

CHURCHES MORE POSITIVE IN 2023, WELL PLACED TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY WELLBEING IN 2024

The major takeaways from a variety of information that the BUV collected through 2023 indicate an improved state for our churches compared to the past couple of years, with an alignment on our core priority, being mission.

Pleasingly, our 2023 Flourishing Church Survey results indicated that **over 80% of churches are flourishing** in the areas of **Spirituality, Congregational Engagement and Structure and Processes**. Areas that had the lowest percentage of churches reporting flourishing results were Evangelism (38%), Justice (54%) and Leadership (59%), but interestingly all reported increases of over 50% in 2023.

Despite Evangelism being the only area that reported less than 50% flourishing, it had increased substantially from 11% in 2022.

Mission, outreach and evangelism clearly provide challenges for our churches and congregation members, and resources and training in this area were the most frequently requested response for BUV equipping and focus in the years ahead.

The major sentiments across congregations were **positivity, hope, enthusiasm and cautious optimism / anticipation**. There was a definite improvement in the general sentiment for pastors and leaders, who reported more positivity and excitement about the future - although this can be balanced by a feeling of exhaustion at times.

Churches have seen a **slight increase in attendance** but most have not yet reached the consistency of their pre-Covid level and are seeing some **decrease in the frequency of attendance**.

Churches are making changes to stay relevant to the time, such as a renewed focus on prayer, preaching appropriate for newcomers, hospitality for newcomers, online programs and more of an outward focus.

Overall, the research results suggest that despite signs of a general lack of hope within the wider community, with specific fears such as cost of living and mental health anxiety, the **church is well placed to provide support to community wellbeing into the future**.

BUV ANNUAL RESEARCH METHODS

The BUV initiates research each year using surveys throughout the year in order to assist in understanding the state of our union, the areas of strength and weaknesses, and the opportunities to focus on for the future. In addition, this year, we also specifically collected some information from the non-church going members of the community (external to the BUV), in order to understand the community landscape, areas of strength and weakness and the challenges community members are facing.

Although these insights are not included below, we also take into account the feedback we receive from our field staff who are talking with pastors and leaders of churches each day and our annual statistical surveys, that provide insight into attendance, membership and

baptisms trends, numbers participating in community outreach, and giving trends.

This article contains insights from the research listed below:

1. Pastors Survey – Nourish (May)
2. Flourishing Church Survey (June – July)
3. Church Pulse – (July)
4. Discernment Process – Consultation forum (March), Members Dinner (May)
5. Pain Points – external (June)

This research forms the basis for the BUV Support Hub strategic planning and priority setting for 2024.

1. Pastors Survey – Nourish

At Nourish in May, 91 Pastors took part in our 2023 **Pastors Survey** which centred mainly on the values and distinctive aspects of the wider BUV and the significance of mission to our Union. The questions asked and the most frequent answers are listed below, additionally with some key quotes from responders:

What sets Victorian Baptists apart?

Diversity, sense of community/ community focused, togetherness/ united, mission focused, autonomy and freedom of conscience, multicultural

“Our commitment to each other in forming disciples, exercising governance, discerning direction, building the church (body of Jesus)”

How would you rate mission as a priority in your church?

Highest	19.4%	Average	16%
High	61.3%	Low	3%

“There is a uniqueness in our voluntary fellowship and the spirit of cooperation that is fostered when vision and faith is the main thing that draws us together, rather than hierarchies of power and governance structures. There is a freedom which comes from being invited in to the cooperative mission of the Baptist family rather than a coercive leadership authority”

Thinking of the wider BUV, what would you say are the actual values of the Baptist Union of Victoria – or what describing words would you use

Care and Support, Christ-Centred, Community, Mission / Outreach

Actual values of the BUV - “Mission and community oriented churches with a diverse range of ethnicities.”

Do you agree that mission should be centre of the BUV strategy?

96% Yes 4% No

“We just don’t talk about loving our community, we actually do many practical things to make a real difference”

One area for BUV to focus on in 2024

Mission / Evangelism / Outreach, Discipleship, Generations and raising up and training leaders

Does being a Baptist church make a difference?

Yes 54% No 46%

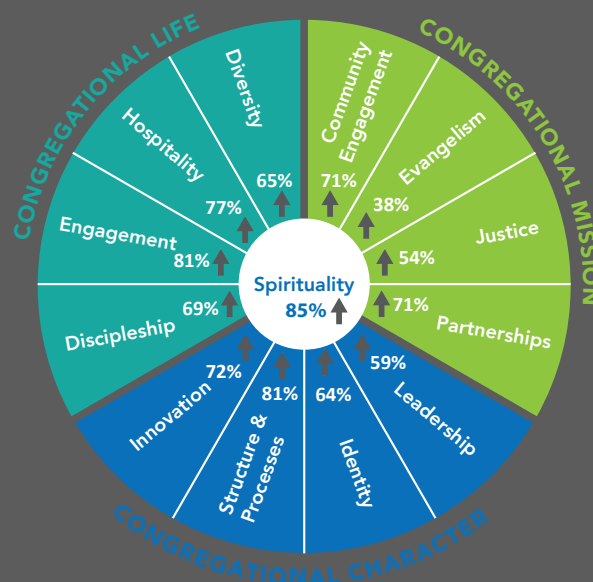
2. The Flourishing Church Survey

The **Flourishing Church Survey** received an improved response with a significant increase in the number of churches submitting surveys.

