

Pointers

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The Celebration of Marriage

Over the past twenty years there has been a marked decline in the role of the church in marriage in Australia. This article explores the facts and some of the reasons.

1993 marked 20 years since the introduction of private marriage celebrants in Australia. In 1973 83.6% of marriages were performed with a religious rite. In 1993 this figure had fallen to 57.9%: a decline of 25.7% in the total proportion of marriages. Most of this fall took place in the first decade (1973 - 1983). In 1983, 60.6% of marriages were performed by a religious celebrant, a decline of 23% in total proportion. During the last decade, the percentage of marriages conducted by religious celebrants has not changed in a significant way, but there has still been a slow decline, with a period of slight improvement in 1990 and 1991.

As shown in figure 1 the start of the major decline in marriages performed by religious celebrants occurred in the period 1971 - 1976. The significant factor, the introduction of a broader civil marriage option, began to have a major impact within two years.

Previously, couples wishing a civil marriage were mainly confined to an official Registry Office. From 1973, there was greater flexibility. Authorised marriage celebrants could marry people in parks, homes and a variety of non-church settings, usually with a style that met the wishes of the couple. In 1974, 82.1% of marriages were performed by religious celebrants.

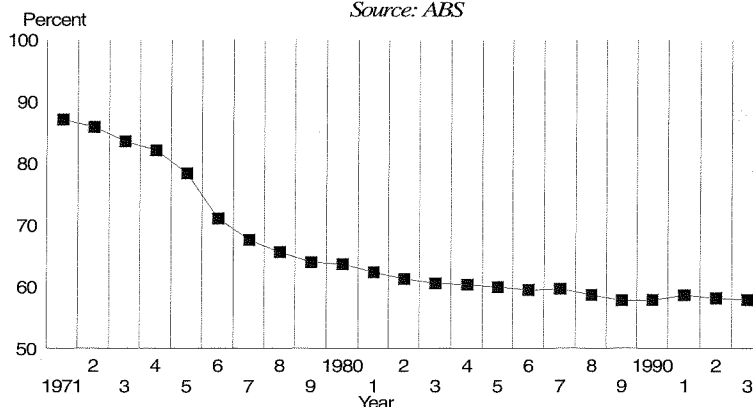
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Percentage of Marriages Conducted by Clergy

1971 to 1993: Australia

Source: ABS



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, Interchurch Trade and Industry Mission, Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, Prahran City Parish Mission, Uniting Church Synods of New South Wales and Victoria, and World Vision of Australia.

By 1976 the figure had fallen to 71.1%.

The decline after 1976 has been more gradual, but steady, with the lowest figure recorded in 1989. Paralleling this decline, there has been a fall in the census records of the nominal affiliation of Australians, but as the following table illustrates, the number of marriages performed by religious celebrants has declined more rapidly than the total Christian population.

Table 1. Population Identifying with Christian Denomination Compared with Use of Christian Celebrants for Marriage Ceremonies (%)

Census	Identify Christian denom.	Used Christian celebrant
1966	88.2	89.2
1971	86.2	87.1
1976	78.6	71.1
1981	76.4	62.4
1986	73.0	59.5
1991	74.0	58.7

Detailed figures of marriages are available for 1992 and 1993. This reveals that the percentage of marriages performed now by churches is usually less than their nominal affiliation recorded in the Census. There are a variety of reasons for this, but it would appear that a significant factor has been the increase in the number of divorced people remarrying, particularly in cases where both people marrying had been divorced. A large increase, (double that of 1974), occurred in the year 1976. This was also related to the introduction of the Family Law Act and new divorce provisions. Correspondingly, the percentage of First Time Marrieds (Both partners never married) declined.

Table 2. Divorced People Remarrying (%)

	Male	Female
1974	8.5	8.0
1975	10.3	9.9
1976	17.6	16.5
1977	19.4	18.3

Of the major denominational groups recorded in the marriage statistics, only three actually record a higher rate of marriages than their nominal census affiliation for the years 1992 and 1993. These are the Baptist,

Churches of Christ and Uniting Churches (as grouped by the Marriages Act).

Baptist - 1.7 (census):1.8 (of all marriages)

Churches of Christ - 0.5 (census):1.1 (of all marriages)

Uniting Church - 8.2 (census):9.9 (of all marriages)

In the Uniting Church, ministers are able to conduct marriages of people of a different denominational affiliation. There is also no proscription on the the remarriage of divorced people. Each case is considered on an individual basis by the minister. In 1992 ministers of the Uniting Churches performed 31.1% of the religious marriages where both partners were divorced and 29.4% of the religious marriages, where at least one partner was divorced.

In comparison, in 1992, the Catholic Church performed 40.5% of first marriages by religious rite, but only 20.2% of total marriages (1991 Census: 27.3%). In 1971, when the percentage of first time marrieds was much higher, 86.1%, (falling to 67.2% in 1992), the Catholic Church performed 27.2% of all marriages. In 1992, the Anglican Church performed 23% of first marriages by religious rite, but only 13.3% of the total number of marriages (1991 Census 23.9%). In 1971, the Anglican Church performed 26.1% of the total number of marriages. The Anglican church has recorded a more rapid decline than the Catholic Church, even though it has a significantly higher rate of performing marriages of people who have been divorced.

