

Future Prospects

Baptist Union of Australia

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I grew up in Baptist churches. My parents were ABMS missionaries in Papua New Guinea in the 1950s before serving in pastoral ministry in Baptist churches in NSW and Victoria.

I left the church in my teens and came back to faith through the influence of a Baptist youth leader. My early years of discipleship were spent in a Baptist church.

Eventually I served as an intern in that church before being sent out with my wife Michelle to plant a Baptist church in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

Today we serve with a mission agency multiplying godly leaders and churches in Australia and beyond. We're members of the Baptist church I grew up in and they have adopted us as one of their missionary families.

Baptist churches were not the only influence on my development, but they have been at the centre.

Many years ago I studied Reformation history under Ken Manley. I was struck by the fluid nature of church history. Great religious movements come into being, they exist for a time and unless they are renewed by the Word and the Spirit, they decline. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is assured except change.

This paper is a labour of love. For the last twenty years I have been a student of church planting movements. How they come into existence. How they grow and function. How they decline and die.

Australian Christianity is at a crossroads. Every year for decades, the number of churches and participants has continued to decline. The old Protestant mainline denominations are unlikely to recover. Any gains made by the evangelical, Pentecostal, and "emerging" churches are far outweighed by losses of the mainline denominations.

The Australian church is significantly older than the rest of the population and the gap is widening. Only 3% of Australian children attend church regularly.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. He is our one hope of salvation. As foolish as it may seem, he has chosen to fulfill his mission through his people, the Church.

I love the Church in all its various forms. I'm grateful for my Baptist heritage. I still believe we have a contribution to make in reaching this great nation and in taking the Gospel to the world.

I offer these reflections on past and future trends of the Baptist Union of Australia believing that God has more in store for us than we dare dream.

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Summary of Trends

1. Baptist membership has been falling since 1992.
2. The gap between membership and population growth has been widening since 1911.
3. Church attendance has been growing since 2003 but the numbers may not be accurate.
4. The number of churches is increasing.
5. The gap between number of churches and population growth has been widening since 1911.
6. Mainline Protestant churches are in serious decline which outweighs the growth in evangelical churches.
7. The Australian population is growing at unexpectedly high levels and will continue to do so.

Conclusion: More of the same will result in steady long-term decline.

What should we do?

1. Confront the evidence.
2. Keep returning to our evangelical heritage.
3. See our future through Great Commission eyes.
4. Release pioneering leadership.
5. Build a church planting movement.
6. Keep learning.
7. Exercise faith.

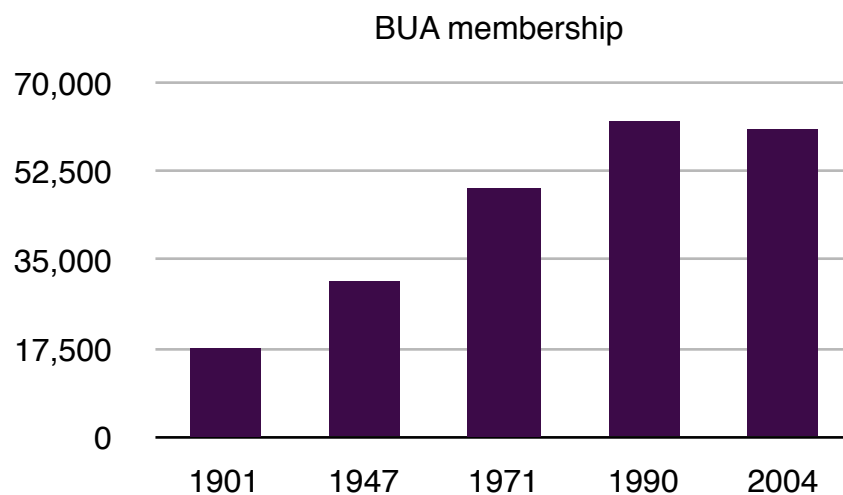
Past and future trends

Baptists held their first church service in Australia in the Long Room of the Rose and Crown Inn, on the corner of King and Castlereagh streets in Sydney. It was Sunday April 24, 1831.

From that small beginning a denomination eventually grew and spread throughout the continent to every state and territory. They preached the Gospel, pioneered new churches and helped shape an emerging nation.

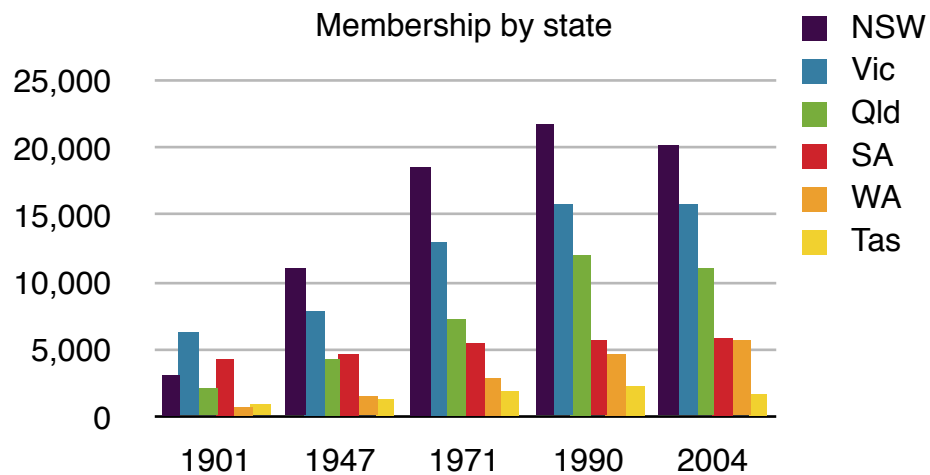
1. Baptist membership has been declining since 1992

Membership grew from 17,743 in 1901 to a peak of 64,560 in 1992. In 2004 membership was 60,856.¹

