

**Snapshots of Population and Church Participation Change  
in the Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn  
by Wayne Brighton, Bishops' Research and Special Projects Officer**

**Introduction**

Statistics provide a set of indicators about activity and engagement at a ministry unit level. While they tell a story, they rarely provide the whole story. The task of interpretation requires a measure of background knowledge for while numbers shed some light on quantitative change, across the Diocese only a local knowledge, of people's lives reveals the depth of qualitative change that is occurring.

The quality of parish return data from Diocesan ministry units can be uneven and uncertain. While many ministry units provide timely and complete data, some seem to 'recycle' the previous return or provide no information at all. Sometimes the Diocese asks questions that can't be answered easily while the quality of data gathering depends on who does the 'head count' on any given day. Efforts have been made to check the reliability of parish figures from year to year. Although some estimates may be more or less reliable than others, the overall combined picture is of particular importance.

The indicators that follow are from parish returns for the period 1997-2007 and reports provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). ABS statistical divisions don't correlate neatly with Diocesan boundaries. Chaplaincy data from schools, hospitals or Synergy Youth are not included. Finally, some 18 months has elapsed since this data was collected bringing with it yet more change in the life of the diocese.

**Summary**

In the decade 1997 to 2007 the following patterns can be seen:

- the general population of the diocese grew by approximately 8% or 48,000 people while the Anglican population in the diocese declined by -3.8% or 5,500 people;
- the median age (50:50 point) of the ACT population was 34.5 compared to 55.5 amongst Anglican attendees;
- participation in pastoral offices declined such as baptism (-35%), confirmations (-57%), weddings (-35%) and funerals (-9%);
- the number of ministry units not offering Sunday school groups for children almost doubled to 44% in 2007;
- nearly half of the Diocese's ministry units experienced growth in regular attendance (29 units out of 62 units) while 3 units were closed and 2 new units were created;
- estimated irregular attendance (i.e. less than monthly) fell by approximately -29%;
- estimated regular attendance (i.e. at least monthly) declined by approximately -2.1%;

- ministry in aged care facilities is a considerable influence on parish attendance figures (possibly 10-15% across Diocese); and
- the general population of the diocese is projected to grow by approximately 86,000 in the decade to 2016, and approximately 60,000 for each decade until 2036.

## Population Change

Population growth rates across the ACT and NSW vary markedly (Table 1). Between 2001 and 2006, the population within every deanery appeared to increase. Growth was strongest in deaneries within northern suburbs of the ACT, chiefly through the development of a new township (Gunghalin) and urban renewal (Central Canberra). Southern Canberra actually showed the lowest rate of growth of any region in the Diocese. Meanwhile, the South Coast experienced the high growth rates compared to agricultural regions in the North West. Depopulation was only apparent in four local areas – Snowy River (-3.6%), Harden (-1.5%), Temora (-1.2%) and Tumut Shire (-0.2%). Goulburn deanery had some of the highest rates of population growth in the diocese, particularly in the Palerang (19%) and the Yass Valley (14.8%), albeit from a low base.

