Active Citizenship in faith-based communities

A report from focus groups

Taskforce on active citizenship

TASCFHÓRSA UM SHAORÁNACHT GHNÍOMHACH

Active Citizenship in faith-based communities

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Introduction

The Taskforce on Active Citizenship was appointed by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern T.D. in April 2006 to, amongst other things, review the evidence regarding trends in citizen participation and organisational experience in relation to levels of engagement in Ireland today. This report was funded by the Taskforce on Active Citizenship as a part of their research into trends in civic participation. More information on the work of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship can be found on the website **www.activecitizen.ie**

In October 2006, the Council for Research & Development, a Commission of the Irish Bishops' Conference conducted research on Active Citizenship in Catholic and other faith parishes/structures in the Republic of Ireland. This is in the broader context of discussions on Active Citizenship and what it means to be an active citizen. The question schedule was designed to gather data on the experiences of volunteers and others in parish contexts. How participants become involved, what work in their community means to them and what might be proposed to enhance such activity were central questions for the research. Some emphasis was also placed on the means by which members of Ireland's migrant communities form networks.

Methodology and Conduct of the Fieldwork

An agreed and semi-structured questionnaire was compiled. The question schedule was compiled on the basis of agreed objectives between the Taskforce on Active Citizenship through the Department of the Taoiseach and the Council for Research & Development. It represented the broad objectives of the Taskforce and the Council. A copy of the question schedule can be furnished. While conscious that the Council is a Commission of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, care was given to the inclusion of structures among other denominations and faiths for the conduct of the fieldwork. Consequently, two Church of Ireland parishes and the Islamic Foundation of Ireland were also engaged in the fieldwork.

As 60% of the Republic's population is now urban, it was important that the research reflected this and a weighting was given to parishes located in urban areas. Getting a rural and urban balance was important to the research although no additional weighting is given in the analysis to these geographies. Fifteen parishes/structures were originally contacted to take part in the research. Their location was chosen for the proximity to the Dublin region, bearing in mind travel times and the short timescale of the research.

The locations can be disaggregated as follows:

Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Islam
Rural Galway*	Urban Dublin*	Urban Dublin*
Urban Dublin	Suburban Wicklow*	
Suburban Limerick*		
Rural Tipperary*		
Urban Dublin		
Urban Limerick		
Suburban Dublin		
Western chaplaincy for migrants*		
Urban and Suburban Dublin*		
Suburban Cork*		
Rural Cavan		

* Actively engaged for fieldwork.

Of these fifteen parishes and community structures, nine of these were actively engaged for the fieldwork (marked with an asterisk above) which took place over the period November 2nd to 16th. The fieldwork was organised by the two project researchers contacting a key informant within the parishes/structures and requesting that a focus group be convened to discuss their experiences of volunteering and how people become involved with the church/structure. Among Roman Catholic parishes, the *Irish Catholic Directory* was used to make contact, keeping in mind a geographical balance. In the case of the Church of Ireland and the Islamic Foundation of Ireland, informants were obtained through members of the Taskforce and its Secretariat. Follow-up contact was maintained in late October in preparation for the fieldwork. In one case, the researchers were asked to request members for the focus group at two masses on a Sunday morning.

What follows is a report of the groups in these 9 parishes/structures totalling 76 participants. The number of participants in each focus group varied considerably, from just 3 to almost 20. The majority of participants were aged over 50 years and had a good balance of both men and women. The conduct of the fieldwork was made more difficult in some locations because of large numbers of participants but cooperation among the parishes/structures was very willing. The contents and composition of each focus group were recorded on paper and electronically. This was to enable the enhancement of the notes made later. Both researchers were present for all 9 focus groups. Note should be taken that all who participated were engaged already in their parish/structure, and thereby self-selected. The informants for each group undoubtedly selected **active** members of community and parish structures and organisations. A list of organisations and structures named by participants can be provided.

Theme 1: How do people get involved?

