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## How Religious Organisations Contribute to Meaning in Life: A Qualitative Study of Australian Retirees<sup>1</sup>

Philip Hughes<sup>2</sup>

University of Divinity  
Melbourne, Australia  
[philip@timmycloud.net](mailto:philip@timmycloud.net)

Robyn Wrigley-Carr<sup>3</sup>

University of Divinity  
Melbourne, Australia

Johannes M. Luetz<sup>4</sup>

Alphacrucis University College  
Brisbane, Australia

Enqi Weng<sup>5</sup>

Deakin University  
Melbourne, Australia

Fleur Creed<sup>6</sup>

Alphacrucis University College  
Brisbane, Australia

Stephen Reid<sup>7</sup>

National Centre for Pastoral Research  
Melbourne, Australia

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1. All authors were involved in conducting interviews, analysing the data, and contributing to the writing of this article.

2. Em. Prof. Philip J. Hughes is honorary research fellow, Pilgrim College, University of Divinity, Melbourne and Emeritus professor, Alphacrucis University College, Parramatta. He is an honorary research fellow with Christian Research Association, Melbourne, and National Centre for Pastoral Research, Canberra. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7057-366X>

3. Assoc. Prof. Robyn Wrigley-Carr is associate professor at Whitley College, University of Divinity, Melbourne. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6146-7892>

4. Prof. Johannes M. Luetz is a professor at Alphacrucis University College, Brisbane, adjunct associate professor at University of New South Wales, Sydney, and adjunct professor at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Brisbane. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9017-4471>

5. Dr Enqi Weng is a teaching fellow with the School of Communication and Creative Arts, and research fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University, Melbourne. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6300-7304>

6. Dr Fleur Creed is a research fellow at Alphacrucis University College, Brisbane and St Francis College, University of Divinity, Brisbane. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8402-7048>

7. Dr Stephen Reid is a co-ordinator of research, Christian Research Association and a research fellow with the National Centre for Pastoral Research, Melbourne. Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0202-8807>

### Abstract

Religions and religious organisations are key sources of meaning in life through beliefs, values, ritual and experiences. As affiliation with religious institutions is in decline in Australia, the question becomes what role does it continue to play. This research explored this question through interviews with 71 retired Australians about how faith does or does not contribute to meaning in life. Forty-five interviewees had frequent connections with religious organisations, and some described meaningful experiences of God, faith-based values and religious rituals. However, the data indicated that social connections were key to meaning-making, especially in contexts in which interviewees were personally valued and felt they could contribute value. Significantly for religious organisations, these findings suggest that meaning in life is frequently found by religious and non-religious Australian retirees in ‘mattering’ rather than through the ritual or belief dimensions of religion.

### Keywords

meaning in life; religion; social connection; community; small groups

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### Introduction: Religious Organisations as Sources of Meaning

Research has shown that meaning in life contributes significantly to good health and longevity. The issue of meaning in life can become acute in retirement when roles and commitments in work and family are reduced and the need to maintain one’s mental and physical wellbeing in the context of ageing is vital for both the positive ageing of individuals and how society at large handles health and wellbeing (Handley et al. 2021; Lim-Soh et al. 2024; McGuire 1992; Nie et al. 2023; Pargament and Ano 2004). For millennia, religion and religious organisations have been major sources of meaning, although they have done so in various ways in different historical and social contexts (Berger 1969; Bouma 1992; McGuire 1992; Weber 1972). The Boomer generation who have been described as ‘architects and agitators of the 1960’s cultural revolution’ (Day 2022: 8) and have led a popular movement rejecting traditional forms of religion, are in the process of retiring and are approaching retirement differently to previous generations.

The notion of generation is based on the idea that a cohort of people, born in a particular place and at a particular time in history, share experiences that have shaped their identity (Mannheim 1952). For any generation, some experiences are shared, others are distinctive. Children born after World War II grew up during a period of relative peace and prosperity in Australia, Canada, the United States and parts of Europe,

and experienced the world very differently from their parents (often referred to as the Builder generation) who had lived through years of deep economic recession and World War II. Boomers had easier access to tertiary education, reliable contraception and electronic networks through telephones and televisions than their parents. Social commentators, such as Taylor (2007) and Inglehart (2021), have noted how the values and behaviour of the Boomer generation were quite distinct from that of the Builder generation. Similarly, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argued that the Boomer generation initiated a fundamental change in primary values from the previous focus on duty to family, community and nation towards a focus on personal fulfilment, often measured in personal experiences rather than in terms of achievement of duty. For the Boomers, community became something developed intentionally, based on connections with people who shared common interests and values, rather than something 'given' by geographic proximity. Arising from these changes, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argued that many Boomers sought to engage with the spiritual milieu in personal ways, assembling their own belief systems and spiritual practices, rather than looking to established religious organisations for meaning. Based partly on interviews in the United Kingdom and Canada, and some survey data, Day (2022) has also described the Boomer generation's rejection of religious organisations and the beliefs and values they affirm. According to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018), 61 per cent of the Boomer generation in Australia attended religious services monthly or more often when they were 11 or 12 years old, but just 12 per cent of that generation attended services monthly or more often in 2018 (Evans 2019). So our research question was how are Boomers finding meaning in life as they retire, and are religious organisations contributing to this?

