

64/23 Attendance Patterns and Mission in the Diocese

(A report of the Standing Committee.)

Key Points

- Over the period 2013-2023, total Sydney Anglican adult attendance declined 7%, or 14% against population.
- Adult attendance declined at approximately two-thirds of Sydney Anglican comparable church centres¹, and only one-third of church centres recorded an increase in attendance.
- The proportion of adult newcomers as measured by the National Church Life Survey (**NCLS**) has been steadily declining: from 12.4% in 2001 to 5.4% in 2021. With fewer new people joining churches, the churches that are growing are primarily growing at the expense of churches that are declining.
- After a period of stability 2013-2017 a noticeable decline in attendance was recorded in 2018-2019, especially in the most rapidly secularising parts of our Diocese (the Northern and Wollongong regions).
- The issues are not just external. There are denominational and congregational factors also at play. Northern and Wollongong regions had the lowest number of newcomers. These regions also recorded results below the Diocesan average on the key internal mission indicators (as selected from the NCLS for Mission 2020), and other NCLS indicators relating to congregational character and leadership.
- There are now fewer large churches, and the large churches declined at a greater rate than medium and small-sized churches.
- Following the temporary decline associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance has 'bounced back' to a level higher than the trajectory of decline that was recorded in 2017-2019. Nevertheless, the final adult attendance figure for 2023 recorded a slight decline from the 2019 figure.

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to respond to the request in Synod resolution 64/23, paragraph (e), that the Standing Committee "initiate an analysis of average attendance trends, and an assessment of the likely impact of social changes upon average attendance, and report back to Synod in 2024".

Recommendations

2. Synod receive this report.
3. Synod, noting the report '64/23 Attendance Patterns and Mission in the Diocese', request the Standing Committee to consider the recommendations of the report (paragraphs 111-130), take appropriate steps to enact those recommendations it chooses to prioritise, and bring a report to the next session of the Synod with an update on progress.

Background

4. Synod passed resolution 64/23 in the following terms –

'Synod –

¹ A "church centre" is defined as a specific geographical location where Anglican worship regularly occurs. Many parishes will have multiple centres, as these can include such centres as a branch church, or an aged care facility where Anglican services are held.

- (a) gives thanks to the Lord for –
 - (i) the faithful Anglican ministry efforts of both laity and clergy since 1788,
 - (ii) the crucial work of Moore Theological College, Anglicare, Youthworks, diocesan schools and other ministry organisations, in supporting the ministry of the Diocese’s churches,
 - (iii) the visionary and theological leadership of archbishops, past and present, and
 - (iv) the property and financial resources which facilitate the ministry of the Word,
which have all contributed to almost 40% of the national Anglican Church’s weekly attendance being within the geographical boundaries of the Diocese of Sydney,
 - (b) therefore encourages all Sydney Anglicans to pray for the lost, so that the Lord would open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ (Acts 26:19),
 - (c) notes –
 - (i) the baby boomer generation, which constitutes a large percentage of the average attendance per week, has begun its progression to glory,
 - (ii) the population within the boundaries of the Diocese is booming and is projected to include an additional one million people by 2041,
 - (iii) the majority of that net population growth is expected to reside within the brownfield areas of Sydney, and
 - (iv) the challenges of ministering with ageing and often inadequate infrastructure within those brownfield areas,
 - (d) further notes the external, forthcoming government-imposed challenges to overcome, that may adversely affect the impact of our ministries, and
 - (e) requests the Standing Committee to initiate an analysis of average attendance trends, and an assessment of the likely impact of social changes upon average attendance, and report back to Synod in 2024.’
5. In response to the request in paragraph (e) of Synod resolution 64/23, on 11 December 2023 the Standing Committee appointed an Attendance Patterns Committee (**the Committee**) comprising the Rev Geoff Bates (Chair), Ms Karen Calayag, Miss Jennifer Flower, the Rev Dominic Steele, the Rev Andrew Bruce, the Rev Mike Doyle, and the Rev Dr Stephen Shead, to initiate an analysis of average attendance trends, and an assessment of the likely impact of social changes upon average attendance, and report to the Standing Committee by July 2024. The Committee elected the Rev Dominic Steele as Deputy Chair, who acted as Chair during the Rev Geoff Bates’ long service leave.
 6. The Committee met on the following eleven occasions: 6 February 2024, 21 February 2024, 6 March 2024, 20 March 2024, 3 April 2024, 30 April 2024, 9 May 2024, 28 May 2024, 27 June 2024, 2 July 2024, and 10 July 2024.
 7. The Committee benefited greatly from the wise counsel and significant expertise of Dr John Bellamy, Senior Researcher with Anglicare’s Social Policy and Research Unit, who served as a coopted member of the Committee. John’s expertise in providing analysis based on National Church Life Survey (**NCLS**) data was especially valuable. The Committee wishes to thank John for his contribution to its work.
 8. The Committee also wishes to thank the Diocesan Registrar, Mrs Catherine Rich, and the Registry team, for their assistance in compiling the raw data upon which this analysis is based. The Registry also actively engaged with the Committee to explain the past history and current processes involved in the collection, storage, and analysis of attendance statistics. The Committee is also grateful for Registry efforts in following up parishes who had not submitted attendance data in a timely manner.
 9. The Committee had access to a considerable suite of resources in its work, including the report of the Committee on Church Growth presented to the Synod in 1991, various reports and papers prepared for the former Strategy and Research Group, and more recent work in this field, such as Andrew Heard’s *Growth and Change: The danger and necessity of a passion for church growth*

(Matthias Media, 2024). The Committee also commissioned research from Dr John Bellamy, and conducted its own research, especially in the area of the intersection of attendance statistics and census statistics.

Doctrinal context

10. The analysis of church attendance needs to be carefully framed by our own theological convictions on the purpose of church, the expectation of growth and the desire for growth. Jesus in His great commission calls on His disciples to make disciples of all nations. It is our desire as disciples to see more and more people around us growing in trust and obedience to Jesus (to grow in numbers and depth).
11. We rejoice in the hope of the great commission and the right desire given to all Christians to see more people accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Our ministry efforts are for more people to be saved, and be established among the saints in a local church.
12. While we hope and pray that churches would grow, there is very little exegetical or theological evidence to suggest that all churches, in all locations and all ages will always grow. There are lots of things that make up a healthy church. Growth in numbers is potentially one of them. Growth on its own is not a sign of a healthy church, and lack of growth on its own is not evidence that a church is not healthy.
13. We reject the tacit accompanying idea that 'good ministers' will always see growth and lack of growth is always proof of 'poor ministry.' Jeremiah and Isaiah, and even Paul, conducted 'good ministry' but this was not always met with numerical growth. While church numerical growth is in a sense the easiest metric to measure, there are a complementary range of other focuses to improve the spiritual health of our churches.
14. The LORD will bring His harvest and so we are to labour faithfully (and indeed wisely, even shrewdly) in His field, as we have been given both the opportunity and responsibility. It is the LORD who gives the growth, we as his servants are called to sow generously and tirelessly. It is appropriate to also hold fast to Jesus' warnings about being a faithful and trustworthy worker who is ready and awaiting his Lord's return. The goal of our investigations has been to help us reflect and consider the nature and quality of our labours past, so as to shape and enthuse our ministry labours going forward.

Current questions and debate

15. A number of questions have been posed by Synod members regarding attendance statistics. Some of the contributing questions are:

Accurate figures

Are we growing, or shrinking, and if so, by how much?

Future expectations

Are we heading towards a further significant decline in attendance numbers, and why?

Causes of growth and decline

How much growth is genuine non-church arrivals (real newcomers, possibly conversions), and how much is transfer growth – from Anglican churches, or switcher growth from other denominations?

Is our lack of growth (if there is one) mainly due to issues of 'leadership skills / ministry strategy' or the 'soils' in which we are ministering?

What other patterns can we observe? For example: geography / culture, Non English Speaking Background (**NESB**) congregations, church styles (e.g. 'stole' parishes), church size, church conflict, church culture and leadership gifts, NCLS measures (e.g. 'newcomers', 'much growth in faith', 'invited someone to church in the last 12 months').

Has some of our preaching and ministry failed to equip our members to think biblically in the face of cultural change and to effectively connect/relate with the people we hope might come to our churches?

Specific questions about large versus small churches

Is there a difference in growth or decline between larger and smaller churches, and why?

Has the viability line for a parish changed?

The impact of, and recovery from, the COVID-19 pandemic (Covid)

To what extent have churches ‘bounced back’, and what does it say about the broader picture of growth/decline?

Are larger churches ‘bouncing back’ numerically better than smaller churches?

Finally, perhaps the most contentious questions in the background to the issue of attendance patterns are those related to ministry philosophy and diagnosing our current situation

Do our senior ministers and church leadership have an issue of ‘head’, ‘heart’ and ‘hands’?

Are there systemic issues in our Diocesan ecosystem affecting growth?

Is there a lack of cohesion in ministry and evangelistic endeavour between the ministry team and the lay members of the congregation?

Conversely, are we responding to the numerical decline with unhelpful alarmism and/or prayerless activism? Should our instinct be to change what we are doing, or to trust God with the biblical essentials of ministry and devote ourselves to prayer?

