

Influences on church attenders' decisions to attend their local church

Choice of church

Slightly more than half the Australian population profess to be Christian, and whilst not every Christian attends church regularly, for those who do, the decision to attend a particular local church is often influenced by one or more factors.

In the 2016 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked the following question:

Which of the following influenced your decision to start attending this local church? (Mark ALL that apply)

- The decision was made by someone else (e.g. parents)
- It was a convenient church for me
- It was the local church of my denomination
- This was the church where I became a Christian
- I was invited to attend here
- I knew people here
- The sense of community here
- The style of worship
- The quality of the preaching/teaching
- The character or style of leader(s)
- The sense of God's presence here
- The stance of people on beliefs or values
- The activities for children/youth
- The strong concern for the wider community
- Other reason

Overall findings

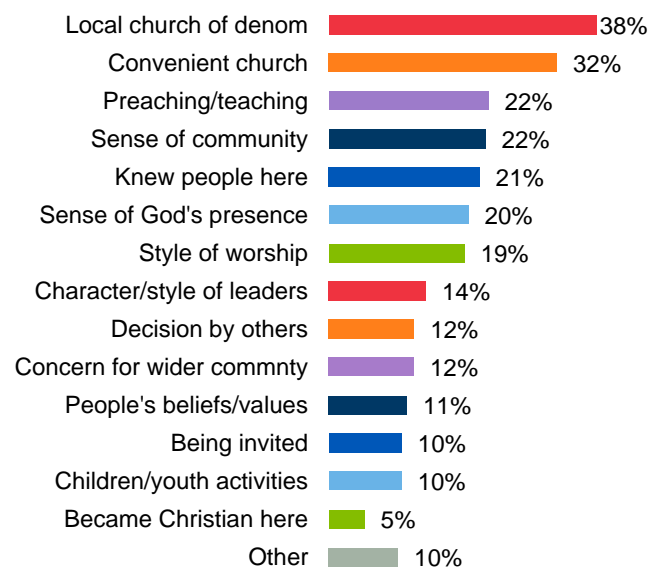
The most common response was that it was the local church of the denomination to which the attender belonged (38%), followed by the convenience of attending the church (32%). Characteristics of the church, its leadership and people (e.g. sense of community, style of worship, style of leaders, stance on beliefs or values) as well as personal considerations (having been invited, decision by others, etc.) were also factors influencing some attenders' decisions (see Figure 1).

Demographic differences in views

Influencing factors were significantly different between age groups and education levels (Table 1), and it is not

surprising that for 41% of 15-29 year olds, the decision to attend a particular church was made by someone else (e.g. parents). Other influences which were significantly higher for this cohort compared to other age groups were knowing people in the church (38%) and having been invited (23%).

Figure 1: Influences on attenders' decisions to attend their local church



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,305).

For half the 70+ year old cohort, attending a local church of their denomination was an influencing factor. Other factors such as the style of worship and the sense of God's presence were not as strong for this group (12%) compared to the other age groups (20-24%), whilst the quality of the teaching/preaching was a factor highest among the 30-49 year olds (31%).

The convenience of the church (38%), a sense of community (29%) and the quality of preaching/teaching (33%) were particularly important for degree holders (compared with 28%, 16% and 13% respectively for those with a school education, and 30%, 21% and 21% respectively of trade certificate/diploma holders).

Table 1: Influencing factors on attenders' decisions to attend their church by demographics

	Age				Education		
	15-29 yrs	30-49 yrs	50-69 yrs	70+ yrs	School	Trade cert/dipl	Degree
	Percentage						
Decn by others	41	8	9	6	17	11	7
Convenient church	27	34	34	32	28	30	38
My denom	28	24	40	50	40	42	32
Christian here	10	5	4	4	7	5	3
Invited	23	12	8	7	11	6	13
Knew people	38	20	23	13	18	22	24
Sense of commnty	28	22	25	17	16	21	29
Style of worship	20	24	22	12	13	20	24
Preaching/teaching	21	31	25	14	13	21	33
Char/style of leaders	17	15	16	8	8	11	21
God's presence	21	24	23	12	14	23	23
People's beliefs	14	11	13	7	8	10	15
Children activities	14	14	11	6	7	9	15
Wider community	15	14	13	9	7	11	17
Other	9	14	10	7	10	10	9

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,286-1,297)

Church life

Significant differences were also found by denomination and the church attendance background of attenders (Table 2).

Table 2: Influencing factors on attenders' decisions to attend by denomination and attendance background

	Denom		Attendance background			
	Cath	Prot	Nc	Sw	Tr	> 5
	Percentage					
Decn by others	12	12	6	2	8	15
Convenient church	44	22	24	25	38	31
My denomination	48	29	20	13	36	44
Christian here	3	7	7	1	4	6
Invited	3	17	29	22	9	8
Knew people	12	30	37	37	20	18
Sense of commnty	16	28	22	40	26	20
Style of worship	11	27	28	25	22	17
Preaching/teaching	15	29	24	37	30	19
Char/style of leadrs	9	18	24	23	19	11
God's presence	13	26	14	33	24	18
People's beliefs	5	17	9	20	10	11
Children activities	3	17	3	21	8	11
Wider community	6	17	10	28	15	10
Other	8	11	16	10	16	8

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,212-1,305)
Church attendance background: Nc=Newcomer, Sw=Switcher, Tr=Transfer, >5=Attender for more than 5 years

For many Catholics, a local Catholic church (48%) and one convenient for them to attend (44%) were key factors (compared with 29% and 22% respectively of Protestants). Proportionally fewer Catholics than Protestants gave other reasons as influences. Being invited, the character/style of leaders, people's values/beliefs, activities for children/youth and concern for the wider community were all selected by less than 10% of Catholics (compared with 17-18% of Protestants).

Some 44% of those who had attended the same church for more than 5 years had decided to attend the local church of their own denomination, compared to 13% of those who had attended one of a different denomination in the previous 5 years (switcher). The main influences for switchers were a sense of community (40%), knowing people in the new church (37%), quality of the preaching/teaching (37%) and a sense of God's presence (33%). Switchers were close to three times more likely (28%) to choose their particular local church because of the concern shown to the wider community, compared to newcomers and those who had attended for more than 5 years (both 10%). Knowing someone there was also a factor for many newcomers in attending the church (37%), close to double the percentage of transfers (20%) and more than double those who had attended for more than 5 years (18%). A significant number of newcomers also attended the church because they were invited (29%).

Summary

Influencing factors on an attender's decision to attend their local church varied significantly between various groups. Degree holders tended to attribute their choice to multiple factors, as did Protestants, whereas Catholics were influenced by convenience and attending the local Catholic church. For some groups, including younger people and newcomers to church, being invited was an important factor.

Data sources

Powell, R., Pepper, M., Hancock, N., & Sterland, S. (2016) [computer file] 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H, NCLS Research, Sydney.

Citation

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