

Churches that Inspire and Empower: A Case Study Survey of the Baptist Union of Victoria¹

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Abstract: *Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) findings reveal that a key characteristic of vitality in church life is inspiring and empowering leadership. Drawing from analysis of NCLS 2011 survey data of Victorian Baptists, and a small set of follow-up interviews, this article discusses where Victorian Baptist churches and leaders are at their best in inspiring and empowering people: inspiring the involvement of the whole people of God in ministry and mission; encouraging and giving permission for innovation; inviting participation through identifying, utilising and supporting people's gifts; welcoming the contribution of different cultures and abilities; and fostering transformation in the direction of the Kingdom of God. There is room for improvement in all these areas, and especially for Victorian Baptists in encouraging the gifts and contributions of members who are younger and newer to church. But where leadership that inspires to action and empowers and mobilises people's gifts is present, churches are more likely to show health and vitality in a range of areas.*

Key Words: Church trends, empowering leadership, pastoral leadership, people of God, non-profit leadership, Baptist church, NCLS

Leadership is critical to church life. It is important for problem solving, promoting visionary goals, encouraging individuals to work together and responding to new opportunities. It is important for resolving conflicts, and for maintaining standards of behaviour and best practice in church life. It is a primary catalyst for change and for churches to move forward. It is also a critical element in both church health and church growth. The Acts of the Apostles shows that these aspects of leadership were also found among leaders in the early church.

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EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP THEORY AND THEOLOGY

Leadership has been described as the most studied phenomena in the social sciences.² An influential scholar, Warren Bennis, attempted a simplification of the myriad theories of leadership, describing it as a “tripod” involving leaders, followers and “the common goal they want to achieve.”³ This view was immediately challenged by Drath et al., who argued that leadership is simply any process that generates common direction, alignment and commitment.⁴

These two theories purport to be mutually exclusive. In Bennis’ view, the ontology of leadership includes tangible leaders and followers, along with an intangible goal and presumably the relationships between the various leaders and followers. This simplified theory lacks any sense of the process of leadership. Drath’s perspective emphasises process, while de-emphasising the tangible aspects of Bennis’ view. However, clearly there are leaders and followers in any leadership situation, regardless of whether these roles are formal, informal, shared or shift around within a situation. These two theories are not mutually exclusive, rather they are complementary.

Within the broad scope of leadership theory and research, the idea that leadership involves empowerment has a long history of use in other theoretical frameworks such as transformational,⁵ servant,⁶ and charismatic leadership theories.⁷ It has also been used to describe effective local church leadership.⁸

Empowering leadership theory (ELT) is also a particular theory in its own right.⁹ In a business context, empowering leadership is the exercise of leadership through sharing power with subordinates, both through delegation of responsibility and strategies to enhance personal efficacy, motivation or commitment.¹⁰ Motivating people and enabling them to see themselves as effective, involves such processes as interpreting and evaluating the context, making sense of the goals and direction of the organisation within that context, and helping the individual to view their role and contribution as meaningful

² John Antonakis, Anna T. Cianciolo, and Robert J Sternberg (eds), *The Nature of Leadership* (California: Sage, 2004) 4.

³ Warren Bennis, “The Challenges of Leadership in the Modern World,” *American Psychologist* 62/1 (2007): 4-5.

⁴ Wilfred H Drath et al., “Direction, Alignment, Commitment: Toward a More Integrative Ontology of Leadership,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 19/6 (2008): 635-653.

⁵ Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, Second Edition (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

⁶ Robert K Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1977/2002).

⁷ Jay A Conger, Rabindra N Kanungo, and Sanjay T Menon, “Charismatic Leadership and Follower Effects,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 21/7 (2000): 747-767.

⁸ Ruth Powell, “Australian Church Health & Generational Differences,” in *Lausanne International Researchers Conference* (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2008); Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, and Ruth Powell, *Shaping a Future: Characteristics of Vital Congregations* (Adelaide: Open Book, 1997).

⁹ Jay A Conger, “Leadership: The Art of Empowering Others,” *The Academy of Management Executive* 3/1 (1989): 17-24; Abhishek Srivastava, Kathryn M Bartol, and Edwin A Locke, “Empowering Leadership in Management Teams: Effects on Knowledge Sharing, Efficacy, and Performance,” *Academy of Management Journal* 49/6 (2006): 1239-1251.

¹⁰ Jay A Conger and Rabindra N Kanungo, “The Empowerment Process: Integrating Theory and Practice,” *Academy of Management Review* 13/3 (1988): 471-482.

and significant. Together, leaders and followers construct meaning through discerning an inspiring goal or vision, setting directions, aligning roles and resources, then committing to work towards the common goal together.

More recent research in ELT has begun to show how empowering leadership contributes to organisational efficacy. Examples include empowered employees more enthusiastically contributing their own creativity;¹¹ and increased levels of trust enabling greater willingness to raise concerns from their perspective.¹² The team building aspects of empowering leadership have been shown to result in better knowledge sharing and greater individual autonomy within senior leadership groups.¹³

In summary, empowering leadership can be understood as a particular subset of leadership, which involves leaders and followers with a goal, who together participate in a process of individual empowerment around collective directions, alignment and commitment.

The overwhelming majority of leadership research assumes an individualist, business focused, and largely American context.¹⁴ However, in Australian culture and schools, empowerment is now actively encouraged from a very young age. Many government initiatives in education, such as the Kids Matter program, focus on helping children become empowered learners, who develop skills and attitudes towards learning that they will carry with them throughout their lives. The government commissioned whitepaper “Bridging the Gap” examines intergenerational interactions in the workplace. It focuses particularly on the challenges of engaging and retaining Gen Y employees, a challenge shared by the church today:

(Generation Y) have been raised in an environment where they have been given leadership opportunities throughout their schooling and encouraged to challenge and independently evaluate other’s decisions. As a result Gen Y has brought new values to the workplace. Gen Y’s expect to be treated as equals, they expect to have choices and input into decision-making processes, and such expectations run counter to hierarchical systems of leadership. Indeed, 97% of Gen Y’s surveyed valued a leadership style that involved empowerment, consultation and partnership, and would leave if they did not get it.¹⁵

Applying leadership theory to a church context needs care. However, for the purposes of this paper, some parallels can be drawn between employees and attenders—although

¹¹ Xiaomeng Zhang and Kathryn M Bartol, “Linking Empowering Leadership and Employee Creativity: The Influence of Psychological Empowerment, Intrinsic Motivation, and Creative Process Engagement,” *Academy of Management Journal* 53/1 (2010): 107-128.

¹² Liping Gao, Onne Janssen, and Kan Shi, “Leader Trust and Employee Voice: The Moderating Role of Empowering Leader Behaviors,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 22/4 (2011): 787-798.

