

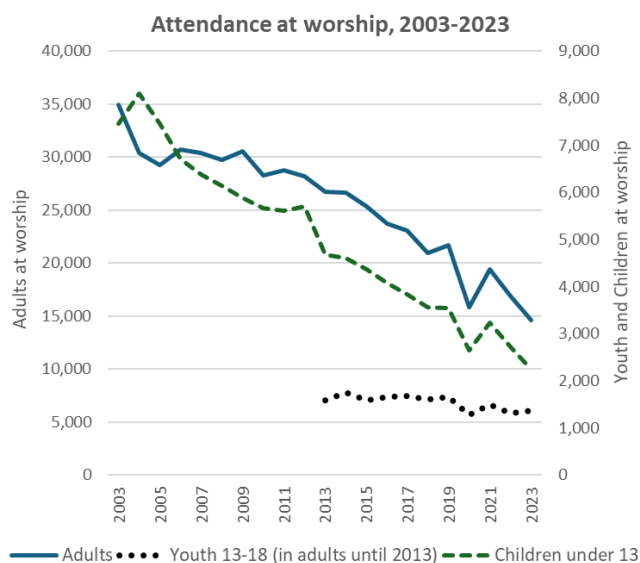
# A Survey of Parish Life, 2025

*This report has been prepared by the Church Property Trustees as a resource for the wider church*

## About our attendance at worship

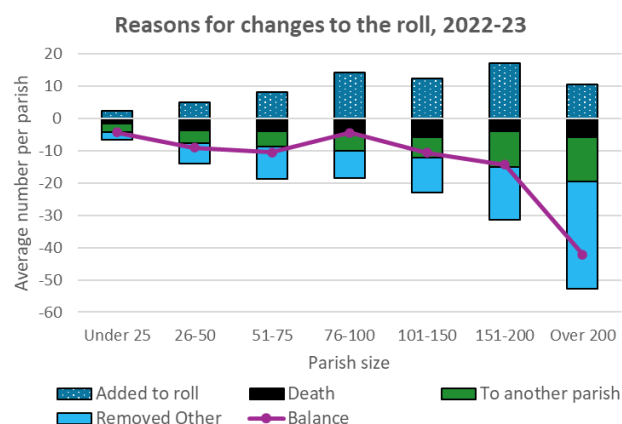
- The number at worship has more than halved in the last 20 years. Covid may have increased the pace of decline.
- Moving to another parish or just leaving are the main reasons for leaving the roll. Even in small parishes, death is not the major reason.
- Parishes of all sizes can grow. Past growth trends do not predict future trends.

- ❖ On an average June Sunday in 2023 about 14,600 adults and 6,700 young people and children worship at one of our about 350 parishes.
- ❖ Worship attendance has declined significantly over the 2000s for both adults and children. The number of youth attending has remained more stable from when these numbers were separately collected in 2013.

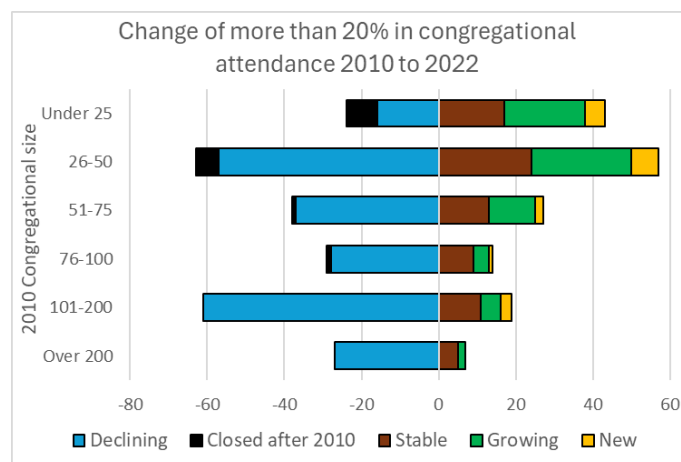


- ❖ The Impact of Covid-19 is clearly seen in 2020, and between 2021 and 2023 the rate of decline appears to have increased. From 2003 to 2019 on average the number of adults at worship declined by about 2% a year. But we lost 13% of the previous year's attendees in each of 2022 and 2023. (This is not because of missing data. See the methodology at the end.)
- ❖ The most significant reasons for people leaving a parish are to move to another parish or "other". It is difficult to know what other includes, but probably it is dominated by those who drift away, rather than deliberately announcing they are