A classical sociological statement of how religion gives meaning was developed by Peter Berger (1969) in *The Social Reality of Religion* originally published as *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger pictured religions as socialising people into a 'sacred cosmos'. He detailed how religious organisations form communities which act as 'plausibility structures', constantly reaffirming the reality of the religious view of the cosmos for the members of that community. Berger (1969) explored the fact that meaning in life becomes a particular issue in times of suffering, death and other experiences that threaten meaning in life. It is particularly important that a religious organisation can produce a 'theodicy', an explanation for such challenging times, and a means of maintaining meaning in the face of adversity.

Another sociologist, Meredith McGuire, identified four major facets of religion through which meaning is formulated and expressed. Firstly, there is religious belief, the cognitive aspect, which includes both formal creedal statements and less formal kinds of beliefs such as myths, images, norms and values (McGuire 1992: 16). Secondly, there are the rituals which she described as consisting of ‘symbolic actions that represent religious meanings’. She explained that, through ritual actions, religious groups remember their shared meanings and are revitalised through that process. The third dimension is religious experience in which individual and group experiences are interpreted in terms of those meaning systems. Fourthly, the religious community, formally or informally organised, reminds people of what they believe and value, and empowers them to accomplish their religious and everyday goals (McGuire 1992: 16–20). In *Religion, Meaning and Transcendence*, Gary Bouma (1992) made the point that through the 2,000 years of Christian history, Christian organisations have focused first on one of the facets of religion identified by McGuire, and then on another. In the Middle Ages, the authority of tradition led to a focus on ritual. In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation emphasised the authority of reason, leading to a focus on correct belief and the coherence of doctrinal systems. In the twentieth century, charismatic authority, and what has been described as the Expressive Revolution, led to an emphasis on the experiential dimension of faith, expressed in the experience of the presence of God (Rose et al. 2014: 25).

This experiential facet is well illustrated in Robert Wuthnow’s account of the impact of small group movements in the United States in shaping the nature of faith. Wuthnow (1994: 17) described the evolving of small religious groups with a focus on intimacy and practical support in everyday life. He argued that these groups encouraged the development of ‘an intimate emotion-laden relationship with God in which God ceased to be a supreme being, but was “a buddy”’ (Wuthnow 1994: 239). Wuthnow (1994: 359) argued these groups provided ‘some of the intimacy that families and friendships and neighborhoods have always provided’ in the past, but such groups were in danger of confirming the status quo rather than challenging people’s faith. He suggested small groups should be part of a larger religious programme to ensure a broad understanding of faith.

While much of the research of Abby Day has focused on people who have withdrawn from religion, she has argued that the whole idea of beliefs, particularly in propositional terms, was largely rejected by the Boomer generation. She suggested that the Boomers she had studied

located belief in ‘deeply embedded relationships’, not with God but with partners, family and friends (Day 2022: 175). In her earlier work on religion and belief, she argued that among those who continued to identify as Christian, this took the form of ‘belief in belonging’, a sense of identity related to social belonging (Day 2011). People valued belonging to Christianity even when they rejected its beliefs and were not involved in the community because this was part of their identity with family or with the wider culture.

Both Day and Wuthnow have argued that, for the Boomer generation, meaning is found in relationships rather than in propositions or rituals. For those who maintained Christian faith, Wuthnow saw it as an intimate relationship with God. For those who have exited faith, meaning is found in close relationships with intimate others. Wuthnow did not explicitly use the term ‘meaning in life’ in his analysis, and Day (2022: 168) was equivocal about its usage.

Is it appropriate to say that Boomers no longer seek ‘meaning in life’ and have replaced it with relationships? Is this true not only for those who are not religious, but for the 12 per cent of Australian Boomers who continue to engage with religious organisations? To explore contemporary constructions of meaning in life, it is necessary to examine the current literature in this field.

### **Conceptual Frameworks for Meaning in Life**

There has been much recent research on meaning in life independent of research on religion. A detailed examination by Li, Valdivia and Wong (2025) of the various models of meaning in life confirmed what several studies (George and Park 2017; Martela and Steger 2023) have suggested: that three components best capture the concept of ‘meaning in life’:

1. comprehension—a cognitive sense that life is meaningful, sometimes termed ‘coherence’;
2. purpose—being directed and motivated by valued life goals; and
3. mattering—feeling that one’s existence is of significance and value in the world.

