

Pastoral Research Online

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ACCPR 30th Anniversary Dinner



Left (top to bottom): Dr Joel Hodge, Mrs Sophy Morley, Em Prof Gabrielle McMullen, Dr Bob Dixon, Mr John Lochowiak
Right (top to bottom): Dr Stephen Reid, Mrs Cath Dixon, Dr Trudy Dantis, Mr Daniel Ang, Fr Brian Lucas

The Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research (ACCPR) provides oversight for the work of the NCPR. In May 2026, Council members met for their annual in-person gathering and shared a meal.

The Council celebrated the 30th Anniversary of the NCPR, together with Founding Director, Dr Bob Dixon, and his wife, Cath. It was a fitting occasion to recognise the work of the office over the past three decades.



Dear Readers,

Welcome to the June 2026 edition of Pastoral Research Online.

This year marks 30 years of pastoral research serving the Catholic Church in Australia. While the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) carries this work forward today, it builds on the foundations laid by earlier bodies, including the Pastoral Research Office and other predecessor initiatives. Together, these have shaped a long-standing commitment to providing reliable data and thoughtful analysis to support pastoral planning and decision-making across the Church. The opportunity for members of the Australian Catholic Council for Pastoral Research to gather in person this year was a meaningful moment to acknowledge that shared journey and the many people who have contributed to this work over three decades.

This edition presents new insights into long-term trends in ordained ministry and religious life, alongside updates on the 2026 Census and the National Count of Attendance. Together, these data sources help us better understand the changing profile of Catholic communities and the emerging pastoral realities facing dioceses and parishes across the country. At the same time, the continuing implementation of the Synod on Synodality invites all of us to consider how structures, leadership and participation within the Church are evolving. The research highlighted in this issue—including work on governance and lay leadership—points to both the challenges and the opportunities of this moment.

We also pause to remember and give thanks for the life and contribution of Michael Brady, whose commitment to pastoral research and planning has left a lasting legacy.

We hope this edition supports your work and encourages informed reflection in your local context.

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30 Years of Pastoral Research

Ordained and Religious Statistics

The NCPR is responsible for collating annual statistics for the Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia (the Directory), continuing a series first established by its predecessor, the Pastoral Research Office (PRO), in 2007. The Directory records the number of parishes, clergy and seminarians, as well as other statistics, for the Catholic Church in Australia, as counted at the end of the previous year.

The figures for diocesan and religious priests, permanent deacons and religious brothers and sisters are also included each year. Snapshots of their populations over the last 30 years identify recent trends. Figure 1 displays five-yearly figures for each ordained or religious group, starting from 1995 and ending with the recently collated 2025 figures. Table 1, on the next page, shows the annual statistics for the full period, including those for 2026-27.

