

Refugee Intake – Church Attenders’ Views

Troubled waters

The question of refugee intake has become a polarizing issue in Australian society. The often tragic life stories of the individuals and families who seek asylum and claim refugee status in Australia have become a complex part of Australia's own national story as Australians seek to define themselves in an increasingly uncertain world.

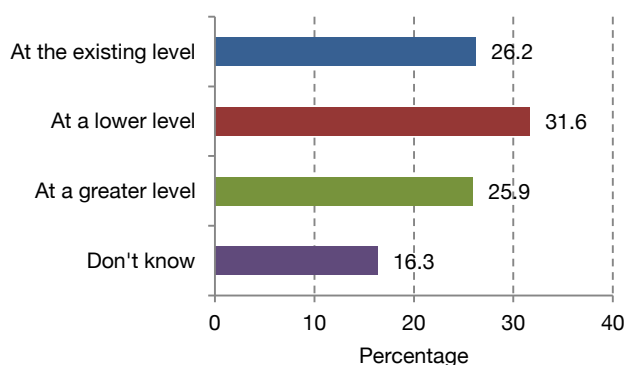
The 2011 National Church Life Survey was a chance to hear the views of church goers on attitudes towards refugee intake in Australia. The 2011 NCLS survey must be read in the light of the fraught historical time of late 2011. The survey took place in the last quarter of 2011, soon after the High Court of Australia rejected the Federal Government's "Malaysian Solution" on August 31 2011, and in the midst of an increase in the number of "irregular maritime arrivals". The month of November 2011 saw a record 902 asylum seekers and crew arrive by boat in Australian waters.

A sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant church attenders were asked:

Do you believe that Australia should accept refugees:

- At the existing level
- At a lower level
- At a greater level
- Don't know

Figure 1: Australia should accept refugees



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N v2 (n=1,410).

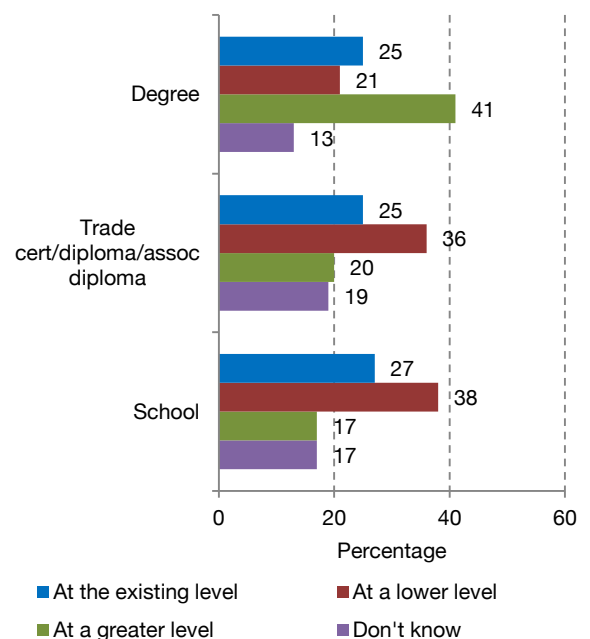
Overall Response

Those who believed the intake should be at a lower level made up 32% of responses (see Figure 1). The proportion of attenders who believed intake should be at the existing level (26%) was the same as that who thought it should be at a greater level (26%). A minority of 16% were unsure.

Education

The level of education of church attenders appears to be a significant determinant of attitude to the level of refugee intake in Australia (as shown in Figure 2). Those who have a tertiary degree were far more likely to believe the intake should be increased (41%) as compared with those with lower levels of formal educational attainment (17% school and 20% trade/diploma). Conversely, those without a tertiary degree were significantly more likely to believe the intake should be at a lower level, with 38% of school educated attenders choosing this option.

Figure 2: Accepting refugees by education



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N v2 (n=1,393).

Age and gender

Although the survey painted a divided picture on church goers’ overall responses to the intake of people seeking refugee status, there were some clear tendencies in attitude when age was taken into account (see Table 1). Those aged 20-29 were the largest group of those unsure of how to respond to the situation, with 36% answering “Don’t know”. The most likely to nominate “At a lower level” were those aged 70+.

Table 1: Accepting refugees by age

	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
	Percentage							
At the existing level	27	18	31	25	27	23	28	33
At a lower level	16	23	31	26	31	34	41	41
At a greater level	38	23	20	30	27	30	20	14
Don't know	19	36	17	19	14	13	11	12

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N v2 (n=1,400).

Some 33% of women believed intake should be at a lower level compared with 28% of men.

Church life

The most notable difference in views by denomination was that Anglicans were most in favour of increasing intake (37% of Anglicans, contrasted with less than 26% for other denominational groupings).

Table 2: Accepting refugees by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
At the existing level	26	27	26	31	30	27	22
At a lower level	28	31	33	40	25	37	32
At a greater level	37	24	25	21	23	24	22
Don't know	9	19	16	9	22	12	23

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N v2 (n=1,410)

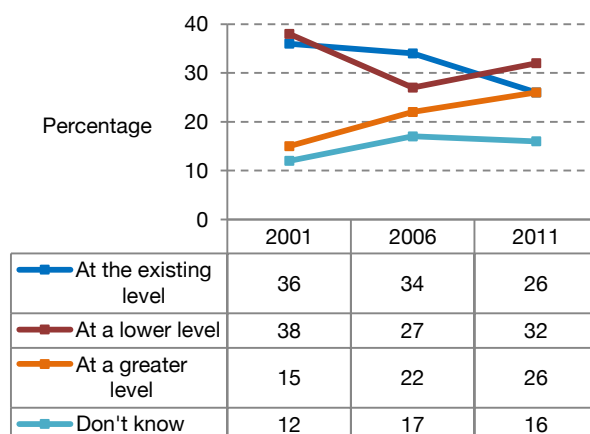
Visitors to churches were the largest group of church goers favouring an increase (40%, compared with 25% of other attenders). Of those who nominated a reduction in intake, newcomers (those who were new to their congregation in the last five years) had the largest percentage (41%, compared with 20% of visitors and 31% of other attenders) holding this view.

Change over time

This survey question on refugee acceptance was also asked in 2006 and 2001, allowing for a look at trends over time (see Figure 3). Satisfaction with the existing level of refugee acceptance seems to have declined

over time, with 36% of attenders selecting “at the existing level” in 2001 compared with 26% in 2011. Those thinking Australia should accept refugees at a greater level has increased over time, from 15% in 2001 to 22% in 2006, to 26% in 2011.

Figure 3: Accepting refugees, 2001-2011



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N (n=1,410), 2006 NCLS Attender Sample Survey J (n=2,356), 2001 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N v2 (n=2,198).

Summary

In summary, the survey reveals a complex and mixed response of attenders to the issue of refugee intake. It points not only to the church in Australia wrestling with the issue, but also to the social complexity that church leadership must contend with in shaping a coherent response to this pressing ethical matter.

Data sources

Castle, K., (2001) [computer file], 2001 NCLS Attender Sample Survey N. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

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

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

Citation

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