

**Comparison of Catholic church attenders in the US and Australia:
A first look at some results from the International Congregational Life
Survey**

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Abstract

In April and May 2001, a massive survey of almost 900,000 church attenders from a wide range of Christian denominations took place in Australia, New Zealand, England and the United States. Catholic parishes were involved in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. This paper outlines the background to the project, known as the International Congregational Life Survey, and briefly describes how its original theoretical basis grew out of a concern to measure vitality in Australian Protestant and evangelical Anglican congregations. The paper outlines the scope of Catholic participation and notes the unsuitability for Catholic parishes of the original vitality model before going on to suggest that the prevailing theological understanding of the Catholic Church may provide a way forward in the development of a Catholic model of parish vitality.

The second half of the paper provides a comparative demographic profile of Catholic attenders in the US and Australia, and a preliminary comparison of some results on Mass attendance, levels of involvement in parish life and other measures of parish participation, personal faith and pastoral leadership.

Note:

For the sake of convenience, I often refer in this paper to 'Americans' and 'Australians', or 'American attenders' and 'Australian attenders', when in fact I always mean, unless specifically stated otherwise 'American Catholic attenders' and 'Australian Catholic attenders'.

1. Background to the International Congregational Life Survey

The International Congregational Life Survey (ICLS) is the largest project of its type in the world. This immense survey of Church attenders, which grew out of the National Church Life Surveys conducted in Australia in 1991 and 1996, was carried out in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and England in April and May 2001.

One of the things that makes the ICLS such a unique project among all the studies of churches that have been undertaken in recent years is its focus on investigating the practices, attitudes and opinions of individual attenders or worshippers. Another is its size and breadth: In Australia, questionnaires were completed by over 430,000 attenders in more than 7,000 congregations and parishes from nineteen Christian denominations. In New Zealand, about 60,000 attenders took part, while in England there were more than 107,000 participants. Finally, in the United States, over 300,000 attenders in more than 2,000 congregations and parishes took part. These figures included a national random sample of 424 congregations involving 122,000 attenders.

Overall, this means that across these four countries, almost 900,000 people aged 15 and over took part in this project. Catholics participated in three of the four countries, but not in England.

Of course, it is not necessary to compile a sample of anywhere near this size if one's aim is simply to create national random samples with which to investigate the practices, attitudes and opinions of people attending worship. And here we come to another unique aspect of the ICLS design — the emphasis on including all the worshippers (aged 15 and over) at each participating congregation or parish so that detailed feedback can be provided to each congregation or parish for use as material for theological reflection and pastoral planning. In each of the four participating countries, much effort has recently been put into the task of preparing and distributing reports and associated resources to each one of the thousands of participating congregations and parishes. As well, because the project collects the views of all the attenders, and because there was also a questionnaire on the congregation or parish as a whole and another one to be completed by the senior leader, it is possible to carry out *congregational or parish-level analysis*.

The large size of the sample also allowed the research teams to use a mixture of questionnaire versions to collect smaller national samples of responses to particular topics.

It can be seen that the ICLS project offers unprecedented opportunities for research-based support of local faith communities and for research into the characteristics of attenders and congregations. It offers a real opportunity for us to deepen our understanding of parish and congregational vitality.

2. The US and Australian Catholic samples

In the United States, the ICLS was carried out by the Research Services unit of the Presbyterian Church (USA), where Cynthia Woolever served as Project Director and Deborah Bruce as Project Manager. Funding for the project was provided by the Lilley Foundation.

The US sample structure was devised and drawn by NORC using hypernetwork sampling techniques first used for sampling congregations by Chaves in the National Congregations Study (Chaves et al. 1999). The sampling process and the final achieved sample is described in Woolever and Bruce (2002). The sample yielded 97 Catholic parishes, from which came approximately 69,000 completed questionnaires. According to CARA (the Center for Applied

Research in the Apostolate, in Washington DC) the total number of US Catholic parishes in 2001 was 19,143, so the sample included about half on one percent of all Catholic parishes.

In Australia, the project was carried out by NCLS Research, a partnership of the Uniting Church in New South Wales (NSW), Anglicare (NSW) and, since December 2000, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). The author of this paper is Director of the ACBC's Pastoral Projects Office and a member of the NCLS Research team. There is nothing comparable to the Lilley Foundation in Australia, so the project is paid for by contributions by the partner organisations, by participation fees paid by parishes and congregations, and through the sale of reports and publications.

