
Original Paper

Looking for Education finding God

Reflections on the logistical potential for Keller's porch metaphor in the Australian Christian School Context

Dr Fraser Douglas Hannam

Lecturer, Morling College, North Ryde, Australia.

Lecturer, Alphacrucis University College, Parramatta, Australia.

Senior Educational Officer Christian Education Ministries, Erina, Australia.

Email: fraserhannam@yahoo.com

"That Jesus was a teacher has never been recognized as it ought in educational literature, lives of Christ and theology. Educational works have ignored him, lives of Christ have degraded him, art has made him a pathological specimen, and theology has made him a metaphysical abstraction. Thus he has been removed from the real life among men and well may another Mary lament,

'They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him. ''

Ellis, 1902, p. 141

Abstract

In response to Keller's 2023 post, *Lemonade on the Porch: The Gospel in a Post-Christendom Society*, Smart revisited the metaphor specifically for Australian Christian Schools (2023). Keller's metaphor contains 3 elements: The 'Road' (the secular world), the 'House' (the church) and the 'Porch' (Christian Schools) a safe third space at the interface of the world and the church where non-Christians might comfortably engage with Christians at a time when church attendance is in decline. The burden of this paper will be to correlate any patterns in church attendance with school enrolment demographics across time. As such it will endeavour to identify the requisite feasibility of Smart's invitation in terms of the existence of a minimal audience for his evangelical 'porch'.

Keywords: Church attendance, Christian culture, Christian schools, Christian school enrolments, Great Commission

Christian Culture in Australia

To better understand the Christian Culture in Australia and therefore the place of Christian education I will examine some data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). First, I will explore the change in religious affiliation over time (see Figure 1) before examining the emerging trends in the Christian school landscape.

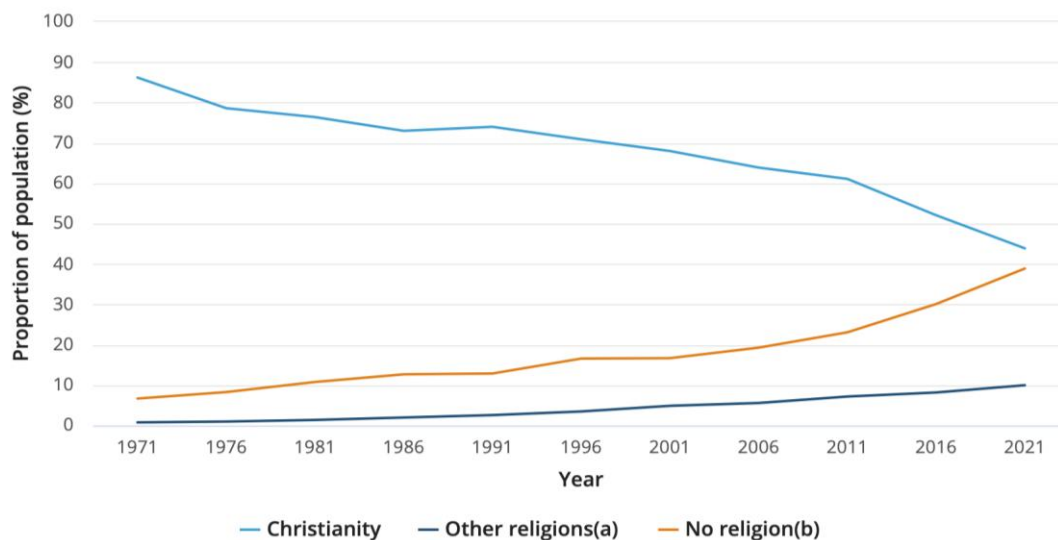


Figure 1. Change in Religious Affiliation in Australia 1971–2021

Note. From Religious affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 census, by Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>).