¹³ Abraham Carmeli, John Schaubroeck, and Asher Tishler, “How CEO Empowering Leadership Shapes Top Management Team Processes: Implications for Firm Performance,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 22/2 (2011): 399-411.

¹⁴ Robert J. House and Ram N. Aditya, “The Social Scientific Study of Leadership: Quo Vadis?,” *Journal of Management* 23/3 (1997): 409-473, at 409-410.

¹⁵ “Bridging the Gap: An Employer’s Guide to Managing and Retaining the New Generation of Employees” (McCrindle Research) 18, accessible at http://www.mccrindle.com.au/resources/whitepapers/Bridging-the-Gap_EMPLOYERS.pdf, including McCrindle research figures.

they are *not* “subordinates”—and between the pastoral leadership team and the senior business leadership team. Trust and confidence are important in both settings.

A theological perspective on empowering leadership in church life highlights significant differences between the purpose of leadership in the church and other settings such as business. A Trinitarian view might emphasise the relational and collective aspects of empowering leadership. When Paul likens the church to a body he is clearly recognising the inherent value of every member and the contribution they have to make (1 Cor 12:12-31; Eph 4:11-13). No one part is more important than another, each has their own role and each is dependent on the other. It is only as a whole, working together, that the body is able to function to its full potential; the priesthood of all believers.

A Christological view might emphasise the discipleship or servant aspects of empowering leadership. The process of empowerment was modelled both by Jesus and early church leaders. Jesus, after teaching and equipping his followers, sent them out into the world. By doing so he demonstrated that sharing leadership does not diminish its effectiveness but rather broadens its impact (Lk 10:1-9; Mat 28:16-20). A Christological question such as “who is Jesus and how does he save us?” related to empowering leadership, might suggest that in a sense we lost people are being saved in the process of finding purpose and a place to belong within the body of Christ, and in participating in the ongoing salvific work of Christ in the world. An ecclesiological frame on empowering leadership suggests that dialogical connection between community and individual disciple that Hall expresses in the term “disciple community”¹⁶ or that Jürgen Moltmann envisages in arguing that the individual callings of disciples must fit within the wider call to work for the Kingdom.¹⁷ Here the development of collective vision, purpose and values, empowers individual disciples to collectively organise themselves into the right roles to employ their God-given gifts and passions.

The *missio Dei* (mission of God) offers a longer view of why churches might seek to develop empowering leadership. Here the congregation is built up not for its own sake, but in order to better participate in God’s mission for the congregation, within God’s wider mission for the Church, which is within God’s wider purposes for humanity and the world.¹⁸

Each of these theological starting points allows a range of theological positions, with very different understandings of the implications of God’s purposes for the church, or for how to practice leadership within churches. It makes an immense difference if the focus of the church is saving souls for the afterlife, or being God’s agent working in the world as it is, toward bringing about the world as it should be.¹⁹ Any theological perspective is shaped by its own mission and purpose; however, in theory it should be uncontroversial

¹⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1967) 333.

¹⁸ David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991) 412; Stephen B Bevens and Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2004) 56.

¹⁹ Edward T Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action and Justice* (New York: Continuum International, 2003).

to advocate building up the body of Christ, so long as this is for the sake of the mission of Christ rather than for the sake of the body itself.

When the mission of Christ for the church is the framework, then empowering leadership becomes a powerful way to build capacity for mission. Empowering leadership can be understood as a particular subset of leadership, which involves leaders and followers with a goal,²⁰ who together participate in a process that develops direction, alignment and commitment.²¹ The goal or direction of leaders and followers in empowering each other becomes equipping the church to better carry on the mission of Christ in the community. The internal alignment of people, roles and resources around a shared goal or vision, becomes the weekly focus of church life, while commitment is enabled through empowering leadership that inspires people by helping them see how they individually contribute to the shared vision.

Part of empowering the church for ministry is sharing ministry roles in the work of the church. It is dissonant when a pastoral leader preaches about the priesthood and ministry of all believers, but holds on to all the “important” Sunday roles of leading worship and speaking. To limit the teaching function of the church to one “hired holy man” [sic], usually limits the empowering of other speakers. It also limits the voices and perspectives that the congregation learns from.

However, the ministry of all believers is not just about empowering them to serve and speak in church; it’s about empowering people for witness in their individual lives, and about organising the congregation to collectively witness in the community as an expression of the body of Christ. Empowering believers to become actively engaged in their church and also the wider community is an area where churches can develop their understanding and skills.

AN EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP

Empowering leadership theory suggests that churches with higher levels of empowering leadership would have higher levels of church vitality. In these churches members would believe their leaders empower them to use their gifts. The NCLS study of church vitality across four countries (Australia, USA, England and New Zealand), found that empowering, inspirational leadership is the leadership style most associated with church growth.²²

NCLS researchers also found that churches that had higher levels of attenders who felt empowered, were also more likely to have other healthy characteristics. The quality of empowering leadership was correlated with other qualities including inspiration, innovation, participation and transformation. Examples of some of the specific measures within churches that relate to people feeling empowered follow:

Inspiration

²⁰ Bennis, “Challenges of Leadership in the Modern World.”

²¹ Drath et al., “Direction, Alignment, Commitment.”

²² Powell et. al, *Enriching Church Life*, 40-41.

- Clear owned vision
- Experience of joy, inspiration and growth in understanding God in worship services.
- Agreement that spiritual needs are met
- Agreement that preaching is helpful

Innovation

- Agreement that congregation will try new things
- Sense of movement in new directions

Participation

- Strong and growing sense of belonging
- More attenders inviting others to church

Transformation

- High growth in faith from this church
- Agreement that congregation is focused on community

This paper discusses the statistical state-wide responses of Victorian Baptists who participated in the 2011 National Church Life Survey (2011 NCLS), together with interview responses from a small set of church leaders. The Victorian Baptist sample is from 8830 adult attender forms from across 79 churches. In 2011 the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) included 203 churches and an estimated total Baptist community of 27,240 participants.²³ Thus the 2011 NCLS BUV sample represents 39% of churches and 33% of participants, which, although not a majority, is a significant representative sample size.

The broader national statistics are from the 2011 NCLS Attenders Survey, which was completed by 216,063 attenders in Australia. Any attender aged 15 years or over in spiritual nurture activities during the survey period was invited to complete an Attender Survey.²⁴ In the 2011 NCLS, attenders were asked how they perceived their leaders in a number of different areas. Figure 1 (below) provides a summary of responses from Victorian Baptist attenders and Australian attenders overall. It shows the percentage of attenders who agreed or strongly agreed that their leaders: empower them, take their ideas into account, inspire them to action, help them focus on the wider community, help build on strengths and communicate clearly and openly.

