vitality. There were several types of inclusivity discussed in detail in that chapter, that varied from parish to parish, and that were dependent on the demographics of the parish community. The five types of inclusivity that were discussed were:

1. Inclusivity between various age groups
2. Inclusivity between different cultural communities
3. Inclusivity between the school community and the worshipping community
4. Inclusivity between parishioners from different areas in the parish
5. Inclusivity between regular parishioners and transient Mass attenders or other community groups

It was also noted that while gender inclusivity is an issue among some Australian Catholics, this was not raised in the responses of participants in this study, suggesting that it is not an issue for them.

There are several ways in which parishes can include people from different groups within the parish community. Most of these ways, such as parish dinners and barbeques, have been discussed earlier in the section on welcoming and hospitality. However, Wittberg notes that one way in which parish leaders can create greater community is by making sure that the lines of communication are kept as open and transparent as possible, in order to help encourage people in the direction of stronger community engagement.²⁷

Good communication was highly valued by many participants in the study, and there were a few participants who noted that the success of their parish was due to good communication between the leaders, parish staff, parish groups and parishioners. As a staff member at Mount Isa Parish remarked, “*Communication is essential. Different*

²⁷ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 146.

groups work independently and come back when we need to share the work or experience.s.”

Communication is particularly important for amalgamated parishes and parishes with more than one Mass centre. Keeping people informed about events and other important parish notices ensures that they all feel included in the community. For such parishes in the study, good communication was a critical aspect of the amalgamation process and the forming of one parish community, and had contributed significantly to the vitality of the parish:

[One of the best things about the parish is] communication. People are kept informed about what's happening. This leads to more ownership and increases their sense of belonging even after the parish has been amalgamated. Although there were challenges but now people feel comfortable going to different Mass centres. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

Communication between the three centres has been excellent. It gives it a feeling of togetherness. —Parish Council member, Myall Coast.

All the parishes in the study had three main ways of communicating with their members. These were through:

1. **Newsletters** – Most parishes had two or four page bulletins that were made available to parishioners at every weekend Mass. Parishes such as Narrabundah and Kings Park had larger bulletins available during Christmas and Easter. In Kings Park these larger bulletins were hand-delivered to all the homes in the parish (about 13,500). Harris Park, being a very large parish, had a special newsletter group to organise the weekly bulletins which were usually quite extensive and contained articles both in English and Arabic.
2. **Parish notices** – Parish notices were usually read out at every weekend Mass by the presider at Mass or a member of the parish. These usually contained the names of the sick and the recently deceased members and highlighted upcoming events or activities.

3. **Websites** – All the parishes had websites although the web content differed from parish to parish. General information on Mass times and the location and contact details of the parish was found on all websites. Parishes like Cororooke and Launceston had one page websites while the websites of Harris Park, Kings Park, Narrabundah, Shepparton and Albany Creek parishes were very extensive and offered a range of information and resources. These included information on parish groups, spirituality and faith formation resources, access to frequently used parish forms and downloadable newsletters amongst a host of other resources. Also, as I noted in Chapter Six, the resources, such as recorded talks and homilies, found on Harris Park, Shepparton and Narrabundah websites ensured that the parishes were able to communicate with people in the wider community as well. Parishes such as Harris Park, Kings Park, Warnervale, Mount Isa, Albany Creek and Launceston also had community pages on Facebook, which helped them make parish information available to a younger generation in a mode that was more familiar to them.

Even with all these modes of communication, many participants still felt that communication needed to be improved and developed as changes occurred across the parish. In general, good communication processes were noted in parishes like Launceston, Myall Coast, Shepparton, Kings Park and Harris Park where procedures had been put into place for a two-way communication between parish leaders and parishioners. Participants from these parishes indicated that they were regularly kept informed with what was happening in the parish and there was an opportunity provided to them to make their opinions heard. For example, in Kings Park Parish one way in which this was done was by keeping the parish office open seven days a week, staffed by volunteers, so that it was easily accessible to parishioners and suited different peoples' needs.

For big parishes and parishes with many ministries and groups, communicating between various groups was sometimes difficult and required much tact and patience, particularly from parish staff:

Because we have so many ministries, we need to work out how everyone knows what's going on. Also we really need to be careful about the school-parish connection, not to step on people's toes. It's been better since we

started. We had to break into previously established ties and let people know who we are and what we do and it's getting better. —Parish staff, Warnervale.

[We have] nine choir teams so there is a give and take about songs in the Advent booklet ... Email communication is useful with nine people but if it's too much back and forth then we have to stop and consider how the parish will be involved. We come back to what the congregation wants to sing and how well they will participate. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

Another problem of communicating in big parishes was the fact that communication could become largely impersonal and hamper relationship-building:

Communication needs to be opened up a little more between every facet, every level of ministry. People don't talk to one another. We need to bring a more personal touch back into our communication, not just text messages, emailing and Facebook. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

In the other parishes, participants generally believed that the communication from their parish leaders and the Parish Council to the people needed to be developed more. They also felt that more procedures needed to be in place for further consultation with parishioners in the decision-making process:

A stronger communication with the stakeholders within the parish [is needed] ... The Parish Pastoral Council needs more structure, it needs to become more formal and meet more regularly and widen membership, bringing more people into the discussion. —Parish staff, Cororooke.

The parish will be well prepared for the future providing the clergy keep an openness to any ministry or service that is offered and negotiate with parishioners. There needs to be open, flexible, alive and good communication. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

Some Parish Council members also voiced a need for better two-way communication between themselves and the parishioners and parish groups. This lack of communication among parish leaders, Parish Council members and parishioners indicated a common area of concern where conflict was likely to occur in many parishes. I shall examine this issue in greater depth in Chapter Nine. It is important to note however, that a breakdown in communication at this level could hamper relationships and community building efforts and lead to a loss of trust and confidence in parish leadership.

Sharing Gifts and Skills

In all the parishes, there was wide evidence of parishioners being encouraged by their parish leaders to share their gifts and skills for the benefit of the parish. There are usually different ways in which people of different ages and cultures respond to such an invitation to share their gifts. Some people prefer to share common skills, like cooking or baking, while others prefer to use their unique individual skills such as playing a musical instrument or utilising their leadership capabilities. What is important is that opportunities are made available for all people to use their skills, and that they are empowered in their roles in the parish. Many parishioners commented on how their parish leaders invited people to participate, were open to hearing about new ideas and were willing to let parishioners start new projects or get involved in existing ones:

People are empowered to go out and do the things they do. People go to Fr P. and say, “I would like to do such and such” and then with consultation with the Parish Council, it would come about. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

Fr M. encourages involvement. He has a “hands on” approach ... He encourages groups, choirs. A broad cross-section of people is involved. —Parishioner, Kings Park.

There were also a few parishioners who shared how they had been invited by their parish priest to use their skills in the service of the parish. Following are two examples of parishioners from Warnervale and Shepparton parishes:

I got tapped on the shoulder. Initially I might have mentioned to Fr B. that I had accounting qualifications and he said, “Well, why don't you come on board?” ... Fr I. then asked me if I would like to be on the Parish Council. Then they wanted a Chair and wanted a younger person and they very quickly voted me into this position. —Parish Council leader, Warnervale.

I answered a job advertisement for a pastoral associate...was encouraged to apply for this post; interviewed by the parish priest who then asked me to put in a formal application ... I won the position after this process. It's been an amazing journey of faith for me ... I am very comfortable with the match of my role with my personal gifts and talents as these have progressively become identified, recognised and “owned” —Parish staff, Shepparton.

The responses of parishioners reveal the extent to which they valued being able to use their talents in the service of the parish. This was encouraging and helpful not only to

them but also to the parish leaders as well. Many parish leaders used a discernment of gifts and skills as the key tool to develop leaders in their parish or to invite parishioners to participate as members of parish groups. In most cases, they allowed people to determine what their skills were and then decide where they would like to fit in. As the parish priest of Warnervale noted, *“I just encourage people that if you've got a gift for something, you just coordinate and use those gifts. And you've got a lot of people who double up and do different things as well”*. In Launceston, the parish priest had found that using the process of a discernment of gifts and skills greatly enhanced the quality of members in the Parish Council:

The Parish Pastoral Council used to be representative and I don't believe that is the optimum way to go ... So we did the Reflection and Discernment process for people to decide whether that is what they are called to. You do take a risk but generally you end up with a group who see it as a living out of their faith life. And that is a big strength in the parish. It's now a good group with good people with good gifts.

Similarly, in Cororooke, the process was used in the determination of the parish coordinators:

The appointment of parish coordinators involves the whole parish. The parishioners nominate potential candidates and then a discernment of gifts process is used to determine who the new coordinator will be. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

Parishes like Narrabundah and Shepparton conduct the formal “Called and Gifted” program²⁸ in the parish to help parishioners to discern their talents:

We run the “Called and Gifted” program twice a year. It helps lay people know their gifts and how to develop it to serve in the parish or outside the parish ... we put lay people into leadership positions, creating a culture of leadership, through the prayer cells that are meant to expand and require new leaders all the time. —Parish Priest, Narrabundah.

All the above responses indicate that many parishes had found the process of encouraging and empowering parishioners to use their gifts and skills and delegating authority to them to make decisions as indispensable for greater participation in parish life. This was a process that was greatly valued by both parishioners and parish leaders

²⁸ The Called & Gifted Discernment Process is a program developed by the Catherine of Siena Institute in 1993 to help ordinary lay Catholics discern their charisms. For more information see Catherine of Siena Institute, “Called and Gifted”, Catherine of Siena Institute <http://www.siena.org/Called-Gifted/called-a-gifted> [accessed 13 January 2014].

alike and in parishes like Cororooke, Albany Creek and Shepparton, there had been a succession of parish leaders who supported and encouraged this attitude. Staff members from these parishes noted that this helped empower their parishioners enormously, so that they were now able to carry it forward and empower others:

Successive PPs, Fathers A., I. and S., have all allowed people's gifts, talents and ways to approach God to flourish and to allow them to find the best way to outreach to the community; there has been/is great acceptance of diversity and respect of individual. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

Our stewardship program is a way of life that we have adopted in our parish, we try to address four main issues—receive gifts gratefully, cultivate them, share them with others, and return them with increases to God—and this is all done through an attitude of gratitude designed to build up the Kingdom of God. —Parish staff, Albany Creek.

Sister L. set up the people to use their gifts. People have a network set up, and will take the parish forward. There is a spirit of "I can do this". —Parish staff, Cororooke.

The role of sharing of gifts and skills in the development of leaders in a parish will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Nine. For the purpose of building community, it is important to note that this sharing is vital to the growth and development of the parish. As well, respecting differences and learning to accommodate diversity were two significant attitudes of parish leaders that helped build the parish community and promote greater participation.

Previous research has shown that empowering leadership is strongly related to parish involvement, especially in urban parishes.²⁹ The participants' responses in this study indicate that even in rural parishes, such as Cororooke and Myall Coast, an attitude of encouragement was fundamental to the continued survival and growth of the parish. In Cororooke, the whole community was enhanced by the life of the parish through people being empowered to participate in every aspect of parish life. In other parishes such as Kings Park, the accommodation of diversity and the promotion of numerous parish groups had significantly contributed to greater participation. In most participating parishes, leaders estimated that the percentage of people involved in active participation³⁰ ranged from 10 to 30 per cent in the larger parishes and from 50 to 80

²⁹ Dixon, "Ingenious Communities," (PhD), 198.

³⁰ Active participation here means participation in parish life beyond regular attendance at Sunday Mass. It involves voluntary participation in parish groups or ministries or in some other area of parish life.

per cent in smaller parishes like Cororooke. Certainly the range of active parish groups and ministries that exist in each parish and the responses of participants that indicated the presence of a strong community seem to support this.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BUILDING, HOSPITALITY AND INCLUSION IN ENHANCING PARISH LIFE

A strong parish community whose members are actively involved in parish life and open to welcoming others are an asset to any parish. The common themes that emerged from the investigations into the community building and welcoming qualities of participating parishes were as follows:

- 1. A strong community built through a network of lay involvement and relationship-building activities is a great contributor to parish vitality.**

All the parishes in the study evidenced a strong community through the combined efforts of parishioners, leaders and parish groups who worked together to build the parish and enhance its vitality. Different parishes had different expressions of a strong community but all of them had the right people in important places to help foster community at many levels. Most parishioners experienced community through the various opportunities provided to them for building relationships with others and by being encouraged to participate in parish life. Building a strong, united community was particularly important for multicultural parishes and parishes with more than one community. There were challenges to building a strong community spirit that were identified particularly in new parishes, amalgamated parishes and parishes with transient populations.

- 2. Community building activities were appropriate to the culture, context and age-groups in the parish.**

Most parishes were successful in building community through a variety of big and small activities, groups and programs where people could develop friendships and build relationships with one another. Creating activities for

different cultural groups was particularly effective in multicultural communities. Small groups were seen to be very useful in building deeper bonds in multicultural and large parishes. World Youth Day activities were identified as being particular occasions to help young people build connections with other age groups, and many youth activities in Harris Park Parish were exemplary in this regard. There was a definite need however to expand activities to cater for people in the 20's and 30's age group which was largely underdeveloped in most parishes.

3. Developing a sense of belonging among parishioners was a shared responsibility in the parish.

The study has revealed that a parishioner's sense of belonging is influenced by a variety of people in the parish. Improving the sense of belonging of people in the community is therefore seen to be the joint responsibility of parish leaders, staff, group leaders and parishioners alike. Through positive interactions with many different people many participants had been able to deepen their own sense of belonging.

4. An attitude of welcoming and hospitality contributed to the building of social bridges in the parish.

Having a welcoming and hospitable attitude especially to newcomers, visitors and people from the wider community was a priority in all parishes. This welcoming attitude was constantly practised by a range of people, particularly parish staff and parish leaders, and was evident in numerous places, activities and events.

5. Being inclusive and encouraging a sharing of gifts and skills greatly contributed to greater participation in parishes.

All the parishes sought to be inclusive of all members of the parish community and were keen to develop better lines of communication between parish leaders, parishioners and parish groups. There was a particular need identified for greater communication and consultation among parish leaders and members of the Parish Council, and better transmission of decisions to the rest of the parish.

There was a great appreciation of parishioners' gifts and skills, and leaders encouraged parishioners to share these for the benefit of the parish. Many leaders used this process widely and as a result many participants indicated that they felt inspired to participate actively in parish life and were greatly satisfied in doing so. The greatest levels of participation were seen in Cororooke Parish where successive leaders had adopted this attitude and lay leadership was developed to a great extent.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the data collected in participating parishes in relation to two measures of vitality that dealt with nurturing spiritual fellowship and community bonds, and encouraging welcoming, hospitality and a sharing of gifts and skills. It can often be challenge not only to build community in a parish but to maintain it as well. Most parishes maintained a strong core community group, while at the same time being open and welcoming to all those who wished to participate. There were many opportunities for parishioners to build bonds with one another within the parish. Most participants indicated that they experienced a strong sense of community in their parish and were happy with the level of encouragement and freedom given to them by parish leaders to participate in areas of parish life that they felt called to. Parishes continued to work on ways in which they could promote involvement and communication with others in the community. This openness to others was a key strength of these parishes, since, in the process of promoting homogeneity inside a parish, members can sometimes exclude others and tend to associate themselves only with like-minded fellow parishioners.³¹ It is important therefore to build linkages and connections with others outside the parish boundaries in order to avoid these pitfalls. The next chapter will look at these connections more deeply as it examines the outwardly focussed aspects of parish life, including mission and evangelisation activities and service and outreach initiatives.

³¹ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 55–56.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MISSION AND OUTREACH

The previous chapter discussed the two measures of vitality dealing with the building and maintaining of a strong parish community and being welcoming and hospitable to all. A parish's welcoming attitude to people from within and outside the parish was seen as one of its main strengths in developing vitality. This chapter will examine some of the parish's links and associations with others in the wider, local community through the data collected in relation to the fifth and sixth measures of vitality:

5. Parishioners are aware of and are formed in their commitment to mission and evangelisation.
6. Practical and diverse service/outreach initiatives are practiced.

Being missionary by its very nature,¹ the Church continues the mission of Christ to preach the Gospel to all nations.² One common way it undertakes such work is through "missions" to preach the Good News to people or groups who do not yet believe in Christ, in areas where the Church has not yet been established.³ In Australia, such missions were established in the early days of settlement,⁴ but with the spread of Christianity over the years, by 1976 Australia was no longer considered a mission country.⁵ However the missionary work of the Church continued in the form of evangelisation. Evangelisation encompasses the proclamation of the Gospel to the unchurched within our own society and the ongoing conversion of those who already follow Christ,⁶ and it is therefore particularly relevant in contemporary Australian

¹ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, n. 2.

² Mk 16:15 and Mt 28:18.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter (1990)
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html [accessed 19 June 2014], n. 34.

⁴ Christopher. Dowd, *Rome in Australia: The Papacy and Conflict in the Australian Catholic Missions, 1834-1884* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 13.

⁵ Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney, "Key Dates in Our History", Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney
http://www.sydneycatholic.org/about/key_dates_in_our_history.shtml [accessed 8 August 2013].

⁶ Cardinal Thomas Williams, "Mission and Evangelization - A Pacific Experience," in *Mission and Evangelization: Vision of the Cardinals*, ed. Michael A. Hayes (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), 5.

society. Evangelisation is “the grace and vocation proper to the Church”,⁷ and Paul VI distinguishes several elements that make up its full reality, which are conversion, witness of life, proclamation, adherence to the truth, entry into the community of believers, celebration of the Sacraments and transformation.⁸ In addition he notes that evangelisation must first begin within the Church by the believers themselves being evangelised if they are to become credible evangelisers in the world.⁹

This first section of this chapter focusses on the missionary and evangelising activities of parishes in the study. I examine the participants’ responses to questions asked about the purpose of their parish, with a view to understanding the relevance of mission in parish life. Next, I explore the missionary aspects of the parishes, particularly their adaptation to cultural needs within the local community. I also examine the range of their missionary activity within the local community, the diocese and their support of overseas missionary work. Finally, I explore some of the ecumenical activities that occur in these parishes.

The second section of this chapter which reviews the charitable and outreach activities of participating parishes begins by looking at the services provided in this area by parish groups. Next, I examine the ways in which parishes look after people with special needs, particularly the sick and the elderly, and their processes of attending to individual needs in the community. The concluding section of the chapter draws out some key themes that arise from these findings.

MISSION AND EVANGELISATION

Parishes are the primary agents of evangelisation in a local community where the missionary action of the Church takes place. All lay people are called to participate actively in this through their witness to the Gospel and by assisting parish leaders in the apostolic works of that community.¹⁰ Parish leaders in particular need to help

⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 14.

⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 21–24.

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 15.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 430–450.

parishioners realise the importance of this task and form them for mission.¹¹ In order for mission to be effective, evangelisation is called to take place through an adaptation of the Good News to the cultural expressions of people and through “a vital integration of the Gospel into their thought, values, customs and prayer”.¹² In order to foster this, Cardinal Thomas Williams reports that the Bishops of Oceania in 1998 saw the need for evangelisers to focus on seven key issues:

- foster a spirit of fellowship at liturgies
- increase their social and apostolic outreach
- reach out to non-practising and alienated Catholics
- strengthen the identity of Catholic schools
- provide faith formation opportunities for adults
- explain the Catholic faith effectively to those outside the Christian community
- bring the Church’s social teaching to bear on civic life in Oceania¹³

Many of these themes were evident in participating parishes. For example, in Chapter Six, I reported on the vibrancy and depth of spirituality seen at most of the liturgies in the parishes and the community building and fellowship particularly in the after-Mass gatherings. It was also noted in the same chapter that parishes were doing their best to help people in their journeys of faith by providing effective spiritual and faith development programs and activities.

The Relevance of Mission in Participating Parishes

For most participants in the study, missionary and outreach themes such as supporting the community and helping others to have an experience of faith were very important aspects of parish life. When asked about the purpose of their parish, the participants explained it as follows:

The purpose is to be an evolving, relevant institution that is the word of God in our community and society and to be a machine which brings in all the talents and the spirituality of people and produces one product which is

¹¹ Barnett, "Trinity and the Parish," 179.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 657.

¹³ Cardinal Thomas Williams, "Mission and Evangelization," 12.

the congregation which is strong in faith and strong in love. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

To build the community, be a support for people and to provide spiritual nourishment. —Parish group leader, Warnervale.

To help each person in the community to come to know and love God and because of that live their lives well ... If you don't have that centring place it's very easy to be knocked around by the world. —Parish staff, Launceston.

Four strong themes emerged from their responses:

1. encouraging people in their faith and passing it on to the next generation
2. being a place of welcome for all God's people to gather and worship
3. spreading the Gospel and being God's word in the community
4. nurturing and supporting the community

A study of the missionary practices of these parishes showed that many of these aspects of mission were already well established through a range of activities, programs and groups in parishes. The following sections will explore these issues further.

Variety in Mission – Adapting to the Culture of Local Needs

Pope John Paul II identified three very different situations of missions that parishes find themselves in:

- mission to those who have never heard the Gospel
- being a witness to the Gospel and committed to the universal mission of the Church
- a re-evangelisation of people who have fallen away from practising the faith¹⁴

Many parishes in the study found themselves in one or more of these situations and chose to evangelise in their own specific ways taking into consideration the culture of the community they were immersed in and the needs and sensibilities of the people around them. In every parish, missionary activities were adapted according to the cultures of the groups of people in the community that needed to be evangelised. For example, in Mount Isa Parish, the parish and the diocese had worked in creating special

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 33.

missionary activities for the Aboriginal people to help them in their faith. As a parish group leader explained,

I think people come here because people are not pushy...People come because individuals are respected and they do have blessings packs and things like that ...They say to them here is your little gift and how you use it is up to you. The Bishop once asked me how do we get Aboriginal people back to Church and I said that is difficult because there are just so many funerals happening...it's just a place of death at the moment. But the little blessing packs changes that. We had them for Healing Day last year and we put in a rosary and some prayer cards and they went like hotcakes.

In Warnervale, the parish priest was conscious of the large percentage of the congregation for whom faith was not important. For this parish, re-evangelisation was the immediate concern and so he encouraged his parishioners to reach out to and evangelise those in their families that needed to hear the Good News:

My emphasis is that your home life is your ministry ... So I push that a fair bit ... I want them to go out to their families and workplaces and minister there ... I feel that the 85 per cent who do not participate are really important to me and I would like to do something to reach out to them and find a way to make Church important to them ... we're more focussed on the spiritual life and offering opportunities for people to come and explore those side of things ... offer a little bit more that the community cannot offer—pastoral care.

The assistant priest in Warnervale spoke of his challenges in dealing with young people in the parish secondary college and trying to help them deepen their faith while being conscious of their different levels of belief:

We have to be aware that they have different levels of readiness all different times. Some just want a social gathering; others want something more intense such as book club, a retreat weekend, prayer nights, twilight retreats. I am strongly interested in keeping calling people to deepen their faith. Each year is different ... It's not one size fits all.

Similar situations were present in each parish as parish leaders and parishioners tried their best to evangelise people within and outside the community. As the parish priest of Shepparton explained,

We look for where the Church is not present. Communion for mission: mission for communion ... It is a challenge to keep people on a missionary footing. People who are involved in prayer and adoration come from that quietness to involvement and they are energised. They are engaged and ask questions about how we remain vibrant. There is movement together.

In Harris Park, the parish priest reported that their main task was re-evangelising non-practising Catholics and encouraging them to play a more active role:

We have a lot of Maronite people who do not participate in the parish and right now our focus is mainly to bring them back into the fold. So our outreach is aimed at them ... I thought if I had to invite these people back, I need to fix up our house first. So that is our main priority now ... We have a very lively atmosphere so people know there's something going on so if they drive past they know something is happening and feel invited to come in and have a look.

This approach of looking for where missionary needs were not being met in the local community seemed to be a common way in which parishes developed their programs and activities for mission.

A Diverse Range of Evangelising Activities

The research showed that every parish had developed several different mission programs and activities over the years that parishioners were encouraged to participate in either at an individual level or through a group. There were three main areas in which parishes were engaged in missionary activities: through activities within the local community, diocesan missionary activities and overseas missionary work.

Evangelising activities within the local community

When asked about the ways in which their parish was connected to the wider local community, the responses of participants indicated that there were different means through which parishes attempted to spread the Gospel to their local community. The primary way to achieve this was through building relationships in many ways with non-practising Catholics and others outside the worshipping community. The most common means of building these relationships with others were through:

1. **Sacramental preparation programs** – As reported in Chapter Six, all the participating parishes had well developed sacramental preparation programs operating in their parishes to prepare children for the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation and Reconciliation. Most parishes took great care to

organise their Sacramental Masses which were attended by a large number of non-practising parents and families in the community:

Sacramental programs and Baptism programs—we have ministries in both those areas and we are very aware of the pastoral side of the program, ministering to people who don't necessarily come regularly. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

Some parishioners from Warnervale and Albany Creek were also involved in catechesis to nearby state schools. In Mount Isa Parish, the parish priest also travelled to the outlying towns to do Baptisms. As also mentioned in Chapter Six, seven out of the 10 parishes had formal RCIA preparation courses for adults who wished to become Catholics. Other parishes like Narrabundah and Shepparton had the “Catholic Returning Home” program that assisted people who wished to re-connect with the Church.

