



Growth, decline, and planting by Australian churches

Results from the 2021 National Church Life Survey

A Report prepared for Exponential Australia,
by NCLS Research

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Growth, decline, and planting by Australian churches

Results from the 2021 National Church Life Survey

This report draws on the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) to describe aspects of local church growth or decline and church planting in 2021 and 2022. It draws on historical information about church sizes and new information provided by local church leaders about their church size and experiences with planting of new churches.



The National Church Life Survey, which is a project of NCLS Research, has assembled a large and growing database of information about Australian churches, church attenders and local church leaders over the past 30 years.

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1 Executive Summary

This report draws from NCLS Research's Church Census to provide estimates of church growth and decline, and church planting activities among Protestant churches for the 2017-2021 period, with comparisons to earlier time periods.

Growth and Decline from 2016-2021

It is estimated that 18% of local Protestant churches have experienced net growth of at least 10% in their weekly attendance over the 2016-2021 period, while 69% have declined. This is a large reduction from the previous 5-year period, 2011-2016, when 31% of churches had experienced such growth and 50% had declined. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on church attendances in 2020 and 2021 mean it is likely that more churches were experiencing growth up until 2019, and that this historic event is the primary reason we have seen such a marked lowering in the number of growing churches.

Churches of larger size are more likely to have experienced attendance growth, with 28% of churches of 100 or more attenders experiencing growth. In the previous time period this tendency was also true, although growing churches were the largest group previously, whereas in the 2016-2021 period the largest group is declining churches (59%). The pandemic has impacted churches of all sizes in a similar way and disrupted previous patterns.

No denominational groups appear to have avoided being impacted by the pandemic, although there are some small differences between them. Churches in Pentecostal denominations have fared slightly better overall, with 27% experiencing growth and 61% decline. This is a significant change for Pentecostal churches, where in the previous period more churches were growing than were declining.

General Church Planting

The rate of Australian Protestant churches planting either overseas or in Australia is markedly lower in the 2017-2021 period. This will be partly attributable to there being little or no successful church planting in 2020 and 2021 given the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. However, it appears that rates of church planting were gradually decreasing before this, and in 2019 about 1.5% of churches were planting in a given year. A decade earlier the rate was about 2.2%.

Pentecostal churches have the highest rate, with an estimated 4.6% of churches planting in 2019, compared to 0.9% of mainstream Protestant churches and 1.2% of other Protestant churches. It is estimated however that over 40% of church plants by Pentecostal churches are occurring overseas.

Church Planting in Australia

Results from a new question restricted to church planting in Australia indicates that approximately 1 in 10 Protestant churches (10.2%) have planted a church in Australia in the last 10 years, with three-quarters of these planting a single church, and a quarter planting two or more churches. After testing a number of simple data models, the most likely rate of church planting in Australia in 2019 (the year before the pandemic occurred) is about 1.0%. That is, one percent of Protestant churches planted a church in Australia in 2019, a rate that has probably been declining for some time.

As with general church planting, there are marked differences between denominational groups in terms of church planting in Australia. About 0.6% of Mainstream Protestant churches are estimated to have planted a church in Australia in 2019. Other non-Pentecostal Protestant churches are estimated to have planted at double that rate, that is, 1.2% of churches. Pentecostal churches are estimated to have planted at more than four times the mainstream rate, with an estimated 2.6% of churches planting another church in Australia in 2019.

Overall, this report confirms the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, both on church attendance levels and church planting. With most of the effects of the pandemic receding now, it remains to be seen whether Australian churches will demonstrate resilience, returning to similar levels of attendance and planting as they recover from the challenges, and whether there appears to be a somewhat altered landscape for ministry and mission in Australia.

2 Introduction

The local church can manifest growth and expansion in a number of ways. Church services can increase in attendance when new people are attracted and retained. Starting a new worship service can connect with a particular target group. New programs and activities such as community services or social events can connect with the local community in a fresh way. Sending out members elsewhere to work in ministry or mission endeavours is another form of expansion of the overall work of the church. Still another form is church planting, which involves providing financial or other support to begin a new local church, and might include sending out members as a group to be part of the new endeavour.

Using results from various National Church Life Surveys, NCLS Research has examined different aspects of growth and expansion of the church in Australia such as new initiatives (*Mapping New Initiatives in Church Life*, Hancock, Powell & Pepper, 2013), supporting overseas mission and participating in mission trips (*Fact sheets*, Sterland & Hancock, 2017a, 2017b), assessing the growth and decline in aspects of the overall Australian church (*The Resilient Church*, Powell, Sterland & Pepper, 2020), and health, growth, and planting by local churches (*Church Growth, Decline, Planting and Multiplication in Australia*, Sterland 2021).

This report examines church growth, decline, and church planting at the local church level, using results from the 2021 National Church Life Survey. It is limited to Protestant denominations, primarily because of the availability of accurate data at local church level.

Growth at the local church level represents one form of expansion and is an important signpost to a general increase in resources the church has to begin other new initiatives, by way of new members who can volunteer, contribute their abilities, and increased financial giving. As well as increased resources, growth of the local church can reflect 'mission fulfilment' where an increase in members suggests an increase in disciples, helping fulfil Jesus' great commission:

“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”
Matthew 28:19

Church planting also seeks to fulfil the great commission by beginning a new community of faith in a new location. It requires a significant amount of resources and is undertaken by only a small proportion of churches in Australia (Sterland, 2021).

The National Church Life Survey, held in late 2021 and early 2022 saw churches from 24 denominations participate, as well as independent churches. As one part of the NCLS, the Church Census is a one-per-church survey filled out by most participating churches, in which attendance figures and information about activities and programs is provided, including about church planting.

In this report the growth and decline of local churches is examined, and the proportion which are engaged in church planting. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is evident, with comparisons to previous results showing the unusual nature of recent years. Comparisons between denominational groups are also considered, highlighting that the stories of growth or decline, and church planting are not uniform across traditions, but all have been affected by the pandemic. Finally, a distinction between general church planting anywhere in the world and church planting in Australia can be made thanks to new data.

