THE DECLINE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

The Hollingworth Saga

"I am not a rapist". May 8 2003 was the first time in Australian history that a Governor-General (who was formerly an Anglican Archbishop) had had to make such a denial. Unbeknown to the Australian population, the Governor-General had been locked in a legal tussle over whether his identity could be revealed in a court case brought by Rose Marie Ann Jarmyn. Mrs Jarmyn claimed that she had been sexually assaulted by the Rev Dr Peter Hollingworth in the mid-1960s. Dr Hollingworth claimed he was a victim of mistaken identity. Eventually the suppression order on the identifying of "AB" (as he was listed in the court documents) was lifted and his name entered the public domain. By the time the order was lifted, Mrs Jarmyn had taker her own life and the substantive court case was later struck out.

Dr Hollingworth's case (which few of us outside of it took seriously) was nonetheless the final straw in Dr Hollingworth's involvement in a sad saga over clergymen and sexual abuse allegations. Dr Hollingworth was appointed Australia's 23rd Governor-General in April 2001. The appointment of a Governor-General is very much the personal decision of the Prime Minister of the day. It is shrouded in mystery because there cannot (to save any embarrassment to potential candidates or the Queen) be any public discussion and so the Prime Minister has to keep the appointment close to his chest for fear that the list of potential candidates gets leaked.

There was a general support from the public for Dr Hollingworth's appointment. The biggest objection (except for republicans who want the post abolished completely) came from people who were opposed to any religious leader being appointed. The animosity at the time was directed at the principle, rather than the particular person. Dr Hollingworth had had a highly praised career of working in the slums of Melbourne at the Anglican welfare organization the Brotherhood of St Laurence (first as chaplain from 1964 and then as the director from 1980). He 1989 he became the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane. (I have known him since 1978, though I have not discussed the Jarmyn case with him).

While he was Archbishop he had to deal with a number of cases of clergymen within his diocese who had allegedly been involved in sexual abuse over the years. All of these matters were handled out of the public eye and were probably not known to the Prime Minister John Howard when he put Dr Hollingworth's name forward to Buckingham Palace as the next Governor-General

(or at least Mr Howard had no idea how explosive the cases could become). The details only started to trickle out after his appointment (with the first compensation payment made to a victim in the December following his April 2001 appointment).

Gradually, there were increasing calls for his resignation. Some people had consistently opposed any religious figure being appointed. They were then joined by people who thought he had handled the sexual abuse cases badly. Other than the tragic Mrs Jarmyn, there were no allegations made against Dr Hollingworth personally. The issue was how he handled the allegations against others. Eventually the pressure became too great and so he resigned.

This article examines the declining status and influence of the Christian church in Australia. The Hollingworth saga has four bearings on this subject. First, his appointment was opposed from the outset by some people who wanted to maintain the "church and state" split and so opposed any religious figure in that role. Second, the Prime Minister had limited options as to whom he could select. The "political class" is despised so that the appointment of an ex-politician would probably not be supported by many Australians. Ex-senior military officers are "safe" but boring. The country is probably not yet ready for a sports personality (though ironically two states have ex-runners as Governors). Therefore the popular "pastor to the slums" seemed a "safe" choice. Third, Dr Hollingworth was collateral damage in the tragedy of clergy sexual abuse, which is the main reason why Australian media cover church affairs nowadays. Finally, no Prime Minister will appoint any other religious leader to the position of Governor General for many years (if ever again). Similarly it is unlikely that any State Premier will put forward another religious leader as State Governor for some years (if ever).

The Church in Early Australia

The church has been one of the major institutions in Australian life right from the outset of the European settlement in 1788. Religious observances began as soon as the colonists arrived in Sydney. The church also provided a range of education and welfare services right from the outset, such as schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Until just over a century ago, the church provided more such services than the colonial governments. The church continues to do so and is highly regarded for the innovative work (such as the creation of the Lifeline telephone counselling service which was started in Sydney by the Wesley Mission four decades ago and is now found in many other countries around the world).

The church also shaped the Australian culture. For example, Sunday was the distinctive day of the week because no employer could demand the staff to work on it. By 1850 it was the only regular holiday for Australians. Almost every shop was closed, as were the theatres. Melbourne, which was the temporary federal capital city from 1901 to 1927, was one of the few capital cities in the world not to have a Sunday newspaper. The temperance movement was also highly effective – despite (or because) of Australia's image as a country fond of alcohol.