2. **Schools** – All parishes except Harris Park (which had no school of its own) had a wonderful opportunity of building relationships with families in the community through the parish schools. Most parishes had school Masses regularly and other activity days where parents and children attended, and most parish leaders saw these as opportunities to get to know people in the community. As some participants from Launceston Parish explained,

We're active in the parish schools—the priests work very hard at enhancing their role there through school Mass and students being familiar with them. All the students know the parish priest. —Parish staff, Launceston

I'm also chaplain at St. Patricks (1500 children and 150 staff) and I've been there 11 years—that gives you exposure to many families who are not part of the parish. —Parish priest, Launceston.

Although Harris Park Parish did not have a parish school, nevertheless the parish and the nearby Catholic schools worked closely together and many young people from the schools were involved in the dynamic and widespread parish youth activities, which included several outreach services:

The youth organise a Breakaway Camp for the disabled youth and their families and they help out at that. They also have the Vinnies van that goes out into the community. The youth also help out at functions and programs organised by the GNK Foundation (The George Naim

Khattar Foundation) which is a non-profit organisation that has been created to support community development and work extensively with young people. —Parish Youth leader, Harris Park.

Joint activities such as fetes and the celebration of the parish feast day that incorporated staff, students and teachers of the school community in preparation, planning and participation were very popular ways in which bonds were built between the school and the worshipping communities in the parishes. In parishes like Albany Creek, Harris Park and Mount Isa, there was great participation from people and businesses in the local community as well.

3. **Hospitals and nursing homes** – Parishes such as Launceston, Warnervale, Narrabundah and Shepparton had formed good links with the hospitals, nursing and retirement homes in their community and parish leaders and people from the parish regularly visited the sick to give communion or administer other Sacraments. As a staff member of Shepparton explained,

We conduct visits to the elderly in the wider community in five retirement facilities and Mass is celebrated there. Communion ministers go to people's homes to take Communion and to patients in both the public and private hospital.

4. **Links with government agencies and community groups** – Many parishes had formed strong links with local government and community agencies either to assist in providing aid to the community or work on projects together. Parishes like Mount Isa and Warnervale annually conducted Masses for emergency services like the Police or Fire Brigade and were well known for these events. Mount Isa Parish, in particular, was highly successful in working with government agencies and community groups since it seemed to have developed many more connections than other parishes:

The parish [has] involvement in the local community through the Mining Expo and the Annual Rodeo events, the parish does the catering to raise money for the work of the parish. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

The AICC (Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council) has a significant place in the parish. NWQICSS (North West Queensland Indigenous

Catholic Social Service) is tapping into the Indigenous community. — Religious brother, Mount Isa.

The [Police] watchhouse meals service liaises with the public. There is an annual Emergency Services Mass. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

Several participants spoke about other such initiatives involving the wider community started in different parishes:

We have Memorial Services—Cancer Memorials, Red-Nose Day events. We're just part of the fabric of the town. —Parish Leader, Launceston.

[We have] connections through the Migrant Resource Centre including adult refugee students...the homework club, community groups including a St Albans project working with people from council. — Parish staff, Kings Park.

The parish takes a lead in the whole community with services for Remembrance Day, 11 November, the Police Day...and the constant involvement of other Church pastors in special parish activities. — Parish staff, Shepparton.

Other groups that parishioners participated in included Prison Ministry and other community groups like the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, Apex, the RSL and local sports groups. There were also many social service activities that parishes were involved in. These will be explored in detail in a later section of this chapter.

5. **Evangelising through other means** – There were some unique ways which different parishes had found to spread the Gospel to people in the local community and also provide information on parish activities, programs and services that were available. Perhaps the most direct approach was taken by the Missionaries of God's Love (MGL) community at Narrabundah Parish through their Street Evangelisation program and the parish Door Knocking Group that visited every resident in the nearby housing block:

Street evangelisation—MGLs sing songs in the street, hand out flyers with an invitation to the 7 pm Sunday Mass, a short preaching, welcome, joyful processions and talk to lots of people ... People are now a lot less hostile to this, much more open and accepting of street evangelisation. —Parish Leader, Narrabundah.

[We do] door knocking in the area and invite people to the parish activities and Mass. —Parish Priest, Narrabundah.

Although no other participating parish focussed on missionary activities to such an extent, there were many other ways in which parishioners or parish groups had found a way of bringing the Gospel message to people in the local community. Some of these were by communicating regularly with the local community, while others had a more active, participative approach. Below are some examples that were reported from different parishes:

I run a men's groups for the City of Shepparton (these groups have put 180 men through the 12 week experience) ... it brings men back to Church knowing I am the director of music and a Catholic, renews their faith. They learn love and camaraderie ... They find God each in their own way. —Parish group leader, Shepparton.

We have a missionary group that hands out food to people in the park near the town hall every Saturday night. People cook the food themselves and take it down there. You get about 20 people coming ... Also the articles in the newspaper are a good way to reach the community. —Parish Council member, Albany Creek.

[We send the] parish newsletter to school families, not all of whom are Catholic ... Often in the country [there is] wider involvement in community groups and then information is passed on to the parish to act on if needed ... for example, the Care Group giving some funds to a recently bereaved family who were not parishioners but were part of the local township. —Parish Leader, Cororooke.

Diocesan mission activities

In an attempt to move beyond parish boundaries, there were a few responses from parishes indicating that they also advertised and participated in some diocesan missionary activities:

[We work with] the Maronite Eparchy that has a program called Uni Maronite where they try to help our Maronite students in universities and try to encourage them to participate in parishes. —Parish Youth leader, Harris Park.

The parish works with R. from the Archdiocesan Catholic Life office. The Young Men of God breakfast is advertised & coordinated through the archdiocese. —Parish Leader, Narrabundah.

I work very closely with the Catholic Archdiocese, I don't try to reinvent the wheel, just look at much of what the Catholic Church is doing, work closely with the parishes around us, and do cross promotion of events ... We're trying to be community for everybody not just the Lebanese. —Parish staff, Harris Park.

Many parishioners also indicated that diocesan activities were regularly published through the parish newsletter. In addition, diocesan appeals for fundraising for different events were regularly promoted in all parishes.

Overseas Missionary work

All the participating parishes were also involved in missionary activities in other countries, although the main way in which this was done was through fundraising for missionary appeals. Regular overseas appeals conducted by Catholic agencies like Catholic Mission were promoted in parishes and all parish leaders supported such efforts. In addition, in some parishes, parishioners themselves promoted and helped raise funds for different appeals. An example of this was reported from Launceston Parish:

Some [people] are actively involved, others support through their generosity ... people are very generous for appeals like for Famine and things like that. People try to live out their faith. Like for the East Africa thing ... a person came to me and asked if she could organise a dance and we did it and they raised \$6000 ... So in these ways people support things outside the community ... [I believe] the parish should support something beyond the parish because my idea with that is you will always have enough of your own resources if you are prepared to be generous beyond your immediate needs. And the ... East Africa contribution is exactly that. I believe we need to emphasise that and it gives great strength to parishes. — Parish Priest, Launceston.

Albany Creek Parish had a special Mission Ministry Team to discuss outreach opportunities and oversee the placement of parish volunteers in the broader community. Through the efforts of this group the parish had formed a partnering program with a parish in East Timor and continued to support missionary and developmental initiatives in that parish community. Warnervale Parish also had a similar twinning project with a parish in Uganda and was assisting with funds for the development of their parish pre-school.

Ecumenical Initiatives

In most parishes there was some evidence of connections with churches of other denominations although a few parishes had worked on developing these links to a greater extent than others. One of the main ways in which parishes worked with other denominations was through joint services and activities. Mount Isa Parish had developed many such links as several parishioners were involved in a range of ecumenical activities, mostly through social service and other community support groups:

There is networking with other churches ... in mental health and companioning people when dealing with government agencies. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

Both Fr L. & I are on local ABC radio weekly on Radio Rhema, a Christian community radio. In ecumenical activities, the parish is a leader here. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

What we do is a joint effort with people in the community. I am on the local Council of Clergy group, which meets regularly. We have some parishioners involved with CRE [Christian Religious Education] in the state schools. There are ecumenical services during Easter. We actively support the Chaplaincy in state schools. There is involvement in the World Day of Prayer. —Parish Priest, Mount Isa.

Similarly Shepparton Parish was also involved in many ecumenical efforts through social services, most of them through relationships formed by former parish leaders which still continued:

Monsignor I. was involved in all sorts of things and was very strong on the ecumenical movement. He built up a lot of good will for St Brendan's...The Soup Kitchen that the previous parish priest had initiated with the assistance of a local Muslim man. It was now running 4–5 times a week and other towns had begun doing the same. —Parish group leader, Shepparton.

The previous parish priest left a great legacy of interfaith and ecumenical involvement. He worked brilliantly with the Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities in town. As a result there is a very good sense of presence in the community. I go to the mainstream churches gatherings and Fr Q. goes to the Pentecostal churches gatherings. —Parish Priest, Shepparton.

In small rural parishes like Cororooke and Myall Coast, ecumenical activities were centred very much on community building and combined spiritual events. There was

often a cross promotion of ecumenical events in these parishes. Cororooke Parish participated in shared services and activities with the nearby Anglican Church in Colac. Myall Coast Parish had participated in several activities with the nearby Baptist and Uniting Church members:

People are involved in things in the town. In the past, we have had a bush dance with the Uniting Church. On Pancake Tuesday we invite people from the other churches. We are involved in the World Day of Prayer movement. We have a Cup of Tea for Cancer. Individuals are involved in different things, but as a Church community we are also involved. We are involved in the Samaritan welfare project that the town is involved in. —Parish group leader, Myall Coast.

We attended a six week Lenten program on social justice. Thirty people including Baptists, Uniting Church members attended. We participated in the “Jesus: All About Life” ecumenical campaign; also in an altar service with the Baptists. —Parish staff, Myall Coast.

Another way in which parishes worked with other denominations was by sharing their resources with those in the community. Mount Isa, Cororooke and Harris Park parishes offered the use of their parish hall and other spaces to other denominations for events and activities. In Launceston, there were multiple ways in which some parishioners and parish leaders connected ecumenically:

We have the Council of Churches¹⁵ and Prayer for the Unborn (both ecumenical groups) ... We’ve had an ecumenical singing group. We also have ecumenical activities at Christmas and Easter. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

We have a great Stations of the Cross on Good Friday and about 400–500 people come and some of the Baptist people come sometimes. —Parish Priest, Launceston.

Memorial Services are often ecumenical. Occasionally we would attend each other’s events if one of us would host a guest speaker. I’ve worked with people from Door of Hope (a big player) which is a Hillsong type of Church, worked with them on memorials. —Parish Leader, Launceston.

The Emmanuel Centre is ecumenical. May people who come there are people from other faith traditions. Recently we had a lama who gave a talk to us at a dinner there. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

Ecumenical links often depended on good relationships developed between pastors and leaders of different denominations in the neighbourhood. In Albany Creek ecumenical

¹⁵ The Tasmanian Council of Churches is a fellowship of Christian Churches in Tasmania committed to the promotion of Christian unity.

links had deteriorated over the years as this relationship had weakened. As the parish priest explained:

We used to have services before but it died off because the current pastors are not much interested. We have three Baptist churches ... and an Assembly of God. The Uniting Church minister is good though and there's only the two of us. We used to have Palm Sunday walks and other meetings but not anymore.

Similarly, ecumenical relations had deteriorated over the years in Narrabundah Parish as well:

Yes it had in the past—but not recently just because we are too busy and other churches in the area keep to themselves. But in the prison ministry we work very closely with the Anglican and Uniting Churches. —Parish Priest, Narrabundah.

In Kings Park Parish there was “very little done” in terms of ecumenism as reported by the parish priest, and in Warnervale too, the parish leaders reported on ecumenical links still being in the developmental stage:

There is great openness to this. We have had some good evenings with the local Anglican diocese. The bishop is strong on ecumenism and we have recently welcomed one priest into the new Anglican Ordinariate. —Parish Leader, Warnervale.

The commitment to ecumenism is of primary importance for the Christian if we are to work towards the reality of a united Church.¹⁶ It necessitates an attitude of charity and cooperation wherever possible, fidelity to the Catholic Church, a spirit of discernment and a sincere wish for renewal through personal commitment and action.¹⁷ It would appear that most participating parishes were already on this journey, although some were more ahead than others. What was important however is that all parishes recognised the value of ecumenism and had begun working towards it through whatever means possible. Much depended on the attitudes of the parish leaders to take the initiative in forming such bonds with other communities.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 670.

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *The Church*, 676, 677.

Effective Evangelisation

DeSiano observes that activities such as catechesis, liturgy, parish groups, social service activities, sacramental preparation, youth and family ministries, the RCIA, hospital visitation and many other ministries are the “usual” ways in which parishes evangelise, and recommends effective tools such as a welcoming attitude, purposeful mailing and home visitations, along with the “personal evangelization” of all parishioners.¹⁸ Certainly, participating parishes appeared to use many of these “tools” and had discovered some of their own as well. Measuring the effectiveness of evangelisation and ecumenical activities was difficult since there was little evidence of the outcomes. However, participants’ responses indicated that some of these activities were indeed helping people to come to the faith. For example, in Shepparton Parish, the outreach work done with the African migrants had led to an increase in the number of Sudanese in the RCIA program. In Warnervale Parish, the welcoming of the community at Sacramental Masses and the outreach work done through the playgroup to young mums was creating inroads for people to participate more:

There are about 15–20 people who come regularly [to the playgroup] ... The parents share stuff with us and so it’s a great way to invite them in. One mum asked about getting married in the Church. Another mum asked about joining the RCIA. —Parish group leader, Warnervale.

In Kings Park Parish as well, the support given to migrant communities and the hospitality and welcoming attitude of the parish had made a difference to participation:

People feel they can belong. They have a choice to participate either here or a neighbouring parish but they come here and participate...to belong. Hospitality is a big part of the parish, welcoming new families, welcoming school families. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

Other evangelical activities that appeared to have been successful in other parishes included:

- **The outreach groups to Aboriginal people in Mount Isa Parish**

I was born and raised a Catholic but I was fairly new to being close to the physical Church. But I joined the AICC and I really enjoyed it. It was joyful

¹⁸ Frank P. DeSiano, *The Evangelizing Catholic: A Practical Handbook for Reaching Out* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 68, 70.

and it felt really good. It makes me want to get up and come every day. — Parish group leader.

- **The groups created for the formation of young couples in Launceston Parish**

Lots of young couple have come through the “engaged couples” course and the marriage education programs. Cell Groups are strong; particularly the young couples who have come through the marriage education programs find that the cell groups are mutually supportive. —Parish group leader

- **The dynamic evangelising activities of the Missionaries of God’s Love community in Narrabundah Parish**

This parish is a drawing point for young people (singles and married). In 1998 before and when the MGLs took over pastoral care of the parish, the demographic was mainly elderly. Now demographic is a lot younger including families. 18–35 year olds are the strong age bracket in the parish. —Parish leader.

- **The Yummies for Mummies playgroup in Myall Coast Parish**

The Yummies for mummies group creates community...Baptisms have increased...Some parishioners expect them to move into Mass and we encourage, but we don’t push. —Parish leader.

In this way it would appear that the evangelising activities of parishes are meeting with some success. Certainly, every parish carried out informal evaluations of their parish groups and activities in order to improve them. Additionally, pastoral planning also played an important role in the development and enhancement of outreach and evangelisation activities. The next chapter will focus more on these planning processes in parishes.

SERVICE AND OUTREACH

The fundamental motive for Christian mission is love that is self-giving. As Pope John Paul II writes, service and outreach to people in the community is a powerful witness of the Gospel in society:

The evangelical witness which the world finds most appealing is that of concern for people, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who

suffer ... A commitment to peace, justice, human rights and human promotion is also a witness to the Gospel when it is a sign of concern for persons and directed toward integral human development.¹⁹

There were many different ways in which parishes sought to live out Christ's teaching to "love your neighbour" and in all parishes there was wide evidence of this being carried out through the work of many individuals and groups.

Coordinated Service through Parish Groups

Most social service and outreach activities in the parishes were conducted by a range of parish groups set up to cater for different needs. Many of these groups were linked to or worked alongside government agencies to overcome problems of hunger, homelessness, poverty, and unemployment in the community. The most common group, present in all the participating parishes, was the St. Vincent de Paul Society—a lay Catholic organisation, whose members "aspire to live the Gospel by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society".²⁰ Through the groups or "conferences" set up in every parish, members of this organisation helped to identify and provide aid to the neediest people in the wider local community. Their efforts were supported by monetary contributions from parishioners in each parish and from funds distributed from the Head Office. All parishes benefitted greatly from the work of this group to help create a link to and serve people in the community.

In addition to the St Vincent de Paul (SVDP) organisation, there were also many other parish groups set up in different parishes. In every parish, groups were formed to cater for the specific needs of people found both within the parish and in the wider, local community. For example, in Kings Park Parish, an "Outreach Group" had been formed to help "families with special needs, those grieving for the loss of a loved one and women challenged by cancer or other illness".²¹ Being a multicultural parish with a large number of refugees and migrants, the parish had also developed a range of

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 42.

²⁰ St Vincent de Paul Society, "Mission and Vision", St Vincent de Paul Society http://www.vinnies.org.au/page/About/Mission___Vision/ [accessed 1 May 2014].

²¹ Kings Park Parish, "Outreach," in *Resurrection Parish Groups 2012 - 2013* (Kings Park Parish, 2012).

services for them such as a “Step Up Group” that helped people with job applications, interview procedures, and provided people with encouragement and basic skills to find work in the community. There were also opportunities for different cultural groups to form support groups and meet on a social and spiritual level in order to help them feel a part of the larger parish community, and a genuine willingness on the part of the parish team to provide support at any level that might be needed. As the parish priest explained,

You are here for people, but in a big way we can only help a limited number. When we had the reading in Matthew of the talents, we gave people \$5 and challenged them to make some more money with it. We used that money to help the Sudanese with housing ... We are active in relation to refugees ... St Vincent de Paul give out about 300 bags of food.

This assistance was critical for many people in the Kings Park community if they were to succeed in building a life in Australia. As one of the Sudanese support group leaders described his experience:

At home, the Sudanese try to learn English. They grab some words. Fr M. has encouraged people to read. For those born here, there are no problems, but it is difficult for those from Africa especially in terms of language. Many of the children were born in Egypt, Kenya and Uganda—in other cultures. This affects the families as the parents and children have different expectations. In education, in Sudan, 90 per cent is listening to the teachers. Families here do not know about computers and do not understand what is going on. We are very grateful for support. For us, it reflects the love of God.

Thus for Kings Park Parish, helping migrants and refugees was a priority in addition to all other needs. In Shepparton Parish, which had a similar multicultural community, help was provided in a similar manner to such groups of people:

Help is available through the Church to people in need. And the community soup kitchen that the parish joins in on and the school, with its reaching out to the wider community. Not forgetting the important part it [the parish] plays in helping immigrants from many different cultures to feel at home, and learn new skills, in this strange land. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

Such initiatives were also found in Launceston Parish though its Migrant Resource Centre. A very different situation was seen in Mount Isa Parish, where the most well developed range of specialised social services was established. Apart from the SVDP conference, the parish also had a Bereavement Group and a caring group in addition to

a host of social services developed specially to care for the needs of Indigenous and other people in the local community. These groups included the North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services (NWQICSS) which incorporated Indigenous programs such as Yallambee, Brilla Brilla, Jangawalla Drop In Centre, Riverbed Action Group, Boulia Community Support Service, the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council (AICC) and the Murri Court Men's & Women's Groups. Each of these programs had very specific tasks and each played a key role in working with government agencies to provide much needed assistance to the Aboriginal and Islander community in the area. The parish also had the Good Shepherd Shared Management Group that provided IT, accounting and legal aid for those in social services. Mount Isa also had volunteer kitchen service that provided meals for the prisoners in the local watchhouse. There were many parishioners who were involved in these groups and described the services provided by them:

The Murri (Aboriginal) men's group and women's group helps keep them out of the courts ... The Jangawalla soup kitchen provides meals for the homeless. —Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

The Riverbed Action Group gets the people out of the riverbed into accommodation, utilising a closed down hostel that was renovated with government support. Cleaning up the riverbed camp regularly is a co-ordinated activity with Health and Transport departments assisting. — Parish group leader, Mount Isa.

The Indigenous kitchen providing meals every night of the week is run by volunteers. The watchhouse visitation—a member visits the police watchhouse every day to look to the needs of the prisoners. —Religious sister, Mount Isa.

Thus parish outreach groups in all parishes helped provide a range of services to people in the community. In most parishes where such specialised services as seen in Mount Isa Parish were not developed, there were usually two other groups apart from the SVDP organisation that helped provide assistance. These often had different names but had similar purposes, and they included a “Care Group” to support families during illnesses and other difficulties and a “Bereavement Support Group” to help families during the loss of a family member. In addition, in every parish, care was provided for other vulnerable members of the community.

Caring for the Most Vulnerable in the Community

Care for people in the parish community (especially for the old, sick and those with special needs) was of particular concern, and most parishes had well-developed ministries set up to care for these groups of people.

Care for the sick, the old and the lonely

In all participating parishes there was a regular coordinated ministry of people visiting and taking communion to the old or sick in their homes and nursing homes:

We have the Legion of Mary of mainly older ladies and they do a lot of visiting people in nursing homes and people's homes. They end up being the link to the parish. —Parish Priest, Launceston.

In Cororooke Parish there was also a food bank set up for meals for the sick which was facilitated through the school community to help people who were struggling. There were similar initiatives reported in Narrabundah and Mount Isa parishes as well.

Parishioners from Cororooke, Warnervale, Launceston and Albany Creek parishes reported that there was a service where elderly people were picked up and driven to Mass:

Most of our needs are to do with older people. So there are people who are ready to provide transport. There is access right up to the front door of the Church. —Parish Council leader, Warnervale.

Warnervale and Harris Park parishes also had a very vibrant seniors group that organised outings and spirituality days for older people.

In rural parishes like Cororooke and Myall Coast, there was also a particular need to look after people who lived alone and who tended to be isolated from the parish community. Keeping contact with such people was a priority for these communities:

We have prayer for those who live alone, keeping connections between the homebound and parish. The parish bulletin is posted or hand delivered to the homebound community. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

Care for those with special needs

A few parishes also had special services and care groups for the disabled and those with special needs. For example, Albany Creek Parish had formed a Disability Focus Group:

A parishioner decided in the Year of Disability that we needed this group so she started that and brought together people with disabilities. Our Church is also built to allow access to people with disabilities. We also have a special Mass at the Saturday before Christmas for them because many cannot come to normal Mass ... People come in with walkers and in wheelchairs and the welcoming committee guides them in and helps them during communion. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

Similarly Harris Park and Shepparton parishes both had Faith and Light groups which did similar work:

The parish Faith and Light movement was established for people with disabilities and their carers. They go out for movies, organise dinners. They have a Mass for sick, ill and disabled people during the Wednesday Chrism Mass during the Holy Week and at other times during the year. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

Faith and Light program—people with special needs come on a scheduled basis to the Sunday 11am Mass where they meet, share a meal after Mass, engage in activities in the parish hall, for example, prayer, craft, guest speakers, and enjoy music. They have an annual retreat, as well as dances. —Parish Leader, Shepparton.

In Narrabundah Parish, members of the L'Arche community regularly participated in Sunday Mass:

L'Arche community is a Catholic community of physically & mentally disabled who live with able-bodied carers. The residents come for the 9 am Sunday Mass. People don't mind their calling out or making noise ... they are part of the assembly. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

In Kings Park Parish the Outreach Group that looked after the needs of the community also assisted the families of those with special needs:

We have an outreach group that works with special needs families. We have a Carers Day, carers are pampered and appreciated and the kids are looked after. We also have a special Mass. We have a number of special days for these special needs groups. Parishioners know who these families are and when to go to help them. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

Shepparton and Warnervale parishes also had parishioners who helped children with special needs prepare for their sacraments.

While not all parishes had special groups set up to care for those with special needs, this was nevertheless seen as an important activity, and the needs of such families were usually met on a case-by-case basis or by recommending them to specialised services in the community. As the parish priest of Warnervale explained,

It's not a particular area we work with. We just respond to needs as they arise on a case-by-case basis. We do it particularly well in the sacramental program where they might be children with special needs who needs special attention and can't do a whole program. One of the staff members works very well with them, We have a good OH&S [Occupational Health and Safety] that shows us what areas are accessible so everything is set up pretty well. A senior member has proposed that we need better chairs in the front so we are going to order some special chairs. We also have a mobility vehicle in the school which is accessible for anyone who needs it to get around. It was got by the college and they just allow us to use it ... we're not in competition with the community which is beautifully set up for things like special needs.

Special programs for those with addictions

A few parishes had developed professional care service to help those dealing with addictions. For example, Harris Park Parish had developed various Maronite Care Services that offered special counselling services for people dealing with drug and alcohol abuse, marriage problems and mental health issues which were open to all in the community. In Narrabundah Parish, there was special program for recovering addicts of alcohol and drugs:

We have a "Celebrate Recovery" Program for people with addictions. There is small attendance as there is a bit of stigma attached to the program. The program has 12 steps of recovery aligned to biblical themes. The program has not really taken off: it is very fragile especially with the participants. We try to reconnect with the participants through the Friday Healing Mass. —Parish Leader, Narrabundah.

