Making Sense of the Generational Decline in Anglican Identity

A report for the Bishop Perry Institute for Ministry and Mission November 2017
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Introduction

The Church of England Boys’ Society (CEBS) – later the Anglican Boys’ Society – was a large-scale boys’ movement similar to the Boy Scouts. Founded in Melbourne in 1914, it expanded quickly, and by the mid 1930s there were more than 120 branches nationally. Girls had the opportunity to join the Girls Friendly Society (GFS), which was formed even earlier than the CEBS, in England in 1875, and the first Australian branch followed in 1879.

Until the late 1970s, the CEBS and GFS, like church netball and cricket teams, drew large numbers of young people to Anglican parishes. Most of them would have also gone to Sunday School at some point, and certainly participated in CEBS and GFS services in the church. And out of a sense of obligation, these same young people probably attended church at least at Christmas and Easter. Here were several generations of young people well connected to their local Anglican parish, most likely familiar with the Anglican liturgy, and able to recite the Lord’s Prayer by heart. But dark clouds were on the horizon for these ancillary parish activities.

The CEBS Leaders’ Bulletins from 1982 show a movement in transition. (SEE FIGURE 1, next page) A slate of summer camps was planned for early 1983, one with the theme ‘let’s put fun into Frankston’. In contrast, an article entitled ‘1981 in Retrospect’ notes that three branches had closed due to insufficient leaders, and two others went into recess. Additionally, registrations were down by 12%. And 1982 was the last year that CEBS News, the newsletter for boys in the organisation, was published.

By the 1980s, joining in parish activities was becoming a less popular option for teenagers and young adults. A generation of prospective Anglicans turned their attention away from the church as a focal point of their activities. The CEBS movement lingered for some time after the early 1980s, but by the 2000s it was effectively over due to insufficient interest. There is now just a handful of groups in some states, operating without a broader organisational structure. Tragically, too, many boys in the CEBS movement were subjected to sexual abuse (see Royal Commission 2017a). Like other institutions, CEBS appealed to leaders whose motivations were entirely antithetical to the movement’s goals.
meaningful for them. As the plight of the CEBS movement illustrates, the causes of this can be found in a changing cultural context.

This is the second and major report for this project. An earlier report examined what the census and survey data show about declining Anglican identification. This report reprises some of that material, and incorporates new census data from 2016, and in-depth interview data. The 2016 census data contain some surprising patterns that were not anticipated in that first report. The first report is available from the project Facebook site (Anglican Identity Research Project — Deakin).

This project is about religious identification, and why people choose to identify as Anglican or not. It does not consider per se why people do or don’t attend Anglican services. Historically, churches in Australia have had a larger constituency than those who attend regularly. This research explores why the Anglican constituency has shrunk so much and so fast, rather than why attendances at many churches are so low, although these are certainly related.

### Project Methods

This project employs mixed methods. The quantitative data are drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data from 1981 through to 2016. It also makes use of the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), the 2014 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA) and the Gallup poll from 1961. Information about all of these data sources is contained at the end of this report.

The qualitative data for this study were collected by means of an in-depth interview. Forty interviews were conducted. This part of the study has a non-random, purposive sample design. It was designed specifically to examine in-depth how different generations understand and experience what it is to be an Anglican. Additionally, I wanted to see if there were generational differences among those who no longer identify as Anglican.

The sample design for this project thus sought to include people from different generations, Anglican and former Anglicans. Additionally, loose gender targets were applied so that there would be sufficient balance in the sample. Although based in Victoria, I worked to ensure that people from different locations across Australia, in both major cities and regional locations, were also included.

To achieve this sample, participants were recruited in a number of ways. The main approach was through a social media campaign on Facebook. I established a Facebook page for the project which contained a request for participants. In order to boost the profile of this page I paid for advertising and specifically targeted a number of active branches in Australia, including one in Melbourne, seven in Sydney, and one in Rockhampton. Additionally, its activities now incorporate women’s and family ministries. Ominously, however, the 2015 National Council Minutes noted: ‘GFS in Australia will die if we don’t look at different ways of being GFS.’ Since its heyday, dozens of branches have closed, and its membership numbers are far below peak levels.

The story of the CEBS and GFS movements illustrates the broader plight of the Anglican Church in Australia. It is well understood that identification with the Anglican Church is in rapid decline, and that attendances are decreasing and parishes closing. Using data from the Australian census, surveys, and specially conducted in-depth interviews, this paper explores some of the reasons why identification with the Anglican Church has declined so rapidly. It argues that the turn away from Anglican identification is in large part a birth cohort or generational problem. Unlike older generations, as the younger generations have moved into adulthood, they have not seen Anglican identity as particularly

![FIGURE 1: CEBS Leaders’ Bulletin 1982](image)
of groups who might have an interest in participating. In total, the page garnered more than 450 ‘likes’ and supplied many of the interview participants. I also used the ‘snowball’ approach, in which known contacts are approached for an interview, or asked to provide the names of people who might be able to assist in the study. For this recruitment, I used my networks, in addition to those of one of the research assistants who worked on the project.

To add to my understanding of the role of Anglican schools in propagating a sense of Anglican identity, my interview corpus also included a subset of four school chaplains from two different states on the eastern seaboard. I obtained their contact details from public records and made initial contacts by email or phone.

Interviews were conducted either by Skype, telephone, or face-to-face. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were conducted by myself and two research assistants, both of whom were PhD students at the time. In the interview, informants were asked about their personal and professional background, religious practices and beliefs, their experience of church, and why they have remained or ceased to identify as Anglican. They were also asked about their overall perception of the Anglican Church in contemporary Australia. The interviews all followed a particular order, however there was ample opportunity for extempore questions or comments.

Of the 40 people I interviewed, 23 identified as Anglican. Five were ordained clergy, the rest lay people. Among lay people, levels of commitment to the church varied from regular attenders enrolled on parish electoral rolls, to people who simply identified as Anglican but had not attended for months or years. Anglicans of the Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical and ‘Middle Church’ traditions all participated. Others saw themselves simply as Anglicans, or described an affinity with some other aspect of the Anglican tradition, whether the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Book of Common Prayer or even just their particular parish.

Seventeen participants identified as former Anglicans. Some had left organised religion for all time, and did not identify with any denomination or religious tradition. Others had previously identified as Anglican but were now affiliated with another Christian denomination or tradition.

Figure 2 shows which states the interview participants lived in at time of interview.

About half lived in Victoria; the remainder in NSW, QLD, ACT, WA, and SA. I did not interview any Tasmanians. Informants were variously workers, students, retirees, or stay-at-home parents, and had various levels of education. They fitted into the birth cohorts shown in Table 1. (See below for the rationale for these cohorts.)

