CHAPTER THREE

# Community and Parish in Contemporary Ireland: The Challenge of Rapid Social Change

## Desmond McCafferty and Brendan O'Keeffe

### 1. Introduction

It is now widely recognised that the future of the parish depends to a great extent on the development of an extended role for the laity in parish affairs (Pope, 2004). This recognition is not, of course, entirely new within the Catholic Church, and can be traced back at least to the Second Vatican Council. However, it has been sharpened considerably in recent years as the numbers in the ordained ministry have continued to decline in Ireland and throughout most of Europe. One response to this trend is an increased focus on the development of 'lay ecclesial ministry' (USCCB, 2005) in which a potentially wide range of functions may be delegated to suitably prepared and qualified members of the laity acting in a quasi-professional capacity. But, more fundamentally, it is apparent that the vibrancy of parish life depends on nurturing a strong, socially-cohesive community, whose members are actively engaged in a wide range of more and less structured voluntary activities, both within and without the church. The current debate about the role of the laity in the parish is taking place within the context of wider social debates about issues such as social engagement, volunteering, active citizenship, participative democracy, partnership, and new forms of governance. Underpinning these in turn are the comparatively new concept of social capital, which has received widespread attention from academics as well as from government policymakers, and the much older concept of community development.

This chapter addresses the issue of parish development from a community development/social capital perspective, and enquires both theoretically and empirically as to how recent demographic, social and economic change in Ireland might be understood as impacting on local communities. We begin with a discussion of the concept of social capital, examining its relationship to volunteering and participation. We then outline

some key aspects of recent social and economic change in Irish society that might be expected to have impacted both on the stock of social capital and on the level of voluntary activity. These trends, it is argued, together present a challenging context for the growth of participation, and ultimately therefore for community and parish development. Following this, we examine in detail some of the recent evidence on trends in volunteering, as one indicator of social capital. This involves a detailed analysis of both the social and geographical dimensions of voluntary activity, based on new data available from the census of population. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the implications for the future of the parish.

## 2. Governance, Sustainability, Social Capital and Volunteering

The development of vibrant parish communities, in which members of the laity play a proactive role in ministry and in the promotion of social justice, can be seen as part of a more general transition in modern liberal democracies from traditional, exogenous or top-down approaches to decision-making, to one that is based on the principles of partnership and equity. In political science and public administration this transition is frequently referred to as the shift from traditional 'government' to 'collaborative governance' (Davoudi, 2005). Where 'government' is associated with the centralised, exogenous, hierarchical and rigid, 'governance' is associated with the local or bottom-up, horizontal structures, shared decision-making and responsibilities, co-operation, flexibility and innovation. Good governance, it is argued, ensures maximum buy-in from interested persons and associations; it encourages creativity, promotes understanding, delivers greater efficiencies, and promotes strategic and longer-term approaches to planning and development (O'Keeffe, 2007). However, adherence to good governance requires time, so that trust can be built-up between those involved in decision-making and so that large organisations can adjust to the needs and issues of individuals and locales (OECD, 2001 and 2006; Stoker and Chhotray, 2008).

Literature on collaborative governance has mushroomed over the past two decades, and in particular since the publication of the United Nations Report *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This report outlined the challenges facing humankind due to the over-consumption of the earth's natural resources. In response,

it advocated a sustainable development approach, based on achieving a balance between economic, social and environmental objectives. The attainment of this balanced or sustainable approach requires action at the global, national and local levels. At the local level, individuals are challenged to collectively foster the creation of communities that are prosperous, green, healthy, safe, just, inclusive and culturally-rich. While the original UN report on sustainable development does not explicitly mention the spiritual dimension of community life, the complementarity between spirituality and sustainable development has emerged in more recent commentaries (McDonagh, 2007), and is evident in a number of Catholic Church pronouncements and actions over recent years.[1] Indeed, in 2007, The Vatican became the first state to become carbon neutral.