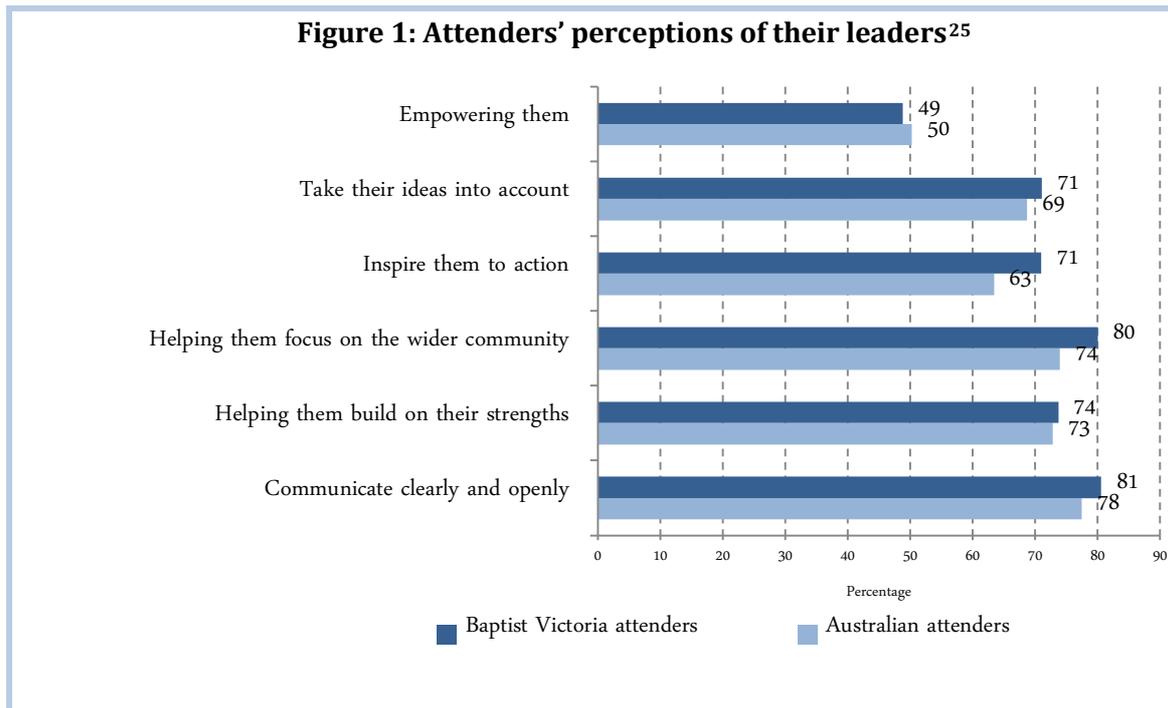
Victorian Baptist attenders showed significantly higher levels of agreement than all Australian attenders with four out of six of these leadership indicators. Victorian Baptists were more likely to agree that their leaders take their ideas into account (71% vs. 68%; $p < .001$), inspire them to action (71% vs. 62%; $p < .001$), help them focus on the wider community (80% vs. 73%; $p < .001$), and communicate clearly and openly (81% vs. 77%; $p < .001$).

²³ Philip J Hughes and Darren Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia: A Church with a Heritage and a Future* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association, 2013) 95.

²⁴ Unless otherwise specified, tests of statistical significance in this paper were carried out using the Pearson's chi-squared test.

Victorian Baptist attenders did not differ from overall Australian attenders (49% vs. 50%) in their agreement that their leaders empower them ($p = .514$) or help them build on their strengths ($p = .055$).

Baptists feel inspired to action (and challenged to “do” something about their faith) (71%), more than they feel empowered to use their gifts and skills (in terms of being equipped to identify how and where they might act in what they are best gifted to do) (49%). It is one thing to challenge people to do something about their faith; the harder test of leadership is to train and equip them with the skills to follow through.



To further develop our understanding of empowering leadership we identified ten churches for more detailed case study work. These churches had a high proportion of respondents who agreed with a single indicator “Our leaders encourage me to use my gifts and skills to a great extent.” A broader analysis using a wider range of indicators from the NCLS data would have generated a different sample.

The four selected churches included a small inner-suburban congregation (AuburnLife), small-medium suburban churches a bit further out in the suburbs (Balwyn) and on the outskirts of the suburbs (Doveton); all in very multicultural suburbs. There was also one large church in a regional city (Moolap/Barrabool Hills in Geelong). Phone interviews were conducted and transcribed with leaders from the four churches:

- (1) Rob Hand, Treasurer at AuburnLife (25 June 2013)
- (2) Paul Llewellyn, Pastor at Doveton Baptist Church (26 June 2013)
- (3) Gayle Hill, Senior Pastor, Balwyn Baptist Church (28 January, 2014)

²⁵ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063); Bronwyn Hughes and John Bellamy (eds.), *A Passion for Evangelism: Turning Vision into Action* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2004).

- (4) Graham Clarke Senior Pastor, Moolap/Barrabool Hills Baptist Church (28 January, 2014)

The interviews offered stories and principles of empowering leadership from local church leaders. In particular they suggested the following qualities were present in churches that inspire and empower: a high value of each individual member, a belief that everyone is given gifts and talents to use to further the kingdom of God, highly developed level of trust between the leadership and the church members, and a strong focus on the needs of the community outside their church.

EMPOWERING ATTENDERS: NOT EASY BUT IMPORTANT

It is a distinctive of Baptist church beliefs that all Christians are called and equipped for ministry—not just to contribute to ministry in the church but also to cooperate with God in God’s mission in the world. The “priesthood of all believers” recognises that all believers can relate to God without needing another special class of priest to mediate for them, but it also has implications for the ministry of all believers; the whole church can function as priests to one another and to the world. However, Victorian Baptists are virtually indistinguishable from national average figures, which makes us wonder how significant these actually are in practice. Moreover while the value of “team ministry” is widely accepted, many church leaders find it hard to systematically implement the concept.

