

Research Project on

CATHOLICS WHO HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING MASS

Final Report February 2007

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Data from 1998 Australian Community Survey used with permission of NCLS Research.

Printed February 2007
Reprinted with minor amendments April 2007

ISBN 978-1-86420-281-6

Design: Mary Ferlin, Catholic Communications Melbourne
Cover image: ©iStockphoto.com/Andrei Tchernov



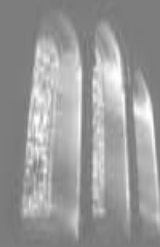
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The core objective of this research project is to discover the major reasons why some Catholics, aged from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders, have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years for reasons other than age or ill-health.

That Catholics have been drifting away from active parish involvement has been evident for quite some years and is well-documented. The report begins with a summary of what is already known from demographic studies and from questionnaire-based research. These studies indicate that among the factors influencing a decline in Mass attendance are difficulties with specific Catholic teachings, disillusionment arising from sexual abuse issues in the Church, a lack of meaning in liturgical experiences, a belief that weekly attendance at Mass is no longer obligatory, and changes in attitudes to working hours and Sunday sport.

Rather than conduct further surveys, the present research addressed the gap in empirical studies by using a qualitative methodology to supplement and extend the existing data. The principal methodological tool was the life history interview, focussing on Church involvement and religious faith. The primary aim of the interviews was to discover what factors led participants to stop attending Mass regularly, whether they still see themselves as belonging in some way to the Church, and whether they could foresee any changes which would encourage them to begin going to Mass again. A second aim was to get a sense of the important themes and events in each participant's life that influenced the development of their attitudes, beliefs and practices.

A total of 41 people from 7 dioceses participated in an interview. Of these, 28 (68%) were women and 13 (32%) were men. Over two-thirds of the participants were aged 50 to 69 and almost half were aged between 50 and 59. The oldest person was aged 74 and the youngest 29.

The report classifies the reasons given by participants under ten main headings, seven of which are 'Church-centred', and three 'participant-centred'. However, in most cases, it was neither possible nor appropriate to identify a single, definitive reason why the person had stopped going to Mass. Participants usually mentioned a combination of factors, of which two or three stood out as the main reasons for the change in their practice of Mass attendance.

Church-centred reasons

1. The irrelevance of the Church to life today
2. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
3. Problems with the priest in the parish
4. Lack of intellectual stimulation
5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. A sense of being excluded by Church rules
7. Structural factors

Participant-centred reasons

1. Family or household-related issues
2. Crisis of faith
3. Going to Mass simply not a priority

There was a high degree of consistency between the reasons given by participants in this project for ceasing to attend Mass and those reported in existing research.

The research also found that it was important for virtually all participants that they nurture the spiritual dimension of their lives. For some, that spiritual dimension had a strong connection to the Catholic community, while a few participants' spiritual lives had little or no connection with the Christian faith or any organised form of religion.

The research team aimed to let the participants speak for themselves as fully as possible. The report is therefore amply illustrated with the aid of their own words taken from the interview transcripts. Many participants expressed the desire for the Church to make changes to certain of its practices and beliefs. The research team recognises that, while many of the changes called for by participants are certainly possible and often desirable, other things are essential elements of the Catholic faith and cannot be changed.

Following the report itself are five commentaries on the research by a sociologist, a theologian, a religious educator, a liturgist and a bishop.

At their Plenary Meeting in November 2006, the Australian bishops asked the Pastoral Projects Office to coordinate a process of consultation designed to seek responses from leadership and consultative bodies in dioceses and other Catholic organisations, and to prepare a set of recommendations to be presented to them at their next plenary meeting in May 2007. Appendix 10 of this report has been designed to serve as a guide to participation in this consultation process. Responses to the consultation should reach the Pastoral Projects Office, at the address in the front of this report, by **Friday, 31 August, 2007**.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mr Bob Dixon is Director of the Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). He is the author of *The Catholic Community in Australia* (2005) and of numerous articles, and co-author of several other publications, including *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*, the 1998 report on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia. He also represents the ACBC on the Board of the Christian Research Association. He has tertiary qualifications in science, theology and education, and is currently working towards a PhD in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University.

Ms Sharon Bond is a researcher at the Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Project Manager for this research project. She is a former researcher with the Christian Research Association (CRA) and is currently on the Executive of the National Pastoral Planning Network. She has co-authored numerous reports and articles for both the Pastoral Projects Office and CRA, including the CD-ROM *Australia's Religious Communities: A Multimedia Exploration* (2004), *A handbook for cross-cultural ministry* (2005) and *Exploring What Australians Value* (2003), all published by CRA. Sharon is also working towards a PhD in Sociology at La Trobe University on the topic of the attitudes and actions of younger Australians to social justice and poverty.

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Mr Bryan Cussen is Resource Development Officer at the Pastoral Projects Office. He has worked in pastoral research and planning since 1991, most recently as the ACBC staff member on the ecumenical National Church Life Survey team. He is co-author of *Enriching Church Life: A Practical Guide for Local Churches* and of various papers, including *Pastoral Planning: A Theological Way of Imagining*. He has tertiary qualifications in psychology, theology and international development.

Ms Katherine Wright spent 2005 working as part-time Research Assistant at the Pastoral Projects Office while she studied for her Honours degree in Arts at Monash University, where she won the Anne Edwards Sociology Honours Dissertation Award for the best Honours project in sociology. Her work on this research project included carrying out interviews and preparing a review of published research in related fields. She is now living in Canberra, where she works for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team would like to acknowledge and thank the many people and organisations that have provided assistance and support to the project. The project was instigated at the suggestion of Bishop Gerard Holohan (Bunbury) and Archbishop Adrian Doyle (Hobart), and supported by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, which provided funding. The bishops of all the dioceses where interviews were conducted gave their full support to the project, as did their Vicars-General and other diocesan administrators who helped select the parishes to be approached for assistance in recruiting potential participants.

We are also very grateful for the assistance we received from parish priests and the chairpersons and members of parish councils of the parishes we approached with an invitation to help us find people prepared to be interviewed. We would like to thank those Catholic schools and parishes around Australia, and the Catholic Education Offices of Hobart and Bunbury, for providing venues for conducting the interviews and for their wonderful hospitality.

We would also like to thank the members of the ACBC Board of Management for the Pastoral Research Projects (recently renamed the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research): Bishop Gerard Hanna (Bishop of Wagga Wagga, Chair), Dr Teresa Angelico (Catholic Education Office, Melbourne), Associate Professor Rowan Ireland (La Trobe University), Fr Brian Lucas (General Secretary, ACBC), Mr Glenn Mowbray (Business Manager, ACBC) and Professor Peter Wilson (Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), Australian Catholic University). The Board has maintained a strong and supportive interest in the project since its inception. In particular, Professor Wilson and his predecessor, Emeritus Professor John Coll, were most encouraging of the cooperation in the project between the Pastoral Projects Office and ACU. Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Head of the Melbourne campus of Australian Catholic University, Professor Gabrielle McMullen, has also been strongly supportive of the cooperative link between the two organisations.

We also gratefully acknowledge the contribution of our expert commentators whose reflections appear at the end of the report: Dr Sandra Carroll, Professor Dean Hoge, Bishop Gerard Holohan, Fr Richard Lennan and Fr Peter Williams.

We would like to thank Fr Brian Lucas (General Secretary, ACBC), Dr Bryan Froehle (Dominican University, Chicago), Archbishop Adrian Doyle and Mr Michael Brady (Pastoral Projects Office) for reading a draft of the final report and providing extremely helpful feedback.

The research team also had the benefit of the expert skills of Ms Audra Kunciunas, Resource Development Officer at the Pastoral Projects Office, who assisted with the content analysis, editing and distribution of this report, and of Ms Mary Ferlin of Catholic Communications in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, who designed this report.

Finally, we wish to express our very sincere thanks to each of the 41 people interviewed for this research, who generously and courageously contributed not only their time but also their considered thoughts about why they had stopped going to Mass and about the issues facing the Church in Australia today.



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For quite some years now, Catholics have been drifting away from active parish involvement, so that by 2001 the percentage of the Catholic population at Mass on a typical weekend had fallen to 15.3 per cent. Anecdotal reports suggest that in recent years this drift has been noticeable even among people who were regular Mass attenders and active parishioners for many years of their adult lives.

This research aims to meet the desire of the Catholic bishops of Australia to know more about the reasons why some people are ceasing to attend Mass and what can be done to stem the flow or reach out to those who have gone. This desire was expressed at the May 2004 plenary meeting of the bishops and resulted in a request to the Pastoral Projects Office to consider what form of research might inform pastoral practice. A research proposal was prepared for consideration by the bishops at their November 2004 meeting. That proposal was approved and appropriate funding allocated.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The core objective of this research project is to discover the major reasons why some Catholics, aged from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders, have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years for reasons other than age or ill-health.

The research also aimed to:

- see how the reasons people give for discontinuing Mass attendance are related to the context of their life experience.
- consider what steps the Church can take to encourage these people to return to regular Mass attendance.
- consider what steps the Church can take to lower the number of people who discontinue regular Mass attendance in the future.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

- Mr Bob Dixon, Pastoral Projects Office, Principal Investigator
- Ms Sharon Bond, Pastoral Projects Office, Project Manager
- Mr Bryan Cussen, Pastoral Projects Office
- Ms Katherine Wright, Pastoral Projects Office
- Associate Professor Kath Engebretson, Australian Catholic University
- Dr Richard Rymarz, Australian Catholic University

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This introductory chapter is followed in Chapter 2 by an examination of existing data and previously published research studies to see to what extent those sources can illuminate the research question under investigation in this study. Data sources used include the 2001 National Count of Attendance, the Australian Census, the 2001 National Church Life Survey and the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey, and the 1998 Australian Community Survey data. These sources provide us with a large amount of information relating to Mass attendances, attendance rates, Catholic disidentification, the reasons people give for reducing their attendance at Mass, and the differences between attenders and non-attenders. This is followed by a brief overview of published studies from Australia, the United States and England which look at church attendance from a variety of perspectives.

The availability of the quantitative data described in Chapter 2 was a crucial element in the decision of the research team to adopt a qualitative methodology, based on in-depth interviews with a relatively small number of people, for this project. This methodology is described in Chapter 3, where the function and advantages of qualitative research methodology are explained and some examples of published qualitative research studies of Catholic life are noted. Chapter 3 also outlines the content which the research team set out to explore in the interviews, the process used to select participants and the method used to analyse the results.



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Chapter 4 describes the interview participants in terms of their demographic characteristics such as age, level of education, occupation and marital status.

Chapter 5 presents the main reasons why the Catholics in this study stopped attending Mass. The reasons are classified under two headings: Church-centred and participant-centred, although it was often difficult to separate them in practice. These main reasons are presented in rank order of importance and are illustrated with the aid of participants' own words. Chapter 5 also contains an outline of the different ways in which participants nurtured a continuing spiritual dimension in their lives. The chapter also includes a number of extended accounts in which the personal stories of individual participants can be heard in some detail.

Chapter 6 summarises the findings of the research and invites readers to participate in a process of reflection and consultation which will lead to the preparation of a set of recommendations to be put to the Bishops Conference during 2007.

Following Chapter 6 are five short commentaries on the report by people who are experts in their field. The commentators comprise a sociologist, a theologian, a religious educator, a liturgist and a bishop.

The final section of the report contains a number of appendices. Of particular importance among these is the final appendix, a suggested outline for a consultation session which readers of the report are encouraged to use in beginning the process of helping the Church to move beyond this research stage and towards a time of pastoral reflection and action.

A summary of this report was presented to the Plenary Meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in November 2006. A few minor corrections were made in the preparation of this Final Report. Where there is a difference between the Summary Report and the Final Report, the latter should be regarded as correct.



CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

1. MASS ATTENDANCE

We know that Mass attendances in Australia are falling and that this is not just due to the absence of young adults. Weekly attendance fell from an estimated 864,000 in 1996 to 765,000, or 15.3 per cent of the Australian Catholic population, in 2001. As can be seen from Table 1, in 2001 there were fewer Mass attenders in all age groups under 75 than there had been in 1996 (Dixon 2003).

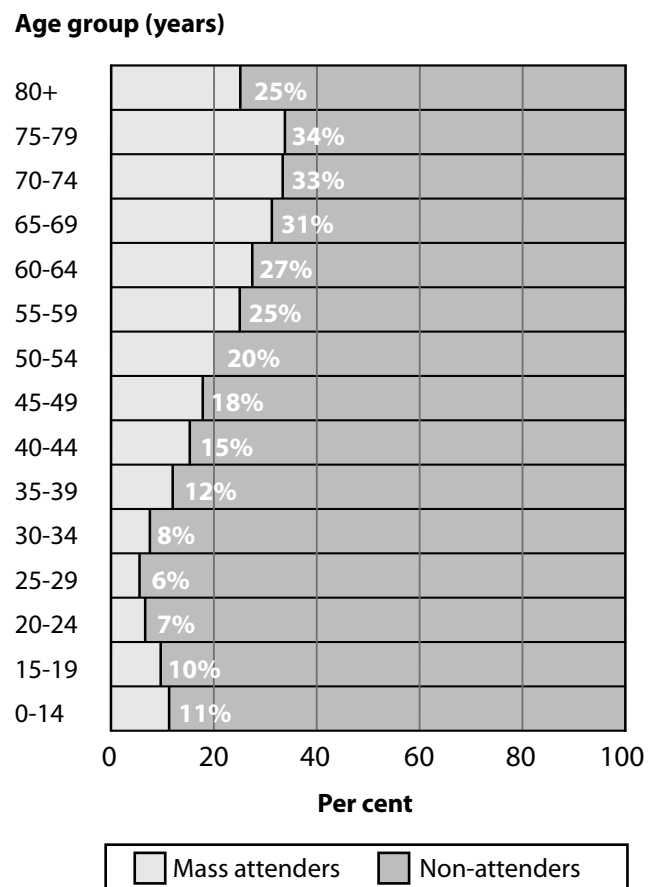
Table 1: Estimated change in number of people attending Mass in Australia, by age group, 1996 - 2001

Age group	Estimated change in number of attenders
15-25	-13,000
25-34	-18,000
35-44	-11,000
45-54	-14,000
55-64	-10,000
65-74	-10,000
75+	14,000

Source: *National Church Life Survey 2001 and Catholic Church Life Survey 1996, 2001 National Count of Attendance & various 1996 diocesan counts and estimates.*

We also know that attendance rates in 2001 varied widely for Catholics of different ages, from over 35 per cent of people aged seventy and over to only six or seven per cent of Catholics in their twenties. Figure 1 strongly suggests that the steady fall in attendances will continue for some time to come, as the higher rates of attendance associated with older attenders are unlikely to be reached by younger Catholics as they get older (Dixon 2005: 96).

Figure 1: Mass attendance rates by age



Source: *Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2001 Census; 2001 National Church Life Survey & 2001 National Count of Attendance.*



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2. CATHOLIC IDENTIFICATION

According to the Australian Census, the Catholic population of Australia rose from 4,605,844 in 1991 to 5,001,624 in 2001. Yet we know that during this period, large numbers of people ceased to identify themselves as Catholics. Around 60,000 of the 775,000 people aged 15 to 24 who had identified themselves (or had been identified by their parents) as Catholics in the 1991 Census did not identify themselves in that way 2001 Census, when they were aged 25 to 34 (Dixon 2005).

This phenomenon of disidentification also exists among older Catholics, although not to anywhere near the same extent. Estimates of the number of people who stopped identifying themselves as Catholics between the 1991 and 2001 Censuses are given in Table 2.

Table 2: People who stopped identifying themselves as Catholics between 1991 & 2001

Age group in 2001	Estimated number of people
25-34	60,000
35-44	12,000
45-54	4,400
55-64	1,000
65-74	1,600

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2001 Census

Whereas ceasing to attend Mass is an early phase of the process of disconnecting from the Church, disidentification is the final step. We don't know at what age these people stopped going to Mass or, indeed, if they ever attended, but it is likely that some at least were regular attenders at some stage of their lives, even if only in childhood. Their decision to stop identifying themselves as Catholics means of course that there is little likelihood that they will return to regular Mass attendance.

3. CATHOLIC CHURCH LIFE SURVEY

We know the reasons why infrequently- and non-attending Catholic parents of children at Catholic schools don't go to Mass. Although the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS) was primarily a survey of Mass attenders, it also included a questionnaire that, in 17 dioceses (including all of Australia's archdioceses), was sent home to parents of children attending Catholic schools. Of the more than 18,000 responses received, 4,623 were from Catholic parents who did not attend Mass at all, or attended less than once a month. Another 7,668 were from Catholic parents who attended Mass at least once a month (65 per cent of these attended at least once a week), and 3,540 were from non-Catholic parents. More than 80 per cent of all these questionnaires were completed by women.

As the national-level results of this questionnaire have never been reported before, they are presented here and in Appendix 1 in some detail.

Of the 4,623 infrequent and non-attenders, 39 per cent said they do go to Mass, but less often than once a month, whereas 61 per cent said they never or hardly ever go to Mass, or attend only on special occasions.

In this section, the focus will be on the infrequent and non-attenders. It is not possible to say how many of this group fit the research criteria, that is, were once regular Mass attenders who had stopped going to Mass in the previous five years or so, as the survey did not include any questions about a person's history of church attendance. But it is possible to examine the reasons why these people say they don't go to Mass regularly, and also to compare Catholic parents who don't attend Mass with those who do.

Reasons for not attending Mass

One of the items in the questionnaire read as follows: 'There can be many reasons why people attend Mass less often than they used to, or hardly at all these days. Have any of the following affected your attendance?' Respondents were invited to select up to three reasons from a list of 20, and then to indicate which one of these three was the most important reason for them. The results for infrequently- and non-attending Catholic parents are shown in Table 3. The response options appear in the same order as they were in the questionnaire.



Table 3: Reasons why infrequently- and non-attending Catholic parents of children attending Catholic schools don't go to Mass

Reason	Per cent selecting this reason*	Per cent selecting this as the most important reason
Married to a non-Catholic	17	4
In an irregular marriage situation	7	3
Disagreement with the Church's teaching on, or attitude to, personal sexual issues	31	9
Disagreement with the Church's teaching on abortion	12	1
No longer accept many Catholic beliefs	18	9
Religion no longer necessary for meaning or security	6	2
Weekends taken up with playing sport or taking children to activities	16	4
Weekend work	14	3
Weekends the only time available for being with the family	23	8
Weekends the only time available for household chores	11	2
Disillusionment with the Church because of revelations of sexual abuse by Church personnel	22	7
No longer feel that being a committed Catholic requires going to Mass every week	54	32
Mass no longer important as a way of socialising	3	0
Seriously offended against in the past by a priest, brother or nun	5	2
Mass holds little or no meaning for me	16	7
Boring or irrelevant homilies	10	2
Don't get on with the priest(s) in the parish	2	1
Don't know many others in the parish	3	1
Australian Church doesn't do enough for justice and the poor	5	1
Some other reason	11	3
Total	286	100

*Percentages add to more than 100 because respondents were invited to select up to three options.

Source: Catholic Church Life Survey 1996, Questionnaire sent home to parents of children attending Catholic schools. N = 4,457

More than half (54%) of all the infrequent or non-attenders among Catholic parents nominated as one of their reasons for non- or less frequent attendance the statement 'I no longer feel that being a committed Catholic requires attending Mass every week or as frequently as I used to attend'. This was by far the most commonly-chosen reason. The next most common reasons were 'I disagree with the Church's teaching on, or attitude to, personal sexual issues such as premarital sex, contraception, homosexuality' (31%), 'Weekends are the only time I have with my family' (23%), and 'I am disillusioned with the Church because of revelations of sexual abuse by Church personnel' (22%). (It must be

remembered that this survey was conducted in 1996, before the worst of the sex abuse scandal.)

Disagreement with the Church's teaching on, or attitude to, abortion, although selected as a reason by 12 per cent of infrequently- and non-attending Catholic parents, was given as the main reason by only one per cent.

These four responses were also among the top five selected as the *most important* reason why people went to Mass less often or not at all. The other response in the top five was 'I find I can no longer accept many Catholic beliefs'.



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Although this CCLS questionnaire had a relatively low response rate (around 35 per cent) and was only conducted in seventeen dioceses, there is little reason to think that the results would have been markedly different with a higher response rate, or that people in the non-participating dioceses would have responded differently. In other words, we can be quite confident that the reasons given for declining frequency of Mass attendance by infrequently- and non-attending Catholic parents of children attending Catholic schools were representative of Catholic parents generally. If there is a problem with the results, it is that they are now more than ten years old, and it is quite likely that some changes have taken place in the intervening years.

Further analysis of the CCLS data, showing how infrequently-attending Catholic parents of children at Catholic schools differ from parents who frequently Mass, can be found in Appendix 1.

4. AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Another source of knowledge about disidentification and the reasons people give for non-attendance is the 1998 Australian Community Survey. This postal survey of the general Australian community, a project of NCLS Research, included 2,430 respondents who said they were Catholic at the time of the survey or had been raised Catholic.

Of those raised Catholic,

- 82% were still Catholic.
- 5% belonged to another Christian denomination.
- 1% belonged to a non-Christian religion.
- 9% said they had no religion.
- 3% gave no response to the question about their current religion.

For all but 200 of these cases, there was sufficient information available to allocate them to one of the four categories in Table 4. According to this categorisation, almost one-third of Catholic or former Catholic respondents (31.5%) said they were regular Mass attenders (that is, they attended Mass at least once a month). This figure is quite a bit higher than the estimate for 1996 in Dixon (2003), based on an incomplete set of diocesan counts, that around 20 or 21 per cent of all Catholics attended Mass at least once a month. The discrepancy is probably due to three factors. Firstly, there are major methodological differences between a survey

like the ACS and an exercise like a diocesan head count, especially in that a head count includes people of all ages while the ACS was completed only by people aged 20 and over. Secondly, Mass attendance rates are much higher among older Catholics, and the mean age of Catholics in the ACS sample is somewhat higher than the mean age of Catholics aged 20 and over in the general population, according to the 1996 Australian Census (47.6 years compared to 44.8 years). Thirdly, there is a well-known tendency in social science research for people to overestimate their frequency of church attendance when responding to surveys.

Table 4: Relationship to Catholic Church of respondents who were Catholic at the time of the survey or who were raised Catholic

Relationship type	Number	Per cent
Catholic, frequent Mass attender	702	31.5
Catholic, but no longer attending Mass	480	21.5
Catholic, never regularly attended Mass as adult	684	30.7
No longer Catholic	364	16.3
Total	2,230	100.0

Source: Australian Community Survey 1998.

The group in this table of most interest to the current research project are the 480 who are still Catholic but who no longer go to Mass regularly (that is, they go to Mass less than once a month). Even so, only a small proportion of these match the research criterion of ceasing to attend Mass in the last five years or so. The question about age at which the respondent stopped going to church was included in only one of eight variants of the ACS questionnaire, so this information is only available for 61 of the 480 respondents. Of those, only 11 had stopped going to Mass in the last five years. The same number said they had stopped going to Mass 33 years or more ago!

Of the 364 who said they were no longer Catholic, 101 had been regular church attenders at some stage of their adult lives. It is possible that some of these could also fit the research criteria. The problem with these cases is that we don't know at what age they stopped identifying themselves as Catholic, meaning that the church they attended as adults may not have been a Catholic church.



In the analysis which follows here and in Appendix 2, the 480 respondents in the second category, whom we shall call 'former Mass attenders', will be compared to the 702 in the first category, those who, at the time of the survey, indicated that they were frequent attenders at Mass.

The comprehensive analysis of the ACS data in Appendix 2 shows that former attenders were younger than frequent attenders, were more likely to have been born in Australia and less likely to have had parents actively engaged in church life. There were no significant differences in sex or level of education between former and frequent attenders, but former attenders were much more likely to be divorced or living in a de facto relationship and much less likely to have a frequently-attending spouse. They were also less likely to affirm Christian beliefs and the moral teachings of the Church, and to pray regularly. They were more likely than frequent attenders to hold negative views about the Church, and they placed less emphasis than frequent attenders did on the spiritual and religious aspects of life.

These results suggest that Mass attenders, particularly those in their young adult years, who experience divorce or who decide to live in a de facto relationship are very likely to stop going to Mass. They also show that once people stop going to Mass, the strength of their attachment to Catholic faith and morality is likely to decline.

5. OTHER PUBLISHED STUDIES

Despite the decline in church attendance by Catholics being well documented, there is a scarcity of empirical studies examining the reasons why once practising Catholics choose to stop going to Mass. There are, however, numerous studies which have looked at church attendance from a variety of perspectives. A few of these are mentioned here.

