

# A HANDBOOK FOR BUILDING STRONGER PARISHES

TRUDY DANTIS



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# HOW TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF THIS BOOK

**S**o you've got this book and you want to use it to improve your parish. What do you do next? Here are some helpful steps:

- Get together a team of people who are able to review parish activities and processes and who will work towards formulating plans and implementing strategies and goals for the future. You may choose to use members from the Parish Council, leaders of parish groups and parishioners. It is important to have the right mix of people as various aspects of parish life will need to be reviewed during the course of your discussions.
- Work out a time schedule when you are going to use this book. The team may need to meet several times and each meeting should allow enough time for reading, reflection and discussion. A suggested timeframe is an hour for each topic.
- Each chapter of this book highlights a different aspect of vitality. We recommend that you read one chapter at a time and work on the corresponding worksheets that follow. If you do not have time to go through the whole book with your team, choose the most important topics that need attention in your parish.

- The diversity of Australian Catholic parishes is a well-known fact.

The worksheets in this book are designed for use across all parishes. However, you may find certain questions that are not relevant to your context. Feel free to customise! Add your own material and make the best use of the time allotted to that topic.

- Read, reflect, discuss and plan but don't forget to implement those plans. This is a crucial step which will need the cooperation and coordination of many people in the parish. The action plans that are provided in this book will help you keep track of your projects and activities.

- Evaluate your plans regularly. This will help you keep focused on tasks that need to be done in order to achieve your goals.
- Spread the news! If you have found this book helpful, don't forget to suggest it to other parishes to help them improve their vitality.



# CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

► Robert Dixon

Catholics are the largest religious group in Australia. According to the 2011 Australian Census, Catholics made up just over a quarter (25.3 per cent) of the Australian population: there were 5 439 268 Catholics in a total Australian population of 21 507 719. In the five years between the 2006 and 2011 Censuses, the number of Catholics increased by over 312 000, or 6.1 per cent.

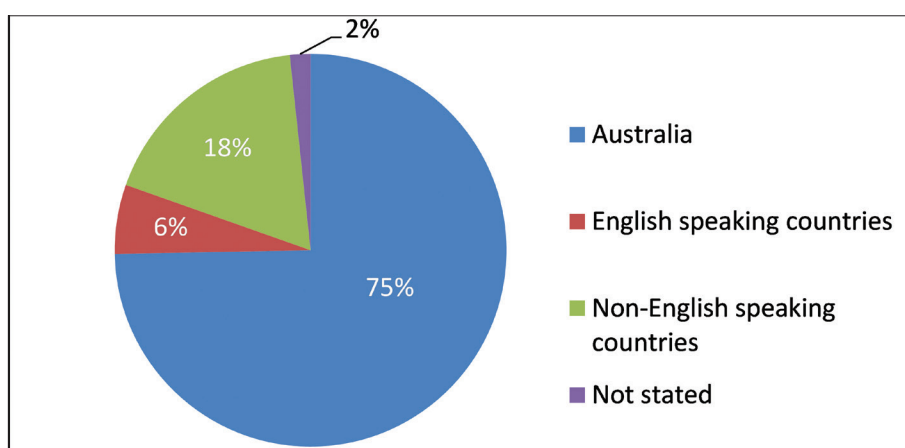
When you filled in your Census form in August 2011, one question you encountered was Question 19 ‘What is your religion?’ It’s because of this question that we know how many Catholics there were in Australia at that time. What’s more, the Census data can help us get a very clear picture of those Catholics.

## ETHNIC DIVERSITY

One of the most striking features of the Catholic population is its ethnic diversity. Nearly a quarter of Australia’s Catholics (23.6 per cent) were born overseas, and about three-quarters of those people (17.9 per cent of all Catholics) were born in non-English speaking countries. A further 124 618 Catholics are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, 2.3 per cent of all Australia’s Catholics.

