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Towards 2015: the future of mainline Protestantism in New Zealand

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The percentage of the population involved in the Christian church in New Zealand has been declining since the middle of the 1960s. Most seriously affected has been the mainline Protestant denominations such as Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist. This article analyses and presents data collected by the National Church Life Survey New Zealand 2001 on churches in New Zealand and compares these figures with New Zealand census data collected in 2001. The results indicated that this sector of the church is heavily overrepresented in the older age groups and underrepresented in the younger age groups. The average age for adults over 15 is 58 years of age for Anglicans, 62 for Presbyterians, 65 for Cooperating Parishes and 66 for Methodists compared to 54 for Catholics, 43 for Baptists and an average age of 41 years for the general population of New Zealand. This situation is a consequence of the significant loss of the baby boomer generation as young adults in the 1960s and 1970s, with its ongoing impact on the relationship to church of subsequent generations. However, surprisingly the census data revealed that the age representation is much more evenly spread when church affiliation, rather than attendance, is indicated. This suggested that young adults are still identifying themselves as Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist even if they do not choose to belong. Implications for the future of the church and its mission are discussed.

Introduction

New Zealand has followed the pattern of many Western countries, with the percentage of the population involved in the Christian church declining considerably since the middle of the 1960s (Roof, 1995). As elsewhere the group most seriously affected has been mainline Protestant denominations. Church attendance has never been particularly high in New Zealand. The first available figure, the 1881 Census, indicated approximately 20% of the population attended church weekly. There was some increase in the last decade of the nineteenth century to reach a high point of almost 30% in 1896 (Jackson, 1983). Figures from the Census throughout the first half of

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the twentieth century indicated a return to a weekly attendance level of about 20% which was more or less sustained until the early 1960s (Department of Statistics).

By the end of the 1970s weekly church attendance appeared to have declined to about 16% (Webster & Perry, 1989), and by 1990 to about 13% (Heartland Survey, 1990). The 1991 and 1998 International Social Survey Programme surveys in New Zealand (Webster 1991, 1998) indicated that the 20% who attended church weekly for the first six decades of the twentieth century now attended only monthly. Denominational returns indicated that in 1999 weekly attendance was about 380,000, or 10% of the New Zealand population (Miller, 2000). These figures then indicate that church going in New Zealand had been sustained at a fairly consistent level for the first half of the twentieth century, but that from the 1960s had declined by about 50%.

For much of New Zealand's history, mainline Protestant churches have accounted for the majority of people's religious commitments. In the 1926 Census 73.3% of the population indicated affiliation with one of the three main Protestant denominations, Anglican, Presbyterian or Methodist. By 1961 there had been a slight decline, to 64.1%. However the next three decades saw a dramatic decline so that by 2001 the figure was 32.6%. If we take another grouping of churches which we may define as conservative, the Baptists, Brethren, Salvation Army, Churches of Christ and Pentecostals, the 1926 Census indicated affiliation by 4% of the population. This figure has remained remarkably constant over the twentieth century, being slightly below 4% in 1961 and slightly higher than it by 2001. This suggests that the decline in church attendance over this period may be largely accounted for by losses to mainline Protestant churches

When we look at attendance figures taken from denominational year books they showed that in 1960 Presbyterian weekly attendance was 119,000 and by 2001 had declined to 41,000; Anglican attendance was 93,000 and had declined to 37,000; Methodist attendance which was 39,000 had declined to 13,000. Baptists have only recorded attendance since 1990, but an estimate of attendance for 1976 was 18,000, which had doubled by 2001 to 36,000. Pentecostals accounted for about 3000 of the census figures in 1961 and 67,000 in 2001. Most of these churches do not keep attendance figures but the Apostolic Church records indicate weekly attendance of 3500 in 1981, which had reached 12,000 in 2001. The four main Pentecostal denominations (Assembly of God, New Life, Apostolic and Elim) totalled 54,000 attenders in 2001. This confirms the pattern suggested by the census figures of losses from the mainline Protestant churches and stability or growth among more conservative Protestant churches.

In endeavouring to explain this decline in mainline Protestant churches the current age profile yields a significant number of clues. If churches were found to have a significantly older age profile it would indicate that decline in attendance was caused by losses in those younger age groups who were now absent in significant numbers. This loss of numbers can be seen in the data presented to have begun with the baby boomer generation (those now aged 40 to 59) and continued with the generations following. This loss and the implications for the future of these churches are then discussed.

