



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUSLY COMMITTED MILLENNIALS TEACHING IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Millennial teachers in Australian Catholic schools are a wild card that may determine the future of Australian Catholic education. They are Australian Catholic education's most significant risk and greatest hope. They represent the foundations of the current workforce. They are established teachers and emerging leaders who will be critical for the sustainability of Catholic education. However, they are also fully immersed within a contemporary Australian society that is becoming increasingly non-religious, secular, pluralistic, and religiously diverse. They are part of an age demographic that has the largest proportion of "no religion" in Australia. So how will they be placed to lead the Catholic identity and mission of Australian Catholic schools for the next generations of students and families? This paper will explore how a subset of "religious millennials" may hold the key. They are both inculturated and faith-filled. They are committed to being a faith witness within their school communities. They are also teachers with experience and an understanding of the shifting context of Australian Catholic schools - highly cognizant of the challenges and aware of the opportunities. This paper will assert that religiously committed millennials are a group of teachers who need to be identified, encouraged and developed so that they can be a critical lifeblood for Australian Catholic schools in the future. And it can only be hoped that there are enough of them.

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone born between 1981 and 1996 is considered a “millennial” (Pew Centre Research, 2019). Millennial teachers in Australian Catholic Schools constitute a core group of staff needed to replace a generation of teachers and leaders who will retire in the coming decades (National Council of Catholic Education, 2021). However, their age profile is the one most likely to have become disaffiliated from Christianity and have declared themselves to be of “no religion” in the most recent national census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This makes them a significant risk to the future Catholic identity and mission of their schools. Australian Catholic schools are, and will continue to be, looking for teachers and leaders from the millennial age bracket who can give witness to the Catholic faith and promote the Catholic identity and mission of their school communities. This looks to be a challenging task.

However, further exploration reveals a subset of religiously committed millennials who may offer a prophetic witness for the next generation of students and families who engage in Australian Catholic schools. They are both deeply immersed in the culture of their students and personally committed to their Catholic faith. This subset is therefore worthy of deep exploration. If they are already teaching in Australian Catholic schools, they need to be supported, encouraged and resourced. If they are not, they need to be recruited so that a critical mass of religiously committed staff in Australian Catholic schools can be maintained.

Millennial Teachers in Australian Catholic Schools

The millennial age bracket of teachers is highly significant in terms of their key presence as teachers now and into the coming decades. The age profile of teachers in Australia indicates that around 1 in 5 teachers is 55 years or older, and a further 23.5 per cent of the teacher workforce is aged 45 to 54 (National Council of Catholic Education, 2021). It has been concluded that:

This data suggests that a sizeable proportion of the teacher workforce is highly likely to retire or reduce their working hours in the short to medium term. The transition of such a significant percentage of experienced teachers out of the full-

time workforce will be challenging to replace (National Council of Catholic Education, 2021).

The difficulty to replace is further complicated in terms of their contribution to the Catholic identity and mission of their schools, which is most effective when they can be a witness to Catholic beliefs and teachings. In defining the nature and purpose of Catholic education, the Australian National Catholic Education Commission states that Catholic schools are nourished by witness (National Catholic Education Commission 2024, p 5). Local Diocesan authorities, such as Sydney Catholic Schools, reiterate it in their documentation around the nature and role of Catholic educators. Sydney Catholic Schools have named witness as one of three values that underpin their newly formulated strategic plan (Sydney Catholic Schools, 2026). Therefore, the call to witness is clearly present in the contemporary strategic vision for Australian Catholic education and is particularly emphasised in school leadership. However, the religious profile of the millennial age bracket coming through suggests that there are likely to be fewer teachers able to offer this witness.