Managing Individual Needs

While parish groups were able to meet the needs of many people in the community, there were also many occasions on which individual people from the community would approach the parish for assistance when needed. Most of these needs were coordinated through the parish office which is the first place people would ring for assistance. Parish staff would then route the queries to parish individuals and groups for assistance. In many parishes, help was provided through these means and additional activities or programs to meet issues that arose regularly were developed through such experiences. An example of this was described by the Parish Council chair of Albany Creek Parish:

Queries come through the office or through councillors from anyone who needs help. So for example I get calls from the office from people who need to be driven to doctor or hospital or people who cannot cook for themselves and who need meals delivered to them. We had a call earlier to say there were a lot of lonely people in the parish and so I thought they could go to the Seniors group and then we found out that that group had fallen flat on its face and so we revamped that and got it going again. ... Recently we had floods and someone got the idea that we could do a laundry basket filled with stuff and we did about a 130 baskets ... You get communion requests from people having operations and things like that.

In rural parishes like Cororooke or Myall Coast much of the help was provided in such an informal manner on a case-by-case basis:

We have no particular [special needs] need really. There is one woman with "mental sort of issues"... there are excellent supportive parishioners who rally around her. We generally have aged people. With cancer, we offer whatever services we can provide, ask, "How can we help?" ... and then offer what we can, get Father to come and talk to them and take them communion. —Parish Leader, Myall Coast.

Parish offered help to families of two girls (two with leukaemia) and the family of a disabled teen confined to a wheelchair. We offered to do fundraising to help with extra costs. Also, to a wife with two young children who lost their husband/ father in a road accident. They were not parishioners but were neighbours of a parishioner who contacted the Care Group. ... The parish responds where and when it can. —Parish Leader, Cororooke.

Overall, all the parishes did their best to meet the community needs that varied in number and kind from parish to parish through their range of social service and

outreach groups and activities. There did not appear to be, however, much evidence about what was being done in terms of social justice groups or advocating for human rights other than some services provided by Mount Isa Parish and one social justice group that was present in Warnervale Parish. As one parish priest explained, “*we don’t have a social justice committee yet and that is one of the things I would like to have but people are not really ready to commit to it yet*”. It would appear that a similar situation prevailed in other parishes. While there were many social service groups and many parishioners were involved directly or indirectly, advocating for social justice was something that had not been developed much at all. There could have been individuals who participated in such efforts but my research was unable to uncover information on work being done in this area. With the increasing demands of so many immediate needs of the community, however, parishes often had to prioritise their efforts, using whatever material, monetary and personnel resources were available to them in the best way possible.

THE ROLE OF MISSION AND OUTREACH ACTIVITIES IN ENHANCING PARISH LIFE

Mission and outreach are important responsibilities that all parishes have in spreading the Gospel and living out the mission of Christ in society. The vitality of a parish is greatly enhanced when parishes are able to reflect tangibly the love of Christ to others through the many ways in which they extend their help and support to people in the community. There were a few themes that emerged through the findings in these two areas in the life of participating parishes:

1. The critical role played by parishes in providing services to a community

The study revealed that many parishes played a very important role of meeting the needs of the community through their coordinated efforts through parish groups and individuals in the parish. These groups often worked alongside government agencies to provide general assistance and to help meet specific needs of groups and individuals. In addition, the parish was always open and accessible to local people to seek aid if needed and care was taken to assist them

in the best way possible. There were different degrees of success of parishes achieving this that depended largely on the number and quality of connections made by parish leaders and parishioners with agencies and groups in the local community and the number of parish groups involved in social service and outreach activities.

2. Mission lived out in a variety of ways

There was a wide range of service and mission opportunities in which parishioners could be involved in all parishes. These included being involved in indirect ways, through contributing to appeals, for example, or through active work with refugees, migrants, the old, sick and other needy members in the community. This variety, which was encouraged by parish leaders, meant that mission continued to be lived out in parishes in a realistic and concrete manner that was relevant to contemporary society.

3. Evangelisation through direct and indirect means

While outreach services abounded in parishes so did opportunities to spread the Gospel. Most parishes were conscious of the cultural context they were in and tailored their efforts to suit the cultural needs of the people in the community. Most evangelisation was carried out through building relationships with non-practising Catholics and others within and outside the parish community in a variety of ways. Some diocesan programs were supported as was regular fundraising for overseas missionary work.

4. Ecumenical links dependent on parish leader support

Most ecumenical links with other denominations or faith traditions were primarily through a sharing in community or social service work, joint spiritual activities (especially in small rural communities) and through a sharing of building resources. While ecumenical links were strong in some parishes and weak in others, there was great openness towards working with other denominational communities. However, parish leadership was the key variable distinguishing between parishes. Most of the links developed with other denominations were largely dependent on parish leaders to create and support

such initiatives and parishes that did well in this area had a history of good relationships that were strengthened over the years.

5. The role of the parish in transforming society

The presence of all the parishes was distinctly experienced by their wider communities through the links created by social services or community-building initiatives. Through their missionary and outreach efforts, parishes had begun transforming their society by putting into practice the values of Catholic social teaching such as justice, care for the needy, respect for human dignity and rights of the individuals. Although there was little evidence of social justice groups present in parishes, still, through their work with the poor, migrants, refugees and other vulnerable communities, parishes were involved in “doing” social justice or acting in a socially just way. In doing so, many parishes, particularly Mount Isa, Shepparton, Kings Park and Launceston had created a lasting impression on their local communities.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the data collected in parishes in relation to the fifth and sixth measures of vitality that dealt with evangelising and mission, and outreach to the community. On reflection, the findings on mission were not as robust as they could have been. The study would have benefitted greatly with a more in-depth inquiry into the understanding and interpretation of mission in each of the participating parishes. Nevertheless, the findings revealed that most parishes had developed a wide range of social service and outreach activities and evangelised their communities by building relationships with people through many different ways. In this manner parishes exemplified the bond between mission and communion, as communion giving rise to mission and mission being accomplished in communion. There were a few areas that were not as widely developed as others, particularly ecumenical relations with other denominations and advocacy for social justice. It was noted, however, that leadership played a big part in all this by initiating links with other denominations and being

supportive of evangelising and outreach services in the community. Parishes that had a history of supportive leaders in these areas had built strong links in the community and had succeeded in making the Gospel present to a greater degree in their society. The vital role played by leaders in developing and sustaining the vitality of their community in many different areas of parish life cannot be underestimated. The next chapter will examine several aspects of leadership and the relationships between leaders at various levels in participating parishes.

CHAPTER NINE

LEADERSHIP

The previous chapter discussed the two measures of vitality that dealt with various aspects of mission and evangelisation and the service and outreach aspects of parish life. This chapter will examine the data collected in relation to the seventh measure of vitality:

7. Collegial and collaborative leadership is practised.

Leadership has been defined by different scholars in a variety of ways and for a variety of contexts within the fields of sociology, psychology, philosophy and anthropology, and in organizational studies. Marshall, in particular, has identified various conceptual approaches of leadership, of which Burn's "transformational leadership", aimed at challenging and transforming peoples' expectations and inspiring them to transcend their own self-interests, seems the most fitting in relation to the work of leaders in Catholic parishes.¹ For the purpose of this study, however, I will not explore the psychological types of leadership or use leadership scales to measure the style of leadership. Rather, this study will focus on the different ways in which leadership is operating in participating parishes and the ways in which these influence the vitality of the parish.

The chapter will argue that the vitality of a parish is greatly influenced by the quality of its leadership. Several research studies of parish leaders, such as Mason and Fennessy and Cieslak, amongst others, show that good leadership can make a positive difference in parishes.² Parishes are bound to transform (negatively or positively) as changes occur in their leadership patterns, community demographics and local Church structures. The quality of parish leadership will most often determine how well a parish survives these changes and whether or not it continues to remain vital throughout. I argue that

¹ Stephen J. Marshall, *Issues in the Development of Leadership for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), 2008), Occasional paper.

² Mason and Fennessy, "Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches," and Cieslak, "The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership."

maintaining a strong parish identity with good collaborative leadership structures in place enable parishes to sustain their communities and enhance their vitality through changes that occur over time.

This chapter is divided into two main sections, with the first section dealing with different types of parish structures and levels of leadership found in participating parishes. Within this section, the style of leadership of parish leaders and processes for collaboration are also examined. The next section focusses primarily on lay leadership and examines various aspects of leadership that have contributed to vitality and how these issues have been managed in participating parishes. Issues such as the encouragement and empowering of lay leaders, the development of skills, provision for support, conflict management and leaders attitudes to work are discussed. Challenges faced by leaders and the experience of leadership for young people are also studied and the chapter concludes by bringing together some of the key themes that have arisen through the findings on leadership.

LEADERSHIP IN A PARISH

Parish leadership is a complex phenomenon since it involves many leadership positions, levels of authority, and formal and informal voluntary and professional leaders. Rousseau argues that in order to understand research issues involving multiple organisational levels it is first necessary to define some concepts such as “level”, which is the hierarchical relationship among things.³ In addition, the criteria for differentiating one level from another must include aspects such as differences in the organisation of each level, their individual characteristics and the structures or processes that set them apart.⁴ In order to understand, therefore, the nature of leadership that exists in participating parishes, I first examine the different types of parish structures and identify the different levels of leadership that can be seen in these structures.

³ Denise M Rousseau, "Issues of Level in Organizational Research: Multi-Level and Cross-Level Perspectives," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 7, no. 1 (1985), 3.

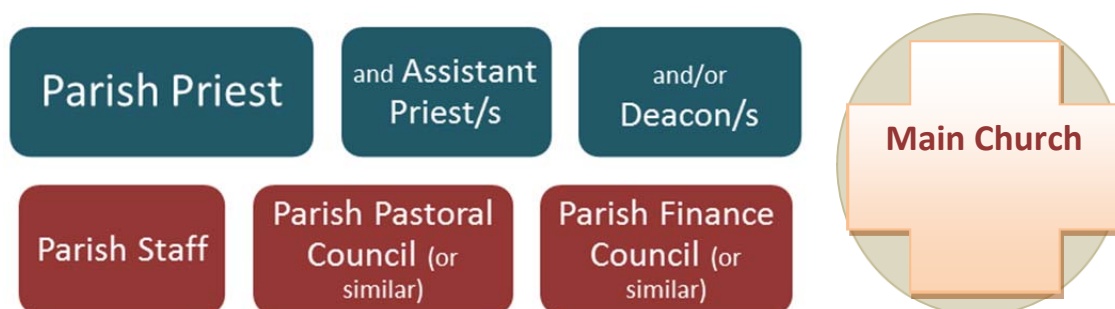
⁴ Rousseau, "Issues of Level in Organizational Research," 3.

TYPES OF PARISH STRUCTURES

The structure of a parish will most often influence the way parish leaders exercise their role and choose to minister to their community. There are a variety of parish structures that can be found in parishes around Australia as different dioceses experiment to find the most suitable arrangements. There were four different types of structures that were seen in the participating parishes.

Type 1: Single parish led by Parish Priest – 1 main Church

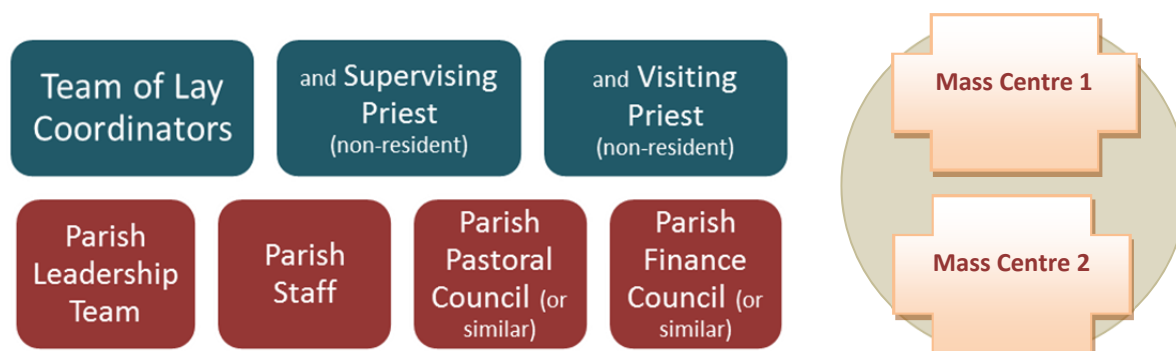
Figure 9.1: Type 1 Parish



This traditional model was the most common type of parish structure in participating parishes. The parish is headed by a parish priest who, in some cases, is helped by assistant priests and deacons. The parish employs parish staff that generally consists of a secretary or an office manager and, in some cases, other staff members such as pastoral associates, sacramental coordinators, business managers and family ministers. There is a Parish Pastoral Council or a similar structure. However, instead of a Parish Pastoral Council, parishes like Kings Park have a Parish Meeting Night—a monthly meeting when all the parish groups meet together at the same time. Many parishes also have a Finance Council or a Finance Officer. The parishes usually have one main Church through which all services and activities are conducted. The seven parishes with such a model of leadership were Kings Park, Albany Creek, Narrabundah, Harris Park, Mount Isa, Warnervale and Shepparton.

Type 2: Single Parish led by Lay Leadership team – Multiple Mass Centres

Figure 9.2: Type 2 Parish



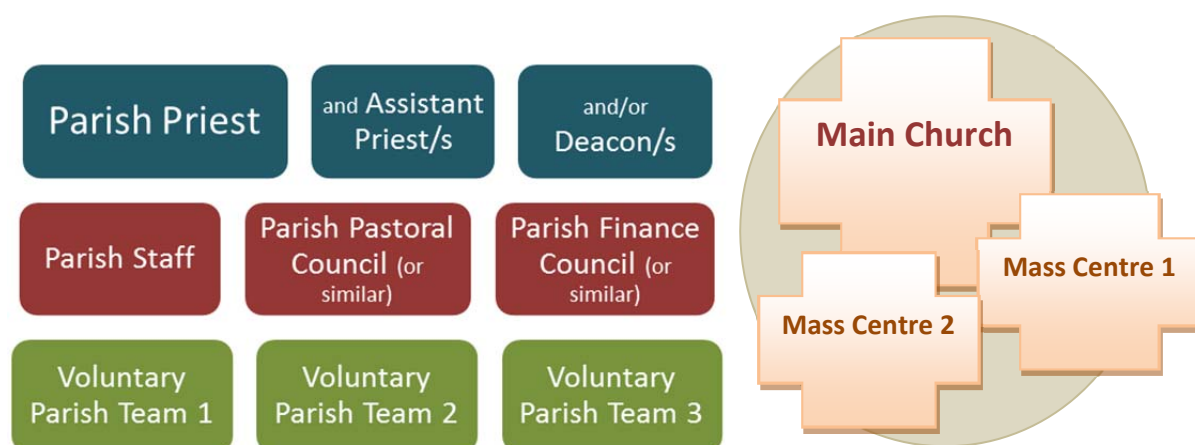
Cororooke was the only parish in the study where the leadership was entrusted to a team of three lay coordinators. It is a parish where the bishops, under Canon 517.2, has entrusted the pastoral care of the parish to someone other than a priest (a deacon, vowed religious or lay person).⁵ Cororooke is one of three parishes in the Diocese of Ballarat that are named “Community-led Parishes”.⁶ The parish consists of two connected yet separate communities, gathered around their two churches. The three lay coordinators each work in specific areas of parish ministry. They liaise with others from the Parish Leadership Team, which consists of 12 members, to overview community life and make decisions together. The parish’s Canonical Administrator or Priest Director or Supervising Priest is a non-resident priest who has been appointed by the diocese to sign off on certain administrative decisions and supervise the work of the three lay coordinators. A retired priest visits the parish every two weeks to say Mass in both churches. The parish also has a part-time staff, a Pastoral Council and a Finance Council.

⁵ Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *The Code of Canon Law in English Translation* (London: Collins, 1983).

⁶ Amanda Smith, "Looking Forward: A Resource for Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Ballarat," (February 2014).
http://www.ballarat.catholic.org.au/_uploads/fcknw/News_Articles/Looking_Forward_February_2014.pdf [accessed 28 March 2014], 9.

Type 3: Amalgamated Parish led by Parish Priest – 1 main Church, merged Mass Centres (former parishes)

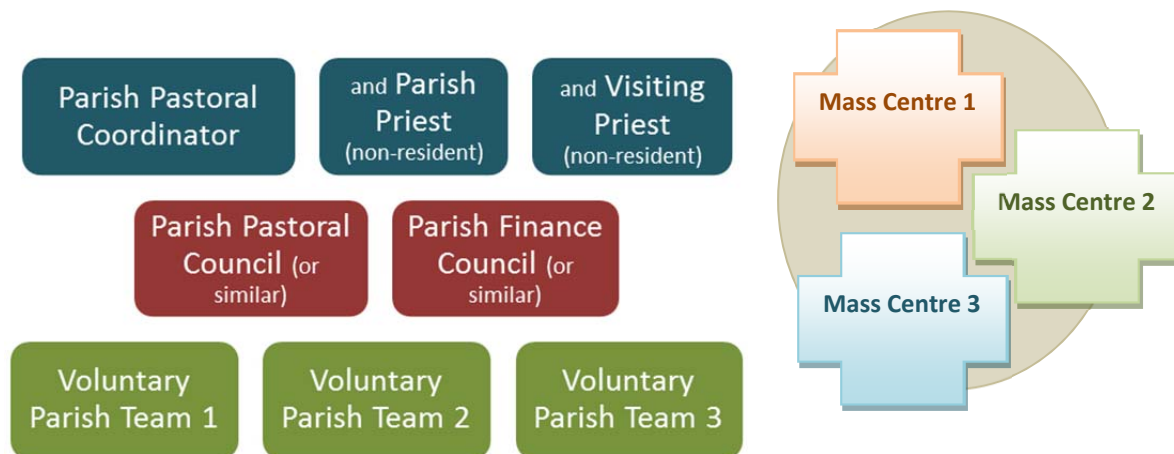
Figure 9.3: Type 3 Parish



Launceston Parish, the only parish within this model, was one of the two amalgamated parishes in the study. The parish was formed from the amalgamation of three former parishes of Invermay, Newstead and the earlier Launceston parish, each with their own distinct communities. Launceston has one main Church and uses the churches of the other two former parishes as Mass centres. The parish is led by a parish priest, with two assistant priests and one deacon. It has a central office staffed by a secretary and a Sacramental Coordinator, and has a single Pastoral Council and a Finance Council for the parish as a whole. The Mass centres are supported by voluntary Mass Centre teams consisting of lay people and the parish has several shared ministries and groups.

Type 4: Amalgamated Parish led by Parish Pastoral coordinator – Multiple Mass Centres with Individual Identities

Figure 9.4: Type 4 Parish



Myall Coast Parish was the only parish with this model in the study. Like Launceston Parish, Myall Coast is also an amalgamated parish formed out of the three former parishes of Tea Gardens, Karuah and Bulahdelah. This parish, however, differs from Launceston in many aspects. Myall Coast is a parish established under Canon 517.2 of the Code of Canon Law, similar to Cororooke Parish, but is led by a religious sister employed by the diocese as the Parish Pastoral Coordinator. The parish has a non-resident parish priest and another non-resident priest who visits the parish to say Mass. The three communities have separate and distinct identities and, unlike Launceston, separate ministry structures as well. The Pastoral Coordinator is assisted by a specially formed Parish Team from each Mass centre. Each team has its own Chairperson who represents their community on the Parish Pastoral Council. The parish also has a single Finance Council.

Observations on Parish Leadership

The four structures presented here are not surprising in themselves as they have been used for many years by different dioceses in Australia. They reveal some of the complexity of parish organisation that exists in Catholic parishes, since each type of

parish structure presents unique challenges to leadership, management and ministry for its leaders. Added to this, the contexts and demographics of the different parishes display a diverse pastoral landscape. Nevertheless, in regards to their implications for parish vitality, previous research has found that all of these structures are viable ways by which parishioners can be nurtured and empowered in their faith.⁷ In addition, the structures reveal two points of interest regarding the leadership of these parishes.

1. Leadership of a parish is always a team effort

This is very evident in Type Two, Three and Four parishes, but it is true even of Type One parishes with only a parish priest. It requires the joint teamwork of the priest with his staff and pastoral and finance councils and other lay leaders to successfully lead the parish if it is to be effective. Collaborative leadership, or “cooperative pastoral care” as Kasper terms it,⁸ is thus absolutely essential for parish vitality.

2. There are different levels and roles of leadership that need to be recognised and lay leaders are to be valued for their role in developing parish vitality

Most leadership positions, such as the members of the Parish Pastoral Council or the parish office staff, are fairly well known and recognizable, but some, such as the voluntary Parish Teams in Type Three and Four parishes, can very often be overlooked and underestimated unless they are formally seen as significant links to the Catholic community and the wider community. The structures also do not show the large number of groups and ministries in parishes, whose leaders play a central role. They also do not reveal important individual leadership roles that may be taken on by some persons.

It is important that each of these leaders be recognised and valued for the work they do and the role they play in the development of parish vitality. Lay persons are to be supported and empowered in their work in order to fulfill their tasks effectively. Collaborative and consultative ministry needs to be exercised at every level between lay and ordained persons alike for the development of the

⁷ Neil A. Parent, "Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership: Final Report Executive Summary," (1 June 2013). http://emergingmodels.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Final-Report_Executive-Summary.pdf [accessed 17 April 2014], 11.

⁸ Walter Kasper, *Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles Can Serve the Christian Community Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 67.

parish. As Pope Benedict XVI notes, “the parish priest is no longer the only one to animate everything” but the vitality of a parish is ultimately “the co-responsibility of the entire parish”.⁹

Levels of Leadership Found in Parishes

There are several roles and responsibilities in every parish that require good leaders. These roles may be formal or informal and some have more authority than others. An examination of the structures of participating parishes revealed that there were three main levels of leadership that could be identified across all parishes. There were:

- **Level One Leaders** – These are leaders to whom the primary care of a parish is entrusted. They include parish priests, assistant priests, deacons, lay coordinators who form the Lay Leadership Team (in the case of a Type 2 parish), the Parish Pastoral Coordinator (in the case of a Type 4 parish) and the parish priest or priest directors (in the case of Type 2 and 4 parishes). There were 21 Level One leaders in this study.
- **Level Two Leaders** – Level Two leaders are persons who assist Level One leaders through consultative or direct roles in carrying out the functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing the parish. These include parish staff, members of the Parish Pastoral Council and the Finance Council, members of the Parish Leadership Team (in Type 2 parishes) and the leaders of various parish groups and ministries, who also play an important role in assisting Level One Leaders. There were 85 Level Two leaders participating in the study.
- **Level Three Leaders** – Level Three leaders are those members of the parish community who take an active role in assisting Level One and Two leaders through various parish ministries and groups. These include members of various community, social, spiritual and liturgical groups and ministries and members of Voluntary Parish Teams (in Type 3 and 4 parishes). There were only 10 participants

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Questions and Answers* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008), 156.

who could be classed as Level Three leaders. These were from the parishes of Albany Creek, Kings Park, Warnervale, Myall Coast, Launceston, Shepparton and Cororooke.

The vitality of a parish depends on the skills of leadership displayed by leaders at different levels, their attitudes towards their work and the people they come in contact with, and the manner in which they relate to other leaders in the parish. The three levels of leadership form the basis for analysing various aspects of leadership in the following sections and the relationships that exist between leaders at different levels in the parish.

FACTORS IN STRUCTURES OF LEADERSHIP THAT CONTRIBUTE TO VITALITY

In organisations such as parishes, leadership may operate on any or all levels.¹⁰ There are also several interpersonal factors in play that may cause changes in the perception of leadership at different levels. The two concepts of “*de jure*” (out of the law) and “*de facto*” (out of the facts) leadership¹¹ are particularly important in a parish, where one sees both forms. Level One and Level Two leaders are clearly seen as *de jure* leaders since they all have particular positions and levels of authority, although some may also exhibit *de facto* leadership. On the other hand, people in Level Three who exhibit leadership skills can be classified as *de facto* leaders since they lead without having formal titles or positions of power. Parish vitality is greatly assisted by *de facto* leaders in parishes, though both forms of leadership are necessary for parish life. The ideal would be, as Tucker notes, if every *de jure* leader was also a *de facto* leader.¹² This is especially important for Level One leaders if they are to have the ability to communicate the parish vision and be able to effect change in parish life. In an attempt to understand how the leadership occurring in participating parishes influenced their

¹⁰ John Antonakis, Chester A Schriesheim, Jaqueline A Donovan, Kishore Gopalakrishna-Pillai, Ekin K Pellegrini, and Jeanne L Rossomme, "Methods for Studying Leadership," in *The Nature of Leadership*, ed. J. Antonakis, A. T. Cianciolo, and R. J. Sternberg (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 63

¹¹ Bruce. Tucker, *Leadership at the Crossroads: A Roadmap through the Potholes and Pitfalls of Christian Leadership* (Bloomington, Indiana: WestBowPress, 2013), 110.

