

## Church attenders and environmental responsibility

### Christian environmental responsibility

Environmental destruction, resource depletion, and the increasingly adverse effects of a changing climate have focussed the attention of publics across the globe in recent decades. The future of the Murray-Darling Basin, drought, flood, fire, food production, the oceans and water security are all part of a heightened Australian debate around our relationship to the environment and our use of our natural resources.

Many of Australia's churches are expressing their sense of environmental responsibility through words and actions. For example, some denominations have environment commissions and networks<sup>1</sup>, and the National Council of Churches has an "Eco Mission" project. Growing numbers of congregations are also becoming more engaged in appreciation of and care for Creation in terms of their worship, mission, service and the operation of their buildings.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2016 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked their views about the moral imperative for action on the environment as follows:

#### **Do you believe that Christians have a responsibility to be active about environmental issues?**

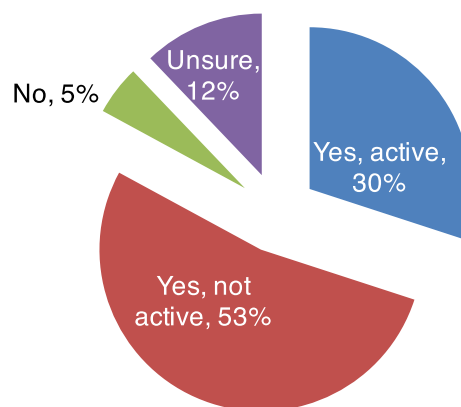
- Yes, and I am already active
- Yes, but I am currently not active
- No
- Unsure

### A strong sense of responsibility

Overall, 83% of attenders in 2016 believed there is a moral obligation to be active about environmental issues, including 30% who themselves were personally

active, as shown in Figure 1. Some 12% were unsure and a small minority (5%) said that being active about environmental issues was not a Christian responsibility.

**Figure 1: Church attenders' sense of Christian environmental responsibility (2016)**



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey B (N=1,324).

### Demographic differences in views

Personal environmental activity increased with education (Table 1). Some 23% of attenders whose highest level of formal education was school, 30% of those with a trade qualification and 37% of those with a degree were convinced of Christian environmental responsibility and personally active. Age and gender differences were minor.

**Table 1: Environmental responsibility by education (2016)**

	School	Trade	Degree	Total
<b>Yes, already active</b>	23%	30%	37%	30%
<b>Yes, not active</b>	51%	58%	51%	53%
<b>No</b>	6%	3%	5%	5%
<b>Unsure</b>	19%	9%	7%	12%

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey B (N=1,313).

Attenders living in rural areas were more likely than those living elsewhere to be personally active (Table 2).

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Catholic Earthcare <http://www.catholicearthcare.org.au/>, Environment Working Group of the Anglican Church in Australia <http://www.environment.perth.anglican.org/>, Uniting Justice <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/environment>

<sup>2</sup> A collection of stories of churches from a range of denominations who are caring for Creation are contained in the "Greening the Church" booklet, available from <http://greenchurch.victas.uca.org.au/what-are-churches-doing/5-leaf-eco-awards/award-winning-churches/>, accessed 14/3/13.

**Table 2: Environmental responsibility by locality (2016)**

	Urban	Regional	Rural	Total
<b>Yes, already active</b>	28%	30%	39%	30%
<b>Yes, not active</b>	55%	54%	41%	53%
<b>No</b>	5%	4%	7%	5%
<b>Unsure</b>	12%	12%	12%	12%

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey B (N=1,323).

### Church life

Personal activity increased with frequency of private devotional practice. Some 17% of those who never or hardly ever practised private devotions (e.g. prayer, Bible reading) were personally active on environmental issues, compared with over 30% of attenders who practised devotions at least weekly. Uncertainty as to whether Christians have a responsibility to be active about environmental issues was relatively high (27%) among those who never/hardly ever practised private devotions (Table 3). Church attenders in a leadership or ministry role at their church were more active than those not in such a role (35% versus 27%).

**Table 3: Environmental responsibility by frequency of devotional practice (2016)**

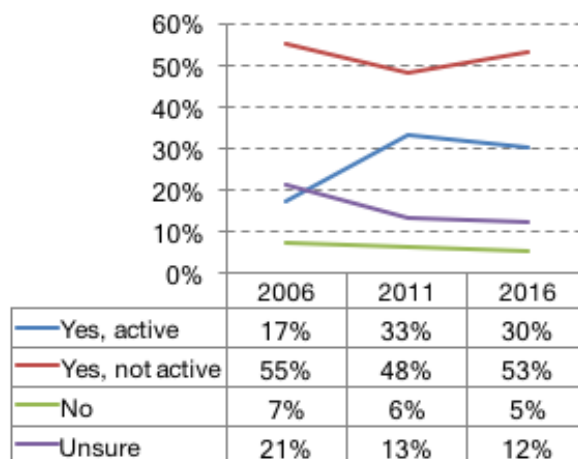
	Never/ hardly ever	Occas- ionally	At least weekly	Every day/ most days	Total
<b>Yes, already active</b>	17%	25%	35%	31%	30%
<b>Yes, not active</b>	47%	57%	50%	55%	53%
<b>No</b>	10%	3%	6%	4%	5%
<b>Unsure</b>	27%	14%	10%	10%	12%

Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey B (N=1,320).

### Change over time

There was a strong shift between 2006 and 2011 towards personal engagement with environmental issues, suggesting an Australian church community that was moving from awareness to action, as shown in Figure 2. In 2006, only 17% were personally active (33% in 2011) and 21% were unsure (13% in 2011). There was little change in views about responsibility and levels of personal activity between 2011 and 2016.

**Figure 2: Church attenders' sense of Christian environmental responsibility, 2006, 2011 and 2016**



Source: 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H (N=3074), 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,362), 2016 NCLS Attender Sample Survey B (N=1324).

### Summary

The survey question wording does not allow an interpretation of the ways in which people were engaging with environmental issues. Nevertheless, the results suggest a high degree of environmental concern, with a large majority of Australian church attenders believing that it is a Christian responsibility to be active about environmental issues.

### Data sources

Castle, K., (2006) [computer file], 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey H, NCLS Research, Sydney.

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

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

### Citation

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