

The Role of Innovation in Church Life and Health

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Imaginative and flexible innovation is one of the nine Core Qualities of vital churches. That is, healthy and effective churches are open and willing to try new things.

Being a vital church is more than just growth in the numbers of attenders. At the heart of any church are relationships with God, between church attenders and with people in the wider community. Based on many years of research, NCLS Research offers a broad framework which includes nine Core Qualities and three Attendance Measures. All are important, and while they all interrelate, they can all be separately understood and addressed.

Nine Core Qualities of Church Life



Three Church Attendance Measures



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So, what is the relationship between the Core Quality of innovation and the other eight core qualities of vital churches? NCLS Research has studied the links using information from congregations in four countries: Australia, USA, UK and New Zealand.

The Core Qualities are grouped into three dimensions:

- Inspirational Core Qualities
- Internal Core Qualities
- Outward Core Qualities

Relationship with Inspirational Qualities

Imaginative and flexible Innovation is one of the three Inspirational Core Qualities that relate to leadership and direction. These three qualities in combination are the major catalysts for churches to move forward:

- a clear and owned Vision
- inspiring and empowering Leadership
- imaginative and flexible Innovation



Innovation has very strong relationships with the other two inspirational qualities: a clear and owned vision and inspiring and empowering leadership.

Having a clear vision is one of the strongest predictors of whether a church will be open to new possibilities. If a church is flexible, it does not mean it is shifting and unpredictable, rather it will have a focused common vision.

The leadership style in a church also relates to its perceived flexibility. Where the leader listens to the ideas of attenders, where gifts and skills are recognised, where leaders are seen as inspiring and where one of the main roles of the

leader is seen as developing vision, there is a strong tendency for attenders to perceive the church as being innovative.

Relationship with Internal Qualities

The Internal Core Qualities focus on the inner life of the community of faith. They are often seen as foundational to church life, providing both shape and energy to the other Core Qualities:

- an alive and growing Faith
- vital and nurturing Worship
- strong and growing Belonging



Research shows that churches where attenders said that there was a willingness to try new things also tend to have higher levels of both belonging and growth in faith.

Relationship with Outward Qualities

The Outward Core Qualities are about how churches focus beyond themselves by reaching out to others in ways that proclaim and live out the Gospel:

- practical and diverse Service
- willing and effective Faith-sharing
- intentional and welcoming Inclusion



Openness to change is closely accompanied by a perception that the church is strongly focused on serving the wider community. This probably reflects what many churches have found to be a driving force for change: the need to adapt to and connect with the wider community.

Urban and rural differences

An Australian-only analysis showed that the willingness of churches to try new things appears to be a more important

feature of churches attracting newcomers in urban areas than it does in rural areas.

The impact of congregational size

The Attendance Measures focus on three aspects that take our understanding of attendance beyond just growth and decline:

- young adult retention
- newcomers
- attendance change



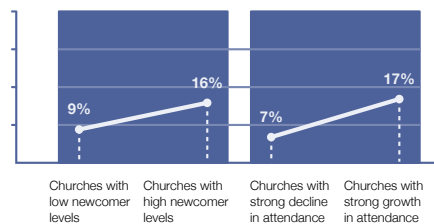
In churches of all sizes, research on Australian churches has found that all the Core Qualities are related to attracting newcomers. That is if your church has strong Qualities, then it is more likely that there are higher than average levels of newcomers.

At the same time, the larger the church, the more important innovation became in relation to newcomers. There is a greater level of agreement among attenders at large high-newcomer churches that their church is willing to try new things.

Openness to innovation

"This congregation is always ready to try something new"

Percent of attenders who strongly agree that the congregation will try new things



When the congregation is open to trying new things, churches tend to grow

Source: ICLS 4 nations data (excluding US Catholic Church)

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References

This fact sheet is based on *Occasional Paper 14: Church attenders attitudes to innovation in church life - A comparison across countries and across time*. For references and further information on data sources, view at www.ncls.org.au in the Research section.