Participants were asked how they became involved in volunteering in the parish, structure or the community. Three main means of engagement emerged from the discussion in the groups.

1.1 Historical involvement in other parish structures

Participants indicated that they had been in a youth organisation like the Brownies or the scouting organisations and had proceeded to become involved in the running of these organisations. "I said I'd give a little bit back". Another badminton player got a lot of pleasure out of the game and "one way of putting something back into the game was by helping others". This initial commitment led on to being asked to engage in other activities, with a number describing being encouraged into it because they had a particular skill. Others had seen a lack of facilities amongst a particular age group and wanted to do something and this was particularly evident for organisations working with young people.

More particularly, their own children's age influenced what they get involved in. Meeting other people of the same age near and in their children's school buildings brings an additional means of engagement. Others expressly stated that they were "reared in a family that had always been involved" and even more dramatically one pointed out that "Guiding is dynastic".

1.2 Persuasion by church/structure personnel

While many of the participants had expressed a duty and an obligation to work in the parish/structure, specific requests by church and community personnel remained important to people's initial involvement. It is difficult to know where being asked by a specific person and the individual participant's sense of duty, interact with each other. However, what remains is the initial request followed by a realisation that *being volunteered* is as evident as volunteering with one participant remarking that "we were roped in" and another stated that they had "a very persuasive parish sister". This was usually followed by laughter in the group. People had begun on a small committee years ago and have spent many years rotating on various groups since with one particular participant stating that they "have tried to escape ever since."

There is a broad understanding, sometimes accompanied by an acknowledgement of still being involved after all of this time, that they are involved having been asked many years ago. Many felt it important that they remained on for they saw a need for the service. The sense of duty for the group or parish was also stated in that people had run a youth club for her when she was younger and now she was determined to do the same for others:

   "There's a need for it. They did it for me why should I not do it for someone else."

1.3 Networks within the community and parish/structure

Participants frequently referred to friends and neighbours asking them to become involved. One participant in a rural setting remarked that because of his job as a publican he was able to get to know people quickly: "who are you and what can you do" was the question he would ask of new faces. Others said that friends had persuaded them with one participant recalling that during a period of illness, that volunteering would help "to get out of yourself". Coupled with a sense that events in a community "snowball" and take on a momentum of their own, the influence of social networks existing in housing estates and amongst parishioners should not be underestimated (this is picked up again in the third theme). Direct appeals on an individual basis are often more successful as people feel included.

Given the nature of the research, the centrality of the religious building as a focal point of activity is also to be remarked upon. This is a community in the broadest sense, not always linked with the proximity of that religious building. The church and associated buildings among the Christian communities in Ireland are central to individual faith and a sense of community. This is no less the case for new communities but people tend to come from a wider area to meet others at the mosque or church. Amongst the new communities, finding out where the religious building is, is important for reasons other than spiritual:

> "People who are educated use the internet to find out where the mosque is, others just ask people."

Among the Polish community, one participant estimated that 20-30% of people coming to the church are doing so because they need help in matters of accommodation or employment. A Polish-Irish society was deemed inadequate by another:

> "When the Polish church started, it was much easier to meet Polish people."

In devising the structure of this report, the researchers struggled with separating the 'why' and the 'how' because there is a duty, an obligation, a pressing faith need to engage with the parish or structure. While the Irish parishes were less likely to make an explicit link between their faith and voluntary work, for new communities, faith enhancement and being a faithful person were important motivations for assisting the parish/structure. An unrecorded conversation on the differences between Islam and Catholicism on this matter took place at the urban Dublin location.

Theme 2: Motivations for involvement and rewards for staying involved

Participants were not asked explicitly why they got involved but instead asked what they get out of assisting in a project or a church structure. While they expressed that it was important to help others, many of the participants saw a sense of purpose to the activity for themselves, as a relational activity: a relation between them and another individual. Firstly, we examine the 'contribution to the community' motivation.

