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Abstract
This paper draws upon current market and social research as well as the 2011 Australian Census to examine trends in Australian church attendance. It finds that all churches are in plateau or decline unless connected to first generation migration. It also finds that there is a marked trend among Australians under the age of 35 away from any religious practice or acknowledgement. Social and market research from Hugh Mackay, Mark McCrindle and Roy Morgan gives qualitative reasons for this movement. The paper then uses Alan Roxburgh and Phyllis Tickle’s analysis of unraveling and recalibrating as metaphors to translate what is going on inside the data. The paper ends with hope, noting that the first step to recovery is acknowledgement of present condition.

Introduction
We all have occasional experiences, when the way we see things no longer make sense. It is in moments like these that we have to develop new a understanding to be able to move forward. Modern life challenges us with plenty of circumstances where this applies. I can remember purchasing my first iphone and couldn’t understand what all the little squares (apps) were on the screen. Shifting to a smart phone required a paradigm shift.

A profound paradigm shift has been developing in Western culture, which the Christian Church needs to attend to. Yet the Church seems to be stuck in quicksand and doesn’t seem to know how to get out of the mire. In fact every time it moves and tries something it seems to just sink deeper into the mire. The struggle is whether we are loyal to what we have been trained to believe is methodologically and ecclesiologically correct or whether to take a leap and adapt to where there is life and a future.

Most church leaders have been trained and molded into a model required for an old world. Local churches have been doing the same things for years and quickly form a young leader into a shape that is acceptable to them. It is a point well illustrated in an old Leadership Journal cartoon set in a church foyer. Along a wall there are a series of heads set in plaques – like hunters used to do with prized game. The chair of elders is standing there with the new pastor explaining the meaning, “Each of these are former ministers who tried to change things around here.”
Things are unraveling. Faithful Christian communities who have for decades (sometimes centuries) effectively lived out the Gospel are getting older and becoming fewer. Too often rigid systems and mindsets have not permitted new initiatives and leading from the Spirit. As Alan Roxburgh observes, “Jesus was announcing the coming of a new reality that only some would be able to see and hear. In the midst of our great unraveling, the Spirit is calling the church toward a new way of being. The call is for us to have the eyes and ears to see and hear what God is doing in front of us. Can we see it?”

We need to state from the outset that many local churches have been wonderful communities, often for generations, where individuals and families have together worshipped, shared life, baptized, broken bread, married and grown in the Christian faith. Some local churches have taken the lead on important social justice matters and helped create a better world, literally. I can remember the church of my childhood taking an active role in settling Vietnamese ‘boatpeople’ through the provision of homes, education, friendship and language. Many of us have grown-up in and benefitted greatly from one of these churches although we must not be too ‘Pollyanna’ as not all people have such positive experiences and memories. Still, many local churches will be closed within a generation.

As difficult as it might be to openly acknowledge, the twenty-first century local church is faced with a tremendous paradigm shift if it is to survive. If we desire to see local Christian communities faithfully continue a presence in a world filled with rapid, discontinuous change then they are going to have to begin a significant series of transitions. It will not be possible to continue to tinker around the edges. The changes required, will challenge every aspect of church life.

Some people point to large and mega churches as a source of hope for church life. Large and mega churches face the same paradigm shift challenges and are not immune from the changes going on in society. This is because most of the numerical growth for large and mega churches has traditionally come from transfer growth from small churches and the supply line is running out. The risk for the large and mega church will be that their size, busyness and success may disguise the coming challenge thus making it harder to see until it is too late. This is a challenge for the whole church inclusive of all sizes and traditions to face together and to prayerfully negotiate. We are all the Body of Christ and when any part suffers we all suffer (1 Cor 12:26).

**Australian society**

Australian society has changed through various factors including mobility, technology, education, travel, migration, scandal, urbanization and an increased awareness of human rights. Local churches have been overwhelmed by wave after wave of challenges and changes. Many thoughtful people who care for the future of Christ’s church are identifying these issues and their impact on the future of the church. Dr Keith Suter was a member of the founding generation of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in 1977. The creation of the UCA was a signal moment in ecumenism in Australia and globally, when the majority of three denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational) chose to unite as one, new church. There was great hope and optimism. Forty years on, Suter has produced his third doctorate on scenario planning for the decline of the UCA. He is not alone. At the Queensland Synod in October 2014 the following statement was publicly asked, “If the UCA keeps declining at the same rate as we have over the past few decades, we may have just forty years left until there are no congregations remaining.”
Are things really this bad? To examine the situation from an appropriate distance and move away from anecdotes we will look at four different and respected Australian sources of data that each address aspects of current church participation, societal expectations and perceptions for the ongoing future of the church in Australian society. We will then examine two international voices that help us translate the moment we find ourselves in.