Method

This research is based on data collected in the Church Life Survey New Zealand (CLSNZ) 2001. This survey was conducted in May 2001 and provided responses from considerable samples of Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic and Baptist churches, as well as some smaller groups, including Cooperating Parishes. Cooperating Parishes are parishes where Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans and Churches of Christ work together in a single congregation. Presbyterians and Methodists are the most significant partners. These uniting churches developed out of the failed church union plans of the 1960s and 1970s. Because, with one or two exceptions, Pentecostal and independent charismatic churches chose not to participate in this survey they were not represented in a significant enough sample for the data to be used to make generalisations about the total church community in New Zealand. The data do however give a very good picture of mainline Protestantism, since churches from this sector make up the majority of the material collected.

Included in the data were figures indicating the age profile of attenders. Comparative data from the religion question in the 2001 New Zealand Census was also used. Analysis is made of the age distribution figures for the mainline Protestant churches and this is compared with the figures for the Roman Catholic and Baptist churches and with the general population of New Zealand. In the New Zealand Census there are two forms to be completed. The first is by the head of the household, and the second an individual form for those aged 15 and over. The religion question is included in this second form so, since only results for those aged over 15 are included, the results are likely to represent the individual's religious response rather than that of their parents. It is acknowledged though that some degree of parental influence may be found in the 15 to 19 age group.

While a brief summary of the CLSNZ 2001 data can be found in Bellamy *et al.* (2002) no analysis or interpretation of the findings has yet been made. This article uses these figures as the basis for its theoretical consideration of the explanation for the pattern found and its implications for the future of these churches.

Results

As can be seen in Figure 1, plotting the age profile of the mainline Protestant churches from the CLSNZ 2001 data over against the population age profile from the Census gives a graphic illustration of the basic issue. The church is heavily overrepresented in the older age groups and underrepresented in the younger age groups.

Looking at the denominational church groups we were particularly concerned with the average age of adults over 15 years of age. This showed that for Anglicans the average was 58 years, Presbyterians 62 years, Cooperating Parishes 65 years and Methodists 66 years. This compared with an average age for Catholics of 54 years, for Baptists 43 years and for the general population 41 years.

A further breakdown of the age data indicated the aged and aging profile for these denominations, particularly when a comparison is made with the 1997 CLSNZ data as demonstrated in Table 1.

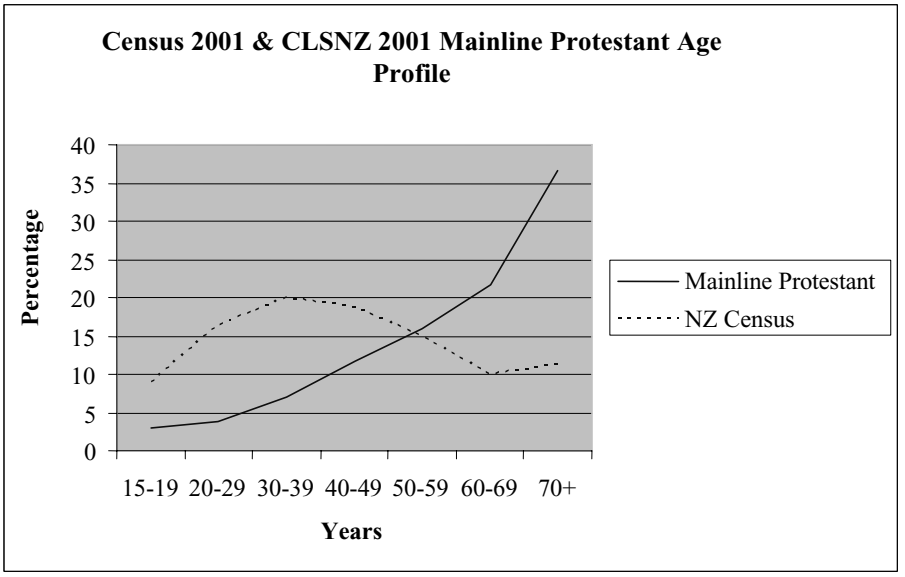

Figure 1 Percentage of total population of New Zealand as a function of age categories from the Census 2001 and 2001 Church Life Survey New Zealand for mainline Protestant churches

In researching this question of age the census figures for religious adherence were also broken down into similar age groups to see if this would generate any new information. Table 2 indicates that rather than these figures showing a pattern consistent with that for attenders found in the CLSNZ 2001 data, as was anticipated, the data indicated a much more even spread across age categories.