Meanwhile, the "best sellers" of the day were often hymnbooks. Lines from them appeared on posters, tombstones, and in school reading books.

Indeed, religious views were so important that the framers of the Australian Constitution decided to stay clear of religion in the lead up to federation in 1901. There is a separation between church and state. There is no "established" church in Australia and the government is prohibited from trying to create one.

There is a similar split in the US Constitution but for a different reason. Many Americans two centuries ago were deists: they believed that there was a God but He was not a present factor in human life; He was away elsewhere in the universe doing other things. This helps explain all the references to God in US public affairs but the far less attention to Jesus and Christianity.

But a century later, when the Australians started work on their Constitution, their religious views were bitterly held. Denominations mattered. It was said that the Anglican and Catholic Archbishops of Melbourne would pass each other in the street but would never speak to each other. You could tell a lot from a person's denomination in those days. As the current Catholic historian Fr Ed Campion has joked about those days: "The Anglicans made the laws, the Presbyterians made the money, the Methodists did the work and the Catholics told the jokes". But denominational discrimination was no joke in those days. Indeed, some government departments were notorious for only recruiting their own kind (and naturally everyone avoided employing Jews).

Generally speaking the Anglicans and Presbyterians drew their support from the richer upper class and they voted conservative. Catholic working class people voted Labor (in 1985 the New South Wales State Labor Premier, Neville Wran, hosting an official dinner for the President of Ireland, joked that he presided over the world's second most Catholic Cabinet).

The Decline of Church

There has been an overall decline of the church in Australia. Although the facts and figures are not specific, the trend is. Measuring the "Christian church" is very difficult. One indication is what people write in their census returns. Australia has 20 million people: 14.6 million (68 per cent) say they are Christian and five million have no religion. But being "Christian" does not necessarily mean attending a church on a regular basis. Most of the 14.6 million only attend (if at all) for special observances such as weddings, funerals, Christmas and Easter.

Another indication is the decline of marriages being performed by ministers and priests. In 1908, ministers and priests performed 97.4 per cent of the marriages in Australia, with civil celebrants doing only 2.6 per cent. Half a century later, the figures were still holding up with ministers and priests conducting 88.9 per cent of the marriages in 1958. But by 1998, the

percentages were almost even: ministers and priests 50.5 per cent and civil celebrants 49.5 per cent.

Similarly the church's impact on culture has been greatly reduced. For example, the introduction of Sunday trading in the States and Territories means that shop are open as much as they are during weekdays and Saturday. The States where Sunday trading is still opposed (mainly Western Australia) do so on the basis of pressure from unions wanting to have some rest for their members. It is not a religiously-based argument and indeed the churches no longer even bother to mention this issue.

Where the churches do participate in social debates, such as over welfare or educational standards, the discourse is very much one of secular values. They speak from their own expertise in (say) the provision of welfare or educational services. Few church spokespersons would say that something must be done or must be stopped "because the Bible says so". It is likely that many Australian homes do not even have a Bible, and those that do, leave it unread. No major Australian politician would quote from the Bible (unlike, say, in making sporting references) because the inferences would probably not be understood.

Reasons for the Decline

One reason for the decline has been the overall decline in respect for – and interest in - institutions in Australian public life. There is no institution that has not been touched with some sort of scandal. Australian political life is riddled with problems, with politicians having a very low standing. Probably at any one time, there is a politician under investigation, or on trial or in prison. Meanwhile, there is currently concern that Australia went to war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction but it seems that there were no weapons.

There is a general despair about Australian political life that leads not to anger and a desire to improve - but just a sense of resignation and apathy. Australians simply could not be bothered. Australia is one of the few countries in the world that makes voting at all three levels of government compulsory – and in one year 54 people were imprisoned for not voting in a federal election. If there were not this compulsion, then many people probably would not bother to vote.

Similarly, there is little interest in the role of Governor-General. In December 2003, there was an opinion survey to see if people knew who was the current Governor-General. Two per cent correctly recalled the name of Major General Michael Jeffery. A further five cent had a vague recollection of his name. 87 per cent had no idea who held the job (which, given all the scandal over Dr Hollingworth was possibly what Mr Howard had hoped for!). (To add insult to injury, the newspaper that tabled the results spelt "Mr Nobody's" name incorrectly in the front-page report).

The problem for the church has largely been the scandals over sexual abuses. No denomination has been left unscathed, though the Catholic and Anglican churches (due to their size) have acquired most of the odium. The pattern of the scandals has been similar to those overseas, such as in the US, UK and Canada.

