

**The rise of the New Clergy: The displacement of the church into 21<sup>st</sup> Australian faith-affiliated schools, and  
the role of the teacher as proxy cleric.**

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**Abstract**

There has been steady decline in Australian church attendance over the last fifty years. This has been inversely matched by an unexpectedly steady rise in student enrolment in religiously-affiliated private schools, now at 40% of all secondary school students, and much higher in the Eastern capital cities. Additionally, all 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian schools are now absorbing more and more responsibilities that were previously owned by parents, churches, club affiliations, health and social services. With these major and largely unplanned shifts in the Australian social contract, I argue teachers in faith-affiliated schools are becoming a proxy form of 'New Clergy'. They are daily tasked with religious instruction, evangelism, pre-evangelism, pastoral care, transfer of biblical content and denominational perpetuation. The expectation in many faith-affiliated schools, particularly many Protestant schools, is that *all* teachers are able to embody and enable 'Christian education' daily, to an involuntary gathering of school students, right across the curriculum and cultural events of their schools. The implications of this unforeseen, market-driven shift for the modern Australian church are many. These include a reconfiguring of the formal function of priesthood/ minister, ordination, Sunday school and church youth groups. There are even broader implications for Australian religiosity, as the primary expression of religion for many families becomes embodied in a capitalist market 'choice', inseparable from cultures of Australian private schooling.

## **Introduction**

My theme is the future of leadership in the Australian Christian church, based on demographic observations: intersecting the sharp decline of formal church attendance, with the huge rise in enrolments in Australian religiously-affiliated schools, many of which are explicitly missional and evangelistic in character. My proposition is that teachers in schools of this type, are becoming a kind of 'proxy clergy': enacting the functions of counselor, pastor, preacher and missionary. The actual experience of Christian leadership, in terms of population quantity, is being lived by Christian faith-based school teachers, unwittingly, both on their behalf, and behalf of the Australian Church. If this is so, then it has massive implications for the leadership of Australian Christianity. The relationship between the citizenry and the private school, is very different to most traditional relationships between the citizen and the Church. It involves powerful notions of the capitalist free market and consumption, through the particular social and political force we know as 'school choice'.

## **Declining Australian church attendance**

61% of Australians still self-identified as 'Christian' in 2011, a decrease of 6.9% since 2001. Only 15% attended a church monthly or more. The figure for teens attending church is harder to calculate, but the CRA estimates around 10%. However, they have found that about 22 per cent of young people who go to church schools attend even though neither parent attends.

In the total Australian population, church attendance contracted by 14% over the decade 1996-2006, with even greater shrinkage, allowing for total increase in the whole population of 12% over the same period. The most losses have occurred in the traditional denominations: (in order) Presbyterian (36%), Uniting (31%), Catholic (19%) and Anglican (12%). The Pentecostal denominations have increased by 27%, and 'other Christian' at 186%.

There has also been a significant decline in 'much or complete' confidence in the clergy and in religious institutions in Australia. 34 % had confidence in 2001, 22 % (Hughes and Fraser 2014, p. 116).

## **Steady rise in student enrolment in Australian religiously-affiliated private schools.**

In 2010, 34% of all Australian school enrolments (primary and secondary) attended a non-government school (Australian Board of Statistics, 2011). Viewing the figures under separate primary and secondary enrolments

(and they should always be), secondary is just at 40% of all student enrolments (over 50% in some capital cities [McDonald, 2011]). Over 90% of all Australian private schools are affiliated with the Christian religion (Buckingham 2010: table 2).

And so we have an interesting population trend.

Even more interesting when the insatiable Australian appetite for private schooling is calculated in relative terms internationally. According to the now famous 2012 Musset OECD paper, Australians have the highest access to school choice in the world.

Furthermore, Australia has the 5<sup>th</sup> highest level of private school enrolment, in the world. (Mussett 2012:9)

Hence we have an OECD average of 15% enrolment in non-government schools, and an Australian figure of 35%, with the blow-out at secondary level to 40%.

The largest element of the Australian secondary private school sector enrolments are in Catholic Schools, at around 22%, with the remainder Protestant or other Christian at around 17%. By far the highest denominational affiliation in the non-Catholic sector is the Anglican (ISCA 2014). Hence, despite the rapid population attendance decline in these most clerical of churches, Anglican and Catholic denominations nevertheless represent the strongest segment in Australian private school enrolments, experiencing unhindered growth for two decades.

