

The future of Anglicanism in Australia

in the light of the decline of the Anglo-Catholic Movement



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This article was originally delivered as the 2002 ICCL Lecture and gives a "big picture" view of how much of the Australian Anglican Church came to be where it is today.

It is especially relevant in the light of the current liberalism facing the Anglican Communion and will repay careful reading.

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This article appeared in the July–August 2003 issue of ACL News,
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Trends in Anglicanism

1. The Australian Anglican Church, like most old mainstream churches, is in numerical decline.

Apart from one diocese (Sydney), all are showing numerical decline and even Sydney's growth is very small. Let me illustrate from Melbourne Diocese:

The situation in the diocese of Melbourne, one of our two largest dioceses, has deteriorated seriously in the last few years as the following figures illustrate. In the seven-year period from 1991 to 1998 we experienced a loss of 22,000 Christmas communicants. Currently we have 300 congregations. The total attendance for the diocese is somewhere between 20–25,000 on an average Sunday. That is approximately 75 per congregation. Of course they are not all evenly spread, in fact 128 have less than 75 attenders. The age profile... is of great concern, 40% of all attenders are 60+ years and only 11% are under 30 years.¹

Some dioceses like Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane have even more serious problems with large numbers of congregations on the edge of financial viability and very high age profiles.

The small rural dioceses are almost all in survival mode and struggling with declining populations. Some rural dioceses like Bendigo and North-West Queensland have been close to bankruptcy. North-West Queensland, a strongly Anglo-Catholic diocese, a few years ago had a multi-million dollar debt; it has now been significantly reduced. Bendigo has basically exhausted

almost all its resources to pay off a multi-million-dollar debt incurred some time ago through the Diocesan school. These situations came about through very poor leadership.

In each of the major dioceses there are exceptions to these trends with strong growing congregations scattered through them and some healthy youth and children's ministry – but most of these are contemporary evangelical or charismatic in flavour and the largest Anglican congregations in the nation are all Evangelical in theology. The two largest and most vigorous theological colleges (in terms of staff and students) are also Evangelical – Moore and Ridley.

The other exception to decline has been the growth of Anglican Private Schools. This is due of course mainly to Federal Government funding, falling state education standards, and a growing preference for private education.

2. The decline of uniformity in worship and liturgy

Most Anglican churches are still discernibly Anglican but there is now enormous variety in the style and level of liturgical content in services.

This process began with the liturgical experiments prior to the Australian Prayer Book of 1978 and has continued apace. Many places now use no Prayer Books at all in their main worship service: everything is on card or Overhead Projector or PowerPoint. The current Prayer Book (1995) says this in its cover page:

"Liturgical resources authorised by General Synod", "...for use together with The Book of Common Prayer 1662, An Australian Prayer Book 1978", and now... A Prayer Book for Australia 1995.

This is a long way from "The Book of Common Prayer". We now have 'cut and paste' liturgy and many contemporary services are pretty minimalist.

The use of robes is also very varied: from Catholic vestments to no robes at all – all the way from over-dressed to under-dressed! In terms of music there is enormous diversity again, with widespread use of contemporary Christian music.

3. The increased level of lay participation in ministry – both in worship and in paid ministry.

Increasingly, ministry teams are made up of lay and ordained, men and women, full-time and part-time, early retirees, youth and children's workers and other specialists.

4. The inability of our governmental structure to effect changes that would bring major new initiatives or arrest decline.

Synods have tried, but basically have become talk-fests that achieve little and are very frustrating for most people. Some years ago the Diocese of Melbourne attempted to reduce its numbers from its present unwieldy size.

It appointed a committee to bring back a proposal the next year, which it did and then the Synod promptly rejected it! The whole parliamentary nature of Synods is cumbersome and poorly placed to deliver creative initiatives and major change in today's world, and the inherited structure of ordinances and ecclesiastical law inappropriate for today's rapidly changing world.

5. Along with many other mainstream denominations is the trend that as the resources have become scarcer, the central Diocesan services have shrunk.

For example, Departments of Christian Education, Youth departments and children's ministry support services etc. have disappeared. Sydney is the only exception because of their financial resources and the very shrewd and creative way they have stewarded them.

6. Many of the reasons for the Anglican church's decline and difficulties are shared with other older mainstream protestant denominations like the UCA and the Presbyterians, e.g.

- The process of institutionalisation. It's a long time since we had a revival or major radical institutional change.
- Over-centralisation and the compliance and control syndrome that aging institutions develop to cope with anything outside the institution's cultural framework.
- Loss of passionate evangelism
- The dominance of the pastoral maintenance model of ministry
- The slowness of the majority of local congregations to contemporise their worship style and music
- The failure to plant new churches and adopt new models of church planting.
- Theological Reductionism and the cave-in to secularism and modernity. Many of our current leaders were trained in the 1960s when the loss of confidence in orthodoxy reached its peak. The pattern of reducing the gospel to fit the prevailing plausibility structure of society became entrenched and historic, credal Christianity was profoundly weakened.