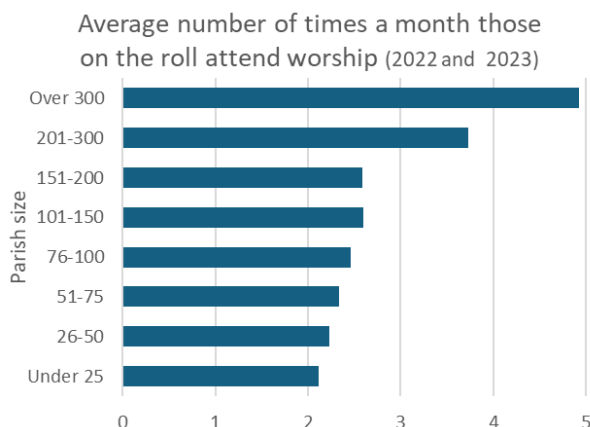
leaving. Even for small congregations, death is not the leading cause of removals.



- ❖ Parishes of all sizes grow and decline. Small parishes are more likely to close if their numbers decline, but they find it easier to meet the 20% threshold set for growth. The group that had the highest proportion of parishes with declines are those with 101-200 at worship. This pattern was also found for the period 1995 to 2007.



- ❖ The trajectory of growth between 2000 and 2010 did not predict the growth between 2010 and 2023. About 60% of parishes declined between 2010 to 2022 regardless of whether they had grown, been stable or declined in the earlier period.
- ❖ Parishes with over 200 worshippers attract a higher proportion of their roll to their worship. This may be because larger churches can offer a wider variety of worship events so that they are able to better meet their congregation's needs.



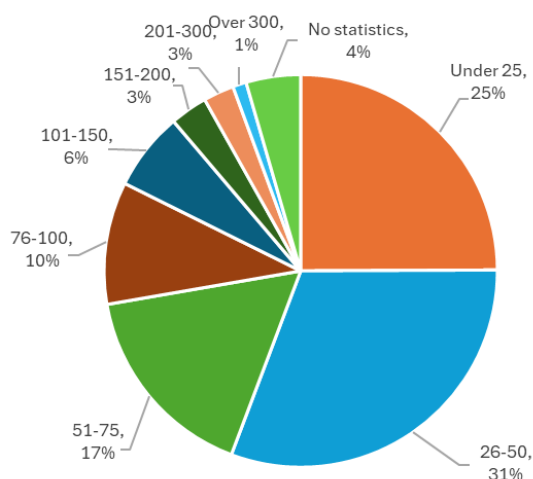
- ❖ The decline in the number of times a month members attend church has been a significant additional reason why congregations have become smaller. In 1961 the average person on the roll attended church 6.3 times a month; by 2013 it was 3 times and in 2023 it was 2.6 times. If the rate of attendance had remained at the 2013 level, there would be about 5,500 at worship. At the 1961 rate there would be almost 50,000 more.

