

# Organization of Leadership in Rural Parishes: Some Australian Catholic Case-Studies

PHILIP HUGHES

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In Australia, many rural parishes are located in areas of declining population. With decreasing numbers of priests available to serve the Catholic parishes in Australia, and without the options of full lay leadership or ecumenical arrangements used by other denominations, dioceses have been struggling to find solutions. Two case-studies present pictures of parishes in which lay people have taken increased responsibility for parish life. In one case, lay leadership is shared with a priest who has responsibility for four parishes. In the other, lay leaders take full responsibility for a parish and the mass is celebrated by a visiting priest. Benefits have been experienced in that the lay people have taken greater ownership of the parishes and have grown in faith through their responsibilities. Appropriate support and mentoring have been major factors in the success of the new organizational models. Lay leadership is especially appropriate in an age in which faith is understood as owned by the individual.

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## Introduction

While the population in some rural areas is growing, as reflected in ‘commuter villages’, retirement centres and leisure locations, in many farming areas the population is shrinking and ageing and denominational organizations struggle to find appropriate leadership for small rural communities (Jung *et al.*, 1998; Martineau, Francis & Francis, 2004). In Australia, the population numbers have declined in many farming communities with the use of ever larger machinery on ever larger farms. In many parts of Australia the decline has been accelerated by drought through the first decade of the twenty-first century (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Hughes & Kunciuinas, 2009b: 5). Neither the people nor the finances can support the church organizations they did fifty or even twenty years ago.

There has been a change, too, in the nature of religious faith. It is no longer seen primarily as owned by a religious organization and offered to people by obedient servants of that organization. As has been noted widely in literature on the nature of religious faith in Western societies, religious faith has become something that is owned by the individual (see, for example, Yip, 2003), a trend rooted in the changed nature of the self in the late modern age (Giddens, 1991: 194–201). The individual may draw on organizational resources which are found to be helpful, but primarily faith is something for which the individual takes responsibility (Hughes, 2010: 78; Wuthnow, 1993: 49–50). This has been a factor in the decline in attendance in many rural as well as city churches.

In many mainstream denominations, the problems are exacerbated by the difficulty of finding clergy willing to serve in these places. Married clergy now look for places where their spouses can find work. Clergy with children are reluctant to serve where they are doubtful of the quality of education available for their children. Many clergy prefer to serve in larger population centres where there are more opportunities for peer engagement and cultural pursuits (Brain, 2009: 108; Hooper, 2007).

Denominations often resort to giving clergy larger groups of churches in sparsely populated rural areas. Some Australian clergy drive 300 or 400 kilometres every Sunday, taking services in three, four or even five small communities. A few Australian clergy travel much larger distances using small planes in remote regions. However, anecdotal evidence in Australia and survey data in England suggest that such patterns lead to lower levels of satisfaction, if not physical and emotional exhaustion in ministry, as clergy have fleeting contact with diverse parishioners and communities (Francis & Robbins, 2011).

One option has been the development of ecumenical local congregations (Hughes & Kunciuinas, 2009a: 5). In Australia, there are some combined congregations: Anglican and Uniting Church, and Lutheran and Uniting Church congregations. Occasionally Baptist and other denominations cooperate in such ecumenical arrangements. One advantage is that a small community may be served by a fully trained and qualified member of the clergy who can concentrate work on that community. However, people who have the ability and sensitivity to serve such congregations are not easy to find, and many denominational organizations are reluctant to accept the compromises such arrangements involve. Catholics have not had this option available to them as they do not recognize the ordination of other denominations.

The rural problem is also greater in those denominations which require ordained people to undertake some roles within the churches. In Australia, some Anglican dioceses have adopted a form of 'local ordination' in which people with minimal training have been ordained to serve within their local communities (Hughes & Kunciuinas, 2009a: 10). Other dioceses, however, have been unwilling to go down this route. The Lutheran Church of Australia also has a system of PWATs (persons with alternative training) who are people without the full training given to pastors, but who are ordained to serve within a local area. Such options are not available in the Catholic Church.

