



NCLS Occasional Paper 3

2001 Church Attendance Estimates

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Introduction

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is undertaken in Australia every five years. In 2001 around 435,000 church attenders from over 7000 parishes and congregations in some 19 denominations took part in the NCLS.

One of the key analysis tasks arising from the NCLS is the preparation of weekly attendance estimates for each denomination in the survey.

Apart from describing the current size of each denomination, the estimates are essential for the process of weighting attender data, in plotting patterns of growth and decline and in making projections of the future size of denominations.

This occasional paper has been produced to outline:

- the procedures followed in preparing these estimates
- estimates of attendance for each participating denomination
- changes in the size of each denomination.

National Church Life Survey

The National Church Life Survey has been developed by ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The NCLS has been carried out on three occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996 and 2001. Nineteen denominations participated in the 2001 NCLS.

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Procedure for Preparing Attendance Estimates

With the exception of the Catholic Church, congregational leaders taking part in 2001 NCLS were asked the following question:

1. Overall, about how many different people, adults and children, attend church services (services of worship) at this congregation during an average week? People attending more than once per week should be counted once only.

This question forms the foundation of the NCLS attendance estimates. Congregational leaders were also asked to provide complementary information such as the average attendances at each church service and average weekly attendances for each of six years 1996 to 2001. In addition, the NCLS contact person for each denominational region taking part in the survey was asked to supply their attendance estimates for all of their congregations, whether participating in the survey or not.

The process involved in preparing the estimates of attendance for each denomination is complex. A brief outline of the process is given here.

1. Attendance data from participating congregations. Where congregations took part in the survey, the estimate supplied by the congregational leader in response to Question 1 has generally been accepted. The congregational leaders' estimates are thus foundational to the whole estimation process.

2. Checking of data from congregational leaders. However, responses to Question 1 have not been accepted uncritically. Electronic checking of responses was carried out against estimates received from the denominational contact person and against other 2001 attendance data received from the congregation. Large anomalies were followed up with the congregations concerned. In some cases, adjustments were then made to the Question 1 response.

3. Cross-checking of NCLS database entries with published yearbooks, directories or other lists. Some denominations are growing rapidly. Previous listings of congregations quickly go out-of-date in such circumstances. This step identified any congregations that may have been closed or new congregations to be added to the NCLS database.

4. Calculation of size of non-participating congregations. Using the attendance data obtained from the denominational contact person for all congregations in the region, and the data from

Question 1 for participating congregations, a ratio was created and applied to the attendance data for non-participating congregations. Thus a total estimate of attendance was obtained for the whole denominational region, based upon Question 1.

5. Cross-checking of NCLS denominational estimates against any other available statistics, and consultation with denominational contact people. Many denominations collect their own attendance statistics, often on an annual basis. Denominational contact people generously allowed access to these statistics in order to see whether changes in the NCLS statistics between 1996 and 2001 were also detected in the denomination's own statistics. Denominational contact people were also given the opportunity to respond to the NCLS estimates for 2001.

6. *Preparation of regional estimates.* In a few cases, whole regions of a denomination did not take part in the survey. In others, the level of congregations participating in a region was so low that the usual method of scaling from estimates provided by the contact person was not suitable. Regional estimates have been prepared using the size of other regions and/or statistics from the denomination as a basis.

7. *Catholic attendance estimates.* The Catholic Church undertakes a comprehensive headcount of attenders across its parishes. National statistics from this exercise were made available to complement those obtained for Anglican and Protestant churches through the NCLS.

2001 Weekly Attendance Estimates

Table 1 shows that about half of church attenders in participating denominations are Catholic, making the Catholic Church the largest denomination in Australia in terms of attendance.

Anglican attenders account for 12% of attenders and this church remains the second biggest denomination. The Uniting Church is the next biggest denomination, with 8% of attenders, followed by the Baptist Church with 7% and the Assemblies of God with 7% of attenders.

