

# Future planning for religious community in the ACT



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## Summary and background

This paper summarises key trends and issues identified in a more in depth ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) study about future planning issues relating to religious communities.

The paper has two focuses: the increasing pluralisation (diversity) of religious life and the emergence of the 'mega-churches' as both organisations and buildings. The original study (conducted in early-2008), on which this paper is based, was done to inform future planning for new areas, land release, and to examine the relationships between religious communities and the provision of social infrastructure.

# Future planning for religious community in the ACT

This paper examines two changes in religious communities that will likely affect future planning in the ACT.

The first change is religious pluralisation. This is defined in this paper as an observable trend linked to immigration patterns and the social process of secularisation.

The second change discussed in this paper is the emergence of 'mega' places of worship in contrast to traditional, smaller places of worship in local areas, such as parishes. While there has been considerable, sometimes sensationalising reportage of the phenomenon, it remains somewhat only partially investigated in the context of Australia cities (for a notable exception, see Connell, 2005).

The paper concludes with a general discussion of the potential implications of the two trends for planning practice. Along with extensive reviews of the existing literature, this research is further based on the analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and National Church Life Survey (NCLS) data, and a series of consultations with representatives of a number of the Territory's religious organisations.

## The changing nature of religious life - pluralisation

Throughout Australasia, North America, and Western Europe, social scientists have characterised religious life as being increasingly plural, or diverse. As a process, pluralisation in the ACT and elsewhere in Australia, can be seen as being driven by immigration, and important changes in the meaning and practice of religious community (or 'secularisation').

While the process of immigration as a driver of social change is relatively straightforward, shifts in the meanings of religious community perhaps require more explanation.

In the relevant social scientific literature, contemporary religious experience for many has become increasingly a matter of individual choice rather than something that is inherited from parents or is otherwise imposed (cf. Baker, 2005: 120; Connell, 2005: 328). Further, it is suggested that this choosing of religious community can also be seen in the context of the broader sociological theory of secularisation.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the details of this theory (see instead, Bruce 1998, or Inglehart and Norris 2004) its implications are significant. As in Australasia and throughout Western Europe, it is anticipated there will be an ongoing observable drift of people away from mass-organised religious groupings (although this may be accompanied by the increased popularity of individualised spirituality, and the emergence of smaller niche communities).

There is strong evidence to of these dual trends of pluralisation and secularisation in the ACT. Clear changes in religious identification in Canberra's population (of approximately 323,000 in 2006) are evident when the data of the 1996, 2001, and 2006 censuses are compared. Specifically, four trends are of note.

First, identification with the traditional mass Christian denominations has notably decreased despite the total population of the Territory growing by approximately 25,000 people over the last census decade. This is particularly clear in the cases of the traditionally larger Protestant churches, with the Anglican Church decreasing from 59,021 to 54,047 adherents between 1996 and 2006, the Uniting Church decreasing from 15,357 to 12,997 adherents, and the Presbyterian & Reformed grouping decreasing from 10,488 to 8,821 adherents. Alternatively, the Catholic Church has seen a modest increase in its total number of adherents from 89,061 to 90,627. However, this has been at a rate lower than the population growth of the wider region, and thus its proportion of adherents decreased from 29.9 per cent to 28.1 per cent.

Second, the number of Territory residents identifying as not religious increased notably between 1996 and 2006, going from 59,731 persons to 75,423 persons, or proportionately, from 20.0 per cent of the population to 22.3 per cent. Such people are now the second largest grouping of religious identification. As the table below shows, identification as non-religious is particularly prevalent among younger people, and is the largest identification group among persons aged 25-34.

