

★ Pointers ★

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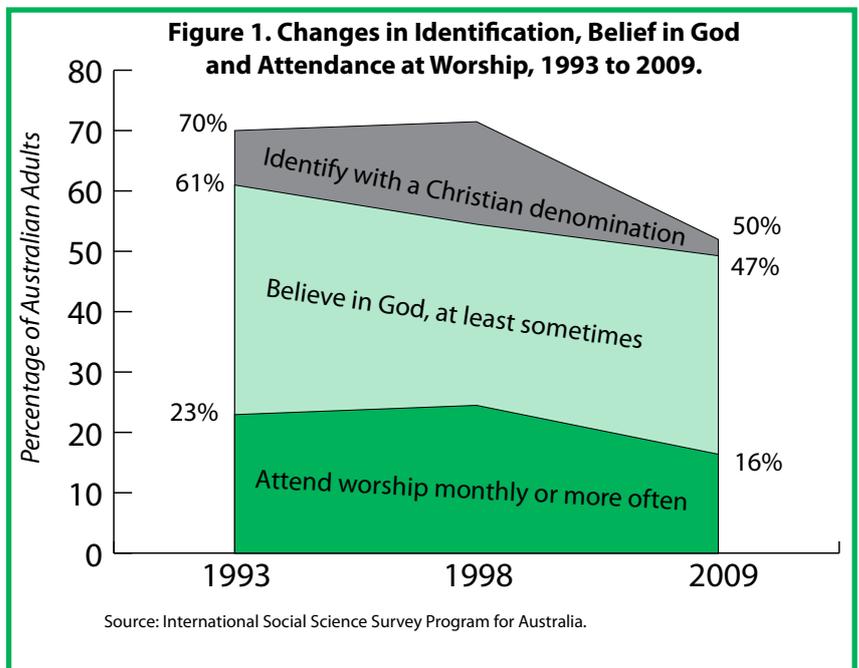
Are Australians ‘Losing their Religion’?

New data, gathered late 2009, provides a new comprehensive picture of the religious faith and spirituality of Australians. The data is part of the International Social Science Survey (ISSP) program and involved surveys of 1718 adult Australians. It is the best picture we have had of the religious faith and spirituality of the Australian population since the Wellbeing and Security Survey of 2002 conducted by Edith Cowan University, Deakin University, Anglicare and NCLS Research. Indeed, this new survey repeats a range of questions asked in 1993 and 1999, giving us an excellent picture of changes over time.

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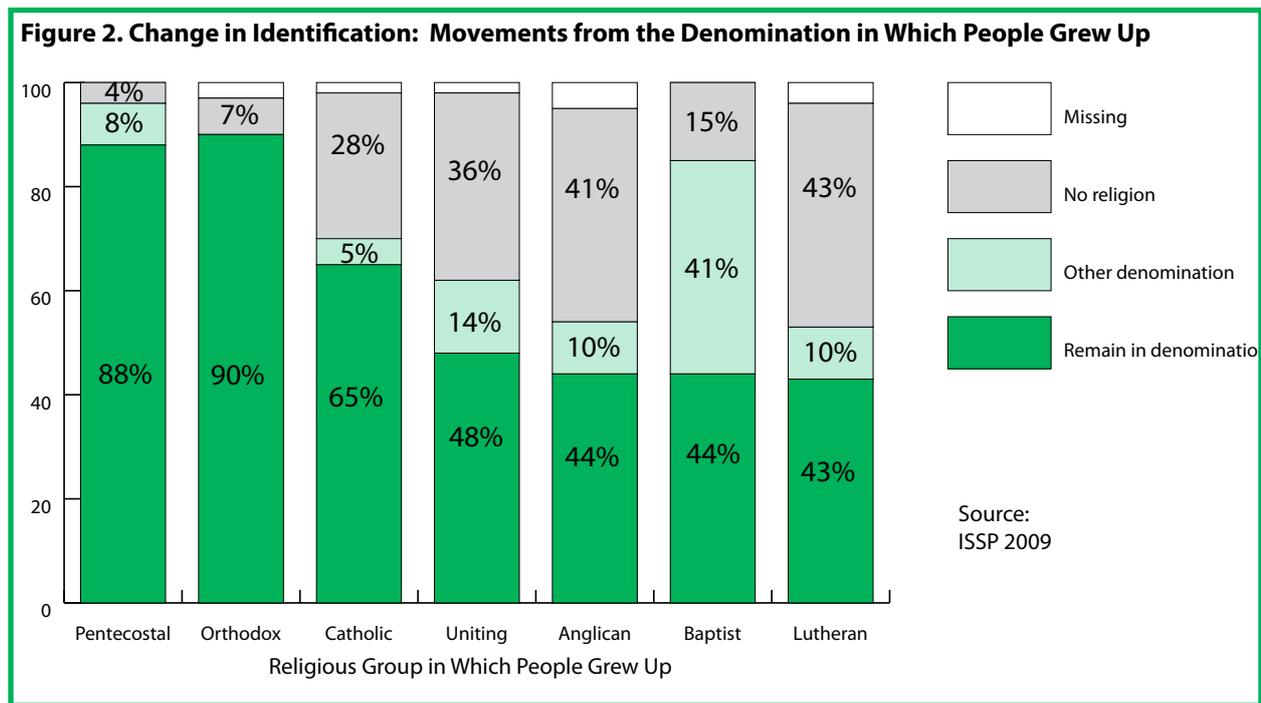
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The major finding is that, among Australians, most measures of religion show significant decline. Attendance at religious services (at least once a month) declined from 23 per cent to 16 per cent of the population between 1993 and 2009. Belief in God (including those who believe but have doubts, and those who believe sometimes) has fallen from 61 per cent of the population to 47 per cent over that same period. Less than one quarter of the Australian population now say they believe in God and have no doubts about it. Identification with a Christian denomination has fallen from 70 per cent in 1993 to 50 per cent of the population.



Charting the faith of Australians

The Christian Research Association was formed in 1985 to serve the churches of Australia. Its task is to provide up-to-date and reliable information about religious faith and church life in Australia. The following organisations are members of its board: the Anglican Dioceses of Brisbane and Melbourne, Baptist Union of Victoria, ACCESS ministries, Converge (International), Lutheran Church Australia, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Prahran Mission, Salvation Army (Southern Territory), Seventh-day Adventists, and the Uniting Church Synods of New South Wales and Victoria.
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Correspondingly, there has been a large increase in those claiming to have ‘no religion’: up from 27 per cent of the population in 1993 to 43 per cent in 2009. This figure is much higher than the figure of 19 per cent who said they had no religion in the 2006 Census as well as previous ISSP surveys. The difference is partly due to the fact that the 2009 ISSP asked people first if they had a religion before asking what was their religion. In other surveys and the Census, people have simply chosen their religion from a list in which ‘no religion’ was an option. Further, the Census question is marked as optional and a lot of people choose not to respond to the Census question about religion (11.2 per cent compared with around 3 per cent in the ISSP surveys). The other difference is that the surveys tend to reflect better where people feel themselves to be because they ask a distinct question about what religion they were raised in. Many people respond to the Census in terms of the heritage of the family or their personal background rather than their present sense of identification. The survey provides a more accurate picture of how many Australians currently regard themselves as having ‘no religion’.