The results provide food for thought for local church leaders, denominational leaders and others who seek to support churches, to reflect on the current picture and possible future of church growth and planting in Australia.

3 Materials and Methods

Data from the 2021 Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) was used for this paper.

The NCLS is a five-yearly quantitative survey of thousands of Christian churches, hundreds of thousands of churchgoers and thousands of church leaders in over 20 Australian denominations (Catholic, Anglican and all major Protestant). The 2021 survey wave received ethics clearance from Charles Sturt University (Ref: H21355). The survey completion period was extended well into 2022 to maximise participation of churches.

The NCLS is based in local churches (congregations and parishes), with approaches to recruitment and sampling varying across the denominations (attempted census, random sampling, or opt-in; paid for by the local church or by the denomination) (Pepper et al. 2018). Catholic NCLS data are random samples, however, in Protestant denominations, there are some self-selection biases in church participation related to church size, locality and theological tradition. Nevertheless, the datasets have national coverage and denominational diversity, and churches from a wide diversity of traditions participate.

Participating local churches complete several types of survey forms, including the “NCLS Attender Survey”, the “NCLS Leader Survey” and the “NCLS Church Census”. All churchgoers aged 15 years and older are requested to fill out an NCLS Attender Survey form, usually during or after a service of worship/Mass. NCLS Leader Survey forms are available to anyone involved in leadership (including clergy and pastors, elders, church council members and other leaders), with the most senior leader at the local church, at minimum, encouraged to participate. The NCLS Church Census, about the activities and operations of the local church/parish is completed by a single leader/administrator in each church/parish. Both hard copy and online survey forms are available.

Questions about church growth/decline, church planting, and other indicators of church health and viability were contained in the NCLS Church Census.

Question wordings are given in Appendix 1. Comparisons with 2011 and 2016 results, where available, are also provided in this report.

3.1 About the NCLS Church Census

The NCLS Church Census, about the activities and operations of the local church/parish is completed by a single leader/administrator in each church/parish. Both hard copy and online survey forms are available. In 2021, there were two Church Census variants (the full version and a shorter version).

In 2021/2022, a Church Census was completed for 3,385 local churches. A small proportion of these churches answered the census on behalf of another church as well (i.e., their answers accounted for more than one local church).

To correct for differences in participation, results were weighted to adjust for variations in survey participation levels between denominations.

3.2 About the NCLS Estimates Project Data

The NCLS Research team holds a database of almost all Australian churches, largely updated every 5 years as part of the National Church Life Survey. This database includes an estimate of average weekly attendance for many local churches, sourced from the churches themselves via a Church Census or similar instrument, or from a denominational representative. Using size estimates from 2016 where available, church growth or decline in 2021 could be calculated.

4 Church growth and decline

Churches are asked in the census to provide an estimate of the attendance of people to all church services on their site within a typical week. The primary question used to gather this estimate has appeared in the NCLS Church Census over many years without variation, asking:

‘Overall, about how many different people, adults and children, attend church services (services of worship) at this local church during an average week?’

In the 2021 Church Census approximately 3,040 (94% of all census forms returned) churches provided an answer to the church attendance question. A number of other questions in the Church Census could also be drawn upon to give a close estimate if the church had not provided an answer to the primary question.

To calculate the growth or decline of each church, a figure of average weekly attendance is also required for 2016. From the 2016 estimates data, 1,726 churches have a reliable figure for both 2016 and 2021. Therefore, the growth and decline of 1,726 local churches could be calculated using highly accurate data from the two time points (2016 and 2021). To provide a more accurate picture of growth and decline across the Australia church, a weighting system was devised for these churches, so that they could represent their denominations in the correct proportions. Not all denominations could be sufficiently represented by the churches which had responded, and so some had to be excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the results for the growth and decline of local Protestant churches between 2016 and 2021 are based on a sample of 1,526 churches from the following denominations: Anglican, Australian Christian Churches, Baptist, C3 Church, Christian Reformed Churches, CRC International, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Hillsong Churches, International Network of Churches (INC), Lutheran, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, and Uniting. This list covers all mainstream denominations, over 80% of churches in Pentecostal denominations, and more than half of churches in other Protestant denominations, together accounting for just over 80% of all Protestant churches in Australia. Therefore, the data provides a good representation of the growth or decline of Protestant churches in Australia.

Churches are classified as ‘declining’ if their weekly attendance has declined by 10% or more between 2016 and 2021, and ‘growing’ if it has grown by 10% or more. The remainder, those whose attendance had changed by less than 9.9%, were classified as ‘stable’.

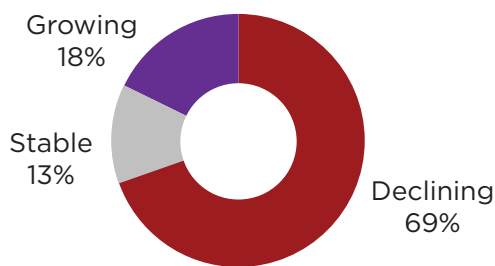
4.1 Growth or decline 2016-2021: overall results

Some 18% of Protestant churches are estimated to be growing by 10% or more over the 5 years from 2016 to 2021, while 69% are estimated to be declining by 10% or more. The remainder, 13%, are estimated to be stable (i.e., less than +/-10% change over the 5-year period).

Figure 1: Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches 2016-2021

Church growth and decline

In 2021, about 7 in 10 Protestant churches had experienced decline of 10% or more since 2016



Source: NCLS Research 2016 and 2021 estimates database (weighted, n=1,526)

These proportions of growing, stable, and declining Protestant churches are markedly different to the previous study of growth and decline of churches from 2011 to 2016 (Sterland, 2021), as shown in Table 1. In that study 31% of churches were estimated to be growing, while 50% were estimated to be declining.