The main countries in which Australia’s Catholics were born are shown in Table 1. Italy is at in second place on the list, after Australia. However, most Italian Catholics arrived in Australia in the 1950s and 60s, so that by 2011 almost two-thirds of them were aged 60 or more. In contrast, almost 90 per cent of Catholics born in the Philippines are aged *under* 60, so that

Figure 1. Birthplace of Australia’s Catholic population, 2011



it is highly probable that by the time of the 2016 Census, the Philippines will have displaced Italy as the overseas country contributing the highest number of Catholics to the Australian population. Catholics born in the Sudan or South Sudan (there were 7983 of them in 2011) have the youngest age profile, with almost 80 per cent being under the age of 40.

*Table 1. Catholics in Australia: Major countries of birth 2011<sup>1</sup>*

Australia	4 065 104
Italy	168 801
Great Britain <sup>2</sup>	137 209
Philippines	134 655
New Zealand	73 145
Ireland <sup>2</sup>	56 309
Croatia and other former Yugoslavia	49 197
India	48 209
Vietnam	39 892
Malta	37 816
Poland	36 117
Germany	30 478
Lebanon	28 004
Netherlands	24 861
China (including Hong Kong)	22 423
Sri Lanka	20 216
South Africa	19 978
Iraq	17 184
Indonesia	16 821
Malaysia	16 791
South Korea	16 705
Mauritius	16 072

Notes:

1. Countries contributing 16 000 or more Catholics to the 2011 Australian Catholic population, in diminishing order of the number of Catholics born in that country.
2. Northern Ireland is included with Ireland rather than with the United Kingdom.

Associated with this ethnic diversity is the fact that Australia's Catholics speak a wide range of languages other than English at home, the most common (in diminishing order) being Italian, Filipino languages, Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, Croatian, Chinese languages, Polish and Maltese. Many people are surprised to find Arabic on this list; it is spoken by Catholics from Lebanon and other parts of the Middle-East and North Africa, particularly Catholics belonging to the Maronite Rite. Another interesting fact related to language, but one which has nothing to do with ethnicity or birthplace, is that the main language 'spoken' at home by 2500 Catholics in 2011 was a sign language.

Like the Australian population as a whole, Catholics are getting older. In 1991, the median age of Catholics was 30.7 years. By 2011, this had risen to 37.6 years. One consequence of this process of ageing can be seen in the rising number of people living alone. In 2011, more than 188 000 Catholics aged 65 or more were living alone; 70 per cent of these were women. For Catholics aged 45 to 64, divorce or separation was the major reason why people lived alone; among older Catholics, it was widowhood.

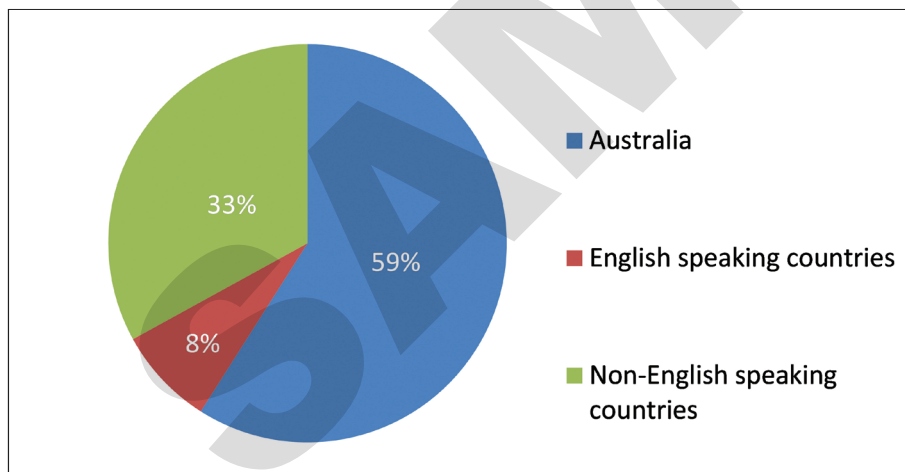
### MASS ATTENDERS

So far I have been describing the Catholic population, that is, those people who identify themselves, or are identified by their parents, as Catholics in the Australian Census. What about those Catholics who go to Mass on weekends? In 2011, the total number of people at Mass in Australia on a typical weekend was about 660 000, only about 12.2 per cent, or one-eighth, of the total number of Catholics. Most of those who do attend Mass, about 85 per cent of them, go every weekend, but the individuals who make up the other 15 per cent vary from week to week. Some are there two or three times a month, others only once a month, others less frequently still.