1. In the *Spirit of Generation Y* project (Mason, Webber, Singleton & Hughes 2006), 363 Australians aged 13-59, including 102 Catholics, were asked why they did not attend religious services. The Catholics were inclined to cite negative publicity about clergy and the Church's attitude to moral issues as reasons for non-attendance, and about a quarter of them said it was not necessary to attend Church to have a personal relationship with God. Many of the young people in the group (not just Catholics) said they:
 - were disillusioned by the churches' attitudes to moral issues.
 - were disillusioned by the restricted role of women in the church.
 - felt that the church was unrealistic and out of step with society.
2. In the 2002 book *Why people don't go to church*, an analysis of the Australian Community Survey data, John Bellamy of NCLS Research and his co-authors found that there were several factors which discouraged people from attending church. They grouped the different factors into four broad categories:
 - a problem with the church or its people
 - a lack of motivation,
 - a lack of time, and
 - a lack of access (Bellamy *et. al.* 2002).
3. The Research Project on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia carried out for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (Macdonald *et. al.* 1999) identified various reasons, particularly those related to gender issues, why people felt dissatisfied with the Catholic Church. Reasons given included:
 - a perceived lack of support by the Church for single women.
 - the Church's perceived discrimination against and active exclusion of those who were divorced and remarried without an annulment.
 - disagreement with the Church's teachings about sexuality, contraception, divorce, remarriage and abortion.
4. In the United States, Hoge *et. al.* (2001) conducted a study of young adult Catholics aged between 20 and 40 years. Of those surveyed, a large majority had become inactive Catholics since making their Confirmation. The reasons they gave for becoming inactive included:
 - no longer believing in the Church's teachings.
 - being tired of religion and religious commitment.
 - feeling alienated from the Church.
 - having a problem with the Church's teachings on marriage, divorce and sexuality, including homosexuality.
 - being divorced.
 - marrying a non-Catholic.
 - the position of women in the Church.
 - regarding the Church's teachings as arbitrary, irrelevant and out of touch with the modern world.
 - Mass being mechanical and boring.



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5. In England, a study by Richter and Francis (1998) of people from numerous denominations found that, for the majority of adults interviewed, departure from their church was typically a gradual process involving a time of carefully weighing up questions regarding their lifestyle, religious identity and understanding of the world. Those who left the Church later in life gave as one of their main reasons for leaving the fact that the Church had failed to offer them support and care in a time of need, such as when a loved one died.
6. In *A Faith Interrupted*, Camille and Schorn (2004) examined the reasons why many American Catholics are separating from the Church. They found that many people had problems with the Church's position on divorce and sexual ethics. They also found that certain groups within the community, such as single adults, felt ignored and so did not feel they belonged to the Catholic community. Boredom with the Mass and the repetitiveness of going to church were among other explanations given by people for distancing themselves from the Church (Camille & Schorn, 2004: 25).
7. In the last decade or so, there has been a school of thought, arising out of the work of Grace Davie in England (Davie 1994), that religious belief persists in society even as church-going declines. The underlying theme of this view, known as 'believing without belonging' is that people who stop going to church do not lose their faith, although it may change in some respects. However, the view has been challenged by some researchers, among them Voas and Crockett (2005), who found little evidence to support the existence of this phenomenon in Britain. They found that, although there might be a time lag between declining attendance and the erosion of belief, people who do not attend church eventually end up with a set of beliefs that differs from that of church attenders. Voas and Crockett argue that such 'residual religiosity' has little personal or social significance, and may include vague, non-Christian and even non-religious beliefs.

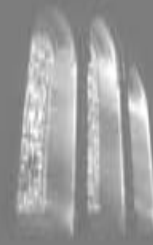
6. SUMMARY

Mass attendances in Australia have been falling for many years so that by 2001 only about 15 per cent of all Catholics were to be found at Mass on a typical weekend. The decline is not only due to the scarcity of young adult attenders, as the number of attenders in all age groups under 75 decreased between 1996 and 2001. The rate of attendance is particularly low among Catholics in their twenties and early thirties, and would be even lower if the many people in that age group who have ceased to identify themselves as Catholics were still counted as part of the Catholic population in the Census.

According to the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey, the most important reason that people who attend Mass less frequently than they used to give for their altered pattern of attendance is that they no longer believe that being a committed Catholic requires attending Mass every week. Both the CCLS and the 1998 Australian Community Survey indicate that once people stop being regular attenders, the strength of their attachment to Catholic beliefs and moral teachings declines.

Studies published in Australia, England and the United States generally support the reasons for diminished attendance that emerge from the CCLS and the ACS. They found that common causes of dissatisfaction and alienation were the Church's teachings regarding marriage and sexuality and the restricted role afforded to women in the Church. Some people, especially those who were single, homosexual, divorced or in a de facto relationship, did not feel a strong sense of belonging to the Catholic community, while others found Mass boring and so were disinclined to attend.

The purpose of the present project is not to repeat any of these quantitative studies with a view to confirming their findings. Rather, it is to examine in some detail the reasons given by people who were formerly regular Mass attenders as to why they stopped attending and to locate those reasons within the context of their overall life situation and history. The qualitative methodology adopted here, which will be described in the next chapter, allowed the research team to do just that.



CHAPTER 3: THE RESEARCH METHOD

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

As stated in Chapter 1, the core objective of this research project is to discover the major reasons why some Catholics, aged from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders, have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years for reasons other than age or ill-health.

The research also aims to:

- See how the reasons people gave for discontinuing Mass attendance were related to the context of their life experience.
- Consider what steps the Church can take to encourage these people to return to regular Mass attendance.
- Consider what steps the Church can take to lower the number of people who discontinue regular Mass attendance in the future.

The research team conducted forty-one interviews with mature-age Catholics who had stopped attending Mass in recent years. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval for the project was given by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University.

A qualitative research project

At the very beginning of the project, the research team made the decision to adopt a qualitative research methodology to address the research question. This was largely because, as can be seen from Chapter 2, a considerable body of quantitative data related to declining Mass attendance already exists. Rather than add to the existing data by means of another quantitative study, the research team deemed it appropriate to explore in some detail people's reasons for ceasing to

attend Mass, and to study the relationship between the reasons given and other aspects of the participants' lives. Taylor and Bogdan (1998: 7) have noted that qualitative research involves 'understanding people from their own frames of reference and experiencing reality as they experience it', while Melbourne psychotherapist Peter O'Connor has observed that 'Personal stories are a valid source of understanding. We need to hear stories and images, rather than just statistics' (O'Connor 2000: xiii).

A secondary consideration affecting the decision to adopt a qualitative methodology was the question of cost. Obtaining a sufficiently large random sample of Catholics who matched the criteria of interest, either by post or by phone, would have been an extremely costly enterprise. In order to ensure statistical representativeness, the sample size would have needed to be about 1100, but the number of households mailed to or phoned would have needed to be several times this number in order to be sure of finding the required number of Catholics who fitted the criteria and who were willing to take part. It would be unusual (and inefficient) to use such a large scale approach to investigate a single, sharply-defined issue as the one under investigation here. Normally, an issue like this would be examined using a quantitative survey that also investigated a range of other questions at the same time. This is the way the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) works. Unfortunately, the methodology used for that survey, involving the distribution of questionnaires to hundreds of thousands of church attenders, is by its very nature not available for this study.

In summary, the principal reasons why the research team chose to use a qualitative methodology were because it supplemented and extended the existing data while at the same time allowing us to listen in depth to the varied and complex stories of participants and obtain very rich, detailed data of a kind that could not have been obtained by asking a random sample of people to complete a survey made up of closed questions with pre-set responses.



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Examples of other qualitative studies on related topics

1. Using a method remarkably similar to that adopted for this study, American sociologist Dean Hoge used a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches in his 1981 study *Converts, Dropouts, Returnees: a study of religious change among young adults* (Hoge 1981). Hoge selected seven dioceses geographically representative of the United States, and asked diocesan personnel in each diocese to help select four or five parishes for the study. In each selected parish, parish census lists were used to identify a number of converts, dropouts and returnees who were then interviewed over the phone.
2. *Young Catholics at the new Millennium* is an entirely qualitative 2001 study based on interviews with young Catholics in Ireland, Italy, Malta, Poland, Great Britain and the United States. At least 45 interviews were conducted in each country, with Poland conducting the greatest number (82). The study makes no claim to represent the views of all young Catholics. 'Our tale is not a tale of statistics ... [It] lacks the numerical accuracy such a study could have provided. It is instead an in-depth account of how young adults come to realise their personal identity in matters of religion and morality, how they develop their personal relationships and what they value in life' (Fulton *et. al.* 2000: 1).

Writing in *The Tablet* of 6 January 2001 (p.16), Michael Hornsby-Smith, the pre-eminent researcher into Catholic Church life in England, observed that the study collected 'a great mass of very rich material' and it ought to be 'required reading for bishops and all concerned about evangelisation.'

3. Many of Hornsby-Smith's own studies of the Catholic community in England are primarily qualitative studies. For example, the chapter on the everyday lives of ordinary Catholics in *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England* (1991) is based on interviews with just 12 people. Yet he is able to use that material, which covered 'a wide range of both personal and professional experiences' to review the areas of lay vocation, support from local parishes, and everyday lay spiritualities.

LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEWS

The principal tool adopted by the research team was the life history interview focussing on Church involvement and religious faith. The use of such biographical research methods is widespread in the social sciences (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 2000). The life history approach seeks to understand each participant's own history in terms of the larger social, historical and institutional context (Plummer 1983), and is especially suited to studies where contradictions and ambiguity of response are evident (Faraday & Plummer, 1979; Plummer, 2001).

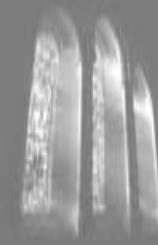
The primary aim of the interviews was to discover what factors participants perceived as having led to their disconnection from Church life, whether they still see themselves as belonging in some ways to the Church, and whether they could foresee any changes which would encourage them to renew Church involvement. A second aim was to get a sense of the important themes and events in each participant's life that influenced the development of their attitudes, beliefs and practices.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Each interview was guided by a schedule of questions or areas for exploration but was flexible and responded to the flow of the person's story as it was being expressed. The interview schedule used in the project is reproduced in Appendix 9.

The main areas included in the schedule were as follows:

- History of participation in Church life while growing up and as an adult.
- Feelings of belonging to, and satisfaction with, parish life.
- Factors which led a participant to stop being a regular Mass attender.
- For married participants, the role their spouse played in the decision to stop attending Mass regularly.
- Whether they kept up any other types of involvement in the Church after ceasing to be a regular Mass attender.
- Their current feelings towards the parish and attitudes to the Church.
- Their current religious beliefs and spiritual life.
- The extent of their agreement or disagreement with the teachings of the Church.
- Factors which might lead them to consider becoming a regular Mass attender again.



The duration of each interview was typically 45 minutes to one hour. The time required depended on the complexity of the participant's story; where a participant had one very specific reason for ceasing to attend Mass, the interview was generally much shorter than in cases where participants had a range of diverse and interconnected reasons. In two instances, participants requested a group interview. The first included a husband and wife. The second included a husband and wife and their friend.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Extracts from interview transcripts have been used to illustrate the results section of this report. All names used are pseudonyms and not the actual names of participants. Towns and parishes have been changed to Town X, Parish Y. Only dioceses are named. Where participants referred to Catholic clergy by name this has been altered to, for example, Bishop X. Archbishops are referred to as bishops as a further means of protecting confidentiality.

SELECTING PARTICIPANTS FOR A QUALITATIVE STUDY

In qualitative research, it is normal to select a *purposive* sample rather than a *random* sample. Purposeful sampling involves selecting a relatively small number of cases based on specific research criteria. In contrast to random sampling, where the aim is to select a sample that is statistically representative of the entire population being studied, so that one can be confident that any results for the sample can be applied to the whole population, purposive sampling aims to select cases which are information-rich for in-depth study of the research issue (Patton 1990).

In this study, the process of selecting participants was intended to seek out a diverse range of Catholics of mature age who had once been regular Mass attenders during their adult years, but were no longer attending. This procedure allowed the researchers to listen at depth to the varied and complex stories of participants and obtain very rich, detailed data of a kind that cannot be obtained by asking randomly-selected people to tick boxes in a survey.

As there was no attempt to construct a statistical sample that was representative of all mature age Catholics who have stopped going to Mass, it is not possible to use the results of this study to make statements along the lines of '42 per cent of all mature-age Catholics who have stopped going to Mass gave as their reason that ...'. Instead, the results allow the reader to reflect on matters such as the complexity of participants' struggles with faith and with the Church, the impact of their work and family on Mass attendance, the manner in which attitudes and behaviour are linked, and how a person's involvement in Church life changes over time.

Qualitative research does not require a large number of participants because the focus is on depth and complexity, not statistical representativeness. In fact, there are no general rules about sample size in qualitative research. There is little point in continuing with additional interviews once new themes stop emerging and the researchers find they are not hearing anything new. This is referred to as the 'saturation point' and is generally considered to occur after 25 to 30 interviews.

The fact that the study is not a quantitative one is not to say that numbers have no part to play in it. Numbers are used in qualitative studies, for example, to describe the participant group and to provide a sense of the relative frequency with which views are expressed (Sandelowski 2001, Miles and Huberman 1994). In this project, numbers will be used in this manner.

FINDING THE PARTICIPANTS

Six dioceses were initially approached to take part in the survey; Bunbury, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth, Rockhampton and Sydney. These dioceses were chosen in order to seek out the experiences of people in large cities, provincial towns and rural and remote communities who have stopped attending Mass, as well as being inclusive of the northern, eastern, southern and western regions of Australia. It was intended that eight to ten interviews be conducted in each of the six dioceses, resulting in a total of 48 – 60 interviews. Despite excellent assistance from diocesan personnel in Sydney and Perth, in those dioceses the final number of interviews was fewer than intended. The Diocese of Parramatta was also approached at a later stage of the project in an effort to increase the number of participants in the Sydney region.



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The process from this point was as follows:

- With the assistance of diocesan authorities, six to eight parishes of diverse geographic, socioeconomic and cultural characteristics were identified. Only parishes known to have functioning parish councils were selected.
- Letters explaining the background and purpose of the project were sent to the parish priests and parish council chairpersons of these parishes.
- Parish councils were asked to assist the project by:
 - a) thinking of three or four people who had stopped attending Mass,
 - b) asking them if they would like to participate in a confidential interview, and
 - c) obtaining their written consent for the research team to contact them directly.
- Potential participants were sent more information about the project and asked to return a final consent form if they still wished to take part.
- Interviews were arranged with participants in each of the dioceses. Almost all were conducted in person, but a few were conducted by phone.

A total of 55 parishes were approached to assist with the study. Twenty-three of these (42%) identified potential participants.

Table 5: Participants by diocese

Diocese	Number of participants
Bunbury	8
Hobart	7
Melbourne	11
Parramatta	1
Perth	2
Rockhampton	10
Sydney	2
Total	41

DIFFICULTIES WITH RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Parish level

The need for sensitivity and adherence to ethical standards was critical in the design of the process for contacting potential participants. While parish priests might be the best person to identify who had stopped attending Mass, it was felt that former attenders might feel pressured or intimidated if approached by the priest, and that this would undermine the credibility and confidentiality of the study. Parish council members were therefore considered to be a more acceptable choice. However, this meant that only parishes with active parish councils could be involved. Many parish councils struggled with the task. Despite the fact that the project had been given ethics clearance, some councils felt that the role they were asked to take on involved violating the privacy of non-attenders. Others struggled to find participants, a few saying they could not think of anyone in their parish who had stopped attending Mass. Lack of support from the parish priest was a clear factor in some other cases. Because parish councils meet infrequently, it generally took several months for the research team to receive a list of potential participants. Although parishes were followed up by phone at regular intervals throughout the process, the result of all these factors was that this stage of the research took much longer than anticipated.

The difficulty in recruiting participants varied from diocese to diocese. In the Archdiocese of Perth, six parishes were approached, of which only two provided potential participants. In the Archdiocese of Sydney, six parishes were contacted in May 2005 and a further nine contacted in September. Of the 15, only three parishes identified potential participants. It was because of this poor response rate that the Diocese of Parramatta was asked to participate in the study in November 2005, as an alternate method of finding potential participants in the Greater Sydney region.



In this discussion of the low participation rate by parishes, the research team acknowledges that many parishes have few resources to devote to a project like this and that many parish priests are overloaded. While it was the parish councils that were asked to actually identify and contact the participants, in reality priests were still involved in the background ensuring the project made it on to meeting agendas and following up progress with members of the council.

It should also be noted that some parishes went out of their way to assist with the project, whether they were successful in identifying participants or not. Many offered the research team kind hospitality and a venue to conduct interviews when participants asked to be interviewed at their local parish. Likewise, many Catholic schools and several Catholic Education Offices played host to the project by offering the use of their facilities for interviews.

Participant level

Ethics requirements concerning protection of privacy dictated that the consent of potential participants be obtained by parish councils prior to the researchers contacting them. Parishes identified a total of 67 potential participants, but only 44 (66%) of these returned their final consent form after being sent all the project details by the research team. That is, there was a drop-out rate of 34 per cent between obtaining the preliminary consent form and the final consent form.

Once the final consent form had been obtained, the drop-out rate was very low (N= 3). The withdrawals were all by men, two because their wives were participating and they felt that their story was too similar to add to the project. The other proved uncontactable over a long period of time.

These difficulties associated with finding participants resulted in fewer cases than planned. However, the final number, 41, is more than acceptable for a qualitative study and subsequent analysis of the transcripts showed that the saturation point had been reached.

The process of recruiting participants means that they were less likely to include people who had lost interest in the Church, were nervous about expressing their views, had less salient stories to tell or who had previously been fringe attenders unknown to any members of the parish council. They were more likely to include people who were more organised, motivated or outspoken and who had striking stories and experiences that they wished to recount. As they were known to at least one member of the parish council, it was also likely that they had been reasonably active parishioners.

ANALYSING THE INTERVIEWS

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and content analysis was used to analyse them and draw out key themes (Weber 1990; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Transcript by transcript, the list of key themes was confirmed and added to, until the researchers were satisfied that all the main themes had been identified. Each of these key themes had several elements or sub-themes. For example, the broad theme 'lack of intellectual satisfaction' appeared in numerous transcripts in a variety of guises, such as dissatisfaction with the quality of homilies, a perception that Catholics are not encouraged to think for themselves, or a perception that some priests did not take into account the improved theological education of lay people. These sub-themes were then tabulated with their main themes, so that ultimately a detailed spreadsheet was devised which showed all the themes and sub-themes, and how often each recurred across all the interviews. At this point, each transcript was analysed again by a different member of the research team to ensure accuracy. The spreadsheet was then ready to use in the writing of the report.



CHAPTER 4: THE PARTICIPANTS

A total of 41 people participated in an interview. Of these, 28 (68%) were women and 13 (32%) were men. Over two-thirds of the participants were aged 40 to 59 and almost half were aged between 50 and 59. The oldest person was aged 74 and the youngest 29.

Table 6: Age profile of participants

Age group	Number	Per cent (%)
25-29	1	2
30-39	2	5
40-49	12	29
50-59	18	44
60-69	7	17
70-79	1	2
Total	41	100

Forty-four per cent of those interviewed had attended university, with 20 per cent having completed postgraduate studies. Between one-fifth and one-quarter held a diploma or certificate while the remaining third had not completed any tertiary level education. The occupations of participants varied considerably and have been grouped according to the categories shown in Table 8.

Table 7: Educational level of participants

Highest Qualification	Number	Per cent (%)
Postgraduate degree	8	20
Degree	10	24
Diploma / trade certificate	9	22
No post-school qualification	14	34
Total	41	100

Table 8: Occupation of participants

Occupation	Number	Per cent (%)
People-orientated profession, e.g., teacher, nurse	11	27
Administration / business, e.g., accountant, real estate agent	8	20
Retired	6	15
Primary industry / trade, e.g., agriculture, construction, electricity worker	6	15
Service industry, e.g., tourism, hospitality	4	10
Public servant	2	5
Home duties	1	2
Student (full time)	1	2
Unemployed	1	2
Unspecified	1	2
Total	41	100

All except one of the participants were born in Australia. Eight were second generation Australians, five of whom had two Italian-born parents.

Three of the participants were converts to Catholicism. Five had spouses who had become Catholics as adults and 12 had non-Catholic spouses.

A majority of the participants had at least some Catholic school education – primary, secondary or both (N = 31). The children of 27 participants had also attended a Catholic school for at least some of their education.



Only eight of the participants said they had been 'Sunday only' Catholics or had only taken on minor or occasional roles in the parish. On the other hand, 22 had been quite involved or heavily involved in parish life, generally participating in and helping to run a number of programs. Many had been involved in, for example, liturgy preparation, children's liturgy, Lenten programs, Renewal of Faith programs or prayer groups, or as special ministers. Quite a few had served terms on the parish council. Others had been involved in other Catholic organisations such as Marriage Encounter, or through employment in their parish, or had been teachers in Catholic schools.

As a group, the participants are younger, better educated and far more likely to have been born in Australia than Mass attenders as a whole (Dixon 2005). They are also much more likely to be married to a non-Catholic, but the ratio of women to men was about the same as among Mass attenders generally.

The fact that the participants were younger on average and less ethnically diverse than Mass attenders in general is not a problem with this research, since data from the National Attendance Count and the National Church Life Survey suggest that the problem of decreasing frequency of Mass attendance is not very applicable to older attenders (those aged over 75; see page 3 of this report) or attenders born overseas. Rather, older people and people born overseas are over-represented among Mass attenders (Dixon 2005: 104). The fact that the participants are better educated than Mass attenders in general is likely to be related to their willingness to talk about their experience of the Church and matters of faith.



CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

REASONS WHY PEOPLE STOP GOING TO MASS

Most participants in this research project were unable to nominate one definitive reason why they had stopped going to Mass. Usually they mentioned a combination of factors, of which two or three stood out as the main reasons for the change in their practice of Mass attendance.

In this chapter, those main reasons will be classified under two headings, Church-centred and participant-centred, although it was often difficult to separate them in practice, as personal experiences, attitudes and beliefs were almost always intertwined with the participant's response to the institutional elements of their reasons. Under each heading, the reasons are arranged in approximate order of the number of times they were identified as a main reason.

For each of the ten main reasons identified in the report, two figures are supplied. The 'Main reason' figure identifies the number of participants who cited this as one of the main reasons why they stopped going to Mass. The second figure identifies the total number of people for whom the item was an issue of concern and includes those for whom it was a main reason. The inclusion of this second figure is important since the decision to stop attending Mass is often based on an accumulation of concerns, incidents and feelings.

Participants often expressed disagreement with the Church's teaching or disappointment with some aspects of its performance, but these disagreements and disappointments were not necessarily a cause of their cessation of Mass attendance. For example, nine participants made comments along the lines of the Church lacking compassion for and acceptance of homosexual people, but in only two cases was the Church's attitude a major reason why the participants decided to stop attending Mass.

In a few cases, the decision to stop going to Mass was made deliberately and took effect suddenly. More commonly, regularity of attendance declined over time, and there might never have been a moment when a decision was made to stop going to Mass. Instead, people found that they had 'got out of the habit of going' and, having stopped, could not think of good enough reasons to start going again, although they might well continue to attend occasionally, such as at Christmas and Easter, or for special occasions, or when they were with their mother. Sometimes the real cause of alienation or discontent lay in the distant past, and the final decision to stop attending was precipitated by a relatively minor issue.

Towards the end of the chapter, the focus turns to the importance participants placed on having an ongoing spiritual dimension to their lives, and how they have nurtured this. The brief final section of the chapter is a review of participants' attitudes to the research project itself.

In this chapter, the research team has aimed to let the participants speak for themselves as fully as possible. Each reason is therefore amply illustrated with the aid of their own words taken from the interview transcripts. We have organised and classified what was said, but there is little in the way of discussion or evaluation. This does not mean that the authors of this report endorse all the changes the participants would like to see in the Church. While many of the changes they called for are certainly possible and often desirable, other things are essential elements of the Catholic faith and cannot be changed. However, the participants were invited to speak freely in the interviews, and it is important that what they said is heard by a larger audience than the members of the research team.

In addition to the illustrative quotes, the chapter also includes a number of brief accounts of participants' stories. These accounts help the reader to see how the interlinkage of many factors over the course of the person's life journey affects their relationship with the Church.



Barbara

More integrity to just kind of slip away.