It is unlikely these differences in ways of asking the question account fully for the change. The responses suggest more Australians in 2009 see themselves as having ‘no religion’.

Having ‘no religion’ does not mean that people have rejected all sense of the transcendent. The ISSP 2009 survey shows that of those who claimed ‘no religion’, just one-third (33%) said they did not believe in God, another 25 per cent said they did not know whether there was a God or not. Around 40 per cent of the ‘no religion’ group felt there was something beyond: a higher power (29%) or perhaps God (12%), although only 2 per cent of the group said they believed in God and had no doubts.

The ISSP (2009) survey allows us to look at the denominations from which come those who now describe themselves as having no religion. The data is shown in Figure 2. Large proportions of people from most denominations, apart from the Orthodox and Pentecostals, have ‘lost their religion’. More than 40 per cent of those who grew up in the Anglican and Lutheran churches now describe themselves as having

‘no religion’, as do 36 per cent of those who grew up as Uniting and 28 per cent who grew up as Catholics.

The small numbers who have moved out of the Orthodox Church shows the continuing strength of the Orthodox communities, probably partly because of their links to particular ethnicities. Few people have moved out of the Pentecostal churches. The data does not support the frequent suggestion that many Pentecostals only stay within their denominations for a short period of time.

It is evident that identification with and involvement in religious institutions has declined at a faster rate than religious belief. Figure 1 shows that belief in God declined between 1993 and 2009, but not as fast as identification with a Christian denomination. Table 1 shows decline in several Christian beliefs: life after death, heaven, hell and miracles. However, the decline in belief is of much smaller magnitude than identification with a Christian denomination.

I have argued in the past that the major reason for decline

Table 1. Change in Affirmation of Various Beliefs among Australian Adults

Belief	Percentage Affirming in 1993	Percentage Affirming in 2009
Life after death	52	46
Heaven	51	44
Hell	32	29
Miracles	41	34

Source: ISSP 1993 and 2009.

in religious faith has to do with the cultural changes that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Hughes 1994). This interpretation has been based on the differences in the various measures of religion between older and younger generations such as that shown in Figure 3. In 1993, there was a significant gap between identification rates between those over 50 years and those under 50 years of age. Sixteen years later, the gap is between those who are over 66 years and those under 66.

The generation that grew up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, often referred to as the 'Boomer generation', rejected the importance of tradition. It felt no sense of duty in relation to religion. Religion changed from being part of the heritage and identity of many people to being a lifestyle option.

At that time, many people rejected religion as having no personal significance. The Boomers are now entering the age of retirement, and there is no sign of them going back to religion or the church.

Generational changes are insufficient to explain the trends evident in Figure 3. In every age group, there has been a decline in religious identification, particularly in the generations which were under the age of 60 in 2009. Throughout society, among people of all age groups, there has been a movement away from religion.

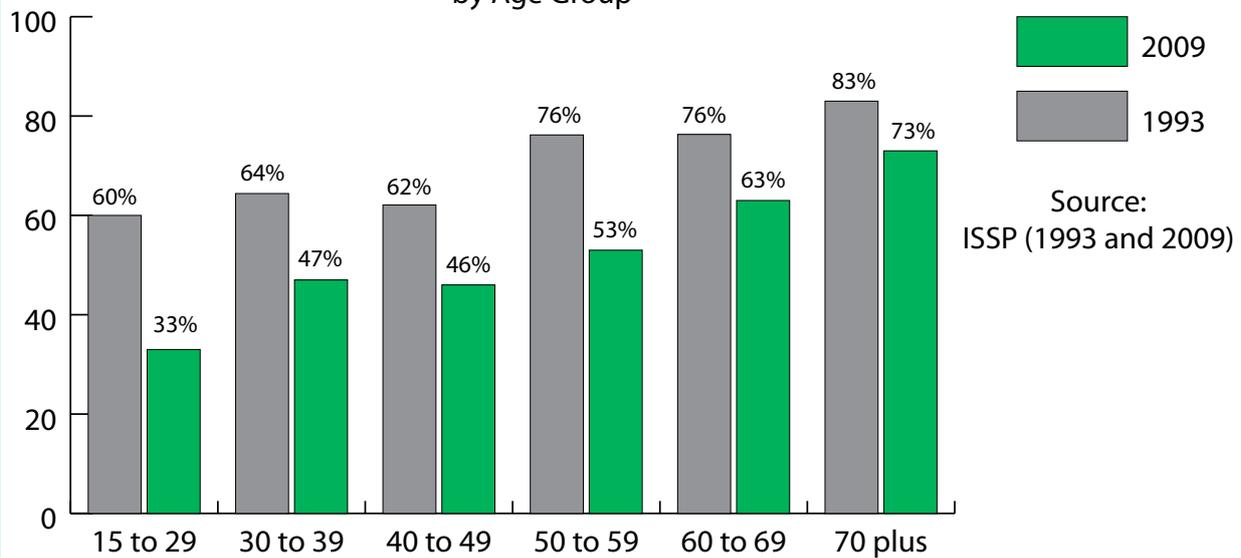
Does this change mean that people are becoming more spiritual while they are becoming less religious? Is declining identification with religious institutions leading to the pursuit of spirituality in other

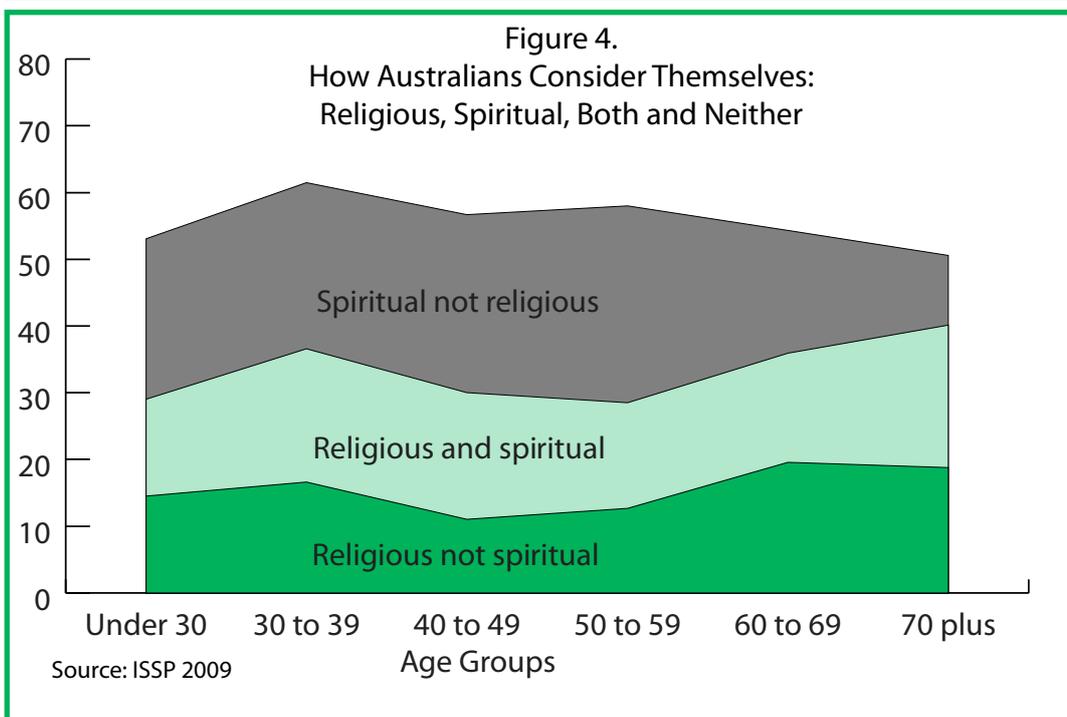
ways?

