

Ageing, Growth and Change:

Understanding the contributions
and support needs of lay
members within Catholic parish
communities

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Executive Summary

Pope Francis has emphasised the need to invent the future for ageing populations. In a world that often regards ageing negatively and treats older people's contributions poorly, he has noted that the Church has yet to realise a spirituality of people in advanced old age and incorporate their contributions to the Church's mission (Address, 2020).

Like the general population of the UK, the population of the Catholic Church in England and Wales is ageing. "Developing the spirituality and pastoral work of and with older people is an ecclesiological and missiological priority" (Kevern, 2020). Doing so allows the positioning of the Church's activities to acknowledge and support the contribution each person has as they age.

SJOG Hospitaller Services UK (SJOG) and Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) undertook a 6-month research project aiming to explore how Catholic parish Communities¹ could benefit from the contributions of their lay members² and better support them throughout the process of ageing.

To understand how Catholic parish communities can benefit from the contributions of their lay members and what support is needed, in addition to making recommendations, the following aims were explored:

1. To understand how Catholic parish communities can support people to express and share experience and wisdom as they age.
2. To identify the benefits of building meaningful intergenerational relationships within Catholic parish communities, and the ways in which Catholics can be supported to build these.
3. To understand how lay members of Catholic parish communities want to be supported in the future so that they can remain active participants in their community as they age.

Methods Used

Both a questionnaire and focus groups were used to explore the research area. A steering group of Catholic Care providers in England and Wales assisted in the development of a questionnaire, asking lay members of Catholic parish communities about their experiences of parish life both before and since the coronavirus pandemic, and how they would like to be supported in the future.

The questionnaire was shared online, and in hard copy, and was completed by n=182 people from across England. Analysis of this data formed a conceptual model depicting important aspects of support within Catholic parishes. This covered lay members':

1. Level of involvement and inclusion within their parishes
2. Strength of their relationships with fellow parishioners, clergy and with God
3. Parish's openness to change and doing things differently

These themes and the broader research question were then explored in greater detail in four focus groups involving eight parish members.

The data from the focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis and combined with the questionnaire data to form a final conceptual model to depict the research findings.

¹ Catholic parish community' was defined as all members of a parish, including clergy, religious and lay members.

² Lay members were defined as Catholic adults in England and Wales, who are not members of the clergy and who regularly practice (defined as attending Mass at least twice a month, prior to the coronavirus pandemic).

Findings

"...we are, or have been involved in [the catholic parish community] in different ways, according to the stage of life we're at...and this reiterates for me, what we were saying about ageing being applicable at all stages of life so, I was looking at it in terms of 'Growing and Changing', rather than ageing..."

'Growth and Change' - the idea that an individual's circumstances and needs for support vary during ageing, became the central premise of the findings. It depicts the process of ageing and how individuals grow metaphorically as they age through changes physically, mentally, and spiritually, with factors such as health and experience influencing each person:

"...not only do older people need support but a lot of older people are very active, and are very capable of doing lots of things..."

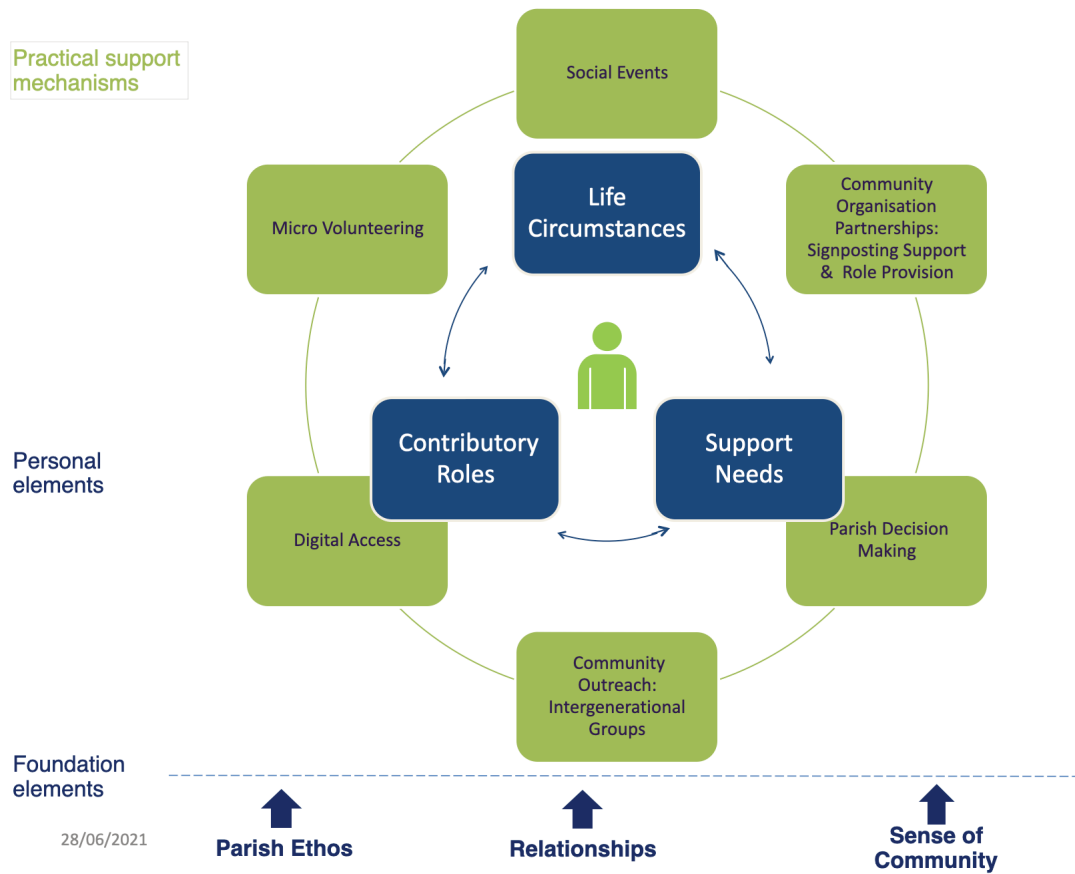
To best support parishioners through 'Growth and Change', it is important that parishes are mindful of the uniqueness of this process for each individual and strive to be adaptable and accommodating of these changes and needs. Supporting people through the process of ageing means supporting them through each stage of their lives, and the circumstances that accompany these changes.

Within the model of 'Growth and Change' there are personal elements, that are unique to each person and change over time (namely Life Circumstances, Support Needs and Contributory Roles), constituting the process of 'Growth and Change'. Foundation elements underpin the process of 'Growth and Change.' Integrating these aspects successfully within the structure of parishes is conducive to lay members having positive experiences of 'Growth and Change.' This is because the Foundation elements provide a core structure for lay members to rely on for support whilst the process of 'Growth and Change' is constantly in flux. The foundation elements are:

- **Parish Ethos:** That parishes promote lay involvement and autonomy of choice, support people to develop roles and responsibilities and are welcoming; accepting of all and open to change.
- **Relationships:** The sense of connection with others is key to developing a network of people to support each other through the process of 'Growth and Change'. This includes intergenerational relationships and relationships with God which drive people to support others.
- **Sense of Community:** A parish in which people feel an ultimate sense of belonging and camaraderie facilitates positive experiences of 'Growth and Change' and should extend beyond the church building and formal worship.

From here, practical support mechanisms are developed which support the personal elements each person experiences (see figure below)

Figure – Model of Growth and Change with example practical support mechanisms



Recommendations

The research has developed the following recommendations for local parishes in order to support the Growth and Change of lay members within their parish communities:

1) Support lay members to express and share experience and wisdom

- Promote autonomy e.g. lay members should seek ways to share their experiences and wisdom.
- Set up outreach programmes for lay members to upskill and educate one another.
- Actively engage in open discussions with lay members when making parish decisions.

2) Foster intergenerational relationships within Catholic parish communities

- Create opportunities for younger people to get involved.
- Strengthen connections with local Catholic schools.
- Create social groups or activities that accommodate and appeal to working-age adults.
- Encourage and promote micro-volunteering opportunities.
- Create more opportunities for multiple generations to meet.

3) Develop context specific support so that parish community members can remain active participants

- Work to change perceptions of what 'active participation' looks like.
- Forge partnerships with local community organisations or interventions.
- Adapt and remove barriers to participation by being open to change and new ideas.
- Assist lay members in developing their digital skills.

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1.0 Introduction

“...sometimes we think of older people needing support because they can’t do things...we also have to remember that, there’s lots that they can do, and that they would like to do.”

The population of the UK is ageing significantly, due to advancements in health care provision, and a reduction in birth rate in recent decades.

According to the Office For National Statistics (ONS, 2017), in 2016 there were around 11.8 million people in the UK aged 65 or over. 8.6 million of these were aged 65 – 79, and 3.2 million were 80 or over. By 2036 this number was predicted to increase, with 35% more 65 – 79-year-olds and 72% more people aged 80 or over than in 2016 (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020).

Within the Catholic Church in England and Wales, the most recent ‘Faith Survey’ (Emberson, 2020) based on 2014 data, identified that 43.1% of Catholics who attend Mass at least weekly are aged 65 or over, whilst all other age groups each constituted less than 27% of the total. This demonstrates that much like the general population of the UK, the population of the Catholic Church in England and Wales is ageing.

Pope Francis has emphasised the need to invent the future for ageing populations. In a world that often regards ageing negatively and treats older people’s contributions poorly, he has noted that the Church has yet to realise the spirituality of people in advanced old age and incorporate their contributions to the Church’s mission (Address, 2020). “Developing the spirituality and pastoral work of, and with, older people is an ecclesiological and missiological priority” (Kevern, 2020).

With this in mind, this research project asked **‘How can Catholic parish communities better support their lay members through the process of ageing?’** Here, we define ‘Catholic parish Community’ as all members of a parish, including clergy, religious and lay members. ‘Lay members’ are defined as adults, practising Catholics in England and Wales, who are not members of the clergy. This includes parish members, and people who would welcome more help to participate in Church, whether still living independently, isolated, carers, or residents in care homes (both Catholic-run and others).

To assess this question, three initial aims were devised. A rationale for each aim is provided, and each aim is shown in bold in the following sections.

1.1 The Quality of Ageing

People may be living longer lives, but having a good quality of life through the process of ageing does not necessarily follow.

