



Pastoral Research Online

Issue 25

August 2015

How demography affects Mass attendance

We are all well aware that numbers at weekend Masses vary from parish to parish. What causes the variation? People often assume that the personality of the parish priest, the way he presides at the Eucharist, and his ability as a homilist are the most important factors contributing to attendance. But there are many other factors as well, including the size and attractiveness of the church and ease of access to it, availability of parking, proximity to other Catholic churches and the number of weekend Masses available in the parish. As well, previous research from this office has shown that the existence of a Sunday night Mass in a parish was associated with a significant positive impact on attendances (see [Who Goes When? Mass attenders and their usual Mass time](#)).

The demographic makeup of the local Catholic community is another factor that has a powerful impact on parish Mass attendances. The PRO can use our extensive demographic data on the Catholic population to predict which parishes might expect to do better in terms of attendance and also to help explain why some parishes have grown or declined in attendance in recent years.

In the following analysis, we will examine two parish-level measures of attendance:

1. *Attendance* (number of attenders at Sunday Mass, as determined by the 2011 National Count of Attendance).
2. *Attendance rate* (number of attenders divided by the number of Catholics living within the parish boundaries, as determined by the 2011 Australian Census).

Continued on next page . . .

DID YOU READ . . . ?

Two of the keynote presentations from the 2014 *Beliefs and Practices of Australian Catholics Conference* were published in the most recent addition of Australasian Catholic Record.



The article “*Tracing the Pulse: An Investigation into Vitality in Australian Catholic Parishes*”, by former PRO staff member and coordinator of the Building Stronger Parishes research project, **Dr Trudy Dantis**, considers the need for every parish to grow in health and strength if it is to be authentic in its witness and if it is to be effective in evangelisation.

“*American Parishes in the Twenty-first Century*”, by **Dr Mary Gautier**, Senior Research Associate from CARA in the US, discusses a number of challenges facing American parishes, that turn out to be much like those facing Australian parishes.

Source: *The Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol. 92, No. 2, April 2015. Subscription to ACR can be requested by phoning (02) 9752 9500. Articles are also available online at the Informit e-library (www.informit.com.au).

How demography affects Mass attendance *(continued from front page)*

From what we already know about Mass attendance, we might predict that the following demographic factors could have an influence on these two measures of attendance.

- It seems reasonable to assume that where there are more Catholic people, there will be more Mass attenders. So the size of the Catholic population should be positively related to attendance. That should come as no surprise to us.
- We *know* from our previous research (see [Mass Attendance in Australia: A Critical Moment](#)) that Mass attenders are older than Catholics in general, so we can hypothesise that attendances will be better where there is a higher proportion of older people among the Catholic population.
- We also *know* that Catholics from non-English speaking countries (NESC)s have a better attendance rate than Catholics born in Australia, so we can hypothesise that parishes with high proportions of Catholics born in NESC)s will perform better in terms of attendance.
- We *know* that Mass attenders are almost twice as likely to have a university degree as Catholics in general, so we can hypothesise that parishes with high proportions of university-educated Catholics will perform better in terms of attendance.
- We *suspect* that when people move into a parish, they often take time to put down roots before they start attending their new parish. So we can hypothesise that parishes with more stable Catholic populations will do better in terms of attendance.
- We can *hypothesise* that where there is a stronger concentration of Catholics in the population (Catholics as a percentage of the total population), there is a stronger culture of Mass attendance, leading to higher Mass attendances.
- Finally, we *know* that parishes and people in the major cities are different in many ways from the parishes and people in the rest of Australia, so we must not assume that what holds in the cities will also hold in other parts of Australia. We will test our hypotheses for both the major cities and the rest of Australia. The PRO has valid data from the 2011 Australian Census and the 2011 National Count of Attendance for 677 parishes in our major cities and 524 parishes in the rest of Australia, in total accounting for 92 per cent of Australia's geographical parishes (that is, not including parishes of the Eastern Catholic Churches, which are not geographically defined in the same way that Latin Rite parishes are).

