



Pastoral Research Online

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Digging Deeper into the 2011 National Church Life Survey

In the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS), a number of variant questionnaires were distributed at random to Mass attenders alongside the main questionnaire. This meant that a wide variety of topics could be investigated, whilst ensuring statistical reliability. This edition of Pastoral Research Online looks at a question asked in one of these questionnaires. Mass attenders' views about the Bible are discussed on page 3.

ACBC 2016 National Count of Attendance

The first weekend in May 2016 will see the commencement of the 2016 National Count of Attendance. First held in 2001, this will be the fourth time the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has conducted the count at a national level.

The Count consists of a simple headcount of all attenders in all parishes and other Mass centres throughout the whole of Australia over **four weekends**, commencing each weekend with the Saturday Vigil Mass. Information collected, in addition to the number of people in attendance, includes the language and frequency of celebration. The Count is conducted both for Masses and Sunday Assemblies in the absence of a Priest.

What did the 2011 National Count reveal?

In 2011, the last time a National Count was held, an average of 662,000 people attended Mass, or a Sunday Assembly in the Absence of a Priest, each weekend. The total attendance figure represented 12.2 per cent of Australia's 2011 Catholic Population.

A copy of the report based on the 2011 Count, **Mass attendance in Australia: A critical moment**, can be downloaded from the Pastoral Research Office website: pro.catholic.org.au.

Further information about the 2016 Count will be sent to a representative in each diocese early next year.



**Merry Christmas and
Happy New Year**

The staff of the ACBC Pastoral Research Office thank you for your interest and support throughout this year. We wish everyone a holy and meaningful Christmas, and a happy new year.

Please note: the Pastoral Research Office will close on Wednesday 23 December and re-open on Thursday 14 January 2016.

For unto us a Saviour has been born...



Merry Christmas from all of us at the PRO

“The NCLS data is useful at so many levels - helping individual parishes and dioceses with tools for solid pastoral planning, giving academics invaluable research on religion that is comparable across churches and over time, and allowing people of all faiths and none to understand better the role of religious faith in shaping culture.”

- Dr Mary Gautier, Senior Research Associate, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Georgetown University, Washington, USA.

2016 National Church Life Survey

The next **National Church Life Survey** will take place in October and November 2016, and Catholic parishes from every geographical diocese will be involved.

The model for Catholic participation in 2016 will follow the pattern established for the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS) and which has continued with very little modification in the 2001, 2006 and 2011 National Church Life Surveys. This model involves the selection of a national statistical random sample of parishes, stratified by diocese, but allowing for dioceses to enrol and pay for additional parishes and also for individual parishes to opt in at their own expense. The PRO is currently working with dioceses to select parishes for the sample.

In 2011, more than 400 Catholic parishes took part in the NCLS, with around 82,650 questionnaires completed. Each participating parish receives their own results about their health and vitality, and also receive planning resources to help engage and process the results.



The Building Stronger Parishes (BSP) project report is now into a second printing, and is available for order from the Pastoral Research Office. Contact the office on (03) 9953 3459 or via email: office@pro.catholic.org.au

There is now also an E-version of the report. The cost of the report is \$20 for the hardcopy edition (including postage and handling, excluding GST) and \$10 for the E-version.

Both versions are now available from the ACBC website at <https://www.catholic.org.au/shop/acbc-shop>. Use the search function to search for 'Stronger Parishes'.

Newsletter subscribers will have received complimentary electronic copies of two BSP Supplementary Reports:

- Report 1: Community Building, Welcoming and Hospitality
- Report 2: Mission, Outreach and Evangelisation

These two reports, along with four additional reports on various aspects of parish vitality arising from the research will be available to buy from the ACBC website shop early in the New Year.