The percentage of Catholics who attend Mass every week has been falling more or less steadily since it peaked in the mid-1950's, when two-thirds or perhaps even three-quarters of all Catholics went to Mass every Sunday.

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Figure 2. Birthplace of Mass attenders, 2011



In general, Mass attenders are older, better educated, more likely to be female and to have been born overseas than the Catholic population as a whole. We know this from the National Church Life Survey. In 2011, all Mass attenders aged 15 and over in a national random sample of 217 Catholic parishes were invited to complete a questionnaire during Mass, at the time usually reserved for the homily. You could say that the survey was a different form of homily, where the people were invited to reflect on their faith and their involvement in the parish by answering the survey questions.

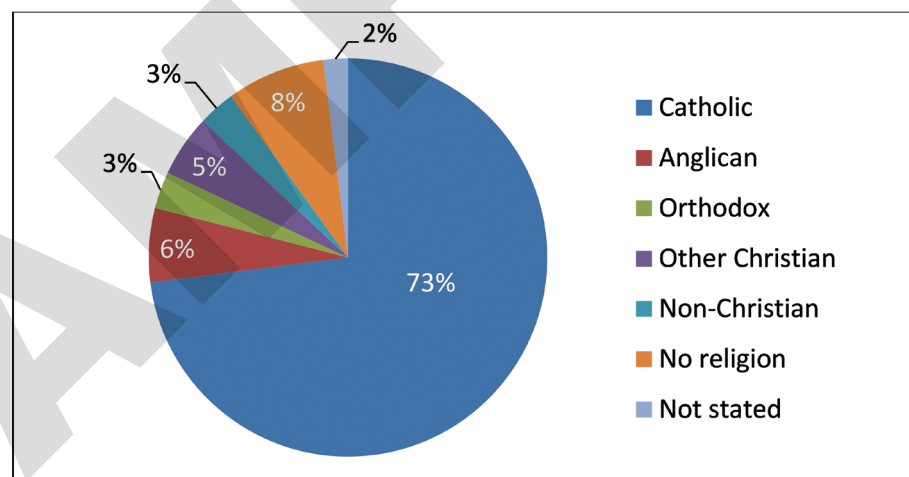
The results of the 2011 survey show that three-fifths (61 per cent) of Mass

attenders aged 15 and over were female, 34 per cent had a university degree, and 41 per cent were born overseas — eight per cent in English speaking countries and 33 per cent in non-English speaking countries. That is, people from non-English speaking countries make up a larger percentage of Mass attenders than they do of the Catholic population in general (see Figures 1 and 2). This is reflected in the fact that, every week around Australia, Mass is celebrated in more than 30 languages.

### CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Attending Sunday Mass is one way of being connected to the Church. Another way is through Catholic schools, either as a student, a parent or a teacher. The 2011 Census tells us that 272 542 Catholic children of primary school age attended Catholic schools, and 210 514 Catholic students of secondary school age attended Catholic schools. That means that 52.8 per cent of Catholic students attend Catholic schools – it's the same percentage for primary and secondary students. But it also means that almost half of all Catholic students do not attend Catholic schools. Most of these go to Government schools, although six per cent of Catholic primary students and ten per cent of Catholic secondary students attend other non-Government schools.

Figure 3. Religion of students at Catholic schools 2011 Australian Census



The Census also tells us that Catholic students account for 72.5 per cent of Catholic school enrolments. Another 14.9 per cent are from other Christian traditions, 2.6 per cent belong to a non-Christian religion and 7.8 per cent have no religion. Altogether, Catholic schools in 2011 educated more than 666 000 students, more than one-fifth (21.6 per cent) of all school students in Australia. So it's not just the Catholic community that benefits from the presence of Catholic schools in our society.

### PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS

We cannot speak of a profile of the Catholic community without mentioning our priests and religious sisters and brothers. In 2016, there are 1948 diocesan priests, 1003 priests belonging to religious orders such as



the Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans and Salesians, 4394 religious sisters, and 680 religious brothers. Like the Catholic population in general, our priests and religious have come from many different countries. Some came as children and grew up in Australia, but many more have come here as migrants or to serve the Church for a few years before returning to their home country. While a growing number of our diocesan priests come from India and the Philippines, priests and religious come from a wide variety of countries. A 2009 survey of Australia's religious orders found that 75 per cent of all sisters, brothers and religious order priests were born in Australia. The others came from, in diminishing order, Ireland, New Zealand, Vietnam, Italy, the Philippines, Great Britain, India, Malta and 67 other countries!

This profile shows that the Australian Catholic community is ethnically diverse, increasingly well-educated and getting older. This is true not only of the Catholic population as a whole, but also of Mass attending Catholics and priests and religious, who are declining in number. In the future, the Church in Australia will depend more than ever on the leadership offered by lay people.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the profile of the Catholic community of your parish? See the chapter 'Building a Parish Profile' above for some tools you can use to help you build up a profile of your parish.

What difference does building up a profile make to the way ministry and pastoral care are exercised in the parish?

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**The next chapters of this book discuss each of the eight measures of vitality. We begin with a chapter on planning that will allow you to organise and make use of all the resources you have collected from the previous two chapters. Adopting a planning approach to your parish lays a firm foundation for development in all of the other measures of vitality.**

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# SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH FORMATION

## ► Interview with Jasmine Hutchinson



*I had more experience and I started to attend Catholic Mass sometimes. My son decided to become a Catholic when he was in primary school and I talked to him about why. In my support of his decision, I looked more closely at Catholicism.*

One of the main tasks of parishes is to nurture people spiritually in their community and help them grow in their faith. But this is often a challenging task as needs vary from person to person. Parishes usually attend to the spiritual needs of their parishioners through prayer groups and bible study groups, talks, missions and retreats, Lent and Advent reflection days, engaging homilies at Mass and sacramental preparation courses. Some parishes offer more intensive counselling opportunities and formal academic courses. The RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults), in particular, is a special process of Christian formation offered to those who seek to become members of the Catholic Church.

Parishioners will often participate in one or more of these activities as regular members of a parish. But the vitality of a parish depends not only on what activities or programs are made available to the community but also on how effective these are in bringing about change in the lives of parishioners. Jasmine's story from Warnervale Parish in the Diocese of Broken Bay describes in great detail how growth in faith needs time to mature and deepen, how the parish can provide

### WARNERVALE PARISH

Total Population:  
22 432

Catholic Population:  
6138 (27.4%)

Median age of  
Catholics:  
37 years

Total Catholic families:  
2361

857 Catholics were  
born overseas

opportunities at many different levels for such processes to occur.

Growing up Anglican, Jasmine's introduction to the Catholic Church began with her first appointment as a teacher at a Catholic school. Her oldest son had also enrolled in a nearby Catholic school and was beginning to show an interest in the faith.

I had more experience and I started to attend Catholic Mass sometimes. My son decided to become a Catholic when he was in primary school and I talked to him about why. In my support of his decision, I looked more closely at Catholicism.

As the seeds of the faith began to grow, Jasmine continued to be a part of Mary MacKillop Parish and participate in community life through the school. In the years ahead, when her second child was born, she decided to get him baptised in the parish.

We went to the Baptism information night where we found out that one of us needed to be Catholic for him to be baptised. At that stage I really loved the MacKillop community so I said, 'OK, let's do this.' I was already part of the community anyway. My older son was already a Catholic.

