

# HEALTHY CHURCHES EXPO 2020

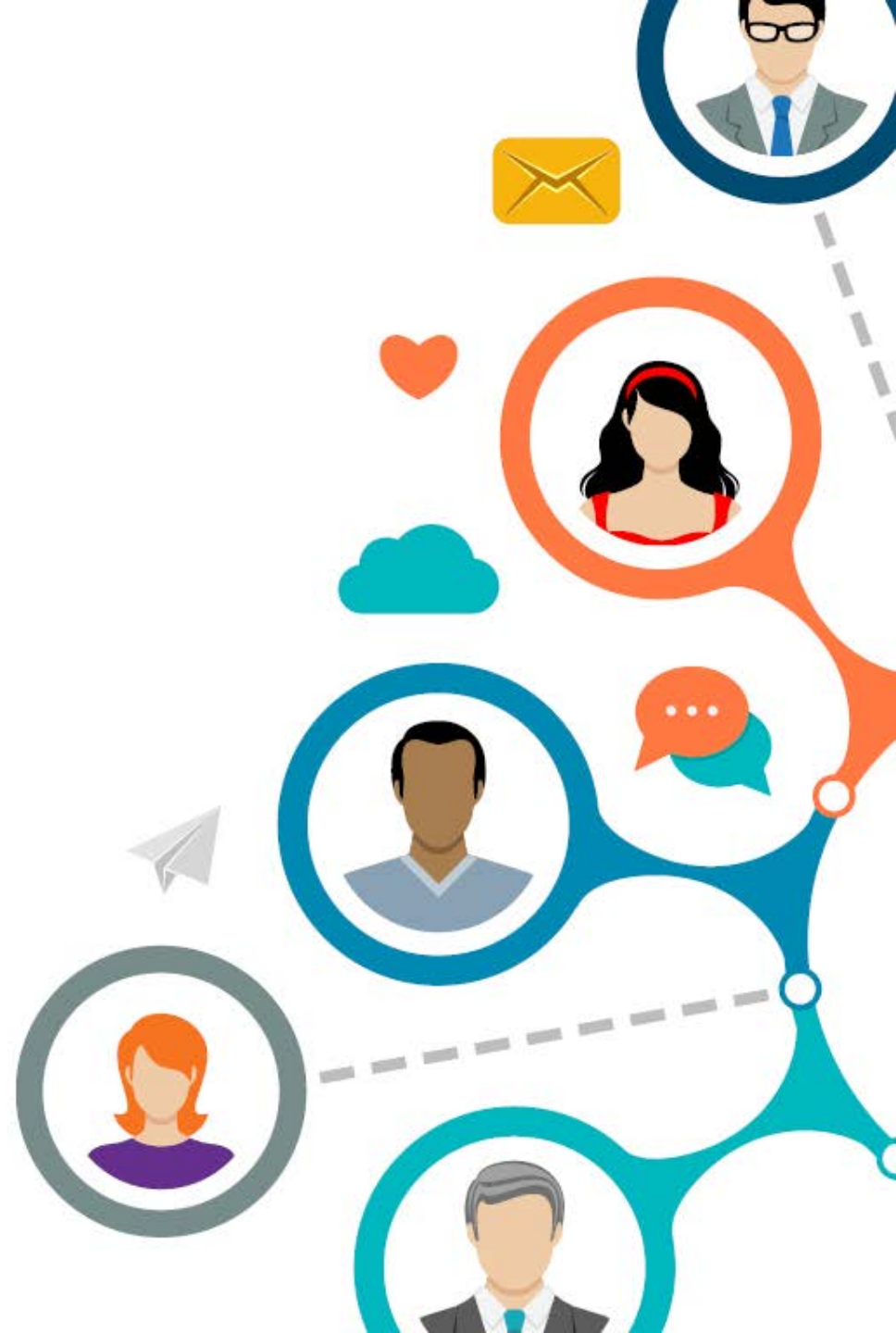


## NCLS: 30 Years of Research on What Makes Churches Healthy

Miriam Pepper  
NCLS Research

# Outline

1. About NCLS Research
2. About church health
3. Research findings
  - Characteristics of Uniting Church congregations
  - Factors associated with healthy churches
  - How churches grow their vitality



# 1. About NCLS Research

NCLS Research is a joint venture started by church mission agencies in the early 1990s. Today it is a partnership of the UCA Synod of NSW & the ACT (UME, Uniting), Anglicare Diocese of Sydney, BaptistCare NSW & ACT

**Our vision:** thriving churches with deepening understanding of their role and mission within a changing society

**Our mission:** to use credible research to identify signs of hope, to nurture life in both leadership and churches as well as to encourage the wider community to reflect on its spiritual journey and the churches place within it.

**Our organisational values:**



## 2. About church health

- What is church health?
- Who decides and why?
- NCLS Research model of church health



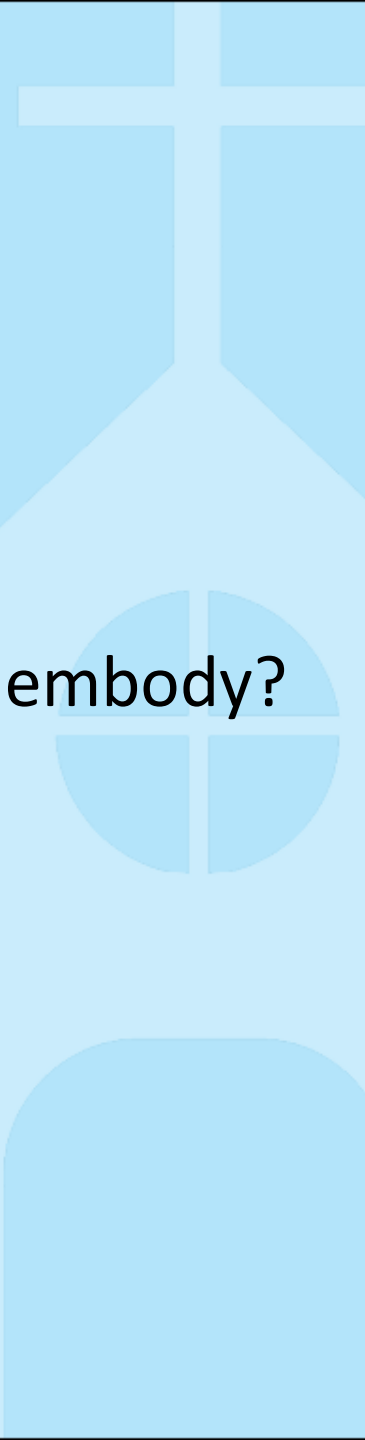
# What is church health?