Should we think of growth in terms of “success” and decline as “failure”?

Are we resting on our laurels by focusing only on inputs to ministry and neglecting the harder process of assessing outcomes to consider whether we can do things in a more effective way? Is that a valid and needed diagnosis or a concerning shift?

Methodology, structure and approach

Four key factors

16. The growth and decline of congregations is the result of the interplay of a great many factors. These have been grouped into four main categories (See table below). The first two categories (national and local community factors) cover external factors related to the wider society while the second two categories cover factors internal to church life (denominational, leadership and congregational factors). This structure is drawn from ‘*Church Attendance Growth: Australian research on growth factors*’, John Bellamy, Peter Mayrick and Ioan Hastie, a report received by the Standing Committee on 20 March 2017.

National factors	Denominational factors
Local community factors	Congregational factors

Source: Hoge & Roozen, 1979.

17. **National factors** These are external factors or trends operating in the whole society that may affect church participation. These factors include social or cultural trends, such as changes in the values and beliefs of the wider population.

18. **Local community factors** As cities grow and develop, local communities often undergo significant change. Population shifts in the number of kinds of people who make up a local community can significantly affect the make-up of local congregations.
19. **Denominational factors** This set of internal factors include the structure, polity, theological orientation and approach to mission of denominations, which can affect the shape of ministry at the local congregational level.
20. **Congregational factors** The characteristics of a congregation such as its resources, group life, leadership and identity, may significantly impact upon attendance.

Colours

21. A consistent form of colour coding has been adopted. Throughout this report, dark red indicates a drop of 20% or greater, medium red a drop of 10-19%, pink a drop of 0-9%, light green an increase of 0-9%, darker green an increase of 10-19%, bright green an increase of greater than 20%

Church size categories

22. This report uses Tim Keller church size categories. They are: 'House' (1-39), 'Small' (40-199), 'Medium' (200-399) and 'Large' (400+). Keller also has a category of 'Very Large' (800+), but this was merged into the 'Large' category as there is only one centre in the Diocese that has an average adult weekly attendance above 800.

Data sets used and how prepared

23. Three sources of data were used in this report. Diocesan attendance statistics, analysed at the level of individual church centres, from 2013 to 2023; census data from 2016 and 2021; and NCLS data from 2016 and 2021.

Diocesan statistics

24. Over the ten year period (2013-2023) data from 436 different church centres has been analysed², ranging in size from small aged care facility congregations meeting monthly, to centres holding five services on a Sunday.³
25. In this report "**church centre**" is defined as a geographic ministry centre. Whilst the majority of parishes will have one ministry centre (the main church building), many parishes operate out of several different centres (for example, an amalgamated parish may have two or more physical church buildings separated in different suburbs and run a church service in a local school and aged care facility. In this example they would operate four centres. The NCLS records results by church centre (rather than, for example, aggregated by parish).
26. In this report, our analysis is based on **adult** attendance figures collected annually by the Registry. Of the 436 church centres for which attendance data was collected over the period 2013 to 2023, a total of 336 church centres recorded attendance in both 2013 and 2023. 29 church centres for which attendance data was recorded in 2023, did not exist in 2013. 55 church centres that recorded attendance data in 2013 had closed by 2023. There were 16 other church centres which began recording attendance after 2013, but had closed by 2023.
27. Complete diocesan statistics for 2016 were not available. Figures from 2020 and 2021 were so compromised due to Covid (e.g. impact of lockdowns, incomplete data, some parishes including livestream figures, and others not) that they have been left out of this analysis.

² As at 26 June 2024, 11 parishes had not submitted data for 2023 and estimates have been used for their centres.

³ This work principally focused on **adult attendance** (total "Weekly Average Service Attendance" as calculated by the Registry, for adults only). Early analysis focused on all attenders (i.e. including children). Ultimately, a thorough analysis of under-18 attendance was not undertaken, due to the significant change in 2019 to the way under-18 data was collected, as noted on page 129 of the 2020-2021 Year Book. It is not possible to compare under-18 attendance data pre-2019 with 2019 and subsequent years.

Understanding discrepancies

28. There are slight discrepancies in some cases between figures published in this report and figures found in past year books or in answers to Synod questions. There are simple and logical explanations for these discrepancies. A number in a Year Book or a Synod answer is correct at the time it was compiled. It is not unusual for parishes to submit data after a publication cut-off. Where data is not submitted an estimate has been used. This report uses the average of the previous and following year for estimates, and has used 2022 figures as an estimate for 2023 where a parish has not provided data. In some cases, these estimates vary from Registry estimates (for example, the Registry estimates for 2023 are an average of 2021 and 2022). In the course of this investigation, various transcription errors were discovered and corrected, such as the accidental reversal of adult and children figures for a centre. Some parishes occasionally submit data which clearly includes an error, or which misses a service or fails to distinguish accurately between different centres. Some parishes only submit combined adult and children data. If a parish changes its service time during the year there have been cases where 'double counting' has been uncovered. These are some examples of reasons for small discrepancies in published figures. Registry records will be progressively updated to correct any errors uncovered in the preparation of this report.

Census data

29. In order to try to identify trends in the state of the spiritual "soils" of the broader communities in which we are ministering, a comparison has been made of statistics from the 2016 and 2021 censuses, broken down into various geographical areas: Local Government Areas (**LGAs**), mission areas, and Diocesan regions. The census boundaries for these areas were derived from Anglicare's work in mapping parishes to 2021 census statistical areas. These were then retrofitted to the 2016 census in order to maintain the same areas for analysis. The statistics for a number of demographic categories were examined: religion, country of birth, language spoken at home, and index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage.

NCLS data

30. NCLS summary charts by region were provided for 2016 and 2021. Anglicare Researcher Dr John Bellamy also analysed diocesan attendance data for individual centres in 2017 and 2022 with the data provided by the 70% of parishes that took part in the NCLS in 2016 and 2021, in order to provide a table showing what correlations could be observed between church centre growth and decline and the makeup of members, mission indicators, and congregational and leadership characteristics.

Adjusting for population change

31. The expression "adjusted for population change" is used at points in this report. While attendance figures have shown growth and decline, the overall population of the Diocese of Sydney has grown significantly over the period under consideration, and it is helpful to take this growth into account. This report analyses Census data from 2016 and 2021 to calculate the total population of mission areas, local government areas, and regions. Attendance data (for adults) has been calculated as a percentage of the total adult population with 2013 attendance aligned to the 2016 adult population, and 2023 attendance aligned to the 2021 adult population. Although it is not possible to exactly align the years, the general trend is clear. Using as an example the Ryde Mission Area, there was a 2.8% increase in average adult weekly attendance from 2013 to 2023. The total adult population of the Mission Area increased by 12.7% from 2016 to 2021 – clearly attendance growth did not keep pace with population growth. When average adult weekly attendance (2013 and 2023) was expressed as a percentage of the total adult population (2016 and 2021), it showed a decline of 9% over time. This is what is meant when the report refers to a 9% decline "adjusted for population change".

Summary of results (2013 – 2023)

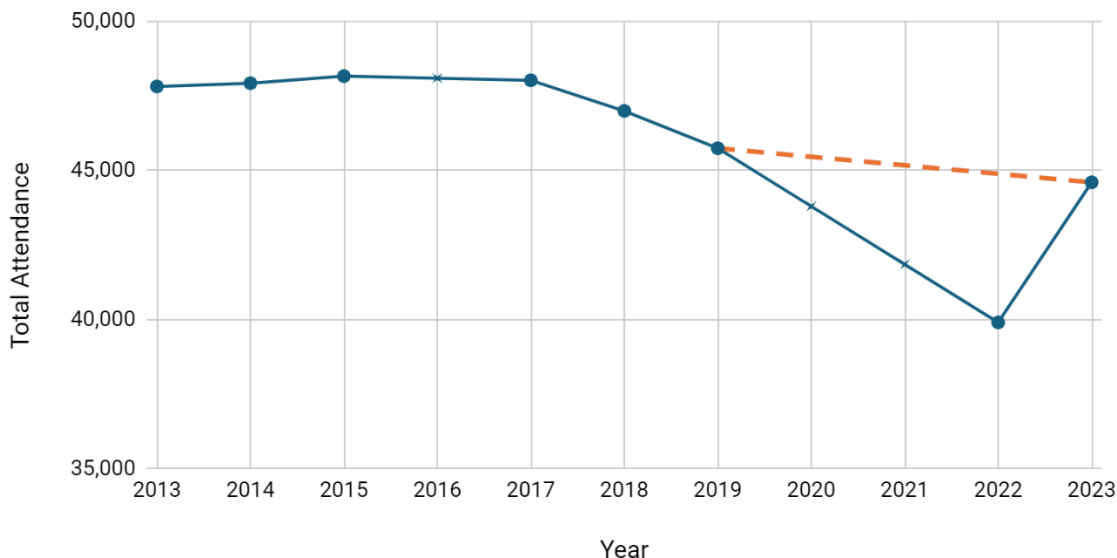
Diocesan results

32. Between 2013 and 2023, average weekly attendance for adults in the Diocese of Sydney declined by 3,209 persons, or 6.7%.

