



Results from the 2016 National Church Life Survey



Models of church vitality: A literature review

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Abstract

Church health and vitality and what drives it has attracted attention from church leaders, consultants and congregational studies scholars alike. With a primary focus on empirical social scientific research, and particular attention to the work of NCLS Research, this literature review outlines and synthesises different approaches to conceptualise and measure church vitality. The shift from a singular focus on growth in church attendance to more complex, multifaceted presentations of vitality is charted. Some 15 features of church vitality are identified across the literature: “community”, “outward focus”, “leadership”, “spirituality”, “worship”, “discipleship”, “prayer”, “vision”, “caring for the young”, “giving”, “open and flexible innovation”, “healing”, “diversity”, “beauty” and attendance (“numerical growth”, “young adult retention” and “newcomers”). Analysis of data from the four countries (Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the USA) that participated in the 2001 International Church Life Survey and utilised the NCLS Research framework for church vitality suggests two underlying vitality constructs, “Collective Confidence” and “Individual Commitment”, that are expressed in more specific aspects of vitality. Parallels with the broader organisational studies literature are given, yielding insights that may be useful in the quest for vital churches.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, against a background of overall decline in religious involvement in Western societies (Voas & Chaves, 2016), there has been a growing preoccupation in some Christian church circles with church “health” or “vitality”. Understanding what constitutes and drives vitality in local churches has attracted attention from church leaders, consultants and congregational studies scholars alike.

This literature review outlines different approaches to conceptualise and measure church vitality. Our focus here is primarily on empirical social scientific research, that is, on rigorous research that utilises data from and/or about local churches and that has been conducted in accordance with the norms of quality social research. However, the field is, of course, interdisciplinary and these research endeavours intersect with theology and commentary from church leaders. As well as reviewing and synthesising scholarly social scientific work, we also attend to influential contributors from beyond the social sciences who have played a role in shaping discourses around church health.

A plethora of indicators and models of vitality now exist, some of which have been asserted to apply across different countries and cultural contexts. Some studies focus on growth in church attendance as a single indicator of church vitality, whereas others propose more complex models. We describe a range of scholarly approaches which use quantitative (based on the collection of numerical data, such as structured surveys) and/or qualitative (based on the collection of qualitative data, such as interviews and observation) research methodologies. The NCLS Research team has invested many years in assessing church vitality in an Australian context. We therefore provide a greater level of detail about conceptualisation and measurement of vitality in the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) and its sister project the 2001 International Church Life Survey (ICLS) than we do for other studies. Following our review of social scientific work, we provide examples of Biblical and pastoral approaches which have been influential for churches across different countries. We then attempt to integrate the various approaches.

Churches are not alone in their quest to understand and pursue vitality. We offer reflections throughout on where research on church vitality connects with research in organisational studies more broadly. In doing so we address a lack of conversation between congregational studies and organisational and management literatures (e.g. Miller, 2002; 2006; Tracey 2012; Hinings and Raynard, 2014, Tracey, Phillips and Lounsbury, 2014).

2 Simple and complex conceptualisations of church vitality

In a review of congregational studies, Woodhead, Guest and Tusting (2004) draw a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic studies. Extrinsic studies have a broader good, such as determining the role of churches in generating social capital, whereas intrinsic studies aim to increase understanding for its own sake. Studies of church vitality are typically undertaken for extrinsic reasons – for example, to evaluate a church’s vitality; or to provide ideas, inspiration and guidance to churches as to how they might improve their vitality; where vitality is understood to achieve certain goals that a church ought to achieve or characteristics that it ought to embody. In this regard, church vitality research has commonalities with research on organisational effectiveness more broadly – a wide-ranging body of work whose interests include achievement of organisational objectives (e.g. Sheehan, 1996, Jobson & Schneck, 1982), an organisation’s ability to maintain sufficient resources for survival (e.g. Sowa et al, 2004), and the reputation of the organisation among stakeholders (e.g. Herman & Renz, 2004, Lecy, Schmitz & Swedlund, 2012).

So what is vitality, who decides and why? We now contrast unidimensional and multidimensional conceptualisations of church health and outline their origins.

2.1 Church growth: A simple measure of vitality

Growth in the number of people attending has been widely used by researchers and commentators as an indicator that a church is healthy or vital. Understanding sources of church growth has been the source of multiple investigations (e.g. Wagner, 1976; Hoge & Roozen, 1979; Stetzer & Rainer, 2010).