The individual figures for religious celebrations as a proportion of total marriages has not changed significantly between 1992 and 1993. In 1993, Victoria

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recorded the highest percentage of marriages celebrated by ministers of religion (60.6%), while the Northern Territory recorded the lowest (36.1% - a significant change from 84% in 1966).

It is evident that a significant difference has emerged between civil and religious celebrations. In 1992, civil celebrants performed 64.6% of marriages, where one or both partners were re-marrying (including those widowed). In fact, in 1992, civil celebrants performed more marriages which were second marriages for at least one partner (24,312) compared to first marriages for both (23,667). It was the reverse for religious celebrants, who performed the majority of first time marriages, namely 69.3% (53,425) and only 35.4% (13,348) of other marriages for a total of 66,773 out of 114,752 total number of marriages).

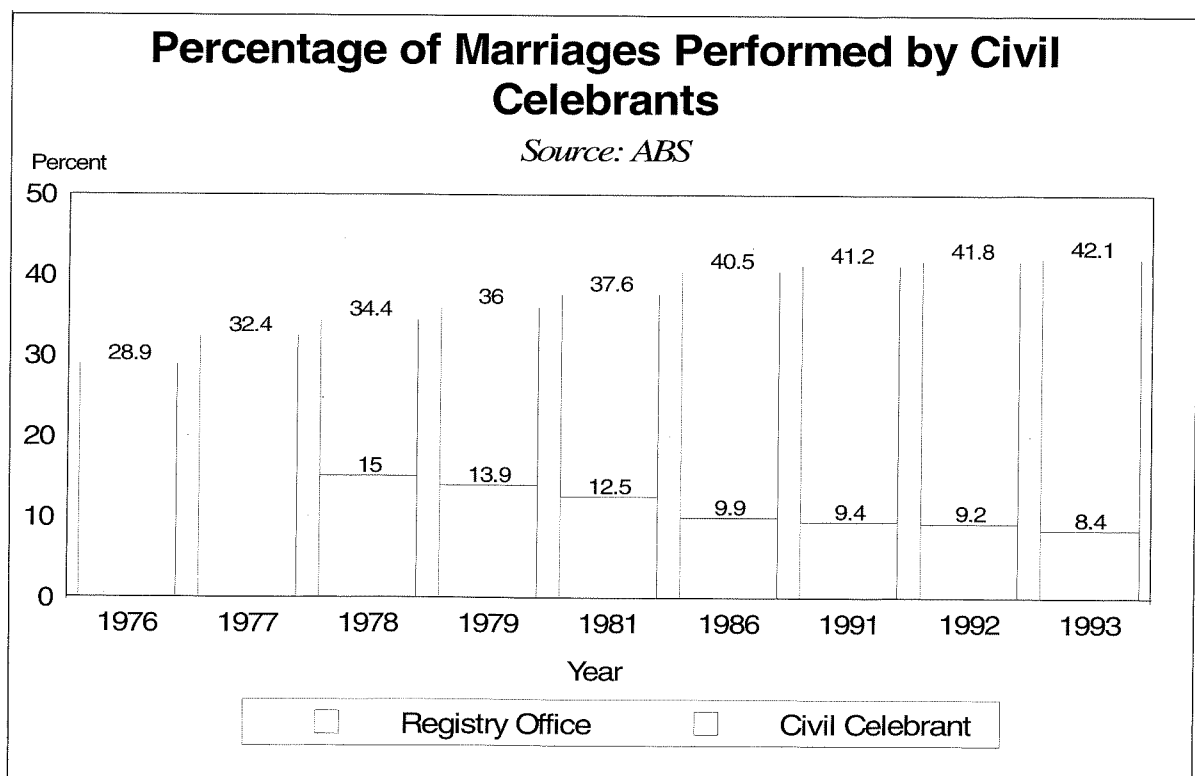
Source: *Marriages (ABS), primarily 1992 and 1993 (ABS)*

Peter Bentley

Table 3. Marriages Performed by Category 1993

	Number	%Proportion of Total Marriages	% Proportion of Religious Marriages
Anglican	15,190	13.4	23.2
Baptist	2,134	1.9	3.3
Catholic	22,625	20.0	34.5
C. of Christ	1,234	1.1	1.9
Lutheran	1,271	1.1	1.9
Orthodox	2,973	2.6	4.5
Presbyterian	1,706	1.5	2.6
Uniting	10,577	9.3	16.1
Other	7,863	6.9	12.0
Total	65,573	57.9	100.0

Note: Other includes other Christian and other faiths. In 1992, this was 11.4% of the marriages performed by religious celebrants. Of this, 1.9%, were from other faiths, mainly Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist. This figure has been reasonably consistent over the last few years.



Note: A distinction between Official Registry Marriages and Other civil marriages has only been recorded since 1978. In 1978, 19.4% of the total number of marriages were conducted outside the registry office. In 1993, this had grown to 33.7%. In the same period, registry office marriages declined by nearly half.