



Unlocking growth in your parish

The power of invitation

We all want our parishes to be healthy and growing. Pope Francis dreams of a ‘missionary impulse, capable of transforming everything’ and inspiring ‘a constant desire to go forth and ... elicit a positive response from all whom Jesus summons to friendship’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §27). At the heart of this missionary impulse is a people confident and equipped to invite others into relationship with Jesus and the Church.

Building a strong invitational culture is an essential element of a missionary parish. In the past, all that was required to grow a parish was to build a church, open the doors and welcome those who came. Today, however, ‘We cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, §15). People are no longer coming to our doors. There is a prior step required. We need to go out, beyond our doors, to meet people where they are and then invite them in.

First, however, we need to examine our motives. Are we inviting people because we want them to make friends with each other and with God? Is it about what we want *for* people or what we want *from* them?

We need to be challenged by the question ‘Whose Church is it?’ It’s said that the Church is one of the few, perhaps only, organisations that exist for the benefit of those outside it. Our mission is not complete until every man, woman and child has had the opportunity to meet Jesus and be invited into our community. It is as if we are saying to everyone, ‘This is your Church. It is not just for us; in fact, we are incomplete without you.’

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Ch__ch? What is missing? U R

The simple act of inviting a friend to come with you to church can unleash growth in our parishes. It so simple that even a child could do it—and often does. So why can’t we?

Why don’t we invite?

Sometimes, Catholics can be resistant to invitation—we tend to think of it a ‘Protestant’ thing. In *Unlocking the Growth*, Michael Harvey describes a number of ‘congregational locks’—the factors that hold us back from inviting our friends, neighbours and co-workers to the parish.

- **Lack of confidence in the quality of parish Masses and events**

The quality of the music, preaching and welcome in our parish can make us hesitate to invite others. We may find it unengaging ourselves and feel reluctant to invite others. Perhaps a visitor is unlikely to see the problems that are holding us back, or maybe our own attitudes and participation in the liturgy and community life need attention.

- **Fear of rejection**

We might be afraid of being rejected by the person we invite. We worry that the invitation will damage our relationship with the person, or that we will be judged as ‘pushy’. We might be afraid that the person being invited might ask questions that we don’t know how to answer, or that they will not be made welcome by the community.

- **Not knowing how to invite**

Invitation is rarely discussed in parishes. Generally, parishioners are neither encouraged to invite nor trained in how to do it. Parishes that develop an actively invitational culture teach their parishioners how to invite, and they celebrate the invitation itself, not whether the invitation is accepted. Success in invitation is one person inviting one person—regardless of whether they say yes.

- **Lack of expectation and trust in God’s action**

While professing belief in a God who is real and active in the world today, we nonetheless frequently don’t expect God to actually *be* real and active. We can feel powerless in the face of relentless and overwhelming cultural forces, and lack a confident expectation that God is working in the hearts and lives of the people around us. Experiencing a sense of gloom about our parish is a serious impediment to invitation.

Each of the ‘locks’ above can prevent us from inviting the people we know to our parish. Based on broad research across a range of demographic groups, the [2018 and 2019 National Church Life Survey \(NCLS\)](#) [Australian Community Surveys](#) give us some great insights that can unlock our potential to invite and grow.

