

RELIGIOUS RESEARCH IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND
INSTITUTIONS: A SURVEY 1977-1987.

In 1971 Hans Mol commented 'that before long some kind of organisation will be necessary in Australia to provide the need for local, regional or national socio-religious research'¹. He cautioned against the premature establishment of such an organisation and gave some thoughtful advice:

Maybe it would be possible to turn a disadvantage (the absence of such an organisation in Australia) into a boon by making sure that, if a need is felt for such an organisation overlapping with others, amateurism will be minimised. There seems to be a good opportunity in Australia for co-ordinated efforts.²

Eight years later Michael Mason echoed these comments. By this stage however several organisations had been established and his concern was that proper records be kept, current research co-ordinated and collaboration encouraged on continuing research.

Mason also proposed a purification of basic religious research. He stated that there was a need to research into 'the range of current Australian worldviews, belief and value systems: their sources, structure, influence, social support bases, principal modes of expression and relationships to traditional religion.'³

A further eight years later there were even more religious research organisations, but thankfully there had also been moves to co-ordinate research and also conduct substantial joint basic research.

Various definitions apply to basic research and applied research. Though they may not be mutually exclusive activities, it is useful to draw a distinction, if only for historical purposes. Basic research is concerned with the theoretical foundations of religious sociology and contributing to the international study of religion. Applied research is practical or even

pragmatically oriented research which is for a specific or a narrower purpose.

Traditionally denominational research is applied in nature while basic research is undertaken by those involved in academic study.

Hans Mol, Michael Mason and Mary Mattis have all elaborated on the importance of co-operation for those different groups of researchers.⁴ Before I begin my survey of pastoral research in Australia in the last ten years it would be helpful to note some of the reasons they give for co-operation in research.

Finance and resources.

There is a limited amount of money available for religious research and one way to stretch denominational funds would be financial pooling from academic and church organisations. Trained personnel are also in short supply. Sharing expertise in certain areas would ensure better quality and greater efficiency in research. Increased communication about research projects would also decrease the possibility of duplication and the production of meaningless work.

Access to data and subjects

Collaboration between researchers would allow church based researchers greater access to the data holdings and analyses of academic institutions and in return academics would have greater access to participants in denominational studies and to church statistical collections. Both groups could benefit from the increased dialogue and the possibility of more extensive research.

Religious research in Australia: 1977 - 1987

The reporting of research will be under denominational headings, excepting where the research has been jointly arranged (as is happening more

frequently). This survey will not detail individual research, unless it is connected to a church or Christian organisation. Important primary research completed at the postgraduate level will be listed in a bibliography to be published by the National Catholic Research Council. This will be commented on again later in this survey.

Anglican Church of Australia

The Social Responsibilities Committees of the Anglican Church produce regular reports on issues affecting the social and pastoral mission of the church. To help coordinate the increasing wealth of information the Social Responsibilities Commission of the Anglican Church has started a newsletter. In the first issue the General Synod research officer, Margaret Rodgers commented that 'often we are all addressing the same issues and could share the work; some have particular expertise in areas which could be of benefit and use to all; some have research resources which could be of benefit to others who have little or none'.⁵

Several significant Social Questions Committee reports have been completed including an extensive report on the aids' crisis by the working party of the Social Questions Committee, Diocese of Melbourne (1985) and a report on Asian immigration by the Social Responsibilities Commission of the Diocese of Perth. This report was based on two surveys. One Survey was conducted in church circles and the other among the general public. In 1985 Les Miller completed a short report for the Social Issues committee, Diocese of Sydney concerning the medical, ethical and legal implications of IVF.

Current research projects include a study of the rural crisis and a study of sole parents for the Social Responsibilities Commission and an investigation of racism and racist attitudes among Sydney Anglicans for the

Diocese of Sydney.

