

# Pastoral Research Online

Issue 69

July 2025

## ACCPR embraces synodality with broader membership



Some ACCPR members (L-R): Dr Louise Guillaume, Dr Trudy Dantis, Mrs Sophy Morley, Professor Emeritus Gabrielle McMullen, Dr Stephen Reid and Dr Joel Hodge.

On 16 May 2025, the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research (ACCPR) met in person at Mary MacKillop Place, Sydney, for their quarterly meeting. This was the first meeting to which two new board members were invited: Mr John Lochowiak from NATSICC as a representative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics, and Mr Younan Frierer as the representative for the Eastern Catholic Churches. We welcome them both and look forward to a fruitful association together.

Dear Readers,

As we continue our work on several projects, we are excited to have reached a stage where many are entering their final stages of analysis and reporting. This edition of the newsletter highlights key developments and insights emerging from our work.

Our feature article, 'The Changing Catholic Community in Australia: 30 Years of Census Data', offers a long-range view of how the Catholic population has shifted across the decades, drawing out trends that inform pastoral planning and future research. Building on this, the Australian Catholic Mapping Online tool has recently been updated with new data layers, enhancing its value for researchers, diocesan staff, and community leaders. These updates will be the focus of a Catholic Census Maps Workshop, which will offer hands-on training and practical guidance on how to engage more deeply with the tool.

As the Synod on Synodality moves into the implementation stage, we take a look at a recently published document that sets a pathway for synodality to take root in local contexts, as a means for enhancing the Church's mission. In our 'Overseas Research' section, we highlight an international study that offers new perspectives on 'religious switching'.

Finally, we are pleased to celebrate the recent recognition of Professor Emeritus Gabrielle McMullen AM, whose contributions to Catholic research and public scholarship continue to inspire. We extend our warm congratulations on this well-deserved honour.

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# The Changing Catholic Community in Australia: 30 Years of Census Data

The NCPR has been collecting Census data about the Catholic community in Australia since 1991 as part of the National Catholic Census Project. This data has enabled us to investigate changes in the Catholic population over the past thirty years. This article brings you the highlights of some of these changes. Table 1 illustrates selected demographic characteristics of Catholics in Australia from 1991 to 2021 and compares them to the non-Catholic population.

## Catholic Population

After recording the highest population in 2011 (5,439,267), the number of Catholics in Australia decreased to 5,075,910 in 2021. This figure was greater than the 4.6 million Catholics recorded in 1991, although it represented a smaller proportion of the total population in 2021. In 1991, 27.3 per cent of Australians identified as Catholic. By 2021, this figure was 20 per cent.

## Age and Sex Profile

For the first time since the National Catholic Census Project began, the proportion of Catholics aged 65 and over (19.9%) exceeded that of those aged 0-14 years (17.9%) in 2021. This marks a significant shift from 1991, when younger Catholics were a much greater proportion (23.8%) of the Catholic population than those aged 65 and over (9.7%)—reflecting a trend also seen in the broader Australian population. The median age of Catholics rose from 31 in 1991 to 43 in 2021, further highlighting the aging demographic. Another notable change was the Catholic male to female ratio; in 1991, there were 96 men for every 100 women, compared to just 89 men per 100 women in 2021. In contrast, the ratio for the non-Catholic population in 2021 was almost perfectly balanced.

## Marital Status

In 1991, 55.4 per cent of Catholics aged 15 and over were married. Since then, this proportion has steadily declined, reaching 49.3 per cent in 2021. Despite the decrease, the marriage rate among Catholics remains slightly higher than that of the non-Catholic population, which stood at 45.8 per cent in 2021. Over the same period, there was a consistent increase in the proportion of Catholics who were divorced or separated, rising from 7.4 per cent in 1991 to 11.7 per cent in 2021. Smaller fluctuations were observed among those who had never married, with proportions ranging from 31.4 per cent in 1991 to 33.9 per cent in 2011. The proportion of widowed Catholics remained relatively stable, consistently making up around 6 per cent of the population in each Census.