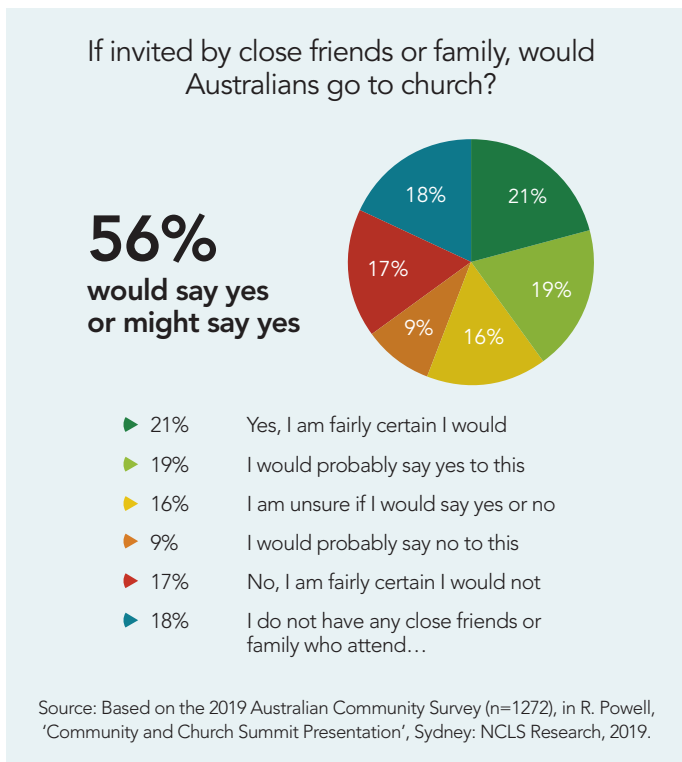
Five clues for inviting Australians to church

1. Make and keep friends.

We can get so caught in a church bubble that we can find ourselves without friends outside the parish. When we think about inviting someone to church, we cannot think of anyone we know who doesn't already attend. The NCLS research shows that 51 per cent of Australians do not have a close friend or family member who attends church. However, it also shows that knowing someone who goes to church makes a person more likely to be attracted rather than repelled by Christianity, and also more likely to attend if asked. Relationships matter. Make and nurture relationships with people—especially people in your neighborhood and workplace who aren't church-goers.

2. Try inviting them.

We have far greater influence on our close friends and families than we realise. Most people who join a church community go because they are invited or were influenced by someone they know. We avoid inviting our friends and family to our parish because we think they are not interested or will say no. However, when Australians were asked whether they would go to a church event if they were invited by a close friend or family member, 40 per cent of people responded that they 'probably would' or were 'fairly certain' they would say yes, and another 16 per cent were undecided. That's 56 per cent of people, more than half, who might come!



3. Invite people who used to attend.

A large (though decreasing) portion of Australians have attended a church in the past. The survey shows that people who used to attend a church are more likely to accept an invitation than those who have never attended a church. So, if you want to start inviting, start with people you know who used to attend.

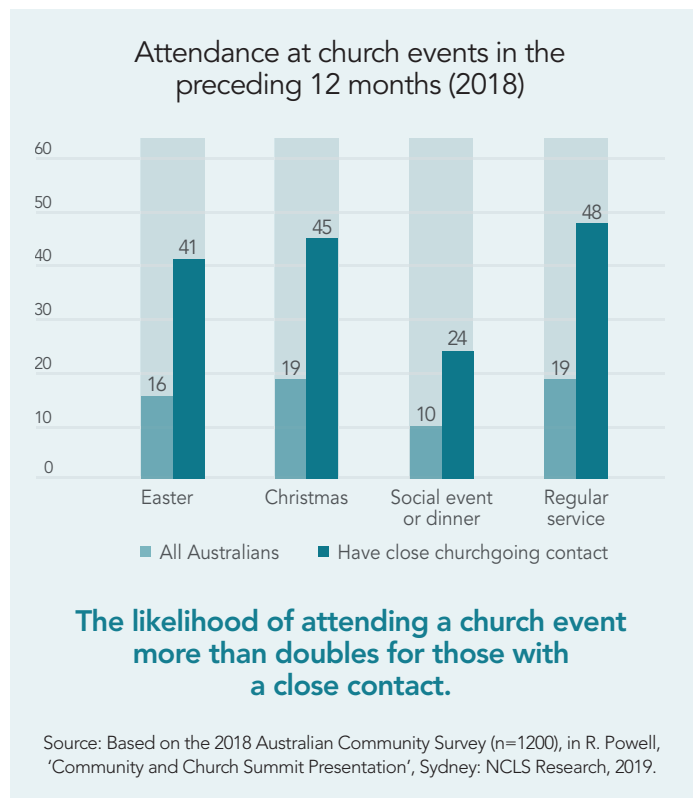
In 2016, a parish in Broken Bay Diocese asked parishioners to think of someone they know who used to come to church, to pray for them and then to invite them to a free barbecue lunch and video at the parish. They had 180 people attend the barbecue! Of those 180 people, 32 accepted an invitation to a ten-week evangelising process.

