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# Inflow and Outflow Between Denominations: 1991 to 2001

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# The National Church Life Survey

*The National Church Life Survey has been developed by ANGLICARE (Diocese of Sydney), Uniting Church in Australia NSW Board of Mission and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The NCLS has been carried out on three occasions in Australia: 1991, 1996 and 2001. Nineteen denominations participated in the 2001 NCLS.*

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# CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	4
INTRODUCING THE NCLS INFLOW OUTFLOW MODEL .....	5
Calculating the flow between churches .....	6
DENOMINATIONAL INFLOW AND OUTFLOW .....	8
COMBINED INFLOW AND OUTFLOW MODELS .....	8
Protestant Churches Inflow and Outflow .....	8
Pentecostal Churches Inflow and Outflow .....	9
INFLOW AND OUTFLOW FOR INDIVIDUAL DENOMINATIONS .....	12
Anglican Church Inflow and Outflow .....	12
Assemblies of God Inflow and Outflow .....	13
Baptist Church Inflow and Outflow .....	15
Catholic Church Inflow and Outflow .....	16
Churches of Christ Inflow and Outflow .....	17
Lutheran Church Inflow and Outflow .....	18
Presbyterian Church Inflow and Outflow .....	20
Uniting Church Inflow and Outflow .....	20
Explanatory Notes .....	22
CONCLUSION .....	23

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The NCLS Inflow Outflow Model of Attendance Change .....	6
Figure 2: The Protestant Church in Australia - Inflow and Outflow 1996 to 2001 .....	9
Figure 3: Pentecostal Churches Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001.....	10
Figure 4: Anglican Churches Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001.....	12
Figure 5: Assemblies of God Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001.....	14
Figure 6: Baptist Church Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001 .....	15
Figure 7: The Catholic Church in Australia - Inflow and Outflow 1996 to 2001 .....	17
Figure 8: Churches of Christ Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001.....	18
Figure 9: Lutheran Church Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001.....	19
Figure 10: Presbyterian Church Inflow and Outflow - 1996 to 2001.....	20
Figure 11: Uniting Church Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001 .....	21

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper introduces the NCLS Inflow Outflow Model and maps the inflow and outflow for a number of Australian denominations that took part in both the 1996 and 2001 NCLS.

Church growth or decline is a widely used measure of overall church health and vitality. Yet, NCLS researchers argue that a focus only on numbers can be limited and misleading. For example, research in Western countries has shown that much of what passes as church growth is actually people moving between churches, or 'religious musical pews'.

Why do churches grow? This question has a very simple answer. Churches grow when inflow exceeds outflow. The NCLS Inflow Outflow model presents attendance change in terms of the three sources of inflow and three sources of outflow. For each inflow path, there is a matching outflow: switching in and out of denominations, births and deaths, newcomers and drift outs.

While some of the estimates can only ever be approximations, this model helps churches to understand whether their growth is a reflection of effectiveness in mission or whether it is being driven by other factors.

After introducing the Inflow Outflow model, this paper provides an overview of the inflow and outflow patterns for Australian churches from 1996 to 2001.

Underlying the overview are distinctly different patterns for various denominations. Estimates are given for two models, which combine denominations. First, the inflow outflow model for the Protestant churches is presented. This represents half of all Australian church attenders. Second, a model for the participating Pentecostal churches is presented.

Where possible, the models for individual denominations are produced in alphabetical order. They include: Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Catholic, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Uniting Churches.

A positive trend across denominations is that the 'front door' is open more widely and the 'back door' has been partly closed. The proportion of newcomers has increased from the 1991 to 1996 period across survey periods. Correspondingly, the proportion of drift outs has also decreased across survey periods for every denomination listed.

Some denominations have a dynamic model with a lot of movement both in and out. While church attenders tend not to switch between Protestant and Catholic churches, it continues to be a characteristic of Protestant churches. Denominations with much higher levels of switchers both in and out include the Pentecostal churches, the Baptist Church, Churches of Christ and the Presbyterian Church.

Denominations with older age profiles face ongoing loss through death of older attenders in the coming years. In a number of mainstream denominations, this factor lies primarily behind the overall decline in numbers. This reality can overshadow the positive gains made elsewhere, such as increases in the level of newcomers or having fewer people leaving the church.

The future is not predetermined. The patterns here describe what has taken place in the last five years, not fixed trends into the future. Armed with a knowledge of past patterns, congregations and denominations can (and must) consider what needs to be put into place now to help shape the future.

## INTRODUCING THE NCLS INFLOW OUTFLOW MODEL

When churches grow, many assume good things must be happening. Indeed, church attendance growth has been seen by some as *the* measure of church health. Where there is decline, it is assumed that the church must be unhealthy in some way.

Yet, NCLS researchers argue that a focus only on numbers can be limited and misleading. Is growth made up mostly of people moving in from other churches? What about attracting newcomers from the community or retaining the children brought up within the church? If a church only pays attention to its overall attendance growth or decline, it can draw wrong conclusions about the true nature of their connection with the community.

Research in Western countries has shown that much of what passes as church growth is actually people moving between churches, or 'religious musical pews'. Often it is not the inclusion of new believers as in the New Testament. In Australia it has been estimated that only a quarter of all church growth is comprised of people fresh from the community moving into church life.

NCLS Research offers a more sophisticated, holistic and useful way to think about attendance change. The NCLS Inflow Outflow model present attendance change in terms of its various components. This model helps churches to understand whether their growth is a reflection of effectiveness in mission or whether it is being driven by other factors.

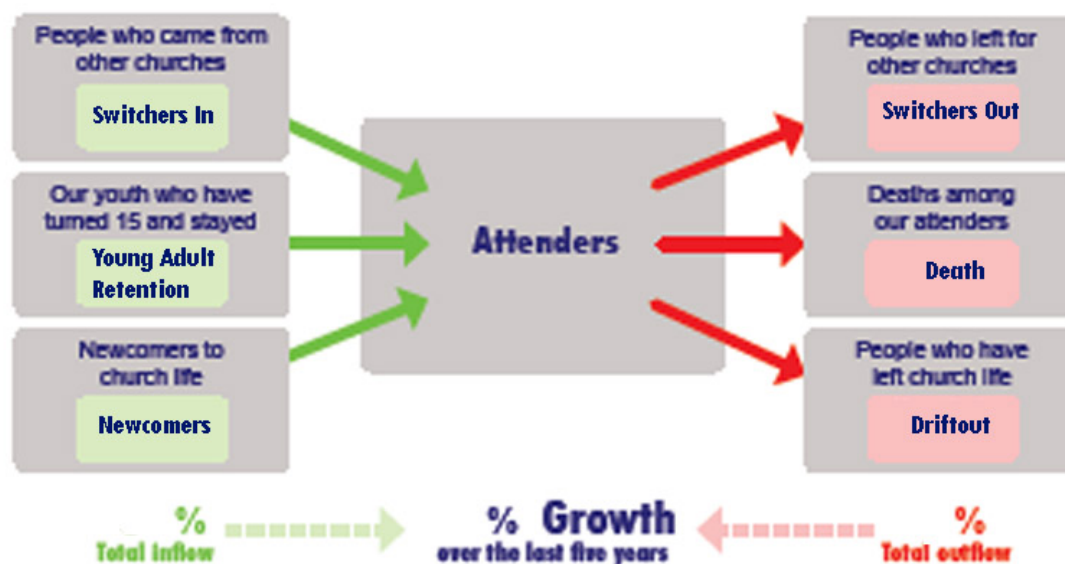
Why do churches grow? This question has a very simple answer. Churches grow when inflow exceeds outflow. Overall attendance increases when the number of people arriving at a church is greater than the number of people who leave it.

*This paper maps the inflow and outflow for a number of Australian denominations that took part in both the 1996 and 2001 NCLS.*

There are three sets of reasons that churches grow and decline; three doors in and three doors out. If we want to better understand how attendance change occurs, we need to measure each of these separately. For each inflow path, there is a matching outflow.

- *Switching:* Attenders switching between churches will affect each one either positively or negatively
- *Births and Deaths:* Children born to church attenders naturally increase the size of the church, but it is whether they can be retained, particularly as they enter the teenage years that ultimately determines whether the church has truly grown from them. The passing of older attenders naturally reduces the size of the churches.
- *The Front and Back Doors:* Newcomers without a background of church involvement comprise an important flow of new life into churches. An equally important flow in the opposite direction are made up by attenders drifting out of church involvement altogether.

Figure 1: The NCLS Inflow Outflow Model of Attendance Change



Source: NCLS Research

The Inflow Outflow Model is made up of seven components: three inflow measures, three outflow measures and net attendance change.

**Inflow** comprises the 3 paths on the left:

- Switchers In: people arriving from other congregations
- Young Adult Retention: people brought up in the church
- Newcomers: people who join with no church background

**Outflow** comprises the 3 paths on the right:

- Switchers Out: People leaving for other congregations
- Deaths
- Drift Out: People drifting out or leaving church life

The attendance change in a congregation or denomination is the net result of these paths added together. That is, the percent growth or decline over the last five years is the percent of total inflow minus the percent of total outflow

### Calculating the flow between churches

When churches or denominations think about attendance change in terms of its components, they can make more sense of the changes they may be seeing. What percentage of current attendees are newcomers (who had no church background)? How many came from other churches in the last five years? What percentage are youth who chose to stay as they became part of the active adult population of church over that time? Put simply, there are no other sources of church growth except these three!

