

Uniting Church leadership must reveal the figures showing where growth lies

Where do more young people go – liberal or evangelical?

The ACC's executive consultant, Peter Bentley, here concludes a three-part statistical analysis of the state of the Uniting Church. Based on the most authoritative expert sources available, it concludes that the best growth for the church, at a time of overall decline, lies in the evangelical congregations.

Parts one and two of this study were published in the September 2007 and December 2007 editions of *Catalyst*.

For statistical purposes, the National Church Life Survey is now the most important resource for the Uniting Church. Since 1991, the survey has been held every five years, among a variety of Anglican and Protestant congregations, and since 1996, the Catholic Church has been a partner.

NCLS Research is sponsored by many smaller groups and agencies, but the largest groups providing support have been the Uniting Church NSW Board of Mission, ANGLICARE (Anglican Diocese of Sydney) and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

The most recent survey was held in the second half of 2006. You may remember filling in the survey form.

When comments are made about the NCLS, you should check what statistics are being quoted, the year and for what purpose. For example, a person could quote 2001 NCLS attendance statistics in the context of commenting on Reforming Alliance and EMU statistics about people who have left the church over the sexuality issue, without fairly admitting that the RA figures in particular mainly address the situation after 2003. Therefore the use of 2001 figures is not a fair comparison. It is worrying that many leaders in the Uniting Church have ignored the obvious changes that have occurred in the last four years, and the substantiated impact on at least two hundred congregations since the start

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of the present sexuality debate. Why have some leaders ignored the pain of so many UCA members?

The NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8 (referred to below) is a very important resource paper and contains interesting comparative material with other denominations. It should be widely considered, particularly



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the differences in decline and change due to the age of church members, and the general remarks about the future in terms of the declining pool

of 'switchers' – people arriving from or leaving for other congregations. The NCLS material provides a very affirming and encouraging way of helping mainstream denominations consider their situation. While it notes present difficulties, it presents the view that change is still possible. This NCLS paper provides an image of the UCA position in 2001, which could be taken by some people to mean that there will be a more positive future, simply because there was a slight decrease in the decline between 1996 and 2001. In fact, the NCLS Paper No. 8 does not detail the present (2006) or beyond, though a further report will provide more detail on this information.

1. NCLS material on the Uniting Church

Will there be a more positive future?

Yes, there have been newcomers (those who arrived in last five years – no previous church), and an increase according to the NCLS for the period 1996 – 2001. What is very important is the local context. NCLS has conducted a raft of research and has identified twelve core values applicable generally (many congregations would have seen the NCLS Connections for Life reports in connection with their own congregation). I am particularly interested in specific details, like

which local churches have grown and what is their theological orientation? If one considers other data in the 1990s, such as the National Social Science Survey, it is clearly evident that the Uniting Church has failed to keep those who have grown up in it, or attract significant numbers of people under the age of 40 into a variety of congregations to make up for the numbers who have exited the church

(see the NCLS estimate of decrease: Table 4), or will exit in the next fifteen years. I believe this exit has increased in the period 1996 - 2006.

Over the last few years I have been constantly amazed at the number of evangelical members I have met, who have told me that their children have left the Uniting Church for another denomination. Many members have told me that their particular local

Uniting Church did not provide a strong message of personal faith and commitment, helping to reinforce their own convictions. Their children were attracted to other churches which presented clear faith and biblical positions, and often ended up marrying into that particular denomination, thus making the next generation more likely to also be members of that denomination.

Certainly there are still young people in the Uniting Church, but there has been little reasonable discussion about the membership basis for most young members. What the Uniting Church needs to do is make available all statistics and detail so that people can truly understand the context. Which Synods and congregations have more young people, and which have fewer? What is the theological orientation of the larger congregations with younger age profiles? I understand it is clearly evangelical, and this is the picture throughout Protestant and Anglican circles as well. While some liberal churches have some younger members, they are few in number compared to evangelical churches.

2. Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) Members and large Congregations

I believe a separate comment needs to be made about NESB congregations. It would also be helpful to have more detailed statistics on our NESB congregations, as from my experience these congregations are usually larger than the average English-speaking background congregation, and have different issues in terms of young adult retention (many are still attending as family groups, but second generation issues are appearing more significant).

Over the years when I was more formally involved in the councils of the Church (1989 – 2004), I came to understand that for some leaders in the Uniting Church, the theological and spiritual orientation of many

Table 1

NCLS	1991-1996 (%)	1996-2001 (%)
Newcomers	5	7

Table 2

NCLS	1991-1996 (%)	1996-2001 (%)
New 15-19 year old young adult retention	3 (4)*	3

Table 3

Selected NCLS data	1991-1996 (%)	1996-2001 (%)
Switchers In	8	8
Estimate Switchers Out	10	10
Estimate of Deaths	11 (10)*	12
Estimate of Drifted out	10 (11)*	7

NCLS Occasional Paper No. 8 explains the inflow and outflow model (I have summarised the terms here):

There are three Inflow measures:

* Switchers In: people arriving from other congregations in last five years

* Young Adult Retention: people aged 15 – 19 years who were attending the denomination five years ago (see Table 3).

