

# Growing Youth Spirituality: What the Research is Telling Us

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Christian Research Association

# More than 10 Years Research on Young Australians

- 2002-2008 Seeking to understand young people - Spirit of Gen Y
  - Published results in 2007 in 'Putting Life Together'
- 2009 Chaplaincy in Government Schools
  - Published report on effectiveness of chaplaincy
- 2010-12 Bible Reading among young people
- 2011-13 'Putting Life Together' -studies in schools
  - Published 'Taking Holistic Education Seriously'
- 2013-15 Youth Ministry in Local Churches

# 3 Conferences

- 2007 Roundtable on the Spirit of Gen Y
- 2010 Conference (with Kingswood College) on Educating for a Purposeful Life
- 2013 This Conference ... with Tabor

Nurturing the growth of the spirituality of young Australians is the greatest contemporary challenge, not just for the churches, but for the whole community.

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## Australia the world's happiest nation: OECD

May 28, 2013

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Happy times in Australia.

Australia is still the world's happiest nation based on criteria including income, jobs, housing and health, despite some signs of a slowing economy, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

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# Factors Making Life Easy and Comfortable for Australians

- Housing – 2.3 rooms/person-2<sup>nd</sup> in OECD
- Health – 85% in good health-4<sup>th</sup> in OECD
- Income - \$30,000 disposable-5<sup>th</sup> in OECD
- Education – scores in literacy, maths and science - 6<sup>th</sup> in OECD
- Employment – 73% had job - 7<sup>th</sup> in OECD

Youth unemployment 11.3% in Australia,  
compared with 16.2% average for OECD countries.

# More Than Ever in Human History

- Occupations, providing not only an income, but something that interests us
- Peace between nation-states
  - War has been horrific and terrible for ordinary people who paid cost through toil, soldiering, and homes and villages plundered
  - Today some problems within countries such as Syria, Afghanistan. Less violence between nations than any time in history

# Communication Options

- Never before in human history has it been so easy to contact people anywhere, any time
- Instant communication internationally
- All in devices we carry in our pockets
- Options (eg Internet-based) that are almost 'free'



# Entertainment Options

- Carry great range on our mobile phones:
  - Solo games
  - Group games
  - Films
  - Music
- Apart from range of sports, arts projects, travel possibilities ...





# Yet, Australians are Troubled

- In life-satisfaction in OECD, Australia 12<sup>th</sup> out of the 36 countries
- Between 500 and 600 young people under 30 have committed suicide each year for past 10 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- 17% of young people say 'I am hurting inside and nothing seems to help' (CRA)
- Half of those turn to alcohol and drugs to mask the pain of life

# Happiness related most to relationships and 'place'

- Largest factor in unhappiness among young people is breakdown in relationships – mostly within the family
- Second factor is conflict between Australian way of life and different expectations among migrant families
- Third factor is not knowing what to make of life: little sense of purpose or place

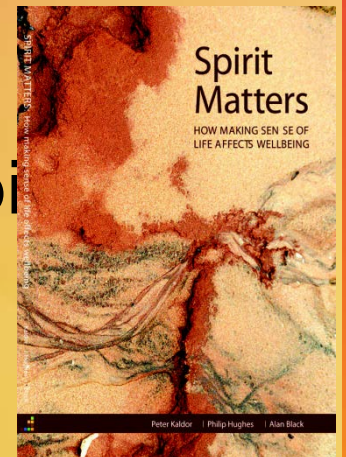
# Australians are rich in material things, But poor in the spiritual dimension

“It is essential – if Australian society is indeed to prosper as a unified nation-state until 2050 and beyond – that Australians understand how they will sustain their societal spiritual values in an environment of enormous secular pressure.”

Future Directions International, Australia's Centre for Strategic Analysis,  
*Australia 2050.*

# What is Spirituality?

- Origin of 'spirit' lies in the 'breath' of a person (e.g. Saul and David)
- Not just our feelings
- But the ways in which we relate to others and the world
- Often has had its roots in our religious faith
  - But it is possible to have religion without spirit
  - And possible to have spirit without religion



