

## Factors associated with a sense of belonging in New Zealand churches

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### Summary

This article uses data from the New Zealand Church Life Survey to explore attitudes and demographic factors connected with a strong (or weak) sense of belonging among church attenders. The strongest predictors of belonging were agreement that the church 'is resourcing my spiritual journey well' and 'How often do you feel encouraged after a worship service?'

### Introduction

One of the important aspects of church life is whether attenders have a strong sense of belonging to the congregation or parish they attend. A strong sense of belonging gives the attender stability and confidence, and a willingness to help and receive help, and so it is an important social and spiritual dimension in its own right. A sense of belonging also affects other factors such as how often respondents attend church, how much they participate in congregational or outreach activities, how likely they are to invite others, and how much they give to the church. So it is important to understand and promote those aspects of church life that foster a strong and growing sense of belonging.

Church Life Survey New Zealand have administered congregational surveys in 2001 (in association with NCLS in Australia), 2007, 2011, a 'lite' survey in 2018 and another NZ survey is planned for 2023. The present study looks at data insights from the 2007 (6368 attenders) and 2011 (20518 attenders) surveys. Although the data is over a decade old, it is data as opposed to guesswork, and provides both useful insights and a baseline against which to see if anything has changed in the last decade. Those answering the survey were from Anglican (11.1%), Baptist (24.9%), Catholic (26.9%), Methodist (0.6%), Open Brethren (0.7%), Presbyterian (28.4%), Wesleyan Methodist (0.9%) and Union or Cooperating parishes (6.2%) in addition to individual congregations from Salvation Army, Congregational and Independent churches (total 0.3%).

This study focuses on the question **"Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation/parish?"** The responses are illustrated in Figure 1, and the precise wording of the options is given in the top rows of Table 1 (a further option "Not applicable or don't know" is excluded from analysis since it includes visitors). The question is nuanced. Attenders may feel a strong sense of belonging because of several years

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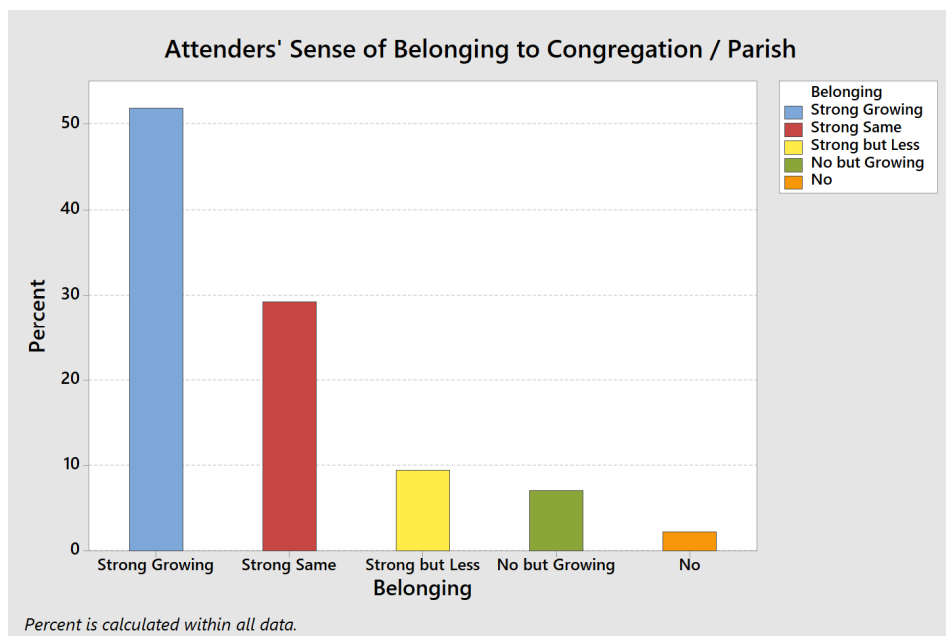
<sup>1</sup> © Barry McDonald, Church Life Survey New Zealand committee. Published August 2022, Auckland.

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attendance but the options ask whether the sense is growing, the same, or less, which gives a snapshot of how the attender is feeling now. Those who do not feel a strong sense are further asked to respond whether a sense of belonging is growing or not. Figure 1 shows that over 50% of attenders felt a strong and growing sense of belonging (blue bar), and it is within this group that we shall see the biggest variation with other questions. In further graphs the same colours are always used for the belonging options, blue for strong growing, and orange for no sense of belonging.

We consider what aspects of the church or the person might be associated with a strong growing sense of belonging rather than lesser categories of belonging.

Figure 1



### Variables affected by sense of Belonging

Tables 1 and 2 show the percentage of people choosing the various options, for other selected questions. The ones in Table 1 may perhaps be thought more as flowing *from* a sense of belonging, although any correlation between factors works in both directions.

The second row of Table 1 is about frequency of attendance. Note that 72.5% of those who completed the survey attended once a week, while 11.6% attend more than once a week, 12.4% 2-3 times a month, and 2.2% attend once a month. If we think of a survey as a snapshot, those who attend less often are less likely to have been caught in the picture, so we have less reliable information about infrequent attenders.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between frequency of church attendance (height of bar representing percentage of attenders) and sense of belonging (colour on the bar). For those attending more than once a week, 65% are coloured blue, that is, had a strong growing sense of belonging, compared to 53% blue for weekly attenders, 38% blue for 2-3 times per month, 30% for monthly, and so on. The trend is easier to see in a percentage graph: Figure 3 shows the percentages for Protestants and Catholics separately, where each bar has been scaled to total 100%. The pattern is similar for Protestants and Catholics, except that about 30% of those Catholics who hardly ever attend a surveyed congregation still claimed a strong and growing sense of belonging (this may be because of multiple congregations in the same parish and they happened to go to a different service to usual).

The diagonal trend in Figure 3 shows that people who attend more frequently are more likely to feel a strong, growing sense of belonging. This is not at all surprising, but the graph gives us a yardstick by which to measure whether other factors are even more strongly or less strongly related to one's sense of belonging.