Table 1: Growth and Decline of local Protestant churches from 2011 to 2021

Growth/Decline Period	Percentage of Churches		
	Growing	Stable	Declining
2016-2021	18%	13%	69%
2011-2016	31%	19%	50%

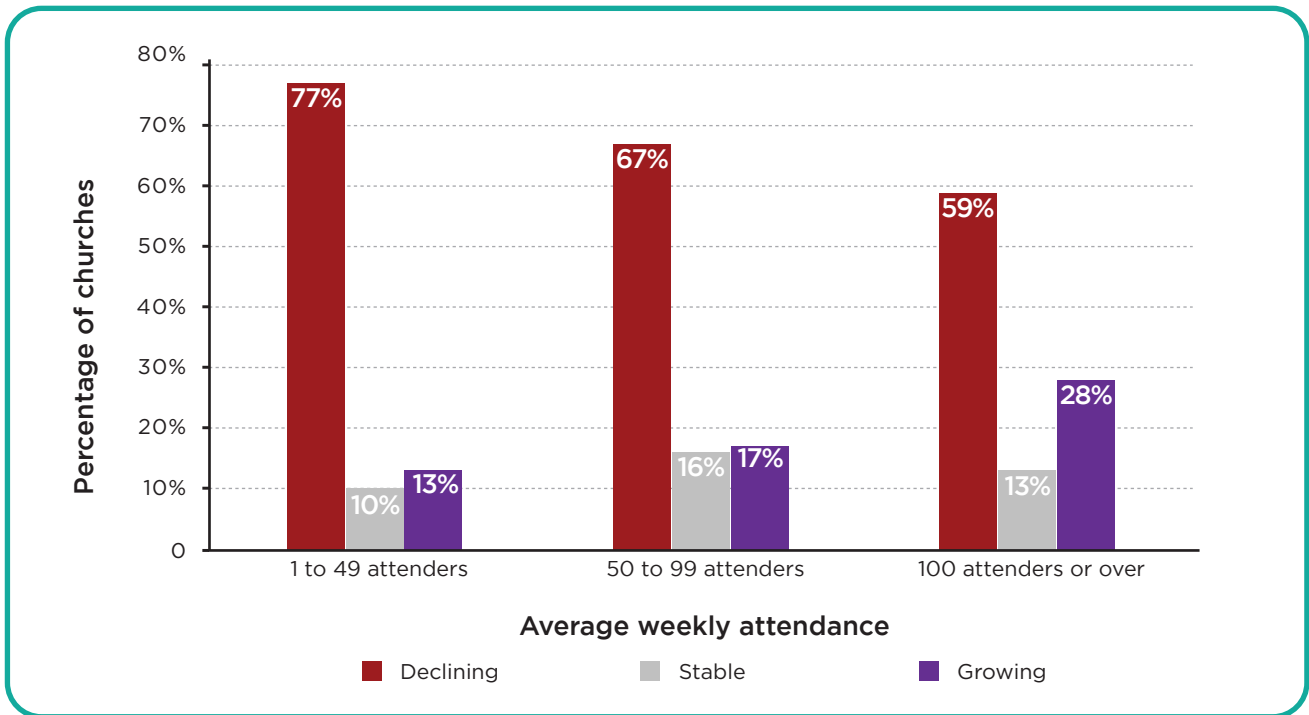
Source: NCLS Research 2011, 2016 and 2021 estimates database (2021 n=1,526, weighted; 2016 n=1,873, weighted)

There has clearly been a significant change to the overall picture of churches growth and decline in the 2016 to 2021 period. Whilst there may be more than one cause contributing to this, the largest influence is likely to be the Covid-19 pandemic which resulted in temporary closures of churches at different periods between 2020 and 2022. This disruption to attendance at church is no doubt reflected in the higher proportion of decline. While churches had resumed meetings when the 2021 census was filled out (or they filled it out in early 2022 when they resumed), it seems that in many cases not all previous attenders had yet returned to church. It remains to be seen whether attendance levels at most churches will eventually return to where they had been before the pandemic, or at least closer to pre-pandemic levels than they were in 2021/2022.

4.2 Growth or decline by church size

The experience of growth or decline between 2016 and 2021 is not uniform among churches of different sizes. While the previous section showed 70% of Protestant churches are declining, this is higher (77%) in smaller churches (those with a weekly attendance of under 50), and lower (59%) in larger churches (with attendances of over 100). Figure 2 shows that in all three size groups the majority of churches have experienced decline. Growth is more common in the larger churches, with 28% of churches with attendance of 100 or more experiencing growth.