In the multicultural area the Diocese of Melbourne published the influential report: A Garden of many Colours: The Report of the Archbishop's Commission of Multicultural Ministry and Mission in 1985.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence

This organisation has produced a wealth of applied research, mostly in the area of social welfare. It is beyond the scope of this survey to even begin a listing of their work.

The Baptist Church in Australia.

In 1978 the Baptist Union of Victoria published Ross Langmead's significant report on the life and possible future of the fourteen Baptist churches in Melbourne's western suburbs. In New South Wales a report examining certain aspects of unemployment was completed by Vladimir Korotkov. This report was accepted by the Baptist Assembly in 1984.

The Catholic Church in Australia.

Archdiocesan (Brisbane Catholic) Research Group.

This research group was in existence for a few years during the period of this survey. The group was set up by the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council. The research group produced an important comparative study of the beliefs and practices of ordained Catholics, lay Catholics and non-Catholics in the Brisbane metropolitan area. The study: by Paul Hewitt, Catholics Divided: A Sociological Investigation (1978) contains fifteen chapters of findings, including the examination of lay attitudes about priests, moral concerns and beliefs.

Catholic Commission For Justice and Peace (CCJP)

The CCJP was established as a research and education body by the (then) Australian Episcopal Conference in 1972. During its fifteen years existence the CCJP produced a variety of papers and audio-visuals in the areas of social justice and peace studies. Primarily to ensure a wider readership for educational purposes CCJP studies have tended to be short and discussion oriented. Though many papers would not be included in a research bibliography, CCJP studies provide an invaluable guide to social issues affecting the church in Australia and the world.

Catholic Enquiry Centre (CEC)

The CEC has published two useful statistical handbooks in the last ten years. The first Belief in Australia was published in June 1979 and the second Australia: Facts and Figures was issued in 1986 in preparation for the Papal visit. This recent publication, contains over forty tables on Australia, Australian Christianity and the Catholic Church. The sources for these statistics are the 1981 Census, the Official Directory of the Catholic Church in Australia 1985-86 and the Australian Values Study (AVS). The AVS section includes tables with age and sex breakdowns. There is a separate section containing statistics on marriage and divorce in Australia. The handbook does not provide extensive analyses, though the notes and bibliography are useful starting points.

Institute of Religious Studies.

The IRS was formed in 1980 by Sr Carmel Leavey to provide the possibility of independent research in the area of socio-religious studies. This research would be carried out on a contract basis.

The National Council of the Major Superiors of the Religious of Australia. Between 1976 and 1979 the Major Superiors Assembly initiated research on the life of religious personnel in Australia. The statistical research was analyzed in Reflections on a Survey: Australian Religious Personnel 1978 (a series of interpretative essays on the National Statistical Survey, edited by M. C. Leavey). An historical review of religious life was also completed. In 1984 the Project on Australian Religious Life (PARL) was commenced.

A recent study of significance for the wider church is the national project on Women and the Australian Church (WATAC). WATAC was commenced in 1984. It has involved the surveying of a large sample of mainly Catholic women (about 3000 responded) and the use of some of the implications of the findings in a national conference on Women in the Church and Society.

The National Catholic Research Council (NCRC).

NCRC was established in 1976 by the (then) Australian Episcopal Conference to assist the Catholic Church with pastoral and social research. During its first decade NCRC produced three important bibliographical works. In 1982 Religion in Australian Life A Bibliography of Social Research was jointly published with the Australian Association for the Study of Religions. (Edited by M Mason and Compiled by G Fitzpatrick). This publication remains the only comprehensive bibliography of Australian religious research. Religion in Australian Life lists research completed or published in the period 1945 - 1977. It contains a supplement of selected items published 1978-1981. In 1983 The Australasian Union List of Serials in Theological Collections (AULOTS) was published (edited by Hans Arns and Sr Marianne Dacy NDS) and in 1984 Graham Rossiter's A Review of Australian Research Related to Religious Education in Schools.