As seen from the above graph, although Christianity remains the most common religion in Australia, the percentage of Australians identifying as Christian has decreased steadily over the last 50 years of census reporting from 86.2% in 1971 to 43.9% in 2021. The largest Christian denominations continue to be Catholic and Anglican, denominations which have historically been responsible for the foundation of Christian schools (20.0% and 9.8% respectively). At the same time, there has been a steady growth in Australians identifying with ‘Other religions’ from 0.8% in 1971 to 10% in 2021 and a marked growth in Australians identifying as having ‘No religion’ from 6.7% in 1971 to 38.9% in 2021. As summarised by the ABS:

Over the past 50 years, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of Australians who reported an affiliation with Christianity. The same period has seen a consistent rise in Other religions and No religion, particularly in the last 20 years. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022)

Decrease in Christian Denominations 2016–2021

Of notable mention is the decrease in Christian denominations for the same period (see Figure 2). Of particular note is the observation that the two largest Christian denominations (Catholic and Anglican) experienced the correspondingly largest decreases in numbers between the census dates of 2016 and 2021 and account for 78% of the total decline in affiliation with Christianity as a religion. Specifically, the Anglican denomination percentage dropped from 22.6% in 2016 to 20% in 2021 (604,900 members), while the Catholic denomination percentage dropped from 13.3% in 2016 to 9.8% in 2021 (215,900 members). Figure 5 also confirms the seemingly universal move away from Christianity regardless of the denomination, including the generic category, ‘Other Christian’, provided for Australian citizens who wish to be identified as Christian but do not identify with any of the denominations provided in the census document.

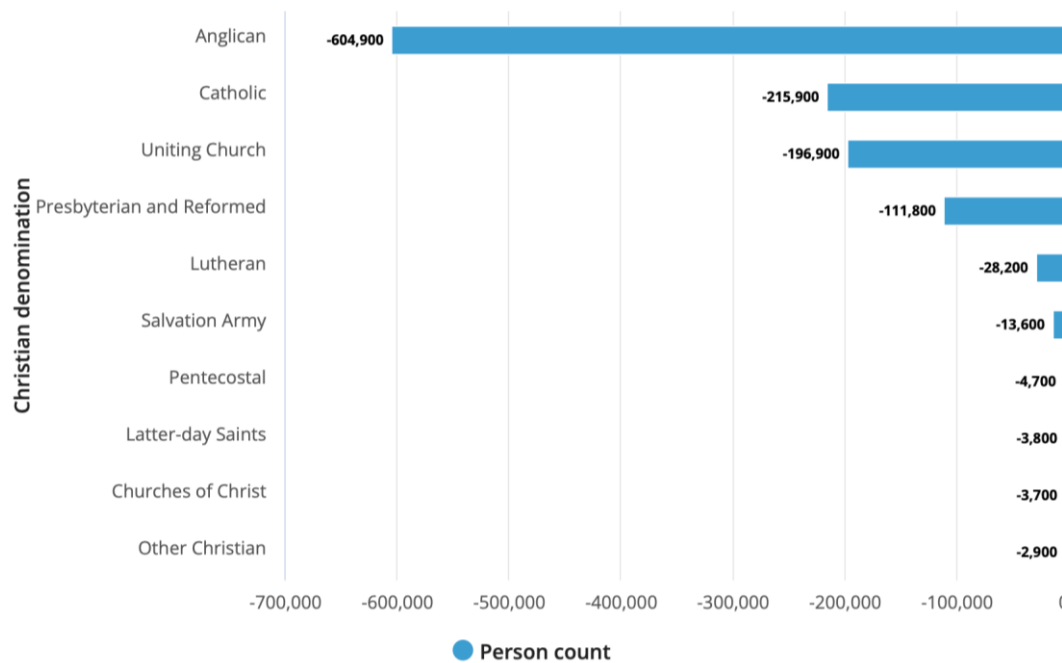


Figure 2. Decrease in Christian Denominations 2016–2021

Note. From Religious affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 census, by Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>).

The decreasing numbers within the Anglican and Catholic sectors are noteworthy owing to the denominations' historical association with establishing Christian schools and being the largest providers of religious instruction. Potentially, a decrease in congregational church membership over time might well equate to a corresponding reduction in the traditional feeder-pool into their school systems.

Student Enrolments by School Affiliation in Australia

Given the above discussion on the reduction in those identifying as 'Christian' and the steady rise of those identifying as having 'No religion' in the Australian census data, one might expect a corresponding decrease in parents and caregivers choosing the independent Christian schools' sector for their children and a corresponding increase in secular government-funded public school enrolments. Yet, as the following statistics show, it seems the reverse is the case (see Figure 3). (Note, in the following discussion, any reference to 'Independent schools' equates to approximately 83% with religious affiliation) (Independent Schools Australia, 2022, School Profile, para. 1).