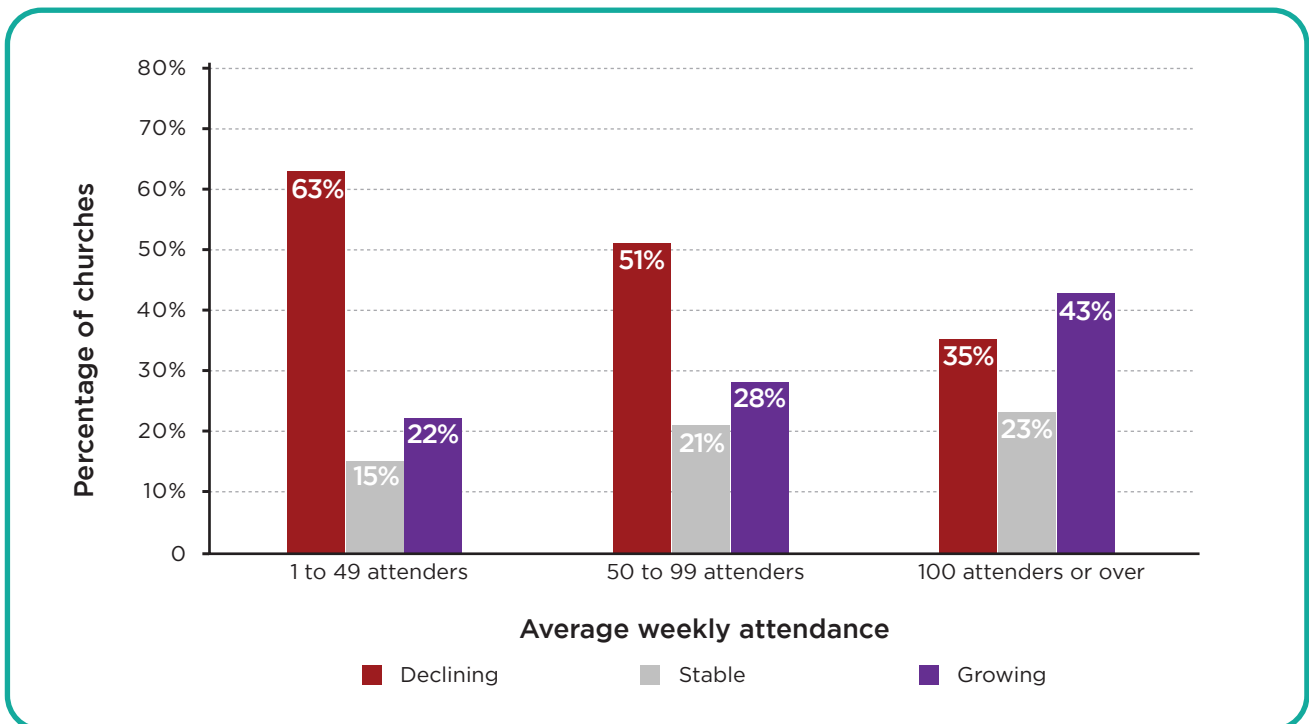
Figure 2: Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches 2016-2021 by Church Size



Source: NCLS Research 2016 and 2021 estimates database (2021, n=1,526, weighted)

The distribution of growing, stable and declining churches in different size groups has changed considerably since 2016, particularly for larger churches with over 100 attenders. The figures for 2016 are provided as a comparison (Figure 3). In 2016 growing churches were the largest group (43%, Figure 3) for those with over 100 weekly attenders, while in 2021 the largest group among the larger churches is those which are declining (59%, Figure 2).

Figure 3: Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches 2011-2016 by Church Size



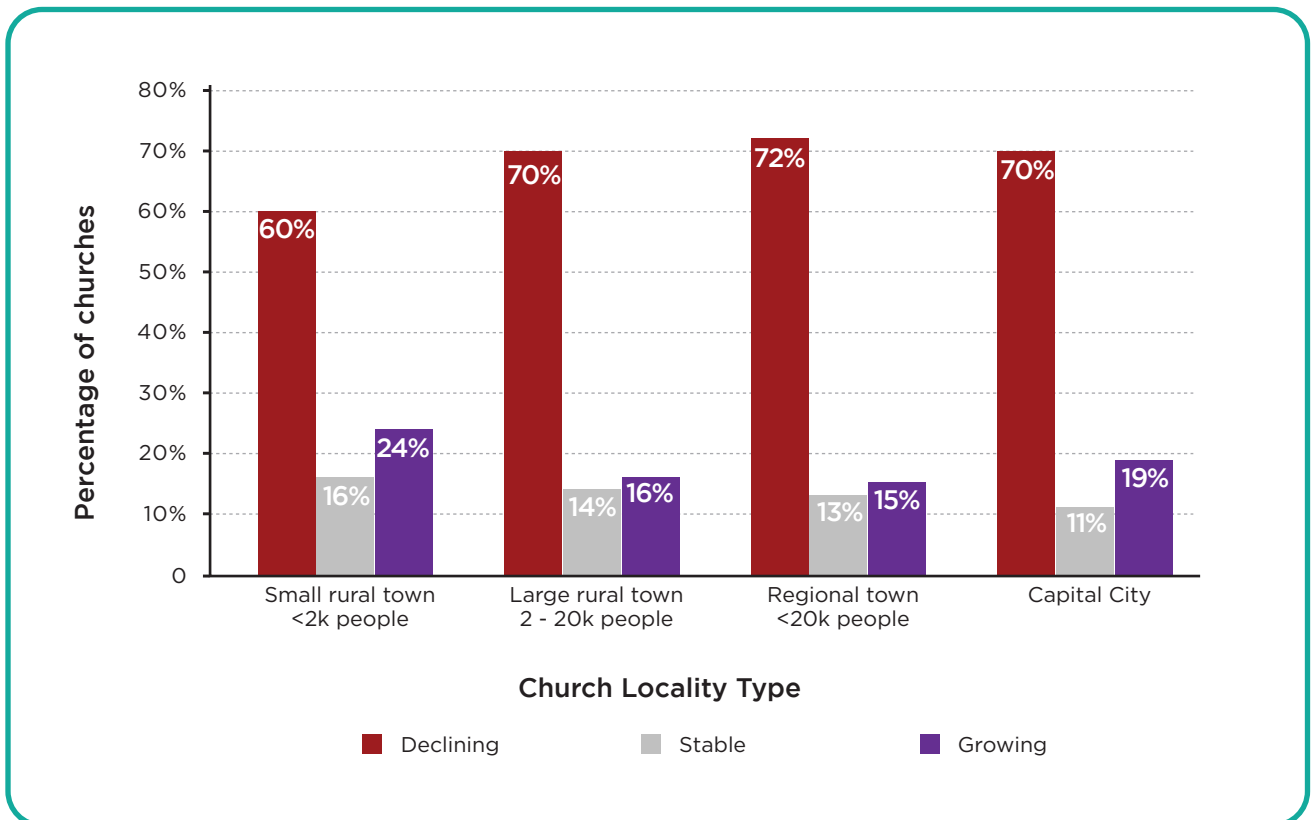
Source: NCLS Research 2016 and 2021 estimates database (2021, n=1,526, weighted)

In the past only churches with attendance under 100 were more likely to be experiencing decline, whereas in 2021 decline is the most common state for any church size, with larger churches doing only slightly better than medium or small churches. The effects of the pandemic have clearly affected attendance levels across all church sizes, disrupting previous patterns where larger churches were at some advantage.