Religious Identification	% of total aged 15-24	% of total aged 25-34	% of total aged 45-54	% of total aged 75-84	ACT Average – All ages
Catholic	28.4	25.7	26.0	29.2	28.1
Not Religious	26.9	28.4	22.3	11.0	22.3
Anglican	13.6	14.1	18.2	25.9	16.7
Buddhist	2.2	2.5	2.7	1.0	2.2
Christian – Not Further Defined	2.1	1.9	1.8	0.7	1.8
Pentecostal	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.5	1.0
Islam	1.5	1.9	1.0	0.4	1.4

**Figure one:** Identification across selected age groupings and religious communities – 2006

**Source:** ABS 2006

Third (reflecting recent patterns of immigration into Australia), there have been notable increases in identification with the non-Christian religious groupings (cf. Bouma 1995). As the table below shows, while around three-in-ten of the Territory’s Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims were born in Australia (or elsewhere in Oceania), most members of these communities are immigrants:

	Australia and Oceania	N. Africa & M. East	S-E. Asia	N-E. Asia	South and Central Asia
% of ACT <b>Buddhists</b> born in region	30.7	-	42.4	10.8	9.6
% of ACT <b>Hindus</b> born in region	29.6	-	-	-	60.0
% of ACT <b>Muslims</b> born in region	28.6	19.4	12.4	-	29.8

**Figure Two:** 2006 Census Data (CDATA) for the ACT (Canberra) – cross-tabulation of selected place of birth and religious affiliation data.

**Note:** A dash indicates that only a very small proportion of the relevant religious community in the ACT was born within the relevant global geographic region. Relatively few of the ACT’s Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims were born in Europe or the Americas.

While no single non-Christian group is larger than 2.2 per cent as a proportion of the Territory’s population (i.e. Buddhists), some groupings have grown relatively significantly in total numbers over the last census decade. Specifically, adherents of Buddhism have increased from 3,872 to 7,117 people, Islam from 2,458 to 4,364 people, and Hinduism from 1,882 to 3,269 people. As a note, these broad categories of religious

identification can mask important distinctions. For example, Spuler (2000: 31) notes the presence of distinct Sri Lankan, Thai, Vipassana, Japanese, and Tibetan Buddhist groups in the ACT (along with two further 'non-sectarian' groups).

Fourth, and again consistent with the secularisation theory, most of the smaller Christian denominations have experienced either minimal increases (e.g. those identifying as Eastern Orthodox, Baptist) or decreases (Lutheran, Latter Day Saints) in numbers, and in the context of the overall population. Notably, the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches reported elsewhere within Australia, at first glance, does not appear to have taken place in the Territory to any great extent, with the Pentecostal grouping growing from 2,848 adherents to 3,173 over the last census decade (or only from 0.096 per cent of the total population to 0.098 per cent).

However, there has been more growth in the category of 'Christian - Not Further Defined' (from 3,704 to 5,721 persons, or +55 per cent). This category is generally interpreted as, to a large extent, containing adherents of Pentecostal (i.e. or in terms of secularisation theory, evangelical but generally socially conservative) churches, but may also contain a proportion of people who consider themselves as generically 'spiritual' in the Christian tradition but who do not regularly practice as part of any organised group.

Religious Identification	Adherents (1996)	Adherents (2006)	Percent Change in Number of Adherents (%) 1996-2006	Percent of ACT Population (1996)	Percent of ACT Population (2006)
Catholic	89,061	90,627	+2	29.9	28.1
No Religion	59,731	75,423	+26	20.0	22.3
Anglican	59,021	54,047	- 8	19.8	16.7
Uniting Church	15,357	12,997	-15	5.2	4.0
Presbyterian and Reformed	10,488	8,821	-16	3.5	2.7
Buddhism	3,872	7,117	+84	1.3	2.2
Islam	2,458	4,364	+78	0.8	1.4
Hinduism	1,882	3,269	+74	0.6	1.0
Christian – Not Further Defined	3,702	5,721	+55	1.2	1.8

**Figure Three:** Changes in religious identification in the ACT - selected religious groups - 1996-2006

Source: ABS 2006

**Note:** Other groups (e.g. the Orthodox Christian, Lutheran, and Jewish communities) have not been included due to their relatively small size within the broader ACT population. Census respondents are allowed to opt-out of providing a response to the religious identification question, and historically around 10 percent of people in the ACT choose to do this.

