

The Plenary Council must address structural inertia and church decline

- [John Warhurst](#)
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Two documents from and about the church in Australia issued in December last year should be compulsory reading for all Plenary Council (PC) delegates. They offer crucial insights into the state of the church in Australia, and taken together they paint a picture of church inertia and decline.



The first, [The Australian Catholic Mass Attendance Report 2016](#) issued by the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPR) is a portrait of contemporary church decline despite the data being almost five years old. The second, the [Response of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to The Light from the Southern Cross: Co-Responsible Governance in the Catholic Church in Australia \(LSC\)](#) report is so averse to taking a national view on the major matters of church governance that it verges on national inertia.

The Bishops' response addresses the 86 recommendations in the LSC report. Their responses range from agreed, agreed in principle, outside their competence (competence apparently being either with individual bishops and dioceses or the Vatican) and not agreed. Their general remarks range from being highly complimentary of the report to expressing extremely worrying assumptions about the church. In the latter category is the remark that for Catholics the hierarchical structure of the church is a given. This tendentious remark is served up without explanation.

The bishops' response is inconsistent and ultimately negative on the matter of one of the report's key recommendations, mandated diocesan pastoral councils, which they discuss in various parts of their response. At one stage they advise that Canon Law

allows and even encourages them, but it does not mandate them. On another occasion they suggest that authoritative church pronouncements encourage them but leave them voluntary. The ACBC refuses to bite the bullet and does not even encourage them for Australian dioceses.

The context of this inertia is the ACBC's understanding of its own role, which it accuses the LSC report of misunderstanding. It concludes that other than in 'very limited ways', it 'does not govern the church in Australia; nor does it have oversight over individual bishops'. It is not 'a supervisory layer above the individual Bishops and their dioceses'. The ACBC steps back much further than is wise.

The Bishops' response lacks a positive statement of the collective role that the ACBC might play. It is strong on what it cannot do (no governing, supervision, oversight, or even receiving annual reports from dioceses), but fails to take the opportunity to express any contribution which the bishops collectively can make to a collaborative national vision for the church in Australia.

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Yet the Plenary Council by its very nature is a national event tasked with producing a national vision for the church in Australia. This sets up a disconnect between the structure of the church in Australia and any aspirations that the PC may have to renew the church.

The Bishops express optimism and conclude that demands for reform show that 'people have not given up on the Church but believe we can be a better church in the future'. Yet the Mass Attendance report (2016) confirms that the church is in crisis in Australia. The statistics are so damning that it is hard to know where to begin. Among the key highlights this report identifies is the fact that over the past 20 years church attendance among Catholics born in Australia and other English speaking countries has almost halved; attendance overall is ageing and one third of those attending are between 60 and 74; Mass attendance on a typical Sunday is 11.8 per cent of Catholics (9.5 per cent of men and less than 6 per cent of those aged between 20 and 34); as always women boost the attendance statistics (more than 60 per cent of those in attendance); by contrast attendance of those born in non-English speaking countries has more than doubled over 20 years from 18 per cent to almost 37 per cent.

In measured but strong terms the NCPR leaves no doubt that the picture for the church in Australia is sombre. It concludes that if 2011 (the year of the previous report) was a critical moment then these figures show that 2016 is a more critical and urgent moment than ever before in Australia's history. The NCPR concludes that 'an extraordinary event or events would need to occur before we witness a reversal — or even plateau — of the declining attendance trends'.

Given this, and if the bleak picture is confirmed once again by the May 2021 Mass count, then PC delegates should gather in October with a sense of urgency. The Plenary Council should articulate for the church in Australia a national vision, thus occupying the space vacated by the ACBC given its inert view of its role within the church.

We must hope and pray that that PC is the extraordinary event or events that the NCPR suggests is needed to reinvigorate the church. National leadership and deep cultural and structural reforms are needed.



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