But coming to the Catholic faith wasn't an easy road. Jasmine found a patient listener and guide in

Fr John Hodgson who steered her through the process of spiritual discovery as she discerned her path.

Because I had been previously married I had to go through the annulment process so it was quite a journey. Fr John and I had a few interesting discussions along the way. I wasn't passive in my journey; I had lots of questions about the differences coming from the way in which I had been brought up.

Fr John's style of running the RCIA on a personal, needs-based manner, giving people the time to work at the pace that the Spirit calls them, suited Jasmine well.

Fr John took me through the RCIA and he was wonderfully pastoral. I appreciated his respect of my opinions and the rigorous discussions we had. I never hesitated to give him a call if I needed guidance. He supported me through the annulment every step of the way. It took a year.

Jasmine's faith has grown and deepened through the years through her participation in various groups and activities in the parish.

The parish nurtures my spirituality. Coming to the liturgy is the most important. I come to the 8 am Sunday Mass, a quiet, reflective Mass which I like. This is how I nurture my faith. I think it's important that parents nourish their own faith in order to help



*Faith becomes operative in the Christian on the basis of the gift received, the love which attracts our hearts to Christ ... For those who have been transformed in this way, a new way of seeing opens up, faith becomes light for their eyes.*

*Pope Francis,  
Lumen Fidei n. 22*

their children. Up until last year I was attending the Break Open the Gospel group. This was wonderful. Now, studying for my Masters and teaching full time I couldn't keep that up, but if you want to be involved there is something for everyone.

She uses her teaching to share her faith story with others, although she finds that impressing young people can be hard.

Last year I taught a lot of RE in the College. I found the resistance of the kids difficult. I found that they loved hearing about your own background, your own journey. The biggest challenge the parish faces is the youth aspect, getting youth involved. A big part is getting parents on board for the lack of interest from the kids comes from the parents. A lot of parents in the parish are not practising Catholics.

She loves the effort the parish is putting into renewing their youth group and hopes that they will be able to inspire and nurture many young people so that her son and others like him may have the same wonderful experiences that she does.

The parish works hard for youth. My 4 year- old son loves coming to the parish. There is a community here and the sense of nourishment and welcoming for me and my family has been great. My son is sixteen. He has a sense of belonging from the welcome and approaches he has received. But it's hard for him to go to church when there are no other young people there. He doesn't experience the sense of community with his peers that other age groups in the parish have. Two things I experienced and enjoyed while growing up was that I could see my friends and play football while mum and dad had a 'cuppa' after church every week. For me it was all about community and friendship then.

Mary Mackillop Parish and the people in the community have made a big impact on Jasmine's life:

Belonging to this parish has given me the spiritual nourishment I didn't have. My husband says that when I come back from Mass there is a centeredness to me. I equate this to spiritual nourishment, a sense of being part of community. It helps me in my faith.

Jasmine works as a teacher at Mary MacKillop College and continues to inspire others with her story.

## REFLECTION

1. How did you feel about Jasmine's story?
2. Have you had experiences similar to Jasmine?
3. Does your parish meet your spiritual needs?
4. Where do you go to find spiritual nourishment?
5. When was the last time you spent time learning more about your faith?
  - Where did this happen?
  - What resources did you make use of?
  - How did this help you?

## SCRIPTURE

***Romans 5: 1-5***

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.



# RESOURCES

## BOOKS

Burns, Robert. *Catholic Spirituality and Prayer in the Secular City*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008, 8.

Cunningham, Lawrence. 'Catholic Spirituality: What Does It Mean Today?' *Commonweal* 133, no. 4 (24 February 2006): 11-15.

Griffith, Colleen ed. *Catholic Spiritual Practices: A Treasury of Old and New*. Paraclete Press, 2012.

Pope John Paul II. *The Church: Mystery, Sacrament, Community*. Vol. 4. Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1998.

## OFFICIAL CHURCH DOCUMENTS

Pope Francis. *Lumen Fidei*. Encyclical Letter, 2013.

*Christifideles Laici*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness John Paul II, 1988.

