



NCLS Occasional Paper 10

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**Moving Beyond Forty Years  
of Missing Generations**

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# Moving Beyond Forty Years of Missing Generations

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## Introduction

Around forty years ago the age profile of church attenders matched the wider community, but since the 1960s, younger generations went missing. Latest results from the 2006 National Church Life Survey confirm the size of the current gap between church and community, as well as denominational variations. This is 'old news' but the need for effective responses are more urgent than ever. In the next two decades, older and younger generations will need to negotiate through a significant period of transition. Perhaps the time is coming for the gap to begin to close.

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### ***NCLS Research***

NCLS Research is a joint project of ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The National Church Life Survey has been carried out on four occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006. Twenty-two denominations participated in the 2006 NCLS.

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## ***Moving beyond forty years of missing generations***

Is the gap between church and community able to close? Some forty years ago the age profile of Australians in church life matched the wider community. However, a gap emerged and has increased over time, with younger generations missing from many churches. Latest results from the 2006 National Church Life Survey show the extent of this gap.

The age gap between church and community is old news. However, the very fact that it is old news means that an intentional response by churches is now even more urgent. Australian churches face an important period of transition in the next decade as the oldest generations pass away in significant numbers. Older and younger generations will find themselves in ongoing negotiations about the future of the church. There will be grief and pain in this as well as profound hope about possibilities for the future.

Perhaps the time is coming when the gap will begin to close.

### **From no gap to a growing gap: 1966 to 2006**

In the past few decades, a person's age has become one of the most powerful clues about their religious beliefs, attitudes and involvement in church life.

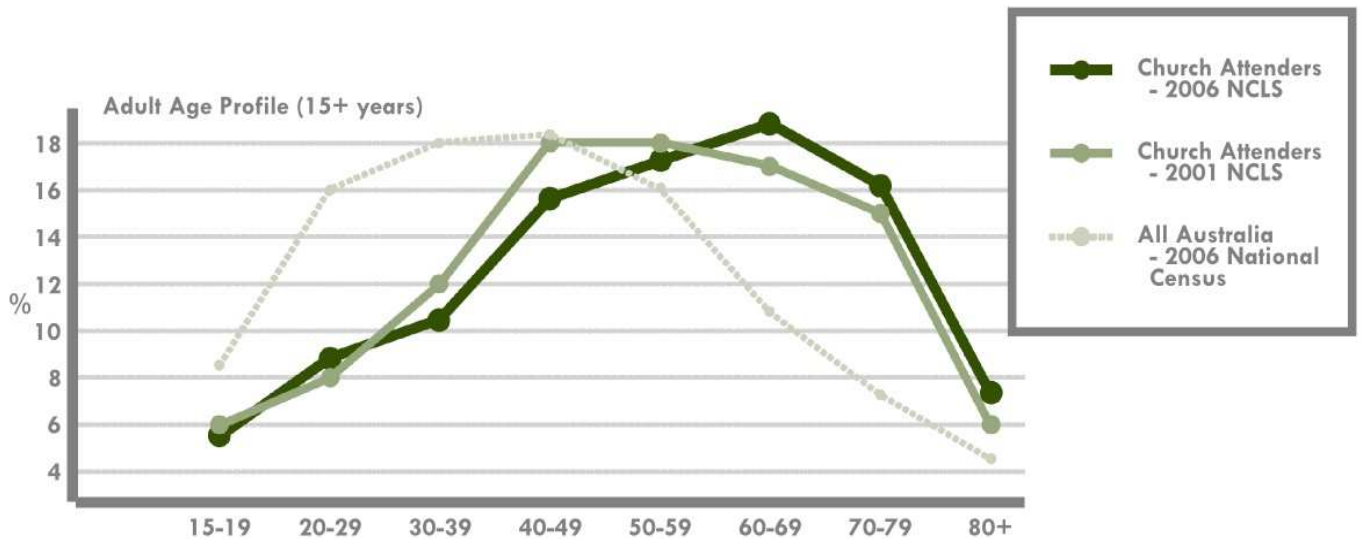
In 1966, Hans Mol (1971) conducted a landmark study of religion in Australia. In his survey and in his review of other Australian data there were *no* differences in church attendance among different age groups in Australia.

Forty years later, there is a large gap between the age profile of the Australian community and church attenders (2006 NCLS).<sup>i</sup> It was the young who first started to leave the churches in the 1960s and 1970s - and they have not returned. Now, younger generations are absent from the churches in greater numbers.

Some will comfort themselves by noting that the Australian population is also ageing. However, such comfort is misplaced. Figure 1 shows the church attender adult age profile in 2001 and 2006, compared with the wider Australian community (ie people aged 15 years and over). Not only is there a gap between church and community, but it has also increased.

