

Attenders' sense of moral duty to act on climate change

Moral duty as a driver for action

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.¹

The extent to which church attenders feel a sense of responsibility to act on climate change can give an indication of the degree to which the work of institutions connects with the people in the pews. Moreover, such sense of obligation has been found to be an important indicator of whether or not people undertaking positive steps to address climate change – including household actions such as saving energy and civic actions such as contacting a member of parliament.²

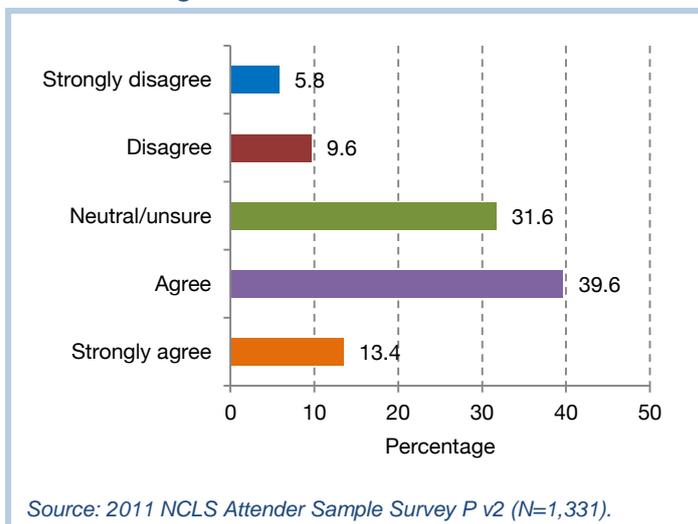
In the 2011 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

I feel a moral duty to do something about climate change.

Overall results

As shown in Figure 1, just over half (53%) of attenders felt a sense of moral responsibility to do something about climate change, almost a third (32%) were unsure. A minority (15%) disagreed.

Figure 1: Attenders' sense of moral duty to act on climate change



Demographics

Attenders' sense of moral obligation differed between age groups. As shown in Table 1, attenders in the 20-29 years and 80+ age brackets were less likely than other attenders to feel a sense of moral duty (34% of 20-29 year olds, 40% of 80+ year olds, and 57% of other attenders), and more likely to be unsure in their views (46% of 20-29 year olds, 42% of 80+ year olds, and 29% of other attenders).

Table 1: Sense of climate change moral duty by age

	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
Sense of obligation	Percentage							
Disagree	21	20	12	13	17	16	13	18
Neutral/unsure	28	46	30	28	29	29	27	42
Agree	50	34	58	59	54	55	59	40

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,313).

Women were more likely than men to feel morally obliged to act, although the difference was small (54% versus 51%). Education also had an effect on views – people who had completed a university degree reported a stronger sense of obligation than attenders with lower levels of formal education (61% versus 50% in agreement).

¹ For example, 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.

² Leviston, Z. and Walker, I. "Second Annual Survey of Australian Attitudes to Climate Change: Interim Report." CSIRO, Perth, 2011, p.21. Online: <http://www.csiro.au/en/Outcomes/Climate/Adapting/Climate-change-attitudes-online-survey.aspx>, accessed 26 April 2013.

Denominational differences

Attenders' sense of moral duty to do something about climate change varied by denomination. Catholics, Uniting Church people and especially Anglicans were more convicted, and Pentecostals, Baptists/Churches of Christ attenders, Other Protestants and Lutherans were less convicted. Almost two thirds (63%) of Anglicans reported a sense of moral duty, compared with only 43% of Pentecostals. However, the proportion of attenders who disagreed did not vary so greatly between denominations. The highest degree of uncertainty was among Pentecostals (37%).

Citation

Bevis, S., Hancock, N., Pepper, M., Powell, R. & Sterland, S. (2014) Attenders' sense of moral duty to act on climate change, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 14021. Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press.

Table 2: Sense of climate change moral duty by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church -es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
Sense of obligation	Percentage						
Disagree	11	19	14	21	20	13	17
Neutral/unsure	26	34	31	30	37	31	34
Agree	63	47	56	49	43	56	49

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,331).

Climate change obligation varied by church attendance background. Almost three quarters (72%) of newcomers to church life in the previous five years (with no recent church attendance history prior to that) reported a sense of moral duty, compared with 50% of all other church attenders who had been attending church for at least five years. There were no significant differences in views by frequency of church attendance or by frequency of devotional practice.

Summary

Just over half of Australian church attenders in late 2011 reported a sense of moral duty to do something about climate change. Views varied somewhat by denomination, with the greatest conviction among Anglicans and the least conviction (and highest uncertainty) among Pentecostals. A large majority of newcomers to church life reported a sense of moral duty.

Data sources

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