

# THE RELATIONSHIP

A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR CHURCH LEADERS

# drought

Prof. Patrick Parkinson AM and Dr Michael Jensen



## OVERVIEW

This discussion paper is offered to Christian leaders to stimulate conversations about how churches can better adjust to changes in the patterns of family formation and dissolution in Australia, and in particular, to the increasing problem of loneliness in certain groups within the community. This discussion is necessary both for the work of pastoral care and for outreach. The history of the Church as well as contemporary observation should tell us that Christians are not entirely insulated from cultural patterns in the wider society. Furthermore, if we are to be effective in outreach and authentic in care, we have to try to engage people at their points of need.

In this discussion paper, we argue that strengthening the work of local churches as healthy communities is imperative for our witness to Christ in a post-Christian society. We are to be those who are 'devoted to one another in love' (Romans 12:10). Such communities are not simply inward-looking. They can reach out to a non-Christian world by inviting others

who are lonely, or struggling with a relationship, into that community. This may well involve a change in emphasis for the activities and outreach of churches.

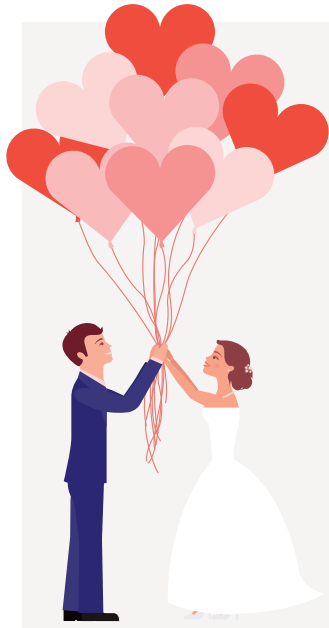
To lay the foundation for this, we present data on changes that are occurring in the Australian community over time, and which highlight the need for new strategies and approaches to outreach.

## 1 PATTERNS OF FAMILY FORMATION

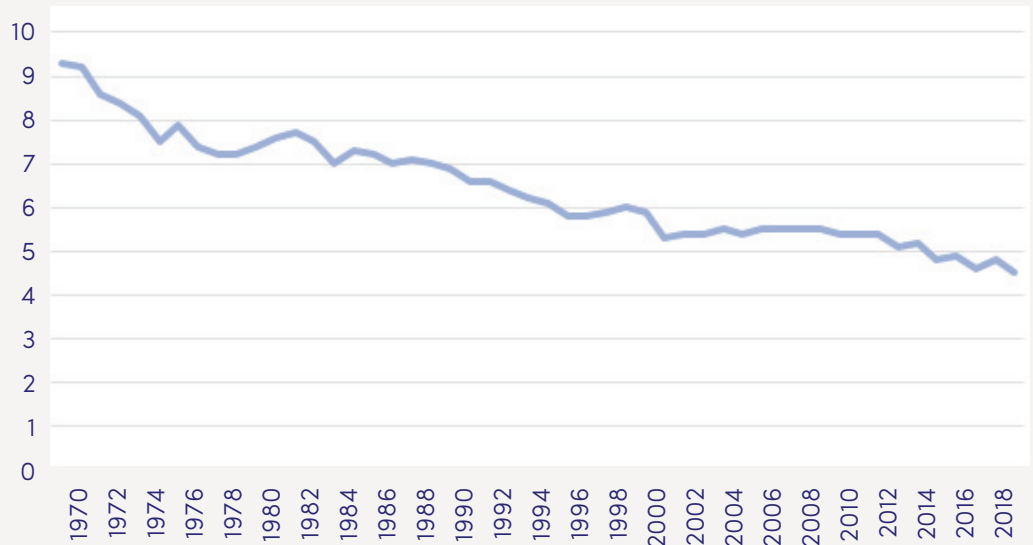
### The erosion of marriage

One of the biggest changes that has occurred in recent decades has been the erosion of marriage as the foundation for intimate partnerships and the rearing of children. It is premature to talk of a 'collapse' of marriage, since traditional marriage continues to be the norm amongst most of Australia's ethnic minority groups, as well as many others. However, the evidence for the decline in marriage across the population is stark.

In 2019, the last year unaffected by covid lockdowns, Australia had the lowest rate of marriages on record – 4.5 per thousand people. (It was much lower still in 2020). By way of contrast, the marriage rate in 1970 was 9.3 per thousand people.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1970s, based upon the marriage rate per 1000 population, it could be expected that 95% of women would marry at some time in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Now, less than half that number per 1000 population are getting married in any given year than did so 50 years ago. The implications should be clear.



MARRIAGE RATES IN AUSTRALIA 1970-2019



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Marriages and Divorces, Australia, various years.

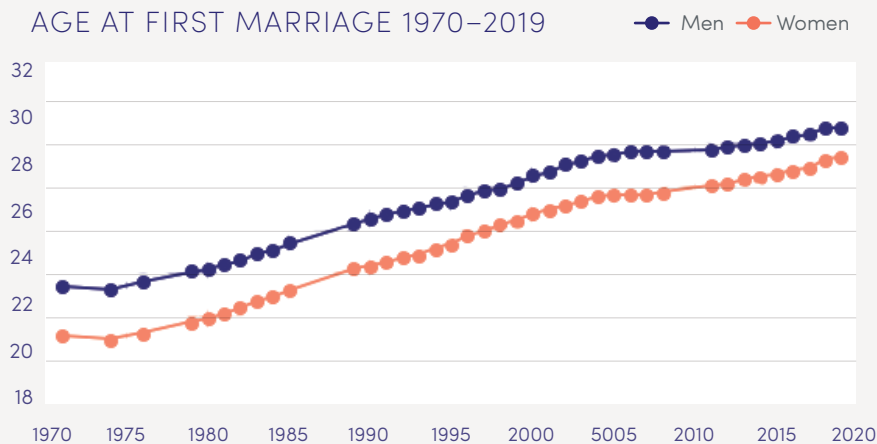
Furthermore, a lot of marriages nowadays are remarriages for one or both of the parties. In 2019, 27% of marriages involved at least one person who had been married before. In 1970, before the introduction of no-fault divorce in Australia, the great majority were first marriages.