Discussion

The results of this research indicate that the mainline Protestant churches have in all cases more than double the percentage of attenders over 60 years of age, pre-

Table 1. Percentage of attenders by age categories across six church denominations for the 1997 and 2001 CLSNZ and 2001 New Zealand Census

	15–39		40–59		Over 60	
Age categories	1997	2001	1997	2001	1997	2001
Anglican	18	15	32	34	48	52
Presbyterian	20	16	28	31	49	56
Methodist	18	12	29	23	53	65
Cooperating Parishes	18	11	29	28	57	61
Catholic	32	25	36	36	32	40
Baptist	43	41	38	38	19	22
NZ Census 2001	46		33		21	

Table 2. The percentage of religious affiliation for five denominations in Census 1996 and 2001 by age categories compared with CLSNZ 1997 and 2001 figures

		15–39		40–59		Over 60	
Age		1996–97	2001	1996–97	2001	1996–97	2001
Anglican	Census NZ	35	29	34	37	31	34
	CLSNZ	18	15	32	32	48	52
Presbyterian	Census NZ	36	30	34	37	30	33
	CLSNZ	20	16	28.1	28	49	56
Methodist	Census NZ	39	32	33	37	29	32
	CLSNZ	18	12	29	23	53	65
Catholic	Census NZ	41	45	36	34	24	22
	CLSNZ	32	25	36	36	32	40
Baptist	Census NZ	44	42	34	36	22	23
	CLSNZ	43	40	38	38	19	22

boomers, than does the general population. The Catholic figure is slightly under double and the Baptist figure only slightly higher than the general population. It is noticeable that in every case, including the Baptists, the percentage is higher in the 2001 survey than it was in the 1997 survey. Mainline Protestant churches have a slightly lower percentage of attenders in the 40–59 age group, baby boomers, which is significantly lower for Methodists, while for both Catholics and Baptists the percentage is slightly higher than the census profile. In all of the groups the percentage in this age group has declined slightly. When we come to the 15–39 age group, post-boomers, they are less than half of that in the general population for Anglicans and Presbyterians, and less than one-third for Methodists and Cooperating Parishes. Catholics are slightly more than half of and Baptists just slightly less than that of the general population profile. In all cases the percentage in this age group has fallen slightly.

This data indicated that the age profile for all the churches identified is older than that for the general population, and is becoming more aged. The figures are particularly concerning for mainline Protestant churches. Those for Catholics and Baptists point clearly in the same direction, if with some time lag and a somewhat slower rate. But for mainline Protestant churches the question must be asked as to how tenable even a short-term future may be for many local congregations, when over 50% of attenders are over 60 years of age. This is even more so for Methodists and Cooperating Parishes, where the figure is over 60%. The year 2015 is identified as a significant marker because 10 years from now the trends would indicate that over 50% of current attenders would either be over 75, or else have died. The age profile also indicated that while the rates of decline may have been significant over the past few decades, the rates may increase even more with so many nearing the end of their life. One often hears comments from ministers in those denominations about the number of funerals they are now being asked to perform.

The very low percentage in the post-boomer age groups indicates that numbers of children born into those churches would be relatively small and also that these churches are not very successful in recruiting new and younger people. Given these facts we may expect this increasingly aging profile to continue. Numbers will also continue to decline as older members die and are not replaced by equal numbers of younger age groups. This then raises serious questions about the future viability of many congregations, a considerable number of which are scarcely viable now, kept going faithfully by a small group of aged members for whom loyalty to the church they have known for most of their life, is a key factor in their personal identity. Partially this is a consequence of them having lived a significant part of their lives within the same local community of which their church is a key part. This is not a significant characteristic for the much more mobile generations that have followed. It also has implications for the future national church of those denominations, given that their relatively centralised and bureaucratic structures depend on the finances flowing upward from local congregations. The CLSNZ 2001 data indicated that 53% of Methodist attenders were retirees, 48% of Cooperating Parishes, 44% of Presbyterians and 41% of Anglicans. Again these compare unfavourably with the Catholic and Baptist rates of 24% and 16% respectively. Given the demographic trends these percentages will have already increased, and have negatively impacted on levels of financial giving from attenders to their churches. The impacts of these trends have begun to bite deeply into the finances of most of these churches. The Presbyterian and Methodist Churches are currently confronting significant financial crises, which is leading to drastic restructuring of their national work. The Anglican church is cushioned from this to some extent by large reserves in property and trusts, but is wrestling with significant issues in terms of its cash flow.