33. The Diocese experienced wafer thin growth between 2013 and 2017. Total attendance figures against the 2013 baseline were up in 2014 (+109), 2015 (+345) and 2017 (+206). Attendance numbers then began to decline sharply. Total attendance against the 2013 baseline declined progressively through 2018 (-819 or 1.7%) and 2019 (-2,069 or 4.3%), to a post Covid low in 2022 (-7,898 or 16.5%). In 2023 we have experienced some recovery in attendance against the 2013 baseline (-3,209 or 6.7%).

Diocesan Attendance 2013 - 2023

Figures for years 2016, 2020 & 2021 not available: see para. 27



34. However, when adjusted for population change, the decline over the ten year period is 14.4%, that is, the percentage of the wider community who are in Anglican churches has fallen by 14.4%. (Note that the population figures used were from the 2016 census and the 2021 census, respectively; population growth will have been even greater between 2013 and 2023.)

2013 Adult Attendance	2023 Adult Attendance	Change	%	Adjusted for Population Change
47,801	44,592	-3,209	-6.7%	-14.4%

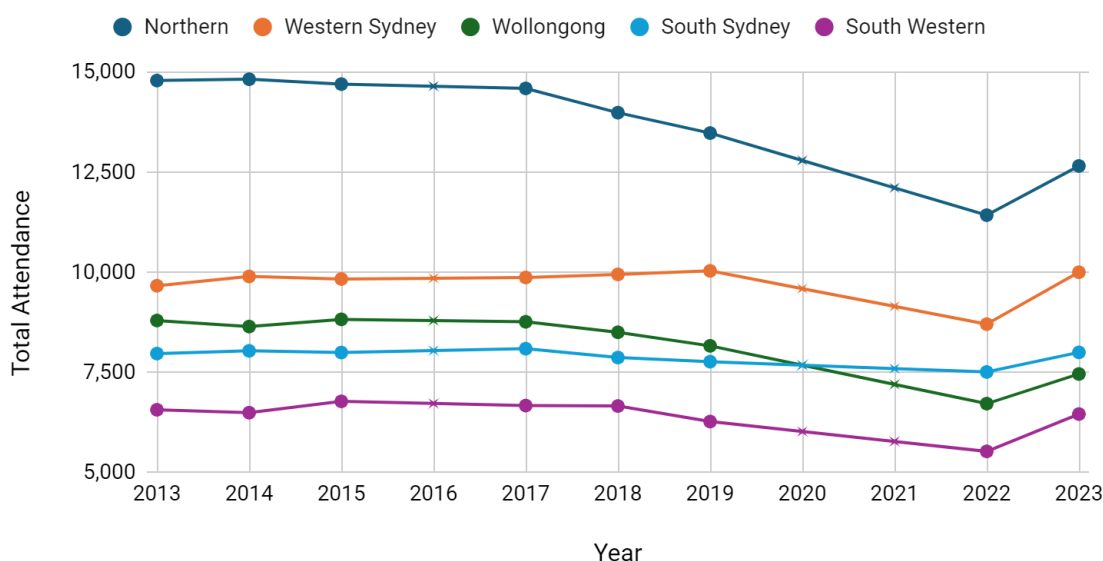
Results by Region⁴

35. Attendance changes have not been uniform across the five diocesan regions. The biggest declines in attendance have been in the Northern (-2,134, or -14.4%) and Wollongong (-1,336, or -15.2%) regions. There has been a slight decline in the South Western Region (-107, or -1.6%). The Western Sydney (+338, or +3.5%) and South Sydney (+30, or +0.4%) regions grew slightly.

⁴ For the purposes of consistent analysis **current** regional boundaries and mission areas are used throughout this report.

Regional Attendance 2013 - 2023

Figures for years 2016, 2020 & 2021 not available: see para. 27



36. When adjusted for population change, the figures for Wollongong (-22%), Northern (-20%) and South Western (-12%) regions are even more stark. In the Western Sydney (-9%) and South Sydney (-3%) regions, while raw numbers went up, the percentage of the total adult population in our churches went down.⁵

Region	2013 Adult Attendance	2023 Adult Attendance	Change	%	Adjusted for Population Change
Northern	14,793	12,659	-2,134	-14.4%	-20%
Western Sydney	9,667	10,005	338	3.5%	-9%
Wollongong	8,799	7,463	-1,336	-15.2%	-22%
South Sydney	7,973	8,003	30	0.4%	-3%
South Western	6,569	6,462	-107	-1.6%	-12%

Results by Mission Area⁶

37. Only four mission areas in the Diocese grew in attendance against population. Attendance grew in the Outer Inner West by 17% against population, in the Blue Mountains by 7%, and in both the Hills and Blacktown mission areas by just 1%. In addition, in raw numbers, we have seen growth in a further three mission areas: Macarthur (+353), Ryde (+54) and Sydney City (+14), though the Macarthur Mission Area has experienced a population explosion in that time (29%, second only to the 34% population growth in the Hills Mission Area). In Wollongong Region every mission area declined, although Southern Highlands (-12% population adjusted) fared better than the other four mission areas, with Wollongong South worst impacted (-33% population adjusted).
38. In the Northern Region, three (Lower North Shore, Upper North Shore and Warringah) of the four mission areas declined. In the Western Sydney Region, despite the population increases, attendance has declined in the Hawkesbury, Parramatta and Penrith mission areas. In the South Western Region, while Macarthur has grown (up 353 or +19% in raw terms), the growth has not kept pace with the population (adjusted for population -7%). In South Sydney Region, there has been a decline in the Inner West (-249), a rise in the Outer Inner West (+319), while the other parts of the region have been reasonably steady.

⁵ For more see: Appendix B available on the Synod webpage.

⁶ Analysis of attendance has also been undertaken by Local Government Area. See: Appendix A available on the Synod webpage.

Mission Area	2013 Adult Attendance	2023 Adult Attendance	Change	%	Adjusted for Population Change
Outer Inner West	1,297	1,616	319	25%	17%
Blue Mountains	1,375	1,501	126	9%	7%
Blacktown	1,534	1,626	92	6%	1%
Hills	2,465	3,309	844	34%	1%
Eastern Suburbs	2,304	2,263	-41	-2%	-4%
Sydney City	2,198	2,212	14	1%	-4%
Ryde	1,918	1,972	54	3%	-9%
St George West	796	736	-60	-8%	-12%
Macarthur	1,872	2,225	353	19%	-7%
Bayside	404	400	-4	-1%	-11%
Southern Highlands	1,070	1,051	-19	-2%	-12%
Inner West	1,770	1,521	-249	-14%	-12%
St George	1,506	1,357	-149	-10%	-14%
Lower North Shore	3,174	2,756	-418	-13%	-16%
Liverpool	1,483	1,300	-183	-12%	-19%
Wollongong	2,034	1,695	-339	-17%	-20%
Bankstown	912	837	-75	-8%	-15%
Shoalhaven	935	788	-147	-16%	-23%
Upper North Shore	6,957	5,792	-1,165	-17%	-22%
Hawkesbury	723	594	-129	-18%	-25%
Parramatta	2,118	1,784	-334	-16%	-25%
Penrith	1,452	1,191	-261	-18%	-26%
Sutherland	3,171	2,671	-500	-16%	-21%
Warringah	2,744	2,120	-624	-23%	-27%
Wollongong South	1,589	1,192	-397	-25%	-33%

Results by parish / centre

39. For confidentiality reasons this report does not include information that can be used to identify individual parishes.⁷
40. Analysis of centres that existed in both 2013 and 2023 (excluding those with adult attendance below 20) shows that 189 centres have declined while 110 have grown. And of those that have declined, the majority (126) have declined by more than 20% over ten years. Of those that have grown, over half (68) have grown by more than 20% over ten years.

Region	Grow 20+%	Grow 10-19%	Grow 0-9%	Decline 1-9%	Decline 10-19%	Decline 20+%
Northern	15	1	8	10	6	34
South Sydney	19	3	4	6	3	25
South Western	9	11	4	2	6	19
Western Sydney	14	4	3	8	5	25

⁷ A more detailed table of parish results (with the names of centres removed) has been prepared, for all 436 church centres. See Appendix B available on the Synod webpage.

Region	Grow 20+%	Grow 10-19%	Grow 0-9%	Decline 1-9%	Decline 10-19%	Decline 20+%
Wollongong	11	2	2	10	7	23
Total	68	21	21	36	27	126
Overall		110			189	

Analysis by church centre size: Tracking how the centres of each category in 2013 changed in size and attendance⁸

41. Of the 21 large centres (400+) in 2013, while 10 are still large centres, 11 have declined below the 400 attendance mark (as the table below shows).
42. Of the 50 medium centres (200-399) only 3 have grown to become large centres, 23 have declined below the 200 adult attendance figure.
43. 10 of the small centres (40-199) have broken through the 200 barrier, while 13 small centres have declined below the 40 mark. A further 15 small centres have closed.
44. Of the 107 'house churches' (1-39) that were operating in 2013, 40 have closed, 51 are still operating as 'house churches', and a further 16 have grown above the 40 mark.
45. Since 2013, we have seen 45 centres commence (some are fully fledged church plants, but the table also includes Sunday aged care facility services recorded by the Registry). 16 of these have subsequently closed. 13 recorded less than 40 adult attendance ('house churches'), 12 have grown to be small centres (40-199), while four have grown to over 200.
46. The complete results are shown in the table below.