Goals that a church ought to achieve?

Characteristics that a church ought to embody?

Practices that a church undertakes?

Who decides and why?



# Church growth vs church health: “Quantities” vs “qualities”

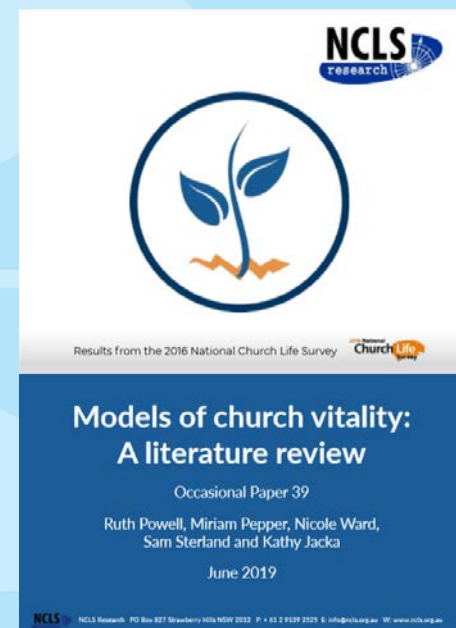
## Growth

- Increase in number of people attending
- Simple, one measure of “quantity”
- Matthew 28:18-20, “go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations”

## Health/vitality

- Multiple dimensions of “quality”
- Perspectives of multiple stakeholders
- John 10:10, “I came that you might have life and have it to the full”

Church vitality research has parallels with research on “organisational effectiveness” in other fields.



# Church health: NCLS Research model

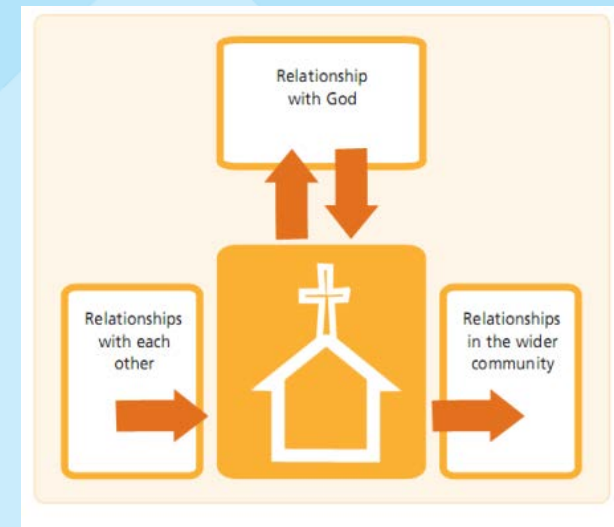
Goal-focused: What a church ought to achieve

Healthy churches **help people in their relationships:**

- with God
- with each other
- with the wider community

Healthy churches are “sustainable” in terms of their **attendance**

Healthy churches also have **vital leadership and directions for the future**



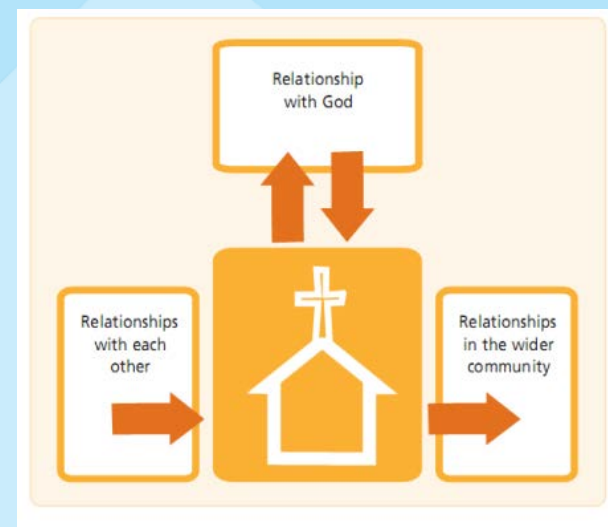
# Church health: Relationships

Goals for all churches are to help participants to develop and maintain:

**Relationship with God:** Healthy churches helping people to explore faith matters, develop religious knowledge, strength religious beliefs and practices.

**Relationships with each other:** In healthy churches, people feel that they belong.

**Relationships in the wider community:** In healthy churches people seek to make an impact through word and/or deed on the wider community (i.e. outward focus, mission, service, social transformation).



# Church health: Attendance

Healthy churches are “sustainable”, with enough inflow of new people.

Measuring inflow:



- **Young adult retention** – measures the extent to which a church retains its young adults.
- **Newcomers** – measures the proportion of attenders at a church are newcomers to church life.
- **Attendance change** – reports attendance change at a church and records inflow and outflow.

A reason for decline is the failure to replace older generations of attenders. It is easier to retain than to attract unchurched. (Voas 2014)