Beyond the attraction of the simplicity of this approach (and its parallels in the broader organisational world with growth measures such as “financial success”, e.g. Baruch & Ramalho, 2006), how did the focus on numerical growth as the primary measure of vitality arise? The rationale was that growth in attendance was a measure of whether a church was effectively fulfilling Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) to “make disciples of all nations” – with disciples being understood as church-attending Christians. This perspective was well established during the 1970s, with seminal publications such as *How to Grow a Church: Conversations about Church Growth* (McGavran & Arn, 1973), and *Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church* (Wagner, 1976). Health was simply defined as an absence of disease, but it was operationalised in terms of growth. Numerous books and articles were produced in the next two decades with numerical growth as the key indicator of vitality.

The book *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*, edited by sociologists Hoge and Roozen (1979) made an important contribution to the church growth literature by highlighting that growth is due to multiple and complex factors, many of which are outside the control of the local church. Hoge and Roozen grouped these factors into four categories. National factors are external factors or trends operating in the whole of society, such as changes in the values and beliefs of the population, which may affect church participation. Local community factors take into account shifts in the kinds of people who make up a local community, which can affect the operation of a congregation and the types of ministries required. Local historical factors may also be important. Denominational factors include structure, polity, theological orientation and mission emphases of the denomination to which the congregation belongs. Finally, congregational factors refer to the nature of a congregation; its resources, programs, group life, leadership and identity may significantly affect its future (Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Correy & Castle, 1994).

Various empirical studies, largely drawing from sociological perspectives and using quantitative data, have examined correlates of (i.e. factors that are associated with) growth. In addition to contextual factors (Hoge & Roozen, 1979; Roozen & Hadaway, 1993), some variables found to predict or relate to church growth have included attender enthusiasm (Hayward, 2005; Medcalfe & Sharp, 2012), the vision of leaders (Voas & Watt, 2013), congregational involvement in small groups (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011; Dudley & Cummings, 1983), congregational strictness (having strict rules for members) (Iannaccone, 1996; Thomas & Olson, 2010), evangelism or recruitment activity (Stoll & Petersen, 2008), congregational harmony and cooperation (Hoge & Roozen, 1979), and church friendships (Roof, Hoge, Dyble & Hadaway, 1979). Using the 1996 Australian NCLS data, 10 variables were identified from a larger selection that were most strongly related to church growth: a sense of vision or direction, a focus on those beyond church life, inviting people to church, an empowering leadership, looking after the young, contemporary worship, a sense of community, a lively faith, moving people toward commitment, and new congregations and services (Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Castle & Hughes, 1999).

2.2 The church health movement: A multifaceted approach to vitality

An alternative approach to the “church growth movement” was the “church health movement”, which developed in the 1990s with a number of church writers questioning the strong focus on counting heads (e.g. Warren, 1995; Schwarz, 1996; Dever, 2013 and Macchia, 1999). Some sociological studies also have investigated a range of vitality outcomes. For example, Dougherty and Whitehead (2011) used the 2001 United States Church Life Survey (USCLS) dataset to test predictors of attenders’ sense of belonging, numerical attendance and financial giving by attenders. This shift aligns with the dismissal of unidimensional models of organisational effectiveness in other contexts (which utilised measures such as productivity, employee satisfaction or profit) in favour of more complex, multidimensional models that take into account the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders (e.g. Lecy et al., 2012; Mitchell, 2013).

The church health perspective focuses on multiple “qualities” within congregational life and tends to take a systemic or organic view. Moreover, these qualities may or may not be associated with growth in the size of the congregation. In a sample of churches across US denominations McKee (2003) compared congregations’ growth rates with other aspects of church health, measured by the Beeson Church Health Characteristics Survey, which covered various practices, experiences and structures of the local church. McKee found that most growing congregations exhibited other signs of vitality but not all vital congregations were growing numerically, a finding also reported in Roozen’s (2012) analysis of the US Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey. Many studies using Australian NCLS data show that the relationships between numerical growth and other measures of vitality can vary dramatically, with some indicators having no link to growth and others being highly correlated (e.g. Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Hughes & Castle, 1997; Powell et al, 2012).

So what are these multifaceted notions of “church vitality”? Multi-dimensional frameworks of church health have come from scholars who have used both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as from writers drawing from Biblical or pastoral perspectives. In the following sections, we outline these approaches (first quantitative, starting with the NCLS, then qualitative) and move to integrate the different contributions.

3 Scholarly quantitative research on vitality

Rigorous quantitative research on church vitality is not common, and few scholars have demonstrated valid, reliable instruments to measure church vitality. A brief overview of four quantitative studies follows. The first example is “Church Life Surveys”, which have been run by NCLS Research since 1991 in Australia and have been replicated in the USA, UK, New Zealand, and most recently South Africa and the Netherlands. The second study is a Catholic adaptation of the Church Life Survey approach, linked with social capital theory. The third quantitative study is of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The fourth study, Natural Church Development, originated in Europe.

