

# Results from the Church Life Survey 2023

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## The key findings:

1. This survey is reasonably representative of our non-ethnic parishes.
2. Covid has accelerated the aging of our congregations and reduced the inflow of members.
3. Our members largely feel their congregations are supporting their faith journey.
4. Our members desire both Belief and Belonging
5. Most respondents' reported faith perspectives towards the conservative end of the spectrum.

## Key finding 1: This survey is reasonably representative of our non-ethnic parishes.

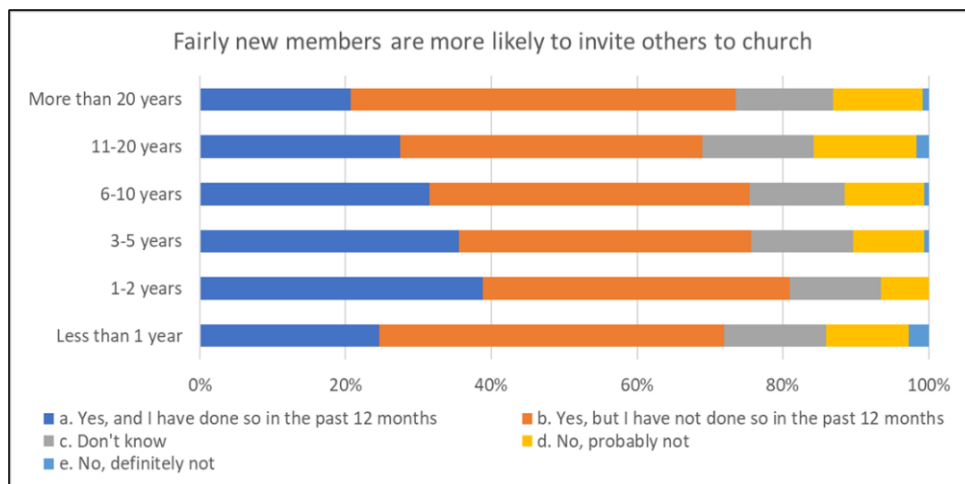
1. The Church Life Survey is a unique, interdenominational survey that asks the people in the pews (over the age of 15) their views on their own faith journey, their congregation, and their leaders. It is designed to assist church leaders to understand both where their people are at, and what their aspirations are for the future.
2. This year the Council of Assembly encouraged our parishes to participate, and 75 parishes chose to do so, with 2,697 parishioners filling in the form (just on 16% of the 2021 attendance of adults and youth). These parishes are fairly evenly spread across the Presbyteries, though Alpine had a higher participation rate at 28%. Overall, the survey seems a reasonably representative mix of large/ middling/ small and urban/suburban/rural parishes. But it did not capture our Pacific, Asian and Te Aka Puaho parishes as other than Auckland Chinese these parishes did not choose to participate. (This pattern was also found in other denominations and the same happened in our previous survey in 2011.)
3. The results are, therefore, only reflecting members in our non-ethnic parishes. To put this year's results into context I have compared them with the results across all denominations (20,357 participants and labelled 'all churches') and with the Presbyterian/Uniting results from the 2011 survey, (7,745 participants from 129 parishes). Unless there are interesting differences, the statistics are for the network as a whole – both Presbyterian and Uniting parishes.

Appendix 1 lists the codes that will enable anyone to download the six more detailed reports on each question. These codes are for the national church and for the Presbyteries that participated. Parishes that participated were also provided with codes that would enable them to get the same six reports on their own statistics and enable them to do further analysis.

The committee has also written an overall summary *Insights from the 2023 Church Life Survey New Zealand*, which is available at [https://clsnz.org/image/CLSNZ\\_Booklet.pdf](https://clsnz.org/image/CLSNZ_Booklet.pdf) The cross-denominational graphs are from this report.