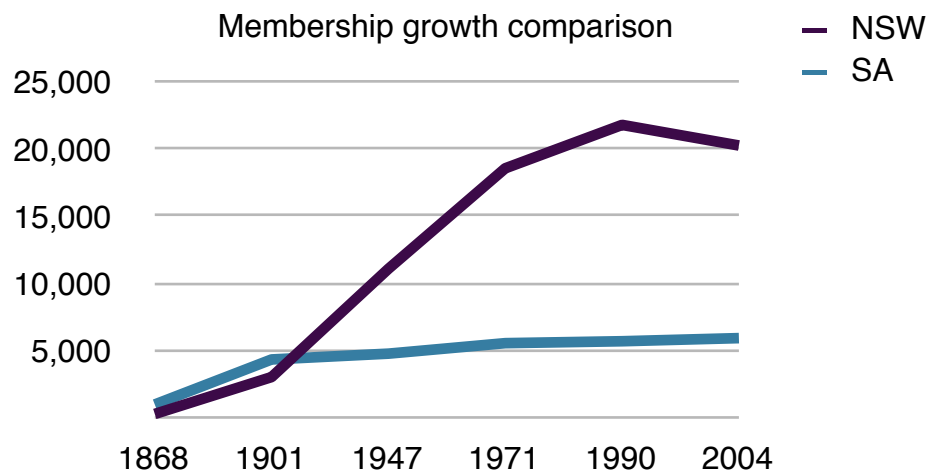


The growth in the number of churches and members has not been uniform over time or between the states.

¹ The 2007 figure was 61,409.



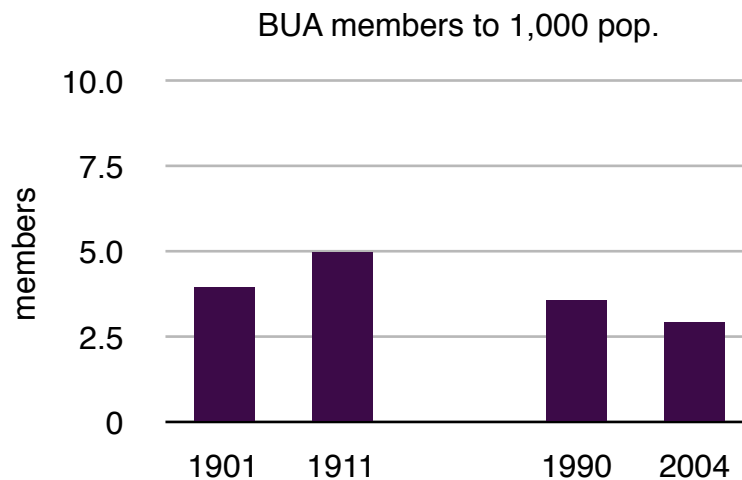
1901–1977 NSW membership grew six-fold. Victoria more than doubled. Queensland tripled. SA’s membership growth has been almost stagnant since 1911 when membership was 5,330. In 96 years the SABU has increased by just 670 additional members.



Since 1990 most states have experienced a decline in the number of members. WA and SA are the exceptions although the SA figures may not be accurate.

2. The gap between membership and population growth has been widening since 1911

At Federation in 1901 there were 3.95 Baptist church members per 1000 population. That ratio rose to 5.02 in 1911 but has been declining ever since.

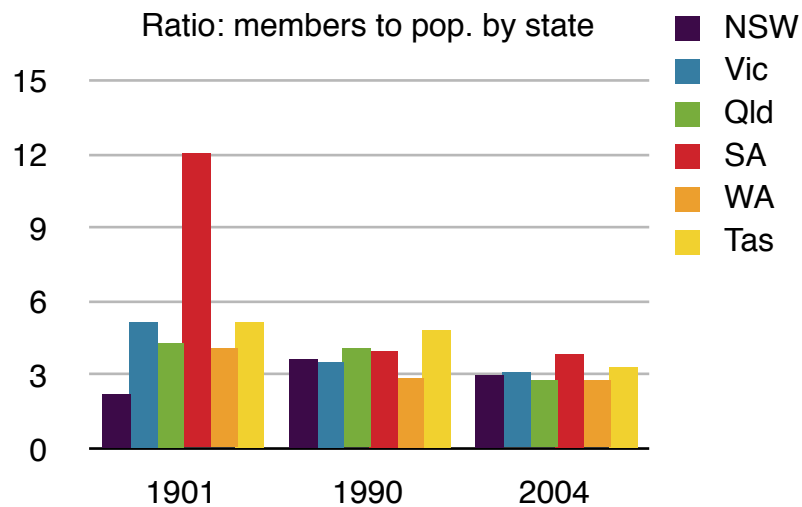


The trend in NSW shows that decline was not inevitable. In 1901 its ratio was 2.26 members to 1000 population. This was the lowest in the nation. For the next 65 years the ratio improved until 1966 when it peaked at 4.32. By 2004 it had declined to 3.02.

Victoria peaked in 1907 at 5.73 and has been in decline ever since.

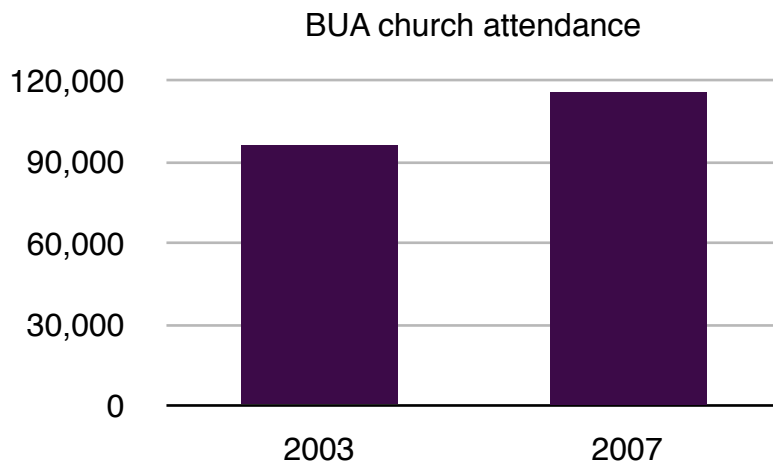
The figures in South Australia show the most dramatic changes. At Federation there were 12.1 members per 1000 population. Ten years later the SABU peaked at 12.71 and then plummeted to 5.14 in 1954. By 2004 the ratio was 3.91 if the reported figures are accurate.

