APPENDIX 2  AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Conversations since Vatican II about Catholic identity and Catholic schools have often explored the relationship between Religious Education programs and Mass attendance.

The research of Armstrong reflected on religious identity and practice across the period of 1966 to 1996 – a time of great sociological change within Australia. He concludes that this was also a time of ‘great religious change as people grow in their understanding of what it means to be who they are.’ He examines the areas of religious affiliation and the effect on worship patterns, the gender differences in worship patterns, the effect of immigration and mobility, marital status and institutional changes in the Catholic Church.

The National Church Life Survey (2001) confirmed the profile and patterns of church attendance with analysis revealing similar reasons for the decline. The changes in family patterns and structures with increases in single parent families, de facto relationships and remarriage without an annulment are linked to the worshipping patterns of students in Catholic schools.

Research by Dixon expands upon this from within the Catholic Church. His findings are from a qualitative research study conducted with forty-one mature-age Catholics (two-thirds aged 50-69) who had stopped attending Mass in recent years. Dixon reports that the ‘regularity of attendance declined over time ... people had ‘got out of the habit of going’. Participants identified the following reasons for non-attendance at Mass:

- ‘the misuse of power and authority in the Church’ ... citing issues such as sexual abuse; women not being fully valued by the Church; dismissal from paid employment in the Church because of remarriage without annulment and unjust or unprofessional treatment from Catholic employers

- the irrelevance of the Church to life today ... particularly strong in relation to moral teachings, leadership and organizational practices such as the requirement of celibacy of Priests and remarriage, annulment and denial of full participation in the Church

- lack of intellectual stimulation

- structural factors such as Mass times clashing with work commitments, parish merges

- concerns related to the parish as a community such as not feeling welcomed

- a sense of being excluded by Church rules especially in relation to remarriage and not getting an annulment; and the Church’s approach to homosexuality

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2 Ibid p. 11
• family or household issues

• going to Mass simply not a priority in the busyness of family life and other claims on time.\(^4\)

The most recent data gathered by Hughes\(^5\) and summarised in the Table 1: Frequency of Attendance of Religious Services by Age Group confirm that as adults opt out of the worshipping community, so do their children. Weekly attendance rate for 13-15 years olds at 16% are almost identical to that of the 45-59 year olds at 17%. A range of factors in family life and Church life have led to the decline in Mass attendance and only a small number of students in Catholic schools are members of the worshipping community.

![Frequency of Attendance of Religious Services by Age Group](image)

The life of pre-Vatican children, including their participation in the life of the Church and their experience of Religious Education, was very different from that of today’s children and young people. The changing relationships between family life, the life of the Church and the work of Catholic schools is complex and calls to earlier ways and simple solutions will not serve our students well.

The identity of the Catholic school has at its heart, a dialogue between faith and life. Catholic schools, as part of their role in educating children and young people, assist them to shine the light of the Catholic story on their own decisions and actions; and in turn to reflect on their life experience, making meaning of the Christian message and their participation in the faith and broader communities. This dynamic presents each Catholic school with a set of opportunities to explore and articulate its identity; and a range of responsibilities to live out its vision and mission in a post traditional society.

\(^4\) Ibid. pp 6-10.