

Results from the 2016 National Church Life Survey

Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Relations in Churches

Occasional Paper 33

Steve Bevis, Miriam Pepper and Ruth Powell

April 2018

Executive summary

Indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia are a core part of our nation's history and are an important element in ongoing national and cultural debates about identity and belonging. Christian churches share in the good and the bad of this national story, a story still in the making.

The 2016 NCLS invited church attenders and leaders to reflect on the state of these relations within churches as well as on current issues such as questions of treaty, constitutional recognition and government intervention to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Attenders and leaders were also asked what actions they and their churches were taking to further reconciliation and relationship building with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The results reveal a broad level of support both for increasing local church-based involvement in the task of reconciliation and for government-based policy initiatives that would close the gap in health and employment. It is when looking at the results for individual- and church-level action that the story loses its shine. The gap between aspiration and action suggests there are further roads to travel in the churches when it comes to indigenous justice and engagement.

Acknowledgement

This report was made possible through sponsorship from Australians Together. We thank Australians Together for their commitment to research in this area.



This paper may be cited as: Bevis, S., Pepper, M., & Powell, R. (2018). Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Relations in Churches, Occasional Paper 33. NCLS Research: Sydney.

For further information about NCLS Research or to join our mailing list, please go to:
<http://www.ncls.org.au>.

For further information about and resources from Australians Together, please go to:
<https://www.australianstogether.org.au>

Contents

Table of contents

| | | |
|----|---|----|
| 1 | Introduction | 4 |
| 2 | Study methodology | 5 |
| 3 | Church attenders, relationships and reconciliation | 6 |
| 4 | Attenders' views on treaty, sovereignty and constitutional change | 9 |
| 5 | Attenders' views on health, employment, incarceration and government policy | 10 |
| 6 | Attenders' views on land..... | 10 |
| 7 | Past, present and future – attender views and experiences | 11 |
| 8 | Church leader views and preaching..... | 13 |
| 9 | Local church engagement with Aboriginal people and culture | 15 |
| 10 | Conclusion..... | 18 |
| | Data sources and references | 18 |
| | About NCLS Research and the National Church Life Survey | 19 |
| | Appendix 1: Question wordings | 20 |

List of figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Church attenders' social contact with Aboriginal people | 6 |
| Figure 2: Church attenders' attitudes to a range of issues concerning the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia..... | 7 |
| Figure 3: Attenders' actions to encourage indigenous reconciliation, awareness or relationship building..... | 8 |
| Figure 4: Levels of support among church attenders for changes to the Australian constitution | 9 |
| Figure 5: Attender views on the Government negotiating a treaty with Aboriginal people | 9 |
| Figure 6: Attender awareness and attitude about denominations apologising for Aboriginal injustices..... | 11 |
| Figure 7: Changes in attender opinion over 12 months about the need to work towards reconciliation with Aboriginal people | 12 |
| Figure 8: Extent of attenders feeling impacted by current talks around reconciliation | 12 |
| Figure 9: Senior local church leaders' views on the most important ways for churches to contribute to reconciliation efforts with Aboriginal people..... | 13 |
| Figure 10: Senior local church leaders' attitudes to churches promoting reconciliation and building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people..... | 14 |
| Figure 11: Senior local church leaders' frequency of preaching on justice for Aboriginal people | 14 |
| Figure 12: Presence of local church connections to Aboriginal people and culture | 15 |
| Figure 13: Local churches' position on ministry with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people..... | 16 |
| Figure 14: Frequency of various types of local church engagement with indigenous people..... | 17 |

Citation

Bevis, S., Pepper, M., & Powell, R. (2018). *Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Relations in Churches, Occasional Paper 33. NCLS Research: Sydney.*

1 Introduction

Indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia are a core part of our nation's history and are an important element in ongoing national and cultural debates about identity and belonging. Christian churches share in the good and the bad of this national story, a story still in the making.

The 2016 NCLS invited church attenders and leaders to respond to a series of questions about indigenous and non-indigenous relations. Respondents were asked to reflect on the state of these relations within churches as well as on current issues such as questions of treaty and constitutional recognition. Broader subjects such as whether injustice is ongoing, or simply in the past, were also asked alongside questions about expanding government support for indigenous peoples in areas such as health and employment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2.8% of the Australian population. Interpreting the nature and status of "relations" between indigenous people and the other 97.2% of the population must be set against this discrepancy in numbers. Such a large discrepancy may raise legitimate questions for what this may mean in practice for people's lives and experiences – many people may truthfully feel that their experience and knowledge is limited. Numbers, however, are only part of the story, and respondents were invited to maintain a moral focus on the place of the nation's "first peoples" within a contested history and present. Furthermore, inaccurate assumptions about geography and demographics may also shape people's expectations. Perhaps no one would be surprised that 25% of the population of the Northern Territory are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, yet many may be shocked to know that more than six in 10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people live in New South Wales and Queensland (ABS, 2017).

For Christianity, morality has never been simply about the "numbers" or geographic boundaries, but about the truth of relationships, the confession of brokenness, and the requirements of the love of God and neighbour. The church lives from the hope and joy in the Kingdom where the ultimate measure and yardstick of relationships is God's grace and the reconciliation made possible in the gospel. With large majorities of attenders agreeing that there is racism towards indigenous people in this nation and that the government should do more to take action on indigenous health outcomes we can see outlines from the survey of a commitment to being good neighbours. It is when churches are asked what they have practically done to further this work of reconciliation that the story loses its shine. The media alerts us that a gap exists between the health outcomes of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians; this survey reveals a gap also exists between what Australian churches believe about indigenous and non-indigenous relations and the efforts made to close the gap between those aspirations and our daily lives.

Current views and actions of Australian churches regarding indigenous and non-indigenous relations must also be situated in a historical context of church and state that deeply informs the experience and expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the very people who are the subject of these questions. Questions about relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians do not take place in a vacuum, and the role of churches in the previous system of denomination-based missions that controlled indigenous people's lives is inescapable. This is not simply a matter of the past for indigenous people, but is part of the living memory of many individuals and their families, significant numbers of whom still affiliate with Christianity. The impact of the missions was mixed; new and profound relationships and approaches existed alongside – or intermingled with – loss of language, culture, restricted access to sites of significance and, of course, the breakup of families and the forced removal of people from their ancestral lands. The churches of Australia are part of this problematic story and legacy. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander church attenders and leaders this is an obvious and profound legacy that is enacted in attempts to this day to build – or rebuild – relationships, both within the church, and in the wider society. For many non-indigenous church attenders this may not be a conscious problem, or remains an unknown history; yet this situation presents an ethical backdrop within which this data must be approached and analysed.

2 Study methodology

The Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is a project of NCLS Research (a partnership of Anglicare Diocese of Sydney, Uniting Church Synod of NSW and ACT, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Australian Catholic University), which has taken place every five years since 1991.

Participating local churches complete three types of survey forms. First, all church attenders aged 15 years and older are requested to fill out a paper NCLS Attender Survey form, usually during or after a service of worship. Second, a single leader/administrator in each church completes an NCLS Operations Survey form about the activities and operations of the local church. Third, the NCLS Leader Survey is available to local church leaders, including clergy and pastors, elders, church councillors and other leaders.

This report presents Attender Survey, Leader Survey and Operations Survey results from the 2016 NCLS for questions that concern indigenous and non-indigenous relations. Survey questions were designed in collaboration with Australians Together. Question wordings are given in Appendix 1.

Attender Survey: Questions to attenders that are covered in this report were located in one of several small sample surveys (Attender Sample Survey I). In 2016 some 1,380 church attenders (weighted) from across the nation completed questions in Survey I, 1.8% of whom identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Leader Survey: This report presents leader survey results for senior local church leaders who are also staff. Senior leader is defined as a senior clergy person at a local church (or multi-site church such as parish, multi-campus or cluster) or senior lay leader when a clergy person is not present at a church. Senior leaders were those who indicated that they were “The minister, pastor or priest of this local church”, “The senior minister/pastor/priest of a ministry team here”, “A minister, pastor or priest of equal standing with others in a ministry team here”, “An interim minister, pastor or priest here” or “A layperson serving as the principal leader here”. In 2016, there were two leader survey variants. The questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues were located in “Leader Survey LS1” in a section completed only by ministry/pastoral staff. Some 1,082 senior local church leaders who are staff (weighted) from across the nation completed Leader Survey LS1, 1.1% of whom identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Operations Survey: Some 2,377 local churches (weighted) from across the nation completed an operations survey. In the case of Protestant churches, local church is defined as a gathering of attenders (congregation) at a particular location. The congregation may include one or more worship services. At some locations, more than one congregation meets – in which case these congregations are separate “local churches”. In the case of the Catholic denomination, local church is defined as the parish, which comprises one or more locations/mass centres.