### About our congregations

- *We have a lot of small parishes, but most people worship with at least 100 others.*
- *While the pace of parish dissolutions has increased, our attendance has declined faster so our average parish size has continued to decline.*

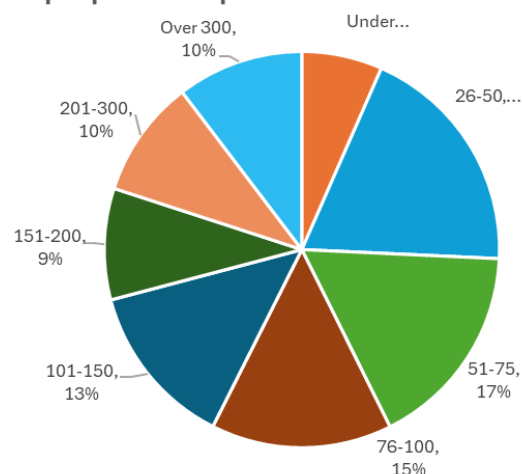
- ❖ Most Presbyterian parishes are small. About three-quarters have less than 75 at worship. (The parishes with no statistics are part of Te Aka Puaho.)

### The size of parishes

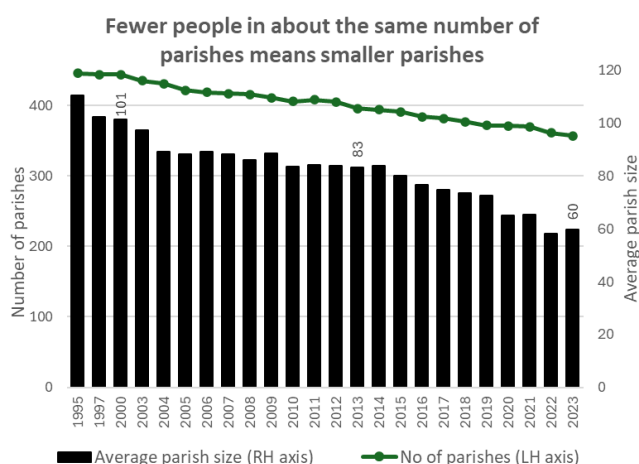


- ❖ But most people belong to large parishes. Almost 70% of us worship with more than 100 others and almost 20% with more than 200.

### Where people worship



- ❖ In 2023 the average parish had 60 people at worship. In 2013 the average parish had 83 and in 1951 the average parish had 308. Since 2018 the pace at which parishes are being dissolved has increased, with 45 dissolutions and 8 new parishes (some formed from the dissolved parishes). However, the pace of falling attendance has also increased.

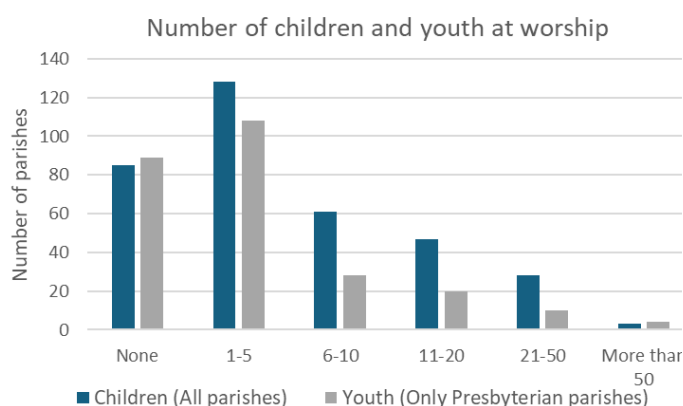


- ❖ Uniting parishes are smaller than Presbyterian parishes, with 39 at worship on average compared to 93. They also have fewer children (3 per parish on average compared to 11). This reflects both their smaller original size and that they are declining faster. In 2000 the average number of people at worship in Union parishes was about 75% of the Presbyterian parishes; in 2023 it was about 60%. For children the ratio was 60% in 2000 and 30% in 2023.