## Key finding 2: Covid has accelerated the aging of our congregations and reduced the inflow of members.

4. All the denominations that took part in the survey saw a significant aging of their congregations. The median age of those over 15 ranged from 42 for the independent churches to 75 for the Uniting congregations. Presbyterian parishes had a median age of 70. This compares with an average age for those over 15 in the 2018 census of 44. Where the church is getting an inflow of younger members, it seems to be disproportionately migrants. This has been most notable in the Auckland Catholic church. (Appendix 2 provides some further detail on the Presbyterian demographic findings from the survey.)
5. Covid seems to have stopped new members joining. While the average length of time that people have been in the congregation has been stable since 2007, there is a noticeable drop in the proportion reporting they have been attending for less than 2 years. It is likely that this is a Covid effect. Inflow is a significant part of our congregational life. About 53% of our members came from a different denomination, and this proportion is consistent regardless of how long people have been attending other than those who have been attending for more than 20 years (26%). This suggests that inflow from other denominations has been a longstanding pattern. About one-third report that belonging to this denomination is very important to them, and another third that it is “somewhat important”.
6. The decline in new members may snowball. People were asked whether they had or would invite friends and family to join them at church. The proportion who said that they actually had done so was highest for those who were fairly new members. Inviting people declines as the member’s length of time in the congregation increases. This means that the lack of intake over the last few years is likely to mean that fewer members invite others unless we encourage those who have been worshipping in church for longer to increase their rates of giving invitations.



7. People often hesitate to ask people to church because they think the invitation would be unwelcome. However, the recent Faith and Belief survey of a random sample of the population found that one-in-five people would welcome an invitation and a higher proportion of young people would welcome one. They also found that 66% of people said they were attracted to investigating faith because of seeing first hand people living out their faith (and again this was higher for young people) suggesting that personal connections matter. (<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org/2452-2/>)
8. When asked how Covid-19 affected their participation in activities of this local church, 13.7% said they participated more, and 14.9% said they participated less, a net decline of 1.2%. The remainder either had the same participation rate (63.6%) or had not been coming before Covid-19 (7.9%). The Anglicans and Baptists (-3%) and Catholics (-2%) reported higher net declines while the Independents (+9%) and Confessing Anglicans (5%) reported net increases in participation rates as a result of Covid.

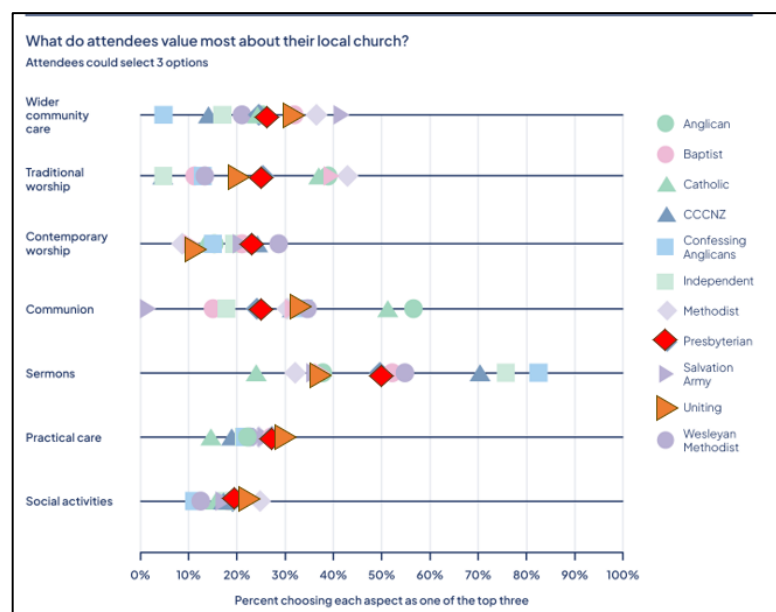
9. Across all denominations, including ours, the decline in attendance was most significant in those over the age of 75 – where overall there was a 10% decline. This shows that their concerns about mixing with others is persisting into 2023. The Presbyterian church has on average an older congregation, and the Uniting parishes an older mix again. (See appendix 2 for the key statistics about our parishioners)
10. Covid does not seem to have noticeably changed in person attendance. The proportion of people reporting that they “normally” attend online is about 2% for both Presbyterians and all churches.
11. Overall, the proportion of the people attending church in the population seems to have declined. The Faith and Belief and other recent surveys suggests that about 16-19 percent of the population was in church at least weekly between 2010-19, but the latest estimate (for 2019) is that this is now 14.5 percent.

Summary of the key points in this section:

- Our people are aging at a rapid rate. This is also true for other mainline denominations.
- Our parishes have experienced a decline in attendance by older members.
- The decline in new members over Covid may lead to fewer members inviting people to come to church with them unless we can persuade older members to do this more often.