2.1 Community contribution

Participants stated that they wanted to change things and get involved in their area: You "can't complain about things if you don't try to help it." They also stated that there was a necessity for involvement because there was no pre-existing structure in place e.g. fundraising for a school or a community service:

"You find some enthusiastic people jumping in and doing it themselves".

In more than one case there was a defined need to begin a new service; particularly among new communities e.g. the church was looking for English teachers to help new arrivals.

There is a sense of satisfaction from seeing things being done that people thought were important for the community. Participants often refer to this as getting stuck in, changing things and having a "great sense of achievement when events go well". There is a wide consensus across all groups that it is good to give something back to the community and that as volunteers they get more out of it than they put in, despite some initial reluctance. This is an individual orientation as well as a collective one.

Central to a parish/structure is the meeting of new individuals arriving in the area. Participants in several groups stated that there was a conscious effort made to introduce themselves to new arrivals or that there was a formal welcoming committee attached to the church. For the rural communities in particular this seemed vital: "there'd never be a them and us" in their own parish. The meeting point was generally the home of the new arrival although this too was becoming increasingly difficult. The home was generally not the point of contact for the new communities.

Several participants mentioned the specific rewards of volunteering such as camaraderie, a sense of fulfilment and that "it gives you a good feeling":

"Sometimes you don't want to do it but once you start, you're in"

"It's work because you have to prepare for it but you're glad you did it."

2.2 Personal satisfaction

Turning to the 'personal satisfaction' motivation, here participants were clear that the happiness attained during their activity was very important to them. For many there's a "feel-good feeling about" the volunteering activity, by visiting disabled

people "you light up your day" and that it gives them a sense of perspective about their own lives. Participants agreed with one another that it relieves stress from paid work and takes you out of yourself. One participant stated "I feel fantastic that it helps people" referring to an English and Polish language website she helps to maintain. Following visits to an elder care home, participants saw the value of their visits by the smiles on the residents' faces. Some participants expressed that they were humbled by the experience of bringing the Eucharist to the older people and that "Twas a therapy" during a difficult personal period. Whatever they got out of it, it was seeing the change in the people visited that made it worthwhile for most participants.

In addition, participants have discovered new talents in the course of their volunteering activity: skills like poster design as well as the personal realisation of fulfilment. For one participant, volunteering can lead people to a better paid job that is not just about surviving on the labour market – it can enhance people's job prospects. This participant had acted in the past as an informal agent between friends and volunteering opportunities in the city. For new communities in particular, social networks are vital for employment and accommodation opportunities. For a number of participants elsewhere, making a link between their relatively privileged position and those they assist during the course of their voluntary work is also important.

Theme 3: How being active changes over time

Intimately bound up with their own experience as an active person in their community and parish, were the demographic and socio-economic changes in Ireland more broadly. Participants were asked what has changed about being active in their community since they began to volunteer. This theme emerged in three ways: firstly that household, working and leisure patterns have changed; secondly, that commuting and time management have changed for many people and; thirdly that national regulatory frameworks had impacted in a very real way.

3.1 Two working people in households

Given the structural transformation in the Irish labour market since the early 1990s, many more households now have two working parents and are taking their children to more strictly defined activities on the weekend. The formality of this arrangement impacts on what constitutes leisure time for people. Most groups stated that in order to spend time with children, many households would rather pay for tennis coaching or another purchased activity than contribute their time to something more informal. Participants felt that time is more limited for households with families currently and so structured leisure activities are favoured for that limited time available. Some groups talked explicitly about a fast-moving and materialistic culture in Ireland but most referred to changing family patterns and that houses are empty:

> *"When you call to houses to get to know new people, houses are empty during the day because people are working. Family patterns have changed."*

More than one group made explicit reference to changing work patterns and its impact on both weeknight and weekend activities. One particular participant stated that fathers are now expected to be as full parents as the mother was solely in the past. Changing household roles for fathers means that both parents are expected to be at home in the evening to help with domestic tasks and childrearing:

> *"In the evening, there are dinners to be got and lessons to be done so there's less time for volunteering."*

One participant saw this in his own sons. Another participant was less optimistic again:

> *"Can't see how they can do, can balance everything today..."*

Migrant participants stated that they and others come to Ireland to advance their careers and work hard in order to send money home, build a career, establish their family. Although one rural-based migrant expressed (through a translator) that he would have no problem coming in from work and going straight to an evening meeting, it is clear that priorities are with building family life and economic and occupational security. The spontaneous occurrences of grandparents acting also as childminders for younger families were also apparent among the participants. Grandparents are effectively working during the day and so have no energy for evening activities and this was remarked upon by more than a few groups. Given the older age profile of the participants in particular groups, this seems a salient point.

3.2 Traffic and time management

Secondly, increasing volumes of traffic affects those already involved from giving more time. It takes longer to get across cities or organise people in groups:

> "...teams coming to play us, because they can't get across the city in time to be over here for..."

Some of the groups remarked how participation in the focus group itself was affected by heavier volumes of traffic. All but one was conducted after 7pm.

Heavier traffic also influences the amount of time people can give to community and parish activity because of longer commuting times in suburban areas particularly. One participant was particular to emphasise road works and longer city commuting times:

> "Spending time bussing your children around and when you don't live near your work means less time to volunteer."

Many of the participants expressed difficulties around commuting long distances for younger families in particular. We propose here that participants and their wider families have defined places of work and defined places for home life and leisure and that the two have become disconnected in a way not evident in the past. Perhaps community for younger people is no longer place-bound in the way that it once was? Does the family stage in the life cycle have an influence on active citizenship? This is examined briefly in this report.

It is considered by the participants that people are devoting more time to self-advancement and career-based study rather than community involvement. Personal, not 'community', goals appear to take precedence at a particular stage in life. There is awareness too, particularly in suburban and urban areas, that there is now more competition for people's time. Participants noted that the internet and other computer-based activity and more highly-structured sports activities take younger people away from community activity. For those involved in their parish or community structure for a long time there is a perception that things have become more anonymous and that the scale of charitable and other activities has become more globalised. There was specific mention of the Mellon house building project in South Africa and the raising of money through overseas leisure activities. There is an appreciation that younger people are involved but that their concerns are not as local as those present in these groups. For one Limerick participant, in particular, many young people he knows have a wide circle of friends and they see this circle as their community, not strangers and neighbours. Support is provided within that circle and not amongst broader networks like union activity or charity work. Some agreed that you need to maintain a local focus, referring explicitly to the Special Olympics, because

> "...to me national is a bit, sort of hit or miss. You could be lucky or you know..."

3.3 The impact of regulatory frameworks

"There is a lot more accountability from voluntary organisations. It's off-putting."

Many of the focus groups referred to changes that have occurred in the regulation of local activity in more recent times. This principally refers to new child protection regulations and general concerns about insurance/liability. While the former is seen as necessary to protect both adults and children, concerns about risk management, while not technically difficult, have altered attitudes toward community volunteering. The impact amongst new communities is also evident among those with limited social and economic rights: for those working with, and without, work permits and with limited access to appropriate healthcare, 'giving back' is down the list of priorities.

Referring to paper work in general one participant said that in the bereavement group she is involved with, it is very hard to manage the amount of paperwork:

"You'd want to be almost a professor to follow it."

In the more particular cases on child protection tasks, *Garda* vetting and checks on people working with children has made it more difficult: it is necessary (and explicitly acknowledged as such) but is also seen as preventing people from getting involved. Many commented on the lengthy procedures required and the processing that "a document of about 5 A4s needed". Participants acknowledged that these measures are for the protection of children and for *adults* "but where's the balance?" And more worryingly:

"It hinders, like, you being compassionate to them."

And that:

"You have to try very hard to not let them see that you're watching everything that you do."