	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2019-23 (% change)
Government	2,614,094	2,605,826	2,622,755	2,629,143	2,594,830	0.7
Catholic	806,323	795,368	787,181	778,605	769,719	4.8
Independent	666,581	641,318	620,781	599,226	584,262	14.1
Total	4,086,998	4,042,512	4,030,717	4,006,974	3,948,811	3.5

Figure 3. Student Enrolment by School Affiliation 2019–2023

Note. From Schools: Data on government and non-government students, staff and schools, by Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>).

As seen in Figure 3, between 2019 and 2023 (Australian Bureau of Statistics access data from schools yearly, which is more frequently than the population census), the total student school enrolments increased in Australia by 3.5%. What is surprising is the distribution of that growth, arguably a reversal of the ‘Religious Affiliation’ trend cited above. That is, the lowest growth was recorded by the secular government schools, still the largest group but whose share of the growth was only 0.7%. However, within the private school sector, Catholic schools grew by 4.8% and Independent schools recorded the largest increase at 14.1%. Given that Independent schools are 83% faith-based, these schools still account for almost 60% of the total growth during this period.

In addition, an examination of the most recent (2022 to 2023) annual growth rates of schools by state and territory adds another layer to the statistical complexity (see Figure 4). In 2023, while the annual growth rate for school enrolments was 1.1% (44,486 more students than in 2022), the secular government-school enrolments accounted for only 1.1% of this growth (8,268 more students than in 2022), whereas the non-government independent school sector recorded an increase of enrolments of 2.5% for the same year (36,218 more students).

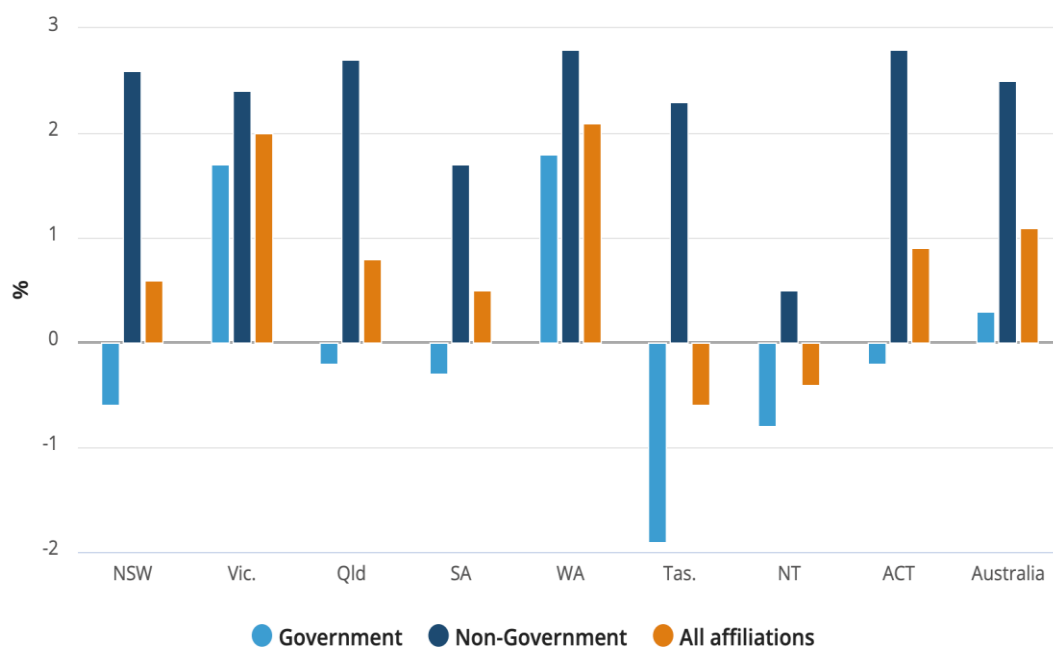


Figure 4. Annual Growth Rates in School Enrolments by State & Territory, Affiliation, 2022–2023

Note. From Schools: Data on government and non-government students, staff and schools, by Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>).

It is clear from Figure 4 that six of the eight Australian States and Territories (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory), all experienced negative growth in secular government-school enrolments for those 12 months. Conversely, every state and territory in Australia experienced positive growth rates in non-government independent school enrolments, all of which surpassed any positive growth levels experienced in secular government schools for that respective state or territory.

