

LEADER SURVEY *Report*

Leader Survey Executive Summary

For Presbyterian Church NSW
All Church Leaders



Leader Survey Executive Summary Report

About the Executive Summary Report

The NCLS Leader Survey and this report

The NCLS Leaders Survey provides an overview of leadership development and effectiveness, as well as the wellbeing and sustainability of church leaders. It was completed by a wide group of leaders including ordained leaders, lay leaders, chaplains etc. as part of the National Church Life Survey.

This report summarises the main findings of the survey of local Presbyterian church leaders of NSW during 2024.

Leaders were asked a range of questions, results of which can be seen in the Wellbeing, Resilience, and Leader Support and Training Reports.

This report summarises results for all local church leaders - ministers, pastoral assistants and commissioned gospel leaders within local churches - identified here as 'church leaders'.

This report is based on 146 responses from all local church leaders in Presbyterian Church NSW

Details about the 2024 sample of Presbyterian NSW church leaders can be found in the Leader Support and Training Report. Results in all three reports are compared with senior leaders in the 2021/2022 national church leader survey, where this benchmark is available.

Who is a 'senior leader'?

Senior leaders, as referred to in the reports, are respondents who identified themselves in the survey as one of the following:

- The minister, pastor or priest of this local church
- The senior minister/pastor/priest of a ministry team here
- A minister, pastor or priest of equal standing with others in a ministry team here
- The interim minister, pastor or priest here
- A layperson serving as the principal leader here

Church leaders, as referred to in the reports, are both senior leaders and all other respondents who participated in the survey for the Presbyterian Church NSW.

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Church leaders of PC NSW were asked a wide range of questions about general personal wellbeing and more specific questions in relation to their work to obtain assessment of aspects of their wellbeing in ministry.

General Wellbeing

Leaders were asked about their general personal wellbeing as well as questions about their wellbeing in relation to their ministry role. Detailed results for PC NSW leaders in 2024 can be viewed in the Leader Wellbeing Report, and further information about wellbeing is in the report 'Thriving and resilient leadership in local Australian churches' (Sterland, Powell & Pepper, 2024).

General Wellbeing of Leaders

Leaders were asked about their personal wellbeing in relation to a range of areas of life, and about their physical health, to obtain an assessment of general wellbeing.

Personal Wellbeing Index

Leaders were asked the full set of 10 questions from the Personal Wellbeing Index (International Wellbeing Group, 2024). Satisfaction with 'life as a whole' was slightly lower than for the average for ministers across all denominations in 2022. Of the age groups in the PC NSW group, the youngest (<50 yrs old) were the least satisfied. On other areas of life, PC NSW leaders were often lower, but sometimes only slightly. The areas where they are most noticeably lower are (in descending order):

- Feeling part of the community
- Personal relationships
- Spirituality
- Standard of living
- Health
- Future security

Physical Health

Subjective assessment of physical health is similar to senior church leaders across Australia. Use of medication is somewhat lower than the Australian church leaders average. This will be at least in part because the PC NSW sample consists of a wider range of respondents than the senior leaders of churches that is the Australian comparison. Senior leaders are of a higher average age, and medication use is reflected in this.

Wellbeing in Ministry

Leaders were asked a range of single questions and scales of questions in relation to positive and negative indicators of wellbeing in ministry.

Single indicators of positive and negative ministry wellbeing

Feeling less effective, and about the same as Australian senior church leaders on stress levels.

Sense of effectiveness. Leaders in the PC NSW 2024 group were significantly lower than Australian senior leaders from 2022 in their overall sense of effectiveness on a single indicator question ('How would you rate your overall effectiveness in your present role here over the last few months?') The senior leaders in the PC NSW group were slightly lower again.

Sense of stress. Leaders in the PC NSW group rated themselves slightly lower on the single indicator of stress compared to Australian senior leaders ('How stressed do you feel in your present role here over the last few months?') The group of PC NSW senior leaders rated themselves as slightly higher.

Leader Wellbeing

Ministry Wellbeing

Scale indicators of positive and negative ministry wellbeing

Slightly lower sense of ministry effectiveness, and higher emotional exhaustion, signalling a lower proportion of leaders thriving, and some at higher risk of burnout or struggling in ministry.

