

# The Future of the Church in Australia

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# Introduction

Australia has a rich history of faith and spirituality. Although the history of the Christian church in Australia began in 1788 with the arrival of the first fleet, God was already present in Australia as the creator and sustainer of the universe'. Indigenous Australians have always been a spiritual people, knowing their world to be a created place. Since early European settlement and through every season of Australia's history as a nation, the Church has been present. From establishing schools to founding charities, in providing welfare to servicemen and woman at war, the Christian church has served the people of Australia.

Now, the social landscape of Australia continues to change, driven by demographic forces like increasing cultural diversity, a growing and ageing population, increasing urbanisation and declining religious affiliation. It is important for the Christian church of today to explore and understand these changes in order to reach, serve and support Australians now and into the future.

## **Changing spiritual landscape of Australia**

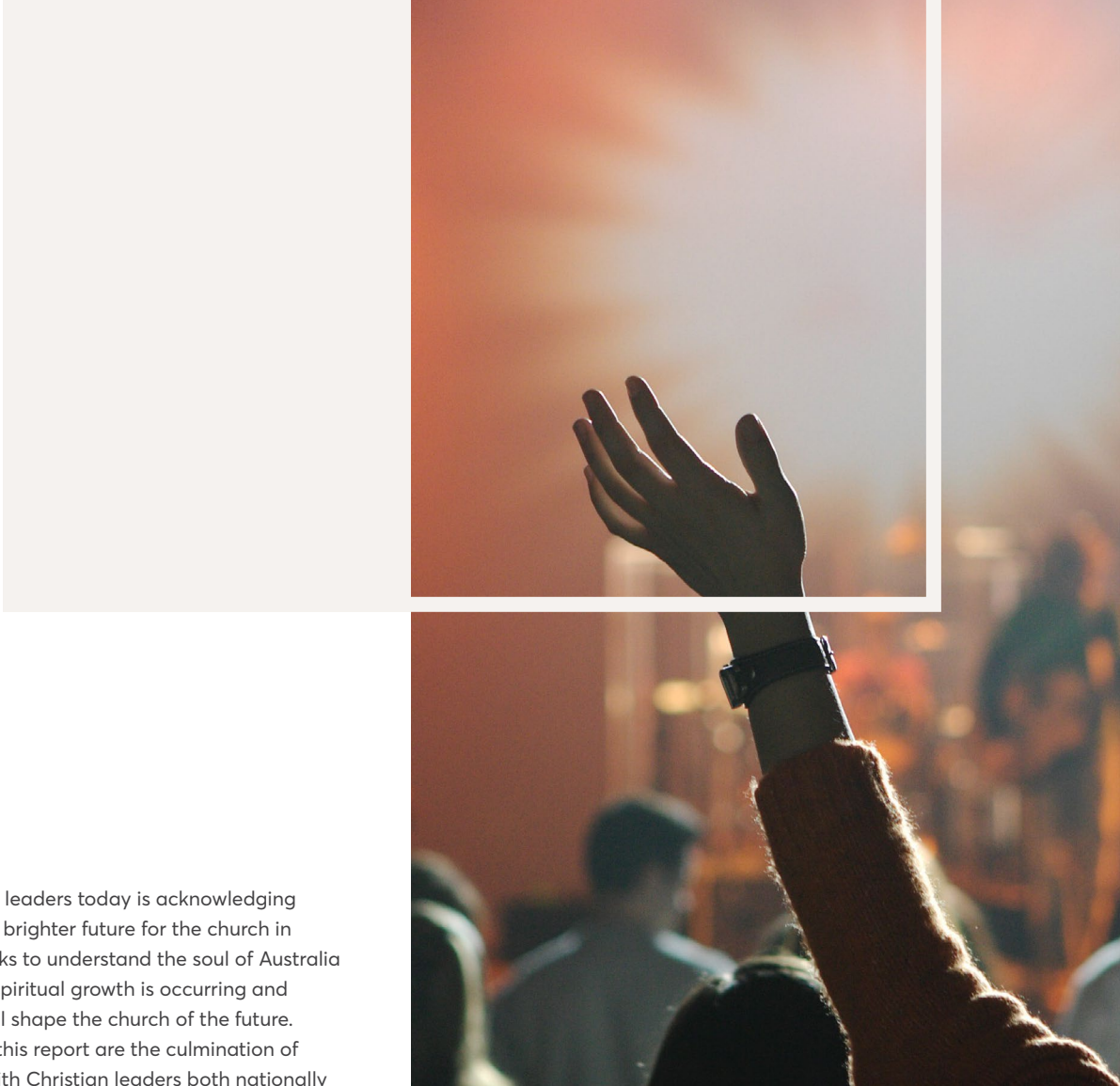
The context in which Christians and the Christian church finds itself today looks vastly different to that of previous generations. The Census data reflects these changes showing that while Christianity is still the dominant religion in Australia, in recent years affiliation with the religion has declined. In 2006 almost two thirds of Australians (64%) identified with Christianity. A decade later that proportion decreased to 52% (2016). Over the same period, the number of Australians identifying with 'no-religion' has risen from 19% (2006) to 30% (2016).<sup>2</sup>

## **Growing diversity of culture and religion**

Australia is one of the most multicultural developed nations in the world, with twice as many residents born overseas (29%)<sup>2</sup> as the United Kingdom (14%)<sup>3</sup> or the United States of America (14%)<sup>4</sup>. The diversity of culture is likely to continue growing with almost two thirds of Australia's population growth (62%) coming from net overseas migration. Even though COVID-19 has seen closed international borders which will impair Australia's net overseas migration until the middle of this decade, our modelling shows that by 2030, annual migration to Australia will be back to the pre-COVID numbers. As a result of shifting migration patterns from Europe to Asia and Africa, there has been an increase in Australia's religious diversity despite the overall decline in religious affiliation. The most recent census data shows that 2.6% of Australians identify with Islam, 2.4% with Buddhism and 3.2% with other religions.

## **Church attendance remains stable amidst declining affiliation with Christianity**

Despite a declining proportion of Australians identifying with Christianity, church attendance remains steady. In 2006, when almost two thirds of Australians identified with Christianity, 17% of Australians attended church. Ten years later, church attendance was steady at 16%, despite a 12-percentage point reduction in Australians identifying with Christianity. Taken together, this data suggests the spiritual change taking place in our nation is not a mass de-conversion of Bible-believing and church-attending Christians but instead the decline of cultural Christianity in a time of increasing secularism and religious plurality.



### About this report

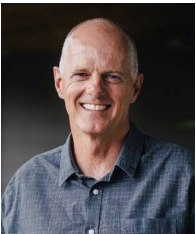
The challenge for church leaders today is acknowledging the past while building a brighter future for the church in Australia. This report seeks to understand the soul of Australia in 2020, pinpoint where spiritual growth is occurring and reveal key trends that will shape the church of the future. The insights provided in this report are the culmination of 30 in-depth interviews with Christian leaders both nationally and internationally between the 18<sup>th</sup> of May and the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. These Christian leaders are not just theorists but practitioners who are heavily involved in sharing the gospel and building the church in their sphere of influence. This report also includes insights from an online survey of 1,002 Australian churchgoers who attend church at least monthly. The survey was in field between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. Throughout this report, respondents are referred to as 'churchgoers'.

### A note on the analysis and findings

Our professional role as independent researchers is to objectively interview, record and distil the findings in the way that most accurately represents the data. This report does not necessarily represent our view (or theological position) nor should the reader take it to represent the position of every interviewee. Amidst the unified purpose of these Christian leaders to see their church and ministries impact Australia effectively, there are, of course, differences in how they believe this can best be achieved. But we believe that the breadth of the interviews, the consensus, where it exists, and the counter perspectives, add to the usefulness of this report. These leaders held a great respect for each other and their ministries, were enthusiastic about this project and expressed much good will to other leaders outside of their realm.



# Christian leaders interviewed



**Andrew Heard** – Lead Pastor, EV Church, Erina



**Archbishop Peter Comensoli** – Archbishop for the Catholic Diocese, Melbourne



**Benny Ho** – Senior Pastor, Faith Community Church, Perth



**Bishop Richard Condie** – Anglican Bishop of Tasmania



**Cindy McGarvie** – National Director, Youth for Christ  
**Andrew Scarborough**, – Ministry Director, Youth for Christ



**Clare Steele** – CEO, Compassion Australia



**Dale Stephenson** – Senior Pastor, Crossway Baptist Church, Melbourne



**Daniel Ang** – Director, Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney



**David Lawton** – National Director, Praxeis



**Guy Mason** – Senior Pastor, City on a Hill



**Joel A'Bell** – Lead Pastor, Revitalise Church, Caringbah



**Jossy Chacko** – Founder and President, Empart



**Mark Sayers** – Senior Pastor, Red Church, Melbourne



**Mark Varughese** – Senior Leader, Kingdomcity Global, Perth



**Matt Hunt** – Lead Pastor, CrossLife Baptist Church, Gold Coast



**Melinda Dwight**  
– National Director, Alpha Australia



**Mike Jeffs** – Founder, Australian Christian Channel



**Mike Stevens** – Lead Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist, Adelaide



**Nicky Gumbel** – Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton, London



**Phil Pringle** – Founder and Senior Leader, C3 Church Global  
**John Pearce** – Regional Director, C3 Australia  
**Tony Moylan** – General Manager, C3 Sydney



**Ray Galea** – Lead Pastor, Multicultural Bible Ministry (MBM), Rooty Hill



**Russell Evans** – Global Senior Pastor, Planetshakers, Melbourne



**Scott Sanders** – Executive Director, Reach Australia and Geneva Push



**Steve & Naomi Chong** – Founder and CEO, RICE Movement



**Steve Dixon** – QLD & NT State Pastor, Hillsong



**Stu Cameron** – Lead Minister, Newlife Church, Gold Coast



**Sue Irwin** – Senior Pastor, The Grainery Church, Newcastle



**Wayne Alcorn** – National President, Australian Christian Churches



**Wayne Swift** – Leader, Acts Global



**William Dumas** – Senior Pastor, Ganggalah Church, Tweed Heads



# Executive summary

## Australians are disillusioned with the church but spiritually hungry

Christian leaders believe Australians have become disillusioned with the church as an institution. This is partly due to church culture becoming detached from the everyday Australian experience, and partly because of a break in trust due to poor leadership examples from the church. But even amidst this disillusionment, Christian leaders are seeing a spiritual hunger in Australia. Times of change, hardship and crisis can often cause people to think more deeply about what matters. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen people across the globe reconsidering their values and searching for community, connection and meaning in their lives. But even before the pandemic, many Christian leaders were beginning to see spiritual hunger in Australia as a result of pre-existing social trends such as family breakdown, declining mental health and rising loneliness. These trends point to a lack of fulfillment among Australians, despite the relative wealth and stability in our country.

In this context, Christian leaders believe there is a need for the Church to rise, to be present in the midst of crisis and to continue sharing the good news of Jesus. Christian leaders suggest that because Australians have lost trust in the church, we need to re-establish trust with the public. The gospel is too valuable for Christians to take a retreating position and stop sharing it with society. In order to rebuild trust, Christian leaders believe the church needs to be serving the community in the hardest places with a spirit of humility and authenticity. A key challenge for Christian leaders in the current context is knowing how to speak into social issues in a way that encourages the flourishing of society. Christian leaders acknowledge the dangers of making complex issues too black and white and the way in which they can be used as wedges to divide, rather than build up. In this context, the church is called to model Jesus, not to "elevate above" or "win the argument". Christian leaders believe the Church should be aiming to "exhibit the love of Christ" in our public voice.





### Church needs to engage the community

Ideal church size is an age-old debate in which there are many different opinions. Some Christian leaders believe there has been a turning of the tide away from the mega church, suggesting small churches can provide a more relaxed, relational experience. Other leaders, however, believe large churches can be just as relational as small churches, as long as they are investing in close personal relationships. Despite this, Christian leaders believe church size should not be the main consideration. Instead, churches should be asking what their unique contribution is so they can reach their community. Churches that are adaptable, dynamic, Kingdom-focused and engaged with culture and community are the churches that will thrive in the future.

Many Christian leaders believe the church of the future should be an expression of its local community. These leaders suggest Australians are not only looking for a more simplified, localised experience but believe churches should reflect the diversity of their local community. A diverse congregation and leadership team allows people from the community to feel more comfortable at church and to engage with the gospel through conversations with people who have a similar life experience.

A number of Christian leaders believe a local church should be engaged with the local community, serving its needs and creating healthy relationships. COVID-19 has caused a disruption to church routine and has shown Christian leaders just how important the 'in between' connections are beyond the Sunday service.

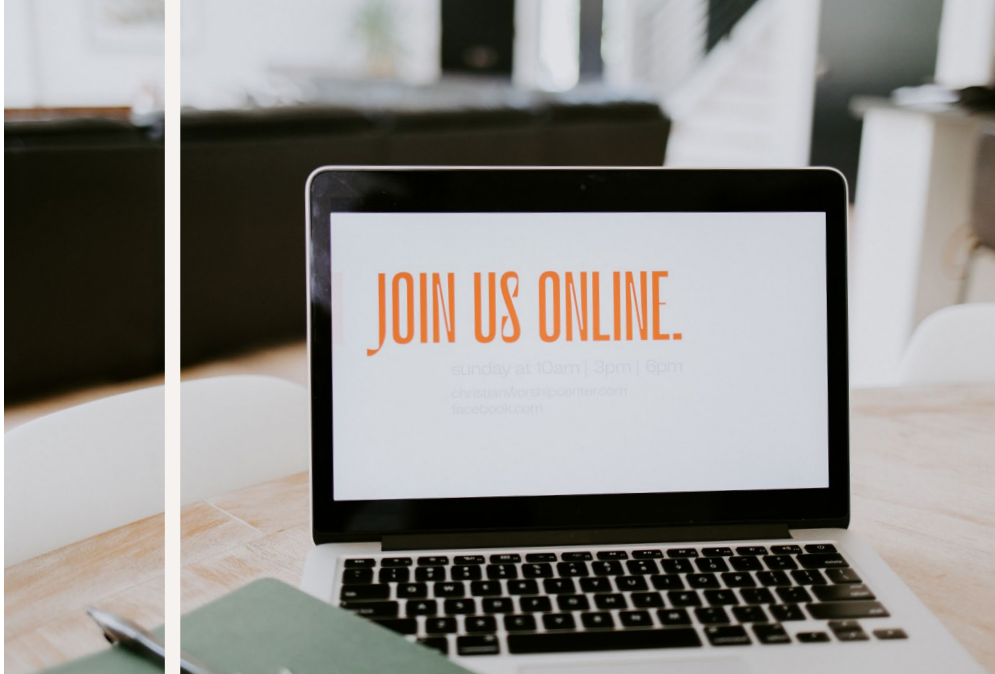
The church of the future must be united in vision. Many Christian leaders are calling for more focus on relationships, connection and collaboration and less focus on competition, comparison and division. There is much to be gained from having a kingdom view and seeing partnerships flourish between different church denominations, and between church and parachurch organisations.