Another solution common among the Catholics and some other denominations in Australia is to ‘import’ clergy from other parts of the world, such as Nigeria, India and the Philippines to work in these rural areas (Lennan, 2011). There has been substantial research on such arrangements in America by Hoge and Okure (2006: 17), who found that many such arrangements have worked with varying success. In the American study, more than two-fifths of the foreign-priests reported that they felt they were only partly or not at all accepted by other priests. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clergy from very different cultures to that of rural farming communities in Australia often find it hard to adapt to the lack of hierarchy and consequent lack of prestige of the clergy in Australian communities. They find it hard to understand a faith that revolves more around belief than ritual. Many find the loneliness of the Australian rural communities difficult to handle, as has also been reported in the United States of America (Hoge & Okure, 2006: 18).

The Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, in western Victoria, Australia, made a decision not to fill clergy vacancies by seeking priests from overseas, but to explore the restructuring of leadership within the diocese. This article illustrates two different solutions to the problem in two parts of rural Victoria, in the south of Australia. In the first case-study, one priest serves a large area of four parishes. In the second case-study, a lay team run a parish with the assistance of a visiting priest.

## Method

This research took place on the request of the Catholic Diocese of Ballarat. The Diocese wanted to ascertain whether the models represented in this study could be commended to other situations. It was keen to understand the strengths and weaknesses of these models.

In investigating these case-studies, the research sought information in three main ways involving: one-on-one interviews with all the parish leaders; interviews with other volunteers from the parish; participation in masses and assemblies of communion and the word and general discussions with people involved.

Prior to the case-studies, an interview schedule was developed to explore with members of the parish their perspectives on the organizational structure of the parish and how changes in this had impacted the various aspects of parish life. Leaders in the parish had been asked prior to the visit of the researcher to nominate a time when they might meet with the researcher. General invitations were also given to any other member of the parish who wanted to meet personally with the researcher to discuss the life of the parish.

The researcher sought to ensure that discussions took place with a wide range of people, including some on the fringes of parish life and some young people. Informal conversations also took place with parishioners, sometimes individually and sometimes in groups, particularly following parish services. The researcher also took the opportunity to read any written materials available about the history of the two parishes and how the present organizational form had evolved.

In February 2010, the first case-study was undertaken in the far west of Victoria. The research involved a stay of nine days covering two weekends. The researcher visited nine of the ten mass centres, and held formal conversations with thirty-eight

people from all parts of the region, as well as many informal conversations following masses and assemblies of communion and the word. He also attended one parish council meeting and visited the parish schools. Several hours of discussion were also held with the priest himself.

The second case-study at the parish of Cororooke was conducted in November 2009. The researcher spent three days in the parish, conducting interviews and attending parish services. In all, seventeen formal interviews were conducted with parishioners. In addition, two interviews with Catholic clergy familiar with the situation were conducted by telephone. The researcher also attended two services and spoke informally with parishioners after the services.

## Results: Case-study 1

In 2006, Fr Andrew Hayes, a priest in his forties, was appointed to serve as the sole priest across what had once been four parishes in far west Victoria: Coleraine, Casterton, Edenhope and Balmoral-Harrow-Tarryoukyan. Parts of this area had been among the earliest settled in Victoria in the late 1830s. By the early years of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church was well established throughout the area and there were priests in all four parishes. Their work was supplemented by several groups of religious sisters. The area for which Fr Andrew was responsible is more than 250 km from one end to the other. He had assistance from one retired priest and one religious sister. It involved ten centres where mass is said. In 2006, according to the national census, there were 9214 persons living in this area, of whom 2046 identified themselves as Catholic (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Projects Office, 2009: 2 of each of the relevant parish profiles).

Fr Andrew's method of dealing with the task was to focus on the roles that he alone could fulfil. He worked out a timetable of masses throughout the ten centres so that, in four major mass centres, there was one Sunday and one weekday mass each week. In this, Fr Andrew had the assistance of the retired priest. The masses were supplemented by ten lay-led assemblies with six of the mass centres holding one or two such services each month.

