



NCLS Research Media Release

For immediate release

Who's in the Pews

What the 2021 NCLS found about who's at church and who is positive about it

Young adult church attenders are most likely of any age group to report they are fully confident their local church can achieve what it has set out to do, according to results from the 2021 National Church Life Survey (NCLS).

This cohort is also most likely of any age group to support the development of new initiatives at their church.

“This is an encouraging picture,” NCLS Research Director Dr Ruth Powell says. “The young adults in Australian churches offer the most positive view about their church experiences.”

A positive picture also emerges in the results from the 2021 NCLS regarding leadership in churches. Young adults are more likely to occupy leadership or ministry roles at the churches they are part of, and they want to be more involved (29% vs 21% overall).

The survey also states that nearly half of all young adults (15 to 30s) joined their church in the previous five years. Some move from other churches, but nearly one in 10 (9%) young adults are newcomers without a church background. This compares with 5% across all ages.

The parallel Australian Community Survey offers a wider view of the experience of young adults. Three in 10 young adult Australians say they attend religious services at least once a month. “In general, they know little about the Christian faith, but are curious rather than hostile” Dr Powell says.

“Because some young adults may be less regular, we don't always notice or count them in church life. Perhaps these results will encourage church leaders to pay more attention to young people who may be orbiting those who are part of a strong committed core.”

The age profile of Australian church attenders has become even older over time. The latest National Church Life Survey results found that 36% of church attenders are people aged 70+. There are distinct denominational differences, with Pentecostal movements having a much younger age profile compared to others.

Regarding the ethnicity of church attenders, the proportion born overseas has risen over time. In 2006, 28% were born in other countries, while in 2021 this has risen to 37%.

“About a quarter of churchgoers (24%) speak a language other than English at home, with most being bilingual or multilingual,” Dr Powell says.



In other results from the 2021 NCLS, people who attend church are highly educated with 44% indicating they had a university degree – up from 27% in 2006.

When it comes to gender, there continues to be more women than men in Australian churches (61% women, 39% men). Dr Powell says every Australian National Church Life Survey since 1991 has shown this gender imbalance.

“Across the globe, in most cultures and religious traditions, women tend to be more spiritual or religious than men,” she says. “They are more likely to pray, to say that faith is important and to attend worship.”

For more information, or to interview with NCLS Research Director, Dr Ruth Powell please contact Connie Lim at clim@ncls.org.au.