

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY PROFILES

The Uniting Church in Australia

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Contents

Foreword	v
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	ix
Introduction	x
The Authors	xii
Acknowledgments	xiv
CHAPTER 1 History	1
Wider background to the union churches	1
In Australia: the heritage and contribution of the union churches	4
Moves towards the formation of the Uniting Church	7
Final moves to union	9
Practical arrangements	11
CHAPTER 2 Beliefs, Worship and Major Religious Practices	13
Beliefs	13
Worship and the Uniting Church	17
The emblem of the Uniting Church	22
Other Central Features of the Uniting Church in Australia	22
Expectations of members and adherents	27
CHAPTER 3 Organisation of the Community	28
Adherents	28
Baptised members	29
Members in association	29
Confirmed members	29
Patterns of authority and leadership within the church	30

Institutional structure	34
Other Uniting Church bodies	39

CHAPTER 4 The Uniting Church: A View from the 1991 Census	45
Changes in the community over time	46
Geographic distribution	48
Age and gender distribution	51
Birthplace	52
Second-generation immigrants in the Uniting Church	54
Language	55
Marital status	56
Income and family type	59
Occupation and employment	60
Qualifications	64

CHAPTER 5 Uniting Church Attenders	66
Membership	67
Congregations, parishes and presbyteries	69
Ministries	71
Church attendance	72
Mobility	74
Group involvement	75
Hours of involvement	76
Sense of belonging	77
The demographics of attenders	79

CHAPTER 6 The Uniting Church in Contemporary Australian Society	84
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Glossary	86
References and Other Works Consulted	88

Introduction

This series of profiles seeks to provide a perspective on the Australian population through a description of the religious communities with which they identify. This book is one of a series of twelve, covering five of the major world religions represented in Australia and the eight largest Christian denominational groups. In the 1991 Population and Housing Census, 77 per cent of the Australian population identified with a religious group. This series of profiles covers 95 per cent of those people, or 73 per cent of the population of Australia.

The profiles tell a story of immigration and settlement. They illustrate how traditions from many parts of the world have become part of Australian society and culture. Religion is a major influence on the ways people think about the world and how they live. It influences patterns of family and community life and can affect their private and public activities. A description of religious identification and involvement is essential to the understanding of Australian society.

These profiles are divided into two major sections. The first describes the formation of the community. It briefly covers the history of the religion prior to its arrival in Australia, and then traces the development of the religious community in Australia.

An account is given of salient beliefs and practices within the community. The profiles do not attempt a full or systematic discussion of official doctrines, creeds or dogmas. Nor do they engage in a sociological analysis of the actual beliefs of adherents. Rather, these profiles focus on the actual public religious practices of the community and seek to place those practices in the context of the ways in which the community sees the world and its faith.

The section on the organisation considers the institutional structures and patterns of authority in the community. It covers the training, appointment and roles of community leaders, and the practices through which the community makes

decisions and interacts with the wider society. In this part of the profile, the authors have relied largely on secondary materials which, in many cases, have not been gathered previously.

The second part of the profile draws a picture of the contemporary community in Australia, based firstly on data from the 1991 Population and Housing Census. It shows how the community has changed in size over time, where it is located in the Australian landscape, and what are its demographic characteristics.

For most religious communities, some data are available about the extent to which people engage in the public activities of the community. A major survey, known as the National Church Life Survey, was undertaken among Protestant and Anglican church attenders in August 1991 and we are grateful that these data have been made available to us.

These books do not attempt to evaluate the religious groups or their beliefs in any way. They make no assessments about the moral value of any beliefs or practices beyond occasionally drawing attention to some social consequences of practice, belief or structure might have. Rather, through description and analysis of these religious communities, it is hoped that this series of books will contribute substantially to the understanding of Australian society and culture. Through understanding will come better cooperation between the communities and greater cohesion in the society as a whole.

The story of the Uniting Church, which this book tells, is about the creation of a church within the Australian context. While the book begins with each of the traditions that came together in the Uniting Church, it moves quickly to the lengthy processes in which union was considered. These processes gave the churches the opportunity to develop or discard their traditions as they felt was appropriate for their new context. The book outlines the doctrines, practices and organisation that have been developed as the foundation of the Uniting Church.

While the denomination as an organisation is young, founded in 1977, its membership tends to be older people, often several generations Australia-born, and is struggling to engage younger people in its programs and spirituality. This book describes the Uniting Church community as it emerged in the 1991 Census statistics and in the National Church Life Survey.

The Authors

Peter Bentley was born in Kempsey, New South Wales, and brought up in the Methodist Church. He became a member of the Uniting Church at Union. He studied at the University of Sydney, completing a BA (Hons) and MA, specialising in Australian religious history.

He has worked for the National Catholic Research Council, responsible to the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, and for the Uniting Church doing contracted research. He has written a number of articles for church magazines and journals, including *National Outlook*, *Church Heritage* and the *Australian Religion Studies Review*.

Peter has been working with the Christian Research Association since 1990. He has been the chief editor of *A Yearbook for Australian Churches* and has been a contributing editor to *Pointers*, the quarterly bulletin of the Christian Research Association. Peter is also working with the Assembly of the Uniting Church as secretary of the Commission on Doctrine. He has been very active in the Uniting Church at presbytery and synod levels.

Philip J. Hughes was born in England and was brought up within the Baptist denomination. He immigrated with his family to Australia as a teenager and completed his secondary education at Carey Baptist Grammar School in Melbourne. Following undergraduate and postgraduate studies in philosophy and education, he entered Whitley, the Baptist College of Victoria, as a candidate for ministry. On completion of an honours degree in systematic theology, he was ordained and called to the ministry at North Carlton Baptist Church in the inner city of Melbourne.

Another period of study took him to Lancaster University and then to three years study in Thailand, where he completed his doctorate. The doctorate was awarded by the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology for a thesis entitled

Christianity and Culture: A Case Study in Northern Thailand. On return to Australia he participated in a team ministry at Wangaratta Baptist Church in rural Victoria.

In 1985 he began work part-time with the Christian Research Association, and has spent much of the last ten years researching the many forms and expressions of religious faith in Australia and their relationship to Australian culture. While continuing to work for the Christian Research Association, he entered the ministry of the Uniting Church in 1988 and began ministry at West Hawthorn Uniting Church.

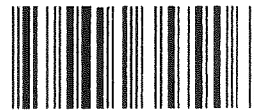
Philip has written fifteen books on the Christian faith in Australia and Thailand and has published numerous articles and research papers. He is a contributing editor to *Pointers* and to *Australian Religion Studies Review*, the journal of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion. He is the general editor of this series of religious community profiles.

Religion has a major influence on the ways people think about the world and how they live. The Religious Community Profiles is a series covering 12 of the major world religions represented in Australia and the eight largest Christian denominations. Through a description of religious identification and involvement the series provides information that is essential to a better understanding of Australian society and culture.

The Uniting Church, founded in 1977, is a young denomination. This book describes the creation of the Uniting Church within the Australian context. It examines each of the traditions that came together as the Uniting Church and the lengthy processes in which union was considered. The book outlines the doctrines, practices and organisation that have developed as the foundation of the Uniting Church.

The Uniting Church in Australia includes an examination of the Uniting Church community in the light of data in the 1991 Australian Census and in the National Church Life Survey. The book covers areas such as location of Uniting Church people in Australia, family type, income, marital status, Uniting Church immigrants and immigration, language groups, education, and employment.

The information is clearly presented, easy to read and is supported by tables and figures. This book will be of particular interest to people within the Uniting Church community as well as anyone interested in gaining an understanding of the role of Uniting Church people in contemporary Australian society.



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