Centre attendance – changes in size category (adult attendance)

Centre size	Number in 2013	Where are the 2013 centres in 2023?				
		Not Meeting	House (1-39)	Small (40-199)	Medium (200-399)	Large (400+)
Was Not Meeting	45	16	13	12	4	0
House (1-39)	107	40	51	16	0	0
Small (40-199)	213	15	13	175	10	0
Medium (200-399)	50	0	0	23	24	3
Large (400+)	21	0	0	0	11	10
Total	436	71	77	226	49	13

47. We have also tracked, for the centres in each size category in 2013, how their aggregate adult attendance changed over the subsequent 10 years.

Centre Size	2013	2023	Raw Change	% Change
House (1-39)	2,216	1,791	-425	-19%
Small (40-199)	21,341	19,153	-2,188	-10%
Medium (200-399)	13,302	12,066	-1,236	-9%
Large (400+)	10,942	9,251	-1,691	-15%

⁸ A more detailed analysis of results by centre size is available. Please refer to Appendix C available on the Synod webpage.

- 48. It should be noted that the table above tracks the change in 2013 centres to 2023, so the aggregate figure for 2023 does not equal total adult attendance in 2023 (i.e. it excludes 2,331 adult attenders in centres that have commenced since 2013).
- 49. Centres that were considered 'house' churches in 2013 had the greatest percentage decline in attendance over the 10 year period. They declined by 425 adults attending, or a total decline of 19%.
- 50. Large centres had the next greatest loss, declining 15% in attendance (-1,691 adults).
- 51. Small (-9%) and Medium (-10%) centres saw adult attendance decline by similar proportions (-2,188 and -1,236, respectively).
- 52. Importantly, the greatest increase in attendance is in new centres, where there were 2,331 adults meeting in church centres in 2023 that did not exist in 2013. It is important to note that total adult attendance in 2013 in the 55 centres that had closed by 2023 was 1,667. This shows a significant net increase (+664) in adult attendance between new centres and closed centres. There is no data available to indicate what percentage of those meeting in new centres had transferred from other centres.

Covid impact and partial recovery

- 53. In 2023 there has been a strong increase in attendance figures⁹ compared with the low of 2022. It is encouraging that, although the 2023 figures are still below those from 2019, we have bounced back to a much shallower trajectory of decline than 2018-2019.
- 54. The figures for 353 comparable centres show that, in 2023, two-thirds of centres (235) increased in attendance against 2022 (+5,849 adults). However, concerningly, 83 centres recorded a decline in attendance from 2022 to 2023 (-1,248 adults). The other centres recorded no change in adult attendance, or have not yet reported their attendance data. There is a particular concern for the 42 centres that recorded significant decline over the 10 years and also experienced no post Covid bounce back between 2022 and 2023.
- 55. We give praise to God that between 2019 and 2023 (i.e. over Covid), raw attendance numbers (adults) declined by only 1,140 or 2.5%. Overall, from anecdotal evidence, it seems we have come out of Covid less impacted than many comparable church networks (although there are significant regional differences).

2019 Adult Attendance	2023 Adult Attendance	Change	%
45,732	44,592	-1,140	-2.5%

- 56. The regional breakdown from the last four years shows again that the Wollongong Region and the Northern Region declined more rapidly. Attendance in the South Sydney and South Western regions has risen slightly, meaning there are now more adults attending Anglican churches in the South Sydney Region than in the Wollongong Region.

Region	2019 Adult Attendance	2023 Adult Attendance	Change	%
Northern	13,481	12,659	-822	-6%
Western Sydney	10,039	10,005	-34	0%
Wollongong	8,166	7,463	-703	-9%
South Sydney	7,771	8,003	232	3%
South Western	6,275	6,462	187	3%

⁹ At the time of writing, 11 parishes have yet to submit their 2023 attendance data. From those outstanding centres a slight net improvement in raw numbers is expected. It should be noted, however, that a substantial minority of centres did not record an increase in adult attendance from 2022 to 2023.

57. When examining change in average weekly adult attendance by region during Covid, whilst the Northern and Wollongong regions changed (more or less) in line with the general change over 10 years, the South Sydney Region grew 3% (against a change of 0% over the 10 year period), and Western Sydney recorded 0% (against a change of +3.5% over the 10 year period). The South Western Region recorded a 3% growth in adult attendance from 2019 to 2023, even though over the 10 year period attendance declined by 1.6%.

Region	% change (2013-2023)	% change (2019-2023)
Northern	-14.4%	-6%
Western Sydney	3.5%	0%
Wollongong	-15.2%	-9%
South Sydney	0.4%	3%
South Western	-1.6%	3%

58. The table below gives a broad-brush picture of the resilience and recovery of centres of different sizes through the Covid pandemic. The table tracks all the centres in each category in 2019, to show their change in attendance to 2023. Overall, from 2019 to 2023, larger centres had a greater decline in adult attendance than smaller centres. The decline in overall numbers increases from the smallest category ('House church' size: declined by 1%) through to the largest category ('Large' centre: declined by 9%).

Church Centre Size	2019 Adult Attendance	2023 Adult Attendance	Raw Change	% Change
House (1-39)	1,599	1,584	-15	-1%
Small (40-199)	22,425	21,605	-820	-4%
Medium (200-399)	11,795	11,344	-451	-4%
Large (400+)	9,913	8,985	-928	-9%

59. It should be noted that the aggregate adult attendance for 2023 in the table above only includes centres that recorded data in 2019 and 2023 (i.e. it excludes 1,074 adults attending centres in 2023 that did not exist in 2019).

Indigenous attendance

60. Aggregate adult attendance for the five Indigenous congregations in the Diocese were as follows: 74 (2018), 78 (2019), 77 (2022), 89 (2023). Attendance data collected by the Registry includes Macarthur Indigenous Church (Campbelltown Parish), Mount Druitt Indigenous Church (Minchinbury Parish), and Shoalhaven Aboriginal Community Church (Nowra Parish). Sunday attendance data for Scarred Tree Indigenous Ministries (within Glebe Parish) was provided directly by the parish. In addition, Evangelism and New Churches (**ENC**) was able to provide attendance data for Living Water Church Redfern, which is a "New Church", noting that the Living Water congregation is not exclusively Indigenous, and ENC congregations are not included in data collected by the Registry.
61. According to the 2021 NCLS, Indigenous persons comprised 1.0% of Sydney Anglican church attenders aged 15 years or more. Based on the adult attendance figures in the report for 2022, this would be approximately 400 adult attenders across the Diocese each week. In the wider community in the Diocese, the 2021 Census revealed that 1.8% of the population were Indigenous, or 95,267 people across the Diocese. A comparison of the NCLS and census data suggests that Indigenous attendees are under-represented in Sydney Anglican congregations, relative to their proportion in the wider community. It may be tentatively suggested that the total adult attendance across our five Indigenous congregations may account for around 20% of the persons who identified as Indigenous in all congregations across the Diocese.

Factors contributing to decline and growth

62. What follows is an analysis of factors that have potentially contributed to the changes outlined above. We look first at the external factors (National and Local Community) then at the internal factors (Denominational and Congregational).

A) National factors: the overall increase in secularisation of Australia

National factors	Denominational factors
Local community factors	Congregational factors

Source: Hoge & Roozen, 1979.

63. Historically, the number of Australians identifying as Christian has declined dramatically over the last 100 years. This can be traced through responses to the census religious affiliation question. In 1911, 96% identified as Christian. In 1971, 86% identified as Christian. The decline accelerated greatly, and in 2021 only 43.9% identified as Christian.¹⁰
64. There is no doubt that there is a relationship between the decline in church attendance and religious affiliation as measured in the census. However, the census figures mostly reflect a decline in nominal adherence, rather than in active practice, meaning that the trajectory of decline in practice has been shallower than the decline in adherence.
65. The rise in secularism is accompanied by a series of other significant social changes such as migration and globalisation, legal access to gambling, pornography, abortion, voluntary assisted dying, increased gender fluidity especially among youth, increased testing of religious freedoms, and the mainstreaming of LGBTIQ+ lifestyles.
66. Recent social changes also include extraordinarily rapid changes in technology (easy availability of information online, AI and the associated ethical issues along with cyberbullying) and economic shifts (growing financial discrepancy between owners and renters, the 24/7 work culture, loss of traditional jobs, high housing costs and rising homelessness, relationship breakdown and single parent families).
67. Additionally, some parishes may not have been as active as others in effectively pastorally addressing complex contemporary issues including child sexual abuse, family and domestic violence, identity issues and divorce and remarriage.
68. The graphs for both Diocesan and regional attendance year-by-year (paragraph 33, and paragraph 35) show that the most significant pre-Covid decline of recent years was recorded in 2018 and 2019, especially in the Northern and Wollongong regions. It may be possible that the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the same-sex marriage plebiscite, a lack of biblical teaching on human sexuality and the accompanying public debate may have had impacts on church attendance, especially in the parts of the Diocese that were simultaneously experiencing the greatest increase in secularism or non-religion (see local community factors below).