3.1 Australian National Church Life Surveys

The Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has been conducted every five years from 1991 to 2016 and employs multidimensional understandings of church vitality across multiple denominations and geographic contexts in Australia. A unique feature of the NCLS is that every church attender in participating congregations is asked to complete a survey. The data can then be aggregated to the level of the local church (and/or region, denomination etc) creating a powerful multi-level picture of local church life.

The NCLS Research approach to defining the characteristics of a healthy or vital church was originally a Protestant endeavour (with Catholic participation commencing in 2001) and started by considering what the purpose of a congregation is. The outcomes proposed by the NCLS Research team were that vital churches would show signs of good relationships with God (“faith exploration” dimension of vitality), with each other (“attractional” dimension) and with the wider community (“incarnational” dimension). These three dimensions capture, in simple terms, the purposes of a local church. Seven indicators were selected to operationalise these concepts in the 1991 NCLS (Kaldor et al, 1992). The faith exploration dimension was measured by a growth in faith index; the attractional dimension was covered by four indicators (belonging, newcomers (people new to church without a church background), young adult retention, and growth in attendance); and the incarnational dimension was measured with a community involvement index and a faith-sharing/inviting index. With each of these seven indicators, in turn, as the dependent or outcome variable, a series of studies were conducted on the predictive power of aspects of the local church, such as church size, theological approach, type of worship, leadership structures and practices, property and finances, as well as characteristics of the local neighbourhood, derived from the national government census. Results showed a high degree of inter-correlation between the seven indicators (Kaldor et al, 1997). This approach was informed by the work of Hoge and Roozen (1979) as well as by frames for the study of congregations developed in the USA by the informal collaboration known as the Congregational Studies

Team (e.g. Dudley, 1983; Carroll & Dudley, 1986; Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley & McKinney, 1998; and most recently <http://studyingcongregations.org>), which focuses on the processes, resources, culture and context of the local church.

In a later study using the 1996 NCLS (Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Castle & Hughes, 1999), the focus was narrowed to predicting only two “attractional” outcomes: church growth and newcomers to church life. Ten predictor variables were identified that were most strongly related to church growth and attracting newcomers. The ‘ten things that make a difference’ were a sense of vision or direction, a focus on those beyond church life, inviting people to church, an empowering leadership, looking after the young, contemporary worship, a sense of community, a lively faith, moving people toward commitment, and new congregations and services (Kaldor et al, 1999).

Prior to the 2001 NCLS, the Australian team invited research teams in other countries to conduct parallel projects, using the framework and methodology of the Australian National Church Life Survey as the foundation. Four countries took part under the banner of the 2001 International Congregational Life Survey, with each country taking responsibility for their own logistics. The 10 characteristics of vital churches used in Australia were influential in framing the survey design and outputs from the 2001 ICLS, which was conducted in Australia (NCLS), the UK (CLS-UK), New Zealand (CLS-NZ) and the USA (USCLS). For example, in their book about USCLS results, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations*, Woolever and Bruce (2004) utilised a closely related set of indicators.

Following the 2001 ICLS, conceptual development continued. The Australian book *Connections for Life*, which was provided to local churches in Australia, the UK and New Zealand with their survey results, extended the list and reorganised them into 12 core qualities under four headings: faith and worship, our life together, community connections, and vision and purpose (Kaldor, Castle & Dixon, 2002). The main adaptations from previous work involved enhancing concepts related to community connections.

By the time of the 2006 NCLS, and after further analysis on the relationships between different vitality measures, a revised model of church vitality was developed which arranged nine “core qualities” in three dimensions (“internal”, “inspirational” and “outward”) (Bellamy et al, 2006). The internal core qualities focus on the inner life of a local church, and concern the extent to which a church helps attenders to: have an “alive and growing *faith*”; experience “vital and nurturing *worship*”; and feel a “strong and growing sense of *belonging*”. The inspirational core qualities focus on the leadership and direction in a church: the extent to which attenders feel the church has a “clear and owned *vision*”; “inspiring and empowering *leadership*”; and “imaginative and flexible *innovation*”. The outward core qualities are about the outward looking life of a local church: the extent to which attenders undertake “practical and diverse *service*”; willing and effective “*faith-sharing*”; and “intentional and welcoming *inclusion*”. A further three attendance measures – numerical growth, newcomers, and young adult retention – were also included in the model. Statistical analysis showed that the qualities related to the attendance measures. For example, churches with strong clear and owned vision among attenders were more likely to be growing (Powell et al, 2012). NCLS results for churches were presented using this framework, and NCLS Research has maintained the 2006 vitality model for the sake of the churches who use the resources. The NCLS model has also influenced other scholars (e.g. Erwich, 2012 in the Netherlands and Schoeman, 2012 in South Africa).

