

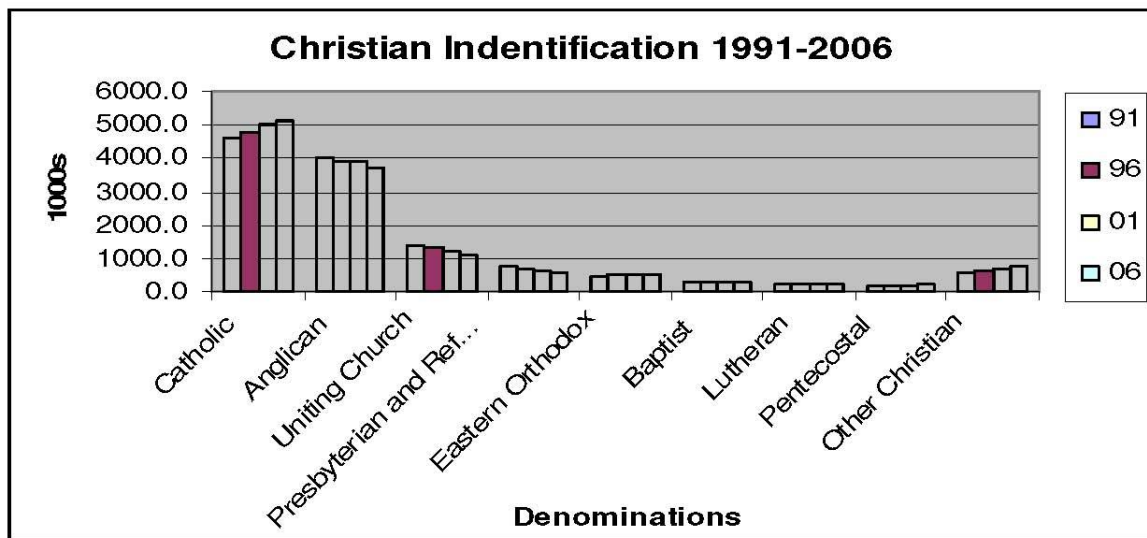
In his keynote address David Pohlmann gives a descriptive outline of the growth and decline of Christianity and other religions in Australia. David compared the decline of religion to the growth of school chaplaincy in Queensland. He found that the decline in Australians actively engaging with the Christian faith to be a direct contradiction to the growth in Queensland welcoming of school chaplaincy programs. David's keynote address raised some important questions about the direction 'religion' is heading in Australia today. He also leaves some open questions for Christian counsellors as they explore the implications in their ministry to the changing spiritual face of Australia

Spiritual Lay of the Land: Religion in Australia
David Pohlmann

What is Australia's current Religious landscape? Where are Australia's religious and spiritual origins and how have these developed over time and distance? How might we view our present spiritual climate and circumstance? What could be 'round the spiritual corner? How might Christian counsellors, early in the 21st century, understand Australian spirituality as they explore its implications for their ministry? These are some of the questions I aim to address in our time today.

What is Australia's current Religious landscape?

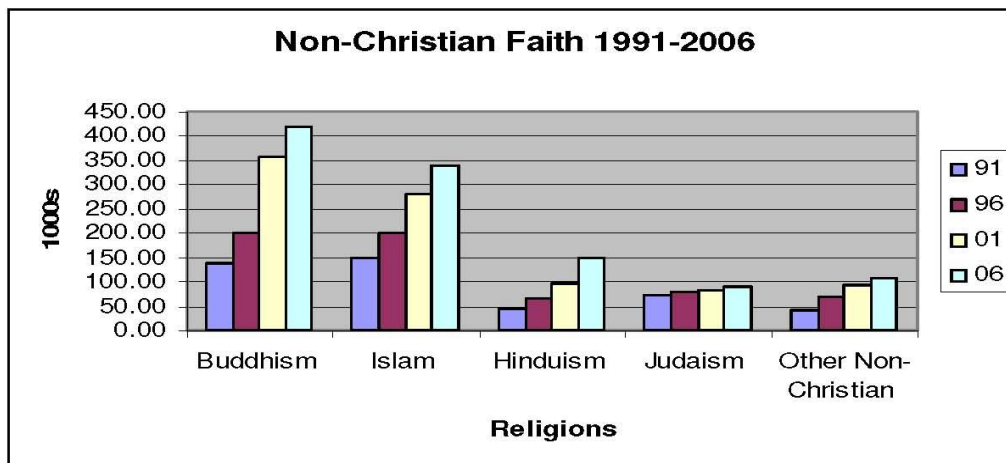
In the 2006 Australian census, 64 per cent of respondents identified as Christian. The pattern of Christian identification looks a little like this.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

The reader can see that the Anglicans, Uniting, Presbyterian and Reformed churches are declining, the Lutherans are static and the Catholics, Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostals and other Christian denominations are growing.

