THE DECLINE OF THE SUBURBAN CHURCH

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Even in this godless age most people might be surprised to see a “For Sale” sign outside St Andrew’s Cathedral in Sydney, or St Mary’s Basilica, or St John’s Cathedral in Brisbane, recently completed in its full Gothic Revival ambitiousness, or beneath those spires of St Peter’s Cathedral that form the background to every cricket telecast from the Adelaide Oval. And presumably such a sight is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Even so, estate agent’s hoardings, redacted with leaden wit – “A heavenly opportunity”, “Divine potential” - are becoming common outside less notable churches in metropolitan suburbs and country towns. All over Australia Anglican and Protestant churches are closing down. Roman Catholic ones have not so far succumbed but there are indications that their day will come. Some people might feel elated at the disappearance of what they would regard as temples of superstition and darkness; about time too, they would say, given the Christian Church's alleged record of slaughter, oppression, paedophilia etc. But architecturally and aesthetically church closures are a loss to the whole community. When a church is demolished a local landmark of greater or lesser prominence disappears - perhaps one that gave an architecturally undistinguished district its only notable building. If the church is spared as a structure but converted to a new use a fine interior may be dismantled or unsympathetically modified and fittings and furniture of high quality dispersed. Either way the closure is further evidence of the gradual passing of a local institution which for generations was part of the everyday experience of many if not most people in this country – the suburban church with its choir and tennis club, its weddings and funerals, and its accumulation of local memories enshrined in honour rolls, memorial plaques and stained-glass windows.

The decline of the suburban church is like a re-run of the fate of the suburban picture theatre 50 or more years ago. Until the 1950s a Regal or Victory or Majestic was a fixed feature of every shopping centre. Then television lured the audiences away and one by one the cinemas closed their doors, to be demolished or turned into bowling alleys and furniture warehouses.

While it is true that churches in Australia have been closing for more than a century, until recently this was usually for a reason unconnected with any serious decline in religious observance, such as a change in the ethnic character of a district (and sometimes the newcomers took over the

church and reopened it for their own use). After 1977 there was a wave of closures as a consequence of three denominations – Methodists, Congregationalists and some Presbyterians - combining their resources to form the Uniting Church. (The adjectivised present participle proclaimed that this was to be a work in progress, a first step towards the unity of all churches; it must thus be a disappointment that 36 years on no one else has joined, and the Uniting Church is losing numbers so rapidly that there won't be much of it left to unite with in a generation or two). In a flush of ecumenical hope, the new denomination established one Uniting parish where formerly there were three congregations, and in each closed and sold at least one of the churches (in not a few cases not without wrangling and rancour over which one). These closures were an earnest of things to come, but at the time were face-savingly attributed less to a decline in churchgoing already starting to make considerable inroads into congregations - and of which the union itself was to some extent a product - than to responsible stewardship of property. Besides, plenty of churches were still being built or extended all over Australia until well after the 1970s.

What is happening now is that churches are closing for no other reason than that the people who live around them have stopped going to them. It's *where* the closures are happening that is new – in predominantly Anglo-Saxon middle-class suburbs that were once the heartland of mainstream denominations. Some of these churches are well under a century old. Quite a few go back only to the years after the Second World War when the suburbs in which they stand had become more populous with streets of new houses spreading over subdivided farms and the gardens of nineteenth-century estates. That was an era when, for example, the Anglican Church, once Australia's largest denomination, built scores of new churches as new parishes were created and the population of old outer-suburban ones grew.

Many of these churches now have no future. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Melbourne, the city I know best. Anglican churches have closed in the last ten years in the once-churchgoing suburbs of Alphington, Brighton, East Brighton, Elwood, Darebin, Deepdene, Middle Park, Mont Albert, Northcote, Port Melbourne (where expensive developments of flats and houses are bringing thousands more people to live), Syndal and Thornbury. In genteel and well-heeled Armadale the suburb's two Anglican churches have *both* gone in two years. (For readers unfamiliar with the place names, all denote what are to varying degrees pleasant districts exhibiting every sign of the prosperity the Australian economy affords.) Few of these closures can be attributed to