### Age at first marriage

The age at first marriage has also increased over time. In 2019, the median

age when a man first married was nearly 31 years old, and for women, over 29. For those who do marry, therefore, it is an event that increasingly represents the capstone to a stable and successful relationship, not the foundation stone. People will often have a wedding some years after cohabitation began, at a point when they are well-enough established financially, and choose to celebrate their continuing partnership with family and friends.

AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE 1970-2019



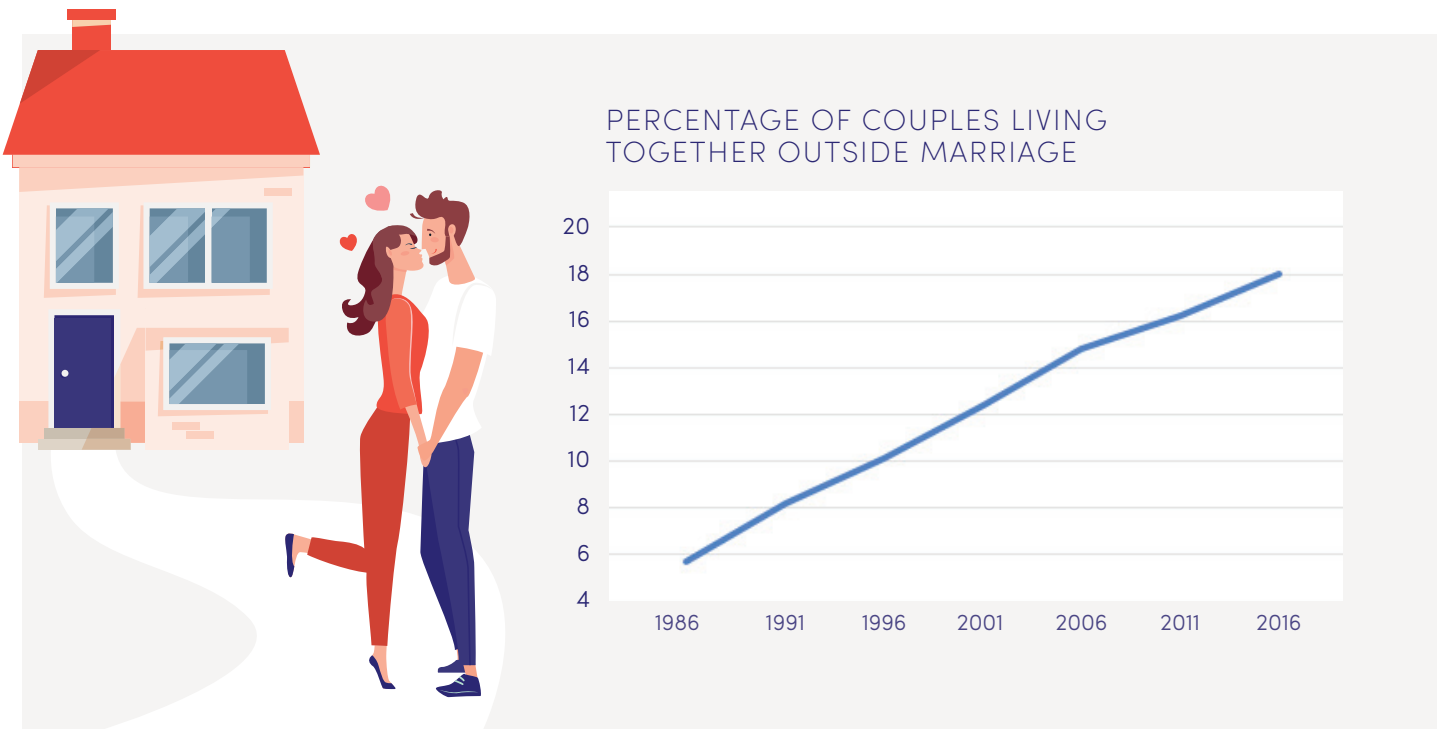
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Marriages and Divorces, Australia, various years.

MARRYING IS AN EVENT THAT INCREASINGLY REPRESENTS THE CAPSTONE TO A STABLE AND SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP, NOT THE FOUNDATION STONE.

## The rise in cohabitation

So is it just that more people are living together outside of marriage? To some extent, yes, but the increase in heterosexual de facto relationships and same sex relationships combined do not substitute for the collapse in marriage rates. The rise in cohabiting relationships is evident from the Census, held every five years in Australia. In 1986, 6% of all couples were cohabiting. It was 12% in 2001 and 18% in 2016.<sup>3</sup> We estimate the rate, from data published in the 2021 census, as over 19.5%.

Of course, some of these couples will go on to marry. More than 80% of couples who marry, live together before the wedding. However, many couples live together without necessarily intending to do so at some point in the future. This has gained widespread acceptance in Australia. In a 2015 survey, 75% agreed that it was alright for a couple to live together even if they have no intention of marrying, compared with 66% in 2005.<sup>4</sup>



Same-sex relationships have also increased over time. In the two decades between 1996 and 2016, the reported number of same-sex couples in the census increased by over 400%.<sup>5</sup> In the 2016 census, 0.9% of couples were in same sex relationships. Another survey published indicated that 1.6% of couples are in same-sex relationships in June 2021.<sup>6</sup>