Positive indicators

Ministry Effectiveness Scale. Scale results are made up of a combination of questions on a topic and tend to be more accurate, avoiding some of the subjectivity in responses to a single global question. Leaders in the PC NSW 2024 group were slightly lower than Australian senior leaders from 2022 on the NCLS ministry effectiveness scale. Senior leaders within the group were slightly lower again.

Looking at the detail of individual questions, few of the ministry effectiveness question results showed much deviation from the national pattern, the clearest being one where leaders agreed less often that they deal very effectively with the problems of people in their church. Other questions showed only slightly lower agreement with positive statements about ministry effectiveness, leading to the overall slightly lower score seen in the standard report. The details for the individual questions can be found in the appendix of the Wellbeing Report.

Satisfaction in Ministry. A second set of questions related to satisfaction in ministry were also asked, with results shown in the appendix of the Wellbeing Report. There are a number which highlight that PC NSW leaders overall feel more satisfaction than the average leader about being in ministry, such as significantly higher agreement about feeling positive about their ministry, and that it gives purpose and meaning to their life.

Negative indicators

Emotional Exhaustion Scale. Literature on burnout and thriving in the workplace has highlighted emotional exhaustion as a critical area. Each person has reserves of enthusiasm and energy that may vary over time, and emotional exhaustion refers to these reserves being dangerously low. If this is chronic (i.e., a longer term state), burnout is a real possibility. A number of results show PC NSW leaders agreeing more often that they are showing signs of emotional exhaustion, e.g., feeling drained, fatigued, discouraged by lack of support, and not having enthusiasm for work. This aligns with the slightly higher score on the emotional exhaustion scale seen in the main report, and shows the higher levels are shown across the board of detailed questions rather than reflected in only one or two.

Depersonalisation. This term refers to a set of attitudes and behaviours that often accompany emotional exhaustion, and probably reflect a coping mechanism. PC NSW leaders were only slightly higher on a couple of these questions, indicating this behaviour is not particularly on display compared to the wider context. It would align with there not being a large number of leaders currently in burnout, but doesn't contradict the above finding that there is a slightly higher risk of burnout among PC NSW leaders.

Overall, there is a slightly higher risk of leaders struggling in ministry among the PC NSW leader group compared to the wider comparison of Australian senior church leaders. This is evidenced in PC NSW leaders having a slightly lower distribution on the ministry effectiveness scale, and a slightly higher distribution on the emotional exhaustion scale. However, this does not necessarily translate to having a higher percentage of leaders experiencing burnout, but rather in danger of it, and not as many thriving in ministry. The proportion of leaders who had considered leaving the ministry very or fairly often in the past five years is very similar to the national figure, and PC NSW leaders have slightly higher average level of satisfaction with being in ministry, even if more may be struggling slightly more than average.

Church leaders of PC NSW were asked the full set of NCLS questions about their personal foundations in ministry. These are areas identified by NCLS as important to examine, as they are associated with thriving in ministry and being more resilient in the face of challenges.

Personal Foundations

NCLS has identified six areas related to personal or situational qualities in a leader's life and ministry that correlate significantly with thriving and burnout aspects of ministry wellbeing. These qualities, which NCLS have labelled 'personal foundations of sustainable ministry' can be thought of as personal resilience factors in ministry, and are listed below with summary results for PC NSW leaders in 2024. Detailed results for PC NSW leaders in 2024 can be found in the Leader Resilience Report, and a fuller explanation of these and a picture of the national context is in the report 'Thriving and resilient leadership in local Australian churches' (Sterland, Powell & Pepper, 2024).

Spiritual Foundations

In this area of active ongoing spiritual formation, PC NSW leaders have a similar overall score, but with some noticeable differences on certain questions. Far less agree that 'spiritual practice has improved over their time in ministry', and more agreement that they often find it hard to maintain private spiritual practice. There are also signs of strength, such as less agreement that time with God is the first thing to go during busy times, and more agreement that they spend time in devotional activities most days. Overall the results suggest a picture of discipline in a typical leader but with some dissatisfaction with the lack of effectiveness.