Attenders from 14 denominations and movements were sampled well enough in to be included in the weighted analysis (13 denominations in the case of leader and operations data). These denominations/movements account for some 95% of the weekly church attenders in Australia (not including Orthodox, independent or house churches or other small poorly-documented movements). Other denominations which were inadequately sampled or absent are not included in the analysis.

The denominations have been combined into larger groups in this report as follows:

1. Catholic
2. Mainstream Protestant (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Uniting Church)
3. Pentecostal (Australian Christian Churches, C3 Church, International Network of Churches, Christian Revival Crusade)

4. Other Protestant (Baptist, Churches of Christ, Christian Reformed, Salvation Army, and in attender data also includes CityLife Church)

The maximum margin of error on a simple random sample of 1,200 (typical number of cases for Attender Survey questions contained in this report) at a 95% level of confidence is 2.8%. That is, assuming a simple random sample, there is a 95% chance that a sample result falls within $\pm 2.8\%$ of the result for the population of Australian church attenders.

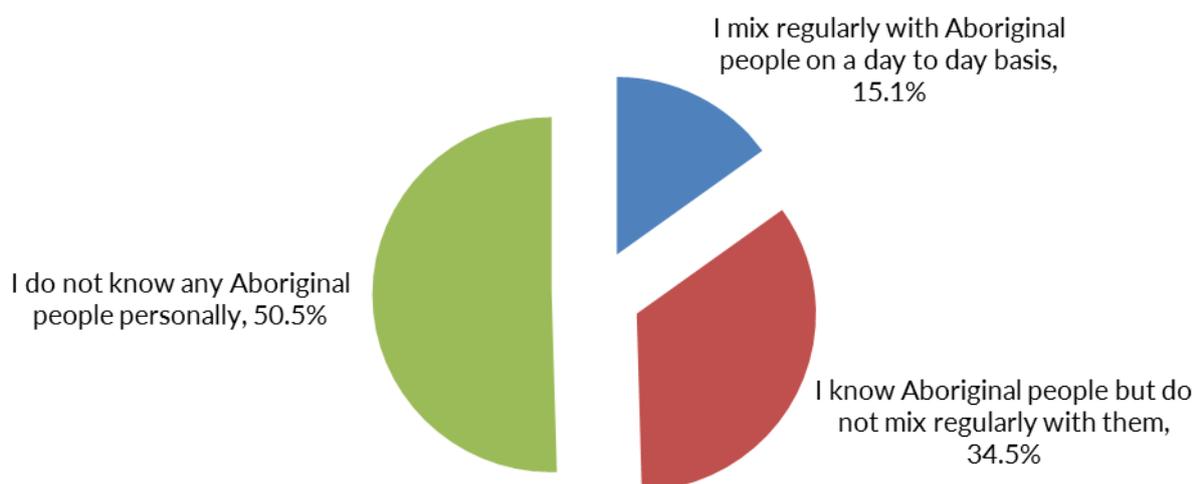
A similar weighting methodology was applied to Operations Survey and to Leader Survey data – to account for different levels of participation of local churches/leaders from different denominations and regions. The maximum margin of error on a simple random sample of 2,200 (typical number of cases for the Operations Survey questions contained in this report) at a 95% level of confidence is 1.9%, when a finite population correction factor is applied. The maximum margin of error on a simple random sample of 1,000 (typical number of cases for the Leader Survey questions contained in this report) at a 95% level of confidence is 2.9%, when a finite population correction factor is applied.

The margin of error is greater for reported results for subsamples.

For some questions included in this report, missing data exceeds 10% of respondents. Where this is the case, the per cent missing is given in chart footers.

3 Church attenders, relationships and reconciliation

Figure 1: Church attenders' social contact with Aboriginal people



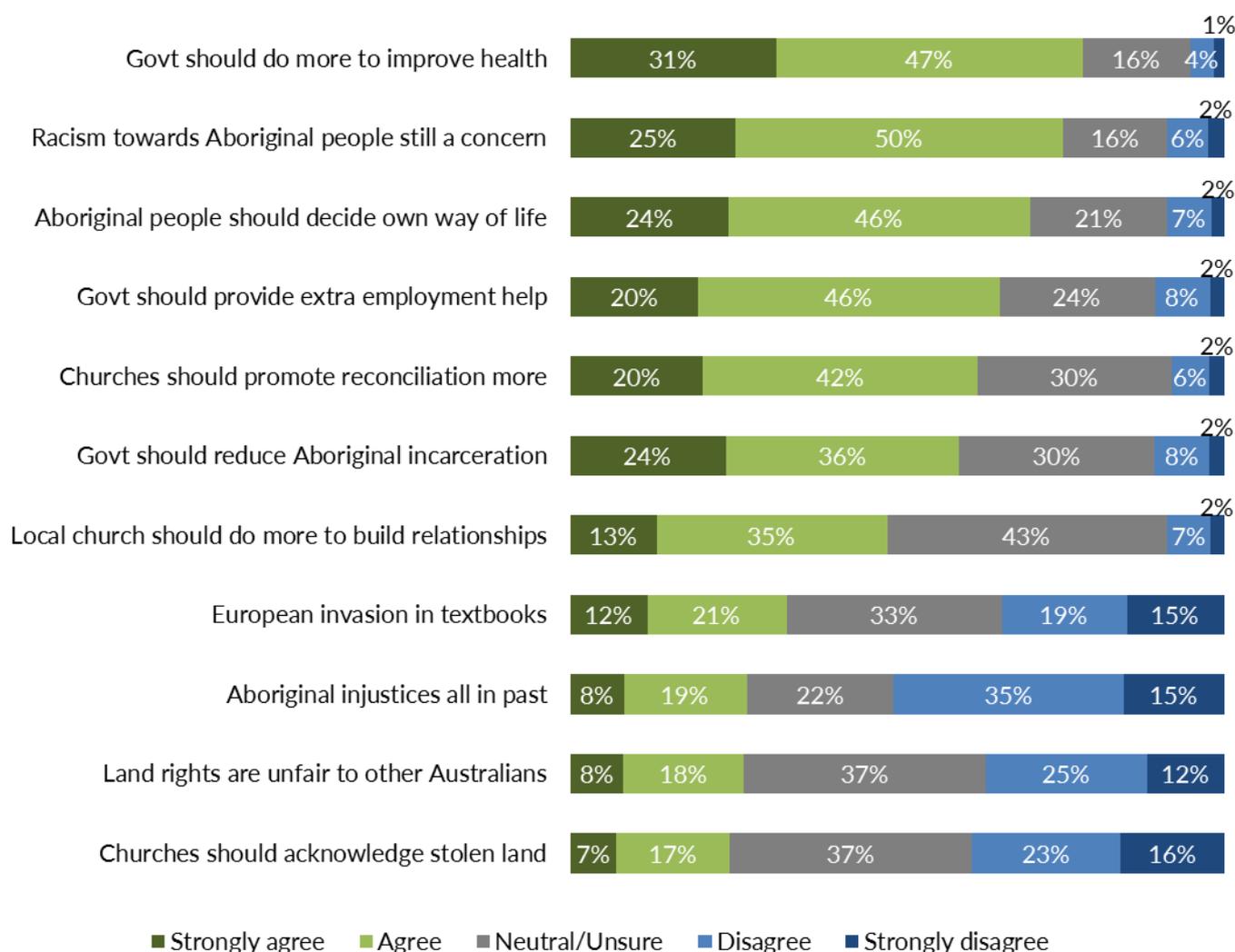
Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,295).

Church attenders were asked about their social contact with Aboriginal people. There remains a significant relational divide within Australian churches with 50% of attenders stating that they do not know an Aboriginal person. While 15% of attenders mix regularly, approximately one third (34%) know Aboriginal

people but do not mix with them (see Figure 1). Among the denominational groups, Pentecostal churches were the most likely to have attenders who mixed regularly. Where you live appears to determine the amount of direct personal contact, with 61% of urban-dwellers reporting that they did not know an Aboriginal person as opposed to only 20% of those residing in rural areas. Those born overseas were least likely to know Aboriginal people.

