

## Original Paper

# Empirical Research on the Downturn in Church Attendance in Australia: The youth without Religion

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### Abstract

*The church has played a significant role in the lives of Australia's people since the European settlement. It used to provide several welfare services such as educational, health, and orphanages, even more than the government. Australian churches played a significant role in shaping the culture of Australians. Australia was the only country with no newspaper on Sunday as they kept Sunday as a regular holiday and kept everything closed. Indeed, for Australia's farmers, religion was so important that they decided to remain clear of their religion and, in 1901, to lead up the Federation. As the years passed, church attendance reduced, and others chose no religion. Few considered religion as least important, resulting in an overall decline in Australia's churches. The paper reiterated the downturn in church attendance in Australia, found reasons for the downturn, and how the youth can be driven to attend the church. Innovation, discipleship, evangelism, oneness, care, hospitality, service to the community, and social media presence were discovered to be strategies for motivating the younger generation, first-time worshippers and new converts to the church.*

### Keywords

*Australia churches, downturn in church attendance, religion, youth*

### 1. Introduction

In the fast pace, everything is getting changed speedily like the belief of the people. Now the time has gone where the people on Sunday had been left with the option of visiting church. Though religion plays a significant role in shaping oneself, social media has been replacing everything these days. In the olden

days, everyone did not have a personal Bible. However, all can access the online Bible these days, which should have made it easier for teaching values, beliefs and shaping society's culture but sadly social media has replaced the younger people's attention.

They have started thinking about religion as a use and throw purpose, like when they feel the church's need, they attend it, but their problems get resolved they stop attending the churches. From past decades, Australia was the country with 20 million Christians in the 1990s, but as time passed, the church's attendance started showing a downturn as one quadrant of these youth opted for no religion. A couple of factors have distracted the youth from attending the church behind such a downturn. There is a famous proverb, "where there is a will, there is a way", so the church attendance's downturn can be improved if the churches will work upon it. There are various measures that the churches can undertake in increasing their attendance by motivating the youth to attend church.

Tiffen and Gittens (2004) revealed religious practices are very less frequently observed. People used to neglect them as the percentage of individuals saying no religion had risen from 1993 to 2009. The one who was recognized with the Christian denomination was only a quarter of people attending the church either regularly or occasionally. The rest three quarters never attended church, even occasionally and, as a result, no attendance. There is a fact behind that the beliefs, practices and values do not remain the same for every generation. The church's interrelation with the community was impacted due to the gradual shift to regional communities from local communities. Also, the shift from a more individualistic way of life in the 19th and 20th centuries. The youth consider religion an option, i.e., whenever interests, emotions, needs, or values are required. As per this study, many factors are responsible for the decline in church attendance (Note 1).

In a study, Bellamy, Black, Castle, Hughes, and Kaldor (2002) saw that religious belief is getting varied and extremely low. It was revealed that the frequency of attendance in the church is closely related to the church confidence. The reason for the decline is the low trust in religious institutions. According to Bellamy et al. (2002), the church must take measures to increase attendance. Gary D. Bouma and Anna Halafoff (2017) found out that the "no religion" category had been increasing in their study on changing Australia's religious profile. They also found that out of all religious groups in Australia, Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches form the fourth largest religious group in Australia. As per them, culture and religion are a part of history. This study also found that the people of no religion group do not solely comprise those who are totally anti-religion (Note 2).

Frequency church attendance is one of the easily identified components of religion. As per this study, the interest cannot be transferred genetically within family members as church attendance is also based on interest, so its frequency also differs between two generations. As per this study, the decline in church attendance is the generation gap as the interest does not get passed with the genes (Note 3).

The basis of their study was to determine the downturn in the attendance of church and how his study can be a tool for church leaders. In this study, an observation was made on five churches that had a downturn. Then, a survey was done in the form of a phone call interview. The two key laypersons, judicatory leaders

and the pastors were surveyed from each church. Using historical methods, this study engaged the voices of the participants. The study concluded that the generalised attitudes, postures, mosaic of actions, and practices of the five churches indeed displayed the general congruence with the literature review's recommendations. The finding of this study would assist the church that is facing a turnaround (Note 4). Jones, Jeffrey D (2015) (Note 5), in his book, revealed that there is a growth and a decline in his church attendance, especially on Sunday. He identifies that the church avoids the bad news. They are less likely to adapt to post modernity and technologies and are operating in a new world by giving rise to secularism. The essential function of a church is making discipline communities and mission statements. This function makes the church listen more and dream slowly. They need to identify their missions and need to be prepared for new directions. The church needs to be reshaped, which calls people for using the gifts fostered in the reign of God and not to build the walls; instead, they should refine their voice. In this manner, this work will be a guide for the church leaders in improving church attendance.