This sample makes no claim to be representative of the Anglican communion in Australia. Rather, it is a purposive sample designed to encompass the very many ways in which contemporary Australians see themselves as Anglicans. After interviewing 40 people I was confident that I was able to understand the key generational differences that underpin people’s experiences of being Anglican.

Finally, the research was conducted with appropriate university ethical approval. To ensure anonymity, all the informants have been assigned pseudonyms and any other potentially identifying information altered.

![Figure 2: State locations of project informants](image)

**TABLE 1: Birth Cohorts of Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation (Birth cohort)</th>
<th>Birth years of cohort</th>
<th>Age range at interview</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucky</td>
<td>1932-1946</td>
<td>71-85</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomers</td>
<td>1947-1966</td>
<td>51-70</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1967-1981</td>
<td>36-50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>1982-1996</td>
<td>21-35</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican Chaplains</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Declining Affiliation with the Anglican Church in Australia

This report begins by using census data to map patterns of Anglican affiliation for the 35-year period of 1981 to 2016, a time of great change for the Anglican Church. The census measures religious affiliation. Examining religious identity or adherence is a useful way of mapping religious change over time, and for understanding the vibrancy of a particular religious community or group.

Identifying as an Anglican in the census is a subjective assessment of how people see themselves and their place in Australia’s religious firmament, not of how religious they are. There is no formal requirement to be baptised, confirmed, or listed on a parish electoral role. The primary focus of this research is about the broader community of people who identify as Anglican (and their children), not just those who go to church regularly. These people can be considered the historic and presumed constituency of the Anglican Church.

To place the Anglican Church’s story in context, Figure 3 shows the fortunes of different religions and denominations in Australia across the past 35 years. Seemingly, particular trajectories evident since the late 1980s accelerated in the most recent census.

Between the 1981 and 2016 censuses, the proportion of the population in Australia identifying as Anglican decreased from 26% to 13% of the population. Those with no religious affiliation, the ‘nones’, surpassed the Catholics to become the single largest group in Australia, and now comprise 30% of Australia’s population. The proportion of Catholics dropped slightly, while adherence to various world religions increased. Pentecostals remained steady, at about 1% of the population.

Part of the rise of the nones is likely due to how the data were collected. In 2016 – for the first time – the ‘no religion’ category was the first choice on the census form, and those people who disaffiliated from the Anglican Church most likely selected none on the census form. There are deeper reasons, however, as to why the Anglican Church has experienced a decline in affiliation across a longer time period.

My particular focus with the census data is on generational – birth cohort – differences. Social scientists often use the distinction between age, period, and cohort in order to make sense of social change over time. Age refers to a person’s stage in the life course. Period is about the time in which a person is living — the early twentieth or the late twentieth century — each epoch has its own distinctive cultural and social milieu. A birth cohort is ‘a group of people born in the same [time] period’ (ABS 2004), and is often measured in 10 or 20 year groupings.

Recent research on declining Christian affiliation in countries such as Great Britain, America and Canada...
shows that Protestant disaffiliation is primarily due to birth cohort changes, rather than changes associated with aging, or period effects (see, for example, Crockett & Voas 2006; Sherkat 2014; Pew Research Center 2015; Day 2017).

This international research shows that as successive birth cohorts have matured into adults, they have been less likely than the preceding generations to take up a Protestant identity. As I demonstrate in this section, there is a pronounced generational effect when it comes to identifying with the Anglican Church in Australia.

For ease of reference, each birth cohort discussed in this report is given a name: i.e. ‘Boomers’ or ‘Generation X’. The dating and naming of these birth cohorts largely follows conventions established in a series of reports by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (ABS 2004; 2006).

Central to this analysis is the birth cohort known as the ‘Baby Boomers’. The ABS has in a recent report identified those born in the period 1947-1966 as being members of the baby boom generation (ABS 2006), although it also often dated as beginning in 1946. There was literally a baby boom in this period: a marked increase in the fertility rate.

Baby Boomers were teens and young adults during the profound social changes of the late 1960s and 1970s. It is their children, more than any other birth cohort, typically called Generation Y, who have rejected or not followed the religious identity of their parents.

The other generations featured in the analysis below span a 15-year period (except the ‘Oldest’ generation, which was 85+ in 2016). This 15-year span aligns with earlier research, including the national Australian Spirit of Generation Y project (See Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007).

The next table, Table 2, summarises demographic details about these different birth cohorts.

The name of each generation is taken from the ABS (e.g. ABS 2006). The ‘Oldest’ are quite simply Australia’s oldest people. The ‘Lucky’ generation are those too young to have served in any of the major wars in the twentieth century. Boomers I have explained above; Generation X is a commonly used moniker for those who missed out on the epic social changes of the 1960s, while Generation Y have followed after the Xers (see Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007 for a full description).

As this table shows, Baby Boomers were teens and young adults in 1981, and members of Generation X were children. In 2016, Boomers were in or moving past their mid-life phase, Generation Y were in their emerging adult years to their early thirties, and Generation X were in their mid to late thirties and forties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Birth Years</th>
<th>Age in 1981</th>
<th>Age in 2016</th>
<th>Size of cohort in 2016 '000</th>
<th>Proportion of popn. In 2016 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oldest</td>
<td>1922-1931</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>85+</td>
<td>449.4</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky</td>
<td>1932-1946</td>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>70-84</td>
<td>2000.9</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomers</td>
<td>1947-1966</td>
<td>15-34</td>
<td>50-69</td>
<td>5466.2</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1967-1981</td>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>4726.2</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>1982-1996</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>20-34</td>
<td>4935.2</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Having established the size and boundaries of these five birth cohorts, Figure 4 maps the patterns of Anglican identification for each birth cohort from 1981 to 2016.

Every generation experienced some kind of decline between 2011 and 2016. I will discuss that in the next section.) Across a longer period of time we can see a distinct generational pattern.

The figure shows the proportion of each birth cohort who identified as Anglican from one census to the next. For example, in 1981, Generation X was aged 0-14, and 23% identified as Anglican (in most cases it was their parents who completed the census form on their behalf). In 2016, and now aged between 35-49, just 12% of Generation X identified as Anglican, a decline of 11% since 1981.

Importantly, there are marked differences between each generation as they have aged in the time period 1981-2016. The proportion of the Lucky and Oldest generations who are Anglican has largely remained the same as these generations have aged, with only a slight decrease (e.g. the proportion of those in the Lucky generation who are Anglican has decreased by only 2% in 35 years). These are people who, as adolescents and young adults, attended church more frequently than young adults today, and most have remained Anglicans across their adult years.

In 1981 Boomers were young adults (15-34), and 24% identified as Anglican. As they have aged, this figure has declined somewhat. In 2016, the Boomers were aged 50-69, and 18% remained Anglicans, a decline of 6% in 35 years.

