

# The Future of the Church in Australia – McCrindle Research (2020)

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*This study involved interviews (18 May-26 Jun 2020) with 30 Christian leaders in Australia, and an online survey (4-16 Sep 2020) of 1002 Australians who attended church at least monthly.*

## Introduction

Christian affiliation has declined in Australia: 2006 65%, 2016 52%, No religion: 2006: 19%, 2016 30% We are one of most multicultural nations in the world: 29% born overseas, 62% growth from migration.

Church attendance steady: 2006: 17%, 2016: 16%. Suggests not deconversion but decline of cultural Christianity.

## Summary

Australians are disillusioned with the church but spiritually hungry. The main reasons are a detached church culture (from ordinary Aussies) and the breach of trust by leaders. But many Aussies are open and supportive of religion. 24% of Aussies are warm towards Christianity. Multicultural Australia is highly religious. But the media doesn't tell this story. Australians, particularly the younger generations, are becoming more open to spirituality as they search for community, connection and meaning in their lives. Needs in the community are producing a hunger for fulfilment. COVID has contributed. The problem is not with God but with the church. We need to re-establish trust. Need to know how to speak into social issues in a way that encourages flourishing. Show our love.

The church needs to engage the community. It has largely taken a defensive position. Churches that are adaptable, dynamic, Kingdom-focused and engaged with culture and community will thrive. Aussies are looking for meaningful community and connection. The church needs to run towards problems not away from them. Christian leaders are being pressured to take sides, but we are not about winning an argument but about loving people. Churches should reflect the diversity of the local community and be involved in community during the week. Need more focus on relationships, connection and collaboration and less on competition, comparison and division.

We need to think like a start-up not an institution. Diversity helps more people connect. This takes intentionality, especially in leadership. Real relationships are built outside the Sunday service. There is some debate over effective size of church. The key is relationship.

Church planting is the most effective way to grow the church, but plants have to be launched strong. Planting allows creativity and raising up of new leaders. Plants need to be strategic and well-resourced. Many leaders advocate hub or multi-site models. Facilities usually enhance church growth but finding and funding them is a challenge.

Developing digital innovation and skills have produced opportunities to enhance relationships and reach new communities. Nicky Gumbel, "This is the greatest evangelistic opportunity of our lifetime." Church online should be retained if just for the communities who have benefitted. But online has not met social needs and attendance at church, small groups and prayer meetings has declined. Churches need to think of themselves as "digital organisations with physical locations."

Evangelism and discipleship should not be separated. Discipleship can be a form of evangelism as people journey towards Jesus. We've pulled the Word back into the hands of the clergy so people feel unequipped to share the gospel. COVID has allowed some individuals to be more proactive in ministry (rather than relying on the clergy or church programs) which needs to be retained.

Churches that are effective both gathered and scattered need to raise up more diverse leaders including women. The key problem is developing a leadership pipeline. Gifted young people often have many career options, lack respect for clergy, and lack clear structures for being developed as Christian leaders. Bible colleges provide good theological training which is needed but are not particularly strong in practical skills development. One way in which churches are developing leaders is through apprenticeship or internship models.