The 2011 Australia Census
Philip Hughes, Margaret Fraser and Stephen Reid in *Australia’s Religious Communities: Facts and Figures from the 2011 Australian Census and other Sources* argue that denominations in Australia today are under great threat if they do not adapt to changing demographics across the nation. These trends have been forecast for many years but now are pressing upon us. Some denominations are in stubborn denial. Others, like the Uniting Church in Australia, as cited above, have been honest about their future, without noting any real strategy to improve things. Hughes, *et al* identify many important trends about each denomination, taken directly from the Australian 2011 Census. Through the many facts and distillations of information, three clear trends and warnings emerge.

**First**, the only real church growth that is occurring is through migration. Actually most of the growth occurring in religious communities, whatever the religion or denomination, is related to migration. The general pattern is that the more ‘Anglo’ the context, the fewer the adherents who seem to stick. Conversely, the closer the religion or tradition is to new migrants, the higher the level of adherence and growth. Hughes, *et al* argue that the motives for growing religious, migrant, communities include factors like desire for a sense of connection and community in Australia; shared language; shared values; and confirmation of identity through ethno-religious association combined with a sense of duty to attend. These patterns have continued in Australian immigration since 1788.

The data demonstrates that religious groups do better among new Australians and ‘immigrant-friendly’ denominations are more likely to grow. Denominations that are growing have all received high proportions of immigrants (Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists and Asian Christians). Denominations, which have declined, have attracted small numbers of immigrants (Salvation Army, Churches of Christ and Brethren).

**Second**, there is a big back door in many churches. A back door is a metaphor for where people slip out and are lost from a church or religious community. Data presented in *Australia’s Religious Communities* suggests that religious organizations that are concerned with and have a reputation for growth are in fact, not growing. There is a widespread plateau across many religious organizations that have been assumed to be growing, while others are in well-established decline. Across all of this, the research reveals a very serious trend, which should concern all who care for the church’s future. The biggest ‘back-door’ issue for religious communities in Australia in the demographic data revealed concerning 10-34 year olds. Somewhere between 300,000 to 500,000 Australian young people disengaged from any level of participation in or identification with religious life between the 2006 and 2011 censuses. There is almost no next generation coming through the pipeline.

**Thirdly**, the conversion of ‘no religion’ is a growing movement. *Australia’s Religious Communities* also identifies movement in the census towards the ‘no religion’ category. The statistical research shows that the emerging church conversation, methods and programs of evangelism, church growth, church health, missional church ideas and Pentecostalism have not made a discernable difference to the growth of Australian religious life.
Roy Morgan Research
Roy Morgan Research is one of the best-known market research companies in Australia. Founded in 1941 Roy Morgan has been taking national surveys on just about every imaginable aspect of Australian life. One of the interesting annual surveys that they take is the Image of Professions Survey. In 1996 Ministers of Religion were rated at an all time high of 59 percent for perceptions of ethical and honest behavior. In only twenty years that has fallen to its all time lowest level of 35 percent. Said another way, two-thirds of Australian society, rate ministers very low on ethics and integrity.

Observations from Australian Social Researchers
Hugh Mackay and Mark McCrindle are social researchers who employ very different methodologies yet arrive at common themes of interpretation. Mackay has been sitting with Australians for decades through focused listening groups in living rooms across the country. He has published many insightful and popular books on various aspects of Australian life as thoughtful précis of his deep listening and is widely sought as an authority in many forms of popular media. Three of his most recent books are directly relevant to church life.

Mackay notes that,
“Around 61 percent of Australians and almost 50 percent of New Zealanders still tick ‘Christian’ in the national census, only about 15 percent attend church once a month or more often, and regular weekly attenders are down to about 8 percent of the population – a very similar picture to that of the UK, Germany, France and Belgium.”

As a social researcher he makes an ironic and telling comment in his introduction to the decline of church attendance,
“Given the steady fifty-year decline in church attendance, it’s not hard to find people who can tell you why they stopped going to church. Nor, these days, is it hard to find younger people who have never been churchgoers and can’t imagine taking it up.”