¹⁰ The census question on religion has changed over time. While always being an optional question, in 1971, for the first time, the form said "If no religion write none" and, unsurprisingly, the "no religion" category jumped from 0.8% in 1966 to 6.7% in 1971. Even the relatively minor change in 2021, moving the "No religion" box from the end of the page to the top of the list, clearly contributed to at least some of the increase in No Religion. These methodological changes should be noted when comparing census data over long periods of time. For further information please see this [link](#).

B) Local community factors: the impact of changes in religious affiliation, disadvantage and ethnicity on church attendance by region and mission area¹¹

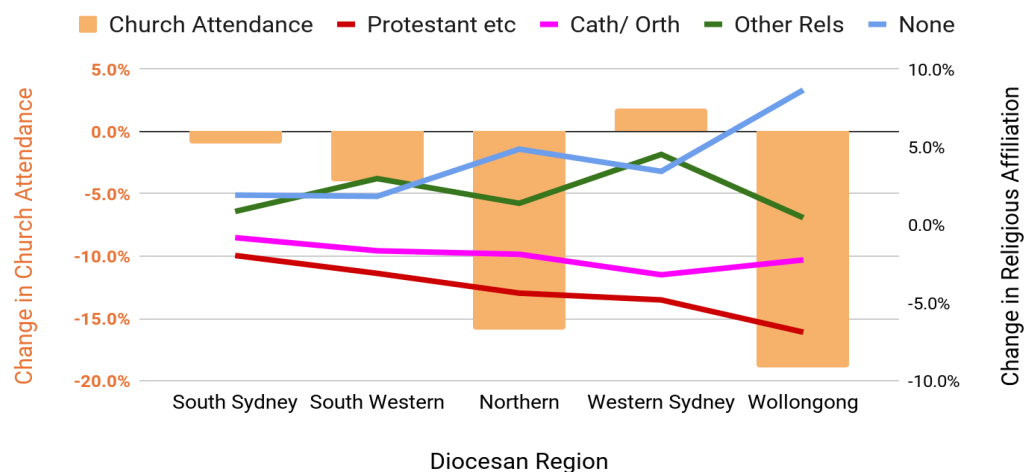
National factors	Denominational factors
Local community factors	Congregational factors

Source: Hoge & Roozen, 1979.

- 69. There seems to be a very rough correlation between decline in church attendance, decline in Protestant (and/or broader Christian) affiliation, and increase of secularism ('No Religion'). The rise of secularism has been most marked in the Wollongong Region, followed by the Northern Region.¹²
- 70. The Wollongong Region is still the most Protestant, and most broadly Christian, region in the Diocese. However, it has had the most dramatic decline in Protestant adherence (-6.9% to 26%) and rise in secularism (+8.7% to 43%).
- 71. The Northern and Western Sydney regions are similar in terms of overall Protestant and Catholic/Orthodox percentages, and have had similar reductions in Protestant adherence (-4.8% to 19% in the Western Sydney Region and -4.4% to 22% in the Northern Region). However, the Western Sydney Region has had by far the greatest rise in Other Religions (+4.5% to 23%), whereas the Northern Region has had a larger rise in secularism (+4.9% to 45%); this is the second-largest rise in the 'No Religion' response, after the Wollongong Region.
- 72. The South Sydney Region remains the least Protestant (11.5%) and least broadly Christian region, and the most secular region (47.9%). It didn't shift as far in religious affiliation as the other regions, but its starting point was far less "Christian". The South Western Region is the least secular region (only 26.4% 'No Religion'), but also the second-least Protestant (15%). It has the highest proportion of both Catholic/Orthodox adherents and non-Christian religions, especially Islam.

Church Attendance vs. Census Religious Affiliation

Change from 2013-2023 (Diocesan Regions) and 2016-2021 (census)



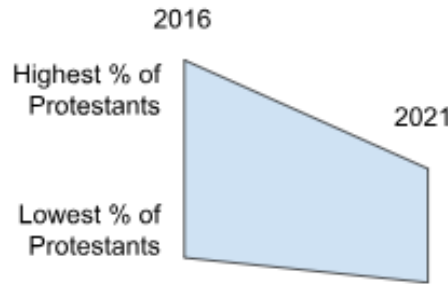
¹¹ While the breakdown of church attendance vs religious affiliation can be seen in the graphic at para. 72, a more detailed analysis is available. See Appendix D available on the Synod webpage.

¹² The Religious Affiliation charts group census data into two Christian categories ("Protestant etc." and "Catholic/Orthodox"); "Other Religions", and "None." The "Protestant etc." category is effectively all non-Catholic/Orthodox adherents who ticked some Christian or pseudo-Christian option (like JW's and Mormons); but it is broadly Protestant. "None" includes both those who selected "Secular Beliefs" and those who did not state their religious affiliation.

73. In assessing the religious composition of the Diocese, it is not enough to consider *change* in religious affiliation without noting the starting state of the "soil." For example, Sydney City Mission Area has only a slight increase in 'No Religion' (+1.1%), and the Inner West Mission Area a moderate increase (+3.6%); but in absolute terms, they are by far the most secular mission areas (each 59.4%). It is a similar story for the entire South Sydney Region. Some of these areas did not decline markedly in Anglican church attendance, but perhaps that is not entirely surprising – they were hard soil to begin with.

Changes in religious affiliation by Mission Area

74. Generally speaking, an analysis by mission area shows the mission areas with the greatest decline in Protestant adherence were the most strongly-Protestant areas to begin with. That is, there has been a general "shrinking" of the range of Protestant adherence (as in the not-to-scale diagram below).

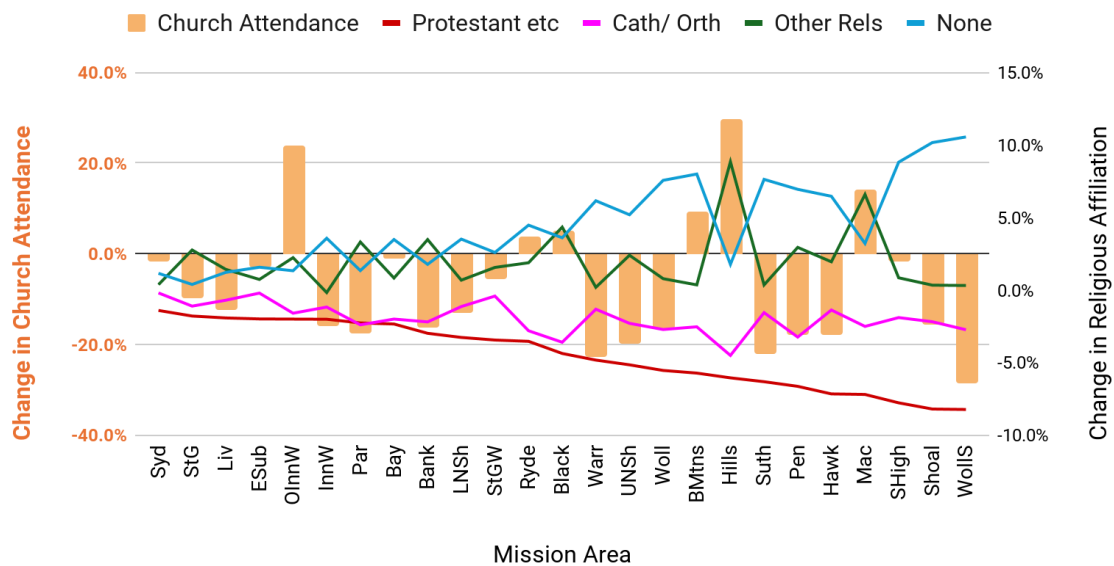


75. The three mission areas with the largest rises in "Other Religions" (Hills, Macarthur and Blacktown) have all seen growth in church attendance – though other mission areas with significant "Other Religions" growth have not (Bankstown, Parramatta, etc.).

76. At first glance, the diagram below is a little hard to follow. Note the **red** line shows the decline in Protestant adherence while the bars indicate the change in attendance: both by all 25 mission areas. For most mission areas there is a relationship: mission areas with a greater decline in Protestant adherence tend to record a greater decline in attendance. However, there are exceptions. It should be noted that the attendance increase in Outer Inner West can be attributed to one parish's significant growth, while the rises in Hills and Macarthur are related to population increase.

Church Attendance vs. Census Religious Affiliation

Change from 2013-2023 (Mission Areas) and 2016-2021 (census)



77. In general, mission areas with a sharp increase in secularism ("Secular", "No Religion" or "Not Stated" >5%) have also seen a sharp decline in both Christian affiliation and church attendance.

