

# UNDERSTAND THE BIG *picture*



## The Catholic Church: Strengths and Vulnerabilities

Based on National Church  
Life Surveys: 1996 to 2016

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# The Australian religious context

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The religious context is diverse and (mostly) tolerant.

There has been a decline in the religiosity of Australians.

Community attitude shifting from apathy to signs of hostility



16% attend services frequently



28% pray or meditate



21% had mystical experiences



50% belief in God/higher power



36% say faith/spirituality is important in life decisions

# Catholic population: 1996 to 2016

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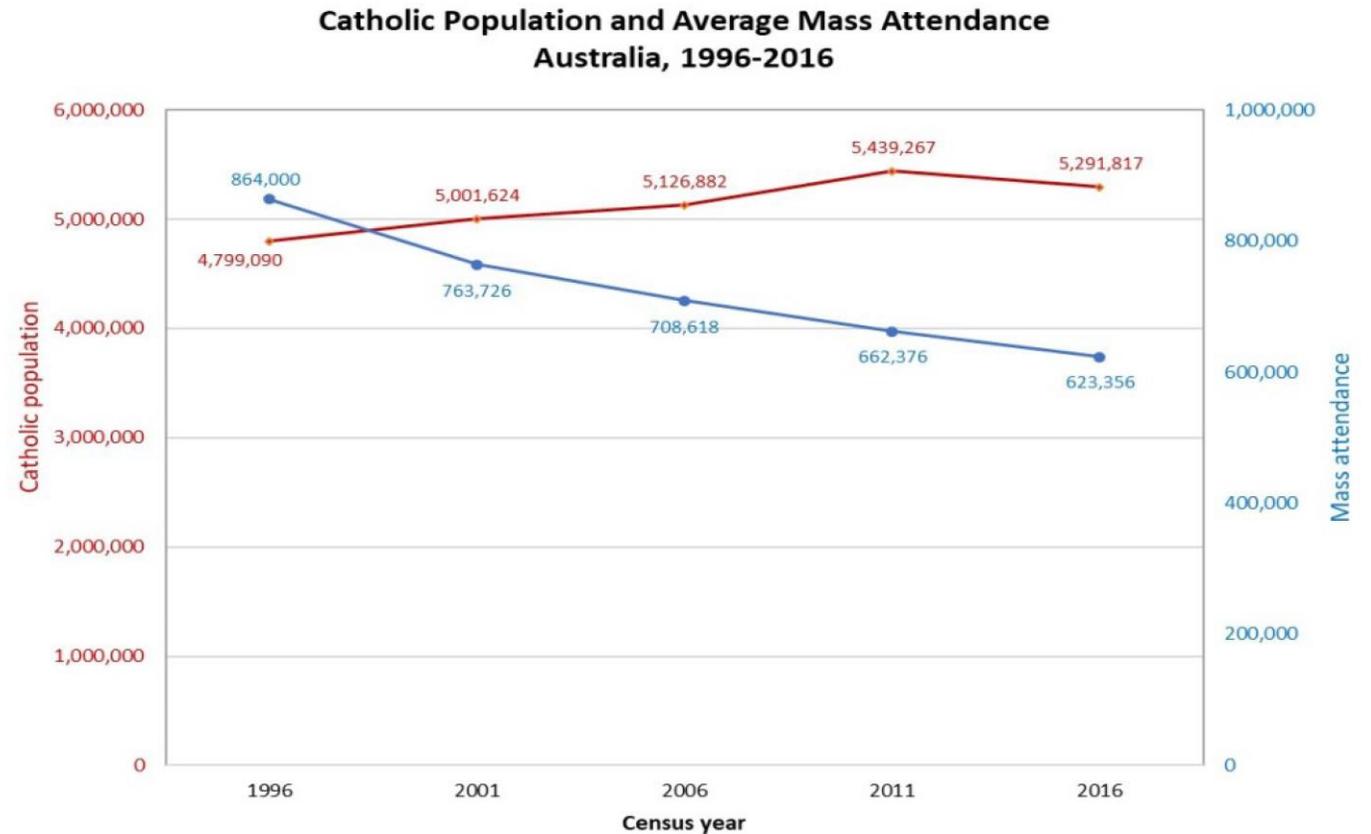
There has been decline in:  
the percent of Australians  
who are Catholic,  
in Mass attendance  
and the number of  
parishes.



# Catholic population: 1996 to 2016

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There has been a decline in:  
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# National Church Life Surveys

Largest, longest-running survey  
of local church life

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- Multiple types of surveys: Attenders, Leaders, and Operations Surveys.
- In 2016 ~250,000+ individuals from 3000 local churches in 20 denominations and over 7000 leaders
- In ten languages: English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tongan, Arabic, Dinka (Sudanese), Burmese Chin, Burmese Karen.



# National Sample of Catholic parishes

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In each National Church Life Survey since 1996, a statistically representative sample group of around 200-250 parishes was selected from across Australia's 28 territorial dioceses.

The aim: a credible research foundation to  
build a profile of Catholic parishes.

Other 'non-sample parishes' also took part in each NCLS. In some dioceses all parishes took part.

# Demographic changes: gender & education

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**Gender: stable over time**

**Education: more university  
educated mass attenders**



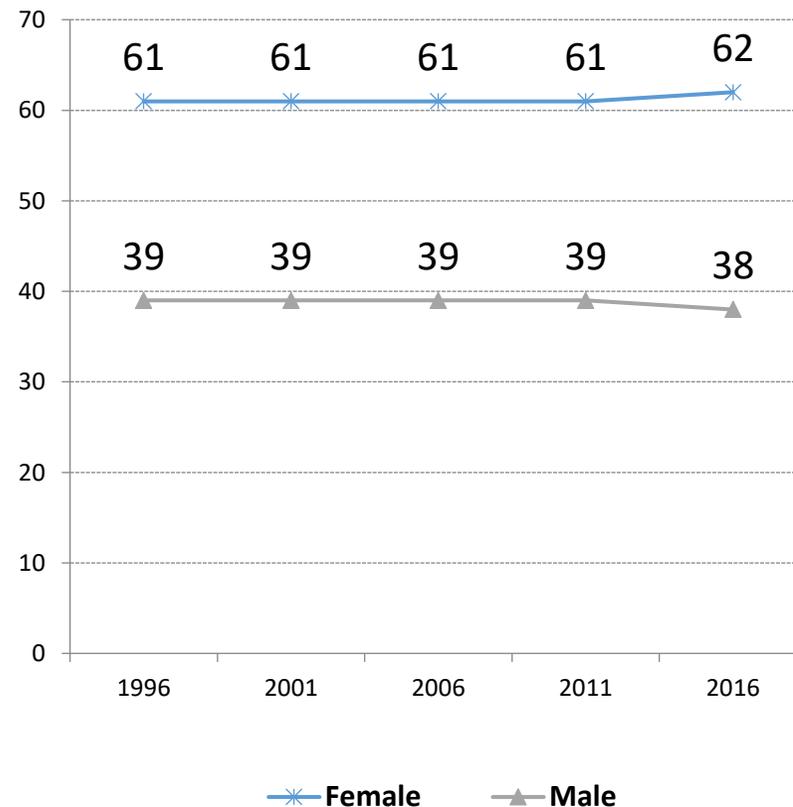
# Demographic changes: gender & education