In other words, participants feel that they have to make an effort to act naturally around children, their own and others:

"If kids fall you can't put them on your knee. Also with teenagers if they want to talk to you on a one-to-one basis, it must be in full view of everyone."

One participant recalled an instance when training young people at badminton:

"Georgina [the other trainer] is coming from Brownies, I'm in the hall putting up the nets, and Susan remembers this, and Susan came over to me and she says Peter, 'I'll stay with you,' and I said 'no, I'm grand, Georgina'll be down in about 5 minutes, she's just coming from Brownies'...[group laughs]." (Names changed.)

He did not understand that there had to be more than one person present in the hall and so the other trainer being late (because of traffic as it happened) made it difficult to manage the situation. Furthermore, those with *Garda* clearance have more pressure upon their role. This is because every new recruited volunteer requires a clearance process and the paperwork imposes additional expenditure of time. One

participant brought to bear the example of recruiting new volunteers for a youth group: *Garda* vetting outcomes contain unrelated offences (such as speeding fines) and this creates further work on the parish side in checking new people. Forms are sent back having been locally filtered and the recruitment process is initiated again.

In some cases, trying to keep a project afloat, administratively and financially, became as important as the objective of the activity itself:

> "The frustration that we have is that if we have more time to prepare, we know we could do it [the activity] better. Em, or we could be better resourced to do it or whatever so there's that squeeze on your time as well...."

Regarding health and safety many of the groups referred to an inability to work spontaneously with children and young people. A woman who takes a group of children to events in the area in her car stated:

> "You can't just pile in and do things the way they used to be done."

And that:

> "You cannot just change course on a hill walk or some such."

This lessening of the spontaneity is evident in other groups too. Some participants felt that this amount of regulation means people are shying away from volunteering because of the attitudes of children's parents. More than a few of the participants noted that because of users' parents' reaction, when small things do go wrong (e.g. breaking up fights, a child breaks a tooth) people disengage as volunteers. Among the agreement, a participant noted "Everybody knows their rights now." A male participant in another suburban setting said people expect things from institutions:"

> "What the church ought to do for me....What's the union doing about this?...As if it's all about service."

He felt that in the past people did things for themselves, in an informal way because they had to, to survive:

> "In the 1950s and 60s, there were a lot more people in communities doing things for themselves."

Several agreed with his view that "It's all about what I can *get* rather than what I have to give."

Another participant stated that some people will not fundraise now without a commission: "That's not in the spirit of fundraising for charitable organisations". Another participant's grandchildren ask her "you're going again like...do ye get paid for it?" and she believes that this tells us about the attitude of that generation. Broadly speaking the notion of the outcome of volunteering is unknown amongst younger people, according to the participants. They get the name of being "a goodie-goodie, dowdy" people who don't know how to enjoy themselves. Another participant in a suburban setting noted that:

> "There's a lot of suspicion now. If you see someone doing something good, you wonder why – what are they getting out of it? Are they doing something for their own good?"

Theme 4: Constraints on activity

For some of the groups, it is hard to find out where in Ireland one finds information on voluntary activity and how to go about organising things in Ireland:

"There is a lack of training in Ireland for newcomers. It is a concern".

Some participants knew of local volunteering centres but they do not know if they promote themselves, their purpose or their successes. One or two other participants noted that when paid staff are taken on at a project the role of the volunteer can be diminished.

As can be seen from Theme 3 above, many of the participants took changes to community and voluntary activity over the years to mean that the context for it has become worse and that these are constraints on their own activity. They decided that 'change' meant difficulties arose. Many participants felt that, attitudinally, parents of younger children today see little in the virtue of volunteering, unrelated to time commitments and family life cycle stage. In particular the users' parental attitudes were discussed at length across groups, in rural settings:

"Maybe remind people not to always take from the community but to give something back."

In a suburban setting, the attitude of the parents of the children was important for many participants. Participants state that others do not get involved in between the time they leave their children at a service or organisation's gate they "come as far as the gate and then off to [the city]" and the time they collect them. Furthermore, in another city a participant noted that if anything happens in between dropping them off and collecting them "and if anything happens to the children....you're up in court". Another participant in the same group stated, with many agreeing, that:

"People seem to need photographs of proof of events now."