The strength of relationships is seen in

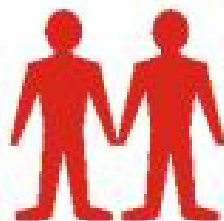


Self

Purpose and  
commitment to  
achieve one's best



Fulfilling relationships and  
commitment to the  
wellbeing of others



Close  
others



Faith and commitment  
to faith shaping life  
and principles for living



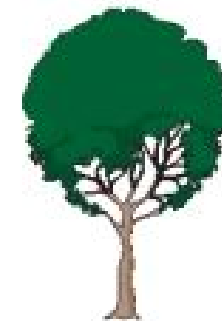
  
God and/or  
principles for life

Interest in society  
and commitment  
to social justice



Wider society

Interest in the natural  
environment and  
commitment to its care



Natural  
environment

## Locating Spirituality

# Working Definition of the Spirituality We Want to Nurture

- Spirituality is passion / commitment in relation to the five relationships
  - Commitment to fulfil the potential of the self
  - Commitment to deep relationships with close others
  - Commitment to social justice
  - Commitment to the natural environment
  - Commitment to God and/or principles of life
- Jesus' terms: loving God and one's neighbour as oneself

Traditionally, Australians found the inspiration for their spirituality primarily in religious faith.

In the late 1960s the way Australians constructed their spirituality began to change

# 1. Individually rather than communally

- For most of history, people have found meaning and place through the communities into which they were born
  - Country
  - Race
  - Village and social class or occupational group
  - Gender group



# Religious Faith

- Gave us a story about the world
  - Creation
  - Fall
  - Redemption
- And our place in the divine plan
- Initiated into divine community by baptism
- Reaffirmed by Lord' Supper / Mass
- Knew that different from others

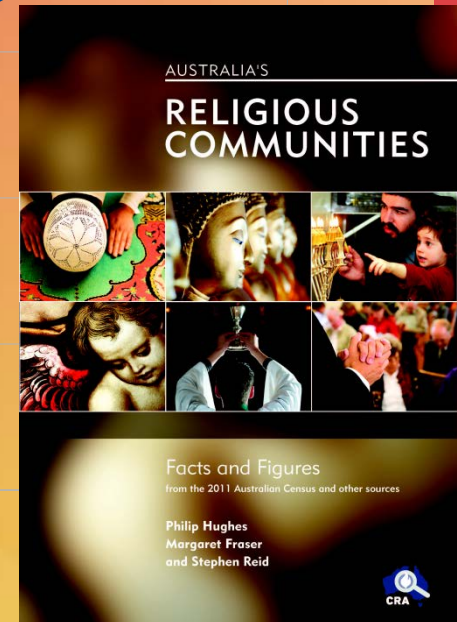
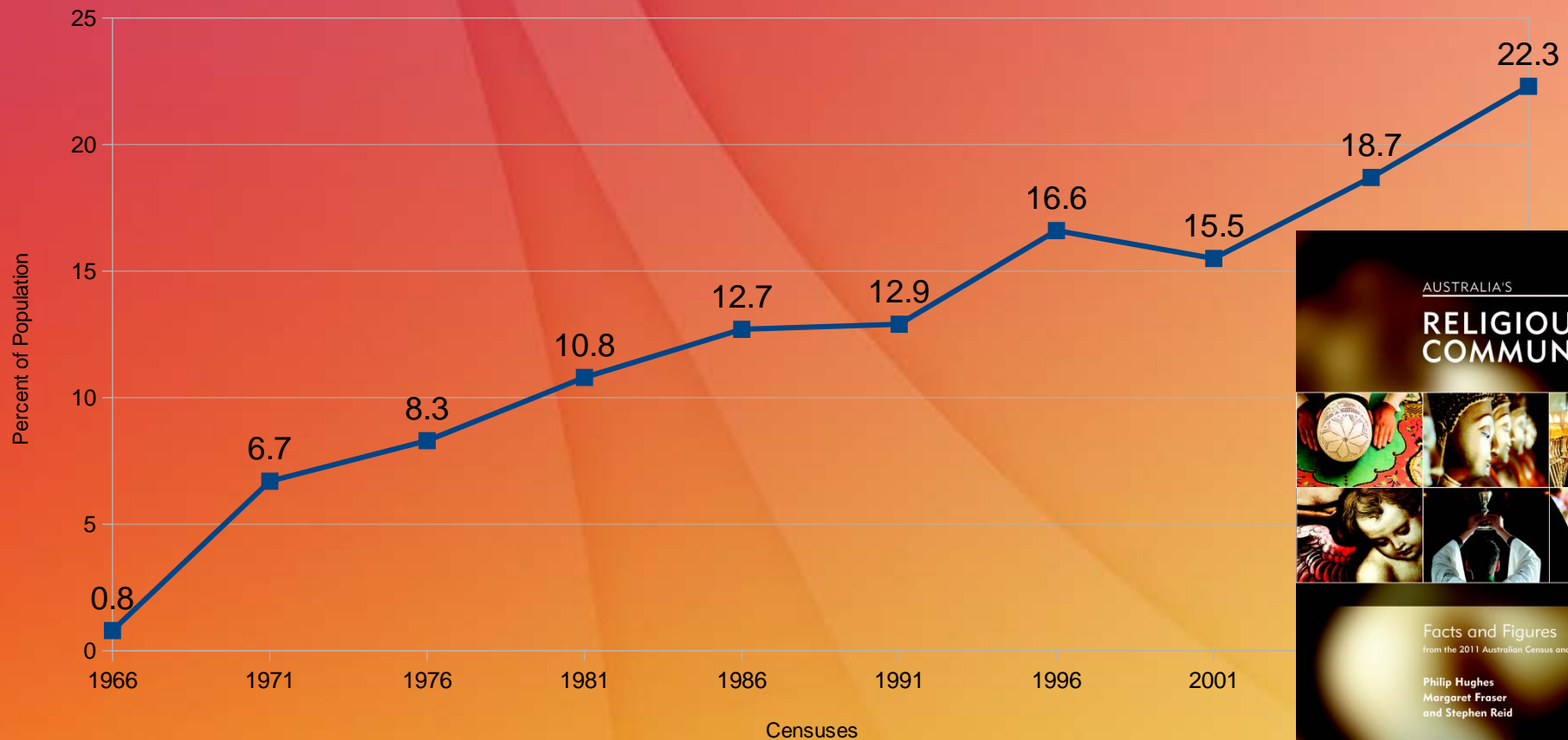
# In 1960s realised that we were not bound by traditions

