

Why Innovation is Needed in Church Life

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Christian churches in many Western nations face a variety of challenges to health and vitality. Some sample indicators of widespread forces of social change that have impacted on religious vitality include:

- a decline in Christian religious affiliation,
- a decline in church attendance,
- the absence of younger generations in many mainstream denominations.

This Fact Sheet outlines some evidence for each of these indicators and draws the conclusion that there is a need for revitalization and innovation in church life.

This is one of a series of NCLS Fact Sheets that examines the place of innovation in church life.

History of Australia's Religious Vitality

Australian indigenous spirituality, including a deep connection with the land, has a long and deep history, dating back 40,000 years. Yet, in Australia's white history there is no glorious age of religious vitality. The early days of white settlement saw a shaky start with the intertwined relationship of Christian church leaders with the authorities of the day. Irish convicts brought their Catholicism, set against the Church of England heritage of much of the establishment.

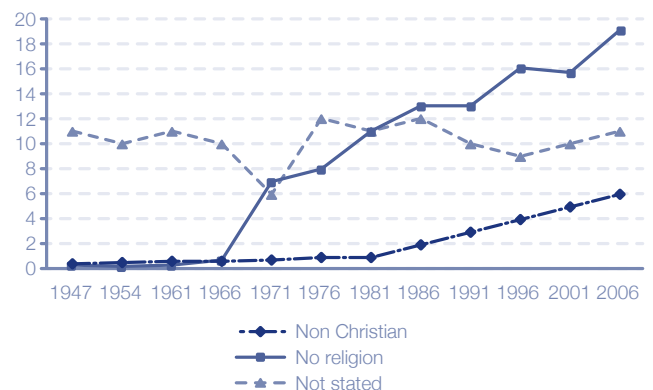
It could be argued that the closest thing to a 'golden era' for religious vitality was the 1950s and into the 1960s: a period of economic boom, conservative government and growing churches with burgeoning Sunday Schools. Conveniently, this was the period when the post-war baby boom generation - the bulge moving through the python of time - was of Sunday School age.

Decline in Christian Religious Affiliation

The majority of Australians claim some Christian religious identity or affiliation when asked. However:

- Christian affiliation: declined from 88% in 1947 to 64% in 2006.
- Non-Christian religions: has risen from 0.5% in 1947 to 5.6% in 2006
- No religion: has increased from 0.4% in 1947 to 19% in 2006.
- Not stated: similar proportions on average do not state their religious affiliation in the national census (11% in 1947 compared with 11% in 2006).

Figure 1: Non-Christian affiliation and no religious affiliation: 1947 to 2006.



Source: Australian Census - 1947, 1954, 1961, 1966, 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006.

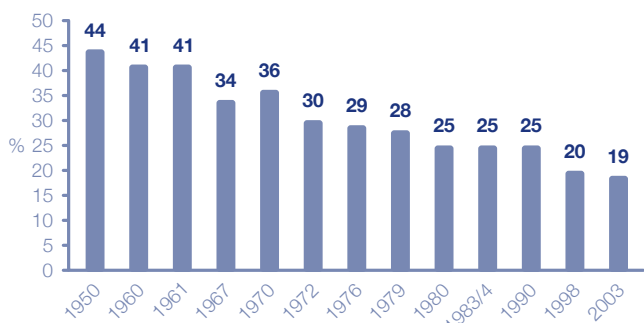
Overall Decline of Church Attendance in Australia

Frequent church attendance is a different measure to affiliation. It measures the proportion of the population who attend church at least monthly.

Between 1950 to 2003 frequent church attendance has declined from 44% to 19%.

Whilst church attendance may be declining overall, it is not the case that all denominations are declining. In Australia, NCLS analysis over time identifies that there are Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations that are growing.

Figure 2: Australian frequent church attendance: 1950 to 2003.

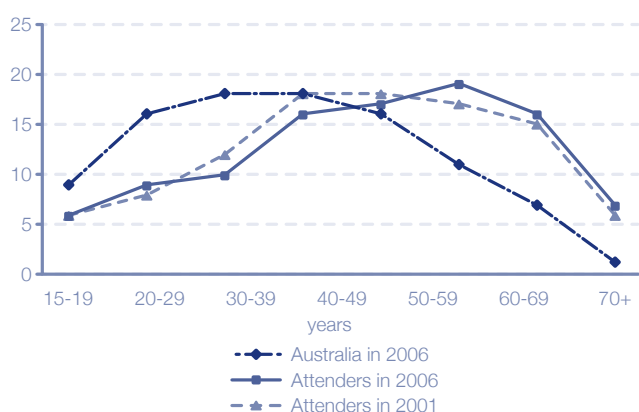


Source: Various Social Surveys.

Younger Generations are Missing

- The rising number of people over the past few decades who claim to have no religious affiliation are disproportionately young.
- Changes in church attendance have been disproportionately great among younger adults
- The young who left the churches in the 1960s and 1970s have not returned.
- Attenders born post-war are underrepresented in church life, primarily in mainstream denominations.

Figure 3: Age Profile of church attenders and Australian population.



Source: 2001 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys and 2006 Australian Census.

This research not only demonstrates the gap between church and community, but also the increasing ageing that is

taking place as younger generations are not present in sufficient numbers to replace older generations passing on. The average age of an Australian church attender is 53 years of age (2006 NCLS). Church Life Surveys over the past 15 years have confirmed the ongoing gap in the age profiles of church attenders compared to the wider community.

Some denominations are growing and continue to have very high levels of younger people. For example, the average age of the combined Pentecostal denominations and movements is 39 years of age. Their age profile is actually younger than the wider Australian community (2006 NCLS Pentecostal Church Life Profile).

The Need for Revitalisation and Innovation

The challenges to religious vitality outlined here highlight the need for revitalization and renewal as well as innovation in church life.



These results highlight an urgency in timeframe. Over the next few decades, many churches will face the loss of a sector of committed & loyal attenders who carry knowledge & experience. The implications are far-reaching and churches will need to prepare for a shift in constituency.

There are too many churches that are losing touch with those beyond church life or with a new generation of church attenders.

Younger age groups are viewed as the 'carriers' of many of the new values that have emerged associated with social and cultural changes.

An openness to change and a spirit of innovation are part of what is needed to reverse these trends.

Authors

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References

This fact sheet is based on *Occasional Paper 14: Church attenders attitudes to innovation in church life - A comparison across countries and across time*. For references and further information on data sources, view at www.ncls.org.au in the Research section.