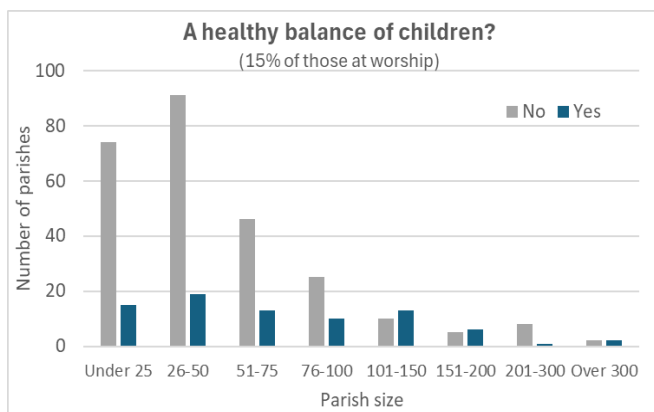
## About our children and youth

- *Most parishes have some children and youth, but a declining proportion have a healthy mix of ages.*
- *Some small parishes have a healthy mix of ages, and some larger ones do not.*

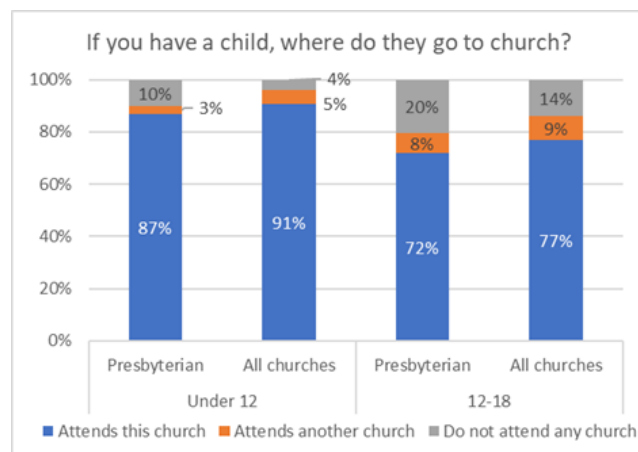
- ❖ Most parishes have some children and youth at worship, but most have only a handful. Large youth groups are rare. Since 2013 the decline in children at worship has mirrored the decline in adults, while youth attendance has been more resilient.



- ❖ Children were at least 15% of those at worship in a quarter of our parishes (compared to 19% in the general population.) These parishes are likely to have a healthy mix of ages. But while two-thirds of parishes with less than 75 at worship had a healthy mix in 2013, now only about 20% do. Parish size does not predict a healthy mix. Some smaller congregations do have a healthy mix of ages while some large ones do not.



- ❖ The Church Life survey 2023 reported a significant decline in respondent's satisfaction with their parish's children and youth work. A smaller proportion of Presbyterian children accompanied their parents to church, and a higher proportion did not go to church at all.



- ❖ The number of baptisms, dedications and confirmations of children have dropped from around 1000 a year around 2010 to about 350 in 2022 and 2023. However, the number of adults receiving baptism, dedication of confirmation has only declined from around 1000 to around 700 over the same time.

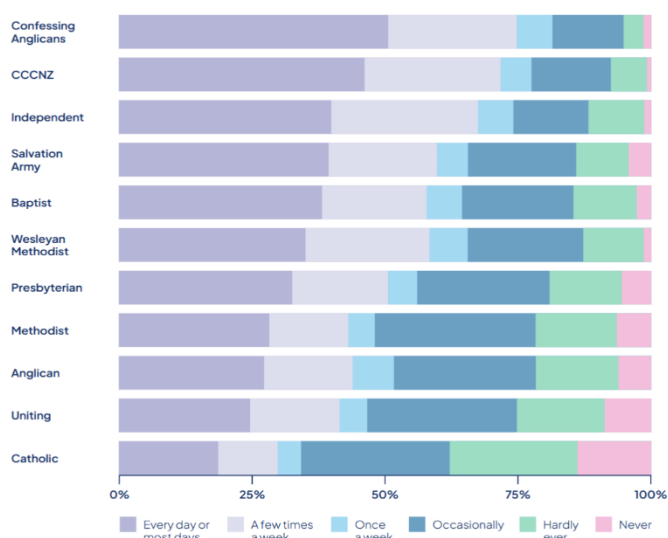
## About our faith

- *Most parishes have some children and youth, but a declining proportion have a healthy mix of ages.*
- *Some small parishes have a healthy mix of ages, and some larger ones do not.*