There has been much discussion in recent literature about the nature of mattering. Some studies, such as those of Li et al. (2025) and Martela and Steger (2023), have used this notion of mattering in the context of the universe: the sense that one’s existence matters at a cosmic level. However, Flett (2018) and Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021) have

argued that mattering occurs particularly in interpersonal relationships, that people experience meaning in relationships in which they feel they are valued by and can contribute to others. Thus, social connections are seen as important contexts for meaning in life. Mattering is not just belonging to a group or to humanity, but is experienced in interaction with others. Flett (2018) and Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021) recognised this was not the only way meaning could be created, but saw it as a major source of meaning.

Guthrie et al. (2025) noted these two types of mattering, referring to them as ‘cosmic’ and ‘interpersonal’. Meaning can come from one’s cosmic framework which may be religious, but may also involve seeing one’s life in relation to nature, humanity or society. Meaning can also come through interpersonal relationships. Cosmic and interpersonal meaning are significantly different. ‘Cosmic’ meaning involves situating the self within a broader interpretive horizon, often shaped by religious or ideological worldviews. It is usually supported by some form of community, but not necessarily a community that meets together. For example, it may be an ethnic community or a network or movement dedicated to a cause such as concern for the protection of the environment. Individuals see themselves as having an identity or perhaps a role within that context. Interpersonal meaning arises from personal interactions with other individuals or small groups where one is known and personally acknowledged, and where one can make a contribution to the group or to other individuals.

In her comprehensive book *The Psychology of Meaning in Life*, Tatjana Schnell (2021) described the elements of meaning in life in a similar way to the three components mentioned above, labelling them direction and purpose, coherence rather than comprehension, and significance rather than mattering. Schnell explained how religion has traditionally provided meaning in life through its beliefs, but also through a fourth element of meaning: belonging. She noted that religious affiliation can contribute to belonging and religions offer belonging within a sacred cosmos. More specifically, religious organisations invite people to belong to a ‘community of saints’ (Schnell 2021: 77). She argued that if we see ourselves as part of a community formed by God then that belonging gives us significance that is universal in scope. Or, if we consider that our actions are observed by a higher power who may judge us in the afterlife, those actions take on eternal significance.

Schnell observed that religious narratives and teachings provide guidance on what it means to live a good life and how to cope with or overcome suffering. In these, and in the values and norms of religion,

one finds orientation and direction. A religion offers a ‘unifying philosophy of life’ which helps create coherence.

Schnell (2021) noted that there are many roads to meaning. Among them, she named religion, spirituality, nature relatedness and social commitment, all of which might be related to the ‘cosmic’ type of mattering identified by Guthrie et al. She also named communion, love, and care which might be related to ‘interpersonal’ mattering. But she also described other roads to meaning which do not fit into either category such as achievement, creativity, self-knowledge and development. This last group of roads to meaning form the basis of another type of meaning which could be described as ‘personal mattering’. People find meaning through what they find personally fulfilling, such as painting a picture, developing one’s knowledge, or maintaining one’s health. These personal pursuits may also give meaning to one’s life as they are seen as valued objectives.

The question arises as to whether the relative importance of these types of meaning—cosmic, interpersonal and personal—vary from one culture, epoch or social context to another. Guthrie et al. (2025: 147) found that interpersonal mattering, rather than cosmic mattering, was the strongest and most reliable predictor of a general measure of meaning in life among American university students. Similarly, Costin and Vignoles (2020) in England found that interpersonal mattering more strongly predicted overall meaning in life than coherence or purpose. However, there has been no measuring of ‘personal mattering’.

Does the decline in identity with and attachment to religious communities in some places indicate that cosmic meaning is no longer as important as it once was? A study in New Zealand by Van Tongeren et al. (2025) found that people who had left religion lost some of their sense of meaning, but while the difference was measurable, it was modest. Van Tongeren et al. concluded that de-identification with religion did not suggest a crisis of meaning and was ‘far from alarming’ (Van Tongeren et al. 2025: 8). Further, a recent international qualitative study has suggested that community gardens can provide pathways to social connection and cohesion, ethical and moral systems, and connection with the transcendent in nature, in ways that transcend the binary of religion and nonreligion. In other words, other activities may replace religion in providing meaning (Beaman et al. 2025).