First, what do we find for parishes in Australia's major cities? We can discover the combined impact of all six of these demographic variables by using the statistical technique known as regression.

Table 1. The impact of selected demographic variables on parish Mass attendance in Australia's major cities

Demographic variable ¹	Standardised beta	Statistical significance
Catholic population of the parish	0.65	***
Percentage of Catholics aged 65 and over	0.01	
Percentage of Catholics born in NESC)s	0.42	***
Percentage of Catholics aged 15+ with a degree	0.14	***
Percentage of Catholics at the same address as in 2006	0.03	
Percentage of Catholics in overall parish population	0.04	
<i>Adjusted R-squared = 0.48</i>		

*** Indicates that the probability of the impact of the variable being due to chance is less than 1 in a thousand, that is, $p < 0.001$

1. All of the demographic indicators in the table refer to the 2011 Catholic population usually resident within a boundary formed by Australian Bureau of Statistics Census boundaries matched as closely as possible to parish boundaries.

Continued on next page . . .

How demography affects Mass attendance (continued from previous page)

Table 1 on the previous page shows standardised regression coefficients for each of the variables: the larger the coefficient, the greater the impact of that variable on attendance. Three of the variables – the size of the Catholic population, the percentage of Catholics in the parish born in non-English speaking countries, and the percentage of adult Catholics with a university degree – have a statistically significant impact, while the other three have very low standardised coefficients and therefore very little impact, if any, on parish Mass attendances.

It won't come as a surprise to find that the demographic variable with the strongest impact (that is, the highest standardised coefficient) on Mass attendance is the size of the Catholic population. In other words, we can expect Mass attendances to be higher in those parishes with high populations of Catholics. To some extent, this is a trivial result, and so we will control for that below by using *attendance rate* instead of attendance on its own. However, we also find in Table 1 that high percentages of Catholics born in non-English speaking countries and having a university degree are also strong predictors of higher Mass attendance in parishes in our major cities.

The adjusted R-squared figure of 0.48 given at the bottom of Table 1 means that 48 per cent of the variation in Mass attendance figures in parishes in our major cities is explained by these demographic variables on their own. So all those other factors mentioned at the beginning of this article, together with various other factors we haven't mentioned and which we may not even be aware of, between them only account for the remaining 52 per cent of variation in attendances.

We can remove the direct impact of the size of the Catholic population by examining *attendance rates*, that is, attendance divided by the Catholic population and expressed as a percentage. The average Mass attendance rate for the whole of Australia in 2011 was 12.2 per cent.

The regression results in Table 2 show that our chosen demographic variables are much less powerful in explaining attendance rates than they were in relation to attendance, but they can still, as a group, explain 21 per cent of the variation in attendance rates in urban parishes. What's more, the size of the Catholic population still has an influence, but this time it's

a negative one. It tells us that attendance rates are likely to be lower in parishes with larger Catholic populations. The percentage of Catholics born in a non-English speaking country is still a powerful predictor of attendance rates, but the education variable, while still statistically significant, has less of an impact than it did on attendance. As before, the percentage of older Catholics and the percentage of Catholics in the population have little or no effect, but there is a surprise for us when we look at the percentage of Catholics who have not changed address since the previous Census in 2006; instead of more stable population being associated with higher attendance rates, the relationship is a negative one: as the percentage of Catholics in the parish who have not changed address in the previous five years goes up, attendance rates come down! Our hypothesis that parishes with more stable Catholic populations will do better in terms of attendance is not supported by the evidence.

