

NUMERICAL CHANGE IN CHURCH ATTENDANCE: NATIONAL, LOCAL AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

David Voas
Professor of Population Studies
Institute for Social and Economic Research
University of Essex



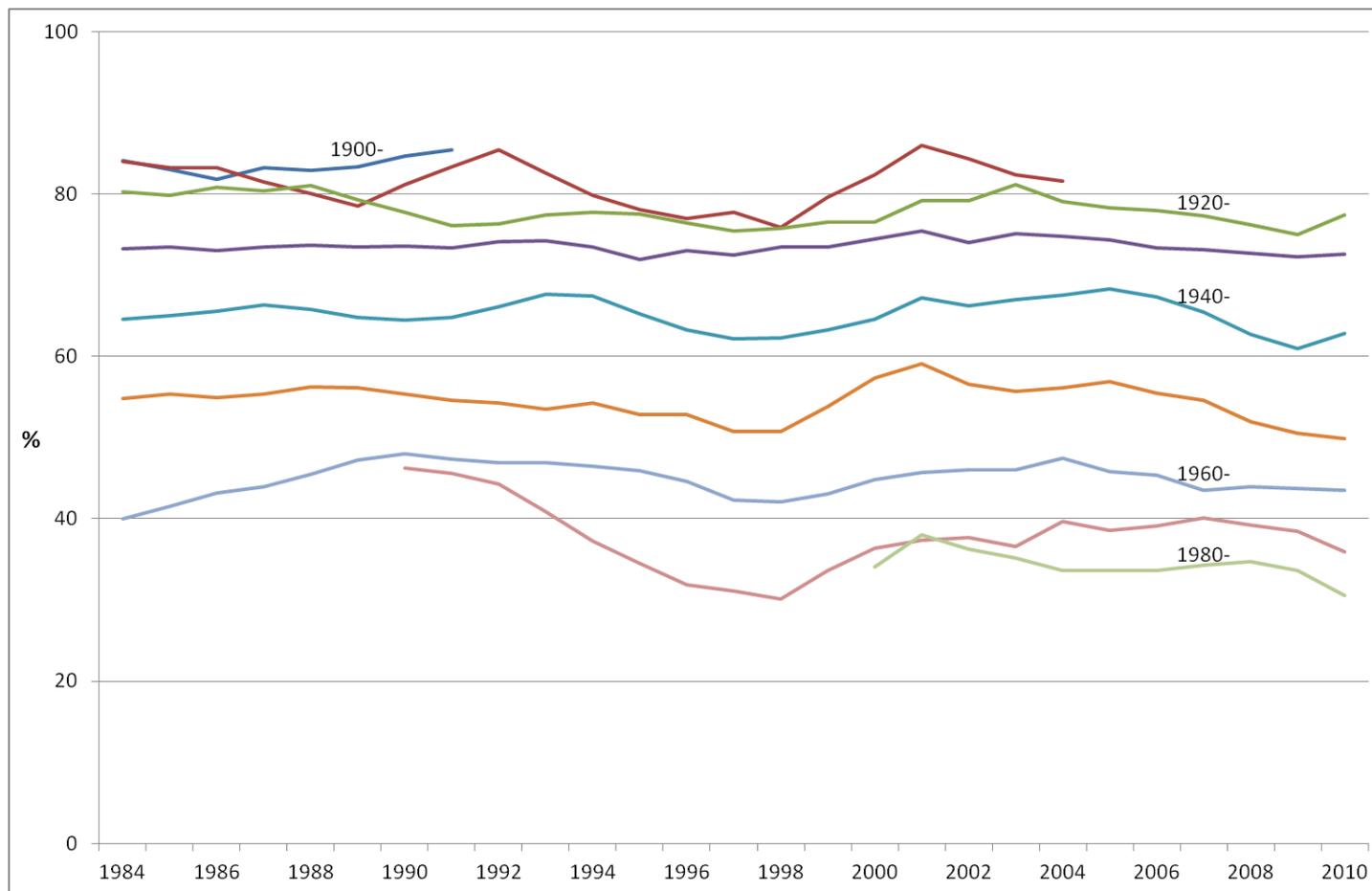
Outline

- The national context
 - generational replacement
 - youth participation
- The local context
 - demography
 - church profile
- The human factor
 - laity
 - clergy
- Resources

The problem of generations

- The Church must retain its young people if it is to thrive.
- Although many individuals enter or leave the Church as adults, net change within any given generation has historically been small.

Religious affiliation by decade of birth, 1983-2011; change is between, not within, generations ...