It is starkly evident that as two of the youngest generations – Generations X and Y – have entered adulthood, they have rejected (or not taken up) Anglican identity. In 1991, when members of Generation Y were infants and young children, 19% were nominated in the census as Anglicans by their parents. In 2016, when members of Generation Y were aged 20-34, and mainly answering the census question on religion themselves, just 7% identified as Anglicans. Clearly, Anglican disaffiliation is most likely to occur within the youngest birth cohorts as they transition through their twenties and thirties. Simply put, both Generation X and Y are about half as Anglican as their respective parents’ generations (the Lucky and Boomer generations).

This same kind of pattern appears if the analysis is done in 10 year blocks, that is, 20-29, 30-39 year-olds, and so on. The longer birth cohorts I have used here help us to see links between a parent’s generation and their children’s generation, and to anticipate the cultural shifts that took place for the Baby Boomers.

Sharp Downturn: Decline and loss between 2011 to 2016

The 2016 census represented grim news for the Anglican Church. Between 2011 and 2016, the total number of Anglicans in Australia declined from 3,679,907 to 3,101,187 – a decrease of almost 16%. I noted above that this is due in part to the position of the ‘no religion’ category on the census form; however, the same generational patterns shown above are at play in the numerical decline of Anglicans in Australia in the past five years.
It is evident from Figure 4 above that each generation experienced a proportional decline in Anglican affiliation between the 2011 and 2016 censuses. Table 3 shows Anglican losses (in numbers) by generation between 2011 and 2016.

The largest losses were among Generation Ys, who decreased by nearly a third, a much larger decrease than the other generations noted in the table. Disaffiliation is most pronounced among this group. Even if we account for the apparent census effect (where the ‘no religion’ category was placed on the census form) we see that Anglican affiliation matters more to the Lucky and Oldest generations, and less to the Boomers, and less still the Generations X and Y, as they age.

To explain all of this, I examine the periods of time in which the different generations came of age. British sociologists Alasdair Crockett and David Voas (2006, p. 577), writing about religious decline in Britain, argue:

The fact that birth cohorts seem to be of far greater significance than either period or age … in accounting for levels of religiosity suggests that experience in childhood and adolescence is crucial.

Indeed, the Lucky and Oldest generations came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time in which being an Anglican had a greater social significance, and a greater proportion of the population was connected to the church.

### Lucky (Generation) Times: Religious Life in the 1950s and ’60s

This section explores religious life in Australia several decades ago. Scholars widely agree that Australia enjoyed something of a ‘modest religious boom’ in the 1950s (Hilliard 1997, p. 211). According to historian David Hilliard (1997, p. 211), ‘In the mid-1950s in every denomination all the measurable indices of religious life – church membership, Sunday school enrolments, the number of new congregations, church income and enrolments in theological colleges and seminaries – had gone steadily upwards.’

The apogee of this boom was arguably evangelist Billy Graham’s tour of Australia in 1959. According to historian Judith Smart (1999, p. 167):

> Even by the standards of the 1950s, the crowds Graham drew were huge – more than three million over fifteen weeks … The Melbourne Cricket Ground saw a record of 143,750 on 15 March … “Decisions for Christ” numbered about 130,000 in Australia (representing about 1.24% of the total population.)

Several of the Lucky generation informants interviewed for this project had attended one of Billy Graham’s rallies. Clyde was 75, and gave a very detailed account of the time, telling me, ‘I decided to become, to join the Anglican Church after the Billy Graham Crusade.’ He was 18. Clyde described the ‘buzz’ that had gripped Sydney when Graham came to town in 1959:

> All over Sydney … there was discussion about it and then you couldn’t go anywhere I suppose, taxi drivers, or people in shops or whoever would be talking about the Crusade and the number of people who were going and the publicity it was receiving and Billy Graham and [were saying]: ‘What did you think of it?’ and ‘What did you think of him?’… So, it was highly publicised and a real talking point, just in general terms, not in any necessarily religious terms, but just as an event that I suppose Sydney had never, I don’t think Sydney had ever seen anything quite like it before.

And in terms of his personal commitment, Clyde was unambiguous about it being a turning point for his faith:

> The atmosphere for me was just to put it into words was electric … I can’t remember the message or his speech or his text but I guess it was just a culmination of the three other nights and that night and thinking it through and the realisation that my life was pretty empty and directionless and that I needed something more than I had and perhaps this was it.

The success of this rally typifies the centrality and normality of Christianity to everyday life. How else could an evangelist’s rally be such an important talking point?
point? It was a time when, according to Hilliard (1997, p. 234) ‘almost everyone, when asked, claimed a denominational affiliation’.

There is a common idea that people of this era felt an enormous social obligation to go to church, even if this was sporadic (see Davie 2005). This idea of ‘obligation’ gives rise to images of churches in the mid-twentieth century being full of people in their Sunday best, stiff and uncomfortable, desperate for the interminable sermon to end. Norma, an octogenarian, was the oldest person I interviewed, and told me about church life in the 1950s. She observed: ‘In the old days you got dressed up and you couldn’t go to church without a hat, the ladies had to wear a hat.’

But families like Norma’s didn’t just go because they felt some broader social pressure to go, ‘keeping up appearances’. They went because the church was an important hub of the community, and the Joneses next door were also going. A friend and colleague of mine is a sociologist and Catholic priest. We previously wrote a book together about youth religion in Australia. In it he made a nostalgic reference to the ‘affective warmth’ of Catholic devotional life in the era before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) (Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007, p. 88). He was reminiscing about the local Catholic parish of the early 1960s, filled with people whose lives were wrapped up in religious practice, and the social life that was a corollary of this. After a fashion, the same thing was occurring in Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian Church in the suburbs of Australian cities and country towns. Church was a home in the community. Importantly, it was also a place where young people were to be found in abundance.

Anne is 72, and became an Anglican as a teenager in the late 1950s. Both her parents were atheists; she became an Anglican because her neighbours invited her to Sunday School on a Sunday morning. Weekends were quiet, and church was something to do on a Sunday:

> The football finished on Saturday evening, we used to come home from football, buy fish and chips, and Sunday, for example, we’d just, we’d go for a long walk maybe and do the gardening, I don’t think there was, I don’t know what we did. We didn’t do anything on a Sunday.

It was simply a coincidence that her neighbour attended an Anglican Church and this is where Anne ended up going. Later Anne moved suburbs and so, as a religiously devoted teen, she was literally ‘sent’ by her parish priest to the Anglican Church in her new suburb. For the next decade, this Anglican Church was her social life:

> There was a huge group of young adults and we used to go for afternoon tea I think half past four, do a Bible study, have afternoon tea, go to church in the evening, and then go down to the coffee shop. We put on a fabulous play, we did Oklahoma and ... we had this huge [production], particularly because we had a couple of really good singers, and very good musicians, yeah, we absolutely loved it ... there was sport coming out of the church as well.