## Living Arrangements

In 2021, 11.3 per cent of Catholic families were single-parent families—a proportion that has remained relatively stable since 1991, fluctuating between 10.1 per cent (1991) and 11.9 per cent (2011). Over the same period, there has been a consistent rise in the proportion of Catholic couples in a de facto relationship in every Census. In 2021, 17.8 per cent of Catholic couples were in de facto relationships, more than double the 1991 figure of 8.5 per cent. Another notable trend related to home ownership, which increased steadily from 67.8 per cent in 1991 to 73 per cent in 2021 and was significantly higher than that of the non-Catholic population, reported at 60.6 per cent in 2021.

## Birthplace and Language

Prior to 2021, the proportion of Catholics born overseas fluctuated between 23 and 25 per cent. In 2021, this figure rose to 26.9 per cent, closely aligning with the non-Catholic population (26.4%). In every Census, nearly four out of five Catholics born overseas came from non-English speaking countries. Additionally, around one in five Catholics reported speaking a language other than English at home across all seven Census periods.

## Education

Over the last thirty years, there has been a nearly four-fold increase in the proportion of Catholics aged 15 and over holding a bachelor's degree or higher qualification—rising from 6.8 per cent in 1991 to 24.6 per cent in 2021. Among the younger generation, the proportion of Catholic primary and secondary school students attending Catholic schools has increased slightly since 1996, when this data was first collected. In contrast, the proportion of non-Catholic students attending Catholic schools has grown substantially. In Catholic primary schools, this group more than doubled between 1996 (17%) and 2021 (36.6%), while in secondary schools, it nearly doubled from 22.5 per cent to 41.3 per cent in the same period.

Reviewing the Census characteristics of Catholics over the past 30 years reveals consistent national level trends. Some characteristics have shown continuous change in one direction—such as the rising median age and the increasing proportion of Catholics with a bachelor’s degree or higher qualification, both of which have grown with each Census. In contrast, other characteristics, like the proportions of Catholics who are widowed or born overseas, have remained relatively stable over time. Gaining a deeper understanding of these demographic shifts requires further detailed analysis. While that broader story is still unfolding, valuable insights can already be found in the Parish and Diocesan Social Profiles available at <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-catholic-census-project/>. Some deeper analysis about the changes in the Catholic community over the 30 years is also available in:

- Robert E. Dixon, *The Catholic Community in Australia*, 2nd Edition (2005), especially Chapter 5, and
- Robert Dixon and Stephen Reid, *The Contemporary Catholic Community: A View from the 2011 Census*, *The Australasian Catholic Record*, 90(2), 2013.