- ❖ Since 2007 an increasing proportion of Presbyterian members have reported that they have experienced "much growth" in their faith in the Church Life Surveys. Uniting parish members are less likely to report this.
- ❖ Over 80% also reported that their local parish supported their faith journey with about 85% saying the preaching was helpful to their lives, 75% saying they felt a sense of God's presence at worship. Presbyterians and those in Uniting congregations placed a higher value on worship (both traditional and contemporary), wider community care and practical care than many denominations.

- ❖ Spiritual growth was associated with personal Bible reading and prayer. Compared to other denominations, Presbyterian parish members about average in their frequency of these practices, and Uniting members the lowest of the

Frequency of Bible reading by denomination



Protestant denominations. Presbyterian members also have a more conservative view of the Bible than Uniting members

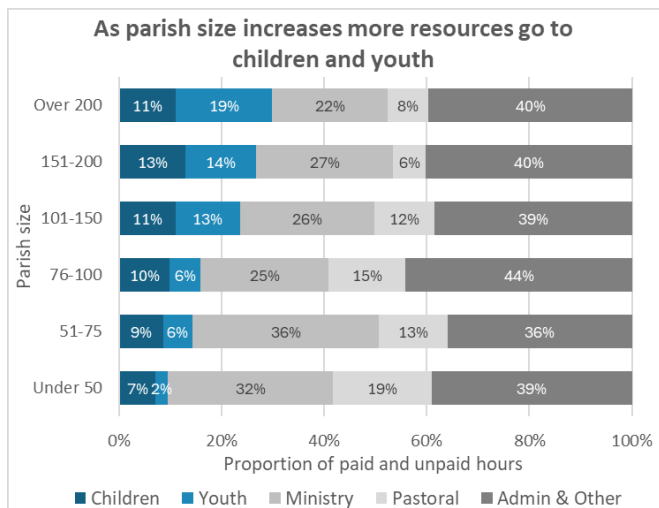
- ❖ About 70% of Presbyterian members and 60% of Uniting members chose to identify with the more conservative end of the theological spectrum, and about 20% and 30% respectively with the moderate and liberal. For both about 10% did not give an identity (largely younger members).
- ❖ Of the denominations participating in the Church Life survey our parishes had the fourth oldest age profile. Over Presbyterian parishes were the fourth oldest and Uniting parishes the oldest. Nearly 40% of Presbyterian and 55% of Uniting members were over 75.

### Leadership

- *Small parishes rely on volunteers but larger pay for more than half of their workers hours*
  - *As parishes grow in size, they spend a higher proportion of their labour on children and youth*
- ❖ Parishes have two resources that support their mission – people and financial resources. As the number at worship increase, parishes substitute paid workers for unpaid volunteers. In parishes

with under 25 at worship about 70% of the labour provided is unpaid, but in parishes with over 200 about 40% is from unpaid volunteers

- ❖ About 40% of the hours available is spent on administration/other in parishes of every size, but as parish size grows the proportion of hours dedicated to ministry and pastoral care declines and the proportion allocated to children and youth increases.