The first two works are essential resources for the social researcher.

NCRC has also commissioned a series of papers under the general title Pastoral Investigation of Contemporary Trends (PICT).

There are six areas of study in the PICT series.

- 1) The church's mission - social history and changes in the Church
- 2) The family in the modern world
- 3) Models of christian community
- 4) Ministry amongst aboriginal people
- 5) The nature of secularization - the academic debate and its significance for the Australian Church
- 6) A study of the beliefs and practices of Australian Catholics.

Another project to be completed in 1988 is a bibliography of postgraduate theses on Australian religious topics. (1922 - 1986). The bibliography will cover all aspects of religious life, but for inclusion theses must have an Australian component or orientation. There is an increasing amount of research being undertaken and completed in the area of religion in Australia but only a small amount is published. It is hoped that this bibliography will help to make people aware of the research to date and thus foster greater academic liaison, as well as helping those involved in social and pastoral research by providing them with details of studies which have not been given extensive (if any) publicity. To facilitate ongoing research the bibliography will be updated annually and published every few years.

As well as these publications NCRC has produced a regular newsletter since August 1977. This newsletter provides information about current pastoral research and publications.

Nelen Yubu

The Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit of Northern Australia was set up in July 1977 by the Catholic order the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC). Nelen Yubu is a research centre which attempts to link anthropology and missiology with contemporary practical missionary work. It encourages the writing of and presentation of papers at local missions and the Nelen Yubu Centre. To foster academic liasion it publishes a journal Nelen Yubu about four times a year.

Migration Research Centres.

Catholic Intercultural Resource Centre (C.I.R.C.).

The Italian Resource Centre was set up in 1977 by the Melbourne Catholic Archdiocesan Office of the coordinator of the Italian Apostolate (renamed C.I.R.C in 1979). The C.I.R.C promotes intercultural awareness, as well as providing facilities to coordinate the pastoral and social care of Italian migrants. The C.I.R.C conducts research on migrant issues and publishes papers in this area. Significant research has been completed in the area of the ethnic aged in Victoria and Australia.

Centre For Migration Studies - Sydney (CMSS)

The CMSS was established in 1981 by the Scalabrinian Fathers, a Catholic religious order founded in 1887 to assist migrants. The CMSS has a significant collection of published and unpublished material related to immigration and the religious traditions of migrants. The CMSS produces a quarterly newsletter and has published a number of papers including Adrian Pittarello's seminal work Soup Without Salt - The Australian Catholic Church and the Italian Migrant (1980). At present the CMSS is examining the family and religious values of second generation migrants. The findings from this study will be compared with research from studies of Australian values.

Clearing House On Migration Issues (CHOMI)

CHOMI is located in Richmond, Victoria. It is the documentation unit of the Ecumenical Migration Centre. The unit has extensive resources on ethnic and migration issues and publishes a regular series of papers and bibliographies as well as a news magazines.

The Italian Catholic Federation (F.C.I.).

This organisation was founded in Bulleen, Victoria to promote the religious, social and cultural well-being of migrants. It has established a research group; the Voce Committee. The Voce Committee has produced two occasional papers. Racism (1985) and Abortion (1986).

Lutheran Church Of Australia

'The Second Survey of Current Attitudes and Concerns of Pastors Serving in Congregations of the Lutheran Church of Australia' was completed in 1984 by Dr E. W. Janetzki. Dr Janetzki conducted the first survey during 1973 and 1974. The second survey has enabled a comparison to be made and provided the Lutheran Church with more extensive data to evaluate their ministry. Summaries of both these surveys have been published in the Lutheran Theological Journal. The summaries record data totals with only minimal commentary.

Uniting Church In Australia.

The various state boards of the Uniting Church have produced several reports in the period 1977-1987 (the first decade of the Uniting Church).