Despite the low levels of personal contact, when asked whether “churches should more actively promote reconciliation” 62% of attenders agreed (see Figure 2). This finding reveals that the majority of Australian church attenders have a desire that their churches take action on reconciliation. Further, some 48% agreed that their local church should do more to build relationships with Aboriginal people, with 43% being neutral or unsure or unsure.

Figure 2: Church attenders’ attitudes to a range of issues concerning the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia



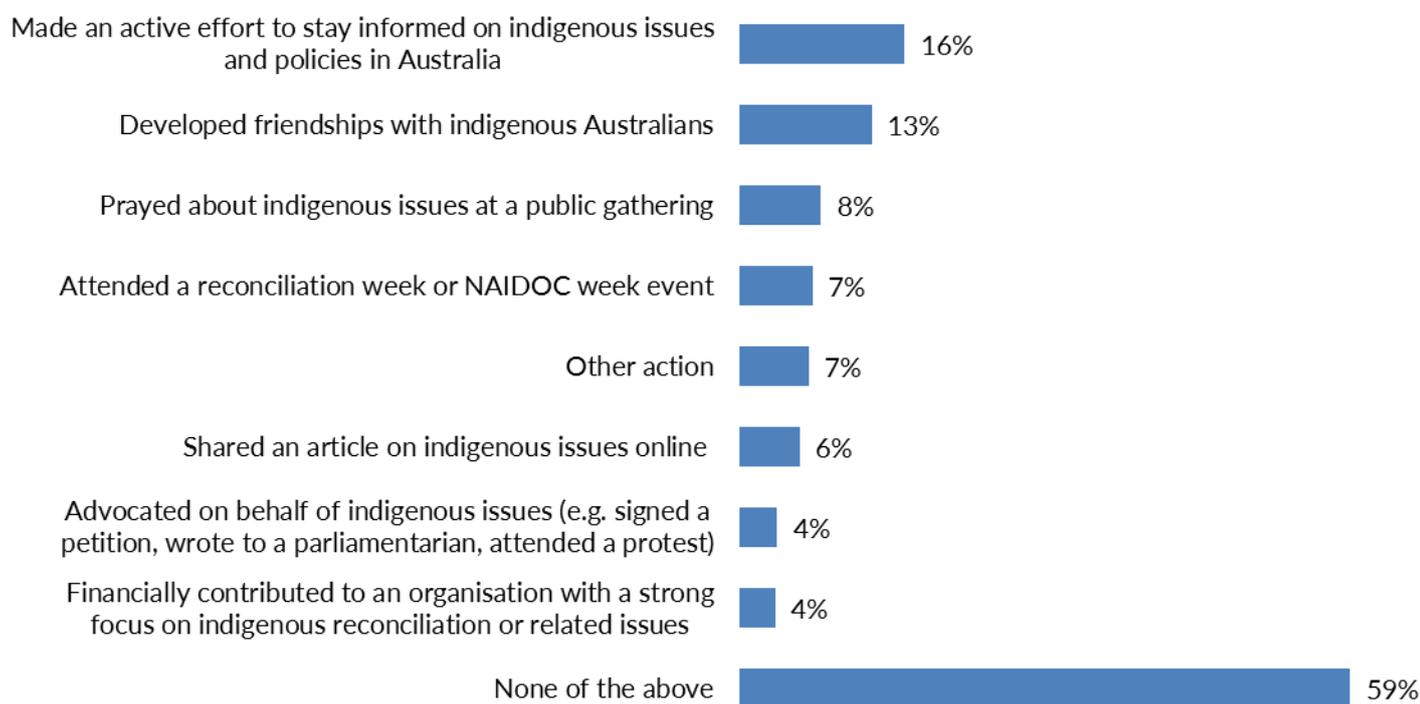
Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,210-1,237, missing data 10.4-12.3%).
Note: Totals might not add to 100% due to rounding.

Yet, when asked individually what they themselves had done in the previous 12 months, almost six in 10 attenders (59%) said that they had done nothing to encourage indigenous reconciliation/awareness/relationship building (Figure 3). Of those who have acted on these issues, “Made an active effort to stay informed on indigenous issues and policies” was the largest action (16% of attenders). In a nation where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples regularly ask for non-indigenous citizens to stand with them in policy and cultural issues only 4% of church attenders had engaged in public advocacy.

It also should be highlighted that in a nation where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people fall behind on almost every measure of health and well-being, and where indigenous families are at a socioeconomic disadvantage, that this same set of disadvantages translates into the income and resources available to local Aboriginal churches, ministries, and congregations across the nation. When this background is considered, the very low level of church attenders reporting making financial contributions (4%) to the task of reconciliation is noteworthy.

These results suggest that there remains a gap between the expressed hopes and actions of church attenders with respect to the task of reconciliation.

Figure 3: Attenders’ actions to encourage indigenous reconciliation, awareness or relationship building



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,194, missing data 13.5%).

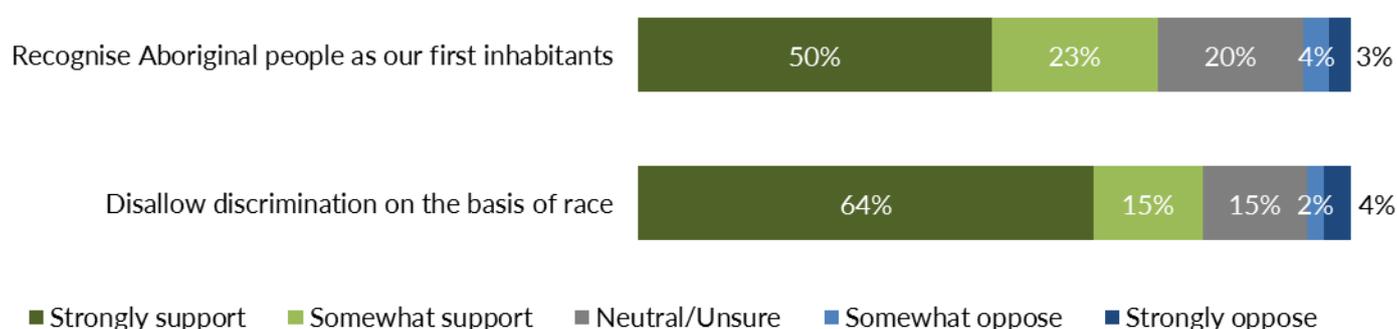
Note: Respondents were instructed to mark all applicable options.

4 Attenders' views on treaty, sovereignty and constitutional change

The 2016 NCLS took place in the midst of a period where questions of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia were, at least in part, publicly focused on the question of a proposed national referendum to change the constitution and provide "recognition" of indigenous people in the nation's founding document.

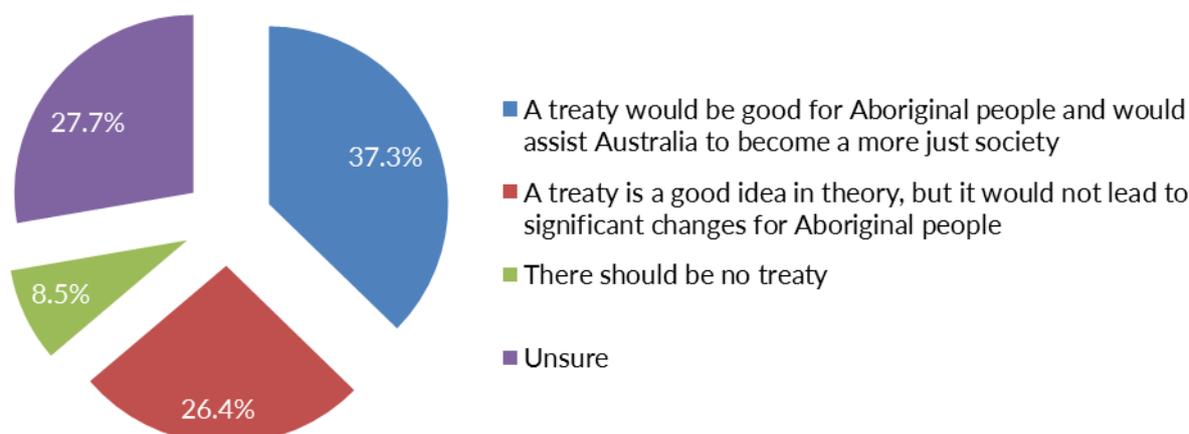
Half of respondents "strongly supported" constitutional change to "recognise Aboriginal people as our first inhabitants", with a further 23% of attenders "somewhat" supportive. Only 7% opposed constitutional change. On the specific question of the removal of racially discriminatory clauses from the Australian constitution a total of 79% of respondents supported this proposal, with 64% strongly in support (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Levels of support among church attenders for changes to the Australian constitution



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,253-1,274).
Note: Totals might not add to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 5: Attender views on the Government negotiating a treaty with Aboriginal people



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,273).