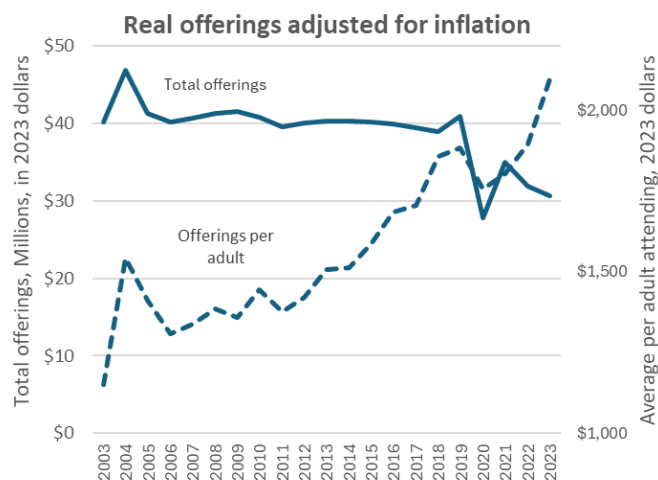


### Financial resources and buildings

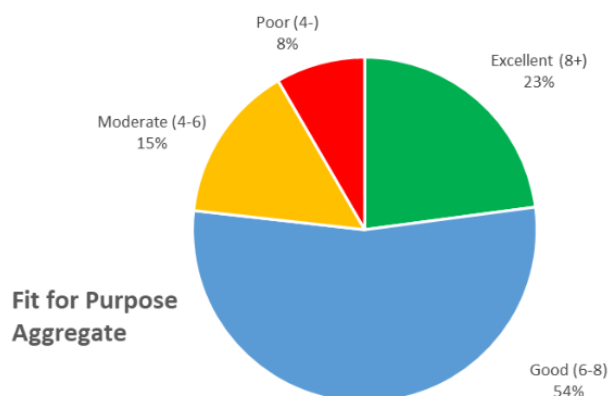
- *Since about 1960 the real value of the offerings has been constant at about \$40 million in 2023 dollars. But since Covid-19 this has dropped significantly despite increased giving per adult at worship.*
- *Our major asset is our buildings and a quarter of these are only moderately or poorly supporting our mission, and about half would not be replaced or would be replaced with something different if they were burned down.*

- ❖ From 1995 to 2019 the total offerings given to parishes remained about constant in real terms. This was part of a longer pattern as the total In fact the real value of offerings has been about the same since 1961. However, Covid-19 has shattered that stability. Since 2021 offerings have been significantly lower and declining in real terms. (While more parishes failed to provide financial data, these are generally small and would not materially affect this trend.)
- ❖ The decline in offerings is driven by the decline in the number of adults at worship. In real terms the

amount each adult is giving has continued to grow after a drop in 2020 due to Covid-19.

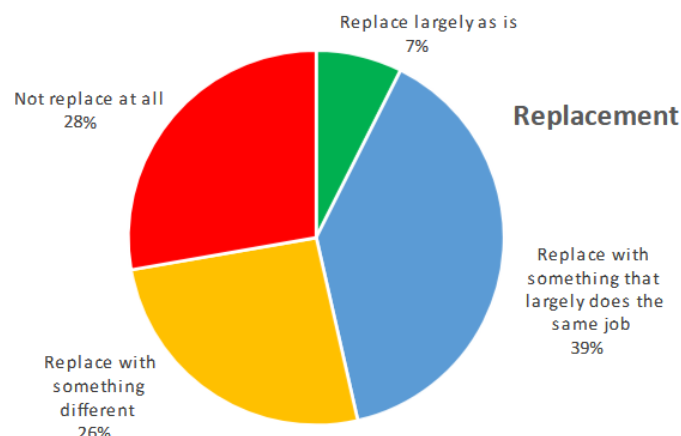


- ❖ Total revenue has had a smaller decline, but that is largely due to a significant increase in the realised gains from property sales, which is not a sustainable source of income.
- ❖ Current congregations have inherited a large capital base from the stewardship of past members, but most of this is invested in the land and buildings. For Presbyterian parishes land and buildings were valued at \$731 million in 2023 out of a total asset holding of \$915 million.
- ❖ In 2023 the General Assembly received a report from the Property Trustees summarising a review of the mission value of our property. This assessed whether our buildings supported the mission of the church in terms of their location, condition, current use and future potential.



- ❖ This survey found that about three-quarters of our current buildings are fit for purpose, with one-quarter being assessed as excellent. But almost a

- ❖ quarter were only moderately fit and almost one in ten were poor.
- ❖ Presbyteries were also asked “what would you do if the building were to burn down?” and, overall, more than half of the buildings would not be replaced or would be replaced with something different.



