

Attitudes to Abortion

Various positions

As a complex matter of medical and sexual ethics, abortion has produced various opinions and positions within Australian churches. Some denominations and groups take a strict stance against it, advocating for the rights of the unborn. Others have conceded that abortion is 'the least problematic solution' in some circumstances.¹ Still other denominations and churches choose to have no official position.

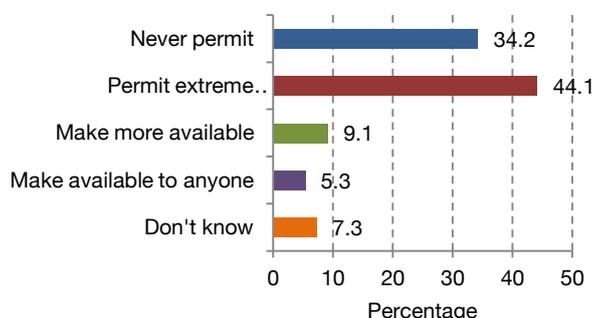
Aside from official teachings, what do church attenders actually think about the issue of abortion? In late 2011 as a part of the 2011 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant church attenders were asked the following question:

Which statement is closest to your attitude to abortion?

- Abortion should never be permitted
- Abortion should be permitted only in extreme circumstances (eg rape, risk to the mother)
- Abortion should be available in a wider range of situations
- Abortion should be available to any woman who desires one
- Don't know

Overall results

Figure 1: Attitudes to abortion



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,354).

As shown in Figure 1, church attenders were most likely to think abortion should only be permitted in extreme circumstances, with 44% thinking so. Those who thought abortion should never be permitted made up a smaller proportion (34%). This suggests that church attenders are more prone to view abortion as a complex moral issue with shades of grey, not just as black and white. A minority of attenders thought abortion should be made available in a wider range of situations (9%) or to any woman (5%), and 7% indicated they did not know.

Age, gender and education

Interestingly, 15-29 year olds were the only age group more likely to think abortion should never be permitted (40%) than that it should be permitted in extreme circumstances (36%), as shown in Table 1. Almost half of people over 50 thought that abortion should be permitted in extreme circumstances.

Table 1: Attitudes to abortion by age

	15-29 yrs	30-49 yrs	50-69 yrs	70+ yrs
	Percentage			
Never permit	40	35	35	28
Permit extreme circumstances	36	42	46	48
Make more available	6	9	9	10
Make available to anyone	5	6	6	5
Don't know	12	8	4	9

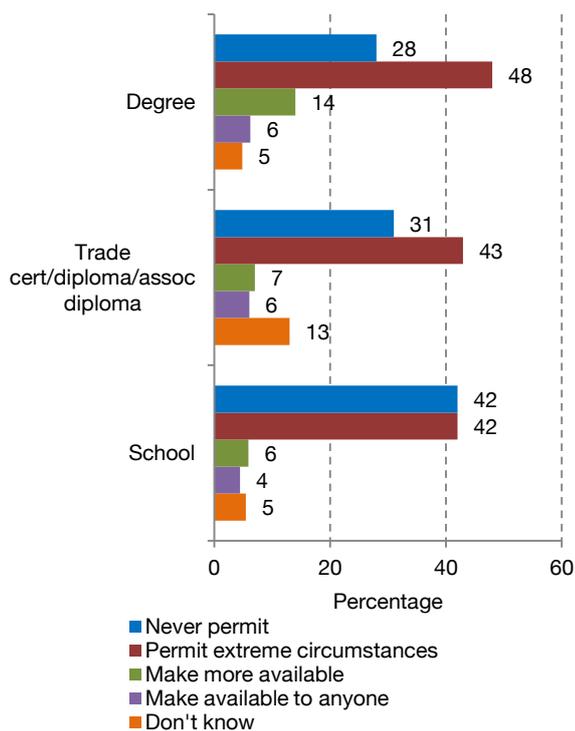
Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,338).

Women were more likely than men to think abortion should never be permitted, with 38% compared to 29% thinking so. Similar proportions of men and women thought abortion should be permitted in extreme circumstances, should be made more available and should be made available to any woman. More men (10%) than women (5%) were unsure about this issue.

As shown in Figure 2, 28% of church attenders with a university education thought abortion should never be permitted, compared to 31% of those with a trade certificate and 42% of those with only schooling.

¹ <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/anglicans-call-for-new-stance-on-abortion/2007/12/14/1197568264984.html>

Figure 2: Attitudes to abortion by education



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,332).

Religious practice

Views about abortion varied by frequency of attending church and frequency of religious practice. A large majority (83%) of weekly (or more often) attenders thought that abortion should never be permitted or only permitted in extreme circumstances, versus 56% of less frequent attenders. Some 84% of attenders who practiced private devotions daily or most days held these views, compared with 60% who rarely or never did so.

Newcomers to church life in the last five years were less strongly opposed to abortion than longer term attenders. Some 20% of newcomers thought that abortion should never be permitted and 40% that it should only be permitted in extreme circumstances. In contrast, of longer term attenders, 32% and 46% respectively held these views.

Denominational differences

Denominations varied greatly in terms of people thinking abortion should never be permitted, from 8% of Uniting attenders to 50% of Pentecostals. Every denomination (other than Pentecostals) was more likely to think abortion should be permitted in extreme circumstances than never permitted, and minorities

(although sizeable for the Uniting Church) thought abortion should be made more available.

Table 2: Attitudes to abortion by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
Never permit	11	36	40	19	50	8	35
Permit extreme circumstances	50	48	41	63	40	46	46
Make more available	15	6	8	11	4	22	7
Make available to anyone	7	5	5	5	1	14	5
Don't know	17	6	6	2	5	10	8

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,354)

Change over time

Attitudes towards abortion remained relatively stable over the previous 10 years. Those who thought abortion should be permitted in extreme circumstances decreased slightly between 2001 and 2011 (from 49% to 44%), and those who were unsure about this issue almost doubled over the same period (4% to 7%).

Summary

Church attenders are likely to think abortion should only be permitted in extreme circumstances (e.g. rape, risk to the mother), or not permitted at all. A minority think abortion should be made more widely available. These results have remained relatively stable over time. Views vary particularly strongly by denomination, but also as a function of age, gender 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

Hancock, N., Pepper, M. & Powell, R. (2014) Attitudes to abortion, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 14010. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.