4.3 Growth or decline by locality

There is little difference to observe between different locality types in regard to church growth and decline from 2016 to 2021, except for smaller rural towns (towns with less than 2,000 people). As Figure 4 shows, churches in the smaller towns have lower levels of declining churches. It may be that restrictions did not have the same effect in small towns as in larger towns, and that attenders were not as reticent to return to church because of the relative isolation of these towns. Interestingly, growth is also higher in the small towns, rather the lower level of decline corresponding to a higher level of churches simply maintaining their size.

Figure 4: Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches 2016-2021 by Locality

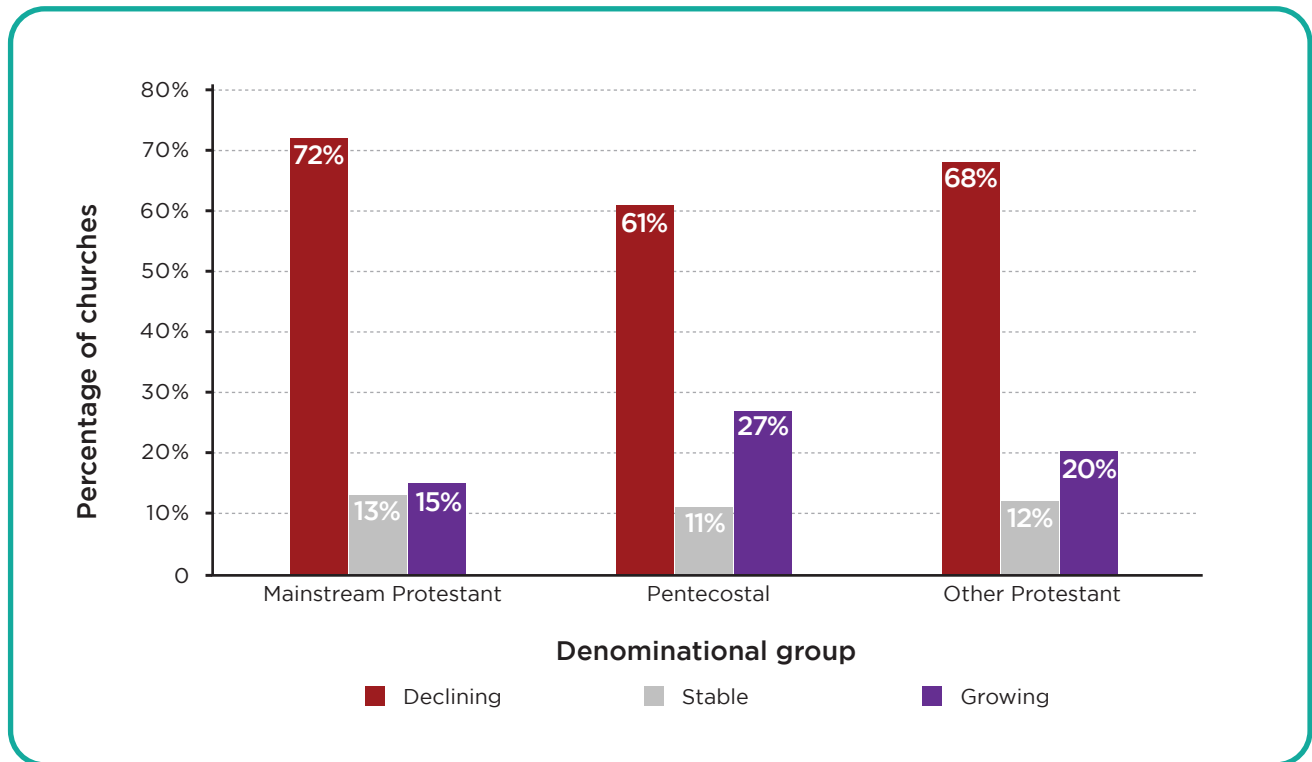


Source: NCLS Research 2016 and 2021 estimates database (2021, n=1,437, weighted)

4.4 Growth or decline by denominational group

Dividing up local churches according to denominational group shows there are some fairly small differences in the proportions of churches growing and declining. The proportions of growing and declining churches within the mainstream Protestant denominations (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Uniting) are very similar to the overall figures for all Protestant denominations combined, as Figure 5 shows. The non-Pentecostal other denominations are also similar, though slightly better than the mainstream churches. Churches in the Pentecostal denominations however have fared better, with 27% recording growth and 61% recording decline.

Figure 5: Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches 2016-2021 by Denominational Group



Source: NCLS Research 2016 and 2021 estimates database (2021, n=1,526, weighted)

1 Mainstream denominations included are Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Uniting Churches

2 Pentecostal denominations included are Australian Christian Churches (ACC), C3 Church, CRC Churches International, Hillsong Churches, and International Network of Churches (INC)

3 Other Protestant denominations included are Baptist, Christian Reformed, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), and Salvation Army

In 2016 the proportions of growth and decline in mainstream and other Protestant churches were similar to each other, as in 2021, and both reflected the overall picture at the time when 50% of churches were declining. The pattern for Pentecostal churches in 2016 was quite different, based on a relatively small sample at the time. In 2016 more Pentecostal churches were growing than were declining in the NCLS sample. Therefore, the results of 2021 show that the effects of the pandemic have been deep, with the overall proportion of declining churches increasing from 50% to 69%, and broad, with Pentecostal churches affected almost as much as other groups despite appearing to be in quite a different position 5 years earlier.