The document ‘The Dignity of Older People’ (DOP, 1999) emphasises that ‘...the quality of our old age will especially depend on our capacity to grasp its meaning and appreciate its value both at the purely human level and at the level of faith.’ It discusses the notion that one’s ability to do this depends largely on the way in which ageing is perceived, noting that some perceive ageing as ‘a time of life which offers them new opportunities for growth and commitment’, whereas others ‘despair.’

This idea that the quality of ageing is affected by its perception extends beyond the Catholic Church and into wider society. Supporting research by Hickey, O’Hanlon and McGee (2010) found that within their study sample of adults aged sixty-five or over who lived in the neighbourhood community, those who reported positive perceptions of ageing also reported a greater quality of life. Whereas, the opposite was true for those who reported negative perceptions of ageing.

In order to improve quality of life through the ageing process, a shift in people’s perceptions of ageing is required, so that ageing is viewed as a period of personal development and growth, rather than as a time of loss (Blawert & Wurm, 2020). In order for individuals to view ageing in this more positive light, the communities they are part of need to support this outlook; social inclusion is an important concept supporting this.

The promotion of social inclusion is particularly important as the DOP (1999) states that the marginalisation of individuals through the process of ageing is due to factors such as removing responsibility from older people and perceiving them as 'socially inadequate'. Furthermore, the DOP (1999) also comments that marginalisation results in other issues, principally social isolation, which has adverse impacts on quality of life (Hickey, O'Hanlon & McGee, 2010).

Changing perceptions of ageing by identifying and emphasising how older people can contribute to their Catholic parish community is therefore an important consideration when answering the question of how Catholic parish communities can better support lay members through the process of ageing. This is especially true considering that the DOP identifies that a key need of people as they age, is to be 'able to contribute to the life of the community by performing activities appropriate to their condition'. This may be in terms of their 'spiritual insight, wisdom or experience' (Kevern, 2019).

This is further supported by two of the dimensions of Scharlach and Lehning's 'Ageing Friendly Communities Framework' (Table 1, below), which relate to the importance of promoting positive perceptions of ageing, in which older people are seen as capable and valuable.

Table 1. Scharlach & Lehning's (2013) 'Age Friendly Communities' framework

FRAMEWORK AREA	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Challenge	'The Development of stimulating new activities and interests'	A new hobby or role within the community.
Contribution	'Opportunities to participate in and have an impact upon the social environment'	Imparting knowledge and wisdom to younger generations.
Connection	'Opportunities to develop and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships'	Meeting new people and forming inter or intergenerational relationships which help to prevent social isolation.
Continuity	'The absence of barriers to continued participation in longstanding activities and interests'	Where barriers (e.g. physical health issues) to being able to carry on enjoying a hobby exist, these are broken down or mitigated by support from the community.
Compensation	'The ability to meet basic health and social needs in spite of age-related disabilities'	Strategies (e.g. assistance with the physical aspect of getting shopping) are put in place to ensure that physical health issues do not prevent people from maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

The 'Challenge' dimension of Scharlach and Lehning's framework refers to the provision of opportunities for people to learn new skills or develop new interests throughout the ageing process. In order for Challenge to exist, there must be an underlying belief that older people are capable and that opportunities to grow and develop are still available to people as they age. The 'Contribution' dimension refers to the idea that ageing does not equate to 'uselessness' and that instead, older people have unique gifts to give to their community, which they must be given the opportunity to offer.

Considering these insights both from literature within the Catholic Church and research conducted in the wider world, the first aim of the current research project was **to understand how Catholic parish communities can better support people to express and share wisdom as they age.**

1.2 The Importance of Social Relationships

Changing perceptions by supporting people to share their wisdom and experience with others will assist in the prevention of marginalisation and associated social isolation discussed in the DOP (1999). Preventing social isolation of individuals as they age is of paramount importance, due to the 'social nature of man' (DOP, 1999). Social relationships are an inherent need of humans (Frith and Frith, 2010), and can act as a 'buffer' in challenging times. In the case of older people, who arguably spend more time than the general population alone, it has been shown that those with more meaningful, strong social relationships are better able to cope with periods of solitude than those who have fewer meaningful relationships with others (Pauly, Lay, Scott & Hoppmann, 2018).

'Connection' is the third aspect of 'Ageing Friendly Communities', (Scharlach & Lehning, 2013, Table 1) referring to opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with others in the community, particularly intergenerational relationships. It is these relationships that play a key role in reducing instances of social isolation and loneliness.

In Kevern's (2019) publication entitled 'It's Beautiful to be Old' the notion of 'webs of mutual responsibility' is discussed. Within the Catholic community, these refer to the importance of older people educating younger people pastorally and spiritually, and in turn, younger people providing support to older people. This can only be achieved if strong and meaningful connections are forged between community members. For this reason, the second aim of the current research was **to identify the specific benefits of building meaningful intergenerational relationships within Catholic parish communities and the ways in which Catholics can be supported to build these.**

1.3 Active Participation Throughout Ageing

The DOP (1999) also stresses the importance of enabling 'active participation in the life of the ecclesial community' of people as they age, and highlights that this has benefits for 'spiritual enrichment.' The importance of active participation and its links with social inclusion is evidenced by research and models of ageing friendly communities that exist in secular literature (WHO global age-friendly cities, 2007; Lui, Everingham, Warburton, Cuthill & Bartlett, 2009; Scharlach & Lehning, 2013; Buffel, 2018).

The final two aspects of 'Ageing Friendly Communities' (Scharlach & Lehning, 2013, Table 1), 'Continuity' and 'Compensation' involve minimising the impact of any functional impairments associated with ageing so that individuals can remain active members of their community. 'Continuity' specifically refers to removing any age-related barriers so that the ageing process does not prevent people from continuing to enjoy 'longstanding interests' or hobbies. Finally, in this context, Compensation refers specifically to strategies that can help to ensure people's needs are met, not financial support. For example, ensuring that an individual's basic needs are met despite any age-related functional impairment, such as mobility issues.

Lui, Everingham, Warburton, Cuthill & Bartlett (2009) suggest that aspects of both the physical and social environment integrate to promote social inclusion. Human connection and strong social relationships are key, but in order to form these, the physical environment in which they are sought must be accessible to all, regardless of age-related need. For example, if an individual feels socially isolated in an environment where opportunities for social connections exist, mobility impairments that have not been considered in the construction of the physical environment may be a key causal factor in their feelings of social isolation. For this reason, models of age-friendly communities consider aspects of both the physical and social environment that either promote or inhibit the inclusion of older people (Buffel, Handler & Phillipson, 2018).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) produced a model of 'The Age Friendly City', which was the result of focus groups involving older people, their carers and service providers (Buffel, Handler & Phillipson, 2018). The model has eight dimensions; Social Participation, Housing, Transportation, Outdoor Spaces and Buildings, Community Support and Health Services, Communication and Information, Civic Participation and Employment, and Respect and Social Inclusion (WHO global age-friendly cities, 2007).

The dimensions of the WHO 'Age Friendly City' model are somewhat reflected in work that recruited older people as co-researchers in the development of age-friendly communities (Buffel, 2018). Co-researchers pinpointed key themes of Health and Social Care Services, Transportation, Safety, Local Amenities, Community Support, Social Networks and [opportunities to make or put forward] Suggestions and/or Strategies for Change, as being key to supporting, involving and empowering older people within their communities.

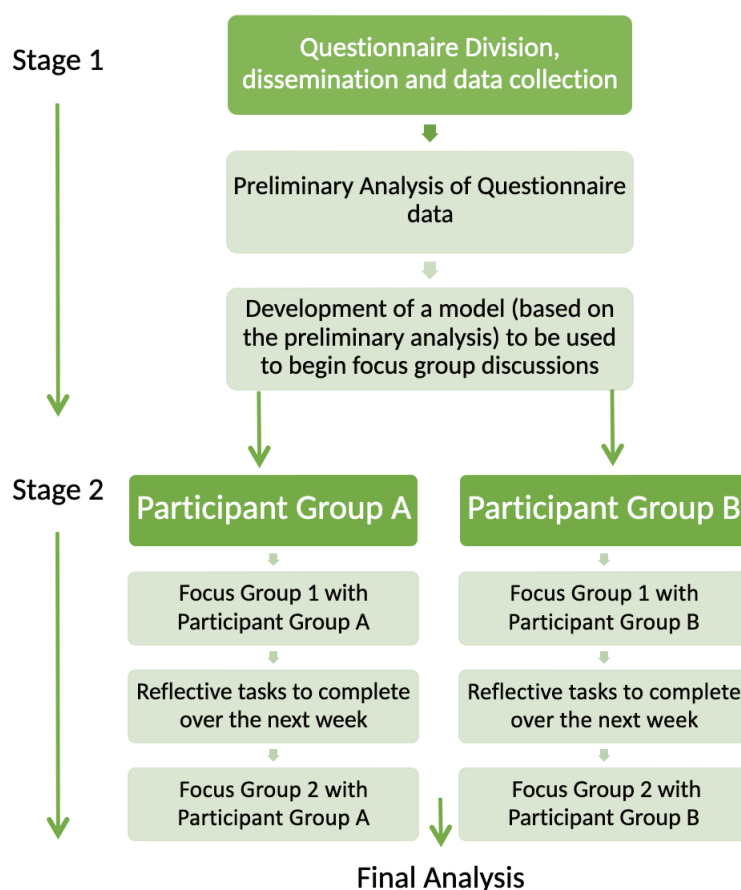
Social and physical environments are intrinsically linked. Therefore, in order to achieve our second aim around the building of social relationships, it was also paramount for the research to consider a third aim of understanding how Catholics want to be supported in the future so that they can remain active participants in their parish community as they age.

We aimed to reflect the import of active participation in our research methodology (detailed in section 2.0). Previous research has highlighted that when examining support in ageing, it is important that research is guided by older people, rather than a process carried out 'for and to' them (Buffel, 2018). Therefore, the process and outcomes of the research were largely shaped by working collaboratively with members of Catholic parish communities.

2.0 Methodology

The research was conducted in two stages, namely a questionnaire followed by two focus groups (see Figure 1, below)

Figure 1. Outline of the research methodology structure



2.1 Questionnaire

2.1.1 Participants

Inclusion criteria for completing the questionnaire were as follows; adults (aged 18 or over), living in England or Wales who were regularly practising lay Catholics prior to the coronavirus pandemic. The term 'regularly practising' was defined as attending mass at least twice a month. N=182 people who met the inclusion criteria completed the questionnaire. N=180 of these provided information about their gender identity. N=95 respondents identified as female, and n=85 as male. Respondents' average age was 69.7 years, ranging from 30–87 years. Demographic statistics for the online questionnaire sample are provided in Appendix A.

