



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Pastoral Research Office

Pastoral Research Online

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Welcome to the first edition of Pastoral Research Online for 2017 . . .

No, you haven't missed any editions of the newsletter since last year! It's just that things have been extremely busy, and other priorities have demanded the attention of PRO staff these past few months.

One such priority has been assisting the Bishops Commission's for Pastoral Life and for Family, Youth and Life in undertaking a survey of Australian young people to assist with feedback for a special Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2018. The purpose of the survey is to help the ACBC understand the world of young people, particularly young people of the Catholic faith and those who have some connection with the Church. More details in coming newsletters.

Although Bob Dixon retired in December, he has continued to assist the office on a casual basis by finalising a couple of projects still outstanding. We hope to be able to bring you results of some of these studies within the next few months.

Additionally, this year is an exciting one for the Pastoral Research Office, with the release of major data which contributes to our understanding of Catholics today. At the end of June, the Australian Bureau of Statistics releases the first results of the 2016 Census. Over the coming months, results from the National Church Life Survey will be received, although some parishes have already received preliminary results. It is hoped shortly thereafter the results from the 2016 National Count of Attendance will be finalised. All three sources of data provide us with important 'snapshots' of the Catholic Community in Australia, which is available to any Catholic parish, diocese, school or organisation, courtesy of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. Key results and findings from all sources will be published in future editions of *Pastoral Research Online*.

Stephen Reid, Acting Director



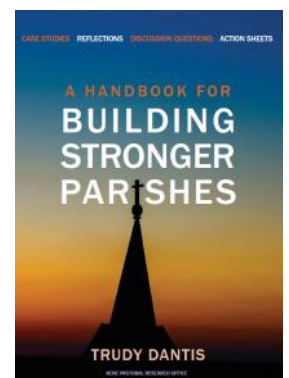
Sophy Morley, who is the Diocesan Pastoral Coordinator in the Diocese of Sale, recently presented a workshop on the Liturgy Section of the **Handbook for Building Stronger Parishes** at the National Biennial Liturgy Meeting in Melbourne.

Sophy provided a wealth of practical information, based on solid research, to assist participants in appreciating the importance of high-quality liturgical celebrations.

To contact Sophy for further information: smorley@sale.catholic.org.au

To see a report of the gathering as reported in *Melbourne Catholic*, click on this link: <http://melbournecatholic.org.au/News/renewing-the-liturgical-life-of-the-local-church>

If you would like to purchase a copy of the handbook, it is available from: garrattpublishing.com.au



Why Research Youth? The Importance of Using Evidence to Inform Youth Ministry

By Stephen Reid

Youth ministry in the Australian Catholic parish has evolved little in the past few decades. While most youth ministers today want answers to addressing the decline of young people involved in parish life, few acknowledge the importance of undertaking quality research to identify and understand the factors which contribute to a healthy youth ministry.

The following is an edited version of a presentation given at the Australian Catholic Youth & Youth Ministry Research Seminar, in Melbourne.

There was once a diocesan youth ministry coordinator. Whilst she had been involved with youth ministry in her local parish for many years, she was fairly new to this diocesan role; and a bit overwhelmed. She spent much of her first few weeks thinking about how she could understand what was happening in youth ministry in all of the parishes in the diocese. She decided to formulate a research plan and presented it to her youth council.

However, upon reading through the plan, the chair of the council suggested that, rather than waste precious resources on all the 'research stuff', she should just get out there and start evangelising the youth.

The youth ministry coordinator thought for a moment, and replied:

“That's a great idea! However, before I do that, could you just let me know: what is the best way to evangelise youth in this day and age? Also, can you tell me about the types of young people I will be evangelising? How old are they – are some ages more represented than others, and why? Do the young people attend Mass regularly? Why or why not? What about their cultural backgrounds? Their levels of education, or the type of school they attended? What about their attitudes toward the Church?”



Whilst that is a fictional story, the underlying premise to it, is very much a reality. Many see research as an appendix to the more “important” ministries which take place in the church; something which may be good to do, but it doesn't really matter if we don't.

So why does youth ministry need to be researched?

Research in youth ministry is vitally important if we are to truly understand the youth whom we work with, and whom we do ministry with. Many leaders want answers to the issues facing the church, but few are prepared to seriously consider the research required in asking the questions. However, it is imperative we get our research right so we have a true account of what lies before us, instead of relying on hunches, hearsay or anecdotal evidence.