National Church Life Surveys have been conducted in 1991, 1996 and 2001, measuring these and a host of other features of churches. These figures can be supplied for either a congregation or a whole denomination. The comprehensive and longitudinal nature of the Surveys means that NCLS researchers are in an unmatched position in terms of being able to estimate inflow and outflow for whole denominations. *This paper focuses on several denominations or groups, and charts their changes using the inflow outflow model, over the 5 year periods of 1991-1996 and 1996-2001.*

### *Components of this model*

*Attendance Net Change:* The foundation of this model is the net change of attendance over five years - the number that appears under the diagram that indicates overall growth or decline. Careful estimates of church attendance have been collated by NCLS Research over the years. (See Occasional Paper 3: Estimates of Church Attendance 2001). NCLS bases their size estimates from a question answered by the church leadership (and includes the numbers of children). In addition, NCLS obtains size estimates of churches that don't participate in the survey, to get a more accurate overall picture. Therefore the inflow outflow model begins with a solid estimate of whether a church has grown or declined in a five-year period. This overall percentage growth or decline is listed at the base in the middle of the Inflow Outflow model.

***NCLS Inflow and Outflow Model:  
A 'rule of thumb'***

The figure for attendance net change shown under each model is the most accurate figure for overall change; the estimates of inflow and outflow shown in the boxes are an approximation of how that change came about.

*An important 'rule of thumb':* The figure for attendance net change shown under each model is the most accurate figure for overall change; the estimates of inflow and outflow shown in the boxes are an approximation of how that change came about. The other figures in the inflow outflow model come from the results of surveying the adult population,

or from an additional estimation (such as the expected number of deaths based on the age profile of a denomination). This means they are not as exact, but an approximation of each component that led to the net result we see.

How does NCLS estimate the other components of the model? The extensive nature of each National Church Life Survey allows accurate estimates of people who are currently in a church. It is possible to count the numbers of denominational switchers, retained youth, newcomers to church life, and long-term attenders.

*Switchers In:* This group includes people who have arrived in the previous five years coming from churches in other denominations.

*Young Adult Retention:* This is the percentage of people in the church aged 15-19 years old who were also attending the same denomination five years ago. These young people who have stayed with church as they have passed into an age where they typically have more personal choice in the matter are the 'retained youth'.

*Newcomers:* Newcomers are the new attenders who have arrived in the last five years and who previously did not attend another church.

*Long term attenders:* Long term attenders have been part of their current denomination for five years or longer. They have not been part of inflow or outflow and are shown in the large middle box in the diagram.

*Helpful hint: if you add these 4 boxes you get 100% - the total adults currently attending church.*

The NCLS cannot provide such an accurate count of the 3 boxes on the right hand side of the diagram: those who have switched to other churches, those who have died, or those who have drifted out of church life. However a reasonable estimate of these can still be arrived if participation rates in the survey has been sufficient. In this paper we concentrate on larger groups and denominations for this reason.

*Switchers Out:* Because so many denominations participate in each NCLS, most of those who have moved to a new denomination are also being counted, and those in non-participating denominations can be estimated to some degree. Therefore at the denominational level a fair estimate of those who have moved to another group can indeed arrived at.

*Deaths:* The Australian Bureau of Statistics provides mortality rates for each age group across the population. By applying that to the current age profile of each denomination, estimates have been made of likely losses through the deaths of some attenders over the previous 5 years.

*Driftout:* This leaves one missing piece - an estimate of the number of people drifting out of church life altogether. This can be estimated by calculating the size of the other flows into and out of church life, and the overall change in attendance between 1996 and 2001. While the result is approximate, it opens up for reflection an important aspect of the churches' relationship with the wider community.

### *Adjustment in calculations*

The benefit of experience has allowed NCLS researchers to improve the method and accuracy of these calculations. More refined measurements of some groups has been possible in recent years subsequent to earlier work.

To allow comparison, the 1991 to 1996 models have been recalculated using the improved methods. Consequently, the figures presented in this paper supersede any earlier publications (eg Build My Church, 1999). Any differences primarily stem from a revision of the estimation of the youth figures and an improved weighting scheme.

## **DENOMINATIONAL INFLOW AND OUTFLOW**

It is possible to map the inflow and outflow of attenders for each denomination. This exercise has been carried out as far as possible for denominations that took part in both the 1996 and 2001 NCLS, and the results for major denominations are reported here.

*A colour code:* The inflow and outflow models for 1996 to 2001 are shown in yellow. Where available, the inflow and outflow models for 1991 to 1996 are shown in green.

This section starts by presenting the combined models for the Protestant churches and also for the Pentecostal churches. Individual denominations are then presented in alphabetical order.

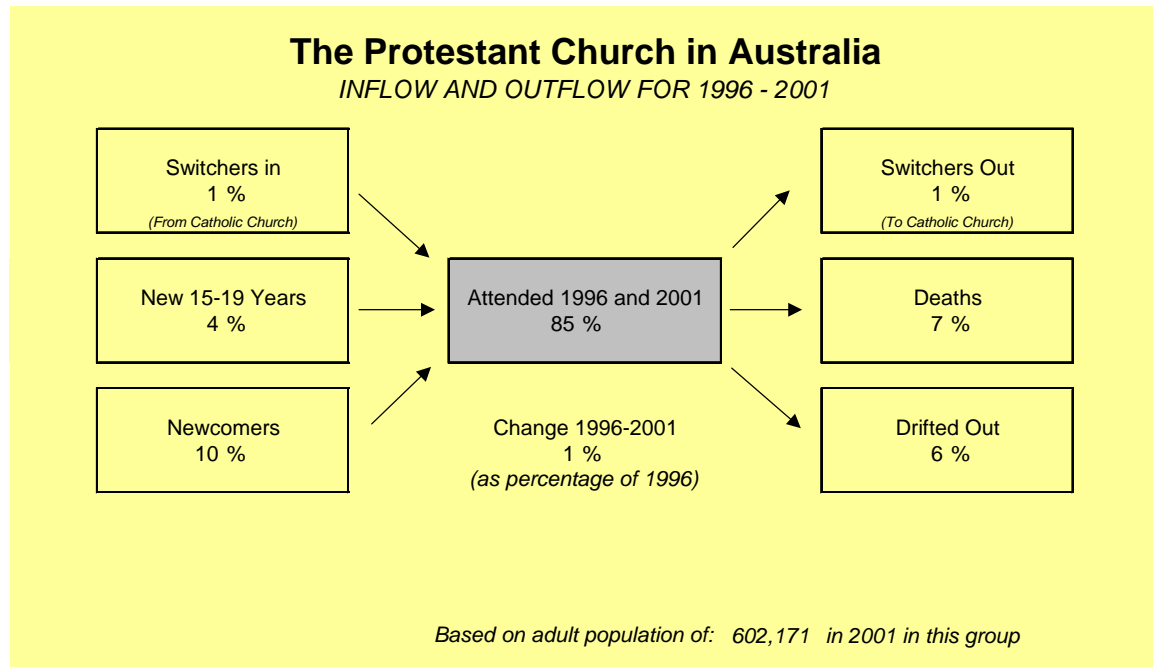
### **COMBINED INFLOW AND OUTFLOW MODELS**

#### **Protestant Churches Inflow and Outflow**

Figure 2 shows the combined picture of inflow and outflow for Protestant denominations.

*Protestants as a 'system'*: This diagram treats the 16 Protestant denominations (including Anglicans) who were part of the National Church Life Survey in both 1996 and 2001 a single system. As this represents roughly half the church attenders in Australia, the people switching between Protestant denominations have not been included. The estimate of switchers only represents the switching to and from Catholic and Orthodox denominations.

Figure 2: The Protestant Church in Australia - Inflow and Outflow 1996 to 2001



Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

Overall, there was an increase in church attendance in Protestant churches of 1% between 1996 and 2001.

The source of this increase does not come from switchers from the Catholic Church - the diagram shows the Switchers in and out (from and to the Catholic Church) are fairly matched. Protestant attenders are more likely than Catholics to switch between denominations, but they generally move to other Protestant churches.

The diagram also shows that as a group, Protestant denominations lost greater numbers through death, than are being replaced by young adults becoming involved (7% vs 4%).

However, this sector of church life has managed to hold its own because it managed to attract greater proportions of newcomers who were not part of congregations (10%), than the estimated proportion who drifted away and no longer attend church (6%).

### Pentecostal Churches Inflow and Outflow

A number of Pentecostal churches have taken part in National Church Life Surveys. Some have been part of denominations, networks or assemblies, while others were independent.

It is not always possible to estimate an individual inflow and outflow model for a denomination. Some are too small to make accurate estimates. Other groups only took part in limited ways.