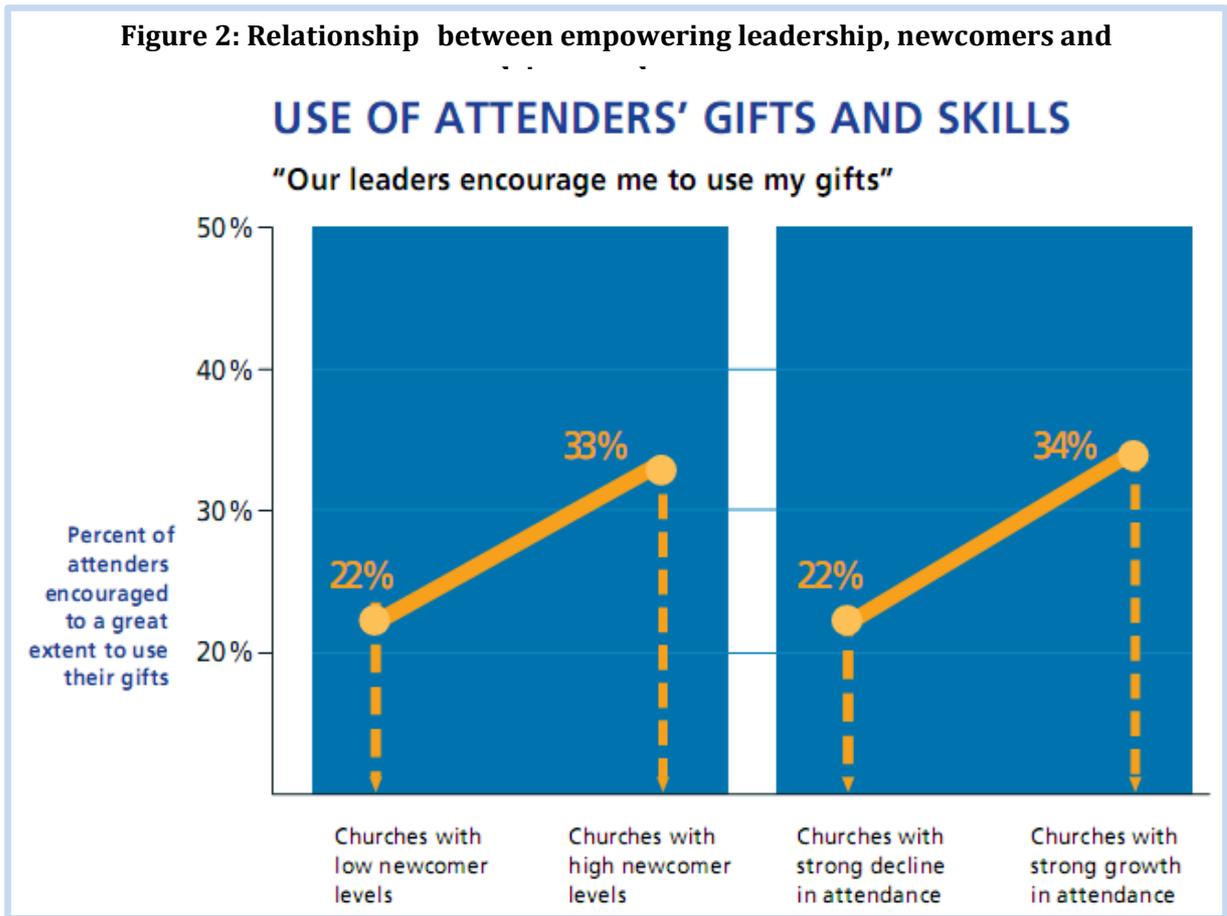
Based on the Congregational Commitment Study (CCS), Hughes and Bellamy suggest at least two reasons for this:²⁶

- (1) For some empowering the ministry of the whole people of God is a new concept in the Western church. While the teaching has been central since the first century [and, we note, the Reformation and its radically changed ideas of vocation paved the way for greater involvement], it is only within the last century that there have been active attempts to implement it; and
- (2) The notion of leaders as team leaders is not widely accepted. Previous NCLS research has found that many church attenders still expect their leaders to restrict themselves to the more directive roles of teacher, pastor and preacher. Discerning the gifts and skills of attenders and matching people with tasks is not always easy.

Theoretically, churches with high levels of empowering leadership should be more likely to be growing and have higher levels of newcomers, due to higher efficacy. This is strongly supported by NCLS research across four countries.²⁷ Empowering leadership that encourages attenders to use their gifts and skills is about helping people identify and live out their vocations in the world, but it is also most associated with growth in attendance. Churches with high levels of newcomers are much more likely to have leadership that values people’s gifts and skills than churches with few or no newcomers (see Figure 2).

²⁶ Hughes and Bellamy (eds.), *A Passion for Evangelism*.

²⁷ Powell et. al, *Enriching Church Life* 40-41.



Source: 2001 International Church Life Survey (ICLS): UK, USA, NZ and Australia.

Paul Llewellyn at Doveton Baptist explains how he aims to value all people and affirms that everyone is created in God’s image and given gifts and talents to use to further God’s kingdom. When Paul first told people he had accepted the call to Doveton, responses were often less than encouraging. They spoke to him about the difficulties he would face working in an area defined by high crime rates and low levels of education; an area where unemployment rates are double the national levels and where less than half the population speak English as their first language. Paul however had a different view of things. While having a firm grasp of the many challenges faced by people living in this area, he saw an opportunity to work with creative, innovative people who needed desperately to know that God did not define them as the world had. His ministry in Doveton has been one of shining a light on existing gifts and helping people to see where they are already capable, active, responsible leaders in both their community and the church. The church values opportunity over perfection or performance, and everyone is encouraged and supported in their participation. Their underlying belief is that God in his grace is able and more than willing to use ordinary frail people do his will. They firmly believe and teach that ministry is not something for the spiritually elite but ministry is for everyone.

²⁸ Ibid. 41.

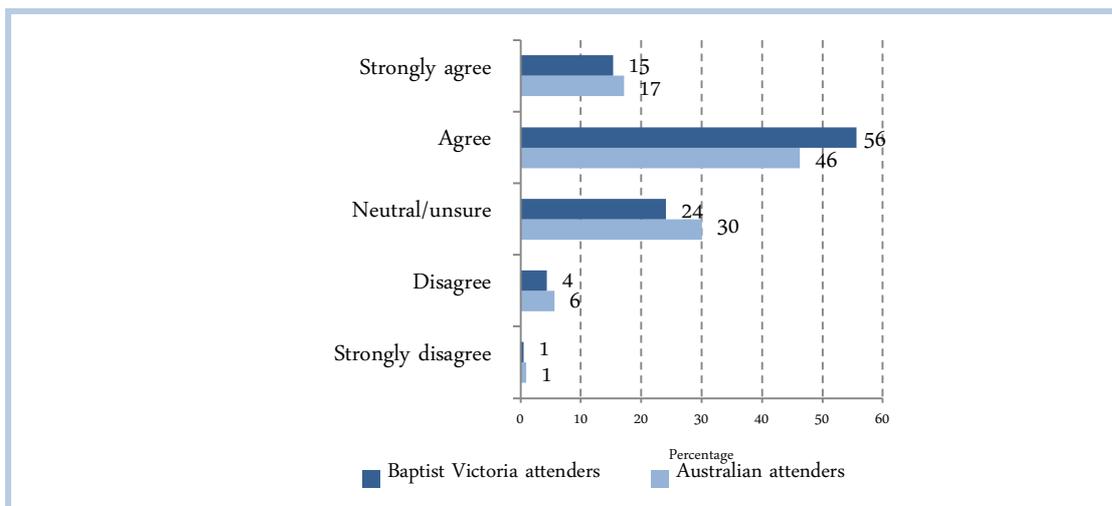
INSPIRATION: EMPOWERING VISION

Empowering Leadership Theory sees clear, inspiring vision as a strategy that should benefit the whole organisation by providing a goal and direction, aligning members to individually act more confidently and inspiring commitment. NCLS Research confirms that a clear and owned vision is strongly associated with church vitality.²⁹ Even where leaders have a strong sense of vision and high motivation, the leadership alone cannot achieve a vision; vision needs a team—or better yet a whole community—to develop common goals that guide their collective and individual effort. Figure 3 shows the degree to which Baptist attenders in Victoria feel inspired to action by their leaders. Some 15% strongly agree that they are inspired to action by their leaders and a further 56% agree. However, there are 24% who are neutral or unsure and a smaller grouping (5%) that disagrees. The Victorian Baptist distribution of results for this question was statistically significantly higher than all Australian churches ($p < .001$), but still show room for improvement. If Baptist pastors can be more inspiring and empowering, and if Baptist church participants feel their leaders are empowering, then they will more likely exercise courage and initiative in ministry and churches will be healthier.