While the denominations involved in the NCLS cover much of church life in Australia, there are a number of smaller Protestant and Pentecostal denominations and groups that did not take part in the 2001 NCLS. Based on 1996 estimates, these would account for around 137,000 attenders. It should also be noted that the NCLS estimates do not include Eastern Orthodox churches and non-trinitarian groups such as Latter-day Saints or Jehovah's Witnesses.

Table 1: 2001 Weekly Attendance Estimates

Denomination	2001 Estimated Weekly Attendance	Percent of Total Attendance
Anglican	177700	11.7%
Apostolic	9100	0.6%
Assemblies of God	104600	6.9%
Baptist	112200	7.4%
Bethesda Ministries	2700	0.2%
Christian & Missionary Alliance	4100	0.3%
Christian City Churches	11400	0.7%
Christian Revival Crusade	11400	0.7%
Church of the Nazarene	1600	0.1%
Churches of Christ	45100	3.0%
Lutheran	40500	2.7%
Presbyterian	35000	2.3%
Reformed	7100	0.5%
Salvation Army	27900	1.8%
Seventh-day Adventist	36600	2.4%
Uniting	126600	8.3%
Vineyard	2500	0.2%
Wesleyan Methodist	3800	0.2%
ANGLICAN & PROTESTANT*	759900	49.8%
CATHOLIC**	764800	50.2%
TOTAL	1524700	100.0%

* The total for Anglican & Protestant does not include non-participating Pentecostal and small Protestant denominations and groups. These were estimated in 1996 to total around 137,000 additional attenders.

** Estimates of Catholic attendance are from national headcounts and were generously supplied by the Pastoral Projects Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conferences.

Changes in Weekly Attendance

As in the previous NCLS survey, some denominations have declined while others appear to have grown over the five-yearly period. Declines in mainstream Anglican and Protestant denominations (Lutheran, Presbyterian and Uniting) appear to have been offset by increases in attendance across the remaining Protestant and Pentecostal denominations. However such increases have not been sufficient to counterbalance large continuing declines in Catholic attendance. Consequently it is estimated that attendance fell by around 7% across the participating denominations between 1996 and 2001.

Unlike the previous survey, some Pentecostal denominations have shown a decline in attendance. This appears to be mainly due to some Pentecostal congregations changing their denominational affiliation between 1996 and 2001.

A decline of just 2% in Anglican attendances masks different experiences in each diocese. Significant falls in attendance in most rural dioceses have been counterbalanced by a significant increase in attendance in the Sydney diocese. Other metropolitan dioceses tended to be stable in attendance.

Table 2: Changes in Weekly Attendance, 1991-2001

Denomination	Weekly Attendance	% change since 1996	% change since 1991
Anglican	177700	-2%	-7%
Apostolic	9100	20%	32%
Assemblies of God	104600	20%	30%
Baptist	112200	8%	9%
Bethesda Ministries	2700	na	na
Christian & Missionary Alliance	4100	na	46%
Christian City Churches	11400	42%	na
Christian Revival Crusade	11400	-7%	12%
Church of the Nazarene	1600	33%	33%
Churches of Christ	45100	7%	3%
Lutheran	40500	-8%	-18%
Presbyterian	35000	-3%	-1%
Reformed	7100	-1%	-15%
Salvation Army	27900	-7%	1%
Seventh-day Adventist*	36600	na	na
Uniting	126600	-11%	-22%
Vineyard	2500	-17%	na
Wesleyan Methodist	3800	-7%	9%
ANGLICAN/PROTESTANT**	759900	1%#	-3%+
CATHOLIC	764800	-13%	na
TOTAL	1524700	-7%#	na

* For the first time, the Seventh-day Adventist total for 2001 includes congregations that do not own property

** The total for Anglican/Protestant does not include non-participating Pentecostal and small Protestant denominations and groups. These were estimated in 1996 to total around 137,000 additional attenders.

#Percent change since 1996 excludes Bethesda, C&MA and Seventh-day Adventist.