Christianity is declining in Australia, and the decrease is the largest among young adults (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The largest “no religion” proportion of Australian society from the most recent census in 2021 was in “millennials”, young adults aged 25–39 in 2021 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). In 2021, almost half (48.4%) of people aged 25–34 years reported having “No Religion” (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). This is illustrated in Figure 1.1:

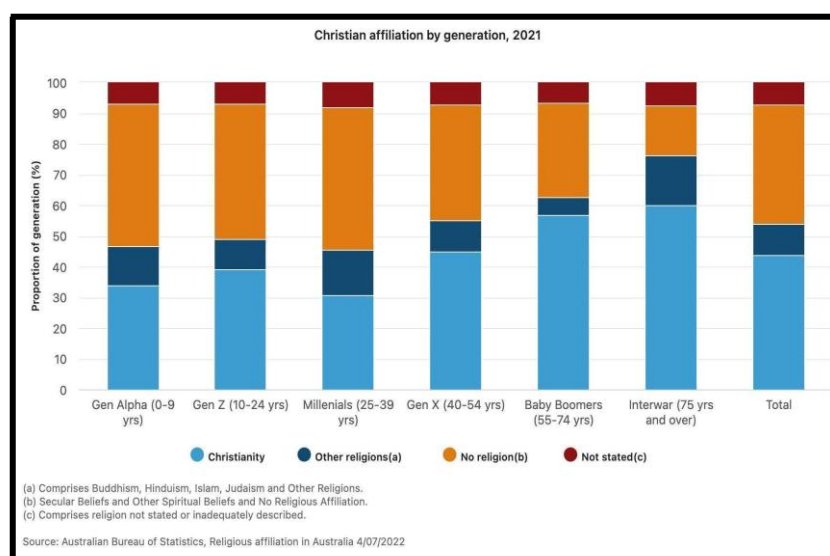


Figure 1.1: Christian Affiliation in Australia by Generation — 2021 (Australian

Bureau of Statistics, 2022)

Figure 1.1 shows a stark contrast between the millennials and the baby boomers, which is significant as it is the baby boomers who are moving through retirement. This generational shift is a confronting reality for Australian Catholic educational leaders to assess. It has been reported that 140,000 Australians aged 15–29 who identified as Catholic in 2011 in the Australian Census dis-identified in 2016, with most indicating “no religion” on the Census form (Pastoral Research Office, 2018, p 5). While this is not the exact age of the millennial bracket, it would also follow that a number of millennial teachers have essentially moved from Christianity to “no religion”, and it is likely that this would include some millennial Catholic school teachers. If so, it is possible that some of these teachers left Catholic schools due to their change in religious belief. However, it is also likely that many continue in Catholic schools but do so absent of any commitment or witness to the school’s Catholic identity and mission. This would not be picked up easily by school leaders as these teachers would not have followed a process of being “de-baptised” and therefore would likely continue to be regarded as Catholics, particularly when it is not in their interest to declare such a change to their employer.

Data from 2016 indicated that 80% of Australian Catholic primary school teachers are Catholic and 61% of Australian Catholic secondary school teachers are Catholic - and of these Catholic teachers, 25% are involved in regular parish engagement (Sultmann et al, 2022, p 10). Therefore, if regular engagement in parish life is a key indicator of being well placed to contribute to the Catholic identity and mission of a Catholic school community, this currently applies to only around 20% of Australian Catholic Primary School teachers and 15% of Australian Catholic Secondary School teachers. Based on the previous data regarding Australian millennials, it is likely that Australian Catholic millennial school teachers would be significantly lower than this.

Furthermore, “the evidence has shown for some time that most young people in surveyed Catholic schools in Australia take a relativistic, or non-believing approach to religion - and evidence now shows that most of their teachers agree with them” (Horner et al, 2025). This suggests that there is a significant shift occurring in Australian Catholic Schools where the majority of teachers and students are disconnecting from Catholic beliefs and teachings. Rymarz (2025) has added to this by naming the rapidly diminishing “critical mass” of religiously committed teachers and leaders who are needed to maintain a strong Catholic identity and mission of

any Australian Catholic School - a critical mass that he asserts has already greatly diminished and is at significant risk.