the disappearance from a district of the demographic group from which Anglicans historically were drawn and its replacement by new residents of other creeds and traditions. Most are indications of a wholesale abandonment of religious practice by its former loyalest practitioners, the Anglo-Saxon-descended middle class. Almost imperceptibly from one Sunday to the next, the congregations have slipped away - moved, got too busy with the garden or grandchildren, lost interest, died. Quietly, without the melancholy long withdrawing roar of Arnold's sea of faith (61.1 per cent of Australians called themselves Christians in the last census) church attendance has given way to indifference. Except possibly for Roman Catholics it is no longer a social habit. For people of Protestant descent going to church has become a minority activity, like joining a camera club. Worship of God has been replaced by worship of the body: probably more people attend gymnasiums and fitness clubs than go to church. There is an instructive scene to be observed in Melbourne's smart Albert Park on Sunday mornings. A nineteenth-century Gothic church built to hold hundreds of worshippers stands locked and empty while in the confluence of streets around it cafés and pavements are jammed with post-jog breakfasters.

Since the nineteenth century the decline in churchgoing has been long and slow, but the alienation from religion of the class which for generations was the mainstay of suburban congregations has been more sudden. It has occurred mainly over the last generation and in those few years has become catastrophic for a parish system that depends on local support and the replenishment of its numbers by younger churchgoers. (That this has happened at a time when nominally Christian suburban private schools are flourishing says something about the effectiveness of those schools as communicators of religion.) For the Anglican Church the decline has been worst in Melbourne and least noticeable in Sydney, where a robust Evangelicalism reinforced by Pentecostalist-style crowd-pleasing retains a hold on sections of the middle class. Sydney's 90,000 Anglican communicants are half the national total.

The closure of a church in a middle-class suburb can mean far more than the loss of a local institution. It is usually symptomatic of the closure of an era of Australian life, of the disappearance of a suburban culture, a culture that is sneered at nowadays by *bien-pensants* but was not without value. Let me illustrate this with an account of the rise and decline of a typical suburban congregation, with details that are wanting in my direct knowledge of this particular narrative supplied by knowledge of many similar cases.

East Malvern in the south-east of Melbourne is a quintessentially middle-class suburb, green, conventional and unassuming, with solid houses of brick and stucco and pockets of weatherboard Californian bungalows. Its Anglican church, All Saints', is one of the postwar churches that have now shut down.

All Saints' was built in 1960. The little more than half a century of the church's existence coincides with the cycle of its parishioners' lives from their days as young families to old age. All Saints' closed because the people who paid for it and went to it in its earlier flourishing years got old and died or moved away. They have not been replaced as churchgoers by the younger families who bought their houses. The kind of people who attended All Saints' and supported it when the new church was built are almost an extinct species among Australian social categories. They were the last generation of regular churchgoers among Australian Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent.

They were a generation old enough to have served in the Second World War. They grew up in the Depression and that made them thrifty. They possibly saw their father unemployed.

After the war the men took jobs in banks and insurance companies or worked for themselves as accountants or solicitors. The girls became typists and nurses. At the weekend they played tennis with a church or local club, went to dances and on Sundays quite a few of them went to church. Some taught in the Sunday School. From around 1950 on they got married. If they were not themselves of local origin, it was then that they moved to the district, when they bought or - once postwar restrictions eased - built a house and started a family. For those who described themselves as Church of England this would have been the start of their association with All Saints', which in those days was a red-brick dual-purpose hall of institutional aspect.

These young families caused a parish founded half a century earlier in what was then semi-countryside to boom. The red-brick hall was soon too small for the number of people attending service and Sunday School. There were children everywhere. There were young wives' groups and fathers' groups and a choir with adults and boys and a tennis club. A number of the men of the parish were on the vestry. This was an era when a majority of families in each street related to a local church. Roman Catholics attended theirs in huge numbers every Sunday (74 per cent of Catholics were weekly mass-goers in 1954, according to research recently published in the priests' journal *The Swag*). Anglicans and

Nonconformists were less outwardly devout, but if they didn't go to church themselves they often sent their children to the Sunday School. In a respectable middle-class suburb such as East Malvern it was a rare family that didn't at least nominally identify with one denomination or another.