*Apostolicam Actuositatem*. Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 1965.

## OTHER RESOURCES

*Building Stronger Parishes Report, 3: Spirituality and Faith Formation* – ACBC Pastoral Research Office, 2015.

## WEBSITES

<http://www.evangeliseaustralia.com/resources.html>



# SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH FORMATION WORKSHEET

## REVIEW

Below is a list of spirituality or faith formation resources that are commonly found in most parishes. Review each one based your own parish's resources. Write your comments in the spaces provided. Use separate sheets if needed.

LIST OF RESOURCES	Do you have this group/ activity in your parish? Answer Yes/No	Who is in charge/the leader of this group/ activity?	Who usually attends this group/activity? (E.g. youth, adults, older people)	Is this group/ activity a source of vitality or does it need improvement? Answer Yes/No	What might help to improve/ strengthen this group/activity?
Prayer Group 1: [Name]_____					
Prayer Group 2: [Name]_____					
Prayer Group 3: [Name]_____					
Eucharistic Adoration					
Sacramental Preparation for Baptism					
Sacramental Preparation for Confirmation					
Sacramental Preparation for First Eucharist					
Marriage Preparation					
RCIA					
Parish Mission					
Bible Study Group					
Meditation Group					
Faith Formation Talks					
Retreats					
Special Activities for Lent					
Special Activities for Advent					
Ethnic Prayer Group/ Activity/Program					
Other Group/Activity: [Name]_____					
Other Group/Activity: [Name]_____					
Academic/Formal Faith Formation Courses e.g. CAFÉ, ALPHA					

Faith Formation Programs for Married Couples					
Parish Library Resources					
Online Resources on Parish Website					

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Based on your answers above, reflect on the following questions:

1. Look at your answers in Column 2. Are there any resources that your parish does not have and which you would like to start in the parish? Name them.

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2. Look at your answers in Column 5. Are there any resources that need to be improved? List three groups/activities that need the most improvement and rank them in order of priority.

- a. -----
- b. -----
- c. -----

3. Look at your responses in Column 3. Are there a variety of people organizing these activities/groups? Yes/No

Is there any other group in the parish that is not listed in Column 3 that might have the capabilities and resources to provide programs or activities to meet the spiritual/faith formation needs of people in your community?

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4. Look at your responses in Column 4. Who are the people that are the usual focus of spiritual/faith-formation activities in the parish?

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5. Who is missing? (E.g. young adults, home-

bound, single parents, newly-married?)

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6. What additional resources/activities might you have to look for to address the needs of these groups?

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## PLANNING

Pick one task from your reflections above as your main priority to begin working on immediately. (E.g. starting a new group, introducing a new faith-formation program in the parish or improving resources for a particular group/activity.)

Write this out as your goal in the attached **Action Plan** and fill in the steps you need to achieve this goal.

## MORE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/FUTURE PLANNING

1. Does your parish have a spirituality centre? For example, a religious community or a diocesan prayer centre. What resources do these centres provide?
2. If you do not have one within your parish boundaries, is there one in a nearby parish whose resources you might be able to access?
3. What efforts are being made to discover spirituality or faith formation resources that might be available through the following:
  - other parishes (Australian and overseas)?
  - your diocese?
  - new ecclesial movements?
4. Which of these might be helpful for your parish?

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# ACTION PLAN—SPIRITUALITY AND FAITH FORMATION

Use this Action Plan to identify specific steps you need to take to achieve the tasks you have highlighted in response to the questions in the planning section. Tip: make each action step as simple and specific as possible, breaking down complex actions into single steps.

Parish name: \_\_\_\_\_

Person completing this worksheet \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

YOUR GOALS: \_\_\_\_\_

Action Step What needs to be done?	Responsible Person Who will complete this step?	Timeline When should this step be completed?	Necessary Resources What do you need to complete this step? Where would you find them? Who can you ask for help?	Potential Challenges Are there any challenges that may impede completion? How will you overcome them?	Result Was this step successfully completed? Were any new steps identified in the process?