



NCLS Occasional Paper 13

Faith-sharing activities by Australian churches

Sam Sterland, Ruth Powell, Michael Pippett with
the NCLS Research team

December 2009

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Introduction

Christianity has a strong outward focussed aspect. Jesus calls his people to go, and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19, 20). Willing and Effective Faith-sharing is one of the three outward focussed NCLS core qualities of healthy churches. In this paper we examine faith sharing among attenders and churches in Australia.

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NCLS Research

NCLS Research is a joint project of ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The National Church Life Survey has been carried out on four occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006. Twenty-two denominations participated in the 2006 NCLS.

PART A: INDIVIDUAL FAITH-SHARING

READINESS TO SHARE FAITH

Evangelism has long been a cornerstone of church belief and culture, but exactly how are everyday church attenders going in this mission? In the 2006 National Church Life Survey, church attenders were asked about patterns of faith-sharing that covered both opinions and actual behaviour, including the following question:

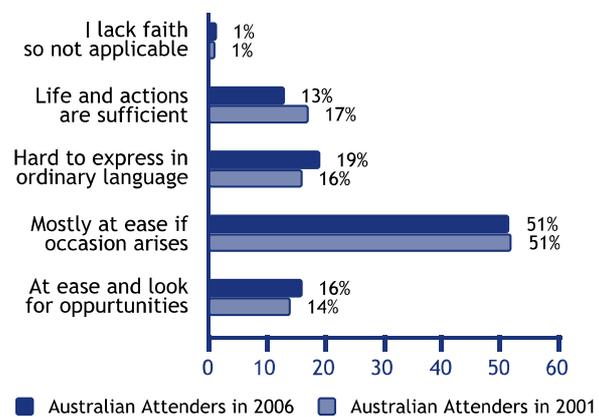
Q. Which of the following best describes your readiness to talk to others about your faith?

- I do not have faith, so the question is not applicable
- I do not like to talk about my faith; my life and actions are sufficient
- I find it hard to talk about my faith in ordinary language
- I mostly feel at ease talking about my faith and do so if it comes up
- I feel at ease talking about my faith and look for opportunities to do so

Figure 1 shows these attender attitudes to sharing faith in Australia as well as a comparison to five years earlier in 2001. In Australia 16% of church attenders in 2006 feel at ease talking about their faith and look for opportunities to do so, while some 51% mostly feel at ease, and talk about faith if it comes up.

Another 19% find it hard to talk about their faith, and 13% believe that their life and actions are sufficient. This means 33% do not describe themselves as consistently or mostly 'at ease' when sharing their faith verbally with friends and family.

Figure 1: Attender attitudes to sharing faith



Source: 2006 NCLS Attenders Survey, based on 300,388 responses in 2006 and 367,531 responses in 2001.

THOSE AT EASE WITH SHARING FAITH

What is the profile of those who are at ease and prepared to share faith with others?

Attenders who are most likely to state that they feel at ease talking about their faith and look for opportunities to do so are, amongst other factors:

- highly involved in church life
- experiencing personal growth in faith
- helping people in practical ways
- younger

In the following discussion, the term 'at ease' will refer to both *those who look for opportunities* and *those at ease with sharing faith if it comes up*.

At ease and highly involved in church life

Previous research has also established a clear link between church involvement and readiness to discuss matters of faith. (*Mission Under the Microscope*, p.63). One form of church involvement is to have some sort of role in church life. In the 2006 NCLS, those in a ministry or leadership role were more likely to look for opportunities or be at ease with sharing faith (74% vs 61% not in a role).

Considering other indicators of church involvement, those in the Australian church who attend church more regularly, those who attend an extra group at church (be it faith-based or social) and those who express a higher sense of belonging to their church all have significantly higher levels of faith-sharing.

At ease and growing in their faith

Results from the 2006 NCLS have also confirmed a past finding that those who express a strong personal faith are more likely to be at ease sharing that faith with others.

Expressing 'much growth' in personal faith in the last year is one of the strongest predictors of whether a person will be at ease sharing their faith. Among Australian church attenders who indicated they had experienced much growth in faith in the last year, 78% of them are at ease sharing their faith. This compares to 57% of attenders who experienced only 'some growth' or 'no growth' also feeling at ease. When churches focus on growing the faith of attenders, other crucial areas of church life (such as faith-sharing) are also positively affected.