As this generation of returned servicemen and their wives reached their middle and upper thirties, those who were parishioners of All Saints' decided it was time to build the new church that had long been intended, across the tennis courts from the parish hall. According to the *Melbourne Diocesan Yearbook* of 1957-58 there were an estimated 450 communicants in the parish, and 230 children enrolled in the Sunday School, and even if they didn't all come every Sunday there were far too many to squeeze into the hall. To acquaint everyone with the plans for a new church - and to kick off the fund-raising - there would have been a "loyalty dinner" catered for by the ladies of the congregation, then an "every member canvass" in which pairs of volunteers doorknocked their way around the parish to every house that had some record of an Anglican connection to persuade residents to "pledge" a certain amount to the church each week. A building committee would have been formed, with vicar, churchwardens and several vestry members, an architect engaged - in this case the indefatigable and prolific Louis Williams, then towards the end of his long career, whose churches can be found in many parts of Australia - and a builder contracted. With plans drawn up and permits issued, digging could start for the foundations, and on 13 February 1960, Archbishop Woods (last of the old regime of English imported prelates) arrived in his Rover, chauffeured by his chaplain, to lay the foundation stone. Led by the substantial choir, the congregation would have sung the hymn "Christ is made a sure foundation" or perhaps "Christ is our corner-stone".

Before long the steel frames were up, the brick walls rose and the roof was on. The new church was admired by all, a decent workmanlike building of moderate size with walls of the cream brick that was near universal for public buildings in the middle quarters of the twentieth century. There were no Gothic arches but a pert little spirelet or *flèche* and a bellcote on the gable conveyed the requisite ecclesiastical look. The windows were cleverly positioned to let in the right amount of light and exclude summer glare. Built near the top of a hill, All Saints' could have done with a prominent spire or tower but there wasn't the money for that.

Before the church was opened parishioners gave gifts to furnish it, each item - pulpit and font, stained-glass windows and altar cross, hymnboard

and pews - bearing a small plaque stating in whose memory or by whom it had been donated. Parish life moved tranquilly on for a decade or so to the rhythm of the *ding-ding* of the little bell three times each Sunday. The young children got older and branches of youth organisations such as the Girls' Friendly Society were formed where they could socialise in clean and edifying circumstances. Then the children grew up. They began to get married and move away. Many would have been married at All Saints' and had their first child baptised there, then never been seen in that church again until they came back for their parents' funerals decades later. Nor, in all probability, were they seen in any other church. The connection between local people and their church that their parents had taken for granted seldom survived the transition into the new suburbs of the 1970s and after.

As the generation that had built the no longer new All Saints' reached its sixties and upwards, the shrinking numbers in the pews were very apparent. Evensong had been given up because most people were glued to the television in the evening and the few oldies who'd been brought up to go to church twice on Sundays didn't like being out after dark now. But even the main morning service - traditionally the best attended - was feeling the pinch. The choir was down to several elderly ladies. Not a few parishioners had retired and moved away, into a "unit" or up to the Gold Coast. Rising property values were an incentive to selling the family home and "downsizing". East Malvern was an increasingly desirable suburb, once considered outer but now relatively inner. It was becoming much smarter than the older generation had ever noticed it to be, proud though they had been of their gardens and their street. A new generation of young families looking for a "renovator's opportunity" was eagerly acquiring the Californian bungalows. The more ambitious newcomers could buy a substantial stucco Spanish Mission three-bedroom villa with a loggia at the front consisting of three arches on barley-sugar columns, or a dark-red brick version of the same basic plan, its alleged Tudor inspiration proclaimed by false shutters pierced with a heart and a functionless iron tie rod in an S shape on the chimney wall.

It is fair to say that in East Malvern, as in similar "comfortable" suburbs, every Anglican parishioner's house sold represented a loss to the local congregation. Few if any of the new owners turned up at church, even when they themselves had been educated at nominally Anglican schools, and although they aspired to send their own children to such schools, the religious connection ceased there. As one century gave way to another, and the middle classes rode ever higher on a wave of prosperity undreamt of by the previous generation - which itself had been much better off than