Analysis of the five-yearly NCLS datasets has continued since 2006 with extensive correlational analyses between measures of vitality, and in more recent years, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to seek underlying patterns in congregational life that may illuminate concepts of vitality (e.g. Sterland & Dowson, 2013, Powell et al, 2012, Powell, 2017, Powell & Pepper, 2018, Sterland et al, 2018a). An empirical study of Protestant church life across four countries used techniques that identified underlying patterns in the data (Sterland, Powell, Pepper & Hancock, 2018b, see more detail later in this paper).

3.2 An Australian Catholic study of vitality

Dixon (2010) provided a Catholic frame that supported the participation of the Catholic Church in the NCLS, linking social capital theory, the ecclesiology of communion, and the core qualities of healthy churches developed by the NCLS Research team. He argued that the core qualities are examples of religious social goods, and that parishes build their stock of social capital by creating and using these goods (see Table 1 for Dixon's alignment of core qualities with social capital concepts). Using survey data from 67,000 Mass attenders in a random sample of 231 Catholic parishes from the 2006 NCLS, alongside the Australian Census of Population and Housing and the National Catholic Count of Attendance, Dixon tested his thesis that parishes that are more successful at producing social capital would perform better in terms of the social capital outcomes such as numbers attending Mass, attendance rate (with reference to the local Catholic population), attraction of newcomers and level of involvement in parish life, although he also expected that the outcomes will also be influenced by the demographic characteristics of the local Catholic population. His results confirmed that the local context (including aspects such as location, the percentage of Catholics born in non-English speaking countries or with university degrees) has a strong effect on the way parishes function. He also found that the parish core quality of empowering leadership (encouraging others to use their gifts and skills) had an extremely strong relationship to parish involvement, particularly in urban parishes. The research also showed that having Sunday Masses was positively related to attendance in urban parishes. Finally, he found that "fringe attenders" (who make up around 50% of Mass attenders) contribute to the creation of a parish's social capital through their generally positive view of the parish community. Dixon, and other colleagues in the Pastoral Research Office (now the National Centre for Pastoral Research), have also contributed more widely to a greater understanding of Catholic parish life in an Australian context (<https://pro.catholic.org.au/>).

Table 1: NCLS dimensions of vitality, core qualities and social capital types

NCLS Dimension	NCLS Core Quality	Social capital type
Inward core qualities	Alive and growing faith	Bonding social capital
	Vital and nurturing worship	
	Strong and growing belonging	
Inspirational core qualities	Clear and owned vision	Transformational or catalytic social capital
	Inspiring and empowering leadership	
	Imaginative and flexible innovation	
Outward core qualities	Practical and diverse service	Bridging social capital
	Willing and effective faith-sharing	
	Intentional and welcoming inclusion	

3.3 Congregational Vitality Scales: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bobbitt (2014, 2015a) developed a survey that can reliably measure qualitative aspects of congregational vitality, through her studies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, one of the largest Christian denominations in the US. Bobbitt’s position is that researchers should embrace multiple outcomes for congregational vitality as desired outcomes may vary in different contexts. Bobbitt produced a robust outcome measurement tool (2014), using a conceptualisation of vitality that resonates with the three-dimensional NCLS model (Kaldor, Bellamy, Correy & Powell, 1992), which posits healthy churches as ones that fulfil “attractional”, “incarnational” and “faith exploration” purposes. Her assessment was that the following nine areas or domains are known to impact a congregation’s vitality: “God’s presence”, “mission/purpose”, “leadership”, “relationships”, “attitudes/culture”, “local context”, “resources”, “governance & administration”, “programs” (2015b). Her Congregational Vitality Scales (CVS) were later refined to a shorter form (2015): connecting with God, each other and the world.

3.4 Natural Church Development

From a German Lutheran context, Schwarz (1996, 2006) sought to devise a procedure for measuring qualitative growth (as opposed to numerical growth or church size). Initially titled Natural Church Development (NCD), he presented an approach to church growth that emphasises “God’s natural principles of development”. Schwarz proposed a “quality index” (QI) comprising eight quality characteristics: “empowering leadership”, “gift-based ministry”, “passionate spirituality”, “effective structures”, “inspiring worship service”, “holistic small groups”, “need-oriented evangelism”, and “loving relationships”.

The NCD survey is a diagnostic tool completed by up to a maximum of 30 church attenders, each of whom have a regular task, are involved in a small group and attend worship services. They evaluate their church’s current quality, identify its area of greatest need and then invest in improving this. In a study of church growth including 1,000 churches from 32 countries and five continents, Schwartz (2006) asserts that “every church in which a quality index of 65 was reached for each of the eight quality characteristics, is a growing church” (p. 39). By July 2016 the NCD Church Survey had been used by more than 70,000 churches, in 84 countries and 112 denominations. At this time, NCD International reframed the “C” in NCD to mean “character” and “community” as well as “church.” (NCD International, 2017).