- Greater awareness through travel and TV that people had different perceptions of the world and of life
- Not bound by particular community or gender
- All traditions – gender, marriage, and religion – could be critiqued
- Could develop one's own sense of life individually whatever community one was born into

# Growth in 'No Religion'

29% of young people under 25 were 'no religion' in the 2011 Census

Percentage of Australians Claiming 'No Religion'



'No religion' means no identification with a religious community

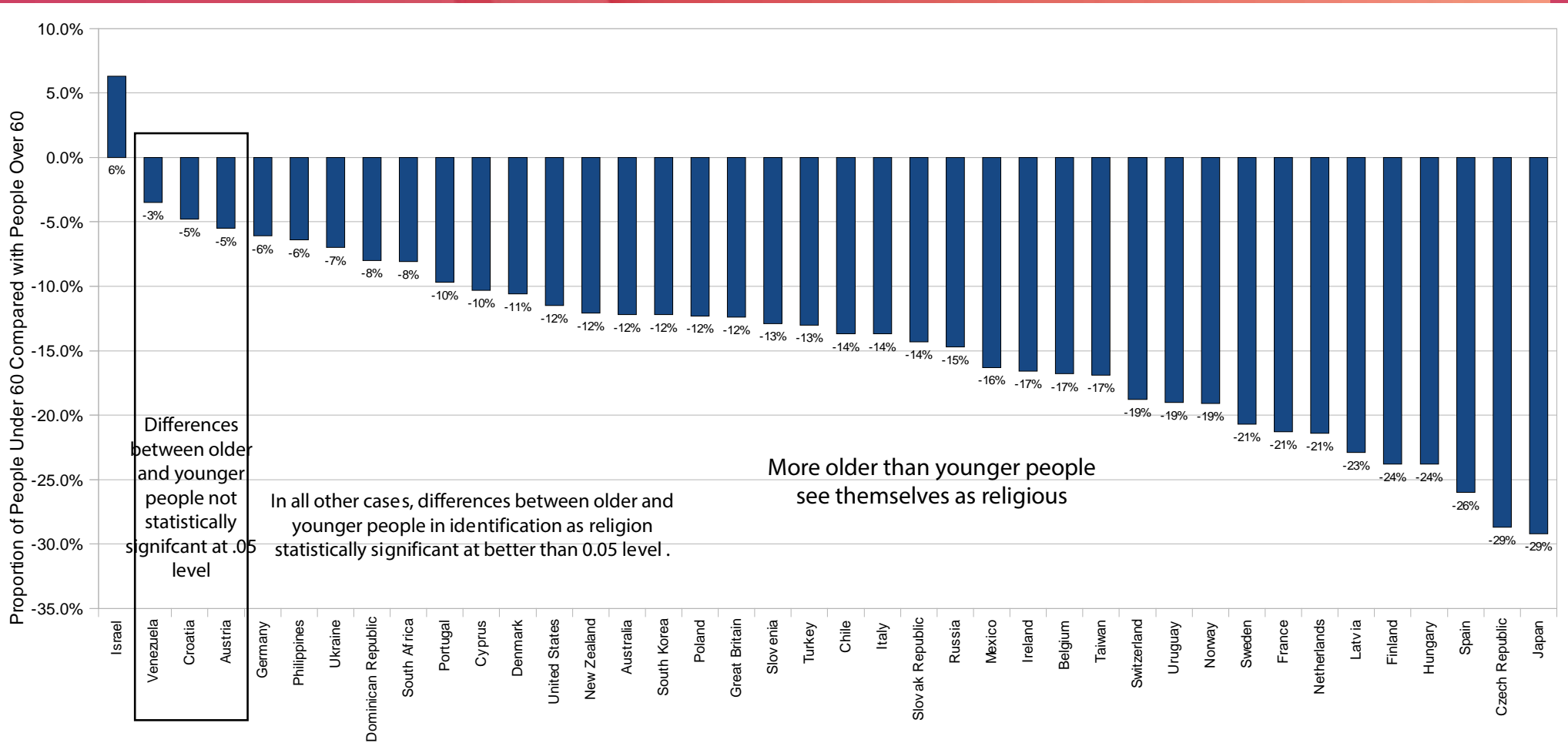
500,000 young people described as  
'Christian' in the 2001 Census were  
described as having no religion in 2011