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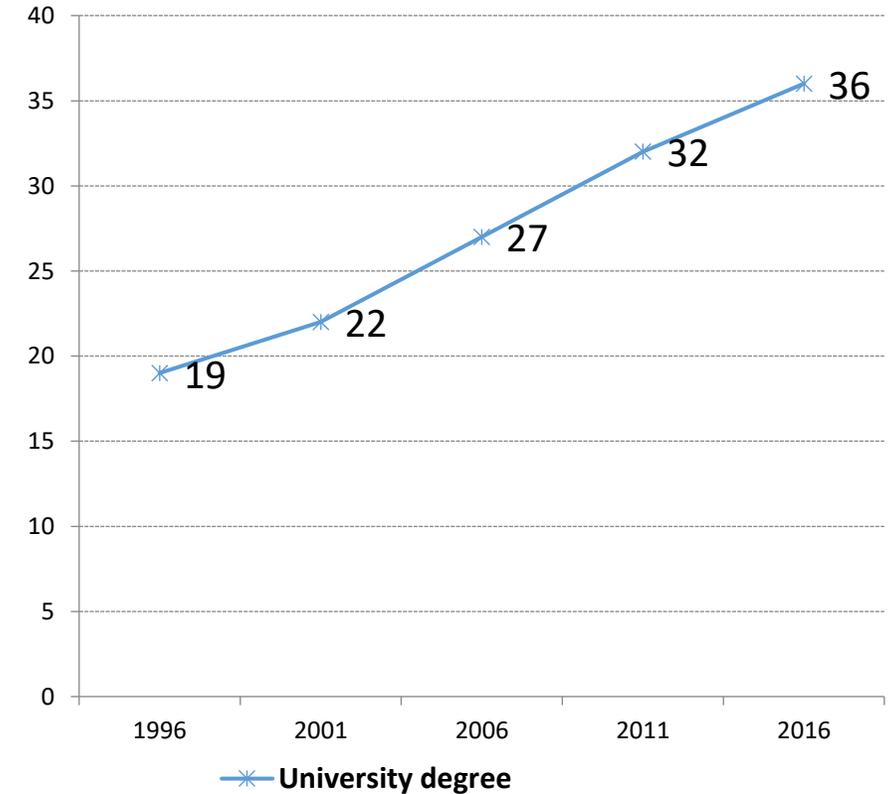
Gender: stable  
over time

Education:  
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### Gender



### University degree



# Age: a key driver for the future

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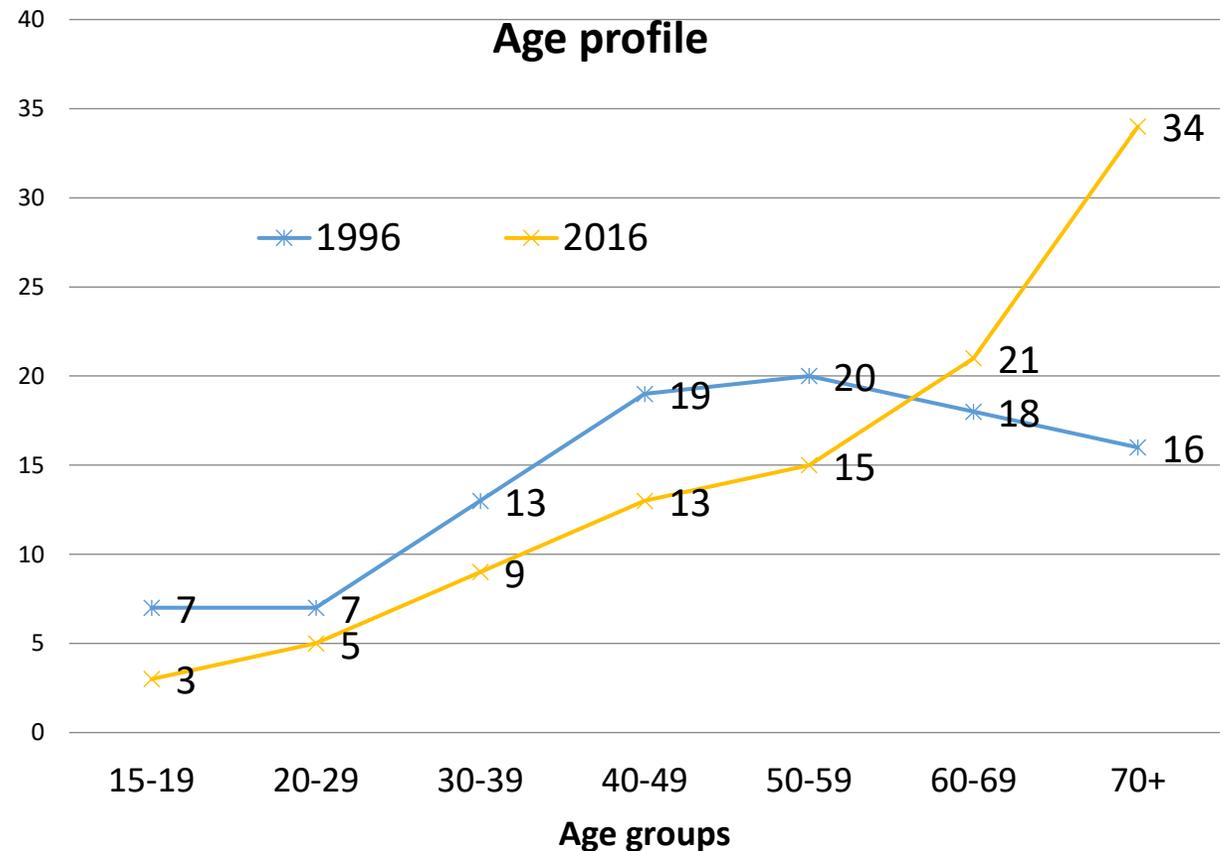
**Mass attenders  
have an ageing  
profile**



# Age: a key driver for the future

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Mass attenders  
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### Parishes have increasing ethnic diversity

- 37% of Catholic attenders were born in Non-English speaking country in 2016 (vs 23% for Australia)
- 51% of Catholic parishes are multicultural (vs 28% overall)