Mackay notes the reasons why people still go to church, in no particular order as: desire for nurturing of faith; a community to belong to; access to pastoral care; a sense of duty; ‘it keeps me on the straight and narrow’; peace and quiet; aesthetics; engagement with ritual; interesting sermons; erotic stimulation; faithfulness; being forced to go; and to qualify the children for a church school.

There is an important observation at the start of Mackay’s observations on why people stop going to church. He observes two of the big pull factors in Western society away from faith communities,
“Any analysis of why people have stopped going to church needs to take account of the massive bombardment of Western society over the past thirty years by propaganda in two directions – both antithetical to the messages of religion and spirituality. The first barrage has come from the world of consumer mass marketing… The unambiguous message embedded in all this consumerist frenzy is that ‘it’s all about me’… The second bombardment has been from the merchants of happiness. Marshaling their considerable forces, they have also been telling us exactly what we want to hear: your entitlement isn’t confined to material prosperity; you’re entitled to happiness as well, and the pursuit of personal happiness is a perfectly suitable goal for your life.”

Following these relevant observations about serious impediments to Australian societal receptiveness to the message of Christianity, Mackay then identifies the reasons he hears
from people in his focus groups about why people stop going to church: boring and irrelevant; alien; ‘I could no longer go along with it’; ‘I felt too exposed’; too rigid, exclusive or insulting; the treatment of women; being too busy; loss of respect for the integrity of the institution; and, choosing not to go to church but to access a church school for the kids as a compromise.

Mackay summarizes,

“All this creates a conundrum for local churches. While they generally receive a strong tick of approval from their neighborhood, and while declining church attendance is often associated in people’s minds with a general loss of moral clarity and ‘shared values’ and with the evolution of a less sharing, more self-interested society, those attitudes rarely translate into a desire to support the local church by actually going to it. Even in the case of weddings and funerals, the trend is away from church-based ceremonies: 70 percent of Australian weddings are now conducted by civil celebrants.”

Mark McCrindle is a futurist, demographer and social researcher. Through regular surveys to a wide sample of Australians over several years he has developed an important database that helps us understand, among many other domains, the church in Australian society. As a general overview McCrindle observes that since 1976 Christianity has reduced by 22 percent and church attendance has dropped by 48 percent while the number of Australians describing themselves of ‘no religion’ has increased by 269 percent. Citing similar figures to Mackay, McCrindle also notes that in 1998, 50 percent of weddings were conducted by religious celebrants and 50 percent were conducted by civil celebrants. By 2011 those numbers had changed to 30 percent conducted by religious celebrants and 70 percent conducted by civil celebrants. By any account this is a huge shift in a relatively short period and reflects the changes in society.

One of the statistics that McCrindle identifies is the ageing of the church. The average age of church attendees in 2014 was 53 years of age. 44 percent of church attendees are over 60 years of age and 25 percent of church attendees are 70 years of age or older. Data such as this suggests that things are going to only get worse for church attendance in Australia.

McCrindle’s surveys identify the top six reasons why Australians don’t go to church: irrelevant to my life (46 percent); don’t accept how it’s taught (26 percent); outdated style (24 percent); issues with clergy/ministers (22 percent); don’t believe the Bible (19 percent); and too busy to attend (18 percent). Again, there are clear points of agreement and alignment with Mackay’s analysis, although McCrindle quantifies things.

Whether using the Australian Census or respected market and social researchers, the data is consistent. There is a major tsunami upon the local church. Some suggest that it is already upon us but the data suggests that there is worse to come. In a few, short years as the oldest generation passes away there will be very few younger people to replace them. While churches are busy with meaningful and important activities like pastoral care, funerals and programs, few people are preparing for change.

There tend to be four reactions to this data when it is presented. The first and obvious response is denial. Some people don’t want to think about it and hope the problem will just go away. Many senior and older church leaders simply put it in the ‘too hard basket’ and leave it for the next generation. The second response is a shrug of the shoulders followed by statements like, ‘What can you do about it’, or ‘Que Sara’. The third response is that this sort of thing is falls into head office’s responsibility. They comment, “The denomination will figure things out”. The problem is that the denominations are just as stuck as everyone else and
are very busy just keeping things going. Finally some people put their heads down and focus on what they can control – their own church. They comment, “Other churches may sink but we will try to weatherproof our own church.” This attitude results in more pressure on the minister, aggressive attempts to attract people from other churches or a tightening of the budget.