Anne met her husband at this church, and her children were baptised there as well. For a variety of reasons, these days she goes to the church of another denomination. Nonetheless, her lifelong affiliation remains with the Anglican Church. When asked which denomination she would check on the then forthcoming 2016 Census, she responded: ‘I think I’ll tick Church of England.’ Lifelong loyalties die hard.

For those who did not live through the period, it is also difficult to comprehend the sense of ‘tribalism’ that characterised Catholic and Protestant relationships — what historian Michael Hogan (1987) described as the ‘sectarian strand’ in Australian religion. Arthur was 75, a lifelong Anglican, and told me about the Catholic-Protestant divide he experienced as a child and teen:

> Yeah it was ... 1950s it was strong, the Catholic kids went to Catholic school and we went to state school and apart from playing in the streets and that we didn’t mix much, you had your own social groups and I suppose the Catholics were, the only other strong religion was Methodism ... so it was a fairly strong Irish-English divide, yes there was.

Norma described this divide and how it was manifested in her small country town. She said:

> I always think of my father when he had his funeral at our church, a very close friend, he rang up our home ... and gave all his sympathies and everything else, very nice chap. When I walked out of the church following Dad’s coffin, I looked across ... the road beside the vicarage [and there] was this particular chap but he was a Catholic, he didn’t dare come into our church [for the funeral] and I thought afterwards you were so lovely on the phone and yet you couldn’t come to the service.

It is a sociological truism that the experience of opposition (from outsiders to a group) strengthens community solidarity and clarifies the boundaries, identity and worldview of a community.

Finding good statistical data about religion in this era is difficult, mostly because very little exists outside of official church records. A careful look through the Australian Data Archive reveals that a Gallup poll from 1961 contained several questions about religious identification, belief and practice. This representative poll was conducted among the adult population of Australia (21 years old and above) and offers a rare statistical insight into religious life at that time.
The data reveal that 43% of the adult population attended services of worship monthly or more often, while 65% of the adult population had attended within the past year. Looking at Anglicans specifically, the Gallup poll suggests that about 60% of Anglicans in 1961 were attending services at least a few times per year. Not everyone who identified with a denomination actually attended services. Overall, a much larger proportion of the population experienced something like an active connection to a church or church community than is so in the current period. By contrast, for instance, according to an estimate from the 2014 HILDA data, about 39% of the adult population attended church in the previous year, 2013.

Critically, in the early 1960s there were no major birth cohort differences in attendance or affiliation. In 1961, members of the Lucky Generation were in their 20s and members of the Oldest Generation were in their 30s. These two birth cohorts were as likely as older birth cohorts to identify as Anglicans or to regularly attend services at an Anglican church.

The church, with its allied activities, was a place where young people were to be found. Richard, 77, is a Lucky generation Anglican who reminisced fondly about the ‘boom’ times:

[In his parish] We had the most marvellous youth group there, huge Sunday School, it was the centre of our life really and we had wonderful role models, the teaching in the Sunday School, the youth group was great, it was a marvellous time to grow up and I just feel so sorry for the young people now that they don’t have that now except in perhaps a few [churches] but no we were lucky, we really were lucky. [It] was a very special place.

These data suggest that the Oldest and Lucky Generations came of age in a time when there was broad social and peer support for their denominational affiliation, and an expectation that a person attend the church of their denomination – at least at Christmas and Easter. Shops closed at noon on a Saturday and there was no football on Sundays. And critically, there was an abiding culture of participation in voluntary associations, not just church-affiliated ones like CEBS and GFS, but also Scouts, Lions, Apex, Rotary and the Freemasons. These were the kinds of places and networks that bound communities together.

Young Anglicans of that time experienced stronger ties between community, church and identity. Members of the Lucky and Older generations accepted that ‘belonging’ to a denomination was part of everyday life, and to an extent, defined one’s place in the community. This experience has proved powerful and enduring. For the most part, these generations have held onto their Anglican identity as they have grown older, even if their attendance today is negligible or sporadic.

Lost Generations

Anglicans from the Lucky and Oldest generations experienced a strong connection with their church in their teen and young adult years, and remain loyal to those traditions. It is clear from the patterns revealed in the census data that the drift from Anglican identification began with the Boomer generation. This generation came of age in a society that was appreciably different to that of just one or two decades earlier.

Five years after Billy Graham’s Crusade, the Beatles toured Australia and were greeted by hundreds of thousands of screaming fans. The Beatles tour represented something of a watershed in Australian society. Among young people, the church was seemingly giving way to other interests. As Safioleas (2016, p. 17) observes, ‘Australia [in the 1960s] ... was slowly turning into a remarkably different place’. Australia was not alone. The popularity of the Beatles signified the emergence of a new and at times rebellious youth culture across the west, one that challenged existing institutions, particularly the church and state (Catto 2014, p. 3).

Numerous scholars have identified how societal and cultural changes that enveloped young people in the 1960s proved a challenge for the churches throughout the west (see Brown 2012; Frame 2007; Mason et al. 2010; Putnam & Campbell 2010). Societies were becoming increasingly affluent, educated and mobile. Nine new universities opened in Australia between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. Cities expanded rapidly to accommodate the boom in families. Anglican parishes were not built at sufficient speed to keep up with this expansion. And the post-war migration boom meant that there was greater cultural diversity than previously. This fractured tighter-knit Anglican enclaves, while new enclaves were never established. Writing about Great Britain, sociologist Linda Woodhead (2016a, p. 255) argues:

Increased mobility, affluence, educational opportunity and contact with a wider range of cultures and religions have broken down religious enclaves and subcultures and shaken up the ordering of religious privilege.

The Baby Boomers represented something of a population ‘bulge’; there were literally more of them than other birth cohorts, and their youth culture developed an inexorable momentum. Respected historian of Christianity, Callum Brown (2012, p. 30), notes that important, Boomer-led cultural trends of the 1960s included: ‘the sexual revolution; the rise of drug taking ... the loss of respect for civic institutions ... the resulting challenge to authority (notably by youth in a so-called generation gap) ... [and] the emergence of a new women’s activism.’
By contrast, the church of the 1960s was thought of as the upholder of traditionalism and morality, and in dynamic and revolutionary times young people – the swelling ranks of Baby Boomers – were less interested in that kind of tradition. Instead, it was a time when young people started to ‘tune in, turn on, and drop out’, and engage in experimentation and rebellion. Frankie is a 59-year-old Boomer, and told me about his experiences in the counter-culture in the late 1970s that drew him away from conventional religion:

I started getting into drugs and things like that … [I have taken] quite a number of illicit substances over my time and … had some very interesting, what I would term spiritual experiences as a result of those experiments with drugs like LSD, ketamine, things like that, cocaine, I tend to look at things like that as being able to access areas of your unconscious mind.