**Key finding 3: Our members largely feel their congregations are supporting their faith journey.**

12. The survey asked respondents which three aspects of church life they valued most from a list. The graphic below shows how the Presbyterian and Uniting parishes compare with each other and the other denominations. There are some areas, notably social activities, practical care, and contemporary worship where all the different denominations have very similar responses, though the Presbyterian and Uniting churches tended to be at the top end of this narrow range. It should be noted that social activities were rated far higher for younger people – particularly those under the age of 25.

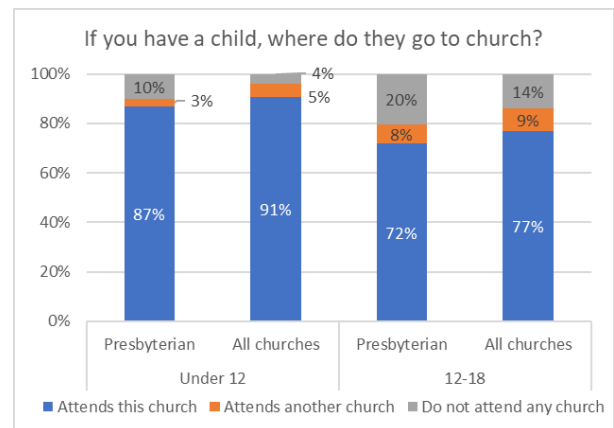


13. The area which Presbyterians valued the most was sermons, preaching and bible teaching (chosen by 52% of respondents). However, this was a significantly lower priority (37%) for those in Uniting parishes (which tended to have priorities that were closer to the Methodist church.) The proportion in

Presbyterian parishes that place a high value on sermons has been increasing noticeably over time (32% in 2001; 40% in 2011) while the proportion in Uniting parishes has been more stable (38% in 2001; 30% in 2011).

14. Overall, our parishioners are satisfied with the preaching they receive. The following proportions said they nearly always or usually felt:
- 84% said the preaching was “helpful to my life” (83% in 2011; 80% for all churches in 2023)
  - 75% said “I feel a sense of God’s presence” (80% in 2011, 81% all churches)
  - 84% said “This local church is resourcing my spiritual journey well” (82% in 2011, 80% all churches)
15. But Presbyterians also place a high value on having ministry to children, youth and young adults, and our members reported a significant decline in their satisfaction with what their parish offered to these groups, both compared to 2011 and compared to all churches:
- For children (under 12): 53% (compared to 70% in 2011, 55% in all churches)
  - For youth (12-18): 44% (52% in 2011, 44% in all churches)
  - For Young Adults (19-25): 33% (43% in 2011, 38% in all churches)

16. Parents were asked to indicate where their children went to church. While most parents reported their children came to church with them, other churches reported a smaller proportion not attending church at all. While all churches showed a higher rate of disengaging with church in the teenage years, Presbyterians had a higher proportion who did not go anywhere (though about the same proportion going to another church. This suggests that total disengagement rather than a different style of worship is the bigger driver for those dropping out of our congregations. (This question was not asked in 2011.)



**Summary of the key points in this section:**

- Our members value sermons and teaching and are largely satisfied with what is provided.
- But there has been a significant decline in member’s satisfaction with the programmes offered for children and youth.
- Disengagement is higher for our youth.

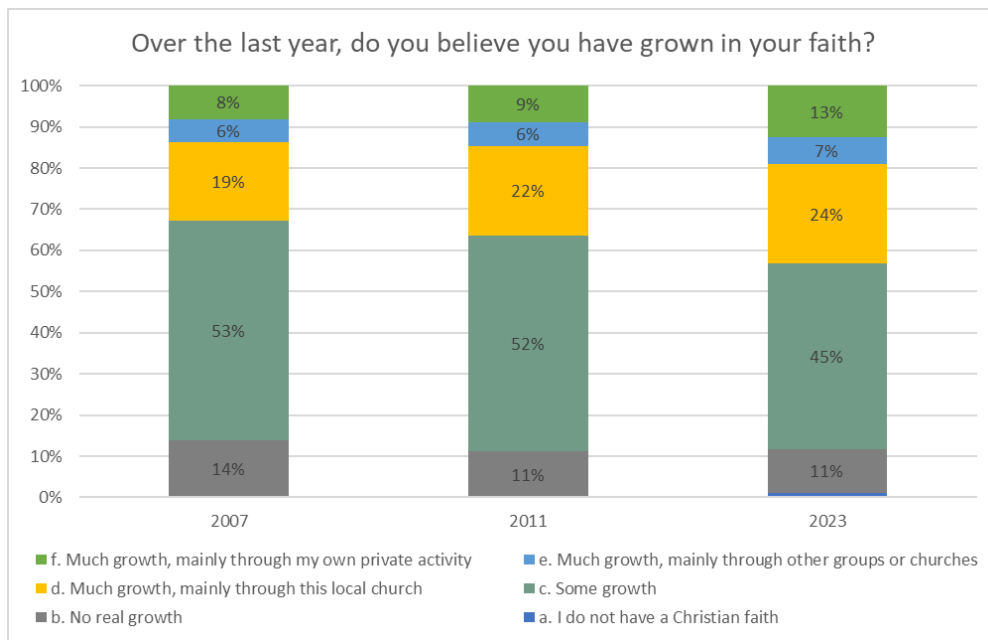
**Key finding 4: Our members desire both Belief and Belonging**