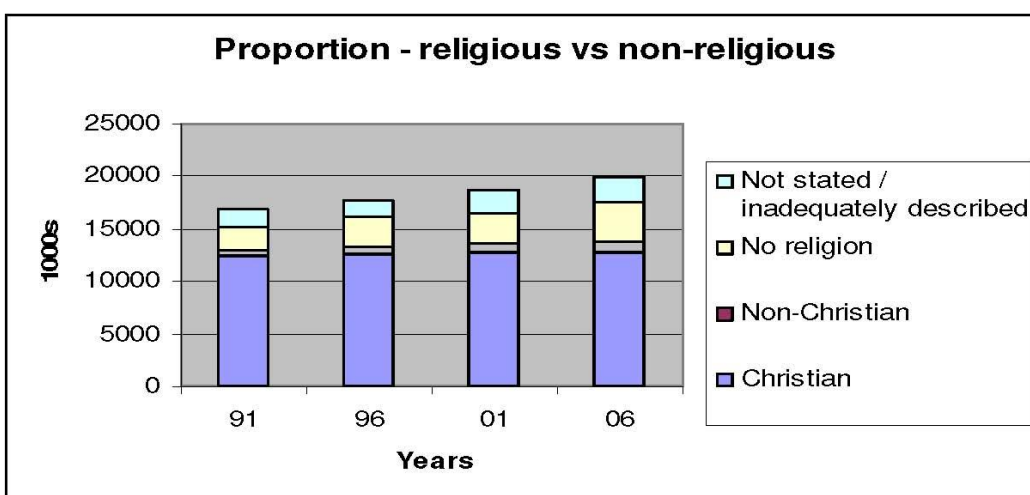
The pattern of non-Christian faith looks like this.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

As is evident in the above graph, Judaism is growing moderately while Buddhism; Islam, Hinduism and other faiths have grown significantly over the last 15 years

What is interesting is what is happening for those claiming to be outside a faith group.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

In this graph the reader can see that Christians remain fairly static, Non-Christians are growing but are still small while those who didn't state their religion or indicate they have no religion are growing significantly.

One take home message from these data is that roughly 8% of Australians engage actively with the Christian faith – roughly 87 % of us are saying “I’m not religious”. There is a contradiction to this message and it comes from Australia’s experience of state school chaplaincy. Statistics indicate that School chaplaincy particularly in Queensland has grown steadily from 1990 to the present and is likely to go close to doubling in Queensland by the beginning of 2008.

This all raises a question for me. Why is it that as a nation we are saying, “We’re not religious!” and at the same time our public schools are quite welcoming of (largely Christian) chaplaincy services?

How might we view our present spiritual climate and circumstance?

As indicated earlier in the article, the Australian spiritual scene broadly divides into three groups -those who generally reject religion and spirituality, those who ascribe to faiths other than Christian and those who identify as Christian.

No-religion

From the outset of record keeping about the spiritual leanings of Australians, there have been those who have said they do not have a religion

Other than Christian

The 'other than Christian' sector of the Australian population is in reality quite small representing currently around seven per cent of our number. Of the non-Christian religions in Australia, Buddhism is the most prevalent followed by Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and other smaller faith groups.

Christian

The most numerically significant religious group in Australia is Christianity. It currently comprises 64 percent of the national population but has been steadily decreasing in proportion since Federation.

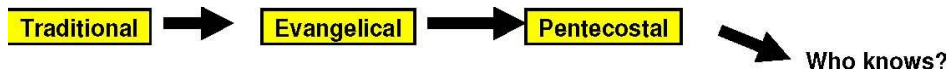
Nominalism

The major issue is nominalism

Religious Nominalism can be defined as when people identify with a particular religion without a "clear understanding" or "serious commitment" to it. "In that case, such people are affiliated with that cause (religion) in name only" (Tienou, 2005, ¶2).

Nominalism occurs in all religious faiths to some degree. In Australia there is clear evidence that Nominalism affects the Christian faith significantly. There is no specific public evidence of Nominalism among adherents of non-Christian faiths in Australia but if the experience of other places is similar to here, it is likely that they too experience this phenomenon. Christian Nominalism is especially noticeable in the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches. A recent evangelisation push by the Brisbane Catholic Archdiocese, focussed on Catholics coming home to the faith of their birth, would suggest that church leaders are fully aware of the enormity of this issue.