Interestingly, Clyde, just 15 years older than Frankie, missed this changing dynamic:

I was aware very much of the Beatles and the impact they made. I didn’t go to see them. I enjoyed their music in a general sense, I don’t think I was aware myself of the change in society, you know the move away from a church being the big central thing although I guess, yes it was coming there but I don’t think I was all that completely aware of it.

All of these changes are seen as having a deleterious effect not only on church attendance, but also identification and belief. Church did not have the same kind of appeal to young people who came of age during the late 1960s and into the 1970s. Society, for many interrelated reasons, was changing in ways that were antithetical to church participation, and consequently to religious identification.

Often overlooked in the discussions about the decline of Protestant denominations are shifting patterns in the population. There has been population decline in many regional parts of Australia, with people shifting to regional and capital cities (ABS 2017). Just like country football and netball teams, dozens of parishes have closed in regional and rural Australia, because young people and families are drawn to the larger cities (see Collins, Collins & Ezzy 2016). Again, this pattern has accelerated in recent decades.

Norma, for example, lives in a regional area that has seen the closure of almost every Anglican church in all of the nearby smaller towns. Her own parish is still open, now with just a monthly Holy Communion and a handful of loyal, ageing Anglicans. This is different to times past. She told me about the regular afternoon teas that followed the monthly services in the late 1940s:

It used to be lovely because it was an afternoon service and all the farmers all came with their families and then you’d have a particular family [and] you’d go and have tea with [them] and they’d put on a beautiful spread and then the following month you’d have whoever you wanted back for tea again so that was the socialising in a little country area.

And decades later:

Now they’ve all gone and another generation is nearly gone and even Geoff, my son, his family have gone, they’ve all got their jobs away. See they’re all in their twenties, late twenties, they’ve gone so that’s why the town is going down and our church is going down as well.

Because of this broader social transformation, we see something of an ‘intergenerational breakdown’ in the transmission of Anglican identification between one generation to the next. This is clear from the patterns identified in Figure 4 above. To make sense of this I draw upon the work of French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000), who suggests religion ought to be understood as a distinctive, communal ‘way of believing’, passed on from one generation to the next. For her, religion is a ‘chain of memory’ that has historically been shared in a continuous, unbroken line from sometime in the past to the present.

These religious ‘chains of memory’ are embedded in the creeds and theology of a particular denomination (like the Thirty-Nine Articles), but also the regular and repeated experience of ritual, community and belonging. For Anglicans in the twentieth century (depending on the kind of Anglican church a person associated with), these rituals included familiar Anglican touchstones such as the celebration of the Holy Communion, the Book of Common Prayer and, later, the distinctive green An Australian Prayer Book, infant baptism, confirmation, and the rhythm of the church calendar, with Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Christmas. Experiencing these rituals, even infrequently, has been an irreducible part of the Anglican story. Many of this project’s informants, both current and former Anglicans, could remember experiencing these rituals in their childhoods. Clare, 33, a Gen Y who no longer attends church and who no longer identifies as Anglican, recalled:

I suppose like one of the kind of rituals that gets drilled into you, this is the way we do it in our church. We drink from the big cup and yeah go up the front and whatever so yeah, I remember that, I think I remember, probably my clearest memories [of being raised Anglican] are of my grandfather. He was the Anglican minister at the local church in the small kind of country … town they lived in … so when we would go to their house he would always
have his [clerical robes] hanging on the back of his door and things and I remember going to church and him being up the front doing things with candles and what not so I suppose yeah those are my memories, yeah ritual and outfits (emphasis added).

These rituals are part of the communal, shared experience of being Anglican, but other activities, particularly auxiliary parish activities, consolidated a sense of belonging, of ‘being Anglican’. For Anglicans in the time up until the 1980s, this included CEBS, GFS, the sporting clubs, Sunday School, and annual summer camps. Vanessa, a 53-year-old Baby Boomer, talked about how she experienced this:

Mum just really encouraged us to go to church and to be a part of the community and she led by example by helping out at and volunteering at every turn of the clock, of reading, being welcoming, helping out at all church functions … my sister and I were involved in the GFS and very much encouraged to participate in that so we had our own little community within the community and so that was very powerful.

Robyn is 70, a former Anglican, and was born at the very start of the baby boom in 1946, and she too recalled this broad sweep of activities from her childhood:

I: You were raised Anglican by your parents?
S: Very much so, yes.
I: What did that involve?
S: The whole Sunday school, there was I think a family service once a month that involved the parents and kids, and then as I say confirmation and church.
I: So were your family very much part of the Anglican community would you say?
S: Well Mum was, Dad was away in the army for a lot of it anyway, but we did the GFS thing, we did church camp every school holidays so yeah, it was a fairly involved childhood.

It is a sociologically established fact that mainline denominations are not built on switchers from other denomination or new converts, but on families, and the passing down of tradition within families (see Bengtson, Putney and Harris 2013). For Hervieu-Léger, a tradition of belief and identification survives and reproduces itself, insofar as ‘mention of the past and memories … are consciously [and successfully] shared with and passed on to others’ (2000, p. 123). The affective, communal threads of ‘being Anglican’ that linked members of the Lucky generations to the religious identity of their forbears are not being successfully passed down to the next generations.

In the past few decades, some potential Anglicans have been lost (that is, people who might have once been Anglicans). In the 1950s and ‘60s it was common to find ‘marginal’ Anglicans, members of the Lucky and Older generations, who attended a handful of times per year, particularly Christmas and Easter, and who may have attended CEBS, GFS and Sunday School. These people have largely remained loyal to the Anglican Church; however, their children and grandchildren have not had the experiences or enculturation of the kind described above. Due to the complexities of life, mobility and other options, in addition to the secularised environment of Australian society (e.g. declining belief in God), they have had little to no exposure to CEBS, GFS, Sunday School or church at Christmas and Easter. They do not, and have never, identified with their parents’ and grandparents’ experiences.

Pam, 67, was born at the start of the baby boom. She does not attend Anglican services these days, preferring instead to go to the conveniently located Uniting Church on occasion, and prays ‘only on Sundays’. She is, however, a ‘cradle-to-the-grave’ Anglican, born into the tradition. Her affiliation is resolute:

It is something I was born into and everybody, all our family are Anglicans, actually we still go under [the name] Church of England, we’re still old fashioned.

This heritage has no meaning for the younger members of her family. She said:

Kids don’t know about it [being Anglican] … I’ve got grand nieces and nephews [and] religion is just something they’ve heard of but they don’t follow Jesus, but they don’t follow anything either, they don’t identify with anything, except Maccas [McDonalds].