The age profile also indicated that the decline in attendance for those churches can be explained to a significant degree by looking at the patterns of the middle of these three age groups, the baby boomers. It is this generation, and their children, the post-boomers, who are largely missing from the ranks of church attenders. In addition when the historic patterns of attendance are examined the figures begin to show serious decline from the middle of the 1960s, the years that the first of the baby boomers hit young adulthood. The decline can first be seen in youth group and Bible class numbers. Then, because baby boomers were significantly absent from church in their child-rearing years, Sunday School numbers began to decline in the early 1970s (Ward, 2003). This had a particularly strong impact on mainline Protestant churches. For their ongoing vitality they have relied on the repetitive cycle of reproduction in families who belong to the parish. Children are baptised, proceed through Sunday School and youth group, are confirmed and eventually become adult members who, when married, have their own children and so the cycle continues. This was the pattern of parish life developed in the settled conditions of Northern European Christendom during the Reformation and centuries immediately following, especially in Great Britain. This pattern of church life was then exported to British colonial settlements like New Zealand. This cycle which had been perpetuated for centuries was broken when baby boomers, as late teenagers and young adults, exited these

established churches in large numbers. There was hope that marriage and the arrival of their own families would lead to them returning. However, this never happened, at least not in significant numbers, indicating it has been a cohort effect not an age effect. Finally, the adult attendance also began to decline. The words of an Australian historian about the decade of the 1960s, apply equally to New Zealand:

> Alienated from the religion of their parents, almost an entire generation of teenagers and young adults seems to have dropped out of the Protestant churches. The socialization process by which religious affiliation is transmitted from parents to the next generation broke down…the relative absence of young adults of child rearing age has affected church membership figures ever since. (Hillard, 1997, pp. 226–227)

One of the reasons for the continuing impact of this effect is that mainline Protestants have a less 'conversionist' understanding of their faith, less of a concern with mission in the sense of evangelism, than have other groups such as the Baptists. In Christendom mission and conversion were concerns and activities that took place only in other places outside of the Christian society. While groups such as the Baptists have also been affected by the disengagement of baby boomers in their youth, they have always sought to attract newcomers, especially young people and children, through special programmes specifically developed for this purpose. Classical sociological theory would see this emphasis as a consequence of their sectarian form (membership by choice), rather than the church form (membership through birth), of the mainline denominations. Thus they have tended to have a stronger inflow of new, younger people to their ranks. The majority of mainline churches have not developed this kind of approach to their local congregational life, having a sufficient inflow from children born into the parish to sustain their continuing life.

The difficulty now is that many of these congregations are beyond the reproductive cycle. There are insufficient people of child-rearing age for replenishment to happen this way, even if they did develop forms that kept the children and young people that they already have. As it is, data collected from other questions in the CLSNZ 2001 and presented in Tables 3 and 4 indicate these mainline churches are less successful at doing this than are some other churches, such as the Baptists. Looking at the percentage of children aged 10 to 14 whose parents are themselves attending church, and who are attending church, the figures for mainline Protestant churches range

Table 3. The percentage of attenders children (still living at home) who are also attending church, from CLSNZ 2001

	Children (10–14)	Youth (15–25)
Anglican	75	53
Presbyterian	79	59
Methodist	79	55
Cooperating Parishes	71	47
Baptists	87	68
Brethren	92	75

Table 4. The percentage of young adults (18–25) who are either satisfied or very satisfied with what church offers for young people from CLSNZ 2001

Anglican	36
Presbyterian	42
Methodist	35
Cooperating Parishes	30
Baptists	54
Brethren	63

from 71% to 79%. For Baptists it is somewhat higher at 87% and for Brethren higher still at 92%. When we move to the young people (age 15 to 25) living at home, the figures for mainline Protestants are between 47% and 59%, compared with a significantly higher figure of 68% of Baptists and 75% of Brethren. In looking at how young people feel about what their church offers for them the results again indicate greater problems for the mainline Protestant denominations in holding on to the youth they have, let alone attracting others. The percentage of those either satisfied or very satisfied with what their church offers for young people ranges between 30% and 42% for mainline Protestant churches. For Baptists the figure was significantly higher at 54% and for Brethren 63%. While all these figures indicate holding on to young people is a difficult challenge for all churches, it also indicates the mainline Protestant churches are less effective in this than other, more sectarian, denominations.

Data from the Youth Ministry of one of the churches, the Presbyterian Church, illustrate the extent of this challenge. A survey of churches (Mansill, 2005) found that there were 5016 young people aged 11–14 under pastoral care of churches. This had fallen to 3327 for those 15–17 and to 1723 by the 18–25 age group. When we realise the last age band is more than twice the length of the first it demonstrates even more the significant challenge these churches face in turning around their aged and aging profile.

As a consequence of this, many congregations in these churches simply do not have the people within their community who are of an age which is going to attract younger persons. The generations are so unlike each other that very few under-40s find any appeal or attraction to their style of worship or life together as a community. Research consistently indicates that most new people are attracted into congregations by social connections and these congregations simply lack the people connections and social networks with younger age groups for this to occur.