The idea of a treaty attracted less upfront support with 37% of respondents indicating “it would be good for Aboriginal people and would assist Australia to become a more just society”, 26% that it wouldn't lead to change, and 28% being unsure. Despite this mixed picture, only 9% chose to respond that there should not be a treaty at all (Figure 5). There were some differences in views on a treaty between rural and urban communities with 39% of urban respondents affirming a treaty “would be good” as compared with just 28% of rural responses. Conversely, 35% of rural attenders felt that a treaty wouldn't lead to change compared with 25% of urban attenders.

5 Attenders' views on health, employment, incarceration and government policy

Many indigenous Australians are trapped in poverty and unemployment. Church attenders were asked a series of questions about possible government responses to health, economic and legal matters affecting indigenous people. Some 78% of attenders affirmed the notion of the government taking action on Aboriginal health outcomes. The idea of Aboriginal employment assistance was affirmed by 66% of attenders with only 11% disagreeing with this notion. Indigenous incarceration rates in Australia are among in the highest in the world, and when asked if the government should take action, 60% of attenders agreed, while 30% were unsure (see Figure 2). These significant majorities suggest Australian church attenders are in favour of government policy settings that address indigenous disadvantage and its consequences.

These affirmations also sit alongside a positive endorsement of a “general values” view that indigenous Australians should be free to pursue their own lifestyle. The idea of “lifestyle” is taken for granted in contemporary Australia; Australians regularly talk of enjoying and even defending their lifestyle and this terminology has also entered recent policy debates about indigenous Australians. In this context, it is interesting that 70% of Australian church attenders affirmed that “Aboriginal people should decide their own way of life” (Figure 2).

6 Attenders' views on land

The idea of “land” is of central importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. For indigenous Christians it also remains central to self-understanding and to kinship responsibility. As Pastor Neville Naden explains, “land for the majority of my people is everything about them, and they are everything about the land” (Naden 2014, p1). The status of land is also critical in Australian law with the legislation of land rights and Native Title on the one hand, and, on the other, in society generally, with lingering debates over the invasion and settlement of the continent, subjects which give rise to ongoing questions of “stolen land” and recompense. The views of church attenders regarding the status and importance – or otherwise – of this arena in indigenous and non-indigenous relations is therefore important to ascertain.

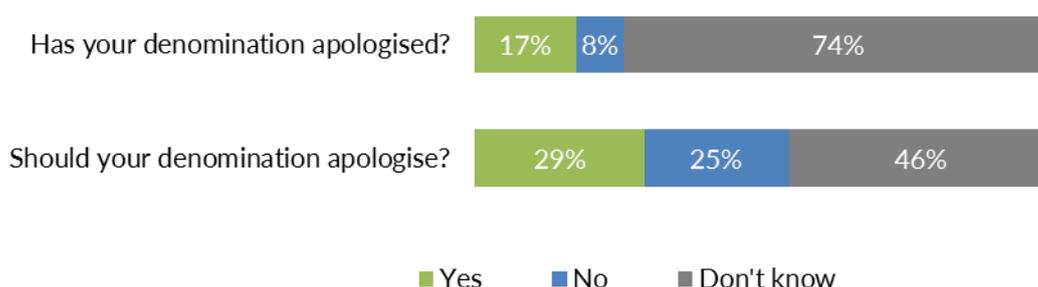
In this context, a lack of clarity or decisiveness on legal issues is apparent. When attenders were asked whether “granting land rights to Aboriginal people is unfair to other Australians” 37% were neutral/unsure, 36% disagreed and 27% agreed (Figure 2). Those with a tertiary degree were more likely than those with lower levels of formal education to disagree (45% of degree holders) with the notion that granting land rights is unfair.

Today, many Aboriginal Christians stand behind the notion that the land has been stolen. Yet only 24% of church attenders agreed churches should acknowledge stolen land (Figure 2). This result may reveal that within the churches – as within the wider society – there are two histories at play, two unreconciled ways of

telling our national narrative. Indeed, when asked whether “European invasion” should be named in textbooks church attenders divided evenly into three groups of agreement, disagreement and uncertainty.

How churches as institutions should respond to this contested history also appears unclear in the responses of church attenders. Whether denominations had made apologies for involvement in previous injustices was itself largely unknown, with 74% of people marking “Don’t know”. Furthermore, when asked whether their denomination should apologise, 46% of attenders (excluding those who indicated that their denominations had apologised) were unsure, 29% agreed and 25% disagreed (Figure 6). Comparing denominational groups, Pentecostals were the most likely group to respond “Don’t know” and the least likely to indicate “Yes”.

Figure 6: Attender awareness and attitude about denominations apologising for Aboriginal injustices



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I
 (“Has” question: n=1,210, missing 12.3%)

(“Should” question: n=982, missing 13.5%, excludes those who indicated their denomination had apologised)
 Note: Totals might not add to 100% due to rounding.

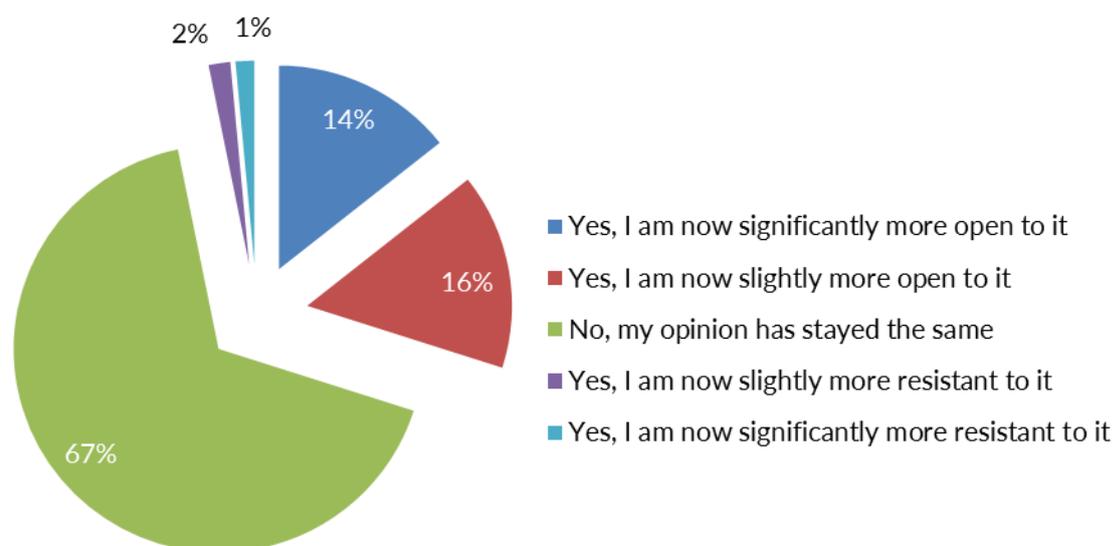
7 Past, present and future – attender views and experiences

Injustice and racism are concepts that can easily remain at a level of sloganeering in public discourse. The survey asked respondents to think about indigenous and non-indigenous relations in the Australian context and how ready they are to utilise these concepts to describe the past and present of these experiences. When asked about the matter of injustice towards Aboriginal people, 51% of attenders disagreed with the idea that Aboriginal injustices are all in the past, whereas 27% agreed. On the other hand, when the question was put as to whether racism towards Aboriginal people is still a concern, 75% agreed (Figure 2). In response to these results, churches may wish to do further work to explore the nature of injustice and racism and their interconnections in the Australian experience. This is a conversation into which indigenous Christians could potentially provide unique and important perspectives.