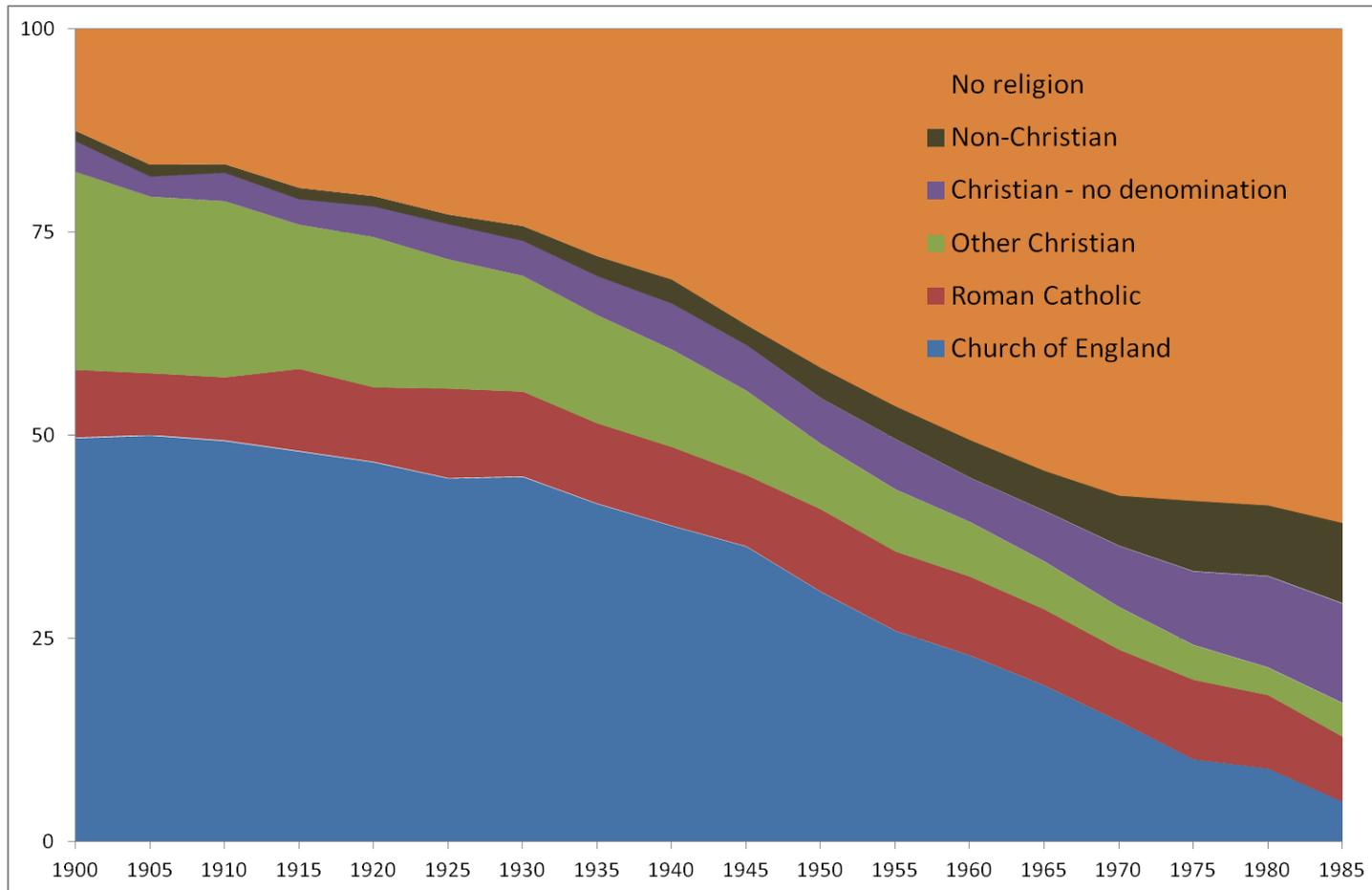


Implications

- If people belong in their 20s, they will probably stay for the rest of their lives ...
- But if they don't, it will be hard to bring them in.
- And unfortunately the Church of England has not done well in keeping young people.

Religious affiliation by year of birth

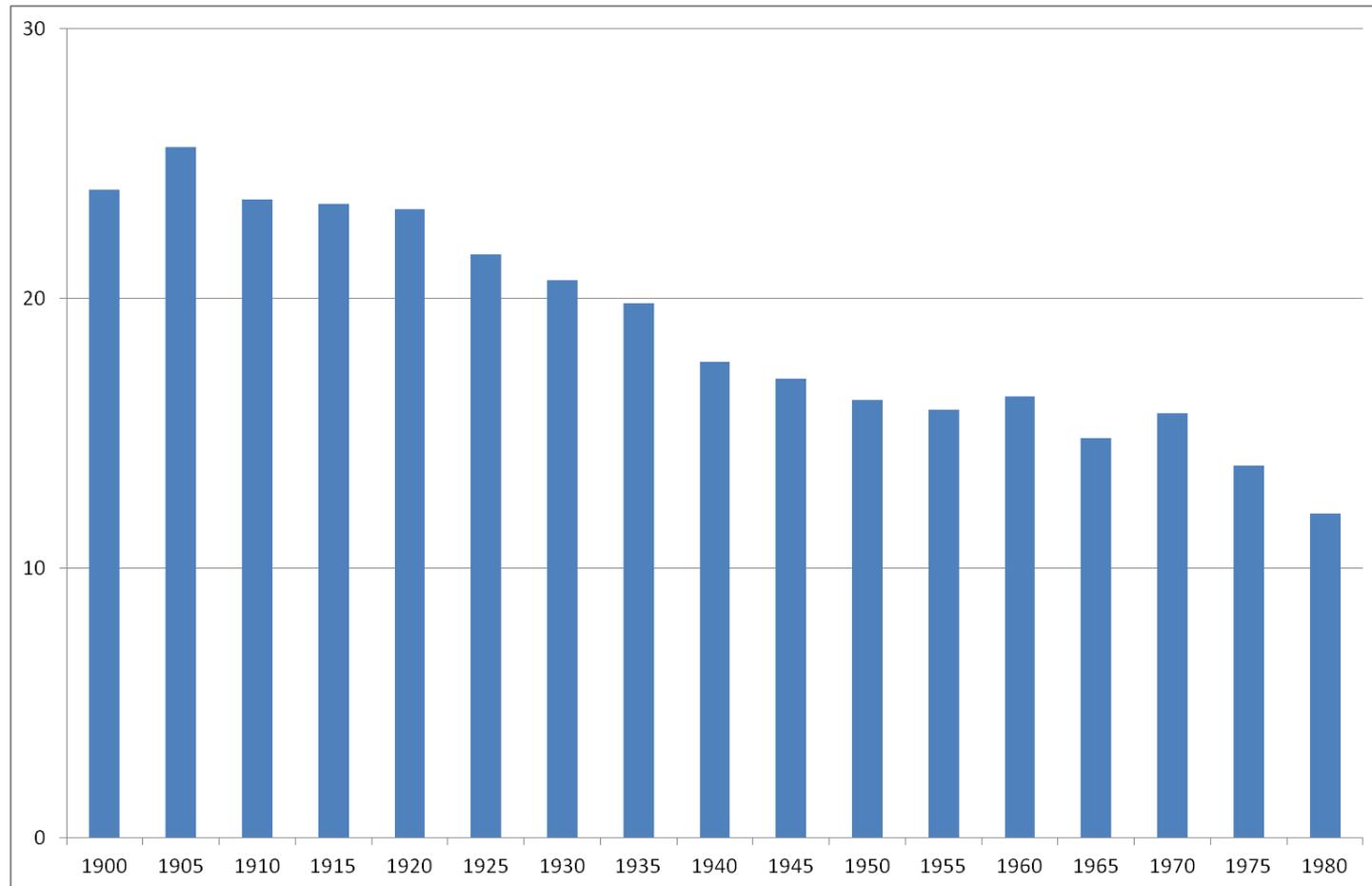
Among the old, 1 in 2 are C of E; among the young, 1 in 20



But if the marginal members have fallen by the wayside, perhaps those who remain are more committed.