There were two small communities on the outskirts of the region in which Fr Andrew had revived activities. He had contacted families in these farming communities and gathered them together for worship, the sacraments and social activities. Hence, this pattern of masses and assemblies was not just a 'holding pattern' but had actually involved some growth in the availability of opportunities for worship in the parish.

Fr Andrew saw the schools as very important. He is trained and registered as a school teacher and, on at least one occasion, had stepped in during an emergency for a full-time week of teaching in one of the schools. Fr Andrew visited each of the schools most weeks and spent time with both staff and students, getting to know many of the families. He went on the school camps and took a significant role in the life of the schools.

Fr Andrew was involved in many baptisms, marriages and funerals as required. He was there not just for presiding at mass, but as a friend and counsellor. The

extent of the region meant that he was constantly on the move and spent about ten hours in the car each week. Yet he also found time to be involved in some of the local communities. A talented musician, Fr Andrew was a key member, for example, of the local town band.

With such a load, some responsibilities had to be reassigned. There were several areas which Fr Andrew determined were lower in his list of priorities, areas where he felt lay people could take responsibility. One of the areas of increasing lay responsibility was administration. Fr Andrew made it clear to the various parish committees that he could not attend all of their meetings and they would need to make decisions without him. There was a long tradition that the priest's approval was needed for any administrative decision, such as the repair of property or a special social evening for the church. In the four parishes, Fr Andrew served, he encouraged lay people to handle much of the day-to-day administration.

Another area in which lay responsibility had been developed was in pastoral care. While the priest was available for emergencies, his work was supplemented by the pastoral care offered by others. Parishioners reported that much pastoral care occurs through the natural bonds in the small communities. Nevertheless, there was a recognition by the priest and the parishioners that more could be done, particularly in providing on-going support for people such as those with serious illnesses or those who suffered a bereavement. A process of identifying lay people with the gifts and graces to offer the church's care had been initiated.

A third area was the conduct of worship. In most parts of the parish, the masses were supplemented by lay-led assemblies of communion and the word. Lay people led these services, preparing and delivering their reflections on the Scriptures. Some lay people were identified as doing an excellent job in leading such services. Others indicated that they did what they could out of a sense of duty and wanting to keep the church open. Most of those who put effort into preparation said they learnt a lot by so doing. Some reported that they had recognized the opportunity for this form of leadership as a real calling to a ministry they could offer to their communities.

## Results: Case-study 2

The parish of Cororooke is centred about 10 km north-west of the town of Colac, about 200 km south-west of Melbourne. While it is a rural farming area, it is not as remote, nor is the population as sparse as in the first case-study. The total population in the parish area, according to the 2006 national census, was 1728 persons, of whom 547 identified themselves as Catholic (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Projects Office, 2009: 2).

The first Catholic church was built in the parish area in 1899. In 1924, a large convent was also built in the small town to provide accommodation for the Sisters of the Good Samaritan who ran the parish primary and secondary schools. In recent years, the population has dwindled and today there is just a small parish primary school remaining, along with two mass centres.

The last full-time priest left the area in 1994. A sister of the Good Samaritans became the parish leader. She believed in the lay people being fully involved and

taking responsibility for the life of the parish. She developed lay structures to take responsibility for various areas of parish work and she mentored individuals for leadership in the liturgy, pastoral care and administrative aspects of the parish. During the final period of her time with the parish of Cororooke, she was located part-time in Hamilton (a regional centre about 120 km from Cororooke) and part-time in Cororooke, and the people of the parish of Cororooke took increasing responsibility for the life of the parish.

In 2008, the parish of Cororooke had to make a decision about its future. One option was to be part of the parish of Colac, a decision which would involve a cessation of services at St Brendan's and St Joseph's and regular travel for the locals 10 km or so to the city of Colac for mass. Another option was to adopt a lay approach to parish leadership. The parishioners opted for this second alternative and the decision was supported by the Bishop. A period of discernment occurred in which people were suggested for various positions in leadership. The positions were voluntary and for a set term. Three women (all of them married) became the coordinating team. One took primary responsibility for the liturgy and sacraments, one for administration and stewardship, and one for community connections including the connection between the church and the parish school. A retired priest visited fortnightly to celebrate mass. On other occasions, lay-led assemblies of communion and the word took place. Another priest was appointed by the diocese to sign off on certain administrative decisions, but did not play an active role in the decision-making.