Of the 1400 or so Catholic parishes in Australia, a stratified random sample of 261 was drawn to take part in the survey. The sample was stratified by diocese so as to allow for statistically reliable reporting at diocesan level. It was, after all, the bishops, through the ACBC, who paid for the participation of the sample parishes. From the 256 parishes in the sample which actually took part, 77,200 questionnaires were received.

Thus we have similarly sized samples of attenders in the two countries, even though they are drawn from substantially different numbers of parishes. In the US, the number of returned questionnaires per parish was 711, whereas in Australia it was only 302. In both countries, the sample size and structure is more than adequate for attender level analysis, and can therefore serve as a reliable basis for comparison between Catholic attenders in the US and Australia. In the US, however, the number of parishes is too small to carry out parish-level analysis with any confidence, even though the Australian situation does allow for such analysis. This paper, therefore, is restricted to attender level analysis.

The paper is being written very early in the process of analysing the two data sets, and so the results presented here are necessarily very preliminary. The vast task of data cleaning has only very recently been completed. There has not yet been any opportunity to make certain adjustments to the data to take account of things such as clustering effects.

In Australia, the data also have to be weighted to take account of the diocesan stratification. For example, in the tiny (in terms of population) diocese like Broome in the North-West of Australia, seven of its nine parishes were included in the sample, whereas in the largest diocese, the Archdiocese of Melbourne, only 13% of its 232 parishes were included.

In the results presented here, (Australian) diocesan weightings have been applied, but the effect of clustering has not been taken into account.

3. The theoretical basis of the study: the search for a model

The ICLS instrument was not primarily designed for use in Catholic parishes. The Catholic Church did not participate in the original (1991) National Church Life Survey (NCLS) project in Australia, and in 1996 ran a parallel but separate project known as the Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS). The 2001 project was therefore the first real attempt to incorporate Catholic perspectives into the design of the NCLS questionnaire.

The fundamental purpose of the NCLS project in 1991 and again in 1996 was to measure vitality in evangelical Anglican and Protestant congregations in Australia, and thereby suggest ways in

which individual congregations might improve their own vitality. This excellent and painstaking work culminated in the 1997 publication of *Shaping a future: characteristics of vital congregations* (Kaldor et al.), in which seven indicators of congregational vitality were identified and extensively analysed. The seven indicators were:

- Levels of newcomers
- Young adult retention
- Numerical growth
- Growing sense of belonging
- Wider community involvement
- Sharing faith with others
- Growth in faith

For a time, there was a natural tendency on the part of NCLS Research to assume that their findings held to a greater or lesser degree for congregations and parishes of all denominations, as they seemed to be successful across a wide range of Protestant denominations. Catholic researchers in Australia, however, were quite sure that these seven indicators were not the crucial measures of Catholic parish vitality. Furthermore, when the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey data are analysed in terms of these indicators, Catholic parishes do not appear to do anywhere near as well as Protestant congregations. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Mockabee et al. 2001:676), 'the fact that Evangelical Protestants have very high levels of commitment relative to Catholics ... may be an artifact of the measures used, not the result of evangelicals actually being more committed to their faith'. The NCLS Research model, for example, attaches great weight to items about discussing faith with others and inviting others to church, both items clearly understood as part of a congregation's approach to evangelism. Catholic attenders, on the other hand, are far less likely to attach such a meaning to these items, but rather to interpret the first as a merely private measure of their own level of comfort in talking about their religious faith and the second as a matter of hospitality.

Clearly, the NCLS Research program had to be broadened if it was to be of much benefit to Catholic parishes. Interestingly, the involvement of churches in New Zealand, England and the United States also led to pressure to broaden the model, as the research teams in each of those countries contributed their own perspectives on congregational vitality.