Figure 1: Ordained and Religious Women and Men – 1995 to 2025

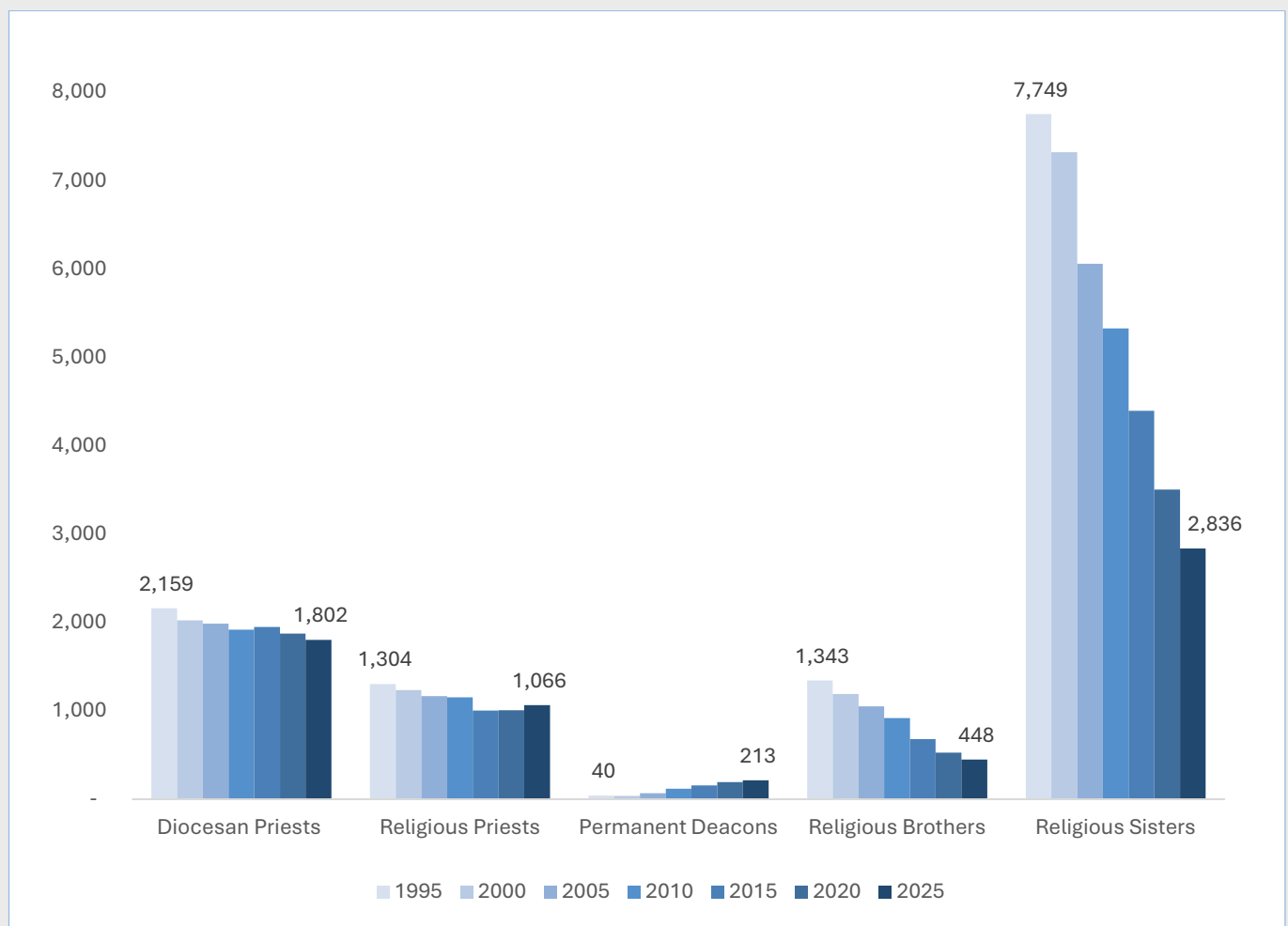


Figure 1 shows substantial change across all groups over the last 30 years. In 2025, the number of diocesan priests (1,802) and religious priests (1,066), including bishops and retired clergy, had declined by around 20 per cent since 1996. More substantial change was evident among consecrated women and men. In 2025, the number of religious brothers (448) and sisters (2,836) had dropped to approximately one-third of their 1995 levels (1,343 and 7,749, respectively). This decline largely reflects the ageing profile of religious institutes, with fewer new or younger members entering these communities.

In contrast, the permanent diaconate shows a markedly different pattern. Reintroduced in Australia following the Second Vatican Council, the number of permanent deacons increased from 40 in 1995 to 213 in 2025—a fivefold rise over the period—indicating continued growth from a comparatively small base. These patterns form the backdrop to subsequent pastoral developments across dioceses and religious communities.

30 Years of Pastoral Research

Over the last 30 years, these changing patterns have prompted significant pastoral responses. Dioceses have introduced initiatives to address declining numbers of priests, and religious congregations have developed their own strategies to continue their mission and charisms, particularly through the creation of ministerial public juridic persons. Many ordained and religious women and men continue to undertake significant pastoral roles within parishes and the broader Church community. Taken together, the shifts evident in these trends point to evolving pastoral practice and highlight the importance of innovative approaches, particularly synodality and co-responsibility, to enable the active participation of all Catholics in the life of the Church.

Table 1: Annual Catholic Directory 1996 to 2026-27 - Statistics

Directory Date	Reporting Year	Diocesan Priests	Religious Priests	Permanent Deacons	Religious Brothers	Religious Sisters
1996	1995	2,159	1,304	40	1,343	7,749
1997	1996	2,126	1,299	38	1,340	7,680
1998	1997	2,765	1,250	42	1,205	7,426
1999	1998	2,100	1,240	39	1,180	7,309
2000	1999	2,075	1,215	39	1,189	7,359
2001	2000	2,023	1,233	38	1,189	7,319
2002	2001	1,910	1,200	46	1,129	6,995
2003	2002	2,044	1,114	48	1,118	6,410
2004	2003	2,033	1,170	61	1,132	6,338
2005-06	2004	1,973	1,153	61	1,082	6,405
2006-07	2005	1,985	1,168	68	1,051	6,057
2007-08	2006	1,996	1,182	83	1,020	5,709
2008-09	2007	1,988	1,153	94	966	5,926
2009-10	2008	1,950	1,137	94	930	5,786
2010-11	2009	1,940	1,125	115	889	5,612
2011-12	2010	1,917	1,153	118	918	5,327
2012-13	2011	1,930	1,174	121	866	5,279
2013-14	2012	1,899	1,174	135	847	5,058
2014-15	2013	1,884	1,169	140	784	4,973
2015-16	2014	1,920	1,018	150	747	4,530
2016-17	2015	1,948	1,003	156	680	4,394
2017-18	2016	1,904	1,063	166	689	4,166
2018-19	2017	1,861	1,039	176	679	4,161
2019-20	2018	1,831	997	179	596	3,907
2020-21	2019	1,892	1,004	187	605	3,833
2021-22	2020	1,875	1,006	195	528	3,503
2022-23	2021	1,834	1,066	192	608	3,501
2023-24	2022	1,822	1,034	192	550	3,318
2024-25	2023	1,810	1,003	204	572	3,070
2025-26	2024	1,782	1,071	210	471	3,023
2026-27	2025	1,802	1,066	213	448	2,835

