Influences on church attenders’ decisions to attend their local church

Choice of church
Slightly more than half the Australian population profess to be Christian, and whilst not every Christian attends church regularly, for those who do, the decision to attend a particular local church is often influenced by one or more factors.

In the 2016 National Church Life Survey, a sample of Catholic, Anglican and Protestant attenders were asked the following question:

Which of the following influenced your decision to start attending this local church? (Mark ALL that apply)

- The decision was made by someone else (e.g. parents)
- It was a convenient church for me
- It was the local church of my denomination
- This was the church where I became a Christian
- I was invited to attend here
- I knew people here
- The sense of community here
- The style of worship
- The quality of the preaching/teaching
- The character or style of leader(s)
- The sense of God's presence here
- The stance of people on beliefs or values
- The activities for children/youth
- The strong concern for the wider community
- Other reason

Overall findings
The most common response was that it was the local church of the denomination to which the attender belonged (38%), followed by the convenience of attending the church (32%). Characteristics of the church, its leadership and people (e.g. sense of community, style of worship, style of leaders, stance on beliefs or values) as well as personal considerations (having been invited, decision by others, etc.) were also factors influencing some attenders’ decisions (see Figure 1).

Demographic differences in views
Influencing factors were significantly different between age groups and education levels (Table 1), and it is not surprising that for 41% of 15-29 year olds, the decision to attend a particular church was made by someone else (e.g. parents). Other influences which were significantly higher for this cohort compared to other age groups were knowing people in the church (38%) and having been invited (23%).

For half the 70+ year old cohort, attending a local church of their denomination was an influencing factor. Other factors such as the style of worship and the sense of God's presence were not as strong for this group (12%) compared to the other age groups (20-24%), whilst the quality of the teaching/preaching was a factor highest among the 30-49 year olds (31%).

The convenience of the church (38%), a sense of community (29%) and the quality of preaching/teaching (33%) were particularly important for degree holders (compared with 28%, 16% and 13% respectively for those with a school education, and 30%, 21% and 21% respectively of trade certificate/diploma holders).
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For many Catholics, a local Catholic church (48%) and one convenient for them to attend (44%) were key factors (compared with 29% and 22% respectively of Protestants). Proportionally fewer Catholics than Protestants gave other reasons as influences. Being invited, the character/style of leaders, people’s values/beliefs, activities for children/youth and concern for the wider community were all selected by less than 10% of Catholics (compared with 17-18% of Protestants).

Some 44% of those who had attended the same church for more than 5 years had decided to attend the local church of their own denomination, compared to 13% of those who had attended one of a different denomination in the previous 5 years (switcher). The main influences for switchers were a sense of community (40%), knowing people in the new church (37%), quality of the preaching/teaching (37%) and a sense of God’s presence (33%). Switchers were close to three times more likely (28%) to choose their particular local church because of the concern shown to the wider community, compared to newcomers and those who had attended for more than 5 years (both 10%). Knowing someone there was also a factor for many newcomers in attending the church (37%), close to double the percentage of transfers (20%) and more than double those who had attended for more than 5 years (18%). A significant number of newcomers also attended the church because they were invited (29%).

### Summary

Influencing factors on an attender’s decision to attend their local church varied significantly between various groups. Degree holders tended to attribute their choice to multiple factors, as did Protestants, whereas Catholics were influenced by convenience and attending the local Catholic church. For some groups, including younger people and newcomers to church, being invited was an important factor.

### Data sources


### Citation