**Table 1: Census Characteristics of Catholics by Census year, 1991-2021**

	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	Non Catholics (2021)
Catholic population (N)	4,605,844	4,799,090	5,001,624	5,126,862	5,439,267	5,291,834	5,075,910	--
Growth rate in the previous five years (%)	13.3	4.2	4.2	2.5	6.1	-2.7	-4.1	12.4
Percentage of total population	27.3	27.0	26.6	25.8	25.3	22.6	20.0	--
<b>Age and sex profile</b>								
Median age (%)	31	33	34	37	38	40	43	38
Aged 0-14 (%)	23.8	23.0	22.3	21.1	20.5	19.8	17.9	18.3
Aged 65 and over (%)	9.7	10.9	12.0	13.2	14.1	16.6	19.9	16.6
Males per 100 females	95.7	94.6	93.5	92.4	92.1	90.6	89.1	99.6
<b>Marital status (Persons aged 15+)</b>								
Never married (%)	31.4	31.8	32.1	33.1	33.9	33.3	32.9	37.4
Married (%)	55.4	53.3	51.8	50.6	49.6	49.7	49.3	45.8
Separated or divorced (%)	7.4	8.9	10.0	10.5	10.8	11.2	11.7	12.1
Widowed (%)	5.8	6.0	6.0	5.9	5.7	5.8	6.1	4.7
<b>Living arrangements</b>								
One-parent families (%)	10.1	10.9	11.4	11.6	11.9	11.6	11.3	17.8
De facto couples (%)	8.5	10.1	12.2	14.8	16.2	17.7	17.8	20.9
Dwellings owned or being purchased (%)	67.8	69.4	70.1	72.0	71.4	71.2	73.0	60.6
<b>Birthplace and language</b>								
Born overseas in English-speaking countries (%)	5.1	4.9	5.0	5.1	5.7	5.6	5.5	8.7
Born in non-English-speaking countries (%)	19.8	18.9	17.9	17.6	17.9	19.1	21.4	17.7
Speak language other than English at home (%)	22.2	20.2	19.2	18.6	19.0	20.4	21.5	22.2
<b>Education</b>								
Aged 15+ with a degree or higher qualification (%)	6.8	9.7	12.2	15.0	17.6	20.6	24.6	26.7
Catholic primary students at Catholic schools (%)	n.a.	52.9	51.7	52.3	52.8	53.1	55.5	--
Catholic secondary students at Catholic schools (%)	n.a.	52.5	52.0	52.3	52.8	54.5	55.3	--
Non-Catholic students in Catholic primary schools (%)	n.a.	17.0	18.8	21.6	24.1	28.1	36.6	--
Non-Catholic students in Catholic secondary schools (%)	n.a.	22.5	26.3	28.0	31.5	35.7	41.3	--

# Australian Catholic Mapping Online

## New Map Layers

We are excited to announce two new interactive map layers on the Australian Catholic Mapping Online (ACMO) platform, based on the 2021 Census. These layers offer valuable insights to support informed decision-making across dioceses and parishes.

- ◆ *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics*
- ◆ *Birthplaces and Languages of Australian Catholics*

Each layer uses a five-colour range to highlight where particular Catholic demographics are most represented across the country or a diocese. Darker shades indicate higher proportions, while lighter shades show lower ones—making it easy to spot patterns at a glance. The layers also have interactive features:

- ◆ *Clicking* on a coloured location on the layer displays a popup containing detailed Census data.
- ◆ *Hovering* over bars or segments in the popup charts will reveal the exact figures.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics Layer