In contrast to Bobbitt’s (2014, 2015) work, there is limited information available about the empirical basis of the NCD model. One paper (Schalk, 1999) presents an exploratory factor analysis from a 1991 to 1993 study, funded by the University of Würzburg, of 334 respondents from 14 German churches, and a further 134 churches for an aspect of a study. The authors claim that similar statistical methods have been repeated on later data collected from international studies, which has also been used to update national standardisation of scores. However, further statistical details have not been released due to commercial reasons.

4 Scholarly qualitative research on vitality

Scholars have used a range of qualitative methods to study church vitality. Of those studies that have been publicly reported, most have examined Protestant churches in the USA. For example, Macchia's (1999) book, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics*, is based on more than 100 church visits and dialogue with hundreds of church leaders. He claims to have a holistic approach to evaluating church health, proposing that the ten traits of a healthy church include "God's empowering presence", "God-exalting worship", "spiritual disciplines", "learning & growing in community", "a commitment to loving & caring relationships", "servant-leadership development", "an outward focus", "wise administration & accountability", "networking with the body of Christ" and "stewardship & generosity".

Independent US religious studies scholar Diana Butler-Bass conducted a three-year national study of 50 flourishing mainline Protestant congregations. In her book *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (2006), she offered a "how-to" approach to build vitality through the innovative use of traditional Christian practices. She described vitality as transcending numeric growth and suggested 10 practices that are signposts of renewal. They are "hospitality", "discernment", "healing", "contemplation", "testimony", "diversity", "justice", "worship", "reflection" and "beauty".

Dantis (2015) conducted a study of Australian Catholic parishes in association with the Building Stronger Parishes research project. This study drew on a theological framework which centred on the concept of church as communion, as well as sociological work in Australia and beyond. Vitality was conceived as comprising eight facets, which are closely tied to the Australian NCLS core qualities, but the wording and emphasis developed from specifically Catholic language and Catholic theology.

1. The vocational call of baptism is nurtured, and parishioners are encouraged in their faith
2. Liturgical celebrations offer an experience of God
3. Welcoming inclusion and hospitality abound, and parishioners are encouraged to share their gifts
4. Spiritual fellowship and community bonds are nurtured, and parishioners experience a strong sense of belonging
5. Parishioners are aware of and are formed in their commitment to mission and evangelisation
6. Practical and diverse service/outreach initiatives are practised
7. Collegial and collaborative leadership is practised
8. The parish is adaptable to changes and is involved in planning for the future

Building Stronger Parishes involved an empirical study of 20 parishes from different dioceses. Parishes were selected which had particular forms or expressions of vitality and were of different types and in different contexts. The methodology used was an exploratory, qualitative approach using mixed methods. Data was collected through interviews and participant observation, supplemented by document analysis, including an examination of church life profiles. The study showed that parish context and community demographics largely determined how parishes expressed their vitality, with a great diversity across participating parishes in each of the eight vitality areas.

Stetzer and Rainer (2010) from Lifeway Research conducted a study in 2008 and 2009 using both qualitative and quantitative methods to ascertain the difference between stagnant and growing churches. Criteria for being a "transformational church" included numerical growth in worship attendance between 2003 and 2008 and the percentage of people taking part in small groups. Survey data was initially collected from around 5,000 US Protestant churches to explore qualities of the top 10 per cent according to select criteria. Interviews with more than 250 church leaders were then conducted. Common qualities identified in transformational churches are where: 1) people become more like Jesus; 2) the church acts more like the body of Christ; and 3) the community becomes more of a reflection of the Kingdom of God. Seven common elements of these churches were identified, including "missionary mentality", "vibrant leadership", "prayerful dependence", "relational intentionality", "worship", "community" and "mission".

5 Biblical or pastoral approaches to vitality

Beyond the social sciences, many influential church leaders and writers have contributed to wider discussions on church vitality. Some write from a biblical perspective and others enter from a practical, pastoral standpoint.

The knowledge base for wider discussions of church vitality may be an experience of a single church or broader experiences of congregational life from consultants, bishops or others who work across congregations. Some selected examples of this so-called “grey” literature are Hemphill (1994), Warren (1995) and Schnase (2007) from the USA, all of whom have had considerable influence internationally. Simon (2016) provides perspective on “great Catholic parishes” in the US, and in *Rebuilt*, White and Corcoran (2013) tell the story of a Catholic parish brought back to life and offer guidance to other parishes based on their experiences.

