

# Marks of the Future Church

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## The future and features of the Church in Australia?

You have probably heard ad nauseum details about the changing nature of the Australian church over the last twenty years, but in reality there has been an ongoing discussion for a considerable time within different circles from the start of the modern missionary movement, a movement which had a wider effect on Australia through the contact and development of missions in the Pacific. The continuing debate about the future of the church reflects the fact that change has always happened. This is something that historians know, the church has never really been stagnant or fixated in time, immune to the challenges and changes of society of the day. However, every now and then, however, we do have a more significant period of social upheaval and change and certainly like the industrial revolution, the technological revolution is providing a significant stimulus to change in society and our churches. Some points to consider.

### 1. FLEXIBILITY and Changing attendance patterns

Churches will develop (that is they will be given, or they will take by stealth, confrontation or plain apathy) increasing flexibility in their development and arrangement of structures. Relationships with denominational bodies will become less of a concern and denominations will be confronted by growing interest in para-church, mega church and inter-church groupings, which may or may not have official sanction or encouragement. Many churches will develop new names and new foci based on their locality, though the denomination will still count them as one of their own.

### 2. FLUIDITY OF MEMBERSHIP

We have all heard about post-denominationalism, well there will be something called a-denominationalism. People will remain committed to denominations, but it will be primarily a local church within that denomination, and in the future some people will have dual or multiple links with different denominations who provide different forms of services and ministry, for example, someone may attend a local church for community fellowship and then another service at night or once a month for its liturgy or social justice program.

### 3. VOLATILITY

Churches will become even more intrinsically local and peculiar to their own mission, rather than to the denomination to which they are attached. While some denominational groupings have always had significant splits, others have been minimised or prevented from them by their stronger polity and structures. This will be under increasing challenge in the future and there may be some well publicised splits, however, I believe that churches may increasingly just decide to not make an open split but have a Clayton's split.

The property may still be part of a denomination, but the newcomer or outsider will not know this. For denominational purposes they will fulfil certain roles within the wider church, but then they may appear to outsiders and even members to be functionally independent or very loosely attached.

#### **4. THEOLOGICAL DIVIDE**

One significant change over the last thirty years has been that overall, the theological divide is now within denominations, rather than before when it was between denominations.

#### **5. GROWTH AND DECLINE WITHIN the same denomination**

Decline is not a generalised phenomenon in every local church, even though you can point to denominations which as a whole are declining in attendance. Always there are local exceptions and these will be accentuated in the future, particularly in Protestant churches:

##### **Some further characteristics:**

According to most survey material, including the National Church Life Survey, evangelical and conservative churches appear to be growing and will continue to do so for three main reasons:

1. These churches have a stronger commitment to evangelism and outreach and perhaps related, usually commitment to providing a newer worship style environment within which newcomers are made to feel welcome.
2. Inclusive leadership. Leadership is provided by clergy, but it is especially visionary, plus actualising. It is able to draw upon a wide range of people for skills and talents and develop networks of ministry teams.
3. Focus on young adults work. Generally, the churches with younger people now, and especially those which have dedicated youth work/ers have more of an ability to survive into the future. The churches which already have an older population and few or no young people (under 40 years) will be less likely to exist in 10 - 15 years.

I know that many of our churches are hard to define theologically, but these broadly general churches and churches which are neither conservative or liberal/progressive will continue to decline and fade away. They will simply offer nothing distinctive or interesting.

Liturgically or Sacramentally based churches in Protestant traditions will face increasing challenges from an ageing population and the fact that these churches do not have a strong liturgical tradition from within the denomination to draw upon, especially among younger people. In general (and there are some exceptions), Protestant churches have not been able to satisfactorily create a priestly or sacramental base, and the time has run out to create it. The next few years will see this style of ministry come under increasing difficulty, especially within conservative rural areas and with churches with strong youth leadership, as differences in understandings of the church and ministry are accentuated and numbers decrease in the broadly general churches.

Protestant churches will also face difficulties because in general they have not have a strong culture that emphasizes weekly worship and focus on personal worship of God. According to most contemporary research, Protestant churches have focused on fellowship and values, and today, many people experience better fellowship and truer values outside the church than inside. Even today, many churches perhaps unwittingly or wittingly support this notion in a real way through ventures like chaplaincy services. The growth of ethic centres and chaplaincies provides contact for the wider population with churches, but the emphasis is not on worship and church services. Many people in the past have gone to church for moral reasons and societal contact, but now see they can get their values elsewhere and they do not see any value in a worship service or organised religion.

Catholic and Anglo-catholic churches who usually have better liturgically based services (and again there are exceptions), at least have a strong liturgical base and history, with many members brought up in these traditions. They will possibly take members away from the Protestant churches or at least will attract them for special services and occasional attendance because liturgical minded Protestants cannot obtain these services in their local church.

Catholics have a better base for the future, because of their overall numbers, bolstered by immigration, and particularly because of their emphasis on regular and personal worship through the mass. They also have a better foundation among young people, through their strong involvement in the educational system. Certainly, these factors are under pressure now and they will face more challenges, particularly related to the role that 'conscience' has taken with the church over the last twenty years and increasing pluralism within the society and perhaps even within the school environment. What is distinctive about Catholic education today, or for that matter any church or Christian education system? For people familiar with the range of new Christian schools and publications supporting their development, it is very fascinating to contrast their orientation to that of the Catholic system today.

