

Counting Baptists!

(Updated)

by

Rev Dr David Parker ©

Baptist Heritage Qld/Baptist Church Archives, Qld

With acknowledgement to the Australian Bureau of Statistics for figures and some commentary
and Australian Baptist Ministries.

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The Trends

The recently released Australian 2021 Census figures show an alarming drop in the number of professing Christians in Australia—down from 56% of the population at the previous census in 2016 to 43.85% (ie, 11,148,814 people). A century and more ago, it used to be virtually the whole population and as late as 1971, it was 86.2%.

Baptists in Queensland

So, in light of this, how are Baptists going? In Queensland, there are 86,876 Baptists, which is 1.68% of the population, making us the 6th largest denomination (or 5th if you do not count 'non-denominational' Christians), next below Presbyterian and Reformed (159,948), and above the Pentecostals (69,900—about 20 groups all totalled). The male/female ratio is 0.89. Our closest 'cousins' are very much smaller—Churches of Christ at 7,902 (0.15%) and Brethren, 3070 (0.06%).

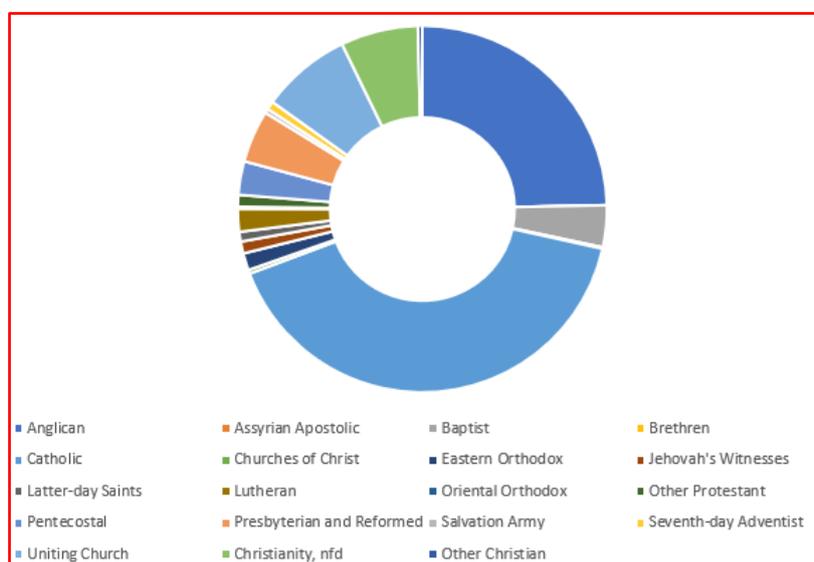


Fig 1. Percentage for each Christian denomination – Queensland, Australian Census 2021

Of course, the 'census' figures for Baptists include more than actual members of 'Union' Baptist churches—it would include those from non-Union churches, nominal Baptists and children of Baptist members. The 2021 returns for actual members of 'Union' Baptist churches reported a total of 17,632, and a 'community' of 52,257 (which is at best only a 'gestimate'). So 0.34% of the population are 'real' Baptists.

The 2021 figures show the percentage of 'census' Baptists in Queensland has declined by almost 10% from 1.86% in the previous Census (2016), and a decline of 'real' Baptists from 0.35% to 0.34%, meaning the denomination is not keeping abreast of population growth, let alone advancing!

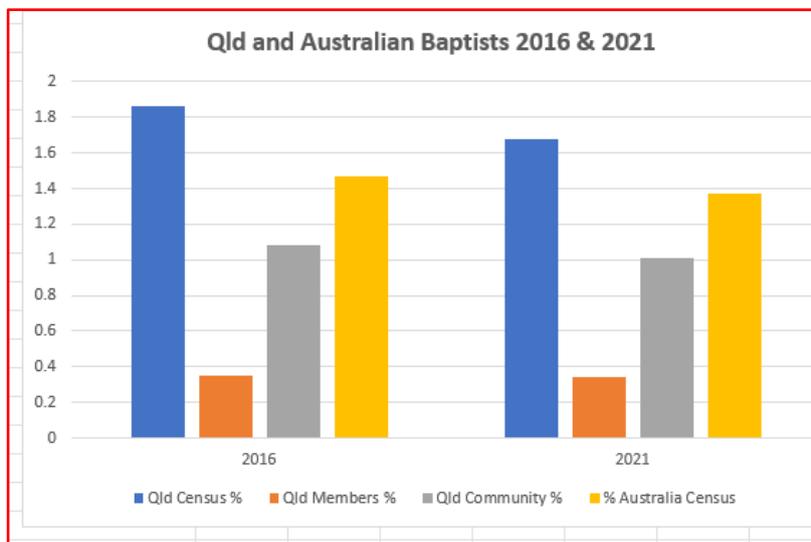


Fig 2. Chart showing the percentage of census, member and community Baptists to the populations of Queensland and Australia, 2016 and 2021

Australia

The figures for all of Australia are interesting. According to the Census, Baptists are the 7th largest—dropping down one notch nationally because of the larger numbers of Orthodox Christians in other states. We amount to 347,334 persons, or 1.366% of the population and 3.11% of the Christians. The male/female ratio is 0.88. Again, Brethren are a low 18,258 and Churches of Christ 35,928. Other world faiths total 2,423,573 and 'no religion' or 'not stated' are 10,025,838.

