

# UNDERSTAND THE BIG *picture*



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



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1. About church health
2. Factors associated with healthy churches
3. How churches grow their vitality

# What is church health?

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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

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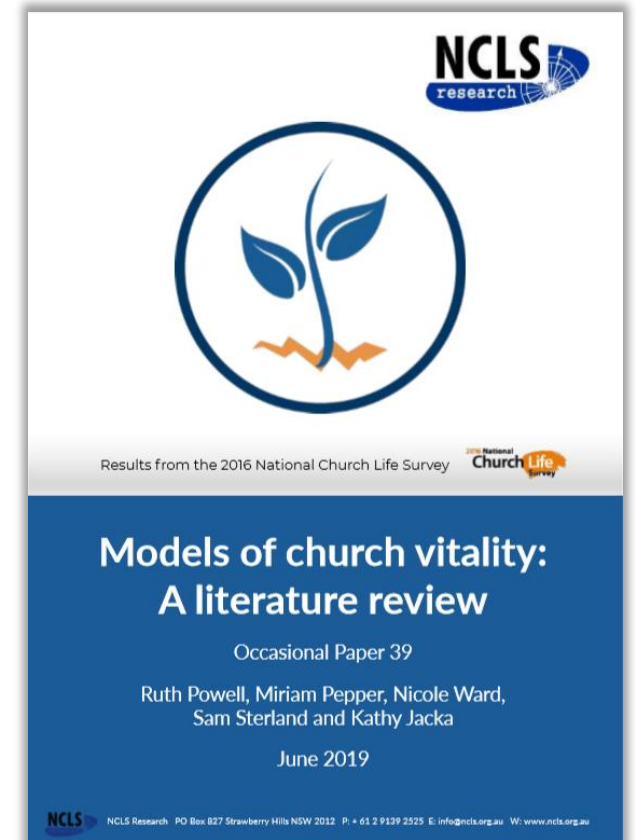
## “Quantities” vs “qualities”

### 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”



# 15 features of vitality in literature

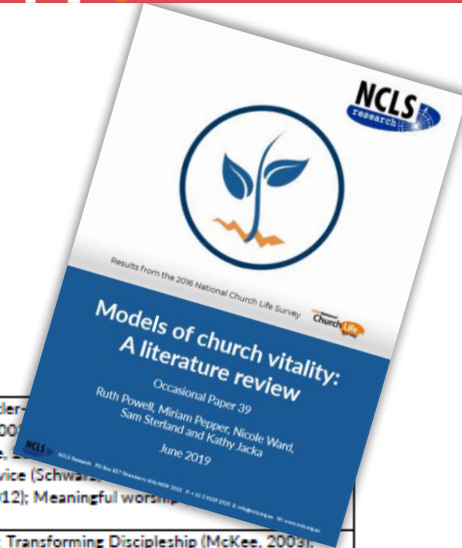
# UNDERSTAND THE BIG picture

community,  
outward focus,  
leadership,  
spirituality,  
worship,  
discipleship,  
prayer,  
vision,  
caring for the young,

giving,  
open and flexible  
innovation,  
healing,  
diversity,  
beauty,  
attendance  
(numerical growth,  
young adult  
retention and  
newcomers).

