

How are Catholic parishes faring?

Richard Curtain, St Carthage's Parish, Parkville, Vic

What is happening in Australian Catholic parishes today? How much do we know about how parishes are supporting parishioners and the wider community. My interest in differences in parish life was triggered by reflecting on three sources.

US liberal Catholic magazine [Commonweal](#) has a series on [The American Parish Today](#) in article and podcast formats. The magazine's website allows free access to five articles a month, as digital subscription for international readers is expensive.

A recent article makes good reading. It is called [The Way Stations for a Pilgrim: Church The Changing Landscape of American Parishes](#) by Susan Bigelow Reynolds. Susan is an Assistant Professor of Catholic Studies at the School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, USA. She describes changes in US parishes by using four examples. The first parish is the suburban Denver parish she grew up in, the second is the traditional Slovak parish of her grandparents, and the third, a poor parish in Texas close to the border where she taught. The latter is a parish where most parishioners are Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal. She also describes a fourth parish she attended in Boston while a postgraduate student. This parish she describes as consisting of a 'tightly knit, multi-ethnic, multilingual community composed primarily of African-American, Afro-Caribbean, Latinx, and Irish-American Catholics'.

Her conclusion is that 'entering into the lives of these communities taught me that holiness has a fundamentally local character. They were holy because they were there, ordinary, and unspectacular, each its own peculiar embodiment of the Communion of Saints'.

The second insight into how parish life differs from parish to parish is the excellent study by Jerome Baggett called 'Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith.' (Oxford University Press 2009). For a good idea of the main findings of his study, see his lecture on his website at the Jesuit School of Theology: [After Vatican II: Institutional & Cultural Dilemmas among American Catholics](#). I hope to write a review of the book and post it on the Sense of the Faithful website.

Baggett's rich study of the attitudes and actions of a sample of active parishioners in six parishes in the San Francisco Bay Area begs the question of what Australian parishes are like. A quick review of the available research on the web shows that the [National Centre For Pastoral Research](#) (NCPR) provides census data on diocesan profiles for 2016 and but at parish level only 2011 census data for available. However, these profiles are highly abstract and misleading because they report on those who self-identify in the census as Catholics. They tell us nothing about the profile of parishioners or parish life. These profiles are a product of the centralised, top-down view of the church in Australia - its public profile is based on national census and national survey results that do not reflect what Catholic parish life is like in the parishioner's their own immediate vicinity, let alone in a wider region within the archdiocese or diocese.

The 2016 National Church Life Survey does supply information about parishioners' views of their parish and its impact on their religious and social life. The report on the relevant survey results are to be found [here](#) entitled 'The Church Life Profile for the Catholic Church in Australia: a report on the vitality of local churches who took part in the 2016 National

Church Life Survey'. However, the survey data are based on a national survey of 191 parishes. Nationally, the sample represents just of one in six Catholic parishes (15 per cent). This means that the results reveal only highly generalised findings. The archdiocese of Melbourne has 215 parishes, but the Church Life Survey cannot tell us anything about differences between parishes in Melbourne if it tried to because its sample of Melbourne parishes would only be 35.

The parish has been and continues to the centre of life in the Catholic Church in Australia, but we know little about how well they are working. Broad survey results provide only a thin national profile based in a standardised average. For example, we know little about the range of outreach activities undertaken by the 1,300 parishes, at the level of individual dioceses or the broader regions in which the dioceses are located. Nor do we know what parish characteristics parishioners see as effective in connecting with them and with others in the wider community.

We are keen to hear from parishioners about what they think their parishes are doing well and what they could do better at. We need to know more about the range of different ways of being Catholic shows itself. This will depend on where you live, what challenges you and your fellow parishioners and their communities face. Another key factor will be the leadership roles of the parish priest, parish associates and other active members of the parish play.

Please tell us about how well your parish functions. What are your parish's strengths and weaknesses? What do you think your parish as a community does well? Also, what issues do you think your parish should be more engaged with? Please post your views on what is happening in your parish and what you think can make your parish more effective.

John Davies' description of his parish [here](#) is an excellent example of the feedback we are seeking.