### *1.1 Objective*

The study objectives include:

- 1) To know the factors that trigger the downturn in Australian churches.
- 2) To know the measures through which there can be growth in Australian churches.
- 3) To know the ways of retaining the youth back to the church.

## **2. Methodology**

This methodology is based on a systematic study of materials on decline in church attendees in Australia to know the reasons for the decline and factors for the growth and how to bring the masses back to church.

### 2.1.1 Source of Data

Primary data and Secondary data

### 2.1.2 Study area

The study is based on a particular country, Australia.

### 2.1.3 Sample Size

The sample data collected is between the periods of 1900- 2015.

## *2.2 Method of research*

Survey method

## **3. Results**

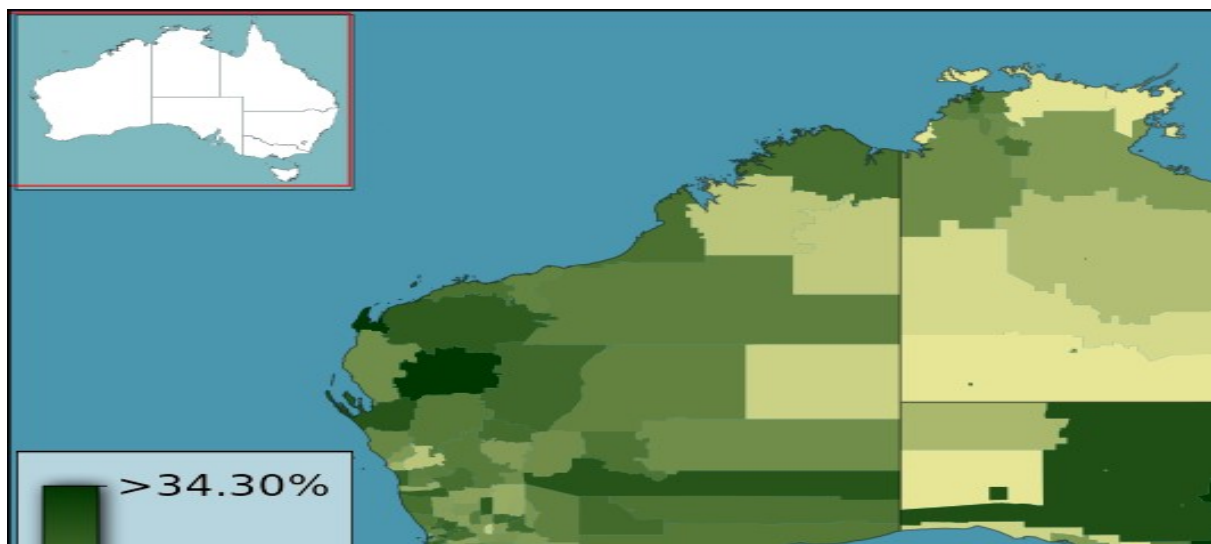
### *3.1 No Religion*

A survey was conducted by NCLS research in 2015 to know about people's religious belief in Australia. So, it was found that out of ten, only four people feel that religion is right for them. The research also found that 36% were unsure or neutral about their religion. In contrast, few, i.e. (23%) disagreed with the statement that for society, religion is good (Note 6).

In 2015 when Australians were asked about their religion, 28.6% of Australians (or 6,933,708 people) chose “no religion.” This 2015 census is 7% higher than the 2011 data (i.e., 2,240,546 more people). In addition to this in 2015, another 0.5%, instead of choosing a specific religion, opted for irreligion; hence, this results in 30.1% (or just over 7,040,700 people) of Australians who had chosen “no religion.” Again, 9.6% did not declare affiliation with any religion. They invariably or gave an unclear stand. For instance, in 2016, 39.7% of Australians did not state any religion (Note 7).