Good governance and sustainability are complementary and mutually reinforcing social and political processes and outcomes. Moreover, both are contingent on community development, whereby citizens organise themselves in collective associations to pursue economic, social and environmental development outcomes. Thus, community and voluntary groups are an essential element in attaining sustainability, and citizens' willingness and capacity to engage on a voluntary basis in community development activity is both a desirable outcome in itself, and an indicator of the health of a community. Modern debates about voluntary associational activity have relied heavily on the conceptual framework associated with social capital, which has attracted a great deal of interest in recent years both from the academic community (across a wide range of disciplines) and from policy makers and governments. The concept is central to the Third Way social and economic policies introduced by the Clinton administration in the US in the 1990s and New Labour in the UK. In Ireland the 2002 Programme for Government (Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats, 2002) committed the government to working 'to promote social capital in all parts of Irish life', while the review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy lists the development of social capital as one of three key objectives. In addition, the National Competitiveness Council now reports on a number of social capital indicators in

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1. Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (2009), *The Cry of the Earth: A Pastoral Reflection on Climate Change from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.*

its annual competitiveness report (National Competitiveness Council, 2008).

The popularisation of social capital as a means of understanding the health of community life is largely due to the work of the American sociologist Robert Putnam (2000), building on earlier contributions from Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988). According to Putnam (2000) social capital consists of the networks, norms and generalised trust that enable individuals and groups to engage in co-operative activity for mutual benefit. He identifies three distinct types of social capital. Bonding capital consists of the links to family, close friends and neighbours that often provide important practical and emotional support for individuals on an informal basis. Bridging capital consists of links between socially heterogenous individuals and groups, such as often exist in sports and special interests clubs. Linking capital consists of connections to the sources of power in society, including those in the public realm, such as governmental bodies, as well as private sector institutions. A common finding in studies of local social capital is that bonding capital is often strong in disadvantaged communities, but bridging and linking capital are stronger in middle class or better-off communities.

Social capital as conceived of by Putnam is both a public good, and intended to be used for the public good (Johnston and Percy-Smith, 2003). The Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007a) describe it as one of the key resources underpinning community development. It exists in a reflexive relationship with voluntary activity: on the one hand it is maintained and renewed by voluntary activity, on the other hand both the level and type of voluntary activity in the community are influenced by the level and type of social capital present. This is the neo-Durkheimian view elaborated by Hardill *et al* (2007) who suggest that bridging social capital may result in quite 'instrumental' forms of volunteering, in which individuals see volunteering as a means of improving their labour market or social status. On the other hand bonding capital may be more likely to result in volunteering that is aimed at community or neighbourhood improvement where 'the principal benefits to the volunteer are less about opportunities for getting on than about opportunities for participation in the shared life of the group' (400).

One of the advantages of using social capital as a means of

understanding voluntary activity is that recent empirical research on social capital can yield insights into current and likely future trends in volunteering and associational activity. In particular we can draw on a number of comparative cross-national studies that have attempted to identify some of the correlates of social capital. Newton (1997) among others has suggested that one of the factors promoting social capital formation is strong and stable family ties, while Fukuyama (1997) argues that a lack of social capital may be related to factors such as the breakdown of the nuclear family (through divorce and extra-marital births), crime, child abuse, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Other factors that have been identified as inimical to social capital development include social and political inequality (Boix and Posner, 1998; Knack, 1999) and social and ethnic divisions (Whiteley, 2000). If these factors can indeed be regarded as causal or explanatory of social capital (or its absence) then by examining recent trends in them we may be able to gain some insights into the prospects for social capital formation, voluntary activity and community development in Ireland. Such an account is furnished in the next section.

## 3. Recent Social Change in Ireland

Irish society has undergone profound change in recent years, much of which has been driven by economic restructuring and the significant improvement in overall living standards produced by the economic boom that emerged in the early to mid-1990s. It seems reasonable to suggest that many of these changes will impact on levels of social capital at both the national and local (community and parish) level. Here we focus on changes that seem likely, on the basis of factors identified in the relevant literature, to have such an impact. The period covered in the discussion varies according to the availability of appropriate statistical data, but in most instances extends to 2006 or 2007.

