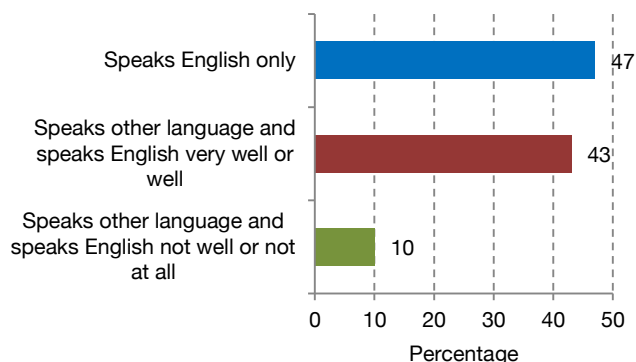


Local Church Engagement with Non-English Speaking Churches

Introduction

Australia's population is becoming increasingly multilingual, with more than half (53%) of those born overseas and migrating to Australia able to speak a language other than English (LOTE). Only one tenth of migrants identified their ability to speak English as 'not well or not at all' (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proficiency in spoken English by migrants to Australia



Source: ABS (2011), table B11.

Churches can potentially offer a sense of belonging and friendships for migrants who may be feeling voiceless or struggling with their ability to communicate. Churches can also provide migrants with practical and pastoral support in settling into a new country, and opportunities to explore or strengthen faith in Christ. This Fact Sheet focuses on that ministry potential by exploring the engagement of churches with congregations from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB).

Local Church Relationships with NESB Congregations

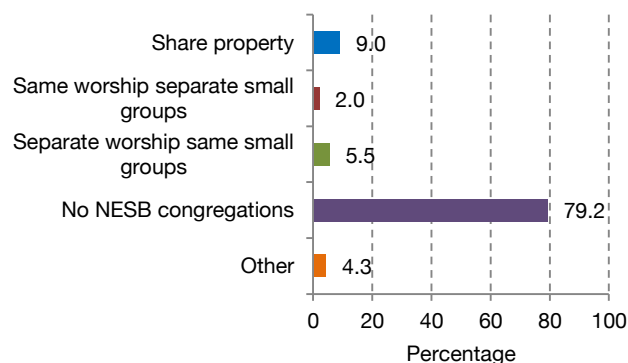
In the 2011 National Church Life Survey, church leaders were asked:

Are there any non-English speaking congregations meeting for worship here? If so, which of the following would best describe your relationship? (Mark ONE only)

- We share the same property, but have no shared ministry
- We share the same church worship service, but have separate language small groups or other activities
- We have separate language church services, but share small groups or other activities
- No non-English speaking congregations meet for worship here
- Other

Figure 2 shows the type of relationships that participating local churches have with NESB congregations.

Figure 2: Local church engagement with NESB churches



Source: 2011 NCLS Operations Survey (n=2,216)

While the majority of local churches do not have a relationship with a NESB congregation, over one fifth (21%) of participating churches do have such a relationship. Most commonly, this centres around sharing property (9%), but this is nearly matched by sharing ministry, whether through small groups (6%), or worship (2%).

Some churches may think language is a barrier to a greater level of shared ministry between themselves and a NESB congregation. However, with 90% of migrants able to speak English ‘very well or well,’ such barriers lie more in other areas. In every cross cultural situation, there are potential challenges that arise from communication and cultural differences, preferences and understandings. These could include: ethnic prejudices between groups, control of resources (e.g. property), and lack of willingness to share ministries and leadership.

Multicultural Ministry Mostly in Urban Settings

Across Australia, those from non-English speaking backgrounds tend to be located in urban centres. This pattern impacts church life, meaning that local church engagement with NESB congregations, or multicultural ministry generally, is much more likely to be relevant for churches in urban settings. This helps explain why 50% of participating churches responded: [ministry toward migrants] “is not a priority in our area.”

Churches in regional and rural areas are more likely to say that multicultural ministry is not a priority. In smaller rural towns or areas (less than 2000 in population), this can be around twice as likely as for those in city suburbs.

Denominational NESB Ministry

Table 1: Relationships with NESB congregations by denomination

	Angli- can	Baptist/ Church- es of Christ	Cath- olic	Luth- eran	Pente- costal	Unit- ing	Other Prot- estant
	Percentage						
Share property	5	16	5	8	1	16	12
Share worship service	1	2	3	2	1	1	5
Share small groups	7	8	9	2	4	4	3
No NESB congregations	85	70	77	86	80	78	77
Other	2	4	6	2	14	2	3

Source: 2011 NCLS Operations Survey (n=2, 216)

Denominational differences are shown in Table 1. Baptist/Churches of Christ and Uniting churches had significant engagement with non-English speaking background congregations.

Care should be taken in seeking to quantify the numbers of NESB churches from this data. This data only includes responses from churches participating in 2011 NCLS, rather than all Australian churches.

Although the 2011 NCLS was available in eight languages, a lower participation of NESB churches gives less information from their perspective about the relationship between NESB congregations with other congregations. In addition, the survey question only asks about NESB congregations that share property, services or small groups, and not about congregations that are independent or have no relationship with another congregation.

Conclusion

It is encouraging that churches are engaging with and responding to the multicultural context of their community through forming relationships with non-English speaking background congregations. However, opportunities remain for many of the 79% of churches who have no association with a non-English speaking background congregation to engage in some way, particularly since only 10% of migrants to Australia identified their proficiency in speaking English as ‘not well or not at all.’ For the churches who do have a relationship with a NESB congregation, the main connecting point is a shared use of property (9%), rather than any form of shared ministry, whether services (2%) or small groups (6%).

References

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Citation

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