Results improved in all areas of the survey, which indicated a more positive year, but also showed that improvements made to the format of the survey in 2023 had made it easier for leaders to respond to each aspect.

Pleasingly, spirituality and evangelism had the highest increases of all aspects, with spirituality moving from 40% of churches flourishing in 2022 (those reporting a rating of 7+) to 85% in 2023, and evangelism moving from 11% in 2022 to 38% in 2023. Despite the large increase in evangelism results, this aspect remains the lowest of all in the survey and is the only aspect with under 50% of churches reporting flourishing results.

Also noteworthy, congregational engagement improved by 69% from the previous year, with 81% of churches flourishing in this aspect; and community engagement improved by 61%, with 71% of churches flourishing.



Areas that had the lowest percentage of churches reporting flourishing results were Evangelism (38%), Justice (54%) and Leadership (59%), but interestingly all reported increases of over 50% in 2023.

3. Church Pulse

Our **Church Pulse** is another qualitative tool from a small representative sample of churches across Metro / Regional / Rural, LOTE / Anglo, Church Size and helps to triangulate information received from other sources. We specifically asked some similar questions from across other surveys to check consistency of results.

The major sentiment across congregations was considered to be **positive, hopeful, enthused and cautious optimism / anticipation**. Most have experienced an increase in in-person attendance post-Covid with steady growth but not a return to pre-Covid levels as yet. **Frequency of attendance** was the detail most noted, with those who come less than every week coming less regularly - perhaps monthly instead of fortnightly - and so on. Some noted a seasonal decline.

In 2023 **churches are doing some things differently** to cater for changes in attendance or their congregations - of note were a renewed focus on prayer, preaching appropriate for newcomers, hospitality for newcomers, online programs and more of an outward focus.

The vast majority of churches have an **online presence**, some being new post-Covid. A minority are investing

in this and developing it into a dedicated community, while others are wrestling with how to better engage in this space.

All churches rated themselves 7 or more out of 10 for how much of a **priority mission** is in their church, some rating it as the highest priority.

All churches are undertaking **missional / community initiatives to connect and engage** their communities - some are more focused than others.

The **biggest challenges or pain points facing the local neighbourhood** or local communities were a lack of hope, anxiety, cost of living, homelessness, suicide, drug and domestic violence.

Most churches are engaging in initiatives that could **help to alleviate a challenge or pain point(s)** and support the community to experience joy and a sense of connection. Some examples are community meals, toy runs, Empowered Faith Communities, emergency housing, schools/ education, men's group, suicide prevention organisation, cooking clubs, assisting immigrants.

And finally, the main sentiments among pastors / leaders about how they are feeling this year are **excitement and positivity**, but at the same time, weariness - depending on the day!

4. Discernment Process – Consultation forum

During 2023, one of the BUV's priorities was to define and demystify evangelism and this topic was a focus of our 6 **Consultation Forums and discernment around the state and May Members' Dinner**. Feedback from the table discussion at both events is summarised below.

The main challenges for evangelism expressed were around the:

- Fear of evangelising and the lack of priority / interest / equipping
- Negative reputation of the church and the hostility toward Christianity in community
- Lack of relationships with neighbours and non-Christians
- Consumer culture

The main opportunities for evangelism expressed were:

- Friendship evangelism - outside church – sharing authentic daily life with people and being there when need arises, listening
- Online/ New Tech – embracing online platforms for some who may not or cannot come to a church and new technology to connect with younger generations

Resources the BUV Support Hub could equip you with in this area?

- Evangelism training and equipping - how to share
- Provide relevant words – how to communicate
- Share stories and resources about ways we can be in community?
- Grants for projects
- Discounted training
- Package video resources eg. BLESS, etc

5. External Community Pain Points

“A sense of fear prevails in some places, as well as a sense of bunkering down and sticking too close family and friends. The world's a less friendly place, scammers, drugs, inflation are all having an impact in society, particularly after long periods of isolation and disconnection post-Covid lockdowns. I think people have become more insular, less trusting; compounded by the fear of inflation and what lies ahead financially.”

What could people of faith do to increase joy fun and connection for people in community?

Provide mental health services that are accessible and affordable without long waiting list times, free or low cost place for people to meet and engage with each other. Helping the vulnerable with food / medical deliveries, anonymously so they don't feel embarrassed. Help people to help other people.