Based on his biblical study of the early church at Antioch, Hemphill (1994) developed eight principles of a healthy church and proposed that contemporary churches also adopt these principles. They are “supernatural power”, “Christ-exalting worship”, “God-centred prayer”, “servant leaders”, “Kingdom family relationships”, “God-sized vision”, “passion for the lost”, and “maturation of believers”.

In *The Purpose Driven Church* (1995), Rick Warren wrote from his own experience and the success of US mega-church Saddleback Church. He suggested that for a church to be healthy it must be built around the five New Testament purposes given to the church by Jesus. These purposes for a church are “worship”, “fellowship”, “discipleship”, “ministry” and “mission” and that they are derived from the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37–40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20). Warren’s focus is church health, rather than church growth.

Robert Schnase is a bishop in the United Methodist Church in the USA who writes to encourage and strengthen basic practices of congregational ministry. His book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (2007) has been translated into a number of different languages and is used outside the USA. His focus is on practical application in order to multiply ministry. The five practices are “radical hospitality”, “passionate worship”, “intentional faith development”, “risk-taking mission and service”, and “extravagant generosity”.

Bill Simon is a successful businessman, professor of law and philanthropist, co-chairing an investment firm and a number of foundations. He is founder of Parish Catalyst, an organization with the aim of exploring why some Catholic parishes thrive while others decline, as well as supporting parish growth and spiritual renewal with stories and practical advice. Using a “snowball” method, Simon and his team identified parishes known to them and their contacts. Described in the book, *Great Catholic Parishes: A Living Mosaic* (2016), they interviewed 244 leaders in Catholic parishes across the USA and named 49 findings under four key headings. The findings say that great Catholic parishes: “share leadership”, using staff to direct the community; “foster spiritual maturity and plan for discipleship”, offering formation programs and ministry opportunities to reach a wide range of parishioners; “excel on Sundays”, with welcoming liturgical celebrations supported by significant time, energy, and money; and “evangelize in intentional, structured ways”, by providing service programs, social events, meaningful sacramental moments, and global mission opportunities that challenge insiders to look outward and invite outsiders to deeper relationship with Christ and the church. Simon (2016) proposed that those four fundamental shared practices lead to a deeper sense of belonging within parish communities and a deepening commitment to discipleship.

6 A synthesis of concepts of vitality

Having reviewed a selection of authors who have worked with multifaceted concepts of church vitality, we now offer a synthesis. First, we take a thematic approach, listing key features of models with similar characteristics. Second, we present an empirical analysis across four countries, which sought to find factors that underlie more specific vitality concepts.

6.1 A thematic synthesis: features of vital churches

This review has found some recurring and consistent themes across the concepts utilised by different studies and authors. These concepts are grouped in Table 2 below into 14 themes that concern “qualities” of vital churches, and one set of attendance measures. Included are concepts invoked by authors that do not align with those given by any other author. In order of occurrence in the literature, the qualities are “community”, “outward focus”, “leadership”, “spirituality”, “worship”, “discipleship”, “prayer”, “vision”, “caring for the young”, “giving”, “innovation”, “healing”, “diversity” and “beauty”. The attendance measures are “numerical growth”, “young adult retention” and “newcomers”.

Table 2: A thematic synthesis: features of vital churches

#	Feature of Vital Churches	Source
Qualities of Vital Churches		
1	Community	Authentic community (McKee, 2003); Kingdom family relationships (Hemphill, 1994); Fellowship (Warren, 1995); Radical hospitality (Schnase, 2007); A commitment to loving and caring relationships (Macchia, 1999); Networking with the body of Christ (Macchia, 1999); Hospitality (Butler-Bass, 2006); Community (Butler-Bass, 2006); Relational intentionality (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Loving relationships (Schwarz, 2006); Connections with each other (Bobbitt, 2014); Relationship with each other /attractional (NCLS Research (1992, 1997, 2006, 2012); Strong and growing belonging (NCLS Research (2012); Intentional and welcoming inclusion (NCLS Research (2012); Having a sense of belonging (Woolever & Bruce, 2004); Participating in the congregation (Woolever & Bruce, 2004); Welcoming new people (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
2	Outward focus	Intentional evangelism (McKee, 2003); Passion for the lost (Hemphill, 1994); Mission (Warren, 1995, Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Missionary mentality (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Risk-taking mission and service (Schnase, 2007); An outward focus, (Macchia, 1999); Need-oriented evangelism (Schwarz, 2006); Testimony (Butler-Bass, 2006); Justice (Butler-Bass (2006); Connections with the world (Bobbitt, 2014); Relationship with the wider community/incarnational (NCLS Research, 1992, 1997, 2006, 2012); Practical and diverse service (NCLS Research, 2012); Willing and effective faith-sharing (NCLS Research (2012); Focusing on the community. (Woolever & Bruce, 2004); Sharing faith (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
3	Leadership	Empowering leadership (McKee, 2003; Schwarz, 2006; Woolever & Bruce 2004); Mobilised laity (McKee, 2003); Servant leaders (Hemphill, 1994); Ministry (Warren (1995); Servant-leadership development (Macchia, 1999); Vibrant leadership (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010); Gift-based ministry (Schwarz, 2006); Inspiring, empowering leadership (NCLS Research, 2012).
4	Spirituality	Passionate spirituality (McKee, 2003, Schwarz, 2006); Supernatural power (Hemphill, 1994); God's empowering Presence (Macchia, 1999); Connections with God (Bobbitt, 2014); Relationship with God/faith exploration (NCLS Research, 1992, 1997, 2006, 2012); Alive and growing faith (NCLS Research, 2012); Growing spiritually (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
5	Worship	Worship (Warren, 1995, Butler-Bass, 2006, Stetzer & Rainer, 2010; Engaging worship (McKee 2003); Christ-exalting worship (Hemphill, 1994); Passionate worship (Schnase, 2007); God-exalting worship (Macchia, 1999); Inspiring worship service (Schwarz, 2006); Vital and nurturing worship (NCLS Research, 2012); Meaningful worship (Woolever & Bruce (2004).
6	Discipleship	Discipleship (Warren, 1995); Transforming Discipleship (McKee, 2003); Maturation of believers (Hemphill, 1994); Intentional faith development (Schnase, 2007); Learning and growing in community; Reflection or Discernment (Butler-Bass, 2006); Holistic small groups (Schwarz, 2006).