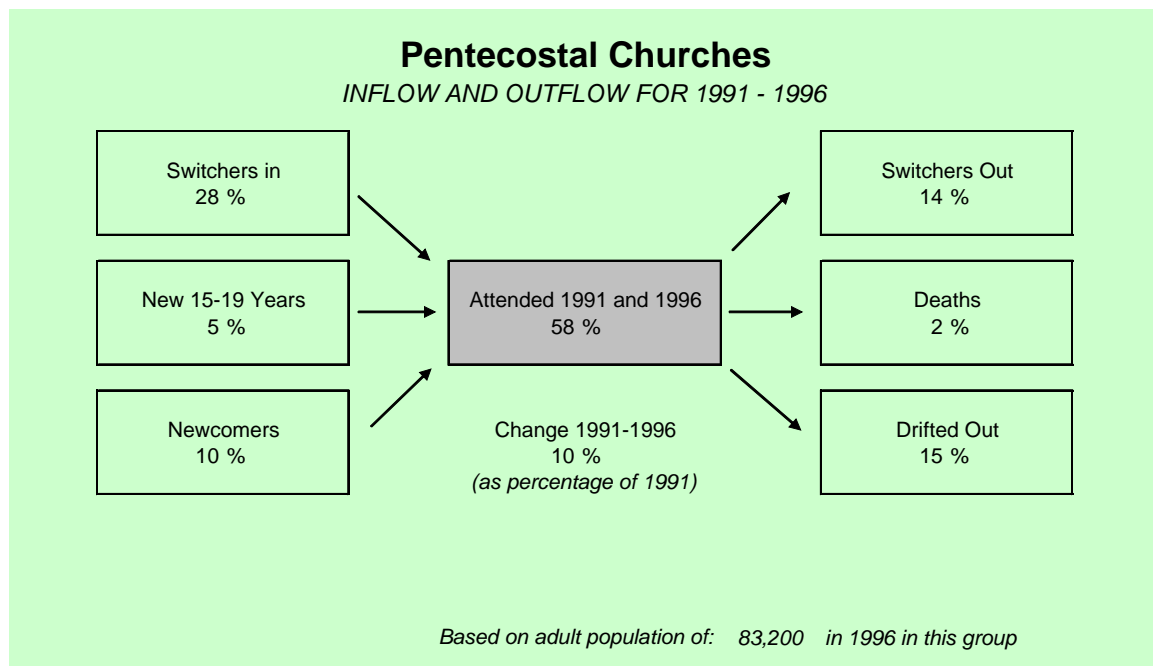
However, they form a sector of the Australian church that has strong similarities. Using the available data for each period, models of the inflow and outflow patterns for combined Pentecostal churches are presented in Figure 3.

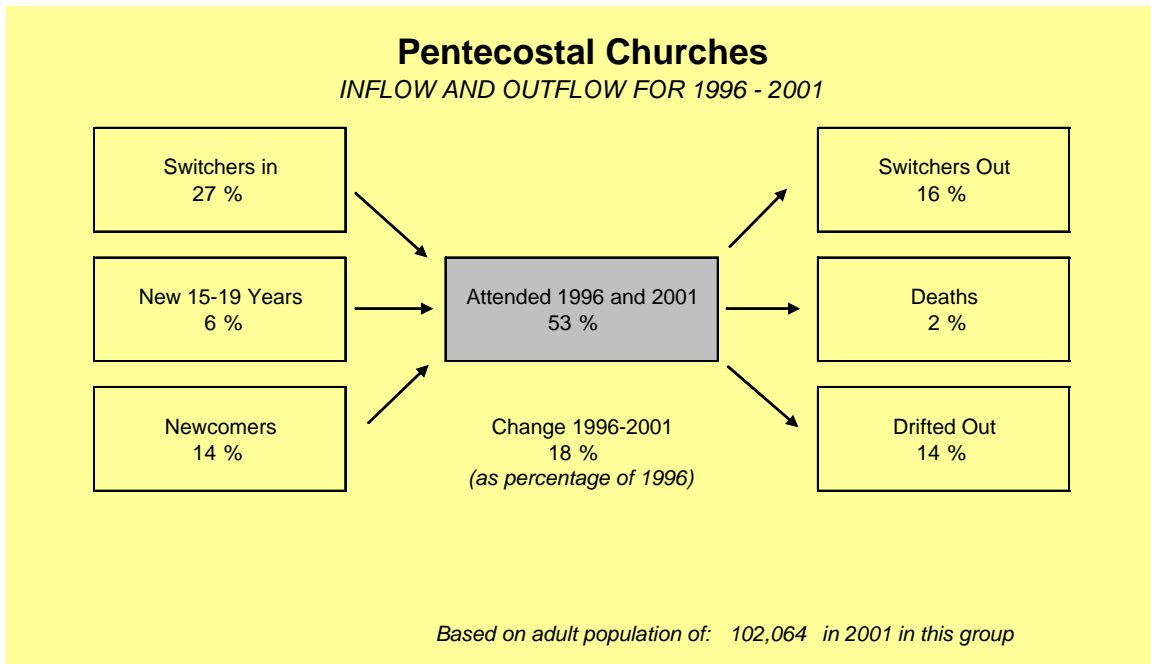
*1991 to 1996 Model:* This model includes data from congregations of the Assemblies of God, Apostolic Church, Christian Revival Crusade and Foursquare Gospel.

*1991 to 1996 Model:* This model includes data from congregations of the Assemblies of God, Apostolic Church, Christian Revival Crusade, Vineyard and Christian City Churches.

It is important to note that, unlike the Protestant model, these models do *not* treat Pentecostal churches as a single entity. That is, switchers include people who have switched from one Pentecostal denomination to another, as well as those who have switched between the Pentecostal sector and non-Pentecostal denominations.

Figure 3: Pentecostal Churches Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001





Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

The pattern of overall growth in attendance is strong and positive. The percentage change between 1996 and 2001 was even greater than for the previous five year period. (18% vs 10%).

A key difference between the two time periods is the improvement in terms of the 'front and back doors'. The most recent model shows that there are now more newcomers (15%) than there were five years earlier (10%). In terms of outflow, the level of estimated drift out dropped from 15% to 14%. Rather than a net loss for this pathway, the Pentecostal churches present a more balanced picture. This should be a source of real encouragement.

Against this positive change, it does need to be noted the Pentecostal sector has among the highest levels of people who drift out of church life altogether. This could partly be linked to the strong and positive inflow of newcomers from outside churches who 'try out' Pentecostal churches. Other research by NCLS Research shows that newcomers do not tend to change churches. If they have not successfully connected, then they simply leave.

The high drift out figure is also foreshadowed by the high levels of switching. It could be the case that more people unhappy with their church experience move from church to church and finally leave. Perhaps more Pentecostal churches are simply the 'last stop'. More work would be required to test this theory.

Another distinctive feature of these models in both time periods is the high levels of mobility. Many attenders are moving both in and out of Pentecostal churches. NCLS 2001 revealed that only a little over half (53%) were at their current church for more than five years. This high turnover has its own issues for a faith community and its leaders.

There is evidence of an ongoing strong inflow from other Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal churches. While the outflow of switchers is not as dramatic, it is higher than for a number of other mainstream denominations.

Pentecostal churches generally have a much younger age profile than average. This lies behind the very low estimate of deaths in both time periods(2%).

## INFLOW AND OUTFLOW FOR INDIVIDUAL DENOMINATIONS

This section presents denominational inflow and outflow patterns for 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001. Those included were verified to be large enough and to have a sufficient sample who participated. They are presented in alphabetical order.

### Anglican Church Inflow and Outflow

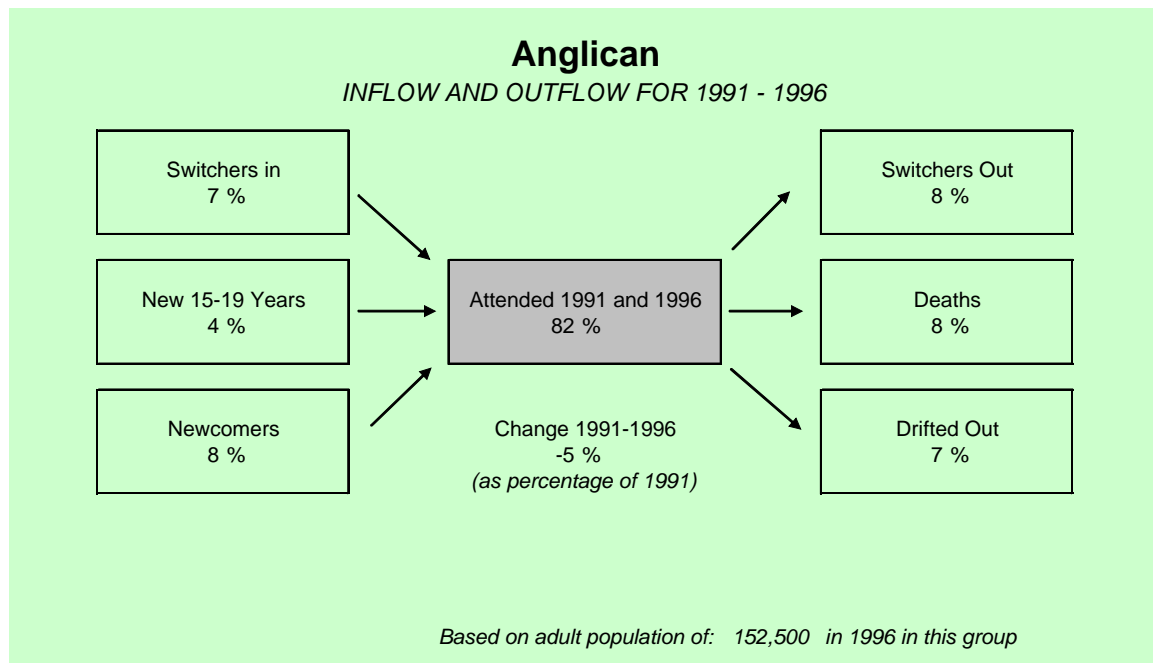
Figure 4 shows the inflow and outflow patterns for the Anglican Church. In the period from 1996 to 2001, the Anglican Church experienced a decline of 2%. This is a lower decline rate than the 5% decline experienced from 1991 to 1996.