- Although their proportion is so much lower, perhaps average participation among young Anglicans is higher
- At least as measured by churchgoing, that does not appear to be the case ...

Monthly or more frequent attendance for Anglicans by year of birth (%)



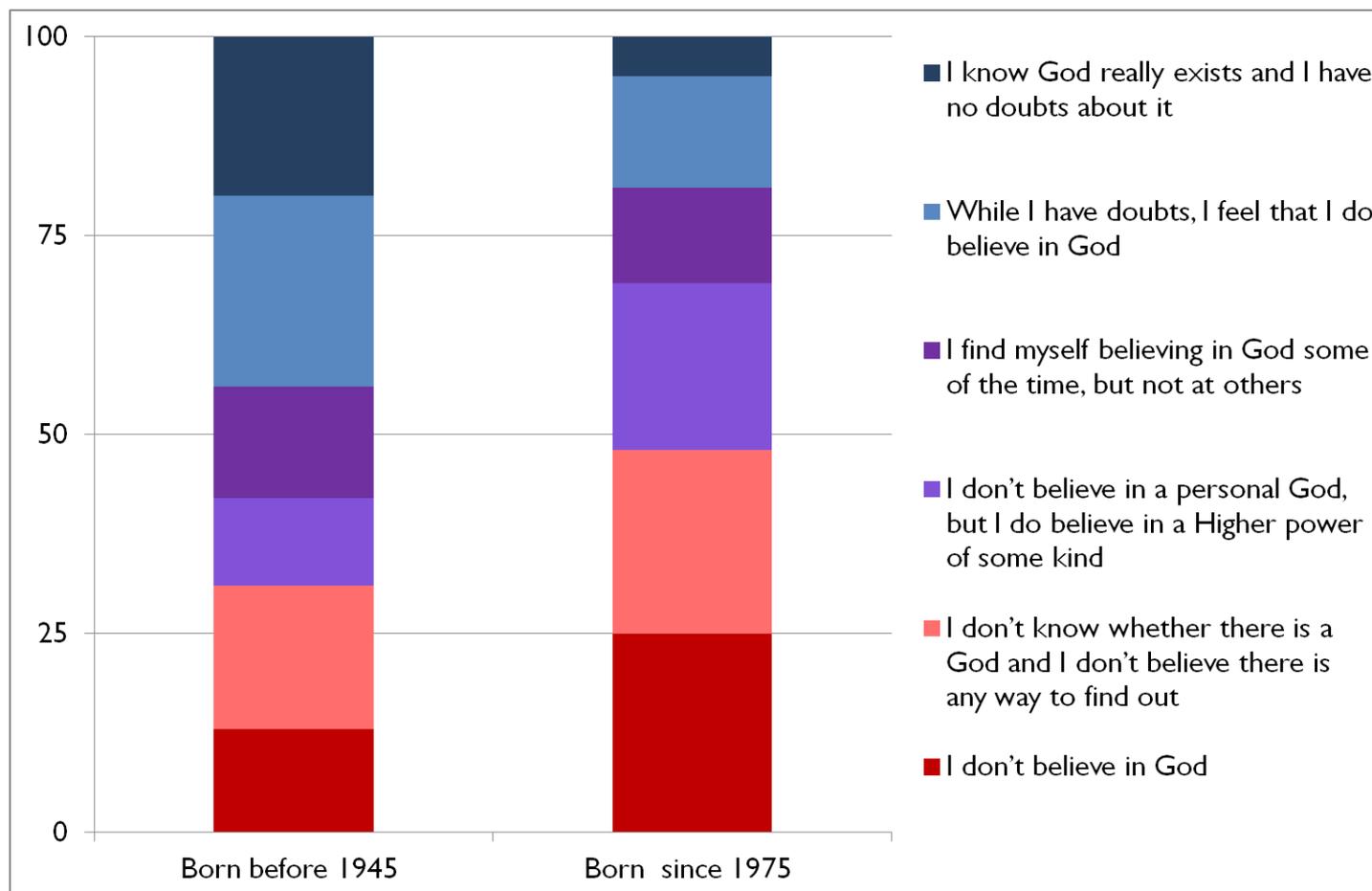
Maybe the opposite is true: perhaps there are just as many churchgoers, they are simply attending less often.

- The survey data offer little support for this conjecture.
- If we compare the current situation with the mid-1980s, more self-identified Anglicans say that they never go to church, but those who do claim to go a bit more often.

Back to the general population ...

- Belief is both a cause and effect of religious participation.
- Some programmes (e.g. Alpha) target belief, but efforts to bring believers back to church may (or may not) require less investment.
- How has belief in God shifted across the generations?

Belief in God among old and young



Isn't it ultimately about commitment?

- Of course people are busy -
- But if going to church isn't a priority for them, doesn't that tell us something?
- How much conviction do they really have?

Keeping young people in the Church

- If parents regard religion as important, why have they failed to pass it on to their children?
- Apologies for blaming the parents, but the decline seems to start in the family.
- Consider the following survey question ...

“Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? Please choose up to five.”

good manners

hard work

imagination

unselfishness

religious faith

obedience

independence

feeling of responsibility

tolerance and respect for other people

thrift; saving money and things

determination, perseverance

How many Anglicans selected religious faith as one of five especially important qualities for children to acquire?

- All Anglicans: 11%
- Active Anglicans (attending at least monthly): 28%
- Anglicans who regard religion as very important in their lives: 36%

Are there not enough children in church?

- In fact the ratio of children to adults is the same for weekly attendance as in the population as a whole
- But midweek attendance is a substantial proportion (38%) of the total for children.
- Scope for innovation and outreach.
- But possible double counting, and some events may not be very effective.