No questions were asked explicitly about spirituality in the 1993 and 1999 ISSP surveys. However, in the 2009 ISSP survey, a question was asked about whether people considered themselves religious and/or spiritual. The following responses were received:

- 17% said they both followed a religion and considered themselves to be spiritual;
- 16% said they followed a religion, but did not consider themselves spiritual;
- 23% said they did not follow a religion, but considered themselves to be spiritual;
- 30% said they did not follow a religion, and did not consider themselves to be spiritual; and
- 13% said they could not choose.

Figure 3. Identification with a Christian Denomination, 1993 and 2009 by Age Group





very thorough and careful analysis of unbelief in Australia. He looks at the historical trends and contemporary situation. He engages both the wider culture and those individuals who have become spokespeople for the 'unbelievers'.

In other words, 40 per cent indicated they were spiritual, and, of these, a little less than half also said they were religious. In the Wellbeing and Security Survey (2002) people were asked to rate how spiritual they were on a scale of 0 to 10. On that scale, 17 per cent scored themselves at 8 or higher on the scale of spirituality, and another 30 per cent scored themselves between 5 and 7. In other words, 47 per cent indicated they were quite spiritual.

In the Wellbeing and Security Survey (2002), most people who said they were spiritual also indicated they were religious. Just 9 per cent indicated they were spiritual but not religious. While it is not possible to make exact comparisons because of the different ways the questions have been asked, the 2009 ISSP results suggest that a much higher proportion of the population now consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious (23%) of the population.

Figure 4 shows how the proportions of those who consider themselves religious, spiritual and both are spread among the different age groups. While the language of

'religion' is more popular among those who are aged 60 years and over, the language of spirituality certainly dominates those who are under 60 years of age.

When one adds together those who are religious and those who are spiritual, the overall proportions do not vary greatly from one age group to another. Indeed, the highest proportions of those who are religious and are spiritual are found among those who are in their 30s. The proportion who are under 30 is not very different from those who are aged 70 years and over.

Thus, while Australians appear to be 'losing their religion', they are not losing their spirituality. There is little evidence here of a major increase in secularism, understood as a rejection of all sense of transcendence. Rather, the evidence points to a rejection of religious organisations (a topic explored in two further articles in this edition of *Pointers*).

Losing My Religion: Unbelief in Australia

Tom Frame's recent tome on unbelief in Australia is timely. In many respects, the book provides a

Rightly, Frame distinguishes between a variety of 'unbelievers'. 'Non-believers', he says, is a position of neutrality in which a decision has not been made about belief. In contrast, 'disbelief' is based on a decision that belief is not tenable for one reason or another. 'Unbelief' is a default position between them. The unbeliever, Frame says, has not rejected belief, but has not felt there is sufficient evidence to believe (p.21).

Frame also correctly notes that behind the figures in surveys and the Census lie a range of attitudes and behaviours. 'No religion' in the Census does not necessarily imply atheism, agnosticism, humanism or rationalism (p.98).

Nevertheless, Frame believes it is increasingly difficult to hold to religious beliefs in Australia and he suggests a variety of reason for the growth of 'unbelief'. He looks at changes in philosophy and the rise of atheistic philosophies such as that of Nietzsche. Perhaps, more persuasive has been the rise in the perception that science explains the world around us and it is not necessary to postulate the existence of God. Over the

last century, Darwin's theories of evolution have challenged the notion that human beings were created by an act of divine intervention.

However, Frame feels that confusion and incoherence in the church must also be blamed for 'unbelief' in Australia. The rise in secular and liberal theologies such as those of Bishops John Robinson and Spong, for example, he says, has contributed to the Australian church proclaiming its faith in a confused and often incoherent way.

Frame takes seriously the writings and thoughts of some major international figures in the rejection of religious faith, including Richard Dawkins. He also reflects on some of the Australians who have been at the forefront of the rejection of belief, including Phillip Adams and Terry Lane.

Frame describes those who 'disbelieve in God' as positive atheists. These people are committed to the rejection of God. This is an ideological stance and one that is held by comparatively few people in Australia.

Frame sees the decline of belief as beginning in Australia in the late 1950s. He sees the major reasons for this as 'problematic elements of Christian doctrine and the conduct of the churches'. Specifically, he names:

1. the growth of alternative community organisations and clubs;
2. the collapse of the Sunday School movement and of many youth groups;
3. the end of the disconnection between religious profession and social respectability;
4. the demise of Sunday as a day of rest;

5. the increase in familiarity with alternative views of the natural world and human life;

6. open, empathetic discussion of atheism and agnosticism;

7. the church being out of touch with scientific thinking and cultural mores; and

8. the inability of the church to speak on compelling issues with a clear voice (pp.292-3).

This is the area in which Frame's thesis is probably weakest. It is not at all clear whether all of the above elements were causes of the decline or results of it. Did the collapse of the Sunday School movement contribute to the decline of belief, or was it the result of that decline? Did the increase in familiarity with alternative views of the natural world occur because people were moving away from dependence on Christian views, or was it a cause of changing ideas?

The decline in religion took place at a similar time as decline in many other organisations and traditions, including membership of both political parties and unions. It took place as many people began to change their views about the traditions of marriage and their attitudes to divorce. The changes in attitudes to the churches and Christian faith that Frame notes are probably much more deeply embedded in social and cultural changes than Frame envisages. The changes in attitudes to belief are rooted partly in the development of the individualistic and consumeristic attitudes of post-modernity and probably have part of their origins in changes in child-rearing practices. From the late 1960s, parents focussed on their children needs rather than the wellbeing of the whole family. From their earliest years, children were asked what they, as individuals, wanted, rather than adjusting themselves to their

parents' decisions, and the family's needs as a whole.

The contemporary rise in 'no religion' is evident in the ISSP 2009 results also appears to be more about a decline in confidence in religious organisations than a rejection of spirituality or even a rejection of Christian belief. Frame does not give attention to the fact that some people are replacing religion with spirituality. However vague this sense of spirituality is, it is indicative that religion is not simply being replaced by scientific or rationalistic views, nor by atheism and agnosticism.

Whatever the reasons for the change, or, for that matter, the nature of the change in religion / spirituality, Frame argues persuasively for a pluralistic society, which is 'secular' in as far as it is open and inclusive. Frame says:

The genuine secular state will respect the rights of citizens to hold and profess a range of views in their own homes or in private gatherings. The citizens must be able to discuss and even propagate their views in public unless and until they attempt to impose them on others by coercion or try to further their aims by illegal means. ... The secular state must not, of course, discriminate between those with religious views and those with none (p.284).