In the light of this literature review, then, it is appropriate to ask whether religion and religious organisations are continuing to provide meaning for contemporary retired Australians. If so, what part do the various facets of religion, beliefs and values, rituals, experiences and

communities play? In light of the studies of meaning, does religion provide meaning through the three major mechanisms of comprehension, purpose and mattering? Or is religion becoming increasingly irrelevant to the creation of meaning as other cosmic, interpersonal and personal paths emerge?

### Methodology

Between November 2023 and March 2025, a team of seven researchers interviewed 71 people in Australia who were retired or semi-retired. Most of these people were Boomers, with a few being members of the Builder generation. In developing a purposive sample, the research team drew up a range of demographic variables which may have some impact on people's sense of meaning and social connection. These included where people lived (city, regional town or rural area), their birthplace, and their religious connections. The intention was to interview a diverse sample of people rather than a representative sample of Australian retirees. The researchers were keen to interview people associated with different Christian denominations and other religions, as well as people with no religious connections. The study was given ethical approval through the University of Divinity and Christian Research Association, where the project was initiated. All interviewees signed consent forms prior to participation in the research. The researchers achieved a sample of:

- 18 who described themselves as Anglicans
- 10 Uniting Church people
- 8 Catholics
- 6 Pentecostals
- 5 Baptists
- 3 Other Protestants
- 3 Other religions
- 5 said they had their own beliefs or spirituality, and
- 13 were atheist or had no religion.

The researchers advertised for participants through a variety of organisations: churches, a walking group, a U3A group,<sup>8</sup> a movie-makers group, a golf group as well as personal and social networks

8. U3A stands for University of the Third Age. It is a global movement focused on providing educational and social opportunities for older adults, specifically those in their 'third age' (retirement); <https://www.worldu3a.org/resources/index.htm>



such as Facebook and neighbourhood houses. The researchers lived in three states in Australia and in rural as well as urban contexts and the participants were recruited in that variety of locations. Seven members of the sample had Chinese heritage, five were born in the United Kingdom, and three others were born outside of Australia. The remaining 56 were born in Australia with European heritage. Table 1 provides the detail of age groups and gender.

**Table 1:** Interviewees in Communities of Meaning Study by Age and Gender

| Age bracket           | Female | Male | Total |
|-----------------------|--------|------|-------|
| Under 65 years of age | 5      | 4    | 9     |
| 65 to 70              | 13     | 9    | 22    |
| 71 to 75              | 9      | 7    | 16    |
| 76 to 80              | 7      | 7    | 14    |
| Over 80 years of age  | 5      | 5    | 10    |
| Total                 | 39     | 32   | 71    |

Source: Communities of Meaning Interviews

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews between 2023 and 2025. They asked people about the various groups in which they were involved and then explored how some or all of those groups contributed to their wellbeing and sense of meaning. They asked whether their involvement in groups contributed to purpose and goals and how they did so. Questions were asked about mattering in terms of how the interviewees were recognised and appreciated within their social groups and how they contributed to them. They were then asked about how this related to their own sense of meaning and purpose in life and what other aspects of life contributed to meaning and purpose. If not previously mentioned, interviewees were asked about whether religion or a religious organisation was significant in their sense of meaning and, if so, how.

As with most qualitative research, no generalisations can be drawn about the Australian population as a whole from this study. However, the interviews revealed a variety of patterns of religion and meaning that exist among a purposive sample of Australian retirees.

**Results**

Of the 71 people interviewed, 45 were attending a religious group and 26 were not involved in a religious community at the time of the

interview. Of those not involved, four people used to attend a religious group but were not doing so at the time of the interviews, and another four identified with a religious group but had never attended. As noted above, 18 of those interviewed described themselves to the interviewers as ‘non-believers’, as having no religion, or as having their own spiritual beliefs.

### **Religious Organisations Mediating Connection with the Divine**

In five interviews, participants emphasised the importance of religious organisations as a source of meaning by mediating their connection to the divine. This occurred in several ways. The first was through the sense of having a personal connection with God in which God provided direction for life on a day-by-day basis. This was well expressed by Simon (Baptist, 65 to 70).<sup>9</sup> He noted how the church had provided the opportunity to share with others in the experience of God. ‘It’s not about getting the theology right’, he said, and not just our intellectual framing of propositions but how we are feeling and how we are experiencing things. For Simon, the church provided an opportunity for a close relationship with God, particularly through a small group, similar to the groups described by Wuthnow (1994). He described it as follows: ‘I think it’s that experience of grace that actually is an overflow of God’s grace in the community where you just receive for who you are and doing the journey together’. He concluded ‘I think what to me is most profound about a church community is the truth that Jesus comes to be amongst us’. Asked explicitly about how the church contributed to meaning in life, Simon spoke of the way the church framed faith and encouraged him to minister to other people and gave him freedom in the way in which he did that. He described his daily conversation with God, explaining how he looked for God’s direction and how he could respond to it. As Wuthnow (1994) described, God was found in personal experience and in the experience of community and it was this that gave Simon’s life meaning.