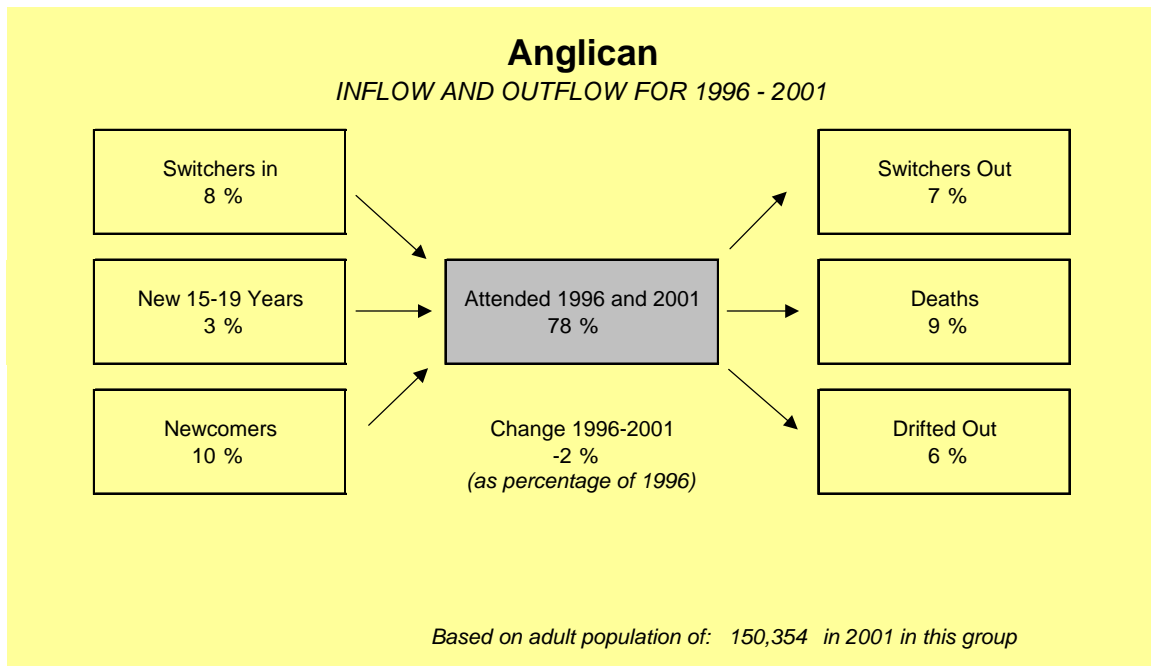
They reversed their switching trend, gaining slightly from switching between 1996 and 2001. However, an older age profile continues to mean that levels of mortality are higher than the level of children.

The inflow of newcomers (10%) is higher than in 1996 (8%). Further, the estimated drift out dropped from 7% to 6%.

The older age profile and associated mortality rates are a factor that will continue to affect the Anglican Church in coming years. However, the positive changes in other aspects of inflow and outflow have contributed to reducing the degree of overall decline.

Figure 4: Anglican Churches Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001





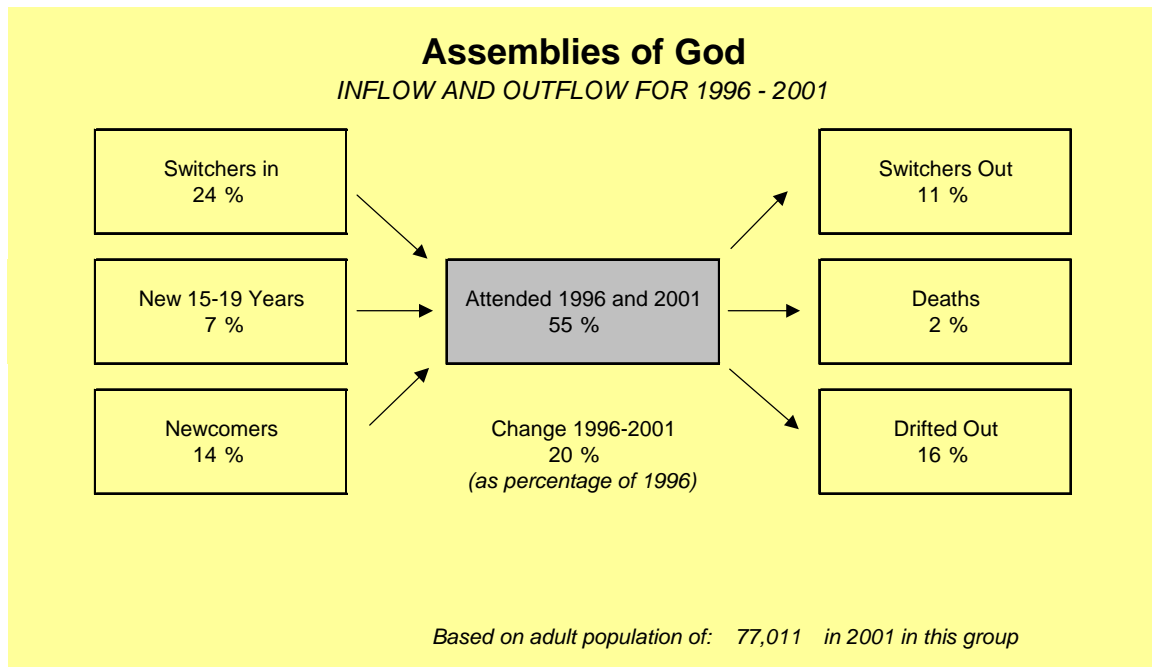
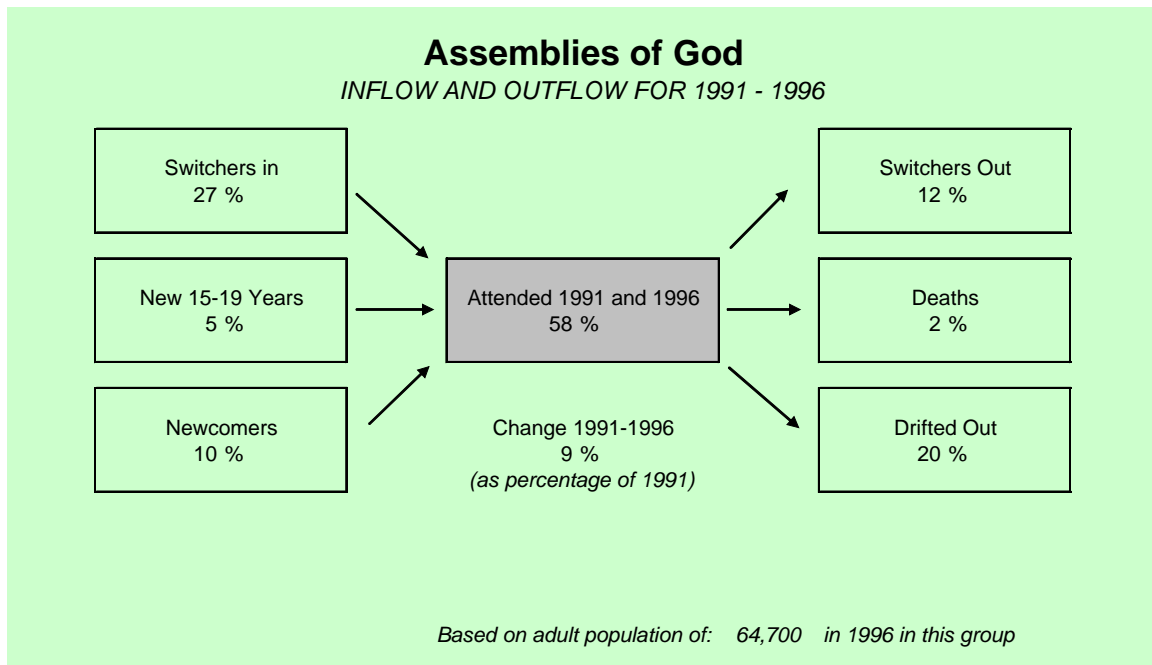
*Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001*

### Assemblies of God Inflow and Outflow

Attendees in Assemblies of God congregations comprise around half of all Pentecostal attendees. So it is possible to estimate their inflow and outflow (see Figure 5).

