

The Australian Church is Being Transformed: 20 years of research reveals changing trends in Australian church life

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Overview

Part 1: Overview of context and history

- Australian context
- NCLS origins and missional framework

Part 2: The NCLS methodology

A quantitative survey with outcomes for all participants
I.e. resources provided for local and denominational churches

Part 3: NCLS Research agenda

Academic and church audiences

Types of research projects: NCLS, joint, commissioned projects

Examples of research themes

Model for church vitality



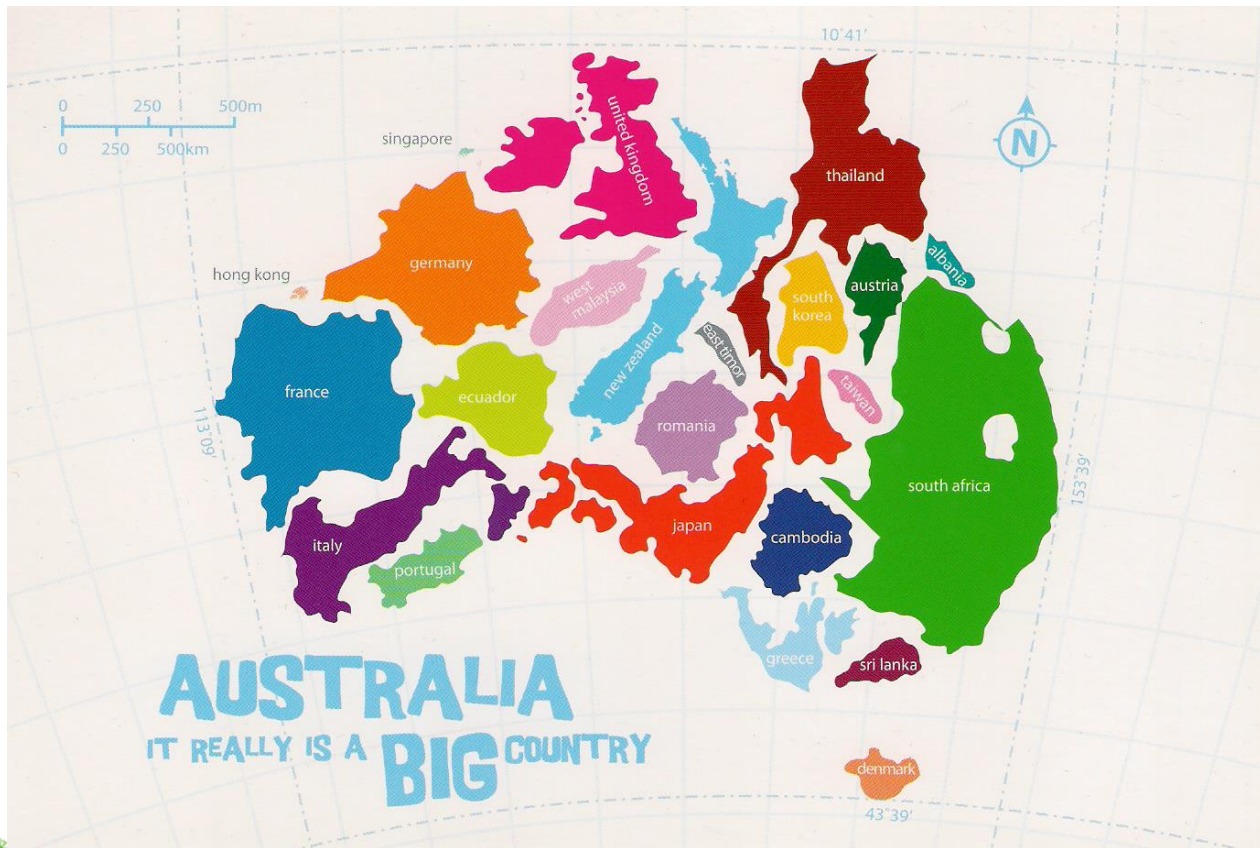
Discussion

Part 1: An overview of history and context



Snapshot of Australia

- A big country
- A small population who live on the coastlines -23 million
- Projected to double in size in next 50 years

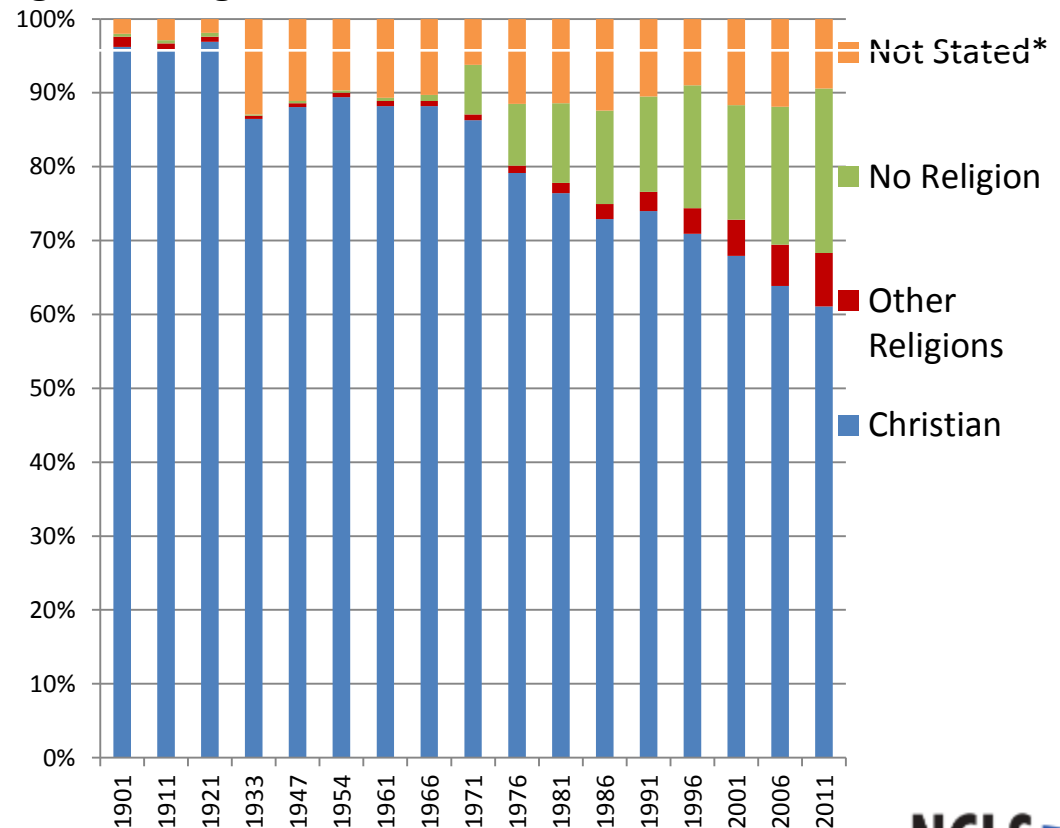


Changes in Australian religious landscape

In the last few decades there has been a decline in:

- **Religious affiliation**
(yet 61% identify as Christian in census)
- **Religious beliefs**
(yet 69% still believe in God)
- **Religious practice**
(15% of Australians go to church at least monthly).

Figure: Religious affiliation of Australians: 1901 to 2011

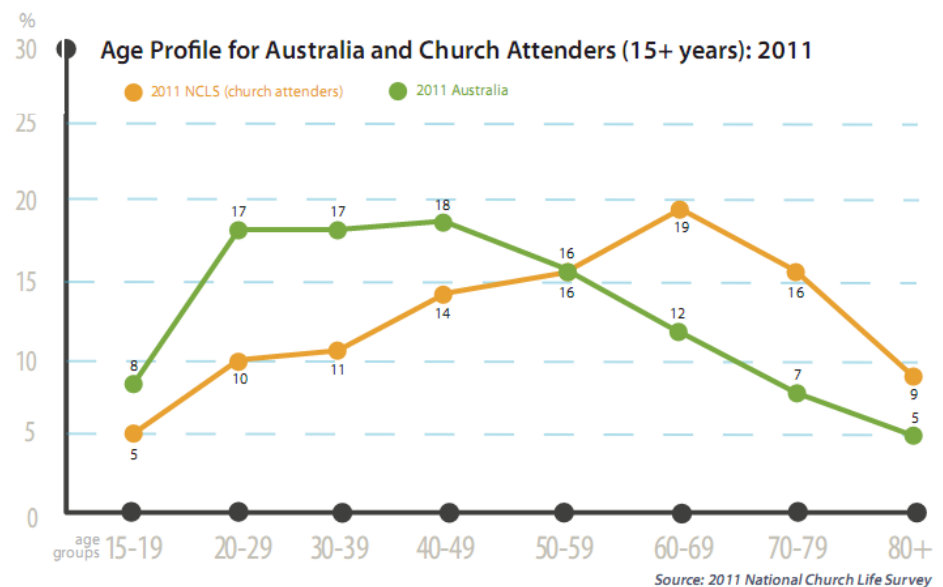
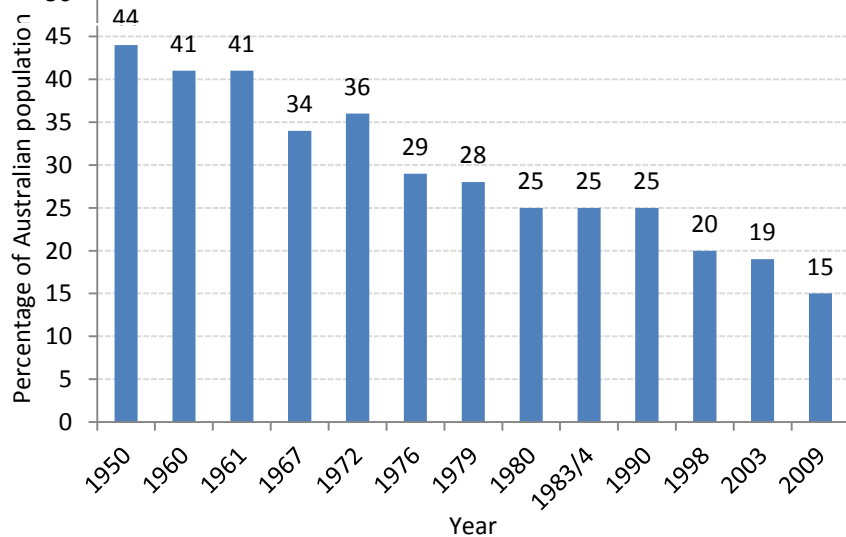