Unraveling and recalibrating

There are several worthwhile Australian and overseas voices who can help us. Many of these voices bring responses, which tackle parts of the problem. There are conferences on doing church better, more simply, more messily or more child-focused. There are seminaries that take us deeper and wider. There are prophetic voices that remind us of the toll of European settlement on Australia’s first people and the need for proper reconciliation. Others remind us about the Christian tradition of hospitality to the stranger and apply it to the world’s refugees. Important voices draw our attention to justice, mercy and compassion for people who churches seem to exclude. We need all of these voices.

Phyllis Tickle and Alan Roxburgh address many of these issues, however they also share a deep concern for the local church and its holistic engagement within culture as well as the historical and theological challenges before us. Their ability to view many issues from the balcony and to translate them to the Western church is a valuable resource. Both have written extensively on the wider challenge facing Western culture. Both articulate the challenge through helpful metaphors, which speak to our problem. Tickle writes as a journalist who articulates both the center and the breadth of the issue. Similarly, Roxburgh writes with one foot firmly in the real world and the other foot firmly in the world of missiology. He helps us wrestle deeply with the challenge left for us by Lesslie Newbigin - can the West be won?  

In The Great Emergence: How Christianity is changing and why, Phyllis Tickle provides a brief survey of the two thousand years of Christianity in order to identify a cycle of relative cohesion which is linked to the subsequent cycle through a dramatic period of recalibration. She says that a typical cycle lasts for approximately five hundred years. Tickle notes that while this pattern applies to Christianity it also applies to the other two Abrahamic faiths. She uses the metaphor of a rummage sale to describe the recalibration. Rummage sales function like a hinge. Tickle, comments, “We all would do well to remember that, not only are we in the hinge leading into a new a five hundred year period, but we are also the direct product of the previous one.”

Tickle identifies the recalibrations (or rummage sales) as the following events which each have the word ‘great’ attached: Gregory the Great and the rise of monasticism which saved Christendom; the Great Schism which saw the division of the Eastern and Western branches of the church; and the Great Reformation which saw the division of Protestant churches and nation-states. She concludes that we are now entering the next recalibration, which she terms The Great Emergence.

Religion, Tickle argues, is like a cable that provides social meaning across the centuries. Through this cable we are able to be connected to the past but live in the present and look towards the future. Developing the metaphor she says it is as if the cable is holding a dingy in safe water. Occasionally the cable is stretched or broken and requires mending or the dingy will be in danger from greater currents and waves. So that there can be safely and predictability again, the cable needs examination and mending. This is what is underway
through what she terms the Great Emergence as Christianity seeks to recalibrate all that has happened since the Enlightenment.

The Great Emergence is a useful metaphor for us. When things that brought meaning and significance to so many for so long appear to be in jeopardy, it is helpful to study previous times where similar patterns have occurred. It provides us with perspective and hope while also sobering us to the depth of changes that might be underway. The Bible carries these stories for our theological reflection and frame of reference, as does the history of the Body of Christ over the past two thousand years.

Similarly, in *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in our time*, Alan Roxburgh uses a metaphor of unraveling. Using his wife’s knitting, Roxburgh describes his amazement when after hours of knitting she unravels it in order to recommence her pattern again, correctly. She knows that if the design is faulty then continuing on won’t make a better garment. Sometimes, painful as it is, we have to watch an unraveling. The unraveling of the church that is going on before us is similar to Roxburgh’s wife Jane’s knitting being unraveled.

The denominations that are experiencing the greatest unraveling are what Roxburgh calls ‘Euro-tribal churches’. He uses this term to explicitly describe the origin of these churches and how they function. They are the result of mass migrations from Europe that have formed their self-identity around this. He says, “To a great extent these denominations were formed and expanded in the context of strong national and ethnic identities.” The unraveling of these churches has progressively increased since the 1960’s. This is a pattern very similar to the Australian scene. As a result Roxburgh notes in North America:

- If you were born between 1925 and 1945, there is a 60 percent chance you are in church today.
- If you were born between 1946 and 1964, there is a 40 percent chance you are in church today.
- If you were born between 1965 and 1983, there is a 20 percent chance you are in church today.
- If you were born after 1984, there is a 10 percent chance you are in church today.