What is clear is that the churches of Australia must come to terms with the changes which have occurred in Australian society. Frame suggests that 'by 2025 the Christian Church will be a marginal player in Australian life with a few surviving remnants' (p.298).

He suggests that Christian affiliation is likely to drop below 50 per cent around 2030 (p.299). This data from the ISSP suggests that Australia is at that point now.

The churches do not have 20 years to adjust to this reality.

As Frame says, however, 'Australia will never be free of religious discord' (p.300). There will always be many people who hold religious views of various kinds. There will also be many people who reject religion. At the moment, around 16 per cent of Australians are religious and involved in religious organisations. At the other end of the scale, about 15 per cent are atheists. In between lie about 70 per cent of Australians who have varying levels of belief in something beyond and believing that, to some degree, religion or spirituality underlies some of their values.

While, on present trends it is unlikely there will be a revival of religious interest in the near future, it is dangerous to be dogmatic about the future. Will people in Australia and other parts of the Western world come round to the point recently reached by many people in Communist parts of the world, that an atheistic stance does not necessarily bring social solidarity nor the personal wellbeing for which they had hoped?

Philip Hughes

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Source of ISSP data: Evans, A. (2009) AuSSA_A_religiosity.sav (computer file), *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*, Australian Social Science Data Archives, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Factors in Declining Church Attendance

The number of Australians attending church services is declining. Data from the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme) shows that, between 1993 and 2009, the proportion of Australians attending a service of worship monthly or more often dropped from 23 per cent to 16 per cent. Occasional attendance (less than monthly) also dropped from 42 per cent to 36 per cent. In turn, the proportion claiming they never attend services of worship rose from 33 per cent to 43 per cent. What might be some of the underlying factors and transitions influencing these trends?

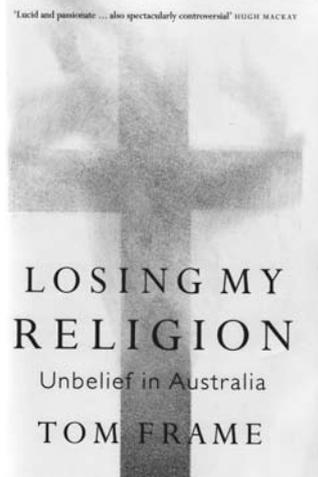
The Decline

Tiffen and Gittens (2004) say the current religious landscape in Australia is one of gradual degeneration. Religious traditions and practices are less frequently observed, and more often neglected or declined outright as imbuing and offering meaningful expressions of existence, in terms of beliefs, experiences, interests and values. Between 1993 and 2009, the percentage of the population saying they had 'no religion' rose from 27 per cent to 43 per cent, and the rate of identification with a Christian denomination declined from 70 per cent to 50 per cent.

Of those who identified with a Christian denomination, just over a quarter attend church services monthly or more often (29%), while the remainder only attend occasionally (44%) or not at all (27%). This indicates that identification, whether meaning membership or association, does not necessarily lead to regular attendance, and occasional or rare attendance is more common.

However, this varied considerably from one denomination to another. More than 60 per cent of Baptists and Pentecostals attend monthly or more often. In comparison, more than 75 per cent of Anglicans, Presbyterians, Uniting and Orthodox attend just a few times a year, as do more than 60 per cent of Lutherans and Catholics. This reflects the nature and extent of the personal commitment called for in charismatic denominations. In comparison, traditional denominations have a large fringe group attending occasionally or rarely.

Among those who claimed 'no religion', more than three-quarters never attend services of worship (78%), just under a quarter attend occasionally (22%) including a few who attend frequently. This indicates that the claim of no religion does not necessarily lead to no attendance. In addition, 'no religion' does not necessarily mean no spirituality, in terms of belief in something beyond. Among those who claimed 'no religion', close to 40 per cent believe in God with certainty or some doubt (12%), or believe in a 'Higher Power' (29%). While these people may not feel comfortable with the word 'religion', with its traditional or institutional overtones, it is evident that a proportion have some form of personal faith or openness to the spiritual dimension of life.



Overall, between 1991 and 2009, belief in God with certainty or some doubt dropped from 61 per cent to 47 per cent, and belief in a 'Higher Power' rose from 17 per cent to 20 per cent. This may indicate declining confidence in the Christian account of 'something beyond'. The exchange of names from 'God' to 'Higher Power' suggests a greater vagueness about what is beyond. Around two in three people continue to profess belief in God or a Higher Power. On the other hand, non-belief rose significantly from 9 per cent to 16 per cent, and 'don't know' rose slightly from 12 per cent to 15 per cent. For some, there has been a transition to outright rejection of any kind of transcendence.

Among those who specified belief in God with certainty or some doubt, almost a third attend at least monthly (31%), while two-thirds attend occasionally (46%) or not at all (23%). In comparison, among those who specified belief in a 'Higher Power', only 5 per cent attend monthly or more often, while the majority attend just once or twice a year (32%) or not at all (63%). This indicates that a level of

belief in God does not necessarily lead to attendance, and that belief in a 'Higher Power' is even less likely to result in attendance. Among those who specified non-belief or 'don't know' most never attend (79%), and others attend very occasionally. This occasional attendance may reflect in some an openness to exploring existence and experience. It may also point to attendance out of interest, or at significant festivals, such as Christmas and Easter with friends and family.