It is helpful to summarise the strength of a trend by a correlation number. A high correlation means a high percentage of blue (strong growing belonging) at the left of the graph and a high percentage of green and orange (not strong belonging) at the right. The so-called Spearman Rank Correlation relating the belonging category (category numbers 1,...,5) to frequency category (category numbers 1,...,6) is 0.18. This is a fairly modest number, typical for category data with large samples where there are people in every frequency category who express every level of belongingness. There are several factors that are more highly correlated with sense of belonging than attendance, including one very strong predictor with correlation 0.48. Unless stated otherwise, all the correlations mentioned in this study are highly statistically significant - in other words appear to be genuine trends, that can't be explained away by the chance of who happened to be there, on the particular day the survey was administered.

Figure 2

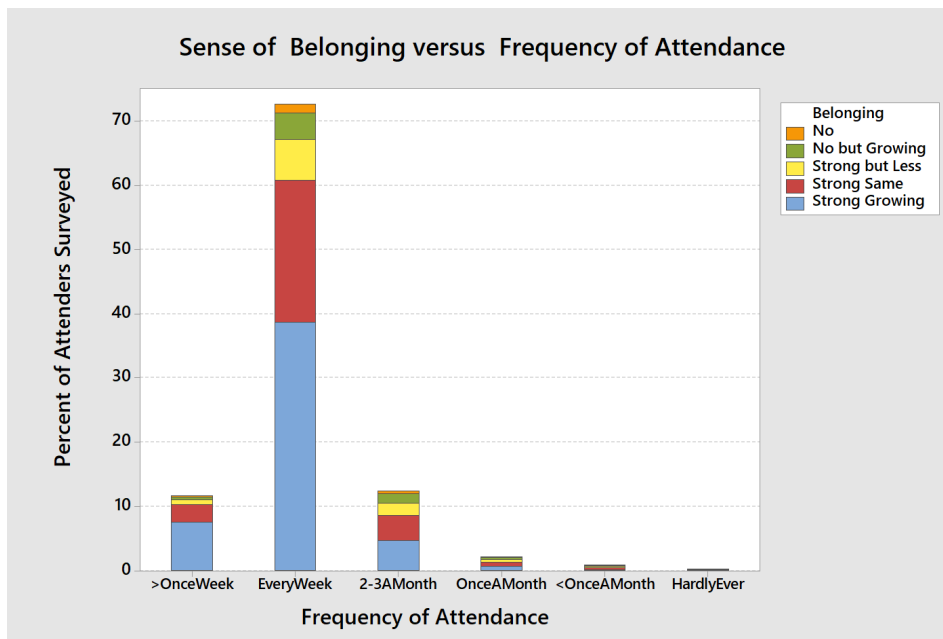


Figure 3

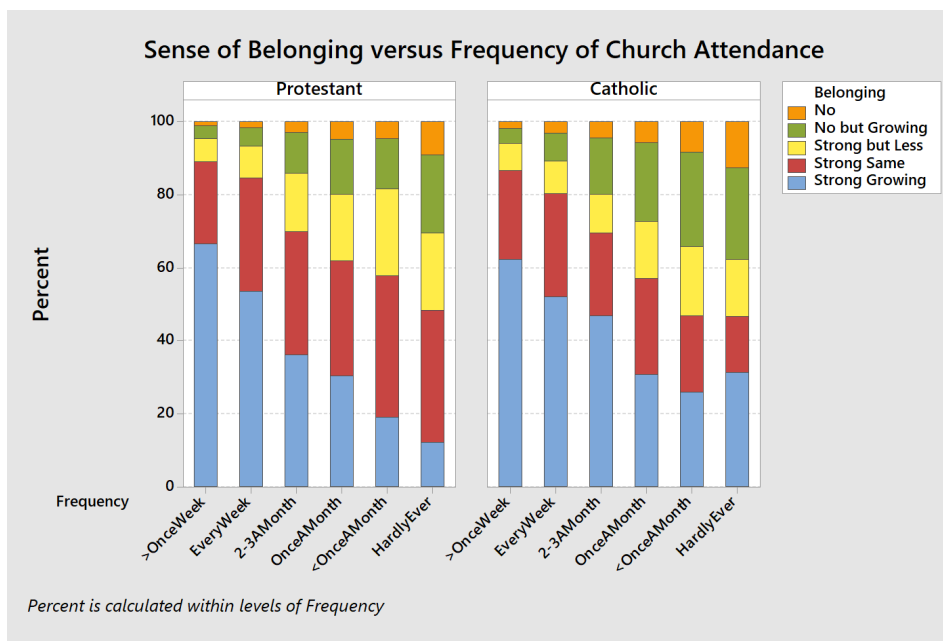
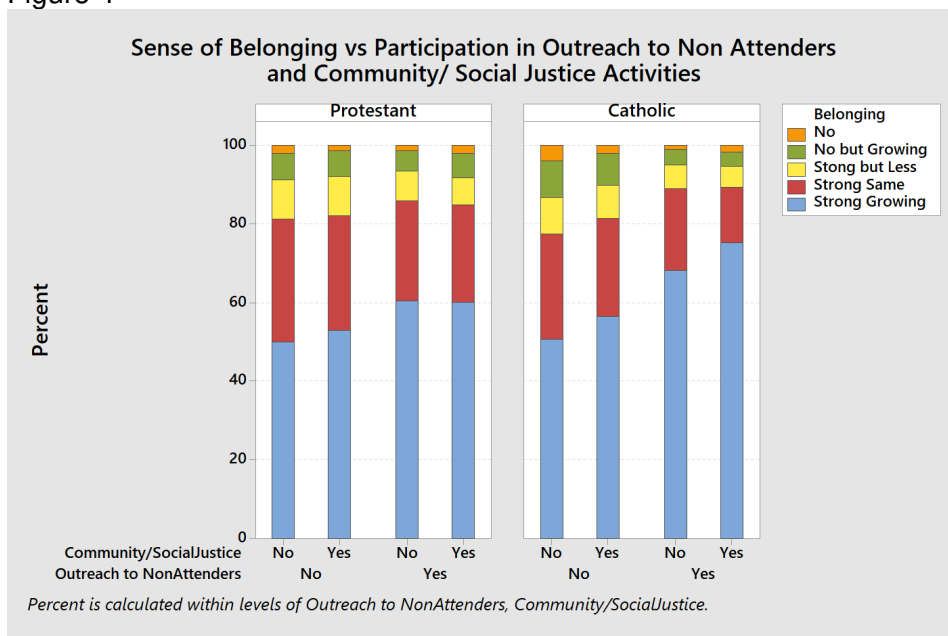