At its most vigorous and vital, its influence was profound – theologically, liturgically, architecturally and aesthetically, pastorally, governmentally, and particularly on the way the nature and role of ordination and ministry was understood.

It developed at its height, numerous institutions, parachurch organisations, orders and societies for education, welfare and mission. e.g. The Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Mission to Streets and Lanes, Bush Brothers, hospitals, schools, religious orders like "The Community of the Holy Name", retreat centres, a theological college, "Crafers" in SA. It was also the primary support base for the Anglican Board of Missions (ABM).

But by the 1960s it began to run out of steam as a movement and has now lost its vitality and momentum. With the exception of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, almost all of the organisations above have died or been absorbed into other organisations – or, as in the case of ABM, have had considerable difficulties.

And here is the point! Having developed such influence, its decline and loss of vitality

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7. But with Anglicanism there is another unique and very important factor that has accelerated and contributed to our decline – that is the role of the "Anglo-Catholic movement", sometimes referred to as "Tractarianism".

This movement has been greatly influential in Australian Anglicanism. By the 1960s it had become the dominant force in most dioceses in Australia, even assuming its style as the "Anglican norm".

at the very time the church was under so many other pressures from the late 60s and 70s on has had very serious consequences for Australian Anglicanism.

A brief historical sketch of the movement

The movement began in the first half of the 19th Century in Oxford in 1833. It became known as the Oxford movement (not to be confused with MRA – Moral Re-Armament, which came much later), its most famous name being John Henry Newman, later to become Cardinal Newman.

They became known as “Tractarians” because of a series of tracts or papers they produced on major issues of theology and church life. They also inspired an association of artists, architects and designers called the “Cambden Society”. Their influence on church architecture and interior design was very great as there was a church building boom in the late 19th Century. The Cambden Society reinforced the Gothic revival of the 19th Century in the U.K. This also coincided with the pre-Raphaelites – an artistic revival of medieval Romanticism. Some commentators would say that the movement was strongly influenced by 19th Century Romanticism.

They were really a “renewal or restoration” movement. In their case they wanted to take the church back to some of its pre-Reformation roots and traditions. They made a careful study of the Early Fathers. They were concerned about personal holiness and committed discipleship and so the recovery of the spiritual disciplines in the Christian life.

They were also concerned to restore a sense of awe and beauty and holiness to worship. This led them to recover a more elaborate and symbol-rich liturgy. They were concerned about the aesthetics and the accoutrements of formal worship. They wrote many beautiful hymns:

*Blest are the pure in heart,
For they shall see our God;
The secret of the Lord is theirs,
Their soul is Christ's abode.*

*The Lord, who left the heavens
Our life and peace to bring,
To dwell in lowliness with men,
Their Pattern and their King;*

*Still to the lowly soul
He doth himself impart,
And for his dwelling and his throne
Chooseth the pure in heart.*

*Lord, we thy presence seek;
May ours this blessing be;
Give us a pure and lowly heart,
A temple meet for thee.*

[Rev. John Keble, 1818]

They wanted to restore what they believed was lost and among the things they believed we had

lost was a particular pre-Reformation concept of the Lord's Supper and Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. This also led to a greater emphasis on the priestly identity and role of the minister, particularly as the celebrant (or president) at Holy Communion.

They had a very high view of Scripture and the creeds and were deeply orthodox and theologically conservative on credal fundamentals. They were not a theologically liberal or reductionist movement.

They also emphasised a more central and Catholic notion of the role of the Bishop and the diocese – “The Ignation” idea of the church being the people gathered around the Bishop and the Bishop standing in direct historical succession to the Apostles.

They also set forward a vision of Christian service and commitment that challenged a whole generation of young men and women to start new religious orders to serve others in evangelism, welfare and education.

Later they developed a strong emphasis on “Incarnational Theology”. At one of their conferences in 1923, Bishop Frank Weston, a noted Anglo-Catholic said: “You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the Slums.” Father Tucker's work during the great depression and the development of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence in Melbourne is a direct outcome of this emphasis. This emphasis led to some outstanding work and ministry.

But by the late 1960s, the vision was running out of energy. Today it is almost exhausted. Many of the movement's institutions, societies and organisations have collapsed or are terminally sick, e.g.

- the female orders that ran the schools and hospitals have almost completely gone.
- The “Bush Brothers” are no more.
- Their theological college, “Crafers” has gone.
- The Brotherhood of St Laurence is still going but is now a highly secularised agency.
- The Anglican Board of Mission has shrunk to one office for the whole of Australia and has had to realise most of its assets to survive.
- The Retreat House is gone.