Changes in Australian local churches

Signs of both challenge and opportunity:

- Growing disengagement with religion
- Numbers in church attendance declining
- Younger generations missing

Figure: Frequent (monthly) church attendance in Australia: 1950 to 2009



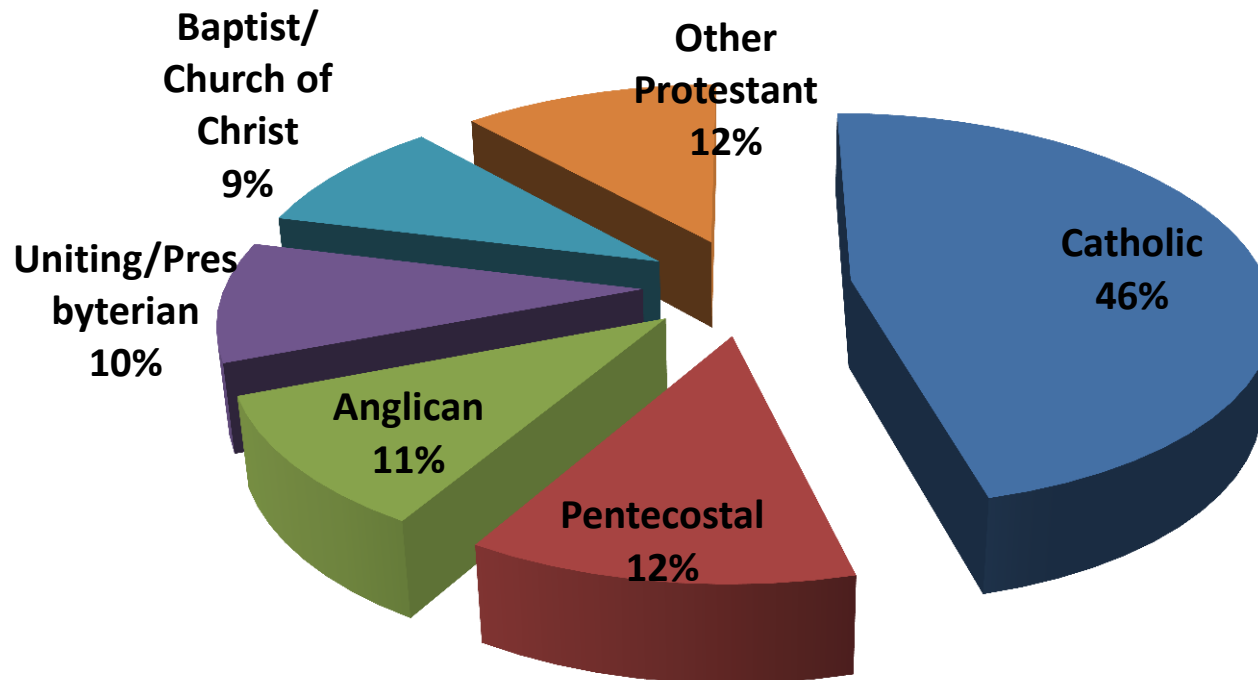
Yet, also growth among Pentecostal movements

A widespread desire to plant new churches

Changes in Australian local churches

Pentecostalism is now 'mainstream'

They are the second largest group of attenders after Catholics



NB. It is expected that Pentecostal attenders now make up an even larger proportion of all church attenders. Updating estimates of church attendance is in progress.

Changes in perspective

- Churches recognise that their mission context had changed.
- New understandings emerging.
e.g.
 - mission had “come home”, “in our own backyard”
 - Overseas mission seen more in term of partnership
 - “Missio Dei” It is God’s mission and God’s Spirit is active
 - The congregation is a key for mission



Built on a history of collaboration

Australian churches decided to invest in "mission research"
They decided they could do more together than separately.

Sponsors

Uniting Mission & Education, Uniting Church NSW/ACT

Anglicare Sydney

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Australian Catholic University



More than
22 denominations
and movements
including:

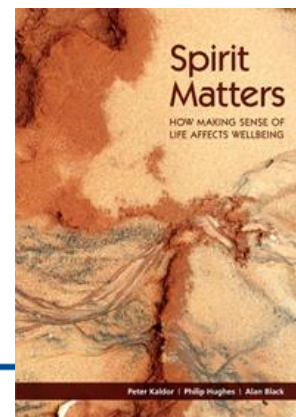
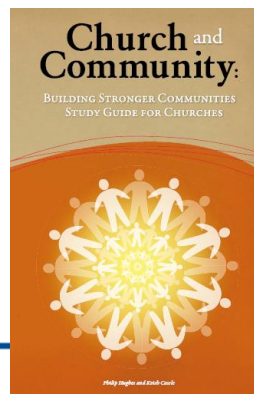
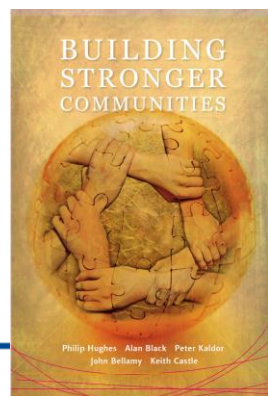
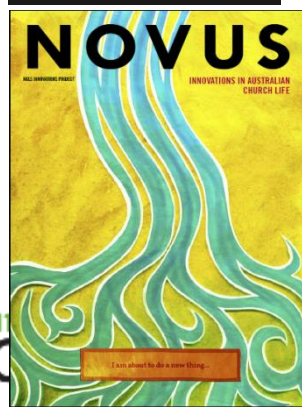
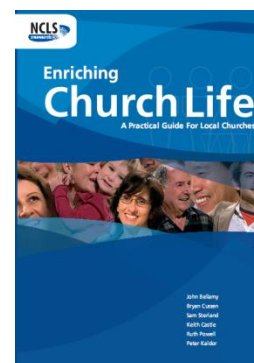
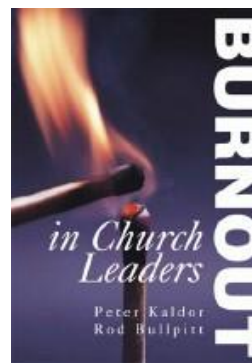
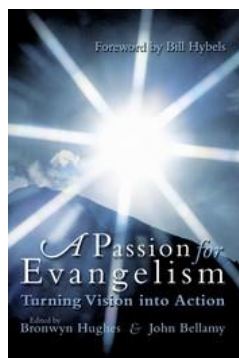
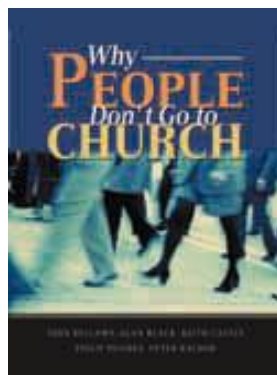
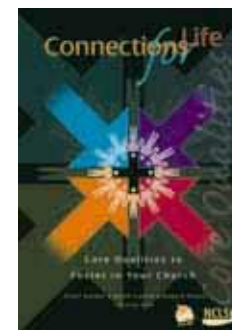
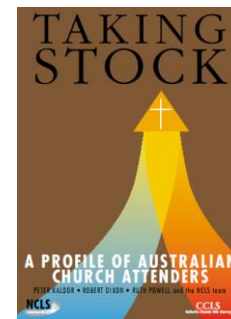
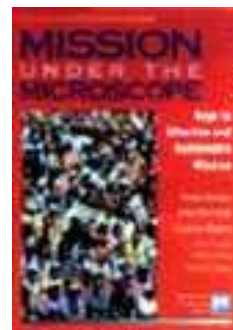
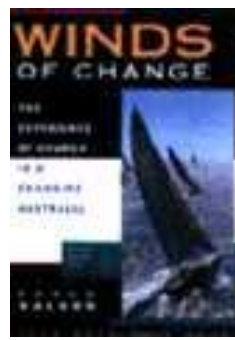
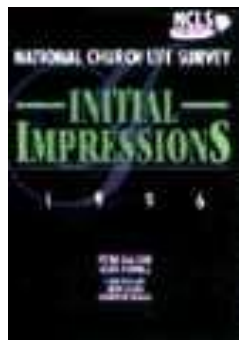
Anglican
Apostolic
Australian Christian Churches (AOG)
Baptist
Brethren
Catholic
Christian Missionary Alliance
C3 Churches (Christian City Church)
COC Australia
Congregational
CRC Churches International
Church of the Nazarene
Churches of Christ

Four Square Gospel
Lutheran
International Pentecostal Holiness Movement
Presbyterian
Christian Reformed Churches
Salvation Army
Seventh-day Adventist
Uniting Church
Vineyard Fellowship
Worldwide Church of God
and Independent congregations,
House churches and other Christian communities.