The 2011 Survey gave some other measures of how attenders perceived their leaders to be inspiring. In Victoria, 80% of Baptist attenders believe their leaders are focussed on directions for the future, significantly higher than the 74% of Australian churchgoers ($p < .001$). People need a vision for the future to inspire them to proactively lead and change things in the present.

Similarly, 80% of Victorian Baptist attenders agree their leaders help them focus on the wider community. Again, this was significantly higher than the 73% of all Australian churches that agreed ($p < .001$). A key part of inspiring leadership is focusing on needs outside the church and supporting community based programs—this captures people’s imaginations and helps foster the mission of God.

Figure 3: Attenders who view their leaders as inspiring³⁰



²⁹ Ibid. 37.

³⁰ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063).

For Gayle Hill, empowering leadership has been a key point of inspiration in the revitalisation of Balwyn Baptist Church. She explains her philosophy of ministry:

The kingdom is built through every single person being passionate and using their gifts to fulfil that incredible Great Commission. Empowering leadership means that the leaders themselves have to be passionate about kingdom values and also how the kingdom is meant to reign here on earth through the entire body of believers.

The challenge then is to live that out as a whole church through building relationships. She intentionally commits to putting the time into developing these relationships, always holding the belief that in every one of us has a God given potential to grow God's kingdom. She has adopted a rule of only speaking positively about people to build an environment of encouragement.

Preaching can also be a source of inspiration. In Baptist Victoria, 80% of attenders say that the preaching is always or usually helpful to their lives, significantly higher than the 75% of Australian churchgoers ($p < .001$). Gayle Hill sees her role as preacher as an important inspirational tool for transforming the church culture at Balwyn. She believes that the exhortation a leader gives from the front allows them to reinforce that a cultural change is both possible and at times necessary. It takes time to recapture vision and hope, but by continually speaking these words into the church the power of God's word and Spirit can bring about transformation.

However, preaching is not always best as a monologue from one pastor. One aspect of empowering leadership, for pastors, is to empower others who can teach and preach, and encourage the congregation to interact and engage with Scripture for themselves.

AuburnLife's leadership team are committed to encouraging people to explore their faith in a safe and supportive environment. Rob Hand, a member of the leadership team, comments: "We don't judge people's performance or beliefs, they are free to discuss their beliefs without being dogmatic, we allow everyone to have their own views and express them without criticism." The church is accepting of differences in opinion and style; they feel it is much more important for people to have a go, to gain confidence and feel secure about expressing themselves and doing things, than putting on a polished stage performance every Sunday. Rob calls it an "anything goes approach." When it comes to Sunday Stuff, including preaching, a high level of participation is valued over a high level of excellence in performance. What AuburnLife finds is that the fact that a number of people are involved is inspiring to others in the church, as well as the value what they have to say.

INNOVATION: EMPOWERING CREATIVE SPACES

Innovation and creative thinking can happen, at their best, when trust exists between leaders and others participating in church, and when the leaders give permission for people to dream and suggest ideas outside-the-box and different from the status quo. Some 73% say that their Baptist leaders encourage innovation and creative thinking, statistically significantly higher than the 65% of Australian churchgoers overall ($p < .001$).

At Moolap/Barrabool Hills, Graham Clarke and his team have made a priority of empowering their people to be creative and they give permission to innovate in new

directions. They have set a specific goal of seeing twenty ministry or mission initiatives that were birthed from the grass roots of the church.

You have to be very intentional and be prepared to hold yourself accountable for it. That's true in everything in life, if it's really important then you should be prepared to actually shoot for it and agree that if we don't get it, that would be something that would be disappointing. It's very easy to talk about these notions but not ever set yourself a goal or plan for it. It's less important whether you reach it or not and more about a statement of your intentionality.

A willingness to step back from directive leadership has empowered the congregation's creativity and vision. If a church member has a particular project or vision for the church they are encouraged to bring it to the team. They work together on what would actually be required to make this possible, after which the person is encouraged to take action. Allowing people to take responsibility, with support, for the whole process of starting something enables them to evaluate how committed they are and how realistic the project will be at this time of their life. It also demonstrates how much support there is within the wider church. This process encourages dreaming and creativity while recognising that there are also many practical issues that need to be considered. By supporting people as they work through the process, making them aware of the resources that are available and what will be needed, any new projects initiated will have firm foundations. Those who join them will have a much clearer picture of what it involves and creativity will not be stifled by automatic negative responses.

The leadership philosophy/principle at Moolap/Barrabool Hills is that the role of employed staff, as much as is practical, is not to focus on generating ideas. Graham Clarke says their role is to focus on resourcing God's people and to "put the legs on the things God's doing in the congregation." Thus ministry is at its best when the church sees people dreaming about and implementing their vision for mission. When it is only the leadership team that comes up with the vision, staff are forced to spend a great deal of energy on recruitment. It can also encourage a culture where they have to take full responsibility to make things happen.

You become responsible for everybody else's sense of prompting by the spirit ... If it is just someone's hobby horse then people see that too and tend not to flock to it. It becomes very self-defining. It falls over before it has a chance to be created into something and create work for other people.

On the other hand, when people communicate a passionate sense of vision and purpose, other people perceive that and are inspired to be involved.

One way Paul Llewellyn and his leadership team at Doveton seek to empower is to value and use the input of the whole congregation in decision-making about innovations. In Baptist governance, the church meeting is where the church gathers to discern together the mind of Christ. The Doveton leadership team have worked hard to earn the trust of the congregation. When an issue or opportunity arises, or an innovative ministry is proposed, the leadership team says they try to bring it to the church without having already made a decision. When the church knows that this really is an open question, much more creative and varied solutions follow and there is an increased ownership of decisions, which in turn leads to greater participation and commitment.