So what is research?

Most of the research work carried out by the Pastoral Research Office (PRO), and other organisations like NCLS Research and the Christian Research Association, is 'empirical' research. The word 'empirical' implies that we can observe something in an empirical way – that is, we can see it, we can hear it, we can touch it. Of course, there are other types of research the PRO doesn't undertake which are just as valid in their own right. Biblical research, which seeks to understand more fully the texts and traditions of the Bible, would be one example of that.

Quite simply, empirical research is an exploration of the situation before us.

But why explore something when it is in plain sight?

Seldom is that which is before us as clear to all as we might think. What one person sees happening in a situation is usually very different to what another sees, and what may actually in fact be happening. What a leader of a youth ministry program sees can often be very different to what someone else sees.

That is why we need to frequently explore the situation before us so that we can get different perspectives on it.

One practical theologian suggests,

“Combining the foundations and aims of Christian faith with empirical insight can help the church to promote realistic perspectives, and perhaps better praxis, in accordance with basic theological values.” (HG Heimbrock, *From Data to Theory*, IJPT, 2005, p. 278)

So, simply put:

Christian faith + empirical insight (research) = realistic perspectives & better praxis.

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If we truly want better praxis in youth ministry, we need to start from a realistic perspective of the youth ministry we are entrusted with.

There's a wonderful story which illustrates the importance of undertaking research in the church and in youth ministry.

*Once upon a time there was a mighty river. It flowed gracefully and elegantly across the landscape. Along its banks it gave life and sustenance to the tribes of Aboriginal Australians who camped by it. For many generations this river was a central focus for life. Then, gradually, the river ceased to flow, becoming a stagnant pool. With the heat of summer it started to dry up. Around the banks of the disappearing symbol of their security, the people watched aghast. What could be happening to them? By the dried-up riverbed many sat, waiting for the river to flow once more. Yet others thought to look around and discovered that the river was not gone. Still flowing, it had simply changed course upstream, creating a billabong on the curve at which they sat. (Veronica Brady, from P & S Kaldor, *Where the River Flows*.)*

Sometimes as people involved in youth ministry, and as members of our local parishes, we feel like we're sitting by the banks of a dried-up riverbed. It's as though the river represents those young people, and the parish as we have known it for countless years has now ceased to be the central focus of life for many of those young people. Changes in a rapidly-changing society has made us feel insecure in our ministry, as though we've been left high and dry as we try to do what we feel is God's mission: "It worked in the past, why won't it work now?" And yet so many young people don't seem to be interested.

The reality is that the church, which has been a central focus in the lives of many generations of young Australians, no longer plays an important role for them. For many young Catholics, the Catholic school they attend is their church community, not the parish – the river seems to have shifted course. But for countless more, there is no connection with any faith community. People have moved from where we are at.

One of the Eucharistic Prayers reads:

Grant that all the faithful of the Church, looking into the signs of the times by the light of faith, may constantly devote themselves to the service of the Gospel. Keep us attentive to the needs of all, that, sharing their grief and pain, their joy and hope, we may faithfully bring them the good news of salvation and go forward with them along the way of your Kingdom (*Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs III*).

What if we, as leaders in our various youth ministry positions around the country, see ourselves as the 'faithful of the Church' in that prayer? Are we attentive to the needs of the young people we engage with? Do we understand them? Do we know how they think? Do we know what they fear, or what they love? Do we share with them authentically in their joys and hopes, their grief and pain? Are we, with faith, looking into the **signs of the times**, and devoting ourselves to the service of the Gospel?



ABS releases Census data . . . sort of!

On 11 April, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released its first insights from the 2016 Census: a snapshot of the 'typical' Australian.

Although far from providing any solid results, the snapshots do reveal some interesting comparisons between the various states and territories. For example, the average age of the 'typical' Australian in 2016 was 38, although the 'typical' person from the Northern Territory was aged 34, while a 'typical' person from South Australia was 40. Perhaps not surprisingly, there were more females in all states except the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

The snapshots also revealed the vast differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians: the average age of the 'typical' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander was just 23 years – which is one year younger than the 'typical' Australian when Australia's first Census was taken back in 1911!

To read the media release from the ABS, go to: www.abs.gov.au