7	Prayer	God-centred prayer (Hemphill, 1994), Spiritual disciplines (Macchia, 1999); Contemplation (Butler-Bass, 2006); Prayerful dependence (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010).
8	Vision	God-sized vision (Hemphill, 1994); Clear and owned vision (NCLS Research, 2012); Looking to the future (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
9	Caring for the young	Caring for the young/young adult retention (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017); Caring for children and youth (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).
10	Giving	Extravagant generosity (Schnase, 2007); Stewardship and generosity (Macchia, 1999).
11	Innovation	Innovation (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017).
12	Healing	Healing (Butler-Bass, 2006).
13	Diversity	Diversity (Butler-Bass (2006).
14	Beauty	Beauty (Butler-Bass (2006).
15	Attendance measures	Numerical growth (e.g. NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017, Wagner 1976; Roozen, 1979; Hoge, Stetzer & Rainer 2010). Young adult retention (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017). Newcomers without a church background (NCLS Research, 2006, 2012, 2017).

6.2 An empirical reduction: two underlying factors from the ICLS

As well as taking a thematic approach, another approach to reduce a large number of wide-ranging components to a smaller number of areas is to conduct a quantitative analysis known as factor analysis. This approach was used in an empirical study of Protestant church life across four countries (Sterland et al, 2018b), drawing on 2001 International Church Life Survey (ICLS) data which measured the core qualities that comprise the NCLS Research model of church vitality. By analysing patterns in the data, the statistical analysis identified constructs or “latent factors” that underly the more specific vitality indicators. There were two latent factors that were confirmed across churches from Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Results from churches in the USA had some similarities but did not align as closely as the other three countries. These two factors, labelled here as “Collective Confidence” and “Individual Commitment”, describe the experiences of church attenders, and do point toward an underlying structure across some English-speaking contexts. Components in both confirmed factors have resonance in wider organisational literature in disciplines such as organisational psychology.

6.2.1 About Collective Confidence

“Collective Confidence” emerged primarily from attender responses about their satisfaction and positive stance towards the church and its leadership (e.g. Sterland et al, 2018b). An exploratory factor analysis showed a factor consisting of much growth in faith through this church, the leadership inspiring to action, inspiration experienced in worship services, other positive worship service experiences, strong sense of belonging to the church, viewing the church as innovative and focused on the community, viewing the leadership as encouraging gifts and listening to opinions, and a higher behaviour of inviting others to church. A confirmatory factor analysis (a stricter statistical technique) confirmed only the first three from this list. The focus is on a positive experience of the collective endeavour that is the church, its activities and leaders. When Collective Confidence is a strong congregational feature, it indicates that church attenders express a high degree of positivity or confidence in their church. Collective Confidence aligns with a number of the themes summarised in Table 2.

