

Faith in Real Life

What Christian Media Should Know about the Spiritual Lives of Australians

Dr. Arnie Cole



April 2012

Australia presents a unique spiritual picture compared to many countries of the world. While aboriginal Australians had lived on the land for many years, modern-day Australia was established as a penal colony by Great Britain. Many of the original settlers then had cultural ties to Christianity from their families of origin. However, it was a much different situation from the founding of the United States, when Christians seeking to express their Christianity in the way they thought best came to settle the new land.

There is room for debate then about whether Australia is in fact a Christian nation. That debate aside, ministry typically touches the spiritual lives of individuals, rather than countries as a whole. In the United States, we've found that although the majority of Americans claims Christianity as their religion and many have heard the Gospel message, only a small minority are actively engaged in a growing, personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

What does the spiritual landscape look like in Australia? In many ways, it's quite different. First, only two-fifths of Australian teens and adults identify Christianity as their preferred religion. Three other groups account for the majority of the remaining Australians: 1) those who say they have no preferred religion (17% overall); 2) atheists (12%); and 2) those who say they are spiritual but not religious (12%).

These may indicate that spiritual matters do not interest Australians. Other evidence suggests this is not the case. For example, two out of three Australians say that spiritual matters are important to them (National Church Life Survey, 1998).

In terms of actual behavior, Australia closely resembles European countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Spain & the United Kingdom. Fewer than three out of ten Australians attend church even occasionally, with only one-quarter attending at least once a month. In a given week, four out of ten prays and only 22% will engage the Christian Bible at all.

Australia: A Spiritual Snapshot

If we approach the findings presented so far with a "evangelism and discipleship" duality mindset, we would say that about 40% of Australians need media that disciples them and 60% need evangelism. But is that really the case?

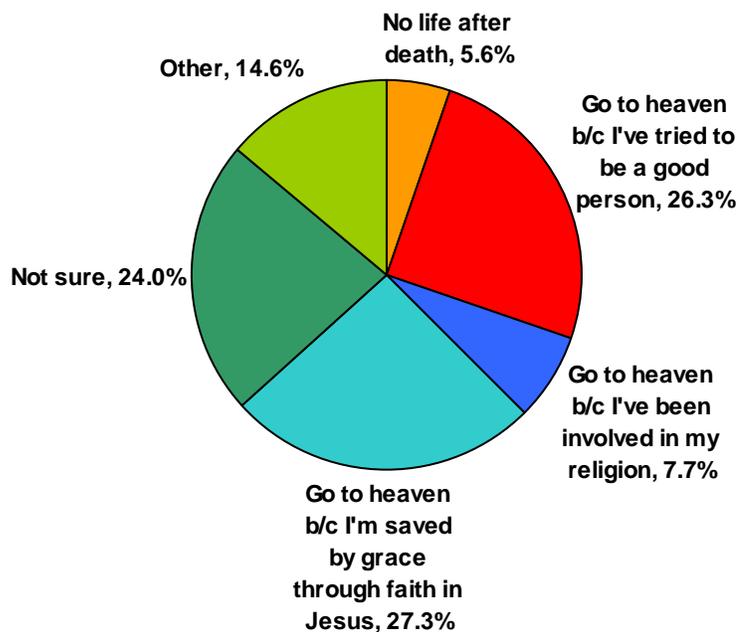
Let's consider the spiritual lives of the 40% of Australians who say that Christianity is their preferred religion. In particular, we ask:

- Do they claim to be saved by grace through faith in Jesus?
- Do they participate in their local church?
- Do they live in relationship with Jesus through regular prayer and engaging the Bible?

Less than three out of 10 Australian Christians believe they will go to heaven because they are saved by grace.

Figure 1 shows that Australian Christians have diverse beliefs about what will happen to them when they die. Nearly identical proportions are not sure (24%), expect to go to heaven because they've lived a good life (26%), and expect to go to heaven through salvation through Jesus Christ (27%).