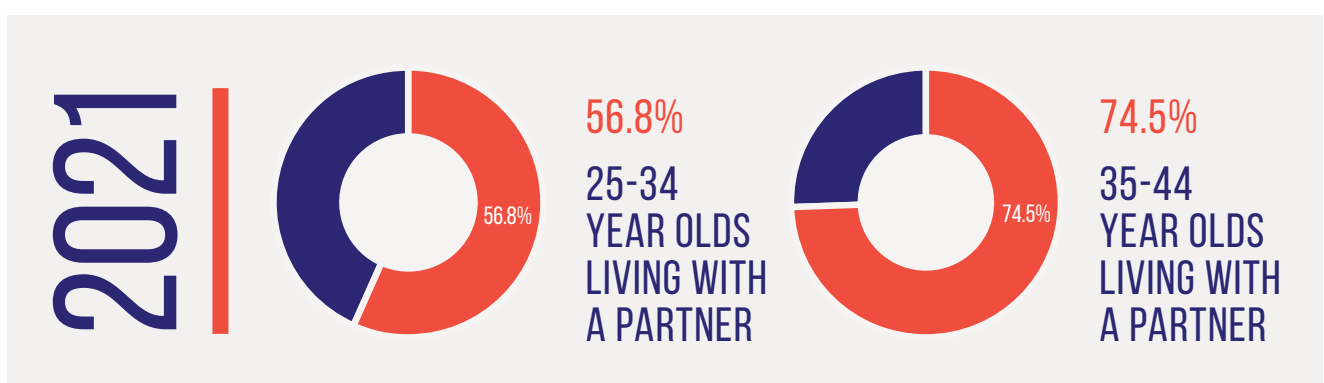
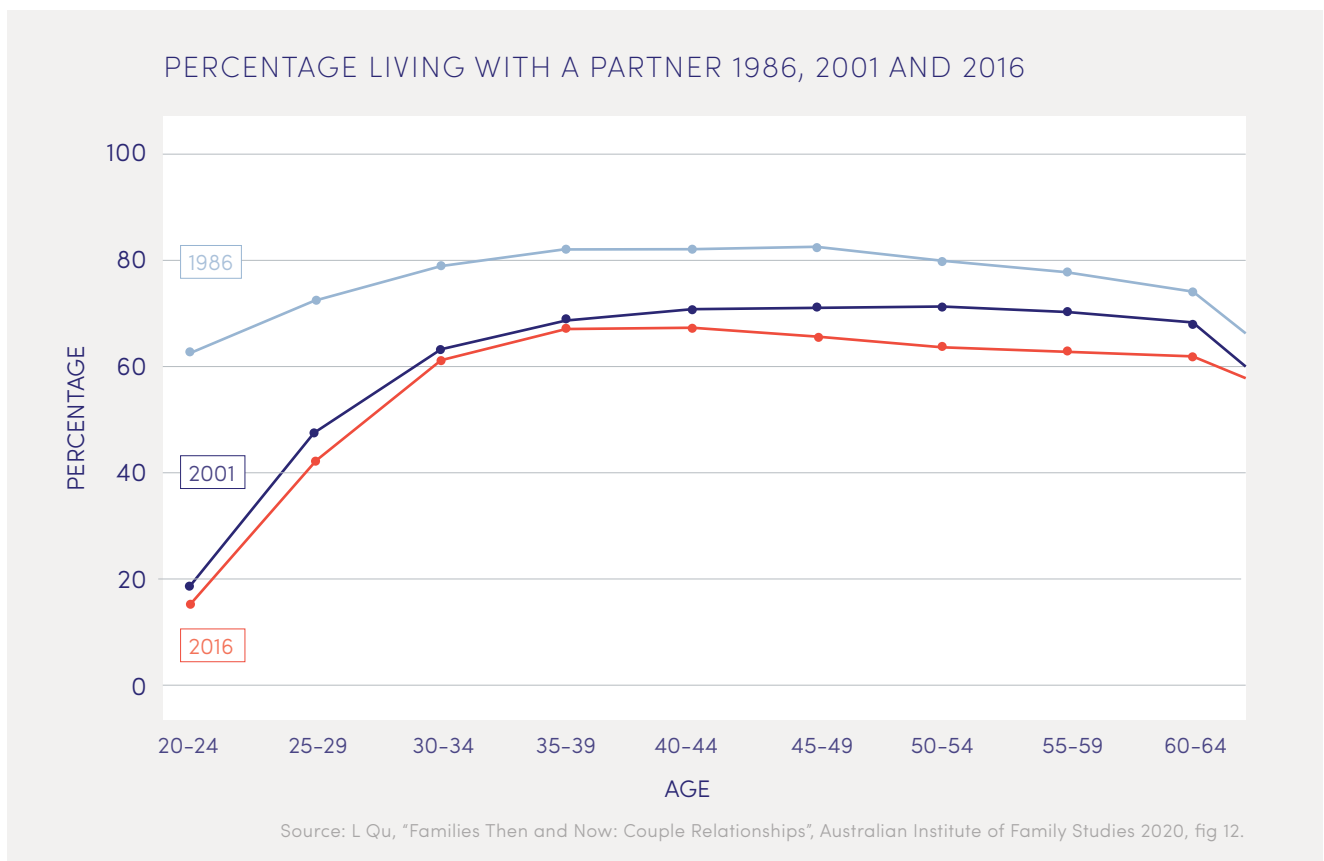
## Fewer people are in intimate partnerships

Although there has been, to some extent, a shift from people marrying to living in de facto relationships (whether heterosexual or same-sex), the bigger picture is a decline in intimate partnerships overall, whether married or de facto. Fewer people are marrying or living together, particularly in younger age groups.

In 2021, 46.5% of the population aged 15 years and over were in registered marriages and another 11.5% in de facto relationships. 42% were single.<sup>7</sup> This may be contrasted with the situation in the 1980s

and early 1990s, when a much greater proportion of people formed couple relationships. As the next graph shows, in the 1986 census, over 80% of 35-54 year olds were living with a partner, and the proportion of 25-34 year olds living with a partner was not much lower.<sup>8</sup> The percentage had fallen significantly by 2016.

On census night 2021, only 56.8% of 25-34 year olds were living with a partner, rising to 74.5% of the 35-44 and 45-54 age groups.