### Church planting as a model for community transformation

Many Christian leaders believe in church planting as the most effective model for growing the church. Church planting is seen to reach the local community in a way that an existing church can't. It gives new churches permission to do things differently and find their unique contribution in the local community. Church planting also provides opportunities to train and release new leaders. While most Christian leaders believe church planting is an effective strategy, they emphasise the importance of planting effective churches that are making a difference in the community and bringing people to Christ. Christian leaders believe church plants need to be strategic and well-resourced to effectively reach a local community in a meaningful and ongoing way. Many Christian leaders are advocates of a hub or multi-site model, where churches are still planted in local communities but remain connected to and resourced by healthy, established churches.





### **Raising and releasing well-rounded leaders**

Christian leaders believe raising up the next generation of leaders is one of the key priorities for the Australian church. To impact Australian communities, the church must be gathered (both physically and online) but also scattered as churches multiply through church plants and multi-site models. This strategy for growth and community engagement will require equipped and empowered leaders to lead the church into these new spaces.

The growth of the church relies, not only on a growing number of leaders, but also a growing diversity of leaders. Raising and releasing diverse leaders of different genders, backgrounds and cultures can help churches to extend their reach into new spaces. Christian leaders believe women are key contributors to spiritual growth in Australia. While being aware of different theological perspectives, they believe churches should intentionally create pathways for women to be raised and released into leadership roles.

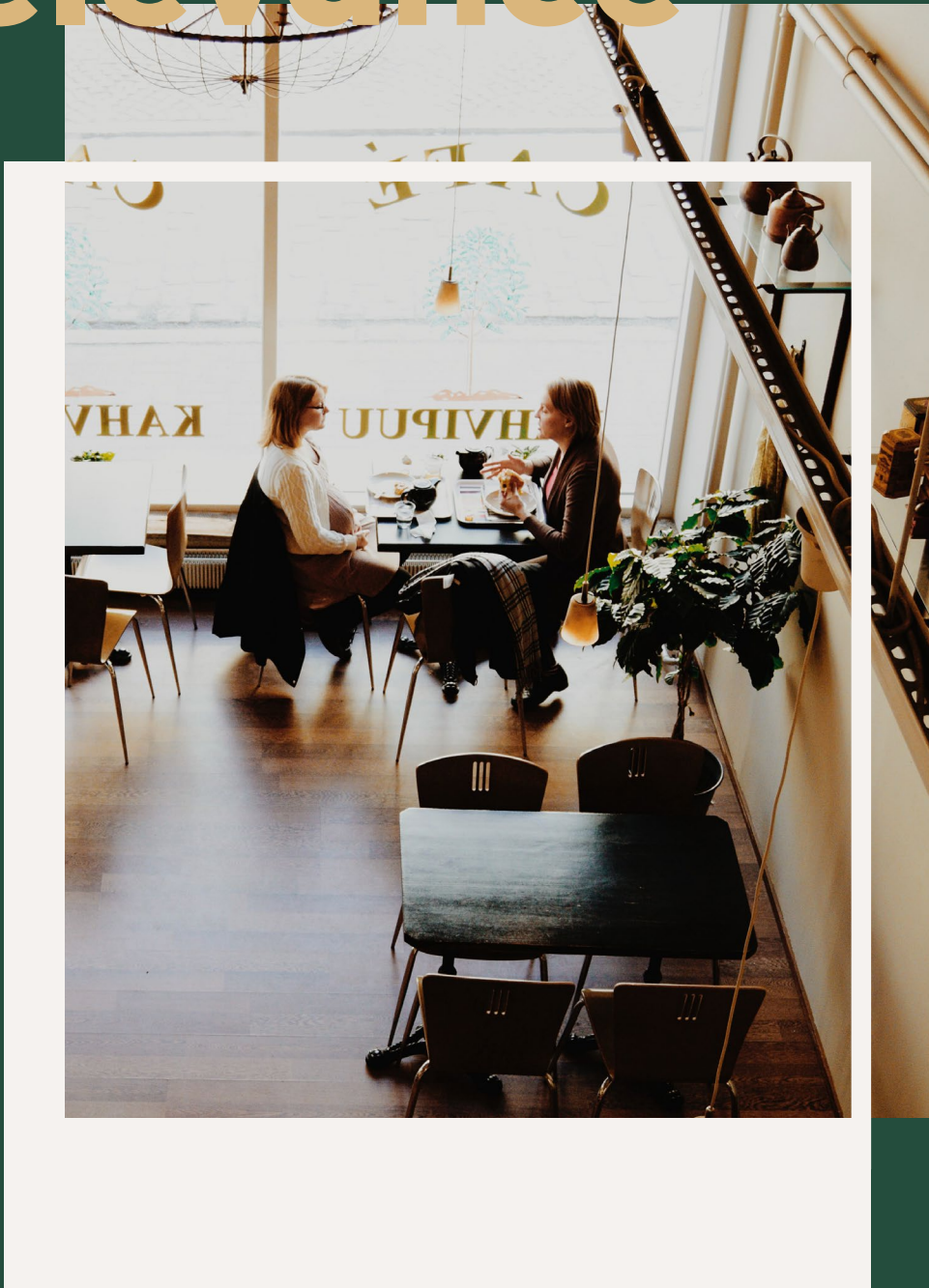
The key blocker to raising leaders is not about resourcing so much as it is about developing the leadership pipeline. Key challenges for developing a leadership pipeline include:

- The range of career options for young people
- The loss of respect for clergy as a profession
- Parental pressure to go into a career that pays well
- The lack of clear structures and systems for developing leaders

Christian leaders believe there are a number of aspects which contribute to an effective leader. Leaders need to be thoughtful and theologically astute, genuinely captured by eternal realities and skilled in the pragmatics of how to do ministry. A number of Christian leaders believe Bible colleges provide some of the training needed to develop well-rounded leaders but are not particularly strong in practical skills development. While Bible colleges will continue to play a key role in equipping young leaders with knowledge and theological training, there is also a need for leaders to be trained in practical skills and people development.

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# Cultural relevance





## Australians have become disillusioned with the church as an institution.

*"Church has gone from being the respectable centre of society to being the outcast."*

– **Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor, EV Church**

Overall trends of religious affiliation in Australia show a decline in the number of Australians identifying with Christianity and an increasing number identifying with no religion. But these trends only provide a surface level representation of spiritual openness in Australia. Church leaders believe the decline in church attendance is largely because Australians are "fed up with church as an institution" (Steve Chong, Founder and CEO, RICE Movement) and have "lost faith in the sector of religion" (William Dumas, Senior Pastor, Ganggalah Church). Sue Irwin, Senior Pastor at The Grainery Church, believes church culture has become so detached from the everyday Australian experience that it is one of the key blockers for people to engage with Church these days: "that's where we're putting up blockers, asking people to engage in an alien culture."

*"If I was trying to minimise growth in the church, I would get everyone to speak a totally different language that no one understands. That's what the church is doing."*

– **Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers**

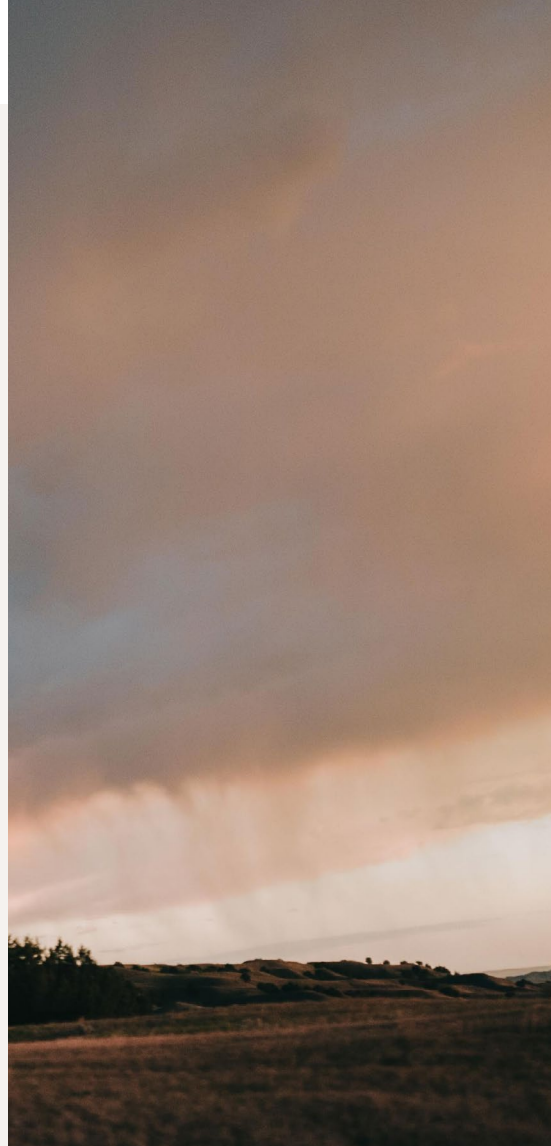
*"(When visiting a church) most non-Christians have to engage with a culture they are totally unfamiliar with. Defenses are up, insecurities are there, they're a bit off balance."*

– **David Lawton, National Director, Praxeis**

On top of church becoming "irrelevant and old-school" (Benny Ho, Senior Pastor, Faith Community Church) in the eyes of Australians, there has also been a break in trust. Joel A'Bell, Lead Pastor at Revitalise Church, believes Australia has a "bad taste of religion in its mouth" as a result of poor examples of leadership from the church. Church abuse is the number one behaviour blocker for non-Christians who are open to change from exploring Christianity<sup>5</sup>. Many Christian leaders acknowledge the church's failings in these areas and the need for an authentic, humble response from the church. Wayne Alcorn, National President of Australian Christian Churches, explains how messages about the church have become a distraction from the church's core message of Jesus.

*"Jesus is our message, but people aren't hearing the message because there have been so many other messages about the church."*

– **Wayne Alcorn, National President, Australian Christian Churches**



## Australians are open to Jesus and Christianity

Despite the disillusionment towards the Church as an institution, Church leaders strongly believe Australians are open to Jesus. Phil Pringle, Founder and Senior Leader at C3 Church Global, suggests "The population who believes in God is still the majority. The problem is not with God, it's with church." Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor at Clovercrest Baptist, explains that while there has been a "decline in attendance at church, there has not necessarily been a decline in engagement with Jesus and warmth to Christianity." In fact, one in four Australians (24%) are warm towards Christianity<sup>5</sup>.

*"Generally, people deep down still have a spiritual life, an openness to God in one way or another."*

– **Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Archbishop for the Catholic Diocese, Melbourne**

Steve Chong suggests "somewhere along the way, churches have believed a lie about how anti everyone is towards Christians." Mark Sayers and Archbishop Peter Comensoli believe the media has communicated a message of post-Christianity in Australia but that this is not reflective of Australian community more broadly.

*"The discourse of Australia is driven by inner city Melbourne and Sydney which is all white and secular but outside the inner city, there's so much diversity. Multicultural Australia is highly religious. There is an incredible story happening in multicultural Australia, but that story is not told ever in the media. It's tricked us into believing that Australia is this post-Christian place. Australia is super religious but it's not the story we tell ourselves."*

– **Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor, Red Church**

*If you listen to the media and the political and academic discourse, faith, religion, Christianity and particularly the Catholic Church is severely on the nose. In academia there's a drive to undermine anything that is of the faith. Even social and cultural roots are being dug up and tossed. At a personal and local level, there are still people who are coming to the Lord, who think it's important that we have a relationship, and that it might drive the way they live in society. There is one (perspective) that receives all the attention, and it has made significant inroads, but it's not all one way.*

– **Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Archbishop for the Catholic Diocese, Melbourne**

While Australia has seen a significant increase in the rise of no religion, Australia is far from being a secular nation. In fact, three in five Australians have a spiritual perspective<sup>5</sup>. Even if the proportion of Christians in Australia were to drop below 50% in next year's Census, there would still be a sense of the transcendent in our nation.

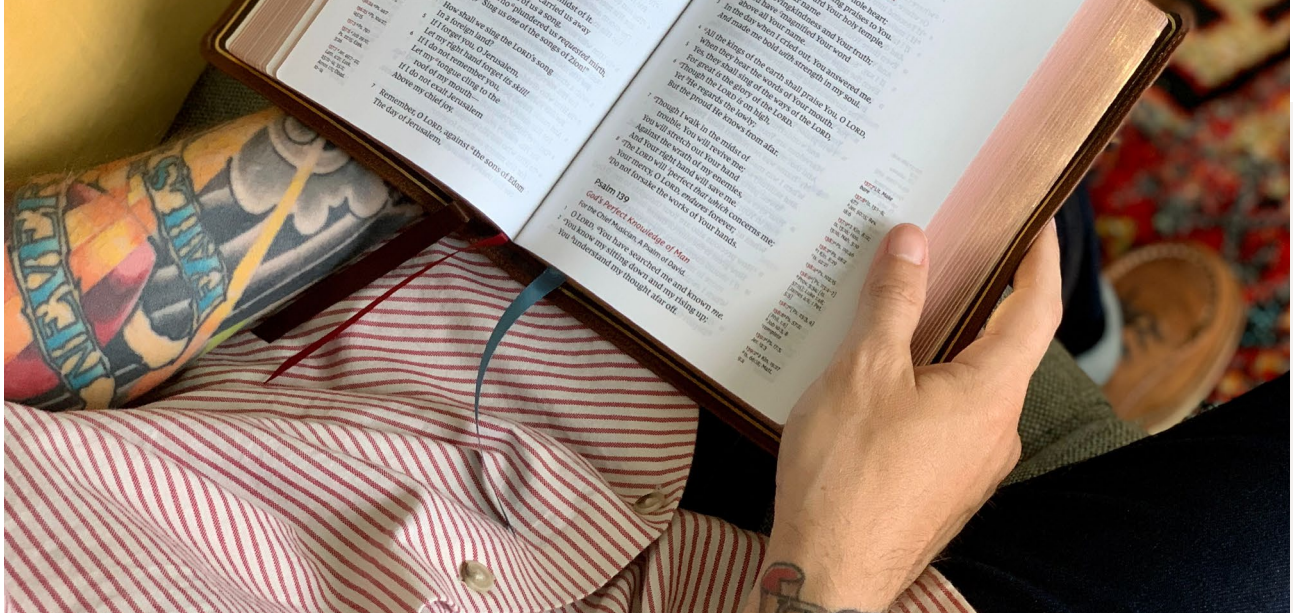
*The actual figures (for church attendance) will probably continue to decline. Most of the Church of England and the Catholic Church are older, so as that generation dies out there will be a decline. Young people do not go to church out of tradition, they only go because they really believe it... We currently have an image of one of those fields that has been burnt and it looks really brown, but if you look closely you can see little shoots. You have to look closely to see the future is green.*

– **Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton**



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– **Archbishop Peter Comensoli,  
Archbishop for the Catholic  
Diocese, Melbourne**



## Spiritual hunger in Australia

Australians are not just open to spirituality, they are spiritually hungry. Christian leaders believe change, hardship and crises can often cause a spiritual opening, as people are forced to think deeply about what matters. The COVID-19 pandemic is a significant example of spiritual opening across the world. Mike Jeffs, the founder of the Australian Christian Channel, explains how "the crisis has removed our crutches and caused us to think about death, mortality and truth." Other Christian leaders agree that COVID has acted as a leveler, showing Australians they can't put trust in the possessions or structures around them. During the experience of COVID-19, almost one in two Australians (47%) have thought about their mortality more, with a similar proportion (47%) thinking about the meaning of life more<sup>6</sup>.