its parents - there were too many other important things to do to find time for churchgoing. Things such as extending the newly acquired home, which had hitherto been found capacious enough for a family of five or six but for the new owners was inadequate for a family of three or four, if the children were to have their own bathrooms and entertaining space and the parents their private zone and jacuzzi. This required the construction of a disproportionately large upstairs extension on the roof that gave the impression of crushing the original house under its weight. Or things like ferrying the children and a prodigious amount of equipment to weekend school sports in the huge new four-wheel-drive, for which a gabled carport that dwarfed the house had been constructed on part of the front garden. As the wave of wealth rose higher, so did the aspirations and pretensions – holidays abroad, endless meals in restaurants, cellars (or the garage) stacked with "boutique" wines, ever uglier and more complex technological gadgets, second homes, multiple cars. Few families in East Malvern mowed their own lawn any more; they paid a man to do it. Obsessed and distracted by "lifestyle" these new residents saw no reason to interrupt the pleasures of the weekend going to church, if indeed it ever crossed their mind to do so. Their Sunday observance was to put on the Lycra and set off on the bike. For anyone requiring a faith commitment to a higher cause there was always sustainability and saving the planet from global warming.

And that, in the story of All Saints', was about that. By the turn of the century the *Melbourne Diocesan Yearbook* recorded only 35 regular communicants in the parish. There was no Sunday School, although the suburb was full of a new generation of children whose only exposure to Christianity would be whatever passed as religion in their private school.

In 1958 the *Yearbook* estimated the total number of Anglican communicants in the Diocese of Melbourne as 69,895: not many in a city of about 1,750,000 but Anglicans were always the least inclined of all Christians to go to church and nominal Anglicans in the diocese were around ten times the communicant figure. (There was never a golden age of Anglican churchgoing in Australia as there was for, especially, Roman Catholics.) In 2000 the number of communicants in Melbourne Anglican churches on Christmas Day, that touchstone of church adherence, was 38,284. Average weekly attendance is now estimated at around half of that and falling.

By 2012 few survive of those decent people who raised the money to build All Saints and went to it for as long as they could. Those "returned" men who put on suits to take up the collection on Sundays and joined

enthusiastically in working bees. Those capable and friendly women, untouched by any breath of feminist envy, whose pride it was to keep a spotless well-run house and see their husbands and children and themselves neatly turned out and who always had time to bake a sponge and cut sandwiches for parish events. People who, if the marital road got rocky, tried to stay together for the sake of the children rather than rush to the divorce court. People who sought to carry their Christian beliefs into their weekday lives. People who laughed at unfunny jokes – jokes that would be prosecutable now as “hate humour” - about Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis and Protestant ministers playing golf but who were untainted by the sectarian bigotry of earlier generations and were not seriously out of charity with any fellow citizen. People who had seen life’s ups and downs and realised that human nature was sometimes odd but tried to not to bear resentments, not even against the Japanese whose brutality some of them had known directly. Good, honest, hardworking, kind people, more concerned to lend a hand to someone else - to cut a widow's grass or coach the kids in cricket - than to demand "rights" and entitlements for themselves. Old-fashioned people, by the criteria of today's "me first" culture. People whose health finally gave way, the men with "dicky" hearts and their widows with dementia.

Already in the 1980s a "memorial garden" had been laid out at All Saints' in a brick enclosure and as it grew fuller the church grew emptier. When the church closed the ashes in the garden were dug up for removal to another churchyard. All Saints’ was deconsecrated in November 2012 and sold as a development site. At the time of writing it is still there, forlorn and rapidly becoming derelict. No one rings the little bell now.

This is by no means an exclusively Anglican story. The Uniting Church has continued to close churches long after the rash of sales caused by congregational amalgamation. Not long ago it announced that 30 per cent of its 600 churches in Victoria were redundant. There will be many more sales to come. One of them will be the most imposing church in the big provincial city of Ballarat. St Andrew’s, once Presbyterian, a fine stone edifice in Norman style (“Scottish pre-Gothic”) with a tall spire, has been put up for sale as part of a wholesale disposal of Uniting Church assets to recover millions of dollars of debt from a failed educational venture. That is the immediate reason, though St Andrew’s, its congregation much reduced, was already out of action before the sale was announced, amalgamated with another church nearby and closed on Sundays (with a figleaf midweek service). What would its Scottish merchant and squatter founders have thought? Surely any denomination that cared about its public profile and preferred not to have its decline spelt out in capital

letters would move heaven and earth, so to speak, to keep a church of that architectural quality and visual prominence in use. Its appearance on the market, and inevitable future conversion into a concert hall or “arts centre”, suggests we are not so very far after all from auction boards outside cathedrals.