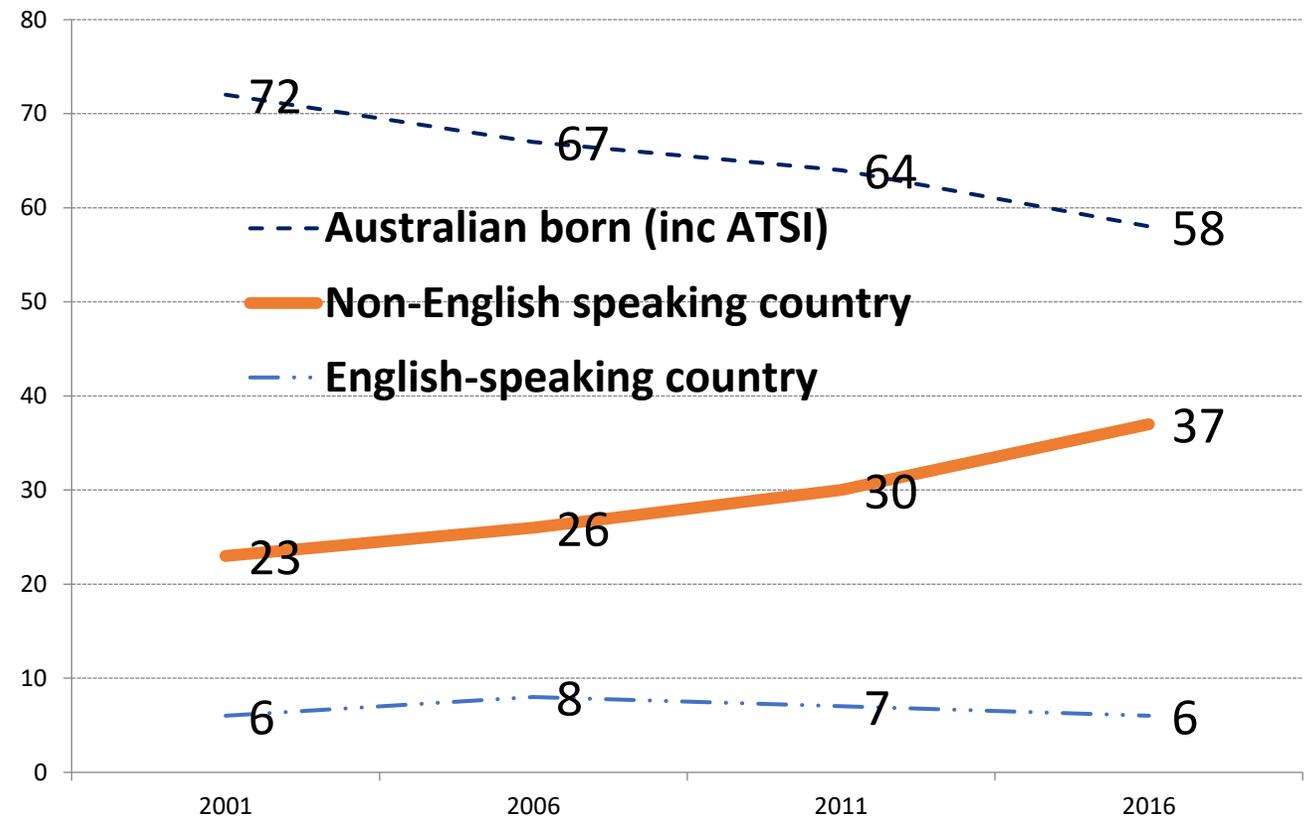
# Ethnicity - A key driver for future

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### Country of Birth

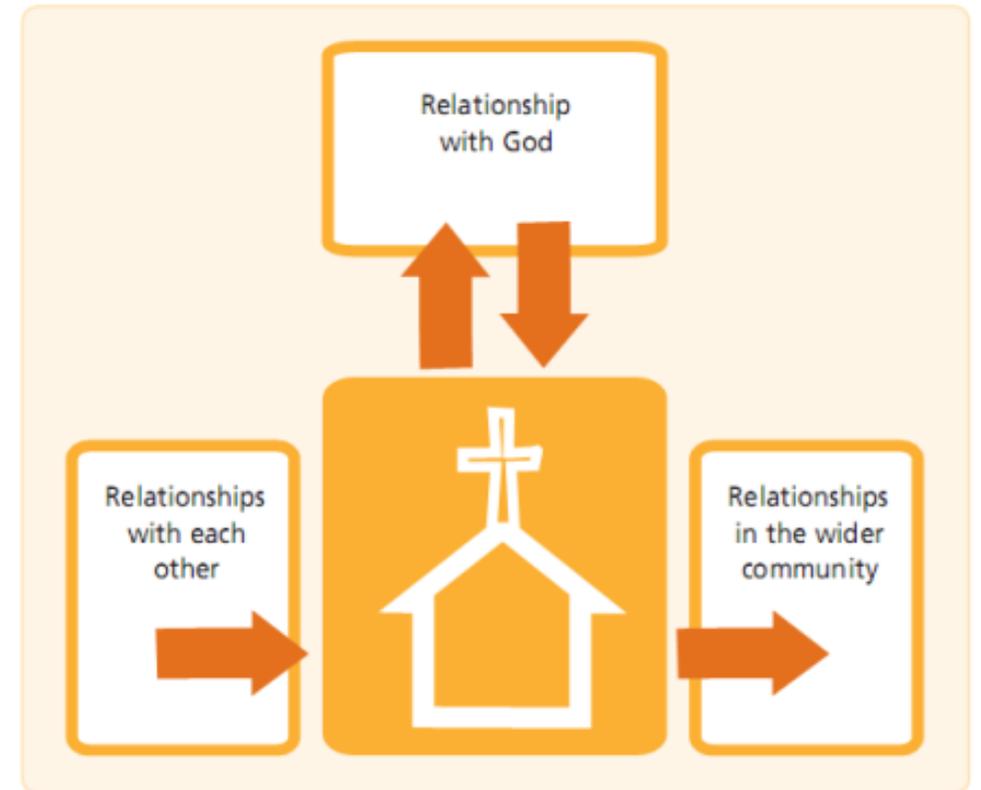


# Mass attenders view of church health

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Healthy churches help people in their relationship with God, with each other and with the wider community.

How do attender assess churches over time? (1996 to 2016)



# Parishes help growth in faith

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**Local parishes continue to help attenders grow in faith**