# Loss of Young People from Almost Every Denomination

- 237,000 Anglicans
- 173,000 Catholics
- 156,000 Uniting Church
- 39,000 Presbyterians
- 18,000 Eastern Orthodox
- 12,000 Baptists
- 11,000 Churches of Christ & Salvation Army
- 10,000 Lutherans and Pentecostals

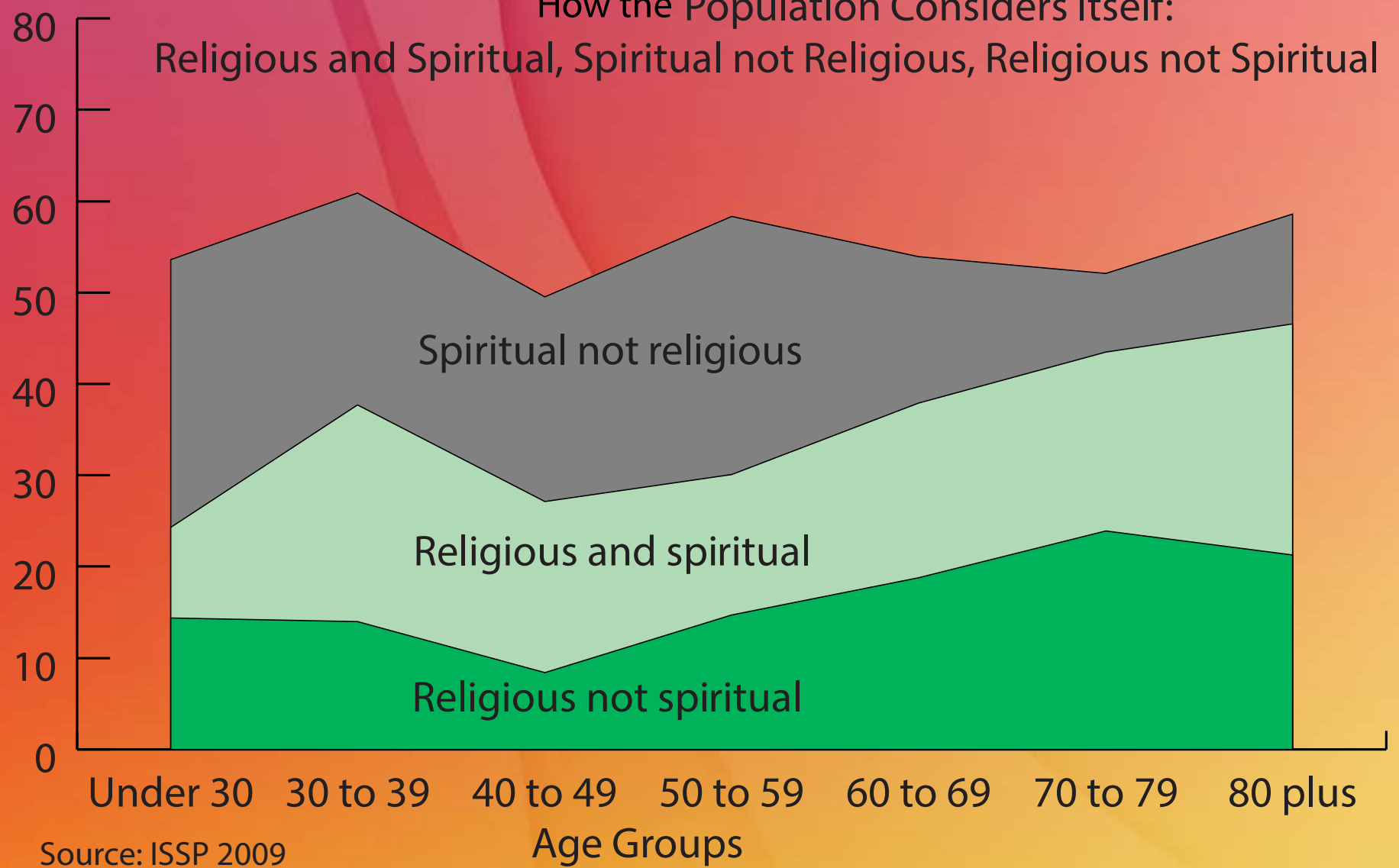
Also loss from the Muslim and Hindu communities, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Latter-day Saints