In the same group another participant stated that "you daren't scold other children for fear of the reaction of the parents." Others felt that people defend their own children first and warn off volunteers when their children are reprimanded. They defend their children:

"To the hilt and they [users' children] cannot say anything wrong".

Others agreed that people take advantage of volunteers and there is the possibility, although emergent from the focus groups, that volunteered projects are now treated in the same manner as services that people can pay for. In two groups, in different settings, and independently of each other, participants noted that services are "actually a babysitting service" and:

*"You sometimes wonder do the parents understand what we are **actually doing** with their children."*

Another participant still noted the presence of the attitude among some, although in a minority:

"Just tell us how much you want, don't ask us to be on a committee."

Several participants noted the staleness of ideas among current committees and the need for new people. Some noted that the apparent stability of committees was a discouragement for others.

Emerging from this discussion then, is there a mismatch of attitudes between well-established volunteers (usually older people) and younger 'users of services' around expectation of and entitlement to service and inter-generational parenting styles? Or is this merely in the nature of volunteering: older people run the services that younger people use – a variant of the life cycle effect noted earlier?

Theme 5: Encouraging others

Finally, participants were asked what might be done to encourage others to take part in community and volunteering activity in their parish/structure. Throughout the focus groups, the one suggestion that emerged both latently and explicitly was the personal request for help. In one rural location, despite numerous attempts to convene a focus group of participants (parish newsletter, altar announcements by one of the researchers, group approaches by informants), not a single person attended for the focus group on the night arranged in this particular location. And while in other locations (without that ground work), our informants personally requested people to attend the focus group, meaning that these parishes and structures were putting their most active citizens forward, the 'general appeal' approach did not work. From the 'failed' session, the informant told us he had to "eyeball people just to become Ministers of the Eucharist". This is contradicted in other locations by the participants themselves:

> *"If you only ask there's great goodwill there."*

Many participants stated that a focused and task-oriented approach to requesting help and maintaining activities is the best way forward. Building on the social networks discussed earlier, the importance of the personal appeal was emphasised by very many participants and across groups. Although many of the participants were conscious that once they are involved they were not able to "escape", their experience has been that if you ask people to conduct a specific task, people will help out. Many groups and committees interchange personnel over the years.

It is the regularity of the commitment needed for many groups that appears to be a feature that turns people away. In a Dublin city location two participants stated:

> *A: "Some people will agree to do a once-off thing."*

> *B [agreeing]: "People have a fear of a regular commitment."*

This is also concretised in terms of reluctance to become involved in committees. Rural setting groups also stated that what worked best for them was to allocate specific tasks to people and then they will be done. Indeed, that is how many of them became involved those years ago: others would retire from the group, they would be asked by friends or would meet someone socially or at a religious occasion.

It is suggested by some that the busyness in people's lives now does not facilitate a regularity of attendance or a regular commitment in the way that they had organised themselves. It's not that people do not want to contribute but they would rather it on an ad hoc, infrequent basis. The relative success of the direct approach may be partly due to the fear of being bound to a committee although evidence of this from the participants is slight:

> *"There's always people who'll give you a couple of hours of their day."*

It is also proposed here that to be asked personally is important because it reinforces and recognises the value of that person's contribution to a project or

activity: "Tell us what it is, where it is, what it is that you can do." Furthermore, and in another group, outlining precisely what is involved is seen as a worthy suggestion:

> *"Make it clear to people what the time limits will be then they'll know what they are getting into.....It's all personal contact at the end of the day."*

This would appear to be a contributing factor in the 'failed' group in the rural location outlined above. Some others indicated that personal connection seems important to encourage parents of younger children:

> *"If it's something that will benefit their child, some parents will get involved"*

Others agreed that if a meeting of parents is called on a subject relevant to their children "you'll take in the crowd."