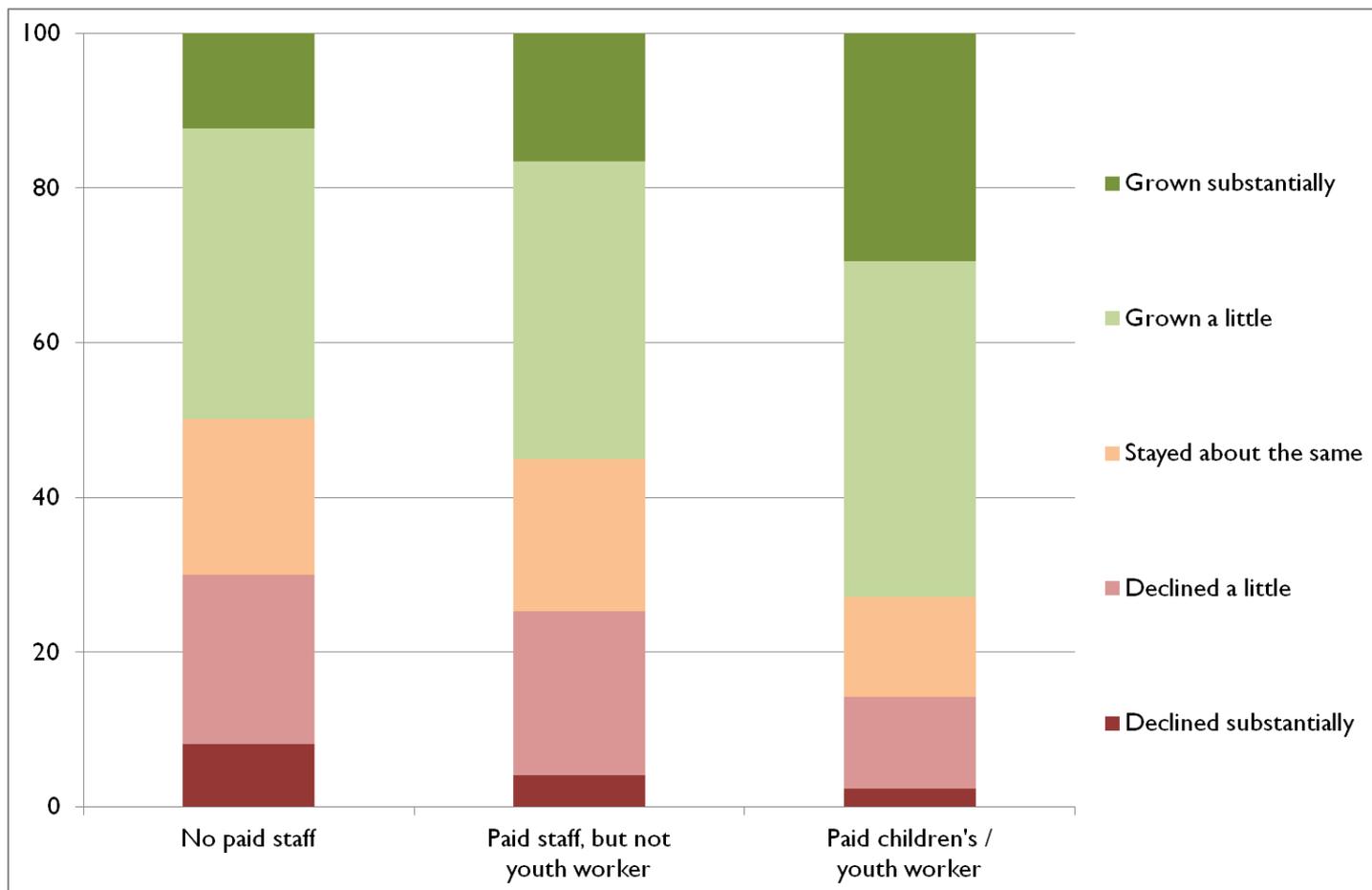
The transitions from childhood to teenage to young adulthood are critical

- Generational replacement is breaking down at the point where young people are making their own decisions about what to do.
- The best programmes are likely to involve new ways of building community with and among the young, and may require considerable amounts of time and effort.

For example ...

- Youth retreats, conferences or camps make a difference to growth – but no more than a fifth of churches offer them.
- Of all of the many types of paid staff, youth workers are most likely to be associated with church growth.

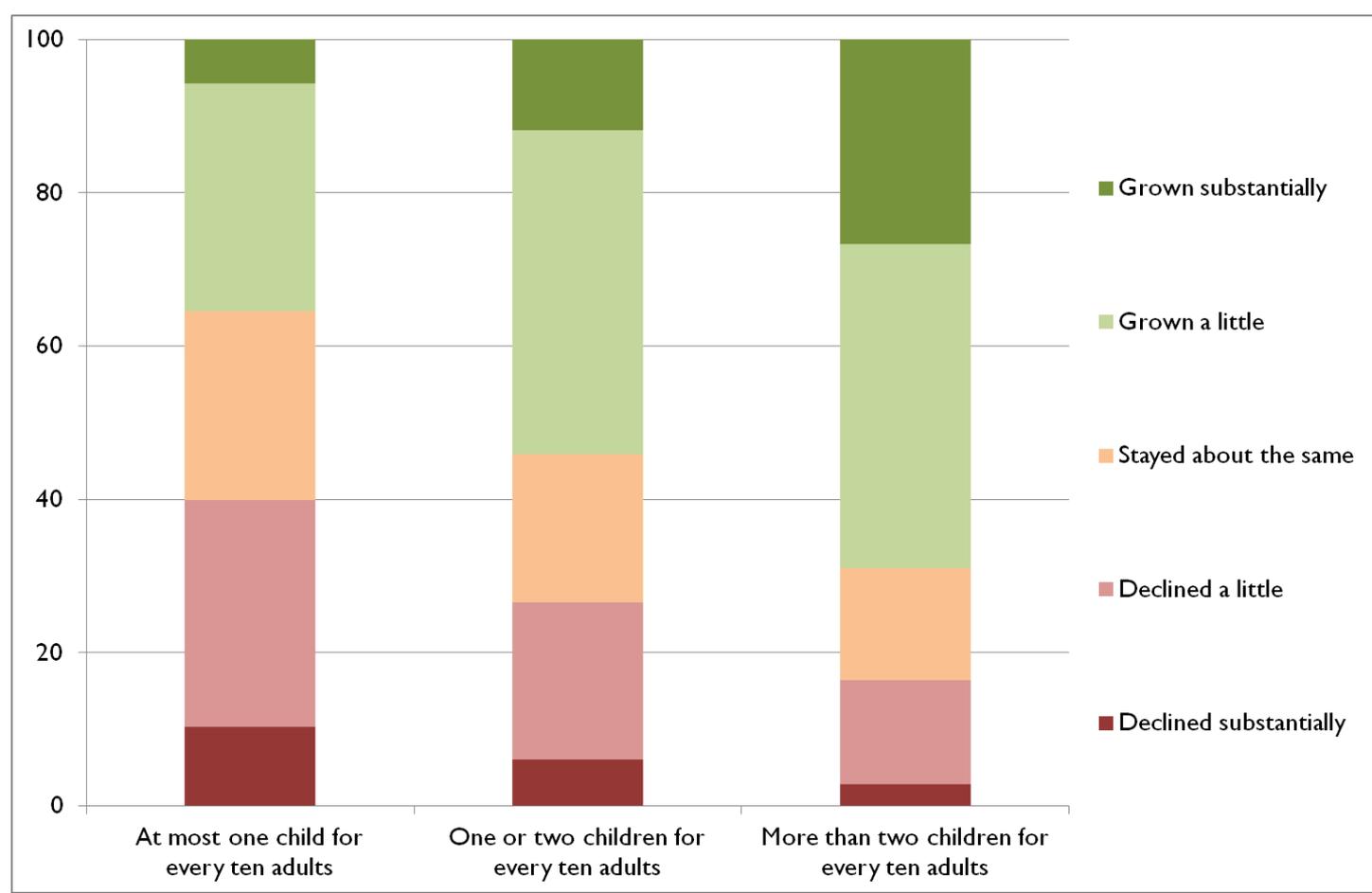
Churches that employ a children's / youth worker are only half as likely to be declining as those with paid staff in some other function