Younger age groups are under-represented in Australian church life. Only 15% of church attenders are aged 15 to 30 years, compared to 25% in the wider Australian population. In contrast, some 23% of attenders are aged 70 year and over, compared to only 12% in the wider population.

**Figure 1: A comparison of the adult age profiles for Australian church attenders and the wider community.**



Source: 1996 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys and 2006 Australian Census

### **More youth claim no religious affiliation**

In addition, national Census data shows that there has been a rise in the proportion of Australians who claim no religious affiliation. In 1970 seven percent of Australians claimed no religious affiliation. By 2006 this had risen to 19%. This group is disproportionately young.

### **Why has the gap emerged?**

This profile is, to some degree, the outcome of changes that took place around forty years ago.

When the young baby boomers left the churches in the 1960s and 1970s, the older generations of church attenders assumed that they would return when older - with children in tow - as every previous generation had done. It was simply a matter of a stage in life.

However, it has been argued that a unique set of social and cultural changes during the 1960s impacted on the baby boom cohort as they entered young adulthood. They defected in large numbers from the churches, and most did not return.

Many churches missed that moment, and have never caught up. The parents of the baby boomers, born before World War Two, are now reaching the end of their lives in increasing numbers.

## **Old news...but urgent response needed**

This message that younger generations are missing from many churches is old news, repeated time and again. Church Life Surveys over the past 15 years have confirmed the ongoing and increasing gap in the age profiles of church attenders compared to the wider community.

The danger is that, because the message is not new, these results will simply be ignored. However, what is new is the urgency in timeframe. Over the next few decades, many churches will face the loss of a sector of committed and loyal attenders who carry knowledge and experience. The implications are far-reaching and churches will need to prepare for a shift in constituency as well as size. Time will tell how effectively the different generations work together towards the future.

## ***Strong denominational variations***

The average age of an Australian church attender is 53 years of age (2006 NCLS). The overall age profile of Australian churches is shaped by the patterns of the larger mainstream denominations - who tend to be older.

## **Mainstream denominations hard struck**

Mainstream denominations, have been particularly hard struck by the absence of younger generations. Average ages range from 55 years for Anglican attenders, 54 for Lutherans and 59 years for Uniting Church attenders.<sup>ii</sup> As Bouma notes, Christian groups emanating from Britain in the 1800s, such as Anglicans, as well as Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists (merged in 1977 as the Uniting Church in Australia), “are moving from asking ‘*Will our children have faith?*’ to ‘*Will our faith have children?*’ ...They have effectively lost two generations and are in the process of losing a third” (Australian Soul, 2006, p67).<sup>iii</sup>

The largest denominations in Australia are among these mainstream denominations: such as Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches. Once those in their 70s and 80s pass away in the next few decades, it is extremely unlikely that they will be replaced in sufficient numbers to maintain their current overall size. If all other factors remain constant, it is to be expected that declines in numbers must occur in the short term in these denominations.

However the ageing profile of major denominations masks much younger age profiles for individual churches as well as for other denominations.

## **Other denominations buck the trend**

Some denominations, many of whom have also grown in recent years, continue to have very high levels of younger people. For example, the average age of the combined Pentecostal denominations and movements is 39 years of age. Their age profile is actually younger than the wider Australian community.<sup>iv</sup>

Several other mainstream Protestant denominations more closely align with the age profile of the general community, including the Churches of Christ, Baptist and Seventh-day Adventists.

**Table 1: Adult Age Profile (15+ years) - Denominational variation**

	15-19 years %	20-29 years %	30-39 years %	40-49 years %	50-59 years %	60-69 years %	70-79 years %	80+ years %
Aust. Community (Census)	9	16	18	18	16	11	7	5
All Church Attenders (NCLS)	6	9	11	16	17	19	16	7
<i>Denominations</i>								
Anglican	5	9	9	12	16	20	19	10
Baptist	8	14	15	19	17	14	9	4
Catholic	4	5	9	16	18	21	18	7
Churches of Christ	8	15	15	18	17	13	9	5
Lutheran	5	8	11	16	20	18	15	7
Pentecostal	11	22	18	21	15	8	3	1
Presbyterian	6	11	12	14	16	15	16	10
Salvation Army	6	11	12	13	17	20	15	7
Seventh-day Adventist	6	13	12	18	18	16	11	5
Uniting	3	5	6	11	15	22	24	15
Other Protestant	9	15	14	23	16	12	9	3

Source: 2006 National Church Life Survey and 2006 Census

### **Responses to the gap between church and community**

The age gap between church and community generates a range of responses. Some simply ignore the issue and the implications, conducting ‘business as usual’. Some seek to come to terms with the status quo, believing this is the new reality for the churches. Others respond defensively, hearing it as a criticism of older generations. The response of grief will show itself in a variety of ways.

However, another type of response is also present. All generations have the shared opportunity to plan and work constructively together towards a positive future and some churches have already made a start.