78. A notable exception to the potential correlation between church attendance and Christian affiliation, is the Western Sydney Region, where Christian affiliation has plummeted, but church attendance has not. This is also the region with the greatest growth in other religions, particularly Hinduism. The most significant contributor to this is the Hills Mission Area, which had the highest rise in other religions and the second-highest rise in church attendance; Blacktown Mission Area had a similar, if less marked, trend, as did the Macarthur Mission Area in the South Western Region. While the pattern is not repeated everywhere there was significant growth in other religions, this may support the thesis that secularism is “harder soil” than those of non-Christian religious belief.
79. A different type of exception is the Blue Mountains Mission Area, where Christian affiliation has also plummeted, due not to an increase in other religions but in secularism – yet church attendance has increased. In the Blue Mountains, it seems there has not been the sharp attendance decline that has been seen elsewhere, and a few have seen standout growth. Church planting has not played a part in this growth.
80. For a further breakdown of the “Other Religions” data, the table on the following page shows all mission areas that had a >1.5% rise in either Hinduism or Islam between the 2016 census and the 2021 census:

Mission Area	Region	Hinduism rise	Islam rise
St George	South Western	1.9%	0.8%
Liverpool	South Western	-0.2%	1.7%
Parramatta	Western Sydney	2.8%	0.9%
Bankstown	South Western	0.1%	3.5%
Blacktown	Western Sydney	1.8%	1.3%
Upper North Shore	Northern	1.6%	0.5%
Hills	Western Sydney	5.8%	2.0%
Penrith	Western Sydney	1.5%	0.9%
Macarthur	South Western	2.6%	3.2%

Changes in the Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (IRSD)

81. Along with individual census topics, the Australian Bureau of Statistics also produces various indexes that combine socioeconomic data, in order to rank areas of the country according to relative socioeconomic advantage and/or disadvantage. These indexes are called Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (**SEIFA**).
82. We have examined the SEIFA Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage (**IRSD**) for Diocesan regions and mission areas. Overall, the most socioeconomically disadvantaged mission areas are in the South Western, Western Sydney, and Wollongong regions.¹³
83. In terms of trends, while the IRSD of most mission areas fell between the 2016 and 2021 censuses (i.e., they became more socioeconomically disadvantaged), the exception is the Wollongong Region, where the IRSD rose for every mission area except Sutherland.
84. Thus, while the Wollongong and Northern regions underwent the most rapid rise in secularism, in the Wollongong Region this has been accompanied by a relative alleviation of disadvantage (life becoming somewhat “better”).

¹³ Further detail on attendance patterns and socioeconomic disadvantage may be found at Appendix E available on the Synod webpage.

C) Congregational factors

National factors	Denominational factors
Local community factors	Congregational factors

Source: Hoge & Roozen, 1979.

Regional breakdown of mission lead indicators

85. The key NCLS mission lead indicators for 2016 and 2021 show that both the Northern and Wollongong regions recorded average results below the Diocesan average for both 2016 and 2021. There is a potential relationship between these results and the biggest declines in attendance, which were also in the Northern and Wollongong regions.
86. The NCLS provides the opportunity to gauge church life and mission. Data from the NCLS provides an opportunity to identify characteristics of church centres that have been growing or declining in attendance. The 2021 NCLS was delayed as parishes sought to return to normality before participating in the survey; consequently, most parishes in the Diocese undertook the survey between March and July 2022. This is helpful as it makes analysis that compares “2021” NCLS data with 2022 attendance data more relevant.
87. The table below shows Sydney Anglican results for 2021 NCLS compared with 2016 NCLS by region. In this table, green indicates above the Diocesan average, and red indicates below the Diocesan average.

Key Mission Indicator	NCLS YEAR	Diocese	REGION				
			Northern	South Sydney	South Western	Western Sydney	W'gong
Measure		Overall					
Members talking intentionally about faith with others	2016	19%	17%	19%	22%	20%	18%
	2021	21%	19%	22%	24%	20%	20%
Members who invite others to church	2016	39%	37%	43%	42%	40%	38%
	2021	32%	31%	36%	33%	33%	29%
Newcomers	2016	8%	7%	10%	9%	8%	7%
	2021	5%	5%	8%	5%	5%	5%
Much growth in faith among members	2016	46%	43%	47%	51%	48%	46%
	2021	39%	36%	40%	41%	41%	37%
Devotions every day/most days	2016	43%	42%	42%	44%	42%	45%
	2021	47%	47%	45%	49%	45%	49%
Use of gifts and skills encouraged	2016	25%	22%	25%	29%	26%	23%
	2021	25%	23%	27%	29%	25%	22%
Level of NESB attenders	2016	18%	17%	24%	32%	20%	7%
	2021	17%	16%	21%	20%	22%	5%
Retention of member's children	2016	63%	63%	61%	62%	64%	64%
	2021	64%	63%	62%	63%	66%	64%

88. Mission 2020 identified a number of things that were important to the Diocese as headline indicators for the four priority areas. They are the indicators shown on the table above, taken from the Diocesan Mission Indicators NCLS 2021 Update.¹⁴
89. It should be noted that 2021 South Western Region data is compared with 2016 Georges River Region data.
90. The table shows that, across the Diocese, the percentage of people talking intentionally about their faith has slightly increased (20.5% in 2021 vs 19.1% in 2016), while the percentage of members who invited others to church in the previous 12 months has declined substantially from 39.3% to 32.1%. The percentage of those reporting much growth in faith has decreased from 46.4% to 38.6%.
91. Regarding the differences between regions in 2021, for instance, the highest levels in relation to members intentionally talking about their faith, were in the South Western Region (23.7%) and the lowest levels in the Northern Region (19.2%). This was similar to 2016, when the Georges River Region (now South West Region) indicated (22.4%) and the lowest levels were recorded in the Northern Region (17.1%).
92. South Sydney Region's newcomer figures are fascinating. With an average of 10% in 2016 and then 8% in 2021, South Sydney's mean newcomer levels have been substantially higher than in other regions. This goes some way to explaining why South Sydney Region has outperformed the other regions in church attendance change over the last ten years, since the inflow of newcomers into church life is one of the key components of increasing church attendance. Another factor may be the increasing gentrification of the South Sydney Region. People who traditionally would have moved to the suburbs and start a family have moved to the city for work and stayed more often even when raising a family.

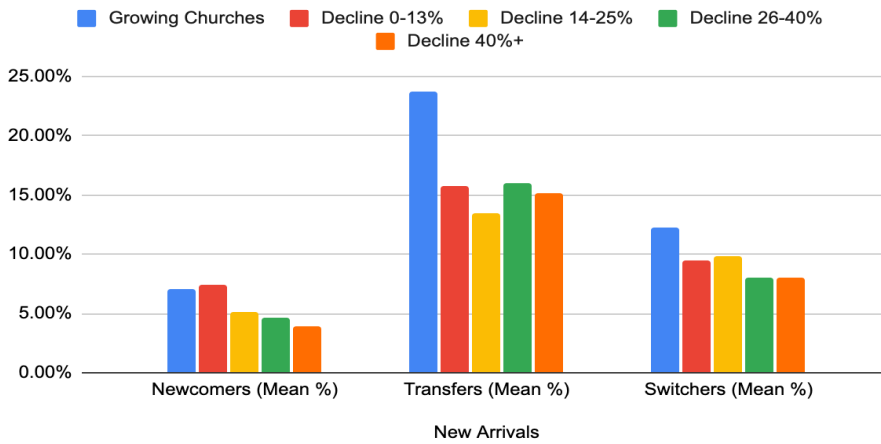
Correlations between growing and declining church centres and internal characteristics

93. Using NCLS data, the internal characteristics of centres that were growing were compared with those centres that were declining. A five-year change in attendance per church centre was calculated from Diocesan attendance data for 2017 and 2022. Since attendances at most centres were still recovering from Covid, most centres had declined in that period. Five attendance change categories were created of roughly equal size which reflect this: one Growing category and four Decline categories: Decline 0-13%, Decline 14-25%, Decline 26-40% and Decline 40%+. A centre that recorded a 0-13% decline in the period from 2017 to 2022 could be regarded as most likely to be an otherwise-growing centre experiencing a temporary Covid-related pause in growth. Conversely, a centre that recorded a 40%+ decline from 2017 to 2022 could be regarded as likely on a declining trajectory, regardless of Covid.
94. By linking the change in attendance at church centres for 2017-2022 to 2021 NCLS data Anglicare researcher Dr John Bellamy was able to provide a report showing correlations between attendance change from 2017 to 2022, and changes in selected NCLS indicators from 2016 to 2021.¹⁵ Using the NCLS data, it is possible to identify the size and composition of inflows into each centre. Unsurprisingly, growing centres have a higher number of people arriving than leaving. Arrivals to a centre (shown on the graph below) are **newcomers** (i.e. with no previous church involvement or returnees to church life), **transfers** (from other Anglican churches), and **switchers** (from other denominations).