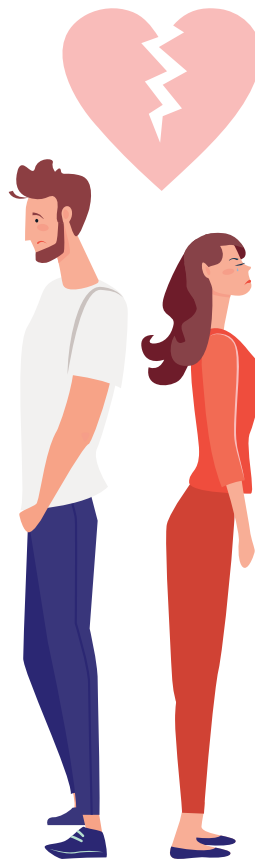


## 2 PATTERNS OF FAMILY DISSOLUTION

Not only has there been a decline in the extent to which intimate partnerships are being formed. There has also been an increase in the breakdown of relationships. Contrary to some popular understanding, this is not due to a rise in divorces. Actually, the divorce rate per 1000 population has been falling ever since the mid-1990s.<sup>9</sup>

The main reason for the increase in the fragility of relationships is that de facto relationships are much less stable than marriages. This is unsurprising, as many de facto relationships are inherently contingent and provisional, lacking the level of commitment typically associated with marriage. Numerous surveys show that married couples have greater levels of satisfaction and trust than people living together outside marriage.<sup>10</sup>

The instability of cohabitation extends to couples with children. Evidence from around the world indicates that de facto relationships with children are much less likely to last than marriages.<sup>11</sup> In an Australian longitudinal study, participants have been interviewed once per year over a period of years, allowing for changes in relationship status to be tracked over



time. Ten per cent of couples with children in this survey were living together in non-marital relationships in 2001. They constituted nearly 38% of those who had separated two years later. The odds of a cohabiting couple with children breaking up was more than seven times as high as a married couple who had not lived together before marriage, and more than four times as high as those who had lived together but went on to marry.<sup>12</sup> Many children of unmarried parents, in other words, are born into relationship instability.

About 13% of children of all children are born into mother-only households, that is, without a father living at the same address.<sup>13</sup> Even if the mother and father continue to be in an intimate relationship at the time of the child's birth, the relationship is unlikely to last long unless the couple go on to marry.

As a consequence of these societal changes, about 40 per cent of all children will experience one of their biological parents living elsewhere by the time they are 15–17 years old, according to data gathered in 2012–13.<sup>14</sup> This represents an increase from around 25 per cent some 20 years ago.<sup>15</sup>



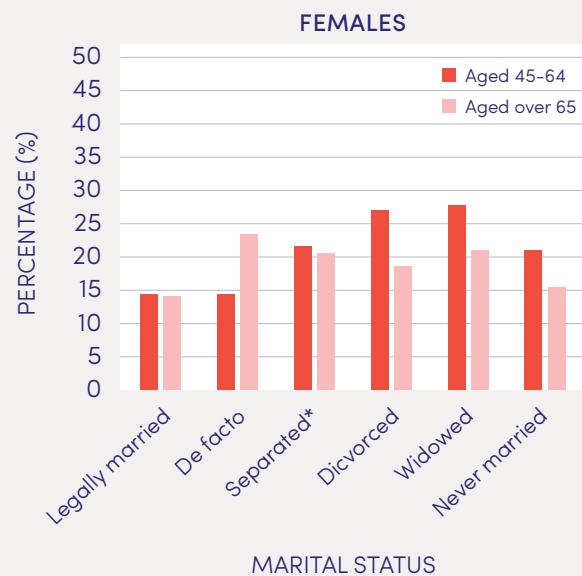
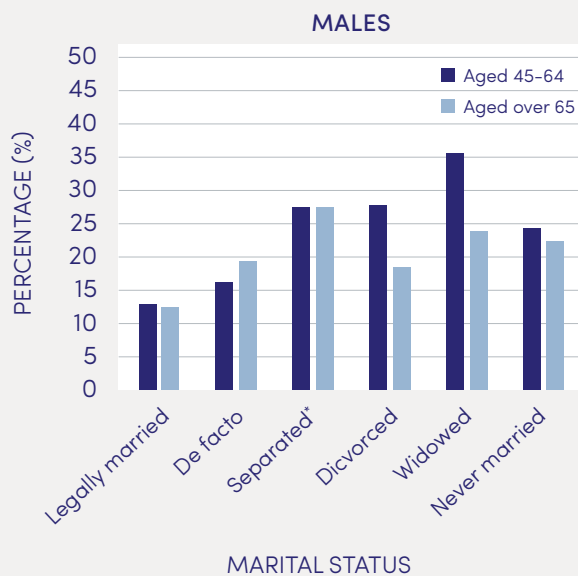
**ABOUT 40 PER CENT OF ALL CHILDREN WILL EXPERIENCE ONE OF THEIR BIOLOGICAL PARENTS LIVING ELSEWHERE BY THE TIME THEY ARE 15–17**

# 3 INCREASE IN LONELINESS

If fewer people are living with an intimate partner during the prime of their adult lives than a few decades ago, whether because they have not found a long-term partner or because previous relationships have broken down, it should not be surprising that there has been an increase in loneliness. Indeed loneliness has been described as an epidemic.<sup>16</sup> As the next Figure shows, married people are typically less lonely than those who are separated, divorced, widowed or never married. Surprisingly, males aged 45 and upwards who are in de facto relationships express more loneliness than those who are married. The same holds true for women aged 65 and upwards.



EMOTIONAL LONELINESS, 2016, AGE COHORT BY MARITAL STATUS AND GENDER, PER CENT



\*the results for the older cohort should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

Source: Relationships Australia, Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness? p. 18 (2018).