# Church health: Vital leadership

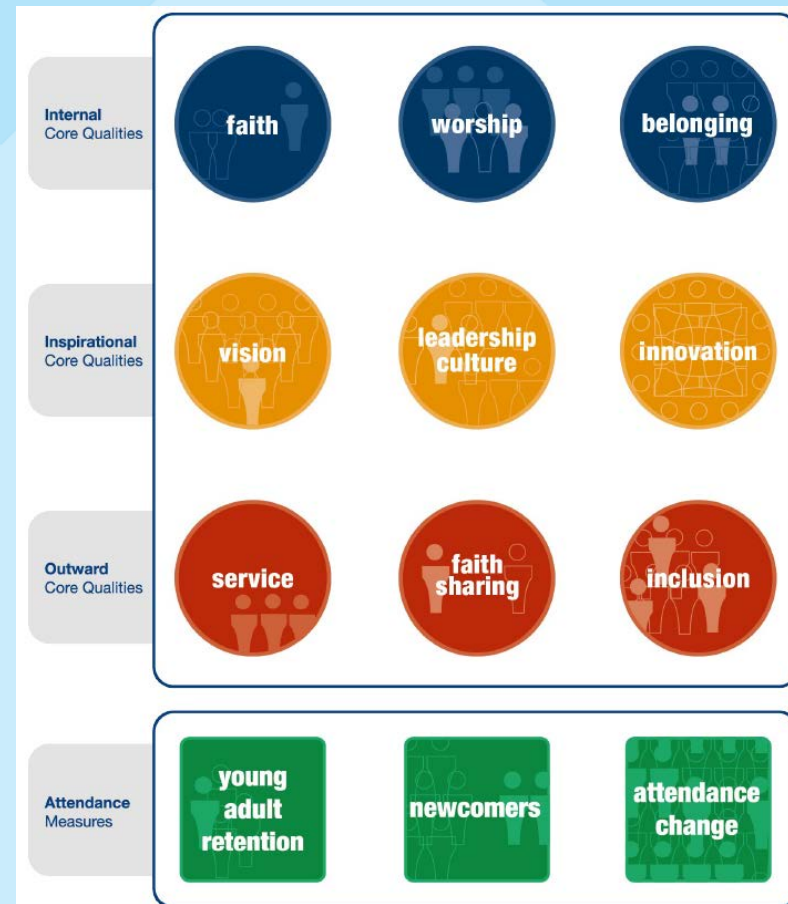
Healthy churches have **vital leadership and directions for the future.**

This is about the capacity or readiness for action within a church. It includes:

- Empowering leadership that includes others
- Clear and owned vision, goals or direction for the church
- A readiness to innovate and try new things
- A sense of confidence in the church – **“collective confidence”**

# Church health: NCLS Research model

- Developed from 1991 National Church Life Survey (Kaldor et al, 1992) onwards
- 20+ denominations
- Based on the perspectives of people in the pews
- Various configurations but the same core concepts
- Church Life Profiles – received by congregations, presbyteries and the Synod after each NCLS
- This is mainly large-scale quantitative research, with both strengths and limitations
- It is not comprehensive – **what is missing?**



## 3. Research findings

- Characteristics of Uniting Church congregations
- Factors associated with healthy churches
- How churches grow their vitality



# Based on three studies

## National Church Life Survey

- Purpose: Support churches to assess and grow their health and vitality
- In 2016, 275 church locations in the Synod took part, approx. 10,000 church attenders

## UCA NSW & ACT Census of Congregations, 2019-2020

- Purpose: Provide information about congregational size, characteristics and activities
- 455 church locations (85%) took part

## Enliven Churches project, 2018-

- Research question: How do churches become and remain vital?
- Interviews and discussion groups with 16 churches, identified as strong on a NCLS vitality measures

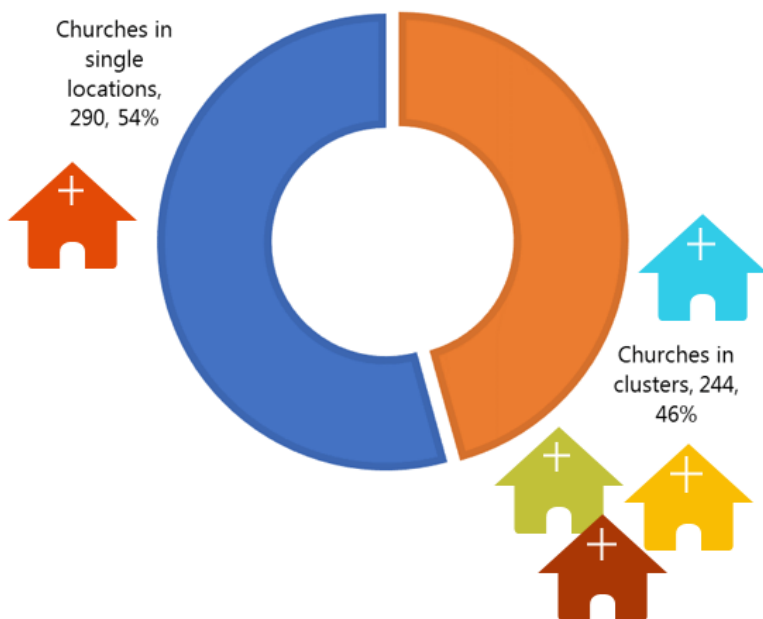
# 3.1. Characteristics of Uniting Church congregations

- Using a vitality lens
- Based on the NCLS and the UCA NSW & ACT Census of Congregations



# UCA: Some numbers

 **534 local churches**  
375 administrative structures  
(i.e. church councils)



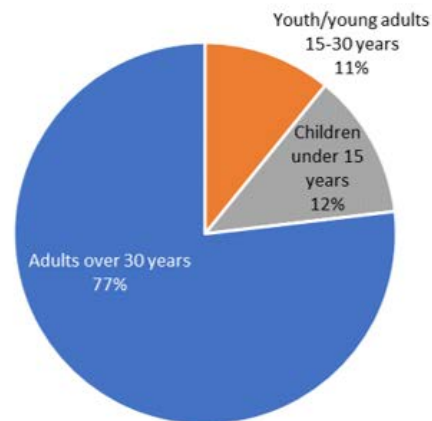
Source: 2019 UCA NSW & ACT Census of Congregations. Based on 534 locations.

## Church service attendance estimate

**23,570 attenders**  
per week, including:

2,896 children under 15 years of age

2,556 youth and young adults aged 15-30 years

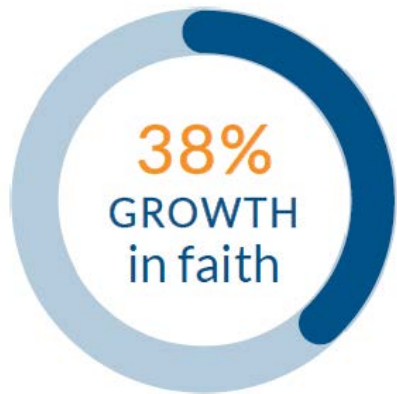


# UCA: Relationship with God



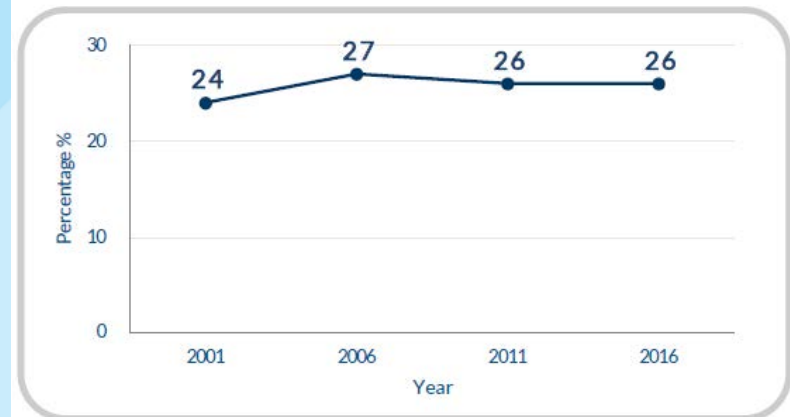
## PERSONAL FAITH

**38%** of attenders said that they had experienced much **GROWTH IN FAITH** in the previous 12 months



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time: Percent of attenders who experienced much growth in faith through their local church in the last 12 months**

