

Values and local Church mission

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At the practical level, there are tensions between the Churches' missional aspiration to be catholic and to be holy. In other words, people are discouraged from attending Churches by the values they perceive as accepted or not accepted by the Churches. Survey data show people who place more importance on the values of freedom, economy, environment and security, and people who are not in married relationships are less involved in Church life. The paper raises the question as to whether these value orientations are essential to the nature of the Church's mission, or whether they are aspects of Church culture which are creating barriers for local Church mission.

One way of conceiving the mission of the Church is in terms of the characteristics noted in the traditional creeds. The Church seeks to be "one, holy, catholic or apostolic," a process which will be completed in the eschaton.

As noted in the Westminster Confession of Faith, in the actual historical Church these characteristics are more or less visible, as the essence of the Church emerges more or less purely.¹

Throughout the Church, there are tensions in the practical development of these characteristics.

This article discusses the tension, found at the local level, between the mission of the Church to be "holy" and to be "catholic."

There has also been a long tradition that divorce is to be avoided. However, is the underlying value of greater importance the positive and committed relationship between husband and wife? Is the failure of such relationships a greater problem than the occurrence of divorce?

The aspiration of holiness is an aspiration towards living according to those values which are fundamental to the Christian life. The aspiration towards catholicity is towards being the Church for all people, the universal Church in which the whole of humanity, ultimately, is included.²

In seeking to be *holy*, there is ever the danger of the Church being exclusive. In seeking to be *catholic*, there is a danger of the Church losing its *holiness*. This article does not seek to resolve the tension, but demonstrates how that tension is demonstrated in the mission of the local Church.

The functions of religious faith

There are two major functions of religion affirmed by most Australians who attend a Church.³ The first and most important is that

Churches facilitate one's relationship with God. Through that relationship comes a sense of peace and wellbeing, a personal sense of security, forgiveness and acceptance. When young people talk about the importance of God in their lives, for example, they often refer to the fact that they value a God who watches over them, a God whom they can turn to in times of trouble.⁴

The second function is the provision of values, the function that can be described in terms of the Church's aspiration for *holiness*. In particular, religion is seen as reaffirming the importance of those values which dominate family and community life, the values of care and compassion.

The Church is seen as a community which reaffirms those values, both explicitly in its teaching and in the sacraments of Eucharist and marriage, but also implicitly in the nature of its community. A related third function of the Churches is to provide a community in which people find their sense of identity and in which they reaffirm what is important to them.

In common parlance, then, the Church is seen as encouraging people to believe in God and to care about others. As Bodycomb said many years ago, fundamentally, the Church in Australian society is about deism and decency.⁵

While both functions of building one's relationship to God and reaffirming one's values are important to most people who attend Church, there are many Australians who are not sure about the existence and nature of God, but believe that religion is valuable in providing values. Few of these people go to Church, however, even though they may send their children to a Church school in order to reinforce those values.⁶

These patterns of the functioning of religion were checked again in the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*, which was run amongst a random sample of 1,715 Australian adults in 2009 by the Australian National University. According to that survey:

- 24 percent said religion was very important to them, both because of its provision of access to God and its values;
- 11 percent said religion was very important to them because of its provision of values, but less important in its provision of access to God;
- One percent said religion was important to them because of its provision of access to God, but less important for its values; and
- 23 percent said that religion was of some importance for one reason or the other; and
- 41 percent said that religion was of little importance for either reason.

That survey also found that 17 percent of those who valued religion highly because of its values went to Church monthly or more. In comparison, 48 percent of those who valued access to God highly went to Church monthly or more often.

These results, in themselves, have implications for Church mission. Few people actually become active in a Church because of the values they see within it. Many applaud the Churches' demonstration of their care for the poor and concern for social justice. But that, in itself, draws few people into the congregational life of the Church.

For example, the Uniting Church has attracted few people into its Church services by its focus on social justice, even though that focus wins respect among many people. Similarly, few people join congregations of The Salvation Army because of their welfare work, even though many have great admiration for that work.

While values do not, generally, attract people into the life of the Church, they can be a factor in discouraging people to attend. Bellamy et al⁷ cites survey data on the stated reasons why people did not attend Church. The most frequently affirmed reasons were:

- Church services are boring and unfulfilling (42 percent)
- Disagreement with the beliefs of the Churches (35 percent)
- Disagreement with the Churches' moral views (35 percent)
- No need to go to Church (34 percent).

In positive terms, people go to Church not only if it is experienced as fulfilling and interesting, but if they feel they are in agreement with the beliefs and moral views which the Churches espouse. Over past decades, many people have ceased to attend at least partly because they have found themselves in disagreement with the values affirmed within the Churches.

