Religion and Spirituality in Australia: results from the 2018 Australian Community Survey

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About NCLS Research
For 25+ years, NCLS Research has used empirical research to inform resources for churches to nurture life and health in their congregations, leaders and local community.

We work in partnership with 20+ denominations in Australia.
1. Attitudes to religion in society
2. A religious and spiritual profile of Australians
3. Connections with Christian churches.
1. Attitudes to religion
Is religion ‘good for society’?

About three in ten Australians agree that religion is good for Australian society. Four in ten are neutral or unsure.

A decline in those who agree since 2016

Source: 2018 Australian Community Survey run by NCLS Research. (n = 1,200)
2. A Religious and Spiritual Profile of Australians
A profile of a person’s religiousness or spirituality has multiple dimensions.

- Public religious practice
- Private religious practice
- Mystical experiences
- Belief in God
- Importance of faith or spirituality in life

Religious affiliation
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The religious affiliation of Australians is 52% Christianity; 8% another religion; 30% none (10% not stated).

Source: 2016 National Census of Population and Housing, ABS
One in five (20%) Australians are frequent attenders at religious services at least monthly.

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
After a steep decline after the 50’s, in recent years the decline in attendance has slowed.

Source: Various sample surveys of the Australian population, 1950-2018
Private religious practice: pray and meditate

Three in ten (30%) Australians said they pray or meditate at least once a week.

**Figure: Self-reported frequency of prayer or meditation**

- **Every day/most days or several times a day**: 17.9%
- **Once a week or a few times a week**: 12.3%
- **Occasionally**: 14.3%
- **Hardly ever**: 14.4%
- **Never**: 39.6%
- **Don’t know**: 1.5%

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Over a quarter (27%) of Australians have had a mystical or supernatural experience.

A further (35%) knew someone who had, or believed that such experiences could happen.

**Figure: Mystical or supernatural experiences**

- Yes, I have had an experience like this: 27.2%
- No, but I know someone who has: 8.7%
- No, but I believe it could happen: 26.3%
- No, and I don't think such experiences occur: 29.3%
- Unsure: 8.5%

*Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).*
Religious/spiritual beliefs

‘Which of these statements comes closest to your belief about God?’

- 56% Believers
- 20% Agnostic
- 23% Atheist

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Importance of faith or spirituality in life

More than four in 10 (44%) say that faith or spirituality was important or very important in shaping their decisions.

**Figure: Importance of faith or spirituality in shaping life’s decisions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of little importance</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
20% attend services frequently

30% pray or meditate

27% had mystical experiences

56% belief in God/higher power

44% say faith or spirituality is important in life decisions

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Religious? Spiritual? Both? Neither?

On scales from 0 to 10, Australians were asked...

To what extent do you see yourself as a religious person?

To what extent do you see yourself as a spiritual person?

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Figure: Religious and spiritual self-perceptions

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
An empirical analysis found four clusters which indicate four general approaches to religion and spirituality.

- Practising (26%)
- Non-practising (26%)
- ‘SBNR’ (13%)
- Neither (35%)

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
3. Connections with Christian churches
Role churches should fulfil

**Group 1: Majority agree (54% to 56%)**
- Conduct weddings, funerals, baptisms etc
- Encourage good morals and
- Support the poor.

**Group 2: Around four in 10 say:**
- Provide opportunities for worship
- Give meaning and direction to life
- Provide chaplains
- Provide social services (e.g. aged care)
- Allow community to use church buildings
- Challenge injustice in society and
- Run social activities.

**Group 3: Up-front roles not well supported**
- leadership at public events such as Anzac Day) (16%)
- convert people to the faith (12%), and
- public comment on political issues (10%).

Only two in 10 (21%) thought that churches should provide schools

Some 18% claimed that churches should have no role in society.

*Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).*
Significantly higher proportions of church attenders affirmed all roles listed.

The five roles for churches where there was the greatest difference between church attenders and all Australians are shown in the chart.

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
A third of Australians have been at a church event in the past 12 months.

Attendance at regular services, at Christmas and Easter were most common, and important points of contact for infrequent attenders.

**Figure: Attendance at Christian events in preceding 12 months**

- A regular church service: 19%
- Christmas service: 19%
- Easter service: 16%
- Social event or a dinner run by a church: 10%
- Adult Bible study group: 6%
- Charitable, social justice or social action event run by a church: 6%
- Seminar or workshop on a topical issue (e.g. raising teenagers): 5%
- Introductory course on Christianity: 1%

*Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).*
Social relationships and church

Social relationships have a vital role in determining whether a person will attend church.

Two thirds of Australians do not have any close friends or family who attend church.

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Who is in relationship?
It varies...
E.g. 40% of the non-practising group had one of the people listed regularly attending church (most commonly their mother).

Figure: Any close others attend a Christian church regularly by segment

| Cluster: Practising religious/spiritual | 63% |
| Cluster: Non-practising religious/spiritual | 40% |
| Cluster: SBNR | 15% |
| Cluster: Neither | 11% |

Overall 33%

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Openness to accepting an invitation to church

Would Australians go to a regular church service if invited by close family and friends?

28% say ‘yes’
24% are unsure
48% say ‘no’

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
14% of non-attenders would accept an invitation to church from close friends or family. A further 22% were unsure.

People who used to attend are more likely be open.

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Why accept or decline an invitation to church?

944 of 1,200 people (79%) gave additional written information about their choice.

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the open text responses, where they were coded into themes which covered:

- their attitudes towards churches and Christianity,
- their own religious identity and/or practices,
- social relationships,
- issues of practical barriers to attendance, and
- curiosity or openness to new experiences.

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200). NB. Those who identified as Christians who already attended religious services at least monthly were excluded from results.
Why accept? Relationships, curiosity and connection

The most commonly given reasons were:

1. To support or affirm their friend or family member, for example:
   "I would attend because it is important to the person who invited you, otherwise they wouldn't have invited you."

2. Curious about attending, or open to trying something new or different:
   "I would accept as I like to be open minded."

3. Appreciated the idea of connecting with other people at church:
   "It's a nice social experience if you go to church and mingle with and get to know other people."

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
Why decline? Negative, no interest, non-religious

The most salient reasons were:

1. Negative attitudes or feelings towards churches and/or Christianity:
   “Out-dated and the reputation of the church has been tarnished for a long time due to paedophilia by the clergy.”

2. Attending a service did not interest them or was a waste of time:
   “I have no real interest in attending religious services”; “…Could use my time better elsewhere.”

3. Not religious or spiritual identity or practices
   “I do not believe in any religious figure, and nor do I participate in anything that has to do with religion.”

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
In summary…

• Overall, Australians are moderately religious.

• While religiousness and spirituality have eroded over time, religious practices, beliefs and experiences continue to be present.

• While religion and religious institutions, such as Christian churches, face higher levels of distrust and disinterest than previously, they are still understood to have roles in society

• Most people preferred Christian churches to have an embedded role, investing in fostering cohesive communities and a good society.

• A person’s religious identity and disposition, along with significant relationships, provide the most effective points of connection for churches, with Christmas, Easter and special occasions presenting strong opportunities.

Source: 2018 ACS run by NCLS Research (n=1,200).
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