It has been stated that the contemporary challenge of Australian Catholic education is reinterpreting its identity and mission in a new cultural context - a response which needs to construct the Catholic identity of a school in a pluralist culture without abandoning the tradition (Sultmann et al, 2022, p 10). In some ways, Australian millennial Catholic School teachers could be well-positioned for this, as they are immersed in the pluralism and secularism of contemporary Australian society. They are part of a generation that research suggests navigates social forces of secularisation and plurality by approaching religion and spirituality with new, adaptive perceptions (Denton and Florey, 2020). Perhaps they could play a positive role in shaping and advocating for a Catholic identity of their school that is culturally plausible, while still being authentically Catholic.

There are studies from the last two decades that assert that many young adults in Western countries feel empowered to question, interpret and negotiate their understandings of religion and spirituality (Fuller, 2001, Smith & Denton, 2005 and Casson, 2011). Fuller names a willingness to test beliefs and seek answers to questions of science and gender (Fuller, 2001). Casson states that many young adults then follow an adaptive approach where they are willing to construct a version of beliefs and practices in light of their ongoing, lived experience (Casson, 2011). Both Fuller and Casson identify that these young adults are critically assessing religion and making choices about what aspects they assent to (Fuller, 2001 and Casson, 2011). However, while adaptive interpretations and selective approaches to religious beliefs, practices and teachings may be culturally plausible, they can also move closer to the side of abandoning the tradition.

Bouma and Halafoff (2017) challenge the sense of the millennials being a “whatever” generation in the sense of being indifferent or apathetic towards religion and rather found that they were “awash” in religious superdiversity and respectful of it (Bouma and Halafoff, 2017). However, respectful tolerance can lead to an increased path towards relativism observed in Australian Catholic Schools (Horner et al, 2025), preferring passive acceptance of religious differences rather than dialogues of encounter. Respectful tolerance is also not the same as being an informed, discerning, active and prayerful advocate and witness within a Catholic school.

Smith and Denton affirm that young adults are taking this adaptive approach; however, they identify a concern that in doing so, young adults are reducing religion to what suits them at a given point in time (Smith & Denton, 2005). They state that many young people have developed a hybrid form of “moral therapeutic deism” with a general moral code of good behaviour not limited to one religion, filtered by their own experiences, where they look to a therapeutic God who they turn to in times of difficulty for reassurance (Smith & Denton 2005, pp 162–163). Millennial Catholic School teachers could then be agents of this “moral therapeutic deism” that may not offend or be particularly visible, but is not a strong source of the promotion of and/or witness to the Catholic faith tradition.

2011 research into young adult Catholics in New Zealand found that they were comfortable in identifying as Catholic, even though they lacked detailed knowledge of Catholic faith tradition and were prepared to ignore any teachings that they considered unhelpful (Duthie-Jung 2011, p 102). This adds another dimension of millennials avoiding detailed knowledge of religious traditions as well as being selective in their religious adherence. This suggests a risk of Australian millennial Catholic School teachers who are offering a watered down, selective version of Catholicism to their students that is not well informed and could further progress the relativistic and non-believing approach to religion of many students and staff in Australian Catholic Schools (Horner et al, 2025).

Further research on contemporary young adult Catholics in the United States (Dillon, 2018, Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2019 and Denton & Florey, 2020) offers a more positive lens to this interpretative approach. They affirm that young adult American Catholics are feeling empowered to exercise interpretative autonomy in finding religious meanings that resonate with their life experience. Dillon states that this leads to a process where secular experiences are “interwoven into their Catholic identity” (Dillon, 2018, pp 15–16). Clydesdale and Garces-Foley affirm the interpretative approach of young adults as an authentic search for meaning, encouraging others to be open to their insights (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2019). Denton and Florey challenge simplistic and negative characterisations of the approach and affirm that many young adult American Catholics do remain open to religion and religious experiences (Denton & Florey, 2020). This would suggest that adaptive Australian millennial Catholic Religious Education teachers who have wrestled with an understanding of faith and

their cultural context could be well placed

to support the Catholic identity and mission of their school through a contemporary lens that resonates with their students.