Table 1 also shows one’s sense of Belonging is strongly associated with: whether the attender is participating more (or less) than two years ago (correlation = 0.27); whether the attender would invite unchurched friends and family (correlation= 0.23); whether the attender takes part in any outreach activities of the congregation (correlation= 0.19); and whether the attender feels ready to talk to others about their faith (correlation = 0.18). The table also gives baseline data on these variables, for example

74.6% of attenders have invited, or would invite, family or friends to a service, while 26.4% would not or don't know.

Another way of framing the responses about participation in outreach is shown in Figure 4, where the 'both' category is counted in each type of outreach. For Catholics there is a strong growing sense of belonging with both community service/social justice outreach and with evangelistic-type outreach, but for Protestants only evangelistic-type outreach is associated with a strong growing sense of belonging. There is a weaker association between belonging and giving financially to the congregation (correlation= 0.13) but nevertheless people who give more, belong more, and vice versa.

Figure 4



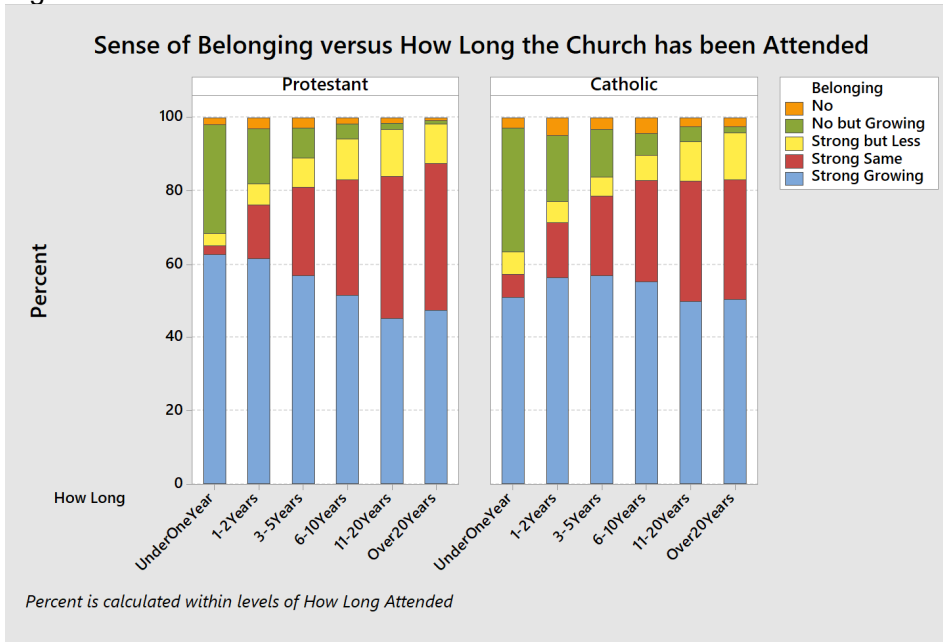
There was no correlation between sense of belonging and length of attendance. This might seem strange, but Figure 5 shows that overall the proportion of attenders with a strong sense of belonging (the three lower categories put together) grows with length of attendance as one might expect: it's just that the growth is in the "about the same as last year" category, which makes sense. The graph shows that even with 6-10 years of attendance around 10% of people would not say they have a strong sense of belonging, though for many it was 'no but growing'.

In summary, having a congregation where there is a strong and growing sense of belonging among attenders is important, not only in its own right, but because it is associated with more frequent attendance, more participation in church activities, more willingness to invite others, more outreach to others, more readiness to talk about one's faith, and higher levels of giving.

**Table 1.**

Question	Response options and percentages						Spearman Correlation with Belonging
<b>B3: Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation/parish?</b>  Percent (%)	1. Yes, a strong sense of belonging, which is growing  51.9	2. Yes, a strong sense - about the same as last year  29.3	3. Yes, although perhaps not as strongly as in the past  9.5	4. No, but a growing sense of belonging  7.1	5. No, I don't have a sense of belonging  2.3		
<b>A4: How often do you go to church services at this church or somewhere else?</b> *Excludes Visitors %	1. >Once Week  11.6	2. Every Week  72.5	3. 2-3 Times A Month  12.4	4. Once A Month  2.2	5. <Once A Month  1.0	6. Hardly Ever  0.3	<b>0.18</b>
<b>E3: How much do you think you participate in the activities of the church/parish, compared to two years ago?</b> %	1. Participate more  26.6	2. About the same participation  53.2	3. Participate less  20.2	Not applicable (been coming less than 2 years)  excluded			<b>0.27</b>
<b>D3: Would you be prepared to invite to a church service here any of your friends and relatives who do not currently attend church?</b> %	1. Yes, and I have done so in the past 12 months  32.5	2. Yes, but I have not done so in the past 12 months  42.1	3. Don't know  13.8	4. No, probably not  10.6	5. No, definitely not  1.0		<b>0.23</b>
<b>D4: Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community (e.g. visitation, outreach, community service, social justice, welfare)?</b> %	1. Yes, in both of the above types of activities  8.8	2. Yes, in evangelistic or outreach activities  10.8	3. Yes, in community service, social justice or welfare activities of this congregation  22.3	4. No, we don't have such activities  6.9	5. No, I am not regularly involved  51.3		<b>0.19</b>
<b>D2: Which of the following best describes your readiness to talk to others about your faith?</b> %	1. I feel at ease talking about my faith and look for opportunities to do so  16.2	2. I mostly feel at ease talking about my faith and do if it comes up  54.5	3. I find it hard to talk about my faith in ordinary language  19.5	4. I do not like to talk about my faith; my life and actions are sufficient  9.2	5. I do not have faith, so the question is not applicable  0.6		<b>0.18</b>
<b>E5: About how much do you give financially to this congregation?</b> %	1. I give 10% or more of my income regularly  18.7	2. I give about 5% to 9% of my income regularly  25.0	3. I give less than 5% of my income regularly  25.7	4. I give a small amount whenever I am able  23.5	5. I do not contribute financially here  7.2		<b>0.13</b>
<b>A5: How long have you been coming to worship services or activities at this church/parish?</b> *Excludes Visitors %	Under One Year  7.2	1-2 Years  9.6	3-5 Years  15.3	6-10 Years  17.4	11-20 Years  19.7	>20 Years  30.1	<b>0.01</b>