Note: Published figures for Diocesan Priests, Religious Priests, Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters from the 2006-07 Directory were incorrect. Figures used above are the averages of preceding (2005-06) and following (2007-08) years.

2026 Census

The 2026 Australian Census is Coming

Once every five years, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) undertakes the Census of Population and Housing. The next Census will take place on **Tuesday, 11 August 2026**.

The Census provides a snapshot of the Australian population at a given point in time, much like a family photo taken at Christmas time, and it remains the most comprehensive source of information on how our society is changing. Census data is used to inform decisions about transport, schools, health care, infrastructure and business. It also helps religious groups, such as the Catholic Church in Australia, to better understand the demographics of their people and important trends within their communities and wider society.

National Catholic Census Project

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference first obtained customised information on Australian Catholics through the NCPR and its predecessors from the 1991 Census and will again do so following the 2026 Census. This will provide 35 years of comparative data. Since 2006, this information has been published in national, parish and diocesan *Social Profiles*.

The ABS generally releases the first round of Census data around nine months after Census night. However, given the scale of the work involved—including the customised data required for Catholic families and households—preparing these reports takes considerably longer. We expect to begin publishing the Social Profiles from mid-2028.

The Religion Question

An optional question on religion has been asked in every Census, with only minor changes to its format over the years. The simple question, “What is the person’s religion?” allows the respondent to select one of ten listed options or to type/write in a response not shown.

Figure 2: Example of how a Maronite Catholic can answer the religion question

24 What is the person's religion?

- Answering this question is **OPTIONAL**
- Use 'Other (specify)' to provide a religion or a level of detail not included in the list.
- For example: MACEDONIAN ORTHODOX, LUTHERAN, SALVATION ARMY, JUDASIM, SIKHISM, TAOISM.
- Mark one box, like this: ☒

DO NOT MARK THIS BOX

☐ No religion

☐ Catholic

☐ Anglican (Church of England)

☐ Islam

☐ Hinduism

☐ Uniting Church

☐ Buddhism

☐ Presbyterian

☐ Greek Orthodox

☐ Baptist

☒ Other (specify)

MARONITE
CATHOLIC

MARK THE 'Other (specify)' BOX AND WRITE 'MARONITE CATHOLIC' IN HERE

Those who select the 'Catholic' box are classified in the main Catholic group (i.e., Latin Rite). Catholics from Eastern Catholic Churches (Chaldean, Maronite, Melkite, Syro-Malabar, Ukrainian and others) are encouraged to record their rite on the form by following the additional steps shown in Figure 2.

Rather than ticking the 'Catholic' box, these respondents select 'Other (specify)' and write in the name of their community. These steps help ensure that members of Eastern Catholic Churches are accurately counted within their own communities, rather than assuming them to be Latin Rite Catholics.

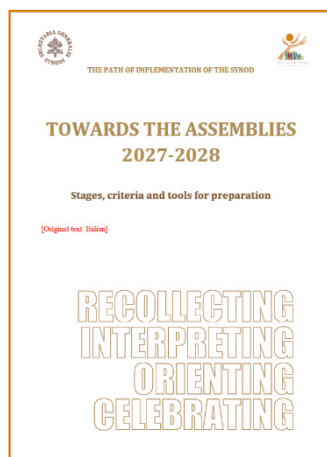
Census data is used by these communities to assist with pastoral planning, including allocating clergy in response to regional

concentrations within an increasingly dispersed Church population, as well as addressing specific welfare needs.

Further information about the Australian Census and the National Catholic Census Project can be found on the NCPR website: <https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-catholic-census-project/>



Towards the Assemblies



As synodality within the Catholic Church worldwide is increasingly understood and implemented, the General Secretariat for the Synod has released a new document to help prepare for the evaluation assemblies planned for 2027 and 2028.