However, Denton and Florey also acknowledge that there is a tendency for the same young adults to see religion as being like a smartphone app—accessible, useful for certain purposes and within the control of the user (Denton & Florey, 2020). This is another warning that millennial Catholic Religious Education teachers may be promoting a hybrid construction of Catholic faith that may resonate with their students (and many staff), but that is not consistent with the orthodox beliefs, teachings and practices of the Catholic Church. It suggests that they would be challenged by the need for participation in prayer and the sacraments, and to make life choices (such as regarding personal relationships) that are consistent with Church teachings. Furthermore, if millennial Australian Catholic school teachers with hybrid, interpretative approaches of Catholicism move into leadership of their schools in the coming decade, there is a heightened risk of these adaptive approaches being amplified through their influential leadership roles in these communities.

Categories of Millennials

Up to this point, millennials have been discussed as a group, and a number of concerns have been raised about the likelihood that Australian millennial Catholic School teachers are using adaptive approaches to faith and religion that may not support the Catholic identity and mission of their schools and may, in fact, confuse and diminish them. However, like any generation, there is likely to be a variety of approaches to faith and religion within Australian millennial Catholic School teachers. Nynäs et al (2022) analysed the values and worldviews of young adults across 12 countries and found that changes to the religious landscape need to be seen as part of a complex socio-economic and cultural change in these countries. Therefore, rather than name one approach of young adults to religion, Nynäs et al (2022, p 52) identify five global prototypes: secular humanist, active-confident believer, non-committed traditionalist, spiritually attuned and disengaged liberal. It can be argued that the active-confident believer prototype within Australian millennial Catholic School teachers in Australia would be well placed to promote and witness to the Catholic identity of their school communities. The other prototypes offer challenges as they each, to differing degrees, disconnect from traditional religious

beliefs. Therefore, rather than focusing on concerns of the many millennials not suited to leading the Catholic identity and mission of their schools, this could be a helpful identification of a prototype of a subset of millennials that could be targeted as ideally suited to being empowered and supported as teachers and leaders in Catholic Schools.

The research of Nynäs et al (2022) resonates with research conducted by Wilkins-Laflamme (2022). Wilkins-Laflamme (2022) found that American and Canadian millennials are approaching religion, spirituality and secularity differently than their parents and grandparents as they navigate a complex interplay of different social influences, illustrated in Figure 1.2:

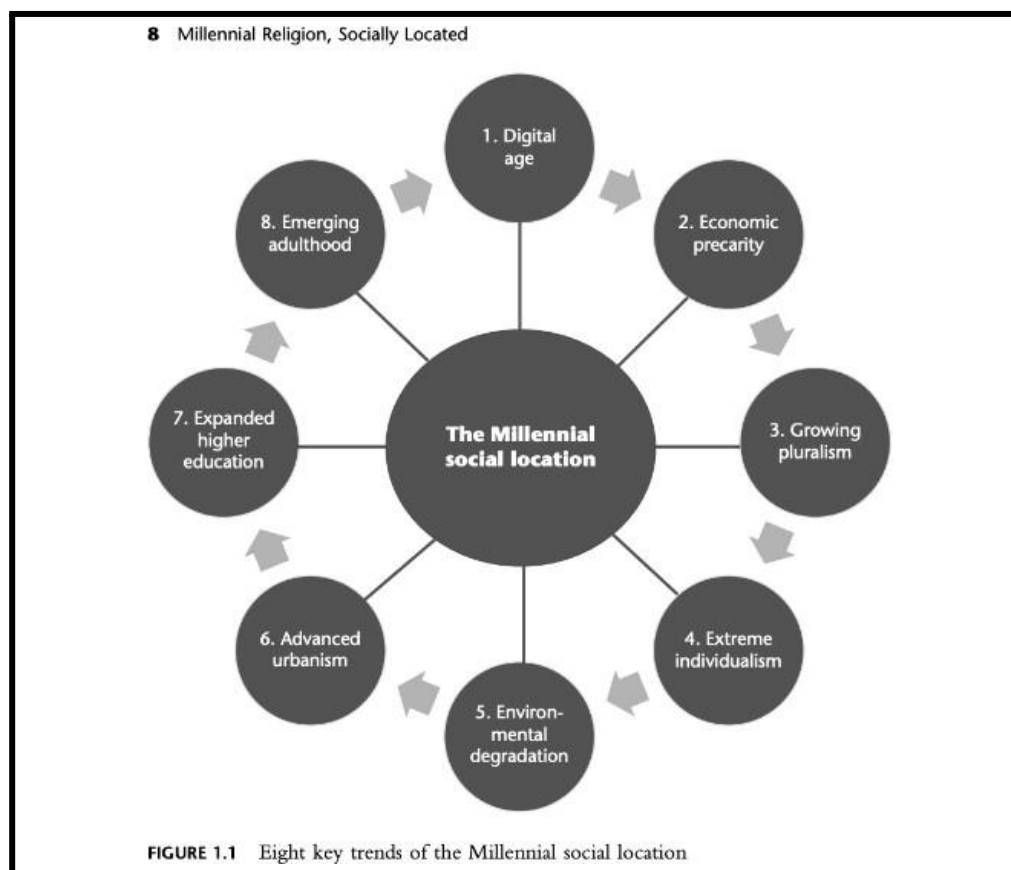


Figure 1.2: Eight Key Trends of Millennial Social Location (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022)

Similar to Nynäs et al (2022), Wilkins-Laflamme (2022) recognises nuance in how millennials are managing these complexities and identified four broad categories of a response. The first is the category of the religious millennials—living among an increasingly secular generation and social world has shaped their approach to religion to be both more left-leaning and defensive. This is consistent with the “active-confident believer” profile named by Nynäs et al (2022). Catholic millennials in this category would be best placed to teach and lead in a Catholic school due to their faith commitment. They

have the potential to witness to a life of faith that offers identity, belonging and purpose in a dominantly secular society. Dugan (2019) studied a group of “millennial missionaries” who would fit into this category and are described as developing a style of Catholic evangelisation that is orthodox as well as attentive and seemingly attractive to contemporary American youth culture. Their approaches are designed for young adults; however, they could still offer adaptable strategies for Catholic School teachers.

Carroll (2003) has identified a trend of young adults seeking a deeper, authentic spiritual experience within Catholicism - stating that while they are not the majority of their age group generally, they are the majority of their age bracket engaged in the life of the church (Carroll, 2003). This is evidence of the presence of religiously committed Catholic millennials. Mannering (2022) has reaffirmed this and gave the rationale that millennial Catholics have tended to seek out an active faith through personal conviction and not familial or social pressure - seeking authenticity, structure and permanence and finding them in the church (Mannering, 2022, p 252).

This is consistent with Taylor (2007), who recognises our contemporary Western cultural context as an age of authenticity where, in the midst of secularism, humans search for authenticity. Smith (2025) identified a small group of religiously committed Australian millennial Catholic Secondary Religious Education teachers in Western Sydney, most of whom were from migrant families and all of whom were committed to their faith and to witness to that faith within their school community.

The second millennial category of Wilkins-Laflamme (2022) is the spiritual seeker millennial—inclusive of organised religion along with more individualised, unchurched spiritualities, with many millennials combining the two in their everyday lives. Nature and outdoor spaces are named as important sources for spiritual experiences. This is consistent with the profile of “spiritually attuned” named by Nynäs et al (2022). Catholic millennial teachers in this category would be well placed to support the Catholic identity and mission of their school through their openness to spirituality that would be relatable for students, and they are open to organized religious practice. However, they may struggle to offer a consistent and Christ-centred witness.

A third category of Wilkins-Laflamme (2022) is the cultural believer millennial, who identify with a religion and have some religious beliefs, but with little to no religious or spiritual behaviour. Their religious identity is one of cultural and family heritage. It can be seen as a group moving towards non-religion (or disaffiliation).