¹² Tucker, *Leadership at the Crossroads*, 110.

vitality, several aspects of leadership were examined and they are described in the following sections.

Style of Leadership of Level One Leaders

The most important feature of Level One Leaders is their *style* of leadership since this will determine the ways in which they influence the management and day-to-day running of a parish. Hughes notes that changes in attitudes to social hierarchy, power, authority, decision making processes and institutionalization over the years have resulted in vast changes in the way younger Australians view the world in comparison to the older generations.¹³ This then has implications for the style of leadership in parishes since different styles will appeal to different generations and different cultures will respond differently as well. In addition, the style of leadership that works in one parish context may not work in another.

Literature on the most effective style of leadership in parishes is prolific. These include the “collaborative” style,¹⁴ the “participatory” or “consultative” style¹⁵ and Burn’s “transformational leadership”.¹⁶ In Chapter Two, I discussed Mason and Fenessey’s study on Australian Catholic leaders which showed that the “Human Relations” style was more popular while the contrasting “Symbolic” style was more effective.¹⁷ In that same chapter, I also highlighted Dixon’s study that showed the importance of “empowering leadership” as a very strong predictor of parish involvement.¹⁸

Level One leaders in the study were asked to describe their style of leadership. Using NVivo, I generated a Word Cloud of the most common words used by them in describing their leadership style (See Figure 9.5). As the diagram shows, the most

¹³ Philip Hughes, "A Maze or a System? Changes in the Worldview of Australian People," *Christian Research Association Research Paper No. 2* (1994). http://www.cra.org.au/file/maze_or_system.pdf [accessed 16 April 2014].

¹⁴ Loughlan Sofield and Donald H. Kuhn, *The Collaborative Leader: Listening to the Wisdom of God's People* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1995), 94.

¹⁵ Sweetser and Holden, *Leadership in a Successful Parish*, 17.

¹⁶ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 169.

¹⁷ Mason and Fennesy, "Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches," 14, 15.

¹⁸ Dixon, *"Ingenious Communities,"* (PhD), 198.

to let that happen again ... When you see people confidently doing good things it's really impressive ... You have to try and see what a person's potential is and help them to realise it".

- **Strong vision, inspiration** – There was a strong focus among many parish priests in communicating a specific vision of the parish and allowing people to be inspired by that vision. Different priests spoke of their visions in different terms. For example, for one priest, it was *“a strong vision of evangelisation and faith formation ... building a community of faith”*, while for another it was *“a strong community ...centred around the Eucharist”*
- **Collaboration, listener** – There was a great willingness to work with people in the running of the parish. Many parish priests spoke of their willingness *“to listen deeply”*, *“lead people to embrace the positives”*, *“to accept people where they are”*, *“to pick up where the energy is in people”* and value the work they did.

Assistant Priests and Deacons

The responses of assistant priests and deacons revealed that “collaboration” was very important, although there was a slight difference as they saw their role as a more supportive one rather than leading from the front. There was a greater emphasis on working collectively “as a team”. Two people (an assistant priest and a deacon) in this group also saw their role as that of a servant leader²⁰—*“I am one in the parish, we are a community and I am here to love and serve them”*. There was also a strong importance placed on empowering lay people in their ministry and most leaders in this group saw this as one of their major tasks.

Religious and Lay Leaders

Collaboration once again featured strongly in the leadership style of lay and religious leaders, perhaps more so because of the situation in which they led the parish. Working alongside supervisory and visiting priests, other parish leaders and parishioners was a

²⁰ Larry C. Spears, *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (Wiley, 1998).

very important aspect of their role. Leaders in this category spoke about “*working cooperatively*”, “*leading by example*” and “*allowing other people to be part of the process*”. For many lay leaders, this was a new role for them and therefore understanding the tasks they were required to do, overcoming work pressures and challenges and trying to give their best effort was part of the process. Other attributes which were mentioned included being welcoming and caring, encouraging and empowering people, getting to know the people and leaders in the community and seeking to unite people. This was particularly important since all the leaders in this category looked after parishes with two or more communities that had been individual parishes in the past.

The investigation into the style of leadership revealed that *collaborative ministry* and the *encouraging of lay leadership* were two of the most prominent features among the leadership style of parish leaders. Jewell and Ramey discovered in their leadership study, that parish leaders reported that they were increasingly acting as facilitators, catalysts and chief collaborators, calling forth the gifts of others and creating new roles, structures and programs to sustain the vitality of the parish, beyond their role as sacramental and liturgical leaders of the parish.²¹ Leaders in this study, too, have had similar experiences. There was a willingness to encourage people in developing and working in a wide variety of parish ministries, respecting differences in attitudes and opinions.

The styles also reveal aspects of *inspirational* or *transformational leadership*, in seeking to lead people to a positive vision and helping them work towards it. This is particularly important in multicultural parishes and parishes with two or more communities. In addition, parish leaders’ ability *to listen* to what is being said beneath the words reveal the basis of effective communication skills.²² Understanding the needs of people and listening to context is crucial to providing appropriate pastoral ministry. The extent and development of these characteristics were further revealed in the attitudes of these leaders towards other lay leaders and parishioners.

²¹ Marti R. Jewell and David A. Ramey, *The Changing Face of Church: Emerging Models of Parish Leadership* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 118.

²² Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 173.

Collaboration Among Leaders in the Parish

Collaboration between leaders is absolutely essential for developing the vitality of a parish. Priests and lay people are all called to work together and cooperate with one another to promote the mission of the Church in a spirit of communion.²³ In describing their relationships with the parish team, the staff group and Parish Pastoral Council members, most parish leaders reported “good” to “very good” relations. Relationships with other Level One leaders and the staff group particularly were often described as being “strong”, “supportive” and “a great team”. Many leaders spoke of their dependability on the team and trust in their work:

Each has their own tasks. I am totally reliant on them. I have reorganised things so I can spend more time visiting. L. runs the office. —Parish Priest, Kings Park.

The college front desk staff are very generous with attending to parishioners who come in. We only have a parish secretary two days a week and the rest of the time the school staff attend to phones and other inquiries. And they could be annoyed but they are not, they're always generous. There is a lot of goodwill. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

There were some challenges voiced by Level One leaders that they faced in collaborating with other leaders. Some of these had been overcome while some were still being worked on. Most of these had to do with working with people with different attitudes and different ways of perceiving parish situations and trying to come to mutual agreement on issues:

In some ways it is very disjointed, because I am dealing with so many different entities although I do try to get on well with everyone. —Parish Priest, Mount Isa.

There were teething issues, being an Australian Catholic among all the other Lebanese born priests, so it was challenging. I have 11 staff and nine other priests and we were never trained for such management so I had to do a lot of reading—“The seven habits of highly effective people”. Then I got people on board and got the whole thing going. That was a big learning curve. —Parish Priest, Harris Park.

There is some frustration and disappointment. There are lots of good people but not much gets done because some don't do much. So it's still not what we want it to be. Initially with the change the Parish Council attracted a lot of attention. There were some really great people but the previous

²³ Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 45 and Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 9.

parish priest just bored them out of it by not engaging with them ... Now with Fr L. we've started to get things going a bit but not all the good people are there on the Parish Council. —Parish Leader, Launceston.

While some parish leaders worked their way through such issues, parish staff in all parishes, on the other hand, generally reported good relationships with everyone in the parish team which included priests and lay persons alike. They indicated that people in their team were very “supportive”, “comfortable”, “open and honest” and easy to work with. Most parish staff seemed very helpful and adaptable in the work they did and with the people they dealt with and generally had a good ability to avoid or manage conflict. This was particularly seen in the responses of parish secretaries who regularly came in contact with a large number of parishioners:

I'm a problem solver—I don't get into too many conflicts. I should exercise more authority sometimes but I usually try to keep everyone happy. Even some people I don't like, I get along with. I'm extremely patient. —Parish Secretary, Mount Isa

I work in the office team with Q. who is the other parish secretary, and we have two part-time youth workers who work certain hours, but we are a great team when we are all together, and we also have morning tea with the teachers at the school; they are very inclusive of us. We share what we're doing with each other and we know what each one is doing and we share ideas on how to do things better. —Parish Secretary, Albany Creek.

Similarly, other parish group leaders and members of the Parish Pastoral and Finance Councils also indicated that they generally got along well with their team members, parish staff, parish leaders and other leaders in their parishes. Parish staff and leaders were generally available when help was needed and most teams worked well together. In most parishes, there appeared to be good links developed between all these groups so that they worked together for the overall improvement of the parish:

There are four of us in the team and we share the workload. ... Fr S. is an excellent pastor and always has time to talk to you. If he is busy you can leave a message and he will always get back to you. I get along well with R. and Q. [parish staff] I feel very comfortable to walk into the office. — Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

Every committee has a range of subcommittees; within those subcommittees are a handful of people that work together as a team. The majority of leaders are lay people, they are well-regarded in the parish ... [The parish priest] is very good, he's very open and I never hesitate to ask for his help ... [With the parish staff group] I'm like a nonpaid staff member, we get

along very well. [My relationship with the Parish Council team] is very good, we're very different. We come from different walks of life and this contributes to the richness. —Parish Council member, Harris Park.

As a team we work well together. We often meet informally to discuss things ... As people have been taking more responsibility there has been a 50 per cent increase in involvement ... There is a lot of delegation going on. —Pastoral Council member, Myall Coast.

One of the difficulties in groups working together, is when one group develops an attitude of cliquishness and members begins to work exclusively on their own agenda to the exclusion of other groups or other people. This attitude can greatly hamper community building efforts and planning processes. Although there were no major leadership cliques reported in participating parishes, there were a few participants in different parishes who indicated having faced such issues:

Yes, there's the Parish Council and there's the parish "clique". I'm quite aware of that. They do dominate very much so and I see that as a bad thing as it strangles the parish. You come against the clique every once in a while and I've butted heads with them a couple of times. For example they took over the 25th celebrations at the last meeting and that was very sad but they didn't get their own way as I stuck to my guns on some points. —Parish Council member, Albany Creek.

There is a little bit of cliquishness but very little and we are trying to work on it. I remind people that we need to put our differences aside and work together. We all bring different gifts. —Parish Council member, Warnervale

The Parish Council and Finance Team act independently but I think they should work more closely with one another. The Parish Council seems to think that they have greater status sometimes and there is some disconnection between the two groups. We need to develop this connection more. —Parish Leader, Launceston

While these differences were issues of concern for these parishes and needed to be dealt with, they were not seen by a majority of parish leaders as affecting the overall vitality of the parish to any great extent. Devoy argues that the degree of collaboration that occurs in a parish is directly proportional to the degree of consensus achieved about the organisational (and canonical) nature of a parish by parishioners and priests together.²⁴ Most parish leaders seemed to be able to work through these problems and manage

²⁴ Francis W. Devoy, "Collaboration, Consensus and Communion: Matters of Character and Heart," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 4, no. 1 (2005).
http://aejt.com.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/395532/AEJT_4.6_Devoy.pdf [accessed 16 April 2014], 5.

differences between groups of people in the parish, although it would seem that they had some way to go before a common harmony could be achieved.

LAY LEADERSHIP IN THE PARISH

Effective everyday leadership involves growing a shared vision, developing commitment to that vision and creating places for people to find their place within that vision and contribute to it.²⁵ The analysis of leadership levels showed that participating parishes had a good network of leaders installed in many areas of parish life who effectively contributed to the overall vitality of the parish through their work and the positive relationships built with people around them.

Encouraging and Developing Lay Leaders

Parish leaders were asked to describe how they promoted lay leadership in the parishes and encouraged people to participate. As mentioned in Chapter Seven, there was a widespread emphasis in calling forth the gifts and skills of parishioners. Many leaders spoke about regularly inviting people to participate and helping them learn the role, a process which had worked very well in parishes like Cororooke, where lay people played a vital role in leading liturgical services:

We have always invited people to participate. We try to partner new volunteers with an experienced person. That way volunteers become skilled through learning and working with that experienced person. We also encourage people to share reflections on the Scriptures and provide liturgy planning teams with two or three sources. Lay leaders enjoy sitting with the reflections and choosing the one that best fits for the assembly they are to lead. —Parish Leader, Cororooke.

In other parishes, there were two main ways through which lay leader were encouraged to participate. As the parish priest of Albany Creek Parish explained:

²⁵ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 175.

Sometimes people will come and say, “We want to organise a group” and so I say, “Yes” and they get resources and other things organised. At other times, I would see a need and I would know people who would be good at running it and so I approach people.

These methods were very useful in large parishes and those with multicultural communities, and parish leaders were keen to encourage and promote the attempts of parishioners even if they were not particularly enthusiastic about the idea themselves:

When people approach me to start a group, I'd take it to the Parish Council and then discuss whether it would be good. For example devotional things like the Divine Mercy, Fr P. is not the greatest fan but there is fairly devoted group in the parish and I go along with that ... I am quite open. I like to encourage everyone's effort. —Parish Priest, Launceston.

I tell them “Keep it going. I can't always be there but I'll support you. I'll back you. If you need me, come and see me or I'll visit you”. People are encouraged to take the initiative and then they're backed ... We let them know too that ministry isn't always easy. People will get angry with you at moments. At the heart of what I do is this: “to see what a person's potential is and help them to realise it”. —Parish Priest, Shepparton.

In general, large parishes and multicultural parishes like Kings Park, Harris Park, Albany Creek and Shepparton were particularly good at developing lay leadership through a variety of parish groups. However, in smaller parishes as well such as Narrabundah and Warnervale, having a variety of parish groups and ministries or developing a network of small groups (such as the cell groups in Narrabundah) seemed to work really well even if the numbers were small as it encouraged greater participation in parish life and a greater opportunity for many people to be involved in leading these groups.

Many Level Two and Level Three leaders in the study confirmed the encouraging, supportive and empowering actions of their parish leaders:

Fr S. doesn't micro-manage. He's happy for you to do the things you do and make decisions as and when. The big stuff I ask but the little bits and pieces I just do them myself ... He gives you a free rein. —Parishioner, Albany Creek.

From the very first, he [the parish priest] was very welcoming. We sat together and there was much consultation. He made the Sudanese very welcome. We have formed a committee—the Sudanese Welcome Group—to

help people to settle, to share information and give encouragement. We have our own choir. —Parish group leader, Kings Park.

Among the participants' responses, there were also references to some religious sisters who had been particularly successful in developing lay leadership in parish over time and who contributed in a very significant way to the overall vitality of the parish. These sisters were good at encouraging people to take up leadership positions, mentoring them in their roles and creating leadership structures for the future. This was very apparent in rural parishes like Cororooke and Myall Coast. Some sisters still lived and worked in the parish in various pastoral roles while others had moved on to other roles. However, without their contributions the parishes could not have been the vibrant places they were today. A parishioner from Cororooke Parish related the story of the contribution three sisters had made to the parish:

After he [the parish priest] moved away ... Sr I. was the pastoral associate who ran the parish when the resident priest was unable due to his having cancer. She was a great leader. When Sr I. left, Sr N. came and she was also a very good leader. After she left, we floundered for a bit ... W. and Sr B. came from the diocese to begin dialogue of finding ways in which to keep the parish viable. They outlined possible future options and that led to the structure of pastoral leadership that we have today.

Empowerment of Lay Leaders

More than just encouraging lay people to lead, empowering them in their work and respecting their decisions and opinions in their work is important for a true collaborative spirit to be fostered in a parish. Empowerment also included helping parishioners develop parish structures so that initiatives and activities didn't lose momentum and they continued to grow and expand. Parish leaders from Myall Coast, Kings Park and Harris Park spoke about the ways in which they facilitated this process:

I give them responsibility and delegate jobs. I give them hands-on work when needed. I've learnt that if you have a good core group of three to six leaders then they attract other leaders to work under them. This strategy works very well. —Parish Priest, Harris Park.

Each group has a group leader ... We have three meetings each year of group leaders. It is hard to get people to accept responsibility ... I am trying to develop that sense of responsibility. —Parish Priest, Kings Park.

I really believe in lay leadership. Involvement is so important. My dream is I would like to see everyone with one little job ... and with the help of other parish leaders we have been able to do a lot of that. —Parish Leader, Myall Coast.

In some parishes like Myall Coast, Level One leaders enlisted the help of other Level Two leaders who had a greater ability to empower people:

People like A. (the chairperson) are able to empower. He's in his early seventies and has been in Myall Coast 10 or 12 years. —Parish Leader, Myall Coast.

The attitudes of Level One leaders showed a great commitment to helping lay people take the initiative and be “co-responsible” for the parish. All the leaders were working to find the best solutions to make this happen in their parish. They respected the views and opinions of other leaders in their team and helped foster a sense of collegiality in leading the parish. These skills in parish management and group leadership seemed to be primarily important in their role as parish leaders.

Decision-making among Level Two leaders

Many Level Two leaders testified to the empowering nature of their parish leaders and the respect they had for the work of other leaders in the parish:

The parish priest realises the extent of the parish and calls on others to assist. —Religious Brother, Mount Isa.

The previous leader, Sister L. set up the people to use their gifts. The people support you; everyone has a go. People have a network set up, and will take the parish forward. There is a spirit of "I can do this". —Parish staff, Cororooke.

When asked if they are free to make independent decisions in the work they did, most leaders in this category responded affirmatively. Members of Parish Councils usually made group decisions together and avoided individual decision-making. However, they acknowledged that their views were considered in the working and development of the parish. Most leaders were conscious that their decisions needed to be aligned with the

views of the parish and so many indicated that they always consulted with parish leaders over bigger decisions:

We make decisions as a group and with Father Q. who has the final say but we offer our input along the way. Because we are dealing with finance its better that a team makes the decisions. —Parish Finance Council member, Albany Creek.

There is a lot of trust between the Parish priest and me. He doesn't hound or micromanage the program but allows me to work on my own and I only go to him for major decisions. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

It's important to have a recognition and alignment of values experience and judgment between the priest and myself. We work together but I can run the school and therefore can deal with any issue "on the same page" whether parent, student or staff. —Parish school Principal, Kings Park.

I have quite a lot of freedom but I do have a team that I need to consult and I am accountable to my congregation ... It's not hierarchical; I don't have to pass decisions through a council. I have shared authority hosted by the parish, which means I need to liaise with the parish to book rooms and get help with events. —Religious sister, Narrabundah.

The responses of Level Two leaders displayed a sincere attitude of working together "in communion" with Level One leaders for the development of the parish. There was an appreciation for the work entrusted to their care as each one endeavoured to fulfil their duties to the best of their abilities. Although the need to consult with parish leaders on certain decisions might seem to be restrictive to some extent, in reality, these attitudes are proper to the "consultative-participative" body of the Church within an ecclesiology of communion, where the priest and parishioners work together with a common purpose, a common vision and a consensus regarding works of pastoral ministry.²⁶ This attitude of being empowered and valued in their work by parish leaders had a very positive influence on Level Two leaders. It reinforced their desire for collaborative ministry and in turn helped them empower others.

Parish Involvement among Level Three leaders

Most Level Three leaders were involved in more than one parish ministry. Even those who felt they were too old to participate as actively as they had done before admitted to being a part of a few groups that did not require much energetic work. Most

²⁶ Devoy, "Collaboration, Consensus and Communion," 6–8.

participants in this group found their work enjoyable and satisfying and were happy to continue working since they felt empowered to play an important role in the community. Even though many Level Three leaders did not have a title or a specific position, they played significantly responsible roles in the parish. Two participants shared their stories thus:

I volunteer in St Vincent De Paul special works in conducting adult literacy classes. I love my role because it involves teaching and I enjoy teaching. In my adult literacy class I enjoy analysing specific needs and I find that many children are not equipped to read well. But I know it will be satisfying as I get to work with them since I love watching them be amazed when they learn new things. —Parishioner, Warnervale.

I am on the Welcoming Committee before and after Mass. I'm also involved in buying and selling books to keep in the Piety Stall ... I buy stuff for Confirmation and Baptisms and things like that Father is very supportive of the enterprise and people like it as well ... I open it usually an hour before Mass begins and [close it] about an hour after Mass ends. I also help with the Bread Run. Someone gets bread from the shops on Saturday and Sunday nights and we keep it out for anyone who needs it ... I love the work I do. —Parishioner, Albany Creek.

Development of Leadership Skills

Lay leaders in parishes need to be equipped with skills if they are to perform their roles well. Skills such as communication skills, organisational skills, and decision-making skills are important at all levels of leadership in the parish and it is important that parish leaders foster this development. There was no question in the interview schedule directly relating to training or skills development. However, lay leaders were asked to describe their path to leadership in order to find out how they developed skills for their parish work. Their responses also indicated how lay ministry was developed in participating parishes. In general, there were three main ways through which skills had been developed and leaders were appointed. These were:

1. **Through involvement in specific parish groups or a variety of volunteer roles** – There were many leaders who had been involved in parish activities, ministries and groups over many years and had gradually assumed leadership roles:

I joined as a member ... I started visiting families, then the coordinator got married and we needed a new coordinator so I got the job. And I started attending diocesan meetings and they asked me if I would be the diocesan Coordinator of Faith and Life. —Parish group leader, Harris Park.

We came into groups and leadership just followed. When I came into the music ministry roughly a year after the parish started, I just started to assume leadership of various liturgies. From that we got involved in the liturgy committee since we also had liturgical knowledge as well, also the arts conference later. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

Two younger leaders who initially got involved with their parish through World Youth Day then went on to be engaged in parish work after that. Another was inspired through school activities:

I went on an immersion trip to Fiji in Year 10 through the school and it inspired me to get involved in youth activities. I then got on to the Parish Council and as there wasn't much going on I decided to start a youth Mass once a month. It started from there. I'm the youth rep on the Pastoral Council and involved in organising youth activities both at the local parish level and at the diocesan level. —Parish group leader, Shepparton.

2. **Personal invitation by priest or parishioner** – There were many who had been “tapped on the shoulder” by priests or who were invited by parishioner to be involved in leadership positions:

Someone invited me to Emmanuel to do the Diploma of Parish Ministry. That was about 16 years ago ... Then later I was asked to be in charge of the Neighbourhood groups ... now I'm Spiritual Director at Emmanuel and also do supervision for other spiritual directors. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

3. **Through professional training acquired elsewhere** – There were some leaders who had acquired skills elsewhere and had then found a place to use them in the parish as, for example, in the case described in Chapter Seven of the accountant who became Chair of the Parish Pastoral Council in Warnervale.

Other paths to leadership included answering advertisements for the job (as in the case of most office staff who had previous skills in administration), getting special training for a particular role, a process of discernment of gifts and skills (as in the case at Cororooke Parish as explained in Chapter Seven) and answering parish bulletin invitations to join a parish group.

Provision of support for ministry

Developing good leadership in a parish is hard but maintaining it is even more critical to sustain the vitality of parish. The wellbeing and ongoing support of leaders, both personally and in their roles as well, is crucial to avoiding the pitfalls of confusion, pressure and burnout.²⁷ Level Two leaders in all parishes indicated that they were greatly supported in their parish work. Many leaders found great support from family members and their spouses. This was particularly true of couples who worked together but also many others who gave much of their time to parish work. Participant's responses also indicated that there was great support extended to them from parish leaders, staff and team members. In addition, many leaders said that they were touched by the caring and appreciative attitude of the parishioners in the community who greatly valued the work they did. The support felt by Level Two leaders was crucial in their job as many often worked in highly responsible and demanding roles:

[I am supported by] heaps and heaps of volunteers. I have a boss who supports my ideas. The volunteers are fantastic. They come in everyday ... there's always 3–4 waiting to do anything that needs to be done. ... I have a husband and family who are a good support too. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

[I find support] definitely from my wife, my immediate family and my mum and dad. A lot of my friends are working for the Church and I see my work here for the Church is a real honour, also the priests in the community are always encouraging and giving ideas, and [there is support] also from the staff and parishioners. —Parish staff, Harris Park.

[I find support from] all of the people around me, the students and their families; at this school there is a critical mass of staff who have really bought into Catholic education and into the idea that this college is connected to a parish. Personally I've never felt more engaged in a parish in my life. —Parish staff, Warnervale.

Level Three leaders indicated that they found support for their parish work mostly from family and the parish community. A few people also spoke of the personal support received from parishioners during their time of need:

The priests are supportive of the Life Ascending group and there is affirmation from within the group. We can get advice from the State President or whoever when necessary. The parish also paid for half of the diploma course in Pastoral Care. —Parishioner, Launceston.

²⁷ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 176.

I had six weeks of meals provided when I was widowed. People drop in with small cakes and stop to have a chat sometimes. They also drop in talking books from the Colac Library for me. —Parishioner, Cororooke.

The support received by these leaders shaped their attitudes to work and to serving parishioners which reflected their confidence and contentment.

Conflict Management

Managing conflict is one of the key tasks for effective leadership. Tensions between parish leaders and parishioners and among leaders of various groups can seriously damage the harmonious working conditions in a parish. Yet, within the diversity of parish life there are bound to be differences of opinions and causes for disagreements and, if not managed properly, these can create major rifts in relationships.