Herbert (Pentecostal, under 65) had a similar foundation for meaning: ‘There is direction in my life, but that direction does not come from me. That direction comes from God. And I have discovered that the more I rely on God, the more satisfying life becomes.’ For both Herbert and Simon, their churches framed faith in terms of a personal connection

9. All names of participants in the research have been changed to protect confidentiality.

with the divine, and in that relationship with God, they found direction and purpose. This occurred on a daily basis and provided a sense of significance in that they felt they were doing what God wanted them to do. The fact that directions were perceived to come from a unitary source gave them coherence. They felt that they ‘mattered’ in a cosmic sense: they had significance through their relationship with God.

Mark (Catholic, 65–70) described his experience in a Catholic Charismatic prayer group. He spoke of the singing and the teaching on themes such as gratitude. The songs further contributed to the emotional atmosphere of the gathering. Mark spoke of finding meaning in the group experience and in the specific roles he performed, particularly in providing music, and in how much that was appreciated by others. He also described it in terms of growing in faith, in developing a sense of thankfulness and joy, and in praying and supporting the other members of the group.

In Berger’s terms, rather than building a ‘sacred cosmos’ in systems beliefs, these cases described the creation and maintenance of a ‘sacred cosmos’ in terms of a relationship with God and with fellow worshippers. This relationship was central to their meaning in giving significance and purpose as they sought to live in response to that relationship.

## Meaning through Ritual

Two people in the sample explicitly referred to meaning arising from ritual. For Jemma (Catholic, 81 to 85), connection to the divine came through the weekly ritual of Mass. She did not spell out the meaning and may well have found it hard to do so. A possible interpretation is that many people have felt that the weekly ritual of church services, or of Mass in particular, is a regular reminder that God is in control of the world and supports those who are faithful (Hughes 1994). As a member of the Builder generation, the duty to attend Mass gave life meaning. She explained as follows:

When I was really crook [ill], I couldn’t get to Mass for at least six months, might’ve been nine months. And I really, really missed it. I was just dying to get back. Not so much to Mass, but to exposition and, well, I suppose I couldn’t live without Mass. I mean, it just means so much to me. And it’s sort of a very personal thing. ... it’s good because it gives you an extra reason to get up and get out of bed. Because some days I think, oh gee, do I have to go? And then I think, yes, I’m going. ... And once you get up and go, you feel a lot better than if you had stayed in bed.

Jemma also described how preparing flowers for the church each week was her special contribution. She was disappointed that the priest had never recognised what she did. Nevertheless, the ritual and her contribution to the church led to meaning in life in the various components of coherence and purpose. She had a sense of belonging and significance through making a contribution.

Emma (Jewish, 65 to 70) spoke of the Jewish festivals, such as Purim, as important to her sense of meaning. Part of this was belonging to her Jewish community and celebrating her Jewish heritage. She also went on to speak about her involvement in the Women's International Zionist organisation and how through that she was able to help many women, children and the elderly. For both Emma and Jemma, religious rituals gave meaning through the 'cosmic' rather than 'interpersonal' sense.

### Meaning through Values

For some of our interviewees, religion provided meaning through providing general values and principles for life, sometimes expressed through activities in which they were involved at the church. For example, Katharine (Church of Christ, 71 to 75) described her involvement in a church-run group for young children and their mothers, many of whom were Chinese immigrants. Katharine explained: 'It's, it's a fulfilment of what my calling is, you know, as I commit myself to God to make me a blessing to others. This has always been my prayer, that my life would be a blessing to others, not to waste my life away, you know.' She described how relationships often continued beyond the mothers' involvement in the group.

Parker (Catholic, 65 to 70) reflected on Catholic education and how that had shaped his social values.

I think my Catholic education has contributed to my feeling my life is meant to contribute towards social justice: Christian belief in terms of the value of life and people's lives, and that rather than doing things like accumulating money. I believe that we are facing global warming, and I want this earth to be habitable for my children and my grandchildren and for everybody. So I've been pleased to do that because it's resulting in, I believe, a social good.

Arnold (Uniting Church, 65 to 70) had worked in the Philippines for many years among indigenous communities, and later with the church documenting human rights abuses. Now retired, he continued to be involved in an advocacy group supporting peasant groups in the

Philippines. Arnold, Katharine and others found in their religion a set of beliefs and values which provided meaning in terms of comprehension and purpose as they sought to live out those values.

Some people who spoke of the meaning of religion in terms of values did not feel the need for involvement in a church. Alan (no religion, 80 to 85) said he and religion did not get along, but he affirmed belief in the Ten Commandments as ‘the best ten rules that anybody could have ever thought of’.