Figure 1. What will happen when you die? - Christian Australians



More Australian Christians use Christian media in a typical month than attend church.

In a typical month, 39% of Australian Christians will attend church. One-third comes only on special occasions and 20% do not attend at all. Australian Christians' use of Christian media actually surpasses their involvement in a local church, with 45% consuming it in some form at least monthly.

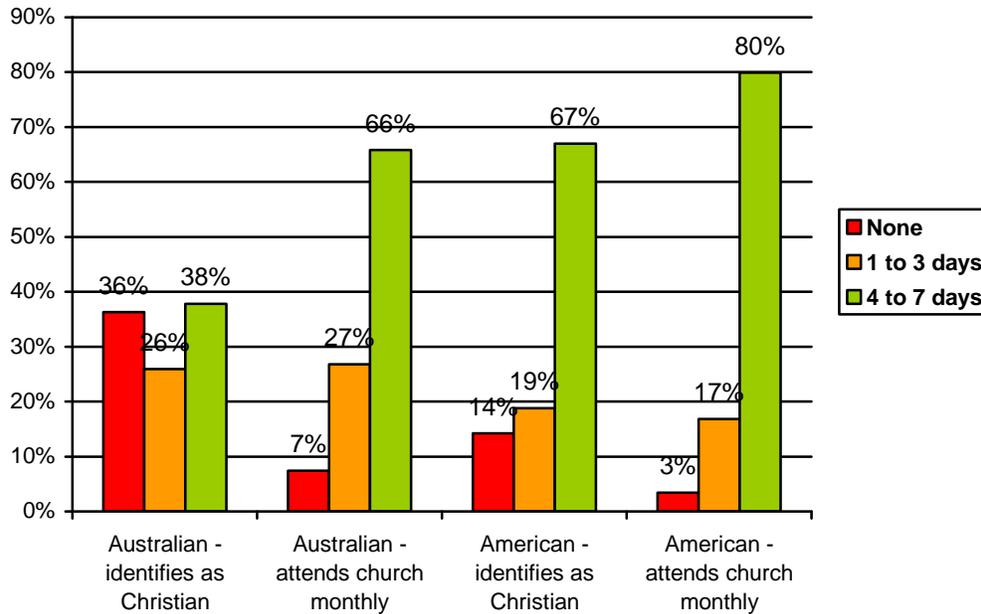
Very few Australian Christians, including only a third of regular church attenders, engage with God through prayer and His Word most days of the weeks.

A key part of Christianity is the personal relationship with God nurtured through two-way communication via prayer and engaging the Bible. Extensive research from the Center for Bible Engagement documents that most Christians around the world fail to regularly engage the Bible and as a result their spiritual growth stagnates.

Similar trends are evident among Australian Christians. In addition, they are also less involved in prayer than their counterparts in the United States.