**Table 1. GENERAL POPULATION BY ABS STATISTICAL DISTRICT**

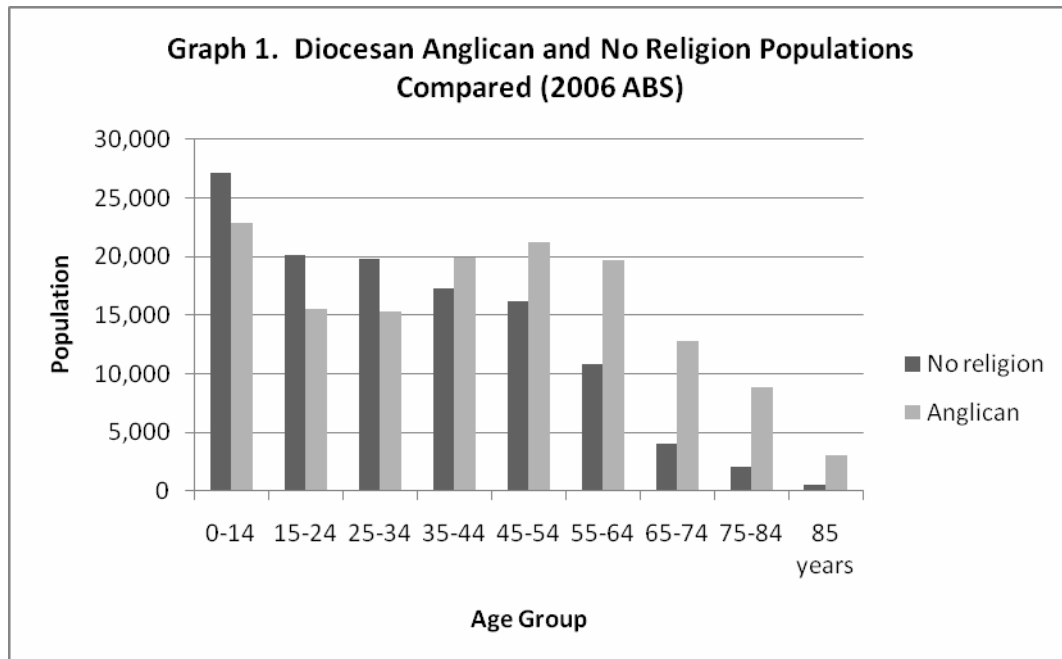
ABS Statistical District	1996	2001	2006	Pop Change 1996-2006	% Change
<b>ACT</b>	299,037	308,186	324,032	24,995	8%
<b>South Eastern</b>	174,862	183,032	197,942	23,080	13%
<b>Wagga</b>	54,893	48,895	52,490	-2,403	-4%
<b>Central Murrumbidgee (ex Wagga)</b>	48,787	50,963	51,182	2,395	5%
<b>TOTAL IN DIOCESE</b>	<b>577,579</b>	<b>591,076</b>	<b>625,646</b>	<b>48,067</b>	<b>8%</b>

The Anglican population has generally not followed these trends (Table 2). Anglicans made up 25% of the general population in 1996. If this proportion had been maintained, an additional 10,700 Anglicans could have called this Diocese home. Instead, the Anglican population fell, most sharply in the ACT and Wagga.

**Table 2. ANGLICAN POPULATION BY ABS STATISTICAL DISTRICT**

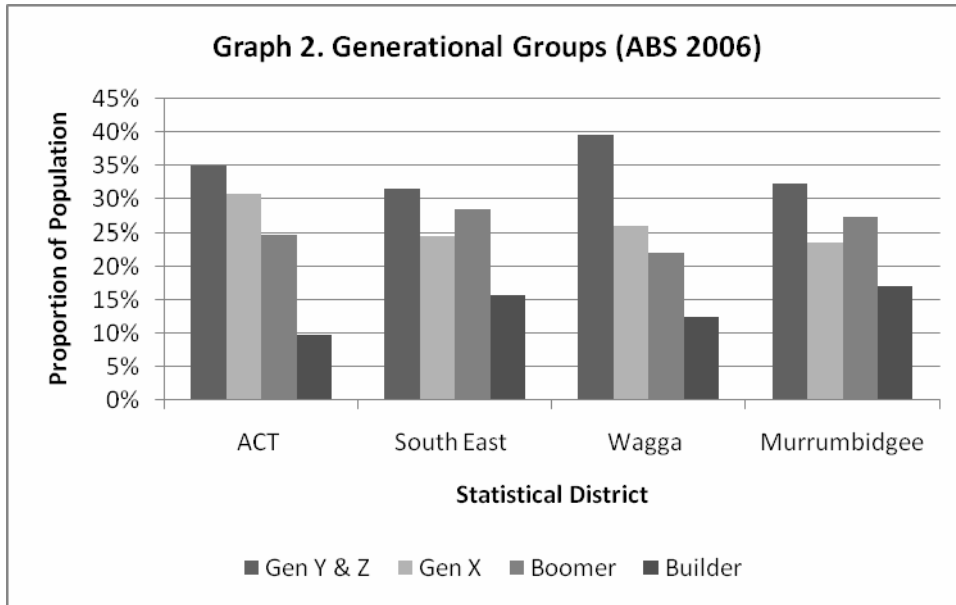
ABS Statistical District	1996	2001	2006	Pop Change 1996-2006	% Change
<b>ACT</b>	59,219	57,047	54,229	-4,990	-8.4%
<b>South Eastern</b>	53,881	54,352	55,406	1,525	2.8%
<b>Wagga</b>	14,715	12,898	13,276	-1,439	-9.8%
<b>Central Murrumbidgee (ex Wagga)</b>	16,868	17,064	16,267	-601	-3.6%
<b>TOTAL IN DIOCESE</b>	<b>144,683</b>	<b>141,361</b>	<b>139,178</b>	<b>-5,505</b>	<b>-3.8%</b>

