

Australian Church Attenders on Overseas Mission Trips

Introduction

This Fact Sheet examines Australian churches' reporting 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 2011 National Church Life Survey *Operations Survey*¹.

Over the past 2 years, how many people from this congregation have:

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 acknowledges Missions Interlink for their valuable advice on the lengths of time used in this question.

The results in this fact sheet come from the responses of 2,670 churches from 20 different denominations (including independent churches).

NCLS estimates that for every 100 churches, there would be an average of 260 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.

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	2.6	0.2	0.1
Anglican	1.1	0.1	0.1
Baptist	4.8	0.6	0.5
Catholic ²	1.7	0.1	0.0
Churches of Christ	5.1	0.4	0.2
Lutheran	1.0	0.1	0.0
Pentecostal ³	5.1	0.2	0.1
Presbyterian	1.1	0.1	0.1
Salvation Army ⁴	0.7	0.0	0.0
Seventh-day Adventist	4.2	0.3	0.1
Uniting	0.6	0.0	0.0
Other Protestant ⁵	6.3	0.6	0.4

Source: 2011 NCLS Operations Surveys (n=2,760 churches, weighted).

² Catholic church attenders were counted per parish.

³ 'Pentecostal' includes Australian Christian Churches, Apostolic, C3 Church, CRC International, and International Network of Churches.

⁴ Australian Salvation Army Southern Territory only (approx. half).

⁵ 'Other Protestant' includes Christian Reformed, Congregational, Vineyard, Missionary Alliance, Nazarene, and independent 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 2.6 people, 0.2, and 0.1 respectively. In other words, NCLS estimates that for every 100 churches, there would be an average of 260 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.

Denominational differences

For long term mission trips, the movements with the strongest culture of sending (i.e., highest number of people per church) were the Baptist church (0.5 people) and 'Other Protestant' (0.4 people; see table footnote for a list of these denominations), followed by Churches of Christ (0.2 people). The same three groups were also the highest for sending people on medium term trips of 7 weeks to 2 years.

For short term mission trips, 'Other Protestant' were slightly stronger than others, with 6.3 people per church going, followed by Churches of Christ and Pentecostal churches (both on 5.1 people), Baptist churches (4.8 people) and Seventh-day Adventist (4.2 people).

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 each church would see attending different kinds of mission trips.

NCLS Estimates of Mission Trips
Short term: over 12,000 per year
Medium term: over 900 per year
Long term: over 650 per year

Table 2 shows that an estimated 24,550 people across all Australian churches have been on a short term mission trip over the two year period before 2011, or just over 12,000 per year. This number confirms the widespread phenomenon of short mission trips across many denominations. The difference between medium term (just over 900 per year) and long term (just over 650 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.

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	24,550	1,840	1,315
Anglican	2,600	260	310
Baptist	4,300	510	470
Catholic	2,250	170	40
Churches of Christ	2,050	150	80
Lutheran	550	45	5
Pentecostal	7,600	310	210
Presbyterian	550	30	50
Salvation Army	250	5	0
Seventh-day Adventist	2,200	175	25
Uniting	1,300	95	55
Other Protestant	900	90	70

Source: 2011 NCLS Operations Surveys (n=2,760 churches, weighted).

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, its sheer size means it is still a large 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 medium and long term mission, and the second highest in 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 among the larger groups for medium and long term. Ongoing monitoring of this issue across all denominations will shed light on trends.

Data sources

Powell, R., (2011) [computer file], 2011 NCLS Operations Survey. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.

Citation

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