The preparation period has been broken down into four sections: Recollecting, Interpreting, Orienting and Celebrating.

Recollecting

The first stage, scheduled for the first half of 2027, is intended as a time of remembrance and discernment. The local church is called to gather and bring into relationship the experiences that have been initiated. The fruit of this stage will be a brief letter addressed to other local churches throughout the world, sharing what has been understood, what is seen as promising, and what remains open.

Interpreting

The next stage is when the work of the dioceses and eparchies will be considered at the national level, allowing their broader ecclesial understandings to emerge. In addition to the letters and other documents gathered at the previous stage, a Theological-Pastoral report will be drafted that aims to bring to light not only what has been accomplished but also the dynamics running through the different areas, the emerging criteria, and the questions that call for further reflection. This stage will conclude at the end of 2027.

Orienting

Following this is a time of gathering and analysing materials at the continental level. It is a time when the churches of the different continents can together recognise the steps that the Holy Spirit is inviting them to take and discern the dynamics underway in light of the Word of God and the tradition of the Church. This culminates in a Perspective Report which will be sent to the General Secretariat at the end of April 2028.

Celebrating

The work of the previous two years will culminate in the Ecclesial Assembly of October 2028, through which the Church as a whole is called to recognise, celebrate and carry forward the fruits that have matured along the path of implementing the Synod. This celebration is intended to include all the local churches, not just those who will travel to Rome.

Further information about how these stages will be undertaken in Australia and how the steps relate to local dioceses and eparchies will be shared in the coming months.

The *Towards the Assemblies* document can be accessed from the General Secretariat website:

<https://www.synod.va/en/news/towards-the-ecclesial-assembly-of-october-2028.html>

Synodality in Australia

Further information about synodal activities and initiatives being implemented within the Church in Australia can be found on the Synod Next Steps webpage, which also includes a link to subscribe to the quarterly newsletter.

<https://www.catholic.au/s/article/synodnextsteps>

Dioceses are invited to share details of their synodal initiatives by emailing synodality@catholic.org.au

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

In Memoriam



Above: Michael Brady

Farewell to a Friend and Colleague

Michael Brady

29 January 1946 – 21 March 2026

By Dr Bob Dixon, Founding Director



Michael presenting at an NCLS information session in Melbourne. PC: Bob Dixon

I first met Michael Brady in the early 90s when we were both working in pastoral planning – Michael with the Archdiocese of Adelaide and me with the Archdiocese of Melbourne. Over the next 30 to 35 years, he became a very dear friend and a highly valued colleague.

During the years from 2000 to 2018, when the ACBC was a partner in NCLS (National Church Life Survey) Research, the Pastoral Research Office (the PRO, the forerunner of the NCPN) delegated a staff member to the NCLS team. Michael was appointed to that role in April 2006 and served in it until 2012. He served as Acting Director for a period in 2008 while I was on long service leave. Michael generally worked from his home in the Adelaide Hills but travelled extensively to Melbourne, Sydney and all over Australia as our man on the NCLS team.

*The Director of NCLS Research, Ruth Powell, told me that Michael was a wonderful friend and colleague to her, and that the Brady home was a welcome haven for her during trips to Adelaide. She pointed out that, in his work with NCLS, he was the primary point of contact between the NCLS Research team and Catholic dioceses, encouraging local parishes and diocesan leaders to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the National Church Life Survey to hear the views and experiences of Mass attenders and local priests. He also had a key role to play in the development of practical pastoral planning resources for parishes, and was a co-author of the 2012 NCLS publication *Enriching Church Life: A Guide to Results from National Church Life Surveys for Local Churches*.*



With Pastoral Research Office colleagues, L-R: Stephen Reid, Audra Kuncinas, Bob Dixon and Michael Brady

During his years as the PRO's representative on the NCLS team, Michael also made important contributions to the work of the PRO, among them taking a leading role in the design and content of the parish and diocesan social profiles based on the 2006 Australian Census profiles, design that has remained largely unchanged since then. The planning resources Michael developed for Catholic parishes and NCLS were never simply about how to be an effective organisation; they were always built on a foundation of spirituality and community, and, as he wrote in one of his reflections, focussed on seeking God's presence in a changing Australian religious landscape where Christians are a "pilgrim people" whose experience of living their faith on a journey is "fundamentally different from that of a people safely ensconced within their village".



