



Pastoral Research Online

Issue 29

March 2016

The Pastoral Research Office turns 20!



The Pastoral Research Office celebrated its 20th anniversary in January this year.

The PRO had its beginnings when Bob Dixon commenced work as the Pastoral Projects Officer for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on 29 January 1996. Bob was appointed to the position by the General Secretary of the Bishops Conference at the time, Fr Michael McKenna, who is now the Bishop of Bathurst. His first tasks were to run the National Catholic Census Project, involving the acquisition, analysis and distribution of data on the Catholic population from the 1996 Australian Census, and to coordinate the participation of the Catholic Church in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS). Fr McKenna appointed Rev Dr Michael Mason CSsR as honorary consultant sociologist to the projects, and Bob soon appointed the office's first admin assistant, Ms Shona McKendry.

At first, the Office was located at Corpus Christi College, Clayton but, when the seminary moved to Carlton it was time to find a new home for the office. At that point ACU stepped in and invited Bob to enter into a partnership with the university and move to St Patrick's campus in Melbourne, where we remain today. In 2016, we are involved in almost 20 projects in one way or another, but those initial two, the five-yearly Census and NCLS projects, remain at the core of our mission of serving the Catholic community in Australia through research.

There will be more to say about this milestone in the life of the Office in later issues of the newsletter this year.



Planning is well under way for Catholic participation in the next National Church Life Survey, which will take place in parishes in October and November 2016.

Every geographical diocese has been contacted by the Pastoral Research Office about a selection of parishes chosen to represent the Catholic Church as part of a national statistical random sample of parishes in the NCLS. The 'lucky' parishes will have their full costs of participation paid for by the ACBC Pastoral Research Office.

Dioceses can enrol and pay for additional parishes, and also individual parishes can opt in at their own expense: at a cost of \$250 + \$1.50 per questionnaire ordered.

Further details about the survey will become available over the next few months. In the meantime, you may wish to have a look at the NCLS website: www.2016ncls.org.au

DID YOU KNOW? In 2011, there were about 662,000 people at Mass on an typical weekend across Australia. (That's about 7 full capacity AFL Grand Final crowds at the Melbourne Cricket Ground!!)

2016 National Count of Attendance

The next Australian Catholic Bishops Conference National Count of Attendance will take place over four weekends in May (the first weekend of the Count actually begins with Vigil Masses on Saturday 30th April).

The Count consists of a simple headcount of all attenders in all parishes and other Mass centres throughout the whole of Australia. Information collected, in addition to the number of people in attendance, includes the language and frequency of celebration. The Count is conducted both for Masses and Sunday Assemblies in the absence of a Priest.

Although some dioceses collect attendance figures annually, the National Count is carried out every five years. 2016 will be the fourth time it has been conducted, with the first held in 2001.

Any queries regarding the ACBC National Count of Attendance can be directed to the Pastoral Research Office. A copy of the report based on the 2011 National Count of Attendance can be downloaded from the Pastoral Research Office website: pro.catholic.org.au

Bonding Social Capital in Christian Congregations across Australia



For some years now, Anglicare NSW's John Bellamy, a former National Church Life Survey (NCLS) researcher, and Rosemary Leonard of Western Sydney University have been conducting research on the concept of social capital as a way of understanding what happens in the life of Christian parishes and congregations. Social capital is a concept that came to public attention primarily through the writing of Robert Putnam, especially after the publication of his book, *Bowling Alone*, in 2000.

Putnam used the concept of social capital to investigate particular questions about community activities and social networks. He distinguished between *bonding* social capital and *bridging* social capital, where the former refers to networks, trust and reciprocity within groups and the latter to 'between group' connections.

It is bonding social capital, and in particular, a theoretical and methodological analysis of that concept, that Leonard and Bellamy turn their attention to in an article published last year in the journal *Voluntas* (Leonard and Bellamy 2015). They emphasise that social capital is of particular interest to the study of congregational life in Australian Christian churches, noting specifically that it offers a reliable framework for broadening our understanding of the qualitative differences between church communities and its correlation with successful functional styles or strengths.

In a church context, bonding social capital can be thought of as the networks, trust, beliefs and behaviours that exist within a congregation or parish, and is distinct from bridging social capital, created by the connections that the congregation has to the wider community (Leonard and Bellamy 2015, Dixon 2010). In more technical language, bonding social capital can be thought of as an inward-focused framework supporting densely connected, internally diverse communities with shared norms that are characterised by thick trust and low instrumentality (that is, not specifically developed for personal or group advantage) (Leonard and Bellamy 2015). The authors suggest that bonding social capital is a reliable conceptual framework for understanding the reciprocal relations between individuals in a congregation or parish and assessing when they are working effectively.