Clarity of Purpose

The clarity of purpose indicators were typically strong, for example with 93% agreeing 'my life has a strong sense of purpose', and other indicators being similar. However, PC NSW leaders were not quite as strong as Australian senior leaders in 2022. The full group of PC NSW leaders compared a bit weaker with senior leaders across Australia, but this sort of comparison is not unexpected, as having a mixture of people in non-senior roles in the sample is usually observed to have this result. Comparing senior leaders of PC NSW with the senior leaders of Australia shows some difference still however, with less leaders affirming a strong sense of call.

Sense of Self

The results for sense of self questions for PC NSW leaders were very similar to the national senior leaders' results, with only some slight differences. The main difference was PC NSW leaders more likely to feel swayed by unrest at church. Emotional intelligence is another area of resilience that could be considered related to sense of self, and a number of questions were asked on this topic as well. PC NSW leaders were similar to Australian leaders in being able to read the emotions of others, but somewhat lower in emotional self-awareness, and using or regulating positive emotions in the face of challenges.

Integration

The results for integration questions for the full group of PC NSW leaders are very similar to the national senior leaders' results, with only some slight differences. The main difference was PC NSW leaders more concerned about whether people can see them modelling what they preach.

Leader Resilience

Personal Foundations

Supportive Relationships

This area shows the most concerning differences out of the six resilience factors, with PC NSW leaders expressing more often that they do not have close friends who provide support, and that they find it hard to make and keep close friends. Consequently the overall scale score is markedly lower (6.5 compared to 7.1 for Australia). There are also lower levels of feeling loved and cared for at church, and learning from others at church, but these are smaller differences. There is only a small difference in their response to the question about how many people leaders have in their life that they feel completely honest and supported with.

Therefore the main issue in this area seems to be that despite leaders being part of communities at church, there is a deficit in relation to friendships, both making and keeping them. There are also lower levels of professional support being received, as the next section shows, and seemingly less openness to receiving this, but not in providing it to others.

Experiences with mentors and professional supervisors

Additional questions in this area regarding professional sources of support revealed more about the supportive relationship gap for PC NSW leaders. There were marked differences, with far less PC NSW leaders than Australian senior leaders in general having such sources of professional support in the past year. Overall, 28% indicate they have had no such support, compared to 17% of Australian senior leaders. The most common sort of support PCNSW leaders have had is a mentor (53%), which is higher than the Australian figure, as is the proportion who have had a counsellor (26%). About one in five (18%) have had a professional supervisor, which is less than half the national figure for senior leaders (39%). Similarly when asking about what support of this kind they are currently receiving, less leaders said they had a regular formal arrangement (47%) than nationally (55%) and twice the number said they are not currently receiving or seeking such support (20% compared to 10% nationally). In terms of leaders offering this kind of support, figures are very similar to national levels, except that more PCNSW leaders say they would like to be providing this (25% compared to 14% nationally) suggesting action can be taken here to facilitate more such support. More importantly, there seems to be a significant gap of PC NSW leaders having professional supervision or some similar kind of support.

Balance and Boundaries

The summary score for balance and boundaries for PC NSW leaders bears consideration, as it was slightly lower than leaders in general across Australia. A lower proportion agree with the general statement that they manage to keep good boundaries between work and the rest of life, but the most telling result here may be the higher proportion who agree they struggle to switch off from their role at home. A slightly lower number also say they have other interests and passions. The summary score would be considerably lower were it not for the larger proportion who indicate they take days off regularly. This suggests balance and boundaries could be improved for PC NSW leaders not by addressing the concrete matter of time off, which is already positive, but the necessary mindset to sufficiently disengage from work in order to recharge well.

An additional question relevant to balance and boundaries asked about the most useful support and self-care activities. As with Australian leaders in general, the most useful activities to reduce stress and enhance wellbeing cited by PC NSW leaders were going on recreational leave and spending quality time with family. Also high for PC NSW leaders was doing physical exercise or sport, significantly higher than for Australian leaders. The next most useful were spending time alone in reflection and doing hobbies and non-ministry activities. One area where PCNSW leaders differ is participating in retreats, with about a quarter (23%) saying they had never tried this, which is much higher than 11% of leaders nationally who indicated this.

Church leaders of PC NSW were asked about their theological qualifications, how well they feel trained for various aspects of ministry, and what ministry supports they have made use of. Supports provided by M & M, as well as other supports were examined, as well as which M & M supports are most valued.