Further data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the 12 months between 2022 and 2023 reveal that this enrolment pattern is consistent between both primary and secondary education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). While secular government primary schools experienced no growth in enrolments, non-government primary schools grew by 12,554, a growth rate of 1.8%. While secular government secondary schools enjoyed some measure of increase, with 8,220 enrolments or 0.8%, non-

government secondary schools grew by 23,673 enrolments, a growth rate of 3.2%. The former statistics regarding primary-school enrolments are clearly of greater concern for secular government schools given the zero-growth rate that will now potentially feed lower numbers into the secular secondary government sector. This will hypothetically have repercussions for teacher jobs in this sector. The converse message for independent non-government schools is undoubtedly to bolster marketing around future enrolment in undergraduate teaching degrees as well as provide incentives to draw in existing teachers from the secular government schools and to make efforts to retain current employees if growing staffing needs are to be met.

The current state of play in school affiliation through enrolment count as of 2023 for government and non-government schools in Australia can be summarised in Figure 5.

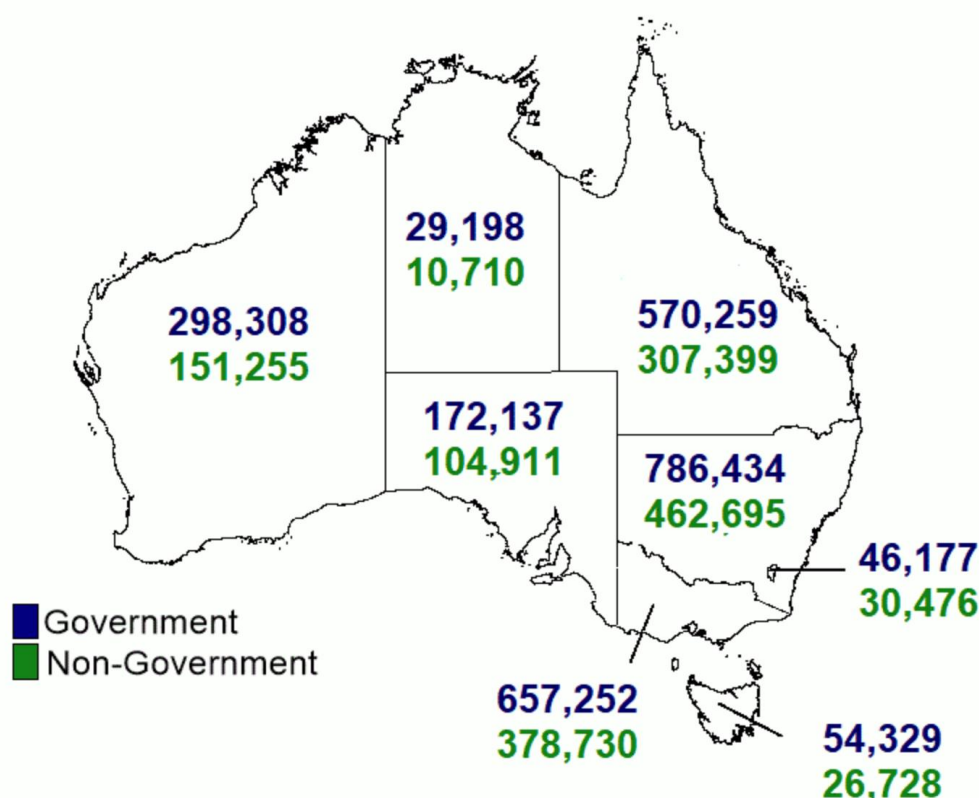


Figure 5. Student Enrolment Counts by State and Territory and School Affiliation

Note. From Schools: Data on government and non-government students, staff and schools, by Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>).

Figure 5 shows there is a growing platform whereby independent schools, and thereby Christian schools, have a purpose as a supplier of school-based education and a potential voice in terms of spiritual influence that has been declining within the church (see Figure 1). Hence this thesis should hold value for the future of Christian schools. Figure 5 exemplifies the apparent contradiction in a reduction of those identifying as Christian by way of religion juxtaposed with the statistical evidence for the increased interest in Christian schooling. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in Timothy Keller's concept of 'The Porch' (2023), an idea he developed shortly before he died. In his article, *Lemonade on the Porch (Part 1): The Gospel in a Post-Christendom Society*, Keller develops his metaphor depicting the church as the 'house' and the secular world as the 'street'. The metaphor then naturally gravitates to 'the porch', a safe third space between the house and the street where Christians and non-Christians might connect, build relationships and conceivably choose to comfortably enter the 'house' (church). Keller identified

educational institutions as some of the few remaining spiritual ‘porches’ in our society where secular people might converse with Christians and gain an appreciation for what they believe and why, a place where they might encounter ‘God with flesh on’.

