

# Tracing the Pulse: An Investigation into Vitality in Australian Catholic Parishes

Trudy Dantis\*

As a ‘definite community of Christian faithful’, every parish is called to embody the presence of the church in the wider community.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, a parish becomes ‘salt’ and ‘light’ for the community it is located in (cf. Matt 5:13–16). 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 is 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’.<sup>3</sup>

This article presents findings from a study on the nature of vitality in Australian Catholic parishes and its different expressions in diverse contexts. This study was conducted in association with the Building Stronger Parishes research project conducted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office. A theological framework centred on the concept of

---

\* Trudy Dantis’s academic background is in community resource management and social work. She has been working with the Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference since 2010. Her role at the office has included management of the Building Stronger Parishes project, membership of the project research team, and development of the Building Stronger Parishes website. She has recently completed her doctorate at the University of Divinity (Melbourne) on the subject of Catholic parish vitality.

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 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](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#_ftn217), n. 28, accessed 19 June 2014.
3. Patricia Wittberg, *Building Strong Church Communities: A Sociological Overview* (Mahwah, NJ Paulist, 2012), 113.

church as communion and sociological research done on Australian and overseas Catholic parishes were used to propose eight measures as indicators of vitality in Catholic parishes. The concluding section presents some implications of the research for pastoral planning in parishes and dioceses in Australia.

### *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 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 would be met by vital parishes, as studies such as NCLS (National Church Life Survey) and the one by Cieslak have done.<sup>6</sup> A similar approach has been adopted in studies where vitality has been conceived in terms such as 'excellent',<sup>7</sup> 'vibrant'<sup>8</sup> or 'successful'.<sup>9</sup> The qualities of the parish that contribute to its

4. Robert Dixon, 'Ingenious Communities: Catholic Parishes in Australia as Creators of Social Capital and Religious Social Goods' (PhD thesis, Monash University, Melbourne, 2010), 41.
5. Michael Mason and Denis Fennessy, 'Leadership and Vitality in Local Churches' (2001), [http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccsls/Otherpap/Lship\\_and\\_Vitality\\_web.pdf](http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccsls/Otherpap/Lship_and_Vitality_web.pdf), 1, accessed 25 March 2014.
6. John Bellamy, Bryan Cussen, Sam Sterland, Keith Castle, Ruth Powell, and Peter Kaldor, *Enriching Church Life: A Practical Guide for Local Churches* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2006), 11, and Michael Cieslak, 'The Consequences of Pastoral Leadership', in *The Parish Management Handbook*, ed. Charles E. Zech (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 2003), 125.
7. Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to Best Places and Practices* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001).
8. Richard Boyatzis, Terry Brizz and Lindsey Godwin, 'The Effect of Religious Leaders' Emotional and Social Competencies on Improving Parish Vibrancy', *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 18, no. 2 (2011): 192.
9. Thomas P. Sweetser and Carol M. Holden, *Leadership in a Successful Parish* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1992).

vibrancy or success are made up of many attributes. ‘Vitality’ therefore is best conceived as a factor comprising several items that cluster together. This is the approach taken in this study.

### *Measures of Vitality*

The measures of a vital parish life developed by the 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 based on survey responses by church attenders. 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,<sup>10</sup> 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.

This method can pose a problem for Catholic parishes that often do not score as highly as their Protestant counterparts due to either a misinterpretation of the language of some questions used in the survey that is unfamiliar to Catholics, or due to differences between Protestant and Catholic theology and practices.<sup>11</sup>

For the purposes of the Building Stronger Parishes project, the concept of parish vitality is derived from the 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 (and accept) Christ’s saving doctrine and who practise the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love.<sup>12</sup> 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, among other things, 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, that is, the activities of a parish as well as the outcomes of those activities in the lives of

---

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

11. Dixon, ‘Ingenious Communities’, 54, 55.

12. *Catechism*, n. 2179.

parishioners. The measures of vitality derived using this approach are closely tied to the NCLS Core Qualities (see Table 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.

**Table 1: Measures of vitality showing their relationship to NCLS Core Qualities<sup>13</sup>**

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

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

*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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> A vibrant parish is one where all members are encouraged in their call and supported in their discernment and response.

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 people of various ages, formation in faith is an important part of every aspect of the parish. 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, and for 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',<sup>16</sup> is also 'the creative force and source of communion among members of the Church'.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> Vibrant parishes encourage active participation among their members in the various components of the liturgy, such as the music and the breaking of the Word, and as special ministers of the Eucharist, greeters and collectors. 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.

- 
14. Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 30 December 1988, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html), n. 19, accessed 19 June 2014. Henceforth CL.
  15. Pope John Paul II, *Homily*, Visit to the Roman Parish of San Pancrazio, 22 April 1979, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/homilies/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19790422\\_san-pancrazio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790422_san-pancrazio_en.html), n. 4, accessed 19 June 2014.
  16. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21 November 1964, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1980), n. 11.
  17. 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>, n. 5, accessed 19 June 2014.
  18. Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 7 December 1965, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), n.6.