**% who have had much growth in faith increased from 33% in 1996 to 44% in 2016**

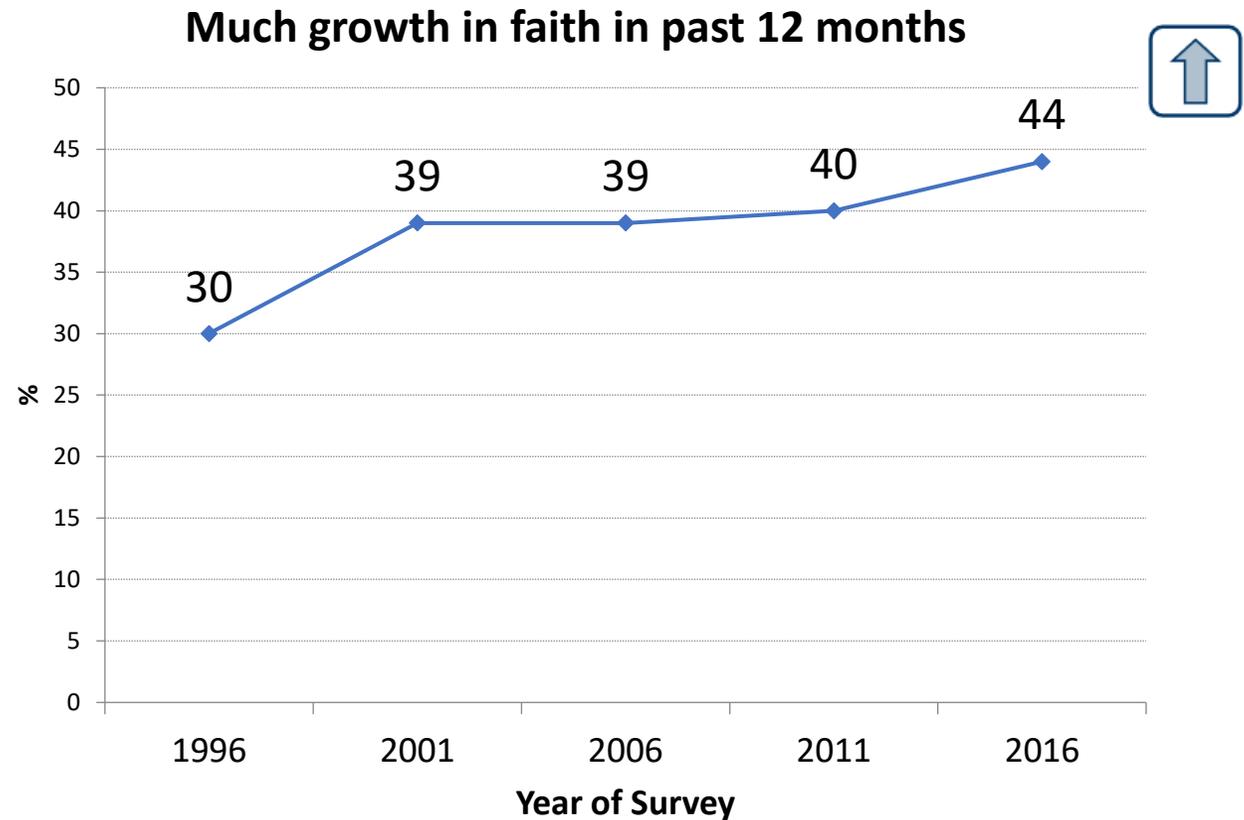


# Parishes help growth in faith

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# Worship services see positive assessment

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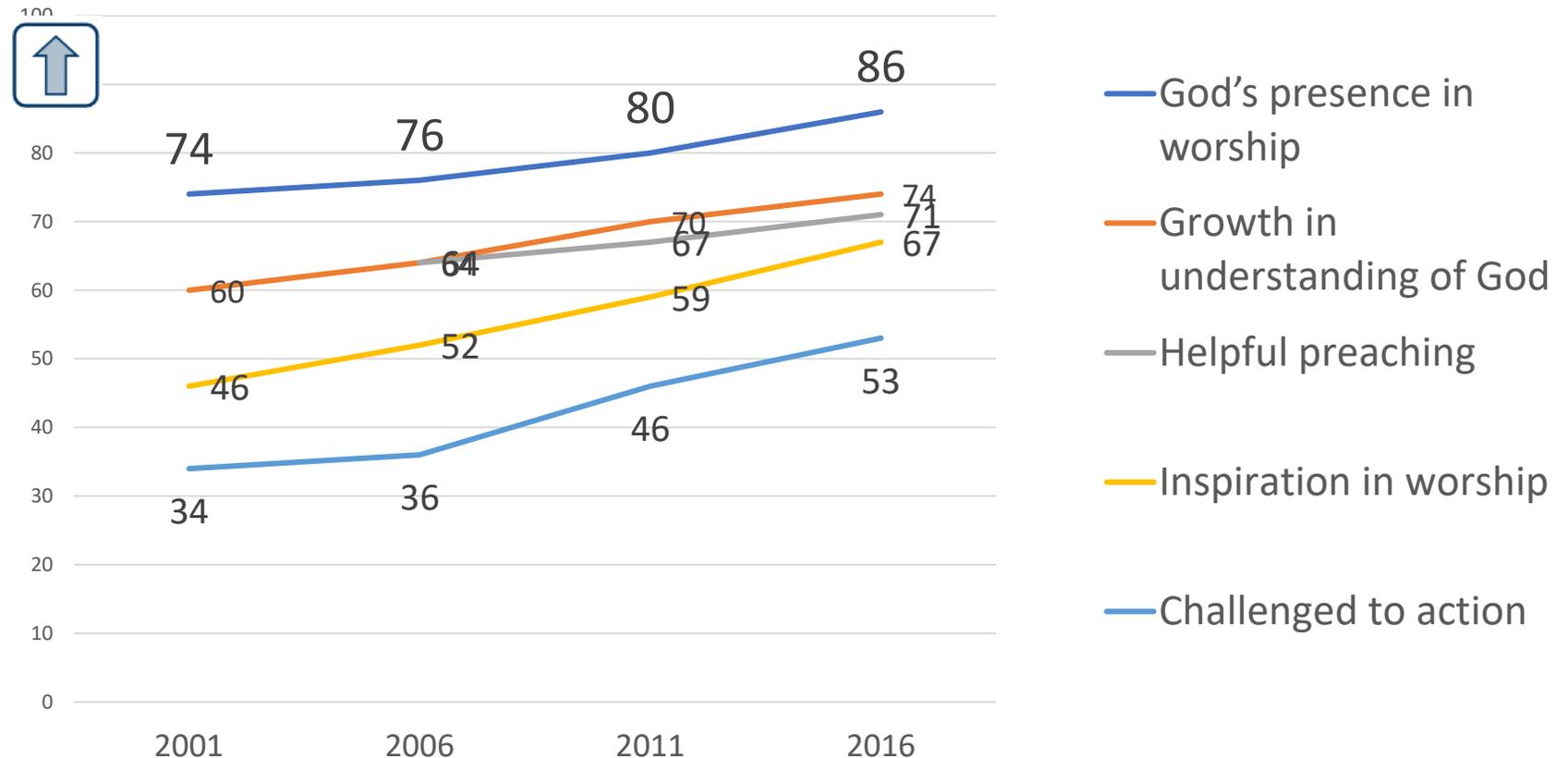
There is an upward trend in attenders' assessment of aspects of worship services.



# Worship services see positive assessment

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There is an upward trend in attenders' assessment of aspects of worship services.



# Parishes offer a sense of community

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**Belonging: stable,  
with increase in  
2016**