What partners want

- Churches want information about
 - The changing national social context
 - The local context for mission
 - The health and vitality of their denominations (with comparisons to others where possible)
 - The health of their local churches
 - The effectiveness and wellbeing of their local church leaders
- Churches want resources to help local churches to build their capacity in mission
- Universities want a credible research basis in order to conduct a wide range of studies of individuals, congregations and denominations

Sample publications



Goals of NCLS Research

In summary, NCLS Research emerged out of Australian churches' response to a changing context.

20+ years on, the key goals remain the same:

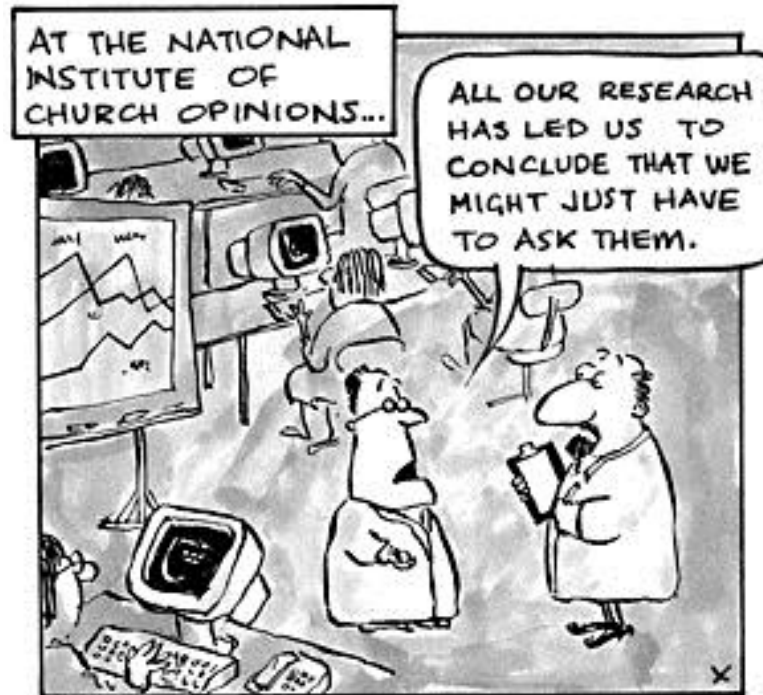
1. To conduct research on community spirituality and wellbeing and the place of the church
2. To resource the local churches to participate in God's mission

International Church Life Surveys

The Australian model has been replicated in other countries

Australia (NCLS)	1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011
South Africa (DRC)	2006, 2010, 2014
Netherlands (pilot)	2010 + ?
New Zealand (CLS-NZ)	1997, 2001 and 2008
USA (US-CLS)	2001, 2008-9 +?
England (CLS-UK)	2001

Part 2: About National Church Life Surveys



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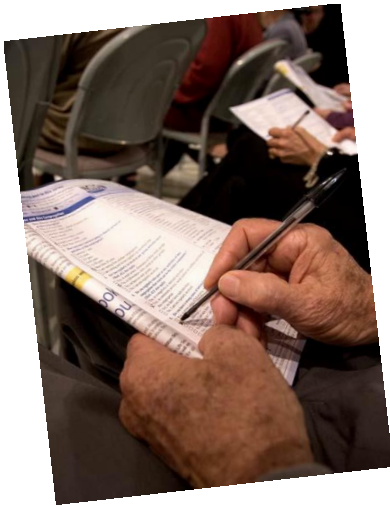
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National Church Life Surveys

1991 – 1996 – 2001 – 2006 – 2011

2011 National Church Life Survey

Goal: To identify signs of hope for the Church in Australia and to present research and analysis so as to nurture life in both the leadership and the congregations across Australia.



- Nation-wide ecumenical venture: 23 denominations
- The largest nationwide survey after the ABS National Census

Five waves: 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011.

- Happens every five years at the same time as the National Census
- Over 4500 local churches and around 260 000+ individuals from 23 denominations took part in 2011
- In eight languages: English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tongan, Italian, Arabic and Dinka (Sudanese)

*Only 20 minutes
every five years*

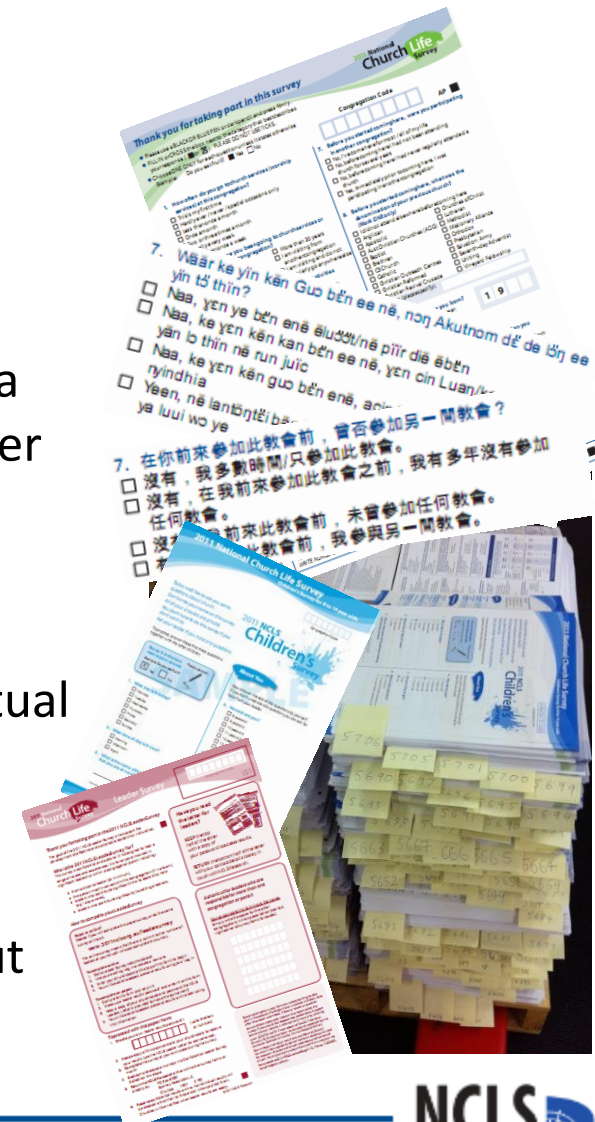
Types of Surveys in a National Church Life Survey

Each church completed three main types of paper surveys:

Attender Surveys: These surveys contained questions about adult attenders' characteristics and their views about their church. In 2001 and 2011, there was also a Child Attender Survey for younger attenders aged under 15 years.

Operations Survey: This survey was completed by a congregational leader and was designed to collect factual information about each church's life and activities.

Leaders Survey: These surveys were available for all leaders, clergy and lay. They contained questions about personal background, job role, attitudes and more.



How does a Church Life Survey work?



Church completes survey



NCLS Research processes survey forms



Church receives Pack with their **Church Life Profile**.



Church uses profile and other resources to reflect and plan for the future



The aim: to help your church to have **'LIFE TO THE FULL'**



Diverse participants receive output

Goal of NCLS: To link research outcomes with planning resources

Framework of church vitality developed

- 12 measures of health

Tailored reports called *Church Life Profiles*:

- identify greatest strengths,
- show change over time,
- compare to other groups.

Plus resources to help churches plan



After 2011 NCLS: Reports were sent to 3000+ local churches, 90+ church regions, 20+ denominations

Other key resources: To understand context

Project: To resource all local churches with information about their local community

Aim:
to help a church in its mission and ministry to the local area



NCLS Research Agenda (a few examples)

Possible studies can be studies of individuals, studies of organisations or longitudinal studies. Below are areas of interest for NCLS Research.