- ❖ With the decline in offerings and the rise in costs, particularly insurance, maximizing the value for mission of our assets will become more important in achieving our mission goals.

#### A note on sources and their reliability

Mostly this report is based on the [June statistics available online](#). Parishes do their best to provide these accurately and any errors are unlikely be large enough to disturb the overall patterns.

Some graphs also come from the [Church Life survey report](#) and report [E11.2 of the White Papers to the 2023 General Assembly](#).

Parishes struggled over the Covid-19 period. There were more missed returns and more suspiciously round numbers. For this report I have used the 2018-19 and 2022-23 figures to backfill 2020-21 with reasonable estimates. In 2023 there was still a higher-than-normal rate of non-reporting, so I have used the trend to estimate the missing returns. This means the numbers here are slightly different (and larger) than the figures found on the returns themselves. A group of Te Aka Puaho parishes could not be estimated because they have not provided statistics for many years. Having talked to members of Te Aka Puaho, the number at worship on Sunday at these parishes combined is unlikely to exceed one standard parish.

This report was prepared by Dr M N Galt, February 2025.



# How to use your parish's June statistics to assist your leadership

Your June statistics, combined with the information in this short report, can be a guide to how your parish is going compared to other similar parishes. Ask someone to do the basic calculations below and then as a Session/Parish council consider what the numbers tell you.

## The preparation:

Get your latest June statistics – if you don't have them to hand you can download them from the national [Presbyterian church website](#). Write the following key statistics in here

The number of adults at worship		The number of additions to the roll**	
The number of youth at worship**		The number removed from the roll**	
The number of children at worship		The total amount of offerings	
Add these together to get the total number at worship		The total amount spent on Ministers (including lay ministers and accommodation)	
The total number of people on the roll (both members and associates)		The total spending	
** These are only available for Presbyterian parishes, not union or cooperating			

If your parish took part in the Church Life Survey, you would also find it has useful information. You can download these at their website if you have the parish's codes. <https://cls.nz.org/> (Click on View your current resources)

## How well are you meeting the needs of your members?

There are two key metrics which have been shown to indicate the strength of your member's commitment

1. Divide the number of people on the roll by the number of adults at worship. \_\_\_\_\_. This gives the average number of times a month they come to worship. **How does this compare with the graph on page 2? What might make them come more often?**
2. Divide the total offerings by the number of adults at worship. \_\_\_\_\_. Compare this with \$2,200. This measure is less about money and more about how your members are engaged with the parish. **If it is a lot lower, is this an indication of a lack of commitment? If it is a lot higher, is it because your circumstances are putting a strain on your members.**
3. Divide the total amount of offerings by the total spending. **Parishes that have less than 30% of their spending covered by offerings are more dependent on their assets than their people. Is this where you want your parish to be?**

The Church Life survey reports 3, 4 and 5 may give you a fuller picture of what your members think of different aspects of parish life like the preaching, children and youth work, your goals and your social activities.

## How well is your parish placed to meet the needs of the future?

There are two key metrics for looking at how well your parish is going.

1. Divide the number of children attending worship by the total number at worship. \_\_\_\_\_. Parishes that grow generally have over 15%. Compare your results with those on page 3. **What conclusions do you draw?**
2. Subtract the number of removals from the roll from the number of additions \_\_\_\_\_. **How do you compare to the graph on page 1? What is the key issue?** You may want to also look at the kind of removals you have.
3. Divide the amount spent on Ministers by the total spending. \_\_\_\_\_. **Parishes that spend over 50% tend to not have enough for other programmes.**
4. If you want to go further, you might like to compare the breakdown of your hours worked (both paid and unpaid) with the distribution of the average parish of your size on page 4.

The Church Life Survey also asked what people thought about the future of the parish.