Figure 5



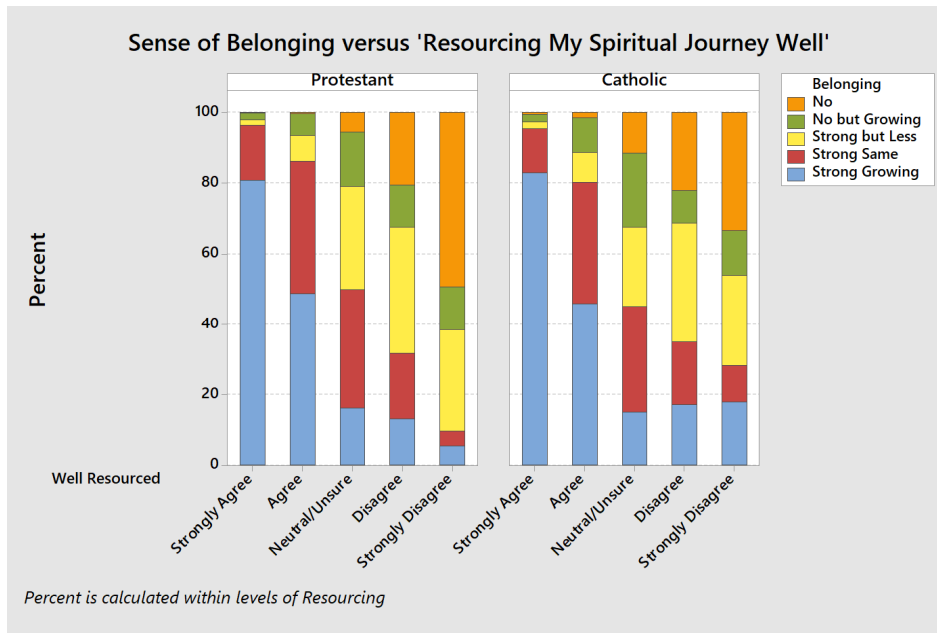
### Variables fostering a sense of belonging

This section considers variables that might be thought to foster a stronger sense of belonging. The variables and their correlations are shown in Table 2.

The question whose answers were most strongly related to Belonging was **B4. Do you agree or disagree: 'This church/ parish is resourcing my spiritual journey well?'** (correlation 0.48). Around 80% of people either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Figure 6 gives a visualisation of this association for Protestants and Catholics. It shows that if the attender agrees (or strongly agrees) that their spiritual journey is being well-resourced, then they are highly likely to feel a strong and growing sense of belonging to the parish or congregation, but if they disagree or are unsure, then the attender is likely to have a reduced sense of belonging. Catholic attenders appear more willing to tolerate poor resourcing while still retaining a sense of belonging, while Protestants presumably just go elsewhere.

This connection between one's sense of belonging, and feeling resourced in one's spiritual journey, is a very interesting one, especially if one compares it to other factors one might think of, such as attendance, giving, or participation in the church's outreach. It seems to reinforce the view that New Zealanders go to church primarily for spiritual reasons, rather than social reasons. If New Zealanders feel that their spiritual needs are being met, then they will show that church the loyalty of a strong and growing sense of belonging, but if they do not feel they are being spiritually resourced then they may be in danger of leaving the church and not coming back.

Figure 6.



But what is resourcing your spiritual journey? The survey gives some insight with the questions **C1. 'Over the last year, do you believe you have grown in your Christian faith?'** (correlation with belonging 0.34, Figure 7) **E4. 'Have this congregation's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?'** (correlation with belonging 0.34) **B7. 'How often is the preaching/teaching helpful for everyday life?'** (correlation with belonging 0.30). These questions round out the idea of resourcing and make it clear that a sense of spiritual learning and growing have a strong influence on an attender's sense of belonging.

The question with the second strongest correlation (0.38) with belonging is **B5. How often do you feel encouraged after a worship service?** Figure 8 shows practically the same trend relating belonging and feeling encouraged for Catholics and Protestants. Feeling encouraged is on a personal level, but there is a related corporate aspect of whether one is part of something that is moving forward with vision and direction. Attenders' sense of belonging was strongly correlated with their level of agreement and commitment to the church's vision **F1. 'Does this congregation / parish have a clear vision, goals or direction for its ministry and mission?'** (correlation 0.33) and direction **F2. 'Of the following, which one best describes your opinion of the future direction of this congregation/parish?'** (correlation 0.26). In other words encouragement, especially personally, but also in the sense of being part of something bigger, are very important in fostering a strong and growing sense of belonging.