In the census of 2011, 22.3% of Australians (or 4,796,787 people) chose to have “no religion” which was 3% higher than the 2006 census (and 1,090,232 people more) and was the second-largest category. The next 2.014 million (9.4%) were in the “inadequately defined or not-stated” class, so it was seen that more than 31% of Australians did not state a connection with any religious affiliation (Note 8).

In the year 2006, an increment was seen in the category of religion, i.e., of 3% from 2001. Further, 11.9% inadequately described their religion. In the same 2006 census, 30% of the people in Australia had no affiliation with religion.



**Figure 1. Population with No Religion by Geographical Dimension**

The areas mentioned above show the masses affiliated with no religion out of Australia’s total population in the 2011 census, which had been divided geographically by local statistical area.

The bar chart portrays the females and males who indicated their stand to be no religion on the census from 1971 to 2011. It states that both counterparts preferring no religion had risen. In 2011 the male gender who believed in no religion reached 25%.

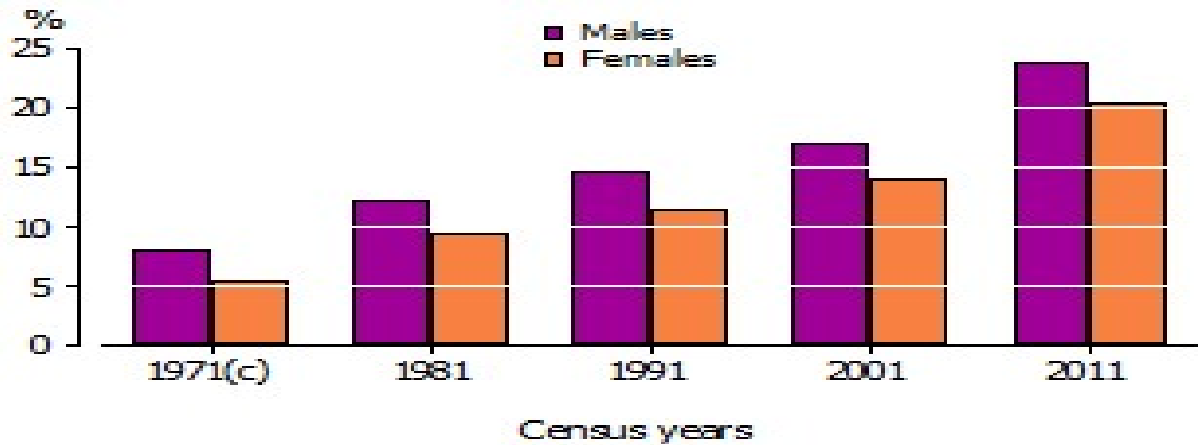


Figure 2. Population with no Religion by Gender from 1971-2011

The chart mentioned above depicts that the people saying to them, religion is “not at all important” has increased from 19% in 1994-1998 to 37%. Almost twice the number in 2010-2014, whereas the persons for whom religion is much important ratio are much less than those who opine that religion is not essential.