Keller’s metaphor was speaking from an American perspective, and it was reworked by Smart (2023) for the Australian Christian school context in *Meeting on the Porch: Christian Schools as Common Ground*. Smart (2023) usefully links the metaphor of Keller’s porch to the opportunity presented in the ongoing growth in Christian schools (as identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics above):

In Australia, as the “no religion” category grows and those ticking “Christian” on the census continues to decline at a striking rate, schools run with a Christian mission and foundation (and there is a wide variety of those) are, perhaps surprisingly, playing an increasingly significant role in our social fabric.

What will people find today when they step onto the “porch”, that is the school, that offers a Christian view of the world? What are the ways that education might be a gift to those people encountering the core of the Christian story at their school? (paras. 4–5)

The opportunity presented by Smart is significant for the future of Christian education and at least part of the reason why a central burden of this thesis is the support of those teachers at the coalface of this challenge, enabling them to teach meaningfully and powerfully to fulfil the mandate of their governing institutions but, ultimately, to make disciples and to advance God’s Kingdom.

The reality check overall for the Australian setting is not encouraging for those with a deep passion for quality Christian education. In effect, Christianity has not just been dwindling in churches (as evidenced above) but pushed out of universities and other Christian organisations and relegated to Christian schools – arguably the last bastion for potential religious encounters for the non-Christian. This ‘inflated secularism’ is arguably exemplified by NESA developing the secular course ‘Studies of Religion’ in the final years of schooling in NSW (Years 11 and 12 Higher School Certificate). As described by NESA:

This course provides students with opportunities to develop their understanding and critical awareness of the nature and significance of religion and the influence of belief systems and religious traditions on individuals and within society.

Care should be taken to accurately represent in teaching the authoritative statements and understanding of the core beliefs and doctrines of any religious traditions selected for study. Identification of the relevant sources of authority would be included in such a study. (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2024c, paras. 1–2)

It could be argued that the presence of such a course in our school system (secular or otherwise) back in the first few centuries of Australia would have caused considerable public outrage. Certainly, it is a litmus test for the ever-changing religious landscape in our country. Such an initiative would unlikely have been considered, let alone instigated, in the United States, a country with a strong Christian heritage with an ongoing presence in all aspects of their cultural worldview.

Conclusion

The negative correlation identified by this paper between declining church attendance and an increase in the choice of sacred over secular education is tenuous at best. Whilst it may indicate a change in the Christian culture concerning the platform chosen in the delivery of spiritual teaching, it could result from a disenchantment with the public education system (for whatever reason) resulting in a push rather than a pull towards the independent Christian school system. What is clear is that there is a significant and growing audience for Smart’s adaption of Keller’s Porch in the Australian setting and thereby an opportunity to invite people into the church or indeed for our schools to become the church in this shifting spiritual culture. Similarly, dwindling church numbers do not necessarily constitute the final throes of evangelistic hope in our nation or the last bastion of the Gospel. The challenge for Christian educational leaders now remains to be prepared for the shifting paradigm and the implications thereof in using this platform to take the Good News of Jesus not just to the porch, but to “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (NIV Acts 1:8).

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, July 4). *Religious affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 census*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024, February 14). *Schools: Data on government and non-government students, staff and schools*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>
- Australian Government Department of Education. (2018, April 30). *Through growth to achievement: report of the review to Achieve educational excellence in Australian schools*. <https://www.csa.edu.au/CSA/About-Us/Our-Story/CSA/About-Us/Our-Story.aspx?hkey=6104b09c-1637-4696-9228-cf820242d0a6>
- Ellis, G. H. (1902). The pedagogy of Jesus. *The Pedagogical Seminary*, 9(4), 441-459.
- Independent Schools Australia. (2022). *School Profile*. https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ISA090322_SNAPSHOT_2022_DD04.pdf
- Keller, T. (2023). *Lemonade on the Porch (Part 1): The Gospel in a Post-Christendom Society*. Gospel in Life. <https://gospelinlife.com/article/gospel-in-a-post-christendom-society/>
- Smart, S. (2023). *Meeting on the porch: Christian schools as common ground*. Eternity. <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/christian-living/meeting-on-the-porch-christian-schools-as-common-ground/>