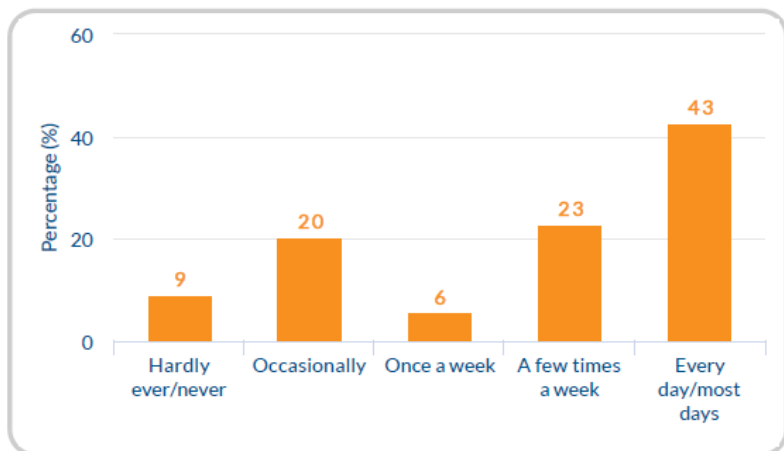


Source: Uniting Church NSW/ACT, NCLS 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016

Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# UCA: Relationship with God

**43%** spend time in PRAYER, BIBLE READING, MEDITATION everyday or most days



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

IMPORTANCE of GOD in people's lives:

"God is more important to me than almost anything else" **36%**

"God is the most important reality in my life" **44%**

Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# UCA: Relationship with God

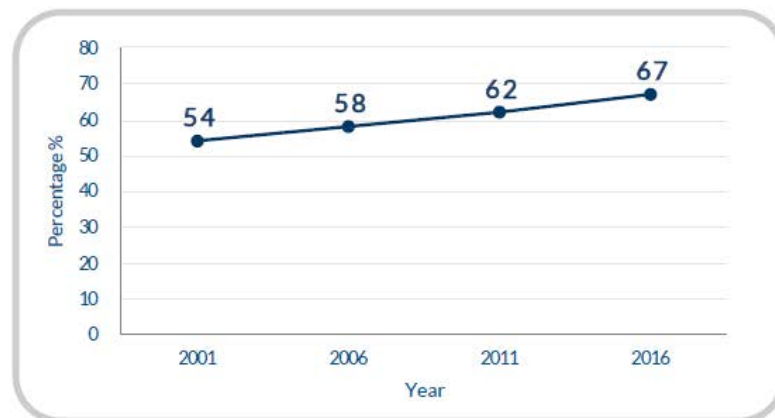
## Inspiration during worship

**67%** of attenders said they always/usually experience inspiration during services



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who always/usually experience inspiration during services



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# UCA: Relationship with each other



## BELONGING and INVOLVEMENT

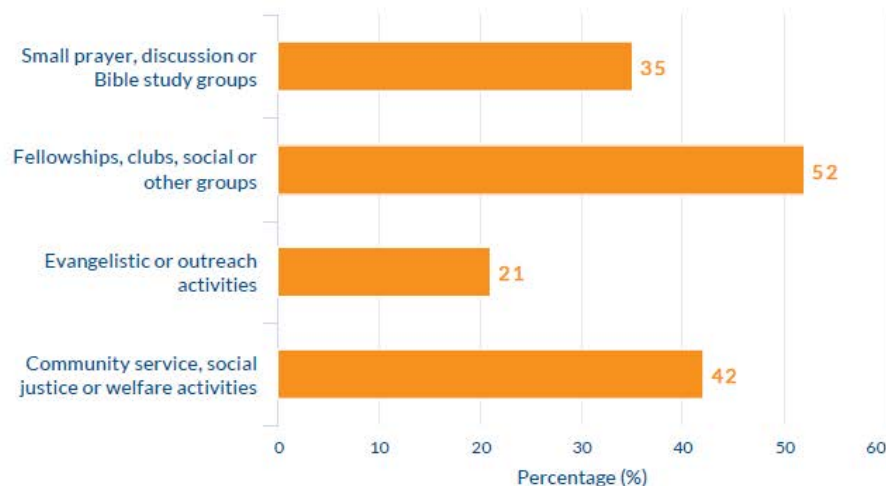


92% of people have a strong sense of belonging to their local church

90% found it easy to make friends within their local church



People in local churches are involved in various local church groups



# UCA: Relationship with each other

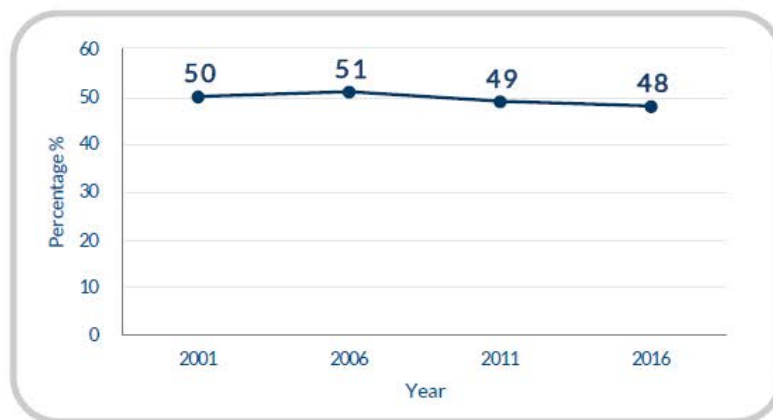
## Strong and growing belonging

**48%** of attenders said they have a strong sense of belonging to their church, which is growing.



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who have a strong and growing sense of belonging to their church