The issue for mission is whether people are ceasing to attend or are feeling excluded from local Churches because of their rejection of values which are fundamental to the nature of the Church, or whether the contentious values are part of the culture of the people who attend, which have little or nothing to do with the essence of the Church, or its holiness.

As a minister of a Church, several people have told me that they could not attend Church because their dress would not be accepted. One person, for example, was conscious of the fact that he did not

have shoes. Less evident, but more pervasive, is the fact a local Church culture may well be seen as espousing certain values and excluding those who have different values. The *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (2009) provides some ways of initiating an exploration of this problem on a nation-wide level.

Important values

In the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (2009), a list of issues representing different value orientations was presented to the respondents and they were asked to pick the two most critical for human societies today. There is a certain ambiguity in such questions about importance. People may choose an issue as critical because they see something in present circumstances which makes it more important than it might normally be.

They may consider that it is critical because it is generally undervalued by societies. On the other hand, they may affirm it as critical because of the general high importance it has to their way of thinking. While the reasons for choosing an option may vary, all the reasons involve a substantial affirmation by the respondent that they consider the issue important. See Table 1.

Table 1
The Percentage of Australian Adults
Affirming Various Issues as Critical
for Human Society Today

Issues	Percentage of Adult Australians Seeing This Issue as Critical for Human Society Today
Family life	44.3
Social justice	35.4
Environment	30.6
Economy	26.9
Tolerance	14.0
Freedom	13.5
Security	12.0
Community	8.2
Meaning and purpose	6.8
Spirituality	2.0

Source:
The Australian Survey of Social Values (2009).
 Note: These percentages add up to more than 100 percent because people were invited to choose two issues.

Factor analysis shows that these issues fall into several groups. The first revolves around family life, and the values of economy and security. The

second group consists of family life and the values of social justice, and meaning and purpose. The third group is environment and community.

The *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* found that there were some differences both in the rank order of the frequency of the affirmation of these values and in the overall frequency with which they were affirmed as critical among those who attend Church frequently, compared with those who attend rarely or never. See Table 2 on page 50.

In terms of rank order of affirmation, Church attenders cite, more frequently than infrequent and non-attenders, community and meaning as being of critical importance, and less frequently affirm security and freedom.

What is also evident when one looks at the percentages affirming the values is that frequent Church attenders more frequently affirm family life and spirituality as critical, and less frequently affirm environment and economy than those who attend a Church rarely or never. There are two possible reasons for these differences in the values of those who attend Church frequently and those who rarely or never attend.

The first is that the Church plays a formative role in the values of those who attend. There is some evidence for this in the fact that these value differences are evident when one looks at the values held at the time of the survey by those who attended a Church when they were 11-years-of-age. On the other hand, it is likely not only that the Churches have had an impact, but that those families which have had the practice of taking their children to Church had different values from those that did not do so.

Table 3 on page 50 shows that amongst the broader population that attended Church as a child, there are value differences with those attending monthly, more frequently affirming social justice and community, and less frequently affirming economy and security than those who never or rarely attended Church.

However, further analysis of the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* shows that those who have dropped out of Church or decreased the frequency of their involvement have different value orientations from those who have continued to attend.

Overall, of all adult Australians who attended Church when 11 years-of-age, 62 percent have dropped out altogether or have decreased their frequency of attendance. Thirty-seven percent of Australian adults have maintained their frequency of attendance.

Table 2
The Affirmation of Issues as Critical to Human Society
Today by Frequency of Church Attendance

Rank Order of Frequency of Affirmation of Issue	Never Attend – Percent Affirming	Attend Rarely – Percent Affirming	Attend Monthly – Percent Affirming
1	Family life - 41%	Family life - 44%	Family life - 55%
2	Environment - 35%	Social justice - 39%	Social justice - 35%
3	Social justice - 34%	Environment - 29%	Environment - 24%
4	Economy - 30%	Economy - 27%	Economy - 18%
5	Freedom - 17%	Tolerance - 18%	Tolerance 14%
6	Security - 12%	Security - 15%	Community - 13%
7	Tolerance - 11%	Freedom - 10%	Meaning - 11%
8	Community - 7%	Community - 8%	Freedom - 9%
9	Meaning - 6%	Meaning - 7%	Security - 7%
10	Spirituality - 1%	Spirituality - 1%	Spirituality - 7%

Source: *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)*.

