

2023 Church Life Survey NZ - Resource for Church Leaders

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Introduction

The 2023 Church Life Survey offers a snapshot of and about people in your church. It contains information on the demographics of those who attend, what they value about church life, how they engage in the wider community, their spiritual growth and health, and their perceptions of church direction and leadership. As such, it provides a treasure trove of information!

Sometimes treasure troves can be a bit overwhelming, and this document is designed to help you as you reflect as a leader, leadership team, or church on the insights that can be gleaned from the Church Life Survey. It offers a whole lot of questions for reflection as you review the Dashboard Reports on your church that you can download from <https://clsnz.org/>. It also makes some suggestions about additional information (including cross tabulations, from the website) that might be interesting and helpful.

You might choose to work your way systematically through each section, or you can dip in and out, looking at questions that relate to parts of the Reports that have already caught your eye as being interesting or important for your context. Either is great!

As you reflect, keep note of the things that encourage you. These should be celebrated! Perhaps there are things that surprise you. Keep track of those too. It is also likely that there are things in this report that concern you: these should also be noted down. Then, as you consider the encouraging, the surprising and the concerning, begin to think about action steps that you might helpfully take in response. This isn't just about "fixing" things that aren't so great. It is also about celebrating (and perhaps enhancing) what is already going well.

Of course, there will be many things that you cannot "fix". The wider church and cultural landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand is characterised by declining religious affiliation (as evidenced in the Census data), declining church attendance (as evidenced in the denominational records of the denominations that keep them), overall post-covid church attendance decline (whether permanent or temporary is yet to be seen), and a declining influence of Christianity on society. This is part of our current reality as a Church in Aotearoa New Zealand, and it impacts local churches in significant ways.²

At the same time, a story of decline is not the whole story. God is still at work in our churches and in our communities. Churches faithfully witness to God's goodness and Christians continue to grow. In Aotearoa New Zealand, spirituality is increasingly recognised as crucial for holistic and communal wellbeing. Migration has brought people of faith to NZ, including Roman Catholics to Auckland. These migrants are younger and more likely to be welcoming new generations of children. The *Faith and Belief Study* showed that most people can imagine themselves investigating faith and/or spirituality further. In fact, it is really only 18% of the population who are strongly resistant to Christianity. Interestingly, younger generations

¹ With thanks to the Baptist Churches of NZ for partially funding the writing of this document.

² I have written more on this here: Lynne Taylor, "Learnings from a More Secular Future: Insights from Aotearoa New Zealand," *Post-Christendom Studies* 8 (2023-2024).

are slightly more likely than older generations to be warm towards Christianity, suggesting that growing up in more secular times does not directly correlate to a lack of openness to Christianity. My own PhD research on why previously unchurched people become Christians today confirms that seeing people live out an authentic Christian faith, and engaging in spiritual practices work towards faith development.

I suggest elsewhere that today's churches are invited to consider: "How might we be the church today?" "How do we faithfully witness to God's goodness and grace?" "How do we sustain the spirituality, and faith development of people in our churches?" And "How might we resource those beyond our churches who want to embrace or resource their spirituality? Of those who want to live flourishing lives?"³

You might like to hold those questions in your mind as well, as you work your way through this document and your church's Dashboard Reports. May you be blessed, strengthened and encouraged as you do.

Accessing your reports

To access your reports, you need your Church code and Report code. These are available in your online **Survey Pack**, down the bottom left. Click **Login to view reports** and enter the codes.

If you cannot find your Survey Pack, click here to retrieve it

https://clsnz.org/registration/retrieve_survey_pack

If you know your Church code and Report code click here to login

<https://clsnz.org/report/login>

³ Ibid.

Report A: About You (Your People)

This first report offers some general information about the people from your church who completed the questionnaire. You're invited to listen to their perspectives and insights.

A2: Frequency of attendance

How frequently do people generally attend your church? We often assume or expect weekly attendance, but this is not true for everyone. Might the ways that you communicate, teach, disciple or worship negatively impact less frequent attenders in any way?

Did any visitors complete the form? Do they usually attend another church? How might you be a place of welcome and inclusion for visitors and for newcomers.

A3: Longevity (length) of attendance

Check the proportions of people who have been attending up to 10 years, between 10-20 years and over 20 years. Is there a healthy proportion of newcomers? How do you work to welcome new people and have them become part of your church life? Is there more you could be doing here? Are there things that you do (or underlying attitudes) that might prevent or hinder newcomers from deeper engagement?

