

Church attenders' role models for their faith

Role models

Whilst faith has a highly personal dimension and is something that one grows into, it is not something that exists and develops in isolation. The personal relationship with Jesus, essential to being Christian, is, in most cases, sparked and possibly nurtured by others who share that same faith.

In the 2016 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked to indicate the following as a part a series of questions about their faith history:

The most significant people to show me what faith is about have been: (Mark up to THREE options)

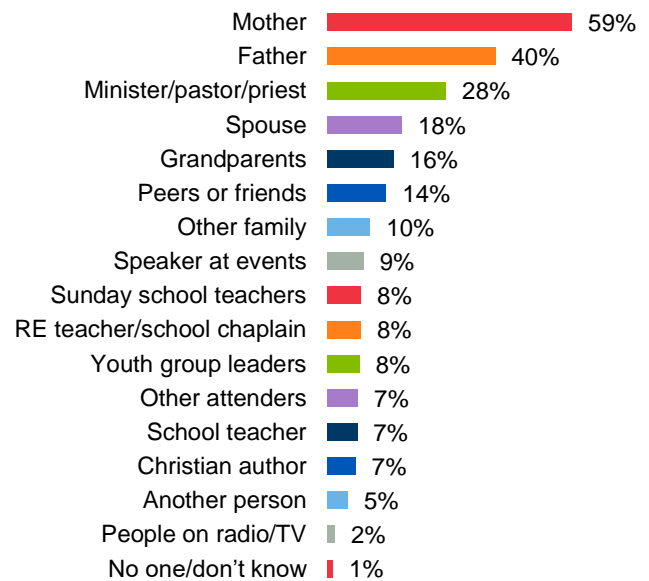
- Mother
- Father
- Spouse
- Grandparents
- Other family members
- Peers or friends
- Minister/pastor/priest of a local church
- Sunday school/Sabbath school teachers
- Youth group leaders
- Other church attenders
- Religious Education teacher/school chaplain
- School teacher
- Speaker at events (e.g. camp, conference, evangelistic event)
- People on the radio/TV
- A Christian author
- Another person
- No one in particular/don't know

Overall findings

A significant role model for most church attenders was their mother (59%), followed by their father (40%). Other role models for many church attenders were the ministers, pastors and priests of their local church (28%), followed by family and friends, i.e. spouse (18%), grandparents (16%), peers and friends (14%) and other family members (10%). Other individuals such as Religious Education/Sunday/Sabbath school teachers, youth group leaders and Christian authors,

whilst also identified as role models, were less influential (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The most significant people to show attenders what faith is about



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,327).

Role models by demographics

Parents were the main role models across all age groups (see Table 1). Sunday school, Religious Education and school teachers as well as school chaplains had made more impact on the 70+ year-olds (significant role models for some 11%-13%) than on younger attenders (3%-8% across the other age groups), whilst peers or friends (24%) and youth group leaders (23%) were significant role models for the 15-29 year-olds. Peers and friends were also 2-3 times more likely to be role models for 30-49-year-olds (18%) and 50-69 year-olds (15%) compared to the 6% of 70+ year-olds. Christian authors were more likely to be role models for the younger than the older cohorts (9% for the 15-29 year-olds and 11% for the 30-49 year-olds).

Women were almost twice as likely (25%) as men (14%) to be role models for their spouse. Some 20% of attenders with a university degree indicated that peers or friends were one of their most important role models.

Table 1: Church attenders' role models in faith by age

	Age			
	15-29 yrs	30-49 yrs	50-69 yrs	70+ yrs
	Percentage			
Mother	58	55	54	66
Father	46	39	39	37
Spouse	7	20	18	21
Grandparents	18	15	18	12
Other family	12	12	13	5
Peers or friends	24	18	15	6
Minister/pastor/priest	31	31	30	24
Sunday school teachers	3	5	8	13
Youth group leaders	23	8	4	5
Other attenders	8	11	8	4
RE teacher/school chaplain	4	4	8	13
School teacher	6	4	6	11
Speaker at events	10	8	9	8
People on radio/TV	2	2	2	1
Christian author	9	11	6	4
Another person	3	7	6	3
No one/don't know	1	1	2	1

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,303)

Church life

The main role models for most Catholics were their mother (72%) and father (50%), which was significantly higher than Protestants (46% and 31% respectively). Catholics were also much more likely to find role models in teachers and chaplains at school (11%-12%) compared with Protestants (4%). Role models at the church itself were less influential for Catholics than for Protestants, as were peers and friends (see Table 2). For Protestants, minister, pastor or priest (36%) was second only to mother as a role model.

Table 2: Church attenders' role models in faith by denomination and ministry involvement

	Denomination		Ministry role	
	Cath	Prot	No	Yes
	Percentage			
Mother	72	46	62	52
Father	50	31	41	38
Spouse	18	18	17	18
Grandparents	19	13	17	14
Other family	10	11	12	8
Peers or friends	9	19	12	19
Minister/pastor/priest	20	36	25	37
Sunday school teachers	4	12	7	10
Youth group leaders	2	13	5	13
Other attenders	4	11	6	11
RE teacher/school chaplain	12	4	10	6
School teacher	11	4	8	7
Speaker at events	3	14	6	14
People on radio/TV	1	2	2	2
Christian author	3	10	6	9
Another person	5	5	5	4
No one/don't know	2	1	1	1

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,270-1,327)

A higher proportion of attenders who held ministry roles in their local church than those who did not identified peers or friends, minister/pastor/priest, youth group leaders, other attenders and event speakers as role models, and a lower proportion identified their mothers.

Table 3: Church attenders' role models in faith by attendance background

	Church attendance background			
	Newcomer	Switcher	Transfer	>5 yrs
	Percentage			
Mother	37	41	59	62
Father	18	21	47	42
Other attenders	12	14	13	6
Christian author	15	11	14	4

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (n=1,218)

Significant differences could also be seen between attenders from different church attendance backgrounds in relation to the importance of parents, other attenders and Christian authors as role models in faith. Those who had been attending their church for more than 5 years were similar to those who had transferred from a church of the same denomination in the high importance of parents. Parents were less significant for those who had switched denominations and those new to church (see Table 3).

Summary

Most church attenders (59%) identified their mother as a significant person who showed them what faith is about, whilst 40% identified their fathers. Ministers, pastors or priests of local churches were also a significant person in attenders' understanding of their faith.

Marked differences could however be seen when comparing the responses across different age groups and between Catholics and Protestants. Some differences were also present by gender, level of formal education and church attendance history.

Data sources

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

Citation

Gan, C. & Pepper, M. (2018) Church attenders' role models for their faith, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 18003. Sydney: NCLS Research.