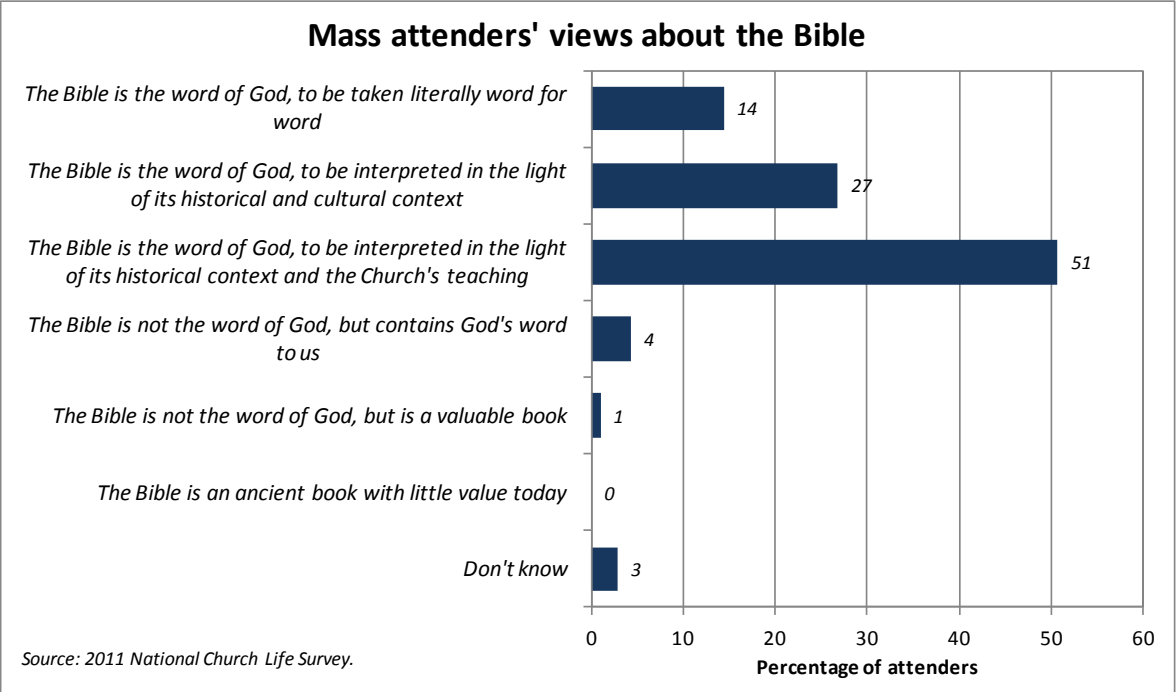
- Report 3: Spirituality and Faith Formation
- Report 4: Liturgy
- Report 5: Leadership
- Report 6: Planning



Mass attenders’ views about the Bible

One of the variant questionnaires in the 2011 NCLS asked attenders to consider their views about the Bible, and to select a statement which came closest to their view. This question was included in Questionnaire ‘R’, which was completed by 840 Mass attenders, of which 474 were from parishes selected in the national random sample. To ensure reliability of data, only the results of attenders in the random sample have been included in this analysis.

As the following graph shows, just over half of all Mass attenders (51%) viewed the Bible as the word of God interpreted according to historical context and Church teaching, the response which most closely matches the teaching of the Church about the Bible. Just over one-quarter (27%) viewed the Bible as the word of God interpreted contextually in light of history and culture. Fourteen per cent of attenders believed that the Bible should be taken literally word for word, while four per cent said the Bible contained God’s word to us, but was not the word of God. Just one per cent of Mass attenders viewed the Bible as a valuable book, but not the word of God, while three per cent were unsure what to think. No attenders in the sample regarded the Bible as just an ancient book with little value today.



There was little difference between the views of females and males. Younger attenders aged 15 to 29 (18%) and older people 70 years or more (20%) were more likely to interpret the Bible literally, than those aged 30 to 69 (10%). Mass attenders who had been born in a non-English speaking country were also more likely to take a literal word for word view of the Bible (22%) compared to those attenders born in Australia (13%) or another English speaking country (5%). Attenders with a bachelor degree or higher were much more likely (62%) to view the Bible as the word of God interpreted according to historical context and Church teaching than those with a trade certificate or diploma (54%) or lower level of qualification (42%). Those who regularly (once a week or more often) spent time in private devotion were more likely (18%) to take a literal view of the Bible as the word of God, than those who only occasionally or never spent time in private devotion (7%).

The question about one’s views of the Bible has been asked in the same way since the 2001 NCLS. In 2001 it was included in most variants of the attendee questionnaire in 2001 but in later years only small samples of attenders were asked the question. There appears to have been little change in two of the most popular responses over the ten-year period, but between 2006 and 2011 there was an increase in those choosing ‘historical and cultural context’ with a corresponding decline in the percentage choosing ‘Don’t know’ and ‘It is not the word of God’.