4. Have fun with friends, food and music.

Attendance at a church event is linked with close relational contact. In 2019, 73 per cent of Australians who had at least one close friend or family member who went to church went to a church event themselves. This compares with just 33 per cent of Australians without a close contact.

What should you invite people to? Over half of those surveyed said they would go to a meal if they were invited (54 per cent), or to a musical event (51 per cent).

Friends, food and music seem to be an attractive combination. These 'shallow entry points' are easy for people to invite their friends and family to and also easy for newcomers to attend. They are far less intimidating than a church service.



5. Build confidence.

Our post-lockdown parishes are going to be very different places. Already in steady decline, habitual church attendance is likely to plummet. Parishes are increasingly open to trying new ways of doing things. If we want to become missionary parishes with a vision to reach out to our communities, then we need to build the confidence of our people to invite newcomers into our parishes.

Newcomers who join a faith community generally:

- **do not go 'church shopping'**, comparing different parishes, programs and websites. They come because someone they know invited them. This is in contrast to people who 'transfer', swapping parishes after comparing and looking for something better. Real parish growth is about attracting newcomers, not transfers.
- **come because 'something is missing'**. They sense there is more to life than they are currently experiencing, and they want to explore who Jesus is and what faith might mean for their lives. They are unsure, tentative and easily scared away.
- **stay because they find community**. They are welcomed, make friends and feel as though their presence matters. In an often lonely world, people yearn for a place to be accepted and loved, and where they can find meaning and purpose.
- **belong and behave before they believe**. Newcomers are open to learning and growing in faith. However, people first need to feel as though they belong and are accepted as they are. They will attend parish events and join the community, often before they make a commitment to a relationship with Jesus.
- **are positive and confident about the future**. Many parishes attest to the fact that our new believers are often our most positive and enthusiastic parishioners. They have found a relationship with Jesus that gives meaning and purpose to their life and they want to share this with others.

God gives the growth

During this pandemic, beneath the obvious health crisis, there is an ongoing epidemic of loneliness, social disconnection, mental health problems and addiction. Now, more than ever, we need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, who is stirring people's hearts, awakening within them a yearning for 'more'. Too often, however, we lock the Holy Spirit down, unaware of how blinkered we are, fearing rejection or not expecting God to act. Let us implore our God to unlock our hearts and our parish doors, releasing us into a world desperate for his love.



But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

—Romans 10:14–15

Pray and invite

- **Who could I invite?**

Who do I know in my friendship group, local community, workplace or sports club? Prayerfully ask God to give you the names of five people to invite. Write the names down and pray for them and for an opportunity to invite them.

- **How should I invite?**

Keep it simple—for example, 'We are having _____ at our parish. It will be interesting. Would you like to come?' Then stop. Wait for their questions.

We can make invitations complicated because we feel uncomfortable. Make your invitation short, personal and clear. Anticipate and offer solutions to any barriers to them attending, such as a lack of transport or childcare, or a fear of not knowing anyone.

- **Practise and pray.**

Find a buddy and pray together. Then practise your invitations with each other, giving feedback. When you have practised your invitation with someone, it is much easier to do it when the time arrives. Inviting via a verbal conversation is much scarier, yet far more effective, than a text or social media post!

We are available to discuss strategies with you and/or your team and to facilitate sessions (remotely) on many topics and issues. Just ask!

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