In comparing the figures for the percentages for the different age categories from CLSNZ 2001 with Census 2001 (Table 2) the same pattern was anticipated. It would be expected that as fewer and fewer young people were raised and socialised in these churches, as they have been from the 1960s on, so fewer and fewer would identify with them. However, as indicated the results did not bear this out. Age representation was much more evenly spread in the census figures of affiliation. Much recent sociology of religion uses the framework of believing without belonging, arguing that to a

significant degree religious believing has been detached from religious belonging (Davie, 1994; Ward, 2004). This is suggested to be so particularly among younger generations. If census affiliation is primarily an indication of religious belief and the CLSNZ attendance figures of religious belonging, then these data indicate that this pattern of believing without belonging is particularly so in mainline Protestant denominations (as well as Catholics) but less so amongst Baptists, where the age profiles for each set of data are very similar. Younger people still identify themselves in significant numbers as Anglicans, Presbyterians or Methodists, even if they do not choose to belong.

The significance of this is seen even more markedly when the actual numbers are looked at. In Census 2001 142,939 people aged 15–39 identified as Anglicans, 110,514 as Presbyterians and 31,326 as Methodists, compared with only 16,764 as Baptists. Attendance at Baptist churches in New Zealand on a Sunday is now roughly equal that of Anglicans or Presbyterians. Given this, and the much healthier age profile for Baptists, the relatively small number identifying as Baptists compared with Presbyterians or Anglicans is somewhat surprising. In New Zealand Baptist churches (along with Pentecostal churches) are seen as the churches which are more attractive to younger people than the mainline churches. Attendance patterns would indicate this. However, these census figures indicate that there is still at least some considerable attraction for younger people in what these mainline denominations have to offer. They still identify with them in considerable numbers. The problem for mainline Protestants is not that younger generations seem no longer to want to identify with them, or even to believe in some kind of way what their religion stands for. The problem is that they do not want to belong in any significant way to them.

These data provide evidence that substantiates what I have suggested elsewhere (Ward, 2004) that the challenge for churches is not so much how they get people to believe again but how they connect with those who have continued to believe in such ways that they might want to belong. I had in mind primarily baby boomers who had ceased belonging but continued to believe. These data provide evidence to support this, but further indicate that this is also true for post-boomer generations as well.

A sign of hope for these churches is that quite significant numbers of younger generations still retain at least some degree of identity with them and a semblance of Christian belief, and therefore may be seen as favourably disposed toward them. The point of great challenge is that they show increasingly less desire to become involved in the life of these churches.

Conclusion

When looking at data such as these, which show declining figures of attendance and an aged and aging profile, it would be easy to paint a picture of complete despair for churches such as the mainline Protestants in New Zealand. Many have done this recently, almost suggesting that they are doomed to disappear and that it is pointless to try and stem the outgoing tide. However, a closer examination of the data does

provide more hope, although with their smaller numbers and the more aged profile the Methodists and Cooperating Parishes particularly do appear to be at considerable risk. For the Anglicans and Presbyterians, at least, there are a good number of congregations with healthy age profiles and these are likely to continue to provide places of life and vitality as well as signs of hope. Numbers overall are likely to continue to decline, perhaps at an even faster rate than the previous two decades, as the remaining generation raised and socialised into the church by baptism as infants, confirmation as teenagers and membership as adults dies out. This will mean that by 2015 a considerable number of existing parishes will not have sufficient numbers to continue to maintain any form of meaningful life as faith communities. It will also lead to the necessity for considerable reorganisation of the parish structure of those churches, as well as their forms of regional and national organisation, which goes considerably beyond the current tinkering taking place.

There are two points of hope however. One is those numerous parishes where there is life, energy and a younger age profile and the second, the considerable number of younger New Zealanders who still identify in some way with these churches. Many existing congregations are too aged for these people to ever make a connection with them and rather than pouring most of their time, energy and resources into continuing to keep these going, churches need to focus energy and resources on helping those congregations which exhibit life and health. Further to this, new faith communities need to be developed which have forms of belonging that can connect in meaningful ways with the lives of the still considerable number of young New Zealanders who still have at least the vestiges of Christian faith, but have been raised without any connection to the church. This implies a shift in the fundamental understanding of church from that of maintenance, keeping in the faith those born into it and perpetuating forms that relate to their needs, to a more missional understanding, that seeks to bring into committed belief and belonging those born outside of the Christian community, by developing forms that are meaningful to their needs. For some, particularly those committed to an older form of 'liberal ecumenical' Christianity, this is a theological as well as a structural issue. This fundamental shift in understanding, on which much has been written, is the critical challenge facing mainline Protestant denominations in New Zealand.

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