Gayle Hill emphasises the importance of courageous leadership in making space for innovation: “if you don’t inspire faith, risk taking and courage in your people it does not always come naturally ... but it has to become part of the culture and DNA of the church and that is all about faith.” For many churches that are struggling with dwindling numbers and financial challenges, risk taking can seem impossible. But working slowly and valuing small steps can inspire courage and creativity. For Balwyn it started with repainting the building. As the church saw that the leadership team was willing to commit to raising the necessary funds to get the job completed without additional financial burden, and as they saw God’s provision of those funds, their trust in their leadership team grew and their faith was inspired. Now as they enter stage five of their redevelopment plan, some of the participants who were once most fearful are suggesting new ideas for what they could do next. Gayle Hill asserts that her role as a pastor/leader is to say and to lead the church in praying: “God it might not be anything like the church next door, we might not look anything like what we looked like in the past. But we really think we are hearing you for where you want us to go and how you want us to be, and we will step out into that.” Inspiration releases creativity, and as a church stretches its faith, it grows in capacity to imagine new ways of being.

PARTICIPATION: EMPOWERING CONNECTION/RELATIONSHIP

In her book *Breaking Calabashes*, missiologist Rosemary Dewerse observes that in Sudanese culture when a visitor arrives they are given a meal and a bed, on the second day this is repeated, but on the third day they are given a hoe! Dewerse makes the extension into illustrating church leadership that empowers participation:

[I]f we leave people eating and resting we may very well encourage a passive, passenger culture or, more than that, infer that they and what they have to offer is not needed. But if we operate an invitational culture and offer a role, we will be giving voice and purpose in a way that indicates the worth of the person to the community in very practical tangible ways.³¹

It is critical to be intentional and develop strategies for involving people in ways that are meaningful for them, and fruitful for the church.

A team culture is an important factor to help attenders commit to a vision for mission and ministry. The Congregational Commitment study found that leaders in strongly committed congregations had developed a number of strategies that could be described as a “team ministry” approach. Bronwyn Hughes and John Bellamy summarise these strategies as:

- (1) Delegation of decision-making to ministry teams
- (2) Implementing the biblical concept of spiritual gifts
- (3) Providing support for ministry teams.³²

Most of the churches interviewed explicitly said their team-based leadership structure has been vital to the growth in participation within their churches.

³¹ Rosemary Dewerse, *Breaking Calabashes: Becoming an Intercultural Community* (Unley: MediaCom 2013).

³² Hughes and Bellamy (eds), *Passion for Evangelism*.

Delegating decisions to the teams that are affected is discussed above, but a central aspect of identifying and releasing spiritual gifts is for leaders to know their people well. For Gayle Hill from Balwyn, it is centrally about relationship:

The best way I know (to discover and facilitate the use of gifts) is through relationship. Listening, talking to people, meeting with and visiting them, even if they are new, to get a picture of who they are, what their background is, why they have come. But also what is on their heart.

As people are released into areas they are passionate about and equipped to take the next step in their journey their ministry is deepened.

Moreover, empowering leadership involves providing opportunity but also support and training. Empowerment is about identifying potential in people and giving them permission, but also equipping and supporting them. For example, Rob Hand invites all AuburnLife leaders to complete the “Strengths Finder” tool.³³ They use this information to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and how to operate effectively as a team by working with one another’s strengths, and for helping to discern what other gifts and strengths are needed on the team.

Empowering leadership is not just directed to people in the church, but also involves collaboration with and encouraging the participation of the broader community. Doveton Baptist, as a church with small numbers in a high needs area, decided to intentionally partner with other groups and churches in their area. Paul Llewellyn echoes this message: “We encourage people to join their mission and take a risk, even when it’s complex and difficult. We would much rather give it a go and fail than not be open to something God is presenting.”

TRANSFORMATION: EMPOWERING GROWTH

The purpose of empowering leadership within the context of Christian faith is not just about developing more habits of highly effective people. Empowerment, at its essence, is about facilitating a process for people to grow more like Jesus. This transformation is best viewed on multiple levels; the transformation of our own lives, the lives of others, our church and own community.

Graham Clarke preaches and practices a transformational approach to leadership at Moolap/Barrabool Hills. He holds a deep conviction theologically that empowerment is the essence of leadership. So their church culture defines leadership as empowering others:

You are not really actually leading unless you are empowering someone else. If you use a position of authority or responsibility particularly in the kingdom to actually add to your own sense of self-worth, or your own sense of purpose or your own agenda, what you are actually doing is something other than leadership. Leadership is when you empower someone else, when you use what God’s given you for the sake of lifting someone else up.

³³ Tom Rath, *Strengthsfinder 2.0* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007); Tom Rath, *Strengths-Based Leadership* (New York: Gallup Press, 2009); <http://www.strengthsfinder.com/home>.

Clarke says that anyone who holds responsibility or authority is meant to pass it away and pass it on to others. The example for this is Jesus, who declared “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” and who then chose to pass on the authority and empower the church. To get a picture of empowering or leadership in its ideal, Clarke teaches people to look to Jesus who, having everything, chose “not grasping or holding onto equality with God instead he empties himself to the form of a slave” (Philippians 2:6-7), in order that people would be built up. Philippians does not make exactly that point from Jesus’ humility, but uses Jesus’ example to encourage God’s people to avoid bickering and pursue blamelessness.

By encouraging people to engage with their community, the act of participation can be moved into an opportunity for growth. Most of the churches we interviewed raised the importance of cultural diversity.