Perhaps the single most positive feature of the boom was that, following the sustained high levels of unemployment of the 1980s, the numbers out of work fell in both absolute and relative terms. The unemployment rate declined from 10 per cent in 1997 to under 4 per cent in 2001, and while it rose slightly to 4.6 per cent in 2007 it remained consistently below the EU average throughout this period. In 2007 the Irish rate was under two-thirds the EU average, and the sixth lowest among all 27 countries. In parallel with this drop in unemployment the phen-

omenon of 'jobless households' (i.e. households in which no one has paid employment) also declined, as indicated by the reduction in the proportion of the population aged 18-59 years living in such households from 12.5 per cent to 7.8 per cent in the decade from 1997 to 2007 (Central Statistics Office, 2008a).

This economic improvement was based on foreign direct investment (FDI) to a large extent, one of the key phenomena associated with the increasing globalisation of the Irish economy. Globalisation has also led to increased immigration, and consequent cultural and ethnic diversity in what was for a long time one of the most homogenous populations in Western Europe. In the course of the 1990s the State not alone experienced its highest ever level of population growth, but a change in the driver of growth to net migration rather than natural increase, which had been the main source of growth since the foundation of the State. In the twelve months leading up to census day in 2006, 121,700 persons migrated into the State. Of these migrants, 55 per cent were not Irish born, among whom the main countries of birth were Poland (33,400), the UK (22,600), and Lithuania (7,400). These one-year data reflect an on-going trend established in the late 1990s, the outcome of which was that by 2006 non-Irish nationals constituted about 10 per cent of the usually resident population (Central Statistics Office, 2006).

While increasing cultural and ethnic diversity is among the more dramatic and visible forms of change in the Irish population in recent years, it has taken place against a background of profound demographic change that had been on-going over a considerably longer period of time. One of the most significant aspects of this is the decline in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) which is a measure of the number of children that would be born to a woman in the course of her reproductive lifetime if she experienced the national age-specific fertility rate at each year of age. The TFR fell from 2.12 in 1990 to 1.88 in 2005 before increasing somewhat to 2.03 in 2007. However, for every year since 1991 it has been below the replacement level of 2.10, the only period in the history of the State for which this is true (Central Statistics Office, 2008b).

The decline in the TFR is the result of a long-term downward trend in the birth rate, which, combined with on-going decline in the death rate and a corresponding increase in longevity, has resulted in a significant change in the age structure of the popul-

ation. This is reflected most clearly in the age dependency rates, i.e. the population aged either under 15 years of age (young dependency) or over 65 years of age (old dependency) expressed as a ratio of those in the category 15 to 65 years. As the annual numbers of births dropped from 1980 onwards, and the relatively large numbers born in the 1970s gradually made their way into category aged 15 years and over, the younger cohort contracted in relative terms, leading to a decrease of 31 per cent in the youth dependency ratio between 1991 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, various). In time, as the 1970s birth cohort ages, the population 'bulge' will be evident in older cohorts. Significantly, the group aged 45-64 (which, as shown later, is the main volunteering group) will expand by approximately 37 per cent by 2021, according to the most recent set of population projections (Central Statistics Office, 2008c).

This change in the age structure has also been favourable for economic growth, yielding the so-called 'demographic dividend' whereby the labour force has been expanded as a result of the high birth rates of the 1970s. Another significant source of labour force growth is the increased participation of females, whose overall participation rate increased from 44 per cent in 1998 to 53 per cent in 2006. Ireland's expanded and more feminised labour force is by and large more highly educated also, and the numbers aged 15 to 64 with third level education rose by almost 300,000 between 2000 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2008b). Increasingly employment is concentrated in the services sector, part of a long-established sectoral shift from agriculture and manufacturing that in turn has had important consequences for where jobs are located. More than ever, this tends to be in the larger urban centres, and the result is an on-going urbanisation of Irish society over the last decade and a half. Of the total population growth of over half a million between 1991 and 2006, 83 per cent was located in the cities and towns of 10,000 or more population. Even so, the urbanisation of population has lagged behind that of jobs, and this spatial mismatch resulted in a significant increase in commuting to work during the economic boom, which is reflected in the fact that the average commuting distance increased by 42 per cent between 1991 and 2006.[2] Average commuting times have also increased, and the number of commuters travelling for more than one hour to work grew

2. Commuting also includes travel to school and College by students.

by 32 per cent, from 137,706 to 182,351 between 2002 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, various).