* Newcomers: people who joined within the last five years and did not belong to a church previously (see Table 2)

There are also three Outflow measures:

* Switchers Out: People leaving for other congregations

* Deaths An estimate based on Australian Bureau of Statistics figures applied to the current age profile of the denomination

* Drift Out: An estimate of the number of people who drifted out.

* Net Attendance Change: This is the Inflow group minus the Outflow group.

For a fuller discussion and explanation of the terms used see Occasional Paper 8, 'Inflow and Outflow Between Denominations: 1991 to 2001'.

* Note: the slightly different figures recorded in brackets in Tables 2 & 3 are from the NCLS Research 1996 Survey on the NCLS website: www.ncls.org.au and referred to in chapter 7 of NCLS Publication *Build My Church*.

For the statistics in Tables 1, 2 & 3 see Occasional Paper 8, 'Inflow and Outflow between denominations: 1991 to 2001,' Sam Sterland, Ruth Powell and Keith Castle, NCLS Research, March 2006

of the larger congregations in general did not fit into what they believed the Uniting Church should promote, and while these leaders may have been pleased to keep the public impression which the overall numbers provided, they were uneasy about where the numbers reside, and they were certainly not pleased if these congregations had an active role in calling attention to the Uniting Church's deficiencies in theological direction.

3. NCLS data on Uniting Church Attendance

What does the NCLS survey mainly outline for attendance in the Uniting Church?

Significant attendance declines are now being experienced, with the NCLS recording a decrease for the Uniting Church of 22%, between the period 1991 – 2001, and a further decline between 2001 and 2006 is expected. While the full national figures are not yet available, some states may already have their statistics, and it is evident that the decline will be at least the same, if not greater than the previous periods.

Ageing and exodus

Most of the decline to date, and future decline is related to the ageing of the Uniting Church, though as I have mentioned, the exodus of members, especially younger families and long-term members in the last five years will exacerbate the situation.

In 1996 48.7% of Uniting Church members were aged 60 years or over.

In 2001 56% of Uniting Church members were aged 60 years or over.

The 2001 NCLS survey found that 36% of the membership was over 70 years, compared to 5% of Pentecostal members being over 70 years of age.

What will 2006 reveal?

NCLS has focused on the results from the 2001 Survey and the statistical base that this provides for comparison with previous surveys. The full results from the 2006 NCLS survey will be very helpful, as it will provide a fifteen year comparison.

4. Conclusion

Commentators like myself can give an opinion now, based on observation of the church in general and the different statistics available. I believe five points will become clearer in 2008

congregations with a strong sense of corporate and community life, and which did not suffer a significant split after the 2003 Assembly, will have grown, or at least remained stable. The majority of young people in the

Table 4

NCLS	Estimated attendance	Change in numbers and percent	Percentage of Census Affiliation
1991	162 830		11.7
1996	142 900	19 930 (-12.2%)	10.7
2001	126 600	16 300 (-11.4%)	10.1

Sources for references: (From NCLS published material: see - www.ncls.org.au) '2001 Church Estimates,' *NCLS Occasional Paper No 3*, John Bellamy and Keith Castle, February 2004, NCLS Research, Sydney and 'An Accurate Look at Attendance Trends in Australian Churches,' *Pointers*, June 1999, Vol 9 No 2 (from NCLS published material) and *Religion: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne 1997

and beyond:

- The future is very dim for overall congregational life in Synods which have a significant liberal orientation, like Victoria and Western Australia.
- Drifting out: this group will increase, especially among older evangelical members of the church who are currently attending a church led by a theologically liberal minister.
- The remaining group of UCA members who have been occasionally attending their local UCA church, while mainly attending another denomination, will make a formal decision that they are no longer UCA members and cease to have contact.
- The general attendance decline due to the ageing church will continue to be accentuated by the exodus of members due to ongoing issues with the sexuality debate and with any more overt liberalisation of the UCA, especially in certain Synods, like Queensland, and some Presbyteries.
- Large evangelical Uniting Church

Uniting Church will attend these congregations and thus worship within a local tradition that promotes chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.

Over this year as more figures come out I will provide an occasional update via email to ACC subscribers and, in the event of dramatic news, in *Catalyst*.

In summary, I can do no better than reiterate my earlier comments that I believe present trends indicate that the most likely churches to develop within the Uniting Church are churches with a more overt evangelical foundation.

If, however, these churches and members are increasingly alienated by more theologically liberal decision-making, then, over time, more evangelical members will leave, confounding the viability of individual congregations and the UCA as a congregationally based denomination.

I know that some people believe that the UCA will be flooded with new members when it embraces a fully liberal theology, but there is no evidence to suggest anything like this will happen – other than in someone's vivid imagination.

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