



# *Pastoral Research Online*

**Issue 35**

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## **Farewell from the retiring Director of the Pastoral Research Office**

Tomorrow, 23 December, will be my last day as Director of the Pastoral Research Office. When I started in this job, on 29 January 1996, almost 21 years ago, I was known as the Pastoral Projects Officer and the office as the Pastoral Projects Office. It was not until 2010 that we changed our name to the Pastoral Research Office. Back in 1996, it was never envisaged that I would be in this job for so long, or indeed that the office would continue to exist for as long as it has. I was appointed by the then ACBC General Secretary, now the Bishop of Bathurst, Michael McKenna. In offering me the job, Michael stressed that it would be a three year appointment, and that there would be no extensions! Well, you can't always tell how things will turn out, can you?

The office was created to carry out two projects. Here they are, as described in my original position description:

- 'To manage the National Catholic Census Project in the three stages of table design, parish geographic specification and centralised data delivery', and
- 'To co-ordinate the participation of the Catholic Church in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS)'.

Those two projects are still central to the PRO's work, but they have developed way beyond our initial conceptions of what they would look like, and we have added numerous other projects over the years. When I say 'we', I'm referring to quite a large number of people who have contributed to the work of the office. Initially, I was joined by Shona McKendry as Admin Assistant and by Fr Michael Mason CSsR, whom Fr McKenna had appointed as consultant sociologist to the project. Michael's expertise in sociology and ecclesiology was instrumental in laying strong theoretical and methodological foundations to the projects.

The graphic on the following page, created by Dr Trudy Dantis, who worked for the PRO from 2010 to 2015, provides some idea of how the PRO's work has developed and expanded over our 21-year history.

I've often spoken of the work we do as being like completing a jigsaw puzzle. Our research creates the pieces that together give a more complete picture of the Catholic community and its institutions. Trudy's graphic shows some of the main pieces that we have put into the jigsaw:



The staff of the Pastoral Research Office wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. We thank you for your support during 2016, and look forward to continuing our association with you in 2017.



**Office hours over Christmas and January school holidays:**

*The Pastoral Research Office will close on Friday 23 December and re-open on Tuesday 11 January 2017.*

- The National Catholic Census Project is still a key part of our work, especially in the demographic profiles on the self-identified Catholic population that we create after each Census for every single parish in Australia. These profiles, which have been highly commended by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, have now attracted international attention as well. After



- speaking about them at a conference in Atlanta in October, I was invited to write up my presentation for publication in next year's edition of the *Yearbook of International Religious Demography*.
- And, of course, our collaboration with the National Church Life Survey team has continued right from those early days. The NCLS is Australia's second largest social survey after the national Census, and most probably the longest-running and largest survey of church attenders in the world. The NCLS provides us with a rich source of data on Australia's Mass attenders. In 2000, the ACBC became the third sponsor of the NCLS project, joining the Uniting Church in NSW and Anglicare NSW. ACU became the fourth sponsor in 2010.
  - There's the National Count of Attendance, which provides a baseline measure of religious practice among Australia's Catholics.
  - The Building Stronger Parishes project, coordinated in outstanding fashion by Trudy Dantis herself, explored the nature of parish vitality and offers every parish some guidance on how to create and nurture vitality.
  - The NCLS Operations Survey also appears in the graphic. We often think of NCLS being a survey of church attenders, but it is also a survey of churches – local parishes and congregations – themselves.
  - Not all of our research is quantitative. Our study of why mature-age Catholics stop going to Mass was our first qualitative study. Published in 2007, its message is still highly applicable today.
  - We have also made use of questions about religion included in the Australian version of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), providing us with one way to learn what Catholics who don't go to church think about a range of issues.
  - We have studied religious life in Australia, firstly with our 2009 study of religious congregations, *See, I am doing a new thing*, conducted in association with Catholic Religious Australia, and our current study of recent trends in religious vocations for Catholic Vocations Ministry Australia (CVMA).
  - The final jigsaw piece refers to our current investigation of the workforce of Australian Catholic organisations that we are carrying out for the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER). Results are still coming in, but it looks as though the total workforce will number somewhere in the region of 210,000 people.

Of course, the jigsaw will never be complete, at least partly because the puzzle itself is always changing.