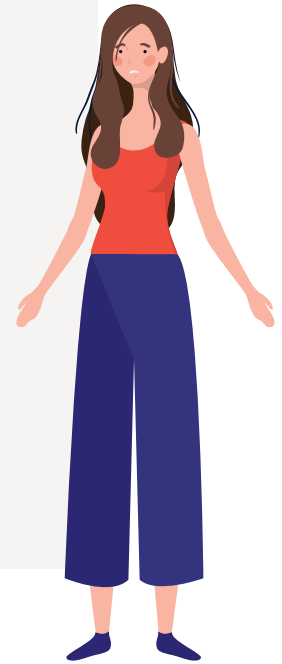
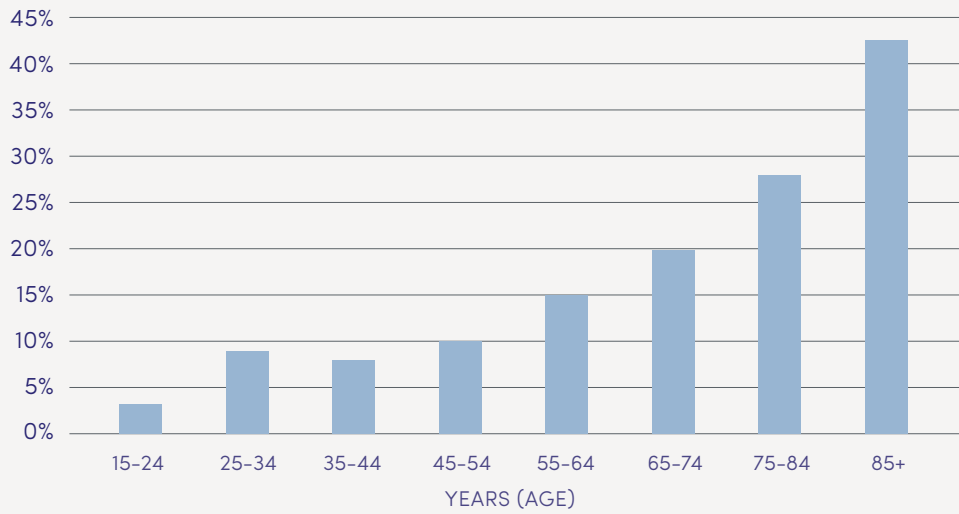
## Living alone

The 2021 census indicated that 25.6% of all households have a lone person, up from 20% in 1991.<sup>17</sup> The largest number of people living alone (473,000) are between the ages of 65 and 74, with the next largest group being those aged 55-64 (440,000).

**WE CAN BE SURROUNDED BY OTHERS BUT STILL BE LONELY, OR WE CAN BE ALONE BUT NOT FEEL LONELY.**

Living alone, of course, does not mean that people are lonely. Loneliness arises from the gulf between the degree of social connection we have and how much we feel we need. We can be surrounded by others but still be lonely, or we can be alone but not feel lonely. That said, the evidence is that many people are profoundly lonely.

## LIVING ALONE CENSUS 2021

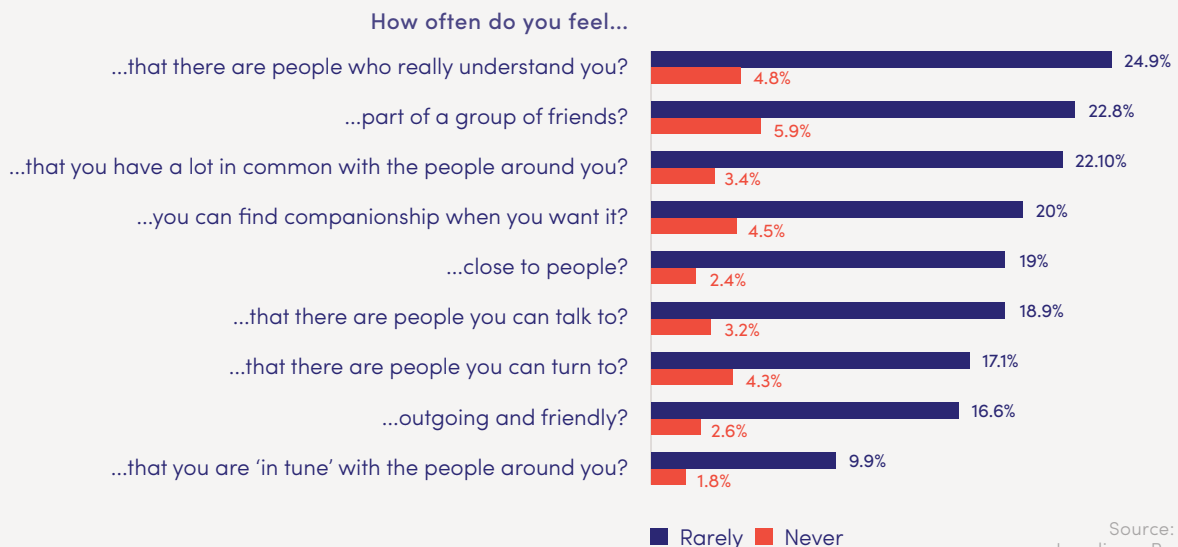


## The extent of loneliness

In a recent Australian study,<sup>18</sup> nearly 25% of respondents reported that they rarely or never were able to find companionship when they wanted it. Over 20% said they rarely or never felt close to people.

**2018** | **20%**  
OF PEOPLE SAID THEY RARELY OR NEVER FELT CLOSE TO PEOPLE

## PROPORTION OF AUSTRALIANS EXPERIENCING CHARACTERISTICS OF LONELINESS



Source: Australian Loneliness Report (2018)

A lot of respondents reported no support at all. The table below indicates the proportion who said they did not have contact with any family members, friends or neighbours

in the last month. It also indicates how many had no-one to talk to about private matters or from whom to get help.<sup>19</sup>

	Did not have contact at least once in last month	Could not discuss private matters	Not a source of help
FAMILY	7.6%	17.1%	12.5%
FRIENDS	8.1%	11.8%	12.3%
NEIGHBOURS	34.1%	69.8%	46.7%

## The persistence of loneliness

For some people, loneliness is a relatively temporary experience – the result of moving to a new neighbourhood or workplace, or experiencing some adverse event which causes them to feel socially isolated, such as a serious illness or relationship breakdown. For some though, loneliness is a long-term state

of affairs. One Australian study found that 8% of women and 7% of men had been lonely for more than 9 years.<sup>20</sup>