Barbara is a healthcare professional in her 50s who lives in a provincial Queensland city. She grew up in a large Catholic family that struggled financially so they could send their children to a Catholic school. Despite Barbara being well-regarded by the nuns and offered a scholarship, her parents would not permit her to continue after Year 10. She was told that the 'boys need their education' and her parents considered the scholarship to be charity.

Barbara began working as a clerk at a time when women were not given much opportunity to make career advances. She continued living at home where she was relied upon by her mother, as new children were still arriving. She was also being mentored by a nun and planned to enter the convent. However, after prayerful consideration and a number of significant events, she realised this was not her path.

By the time she was 22, Barbara was married. Her husband was a practising Anglican whose conversion to Catholicism included being re-baptised. Their parish priest took them 'under his wing' and influenced how they saw the Church. He encouraged them to read widely and challenged them to think about what it is to be Catholic. Both he and his successor were 'affirming' and 'inclusive', and they encouraged people to use their gifts in both the parish and the wider community. Barbara 'really learned a lot, just by experiencing their kind of leadership'. She and her husband were involved in a range of justice and peace groups, welfare and community initiatives and ecumenical activities. After Vatican II, Barbara recalls convincing a friend to return to the Church saying 'there's room here for you. Things aren't like you remember.'

When their next priest arrived, he met with the parish team including Barbara. The new priest was dismissive, cancelling most of the programs that had been set up, including Project Compassion which he viewed as a 'communist conspiracy'. The parishioners sought counsel from a nun who was

a social worker. Barbara found this helped to 'clear' her thinking. Together they decided to hold a big welcome party for the priest so he didn't feel so 'threatened'. However, the collaborative style of parish leadership they knew had gone and Barbara realised that her past vision of the Catholic Church was 'not really how it was'.

Barbara was still committed to the Church - she paid her own way to attend a women's conference and studied pastoral education for a year. However, in her view, the parish had lost its vibrancy. The liturgy's non-inclusive language made her uncomfortable, the homilies lacked any relevance or challenge and became 'increasingly difficult to bear.' After some years she asked herself as a rational person, why are you doing this? Who is this good for? Are you a masochist?'

Slowly we just missed one Sunday and I don't think I ever came to it [a decision] with any great sense of hellfire and brimstone. It just seemed to have more integrity to just kind of slip away.

Leaving their parish with a great sense of sadness, Barbara says 'we tried to replace it in our own way.' They read widely and listened to theologians and commentators. Barbara continues meeting with local Catholic women, they socialise with Catholic clergy and religious, and they subscribe to a range of Catholic publications. Barbara is often asked to arrange funerals. They attend Mass when they are on holiday or, out of respect, when visiting Barbara's mother.

Barbara takes issue with the Church's lack of 'democracy' and describes it as 'masculine' and 'legalistic'. She believes Catholics are expected to accept in Church things they would not accept in any other part of their life. She says

the gifts of women weren't called, I mean this goes back to the time when women still were only thinking their job was cleaning the brass and, you know. And I did my share of all of that...



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Barbara recalls a women's gathering, at which an invited bishop told them that women had been treated well and that they ought to listen more and be patient.

She believes that the hierarchy tries to control too much and 'don't have a lot of faith in the Holy Spirit'. While Barbara considers celibacy a gift, in her view, it should not be a requirement of the priesthood. She does not 'trust the teachings of the Church on science', disagrees with the teaching on contraception, homosexuality, sexual relationships and abortion. Barbara believes that the Church has been inconsistent and has taught against abortion while not supporting women who became pregnant and instead sending them away and putting their children up for adoption. She objects to the way in which the rules have denied rural and remote places the Eucharist, and disagrees with bringing in overseas priests, believing that priests have to 'come from the people'.

I just see that the Church is probably going so much more conservative and... I think for middle-class white people like ourselves, that we are not the growth area of the Church and the Church will be very different in the future.

Barbara says she can still say the Creed but believes it can be interpreted quite liberally. In her life, she looks to 'the women who followed Jesus and find my own way'. While she still considers herself Catholic, a big 'proviso' follows this identification. When asked if she would ever try a church of another Christian tradition, she says she 'would not swap one dysfunctional religion for another'. While she is pleased that the Church spoke out against the industrial reforms, she adds that the Church also says a lot of things that people generally don't accept and as a result

they've lost their clout because of the stupid things they come out and say like they've lost such relevance that it always makes me sad when they do speak on things that I think are important... They've lost a lot of that authority.

CHURCH-CENTRED REASONS

1. The irrelevance of the Church to life today

[Main reason for 21 participants, raised as an issue by a total of 40].

The irrelevance of the Church to life today was given as the main reason why they stopped going to Mass by 21 participants in this research project, and it was an issue for virtually all participants, with only one of the 41 not raising it.

The participants expressed the view that the Church was out of touch with Australian society. In their eyes, the Church had lost its ability to connect with the day-to-day lives of ordinary people and as a result they no longer regarded it as having the authority to guide them in living an authentic life.

Sue, a semi-retired music teacher:

I guess we don't take what the priest and the Church says as absolute anymore. We question everything, but it's the same as all professional people. You don't even take what the doctor says as the truth anymore. You just... keep on questioning and answer that for yourself. So I guess that's where we are really. The Church's relevance in our lives has diminished, I guess, because of our own educational process.

Sarah, a teacher in her 50s:

I started to think 'No, I can't cope with this any more. I can't believe all of these things that I am saying.' I want to go along to a church service that is loving and spiritual and in tune and relevant and words that mean something. Not a priest that stands up there and preaches at you that reads his service off the Internet that says 'You do this, this and this or else'.

Beverley, a student and music teacher in her 50s:

The Church really lacks relevance, you know, in 2006, really. They've really lost touch with the reality of life.



This perception of a lack of relevance and being out of touch with the real world was particularly strong in relation to moral teachings (raised by 23 participants), leadership (36 participants) and institutional policies and practices such as mandatory clerical celibacy and the refusal to allow people who have remarried without an annulment of their first marriage to receive communion (34 participants).

The moral teachings which most commonly affected participants' attendance were pre-marital cohabitation and contraception.

Barbara, the healthcare professional from Queensland whose story we heard above:

People shouldn't have to, at those young ages, live outside the Church because they are seen as living in sin. I just think that's a great shame.

Vicki, an immigration officer in her 40s, was asked to name issues where she considers the Church to be out of touch:

Well, contraception is one. No sex before marriage is another one.

Sue on contraception:

I think the Church's teaching is wrong. I mean, I used to agree with it wholeheartedly but I don't any more because, like, you can't just keep having babies. No matter how enjoyable it is.

Although many participants were also critical of the Church's stance on other moral issues such as stem cell research and the use of condoms in the context of the African AIDs crisis, these issues were not crucial components of their decision to stop going to Mass.

Karen, a teacher in her 40s:

I don't necessarily really agree with what the Church stipulates like stem cell research and that sort of thing. I think that a lot of those big decisions, people up above make and say 'This is how it's going to be'. They don't really know people's individual situations and I think in those sorts of things it's gotta be about choice.

Stephanie, a former teacher in her 40s who is now studying theology:

And I look at Africa. I've got a lot of friends that are actually working in charities and they do travel to Third World countries. I think Africa, and the Church not allowing condoms, for me is probably their greatest shame in the modern era ... That I find very, very difficult. It's the only thing that makes me really, really angry, just letting them die and holding onto that Church law. It's dreadful.

Another cause of participants' loss of confidence in the Church was the perception that its leadership is poor — neither intelligent nor vibrant nor relevant. The Church's leaders were not considered to understand the experience or needs of modern-day Australians. Instead, they were seen to have closed minds and to be insistent on preserving the status quo.

Paul, a Victorian in his 50s who works in the tertiary education sector:

I think the Church does things that are not clever. They're not intelligent. They're not relevant. And I think it [the Church] actually antagonises and causes problems as [much as it] helps solve problems.

Christine, a primary teacher in her 50s:

But I still do think there are some things that the Church really does need to rethink... The people in charge are all (and I'm talking about the Vatican) old men who have a very narrow view of things.

Although priests were often seen as part of the problem of leadership in the Church, they were also often excused on the basis of their increasing age and the heavy workloads they continue to bear as numbers decrease.

Nicole, a nurse in her 50s:

And I just think some of the priests, they are exhausted, they're old, they should be retired. They can't. It's dreadful.



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The concern for the difficulties faced by priests led many participants to comment on the Church's practice of requiring priests to be celibate. A common position was that celibacy denied priests the happiness and the practical and emotional support that married couples enjoy, and that this impacted upon both their personal wellbeing and on their ministry. Another common view was that celibacy has contributed to the clergy being out of touch with the experiences of ordinary people.

Rebecca, an administration manager in her 40s:

I think it would help the Catholic Church if priests were married. It makes them a little bit more human and I think maybe they would understand marriage more, wouldn't they?

Stephanie grew up as a Presbyterian and became a Catholic when she was married:

I would love priests to be able to marry. I think that would be great, because growing up in the Protestant Churches you always got the reverend and his wife and family so, in a sense, the Church got often 2 or 5 workers in the family rather than one. And one of our lecturers was an Eastern Rite ordained priest who was married, and it seems to me that it works very well because we're going to run out of priests so, if they can marry and we can have women, that will certainly help towards that solution.

David, a local government worker in his 50s who knows and admires a married parish priest:

Maybe they [the Church] need to look at changing a few of their ideas and if they want to keep them in and they're gonna try and get priests again. I know it's dead set against marriage, but that's what they gotta do. And relax a few laws, not so much relax but possibly catch up. You know, what they were doing and how they set themselves up 1000 years ago is possibly not what they need to be looking at in the 21st Century... It's a slow moving organisation and the wheels don't move too fast, so it might be another 50 years before they actually... in 50 years will it be too late?

The practice of refusing communion to people who have remarried without first obtaining an annulment of their previous marriage was regarded by many participants as vindictive and insensitive as well as being another example of a Church that has failed to understand changes in society and the ways in which the institution of marriage in Australia has evolved.

Elaine, a divorced woman in her 60s:

I'm not bitter about the Church. To me it's like my parents, it's where I grew up and where I developed and where I feel that I came into a more personal relationship with God ... but I don't like the way they look at annulments, but anyway, that's just me. Like looking back and having people saying what people's attitudes were 40 years ago seems a bit senseless. If you look at it now and what the situation is now, to me that makes more sense.

The lack of relevance of the Church was not only a factor mentioned explicitly by the participants, it was a thread that ran through most of the other factors they identified. Disagreements with a particular Church teaching often had the component that the teaching no longer rings true in today's world; similarly that a practice had served its purpose or that a behaviour seemed inappropriate now whereas it would not have in the past. What people were saying, in a range of ways, was that they could no longer sufficiently locate themselves within the Church's worldview to be regular participants in the Church's core communal action.

Andrew

A twilight zone where I'm not quite in and I'm not quite out.

Andrew is a 48-year-old engineer who lives in suburban Sydney. While his education was mostly in government schools he notes that weekly Mass attendance was 'one of the house rules' while he lived at home. Andrew studied engineering at university, which he describes as rather 'male-dominated' so he joined the Catholic Youth Organisation as a way of meeting girls in a non-pressured environment. One of these girls, now his wife of 19 years, comes from a Polish Catholic background.



Once married, Andrew and his wife moved to a new parish which he describes as 'warm and inviting' compared to the parish he grew up in where people didn't really speak to each other and 'you could remain quite anonymous.' On the weekends they would renovate their house and take a break on Sunday night by going to Mass and then out for dinner. Andrew's wife helped with the parish playgroup while their two children were small and later they ran Baptismal groups and sacramental preparation programs in their home.

More recently, the parish priest, whom Andrew describes as a good friend, moved on. While he says the new, overseas-born priest is 'very warm and inviting', his communication skills are not as good, his style is very different ('he prefers to do things his way') and his homilies are not 'particularly relevant or something that really speaks to me.' The previous priest by comparison had a knack for speaking about current social issues and political events, and

getting you to think about well, 'what challenge does that pose to you as Catholics?'... It was valuable to be reminded of the extra responsibilities or the extra level of commitment that we should have as practising Catholics.

Around the same period, Andrew said the family underwent a period of 'fairly intense preparation' for their younger daughter's Confirmation. This entailed Mass and four family meetings a week and concluded with a mass Confirmation at Sydney's Super Dome. While Andrew described the experience as 'good and quite enriching', he adds they were ready for a 'little break' afterwards.

It was full on for a while, 'Let's not go this week, and then next week and then a month goes by and 'Oh, maybe we should go back to Mass again'. And 'Oh not this weekend, we're doing something else' or 'It's boring' or 'We went this week at school'.

It was the combination of his children's protests about attending Mass and the arrival of the new priest that led to the family's stopping going to Mass. His children weren't old enough to be left at home on their own and he wanted to avoid a family conflict. At the same time, Andrew's motivation to attend had decreased. While the new priest was dedicated, he had a 'one-dimensional religious role', and Mass began to lack that social and community element.

Andrew expects that he and his wife will return to regular Mass attendance when the children are settled in high school. He describes this as a 'transition' period in which he and his wife need to re-establish their identity as a couple while their children develop their own identities and make choices about non-school Mass attendance. Despite not attending Mass, Andrew and his wife are still involved in the informal community of the parish and extended parish. They meet other Catholic families for Christmas get-togethers, camping trips and other occasions such as school events. Additionally, Andrew's wife helps run an Antioch / social group for young people in the parish while Andrew and some

blokes are involved in a thing called the Ministry of Mowing where a couple of us go down every few weeks and run the mower over the grass and tidy the garden up [laughs]. I refer to it as the Ministry of Mowing because everyone else has a ministry, we're just the lawnmower guys so we renamed it the Ministry of Mowing. Not particularly religious but then again it's a chance to see friends in the parish who have maybe gone through a similar experience.

Aside from these involvements, Andrew plans to volunteer for the St Vincent de Paul Society when he retires but at the moment, the pressure of a 'demanding' job that takes a lot of 'time and energy' and his daughters' extra-curricular commitments prevent him from doing so. In fact, Andrew notes that there is a 'yawning gap' between where the Church positions itself on traditional teachings and the reality of



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contemporary lifestyles – demanding jobs, dual income families, struggling to afford a house and raising children.

...it's not really getting on a materialistic treadmill even though it might seem that way or some sort of renouncing your religion because you choose to have two incomes [in the family] and like having an overseas holiday or wanting to save for your retirement. I don't think the two are incompatible but I think the Church doesn't cope as easily about how people get the balance right between spiritual participation and the materialistic aspirations.

In terms of Church teachings, Andrew supports the principle of primacy of conscience, particularly with respect to the issue of contraception. He finds it difficult to reconcile the Church's view concerning the role of women and equal opportunity, commenting that the Church has essentially excluded half of its skill-base, many of them highly capable women who can organise terrific events and deliver well-researched and relevant homilies. Andrew also disagrees with the requirement that priests be celibate and raised the issue of sexual abuse asking, 'how balanced is a life for young people where they have to renounce their sexuality?' In his view, it would be much better to allow priests to have a 'normal family'.

Andrew describes Jesus as 'a living presence' in his life. He sees the consolation that his father's faith brings him in times of difficulty and says that his own faith is something that has an enduring value. While he takes a 'relaxed' attitude to Mass attendance, he expects to return when the time is right. In the meantime, he says:

I certainly fall in that fringe group of this transition, either of moving away from the Church in a more permanent way or in that sort of twilight zone where I'm not quite in and I'm not quite out.

2. The misuse of power and authority in the Church

[Main reason for 15 participants, raised as an issue by a total of 28]

Among the most common causes for the cessation of Mass attendance given by participants were those that had to do with a perceived misuse of authority and power at all levels of the Church. Participants often used the word 'disillusionment' to describe how they felt about this. They complained of the silencing of prominent theologians and other Catholic thinkers, and of the refusal to allow the celebration of the Third Rite of Reconciliation. In their view, decision-making in the Church was characterised by a lack of consultation and accountability. They felt that the Church's focus was on rules, not compassion, and three people made comments along the lines of 'Jesus is not at the heart of today's Church'.

Kathleen, a senior manager with postgraduate qualifications who works in the education sector:

With the death of John XXIII there was a grabbing back of the power and there is no understanding, I believe, of the way things are today.

Helen, a pastoral care worker in her 60s:

My sense is that the whole Church is paralysed by what happens in Rome. Well, literally paralysed. It's clear that you can't even raise a voice of prophecy or dissent or anything without being reported to Rome, Rome listening, and somebody getting canned. That seems to be, from my perception, what happens. Maybe something is going on that I don't know about, so for me there is a sense of powerlessness, helplessness, a lack of belief or hope that anything might change soon. I've abandoned hope almost that anything will change in my life time.

What would I like to see change? I'd like to see a decentralisation of power, that for a start. I would like to see the bishops allowed to fulfil the role that I think they are ordained to do. Which is teaching. My understanding is that the primary role of the bishops is to teach. And to pastor his people.



When I said culture of arrogance I think that was an umbrella thing that pervades everything so that everything is seen through the prism of 'We have all the knowledge, we have all the wisdom, we have all the power' so whether it's professional accountability, whether it's sex, whether it's structures, whether it's the pastoral dimension of the priesthood, I mean I have got a lot of friends who are priests, as I'm sure you do, and you would know as well as I do the helplessness that they feel.

Robert, a tour operator in his 50s:

The million rules or something don't sort of suit me and this prescriptive stuff, the black and white doesn't suit me. The guidance how we should relate to other people and lead our lives, that comes from Christ's teachings and I'm perfectly comfortable with that.

Susan, a retiree in her 60s:

I think the people in power have lost the humanness and it's about power. Sorry, I just think they are power mongers and they're just grappling their way up the ladder somehow and they are not looking at their general flock and being loving and caring. That, to me, that does make me angry because I think it's hypocritical.

Sarah, a primary teacher in her 50s who became a Catholic when she married:

And to me, Jesus loved people. He loved sinners. He comforted and embraced everybody and to me Jesus is a part of God ... But Jesus who I love and who I talk to and pray to and believe in doesn't act like Bishop X and like a lot of those people who to me are just awful people because they are so judgmental and holier than thou and come out and damn people, and publicly. Where's the God there?

Jennifer, a retired medical receptionist in her 50s who had taught RE to children attending government schools:

No, Jesus, when he came to earth and he tore down the temple I believe that the Church is like what he wanted to destroy before. And I believe it's back to that stage. So I just don't have the belief that it's God's Church any more. My God, my Jesus God that I've known and loved, I think he'd be horrified with the Church.

Several specific issues have been included as sub-categories of this reason. They are:

ISSUE 1

Sexual abuse — the breach of trust involved in the crime itself and the perceived failure of the Church to respond appropriately once the offences had come to light. This issue was raised by 15 participants. In general, only participants who actually knew victims or perpetrators — there were five such people — stopped attending Mass solely because of the issue of sexual abuse.

Sylvia, a woman in her 70s whose extended family has been personally and profoundly impacted by sex abuse:

I feel the Catholic Church is the most evil cult of all because of the paedophiles. And their abuse of the children in their care. And the cover-up by the hierarchy. Being betrayed by the Church you have attended all your life is the pits. You know, it's just removed so much from our lives ... These men must not believe in God or they could not do what they do to children.

Ian, an engineer in his 40s:

I saw him (the priest) back in our community and I had a very strong sense of well, hold on, there was no accountability here. It was understood it happened but there was never any charges laid, there was never any feedback to the community about what was happening. And he's back. And that sent a very strong message to me that the protection of him was more important than the protection of, you know, those boys that were involved in the incident.

Sue:

The priest would get up and say how terrible birth control was and [then] you find the priests were paedophiles. And when that came out years later, I had a lot of anger about that. Here's these priests up there going on about us who are just being normal, inverted commas. Trying really hard, and we find that they're having it off with the altar boys. That is really, really hard.



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ISSUE 2

Abuse suffered personally (four participants) or by family members in Catholic schools and other institutions (five participants), often many years previously.

Sarah:

I saw that nun get that girl's pony tail and bang her against the black board. Now you would take them to court. But we just took it. We were told you will not put on make-up, you will not wear lipstick. We grew up in a way terrified. Because it was unnatural. But we didn't know any different. We just put up with them. It was like women getting abused by their husbands. It was abuse but we did not know any different.

Robert, who, with his brother, attended a Catholic boarding school:

He gave us a stroke of a cane, that bloody wide and as thick as my finger, for every spelling mistake we made. And so I've seen this guy drag kids by the scruff of their shirts through their desk and upturn their desk and literally throw the kid out of the classroom. I was one of the good kids, probably largely because I didn't want to be belted around but, yeah, they were pigs. They were pigs. I've never met people in my adult life like them, you know. And they belted the hell out of my young brother. [He'd say] 'I don't know why I'm a failure' I saw his life being cast as being a failure in terms of being able to achieve the things that he otherwise might have been able to achieve. And largely attributing it to the school here. And they were brutal to him and it was awful. And it all turned out the way I thought it was going to. He had a dreadful life.

ISSUE 3

The view, expressed by 24 participants, both male and female, that the Church does not treat the sexes equitably, but rather denies women full and equal participation and maintains an inequality that is unacceptable in broader society.

Stephanie:

Because we're always asked to do the clean-up jobs at the bottom of society but we can't be allowed to give the decisions at the top.

Andrew:

The Church is pushing at arm's length 50 per cent of the people who've got a major contribution to make. That's an issue that should be reconsidered at the appropriate time.

Lynette, a woman in her 30s who runs a small business:

It's ridiculous and I always put it back to, I just see my God saying, 'Oh look, I know I've created you equal but you know – he's just a little bit more equal because he's my chosen person to spread the word and to look after my people.' I just can't see that, and I see people that – like Mother Theresa jumps to mind straight away – how was she less a priest than any priest than you can point to, in fact I'd say she was more a priest than many of the priests that I've met or heard about.

Ian:

I think that by saying that a woman can't be a priest, and if the Church was able to accept women as priests, it would show a very strong sign of moving into a modern era and world and appreciating what the value a person has is not defined by their gender, it's defined by their – who they are, the way they live their life and their commitment to God. I've never understood why a woman has less right to be in that position in the Church than a man. It's to me, particularly when the Church is – as I understand – short of people taking up positions in the priesthood, would show a sign that the Church has sat down and done some very strong, serious thinking about how they approach their view on the community and their place in the community.



ISSUE 4

Unjust or unprofessional treatment from Catholic employers, an issue raised by five participants.

Jennifer, a retired medical receptionist:

My neighbour, she was a nurse at St X's and she got thrown against the wall by a patient and she went onto workers' comp. St X's gave her a very hard time. I used to go next door to visit her and she was in bed. And they were complaining about paying her her pay-out and I just thought God does not want his name being defamed like that. Like they shouldn't use St X in their name if they can't look after people. So there were just a lot of things. I just thought, 'No, I don't need to be involved under God's banner at the Catholic Church'.

ISSUE 5

Dismissal from paid employment in the Church because of remarriage without an annulment.

Michelle

The parish has just fallen away

Michelle is in her 40s and lives in a remote part of Australia. As a child, she attended a Catholic school. Every week the family walked to Mass, 'rain, hail or shine'. As a young adult, she was a member of the YCW.

Michelle married a non-Catholic whom she describes as 'very supportive' of her going to church, and it was then that she moved to this remote town. While there is no Catholic school in the town where they live, Michelle's now-adult children were baptised, received their First Communion and were confirmed. Her youngest child was also an altar server.

When her children were young, the local Catholic community held get-togethers at the church and the local priest used to come round for tea. However, as the town grew, the priest became busier and he was no longer able to interact with parishioners in this way.

Most of the local men are shift workers, which Michelle says 'takes its toll on everyone'. Nightshift meant that, for example, on Saturday evenings dinner had to be prepared and cleared up, and children cared for while her husband rushed to leave for work. Considerable organisation was required in order to make it to the 6pm Vigil Mass or the next morning, single-handedly, get four young children to Mass. Despite these difficulties, Michelle experienced Mass as a time of peace and relaxation.

I used to enjoy going to church. I mean that was sort of relaxing but it was probably because you knew you didn't have to get breakfast or tea or something. You are just sitting there.

However, three years ago, the last of the nuns left the parish and, as a result of the priest shortage, Mass was reduced to once a fortnight in Michelle's town. Although she attended a few of the lay-led assemblies, she said that having someone 'the same as me' preaching, even though they were a 'good Catholic' just didn't feel like church. Also, having a woman lead the assembly felt unfamiliar because 'you think of the priest as a man'. As a result of these changes, Michelle believes that:

the parish has just fallen away, you know because we ... don't have the permanent priest and then the nuns were here and now they have gone.