*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’.<sup>19</sup> 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. 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.<sup>20</sup> A vital parish is one that identifies and invites the skills and talents of its parishioners to be developed in parish activities, based on what parishioners can offer. This fosters an environment where innovation and 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. All parishioners 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’.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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).

All the lay faithful in a parish are called into communion to a ‘full

---

19. CL 26.

20. Ibid., 20.

21. Ibid.

22. 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: Liturgical Training, 2007), 177.

belonging' to 'the Church and to its mystery'.<sup>23</sup> A sense of belonging refers to the extent to 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.<sup>24</sup>

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

Through baptism, the members of a parish or the 'lay faithful' are called to participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ to bring salvation in the world.<sup>25</sup> 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 in 'the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media'.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> These missionary activities include connections with people of other Christian communities and religions.

*6. Practical and diverse service/outreach initiatives are practised*

The threefold responsibility of the church includes proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*).<sup>28</sup> Charity that begins with intra-ecclesial communion opens out into universal service and inspires a commitment to 'practical and concrete love for every human being'.<sup>29</sup> There are abundant ways

23. CL 9.

24. Ibid..

25. Ibid., 23.

26. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation, 8 December 1975, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html), n. 70, accessed 19 June 2014.

27. Barnett, 'Trinity and the Parish', 179.

28. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter, 25 December 2005, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html), n. 25, accessed 20 February 2012.

29. Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Apostolic Letter, 6 January 2001, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_20010106\\_novo-millennio-ineunte.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html), n. 49, accessed 19 June 2014. Henceforth NMI.

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 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 to also generate constructive change to help a parish grow.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> Parishes are called to foster a 'spirituality of communion' that shapes the process of collaboration and encourages fruitful dialogue between pastors and their people.<sup>32</sup> 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.

### *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 parish leaders be open and adapt to the changes in the parish and in society that will occur over time. A vital parish exhibits a willingness to build on the parish's strengths, face difficult choices and make decisions for the sustainable future of the parish community. Leaders engage with their community to manage forthcoming changes by envisioning the future, communicating 'the parish vision' clearly to their parishioners and preparing them accordingly.

## ***Empirical Research***

The Building Stronger Parishes project involved an empirical study of twenty parishes from different dioceses that had been shown to have particular forms or expressions of vitality. Parishes were selected so that different types

---

30. Mason and Fennessy, 'Leadership and Vitality', and Cieslak, 'Consequences of Pastoral Leadership'.

31. 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>, 3, accessed 19 June 2014.

32. NMI 45.



(large and small, ethnic, multicultural and Anglo–Irish, clergy-led and lay-led) were included in the study. Equal numbers of metropolitan and non-metropolitan parishes were selected. The methodology used was an exploratory, qualitative approach using mixed methods. Data was collected using semi-structured face-to-face *interviews* with parish leaders, parish staff and parishioners in general. 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* such as newsletters, parish and diocesan pastoral plans and profiles, and *research reports* from the ACBC Pastoral Research Office were also used to supplement other data collected during the research. Data analysis was carried out with the help of NVivo software. Table 2 is a list of participating parishes in the study.

**Table 2: Parishes participating in the study**

	<b>Parish</b>	<b>Diocese</b>
1	Albany Creek	Brisbane
2	Cororooke	Ballarat
3	Glenwood–Stanhope Gardens	Parramatta
4	Harris Park	Maronite
5	Kings Park	Melbourne
6	Launceston	Hobart
7	Miles	Toowoomba
8	Montmorency	Melbourne
9	Mount Isa	Townsville
10	Mudgee	Bathurst
11	Myall Coast	Maitland–Newcastle
12	Narrabundah	Canberra & Goulburn
13	Narre Warren	Sale
14	Northam	Perth
15	Shepparton	Sandhurst
16	Sugarloaf	Maitland–Newcastle
17	Summer Hill	Sydney
18	Warnervale	Broken Bay
19	Warragul	Sale
20	Willunga	Adelaide

### *Research Findings*

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
- 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.

Furthermore, the study found that:

- 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 the *needs* of the community.

One of the strengths 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 how they expressed 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. For a given aspect of vitality, for example, 'outreach', each parish had different outreach programs or different ways of how the parish 'did outreach'. An example of this can 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 parishioners to make 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*, such as 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 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*, such as 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 (e.g., the Syro-Malabar Rite). Vitality was also expressed through the great diversity 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 and remote parishes*, such as 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 volunteering their help and looking after sick and housebound people in the community. In addition, rural parishes in the study had stronger ecumenical connections, greater adaptability and stronger planning processes than urban parishes.
- In *amalgamated or combined parishes*, such as Launceston and Myall Coast, each individual Mass centre had 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*, such as 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 had diverse ways of expressing their vitality, each parish was also able to express certain measures of vitality more strongly than others based on their available resources and the 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. For example, based on the research findings, the following were the three best-developed expressions found in five participating parishes.