All this resulted in the 'model' of congregational vitality for the 2001 survey being looser than that described in *Shaping a future*. In fact, it was less a model than a simple framework on which a number of 'core qualities' of parish and congregational life were arranged. From the framework, participating churches can select those elements which matter most to them. In Australia, it took the form of the *Connections for Life* framework, with four dimensions and twelve core qualities, as follows (Kaldor et al. 2002):

Faith and worship

1. An alive and growing faith
2. Vital and nurturing worship

Our life together

3. Growth in belonging and involvement
4. An active concern for those on the fringe of church life
5. Care for young people

Community connections

6. A focus beyond ourselves
7. Serving the wider community
8. Discussing faith and inviting others to church
9. Integrating newcomers

Vision and purpose

10. A clear, owned vision for the future
11. Openness to new possibilities
12. Empowering and inspiring leadership

In the US, a similar ‘connections’ theme was used by Woolever and Bruce (2002) to report the preliminary results, with the following four broad categories:

1. Spiritual connections
2. Inside connections
3. Outside connections
4. Identity, leadership, vision

These frameworks are better suited to Catholic parishes than the *Shaping a future* model. Important elements of Catholic parish life can be grouped under the four broad areas of the Australian or US frameworks, but not all the core qualities are of equal concern to Catholic parishes. Indeed, as I indicated above, at least one of them (‘Discussing faith and inviting others to church’) contributes very little to an appreciation of Catholic parish vitality. The most useful core qualities for studying the vitality of Catholic parishes are probably 1 - 3, 6, 7 and 10 - 12.

What this leaves us with is a collection of loosely related qualities rather than a well-constructed model. In order to use the ICLS data to deepen our understanding of Catholic parish vitality, we need to build a new and coherent model, and to find the building materials for that, we need to look beyond the data.

4. Building a Catholic model: *communio* ecclesiology

The prevailing ecclesiology (that is, the Church’s theological self-understanding) in the Catholic Church at present is the ecclesiology of *communio*, which sees the Church as a *communio for mission*. The concept of *communio* here is almost synonymous with community, but is used to indicate that the local parish is not an isolated community but is rather in relationship with the diocese and the universal church, and furthermore, that the community has a spiritual dimension to it as well, in its relationship with God. Implied in the notion of *communio* is the idea that a parish which is good at living this ecclesiology will be a *successful* community and *effective* in mission.

Although participation in the ICLS meant, as far as possible, using a common questionnaire across different denominations and in different countries, some allowance was made for Catholic differences. A Catholic version of the main attender questionnaire was designed, and there was a very high degree of comparability between the questionnaires prepared for Catholics in Australia, the United States and New Zealand. It was not possible, of course, given the nature of the ICLS project, to design a new questionnaire from the ground up to fit a *communio* understanding of the Church, but the modifications introduced into the Catholic version were

made with a *communio* ecclesiology in mind and, in the end, the instrument incorporated most of the key elements of that ecclesiology.

Communio ecclesiology underpins recent documents on parish or diocesan pastoral planning prepared by numerous dioceses in the US and Australia, including the US Archdioceses of Chicago, Baltimore and Milwaukee and the Dioceses of Rockford, IL, and Albany, NY.

Most of these planning documents discuss Catholic parish life in terms of the four dimensions of

- proclamation:
- prayer and worship
- service
- community life

(corresponding to the New Testament terms *kerygma*, *leiturgia*, *diakonia* and *koinonia*).

These dimensions are coordinated and directed by the parish leaders. Parish leadership is often treated as a fifth dimension in the planning documents.

The Catholic version of the ICLS questionnaire was therefore designed to ensure that items examining each of these four dimensions of parish life, and parish leadership as well, were included. A full list of the questionnaire topics on each of these dimensions is given in the Appendix.

The modified-for-Catholics version of the questionnaire was completed by 68% of attenders in Australian parishes, and by 85% in US parishes. It was this questionnaire which supplied the data for reports back to parishes. The remaining attenders completed similar but different versions of the questionnaire designed to collect small national samples on a variety of topics.

While these dimensions were useful for ensuring a comprehensive coverage of parish life among the items in the questionnaire, they prove to be unsuitable when it comes to building a model for understanding parishes, being too static and unable to represent interactions among parishioners and between parishioners and parish leaders.

So a large part of the work of the next twelve months will be the search for and construction of a model of Catholic parish vitality. We have collected the data, now we need to build the model and develop the theory. It's not the ideal way of doing research, but it was the only practicable way forward if Catholic parishes were to take part in the ICLS.

But now let us have a very preliminary look at the data to see how US and Australian Catholic attenders compare.

5. US and Australian Catholic church-goers in the ICLS: a brief demographic profile

Figure 1 shows the comparative age profile for Catholic Church attenders in Australia and the US (see worksheet named 'Figure 1' in accompanying Excel file, RDixon SSSR tables.xls). The shape of the graph for the two countries is remarkably similar, but the US has somewhat higher proportions of attenders aged between 25 and 49. According to Table 1, the median age of Catholic attenders in Australia is 53.9 years, considerably older than the US figure of 50.6 years.