Tasmania peaked in 1933 at 6.77. By 2004 it had halved to 3.33.



3. Church attendance is increasing but the numbers may not be accurate

Attendance figures have only recently found their way into official reports. Unfortunately they may not be reliable.

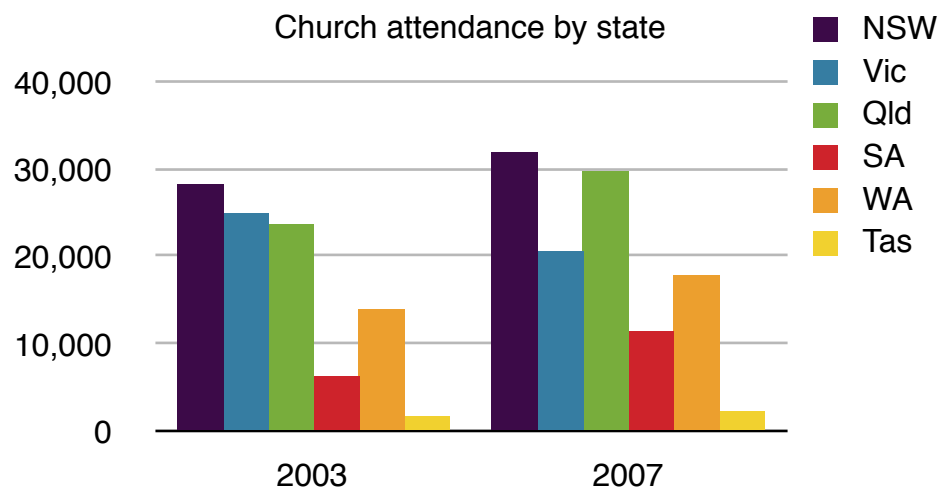


The figures for South Australia appear to show a dramatic growth in attendance from 13,540 in 2005 to 18,000 in 2006. I have reason to question the accuracy of these figures.²

² The size of the SABU attendance increase in just twelve months (4,460 or 33%) is unusual. Attendance figures from 2003-07 are rounded numbers. Membership figures going back to the early 1990s are also rounded. Both fluctuate unusually. At the time of writing I was unable to find out why, but I wonder if accurate figures are not maintained by South Australia.

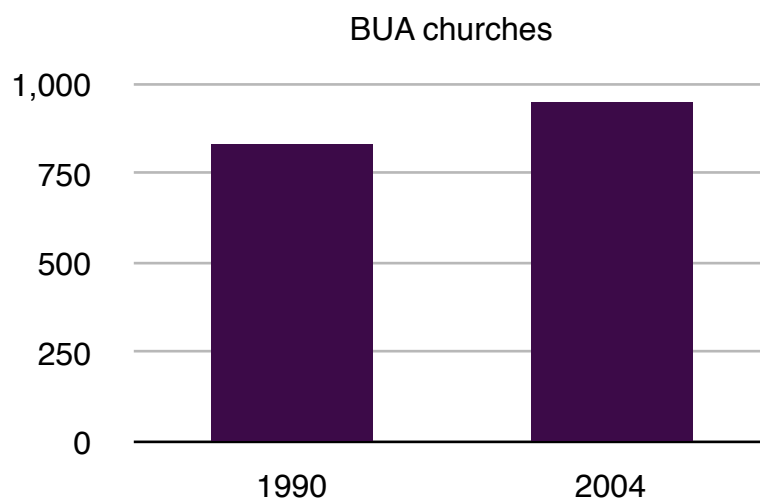
The BUWA reported a dramatic increase in attendance from 6,534 to 11,500 between 2003–07. Such an increase in only four years requires further investigation.³

Between 2003–07 Queensland replaced Victoria as the state with the second largest attendance.



4. The number of churches is increasing

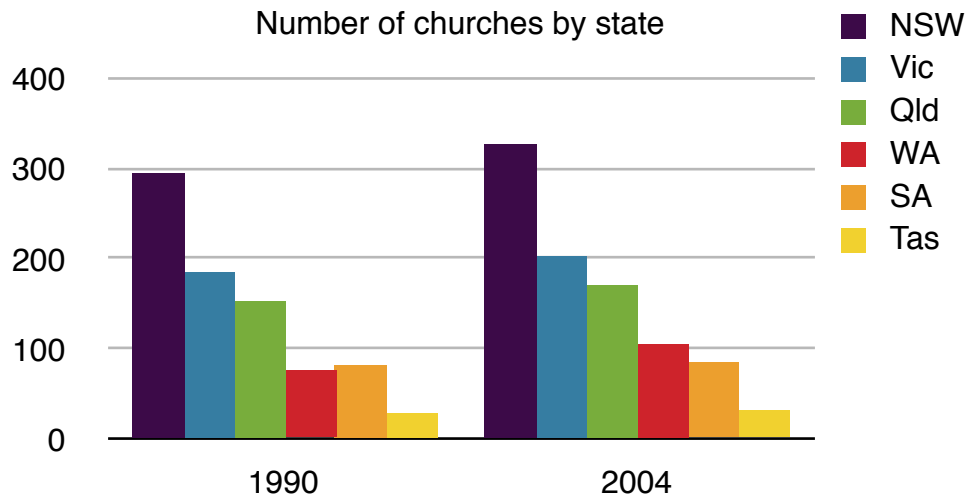
The number of BUA churches and fellowships increased between 1990–2004 from 835 to 939⁴.



³ The WA attendance and membership figures also display a pattern of rounded figures and unusual fluctuations which may indicate they are inaccurate estimates.