### Important in life: Religion

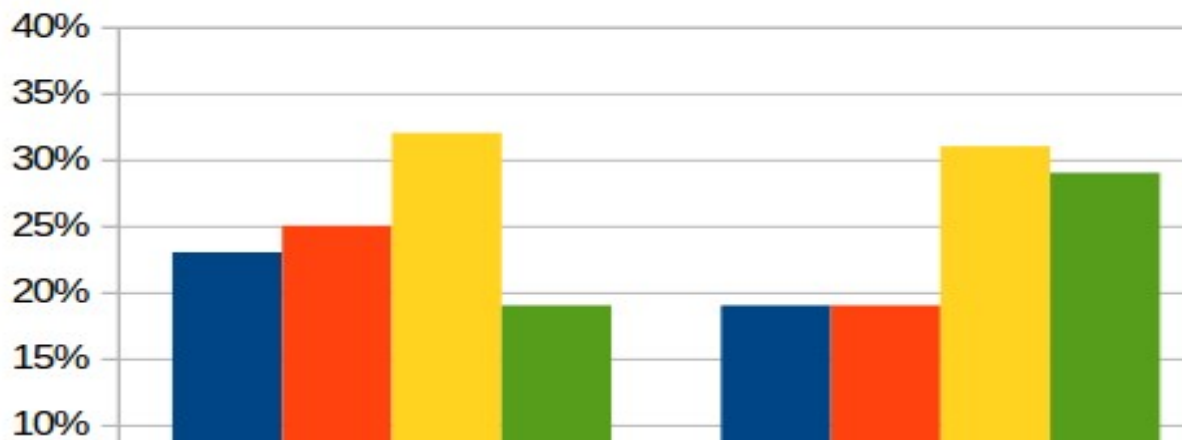


Figure 3. Importance of Religion in Life

#### 3.1.1 Regular Attendance

It is the survey conducted by various institutions on the masses who attend the church at different intervals or are regular attendees. In 1996, it was realised that those who attended Mass on a typical Sunday were 17.9% in the Roman Catholic church. However, this percentage decreased to 12.2% in 2011 in the age group 15 to 44. In 1996, Roman Catholics aged 50-54 years out of the 27% who regularly attended church, declined to 15% in 2006. However, the age group of 55-59 years dropped from 30 to 19%. Over ten years, the age group’s attendance between 15-34 declined approximately 38% (Note 9).

**Table 1. Church Attendance in Australia**

<b>Age</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2006</b>
15-44 years	17.9%	12.2%
50-54 years	27%	15%
55-59 years	30%	19%

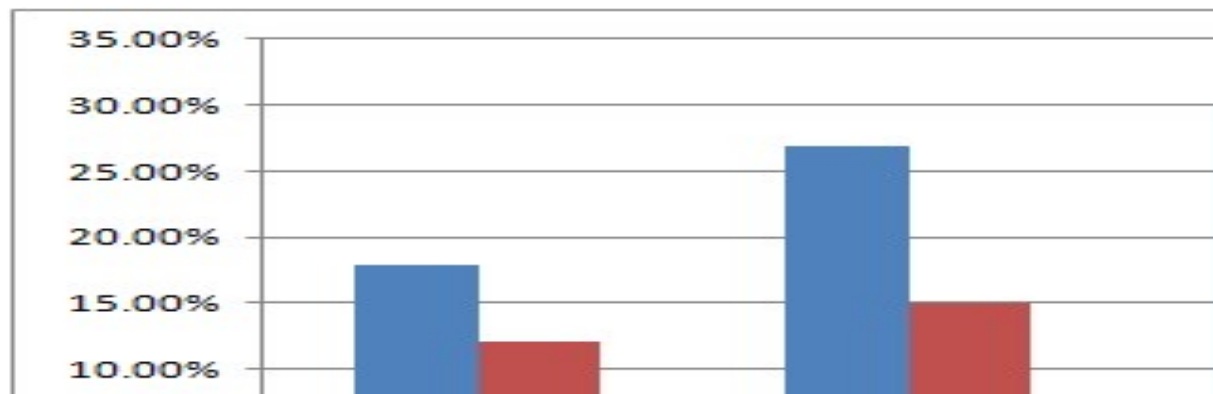
As per the National Church Life Survey, from 1950-2007, the monthly church attendance showed a downturn from 44% to 17%. However, the decrease in church attendance has slowed (Note 10). In 2015, monthly church attendance was 16%.

In 2009 as per the survey conducted by Christian Research Association in Australia, the number of people who attend church once a month is only 16%, which was less than 23% in 1993. More than 40% of Anglicans or Lutherans, 36% of the Uniting Church and 28% of Roman Catholics now say they do not have any affiliation with religion. Over 33% of young persons between the ages 15 to 29 indicated their affiliations with a church in 2009, a downturn from 60% in 1993 (Note 11).

In 2011, the Christian Research Association in a study, revealed that attendance in the uniting churches over the past decade has declined by 30%. It was found that the age group around 60 years of age attend church daily. This meant that the younger generation forms the majority in the declining percentage. Philip Hughes, the president of the Christian Research Association, forecasted that for the next 20 years, the church attendance would keep on declining. (Note 12)

McCrindle Research conducted a 2013 survey found that only 8% of Christians attend church once a month. The survey also found that 47% of masses do not go to church because they do not find the relevance of religion in their life, 26% “fail to accept the way it used to teach”, while 19% “do not have faith in the Bible” (Note 13).