Additional questions you might ask (via the website):

- How do people who have been part of your church for different lengths of time respond to the other questions? For example,
 - What do they particularly value about the church?
 - Do they have a good sense of belonging?

A4 and A5: Religious / Faith background (also see F3)

Are there many people in your church who have come from an unchurched background or from a different religious background? What unique teaching and discipleship needs might they have?

What proportion of people are new to your denomination? In the past, there were high levels of loyalty to denominations and if people moved location, they usually found the nearest church of their denomination. Today, except among Catholics, denominational loyalty is relatively low. How do or might you help newcomers to understand the unique characteristics or values of your denomination? (Also see F3: how important is it to people in your church that it is part of your denomination?)

A6 and A7: Age and Gender

Take a careful look at the ages that are strongly represented in your church. Think about how your church's age-sex structure could and should affect the character and ministries of your church. Are you catering for people of all the ages represented? You may also identify potential issues and current or coming pressures if there are missing generations in your graph. For instance, what happens if you add ten years to everyone's current age? Are there things that could or should change to help people of different ages to become part of your church?

Churches generally have more females than males attending. (Nationally, 61% of respondents were female.) How does your church compare?

A8 and A9: Ethnicity and Country of birth

What ethnic groups are represented in your church, and where are people born? Consider what the needs and aspirations of any migrants might be. (Have you asked them about their needs and aspirations?) How does your church support migrants? Are there other ways you might help newcomers find a home here in Aotearoa. Children born to migrant families generally have different needs, challenges, and aspirations than those who migrated as adults. How does or might your church support the holistic wellbeing of any second-generation young people who attend your church?

A10 and A13: Highest qualifications and Employment status

How well qualified are those in your church? How do and how might your sermons, small groups, etc cater for the diversity of people represented?

What proportion of your church is retired? Working full time? How might your church engage and support people with different patterns of employment?

A11 and A12: Marital status

What proportion of people in your church are married? Single? How many are alone again, having been previously married? How well do your ministries and the way that you talk about the composition of your church reflect your current reality? For instance, might you be inadvertently excluding people by emphasising the importance of families without defining them broadly? A shift to an emphasis on intergenerational relationships may be more inclusive.

Do people's spouses also attend your church? Nationally, 76% of spouses do so. How does your church compare? What opportunities and challenges might nonattending spouses offer?

Overall, consider:

How do these demographics compare to the wider community your church is a part of? (See the Going Deeper section for how to access more information.)

Report B: You And This Local Church **(Values, Belonging and Spiritual Resourcing & Growth)**

The second report shows responses to the questions relating to your congregation's values, spiritual growth and sense of belonging.

B1: Valued aspects of church life

What do people in your church most value about your church? How do these values align with the espoused values of your church? Does anything surprise you? Does anything concern you? If so, why? Different people value different things. How could such differences inform your leadership? Could they explain any conflict or tension currently occurring? (You might like to investigate any age variation in things that are valued, using the online cross tabulations.)

B2: Sense of belonging (Also see F7-F10: Inclusiveness, friendship and involvement)

To what extent are people experiencing a sense of belonging to your church? Is the sense of belonging generally growing, staying the same, or declining? What might encourage belonging in your church. What might discourage belonging? How can you work to enhance people's sense of belonging? (It is worth noting that the *Faith and Belief Study* showed that those in our wider communities also desire for a deeper sense of community and belonging.)

B3-B9: Experiences of worship services, and Spiritual growth

Overall, to what extent is your church resourcing the spiritual journey of respondents? As you look through B4 to B9, what is it that people particularly value? Do people find the preaching helpful to their lives? Do they appreciate the music? Do they feel inspired and experience a sense of God's presence? Are they growing in their understanding of God, and being challenged to take action? Which of these do you think are most important? Why? What would you like your church to be known for? How might you (further) strengthen this area of church life? (It would be interesting to look at some cross tabulations here – what are younger people most positive about, for example.)

What can you do to enhance people's spiritual resourcing? What in this regard are you doing well? What could you be working on?

B10-B15: Children and Youth

Families often settle and remain in churches where there are appropriate age-specific ministries as well as good intergenerational interaction. How satisfied are people in your church with what is offered for children, youth, and young adults. It is worth doing some cross tabulations on these questions – for instance, looking at the responses to these questions made by respondents who have children living at home. Think about how your church can support the passing on of faith to the next generation. Programmes for children and young people will be important here, but that is not all that is important. Offering support for parents, and linking older and younger generations in supportive relationships are also vital.

Breaking it down further

Cross tabulations will help you better understand the relationship between people's responses. For example, comparing the age of attenders and the things that they value; or whether those with children are satisfied with the ministries that are on offer for young people.