# Extent to Which Older People See Themselves as More Religious



# How the Population Considers Itself:

Religious and Spiritual, Spiritual not Religious, Religious not Spiritual



Source: ISSP 2009

# Major caveat

- Many young migrants continue to see the source of their spirituality in the communities in which they have been born
- Recent migrants form the vibrant sectors of many denominations
- 41% of all church attenders (18 to 64) are migrants
- But issues with 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations



2. In 1960s Australians began to see their spiritual roots as existing subjectively rather than objectively

- Looked for purpose and place within themselves through personal fulfilment
- Rather than seeing it as fulfilling the duties associated with gender, race, social position
- Focus on subjective life and personal creativity rather than objective duties

### 3. Focus on experience rather than reason

- Life about the experiences of it rather than the understanding of it
- As human knowledge-base has exploded, make personal decisions on what experience as good rather than on what 'is rational'
- Christian faith evaluated experientially rather than rationally

Young Australians look for 'what works'

How can we best provide the conditions in which the spirituality of young people will grow?

# Three major areas of influence

- Home – family
- School
- Community

# Increase pressure of socialisation?

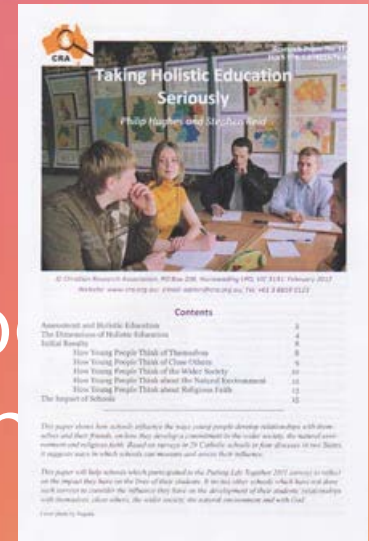
- Ensure that influences are strong
- Build the notion that the 'outside world' is to be feared
- Works with some young people to some extent
  - For example, the Mormons
- Can also lead to rebellion as young people realise can make own decisions
- Does it really build creative spirituality or just conformity?