There are parallels between Collective Confidence and “organisational climate”, a construct used in organisational studies. Organisational climate refers to the perceptions shared by an organisation’s employees about their work environment and has been shown to relate to positive organisational outcomes

(Patterson et al, 2005; González-Romá et al, 2009; Parker et al, 2003; Thumin et al, 2011). It has similarities with our Collective Confidence construct, where employees are replaced with church attenders, and the organisation is the local church. The Collective Confidence factor may also correspond with the organisational construct of “group potency” (or “collective agency”), which consists of members’ shared beliefs about the general ability and effectiveness of the team (Lee, Tinsley & Bobko, 2002). A host of studies have consistently linked group potency with performance and other positive outcomes (e.g. Stajkovic, Lee & Nyberg, 2009; Jung & Sosik, 2003; Hecht, Allen, Klammer & Kelly, 2002).

6.2.2 About Individual Commitment

The second factor, “Individual Commitment”, emerged from attender responses to questions about personal commitment to faith and aspects of faith practice. Conceptually, the focal point is on the religious practices of individuals, rather than on their experience of the collective. Examples of items that loaded on this factor were “God is most important to me”, regular private devotions, and financial giving to the local church. When individual commitment is a strong congregational feature, it indicates that church attenders have high levels of personal religious commitment and practice. The Individual Commitment factor does not have the same strength of alignment as Collective Confidence with indicators of vitality listed earlier.

Organisational studies utilise the construct of “organisational citizenship”, which bears some resemblance to Individual Commitment. Originating in studies of the workplace, organisational citizenship behaviour has been defined as employee behaviour that is discretionary rather than mandated formally by a task or role, and which promotes the effective functioning of the organisation (Organ, 1988). Interest in citizenship-like behaviour has expanded into a variety of domains such as marketing, hospital and health administration, community psychology, economics and leadership and has been linked to organisational effectiveness and performance (Podsakof et al, 2000). It could be argued that individual commitment is related to being a good “citizen” of that church, and that each of the indicators that make up the factor (financial giving, God is most important, regular devotions) show good citizenship. These indicators also correspond to some extent with some of the dimensions of citizenship present in the literature, such as an allegiance to the organisation (financial giving) (Podsakof et al, 2000), endorsing and supporting organisational values and objectives (God as most important) (Coleman et al, 2000), and self-development and commitment (regular devotions) (Dyne et al, 1994).

7 Conclusion

There is a breadth of approaches in the literature about what constitutes vitality and what fosters it. The singular concept of numerical growth in attendance continues to be used by some commentators, perhaps for pragmatic as much as for ideological reasons (it is simple to grasp and can be measured relatively easily). But in general, vitality is understood to be a complex combination that requires greater nuance in its measurement.

A broad range of methodologies is employed for work in the religious sphere. Biblical reflection and practitioner experience are offered alongside scholarly studies which utilise a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods. This review of diverse sources has identified some 15 features of vital churches that cover “community”, “outward focus”, “leadership”, “spirituality”, “worship”, “discipleship”, “prayer”, “vision”, “caring for the young”, “giving”, “innovation”, “healing”, “diversity”, “beauty” and attendance (“numerical growth”, “young adult retention” and “newcomers”).

One of the reasons for diverse views on what constitutes vitality is that aspects of vitality may be treated both as antecedents and as outcomes. In other words, what one author may claim as a sign of vitality, may be seen by another as an “input” which then results in a vitality “outcome”.

What the outcome is can vary depending on the purpose of the study, and should be made clear in any piece of research. The desired outcomes should answer the “so that” question (Bobbitt, 2014) of the purpose or ends of a vital church. For example, vital churches may train people, or have small groups, not as outcomes in and of themselves but rather so *that* people will grow in their faith or participate in God’s mission in the world etc. Complex multi-dimensional frameworks of church health can appear as systems with different components of vitality operating in some form of interplay or mutual reinforcement.

This review has presented parallels between research into church health and studies and concepts from organisational literatures more broadly. This interdisciplinary conversation yields insights that may be useful in the quest for vital churches.

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Models of church vitality: A literature review

Occasional Paper 39

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Understanding what constitutes and drives vitality in local churches has attracted attention from church leaders, consultants and congregational studies scholars alike.

This literature review outlines different approaches to conceptualise and measure church vitality. Our focus here is primarily on empirical social scientific research, that is, on rigorous research that utilises data from and/or about local churches and that has been conducted in accordance with the norms of quality social research. However, the field is, of course, interdisciplinary and these research endeavours intersect with theology and commentary from church leaders. As well as reviewing and synthesising scholarly social scientific work, we also attend to influential contributors from beyond the social sciences who have played a role in shaping discourses around church health.

The NCLS Research team has invested many years in assessing church vitality in an Australian context. We provide detail about conceptualisation and measurement of vitality in the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) and its sister project the 2001 International Congregational Life Survey (ICLS).

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NCLS Research is a leading research organisation whose research aims include studying Australian spirituality, church health, effective and sustainable leadership, and the connections between church and community. The National Church Life Survey is a collaborative project involving millions of participants in over 20 denominations since 1991.

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