

A review of A HANDBOOK FOR BUILDING STRONGER PARISHES, by Trudi Dantis

A Handbook for Building Stronger Parishes is both the title and a description of this handy book.

The Handbook builds upon work previously undertaken by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference Pastoral Research Office which identified eight key characteristics of 'vital' parishes. It provides brief Catholic demographic data. It works through each of the eight characteristics, with a series of resources and exercises for parishes seeking to review or improve their performance on each measure.

Some general comments:

- The Handbook is very well presented. The vitality of Gospel living is evident in many of the case studies. The resources and exercises seem excellent.
- It was good to see youth engaged in some of the case studies, showing both that youth engagement is possible, and some of the means of engagement.
- It is notable that the eight characteristics include measures concerned with the spiritual development of parishioners (Spirituality and Faith Formation, Liturgy, Evangelisation) as well as parish and external service to communities (Planning, Community Building, Welcoming and Hospitality, Outreach, Leadership).
- The vitality that the Report describes is desirable for all parishes – alternative courses may be gloomy, and would not do justice to our calling to being the world to Christ.

Implementing at a parish level

- The integrated approach to parish life shown in the eight characteristics emphasises the need for engagement by the clergy, and for clerical leadership in at least the areas of spiritual development and service.
- Significant progress with implementing the measures recommended in the Handbook would seem to require
 - the clergy at all levels strongly getting behind the program - bishops and priests need to be seen to be more actively involved than the largely unseen support at present
 - clergy and laity working together, with the laity providing the human resources to implement programs, since our priests tend to be fully occupied maintaining parish continuity and the building the spiritual life of parishioners
 - external help - many parishes won't have the skills or resources to take up the processes described in the Handbook
 - substantial educational, attitudinal and cultural change in many parishes - this will not happen without substantial investment
 - the desire for change - people are not going to pick up the Handbook and say, "we should do this" until they first have the desire to improve in the eight areas. Awareness building and education are required.

Parishes need support

Wouldn't it be good if Bishops and priests generally committed to a renewed Building Stronger Parishes program - *based predominantly upon practical measures at parish level, authorised and resourced by the Church.*

Such support might usefully extend to provision of the resources needed for a successful program, including

- promotional activities to raise increased awareness of the BSP program, including web and social media
- short videos of the eight case studies made available to every parish council to increase awareness and show what is possible
- facilitation of parish discussion groups
- parish forums for each diocese
- each diocese to have one or more consultants employed to directly assist parishes work through the characteristics they choose for implementation (not sitting in an office waiting for parishes to call)
- continuing evaluation, reporting and renewal at the diocesan, state and national levels

But even without such centralised support, *Building Stronger Parishes* provides inspiration and example that can be utilised by parishes across Australia. Well done to the parishes that contributed and to the Pastoral Research Office.

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10 October 2016