+Percent change since 1991 excludes Bethesda, Christian City Church, Seventh-day Adventist and Vineyard

Factors Behind Attendance Change

The statistics in Table 2 highlight that while church attendance overall continues to decline, the situation of each denomination varies greatly. The large mainstream denominations such as Anglican, Catholic and Uniting are declining, but many of the smaller Protestant and Pentecostal denominations are growing, some very strongly.

Previous research by NCLS Research (Kaldor *et al*, 1999, pp50-58) has identified factors that determine the growth and decline of denominations. Attender numbers increase through three main ways:

- Attenders switching in from other denominations
- Newcomers joining the church for the first time or rejoining after an absence of years
- The birth of children and retention of children in church life
- Attenders leave denominations through the following avenues:
 - switching out to other denominations
 - decreasing their frequency of attendance or ceasing to attend altogether
 - death

The attendance change in each denomination is the result of these factors competing with each other. In the case of large mainstream Anglican and Protestant denominations, the numbers switching out to other denominations is greater than the numbers switching in. In addition, the numbers dying are generally greater than the numbers being born into these denominations.

The age profile of each denomination provides the strongest indication of future trends. It is now unlikely that the large mainstream denominations, with their older age profiles, will be able to replace the large percentages of attenders who will inevitably be lost to death or infirmity in the coming years. Nevertheless even small increases in the proportions of newcomers or decreases in the proportions choosing to leave can have a large impact on future attendance trends, provided such changes can be maintained into the longer term.

Attendance as a Percentage of the Australian Population

Based on the 2001 NCLS, it is estimated that around 1.5 million people attended services at participating Anglican, Catholic and Protestant denominations each week in 2001. In addition there were another 137,000 people attending small Pentecostal and Protestant denominations and groups, based on 1996 estimates. Assuming that this remnant figure hasn't changed much since 1996, weekly attendance in 2001 would be about 1,660,000 for Anglican, Catholic and Protestant churches. This equates to 8.8% of a population of 18,769,249.

It should be noted that the weekly attendance estimates discussed here are conservative when it comes to evaluating the proportion of the population that attends church frequently. The reason for this is that people who attend less than weekly will tend to be undercounted in an estimate based on attendance in a typical week. The actual number of Australians attending church say

over a month would be expected to be higher, particularly in the larger mainstream denominations.

There is evidence here that the proportion of the population present at church in a typical week has declined since 1996. In 1996, NCLS Research estimated that there were 1,759,000 people present in a typical week in all Anglican, Catholic and Protestant churches (Kaldor *et al*, 1999, p.15). This equated to 9.9% of the then population of 17,752,829 (Bentley and Hughes, 1998, p.10). Weekly attendance as a proportion of population has thus dropped markedly from 9.9% in 1996 to 8.8% in 2001. This change is due to two factors:

- a decrease in church attendance over this period
- an increase in the size of the Australian population by around 6% over the same period

There is other survey evidence that the proportion of the population attending religious services has decreased over the period. The 1998 Australian Community Survey found that 20.0% of the population claimed to attend religious services at least monthly or more often. The 2002 Well-being and Security Survey found that this figure had dropped to 18.6% of the population.

Attendance as a Percentage of Census Identification

The proportion of people claiming to identify with a Christian denomination has dropped from 71% in the 1996 Census to 68% in the 2001 Census. What proportion of these people actually attend church frequently? The answer to this question varies significantly from one denomination to another. Attendance rates in larger mainstream denominations such as Anglican (5%) and Uniting (10%) are a small proportion of the overall number identifying. By comparison, Protestant denominations such as Baptist (36%), Churches of Christ (74%) and the Salvation Army (39%) tend to have much higher proportions attending.

The proportion attending for each of these denominations has not changed much from the picture found in the 1996 Census (Kaldor *et al*, 1999, p17). An exception is the Churches of Christ, which now accounts for a greater proportion of people identifying than in 1996 (74% compared with 56%). The main reason for this change appears to be a sharp decline in the number of people identifying with the denomination between the 1996 and 2001 Census, coupled with an apparent increase in attendance over the same period.