N=180 participants provided information on the region in which they lived (all of these participants lived in England). Appendix B is a map showing the numbers of participants in each region of England.

2.1.2 Materials and Procedure

The questionnaire (see Appendix C) was developed to assess the research question. The proposed questionnaire was presented to a steering group of Catholic care providers in England and Wales, for feedback and approval. Following this, the questionnaire was piloted with five respondents who commented on the comprehension and structure of the questionnaire. The final format and wording were then decided.

The final questionnaire was made available for completion online, via Survey Monkey. Participants were recruited through posting the link to the questionnaire on social media platforms, in the Tablet E-newsletter and through appropriate contacts of steering group members.

After clicking on the link, respondents were presented with an information sheet to read about the research. If respondents were willing to take part, they were then asked to click a specified button to provide their informed consent to participate.

IP addresses or other personally identifiable information were not collected, meaning questionnaire responses were fully anonymised.

Respondents were asked about their experiences of parish life both before and after the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. Once the questionnaire was completed, participants were presented with the researchers' contact details, should they have any questions about the research.

Hard copies of the questionnaire were also disseminated, but no responses were received in this format.

2.2 Focus Groups

2.2.1 Participants

Inclusion criteria for the focus groups were the same as for the questionnaire. The average age of focus group participants (n = 4) was 60.8 years, with a range of 49 – 73 years. Three participants identified as female, and one as male. Two participants were currently employed, and two were retired. Three participants lived in urban areas, one in a semi-rural area. All participants lived independently in their own homes, with other people. Two participants had informal caring responsibilities for a relative or friend. A further 4 individuals engaged in the research through the 'homework' activity. No demographic information was collected about these individuals as this was considered disproportionate to the needs and aims of the research.

2.2.2 Materials

Focus group participants were recruited through contacts of steering group members. Participants did not have to complete the online questionnaire in order to participate in the focus groups.

A focus group advert was sent out to these contacts and individuals were provided with the researchers' contact details to request more information or register an interest. Those who emailed the researchers with an interest in participating were sent an information sheet to read and a consent form to sign and return if they were willing to take part. All participants were given at least 24 hours to decide whether or not they wanted to take part. A full research ethics proposal was prepared to help ensure that the focus groups were conducted in line with ethics guidelines. This was externally reviewed for comment and suggestions on ethical issues by SJOG research colleagues in Ireland who had no part in the design of this research.

Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the focus groups were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. Individuals who returned a signed consent form were sent a link to join the focus group meeting together with instructions on how to use Microsoft Teams, and were reminded that they could join the focus group with their webcam switched off if they did not want their face to be seen. The focus groups were recorded to enable transcription and detailed analysis to be undertaken. Participants were reminded of this before the recordings were started and again had the option to turn their webcam off.

The four participants formed two groups. Two focus groups were conducted with each group, one week apart. A total of four focus groups were carried out.

2.2.3 Procedure

Figure 1 (stage 2) above shows the focus group process. To begin discussions in the first focus group, participants were shown an infographic (Figure 2, below) of the themes which arose from the preliminary analysis of the questionnaire responses. Participants were asked to feedback on how well they thought these themes reflected their own experience of support within their Catholic parish community. From there a semi-structured discussion took place.

In the intervening week between the first and second focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on discussions from the first focus group, and were set some tasks to help them do this. The first of these was a 'Day (or week) in the Life' task. Here, participants were asked to think about a 'usual' day or week in their life (pre and/or post the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic), and reflect on the role the Church plays in their daily life. Were they happy with the role the Church plays, or are there things they would change? For the second reflective task, participants were asked to have an informal chat with a fellow parishioner (over the phone or video call due to the coronavirus pandemic) to ask them about their experiences of support within their parish.

Focus group two began with participants feeding back their reflections from the 'homework' tasks, in order to stimulate further discussion. When feeding back on the second task, participants were reminded that they were not required to identify the parishioner they had an informal chat with in any way. No demographic information was collected from the lay members involved in task two, ensuring their anonymity was maintained.

At the end of focus group two, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and to attend a research debrief session via Microsoft Teams once the research had been completed.

The focus groups produced 6 hours of in-depth discussion focused around the research question.

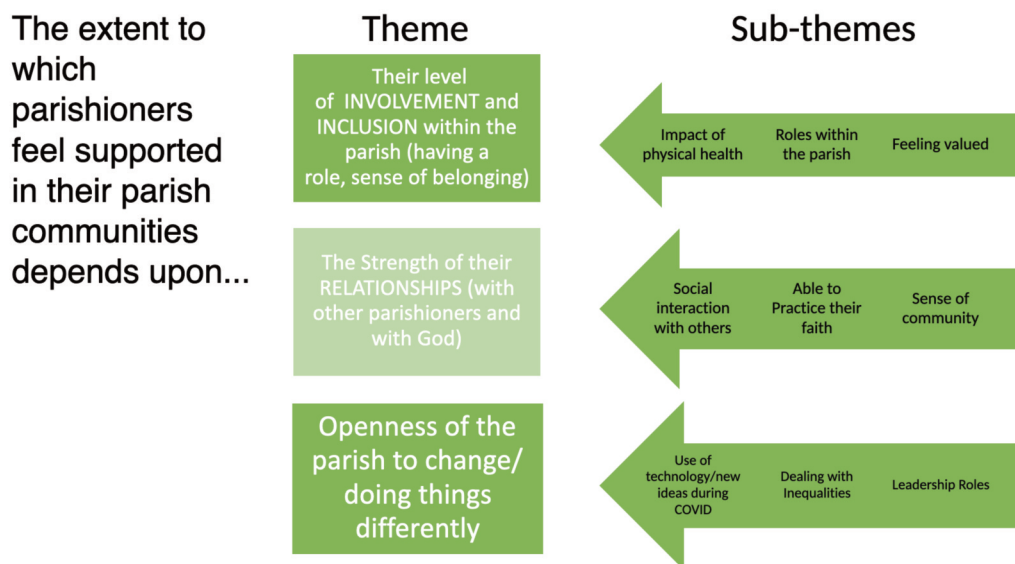
2.3 Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to capture demographic data and to report on the frequency of themes which emerged from the qualitative analysis.

Thematic Analysis was used for both the open-ended questionnaire data and the focus group data. Thematic analysis involves assigning short 'codes' to sections of text (from a participant interview or focus group, for example) which use a few words to describe the point(s) being made. Similar codes, or those that share a central idea or concept, are grouped into themes and subthemes. These themes are then brought together in a 'thematic map' which represents the data and shows how each theme is linked to the others (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016)

Qualitative questionnaire data was coded independently by three researchers and then triangulated before grouping the codes into themes. The themes that emerged from this process were those used at the beginning of Focus Group 1 to begin discussions. (see Figure 2, below).

Figure 2. The model generated from the initial analysis of the questionnaire data, shown to participants at the beginning of Focus Group 1.



Following the completion of the Focus Groups, the recordings were transcribed and coded as above. Transcripts were pseudo-anonymised with a unique number for each participant. These codes and the codes previously generated from the questionnaire data were combined, and the codes were grouped into themes to produce the thematic map in Figure 3, shown in section 3.0.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The three themes that emerged from the preliminary thematic analysis of the questionnaire (Figure 2, section 2.4) were built on and explored in greater depth during the focus groups. What follows is the final analysis of the questionnaire data, combined with insights from those involved in the focus groups. Supporting quotes are from Focus Group participants (FGP), and responses to the questionnaire (QP).

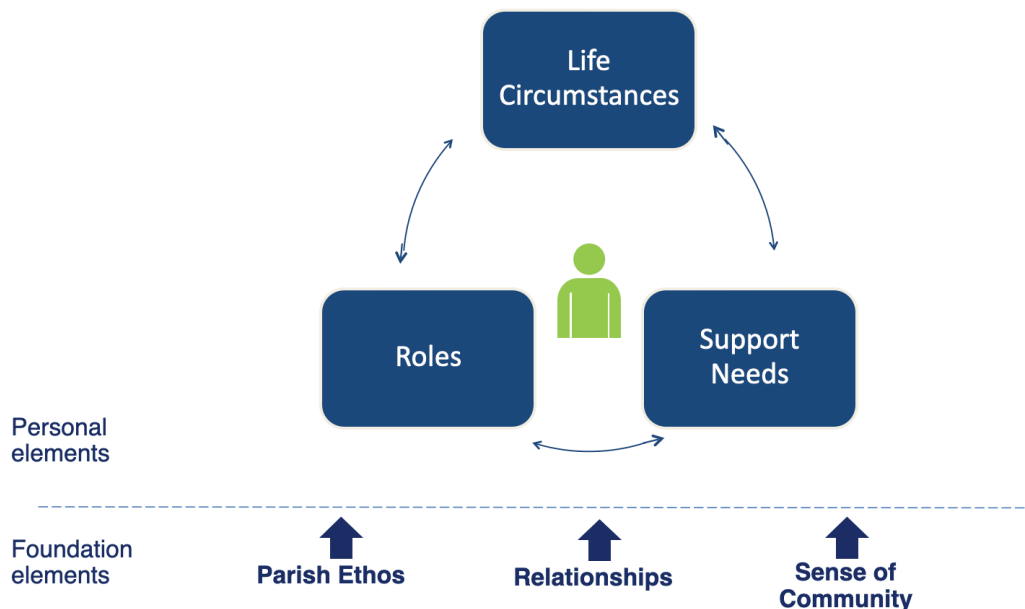
The research question that began this project was 'How can Catholic parish communities better support their members through the process of ageing?' After completing the reflective tasks between Focus Groups, one participant had a different interpretation of the notion of ageing:

"...we are, or have been involved in [the catholic parish community] in different ways, according to the stage of life we're at...and this reiterates for me, what we were saying about ageing being applicable at all stages of life so, I was looking at it in terms of 'Growing and Changing', rather than ageing..." (FGP01)

The concept of "Growth and Change" encapsulated the temporal variation of need that each person has during ageing. This is not necessarily through increased physical frailty but through differing support needs and levels of engagement with the Catholic community that ebb and flow over time. Focusing on "Growing and Changing" promotes positive perceptions of ageing, as a period of 'personal development and growth', as suggested by Blawert and Wurm (2020).