This is consistent with the profile of “non-committed traditionalist” named by Nynäs et al (2022). Catholic millennial teachers in this category could be well placed to support the overt religious practises of a Catholic school due to their openness to some religious practices—such as attending church services for special occasions—that would be relatable for students. However, they also may struggle to offer a consistent and Christ-centred witness to faith and belief. It is likely they would participate in a Catholic school with acceptance and tolerance of its Catholic identity and mission, rather than being well placed to lead it strongly.

The fourth and final millennial category of Wilkins-Laflamme (2022) is the non-religious millennial, inclusive of high rates of disaffiliation rates from parents’ religion and very high rates of retaining parents’ non-religion. This is consistent with the profile of “secular humanist” named by Nynäs et al (2022). Catholic millennial teachers in this category could be authentic, highly relatable, positive role models within their Catholic school communities. However, while they may support social justice initiatives and the general values of their Catholic school, they are likely to feel compromised by, or even in opposition to, some aspects of their school's Catholic identity and mission, as they do not share the beliefs of the Catholic Church. Those who have disaffiliated from their parents’ Catholic identity would still be eligible to teach Religious Education and seek senior leadership roles in their school, as they would likely still be regarded as baptised Catholics.

It can therefore be concluded that Australian millennial Catholic Religious Education teachers who are willing and able to be strong advocates and promoters of their school's Catholic identity and mission will be exceptional—a subset of religious millennials (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2022) or active-confident believer millennials (Nynäs et al, 2022). However, while they will be a minority, Carroll (2003), Mannering (2022) and Smith (2025) all attest to the fact that they exist, they have much to offer, and they may even be a growing subset. And as younger teachers, they are likely to approach their teaching challenge of the call to witness with enthusiasm and fresh insights. They are also a profile who would be well positioned to become a future generation of leaders in Australian Catholic Education. However, Rymarz (2025) and Horner et al (2025) would warn that they may be too little and too late to ensure the long term sustainability of the Catholic identity and mission of Australian Catholic Schools.

CONCLUSIONS

Australian Catholic School teachers and leaders are invited to be great educators and to contribute to the Catholic identity and mission of their school. Their witness to this Catholic identity and mission is crucial to the future of Catholic Schools in Australia (see National Catholic Education Commission, 2024 and Sydney Catholic Schools, 2026). The millennial age bracket (aged 29-44 in 2026) is vital for the future workforce, identity and mission of Australian Catholic Schools. However, data suggests that an increasing majority of this age bracket are not in a position to promote and contribute to the Catholic identity and mission of their school, as they either have a limited belief and connection to Catholic beliefs and teachings or have no belief in them at all. This age group is the most likely to have “no religion” of all age groups in Australia. Australian Catholic School teachers in this age bracket are likely to be spiritual seekers or cultural believers whose witness and commitment are compromised by the strong secularising influences of the Australian culture.

Nonetheless, within this age bracket are also religiously committed millennials who are committed to Catholic faith and practises and who are well placed to offer a prophetic faith witness within their Catholic school communities. The challenge is to identify, support and develop them so that they play key roles in shaping the future of Catholic Schools in Australia. The hope is that there are enough of them to be effective.

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that student truancy is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple interrelated factors. The primary factors contributing to truancy include peer influence, students’ dislike of certain subjects, and teachers’ teaching methods and attitudes. Learning materials perceived as difficult, ineffective instructional practices, and authoritarian or non-educational disciplinary approaches reduce students’ motivation to participate in classroom learning.

In addition to pedagogical factors, structural and institutional conditions within the school also play a significant role in encouraging truancy. An open school environment, weak supervision, the absence of a student council, teacher absenteeism, overcrowded classrooms, and limited school facilities contribute to unconducive learning conditions. Under such circumstances, students tend to choose truancy as a coping mechanism to escape uncomfortable learning

environments. The school's sanctions are largely administrative and have not fully addressed the underlying causes of truancy, underscoring the need for more comprehensive, student-centred intervention strategies.

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