At ease and involved in practical service of others

Some commentators of church health would question the value of putting emphasis on practical service to others in the community, suggesting this is secondary to evangelism and unrelated to church growth. NCLS Research found in 2001 data across four nations (Australia, England, New Zealand and the USA) that churches with higher proportions of people who informally help others also tend to have slightly higher levels of newcomers (*Enriching Church Life*, p.24). In new analysis on Australian results from 2006 NCLS has found that church attenders who are more often helping others in informal ways are more commonly at ease in sharing their own faith. This highlights how faith-sharing as a core quality of church life is intertwined with 'Practical and Diverse Service' - another outward core quality of healthy churches.

Age differences

Previous research (*Mission Under the Microscope*, p.61) has shown that older attenders are more likely than young attenders to prefer not to talk about their faith, believing their life example is sufficient. For the younger group the barrier is more often finding it difficult to talk about their faith in ordinary language. Generational differences are most marked between these two categories. Those who are at ease sharing their faith are about two-thirds of each generational group, but there is substantial variation in different denominations.

The generational differences for faith-sharing in Australia can be seen in Table 1. Some other relevant indicators focused on later in this paper are also displayed by age here. It can be seen that the 15-29 year olds (roughly equating to the group known as 'Generation Y') are considerably more often involved in outreach than older generations. They are also the group most likely to say 'reaching those who don't attend church' is one of the top three features they most value about their church congregation. When it comes to inviting others to church, all age groups are virtually the same in their willingness to do so, but

there is a gradual trend towards younger church attenders being more likely to have acted on this in the last 12 months.

Table 1: Generational differences related to faith-sharing in Australia.

	15-29 yrs in 2006 %	30-44 yrs in 2006 %	45-64 yrs in 2006 %	65+ yrs in 2006 %
Readiness to share faith with others				
Do not have faith, so not applicable	1	1	1	1
Do not like to share faith, feel life and actions are sufficient	8	11	13	18
Find it hard to share faith in ordinary language	23	21	19	17
Mostly at ease and share faith if it comes up	50	52	51	50
Attenders who look for opportunities to share their faith	17	16	16	15
Involvement in evangelistic or outreach activities				
Attenders involved regularly in outreach or evangelistic activity	24	19	18	15
Aspects of church most valued - outreach				
Attenders who consider reaching those not attending church as one of the features of their church they most value	18	13	11	10
Inviting others to church				
Invited someone in the last 12 months	43	41	37	31
Willing, but didn't invite someone	31	33	37	40
Probably or definitely wouldn't invite someone	10	13	14	17
Don't know	16	13	12	11
Source: 2006 NCLS Attender Survey. Number of survey forms in each age group:	47,149	54,341	98,541	97,224

Denominational differences

Attenders in different denominations do vary in their patterns of personal faith-sharing. This is shaped by differing theological heritages and outreach emphases. For example, Pentecostal attenders are most likely to look for opportunities to share faith with others (29%). They are also least likely to find their faith hard to talk about (16% vs 19% for the overall church). Catholic attenders also have fewer than average who find their faith hard to talk about (16%). However, there are also fewer than average who look for opportunities to talk about their faith. They in turn have the highest proportion who believe their life and actions are sufficient (18% vs 13% overall). Baptist attenders most often agree they find it difficult to communicate their faith in every day language (27%) followed by the Churches of Christ, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations (all 25%).

FAITH-SHARING IN FAMILIES

The results of various studies suggest that the influence of parents is the most powerful predictor from a person's childhood of their current religious involvement (*Why People Don't Go To Church, p.27*). The majority of households in Australia are family based households (72% in the 2006 Census). As such faith-sharing within the family context is of extreme importance and raises a significant opportunity. In Australia in 2006 44% of church attenders indicated they frequently discuss matters of faith at home. Of this group, 14% discuss faith in formal ways, through family or household devotions. Some 6% of church attenders in Australia note that they do not talk about their Christian beliefs with other members of their household.

Previous research has confirmed that for the majority of Anglican and Protestant attenders, first contact with the Christian faith is provided by their parents or family. These familial ties are the most significant in bringing attenders to faith (*Taking Stock, p.60*). In the Catholic Church importance is placed on the role of parents educating their children in the faith (*Taking Stock, p.66*). Churches that support parents in this role are more likely to retain youth.

The issue of youth and young adult retention in church life requires great attention. Among church attenders in Australia who have children aged 15 and over still living at home, 40% of those children do not attend any church. This compares to 42% in 2001. Combining all

Protestant denominations in 2006, this figure was 35%. Dismissing faith at home, along with the presence of church programs oriented at youth, and a larger church size, are all factors that lead to a higher level of young adult retention (*Enriching Church Life*, p.55).