Australian church leaders (including the then Archbishop Hollingworth) have been in a dilemma over how to respond to the allegations. They have not been embroiled in this type of controversy before. They had little precedent to guide them. First, some of the allegations have been difficult to sort out, especially if they were committed many years earlier with some witnesses no longer around to question. Rumours and innuendo are not facts.

Second, if the church leaders wanted to admit the liability of their institutions for past crimes (as distinct from personal liability themselves) then the lawyers warned them (including Archbishop Hollingworth) that any such pastoral response would cost them their insurance cover and so their own assets would be vulnerable to loss via litigation. Indeed, one Anglican diocese in Canada became insolvent in paying legal costs over sexual abuse cases. This advice was probably Dr Hollingworth's eventual undoing. He had followed strict legal advice while in clerical office. His personal inclination (given his experience over the decades) may well have been to show compassion to the victims but the lawyers would not let him. When all the Brisbane scandals became public, he was seen as the tough, uncompassionate person – rather than the lawyers who gave him the advice in the first place. But, then, as some church lawyers have since argued, they only gave advice – it was up to him to make his own decision one way or the other.

Finally, there is a sense of combat fatigue among many of the churches. Many ministers and priests trained and were first employed before the 1960s and they joined thriving institutions. It occurred to few people in (say) 1964 that the churches would be in such a sorry state by 2004. If they had known that, they may not have accepted their call to ministry in the first place. These people hold themselves partly responsible for the decline; it happened on their "watch". Just how much blame they should actually have is another matter. But they feel it and so it is real to them. Meanwhile, other, younger people are not coming forward for ministry. They may well go into professional social work (which pays somewhat better, is less stressful and has a higher social standing).

The laity also suffers from a sense of combat fatigue. Church members tend to be older than the rest of society and they also have a sense of failure. They are disappointed that they cannot encourage their adult children and grandchildren to get involved (except possibly for special observances, such as Christmas).

The Future of the Church in Australia

Some religious sociologists have predicted the disappearance of the church in Australia. I am not so sure. It certainly has some problems and the "good old days" of, say, the 1950s will not return. But there are some interesting trends to watch out for.

First, the pattern of decline is not uniform. There are some growth areas. For example, Wesley Mission Sydney (where I have been the Consultant on Social Policy since 1991) has over 2,000 people on average worshipping each week in its congregations. The Mission (formerly the Central Methodist Mission) is the one of the world's largest parish churches because it was an innovator in the provision of social welfare services (beginning in 1884). It has a ministry of blending Christian evangelism and outreach with a variety of aged and child care, education and training, and multimedia ministry programmes (with an annual budget equivalent to 75 million pounds). It has a variety of congregations and worship times catering for a variety of tastes. Large parish churches catering for a variety of tastes constitute one way to go.

Second, denominational loyalty – which was such a major issue in Australia for the first century and a half of its European settlement – is now virtually meaningless. Current generations play "musical pews". They shop around until they find what they want – and they are not worried about the denomination providing it. This is obviously a threat to the old religious guard who want to maintain the purity of their religious labels. But it is a window of opportunity to other Christians who can think and act flexibly. For example, there is a growth of small "house churches" (which is how the Jesus movement began in the first place two millennia ago).

Third, the churches still have a monopoly over death. There is no law saying that an Australian has to be buried via a religious service. The laws only relate to the physical problems associated with the disposal of the body, such as the avoidance of burying a body that could damage the water table. But almost all Australians are buried via some form of a religious – usually Christian - service.

One aspect of this interest in death is the presence of roadside crosses to memorialize people killed in road accidents. Almost double the numbers of people were killed in road accidents last century as were the number of Australians killed in the four major wars. Road accidents are estimated to cost the equivalent of seven billion pounds per year. Nowadays, road accident scenes receive makeshift crosses and regular supplies of flowers by anonymous donors. Few are ever desecrated. In June 2004 an Australian university will be hosting what is thought to be the world's first international conference on this phenomenon (which is also now found in other countries). Death haunts people.

Australia is now often thought to be one of the world's most materialist countries. It may well. But there is a quiet spiritual quest also underway. As the population gets older, so it wonders where it will be spending eternity. This does not mean that people will suddenly start

pouring back into the churches. That era has gone. But it does provide a basis on which churches can open a dialogue with such searchers and show what they can offer – providing they can be flexible and accommodating.

Keith Suter