Keeping young people is essential for the Church as a whole, but it should also be a priority for local churches

- The presence of young people is correlated with all measures of growth, even growth in *adult* usual Sunday attendance.
- Of course families are attracted to churches that are growing, but it also seems plausible that children help to keep churches healthy.

Churches with young people are twice as likely to be growing



Baptisms: Some potential benefits for growth

- Non-churchgoers still seek rites of passage.
- Occasional offices bring in visitors.
- Good programmes may keep these families.
- In any event a bond is established.
- The cultural presence of the Church is strongly reinforced through occasional offices.
- The C of E should be the national church.

Festivals: Annual opportunities for outreach

- Christmas attendance is nearly three times average Sunday attendance.
- 2.6 million people attend at Christmas (Eve and Day) versus 1.4 million at Easter.
- The influx is especially large in rural and suburban areas.
- Could services could be devised for Easter, Pentecost/mid-summer and Harvest that would attract the unchurched?

The local context: geography and demography

- Need to distinguish the level of church attendance from trends in attendance.
- Attendance is often highest as a proportion of the population in rural areas where growth is hard to achieve.
- Growing churches are often found in cities where relatively few people are active Anglicans.

	<i>High share</i>	<i>Low share</i>
<i>Good growth potential</i>	Middle class suburbs	Urban areas with many Christian immigrants
<i>Poor recent growth</i>	Rural villages	Towns and cities with struggling white British populations

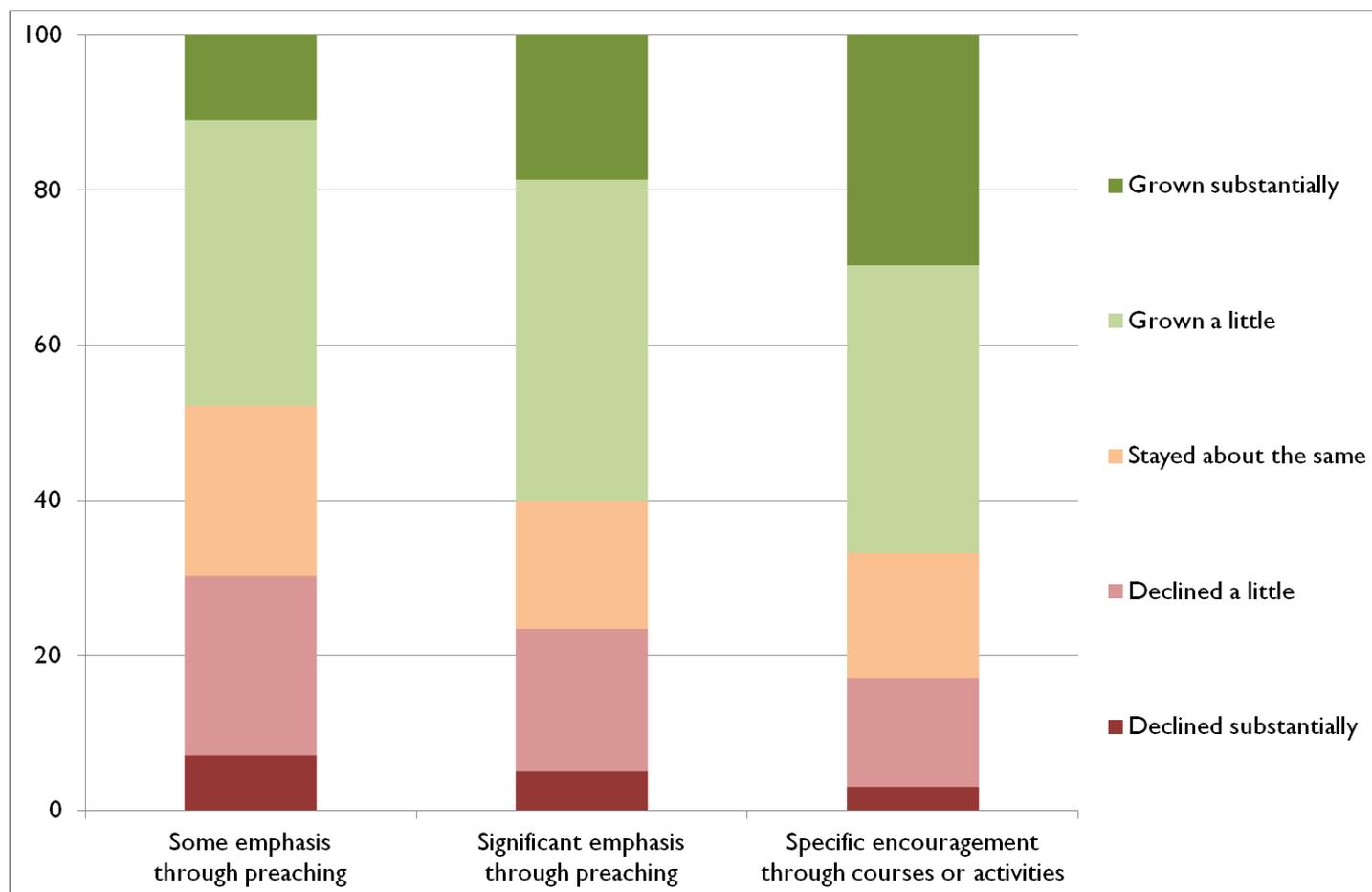
A footnote on local context

- Being connected with an over-subscribed school is helpful, if not easy to engineer!
- Having substantial numbers of ethnic minority Christians in the area can provide an even larger boost.