Figure 7

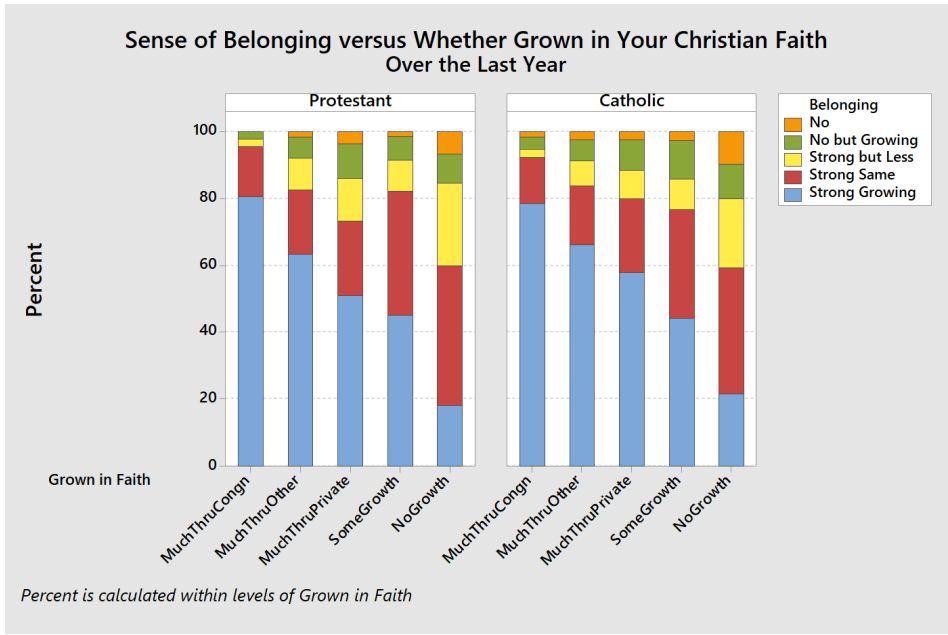
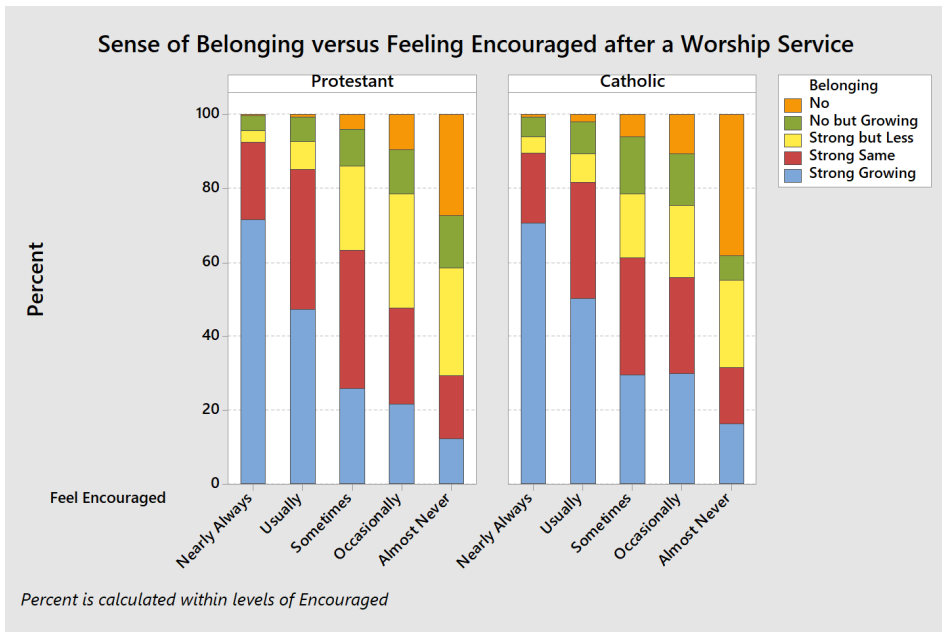


Figure 8

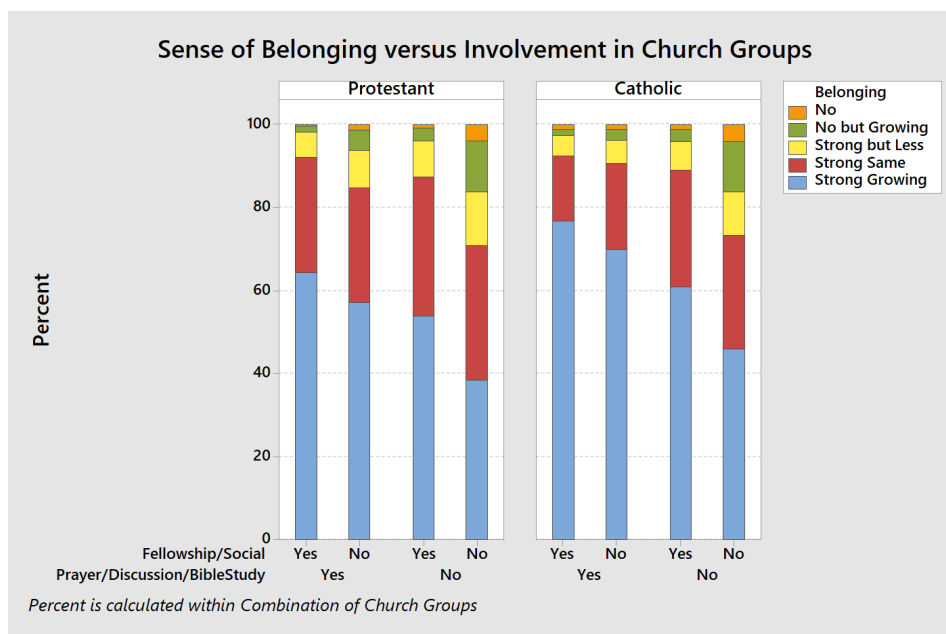


Another dimension of church life has to do with the running of the church services: how well they are organised and the quality of execution. One part is whether the attender feels they are able to connect with God, perhaps in Communion, in times of silent prayer, or in worship singing. Question B8. 'How often is the presence of God evident in our church services?' had a correlation 0.29 with sense of belonging. Another part is whether the service was attractive, enjoyable and kept the one's attention. This is reflected in Question B6. 'How often do our church services contain an effective mix of music, prayer, participation, etc?' The correlation with belonging was 0.26. It is clear these

factors both promote a sense of belonging, though the effect is not as strong as being spiritually resourced and encouraged.