The overall growth of attendance increased from 9% between 1991 and 1996 to 20%. Behind this net growth, the model shows the same patterns outlined for the Pentecostal sector in general. Congregations tend to be very dynamic with the faces of attendees changing frequently. Only 55% of the current attendees in 2001 had been there for more than five years.

Figure 5: Assemblies of God Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001



Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

The low losses through death remained a consistent feature (2%) across the two time periods.

The primary sources of inflow are the very high level of switchers from other churches, followed by newcomers. The proportion of newcomers rose between the two survey periods from 10% to 14%.

At the same time, outflow is primarily being driven by people leaving church altogether. While the overall balance of newcomers and driftouts improved, an estimated 16% of people left

church life between 1996 and 2001. More people drift out of Assemblies of God congregations than switch to other churches.

Possible explanations for this would be the same as similar to those given for the Pentecostal churches in general. It may partly be due to the presence of more newcomers and switchers.

## Baptist Church Inflow and Outflow

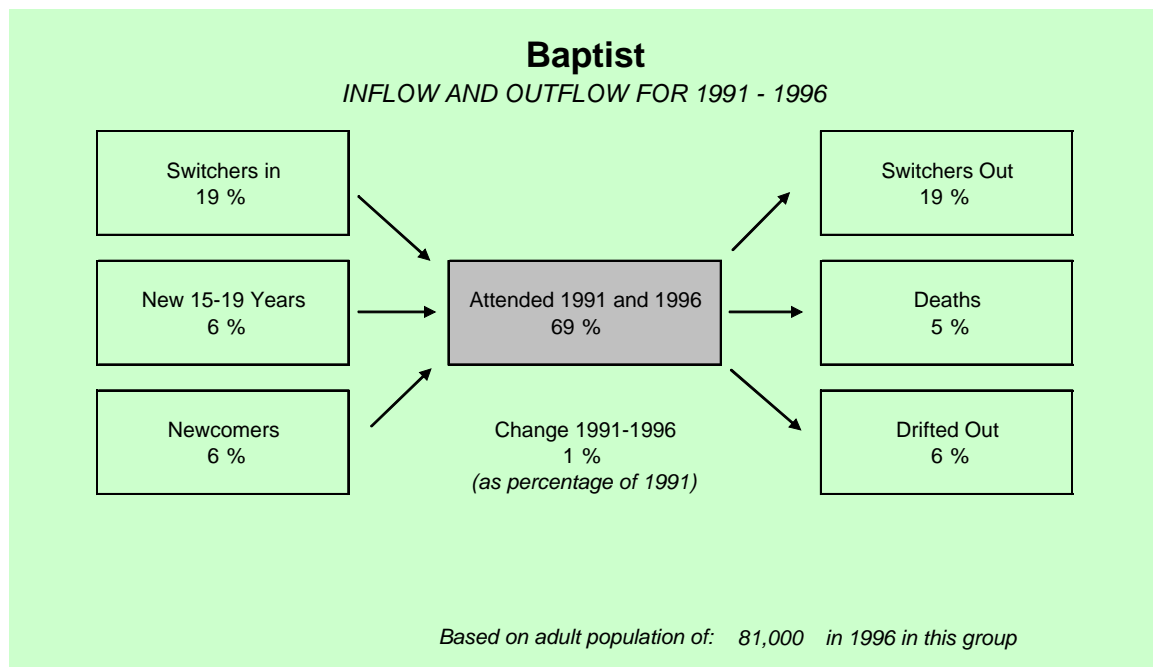
Baptist churches grew more in the period 1996 to 2001 (8%), than in the preceding five years (1%). This growth can be attributed to net gains in switching as well as higher levels of newcomers.

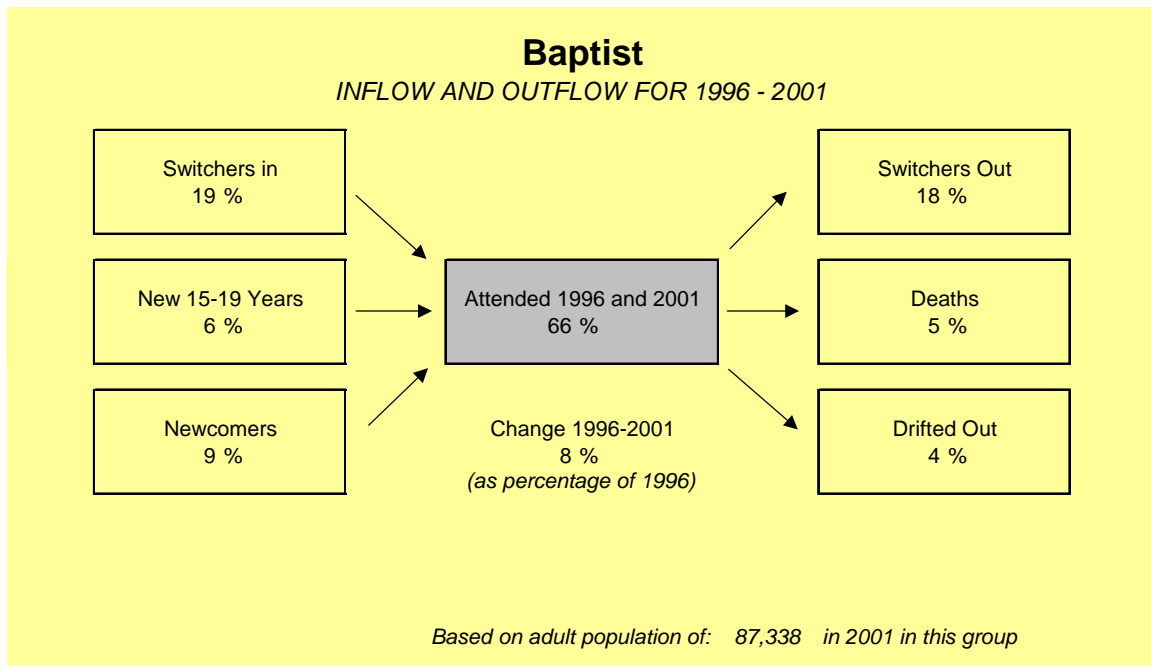
From 1996 to 2001 there was relatively high levels of switching to Baptist churches, with slightly fewer attenders switching out to other denominations.

With an age profile somewhere between the Pentecostal and mainstream denominations, the Baptist Church made net gains from biological growth. This did not change across the two survey periods.

The greatest point of encouragement for the Baptist Church is that they improved their levels of newcomers (9% vs 6%), while reducing a relatively low level of drift outs (4% vs 6%).

Figure 6: Baptist Church Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001





Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

## Catholic Church Inflow and Outflow

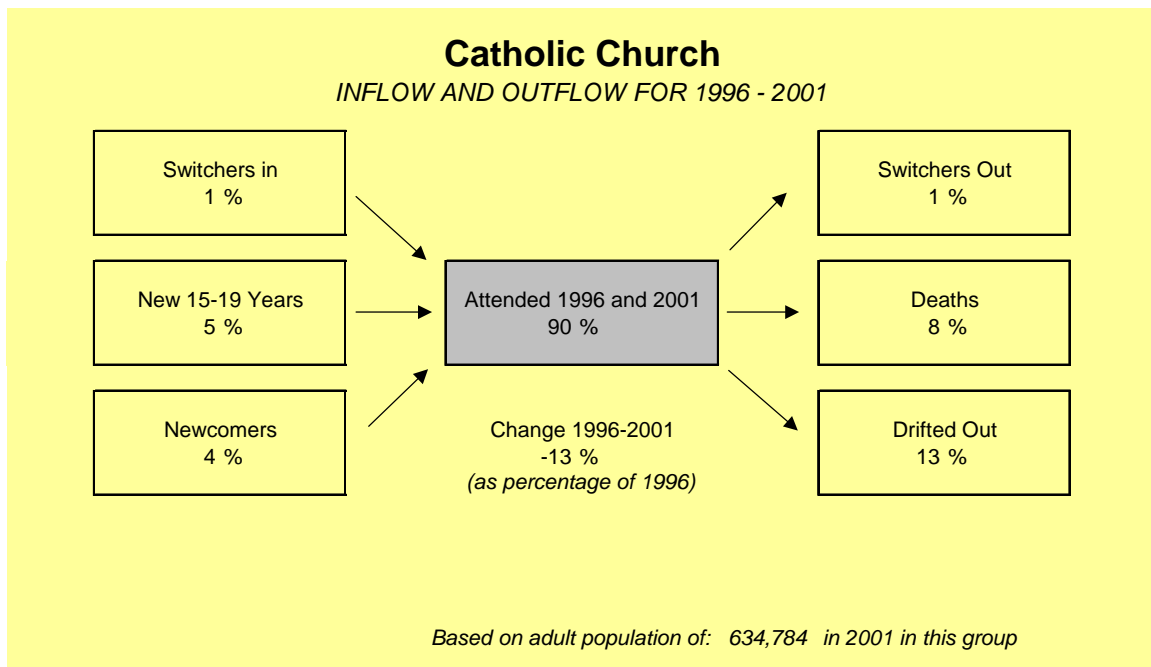
It is not possible to calculate the inflow and outflow patterns between 1991 and 1996 because the Catholic Church did not participate in the 1991 National Church Life Survey.