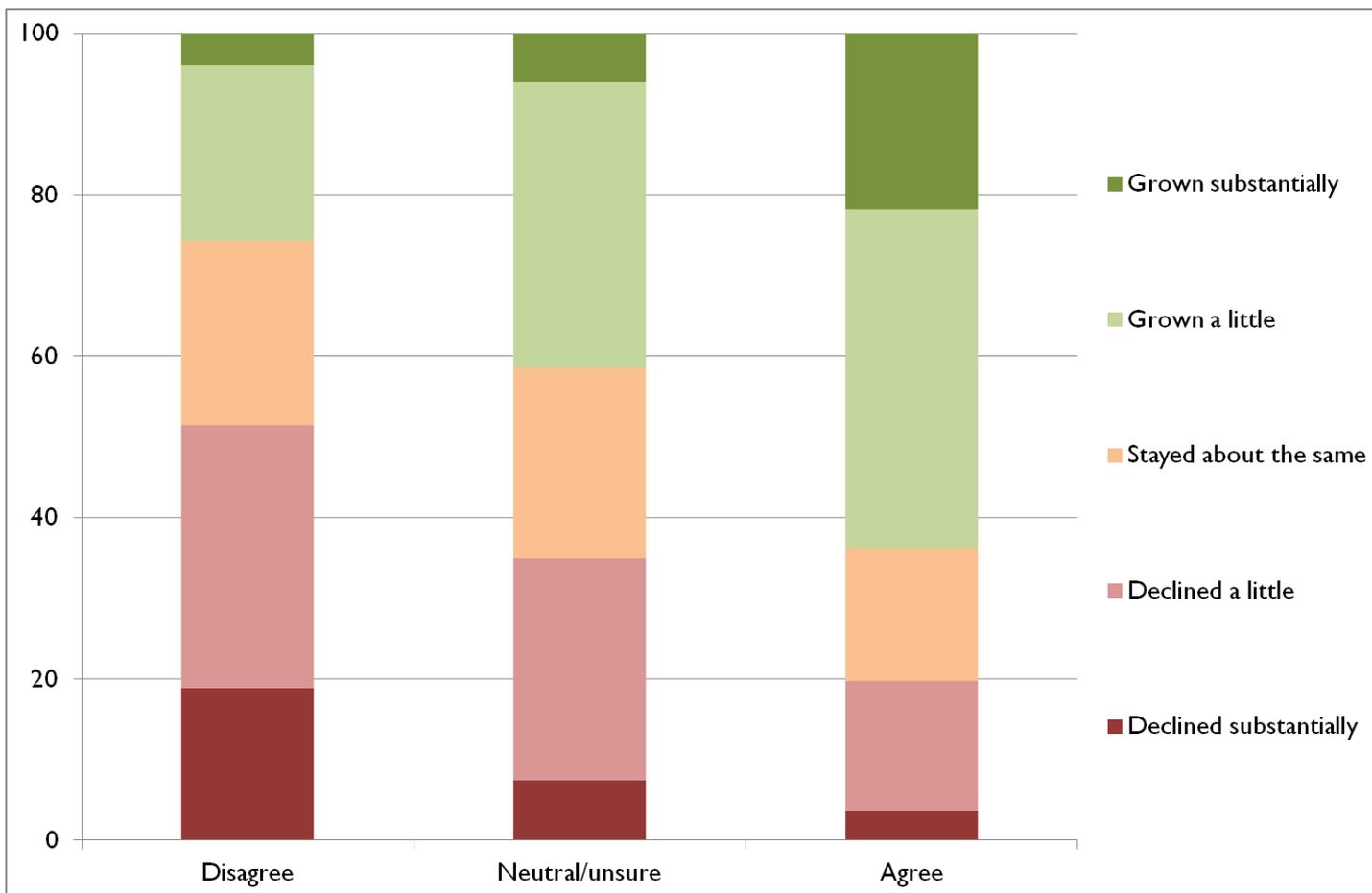
Church profiles: where growth is found

- There is no single recipe for growth; there are no simple solutions to decline.
- Are non-liturgical worship and contemporary music helpful?
- Sometimes, but not always. Strong growth is also found in some very high church settings.
- The danger is stagnation: old-fashioned services offered with little reflection.

Seek, and ye shall find: The impact of promoting Christian witness



“Our church has a clear mission and purpose”



Lay attitudes to growth, stability and change

- Everyone pays lip service to the desirability of growth.
- To grow, however, the existing congregation must be willing to experience change.
- New people disrupt what might be a cosy club.
- They may instigate changes in the timing and type of worship, in how and when the building is used, and in lay leadership.

Lay attitudes to growth, stability and change

- For existing churchgoers, what is the incentive to push for numerical growth?
- Of course in principle they want to spread the Word and serve the Church, but in practice they may prefer the status quo.

Lay leadership and growth

“Do the same people tend to serve in volunteer leadership roles year after year, or does your church rotate volunteer service among a larger number of people?”

- The same people tend to serve. 8%
- Although there is some rotation, it tends to be among a limited number of people. 19%
- We have a lot of rotation among persons in volunteer leadership roles. 47%

Clergy

- People are called to ordained ministry – but to do what?
- There are different gifts, not all associated with church growth.
- To point out that the characteristics of clergy make a difference to growth is not meant to imply that only those characteristics are valuable.

Clergy – personal characteristics

- Several are unrelated to church growth: gender, marital status, ethnicity.
- Younger ministers are more likely to report growth – as are those with children living at home.
- Length of tenure in the post is positively correlated with growth.

Theology ('churchmanship')

- Clergy were asked to place their theological orientation along three 7-point scales:
 - Catholic to Evangelical
 - Liberal to Conservative
 - Charismatic to non-Charismatic

Theology ('churchmanship')

- Self-reported growth is associated with evangelical, conservative and charismatic tendencies.
- Controlling for other characteristics nearly always reduces churchmanship to insignificance, however.