Leonard and Bellamy explored the dimensions of bonding social capital in Australian congregations by using survey data from 3,363 respondents to a questionnaire sent to a panel of more than 6,000 church attenders from 19 denominations who participated in the 2006 National Church Life Survey and who volunteered to participate in further research. The questionnaire aimed to collect data that would aid in the understanding of the different ways social capital might be generated and accounted for across different church communities and included, among other things, items about church participation levels, the identification of informal friendships, and the implementation of congregational projects. The authors analysed the data using factor analysis, a statistical technique which creates sets of variables relating to a shared feature or 'factor'. Structural equation modelling was then applied to identify the strength of the relationship between the factors identified and their efficacy in explaining the concept of bonding social capital.

The authors found that bonding social capital in Australian congregations has three clear factors or dimensions. Those factors were *Collective Agency*, *Congregational Unity* and *Personal Connections*.

The concept of *Collective Agency* related to having plans for the future and being able to make them happen, and was measured by a set of items including questions about helpfulness, shared vision and collective activities within the congregation.

Congregational Unity related to the potential negatives of congregational life, such as divisions and conflict, experiences of criticism or excessive demands, and apathy. The items associated with this factor were reverse coded so that they became a measure of unity rather than of disunity.

The Personal Connections factor included five items related to friendship within the congregation and the perception that the congregation was close knit.

The authors found that Collective Agency made the strongest contribution to bonding social capital in their study, and conclude that it is a particularly important construct warranting much greater attention in future research into bonding social capital in church life in Australia.

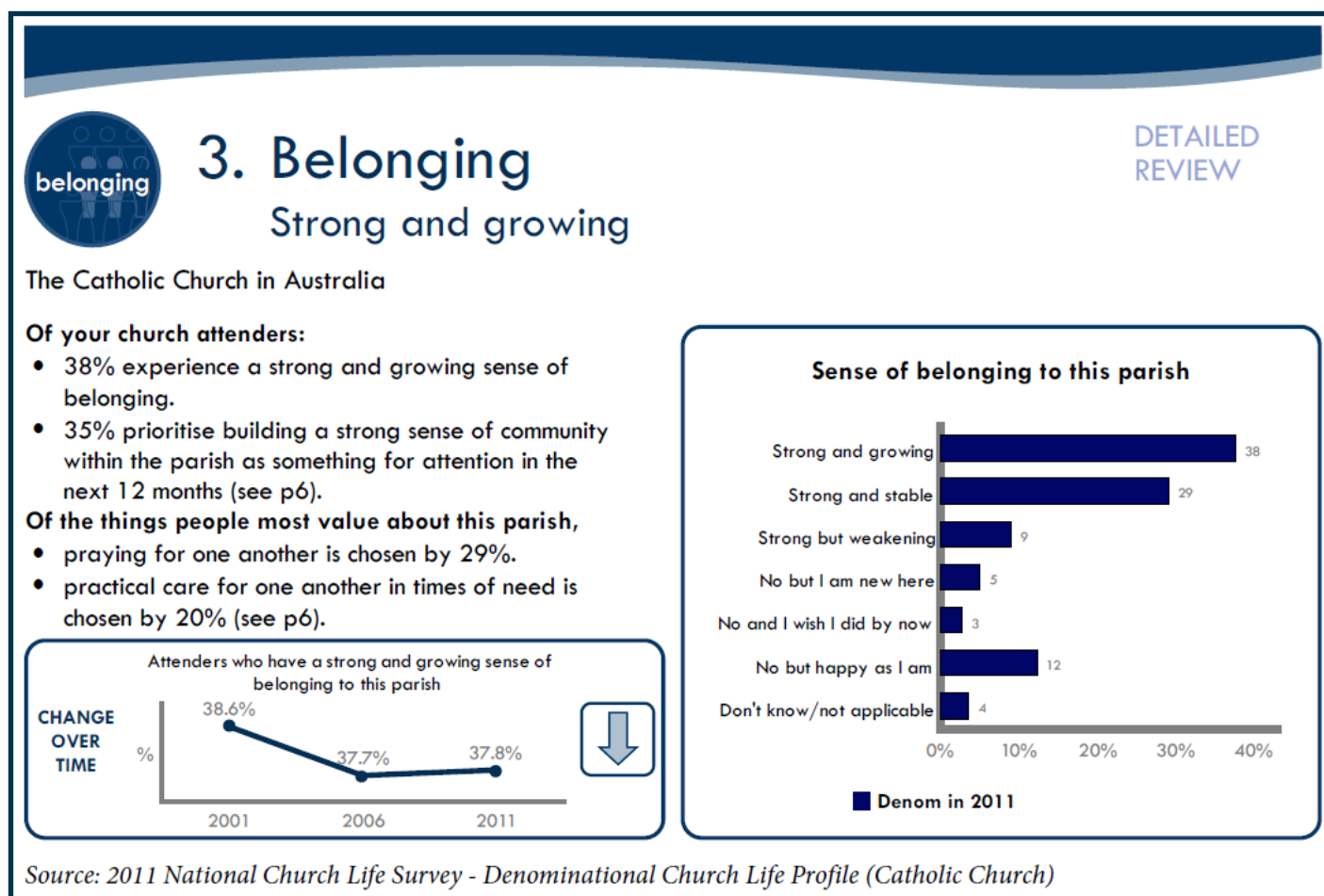
Leonard and Bellamy conclude that, based on their analyses in this article and previous publications, bonding social capital has been carefully developed and verified as a valuable construct for research into congregational and parish life. Commenting on the methodological limitations of their analyses, particularly in relation to the study's representativeness of Australian church communities more broadly, they note that future research would best extend this field for the Australian context by confirming the reliability and strength of correlations between factors as they relate to a more generalizable population of church attenders in the wider community.