Apart from its effects on the individual, long-distance and long-time commuting is recognised as a stress factor in personal relationships and potentially detrimental to family life. It is notable in this context that the latter years of the economic boom were characterised by a sharp increase in the extent of marital breakdown. The number of divorced persons increased from 35,100 to 59,500 between 2002 and 2006, an increase of about 70 per cent, while the number of separated persons (including divorced) increased from 133,800 to 166,800 (+25 per cent) over the same period. In parallel with increasing marriage breakdown there has been a strong trend towards cohabitation: cohabiting couples accounted for 11.6 per cent of all family units in 2006 compared with 8.4 per cent in 2002, while the number of children living with cohabiting parents increased from 51,700 to 74,500 (+44 per cent) (Central Statistics Office, 2007).

Marital breakdown is one of several factors that have contributed to a high rate of new household formation in Ireland which is reflected in the sharp rise (+43 per cent) in the number of households, from 1,029,100 in 1991 to 1,469,521 in 2006. This increase has outstripped population growth over the same period, resulting in a decrease in the average household size from 3.3 persons per household in 1991, to the latest figure, for 2006, of 2.8 persons, a decline of 12 per cent. Over the same period the number of one-person households grew by 52,000, and these households now account for 22 per cent of all households (Central Statistics Office, various).

Finally, the various changes outlined above have been accompanied by an increasing incidence of a number of social pathologies. Between 2003 and 2007 the number of homicides increased by 62 per cent, controlled drug offences doubled in number, recorded instances of damage to property and the environment increased by 27 per cent, and public order and other social code offences by 34 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2008d). Although certain other categories of offences (including sexual offences) showed a downward trend over the same period, the number of prisoners also increased, in this instance by 32 per cent between 1997 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2008e).

In summary, the last decade and a half has been one of profound economic and social transformation. While many of the

changes have been positive in nature, others have trended in the opposite direction, and it would appear evident that many of these have shifted in a direction that is not conducive to social capital formation. This is most obvious in relation to the increasing rates of serious crime and drug use, and the growing numbers of prisoners. However it may also be true of factors such as urbanisation, increased commuting times and distances, the increase in marital breakdown, and the trend towards smaller households and non-family based households. Against this background, we next examine the most recent data on patterns of voluntary activity in Ireland.

## 4. *Trends in Volunteering and Participation*

Ireland is generally perceived as a society that has promoted and valued volunteerism. Many religious orders have been to the fore in promoting volunteerism, and large voluntary bodies such as the St Vincent De Paul Society are closely associated with the church. Several members of the clergy play a prominent role as conveners and leaders of community and voluntary associations, and are among Ireland's leading lights in the promotion of social justice. The European Union has been a strong advocate of volunteerism and community development, and has produced a White Paper on Governance (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). The EU has provided funding and technical support for countless community-based projects, and is to the fore in supporting community-based approaches to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic. National and local government bodies have also taken steps to promote volunteerism. Through Local Agenda 21, city and county councils have engaged with schools, neighbourhood associations and other voluntary bodies in promoting projects to improve citizens' quality of life and the local environment. Area-based Partnerships and LEADER Local Action groups have been extremely active in supporting community and voluntary groups, and in building their capacity to promote an extensive range of projects and actions (Walsh, Craig and McCafferty, 1998; Walsh and Meldon, 2004). At national level the Taskforce on Active Citizenship was launched by An Taoiseach in 2005, and its roles include advising government and public bodies on how they can support community development and volunteerism. As suggested by Table 1, which is

taken from one of the Taskforce's reports, these combined efforts appear to be delivering positive results in the form of a net increase in volunteerism in Ireland. These data are consistent with the findings of a 2002 survey for the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2003) that both informal social contact and local community involvement in Ireland are above the European average.