Other highly influential factors include parental patterns of church attendance, importance of their faith and whether both parents share the same religion (*Why People Don't Go To Church*, p.27). Of the 4400 churches in Australia which returned an Operations Survey in the 2006 NCLS, 49% indicated there were children attending a youth group. In relation to church programs oriented to young people, 56% of adult attenders in Australia are satisfied with what is being offered for children under 12 years. Some 42% are satisfied with what is being offered for youth aged 12-18 years at their church. Therefore adult attenders are more satisfied with what is being offered for children than with what is being offered for youth. With the significant loss in young adult church attenders that begins to occur around this time, this raises a significant concern that churches must consider.

The importance of the childhood and young adult years have been well established as critical to continual Christian belief. These findings suggest that supporting families to nurture the faith development of children at home, within a local church context as well as through the wider church, is of vital importance.

INVITING PEOPLE TO CHURCH

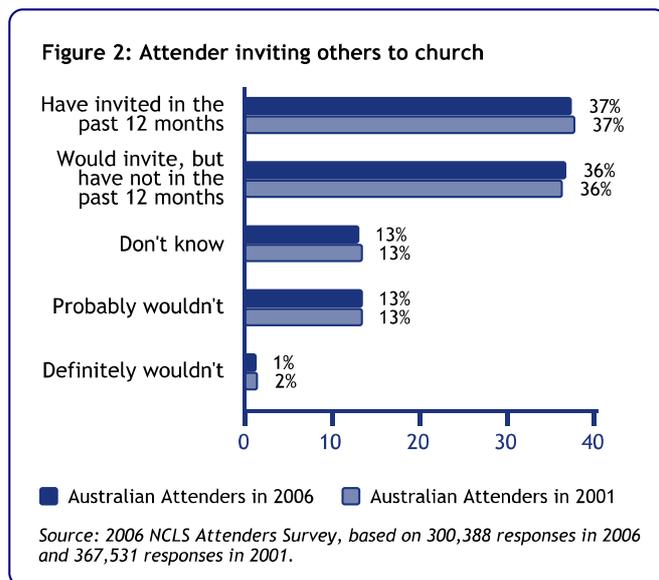
Attenders who invite people to church

The most common way in which people join religious groups is because friends and relatives invite them. Two-thirds of Australian Protestant newcomers first joined their church through someone inviting them (*Enriching Church Life*, p.26, 52).

In the 2006 NCLS church attenders were asked:

Q. Would you be prepared to invite to a church service here any of your friends and relatives who do not currently attend a church?

- Yes, and I have done so in the past 12 months
- Yes, but I have not done so in the past 12 months
- Don't know
- No, probably not
- No definitely not



In Australia 73% of church attenders were open to inviting someone, with 36% having invited someone in the last 12 months and another 36% being willing to invite someone but hadn't. In contrast, 14% of church attenders probably or definitely would not invite someone. A further 13% said they did not know if they would be prepared to invite someone. These results have been very stable over time; changes in these figures since 2001 were of less than 1%.

The denominations with the most attenders inviting others are the Pentecostal groups (with an overall average of 59%, and the Assemblies of God churches indicating 63% of attenders have invited someone in the last year). Salvation Army attenders are also high, with 47% inviting in the last year. While different cultures exist in churches with regard to inviting, churches can consider what the reasons might be that their attenders do and do not invite others.

Reasons people don't invite others to church

New arrivals to church are more likely than long-term attenders to invite others. In general, church attenders who have been at their church for over 5 years are less likely to have invited someone in the last year (35%), compared to those who are new to their church in the last five years. Switchers (those who have changed denominations) are particularly strong inviters (49%) as are newcomers (those new to church life or returned after a long absence), 44% of whom have invited in the last year.

When church attenders indicated from a list the main two reasons they would not invite someone to church, the most common reason was 'Those I could invite may not be interested', selected by 18% of Australian church attenders. The next most commonly selected reasons were 'I do not see the need to do so', 'I don't know many people from outside church' and 'Lack of confidence in talking about my faith' (each 10%).

These and other results (for example friends living too far away) show that one common theme among attenders for not inviting someone to church is a

lack of connection with people outside church life. Such a disconnect between church and the outside world could be a very real issue for many churches. The results for these and other reasons given by Australian Attenders attenders are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Reasons given by All Australian Attenders church attenders for not inviting others.