The visit to the parish by the researcher in November 2009 found the lay-led services were well attended. A variety of lay people took leadership roles and did so with confidence and skill. Indeed, some people who had retired into the nearby rural city travelled to the parish of Cororooke because they enjoyed both the services and the sense of community in the parish. Young people were involved in liturgies at both mass centres during the weekend the researcher was there. In one place, a twenty-one-year-old man distributed communion. At the other, the reflection was delivered by a girl in her final year of secondary school. The older teenagers took the young children out of the church for a children's liturgy. The proportion of young people present was twice the average for Catholic parishes across Australia, given their numbers in the population. It was reported that financial giving had increased in the parish since the adoption of a lay approach to parish leadership.

In interviews, it was generally agreed that most parishioners, if not all, after some early apprehension, had become convinced that the lay-led assemblies were acceptable. The parish had lost none of its parishioners by adopting the lay-led model. It was also noted that similar numbers attended the lay-led assemblies as attended the mass at which the visiting priest was present.

Indeed, some people said that they made a special effort to attend the lay-led services to encourage those leading. They are well aware that leading the church has been daunting for some people. They have wanted to ensure that those people were aware of the support of the community. In that way, having lay-led assemblies had strengthened the sense of community and given the people a higher level of ownership of the liturgies.

## Discussion

### *Challenges and possibilities*

Not surprisingly, given the long tradition of emphasis on the centrality of the mass in Catholic life, some Catholics have misgivings about lay-led assemblies. In Far West Victoria some would travel many kilometres every week in order to attend mass, often far outside their local communities. For these people, the Real Presence of Christ signified by the consecration of the bread and wine by the priest at mass was the most important aspect of Sunday worship. For the majority, however, the priority was to come together to worship as a local community of faith and thereby become an expression of the presence of God in that community.

One future possibility for communication between the parishes which might even be used for some forms of worship is the use of video links. In many rural areas, video links are increasingly used for a variety of purposes. The researcher was shown a high-quality link between a small local health clinic and a hospital. With the aid of that link, people could be treated at the clinic during emergencies rather than having to be transported hundreds of kilometres to a large hospital.

The researcher was told about the video links in some of the local schools. Schools in small rural towns were linked so that classes could be taught across the region. This was especially important at the final years of secondary school. It meant that these students did not have to move away from home. They could receive expert tuition along with other students across a large region.

In some areas of Australia, such video links are being used in churches. It may well be possible to link several congregations in the near future so that one priest can see and interact with them all in various locations. While video links are not ideal, just as having a teacher via video link at a remote location is not ideal, it can be a very real option for tiny rural churches spread across a wide area. In Australia, a National Broadband Network is being rolled out by the Federal government with the aim of giving most, if not all communities, access to high-speed Internet services. This new network will enlarge the possibilities of video links.

The western region of the Ballarat Diocese is exploring new possibilities. However, in some ways, it is returning to earlier patterns. When parishes were founded in this part of Victoria, there were just one or two priests who would travel across a vast area. They celebrated mass wherever they went. But they could not be everywhere at once. They offered pastoral care, but they could not care for the needs of all.

In some respects, as rural populations thin and as numbers of parishioners and priests decline, the area is returning to those earlier patterns. However, travelling by car rather than horse means the priest can have one (or in the case of the western region, two) base(s) where he returns in the evenings. There are communication links throughout the region. Everyone has a phone, and many have mobile phones. Communication may become easier between whole communities as Internet facilities expand in speed and band-width. It is also possible for lay people to take on many roles that have traditionally been done by priests so that worship and care continue even if the priest cannot be physically present.

The changes are challenging lay people, in terms of their expectations of what a priest will and can do, and in terms of the role they themselves can play. Yet, out of those changes are coming lay people who are ready to offer care to others, and who can study the Scriptures for themselves and present their reflections on it to their neighbours. A new sense of ownership of both the church and the faith is evident in these communities.