Report C: You And Your Faith (Personal Faith)

Questions in the third report relate to your congregation's faith and spiritual growth. These are core tasks of the local church, although the data shows that people are also drawing on resources beyond the church to strengthen their faith.

C1-C3: Growth in faith and Devotional activities

Do those in your congregation think that they are growing in faith? To what extent do they see their growth as being because of the church, other groups, or their own activity? How are people resourcing their own spiritual lives? Are they regularly reading the bible and/or engaging in other devotional activities? How does your church encourage and resource such engagement in spiritual practices? Do you talk about ways people might deepen their relationship with God? Engaging in spiritual practices is also an important part of faith formation for those who would not call themselves Christian. (Consider again the frequency of attendance data: with people attending church less frequently, it is even more important that they have resources for strengthening their faith beyond Sunday.)

C4-C5: View of the Bible and Faith description

How do people in your church view the bible? Are their views consistent with the ethos of your church? How about their approach to faith? Again, is it consistent with the ethos of your church?

If not, what might be some reasons why that is the case? Do you think their views should be consistent with the church? If so, what teaching input might be needed or helpful? Should everyone hold the exact same perspectives? What challenges and opportunities might result from people having different views or understandings?

Report D: You And Your Community (Involvement Beyond The Church)

The fourth report considers ways that people are involved beyond the church. It reports on a range of questions related to practical and spiritual sharing and caring. One of the things the early church was known for was its care towards those beyond the church. Today, such care occurs both through programmes run by the church, and as individuals who are part of your church care for others informally or as part of other organisations.

D1: Involvement in community service

Many people in your church will be involved in a range of community groups and ministries, some associated with your church and some not. How involved are members of your congregation in activities beyond the church? (Nationally, just over half of respondents are involved in such groups.) Do you think such involvement is important? Why, or why not? If so, how does (or how could) your church make space for, acknowledge, and celebrate these sorts of involvement?

D2: Environmental concerns

Do people in your church believe that Christians have a responsibility to actively care for the environment? Are their views consistent with the views of your church or denomination? How might such concerns be acted upon? (Note that the *Faith and Belief Study* also showed that many in our wider communities have a sense of hopelessness about the environment; churches that are engaging with environmental concerns are engaging with an area of significant concern.)

D3: Practical care for others

How involved are people in your church in practically caring for others? Might there be ways that your church can support such activities?

D4-D6: Faith sharing and wider community engagement

How ready are people in your church to talk about their faith? Are there ways you can be equipping people to do so? (It is important to recognise our changing context: past methods and approaches to evangelism are less likely to be connective today.)

How about their willingness to invite non-church-attending friends or relatives to church? What proportion of your church is willing to do so and has invited people in the past 12 months? What proportion are willing to invite others but have not done so? What are some reasons why they might not have done so? How many would not be willing to invite others? Can you think of reasons why this might be so?

While attending church is often an important step on the journey to embracing the Christian faith, participating in spiritual practices, and engaging in formal and informal activities with other Christians are also very important. What sorts of activities like that does your church offer or resource?

Does your church have evangelistic, community service and/or social justice activities? If so, what proportions of people are involved? Are such activities important to you? If so, are you satisfied with the levels of involvement? How do (or how might) you equip people for such ministry?

Report E: You And Your Involvement Here (Church Involvement)

The fifth report relates to participants' involvement in church life. There are connections to be made here, back to section B, particularly in relation to a sense of belonging. You might like to also look at some cross tabulations between sense of belonging and involvement in church activities.

E1: Group activities

How involved are people in your church in group activities? Are they mostly social or spiritual groups? If you had a proportion of people saying that your church doesn't have such groups (and you do), how might you better advertise then? Are your groups open to newcomers? It would be interesting to run a cross-tabulation comparing the sense of belonging with involvement in groups. Do people who are involved in such groups have a greater sense of belonging than those who do not? Consider how you might increase involvement, perhaps by offering short term or seasonal groups as an initial alternative to ongoing ones. (Such groups may later decide to continue to meet.)

E2-E5: Leadership and ministry roles, participation levels, use of gifts and giving

What proportion of your church is involved in some sort of ministry or leadership role? Consider a cross-tabulation to investigate whether the same people are involved in leadership roles and group activities. Are some people not involved in any such activities? How do you discern the gifts and skills of newcomers and invite their participation? Are there others who might be underutilised?

Has COVID-19 changed involvement levels? How?

Do people feel like their gifts and skills are being used? Are there ways that this can be appropriately enhanced?

