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Rural churches: just as healthy but facing unique challenges

Key issues facing churches in rural settings differ considerably from those in urban environments.

However, across measures of health and vitality there is little difference between rural church attenders and the national average, NCLS Research has found.

Rural churches make up a considerable proportion of churches across the nation. Some 42% of churches that took part in the 2006 NCLS were in rural settings (and more than half of those were Anglican or Uniting).

Key issues facing rural communities included drought, decline of jobs and decline of churches.

Many rural churches are small in size, which presents a problem for funding ministry agents. Over 60% of rural churches have regular congregations of less than 51 people — reflecting the fact that they are in communities with smaller populations than urban areas.

Some 25% of rural churches have a declining financial base and a further 14% feel their viability is threatened by finances.

Rural churches are often led by teams (45%) and their leaders are likely to have responsibility for multiple congregations. For some, these leadership structures will be a matter of choice, while for others, it will be due to the fact that many denominations are finding that there are insufficient clergy to fill all the positions for which there are sufficient funds, let alone for those places where the finances are inadequate.

Rural church attenders have an older age profile than urban church attenders. They are also less likely to be university-educated or employed, which aligns with their older age profile.

And while 75% of respondents said access to aged care accommodation was excellent or very good, only 29% said access to youth facilities and activities was excellent or very good.

Rural church attenders are more likely than urban attenders to be involved in church-based community service, social justice or welfare activities (26% vs 21%) and are more likely to be involved in certain community-based activities than urban attenders.

Rural attenders are much less likely to be born in a non-English speaking country (9% vs 25% of urban attenders). Only 1% of rural attenders considered racial conflict to be a major problem in their rural community.

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Across all measures of health and vitality — faith, worship, belonging, vision, leadership, innovation, service, faith-sharing and inclusion — there was little difference between the responses of rural attenders and the national average.

The inflow of newcomers was also similar for rural churches compared to the national average (7% vs 6%).

Research provides relevant resources

NCLS Research has collaborated with the Christian Research Association to examine the situation of rural churches in Australia and to provide relevant resources in the area of rural ministry.

Increasingly lay people are found to be taking responsibility for the religious life of their communities. They are determined to keep the church open, to maintain worship, and to provide care for the members of the community.

In many places, the leading lay people are in their 60s, or sometimes still with substantial employment commitments, as well as commitments to their family members, older and younger.

Other equally significant challenges across rural communities include the maintenance of community infrastructure as well as the changes in rural agriculture as it adjusts to climate change realities and the pressures of global economics.

Understanding the unique contribution made by rural churches to their communities will be part of what the upcoming 2011 National Church Life Survey captures (www.2011ncls.org.au).

“We are very keen to have rural churches represented in this national survey of Australian churches,” said NCLS Research Director Dr Ruth Powell, who is encouraging congregations of all denominations to participate in the 2011 NCLS survey of churchgoers.

“At the same time, we want to improve how we specifically serve rural churches. We will aim to adapt the survey experience for small rural and remote churches, including potential cost adjustments.”

For comment or more information, contact Dr Powell 02 8267 4394.