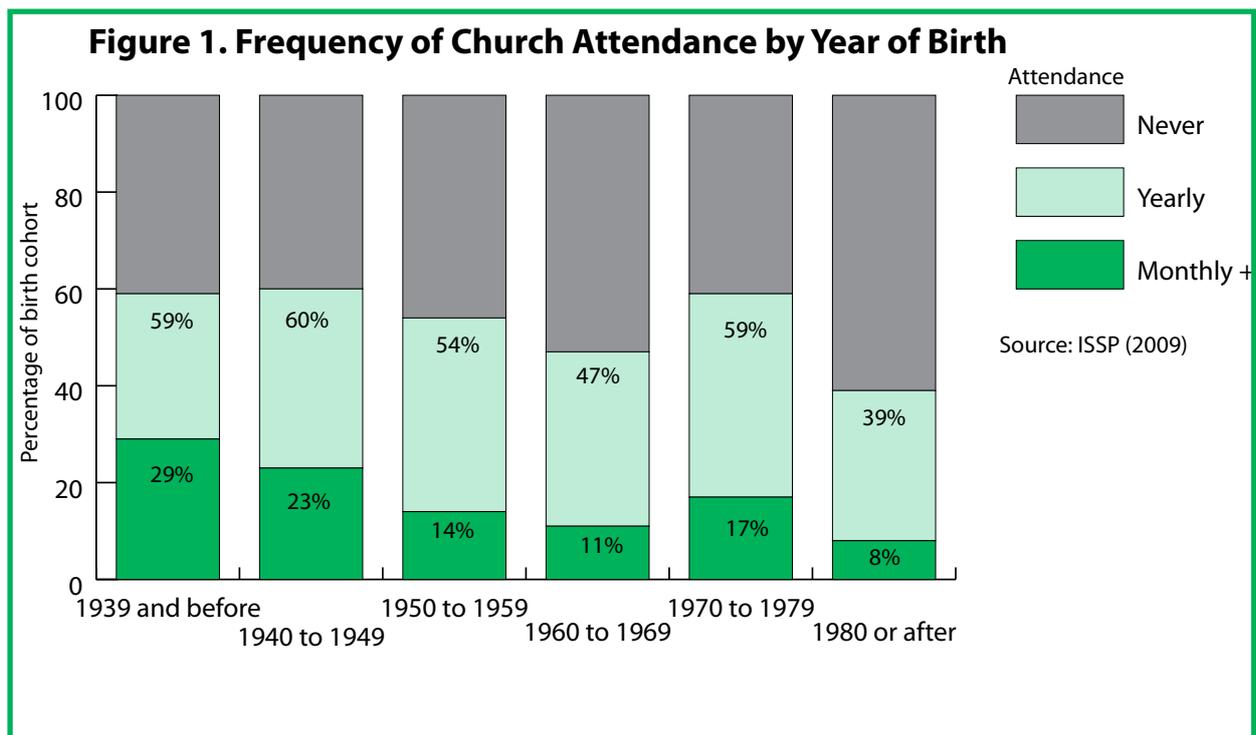
Generational Changes

The beliefs, interests, experiences and values, and thus the traditions and practices, of one generation are not necessarily those of the next (Graetz and McAllister, 2004). As shown in Figure 1, among those born prior to World War II, almost three in ten currently attend church monthly or more often (28%). Among those born after World War II, around half of that proportion attend, with less than one in ten of those born in 1980 or after attending monthly or more often.

Thus, across the generations there is a clear declining trend for regular attendance (monthly or more often) from 29 per cent to 8 per cent. Occasional attendance has risen a little as has the proportion indicating they never attend (from 30% to 42%).

When asked about their church attendance as children (aged 11-12 years), each generation reported much higher rates of frequent attendance. At age 11-12, more than half (59%) of all Australians born before World War II attended church monthly or more often. Similar proportions of those born in the 1950s (61%) also reported that they attended the church frequently as children.

Attendance as children of later generations was significantly less. Forty-seven per cent of those born in the 1970s attended as children, and less (28%) of those born in the 1980s. This shows the incidental or direct rejection of religion and church among many of the Baby Boomer generation. It reflects the dramatic cultural changes of the late 1960s and 1970s, including the rise in feminism, the increased



secular attitudes, and the change in social values. However, the overall decline in attendance, which has its roots in those changes, has continued through successive generations.

Life-cycle factors may also have an impact. Old age and related issues, such as ill-health and reduced mobility, affect the ability of some to attend church services. On the other hand, the settling affects of early family life and the desire for children to have some religious or spiritual socialisation may be reflected in the comparatively high occasional attendance of those born between 1970-1979. To some extent, generational and relational factors and changes, such as aging, upbringing, and life stage mould church attendance trends. However, broader social transitions underlie these and other associated trends.

Social Changes

The gradual shift from local communities to regional communities and a more individualistic way of life, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries, has impacted on the interrelation between church and society. Historically, churches were constructed at the centres of small communities, often within walking distance (Hughes, 2007). These local churches were to guide, serve and support community life and its subgroups. In many Christian denominations this important notion of function and responsibility remains although the landscape has vastly changed.

These small communities grew in population, industry and infrastructure, and became suburbs in metropolitan areas and then larger regional centres. As these changes occurred, the notion of churches as central to communal

life was displaced (Bouma, 2006). A more individualistic approach to life emerged, which arguably prevails today. This approach prioritises individual interests, needs, values and preferences, and prizes personal success and gratification. These are pursued through competition and consumerism, which are attained through technology (computers, telecommunications) and globalising mediums (the Internet, television, travel).

In conjunction with this change has been a gradual shift from a greater emphasis on reason and structure in life to an emphasis on experience (Bouma, 2006). Historically, churches have embodied the rational and structured approach to life through the construction of pervasive, visible authorities (officials, leadership, regulations) and dominant, community-oriented practices (the Eucharist, confession, proclamation). These have directed the faith, thought and behaviour of members within the institution and in relation to the world (thus, their spirituality, beliefs, interests, values and activities). Again, in many Christian denominations such authority, structure and ordering remain. However, broader attitudes to life have changed.

The emphasis on experience prioritises an internal locus of control, where beliefs, interests, needs and values are located within and derive from the experiences and emotions of the individual. These encompass the senses (touch, sight, taste, smell, hearing) and intuition (feelings) (Bouma, 2006).

Overall, these shifts in broader society have resulted in a growing sense of individual decision-making based on experiences and emotions, rather than communal

and institutional regulation or instruction based on external authority and tradition. As such, church, religion and spirituality have become objects of personal appraisal and choice. Religious affiliation and spiritual belief, together with their practice, can be chosen or declined, observed or neglected at will by the individual, based on whether these add to one's experience, or contribute to a feeling of gratification and well being.

Many younger people approach religion and spirituality as commodities that can be used and let go whenever needs, interests, emotions or values require (Graetz and McAllister, 2004). In the 1998 Australian Community Survey, infrequent and non-attendees identified several significant reasons for not attending church. The top five reasons for not attending were: 'boring or unfulfilling church services' (42%), 'beliefs of the churches' (35%), 'churches' moral views' (35%), 'no need to go to church' (34%), 'prefer to do other things' (31%) (Bellamy et al, 2002). These are arguably underpinned by and reflect broader societal transitions, in that they are indicative of individual appraisals and choices. The primary factors identified as impacting on church attendance include the form of church services and moral/ethical views.

The perception of church services as 'boring or unfulfilling' may refer to the style of liturgy and expression of faith, and a difficulty connecting with and making sense of the layered and embedded language, actions and symbols within, for example, hymns, the Eucharist, Bible readings and preaching. Bouma (2004) also suggests that these are often underpinned by a propositional

theology (intellectual, rational), which is detached from everyday and individual beliefs, thoughts and interests. Thus, church services may not always be providing a space within which people feel that their sense of faith, spirituality and 'being' in the world is adequately expressed, nourished or developed.

That which is sensory, experiential, down-to-earth and stimulating, and which focuses on personal wholeness and wellbeing in relation to others is often highly valued in contemporary society. Therefore, there is a need for church, through its many forms of activity and ministry (services, schools, chapels, hospitals), to express the paramount message of grace in language, actions and symbols which embody these qualities. For example, through sensory methods, the use of technology, various music and story-telling, churches must address contemporary human experience, perceive how lives are composed and managed (in relationships, work/study, recreation), and provide spaces where these can be enhanced (Hughes, 2007).

Changes in Values

'Moral values', as another reason for non attendance, may point to a perceived gap between the pertinent moral issues addressed by civil society and the church, and their official resolutions. Churches have an important role in ethical discussions. However, the ways in which discussions have been undertaken and the decisions of churches have perhaps led to disengagement, and therefore, decline in attendance. In relation to divorce, abortion, homosexuality and women's rights, churches often entered broader dialogue late, and, following lengthy in-house

debates, often made decisions quite different from public policies (Graetz and McAllister, 2004).