*"In Australia you have so much, a car, house, job, stable government. COVID has actually removed the veneer to show that we have no control."*

– Clare Steele, CEO, Compassion Australia

*"In Melbourne, we have a whole culture that is trying to find their identity, maybe through career, maybe through affirmation of family, sports, entertainment. So many of those things got levelled (as a result of COVID-19). It's a revealing thing."*

– Guy Mason, Senior Pastor, City on a Hill

*"COVID has brought us collectively to our knees."*

– Ray Galea, Lead Pastor, MBM Rooty Hill

*"When people are at home and under various kinds of stress and anxiety, it does open up an interior life and a search for what matters. 'Do I like the way that I'm living and working?' A lot more of our life surfaces for us, the lights and shadows we normally pass over when we're busy and on the run."*

– Daniel Ang, Director, Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Australia's wealth and comfort can often be a barrier to spiritual openness, as Mark Sayers explains, "countries that have more of a survival mentality, often have higher levels of spirituality." Even though Australia is not often thought of as a survivalist country, this is starting to change. Many Christian leaders were beginning to see a spiritual hunger in Australia even before the global pandemic. Pre-existing social trends, such as family breakdown, declining mental health and rising loneliness, point to a lack of fulfillment among Australians, despite the relative wealth and stability in our country. Australians, particularly the younger generations, are becoming more open to spirituality as they search for community, connection and meaning in their lives.

*"There's a sense of meaninglessness (among the younger generations). Young people are taught that there are no moral or religious principles to live by and you have to find your own... everything is so fluid and there is this sense of lostness. People are becoming so aware of their own lostness. The more you ask questions, the more you can see they realise they don't know what they believe, and it actually concerns them."*

– Cindy McGarvie, National Director, Youth for Christ

*"Australia is starting to see a change. There is a spiritual opening through mental health as we are finally able to get everything we want and it's starting to create an emptiness."*

– Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor, Red Church



## The role of the church is to rise rather than retreat

Part of the reason Australians see the church as irrelevant is that the church has stopped using its voice. Steve Chong suggests churches are “in defensive mode and have taken up a retreating position.” Christian leaders believe there is a need for the church to rise, to be present in the midst of crisis and to continue sharing the good news of Jesus.

Joel A'Bell, Lead Pastor at Revitalise Church, suggests Australia has a “national appetite for spiritual authenticity.” A spirit of humility and authenticity is crucial for churches in engaging with Australian society and removing some of the barriers that currently exist. Without fail, Christian leaders are accepting of the criticism the church has received for past wrongs and have a passionate desire to deal with these wrongs in an authentic and humble way. In 2018, Richard Condie, the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania, led his Diocese in “a season of lament about the failures of the church, including child abuse, the mistreatment of indigenous people and the church's role in not calling out domestic violence.” This is just one example of how churches can begin to acknowledge past wrongs and live out an authentic spirituality.

*“We need to be authentic and put our hand up when we've got it wrong. We need a level of contrition and authenticity, not trying to hide. It's important to Australians and to me as a leader.”*

– Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist

*“The attitude of the Australian population is pretty sobering and the natural response is to retreat. We need a confident humility and a willingness to learn from others...the way we present our argument and our willingness to have our argument shifted by what we hear (is really important). I'm really passionate that we need to recover our voice from a different posture.”*

– Stu Cameron, Lead Minister, Newlife Church

Mike Stevens suggests that because Australians have lost trust in the church, “we need to work our way back to the table.” The gospel is too valuable for Christians to take a retreating position and stop sharing it with society. In order to rebuild trust, churches need to be serving the community in the hardest places. Mike Stevens asks the question, “If we had to close tomorrow, would we be missed by the community? As leaders, we need to think about how we make our communities better, not just pumping out Sundays.”

*“Going back to the early church, the reason we got the right to speak is that we were in the worst situations. It's the same in our Compassion projects (overseas), we're among the grit and the dirt and the illness. We're the ones starting schools, hospitals and that gives us the opportunity to speak into the community. (In Australia) how can we be in situations that earn us the right to speak?”*

– Clare Steele, CEO, Compassion Australia



Christians play a key role amidst crisis, tragedy and trial. In a time of increasing isolation and declining social connection, the church is one of the few facilitated communities that individuals can access. During the early COVID-19 shutdown period in Australia, Mike Jeffs, the founder of the Australian Christian Channel, saw that it was the community that missed the church most.

*“We run a Community Centre in our region called the Goodlife Community. [When we had to close the centre due to lockdown] the community family seemed to be more emotionally distressed that we were shutting the doors than the church community. Interestingly enough as we processed this situation it became obvious the Church folk had strong relational/faith connections, this was not so with the community folk, who struggled to come to terms with their relational anchor points once the Community Centre doors were closed for a period of time. The bottom line is Aussies are looking for meaningful community and connections.”*

– Mike Jeffs, Founder, Australian Christian Channel

In thinking about epidemics during the time of the early church, Nicky Gumbel describes the significant growth in Christianity because “the Christians ran towards (the problem), whereas the pagans ran away from it”. As Christians choose to be present in the difficult places, it builds credibility and transforms people's perspectives of the church. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a significant opportunity for the church to “show a true expression of community” (Clare Steele, CEO, Compassion Australia).

*“This is not a moment for the Church to retreat, it's a moment for the Kingdom of God to advance.”*

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton





## This is not a moment for the Church to retreat, it's a moment for the Kingdom of God to advance

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton

### The church's role in speaking into social issues

A key challenge for Christian leaders in the current context is knowing how to speak into social issues in a way that encourages the flourishing of society. Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor at Red Church, describes the pressure for any social commentator to "take a side". He says, "if pastors don't take a side, the labels come". Clare Steele believes it can be damaging to make issues too black and white, for example "making issues like abortion into black and white conversations when they are actually really thick". Phil Pringle, Founder and Senior Leader at C3 Church Global, also describes the social commentary landscape as being "filled with land mines. I've seen pastors hit those land mines and be damaged significantly".

Mark Sayers suggests that these arguments are not so much about the social issue itself but are used as wedges to divide. He uses the metaphor of a dolphin to describe how social issues, such as racism, climate change and #metoo surface into the social media milieu temporarily and then return back to the ocean in what he calls the "real spaces". These issues are still real and relevant for individuals and communities but are used in public debates as a battleground for different 'sides'.

Clare Steele asks the question, "what does it look like to win as a Christian? Is it about winning the argument? Look at Jesus on the cross? That was a victory which nobody would expect." Guy Mason, Senior Pastor at City on a Hill, acknowledges that "religious people have a tendency sometimes to want to elevate above." Christian leaders believe the church should not be aiming to win the argument but to "exhibit the love of Christ in our public voice... for me I would much prefer that we are reaching people because we are loving them as opposed to telling them they are doing the wrong thing" (Wayne Swift, Leader, Acts Global). Guy Mason suggests "it's important you invite questions and for people to ask the difficult things. Always create room in teaching and church for people to ask questions".

Clare Steele suggests "we have lost the theology of how our lives are shaped by the gospel. We've made it too simple and have lost the language of how our faith outworks." Nicky Gumbel believes that speaking into social issues and communicating the gospel are one and the same.

*In my mind, [communicating the gospel and responding to social issues] is part and parcel of the same thing. Racism is an affront to the gospel. Jesus died to bring us together.*

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton

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# The future of the church



### Remaining adaptable to change

COVID-19 has shown Christian leaders just how important it is for churches to be adaptable to change. Steve Dixon, QLD & NT State Pastor at Hillsong, describes how churches that have treated "COVID-19 as an opportunity, and tried to find ways of responding and connecting people, have seen a significant positive impact, compared to those that have seen it as an obstacle".

Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor at Crossway Baptist Church, believes COVID-19 has turbo charged the trends that were happening in churches anyway. Churches that were already practiced in adapting to the changing context around them have pivoted quickly and are likely to have remained stable or are even seen growth during this season. For faith communities that were already struggling, however, "the writing on the wall will become the nail in the coffin" (Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist).

*I always want our culture to be a culture that's learning. Culture is always moving, shaping and changing. We need to create an understanding of the digital age. I'm treating it as if I've just arrived in a new country and everybody speaks a slightly different language. If we don't do our homework now, we're going to let culture sail on past. How do I as a missiologist understand the next horizon?*

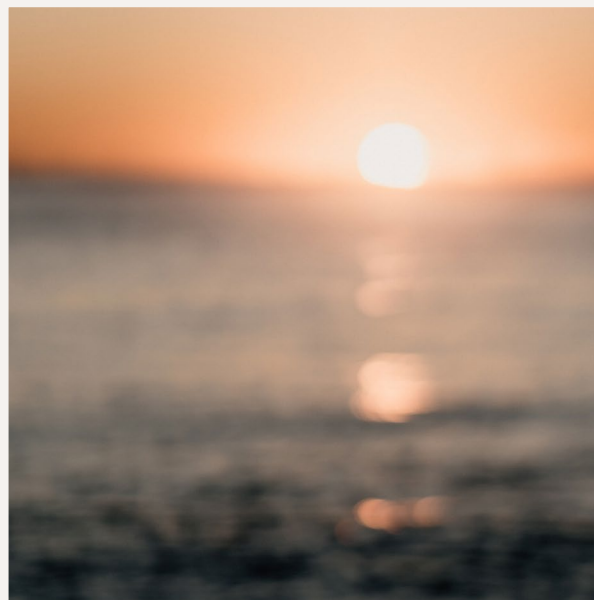
– Guy Mason, Senior Pastor, City on a Hill

The global pandemic highlights the importance for churches to be dynamic, adaptable and in touch with culture and community. Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor at Red Church, frames it as "continually thinking like a startup, rather than an institution. Every four years we change what we're doing so that we can serve the city and the community".



**How do I as  
a missiologist  
understand the  
next horizon.**

– Guy Mason, Senior Pastor,  
City on a Hill



## Reconnecting locally

Many Christian leaders believe the church of the future should be an expression of its local community. There is less of an appetite for destination churches as Australians are looking for a more localised experience. In contrast to the cathedrals of old that often stood tallest on the hill, Australians are more interested in something that is down to earth, warm and welcoming.

*"What we're finding is that people have a desire to return to the simplicity of life."*

– Joel A'Bell, Lead Pastor, Revitalise Church

Many Christian leaders believe a local church should also reflect the diversity of the community in which its embedded, both in the leadership team and the congregation. Melinda Dwight, National Director of Alpha Australia, believes "our lack of inclusion is working against us. I see Jesus in the Bible reaching out to women and that is not always the experience at church. We need more gender inclusion, cultural inclusion and age inclusion... We wait until people are 65 until they have an opportunity to talk."

A diverse congregation and leadership team can help people from the community to feel more comfortable at church and to engage with the gospel through conversations with people who have a similar worldview. William Dumas, Senior Pastor at Ganggalah Church, explains the significance of this for Australia's indigenous communities: "it's important knowing we can share the gospel without the white fella being the Santa Claus. We engage the gospel of equality and a spirit of humility and when I go to local indigenous communities, they are receptive and embrace it".

A number of Christian leaders believe a diverse church is a true reflection of the kingdom of heaven. Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton, explains that all cultures are "inheritors together of the Kingdom of God". He says the "role of the church is to bring this (reconciliation) to the world. God's glory is revealed in diversity. It's only in a diverse church that Jesus is revealed". Australia's cities, particularly Sydney and Melbourne, are extremely diverse and Guy Mason sees the city as "a significant mission field for the gospel. It brings together a diversity of ethnicities, religious background, career – in our church we have artists, bankers and CEOs". The church is one of the only places in society where people of such diverse background can share in community together.

*"When you look at the gospel in the purest context it never separates people, it actually unites people... I had a prophetic vision about the keys on a piano. You are meant to play both the white and black keys and until we have harmony in Australia, we won't see full revival."*

– William Dumas, Senior Pastor, Ganggalah Church

*"My sister came to church and saw a tattooed (Anglo) guy talking to an older Maltese person and said, 'you don't see that anywhere else in the world.'"*

– Ray Galea, Lead Pastor, MBM Rooty Hill

Encouraging diversity within a church congregation requires intentionality from Church leaders to ensure diverse representation in both leaders and the laity. Nicky Gumbel explains that the congregation at Holy Trinity Brompton reflects the diversity of London but feels there is still room to grow in creating diversity within the leadership team. Russell Evans, the Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers, describes the increasing diversity he saw in his congregation once they made an intentional effort to focus on it.

*"London is 40.2% diverse. HTB is 41% diverse. The congregation reflects London. Where I have failed is in (having diversity within the) leadership which I have been fighting for, for about 5 years. Now I feel the wind is with me... If we can transform it, it will be so beautiful for the kingdom of God. God can use it for good."*

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton

*"Originally we had lots of Asian and Caucasian people in the congregation. We started saying 'church for all' and Africans started coming. You can just see the beautiful colour of God's kingdom. But it's because we focused on it and it played out in what we had on stage."*

– Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers



**When you look at the gospel in the purest context it never separates people, it actually unites people...**

– William Dumas, Senior Pastor, Ganggalah Church





Many Christian leaders believe a local church is one that is engaged with the local community, serving its needs and creating healthy relationships. Matt Hunt, Lead Pastor at CrossLife Baptist Church, explains that “to be a city on a hill, you actually have to be a light to the community”. He argues that people come to know Jesus through genuine connections made at the local level. [Healthy Vibrant Communities](#), founded by Matt Hunt, is one example of how churches can create connection with local communities through establishing local, church-owned, community-centric venues. But the way in which a church engages its local community is likely to look different depending on the needs in that particular community.

*“There has been such bad news about the church in the public, and it’s not without reason, but there needs to be more focus on the local level. Out of that is where people come to know Jesus.”*

– Matt Hunt, Lead Pastor, CrossLife Baptist Church

*“What does the Southbank (Melbourne) community need? They need a first-class café where people can come and have community, an indoor play centre. Getting an understanding of what I need to do to influence community.”*

– Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers

*“How do we as a local church assess what is the best model to reach our local communities? Not just for the sake of trying something new, but to more effectively reach people.”*

– Clare Steele, CEO, Compassion Australia

### More than a Sunday service

Some Christian leaders suggest that church is often reduced to a Sunday service in the minds of Australian Christians and church leaders. Joel A’Bell, Lead Pastor at Revitalise Church, tells a story about a young couple visiting his church who really appreciated that the church celebrated and lifted up the church members who were not able to attend the Sunday service. He says “I get emotional about how much people are made to feel guilty when they’re not there at a Sunday service. Churches resort to shame and guilt to get vision accomplished”. COVID-19 has caused a disruption to church routine and has shown Christian leaders just how important the ‘in between’ connections are.