From this concept, a model depicting how Catholic communities can better support their members as they age was developed. The model, shown in Figure 3, has six core themes of: Parish Ethos, Relationships, Sense of Community, Contributory Roles, Life Circumstances and Support Needs.

Figure 3. Thematic map developed using data from both the questionnaire and focus groups.



Lay members had unique life experiences and **circumstances**, and these affected the roles they played or the type of support they needed from the parish. Importantly, a person's life circumstances are not static, but change with time. Each person is likely to inhabit different roles within the parish at different times in their life, and require different types of support. In fact, the best way in which parishes can **support** their members is by being adaptable and recognising that the process of growth and change is dynamic and different for each person. Life Circumstances, Support Needs and Contributory Roles are unique and specific to each parishioner, and constitute the process of "Growth and Change". These are referred to as the 'Personal Elements' of the model.

Themes of **Parish Ethos, Relationships and Sense of Community** underpin the personal elements and are key to ensuring that lay members have positive experiences of their personal "Growth and Change". Parishes can support lay members through the process of "Growth and Change" by building an environment with a Parish Ethos, Relationships and Sense of Community that act as a strong foundation for, and are conducive to, positive experiences of "Growth and Change". These are referred to as the 'Foundation Elements' of the model. This is the framework that supports parish communities through the process of "Growth and Change".

We present these in detail in the following sections. Appendix D shows the themes, subthemes and codes within the model of Growth and Change, that emerged during thematic analysis.

3.1 Personal Elements

The Personal Elements of the model of "Growth and Change" are different for each person and change over time.

3.1.1 Life Circumstances and Support Needs

Life Circumstances were discussed in relation to their impact upon parishioners' Support Needs. Although Life Circumstances and Support Needs are two separate themes, they are discussed together here.

Life Circumstances could be considered to be the starting point of "Growth and Change." The model conceptualises the ways in which lay communities can be best supported throughout "Growth and Change" in their lives, and one aspect that is constantly changing is an individual's life circumstances. Focus group participants discussed a variety of different life circumstances and experiences. From retrospective accounts of their experiences of parenthood and being a newcomer to their parishes, to their experiences of working life, retirement, health issues and bereavement.

Changes in life circumstances have a 'domino effect' on individuals' contributory roles and support needs within their parishes. This was reflected in the following experience of bereavement and its impact on parish role:

"...I was a Eucharistic minister to my [family member] but I have augmented my role since [they] passed away. After [they] died our priests asked if I would like to continue my Eucharistic ministry." (QP8)

3.1.1.1 Adaptable and Person-Centred Approach

Each person's life circumstances are unique. Participants emphasised that "there are things that you do at different stages of your life" (FGP01) within parishes, and that "...there are times when you do want to step back...and there are times when you need to have more support than you can give..." (FGP01). The uniqueness of parishioners' life circumstances calls for a person-centred approach to facilitate the mechanisms of support that are most appropriate for each parishioner. Parishes should strive to be adaptable and mindful of this. Developing support initiatives would help create a framework of support that people can access, as they need. Working in partnership with local charities and agencies is one way to achieve this.

The adaptability (or otherwise) of parishes has been exemplified recently in light of the coronavirus pandemic. The need to develop new methods to allow people opportunities to continue to be involved in parish life has been brought to the fore. This is a prime example of how a change in circumstances has resulted in a change in support needs.

3.1.1.2 Online Provision and Digital Skills Support

Many people "...feel spiritually isolated..." (FGP04) because of the pandemic. Just 4% of questionnaire responses mentioned feeling isolated from parish communities before the coronavirus pandemic. This rose to 35% of responses mentioning feeling isolated since the pandemic began. To minimise this sense of spiritual isolation, many parishes have adapted to support people online:

"The ability to attend Mass every day through livestreaming and the recognition by several priests of the expansion in their mission to those attending on the internet has had a huge effect on my spiritual life." (QP83)

However, in some parishes "Masses [are] not live-streamed" (QP101). This respondent went on to state that in parishes where this is the case, efforts are made to provide online services, "so that lay members who can't get to Mass, can watch..." (FGP01). In this way, parishes are providing a connection between themselves and their parishioners who, due to whatever circumstance, are unable to attend mass. It is key that such adaptations remain in place once the pandemic restrictions are fully lifted, so that, those who are, for example, frail can still be supported in their faith and social relationships.

In order for the potential of online provision to be maximised, participants recognised that "[digital skills support] would be quite useful, if there were people who were willing to go round and maybe sit with people, and just get them through a few basic things." (FGP02). Helping people to access online provision is an important part of the Catholic Church's response to change, because in some parishes "... we are live streaming masses. A lot of older people do not have the technology to access this so they are missing out." (QP182)

This digital assistance should not be hampered by a fear that some parishioners may not return to face-to-face mass once coronavirus restrictions are fully lifted:

"It's wonderful that if you are housebound, you are able to access the livestream...But I wouldn't want church to be heavily weighted in that respect. I think that church definitely needs to be face-to-face and a community rather than something remote." (FGP03)

Each community member's circumstances are unique. For some, it may be preferable to continue to be able to access mass from home, in which case it is important that those who require it have support to be able to use technology. At a recent webinar by the Design Age Institute at the Royal College of Art, Lady Helen Hamlyn, founder of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, referred to the "huge generational gap" in technology use, and the importance of equipping older adults with technological skills (Hamlyn, 2021). Likewise, the Centre for Ageing Better (2021), highlighted the need to help people be confident and able to use technology, showing that five million over 55-year-olds do not use the internet. Tackling digital exclusion is one way for parishes to engage in supporting people through the process of 'Growth and Change.'

3.1.1.3 Access and Autonomy

Other individuals may prefer to return to 'in person' mass when this is possible. They must be given the opportunity to do this. It is important for parishes to "look at supporting people who can no longer drive, or who aren't too good on their legs can come to Mass." (FGP01)

Participants in the research encouraged adaptations which allow lay members to exercise personal choice over how they access mass. This is consistent with the 'Compensation' aspect of Scharlach and Lehning's (2013) 'Ageing Friendly Communities' Framework. Scharlach and Lehning (2013) refer to the importance of putting strategies in place, which allow people to be involved in their communities despite 'age-related disabilities.' It is particularly important for the Catholic Church to consider how they can support people so that health issues do not become a barrier to involvement. As questionnaire respondents noted, "... It is health and mobility that compromises involvement not age." (QP124)

3.1.1.4 Formal Care

For some there may come a time when a level of formal care is required to meet their needs. With this in mind, questionnaire respondents and focus group participants were asked about their views on 'Catholic Care' establishments. In the event that some level of formal care was required for themselves or their family members, 59% of questionnaire respondents said that 'Catholic Care' would be their first choice, citing the importance of the "faith component" (QP53) and that "A catholic understanding would be fantastic." (QP52)

Over a third (34%) of respondents made a definite decision that 'Catholic Care' would not be their first choice. Most of this group (63%) cited reasons including having other plans in place for their care, previous negative experiences of Catholic Care, not wishing to live in a "closed off religious" (QP55) setting, or other factors, such as proximity of a care setting to family and friends, being more important than 'Catholic Care' aspects. However, over a third (37%) of respondents who said that 'Catholic Care' would not be their first choice said that this was because they were not aware of the option of 'Catholic Care.'

The remaining 7.4% of respondents were unsure whether or not 'Catholic Care' would be their preferred option.

Focus group participants expressed positive views towards, and experience of 'Catholic Care' environments, which are "much more holistic" (FGP01) and "underpinned with our Catholic faith" (FGP04):

"...the staff... have an understanding of what was important to people...when they put my [family member] to bed, they would make sure [their] rosary beads were close at hand... And, when my [family member] died... not only did they care for my [family member], they cared for us... it was a very special place for lots of reasons...there was this faith element to what went on there." (FGP02)

Despite these positive comments, focus group participants discussed that they weren't always aware that "that possibility [of Catholic Care] was there." (FGP04):

"I was aware there was something, but I didn't know...enough of its existence, before we'd started looking at care facilities for my [family member]...it would have been quite nice to know about [the care home] ...before I was actually going out there and looking, because I wasn't quite aware of what it was, and what facility was there." (FGP02)

This highlights that the spiritual support offered by 'Catholic Care' organisations is important to and desirable for people, however, a lack of awareness of this option suggests that a key aspect of supporting Catholic Communities throughout "Growth and Change", lies in better informing people of the option of 'Catholic Care.' Parishes must be more open in dialogue with the laity around options for care, whilst being mindful that 'Catholic Care' is not the right choice for everyone.

In order for local parishes to fully support its members through "Growth and Change" it may look to develop signposting to community services that support their members. A church parish is not placed to provide every support need. It can be a hub, networked sufficiently to offer a route of appropriate support, as the community members need it.

3.1.2 Contributory Roles

Throughout “Growth and Change” the desire for a role or involvement in the community was clear. The theme of Contributory Roles is a development of the theme of ‘Involvement and Inclusion’ which emerged from the preliminary analysis. Laity wanted to be involved in the life of their parish and community by taking on a role that contributes to it. Lay members with positive experiences of support said that their parish supported them “By allowing me to be involved and use my skills - I feel supported when able to contribute...” (QP51). Tables 2 and 3 highlight the contributory roles that were commented on during the research. These are both within and outside of Mass and Worship.