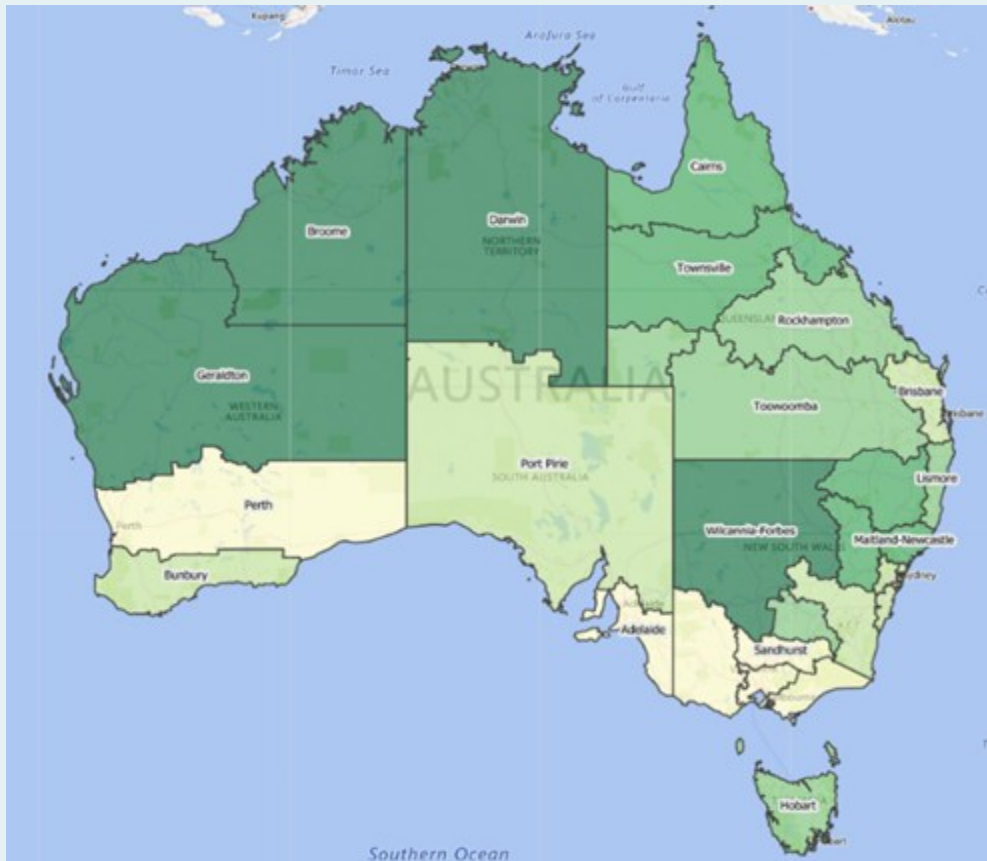


Figure 1: National Map Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Layer

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics layer was developed in collaboration with Craig Arthur, the National Administrator of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Commission (NATSICC), which represents over 135,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics.

Craig shared:

*“To be able to see the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics across the country is a blessing and a very useful tool that will empower NATSICC and our Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Ministries.”*

This layer shows the percentage of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Catholics by diocese (See Figure 1) or parish. Areas with the highest percentages are shaded dark green, while lighter shades of green and cream represent lower proportions. Looking at the above National Map, we see that dioceses in the north-west of Australia and Wilcannia-Forbes have the highest proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics, while a band of dioceses across the southern mainland have some of the smallest percentages.

Parish and diocesan popups contain information about the total population, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics, and the major language groups spoken at home.



# Australian Catholic Mapping Online

The “Australian Indigenous” language group (shown in the map’s popup) represents over 150 active languages identified in the 2021 Census. Diocesan popups on the National Map also feature a chart showing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics by Age Group (not available at the parish-level).

We are deeply grateful to Craig Arthur for suggesting the layer and for his collaboration in making it a valuable resource for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Ministries. Thank you, Craig!

## Birthplace and Languages Layer

The second new layer on the Australian Catholic Mapping Online (ACMO) platform highlights the percentage of Catholics born overseas in each diocese (See Figure 2) or parish.

Areas with the lowest percentages are shaded pale pink, while those with the highest proportions appear in dark purple. From the adjacent National Map, we see that in 2021 the highest concentrations of overseas-born Catholics were in capital city dioceses such as Perth, Darwin and Melbourne. In contrast, a group of dioceses with the lowest percentages are clustered across western Victoria, New South Wales and southern Queensland, as well as Broome.

