

## Attitudes to extra-marital sex

Extra-marital sex has historically been considered a serious offense in many cultures. In some countries adultery is illegal today, with punishments ranging from fines to the death penalty. In Australia, although extra-marital sex is not a legal matter, it is still an important moral issue. What do Australian church attenders think about extra-marital sex?

In late 2011 as a part of the 2011 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant church attenders were asked the following question, after having first been asked whether they thought it is wrong if a man and a woman have sexual relations before marriage:

**And what about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her husband or wife?**

- Always wrong
- Almost always wrong
- Sometimes wrong
- Not wrong
- Don't know

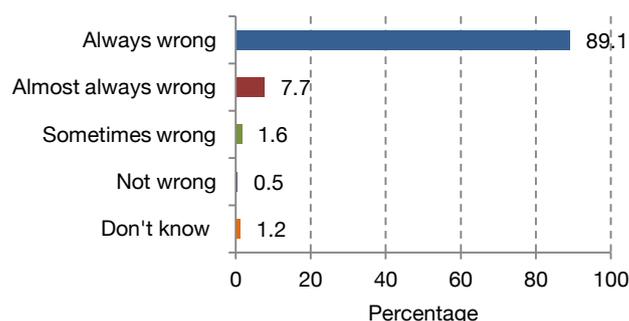
### Overall results

As shown in Figure 1, an overwhelming majority (89%) of Australian church attenders thought extra-marital sex is always wrong. A further 8% thought it is almost always wrong, suggesting they may condone it in some circumstances. The proportions who thought extra-marital sex was sometimes wrong, not wrong, and who didn't know, were negligible. The latter also indicates the assurance with which most attenders form an opinion on this issue.

Church attenders' views about the issue differ significantly from those of the broader Australian community. Some 63% of Australians thought in 2009 that extra-marital sex was always wrong, and 27% that it was almost always wrong.<sup>1</sup> However, the gap

between attenders and the broader community was not as great as was the case for views about pre-marital sex.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Attitudes to extra-marital sex**



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey v2 (n=1,233).

### Age, gender and education

Although the vast majority of every age group thought that extra-marital sex is always wrong, some differences can be observed. The 20-29 year old group had the highest proportion of attenders thinking extra-marital sex is always wrong (97%). The 60-69 year old group had the lowest proportion holding this view (84%), and the highest thinking it is almost always wrong (12%).

**Table 1: Attitudes to extra-marital sex by age**

	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
	Percentage							
<b>Always wrong</b>	88	97	90	94	88	84	88	88
<b>Almost always wrong</b>	8	3	8	5	9	12	7	7
<b>Sometimes wrong</b>	2	0	0	1	1	3	3	1
<b>Not wrong</b>	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
<b>Don't know</b>	3	0	2	1	1	0	2	2

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey v2 (n=1,233).

Differences in views between men and women were slight. Women were a little more likely than men to think extra-marital sex is always wrong (91% of women vs.

<sup>1</sup> Evans, A. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2009. [Computer file]. Canberra: Australian Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2010. <http://www.ada.edu.au/social-science/01189-release1jun2011>.

<sup>2</sup> Hancock, N., Pepper, M. & Powell, R. (2013) Attitudes to sex before marriage, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 19. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.

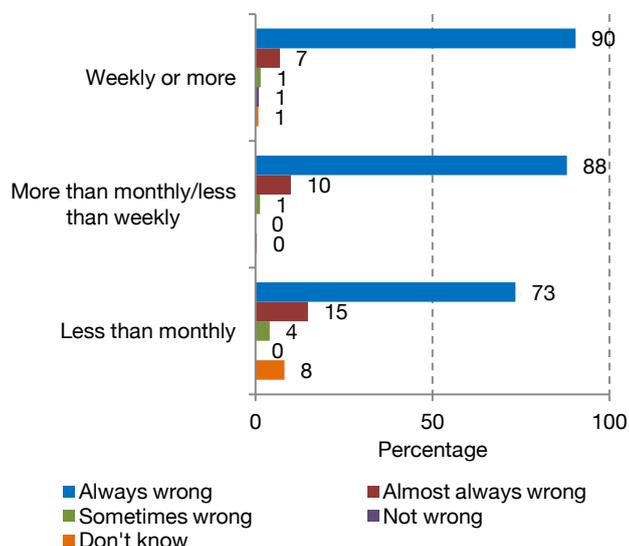
87% of men). In contrast, men were more likely than women to think it is almost always wrong (11% vs. 6%).

Again differences by education level were small. Those attenders whose highest education was school were more likely than those with a trade certificate/diploma or degree to think extra-marital sex is always wrong, with 92% thinking so. These attenders were also less likely than those higher educated to think extra-marital sex is almost always wrong (4% compared to 10%).

### Religious practice

Those who attended church less than monthly were less likely than other church attenders to think extra-marital sex is always wrong, and more likely to think it is almost always wrong (see Figure 2). Similarly, as the frequency of church attenders' private devotions increase, so does their likelihood of thinking extra-marital sex is always wrong (79% of those who hardly ever/never have private devotions thought it was wrong, verses 94% of those who have devotions everyday/most days).

**Figure 2: Extra-marital sex by church attendance**



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,219).

Interestingly, there was little difference between the views of people with different church attendance histories. Church attenders who were visitors or who were newcomers to church life in the last five years were just as strongly against extra-marital sex as long-term attenders.

### Denominational differences

Uniting Church attenders were least likely out of the denominations to think extra-marital sex is always wrong (80%), and most likely to think it is almost always wrong (16%). In contrast, Pentecostal attenders had the highest proportion thinking it is always wrong (98%).

**Table 2: Extra-marital sex by denomination**

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
<b>Always wrong</b>	90	97	84	91	98	80	95
<b>Almost always wrong</b>	7	1	11	4	2	16	3
<b>Sometimes wrong</b>	2	1	2	0	0	4	1
<b>Not wrong</b>	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
<b>Don't know</b>	1	1	2	4	0	1	1

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,233)

### Change over time

Attenders' views on extra-marital sex have remained remarkably stable over time. In 2001, 89% of attenders thought it was always wrong, 7% almost always, 2% sometimes wrong, and 2% didn't know. Zero percent selected 'not wrong'. These results are almost identical to those sourced in 2011, ten years later.

### Summary

The vast majority of Australian church attenders think extra-marital sex is always wrong, and a small proportion think it is almost always wrong. These views vary somewhat by denomination, frequency of church attendance and devotional practice, and only slightly by age and education.

### Data sources

Castle, K., (2001) [computer file], 2001 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Castle, K., (2006) [computer file], 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey J. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Powell, R., (2014) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

### Citation

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