



Pastoral Research Online

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How demography affects Mass attendance (Part 2)

In the August issue of *Pastoral Research Online*, we saw that the demography of the local Catholic population has a powerful impact on Mass attendances and attendance rates in Australia's major cities.

We found that attendances at Mass in parishes were strongly influenced by the number of Catholics living within the parish boundaries, by the percentage of the Catholic population who had been born in non-English speaking countries (NESCs), and by the percentage of adult Catholics with a university degree. When we removed the direct influence of the size of the Catholic population by considering *attendance rates* rather than attendance itself, we found that the percentage born in NESCs and the percentage with a degree still had a statistically significant positive impact, and that the size of the Catholic population was also still significant, but now in a negative sense: the larger the Catholic population of the parish, the lower the attendance rate was likely to be. A final somewhat surprising finding was that higher residential stability in the Catholic population, measured by the percentage who were living at the same address as in 2006, the year of the previous Census, was rather weakly associated with lower attendance rates.

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POSITION VACANT—RESEARCH OFFICER (Full- or part-time)

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) is seeking to engage a Research Officer to work as a member of its Pastoral Research Office (PRO). The PRO is located on the Australian Catholic University campus in Fitzroy, Victoria.

This position involves contributing to the design and implementation of quantitative and qualitative research projects, and analysis of project data and data from the Australian Census and the National Church Life Survey. The Research Officer will be required to prepare reports and publications, and present research findings to general and academic audiences.

Applicants must have:

- A higher degree in social science or a related discipline.
- Experience in social research, demonstrating strong quantitative and qualitative research skills.
- Extensive knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Church, its mission and ethos, and its organisational structures in Australia.
- Excellent communication skills, both verbal and written.

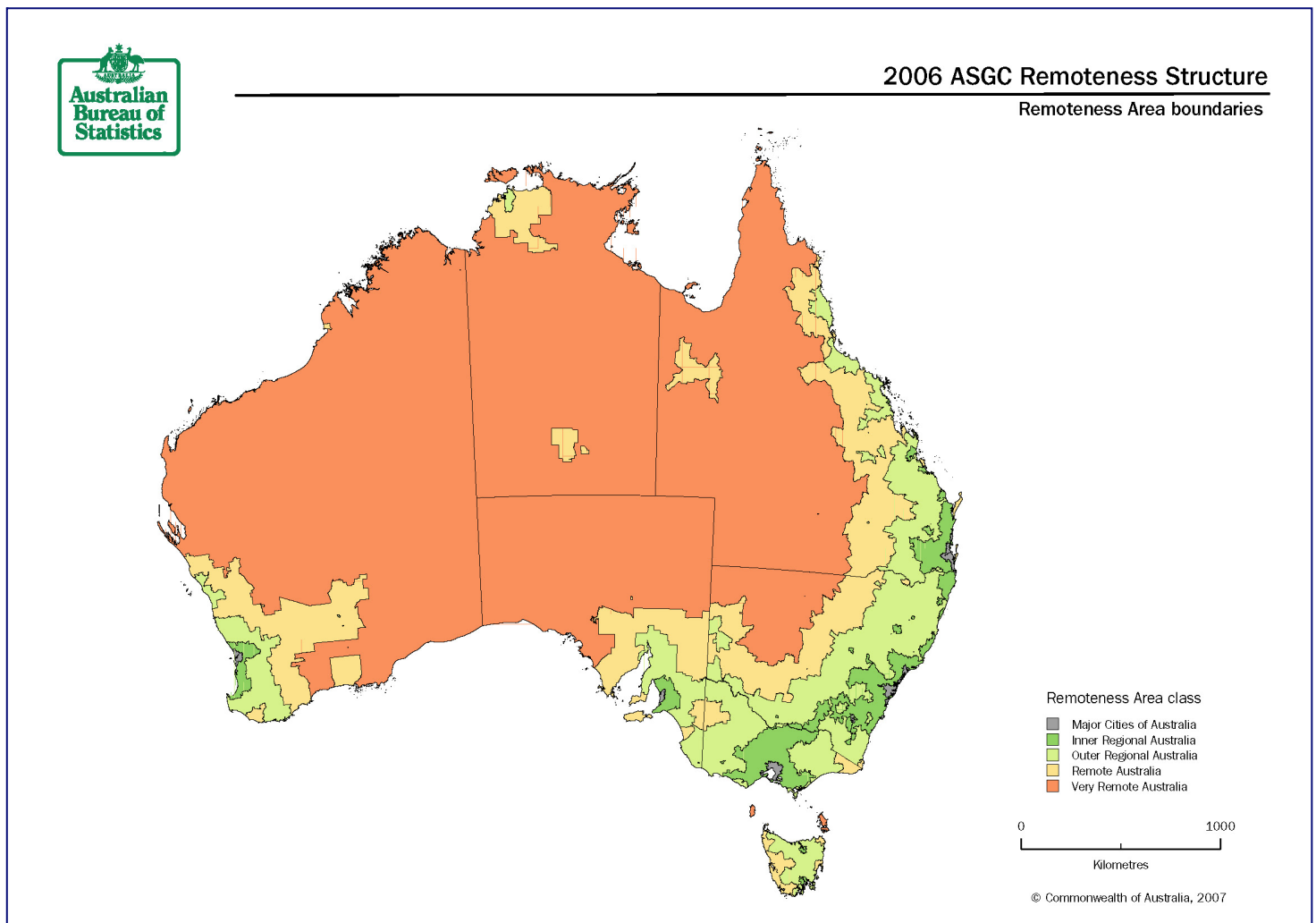
The position can be full-time or part-time (at 30 hours per week), to be negotiated with the successful applicant.