Figure 7 shows inflow and outflow for the Catholic Church from 1996 to 2001. In this period, the Catholic Church experienced a decline of 13%. This decline was explained mainly by the estimated high level of people who have left Catholic parishes and not attended elsewhere, but drifted out instead (13%).

There is very little movement of attenders between the Catholic Church and Protestant churches. It appears that Catholic attenders who make a change tend to leave church life altogether, rather than moving to other churches.

Like several other denominations, the Catholic Church has a high proportion of people in the older age groups, making the higher death rate an inevitable reality for decades to come. An older age profile lies behind the pattern where the proportion of deaths is greater than the inflow of young Catholics (8% vs 5%).

Figure 7: The Catholic Church in Australia - Inflow and Outflow 1996 to 2001



Source: National Church Life Survey 2001

### Churches of Christ Inflow and Outflow

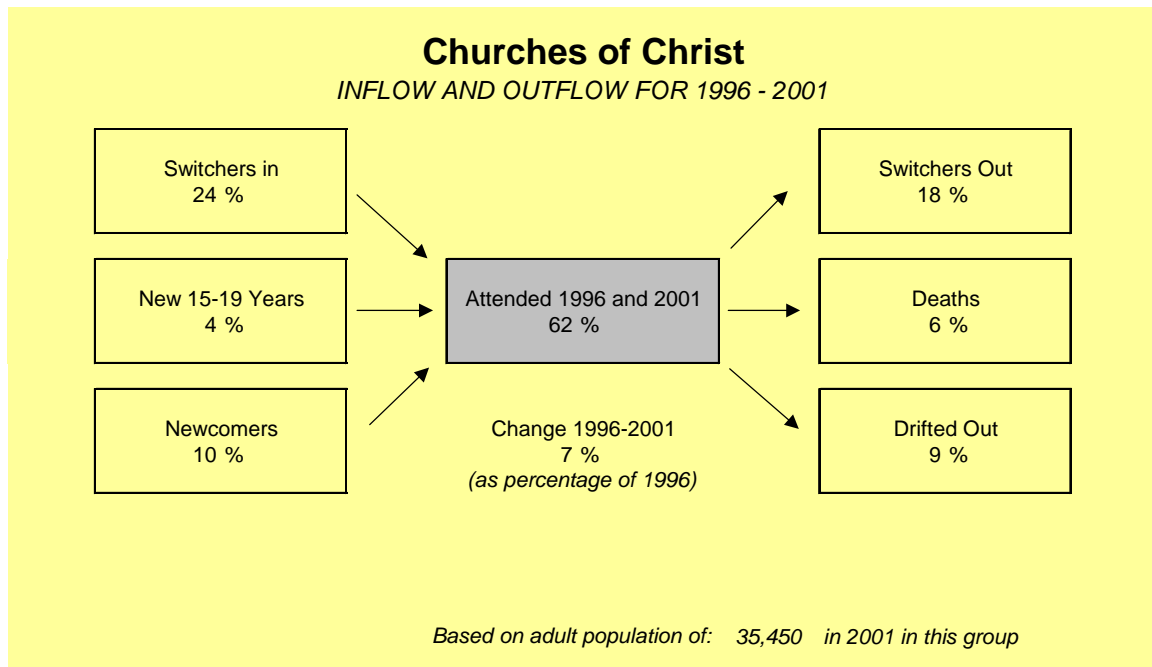
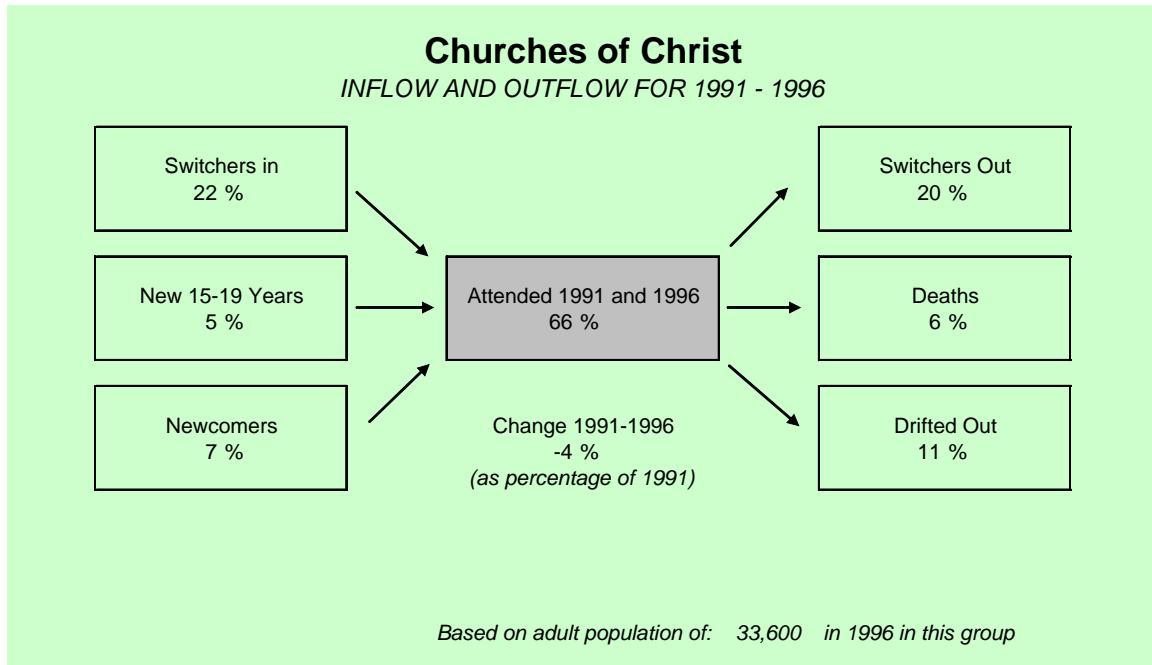
The Churches of Christ experienced 7% growth between 1996 and 2001. This was a significant reversal of the decline of 4% from 1991 to 1996. (See Figure 8).

Sources of this change can be traced to the higher inflow of switchers into Churches of Christ congregations (24%) and the reduced outflow of switchers (18%) to other denominations in the period 1996 to 2001, when compared with 1991 to 1996.

Further, the level of newcomers increased substantially across the two survey periods from 7% to 10%. At the same time, the estimated rate of drift outs was reduced from 11% to 9%.

These two factors overrode the continuing negative impact of the estimated rate of deaths being higher than new additions of young adults.

Figure 8: Churches of Christ Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001



Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

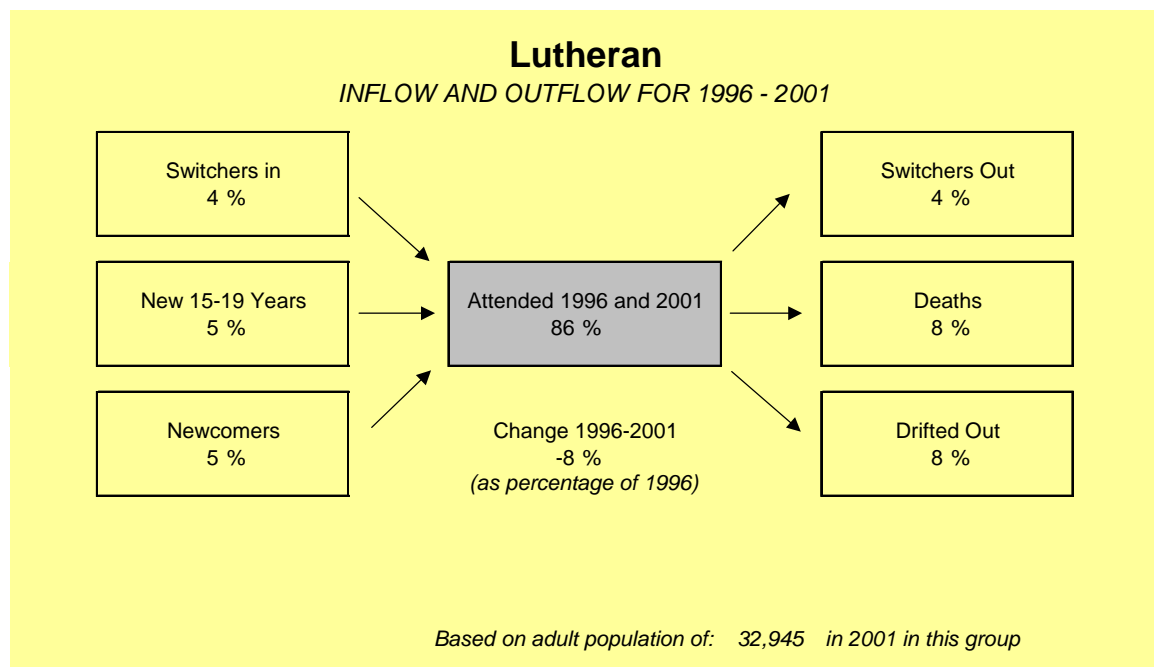
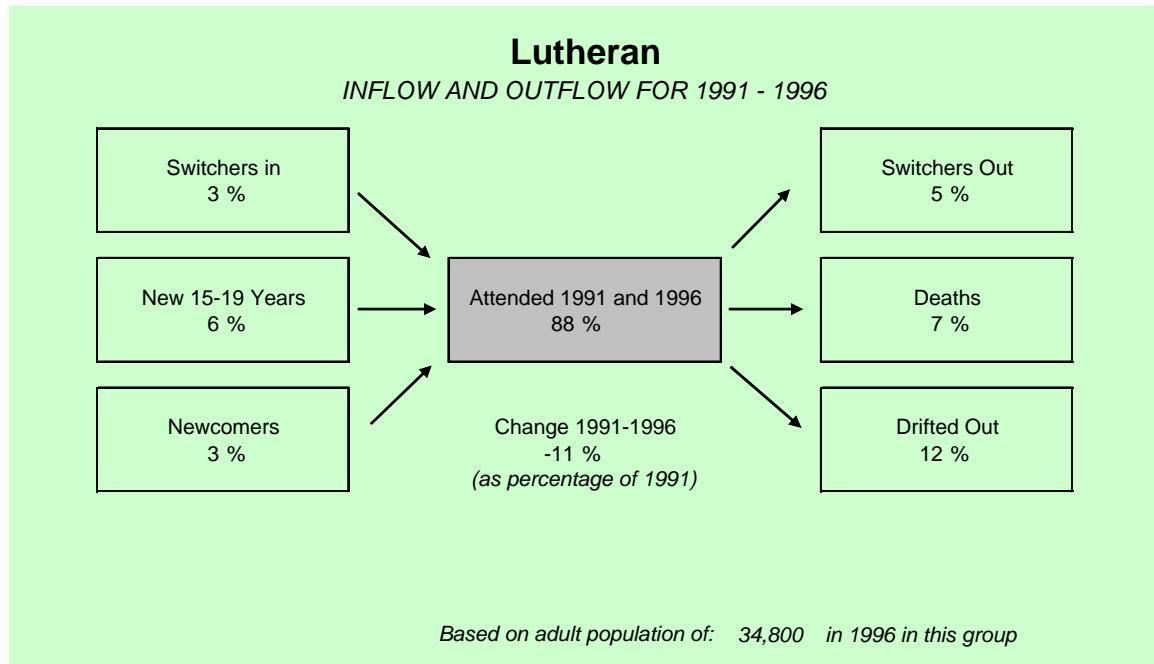
### Lutheran Church Inflow and Outflow

The Lutheran Church provides a static picture. Compared to other denominations, lower inflow is matched by lower outflow. Figure 9 shows that the Lutheran Church experienced decline in both survey periods, although it was reduced to 8% decline from 1996 to 2001, compared to 11% decline from 1991 to 1996.

Low levels of switching both in and out of the Lutheran Church (4%) reveal that this is not the key source of the decline. The impact of an older age profile can be seen with a higher estimate of loss through death in the most recent survey period (8% vs 7%).

The greatest difference between the two survey periods is that the level of newcomers increased from 3% to 5% and the estimate of drift outs reduced from 12% to 8%.

Figure 9: Lutheran Church Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001



Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

## Presbyterian Church Inflow and Outflow

Estimates of Presbyterian inflow and outflow can only be provided for the period 1996 to 2001, due to significant levels of non-participation by Presbyterian churches in the previous survey period.

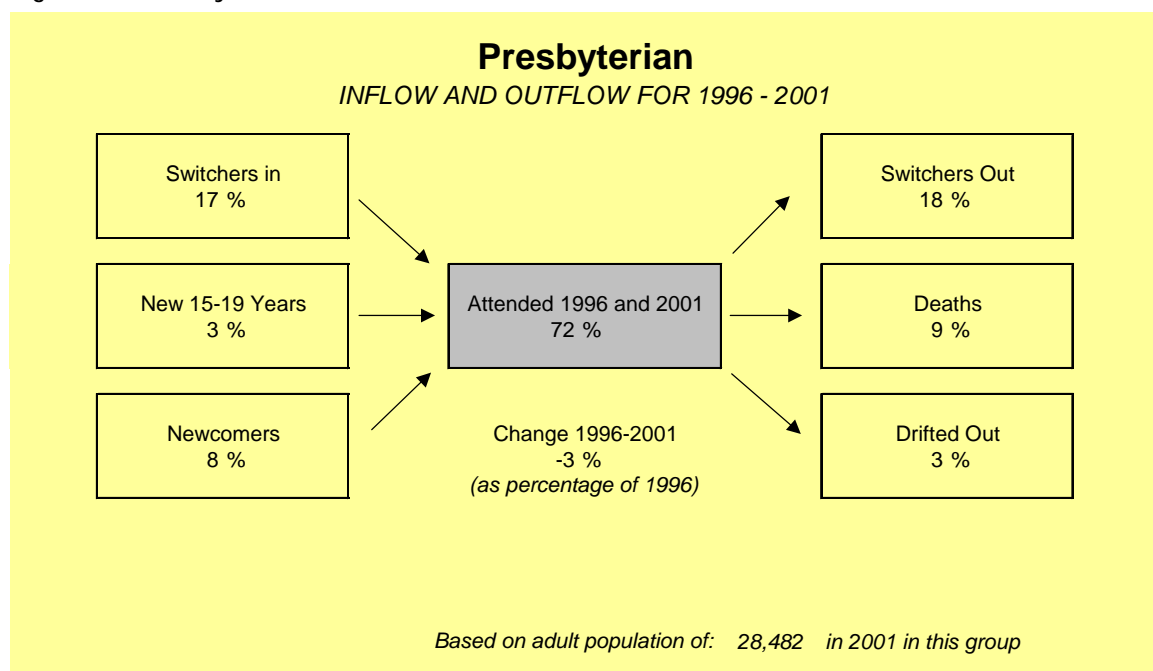
The Presbyterian Church declined by 3% between 1996 and 2001.

Levels of switching in and out between Presbyterian congregations and other denominations was quite high between 1996 and 2001. This pattern has more in common with the high switching patterns of denominations such as the Baptists and Churches of Christ, rather than mainstream denominations who had lower levels of switching. (eg Anglican, Lutheran, and Uniting).

Another source of decline was the older age profile, which impacted on an estimated loss by death of 9%. This was not compensated for by the arrival of new young adults.

Presbyterians can be encouraged by the much higher levels of newcomers (8%) when compared to the estimated low level of drift outs (3%).

Figure 10: Presbyterian Church Inflow and Outflow - 1996 to 2001



Source: National Church Life Survey 2001

## Uniting Church Inflow and Outflow

Attendance in the Uniting Church declined by similar proportions in both survey periods. (11% and 12%).

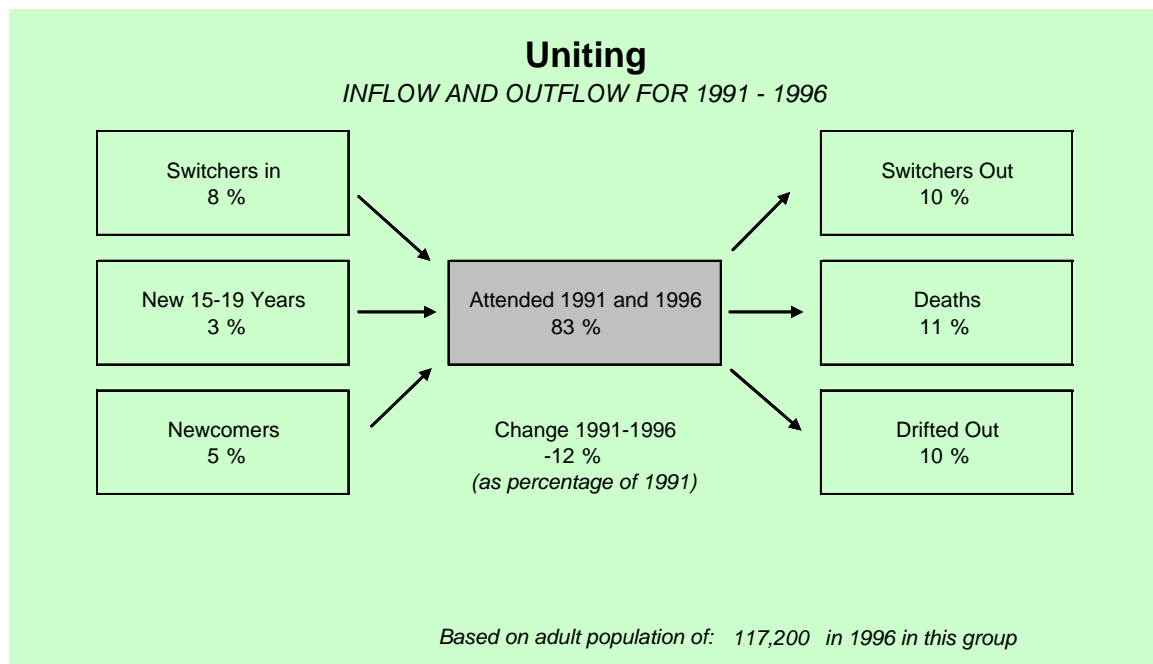
The proportion of people who switched out, leaving the Uniting Church for other churches did not change (10%). The proportion who switched in from other churches was also unchanged, and is equivalent to the Anglican Church (8%). These mainstream churches have much lower switching flows, both in and out, when compared with other Protestant denominations.

