

SEEKING SUPPORT for AGED FOCUSED EVANGELISTIC PROJECT

Older church returnees – Who? Where? Why?

Partnership Research – University of South Australia (UniSA) & NCLS Research (NCLS)

Project reference group reps - Uniting Church, Anglican churches, Catholic Diocese and St Barnabas College (others welcome!)

We are seeking funds to support core activities of the research outlined below. The findings will offer insights into an overlooked phenomenon in church communities to date ie older church returnees. Findings will indicate ideas as to how to better recognise, harness and actively support this naturally occurring pattern within church communities.

Background

Increased life expectancy is a key feature and achievement of the 20th century and has implications for the time that people have to engage in a range of pursuits. People may intensify engagement in established activities, engage in new activities (the proverbial “bucket list”) and, they may return to activities and engagement that they pursued when younger. Our project focuses on the latter – specifically the returning to active church engagement by older people after many years away from the church community (returnees).

The spur for undertaking this research is that the returnee phenomenon is not a well-recognised or researched. Yet once recognised, our team of researchers was readily able to identify a number of people within our own faith communities who fitted this profile and conversations with ministers and other church members usually lead to people noting that they also know of people with a similar trajectory of non-engagement to engagement in ageing. A small number of publications exist looking at aspects of this phenomenon but there are no known Australian publications. Church attendees in Australia are more likely to be aged over 60 (48%) than the population at large (26%) (NCLS 2016) yet it is commonly presumed that this profile is an indication of continuity of engagement rather than a return to older patterns of activities.

For the church communities this project is significant as at present there is no ‘targeted’ response or awareness of these people, hence the opportunity to respond in innovative and appropriate ways is high (from zero to ???). Within Australian society as a whole it is important to explore reengagement in faith communities as part of seeking to reduce loneliness and isolation in older people’s lives.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of this mixed methods project is:

Qualitative (UniSA) – to explore the reasons and experiences given by older people for re-engaging with faith communities (Christian churches) after many years absence.

Quantitative (NCLS) – to investigate the characteristics of older church-attending returnees and the characteristics of their congregations across denominations who took part in the 2016 National Church Life Survey.

Qualitative research

Participants will be recruited from a mix of Christian denominations (Anglican, Uniting, Catholic to begin) metropolitan and rural, mixed numbers of regular Sunday attendance (less than 50, 50-100, 100+). An estimated 25 people will be interviewed. Participants will be recruited via networks of the research team aiming for maximum variation sampling (a mix of people!) within the criteria of beginning/returning to church less than 5 years ago; regular engagement ie at least monthly since then, non-attendance for 10 or more years prior to this time, and aged over 60. The focus will be on South Australia for pragmatic and conceptual reasons:

- SA has the second highest median population age at 40 (national average = 37)
- The qualitative research team is based at UniSA.

Interview questions will include:

- Why they (older people) left (or did not engage with) churches when younger.
- Why they have returned (spiritual, community or ?? drivers)
- What keeps them engaged when they return
- What is different now (compared to when they left/did not engage)
- What could churches do to attract more people like them?

Quantitative research

The aim of the quantitative arm of this project is to investigate the following questions:

1. How do older returnees differ from other older churchgoers in terms of demographics (eg marital status, education, ethnicity?).
2. Other differing qualities between older returnees and older church-goers (current church involvement, faith journey, attitudes to worship, leadership, involvement in non-church groups?).
3. Do certain denominations have more success in attracting older returnees?
4. Are there other features of churches more successful in attracting older returnees (urban? size? highly community-involved?).
5. Do older returnees differ from younger returnees across a range of characteristics?

Project timeframe

Month	Activity
Mid 2018	Initial project scoping, discussions re interests, ideas development
November 2018	Partnership discussions initiated
January 2019	Internal UniSA funds identified
February 2019	Casual UniSA Research Assistant contracted using internal funds
April 2019	Human Ethics application submitted (qual project cannot start without approval)
May 2019	Quantitative research initiated
June - Aug 2019	Qualitative commences. Recruitment and interviewing
August 2019	Project and Stakeholders Workshop day <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preliminary findings• Implications & Opportunities• Future directions (expansion of research eg interstate?)

Budget

Research	Details	UniSA/NCLS funds	Funds sought
Qualitative (UniSA)	Literature review, report writing, project mgt & coord, interviewing, transcription	\$3 350	\$6 290
Quantitative (NCLS)	Data access, preparation, analysis, reports	\$4 000	\$5 000
Workshop - Project & Stakeholders	Flights, Accom x 2 NCLS researchers, venue, food	\$250	\$1 450
TOTALS	(Total project value = \$20 340)	\$7 600	\$12 740

Please feel free to contact either Janette or Ruth if you have any questions:

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