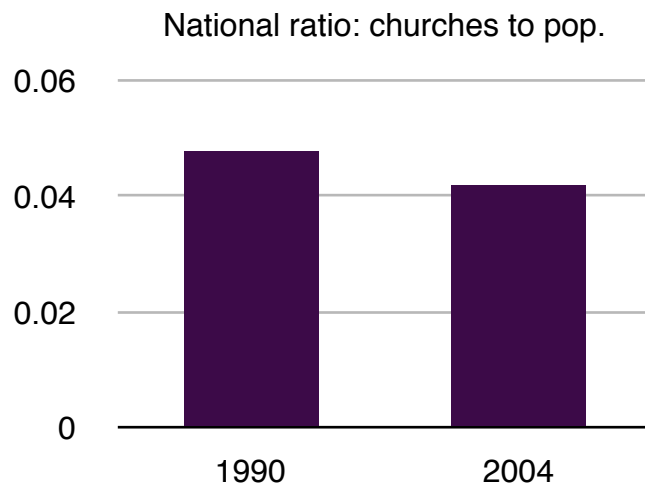
⁴ BUA had 945 churches in 2007.

Between 1990–2004 every state showed an increase in the number of churches.

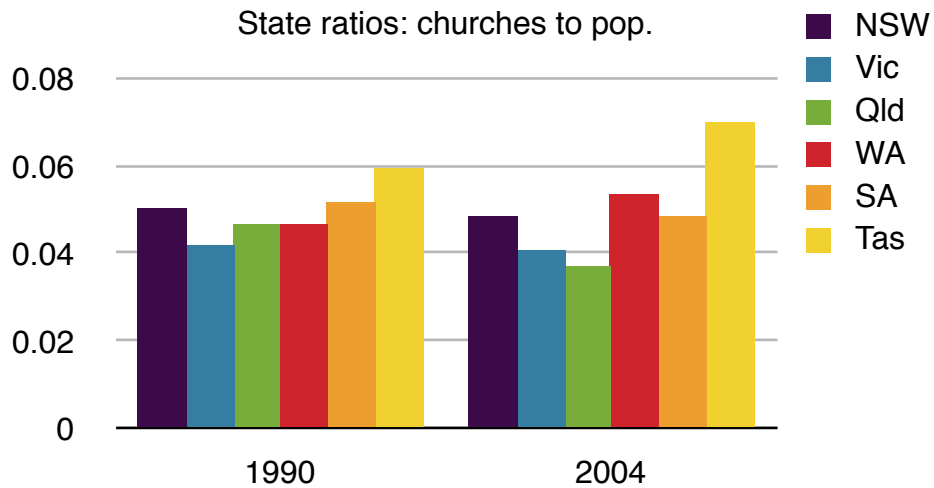


5. The gap between number of churches and population growth has been widening since 1911

From 1990–2004 the number of Baptist churches and fellowships increased from 835 to 939. Despite this, the ratio of Baptist churches to the growing Australian population declined slightly from .048 per 1000 population to .042.

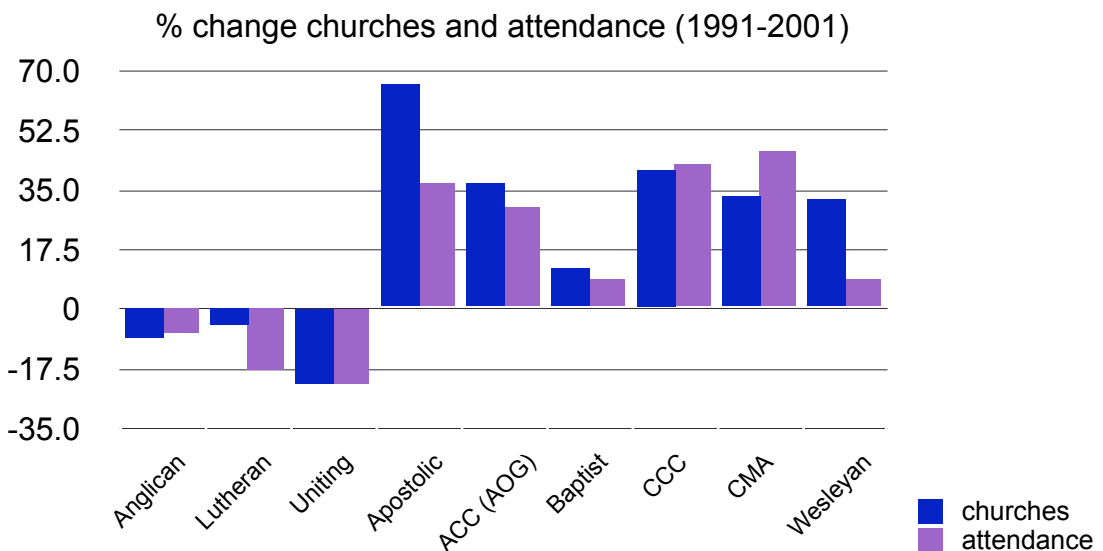


Between 1990–2004 every state except WA and Tasmania reduced their ratio of churches to population. Tasmania is the clear leader in this field.



6. Mainline Protestant churches are in serious decline which outweighs the growth in evangelical churches⁵

The Protestant “mainline” denominations in Australia are in serious long-term decline. The Anglican (outside Sydney), Uniting, and Lutheran churches are included in this group.