**Involvement in  
groups: stable**

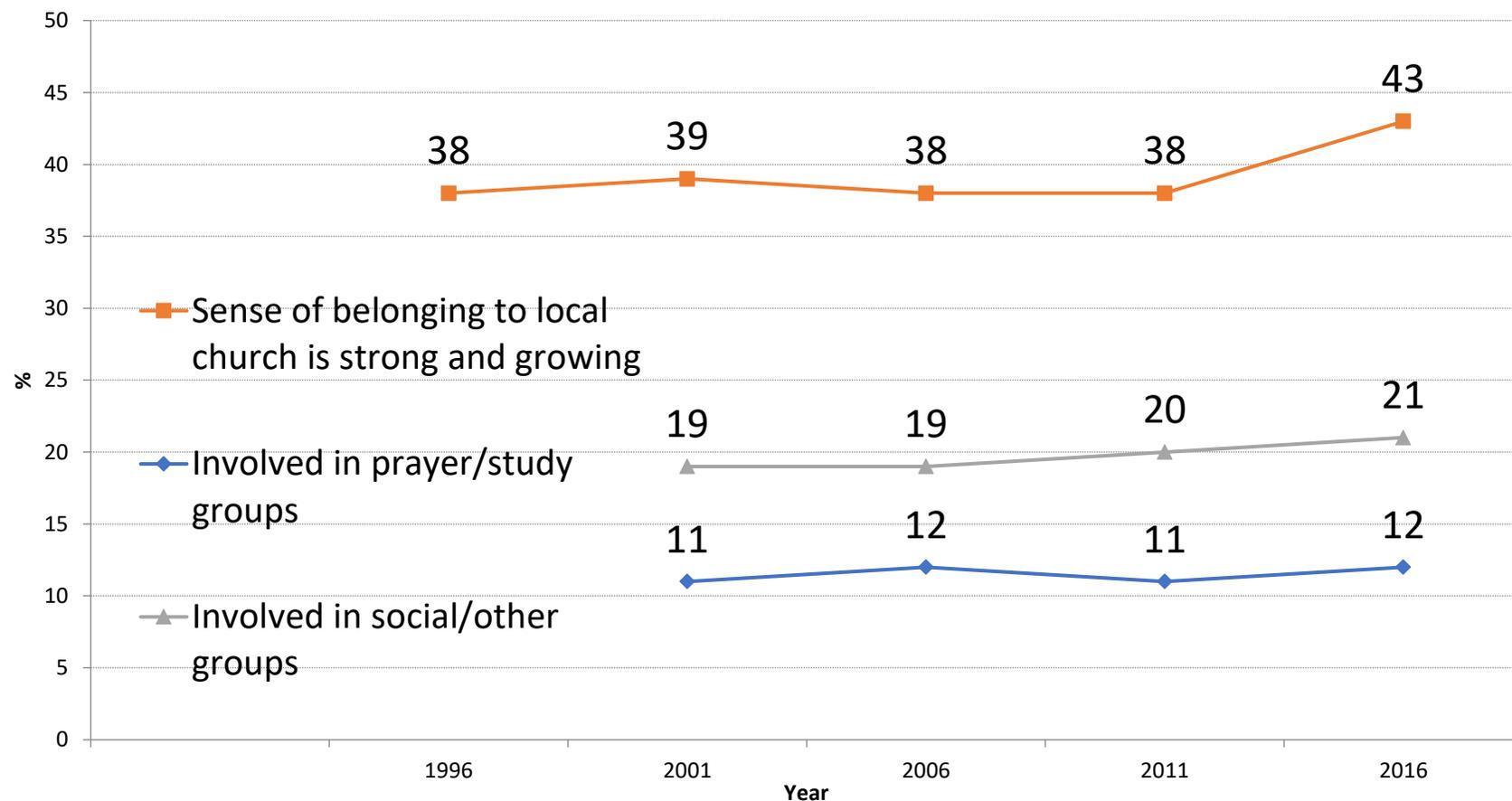


# Parishes offer a sense of community

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# Church attenders serve others informally

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## The percent of informal acts of service by mass attenders has increased

*Attenders who helped others in three or more of the ways below:  
Lent or gave money outside family; Cared for someone who was very sick; Helped someone through a crisis; Visited someone in hospital; Gave possessions to a needy person; Tried to stop someone abusing alcohol or drugs; Donated money to charity; Contacted a parliamentarian or councillor about an issue*



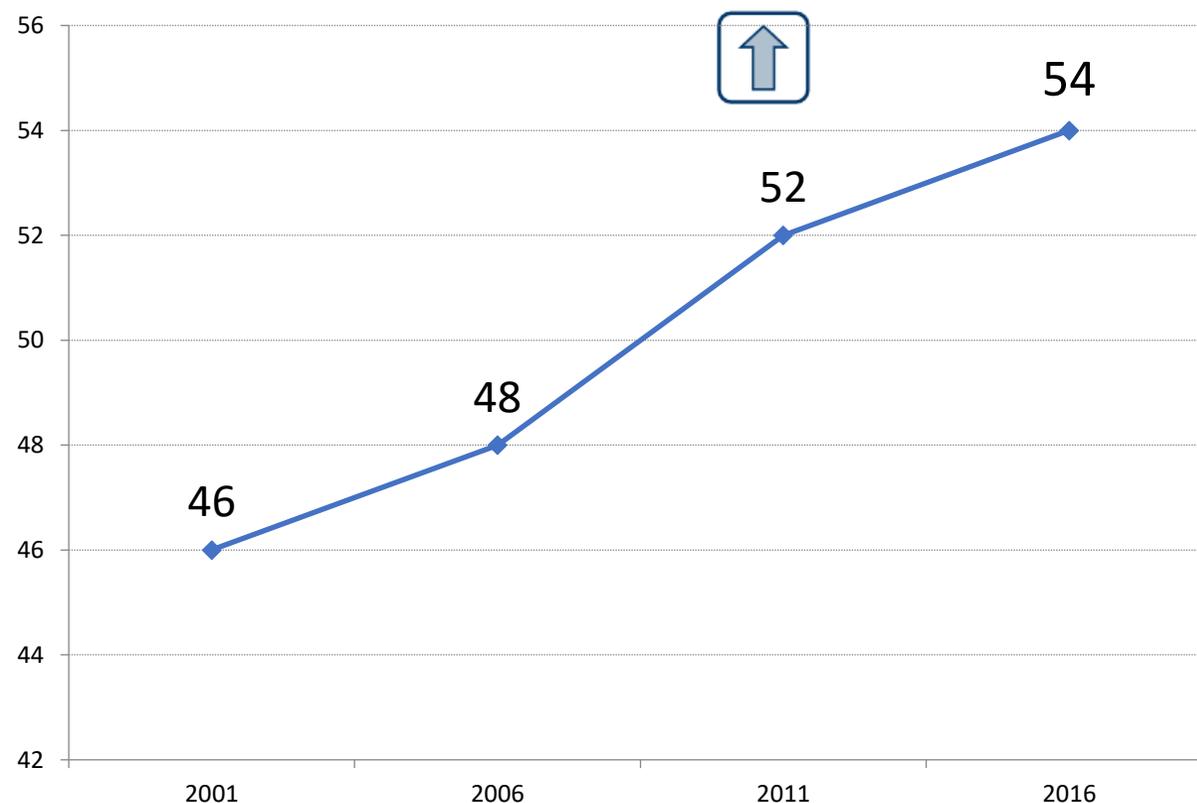
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Informal helping (3 or more ways)



# Churches reach out to others in groups

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**% in community-based  
service groups has been  
stable**