*Table 1: Trends in Volunteerism and Community Engagement, 2002-2006*

Percentage of surveyed adults who:

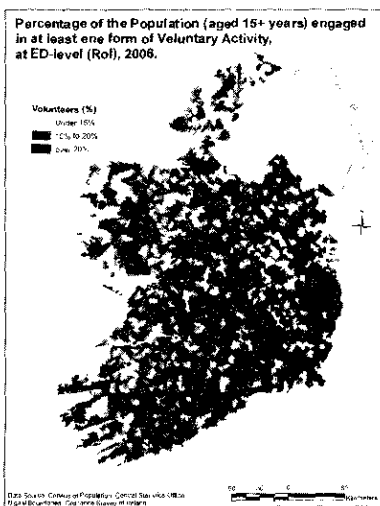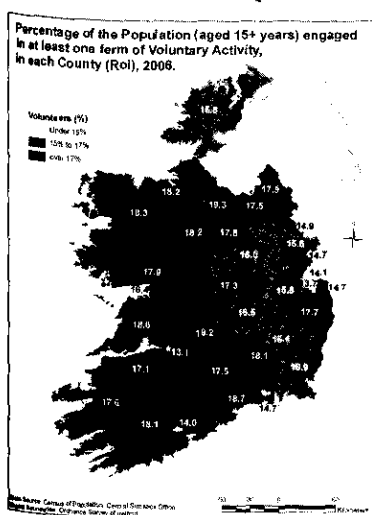|  | A. Undertook regular voluntary activity | | B. Were actively involved in a voluntary / community group | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | 2002 | 2006 | 2002 | 2006 |
| All respondents | 17.1 | 23.1 | 21.7 | 29.0 |
| Male | 18.9 | 23.7 | 25.3 | 31.4 |
| Female | 15.4 | 22.5 | 18.4 | 26.7 |
| Source: Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2007b) | | | | |

However, a somewhat less optimistic picture emerges from the data on volunteering collected nationally for the first time in the 2006 census of population. The census gives a figure of just 16.4 per cent of the population engaged in at least one form of voluntary activity, considerably lower than that for the same year in the Taskforce report.[3] This figure is somewhat below the EU average, and it compares unfavourably with countries such as Italy and Austria that have long traditions of an active civil society.[4] There is also a strong variation in volunteerism according to age, with the lowest levels among young adults (Figure 1). Less than 4 per cent of persons aged 20 to 34 years are en-

3. While the census is based on a survey of every citizen in the state, and deals with a wide range issues, the Taskforce data in contrast are gathered from sample surveys that deal specifically with issues of volunteerism and active citizenship.

4. The Eurobarometer Survey 273 Wave 63.3 records that across the EU, an average of 30% of adults participate in voluntary activity. The countries with the highest levels are Austria (60%) and The Netherlands (55%), while countries such as Italy and Spain are recognised for high levels of volunteerism associated with a well developed social economy and co-operative sector (Douglas, 2006). Former communist counties in Central and Eastern Europe, along with Portugal, record the lowest levels of volunteerism.

gaged in any type of voluntary activity, while less than 2 per cent of those in this age cohort are involved in any church-related activity. The age cohorts with the highest levels of voluntary engagement are 45 to 54 years and 55 to 65 years, with the latter also having the highest level of engagement in church-oriented activities.

Very considerable variations emerge among religious denominations in respect of their members' engagement in voluntary activities. The highest levels of volunteerism can be found among the smaller and newer churches. Among the larger and longer-established churches in Ireland, Methodists, Presbyterians and so-called 'other'[5] Christians have the highest levels of engagement in voluntary activity. In contrast, Roman Catholics and members of the Orthodox Churches are the least likely to engage in any type of volunteerism, and especially in any church-related voluntary activity. Just under 4 per cent of Roman Catholics are involved in a church-related voluntary association, as compared to over 13 per cent of Methodists.



Percentage of the Population (aged 15+ years) engaged in at least one form of Voluntary Activity, in each County (RoI), 2006.

Percentage of the Population (aged 15+ years) engaged in at least one form of Voluntary Activity, at ED-level (RoI), 2006.