Question E1. **‘Are you regularly involved in any group activities here?’** asks about two different types of groups: prayer/discussion/bible study etc. groups; and fellowship/ social groups. Because it is asking about two things the correlation is less meaningful. Instead, the effect of both types of groups is seen in Figure 9. Catholics who attend either or both sorts of groups seem to have a stronger sense of belonging than the equivalent Protestants, but this might be because fewer Catholics attend groups in the first place (28.5% of Catholics vs 65.2% of Protestants). Overall, attenders who participated in Prayer/Discussion/Bible study/etc. groups were more likely feel a strong growing sense of belonging (60.6%) than those who did not participate in those groups (45.7%). Those who participated in Fellowship/Social groups similarly were more likely feel a strong growing sense of belonging (59.2%) than those who did not (48.1%).

Figure 9



Survey questions B9-B11 had to do with how satisfied the attender is with what is available for children under 12, youth 12-18, and young adults 19-25. These had a weak association with the attender’s sense of belonging. The correlation is strongest for young adults, but 43% of people did not express an opinion about them.

Finally questions C2 and C3 relate to personal piety, the frequency of private devotions and/or Bible reading. These have a weak correlation with Belonging. All the correlations above were highly statistically significant.

In summary, the data suggest a New Zealand church attender’s sense of Belonging to their church appears to be strongly linked to how they are progressing as a spiritual person, that is, as someone who is being resourced for their spiritual journey, growing in their faith, finding and exercising their gifts, aware of the presence of God and being given

teaching for practical life. The second strongest dimension is whether the attender feels encouraged personally, as well as feeling part of a church community moving forward with clear direction and vision.

**Table 2.**

Percent (%)	Response Category					Spearman Correlation with Belonging
<b>B4. Do you agree or disagree: 'This church/parish is resourcing my spiritual journey well'?</b>	1.Strongly agree 27.8	2.Agree 54.5	3.Neutral or unsure 14.6	4.Disagree 2.7	5.Strongly disagree 0.5	<b>0.48</b>
<b>B5. How often do you feel encouraged after a worship service?</b>	1.Nearly always 37.7	2.Usually 39.3	3.Sometimes 15.7	4. Almost never 5.9	5.Almost never 1.4	<b>0.38</b>
<b>B6. How often do our church services contain an effective mix of music, prayer, participation, etc?</b>	44.4	40.2	10.6	4.1	0.8	<b>0.25</b>
<b>B7. How often is the preaching/teaching helpful for everyday life?</b>	41.0	38.9	14.3	4.8	1.0	<b>0.30</b>
<b>B8. How often is the presence of God evident in our church services?</b>	47.7	33.2	13.6	4.5	1.0	<b>0.29</b>
<b>C1. Over the last year, do you believe you have grown in your Christian faith?</b>	1. Much through congregation 20.7	2. Much through other groups 7.8	3. Much through private activity 11.4	4. Some growth 48.7	5. No Growth 11.4	<b>0.34</b>
<b>E4. Have this congregation's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?</b>	1. Yes, to a great extent 19.9	2. Yes, to some extent 37.5	3. Yes, to a small extent 24.5	4. Not at all 18.2		<b>0.34</b>
<b>E1. Are you regularly involved in any group activities here?</b>	1. Yes, in both of the following types of groups 11.2	2. Yes, in small prayer, discussion or Bible study groups 26.1	3. Yes, in fellowship, clubs, social or other groups 18.3	4. No, we have no such groups 3.5	5. No, I am not regularly involved 40.9	<b>0.21</b>
<b>B9: How satisfied are you with what is offered here for children under 12 years? *omitted by 28%</b>	1.Very satisfied 40.9	2.Satisfied 50.0	3. Dissatisfied 7.4	4. Very dissatisfied 1.7		<b>0.15</b>
<b>B10: How satisfied are you with what is offered here for youth aged 12-18 years? *omitted by 36%</b>	31.0	51.1	14.8	3.2		<b>0.16</b>
<b>B11: How satisfied are you with what is offered here for adults aged 19-25 years? *omitted by 43%</b>	22.3	54.2	19.8	3.7		<b>0.22</b>

<b>C2. How often do you spend time in private devotional activities (e.g. prayer, meditation, reading the Bible alone) ?</b>	1. Every or most days 43.9	2. A few times a week 22.9	3. Once a week 4.9	4. Occasionally 19.1	5. Hardly ever 7.0	6. Never 2.1	<b>0.12</b>
<b>C3. How often do you read the Bible on your own?</b>	25.6	18.6	5.8	27.0	15.4	7.8	<b>0.14</b>
<b>F1: Does this congregation / parish have a clear vision, goals or direction for its ministry and mission?</b>	1. Yes, and I am strongly committed to them 36.2	2. Yes, and I am partly committed to them 30.6	3. Yes, but I am not committed to them 10.8	4. There are ideas but no clear vision, goals or direction 10.2	5. I am not aware of such vision/goals or direction 10.6	6. We need to go back to the way we did things in the past 1.5	<b>0.33</b>
<b>F2: Of the following, which one best describes your opinion of the future direction of this congregation/parish?</b>	1. We are currently moving in new directions 36.7	2. We are currently deciding on new directions 28.7	3. We are faithfully maintaining past directions 13.0	4. We need to rethink where we are heading 8.4	5. Our future direction is unclear to me 13.1		<b>0.26</b>

### A sense of belonging versus demographic effects

Finally we consider whether there are subgroups of the population which have a higher or lower sense of belonging. Identifying those with less sense of belonging may be the first step to reaching out and encouraging them.

As there are many subgroups and interacting factors, this section reports results that were statistically significant using ordinal logistic regression rather than correlation.

