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It is usually easier to spot a problem than to see its solution. This is certainly the case when we think about encouraging young people to be part of the Christian church.

It is easy to see that most young Australians do not think much of the church. To find ways of encouraging them to throw in their lot with us ... well that is much more difficult. However the first step is to explore why the problem exists!

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported a 22 per cent decline in the religious affiliation of all Australians over the thirty-five years between 1971 and 2006 (Mason et al, 2007). This decline in an older portion of the population was mirrored in the spiritual life of young people.

As we think about the way that young people think about Christianity and the church this sort of information can help us to see at least two things. The first is that we who value both Christianity and the church cannot assume that many of our neighbours, friends and family do so too. The second is that young people are actually led in their attitude to the church by their aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers and grandparents.

One area of Australian public life that has had an effect on the Christian churches' ability to transmit the Christian faith has been the widespread and rising dissatisfaction and disillusionment with churches as social institutions. As people have drifted away from church life a 'religious de-socialisation' has occurred in which the aims and reinforcing structures of the Christian churches as social entities have been forgotten.

It seems people no longer know what these aims are, yet the general perception within the Australian community is that churches are fundamentally self-serving.

While Australia has increasingly functioned as a secular nation politically, there have been occasions when the Christian churches have played a vital role spiritually and socially within Australian society. During these times the increased likelihood of contact between the general population and the Christian churches would have lent itself to greater familiarity and therefore, it seems, greater trust.

For many, the general perception of relational distance has hardened into specific unease. The slow and often inadequate manner in which the Christian churches as a whole, both in Australia and overseas, have dealt with allegations of abuse of various kinds has given explicit voice to distrust forged by unfamiliarity. Many have regarded the actions of the institutions involved as being more interested in self-service than transparent assistance to others. Against a background of generally improving confidence in institutions, social researchers note that public confidence in the churches continues to fall.

Young Australians are in many ways the inheritors of the general disengagement with Christianity found in all parts of Australia. By and large they do not value the church because they rarely think about it. When they do it is from a distance that can easily become distrust. As confronting as this is for those of us who do value Christianity and the church, it is actually good news, because their disengagement is not evidence of a lack of spiritual interest or capacity. Indeed we are left with a clear challenge ... is my Christian faith readily observable to those young people around me?

Coming up next: Exploring the spiritual world of young Australians.

This blog uses material adapted from Matt's book 'Engage! How the church can reconnect with young people' which is published by Barton Books. <http://www.bartonbooks.com.au/books/engage.htm> or +61 2 6272 6262

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I feel kind of weird writing a post, you probably had no idea that from time to time I actually read what you write! But I do (surprise)! Anyways, I just wanted to say that what you are doing has meaning. It probably has more meaning than you can even comprehend right now. And trying to live more local with spark movements and change that you will actually be able to see and experience with your own eyes in your own community! Lastly, I wouldn't say that what you are doing is smaller; I would say that it is a different direction that is as equally big and important to the local people! Please keep up all your crazy local efforts, I appreciate them :)

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