In which age groups is this change occurring? The decline in Anglican self-identification among those aged under 35 is substantial, ranging between -20% to -30% across the decade. These falls are significant even when migration of people in these age groups for study and work opportunities is taken into account. By contrast (Graph 1), the level of ‘no religion’ has grown markedly, increasing by approximately 25% in the ACT and the South East and over 40% in Wagga and the Central Murrumbidgee. In many age groups, it is now the second largest by affiliation.



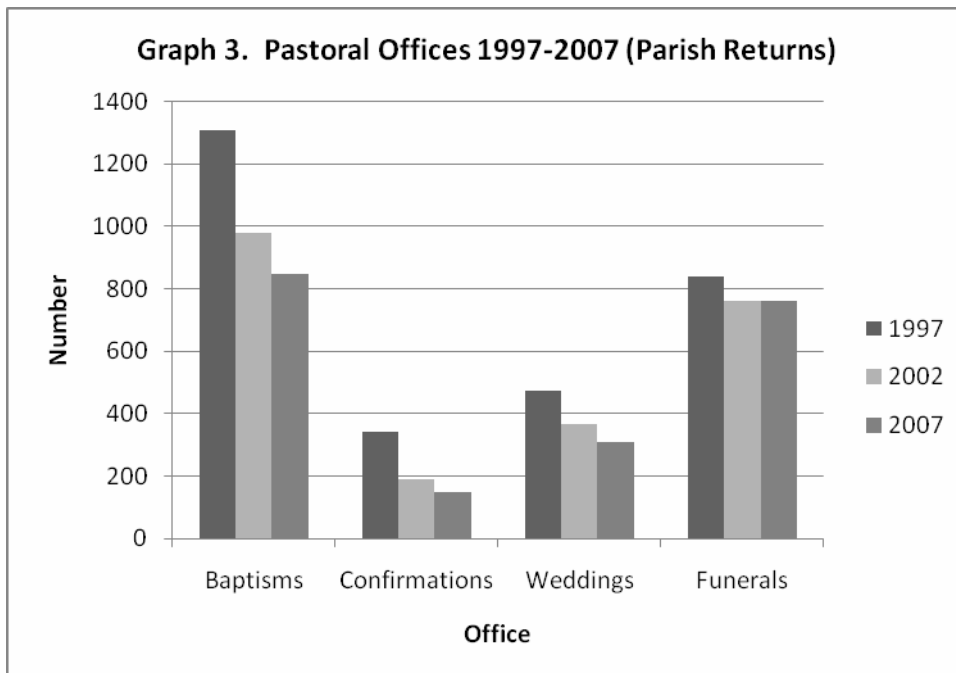
## Generational Change

The age imbalance between church attendees and the general community is becoming pronounced. Graph 2 shows that the Builder (aged over 65) and Boomer (aged 45-64) generations are significant demographic groups. However, the number of people that might be identified with Generation X (aged 25-44) and Generations Y and Z (aged between 15 and 25) comprise more than 60% of the general population. These groups are disproportionately absent from our churches. While few parishes in the Diocese participated in the 2006 National Church Life Survey, the sample that did suggested that fewer than 20% of regular attendees were aged between 15 and 40.