Table 2. The impact of selected demographic variables on parish Mass attendance rates in Australia's major cities

Demographic variable ¹	Standardised coefficients	Statistical significance
Catholic population of the parish	-0.15	***
Percentage of Catholics aged 65 and over	0.04	
Percentage of Catholics born in NESCs	0.38	***
Percentage of Catholics aged 15+ with a degree	0.11	*
Percentage of Catholics at the same address as in 2006	-0.13	**
Percentage of Catholics in overall parish population	0.01	
<i>Adjusted R-squared = 0.21</i>		

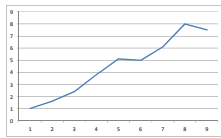
*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$, where p indicates the probability of the impact of the variable being due to chance.

1. All of the demographic indicators in the table refer to the 2011 Catholic population usually resident within a boundary formed by Australian Bureau of Statistics Census boundaries matched as closely as possible to parish boundaries.

So that's the story of how demographic factors influence Mass attendances in urban parishes in Australia. **Is it the same in regional and remote Australia?** You can find out in the next issue of *Pastoral Research Online*!

This article is a modified version of a paper presented by Bob Dixon at the recent International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) conference in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

Projected Global Christian Population



By 2050 the world's Christian population is expected to grow to 2.9 billion, up from 2.2 billion in 2010, according to the Pew Research Center's *The Future of World Religions* report.

Just under one-in-three people were Christian in 2010, according to the report, and the annual growth rate of Christians is expected to be similar to the rate of population growth over the course of the next 35 years.

About half of all Christians are Catholic, meaning that currently there are around 1.1 billion Catholics worldwide.

Source: *Pew Research Center, 2015, The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050.* (www.pewresearch.org)



The Building Stronger Parishes project report is now into a second printing, and is available for order from the Pastoral Research Office.

The cost of the hardcopy report is \$20 (including postage and handling, excluding GST), and there are also plans for an 'e-copy' to be made available.

Contact the office on (03) 9953 3459 or via email: office@pro.catholic.org.au



The material for this edition of *Pastoral Research Online* was prepared by the following PRO staff:

Bob Dixon
Director

r.dixon@pro.catholic.org.au
(03) 9953 3456

Stephen Reid
Research Officer

s.reid@pro.catholic.org.au
(03) 9953 3457

For more information about the office, or how we can assist you, please contact:

ACBC Pastoral Research Office,
Australian Catholic University,
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy VIC 3065
P: (03) 9953 3459
E: office@pro.catholic.org.au
W: www.pro.catholic.org.au

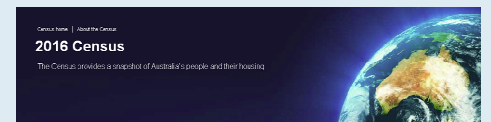


MELBOURNE TO HOST 2017 ISSR CONFERENCE

Melbourne has been confirmed as the location for the 34th Conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) in July 2017. The Conference will be only the third ISSR conference to be held outside Europe and the first in the Southern Hemisphere.

Director of the Pastoral Research Office, Dr Bob Dixon, will be responsible for chairing the local organising committee.

UPDATE ON THE 2016 AUSTRALIAN CENSUS



The next Australian Census is to be held on Tuesday 9 August 2016. It will be Australia's 17th national Census of Population and Housing.

Traditionally, the Census involved the mobilisation of Census collectors across the country to deliver and collect forms from every dwelling. For the 2011 Census there were 45,000 temporary employees who undertook this role. However, with increasing difficulties and costs with this method of collection, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) will adopt a 'digital first' approach to the Census. About two-thirds of Australians are expected to complete the 2016 Census online, and as such has been described as "one of Australia's most significant online events in history".

The 2016 Census will collect information across the same set of Census topics included in the previous two Censuses, including religious affiliation.

The first data from the Census will be published in mid-2017. The Pastoral Research Office, on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, will again be obtaining customised data on the Catholic population in Australia for all parishes and dioceses, making it the sixth Census to be included in the National Catholic Census Project.

For further information about the Census, visit the ABS website: www.abs.gov.au

To see what the Catholic community in Australia looks like according to the 2011 Census, download a copy of the *Social Profile of the Catholic Community in Australia* from the PRO website: pro.catholic.org.au