

Attitudes to sex before marriage

A point of difference

Australian society is increasingly accepting sex before marriage as the norm. As one indication of this, cohabitation with a partner before marriage has become more common in the past 20 years, from 45% of married couples in 1990 having lived together first, to 71% in 2000 and 79% in 2010¹. This represents a point of difference between the teaching of many churches and what is acceptable in wider society. What do Australian church attenders, immersed in this broader context, think about sex before marriage?

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:

Do you think it is wrong if a man and a woman have sexual relations before marriage?

- Always wrong
- Not wrong if they are engaged
- Not wrong, if they are committed to a long term relationship
- Not wrong in any circumstances
- Don't know

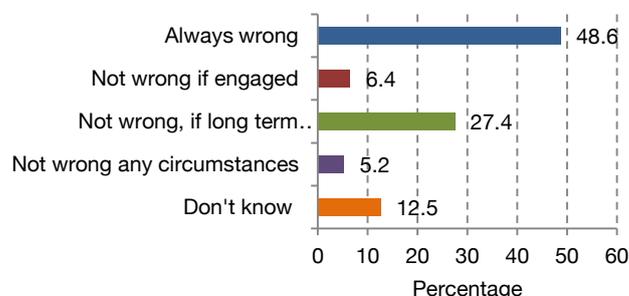
Overall results

As shown in Figure 1, almost half of all church attenders (49%) in 2011 thought that sex before marriage is always wrong. Some 6% thought it isn't wrong if engaged, a further 27% thought it isn't wrong if committed to a long-term relationship, and 5% thought that there are no circumstances in which it is wrong. Some 13% did not know. There is a large gap between the views of church attenders and broader community views about pre-marital sex. In 2009, 9% of Australians thought that sex before marriage was always wrong, and 5% that it was almost always wrong.²

¹<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30March+Quarter+2012>

² 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>

Figure 1: Attitudes to sex before marriage



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey 0 v2 (n=1,357).

Demographics

Apart from the very youngest and oldest age groups, the proportion of attenders who thought premarital sex is always wrong seemed to decline with age (Table 1). The 20-29 year old grouping (58%) and the 30-39 year old grouping (57%) were the most likely to think this. Fifteen to 19 year olds were the age group most likely to think that sex before marriage wasn't wrong in any circumstances (14% versus 5% of the other ages).

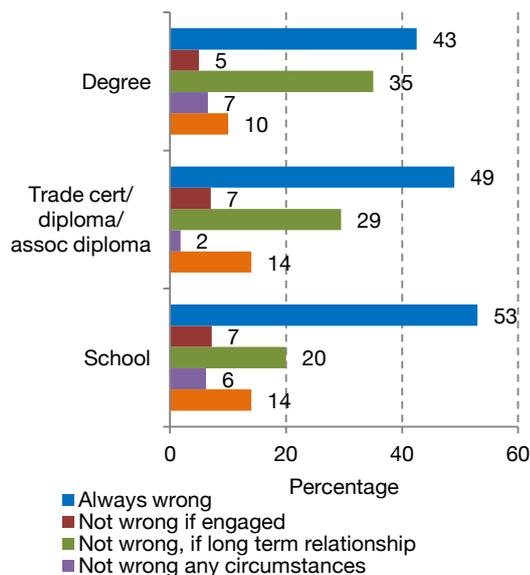
Table 1: Sex before marriage by age

	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
	Percentage							
Always wrong	53	58	57	50	45	43	40	57
Not wrong if engaged	3	0	3	8	8	8	8	5
Not wrong if long term relationship	8	33	27	25	27	36	29	22
Not wrong any circumstances	14	4	5	6	6	5	2	4
Don't know	22	5	7	10	14	7	21	13

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey 0 v2 (n=1,345).

Men and women answered this question quite similarly, with little difference in their responses. Attenders whose highest education was school were most likely to think premarital sex is always wrong (53% compared to 49% of those with a trade certificate/diploma, and 43% of those with a degree). Those with a degree were most likely to take the more liberal stance that premarital sex isn't wrong if committed to a long-term relationship (35% thought so).

Figure 2: Sex before marriage by education



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,337).

Frequency of religious practice

Frequency of church attendance was associated with more conservative views about pre-marital sex. Over half (54%) of people who attended church at least weekly thought that pre-marital sex was always wrong, compared with 23% of less frequent attenders. A similar pattern was observed for devotional practice. As frequency of private devotions increased from hardly ever/never to everyday/most days, being always against pre-marital sex increased from 24% to 59%

Newcomers to church life in the last five years were also highly distinct in their views. Over a fifth (22%) of newcomers thought that pre-marital sex was always wrong, versus almost half (46%) of attenders who had been at their church for at least five years.

Denominational differences

Table 2: Sex before marriage by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
Always wrong	45	69	34	39	85	32	70
Not wrong if engaged	5	2	9	10	5	7	2
Not wrong if long term relationship	25	14	36	34	5	41	18
Not wrong any circumstances	4	3	8	6	0	6	2
Don't know	21	12	13	11	5	14	8

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey O v2 (n=1,357)

“Always wrong” was the most common response from all denominations, except for Catholics and Uniting Church attenders, who were more likely to think it isn’t wrong if committed to a long-term relationship. Anglicans were the most unsure denomination (21%).

Change over time

The views of church attenders regarding premarital sex have remained relatively stable over time. The proportion who think it is always wrong was slightly lower in 2011 (49%) than in 2001 (52%). The proportion of people who don’t know what to think has increased, from 9% in 2001 to 13% in 2011. However in 1991, 75% of Protestant church attenders disagreed with sex outside of marriage³, compared with 63% of Protestants in 2001 and 61% in 2011 who think sex before marriage is always wrong. This may indicate that just as cohabitation before marriage increased rapidly in Australia between 1990 and 2000 and less sharply since 2000, views among church attenders regarding pre-marital sex have followed a parallel trajectory.

Summary

While about half of church attenders thought sex before marriage is always wrong, more than a quarter thought it isn’t wrong if the couple are committed to a long-term relationship. This more liberal stance is more common among the higher educated, in some denominations and among people who attend church and practise devotions less frequently. Views on sex before marriage have remained relatively stable over time.

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 sex before marriage, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 14013. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.

³ No data are available for Catholics in 2001. The question wording in 1991 was also slightly different.