Around 15000 of these students attend Sydney Anglican Schools Corporation schools, an organization by which, I have a duty to declare, I was recently employed. SASC schools are very purposeful and explicit about their Christian focus.

Note the following statement on all but 2 of the Sydney Anglican School's Corporation's 20 school's publically available enrolment forms:

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All other Anglican schools have a less direct version of this disclaimer, such as the one for SASC's Roseville College:

*Text awaiting copyright*

The 'SASC Philosophy of education' includes:

*Text awaiting copyright*

The document goes on to detail, in a highly thoughtful and rigorous way, an integrated Christian approach to learning. Such as.

*Text awaiting copyright*

Sydney Anglican Schools Corporation Schools, furthermore, typical of all Australian Anglican Schools, have an entirely open enrolment policy, captured by the follow typical enrolment form disclaimer:

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Another segment of the private school market, Christian School's Australia (CSA), is a national association of many non-denominational Christian schools, the largest of 8 or so similar umbrella associations, and culturally typical of many other independent schools of similar type. This kind of school has absorbed the highest growth of any sort of Australian school in the last decade.

In their *webpage "About Christian Schools" CSA states that:*

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Thus, in a publicly transparent way, the Christian mission of Anglican and CSA schools and others of their type, not only seeks to retain social territory, but is also expansionist in gesture.

Furthermore, the most recent centralized statement on Catholic education, the *Instrumentum Laboris* (2014), contains many of the sentiments found in the Anglican and CSA documents.

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So much for public statements, but what about actual practice? There has not been a great deal of research into the religious practice of teachers in Australian religious schools. My own study of the thoughts and actions of Protestant school English teachers is one of about five that I know of in the Protestant sector, and the only one with a comparatively sizable sample in statistical terms.

The survey asked English teachers working in NSW Protestant schools to self-identify from a variety of theological 'labels', modelled on the taxonomy of the long-running Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS, 2013). By far, the strongest identification was with 'Evangelical' (46%) or as Evangelicals in combination with something else, mostly 'Pentecostal'. Next strongest as a single category was 17% Pentecostal/Charismatic, followed by 14% of participants who chose not to identify with any of the theological 'labels'.

If there is such a concentration of Evangelical-style ideology into Australian Protestant schools, then it has significant implications for Australian Education: an intensified population of theologically monophonic, activist Christian teachers. It is highly likely that students under such staff in these schools will experience multiple, intensified exposures to Evangelical style ideology and customs over the years of their enrolment. Personal allegiance to this ideology was highly pronounced in the interviews, often in a way that suggested accountability to a more preeminent authority than the participant's actual school. Anglican school interviewees indicated a sometimes dissonant relationship between their school and their strongly held personal evangelical theology.

Such are some of the figures that underpin my demographic argument. Even if teachers cannot be characterized as 'proxy clergy', it is clear that the Christian faith's primary contact with the Australian population is now through faith-based private schooling, not the institutional church.

### **School Choice**

Even recognizing and planning for this demographic trend, however, would be unlikely to provide a clear vision for the future of Australian Christianity. Consider the following.

Parents choose religious private schools for a diverse range of reasons, reasons which have their own market force, and conflated with religion, promise to create a whole new kind of postmodern market-place church that is peculiar to Australia. What happens to Australian religiosity, if the primary expression of religion for many families becomes embodied in a capitalist market 'choice', inseparable from the complex cultures of Australian private schools?

The issue of school choice is complex, but a couple of good studies have been conducted by ACER and ISCA.

The 2004 ACER study into school choice of 2004, found that choice was affected by:

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The 2008 ISCA study of Independent schools (which did not include most Catholic schools), found that 'learning about cultural and religious heritage' was rarely cited as a reason to choose or recommend an independent school. Similarly 'Faith based environment' was rarely cited, only 'commonly cited' in one of the five categories. However 'teaches/ reinforces moral values' rated highly . (ISCA 2008).

So here is something of a paradox. Many parents choosing private schools, many of which are explicitly and missionally religious, but not citing faith as an explicit reason for doing so. Their primary reasons, rather, according to ICSEA, are:

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### **Educapitalism**

There is a significant body of research, however, that links the drive towards private schooling to a much more primal 'marketization' of society. It is what Blackmore terms 'Edu-capitalism' when 'managerialism aligns teachers and researchers with the corporate logic of economism and entrepreneurialism (Blackmore 2014: 500). In Australia, she argues, this is due to a shift from social democracy to neo-liberal explanation of the relationship between the nation, individual and the state in education.