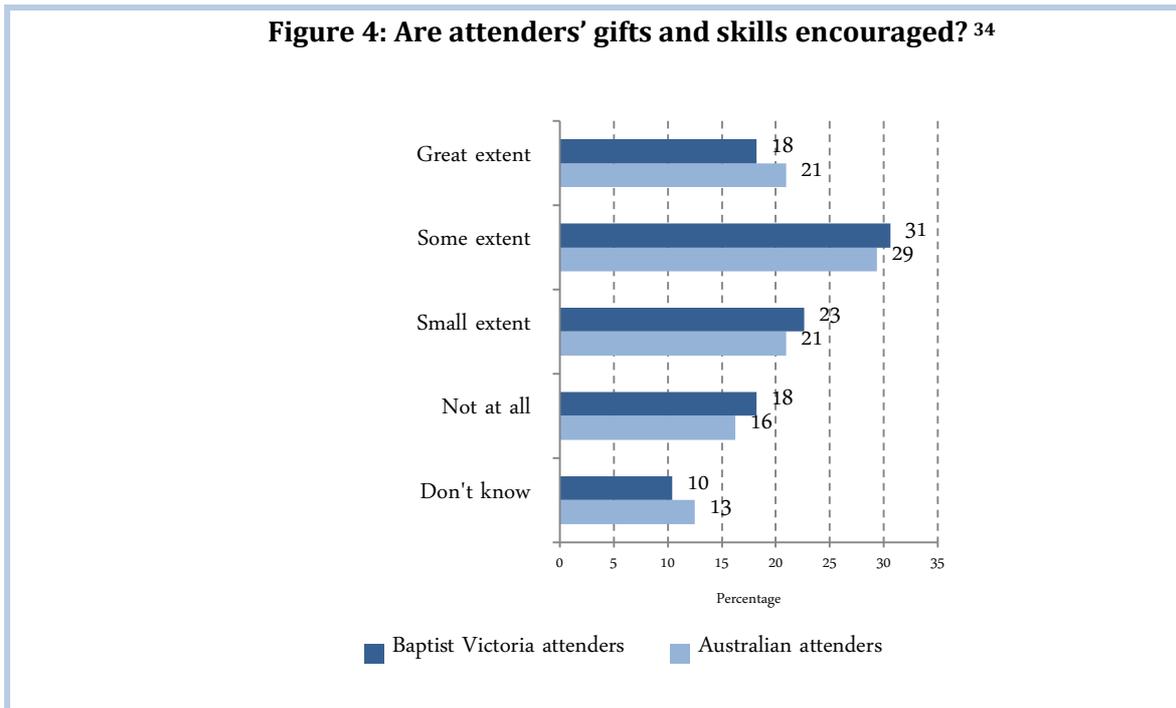
Paul Llewellyn and his leadership team at Doveton Baptist have strong convictions that ministry is for all believers not just some spiritual elite. They work these out in practice in a number of ways. They have been intentional about broadening the variety of people in leadership roles. It would have been easy for tertiary educated white males to be given leadership roles because they “look” like leaders. But by encouraging people from a variety of backgrounds the church has gained different skills and gifts; diverse ways of looking at and doing things; and new ideas and viewpoints.

At AuburnLife, Rob Hand feels that one of the keys to their success is having a leadership team that is open to share power, control and opportunities, for example, on the preaching roster. One of the challenges they have faced is meeting the needs of two very different cultural groups. It was here that the style of leadership they have embraced has proved most successful. Early on there was a move to change the name and day the church met. But when the idea was opened up to the church it became clear that for some members, especially those from Asian, Papua New Guinean and other cultural backgrounds, this would be confronting and difficult to accept, and “unusual” for their image of church. They would go with the change, they said, but do not think they would have come to a church that doesn't meet on a Sunday morning. This alerted the church to the reality that changing the time may not help the church connect with their neighbourhood’s multicultural diversity, even though it may connect better with younger generations to meet on Saturday late afternoon. So the leadership team stepped in and made the decision to change only the name, out of respect for the beliefs of those involved, but with the understanding that the church was still committed to being open to new ways of doing things. The trust and respect that grew out of this potentially difficult issue has been transformative, at least for the leadership team.

Welcoming and listening to the voices and participation of people of different backgrounds gives fresh inspiration, opens up new windows of innovation, and transforms a group and their capacity for transforming others. By sharing life with people who have had diverse experiences and histories, a group can become more open to new ways of doing things.

EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP

A key indicator of the levels of empowerment in a church is the extent to which attenders perceive their leaders as empowering them. One survey question in particular focused on this aspect of leadership. “Have this congregation’s /parish's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?” Figure 4 shows the results for Baptist Victoria compared to all attenders.



Victorian Baptist attenders are a little less likely than average (18% compared to 21% overall) to say their gifts and skills are greatly encouraged, but a little more likely than average to say they are encouraged to some extent or to a small extent. The Victorian Baptist distribution of results for this question was significantly different from that of all Australian churches ($p < .001$).

Table 1 compares Baptist Victoria with a range of denominations on two indicators of inspiring and empowering leaders.

³⁴ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063).

Table 1: Attender views of inspiring and empowering leaders: denominational variation³⁵

	Inspired to Action		Gifts and skills encouraged	
	Strongly agree %	Agree %	To great extent %	To some extent %
Baptist Victoria	15	56	18	31
Anglican	16	54	22	33
Baptist/Churches of Christ	17	55	21	33
Catholic	10	41	13	26
Lutheran	8	48	16	34
Pentecostal	45	43	45	30
Uniting	13	52	22	36
Other Protestant	17	52	23	34
All churches	17	46	21	29

Some denominational variations regarding inspiring and empowering leadership were revealed following statistically significance tests.³⁶ Victorian Baptist attenders showed significantly less agreement that their leaders inspire them to action than Pentecostal attenders ($p < .001$), but significantly more agreement than any other denomination ($p < .001$). In terms of having their gifts and skills encouraged, Baptist Victoria attenders showed significantly less agreement than Anglican ($p = .002$) and Pentecostal ($p < .001$) attenders, and significantly more agreement than Catholic attenders ($p < .001$). Their results for this question were not significantly different from the other denominations that took part in the 2011 NCLS.

TRANSFORMATION: A PROFILE OF ATTENDERS WHO ARE EMPOWERED

When leaders empower people to contribute and participate in the life of the church they are not just ensuring greater effectiveness in the task, they are assisting people to live out their discipleship and be able to exercise their gifts in the journey to the kingdom.

Leaders empower people when they encourage them to participate, authorize them to do so, train them and support them, and make room for them to contribute in a meaningful way. Empowered people contribute more fully and are prepared to step beyond their comfort zone for the sake of the community, and for the sake of the kingdom. As Graham Clarke states:

We aim to get people walking out into their daily lives with the mentality of a missionary, God sent me here to be his agent. We articulate our mission statement as being 'A kingdom movement of restoration; everyone, every day, everywhere'. This is to try and break down that idea that we do the church stuff when I'm a youth group leader, or when I'm at church or when I'm a part of an official ministry. Rather than see that it's a 24/7 thing.

³⁵ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063).

³⁶ ANOVAs and post-hoc Bonferroni comparisons were computed.

Thus the Moolap/Barrabool Hills perspective of empowerment is about both the ministry and the mission of all believers; i.e. not just what the whole people of God do when they are gathered but when they are scattered. As Clarke comments, this requires pushing beyond the professionalization of ministry and mission and ministry, as if the Sunday gathering is the place to tithe or give so that the church is able to support professionals to do mission overseas and support the pastor to do local community ministry here. Transitioning to a truly priesthood of all believers is both theologically and culturally challenging.

Similarly, the focus at AuburnLife is to develop leadership for the kingdom of God not just Auburn. One of their goals is to develop people for ministry here and elsewhere, releasing talent and holding people loosely. As a result, church treasurer Rob Hand says people don't have to fit a particular Auburn mould because the church proudly realises they may be equipping them for something else. They are excited to see people leave them to further the kingdom elsewhere rather than locking people in place. This is not just a theoretical position; as a small church of 20-30 people gathering each Sunday, they have released and sent ten members over the last year into other ministry and training contexts or to contribute to churches more local to where the members live. And although, as one member pointed out, this goal directly impacts one of their other goals, that of church growth, the act of trusting God for his provision has deepened the commitment to their local community. They have grown in compassion and hope and constantly look for ways to share this with those around them.