Church attenders were also asked to reflect on their own experiences of the process of reconciliation. An awareness of a personal change in attitude to the concept of reconciliation over the preceding 12 months was indicated by 30% of attenders, who were more open to reconciliation and its demands than in the past. A significant majority of 67% of attenders indicated, however, that their attitudes have stayed the same (Figure 7). In this context it is worth noting that 55% of attenders had been impacted by reconciliation talks,

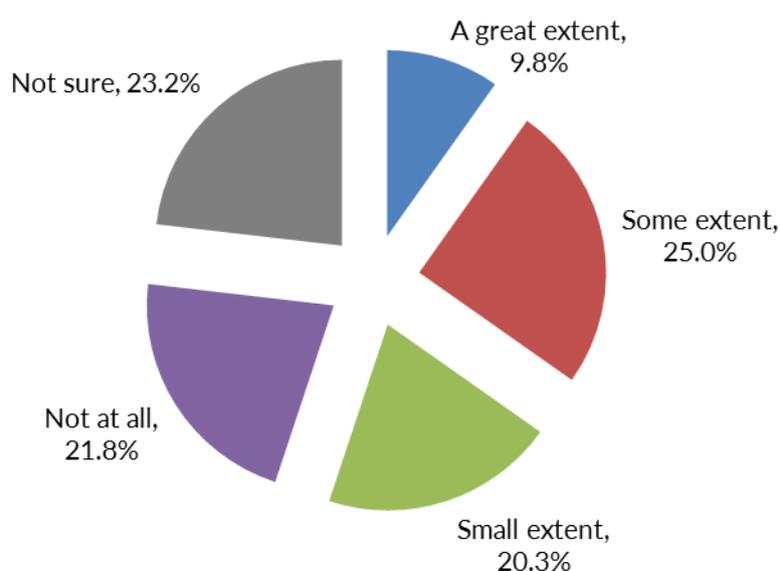
with only 22% stating that they were not impacted, and 23% being unsure (Figure 8), an indication that there is perhaps room for further engagement and openness among church attenders on this subject.

Figure 7: Changes in attender opinion over 12 months about the need to work towards reconciliation with Aboriginal people



Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,196, missing 13.3%).

Figure 8: Extent of attenders feeling impacted by current talks around reconciliation

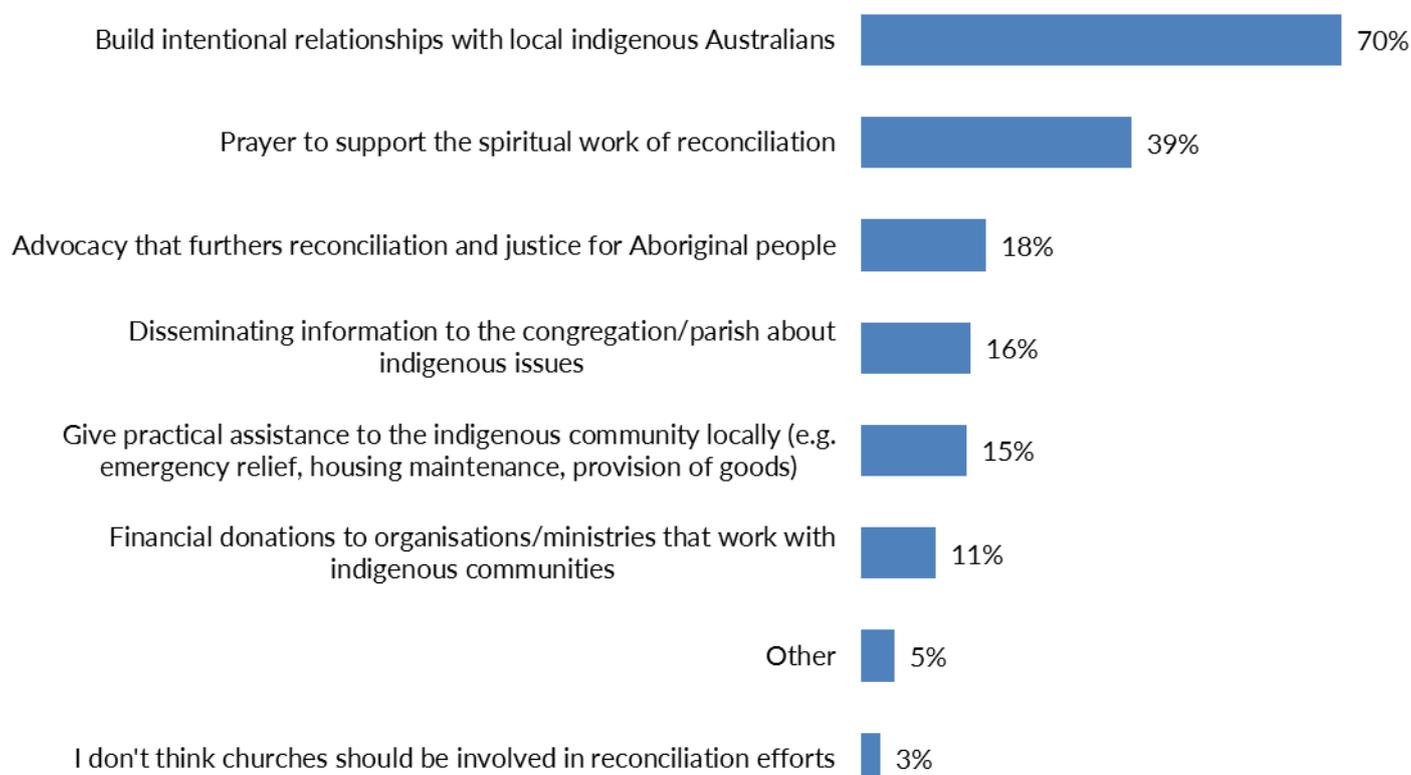


Source: 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I (n=1,223, missing 11.4%).

8 Church leader views and preaching

Local church leaders were asked to think about the most important ways for local churches to contribute to reconciliation efforts with Aboriginal people. They were asked to mark up to two options. Responses reveal that the focus of church leaders is mainly upon the building of relationships, with 70% choosing this option. Prayer was the next highest option to further reconciliation, being affirmed by 39% of leaders. A large drop in interest is seen to the next most likely responses to the task of engaging in reconciliation, those being advocacy (18%), the sharing of information (16%) and the direct delivery of services (15%). Donations (11%) attracted less support (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Senior local church leaders' views on the most important ways for churches to contribute to reconciliation efforts with Aboriginal people



Source: 2016 Leader Survey LS1 (n=1,013).

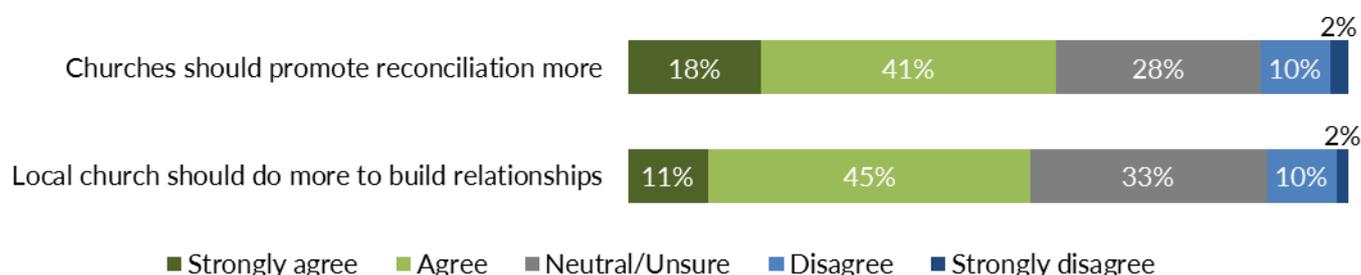
Note: Respondents were instructed to mark up to two options.

Leaders held similar views to attenders about whether or not churches should more actively promote reconciliation (59% of leaders agreed versus 62% of attenders, 28% of leaders versus 30% of attenders neutral or unsure). Leaders were more likely than attenders to agree that their local church should do more to build relationships with Aboriginal people (56% versus 48%) and less likely to be unsure (33% versus 43%) (see Figure 10 for leader results and Figure 2 for attender results).