Orthodox churches face similar, but also greater problems as the cultural connection will drop significantly in the next generation and increasing inter-marriage will progressively take its toll on a distinctive Orthodox environment. It is difficult to find reliable statistics about Orthodox attendance, but from National Social Science Survey material it is evident that Orthodox women are at least five times more likely to attend worship as men. It will be interesting to watch the changes for attendance at the focus times for the Orthodox, especially Easter, particularly among the younger generation.

Theologically liberal or progressive churches will decline overall, but there will remain pockets of these churches in major cities which will attract people from a wide range of denominational backgrounds and beliefs. In Sydney they are referred to as safety-valve churches.

Many of these churches have significant social service arms, which are essentially mini social service agencies. It is likely that they will eventually cease to have worshipping congregations and will become a service of the denomination or perhaps the community. This will be a major challenge for those who wish to re-integrate word and deed, as it has been promoted in the 1990s.

One outcome in the next 20 years, with declining attendance and a reduction in the number of congregations, is that there will be a considerable amount of property available from the closure of small congregations, particularly in rural and inner-city areas, mainly among Protestant and Anglican churches as another round of rationalisation takes place. This will also provide a buffer to the institutions and bureaucracies within the institutions as the interest or money from property sales will be used to pay for the structures. It may mean that more and more ministers, particularly within Protestant traditions will end up working for the institutional levels of the denomination, or for the social service arms of the institutions, or on special projects, as the church endeavours to find them positions with an ever-decreasing number of pastoral placements and an environment of increased choosiness and local emphasis, particularly among conservative and evangelical groups.

## **6. Development of Multi-dimensional and mega churches**

Some individual churches, though part of a denomination, act like a denomination. These will continue to develop and expand their areas of ministry, including having a school, bible training centre and music ministry and sometime multi-media. Christian schools will expand and provide a continued source of contact among young people for new churches and Pentecostal and Protestant churches. The eventual development of a network of small Christian universities will also provide certain churches with a continued Christian path through society, forming a Christian sub-culture much like that of some areas in the Southern U.S.A.

## **7. Churches - COST OF MAINTENANCE**

A significant issue for many of our older churches will be their maintenance. Unless there is a wide scale property development plan in the near future, denominations may have to make certain decisions about what churches are kept and what are allowed to crumble or be sold or given to the community for restoration and used in different ways. In one inner-city suburb in Sydney, churches are now used as: a restaurant, childcare centre, casting agency, warehouse and an office. Local churches will need to be more conscious of pragmatic decisions when it comes to buildings and development. Some churches may find new life in a large-scale re-development and plan for change.

## **8. Church and CIVIL ELEMENTS**

The decline of church involvement in some key social areas like marriage celebration and baptisms is now very evident, statistically for marriages and at least anecdotally for baptism. Even the Catholic Church is experiencing a decline with marriages and with the increasing advertising and acceptance of professional celebrants it would appear that within the next generation only about 1/3 of marriages will be conducted with a religious rite. This will mean that local churches will probably have even less contact with many people at these key areas or rites of passage. The one area of constant religious presence, the funeral is also changing though, as increasingly funerals are held at the crematorium, rather than the local church, usually because the person had little contact with the local church, but still wants (or their family) a religious rite.

## **9. LEADERSHIP**

Clergy will increasingly have to provide creative, visionary, and yet stable leadership. Plodding along with the same style of sermon or liturgy each week will not grow a church, but will provide a form of in-house chaplaincy for those members who like this style.

Team leadership will remain a strong prospect for established churches, but positions and responsibilities will be clearly marked and joint leadership without the designation of a team leader, superintendent, senior minister or Priest in charge will be very minimal (perhaps husband and wife teams may do this, but then we may encourage them to an early divorce).

## **10. USE OF SMALL GROUPS**

Small groups have been a significant area and will still be a major area of interaction for Australian churches, particularly with the challenges of technology and the often-impersonal environment it provides. I also see small groups in technology, for example chat groups on the web, meetings for isolated people, or to help reduce travel costs.

## **11. TECHNOLOGY**

Some churches of the future will be multi-media centres, but for all people under 50 years of age, the world wide web will play an important part as this will be a point of contact for people looking up information. Once people may have used the telephone or checked the Yellow Pages or asked their neighbour, but a local church web site with information and details about services, baptismal policy, statements of faith etc will provide a link to the wider community. Previously, the wider availability of the car broke the base of local church as the centre for the community, today, the Internet will provide wider links, particularly for large media oriented mega-churches and these will be cross-denominations and inter-denominational, providing another source of direction and leadership for local churches.

Technology will also impact upon areas like the offering and already some churches have more people on direct debit and giving than through the plate.

Overall, I still believe we are yet to see what impact technology will have on our churches - will it be like the new nightclub Home, where people in one country can dance to the same music at the same time as someone in another country. Will technology provide a visual link with other churches, in Australia and in the world and could we see the development (some would say renewal) of the 'house church' movement, with "home" being the foundation?

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