5 Church planting

In the NCLS Church Census over 2,800 local churches provided answers to the two key church planting questions, from 17 denominations that were sufficiently represented to be included in national weighted results. The denominations of these churches account for over 90% of Protestant churches in Australia that take part in the NCLS. A list of the denominations that are represented in the church planting results are shown below (Tables 3 and 4).

Churches were asked several questions about their activities planting other churches. This section provides an estimate for church planting over the past 5 years, and also introduces new results providing a distinction between planting in Australia and planting overseas. Church planting with no restriction to Australia is referred to as 'general church planting', described in the first sections below. Church planting in Australia is referred to in the later sections, and provides figures based on the past 10 years.

5.1 General Church Planting

Churches completing the Church Census were asked whether they had 'started a new church elsewhere (church planting)' in the last 5 years, including during the pandemic. By employing denominational weighting to the Protestant churches that indicated an answer in the census, it is estimated that 5.0% of Protestant churches planted another church between 2017 and 2021.

Table 2: Church Planting by Australian Protestant churches from 2002 to 2021

Church Planting Period	Percentage of Churches
2002-2006	10.9%
2007-2011	11.7%
2012-2016	(n/a)*
2017-2021	5.0%

Source: NCLS Research 2006, 2011 and 2021 Church Census database (2006 n=3,888, weighted; 2011 n=2,137, weighted; 2021 n=2,832, weighted) *figure not available for 2012-2016

Table 2 shows a comparison to previous time periods and indicates there has been a large reduction in church planting in the five-year period of 2017-2021 compared to earlier five-year periods. Given the restrictions imposed on churches meeting that happened in various Australian states at different times starting from March 2020 and the uncertainty that continued after restrictions were lifted, it is not surprising that church planting is markedly lower, as little or no successful church planting probably took place over 2 of the 5 years (2020 and 2021). It is likely that most churches preparing in early 2020 to plant a church put their plans on hold or had to pull out once restrictions had been introduced.

A gradual reduction in church planting prior to the pandemic

Based on the earlier results shown in Table 2 (the periods 2002-2006 and 2007-2011) it is reasonable to conclude that about 2.2% of churches had planted in a given year during that time period. No comparable figure is available for the 2012-2016 period as the Church Census questions were changed. In the 2021 Church Census the same wording was used as the earlier periods, so the 2017-2021 result is comparable. However, as a major disruption to church planting occurred over the bulk of the last two years of the five-year period, coming up with a yearly figure is challenging. If a church planting rate of 2.2% had held from 2012 onwards, we would expect the 2017-2021 figure to be at least 6.6%, if not more, given a very small amount of church planting may have taken place over 2020 and 2021 in areas where restrictions had ceased.

It is likely the rate of planting has been decreasing for some time before the pandemic, perhaps over the last decade or so.

It is possible that church planting from at least 2012 onwards has been gradually lowering, continuing at rates of less than 2.2% a year. A rate of 1.7% a year for 2017-2019 would produce 5.1% overall, close to the 5.0% result. However, if the rate has lowered from 2.2% it is more likely that it has been dropping slowly over a period of years. For example, if church planting had been 2.2% a year in 2012 and lowering to 0.95 of its previous level each year, this would produce a result of about 5% in total for 2017-2019. After testing a number of simple data projection models, this is a likely scenario.

In summary, it is likely that church planting has been decreasing slightly over the past decade and in 2019, immediately prior to the pandemic, was occurring at a rate of about 1.5% a year. That is, from 2017 to 2019 between about 1.5% to 1.7% of Protestant churches were planting a church each year.

General church planting
It is likely that in 2019 about 1.5% of Protestant churches planted a church.

5.2 General Church Planting Compared by Denominational Group

While the differences in growth or decline between denominational groups are fairly small, there are marked differences when it comes to church planting. Mainstream churches record the lowest level of church planting, with 2.8% planting a church in the past 5 years (Table 3). This equates to an annual planting rate of about 0.9% of churches in 2019 for mainstream denomination churches.

Table 3: General Church Planting from 2017 to 2021 by Denominational Group

Denominational Mainstream	Percentage of Churches planting in any country over the 2017-2021 period	Estimated annual rate of planting for 2019
Mainstream Protestant ¹	2.8%	0.9%
Pentecostal ²	14.5%	4.6%
Other Protestant ³	3.8%	1.2%
All Protestant combined	5.0%	1.5%

Source: NCLS Research 2021 Church Census database (2021 n=2,832, weighted)

¹ Includes Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Uniting churches

² Includes Acts 2 Alliance, Acts Global Churches, Australian Christian Churches (ACC), C3 Church, CityLife Church, CRC Churches International, and International Network of Churches (INC).

³ Includes Baptist, Churches of Christ, Christian Reformed, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Salvation Army, and Vineyard Churches Australia

Other non-Pentecostal churches denominations recorded a slightly higher 3.8% of their churches planting another church over the 5-year period, equating to about 1.2% of churches from these denominations planting a church in 2019. Pentecostal denominations recorded a far higher figure, with 14.5% of churches indicating they had planted a church in the past 5 years, which equates to about 4.6% of Pentecostal churches in 2019 planting another church.

The results throughout the last two sections (‘General Church Planting’) should be understood as church planting in any part of the world, as the wording for the question concerned is not restricted to church planting in Australia. In decades past, the proportion of churches being planted by Australian churches in other countries was expected to be a very small proportion of the overall number. New results from the 2021 census suggest this is no longer the case, particularly among Pentecostal movements. This is outlined in the following sections.