Roman Catholic churches in country towns have suffered like all denominations from rural depopulation but in metropolitan areas few if any have been sold. But if you look at the ageing and diminished attendance at Mass in many suburban parishes you realise the day of disposal cannot be far away. The new Mass of the Second Vatican Council that was supposed to revitalise worship has been a flop. Do the math, as Americans say: at the time the council ended in 1965 more than 60 per cent of Catholics were still going to Mass every Sunday, down 14 per cent on the statistic of eleven years earlier but still a clear majority. The latest figure is 10.6 per cent. Large numbers of Catholic convents and other religious houses have been sold or converted to other church purposes as the religious orders have declined, in some cases to near-extinction. The churches will be next.

For some non-Catholic suburban parishes the day of reckoning has been staved off by inherited assets. In the inner areas of every city there are older parishes that have kept going on the strength of endowments from palmier days which have enabled them to keep their buildings open and in repair when the income from congregations fell. As a lady in a cavernous under-used Anglican church in Melbourne’s Brighton Road (now the church of two united parishes – the other has been turned into houses) put it, “We are cash-rich and people-poor.” Property holdings have kept a vast Presbyterian church not far away, built to hold 600 and with a hilltop spire visible from miles around, open with an elderly congregation of 20. But keeping the church open will be of little use when the congregation is dead. This should be a worry for anyone who cares about our architectural patrimony. Not all large churches can be used by other denominations or converted to other relatively sympathetic uses that will ensure their survival as local landmarks and to some extent protect their internal architectural character.

So far demolition has been rare and a closed church is more often adapted to a new purpose. Leaving aside use by other (usually non-anglophone) denominations such as the Orthodox or Chinese Evangelicals, this means secular use. Dividing church buildings laterally into apartments or vertically into town houses is becoming common. Conversion of this sort has the advantage that from the outside, give or take a few skylights and

solar panels, the church will look more or less as before. The neighbours like that. They never darkened its doors but they appreciate the church because as a building it's pleasing to the eye and it adds character to the street and value to their own houses. Residential use means the church won't be disfigured with neon signs advertising pizzas or painted tangerine and used as a discount warehouse.

Churches in commercial use all over Australia have become bars, cafés, offices, design studios, theatres, art galleries, antiques markets and funeral chapels. In a few cases original fittings remain – I have seen a pulpit and stained glass in a church that is now a hat maker's showroom – just as you occasionally find a converted picture theatre filled with merchandise with its proscenium arch and dress circle intact. But in most cases the church is stripped and emptied before sale. When possible the more valuable contents and fittings such as organs and glass are moved to other churches, though that can't go on forever. Already much is abandoned or bought by secondhand dealers. You can find lecterns, pews, candlesticks and vestments in antiques shops and "collectibles" markets in every part of the country.

Converted churches that at least retain their outward appearance and spare the streetscape the addition of one more dull development may be the best solution that can be hoped for in the circumstances but the risk is that as the number of closures in all denominations increases, more and more churches will have to be demolished, simply because there will be too many for the alternative uses available and the value of their sites will be too temptingly high to protect them. The church authorities themselves don't want valuable sites tied up with under-used "plant" when the proceeds of their sale can go to building new churches in growing areas identified as having "mission" potential.

The looming fate of the suburban church was recognised two decades ago by the National Trust, which stated in the introduction to its 1991 survey *Victorian Churches* that

> in the final analysis [churches] will only be preserved in proportion either as they are useful, or as money is available to support them. Many churches are inevitably going to be demolished, moved or altered beyond recognition.

That is now happening. In the same way that the shopping strips lost their Hoyts or their Independent cinema, Australia's suburbs will lose more and more of their churches. And just as the cinema chains concentrated

their resources on keeping a few major theatres open on strategically sited cinema complexes, perhaps the Christian communions will do the same and shrink from a parish network with a church building in every suburb to a few central churches for eclectic or “gathered” congregations from churchless areas near and far. Some remnants of suburban congregations will meet for worship in people’s houses, or as one inner-city congregation that abandoned its barn-like Victorian church already does, in a shop. The suburban churches themselves won’t all disappear - in 50 years’ time there’ll still be buildings that look like churches, with spires and Gothic windows, but on closer inspection they’ll turn out not to be churches at all. The surprise will be when one still is.

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