Sexual abuse had been an issue in the area and Michelle felt 'angry with the Church' because they had just 'let it go'. When news came that a priest, whose child was believed to be living with its mother in a Church house in another state, had been sent to their region, it only strengthened the perception that the Church had hidden things for years.

Michelle agrees with the Church's position on abortion. She is uncertain about its approach to homosexuality, especially if sexuality is genetically determined, and she has no opinion on the requirement that priests be celibate.



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Michelle says she and her children attend Mass when they visit her mother in the city. The guilt she feels about not attending mainly relates to her mother's expectations. As for her own expectations, Michelle says she feels 'terrible' if she doesn't attend at Christmas. Otherwise she doesn't believe that not attending makes her a bad person, especially given the amount of gossiping that occurs among those who do attend. Also, what with her husband still working shifts, and with her grandchildren, there is so much else to be done. All the same, Michelle still considers herself a Catholic and she still prays.

I don't think I am any worse a person for not going to church than I would be if I went to church. I would still be the same person, and I am still sure I will go to heaven.

3. Problems with the priest in the parish

[Main reason for 11 participants, raised as an issue by a total of 16.]

Sixteen participants talked about various types of problems they had experienced with a priest, usually a priest in their own parish. In eleven of these cases, the experience had been sufficiently aggravating to have become a major factor in their decision to stop going to Mass. For eight participants, their experience related to unacceptable or immoral behaviour on the part of the priest, such as where:

- The priest was convicted of sexually abusing children.
- The priest had problems with alcohol.
- The priest was known to be having a sexual relationship with a woman.

Maria, a beauty advisor in her 40s:

I know when I go [to Mass] I should feel really comfortable listening to him but I'm looking and listening and I feel like I can hear [the former parish priest, convicted of sexual abuse]. And I just feel sad because I do that, and I shouldn't be blaming [the current priest] or feeling that way towards him.

Pam, a real estate agent in her 40s, who had become a Catholic through the RCIA:

It was very special when that [the RCIA] happened. It was just, I don't know, like being born again or something. It was a very, very spiritual time for me. The father [priest] we had then, he was really good ... I didn't like [the new priest] at all, and that's when I pretty much started going off going to church because there was something about him that I couldn't relate to. I don't know what it was, but I just didn't feel comfortable being at church when he was there. And when I found out what had actually gone on [the priest was convicted of sexual abuse], it didn't surprise me in a way.

Kathleen:

Yes indeed, and you know, the actual favouritism of people, the drinking, the womanising, you know, and it's not unusual and you do lose faith through those things.

In numerous other instances, people had experienced a priest's behaviour as insensitive, ungracious, rude, arrogant or simply incompetent, or as being out of touch with contemporary Australian life and specifically with work and family life. They felt that the priest's pastoral response to particular situations had been poor.

Beverley:

Oh, in terms of his whole conduct and his sermon: Oh, shocker. Absolute shocker. In terms of bigotry, unenlightened. He was an unenlightened, bigoted man. And I just thought 'Gosh, nah, we've lost the plot.'



Vicki, whose first marriage ended in divorce:

I used to go to church every Sunday with the kids, I used to take them on my own, I used to teach children's liturgy and I was involved in the community and there were lots of people I knew and it was a really nice community. And then we had a change of parish priest, and I found him very negative and very critical, and he didn't even know that I had split from my husband, that I was on my own with my kids, and he used to make comments about people who were divorced and all this stuff, it used to really break me, yeah, I just thought 'This is somebody who's actually bothering to come to church' and he was there telling me, you know, 'You're not doing the right thing', so that really annoyed me and there were lots of things that he said that I just didn't agree with.

Teresa, a woman in her 50s whose husband is not a Catholic:

And then he [the parish priest] virtually said to my husband, 'If you don't do what I tell you to do, well, I could stop you from marrying Teresa.'

Mark, an accountant in his 40s who had often provided professional assistance to the parish:

The priest that we had in Town X was just very old fashioned and he has since passed away and probably should have been retired. He was very old fashioned and for ... one of the kids' First Communion, the sermon was on the killing and raping of a 12-year-old martyr. And we came away from Mass going 'Grrrr...'. [Between Masses], the primary school principal [said to the priest], 'Do you think that's the best topic for a sermon for First Communion?' And the second group – we were interested to hear what [he said to] the second group, and they came out and said he spoke about rape — so he did exactly the same thing. He was very involved with the kids but I felt, again, he's too old, and I know that's a product of people not going to Mass, and people not becoming priests and nuns but I thought that was, you know, he shouldn't have been there.

For some participants, problems arose when a new priest arrived in their parish and began to do things differently from what they had grown used to. The problems could be particularly acute if the new priest had come from overseas.

Sue :

He closed the doors of the presbytery. The presbytery up until then was the parish house, everybody dropped in and out... It was an open house. It was called a parish house, not the presbytery. And then Father X arrived and the security door was up and you could only get in if you knocked and it was a bit like that everywhere. He took the whole liturgy back to before Vatican II, really. And the priest we've got now tries really, really hard but anybody with any thinking has just left the Church up here. And there was a big exodus. People stayed around for a while and then they just skat out of here, yeah, it's not for us.

Helen:

But it was a real core group of dynamic people. We had 36 groups in that parish that were tremendously active. Not just sailing around the Catholic lake but we were doing ... spiritual, social justice, all kinds of things. Within 2 years everything had gone. Everything, the people had just walked away. And it was about the cultural Polish thing of 'I'm the priest'; a very clerical culture. 'I'm the priest, you'll do what I tell you and you peasants can kind of mill around out there.' So people said 'We don't need this', you know. But the interesting thing was that people walked away not from the parish but from the Church ... Some of them went to neighbouring parishes and then dropped off after a while because it wasn't their community. We'd really built that community, you know, so there was a sense of disenfranchisement.

Andrew:

And it's been difficult for [the new priest] to build those sort of depth of friendships and, you know, integrate, if you like, with the more traditional Aussie families in the parish. He's a very dedicated priest but I guess they sort of see him in a more one-dimensional religious role rather than as able to have a larger presence as much of a friend and person in the community.



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Josie

I was looking for a God that loved me.

Josie is a 55-year-old Tasmanian woman who came to Australia at the age of 9. She was brought up in a strict Italian household and was taken to Mass every Sunday by her parents.

At the age of 18, impressed by the strength of faith of people from other Christian denominations at a stage of her life when she thought that only Catholics could go to heaven, she began to question her Catholic faith. She felt that her attendance at Mass was just a family habit and that the only benefits for her were social ones. She felt a yearning to develop a more spiritual life, and began attending a Bible study group with the Presbyterian wife of her cousin, despite her parents' objections. Here she found spiritual nourishment of a kind she had never experienced in the Catholic Church. She went to a Catholic school but did not talk in the interview about what sort of influence her schooling had had on her spiritual life.

She married a local Catholic man, also of Italian background, who was very good but not at all religious, and she was baffled by the fact that someone could be a good person but not have a yearning for a religious aspect to life. She was still going to Mass at this stage, but also wanted to attend a Baptist Church. However, her husband would not allow her to do this.

Looking back, she feels that at this stage of her life she needed God because of her low self-esteem. 'I was looking for a God that loved me', she said, and she found this God in the Bible.

Later, she tried attending various Protestant churches, but eventually became disillusioned with all churches, including the Catholic Church, because they all seemed to think that they were the only ones who were going to be saved. At the age of 28, she had an experience which caused her to decide to stop going to Mass.

It just seemed to come as a, I guess you'd call it, inspiration, I don't know, but I was very low at that time, but it came to me as if, you know, it was God that had spoken and said 'If you love you have fulfilled the Lord, so if you love your husband, you love your children, you have done what is required of you'. And I thought 'That's a relief! I don't have to go crazy about trying to chase the right religion, I can just sit at home, and do what is right for my family', and I have done what is necessary and I became more content.

Some time later, she was visited by an Italian priest who had known the family when she was young. She told him about her spiritual search and, as a result, he put her in touch with the Focolare movement. The Focolare approach felt just right to her, since

these people don't think they're the only ones [who are] right, they seem to want to include the other religions and that's what I was looking for, not this sort of 'We're the only ones'. I was looking for that, you know. I thought we're all God's children and that's what they seemed to believe in, and love, that was the other thing, love was the answer, if you love then you have done God's will. So that was exactly where I was that and it thrilled me to think that there's other people, I'm not crazy, there's other people out there thinking it, and I was excited it was in the Catholic Church. I've done a whole circle and gone back to the Catholic Church!

This feeling of connection with a Catholic movement did not result in her resuming regular Mass attendance. Instead, as soon as her parents died,

I thought, 'That's it!'. I felt free. I don't have to go to church, you know, there was no more of that pressure to be something that I didn't want to be.



These days, Josie is an occasional Mass attender. She likes going to funerals. She misses the singing at Mass but feels she would be a hypocrite to go regularly since her heart wouldn't be in it. She does not believe that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ at Mass. She has a personal relationship with Jesus whom she sees as

what you'd call an older brother who ... was already God-like, came to show us the way, ... a spiritual being that's very much involved in our lives ...

The kingdom of God is within me, that's the greatest thing I've ever felt. The kingdom of God is within me, and as you grow the kingdom grows. That's where I'm at ... It's, you know, all the struggles we go through to find this kingdom, this great treasure, we go through pain, you know, and through darkness, and suddenly something makes sense, you know? ... God is within you. He's not out there, you don't have to go chasing, but in the silence you find yourself, you find God, you know, you find God, you find yourself, you find peace.

Josie prays 'privately on a continual sort of basis' and with the family before meals. She still reads the Bible, especially the Psalms, from time to time, but for the present meditating on nature fills her spiritual needs best. She has no ill-feelings towards the Church; rather, she has good memories of it and of the nuns who taught her at school, and she is a regular volunteer worker at a Catholic hospital. She had wanted her grand-daughter to be baptised and made the arrangements with the parish to make sure it happened.

4. Lack of intellectual stimulation

[Main reason for 8 participants, raised as an issue by 17 in total.]

A common cause of declining attendance among participants was that they did not find much intellectual satisfaction in going to Mass. Ten participants commented that the homilies in their parish were of poor quality, being ill-prepared, theologically unsound, badly delivered and irrelevant. As a result, several participants said they used to come away from Mass feeling angry, frustrated and wondering why they were still attending.

A few believed that their parish priest promoted an anti-intellectual environment where his word was law and critical thinking discouraged. This was seen as unacceptable in an age when the educational levels of parishioners and their expectations regarding homilies were much higher than in the past.

Ken, a sales administration manager in his 50s:

I'm looking for, I suppose a bit of philosophy [but] none of the guys out there know how to deliver a meaningful message.

Vicki:

I would quite like to go to Mass and be challenged about my philosophy on life and what I think.

Kathleen:

And it's not big stuff, I mean, you know, married priests and women in the Church, that's really big. But it wasn't big things that made me leave in the first place, it was that living day-to-day, not having the tolerance to put up with, listening to what I believe nine times out of ten was drivel. I'm sorry but that's the way it came across to me.



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Paul

There aren't enough reasons to go

Paul was one of six children in a poor Catholic family that walked, through the rain if necessary, to Mass every Sunday. In his late teens he briefly studied to become a religious brother and he speaks highly both of this experience and of the brothers he came to know: 'Absolutely top guys... I've modelled my own thinking and life on those people'. During his twenties, Paul was also quite involved in the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Now in his fifties with adult children, Paul is a tertiary educator. His wife is a Catholic school teacher who is highly involved in their local parish. Although Paul only attends Mass for significant family events, he says he hasn't lost his faith which he describes as something that 'keeps changing throughout your life'. He says the worst times in his life have been when he has neglected the spiritual dimension of life.

While the importance Paul places on spirituality might seem at odds with ceasing to attend Mass, he describes this re-allocation of priorities as a 'protest statement' against the organisation and leadership of today's Church. However, he praises the work of the local parish priest.

He is one of the few people that I've met who does all the things that I reckon a parish priest should do. In fact my protest statement of not going to Mass is not directed at him. He has my full support and total admiration in the work that he does, the care he gives to his parishioners, the energy that he has, the preparedness he has to be critical of local and senior management of the Church.

It was after the death of one of his children, followed by the deaths of his mother and grandfather, that Paul began to reflect on what Church meant to them and what it meant to him.

If you haven't got the time, you are going to drop things you are not strong about. I'm strong about faith and spirituality and making sense of your life trajectory, even in my workplace, which is an a-religious environment.

What stopped me from going to church? It may just have been that there aren't enough reasons to go and I'm tired of trying to make an effort in so many directions. Why make an effort for the Church anymore?

Leadership and spiritual direction represent key areas in which Paul believes the Church is failing. He believes that religious fanaticism of all kinds stems from poor education and that the Church, at least in the past, has contributed to this.

It prefers to tell people what to do rather than educate them and lead them in decision making themselves and it's the very thing that leads to ignorant fanaticism. So I think there is something about the tone of the Church that is so unhelpful. It's just not intelligent, it's not contemporary. And Catholics today, they need really intelligent, helpful, active vibrant leadership... I think the Church does things that are not clever. They're not intelligent. They're not relevant.

Paul believes that when the Church does make social and moral statements, its choice of issues and the way it articulates its position is poor, even though the underlying 'foundation of faith' might be accurate.

It doesn't get its message through. It gives confused reasons, inappropriate arguments and it gets sucked into things it shouldn't get sucked into. I think it boils down to the fact that the Church is just not smart enough. It really needs some intelligent people running the place.

Failure to provide pastoral care for family and the broader community was another area in which he believes 'the Church fell down really, really badly'. He describes how, when he was a child, his parish did nothing when his father required surgery and was out of work for six months but that the parish was always there 'anytime they wanted something from him as a plumber'.



Paul sent his children to Catholic schools and many of his immediate and extended family work as Catholic educators. He believes that in spite of their dedication, they have been treated very badly over the years.

There are others in the family who have been involved, as I was, in teaching in Catholic schools and putting an enormous effort into that and who have been really short-changed, treated badly. And without getting into details, that bad treatment has come from nepotism, the small-mindedness, the inbred fabric of the Church.

He believes that in Catholic education there is 'atrocious elitism' and 'illegal' employment practices' resulting in the retention of poor teachers who 'don't respect children'. This has put Paul off the Church which he sees as attracting a high proportion of 'drop kicks' which are in marked comparison to the fine brothers and nuns he has been privileged to know over the years. He notes his local priest's struggle against parishioners 'who want a comfortable life' and want to 'remain ignorant', and who go 'tattling' when they hear something disagreeable in the homily.

Paul is looking for kindred spirits, for community. He has tried men's spirituality groups but said things like Spirituality in the Pub hadn't worked for him because of the diverse backgrounds of attenders. He says he would be interested in doing

something in the evening where you go for a walk, sit down and have a drink and watch, say, a piece of intelligent cinema or talk about a book. That would be interesting, I'd do that.

When asked if he could ever see himself returning to regular Mass attendance he said:

Yeah, five minutes flat. I reckon that it would come as a result of community.

5. Concerns related to the parish as a community

[Main reason for 7 participants, raised as an issue by a total of 9].

Seven respondents said that poor community life in their parish was a factor in their ceasing to attend Mass. For these people, life in their parish was characterised by:

- People not feeling welcomed.
- A sense that there was nothing available in the parish for single or divorced people.
- A lack of a sense of community, or erosion of a previously-existing community spirit.
- Poor communication.
- The existence of unkind gossip.
- A belief that the people at Mass lacked sincerity in their worship.

While these participants had stopped going to Mass, it was often not without a sense of sadness for the community they had lost.

Kylie, an investment advisor:

I'm twenty-nine, I'm not married, I don't have kids in the local school so there isn't really a market for us.

Rebecca, an administration manager:

They [an Assembly of God congregation] made me feel welcome more so than the Catholic Church did, so in the end I thought 'Yeah, what I am doing going to the Catholic Church?', when, I mean there are some nice people there, don't get me wrong, but they [the AOG congregation] have somebody standing at the door, as soon as you walk in they've got you in more ways than one. Do you know what I mean? They make a point of saying, 'Oh, we haven't seen you before. Are you new to town? Oh, we'll introduce you to someone'. And when you are new to town that helps, you know... I think that you have got to belong somewhere... It is not about the past of the Church or the priest, it is about your relationship.



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Elaine, a divorcee in her late sixties:

I suppose I just didn't feel like I was part of something. I was just going along. I'll tell you the difference... I live next door to an Anglican church, and I could hear them over there and they're a very vibrant and lively community and they had that Alpha course. They're friendly and welcoming and you sit down and someone next to you starts to talk to you. I just found at the Catholic Church in the country town, you'd shake hands with someone and they'd just about trip you up as you're going out the church. The Anglican Church, they have a longer service which isn't that different to the Catholic one but then they all congregate and go for coffee and they're all friendly and welcoming.

Sarah:

I feel a loss of a sense of community. That is probably the only loss I feel, to be honest, with not going to Mass every Sunday. Because we had a community of absolutely beautiful friends who we would meet. We would go to Mass. We would meet at each other's house afterwards. Our kids would play together. We would have coffee. We would chat. And it was the same with the other things we did with the youth and things. But our kids grew up and grew away and they got married and whatever, so life is changed. So I would like in a way for that to be the same when we were young and that commitment was there, but it has changed. We have changed. Most of those friends that we are very good friends with don't go to Mass any more either. Now that has nothing to do with why I don't go very often.

Stephanie:

No, the faith part is still part of me, I wish I could find somewhere I fitted in. You need other people of similar minds, you know, to develop further.

Mark

It's sort of like a childhood home

Mark is an accountant who moved to the State capital with his family about five years ago, after living in a rural part of the State for most of his married life. His wife is not a Catholic but has always been very supportive of bringing the children up in the Catholic faith. He still helps out one of their former parishes with the parish accounts from time to time.

Before moving to the city, Mark was a member of the Parish Council in his parish, and the parish treasurer. However, in moving to the city, he stopped attending Mass, even though the priest from their new parish called in to welcome the family. He still attends with his mother, who lives nearby, on Mother's Day, at Christmas and Easter, and for the occasional funeral.

It is not altogether clear why Mark stopped attending Mass when he moved to the city. It seems to have something to do with the loss of the small town community feeling, and the fact that his three children were growing up — the youngest is 16 — and were now making their own decisions about Church. Earlier, he found that going to Mass helped provide his children with a structure, moral guidance and background knowledge about Catholicism, especially as they attended government primary schools before heading off to Catholic boarding schools for their secondary education.

It was after ceasing regular attendance that Mark

got to a point where I didn't agree with some of the things the Church was saying and doing and not doing, and the focus of what they were doing... I thought it was hypocritical of me to go where I didn't agree with a lot of the ... more modern things like the teachings on women particularly, on contraception, on stem cell research, on you name it — I think it's wrong. The Church is wrong ... I just feel that the rule about contraception is ridiculous.



He expressed disappointment that the promise of Vatican II hadn't been fully realised, possibly because 'the popes are too old'. He thinks of his 84-year-old mother and considers that's too old for someone to have the power and authority that popes have.

Mark's attitude to the Church has been affected by a number of incidents over many years. There was, for example, an argument with the parish priest of the parish where he and his wife were to be married, when they were told they could not have the organist they wanted, a friend of theirs and a highly talented and experienced church musician. Mark recalls that the priest, insisting that they use the services of the parish organist,

got a bit grumpy and he said 'Well, it's something about our church'. And I said 'Well, it's not your church, it's our church — it's my church. I've never been to it but I'm Catholic. It's my church. It's not just yours and the parishioners' and the organist's'.

Later, he was disappointed at the total lack of support from the local Catholic school in preparing one of his children, a government school student, for First Communion, although he noted that there had been a change of principal and a complete reversal of attitude by the time the next child reached that stage. He also remembers being appalled by the inappropriateness of the sermon the parish priest gave at one of these First Communion Masses, telling the story of a 12-year-old martyr who had been raped and murdered.

More recently, his rural parish had been placed in the care of Polish priests. He found these men 'nice and genuine and caring' but also 'arrogant' and 'out of their depth' in relating to a society different from what they were used to, particularly in relation to the educational level of the parishioners. He is also concerned by the advanced age of many priests, and by the undue influence that priests have in the governance of Catholic primary schools.

As far as belief in Jesus is concerned, Mark says that 'I believe he's obviously a good man. I think he did exist', but says that 'I have a problem saying he is the Son of God ... the Immaculate Conception and all that stuff — it's just nonsensical'. On moral issues, he thinks that stem cell research should go ahead, but he does not agree with abortion.

Because he doesn't agree with much of what the Church teaches, Mark feels he would be hypocritical to go to Mass. He believes it is important to try to live a good life, but that it is not necessary to go to Mass to do that. He continues to think of himself as a Catholic. 'Being Catholic] has been constant all the way through. I guess it's sort of like a childhood home', one that stays part of your life even after your actual childhood home has been sold or demolished. He recognises that the Church does a lot of very good things, and supports the Church being outspoken on social issues. In fact, he thinks the Church should be more outspoken, but then admits that he has lost touch with what is happening in the Church and that he no longer hears about what it is saying or doing. He is very pleased that the Church is carrying out this research project, and he is pleased that his voice is being listened to.

Mark does not see much likelihood of his returning to regular Mass attendance. He would like his children to be married in a Catholic Church, and would himself like a Catholic funeral, but thinks he will probably remain a 'C and E' (Christmas and Easter) Catholic.



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6. A sense of being excluded by Church rules

[Main reason for 6 participants, raised as an issue by a total of 15]

Three female participants felt excluded from the Church because they had remarried without an annulment of their first marriage, while another woman felt excluded because she had married a divorced man after her first husband had died. All four felt as though they had been let down by the Church and pushed out against their will at the very time when they most needed the Church's care and understanding.

Dianne, a divorced woman in her 60s, and a retired tertiary educator:

I did get a visit from one of the nuns but they had nothing to offer me. Just, 'You're married in the Catholic Church, you're stuck'. [After my husband left me] I found it very hard to cope. I had worked in the family business until that point and I had no background in work and I was struggling trying to keep my boys. I met another person who was happy to take on my boys but I couldn't get married and stay in the Church. However, I did marry that person. I refused to marry in any other church because I'm Catholic and I felt like I was excommunicated. Though I wasn't worthy of the Catholic Church, I wasn't going to go to some other church ... Where would I be if I had followed the teachings of the Church? Where would I be today? Where my mother was, and I didn't want to go there. I didn't want for my children to go through what I went through as a child, feeling responsible for my mother's loneliness. It's not God that's causing the problem, it's the rules and the Church.

Always in the back of my mind I had this sadness that I didn't have a church... that I'm not entitled to go to the church to receive any sacraments.

My son's first marriage was a civil ceremony and that didn't work out and then he married for the second time and he was allowed to marry in the Church! Which I know is the rule but I feel it's a poor rule.

I know about annulments and I'm totally against it. I mean as far as I'm concerned I was married in the Church, so I was married. If I can't make a life for myself and try to live a good life with another person because of that rule, then I couldn't see how an annulment could allow me to remarry. It didn't make sense to me and it was very expensive and I thought this is a matter of money! It's not a matter of morals, it's a matter of money. I was speaking to a lady friend of mine only yesterday who told me it's around a thousand dollars now. I'm a very economical person, had to be all my life, so I check things out like that.

Elaine, who is also divorced:

They had a group for older people, they must have given an age group, over 40 or something. It was for single people. But when I inquired, it was only for widowed or single, not divorcees. There was nothing in the older age group at that time. That was in the 90s, the beginning of the 90s. It wasn't something that was supportive of divorced people.

Susan, who married a divorced man after the death of her first husband:

And I said 'I want a community. I want a Church that's healing and accepts people.' This is the Jesus I know. It is love, not religion. And I am not happy with the fact that I was outside of the Church in my love for [my second husband].

In two cases, participants had stopped going to Mass because they felt the Church's approach to homosexuality excluded a close relative. Their refusal to attend was an expression of anger at the Church and of solidarity with their relatives.

Nicole, a registered nurse in her 50s:

As for gay people not having the right to go to Communion, I don't accept that at all. I don't think Jesus would have refused anyone Communion.



Helen:

The Catholic Church is quite dishonest. [It] ordains gay men very happily, but then tells us they are all intrinsically disordered and inclined towards evil, so I mean that is such a false dichotomy or a false position. But at least the Anglicans, I think they are more honest. And less obsessed with power, and less centralised, of course, which has its pluses and minuses. But they're less obsessed with power and I think less obsessed with sex.