Michael leaving the NCLS at his retirement. PC: Ruth Powell

Michael was an outstanding writer; in fact, it was that skill as well as his many other fine attributes that made me so keen to appoint him to the PRO's NCLS role. He was also an excellent presenter—always clear, measured, and in tune with his audience—at National Pastoral Planning Network (NPPN) conferences and on capital city visits to explain NCLS results to leaders from many different Christian churches.

Michael was a very fine man – one of the finest, really – a man of great integrity, wisdom and deep spirituality, devoted to his family and a very welcoming host. He was thoughtful, considerate, compassionate and kind, and blessed with a gentle sense of humour.

Michael was followed in the role of PRO delegate to the NCLS team by Chris Ehler from the Archdiocese of Brisbane. Also, an experienced pastoral planner, Chris had got to know Michael through the NPPN, and was delighted when the opportunity arose after Michael retired to follow in his footsteps working with Ruth Powell and her team. Chris told me that Michael was extremely helpful and regularly supported him in gaining the skills and knowledge he needed for that role. “Michael served the Lord with resolute faithfulness and great distinction”, said Chris. “I will always be grateful to have known him, and I was always so impressed by his faith and competence in living out his mission as an inspiring leader of our Australian Catholic community.”

Once Michael retired, he retired. He was not interested in sitting on advisory committees, reviewing research reports, going to conferences or any of that sort of thing. He had more important things to do, especially being a grandfather, but also writing and publishing in the local newspaper stories about twenty of the Adelaide Hills towns and villages, and self-publishing two high-quality detective novels set in the Adelaide Hills. He was also a passionate supporter of the Adelaide Crows and the Australian cricket team. A regular attendee at the Adelaide Test, in some years he was there for all five days. On at least one occasion, I went to Adelaide to accompany him to one day of the Test, and when I wasn't there we would frequently exchange texts about the state of play. On 19



L-R: Stephen Reid, Bob Dixon, Trudy Dantis and Michael Brady

December last year, after something noteworthy had happened on the field, I sent him a text saying “I assume you are at the Adelaide Oval and saw that”. He replied: “Unfortunately I’m not there. Diagnosed with leukaemia a month ago. On chemo and the full mix.”

Michael died on 21 March 2026, a little over 2 months after the 57th anniversary of his wedding to Patricia and not quite two months after his eightieth birthday. He is buried beside his son Dan in the Hahndorf Cemetery in his beloved Adelaide Hills. May he rest in peace.

2026 National Count of Attendance

Mass Count Completed in May

The 6th National Count of Attendance at Mass and Other (Sunday) Assemblies (“the Count”) took place over the first four weekends in May 2026. A very small number of parishes made arrangements with the NCPR to undertake their Count on subsequent weekends. Most parishes, supported by their diocesan contacts, used the online portal to enter their data, with feedback being that the portal was “easy to use”.

At the time of publication, approximately 85 per cent of parishes across Australia had submitted their counts to the NCPR. To assist those who have not yet been able to send in their information, the submission deadline has been extended to Sunday, 12 July 2026. Please contact the NCPR if you have any difficulties in submitting your Count, and we would be happy to help you.

The NCPR staff extend their sincere thanks to all who assisted with undertaking the Count, entering the data and coordinating the work across parishes. We could not have done it without you.

Updates on the status of the project will be available on the NCPR website:

<https://ncpr.catholic.org.au/national-count-of-attendance/>



IGSC Symposium



Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church (IGSC) Symposium

The Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church (IGSC) Project was developed by the Australian Catholic University in response to the Synod on Synodality 2021-24, and particularly the Final Report of the 2023 Assembly, which identified the need for formation for all ecclesial roles. The Project was conceived to develop a better understanding of the involvement of laypeople in decision-taking in the Church, their levels of preparation for such roles, and the adequacy of existing formation programs and approaches. The Project is a multi-year (commencing in 2024), multi-disciplinary and multi-layered initiative.

In early 2026, the NCPR was commissioned to undertake research into the *Qualities and Qualifications of Lay Leaders in Church Governance* as

part of this broader project. The project involved two layers: a desktop analysis to review existing frameworks that outline expectations for lay governance, and a survey conducted with selected lay and ecclesial leaders in seven Anglophone countries to gain deeper insights into current practices and emerging needs. The participants included a mix of bishops, clergy and religious, and lay women and men who were involved in, or responsible for, governance and decision-making.

The research was completed and the report submitted in May 2026. In early June, NCPR Director Dr Trudy Dantis travelled to Rome to present the findings at the project symposium, alongside other researchers from around the world. It was a productive and enriching occasion for all involved. The final report will be released on the NCPR website in the coming months.



Above: Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, greets NCPR Director Dr Trudy Dantis. PC: Vatican News

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