17. Members were asked to indicate what they thought should be the top priorities for their local congregation out of a long list of options. (They could choose more than one.) This question captures both what people value and where they feel the church is currently needing to improve its performance.
18. Our members four top priorities bring out two key themes: growing faith and strong communities. These were:
- 44% prioritised “Worship services that are nurturing to people’s faith” (35% in all churches)

- 42% prioritised "Building a strong sense of community within this church (41% in all churches)
- 37% prioritised "Spiritual growth (e.g. spiritual direction, prayer groups)" (37% in all churches)
- 31% prioritised "Ensuring new people are included well in church life" (22% in call churches)

**Growing faith**

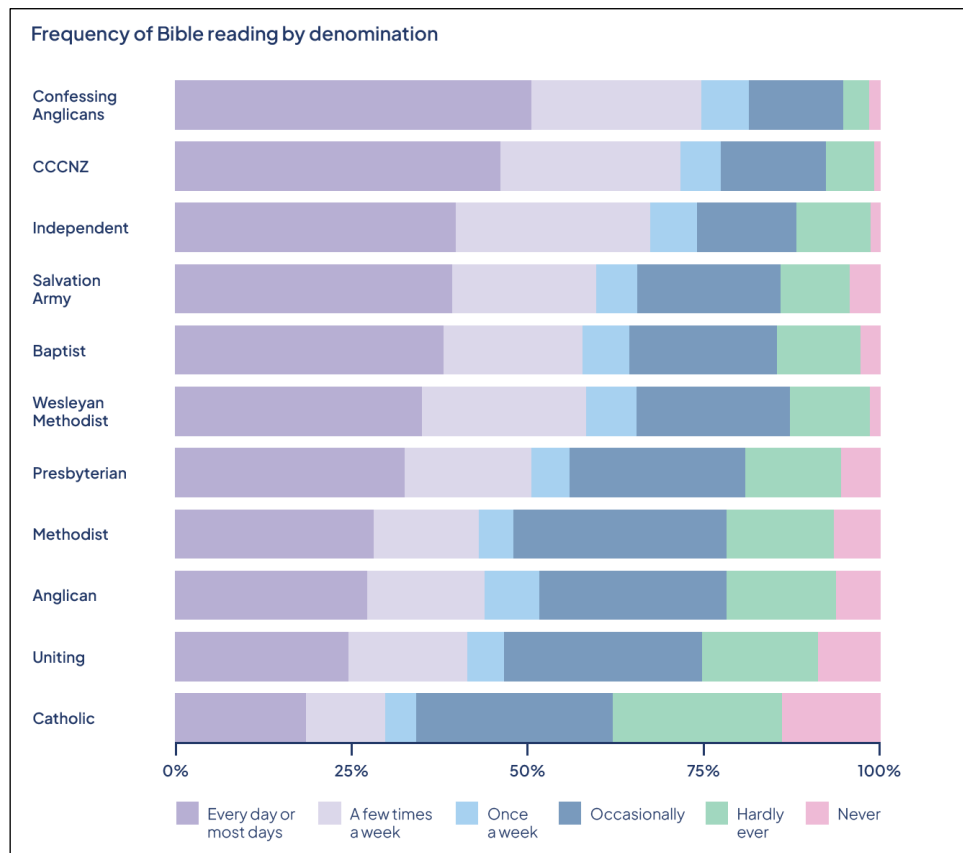
19. The proportion of our members who report that they have experienced "much growth" in their faith has been steadily increasing. In 2007 33% of our members reported much growth, but in 2023, 43% did. Even more heartening, the proportion who attributed this growth to their local church increased. However, this is still lower than all church average of 49%, and it is significantly lower in the Uniting parishes.