1. Willunga:
  - a. integrated community model
  - b. excellent parish management
  - c. strong ecumenical community links
2. 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
3. Sugarloaf:
  - a. strong global focus
  - b. inspiring overseas outreach programs
  - c. emphasis on celebrating parish diversity
4. 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
5. 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

These expressions revealed how parish vitality took on many shapes and forms according to the uniqueness of every parish. While no two parishes expressed vitality in exactly the same manner, every parish had the capacity to use its strengths and resources to develop vitality irrespective of its size, location, community demographics and leadership pattern.

### ***Challenges and Impediments to Vitality***

The study revealed that some of the main challenges or impediments to vitality concerned:

- developing spiritual resources for young people in some parishes, particularly Youth Masses, and developing social and spiritual activities for people aged 20–35 years

- building community among parishioners, especially in new, multicultural and amalgamated parishes and parishes with transient populations
- 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
- developing ecumenical links with other denominations that do not depend on the initiative of the parish leader
- sustaining the number of leaders and the quality of leadership in parishes
- 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 confronting rural parishes. These were:

- personal challenges faced by parish leaders and a perceived need for more personal support from diocesan agencies and staff
- finding supply priests to fill in for Mass when regular priests were not available
- 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
- having the continued support of the diocese and the bishops for lay-led liturgies to continue to grow and develop
- facing and planning for decline in a community population
- facing and planning for a very real possibility of a future without priests and the celebration of Mass in the parish.

### ***Implications of the Research***

The findings of this study can help inform parish leaders, bishops, diocesan staff and others involved in parish and diocesan pastoral planning processes to help good parishes maintain their vitality, so that they may continue to effectively carry out the mission of the church, and to assist parishes facing challenges to find ways to develop their vitality. Five particular issues arising from this research are discussed below.

#### ***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 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 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 leadership transition.

## 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 the levels of vitality in these parishes are to be sustained. The main ways in which dioceses can help these parishes are by:

- providing ongoing mentoring and personal support for leaders in rural parishes
- providing special assistance for non-ordained parish leaders and helping them work with the priests who lead parishes 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
- providing extensive assistance to parish communities before, during and after parish reorganisations and changes in leadership.

---

33. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership that Fits Your Church: What Kind of Pastor for What Kind of Congregation* (St Louis, MO: Chalice, 2012).

### *3. Stronger Training Programs, Ongoing Support and Mentoring for Lay Leaders*

One of the main challenges faced by many parishes in the study was sustaining the levels of lay leadership in parishes. A high percentage of lay leaders in voluntary and paid positions were aged fifty and over and had increasingly multifaceted roles that required planning, project management and team-building skills. This put a great strain on lay leaders who struggled to achieve a healthy work–life balance, and made it difficult to recruit more leaders and encourage greater participation from parishioners. Dioceses need to help parishes to address these issues if they are to maintain current 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 Twenties and Thirties*

The research revealed a distinct lack of programs and activities in parishes for young people in their twenties and thirties, although some parishes had been successful in developing a few activities. For example, Narrabundah parish has the Young Men of God movement and Harris Park parish celebrates a special Mass and organises a monthly brunch for young families to address this issue. Overall, however, parishes struggle to engage people in this age 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 in 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 facilitate the sharing of these ideas with other parishes facing similar challenges. Collaboration between parishes fosters greater renewal and more effectiveness in mission.<sup>34</sup> 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, and community-building and outreach initiatives will also help parishes develop activities and strategies that they could not establish on their own, and will avoid any duplication in

---

34. CL 26.

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. Monocultural parishes may have to adjust to the influx of people 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.

The Building Stronger Parishes 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. Despite the differences, every parish studied 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 had been developed by the participating parishes. These expressions of different measures of vitality continue to be explored through the next phase of the project, which involves pastoral interpretation and applications. The Building Stronger Parishes website will be the ongoing primary source of information on all aspects of the project.<sup>35</sup> Over the next few months a series of reports will be released that will systematically present and interpret findings in the topical areas addressed in the study, and seminars will be offered in metropolitan areas around Australia. An outline for a planning session has also been designed to serve as a

---

35. The website address is [www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au](http://www.buildingstrongerparishes.catholic.org.au).



guide for use in parishes and dioceses to help people consider the reports and apply the findings to their own situation.

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 be gathered together in communion, the Eucharist be celebrated, and the message of the Gospel be lived, proclaimed and passed on.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.