However, as expressed in consultation with representatives of the Territory's religious groups, it is important to note that census data, while useful, does not necessarily fully reflect contemporary religious experience. Other frameworks of understanding religious life were sometimes described by local religious leaders, with the following reflecting these views among Christian groups.

- First, was the category of full formal membership on a parish church roll, and other regular attendees. This category includes people unwilling to identify as members of a given denomination (a practice specifically suggested to be common among people aged less than forty).

- Second, were 'fringe' people, who identify with a denomination in times of need, major Christian festivals (e.g. Christmas or Easter), or major life events (weddings and funerals).
- Third, were members of the community in the territory of a parish, who may or may not identify as a member of the denomination, but nonetheless have contact with a church through some form of community program.

Weekly attendance at a service or place of worship is generally significant in the Christian tradition. While there is no local data, at national level the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) does collect data on this and other topics. In the most recent publicly released data (2001), the trends towards decreasing religiosity in census data, can also be seen in service attendance.

Specifically, only small proportions of those identifying as members of the Catholic (15 per cent), Anglican (5 per cent), Uniting (10 per cent), or Presbyterian & Reformed churches (7 per cent) are estimated as attending services weekly (NCLS 2004: 9). These low and declining rates of attendance however contrast with markedly higher rates of weekly attendance at places of worship among certain Pentecostal and other generally conservative churches.

Among such churches it was estimated that 74 per cent of those identifying as adhering to the Churches of Christ, 73 per cent of Pentecostal adherents, and 68 per cent of Seventh-Day Adventists attended worship services weekly. Accordingly, across Australia, these churches account for a disproportionate share of overall Christian worship attendance and rival the traditionally larger denominations in total numbers of regular attendees (cf. Hey 2006).

Unfortunately though there is no comparable data for the rates of active participation among non-Christian religions. It is also crucial to recognise that many religious traditions often do not emphasise weekly group attendance of worship services in a dedicated place of worship.



St John's Anglican Church, Reid

## From neighbourhood parish to 'mega' places of worship

The second key change expected to be seen in religious life in the Territory, is the growth of what are sometimes called 'mega-churches' (or, as appropriate, mega-mosques or mega-temples) (Connell, 2005: 318).

'Mega-churches' are usually defined in the literature as places of worship with weekly attendances of over 2000 people. While perhaps usually linked with the 'Bible Belt' of the United States, mega-churches can be found around the world (with five of the ten largest mega-churches being in South Korea—the largest of which, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, claims over 800,000 members) (Schietle and Dougherty, 2008: 991).

The vast majority of these churches are evangelical, or orientated towards the conversion of previously non-Christian people, or reviving the faith of people who already identify as Christians. Most are linked to the Pentecostal or Baptist movements, and emphasise spectacular forms of communal and personal worship (e.g. large-scale and loud Christian rock performances, the 'spiritual healing' of attendees, speaking in tongues) that perhaps facilitate and are facilitated by the scale of these churches.

While they can be found in most forms of urban space, research from the United States suggests that most mega-churches are located in suburban areas (Connell 2005; Thumma et al 2005: 4). Demographically, American mega-churches appear to have many common characteristics. Thumma et al (2005: 9) suggest that their memberships tend to be disproportionately comprised of people married with young children and university graduates. In a book styled as a manual for would-be mega-church 'planters' Carl George argues that these churches are popular with the 'upwardly mobile' or 'aspirational' for a number of reasons, including their frequent emphasis on prosperity rather than poverty as being compatible with salvation and their potential as a 'neutral' worship venue for couples from different denominational backgrounds, and as sites for networking (George 1992). This dimension of mega-churches as places of networking is noted as a key feature of their development, with their large scale contrasting with their frequent organisation into small 'cells' of like-minded persons (Connell 2005: 324).

It has been suggested that suburban nature of mega-churches has in many cases taken an 'exurban' turn towards segregated and enclosed spaces extending beyond the provision of a relatively straightforward—if large—place of worship (Aleksic 2007; Baker 2005). Throughout the United States, mega-churches are increasingly found within the contexts of wider church-centred enclaves including residential, entertainment, educational, and retail facilities on sites sometimes in excess of 150 acres (Brown 2002).