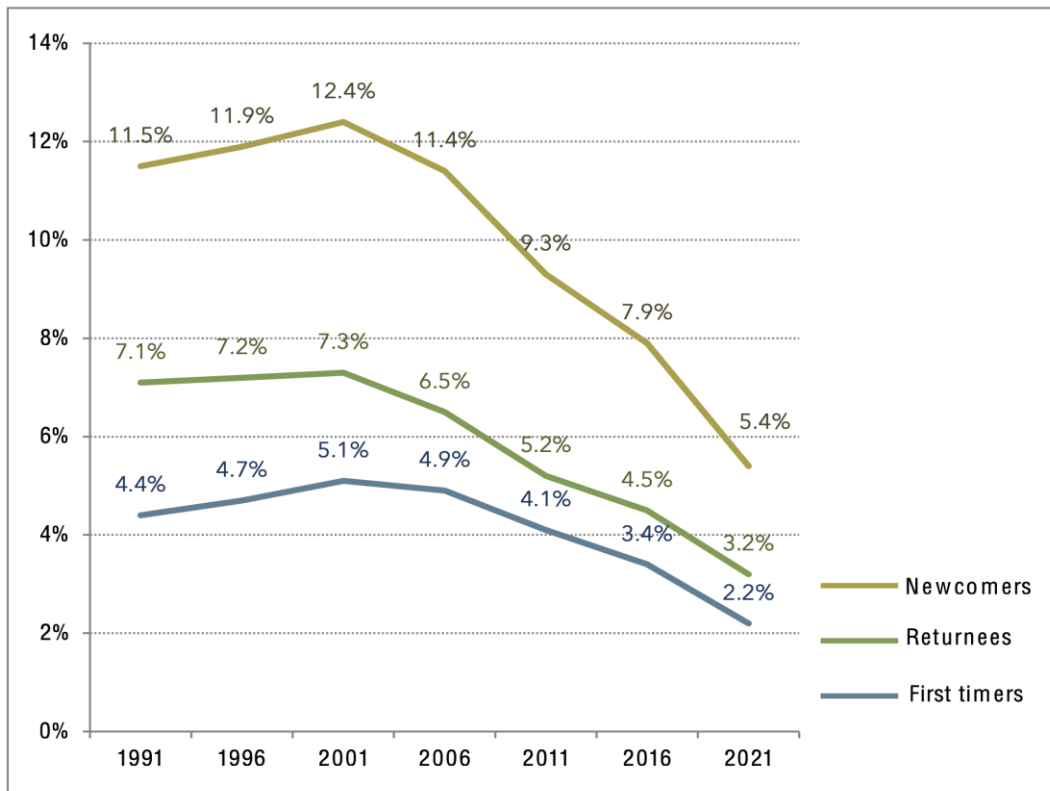
¹⁴ The full report, which was prepared for the Committee by Dr John Bellamy in March 2024, is available. Please refer to Appendix F available on the Synod webpage.

¹⁵ A detailed table of correlations is available. Please refer to Appendix G available on the Synod webpage.

New Arrivals



95. The largest external input into churches has been transfers from other Anglican churches. The chart above shows this to be true of our church centres generally but particularly among *growing* centres. The percentage of people transferring (23.7%) or switching (12.2%) into an individual *growing* centre was substantially higher than for centres that declined by more than 40% (15.1% and 8.0%). The level of transfers in growing centres was on average four times greater than the level of newcomers and twice as great as the inflow of denominational switchers. While growing centres tended to be more successful in attracting newcomers than most categories of declining centres, they were still dependent upon receiving transfers from other Anglican churches for much of their growth.
96. The inflow of newcomers into our churches is a critical indicator of how well our churches are drawing people into church life from the wider community. Unlike transfers and denominational switchers, newcomers include those who have never been regularly involved in a church and those who are returning to church life after an absence of years. However, the chart below (NCLS data) shows a steady decline in the percentage of newcomers from over 12.4% in 2001 to 5.4% by 2021, both among first-timers and returnees.

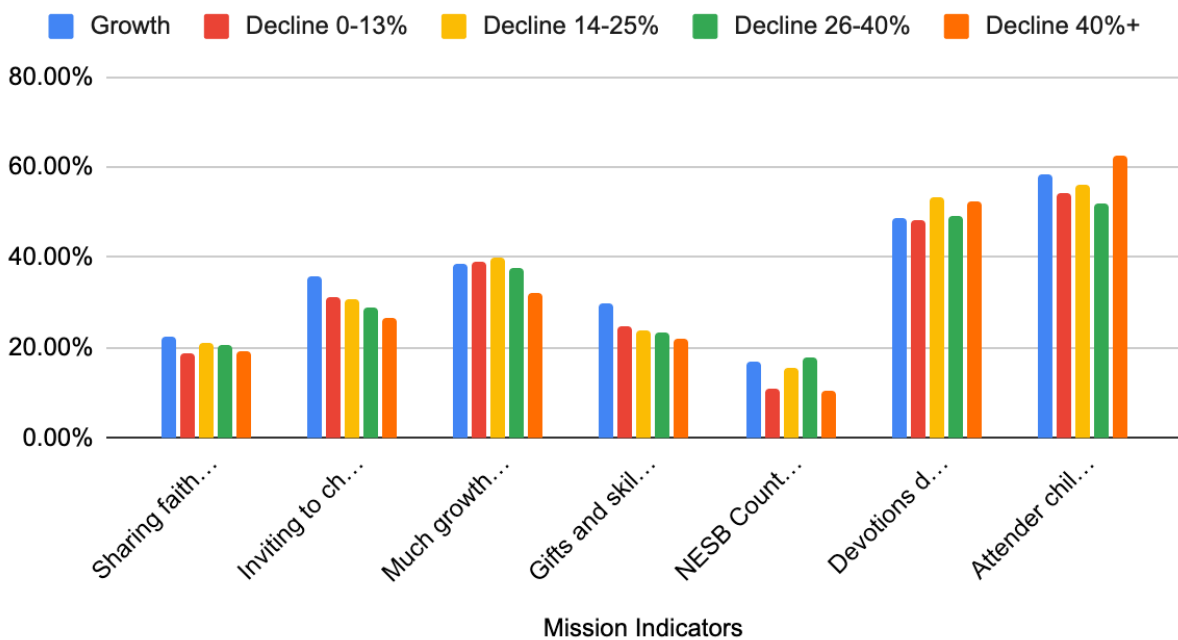


- 97. Given that average weekly adult attendance declined by 6.7% between 2013 and 2023 and that newcomers are an important component in church growth, the NCLS data indicates a significant factor in our declining church attendances is the cumulative impact of declining levels of newcomers.
- 98. There is a significant concern that we are rapidly approaching an attendance cliff, given that average age across our Diocese (of attenders 15 years or more) has jumped sharply from 49 in 2016 to 52 in 2022. The NCLS correlational data shows that congregations with older age profiles are less likely to be growing in attendance.

Key indicators used in Mission 2020

- 99. There is some association between attendance change and the NCLS missional indicators used in Mission 2020 particularly with the percentage of attenders who have invited people from outside church life to attend a church service or other activity and attenders saying that their gifts and skills are encouraged by leaders to a great extent (as the chart below shows).

Mission Indicators



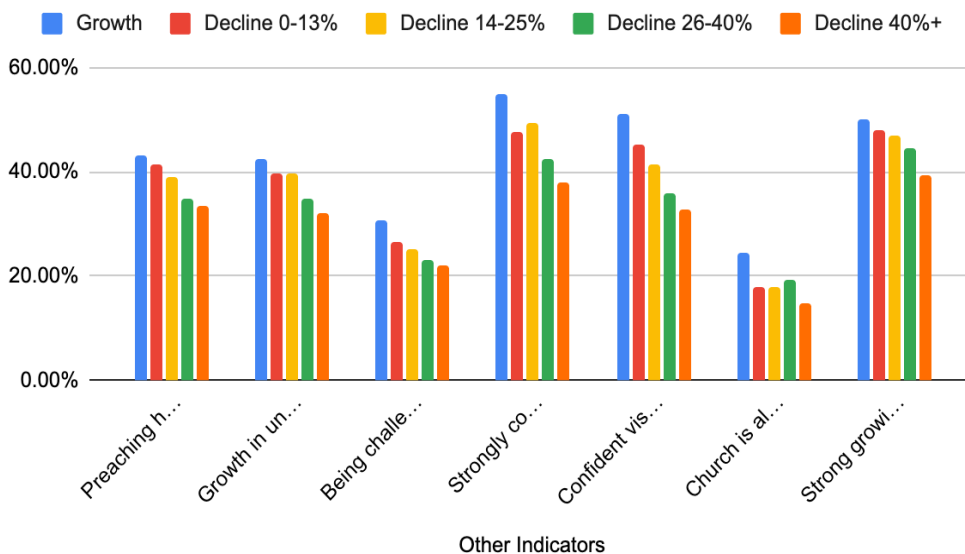
Key: "Sharing faith intentional (Mean %)"; "Inviting to church (Mean %)"; "Much growth in faith (Mean %)"; "Gifts and skills – great extent (Mean %)"; "NESB Country of birth (Mean %)"; "Devotions daily/most days (Mean %)"; "Attender children 15yrs+ going to church (anywhere) (Mean %)".

- 100. The DNA of growing congregations is more focused on sharing faith (22.4% vs 19.1%), inviting others to church (36% vs 26.7%) and attenders feeling their gifts and skills are valued to a greater extent (29.8% vs 22%). A weaker association was detected between attendance change and attenders saying that they grew much in faith in the past year.

Growth indicators

- 101. The data shows that internal characteristics of growing church centres are a clear vision which is communicated to and owned by the congregation; clear, faithful and challenging Bible teaching; a willingness to try new things; and a strong sense of belonging.

Growth indicators



Key to Growth indicators: "Preaching helpful to life (Mean %)"; "Growth in understanding of God at church – Always (Mean %)"; "Being challenged to take action through church – Always (Mean %)"; "Strongly committed to church's vision/goals (Mean %)"; "Confident vision/goals are achievable (Mean %)"; "Church is always ready to try something new – Strongly agree (Mean %)"; "Strong growing sense of belonging (Mean %)".

