

# The Church and Family Life in Australia and Overseas

## Family life in society

Australia has seen significant changes in family life over the last few decades. The composition of family households are changing steadily, as are many of the issues facing families.

In Australia in 2006, family households made up 71.7 per cent of the 7.1 million households, down from 73 per cent ten years earlier. The proportion of households comprising of couples with children continued to decline from 36.6 per cent in 1996, to 34.3 per cent in 2001, and then down to 32.8 per cent in 2006. By contrast, lone person households rose from 22.8 per cent to 24.4 per cent during that same period.

Whilst these changes have led to changes in values, Australians still consider family important. When asked what two issues were most critical for human societies today, 46 per cent of respondents to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes said *'Family life – encouraging families to provide care and support for each other'*. Around 36 per cent of respondents indicated that social justice was a critical issue, while 31 per cent said the environment was a critical issue. Just two per cent said spirituality was critical.

Family structures have changed, and, as a result, there is much more diversity. But that often means more lack of stability in families.

On the other hand, marriage is still seen as relevant. In the 2005 World Values Survey, 83 per cent of Australians disagreed with the statement that *"Marriage is an out-dated institution."* However, the reality is that fewer people are getting married, and the proportion of people living in de facto relationships is increasing.

Roles in society have changed, particularly in regard to gender specific roles. In Australia, women are taking on career roles traditionally undertaken by men. Australia now has its first elected female Prime Minister – with a de facto partner who is a hairdresser!

Roles within marriage have also changed. Household roles are becoming less and less defined by gender. Consider the statement: *"The husband's job is to earn money and the wife's job is in the family."* In 1993, 28 per cent of Australians agreed. In 2009, only 17 per cent of Australians agreed. If we compare church-attenders (those who said they attend monthly or more often) with non-attenders we see a considerable difference: 27 per cent of attenders agreed with that statement compared with 14 per cent of those who don't attend (ASSA 2009 and ISSP 1993).

Attitudes to relationships have also changed in society. Again there are huge contrasts between church-attenders and non-attenders, particularly in regard to sexuality and marriage. In Australia, in 1993, almost half (49%) of all attenders thought sexual relations before marriage was always or almost always wrong. Such attitudes among attenders had strengthened by 2009, with 54 per cent indicating they thought sex before marriage was always or almost always wrong.

In contrast, sexual relationships prior to marriage became more acceptable to non-attenders. In 1993, around ten per cent of non-attenders thought sex before marriage was

always or almost always wrong. In 2009, just six per cent thought the same.

In 2008, there were almost 119,000 marriages in Australia. Around 78 per cent of those were of couples who had lived together prior to marriage. Just over one-fifth of the marriages were between couples where one or both had remarried (ABS, Cat 3310.0\_1, Marriages 2008).

There are also some interesting differences in values of societies in various countries. The following table shows results from five selected countries.

**Table 1. Sexual relations before marriage**

	<b>Australia</b>	<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>
Always wrong	10	22	14	4	7
Almost always wrong	5	8	8	2	3
Wrong only sometimes	14	14	17	8	15
Not wrong at all	71	56	61	87	75
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)

Whilst people in some countries have stronger views than others, in all countries the majority of respondents did not believe sexual relations before marriage was wrong at all. Overall, there is far more acceptance – or in some countries, perhaps tolerance – of sexual relations prior to marriage.

Similarly there have been considerable changes with regard to same-sex relations. Overall, in 1993, around 61 per cent of Australians (77 per cent of attenders) said that sexual relations with someone of the same sex was always or almost always wrong. In 2009, 39 per cent (73 per cent of attenders) had that opinion.

Again, when we compare a few selected countries, there are also notable differences, as shown in the following table.

**Table 2. Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex**

	<b>Australia</b>	<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>
Always wrong	33	44	25	18	12
Almost always wrong	6	6	9	6	2
Wrong only sometimes	9	8	13	11	10
Not wrong at all	42	28	35	57	70
Can't choose / Not answered	11	15	19	8	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009)

In Great Britain, half the population said homosexual relationships were always or almost always wrong. Around one-third of the population (34%) in Ireland had the same opinion. In contrast, just under one-quarter of Danes (24%) and 14 per cent of Dutch saw same-sex relationships as always or almost always wrong.

In Australia, while church attenders generally have more conservative attitudes on certain issues than those who don't attend, church attenders vary considerably in their attitudes. There can also be huge differences in the attitudes of people within denominations, particularly the larger denominations, such as Catholicism or Anglicanism.

In society, the ideals of family life, marriage and relationships, and the reality can be quite

different. There are some indicators showing that family life is not all that good.