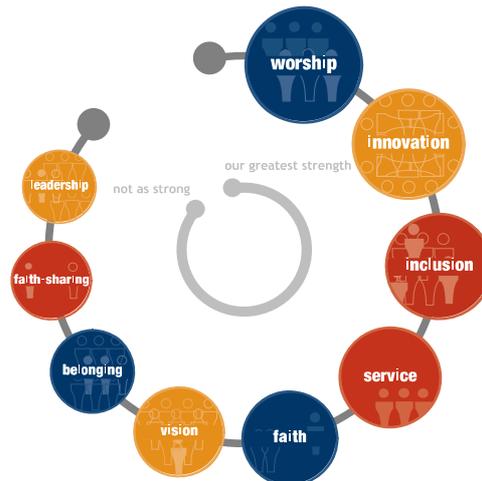
<i>What most discourages you from inviting people to this congregation/parish? (Mark up to TWO)</i>	All NCLS in 2006 %
I do not see the need to do so	10
I don't know many people from outside church	10
My friends and contacts live too far away	9
Lack of confidence in talking about my faith	10
Fear of rejection/damaging relationships	7
They may not like the style of worship here	9
They may not be made to feel welcome here	3
They may not be interested	18
Other	6
Don't know	9

Source: NCLS Attenders Survey I, based on 8835 responses. Responses for 'I'm generally happy to invite' are not shown.

Is faith-sharing through inviting a strength for Australia?

NCLS Research measures nine core qualities of church health. To compare the relative strength of each quality, a summary score is calculated and standardised, then ranked and displayed as a 'circle of strengths'. In this way it is possible to compare strength on one core quality for Australia with its strengths on the other core qualities. The summary score for the Faith-sharing core quality is calculated based on the percent of attenders in Australia who are not only willing, but have actually invited someone to church in the past 12 months (36%). While the circle of strengths was primarily designed for local churches to gain an overview, it has some value for a wider perspective. Figure 3 shows how this strength is ranked compared to other core qualities in Australia. Across all Australian churches, faith-sharing as a core quality, as measured by active inviting, is the second weakest of the nine core qualities. It has also declined since 2001.

Figure 3: Ranking faith-sharing against other core qualities for Australian Attenders



PART B: CORPORATE FAITH-SHARING

CHURCHES WITH AN INVITING CULTURE

Some churches have developed a strong 'culture of inviting', where a large percentage of attenders are actively inviting others to church. Characteristics of such churches are:

- local church mission activities are present
- attenders feel empowered and mobilised
- churches are inclusive and enriching.

Local church mission activities: Conducting activities such as evangelistic church services, events, or Bible studies, door-knocking, outdoor evangelism, drop-in centres or some other evangelistic activity is significant for a church in several ways. Apart from providing a means for spreading the faith, it also extends church attenders' opportunity to be involved in evangelism. Research shows those involved are more likely to have invited someone to church in the past year and to be at ease sharing their faith (*Mission under the Microscope p.48*). Whilst some churches appear to run few specific evangelistic events because they strive to ensure that their regular activities are geared to new people, the presence of evangelistic activities of some kind is usually a good indicator that the church has an intentional outward focus.

Attenders feel empowered and mobilised: Where attenders feel that their own gifts are recognised and that their contribution is valued, higher levels of sharing faith and inviting to church are likely to exist (see *Enriching Church Life, p.48*). More than that, churches also have higher levels of sharing and inviting when training specifically for outreach and evangelism is provided. Churches would do well therefore to consider what forms of outreach/ evangelism training would be helpful to their attenders, particularly in the light of what sort of outreach they conduct. This is of specific importance when one of the main reasons people do not share their faith is a lack of confidence in evangelising.

Churches are inclusive and enriching: When outreach is organised, attenders are inviting and new people are coming, what is the quality of the church they are being brought into? While this really touches on all the core qualities, a focus on the first experiences of a new arrival is helpful. Does the church have procedures in place to ensure new people are not only welcomed well but integration over time is facilitated by, for example, visits, hospitality, programs or groups? When new people experience a warm and consistent

welcome they are more willing to stay, just as an enriching sense of community and nurturing worship will also help.

The ninth core quality of healthy churches identified by NCLS Research, Intentional and Welcoming Inclusion, is highlighted here for another reason. In a church with strong inclusion, the church attenders are more likely to share their faith and invite others (*Enriching Church Life*, p51). The following pages examine each of these characteristics for Australia.