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# Relationship with the wider community

## Activities run by churches

**Table: Social services or social action activities in past 12 months**

Social service/action	Churches %
Visiting	55.6
Emergency relief	45.6
Political or social justice activities	17.5
Migrant support activities	14.9
Counselling services	12.0
Community development	12.0
Aged care services	11.8
Children or youth support	8.6
Activities for unemployed people	7.9
Accommodation	7.2
Care for the disabled	6.2
Animal welfare/environmental	5.0
Other service activities	28.1
No such activities	20.1

**Table: Outreach or evangelistic activities in past 12 months**

Outreach/evangelistic activity	Churches %
Event to engage the community	66.9
Evangelistic church services	26.8
Doorknock programs/letterbox drops	10.5
Evangelistic Bible studies	9.5
Drop-in centre	7.5
Street evangelism	5.4
Other evangelistic/outreach activities	12.2
No such activities	22.6

Source: 2019 UCA NSW & ACT Census of Congregations

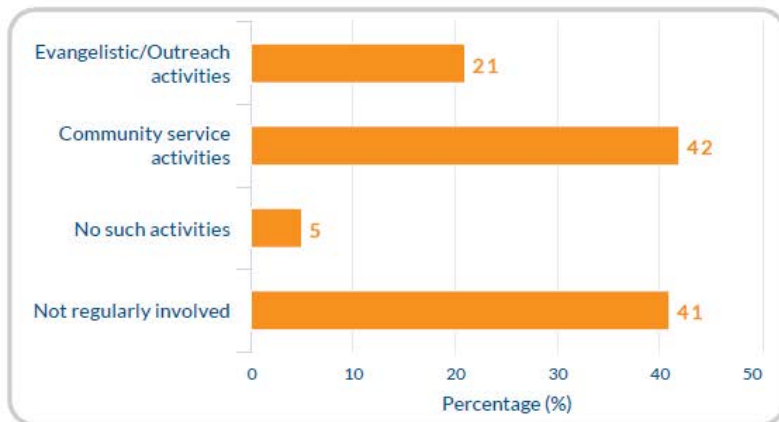
# Relationship with the wider community



## INVOLVEMENT IN OUTWARD-FACING GROUPS

54% of people reach out to the wider community through activities of their local churches

61% of people participate in wider community groups



*Note: Attenders could choose more than one option, so percentages will not add to 100%*

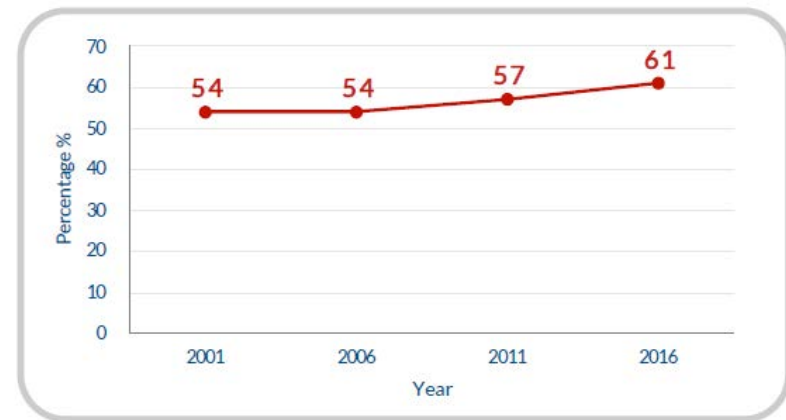
# Relationship with the wider community

## Informal acts of service

Informal action in last 12 months	%
Donated money to a charitable organisation	78
Visited someone in hospital	57
Lent or gave money to someone outside your family	45
Helped someone through a personal crisis (not sickness)	38
Given some of your possessions to someone in need	36
Cared for someone who was very sick	31
Contacted a parliamentarian/councillor on a public issue	19
Tried to stop someone abusing alcohol or drugs	9

Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who informally helped others in three or more ways in the last year



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# Relationship with the wider community

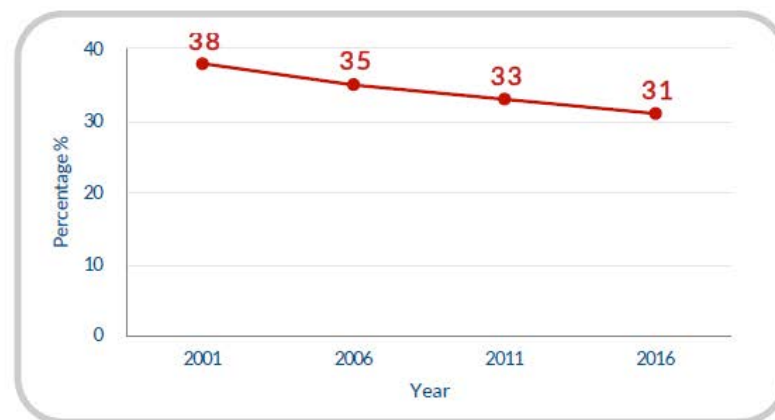
## Inviting others to church

**31%** of attenders said they had invited a friend or relative who does not currently attend church to a service in the last year



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who invited a friend or relative who does not currently attend church to a service in the last year



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# UCA: Attendance

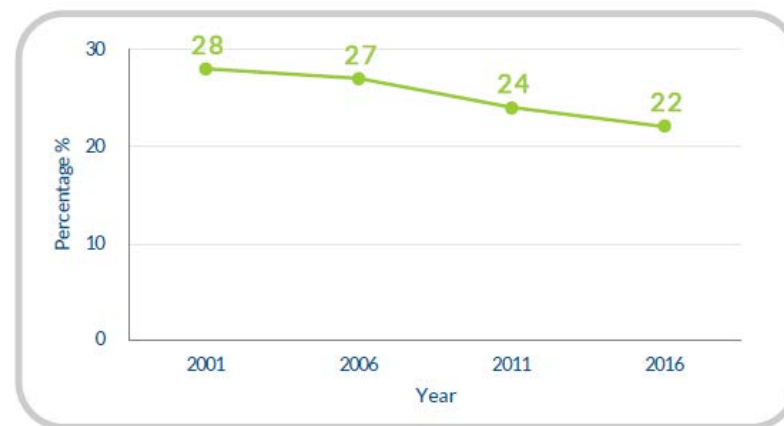
## New arrivals

**22%** of attenders here are new arrivals in the past five years.



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who were new arrivals in the 5 years prior to the survey



