

ARPA and Christian Press in Australia

In 1974, a Christian communication network was established in Australia: The Australian Religious Press Association. A New Zealand Chapter was formed in 1990 and ARPA became the Australasian Religious Press Association.

Previous interest in a network had arisen from opposition to postage increases for registered publications in the 1960s, and an early group, The Religious Press Association, had been formed to focus on this area as a lobby group, though its role concluded in 1970. By the early 1970s, key members of the association working in major denominational publications had witnessed the value of a collegiate, supportive network, especially one that was thoroughly independent of denominational direction and genuinely ecumenical, and thus ARPA was born.

ARPA will celebrate its 40th Anniversary at a conference in Canberra in September. The conference aims to provide support, networking, education and information for those working in Christian publications and also provides awards in recognition of publishing excellence in 21 categories. An overall prize, the Gutenberg Award, is given to an individual or publication that has achieved outstanding excellence in religious communication.

ARPA provides a professional base for Christian communicators and has 'penned' a number of documents for guidance and use, including:

- Australasian Religious Press Association Charter of the Rights and Responsibilities of the Religious Press (for press and proprietors). This charter is intended to help those producing publications, and the proprietors, especially within the institutional church to work together and understand each others' role and to provide a foundation and model for Christian communication.
- The Church and the Religious Press: A statement about an appropriate relationship between the church and the religious press. I highlight Point 3 of this statement: "The Australasian Religious Press Association urges church leaders and members to recognise the value of the religious press, and to encourage and support those who serve in this area of ministry. Especially at this time when media ownership is becoming more and more concentrated, the religious press is becoming increasingly important as an alternative media voice."

- Australasian Religious Press Association: Universal media freedoms. This document links into wider universal media concerns that continue to apply today, especially the abuse of those who report human rights and religious news.
- Australasian Religious Press Association: Code of ethics

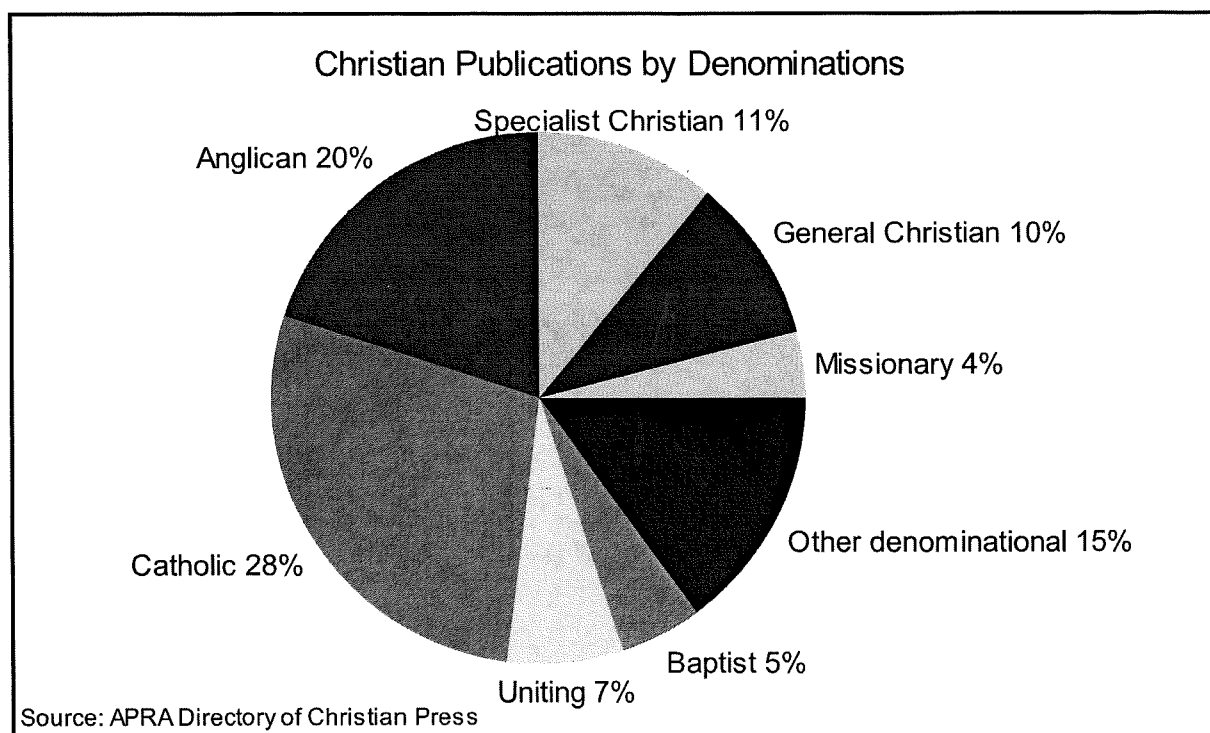
During the forty years much has changed in the religious press scene. Notably, there is a wider variety of publications from other faiths. Many of these are electronic in form and have 'by-passed' the older forms of print publication. However, ARPA remains a network of Christian press and members must adhere to the Trinitarian faith.