#### Denomination

Overall there were only small differences between denominations in the sense of belonging felt by attenders. Baptist attenders were slightly more likely to *not* have a strong sense of Belonging (“perhaps not as strongly as in the past”, “No, but a growing sense of belonging”, “No, I don't have a sense of belonging”: 22.0% versus 17.8% for non-Baptists). This is consistent with the findings of McDonald (2017), who in a study of religious switching in New Zealand, found that only 74.5% of Baptists who participated in the New Zealand Election Study called themselves Baptist when surveyed 3 years later. Baptist churches seem to have a special role in New Zealand as a kind of comfortable landing place, where people disaffected with a former church may sojourn for a while and then move on. In the CLSNZ data, 51.5% of Baptists had previously been attending a different denomination, which is uncommonly large. On the other hand those attending Union or Cooperating parishes (some combination of Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian) were slightly *less* likely to choose those weaker expressions of belonging, suggesting either they grow into this type of shared

worship or they don't stay around. There was no difference overall between Catholics and Protestants in their sense of belonging to their congregation. It made no difference to one's sense of belonging whether the attender had been brought up in a Christian home, nor whether one's previous church had been the same denomination.

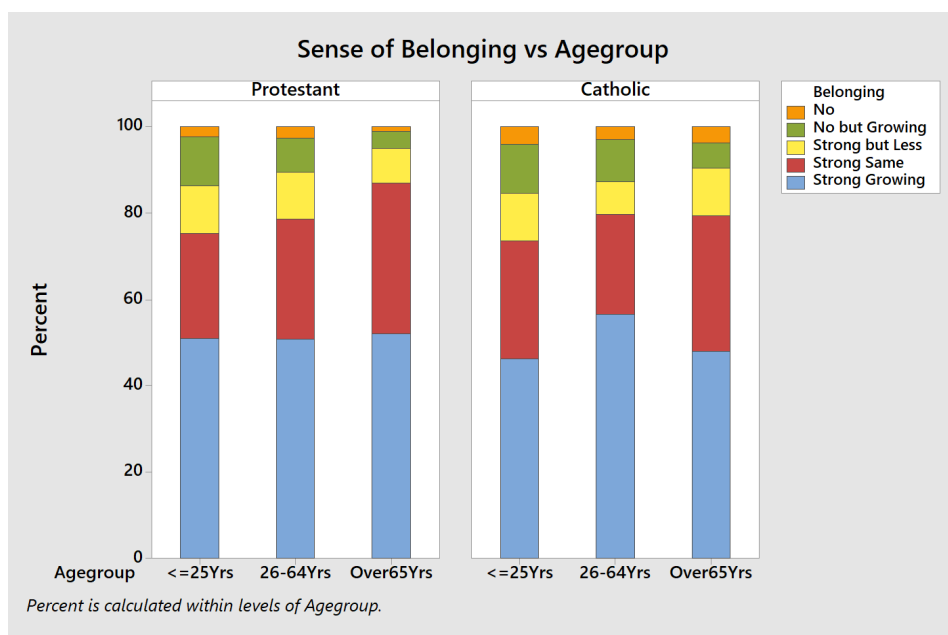
### Gender

Women were a little bit more likely to express a strong and growing sense of belonging than men (53.2% vs 49.8%). Women were also more likely to say that they nearly always left the worship service feeling encouraged (40.8% vs 32.8% for men). In a combined (regression) analysis, differences in feeling encouraged were enough to completely account for the gender difference in belonging. This suggests consistent effort to encourage men may help enhance their sense of belonging.

### Age

Figure 10 shows a different pattern with age for Protestants and Catholics. Catholics aged between 26 and 64 years are more likely (56.6%) to express a strong and growing sense of belonging than those younger (46.2%) or older (48.0%). This may be because of family, or because of immigration in that middle age group, however we do not see a similar rise in belonging in that age group for Protestants so there may be other factors at play. The number of attenders who feel a strong sense of belonging overall, (bottom three categories) increases with age for both Protestant and Catholics.

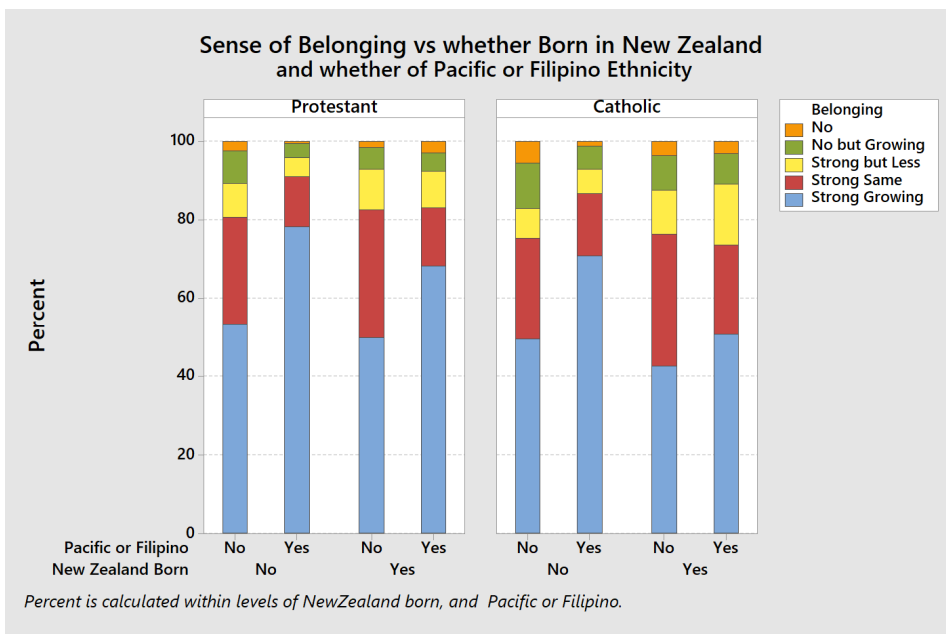
Figure 10.