For example, abortion remains perceived as tantamount to murder in the Catholic Church, while many Protestant denominations have acknowledged abortion as being acceptable in some circumstances. The ordination of women is encouraged in many Protestant denominations, but disavowed by others, including the Catholic Church, despite significant movements towards the equality of women in broader society. In addition, while many churches and denominations continue to disavow homosexuality or debate their official position, society has largely moved on and is engaging with other issues related to sexuality and gender, such as trans-sexual and gender variant rights. This ethical plurality between and within religious institutions may be perceived by the wider population as confusing. The stance of some churches on some issues contributes to criticism and the perception that the church is irrelevant to contemporary society.

Conclusion

In summary, there is no one factor that accounts for declining attendance. Rather this trend seems to be occurring because of an interplay of factors (religiosity, spirituality, ageing, upbringing, life stage), underpinned and shaped by particular societal transitions (individualism, experientialism). Within Australian society, therefore, increasing numbers have no religion or affiliation, no spiritual belief and never attend church services, and those numbers that do engage are gradually declining. Those who do not attend or are attending less frequently seem to be measuring

what churches offer against their individual beliefs, values, interests, needs, experiences and emotions. Churches must endeavour to further understand the whole context in which they are situated. They need to work towards developing a diversity of activities and modes of expression that relate to and enhance personal existence and 'being' in the world, in relation to the created order, universe and transcendent.

Claire Pickering

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Power and the Churches

In the 2009 International Social Science Program (ISSP) survey just released, 42 per cent of Australian respondents indicated that churches and religious organisations had ‘about the right amount of power’ and 37 per cent indicated they had ‘too much power’ or ‘far too much power’. In addition, 78 per cent ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that religious leaders should not influence how people voted, and 71 per cent that religious leaders should not influence government. What implications does this have for Christianity’s underlying principles of social justice? Do these figures suggest that churches and religious organisations the Australian public wants the churches to remain silent on issues?

Confidence in institutions

The ISSP (2009) survey asked about people's confidence in a range of institutions. Table 1 (below) shows the responses to questions about confidence in institutions in contrast to results from previous ISSP surveys. The institutions in which Australians had the highest levels of confidence in 2009 were the defence forces (59%) and state/territory police (45%). Not far behind was the Australian Broadcasting Commission (42%). Much further down were churches and religious institutions (21%), although not as far down as the public service (16%) or the banks and financial institutions (14%). Towards the bottom were the unions (11%). Business and

industry scored a little lower than churches (18%), as also did the Federal government (14%).

Overall, Australians’ confidence in institutions has been declining in all institutions over the last 16 years as can be seen in the Table 1. Why this is so is not evident. Is it something to do with the increasing diversity in society or with increasing economically polarity? Whatever the reason, when levels of confidence drop below a critical point, people disengage from the wider community and society becomes less stable.

Anthony Giddens describes a process of ‘disembedding’ in which social institutions become disconnected from people’s everyday concerns and less

able to provide reliable support. Change is now a constant in our everyday lives instead of being an occasional source of discomfort. The accelerating rate of change has expanded our opportunities for wealth, leisure and knowledge but it does not always enhance confidence in our organisations.

At the heart of the levels of confidence is whether people feel that the organisations are really there to serve the public or are serving their own interests as organisations, or simply making profits for their shareholders or stakeholders.

When we look at confidence in churches by age groups over the total population (Table 2), we see two groups stand out: those over 70 years of age who have the

Table 1: Confidence in Institutions, Australia

	2009 ISSP Survey	1999 ISSP	1993 ISSP
Institution	A great deal or complete confidence (%)		
Defence Forces	59		
State/Territory Police	45		
Australian Broadcasting Commission	42		
Schools & Educational System	35	39	42
Australia’s Social Welfare System	24		
Courts and Legal System	23	25	26
Churches and Religious Organisations	21	29	33
Business and Industry	18	28	37
Public Service	16	-	20
Federal Parliament	14	21	21
Banks & Financial Institutions	14		
Unions	11		

Sources: 2009 International Social Science Program survey; 1983 Australian Values Study Survey; 1998 Australian Community Survey.

Table 2: Age Groups and Confidence in Churches, Australia

Age group (years)	A great deal or complete confidence (%)
< 30	19
30 - 39	24
40 - 49	13
50 - 59	15
60 - 69	20
> 70	32

Source: 2009 International Social Science Program survey.

highest confidence in churches and those in the 40-49 year group who have the lowest.

Church attendance and confidence in churches

In 2002, Bellamy et al (p67) noted that levels of confidence in institutions accounted for 2 per cent of the variation in the frequency of church attendance among Australians. Table 3 shows that confidence in churches is clearly related to frequency of attendance.

Generally, trust in religious institutions is extremely low in most European Union countries. However, data collected by Gallup for the European Commission in 2004 shows that, even in countries where populations express high levels of trust in religious institutions, trust does not always translate into regular church attendance. For example, Denmark has the highest level of confidence in religious institutions

at 74 per cent, but only 3 per cent of Danes attend church at least once a week. Sweden has the lowest level of trust at 21 per cent, but a slightly higher (5%) weekly church attendance. The confidence level among Australians is also 21 per cent, as shown in Table 1, and the weekly (or more) attendance rate is 8 per cent.

Power and churches

Power is part of the basic fabric of all societies. It is possessed by a diverse range of individuals and social institutions, and determined by a number of factors: social status, resources, expertise, and self-confidence (or arrogance, narcissism). Max Weber, one of the foremost social theorists of the twentieth century, defined power as the likelihood a person can achieve personal ends despite resistance from others. Authority, on the other hand, he contended, is power which people determine to be legitimate rather than coercive. Power becomes

exploitative when the freedom of others is compromised for the gain of another person or group of people.

Hierarchical institutions, by nature, prioritise dominance and submission to prescribed behaviour. In contrast, more laterally structured institutions or groups tend to encourage mutuality or collaboration.

Churches have traditionally been seen as hierarchical in structure. In fact, there is a range of church organisational models, from the pyramidal shape of the Catholic Church with the Pope at the top, through the Presbyterian emphasis on the leadership of ‘elders’, the Baptists’ congregational model, to the ‘flat’ model of the Quakers where all are equally empowered to make decisions. Scripture has more authority in Protestant churches than in the Catholic Church where church tradition plays a stronger role.

When we look at differences between Christian denominations in Table 4, we find that, generally, the more hierarchical the church, the less confidence it inspires in those who identify with that denomination (but who do not necessarily participate in church life). However, church attendance is positively related to confidence. Most people do not associate with an institution that does not have their trust.

When we look at how confidence in churches relates to the level of

Table 3: Attendance and Confidence in Churches, Australia

Church attendance:	A great deal or complete confidence (%)	Some confidence (%)	None or very little confidence (%)	Missing (%)	Total (%)
Never or almost never	6	22	64	8	100
Occasionally	23	39	32	6	100
Monthly plus	60	29	6	5	100

Source: 2009 International Social Science Program survey.

Table 4: Denomination, Attendance and Confidence in Churches

Denomination:	A great deal or complete confidence (% all who identify with denomination)	A great deal or complete confidence (% attenders only)
Baptist	66	80
Pentecostal	63	64
Lutheran	39	43
Uniting Church	32	74
Catholic	32	61
Anglican	26	59

Source: 2009 International Social Science Program survey.

power that people think churches and religious organisations should have (see Figure 1), those with lower levels of confidence in the church also tend to believe churches have too much power. Interestingly, 20 per cent of those who have complete confidence in churches, also believe it has too much power.