Generally, in most participating parishes, there were no serious conflicts with parish leaders reported by participants that had not been sorted out through mutual discussion. Two participants from different parishes gave examples of how they had overcome such situations:

There was a recent conflict over the placing of the Blessed Sacrament altar in the Church; some wanted it moved back to the front. It became deep seated and personal for a number of people. Fr I. allowed things to be expressed and endeavoured to come to a place where people can live alongside each other with a different way of worshipping; he tried to make them see it from more perspectives. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

There have been issues that we've discussed; that we both feel should be handled differently. The way we resolve them is to get our heads together and discuss the situation and add a bit of compromise. Ultimately it is his [the parish priest] responsibility and I have a lot of respect for his decisions. There are always different ways to do things and we can always turn to each other for opinions. —Parish staff, Harris Park.

There was a tendency for most disagreements to be encountered between parish leaders and members of Parish or Finance Councils since this was the place where major decision-making took place. However, most leaders indicated that these had been sorted through mutual dialogue and a respect for others' opinions:

The Parish Pastoral Council Executive is really good. We clarify a lot of issues in our meeting before the full council meeting so it's good. I really like a robust discussion. I like to offer direction but I like it to be challenged and not just accepted simply or outrightly rejected but that doesn't always happen. I'm happy that people are responding. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

We have a good relationship. There have been only differences of opinion. Or I may have another way of seeing things. Sometimes people can't say things to you but I feel one has to listen to them even if they annoy you. I used to get upset before but it was a good learning curve for me and now it's all ok. I listen and then tell them why I don't agree. —Parish Priest, Launceston.

We have a very open relationship. No conflict really. We have long meetings that go on till late so nerves can get a bit frayed at the end of the day. I did have some issues once with one Eucharistic Minister due to a miscommunication but we were able to talk through it and work it out. —Parish Priest, Harris Park.

Parish Council members in many parishes also reported similar experiences of negotiation and mutual agreement:

There was some tension because parish was coming to decisions about ministry to Gowrie Court [government housing complex] without consulting those who lived there. Negotiation achieved an outcome whereby if the parish wanted to do anything in Gowrie Court they would contact the liaison people there (myself and another person). Now good things are happening and no decision is taken without prayer. —Parish Council member, Narrabundah.

He is extremely supportive; we are able to talk things out; he is very amenable to seeing your point of view; I feel trusted and valued. It's not about what he wants or his vision; he is open to listen to everyone; he doesn't see it as his parish but it belongs to the community ... We talk everything out, there is never conflict but there is open discussion. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

There were past differences of opinion with parish leaders expressed by participants from all the parishes. However, they all indicated that they had been able to talk things over with the leader concerned and come to a mutual agreement on issues.

There were a few ongoing issues of conflict that were a cause of concern in some parishes. In Cororooke Parish, an incident that took place a few years back involved a falling out between two of the previous lay leaders. Both had resigned and new

coordinators were appointed to take their place. The diocesan staff and the supervisor priest had stepped in to ease the conflict and relationship building efforts were said to be still ongoing in the parish. In Narrabundah Parish, one of the Parish Council members reported a disagreement with the leader of the Eucharistic Centre and was trying to work things out:

There is mutual respect between Fr R. [the parish priest] and me ...not the same situation with Fr J. from the Eucharist Centre ... He is not in the rough and tumble of the parish where people tend to be more critical ... There was conflict between me and him about the renovation of the Church. The three principles of shared values, shared history and shared action need to be in place and all need to work.

In Warnervale Parish, the new model of school and parish together often caused tensions between people and parish leaders who found that working to come to a mutual understanding was particularly challenging in these situations as roles and expectations differed from traditional parish models:

The staff are a bit edgy with me as I tend to put the burner under them. I might clash with them sometimes as I may not like how they do certain things but we'll work together anyways. When it comes as push to the shove we do things together anyways ... Even with the married deacon and his wife, there is a bit of edginess anyways and it doesn't disturb me because I think that's just the way life is working with people. When we have such educated staff each has their own vision of Church and therefore we've got to come to a common vision together and it's difficult. I know what I can do in five years here but I have to encourage others to buy into it. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

Fr I. and I and the team do name the reality of our situation. The pains and struggles, often it is missionary territory. We don't just gloss over the issues, we are honest. We know that not everyone is finding it easy, but we hang in. —Assistant Priest, Warnervale.

Overall, however, there was a *genuinely* cooperative attitude towards managing conflict in parish life. Many participants indicated that they valued the attitude that their parish leaders had of respecting other peoples' opinions and they expressed a desire to work alongside them to help the parish thrive.

Attitudes to Work and Parishioners

There was an overwhelmingly positive attitude displayed by lay leaders in the parishes towards their work. Many indicated that they found the role “enjoyable”, “satisfying”, “enriching” and “rewarding”. Some of the aspects of work that leaders enjoyed in their roles were meeting and connecting with people, helping out in the community, learning from others, sharing the faith journeys of others and encouraging people in their faith:

I enjoy advocating for students, forming them, encouraging them to use their gifts and skills, enabling students to be leaders and working with other diocesan coordinators. —Youth Ministry Coordinator, Warnervale.

I enjoy it because it is very rewarding, I feel I can help those that really need it and open up the community where the disabled really feel part of the community. The disabled are very happy to attend Mass and other functions and this is very rewarding. —Disabilities Group Coordinator, Harris Park.

When asked about the impact of their leadership role, most leaders indicated that they found it challenging but rewarding, and many said that it gave them great satisfaction and confidence and had added purpose and meaning to their life. Among the many things that people loved about their job were learning things about the faith and the Church, being able to grow in faith through their work and come closer to God and being able to meet and build relationships with more people in the parish:

Now I feel that I'm doing what I am born to do. I get to be creative. Every day is very different. I share my faith with committed kids and I love that. I get to advocate for kids and I'm passionate about trying to get them to reach their potential. —Parish group leader, Warnervale.

For me it's the “best job”. It doesn't pay a lot but within limited resources it's ok. A few years ago I had to justify myself for a pay raise. I'm happy and I go home and love coming to work. —Parish staff, Launceston.

In general, leadership was an enjoyable experience for many and when asked about the future of their role, most leaders indicated that they would continue in it till they were required to step down or till they changed roles to something deeper or different. Many expected that changes in their life situation would have an effect on their involvement but they would nevertheless keep being involved in some way or another in parish life.

CHALLENGES FACED BY LEADERS

Although most leaders indicated that they found support for their work, there were many challenges voiced by parish and lay leaders in doing the work they did. These included:

1. **Time constraints** – This was one of the main challenges facing leaders as most tried to balance their parish work with their hectic work and family lives as well. Also, their roles had become increasingly demanding and complex and finding the time to do everything became more of a challenge:

The challenge has been to be a couple and yet detached. I've had to figure out how to be a deacon and yet maintain the loving relationship with my wife. Also financial challenges that all deacons face. —Parish Deacon, Launceston.

This challenge was constantly faced particularly by Level Two leaders in parishes. Parish secretaries in bigger parishes seemed to have the most challenging job of all and found their role constantly evolving. Many indicated that they were usually able to delegate jobs to others and find people to help out, as experience had taught them who to turn to when help was needed. This got more people involved in the parish and usually helped generate further empowerment among parishioners:

Initially it was one job per day of the week ... but then it got busier and busier through the years. It's just everything and anything now ... People come out and pour out their stories and you can't just send them away ... A lot of things happen because I make them happen. Like fundraisers and social things, happen through the office because you need someone to organise it and send emails ... There are a few people who I can call on for assistance if needed ... If and when we hear about someone who needs help we can do it, like cooking or driving lessons for the Africans. —Parish staff, Launceston

[The things I find] enjoyable are the variety of people and the variety of tasks ... Challenges are dealing with people who haven't got a normal reaction to something and out this way there are a lot of people who don't fit into ordinary categories ... For example, we have cooking for the watchhouse that has a volunteer cooking roster but it's not that straightforward, each volunteer has their own needs. One person is depressed and was told by their doctor to volunteer and get out in the community but sometimes he doesn't feel like cooking and I have to deal with that. Another person is on a correctional services order and

she has time to make up and I have to fit her into a group that doesn't need to know her history. It's about matching people and skills with the chore that needs to be done. And when you get it wrong you're really stuck with it. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

Jewell and Ramey believe that, like the roles of parish leaders, parish staff roles are also growing beyond “specific theological and pastoral areas of training”, as parish life becomes a more complex environment to work in.²⁸ They describe the changing priorities of parish staff to include mentoring lay leaders and calling forth the gifts and skills of parishioners,²⁹ a process that many staff in this current study were indirectly or directly familiar with. Most Level Two leaders in parishes had multifaceted roles that required them to be skilled in processes of planning, team building, program design and evaluations and group management skills, over and above their call to ministry in service of the parish. Since many leaders in this category were well-educated and had previous work experience in some industry or another, most seemed to manage these challenges well and appreciated the richness that the experience had brought them.

2. **Finding more volunteers and leaders** – This was another significant challenge voiced by many leaders. Some found it hard to recruit more volunteers into their team to share the workload. Others said that they would have liked to take on new challenges but finding someone to take their place was difficult and so they continued to remain in their current role. The implications of this were that in some instances older people were forced to remain in roles when they would have liked to get others to take it on.

3. **Working with and trying to encourage greater participation from non-Mass attenders** – This is was particularly challenging for people who regularly came in contact with such people through the school, sacramental preparation teams or bereavement teams. Encouraging people to keep coming to Mass and keeping young people and families involved was hard work. In addition, trying to get people to understand parish procedures was also difficult especially when arranging funerals or Sacraments.

²⁸ Jewell and Ramey, *The Changing Face of Church*, 119.

²⁹ Jewell and Ramey, *The Changing Face of Church*, 119.

4. **Other challenges** that were mentioned included setting up programs and activities and finding the funds and resources to maintain them, working with volunteer teams and people of different cultures and personalities, and continuing to remain energetic, motivated and vision-focussed.

LEADERSHIP AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Hoge and Jewell advocate making room for young adults in active parish leadership roles as one of the main ways in which to foster and enhance future young leaders in parishes.³⁰ There were 10 participants below the age of thirty in the study and just one participant in the 16–20 age group.³¹ Harris Park Parish had been particularly successful in engaging young people and four young participants in the study led important parish groups. Most young people in this group indicated that they enjoyed their parish work and had found it engaging and fulfilling:

Being so close to the Church has helped me to realise and nurture my vocation of becoming a priest. I hope to start working towards this soon ... The Church has become very personal. I have grown with the people here.
—Parish group leader, Harris Park.

This is amazing, through being involved with Church has solidified my faith and makes me proud to be a Catholic. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

It has shaped me to be the person I am. I am a practising Catholic and I will not lose my faith. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

However, some leaders reported more challenges than others. Two youth leaders shared their experiences being youth representatives on the Pastoral Council of their parish:

Initially it was a bit daunting being the youngest member of the Council. But now I have learned to speak up. There is a lot of openness from the priests which is really good. The challenges I face are not having many young people in the parish. There is that missing gap among Mass attendees. —Parish Youth Leader, Warnervale.

³⁰ Dean R. Hoge and Marti R. Jewell, *The Next Generation of Pastoral Leaders: What the Church Needs to Know* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 170.

³¹ An age profile of participants was provided in Chapter Four.

I keep on encouraging people to be involved because it's a lot easier to grow with other people round you ... I find it [Parish Council Meetings] quite boring and don't say much, but I realise that it's L's first year and she and the Council are very supportive of youth activities. —Parish Youth Leader, Shepparton.

Thus, although parishes could be commended for involving young people in various leadership positions and on the Parish Council, it would seem that they needed more constant support and encouragement from older parish leaders, and preferably the company of other young people, to prevent it unintentionally becoming an isolating and difficult experience.

Sustaining Leadership Levels

Overall, it would appear that most parishes still had some way to go to be able to sustain effective leadership patterns. Finding future leaders was a challenge most parishes faced. Many Level One and some Level Two leaders were successful in calling forth leadership from others in the parish. But in order to sustain levels of leadership, the core of committed parishioners who voluntarily helped out would first need to be maintained.

Level Three leaders regularly came in contact with parishioners, non-attenders and non-parishioners in their work. Their experiences showed that each of them played a key role in expanding the mission and ministry of the parish to people such as these. Although most of their roles were not formally recognised and did not have much authority, nevertheless they were crucial in allowing Level One and Two leaders to be effective beyond the scope of their daily work and beyond parish boundaries.

Thus, it would seem to be important that all Level Three leaders in a parish are recognised and supported in their ministry. As well as Level One and Two leaders, people in Level Three also need to be taught to empower others and pass on their positive experiences so that more people may be encouraged to participate actively in parish life and take up leadership roles. In the current study, this skill of empowering others did

not appear to be prevalent among participants in this group. Instead, it is an area for further growth if the practice of developing and maintaining lay leadership is to continue in these vital parishes.

In many parishes, having a history of good parish leaders had contributed significantly to maintaining the vitality of the parish. As one of the staff members from Shepparton Parish explained,

Fr I. is following what Monsignor I. did. Before he was appointed parish leaders decided to ensure that Fr O.'s vision was continued. Monsignor I. had established a vision for the parish which the Parish Pastoral Council was charged with implementing [the plan], though individuals with ideas for new programs were actively encouraged ... As Fr I. settles in—he came in January 2012—he is asking the Pastoral Council to re-look at this plan as needs have changed.

This tradition of good parish leadership was seen in many of the participating parishes. While parish leaders were flexible and innovative in their attitudes and ideas, the main focus of carrying on and developing the good work that had already been done proved to be the very reason why many parishes had continued to remain vital. The implications of maintaining good leadership patterns in parishes will be further examined in the following sections on adaptability and planning.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING PARISH LIFE

Leadership is a critical aspect of parish life that influences the development of many other areas. The investigation into leadership showed that it was very well developed in all participating parishes. The different structures of pastoral leadership revealed **three levels of leaders** in each parish working cooperatively to sustain and develop the vitality of the parish. Many common themes of leadership emerged from the findings, as follows:

1. **The role of parish leaders as facilitators, collaborators and catalysts** – The study revealed that empowering people, collaborating with others and

facilitating the development of new structures to increase the vitality of the parish were highly important leadership qualities for Level One leaders.

2. **Lay leadership is significant for vitality** – This was evident in all parishes irrespective of context or parish leadership. The presence of good lay leadership did not depend on parish size, location or resources and the pattern of active lay leadership was evident across all parishes. However the extent of the development of lay leadership in parishes largely depended on the empowering nature of parish leaders and an encouragement of a sharing of gifts and skills of parishioners.
3. **Lay leadership did not diminish the role of parish leaders** – The development of lay leadership in a parish did not undermine the role and the work of parish leaders such as priests and religious. Rather, in all parishes, there was great cooperation and collaboration between lay and ordained leaders alike with mutual trust, respect and support, which proved to be very effective for the overall growth and development of the parish. One area where conflict sometimes occurred was between Parish Council members and parish leaders. There was a particular need for leaders at this level to work together in a mutually cooperative attitude to sustain the vitality of the parish. In many participating parishes, such as Shepparton and Harris Park, leaders had achieved this through accommodating differences and being mutually respectful of each another.
4. **Many people contributed to lay leadership** – Several people helped in the development of lay leadership through mentoring and empowering lay people in their roles. Primarily, these were parish priests and other parish leaders, but also religious sisters who had played an important part in this regard in some parishes. In parishes such as Launceston, Mount Isa and Kings Park, parish secretaries, too, played an important role in empowering people to take up leadership roles by watching out for potential leaders.
5. **Lay leaders in vital parishes generally had positive attitudes and experiences in parish life** – Most Level Two leaders in parishes had

increasingly multifaceted roles. Most lay leaders found their work challenging, and yet rewarding, and reported high levels of satisfaction due to the support, empowerment and collaboration that existed in the parish. Three recommendations for further improvement in this area include:

- Training Level Three leaders to empower others
- Mentoring and supporting young leaders, and
- Ensuring that parishes received support from the diocese in maintaining the tradition of good lay leadership in the parishes.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the data collected in parishes in relation to the seventh measure of vitality that deals with collaborative leadership. Good leadership structures were generally developed in all parishes and good working relationships existed between ordained and lay leaders at different levels that positively affected parish growth and vitality. Lay leadership was recognised as being highly important and strongly promoted in all parishes. A few challenges faced by leaders were identified, along with a few aspects of leadership that needed to be improved in order to sustain the quality of parish leadership over time. Planning for the future and working with diocesan staff and leaders are very important in this regard. The next chapter will look at these areas and examine practices such as pastoral planning processes and the ability of parishes to be adaptable to changes and work to overcome challenges.

CHAPTER TEN

ADAPTABILITY AND PLANNING

The previous chapter discussed the seventh measure of vitality: collegial and collaborative leadership. This chapter examines the data collected in relation to the eighth measure of vitality:

8. The parish is adaptable to changes and is involved in planning for the future

Changes such as the closure of a Mass centre or a change in leadership patterns can often have crippling effects on the vitality of a parish. The result may be that communities that are vital are faced with uncertainties that dampen enthusiasm and cause conflict, confusion and considerable distress. As Ammerman notes, while following simple steps to assess the changes, decide on what to do next, and implement new strategies would be the ideal course of action, the reality is far from easy, as communities struggle to cope.

At every stage of the process, the weight of habit and tradition maintain familiar patterns. Those familiar patterns often blind congregations to the change in the first place. Once they recognize change, their ability to imagine the future is blunted by the weight of the past. And even valiant, imaginative efforts to change are made more difficult by expectations and assumptions long in place. The most common response to change, in fact, is to proceed with business as usual.¹

Parishes that are adaptable in such situations are the most resilient in the face of change. Being open and willing to try new things is one of the key qualities that enrich Church life.² This is especially true when a parish is facing a process of transformation. As their communities change, parishes that adapt well are able to gather new resources, establish new partnerships and develop new programs, ideas and community leaders in order to survive.³ Parishes that are ready for such changes and prepare for them ahead of time continue to remain vital.

¹ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 63.

² Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 22.

³ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 345.

This chapter begins by examining the pastoral planning processes in participating parishes and highlights some of the challenges they have overcome. The development of a shared vision in parishes is briefly explored and some of their ongoing challenges are discussed. The next section looks at the importance of planning in rural parishes and discusses some of the areas in which rural parishes excelled. The chapter concludes by bringing together some of the key themes that have arisen through the findings on planning.

PASTORAL PLANNING PROCESSES

Participants from all the participating parishes indicated that their parish was involved in pastoral planning, although their approaches to planning and the extent to which they planned differed somewhat. Most pastoral plans were formally developed for about three to five years and some parishes such as Warnervale, Harris Park, Myall Coast and Launceston had strategies in place that regulated this process:

We had a parish assembly last year ... Everyone was invited over two sessions. It was a listening exercise. All of this went to the Parish Council and we developed goals from it linking it back to the diocesan statement. It came down to groups about things we need to address—spirituality, music and liturgy, youth, social and fund raisings, outreach ... Over the next five years they are our goals ... We try to listen and talk to the parish as much as possible. We take people's ideas on board and try to work with them. — Parish Council member, Warnervale.

The pastoral plan was drawn up after a parish assembly. One of the sisters came up and worked with the Parish Council and the parishioners. It was modelled on the diocese's pastoral plan. It's reviewed by Pastoral Council and assembly yearly and also by the parish assembly. It certainly gives you direction. —Parish Leader, Myall Coast.

In parishes like Narrabundah, the parish plans were used to align plans of parish groups so that they all had the same focus:

The plan is hosted by parish and follows the same vision of the parish. Ministries plan for the whole year at the beginning of the year and then do fortnightly meetings. At the start of the year they go through the youth handbook for all youth leaders— a whole day on leadership training, practical skills, then split up into each of the four ministries and plan for the whole year. —Youth Group Leader, Narrabundah.

There were some parishes that found that working informally through planning meetings worked better than going through major formal processes. Albany Creek Parish prepared some formal plans but worked largely informally through its many groups as did Mount Isa Parish. On the other hand, Kings Park Parish preferred to be totally informal:

Mostly we do things unofficially—trying to make the parish welcoming and make sure our liturgy is good and paying off our debts and things like that. The vision is to have a living parish with Jesus our Lord at the centre of everything. According to the plan of our Parish Council, youth ministers were funded, debts were paid off and now we've got two part-time secretaries and two part-time youth ministers, but we just seem to respond to needs. —Parish Priest, Albany Creek.

The diocese has four things and we made them into two. It is fairly informal. Every two to three years there is a parish meeting which looks at how and where we are going —Parish Priest, Mount Isa.

Our group leaders communicate goals for the next six months. —Parish staff, Kings Park.

Planning can be a very tedious process as changes in the diocesan vision and planning, and parish leadership changes, directly impact parish pastoral plans. Too often the processes of renewing the plans take time and need consultation on a very wide level. Some parishes directly or indirectly relied on diocesan plans and this was particularly hard for parishes whose dioceses have changing parish structures. Both Cororooke and Launceston parishes were stalled for further planning at the time of the study as they waited for their dioceses to release plans before they attempted to formulate their own future goals:

The pastoral plan usually flows out of the leadership ... The plan now is to wait for the new bishop so we can't make any major decisions until he comes. It also depends on the diocese. To formulate a plan for the current community, it would be out of date even before it was out in place because of the changing nature of the parish. —Parish Leader, Launceston.

Although the processes of planning varied widely, what was common in all parishes was that parish leaders were involved in the current and future situation of the parish and worked with the people to build the parish for future needs. Some parishes such as

Mount Isa and Myall Coast had also taken part in NCLS surveys to help them better understand their situation and build on their strengths.

CHALLENGES OVERCOME BY PARISHES

Planning played a major role in helping many of the parishes overcome their challenges. Most of the participating parishes had faced some significant challenges in the past and many of these had been successfully overcome through planning, building on the parish strengths, facing difficult choices and working together as a community to make decisions for a sustainable future. In many instances the overcoming of challenges had themselves given rise to new vitality through innovative parish structures, programs and activities and new ways of managing parish resources. Several challenges that had been overcome were described by participants from different parishes, as follows:

1. **Loss of leadership model and parish identity** – The major challenge faced by the parishes of Cororooke, Myall Coast and Launceston was the change of an established and recognizable parish leadership structure. Cororooke and Myall Coast both lost their resident priests and were set up as Canon 517.2 parishes⁴ and Launceston was formed by the amalgamation of three former parishes. This had resulted in a greater sense of collaboration and ownership for Cororooke and Myall Coast, and Launceston benefitted deeply from the shared resources of its former parishes:

The biggest challenge was when we lost our priest and Sr L. came. We have been very, very blessed. We have worked that through. She can see you have a good initiative and she lets you go and she supports you.
—Parish group leader, Myall Coast.

Sr N. got us all working together, developing lay leadership. The challenge was overcome by realising that anyone can do these jobs— young and old. It has been a wonderful experience. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

⁴ The Code of Canon Law 517.2 reads, “If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care.”

There was a lot of grief. But later people started going to the churches that were not closed down and gradually overcame their sadness. Parish priests gave a chance for people to talk about it and discuss things before it happened. In the early days the Pastoral Council drew on people from all areas so that everyone felt a part of the new parish. —Parish group leader, Launceston.

2. **Space to accommodate the needs of a large community** – This was a real challenge for Harris Park Parish, one of the largest parishes in the study. This was largely overcome by very strong planning processes involving the leaders and the people in the community over a period of many years through the building of a Parish Community Centre. The parish now has ample capacity to cater for the needs of its huge community:

The Parish Community Centre—It was first a youth idea which was taken up by the Pastoral Council and the Stewardship Committee. They then got an architect to design it and he told us to put a wish list together (what we would need in 20 years' time) ... and the parishioners were consulted. The parish then got a loan from the Parramatta Diocese. It was a \$5 million project. —Parish Priest, Harris Park.

3. **Financial problems** – The parishes of Mount Isa and Warnervale both had developed innovative, viable solutions to overcome financial troubles that faced them, through the introduction of a Multicultural Festival in Mount Isa and the concept of a new parish model in Warnervale:

Financially it's tight—a major challenge. 18 years ago we came up with the Multicultural Festival, the second largest event in town now, as a fundraiser. We make about \$30,000 dollars profit in the one day ... It's a community event. There are 100 businesses involved ... We also have people from the parish involved in the food so it's cheaper that way. —Parish staff, Mount Isa.

We've struggled financially. We live on a shoestring budget. But the good news story is that the College absorbs so much of the running of the parish that we could not exist as a separate entity without them. The school pays the water, power, computer technology and rent for office spaces. For us it's been a big ask to keep our income steady so we can pay our staff. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

4. **Involvement of young people** – Shepparton Parish had been particularly successful in developing a strong youth ministry and getting a greater number of young people involved in parish life:

We started a couple of years ago by initiating a youth Mass once a month with young people involved in everything ... The next year Fr Q. came and they started the D (discipleship) groups after the monthly youth Mass, in the parish centre. ... The Stronger rallies occur 3 times a year in different towns in the diocese ... The Stronger retreat is held once a year over three days ... So the Stronger programs work well together and offer not just a one off but a way into the life of the parish and the life of Christ. —Youth group leader, Shepparton.