20. There is a clear link between personal devotions and spiritual growth. The influence probably goes both ways – with people increasing their devotions when they experience spiritual growth, but then also building their spiritual growth through their devotion. This is most clearly seen in way the frequency of Bible reading and the level of reported level of spiritual growth is linked in this survey.



21. The Presbyterian respondents reported only moderate levels of regular Bible reading compared to other denominations, and the Uniting church's rates were amongst the lowest. This is surprising as generally Bible reading is higher amongst older age-groups, and this is also true in our church.



***Belonging to their faith community***

22. The other priority area for our members was to increase the sense of community in their congregations both for themselves and for new members. About 84% of our members stated that they found it easy to make friends in their congregation, and this varied little by the length of time they had been in the congregation, with 76% those who had been attending for less than a year reported it was easy to make friends.

23. There was more difference by length of time in the congregation for having a leadership role in the congregation. About two-thirds report that they have some leadership or ministry role in their congregation and 60% reported that they were encouraged to use their gifts and skills in the congregation to some or a great extent (both are the same as for all churches). However, our members are more likely than average (81%, compared to all churches 72%) feel that the leaders in their local church are willing to support new initiatives, and the same proportion feel that all age groups are encouraged to get involved. The Presbyterian and Uniting churches are about average in their respondent's knowledge of and commitment to the parish's vision for ministry and mission of the congregation.

24. About two-thirds of our members reported that they are involved in either study, fellowship, or youth/young adult groups in their local congregation, and less than 3% indicated that their congregation had no such groups. Most people (87%) feel their local church is inclusive of different types of people, and about 95% expect that their congregation will either become more ethnically diverse or have the same mix as now. However, only a quarter of the respondents had invited someone to a service in the last 12 months and 13% said that they would not do so.

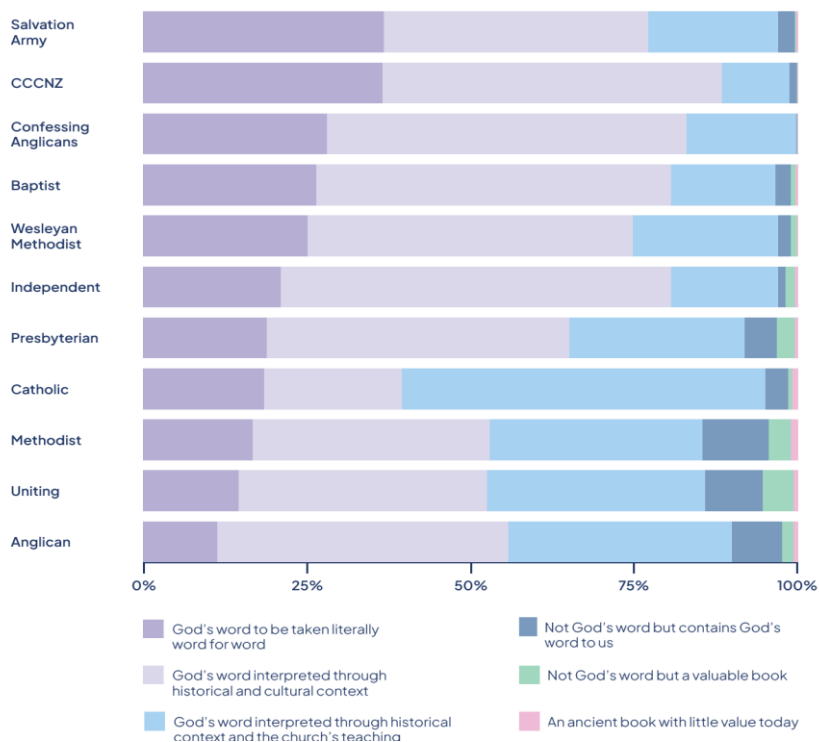
Summary of the key points in this section:

- Our members highly value both having their faith journey supported and their sense of belonging.
- The proportion who reports they have experience much spiritual growth is rising over time.
- Reporting much spiritual growth is highly correlated with personal devotions but our people report lower levels of these than in many denominations.
- Respondents report it was easy to get involved with their parish life and were satisfied with their sense of belonging.

