

Church attenders' climate change attitudes

Climate change in the public discourse

Discussion and debate about climate change has been a feature of mainstream public discourse in Australia since the mid 2000s, discourse which has become highly politicised in the last several years.¹

Some of Australia's church denominations, congregations/parishes, church aid and development agencies, and ecumenical networks have spoken publicly about climate change and its implications for humans and God's larger Creation, and have urged the churches and the broader society to mitigate climate change and its effects on the most vulnerable.² Some congregations, parishes and individual Christians have also engaged with these issues.³

In 2011, the National Church Life Survey asked a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders the following question:

Which of the following statements best describes your thoughts about climate change?

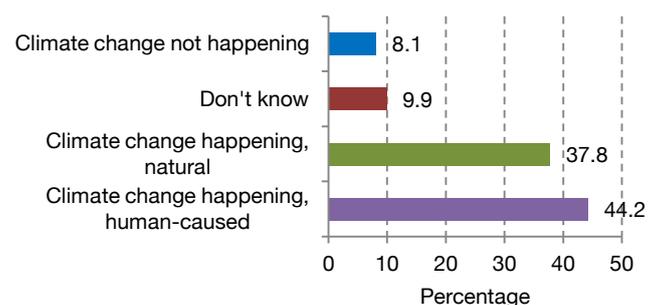
- I don't think that climate change is happening
- I have no idea whether climate change is happening or not
- I think that climate change is happening, but it's just a natural fluctuation in Earth's temperatures
- I think that climate change is happening, and I think that humans are largely causing it

A diversity of views

Attenders largely agreed that climate change was occurring, with 82% endorsing the proposition. This figure constituted 38% who thought that the causes of

climate change were natural and not human-caused, and 44% who thought that climate change was human-caused (see Figure 1). A tenth (10%) of attenders indicated that they had no idea whether climate change was happening or not, and 8% did not think that it was happening. Comparison with a survey of the broader Australian populace conducted at a similar time indicated that attenders held similar views to the public at large.⁴ However, these views are discrepant from climate scientists, almost the entirety of whom are convinced of the existence of human-induced climate change.⁵

Figure 1: Climate change attitudes of church attenders



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (n=1,286).

Demographic differences in attitudes

An analysis of the attitudes of different age groups (shown in Table 1) indicates that as age of churchgoers increased, there was an increased tendency to think that climate change was a natural occurrence and a decreased tendency to think that it was human-caused. The 20-29 year old age group was the main exception

¹ For an overview, see Leonard, R. & Leviston, Z. (2012) Changes in trust in environmental organisations and the implications for their legitimising strategies, *Third Sector Review*, (2):121-144.

² For a collection of statements about climate change from the main Christian denominations, see "Common belief: Australia's faith communities on climate change," available <http://www.climateinstitute.org.au/articles/publications/common-belief.html>, accessed 14/4/13.

³ A collection of stories of churches from a range of denominations who are taking action on climate change and caring for Creation are contained in the "Greening the Church" booklet, available from <http://greenchurch.victas.uca.org.au/what-are-churches-doing-five-leaf-eco-awards/award-winning-churches/>, accessed 14/3/13.

⁴ A representative sample of the Australian population was asked about their views towards climate change in July and August 2011. The question wording was identical to that used in the NCLS. 42.8% accepted anthropogenic climate change, 45.3% thought that climate change was a natural fluctuation, 7.4% did not think climate change was happening, and 4.5% had no idea. Leviston, Z. & Walker, I. (2011) *Second Annual Survey of Australian Attitudes to Climate Change: Interim Report*. Social & Behavioural Sciences Research Group, CSIRO. Available <http://www.csiro.au/en/Outcomes/Climate/Adapting/Climate-change-attitudes-online-survey.aspx>, accessed 12/3/13.

⁵ An examination of the views of scientists, drawing on a number of sources including polling of scientists, is available at <http://www.skepticalscience.com/global-warming-scientific-consensus-intermediate.htm>, accessed 14/3/13.

to this trend, however. This age group was much less likely than attenders in their 30s, 40s and 50s to think that climate change was human-caused (38% of 20-29 year olds held this view, versus 53% of 30-59 year olds).

Table 1: Climate change attitudes by age

	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
	Percentage							
Not happening	6	11	6	7	5	11	8	11
No idea	9	15	13	14	7	8	7	10
Natural fluctuation	32	36	23	26	39	44	45	50
Human-caused	53	38	59	52	49	37	39	29

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (n=1,268).

There was also a significant gender difference (see Table 2), with women more likely than men to think that climate change was human caused (49% versus 38%), less likely to think it was occurring but a natural phenomenon (34% versus 42%), less likely to think that climate change is not happening (6% versus 12%), and more uncertain in their views (12% of women had no idea, versus 7% of men). Church attenders with a university education were more likely than other attenders to think that climate change was caused by humans (56% versus 38%) and less likely to hold other views, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Climate change attitudes by gender and education

	Education			Gender	
	School	Trade cert /diploma	Degree	Female	Male
	Percentage				
Not happening	9	10	6	6	12
No idea	11	11	7	12	7
Natural fluctuation	41	42	31	34	42
Human-caused	39	37	56	49	38

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (n=1,270 to 1,272)

Church life

Attitudes towards climate change also differed across denominations and are illustrated in Table 3. The strongest differences were observed in relation to thinking that climate change is human-caused. Lutherans were the least likely to think so (38%), and Other Protestants (consisting of a range of small evangelical churches) were most likely (54%), followed by Anglicans (50%). Pentecostals were the most likely denominational group to think that climate change was not happening (12% of Pentecostals versus 8% of other attenders).

Table 3: Climate change attitudes by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
Not happening	5	9	8	9	12	4	9
No idea	8	13	10	10	9	7	11
Natural fluctuation	37	39	39	43	34	44	26
Human-caused	50	40	42	38	45	45	54

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (n=1,286)

There were also some differences in views by frequency of private devotional practice. Church attenders who indicated that they undertook private devotional activity every day or most days were the least likely attenders to accept human-caused climate change (39% of the most devout attenders, versus 46% of people who practiced private devotion once or a few times a week, and 50% of those who did so occasionally, hardly ever or never).

Summary

Although a large majority of Australian church attenders thought in late 2011 that climate change was occurring, they were split about whether or not this was a natural or largely human-induced phenomenon, as is the case for the Australian populace in general. While leadership in many denominations has indicated an acceptance of the position of the vast majority of scientific opinion that climate change is largely human-caused, there is a considerable gap to the views of attenders. The results indicate a need for considerable engagement with people in the pews about climate change, its causes and imperatives for mitigation.

Data sources

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

Citation

Pepper, M., Hancock, N., Powell, R. & Sterland, S. (2014) Church attenders' climate change attitudes, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 14020. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.