Provision of local information also arose as a way to involve more people: community and parish directories, leaflets on various parish activities and information packs for new arrivals do work but this is linked very strongly with the volunteers' knowledge of which people are in what houses. Many participants noted that they have called to deliver such information but people are not in their home as much as they used to. Work and other commitments bring people away from the local area for long stretches of the day:

> *"Because you cannot find people in their homes now when you call it is more difficult to know your neighbours. You do not know who is in what house."*

One woman in a suburban parish keeps an eye out for new faces at Sunday services: you "need to have a welcome". She puts the new people on a mailing list for the parish newsletter and "her role is so important."

Others expressed it in terms of an insider - outsider relationship:

> *"I think that people need to be asked more nowadays than before".*

This participant continued that younger people don't have the same confidence ("what would I know about that kind of thing") to come forward and see the skills they evidently have: "You need to be invited or encouraged". Once inside in the activity, however:

> *"...you still have to be doing the thing before you get that feeling" [of well being].*

The benefit can only be perceived from inside the activity or project.

At the same time, and without over-emphasising the place of projects that involve children among the groups participating here, there is the recognition that people have a right *not* to participate because of the particular point in their family's life cycle: "They need the time to be the parents..." This was agreed with by a few more of the participants. There is "a focus of years" where people are "trying other things, broadening their horizons..." and that this needs to be respected. While teenagers do follow through on being users, being trained and taking on leadership roles (several examples from focus groups), at least "you've sown the seed in their mind" and let them come back later.

Concluding remarks

There is some evidence here to suggest that the changing nature of community and localism in Ireland has led to a detachment of household and kinship ties from their immediate geographical area. If this has taken place and longer working hours, commuting times as well as more opportunities for distant leisure pursuits having taken hold, this may well have had a profound influence on the nature of what it means to be active through community and parish structures. In addition, there has been a steady decline in regular service attendance among the Catholic population since the mid-1990s. This is particularly marked in urban and suburban areas (Council for Research & Development, 2002, 2006). The opportunities to recruit people actively through church structures and direct house calls have diminished considerably over this time.

At the same time, changes in household composition, smaller families, both parents working and grandparents involved in childcare, has meant that time spent with family is lessened. A more market-led and structured approach to leisure and free time is emerging. While the local youth club may be finding it difficult to find trained (and child protection-cleared) leaders, people are volunteering but not just in their local areas; overseas fundraising projects have increased in popularity in recent years.

There is also evidence that participants are aware of the obligations of younger families with children. Participants have referred to younger families that have childrearing commitments and who are absent for much of the day. Children appear as the focus of most recorded activities during the research. Are these younger families not available to devote time to enhancing networks that are important to encouraging participation and communication? Participants have spoken of volunteering time being "eaten into" when the traffic is heavier, when their children are younger and not being able to give more time when they themselves were younger. There is an awareness of the existence of varying degrees of commitment across family and household types.

While the purpose of this research was not to measure the incidence or occurrence of volunteering and unpaid community activity across a number of parishes and religious structures, a number of key facts emerge:

■ Regulatory frameworks facilitating child protection and risk management are having an impact on the informality of volunteering (a key part of the experience) and in the recruitment of new volunteers.

■ New communities resident in Ireland are engaged in community and volunteering activity but it is placed in the context of the importance of economic and physical security. For more established communities, the value attached to the personal and collective activity is evident.

■ Changes in household structure and its relationship with the formal labour market (most particularly the influence of commuting patterns) have meant that being an active citizen may have become detached from households' immediate geographical area. Broader changes in religious practice and social mobility have also changed the historical relationship between Christian parishes and households.

■ Personal contact in encouraging new people to get involved is very important to the establishment of the broader social networks necessary for unpaid activity in the community.

■ Being active in the community and within parish and religious structures is seen as dependent upon the individual's stage in the life cycle (for both younger and older people) and relative to other family commitments.