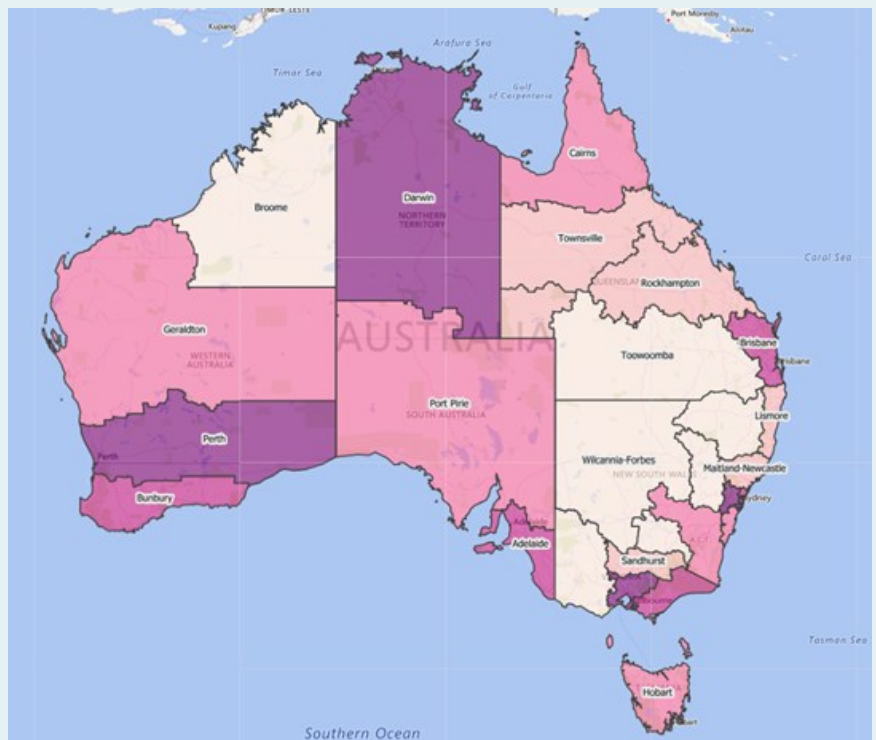


Figure 2: National Map Birthplace and Languages layer.

A large popup is provided with this layer, that includes information about the population by place of birth, the percentage used in the map layer and the top 5 birthplaces of Catholics born overseas. Scrolling down the popup will reveal information about the language groups, followed by the top 5 languages other than English that are spoken at home in each area. These insights help dioceses and parishes better understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of their communities.

All ACMO 2021 Census Maps are available via the NCPR website or directly through the ACMO portal:

<https://mangomap.com/australian-catholic-mapping-online/maps>

We would welcome your thoughts! If you have questions about the two new layers, suggestions for future themes, or feedback on the maps, please email us at [ncpr@catholic.org.au](mailto:ncpr@catholic.org.au)

## Catholic Census Maps Workshop

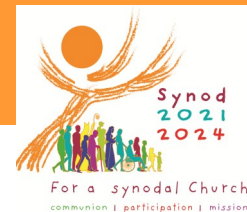


**Tuesday 26 August 2025, 2:00pm-3:00pm AEST**

Join the NCPR team to learn about navigating the Catholic Census Maps in the Australian Catholic Mapping Online (ACMO) portal and using them alongside the Social Profiles. Both sources of information can be found on our webpage: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/>

Registrations are now open at <https://bit.ly/CatholicCensusMapsWorkshop2025>

# Synod on Synodality: Implementation



## The Global Implementation Phase

In March 2025, the late Pope Francis approved the Implementation Phase of the Synod, encouraging Churches worldwide to implement actions from the *Final Document of the Synod* in ways suited to their local contexts. The 'Letter on the Accompaniment Process of the Implementation Phase of the Synod' set out the expectations for this phase, with activities being undertaken to culminate in an ecclesial assembly at the Vatican in October 2028.

On 7 July, the General Secretariat of the Synod released *Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod*, a guiding document offering a "shared framework" for local Churches around the world to journey together. The document outlines the objectives of the Synod's implementation phase, introduces participants and roles, provides guidance on engaging with the Synod's *Final Document*, and offers practical tools for local Churches. More information and access to the document can be found at: <https://www.synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase-3-the-implementation/resources.html>

## Implementing Synodality in Australia

Australian dioceses, eparchies and Catholic organisations have already begun implementing synodal practices. The ACBC Synod Interim Coordinating Committee is collating examples of these synodal activities. A new webpage has been created to share stories and resources, and provide further information and regular updates.



Visit the webpage at: <https://bit.ly/SynodalityAustNextSteps>

You are invited to share your stories on synodal activities across Australia. All stories, resources, feedback and suggestions can be sent to [synodality@catholic.org.au](mailto:synodality@catholic.org.au) We look forward to hearing from you!

## Jubilee of Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies

A new event has been announced to recognise Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies in Rome from 24 to 26 October 2025. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is coordinating the group of Australian attendees.