## Immigration and Ethnicity

Immigrants and ethnic minorities are likely to find church to be a place of reunion and cultural identity. People of Pacific ethnicity (especially Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island Maori and Fijian) or Filipinos, were more likely to express a strong and growing sense of belonging than other ethnic groups, for both Protestant and Catholics. This is illustrated in Figure 11. The peak group is Pacific or Filipino not born in New Zealand, at 78.2% 'strong and growing' for Protestants and 70.8% for Catholics. The lowest sense of belonging was among New Zealand born non-Pacific and non-Filipino at 49.8% for Protestants and 42.5% for Catholics (almost the same percentages are found by just looking at NZ-born Europeans / Pakeha). There was no difference in sense of belonging between Pakeha and Maori, nor for other ethnicities although that may be because of small numbers in the survey.

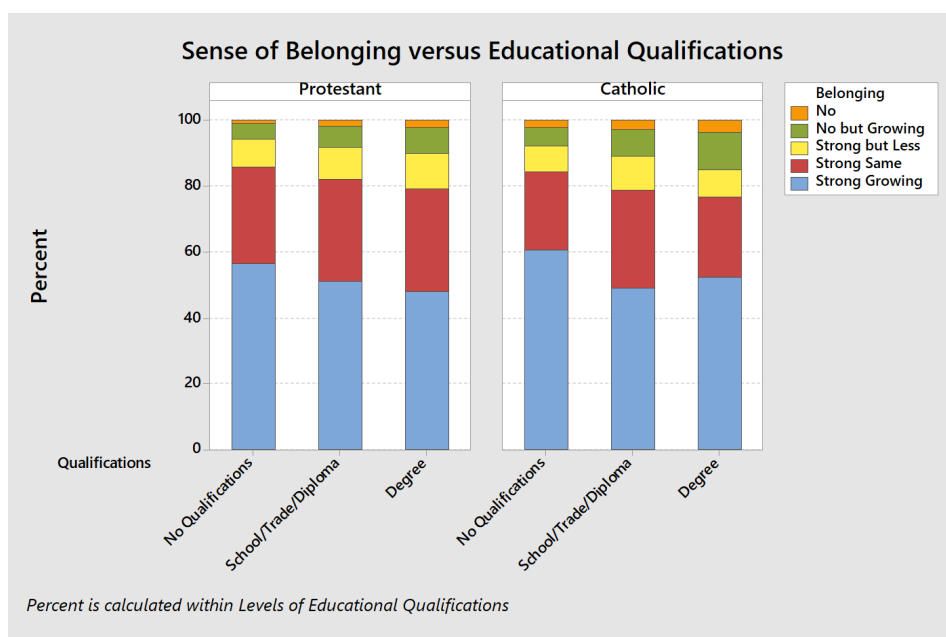
Figure 11



## Education and Employment

The effect of education boiled down to three categories: those with no qualifications, those with some (school or trade qualification or a diploma of some sort) and those with a university degree or higher qualification. As shown in Figure 12, those with no qualifications were more likely to feel a strong and growing sense of belonging. Those who were unemployed similarly were more likely to feel strong growing belonging (62.0% vs 51.6% for everyone else). These facts point to the importance of the church as a place of welcome and support for who may feel less valued by society at large.

Figure 12



#### Marital status, church school and social diversity

Those who were widowed but not remarried were a little more likely to express a strong growing sense of belonging. For Catholics, those who were in a de facto or civil union relationship, or who were separated or divorced, were less likely to have a strong growing sense of belonging. Curiously, the reverse was true for Protestants in almost all denominations.

If an attender nominated the presence of a church school or pre-school as being one of the three aspects of the church / parish that they personally valued the most, then they were less likely to express a strong growing sense of belonging to the congregation (44.4% vs 52.1% for those who chose other aspects). Those who nominated the church school/ preschool were also more likely to nominate openness to social diversity one of their three aspects (48.5% as compared to 7.0% among those who did not mention a church school/preschool.) Those who valued social diversity were slightly less likely to feel a strong growing sense of belonging to the church (47.9% vs 52.0% for those who did not choose that aspect as one of their three). It will be interesting to see whether this changes with the next Church Life Survey in a society which is more openly diverse.

In summary, there were only small differences in sense of belonging between attenders of different denominations, genders, and age groups. Pacific Islanders and Filipinos found church to be a strong place or belonging, as did unemployed and people with limited education. Catholics in non-traditional relationships,

or church attenders generally who value church schools/preschools and social diversity have a lesser sense of belonging. However the differences are not large, and it may be possible to overcome these demographic differences by encouragement and leaving the attender feeling spiritually resourced.

### **Final remarks and Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that the Church Life Survey did not ask a question about church hospitality, such as greeters, refreshments after the service, or getting-to-know-us lunches etc., which are a common means of building a sense of belonging for attenders. A question about this may be useful for future surveys. However, absence of this extra question does not invalidate the trends we do see in the data. A further limitation of the study is that the data is over ten years old, but the study findings are still relevant, and it provides a baseline for seeing whether anything has changed by 2023 or beyond.

The main purpose of the Church Life Survey is to provide local leaders with information about their local congregations, information that is available through a helpful interface immediately once responses have been entered. A benefit of a common set of questions is that it provides points of context and comparison which make it easier to draw conclusions from the data, as well as making the survey very cheap to run.

The present study shows that with a common survey one can also benefit from lessons learned across churches and denominations. It is easy for Catholics, or members of particular Protestant denominations, to think that they are unique, with unique problems. This study on sense of belonging has shown that though there are some denominational differences, many trends are in common, so that all can learn from each other. It is hoped that this document will encourage churches to participate in future Church Life Surveys.

McDonald, B. W. (2017) 'Religious Switchers: Data on Religious Change in New Zealand'. *Archives of Data Science Series A*, 2(1), 1-20. <https://publikationen.bibliothek.kit.edu/1000068238>