**% in church-based service  
groups has increased**

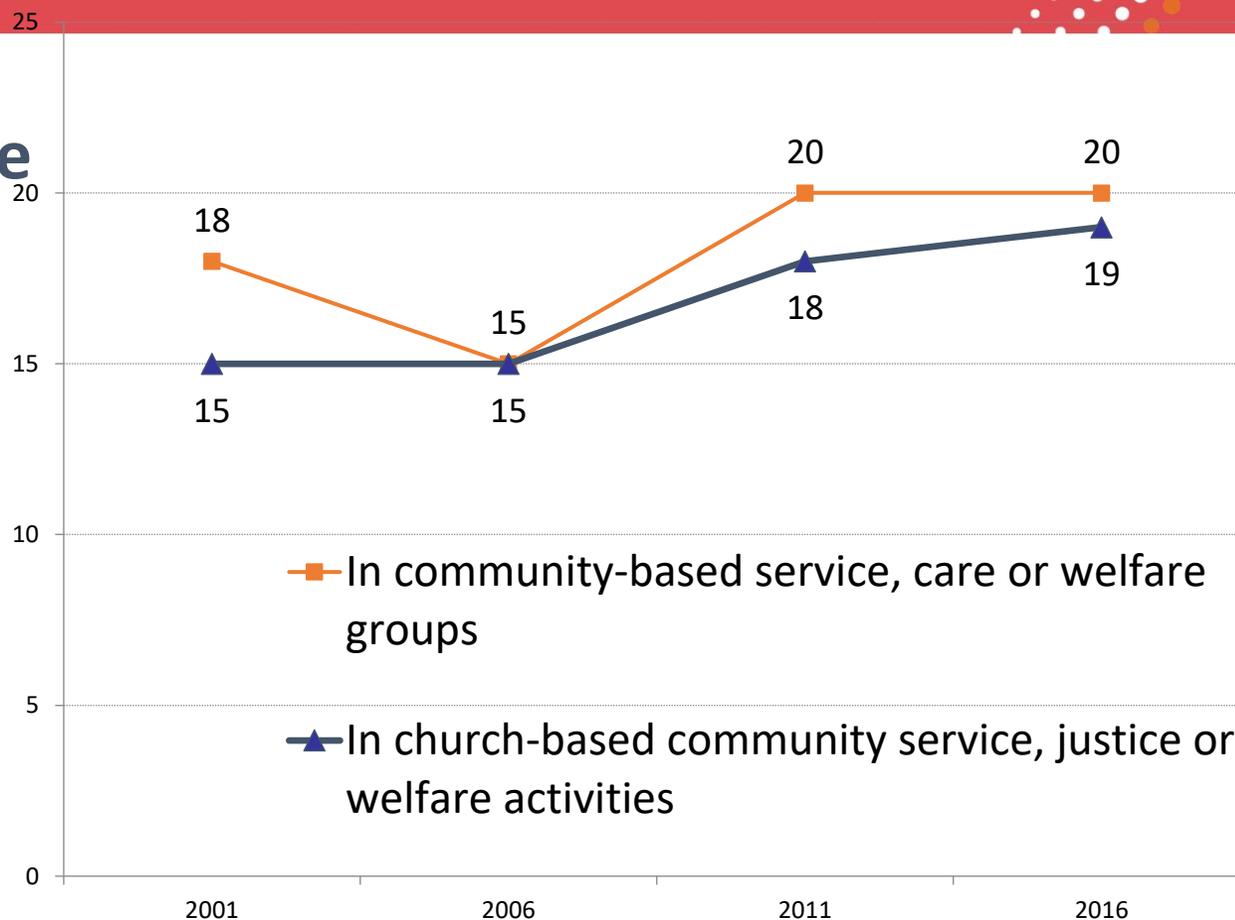


# Churches reach out to others in groups

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# Attendees more at ease to share faith

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Those at ease with sharing faith has increased.

% who invited others to church is stable, with slight increase

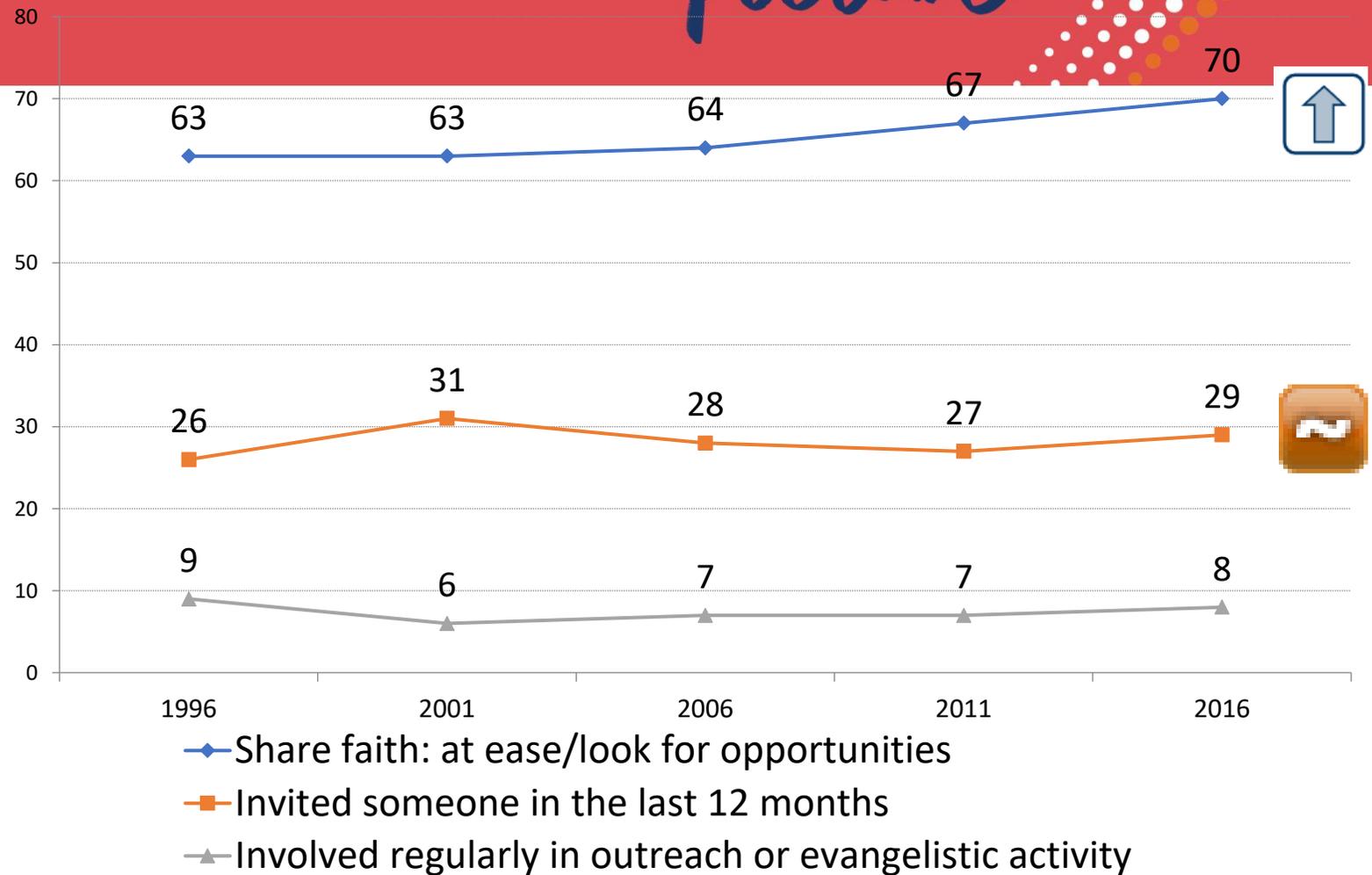


# Attendees more at ease to share faith

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% who invited others to church is stable, with slight increase



# Positioning for the future? Vision, innovation and leadership culture

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When a local church community shows a readiness to act or a culture of 'collective confidence', other signs of health are often present.