I have a gay daughter, so this is very pertinent for me. And if nothing else had happened, that would almost be enough reason for me to say I don't stand with this Church.

7. Structural factors

[Main reason for five participants, raised as an issue by a total of 10]

Structural factors refer to parish and diocesan administrative decisions to do with parish mergers, Mass times and so on. Such factors included:

- The parish had been merged into a larger neighbouring parish, resulting in a loss of a sense of belonging and identity.
- Changes to Mass times.
- Communion services in the absence of a priest were not a satisfactory alternative to Mass.

The question of parish mergers concerned Anne and James, who had both served on their respective parish councils.

Anne, a woman in her 50s involved in home duties:

I think the final sort of thing came when our little church had to move to make part of parish Y, and I knew it was coming, and I did go for a while, but I just came to another stage in my life where I couldn't see a reason for going. [After the parish merger] we probably didn't have the years of togetherness as we did with the other people. And it's just like, you don't sort of know your priests any more because he's not a permanent part of here. He's, you know, well, got so much to do, so many places to be... I think that the parish has just fallen away.

James, a teacher:

The parish has been merged and [now it] is lurching towards the 1920s.

Patricia, a 50-year-old woman who lives in a remote area where Mass is only held on a Saturday:

I just have an issue with Saturday nights instead of Sunday. I just felt, you know, when you were brought up, when we were growing up, it was 'You must attend Mass on Sunday', and that was that. So it might sound a bit petty but, anyway, that's just how I feel.

Michelle:

And the shortage of priests and the availability of the times to have Mass, like we used to have it at 8 o'clock on Sunday morning and I always made that one, I got to that one but then like Saturday nights, you know, I could just never get around to getting there and now, like, I am really ashamed to say, I don't know when it is. But, well, it is probably every Saturday but we only have the priest every two weeks out of a month or something.

Elizabeth

I want more from religion than rules

Elizabeth is a 67-year-old, semi-retired artist in Western Australia. She was raised in a devout Catholic family, attended a Catholic school and went to Mass regularly. The Rosary, Benediction, indulgences, self-denial, prayer and devotions to saints were a part of daily life. Her father believed it was a waste of time educating girls whose role was to get married and have a family, so she was forced to leave school at 14. By 19 she was married and before she was 27, Elizabeth had given birth to five children and had one miscarriage.



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Oh, don't tell me there wasn't some anger about not being able to use contraception. Gee, it wouldn't be like that nowadays. No one takes much notice of that... At 19, I wasn't really emotionally equipped. I was an only child for 9 years and I was not emotionally equipped to handle all of those children. And I had a mental breakdown and ended up at a psychiatrist. And it was as the result of that terrible breakdown and just not being able to cope, I mean there was 15 months between 2 of them. I just couldn't cope emotionally and they were very tough years because I had no support from my husband. Men just didn't do dishes or change nappies in those days... The meal had to be on the table on the dot.

During this period, Elizabeth continued to attend Mass regularly, practise Marian devotions and say the family Rosary. She observed the nine First Fridays and the five First Saturdays, and was the parish organist and a member of the Third Order of St Francis. As her children grew, her involvement in the parish increased. She was involved in the liturgy committee and in leading Marriage Encounter, Renewal of Faith, Charismatic Renewal and the religious education and sacramental programs. She studied pastoral care and sacramental theology and did Enneagram workshops. She also participated in meditation groups, had spiritual direction and attended retreats.

In the 1980s, however, Elizabeth began to question her long-held beliefs saying,

I suffered a lot of inner turmoil and confusion but there seemed nobody who could listen to my distressing doubts... It became more and more difficult to attend Mass and receive the Eucharist without satisfactory answers to my questions. I found too many old beliefs too hard to sustain, what is commonly called a crisis of faith. Gradually a lot of what I had blindly accepted was no longer acceptable.

This 'crisis of faith' saw Elizabeth begin to 'study and seek answers relevant to my journey without restriction'. These studies included the role of women in the Church, the Church's rules about celibacy and contraception, its practice of using non-inclusive language and its attitudes towards homosexuality. Her studies were driven by personal experience of many of these issues: 'I did a lot of studies in whatever has bugged me in life'. She objects to the fact that Catholics are not even permitted to discuss the possibility of women's ordination. She also objects to the Church's attitude toward homosexuality. Her grandson is gay and she believed this was not his choice, but that he was born that way. 'You know, why not accept all people? They are all part of God's creation.' There is also much in Catholic teaching that she affirms:

I agree with the Church's teaching to the extent that it proclaims and expands the realm of God. I believe it is the vocation of God's realm to bring life and not death, love and not oppression, being and not the diminishment of humanity, to a secular society. I agree with Church teaching in every instance where justice and equality is upheld.

Elizabeth believes that 'some of the greatest thinkers within the Catholic Church who could revitalise our faith and fill us with hope and new life have been silenced'. The result is that the 'changes necessary for the Church's survival are just not happening. And some of us are just too tired to continue waiting.'

I want more from religion now than rules, I want something to help me to find meaning in life, when all the rules cease to make sense and all the old systems break down and fade away.

She describes her process of leaving as an extremely gradual, 20 year process. Leaving the Church is something to which she has given a lot of serious thought - 'I've agonised over it'. For a long period she felt a lot of guilt but now



the guilt has gone and I just feel I trust more in God that I'm not going out of fear or going so I'll get some reward at the end of life. There may not be a reward, who knows. I'm just doing it because it feels right for me. I'm being true to myself. And it's taken a lot of courage to do it.

Another aspect of Elizabeth's ceasing to attend Mass related to the way in which she believed it restricted spiritual experience and engagement in the wider community. 'It's all a little bit too structured. People aren't given the free rein to be able to present the gifts that they've got in the broader community'. Over the years, she found her ability to use her own musical and artistic gifts in the parish was limited by the priests who came and went. During one good period, she had really enjoyed organising movie nights at which people could watch and then discuss a religious film over supper. In a less positive era, her parish priest tried to prevent her from teaching new hymns by refusing to buy any new sheet music and making her pay for her own photocopying. In the end, Elizabeth

hungered for a deeper spiritual experience within my community but unfortunately I had to look outside my local parish in order to fill this need.

She began volunteering at a drug and alcohol program. She organises fundraising concerts for a cancer support group and art workshops for the intellectually challenged. Her connection to the Church today is through relationships with religious and lay Catholics. From time to time, she donates artwork to assist with Church fundraising.

Although Elizabeth doesn't think she will return to Mass attendance, she hasn't closed off the possibility. She described the beautiful church buildings in her locality and had some definite ideas about how the Church could respond to people's current needs:

Everybody's journey is so different. If these people could get together, they've all got something in common, they no longer go to Mass. Let's use the church so that we can start some spiritual activity – a meditation group or something like that. It seems a waste.

I would suggest that all people who no longer attend Mass have a big meeting in the parish. We all come together, we all form a big group and we talk about why we no longer go to Mass. That would be a starting point. And it might continue like that for several weeks but then I'm sure something, suggestions from the group, would come from that as to what they need to spiritually satisfy themselves and nourish themselves, and I think the Church could be doing that.

PARTICIPANT-CENTRED REASONS

1. Family or household-related issues

[Main reason for 8 participants, raised as an issue by 27 in total]

Many respondents cited a family or household-related issue as at least part of their reason for ceasing to attend Mass. These reasons covered situations such as the following:

- Moving to a new location.
- Mothers attending Mass without a partner finding it difficult to get young children ready on time.
- Mothers attending Mass without a partner finding it difficult to supervise young children at Mass and, as a consequence, being unable to participate in and appreciate Mass as they would have liked.
- Older children attending under duress or refusing to attend, leading to family conflict and eventually a decision by the parents to stop going as well.
- Older children moving away from home, removing the incentive for the participants to set a good example.
- Middle-age participants ceasing to attend once their parents had died.



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Mark:

When we moved to the city I guess probably I got out of the habit of going to Mass but I also started thinking the kids were grown up and reasonably settled and in a structure at school so they were getting, I guess, some religious background. And I got to a point where I didn't agree with some of the things the Church was saying and doing and not doing and the focus of what they were doing. And at the same time, totally unconnected, I'd gone through a fairly difficult time at my work where I ended up resigning having been with the same firm for over 20 years. And I don't know whether that's connected, I was disagreeing with their bureaucracy and management or perhaps not agreeing which is not necessarily the same.

Anne, who is married to a non-Catholic:

My husband changed jobs and in the summer the only day he may have off is Sunday. He goes to work at six in the morning and comes home at eight at night, and if he only has one day off, I'm not going out.

Nicole, whose husband is a non-practising Catholic:

Sunday morning is the only morning I have with my husband. I think that's more important than whizzing off to church.

Karen, a teacher and mother of young children:

It is 8 o'clock in the morning and there is only one Mass for the weekend and I sort of balance it out by saying I go to Mass with school and do liturgies and that sort of thing... I have two small children as well and a husband who is non-Catholic. So all of that adds in there... 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning with small children is not conducive to [getting to Mass], especially when you work and get out of bed and hurry everyone along during the week, it's nice to not have to do that on the weekends, too. But yeah, here, in a small town you don't have any choice when church is and if you can't go at that one time, then you just don't go.

Andrew, an engineer with children approaching their teens:

We were experiencing some push back from our children who had been attending Mass every Sunday and going to Catholic schools and attending Mass through that. We were starting to get some push back that 'Church is boring, what do we have to go to Mass for?' In some ways, it's been, rather than have a family conflict over it, we have tended to take the conflict away and reduce our Mass participation to significant events.

It was becoming more difficult to get the kids to go along and they are not of the age to be left on their own.

Josie, retiree:

Because [Mass] had been forced, we had been forced all our lives... I always thought that I wasn't free to think and be myself. As soon as my parents died I thought, 'That's it!'. I felt free. I don't have to go to church.

Some participants stopped attending at the same time or some time after their Catholic spouse had stopped. Only two of the twelve participants with non-Catholic spouses attributed their decision to stop going to Mass to the influence of a critical and unsupportive partner. Most other participants with a non-Catholic spouse said that their partners had always been supportive of their attendance at Mass.

Teresa, who has a non-Catholic husband:

It's easier not to go with [my husband]. Not that he puts any pressure on me not to go.

Stephanie, regarding the decision to stop attending:

We were united on that one that we sort of wouldn't go separately. I didn't want to go separately and he said if you're going to stay home, I'll stay home with you. So there was no sort of dissension there at all.



Kathleen:

I am a very strong willed person and very much my own person and, I mean, so is my husband but I certainly had had enough and he stopped going as well. But I didn't say 'Don't you go'... I think he was about as fed up as I was actually.

Rebecca:

My husband was going to the AOG [Assemblies of God] church, my daughter was going to the AOG church, and they were going every Sunday and I was going to the Catholic church, and one day I just sat there and thought, 'What am I doing? This isn't what it is about. It's about family and we should go together as a family'... One day I was sitting beside my husband in the AOG church and I suddenly went 'Ahh', and he looked at me and he said 'What's the matter?' and I said, 'You know, I used to pray that you and I would be sitting in church together... [and] I'd always imagined it in the Catholic church; And I thought 'Well, obviously that's not the way it was meant to be. Obviously it's God's way.' And I really got more out of the AOG church.

2. Crisis of faith

[Main reason for 7 participants, raised as an issue by 18 in total]

A large group of respondents had suffered what might be called a crisis in faith. For them, the Catholic faith no longer provided meaning or made sense. The issue for twelve of them was that as adults they no longer found helpful the rigid and rather severe Catholic faith presented to them as children. Five participants said that even after they had stopped going to Mass, they continued to feel guilt and to be conscious of a fear of going to hell. Moreover, they often said that these things prevented them from being able to trust in God and reach a more mature faith.

Alan, a plumber in his 50s:

We used to go to Confession every week as a kid and one of the times I said, 'Well, I'm just going to keep the copy book clean this time. I'm just going to do my very best, my uppermost best to do the right thing'. And you know what? Before I even got out of church I'd kicked my foot, and I swore. You know? And I just think, 'I can't do this' and then all of a sudden someone comes along and says you were never expected to do it. You know? And for someone to tell me that Christ died for my sins, you know, and he came here and it just changed my life. None of us can love God until we know that he loves us. And when we get that understanding that he does love us, our lives can change.

Christine, a primary teacher in her 50s:

But the Church back then, you know, was fairly strict and I can even remember it being in Latin, too, and not understanding a word of it, but you sort of took on board everything that was said and believed it explicitly whether or not you understood it. It was whatever's said. But I think as you get older you question things a lot more.

Robert:

I got to this point when we were adults and my wife was becoming a Catholic, there were just things about it that I realised I was never totally comfortable with, sort of looking at it with a fresh set of adult eyes.

Elaine:

But it came to the point, I can remember clearly when it happened, that there was a Thursday that came up and I was planning to do something and then I remembered it was the Feast of the Assumption which was a Holy Day of Obligation and I had to go to Mass and I thought 'I'm only doing this out a sense of obligation or duty'. I thought if I'm doing it only for that reason, that's not a good enough reason. So that was the beginning of my falling off.

Some participants described in more detail how their view of God and their faith developed in ways that seemed at odds with the Church.



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Sarah:

I got to a stage where I thought, 'I'm an intellectual person, I am a human being, I'm not an idiot.' And I still have a faith and I know lots of things we take on faith and we have no answers for. But I think there are a lot of things that I just took and said 'Yes, yes, yes' to all of that and I started to think 'No, I can't cope with this any more. I can't believe all of these things that I am saying.' I want to go along to a church service that is loving and spiritual and in tune and relevant and with words that mean something. Not a priest that stands up there and preaches at you [and] says 'You do this, this and this or else.'

Elizabeth:

I think my image of God has changed so dramatically to what it was. But, I've got nothing against Jesus and nothing against God [laughs]. It's just that the Church hasn't kept up with my perception of things. I look upon Jesus as giving to the world great wisdom and I like the wisdom that Jesus gave the world but I don't like all the theological stuff that's happened in the interpretation of that. I think the Jesus story could be re-told. As far as God goes, I mean God is so abstract I don't really have a very strong image of God any more. I used to have a very, very strong image of what God was and who God was and what God did.

For other participants, a crisis of faith involved:

- A sense of uncertainty about things such as the meaning of life and the existence of God.
- The role of religion in world conflicts.
- A sense that all religions and not just Catholicism lead to God.
- An inability to accept certain Christian doctrines.

Chris, an electricity industry worker in his 40s:

[There are] great devastations in a lot of countries through religion and I... just can't comprehend it. I don't know what different bibles or different religions are supposed to believe, I'm not really certain about that ... So it was always in the back of my mind that something's not quite right somewhere.

Mark was asked by one of his brothers:

'Well, how come there's so many different churches?' And I said ... 'Some look from this direction and that direction, but it's just one church'. And that's whether it's Muslim or Christian or and all the sects within the Christian church and Eastern Christians and Buddhism and Confucianism and all the rest of them. It's the same. Most of the precepts are the same, coming back to the teachings and Jesus himself, I think that's what he was talking about.

Rebecca:

I guess I started to question some of the teachings, you know, like for example the purgatory thing, limbo. When I was at school I was told that when a baby died that wasn't baptised, it was in limbo. Ah, what else? I don't believe in transubstantiation. I don't believe that the host actually changes into the body and blood. I don't think I, well, I wouldn't say I ever believed it but things like that are hard to grasp. It is a symbol rather than the actual body and blood. I feel that I have had my faith forced in Catholicism.

Sarah:

I would go along and I thought 'What am I doing here?' I couldn't say the Creed. I started getting perhaps a bit too pedantic but I started really listening to all the words in the Mass and saying 'I don't believe this. Jesus did not live in heaven and come down to earth. He was born a man. OK, he was divine but so are we all.'

However, it is noteworthy that only one person said their faith was challenged by their education and knowledge of science. Science played an almost non-existent role in crises of faith.



Valerie

I guess I want to see more tolerance

Valerie is in her early 50's and works as a bookkeeper. She grew up as one of six children in a strong Catholic family, originally in South Australia and then in a regional Victorian city. She went to Catholic schools and always participated in the life of the parish with her family. She was an amateur actress and loved the 'theatricality' of the liturgy as well as being part of a community.

At age 18 she became pregnant and married her boyfriend because she felt there was no other option. She and her husband had two boys but the marriage was never stable. Part of the difficulty was her level of attachment to the Church, her husband being a non-Catholic who was opposed to much of the Church's teaching and practice. After seven years, she and her husband separated and then divorced. Valerie considered annulment but decided that was not an authentic path for them. After the divorce, she stopped going to Mass because she felt she had placed herself outside the Church. At the same time, Valerie's faith was still important to her and she arranged for her sons, who were attending a state school, to receive religious instruction on a Sunday morning.

After three years, Valerie remarried, again to a non-Catholic, but this man was supportive of her participation in the Church and she began returning to Mass. She undertook a program to assist people who were re-entering Church life, updating herself on Church teaching in the process, and gradually regained a sense of belonging.

After several years, though, Valerie began to feel that 'the Church was not moving forward', that its teaching and pastoral response to people who are divorced or gay, for example, alienated people such as herself. She also found difficulty in accepting the teaching on birth control and the exclusion of abortion under all circumstances. These differences in belief, along with alternative weekend occupations, gradually led to her going to Mass less and less.

That was 15 years ago. Just four years ago she was drawn back into active participation by the funeral of a close friend who was killed in an accident and by the support offered to her by the priest at the time. But her return lasted only a year and gradually she again let the Church go, largely because of the same issues as before. She feels that 'the Church is ruled by old fogies' who are out of touch with the needs of the modern world and too lacking in tolerance:

Those rules [of the Church] are so strong and yet we are all so different, and I just think that those rules are too strict to be putting on people and saying, you know, you can't do this, you can't do that. So I guess I want to see more tolerance.

3. Going to Mass simply not a priority

[Main reason for 7 participants, raised as an issue by 12 in total]

A very common view expressed by participants was that attending Mass was simply not as important to them as it used to be, so that in the face of competing priorities, other things seemed more important. Examples of things which were given higher priority than Mass attendance included:

- Resting after a busy week at work.
- Spending time with family members who were not around during the week.
- Caring for ill or disabled family members.
- Spending time on business matters.
- Resolving family issues.
- Pursuing recreational activities such as meeting friends or going surfing.
- Going away on weekend breaks.

Some felt that there is just so much else to be done in their lives.



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Ron, a teacher who became a Catholic as an adult:

A lot of it comes down to lifestyle, and you move on to another stage in your marriage, in your lifestyle, and it's not so much that you stop believing, because that hasn't happened, just that other things are happening in your life... Nowadays you work longer hours, it's so much more pressure... What I'm saying is, anyone who's in a full time job nowadays, it's changed so much in the last couple of years, you come to weekends and to put it bluntly you're bugged! And you just need some time out. And as you get older and you suddenly realise you've got some free time, your kids are gone, you and your wife, you start doing other things.

Teresa, who together with her husband runs a small winemaking enterprise:

And I don't get to church because of this [gestures at her business], because we don't leave here till late. But that's a bit of a cop-out, too, because I'm tired.

In a Catholic school [where she used to work] there's huge demands as you probably know. We had sports days and we had to be there for Confirmation days and there were lots of weekends that you would have to be there as well. And I think I was starting to get tired as well, so it all just got a bit too much toward the end of leaving. And then I just slowly, slowly stopped going because I was having trouble and there was just too much. And then I just got into the habit of not going.

David, who finds that the family business makes demands on his time on weekends:

Probably the last 12 months just, yeah, been busy with the business and stuff.

Michelle:

I haven't decided I'm going to stop going to church. It is just time out. I think, like, because here in [Town X] we deal with shift work, you know, and probably this only sounds like an excuse or whatever but, yeah, shift work does take a toll on a lot of things.

For some participants caring for the needs of a friend or helping in their community was a higher priority than going to Mass.

Stephanie:

A very close friend of ours developed Parkinson's Disease and he'd already previously lost his wife to cancer, and we just took him out to breakfast on a Sunday. And he still works [in his profession] so he had Saturday morning [at work], so Sunday was the only time. And we started going out to breakfast or taking him out to breakfast on a Sunday and he got into loving it so much that he'd ring up every Saturday night [and ask] 'Are we going?' And I thought 'OK, well, we were thinking of going back to Mass' but we thought 'No, he's our priority for that time.'

Nicole:

I would rather spend my time with my work and helping the community rather than going to church for that hour.

A common response from participants was that they had just got out of the habit of going to Mass.

Kylie:

Number one, I did get lazy, that's probably number one, but you never forget. Yeah, it's still part of my life everyday. It would have to be number one, laziness and number two, just not having the connection, because when I came back we moved to St Joseph's and I really had no connection there so that's probably it.

...On a Sunday or Saturday night you've got other things on, and I work really long hours so a lot of the time it's my fault. I have to make more of an effort but think there just has to be more.



David

Going for a surf is like going to church

David lives in a rural town where he and his wife run a small business. For him, attending Mass is simply not a priority. Other things, such as running the business and leisure activities, are more important, although he sometimes goes to Mass if it is a special occasion. His wife, who became a Catholic as an adult, is a regular attender and sometimes he will go with her. As far as going to church is concerned, he says:

I probably just need a kick along to get me to go and I just think, 'Oh yeah, something's happening', and off I'll go and do something else but, if I make the effort I'll come along. I don't have any real problems. It's just actually getting there at 10 o'clock in the morning.

Unlike most people interviewed for this research, David has not had long periods of regular attendance during his adult life, although he has had intermittent periods of regular attendance, such as after he and his wife were reunited after being separated for a number of years. His mother, a widow who lives in another State, is a weekly Mass attender and he goes to Mass with her whenever they are together.

Although David recognises that attending Mass has a spiritual aspect, he does not elaborate on that. Instead, he speaks of its social value, in that it provides an opportunity to catch up with people he might not otherwise see. His strongest use of spiritual language is applied to his experience of surfing, the pastime which brought him to this part of the world and the reason why he still lives here. There's 'nothing better' than surfing. It provides him with a sense of peace and tranquility, and a sense of belonging to a community as well, not only in seeing the same friends on the beach each Sunday morning, but through holding positions of responsibility in activities like organising competitions and coaching juniors.

Going for a surf Sunday morning is like going to church. You come out feeling good, you've had a good time, everything's up, all the

endorphins or whatever it is that keeps you going so, you know. You come out, you've had good exercise, come home, have a nice hearty breakfast... You're at peace with everything and going home to face whatever life's got to throw up at you on the home front. Whatever dramas come up.

Formal religion plays little role in David's life, but he says his Catholic upbringing does affect the way he lives his life. Although he is an infrequent Mass attender and very few of his friends go to any church, and he rarely if ever has conversations about religious topics, he is aware of Jesus as someone who is 'always there', and he is conscious of always trying to treat other people according to the Christian values he was taught as a child. He has a high level of involvement in the local community.

David does not have any 'issues' with the Church that keep him from attending. He is on good terms with the parish priest and helps out in the parish in various ways if asked to do a job. His views on some matters do not correspond with the teachings of the Church, but this is not the cause of his non-attendance. In fact, in relation to most issues, he was quite unsure of what the Church's teaching is. He doesn't 'have a problem' with stem cell research because it might achieve good outcomes for humanity. He believes contraception and abortion 'are things that sometimes just have to happen' and that the decision must be left to the people involved. He thinks the Church is 'still way behind the modern day' in its attitudes to clerical celibacy, for example. He knows a married priest and thinks he is 'a breath of fresh air' and that he and his wife are 'a lovely couple'. He had recently visited Vietnam where he had noticed the disrepair of the churches, and wonders why the Vatican doesn't 'flick a few dollars over there and help these people out a bit'. He admired Pope John Paul II and the way that he had such a powerful presence in the media.

He thinks church attendance is a cyclical sort of thing, something you do in childhood and old age, and expects he will return to regular Mass attendance later in life.



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ONGOING SPIRITUAL LIFE

Mass attendance

Half the respondents said they still attended Mass occasionally, for example:

- When visiting their mother or an elderly relative (this was the most common reason, given by eight participants).
- At Christmas, Easter or special family events.
- For funerals.
- With their still-regularly attending spouse.
- As part of their work at a Catholic school.

Almost one-third of the participants said they might return to weekly Mass attendance in the future. A few said they fully expected to return, but most said their return would be dependent on the issues they had with the Church being resolved.

Andrew:

But I think my wife and I will probably resume that regular participation in a parish once the girls are settled in high school and have their little thing happening.