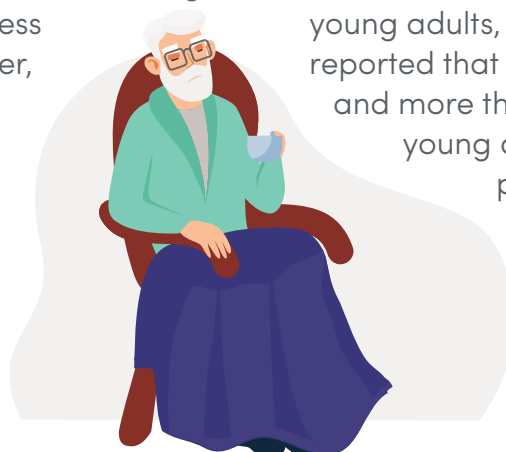


**8% OF WOMEN AND 7% OF MEN HAVE BEEN LONELY FOR MORE THAN 9 YEARS.**

## 4 WHO ARE MOST VULNERABLE TO LONELINESS?

### Loneliness among the elderly

Loneliness tends to be a particular problem for the very elderly and infirm. In the period after retirement, people seem to be the least lonely of any age group. They tend to be well-connected in their communities. They have more time to maintain and develop friendships than those in mid-life who are pursuing careers and caring for young children. Loneliness increases with age, however, being high amongst those 75 years and older. This is due to loss of partners and friends through death or dementia. Declining mobility and chronic illness can also impact upon the capacity for social connection.



### The loneliest age group: 18-24

Surprisingly, the age group that seems to be most vulnerable to loneliness is the group between 18- 24 years old.<sup>21</sup> In a 2021 report, 54% of Gen Z Australians (those under 24 at the date of the survey) reported that they felt lonely either often, always or some of the time.<sup>22</sup> In a study in Victoria of nearly 1500 adolescents and young adults, Michelle Lim and colleagues reported that nearly 16% of 12-17 year olds and more than one in three (37.10%) young adults aged 18-25 indicated a problematic level of loneliness on a standardised measure. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of young adults reported that they felt alone either sometimes or often.



Young adult women, on average, had higher rates of loneliness than young adult men. The highest level of social anxiety was in the 18–20 age group.<sup>23</sup>

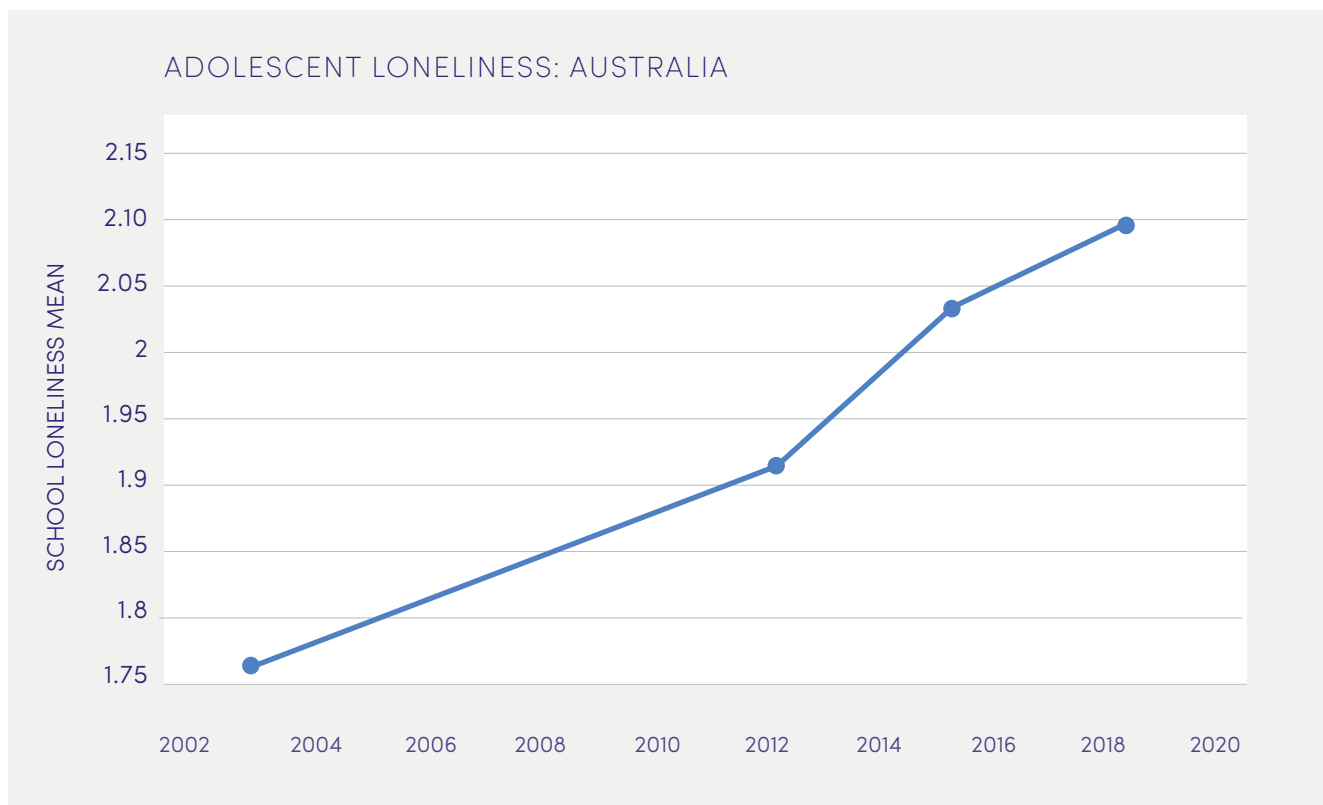
This is consistent with various overseas studies. A UK study found that 19% of 18–24s reported one or fewer friends, compared to 9% for the over-65s. 57% reported three or fewer friends, compared to 33% for the over-65s.<sup>24</sup> Another UK survey found that nearly 10% of 16–24 year olds reported feeling lonely often or always. This was far higher than any other age group.<sup>25</sup>

Loneliness, paradoxically, is associated with digital connectedness. An American study of 10th graders between 2006 and 2017 found that as internet and social media

usage increased year by year, so there was a corresponding fall in social interactions that occurred in person in this age group. Loneliness increased to the extent that in-person connectedness decreased.<sup>26</sup>

There is clear evidence of an increase in loneliness at school amongst Australian teenagers as well, with the increase being particularly sharp from 2012 onwards. The data comes from the PISA test taken by year 10 students, which measures academic competencies, but also has some data on emotional wellbeing.

