

## 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 commenced a new "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 2011 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked their views about the moral requirement 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

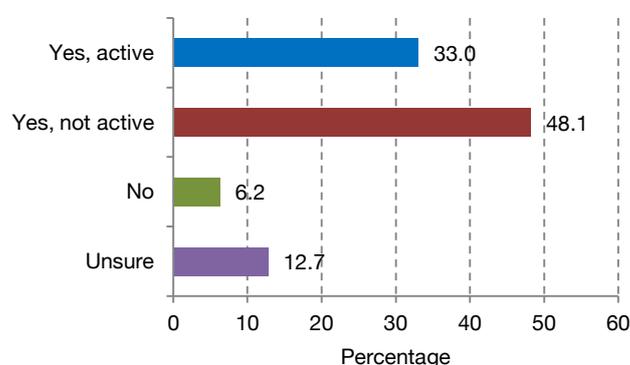
Overall, 81% of attenders in 2011 believed there is a moral obligation to be active about environmental

<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/leaf-eco-awards/award-winning-churches/>, accessed 14/3/13.

issues, including 33% who indicated that they themselves were personally active, as shown in Figure 1. Some 13% were unsure and a small minority (6%) said that being active about environmental issues was not a Christian responsibility.

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



Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,362).

### Demographic differences in views

An analysis of the responses of different age groups (shown in Table 1) indicates increased personal environmental activity with age, with 21% of attenders aged under 30, 29% of 30-49 year olds, 36% of 50-69 year olds and 40% of those aged 70+ convinced of Christian environmental responsibility and personally active. There were no significant differences among respondents with different levels of formal education, and gender differences were minor.

**Table 1: Environmental responsibility by age**

	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+
	Percentage							
Yes, already active	18	23	30	29	38	34	41	37
Yes, not active	64	49	50	48	41	51	49	41
No	7	7	7	9	7	7	3	5
Unsure	12	21	13	14	14	8	7	17

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,341).

### Church life

Over 80% of attenders in most denominational groupings thought that it was a Christian responsibility

to be environmentally active, as shown in Table 2. The exceptions were Baptist/Churches of Christ (73%) and Pentecostals (75%). A particularly high proportion of people reported being active in the Lutheran (44%), Uniting (41%) churches, compared with 32% of attenders in other denominations. Pentecostals were the group most uncertain in their views (18% unsure).

**Table 2: Environmental responsibility by denomination**

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
Yes, already active	31	24	33	44	39	41	26
Yes, not active	52	49	51	39	36	44	55
No	5	10	6	5	6	3	5
Unsure	12	17	10	13	18	11	14

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,362)

Interestingly, there was a difference in views by church attender background (see Table 3). Visitors to church were the most likely to agree that Christians have a responsibility to be active about environmental issues and to be personally active (39%), compared with 32% of regular church attenders.

**Table 3: Environmental responsibility by attender background**

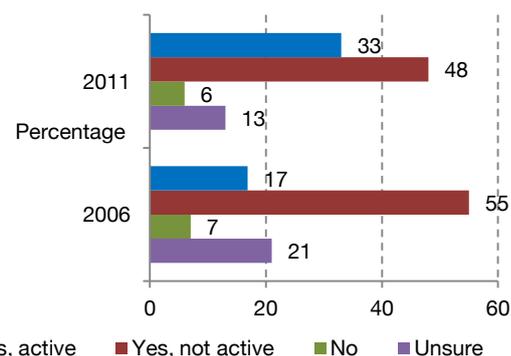
	Visitors	New- comers	Switchers	Transfers	Long-term attenders
	Percentage				
Yes, already active	39	33	28	31	33
Yes, not active	44	54	53	58	46
No	2	2	8	5	7
Unsure	15	11	11	7	14

Source: 2011 NCLS Attender Sample Survey P v2 (N=1,319)

## Change over time

The 2006 NCLS also asked attenders about Christian environmental responsibility. The results indicate a strong shift over five years towards personal engagement with environmental issues and suggest an Australian church community that is moving from awareness to action, as shown in Figure 2. This shift was also evident across each of the seven denominational groupings. In 2006, 72% of attenders agreed that Christians had an environmental responsibility (compared with 81% in 2011), and only 17% were personally active (33% in 2011). There was a decrease in uncertainty, with 21% of attenders unsure in their views in 2006 (13% in 2011).

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



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

## Summary

The survey question wording does not allow an interpretation of the ways in which people were engaging with environmental issues (for example, church attenders may advocate for divergent outcomes in relation to water management in the Murray-Darling Basin, or simply recycle household goods). Nevertheless, the results suggest a high degree of environmental concern, with a large majority of Australian church attenders in 2011 thinking that it was a Christian environmental responsibility to be active about environmental issues. While only a third were themselves personally active, this proportion had almost doubled over five years, indicating a growing connection not only between environmental awareness and faith but a personal ownership of moral responsibility. While some denominations were more engaged than others, this trend towards increased responsibility seems to have occurred across the board.

## 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.

## Citation

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