*“As time went on (during the COVID-19 shut down period) we realised that community is really important. It’s not just about the Sunday service. My hope is that we’ll move towards valuing community even more.”*

– Clare Steele, CEO, Compassion Australia

Ray Galea, Lead Pastor at MBM Rooty Hill, explains how “the real work of building relationships happens outside the Sunday service”, particularly when connecting with people of other cultures. “Doing it over the context of a meal, nurturing relationships”.

## Churches need some scale, but bigger isn't always better

Ideal church size is an age-old debate in which there are many different opinions. Some Christian leaders believe there has been a turning of the tide away from the mega church. Joel A'Bell suggests "big doesn't seem to impress people as much" and suggests people are looking for something more pulled back and local. Matt Hunt, Lead Pastor at CrossLife Baptist Church, warns against "the thinking that bigger is more fruitful, more Godly, more successful". Other leaders, however, believe large churches can be just as relational as small churches, as long as they are investing in close personal relationships. Archbishop Peter Comensoli suggests churches need to be both viable and vital which can sometimes be difficult if churches are too small.

*"Big church fails if it fails to also invest in close personal relationships. When invested in properly, big church can be just as relational as small church, and in fact, more relational. This has been our experience, overwhelmingly...In our region we've seen no evidence of people choosing smaller churches because they more want more connection. The opposite has been the case. They are finding more connectedness in the larger, healthier churches."*

– **Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor, EV Church**

*"You can have a viable church but whether there's vitality is the question. There's a tendency in the Catholic church to be very localised, which is good in that there's a local expression of the body of Christ, but some of the things that are needed for vitality are not so easy to do in a smaller community. You need to get a balance here. Big institutions aren't the answer, but we need something that's vital and viable."*

– **Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Archbishop for the Catholic Diocese, Melbourne**

While there are practical considerations regarding church size, Melinda Dwight argues that church size isn't really the main issue up for debate. She uses a metaphor of ice cream flavours to show that there is no need to feel threatened by a diversity of churches. Instead, churches should be asking what their unique contribution is so they can reach their community.

*"We have to increase the market for ice cream. There are lots of flavours of ice cream and that hasn't negated our desire for ice cream. I've travelled around much of the church world and it's too beige. Everything is the same. There is an opportunity to find out who we are and the unique way we can reach our community. So not being threatened by the fact that there is a diversity of churches. We have to say, 'who are we called to be and what's our unique contribution?' Mega churches have [had great impacts] but very few of them are reproducible."*

– **Melinda Dwight, National Director, Alpha Australia**

## Church planting as a model for community transformation

Many Christian leaders believe in church planting as the most effective model for growing the church. Both Guy Mason and Wayne Alcorn quote C. Peter Wagner in saying "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches". Church planting is seen to "reach the local community in a way that an existing church can't" (Guy Mason). Richard Condie, the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania, also "has a commitment to church planting as the top way of seeing people come to faith", suggesting that "church planting is a good way to help figure out a new DNA". It gives permission to do things differently, finding their unique contribution in the local community.

*"We tried to prioritise church planting as our missional strategy. As we were growing and getting bigger, we thought 'do we just create one mega thing in the city of Melbourne?' 'Or do we empower other leaders? Do we go to new places? Do we prioritise community?' The bigger the show gets, the more it becomes a production. Planting a new church reaches the local community in a way that an existing church can't."*

– **Guy Mason, Senior Pastor, City on a Hill**

*"The local church is the answer to community engagement. There is no substitute for presence and relationship at the grassroots level."*

– **Mark Varughese, Senior Leader, Kingdomcity Global**

Church planting also provides opportunities to train and release new leaders. Guy Mason describes how his church has "been able to raise up other leaders and send them out to other churches". He believes this strategy "creates a fantastic ecosystem for leadership, with people working together at different stages of ministry, working alongside each other and cheering each other on".

While most Christian leaders believe church planting is an effective strategy, they advise that it needs to be done in the right way. Wayne Swift, Leader of Acts Global, explains "We all know we need more churches, but what we don't need is more churches not doing what needs to be done. We need more effective churches making a difference in the community and bringing people to Christ." Scott Sanders, Executive Director at [Reach Australia](#) and [Geneva Push](#), agrees, suggesting "we need more church planting across Australia. Denominations need to have a clear plan for revitalising existing churches and starting new ones. Importantly, we need church plants to launch strong. We don't need small, ineffective churches that don't reach the lost and see prodigals return to church."

Christian leaders believe church plants need to be strategic and well-resourced to effectively reach a local community in a meaningful and ongoing way. Mark Varughese, Senior Leader at Kingdomcity Global, says that while neither is wrong, "he would rather have a few strong hubs that become

major lighthouses than many more smaller works that may not have the infrastructure to be generationally sustainable. This includes land and buildings as well as a strong pipeline of raising and equipping leaders." Nicky Gumbel describes his church's approach to church planting as having "a big back door" where they send "older leaders along with younger leaders to a new church plant". Steve Dixon, QLD & NT State Pastor at Hillsong, notes that church planting is not the end goal, but the process.

*"I think that we plant churches is really important, but I think the way we plant churches has changed. You know back in the day you would take someone who had a bold enough personality and a good enough gift, and they would go and put a sign on the footpath. Now it's far more strategic. Now it comes out of a strong mother church."*

– **Wayne Alcorn, National President, Australian Christian Churches**

*"We need to be planting church planting churches. The end goal is not only for the community we plant in (but for the communities beyond that. That's how you see the fruit all around the world right now."*

– **Steve Dixon, QLD & NT State Pastor, Hillsong**

Many Christian leaders are advocates of a hub or multi-site model, where churches are still planted in local communities but remain connected to and resourced by healthy established churches. Reach Australia is an organisation that focuses on creating healthy church ecosystems by connecting existing churches\*. Ray Galea, Lead Pastor, MBM Rooty Hill, is "committed to the way Reach Australia is doing it. They want Australia to be won for Jesus and know healthy churches is the way to do it. They help existing churches develop healthy ecosystems. It's Word-driven but missional-hearted".

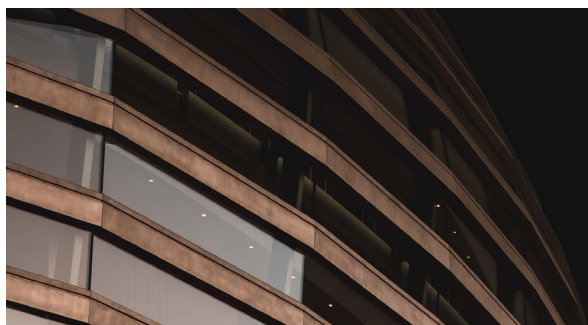
*"(It may mean) that declining and plateaued churches close and we see an increase in mission-focused mergers and the starting of multi-site churches... which is an area we've been resourcing the last two or three years, primarily as a network for healthy church planting. In Australia, we have some good examples of multisite networks, Holy Trinity network in Adelaide, City on a Hill in Melbourne and MBM Rooty Hill in Sydney's West."*

– **Scott Sanders, Executive Director, Reach Australia and Geneva Push**

Another model for establishing well-resourced churches is Matt Hunt's Healthy Vibrant Communities model. This model aims to promote growth through establishing churches that will go on to multiply financially, as well as personally.

*"If we can release the gifted people in the church to manage venues at a local level not a centralised level (that would be more effective). We're talking about venues in the community that do bring a return, like childcare facilities... You can imagine church plants that multiply themselves financially let alone personally. That's a long-term vision."*

– **Matt Hunt, Lead Pastor, CrossLife Baptist Church**



**We need church plants to launch strong. We don't need small, ineffective churches that don't reach the lost.**

– **Scott Sanders, Executive Director, Reach Australia and Geneva Push**

\* This collaborative group involves three Christian leaders interviewed for this research: Andrew Heard, Scott Sanders and Ray Galea.





## Church needs a place to call home

The conversation around church facilities has changed in recent decades as Christian leaders are seeing how church buildings contribute to growth and community engagement. Although Christian leaders acknowledge that “things can grow in rental properties” (Richard Condie, Anglican Bishop of Tasmania), Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor at EV Church, believes that “physical spaces can help or hinder growth”. Looking back over the last 23 years at EV Church, Andrew recounts how church growth struggled “because we had to meet at a school that was cold” and how they “grew by 20% when they moved out of schools”. He says, “buildings are worth the investment”.

*“One of the things that can put a cap on church growth is venues.”*

– **Wayne Alcorn, National President, Australian Christian Churches**

*“It’s become clear over the last 10 years, the importance of facilities. The more we grew, we just rented anything we could get our hands on. The difference between doing that and having a base has been proven to make a world of difference. We need strategic base churches. Like here in Brisbane we have enough staff to run daily, weekly events. We have kid’s facilities, youth spaces, places for after school. It becomes a community gathering place.”*

– **Steve Dixon, QLD & NT State Pastor, Hillsong**

Steve Dixon’s example of Hillsong Church in Brisbane shows how church facilities can not only help the growth of a church but can provide spaces which serve the community and can become a hub or meeting place. Russell Evans supports this by asking “why do I have a building like I do? We hire out buildings for schools, so it becomes the hub of the community. We have kids’ facilities, indoor play centres and a café to serve the Southbank community”.

Finding and funding church facilities has become a key challenge for churches in recent years. In brownfield sites, such as inner-city Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, the cost of property can pose a significant challenge for churches that are seeking to plant in strategic locations. Matt Hunt’s Healthy Vibrant Communities model is an example of churches partnering with property developers to create community hubs in greenfield sites, but this still requires funding and involves a level of risk. Many Christian leaders would like to see more strategy and collaboration between churches, philanthropists and other partners to ensure growing churches have a place to call home in the future. Scott Sanders, Executive Director at Reach Australia and Geneva Push, suggests a couple of possible solutions to this challenge including “land banking” and “working with developers who are open to religious centres” but also suggests Reach’s “multi-site model can be a better approach as they shut down some inefficient locations and restart them with energy and life”.



## Churches connecting, denominations collaborating

The church of the future must be united in vision. Many Christian leaders are calling for more focus on relationships, connection and collaboration and less focus on competition, comparison and division. There is much to be gained from having a kingdom view and seeing partnerships flourish between different church denominations, and between church and parachurch organisations. While denominations will continue to have a role in terms of government relationships and compliance, many Christian leaders see a future with less demarcation and more unity.

*"In Australia, I think because of the success of music and some of the larger churches, the mindset is that we, as a country, are doing great. But, like Alcoholics Anonymous you have to start by recognising that we have a problem. Australia is not doing great with having a Kingdom view. Everybody is only looking at their own church and they think they're doing great. We have to change the measurements of success, everybody mentions Sunday attendance, how many people are watching and listening to them online. How shallow."*

– **Josy Chacko, Founder and President, Empart**

Joel A'Bell, Lead Pastor at Revitalise Church, calls out the current trend towards "competitiveness and comparison" between churches. He sees this happening particularly in relation to releasing leaders saying "we need more churches. We need to release people". Joel suggests this "hoarding and holding mentality" is not kingdom focused and "creates a culture where people can become too focused on what they have and too reticent to take a risk". In this climate "people are never going to start a conversation about wanting to plant a church".

Steve Chong, founder and CEO, RICE Movement, believes "a lot of the favour is on movements that are kingdom focused. Unity of the church attracts the favour of God". Steve suggests current churches are "not just not uniting, they are dividing" and "the first step is to stop dividing". Benny Ho, Senior Pastor at Faith Community Church, believes that as we are becoming more connected globally, the "local church mindset is going to have to change." He suggests "collaboration is a necessary thing going forward".

*"It's about saying, 'hey, listen we are all heading in the same direction. Let's work together so the church nationally works more effectively."*

– **Wayne Swift, Leader, Acts Global**

*"It's a deep ecumenical thing. The last supper shows that we should be one. It's actually part of our church teaching, it's not an optional extra."*

– **Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Archbishop for the Catholic Diocese, Melbourne**

Some Christian leaders have already experienced the benefits of creating relationships across denominations. Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor at Clovercrest Baptist, suggests "denominational lines don't mean what they used to mean. People come to churches because it's family, they connect, it's warm not because it's Baptist". He says, "in South Australia they have a smaller population, so collaboration between denominations is really important." Scott Sanders, Executive Director at Reach Australia and Geneva Push, argues that "denominations doing it by themselves miss out on the diversity of thought and opinion that comes from working with others. This has been true of the Geneva Push network. We're so much stronger working together with over 10 different networks and denominations across Australia".

*"I felt (prompted to) get people together to pray every day at 1900 hours every night to pray against the effects of COVID-19. And then everybody said yes. I contacted the evangelicals they were all in. Then I contacted all my friends on the other streams that we don't really have much to do with, the Anglicans, the Catholics, the national council of churches and they all said yes. They were all in. It was the greatest example of unity I have ever seen. It did my heart good."*

– **Wayne Alcorn, National President, Australian Christian Churches**

## Churches and ministries working together

Adopting a kingdom view is also relevant to the relationship between churches and parachurch organisations. Steve Chong believes "the parachurch's role is to stoke the fire, to be a catalytic agent for the church and the church needs to be open to that". Steve is passionate that this needs to be done in way that is "empowering and inspiring" rather than "critiquing".

It is important for parachurch organisations and churches to work together and to see their work as a partnership. Wayne Swift "wants to set up a pattern that works through the church". He "doesn't want to leave it to just the parachurch structures". Steve Chong agrees, suggesting "the parachurch needs to not sideline the church and use them occasionally but see them as something that's really needed". Melinda Dwight, National Director of Alpha Australia, sees the role of Alpha as "serving the church in its mission". In his work at Praxeis, David Lawton, National Director at Praxeis, has seen more success when their partner churches "have taken what we have and adopted it throughout the church. Where it's been a failure is where the leadership has accepted it as a program but not as a culture throughout the church".

# Digital opportunities



## The Holy Spirit is not confused by Zoom

Although COVID-19 has taken the world by surprise and churches, along with individuals and businesses, have had to innovate quickly, several Christian leaders believe this season presents a significant opportunity to reach their communities and grow the church. Phil Pringle, Founder and Senior Leader at C3 Church Global, suggests "God has given us a tool, possibly the greatest tool to the church, for us to reach others in an unprecedented way". He says "the online church is not a viable option, it's a reality. It has reached people we've never been able to meet before". Guy Mason, Senior Pastor at City on a Hill, highlights the importance of the church using God-given tools to make the gospel known.