It is interesting to note, however, that when asked how often they would touch on the topic of justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their preaching over the course of a year, a majority of church

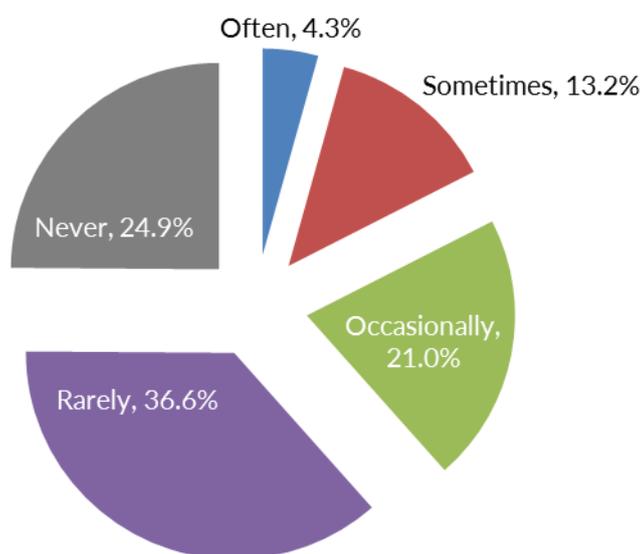
leaders reported that they rarely or never did so (37% rarely, 25% never). Some 21% preached occasionally and 17% did so sometimes or often (Figure 11). While preaching is only one avenue for the tasks of teaching, education and discipleship formation, the survey results suggest that this area awaits development in Australian church life. A gender gap is distinguishable with female leaders more likely to often or sometimes preach on this subject than male leaders, and Catholic and Mainstream Protestant leaders were also more likely to do so than their counterparts from other denominations.

Figure 10: Senior local church leaders' attitudes to churches promoting reconciliation and building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



Source: 2016 Leader Survey LS1 (n=1,041).
Note: Totals might not add to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 11: Senior local church leaders' frequency of preaching on justice for Aboriginal people



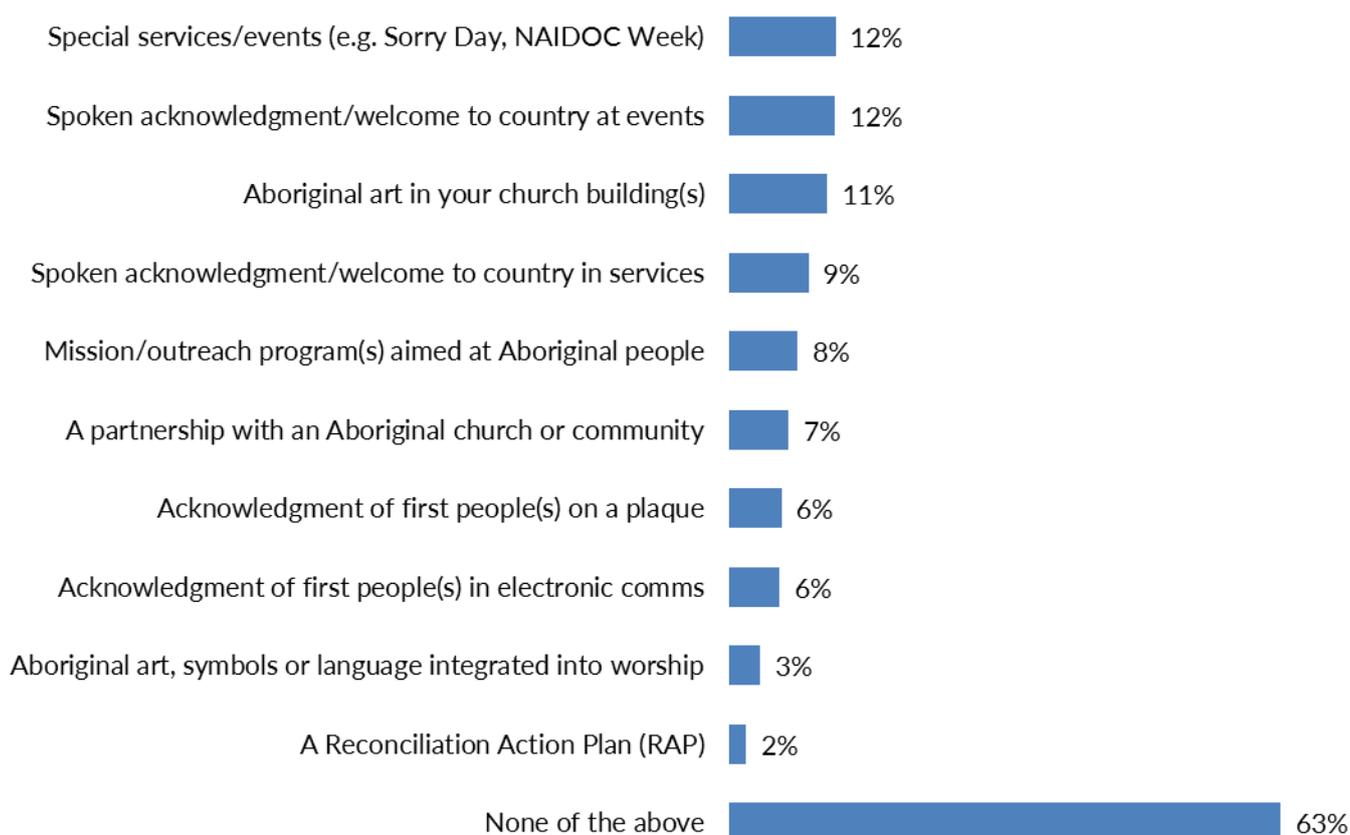
Source: 2016 Leader Survey LS1 (n=1,007).

9 Local church engagement with Aboriginal people and culture

Questions included in the 2016 Operations Survey provide an indication of the breadth, depth and type of engagement local churches have with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

When asked whether their local church had any direct relationship with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, across all denominations 76% of local churches indicated that they did not. Mainstream Protestants were the most likely to not have a direct relationship, with 84% reporting no connection. Pentecostals had the most direct connection (48% of local churches). Geography also appears to play its part with 38% of rural congregations reporting the existence of a direct relationship (compared with 20% of urban churches and 20% of regional churches). It is of interest that those churches with the longest presence in Australia were least likely to have a direct relationship, with 83% of local churches which were founded before 1900 reporting no relationship.

Figure 12: Presence of local church connections to Aboriginal people and culture



Source: 2016 NCLS Operations Survey (n=2,225).
Note: Respondents were instructed to mark all applicable options.

Churches were asked to indicate which, if any, of 10 different types of acknowledgement of or engagement with Aboriginal people and culture they had at their church. Only 37% of churches indicated at least one of these. The most common was special services/events (e.g. Sorry Day, NAIDOC Week), at only 12% of local churches. A tiny 1.9% had incorporated a Reconciliation Action Plan into the life of the local church (see Figure 12). The likelihood of engagement increased with church size. The strongest result however was for Catholic parishes; some 68% indicated at least one of the 10 ways of engagement, including special services/events (46% of parishes) and Aboriginal art in the parish building (26%).

When asked to describe the local church's current position with regard to ministry with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, 40% had "limited/no opportunity in our area for this type of ministry". However it is interesting to note that 22% reported current involvement or taking first steps and a further 14% were open to involvement in the next two years (Figure 13). Against the background of long term marginalisation within the churches' thinking, these responses suggest that positive engagement may be emerging or just around the corner.