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

## Newcomers who weren't previously attending a church

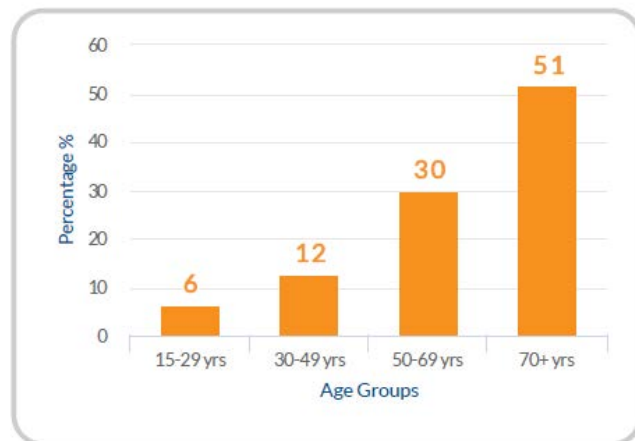
- 5% of attenders are newcomers who weren't previously attending a church
- 1 in 3 churches have no newcomers at all, while 1 in 6 churches have 10% or more

Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# UCA: Attendance

## Age and age satisfaction

The AVERAGE AGE of people is **66** years



Satisfaction with what is offered here  
“for people your own age”

Percentage very satisfied or satisfied:

**80%:** All attenders

**59%:** 15-18 year olds

**57%:** 19-25 year olds

# UCA: Attendance

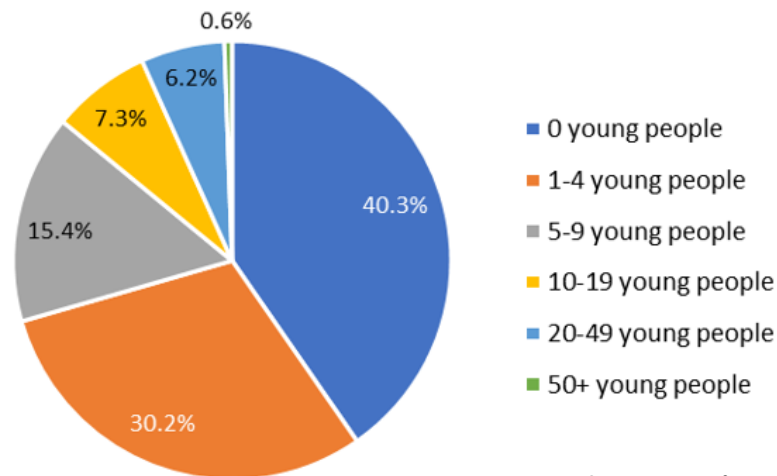
## Retention of young adults

**48%** is the proportion of attenders' children (aged 15+ and living at home) who attend a church



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

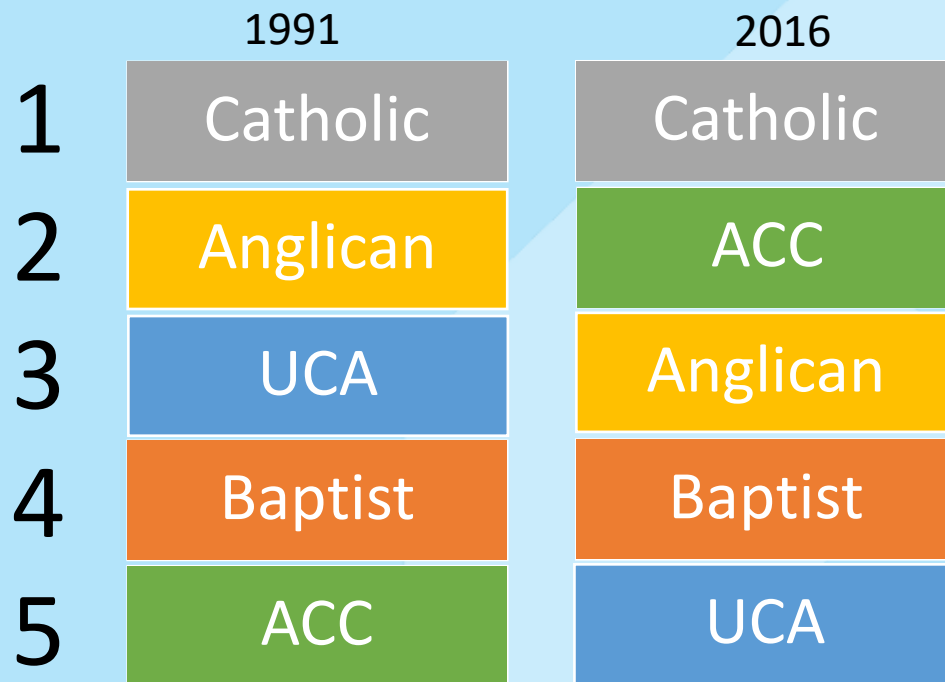
**Figure: Percentage of churches by number of youth and young adults (aged 15-30)**



Source: 2019 UCA NSW & ACT Census of Congregations.

# UCA: Attendance

Top 5 denominations in Australia, in size order



Source: NCLS Churches Estimates of Attendance Database. Based on estimates collected through National Church Life Surveys (as reported by church leaders and administrators).