For further information and a copy of the position description, contact Dr Bob Dixon on (03) 9953 3456 or email r.dixon@pro.catholic.org.au. Applications close **Friday, 9 October 2015**.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is an equal employment opportunity employer and promotes and supports a family friendly workplace. The successful applicant must be eligible to work in Australia.

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So far we have only been talking about parishes in the major cities, where 54 per cent of Australia's parishes are located and, in 2011, almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of Australia's Catholics lived. But when we look at a map of Australia, the major cities are barely visible. Almost the entire continent is classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as either 'regional' or 'remote' (see map).¹ What is the relationship between demography and Mass attendance in regional and remote Australia, where we find 46 per cent of parishes but only 27 per cent of Australia's Catholics?



As in the previous issue, we will look at two parish-level measures of attendance and examine the statistical impact of some six demographic measures of the Catholic population of the parish using the same statistical technique, multiple regression, as before. The measures of attendance are:

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).

The demographic variables are:

1. The Catholic population: the number of Catholics who live within the parish boundaries.
2. The percentage of the Catholic population in the parish aged 65 and over.
3. The percentage of Catholics in the parish who were born in non-English speaking countries.
4. The percentage of Catholics aged 15 or over in the parish who have a university degree.
5. Residential stability: the percentage of Catholics in the parish aged 5 or over who lived at the same address as at the time of the previous Census in 2006.
6. Catholics as a percentage of all people living within the parish boundaries.

¹ The categories in the ABS Remoteness Structure are 'Major Cities', 'Inner Regional Australia', 'Outer Regional Australia', 'Remote Australia', 'Very Remote Australia'.

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When we carry out the regression analysis for 524 parishes in regional and remote Australia, we find that, in some respects, the results are similar to what we found in the major cities, but there are also some notable differences. Once again, and unsurprisingly, the number of Catholics living in the parish is the demographic variable most strongly related to attendance (it has a standardised coefficient of 0.77; see Table 1), but even more powerfully than it was in the cities, probably because, in regional and remote Australia, it is often more difficult than it is in the cities to travel across parish boundaries to attend Mass in a neighbouring parish.

In fact, all but one of the selected demographic variables have a statistically significant impact on Mass attendances on parishes in regional and remote Australia. The only one that does not is the percentage of Catholics born in NESCs, and that is largely because the vast majority of such people live in the major cities.

The adjusted R-squared figure of 0.75 given at the bottom of Table 1 means that 75 per cent of the variation in Mass attendance figures in parishes in regional and remote areas is explained by these demographic variables on their own. Only 25 per cent of the variation is explained by all other factors, including other demographic factors, the personality of the parish priest (if there is one – not all parishes in regional and remote Australia have a resident parish priest), the availability of Mass as compared to Sunday assemblies in the absence of a priest, and so on.

Table 1. The impact of selected demographic variables on parish Mass attendance in regional and remote Australia

Demographic variable ¹	Standardised coefficient	Statistical significance
Catholic population of the parish	0.77	***
Percentage of Catholics aged 65 and over	0.23	***
Percentage of Catholics born in NESCs	0.03	
Percentage of Catholics aged 15+ with a degree	0.18	***
Percentage of Catholics at the same address as in 2006	-0.11	***
Percentage of Catholics in overall parish population	0.18	***
<i>Parishes = 524. Adjusted R-squared = 0.75</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.