- Their student ministries are almost non-existent.
- And with one or two notable exceptions, the parish churches they dominated for years are now small, struggling and aging.

Outstanding people like Archbishop Strong and the Rev Dr Barry Marshall were among the last of their inspirational leaders and thinkers. In recent years they have not produced people of this calibre. This vacuum of leadership is also sadly reflected today in the quality of leadership that has risen to the top of the dioceses that they have dominated for so long around the Australian Church.

It's a sad story, but the bigger tragedy is that they have taken large sections of the Australian Anglican Church down with them.

Why? What happened?

The answer is important because it has very significant lessons for all of us. "Those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes."

What happened is that the movement gradually embraced a series of theological trends that eventually sapped its vitality. It lost touch with its theological and ideological core – the very things that had produced its energy and passion. As someone said: "Passion leaks" – it must be constantly renewed by its source.

This is a brief summary of the trends that, once embraced, eventually ate the heart out of the movement.

1. It drifted away from the credal and biblical orthodoxy of its founders and gradually embraced a reductionist liberal theology. Most people in ministry now who have been influenced by this movement could be more accurately described as "liberal catholic".

They have retained some of the outward expressions of the movement but departed from its core theological ideas.

When a movement that has a highly symbolic and formal liturgical expression of Christianity goes down the theologically reductionist pathway, what you end up with is "religion" – form without substance. What happens is that the meaning of the symbols becomes more and more mysterious and fuzzy as the orthodox core is reduced, lost or reconstructed to fit the spirit of the age. The appearance of Christianity is preserved but the essence is lost. The signs and symbols are retained but their meaning is changed. Reductionism is a familiar pathway for Liberal theology.

In spite of its claims to be broad and open, Liberal theology is frequently intellectually narrow and provincial. It allows the immediate landscape of the spirit of the age and what its host society finds plausible or implausible to over-influence its interpretation of the gospel. It is also re-active in that instead of critiquing the



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spirit of the age with the gospel, it loses confidence in orthodoxy and critiques the gospel with the prevailing intellectual fashion. Having lost its confidence in historic, biblical and credal Christianity, it disconnects itself from the very perspective that would save it from being seduced by the spirit of the age – the larger, longer and broader perspective of historical orthodoxy. The great danger for ordinary church members, as said earlier, is that Liberal theology preserves the appearance of Christianity but contradicts its essence. It keeps the language of faith but changes the meaning. The damage is done gradually by stealth.

2. The second trend was to allow a recovered incarnational theology to become **unbalanced**. The idea of the importance of “presence”, particularly presence with the poor, eventually over-powered the importance of proclamation. So, instead of a balance of “the whole gospel for the whole person,” confidence in preaching was eroded and the link between word and deed

ing and preaching was diminished, this produced a poorly taught laity. Also the development of pre-Reformed liturgical practices like the Gospel procession subtly implied a division in the unity and authority of the whole Bible. The symbolic elevation of the Gospel reading subtly devalued the Old Testament and Epistles and eroded the critical idea that Christ and the gospel are central to and woven through the entire Bible.

The second result of an unbalanced incarnational theology was the development of an incipient “Pelagianism” – salvation by good works. Being good and kind to others came to be seen as the essence of the gospel.

3. As reductionist liberalism ate the heart out of its theology, the distinctiveness of Anglo-Catholicism was left to depend more and more on its particular liturgical, symbolic and cultural expressions.

Many people associated this with elements of so-called “High Culture” – classical music and art. It was, and is still seen in some circles, as

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fatally weakened. The inevitable eventually happened: preaching, evangelism and proclamation were devalued and diminished.

Historically the very opposite trend happened in many parts of evangelicalism before and after WWII. It wasn't till the Lausanne Movement in the early 70s that evangelicalism recovered a proper emphasis on social justice and restored the balance of deed and word. This was largely due to the influence of evangelical leaders like John Stott in the UK and Ronald J Sider in the US.²

There were two other negative results for Anglo-Catholicism that came from its unbalanced incarnational theology.

The first was an untaught laity. For a long time in liberal catholic parishes, the standard sermon fare was a ten-minute light-weight meditation on the Gospel. Because Bible teach-

a more cultured and sophisticated form of faith expression. The result of this was that the movement began to attract people and clergy who were more drawn to its style than to the core ideas and earlier passions of personal holiness and a desire to evangelise and care for the poor and marginalised.

These more “effete”³ recruits often displayed a worldly sophistication that Newman and his friends would have felt very disturbed by. These new followers were not so drawn to sacrificial ministries to the poor or in difficult places or in highly committed “orders”.

The other effect was that this style was well out of step with ordinary Australians and further marginalised Anglicanism from the mainstream of Australian life. We were fast becoming a boutique church.