The event is being held to recognise "the values of these bodies and the individuals who serve within them, thereby affirming the commitment to building an ever more synodal Church within the horizon of the hope that does not disappoint—the very hope we celebrate in the Jubilee". See more at: <https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/jubilee-of-synodal-teams-and-participatory-bodies.html>



## DID YOU KNOW?....



**In 2021, there were 7,599 Catholics in Australia who reported being born in Peru and 14,694 Catholics in Australia who reported being born in the United States of America**

On 8 May 2025, we welcomed our new pope, Pope Leo XIV, who has had the privilege of being a dual citizen of both the United States of America, having been born in Chicago, and of Peru, where he was the Bishop of Chiclayo. Many of our American- and Peruvian-born Australian Catholics share a special tie with our new pope.

Sources: 2021 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics;  
APNews, "Rejoicing Peruvians see Pope Leo XIV as one of their own after his many years in Peru," May 9, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/peru-pope-leo-chiclayo-vatican-prevost-7d26905df2dfd253fd87f047c764e6>

# Overseas Research

## Religious Switching Around the World



Pew Research Center

A recent study by Pew Research explored the topic of ‘religious switching’—

when people change their religious identity from childhood to adulthood. The findings revealed an increasing number of people switching to ‘no religious affiliation’. Additionally, there were significant global variations:

- In countries such as India, Israel and Nigeria, over 95 per cent of adults retained the same religious identity they grew up with.
- In contrast, religious switching is a more common phenomenon in regions such as East Asia, Western Europe, North America and South America.

The Australian religious landscape provided some interesting trends:

- Around 34 per cent of adults reported having switched from their childhood religion.
- Most of these switched to being ‘religiously unaffiliated’, i.e. no longer choosing to identify with any religion.
- Most Australians who switched moved away from Christianity.

While switching from Christianity is common around the world, in countries such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore, a significant portion switched from Buddhism.

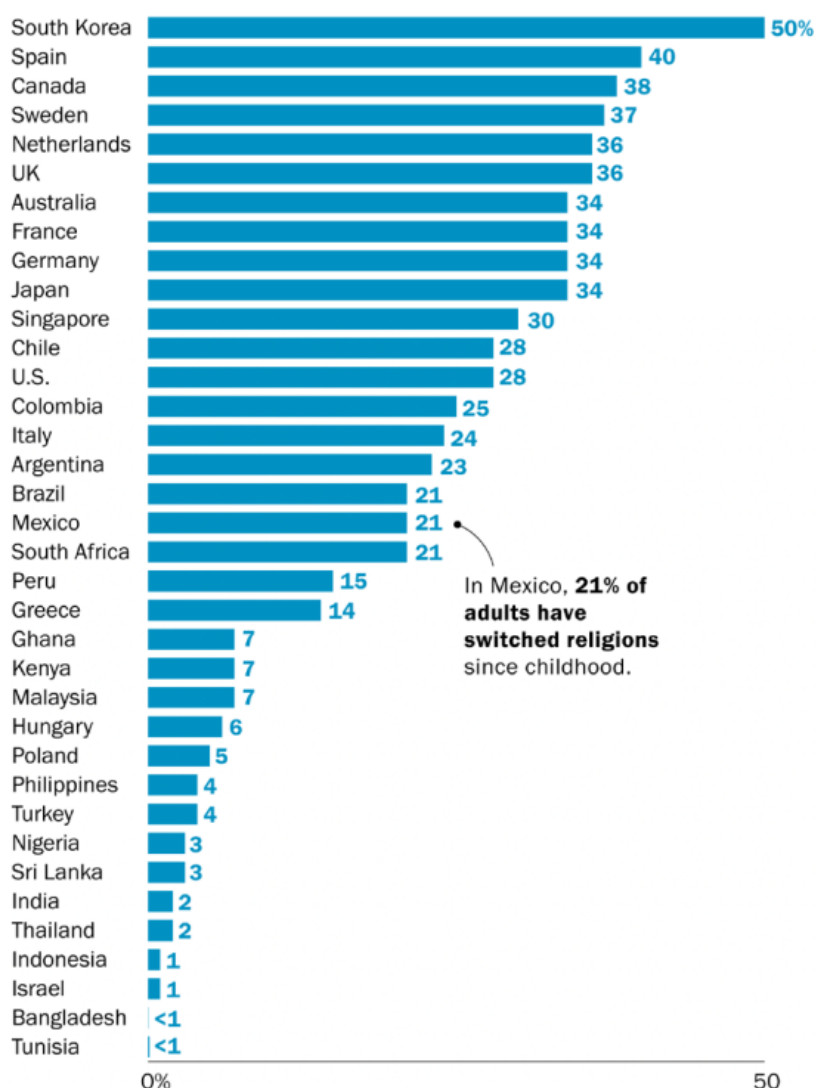
Interestingly, not all religious switching is disaffiliation—in South Korea, a notable number of adults switched from having no religious affiliation in childhood to Christianity in adulthood.