5. **Community Involvement** – Albany Creek Parish had been able to overcome its challenge of getting more people involved in parish life through the implementation of the Stewardship Program:

A way of life of stewardship where you can share your time and talent is a tool for allowing people to be part of different ministry groups and feel connected. There are about 40 different stewardship groups. Every second year we have the Ministry Fair where all the stewardship programs get the chance to show off their work. On every other alternative year we have a time and talent weekend to identify people's strengths. It also gives a chance for people to switch groups, try something new or change leadership. —Parish staff, Albany Creek.

The experiences of participating parishes showed great resilience in the face of change. Their paths to developing vitality have not been without failures and roadblocks but in every parish their attitude to challenges has been one of persistence and collaboration between diocesan and parish leaders and the parish community. Parishes have been able to explore new ways of doing things, have taken on new initiatives, and had the courage to accept manageable risks in order to achieve a shared vision and goal.

SHARED VISION

There was a great unanimity among leaders in having a concrete vision for their parish and helping other leaders and parishioners see this vision and work towards it. Every parish had a different vision based on the needs of the community and the challenges the parish was undergoing at the moment. Some of the visions shared by parish leaders were as follows:

That we will be a parish with a vision based in the Eucharist, in Scripture, in prayer ... That there is an atmosphere that says you can do it—you'll be backed. And the priests understand their job involves seeing what a

person's potential is and helping them realise it ... The mission here is to engage, to reach out to those on the edges, to reach out to those in need ... At the heart of it all is a praying community and Jesus Christ and God. — Parish Priest, Shepparton.

I would hope that in 10 years' time when I leave that the parish would run itself. That would be my hope and vision—that there will be people to carry on the jobs and take ownership and run with it, not overtaking the priest's jobs but just carrying on the day to day running of the parish. —Parish Leader, Myall Coast.

Some of the more common themes of these visions included an emphasis on Eucharist, prayer and God's Word, connecting people to a deeper level of faith, building community and especially encouraging younger people and leading the community to greater outreach activities. Of these, building community was particularly important for leaders from rural parishes.

In most parishes, there was also congruence between the vision of the parish leaders and the vision of other group leaders and parishioners, showing that people were generally united in a shared vision. For example, in Warnervale Parish, keeping the model of school and parish going and encouraging the faith and greater participation of the parish community was important for parish leaders. Similarly, the responses of Level Two leaders and parishioners revealed that they, too, were keen on encouraging the participation of families and especially younger people in the parish. In Cororooke Parish as well, there was a similar vision of greater involvement among people shared by leaders and parishioners alike but the focus here was more on keeping the parish alive and viable and not letting it collapse.

ONGOING CHALLENGES AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

While it seemed that there were many positive aspects in relation to planning in participating parishes, in that they seemed to be able to plan well and had been successful in overcoming challenges in the past, there were also some real problems that they struggle with. The main challenges that parishes were currently working on included:

1. **Participation of youth and young adults in the age group of 20–35** – Many parishes struggled with encouraging young people into greater participation in parish life. While parishes like Shepparton, Harris Park and Narrabundah had vibrant youth groups going, other parishes were finding it hard to engage young people, especially those in the 20–35 age group. Parishes like Warnervale were currently working on reviving what was once a vibrant youth ministry:

We used to do a monthly youth Mass that was very vibrant. There was a fortnightly Youth Group called Freefall. We also did movie nights and social events ... There were young people before but now many have dropped off after school and gone to university. —Parish Council member, Warnervale.

2. **A greater integration of immigrants into the parish community and a greater accommodation of cultural differences** – This was an ongoing challenge not only for multicultural parishes such as Kings Park, Warnervale and Shepparton but also for mono-ethnic parishes like Harris Park:

The fact of quite a few Sudanese going through the RCIA program at the moment has meant a cultural shift. Not only are the questions more complex but the cultural differences challenge in all sorts of ways the pre-suppositions of the RCIA. —Parish RCIA leader, Shepparton.

The culture gap between generations—there is a difference between Lebanese-born Maronites and Australian-born Maronites. Being Australian-born myself it is difficult even for me sometimes to understand what a Lebanese-born priest might be trying to say ... And this is happening in committee groups and families. But we have tried to overcome this challenge and we've tried to get leaders who understand both. A big challenge is keeping our culture and keeping our Australian-born generation in. —Parish Priest, Harris Park.

3. **Financial challenges**— Many parishes such as Mount Isa and Harris Park among others continued to face significant financial difficulties in maintaining the parish:

The big challenge is that we are about \$7–8 million in debt, so finances are a problem and that is why we are starting to push the stewardship and envelope programs to motivate people to give to try and overcome this challenge. In the past there have been issues with the way things have operated in the parish ... [we need to] open a dialogue and be transparent about what we are doing and work with others to get our message across. —Parish staff, Harris Park.

4. **Parish Model Maintenance** – A particularly significant struggle for Warnervale Parish was trying to maintain their model of school and Church:

Working with a parish and school is more difficult. Having that many meetings to attend and that many more people to take into account for everything you plan ... At the heart is this Aussie culture that is cynical and apathetic. The migrants bring in the devotional, generous, faith-filled approach but here the Aussies are kind of brutalised by something and they don't respond like the migrants. So we are a model but it's a fragile one. It will cost people lives in terms of burnout without support. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

5. **Mentoring younger people for future roles** – In many parishes, there were many older people participating and leading groups, and for parishes like Myall Coast and others, finding newer and younger people to take on these roles was a constant challenge:

The next 10 years will be a critical time. There are a lot of people in their 80s who won't be capable of doing things ... The negative issue is that of manpower. People have gone through some rough times. The congregation is grateful for what occurs. There are very few young people—just three that would take on anything. —Parish group leader, Myall Coast.

Although these were very real challenges, perhaps the biggest challenge of all that was constantly referred to by participants from different parishes was the threat to the vitality of the parish due to a loss of effective leadership. As was revealed earlier in the section on leadership, most parishes had had a succession of good leaders and losing this seemed to be a source of constant worry for many. Because these fears seemed to affect many parishioners in different parishes, they were examined in greater detail.

The Loss of Effective Parish Leadership

When asked what could change the parish in the years ahead, participants from all parishes were seriously concerned about the difficulties a change in parish or diocesan leadership could bring and how it could hamper the vitality of their parish:

A new bishop and new priest will make a big difference. Fr I. and Fr O. are both very good. Hopefully we have them both for a few years more till we have something lasting. —Parish staff, Warnervale.

We are approaching this a year at a time. The numbers of people are decreasing. Finding leaders may be a problem and Fr C. is 82 so we don't know how much longer he can keep coming. We can't do any more than we are now. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

Fr S. will leave and that will be a big challenge. We'd be really sad if someone arrived and wanted to undo a lot of the good work that we've done. That is our biggest concern. —Parish group leader, Albany Creek.

The administrator shapes the parish, so depending on who is leading spiritually does have a tendency to shape the parish. People become really attached to the parish priest, but the parish priest changes every three years. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

These concerns were very real and often there was not much the parish could do as most leadership changes were made by the dioceses. Warnervale Parish had once managed to overcome this problem by writing to the diocese, as a Parish Council member revealed, *“The change of priest was a major challenge. We were going to get a Filipino priest and the people wrote and asked for Fr I. to stay”*, but even they knew it couldn't last long—*“Our biggest concern is what will happen when Fr I. leaves next year”*.

There were a range of conflicting theories as to how the parishes would cope as almost all were reliant on diocesan decisions. *“I wish that bishops would not have the opinion that any priest is better than no priest. We need a succession plan for when Fr L. moves on”*, said one parish group leader from Mount Isa. Many participants admitted that their parish was just waiting for it to happen and would deal with it then as there were more immediate concerns. As one group leader from Albany Creek remarked, *“We have our head in the sand and not much preparation at all. Perhaps the Parish Council has thought of it....”* Another staff member from Mount Isa also expressed similar feelings:

Currently the goal is just extending ourselves, growing the parish and community outreach ... If we get a new priest it will come down to the parishioners and how strong they are in accepting change. Most of the parishioners have been through the change before and would like to think they are all good people and are able to embrace change and learn to love again.

A few other participants seemed more optimistic:

The parish will be well prepared for the future providing the clergy keep an openness to any ministry or service that is offered and negotiate with parishioners. —Parish group leader, Narrabundah.

I think the parish is well prepared because it has strong groups within the parish which I think will continue on ... It would just be the parish that has to adapt to the new priest. —Parish Council member, Albany Creek.

While no one could say for certain how things would change and what would come about, it seemed that most parishes sought to do their best with what they had currently achieved in the hope that it would enable them to cope with each challenge as it arose. Certainly, having the experience of remaining vital despite previous challenges had given people some cause for optimism. As the parish priest of Shepparton pointed out,

In a sense the parish is always making adjustments and seeking to understand what it needs to do, so that the Spirit might live ... Like the relationship of parish and schools it is always “a work in progress”. And it’s this provisional sense of things, this understanding that it’s a daily, weekly, monthly business that contributes to the vitality of the parish.

For many parishes, this attitude of being adaptable and flexible to changing situations and building on the strengths and processes already in place seemed to be the best way to move forward. Ammerman notes that failure to appoint strong pastoral leadership for a community that is ready to change can often leave them feeling “abandoned and powerless”.⁵ If diocesan leaders fail to take into consideration the history of the development of vitality in these parishes, it could greatly obstruct further progress, resulting in loss and decay. This would be particularly harmful to rural parishes that are faced with dire situations despite their present vitality. Their needs and challenges differ from urban parishes in that they require greater support if they are to survive at all.

PLANNING IN RURAL PARISHES

Previous research has shown that in recent years many rural communities particularly farming areas in Australia have experienced decline. Many small rural towns are

⁵ Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 344.

characterised by large population outflows, especially of women, and ageing populations.⁶ The 2006 NCLS study showed that drought and declining jobs, churches, government services and local businesses were the most anxiety creating for Catholic and Protestant church leaders in rural parishes.⁷ Hughes revealed that the mentality of people living in rural and remote Australia is characterised by anxiety and helplessness due to these problems.⁸ However, some rural towns and regions, particularly retirement, holiday and mining areas, are experiencing growth. This difference was well illustrated in the three Mass centres of Myall Coast Parish, where Tea Gardens had become a thriving retirement centre while the other two centres, being farming and fishing areas, were experiencing population decline. The deterioration of many rural areas, however, led Cahill to pronounce “an emergency situation” for the Australian rural Catholic Church.⁹

Most rural parishes in the study had been successful despite these challenges. The study revealed at least five areas in which rural parishes excelled and had been more successful than their urban counterparts. These were:

1. **Innovative Leadership Structures** – Parishes like Cororooke and Myall Coast continued to thrive despite their loss of the traditional pastoral leadership model of having a parish priest as a leader, and had set up new structures to take the parish forward.
2. **Dynamic Youth Activities** – The “Stronger” youth activities in Shepparton Parish that included rallies, retreats and groups were fast spreading across the Sandhurst Diocese and were soon to be included as part of a national youth initiative.
3. **Innovative parish events** – The Multicultural Festival of Mount Isa Parish which started off as a one-off parish fundraising event had grown to become an annual event of Mount Isa town and a key event of the state of Queensland’s Multicultural Week.

⁶ Hughes et al., *Building Stronger Communities*, 180–182.

⁷ Ruth Powell, Michael Brady, Michael Pippett, and Sam Sterland, “Rural Churches: A Snapshot,” (June 2010). <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=6561> [accessed 8 April 2014].

⁸ Philip Hughes in Desmond Cahill, “They couldn’t give a damn about us: The Emergency Situation of the Australian Rural Catholic Church ” (February 2010).

<http://www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au/pdf/BSP02.pdf> [accessed 8 April 2014], 3–4.

⁹ Cahill, “They couldn’t give a damn about us,” 1.

4. **Strong Community engagement** – Women’s activities in Myall Coast Parish that included groups such as the “Wrap with love” knitting group, the “Yummies for Mummies” playgroup and “The Women’s shed” were highly successful in engaging and empowering women of all ages.
5. **Adaptability, planning and vision** – The new pastoral model of Warnervale Parish that combined the church and school into a joint entity and shared office spaces, resources and personnel showed great initiative in diocesan planning processes to develop new structures for the pastoral care of newer parish communities.

Many participants from rural parishes in the study described specific challenges that their parish had striven to overcome and expressed concern over the work needed to rise above new situations that had arisen:

Under Monsignor I. [parish priest for 17 years] the parish had to create its own vision of what it could be in the Shepparton area. It has done this very, very successfully. The new parish priest, Fr I., is continuing this vision but it is expected, without any misgivings, that he and the Parish Pastoral Council will re-enunciate this vision as different challenges emerge. For example, demographic changes, the loss of small farms as they are purchased by larger holdings because many small farms cannot “make a go of things”, and the fact that the iconic SPC cannery is now owned by Coca Cola Amatil which has no identification with the area. —Parish staff, Shepparton.

If Pirron Church closed, people probably wouldn't come to Coragulac ... The decline in numbers is because of amalgamated farms and smaller holdings vanishing. School numbers are up but the challenge is to get families involved the same way as they are now ... Fr C. [the visiting priest] is 82 so after he stops ministering, will we get another priest? It is difficult to see how, with the general ageing of priests in the diocese. —Parish group leader, Cororooke.

The diocese needs to provide more resourcing for lay people, rather than build the deaneries. In general, we need to develop a stronger structure for the lay people so that can be independent of the religious if none are available ... We need to develop a full lay management team for the future. And we need to get some more of the children involved ... If you get the children, then you get the parents more involved. —Parish Council member, Myall Coast.

In Chapter Six, I identified five specific problems faced by rural parishes that included:

- finding more supply priests
- training more lay leaders for ministry and mentoring future ones
- having the continued support of the diocese and the bishops for lay-led liturgies to continue to grow and develop
- facing and planning for the continuing decline of community
- facing and planning for a very real possibility of a future without priests and the celebration of Mass in the parish

In addition, some leaders of these parishes also indicated that they faced some real challenges in leading rural parishes and felt the need for more personal support from diocesan agencies and staff:

The diocese is not really supportive and I feel like I'm in "no man's land"... I'm very much part of the deanery. I found that some men in the diocese were less keen on my presence because I'm not clergy. Originally I went to pastoral associate meetings but found they had a different agenda. I'm not part of clergy, my role and agenda are different to pastoral associates, so I'm in a different position. All I can do is do what is right here and do my best here and not worry about what they think. —Parish Leader, Myall Coast.

At some point the diocese will say you have to manage the debt but they still want to continue this model so I wonder how we will be able to do both. Nobody really wants to come up to ask us how we are going. They just want it to continue. But it's incredibly taxing and it will kill people eventually if the support does not happen by the authorities. If the diocese decides to change anything here then we definitely would be affected. —Parish Priest, Warnervale.

The concerns expressed in this chapter reveal that without consistent strong, empowering pastoral leadership, many rural parishes may be faced with strong decline in parish life and perhaps even closure. In addition, more personal support for parish leaders is needed to prevent them from collapse or burnout. Also, diocesan policies in some dioceses need to be further adapted to ensure the proper integration of newer pastoral roles like religious or lay parish leaders into existing structures of the institutional Church to overcome the role confusion challenges faced by leaders in such positions.

THE ROLE OF PLANNING IN ENHANCING PARISH LIFE

The role of good planning is paramount to ensuring the continued growth, success and vitality of a parish. The investigations into planning processes in participating parishes showed that though these varied widely, all parishes were involved in some way or the other in working together to build the parish for future needs. Many common themes of adaptability and planning emerged from the findings, as follows:

1. **Planning and visioning helped overcome challenges and create innovative strategies to develop parish vitality** – Most parishes had been able to overcome many challenges in the past through formal and informal planning processes. There was, however, a certain amount of dependence on the dioceses in some parishes with regards to the renewing of pastoral plans and making plans for the future. In most parishes, leaders and parishioners had a similar vision that helped them focus on shared goals for the parish.
2. **The greatest challenge was a loss of effective leadership** – The most significant challenge facing parishes was the fear of a loss of effective leadership leading to the collapse of the vitality of the parish. In this case, most parishes were highly dependent on diocesan decisions and found that they were unable to make any significant plans in this regard.
3. **Rural parishes faced greater challenges in planning** – Rural parishes generally faced greater challenges due to the critical situation in some parts of rural Australia. While some had been able to develop innovative and effective programs and activities that helped enliven their parishes, there was still an urgent need for greater help from diocesan agencies in order to maintain their vitality and sustain the parish into the future.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the data collected in parishes in relation to the final measure of vitality that dealt with adaptability and planning. While parishes had been fairly successful in planning for change and meeting challenges, the sustainability of the vitality of the parish largely depended on the continued support extended from the diocese and cooperation with parish leaders and parishioners. This was more crucial for rural parishes, which despite facing greater challenges, had nevertheless managed to surpass urban parishes in developing many effective and innovative strategies in several aspects of parish life.

This chapter concludes the analysis of data in the study. The next chapter will look at the implications of these findings and suggest areas for further study.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSION

As a “definite community of Christian faithful”, every parish is called to embody the presence of the Church in the wider community.¹ It does this by being a place of living communion and participation that is wholly mission-oriented, an environment conducive to hearing God’s word and growing in the Christian life, and one that is engaged in dialogue, proclamation, outreach, worship and celebration.² In doing so, a parish becomes “salt” and “light” for the community it is located in.³ Parish vitality can therefore be likened to the “saltiness” or “luminosity” of a parish community. It is imperative for every parish community to grow in health and strength if it to be an effective source of evangelisation and an authentic witness of the Gospel. As Wittberg notes, “To the extent that their communal “salt” loses its flavor, parishes ... are worse than irrelevant, because they no longer image God”.⁴

This research study has examined the nature of vitality in Australian Catholic parishes and studied its different expressions in diverse contexts. The concept of parish vitality is understood in the literature as a factor consisting of several items which cluster together. In the light of this examination of the literature and the derivation of eight measures that can be used as indicators of vitality, this chapter presents a summary of the findings and discusses their implications and recommendations for further research.

The chapter begins with a restatement of the thesis objectives, followed by a discussion of the key findings presented in Chapters Six to Nine, concerning a) spiritual nourishment, faith formation and liturgy; b) community and hospitality; c) mission and outreach, and d) leadership and planning. These reveal the main contributors and challenges to vitality identified through the research. The findings related to the

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. n. 2179.

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation (24 November 2013) http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#_ftn217 [accessed 19 June 2014], n 28.

³ Matt 5:13–16.

⁴ Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities*, 113.

different expressions of vitality are also discussed, along with three main expressions of vitality that were found in participating parishes. The further sections of the chapter examine the implications of the research for parish leaders and pastoral planners, and the chapter concludes with recommendations for further research in this field.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In examining the nature of vitality in Australian Catholic parishes, the main objectives of this thesis were:

1. To investigate how various measures of, and contributors to, parish vitality derived from a review of literature and identified in this research are related to the overall quality of parish life.
2. To investigate the different expressions of vitality found in different contexts in Australian Catholic parishes today.

In order to achieve these objectives, the inquiry was based on a theological framework, centred on the concept of Church as communion and on sociological research done on Australian and overseas Catholic parishes, extensively reviewed in Chapters One and Two.

Drawing on these two sources, the theological and the sociological, eight measures were proposed as indicators of vitality in Catholic parishes. In the empirical research, 10 parishes were identified that had been shown to have particular forms or expressions of vitality. Data was collected using interviews, participant observation and document collection and a comprehensive analysis using NVivo was carried out.

RESEARCH FINDINGS IN RELATION TO THE EIGHT MEASURES OF VITALITY

1–2 Spiritual Nourishment, Faith Formation and Liturgy

One of the main findings in the area of spiritual nourishment was that both rural and urban parishes had developed a great diversity of spiritual practices that contributed to the vibrancy of the parish and provided opportunities for a variety of people to share in the “holiness” of the Church. Spiritual nourishment was facilitated through a variety of parish groups, opportunities for talks and retreats, and other spiritual activities that parishioners were encouraged to participate in. Parish leaders were greatly supportive of this diversity and some parishes were assisted by religious communities or other spiritual centres in the parish to provide parishioners with additional resources for spiritual development.

Previous research has shown diversity in parish activities to be an indicator of parish vitality.⁵ The range and diversity of spiritual practices found in participating parishes were developed to suit the cultural and spiritual needs of each community. Efforts were made to develop suitable resources for smaller groups of people who often went unnoticed. Multicultural parishes faced greater challenges in identifying and meeting the spiritual needs of parishioners from different cultures.

Faith formation for children, particularly those receiving sacraments, was strongly developed in participating parishes. Adult faith formation, however, was seriously underdeveloped in many parishes with only limited opportunities available through homilies at Mass, the RCIA, academic courses and programs for engaged and married couples. A few parishes had found it helpful to create a “Faith Development Team” of some sort to identify and respond to the faith formation needs of the community. Nevertheless, all parishes still faced challenges coping with the diversity of needs and the time and commitment constraints of parishioners.

⁵ DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 18.

Liturgies were generally vibrant, well planned and welcoming, with good music and homilies, and a depth of spirituality—attributes that have been demonstrated by previous studies as being strong indicators of vitality.⁶ Most parishes had a variety of liturgical styles to suit people's needs and some multicultural parishes had a small range of Masses in different languages. Resources for young people were somewhat inadequate and youth Masses were available only in three parishes in the study. All parishes greatly encouraged active participation at Mass and a wide range of people of all ages were involved in various liturgical ministries. After-Mass gatherings were seen to be a very big success in community building and fellowship, greatly valued by many participants, and these were organised at a few weekend Masses in most parishes.

3–4 Community and Hospitality

In all parishes, a network of lay involvement and a wide range of relationship-building activities had built a strong community that was a great contributor to vitality, a finding similarly revealed by the Notre Dame Study.⁷ This was largely a result of the combined efforts of parishioners, parish leaders and parish groups. Building a strong, united community was particularly essential for multicultural parishes and parishes with more than one community. New parishes and parishes with transient populations also faced challenges in this area.

Like spiritual practices, community building activities in all parishes were developed to suit the culture, context and age groups in the parish. Small groups were effective in building relationships, particularly in multicultural and large parishes. Specific activities created for different cultural groups were also successful in multicultural communities. World Youth Day activities were identified as being particularly useful in helping young people build connections with other age groups in the parish. The youth activities in Harris Park Parish were exemplary in this regard. Activities for people in their 20s and 30s were largely underdeveloped in most parishes.

⁶ See Gremillion and Castelli, *The Emerging Parish*, 142–143; DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 11, Diocese of Green Bay, *Diocesan Visioning 2010-2011: Parish Discovery and Dreaming Report*, 5–6 and Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 14.

⁷ Gremillion and Castelli, *The Emerging Parish*.

The study provided preliminary evidence to suggest that a parishioner's sense of belonging is influenced by relationships with a variety of people in the parish, and that therefore improving the sense of belonging of parishioners is the joint responsibility of parish leaders, staff, group leaders and parishioners alike. Many participants had deepened their own sense of belonging through positive interactions with many different people in the parish. This in turn had resulted in greater participation in parish life, confirming previous research done by ICLS and NCLS researchers in this regard.⁸

An attitude of welcoming and hospitality, a priority in all parishes, greatly contributed to the sense of vitality and to creating social bridges for newcomers, visitors and people from the wider community. This attitude was evident in parish staff and leaders and in various places, activities and events in the parish, demonstrating the willingness of parishes to be authentically "catholic" and "one" in every sense.

Higher levels of participation in parishes were also helped by an attitude of being inclusive of people within the parish community and encouraging a sharing of gifts and skills. Many parish leaders used the process of identifying and recruiting skilled parishioners to develop lay leadership in the parish. However, the study revealed a particular need felt by parishioners for greater communication and consultation among parish leaders and members of the Parish Council, and better communication of parish decisions to the rest of the parish.

5–6 Mission and Outreach

The study revealed that many parishes played a significant role in meeting the needs of the wider community through the coordinated efforts of parish leaders, groups and individuals. Parish groups usually worked with local government agencies and other community services to provide general assistance to people in the wider local community and to help meet specific needs. Parishes were always open and accessible to individuals from the community to seek aid at any time and care was taken to assist them in the best way possible.

⁸ See Sterland et al., "Attracting and Integrating Newcomers into Church Life," and Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life*, 16.

Mission was encouraged in parishes and lived out in a variety of ways through a wide range of service and mission opportunities that parishioners could be involved in. These included being involved in indirect ways, through contributing to appeals for example, or through active work with refugees, migrants, the old, sick and other needy members in the community.

Evangelisation was also carried out through direct and indirect means, being conscious of the cultural context and the needs of the people in the community. There was a greater emphasis on building relationships with non-practising Catholics and other people outside the parish community, once again demonstrating the “catholicity” of these parishes.

Ecumenical links in parishes were largely dependent on the support of the parish leader and most ecumenical links with other denominations or faith traditions involved a sharing in community or social service work, joint spiritual activities (especially in small rural communities) and a shared use of buildings. Parishes that had strong ecumenical links had a history of good relationships built up and strengthened over the years by successive parish leaders.

Many parishes had succeeded in transforming the community around them through the links created by social services or community-building initiatives. By putting into practice the values of Catholic social teaching such as justice, care for the needy, respect for human dignity and rights of the individuals, many parishes, particularly Mount Isa, Shepparton, Kings Park and Launceston, had created a lasting impression on their local communities.