Roxburgh’s summary of the challenges facing these churches is similar to the language of the cable articulated by Tickle, “It is not that the ways we have been God’s people were wrong. They were developed for another time, and now they are fraying, stretched and torn in the midst of massive social change.” Roxburgh then describes some of the technical methods that churches and leaders have employed to negotiate the coming changes: the 1960’s and 1970’s churches tried relational revolution; in the 1970’s and 1980’s churches tried Church Growth; in the 1980’s and 1990’s churches tried the Corporate Approach; and since 2000 the church has experimented with the emerging and missional church. In this important statement he says,

“There is an increasing recognition across the Euro-tribal churches that tactics, metrics, programs, demographics, health assessments, or strategies for institutional reorganization are not approximations of the Jesus movement the Spirit is inviting us into across our neighborhoods. New monasticism, along with counterparts like the Parish Collective and slow church movements, are indicators that after more than fifty years of trying to fix the church, significant numbers of Christians are hearing the Spirit’s call to a journey in a different way.”

Our commission (Matt 28:18-20) is not to get church programs and services better so people will come and join our club. We are the ones called to go and live and participate with God in
the neighborhood. Roxburgh challenges us, “We have to frame our lives around questions about God’s actions in our neighborhoods and how to join with God in these places.”

**Conclusion**

As we have explored the problems facing the church in Australia, let us conclude with hope. There is ample data that shows us what is not working and there are many voices that have helped us understand the social changes that are underfoot. As uncomfortable and threatened as some of us might be with change, our journey is not about comfort but pilgrimage. We are called to a journey of participation with God’s Spirit, in our communities, neighborhoods and social networks. And any long pilgrimage requires the pilgrim to off load unnecessary items.

Many of the models of our present imagination may be struggling, however God is always a step ahead of us and promises to shine a light for our path (Ps 119:105). Our task is to look and listen rather than defend, complain and attack. It is important and freeing to remember that Jesus never asked his followers to build church buildings and denominations. The early followers of Jesus practiced things very differently with great fruit. Perhaps this is where we are headed also?

1 ROXBURGH, Alan, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New*
2 Regardless of what path the UCA takes, its establishment was a highpoint in ecumenism and its’ founding document, The Basis of Union is a wonderful piece of theology.
3 www.churchfutures.com.au
5 The well documented technological and communication failures combined with the reframing of the religious affiliation question by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in relation to the 2016 Census may mean that we have to wait until after 2021 for the next accurate snapshot of Australia’s religious statistics.
6 http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/6797-image-of-professions-2016-201605110031
8 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, p9
9 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, p51
10 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, pp63-64, “The category of ‘erotic stimulation’ refers to the adolescent blend of the spiritual and the sexual and also the transference that can occur between a minister/priest and a church attendee.”
11 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, pp52-65
12 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, pp65-67
13 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, p75, “When a churchgoer reaches a point of feeling uncomfortable with the whole structure of the church and it’s teachings, it’s easy to understand why they might feel it’s time to leave. Sometimes the tipping point is over their resistance to a specific piece of doctrine... Sometimes, the repetitiveness of a service that had once seemed reassuringly familiar may come to feel tedious or uninspiring, particularly if the clergy conducting the service are themselves perceived to be merely going through the motions.”
14 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, pp65-89
15 Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, p91
16 MCCRINDLE, Mark, *The McCrindle Blog*, ‘A Demographic snapshot of Christianity and church attenders in Australia’, April 18th, 2014
During a plenary session at the 1973 Bangkok meeting of the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, Indonesia’s General Simatoupong asked Newbigin a question which had a profound effect on him and coalesced the challenge that he felt was before him for the rest of his life, ‘Can the West be converted? See NEWBIGIN, Lesslie, A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p66


TICKLE, Phyllis, The Great Emergence, pp29-30, “… Much the same sort of scheme appertains to Judaism. That is, if one goes back five hundred years from the destruction of the Second Temple and priestly Judaism in the first century CE, one hits the Babylonian Captivity which decimated Solomon’s Temple and scattered Judaism away form Judea and into much of the Middle eastern world. Five hundred years before the Captivity… was the end of the Age of the Judges and the establishment of the monarchy… Of late, an Islamic scholar or two has begun to argue that the same kind of cycling can be discerned in that faith’s history.”

Australians call this a garage sale.

ROXBURGH, Alan, Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World, p3

ROXBURGH, Alan, Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World, p 6

ROXBURGH, Alan, Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World, p10

ROXBURGH, Alan, Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World, p23

ROXBURGH, Alan, Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World, p45