Again, there are worthwhile cross tabulations here, for example with sense of belonging, levels of giving, etc.

Report F: Leadership and Direction

The final report considers the leadership and direction of your church. Australian NCLS data from the past 30 years demonstrates that healthy churches have clear and vital future leadership and direction. Consider the responses to this section alongside your church's actual goals and purposes; and what you've already identified as you've responded to the above questions. (According to the NCLS, healthy churches also help attenders to grow in their relationships with God, each other and the wider community; and are sustainable, thanks to a good inflow of new people and retention of young adults. You'll need to look back to earlier sections to consider how well your church is doing in these areas.)⁴

F1-F2, F11: Vision, goals and direction; Leadership support of new initiatives

Do respondents think that your church has clear goals and vision, and if so, are they committed to them? Do they think that you will be able to achieve them? Are you comfortable with the levels of commitment to the goals and with the perceptions of whether they are achievable? (Also, are you satisfied with the content of that vision, goals and direction?) Do participants perceive that leadership is supportive of new initiatives? Does this perception align with your own? If not, why might it be different?

F4-F6: The future shape of your church

What are people's expectations for the church? Do you think they are realistic? This vision of your future church might provide an opportunity to explore and work towards necessary change. For example, you might discuss or be resourced in relation to what changes might be needed to assist future growth, increased ethnic diversity or a future church that is not mainly composed of older people. Each of these futures are likely to require intentionality, investment and may require some adjustment to priorities. What opportunities might such a vision provide to your church?

F7 and F12: Inclusion and safety

Do people perceive the church to be inclusive of different kinds of people? Do you agree? Are there ways that you act that might exclude others, either inadvertently or deliberately? How about levels of safety? What helps make your church a safe place? Are there things that decrease safety and how might they be addressed? (Is your church fully compliant with all legal and ethical requirements?⁵)

Consider a cross tabulation of minority groups in your church in relation to the question about inclusion, and their sense of belonging (B2).

F8-F10: Getting involved

Is it easy for people to get involved in ministry at your church? What is the process for doing so and how might newcomers become aware of that process? Is there anything that should be made more transparent? Do participants perceive that all ages are encouraged to get involved? If not, what age groups do you think might find it more difficult? (You might like to ask some people about this.) Again, it would be worth running some cross tabulations with this question and ages of people, or length of time they have been part of your church: do newcomers think it is easy to get involved?

⁴ Ruth Powell, "What Makes a Healthy Church?," (Sydney: 2021).

⁵ For example, see <https://www.parryfield.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Churches-Legal-Handbook-1.pdf>

F13: Future priorities

What do participants think that should be prioritised in the next twelve months? How does this compare with what you are currently spending your time and resources on? Does this suggest any need for change in priorities?

Talking together

As you have reflected, what has encouraged you? Surprised you? Concerned you? What action steps do you want to take as a result? How can you work to enhance what you are doing well? How can you improve something that needs work? What further questions do you have?

Going deeper

There are a couple of ways that you can access additional information:

More from the Church Life Survey

You can access your church's information online and do further cross tabulations to help you to better understand your church.

A simple cross-tabulation example is age by gender. To access this, go to the detailed report on age through either:

- The Dashboard report on People
- The Detailed report on each question

Down the bottom click on this button and select **A7. What is your gender?**



Factor this question by another

This will bring up:

- The number of respondents who answered both questions
- A table showing age by gender
- A graph showing age by gender

By clicking on **Swap Questions** you can rearrange so that the table and graph shows gender by age. You can only factor two questions together at once. And to preserve confidentiality of your respondents, you cannot factor postcode by any other question.

More on your local community

Demographic information to help you better understand your local community is available:

See basic demographics on your statistical area here:

<https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-place-summaries/> More detailed information on an agglomerate of your parish or community is available from AngelWings Ltd at a cost of reduced price of \$120 +GST if you mention the Church Life Survey.

See here for more information: see <https://lynnetaylor.nz/nz-community-demographics/> or email nzdemographics@gmail.com

Concluding comments

This document has sought to provide reflection and talking points as you review the results from the 2023 Church Life Survey. No church is perfect, and every church can helpfully (and hopefully) reflect on where it is at; its strengths and weaknesses; its visions and goals, with a desire to be the body of Christ in the particular part of the world that they find themselves.

Powell, Ruth. "What Makes a Healthy Church?". Sydney: NCLS Research, 2021.

Taylor, Lynne. "Learnings from a More Secular Future: Insights from Aotearoa New Zealand." *Post-Christendom Studies* 8 (2023-2024): 62-74.