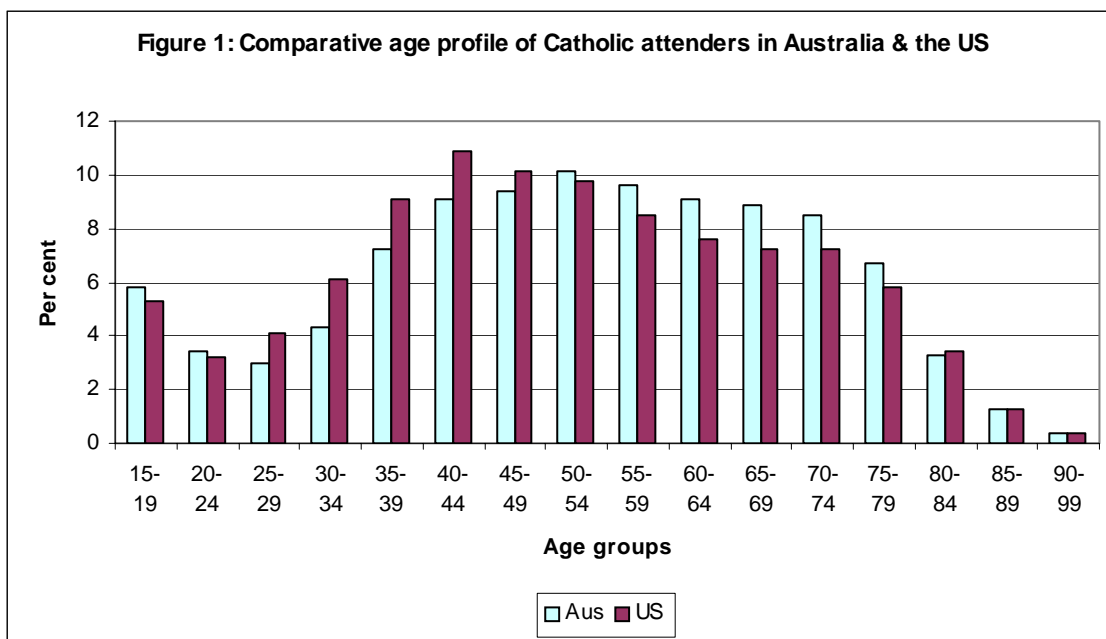


Table 1 also shows that the proportion of women among Catholic attenders is almost exactly the same in both countries, at 61 percent. Perhaps because of the older age profile, there is a higher proportion of retired people among Australian attenders, 30 percent compared to 23 percent. In both countries, the proportion of people with degrees is higher among attenders than it is among Catholics generally, but it is considerably higher among American attenders than it is among Australian attenders. Catholic attenders in the United States come from a variety of racial backgrounds, particularly white (66 percent), Hispanic (18 percent) and Asian (6 percent), but only 13 percent were born in non-English-speaking countries, compared to 25 percent of Australian Catholic attenders.

Table 1: Selected demographic characteristics

Characteristic	United States	Australia
Median age (years)	50.6	53.9
Female (%)	61.3	61.1
Retired (%)	23.0	30.2
Bachelor degree or higher qualification (%)	36.1	22.7
Born in non-English-speaking country (%)	13.1	25.0

There are some interesting differences in the pattern of marital status for the two countries (Table 2). The same percentage of attenders in each country gave their marital status as never married, but the percentage in their first marriage was much lower in the United States. In that country, significantly higher proportions of attenders than in Australia were divorced or had remarried after divorce, and there was also a higher, though still very small, proportion of attenders living in de facto relationships. These figures may reflect a longer period of high divorce rates in the US; divorce among Catholics in Australia has really only become quite common in the last twenty years.

Table 2: Marital status

Marital Status	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Never married	17.3	17.2
In first marriage	55.8	64.4
Remarried after divorce	7.2	2.9
Remarried after death of spouse	1.5	1.2
Living in committed relationship	2.2	1.0
Separated	1.4	1.5
Divorced	6.1	3.0
Widowed	8.6	8.8
Total	100	100

Am I, by the way, justified in referring to people who completed a questionnaire in a Catholic parish as ‘Catholic attenders’? I am. In Australia, we included a simple item that asked attenders whether they were Catholic or not. Ninety-seven percent said they were, and if the three percent who are not are removed from the analysis, it makes almost no difference to the results. The more detailed religion question in the 1996 CCLS found the same proportion of non-Catholics among attenders in Catholic parishes, and I suspect the situation in the US would be similar.