The South Australian Synod has published Dean Drayton's historical study of the changing perceptions of evangelism in the Methodist Church of South Australia (1980) and commissioned Rachael Threapleton to research into the location of church member's residences in relation to the location of

their church (1980).

In New South Wales, the Board of Mission assists pastoral planning by providing social profiles of Uniting Church (and other church) parish areas. The board has published some valuable studies, including Peter Kaldor's account of the division between the Protestant Churches and the Urban Working Class in Australia - A Gulf Too Deep? (1983) and his survey of eleven areas in which the Uniting Church is ministering - Stepping Out and Dean Drayton's paper The Small Rural Community (1986).

Recently Peter Kaldor's important study Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care (1987) was published by Lancer Books. This book emerged from his research for the Board of Mission (1983) and his postgraduate research (at the time of his appointment to the Board of Mission) at the Centre for Environmental and Urban Studies at Macquarie University. Kaldor's experience in both church and academic spheres is reflected in his comment that 'the ongoing connection between church and university has proved valuable to the development of this project.'⁶

In 1981 the Task Group on departmental organisation (established by the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church) decided to survey Church members about structure and administration. Consultants constructed a fourteen page questionnaire which asked members about the degree of involvement the Queensland Synod should have in certain activities and about state/national division of functions.

About 10,000 questionnaires were returned (approximately forty per cent of members), but it should be noted that because the cost of a complete thorough analysis was prohibitive only a random sample of 500 questionnaires were chosen for analysis. There were however, no significant alterations in the results when a further one hundred questionnaires were analyzed.

In 1985 the Queensland Synod published a resource booklet about industrial relations. This document: The Gospel, Industrial Conflict and Community Life was a result of the Queensland Churches split over the Queensland electricity services strike. As well as general pastoral comment and extensive analyses, there is a section concerning the new industrial laws.

The Joint Board Of Christian Education (JBCE).

In Australia the JBCE is a joint enterprise between the Uniting Church, the Churches of Christ and some dioceses of the Anglican Church.

Since 1977 the JBCE has commissioned studies of young people and youth in the church. The first report Discovering the Needs and Interests of Young People was released in 1977.

A similar, more practically oriented report was published by The Board of Education (New South Wales Synod, Uniting Church) in the same year. This report It's Different; It's Ours! Youth Involved in the Community was the result of a government sponsored project in which young people in the Liverpool area were helped to engage in community projects.

The latest JBCE report to be published was 12-14 Year Olds in the Church: Report of an Investigation. (1982). This report was based on a preliminary study of youth who were deemed to be too old to fit into children's work and too young for youth work. It examines youth groups already existing, the needs of 12-14 year olds and the needs of leaders of these groups. Though only Uniting Church youth were interviewed the findings would be useful for any youth evaluation. Future reports from the JBCE include: 15-17 year olds in the Church, 18-25 year olds in the Church and Small Rural and Isolated Youth Groups.

The Australian Council Of Churches (ACC).

The ACC has been an instigator of change in the Australian church scene for over twenty five years. Though the ACC has not been actively involved in basic religious research it has always encouraged research and theological discussion. During the 1970s the ACC commissioned the survey of declining recruitment to the ministry by E. Dowdy and G. Lupton. This survey examined ministerial recruitment in NSW and Queensland.

The ACC publishes significant resources particularly in the social justice area and provides Australian churches with access to the extensive reports and publications of the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia.

Recently the ACC Commission on the Status of Women produced a series of information packages. These packages provide resources and activities in four areas. The areas examined are language and liturgy, women and poverty, the church and domestic violence, and the church and reproductive technology.

Fusion Australia.

FUSION is a christian organisation concerned with youth ministry and the unemployed in Australia.

Fusion has published a discussion paper Understanding and Reaching Australians. This paper examines popular Australian history in the context of culture and myth. Recently it has taken up the distribution of Mal Garvin's examination of the Australian people 'Us Assies'.

The Inter-Church Trade and Industry Mission (I.T.I.M).