As a service to the wider church and community, ARPA publishes a *Directory of Christian Press: Australian and New Zealand*. The 2014 *Directory* provides a listing of 149 individual Australian Christian publications. The 2014 *Directory* also indicates whether publications are members of the Australasian Religious Press Association (ARPA). 82 are members and 67 non-members.

While this directory is not exhaustive, it does provide a good overview, especially of denominational publications. Publications included in the directory include denominational newspapers and magazines, mission and parachurch publications and a range of material from specialist Christian organisations. Overall 75 percent are denominationally based or oriented, the



Peter Bentley, current ARPA President, gives a life membership award to the photographer, Ramon Williams



largest group being Catholic publications, including publications from Catholic missionary orders. While it is difficult to place some publications in a category, the graph above illustrates the range of religious publishing.

Over twenty years ago I penned a short reflection for *Pointers* (March 1992) based on the quite extensive listing of religious periodicals in Australia in the 1992 edition of CRA's *A Yearbook for Australian Churches*. Growth had been occurring in the 1980s in the number of printed publications, especially in the following areas:

- periodicals concerned with current issues and biblical questions;
- resources for specialist societies and groups that had formed;
- women and family and also feminist issues; and
- theology and ministry, including publications from new Bible colleges and new journals from established colleges.

I noted that "The growth throughout the 1980s reflected the search by many Christians for material which would help them understand emerging changes in society and within the church." However, even though growth was happening, some of the challenges for print were becoming evident and it is interesting to highlight them again. I noted in particular significant overheads due to postage costs, a waning general 'church public', and the beginning of alternative methods for production and distribution. Developments in computer technology were raising the question then of whether to continue to use hard printed copy. Initially publishers considered supplying discs with

material. Shortly after that newsletters began to be sent by email. Within a decade, when the Internet became widely used, on-line versions, either as pdfs or as regular web page publications, were increasingly developed. Even specialist publications could be provided to a world-wide audience at a fraction of the cost, especially if the labour cost was contributed on an honorary basis.

The major change that has occurred in the last ten years is that nearly all religious publications provide a web edition or a website containing material from the latest printed edition. However, only 5 of the 149 entries in the *Directory of Christian Press* are solely on-line publications (4 of these are ARPA members). Print remains the most prominent form of communication, particularly for denominations which can readily distribute their publication cost-effectively through local church networks. This point of contact should not be underestimated. In an age of technology, the local delivery of a publication provides a personal connection and if used well could mean greater readership. The combination of internet technology and print is being used to great effect at present by religious publications, which are in essence specialist or niche publications. There is seemingly more potential as technologies converge. The 40th anniversary conference will explore and consider some of these issues, and the way to communicate the gospel message today.

Peter Bentley

Further information about ARPA can be found on the website: <http://arpa.net.au/>

Peter Bentley is the current President of ARPA.