*CCC figures are for 1996–2001⁶

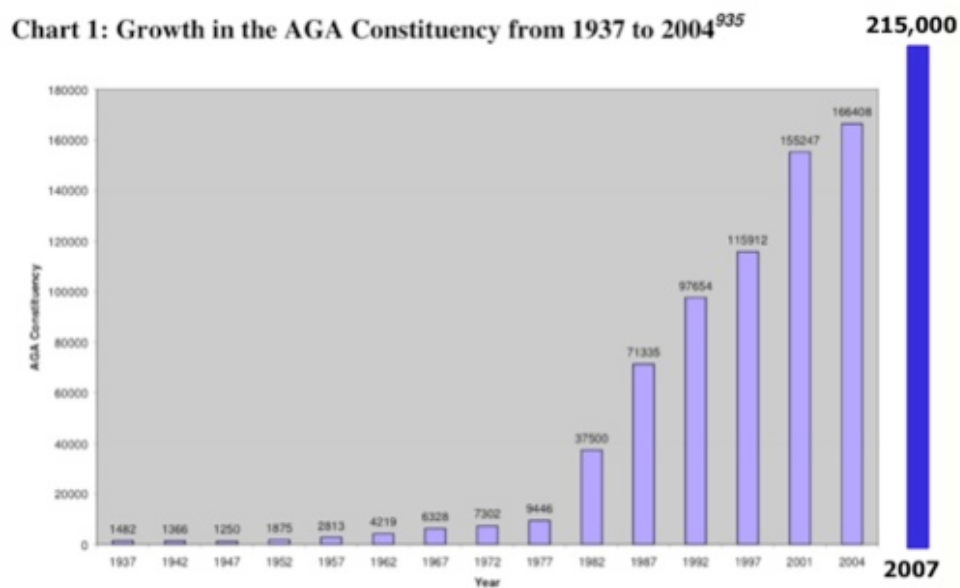
⁵ “Evangelical” includes: conservative evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal.

⁶ National Church Life Survey, www.ncls.org.au

For example, Uniting Church attendance has halved since Union in 1977. The UCA’s largest adult age bracket is 70–79 years. In the next 15 years, adult attendance in the Uniting Church will halve again.

With few exceptions, the growing churches and denominations within Australia are “evangelical” (conservative evangelical and/or Pentecostal/charismatic).

From 1977–2007 ACC (formerly AOG) attendance grew by 2276%. The number of churches increased by 736%.⁷

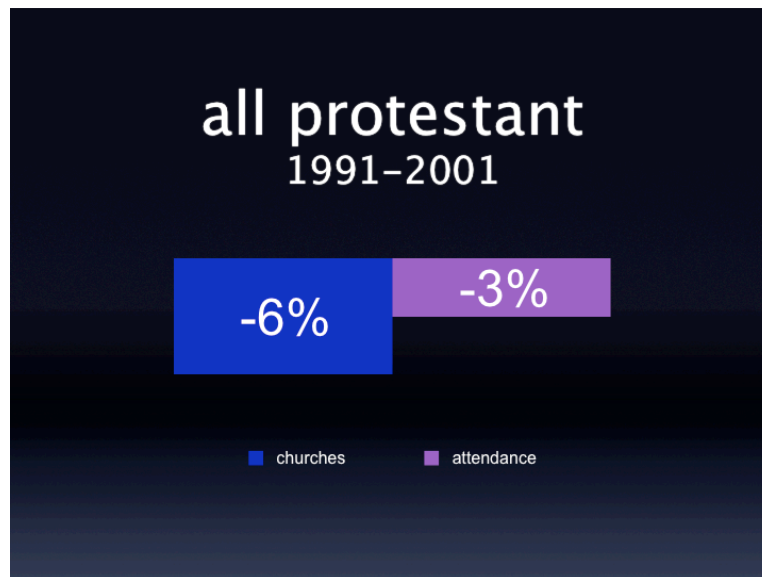


Despite the gains of the evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic churches Australian church attendance has continued to decline.

These churches are growing off a much smaller base than the declining mainline churches.

According to the NCLS, between 1991–2001 Australian church attendance declined overall by 3%. The number of Australian churches fell by 6%. Against a growing population, these figures are even more disturbing.

⁷ Shane Clifton, An Analysis of the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia. For an account of the reasons behind the growth go to: www.steveaddison.net/2008/08/19/andrew-evans-on-the-rise-and-rise-of-the-australian-assemblies-of-god.html



In 1991 Australia had one church for every 1561 people. NCLS has not yet released its 2006 estimates. If the 1991–2001 trend continued, the ratio in 2006 would be one church for every 2054 people.

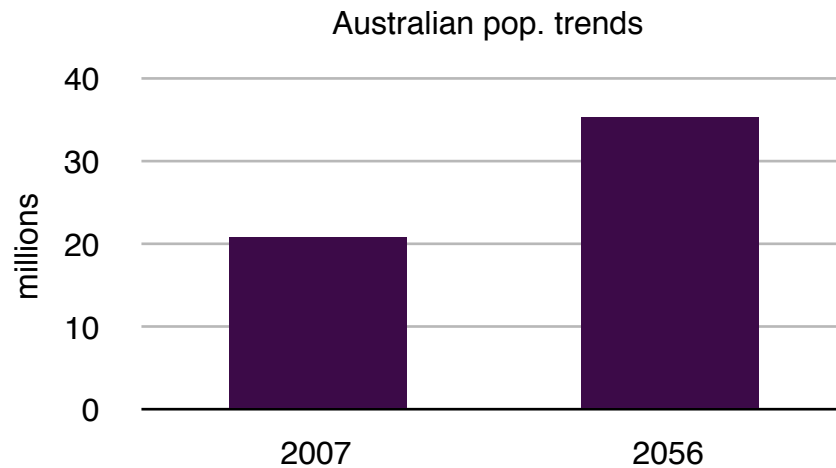
7. The Australian population is growing at unexpected high levels and will continue to do so⁸

There has been a paradigm shift in the way that demographers view Australia. The key difference is immigration.

Revised projections from the Australian Bureau of Statistics predict a population of up to 42.5 million by 2056. The estimates below reflect the mid-range projection of 35.7 million.

Rising fertility rates are part of the cause, but changing trends in immigration have had the greatest impact. Annual immigration figures have been adjusted from 110,000 to 180,000. Currently, the largest non-Anglo ethnic groups migrating to Australia are Chinese and Indian.