5.3 Church Planting in Australia

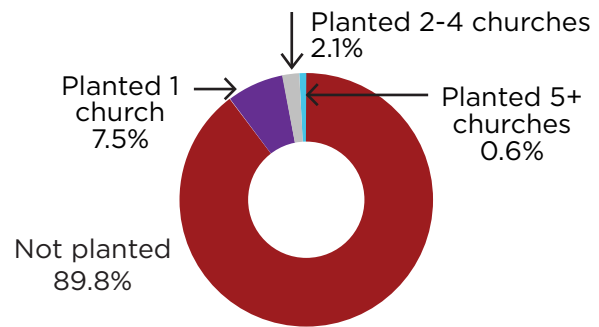
In the 2021 Church Census a new question asked about church planting specifically in Australia, and also about multiple church planting by a single church. The results do not easily align with those of the previous section, suggesting that a significant proportion of church planting reported in the previous section is in places outside Australia.

In response to the question ‘Has this church been involved in ‘church planting’ in Australia in the past 10 years?’, one in ten (10.2%) Protestant churches indicated they had planted one or more churches. Three-quarters of these (7.5%) indicated they had planted one church, while a quarter (2.7%) indicated they had planted two or more churches in the 10-year period (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Protestant churches that have planted in Australia 2012-2021

Church planting in Australia

1 in 10 Protestant churches indicated they had planted at least 1 church in Australia in the last 10 years



Source: NCLS Research 2021 Church Census database (2021 n=2,830, weighted)

The previous section on general church planting over a five-year period in any country concluded from data modelling and taking the pandemic into account, that planting had been done by about 1.5% of churches in 2019. In the current section the time period is 10 years and the wording restricted to plants only in Australia. If there were no churches being planted overseas, the annual planting rate behind this question would be the same (1.5% in 2019 and incrementally higher in earlier years) and we would have expected the total percentage of churches which had planted over the 10 year period to be about 15%, not 10.2% as found. Therefore, it appears that a significant amount of church planting reported in the previous section, about one third, refers to churches planted overseas.

The most likely rate of church planting in 2019 is about 1.0% of churches planting in Australia each year

Of a number of simple data models that were tested, it seems the most likely rate of planting is about 1.0% of churches planting in Australia in 2019, and, as with general church planting, a slow reduction in planting over the decade or so before.

5.4 Church Planting in Australia by Denominational Group

As with general church planting, significant differences are evident between the three denominational groups (see Table 4). Among mainstream Protestant denominations, 5.7% of local churches are estimated to have planted a church in Australia in the previous 10 years, an estimated rate of 0.6% of churches in 2019. Non-Pentecostal other Protestant churches are almost double this, with an estimated 11.1% of churches planting in Australia in a 10 year period. This equates to about 1.2% of churches in these denominations planting a church in Australia in 2019.

Table 4: Church Planting in Australia from 2012 to 2021 by Denominational Group

Denominational Mainstream	Percentage of Churches planting in Australia over the 2012-2021 period	Estimated annual rate of planting for 2019
Mainstream Protestant ¹	5.7%	0.6%
Pentecostal ²	24.8%	2.6%
Other Protestant ³	11.1%	1.2%
All Protestant combined	10.2%	1.0%

Source: NCLS Research 2021 Church Census database (2021 n=2,830, weighted)

¹ Includes Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Uniting churches

² Includes Acts 2 Alliance, Acts Global Churches, Australian Christian Churches (ACC), C3 Church, CityLife Church, CRC Churches International, and International Network of Churches (INC).

³ Includes Baptist, Churches of Christ, Christian Reformed, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Salvation Army, and Vineyard Churches Australia

Pentecostal churches higher planters, including overseas

Pentecostal churches are considerably higher in church planting rates, with about a quarter (24.8%) of churches planting a church in Australia in the 2012-2021 period, equating to an annual rate of about 2.6% of churches planting in 2019. Therefore, in both general church planting and Australian church planting the Pentecostal denominations as a group are the most active church planters, with rates more than double the next closest group (other Protestant denominations).

In addition, comparing the estimated annual rates of Pentecostal churches general church planting (4.6%, Table 3) and planting in Australia (2.6%, Table 4) shows a difference of 2% of churches planting overseas. Although these rates are estimates based on a limited sample, these results suggest that over 40% of church plants by Pentecostal churches are occurring overseas.

These results suggest that over 40% of church plants by Pentecostal churches are occurring overseas

There may be differences in denominational culture contributing to the higher levels of overseas church planting among Pentecostal churches. For example, the ‘mission spirit’ of Pentecostal churches may be shown more in planting churches in other countries rather than supporting persons designated as ‘missionaries’. This would align with an earlier finding that Pentecostal churches are less likely than other denominations to support an overseas Christian worker through a mission agency (Sterland & Hancock, 2017a). There may also be some important differences in the reality of planting a church overseas compared to planting in Australia. For example, a church indicating they have planted overseas may be one of several from different countries contributing. It’s also conceivable that the resources required to plant overseas are different, depending on the country. In a country of lower socio-economic status, the monetary equivalent to secure a premises for a church or pay for a pastor may be considerably lower than what it is in Australia.

In terms of describing churches in categories such as ‘growing’, ‘reproducing’ (planting on occasion), and ‘multiplying’ (planting regularly), the resources and context in each country likely differ. The following section will focus on Australia, combining earlier sections of this report to consider the possible size of such categories among Australian churches.

5.5 Growing, Reproducing, and Multiplying Churches in Australia

The 2021 Church Census collected more specific data about churches that plant in Australia, including those which have planted multiple churches. Those which have planted a single church have been referred to as 'reproducing' while those planting multiple churches have been called 'multiplying' (Lifeway Research, 2019). A previous examination of church planting by Australian churches from 2012-2016 (Sterland, 2021) estimated that about 2% of churches are reproducing in a given year and within that group a very small proportion, perhaps less than 0.5%, could be regarded as multiplying (planting more often). These results were for Australian churches planting in any country, rather than only Australia.

Results from the most recent Church Census can classify Australian Protestant churches using the terms 'growing', 'reproducing', and 'multiplying' as follows.

Growing: 18% of churches grew by at least 10% in weekly attendance from 2017 to 2021.