4. Because the emotional tendency of the movement has been to look backwards to a very late-19th Century English expression of Anglicanism, the movement failed to assist the process of really grounding Anglicanism in Australian culture. The model of the English village church is a sentimental and anglophile vision that has been fostered by the movement and helped to alienate us from Australian culture.

I am sure that many of you have seen and chuckled at the TV show "The Vicar of Dibley". At one level it is amusing; at another level it is very disturbing for the thoughtful Christian, because what it does is to trivialise us and, by association, trivialise the gospel.

Once we can be identified as eccentric, odd and quaint, we can be dismissed as a harmless anachronism, an amusing curiosity, a source of nostalgia, a bit like a tableau in an historical theme park – but of no serious threat or challenge.

Sadly, there are Anglican clergy who think this is wonderful and positive: they imagine the world is laughing with them, while in fact it's laughing at them!

A gutted Anglo-Catholicism leads to this sad scenario – "The Vicar of Dibley Syndrome." It's not what Newman, Pusey and Keble desired. To them it would be better:

- To be violently disagreed with
- To be a challenge to people's beliefs
- To hold views and ideas and behaviour that people find confronting and disturbing
- To be a John the Baptist to Herod
- To be a Paul before Felix
- To be a Christ before Pilate

than be dismissed as a trivial, harmless and amusing anachronism.

5. They focussed on a pastoral maintenance model of ministry and so did not grow churches. The emphasis on the priestly role fed this trend.

6. Because of the tendency to look backwards nostalgically to the English village or cathedral model and ethos, and their commitment to more formality in worship, they were very slow to embrace contemporary and informal styles in

worship and music. They were totally unprepared for the rejection of formality in the 70s and 80s by the "Boomers" and very few ever worked out how to minister to them effectively.

All the liturgical experiments and changes from the 1978 Prayer Book to the 1995 Prayer Book were basically changes to the written liturgy. They were helpful, but basically the project completely misunderstood the fundamental change that had taken place in the minds and emotions of the average punter as to how the style and ethos of the service should be set and the worship conducted. Pentecostalism and contemporary evangelicalism understood this and swept the field.

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7. The Parish Communion Movement of the 1920s and 30s was a child of Anglo-Catholicism. The idea was that the principal service of the day should be Holy Communion and that everyone should be present – including youth and children. This view has had great influence but it had several very negative effects:

- (1) Other non-eucharistic services disappeared. This created a barrier for non-communicants and fringe people. It also made outreach and guest services difficult to hold in a way relevant to outsiders.

(2) Because it downplayed Sunday Schools, insisting children be in the whole service, the Sunday School movement was undermined and children's and youth ministry suffered. A generation of clergy had little interest in either and this was a disaster for the future.

8. The issue of women's ordination created a crisis in the Anglo-Catholic movement. The traditionalists were opposed but their offspring, the liberal Catholics, were pro. As the traditionalists are now a minority, their bitter rearguard action failed. This has left many unhappy legacies and further weakened the movement.

The issues surrounding gender and sexual politics have been a major pre-occupation of the movement in recent times, and so it has had little energy for other fundamental issues.

To conclude

Anglicanism is essentially protestant and its formularies were forged on reformed anvils. The Anglo-Catholic movement, for all its early achievements in ministry, really took Anglicanism too far to the Catholic right – we are now seeing a major correction to that trend.

It must also be remembered that, historically, in Australia the major dioceses were founded by evangelicals. (Bishop Perry in Melbourne was an evangelical – he created the first lay representative synodical government in the Anglican Communion.) That history is now reasserting itself.

The energy and creativity in the Australian Anglican Church is now swinging back to its reformed roots. The great lesson to be learned from the demise of the Anglo-Catholic Movement is that if you depart far enough from the theological roots from which a movement springs, eventually the passion dies and the plant dies.

The critical question that we are now left with is this: **“Will evangelicals, who now have the energy, creativity and momentum in the Anglican Church, be able to re-construct it so it can do its part in re-connecting with and evangelising the new Australia?”**

- Will they retain their focus theologically?
- Will they maintain their energy and passion?
- Will they capture the imagination of a new

generation of able young leaders?

- Will they maintain internal unity?
- How will they interact with and tackle the inherited entropy of our ecclesiastical government and laws?

The long-term future is now passing into their hands and will be determined by how they answer these questions. •

Footnotes:

1. 1998 figures. The situation in the eastern region of the diocese has improved slightly but the overall position has continued to decline.
2. See the very influential and popular book by R J Sider, “Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger” (Hodder, 1977) and “Issues Facing Christians Today” by John Stott (Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984).
3. “Too refined”.



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“The Welcoming Church”

“The Gospel and the Growing Church”

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