Robert:

In a way I'm anxious that I don't live my life and die and never resolve what's obviously an issue for me and it's not even as though I'm desperate to initiate the process but I think somehow or other something has to fall out of the sky that's got to get this resolved for me... To rectify it for me and people like me what I need to have the Church do is welcome me back no matter what. That's what. And somehow or other reach out and get the message to me that 'You are welcome back no matter what. That you don't have to be able to lift a 50 kilo weight with one hand or whatever qualification. You don't have to have that qualification, you're welcome back.' And I'm not certain that that's what they want to do.

Vicki:

[What could be done] to get me back to Church? ... If it was relevant to how society is now. It is very out of touch now, I think.

Rebecca:

Some of the teachings would have to change... I don't have anything strongly against the Church. It never did me any wrong. It probably did me more good than harm.

Only three respondents said they would definitely not be returning to regular Mass attendance, although for a few others this was implied.

Continuing Catholic identity and connections

More than half the participants said they still had faith even though they did not attend church. Most of these continued to identify themselves as Catholics, sometimes vehemently so, while a few identified themselves as Christians first and Catholics second. Several people stressed that they would like Catholic liturgies for important family events and that they wanted a Catholic funeral when they died. Some participants said they would never consider joining another denomination because they could not see themselves as anything but Catholic.

Robert:

I've always had this sense that whilst I'm very much aware that I'm out there in the car-park and not inside the church, I don't think I've left the Catholic community in a sense. If somebody says to me what religion are you, I say Catholic. I don't say atheist or anything. So for me, it's about the Church not about the religion, if you get the distinction.

Helen:

It's my Church, yeah ... I feel disenfranchised, I feel patronised, I feel alienated and I feel isolated. I feel distrustful and I feel angry [laughs]. Will that do for this morning? But I refuse to stop being a Catholic.

James:

I see myself as a Catholic. In terms of global religions, I see myself as a Catholic. I see Catholic as a word which has many, many connotations [but] I'm exercising my responsibility as a thinking adult to be in communion with my God.



Peter, a retired accountant in his 60s who is married to Sue, another participant:

We still go to church on and off but it's not sort of central to our lives anymore. But Christianity is. And it's interesting; we've had a lot people say that to us, they've found other ways of being a Christian.

Elaine, who is divorced, speaking about her local Anglican Church:

They're all friendly and welcoming... but it got to where I felt that unless I was a fully fledged member of their Church I didn't feel right about it. The Catholic Church has, not ruined me, but I can't sort of take up another mainstream Church. It just doesn't, it's just not the same... In the last few years I've searched around, I've gone to different denominations but they just don't sit, they're welcoming enough – they know a new face when they see one – but I just don't feel right anymore. And yet I can't go back to the strict Catholic thing that I was in before. So I go to the Catholic Church now when I feel like it. That sounds terrible. But I don't go to Communion because that's how I was brought up because of the rules [about divorce].

Dianne, who is also divorced:

But I will never be anything but a Catholic whether it be a good Catholic or a bad Catholic. I think I am a Catholic, I always will be a Catholic and I've put in my will that I want to be buried with a Catholic priest doing my service. Whether that will happen I don't know, I'd be relying on my Catholic family to be able to rig that one for me. So that's where I am at the moment.

Although all of the people in this study have moved away from weekly Mass attendance, about four-fifths of them still had some sort of connection to Catholic life and faith. This connection varied considerably in level of formality and closeness to the core of Catholic life. Connections took the form of, among other things:

- Working as employees in Catholic organisations.
- Serving as volunteers in Catholic organisations.
- Studying theology at Catholic institutions.
- Membership of Catholic groups.
- Receiving pastoral support such as counselling from parish staff or spiritual direction from a priest or religious.
- Participating in their local parish by providing practical support such as making financial contributions, mowing the church lawns and assisting with taxation issues.
- Reading newspapers, journals, newsletters and websites produced by Catholic groups.

Involvement in other Christian traditions

Several participants had become involved in the activities of other Christian churches. Some now attended the services of that church, while others had taken part in Bible study courses run by another denomination but had chosen not to join it formally. In some cases the association with the new denomination was brought about through their children.

Teresa:

What she [a Christian pastor] presented to me was a loving father in God. And all the basics that I knew but more... the tools to apply it to my everyday life. And that is when I think I really discovered a deeper faith and a peace and was able to hold onto that faith through the everyday things. She gave me the tools to use and the understanding of which I'd never really received.

Rebecca:

I just feel a little more uplifted at the AOG [Assemblies of God] church. I feel like they teach more about the Bible. Like they encourage you to read more, mind you, I am still not good at that. I could not get over the amount of people in the church that know the Scripture. They know the Scripture. Other than Cursillo, I don't think as Catholics that we are encouraged to read the Bible.



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Non-Church spirituality

About half of the participants spoke of their desire to develop a spiritual life that was not dependent on the Church or on Mass attendance. These forms of spirituality included:

- Developing a new and personal relationship with Christ.
- Expressing one's religious values in daily living.
- Faith as an inter-personal journal lived in dialogue with one's partner and friends.
- Voluntary work in the community in both Catholic and secular institutions.
- Teaching young people about God at school.
- Organising funerals.
- Conducting special family liturgies, for example at Easter, or for weddings and Baptisms.
- Expressing spirituality through art, music, sport or interaction with nature.
- Ecumenical and interfaith expressions of spirituality.
- Private devotion, for example, prayer, meditation, personal reflection on the rosary, use of pictures and icons.

Sue:

I'm an avid reader. We've done lots and lots of reading. Basically, we just don't feel the need to go to church anymore. Neither of us have made an absolute commitment not to go... I've done a lot of reading about Buddhism and other things... And I think in our days, we weren't as educated as the priests were, but I think the swing's gone the other way now and I think there's a lot of people around who are more educated than some of our priests in some ways.

I have to find people to talk to. I find I have a big circle of friends. A lot of them are Catholic friends, some of them go to church and some of them don't. And I go to a lovely lady in City X if I get really tied up. She's a counsellor and I go in and chat to her. She's been part of the Catholic community up there. I find if I go to talk to anybody it's good if I have someone who knows where I come from. Yeah so, I guess that's what happens here with us. We just do our own thing. But I do a lot of talking to other people. [That's] probably where I find my spirituality.

Stephanie:

I'm just doing the [theological] study and I've become interested in the Ordination of Women organisation. They've got a conference at Melbourne Uni soon so I thought 'OK, I'll go and have a look into that' and if I just keep exploring I'll find somewhere where all this will come into play for the future.

Barbara:

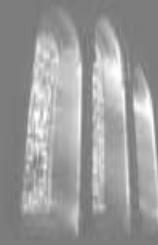
I look at the women who followed Jesus and find my own way. That would be where a lot of that sort of direction comes from and there is certainly more help in that these days. I get the Women-Church journal and I was at the launch of that all those years ago.

Helen:

Online Catholics actually saves my life [laughs]. It's the only thing that has any sanity... I stay tuned in with Catholic News on the net so I can keep myself informed and sometimes there are links there that take me to things I want to read. I mean, for example, I read Ron Rolheiser every week. So I try and get my nurture that way... Other Catholic organisations, no.

Sarah:

Just talking with several of our friends who are like us and don't go to church very often but still feel a deep faith and they want a sense of community. [We] have got together a little group of about seven or eight couples and we meet in each other's homes about once a month and it's a really lovely, non-threatening little meeting. We get around - we might have a theme. The person whose home it is in is responsible for something that evening. We might light some candles that float in water and there might be a little reading thing on light. Christ the light of our life and whatever. There might be a couple of songs. We go around the group and talk about our God moment that month. If we have had something that month that has really hit us, that has struck us, that has touched us. One of our friends has had cancer. We met one month and prayed for her. Talked about her journey. What she is going through. Her fears. What she is scared of. Her friendship, what it has meant. We prayed for her



and with her. And we felt a real sense of God being with us as we sat and prayed. And we ended up with a cup of tea and biscuits afterwards and it has not got any special format. If you don't want to say anything, you don't have to. You don't feel that you have to do something, you have to say something.

Some see their spirituality developing through community engagements:

Kathleen:

I've been involved in Meals on Wheels, involved in the community, involved in the way I treat people, just my daily way that I live.

Nicole:

Lots of people just go to church to be seen because it's routine and to me they would be better off spending an hour with a lonely person just talking. Making a meal for someone... There's lots of people out in the world that are lonely and deprived really. And aged care is very sad. They're forgotten.

Elizabeth:

I hungered for a deeper spiritual experience within my community but unfortunately I had to look outside my local parish in order to fill this need... And within church it's always set things that can be done, you know, 'You can be the choir mistress or the organist or the church cleaner or this or this. And your hours are such and such.' It's all a little bit too structured. People aren't given the free rein to be able to present the gifts that they've got in the broader community.

Some participants articulated why their relationship with God did not entail church attendance.

Josie:

The kingdom of God is within me, that's the greatest thing I've ever felt. The kingdom of God is within me, and as you grow the kingdom grows. That's where I'm at.

Ian:

As of this day I still have a very strong belief in God and I still pray and I still maintain that relationship and value it, and I still try to live my life on very strong Christian values. And that's become the most important thing to me, for me personally, while I may not go to church, that I live my life under the values that my parents instilled in me.

Interviewer: *Who is Jesus for you? How important is he in your life? Difficult question to ask people to talk about.*

Ian: *No, no, I'm quite happy to talk about it. To me he is a person, he is my guidance, my mentor, the person who advises me. We all go through various difficult times in our life and I suppose it's the person that I lean on for guidance and sometimes that I put my trust in that guidance. There's almost sort of a friendship relationship and it is quite important to me. I see that as something that I will retain for the rest of my life, I don't see that faith will be shaken completely.*

Participants' attitude to the project

All the participants in this research had at least three opportunities to decline to take part: when first approached by the parish council, when they received the project information and consent form from the Pastoral Projects Office, and when they were contacted regarding a suitable time and place for an interview. Some people did pull out at each of these stages. The fact that the 41 people did not decline to take part is an indication of how seriously they took the project and how much they wanted to communicate with the bishops about their experiences and feelings.

Many participants expressed a genuine gratitude for being given the opportunity to explain why they had stopped going to Mass. The majority said that once they had decided to take part in the project, they had given a considerable amount of thought to their reasons, and many said they had discussed the project with family members, work colleagues and friends prior to being interviewed. Quite a few brought a written statement or a list of dot points to the interview.



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Elizabeth:

I really appreciate the fact that I've left the Church and the Church has reached out, I think that's wonderful.

Mark:

I was quite pleased when I heard you were doing it [the research project] actually. ... It's been interesting to hear that ... the Church is actually asking people's opinion.

Elaine:

I just found it interesting that they were asking now. Like, when I was asked to take part, I thought, 'It's a pity they weren't wondering why people were leaving 20 years ago, you know, but I was quite willing to take part.'

A few were less positive about the research. They said they had participated in these sorts of projects before and, as nothing had ever come of them, they doubted that any changes would occur this time.

Peter:

What can this research do in Australia, change anything? All that it will do is, I see, illuminate the problems that have been there for decades and yet nothing has been done because we're tired and rightly so, too... I can't see anything being changed, doctrine may change slightly, it may now [allow] married priests, I don't know. I just sometimes get a little bit cynical about the outcomes of these researches because this is not the first time it's happened.

Helen:

I just thought [this interview] was a really good opportunity, if the bishops really are asking people, to give them feedback or make some comments. I have experience of a Church that really doesn't listen. I'm prepared to, or want to, try again and just put my little voice in, which is being asked for. That's about what it amounts to. I mean I've lost all trust in the Church listening, just through programs like 'Tomorrow's Church' and the Women's Commission and all that sort of thing, but I'm determined not to give up or go away.



CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH FINDINGS

MAJOR FINDINGS

The core objective of this research project is to discover the major reasons why some Catholics, aged from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders, have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years for reasons other than age or ill-health. The research also aims to see how the reasons people give for discontinuing Mass attendance are related to the context of their life experience.

The research team found that the reasons participants gave can be classified under ten main headings, seven of which were 'Church-centred', and three 'participant-centred'. However, in most cases, it was neither possible nor appropriate to identify a single, clear reason why the person had stopped going to Mass. Participants usually mentioned a combination of factors, of which two or three stood out as the main reasons for the change in their practice of Mass attendance.

Church-centred reasons

1. The irrelevance of the Church to life today
2. The misuse of power and authority in the Church
3. Problems with the priest in the parish
4. Lack of intellectual stimulation
5. Concerns related to the parish as a community
6. A sense of being excluded by Church rules
7. Structural factors

Participant-centred reasons

1. Family or household-related issues
2. Crisis of faith
3. Going to Mass simply not a priority

The first three 'Church-centred' reasons had a particularly powerful and inter-connected impact on participants' decisions regarding Mass attendance. First, most participants said they believed that the Church is out of touch with the current world and is not relevant to their own lives. This lack of connection was seen as arising out

of both their own changing personal circumstances and a failure of the Church to adapt to changes in Australian society and culture. Second, many expressed a sense of anger or disillusionment at what they perceived to be the misuse of authority and power at all levels of the Church. Third, many reported negative experiences regarding the behaviour, personality, attitude or lack of competence of particular priests, usually a priest in their own parish.

There was a high degree of consistency between the reasons given by participants in this project for ceasing to attend Mass and those reported in the existing research and analysis documented in Chapter 2.

The research also found that it was important for virtually all participants that they nurture the spiritual dimension of their lives. For some, that spiritual dimension had a strong connection to the Catholic community, while a few participants' spiritual lives had little or no connection with the Christian faith or any organised form of religion. Participants insisted that they wanted to take responsibility for the quality of their own spiritual lives, leading to an eclectic approach to spirituality and a readiness to leave aside beliefs and practices that were not seen as helpful, life-giving or leading to personal fulfilment.

Some may say that the reasons given by some participants were 'just excuses' for not going to Mass. We wondered if an 'excuse' is different from a 'reason'. An excuse, we decided, is usually the reason people give for not doing something they might be expected to do when they don't want to reveal the real or underlying reason, as for example, in refusing an invitation to dinner. An excuse is offered to disguise the real reason which may simply be that the person doesn't want to go. Sometimes, perhaps, the person giving the excuse is not even aware of, or able to articulate, the real reason. In the case of Mass attendance, an excuse, according to this interpretation, is a way of saying 'I really just don't want to go'. The challenge in these circumstances is to search for and address the real reason, while not dismissing the excuse.



SUPPLEMENTARY FINDINGS

1. Change in attendance patterns happens gradually, although there are exceptions

In general, participants' change in frequency of Mass attendance came about through a process in which changing attitudes to Church teaching interacted with negative personal experiences of Church personnel and regulations. The level of dissatisfaction with various aspects of Church life tended to increase gradually until it outweighed the motivation to keep attending. However, in a few cases, the decision to stop going to Mass was made deliberately and took effect suddenly. In some cases, the seeds of alienation and discontent had been germinating for many years, even as far back as school days, and the final decision to stop attending was triggered by a relatively minor issue.

Regardless of whether the change happened gradually or suddenly, in general the participants had expended a great deal of time and energy in reflecting on the Church, their hopes for and expectations of it, and their own role in it. Often the decision to withdraw from regular Mass attendance was accompanied by feelings of grief.

2. Catholic identity continues for many, but through alternative community connections

This and related research suggests that there has been a change of understanding in the minds of many people about what it means to be Catholic and what obligations are intrinsic to Catholic identity. One result of this is the widespread attitude that weekly attendance at Mass is no longer obligatory, and that one can be a committed Catholic without attending Mass regularly. A number of participants stated this explicitly, and it was implicit in what many others said.

For some participants, their sense of continuing Catholic identity was reflected in their desire for a Catholic funeral, and for their children and grandchildren to be baptised and confirmed and to make their First Communion. Moreover, a number of participants saw themselves as living their commitment to their faith through their work as teachers in Catholic schools or their involvement in Catholic organisations, even though they no longer attended Mass regularly.

Just as it was possible to recognise this altered concept of Catholic identity emerging from the interview transcripts, it was also possible to distinguish an alternative concept of Catholic community in the minds of some participants. For some, the functions fulfilled by the parish community in which they no longer participated have been met by informal networks of friends who get together regularly for prayer, discussion and socialising, and even by virtual communities that grow up through initiatives like *Online Catholics*.

3. General dissatisfaction with Church life is more a barrier to a return than a cause of ceasing regular Mass attendance

The disagreement with specific Church teachings, disappointment and frustration with its lack of connection to everyday life, and anger arising from specific policies or practices expressed in some shape or form by every participant, were very frequently not the cause of their ceasing to attend Mass. However, once they had stopped attending, these issues acted as barriers to their return to Mass attendance.

4. Many, but not all, participants displayed a limited knowledge of Catholic teaching

Many participants displayed a poor knowledge of certain Catholic teachings. When asked whether they agreed with the Catholic position on a particular issue, some said they did not know what the Catholic position was. Others expressed disagreement with specific Church teachings despite having only a hazy idea of what those teachings entailed. Nuances in Catholic thought — for example, the distinction between condemnation of homosexual acts and compassion for the homosexual person — were often completely missed. In contrast, a number of participants were theologically well-educated and articulate. These people were often disenchanted with what they saw as the Church's failure to implement fully the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.



5. Changing mores within Australian families and society can cause changes in attendance

The research noted the phenomenon of adults' attendance patterns being determined by their children, and not the other way around, as, for example, when children protest about going to Mass or when older children move out of home and remove the need for their parents to set a good example by going to Mass. On the other hand, Mass-attending mothers, even elderly mothers living far away from their middle-aged children, continue to have a positive impact on Mass attendance.

The research also found that Mass attendance could become a cyclical thing for some people, waxing and waning at various points of a person's and a family's life cycle according to other commitments and needs.

Furthermore, this and related research found that recent changes in Australian society and culture, such as changes to work practices and to Sunday sport and shopping, mean that people now have other commitments on weekends that compete with going to Mass.

6. Parish reorganisation and restructuring can have a critical effect on attendance.

Even a minor reorganisation such as a change of Mass times can have a permanent affect on people's attendance, while a major restructure such as an amalgamation of two parishes can result in considerable numbers of people feeling disconnected from the community they had come to know.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The factors identified by the participants in this research which led them to stop going to Mass are also influencing people who are still regular Mass attenders. Except in the case of sexual abuse, where one hopes the worst is over, there is no reason to think the impact of those factors is declining. In other words, if no action is taken, Catholics who are presently regular Mass attenders will continue on a path that may well lead to their disappearance from Church life within a year or two.

The Church does have the capacity to take actions which will reduce the likelihood of current attenders joining the ranks of those who have stopped attending and increase the chances of returning of some of those who have left. The latter, as the research findings demonstrate, is much harder to do. Very few of the reasons given by participants in this project refer to matters that the Church can do nothing about. It seemed, for example, that all it would take to get several participants to return to regular Mass attendance, or to at least give it a try, was a warm personal invitation.

The multiplicity of reasons given by participants for the change to their Mass attendance practice indicates that retaining current attenders, and attracting former attenders back to Mass, has to be a multi-faceted task. Any single strategy is likely to address only one of the factors at work.

It might seem at first glance that the Church can only have an influence in relation to the Church-centred reasons outlined in this report. In fact, action to reduce the impact of those reasons and to make Mass attendance more appealing could result in the participant-centred reasons becoming less influential as well.

It would be possible to adopt a perspective which finds fault with every participant regarding their non-attendance at Mass — laziness, lack of faith, placing unreasonable expectations on priests, lack of respect for legitimate authority, getting priorities wrong, and so on. However, this attitude is most unlikely to attract them back to Mass or to prevent people who are still attending from leaving.

EXTENDING THE RESEARCH

This project has extended the quantitative studies outlined in Chapter 2 by situating the reasons participants gave for ceasing to attend Mass within the context of their lives and their experiences of the Church.

However, since like all research, this project still leaves many questions unanswered, it is helpful to consider what other research might be carried out in the future to enhance the Church's capacity to understand and respond to this pastoral phenomenon.



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Firstly, some parishes are more successful than others at attracting and retaining Mass attenders. What are the characteristics of these more successful parishes, and can we learn anything from them that can help other parishes to grow in vitality? Data from the 2001 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys can help us address these questions, and research of this nature is currently underway. A more direct approach to a question like this would be to carry out case studies of particular parishes which have been identified as being particularly vital or where attendances have been increasing.

A second avenue of research would be to address the question of Catholic identity, commitment and community as understood by non-attending Catholics who work in Catholic schools, hospitals and other Catholic organisations.

Third, the results from the Catholic Church Life Survey of parents of children attending Catholic schools, while informative, are now over ten years old. Another possible research project, then, could entail a similar survey of Catholic parents.

Over the coming months, in response to the directives of the Bishops Conference and in cooperation with our research partners and other Catholic organisations, the Pastoral Projects Office and the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research will formulate a program of research that builds on these findings.

AN INVITATION TO FURTHER CONSULTATION

Two parts of the research question that formed the focus of this project remain to be addressed. They are to:

- Consider what steps the Church can take to encourage people who have stopped going to Mass to return to regular Mass attendance.
- Consider what steps the Church can take to lower the number of people who discontinue regular Mass attendance in the future.

In the view of the research team, these two aims can best be addressed by inviting the Catholic community to consider this report and how the Church can best respond to the issues raised in it. The report thus becomes a tool for theological and pastoral reflection and action.

At their meeting in November 2006, the bishops asked the Pastoral Projects Office to coordinate a process of consultation designed to seek responses from leadership and consultative bodies in dioceses and other Catholic organisations, and to prepare a set of recommendations to be presented to them at their next plenary meeting in May 2007.

Appendix 10 of this report has been designed to serve as a guide to participation in this consultation process. Responses to the consultation should reach the Pastoral Projects Office, at the address in the front of this report, by **Friday, 31 August, 2007**.



COMMENTARIES

A SOCIOLOGIST'S RESPONSE

Professor Dean Hoge

This research exemplifies the best type of social science research in service of the Church. It is practical, concrete, and useful. It speaks directly to a felt concern of Church leaders. And it is presented in plain language.

The sample in this study makes no pretense of representing all Catholics who have stopped Mass attendance, since gathering a truly representative sample is impossible. Human nature being what it is, not enough people agree to be interviewed. But even with the sample available here, we can learn about the main attitudes and feelings. I am sure the researcher captured the main ones, partly because the findings are similar to findings of earlier studies.

Church leaders have an agenda here for immediate action. Priests can be aided to improve their relations with members. International priests can be screened for English language before being brought to Australia. The liturgy can be performed more spiritually. Preaching and teaching can be made more relevant. Churches can be made more welcoming through use of greeters, welcome packets for visitors, more coffee hours, and communications with visitors afterwards. Lay leaders can call on inactive Catholics and visitors without any tinge of criticism or guilt.

There is also an agenda here for long-range action. Church teachings in the realm of gender, sexuality, and reproduction need to be more widely discussed and possibly restated. Church leaders need to listen more to young adults. Clergy needs to consult with laity more widely on parish issues. Actions such as these would certainly make the Catholic Church more credible in the long run.

In short, this report gives plenty of material for discussion and concrete action.

Dean R. Hoge

Life Cycle Institute
Catholic University of America
1 November 2006

Professor Dean Hoge is Professor of Sociology at the Life Cycle Institute of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. One of the foremost scholars of Catholic life in the United States, since 1972 he has written or co-authored 19 books and over 100 scholarly articles. He has been elected President of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, a position he will take up in October 2007. Professor Hoge visited Australia as a guest of the ACBC Pastoral Projects Office in October 2006.

A THEOLOGIAN'S RESPONSE

Fr Richard Lennan

In the decades since the Second Vatican Council, theological reflection on 'the church' has multiplied exponentially, both amongst theologians and the church's teaching authority. This report, however, underscores the considerable distance that exists between the richness of such writing and the 'lived' ecclesiology of many members of the church. In addition, the report indicates that some of the everyday practices within the church are far from expressing the presence of the Holy Spirit within the ecclesial body. In order for the Catholic Church in Australia today to grow as a Eucharistic community, there is a need to acknowledge and address such gaps.

The responses in this report suggest that those who no longer participate in the Eucharist tend to equate 'church' primarily, even exclusively, with the actions and decisions of those who exercise authority in the Christian community. Not only do the respondents reduce 'church' to 'authority', they also perceive the exercise of authority in negative terms: 'the Church's focus was on rules, not compassion'; 'the Church's leaders were not considered to understand'. This indicates that, prior to discontinuing any participation in the Eucharist, many respondents located themselves as outsiders looking in on the church, looking in on what they regarded as an inhospitable institution. In some instances, the respondents' experience of Eucharistic liturgy intensified their alienation, either because of the attitudes and actions of priests or of fellow-worshippers.



