

Media Release

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Gap between aspiration and action in indigenous justice and engagement in churches

Indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia are a core part of the nation's history and are an important element in ongoing debates about justice and identity.

The 2016 National Church Life Survey (2016 NCLS) invited church attenders and leaders to reflect on the state of these relations within churches as well as on current public policy issues concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These matters are of importance not only in a church context but also nationally, given the legacy of missions that controlled indigenous people's lives and that significant numbers of indigenous people continue to affiliate with Christianity.

"Results from the NCLS indicate sympathy among the churchgoing population towards the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as widespread support for self-determination and government measures to improve life outcomes," said Dr Miriam Pepper, Researcher, NCLS Research.

Three-quarters of church attenders agreed that racism towards Aboriginal people is still a concern in Australia. There was strong support for government action to "close the gap"; some 78% agreed that the government should do more to improve health, 66% that governments should provide extra help for Aboriginal people to gain employment, and 60% that governments should commit to reducing incarceration rates. Large majorities were in support of constitutional recognition and agreed that Aboriginal people should decide their own way of life.

There was also significant support for churches to be more proactive. Some 62% of attenders agreed that churches should more actively promote reconciliation, and 48% agreed that their local church should do more to build relationships with Aboriginal people.

In contrast, levels of action on these matters were low. Around four in ten church attenders reported taking some form of action to encourage indigenous reconciliation, awareness or relationship building in the previous 12 months; including 16% who had made an active effort to stay informed on indigenous issues and policies, 13% who had developed friendships with indigenous Australians and 4% who had advocated on indigenous issues (e.g. signed a petition, wrote to a parliamentarian).

At the church level, 39% of local churches had a prayer focus on indigenous ministries and reconciliation and 24% had a direct relationship with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. However just 9% acknowledged country at church services, and in the previous 12 months 14% had undertaken advocacy for reconciliation and justice for indigenous Australians.

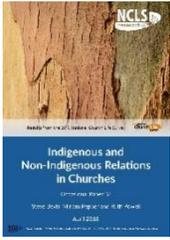
Further, attenders' views about contentious issues of justice such as churches acknowledging that they have received stolen land, whether school textbooks should refer to European colonisation as invasion, and the efficacy of a treaty received only minority support.

"While there is clearly an openness in the churches to engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the gap between broad aspiration and specific action shows there are further roads to travel when it comes to indigenous justice and engagement," said Dr Pepper.

Data sources: 2016 National Church Life Survey (Attender Survey Sample Survey I, Operations Survey).

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Research Report available



A detailed research report is available for free: “Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Relations in Churches” www.ncls.org.au/research/ncls-occasional-paper-33

The 2016 National Church Life Survey 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 report was sponsored by Australians Together www.australianstogether.org.au/ncls

The report can be viewed or downloaded online www.ncls.org.au/research/ncls-occasional-paper-33