6. Initial comparisons on selected questionnaire items.

Firstly, let me say that when I began to compare the responses of Australian and US Catholics, I was astonished by the results. For example, let us begin with church attendance. NCLS Research has always asked the attendance question in a form such as ‘How often do you attend church services *in this congregation*’. Given the emphasis on congregational vitality, this is a reasonable question to ask. But observers of Catholic habits know that every week numerous Catholics attend Sunday Mass in a parish other than the one where they regularly attend, whether for the sake of convenience, or because they are away on vacation, or some other reason. So the Catholic version of the questionnaire asked *two* attendance questions, both ‘How often do you go to Mass *at this parish*?’ and ‘How often do you go to Mass?’.

In both countries, 87 percent of Catholic attenders go to Mass at least once a week. In each case, this figure includes 15 percent who go more than once a week (Table 3). Surprisingly, this similarity extends to frequency of attendance at the parish where the questionnaire was answered: 79 percent go to Mass at least once a week in that parish, including 12 percent who go more than once (Table 4).

Table 3: Frequency of attendance at Mass (anywhere)

Frequency	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Less than once a month	3.0	3.6
Once a month	1.6	1.9
2 or 3 times a month	8.4	7.1
Every week	72.5	72.3
More than once a week	14.5	15.1
Total	100	100

Table 4: Frequency of attendance at Mass *in this parish*

Frequency	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Less than once a month	7.8	8.1
Once a month	2.6	3.1
2 or 3 times a month	10.4	10.0
Every week	67.5	66.5
More than once a week	11.6	12.3
Total	100	100

It is hard to see why these figures are so alike, the Australian and US values differing by less than 1 percent in each case. Perhaps the general attendance result can be attributed to the teaching of the Catholic Church that weekly attendance at Sunday Mass is a serious obligation for Catholics, especially as 79 percent of Americans and 71 percent of Australians say they usually or always experience a sense of fulfilling an obligation during church services. But it is harder to explain why the difference between attendance *here* and attendance in general should be the same. One would expect that many local factors would come into play in this case. Perhaps it is just chance that the figures are so alike. What they definitely show, however, is that it is common behaviour among Catholics in both countries to attend Mass somewhere every week, even if for some reason they can't attend in their own parish on a particular Sunday.

The uncanny similarity of results continues when we look at other questionnaire items, too. Ten percent of Americans and 11 percent of Australians are involved in parish prayer, discussion or Bible study groups, a very much lower figure than for Protestant attenders in both countries. Nineteen percent in both countries are involved in parish clubs or social groups (Table 5). The warning articulated by Mockabee and his colleagues (see above) may be pertinent here. (It needs to be remembered that around six percent of attenders in each country say they are not in their own parish but are visiting from elsewhere. It is possible that some of these belong to groups or participate in other ways in their own parish, but these would be nowhere near enough to lift the percentage to the level of group involvement recorded by Protestant congregations).

Table 5: Involvement in parish groups

Type of group	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Involved in prayer, discussion or Bible study groups	10.2	10.5
Involved in clubs of social groups	18.9	18.6

Participation in parish activities reaching out to the wider community is also remarkably similar in both countries, with seven percent of Americans and six percent of Australians being involved in outreach or evangelisation activities, and 13 and 14 percent respectively being involved in the parish's community service, social justice or welfare activities (Table 6).

Table 6: Involvement in parish activities reaching out to the wider community

Type of involvement	United States (%)	Australia (%)
In evangelisation or outreach activities	6.6	6.2
In community service or social justice groups	13.3	14.2

American and Australian Catholics also report exceptionally similar levels of a sense of belonging to their parish (Table 7). Two-fifths say they have a strong and growing sense of belonging, more than another quarter say their sense of belonging is strong but stable, while another nine percent in both countries say their sense of belonging is declining. Eighty-two percent in both countries agree or strongly disagree that the parish is meeting their spiritual needs (Table 8), and around three-fifths agree or strongly agree that their parish grew in unity and strength during the previous year (Table 9).