Table 2. Number of questionnaire respondents with various contributory roles directly linked with Mass and Worship

ROLE	N
Reader	44
Eucharistic Minister	40
Giving Holy Communion/ lay Hospital Chaplain	7
Music	23
Sacristan	5
Steward	8
TOTAL	77

Table 3. Number of questionnaire respondents with various contributory roles outside of Mass and Worship

ROLE	N
Cleaning	5
Group/Event Planning and Support	13
Parish Team/Council	20
Social Outreach & Fundraising	28
Welcoming new parishioners	3
COVID Outreach	6
Youth groups	2
Children’s Liturgy	6
In Charge of Online Presence	2
SVP	9
Finances	9
Administration	4
School Governor	5
Bereavement Counselling	1
Gardening/Flower Arranging	3
Reading/Prayer Rota	5
TOTAL	82

This emphasises that 'support' from a parish to its lay members does not always allude to the 'traditional' stereotype of support, as a process of one party giving to another. In fact, it is "a two-way process of help given and help received." (QP183). When asked about support in the parish community, one questionnaire respondent said that they felt supported because their parish community "gave [them] a role." (QP131). The idea of a parish role acting as a support mechanism was also a key element of focus group discussions:

"I think it's being allowed to perform a role that is hopefully helpful to other people, that is certainly for me intrinsic to me feeling [a sense of] "belonging" in the parish...for me to feel supported...involves me putting myself out there and trying to help..." (FGP04)

Seventy percent of questionnaire respondents who said they felt involved in their parish reported that it was the roles and responsibilities they had, that made them feel involved, particularly when they had been specifically asked to take on a certain role:

"[the parish make me feel involved] By asking me to read and my [spouse]...as Minister of Holy Communion and them asking that one of us become a school governor." (QP150)

Respondents who indicated that they did not feel involved in their Catholic community said that having a role would help reverse this. It is possible to want to be involved but opportunities are limited, or offers of help are not taken up:

"[I could feel more involved] By having the opportunity to carry out one or two tasks in the parish. I have served previous parishes in a number of way[s]... I offered assistance with my present parish... My offer was neither accepted nor declined." (QP151)

This indicates that there needs to be a proactive approach to engaging members of the lay Church in developing their roles and responsibilities. This might be through specific roles in the church building or services but may also be through community-based work.

It is notable that relatively few participants (N=34) said their contributory roles involved a community focus, through social events, COVID support and youth work. This seems like a missed opportunity as these roles act as a bridge between the Church building and the wider community in which they work. By linking with other organisations or initiatives within the wider local community, parishes can open up more opportunities for the lay community to take on roles, and thus feel supported. Doing this would also allow the Church to be a greater presence in the wider community and in living its mission. Some examples of community partnership already taking place between participants' parishes and other agencies were provided:

"[local organisation] was a group that was set up, it's actually across lots of churches and lots of groups within [the town], it's not just the Catholic Church, it's lots of Christian communities...it's like a Social Concern group..." (FGP02)

"For instance, if anybody needs a referral to a particular agency...we can point them in the right direction or make a referral with their permission." (FGP04)

By supporting lay members through ensuring that they have a contributory role, in turn, allows them to provide support to the parish by carrying out their roles. In this way, lay members feel fully integrated into their parish and wider community and therefore a network of support develops organically around them:

"...when you're really involved with a group, you tend to feel supported by each other, so you've got this kind of camaraderie, that you've got a task to fulfil or a group of people to help, or whatever it might be..." (FGP01)

Participants emphasised that the roles they have inhabited in the parish have changed over time, in accordance with the stage they are at in their lives:

"...When children are little, [people are often] involved through sacramental preparation, children's liturgy, PTA fundraising...and a bit later through other ministries...Eucharistic ministry, or outreach ministries of all sorts..." (FGP01)

Lay members may naturally progress from one role to the next as their circumstances change, or there may be a life event that leads them to change roles, or step back from an active 'contributory role' altogether:

"...We've [my spouse and I] always been involved in various things and I think, that has changed as we've got older... I think for a little while we stood back, and didn't get involved in too much" (FGP01)

The notion of 'active' contributory roles is the basis for the final subtheme within 'Contributory Roles,' which concerns 'Redefining the concept of a Contributory Role.' This subtheme is also encompassed under the Foundation Element of Parish Ethos described later in the paper. 'Having a role' within parishes has perhaps been traditionally synonymous with 'active' roles such as Eucharistic Minister, Parish Council Member, Reader. During the course of this research, it became evident that in order to support lay members holistically, it is necessary to view each parishioner as having a vital and valuable contributory role to play within their community as a whole, whether they are 'active' or not. 'Contributory Role' can simply refer to someone's presence at mass, or ability to offer prayer for fellow parishioners. By redefining what it means to have a contributory role within a parish ensures that all lay members feel valued, and in turn supported:

"... maybe that [valuing parishioners] needs to be spread out to every member of the parish not just because you've got a [active] role at church but because you're valued as part of... a community, you are equally as valuable as everybody else regardless of what you do." (FGP03)

3.2 Foundation Elements

The Foundation Elements are more constant over the "Growth and Change" period. If these elements are well established in parishes, they can help to facilitate positive experiences of "Growth and Change", acting as a stable support network as the Personal Elements continue to change over time.

3.2.1 Parish Ethos

'Ethos' comes from the Greek, meaning 'character' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). This theme pertains to the character of a parish and its importance in ensuring that the community feel supported. The theme of 'openness to change or doing things differently' which emerged from the preliminary analysis of the questionnaire (see Figure 2, above) fed into the first two subthemes within the broader theme of 'Parish Ethos.' These subthemes are 'Lay Autonomy or Involvement' and 'Attitudes to Change'.

Lay autonomy or involvement concerns ensuring that the laity are valued, and have a stake hold in the parish. This encourages and allows them to be involved in aspects such as decision making, and making their roles their own:

"...There's a couple of us who used to pick the hymns every week... but we didn't actually...have to seek permission from the parish Priest as to what we sang or didn't sing, we were just allowed to more or less carry on and do the stuff that we felt was appropriate for the particular mass..." (FGP02)

It is important that lay members are encouraged and supported to be involved in the life of their parish in a way that works for them, with an "...open armed welcome without too much pressure." (FGP03)

Neglecting to promote lay involvement can result in lay members feeling unsupported and "disenfranchised" (QP129) from fellow parishioners, and the parish as a whole:

"I feel very distant, very few connections have been made...This is because the parish priest wants to be in control and will not allow lay people to play a significant role" (QP70)

The importance of lay involvement throughout "Growth and Change" is further evidenced by the fact that when asked about how they would like to be supported over the next ten years, 25% of questionnaire respondents said that they would like to continue to be involved in their parishes, through active participation, communication and being "...kept in the religious loop" (QP127).

It was particularly evident that when lay members felt a lack of support, this was often attributed to those in leadership roles "not want[ing] to discuss anything" (QP163) with the laity:

"[our] Latest priest has gradually alienated people...I would like to see some accountability...discussion of spending on church furnishings...Mass times, other services wanted...[I have] experienced 7 excellent and collaborative priests in the past." (QP137)

This is closely linked to the second subtheme of 'Attitudes to Change.' In order for a parish to truly promote lay autonomy and involvement, it is necessary for it to be open to change, to new ideas or ways of doing things.

To be willing to make changes that are suggested in discussions with the laity is to be forward-looking and progressive. This also includes managing unexpected changes, such as the current coronavirus pandemic effectively:

"Sometimes you see things in the bulletin that lay members have come up with...[Father] is very open to letting [them] do that... for example, [the idea of making phone calls to lay members during the COVID-19 pandemic] ...was a parishioner's idea, and [they] took it to [Father] and he said "Yeah, let's go with it" ...I think we have to, if you want the parish to be as vibrant as it is, you have to have a stake hold in it, to make it work." (FGP01)

For some, there was a sense that the pandemic *"...has made the parish community more thoughtful, caring and open to change. We are doing things we never thought we achievable or acceptable, to some!" (QP71)*

This sense of progressiveness and doing things differently should be harnessed so that development of how the Church and community interact is enhanced.

Within the Foundation Element of Parish Ethos, the subtheme of 'Attitudes to Change' is also related to the third subtheme, 'Redefining the Concept of a Contributory Role.' In order to support lay members through the process of "Growth and Change" effectively, a change in outlook regarding what constitutes a meaningful role or contribution is crucial. The perception of contributory roles equating only to those seen as 'active' needs to change at a systemic level and form a shift in the outlook within parishes. This includes working to develop a positive perception of growing older, with 'ageing' seen as one aspect of 'Growth and Change', and not as a factor that limits the contribution individuals can make. As one questionnaire respondent said, we need to work on changing the perception that *"Vocation as an idea seems only to apply to the young!!" (QP101):*

"...not only do older people need support but a lot of older people are very active, and are very capable of doing lots of things, and I think it's important that we remember that they can actually be very proactive ...because sometimes we think of older people needing support because they can't do things...we also have to remember that. There's lots that they can do, and that they would like to do." (FGP02)

As part of this, participants emphasised the importance of focussing on developing roles for lay members which allow *"... people to use their skills- whatever their age but especially newly retired." (QP171)* This is key to giving people purpose throughout the process of "Growth and Change." It helps to avoid the 'removal of responsibility' from individuals, which according to the DOP (1999), is a leading contributor towards the marginalisation of older generations:

"I would have liked the opportunity to share the fruits of my wisdom and experience with regard to the pastoral work in the parish. Older people have much to offer in this way, which is usually ignored, and need to be supported in feeling useful and valued." (QP76)

In order to feel supported through "Growth and Change", it is important that parishes focus on *"...welcoming all as they are..." (QP49)*. This includes ensuring that there is an accepting parish environment, that values individuals' unique gifts and skills, and utilises them for the benefit of all in the parish. In addition, welcoming and encouraging young people and families, in order to create an environment where intergenerational relationships can be built:

"...if people are being truly Christian there shouldn't be any cliques...we should be all encompassing, all welcoming... it's very important to be consciously aware that we're not presenting that...we're in a clique...that's completely unchristian so...just trying to be welcoming to everybody without discrimination." (FGP04)

"... Some churches have a range of ages doing a meet and greet... [in our Church] it's the youngsters that do that...But maybe it would be more welcoming to families if there was a range of ages doing that." (FGP03)

3.2.2 Relationships and Sense of Community

The Foundation Element of 'Relationships' emphasises the importance of strong and meaningful relationships or connections with God, the clergy and fellow parishioners. It is a theme that emerged from the preliminary analysis and its importance was further strengthened and detailed during the final analysis. The Foundation Element of 'Sense of Community' is closely linked to 'Relationships', and is also discussed here.