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Against that background, it is worth recalling the key features of the church as communion, which, in the decades since Vatican II, has become the primary ecclesiological motif in Catholic thought. Communion ecclesiology finds its source and model in God's trinitarian life, which proclaims that unity and diversity are not only mutually inclusive, but are also constitutive of divine creativity. Applied to the communion of the church, the trinitarian model means that all the baptised, in their different ways, share responsibility not only for the mission of the church, but also for its unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, which enable and sustain that mission. Office-bearers in the church have a particular responsibility to serve, nurture, and shepherd the church's communion and mission, but office does not, and cannot, annul the rights and duties that belong properly to all the baptised.

How might communal theologies of the church offer alternatives to the situations that the report identifies as obstacles to the realisation of the church as a genuinely Eucharistic communion?

First, communal ecclesiologies challenge the individualistic understanding of Christian discipleship that underpins many of the responses in the report. In a community of faith, especially one dependent on a living tradition, no individual or group, irrespective of age, gender, and even office, owns the church or can claim a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. Rather, our Baptism involves a form of 'self-expropriation' (Avery Dulles), which implies our surrender to a faith that is as broad and deep as the communion of all the baptised across space and time. Although each of the baptised has a unique contribution to make to that communion, none of us possesses the church on our own terms.

Accordingly, each of us must remain open to the challenge of being part of a shared faith, which includes accepting that those who differ from us are not necessarily ill-informed, misguided, or bigoted. Characteristic of an authentic ecclesial communion is not unruffled unanimity, but the willingness to be attentive and responsive to the God who not only exceeds even our treasured ideas on how God ought to be, but who can also operate through 'sacraments' – people and events – that we might not associate with the Spirit. A healthy ecclesial communion, then, is one in which the willingness to learn and to engage in dialogue are prominent.

Secondly, the practices of the church must embody the implications of communion. If it is true either that there remains a parish priest who promotes 'an anti-intellectual environment where his word was law and critical thinking discouraged' or that the church's leaders actually do have 'closed minds', there is a need for the conversion of such office-holders; otherwise, they could stifle what the Spirit might be saying to the church through the baptised faithful. Since responsibility for the order and mission of the church is not the exclusive province of the ordained, but belongs properly to the whole community, we must develop mechanisms to enable communal discernment of appropriate responses to issues that we face as a church.

In short, there is an urgent need to consider how the ecclesiology of communion might move from the pages of official documents and theological texts into the lived reality of the church in Australia. Achieving general 'ownership' of this ecclesiology requires something other than instruction in theological thinking. What is necessary is that the practices of the church, at every level, embody that ecclesiology. While this requires reform in the exercise of authority in the church, as well as commitment to a deeper engagement with the Gospel by those who proclaim it to others, such measures alone are not sufficient. It is also necessary that every member of the church re-appropriate the implications of their Baptism into the communion of faith.

Since the Eucharist is the coming-together of the whole communion of the church to celebrate liturgically what makes it one and what shapes its shared mission, a thriving Eucharistic community is inseparable from a thriving ecclesial community. In other words, it is not possible to 'fix' deficiencies in the Eucharistic community without a commitment to the well-being of every dimension of ecclesial life. This report offers helpful insights into areas that are 'broken'; in its turn, the ecclesiology of communion offers 'tools' to aid the construction of a more authentic church. Such a church could celebrate Eucharist with a passion for both unity and mission.

Richard Lennan

Catholic Institute of Sydney
25 November 2006

Fr Richard Lennan, a priest of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, is the head of the Department of Systematic Theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney; he is also the current President of the Australian Catholic Theological Association. In September 2007, he will take up a teaching post at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



A RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR'S RESPONSE

Dr Sandra Carroll

As a Religious Educator I welcome this report of the research project on *Catholics who have stopped attending Mass*. It reports the analysis of credible qualitative data that complements and adds depth to the considerable amount of quantitative data available as to why Catholics have stopped going to Mass. This research should help to provide an accurate assessment of the current situation enabling a firm basis for addressing some of the issues identified.

Many of the people interviewed seemed to be in the zone between disconnection with a supporting parish community and dis-identification as a Catholic. The report indicates that whereas 'ceasing to attend Mass is an early phase of the process of disconnecting from the Church, disidentification is the final step' (p.4). What is interesting is that the report notes that, although the participants have stopped going to Mass, most are still connected in some way to Catholic life and faith. We need to listen to these people. Agencies such as Catholic schools, Centacare / Catholic Community Services, St Vincent de Paul, Catholic Health and the social justice agenda are valued and valuable points of connection for the disaffected Catholic, and this needs to be recognised and affirmed. It signals again the importance of credible institutional witness.

According to the report, under the heading, *Non-Church Spirituality*, about half of the participants spoke of their desire to develop a spiritual life. The characteristics listed in the dot points suggests that the issue is not so much identification with the Church or Catholicism but specifically to do with their experience of attending Mass. None of the dot points listed is inconsistent with belonging to a local Christian community and worshipping as a member of that community. Interestingly almost one third of the participants said they might return to weekly Mass in the future and all it would take to get several participants to return to regular Mass attendance, or at least give it a try, was a warm personal invitation.

In *Familiaris Consortio* Pope John Paul II offers a positive vision of Church as a welcoming, inviting, inclusive and caring community:

There exist in the world countless people who unfortunately cannot in any sense claim membership of what could be called a family ... For those who have no natural family the doors of the great family which is the Church ... must be opened even wider. No one is without a home and family in this world: the Church is a home and family for everyone (para. 85).

Drawing on this metaphor of the Church as a great family, it would seem that in many families there is a period of an individual's disconnection as part of the journey into adulthood. This research, however, reports a disconnection, or 'drift away' among adults, 'people who were regular Mass attenders and active parishioners for many years of their adult lives' (p.1). The reality of their discontent and disconnection needs to be acknowledged. Under the heading *Participants Attitudes to the Project*, the comment is made that the people interviewed had at least three opportunities to decline to take part. Their participation is seen as 'an indication of how seriously they took the project and 'how much they wanted to communicate with the bishops about their experiences and feelings' (p.47). These people wanted their voice heard, and many 'expressed a genuine gratitude for being given the opportunity to explain' their stance. It seems likely that some see not going to Mass as a kind of protest vote, a with-holding of their presence as akin to a symbolic action. A few others were said to be less positive about the research, not because they didn't care, but because they did care. It seems they have had multiple experiences of disappointment (p.48) so there was a sense of frustration at their perceived inability to have an effective voice.



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While preparing this response, I spoke to some others. One person gave the following view in support of one of the report's *Concluding remarks* on page 51, 'If no action is taken, Catholics who are presently regular Mass attenders will continue on a path that may well lead to their disappearance from Church life within a year or two.'

I have had the good fortune to experience the best of the Church. That helps me hold on. Those who experience it only at its worst are surely right to get out. It intrigues me how many former priests, nuns and brothers who are highly educated in religion have stopped going to Mass. I think that for many people the Church has ceased to be their primary community or part of their primary community. Once the fear and the peer group pressure went and their mothers died they went, too. They do not need it for their identity, for their friendship group, or for their support. In the 1950s, for example, all the things that make the Church unattractive — injustice, inadequate leadership, boring and unhelpful liturgy or homilies, exclusion of women, ignorant or uneducated or rude clergy, inability to handle family breakdown, foreign priests, lack of choice, etc — were all there but for cultural and social reasons Catholics put up with them, or excused them. Now they do not have to.

For people to participate, Church needs to be life giving.

Sacraments are still a vital point of connection for the unchurched. Many young people preparing for marriage or parents of young children still want to 'do the Catholic thing' – weddings, Baptisms and Confirmations remain strong points of possible encounter with Church. Parish-based sacramental programs adequately resourced and supported by diocesan agencies could enable a systemic, rather than fragmented approach, to sacramental preparation. They offer an opportunity for the parish community to engage in Adult Faith Education with the parents and friends of those preparing for the sacraments. Teachers' anecdotal accounts suggest a quasi-compulsory volunteerism for the Religious Education staff at parish Catholic schools in regard to parish-based programs. These teachers often are asked to support the parish-based sacramental program of the school they work in while their parish may be elsewhere.

It seems the life of the parish and worship require renewed energy and resources. The perception of the identification of 'the misuse of power and authority in the Church' that this research highlights could be targeted at the local level with a renewed emphasis on a collaborative leadership.

Connection and identification are important steps in Religious Education. *The General Directory for Catechesis* articulates a realistic understanding when it states that 'entire groups of the baptised have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church' (1997, para. 58), such situations require a new evangelisation. Religious educators often speak of beginning where the students are at, making connections with their lives and inviting them into the larger story, the life of the Christian community. Adult faith education involves engaging people in an authentic dialogue with a living Tradition. It takes people seriously and treats them respectfully; thus the view that the answer is a back-to-basics approach, a restoration based on an exposition of doctrine, is inadequate. This research provides valuable and credible data for the Church strategic planning at the parish, diocesan and national levels.

Sandra Carroll

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27 November 2006

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- Dr Sandra Carroll lectures in Religious Education at the Strathfield campus of the Australian Catholic University, Sydney. Her doctoral thesis from San Francisco Theological Seminary was titled 'Teaching about Mary: Professional Development for Religious Educators.' Sandra is married with two teenage sons. She has published book chapters and journal articles in the areas of Religious Education and Theology and is currently on the Editorial Committee of the Journal of Religious Education.*



A LITURGIST'S RESPONSE

Fr Peter Williams

Faith grows when it is well expressed in celebration. Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it.

Reflecting on the summary report on this study immediately brings to mind the single yet telling statement from the United State Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) document *Music in Catholic Worship*. These three short sentences reflect the experience not only of those who participated in the survey, but also the sad lot of many Mass goers in contemporary Australia.

Maintaining a strong and vibrant faith in 21st Century Australia with a society increasingly secular and indifferent to public religious expression of any sort requires a renewed approach to the preparation and resourcing of liturgical celebrations in Australian parishes. Whilst a number of participants identified poor leadership, institutional inertia to change and what was perceived as intransigence in matters pertaining to moral issues, the report states:

...they (respondents) did not get anything out of going to Mass any more and ... came away from Mass feeling angry, frustrated and wondering why they were still attending.

Good liturgical celebrations that will nourish faith and provide opportunities for the worshipper to find a connection between the life of the Church, their own lives, and the Divine presuppose a number of conditions. Firstly, it is assumed in all liturgical celebrations that those in the assembly have an understanding of their own Baptism and thus their unique place within the life of the Church as a member of the Body of Christ. There is an ecclesiological issue here that underpins all liturgical rites. If one's Baptismal dignity is not understood or appreciated in its fullness then the mindset of the worshipper will be severely diminished. Secondly, those who have the responsibility of liturgical leadership — in particular, the priest — must engage in careful preparation for every liturgical celebration. This involves more than adequate preparation of the homily (as important as that is for relating the scriptural proclamations to the life of faith today) but also must attend to liturgical aesthetics and, in particular, to the importance of music as a vehicle for the expression of faith.

The priest himself needs to appreciate that the style of liturgical leadership in the celebration of the public rites of the Church is a critical factor in the age of vernacular liturgy. Whilst many priests are very conscious of their role as liturgical leader and carefully recite the liturgical prayers with care and due diligence, there still remains a perfunctory style of liturgical leadership that is often manifest in little or no preparation of the homily, a 'matter of fact' approach to liturgical leadership that either conveys to the worshipper a sense of boredom, sometimes anger and frustration on the part of the priest and, in some cases, a trivialisation of the liturgical celebration. The anti-intellectual climate that has been identified by some respondents as one reason for giving up Mass attendance can be traced to the mindset of some clergy who still, long after the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, maintain an *ex opere operato* approach to their liturgical functioning.

This report is timely as the Church prepares to embrace a new liturgical translation of the Latin Missal. There will be many challenges in the introduction of the new English Missal, not least the requirement for all priest celebrants to reassess their liturgical leadership style and liturgical professionalism.

There will also be a challenge for the appropriate resourcing of those who assist in liturgical celebrations, not least in the musical area, but also for those who exercise lay liturgical leadership with adequate formation and training. To establish the right balance between a liturgical celebration that communicates the truth of the Gospel and at the same time enables the assembly to pray and engage in the mysteries of Divine worship will be the major challenge of the next decade. From the liturgical perspective this should, if properly implemented, arrest the hemorrhage of those who may be considering abandoning the practice of the faith.

Peter Williams

Executive Secretary
Bishops Commission for Liturgy
30 November 2006

Fr Peter Williams, a priest of the Diocese of Parramatta, is Executive Secretary of the Bishops Commission for Liturgy and also Director of Liturgy in the Diocese of Parramatta. His liturgical studies were undertaken at the Catholic University of America. He teaches sessionally at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and the Seminary of the Good Shepherd at Homebush, NSW, and has recently been appointed as Director of Liturgy for World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008.



Research Report on CATHOLICS WHO HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING MASS

A BISHOP'S RESPONSE

Bishop Gerard Holohan

The decline in religious practice among Australian Catholics is one of the greatest pastoral concerns of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. Hence, the commissioning of this research project.

To suggest that one can be a 'good Christian' without the Eucharist is to hold a different idea of Christian faith from that of Jesus. After all, Jesus made clear the centrality of the Eucharist for growth in the Christian life [John 6:53]:

...if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you shall have no life in you.

Just three observations follow in response to the research project findings. It is not possible to respond either fully or adequately to the project findings in a few pages.

A Gospel context

Pastoral responses to the research findings can be made only within the context of the Church's mission, which is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While no one will be surprised, or want something different from this, it still needs to be mentioned so that expectations of future pastoral responses remain realistic. This mission includes the Church's commission to teach, in the words of Jesus, 'all the commands that I gave you' [Matthew 28:19].

Second, a Gospel context will demand that pastoral responses acknowledge that Christian faith is a journey towards ever greater personal conversion. To be faithful to the Gospels, and particularly to the pedagogy of Jesus, future pastoral responses will need to recognise that different people are at different stages of that journey [cf *General Directory for Catechesis* 137-140].

After all, personal conversion was something Jesus insisted upon. For example, he allowed people to walk away, rather than modify his teaching on the Eucharist. He was quite prepared even to let his apostles go [John 6:67]:

What about you, do you want to go away too?

From these and other considerations, it seems to me that the research findings point to an urgent need for new evangelisation. It is hard to see any other way of responding adequately to those who no longer participate in Sunday Mass. This means re-examining the steps Jesus used to proclaim his Gospel, and trying to improve upon the ways the Church in Australia tries to follow them today.

New evangelisation parishes

How Jesus built his community can be broken into four steps. He continually kept reaching out to people where they lived their lives, particularly the poor, needy and lost [eg Mark 1:16, 38; Luke 4:43]. He called for personal conversion [eg Mark 1:15]. He taught how Christian community grows [eg John 15:12; Matthew 18:15-18]. He charged his followers to continue his mission [Matthew 28:20; John 20:21].

Many research findings raise for me the question of whether parishes today are applying these steps effectively. For example, are parishes today reaching out sufficiently to people wherever they are living their lives, including in their homes, their places of work and, if they are sick or elderly, where they are being cared for? This first step leads also to greater understanding of people and their life problems and issues. It provides much of the information needed to proclaim the Gospel effectively.

Parishes today can expend much energy trying to build Christian community, and to undertake social justice initiatives to fulfil their mission. These implement the third and fourth steps of Jesus. However, unless there are effective strategies as well to keep reaching out to people where they live, and to provide for their journeys of Christian conversion through, for example, the *Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults* and adult faith education, parishes will continue to grow older and eventually decline.

Could some project findings mean, for example, that the parishes of some participants are not following the first two steps of Jesus effectively? Do they point to the need for some parishes to radically question the effectiveness of their pastoral strategies for each of the four steps for building Christian community? These are just two of the possible questions the research findings raise.



New evangelisation proclamation

Documents such as the *General Directory for Catechesis* outline the pedagogical steps for proclaiming the Gospel effectively. Though terms such as *missionary or primary proclamation, initiatory catechesis* and *continuing catechesis* are used, basically the substance of these steps follows the pedagogy of Jesus [eg *General Directory for Catechesis* 61-72]. The first two are the most urgent priorities for new evangelisation [*General Directory for Catechesis* 58(c)].

The first and second steps are priorities not just for those who have given up religious practice. They are needed also by children and young people, by people whose faith is weak and by those whose faith is based more on devotion than solid doctrine [*General Directory for Catechesis* 25, 58(c)].

The aim of the *primary proclamation* is to lead people to an initial personal conversion to Jesus Christ himself. It proclaims a cluster of basic Christian experiences and truths related to the Kingdom of God [*General Directory for Catechesis* 101]:

... a new and definitive intervention by God, with a transforming power equal and even superior to his creation of the world.

The primary proclamation seeks to help people see that this personally transforming power can be received only from Jesus himself. It always presents the Gospel [*General Directory for Catechesis* 117]:

... in close connection with the human heart and its aspirations, and will show how the Gospel fully satisfies the human heart.

The primary proclamation is needed by anyone not converted personally to Jesus Christ himself. They may say things like: 'I do not need religion to be a good person'; 'All religions are equally good, leading people to God'. Their view of Jesus might be similar to how many view Confucius or Buddha – as a great and influential thinker, rather than as the Saviour who is Risen and present.

Second, catechesis in the pedagogical sense of the word, derived from the Greek word for 'echo', involves continually proclaiming a Gospel teaching until there is a faith response (or 'echo') from within the hearer. Like children trying to find the echo point in a canyon, catechesis keeps trying to help the hearer discover the personal experiences in his or her life to which the Gospel teaching will relate. Otherwise, there will be no 'echo', for [*General Directory for Catechesis* 150]:

The communication of faith... is an event of grace, realised in the encounter of the Word of God with the experience of the person.

Initiatory catechesis aims for the personal conversion needed to enter into the experiences of Christ, and through him, of the Father and the Holy Spirit, that are possible within the Church community. It is centred on 'the nucleus of Christian experience, the most fundamental certainties of the faith and the most essential Gospel values' [*General Directory for Catechesis*, 67 #4]. Initiatory catechesis is needed, for example, by those who say: 'I can pray at home as well as I can at Mass'; 'I feel close to Jesus, and do not need the Church to relate with him'; 'Mass is boring, the same thing each week'; 'I live a fairly good life and do not need Mass'.

Continuing catechesis, on the other hand, builds upon the earlier two steps. It includes liturgical catechesis and scriptural catechesis, as well as deeper theological study [*General Directory for Catechesis* 71]. However, continuing catechesis leads at best to limited and flawed faith, unless it is built on the more foundational stages of conversion that are the goals of the earlier two steps.

Without the more foundational stages of conversion, continuing catechesis can lead to what the scriptures call 'outsiders' – people well versed in theological discussion and debate, but who have little or no real interest in being involved in the life and worship of the faith community [eg Mark 4:11; Colossians 4:5]. Often the reasons why people give up religious practice after a long track record of parish involvement stem from them receiving plenty of continuing catechesis in homilies, Mass commentaries and other ways, but too little foundational primary proclamation or initiatory catechesis. Without the first two steps in proclaiming the Gospel, people's faith can all too easily crumble in the face of personal faith questions and crises.



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The research findings pose real questions about all of this, such as 'Do our adult faith programs provide for the faith needs of all, or do they mainly offer continuing catechesis?' How effectively are homilies 'drawing on the scriptures to proclaim the Christian mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life during each liturgical year?' [cf *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 52; *Code of Canon Law* 767]. These mysteries and principles are the content of the primary proclamation and initiatory catechesis. Many Mass reading commentaries and homily notes, on the other hand, provide scripture catechesis exclusively, which is continuing catechesis.

Then there is the question of the religious education of our young. Its role is to complement catechesis as a pedagogy; it can never replace it [*General Directory for Catechesis* 73]. Is it doing so effectively?

If participants in the research project had received effective primary proclamation and initiatory catechesis, would they not know the beliefs and moral teachings of the Catholic faith? Would they not see its relevance to their lives and to the human heart questions, such as those related to personal meaning? Did their religious education complement their catechesis effectively?

Conclusion

The period in Church history in which respondents seem to have lived is post-Vatican II — a time of some turmoil and confusion. Vatican II was about renewal and reform. The findings of the research project are just one consideration that causes us to wonder if, since the Council, all too often the reforms were attempted prematurely, without the prerequisite renewal, for example, of our parishes and our Gospel proclamation. The research project certainly provides a useful tool for reflection and pastoral planning as the Australian Church seeks to respond pastorally to the faith needs of Catholics who do not participate in Sunday Mass.

Gerard Holohan

Bishop of Bunbury
8 January 2007

Bishop Gerard Holohan is Bishop of Bunbury in Western Australia. He serves also as Chairman of the Bishops Commission for Education. His previous ministries include faith education and religious education.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: THE 1996 CATHOLIC CHURCH LIFE SURVEY

The 1996 CCLS data referred to in Chapter 2 also allows us to examine differences between infrequently- or non-attending Catholic parents of children at Catholic schools, and those Catholic parents who were frequent Mass attenders at the time of the survey. For the sake of convenience in this section, we will refer to these two groups as 'infrequent attenders' and 'frequent attenders', although it is important to recognise that the infrequent attenders include those who never attend.

Frequent attenders were a little more likely to be male (20 per cent compared with 17 per cent among non-attenders) and were also a little older, with an average age of 40.0 years compared with 37.4 years for non-attenders. Ten per cent of frequent attenders were either separated, divorced or remarried after divorce, and another one per cent were living in a de facto relationship. In contrast, the corresponding figures for infrequent attenders were 20 per cent and four per cent respectively. More than a quarter of frequent attenders (26%) had a university degree or higher qualification compared with 14 per cent of infrequent attenders. Seventy per cent of frequent attenders had a Catholic spouse, compared with 52 per cent of infrequent attenders.

The differences in attitudes and practices between infrequent and frequent attenders are summarised in Table A1.

Table A1 shows that infrequent and frequent attenders responded very differently to questions about Catholic beliefs and premarital sex, their personal and family faith practices, and their sense of belonging to and levels of participation in parish life. These results are not surprising and lend support to the argument of Voas and Crockett (2005) that infrequent and non-attenders do not maintain the same level of religious belief as attenders. What is a little surprising is that there are virtually no differences between infrequent and frequent attenders in relation to their attitudes to and levels of satisfaction with their children's schools, suggesting that demand for Catholic schools is unlikely to be affected by any change in the rate of Mass attendance in the Catholic community.



Table A1: Differences between infrequently- and frequently-attending Catholic parents of children at Catholic schools

Characteristics of Catholic parents	Infrequent Mass attenders* (%)	Frequent Mass attenders (%)
Understand God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit	52	71
God is the most important reality in life	11	34
No real growth in Christian faith in last 12 months	47	18
Believe the consecrated bread and wine at Mass truly become the sacred Body and Blood of Christ	31	59
Believe the consecrated bread and wine at Mass remain bread and wine	8	4
Attending Mass always or usually strengthens spiritually	34	69
Have some leadership or ministry role in the parish	3	30
Parish community very important in life (rated 5 to 7 on 7-point scale)	14	48
Have strong sense of belonging to the parish	25	65
Contribute financially to parish	46	96
Believe sex before marriage is always wrong	8	32
Pray together as a family at least a few times a week	5	23
Sometimes or often talk to their children about faith	74	92
Very important that their children become committed Catholics (rated 5 to 7 on 7-point scale)	48	85
Oldest child still at school attends Mass every week	9	55
Fourth child at school attends Mass every week (where applicable)	11	68
Children satisfied or very satisfied with parish Masses	38	37
Children satisfied or very satisfied with school Masses	51	58
Agree or strongly agree that the parish school provides strong community for families	70	78
Agree or strongly agree that the parish school supports families in difficult times	72	76
Believe relationship between the parish and the parish school is strong or very strong	77	79
Satisfied or very satisfied with the education provided by children's Catholic primary school	83	86
Satisfied or very satisfied with the education provided by children's Catholic secondary school	85	85

*Includes Catholic parents who never attend Mass

Source: Catholic Church Life Survey 1996, Questionnaire sent home to parents of children attending Catholic schools. Infrequent attenders: N = 4,623, Frequent attenders: N = 7,668)



APPENDIX 2: THE 1998 AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Chapter 2 of this report identified and provided a brief description of the former Mass attenders who completed the 1998 Australian Community Survey. This appendix presents a more detailed report of that analysis, comparing former Mass attenders and frequent attenders with respect to their demographic characteristics, religious practices and beliefs, attitudes to the Church, the role of spirituality and religion in their lives, their moral attitudes and values, and their engagement in the wider community.