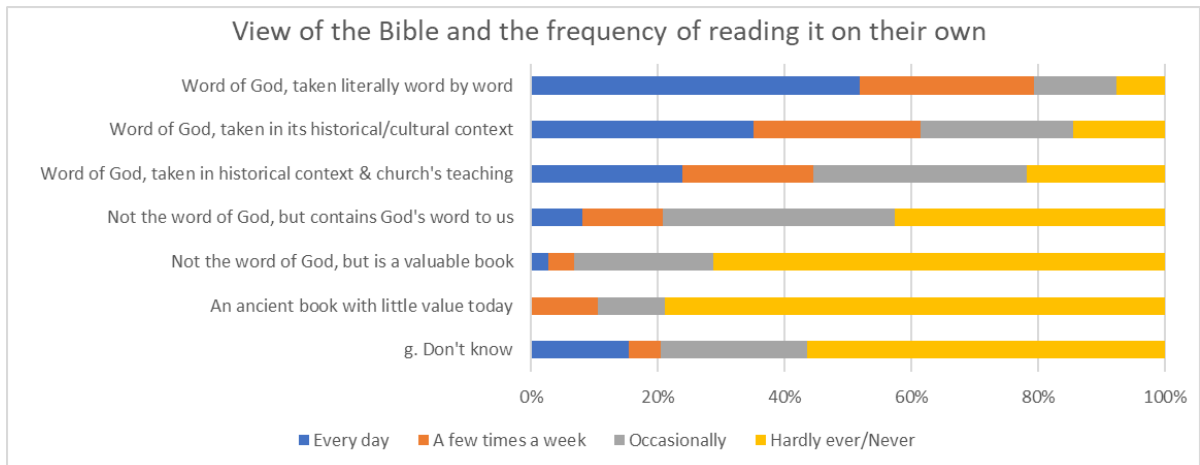
**Key finding 5: Most respondents’ reported faith perspectives towards the conservative end of the spectrum.**

25. The Presbyterian parishes sit in the middle of the denominations in terms of people’s view of what the Bible is. The Uniting parishes members are more likely to agree that the Bible is not the Word of God and less likely to agree that it should be read literally or in the historical/cultural context of the time. The proportion of people with each viewpoint has remained stable since 2007.

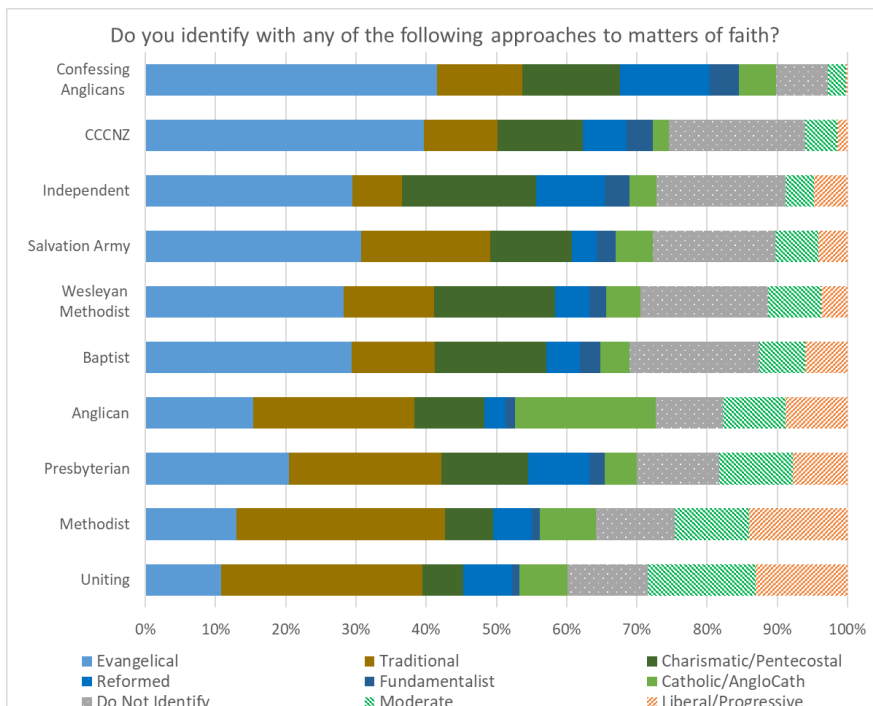
View of the Bible by denomination



26. In 2011 it was clear that we disproportionately drew new members from the other denominations that were closer to us on these views (notably Baptist and independent churches, rather than Methodist and Anglican). (The question of the specific denomination people came from was not asked this time.)
27. There is a noticeable pattern that how people perceive the Bible by their age, with both the oldest and the youngest respondents being more likely to report they are uncertain about their view or to not think the Bible is the Word of God. Perceptions of the Bible are related to the frequency that people read the Bible by themselves.