*"I think the elevation of the digital age and where we are now, in terms of communication, is giving us an opportunity. Apostle Paul in his day had some letters and a ship that often broke down, but it didn't matter, he used whatever he could to get the gospel out. At the time of the reformation it was the printing press. Billy Graham used TV, radio and film. Here we are in this moment and we've been handed this (COVID-19 and the online world) and God's saying, 'What will you do with what I gave you to make the gospel known?'"*

– Guy Mason, Senior Pastor, City On A Hill

*"Now digital is the new normal. If it weren't for COVID, it probably would have taken some of our communities another 5-10 years to embrace it to the same extent. We've got youth ministry online where the Archbishop is able to speak with his clergy and youth leaders and share his vision and encouragement. We have marriage preparation with engaged couples taking place online. An initiative at Pentecost saw speakers from the church around the world speaking about the influence of the Holy Spirit in their life and that was possible only online. I think digital outreach will become the new normal and I just hope that as our churches open back up, we don't lose the missionary opportunity that this pandemic has presented."*

– Daniel Ang, Director, Sydney Centre for Evangelisation, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

During this season, pivoting to online church has not only been vital, it has also opened up significant opportunities. Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton, reflects on his surprise at seeing how digital tools can actually enhance relational connection rather than reducing it. "I never thought an online version of Alpha would work – I mean how could it- we have a meal, we have people sitting in a circle sharing together, yet after being forced into Alpha Online we've found people are actually more open because they're in their own homes". Nicky has seen a growth in the number of people doing Alpha since moving online and many people have become Christians through this medium. In Nicky Gumbel's most recent Alpha group, he said "of the eleven guests, only one would have done it but for COVID-19...and we only had one drop out, which is rare in our normal gatherings". He concludes "I've never been more wrong in my life! The Holy Spirit is not confused by Zoom. Jesus healed people from a distance."

Melinda Dwight, National Director of Alpha Australia, confirms the same experience in Australia suggesting they have "seen more unchurched people do Alpha online than we would normally". Many churches have also been able to reach new people through running online services. Going digital has also opened up doorways for people who would not attend church in person.

*"I was very against doing services online because I thought they would attract people from other churches, but people who would never go to church are coming to our services... Watching online is like Zacchaeus. It allows people to see Jesus without Jesus seeing them. We've always had a problem with anonymity in the church because we want to welcome people, but we also want to respect their anonymity. I think Sunday online enables us to welcome people while they stay anonymous. We can say "welcome to HTB (Holy Trinity Brompton), so great to have you with us" but we can't see them, they can see us. I actually think this is the greatest evangelistic opportunity of our lifetime."*

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton

Many Christian leaders have seen other people benefit from online services as well, including new parents, people with disabilities, those with social anxiety, shift workers and many others. Nicky Gumbel suggests "even if (online church) is just for them, we will never stop doing it". Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor at Red Church, describes how online services allow people to remain connected, despite the busyness of life these days.

*"Aussies are too busy, people who were coming every six weeks are now watching every week. Parents who aren't sleeping are now watching it at 9pm at night... Lifestyles are becoming more diverse. People are managing kids, sport and work. That's what's different about Netflix, people can watch it whenever they want. There is a little caveat, which is that you don't want to completely individualise faith, but the accessibility has helped."*

– Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor, Red Church



**This is the greatest evangelistic opportunity of our lifetime.**

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton

Clare Steele and Melinda Dwight also recognise the opportunity online church provides for global connection. Clare suggests "in Australia we've missed an opportunity. The time and energy for each church to make their own production we could have run an economy on that effort. We could've had the Philippines streaming a service into Australia. It's an opportunity for the global church". Melinda says "people are now asking if we have Alpha in Filipino, in Mandarin. We've had to start new Alphas so that people can do it with their family globally. Because people are realising that connection is not necessarily geographical anymore." Richard Condie, the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania, also recognises the opportunities that digital provides to reach people in more remote areas, especially in his Tasmanian context.

*"Before this (COVID-19), we were already doing a little project, gathering prerecorded services, investing in good quality TVs, so that people in remote places could access good teaching. We're working with the Bush Church Aid Society to try and scale this up for all remote communities in Australia."*

**– Richard Condie, Anglican Bishop of Tasmania**

## Online church and spiritual atrophy

Despite the benefits of online church, a number of Christian leaders believe the future cannot only be online. Phil Pringle, Founder and Senior Leader at C3 Church Global, believes online church "won't replace people meeting together physically. There is a magic in meeting together that can't be replaced".

Prior to COVID-19, 61% of churchgoers were weekly attenders at church in person. One in four (27%) attended online church services once a week. Interestingly, 73% of these also attended church in person so it could be assumed online church services could be as broad as watching archived services online throughout the week or listening to a podcast. Despite Christian leaders seeing the power of online church to reach new groups of people, churchgoers have been attending church less often during the COVID-19 period. Almost half of churchgoers (46%) are attending online church each week, while 22% are attending church in person. Attendance at other church activities such as Bible studies and prayer meetings has also declined slightly during the pandemic. Almost three in five churchgoers were attending prayer meetings (58%) and Bible studies (57%) prior to COVID-19. Now, however, just over two in five continue to attend these activities (46% Bible studies, 44% prayer meetings).



### Weekly church attendance before COVID-19

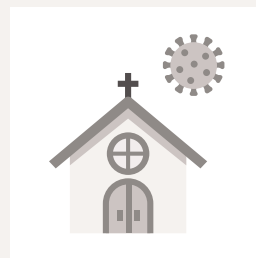
61% in person



27% online\*

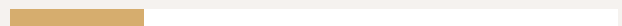


\* This could be as broad as watching archived services online throughout the week or listening to a podcast.



### Weekly church attendance during COVID-19

22% in person



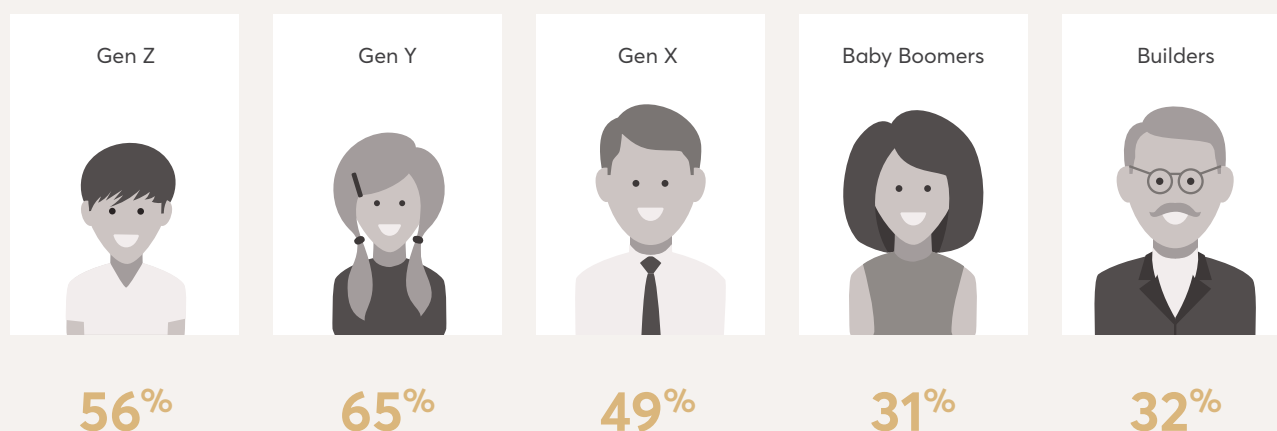
46% online





## Younger churchgoers are enjoying the social aspect of church online more than older generations.

Proportion in each generation who say the social aspect of church online has been extremely/very positive



Practicality is the most positive aspect of online church for churchgoers, with seven in ten (69%) suggesting the ease of attending online church has been extremely or very positive. What churchgoers have missed most in doing church online is the fellowship that attending church in-person provides. Just half of churchgoers (51%) say their social experience of online church has been extremely/very positive, and two in three (67%) strongly/somewhat agree they have missed the connections that gathering in person provides. Young churchgoers are more likely than older churchgoers to say their experience of church online has been extremely/very positive socially.

Despite the challenges of meeting online for churchgoers, many have found online church to be positive for their spiritual growth (64% extremely/very positive). In fact, for 45% of churchgoers the COVID-19 season has been a period of significant or moderate spiritual growth for them personally. This compares to just 9% who have experienced a season of significant or moderate spiritual dryness during COVID-19. Almost three in five churchgoers (57%) strongly or somewhat agree they have taken greater responsibility for their own spiritual growth during this period. So, there has been no significant negative impacts of online church in the short term. Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers, however, shares his concerns about meeting online in the long term and the effect this might have on people's spiritual flourishing.

*"My biggest concern is what I call spiritual atrophy. If you have surgery, they want to get you moving so that you don't get atrophy in your muscles. It's the same with the online experience, it creates spiritual atrophy."*

– Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planet Shakers

Mark Varughese, Senior Leader at Kingdomcity Global, also believes there could be a challenge in moving back to meeting in person. He says "because of the impact of the isolation, there could be a genuine challenge to re-engage or to reverse the atrophy."

After five months of COVID-19, feeling anxious is still the dominant emotion of Australians. Even as some are easing back into everyday life, more than three in four Australians express reservations about travelling on public transport, gathering in communal spaces and catching lifts<sup>7</sup>. As churches move back to physical gatherings, managing not just the hygiene protocols but the social anxieties will be important in addition to the core business of spiritual formation. Churchgoers expect some of the proposed COVID safe practices for churches will impact their experience of church more than others. The practices that are most likely to diminish the church experience are not singing during the service (45% extremely/very much diminish) and not mingling before or after the service (42%).

## Online church will be an addition, not a replacement

*"We want to be a congregation that reframes. This season is genuinely opening a new doorway and the wind will be in the sails for the congregations that lean in and reevaluate. Digital mission will be taken much more seriously. We were all dabbling in it, but we will see an emergence of digital communities like we haven't seen before."*

– Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist

Given the significant opportunities that online church presents, most Christian leaders believe it is here to stay. Online church will not be a replacement for meeting together, it will become an addition. This is especially important given the church is only accessible for some people if its available online. This will mean churches need to reframe the way they think about their organisation in the future. Benny Ho, Senior Pastor at Faith Community Church in Perth, suggests that going forward, churches will need to think of themselves more as a "digital organisation with a physical location, rather than a physical location with a digital presence."

*"Online will be as real as a location, we will call it our online church. It won't replace people meeting together physically. There's a magic in meeting together that can't be replaced but there are opportunities online that can't be duplicated too, people who can't come to church, people who don't want to walk into a big building."*

– Phil Pringle, Founder and Senior Leader, C3 Church Global

If online gatherings are here to stay, Christian leaders will need to think about what will contribute to the most fruitful experience for people engaging online. Some Christian leaders share their learnings from this season in how to establish or maintain genuine, authentic connection with people through online platforms. Melinda Dwight also shares her reflections on how to create a welcoming environment when doing Alpha online.

*"We've had to adapt some of our style of discussion, and we've had to adapt some of our expectations of how the fun looks. It's still important to recognise hospitality, so asking 'who's got their coffee or wine' or whatever it is. And you have to have more trust in the Holy Spirit. We thought the Holy Spirit could only turn up if I was there touching you. And now, apparently, God can meet you wherever you are. I was talking to someone recently who came to faith through Alpha online and he said 'I could never have gone to a church. If I had had people around me, it would have felt like you were making me do something.' And I said, 'come Holy Spirit' and He did."*

– Melinda Dwight, National Director, Alpha Australia

Phil Pringle reflects on C3's experience doing online church. He says, "we started with prerecorded services but went live as soon as we could". Once the services were live, they saw engagement levels increase. Phil suggests "prerecorded services are like canned food".

Phil Pringle's experience with live recorded services is supported by churchgoers. More than three in five churchgoers (64%) strongly/somewhat agree they prefer a live church stream over a pre-recorded service. Churchgoers also prefer a low-key online service rather than a big production when watching church online (63% strongly/somewhat agree). Half of churchgoers (51%) have enjoyed the additional elements online church has offered such as Q&As, pre-rolls and panel discussions and a similar proportion (48%) have enjoyed engaging in the live chat function or comments.

Online church will adapt from just streaming the usual service. The gathered experience will be different from the service curated for online. Even online services, however, will need to be produced as live events as this gives them an authenticity and currency that is hard to achieve through prerecorded services. Over time, these services may end up with more on-demand views than live views, but they will get more on-demand views because of this authenticity.

## Lessons from COVID-19

As we look to the future, churchgoers would like to see churches learning and growing from the lessons that have been learned during this time. The main thing churchgoers would like to see continuing into the future is treating online services as a way to engage those who might not come to church otherwise (53%). Churchgoers would also like to see churches keeping the focus on church as a community rather than a service (47%) and a greater focus on outreach to the local community (45%).



“

**This season is genuinely opening a new doorway and the wind will be in the sails for the congregations that lean in and reevaluate.**

– Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist

# Going and growing

# 04





A number of Christian leaders believe that evangelism and discipleship can't be decoupled and that going (evangelism) is a natural outcome of growing (discipleship).

### **Evangelism and discipleship are 'as you go' activities**

In looking at Jesus' model of discipleship and evangelism, some Christian leaders believe there is a need for the Australian church to re-evaluate its model of discipleship and evangelism. Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor at Crossway Baptist Church, believes "we have a broken model of discipleship in Australia". He points out that we "convert to disciple" rather than Jesus' ministry where his followers were converted as they journeyed with Him.

*"Jesus journeyed with his disciples for three years but we try to shrink the process to an event 'I shared the gospel with my friend.' In the failed Western Christian model people get converted, then they are expected to grow, get trained and then be mobilised. Jesus did the reverse order to that. He mobilised His disciples straight away, trained them in situ and growth was a by-product. Faith in Jesus happened somewhere along the way."*

**– Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor, Crossway Baptist Church**

These Christian leaders also believe we have reduced evangelism to a single event, rather than journeying with people as they discover who Jesus is and learn to obey Him. With this long-term view of evangelism and discipleship, these leaders believe evangelism and discipleship should not be separated from one another. Melinda Dwight, National Director of Alpha Australia, "will not (talk about) evangelism without discipleship. Jesus took three years to build a disciple, why the heck do we think we can do it in a weekend?"

*"There is something wrong with our language around evangelism: that it's simply transactional. Giving people space to explore the faith is important. So, we (at Praxeis) emphasise bringing our spirituality upfront rather than an evangelism formula so that people can see we have something deep running in our life."*

**– David Lawton, National Director, Praxeis**

Dale Stephenson believes disciple-making needs to be made simple. He uses the metaphor of soccer being the world game because it can be played by anyone, anywhere at any time. No gear, no special venue is required, even a tin can in lieu of a soccer ball will suffice. He says, "until disciple making becomes that simple, it will never go viral". Melinda Dwight illustrates just how simple Jesus' ministry was in contrast to the programs and structures that can sometimes be distractions in the present-day church.