I enjoyed this paper for its analysis of the shared vision of committed church attenders in this study and refinement of the correlation that vision can have on the collective agency and personal connections in communities of church goers. This paper is an essential read for anyone seeking to understand underlying features of collective agency in church communities in Australia.

- Francine Hanley

References:

- Dixon, R. (2010). "Ingenious communities: Catholic parishes as creators of social capital". ACBC Pastoral Projects Office.
- Leonard, R., & Bellamy, J. (2015). "Dimensions of bonding social capital in Christian congregations across Australia". *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 26(4), 1046-1065.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.



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

Stephen Reid
Research Officer

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

Francine Hanley
Research Officer

f.hanley@pro.catholic.org.au
(03) 9953 3458

Bob Dixon
Director

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



The Building Stronger Parishes (BSP) project report is now into a second printing. There is also an E-version of the report.

The cost of the report is \$20 for the hardcopy edition (including postage and handling, excluding GST) and \$10 for the E-version.

Both versions are now available from the ACBC website at www.catholic.org.au/shop/acbc-shop. Use the search function to search for 'Stronger Parishes'.

Prior to Christmas, newsletter subscribers received complimentary electronic copies of the first two BSP Supplementary Reports:

- Report 1: Community Building, Welcoming and Hospitality
- Report 2: Mission, Outreach and Evangelisation

With this edition of the newsletter, subscribers have also received a complimentary copy of:

- Report 3: Spirituality and Faith Formation

The remaining three additional reports on various aspects of parish vitality arising from the research will be available to buy from the ACBC website shop early in April.

- Report 4: Liturgy
- Report 5: Leadership
- Report 6: Planning

WANTED: OLD CATHOLIC DIRECTORIES

Can you help? The Pastoral Research Office has a collection of Official Catholic Directories (OCD) and Directories of Australian Catholic Clergy (DACC). However, we are missing a number of editions which we would very much like to obtain to complete the collection.

Some years ago, we received a set of *Official Catholic Directories*, covering the period from 1948 to 1990, from Fr Eric Hodgens of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Some editions were lost during our most recent change of office location here at ACU. It is those we are now seeking to replace.

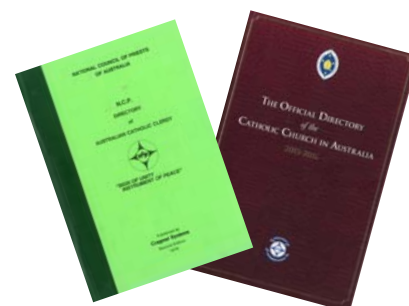
If you have any of the following which you no longer need, and would like to donate them, please contact one of the staff at the Pastoral Research Office.

The missing years from the OCD collection are:

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------|--------|
| * 1950 | * 1951 | * 1952 |
| * 1953 | * 1954 | * 1955 |
| * 1960-61 | * 1983-84 | |

The missing years from the DACC collection are:

- | | | | |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| * 1978 | * 1984 | * 1987 | * 1997 |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|



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