

CHURCH VITALITY: A REVIEW OF TRENDS OVER TIME

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In a changing and challenging context, how is the Australian church faring? Are there signs of health?

The NCLS Research team has access to a unique data source that allows us to map changes in the Australian church landscape and church vitality. This article shares some key features of a review of trends from the past few decades.

The NCLS Research team have held the role of 'mission researchers' for the Australian church. This national survey is for attenders (including children) and local church leaders. In 2016, around 240,000 individuals from 3000 local churches in 20 denominations and over 7000 leaders completed surveys.

Six features of the Australian church landscape

Before we talk about what we want to see happen and how to get there, we need to face the confronting reality of what is happening in our surrounding culture and Church right now.

1. **Church attendance has begun to plateau** - It is old, and often repeated, news that the Australian church has been declining over recent decades. However, we have observed that since 1990 the rate of decline of monthly church attendance has slowed. This data comes from self-reported monthly attendance at religious services from national sample survey. In addition, using church estimates of 'head counts', the decline in weekly church attendance has now plateaued.

2. **Protestant churches are growing** - When considered together, Protestant churches are growing in numbers. While a closer study of denominations shows that Catholic and Mainstream Protestant churches (e.g. Anglican, Uniting, Lutheran) continue a pattern of overall decline, other Protestants have experienced moderate growth between 1991 and 2016. Pentecostal movements have experienced high growth. The net effect of these different patterns is net growth for all Protestant churches.

3. **The size order of the top five denominations has changed** - In 1991 in terms of churchgoers, the top five denominations in order of size were Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Baptist and ACC (AoG). By 2016 this order had changed to reflect the differing growth patterns of attenders: Catholic, ACC (AoG), Anglican, Baptist and Uniting.

4. **Inflow of new arrivals has been largely stable** - People can join churches having previously been in other churches or they can come from outside the church community. Considering all denominations together, the inflow of new arrivals into churches between 1996 and 2016 has been largely stable.

5. **Local church leaders believe they are effective in their roles** - The 2016 NCLS Leaders Survey enabled local church leaders to reflect on their roles and experiences of ministry. By 'local church leaders' we mean the local minister/pastor or lay leader in a senior leadership role. While ministry can be a demanding role, when asked how they would rate their effectiveness in their

current role over the previous few months, most ministers rated their effectiveness in their role highly or very highly.

6. **Current attenders are more likely to be positive about church than previously** - Healthy churches help people in their relationship with God, with each other and with the wider community. They also have vital leadership and directions for the future. Based on the responses of church attenders, a range of indicators of vitality were all higher in 2016 than previously, including:

- Faith: Growth in faith
- Worship: Inspired during worship services
- Service: Informal acts of service & in church-based service groups
- Faith-sharing: Look for opportunities to share faith and involved in evangelistic groups
- Vision: Commitment to the church's vision
- Innovation: Agree church is ready something new has increased

Vitality trends and some strategic responses

Our review of different aspects of church vitality found signs of health are stronger than before and a sense of collective confidence is increasing. Overall, we see a consolidation across church life. The reality of a changing context has largely been accepted. While the ageing profile of the church and increasing ethnic diversity will be key drivers for the future of the church, attention has turned to sharpening clarity about the core practices related to mission, discipleship, service and worship.

The Church is calibrated for a world that no longer exists. Based on research findings, we make some suggestions for strategic responses.

Keep Jesus at the centre

1. Help families share faith with family members.
2. Invest in worship services as a core mission activity.

Give ongoing attention to helping people belong

3. Provide newcomers with ways to meet people.
4. Build relationships in multicultural churches across groups.

Pair action with witness

5. Encourage inviting others.
6. Volunteer in both church & community groups.
7. Help people find words to express why they act.

Build a culture of collective confidence

8. Clarify vision and align all activities around it.
9. Start new initiatives.
10. Equip and empower lay leadership.

Do we take an optimistic or pessimistic view of the future? Perhaps they can be held in a creative tension: staying honest and hopeful, realistic and courageous, focussing on the immediate issues, and yet remembering the much longer story of the Church in mission across history. www.ncls.org.au ■