To read more about this research, go to:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/03/26/around-the-world-many-people-are-leaving-their-childhood-religions/>

### About 20% or more of adults in many countries in East Asia, Europe and the Americas have switched religions

% of adults in each country who belong to a religious category (including unaffiliated) different from the one they were raised in



Note: Rates are based on self-reported childhood and present religions. We measure switching between the following categories: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, other religions, religiously unaffiliated and those who did not answer the questions.

Source: Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey. Religious Landscape Study of U.S. adults conducted July 17, 2023–March 4, 2024.

“Around the World, Many People Are Leaving Their Childhood Religions”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

If you would like more information about how the NCPR can support your organisation, please contact us at [ncpr@catholic.org.au](mailto:ncpr@catholic.org.au)

# Congratulations to Professor Emeritus Gabrielle McMullen!

## Honorary Doctorate for Chair of ACCPR

Professor Emeritus Gabrielle McMullen AM, Chair of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research (ACCPR), has been awarded an honorary degree from Australian Catholic University (ACU), recognising her as *Doctor of the University*.

This honour celebrates her outstanding contributions to Catholic education, particularly her role in helping to establish ACU.

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Zlatko Skrbis commended Professor McMullen for her “commitment to academic integrity, equality of opportunity and community engagement through work with educational and religious organisations”.

The staff of the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) warmly congratulate Professor McMullen on this well-deserved achievement.



Professor Emeritus Gabrielle McMullen, Chair of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research. PC: ACU

Source: <https://cathnews.com/2025/05/12/academic-who-helped-establish-acu-awarded-honorary-doctorate/>

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## NCPR Staff

Trudy Dantis  
Director

[trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au](mailto:trudy.dantis@catholic.org.au)  
(02) 6201 9812

Leith Dudfield  
Research Assistant

[leith.dudfield@catholic.org.au](mailto:leith.dudfield@catholic.org.au)  
(02) 6201 9813

Carole Gan  
Research Assistant  
[carole.gan@catholic.org.au](mailto:carole.gan@catholic.org.au)  
(02) 6201 9810

## Melbourne Office:

90 Albion Road  
Box Hill VIC 3128

Stephen Reid  
Senior Research Officer  
[stephen.reid@catholic.org.au](mailto:stephen.reid@catholic.org.au)  
(02) 6201 9808

Katherine Jelavic  
Research Assistant  
[Katherine.jelavic@catholic.org.au](mailto:Katherine.jelavic@catholic.org.au)  
(02) 6201 9801

For more information please contact:  
National Centre for Pastoral Research  
Australian Catholic Bishops  
Conference,  
GPO Box 368 Canberra ACT 2601  
P: (02) 6201 9812  
E: [ncpr@catholic.org.au](mailto:ncpr@catholic.org.au)  
W: [www.ncpr.catholic.org.au](http://www.ncpr.catholic.org.au)

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