Bethany (own beliefs, 65 to 70) referred to the Ten Commandments as providing a good basis for life, along with the serenity prayer. ‘There is so much wisdom and so much strength’ in that prayer, she said. She saw these as teachings she had learned in Sunday School and church as a child, but had not found a church group with which she felt comfortable.

For Katharine, Parker, Arnold, Alan and Bethany, purpose and direction arose from values which they traced back to Christian teaching and example. The values provided meaning through comprehension, and living them out gave them a sense of purpose. It is noteworthy that the values continued to be significant for several people who had no involvement with religious organisations at the time of the interviews. Religious organisations can contribute to continued meaning in terms of direction and purpose in life through its teaching even among those who are not involved in a religious community.

## **Meaning through Mattering**

In the interviews, it was evident that religious organisations also provided meaning by providing opportunities for social connections in which people were recognised and supported and through which they contributed to the lives of others. Of the 45 people who were involved in a religious organisation, 26 people spoke of small groups, positions or special relationships through which they found meaning. For these people, meaning arose not so much within the local religious community as a whole, but through the small group or position they held within the community. Interpersonal mattering through social connections within the religious group provided an immediate sense of meaning.

Fourteen of our interviewees spoke about the small group or Bible study in which they were involved. They talked about the opportunities the group provided for discussion, encouraging each other, sharing their lives and caring for each other. For example, Kay (Pentecostal, under 65) spoke about her own and her husband’s decision to join a Bible study group: ‘So in that group we, I mean, we grow in our faith and knowledge

of God. ... So we care for one another and sort of share life with each other. That's the meaningful thing.' Kay and her husband Donald were also active on Sundays, welcoming people to church and directing traffic in the church car-park. They were part of one of the largest churches in the city, but participation in the small group contributed most to meaning.

In some of the interviews, the term 'belonging' was used. Mostly it was used in relation to belonging to a small group and was associated with fitting in and feeling that they were accepted. In one case, a person said his church was a place where he belonged. However, what was more important to him was being able to be useful. In terms of meaning in life, what mattered was not belonging as such, but being useful through a variety of groups and activities. Conceptually, belonging was noted as a dimension of mattering in these interviews.

Four interviewees described their sense of meaning as arising from the positions they had within the church. For example, Richard (Catholic, 76 to 80) was part of a 'bereavement ministry', visiting people who had been recently bereaved. It gave him purpose and he reflected on how his listening helped people through the process of grieving, giving him a sense that he was doing something valuable. Two other interviewees said they had been on a church or parish council. This could provide a sense of meaning in that they felt they were making a contribution which people appreciated.

In all the cases noted above, apart from those not involved in a church, meaning was found not just in their experiences of God or their values, but also in interpersonal interactions within the church in which they felt that they were valued and could contribute value. Simon experienced God most poignantly in a small group. Mark noted the importance of group interaction. Katharine found she mattered in the group of mothers and babies. Arnold summed it up well:

The functional purpose of the community is less important than the actual encounter people have. And that's what's life giving. That's where the spirit comes alive. ... It's the people connection, whether you're painting or singing or jujitsu or worshipping or talking about social justice or cooking meals for homeless people or whatever. It's that you're doing it with someone else. That's that connection that makes you feel valued.

## **Failure of Churches to Provide Meaning**

However, six people who attended a church said the church was not providing much meaning for them. They found more meaning in their

involvement in other groups and activities. Two people explicitly said that church attendance was something they could easily give up. In each of these cases, the people were not involved in a small group within the church. Nor did they speak of specific personal relationships within the church that provided them a sense of meaning. Campbell (Anglican, 71 to 75), for example, was critical of the values he saw expressed in the church but found his meaning primarily through Rotary. He described how Rotary provided a way of contributing to the world, giving him both comprehension and purpose. He added that people in Rotary had become personal friends, who contributed to his sense of meaning.

June (Pentecostal, 65 to 70), who had found meaning through missionary work in Nepal and in church leadership, had lost her husband in traumatic circumstances a year or two before the interview. She reported:

I no longer felt connected to the church community that I had been a huge part of because of my own grief journey and things that I was struggling with. So my main community at the moment is just my family, and when I get together socially, it tends to be with my children, their spouses, their spouses' parents.

This was a case where trauma had occurred in her life and where she might have turned to religion for answers. In fact, the trauma had turned her away from religious organisations and especially from the church in which she had been involved. She noted in further conversation that she did not feel valued in her church now she was struggling with grief: 'I really believe that a lot of churches undervalue somebody who can't contribute.' When asked about what made life worthwhile now, she talked about the simple and personal things in life: putting roses in a vase, an ocean view and weeding her garden as well as relationships with her family.