'Relationships' is divided into two key subthemes, 'Relationships with People' and 'Relationships with God'. The two subthemes are linked by the concept that a parishioner's "...relationship with God... should influence how you actually treat others" (FGP02), both in terms of how they relate to, and support the other people within their parish. This is often through a "...love of Jesus and his people... Meeting up with people. Sharing faith, love..." (QP24):

"...Sometimes, I'm aware that, I'm doing things that I wouldn't have done without a little nudge from above... although I've had reservations, or reluctances to do it, it's always been the right thing. I've never got involved in something and thought 'shouldn't have done that.' And I can only put that down to God giving me... a nudge." (FGP01)

A network of meaningful friendships with fellow parishioners, clergy and religious was key to many feeling that their parish supports them. Where lay members had positive experiences of their parishes, this was often related to a sense of mutual support and community. Participants explained that such relationships act as a support network and are "...key to really feeling part of the parish" (FGP03):

"You know, somebody once said to me, "The reality of life is the people that journey with you." ...And at difficult times that's come back me, and they are the people really, who offer that support, and you just know, that if you needed, X, Y or Z, you could phone those people and they'd be there." (FGP01)

It is not surprising, that questionnaire respondents who indicated a lack of meaningful relationships with other lay members often expressed a desire for opportunities to build these, through "More personal contact with lay members...More social activities." (QP133)

Accordingly, to better support lay members through the process of "Growth and Change", initiatives that encourage the building of social relationships among fellow Catholics are required. For many, mass attendance was an opportunity to build relationships with others through social interaction and a shared faith:

"I feel closer to Catholic friends and it is wonderful to be able to discuss and socialise with people who share my faith." (QP107)

Social occasions outside of mass "...things like coffee mornings and...Christmas bazaars" (FGP04), were also seen as important opportunities to build meaningful relationships and connections.

Within the Foundation Element of 'Relationships', participants also discussed the importance of intergenerational relationships within their parishes, describing them as a "blessing" that "really lifts your spirits" (FGP01):

"... [my family member] was in [a] care home ...there was a local nursery group that used to come in, and they would just do little bits of artwork... the joy that was there was just amazing, both from the children and from the older residents who were involved... It was lovely." (FGP02)

Participants discussed that "getting the age groups mixing, where appropriate, a bit more...needs to be worked on" (FGP04), and suggested that a "...fine balance of offering something that people can feel they can join in with and not making it a cliquey group either" (FGP03), may help to encourage more younger people into Church. Young people's presence is a starting point for developing intergenerational relationships.

Others suggested that older lay members imparting their experience, skills and knowledge to help and support those who are younger, may also be key:

"I think, some families need to be... taught those [life] skills. So maybe that's something people of our generation can... get involved with." (FGP01)

This approach is supported by responses from questionnaire participants who wished to see parishes develop “As a team of different ages” (QP23) and “Younger lay members stepping up to takeover some of the roles I undertake, and give confidence that [the] parish will continue.” (QP159) This process is likely to involve intergenerational mentoring, as younger lay members build confidence to take on these roles.

An opportunity presents itself for intergenerational relationships to form through this mentoring. What begins as older generations upskilling younger people has the potential to develop into a mutual intergenerational support network. This reflects the notion of the ‘webs of mutual responsibility’ discussed in Kevern’s (2019) ‘It’s Beautiful to be Old’:

“Social groups with mixed generations, e.g. ‘Family Groups’ Encourage more young people to mix with older people for mutual support - not just the young having to help the elderly, but all generations supporting each other.” (QP98)

Tied to the theme of Relationships is a Sense of Community – a theme that runs through the research. A sense of community within parishes supports people through the process of “Growth and Change.” An environment of lay members “...supporting one another...” (QP114) helps to create a sense of belonging and ultimately, support:

“...With relationships, once you’re in that sort of bubble... there is a sort of psychological support, you know faces, you know names. That belonging can make you feel supported.” (FGP04)

It is important that the notion of Community extends beyond the physical church walls. The local community and organisations within it should be used so that roles can be diversified and support that meets individual life circumstances is available throughout “Growth and Change”.

4.0 Recommendations

The research has developed the following recommendations for local parishes in order to support the “Growth and Change” of their parish communities. These recommendations are related to each of the initial research aims presented earlier in the paper:

1) Support lay members to express and share experience and wisdom

- Promote **autonomy** e.g. lay members should seek ways to share their experience and wisdom. For example, they may want to share it:
 - *Through activities which utilise their experience and skills*
 - *Through informal conversations after mass*
 - *Through giving talks at services*
 - *Through small fellowship groups*
- Set up outreach programmes for lay members to **upskill and educate** one another, such as:
 - *Cookery lessons*
 - *Life skill sessions*
 - *Craft sessions*
 - *Opportunities to learn a specific new skill*
- **Actively engage** in open discussions with lay members when making parish decisions. This could be achieved by:
 - *Making the laity aware that the parish wants to hear their opinions and involve them in discussions*
 - *Opening new channels of communication to allow people to share their views in a variety of different ways*
 - *Involving the laity in decision making processes from the outset, by making them aware of decisions to be made*

2) Foster intergenerational relationships within Catholic parish communities

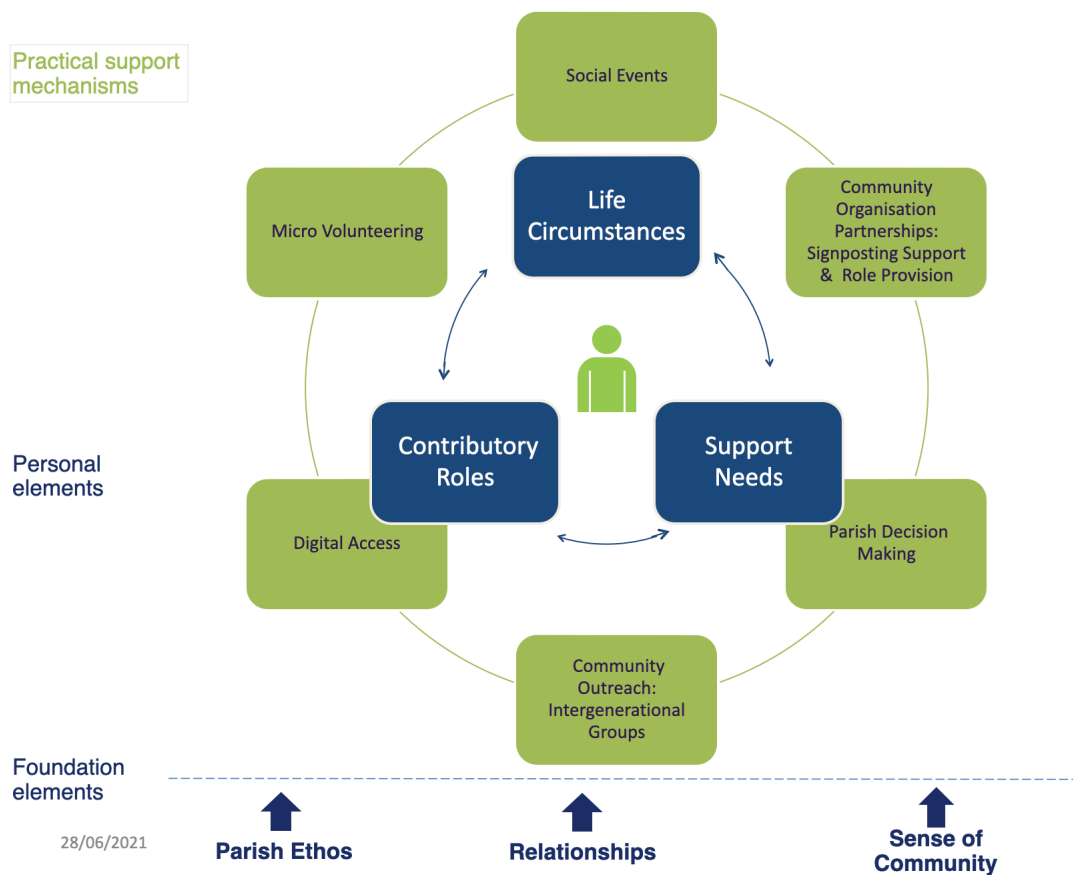
- Create opportunities for **younger people** to get involved
- Strengthen connections with local **Catholic schools**.
- Create social groups or activities that accommodate and appeal to **working-age adults**:
 - *On evenings or weekends to fit in with work schedules*
 - *That are informal and welcoming to newcomers*
 - *That cover a wide variety of interests from food to prayer groups, so there is something for everyone.*
- Encourage and promote **micro-volunteering** opportunities, such as:
 - *Engaging with parish content on social media*
 - *Giving feedback or opinions on parish changes or decisions*
 - *Baking refreshments for after mass*
 - *Proof reading or handing out parish newsletters*
 - *Setting up chairs and tables for after mass refreshments*
- Create more opportunities for **multiple generations** to meet, for example:
 - *Intergenerational welcoming committees at mass*
 - *Prayer partners for first Holy Communion participants*
 - *Intergenerational small fellowship groups*
 - *Social events open to all ages*
 - *In parish music groups*
 - *Informal conversations after mass*

3) Develop context specific support so that parish community members can remain active participants

- Work to **change perceptions** of what 'active participation' looks like:
 - *Ensure that everyone is valued no matter their parish role*
- Forge **partnerships** with local community organisations or interventions:
 - *To open up more opportunities for lay members to have roles*
 - *To increase parish presence in the local community and welcome potential new members*
- Adapt and remove **barriers to participation** by being open to change and new ideas, such as:
 - *Maintaining and increasing the parish's online presence to enable more people to access mass and social events*
 - *Finding roles for all those who wish to be involved*
- Assist lay members in developing their **digital skills**.

Based on the research findings and the recommendations, the diagram below shows the model of "Growth and Change" with the addition of the key suggestions for implementing practical support mechanisms. These are interventions, which can be put in place by parishes, to further enhance lay members' positive experiences of "Growth and Change."

Figure 4. Growth and Change Model with Key Practical Support Mechanisms based on the research recommendations



5.0 Limitations and future work

As with all research, limitations are acknowledged. Firstly, the sample of n=182 responding to the online questionnaire is a limited proportion of the estimated 3.8m people who identify as Catholic (Bullivant, 2016). We made extensive efforts to capture survey responses from a broad range of parishes. This involved inviting participation via the online Tablet (Catholic press) newsletter (which reaches 25,000 people), targeted recruitment via social media, including online groups, and invitations to advertise the survey across Universities. Nevertheless, there was a reasonable spread of responses across England. Future work should use the questionnaire responses as a basis to conduct surveys exploring similar themes.

Recent work by the National Office for Vocation (NOV) examined how Catholics perceive their role in the Church and in wider society as they age. Alongside the current research project, this work by the NOV has added to a growing body of research about the experience of growing older in the Catholic Church. Subsequent research should seek to build on, and build up, this body of work.