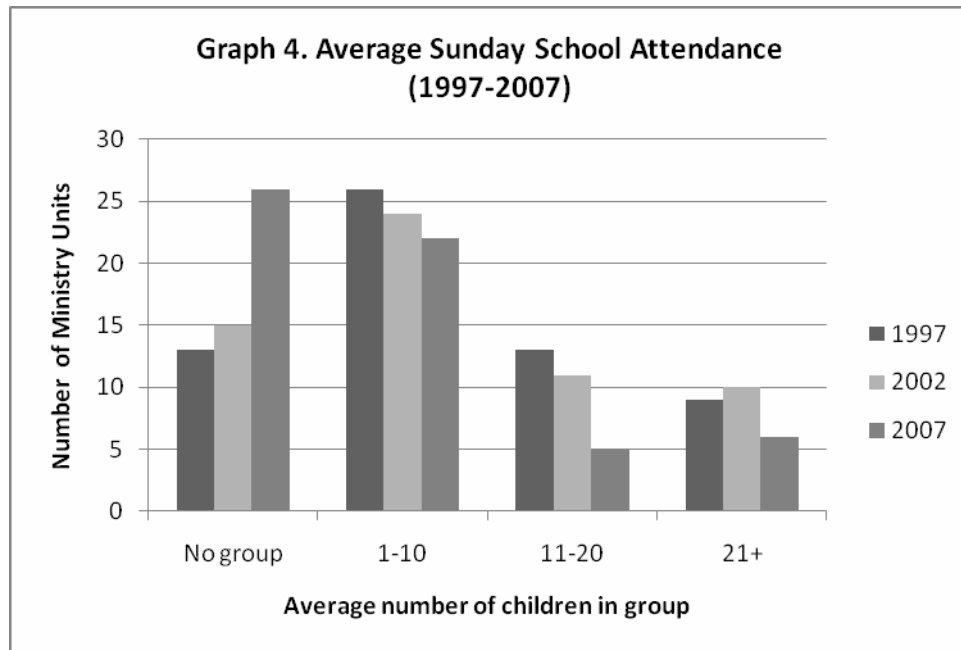


### Pastoral Offices and Children’s Ministry

These broad demographic changes are reflected in trends associated with pastoral offices (Graph 3). Fewer people are coming to us for pastoral care around key life transitions such as baptism (-35%), confirmation (-57%), weddings (-35%) and funerals (-9%). This is disconcerting as much of the Anglican Church’s capacity to encourage people to take up the life of Christian discipleship is predicated on them coming to us for these services. As the vast majority of baptisms are of children our capacity to engage with growing numbers of unbaptised people appears limited.

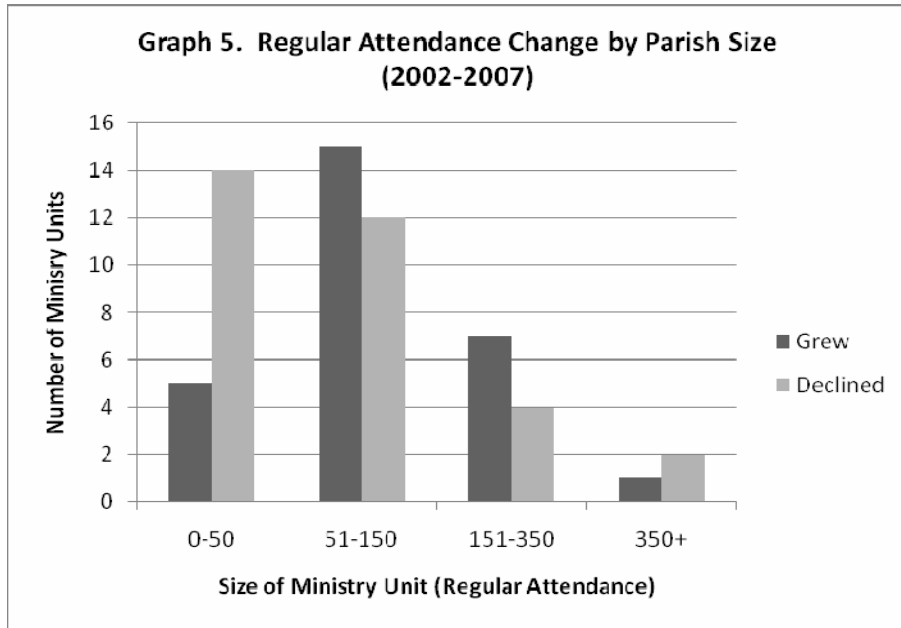


A significant number of ministry units no longer offer a children’s group (Graph 4). In 2007, 26 ministry units, or nearly half of all units in the Diocese (44%), did not report offering a group for children compared to 13 units in 1997. A disproportionate number of rural ministry units offered no children’s group as part of their worship activity. Furthermore, many of those children’s groups operating within ministry units appear to have become smaller. While low numbers may not make these groups viable in small centres, the knock on effects of this trend makes the challenge of engaging with young families increasingly difficult with time.