Table 7: Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Yes, strong sense, growing	40.8	38.9
Yes, strong sense, same as last year	26.2	28.7
Yes, but not as strongly as in the past	8.5	8.9
No, but new here	5.9	5.5
No, and wish I did by now	4.0	2.9
No, but happy as I am	7.8	10.9
Don't know / not applicable	6.8	4.2
Total	100	100

Table 8: My spiritual needs are being met in this parish

	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Strongly agree	28.9	27.7
Agree	52.7	54.4
Neutral or unsure	14.0	13.9
Disagree	3.5	3.1
Strongly disagree	1.0	0.8
Total	100	100

Table 9: In the past year we have grown in unity and strength as a parish community

	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Strongly agree	19.1	13.1
Agree	42.2	44.4
Neutral or unsure	34.7	36.2
Disagree	3.3	5.3
Strongly disagree	0.8	1.0
Total	100	100

Even when we shift the focus away from parish life and look at the private devotional practices of attenders, there are strong similarities (Table 10). Forty-one percent of Americans and 45 percent of Australians spend time every day or most days in prayer, meditation or reading the Bible alone.

Table 10: How often do you spend time in private devotional activities?

Frequency	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Every day / most days	41.1	45.2
A few times a week / once a week	21.7	21.5
Occasionally	21.7	20.3
Hardly ever	11.1	9.2
Never	4.5	3.9
Total	100	100

All these figures were among the first I encountered when I began to compare results from the two countries. Just as I was beginning to wonder if I would find any differences to speak of at all, I found that Americans seemed to regard their parishes more positively, as 65 percent said their parish was ‘very important’ or ‘extremely important’ in their life, compared to 36 percent of Australians (Table 11). Why should this item draw such a different response pattern, given the high degree of similarity already noted in other aspects of parish life? Perhaps it was because it was near the end of the Australian questionnaire: people were tiring and there were higher numbers of missing values as in many parishes some people were not given time to finish filling in the questionnaire. But another clue to the difference becomes apparent when we look at attenders’ experience of worship. There were eight items common to the Catholic questionnaire in both countries on this topic. Let us look at inspiration, awe or mystery, and boredom. In comparison with Australians, Americans were far more likely to say they always or sometimes experience inspiration and awe or mystery during church services in this parish (Table 12). Is this an indication that liturgy is celebrated better in US parishes? Or are American attenders more attuned to what is happening in the liturgy? — another question for further investigation. Fortunately, in both countries, over 50 percent said they rarely or never experience boredom during church services in the parish, and another 40 percent or so said they experienced it sometimes.

Table 11: How important is this parish in your life?

	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Not at all important	3.3	5.0
A little important	16.4	22.0
Quite important	23.8	36.9
Very important	32.4	25.9
Extremely important	24.1	10.3
Total	100	100

Table 12: Experience of worship in this parish

Usually or always experience ...	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Inspiration	71.4	46.9
Awe or mystery	31.8	22.4
Boredom	7.3	7.3

Another interesting difference can be found in the question about acceptance of the Catholic Church's teaching authority. Virtually the same percentage from both countries said they accepted the teaching authority of Church with *some* or *no* difficulty, but Americans were more likely than Australians to say they accepted the Church's authority with *no* difficulty (Table 13). Whether this is a real difference in attitude to the Church's authority is a question for further research, but it would be very interesting to have the opportunity to ask the same question in US parishes now, in the light of several months of highly damaging publicity about clergy sexual abuse and allegations of official cover-ups.

Table 13: Acceptance of the Church's teaching authority

	United States (%)	Australia (%)
Yes, with no difficulty	57.9	48.0
Yes, with some difficulty	30.9	39.9
Yes, with great difficulty	3.0	6.5
No	4.0	5.9
Don't know *	4.2	--
Total	100	100

* This option was not provided for in the Australian version of the questionnaire

The full text of the question was: 'Do you acceptance the authority of the Church to teach that certain doctrines are true, are essential to the Catholic faith, and are to be believed by all Catholics?'

The question about attenders views on the Bible was another one that resulted in highly similar response patterns in both countries (Table 14). Just over half gave the 'correct' Catholic answer, that 'The Bible is the word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical context and the Church's teaching', while Americans were a little more likely than Australians (19% compared to 15%) to choose the option that 'The Bible is the word of God, to be taken literally word for word.