Clues can be found in:

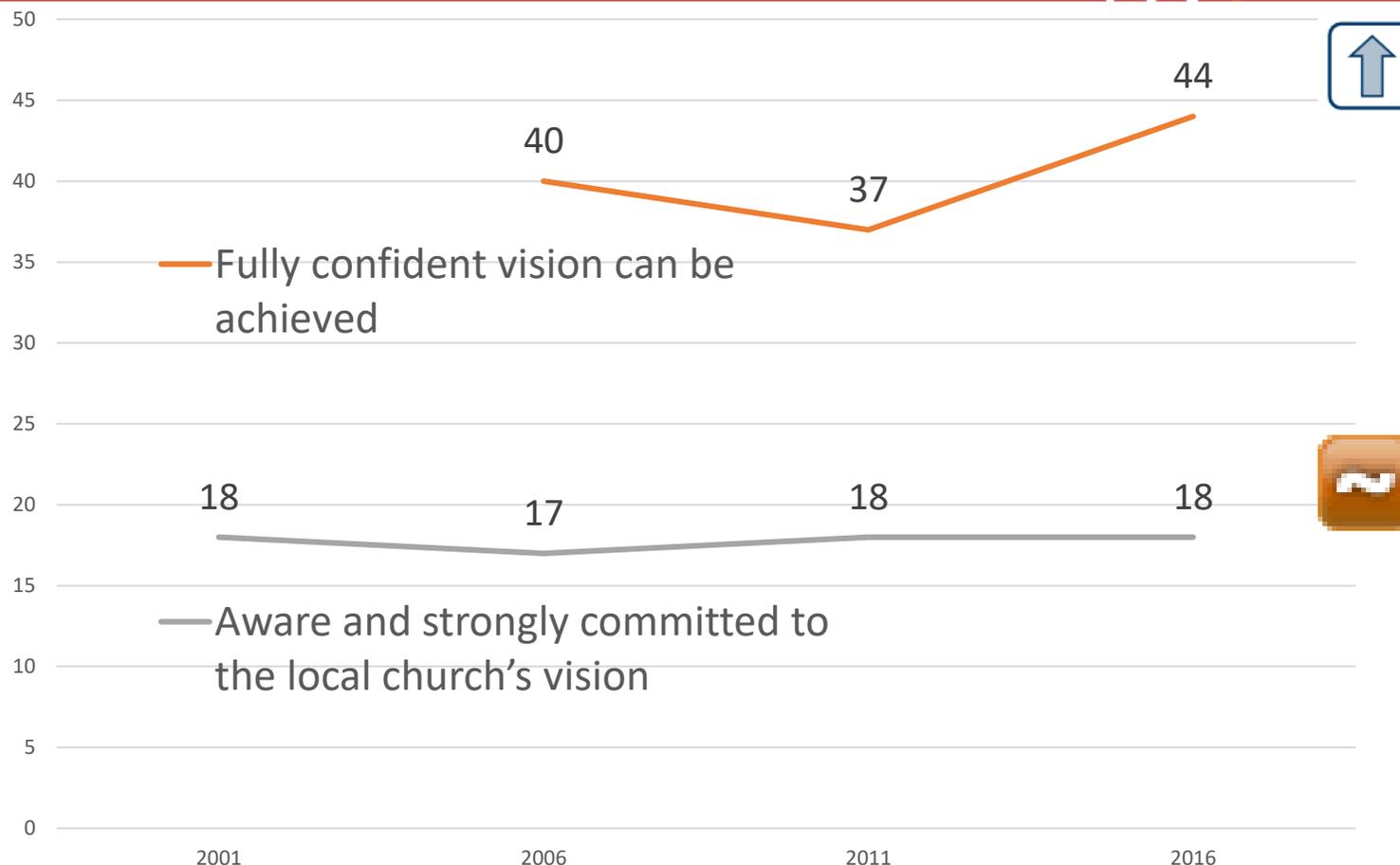
- levels of commitment to the vision,
- openness to new possibilities and
- the presence of an inspiring, equipping leadership culture.



# Vision: aware, committed and confident?

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**% committed to the church's vision is stable, but confidence that vision can be achieved has increased**

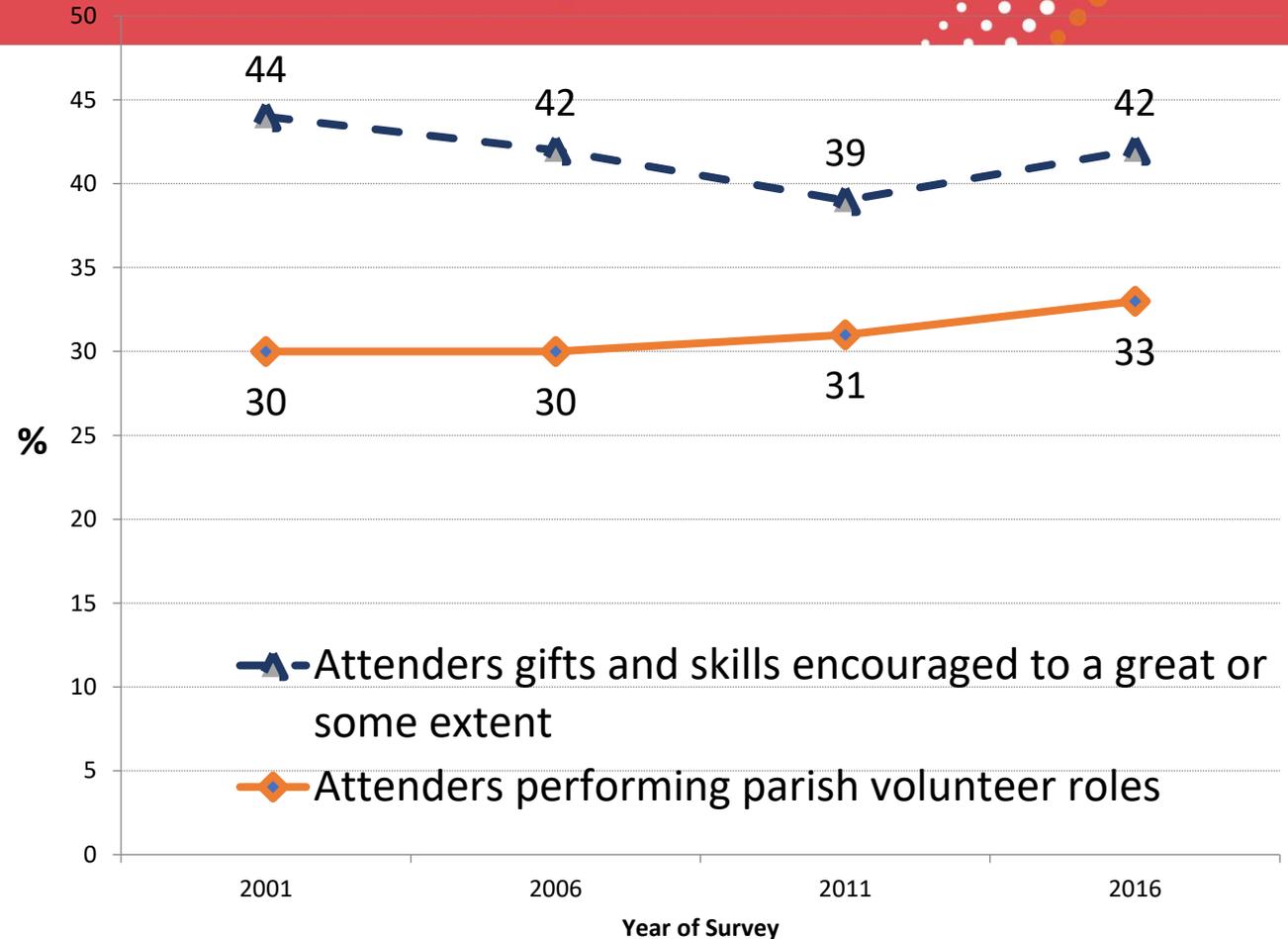


# Empowering leadership stable

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% who agree gifts & skills are encouraged is (largely) stable