# UCA: Leadership and directions

## Empowering leadership

### Attendees who perform leadership & ministry roles

**36%:** Worship services (teach/preach, music, lead/assist in service)

**10%:** Children's ministry/youth ministry role

**11%:** Small group leadership

**9%:** Administrator role

**19%:** Council/board/elder/deacon

**12%:** Committee/task force member

**16%:** Pastoral care/visitation role

**57%:** Perform any of above leadership/ministry roles

**19%:** Some other role

**25%** of attenders said their local church's leaders have encouraged them to find and use their gifts and skills here to a great extent



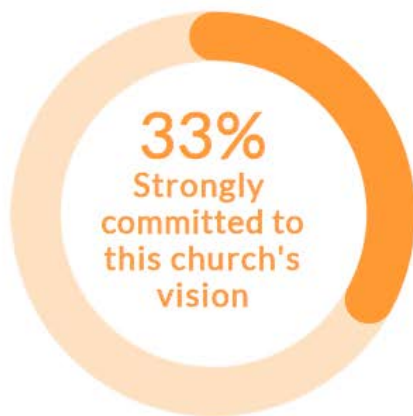
**57%** of attenders perform at least one leadership or ministry role



# UCA: Leadership and directions

## Commitment to vision

**33%** of attenders said they are aware of and strongly committed to their local church's vision, goals or directions



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who are aware of and strongly committed to their local church's vision, goals or directions



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

# UCA: Leadership and directions

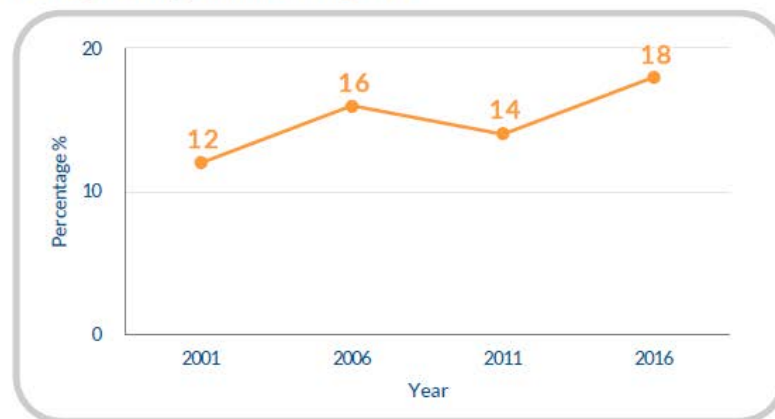
## Ready to try something new

**18%** of attenders strongly agree that their local church is always ready to try something new



Source: 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

**Change over time:** Percent of attenders who strongly agree that their local church is always ready to try something new



Source: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 NCLS (UCA NSW/ACT)

## 3.2. Factors associated with healthy churches

- Based on NCLS data (and CLS data from overseas studies) across multiple denominations



# Factors associated with healthy churches

Many of our studies assume that the local church can make changes. Yet, many factors outside the control of the church impact on vitality outcomes.

The context in which the church is located:

- Younger age profile
- Urban location
- People moving into an area
- New housing
- Arrivals from other countries
- Changing demography is often linked to decline

The faith tradition:

- Charismatic, Pentecostal
- Evangelical

# Factors associated with healthy churches

## Dimensions of health are inter-related

Some aspects appear time and again in attracting/fostering/relation to other aspects:

- Faith sharing
- Empowering leadership
- Clear and owned vision
- Growth in faith

# Factors associated with healthy churches

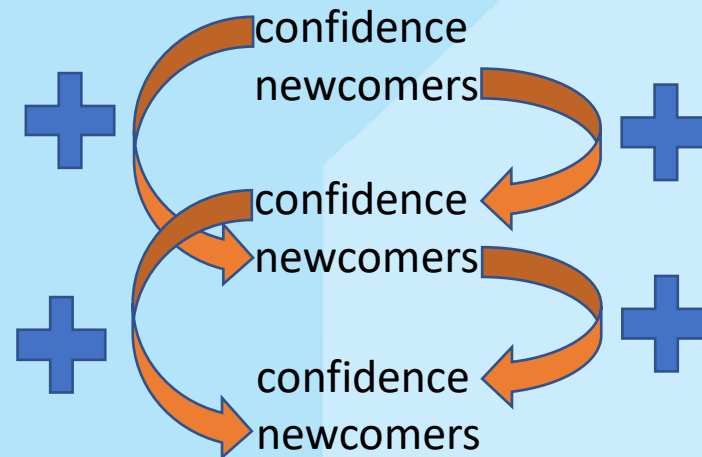
## Attracting newcomers

Key priorities for attracting newcomers (based on CLS data from Australia, UK, USA, NZ):

1. Promote a strong sense of belonging among attenders
2. Encourage attenders to invite others to church
3. Be an empowering leader
4. Discover a sense of vision and direction
5. Nurture growth in faith and movement towards commitment
6. Aim for joyful, inspiring services
7. Introduce contemporary worship
8. Encourage informal acts of helping
9. Look after the young
10. Focus on people beyond church life
11. Be willing to try new things