*"We have a leadership model where (Jesus) said, 'hey you 12 come follow me, you 70 you tag along'. His model was practical. I still can't see where Jesus built a building or founded a ministry or got distracted with the things we do."*

**– Melinda Dwight, National Director, Alpha Australia**

Dale Stephenson also believes in sharing the gospel with a 'person of peace'. He suggests "God is already stirring the hearts of people when it is noted that they like you, listen to you and who would serve you. Through this grid it is difficult to be rejected three times in a row with an invitation to read the bible together." Dale Stephenson and David Lawton are both advocates of the Bible discovery method for sharing the gospel and making disciples. Dale describes the Bible discovery method as "reading the Bible with a pre-Christian friend" with both parties exploring and questioning. He says, "the key is for Christians not to demonstrate knowledge but only to do what the pre-Christian person can do themselves. People can become evangelists before they even become Christians when the methodology is sufficiently simple". David Lawton describes a similar approach that is "relational rather than top down".

*"You start with the bridges and the barriers in their community. For example, one of the biggest issues for Aussies is that Christians are hypocrites. They say they don't like religion and Jesus agrees. He has a lot to say about that. Through reading the scripture they find themselves on the side of Jesus, and good conversations can come out of that. It's about doing things that don't need an outside expert, flipping the classroom, empowering and honoring people's intelligence."*

**– David Lawton, National Director, Praxeis**

Many Christian leaders communicate that evangelism is more effective when it is a lifestyle, rather than an event or a program. Steve Chong, founder and CEO of the RICE Movement, believes Christians need to live their lives in the same way they live at church and that this will be a powerful witness to the world.

*"Church needs to figure out if it's going to continue living in the dualistic world – the church world and the other world... If we have integrity in living in the same way outside the Church walls as inside, Australia won't know what's happening... There is a sense in which God is breaking into ordinary conversations, ordinary life. That is going to be the place of power."*

**– Steve Chong, founder and CEO, RICE Movement**

## Staying culturally relevant, but remaining true to the gospel

All churches face the challenge of ensuring they are relevant to culture while staying true to the core message of the gospel. Guy Mason, Senior Pastor at City on a Hill, characterises this tension as being *open handed* with the method and *closed handed* on the message. Guy talks about how City on a Hill was initially planted in a pub in order to break down cultural barriers.

*"What's true for City on a Hill is we've always been closed-hand on the message, the gospel never changes. We don't have to make the Bible relevant to culture, the Bible is relevant to culture. Jesus is always good news. When it comes to the method, we want to be open-handed, whether that is meeting in a pub or doing church online, we've always sought to be all things to all people."*

– Guy Mason, Senior Pastor, City on a Hill

Mark Varughese feels churches are best positioned to remain culturally relevant when they are engaged with their local community, adaptable to change and when they have clarity about which parts of what they do are cultural preferences, and what is Kingdom principles, which transcends culture. Mark Varughese, in planting sister churches in Perth and Malaysia, has a unique lens to distinguish between "kingdom" and "culture". Much of our Christian practice is biblically patterned but some of it is cultural overlay. By understanding our context, we can ensure our culture provides a bridge of connection rather than a blocker to the gospel.

*"I am too Aussie to be Asian and too Asian to be Aussie. I never belonged exclusively to an ethnic culture or a national culture, so building church simultaneously in Malaysia and Perth worked like a sieve to retain what was truly Kingdom and what was local culture."*

– Mark Varughese, Senior Leader, Kingdomcity Global

While Christian leaders believe it is important to be culturally relevant, Melinda Dwight highlights the danger of going too far down this route. She believes "being culturally relevant is really important but we need to be absolutely clear on what the content and the truth is. The seeker sensitive movement absolutely undermined our evangelistic thrust... We watered down the gospel, we didn't address truths, we didn't talk about who Jesus is, or talk about the importance of prayer, even though 70% of our culture pray. If we water down the truth, what are we? We're just a gathering of people. Frankly if you want to gather people, in Melbourne, you can just go to a football club".

Staying true to the core message is actually compelling for people. Phil Pringle, Founder and Senior Leader at C3 Church Global, says "even though we would call ourselves a relevant church, a little bit of irrelevance is ok too. You don't want to get swept up in causes that are going to replace the (core message)".



**If churches feel like they're forever changing for the marketplace, they won't get traction. Having their eyes opened to an unchanging deeper reality is what people are looking for.**

– Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor, EV Church

*The core never changes, that's actually compelling for people. Beneath them, if churches feel like they're forever changing for the marketplace, they won't get traction. Having their eyes opened to an unchanging deeper reality is what people are looking for.*

– Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor, EV Church

## Growth among migrant communities

Christian leaders believe people going through change or dislocation are often more open to receiving the gospel. Andrew Heard suggests "big change moments in life, such as moving to a new area, kids going to school and retirement, can cause people to pause and think a little more about life". David Lawton, National Director at Praxeis, sees more spiritual hunger among "the hurting places in our culture" such as among refugees, people in prison and those going through family fragmentation.

In Australia, this trend is particularly noticeable among first- and second-generation migrants. Ray Galea, Lead Pastor, MBM Rooty Hill, sees how "God has brought the world into our backyard" and suggests "migration and dislocation of culture" can cause people to seek community and belonging. Jossy Chacko, Founder and President at Empart, believes "the greatest growth of the church in Western world is occurring among migrant communities". Archbishop Peter Comensoli comments on how this first-generation faith is bringing life into Australian churches.

*"Migrant communities have a more of a vital faith. The church in Australia is becoming more Asian which is a factor of migration. As the more Anglo European generations age and drift from strong commitment to the faith, it's the newer migrant communities that are bringing life to communities."*

– Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Archbishop for the Catholic Diocese, Melbourne

## Social justice and evangelism

Just as many Christian leaders believe evangelism cannot be separated from discipleship, a number of leaders also believe social justice and evangelism are one and the same. Clare Steele, CEO of Compassion Australia, points out there is no *social gospel* and *proclaimed gospel*, but that there is just *the gospel*. A number of Christian leaders believe that although churches are serving their communities, they have let social justice become the main focus, rather than sharing the gospel.

*"Social justice is important, we will feed and clothe and do all that, but it's an injustice to do that without giving them the opportunity to respond to Jesus."*

– Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers

*"Aussie Christians are very sincere. Their upwards relationship with God is great but the outward relationships are not great. Being good (social justice) is good by definition but we have lost the 'out' of discipling people towards faith in Jesus. Social justice efforts often begin with a Christian focus but start to secularise off the back of government money. Local churches are feeding the hungry but it's very rare that they are making disciples out of it."*

– Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor, Crossway Baptist Church

## Putting responsibility back into the hands of the people

Some Christian leaders believe a key challenge in Australia is that "almost blindly we've pulled the Word back into the hands of the clergy" (Dale Stephenson). They argue that, as a result, many Australian Christians do not feel equipped or empowered to share the gospel within their communities and are relying on church leaders to do it for them. Steve Chong believes there is a lack of boldness among Australians to share the gospel.

*"There is a lack of faith jumping and boldness. If the evangelist or general Christian is too scared to ask the question because you don't know what the answer will be on the side of things, how do you expect the other person to make the even bigger leap of faith in putting their whole life in Jesus?"*

– Steve Chong, Founder and CEO, RICE Movement

*"The hard soil is actually between the ears of the Australian Christian where the inner voice says, 'I can't.' It manifests as fear but is actually pride. I've seen it so repeatedly that I could hardly say it with more conviction. Australian Christians en masse predispose in their own mind 'I can't, it has to be someone else', especially when it comes to sharing the gospel. They think it's only them that thinks that, but it's en masse."*

– Dale Stephenson, Senior Pastor, Crossway Baptist Church



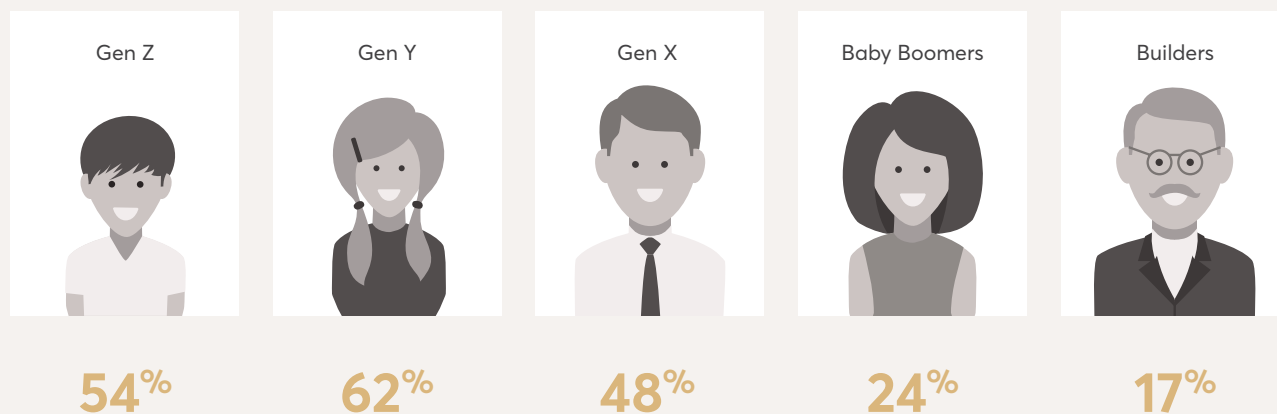
COVID-19 has shown the importance of personal discipleship and evangelism in addition to centralised delivery from the professional clergy. As people were required to stay at home and church moved online, church has largely taken place through friendships, homes and the laity. Although many churchgoers have missed the gathered experience of church (pg. 24), almost two in five churchgoers (38%) strongly/somewhat agree that COVID-19 has made them more active in ministry as they feel they cannot leave it to the paid church staff. Many have also invited more people to church online (47%) or have opened their homes and hosted watch parties for church (34%). Some (35%) also feel that doing less church activities has given them more time to build connections in their local community. A number of Christian leaders are thinking about this moment in time as a 'reformation moment' where the Word of God is put back into the hands of the people.

*"The church needs to continually immerse people in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Just preaching and music on a Sunday won't change anything but (what will change the world is) empowering people, giving them the tools to go out and change the world."*

– Russell Evans, Global Senior Pastor of Planetshakers

## Young churchgoers are inviting more people to church online

*I have invited more people to church online because it is easy to share a link and they can watch at home (% strongly/somewhat agree)*



Many Christian leaders are calling for a national intentional move towards diffusing responsibility back into the hands of the laity. Melinda Dwight suggests "you want every church to have the bottom up approach. Find the people who will actually run Alpha, do evangelism, be invitational and welcoming." Phil Pringle also suggests that "Christianity without a context becomes quickly irrelevant. People need a reason to be at church. If they fall into a culture of being a church attender, it is difficult to get them out of that... it brings people into the acceptance or assumption of responsibility". Steve Chong believes we need to see more expectation of what God can and will do in and throughout Australian churches.

*God brings things to life overnight, even the democratisation of the evangelistic gift. Expectation of what God can do is rising. God has taken us on a journey through to 'he can do it' and 'he will do it...we've all had the experience recently on Zoom of being told 'you're on mute! We can't hear you!' Christians in Australia need to take their mask off, turn the sound on and use their voice again."*

– Steve Chong, Founder and CEO, RICE Movement





## Marketplace ministry

Many Christian leaders believe in the importance of people serving where God has placed them. While congregation members are called to serve at church, and some are called to church ministry, many others can be a light to the people around them if they remain engaged in their communities. Jossy Chacko believes churches need to be equipping their members in how to serve Jesus in their context.

*"Removing people from where they are planted is the worst thing that can be done. The question we need to ask is, 'how do you connect the mission of Jesus to where you are and who you are?' It's more about, 'okay, you're a politician, you're a businessman, you are a community worker.' How do you connect the vision of Jesus into who you are and where you are and then develop strategies around that?"*

– Jossy Chacko, Founder and President of Empart

*"Wherever we are planted the Holy Spirit wants to lead and rescue people. We need to know who we are and that we're called to thrive wherever."*

– Sue Irwin, Senior Pastor, The Grainery Church

*"Raising and releasing leaders across a number of sectors in the marketplace is one of the most untapped opportunities in our society."*

– Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor, Clovercrest Baptist

## The call for Australian Christians to take up their cross

Christian leaders believe the church in the west has a tendency to fall into 'cultural Christianity' without the expectation that becoming a Christian will come at a cost. David Lawton explains that in the West "we have separated

into two classes of people: you can become Christian without becoming a disciple".

*"We have created a culture where you can come in, put up your hand and as long as you come on Sundays, you're ok. This would have been foreign to Jesus and the early church. Making disciples is different to just a faith response, a knowledge response and church attendance. You need to help people engage with teachings of Jesus and see how it applies to their life step by step. It needs to be a lived response rather than a knowledge response".*

– David Lawton, National Director, Praxeis

*"In a developing country you have people who are willing to sacrifice everything they're doing to bring people to Christ."*

– Wayne Swift, Leader, Acts Global

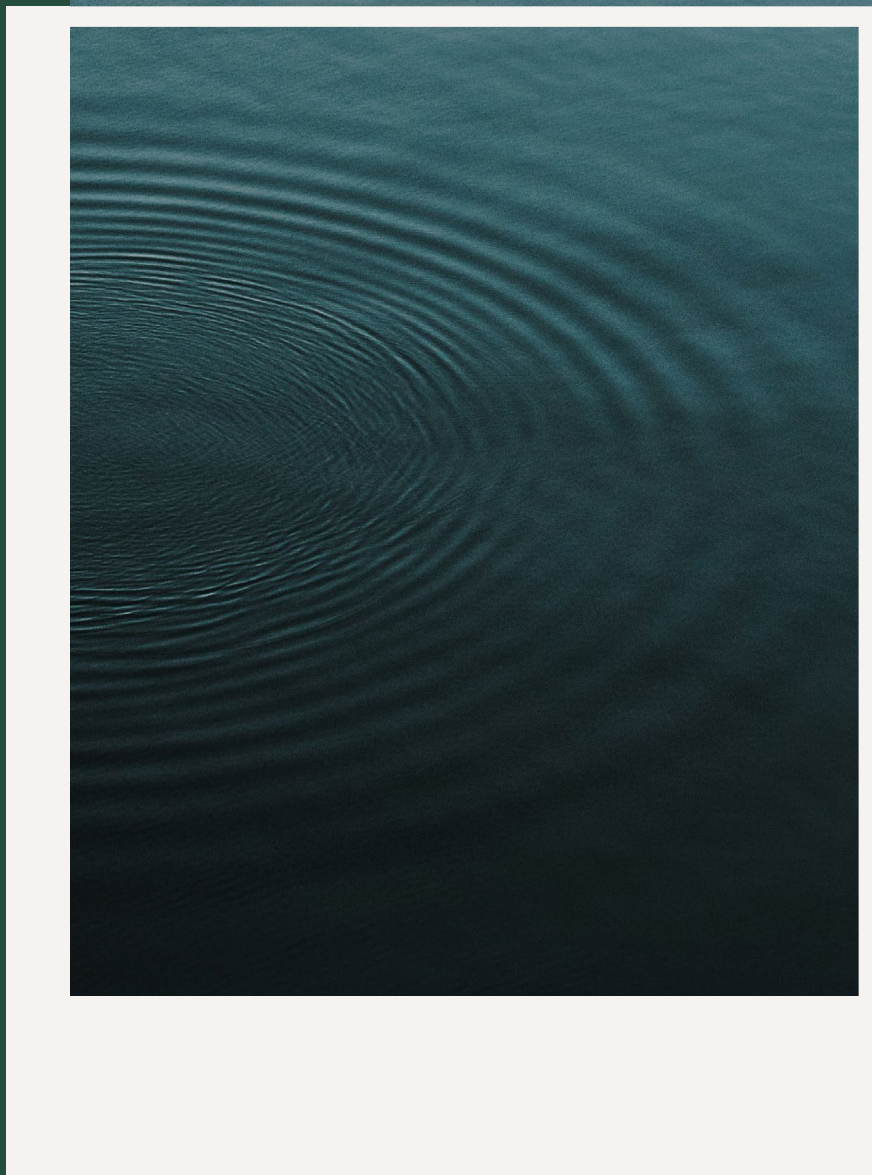
The Christian walk should not be too comfortable. Mark Varughese, Senior Leader at Kingdomcity Global, believes "in Australia we do everything we can to win the relevance battle. But if you take it too far it becomes a consumer culture. Trying to make disciples is counterintuitive to making things comfortable and then we have to tell people to stop being so comfortable".