Evidence that churchmanship matters?

- Is conducting funerals for non-churchgoers part of the job? Few disagree, but many ministers merely ‘agree’ rather than ‘strongly agree’.
- Lack of enthusiasm is associated with growth (but which way does causality run?)
- This variable remains significant in some multivariate analyses.

Making growth a priority

“Which of these three church objectives is your priority?”

- Numerical growth
- Spiritual growth/discipleship
- Social transformation

Numerical growth was the priority for only 13% of respondents, but it is significantly associated with growth.

Personality type

- Used Francis Personality Type Scales, similar to Myers-Briggs inventory
 - Extraversion – Introversion
 - Sensing – iNtuition
 - Thinking – Feeling
 - Judging – Perceiving
- Also includes emotional stability

Key dimensions

- Extraversion – Introversion: Extraverts are energised by dealing with the outside world.
- Sensing – iNtuition: being methodical versus trusting inspiration. People who prefer sensing tend to rely on experience rather than theory; those who prefer to gain information in an intuitive way are likely to focus on possibilities and the bigger picture.

Personality and church growth

- Growth is associated with E and N.
- The combination of E and N is particularly effective.
- Based on self-reported numerical change,
 - I-S clergy are three times as likely to preside over decline as substantial growth;
 - E-N clergy are twice as likely to experience substantial growth as decline.

Why does personality matter?

For different types of people, some abilities come more or less naturally, including:

Empathising

Speaking

Innovating

Connecting

Managing

Envisioning

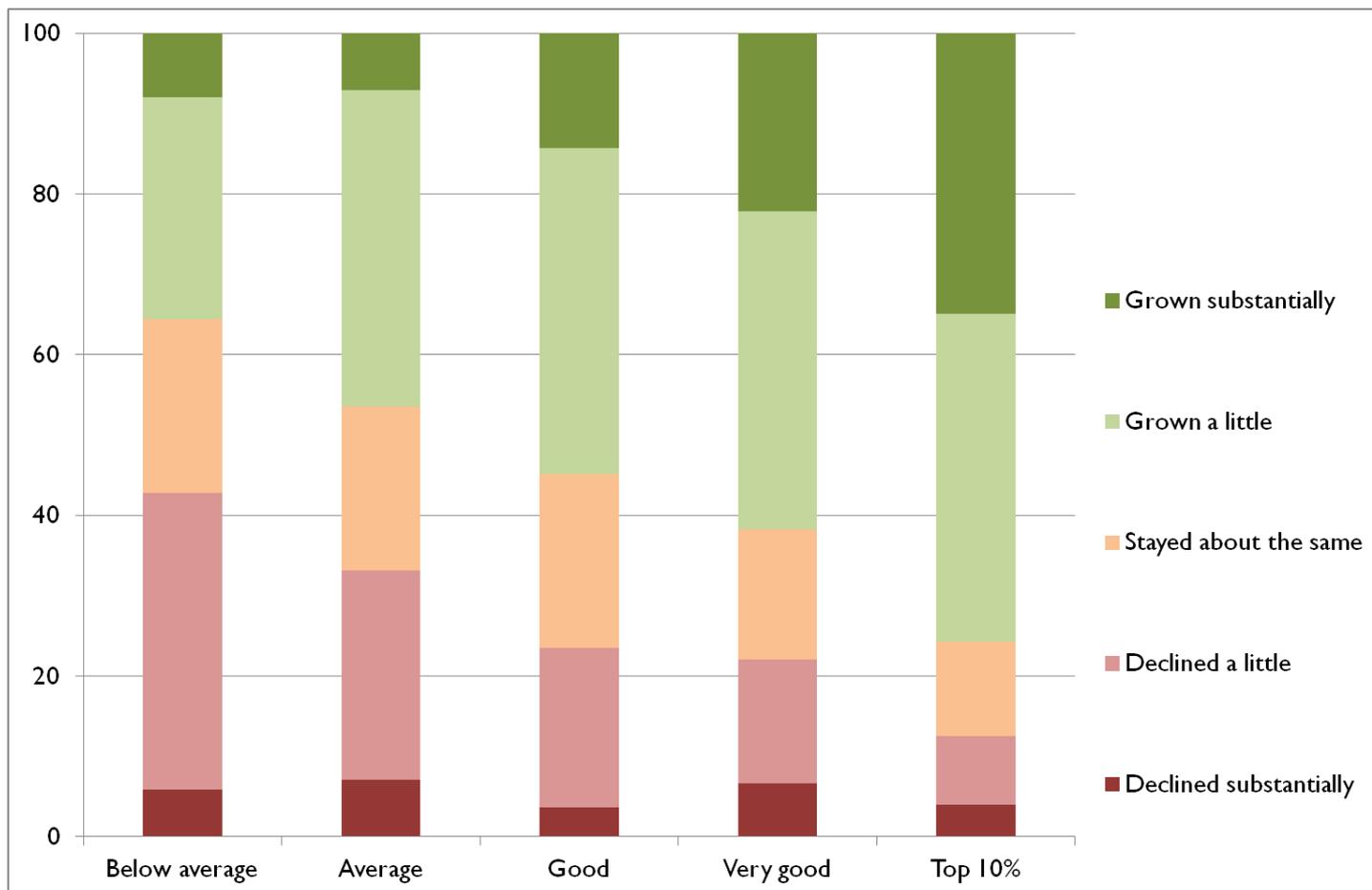
Persisting

Motivating

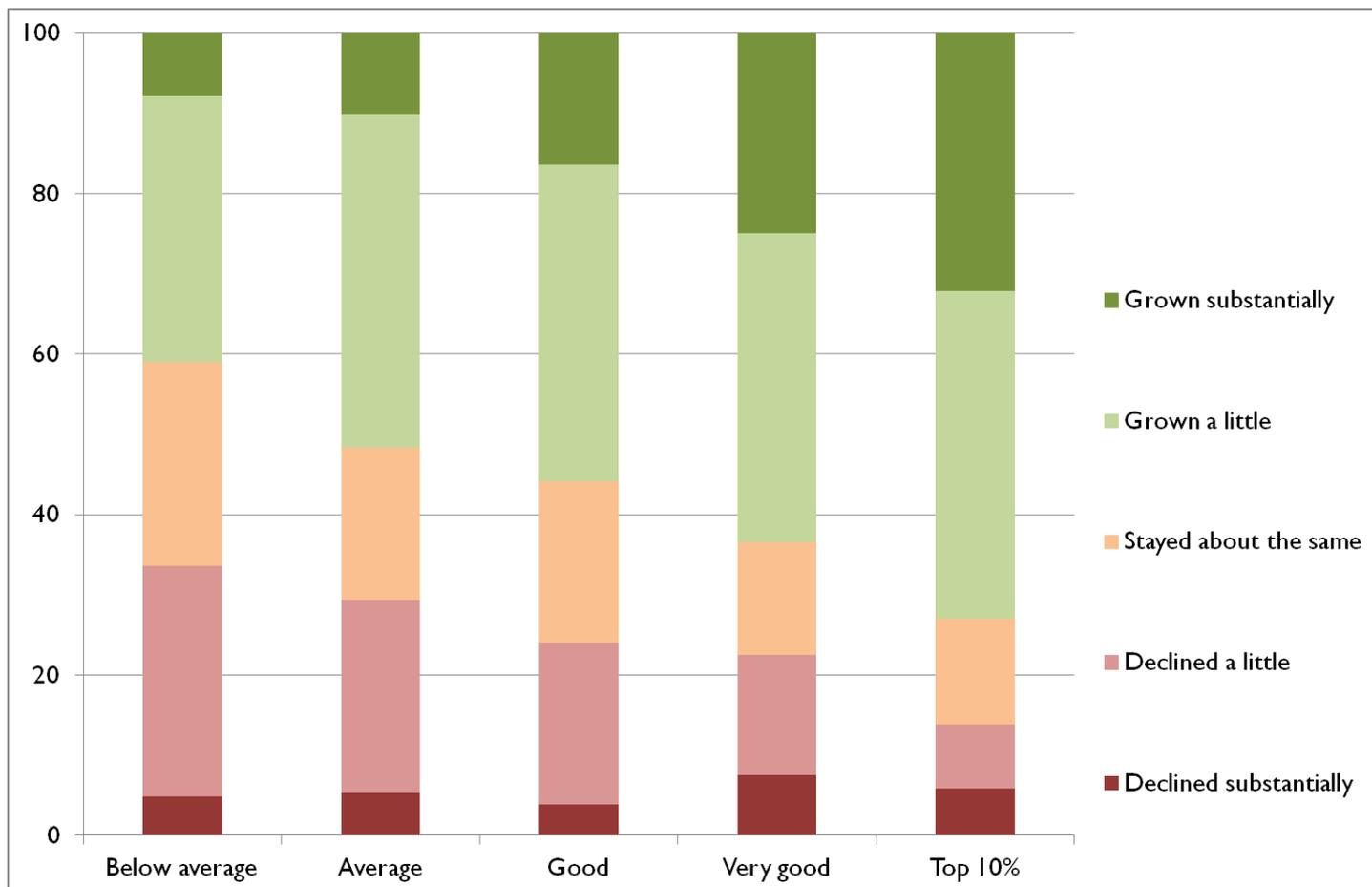
Leadership skills and church growth

- Motivating and envisioning have substantial positive effects.
- Persisting and empathising have negative effects, controlling for the others.
- They are not bad qualities to have, but those strengths may not be congruent with flexibility and a willingness to push people in new directions.

Motivating (generating enthusiasm and inspiring people to action)



Envisioning (having a clear vision for the future and being focused on achieving it)



Can leadership be taught?

- If so, it's not obvious that current training is effective.
- More than half of the survey respondents had been on a leadership course.
- No association was found between attendance and church growth.

Resources

	%
We manage reasonably well with the resources available	54
The need to fund our Parish Share/quota limits our ability to grow	43
Building maintenance is a significant burden	47
We devote too much time and energy to fundraising rather than mission and service	27

More resources, more growth

- For churches of any size, staff numbers (ordained and lay) are connected to growth.
- It is not financially feasible to have a full-time ordained minister exclusively dedicated to each parish; active and able lay involvement is crucial.
- Just as there is a vicious circle of declining numbers leading to declining resources, there can be a virtuous spiral of increased resource producing growth.

More specialisation?

- Parish geography matters less and less; people will go where the facilities and programmes are attractive.
- People already sort themselves by churchmanship and worship style; there is also some sorting by age, ethnicity, and so on.
- Deliberately or not, some churches will be responsible for distinct groups or functions: better to have good activities somewhere than mediocre provision everywhere.

To sum up – first the big picture ...

- Retaining young people is essential.
- No amount of evangelism among adults is likely to compensate for the loss of people entering adulthood.
- The good news: a churchgoer at 25 is likely to be a churchgoer at 75.
- The interests of local churches coincide with those of the whole Church.

Point to note

- Many children have no religious upbringing, but churches are mostly doing what they can.
- The main problem comes in late adolescence and early adulthood: the transition from family to independent participation.
- Specialist provision that most parishes are unable to offer is needed; how should it be organised?

Points for reflection

- How can different types of areas be served best?
- Can Christmas come more than once a year? Could special services at Easter, Pentecost and Harvest become popular among the general public?

How should we do church?

- Too much is done by default, following old patterns: the result is stagnation.
- Success is not a function of churchmanship or worship style: it is the product of reflection.
- It is critical to think and to choose:
 - Why are we here?
 - What is our mission?
 - Are we looking inwards or outwards?
 - How are we going to be Christians?

Laity: Both problem and solution

- Growth depends in large part on the current membership, but what are the incentives?
- Most are free riders, and others may be more interested in club goods than in expansion.
- Congregations need to understand that their fate is in their own hands; the parish church is not a public utility run for the benefit of existing members.

Clergy: Both solution and problem

- Growth depends in large part on the aptitudes and abilities of the ordained leadership.
- It helps to be an extravert concerned with the bigger picture and to be good at motivating people.
- Youth is an asset, and the Church could use more young adults with a vocation for ministry.
- Are the right criteria used for selecting ordinands? Are the right clergy deployed in the right places?

Resources

- Is the generalist parish church well suited to the 21st century?
- Should there be a deliberate move towards a mixed economy of superstores, boutiques and corner shops?
- Even if the parish system remains intact, should there be more functional specialisation?
- Can lay leadership take more responsibility in more churches – and if not, are those churches viable?