It is important to tease apart the notion of 'Church'—what exactly are we trusting or not trusting? For example, recent polls (Zogby Interactive poll) in the US show that Catholics are critical of the Pope and the Catholic Church's handling of the sexual abuse crisis. However, US Catholics' ratings of other aspects of the issue are more positive. For example, the majority have confidence in the Vatican to make changes to prevent abuse in the future. Sixty-four per cent believe Pope Benedict XVI should continue as Pope (should resign 16%, and don't know/not sure 20%).

But, while US Catholics are critical of the hierarchy in Rome, they feel differently about their parish priest. The majority say that most priests understand the needs of Catholics (unlike the Vatican) and they trust their own priest with their children. They say the sexual abuse crisis has had no effect on their Mass attendance, financial contributions or participation in

parish life. Only one in 10 US Catholics say they are considering leaving the church, compared to one in 5 in 2002 at the height of the crisis.

Different groups of people feel differently about churches. Many single and divorced people and people with homosexual preferences experience some churches as not providing a place for them. Their confidence in the churches, then, is likely to be low. Lack of confidence is often transferred from one church to churches in general, despite the fact that churches have very different policies and principles.

Conclusion

The problem of loss of confidence is not just one needing to be faced by churches. Over the last quarter century, it is clear that not only have churches and other religious organisations been rapidly losing

the confidence of the general population, but that all institutions are suffering from this steep decline in confidence.

That churches appear to wield a great deal of power may be more about public perception than reality. Why do people think the churches hold so much power, especially in such a secular society as Australia? Nevertheless, the data about power and the churches prompts questions about the nature of power in the church. Is power being exercised in a way consistent with the principles of its founder? Is 'servant leadership' evident in the way that the churches operate in society?

The task of institutions, including the churches, regaining the public's confidence is a complex one. Gaining the confidence of people requires reconnecting with them and their everyday concerns. It requires building trust

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through different sorts of networks and in ways different from those traditionally associated with institutions.

Audra Kunciuinas

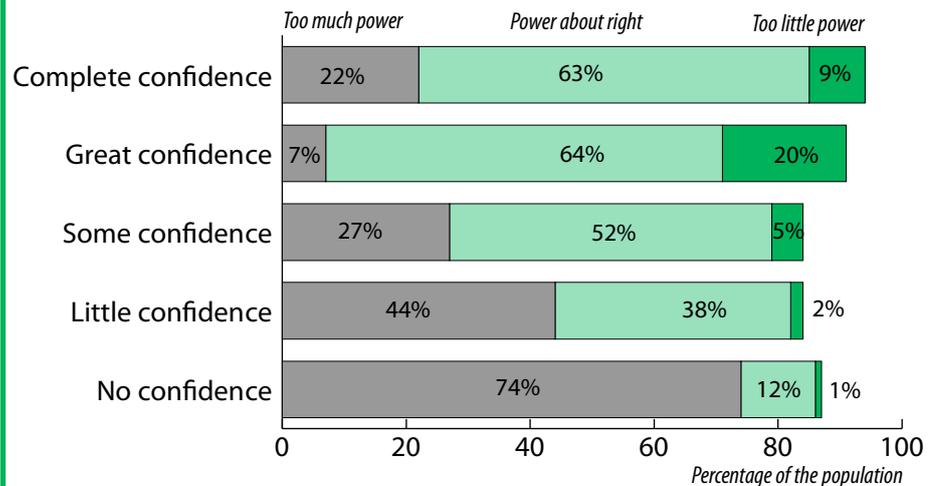
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Figure 1. Responses to 'Do you think churches and religious organisations in this country have too much power or too little?' by levels of confidence in the churches



Source: ISSP (2009). Note that the percentages do not add up to 100% because some people chose not to answer the question.

Source of ISSP data: Evans, A. (2009) AuSSA_A_religiosity.sav (computer file), *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*, Australian Social Science Data Archives, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Is the End Nigh? Print Based Religious Periodicals in Australia

Then

In 1992, the CRA published a special section in the annual *Yearbook for Australian Churches*, which focused on religious periodicals. There were about 220 religious periodicals, including a handful from co-ordinating agencies of the major non-Christian religions. There is now a much wider diversity of periodical and web publications from Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist communities in particular, and also notably there has been development of inter-faith publications.

A follow-up article in *Pointers* considered some of the issues facing the Christian press at the time, with five major points outlined.

1. What format to publish? An increasing number of periodicals had adopted a magazine or journal format, often with glossy covers and better quality paper, (though the impact of the environmental movement was being felt in the consideration of using recycled paper).

2. Declining interest in denominational foci. Denominational publications were perceived to be going

through an identity crisis, with denominational loyalty waning especially in Protestant churches with church-goers increasingly focussed on their local congregation.

3. Increasing post and distribution costs. The decreasing subscription base and rising production costs of many denominational publications prompted churches to seek alternative methods of communication.

4. Increased competition and proliferation of material. Writing had become more diverse and also more specialised. Religious writing pre-1970s was confined largely to denominational publications and theological journals, but with local desktop publishing arrangements any competent person with some training could produce at least a regular newsletter.

Of significant note was the rise of interest in the ordination of women and their formal involvement in the church and the development, usually initially through small groups, of individuals networking and issuing occasional newsletters. There were also

new theological journals as interests consolidated and, in some cases, new theological journals followed the establishment or development of bible and theological colleges and fellowships. Theological journals tend to be fairly stable if they gain a reasonable subscription base from libraries, and costs are generally limited to print and posting, as the labour is usually free or subsidised by the theological college. There appears to be a trend now for new journals to be solely web based, as this reduces the cost even further, and allows a broad interaction, potentially with people all over the world.

5. Changes in Society and the place of the Church.

There has been increasing consideration of the changing nature of society and its implications for the churches. During the 1970s and 1980s, several organisations were established to provide churches and individual Christians with information and resources about contemporary church and community life (see Bentley and Hughes (2005) for an overview). Most of these groups issued a newsletter or research papers.

The two main challenges highlighted in 1992 for religious periodical publishers were:

- a) how to utilise developments in computer technology; and
- b) increasing costs coupled with a generally small market and low circulation, noting that postage was a major factor, particularly for publications with decreasing subscriptions.

Today

According to the Australasian Religious Press Association (ARPA) *Directory of Christian Press* for 2010, there were just over 150 separate publications in Australia, comprising approximately:

- 27% Catholic,
- 21% Anglican,
- 25% other denominations, and
- 27% non-denominational and specialised.
(ARPA lists most of the major denominational and specialist publications).

There would be well over 200 major publications if all the Pentecostal denominations were included, as well as the denominationally-linked or independent mega-churches, which have their own publishing and media base. Some mega-churches would have higher circulations than small denominations.

There is also an increasing number of smaller denominations or umbrella groups, and an increasing range of mission agencies with at least internet-based publications. There are, of course, thousands of newsletters and publications if individual local church publications are included.

In the ARPA directory, ten of the periodicals are solely web based or available only as a downloadable electronic publications. Web based publications are an interesting development as technically they are a new edition every time a change is made. For example *Eureka Street* is updated at least daily.

The majority of Christian periodicals in Australia provide either a downloadable electronic copy of their printed publication or an associated website, providing additional news and other materials.