Table 14: Attitude to the Bible

The Bible is ...	United States (%)	Australia (%)
The word of God, to be taken literally word for word	18.5	15.3
The word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical and cultural context	18.3	19.2
The word of God, to be interpreted in light of its historical context and the Church's teaching	53.4	52.2
Not the word of God / a valuable book	5.5	8.5
Don't know	4.2	4.6
Total	100	100

There are some substantial differences in questions such as readiness to invite others to church or to talk about one's faith, and it is interesting to speculate whether these differences arise because questions like these are seen as less crucial to Catholic attenders' understanding of their personal faith and their parish. Australians, for example, were more than twice as likely as Americans (20% to 9%) to say they would *probably* or *definitely* not invite to Mass a friend or relative who is not already a church-goer. In contrast, 76 percent of Americans said they would be prepared to invite someone, or had actually done so in the past year, compared to 63 percent of Australians. American Catholics were somewhat more likely than their Australian counterparts to say they

felt at ease talking about their faith (60% compared to 52%), while the Australians preferred to let their life and actions speak for themselves rather than talk about their faith (US 14%, Australia 23%).

Finally, let us look at some questions from the area of leadership. The leadership styles of pastors seem to be similar, with two-fifths of attenders saying their pastor inspires people to take action (US 41%, Australia 39%), and the same proportion saying that the pastor takes attenders' ideas into account to a great extent (US 40%, Australia 38%). American attenders were somewhat more likely than Australians to say that their pastors tended to take charge (20% compared to 15%). However, there are substantial differences when it comes to vision and directions (Tables 15 & 16). Although only seven percent in both countries believe that the parish needs to go back to doing things the way it did in the past, Americans were more likely to report that their parish was moving in new directions, while Australians were more likely to say that their parish needed to *think about* a new direction. As well, almost half of the Americans (49%) said their parish had a clear vision or goals or direction for the future, compared to only 34 percent of Australians who thought this. Figures like this might reflect a greater emphasis on planning and the longer history of diocesan pastoral planning offices in the United States, or they might just be a product of the small sample of US parishes, since these questions are more about the parish as a whole and the individual pastor leading it than all the earlier questions we have looked at. Further investigation may enable us to answer questions like these. In both countries, large numbers chose 'Don't know' in response to the question on future directions and said they were not aware of a vision for the parish in response to the question about vision and goals.

Table 15: Future directions

	United States (%)	Australia (%)
We need to get back to the way we did things before	7.1	6.5
We are faithfully maintaining past directions	13.1	12.1
We are currently deciding on new directions	15.6	16.7
We are currently moving in new directions	27.8	22.7
We need to rethink where we are headed	6.9	17.1
Our future is very unclear or doubtful	1.8	4.2
Don't know	27.7	20.6
Total	100	100

Table 16: Does this parish have clear vision, goals or direction?

	United States (%)	Australia (%)
I am not aware of such a vision	25.4	34.4
There are ideas but no clear vision	10.6	16.7
Yes, and I am strongly committed to them	23.2	18.0
Yes, and I am partly committed to them	25.9	16.4
Yes, but I am not committed to them	14.9	14.5
Total	100	100

Conclusion

A first look at the ICLS data for Catholic attenders in the United States and Australia reveals a remarkable, even astonishing, degree of similarity with respect to patterns of attendance at Mass, involvement in parish life, and sense of belonging to the parish community. In some respects the two groups also have demographic similarities, with more than 50 percent of attenders in each country being over 50 years of age and retirees making up substantial proportions of both groups. There are differences, however, for example in attenders' experience of worship and in items to do with vision and planning. One of the interesting tasks for the next stage of the study is to account for these differences but it may prove to be just as interesting, and more difficult, to account for the extraordinary similarities.

While comparisons like these can be interesting and sometimes even helpful to our understanding of parish life, the real value of data sets like those collected in the ICLS is the fact that are a treasury that with in-depth analysis can help us add to our theoretical understanding of the way Catholic parishes work, and in doing so provide information that parishes, including those that did not take part in the survey, can use to improve their own quality of community life and effectiveness in mission. To do this, we need to use the data to address questions such as: What are the characteristics of effective parishes? Do the most effective parishes have a particular type of demographic profile? What leadership styles give rise to the most effective parishes? The data collected in this project provide a means of assessing just how well the ecclesiology of *communio* espoused in official church documents is actually lived out in real-life parishes. Does the reality match the rhetoric?

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