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And the movement is global: charter schools in USA and Canada, Free Schools in Sweden and UK, Academies in the UK and Independent Public Schools in Australia. The OECD, IMF, and World Bank are all involved; management consultancies such as KPMG and Boston Consulting, the global education for-profit giants Pearson, The International Baccalaureate and Cambridge International Examinations, and educational philanthropic organisations such as the Gates Foundation, the Clinton sponsored GEMS Education.

"Research, policy, politics and edu-capitalism are closely intertwined." (Blackmore 2012: 504-505)

One effect of 'school choice' is on the organisational relationship between parents and school, becoming more 'contractualised'. This freedom is seen by political leaders of most stamps as a good thing for Australia, but has been met with horror and distain by university education faculties and education unions nationwide.

Campbell, Proctor and Sherrington suggested that 'School choice' in Australia has been characterised by generalised anxiety (Campbell, Proctor & Sherrington 2009; Blackmore 2014: 509), and a high level of parent strategizing and ongoing involvement in schools.

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There is also strong body of data to suggest, or at least to ominously forebode, that the marketization of education is/will exacerbate social inequality.

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According to Windle, this 'parentocracy' principle strengthens the social power of middle-class parents, but weakens the agency of working-class and ethnic-minority parents (Windle 2009: 240-241). Parents become "consumers" of the individual school rather than citizen-members of a common system of schools, in which everyone had an interest in everyone else's welfare' (Marginson, 1996, p. 119).

Academically, school choice' has not really addressed these criticisms from a research perspective, but it would seem a vast amount of parents entertain a different definition of 'equity' and 'social justice'. An so we find the academy's view of the public good, significantly out of step with what the actual public sees as 'good'.

### **The School as Post-modern marketplace church.**

'The School as Post-modern marketplace church' is a phrase coined by school chaplain and Baptist cleric Rev Peter Wilson (2010), and a useful one to appropriate for describing the potential dynamic that exists in the Australian Christian future. Faith-affiliated private schools are currently the greatest contact point between Australian families and religion, and, despite the ISCA survey finding 'faith as a rarely cited reason', I would speculate this inaccurate, in the following way.

Schools have increasingly become providers of services previously delivered by families. Governments recognize and require this through a large and increasing range of mandatory risk management protocols crowding out Australian schools. When such education becomes 'contractualized', in a commercial exchange

between parent and school, then a delivered 'service' becomes a consumer expectation, and one that the consumer no longer expects to have to provide, having paid someone else to do so.

A child acquiring 'Values/ morals' is a significant aspect of 'school choice': the parent expects the school to equip their child with 'morals'. Clearly, for most parents who even mildly read the enrolment material, these 'morals/ values' are in some way expected by both parents and school to come from the school's religious affiliation. This is despite many parents, by and large, having vague or no religious affiliation, or identifying as 'spiritual', rather than 'religious'. Perhaps this is a kind of 'lazy religiosity': contracting-out of values education by parents in a market mindset.

Of course the idea of lay teachers as 'clergy' is likely to be absurd to many Catholics. Where the Catholic school philosophy significantly varies from the Protestant is in 'The emphasis on the necessarily sacramental character of education for the baptized: whereby it must be centered around baptism and the Eucharist (Lumen Gentium, n. 11). Yet, even though the idea of Christian clericalism is most pronounced in the Catholic church, the most recent Congregation for Catholic Education identified the demographic paradox of this paper as an international trend.

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## **Conclusion**

And so there is a case to imagine a religious future that is peculiar to Australia, relative to other nations. As noted before, Australia has the highest access to school choice in the world, and the fifth highest private school rate in the world, with a 90% religious affiliation of such private schools. If the school is indeed to become the postmodern marketplace church, what kind of role will free market neoliberalism play in Australian Christianity? If, indeed, school choice leads to social inequity, with those inside religious schools socially advantaged over those outside, how might that align with theologies of Christ's preferential treatment of the poor? Furthermore, when Christian religion is understood as a market commodity, inextricably located in a site as socially complex as the private school, what happens to it?

My theme has been leadership in the Australian Christian church and the future of Australian Christianity. Notwithstanding questions for the future, it is certain that the religious leadership role of the teacher in the faith based school needs broader recognition by the established churches, and that churches need to strategize more purposefully around the phenomena of the private school as the dominant Australian congregational site.

But as Connell says, “We have not yet, however, fully assimilated the profound consequences of the neoliberal turn for the basic project of education. (Connell 2013:99). Nor, I say, for the basic project of the church.

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