I.T.I.M is an ecumenical agency operating in all states. It was formed at a National Conference of Churches in 1960 and at present is represented by twelve churches. As well as providing a chaplaincy service ITIM conducts

research into Australian urban and industrial society. I.T.I.M Research (Victoria) has produced over sixty papers in the last ten years.

Zadok Institute for Christianity and Society

The Zadok Centre was established in 1976 by businessmen who were concerned with helping lay Christians live their faith more effectively in work and everyday life. Zadok became a viable organization when the Scripture Union and The Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students committed themselves to support the venture financially. Zadok is co-ordinated from its Canberra offices, but is trying to widen its profile and base by emphasizing that it is an institute promoting research and the study of contemporary Christian issues in Australia, rather than the centre for this activity.

To facilitate research Zadok publishes a news magazine Zadok Perspectives and a regular series of papers, including reading guides on significant topics. Series One papers are concerned with contemporary Christian issues and Series Two papers, contain evaluations of a more biblical/theological nature. These papers are valuable starting points for research students. In recent years several papers have contained summaries and analyses of Australian Values Study Survey data and Christian Research Association data. The particular Zadok study areas worth examining include Australian Society, Mission in Australia and Work, Religion and Everyday Life. Together they provide a historical account of the development of research in Australia over the last ten years. Zadok has also been instrumental in publishing some significant resources. The Shape of Belief, (edited by D. Harris, D. Hynd and D. Millikan, 1982) consists of twenty succinct articles of denominational and religious life in Australia. Though Australian Christianity in Outline (edited by Doug Hynd, 1984) needs

substantial updating, it is still the only comprehensive directory of denominations and organizations in Australia.

Another book worth examining is David Millikan's The Sunburnt Soul: Christianity in Search of an Australian Identity. Though the book and television series of the same name contained little research they were important in stimulating a debate which current researchers are commenting on in depth.

NCRC and Zadok involvement in the Australian Values Study Survey (AVSS)

The AVSS is part of an international study of moral and social values. In 1978 Professor J Kerkhofs, S.J, of the University of Louvain established the European Value Systems Study Group. Since 1978 over twenty eight countries have joined the study.

In Australia the survey was conducted by the Roy Morgan Research Centre between August and October 1983. 1228 individuals aged 14 years and over were interviewed. Initially the only funding received for the study came from commerce. This allowed the Australian Steering Committee of AVSS to drop the questions relating to religion which had been included in other studies. To correct this move NCRC initiated church sponsorship in the study. Zadok organized the Protestant Churches' participation. This move gave the sponsoring organisations the right to frame questions on religion for inclusion in the survey. It also meant that they would have access to the survey data.

During 1984 and 1985 Zadok and NCRC organised several joint and independent presentations of AVSS findings. As I have already noted, Zadok has since published several of these presentations as papers. In 1986 Zadok, in association with World Vision, published the first comprehensive study of AVSS data. This report by Gary Bouma and Beverly Dixon was entitled

The Religious Factor in Australian Life. Bouma and Dixon provide a controversial contribution to the debates about secularization, denominational identifications and religiosity in Australia.

The involvement of different churches in the AVSS project has opened up further possibilities in research co-operation. Doug Hynd believes that 'the experience has been seen by the churches to be fruitful and a starting point for continuing research rather than a "one off" exercise'.⁷ The Christian Research Association (CRA) was formed as a result of the churches association with AVSS. After considering the background to this research it is worth noting the comments of Margaret Lewis, Chairperson of NCRC in 1983.

Since the inception of NCRC in 1976 we have invested energy in the development of networks in Australia in order to identify the research being undertaken, to put researchers in touch with one another, and to put users of research in touch with researchers. It is thanks to these informal networks that one of our members became aware of this study in Australia; he was able to intervene when it appeared that the religion questions were to be deleted.⁸

The informal networks of NCRC promoted a formal association which has now opened the way for a significant study by the CRA of the beliefs and practices of Australians. NCRC also commissioned a similar study as part of its PICT series.