### ***Benefits of lay leadership***

The growth of lay leadership depends on the development of the capacities and confidence of the lay people to lead them. As the parishioners themselves noted and as has been evident in other studies of rural churches (Hughes & Kuncinuas, 2008: 21), mentoring, training, and strong support from the parishioners can all contribute to that development.

As people are encouraged to put more into the preparation, so they grow more in faith as a result of that effort. Several lay people in both case studies noted that one of the benefits of the lay-led assemblies was that they had been involved in preparing the services and the reflections on the readings. In so doing, they had grown in their understanding of the liturgy and the Scriptures.

Another benefit has been that these lay-led assemblies have provided opportunities for people to grow in confidence in serving the parish community. People who would not have dreamt of speaking in public in a church had been 'up front' and had found the confidence to speak about matters of faith. In turn, this had increased their personal ownership of the faith. Some indications of these benefits were also apparent in the first case-study in which lay people were taking a greater share of responsibility although a priest was still present.

Certainly, the involvement of young people in the life of the Cororooke parish had developed their skills in leadership. It was noted that the young people from this parish had long provided significant leadership in the Catholic secondary college they attended in Colac. One young person from this parish also contributed to leadership in the wider church through involvement in the youth council of the diocese.

In both case-studies, parishioners were offering pastoral care not only to their members, but also to other people in the community. One of the strengths of having locally based churches, rather than people congregating in larger regional parishes, is that the parishioners know and interact regularly with the members of the community. There was some concern expressed in interviews that sometimes the leaders did not get to hear about sicknesses or people who have gone into hospital. While the local grapevine may occasionally fail, most people felt that it worked well. The parishioners were exceptional in expressing care when there were special needs through such practical methods as providing meals.

Parishioners visited people in the community and others were ready to assist in the case of bereavement, for example. In Cororooke, these parishioners had been mentored in their visiting by the Good Samaritan sister. While it was not possible to evaluate the quality of the pastoral care that was offered, there was no reason to doubt that the pastoral care structures were effective and appreciated.



In some parts of the far western Victorian parishes, there appeared to be a gap between the emergency care provided by the priest and the natural care offered by community members for each other. There was a need for something more structured, with people appointed to take time to seek out those whose needs might not naturally come to the attention of the community. There was also a need to have some organized way of following up those who had been through a crisis such as a bereavement or a serious illness. While a few individuals were seeking to fill this gap, they felt that their role would be enhanced by more formal recognition by the whole parish.

### ***The importance of mentoring***

There was some anxiety in the Cororooke parish about whether it would be possible to keep the model going in the long term. It was recognized that the three coordinators were donating a lot of time to the work of the parish. Would they burn out?

There may be lessons from one of the mass centres in the Cororooke parish. It had had lay-led liturgies for more than ten years, and there was no sign of the lay people burning out. They were relaxed about their involvement, and the services were less structured than those at the other Mass centre. They had found patterns which they could maintain. With little fuss, they achieved a strong sense of community and well-ordered liturgies. People must be allowed to contribute at the level that works for them. Lay leaders should not be expected to emulate what a priest would do, but to find patterns of operating that are appropriate for the time, energy and capacities that they are able to offer.

Since the researcher's visit, there has occurred a change in leadership at the parish. The parish has found other people to take the responsibilities, and the parish has not lost heart. The high level of participation has meant that there is a strong ownership of the life and mission of the parish. The people know that the future is in their hands and they have risen to the challenge. One important indicator of this sense of ownership and the enthusiasm of the lay people has been in the increase in financial giving to the parish.

The adoption of lay leadership patterns has not always been so successful. It can mean laying heavy burdens on people who have other responsibilities in life. It has often been hard to find people with the time and the capacity to take such responsibilities, as has been noted in other places (Jung *et al.*, 1998: 30–31). One important factor in the success of the Cororooke parish was the mentoring process. Lay people now take roles of leadership with confidence because they have been mentored into those roles by the Good Samaritan sister who believed in their capacity and trained and encouraged them. In Far West Victoria, some training and mentoring was being provided by the priest. Such mentoring has also been a factor in the success of lay leadership in many other rural churches of other denominations that the researcher has visited (Hughes & Kuncianas, 2008: 21). As lay leadership becomes more widespread, it will be important for dioceses to establish more structures for training, mentoring and support.