LOCAL EVANGELISTIC ACTIVITIES

Churches that took part in the 2006 NCLS were asked to complete an Operations Survey outlining programs and activities. The following question was included: 'In the past 12 months, did this congregation/parish conduct any of the following outreach or evangelistic activities?' Results for Australia in 2006 can be seen in Table 3. A comparison for Protestant churches to 10 years earlier is also shown (results for Catholic churches in 1996 were not available).

Across Australia 14% of churches in 2006 indicated they put on 'Evangelistic church services or events' (the first section in Table 3) monthly or more often, and another 45% indicated they had done so occasionally over the previous year. The strongest denominations in this regard were the Pentecostals, with Christian City Churches the highest, indicating 46% monthly or more often and 54% occasionally.

Table 3: Evangelistic Activities Taking Place in Australian Attenders.

<i>In the past 12 months, did this congregation/parish conduct any of the following outreach or evangelistic activities?</i>	All NCLS in 2006 %	All Prot in 1996 %	All Prot in 2006 %
Evangelistic church services or events (eg guest services, crusades)			
Monthly or more often	14	22	14
Occasionally	45	36	47
Never	41	42	39
Evangelistic Bible studies (eg Christianity Explained, Alpha)			
Monthly or more often	18	19	18
Occasionally	32	32	34
Never	50	50	48
Street/shopping centre evangelism, door-knocking, or drop-in centres			
Monthly or more often	13	12	14
Occasionally	21	17	22
Never	66	71	65
Other visiting (eg prisons, hospitals, fringe attenders)			
Monthly or more often	40	N/A	37
Occasionally	29	N/A	31
Never	31	N/A	32
Mission teams to Australia or overseas			
Monthly or more often	2	N/A	2
Occasionally	24	N/A	26
Never	73	N/A	71
Other evangelistic or outreach activities not mentioned above			
Monthly or more often	16	N/A	17
Occasionally	31	N/A	33
Never	53	N/A	50
Churches indicated at least one of the above			
Monthly or more often	57	N/A	56
Occasionally	32	N/A	33
Never	11	N/A	11
Source: 2006 NCLS Operations Survey			
Based on Operations Surveys responses from the following number of locations:	4,400	6,359	4,212

The denomination with the highest percentage of churches practicing at least one form of outreach (the last section in Table 3) was the Salvation Army, with 79% of churches indicating at least one of the outreach strategies listed was practised monthly or more

often. While their proportion of churches conducting evangelistic services and Bible studies was about average, such a high figure was due to the high proportion of churches conducting programs related to street evangelism, drop-in centres, or visiting.

WHAT PUBLISHED OUTREACH PROGRAMS ARE BEING USED?

Churches were able to indicate whether they had used particular published outreach programs when completing the 2006 NCLS Operations Survey. Apart from indicating use of Christianity Explained and Alpha programs, the names of other programs could be written in, and many churches did so. While many other programs were mentioned, 'Introducing God' was the most common, while 'Christianity Explored', 'Simply Christianity', 'Journeys', and 'Living the Questions' were also popular.

The percentage of churches using such programs in Australia can be seen in Table 4, with other comparisons.

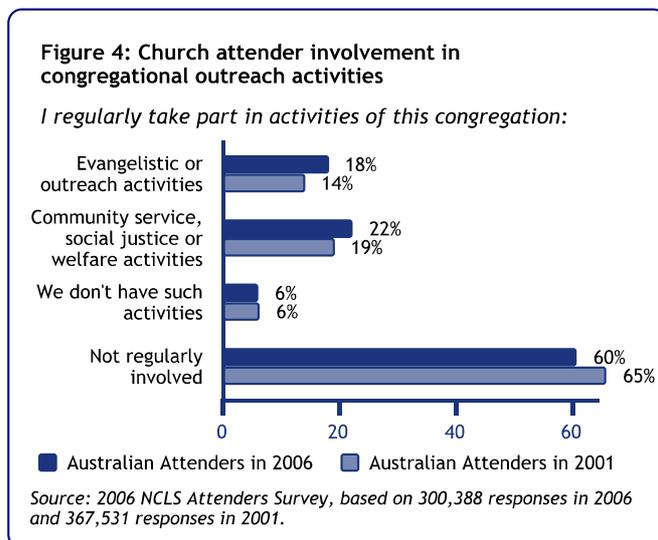
In the past 2 years, did this congregation/parish conduct any of the following outreach or evangelistic activities?	All NCLS in 2006 %	All Prot in 2006 %
An Alpha Course (incl Alpha Marriage, Youth Alpha, etc)	20	21
Christianity Explained	12	13
Introducing God	4	5
Another evangelistic program	15	17
At least one of the above	41	45
Source: 2006 NCLS Operations Survey Based on Operations Surveys responses from the following number of locations:	4,400	4,212