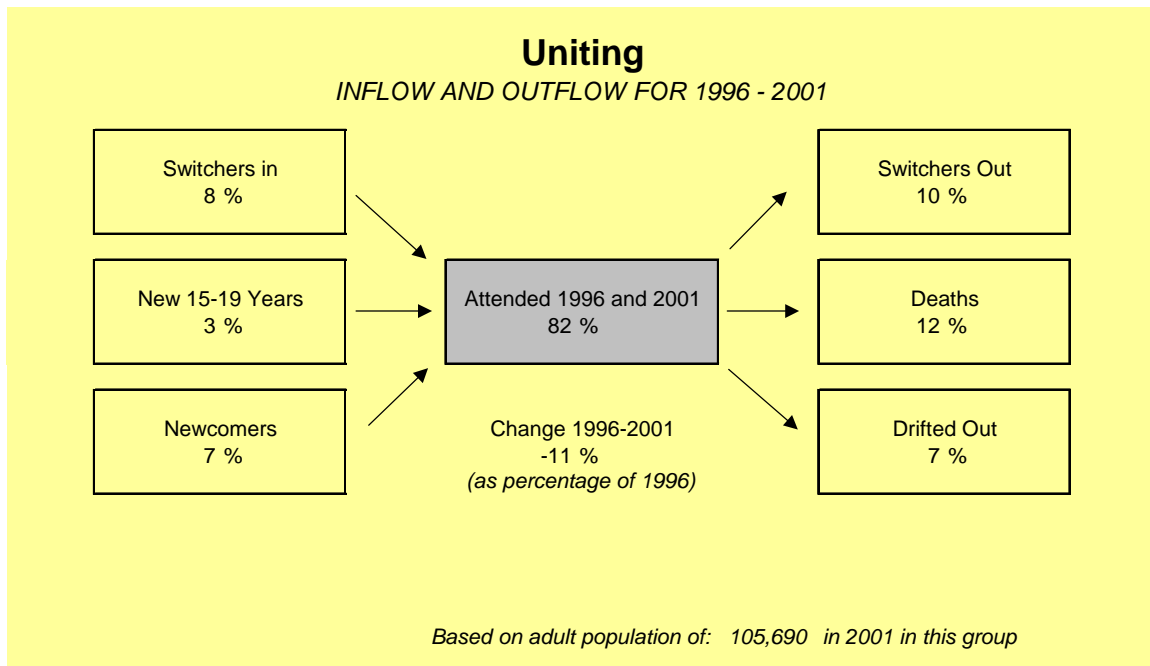
While there is a small net loss through switching, the fact that the pattern has remained the same will be of interest to those concerned about the effect of debates about sexuality within the Uniting Church across the survey periods. While some people and congregations did leave between 1996 and 2001, from the perspective of this model, there is no identifiable negative effect. However, such issues remain a source of controversy and the updated flows resulting from the 2006 NCLS will shed more light on their overall effect.

It is the high mortality rate and the low levels of young adults that actually have a greater impact on the net attendance change for the Uniting Church. A critical challenge that remains for the Uniting Church With the oldest age profile of all Protestant denominations, the estimate of loss through death is the highest of any denominations. The absence of adults with young children also leads to a corresponding lack of young people growing up in the church.

The Uniting Church can be encouraged by the increase in the level of newcomers from 5% to 7% for each survey period. There has also been a decrease in the level of drift outs from 10% to 7%. This means that the Uniting Church has improved from a position of losing more people through the back door than arrive through the front door to a neutral position.

Figure 11: Uniting Church Inflow and Outflow - 1991 to 1996 and 1996 to 2001





Source: National Church Life Surveys 1996 and 2001

## Explanatory Notes

### *Why some denominations are not included*

There are a number of reasons that NCLS researchers decided not to include an Inflow Outflow model for all participating denominations. While it is acknowledged that this exercise must include a degree of approximation, the degree of possible error was deemed as too great for a range of denominations. Examples are given to illustrate.

- *Incomplete data:* When a denomination did not participate in the earlier National Church Life Surveys, the data was not available to complete the inflow-outflow diagram. Specifically, the age groups in five year increments is required to calculate death rates. While estimates were obtained through other means for the Catholic Church, however it was not possible to complete the task for the Christian Missionary Alliance.
- *Size:* In smaller denominations, the omission of a particular church, or a skewed sample means that the foundations for making estimates of inflow and outflow would be flawed and results misleading. This affected a number of Pentecostal denominations as well as others.
- *Terminology:* This problem specifically applies to the Reformed Church. It is possible that when people selected 'Reformed' from a list of denominations they had switched from, that they were using it as a generic term. As well as their small size, this possibility introduces too much 'noise' into the equation.
- *Possible sampling differences.* It is possible that different methods were used by the Salvation Army to gather data in different survey periods, so their model has not been included to avoid misleading or confusion.

### *When the sums don't add up*

Observant readers will have noted that not all models satisfy the equation rules set out in the introduction. There are three reasons that contribute to this.

Firstly, when percentages are rounded to whole numbers rather than including decimal points, this can inflate numbers (eg 2.4 plus 2.4 = 4.8 which rounds up to 5). When a series of rounded percentages are added, this error is compounded.

Secondly, the number under the model is a fraction of the beginning population (1996 in this case), which is the normal convention for recording percentage change. However, the other numbers are percentages of the end population (at 2001) so a discrepancy is not surprising. Such a discrepancy can be larger if the denomination is smaller or the change has been considerable.

Thirdly, the figure under the diagram is based on the total population from the estimates process: it is the accurate net change figure, which takes in the adult and child population of the denomination. The figures on the boxes are based on the surveyed adult population. Where this population is different to the flows that are occurring for the children under 15, or where the adult sample has difficulties with representativeness, a discrepancy will emerge.

This highlights the important rule of thumb for Inflow Outflow models. The net change figure under the diagram is 'the right figure' for overall change; the figures in the boxes are an approximation of how that change came about.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper presents the NCLS Inflow Outflow model as a more sophisticated way to think about attendance change. Church growth and decline are the products of different dynamics that are measures of inflow and outflow. A church grows when inflow exceeds outflow. A church declines when outflow exceeds inflow.

While some of the estimates can only ever be approximations, this model helps churches to understand whether their growth is a reflection of effectiveness in mission or whether it is being driven by other factors.

A positive trend across denominations is that the 'front door' is open more widely and the 'back door' has been partly closed. The proportion of newcomers has increased across survey periods. Correspondingly, the proportion of driftouts has also decreased across survey periods for every denomination listed here with longitudinal data.

The NCLS provides solid evidence that denominational switching is a major source of growth in many denominations. Examples include the Pentecostal churches, the Baptist Church, Churches of Christ and the Presbyterian Church.

One reason for the high levels of switching in these denominations is that there are less aligned congregations across the nation. For example, a person moving home may not have the option of continuing to attend a congregation of the same denomination in their new location.

It is also clear that there is not a culture of denominational loyalty among many attenders. They seem to make their choice about church attendance based on other factors.

Another challenge for leadership includes working in situations where many attenders have only been in their current congregation for less than five years.

There is also the long-term warning that NCLS has issued for some time about the shrinking switching pool. If mainstream denominations continue to decline, this source of church growth will also diminish into the future.

The implications of older age profiles for some denominations is seen quite starkly in these models. It has an impact at both ends of life's spectrum. When older long-term attenders die, it is not simply about a decline in numbers. The loss of the practitioners and participants in congregational life represents the loss of knowledge, experience and wisdom in multiple local settings across the country.

To compound the tragedy, the missing generations of parents raising children in the life of the church mean that the capacity to pass on something of worth is diminished.

Unless the losses through the ageing process can be offset, severe declines are inevitable in the short and medium term future. It is clear that some mainstream denominations, in particular, face a difficult future.

There is a need for new directions and a willingness to experiment. There is a need for new mission efforts, new worship services and new groups and congregations designed to reach those who are outside church life.

It is important to recognise that the future is not predetermined. The patterns here describe what has taken place in the last five years, not fixed trends into the future. Armed with a knowledge of past patterns, congregations and denominations can (and must) consider what needs to be put into place now to help shape the future.

The 2006 National Church Life Survey provides an opportunity for participating congregations and denominations to reflect on their local and national patterns of inflow and outflow. It is a chance for churches to monitor the quality of their church life and take up one of a range of options to enhance their own vitality.