28. Our members whether they identified with the various approaches to faith. They could choose multiple answers. The pattern of identification has not changed significantly since 2011, except that the proportion that identified as Charismatic/Pentecostal declined by 6% and the proportion of Evangelical rose by 67%. (It is unclear whether this is just a renaming or a change in identification.) The proportion that did not identify with any of these rose slightly. Younger members, particularly under the age of 30 are less likely to identify with these approaches, and not identifying with these labels is more likely to occur in the more conservative denominations.





29. About 70 percent of our members chose to identify with approaches at the more conservative end of the theological spectrum and about 20 percent with the moderate and liberal approaches. About 12 percent did not identify and, on the basis of the pattern in other denominations, this will be a mix of those who have conservative views and those who do not know where they fit in these labels.

Summary of the key points in this section:

- Most of our members believe the Bible is the Word of God. Their view of the Bible is reflected in their personal Bible reading practices.
- Over half of our members reported their faith perspective was Traditional (22%), Evangelical (21%), and Charismatic/Pentecostal (12%). 8% identified as liberal/progressive.

## Appendix 1: The codes for further information.

1. The Church Life Survey website [www.clsnz.org](http://www.clsnz.org) has six automatically generated reports with further details about the results from this survey. These reports are:
  - a. About You
  - b. You and This Local Church
  - c. You and Your Faith
  - d. You and Your Community
  - e. You and Your involvement Here
  - f. Leadership and Direction.
2. I have arranged that these reports also be available at national and Presbytery level (for those Presbyteries where parishes participated). All Presbyterian parishes and Uniting parishes with Presbyterian involvement are included.
3. To access this information, you go onto the [www.clsnz.org](http://www.clsnz.org) website and click on View your Church Reports at the top of the screen. It will then ask for codes. The codes for the national and Presbytery reports are:

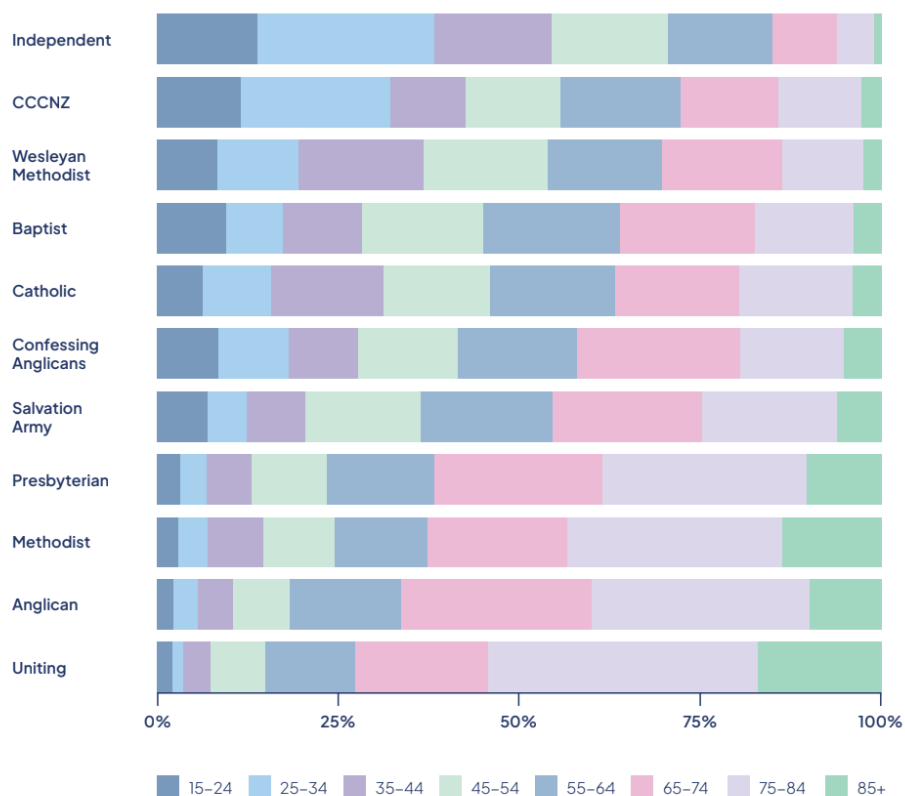
Report for:	Church Code	Report Code
National Presbyterian church	PRES246	VKRTTBSH
Northern Presbytery	WGTETIP	KRCPSADY
Presbytery of Kaimai	JPBUYMK	PZNBKBTYV
Alpine Presbytery	MYWXCDGH	NTKADUUL
Presbytery Central - Nukuhau Tapu	JKJZHNMN	UECQPPRP
The Southern Presbytery	UZWRQRO	WFTJZZTC