% with parish volunteer roles has increased



# Empowering leadership stable

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# Openness to innovation increased

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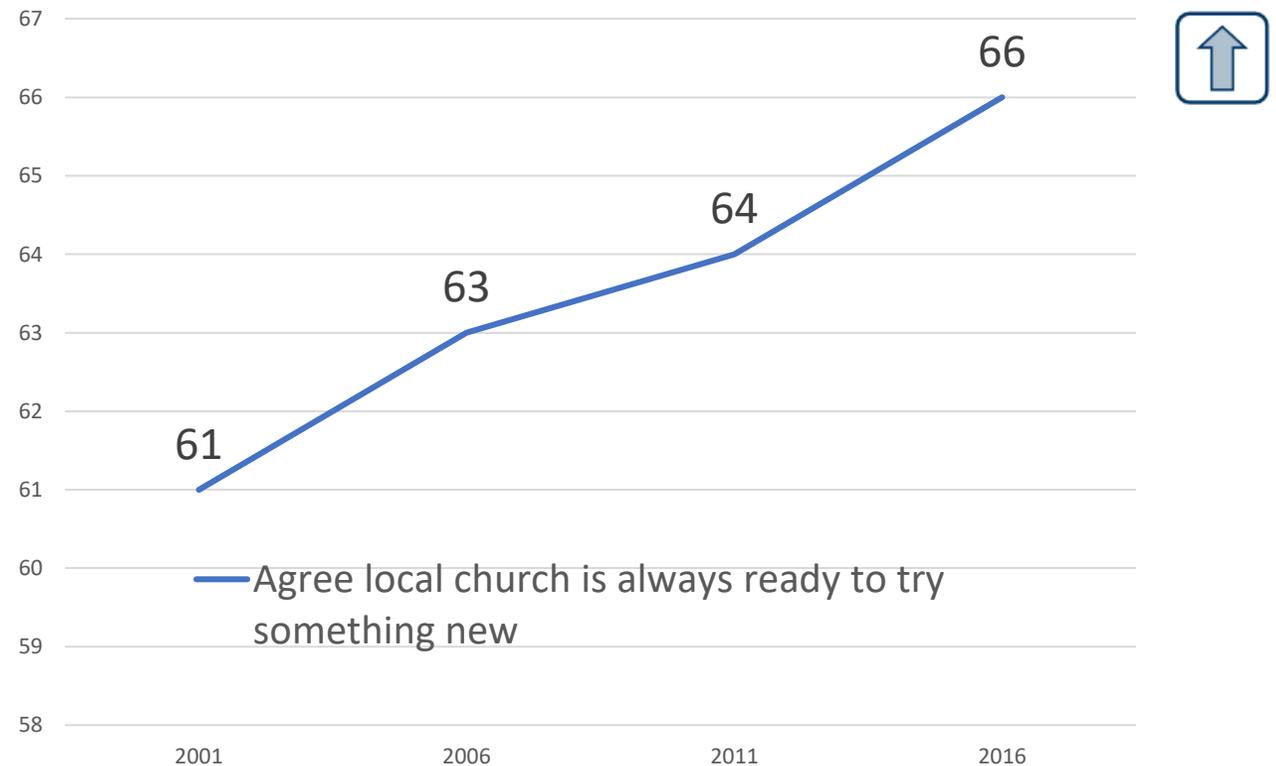
The percent who agree  
their local parish is ready  
for something new has  
increased



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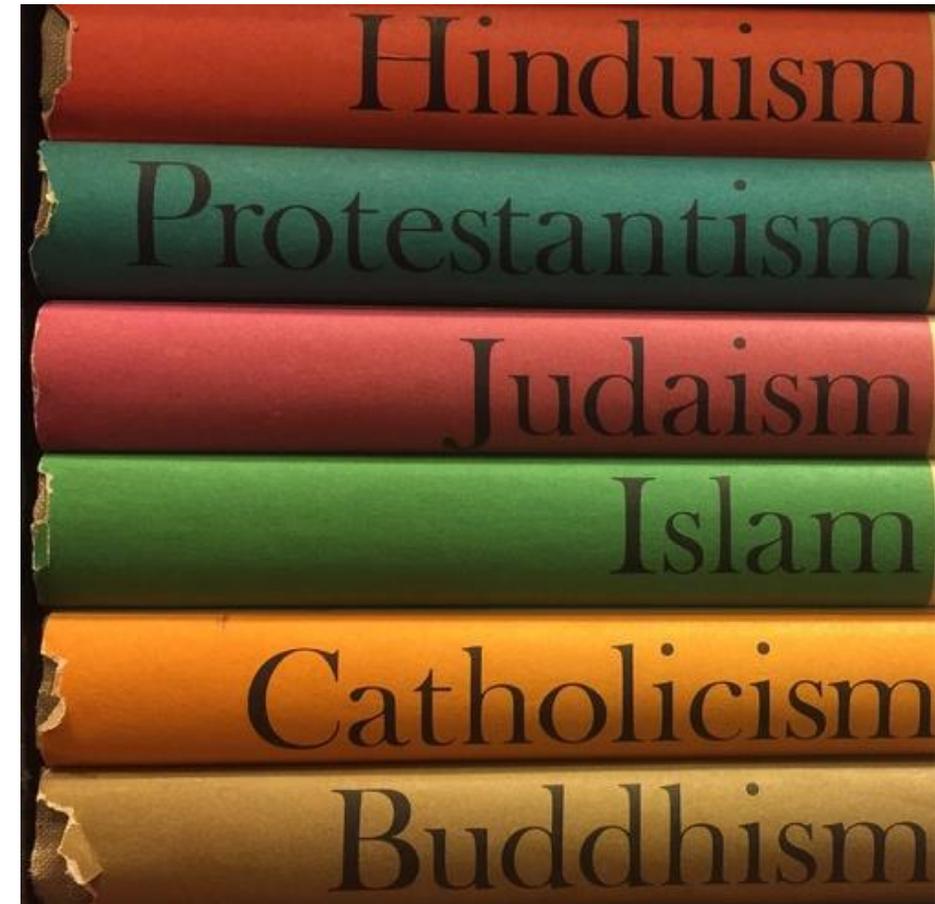


# In Summary

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*Some sources of vulnerability for Catholic parishes include*

- 1. Declining affiliation and attendance**
- 2. Contested role in society**
- 3. Changing demographics: education, age and ethnicity (key drivers for future)**



# In Summary

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***Yet...National Church Life  
Surveys across 20 years  
suggest that Catholic parishes  
are positioning for the future***



# In Summary

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***A higher percent  
of mass attenders are now  
committed to a vision for the future  
and open to new possibilities  
than previously***



# Conclusion

Age and ethnicity remain key drivers for the future of Catholic parishes.

Attention has turned to sharpening clarity about the core practices related to mission, discipleship, service and worship.

There is evidence of a degree of intentionality about the work of the church in mission.

Whether or not the hoped-for outcomes are forthcoming is yet to be seen.



# UNDERSTAND THE BIG picture

## References

Powell, R. (2021). A Profile of the Catholic Church: 1996 to 2016. August 2021, NCLS Research: Sydney.  
Powell, R., Pepper, M., Sterland, S., and Hancock, N., (2016). *NCLS Attender Surveys: 1996 - 2016*. [Data file]. Sydney, Australia: NCLS Research.



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