Table 2: A thematic synthesis: features of vital churches

#	Feature of Vital Churches	Source
<b>Qualities of Vital Churches</b>		
1	Community	Authentic community (McKee, 2003); Kingdom family relationships (Hemphill, 1994); Fellowship (Warren, 1995); Radical hospitality (Schnase, 2007); A commitment to loving and caring relationships (Macchia, 1999); Networking with the body of Christ (Macchia, 1999); Hospitality (Butler-Bass, 2006); Community (Butler-Bass, 2006); Relational intentionality (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Loving relationships (Schwarz, 2006); Connections with each other (Bobbitt, 2014); Relationship with each other /attractual (NCLS Research (1992, 1997, 2006, 2012); Strong and growing belonging (NCLS Research (2012); Intentional and welcoming inclusion (NCLS Research (2012); Having a sense of belonging (Woolever & Bruce, 2004); Participating in the congregation (Woolever & Bruce, 2004); Welcoming new people (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
2	Outward focus	Intentional evangelism (McKee, 2003); Passion for the lost (Hemphill, 1994); Mission (Warren, 1995, Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Missionary mentality (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Risk-taking mission and service (Schnase, 2007); An outward focus, (Macchia, 1999); Need-oriented evangelism (Schwarz, 2006); Testimony (Butler-Bass, 2006); Justice (Butler-Bass (2006); Connections with the world (Bobbitt, 2014).
3	Leadership	Empowering leaders (Woolever & Bruce, 2004); Mobilized leadership (Warren, 1995); Vibrant leadership (Schnase, 2007); Inspiring, etc.
4	Spirituality	Passionate spirituality (Hemphill, 1994); Connections with exploration (NCLS Research (2012); Faith (NCLS Research (2004).
5	Worship	Worship (Warren, 1995, Butler-Bass, 2006); Engaging worship (McKee, 2003); Passionate worship (Schnase, 2007); Inspiring worship service (Schwarz, 2006); Meaningful worship (NCLS Research, 2012); Meaningful worship (Schnase, 2007).
6	Discipleship	Discipleship (Warren, 1995); Transforming Discipleship (McKee, 2003); Maturation of believers (Hemphill, 1994); Intentional faith development (Schnase, 2007); Learning and growing in community; Reflection or Discernment (Butler-Bass, 2006); Holistic small groups (Schwarz, 2006).
7	Prayer	God-centred prayer (Hemphill, 1994); Spiritual disciplines (Macchia, 1999); Contemplation (Butler-Bass, 2006); Prayerful dependence (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010).
8	Vision	God-sized vision (Hemphill, 1994); Clear and owned vision (NCLS Research, 2012); Looking to the future (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
9	Caring for the young	Caring for the young/young adult retention (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017); Caring for children and youth (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
10	Giving	Extravagant generosity (Schnase, 2007); Stewardship and generosity (Macchia, 1999).
11	Innovation	Innovation (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017).
12	Healing	Healing (Butler-Bass, 2006).
13	Diversity	Diversity (Butler-Bass (2006).
14	Beauty	Beauty (Butler-Bass (2006).
15	Attendance measures	Numerical growth (e.g. NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017, Wagner 1976; Roozen, 1979; Hoge, Stetzer & Rainer 2010). Young adult retention (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017). Newcomers without a church background (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017).



# Church health: NCLS Research model

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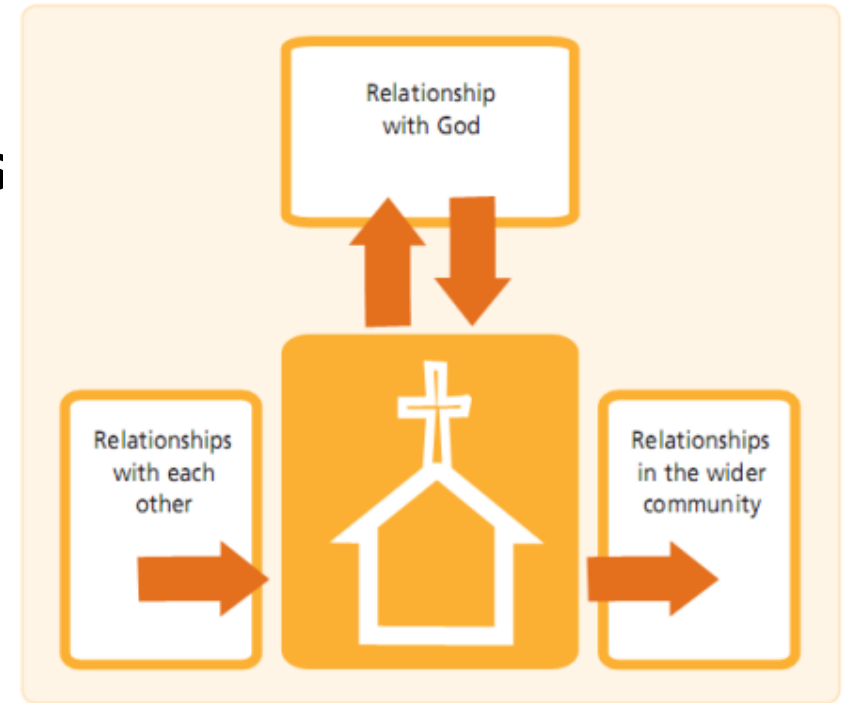
Goal-focused: What a church seeks to achieve

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 directions for the future**



Attendance  
Measures

young  
adult  
retention

newcomers

attendance  
change



# Church health: Relationships

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Churches seek to help participants develop and maintain:  
**Relationship with God:** Healthy churches helping people to explore faith matters, develop religious knowledge, strengthen 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

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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