These developments are facilitated by emphasis on tithing and other forms of gifting, with it being estimated in 2005 that the average American mega-church had an annual income of approximately US\$6 million (Thumma et al 2005: 12).

While most are not on the scale of the largest congregations in the United States or South Korea, a number of mega-churches can now be found in Australian cities. Perhaps the most well-known Pentecostal organisation in Australia, Hillsong, currently has a 3,500-seat conference centre and a 1500-seat venue, along with a more traditionally-styled 300-seat chapel, within its Baulkham Hills campus in Sydney.

Similarly, the Christian City Church movement's headquarter complex in Oxford Falls, Sydney, features a television studio, café, art gallery, auditorium, and three schools; the Christian Outreach Centre movement's Citipointe Church in Brisbane is spread over 40 acres with two auditoriums (one of which has 3000 seats), a chapel, café, child-care facility, and several educational facilities. As with their counterparts in the United States and elsewhere, many of the local mega-churches are considerable financial concerns, with in 2005

Hillsong having a turnover estimated at \$40 million, the Christian City Churches having a movement-wide turnover in Australia of \$38 million (out of a global turnover of \$100 million), and the Christian Outreach Centre movement a turnover of \$48 million (Ferguson 2005).

Incidentally, Australia would seem to be a significant exporter of mega-churches, with both Hillsong and the Christian City Church movement having 'planted' significant numbers of churches overseas.

While there are no individual churches in the ACT with congregations of mega-church size, echoes of the trend can still be seen locally, in terms of organisational links, style of religious practice, and building aspirations. The Hillsong movement (under the name of 'Canberra Christian Life Centre', in Charnwood, Civic, Gungahlin); Christian City Church (in Monash, Watson, and Belconnen); and Christian Outreach Centre (in Monash, Belconnen, and Queanbeyan), all have presences in the Canberra region; along with other similar groups such as the Parkway Church (Kambah).

In mega-church style, some of these groups have established places of worship much larger other denominations. Notably, the Canberra Christian Life Centre in Charnwood has acquired and redeveloped a former public secondary school, converting the former gymnasium into an auditorium capable of seating several hundred worshippers. Other groups have similarly expressed plans to build in this manner, while for the moment making do with school halls, lecture theatres, and other converted spaces around the city. If experience elsewhere is a guide, while many will come to nothing, at least some groups will likely eventually seek to make their distinct mark on the Territory's built environment.

Representatives of the Territory's religious groups identified a number of factors as contributing to the emergence of mega-churches. Among these, and echoing the links between choice and contemporary religious community noted above, it was argued that style of worship was central to the choices of individuals. Contemporary places of worship seek to draw attendees not through geographic proximity but alignment with tastes. Accordingly, runs the argument, they must operate on a larger city-wide catchment basis rather than traditional smaller scales. As one church representative put it, their members "will drive past 25 churches before they get to us". Therefore it is not expected that such places of worship will lead to significant residential clustering by members of a particular religious community (cf. Bouma and Hughes 2000; Bouma and Dobson 2005).



Wat Dhammadharo (Thai Buddhists), Lyneham

## Conclusion

Despite the decline in religious identification found in census and other data, religious groups will still need to be planned for in the ongoing community development of the ACT. However, as this paper has outlined, this planning will need to take place in the context of a number of important changes.

Pluralisation, through individual choices and immigration will probably see further diversity, while the overall proportion of people identifying as non-religious is likely to continue to grow. Religious community continues to be important in the social life of the Territory even if it does not appear to popularly mean what it once did. Space will still be needed in the future for those who choose to participate in such communities and what they offer.

Similarly, the rise of 'mega'-places of worship will also likely bring new challenges to planning in the Territory. Although it may be unlikely that the Territory will see any mega-churches of 2,000 or more regular worshipers (or similar sized non-Christian facilities) in the near future, aspirations for such places of worship can certainly be found locally.

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