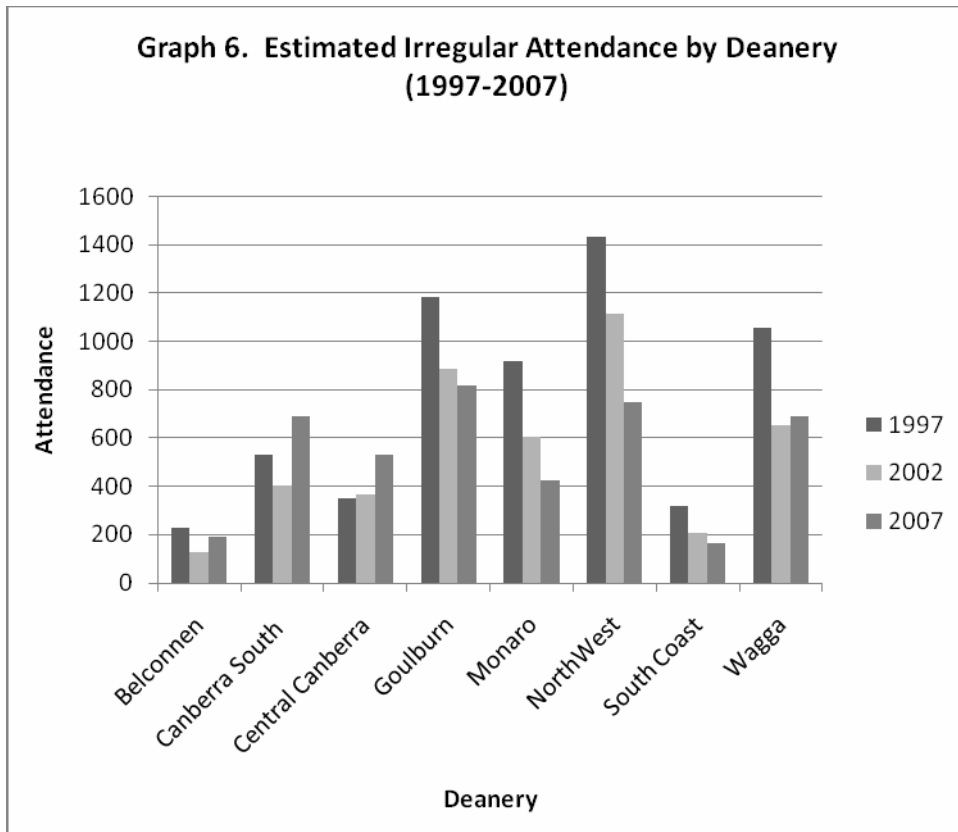


### Changes in Estimated Attendance

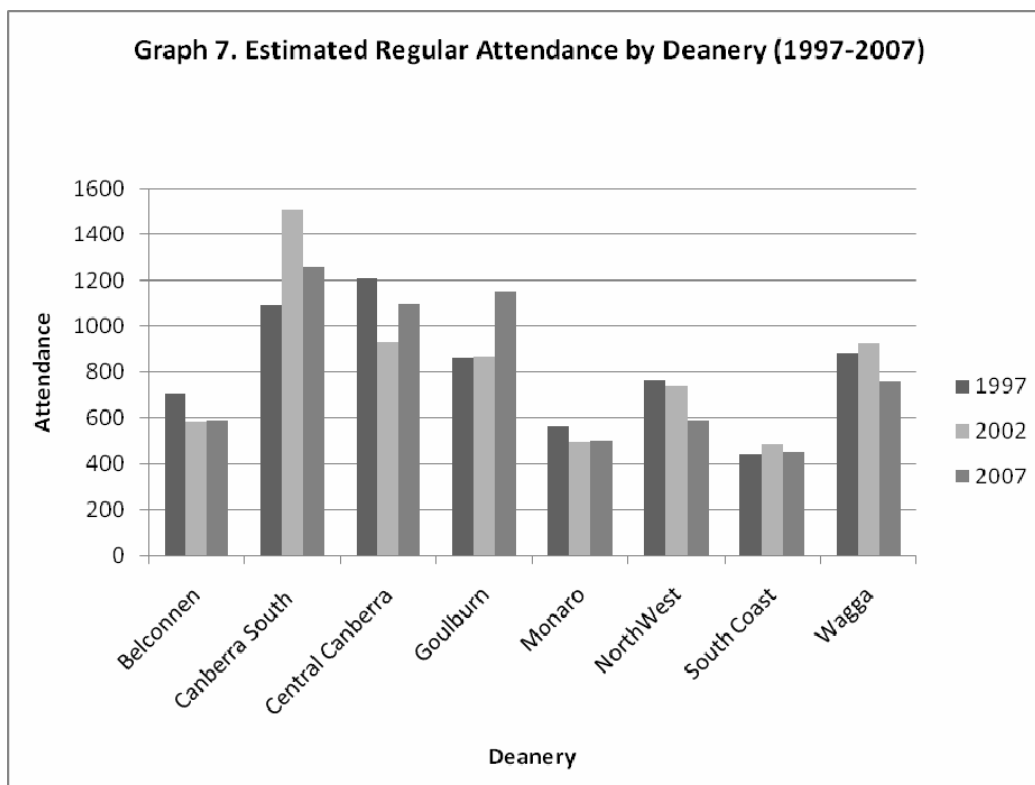
Many ministry units across the diocese had experienced growth in estimated attendance since 2002 (Graph 5). Ministry units with attendance between 50 and 350 were more likely to grow. Units with fewer than 50 members were more likely to have experienced decline.



Some parishes have substantial difficulty estimating irregular attendance (Graph 6). Notwithstanding the difficulty that ministry units with large attendance experience, it is important to note that much of the decline in this indicator occurred in country areas, particularly in the North West, Monaro and Goulburn deaneries. In these areas, a greater proportion of overall attendance is irregular, which is to say less than monthly. By comparison, attendance in the ACT is more likely regular in nature.



Estimated regular attendance (i.e. at least monthly) varied across the Diocese during the decade 1997-2007 (Graph 7). Overall, regular attendance appeared to grow during the first half and fall slightly during the second half of the decade, totalling -2.1% overall (6535 in 1997 to 6396 in 2007). Although parish returns lack precision at this point, this low estimate suggests that the full benefits of population growth across the region proved elusive.



