

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

*Audra Kunciuinas*

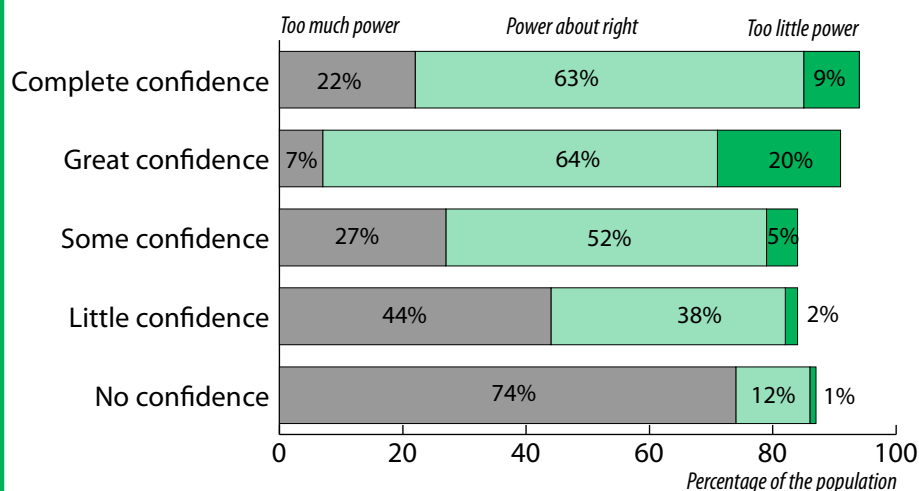
## References

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Giddens, Anthony, (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, California.

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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 then only two years later ceased active up-dating.

**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*

### References:

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Peter Bentley, 'Religious Periodicals in Australia 1992', *Pointers*, Volume 2. Number 2. March 1992.

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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.