Qualifications and training

PC NSW church leaders have an average level of theological qualification markedly higher than the average level for senior church leaders across Australia. Very few have no qualification (1%) or undergoing training while in their position (1%), fewer than average have diplomas or a similar level, while far more have a postgraduate diploma/degree.

This high level of training is reflected in leaders feeling at least as adequately trained in many aspects of ministry as leaders across Australia. The two areas where PC NSW leaders felt least well equipped were church administration and finances, and cross-cultural ministry, with levels noticeably lower than Australia for the former. Also somewhat lower than Australian leaders were PC NSW leaders feeling adequately trained to handle conflict and organisation management skills for church leadership. There were a number of other areas with slightly lower levels. The strong theological component of most PC NSW leaders' training is reflected in feeling more highly trained than Australian leaders in the areas of mission/outreach, helping others exercise ministry, childrens, families and youth ministry, and especially teaching/preaching.

The one area where more than half of PC NSW leaders indicated they had received training in the previous two years was safe churches training. In this respect they are the same as leaders across Australia in 2022, though the responses of PC NSW leaders in 2024 were somewhat lower. More PC NSW leaders had received recent training in teaching/preaching, childrens and youth ministry, music ministry, small group leadership and outreach/evangelism than Australian senior church leaders had. Far less PC NSW leaders had received training in management/admin roles.

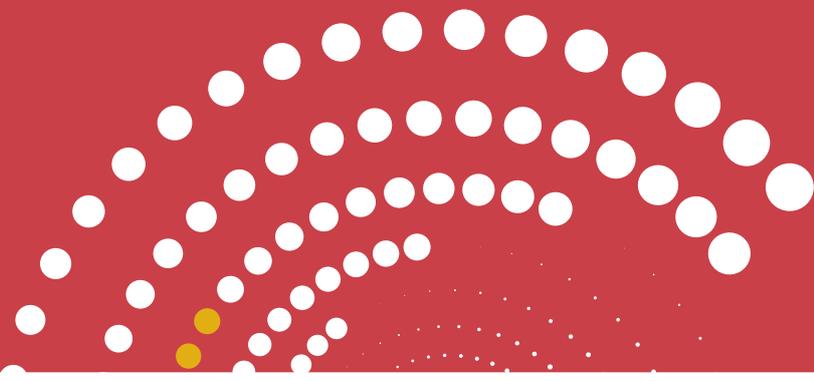
Ministry supports used and valued

The PC NSW Ministry and Mission Committee (M & M) provide a range of supportive services to local church leaders, and leaders were asked which they had made use of in the past two years. Most commonly, almost half of leaders have had face to face contact with one of the M & M staff team. Second highest was spiritual renewal groups, used by just over a third of leaders, and the refresh camp, which had been used by just under a third. About a third indicated they had not made use of any of the services listed in the previous two years.

Other, non M & M supports were also asked about, and about half of leaders indicated they had made use of formal mentoring, coaching or pastoral supervision, while about four in ten indicated they had made use of counselling for themselves or a family member. Almost three in ten indicated they had not used any such supports.

A third question asked which of the M & M supports were important to continue offering, and support for all listed was high, with only 3% indicating no supports should be continued. The highest support was for face to face contact (84%) while the lowest was for PeaceWise courses provided by M & M (66%).

Full details for results about qualifications, training, and ministry supports can be viewed in the Leader Support and Training report.



Leader Survey Executive Summary

A report for Presbyterian Church of NSW (All church leaders)

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This report presents an executive summary of how local church leaders evaluated their wellbeing, resilience, support and training during 2024.

It draws on Leader Survey data from the National Church Life Survey, to provide an overview and comparison. Full details of results can be viewed in three accompanying reports: Leader Wellbeing; Leader Resilience; and Support and Training for Church Leaders.

Results are included for all church leaders who participated in the leader survey identified in this report as 'church leaders'.

Want more?

Denominations can commission this report on a wider range of leaders including all leaders who participated in the 2021 NCLS, including ordained leaders, lay leaders, chaplains etc. Or, alternatively, update your results by running a new Leader Survey amongst your leaders this year. Contact the NCLS Research team.



NCLS Research is a leading research organisation whose research aims include studying church health, effective and sustainable leadership, the connections between church and community, and Australian spirituality. The National Church Life Survey is a collaborative project involving millions of participants in over 20 denominations since 1991.