

Australian Church Attenders on Overseas Mission Trips 2015-2016

Introduction

This Fact Sheet examines Australian churches' reporting in the 2016 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) on the numbers of people who have gone on short, medium, and long term overseas mission trips. Christian mission organisations in Australia have a long history of sending workers overseas on long term mission, whether evangelism and assisting churches in ministry training, works of practical service and empowerment, or endeavours comprised of both proclamation and social service/justice.

However there has been a growing phenomenon of short term and medium term mission trips as well, perhaps partly because of the growth in disposable income in an increasingly affluent Australia, as well as greater ease (including a lower cost) of overseas travel and communication. Mission agencies and other observers are interested in how many church attenders participate in trips of different lengths, and whether there is much variation between denominations.

Churches report on attenders' mission trips

The following question was asked in the 2016 NCLS Operations Survey¹.

Over the last 2 years about how many people from this local church² have done the following:

Gone on a short term overseas mission trip (1-6 weeks)?

Gone on medium term overseas mission or ministry work (7 weeks up to 2 years)?

Gone on long term overseas mission or ministry work (more than 2 years)?

¹ The Operations Survey is a one-per-church survey used as an audit of objective information such as activities each church runs or supports. NCLS Research acknowledges Missions Interlink for their valuable advice on the periods of time used in this question.

² "...this parish" in the Catholic version of the Operations Survey.

The results in this Fact Sheet come from the responses of 3,065 churches from 11 different denominations.

Table 1: Average number of people per church reported as going on short, medium and long term mission trips in the past 2 years

	Short term	Medium term	Long term
All Churches	2.2	0.2	0.1
Anglican	0.9	0.1	0.1
Baptist	4.3	0.3	0.4
Catholic ³	1.7	0.1	0.0
Lutheran	0.8	0.1	0.0
Pentecostal ⁴	5.6	0.3	0.1
Presbyterian	1.7	0.1	0.1
Salvation Army	0.7	0.1	0.1
Uniting	0.7	0.1	0.0

Source: 2016 NCLS Operations Survey (n=3,065 churches).

Table 1 shows the average number of people who were indicated on each part of the question. The average number of people indicated by a church was 2.2 people, 0.2, and 0.1

respectively. In other words, NCLS Research estimates that for every 100 churches, there would be an average of 220 people who had gone on a short term mission trip, 20 on a medium and 10 on a long term trip, in the last 2 years.

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³ Catholic church attenders were counted per parish.

⁴ 'Pentecostal' includes Australian Christian Churches, C3 Church, CRC International, and International Network of Churches.

Denominational differences

For long term mission trips, the movement with the strongest culture of sending (i.e. highest number of people per church) was the Baptist church (0.4 people). Along with Pentecostal churches, Baptist churches were also the highest for sending people on medium term trips of 7 weeks to 2 years, with both of these movements having 0.3 people per church.

For short term mission trips, some 5.6 people per Pentecostal church had been in the past 2 years, the highest rate out of the participating denominations. This was followed by Baptist churches (4.3 people), while the Catholic and Presbyterian movements were the only others to have more than one person per church on short term mission.

Numbers of people attending trips

As most people attend only one church and would be reported only once in the National Church Life Survey, it is possible to obtain an estimate of the overall number of people going on mission trips in the different denominational movements. Although not all churches take part in the NCLS, as a size estimate is known for most churches it is possible to estimate to a rough approximation the number of attenders who go on different kinds of mission trips.

Table 2: Estimated total number of church attenders going on short, medium and long term mission trips in the past 2 years

	Short term	Medium term	Long term
All Churches	17,000	1,250	940
Anglican	2,350	230	250
Baptist	3,500	265	345
Catholic	2,300	135	25
Lutheran	450	30	15
Pentecostal	6,100	320	135
Presbyterian	850	65	70
Salvation Army	200	40	20
Uniting	1,250	165	80

Source: 2016 NCLS Operations Surveys (n=3,065 churches).

Table 2 shows that an estimated 17,000 people across all Australian churches (from included denominations)

have been on a short term mission trip over the two year period before 2016, or 8,500 per year. This number confirms the widespread phenomenon of short mission trips across many denominations. The difference between medium term (just over 600 per year) and long term (just over 450 per year) is also relatively small, suggesting that the difference in commitment required and willingness for medium and longer term mission work is not as great as it may have been in the past.

NCLS Estimates of Mission Trips
Short term: roughly 8,500 per year
Medium term: over 600 per year
Long term: over 450 per year

Comparing the estimated contribution of people by each denomination in Table 2 with the 'culture' of each in Table 1 highlights the importance of considering both perspectives. For example while there does not appear to be an especially strong culture in the Anglican Church, as a large denomination it is still a significant contributor of church attenders committing to some form of overseas mission involvement, including being the second largest for long term mission. The Baptist Church, both strong in culture and of reasonable size, is the highest contributor to long term mission, and the second highest for medium and short term. The Pentecostal churches, considered together as a group, are contributing a very large number of people to short term mission trips, and are also the highest contributor for medium term. Ongoing monitoring of this issue across all denominations will shed light on trends.

Methodological note: Due to differing methodologies, the results in this Fact Sheet should not be compared with those in the previously published Fact Sheet based on 2011 NCLS data. Any such assessment of 'change over time' between the two would not be reliable.

Data source

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

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