

Baptists in Australia

Hughes, Philip J. *The Baptists in Australia* Canberra, Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research/Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996, pp 78-79.

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Chapter 7 - Baptists and Australian Society

In most places around the world, and through most of its history, the Baptist Church has been a minority group. Its emphasis on the necessity of an individual, public commitment to faith in baptism has meant that people had to make a personal decision to become part of it.

It has also tended to be a minority church because of its high expectations of members in terms of personal behaviour and high levels of involvement in the church. Most of those who have been involved in Baptist churches have had little time or energy for involvement in other aspects of the wider society.

By the autonomy of the churches, the importance given to Bible study and other such activities, the Baptist churches have attracted people with a high level of education and with professional backgrounds. Comparatively few blue-collar workers have become attenders of Baptist churches.

Sociologically, the intense form of congregationalism, with its high levels of involvement has been, and continues to be, the greatest strength and the most problematic liability of the Baptists. In some situations it can lead to the formation of small groups, exclusive in their attitudes, particularly in terms of power-sharing. It is easy for those groups to remain insular and oblivious of external changes in the

surrounding culture. It can provide a fertile ground for leadership conflict, both within the congregation and between lay leaders and the minister.

On the other hand, such congregationalism can enhance the development of flexible, warm and caring communities attractive to many people today in a society which has become increasingly fragmented. The freedom and autonomy of each congregation has enabled some to adapt their activities for their situation, to try new ways of expressing faith, and to be entrepreneurial in styles of worship and service.

There have been some environments in which Baptist churches have thrived. This has been so in the United States of America, where the Baptist principles have fitted comfortably with the strong division between government and religion that has long been part of American society. Perhaps, in a similar way, it has found an environment for growth in Russia, where, in a different way, religion has been separated from politics.

It is possible that recent changes in Australian society and culture have made Baptist styles of worship and community more attractive to Australians. Since the mid-1960s the Baptists have not lost numbers to the same extent as many other denominations in Australia. The informality in style of worship, the use of contemporary music, the strength of community life, and the relative unimportance of organisational structures have been attractive to many (Hughes 1994).

The 1991 Census showed considerable growth among Baptists. It will be interesting to see whether this was, to some extent, an aberration in the way the question was asked. Or perhaps there has been and will continue to be growth of Baptists within a society which enjoys the

informality of Baptist worship but, at the same time, appreciates the strong sense of community which develops through high levels of involvement.