Who goes to church

- Demographics eg age, education, ethnicity
- Psychological type, Psychological wellbeing, leadership strengths, character traits/strengths

Church vitality

- innovation in church life
- multicultural issues in church life

Effective leadership

- What are the characteristics of effective leaders?

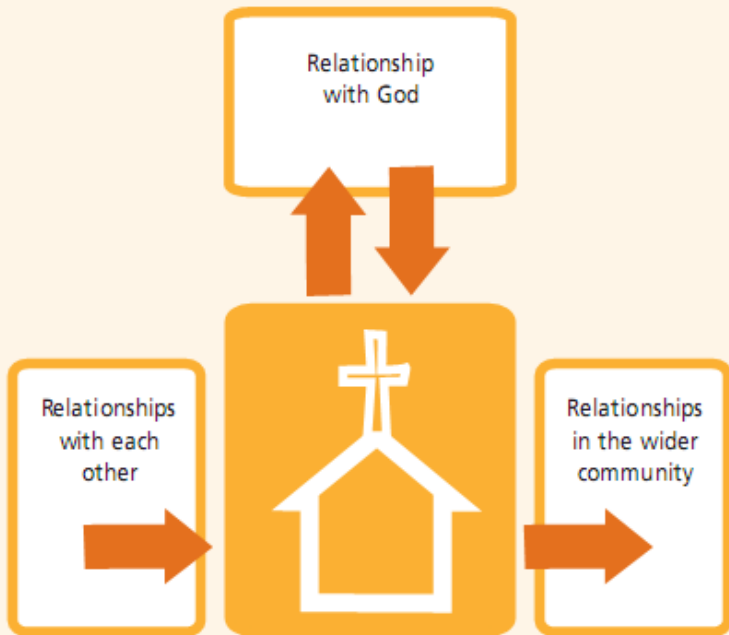
Sustainable leadership

- How do leaders thrive, not just survive?

NCLS model of church health and vitality

NCLS Models of Church Vitality

Christians understand themselves to be called into a relationship with God, with others in the church and with the wider community.



Nine Core Qualities of Church Life

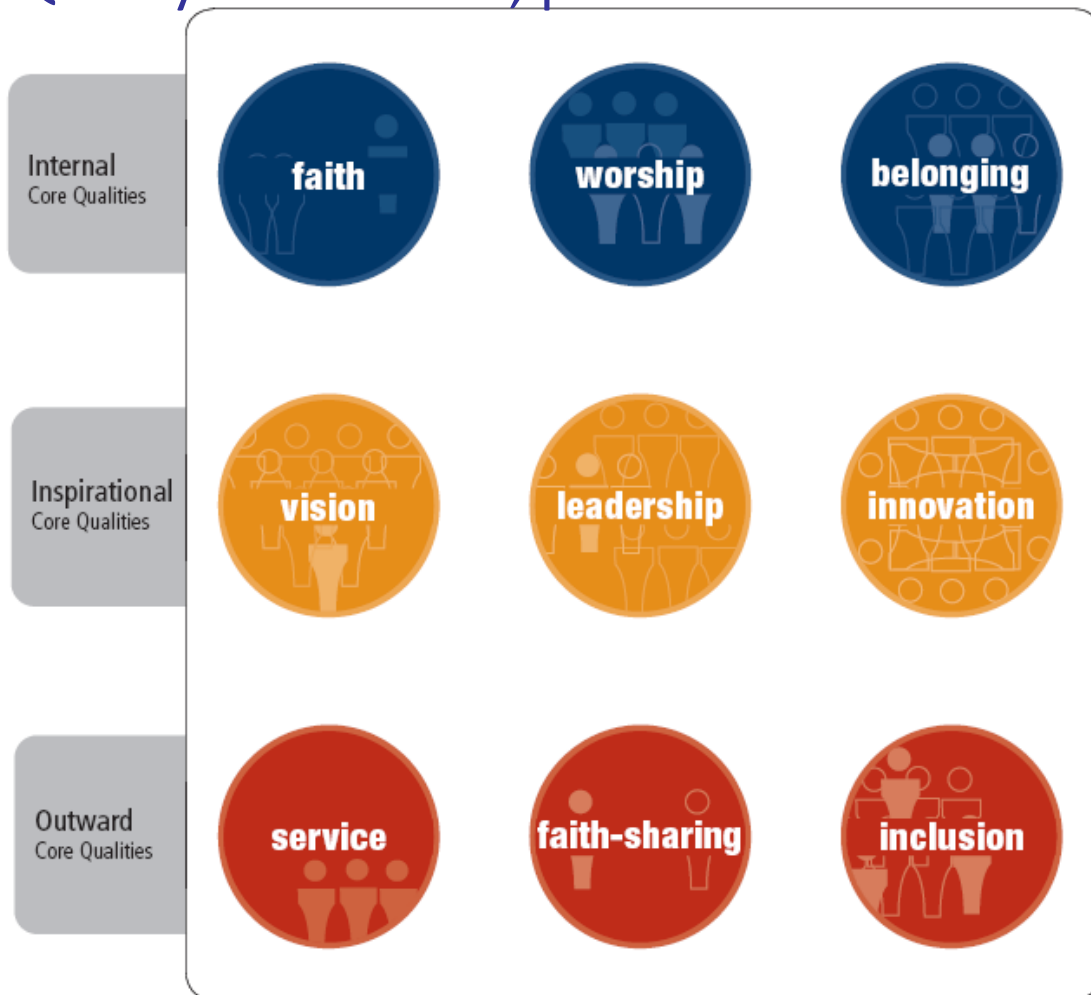


Three Church Attendance Measures



NCLS Nine Core Qualities of Church Life

Church Life Surveys include many measures for each of 9 Core Quality dimensions, plus attendance measures



Internal Core Qualities

The inner life of the community of faith

Inspirational Core Qualities

Relate to leadership and direction

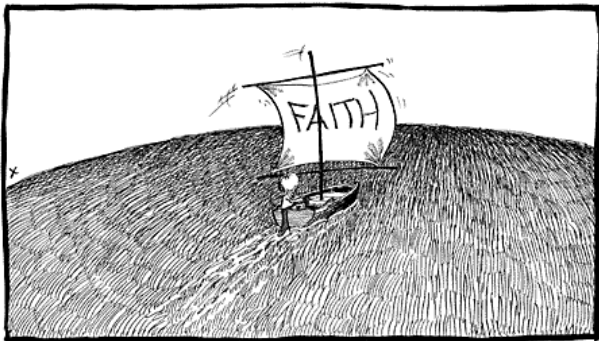
Outward Core Qualities

How churches focus beyond themselves

Relationship with God

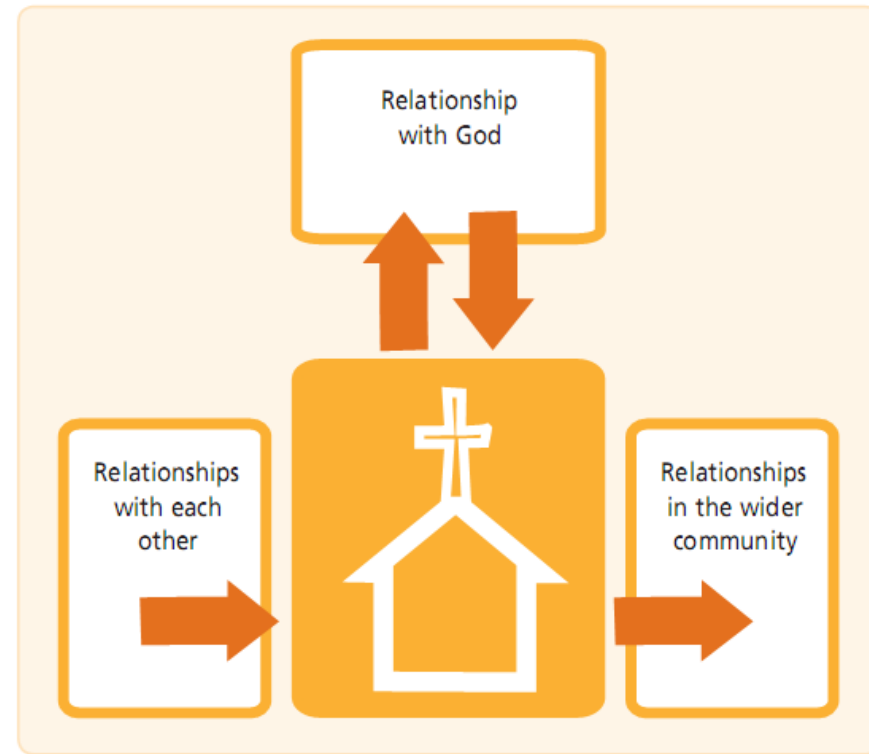
84% of church attenders say God is an important reality in their lives

- The most important reality– 54%
- More important than almost anything else – 30%