ATTENDERS INVOLVED IN LOCAL CHURCH EVANGELISTIC ACTIVITIES

Q. Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community? (Mark ALL that apply)

- Yes, in evangelistic or outreach activities
- Yes, in community service, social justice or welfare activities of this congregation
- No, we don't have such activities
- No, I am not regularly involved

Attendees were asked about their involvement in any activities of their congregation which reach out to the wider community. In Australia 18% of attendees were involved regularly in such outreach or evangelistic activities in 2006 compared to 14% in 2001, (see Figure 4).



Levels of involvement by denomination are highest among Pentecostals (37%), and Baptists (29%), and lowest among Catholics (7%) and Lutherans (16%). Previous research has suggested that family education as well as an emphasis on the Catholic school system contributes to Catholic parishes having fewer formal evangelistic programs than their Protestant counterparts (*Taking Stock, p.66*).

HOW MANY CHURCHES ARE TRAINING PEOPLE?

The 2006 NCLS Operations Survey asked:

'Has this congregation offered significant training for lay people in the following leadership or ministry roles in the past 2 years?'

Training for an 'Outreach/evangelism role' was one of 12 options (any of which could be marked). The proportion of churches offering significant training for attenders in outreach or evangelism roles can be seen in Table 5. Results for Australia and selected denominations are shown.

Table 5: Percentage of local churches providing training in outreach/ evangelism in the previous 2 years (by denomination).

Anglican	13%
Baptist	24%
Catholic	11%
Churches of Christ	21%
Lutheran	12%
Pentecostal	28%
Presbyterian	25%
Salvation Army	15%
Uniting	5%
All Australian attenders	17%

Source: 2006 NCLS Operations Survey, based on responses from 4,400 congregations in Australia.

INCLUSION: AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE PROCESS

One factor that will naturally affect people's willingness to invite is whether they think their friends will be treated well. Churches with higher levels of sense of belonging have higher inviting levels (*Enriching Church Life, p48*); the closeness of the group no doubt helps confidence in the church as a place where friends will be welcomed. A culture of inclusion is as important as a culture of inviting if new people are to stay, and eventually consider themselves belonging to the church. Churches that provide ways to intentionally include new people have significantly more success in retaining them (*Enriching Church Life, p28*).

The 2006 NCLS Operations Survey asked whether a church had planned procedures to follow up new people and help them to become integrated into the congregation. The results for churches in Australia and other comparisons are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Percentage of local churches with planned procedures designed to help integrate new people.

	All NCLS in 2006 %	All NCLS in 2001 %	All Prot in 2006 %
Follow-up visits by clergy or other people from church	67	67	70
People extend hospitality and invite them for meals	50	45	55
Group or program for new Christians or new members	20	18	22
Invitation to join a small group, fellowship or similar	57	52	59
Invitation to take up a task in the life of the church	43	35	42
Other	3	4	3
<i>At least one of the above</i>	86	84	88

Source: 2006 NCLS Operations Survey

Based on Operations Surveys responses from the following number of locations:

4,400

6,148

4,212

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted some of the most salient features of church life that are related to faith sharing and inviting, and displayed many important results for Australia. Looking at individual attenders (Part A) highlights the importance in personal inviting and faith-sharing, whether these things have been increasing or decreasing over time, and what

factors can be behind this. Results from Operations Surveys (Part B) give insights into actual programs being run, as well as training and efforts at inclusion of new people.

Personal qualities play a role in faith-sharing, probably none more than personal commitment to the faith, so when churches focus on 'growing disciples' they are also influencing faith-sharing. However programs and training also have an important place, not only with direct evangelistic value, but because of the confidence in church that they engender in church attenders.

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Data for this Research Paper was drawn from:

The **2006 NCLS Attenders Surveys** were completed by 300338 attenders from Australia in 2006. Any attender aged 15 years or over during the survey period was invited to complete an Attender Survey.

The **2006 NCLS Attenders Survey I** was one of a number of randomly distributed surveys used during the national survey to collect more targeted information on a range of topics. Most questions are the same as on the main survey - about a third have been removed for the specialised questions to be introduced.

The **2006 NCLS Operations Surveys** were completed by a representative from each local church that took part in the NCLS. These surveys were an audit of local church programs, worship services, resources, as well as staffing.