## Recommendations for Leaders

1. *Proactively speak into the national dialogue to share Jesus' heart for the nation.* Be proactive, not reactive or defensive on social issues. Shape the national conversation. Social media expertise is important.
2. *Shift the internal narrative about openness to the gospel in Australia.* We have begun to believe the media's message that Aussies are closed to the gospel. "Read the street not the tweet." There is a hunger.
3. *Show a true expression of community in a lonely world.* This happens through authentic relationships throughout the week. Aussies are looking for connection. Often, the community has returned to church facilities before congregations. Churches need to work together across boundaries.
4. *Engage the next generation to remain adaptable to change and culturally relevant.* An effective way for churches to keep across cultural change is to ensure younger members of the church have opportunities to serve and lead.
5. *Equip churchgoers to serve and lead where they are planted.* The Church should not only be the hope of the world but should be the leadership development base of this nation. We need to equip Christians to thrive and lead wherever. There are few Aussie resources available.
6. *Resource the congregation with tools for evangelism and discipleship.* Like the Discovery Bible Method (Crosslife).
7. *Release leaders to plant church planting churches.* This means churches remain dynamic and keep the sense of being on the frontline, rather than becoming too comfortable and insular. But this requires resources. They will need help.
8. *Implement fit-for-purpose leadership development pathways.* Apprenticeship or internship models are one strategy churches are trialling to practically equip the next generation of leaders.
9. *Create opportunities for a diverse range of people to become leaders.*
10. *Give indigenous leaders more platform in the church.* This would help give indigenous Australians a voice within the church and would help the Church be a model of Indigenous reconciliation as it proclaims the good news of spiritual reconciliation.
11. *Share knowledge and experience about how to run effective services online.* As many churches have gone digital, there are doubtless many resources that could be collated and shared between churches to connect and encourage congregations around Australia.

## Statistics from the COVID Season

Practicality is the most positive aspect of online church for churchgoers, with seven in ten (69%) suggesting the ease of attending online church has been extremely or very positive. What churchgoers have missed most in doing church online is the fellowship that attending church in-person provides. Just half of churchgoers (51%) say their social experience of online church has been extremely/very positive, and two in three (67%) strongly/somewhat agree they have missed the connections that gathering in person provides. Young churchgoers are more likely than older churchgoers to say their experience of church online has been extremely/very positive socially.

Despite the challenges of meeting online for churchgoers, many have found online church to be positive for their spiritual growth (64% extremely/very positive). In fact, for 45% of churchgoers the COVID-19 season has been a period of significant or moderate spiritual growth for them personally. This compares to just 9% who have experienced a season of significant or moderate spiritual dryness during COVID-19. Almost three in five churchgoers (57%) strongly or somewhat agree they have taken greater responsibility for their own spiritual growth during this period. So, there has been no significant negative impacts of online church in the short term.

More than three in five churchgoers (64%) strongly/somewhat agree they prefer a live church stream over a pre-recorded service. Churchgoers also prefer a low-key online service rather than a big production when watching church online (63% strongly/somewhat agree). Half of churchgoers (51%) have enjoyed the additional elements online church has offered such as Q&As, pre-rolls and panel discussions and a similar proportion (48%) have enjoyed engaging in the live chat function or comments.

As we look to the future, churchgoers would like to see churches learning and growing from the lessons that have been learned during this time. The main thing churchgoers would like to see continuing into the future is treating online services as a way to engage those who might not come to church otherwise (53%). Churchgoers would also like to see churches keeping the focus on church as a community rather than a service (47%) and a greater focus on outreach to the local community (45%).

Prior to COVID-19, 61% of churchgoers were weekly attenders at church in person. One in four (27%) attended online church services once a week. Interestingly, 73% of these also attended church in person so it could be assumed online church services could be as broad as watching archived services online throughout the week or listening to a podcast. Despite Christian leaders seeing the power of online church to reach new groups of people, churchgoers have been attending church less often during the COVID-19 period. Almost half of churchgoers (46%) are attending online church each week, while 22% are attending church in person. Attendance at other church activities such as Bible studies and prayer meetings has also declined slightly during the pandemic. Almost three in five churchgoers were attending prayer meetings (58%) and Bible studies (57%) prior to COVID-19. Now, however, just over two in five continue to attend these activities (44% prayer meetings, 46% Bible studies).

Although many churchgoers have missed the gathered experience of church, almost two in five churchgoers (38%) strongly/ somewhat agree that COVID-19 has made them more active in ministry as they feel they cannot leave it to the paid church staff. Many have also invited more people to church online (47%) or have opened their homes and hosted watch parties for church (34%). Some (35%) also feel that doing less church activities has given them more time to build connections in their local community. A number of Christian leaders are thinking about this moment in time as a 'reformation moment' where the Word of God is put back into the hands of the people.