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

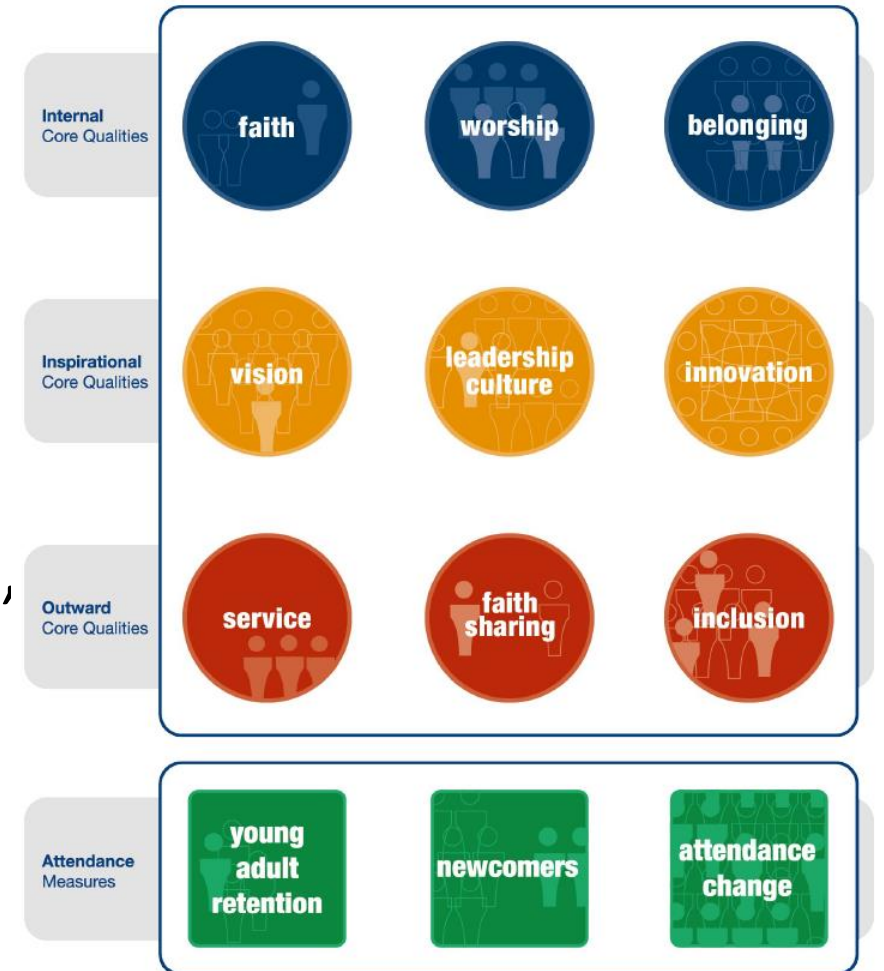
This is about the capacity or readiness for action within a church.



# Church health: NCLS Core Qualities model

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- Developed from 1991 National Church Life Survey (Kaldor et al, 1992) onwards
- 20+ denominations
- Based on perspectives of people in the pews
- Various configurations but same core concepts
- Church Life Profiles – received by congregations, presbyteries and the Synod after each NCLS
- Mainly large-scale quantitative research, with both strengths and limitations



# Factors associated with healthy churches

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- 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.
- What about the social context? The theological tradition?
- What role does the internal life of the church have?

# Factors associated with healthy churches

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**Social context and faith tradition do make a difference for church health**

Studies show that social context can predict aspects of church health e.g. growth, newcomer inflow  
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

Faith tradition also is related to church health e.g.

- Charismatic, Pentecostal
- Evangelical

# Factors associated with healthy churches

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**BUT internal life of church matters more**

Our research shows the quality of church life is an even greater influence than the demographics of the local community.





# Factors associated with healthy churches

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Dimensions of health are inter-related

Some aspects of health appear time and again in fostering or relating to other aspects:

- Clear and owned vision
- Empowering leadership
- Faith sharing

Figure 4.4: Vision and strongest associations with other Core Qualities

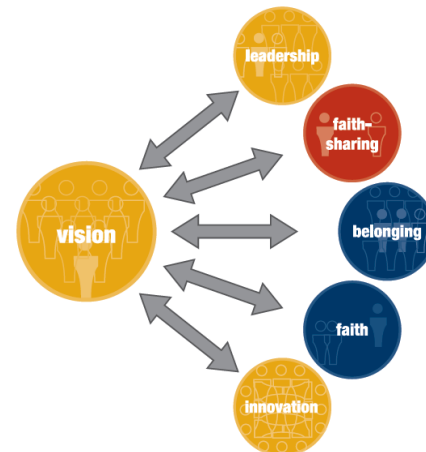


Figure 4.5: Leadership and strongest associations with other Core Qualities

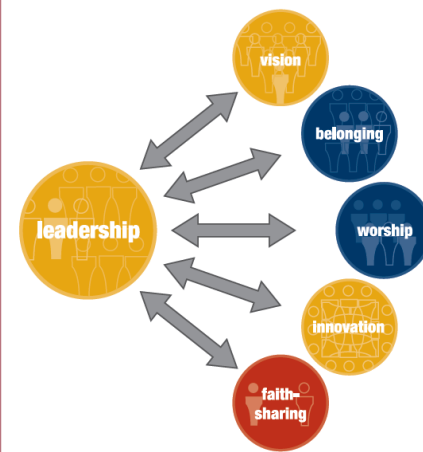


Figure 4.8: Faith-sharing and strongest associations with other Core Qualities





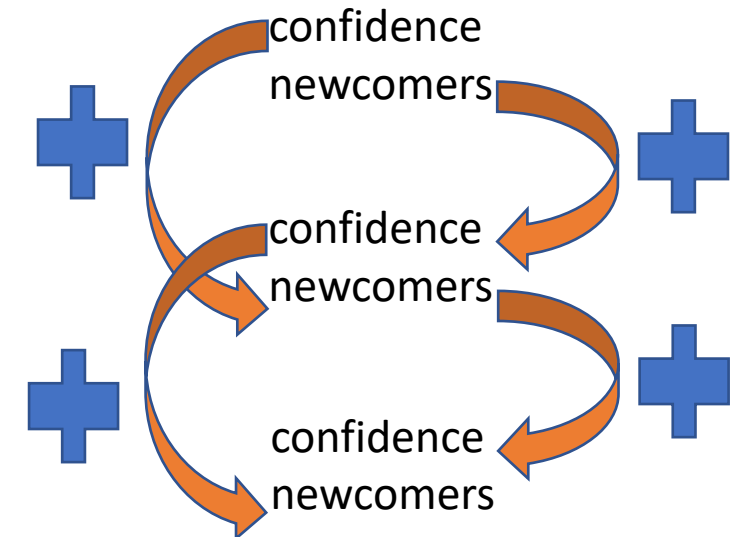
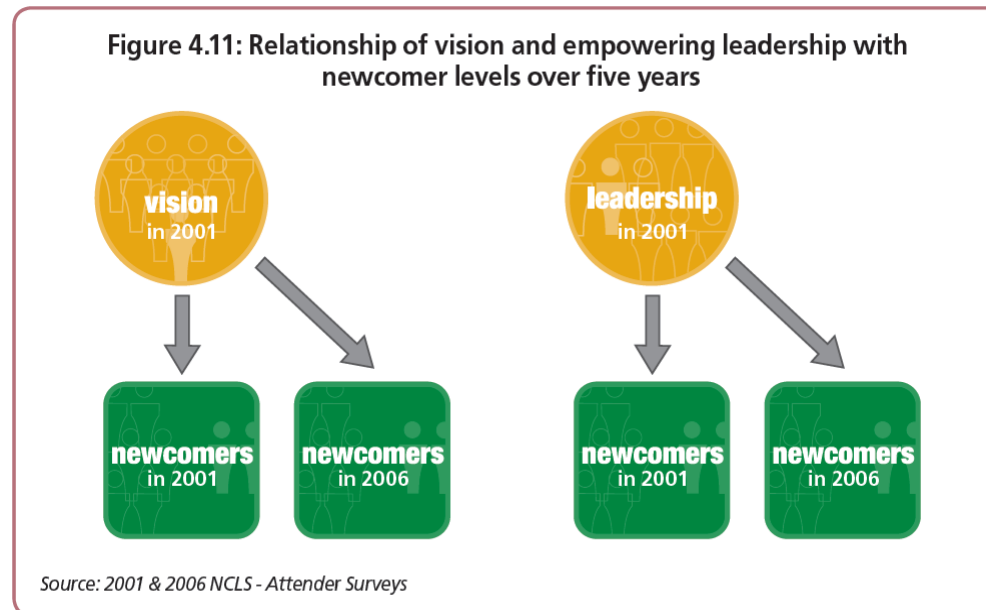
# Factors associated with healthy churches

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Collective confidence creates positive spiral

e.g. A study of newcomers found confidence is associated with higher levels of newcomers now and also five years later.

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)



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