⁸ ABS Population Projections, Australia, 2006–2101.

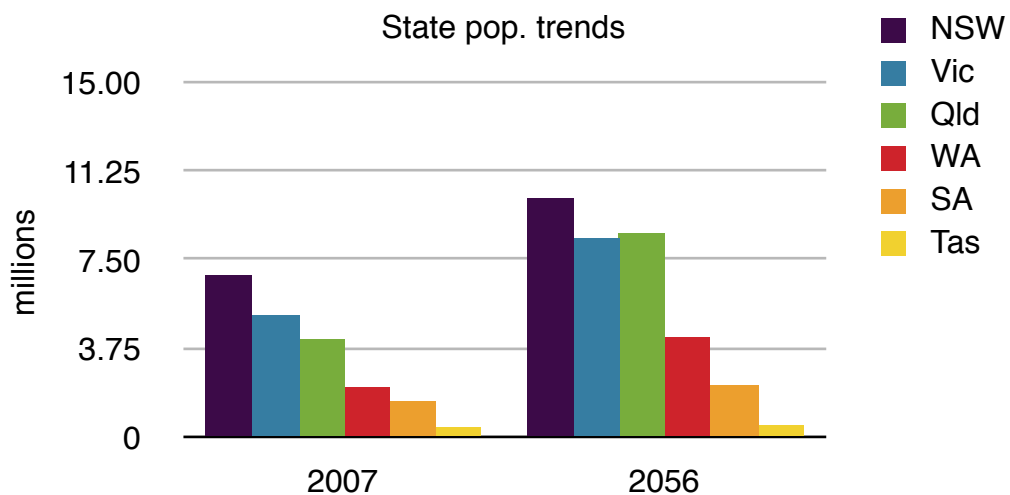


As the baby boomer generation grows older, the tax base and pool of skilled labour will shrink. Immigration, especially economic migrants from the developing world, must increase to meet the need.

The ABS projects that by 2056 the population of **New South Wales** will reach 10.2m people. **Victoria** is projected to reach 8.5m.

Queensland's population will more than double in size, from 4.2m in 2007 to 8.7m in 2056. By 2050 Queensland will replace Victoria as Australia's second most populous state.

Likewise, **Western Australia's** population is projected to more than double, from 2.1m to 4.3m. **South Australia** will increase by 620,300 people (39%) to 2.2m by 2056. **Tasmania's** population will increase slowly before leveling out by around 2040.



What should we do?

The best way to reach the harvest isn't through large churches or small churches but churches that multiply whatever their size.

Bob Logan

1. Confront the evidence

If we kept track of our money as poorly as we track our people and churches, we would soon find ourselves in court or bankrupt or both.

The BUA and each state must keep careful track of key indicators such as:

- How many churches planted and closed?
- Which churches are growing, plateaued or declining?
- How many existing churches have planted new churches?
- How many churches have planted churches that have planted churches?
- What is the age distribution of our people?
- What is the age distribution of our leaders?
- The breakdown of membership growth into conversion, restoration, transfer or biological.
- How are we doing in relation to the trends in Australian population growth and composition (age, ethnicity, geography)?

The figures should be available publicly and become a regular agenda item in planning meetings at a national, state and local level.

2. Keep returning to our evangelical heritage

Movements are renewed by making an innovative return to tradition. Our heritage as Baptists is “evangelical” with its emphasis on the importance of conversion, activism, the authority of the Scriptures, the centrality of Jesus Christ and the Cross.⁹

The strength of evangelicalism is “engaged orthodoxy”. Christian Smith explains, Evangelicals are “committed to maintaining and promoting confidently traditional, orthodox Protestant theology and belief, while at

⁹ See Manley, vol 1, 10 and D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1989, pp. 1-19, 233-5.

the same time becoming confidently and proactively engaged in the intellectual, cultural, social and political life of the nation.”¹⁰

In contrast “Fundamentalism” is distinct from the world but not engaged. Liberal Protestantism is engaged but not distinct.

Historian Stuart Piggin¹¹ explains that evangelicalism is passionate about three of Christ’s concerns: his Word, his Spirit, and his mission. Where these three concerns were held together in synthesis, evangelicalism was strong in itself and made a significant contribution to the shaping of Australian society and culture.

The further we move from our evangelical heritage the faster will be our decline. The scrap heap of history awaits those movements that drift into either Fundamentalism or Liberal Protestantism.

We must go back to our evangelical heritage as we go forward in a fresh way.

3. See our future through Great Commission eyes

We need to begin with the end in mind, no matter how daunting the challenge. What would it look like to have faithfully completed our task?

Mere denominational survival is not enough.

The DAWN¹² movement has established a target of one evangelical church per 1000 persons of the population. The current ratio of Protestant churches to population is around one to 2000 and increasing. We need to at least double the number of churches if we are to reach every neighbourhood and people group.

I believe our goal should be to double the number of Baptist churches throughout Australia. In addition we should work with other evangelical churches and movements as we all play our part in ensuring there is one church for every 1,000 Australians.

¹⁰ See Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism : Embattled and Thriving*, 1998.

¹¹ Stuart Piggin, *The Spirit of a Nation*, 2004.

¹² www.dawn.org

We need to plant 1000 new churches in the next twenty–five years.

We should start with an “endvision” and find the faith and methods to make it a reality.

4. Release pioneering leadership

At every level we must identify and empower leaders who catch the vision.

- a. Denominational leaders must embrace church planting as central to our mission.
- b. Each state must appoint strong, energetic field leadership with a vision to multiply churches and the ability to turn vision into action.
- c. Leaders of flagship churches in every region must evaluate their ministry on the basis of how effective they are in growing future leaders who can lead and plant churches.
- d. A new generation of younger leaders is required to serve as church planters and team members.
- e. Partnerships with major donors must be forged, not to buy buildings and pay church planters (“production” or addition) but to invest in the systems that build “production capacity” (or multiplication).