A different question about the Bible was asked in the 1996 Catholic Church Life Survey, meaning that direct comparisons with the figures from the later surveys are not possible. In that survey, 21 per cent of Mass attenders chose the response ‘Every word of the Bible is literally true, not only in its teachings of faith and morals, but also in its historical, scientific, geographical and other details’, while 33 per cent said that ‘the Bible is true in all it teaches about faith and morals, but not necessarily in other details’, and another 24 per cent said ‘the Bible contains the truth needed to know God’, but that some parts of it reflect a limited knowledge of the world.

View about the Bible	2001	2006	2011
	(N=59,031)	(N=640)	(N=474)
To be taken literally word for word	15	15	14
To be interpreted in light of historical & cultural context	19	19	27
To be interpreted in light of historical context & Church’s teaching	52	53	51

The material for this edition of *Pastoral Research Online* was prepared by the following PRO staff:

Stephen Reid
Research Officer
s.reid@pro.catholic.org.au
(03) 9953 3457

Bob Dixon
Director
r.dixon@pro.catholic.org.au
(03) 9953 3456

and

Richard Rymarz
Head of Religious Education, Broken Bay Institute, and
Honorary Senior Fellow at the Pastoral Research Office.

(Richard served as Research Officer at the PRO from May to November 2015.)

For more information about the office, or how we can assist you, please contact:

ACBC Pastoral Research Office,
Australian Catholic University,
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy VIC 3065
P: (03) 9953 3459
E: office@pro.catholic.org.au
W: www.pro.catholic.org.au

Reflections from the 2015 Conference, Newport Beach, California

Professor Richard Rymarz, Honorary Senior Fellow, ACBC Pastoral Research Office
& Head of Religious Education, Broken Bay Institute

I recently attended the annual conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) held in Newport Beach, California. There was a very large turn out and as usual for such a conferences, a jam packed program. There was a lot of excitement about the news that the 2017 International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) Conference which will be held in Melbourne [see October 2015 edition of Pastoral Research Online].

One area of great interest at SSSR was the discussion around religious expression outside of traditional institutional structures. One thing is clear: in many places across the post-industrial West affiliation to religious institutions is in steady decline. This is a trend that has been evident for some time. The really fascinating question is, if you like, what happens now? There is a great deal of discussion on this question and many papers at this conference addressed this issue. One school of thought sees this disaffiliation as a prelude to more varied religious expression. A good summary of this view is to describe the current situation as a manifestation of "lived religion". This term was developed by Nancy Ammerman of Boston University, and she gave a well attended paper on this phenomenon at the conference. A good deal of research all over the world is being directed to gaining a better understanding of lived religion. The premise here is that people in their daily lives still manifest religious behaviours and beliefs, but that they are in more idiosyncratic forms.

Another perspective on "what happens now" places greater emphasis on disaffiliation from religious communities leading to a more secular worldview. Jörg Stoltz, the current President of ISSR and Professor of Sociology of Religions at the University of Lausanne, put this view at the conference as a range of new dispositions that are much more sensitive to personal needs. For instance, many people today have adapted what he would call a "distanced" religious disposition. They may still identify as being part of a more traditional religious community, but this is not an active association. From this perspective the likely trajectory of individuals is to a more and more tenuous connection over time. Does it lead to new forms of religious expression? This all depends on how you define your terms. One key consideration is how religion is seen in relation to the wider culture. If traditional markers of religion such as Church attendance, belief in a personal God and behavioural expectations are discounted then people are not becoming less religious. But is this a new kind of religion or simply a new way of describing religion becoming integrated into the dominant culture?

My own paper was a summary of a number of projects that I am involved with which examine the beliefs and behaviours of students in Catholic schools. In the future I hope to extend this work to parents who send their children to Catholic schools. In a way, Catholic schools manifest well the broader discussion about religious motivation and trajectory. In Australia and other places Catholic schools are experiencing a strong growth in enrolments. Many of the people now in Catholic schools are not connected with worshipping communities such as parishes. Is this a manifestation of lived religion? Only more research will tell!