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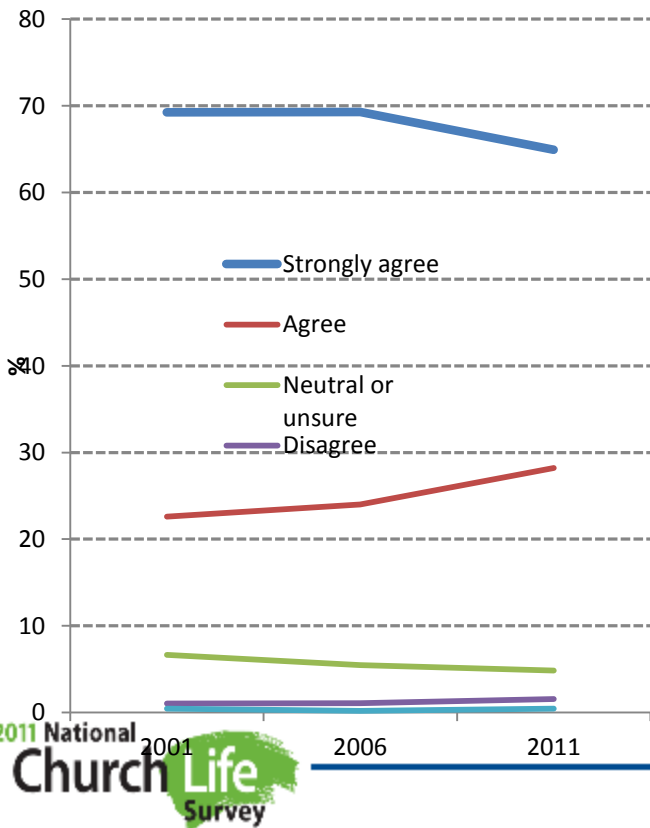


Attender beliefs about Jesus: 2001 to 2011

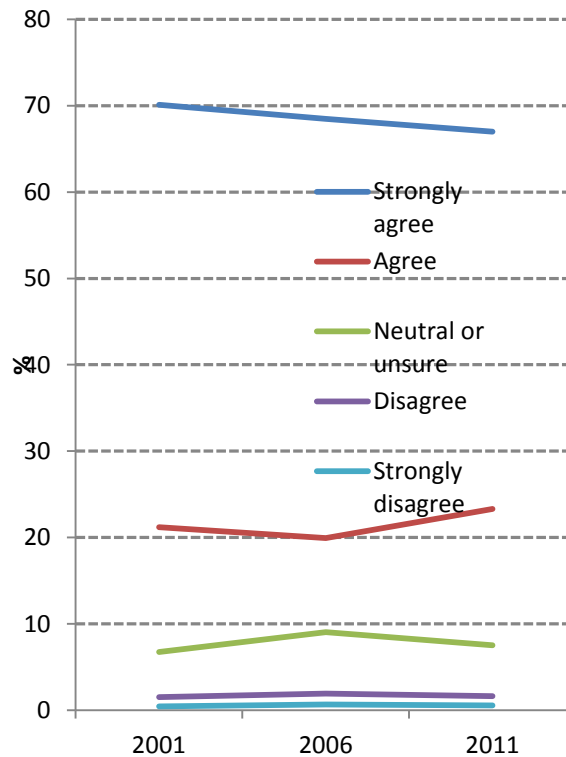
Attendees' strength of belief has 'softened' over time.
i.e. Less likely to strongly agree

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

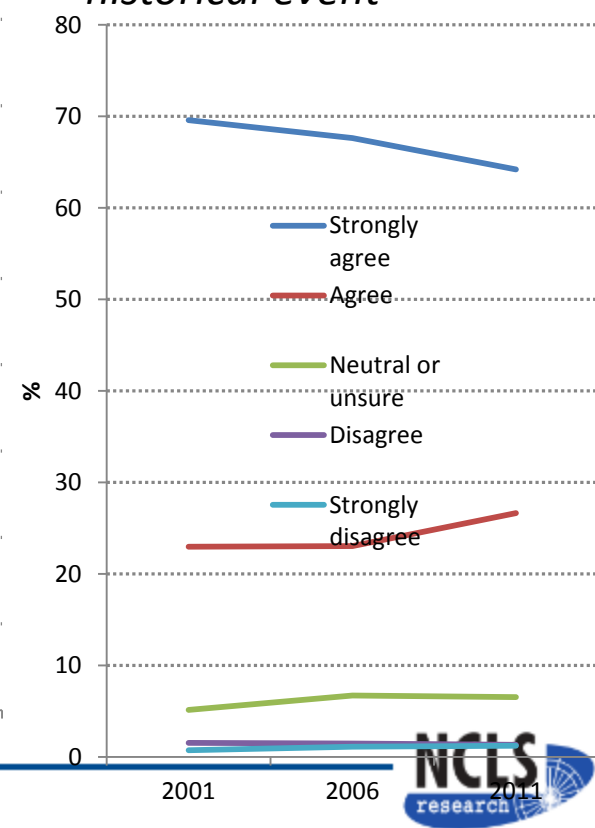
Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully human



Jesus was born of a virgin



Jesus' resurrection from the dead was an actual historical event



Alive and Growing Faith

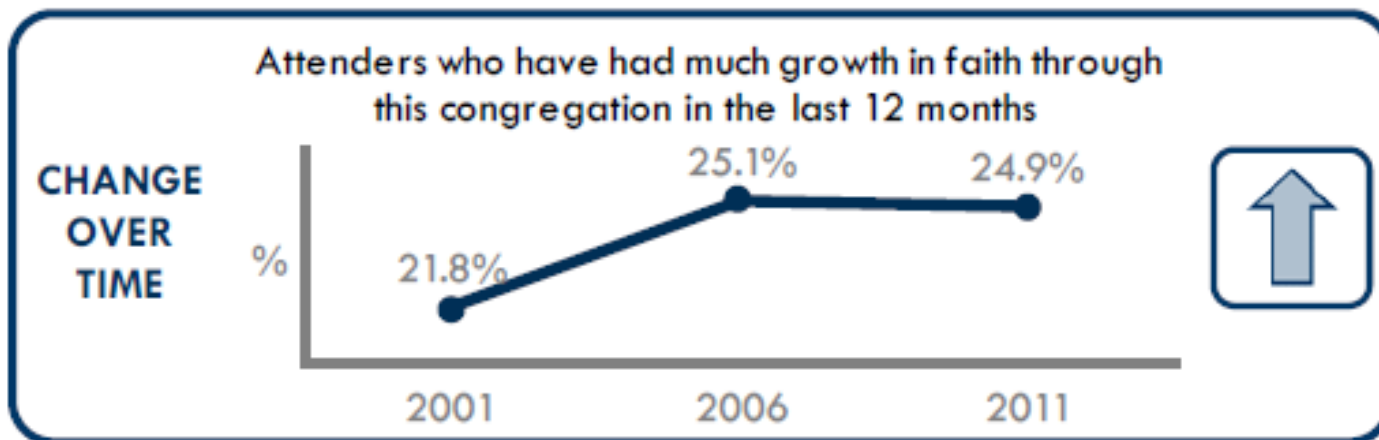


In vital faith communities people say they have been helped to grow in their own faith

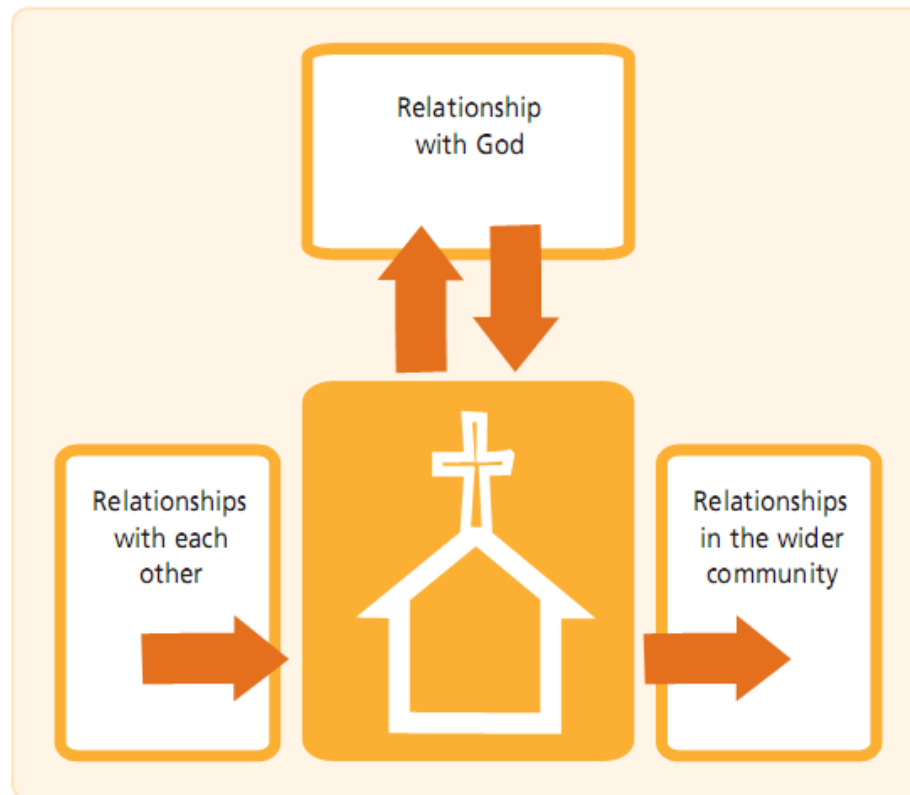
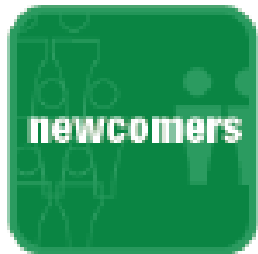
In the previous year...