Due to the timeline of the planned research, conducting this during the Coronavirus pandemic has been challenging. Limitations are present with conducting focus groups virtually rather than in person, but safety was our priority at all times. Furthermore, given that COVID-19 is likely to feature in all of our lives for the foreseeable future, the opportunity to ask about how the pandemic has changed support needs was a useful one. Though the focus groups were small (N = 4, and N = 8 including lay members involved in the homework tasks), they were conducted in depth and some incredibly rich insights were gained. This was partly due to concentrating focus group recruitment on selected parishes identified via the Advisory group. The structure of the focus group worked well and should be used to build on the model that is developed. We suggest that future research should utilise the methodology employed here once the COVID-19 pandemic is being managed effectively in the long term. This would allow for the insights gained here (during the peak of the pandemic) to be compared and contrasted with new insights from a post-COVID world that would build on the findings of this research.

Theoretical saturation was met in the themes that were developed and it is worthwhile noting Oppenheim (2000) who argues sample accuracy is more important than overall size.

Future work should develop the "Growth and Change" model. This is a new way to approach the conversation of ageing and the themes and recommendations here can be developed. Development should not be in a theoretical manner but through practical implementation and reflection on the impact that emerges.

6.0 Final Remarks

A new model of Growth and Change which depicts ageing for lay Catholic Communities now exists.

To support people as they age, Catholic Communities must strive to recognise the importance that the laity place on having a contributory role or involvement in their parish. The aim must be to make involvement possible for all, and help to remove some of the barriers to involvement that lay members may experience at different times in their lives. Parishes must also be mindful of the 'domino effect' that individuals' unique life experiences and circumstances may have on the roles they undertake and the type of support they need from their Church and its members. The adoption of a person-centred, holistic approach will ultimately assist parishes in being able to support people through "Growth and Change." In order to do this, extending the reach to the local community is key.

This can be achieved through partnership working, developing community-based initiatives to create a network of support and role opportunities, whilst also extending the parish ethos, church mission and community across the local area.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Demographic Statistics for the Questionnaire Sample

Appendix B – Regional Map for Questionnaire Sample

Appendix C – Copy of Questionnaire

Appendix D – Model of Growth and Change Themes, Subthemes and Codes

Appendix A

Demographic statistics for the online questionnaire sample.

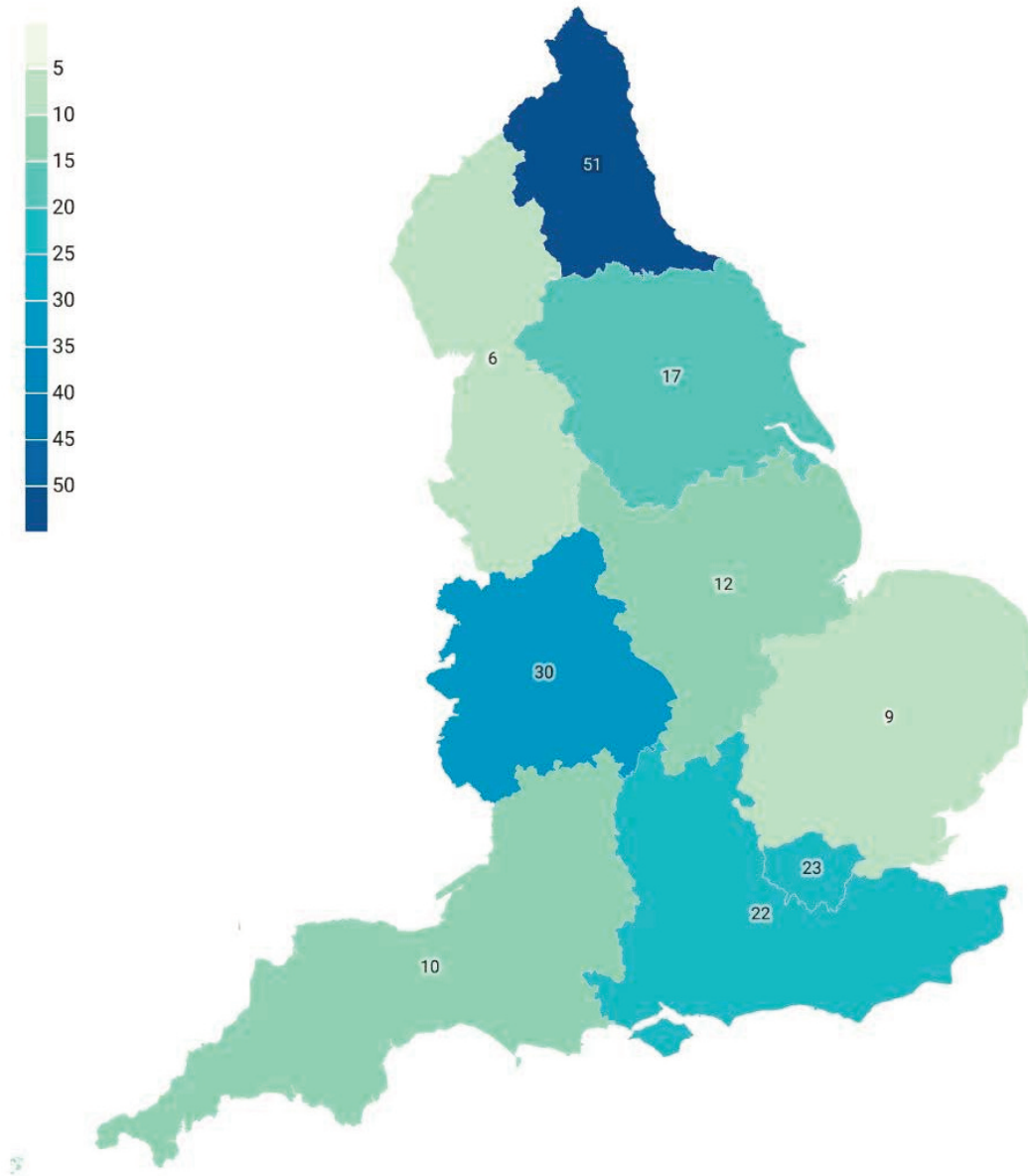
AGE GROUP	N	GENDER IDENTITY		EMPLOYMENT STATUS			DO YOU LIVE IN AN URBAN OR RURAL AREA?	
		Male	Female	Employed	Unemployed	Retired	Urban	Rural
30-50	11	4	6	11	0	0	9	2
51-65	37	13	23	22	1	14	30	7
66-75	90	42	48	4	1	85	70	19
76-90	44	26	18	3	0	41	33	11
TOTAL	182	85	95	40	2	140	142	39
TOTAL %	100	45	52	22	1	77	78	21

AGE GROUP	LIVING ARRANGEMENTS		
	I live independently in my own home (even if you do live with others)	I live in my own home with support/care from family, friends or other carer	Other
30-50	11	0	0
51-65	37	0	0
66-75	86	2	2
76-90	39	5	0
TOTAL	173	7	2
TOTAL %	95	4	1

AGE GROUP	HOW MANY OTHER PEOPLE DO YOU LIVE WITH?			DO YOU HAVE INFORMAL CARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR A RELATIVE/FRIEND?	
	I live on my own, with no other people	I live with 1-4 other people	I live with more than 4 other people	Yes	No
30-50	1	10	0	4	7
51-65	7	29	1	11	26
66-75	17	73	0	18	72
76-90	13	31	0	9	35
TOTAL	38	143	1	42	140
TOTAL %	21	78.5	0.5	23	77

Appendix B

Map showing the numbers of questionnaire respondents in each region of England. Darker colours indicate a greater number of respondents.



Appendix C

A copy of the questionnaire respondents completed for the research.

Demographic Questions

Please answer the questions below to provide us with some background information about yourself

Q1. What is your age?

Q2. What is your gender identity?

Q3. What is your current Employment Status?

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Retired

Q4. What is the first part of your postcode? (e.g. TS21)

Q5. Do you live in an urban or rural area?

- Urban
- Rural

Q6. Which of the following living arrangements best applies to your living situation?

- I live independently in my own home (even if you live with others)
- I live in my own home with support/care from family, friends or other carer
- I live in a care home or nursing home
- Other (please specify)

Q7. How many other people do you live with?

- I live on my own, with no other people
- I live with 1 - 4 other people
- I live with more than 4 other people

Q8. Do you have informal caring responsibilities for a relative/friend?

- Yes
- No

Question 9 (part a)

Please respond to the statement below.

Then click 'Next' to answer some follow-up questions

Q9a. I felt involved in my Catholic parish community, pre Covid-19

Strongly Disagree: 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly Agree: 7
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 9 (part a) Continued

Q9a i) In what ways could you have felt more involved?

Question 9 (part a) Continued

Q9a i) What made you feel involved?

Question 9 (part b)

Q9b. Has Covid-19 affected how involved you feel in your Catholic parish community?

- Yes
- No

Question 9 (part b) Continued

Q9b i) In what ways has Covid-19 affected how involved you feel in your Catholic parish community?

Question 10 (part a)

Please respond to the statement below.

Then click 'Next' to answer some follow-up questions

Q10a. Prior to Covid-19, I felt I had meaningful relationships/connections within my Catholic parish community

Strongly Disagree: 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly Agree: 7
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 10 (part a) Continued

Q10a i) What would have helped you to develop more meaningful relationships/connections?

Question 10 (part a) Continued

Q10a i) Were these relationships/connections with fellow Catholics of a similar age to yourself, a different generation, or both?

Question 10 (part b)

Q10b. Has Covid-19 affected your meaningful relationships/connections within your Catholic parish community?

- Yes
 No

Question 10 (part b) Continued

Q10b i) In what ways has Covid-19 affected your meaningful relationships/connections within your Catholic parish community?

Question 11 (part a)

Please respond to the statement below.

Then click 'Next' to answer some follow-up questions

Q11a. Prior to Covid-19, I felt I had a meaningful purpose/made a meaningful contribution within my Catholic parish community

Strongly Disagree: 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly Agree: 7
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 11 (part a) Continued

Q11a i) In what ways could fellow Catholics have supported you to feel that you had a meaningful purpose/made a meaningful contribution within your Catholic parish community?

Question 11 (part a) Continued

Q11a i) What do you feel this meaningful purpose is/in what ways did you feel you made a meaningful contribution within your Catholic parish community?

Question 11 (part b)

Q11b. Has Covid-19 affected your sense of meaningful purpose/contribution within your Catholic parish community?

