

Presbyterians in Australia

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Chapter 7 - Presbyterians and Australian society

The Presbyterians have brought to Australia one of the major streams of the Reformation, usually referred to as Calvinism. While Calvinistic ideas had their origins in the city of Geneva, the form that has come to Australia through the Presbyterians was moulded in Scottish political and cultural life. The Presbyterian churches are strongly Scottish in heritage, although other influences from the Netherlands, Hungary and Korea have broadened that heritage since the Second World War.

At the heart of Presbyterianism has been the commitment to applying the Christian faith to life in society, and Christianity has been seen as providing values for every aspect of social and personal life. Presbyterians have applied this commitment in different ways from some other denominations. Baptists, for example, have held that personal commitment to the Christian faith had to precede the adoption of a Christian lifestyle. Thus, Christian values were for committed Christians and not for society as a whole. Anglicans, on the other hand, have sometimes seen themselves as guardians of morality in the society, but have rarely had a program of social reform.

Presbyterians have sought to influence every aspect of life in the wider society, particularly through political life and the provision of educational facilities. Many Australian

politicians at both State and federal levels have had a Presbyterian background. While few have had a narrow and prescriptive program like that which John Calvin introduced to Geneva, they have been inspired by the desire to work for a better society through the implementation of basic Christian principles of encouraging hard work and providing care for those in need.

Presbyterians have had a major impact on education. Last century they founded independent schools which remain some of the most prestigious and influential in Australia. More recently, the principles of Calvinism have been developed in a different way by the Dutch Reformed immigrants, who have brought to Australia the model of parent-controlled schools.

Since the 1960s, Presbyterianism has undergone massive change. The most significant factor was the formation of the Uniting Church in 1977 in which about two-thirds of the churches of the Presbyterian Church of Australia participated. The remaining Presbyterian community, which continued with the constitution of 1901, was very different from that which existed prior to union.

In the formation of the Uniting Church, the Presbyterians lost many of their more liberal influences. The continuing church has redeveloped its institutions and life and has a generally more conservative character than previously. This is reflected in the Presbyterian Church of Australia's handling of successive cases of doctrinal deviance and its attitudes to the ordination of women for ministry.

Apart from the formation of the Uniting Church, the Presbyterian churches have lost many younger people, with the result that the Presbyterian Church of Australia is one of the most elderly denominations in Australia. Most

of these younger people have left the churches altogether, although some have moved into the Pentecostal and other charismatic groups.

Following the Second World War, some people of Presbyterian and Reformed background came from northern Europe, as well as many from Scotland. However, immigration of Presbyterians had decreased to a trickle by the 1970s. While some Presbyterians have arrived recently from Korea, their brands of church life and their commitment to the maintenance of their culture has meant that they have had little impact on the older Presbyterian denominations. The older Presbyterian denominations have benefited little from immigration since 1970.

As a smaller group of Christians than they were 50 or 100 years ago in terms of their proportion of the population, or even in terms of actual numbers of members, the Presbyterians are struggling to find a new identity. It has become more difficult for Presbyterians to see themselves as a major and significant force for social reform in Australian society, and there have been some tendencies for that program to be internalised, as values and a lifestyle only for the committed.

Presbyterians are currently working through their identity, both in terms of their own theology and modes of operation, and in relation to society. Only the future will show what forms their future impact on Australian society will take.