7–8 Leadership and Planning

The investigation into leadership in parishes revealed three levels of leaders in each parish working cooperatively to sustain and develop the vitality of the parish. They were:

- **Level One Leaders** – Persons to whom the primary care of a parish is entrusted, and including assistant priests and deacons.
- **Level Two Leaders** – Persons who assist Level One leaders through consultative or direct roles in carrying out the functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing the parish
- **Level Three Leaders** – Active members of the parish community who assist Level One and Two leaders through various parish ministries and groups.

The study revealed that the style of parish leaders was largely that of encouraging and empowering lay leaders, communicating a parish vision and collaborating with, and listening to, other leaders, suggesting that many individual parish leaders had a mix of the two contrasting styles shown in Mason and Fennessy's research.⁹ Empowerment, collaboration and the development of leadership structures were seen to be highly important skills for parish leaders to develop parish vitality, and the increasing complexity of parish life also meant that most Level Two leaders had multifaceted roles that involved planning, team building, program design and evaluations and group management skills. These findings were consistent with those from previous research studies that showed similar trends in the US and Australia.¹⁰

One of the key findings of the study was that lay leadership is significant for parish vitality, a trend that was evident across all parishes irrespective of their context or leadership structure. Lay Leadership did not diminish the role of parish leaders. There was great collaboration in all parishes between lay and ordained leaders alike, in a demonstration of real "apostolicity". This mutual trust, respect and support proved to be very effective for the development of the parish. One area where conflict sometimes occurred was between Parish Council members and parish leaders. There was a greater need for leaders at this level to work cooperatively to sustain the vitality of the parish.

The development of lay leadership was facilitated by parish priests, and religious sisters in some parishes, who helped form lay people in their roles by mentoring and empowering them. Additionally, there was preliminary evidence to suggest that in large

⁹ Mason and Fennessy, *Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches*.

¹⁰ See Cieslak, "The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership," Ganim, *Shaping Catholic Parishes*, Mogilka, *Parish Vitality Initiative: The Pilot Parishes: An Evaluation Report*, Dixon, "Ingenious Communities," (PhD) and Jewell and Ramey, *The Changing Face of Church*, 119.

parishes, parish secretaries had an important role in calling forth and organising lay leaders in the parish.

The study revealed that lay leaders in vital parishes generally had positive attitudes to and experiences of parish life. Although they found their work challenging, they reported high levels of satisfaction due to the support, empowerment and collaboration that existed in the parish, confirming previous research findings on the positive influence of empowering leadership.¹¹ The main challenge reported was sustaining the number of leaders and the levels of leadership in parishes.

Many parishes had been able to overcome challenges and create innovative strategies to develop parish vitality through good planning and visioning processes, another finding consistent with previous research.¹² There was, however, some dependence on the dioceses in renewing pastoral plans and planning for the future, with the most significant challenge facing parishes being the fear of a loss of effective parish leadership leading to the collapse of parish vitality. In this regard, most parishes found themselves incapable of planning successfully without diocesan help.

Sustaining the levels of vitality in rural parishes was a greater challenge. While some parishes had been able to develop innovative and effective programs and activities for people in their communities, there was still an urgent need for greater help from diocesan agencies in order to sustain the parish in the future.

CONTRIBUTORS AND CHALLENGES TO VITALITY

The findings of the study revealed that the **main contributors to vitality** in parishes were:

1. Diversity in spiritual, social and outreach activities, appropriate to the culture, context and age-groups in the parish

¹¹ See Dixon, *Ingenious Communities*(PhD Summary) 12.

¹² DeLambo, *In Search of Pastoral Excellence*, para 7 and 19.

2. Empowering and collaborative parish leadership, involved in planning and visioning
3. Strong community bonds among parishioners with an attitude of inclusivity and welcoming
4. A variety of opportunities for lay involvement
5. A network of lay leadership spread throughout the parish

The study also revealed that the **main challenges to vitality** were:

1. Identifying and meeting the spiritual and social needs of certain groups of people within the parish such as the home-bound, young mums, certain cultural groups in multicultural parishes and those who did not attend Mass.
2. Providing faith formation to suit the diverse needs and the time and commitment constraints of parishioners
3. Developing spiritual resources for young people in some parishes, particularly Youth Mass, and developing social and spiritual activities for people aged 20–35 years
4. Building community among parishioners especially in new, multicultural and amalgamated parishes and parishes with transient populations
5. Working together in a mutually cooperative attitude in the Parish Pastoral Council, an area identified as the most likely place for disagreements and conflict to occur. Developing greater communication and consultation between parish leaders and members of the Parish Council and a better transmission of parish decisions to the rest of the parish
6. Developing ecumenical links with other denominations that do not depend on the initiative of the parish leader
7. Sustaining the number of leaders and the quality of leadership in parishes
8. Overcoming a constant dependence on the diocese in renewing pastoral plans and planning for the future and working with the diocese to overcome a constant fear felt by parishioners of a loss of effective parish leadership

In addition there were very specific challenges identified in the research that were faced by rural parishes. These were:

1. Personal challenges faced by parish leaders and a perceived need for more personal support from diocesan agencies and staff
2. Finding supply priests to fill in for Mass when regular priests were not available
3. Training more lay leaders to lead services of worship when regular priests or lay leaders were not available. Mentoring future leaders to continue the work
4. Having the continued support of the diocese and the bishops for lay-led liturgies to continue to grow and develop
5. Facing and planning for decline in a community population.
6. Facing and planning for a very real possibility of a future without priests and the celebration of Mass in the parish

RESEARCH FINDINGS IN RELATION TO THE EXPRESSIONS OF VITALITY FOUND IN PARISHES

The inquiry in the nature of vitality in parishes revealed two important findings:

1. Different parishes expressed each of the eight measures of vitality differently based on the parish *context* and *demographics* of the community.
2. Each parish expressed some measures of vitality more strongly than others based on their available *resources* and *needs* of the community.

The strength of conducting an in-depth study on parish vitality was that the nature of vitality was examined at a level that could not be achieved by survey methodology. The inquiry revealed that the parish context and demographics of the community largely determined how parishes expressed their vitality. There was a great diversity seen in participating parishes in expressing each of the eight measures. This is an important finding of this study that extends previous research done by the NCLS team. Vitality in rural parishes was expressed differently compared to the vitality expressed by metropolitan parishes. Although the aspect of vitality was the same, for example “outreach”, each parish had different outreach programs or different ways of how they “do outreach”. An example of this could be seen in the unique ways in which the parishes of Kings Park and Cororooke expressed “collaborative leadership”.

In Kings Park Parish, collaborative leadership was primarily expressed through the *Parish Meeting Night*, a unique process set up (in place of a Parish Pastoral Council) to ensure that people from the wide range of parish groups were able to combine their efforts and work together in an efficient manner. The parish priest collaborated with staff and leaders of parish groups and ministries in the running of the parish.

On the other hand, Cororooke Parish strongly expressed collaborative leadership through their *Lay Leadership Team*, where three lay people who each worked in specific areas of parish life liaised with other representatives from the community to make parish decisions together. Collaboration was thus carried out through a shared ministry, with parishioners working cooperatively and assuming responsibility for their community.

In general, findings regarding the different expressions of vitality revealed that:

- In **large parishes** like Harris Park and Kings Park, vitality was predominantly seen in a variety of active parish groups of all ages working together, with many people involved in parish activities. These parishes had a great number of parish groups of a similar nature such as many different prayer groups and choirs. Liturgies in these parishes were generally very well attended and were celebrated in a variety of liturgical styles. The parishes also had well developed sacramental programs and many activities for young people, well developed websites offering a range of information and resources and a wide range of big and small community building activities for parishioners and the wider community.
- **Multicultural parishes** like Albany Creek, Kings Park, Shepparton and Mount Isa expressed vitality primarily through their spiritual, community building, and outreach services for people of different cultures and through various opportunities presented for people to be involved in the parish. Liturgies in these parishes were well planned, and were sometimes celebrated in more than one language, and in some cases included, another rite (for example the Syro-Malabar Rite). Vitality was also expressed through the great diversity seen in the range of spiritual groups,

choirs and youth activities and through the diverse mix of people of different cultures participating in them.

- In **rural parishes** like Myall Coast, Cororooke and Mount Isa, there was a more close-knit community spirit prevalent and thus vitality was expressed mainly through the well-developed and close-knit bonds among parishioners and their strong support for the parish and people in the community. Liturgies in parishes such as Myall Coast and Cororooke included lay-led liturgies. In comparison to urban parishes, vitality in rural parishes was expressed through a deeper level of involvement, with a larger percentage of parishioners likely to be involved in parish activities, and a stronger level of care and concern, with more people willing to volunteer their help and in looking after sick and home-bound people in the community. In addition, rural parishes had stronger ecumenical connections, greater adaptability and stronger planning processes than urban parishes.
- In **amalgamated or combined parishes** like Launceston and Myall Coast, each individual Mass centre has its own distinct sense of community. Vitality was therefore expressed through the efforts of the parish to foster a common parish identity through shared community-building events and parish celebrations. There were high levels of inclusivity in terms of providing opportunities for people of the different Mass centres to be involved in parish activities.
- In **new parishes** like Warnervale, forming community within the parish and beyond was of primary importance. Vitality therefore was expressed through combined school and parish events, a diverse range of big and small community building activities and events, community outreach services and a strong emphasis on welcoming and hospitality in all areas of parish life.

While parishes in different contexts have diverse ways of expressing their vitality, each parish is also able to express certain measures of vitality more strongly than others based on their available resources and needs of their community. The **strongest expressions of parish vitality** varied in each of the participating parishes and parish vitality looked different in every parish. Based on the research findings, the following are three best-developed expressions that were found in the participating parishes.

1. Albany Creek –

- a. Vibrant, well-planned liturgies, involving many people
- b. Diverse range of parish groups and activities
- c. Strong empowerment of lay leaders

2. Kings Park –

- a. Strong emphasis on welcoming and parish hospitality
- b. Diverse range of parish groups and activities
- c. Strong inclusivity between people of different cultures

3. Warnervale –

- a. Strong emphasis on welcoming and parish hospitality
- b. Strong inclusivity between school and parish communities.
- c. Focussed on pastoral care and community

4. Myall Coast –

- a. Strong sense of belonging and community, with strong bonds between parishioners
- b. Inclusivity and cooperation between people of separate communities
- c. Collaborative and pastoral leadership

5. Narrabundah –

- a. Diverse range of parish groups and activities
- b. Strong focus on mission, outreach and evangelising activities
- c. Programs for youth and young families

6. Harris Park –

- a. Diverse range of parish groups and activities
- b. Strongly committed and involved parishioners
- c. Strong sense of belonging and community, with strong bonds between parishioners

7. Launceston –

- a. Inclusivity between people of separate communities
- b. Strong sense of belonging and community, focussed on a shared parish identity
- c. Programs for youth and young families

8. Shepparton –

- a. Diverse range of parish groups and activities
- b. Strong emphasis on welcoming and parish hospitality
- c. Strong sense of belonging and community, with many opportunities for participation and a special focus on outreach

9. Mount Isa –

- a. Strong emphasis on welcoming and parish hospitality
- b. Strong sense of belonging and community, with a special focus on outreach
- c. Inclusive parish with a diverse range of groups and activities

10. Cororooke –

- a. Strong sense of belonging and community, with strong bonds between parishioners
- b. Committed parishioners supporting the parish
- c. Emphasis on welcoming and caring for the community

These expressions reveal how parish vitality takes on many shapes and forms according to the uniqueness of every parish. While no two parishes express vitality in exactly the same manner, every parish has the capacity to use its strengths and resources to develop vitality irrespective of its size, location, community demographics and leadership pattern. The following sections reveal how the findings of this study can inform parish leaders and pastoral planners.

INSIGHTS FOR PARISH LEADERS

The insights in this section are primarily for parish leaders, i.e. those to whom the primary care of a parish is entrusted. They include parish priests and non-ordained pastoral coordinators. However, these insights could also help Parish Council members, people involved in leadership and planning in parishes and lay people interested in improving the vitality of their parish.

The research findings revealed several factors that contribute to the vitality of a parish that can easily be developed in any parish irrespective of its context or the demographics of the community. These include:

1. **Vibrant, well planned, inclusive liturgies**

The Eucharist forms the centre of parish life and everything else originates from it. Parish liturgies, including Eucharistic celebrations and lay-led liturgies, thus form the very core of vitality. Good liturgies are achievable with good planning and preparation and by encouraging the participation of parishioners. The research revealed that some factors that contributed to vibrant liturgies included having a welcoming ministry, good music and singing, clear reading, homilies that invited reflection and were encouraging and relevant to daily life, opportunities provided for a variety of people to be engaged in liturgical ministries, a range of liturgical styles to suit the needs of the community, special preparation for special Masses such as Sacramental, Feast Day Masses and Family Masses, and the provision of a “cuppa” after Mass.

2. **A network of lay leadership—having the right people in the right places**

Parish vitality is largely facilitated by good leadership which, as the research shows, is always a team effort. It is important for parish leaders to work alongside staff, group leaders and other active parishioners for the development of their parish. Having a network of lay leaders who understand their responsibilities, are empowered in their work and are able to empower others is a significant contributor to vitality. Parish leaders are able to form this network by:

- Identifying the three levels of leadership in the parish and the leaders in each group
- Encouraging a sharing of gifts and skills of parishioners to help identify potential lay leaders
- Empowering lay leaders in their work and providing help and support when needed
- Using the help of other priests, religious and key office staff such as office managers to provide additional training, support and mentoring for lay leaders.
- Identifying and encouraging the work of Level Three leaders and other “committed parishioners” and using them to empower others to generate greater involvement from the wider parish community.

3. Collaborative leadership in planning and decision making

The study identified that an area where most disagreements and conflict between leaders took place was between parish leaders and members of the Parish Pastoral Council. Good relationships within this group are very important, as problems at this level could affect other areas of parish life. Parish leaders and Parish Council members will need to employ processes of greater discussion and consultation, a mutual respect for differences of opinion and good conflict management techniques if they are work collaboratively to develop parish vitality. In addition, they will need to ensure that parishioners are involved in planning and decision making and that these decisions are communicated to them in a clear and effective manner.

4. Building a strong sense of belonging and community

A strong sense of belonging and community was the foremost reason given by participants for the vitality of their parish, valued by men and women and young and old alike. Building community among people of different ages and being inclusive of all cultures, groups and communities in the parish is an important aspect for parish leaders seeking to develop parish vitality. The research revealed that some factors that could help build a strong community included utilising the resources and activities of parish groups, planning a mix of big and

small events and activities to facilitate a building of relationships, creating an atmosphere of welcoming and hospitality and encouraging participation and a sharing of gifts and skills among parishioners. Additionally, youth group activities, such as events associated with World Youth Day and other social events could also be used as community building events for all age groups in the parish.

5. Meeting spiritual and faith formation needs through combined, concentrated efforts

Identifying and meeting the spiritual and faith formation needs of parishioners of different ages is a challenging task, particularly in big and multicultural parishes. The study found that participating parishes utilised the resources of parish groups, religious communities in the parish and diocesan programs for help in this regard. In addition, parish leaders may also find it helpful to set up a faith development team to identify the spiritual and faith formation needs of groups of people and plan programs and workshops to meet these needs.

6. Using diversity as a strength to facilitate greater participation

One of the biggest contributors to parish vitality was the diversity offered to parishioners in parish life. A common factor seen in all participating parishes was that every parish had a variety of parish groups, including prayer groups, outreach groups, liturgical ministries and cultural groups that helped involve many people. While membership within these groups was not large, it nevertheless helped a greater number of parishioners to participate actively, build relationships and deepen their sense of belonging. There was also great diversity in parish activities and events that sought to include people of different ages in the community. Parish leaders can use this concept as a tool to enhance parish vitality by encouraging diversity in the parish and empowering people to create a range of groups and activities that will help facilitate greater participation.

7. Using websites for more effective communication

The study revealed how many parishes used parish websites to communicate effectively with their parishioners and the wider community. Websites ensured

that parishes had a greater presence in the online community, an easier accessibility of information and resources for parishioners and people in the wider local community and a mode of communication that was familiar to younger age groups. Parish leaders seeking to communicate with young people and others in the wider community will need to develop this resource if they are to do this effectively. Effective resources found on the websites of participating parishes included detailed information on parish groups and services, access to parish bulletins and other frequently-used documents, several text, audio and video spiritual and faith formation resources, special pages for young people and links to other important websites.

INSIGHTS FOR PASTORAL PLANNERS

The findings of this study can also help inform bishops, diocesan staff and others involved in diocesan pastoral planning processes. It is important for diocesan staff and pastoral planners to help good parishes maintain their vitality if they are to continue to effectively carry out the mission of the Church. In addition, these insights could also help pastoral planners to improve parish structures and plan for effective parish leadership to assist other parishes in developing their vitality.

1. Leadership planning for vital parishes

The research revealed that one of the deepest fears of many participants was the loss of effective parish leadership leading to a loss of parish vitality. Changes in parish leadership greatly hamper the continued processes and expressions of vitality that have been developed in a parish as these are likely to be changed, altered, or discarded altogether by the new parish priest or other appointed leader. While many parishes in the study had benefitted from a history of good leadership, parishioners have always had to rely on the diocese to send them a good leader. This then implies that diocesan authorities have a big responsibility in providing vital parishes with a suitable leader who will be able to carry on and improve the good work begun in these parishes. As previous research has

shown, a good match between a parish leader and a parish community can greatly enhance the vitality of a parish.¹³

Given the diversity of parish life in Australia, it is important to note that the context of a parish and the demographics of the community influence the impact that leaders have on a parish. Dioceses will need to choose parish leaders with a suitable style of leadership and inform them about the strengths and challenges of the parish community and the particular expressions of vitality that have been developed in the parish prior to their appointment. It may also be helpful for diocesan staff to meet with lay leaders of the parish community before a change in leadership to assist them through the process of change. In addition, providing mentoring and support for new parish leaders and the lay leaders of the community to help them adjust to each new situation and offering a forum to discuss problems and difficulties that may arise will greatly help parishes through the transition of leadership.

2. **Greater support for rural parishes**

The research revealed some very serious challenges faced by rural parishes despite their present vitality. Diocesan authorities will need to address these issues if they are to sustain the levels of vitality in these parishes. The main ways in which dioceses can help these parishes are by:

- Providing on-going mentoring and personal support for leaders in rural parishes.
- Providing special assistance for non-ordained parish leaders and helping them integrate with other parish leaders in the diocese.
- Helping parishes find supply priests for liturgical celebrations.
- Supporting lay-led liturgies in parishes by providing resources and formation for lay people who lead these liturgies and helping with difficulties and issues that may arise. Helping parishes in training and mentoring future lay leaders.
- Providing rural parishes with assistance in parish planning, especially in planning for and addressing long-term challenges.

¹³ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah. Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church: What Kind of Pastor for What Kind of Congregation* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2012).

- Providing extensive assistance to parish communities before, during and after parish re-organisations and changes in leadership.

3. Stronger training programs and ongoing support and mentoring for lay leaders

One of the main challenges faced by many parishes in the study was sustaining the levels of leadership in parishes. Most Level Two leaders in parishes were much older and had increasingly multifaceted roles that involved planning, team building, program design and evaluation and group management skills, over and above their call to ministry in the parish. This put a great strain on leaders who struggled with challenges such as finding the time for their work, recruiting more volunteers and leaders and encouraging greater participation from parishioners. Diocese will need to help parishes address this issue in order to maintain parish activities and groups. In particular, providing training and formation for lay leaders in important roles will assist them in their work. Also, helping parishes set up training and mentoring programs to identify, recruit and train future leaders will help parish leaders sustain programs and activities of vitality in the parish.

4. Programs and opportunities for people in their 20s and 30s

The research revealed a distinct lack of programs and activities in parishes for young people their 20s and 30s. Some parishes had been successful in developing a few activities. For example, Narrabundah Parish had the Young Men of God movement and Harris Park Parish celebrated a special Mass and organised a monthly brunch for young families to address this issue. Overall, however, parishes struggled to engage people in this group. Dioceses can assist parishes in this regard by identifying programs to engage such people and helping parishes set these up in their parishes. In addition, organising formation programs for people within this age group to train them for important roles in parishes may help generate further interest and develop potential leaders for the future.

5. A sharing of resources across parishes

This research study identified many parishes with innovative activities, structures, programs, practices and events that contributed to their vitality. Many parishes had successfully overcome challenges by developing these strategies. Dioceses can use these ideas to share them with other parishes facing similar challenges. Collaboration between parishes fosters greater renewal and more effectiveness in mission.¹⁴ By promoting a greater sharing of resources and ideas across the diocese, parishes can work together, learn from one another and contribute and develop their own activities and ideas for vitality. A sharing of resources in areas of spirituality and faith formation, community building and outreach initiatives will also help parishes develop activities and strategies that they could not have established on their own, and will avoid any duplication in pastoral ministry in the diocese. An attitude of sharing and learning is essential for all parishes in the diocese and is particularly important for rural parishes. Working with parishes in this manner can help pastoral planners and diocesan staff to plan with greater efficiency for the development of vitality across the diocese.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In Australia, changes such as the decline in priestly vocations and surges of immigration are affecting many parishes across the country. Small parishes may find themselves clumped together with their neighbours to form one big parish, while other large parishes are faced with a diminishing attendance at Mass. Mono-cultural parishes may have to adjust to the influx of other ethnicities, and parishes with priests as leaders may face the possibility of other models of pastoral leadership. Through it all parishes everywhere must continue to remain effective in being places of communion, worship, celebration, proclamation and mission.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, n. 26.

This study explored the nature of vitality in a diverse mix of Australian Catholic parishes that varied in parish organisation, outreach and mission activities, spirituality and faith formation programs, community building projects and leadership patterns. Through the differences, every parish had found life-giving ways of living out its vocation of being “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”. Eight measures were proposed as indicators of vitality in parishes. These eight measures of vitality will need to be explored further and tested in other Catholic parishes and dioceses throughout Australia. Solidifying the measures of vitality that are indicative of the health of a parish can have major implications for enhancing and invigorating parish life. The eight measures of vitality hold potential opportunities for Church leaders and pastoral planners to identify and develop initiatives of vitality in parishes across the country.

This study also revealed that parishes in any situation are able to remain effective in mission by developing their own unique expressions of vitality. The research uncovered a range of effective activities, programs and initiatives that have been developed by participating parishes. These expressions of different measures of vitality will need to be explored in a greater number of parishes than the 10 in this study. Such exploration will uncover further resources, programs and activities that could help other parishes facing challenges and aid them in improving their vitality. In addition, longitudinal studies will need to be performed on “vital” parishes to evaluate the effects that changes in leadership, parish reorganisation, demographic changes and other factors have on their vitality.

As Australian Catholic parishes and their communities grow and change over time, parish vitality will continue to evolve and take on many forms and shapes, some of which have perhaps not yet been envisaged. Parishes will need to continue to explore new ways to help people experience God and participate in Christ’s mission. What needs to remain constant, however, is that the faithful are gathered together in communion, the Eucharist is celebrated, and the message of the Gospel is lived, proclaimed and passed on.

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APPENDIX A



MCD UNIVERSITY *of* DIVINITY

Established by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act 1910

Tracing the pulse: An investigation into vitality in Australian Catholic parishes

LETTER TO PARISH PRIESTS

1 February, 2012

Rev ... PP

[Parish Name]

[Address details]

Dear Father,

My name is Trudy Dantis and I am a student at the MCD University of Divinity, conducting a research project for my Doctor of Philosophy thesis.

My research is an investigation on factors that have contributed to vitality in Catholic parishes around Australia. I am interested in exploring how these initiatives influence the overall climate of the parish and shape its ongoing development. The research project includes a detailed study of around 10 Catholic parishes from around Australia that have been identified by the Building Stronger Parish research as having shown particular forms or expressions of vitality. It has been suggested that your parish might be able to assist us in this research. I am therefore writing to you to invite you to be a part of this project.

If you accept this invitation, this is what it will mean for the parish:

- I will liaise with you, or another person nominated by you, to contact relevant people in the parish who could participate in the research. The people I am looking for are adults or young people who have been actively involved in their parish for at least the past two years. This means attendance at Masses, involvement in Catholic social groups or any other ministry in the parish.
- The selected participants will be given an Information Letter with all details of the research and will be invited to sign a consent form before being interviewed.

- Each parish study will include interviews with individuals and/or groups. I would also like to visit your parish with a team of two researchers who will spend about two or three days in each parish observing parish life, including liturgical celebrations, and interviewing participants in the study. These could include priests, pastoral associates and other parish staff, group leaders, Parish Council members, and parishioners.
- Interviews with participants will be conducted by members of the research team at locations convenient for the participants.

Additional details of this research have been included in the Information Letter to Participants which I have enclosed along with this letter. This project has been reviewed and approved by the MCD University of Divinity Human Research Ethics Committee. Should you have any questions regarding the research or if you would like more information, you may contact me at any time.

For your information, I also enclose copies of the various letters and other documents that will be sent to potential participants. I trust that you will welcome the opportunity to have this research conducted in your parish.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Trudy Dantis

Researchers Name: Ms Trudy Dantis

Telephone: #####

Email: #####

APPENDIX B



MCD UNIVERSITY of DIVINITY

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Tracing the pulse: An investigation into vitality in Australian Catholic parishes

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher	Name	Ms Trudy Dantis
	Telephone	#####
	Email	#####

You are invited to participate in this project.