### ***Administrative structures***

As lay people take greater responsibility for the life of a parish, it is important to develop clear administrative structures with well-defined roles and clear delegation of authority. In the western region of Victoria, this was happening in some areas as lay people took greater responsibility for property. Parishioners had begun to recognize that they did not take property matters to the priest but contacted the relevant lay people. In the parish of Cororooke, a clear structure of administration had been developed for the lay people with well defined areas of responsibility.

One possibility which had not been considered in either place was the appointment of a paid lay administrator. Such appointments provide ways in which the financial burden of the administrative work of the parish can be shared by all parishioners. Through the formal structures of employment, administrators are given specific responsibilities and are held accountable for the work they do. While volunteers can provide additional assistance, a church run by volunteers is dependent on people being able to donate a lot of time to the task. It often means that tasks are done by people who are available, rather than those who have the specific skills that are needed. Most volunteers have other responsibilities, including family commitments, which, from time to time, must come before their voluntary work. In other rural churches, having a paid administrator has been found beneficial in ensuring that the church runs smoothly (Hughes & Kunciuinas, 2008: 20).

### **Conclusion**

While these changes in organizational patterns have occurred out of local economic necessities, changes in population densities, and lack of people to fulfil clergy positions, there are underlying contributing factors in the changes in the nature and expression of faith. Fifty years ago, there were many people who felt the call to enter the priesthood or to enter a religious order. Today, it seems, few people hear that call. One reason for the lack of call may be that priesthood is no longer as distinct in the contribution it makes to the life of the churches. With many people with high levels of education, and some lay people with tertiary studies in theology, education, pastoral care and administration, leadership roles in parishes can be more easily taken on by lay people than they could a generation ago.

Increased responsibilities for lay people is also appropriate given the change in the nature of faith. As faith is seen as something for which the individual must take personal responsibility, so the opportunity for lay people to take an active role in the expression of faith, either through pastoral care or through leadership in lay-led assemblies can assist people in embracing that responsibility. For example, the fact that young people in Cororooke had had the opportunity to participate in leadership contributed to their involvement in the life of the parish.

However, if lay people are to take some of the responsibilities previously taken by clergy, there needs to be appropriate development of training, mentoring and support provided at denominational or diocesan level. One way in which this is being done within the Uniting Church of South Australia, for example, is through

the appointment of 'Resource Ministers' (Hughes & Kunciuinas, 2008). A similar pattern has been adopted by some Anglican Dioceses who are appointing 'Enabling Priests' (Hughes & Kunciuinas, 2009a). Such clergy focus on providing local mentoring, support and back-up for lay ministry teams, rather than being expected to travel to every little congregation every Sunday.

Such clergy need appropriate training and support at denominational or diocesan level for the roles of mentoring, training and supporting. Nevertheless, there are some strengths apparent in these changes in the leadership style in these Catholic parishes. Faith is personally owned at a lay level in a way it has never been owned before. Individuals think about what they believe and how they will live in relation to their faith. As they are sharing their faith with others through lay-led assemblies and in the offer of pastoral care, as well as in making administrative decisions about the life of the parish, they are reflecting on what their faith means in practice. The onus is on organizations to provide forms of support and encouragement in which positive exploration and ownership can best be fostered.

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## Notes on contributor

Revd Dr Philip Hughes is the Senior Research Officer in the Christian Research Association, Australia. He is also Honorary Research Fellow at Edith Cowan University, Perth and at the MCD University of Divinity, Melbourne.

Correspondence to: Revd Dr Philip Hughes, PO Box 206, Nunawading LPO, VIC 3131, Australia. Email: [p.hughes@cra.org.au](mailto:p.hughes@cra.org.au).