The Christian Research Association was established in 1985. It is funded by a number of protestant organisations and includes representation from NCRC.

In its first study the CRA team interviewed ninety two people between March and July 1986. Most of those interviewed were from Protestant or non religious background. The interviews were conducted in two socially different

Sydney suburbs.

The aim of the study was to obtain a variety of responses in order to produce hypotheses for a more extensive survey. The report from the CRA Australian Beliefs and Practices Project was released in October 1986.

It is worth noting the caution of the CRA team.

Any percentages quoted in this study refer only to the sample interviewed. The sample was chosen to ensure a range of responses, but not to represent any particular group. Hence the results cannot be extrapolated to any other group of people or population. These results illustrate some of the types of meaning-systems and some of the types of ways in which religion is important to people.

It should also be noted that the study did not include any interviews with migrants.

The current project of the CRA is entitled the Combined Churches Study for Faith and Mission. Over 16,000 questionnaires were distributed in ninety eight Australian churches. The five church groups involved were Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Uniting and Pentecostal. The response rate was reasonable, with a return of thirty six percent. The preliminary project report was a major publication in December 1987 and was presented at seminars around Australia in early 1988. Further analysis of the voluminous data will ensure a number of publications in the next few years.

Conclusion.

Most institutional religious research in Australia has been conducted by church departments or groups funded by the various denominations. Several dioceses and parishes in some denominations have initiated pastoral planning but generally there is still a 'need to develop competent resource people for sound pastoral planning.' Trained resource people could help

more effectively with local church and parish studies. This seems to be a particularly relevant point as there has been a rapid growth in local church studies. These studies would mostly be included in the category of applied research because of their limited value. If they are not conducted and analysed properly their value for the local church is also questionable.

Denominations need to be made aware of the necessity of conducting basic research. This research will provide the foundation for better applied research. Considering the limited resources and finance for church research, this basic research should be undertaken on a joint basis. It would also be helpful if the churches encouraged greater liaison with relevant tertiary institutions. Several research groups in Australia have already begun to share resources. If Australian churches desire to effectively examine the increasing number of pastoral and religious concerns these moves toward joint research need to be encouraged.

Peter Bentley
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Notes.

1. J. J. Mol, 'The Scope of Sociological Research in Religion in Australia and New Zealand,' Colloquium 4, no.3 (October 1971) p.12.
2. Ibid., p.7.
3. M. C. Mason, 'Research on Religion in Australia: A Proposal for Increased Collaboration', Colloquium, Vol.12, 1979, p.41.
4. See Mol and Mason, op.cit., and Mary Mattis '"Social research and the churches": A comment from a denominational researcher', Review of Religious Research, Vol.28, No.1 (December 1986) pp.85-88.
5. Margaret Rodgers, Social Responsibilities Newsletter, No.1 June 1986, p.2.
6. Peter Kaldor, Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care?, Lancer Books, Homebush 1987, pp.xii-xiv.
7. Doug Hynd, 'A Landmark Report: An Introduction to The Religious Factor in Australian Life', Zadok Perspectives No.16, December 1986, p.18.
8. Margaret Lewis, NCRC Newsletter, Vol.III, No.2, June 1983, p.1.
9. Christian Research Association, Australian Beliefs and Practices Project, Stage One Report October 1986. (See preface)
10. Kevin Treston, Paper presented at the Christian Brothers (NSW) Centenary Conference July 1987. Though Kevin Treston's comment is related to the Catholic Church it has wider significance. He notes that the Adelaide Catholic diocese is comprehensively involved in pastoral planning and that The Catholic Research Office for Pastoral Planning in Melbourne is also producing fruitful work.
11. An example of recent collaboration was the Joint Church Census conducted in New South Wales Protestant churches in July 1986.

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