45% of attenders experienced much growth in faith and 41% some growth

The role of local churches increased from 2001 to 2011



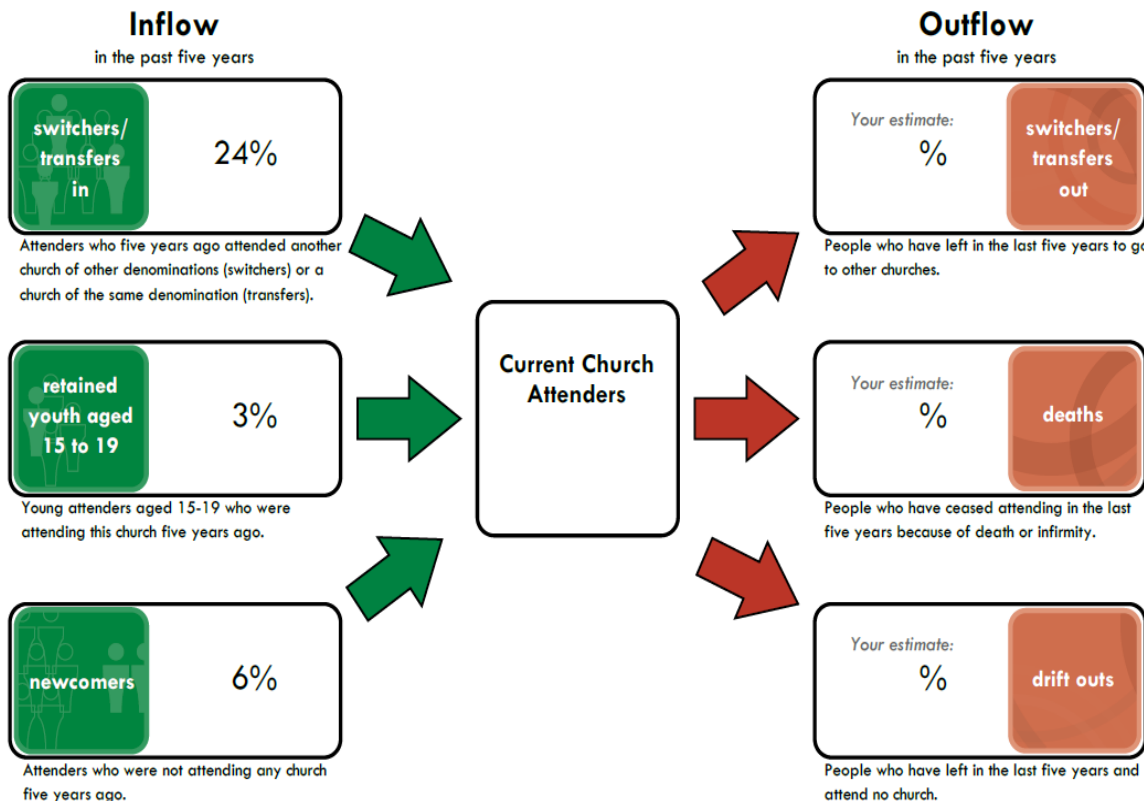
Relationship with each other



Inflows to churches

Signs of greater mobility and integration between churches.

A third of all attenders have joined their current church in the past 5 years
 10% changed denominations (switcher). A Protestant pattern: 17% switched



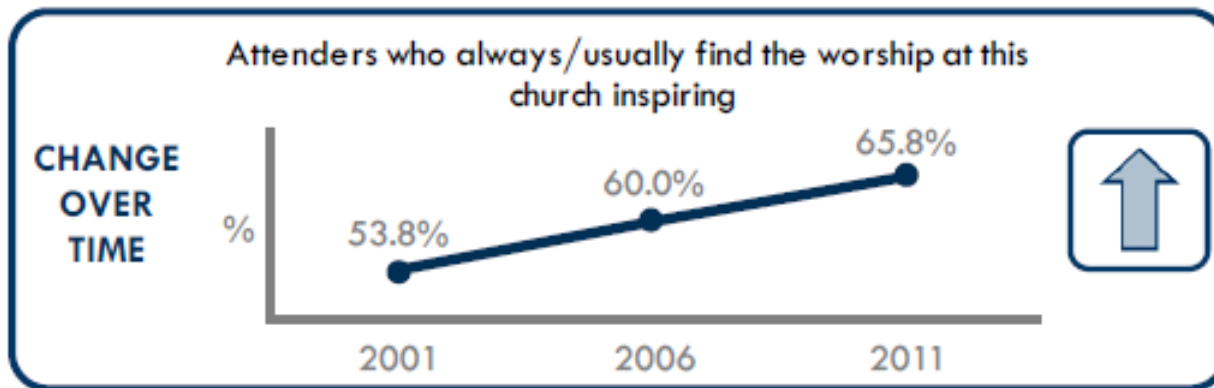
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Net Attendance Change = Inflow Minus Outflow
 All flows are percentages of the congregation in 2011 (aged 15 and over).

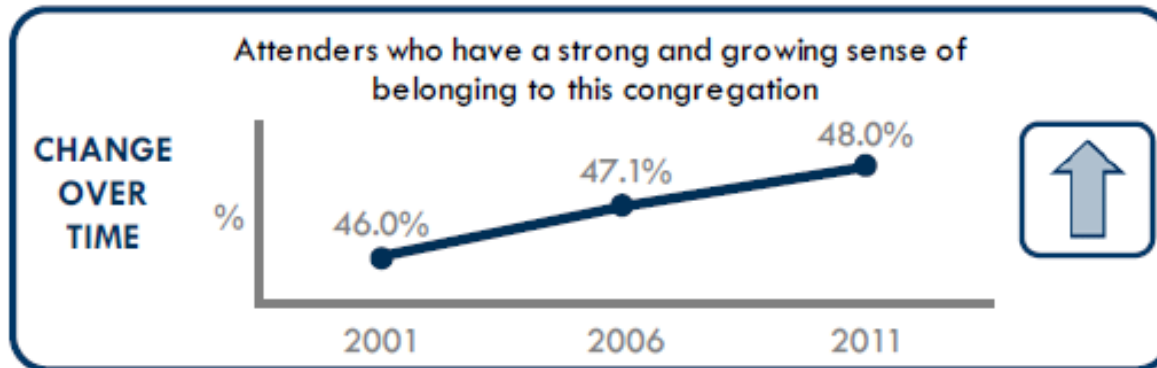
Vital and Nurturing Worship



In vital faith communities people describe the worship as vital and nurturing



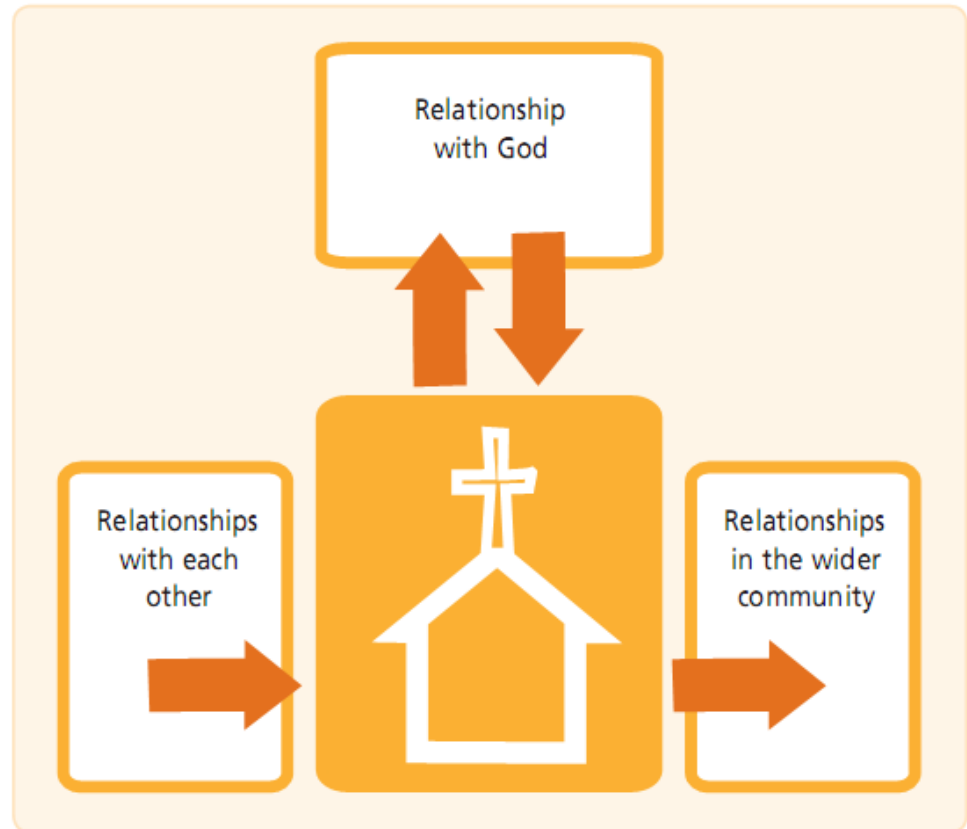
In vital faith communities people have a sense of belonging



Relationships in the wider community



Isabel's contribution to her church community was giving others the opportunity to serve.