In graph 1.1, the number of attendees who attended the church from 1996- 2006 had reduced in all age groups. The gathered data from 1950-2007 indicated that church attendance was declining vastly. However, this decline rate slowed down in 2015. Thus, the surveys concluded that churches’ attendance in Australia reduced with the passing of years.



**Figure 4. Church Attendance**

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 Reasons for the Decline in Churches

With the pace of time, everything changed as it happened with the church's attendance, so various factors resulted in a downturn in churches' attendance in Australia. The first and foremost reason behind the downturn is the decline in the respect that people earlier used to give to religious institutions. Out of 20 million, only 14.6 million people used to attend the church, and 5 million were those who say that they do not have any religion (Note 14).

Another reason behind the decline is the switch in church celebration of marriages that priests and ministers were performing. In 1908, priests and ministers performed 97.4% of Australia's marriages, whereas the civil celebrants performed only 2.6%. Half a century later, it was seen that priests and ministers conducted 88.9% of the marriages in 1958. Nevertheless, by 1998, the priests and ministers performed 50.5% and civil celebrants 49.5%. The sexual revolution was also a significant factor.

The introduction of Sunday as the trading day in the States and Territories was another factor that meant that shops would remain open as they are during weekdays. It was also the reason behind the reduction in church attendance. Many younger people believed that spirituality and religion are commodities that can be used and left whenever their interests, emotions, needs, or values require it. Many people visit only during events, not regularly.

Thus no one factor is accountable for declining attendance. Many factors contribute to the church's decline (spirituality, upbringing, ageing, religiosity, life stage). They are shaped and underpinned by societal transitions (individualism, experientialism).

##### 4.2 Measures for the Increase in Church Attendance

The following are the few measures through which the church attendance can be increased, and even the youth can get motivated for attending the church (Note 15).

###### 4.2.1 Designing a Mission Statement That Reflects the Growth's Desire

The first thing which can be done is to bring everyone on board with a focused growth mission. Clearly

write the task and make everyone understand the energy, time, and resources required for growth and teamwork rather than individualism.

#### 4.2.2 Creating an Environment for the Visitors Attending Church for the First Time

A healthy environment should be created for newcomers visiting the church and then evaluate that step from the youth perspective. There should be trained personnel to welcome all who join the church service. The church should duly recognize visitors and make a follow up within seven days.

#### 4.2.3 Engaging Those Members Who Attend Church Daily

At this step, as the church cares for the people visiting them, they would be motivated to invite their friends and family members to events like marriages, parties, and other events where they will get a chance to explore more about the church. In this way, the young people will be attracted and start attending church at least once a while.

#### 4.2.4 Serving the Community.

When the Church starts volunteering the community, it will show the society its mission of serving others, i.e., cleaned parks, running soup kitchens, organising events widely for the community, assisting the schools, etc. Just doing minor tasks make a genuine difference in the lives of individuals and creatures in need.

#### 4.2.5 Developing Social Media Presence

The social media presence would make the youth aware of the churches' mission. This would assist them in deciding on whether they should visit the church or not. Social media will influence the youth in attending the church, so churches must have a social media presence. Everything has been done online in the technological era.

The measures mentioned above would assist the church in increasing its attendance in Australia, and these measures would prove beneficial in retaining the youth.

## 5. Conclusion

Over time, there has been a considerable change in Australians' lives' cultural and religious diversity. Instead of choosing a particular religion, they have started choosing no religion as their religion. In fact, from various surveys, it can be concluded that half of the populace have chosen no religion or considered religion less critical. To motivate youth or retain them back, the church needs to take various steps to grow in the number of church attendance in Australia. The church attendees must be disciplined to evangelize. They must encourage and invite those who have never visited the church before to church. Though most shops open after midday on Sunday, it does not guarantee church attendance. The Sunday must be dedicated to religious purposes as in the past to observe the Sabbath day and attend church. The church must be confident and welcome innovations to retain the youth in the church.



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### Notes

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Note 6. Australian Bureau of Statistics (27 June 2017). 2016 Census of Population and Housing. "2016 Community Profiles: Australia". Retrieved 05-02-2021.

Note 7. Religion in Australia Demographics

Note 8. "3416.0-Perspectives on Migrants, 2007: Birthplace and Religion". Australian Bureau of Statistics. 25 February 2008. Archived from the original on 2 March 2008. Retrieved 15 August 2008.

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