Figure 13: Local churches' position on ministry with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people

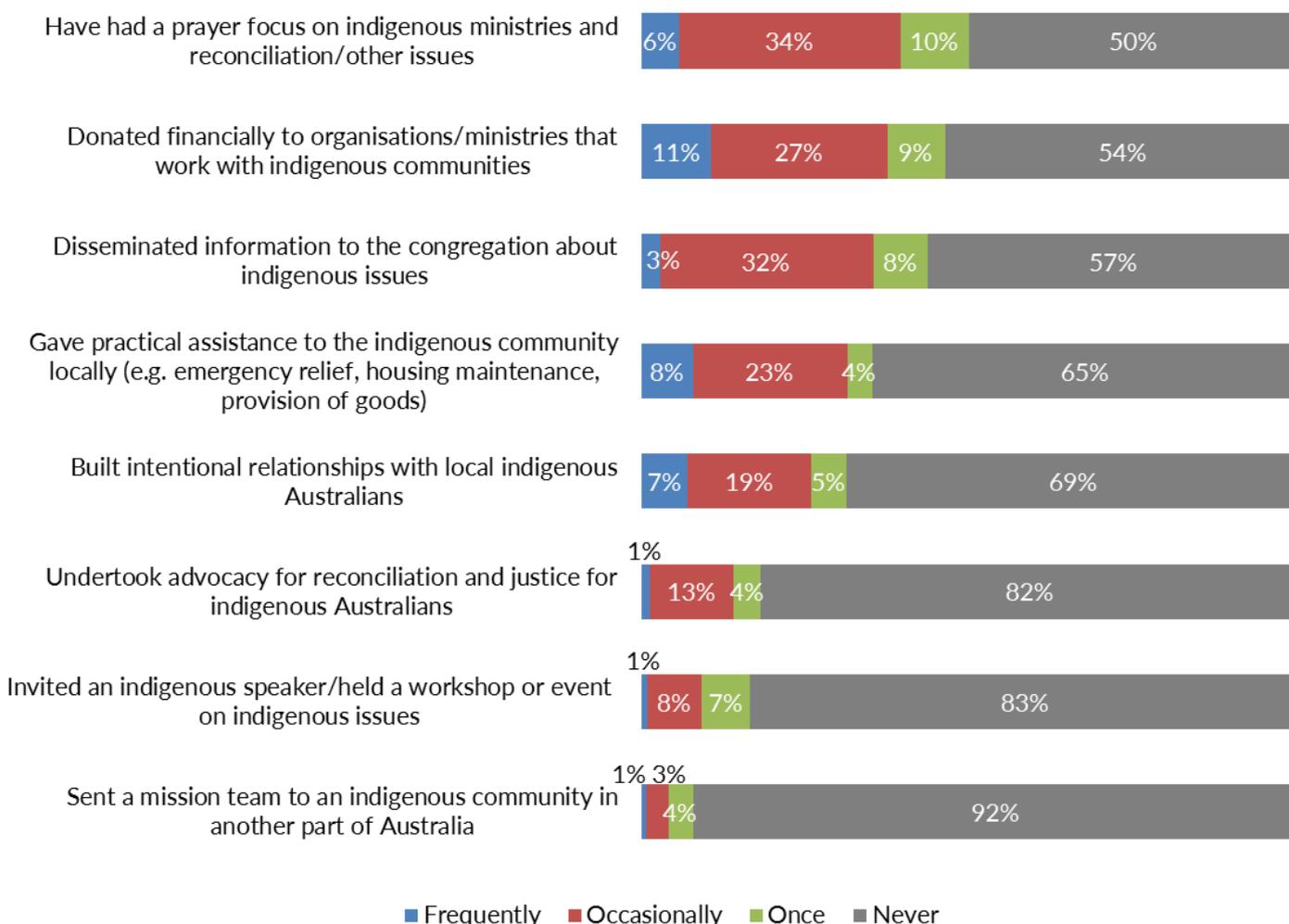


Source: 2016 NCLS Operations Survey (n=2,257).

Churches were also asked to reflect on how they had engaged with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people over the previous 12 months in a more detailed manner. They were invited to consider their frequency of participation in eight areas of possible connection. Some 69% reported they had never "built intentional direct relationships with local indigenous Australians" in this period (Figure 14). While over half of churches (54%) reported no giving in the form of donations to groups working with or for ATSI people, 11% of churches had done so frequently, and 27% occasionally. This suggests the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, while not front and centre, are not entirely off the radar of Australian church life. Giving and action, of course, are related to awareness, and in the Christian story this is often focused by prayer. Here, 39% of local churches reported at least an occasional prayer focus on indigenous ministries and reconciliation.

When asked whether they were aware of other churches or ministries in their locality that primarily serve indigenous Australians, 58% indicated that they were not aware of any and 23% indicated that there were none nearby. Just under a fifth (19%) indicated that they were aware of such ministries. In terms of locality, rural churches were most likely to answer affirmatively (30% of rural churches versus 15% of urban churches and 16% of regional churches). Of the four denominational groups, Pentecostal churches were most likely to be aware, with 27% noting the presence of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander-focused ministries in their area.

Figure 14: Frequency of various types of local church engagement with indigenous people



Source: 2016 NCLS Operations Survey (n=2,238-2,263).
Note: Totals might not add to 100% due to rounding.

10 Conclusion

The survey paints an interesting picture of Australian church attenders' and leaders' current level of experience, practice and thinking around the issue of indigenous and non-indigenous relations. The results reveal a broad level of support both for increasing local church-based involvement in the task of reconciliation and for government-based policy initiatives that would close the gap in health and employment.

Leaders emphasised relationship building and prayer as their preferred responses to indigenous engagement. While prayer and relationships might be expected to be at the heart of local church life, these responses perhaps raise a question about the rigour of the engagement around this issue. Are Australian churches simply going with the flow of broader social and political currents on this issue? At both intellectual and practical levels it would appear that Australian church leaders could well expand their level of engagement. Theologically and culturally informed leadership might yet play a critical role in enabling churches and church attenders to better and more effectively carry out the mission of furthering reconciliation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, both those who are church attenders and those who do not affiliate with Christianity, will be awaiting the response of Australian churches to the findings in this report. The attitudes represented in this survey indicate how far churches have come in Australia on the question of the relations of indigenous and non-indigenous people in this land. The results also suggest there are further roads to travel. In whose company this trip is made may well define the shape and quality of the Australian churches' contribution to this issue in the future.

Data sources and references

ABS (2017). 2071.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census, 2016. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATION: 2016 Census data summary. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Population%20Data%20Summary~10>, accessed 2 Feb 2018.

Naden, N., with Havea, J., (2014). Colonisation has many names. In: J. Havea, ed., 2014. Indigenous Australia and the unfinished business of theology. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 1-8.

Powell, R., Pepper, M., Hancock, N. and Sterland, S. (2016) [computer file], 2016 NCLS Attender Survey I, NCLS Research, Sydney.

Powell, R., Pepper, M., Hancock, N. and Sterland, S. (2016) [computer file], 2016 NCLS Operations Survey, NCLS Research, Sydney.

Powell, R., Sterland, S., Pepper, M. and Hancock, N. (2016) [computer file], 2016 NCLS Leader Survey LS1, NCLS Research, Sydney.

About NCLS Research and the National Church Life Survey

NCLS Research is a joint project of several denominational partners. Established in the early 1990s, it is a world leader in research focused on connecting churches and their communities. The most well-known project is the five-yearly National Church Life Survey (NCLS).

The NCLS is a quantitative survey of 260,000-450,000 church attenders, 6,000-10,000 church leaders and 3,000-7,000 churches in more than 20 Australian denominations (Catholic, Anglican and Protestant denominations) every census year since 1991. The survey covers a wide range of areas of religious faith and practice and social concern. The NCLS includes three major survey types:

1. Attender Surveys (comprising a main survey variant and multiple small sample survey variants);
2. Several variants of a Leader Survey which is completed by local church leaders; and
3. An Operations Survey audit of local church activities.

Data are weighted to adjust for variations in participation levels across denominations and regions.

Appendix 1: Question wordings

ATTENDER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Which of the following statements most closely reflects your own situation?

- I mix regularly with Aboriginal people on a day to day basis
- I know Aboriginal people but do not mix regularly with them
- I do not know any Aboriginal people personally

There have been calls for the Government to negotiate a treaty with Aboriginal people. How do you feel about this?

- A treaty would be good for Aboriginal people and would assist Australia to become a more just society
- A treaty is a good idea in theory, but it would not lead to significant changes for Aboriginal people
- There should be no treaty
- Unsure

Would you support or oppose changes being made to the Australian constitution in order to:

Recognise Aboriginal people as our first inhabitants?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neutral/Unsure
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

Disallow discrimination on the basis of race?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neutral/Unsure
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia? (Mark one box on EACH line)

SA' = Strongly agree, 'A' = Agree, 'N' = Neutral/unsure, 'D' = Disagree, 'SD' = Strongly disagree

Injustices towards Aboriginal people are now all in the past

- SA A N D SD

Racism towards Aboriginal people is still a concern in Australia

- SA A N D SD

Aboriginal people should be able to decide their own way of life

- SA A N D SD

Governments should commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal people in prison

- SA A N D SD

Granting land rights to Aboriginal people is unfair to other Australians

- SA A N D SD

Governments should provide extra help for Aboriginal people to gain employment

- SA A N D SD

Governments should do more to improve Aboriginal health outcomes

- SA A N D SD

School textbooks should refer to the arrival of European colonists in Australia as an invasion of Aboriginal lands

- SA A N D SD

The churches should more actively promote the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal people

- SA A N D SD

My local church should do more to build relationships with Aboriginal people

- SA A N D SD

The churches should acknowledge that they are recipients of 'stolen land' used for church buildings

- SA A N D SD

Some church denominations have apologised for their part in injustices towards Aboriginal people.