Other members of the younger generations have had some contact with the church when children, and were once Anglicans, but they have not retained an Anglican identity as they have aged. This explains in part the drop-off seen in Figure 4 above, where large numbers of Gen X and Gen Y cease affiliating as they get older. Data from another social survey, the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, asked adults (ages 17-94) about whether they had been ‘raised religious’. Forty-four per cent of those who were raised Anglican said that they still identify as Anglican; 2% had become Catholic; 5% of those who were raised Anglican now identify with ‘Other Christian’ denominations; 41% of those raised Anglican do not now identify with any denomination. In effect, almost half the adults in the sample who were raised Anglican no longer identify as Anglicans. Most have no religion.

Norma talked about the struggle to keep her children and her grandchildren interested in going to church, even occasionally. This was due in part to traditional, ‘Middle Anglican’ style of service. She said:
I think [church] was above their head ... Jocelyn [her granddaughter] was the youngest of Geoff’s family and she would go to church and say ‘Nanny it is boring’, well it was boring for kids, they couldn’t work it all out and you know the sermons weren’t … the kids just don’t, they don’t follow it.

Norma, living in a small country town, felt this change began to be particularly discernible from the 1970s:

It would have got late 70s, yeah late 70s they seemed to drift off and did more things they wanted to do, perhaps the family, their families … didn’t push them to go to church, if they didn’t want to go they stayed home.

Jack, 41, a member of Generation X, and a former Anglican, described his own lost threads:

There was never any pressure at all [from his parents] they understood when I had to stop going to church because junior cricket was playing on a Sunday morning, so there was no pressure to stay in the church, I’m sure there’s a little part of my parents now that are a little bit disappointed that I’m not involved in a formal or organised capacity with any church but that’s my generation.

For those without expressed Christian commitment, there are fewer reasons to go near the parish, or to think there is any ‘social capital’ that might be gained from identifying with the ‘C of E’.

What has also been lost is a sense that one’s family traditions are worth identifying with, and even activities that once drew in marginal Anglicans, such as baptisms and attendance at Christmas and Easter, are unimportant. Nathan is 32, a Generation Y, and a lifelong and committed Anglican. He summarises this nicely when he says:

We have moved from a time when to be a socially acceptable member of society you had to be a religious person, even if you weren’t active in it, you had to identify as a religious person so you identified as being Anglican or a Catholic or a Baptist or a Buddhist or whatever and that was part of the moral identity you upheld. I think that’s gone now, that notion of having to be religious, to be moral, is gone from our society.

While fewer members of Generation Y as a whole identify as Anglican (perhaps described as lost nominals), those who do go to church are not a ‘lost cause’. One of the few data sources that might allow this proposition to be properly substantiated is the 2014 HILDA survey, which counts more than 2300 Anglicans among its respondents. According to this data, while a smaller proportion of those who are Anglican are Generation Y, these Anglicans are about as likely as members of the Lucky Generation to go to church at least a few times per year (approx. 23% for both age groups).

Rising multiculturalism, and slow eclipse of the British influence on Australian society are also identified by some commentators as having a deleterious effect on the importance of this Anglican identity (see Bouma 2016; Powell 2017). It is certainly true that historically the church was emblematic of the Empire, and the ascendancy of British culture. Some of the older Anglicans with whom I spoke described this association, how it seemed to them several decades ago. Arthur, for example, a 75-year-old lifelong Anglican commented:

[in the 1950s] When we had the British Empire, it was good to be Anglican because the British people ruled the world and the Anglican Church must be good because it is part of that system and when I was a boy, playing in the fifties, [it was] still part of the Empire.

That said, whilst the older informants did acknowledge the reality of sectarian divisions, no one else mentioned that ‘Old Country’ ties were enduringly important to them. If being Anglican encapsulated some sense of Empire, then this was latent or lost.

In sum, we see that with each generation, fewer people are coming into contact with the Anglican Church’s orbit, particularly those auxiliary activities that connected people to the broader Anglican community. Anglican chains of memory that might bind generations of families are lost, or in the process of being lost.

Image Problems?

In recent decades, the Catholic Church has been devastated by revelations of child sexual abuse. The recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse heard evidence that Catholic bishops knowingly moved paedophile priests from one parish to another (Royal Commission 2017b). These revelations have caused much soul-searching among the Catholic laity about the state of their church (see Windsor 2017). Many Catholics now openly question the insistence that they ‘must be good because it is part of that system and when I was a boy, playing in the fifties, [it was] still part of the Empire.

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The actions and activities of Anglican dioceses, Anglican schools, and organisations such as the CEBS have also been investigated at the Royal commission. The interviews for this project were conducted when the Royal Commission was sitting, and some interviewees commented that this was reflecting very poorly on the church.

More broadly, the Anglican Church has in recent decades experienced other turmoil and upheaval. There has been
persistent debate around the ordination of women, gay and lesbian clergy, revisions to the liturgy and prayer book, and marriage equality. For many Anglicans, these are internal issues and ought not to be the concern of non-Anglicans. Others worry that these debates harm the wider perception of the church and dissuade potential joiners, or lead to disaffection and disaffiliation from Anglicans.


> Religion flourishes when it is enmeshed with the lives of those it serves and dies when it no longer connects. Societal churches depend on a healthy relationship with their societies, even when there is mutual criticism. But in England, after the 1980s, the increasingly stretched ties between the two snapped. Church and society spun off in different orbits.

She and Brown argue that squabbles between various branches of the church over the ordination of women are the kinds of issues that have rendered the Church of England an irrelevant institution to the increasingly secular British public, particularly young people. They point directly to the insular nature of the church and its leaders as having a deleterious effect on the Church of England. According to Brown and Woodhead (2016, p. 213):

> Faced with the challenge of maintaining a living relationship between its traditions and the society of which it was part, it baulked ... Clericalism increased, and internecine warfare between clerical tribes proved a destructive distraction.

How relevant are these arguments to the plight of the Anglican Church in Australia, particularly when it comes to identification as Anglican?

Thus far, I have argued that it is more the changing nature of society, and how this has affected the lives of young people in particular, that has first and foremost drawn young people away from the church and its community-building ancillary activities. In the 1980s, the CEBS failed not because of the programs it offered, but because no one was interested in parish-based activities. Their traditional constituency had shrunk and were doing other activities. And parents stopped sending their children to Sunday School because they no longer felt some social obligation to do so; moreover, shopping centres were open and junior football and netball matches had to be played.