Jill (Uniting, 76 to 80) was dealing with a very sick husband, and George (No religion, 80 to 85) was devastated by the death of his wife. While this was not explicitly asked, they made no reference to religion providing a theodicy or means of dealing with the challenges in life. Nor were they turning to religious organisations for assistance. June, Jill and George each spoke of how relationships with family were providing support.

Among those who attended a church, some were not interested in developing close personal connections there: occasional or peripheral involvement was sufficient. Many of these people saw their religious faith as being the justification for their values in their relations to other

people, but did not see the religious community as their major or ongoing source of meaning and support. Eighteen out of the 44 attenders saw their religious involvement in that way. Each of these people had other activities that gave them personal meaning or were involved with other groups and activities outside their religious community to which they pointed as major sources of meaning in their lives. Ann (Catholic, 65 to 70) was a volunteer for her local politician. Howard (Uniting Church, 81 to 85) found meaning through his golf club where he had become an unofficial 'chaplain' to the group. In each of these examples, meaning was found primarily through interpersonal mattering in a group of people in which they felt valued and could contribute value.

These counter examples in which religious organisations were not providing meaning demonstrate that other organisations could contribute to meaning-making. Other organisations, such as Rotary, could provide meaning by creating ways of making the world a better place as well as specific activities to make a difference. For some, meaning came through simple personal activities such as creating a beautiful garden. For many, both religious attenders and non-attenders, meaning was found through interpersonal relationships. There is a hint here of what Day and Beaman have described as a weakening of the division between the sacred and secular, particularly in relation to meaning-making.

### Discussion

Each of the facets of religion identified by McGuire (1992) were important for some of the interviewees: beliefs and values, ritual and experiences. However, the beliefs were rarely expressed in terms of propositions, but often in terms of closeness to a God who gave personal directions for life day by day. In some ways, the interviews reflected Day's observation that propositional beliefs have been replaced by 'beliefs in' people, and it was through such relationships that people were experiencing a relationship with God, as Wuthnow (1994) described in his analysis of small religious groups in the USA.

Conceptually, this relationship with God presupposed a 'sacred cosmos', although it was not articulated in detail. For other interviewees, the 'sacred cosmos' was less personal, providing general principles about how to live. These principles also led to specific purposes and activities. Three interviewees phrased this in terms of having a specific calling, while others spoke of using their gifts for others. Others noted that they were living out their faith in their personal ethic of being kind and helpful to others, or in helping with a particular form of ministry.



For some it took the form of involvement with religious programmes or structures such as in a parish council. Both personal and impersonal forms of 'sacred cosmos' provided meaning by giving comprehension and purpose, but also through cosmic mattering.

There was no indication in our interviews of religious faith providing a theodicy that helped people deal with the crises of life. Indeed, in some cases where a crisis had occurred, people had turned away from the church and from faith, finding support in family.

Jemma spoke of the importance of the ritual attending Mass, and there was a hint there and in several other interviews with older retirees that it was important to fulfil their duty to God and the church in that way, reflecting the sense of duty that was important to the Builder generation. However, for the Boomers, attending a church was not enough. They wanted involvement where they were personally valued. Jemma valued contributing flowers to the church and wished that had been recognised.

The most significant finding of this study was the fact that the majority of religious attendees found meaning in life primarily through personal social connections in which they felt they were valued and through which they could contribute value. Around half of all attenders described small groups within their religious organisations in which strong personal relationships were formed providing support and meaning. These groups took several forms. Some existed around devotional activities such as Bible study, prayer or meditation. However, mattering occurred in many contexts beyond the sort of small groups described by Wuthnow (1994): in charitable activities serving people in the wider community, such as programmes for young children and mothers, or through an Opportunity Shop and in a bereavement ministry. While McGuire (1992), Berger (1969) and others have recognised the importance of the religious community, they have seen it as a context in which beliefs and values are shared and in which rituals are practised. McGuire (1992), Berger (1969) and Bouma (1992) did not emphasise the importance of religious communities as contexts forming meaningful social connections in which individuals felt they mattered and in which they felt they could contribute, as has been highlighted by Flett (2018) and Pilleltensky and Pilleltensky (2021). Wuthnow (1994) noted the importance of small groups for spiritual growth, but did not explicitly link this to meaning, as explored in the psychological literature on mattering. Nor did he explore how religious groups could be replaced by non-religious groups in providing meaning. This study has demonstrated that opportunities for social relationships, where individuals were personally

acknowledged, felt accepted, and where they felt they could contribute to others, were extremely significant for many Australian retirees in the creation of meaning in life.