As before, 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 results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The impact of selected demographic variables on parish Mass attendance rates in regional and remote Australia

Demographic variable ¹	Standardised coefficient	Statistical significance
Catholic population of the parish	-0.24	***
Percentage of Catholics aged 65 and over	0.31	***
Percentage of Catholics born in NESCs	0.08	
Percentage of Catholics aged 15+ with a degree	0.27	***
Percentage of Catholics at the same address as in 2006	-0.11	*
Percentage of Catholics in overall parish population	0.26	***
<i>Parishes = 524. Adjusted R-squared = 0.16</i>		

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$, 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.

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Now the model explains far less of the variation – only 16 per cent – but all five of the demographic variables that had a statistically significant effect on attendance are still significant in relation to attendance rate. In fact, in most cases their effect has strengthened (their standardised coefficient has increased) once the direct impact of the Catholic population has been removed. Just as we found in the cities, parishes with larger Catholic populations tend to have lower attendance rates, suggesting that it is easier to build a sense of community and belonging in smaller parishes.

Two variables that had no impact on attendance or attendance rate in the major city parishes turn out to have a statistically significant positive effect in regional and remote parishes. These are the percentage of Catholics in the total population of the parish, and the percentage of the Catholic population aged 65 or more. It may be that as the percentage of Catholics in the local population increases, there is a greater sense of being part of a Catholic community, which in turn promotes a sense of belonging to the parish and a corresponding desire to participate in parish life. This sense of being part of the Catholic community may be more easily discernible in regional and remote areas than it is in the cities.

In Part 1 of this article, we hypothesised that a stronger presence of older Catholics would be associated with better attendance at Mass, but why this is true in the country when it did not turn out that way in the cities is not immediately clear. Has it got something to do with the fact that many regional and remote communities have experienced the movement of so many (non-attending) younger people to the cities? If this is the case, one would expect a positive association between residential stability and attendance whereas in fact the association between them is negative in both city and country.

In this and the previous issue of *Pastoral Research Online*, we have seen that demographic factors do influence Mass attendances and attendance rates in parishes throughout in Australia.

We can summarise the results as follows:

1. Obviously, the size of the local Catholic population has the largest impact on attendance in both city and country.
2. The percentage of Catholics born in NESCs has a powerful impact in the major cities but is not significant in the rest of Australia.
3. The percentage of adult Catholics with a university degree has a significant impact on attendance and attendance rate throughout Australia.
4. The percentage of the Catholic population aged 65 and over is significant in the country but not in the city.
5. The percentage of Catholic in the local population has a significant positive effect in regional and remote Australia, but not in the major cities.
6. Perhaps counter-intuitively, residential stability has a small negative effect in both city and country.

So in asking why attendance in any particular parish has changed in recent years, take a moment to consider whether the demography of the Catholic population has also been changing.

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.

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“The Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research recognises the important role that NCLS Research plays in Australian church life and Australian society, and values the way that research findings can inform pastoral practice and pastoral planning at all levels of leadership in the Catholic Church. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is pleased to be a partner in this valuable venture.”

Archbishop Julian Porteous, Archdiocese of Hobart, Chair of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research

UPDATE ON THE 2016 NCLS



The 2016 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) will take place in October and November 2016, continuing the largest longitudinal survey of local church life in the world.

Conducted by NCLS Research, partnering with more than 20 Christian denominations across Australia, it is expected that the 2016 NCLS will, once again, involve hundreds of thousands of church attenders and leaders.

“When we started 25 years ago, we never contemplated a sixth wave of the NCLS would happen. To now have 25 years of accumulated learning about Australian local churches is quite astounding,” says Dr Ruth Powell, NCLS Research Director. “It is a tremendous testimony to the collaboration of so many church leaders over such a period.”

What began as a small research project in 1991, asking “who goes to church”, has grown into a research organisation of international renown.

The Catholic Church in Australia has participated in the NCLS since 2001, although it ran a parallel project, the Catholic Church Life Survey, in 1996. NCLS Research is sponsored by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, the Australian Catholic University, Anglicare (Sydney) and Uniting Mission and Education (NSW & the ACT) .

The 2016 NCLS will produce a snapshot of the role of faith in the lives of individuals, the place of local parishes in their communities, and of local and denominational church vitality. Responding to changing needs, the 2016 NCLS will be adaptive and innovative in its approach.

“Our mission in 2016 remains– to help identify signs of hope in churches and its leadership, providing a credible research base to build vitality and connect churches and communities,” explains Dr Powell. “Our goal is still to listen to the great diversity of Australian churchgoers, leaders and communities and to learn from them.”



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