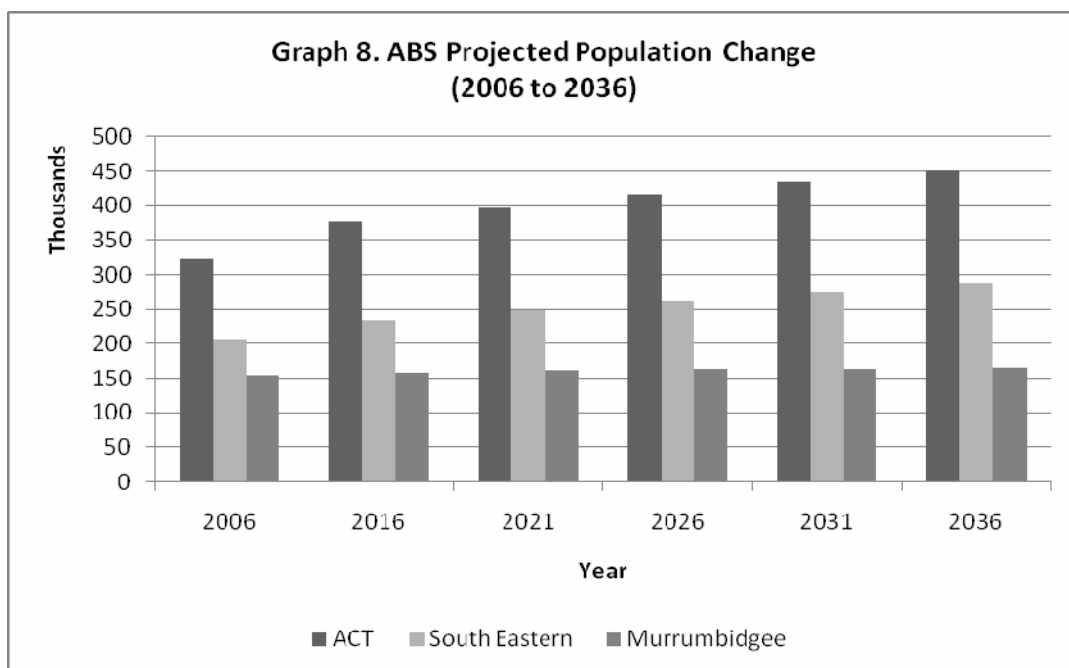
## Future Trends

Projecting trends in population growth is always challenging with much depending on assumptions about life expectancy, fertility rates, mortality and migration patterns. Real world outcomes are of course also subject to changes in economic opportunities, not to mention the likely impact of climate change, particularly the supply of water. Nevertheless, the ACT Chief Minister's Department and the NSW Department of Planning have produced projections to 2036 and beyond (Graph 8).<sup>1</sup> These projections are suggestive illustrations and neither predictions nor policy determinations.

<sup>1</sup> Chief Minister's Department, *ACT Population Projections 2007 to 2056*. Canberra: Chief Minister's Department, May 2009. Publication No. 09/0351. Cited 9 September 2009. Available online at: [http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/3360/ACT\\_population\\_projections\\_2007\\_2056.pdf](http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0012/3360/ACT_population_projections_2007_2056.pdf)

NSW Department of Planning, *New South Wales State and Regional Population Projections, 2006 -2036: 2008 Release*. Sydney: Department of Planning, 2008. Cited 9 September 2009. Available online at [http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/population/pdfs/nsw\\_state\\_regional\\_population\\_projections\\_2006\\_2036\\_2008release.pdf](http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/population/pdfs/nsw_state_regional_population_projections_2006_2036_2008release.pdf)

Demographers estimate a potential 32% increase in population for the regional planning areas that comprise the Diocese by 2036. This is a possible population increase from approximately 685,000 in 2006 to approximately 900,000 in 30 years. This forecasts a population increase of 86,000 by 2016 with it slowly tapering off to about 60,000 each and every decade after that. The ACT intends to be a major beneficiary of this growth as the Gungahlin town centre continues construction and the Molonglo development comes online. Both the South Eastern and Murrumbidgee regions are expected to grow too, the former at a comparable rate to the ACT, while the latter at a considerably reduced rate. The population in NSW is likely to have a higher average age than the ACT due to the availability of study and employment opportunities for young adults and retirement options. The social and environmental challenges associated with this possible population growth will be very significant.



## Conclusion

Statistics can easily feed unhelpful responses, like blame or guilt. The question is not a matter of responsibility but effectiveness at addressing the reality of change.

These diocesan statistics show a mixed picture. Anglicans are engaging with their church, but not at the rates they once did. Pastoral offices remain vitally important, but the number of people choosing to use them appears to have diminished with time. Some ministry units find that their attendance is growing, while others find that beloved members are not being replaced. These patterns are not irrevocable as a good many units went on to experience attendance growth after a period of decline.

The general population grew by 48,000 in the decade to 2007. The Anglican Church undoubtedly benefited from this increase. However, more people stopped identifying

themselves with our church than the number of newcomers who found life within it. Government demographers estimate that the population may grow by another 86,000 people by 2016 and by approximately 60,000 per decade after that.

The question for this Diocese is - will we respond effectively? Is our infrastructure, ministry models and missional approaches adequate to the opportunities that are emerging around us? If we are to be more effective in helping the Kingdom of God grow throughout the ACT and southern NSW, what might we need to do or do differently?