102. Some of the most predictive indicators of church attendance growth from the NCLS figures indicate that on average, attenders at growing centres compared with strongly declining centres were much more likely to indicate:
 - (a) A strong sense of belonging (50% growing centres vs 39% centres declining by more than 40% over ten years),
 - (b) Confidence that the vision/goals are achievable (51% vs 33%),
 - (c) Experiencing preaching that is helpful to life (43% vs 33%),
 - (d) Growth in understanding of God at church (42% vs 32%),
 - (e) Always being challenged to take action through church (30% vs 22%),
 - (f) Being strongly committed to the church's vision/goals (55% vs 38%),
 - (g) Their church is always ready to try something new (24% vs 15%).

103. The relationship between attendance change and a strong sense of belonging dovetails with the observation that when parish attendance data was examined, every parish that had experienced a significant conflict or moral failure in the leadership (that was known to members of the Committee) also experienced an attendance decline.

104. Significant increases in attendance were noted in parishes where there had been conflict or moral failure in other churches (whether Anglican or non-Anglican) nearby, suggesting that individual parish growth is often transfer or switcher growth not gospel growth.

D) Denominational factors

National factors	Denominational factors
Local community factors	Congregational factors

Source: Hoge & Roozen, 1979.

105. What follows are reflections of the Committee as it has analysed the data.
106. We have dropped the ball when it comes to tracking, reporting and analysing numbers. There has been no recent transparent high level watch or analysis of overall Diocesan attendance and salvations. Regular reporting of growth in the Diocese has relied on questions in Synod, rather than there being a culture within our Diocese of genuine willingness to track and assess the data to enable us to assess how we are going and whether we are doing things well in regards to people becoming Christians / newcomers and attendance.
107. Reporting on kids and youth attendance is even worse. In our assessment we restricted our work to adults because the significant change made in 2019 to the way in which under 18s data was collected and recorded meant that it was not possible to compare results before and after that year and data for kids and youth has been inconsistently recorded year to year and parish to parish.
108. Skills and the load on senior ministers: While the essential skills of Christian ministry haven't changed (preaching and prayer) the practical skills for senior ministers needed to manage the complexities and compliance issues of Anglican parishes have changed massively over the last twenty years.
109. Senior ministers are no longer expected to just be preachers, but team-leaders, vision-casters, managers, event coordinators, fundraisers, change agents, and evangelists, serving in a context where one's customers are also shareholders. This related to social changes such as two income families, dropping volunteerism, a shift from 'corner store mentality' to 'full service department store' expectations, increasing compliance burdens, long term assistants and team ministry along with increasing congregational expectations. Additionally, conflict in churches and on ministry teams, high workloads, cumulative stress, grief, poor physical health, changing ministry demands (including the use of multimedia and social media),¹⁶ has led to significant mental health problems,¹⁷ a higher rate of senior ministers dropping out of their roles, churn and instability.
110. Sustainability or Viability: the effective line for sustainability or viability of a parish has changed. More research needs to be done to determine the actual minimum level of parishioners and offertory that is required in 2024 for a parish to be sustainable.

Recommendations from the Committee

Overall

111. **Giving thanks to God.** We should give thanks to God for the substantial recovery in attendance post-Covid and for the diligent and faithful service of senior ministers, staff teams, parish council and church members, putting us in a better position post-Covid than many other ministries.
112. **Repentance and Prayer.** We recommend an earnest humble campaign of repentance where we have collectively been distracted and haven't given sufficient priority, attention and resources to see the lost of Sydney and the Illawarra saved and for more earnest prayer for growth in faith among our members.
113. **Fresh priority.** Noting the increased complexity of leading a parish which consists of only a small percentage of its local community, we need to pursue a laser-like focus on growing disciples in depth and numbers. A fresh priority is required on winning newcomers/converts to Jesus and our churches. We need to change the ongoing diocesan conversation, so we focus on people being saved (genuine newcomers, not only switchers and transfers). Synod should request a further report on attendance data for all ages (once attendance data can be accurately determined for all ages). This report should be updated for the first session of each synod triennium.

¹⁶ NCLS Leader Survey: Summary Report for the Diocese of Sydney (2023) discloses that for those in senior roles, identified as local church leaders: 35% of senior clergy rated themselves as highly stressed, and 42% said they found it hard to cope during the pandemic. (53rd Synod of the Diocese of Sydney, First Session, Answers to Questions asked on Tuesday 12 September 2023.)

¹⁷ See "The stark reality of clergy stress and burnout" in the May-June 2023 edition of *Southern Cross*.

114. **Diocesan bodies.** Mission areas, regional councils, training colleges and diocesan organisations (Anglicare, schools etc), senior ministers, parishes and bishops to refocus their efforts on how they can align to the purpose of contributing to seeing sinners saved and growing the number of newcomers in local churches, as well as how they can collaborate to that effect.
115. **Funding.** Noting we only have finite resources, every “yes” is an implicit “no” to something else. Synod, the Standing Committee, the Endowment of the See and Episcopal team need to resolutely focus on promotion of mission and maturity.

Parishes

116. **Focus on evangelism over transfer growth.** Growing churches need to examine whether their growth is by conversion or transfer/switchers and if it is the latter there should not be complacency but rather an increased focus on evangelism.
117. **Newcomer pathways.** Senior Ministers to focus on ensuring effective entry and evangelistic pathways are developed. Senior Ministers and parishes to collaborate and seek internal and external help in doing this from organisations consistent with our theological stance.¹⁸
118. **Rigorous theology in the face of changing values.** Senior ministers encouraged and empowered to biblically equip members to strengthen and defend their faith in the face of increasing secularism and cultural shifts, and to work to relevantly connect/apply preaching with those we pray might visit our churches.
119. **Public Face.** Churches to review their external focus improving social media/communications management (especially Instagram for under 40s), webpages, advertising, promotions, to appeal to newcomers. Regional councils to consider how they could assist churches here.
120. **Supporting senior ministers.** Synod, episcopal team, regional councils and parishes to consider what can be done to support and ease the senior minister’s burden in addressing administrative overhead, compliance complexity, high workload, cumulative stress, management skills, change management and potential poor mental and physical health. Part of this solution might include coaching, supervision and counselling.
121. **Parish Collaboration.** Parishes to consider collaboration to ease the administrative and compliance burden, sharing expertise and resources. Synod, episcopal team and regional councils to help facilitate such partnerships.

Greenfields and Urban renewal

122. **Church plants in the southwest and northwest.** While celebrating that our new parishes have grown in the Macarthur and Hills mission areas, we have not kept up with the population growth in Greenfields areas, therefore ENC and Sydney Anglican Property should refocus on the raising of church planters and the priority of opening new Greenfields parish facilities.
123. **Urban renewal.** Noting that State Government policies to increase population in urban areas especially around metro and train stations means a recasting of key parishes which might be expected to grow, regional councils and Sydney Anglican Property should focus on what population variations are expected and what church plants and facilities should be developed.

Understanding decline and growth

124. **Celebrating and Monitoring.** Synod should ask the Standing Committee to report to the Synod in 2025 on a proposed new system for celebrating sinners saved. This would be part of a necessary new diocesan-wide approach to reporting on attendance, newcomers, adult and child baptisms, confirmations, child and youth attendance and retention, broken down by region, mission area and parish.

¹⁸ e.g. Centre for Ministry Development, Reach Australia, ENC etc.

125. **Support for declining parishes.** Regional councils and the Synod to consider funding parish consultations¹⁹ for centres that have declined by +20% or more than 100 over 2013-2023, and for the results of these consultations to be reported to the Synod in 2026 (with a progress update in 2025). Standing Committee to research the minimum level of parishioners and finances required in 2024 for a parish to be sustainable/viable.
126. **Learning from growing and declining parishes.** Synod to ask the Standing Committee to report to the Synod in 2025 on measures taken by 20 centres with high attendance growth and 20 with high attendance decline on key factors contributing to growth and decline and what the Diocese can do in order to help more parishes grow and fewer decline.
127. **People leaving our churches.** Parishes to focus on growth of understanding of God, clarifying vision and goals, growing a strong sense of belonging among members and encouraging members to be committed to the church's vision and goals, and leaders growing pastoral care.

Further research

128. **Better use of the NCLS.** Noting that new and powerful insights about mission effectiveness and congregational health have been brought to light by reconciling NCLS data with parish attendance data, the Synod should ask for a fresh, more detailed report after each NCLS survey showing any correlations with our attendance trends including newcomer figures. Standing Committee to give input to NCLS on new questions to assist us in growing newcomers and maturity.

Ethnic ministries

129. **Reaching people from other cultural and language backgrounds.** Parishes should develop ministry capacity to people from other cultural and language backgrounds (as appropriate). This should include resourcing and development of a wider number of specific language ministries. Synod to explore alternative pathways to raise up, recruit, and licence ministry workers from different language and cultural backgrounds.

Next steps

130. Synod to ask the Standing Committee to bring a report to the next session of the Synod on actions taken and progress made on reversing the attendance decline.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee.

BRIONY BOUNDS
Diocesan Secretary

22 July 2024

¹⁹ from an organisation such as Reach Australia.