Dale Stephenson characterises the walk with Jesus as a "zone of challenge". He says "Jesus is highly invitational with a low barrier for engagement with Him. But the closer you come to Him the challenge increases in hyperbolic form. Jesus ramps up the challenge. At the centre is 'pick up your cross daily and follow me'. We need to open up a zone of challenge by discipling people towards faith in Jesus".



05

# Leadership pipeline



## Leaders are key to the future growth of the church

Christian leaders believe raising up the next generation of leaders is one of the key priorities for the Australian church. Wayne Swift, leader of Acts Global, believes it is "something for us to keep talking about. How do we nurture, grow and encourage new leaders? They are the future". To impact Australian communities the church must be gathered (both physically and online) but also scattered as churches multiply through church plants and multi-site models. This strategy for growth and community engagement will require equipped and empowered leaders to lead the church into these new spaces.

*"I get emails from young people all the time, telling me there is a Boomer ceiling. I have nothing against Boomers, but we need to release young leaders and there could be a church planting movement if they were equipped and released, with ongoing equipping."*

– Mark Sayers, Senior Pastor, Red Church

## The importance of raising up diverse leaders

The growth of the church relies, not only on a growing number of leaders, but also a growing diversity of leaders. Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton, tells the story of a young man who grew up in an estate in London, who is now leading a church in a low socioeconomic neighbourhood. This leader was given an opportunity to train through Holy Trinity Brompton's Peter Stream. This provides opportunities for people from culturally diverse or deprived backgrounds who may not have the educational prerequisites that theological colleges require to become leaders in the church. Raising and releasing diverse leaders can help churches to extend their reach into new spaces.

*"The guy who is running the church in the estate is from the Peter stream. He came from an estate himself. Nobody else has been able to make that church work. He's utterly brilliant. He has no educational qualifications and has never passed an exam in his life, but he got outstanding on every category for his first test to be ordained. Who would you rather have running a church? Someone with seven degrees? Or someone with emotional intelligence?"*

– Nicky Gumbel, Founder of Alpha & Vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton



More than half of the national population, and an even higher proportion of the churchgoing population are women. Christian leaders believe women are key contributors to spiritual growth in Australia and there was a clear consensus that churches should intentionally engage in finding pathways for women, championing, raising and releasing them into leadership roles.

*"I believe one of the underutilised resources in the church are women; yet they are much better in developing and nurturing relationships and communities. For the past 20 years, we have been empowering them and found that they are able to reach communities and people in a way that men are not able to. I feel that, in Australia, we need to be more intentional in training and empowering them to be in "lead roles" and not just in "serve roles."*

– Jossy Chacko, Founder and President of Empart

*"We are embracing women in every role in the life of the Church, knowing full well that there are other denominations that don't do that. I don't speak in that sort of space too much because I just want to be getting on with what we believe and for me it is putting women in leadership roles on the platform. I want my two daughters to have role models to look up to. So that's personal as well as theological and professional."*

– Mike Stevens, Lead Pastor Clovercrest Baptist

*"We need women in leadership so that our daughters can see there's a place for them in the church. We don't need another football analogy. It can't be an us and them conversation, it's a sociological and theological problem."*

– Clare Steele, CEO, Compassion Australia



## Empowering the next generation

Some Christian leaders believe the Australian church needs to be more intentional in empowering the next generation. Sue Irwin, Senior Pastor at The Grainery Church, says, "Generations who aren't in their twenties need to remember that those in their twenties are actually adults. They are more capable than what we think they are. They are not just 'the kids'". Mike Jeffs, the founder of the Australian Christian Channel, suggests "it is often the next generation that knows the new era. They know how to do things in new ways which can bring about significant fruitfulness and even revival".

Steve Chong is passionate about giving young people opportunities. He tells the story of his son sharing with a friend at school to show that the same Holy Spirit moves in all generations.

*"There is no junior Holy Spirit, everyone needs to understand that. My eight-year-old son asked his friend to read the Bible with him and at one stage he had fifty people turning up to read the Bible at lunch time. The same Holy Spirit moves in my son as in Billy Graham. What are we doing not releasing them on the world?"*

– **Steve Chong, Founder and CEO, RICE Movement**

## Developing the leadership pipeline

The key blocker to raising leaders is not about resourcing so much as it is about developing the leadership pipeline. Christian leaders identify a number of key challenges when it comes to finding and developing leaders in the church. Guy Mason, Senior Pastor at City on a Hill, believes a challenge for the church in developing the leadership pipeline is a lack of confidence. "Australia has an interesting relationship with confidence. I hope that we can show people they can be confident in Jesus. That's why we can be open with our weaknesses. Helping people see that God delights in doing extraordinary things with ordinary people. It's important to celebrate the people in your church as they step out in their calling, whether upfront or behind the scenes".

Another challenge is that young people in modern society have a vast choice of career paths, and there are a lack of clear structure and systems for developing leaders in the church. Scott Sanders, Executive Director at Reach Australia and Geneva Push, suggests the church has not exemplified influential church leaders enough to show young people what it looks like to work in church ministry. Melinda Dwight, National Director of Alpha Australia, suggests the clergy is no longer a trusted, respected profession in society.

*"One thing that is missing is a vocational path for young leaders."*

– **Wayne Swift, Leader, Acts Global**

*"I wonder if Australia is missing the big leaders? With our strong egalitarian culture or 'tall poppy syndrome' we've not raised up leaders with the profile to gather people nationally and urge Christian men and women to give themselves to full time ministry... we need more examples for people to know what it looks like to be in full time ministry."*

– **Scott Sanders, Executive Director, Reach Australia and Geneva Push**

*"If we take the Catholic church, when people were training for priesthood, they had a job for life, they had a status for life. In the last twenty years we have seen the whole slide of that profession. That's in general in the community, the clergy used to be a respected, trusted profession. It's not a bad thing as people are doing that as a calling rather than a profession. But maybe we need to champion some of the leaders we have, our role models."*

– **Melinda Dwight, National Director, Alpha Australia**

There can also be parental pressure to go into a career that pays well, particularly among Asian cultures. Benny Ho Senior Pastor at Faith Community Church, explains that, "parents' main concern is the wellbeing of their children. Parents think ministry won't pay well. One thing to overcome this is to be able to pay our people properly." William Dumas, Senior Pastor at Ganggalah Church, suggests there is a lack of leadership programs for indigenous young people being provided by the church, whereas the government is providing these opportunities.

Christian leaders discuss a number of strategies they use to develop the leadership pipeline. Ray Galea, Lead Pastor at MBM Rooty Hill, says, "I don't care if they were saved yesterday but if we sense they have any leadership strengths I put them on a list. Then I will consider them when it comes to doing a leadership course". Richard Condie, the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania, uses two key strategies to develop the leadership pipeline for his church. One is to grow leaders from a young age through a number of programs including "a kids camping program" a program called "Leaders in Training" and a "flexible partnership with Ridley College". He also talks about having a clear vision and using that to attract potential leaders.





## The need for well-rounded leaders

Christian leaders believe there are a number of aspects which contribute to an effective leader. Andrew Heard, Lead Pastor at EV Church, uses the “head, heart, hand” model to describe the areas in which leaders should be developed: “head describes how leaders need to be thoughtful, theologically astute, insightful about culture, understand the Bible, how God works, be smarter about what they think. Heart shows that the leader is genuinely captured by eternal realities. Hand refers to the pragmatics of how to do ministry, set up structures and system management”. Andrew says there are leaders all over the world who are good at one of these three areas, but the impact can be significant when all three come together.

*“We desperately need leaders who have a really vital faith, who are bathed in prayer and expectation that God is alive and active. It’s so sad when I see leaders who have lost the expectation that God will show up and do something amazing. They have to know God and be in love with Jesus. They’re the kind of people we are looking for.”*

– Richard Condie, Anglican Bishop of Tasmania

*“I’m looking for people who love Jesus. They need to have a passion for the gospel, and a genuine desire to see other people come to Christ. I’m not looking for someone who can lead in theory, but do they lead in a way that I can see there is already fruit there. Do they have the character?”.*

– Stu Cameron, Lead Minister Newlife Church



**It is often the next generation that knows the new era. They know how to do things in new ways which can bring about significant fruitfulness and even revival.**

– Mike Jeffs, founder Australian Christian Channel

## Training models to develop the next generation of leaders

A number of Christian leaders believe Bible colleges provide some of the training needed to develop well-rounded leaders but are not particularly strong in practical skill development. As Bible colleges often employ an academic model, the training tends to be knowledge based, rather than practical. Mark Sayers suggests Bible colleges, “can fill you with lots of information but are not as strong on equipping you with application”. David Lawton, National Director at Praxeis, sees limited connection between the approach of Bible colleges and training well-rounded leaders.

*“The whole business model, let alone educational model of theological education, has been under pressure.”*

– Melinda Dwight, National Director, Alpha Australia

*“Having gone through Bible College to master’s level, I know you can go through college and...if you can write about somebody’s thoughts about the Bible, you can pass. I encourage young adults in our midst not to go to Bible college... If you’re a leader you need to be able to multiply other leaders. And what are you multiplying – the classroom approach? My work is to mentor and coach leaders, and I don’t care if people have gone to college or not. Some people who have gone to college are just not there. If you’re a leader and you’re not multiplying, you’re actually not even a disciple. You’ve got to take time; it’s not instant fix and it can’t be done in the classroom.”*

– David Lawton, National Director, Praxeis

Christian leaders believe there is a need for more practical training. One way in which churches are developing leaders is through apprenticeship or internship models. Mark Varughese, Senior Leader at Kingdomcity Global, suggests their model is “fairly simple and highly relational. It seems weird in a large church, but Jesus took a really relational approach so that’s what we do.” Benny Ho gives potential leaders “a chance to explore what ministry is like through three months of practical ministry training. This gives them the space to decide if that is something they would give their life to and is a smaller cost than three years at Bible college”.

Phil Pringle says at C3 they have an apprenticeship program where trainees have “some college a couple of days a week but coupled with practical training. It gives young leaders great theological training, great character development and then also some leadership competency and leadership specific training”. While Bible colleges will continue to play a key role in equipping young leaders with knowledge and theological training, there is also a need for leaders to be trained in practical skills and character development.

# Recommendations for leaders



### **Proactively speak into the national dialogue to share Jesus' heart for the nation**

It's important for Christians to be proactive in the national conversation, rather than being reactive and even defensive at times. This is not about winning the argument or taking sides, but about the church rediscovering its voice. Proverbs 31:8 says the role of the Church is to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute". Nicky Gumbel reminds us that social issues such as racism are "an affront to the gospel" and that responding to social issues and sharing the gospel are "part and parcel of the same thing". There is an opportunity to set the tone by putting forward evidence on important issues that can shape the national conversation.

Some practical ways in which churches and Christian organisations can proactively engage with the national conversation include producing thought leadership reports on social issues, holding Ted X style events such as Q Commons or using social media to produce engaging content. In the 1990's there were resources like World Vision Australia's Grid publication and today there are well-accessed resources like Barna.org and [Carey Nieuwhof's blog](#), but both bring a North American perspective. A few Australian resources exist including CPX for public audiences and [faithandbelief.org.au](#) and [Covid19 Church](#) for church leaders.



### **Shift the internal narrative about openness to the gospel in Australia**

Even within the church we have started to believe the media's message that Australians are not open to Christianity. It's important for church leaders and churchgoers to check their own underlying assumptions about how difficult it is to share the gospel in Australia and ensure this doesn't become a barrier in and of itself to evangelism and discipleship. Mark Sayers encourages church leaders to "read the street, not the tweet." The real story of Australia is happening in the conversations between members of our local communities, not in what the media is communicating. Christian leaders believe Australians are more open to the gospel than the media would suggest and are seeing a growing spiritual hunger in their local communities. The church in Australia is much more likely to grow if church leaders and churchgoers are engaging with their local communities and believing in the power of the gospel to change people's hearts. Understanding and communicating the real community attitudes and needs, rather than our perception of these is critical.

### Show a true expression of community

In the words of Ray Galea, COVID-19 has “brought us collectively to our knees.” Combined with pre-existing trends of loneliness and mental health challenges, 2020 could be the beginning of an extended period of uncertainty in Australia. In this environment, Australians are looking for connection and the church has an opportunity to show a true expression of community.