Pointers is an example of a publication provided by downloadable pdf (for members) or as a print publication, with some members choosing both formats. During the last two decades most Christian denominations and organisations have maintained their printed publications, but the future brings substantial challenge to print. The two major challenges are as follows.

Faster internet access. It is very easy now to download high quality publications and these are now available from a range of religious organisations. Often these versions contain hyperlinks to supplementary audio and video materials. Some denominations made early moves into the new technology providing CD or DVD versions of publications, but the web has now meant that this is not as relevant, with podcasts, and webcasts being accessible, even on mobile phones and the i-pad. The Sydney Anglican web section *SX Digital* is an example of the variety of material being made available for use in local churches and by local members. As internet access and reliability increases, this option increases in attraction.

Tablet development. General media are already discussing the influence this will have on mainstream publishing, and certainly it will impact on Christian publishing. As tablets develop and become more accessible in terms of price and features, they will increasingly become a standard communication tool, especially among younger people. A new Christian newspaper *Eternity* (established October 2009), is already well established as an app for the I-phone and tablet devices.

Future Trends

Denominations

Some denominations are better placed for a longer term print publication, simply because the denomination has greater financial resources and can subsidise the on-going printing and distribution costs. There is a wide variety of patterns of subscription even in the same denomination. Some are free publications, some have a cover charge, often at a fairly nominal rate (\$1). In many cases, the cover charge is never collected personally, but local churches pay for copies they receive or a set fee. Some local churches try to collect the cover charge, and others include it in their local budget. Nearly all denominational publications offer a paid subscription, but this is to primarily to cover individual postage and packing.

One of the major difficulties all denominations are facing is the perennial issue of rising costs together with decreasing income. Advertising revenue is a key consideration for many publications as there is a limit to the level of subsidy by churches. Most organisations keep their information about advertising and revenue relatively private, though from my anecdotal conversations with ARPA members, as yet, no-one has worked out how to receive the same level of revenue from a web based Christian publication. At the moment, web based advertising may add to overall revenue, but if a publication had to rely solely on web advertising this would cause major re-thinking of their cost structure. An estimate from this organisation is that web based advertising revenue would bring in about 10 per cent of the revenue of their print based version.

One area in which printed publications still have an advantage is the advertising insert which, while treated by readers in different ways, does provide a tangible initial 'hit'. However, as fewer publications are picked up by local church readers this becomes less effective.

Denominations have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to advertising revenue. There may be a level of loyalty, especially for certain denominations, but there is also a smaller group of potential advertisers. Major exceptions are the Catholic dioceses (especially city ones), which have greater access to advertising revenue from the established diocesan school system, and these publications often carry education sections, which can attract wider advertising from businesses associated with school development and building. .

Move to electronic publishing. As noted earlier, many groups and denominations use a combination of print

and web based formats to try to reach as wide an audience as possible. One of the early movers in the electronic arena was Jesuit Publications, which took *Eureka Street*, a high quality print publication available by subscription or at newsagents, direct to anyone with web access for free. Jesuit Publications have, however, maintained the production of the periodical with the largest print circulation in Australia (over 180 000), *Australian Catholics*, founded in 1993.

Other factors in denominational publication

The age of the membership is a concern, especially those denominations with a majority of members above 65 years. Rural and regional areas with higher age profiles are already experiencing this factor. While many older people may be computer literate, there is a limit to how much they want to read on screen. And would someone used to picking up a free copy in their local church want to spend their ink-cartridge printing it out?

Smaller denominations and denominations with a strong identity, have a more loyal following which may, in the short term, provide readership for a print version. It is worth noting that the Churches of Christ publication, *The Australian Christian*, which started publication in 1898, moved to being an on-line publication in 2006, and is now requesting income via donations.

The value of the publication as a communication tool is partly related to the age of readers as well as their numbers. Based partly on the subsidies available, denominations will have to make hard decisions on publication.

Long-standing denominational publications with a broader community appeal and which also act as a public relations tool, like *The War Cry* (Salvation Army) have a different basis for their continuation and are not as dependent on membership and age of the church community. Church mission agencies and welfare groups have a print orientation to ensure continued contact with their supporters, especially important in these days of receiving too many emails. Some agencies may struggle with maintaining a long-term publication if they do not succeed in gaining a younger market, and others may move into tablet publication, while maintaining print for those who wish this.

Other options for print-based periodicals

Reduced frequency. In an effort to reduce costs, publications may move from monthly to every second month, or quarterly. However, this severely limits their ability to respond to current issues. It also has an affect on advertising as advertising revenue as there are fewer opportunities to advertise topical and special events.

Sharing of resources. Denominations could explore shared editions, with special local or state supplements. This is always tricky given the different theological traditions in states and areas.

Sharing a publication. A recent example is 3D review, a newspaper from the three covenanting dioceses that make up the Tri-diocesan Covenant (linking the Anglican Dioceses of Bathurst, Riverina and Canberra-Goulburn). A first edition in December 2009 was well received.

Non-denominational

Most non-denominational publications are dependent on subscriptions and advertising. The fact that people find news and information quite easily on the web, including free newsletters from a variety of religious media sources, has meant these periodicals have been the first to face challenges.

If a periodical is available for free then it needs to have a large circulation to maintain advertising rates sufficient to meet all the costs of production. *Eternity* newspaper has started in this way, with a targeted audience of around 100,000, more than most rural and regional newspapers.

Where a non-denominational organisation is based on membership there is greater potential to maintain a print publication as part of the whole package. Usually there is greater loyalty in non-denominational organisations in terms of membership and donations, especially among evangelical groups, and if membership is maintained then communication possibilities are broader.

Some non-denominational magazines have already closed over the last decade, often because of their

ageing and declining subscription base, with the well-known independent magazine *National Outlook (1979-2001)*, being a prime example. A related problem is an ageing volunteer base and thus lacking the resources to move to, or maintain, a web base. Before closure in the future as a print publication most will first consider a move to web-based publication.

A significant move came during the last year from Media InCorp, the publisher of prominent evangelical magazines such as *Alive* (formerly *On-Being* an evangelical magazine founded in 1975), *Daystar* (NZ), and *Christian Woman*. Now they offer a range of electronic publications and e-newsletters, paid for by an advertising base. *Alive* and *Daystar* have become one magazine - *Alive* (incorporating *Daystar*), and is available by download. *Christian Woman* continues as a printed publication available by subscription as well as being web based, no doubt reflecting the age of many subscribers who are keen to still receive a printed edition in the post, and also to use it to give away.

In summary, there a number of important factors to look at when considering the future for a print periodical.

- Substantial under-writing of costs by the denomination or organisation.
- The value of the publication in terms of public relations and fund-raising.
- If non-denominational - a membership base rather than subscription.
- Being available for free and distributed through established networks.
- Access to a wide range of advertisers.

Peter Bentley

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National Roundtable: Shaping Australia's Spirituality 31st August to 3rd September.

With more than 30 church leaders and researchers leading the conversations, this event promises to be a major event in the story of the Australian churches. As outlined in this issue, there are many challenges for the churches. But there are also many good things happening around the country. This is an opportunity to reflect on future directions with people from across the denominations. Make sure you are registered.