About local church activities

Ninety five percent of churches provide social services to the wider community.
Emergency relief/material assistance (e. g. food, clothes for the needy) is most common.

Two thirds offer some form of social, recreation or leisure activities.

Nearly all local churches are involved in community events, such as community fairs.

Some 86% of churches allow their property to be used by groups in the wider community

Two thirds of churches recycle, and a third purchase environmentally friendly consumables

Six out of ten churches provide Sunday Schools and half provide youth groups

Most churches (75%) have major physical facilities for people with disabilities.



Most churches have a specific commitment to people in developing countries



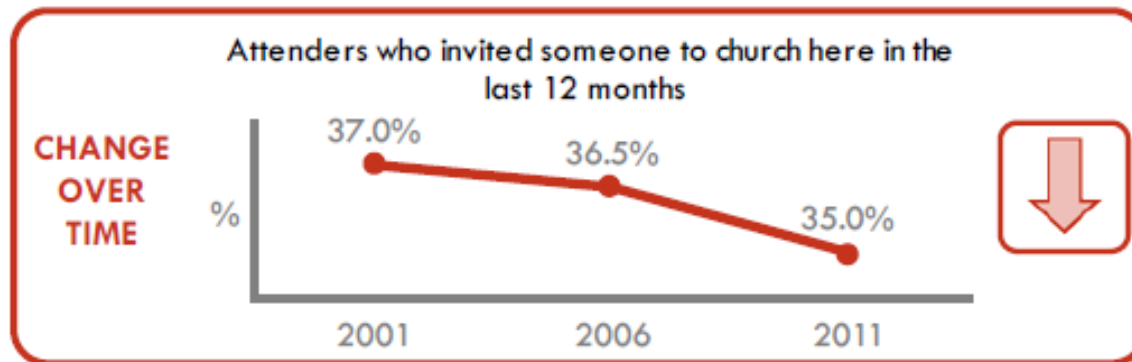
Vital faith communities focus beyond themselves – in word and deed

Action as individuals: 48% of attenders are volunteers (vs 38% of Australians)



Action as churches: Church-based service/action has increased (19% in 2001 to 25% in 2011).

Word: Attenders are more at ease talking about faith to others (65% in 2001 to 69% in 2011)...but it does not translate to inviting to church.



Attitudes of attenders re Christianity and public policy

An integration of private and public

80% of attenders (and 87% of leaders) agreed that **Christians should work to create a more just society.**

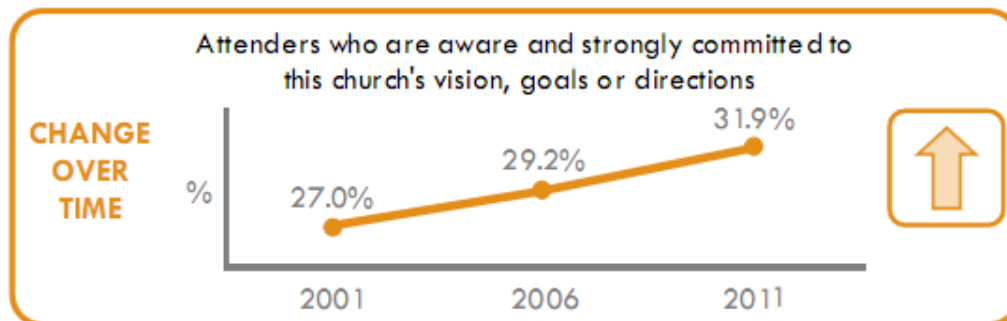
There was strong support from church attenders that **Christians should be involved in public policy issues** with:
80% support for Christian public comment and
75% support for Christian advocacy.

81% believed that **Christians have a responsibility to be active about environmental issues.**

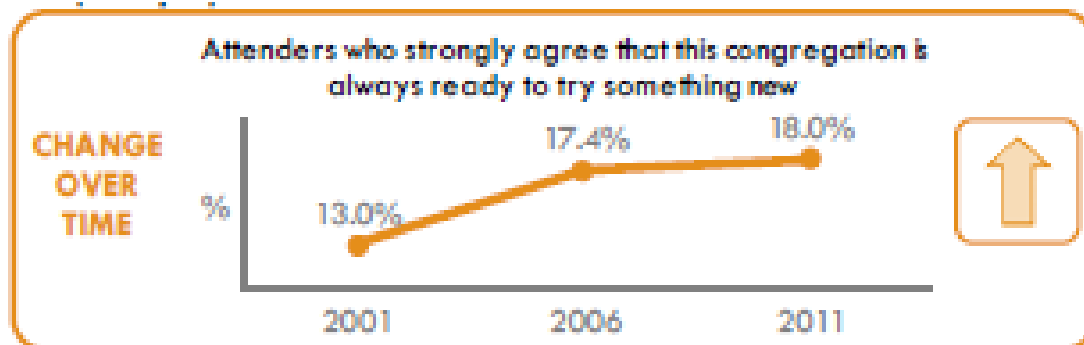
Clear and owned vision



Vital faith communities have a clear and owned vision



Vital faith communities are innovative – open to new possibilities



Core Qualities: a way to measure health

An Alive and Growing Faith

Your faith commitment? Relationship with God? Private devotional practices? Growth in faith?

Vital and Nurturing Worship

Services bring to you an experience of God?
Growth in relationship with God?
Helpful preaching?

Strong and Growing Belonging

Your sense of belonging in this church?
Levels of friendliness? Levels of conflict?
Your level of participation in the life of this church?

Clear and Owned Vision

A vision that is shared? Goals that are real and achievable?
Leadership looking to the future?

Inspiring and Empowering Leadership

Leadership inspiring and empowering? Leadership communicates clearly?
Leadership focuses on the wider community?

Imaginative and Flexible Innovation

Leadership encourages innovation? Congregation open to try new things? Openness to different worship style?

Practical and Diverse Service

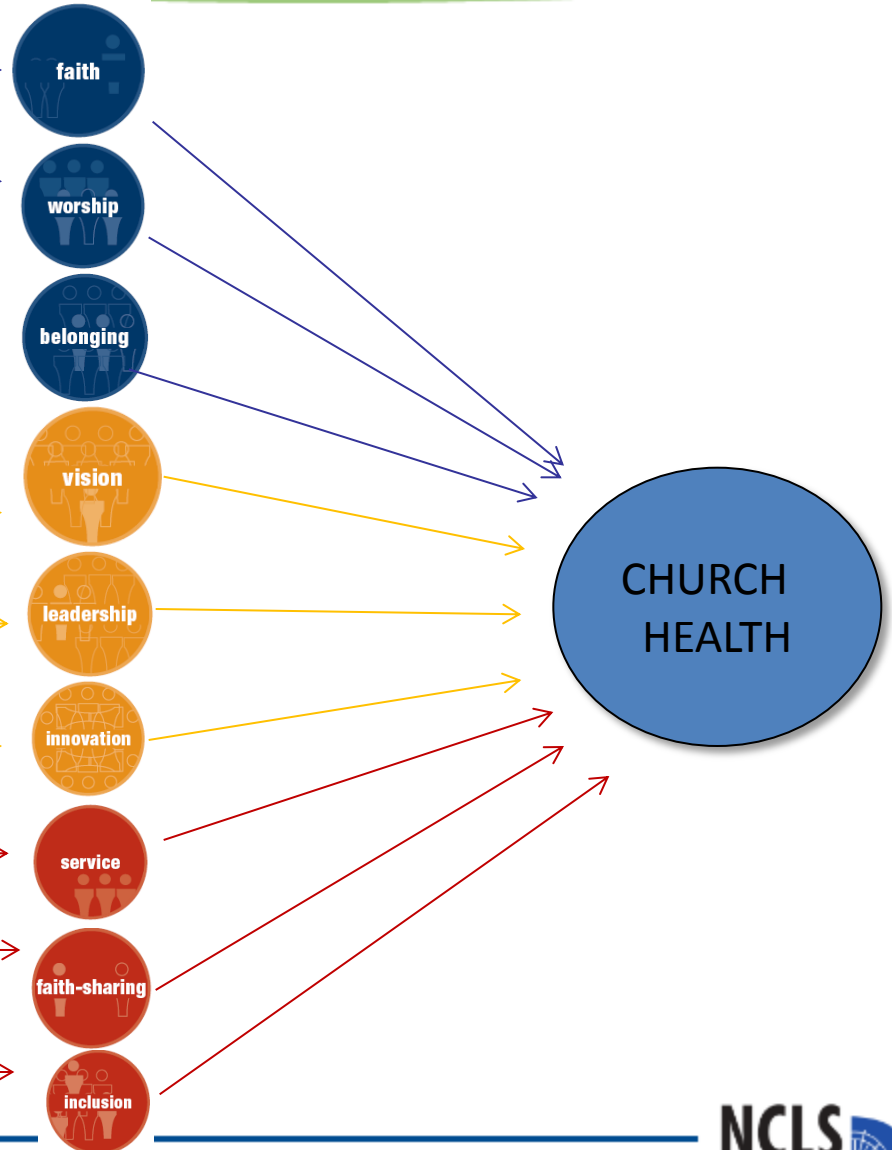
Involved in the church's welfare programs? Involved in community service organisations? Helping others informally?