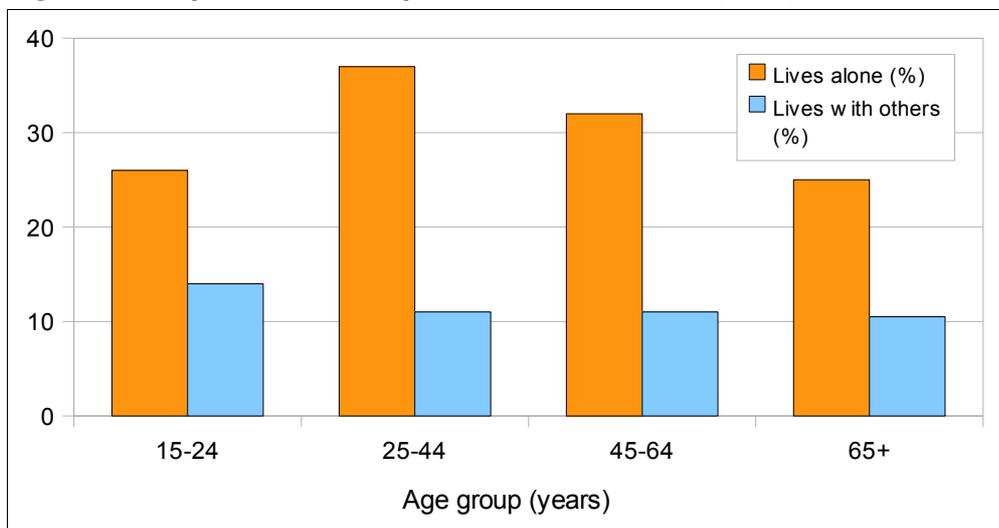
One such indicator is divorce. The likelihood of marriages in Australia ending in divorce is increasing. In a 2007 study, the Australian Bureau of Statistics determined that for marriages entered into between 1985-1987, around 28 per cent would end in divorce. For marriages entered into between 2000-02, around one-third would end in divorce. The length of time in a person spends in marriage in their lifetime is also decreasing.

Domestic violence is very much an under-reported crime, particularly in some communities (low socio-economic areas, indigenous, ethnic). In Australia in 2005, there were 228,000 reported experiences of violence committed by a victim's current partner. More than half of these cases had children in their care when the violence was being committed (ABS, Cat. 4906.0, Personal Safety Survey 2005 – reissue).

Similarly, figures on child abuse – a product of domestic violence – is also staggeringly high. In Australia, during 2008-2009, there were almost 340,000 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made to government.

Another indicator that family life is not really all that good is the issue of loneliness. For many people, living alone is a lifestyle choice. But for many others living by themselves means loneliness. Many people who live alone would prefer to spend less time alone. In a 2006 time use survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 37 per cent of 25-44 year olds living alone said they would prefer less time by themselves. For those aged 65 or older living alone, one-quarter said they would prefer less time alone.

**Figure 1. People who would prefer less time alone (2006)**



## **The Churches contribution to family life**

So where does the Christian church fit into all this? Has the church made any significant difference to family life in Australia or in other countries around the world?

The church has made a significant contribution to family life in a number of ways:

- Family-friendly focus of events and worship
- Children-oriented ministries
- Marriage is seen as a sacrament, binding for life

- Lower rates of divorce among attenders
- Churches have provided important rites of passage.

However, times are changing. Fewer weddings are being conducted by clergy. In 1970, nine out of every ten weddings in Australia were conducted by ministers of religion (de Vaus, 2004, p168.) In 1988, 59 per cent of weddings were conducted by clergy, and 41 per cent by civil celebrants. By 2007, that trend had reversed, and 63 per cent of all weddings were conducted by celebrants (ABS 2008).

With fewer church weddings, rites of passage are being broken. Couples have no connection with a church community. Their children have no connection with a church community. It may well be that for many in this current generation of young people, the first time they connect with a church community will be at a funeral – again, if conducted by clergy.

In 2002, the National Church Life Survey Research team reported that this generation of school-aged children will be the first where the majority will not attend church at some point in their upbringing. (Bellamy, Black et al. 2002, pp30-33.)

It may not be surprising, then, that there are lower divorce rates in church-attenders than in non-attenders.

In a paper published in 2009 about lifestyles and parental divorce, Mariah Evans and Jonathan Kelley (Evans & Kelley, Lifestyles and Parental Divorce, 2009) found three factors which contributed significantly to lower divorce in Australia:

1. Employment of wife – there was greater risk of divorce in families where the wife was employed full time.
2. Ethnicity – incidence of divorce was lower among those of Mediterranean ethnicity.
3. Church attendance – the more frequently a couple attended church the lower the likelihood of divorce. There was no difference between denomination, theology or belief system, but rather, the social activity of attending church was the important factor.

But whilst churches may have contributed to lower rates of divorce, there has been a cost. People who are separated or divorced often feel their situation is not acceptable to a church.

### **Where does the church go from here?**

In the past parents have looked towards the church in assisting them to instil values and beliefs in their children. Perhaps more so than ever the church still has this important role. Anyone who has raised a family in the last few decades no doubt understands the changes that have taken place in society in relation to families. The competing demands placed upon families today are very different to what they were just a few decades ago. Social networking, global mass media, work/family balance, and technology have all contributed to the changing face of what is family. Change will continue. Families come in all shapes and sizes – even within the church.

However, the emphasis on family life and the structures of family relationships within the church has sometimes meant certain groups of people have felt left out.

Philip Wilson, in *Being Single: Insights for Tomorrow's Church*, found most single people active in church life had been hurt by 'church-pain', that is, church activity or teaching or people insensitive to the needs and situation of single people.

Wilson suggests the real challenge of singleness in the church is the churches' concept of community. He asks: "Can a sense of community be developed in the church which is more inclusive of single people rather than being centred around the notion of the family?" (Wilson, 2005)

But the issue here is much broader than singleness. The question for churches relates to the very concept of family and structure. How does the church continue to work for families without alienating those who aren't in typical family structures? How can the church develop a more inclusive sense of community?

At the heart of the challenge for the church in Western societies, both now and in the future, is the importance of seeking to develop a true sense of community in society. The church's genuine focus should be about building quality relationships, not maintaining structures.

The Christian church is in a difficult place. It strives to maintain values and to be a voice not swayed by public opinion and an ever-changing society. Yet, in so doing it excludes people. If the church is to develop and encourage a true sense of community in society, it must focus less on structures and place a genuine emphasis on the building of quality relationships as the key to transforming the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

### **Sources of data:**

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