Interpersonal mattering has rarely been conceptualised as significant in studies of religion and has rarely been measured in studies of meaning. The studies of Li et al. (2025) and Martela and Steger (2023) included reference to mattering as a dimension of meaning, but measured it only with cosmic statements such as 'Whether my life ever existed matters even in the grand scheme of the universe' (Li et al. 2025: 743). These interviews demonstrate the importance of interpersonal, as distinct from cosmic, mattering, particularly as experienced in small groups. Only recently in works such as Guthrie et al. (2025) has interpersonal mattering been identified as a primary source of meaning in life.

These interviews make sense of the findings of Van Tongeren et al. (2025). For those interviewees who had left religious organisations, a major crisis of meaning did not result, despite some reduction in the strength of meaning in life. This was likely due to the relative importance of interpersonal mattering which could be found outside religions, in comparison with the cosmic mattering that religion provided. The fact that 18 of the interviewees who attended a church found their meaning primarily through social connections outside of the church confirms the observation of Beaman et al. (2025) in their study of community gardens that the distinctiveness of sacred and secular meaning-creation is fading.

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

These interpretations should be read in the light of the study's conceptual and sampling boundaries. As a qualitative study, it is not intended to be statistically representative of older Australians, let alone people in other regions and cultures. The accounts are cross-sectional and retrospective, and the interview setting and mode may have shaped what participants disclosed and how they narrated meaning-making. In addition, our interpretation uses analytic categories such as cosmic and interpersonal mattering which may not map neatly onto participants' own emic terms. Future research could triangulate these findings with quantitative measures. Relatedly, this study was framed primarily through institutional religious traditions of European and Christian origin and did not explicitly theorise or explore the many other cultures that contribute to the multicultural nature of the Australian population. Specifically, it has not considered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cosmologies or

other spiritualities as distinctive meaning-making frameworks (Luetz et al. 2026).

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that religious organisations can still play an important role in the meaning in life for some Australian retirees. However, the interviews demonstrated that religious organisations were most effective when they provided the opportunities for people to be involved in interpersonal activities and relationships where they felt they mattered: where they were valued and could contribute value. In these contexts, some interviewees spoke of feeling close to God. Others felt they were able to live out their Christian values in helping, supporting or encouraging others or working with others in advocacy and service in the wider world.

In most religious organisations, the central activity remains the weekly service, which is seen as a teaching event (particularly in Protestant churches) or a ritual celebration (particularly in Catholic churches). However, this research indicates that the most meaningful activities for most people who are involved in churches are the small groups and other activities that happen during the week. These include the small groups described by Wuthnow (1994). However, this research moves us beyond Wuthnow and Day. Most Australian retirees we interviewed want more than a pleasant time with other people and they want more than belonging. They want to be valued and to contribute value. This was expressed through opening homes for Bible study, contributing to a group for migrant women and their children, visiting people who had been bereaved, volunteering in an Opportunity Shop and advocating for Filipino peasants. While fulfilling one's duty by attending church and living by its teaching may have been enough for one's sense of meaning in previous generations, it was certainly not enough for the retirees we interviewed. People wanted to be involved with others in ways they felt were useful, and the variety of forms this took suggested that people were choosing activities in line with their sense of personal capacity and what gave them fulfilment. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have argued that doing what is personally fulfilling is fundamental to meaning for the Boomer and subsequent generations. The many examples of people who sought meaning through activities outside of their churches indicates that religious organisations must pay more attention to developing such contexts in which people feel they are personally valued and can add value, if they are to contribute to meaning in life.

Scholars such as Berger (1969), McGuire (1992), Pargament and Ano (2004) have emphasised the importance of religion in providing theodicies to help people cope in traumatic situations where the meaning in life is under threat. The fact that there was no mention of people turning to religious faith in crises also points to the fact that beliefs about the 'sacred cosmos' have little significance for many people, including religious attendees. Instead, people looked for supportive relationships in family and small groups.

This research is important for reaffirming that meaning in life frequently occurs through interpersonal mattering: the social connections developed within small groups where people are valued and where they feel they can contribute value (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2021). As recent research by Guthrie et al. and others has indicated, more attention needs to be given to interpersonal mattering in understanding the overall nature of meaning, and this means a focus not just on social connections but on how people are valued and can add value.

This study also offers insight into how religious organisations can contribute to meaning in life through providing contexts where people feel they matter. The study demonstrates there is no one formula for providing such contexts. People want to contribute according to their skills and opportunities, not just attend a service, and not all find meaning in Bible study groups. Many will find appropriate opportunities outside of their religious organisations, with the result that religious organisations are replaced as sources of meaning. The major source of meaning in life in contemporary society is through interpersonal mattering in activities experienced as personally fulfilling, both within and outside religious organisations.

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