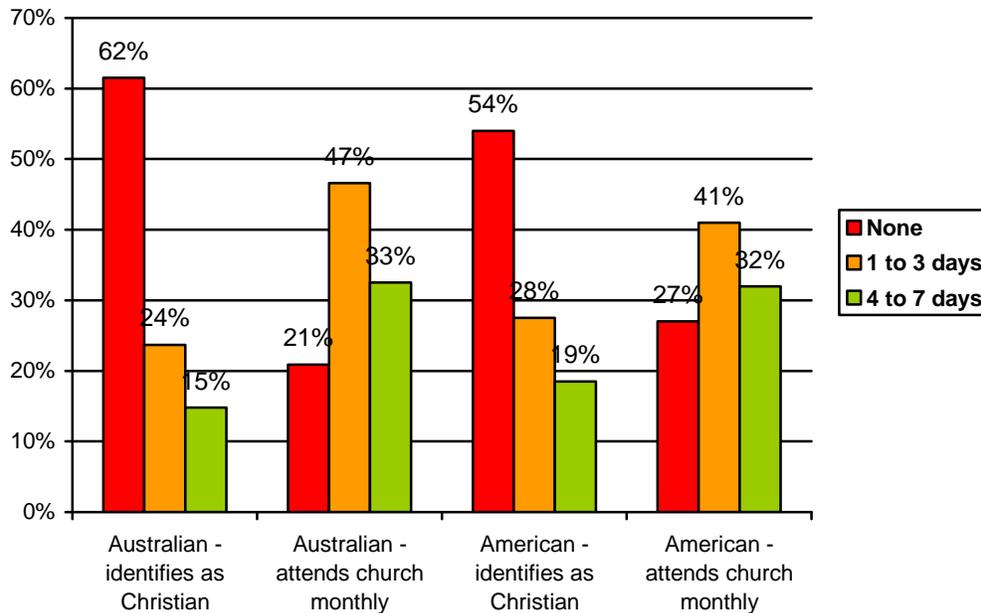
These findings are illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. In a typical week, more than a third of Australian Christians will not pray at all. Among regular church attenders, two-thirds of Australians pray most days of the week, compared to 80% of Americans.

Figure 2. How Many Days Did You Pray in the Last Week?



Patterns of Bible engagement are more similar between the two countries. In both nations, less than one-fifth of all people who claim to follow Christ read or listen to the Bible four or more days a week. Frequent church attenders engagement rates are higher, but still only about one-third are in God's Word at the level necessary for real spiritual growth.

Figure 3. How Many Days Did You Read or Listen to the Bible Last Week?



There Is Much Work For Christian Media Among Both Christian And Non-Christian Australians

This closer look at the spiritual lives of Australian Christians reveals a need for both evangelism and discipleship. To effectively minister to this group, as well as those who don't claim to follow Christ, Christian media leaders should understand that although people may be at different starting points, they can all be encouraged and equipped to move closer to Jesus.

Even among the church in Australia, most are not engaged in their spiritual lives at the level that produces growth. We know from other CBE research that the average church-goer then will not differ in terms of moral behavior from the average non-Christian (Cole & Ovwigho, 2009). Thus, an argument can be made that they need both evangelism and discipleship.

For most media ministries, this is an exciting challenge as they want to reach both Christian and non-Christian audiences. The good news is that Christian media in Australia does indeed impact a diverse audience. Nearly half (48%) of Christian media consumers do not identify with the Christian faith and only one-fifth say he or she is saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

In its current form, Christian media has different effects on different faith groups. Christian consumers more commonly report feeling inspired or encouraged and feeling more strongly about their faith. In contrast, people from other faiths who use Christian media are more likely to search for more information about the topic or visit a website.

The challenge for media ministries in Australia then is to consider carefully the outcomes they want to achieve with their consumers. If the goal is to help people move closer to Jesus, how can this be done more effectively? One starting point is to consider how media can challenge Australia Christians to more actively engage their spiritual lives.

About the author:

Dr. Arnie Cole is the CEO of Back to the Bible, an international ministry dedicated to using media and technology to lead people into a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ and walk with them daily as they draw closer to Him.

About the Center for Bible Engagement:

The Center for Bible Engagement (CBE), a research and development division of Back to the Bible, seeks to answer the question: Why do so many people own Bibles but so few read them? The center goes beyond simply usage statistics to consider attitudes and behaviors that significantly impact spiritual growth and a person's relationship with God. The primary goal of the CBE is to develop tools and resources that will engage people with God's Word. Since its inception in 2003, CBE has become the major world center addressing Bible engagement and spiritual growth.

References

Cole, A. & Ovwigho, P.C. (2009). Understanding the Bible engagement challenge: Scientific evidence for the power of 4. http://www.centerforbibleengagement.org/images/stories/pdf/Scientific_Evidence_for_the_Power_of_4.pdf

National Church Life Survey. (1998). <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=26>