The same analysis indicated that in 2003, 10.42% of students were rated as having a high level of loneliness. By 2018, the proportion had risen to 34.43%.<sup>27</sup>



## Separated and divorced men

A third group that is particularly vulnerable to loneliness is separated and divorced men in mid-life. An Australian survey has found that separated women are twice as likely as married women to experience serious

loneliness. Conversely, separated men are over thirteen times more likely than married men to experience serious loneliness.<sup>28</sup> Single men who have never partnered are also very vulnerable to loneliness.

Why are separated and divorced men much more at risk of loneliness than women? Of course, relationship breakdown is very difficult for both women and men, but women are more likely to continue having the primary care of children after separation. They often have good networks of support from other mothers with children of similar ages. Such local community support networks are developed through participation in playgroups, involvement with children's sports and engagement with the school community. Conversely, men's support networks are more likely to centre on their workplaces. There is a tendency also for women in partnered relationships to be the ones who organise and maintain social relationships for the couple. If they then break up, men may feel more isolated from the friends they previously had together with their partners.

**EVEN MANY COMMITTED BELIEVERS ARE COHABITING WITH A PROSPECTIVE PARTNER PRIOR TO MARRIAGE**

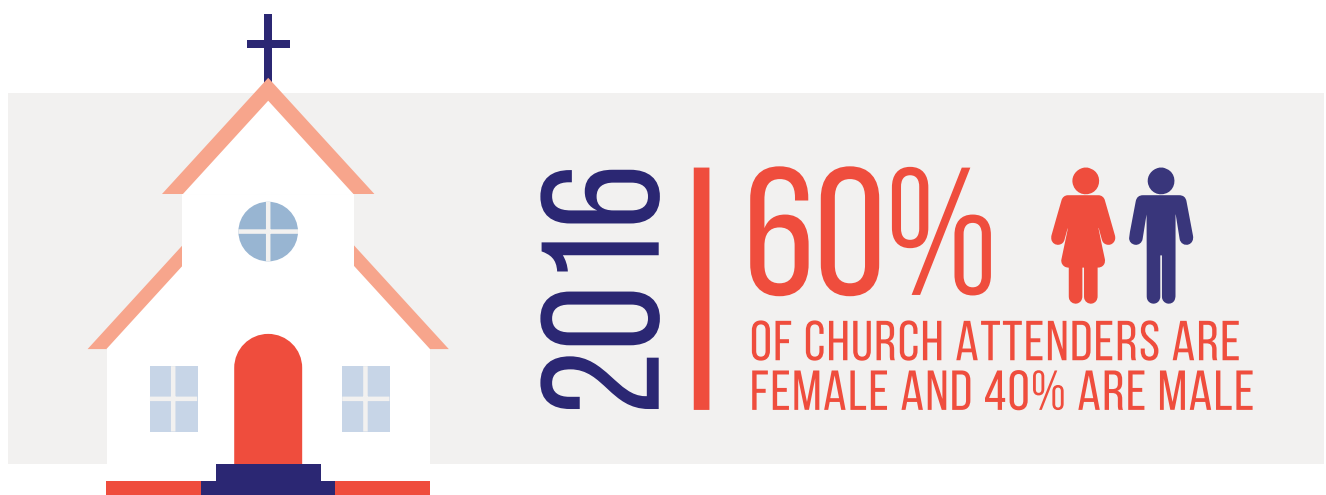
### Conformed to this world?

Churches are not unaffected by these broader societal trends. It cannot be assumed, for example, that Christians will be uninfluenced by the trend in the wider society to live together before marriage. Prof. Mark Regnerus, in interviews with young adults who were committed Christians in the United States, Mexico, Spain, Poland, Russia, Lebanon and Nigeria, found that the capstone view of marriage – as a public celebration of a continuing domestic partnership – is to be found even among many of those who express a strong commitment to the Christian faith.<sup>29</sup> All interviewees remained committed to the idea of marriage, but increasingly, even many committed believers were cohabiting with a prospective partner prior to marriage.

Christian young people who adhere to traditional Christian sexual ethics may choose to enter into marriage at younger ages than their contemporaries. But they will need pastoral guidance and the support of their church community as they do so. We should certainly move beyond the teaching of a previous generation which (at its worst) held out marriage as the complete remedy for sexual frustration. We need to teach about chastity and self-control as an integral part of Christian discipleship, whether in marriage or not.

## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERS

We suggest that understanding the changes that are occurring in the broader society has implications for internal local church organisation and pastoral care, as well as outreach to the broader community. What then are some of the implications for church leaders?



Will as many Christian young people remain single as their contemporaries in the general community? It is hard to know, but partnering for some may be made difficult by the imbalance of males and females in church communities. The 2016 National Church Life Survey indicated that 60% of Australian church attenders are female and 40% male.<sup>30</sup>

Divorce affects the Christian community as well, although when both partners are committed Christians and attend church regularly, marital satisfaction is higher, and divorce rates lower, than in the general population.<sup>31</sup>

So Christians are not insulated from broader trends across the population, and in any event, people come to faith at various stages of their lives. Some may have a history of one or more relationship breakdowns before coming to faith. The composition of our congregations may well be quite different to a couple of decades ago, with many more single, divorced, and separated people than hitherto.

### **The traditional focus on families and children**

While there is no doubt some variation across the churches, and much innovation to meet different needs in local communities, there is a recognisable pattern for local church organisation that remains very widespread. Traditionally, local churches have focused primarily on children, young people and families, while also seeking to meet the social and spiritual needs of the elderly.