### **To accept the status quo is not an option**

Some suggest that the Australian church as a whole has to come to terms with having an older age profile, to accept the status quo. However, this is not a realistic option.

It is not possible for Australian churches to sustain an older age profile. There are currently 23% of church attenders aged 70 years or over. In the next twenty years they will be aged over 90 years or will be no longer with us.



Further, younger generations will almost certainly *not* line up to take their place. It is not simply a matter of numbers, but there are also significant generational differences. These differences relate to what attenders value about church, what they hope for, their preferred styles of worship, their expectations about their roles and more. (See NCLS Research Occasional Paper 11 'Generations approach church differently').

While an older age profile is a true and realistic view of the immediate future, the risk of assuming that this is the new status quo is that people fall into the trap of no longer paying attention to the issue. It also does not even begin to engage the missional imperative to find effective ways to follow Jesus command to 'go and make disciples'.

### **Not a criticism of older attenders**

This is hard news. Some will respond defensively, hearing it as a critique of the contribution of older attenders. Yet, this is not the issue. The far-reaching contribution of older attenders is impossible to deny. It is also inappropriate to devalue lifetimes of faithfulness expressed in a multitude of ways to God, to local churches, to denominations, and to their communities.

One example is the extraordinary 'social capital' represented by the hundreds of thousands of older attenders involved in community service, justice, care and welfare activities - both in their church and also in the wider community.

Yet, while it is important to honour the contribution of older attenders, people of all ages must face the reality that the length of time they will be around can only continue to decrease.

### **A response of grief**

The Australian church age profile will create a response of grief for many. On the one hand, it represents the loss of loved people. There is also the loss associated with the closure or disappearance of places, buildings, congregations, and even ways of doing church that have had meaning for many years.

Some will grieve the lost opportunities of finding ways to effectively share the gospel with current generations. Some will grieve the lack of trust and willingness to hand on power and responsibility from one generation to the next.

People will also experience different stages of grief, such as anger, denial, bargaining, as well as acceptance. Each person's journey will be unique and personal.

There is a need, which will grow, for those with pastoral gifts, to minister to those who grieve. There is also a need for missional funerals; events that celebrate the best of what has been, that mourns the passing, and that helps people bring closure that, at the same time, also looks to a future with hope.

## **What inheritance will older generations leave?**

What inheritance will older generations will leave behind? Like a family with ageing parents, there needs to be difficult conversations about “the will” or the inheritance that will be entrusted to future generations.

This inheritance is partly about access to assets such as property and finances. But it is also about passing on the ‘faith inheritance’. What more can the churches do to hear the stories of faith from the elders, those who have a lifetime of experience to share of the reality and faithfulness of God?

How will younger generations honour and respect the older generations, while stepping up to take on roles and responsibilities?

## **Intentional hope-filled transition**

The 1966 study of Australian church attenders showed that it is not inevitable that a gap should exist between church and community. However, all studies of church life in the past forty years, including the 2006 NCLS, have identified a growing gap.

Beyond this ‘old news’, could these data point to a new reality in the future? Could the gap close?

In the next two decades, the average age of church attenders will fall, as a proportion of older attenders will pass away. These attenders are currently over-represented in the larger mainstream denominations.

If all other factors remain the same, then this significant loss of attenders will affect the Australian religious landscape in a range of ways. As well as a likely drop in the overall size, the denominational balances will also change.

At the same time, given the age profile of the younger, growing denominations, one possible positive outcome is that the gap between church and community will begin to close in the coming decades.

There are many examples of local churches as well as whole denominations that are full of younger generations of attenders ready to participate in a vibrant present and future church. Together, with older generations, they now have the opportunity to strive intentionally for a life-giving future for Australian churches.

## ***In summary***

In summary, this article shows that:

- There has not always been an age gap between church and community. A 1966 study found no age differences.
- Forty years later, in 2006, the overall age profile of Australian church attenders is much older than the wider community

- The larger mainstream denominations have an older age profile.
- Other younger, growing denominations as well as individual churches buck this trend.
- The overall age gap results in a range of responses: acceptance, denial, and grief as well as intentional focus on passing on hope and vision for the future.
- An older age profile is not sustainable, and, if nothing else changes, in the next two decades, there will be a loss of up to 23% of church attenders, currently aged over 70 years.
- However, one possible positive outcome is that the gap between church and community will begin to close in the coming decades.

How can Australian churches prepare for the transition period of the new two decades, which may conclude an era that started in the 1960s? The church as a whole may well be smaller in twenty years time - but perhaps it will no longer be older than the wider community. What next?

**Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka**

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<sup>i</sup> 2006 National Church Life Survey.

<sup>ii</sup> 2006 NCLS Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Denominational Church Life Profiles

<sup>iii</sup> Bouma, G., 2006. *Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge University Press. Melbourne.

<sup>iv</sup> 2006 NCLS Pentecostal Church Life Profile