# Home

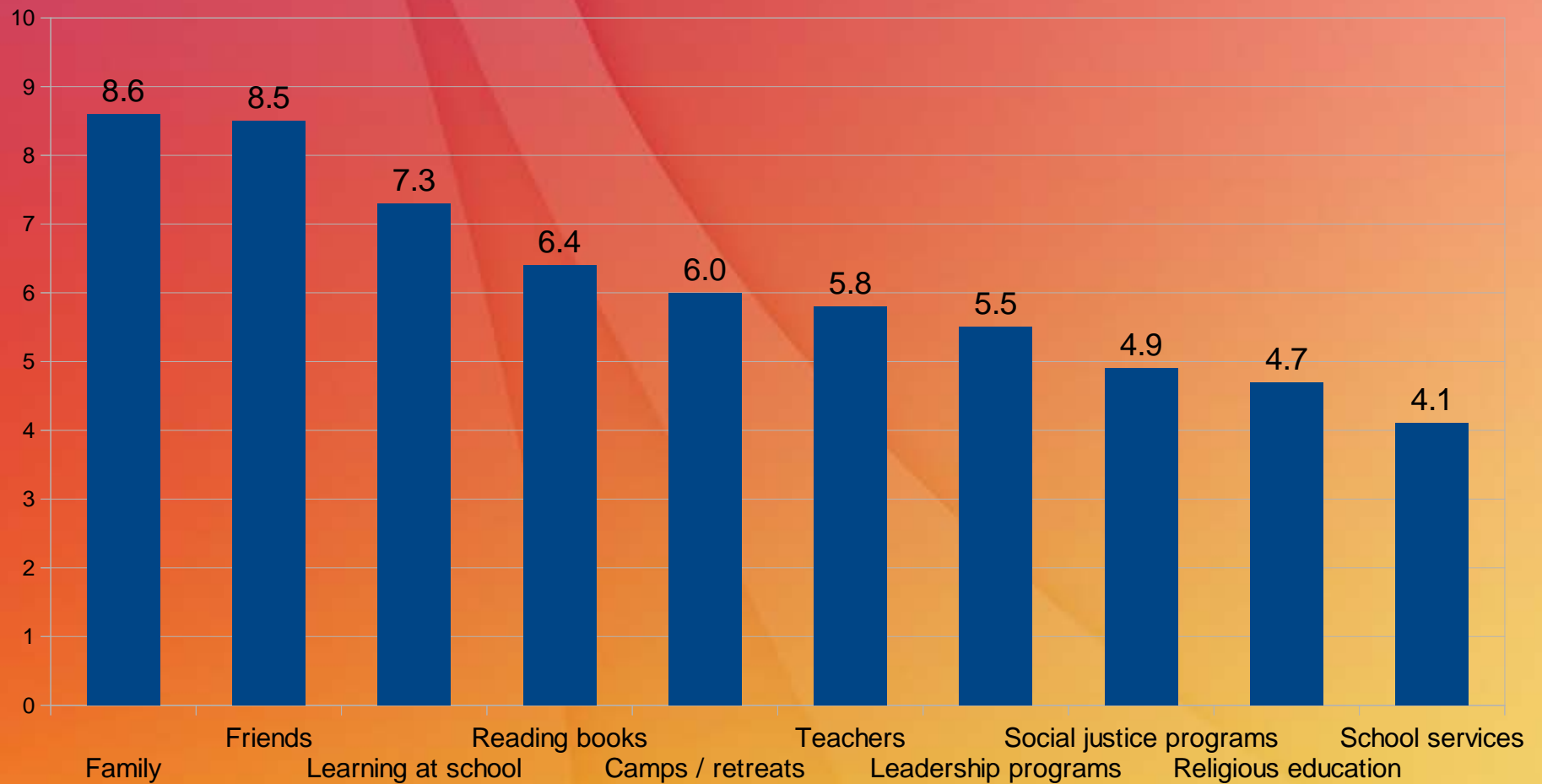
- By far the largest influence: 50% of variance compared with 3% for school and 1% for church
- Earliest relationships in which there is stability and trust provide basis for forming further relationships
- Schools and churches need to find ways of working effectively with parents

# School

- Various influences in different types of schools – Catholic, other Christian, government
- Major impact is not content of teaching but voluntary activities, and building of communities who support each other
- Camps and retreats where opportunity to develop own thinking more influential than when 'content' taught



# How Students See the Importance of Influences on How They Think about Life





# Church and Community

- Community is not given but is built by individual
- Build communities of spirituality from common experiences
- Young people relate to churches out of specific interests rather than in response to authority of the church community

*CRA beginning research on local churches and youth ministry through case-studies and through Ph.D. program.*

# Study of 4000 students in Catholic schools found ...

- 25 per cent of students attended worship monthly or more often
- 31 per cent of students attended some other church activity but did not attend worship monthly or more often
- 13 per cent of the total sample were frequently involved in a local church activity but said they never attended worship

Churches have more connections with students who do not attend worship than through worship

# Conclusions

- Great challenge: to nurture the spirituality of young Australians
- For most, cannot do it through increased pressures to conform
- Basis in relationships within family life
- Providing variety of voluntary opportunities for young people to explore and to grow relationships with self, others, society, nature and God
- In this way, will build a 'happier' society