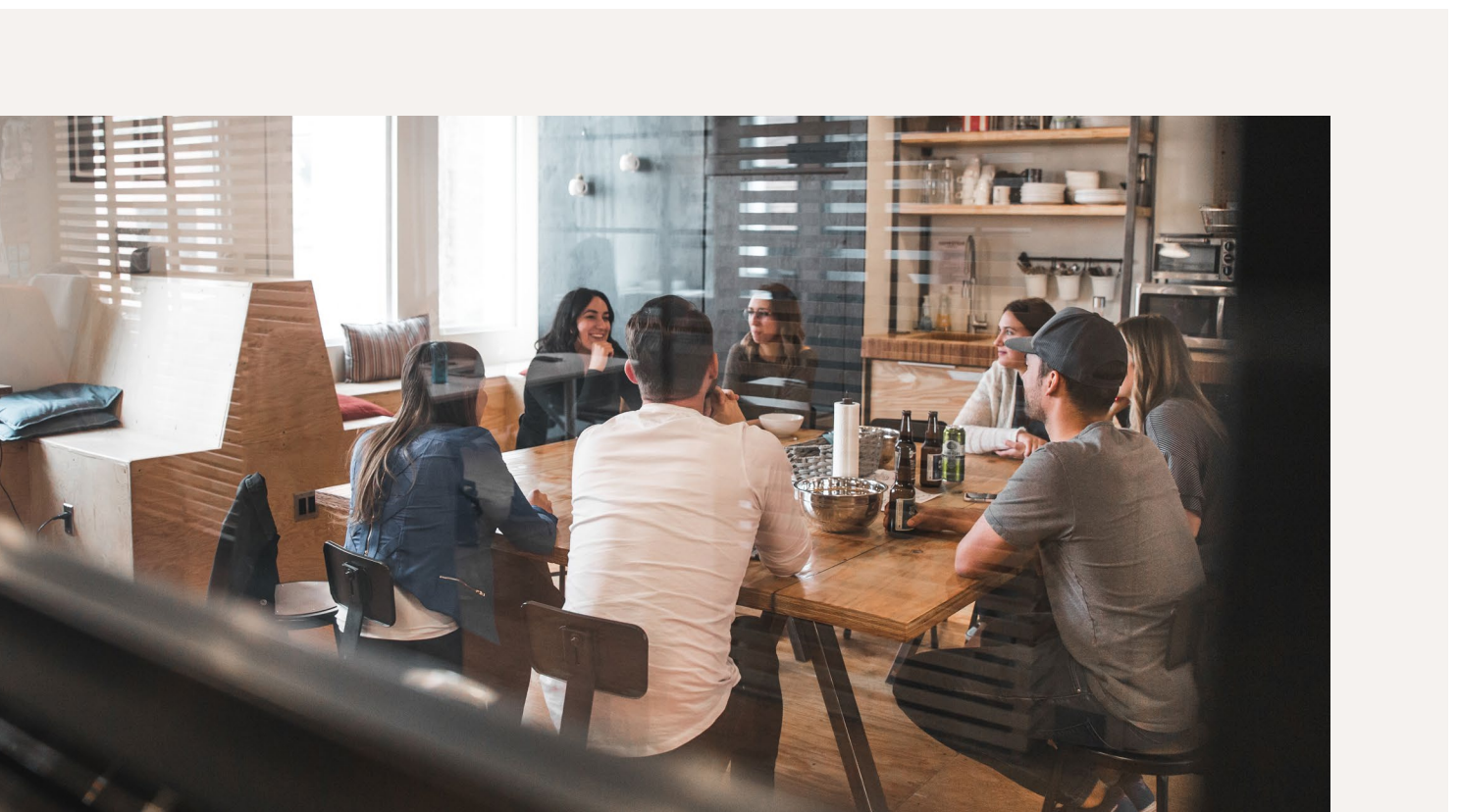
Christian leaders point out that church is more than a Sunday service. For church to be a true expression of community it needs to be expressed through authentic relationships throughout the week, in the ‘in between’ spaces. In both gathered (face-to-face) and scattered (online) versions of church, Australians are looking for a relatable experience. With rising uncertainty and loneliness in Australia, churches will need to lean in to more authentic, ‘unplugged’ expressions of church, whether on stage or off. This could be the difference between showing pre-recorded services and live services online, or between leaving the church facilities unused during the week and using church facilities to serve the local community.

More than at any other time this century, Australians are seeking an authentic, unified community. At such a time, the church should be the model of unity as a powerful witness to this world ([John 17:20-23](#)). While Christian leaders are clear that denominations have their purpose and practically, there are limits to how much resources and plans can be interdenominational, most of these leaders connect across boundaries regularly and seamlessly, and there is an expressed desire for appropriate church-wide projects. The broad engagement of campaigns in the past like [Jesus All About Life](#) and this very research project are indicators of this desire.

### Engage the next generation to remain adaptable to change

While the core message of the gospel is unchanging, it is important for churches to remain adaptable in a world that is constantly changing. An effective way for churches to keep across cultural change is to ensure younger members of the church have opportunities to serve and lead. Engaging the next generation can encourage the sharing of new information and ideas, ensuring the church remains culturally relevant.

This is also important for engaging with the younger generations outside church. Cindy McGarvie, the National Director of Youth for Christ believes young people are an “unreached people group” and therefore believes “peer to peer” evangelism is one of the most effective approaches for sharing the gospel with the next generation. Ensuring young people are equipped and empowered to serve in the church is vital for the sustainability of the church. This requires relevant training and engagement strategies such as mentoring programs, apprenticeship pathways and leadership development infrastructure examples of which are further explained in the final section, Leadership Pipeline.







### Equip churchgoers to serve and lead where they are planted

Churches have a unique opportunity to equip leaders that will go on to serve in all parts of their life, both at work and at home, at church and in the public square. Creating a culture of leadership within the church will help to build up Christians who see their lives through a faith perspective and take responsibility for living out and sharing the gospel in their everyday lives. Christian leaders believe the Church should not only be the hope of the world, but should be the leadership development base of this nation. While churches provide opportunities for Christians to be trained and serve at church, there is much more that could be done to more practically equip churchgoers to thrive and lead where they are planted, particularly in building leaders for workplace ministry.

The church has a role in championing the 98% of Christians who are not working in church-based ministry. With churches being largely pastored by professional clergy, and bi-vocational models not widespread, it is perhaps understandable that the experience of the 98% is overlooked. [The Institute for Faith, Work and Economics](#) in the US is impacting North America, as is Canada's [Faith at Work](#) network. One Australian organisation that is equipping Christians in this way is [Transforming Vocation](#). Until pastors and churchgoers are each convinced of their mutual calling and gifting that they are interdependent partners in evangelism and discipleship, Australia will not be reached for Christ.

### Resource the congregation with tools for evangelism and discipleship

Christian leaders are clear that evangelism and discipleship should not be separated from one another. They also recognise that the responsibility for these activities has been pulled back into the hands of the clergy. As a result, Australian Christians are not well-equipped to share the gospel and journey with the people in their everyday lives. There is an opportunity to create resources to empower and equip Australian Christians to be bolder in sharing their faith. Dale Stephenson and David Lawton both mention the [Discovery Bible Method](#) as an effective model for evangelism discipleship due to its simplicity and the fact that both parties are exploring the Bible together, rather than the Christian demonstrating their knowledge. Cindy McGarvie, the National Director of Youth for Christ, also shared an example of a digital evangelism movement called the [Hope Story Challenge](#) which encourages people to share their testimony in a 60 second video, post it on social media and then tag and nominate five friends to do the same.

### Release leaders to plant church planting churches

Christian leaders agree that church planting is an effective strategy for engaging with local communities and growing the church across Australia. Steve Dixon, QLD & NT State Pastor at Hillsong, believes the model for church planting should be “planting church planting churches”. Church planting is not the goal, it is the means. This approach requires churches to be releasing leaders rather than adopting what Joel A’Bell calls a “hoarding and holding” mentality. Planting church planting churches lends itself to the grow and split model where churches, once they reach a certain size, look to split and plant in a new community. This model means churches remain dynamic and keep the sense of being on the frontline, rather than becoming too comfortable and insular. Networks like Reach Australia and Geneva Push are helping to shape such a culture in Australian churches although further investment would be required for their impacts to be felt more broadly. Additionally it is clear from these conversations that there is a practical need for programs to develop the expertise (such as Healthy Vibrant Communities), and investment to acquire land, construct buildings which can become community hubs, and refurbish church properties which are not fit-for-purpose.

### Implement fit-for-purpose leadership development pathways

If the future of the church relies on a church planting culture across Australia and more intentionality with evangelism and discipleship, the Australian church is going to require many ministry-focused leaders in the future. Christian leaders are clear that there is a need for well-rounded leaders. The head, heart, hand model, mentioned by Andrew Heard, provides an effective framework for assessing the training needs for young leaders to go into full time ministry. If churches require leaders that are not just theologically astute, but also passionate about the gospel and trained in practical skills, a purely academic pathway is too narrow. Just as an over-enthusiasm for higher education in Australia has pushed more young people into university courses that are not filling the national need, and leading to trade skills shortages, churches also have championed the singular path of theological degrees at the expense of other ministry development options. Bible colleges are well-regarded but full-time, three or four-year courses do not offer the fit, flexibility and efficiencies that many church leaders and emerging leaders seek. Apprenticeship or internship models are one strategy churches are trialling to practically equip the next generation of leaders. Organisations such as [Arrow Leadership](#) are working to develop the leadership pipeline for churches and are developing these leaders to make an impact in their communities. There is also an opportunity to provide more training online, such as the [Church in a Box](#) resource developed by Geneva Push.

### Create opportunities for a diverse range of people to become leaders

Raising and releasing diverse leaders can help churches to extend their reach into new spaces as people often feel more comfortable at church if they can engage with others from similar backgrounds. [The Peter Stream](#), of the Anglican Diocese of London, as mentioned by Nicky Gumbel, is a program which creates opportunities for people from a range of backgrounds to train as leaders. By providing a clear pathway, churches can encourage a diverse group of people to become leaders, whether they be women, indigenous Australians or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.





### Give indigenous leaders more platform in the church

If churches want to engage with and be relevant in the indigenous community, particularly the next generation of indigenous Australians, indigenous leaders need to be given more opportunities to speak in churches. William Dumas acknowledges a social stigma that “people just don’t think Aboriginal people are Christians”. He suggests that “when (young indigenous Australians) do see indigenous people ministering up the front, it pulls down the walls and gives them a different perception”. A number of Christian leaders have a desire for indigenous leaders to speak at their church but suggest they are only aware of a few indigenous people in ministry. William Dumas, on the other hand, suggests there are many young indigenous leaders “on the landscape who are just waiting for (an opportunity)”. There is an opportunity to develop a directory or engagement portal of indigenous Christians who would be willing to share their own gospel journey with churches around Australia. [40 Stories](#) is an example of a media portal which tells such stories well. This would help give indigenous Australians a voice within the church and would help the Church be a model of Indigenous reconciliation as it proclaims the good news of spiritual reconciliation.

### Share knowledge and experience about how to run effective services online

Given the abruptness of COVID-19, churches were required to pivot to online church quickly. Christian leaders suggest there is no playbook for this new context in which churches find themselves and as a result churches all over Australia have been inventing and experimenting with digital opportunities. It can be assumed that church leaders have all learned valuable lessons from their varied experience during this time and yet there is no established forum in which to share this knowledge.

Christian leaders liken the digital world to the printing press in the opportunities it presents to share resources and ideas in an unprecedented way. In a world of digital services, more than ever, there is the opportunity for resources such as videos, testimonies, musical items and messages to be collated and shared. While the church globally has shared a number of resources, the Australian church is looking for usable components which speak to the Australian church context. For decades, pastors have been using shared sermon content from sites like [SermonCentral](#) but there is an opportunity to share broader service content. There are examples from other countries such as [Thirst](#) in Singapore which produces articles, videos and stories about young people grappling with life and faith in Singapore. Australian churches would benefit from some more home-grown content like this and as many churches have gone digital, there are doubtless many resources that could be collated and shared between churches to connect and encourage congregations around Australia.

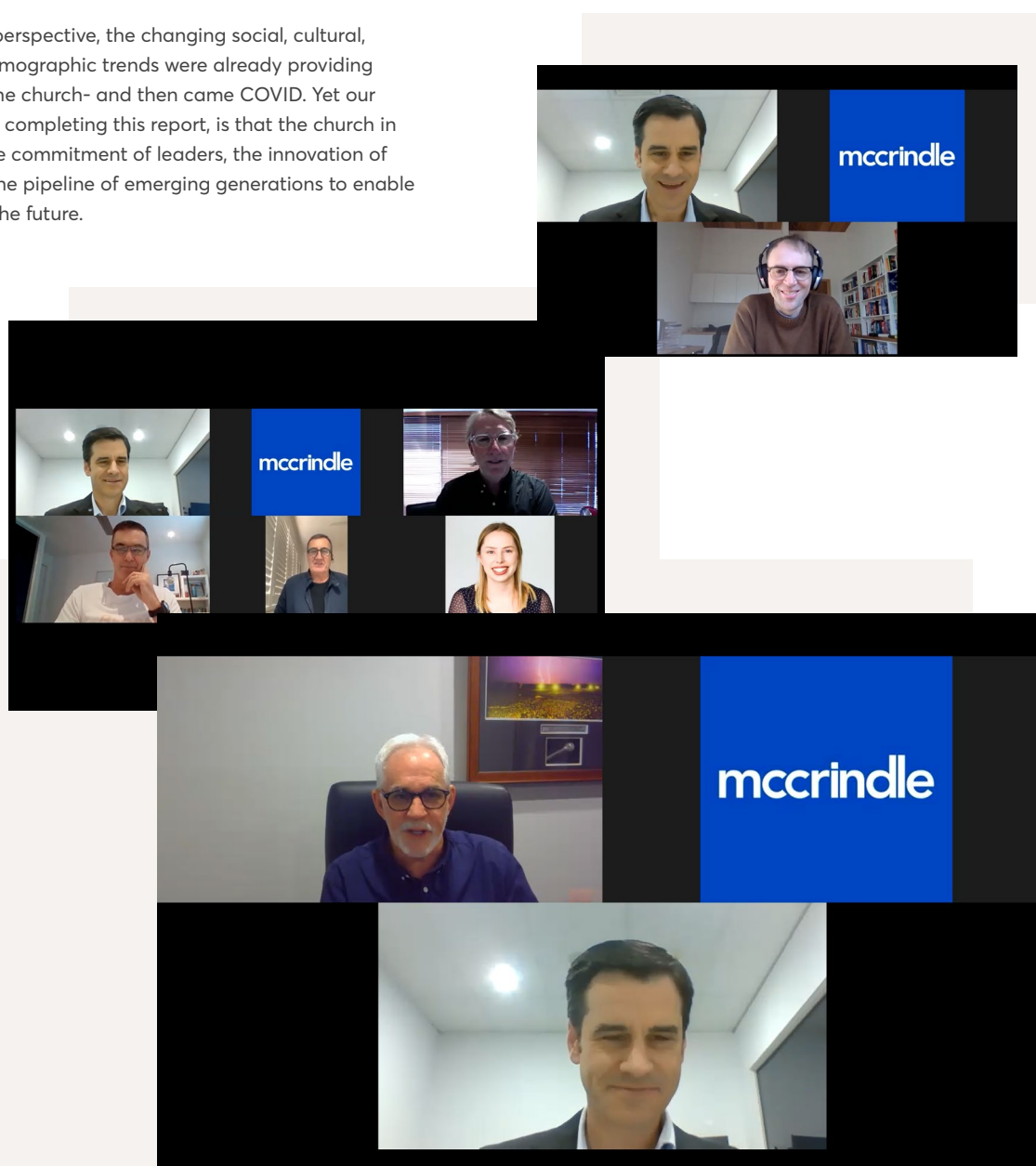


# A final word

It was an honour for us to interview such a diverse and impacting array of Christian leaders. These leaders believe the Church is the hope of our nation, and the servant of the local community. With such a high call, it is imperative that the church in Australia is united in vision, authentic in approach and adaptable to change.

From a human perspective, the changing social, cultural, religious and demographic trends were already providing challenges for the church- and then came COVID. Yet our conviction, after completing this report, is that the church in Australia has the commitment of leaders, the innovation of approach and the pipeline of emerging generations to enable it to thrive into the future.

As our research consistently shows, Australians are warm towards Christians, and even more positive towards Christ. The opportunity for the church is as straightforward as it is complex- in a diverse and changing nation, to make Him known.







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