Demographic characteristics of former and frequent Mass attenders

When the ACS was conducted in 1998, 62 per cent of all former Mass attenders among the respondents were aged under 50, with 46 per cent aged between 30 and 49 and a further sixteen per cent aged in their twenties. By comparison, only 49 per cent of frequent attenders were aged under 50.

Table A2: Age profile of former and frequent Mass attenders

Age group	Former attenders (%)	Frequent attenders (%)
25-29	16.3	12.9
30-39	23.3	15.9
40-49	22.7	20.3
50-59	15.6	16.0
60-69	9.6	14.2
70-79	10.4	14.0
80-89	1.7	6.3
90+	0.4	0.5

Source: Australian Community Survey, 1998. N=473

Forty-one per cent of Catholics aged 20 to 34 who had been regular attenders at some stage of their adult lives were no longer attending Mass by the time they completed the survey, indicating that people in their twenties and early thirties are at high risk of dropping out of regular Mass attendance.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was no difference between men and women in the proportion of adult Catholics who stopped going to Mass, nor did level of education have any significant impact. Former Mass attenders were more likely to be Australian-born (76%) than frequent attenders (69%) and they were also less likely, when they were children, to have had two parents who were actively involved in their parish (45%) than was the case for frequent Mass attenders (59%). Not surprisingly, former attenders were more likely than frequent attenders to say that none of their close friends were regular church attenders (28% compared with 11%).

Former Mass attenders were more likely to be full-time employed and they were almost twice as likely to, at least occasionally, work on Sunday (29%) compared with frequent attenders (16%). They also rated their lives as busier than frequent attenders did. Some of this difference is due to the younger age profile of former attenders. It may also reflect differences in priorities, but whether some respondents stopped going to church because they gave a higher priority to work commitments is impossible to say.

Almost one quarter (23%) of former attenders lived in a de facto relationship or were separated, divorced or remarried as compared with one tenth (9.6%) of frequent attenders. The latter figure is consistent with the results of the 2001 National Church Life Survey, in which eight per cent of Mass attenders described themselves as separated, divorced or remarried after divorce, or living in a de facto relationship (Dixon 2005).

Among married former attenders, only seven per cent had spouses who attended church more than once a month, while 90 per cent had spouses who attended monthly or less often. On the other hand, among married people who were frequent attenders, the spouses of 62 per cent were regular attenders and only 37 per cent rarely or never attended. These figures suggest that people are much more likely to attend Mass if their spouse is also an attender, and also that, once a person decides to stop attending Mass, it is probable that their spouse will eventually do likewise. In other words, a decision by one person to stop going to Mass may actually result in two people no longer attending.



Practice and beliefs

Most people who stop going to Church regularly do not stop attending completely. Two-thirds of the former Mass attenders (67%) said they still go to church from one to several times a year, while only one-quarter (23%) said they never attend. Around half (51%) still placed some importance on attending. In fact, a quarter of these (12% of all former attenders) said that, for them, going to Church was 'very important'.

Three-quarters (76%) of former attenders said that prayer was important in providing them with a sense of peace and wellbeing (as compared with 97 per cent of frequent attenders). Although most former attenders do still pray, they do so much less frequently than frequent Mass attenders. Seventy-two per cent of frequent attenders pray at least a few times a week; in contrast, only 34 per cent of former attenders pray this frequently.

Compared with frequent Mass attenders, former attenders were less likely to have faith in a personal God (48% compared with 83%) and were more inclined to view God as a life force (40% : 14%) or to say they did not know what to think or believe about God (11% : 3%). Sixty per cent said they felt close or very close to God, but among frequent attenders this figure was 85 per cent.

Likewise, former attenders were less likely than frequent attenders to affirm Christian teachings such as:

- the divinity of Christ (65% compared with 86%)
- the power of Jesus' death to bring about the forgiveness of sins (57% : 90%)
- Jesus' resurrection from the dead as an actual historical event (60% : 84%)
- life after death (53% : 82%)
- heaven (66% : 93%)
- hell (32% : 73%)
- the devil (32% : 75%)

Attitudes towards the Church

Compared with frequent Mass attenders, former attenders were more likely to hold negative opinions about the Church and less likely to hold positive views. For example, they were more likely to agree or strongly agree with statements such as 'Most church services are boring', 'The cases of sexual abuse by priests and other church workers have damaged my confidence in the churches' and 'Churches spend too much energy keeping their institutional structures going'. In contrast, they were more likely than frequent attenders to disagree or strongly disagree with statements such as 'Most churches today are effective in helping people find meaning in life' and 'The Church is a place where a warm sense of community and acceptance is usually found'.

They were also inclined to have a negative picture of other church attenders, one third saying that hardly any or only a few church attenders were kind to others and almost half saying that that some or most church attenders say one thing but do another.

Role of spirituality and religion

While former Mass attenders were less likely than frequent attenders to agree that there are things that cannot be explained by science and are more in the realm of the spiritual, this is not to say they reject spirituality altogether. In fact, about three-quarters of former attenders considered living a spiritual life (emphasis on spiritual not material matters) or devout life (holding to religious faith and beliefs) to be important, although neither the percentage nor the degree of importance attached to these things was as high as they were among frequent attenders. Around two-fifths of former attenders said that there were more important things than their spiritual life compared with one-fifth of frequent attenders. What this means is that former attenders do still value spirituality and religion but generally it is not foremost among their values. As a consequence, other considerations may come ahead of church attendance.



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Moral attitudes and values

Former Mass attenders were more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement 'Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own way' (75%) although quite a high proportion of frequent attenders also held this view (66%). Former attenders were more likely to be moral relativists, with just under half (45%) agreeing with the statement 'There can never be absolutely clear guidelines about what is good and evil as this depends on the circumstances at the time'. Note, however, that one-third (34%) of frequent attenders also held this view.

Former attenders did not significantly differ from frequent attenders in many of their social and moral attitudes such as their assessment of the effect of immigration on Australian society and their attitude to cheating in relation to paying tax. However, they differed considerably in their views about abortion and euthanasia as well as in their views about sexual relationships. Forty-four per cent of former attenders said that abortion should never be permitted, or should only be permitted in extreme circumstances, whereas this view was held by 84 per cent of frequent attenders. With regard to euthanasia, two-thirds of former attenders (66%) believed that it was sometimes or always justified, and three-quarters (75%) believed that people should be able to choose to die if suffering from a terminal illness. In contrast, less than one-third of frequent attenders (30%) believed euthanasia was sometimes or always justified and just over a third (35%) said that people suffering from a terminal illness should be able to choose to die.

Frequent and former attenders also had different views about sexual relationships. Seven in ten former attenders (68%) believed that sex before marriage was not wrong, compared with just over one-third (37%) of frequent attenders. Former attenders were also less likely to say that sexual relationships between people of the same sex were always or almost always wrong (31% compared with 68% of frequent attenders), and 70 per cent held that divorce is always or sometimes justified although half of all frequent attenders (52%) also held this view.

The wider community

Former Mass attenders were somewhat less likely than frequent attenders to be involved in at least occasional voluntary work in the wider community (43% compared with 52%). However, former Mass attenders contributed at similar levels as frequent attenders in less formal or organisation-based forms of social action such as caring for the sick or elderly, helping someone with a personal crisis and giving away possessions, and in the amount they donated to charity each year.

These results show that once people stop going to Mass, the degree to which they accept Catholic beliefs and moral teachings is likely to decline. The notion of 'believing without belonging', that people who no longer attend church maintain religious beliefs and moral attitudes similar to those held by church attenders, is not supported by the evidence presented here. There may well be exceptions but, for most Catholics, levels of belief will eventually decline if they do not participate in the life of the Catholic faith community.

APPENDIX 3: LETTER TO PARISH PRIESTS

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic University
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy Vic 3065

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Fax. 03 9415 1196
e-mail: admin@ppo.catholic.org.au

11 May 2005

Rev Patrick Parish PP
Parish Priest
St Mary's Catholic Parish
12 Angel Street
Churchville

Dear Fr Parish,

At its November 2004 Plenary Meeting, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference requested that this office carry out research to discover the reasons why some Catholics who were regular Mass attenders in the past have ceased going to Mass in recent years.

The research will be carried out by conducting about eight to ten interviews in six Australian dioceses. With the approval of Bishop N, the Diocese of X has been selected as one of these.

The Vicar-General, Monsignor Y, has suggested that your parish may be able to assist us with this research. I am writing to the Chairperson of your Parish Council with the request that this project be discussed at the next meeting of the Council. A copy of the letter is enclosed. Also enclosed is an information sheet outlining the characteristics of people we are seeking to interview and the areas to be covered in the interview.

In my letter to the Chairperson, I ask the members of the Council to identify and contact two or three men or women they know who have ceased attending Mass in recent years, and to ask those people if they would be interested in participating in this study.

We have chosen to work through parish councils rather than parish priests because of the potential sensitivities that may be associated with parish priests approaching potential participants. This letter is to inform you about the project and to ask you to facilitate the parish council's response to the project.

This project provides participants with an opportunity to make known their experiences to the bishops and to the wider Catholic community while also offering them an opportunity to explore and raise their own awareness of their faith journey within a secure, professional environment. It will provide bishops with information that will help them to increase their understanding of the factors that cause regular Mass attenders to stop attending Mass and to identify pastoral strategies that may enable outreach to those who are in the process of disconnecting or have already left parish life. A summary of the results of the research will be made available to all participants at the conclusion of the project.

(continued overleaf)

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

The members of the research team are as follows:

- Mr Robert Dixon (Principal Investigator)
- Ms Sharon Bond (Project Manager: ACBC Pastoral Projects Office Research Assistant)
- Mr Bryan Cussen (ACBC Pastoral Projects Office Research Officer)
- Ms Katherine Wright (ACBC Pastoral Projects Office Research Assistant)
- Dr Kath Engebretson (Australian Catholic University)
- Dr Richard Rymarz (Australian Catholic University)

I trust that your Parish Council will be able to assist us in this important research project.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Dixon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Bob Dixon
Director
ACBC Pastoral Projects Office

APPENDIX 4: LETTER TO PARISH COUNCILS

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic University
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy Vic 3065

Ph. 03 9953 3456
Fax. 03 9415 1196
e-mail: admin@ppo.catholic.org.au

11 May 2005

Mrs Patricia Church
Parish Council Chairperson
St Mary's Catholic Parish
12 Angel Street
Churchville

Dear Mrs Church,

At its November 2004 Plenary Meeting, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference requested that this office carry out research to discover the reasons why some Catholics who were regular Mass attenders in the past have ceased going to Mass in recent years.

The research will be carried out by conducting about eight to ten interviews in six Australian dioceses. With the approval of Bishop N, the Diocese of X has been selected as one of these.

The Vicar-General, Monsignor Y, has suggested that your parish may be able to assist us with this research. I am writing to you with the request that you discuss this project at the next meeting of your Parish Council.

I would like to ask the members of the Council to identify and contact two or three men or women they know who have ceased attending Mass in recent years. I would like to ask them to give those people a copy of the enclosed information sheet, and to ask them if they would be interested in participating in this study. The information sheet outlines the characteristics of people we are seeking to interview and the areas to be covered in the interview.

People who are interested in participating in the project should then be invited to complete one of the enclosed pink forms giving permission for their contact details to be passed on to us so that we can contact them to discuss the study with them and seek their formal consent to participate.

Please return any completed pink forms to this office along with the enclosed Parish Council Response Form (yellow). I would appreciate it if the forms could be returned as soon as practicable so that the interview stage of the project can begin.

This project provides participants with an opportunity to make known their experiences to the bishops and to the wider Catholic community. It will provide bishops with information that will help them to increase their understanding of the factors that cause regular Mass attenders to stop attending Mass and to identify pastoral strategies that may enable outreach to those who are in the process of disconnecting or have already left parish life. A summary of the results of the research will be made available to all participants at the conclusion of the project.

(continued overleaf)

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

We have chosen to work through parish councils rather than parish priests because of the potential sensitivities that may be associated with parish priests approaching potential participants. However, I have written to your parish priest to let him know about the project and to ask him to facilitate the parish council's response to the project.

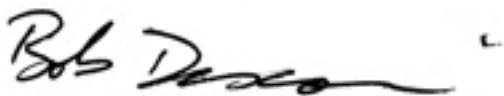
The members of the research team are as follows:

- Mr Robert Dixon (Principal Investigator)
- Ms Sharon Bond (Project Manager: ACBC Pastoral Projects Office Research Assistant)
- Mr Bryan Cussen (ACBC Pastoral Projects Office Research Officer)
- Ms Katherine Wright (ACBC Pastoral Projects Office Research Assistant)
- Dr Kath Engebretson (Australian Catholic University)
- Dr Richard Rymarz (Australian Catholic University)

I trust that you and the other members of the Parish Council will be able to assist us in this important research project.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Dixon". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bob Dixon
Director
ACBC Pastoral Projects Office

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE PASTORAL PROJECTS OFFICE

Research Project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass INFORMATION SHEET

In November 2004, the bishops of Australia requested that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Projects Office carry out research to discover the reasons why some Catholics who were regular Mass attenders in the past have ceased going to Mass in recent years.

The research will be carried out by conducting about eight to ten interviews in each of six Australian dioceses.

The people to be interviewed will be Catholics, of any age from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders but who have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years. They may or may not have been active parishioners; what is important is that there was a long period in their adult lives when they attended Mass every week, or nearly every week, but then at some time stopped attending regularly. Interviews will last approximately one hour and will be conducted in a convenient location for participants. In most cases interviews will be conducted by a researcher of the same sex as the participant.

Interviews will cover matters such as:

- The participants' history of participation in church life while growing up and as an adult.
- Their feelings of belonging to, and satisfaction with, parish life.
- Factors which led them to stop being regular Mass attenders.
- For married participants, the role of partners in the process.
- Whether participants maintained any other types of involvement in the Church after ceasing to be regular Mass attenders.
- Their current feelings towards the parish and attitudes to the Church.
- Their current religious beliefs and spiritual life.
- The extent to which they agree or disagree with the teachings of the Church.
- Whether there are any factors which would lead them to consider becoming a regular Mass attender again.

It is important to understand that the aim of the research is to listen to the stories and the points of view of participants. The interviewers will make no judgements about participants' decisions, beliefs or practices, nor is it the role of the interviewer to invite participants to consider a return to regular attendance.

The project provides participants with an opportunity to make their experiences and feelings known to the bishops and to the wider Catholic community. Interviews will be confidential, and it will not be possible to identify any individual participant in any report or publication. A summary of the results will be made available to all participants at the conclusion of the project.

The research will provide bishops with information that will help them to increase their understanding of the factors that cause regular Mass attenders to stop attending Mass and to identify pastoral strategies that may enable outreach to those who are in the process of disconnecting or have already left parish life.

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

For further information, contact the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Projects Office,
Locked Bag 4115, Fitzroy, Victoria 3065.

Ph: (03) 9953 3457

Email: admin@ppo.catholic.org.au

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic University
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Research Project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass

CONSENT TO PROVIDE CONTACT DETAILS TO THE PASTORAL PROJECTS OFFICE

I have been approached by a member of the Parish Council of
Parish who has informed me about the research project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass, and has given me a copy of the Information Sheet. As I am interested in participating in the project, I give my consent to the Parish Council to pass on the contact details which appear below to the Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. I understand that I will be contacted by the Pastoral Projects Office and that I will have an opportunity to discuss the study before giving my formal consent to participate.

NAME: TITLE:

(please use block letters)

SEX: FEMALE
MALE

AGE: 25-39
40-64
65 or over

ADDRESS:

..... POSTCODE:

DAY TIME PHONE :

EMAIL ADDRESS:

SIGNATURE

DATE

APPENDIX 7: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic University
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy Vic 3065

Ph. 03 9953 3456
Fax. 03 9415 1196
e-mail: admin@ppo.catholic.org.au

9 September, 2005

Mr Michael Participant
8 Wellington Avenue
CHURCHVILLE

Research Project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass

Letter to Participants

Title of project: Research Project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass

Names of investigators: Mr Robert Dixon (Principal Investigator)
Ms Sharon Bond (Project Manager)
Mr Bryan Cussen
Ms Katherine Wright
Dr Kath Engebretson
Dr Richard Rymarz

Dear Mr Participant,

Thank-you for expressing interest in this research project by allowing your contact details to be passed on to us.

The project arose from a request by the Australian Catholic bishops that research be carried out to discover the reasons why some Catholics who were regular Mass attenders in the past have ceased going to Mass in recent years.

In order to answer this question, the research team named above plans to interview eight to ten people in each of six selected Australian Catholic dioceses. The people we will interview will be Catholics, of any age from about 25 upwards, who were once regular Mass attenders but who have stopped going regularly to Mass within the last five or so years. They may or may not have been active parishioners; what is important is that there was a long period in their adult lives when they attended Mass every week, or nearly every week, but then at some time stopped attending regularly.

If you decide that you would like to participate in this project, we will arrange for you to take part in an interview of approximately one hour's duration that will be conducted in a convenient location for you.

(continued overleaf)

Interviews will cover matters such as:

- Your history of participation in Church life while growing up and as an adult.
- Your feelings of belonging to, and satisfaction with, parish life.
- Factors which led you to stop being a regular Mass attender.
- If you are married, what role your spouse played in your decision to stop attending Mass regularly.
- Whether you kept up any other types of involvement in the Church after ceasing to be a regular Mass attender.
- Your current feelings towards the parish and attitudes to the Church.
- Your current religious beliefs and spiritual life.
- The extent to which you agree or disagree with the teachings of the Church.
- Whether there are any factors which would lead you to consider becoming a regular Mass attender again.

It is important to understand that the aim of the research is to listen to your story and to your point of view. The interviewers will make no judgements about your decisions, beliefs or practices, nor is it the role of the interviewer to invite you to consider a return to regular attendance.

This project provides you with an opportunity to make your experiences and feelings known to the Catholic bishops of Australia and to the wider Catholic community. It is expected that the research results will add to our knowledge of the significant changes taking place within the Catholic Church. The bishops will use the information obtained through the project to increase their understanding of the factors that cause regular Mass attenders to stop attending Mass. It will help them to identify pastoral strategies that may enable outreach to those who are in the process of leaving or have already left parish life.

Participation in this research project is, of course, entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part without having to justify your decision. Furthermore, if you do decide to take part, you may change your mind and discontinue participation at any time without giving a reason.

The interviews will be taped and transcripts of these will be made. Both tapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure location at the Melbourne campus of Australian Catholic University. Results of the research will be reported to the bishops and then to the Catholic and academic communities through articles in Catholic newspapers and magazines, on-line publications and academic journals. However, it will not be possible to identify any individual participant in any report or publication. Where direct quotations from interviews are used, care will be taken to ensure that no identifying material is included.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to me as the Principal Investigator on (03) 9953 3456, or to Ms Sharon Bond, the Project Manager, on (03) 9953 3457, at the Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, located at Australian Catholic University, Locked Bag 4115, Fitzroy, Victoria, 3065.

If you would like to hear about the results of the research, we would be pleased to send you a summary of the results at the conclusion of the project.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University. In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the study, or if you have any query that the Principal Investigator or Project Manager have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the following address:

Chair, HREC
C/o Research Services
Australian Catholic University
Melbourne Campus
Locked Bag 4115
FITZROY VIC 3065
Tel: 03 9953 3157
Fax: 03 9953 3315

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

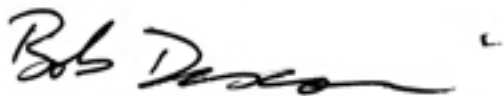
If you agree to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the Consent Form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to:

Ms Sharon Bond
ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic University
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy Victoria 3065

Sharon will then contact you to arrange a suitable time and location for an interview.

With thanks for your interest in this project,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Dixon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Bob Dixon
Principal Investigator.

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

ACBC Pastoral Projects Office
Australian Catholic University
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy Vic 3065

Ph. 03 9953 3456
Fax. 03 9415 1196
e-mail: admin@ppo.catholic.org.au

Research Project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass

CONSENT FORM

Title of project: Research Project on Catholics who no longer attend Mass

Names of investigators: Mr Robert Dixon (Principal Investigator)
Ms Sharon Bond (Project Manager)
Mr Bryan Cussen
Ms Katherine Wright
Dr Kath Engebretson
Dr Richard Rymarz

I,, have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I can withdraw at any time. I give my consent for the interview to be audio-taped. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:
(block letters)

SIGNATURE DATE

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

DATE:

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Catholics who have stopped attending Mass

Personal information

- Age
- Marital Status
- Education
- Occupation

Faith journey

- Parents' religion and church participation
- Number of siblings and their church participation
- Personal participation during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and feelings about church during those periods
- Changes in belief and spiritual of personal significance
- Partner's church history

Involvement prior to ceasing attendance

- Frequency of Mass attendance
- Involvements in parish activities
- Involvements in Catholic school or other church organizations
- Level of personal feeling of belonging
- Level of partner's involvement in Church

Process of ceasing attendance

- When and how did the process begin and factors which influenced the decision
- Was disconnection gradual or abrupt: was there a moment of decision or realization?
- Partner's attitude and whether it was a joint process
- Did other involvements in Church persist

Current attitudes to Church

- Current assessments of factors which led to change in attendance: strength of feeling
- Feelings and attitudes to parish and to wider Church
- Whether self-identification as Catholic continues and level of importance of that
- Whether faith journey continues and ways that is fostered and expressed
- Any ongoing participation in Church organizations or activities
- Any factors which would lead to a consideration of returning to regular Mass attendance
- Involvement in community service, social advocacy, charity support etc. and relationship of that to faith

Faith and moral questions

- Level of agreement with Nicene Creed
- Agreement or disagreement with Catholic teaching on:
 - Contraception
 - Divorce
 - Abortion
 - Pre-marital sex
 - Homosexuality
 - Priestly celibacy
 - Women's ordination
 - Admission to communion of people who publicly disagree with official teaching

Note: *This guide was used more as a prompt and checklist for the interviewer than as a set of topics to be worked through in any systematic way. It also served as a means of keeping interviews on track; most participants required little prompting to talk about their experiences, but sometimes had to be reminded what the focus of the interview was.*

APPENDIX 10: CONSULTATION SESSION

Research on Catholics who have stopped attending Mass **A consultation process for Catholic leadership bodies**

Australia's bishops say of the research on Catholics who have stopped attending Mass: 'The research project is part of our deep and ongoing desire to connect with people who have left the Church and to listen to their experiences, so that we might identify ways to reach out to them and welcome them back' (Media release, 1 December 2006).

This consultation session offers a way to assist the bishops in forming such pastoral strategies. It is designed to help you reflect on the research with your colleagues and to generate ideas for action that the Church can take to reach out to people who may be drifting away from Church belonging or who have already gone.

Before the session

Each participant is asked to:

- Read the research report.
- Reflect on its findings in the light of people you know who have stopped attending Mass.
- Begin to think of practical pastoral responses that could be taken at one of three levels:
 - the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.
 - the local diocese.
 - the local parish.

You might also look at some programs that are offered in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, for example,

www.bne.catholic.net.au/crh

www.OnceCatholic.org

www.landings-international.org

www.richmond.demon.co.uk/landings/index.html

www.archdioceseofanchorage.org/living/home.html

At the session:

1. Begin with a time of prayer. You might reflect on Acts 2:42-47 which outlines the ideals of community belonging that we would like all Catholics to experience.
2. The group leader presents a brief synopsis of the report to remind people of the main findings.
3. People are then invited to share in threes what stood out for them in the research and to relate that to their own knowledge of people who have drifted away from the Church. People next share significant points with the whole group and record these on butcher's paper/whiteboard/overhead, etc.
4. The research proposes that the Church take actions to reduce the likelihood of people drifting away. Using butcher's paper/whiteboard, etc., brainstorm two lists: one of areas that the Church in Australia can address and one of areas that are beyond our capacity or competence to address.

5. Using the list of areas that the Church in Australia *can* address:
 - a. each person writes their ideas for pastoral strategies on A4 cards, one idea for each card
 - b. they place their cards on the wall in three areas: Bishops Conference, dioceses, parishes.
 - c. everyone walks around and looks at the range of ideas on the wall and, if necessary, questions of clarification can be asked.
 - d. by consensus/voting/prioritising, etc. the group discerns which two or three ideas from each area it would like to develop a little more and forward to the Pastoral Projects Office. Smaller groups can then be formed to spend 15-20 minutes developing the strategies.
 - e. once the ideas are developed, someone is nominated to write them up and send them to the Pastoral Projects Office.
6. The meeting closes with thanks to participants and a prayer for the continued work of all in the Church in reaching out to all members of the Catholic community.