- Yes
 No

Question 11 (part b) Continued

Q11b i) In what ways has Covid-19 affected your sense of meaningful purpose/contribution within your Catholic parish community?

Question 12

Q12a. Prior to Covid-19, did you feel that others, of a similar age to yourself had a meaningful purpose/made a meaningful contribution within the Catholic community?

- Yes
 No

Q12a i) If so, what do you feel this meaningful purpose is/in what ways did you feel they made a meaningful contribution to the Catholic community?

Q12b. Has this been affected by Covid-19?

- Yes
 No

Q12b i) Please explain the reason(s) for your answer

Question 13

Q13a. **Prior to Covid-19**, did you feel that others, older than yourself had a meaningful purpose/made a meaningful contribution within the Catholic community?

- Yes
 No

Q13a i) If so, what do you feel this meaningful purpose is/in what ways did you feel they made a meaningful contribution to the Catholic community?

Q13b. Has this been affected by Covid-19?

- Yes
 No

Q13b i) Please explain the reason(s) for your answer

Question 14 (part a)

Please respond to the statement below.

Then click 'Next' to answer some follow-up questions

Q14a. Prior to Covid-19, I felt supported by my Catholic parish community

Strongly Disagree: 1	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly Agree: 7
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Question 14 (part a) Continued

Q14a i) In what ways could you have felt more supported?

Q14a i) In what ways did your Catholic parish community support you?

Question 14 (part b)

Q14b. Has Covid-19 affected how supported you feel, by your Catholic parish community?

- Yes
 No

Question 14 (part b) Continued

Q14b i) In what ways has Covid-19 affected how supported you feel, by your Catholic parish community?

Questions 15 & 16

Q15. In what ways would you like to be supported by your Catholic parish community over the next ten years?

Q16. Would 'Catholic care' be your first choice for yourself and/or your family?

('Catholic care' refers to an organisation that "embraces and realises a Catholic understanding of the person and the common good, including provision for spiritual, human and moral formation, and religious practice, throughout their care.)

Yes

No

Q16a. Please explain the reason(s) for your answer

To submit your answers, please click the green 'Done' button below

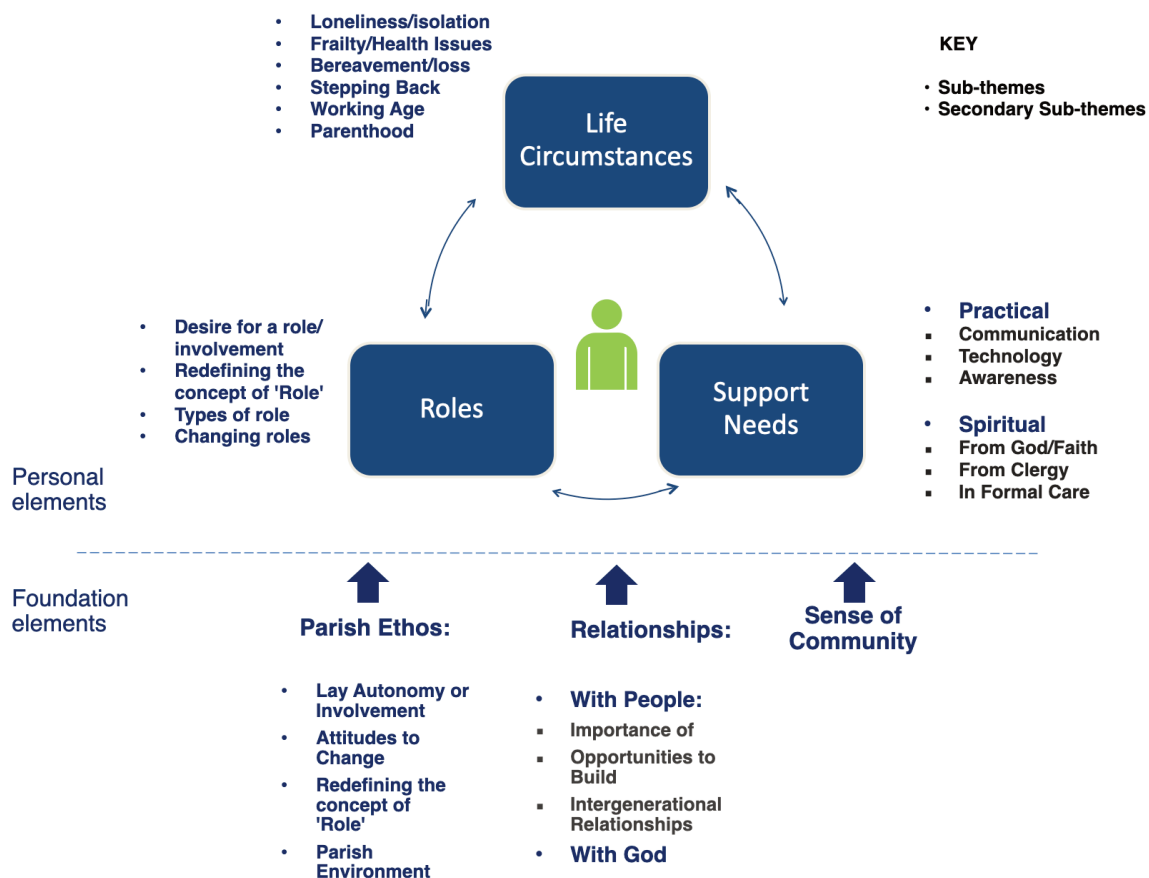
If you have any questions about the research, please contact Eliza Ross (elizaross@sjog.org.uk) or Jamie Mackrill (jamiemackrill@sjog.org.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire.

Appendix D

The model of Growth and Change: Themes, subthemes and codes from thematic analysis.

The Model of Growth and Change including subthemes and secondary subthemes



Contributory Roles

Subtheme	Desire for a role/involvement
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having a role in the parish Making a contribution to the parish Want to be involved in the parish Desire for parish to allow continued participation over next 10 years Being involved or included Desire for more outreach

Subtheme	Redefining the concept of a 'Contributory Role'
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling valued regardless of whether you have an 'active' role Awareness that people can still make contributions as they age

Subtheme	Types of role
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fulfilment through helping/supporting others Involvement in community outreach Utilising or sharing knowledge/experience/skills Attending masses Roles at Masses (reader etc) The running of the parish

Subtheme	Changing roles
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire for more younger people to take on roles and continue parish Roles or involvement changing with age/life stage

Parish Ethos

Subtheme	Lay autonomy/involvement
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of opportunities for parish involvement Clergy who promote lay autonomy/involvement Clergy who do not promote lay autonomy/involvement Worries about getting more involved with parish Being consulted/listened to Desire to be consulted/ listened to Desire for parish to allow... COVID has allowed laity to get on with doing things that they think need doing Promoting lay involvement or autonomy Difficultly getting people involved with church Commitment concerns Opportunity to be involved Finding roles for everyone

Subtheme	Attitudes to Change
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parish/clergy open to change Parish/clergy not open to change Use of technology Use or benefits of technology Parish being open to change Forward looking, supportive clergy Changing attitudes Openness/reluctance about change

Subtheme	Parish Environment
CODES	<p>Good communication in parish</p> <p>Communication in parish is not good/lacking</p> <p>Good leadership/support from clergy</p> <p>Feeling judged</p> <p>Unsupportive clergy</p> <p>Lay members helping and supporting one another</p> <p>Supportive relationship with priest/clergy</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Presence of young people/families</p> <p>Gratitude from clergy</p> <p>lacking support from priest/clergy</p> <p>Leadership issues</p> <p>Feeling welcomed</p> <p>Not feeling welcomed (cliques)</p> <p>Being hospitable/welcoming</p>

Subtheme	Redefining the concept of 'role'
CODES	<p>Awareness that people can still make contributions as they age</p> <p>Parish values all members whether 'active' or not</p> <p>Parish only values certain/'active' members</p> <p>Lack of gratitude/appreciation for contribution</p> <p>Gratitude/appreciation for contribution</p>

Relationships

Subtheme	Relationship with God
CODES	<p>Relationship with God and faith</p> <p>Vocation/God's Calling</p>

Subtheme	Relationships with People		
	Importance Of	Opportunities to Build	Intergenerational Relationships
CODES	<p>Meaningful relationships with others</p> <p>Desire for more meaningful relationships with others</p> <p>Being known/knowing others</p> <p>Sense of camaraderie</p> <p>Importance of relationships/connections with others</p> <p>Supportive relationship with priest/clergy</p> <p>Lay members helping and supporting one another</p> <p>Importance of celebrating events in Christian calendar</p>	<p>Social events/groups</p> <p>Lack of social events/groups</p> <p>Social interaction/contact</p> <p>Lack of social interaction/contact</p> <p>Groups/events outside of church services</p>	<p>Benefits/importance of intergenerational relationships</p> <p>Presence of younger people/families</p>

Life Circumstances

CODES	<p>Lay members choose whether or not to be involved</p> <p>Feeling isolated</p> <p>Physical frailty/health issues</p> <p>Bereavement/loss</p> <p>Work/other commitments reduce opportunities for parish involvement</p> <p>Concerns about COVID transmission</p> <p>COVID has highlighted difficulties in reaching out to housebound</p> <p>Reduced mass makes it harder to know if people are in need of support</p> <p>Connections built through children/school</p> <p>Roles or involvement changing with age/life stage</p> <p>Balancing support given, support received and involvement</p> <p>Commitment concerns</p> <p>Geographical issues</p> <p>Not having technology/difficulties using technology</p> <p>Newcomer experiences</p> <p>Impact of COVID-19</p> <p>Difficulties/isolation of elderly parishioners</p>
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Support Needs

Subtheme	Practical Support
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire to be kept in touch with when no longer active Improving communication/outreach with housebound Improving connections with isolated parishioners Assistance with technology Awareness of support/services Lack of awareness of Catholic care

Subtheme	Spiritual Support
CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guidance/support from God/faith Positive experience with Catholic care Understanding of personal needs whilst in Catholic care Supporting family whilst in Catholic care Desire for Catholic Care when needed Home visits/visits from clergy Supportive relationship with priest/clergy Forward looking, supportive clergy Holistic, all encompassing, individualised care

Sense of Community

CODES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of belonging Feeling supported by the parish Not feeling supported by the parish Desire for a sense of belonging/community Mutual support for parishioners Sense of camaraderie
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