Willing and Effective Faith-sharing

Involved in the church's evangelistic programs? Share faith with others? Invite others to church? Discuss faith matters at home?

Intentional and Welcoming Inclusion

How are new arrivals welcomed? How are those drifting away followed-up?



Core Qualities: a way to measure health

- Each Core Quality is valuable in its own right

We suggest that most church leaders would agree that an increase in any of the Core Qualities would be a desirable outcome. Does my church help people grow in their faith? Does it foster a strong sense of community? Even if a church community feels that it knows itself well, these simple indicators touch on issues that are not often directly addressed in the regular flow of church life.

- Strong Core Qualities are related to outcomes, such as church growth, newcomers or retaining youth

- Core Qualities are related to each other

Table 4.1: The strength of relationship between all Core Qualities

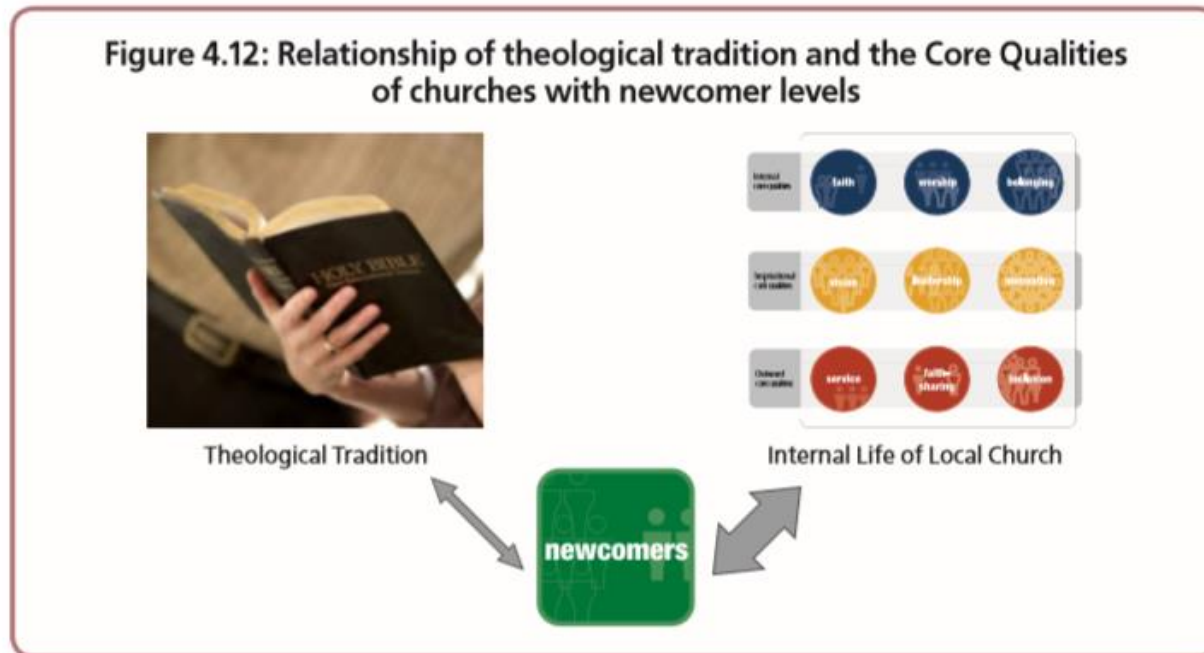
	Faith	Worship	Belonging	Vision	Leadership	Innovation	Service	Faith-sharing	Inclusion
Faith		**	**	***	**	*	*	***	**
Worship	**		***	**	***	**	-	***	**
Belonging	**	***		***	***	**	*	***	**
Vision	***	**	***		***	***	*	***	*
Leadership	**	***	***	***		***	*	***	**
Innovation	*	**	**	***	***		*	**	**
Service	*	-	*	*	*	*		**	*
Faith-sharing	***	***	***	***	***	**	**		***
Inclusion	**	**	**	*	**	**	*	***	

KEY: * = small ** = medium *** = large

Source: NCLS - Attender Surveys

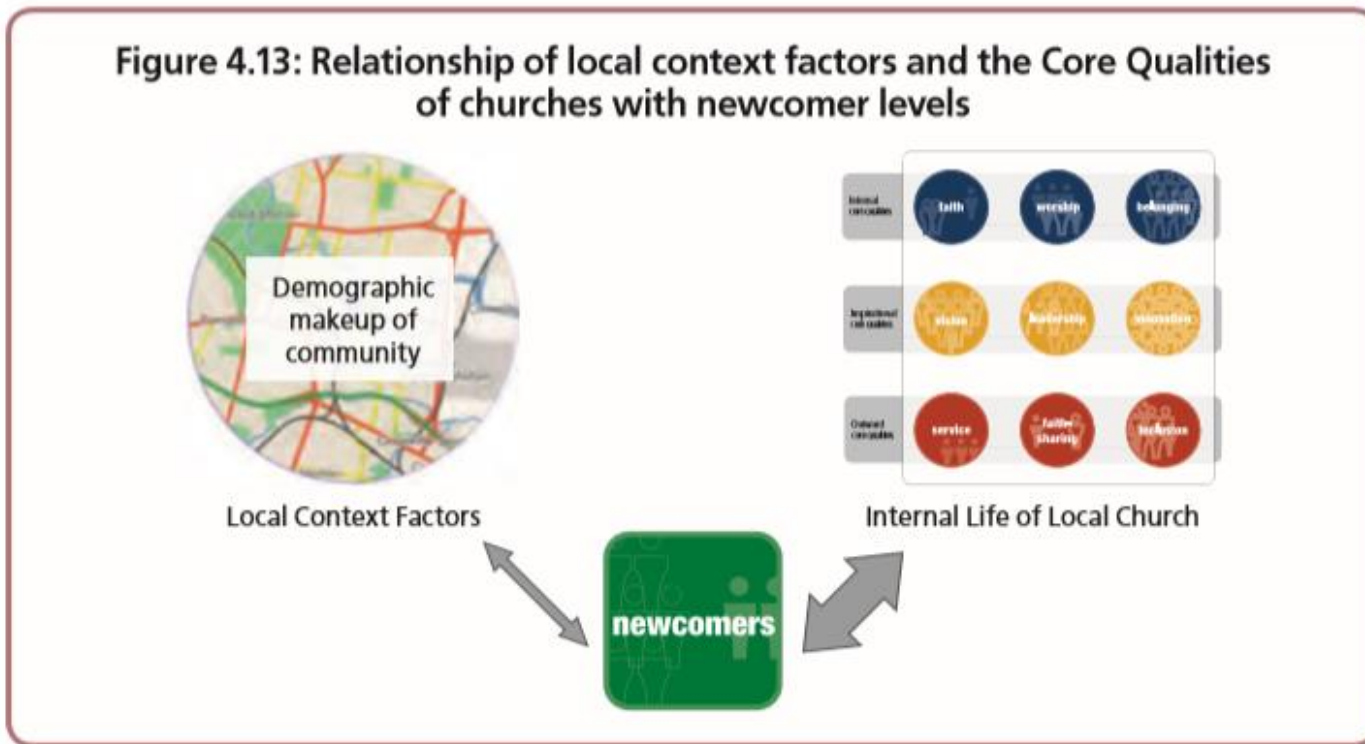
Influence of Theological Tradition on Church Health

Theological tradition does indeed play a role in the outcomes of church vitality. However the Core Qualities play a role in church vitality over and above such influences. Churches can benefit from the influences of Core Qualities regardless of their background, denomination or tradition.



The impact of context

Local community context does have an impact on church growth and decline, but the internal life of the church still makes a difference.



2016 National Church Life Survey

1991 to 2016:
25 years of research partnership
with more than 20 denominations and
movements

Discussion and Questions



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