Has your denomination apologised?

- Yes
 No
 Don't know

Should your denomination apologise?

- Yes
 No
 Don't know

To what extent have you felt impacted by current talks around the need for reconciliation with Aboriginal people?

- A great extent
 Some extent
 A small extent
 Not at all
 Not sure

Has your opinion about the need to work towards reconciliation with Aboriginal people changed at all over the last 12 months?

- Yes, I am now significantly more open to it
 Yes, I am now slightly more open to it
 No, my opinion has stayed the same
 Yes, I am now slightly more resistant to it
 Yes, I am now significantly more resistant to it

In the past 12 months, have you done any of the following to encourage indigenous reconciliation, awareness or relationship building? (Mark ALL that apply)

- Shared an article on indigenous issues online
 Developed friendships with indigenous Australians

- Advocated on behalf of indigenous issues (e.g. signed a petition, wrote to a parliamentarian, attended a protest)
- Made an active effort to stay informed on indigenous issues and policies in Australia
- Financially contributed to an organisation with a strong focus on indigenous reconciliation or related issues
- Prayed about indigenous issues at a public gathering
- Attended a reconciliation week or NAIDOC week event
- Other action
- None of the above

LEADER SURVEY QUESTIONS

What do you think are the **most important** ways for local churches to contribute to reconciliation efforts with Aboriginal people? (Mark up to TWO options)

- Build intentional relationships with local indigenous Australians
- Financial donations to organisations/ministries that work with indigenous communities
- Prayer to support the spiritual work of reconciliation
- Disseminating information to the congregation/parish about indigenous issues
- Advocacy that furthers reconciliation and justice for Aboriginal people
- Give practical assistance to the indigenous community locally (e.g. emergency relief, housing maintenance, provision of goods)
- Other (please specify): _____
- I don't think churches should be involved in reconciliation efforts

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. (Mark one box on EACH line)
 SA' = Strongly agree, 'A' = Agree, 'N' = Neutral/unsure, 'D' = Disagree, 'SD' = Strongly disagree

The churches should more actively promote the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal people

- SA A N D SD

My local church should do more to build relationships with Aboriginal people

- SA A N D SD

How often would you touch on the following topics in your preaching over the course of a year? (Mark one box on EACH line)

Justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- Often Sometimes Occasionally Rarely Never

OPERATIONS SURVEY QUESTIONS

PROTESTANT FORM WORDINGS:

Does this local church have any direct relationship with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (indigenous) people?

- Yes
- No

Do you have any of the following at this local church in relation to Aboriginal people and culture? (Mark ALL that apply)

- Aboriginal art in your church building(s)
- Acknowledgment of first people(s) on a plaque
- Acknowledgment of first people(s) in electronic communications
- Aboriginal art, symbols or language integrated into worship
- Spoken acknowledgment/welcome to country in church services
- Spoken acknowledgment/welcome to country at other events
- Special services/events (e.g. Sorry Day, NAIDOC Week)
- A partnership with an Aboriginal church or community
- A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
- Mission/outreach program(s) aimed at Aboriginal people
- None of the above

How would you describe this local church's current position with regard to ministry with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people? (Mark ONE only)

- We are heavily involved (e.g. conducting Aboriginal-specific ministries, significant numbers of Aboriginal attenders)
- We have some involvement
- We are taking first steps
- No current ministry, but we would be open to it within the next 2 years
- No current ministry, and it is unlikely in the next 2 years
- There is limited/no opportunity in our area for this type of ministry

Over the last 12 months, how often has this local church engaged with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the following ways? (Mark one box on EACH line)

Built intentional relationships with local indigenous Australians

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Donated financially to organisations/ministries that work with indigenous communities

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Have had a prayer focus on indigenous ministries and reconciliation/other issues

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Disseminated information to the congregation about indigenous issues

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Undertook advocacy for reconciliation and justice for indigenous Australians

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Gave practical assistance to the indigenous community locally (e.g. emergency relief, housing maintenance, provision of goods)

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Invited an indigenous speaker/held a workshop or event on indigenous issues

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Sent a mission team to an indigenous community in another part of Australia

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Are you aware of any churches or Christian ministries that primarily serve indigenous Australians that are nearby to your local church?

- No, I'm not aware of any
 No, there are none nearby
 Yes

If 'yes', please write details of these churches or ministries below:

CATHOLIC FORM WORDINGS:

Does this parish have any direct relationship with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (indigenous) people?

- Yes
 No

How would you describe this parish's current position with regard to ministry with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people? (Mark ONE only)

- We are heavily involved (e.g. conducting Aboriginal-specific ministries, significant numbers of Aboriginal attenders)
 We have some involvement
 We are taking first steps
 No current ministry, but we would be open to it within the next 2 years
 No current ministry, and it is unlikely in the next 2 years
 There is limited/no opportunity in our area for this type of ministry

Do you have any of the following at this parish in relation to Aboriginal people and culture? (Mark ALL that apply)

- Aboriginal art in your church building(s)
 Acknowledgment of first people(s) on a plaque
 Acknowledgment of first people(s) in electronic communications
 Aboriginal art, symbols or language integrated into Mass
 Spoken acknowledgment/welcome to country in Mass
 Spoken acknowledgment/welcome to country at other events
 Special services/events (e.g. Sorry Day, NAIDOC Week, Aboriginal Sunday Mass)
 A partnership with an Aboriginal church, community or Catholic Ministry
 A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
 Mission/outreach program(s) aimed at Aboriginal people
 None of the above

Over the last 12 months, how often has this parish engaged with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the following ways? (Mark one box on EACH line)

Built intentional relationships with local indigenous Australians

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Donated financially to organisations/ministries that work with indigenous communities

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Have had a prayer focus on indigenous ministries and reconciliation/other issues

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Disseminated information to the parish about indigenous issues

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Undertook advocacy for reconciliation and justice for indigenous Australians

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Gave practical assistance to the indigenous community locally (e.g. emergency relief, housing maintenance, provision of goods)

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Invited an indigenous speaker/held a workshop or event on indigenous issues

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Sent a mission team to an indigenous community in another part of Australia

- Frequently Occasionally Once Never

Are you aware of any local churches or Christian ministries that primarily serve indigenous Australians that are nearby to your church?

- No, I'm not aware of any
 No, there are none nearby
 Yes
 If 'yes', please write details of these churches or ministries below:

Indigenous and Non-indigenous Relations in Churches

Occasional Paper 33

Citation: Bevis, S., Pepper, M. & Powell, R. (2018). *Indigenous and non-indigenous relations in churches*. NCLS Research Occasional Paper 33. Sydney: NCLS Research.

Indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia are a core part of our nation's history and are an important element in ongoing national and cultural debates about identity and belonging. Christian churches share in the good and the bad of this national story, a story still in the making.

The 2016 NCLS invited church attenders and leaders to reflect on the state of these relations within churches as well as on current issues such as questions of treaty, constitutional recognition and government intervention to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Attenders and leaders were also asked what actions they and their churches were taking to further reconciliation and relationship building with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The results reveal a broad level of support both for increasing local church-based involvement in the task of reconciliation and for government-based policy initiatives that would close the gap in health and employment. It is when looking at the results for individual- and church-level action that the story loses its shine. The gap between aspiration and action suggests there are further roads to travel in the churches when it comes to indigenous justice and engagement.



This report was sponsored by Australian Together. <https://australianstogether.org.au>

**Research papers, fact sheets and reports
by NCLS Research are available online**

ncls.org.au/research



NCLS Research is a leading research organisation whose research aims include studying Australian spirituality, church health, effective and sustainable leadership, and the connections between church and community. The National Church Life Survey is a collaborative project involving millions of participants in over 20 denominations since 1991.

NCLS Research | PO Box 968 North Sydney NSW 2059 Australia

P: + 61 2 9701 4479 | E: info@ncls.org.au | W: www.ncls.org.au