My name is Trudy Dantis and I am a student at the MCD University of Divinity, conducting a research project for my Doctor of Philosophy thesis.

My research is an investigation of factors that have contributed to vitality in Catholic parishes around Australia. I am interested in exploring how these influence the overall climate of the parish and shape its ongoing development. I am studying 10 parishes. My research study is in association with the Building Stronger Parishes research project conducted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office. The link between the two projects involves a sharing of resources and other information obtained in both projects. For more information on that project see [www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au].

I am interviewing six to eight Catholics aged 16 years and over in each parish, selected on the basis of their involvement with the particular aspect of vitality being studied in their parish. The total time commitment required for this research is approximately one hour for an interview.

The time and location of these interviews will be determined to suit you. The location could be the parish buildings, at your home or at a neutral location chosen by you. Topics covered will be a discussion on your parish activities, your beliefs and practices, and experiences within your parish.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Decline to answer any particular question
- Choose to decline to participate in this study or withdraw from it at any time, without any disadvantages, penalties or adverse consequences. *Once you have*

been interviewed, you have up to 10 days to withdraw your permission for the interview to be used in the research project.

- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- Request to have the voice recorder turned off at any time during the interview
- Preserve your confidentiality with respect to participation in this project

With your permission, I will record the interviews for the purpose of my research records. These recordings will only be accessed by me and researchers in the Building Stronger Parishes research project. They will be securely stored for a period of five years from completion of the research after which they will be destroyed. If direct quotations from your interview are used in my thesis, you will have an opportunity to check their accuracy before the thesis is submitted. At this time, I will also check with you that you are willing for the quotations to be used. While individuals will not be named in any reports, it is possible, given the nature of the study, that an individual could be identified. You may also request a copy of personal information about yourself which is collected in the course of this research project. A summary of the key research findings will be provided to you prior to the completion of the project.

The information collected in this research project will be used in my thesis and may also be used by the ACBC Pastoral Research Office in publications, seminars and conferences on the topic of parish vitality.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the MCD University of Divinity Human Research Ethics Committee. Any questions regarding this project may be directed to the MCD Administration, Ph: (03) 9853 3177. If you have any complaints or queries that I have not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the MCD Director of Research: Ph: (03) 9853 3177, e-mail admin@mcd.edu.au.

If you agree to become involved with this research it will be under the conditions set out in this information sheet.

You have the right to withdraw from active participation in this research project at any time prior to your giving information. You can also insist that information arising from your participation is not used in the research project, provided you exercise this right within two weeks of completing your participation in the project. Should you have any queries, you may contact me at any time.

I do hope that you will be willing to participate in this project. Your experience will contribute to our understanding of parish life. I would be most grateful if you would complete the **Consent Form attached to this Information Sheet.**

Thank you,

Trudy Dantis

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF AUTHORISATION



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research

23 February 2012

To whom it may concern

Mrs Trudy Dantis, a member of staff of the Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) with responsibility for coordinating the Building Stronger Parishes project, has been authorised by the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research (ACCPR) to use the data collected in the fieldwork phase of the BSP project for the purposes of completing her PhD studies. The Building Stronger Parishes project has received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (HREC Register Number V2010122). The ACCPR operates under the authority of the ACBC, the owner of the data.

Mrs Dantis is also authorised to make use where necessary of other data in the possession of the ACBC Pastoral Research Office, including data from the 2006 and 2011 National Counts of Attendance, and from the 2001, 2006 and 2011 National Church Life Surveys (NCLS). The ACBC is a partner in NCLS Research, the organisation which owns the NCLS data sets, and has been delegated the responsibility for supervising all use of NCLS data by the staff of the Pastoral Research Office.

Yours faithfully,

Gerard Hanna
Chair, Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research
Bishop of Wagga Wagga.

APPENDIX D

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER



MCD UNIVERSITY of DIVINITY

Established by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act 1910

16 July 2012

Trudy Dantis
47 Somersby Road
CRAIGIEBURN VIC 3064

Dear Trudy,

Re: HREC Application No. 255/12

The MCD University of Divinity Human Research Ethics Committee has considered your application for ethical approval for your research project. It has agreed to grant such approval, subject to the following amendments being made to the satisfaction of the Director of Research:

- a) That the list of sample questions, being too long for a 1 hour interview, should either be grouped into categories or the interview length be increased (with consequent notification to participants).
- b) That the relationship between the 'Building Stronger Parishes' research project and the MCD PhD research should be clarified.
- c) That the relationship between 'existing' and 'new' parishes should be made clear.
- d) That at Q 13g the risk involving minors needs to be addressed in more detail.
- e) That at Q 12f, the consent form and the participant information sheet should specify the notification and withdrawal time, and there should be a separate form and information letter for participants who are minors.
- f) That at Q 13f and 13j, the emergency steps taken for counsellors and Catholic care should be explained and details provided.
- g) That all the related letters should be on current letterhead of MCD University of Divinity.
- h) That all the editorial issues listed by the primary reviewer (enclosed) be corrected.
- i) That the application should be on the current 2012 form, as the details on p.2 (summary index) were incomplete.

If in the course of your research, you make any changes that are contrary to what has been approved, you and your supervisor are required to advise the HREC in writing and seek further approval.

Contact Details

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Australia
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NSW
Morling College
SA
Australian Lutheran College
VIC
Catholic Theological College
Sentir - Institute for Christian Spirituality and Pastoral Formation

Salvation Army Booth College
Stirling Theological College
St Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Theological College
United Faculty of Theology
Whitley College
Yarra Theological Union

Journal

Pacific Australasian Theological Studies

APPENDIX E



MCD UNIVERSITY of DIVINITY

Established by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act 1910

Tracing the pulse: An investigation into vitality in Australian Catholic parishes

CONSENT FORM FOR PARISH PRIESTS

Researcher	Name	Ms Trudy Dantis
	Telephone	#####
	Email	#####

- ☐ I (the participant) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Participant Information Sheet, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- ☐ I agree to research being carried out in the parish and parishioners participating in this research
- ☐ I agree to participate in the research project, realising that I may withdraw from the data collection part of the study at any time without any disadvantages, penalties or adverse consequences, and may also request that no information arising from my participation is used, upto two weeks following the completion of my participation in the project. *Once I have been interviewed, I have up to 10 days to withdraw my permission for the interview to be used in the research project.*
- ☐ I give my consent for the interview to be digitally audio recorded.
- ☐ I agree that information provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals or provided to other researchers associated with the Building Stronger Parishes research project in a form that might enable me to be identified.
- ☐ I agree that the researchers will use their discretion to remove any sensitive data and that I will have the option to review all remarks made by me before they are used in the study

Name of Researcher (in block letters):

Signature: _____ **Date:** ____ / ____ / ____

Name of participant (in block letters):

Signature: _____ **Date:** ____ / ____ / ____

APPENDIX F



MCD UNIVERSITY of DIVINITY

Established by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act 1910

Tracing the pulse: An investigation into vitality in Australian Catholic parishes

CONSENT FORM FOR OTHER PARTICIPANTS

Researcher	Name	Ms Trudy Dantis
	Telephone	#####
	Email	#####

- ☐ I (the participant) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Participant Information Sheet, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

 - ☐ I agree to participate in the research project, realising that I may withdraw from the data collection part of the study at any time without any disadvantages, penalties or adverse consequences, and may also request that no information arising from my participation is used, upto two weeks following the completion of my participation in the project. Once I have been interviewed, I have up to 10 days to withdraw my permission for the interview to be used in the research project.

 - ☐ I give my consent for the interview to be digitally audio recorded.

 - ☐ I agree that information provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my name nor any other identifying information is used.
- OR
- ☐ I agree that information provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals or provided to other researchers associated with the Building Stronger Parishes research project in a form that might enable me to be identified

 - ☐ I agree that the researchers will use their discretion to remove any sensitive data and that I will have the option to review all remarks made by me before they are used in the study

Name of Researcher (in block letters):

Signature: _____ **Date:** __ / __ / __

Name of participant (in block letters):

Signature: _____ **Date:** __ / __ / __

APPENDIX G



MCD UNIVERSITY of DIVINITY

Established by the Melbourne College of Divinity Act 1910

Tracing the pulse: An investigation into vitality in Australian Catholic parishes

SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview Code # - _____

Parish ID# - _____

Date of Interview - _____

Participant ID - _____

SECTION ONE: INTERVIEWEE DETAILS

- **Name :**
- **Years as a parishioner in this parish:**
- **Current parish based activity- employee or volunteer (if any):**
- **Previous parish based activity:**

SECTION TWO: PARISH DETAILS

(Interviewer: I'd like to now ask you about your parish and get some details about parish life)

- **We are visiting this parish because it is regarded as a 'successful' or 'vital' parish. Why do you think it is doing so well?**
 - i. What do you think are the best things about the parish?
 - ii. Is there anything that makes this parish different from surrounding parishes?
 - iii. How would you describe the purpose of your parish?
- **What challenges has this parish faced in the past?**
 - i. How have they been overcome?
- **Would you say there is a strong community spirit in the parish? ☐ Yes ☐ No**
 - ii. In what ways do you see this at work?

- **How well and in what ways does the parish support you in your faith life?**
 - i. Do you feel empowered to live out your Christian life outside the parish - in your family, your community and/ or in your place of work?
 - ii. How well does the parish meet your spiritual needs? Where do you find spiritual nourishment or ways to deepen your spirituality in your parish?
 - iii. How well does the parish meet your social needs? Do you think this is a parish in which it is easy to make friends and build relationships? Why do you think that way?
- **To what extent would you say that you are satisfied with the parish?**
- **How does the parish assist parishioners with special needs?**
- **How does the parish welcome and engage newcomers? How is the hospitality of the Church expressed?**
 - i. How inclusive would you say this parish is in the way that it welcomes people? Do you think there would be any groups of parishioners who would not feel welcome here? Do you think, for example, that young people would find it easy to find a home here?
- **What are the main ways in which the parish is connected to the wider local community?**

SECTION THREE: LIFE IN THE PARISH

(Interviewer: This next section deals with life in the parish and your experiences of it)

- **What is your current role in the parish? Do you have any responsibilities?**
 - i. How do you find your current role? What are things you find enjoyable? What challenges do you face?
 - ii. Is there anything you are not currently involved in that you might like to join or might like to see started in your parish?
 - iii. What support do you have for your parish work (if any)? Where does it come from? Family? Church? Community? Friends?
- **To what extent does this parish provide opportunities for all kinds of people to use their gifts and talents?**
 - i. What opportunities are given to young people to participate in the life of the parish, for example?
- **How would you describe the sort of leadership that the parish priest gives to this parish? Is the parish priest someone who takes the lead in everything**

personally? Does he encourage, support and mentor the lay people in their leadership roles? How does that support occur?

- ii. How would you describe your relationship with the parish priest or parish team?
- iii. Has there been any conflict between you and the parish priest? How was it resolved?
- **What do you feel is going on well in the parish? What needs greater attention?**
- **What factors do you think will shape the future of the parish and how do you think the parish will change in the years ahead? How well prepared do you think the parish is for these changes?**
 - i. Does the parish engage in planning for the future? Is there a clear vision for the future of the parish? Are there steps by which that vision is to be achieved?
 - ii. How realistic is that vision given the context of this parish? To what extent do you feel committed to that vision? Overall, how strong is commitment to that vision among the parishioners?
- **What has been the impact on your own life of belonging to this parish? What do you see as being your own future in terms of being a member of the parish?**

SECTION FOUR: PARISH PROGRAMS / ACTIVITIES

(Interviewer: This next section is about parish programs and activities)[The interviewer needs to make sure s/he collects sufficient information to be able to describe what the program or activity is about and how it works]

- **Tell me about your experience of the Sunday liturgy in the parish. What is it like for you? Do you find it spiritually nourishing? Empowering? Motivating?**
- **Apart from the Sunday liturgy, what are the main programs or activities in the parish that build community? Should it have others? Why?**
 - i. Are there any missionary/evangelising activities that the parish engages in? In what ways are parishioners encouraged to participate in these?
 - ii. What are some of the service/outreach/charity programs/activities that the parish engages in? In what ways does the parish encourage parishioners to participate in these? Does the parish have any partnerships with Catholic agencies?

- iii. In what ways is this parish addressing and helping parishioners to be involved in issues of social justice?
- iv. Has this parish been involved in local community issues? What issues?
- v. Are there any ways in which this parish encourages art, drama or music, or similar activities?
- vi. Does the parish engage in any ecumenical or inter-faith activities? To what extent do the parishioners participate in these activities?
- **Are there particular Catholic schools with which this parish is connected? In what ways are there connections with the schools? How would you evaluate those connections?**
- **In what ways does this parish help people to feel that they are part of the wider Church across the world?**
- **What are some of the regular parish activities/programs in which parishioners actively participate in?**
 - vii. What programs or activities (if any) make your parish unique among parishes?
 - viii. What aspects of parish life contribute most to the overall vitality of this parish?
 - ix. Are there any particular parish programs or activities that have top priority at the moment? Why is this? How do they contribute to the current vitality of the parish?
 - x. Are there any future changes planned for this program?
- **Is there anything else you would like to say about the matters I have been asking you about?**

SECTION FIVE: PERSONAL INFORMATION

- **Age :**
- **Ethnicity:**
- **Qualifications:**

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND COOPERATION IN DOING THIS
INTERVIEW**

APPENDIX H



LITURGY OBSERVATION GUIDE

- 1) Name of parish:
- 2) Time of Mass:
- 3) Is this a 'normal' Sunday Mass or is there some special event happening?

Description of the Church

- 4) Is this a Parish Church?
- 5) Is this a Mass centre?
- 6) Seating capacity:
- 7) Style:
- 8) Access for the elderly:
- 9) Is there a hearing loop?
- 10) Is the temperature comfortable?
- 11) Are the seats comfortable?
- 12) Is a parish bulletin available?
- 13) Who manages preparations for Mass? (a) Priest

(b) Acolyte

(c) Sacristan

(d) Other (specify)

- 14) **Attendance** (estimate)

Males

Females

0-14

15-34

35-59

60+

- 15) How many families accompanied by children?

Ethnicity

- 16) Is the congregational monocultural or multicultural? Describe as fully as possible.
- 17) Describe the extent to which the congregation are involved in the Liturgy?
- 18) How engaged are people at the back of the Church during Mass?

Events before Mass

- 19) Describe what happens before Mass begins
(E.g. is priest available? Are there greeters? Do people talk? Pray? Is there music? Are the songs practised? Who prepares the altar?)
- 20) How long before Mass do people begin to arrive?
- 21) Does Mass begin on time? If not, how late?
- 22) What proportion arrives after Mass begins?
- 23) Describe the atmosphere in the Church at the beginning of Mass
- 24) Is anything announced before Mass? (E.g. welcome, name of priest celebrating, anything else?)
- 25) Who does this?

Entrance and Greeting

- 26) **Entrance Hymn** Describe what happens and what music is used.
- 27) Does Mass begin with a procession? Who is in it? What items are carried in it?
- 28) Are there altar servers? Boys and girls? Approx age? Ethnicity?
- 29) Are there any Eucharistic ministers (other than the priest)?
- 30) Who is the presiding priest? PP? Assistant priest? Visitor? (If a visitor, how well does he know the congregation?)
- 31) Ethnicity and approximate age of the presider?
- 32) How does the priest begin the Mass? Words of welcome? News? Informally or formally?
- 33) Describe the length and tone of the priest's remarks.
- 34) Is there an initial invitation to greet one another?
- 35) How would you describe the nature of congregational participation in the opening part of the Mass? (Engaged, enthusiastic, mechanical, poor?)

Music arrangement

- 36) Is there Music for the Mass?
- 37) Describe the arrangements for music. (number and type of musicians and singers, choir, cantor)
- 38) Are hymn books used? Which one(s)?
- 39) How would you describe the congregation's singing? How many sing -- none, some, most, all?
- 40) Overall, how would you characterise the contribution of the music to the celebration of the liturgy?

AV and IT

- 41) Is a data projector used? How? What do they show?
- 42) Who manages the projector? Age? Gender? Ethnicity?

Children's Liturgy (leave blank if not applicable)

- 43) Is there a children's liturgy?
- 44) How many participate? What age range?
- 45) How many leaders? Age? Ethnicity?
- 46) Where do they go?
- 47) At what point do they leave, and when do they return?
- 48) What role does the presiding priest play in the children's liturgy?
- 49) Does he do anything on their return?
- 50) What happens in the children's liturgy?
- 51) Who presides?
- 52) What roles do the presiders play?
- 53) **Penitential rite** - Describe what happens and what music is used (if any)
- 54) **Gloria** - Describe what happens and what music is used

Liturgy of the Word

- 55) Readers (How many? Male or female?) How do you rate their performance as readers?
- 56) Are the readings published in the parish bulletin?
- 57) What proportion of the congregation follows the readings in a missal or on the parish bulletin?

58) **Responsorial Psalm** - Describe what happens and what music is used (if any)

59) **Gospel acclamation** - Describe what happens and what music is used.

Homily

60) Was the homily given by the presiding priest? If not, by whom?

- a) Length
- b) Style
- c) Topic

61) How did the homilist make use of the readings of the Mass?

- 62) Did the homily involve
 - (a) exegesis
 - (b) application to daily life

- Was the homily focussed on
 - (a) personal morality
 - (b) social morality
 - (c) prayer and spirituality
 - (d) invitation to action ...

63) Did the homilist use stories? Jokes? His own personal experiences?

64) Was the tone hopeful? Lamenting the state of the world, Church or personal faith?

65) Was the purpose of the homily to teach? To encourage? To exhort? To chastise? To invite reflection?

66) How would you rate the homily in terms of the quality of delivery?

67) How would you assess the response of the congregation?

Prayers of the Faithful

68) Who reads them?

69) Are the names of the sick, dead, anniversaries read out?

70) Can people offer impromptu prayers?

Collections

71) How many? What is each one for? (*Ask before or after Mass.*)

72) Who does the collecting? Male or female? Ethnicity?

73) Does anything else happen while the collections are being taken up?

Parish notices

74) When are these read? By whom? How long is spent on this? At what point of the Mass are they read?

Offertory

75) **Procession of the Gifts hymn** - Describe what happens and what music is used

76) Describe how the gifts are brought to the altar. What is brought?

77) By whom? Singles / Families

Gender?

Ethnicity?

78) What happens when they get to the altar?

79) Is incense used at any stage during the Mass. Describe when and how it is used.

80) Does the priest explain to the people why it is being used?

81) **Holy, Holy hymn** - Describe what happens and what music is used

Liturgy of the Eucharist

82) Which Eucharistic prayer is used? Which acclamation?

83) **Eucharistic acclamation hymn** if any?

84) Do all the people kneel throughout the Eucharistic prayer?

85) Do the people join in the doxology at the end of the Eucharistic prayer?

86) Are bells rung at the consecration?

87) Is a single large host consecrated and broken for distribution to the congregation?

88) **Great Amen** (sung or recited?) - Describe what happens and what music is used

89) **Our Father** - Describe what happens and what music is used, if any

Sign of peace

90) Describe how this takes place, and level of participation of the congregation

91) **Lamb of God** - Describe what happens and what music is used

Communion

- 92) Is Communion distributed under both kinds? What proportion of those going to Communion receive Communion from the cup?
- 93) What proportion of the congregation receives Communion?
- 94) Do the Eucharistic ministers take Communion to any elderly people in their seats?
- 95) What else is happening during the distribution of Communion?
- 96) Is there any provision made for people to take Communion to the sick in their homes?
- 97) Are there Eucharistic ministers in addition to the priest? How many?
- 98) Eucharistic Ministers Gender? Ethnicity?
- 99) Describe what they do and where they go from the time they come forward to the time they resume their seats.
- 100) **Communion Music** - Describe what happens and what music is used, if any
- 101) Communion Hymns -
- 102) Reflection after communion hymns

Concluding Rite

- 103) How does the priest end the Mass? Concluding remarks or Dismissal
- 104) Any other remarks made by the priest?
- 105) Describe the procession that leaves the Church
- 106) **Recessional Hymn** - Describe what happens and what music is used, if any

Events after Mass

- 107) How many people leave before the end of Mass?
- 108) How many people talk to others in the Church?
- 109) How many people pray privately?
- 110) How many people visit statues or other devotional items in the Church?
- 111) Does the priest talk to people as they leave?
- 112) Do people gather in groups to talk outside the Church?
- 113) Is there a gathering after Mass? How many stay? Is there tea / coffee? Food?
- 114) Is the priest present?
- 115) Where is the gathering held?

Mass Style

116) How would you describe the priest's style of celebration (apart from the homily)?

- a) Serious, reverent, unhurried; emphasis on sacredness
- b) Brisk and business-like; emphasis on not keeping people too long
- c) Casual, often humorous; emphasis on putting people at ease
- d) Warm and personal; emphasis on involving all the people present in a communal celebration
- e) Dull and impersonal; uninspiring and out of touch with the people
- f) Other - describe

117) Overall reflections on the Mass, its spiritual effects, its capacity to build community and its connection to transcendence.

118) What was your own response to the liturgy? Did you find it meaningful? Moving? Inspiring? Boring? Prayerful?

APPENDIX I

NOTES ON THE NEW ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS FOLLOWING VATICAN II

The Focolare

The Focolare (meaning fireplace) was founded by Chiara Lubich in 1944 in Trent. The term "focolare" was applied to the Movement by the people of Trent because of the "fire" of Gospel love which animated Chiara and her first companions. The Movement has grown internationally and developed through a "spirituality of unity" inspired by the Gospel, which over time has become the lifestyle of people of all ages, backgrounds, vocations and cultures working for unity in all spheres of life. *More information can be found at <http://www.focolare.org/>*

Opus Dei

Opus Dei (meaning "Work of God") is a Catholic institution founded by Saint Josemaría Escrivá in 1928. The aim of this institution is to contribute to the evangelising mission of the Church, by promoting among all Christians a life fully consistent with their faith, in the middle of the ordinary circumstances of their lives, through the sanctification of their work and their family and social duties. In order to achieve this aim, the prelature offers to people the sort of spiritual formation that will inspire them to live according to the teachings of the Gospel, through exercising the Christian virtues and sanctifying their work. *More information can be found at <http://www.opusdei.org/>*

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) is a spiritual movement within the Catholic Church that emphasises the availability of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer, and the need for a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is not a single, unified worldwide movement and does not have a single founder or group of founders. It is a highly diverse collection of covenant communities, prayer groups, small faith sharing groups, renewed parishes, conferences and retreats, often quite independent of one another, in different stages and modes of development

and with different emphases, that nevertheless share the same fundamental experience and espouse the same general goals. *More information can be found at <http://www.iccrs.org/>*

Cursillo

Cursillo (meaning “short course”) is a movement from the Church that focuses on helping each person to discover themselves, their relationship with Christ and with others. The movement follows a method that shows how the Gospel can be lived in daily life and provides a means of support for Christian living. It has spread through 60 countries and numerous Christian denominations. *More information can be found at <http://www.cursillo.asn.au/>*

Neocatechumenate

The Neocatechumenal Way, also known as the Neocatechumenate, or The Way, is an organisation within the Catholic Church dedicated to adult faith formation. It was formed in Madrid in 1964 by Kiko Argüello and Carmen Hernández and received approval from the Holy See in 2008. The Neocatechumenal Way is composed of an ensemble of spiritual goods that comprise of the "Neocatechumenate", or a post-baptismal catechumenate, the ongoing education in faith, the catechumenate and the service of catechesis. *More information can be found at <http://www.camminoneocatecumenale.it/>*

Communion and Liberation

Communion and Liberation is a movement which has the purpose of forming its members in Christianity in order to make them co-workers in the Church's mission in all areas of society. Started by Father Luigi Giussani in 1954 in Italy, the name brings together the conviction that the Christian event, lived in communion, is the foundation of a human being's authentic liberation. The sole purpose of Communion and Liberation is to testify how the Christian event is the truest response to human needs, and to educate people to verify their faith in life. The Movement strongly insists that in Christ there is the consistency of all things, their ultimate meaning. *More information can be found at <http://english.clonline.org/>*

L'Arche

The roots of L'Arche International lie in the first L'Arche community, founded in 1964 by Jean Vanier in Trosly-Breuil, a small village north of Paris. L'Arche is about people, with and without an intellectual disability, who share their lives in homes, workshops and day programs which are grouped into what L'Arche calls communities. A respectful relationship between people who treat each other as of equal value provides security – allowing for growth, personal development and freedom. *More information can be found at <http://www.larche.org/en/home>*

Marriage Encounter

The mission of Worldwide Marriage Encounter is to proclaim the value of Marriage and Holy Orders in the Church and in the world. The movement began as a way of improving communication between husbands and wives, but soon grew to benefit anyone whose vocation involved close, caring communication with others. It is considered the first marriage enrichment program and has been updated on a continual basis to reflect the current marriage environment. The Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend is a positive and personal experience offering married couples an opportunity to learn techniques of loving communication that they can use for the rest of their lives. *More information can be found at <http://www.wwme.org.au/>*