5. Build a church planting movement

There is no secret regarding what a denomination must do to multiply churches in a healthy sustainable way. This is what is required:

- a. Clarify the vision and ownership for multiplication.
- b. Recruit and select the right candidates to lead church planting teams
- c. Equip and coach leaders in the field.
- d. Partner with healthy existing churches to plant churches that reproduce
- e. Intentionally grow the leaders who will plant churches in 3–5 years time
- f. Ensure funding strategies are sustainable and will not inhibit the growth of a church planting movement.

We know what to do. The question is are we willing to commit ourselves to relentless implementation?

6. Keep learning

In my life time no one has predicted the future with any degree of accuracy and consistency. The only way to survive and prosper in the real world is to keep learning by doing.

We need a diversity of approaches while maintaining our core beliefs and mission. We need mega churches, cafe churches, neighbourhood churches, churches of all different shapes and sizes. We must encourage diversity of approaches in pursuing our common calling.

We must learn key principles from other contemporary and historical case studies. We must look for fruitfulness and healthy multiplication rather than judge a church or “missional initiative” by mere size or novelty.

Where do we see lives touched, disciples made, groups multiplied, leaders developed and new viable churches reproduced? Our independence gives us the freedom to experiment. Our interdependence creates a learning community committed to discovering the new thing God is doing.

We must be willing to sacrifice any of our current methods to fulfill our calling.

7. Exercise faith

Jesus proclaimed, “ If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Mt 12:28). His ministry could only be explained by the presence and power of God the Holy Spirit.

We face an impossible task. We serve a God who does the impossible. The only way forward is by faith and prayer. Budgets will not get the job done. Corporate plans and “expert” reports alone are futile. Continuing our current practices will deliver more of the same decline and lost opportunity.

We must become men and women of faith who see the world through the compassionate eyes of Jesus and cry out to God for the workers to go out into his harvest field.

What if we do nothing?

If we do nothing, we'll survive. It will take decades for the full impact of our inaction to bear fruit. There will be a long journey of gradual decline in relation to population growth. The denomination will probably still be around in 100 years time—unless Jesus returns.

AJ Waldock and the BUNSW

A case study of denominational turnaround

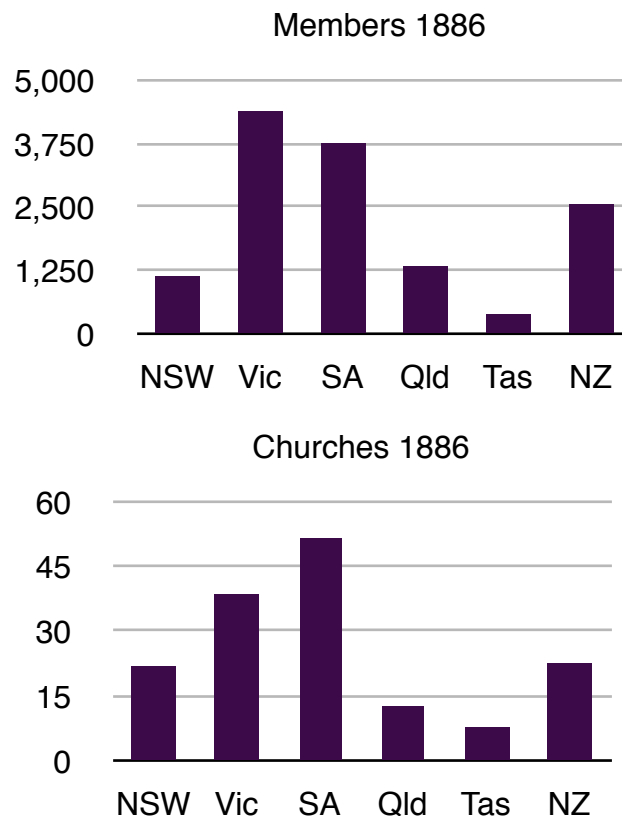


In 177 years of Baptist history in Australia, there is no shortage of case studies of both decline and renewal.

One of the best examples of a turnaround is the story of AJ Waldock and the Baptist Union of NSW.¹³

Confronting reality with faith

In 1886 the Baptist Union of New South Wales celebrated its Jubilee. Perhaps “celebrated” is not the right word. The Annual Report regrets that although NSW was the oldest and most populous colony in Australia, there was only one colony with fewer Baptist members—Tasmania.



¹³ Sources: Michael Petras, *Extension or Extinction: Baptist Growth in New South Wales, 1900–1939*, 1983 and Ken Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to Eternity: A History of Australian Baptists*, 2 vols.

The situation steadily improved until the end of the nineteenth century. But it was the first three decades of the twentieth century that produced a stunning turnaround in the denomination's fortunes.

In 1900, after 69 years of ministry, there were only 37 churches in New South Wales with 2,841 members. By 1940 there were 126 churches and 10,233 members.

What did the NSW Baptists do to turn this around?¹⁴

1. Appoint visionary leadership

In 1904 the Union appointed a young man to lead Home Missions—AJ Waldock.

Previously Home Mission Secretaries were just that—secretaries or administrators. Waldock reinvented the role and began travelling to every corner of the state.

By the end of his first year 9 mission stations became 13. The number of preaching stations had doubled to 40. The number of workers in the field grew to 22.

2. Commit to an effective strategy

Waldock was not just an energetic activist. He was a strategist. He produced a strategy paper for the 1905 Assembly: "Methods of Home Mission Work". His approach was direct and uncompromising.

"All too long has our denominational expansion been left to haphazard and chance. We need a fixed policy and a determined plan; we need a method in our work that will give some guarantee of a going forward all the time."

'Too long the [Home Mission] Committee has been the benevolent institution of the denomination—the asylum of aged and infirm Churches—a kind of ecclesiastical couch for sleeping congregations to repose their weary limbs—a perambulator for carrying infant causes which never learn to walk'.

AJ Waldock

¹⁴ See Petras and Manley.

