

A Profile of People Who Share Faith

Introduction

Evangelism has long been a cornerstone of church belief and culture, but exactly how are everyday church attenders going in this great commission of making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19, 20)? What is the profile of a faith sharer? The 2006 National Church Life Survey asked church attenders about patterns of faith-sharing that covered both opinions and actual behaviour, including the following question:

Q. Which of the following best describes your readiness to talk to others about your faith?

- *I do not have faith, so the question is not applicable*
- *I do not like to talk about my faith; my life and actions are sufficient*
- *I find it hard to talk about my faith in ordinary language*
- *I mostly feel at ease talking about my faith and do so if it comes up*
- *I feel at ease talking about my faith and look for opportunities to do so*

In Australia 16% of church attenders in 2006 feel at ease talking about their faith and look for opportunities to do so. 51% mostly feel at ease, and talk about faith if it comes up.

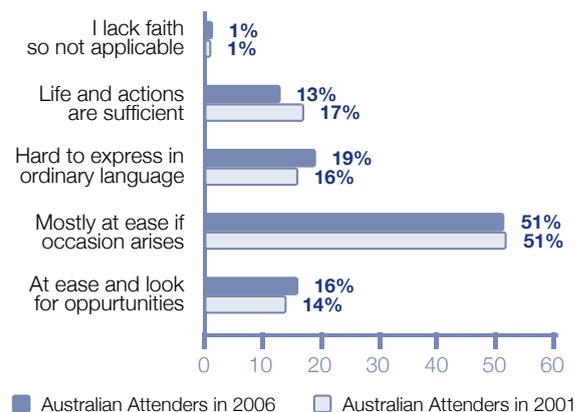
Another 19% find it hard to talk about their faith, and 13% believe that their life and actions are sufficient. This means 33% do not describe themselves as consistently or mostly 'at ease' when sharing their faith verbally with friends and family.

Characteristics of Faith Sharers

What is the profile of those who are at ease, who look for opportunities and are prepared to share faith with others? Characteristics of these 'faith sharers' are people who:

- **Are in a ministry or leadership role (74% vs 61% not in a role).** Research has established a clear link between church involvement and readiness to discuss matters of faith (*Mission Under the Microscope*, p.63).
- **Attend church more regularly and who attend an extra group at church (faith based or social).** They express a higher sense of belonging to church and show significantly higher levels of faith sharing.
- **Express a strong personal faith.** They have experienced 'much growth' in personal faith in the last year (78% of them are at ease sharing their faith, compared with 57% who say they have experienced only 'some growth' or 'no growth'). When churches focus on growing the faith of attenders, other crucial areas of church life (such as faith-sharing) also benefit.
- **Help others in informal ways.** This highlights how faith-sharing as a core quality of church life is intertwined with other qualities, such as 'Practical and Diverse Service'.

Figure 1: Attender attitudes to sharing faith



Source: 2006 NCLS Attenders Survey, based on 300,388 responses in 2006 and 367,531 responses in 2001.

Age differences

Research shows that older attenders are more likely than young attenders to prefer not to talk about their faith, believing their life example is sufficient

A barrier for young people in sharing faith is they often find it difficult to talk about their faith in ordinary language (*Mission Under the Microscope*, p.61)

Denominational differences

Attenders in different denominations do vary in their patterns of personal faith-sharing. This is shaped by differing theological heritages and outreach emphases.

Pentecostal attenders are most likely to look for opportunities to share faith with others (29%) and are least likely to find their faith hard to talk about (16% vs 19% for the overall church)

Catholic attenders also have fewer than average who find their faith hard to talk about (16%), however they have fewer than average who look for opportunities to talk about their faith. They have the highest proportion who believe their life and actions are sufficient (18% vs 13% overall)

Baptist attenders most often agree they find it difficult to communicate their faith in every day language (27%) followed by the Churches of Christ, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations (all 25%).

Faith-Sharing in Families

The impact of issues of faith being discussed and modelled in the family environment significantly affects one's faith journey.

The influence of parents is the most powerful predictor from a person's childhood of their current religious involvement (*Why People Don't Go To Church*, p.27).

44% frequently discuss matters of faith at home. (14% discuss faith in formal ways, through family or household devotions, 6% of church attenders do not talk about their Christian beliefs with other members of their household).

For the majority of Anglican and Protestant attenders, first contact with the Christian faith is provided by their parents or family. These familial ties are the most significant in bringing attenders to faith (*Taking Stock*, p.60). In the Catholic Church importance is placed on the role of parents educating their children in the faith (*Taking Stock*, p.66). Churches that support parents in this role are more likely to retain youth.

Young adult retention in church life is an issue: among church attenders in Australia who have children aged 15 and over still living at home, 40% of those children do not attend any church. Discussing faith at home, along with the presence of church programs oriented at youth, and a larger church size, are all factors that lead to a higher level of young adult retention (*Enriching Church Life*, p.55).

Parental patterns of church attendance, importance of their faith and whether both parents share the same religion impact on a child's faith journey (*Why People Don't Go To Church*, p.27).

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References

This fact sheet is based on *Occasional Paper 13: Faith-sharing activities by Australian Churches*. For references and further information on data sources, view at www.ncls.org.au in the Research section.

See also *NCLS Research Fact Sheet 3: Inviting People to Church*.