# Factors associated with healthy churches

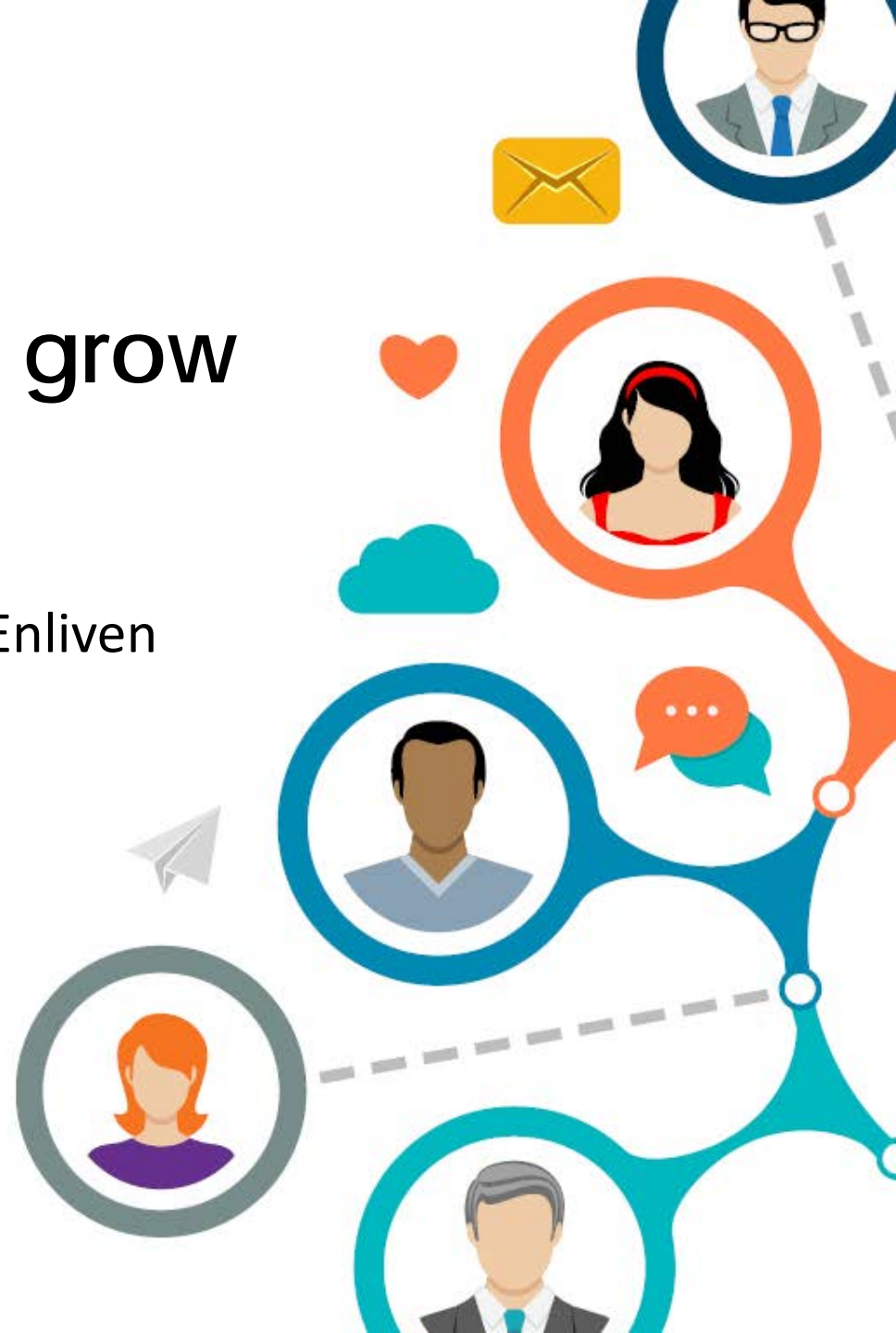
A spiral between confidence in the church and newcomers



Sterland, S., Powell, R., Hancock, N., Pepper, M., & Dowson, M. (2018). "Newcomers and Collective Confidence in Protestant Churches: A Longitudinal Study from 2001 to 2011". In *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*. Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382640\\_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004382640_013)

## 3.3. How churches grow their vitality

- Preliminary findings from the Enliven Churches Project



# How churches grow their vitality

Based on an interview with the senior leader (clergy) and discussion group of lay leaders at each of 16 churches:

- Catholic and Protestant (including one UCA congregation)
- Large and small
- Urban and rural

Preliminary results. We are partway through analysis.

# How churches grow their vitality

- Express and reinforce core identity and values
- Engage in intentional strategies
- Discern and communicate a clear and owned vision for the future
- Be proactive in learning
- Take risks and step out into the unknown
- Make facilities friendly and accessible
- Use accessible language
- Have clear processes for welcoming and hospitality
- Practise inclusiveness
- Invite and empower people to contribute
- Be thoughtful and intentional about resourcing
- Practise sustainable leadership – rest, boundaries, hobbies

HEALTHY  
CHURCHES  
EXPO 2020

# Like to know more?



## Panorama

Scanning the landscape  
of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT



2016 National  
Church Life  
Survey

Inside  
Mapping the church landscape  
The spiritual life of attenders  
Who goes to church  
Generations & church  
Church & community connections

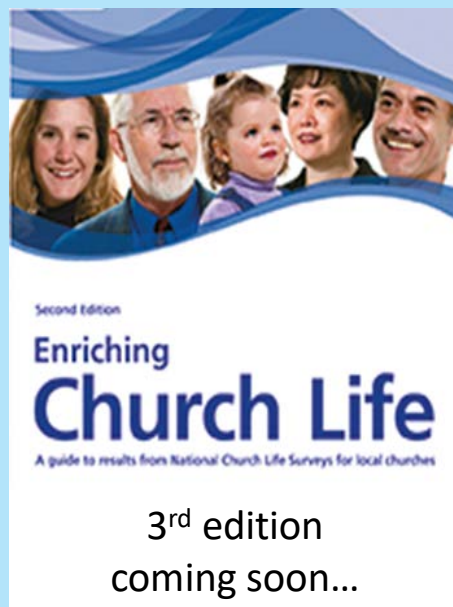
Advocacy  
Environmental activity & awareness  
Healthy churches  
First peoples & church  
Cultural diversity & church  
Leadership

Findings from the  
2016 National Church Life Survey  
by NCLS Research

NCLS  
research

uniting  
Mission & Education

Uniting

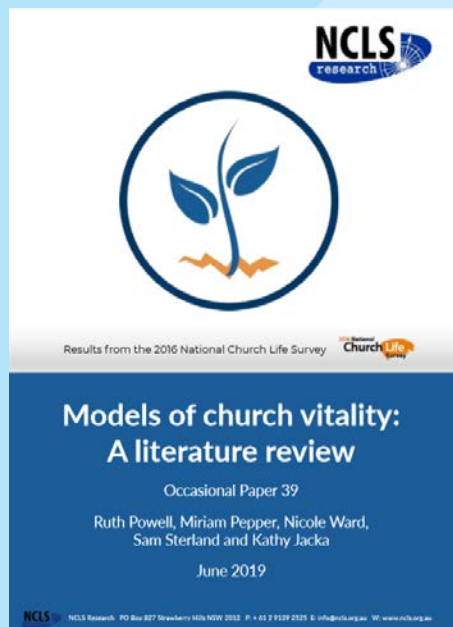


Second Edition

## Enriching Church Life

A guide to results from National Church Life Surveys for local churches

3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
coming soon...



NCLS  
research



Results from the 2016 National Church Life Survey

## Models of church vitality: A literature review

Occasional Paper 39

Ruth Powell, Miriam Pepper, Nicole Ward,  
Sam Sterland and Kathy Jacka

June 2019

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## 2019 Uniting Church NSW/ACT Census of congregations



Headline Report

July 2020

Prepared by NCLS Research  
www.ncls.org.au

## Enliven Churches Project

Reports and resources coming soon...

Plus other resources & publications:

<http://www.ncls.org.au/research/>

<https://library.ncls.org.au/>

<https://shop.ncls.org.au/>

# HEALTHY CHURCHES EXPO 2020



## Thank you!

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Mission &  
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