Many people have asked me what I plan to do in my retirement. A short answer is 'more research'! Here are some of my plans for 2017:

- ◆ I'm participating in the Asian-Pacific Catholicisms Project, under the direction of Professor José Casanova of Georgetown University and ACU. After meeting this year in Melbourne and Washington, the project team will meet in Manila in March and then for the fourth and last time in Melbourne in June next year. The project is about how Catholicism has a different shape and story in each Asian and Pacific country – hence the 's' in Catholicisms – including Australia.
- ◆ I've been invited to present a paper at a Festival of Creative Church Management to be held in Rome in March, on the contribution that research can make to church management.

- ◆ I will convene the parish and congregational studies group for the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) conference to be held in Lausanne next July. This involves bringing together about 10 or 12 international researchers as a small part of a much larger conference.
- ◆ I've recently had a request from one publisher to review a manuscript on contemporary Catholicism in the Netherlands and from another to review a manuscript about the wellbeing of church workers in the Lutheran Church of Finland.
- ◆ And, most importantly, my wife Cath and I have plans to walk the *Camino* sometime during 2017, from the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela.

At this stage, my position has not been advertised. Stephen Reid has been appointed Acting Director for the time being.

I am immensely grateful to all those people who have worked at the office over these last 21 years, and also to those who supported our work in any way, either as volunteers, members of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research, people associated with our partner organisations such as NCLS, the Christian Research Association and the National Pastoral Planning Network, our diocesan contact person in each diocese, the ACBC General Secretaries and Directors and staff of ACBC agencies ... the list could go on and on. I would also like to thank all the bishops whom I have served over the years, and particularly those three who have been the Chair of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research: Archbishop Adrian Doyle, Bishop Gerard Hanna and Archbishop Julian Porteous. It has been a tremendous honour and privilege to work for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and to spend such a large part of my working life in a ministry serving the Church at all levels and across all parts of Australia.

- **Bob Dixon**

## Mass attenders beliefs about the Virgin Birth

In the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS), a number of variant questionnaires were distributed at random to Mass attenders alongside the main questionnaire. This meant that a wide variety of topics could be investigated, whilst ensuring statistical reliability. One of the variant questionnaires, called 'Questionnaire S3', which was completed

by 2,779 attenders, asked Mass attenders about their belief in the Virgin Birth. Attenders could choose from one of two options:

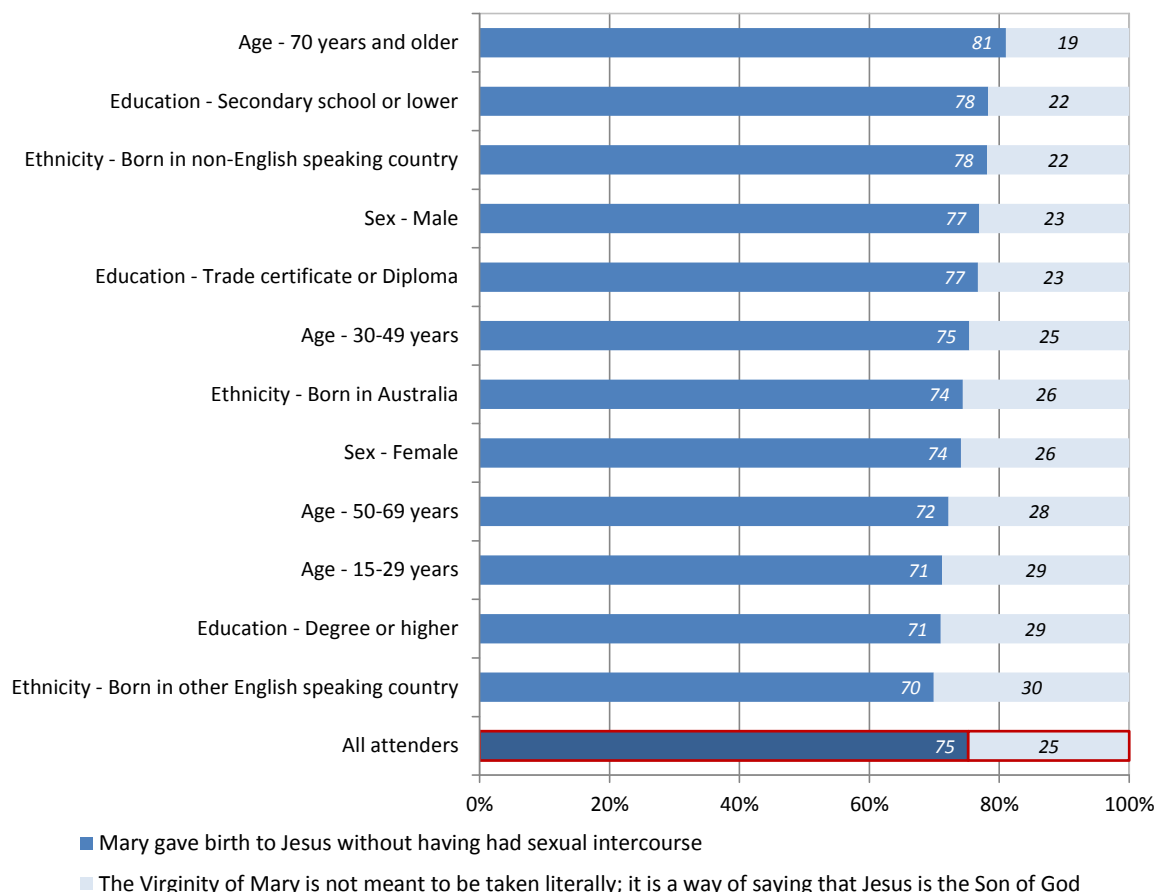
- *Mary gave birth to Jesus without having had sexual intercourse;* or,
- *The Virginity of Mary is not meant to be taken literally; it is a way of saying that Jesus is the Son of God.*