Reproducing: About 0.75% of churches 'reproduced' by planting a church in Australia, in 2019 (the year before the pandemic occurred) but didn't plant in other years.

Multiplying: About 0.25% of churches, which is one-quarter of the planting churches, planted in Australia in 2019, and are planting repeatedly.

Churches in 2017-2021
Growing: 18% Grew by at least 10% in 5 years
Reproducing: 0.75% Churches which plant in a normal year
Multiplying: 0.25% Churches which plant often
Note: planting overseas not included

These results are not directly comparable to the previous report on church planting (Sterland, 2021) for the following reasons:

Restriction to planting in Australia. For the first time the Church Census has collected figures related to planting in Australia. The previous report was based on church planting anywhere in the world.

Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from the conclusion that the pandemic has had a marked effect on growth and planting and is an unusual historical event, it also means that an assumption made in earlier work cannot safely be made now. Previously, it was assumed that the churches planting were a subset of those that were growing. This is reflected in Exponential's '5 levels'. In fact, churches can have a planting status even if they are not growing, but it was arguably a fairly safe assumption previously that growth and planting often go together. However, because of the pandemic, many churches which planted in 2017-2019 may well have gone on to experience decline in 2020-2021 when the pandemic hit. Therefore, while we can always think of 'reproducing' and 'multiplying' as subsets of church planting, we can't assume that 'planting' is largely a subset of the 'growing' group in the 2017-2021 period. An examination of the data found that churches that planted were from the growing, stable, and declining groups in fairly similar proportions to the overall growth/decline results.

6 Conclusion

This report has examined the proportions of local Protestant churches experiencing net growth or decline in the period 2017-2021, showing a marked change since the previous five-year period. Comparisons across church sizes showed that larger churches (over 100 in weekly attendance) have experienced less decline, although declining churches are still the largest group in this category, unlike the previous time period. Churches in small rural localities, and Pentecostal churches have experienced less decline and more growth.

Church planting has also been examined in this report. General church planting, by which is meant planting in any part of the world (including Australia) is estimated to have been undertaken by about 1.5% of Protestant churches in 2019 (the year before the Covid-19 pandemic). After testing some simple data models it was concluded that church planting has been gradually decreasing for some time, possibly the last decade or so. A significant proportion (about one third) of general church planting by Australian Protestant churches appears to be occurring overseas.

About 1.0% of Australian Protestant churches are estimated to have planted a new church in Australia in 2019. The rate of Australian church planting also appears to have been in very slight decline over the past decade or so. A large proportion (perhaps over 40%) of church plants by Pentecostal churches are occurring overseas. Pentecostal churches are engaged in far higher levels of church planting than other churches, both in Australia and overseas.

This report does not cover all church planting. Because the data comes from the NCLS Church Census, church plants by groups that are not local churches have not been captured. There may also be smaller endeavours (using terms such as 'micro church' or 'simple church') that are not being captured in this data, either because there was no local church that considered themselves as the planter, or because these are perceived as not meeting the criteria of a normal church plant endeavour by local church leaders who therefore did not include it in their answers.

Overall, the figures in this report confirm that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on church life, with a large majority of churches experiencing decline, and a significant interruption to church planting efforts.

However, before the pandemic occurred there were already significant challenges to the church in Australia, with about half of churches experiencing decline in the 2011-2016 period, and evidence of a gradual decline in church planting occurring over perhaps the past 10 years.

Therefore, with most of the effects of the pandemic receding now, it remains to be seen whether church growth and decline will return to similar trends as before, and whether church planting will resume at a similar rate. The pandemic has presented challenges and possibly a somewhat altered landscape. The Australian church's resourcefulness has been put to the test, and its resilience will now be on display both in how it can resume healthy growth and sustainable planting, and find fresh opportunities for new and creative mission in the coming years.

7 Data Sources

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9 Appendix: About Survey Questions

2021 NCLS Church Census questions

CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Overall, about how many different people, adults and children, attend church services (services of worship) at this local church during an average week? Count those who attend more than once a week once only.

GENERAL CHURCH PLANTING

In the last 5 years, has this local church carried out any of the following (including due to the pandemic)? (Select ALL that apply)

- Started a new church elsewhere (church planting)

(Note, showing question stem, and only church-planting option. Seven other options were available.)

CHURCH PLANTING IN AUSTRALIA

Has this church been involved in 'church planting' in Australia in the past 10 years? (Select ALL that apply)

- No
- Yes, we are a church plant
- Yes, we have planted a church
- Yes, planted 2 - 4 churches
- Yes, planted 5 or more churches

DENOMINATIONAL GROUP

Breakdowns are presented as follows.

Growth and Decline section

1. Mainstream Protestant: Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Uniting Church
2. Pentecostal: Australian Christian Churches (ACC), C3 Church, CRC International, Hillsong Churches, International Network of Churches (INC)
3. Other Protestant: Baptist, Christian Reformed Churches, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Salvation Army

Church Planting section

1. Mainstream Protestant: Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Uniting Church
2. Pentecostal: Acts 2 Alliance, Acts Global Churches, Australian Christian Churches (ACC), C3 Australia, CityLife Church, CRC Churches International, International Network of Churches (INC)
3. Other Protestant: Baptist, Churches of Christ, Christian Reformed, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Salvation Army, Vineyard Churches Australia

LOCALITY

Locality is derived from a question asking respondents to select a response that best describes the location of their local church.

Responses have been collapsed from 8 categories to 4 to provide the following breakdowns:

- Capital city
- Regional - greater than 20,000 people
- Large rural - 2,000 - 20,000 people
- Small rural - less than 2,000 people

Growth, decline, and planting by Australian churches

This report examines church growth, decline, and church planting at the local church level, using results from the 2021 National Church Life Survey. Comparisons with previous periods show there have been significant changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results provide food for thought for local church leaders, denominational leaders and others who seek to support churches, to reflect on the current picture and possible future of church growth and planting in Australia.