For some of the larger mainstream denominations (Catholic, Lutheran and, Uniting) there have been decreases in the proportion of people attending of those identifying. Catholic attendance

has decreased from 18% to 15% of those identifying, Lutheran from 18% to 16% and Uniting from 11% to 10%.

Table 3: Weekly Attendance as a Percentage of Census Identification

Denomination	No. of People (2001 Census)	2001 Estimated Weekly Attendance	Percent attending of people identifying
Anglican	3881162	177700	5%
Baptist	309205	112200	36%
Catholic	5001624	764800	15%
Churches of Christ	61335	45100	74%
Lutheran	250365	40500	16%
Pentecostal	194592	141700*	73%
Presbyterian & Reformed	637530	42100	7%
Salvation Army	71423	27900	39%
Seventh-day Adventist	53844	36600	68%
Uniting	1248674	126600	10%

** NCLS attendance estimate for 'Pentecostal' only includes Apostolic, Assemblies of God, Bethesda, Christian City Churches, Christian Revival Crusade and Vineyard.*

Change in the Number of Congregations

In the NCLS, a 'congregation' is generally defined as all people meeting for worship at a local church centre. In some cases, two independent congregations may be meeting at the same church centre. These have generally been counted as two congregations in the NCLS.

A change in the total weekly attendance for each denomination is often a reflection of a change in the total number of congregations. A decrease in the number of congregations is usually the result of closures but can also be due to congregations changing their denominational affiliation. In this respect, it was noted that a number of Pentecostal congregations had switched denominations since the 1996 survey.

Attendance change in most denominations, as shown in Table 2, is often matched by a growth or decline in the number of congregations, shown below in Table 4. It should be noted that a change to the definition of a congregation in the Uniting Church would account for part of the decrease in the number of congregations between 1996 and 2001 in that denomination.

Table 4: Change in the Number of Congregations, 1991-2001

Denomination	2001 No. of Congregations	% change since 1996	% change since 1991
Anglican	3128	-5%	-9%
Apostolic	105	14%	67%
Assemblies of God	848	11%	37%
Baptist	927	7%	12%
Bethesda Ministries	51	na	na
Christian & Missionary Alliance	44	na	33%
Christian City Churches	55	41%	na
Christian Revival Crusade	124	-5%	19%
Church of the Nazarene	38	27%	27%
Churches of Christ	448	-2%	0%
Lutheran	605	-3%	-5%
Presbyterian	696	-5%	-8%
Reformed	49	-4%	2%
Salvation Army	359	-3%	-2%
Seventh-day Adventist*	490	na	na
Uniting**	2373	-15%	-22%
Vineyard	24	60%	na
Wesleyan Methodist	83	4%	32%
TOTAL ANGLICAN/PROTESTANT	10447	-5%#	-6%+

* For the first time, the Seventh-day Adventist total for 2001 includes congregations that do not own property

** The definition of a 'congregation' within the Uniting Church has changed since 1996

#Percent change since 1996 excludes Bethesda, C&MA and Seventh-day Adventist.

+Percent change since 1991 excludes Bethesda, Christian City Church, Seventh-day Adventist and Vineyard

Conclusion

There are many issues of concern here. Church attendance has fallen while the Australian population continues to grow. It is estimated that the proportion of Australians present in Anglican, Catholic or Protestant churches each week has decreased from 9.9 % in 1996 to 8.8% in 2001.

The overall levels of decline in the mainstream denominations do not appear to have been matched by increases in the Pentecostal and other Protestant sectors of the church. The continuing decline in the Catholic and Uniting Churches is a major long-term issue for these denominations.

The growth and decline of churches are the result of several separate processes. Congregations are replenished by the addition of children but lose attenders through ill health or death. Attenders who move to other congregations often change denominations at the same time, thereby affecting the fortunes of each denomination. Newcomers help to increase attendance but such gains are offset through people decreasing their attendance or leaving church life

altogether. There is an ongoing need for churches to better understand these processes and how these processes can be influenced.

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