. My own experience and the experience of others I know suggest that there may be a continuum of movement within Christianity itself. This continuum begins at the traditional – moves to the evangelical – perhaps to the Pentecostal – and then – who knows where? Perhaps they stay at home and do early morning TV church?



Transfer growth is a key issue here

Pentecostalism is certainly the growing movement within Christianity today. Presbyterian/ Reformed, Uniting and Anglican churches are in decline. The Lutherans are static and the growth rates of Catholic, Orthodox and Baptist churches are under 20 per cent. Pentecostal churches were the fastest growing of all Christian denominations between 1991 and 2006 at about 46 per cent. The other Christian church's category, which is made up of the smaller denominations, non-denominational groups and gatherings such as house churches, also grew significantly.

The idea of the God Shaped Hole may be out of favor in general society, but still many Australians seem to crave for some kind of spirituality – often an eclectic morphing of Christianity, Eastern philosophy, and New Age claptrap. Of course the humanist rejects the idea of spirituality entirely. They might suggest that "our brains don't have a God-shaped hole" and that instead the idea of "God has been fashioned to fit the shape of the holes that our brains have" (Willett, N.D., ¶).

On the other hand remarks attributed to Clive Hamilton, suggest "that in his opinion in the end we will have to go back to the churches, for the sort of transcendent values that are needed in a community, if our community is going to do well" (ABC, 2007, ¶3). Commenting on Clive Hamilton's remarks, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Peter Jensen suggests that "Secularism fails to support the central concern of the truly human life: relationships, the very point that Mr. Hamilton and so many others are making. And Australians regard relationships and families as their chief source of happiness. (ABC, 2007)

While some argue the “demise of Christianity in Australia and (that) our Christian heritage have been considerably exaggerated” (ABC, 2006,) Stuart Pigeon asserts that “our Christian heritage has never been identified as such and therefore it's in danger of being totally lost before it's ever been found” (ABC, 2006,). Instead of a religious demise in Australia, Piggitt suggests there is now “a resurgence among our politicians for example, of interest in Christian things” (ABC, 2006,)

This is quite clearly seen in the current Generation Y. In 2006, Michael Mason, Ruth Webber, Andrew Singleton and Philip Hughes published a report that described the Spirituality of Generation Y in Australia. They found that 48 per cent of Gen Y has a belief in God, 20 per cent do not and 32 percent are not sure. 19 there are likely to be three groups of spiritual belief among these young people – 43 per cent will be Christian, 31 per cent will be humanist and 17 per cent will have some eclectic mix of spiritualities.

Most Christian young people are unlikely to attend church very much but are more likely to do so if they come from conservative protestant backgrounds. They are more likely to hold their belief in God and Jesus privately as well as practicing private prayer. Humanist young people reject the concept of a personal God but may believe in some kind of ‘higher being’. They distrust religion rejecting religious ceremonies and religious beliefs. They are less likely embrace concepts like life after death or alternative spiritualities. Significant influences helping to shape contemporary religion and spirituality which affect Generation Y and many others as well, include “secularisation, the relativism of postmodernity, consumer capitalism, (and) individualism” (Mason, Webber, Singleton and Hughes, 2006, p.ii)

What could be ‘round the spiritual corner?’

How might Christian counsellors, early in the 21st century, understand Australian spirituality as they explore its implications for their ministry?

So here we are – a land that has never been fully Christian but who are definitely showing less and less interest in organised religion. Many churches are in decline or at least not keeping up and non-Christian faiths are growing freely. And yet while more and more Australians are saying, “We’re not religious!” our public schools are welcoming (largely Christian) chaplaincy services and governments are funding them!

Narelle Jarrett (2006) from the Sydney Anglican Archdiocese suggests that “The heart of the church is the message of Christ – the message above all messages that speaks of belonging and that births commitment to serving one another. It is not a message about loyalty to an institution or even about belonging to a particular group, church or location. It is God in transforming people who, in turn, may be able to bring hope to a lost nation”

Philip Yancey (1995) in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew* confronts us with an important question. Why were so many drawn to Jesus, but now so many repelled by the Christian church? Perhaps the saying²⁰ that people “don't care about how much you know, until they know how much you care!” is true after all - especially in a postmodern Australia.

I get the sense that while Australians are rejecting the dogmatic, the religious and the institutional, they are not really rejecting the spiritual. They are welcoming, I think, of authentic Christianity. The Christianity that rolls its sleeves up – the one that welcomes – the one that cares deeply and shares divine resources profoundly – the one that is prepared to hear their story – and companions them on their journey.

How Christian counselling professionals interact with Australia’s spiritual landscape is a matter for you as the profession. Perhaps these thoughts have been something of a catalyst to your own and I trust they have been useful.