Apart from the Northern Territory which has the highest percentage of 'census' Baptists, 2.36%, Queensland has the highest density at 1.68%. Others are: WA, 1.61%; SA, 1.47%; Victoria, 1.26%; Tasmania 1.16%; NSW, 1.15% and ACT 0.86%. Overall, NSW is the most 'Christian' of all states, with Queensland just behind; NT is lowest and Victoria not much better.

National Baptist church membership figures for 2021 show a total of 88,756 members in 1031 churches and an estimated community of 214,686. This is an increase of 25% in membership since 2016. NSW (33,277) and Victoria (22,860) are the largest states with Queensland coming in third (17,632). South Australia and Western Australia are about half the size. The largest membership increase took place in NSW (163%) compared with Queensland's 110%. Declines took place in Tasmania and the NT.

Church membership density in the population averages out at 0.28% with NT (0.33%) the highest, followed by Queensland (0.32%) and Victoria (0.31%, with other states varying between 0.29% and 0.23%.

There are interesting figures available from the 2021 Census for the ancestry of Australian Baptists—120,403 are overseas-born, and 223,453 local. The following are some of the geographical areas represented—North Africa and Middle East, 1.84%; Sub-Saharan Africa 3.6%; Europe, 52%; Asia, 12%. Nearly 16,000 Baptists arrived in Australia since the last Census, only about 10% of the number of Catholic migrants!

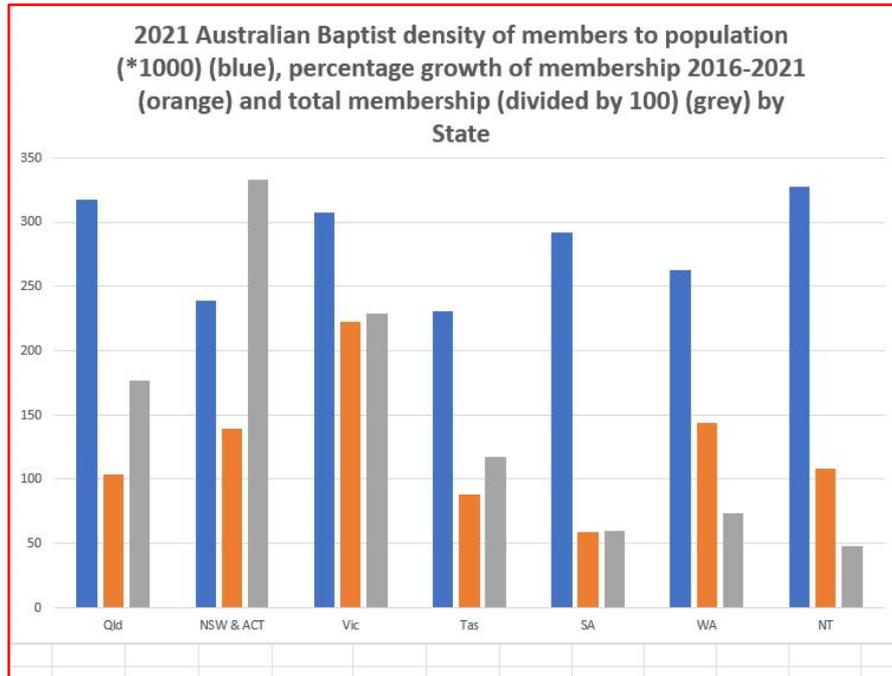


Fig 3. 2021 Australian Baptist density, growth in membership and total membership by State

What now?

Evidently, Baptists have not suffered the same losses as others—Catholics and Anglicans together contributed 78% of the total, with Catholic numbers being bolstered somewhat by extensive migration. Anglicans are ageing—the average being 56 years of age, compared with 47 for all Christians, and there are more ‘nones’ than Anglicans in Australia. The Uniting Church, Presbyterians and Lutherans also suffered losses, as did, perhaps surprisingly, Pentecostals. Increases took place amongst the Orthodox due to migration.

Of particular interest is the growth of ‘non-denominational’ Christians. According to the Bureau of Statistics,

In 2021, there were nearly 700 thousand people in the Christianity nfd [not further defined] category (688,400), an increase of 75 thousand since 2016 (76,100). They represented 2.7% of Australians.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia#understanding-religious-affiliation>; accessed 10/11/2021

So Australia seems to be following a trend strongly evident in the United States where it is reported that “nondenominational” is now the largest segment of American Protestants’ – ie, churches without any denominational affiliation (the ‘nons’ are now larger and their members more numerous than any of the

Protestant denominations (https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/november/religion-census-nondenominational-church-growth-nons.html?utm_source=CT+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=728469&utm_content=11386&utm_campaign=email)

So, although the figures for Baptists in Australia are not as bad as some others, they can hardly be considered healthy or positive, which means serious questions need to be asked about the identity, heart and direction of the Movement, especially in the light of the growth of the 'nons', and whether the status quo is acceptable.

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