The census data also provide interesting insights into the spatial variations that exist in respect of volunteerism in Ireland. A clear urban-rural dichotomy emerges, with rural areas generally having above average levels of volunteerism and urban areas having lower levels. Western counties, notably Clare, Leitrim,

5. The term 'other' is used by the CSO to refer to Christian churches excluding Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Orthodox.

Galway and Roscommon, together with North Tipperary record
the highest levels of volunteerism in the state. The striking ex-
ception in respect of counties along the Atlantic seaboard is
Donegal, which has one of the lowest levels. The counties with
the lowest level of volunteerism nationally are Fingal (14.7 per
cent) and Louth (14.9 per cent), while low levels are also preval-
ent in the counties of the Dublin commuter belt, namely Kildare,
Laois, Carlow, Meath, Westmeath and Wexford. Of the counties
in the east of Ireland, Wicklow and South Dublin are the only
ones to record relatively high levels of volunteerism, 17.7 per
cent and 18.7 per cent respectively – on a par with counties
Galway and Kerry.

Urban areas generally have lower levels of volunteerism,
and the local authority area with the absolute lowest level is
Limerick City, where only 13.1 per cent of the population is
recorded as being engaged in any form of voluntary activity.
The corresponding figures for Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (13.7
per cent), Dublin City (14.1 per cent), Cork City (14.0 per cent)
and Waterford City (14.7 per cent) are only marginally higher
than Limerick's, and are all indicative of low levels of social
capital and poorly developed community structures and facili-
ties in Ireland's cities. The figures may be attributed to social
polarisation associated with residential segregation based on
social class, and to the greater degree of transience in urban
populations. Whatever the underlying causes, viewed in the
light of the country's on-going urbanisation (as described earlier),
the association of lower levels of volunteering with urban living
appear to have negative consequences for the national stock of
social capital.

While the census figures show clear contrasts between urban
and rural areas generally, a further spatial distillation provides
greater insights into the dynamics of volunteering within our
cities, towns and rural areas. Thus, by disaggregating data on
volunteerism at ED level (Electoral District – the smallest spatial
unit used by the census), one can capture and analyse patterns
at a much more localised level. Although the average level of
volunteerism in Limerick county stands at 17.1 per cent, very
clear contrasts emerge within the county. Levels of volun-
teerism are generally higher in the east and south east of the
county, and lower in West Limerick. The communities with the
highest levels of volunteerism include Galbally, Kilfinnane,

Bruff and Bruree. The LEADER Partnership, Ballyhoura Development, has been active in these communities and throughout East Limerick and North East Cork since the 1980s. Although there are many active community associations in West Limerick, the levels of volunteerism there are noticeably lower that in the east of the county, with the lowest levels being found in the hinterland of Abbeyfeale.

Within Limerick City, there appears to be a correlation between social class and levels of volunteerism, with the higher levels (above 14 per cent) evident in relatively affluent areas such as the North Circular Road, South Circular Road, Caherdavin, Raheen and Corbally. Castletroy also records an above average level of engagement in voluntary activity, which may in part derive from the activities of student bodies and clubs based in the university. In contrast, neighbourhoods that have been classified as disadvantaged (Haase and Pratschke, 2005) tend to record the lowest levels of volunteerism. This is consistent with the findings of Humphreys and Dinneen (2007) who, in a detailed neighbourhood-level study, report comparatively low levels of social capital, other than bonding capital, in the Moyross and King's Island areas as compared to the Castletroy/ Monaleen area.

*5. After the Tiger: Opportunities and Challenges for Parish Development*
The writings of Brien Friel and the late John B. Keane among others provide insights into how the concepts of 'parish' and 'community' became synonymous with each other in 20th century Ireland. Indeed the words 'parish' and 'community' continue to be used interchangeably in the contemporary vernacular of Ireland. Traditionally, the parish has represented much more than an ecclesiastical unit; it is often the forum in which community identity is expressed and the fulcrum around which social events and associations are structured and defined.