That said, in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the Church was perhaps slow to react to the cultural upheaval in mainstream society, and young people were aware of this. Eventually, however, almost every congregation adapted their church practices in some way or another; the church itself has not forgotten that the society around it is changing. In Australia, the Book of Common Prayer was adapted in the late 1970s, and again in the 1990s. And taking the lead first from the Jesus People Movement, and later, the Pentecostal churches, contemporary music was folded into many church services. Every single diocese, and almost every single church in Australia, has done something at some point to try and attract more young people. This might be a youth group, youth services, church planting, camps, or something else. Arguably, it has been too late to keep chains of memory active in many places. The Church is not blameless.

And like England, intense factional disputes have also characterised Anglican relations in recent decades (see Porter 2011; Cameron 2016). I asked the project participants whether or not they thought divisions between different movements within the Anglican Church, and particular flashpoints, like the ordination of women, were a problem for the church. Among Anglicans, opinion was divided, which is to be expected. Some thought debate was an important strength of the Church, like Jack, 41, and an infrequent attendee:

> I think it is great that they are having the discussion even and the discussion at that level and with those results and with that passion is not being had anywhere else in organised religion ... I think it is great that the Anglican Church is having those debates, I think it’s great that the Archbishop of Canterbury is taking a lead on a lot of those debates, not shying away from it ... I don’t think division in a church, in the long run, is a bad thing.

Others personally felt affronted or angry with those parts of the church that followed different theological positions. For all of this, however, they remain loyal in some way to the Anglican Church in its present form.

It is apposite to look in detail at the responses of those people I interviewed who no longer identify as Anglican, and who are members of the ‘lost Anglican generations’, Generation X and Y. Three key patterns emerged among this group. Some thought that denominational differences were a good thing, evidence of a healthy and robust approach to theological matters. Adam, 46, expressed this point of view:

> That’s what I really like about the Anglican Church is all those debates they have but on the other hand I think, I don’t think the ordination of women should be a topic of debate, I think they should...
be, a lot of women are already ordained and there should be more women ordained so it is probably, I just think they should pick better topics to argue over, I never was really interested in that stuff, certainly really happy to see women ordained, thought that was really good.

However, most of the former Anglicans to whom I spoke did think these divisions and tensions were somewhat of a problem for the church, although none said it was the reason they no longer identified with the Anglican Church. Helen, 27, said:

I think because as a denomination you [should] put forward your one thing and that thing is what connects you and brings you together ... there should be some sort of balance in what is believed ... and ... with so much division there's these really big issues, I don't think they're small issues by any means. I think they're very big and if they were small issues I think I'd be OK, small things do change and we are people. But with such large issues that really matter and really take an effect in communities and effect in people's lives [the church] should be more together on things like that.

Daniel, 48, and now a Baptist, said:

I think it is a problem if it gets to the level that it is in the media, I think one of the advantages that we have with the Baptist [church], particularly on the women issue, is that it is up to the individual church to decide, so you know some churches say yeah, some say no, they are all small scale decisions so they never get to the point of actually hitting the airwaves, whereas yeah, because with the Anglican Church things are decided so much more centrally it becomes so, tends to supercharge those announcements, so I think the fact that there is that visible divisiveness particularly when, on the occasion where people get nasty about it, that is a problem, yeah.

Clare, 33, thought an ‘out-of-step’ church was a serious negative:

Everywhere else has caught up with the fact you can’t discriminate on appointing a woman to a leadership position so the complexities of the behind the scenes interpretations of the Bible, personal faith and what not, is just lost on [people] it just looks like an archaic institution so I do think it’s a problem because when the rest of the world, secular world has moved on and accepted ... become accepted on a broad level across the rest of society, it just looks like a plain old confusing mess when you look back at the kind of Christian grapple with it.

A few informants thought that the general public was indifferent to or unaware of intra-denominational matters, and did not register or care about what might be taking place at Synod, or within a particular diocese. One said:

In the street I live in, there’s more Hindus than Christians here so a lot of inner-church squabbles seem completely trivial in that sort of a context.

Jamie, 42, said:

I haven’t been part of the Anglican Church for a number of years so not sure what is going on in dioceses or what’s being communicated or not.

A church that is seemingly out of step with society on some social issues, or riven by factions, might simply give those on the periphery another reason as to why they don’t want to identify as Anglicans, rather than being the cause of the disaffiliation per se. (I am not referring here to people who leave the church because of a specific dispute). All of the sociological research, including the findings presented above, suggests that it is deeper factors — personal, familiar and familial — that lead a person away from identification with the Anglican Church.

On Being Anglican Today …

In 1961, when a third of all Australians identified with the Church of England, this denomination, more than any other, could claim to be the ‘church of the people’, representing the needs and interests of a large plurality of the population, and saying something about one’s heritage and social position: where one fitted within the Australian community. Recent losses, and coverage of these losses, perhaps convey the impression of a church on the wane, irrelevant to the broader population. Almost to a person, current Anglicans interviewed were sanguine about their church and its prospects, and quietly optimistic it could still be relevant to Australian society, both socially and spiritually. A number of participants emphasised that the Church’s social services and advocacy for the socially disenfranchised were of critical importance to this enterprise. Konrad is 61, and became an Anglican after having been raised in another tradition. He said:

I think if it continues to reach out to people in terms of providing social services and education it probably will have a good place, it, one of the things, I know my church is inner city and we do run a shelter on Saturday nights for homeless men, and we also take in their laundry, and different people volunteer to take home a bag of laundry and bring it back the next week, so I think those sorts of things, outreach, and they have, we
have a charity shop as well, like an op shop which raises money for people living in some of the, kind of, depressed areas, very poor areas where there’s a lot of unemployment or people on long term social security, yeah so I think the church will remain relevant in those ways.

Rachel, 27, and a lifelong Anglican, echoed these sentiments:

I think the cathedral offering sanctuary and a voice for the refugee issues and the offshore detention I think is a very good and clear message and I think that is something which as Anglicans we can be proud of. So, I mean I think there’s definitely a role [for the church in society].

Others were quietly optimistic too that the spiritual offerings of the church might yet appeal to the non-religious. Justin, 38, and a lifelong Anglican, said:

I guess numbers are continuing to decrease but I feel like there will be a bit of a swing back as well, as I think, I just feel like there has been a bit of a swing back where people want to connect a bit more to the ancient sacraments and traditions, and want to be focussed on things a bit more spiritual or something, so I think there might be a little bit more of a swing back in that regard.

Kylie is 41, and a member of Generation X. She has been an Anglican for a large part of her life, and been part of Anglican communities around Australia. She currently works for a church, and was also of the view that a link could still be forged between the church and those with Anglican roots:

I think that in lots of ways it still is a key place that people wanting to have connection with the Christian faith and [those who] have a background potentially with an Anglican church ... do look to connect ... I’ve had three baptism requests in the last few weeks, so I think that, I do think that there is some kind of place for people who are not particularly church connected who look to Anglican churches in a way that they might not look to other churches.