4. The link for the reports is below the list of parishes that participated and some key statistics. It looks like this: [Printable report for each section of questions](#)
5. You can also look at individual questions and do cross-tabulations across two questions by clicking on the other button labelled. [Detailed reports on each question](#) You do not need to be either a computer geek or a statistician to use this facility. It is designed to be as easy as possible.

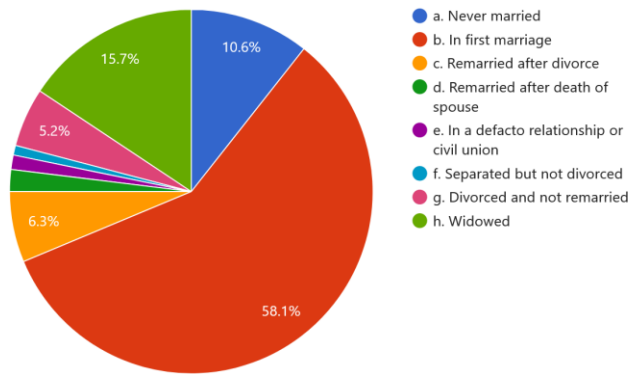
## Appendix 2: Key statistics about our parishioners

1. These statistics for the Presbyterian and Uniting parishes do not include our ethnic parishes. These are younger and more diverse than our standard parishes, so the analysis below is only relevant to the non-ethnic parishes in the church.
2. The Presbyterian parishes have an older age profile than average, but it is noticeably younger than the Uniting parishes where over half or all respondents were over the age of 75. 63% of our respondents were female (all churches 61%).

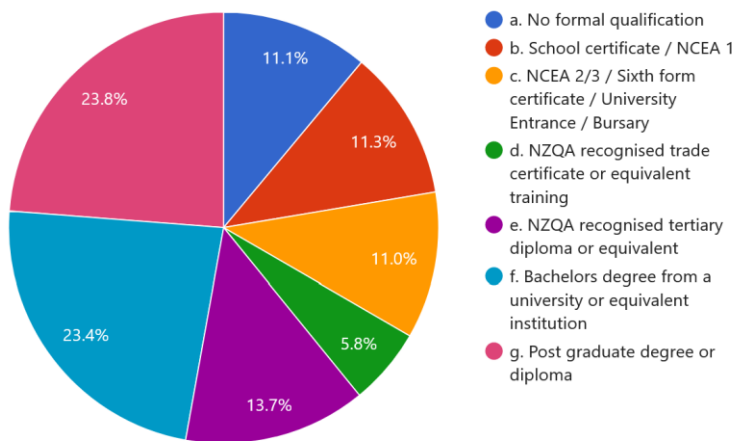
Age distribution by denomination



3. About a quarter of the members in our non-ethnic parishes were born overseas. This is about the national average. Overseas birth is markedly higher in Catholic churches and in Auckland. Of the 2666 respondents who answered the ethnicity question, 2.5% were Māori and 3.7% were Pacific. If these numbers were representative of distribution in the five non-ethnic Presbyteries, then there are almost as many Pacific people in the non-ethnic parishes as in the Pacific Presbytery, and many more Māori in our standard parishes than the June statistics indicate worship in the Te Aka Puaho pastorates.
4. Most of our members are in their first marriage, widowed or never married. These proportions have been stable over time. Of those with a partner three-quarters attend church with their partner. This is more likely (87%) when people are in their first marriage.



5. Our respondents had a similar qualification profile to the average for all churches. Church attendees are significantly better educated than the general adult population in the 2018 census.



6. Few (6.8%) of our members do not contribute financially to their local church, and 24% give 10%, and 31% give 5% or more of their income. These proportions have been stable over time. The main factor that influences giving is age.