Table 3
The Values Seen as Critical for Human Societies Today by Those
Who Attended Church When They were 11 Years of Age

Rank Order of Frequency of Affirmation of Values	Never Attended at 11 Years of Age - Percent Affirming	Attended Rarely at 11 Years of Age - Percent Affirming	Attended Monthly at 11 Years of Age - Percent Affirming
1	Family life - 50%	Family life - 43%	Family life - 43%
2	Economy - 33%	Social justice - 35%	Social justice - 39%
3	Environment - 31%	Environment - 34%	Environment - 28%
4	Social justice - 28%	Economy - 25%	Economy - 26%
5	Security - 17%	Freedom- 17%	Tolerance - 15%
6	Freedom - 12%	Tolerance - 17%	Freedom - 13%
7	Tolerance - 10%	Security - 11%	Community - 10%
8	Meaning - 6%	Community - 7%	Security - 9%
9	Community - 5%	Meaning- 5%	Meaning- 9%
10	Spirituality - 1%	Spirituality - 1%	Spirituality - 3%

Source: *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)*.



Table 4
Change in the Frequency of Church Attendance
by Issues Seen as Critical for Human Society.

Issue Seen as Critical for Human Society	Decreased Frequency of Church Attendance	Maintained Frequency of Church Attendance	Increased Frequency of Church Attendance
Freedom	74%	24%	2%
Economy	67%	33%	1%
Environment	66%	33%	1%
Security	65%	31%	4%
Tolerance	61%	38%	2%
Social justice	61%	38%	1%
Meaning and purpose	56%	41%	3%
Family life	55%	43%	2%
Community	55%	43%	2%
Spirituality	33%	67%	0%

Source: *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)*.

Table 5
Marital State by Frequency of Church Attendance
among the Australian Adult Population

Marital State	Never Attend	Occasionally Attend	Frequently Attend
Married	43%	36%	21%
Widowed	35%	39%	26%
Separated	36%	49%	15%
Divorced	59%	32%	9%
Single	52%	38%	10%
De facto	69%	28%	3%

Source: *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)*.

Table 6
Change in Frequency of Church
Attendance by Marital Status

Marital Status	Decreased Frequency of Church Attendance	Maintained Frequency of Church Attendance	Increased Frequency of Church Attendance
De facto	80%	20%	0%
Divorced	79%	17%	5%
Widowed	65%	33%	3%
Separated	57%	43%	0%
Single	60%	39%	0%
Married	57%	42%	2%

Source: *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)*.

This means that if they went frequently when they were children, they continue to go frequently, or if they went occasionally then, they still go occasionally. One percent of the population has increased the frequency of attendance since aged 11, either from never attending to attending occasionally, or from never or occasional attendance, or to attending frequently.

Table 4 on page 51 shows the relative frequency of maintaining or changing the frequency of attendance by the values seen as critical for the future of human society. It should be noted that those who have never attended Church, either when aged 11 or as an adult, have not been included in this table.

Table 4 shows that a higher proportion of those who see particular issues as being of critical importance for human society have dropped out of Church life than for other values.

A higher proportion of those who see freedom, economy, environment, security, tolerance and social justice as critical, have dropped out, than those who see meaning and purpose, family life, community or, particularly, spirituality, as being of critical importance.

Sometimes people drop out of Churches because of a disagreement with the explicit values expounded by the Churches they attend. More often, they drop out because they become uncomfortable with the Church's orientation or they come to see the Church as irrelevant, because it fails to affirm the values they consider to be importance.

The Church places great emphasis on values such as spirituality, community, family life and meaning and purpose.

As people find their values in relation to these reaffirmed, so they feel positive about the Church. On the other hand, Churches tend to place less importance on security, economy and environment. Those who feel these values to be of great importance often see the Church as irrelevant.

The large-scale exiting of the business community from the Churches in Australia and the problems that the Churches have had in engaging skilled tradespeople, is partly because the values which dominate these people lives are rarely mentioned within the Church context.

In general terms, the world of business and trades is focussed on the material rather than the spiritual world. It has to do with the development of material goods, rather than with relationships and meaning.

The Church's understanding of *holiness*, to use the credal term, is often seen to exclude concern with the material world. Yet, is this true to the holistic approach to life that is present with the bible?

The issue of security is interesting in that it appears to be one *issue* which attracts some people. Anecdotally, some enter the Church looking for a personal sense of security. On the other hand, in terms of national security, the Church has little to say and, sometimes, has been negative.

One would think that many Churches make a great deal of social justice. However, many people find ways outside the Church to pursue it. The Church is not necessary to the pursuit of social justice. To some extent, that is also true in relation to concern about the environment. On the other hand, there are also sections of the Church that have totally or largely ignored the issue of the environment.

Sexuality and Church attendance

The relationship between attendance and sexual values is also clear from the statistics. Most people have a sense that the Churches are opposed to sexuality outside of marriage. They also see the Churches as opposed to divorce. The *holiness* of the Church is often seen as being in opposition to sexuality and particularly to sexuality outside marriage. This is certainly reflected in the attendance statistics in Table 5, which appears on page 51.

Table 5 shows that, if one is married, one is seven times more likely to attend a Church frequently than if one is in a de facto relationship. It shows that comparatively few people who are divorced attend frequently and those who are separated attend less frequently than those who are married or widowed.