This is evident in the groups that local churches have typically sought to provide (to the extent needed given the composition of their congregations). Commonly, churches have a crèche and Sunday Schools for children, Sunday

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morning groups for teenagers, and a mid-week youth group. The groups for young people usually cater for the under 18s, the implicit assumption being that after finishing school, young adults will join the ordinary adult activities of the church.

Local churches have typically also sought to provide support for young families, primarily mothers of young children, through playgroups for pre-schoolers. There may also be social groups for the elderly.

Community, in church life, has therefore been structured, to a very significant extent, around families and children, although churches that have mid-week bible study or fellowship groups cater for a broader cross-section of the church community.

There are, we suggest, three pastoral issues to consider. The first is whether the single, separated and divorced may feel at the margins of a church congregation that seems to be oriented around children and families, particularly if they sense an expectation that this is the normal pathway of Christian living. This is, of course, not a biblical view. In 1 Corinthians 7:6-9, Paul emphasised the virtues of singleness and made clear that it was an authentic and valued Christian calling.



Jesus himself was not married! Singleness needs to be centred, rather than marginalised, in our preaching, our discipleship, and in our church activities. We should operate with the working assumption that about half of the adults present are not currently married.

There will be theological differences about divorce and remarriage between different churches and even within different denominations. Nevertheless, churches should be more aware of the stigma and pain surrounding divorce than we perhaps have been in the past. A person facing a transition from the status of being married to become single again generally faces a change in their entire social landscape, not to mention the economic implications and the trauma of the divorce itself.

The second is whether the available groups for people sufficiently cater for those who are single, separated or divorced. Whereas once, young people might expect to enter into marriages in their early to mid-20s, and might live in the family home until that time, now there is, for a great many at least, a lonely decade after leaving school, during which they may or may not explore the prospect of a long-term relationship.

The evidence of loneliness as a problem in the 18–24 age group suggests a particular need for young adult activities.

## PROMOTING HEALTHY TOGETHERNESS MAY INVOLVE PAYING SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF THOSE WHO LIVE ALONE

It cannot be assumed that young people will go straight from youth groups to an all-age bible study or fellowship group without some kind of stepping stone, and in any event, young adult groups are more suited to help develop and maintain age-specific friendships.

The third issue is how to promote healthy togetherness across the congregation, in a way that helps single, separated and divorced people to be included. That may involve paying special attention to the needs of those who live alone, encouraging invitations to other people's homes and helping them to feel welcome within family group settings. Developing a culture of hospitality will take a conscious effort, particularly given the very busy lives so many career-focused people lead.

The way we use the word 'family' may itself be the issue. The New Testament strikingly uses familial language as a metaphor to describe the church of Jesus Christ. We are adelphoi, 'brothers and sisters', regardless of our status or background. But the 'family' of Jesus Christ, while it may contain people who are literally related, is not constituted by those blood ties. When we use the word 'family' as a metaphor to describe the church (as in a 'family service') we may be heard as if we are saying that this is a community composed of those who are literally families. We may think we are being inclusive of single, separated, and divorced people by using such language, but we may be heard by them as suggesting that this community is not for them.

### Outreach to the community

The relationship revolution of the last forty years has changed patterns of relationships in Australia quite significantly; but the



evidence is mounting that it has led to many casualties. The downsides of the promotion of recreational sex outside of a committed relationship are all too apparent. The paradox, indeed, is that young people are having rather less sex now than they were a couple of decades ago.<sup>32</sup> Pornography use amongst males is so high now that it is affecting male-female relationships in a variety of negative ways.<sup>33</sup>

Churches are well-placed to model alternative ways of living and relating, and to be attractive communities for the lonely – a relationship oasis amidst the relationship drought. They need to model healthy togetherness, and invite others into that community, from which people may ‘catch’ faith.

## SOME POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS:

### 1 Pre-marriage counselling or courses.

Christian organisations have long played a valuable role in providing pre-marriage counselling, both for those within the community of faith and those outside of it. Given that more than 80% of the population that marries live together first, it may make more sense to offer counselling services before people move in with one another, while encouraging marriage as an important next step for the couple.

### 2 Marriage enrichment.

Church leaders can encourage married couples to enrich their marriages by providing access to courses and relevant materials. It is worth noting that the course material provided by Alpha allows for both in-person and zoom options – very useful for busy parents.

**3 Programs for the divorced and separated.** Relationship breakdown is a time of enormous difficulty for people, both emotionally and financially. DivorceCare support groups and similar workshops for those going through separation have proven very beneficial to people in such times.

They may form a point of connection for people who otherwise have no relationship to a church or other faith community.

**4 Better relationships.** There is a space for the development of a course that simply addresses the development of better and more fulfilling relationships of all kinds. Meaningful friendships are as vital to addressing loneliness as better marriages are.

**5 Volunteer programs:** One of the best things that a person can do if they feel lonely is to reach out to others. If young people are feeling alone in the sometimes difficult decade from 18–28 when they are going through major transitions in their lives, they may find both connection and meaning in helping the elderly. Divorced and separated men also often have a variety of skills and talents that could be harnessed in the service of others, if given the the opportunity.

In making these suggestions, it is important to emphasise that there is no disconnection between this social outreach and the ministry of the gospel. Pastors will be acutely aware of the extent to which Australia has become a post-Christian society. This is reflected in the rise in those who say they have no religion in the 2021



census; but, more significantly, perhaps, it is evidenced by a decline in biblical literacy – the extent to which people even understand the basic beliefs of Christianity or could recognise a gospel story such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The marked increase in social disconnection is a moment of real opportunity for the church of Jesus Christ – since the gospel itself speaks in the language of loving relationships, starting with the self-giving love of God for the

world which gives life and reconciles. Paradoxically, at just the moment when Australia seems to be moving away from Christian faith, the hunger for what it offers has never been more evident. The challenge for local churches is not to follow the pattern of this world (Romans 12:1-2), but actively to resist the contemporary habits of anonymity and disconnection. We are to be transformed into communities of genuine care for one another, so that we might also become places of real welcome.

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