3. Stay on target

Waldock argued that the primary role of the Society was not to prop up struggling churches that could not fend for themselves. It must be to establish new churches that grow to healthy independence and then reproduce.

Waldock laid down a number of practical steps towards this goal:

1. Overcome the tyranny of distance by grouping churches into District Associations, under the leadership of a senior minister. Each Association was to take responsibility for Mission in their region.
2. Appoint a salaried General Superintendent of Home Missions.
3. Reorganize finances so that mission workers could be paid and directed centrally.

The primary purpose of the Society must be church planting and evangelism. Struggling churches would only be supported if funds permitted.

The Annual Assembly of 1905 adopted Waldock's vision for expansion. A young and inexperienced minister of 32 years had struck the first blow in the battle to turn the denomination around.

4. Partner with key leaders and churches

CJ Tinsley was the other key figure in the resurgence of the BUNSW. Australian born, he trained at Spurgeon's College London. He returned to take up leadership at the newly constituted Stanmore Baptist in 1901.

For the next thirty years Tinsley was "a blaze of evangelistic fire and fervour" at Stanmore and among the Baptist churches throughout the state and nation. He was a great evangelist and he led the whole denomination into evangelism.

In 1912 he became President of the Union. The denomination was already advancing under Waldock's leadership in the field. Tinsley challenged them to go further.

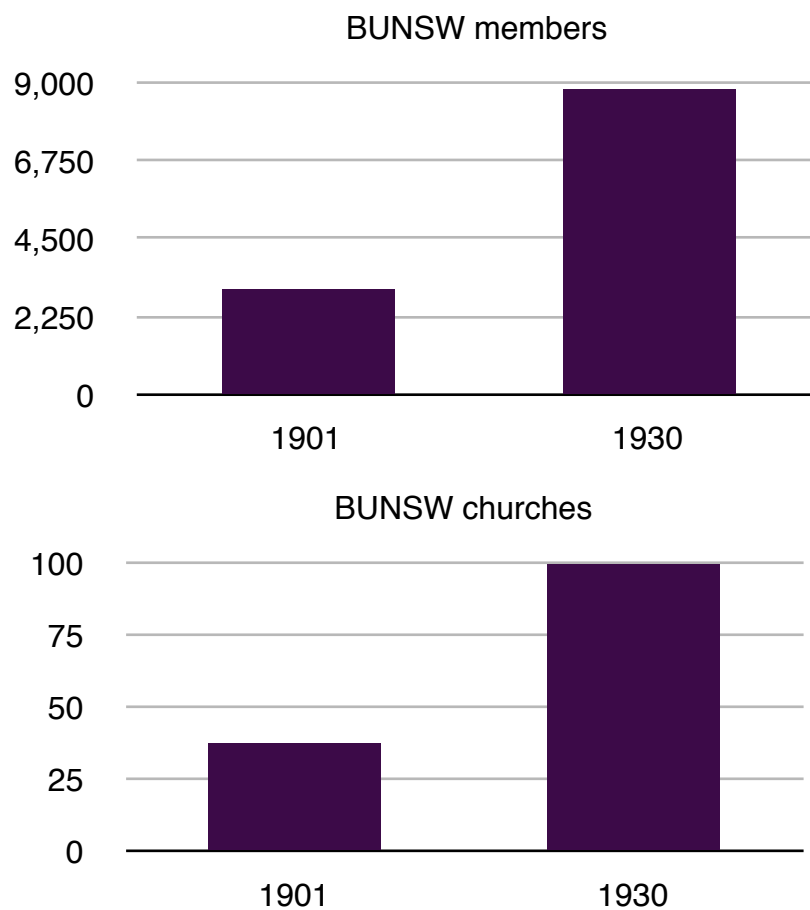
"We must preach or we will perish; we must evangelise or we shall fossilise; we must be a missionary force or we shall become a missionary field."

5. Partner with major donors

Right from the beginning Waldock's vision for expansion was supported by a small group of major donors led by Hugh Dixson and William Buckingham. By 1925 Dixson had contributed £11,000, Buckingham, £3,000.

The outcome?

From 1901–1930 the number of churches and members in NSW almost tripled.



Tables¹

1. Baptist membership

	1901	1947	1971	1990	2007
BUA	17,743	31,210	49,240	62,834	61,409
NSW	3,104	11,156	18,632	21,860	20,327
Vic	6,296	7,870	13,077	15,915	15,896
Qld	2,210	4,388	7,400	12,075	11,125
SA	4,413	4,845	5,625	5,768	6,000
WA	800	1,501	3,049	4,754	5,800
Tas	920	1,450	1,995	2,285	1,769

2. Baptist members per 1000 population

	1901	1990	2004
BUA	3.95	3.62	3.01
NSW	2.26	3.74	3.02
Vic	5.2	3.62	3.14
Qld	4.36	4.12	2.86
SA	12.1	4.01	3.91
WA	4.13	2.93	2.84
Tas	5.25	4.92	3.33

¹ Sources: Baptist Union handbooks and the ABS.

3. Baptist attendance

	2003	2007
BUA	96,854	115,720
NSW	28,537	31,929
Vic	25,131	20,904
Qld	23,666	29,797
WA	6,534	11,500
SA	14,000	18,000
Tas	1,964	2,300

4. Baptist churches

	1990	2004
BUA	835	939
NSW	297	328
Vic	186	203
Qld	154	171
WA	76	108
SA	83	85
Tas	30	32

5. Ratio of Baptist churches to population

	1990	2004
BUA	0.048	0.042
NSW	0.0507	0.0486
Vic	0.0423	0.0407
Qld	0.047	0.037
WA	0.047	0.054
SA	0.052	0.049
Tas	0.06	0.07

6. ABS mid-range population trends (millions)

	2007	2056
Australia	21.01	35.47
NSW	6.9	10.2
Vic	5.2	8.5
Qld	4.2	8.7
WA	2.1	4.3
SA	1.6	2.2
Tas	0.49	0.57