Informants were not defeatist or pessimistic about their church. More broadly, I heard many examples of how critical the Anglican Church was to people’s spiritual lives, or expressions of affection for their denomination. Mark, 42, put it this way:

I actually feel ... some connection to the Anglican [tradition], the whole, I was staying in Melbourne four weeks or so, three to four weeks ago and I attended the Cathedral in Flinders Street there and loved it ... I just went to reinforce I guess the connection with, on an emotional level, between myself and Anglicanism.

To identify as Anglican in the present day, then, is much more a declaration bound up with the practice of organised religion, and some acknowledgement of family tradition. It is no longer a claim about social status, school ties, or one’s place in the local community.

As expected, the former Anglicans interviewed for this project were less optimistic about the church, its place, and its prospects. This is not surprising; for they have either stopped going to the Anglican Church and joined somewhere else, or their identification had simply lapsed. There was not much affection for what had once been, although I did not detect hostility or animosity to the broader denomination. Michael was probably the most critical towards the church. He is a 37-year-old former Anglican, and felt that the church was too insular. He said:

I think for some of modern Australian society it is, you know, it’s still a place that people look to when they are wondering what does the Church think about this so I think it still has a bit of a role as a kind of spokesperson and I think it is, I think it really could have a significant role as, in the life of the local community, yeah but you know it seems to ... invest a lot of its time and energy and resources on itself rather than on the community around it, so its role in the community seems pretty insignificant as a result of that.

And Jamie, another member of Generation X, saw it as a denomination that spoke mainly to its oldest adherents:

I think it certainly plays a role for those who identify with the particular badge and I think that’s more Baby Boomers and older that would identify more with denominations I think, that’s my impression, so I guess if it is the way you like church to be then that’s the one you go to so in that sense I think it provides for that demographic.

This idea that denominational fidelity is something for the older cohorts is telling. Among almost all of the current and former Gen X and Gen Y Anglicans that I interviewed, I detected a very pronounced strand of ‘religious individualism’. In contemporary Australian society, many young people now are ‘seekers’, looking for the authentic religious expression that is right for them (see Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007). Denominational affiliation is secondary to individual choice. Even the strongly religiously committed attended a church that fitted with their religious sensibilities, and this took primacy in their choices. Will, for instance, is 42, and attends church regularly, and prays ‘every day’. He expressed this sentiment:

At the present time, I very much identify as Anglican but I am aware that, I suppose I’m not hard and fast stuck to that, it’s not something I would die over. If for example the Anglican
making sense of the generational decline in anglican identity

Anglo-Catholic) and a particular parish. Some of those who expressed an affinity with one branch or tradition felt alienated from or antipathetic to other branches.

This is only part of the current Anglican story. Between the 2001 and 2016 censuses there was a small increase in the proportion of Anglicans who were born overseas. With recent migration, this figure will increase. Some parishes have been reinvigorated with families from Sub-Saharan Africa. Others now have Chinese or Karen congregations. All of this recent change means that the future of Anglicanism will look different and be more culturally diverse than it has in the past.

This will require the Church to tell a new narrative; a denomination characterised now by diverse theological and cultural traditions, but bonded together (though not bound) by a rich and storied past. Importantly this needs to be communicated and treasured from one generation to the next.

diocese just completely folded I would be sad but I wouldn’t feel crushed to the point I’ll never go to church again, I would actually probably get involved in another like-minded church and it wouldn’t have to be Anglican.

He is not alone in expressing this point of view; rather, it is a leitmotif of the present day, even among committed young Anglicans.

Conclusion

The plight of the Anglican Church in recent decades is perhaps akin to that of a political party. It is widely understood that one of the reasons for John Howard’s long-term political success was his ability to persuade traditional Labor voters to think he best represented their needs, the so-called ‘Howard’s battlers’ of parts of NSW (e.g. the seats of Lindsay, Macarthur and Macquarie in Sydney). This constituency experienced change and upheaval and came to believe that the party their kin had traditionally supported no longer spoke for them or their lives. In a way, the same is true of the Anglican Church. For many interrelated cultural and familial reasons, the Church has seen its constituency grow smaller with every passing decade. People who would have once been Anglicans instead experience a disconnect from the organisation that represented their forbears, even if that organisation is changing, albeit slowly. It is also true that the prospective constituency has shrunk somewhat in recent decades, in an increasingly diverse society. An older way of being Anglican, defined by British Protestantism, loyalty to one’s denomination, mono-cultural communities, and many ‘Christmas and Easter’ attenders, is now long eclipsed, living only in the memories of the oldest Anglicans and their ‘rusted on’ loyalties.

Other mainline denominations have experienced a similar trajectory. The Catholics have fared much better in retaining affiliates, even though attendances at Mass are in decline. This is driven in part by the centrally controlled Catholic education system, and a hierarchical ecclesiastical structure, which affords the Catholic Church the opportunity to instruct young people about a reasonably bounded Catholic faith and ethos. And many Catholic primary schools are attached to a parish.

Many lay Anglicans today, particularly members of the younger generations, do not see or experience Anglicanism as being about loyalty to a bigger ‘imagined community’ of the past or even the present. When asked to describe what it meant to be an Anglican, informants talk in very personalised ways. People were choosing the Anglican Church not just because they were raised Anglican (indeed some were not), but because they felt an affinity with some aspects of Anglican doctrine, a particular approach (be that Evangelical, charismatic or
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CENSUS AND SURVEY INFORMATION:
All estimates in this paper are from statistical analysis done by the author. Those who carried out the original analysis and collection of the data bear no responsibility for this analysis. Below are details of the surveys. All data and figures quoted are statistically representative of the population specified in the table, chart or text (i.e. Australian adults; Australian Anglicans etc.).

Australian Census for various years:


Some analysis has been done using the Australian Bureau of Statistics Confidentialised Unit Record Files (CURFs) for the years 1981; 1991; 2011; 2011. These are 1% randomised samples of the Australian census and are very accurate. Otherwise, sources are published census data for years 1981-2001; for 2006 and later, findings based on use of ABS TableBuilder data.

Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2009


The AuSSA (questionnaire A) has 1718 respondents (18-94 years old) randomly selected to participate in the study. Further information: http://ada.edu.au/ada/01189-release1jun2011

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA) 2014 (Wave 14)

CITATION: This paper uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author and should not be attributed to either FaHCSIA or the Melbourne Institute.

WAVE 14 was used in this analysis. This wave has 17,512 participants aged 15-97 randomly selected to participate in the study.

Further information: http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/

Gallup Poll 1961


Further information: http://ada.edu.au/ada/00092

This poll has 1812 participants aged 21 and over, randomly selected to participate in the study.

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