The development of vibrant parish life in Ireland is very much tied up with fostering active citizenship, volunteerism, trust and social capital at community level. Thus, progressing the sustainable development of parishes requires that we draw on experiences in community development practice both within church organisations and without. Community development is both an outcome and a process. As an outcome, it implies an active civil society working in partnership with other bodies. As

a process it involves informing, animating and empowering people, and in particular those who are most disadvantaged or socially excluded. It implies working with and through existing organisations and structures and, where necessary, reforming them and enabling them to adapt, rather than setting up new, duplicate or parallel structures that waste energy and split resources. Community development requires investment in skills and capacities at local level, and is contingent on training volunteers and community leaders. Community associations need to regularly review and evaluate their efforts and achievements, and to work in collaboration with other communities. Over recent years in Ireland, a number of inter-community networks have emerged. These enable groups of volunteers to share information, resources, expertise and know-how, while ensuring that each constituent group retains and draws on the strengths associated with its own identity and experiences. Parallels exist between these networks and the emergence of parish clusters.

The policy and institutional contexts for the advancement of volunteerism and community development in Ireland have become more favourable in recent years. Considerable expertise exists among many community and voluntary groups, and there are several examples of vibrant community action throughout the island of Ireland. Indeed, many community and voluntary groups have filled gaps in public sector provision and are responsible for the management of services in childcare, eldercare, social housing, mental health, youth development, and life-long education and training. Harnessing these new and emerging energies, skills, commitments and organisational structures presents considerable opportunities for parish development.

However, as this chapter has shown, many challenges need to be addressed. First, there is a clear challenge for the church itself. While clergy generally welcome and encourage lay participation in the liturgy and in aspects of parish administration, collaborative governance remains an elusive goal for many parishes. There is a clear need for strategic planning at parish level, so that all members of the parish community can contribute to the formulation and realisation of a shared vision and mission.

Second, as we have noted above, there is evidence that rapid economic growth and the associated demographic and social transformations of the so-called Celtic Tiger period have placed

a strain on social capital. This poses a challenge for the development of participative democracy and governance as well as the maintenance and reinforcement of parish. Change raises questions about what 'community' means to people in contemporary Ireland. There is evidence of increasing individualism and alienation from society, and the Durkheimian concept of 'anomie' would appear to provide a useful way of understanding increasing social pathologies. Our track record in welcoming the new Irish is patchy at best,[6] and we are inclined to judge migrants based on their contributions to our economy, rather than supporting them to enrich our society and community and parish life.

But if the boom raised challenges for community and parish development, the manner of its ending in a sharp economic downturn and an accompanying financial crisis appears only to have intensified these challenges, as new social problems emerge, and as our capacity to address current social ills declines. Our collective self-confidence as a society has been eroded, and we increasingly hear calls for 'leadership' and 'a sense of direction'. Social partnership, which is much in need of renewal, is in fact under considerable pressure, and calls from the government for a new 'patriotism' seem naïve and ineffective at best, such has been the erosion of trust in government that some commentators have labelled them as hypocritical or even cynical. For the church too there are major issues of trust, and Hughes *et al* (2006; 107) observe that 'the exposure of the extent of child sexual and physical abuse perpetrated by members of the religious orders has contributed significantly to the dramatic decline in the standing of the Catholic Church in Irish society.'

It is probably true, then, to say that what social capital theorists refer to as 'generalised trust' appears seldom to have been at a lower ebb in Ireland. Consequently, the social context for community and parish development efforts to have been more difficult. At the same time studies of social capital suggest that the building of trust begins in the locality and neighbourhood and so despite, or maybe because of, the current adverse circumstances there appears to be an opportunity for the parish to emerge at the centre of a new model of social cohesion in Ireland. Parishes need to look to their internal, combined and

6. MacÉinrí, P. (2007), 'Ireland: What Models for Integration?' in Fanning, B., *Immigration and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester UP.

collective capacity and to bear in mind the words of President McAleese (2008):

> We need to look to our proven strengths and the resilience that comes from having faced tough times before, to find the tenacity, self-sacrifice and creativity to see us through the period of retrenchment ahead.

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