The following graph shows the responses of the various groups of attenders, sorted in descending order.

Overall, three-quarters of Mass attenders believed the Virgin

### Mass attenders beliefs about the Virgin Birth

Percentage of attenders



Source of data: National Church Life Survey 2011 (weighted, sample parishes only).

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Birth as a literal event, while one-quarter believed that it should not be understood literally.

There was surprisingly little variation between different groups of attenders. Those who were most likely to accept the Virgin Birth as a literal event were aged 70 or older (81%), had lower levels of education (78%), and were born in a non-English speaking country (78%). Attenders born overseas in an English speaking country (70%), attenders with a bachelor degree or higher (71%), and people aged under 30 (71%) were least likely to believe in a literal interpretation of the Virgin Birth.

It is important to note that Mass attenders could only choose one of two options, with no “Neutral” or “Unsure” option available. Alternatively, they could choose not to answer the question at all, which around eight per cent of attenders did.

Another of the variant questionnaires in the 2011 NCLS (called ‘Questionnaire J’) asked attenders a similar question to that asked in the ‘S3’ questionnaire, although with more gradated responses. Attenders were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Jesus was born of a virgin”.

The vast majority of Mass attenders (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that Jesus was born of a virgin, with very few (3%) disagreeing to any extent. Around nine per cent of attenders were unsure whether they agreed with the statement or not. Mass attenders born in a non-English speaking country (96%), those aged 30-49 (95%) or 70 years or older (92%), and those with a trade certificate or diploma (93%) were the most likely to

	Percentage of attenders		
	Agree or Strongly agree	Neutral or Unsure	Disagree or Strongly disagree
<b>Jesus was born of a virgin</b>			
<b>All attenders</b>	89	9	3
<b>Age</b>			
15-29 years	82	18	0
30-49 years	95	5	0
50-69 years	86	11	4
70 years and older	92	4	4
<b>Sex</b>			
Female	88	9	3
Male	90	8	2
<b>Highest education</b>			
Secondary school or lower	91	6	3
Trade certificate or Diploma	93	6	1
Degree or higher	84	13	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Born in Australia	86	10	4
Born in other English speaking country	89	12	0
Born in non-English speaking country	96	4	0

**Source of data:** National Church Life Survey 2011 (unweighted, sample parishes only, N=390). Table prepared by ACBC Pastoral Research Office: [www.pro.catholic.org.au](http://www.pro.catholic.org.au). Copyright © Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

affirm that Jesus was born of a virgin. Younger attenders (18%) and those who held a degree level qualification (13%) were the most likely to say they were unsure whether Jesus was born of a virgin.

### IT’S TRUE!

A search of demography records by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2006 revealed that Christmas themes featured in a dozen Australian town and location names: Christmas Island, Christmas Creek and Christmas Hills (Queensland); Christmas Town, Bells Beach and Shepherds Creek (Vic); Turkey Creek (NT); Turkey Hill (WA); Wisemans Creek, Wisemans Ferry and Snowball (NSW); and Snowtown (SA).

And whilst ABS statistics do not record reindeers, it estimated that there were 59,469 farmed deer on June 30 2005. The 2011 Census also revealed there were 47 people working in the deer farming industry in Australia, 15 per cent of whom were Catholic.

**Source:** Media release: *Festive facts and figures*, ABS, 18 Dec 2006; Census, ABS, 2011.