There is an age factor that is present in Table 5. Widowed people are more likely to be older and older people attend more frequently than younger people, whether widowed or not. Those in de facto relationships and those who are single tend to be younger, and younger people are less likely to attend.

Certainly, these results partly reflect the impact of the Church on people's values. Those who attend Church are less likely to enter into a de facto relationship. It is frequently noted, for example, that young evangelicals and Pentecostals are more likely to marry earlier in life, while many other young people enter into relationships at a similar age, but live in a de facto relationship before being married at an older age.

Carefully analysis over many years has shown that

Church attendance is one of the most significant factors in the Australian society in discouraging divorce. Recent research has found that it was not the beliefs that were so important as the actual involvement in Church life.⁸ The community exercises encouragement for couples to avoid divorce.

However, analysis of those who have dropped out of Church life shows that certain marital status groups are more likely to have dropped out than others. As shown in Table 6, those who are in de facto relationships and those who are divorced are much more likely to have dropped out of Church life than those in other marital status groups.

Interestingly, the widowed are more likely to have dropped out than those who are separated or married. This is likely to be because of the age factor. They have had more time to drop out and much higher proportions of those who are currently widowed attended when they were young (perhaps 60 or 70 years ago), than younger people today.

It is also interesting to note that five percent of all those divorced have increased their Church attendance. Perhaps some of these people find Churches which accept them and find a sense of community there, while other divorced people feel unaccepted by the Churches.

See Table 6 on page 51.

Again, the change in frequency may occur because of the explicit teaching of the Church. On other occasions, people simply feel uncomfortable within the Church when divorced or in a de facto relationship.

It is interesting that there is a relatively high rate of dropping out among those who are single. It has been claimed from research conducted in England that many single people feel uncomfortable with the family orientation of their Churches. Family activities are arranged and there is no place for those who are single. Others find that greater expectations are placed on them because they are single and are thus seen as having no responsibilities.⁹

Implications for the mission of the local Church

The Church exists with a tension in its mission. If it holds firm to certain values, it risks alienating some people. People will walk away if they are not comfortable with the values espoused within the Church.

On the other hand, embedded deep within the Christian life are certain value orientations which

are related to its sense of holiness. It is important that the Churches retain their distinctiveness over and against the wider culture. Indeed, the mission of the Church is partly about offering a different orientation to life based on a different set of values.

Certainly, the values of love and compassion, the concern for social justice and the plight of the poor are close to the heart of the Christian faith.

However, these research findings give the Churches an opportunity to reflect on whether their values, as they are expressed and experienced within the culture of the local Church, are those that are fundamental to its mission.

Are local Churches simply ignoring the world of work and economy in their emphasis on spirituality, relationships and meaning? Or is this an inevitable outcome given the importance of spirituality and the negative teachings in the bible about "building bigger barns" and accumulating material goods?

In these value orientations is one of the reasons why Churches find it harder to connect with men than with women. Women are more likely to affirm most of the values that Churches affirm, in particular the emphasis on family life.

Forty-nine percent of women see this as critical for human societies compared with 40 percent of men. On the other hand, there is a slight tendency for men to affirm the importance of economy as critical (28 percent to 26 percent).

Do local Churches sometimes send *implicit* messages by the emphases in their programmes and activities quite apart from the explicit values? Is singleness implicitly de-valued, for example, by the Churches' emphasis on family life and family values?

I personally believe that concern for the protection of the environment is deeply embedded in the Christian faith. From the early chapters of Genesis, the instruction to care for the environment is clear.

Yet, many local Churches have been silent about this issue and people who are passionate about this issue have looked elsewhere for opportunities to express their concern.

There has been a clear emphasis in scripture and in the centuries of Church history on the importance of sexuality being expressed (if at all) within the context of a committed relationship. However, the situation has now changed. For the first time in human history, sexuality can be separated from procreation through reliable means of contraception.

Is the value that is of real importance the care and compassion of children by a couple who are both committed to each other and committed to their children? Or is the fundamental value that of sex occurring within the married relationship?

There has also been a long tradition that divorce is to be avoided. However, is the underlying value of greater importance the positive and committed relationship between husband and wife? Is the failure of such relationships a greater problem than the occurrence of divorce?

This paper is not the place to resolve these issues. Rather, the argument of this paper is Churches proclaim their values and sometimes exclude people, through implicit as well as explicit value emphases.

The statistics about people who drop out of Church life because their value orientations are not in line with those of the Church, should in no way drive the mission of the Church. However, the statistics can be a catalyst for pondering if our value orientations, as expressed in the culture of local Church life, are correct and accurately express the essence of the faith for which the Churches stand ■

NOTE ON DATA SOURCE

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