Table 2 below shows some of the characteristics of attenders who feel encouraged and mobilised.

Younger generational groups of Victorian Baptists report feeling less empowered when compared to all Australian church attenders, and are less likely to feel their gifts and skills are encouraged to a great extent. Only 23% of 15-29 year old Victorian Baptist attenders feel their gifts and skills are encouraged to a great extent, significantly less than the 32% all Australian attenders ($p = .010$). This gap also exists for 30-44 year olds (16% Vic Baptists compared to 21% overall; $p < .001$).

Table 2: Characteristics of attenders who feel their gifts and skills are encouraged to a great extent³⁷

	Baptist Vic %	All Aus %
Age Groups		
15 to 29	23	32
30 to 44	16	22
45 to 64	17	20
65 +	18	16
Gender		
Male	19	21
Female	18	21

³⁷ 2011 NCLS Attender Survey (n = 216,063)

Education		
School	20	19
Diploma	17	23
Degree	18	22
Roles in local church		
In leadership or ministry roles	31	30
Not in roles	9	9
Attender background		
Newcomer (no church background)	11	20
Switcher/transfer from another church	16	23
Long-term attender	21	21

While Baptist Victoria males were no more or less likely than Australian male attenders to feel this way ($p = .143$), Baptist Victoria females were significantly less likely than Australian female attenders to feel their gifts were greatly encouraged ($p = .027$). However, this does not delve deeply into how many women are in leadership positions in churches, a question worth analysing further. For example, only a small proportion of senior pastors are women.

Interestingly, 20% of Victorian Baptists with just a school education feel greatly empowered (1% more than the national average of 19%). On the other hand, Victorian Baptists with diplomas ($p = .005$) or degrees ($p = .002$) were significantly less likely to feel greatly empowered than Australian attenders with the same level of education.

That people who are in church roles feel greatly empowered (31% of Victorian Baptists, close to the national average of 30%) in comparison with those who have no role (9%), demonstrates that empowerment is not just a feeling, but also something that must be practiced.

Attender background highlights another significant disparity. Newcomers in Victorian Baptist churches are about half as likely as long-term attenders to feel their gifts and skills are greatly encouraged. Of course it is difficult to include newcomers as effectively as long-term attenders, but other churches manage it as the national average is almost double the Victorian Baptist figure. Of those who switch or transfer into a Victorian Baptist church, 16% feel greatly empowered, compared to a national average of 23%. It seems long-time attenders in Victorian Baptist churches are more likely to feel greatly empowered than anyone new, especially if they do not have a church background. It may be that there are systemic or cultural blockages to the welcoming and integration of newcomers (and also to a lesser extent switchers and transferees) into the ministry and leadership life of Victorian Baptist churches. Perhaps Baptist churches tend to want new Christians to sit and be taught, rather than stand and contribute. BUV churches say they believe in priesthood of all believers but seem to practice more the priesthood of mature believers.

DISCUSSION

A perspective informed by God's mission for the church reminds us that empowering leadership may be good for the leaders, the led and the organisation, but its purpose is to equip the church for work as a kingdom-focused agent of social change and transformation. One of the limitations of leadership literature in both business and the church, is that the goal is typically to benefit the organisation, ignoring the implications for the wider community or Creation. Church leaders might be advised to look beyond business leadership models to engage the social change leadership literature.³⁸

It is a concern that younger people and newcomers do not feel empowered, as these groups are of critical importance for future vitality and efficacy. Victorian Baptists need to ensure that younger generations and new Christians are empowered—for their sakes and for the sake of the church and its wider mission.

Of similar importance is the percentage of people from different cultural backgrounds who feel empowered. Are Victorian Baptist churches welcoming and celebrating the gifts and skills of people who come from different cultures? To what extent are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) churches empowering and inspiring? This is a critical question in Australia as a multicultural society. But it is also especially critical when a lot of the growth of Baptist churches in Victoria and across Australia has come from migrants.³⁹

How church size influences the extent of inspiring and empowering leadership is also of interest, as a large proportion of the churches identified as very empowering were relatively small. This may be due to the needs of smaller churches for a higher percentage of the congregation to take on leadership roles, with subsequent higher feelings of empowerment. Less people can mean more opportunities and a stronger sense of community, with more for people having their say on issues. Yet these churches face great challenges, often with part-time pastors. While a shortage of resources can be a burden, it can also encourage creativity, innovation and willingness to risk new ideas.

There was a methodology issue with the sample. The churches identified as strongest in their response to the one question of whether "attenders feel encouraged to use their gifts and skills to a great extent" tended to be small churches, and some are struggling to survive. Perhaps small churches offer more space and encouragement for everyone to use their gifts. But it is also easier, on reflection, for a small church to make it into this selection because a few extra people tick that box of feeling greatly encouraged. Future studies would do well to use a broader selection tool that includes more medium and large sized churches, many of which do have influential and strongly empowering leaders.

³⁸ See for example Helen S Astin and Alexander W Astin, *A Social Change Model of Leadership Development: Guidebook: Version III* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, 1996); C Marlene Fiol, Drew Harris, and Robert House, "Charismatic Leadership: Strategies for Effecting Social Change," *The Leadership Quarterly* 10/3 (1999): 449-482; Sonia Ospina, "How Social Change Organizations Create Leadership Capital and Realize Abundance Amidst Scarcity" (2011), accessible at <http://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/RCLASocialChangeOverview04.11.pdf>.

³⁹ Hughes and Cronshaw, *Baptists in Australia* 77-81.

Finally, we realise that one of the challenging dynamics of Baptist church life and congregational meetings is that church members are empowered to make decisions for the church, and sometimes they can do this in ways that side-line or ignore the leadership of the pastor. The people of the church may feel empowered at the expense of the disempowerment of the pastoral leader.

Leadership theoreticians remind us that empowering leadership is a mutual, relational process between leaders and followers. Pastoral leaders can only empower church members as far as they are willing to be empowered! Setting direction, alignment and commitment requires active participation of leaders and followers. Sometimes members leave their pastors to do all the work, despite the pastors' best efforts to empower.

Moreover, people can be too quick to expect perfection from leaders and create an environment where it is no longer safe for leaders to show any failings. When this occurs leaders become isolated and are forced to take sole responsibility for both the successes and failures encountered along the way. Somewhat perversely, people can relish the discovery of a leader's failings; "see they aren't any better than the rest of us" whether or not they have ever actually claimed to be. More research and analysis of how leaders and churches can best minister mutually to one another is important, especially although not exclusively in a Baptist context.

CONCLUSION

Empowering leadership is about inspiration, innovation, participation and transformation. It is about creating a communal core that enables and coordinates individual autonomy, a safe place to share ideas and life, and that takes the generosity to give permission for new ideas and authority to put things into action. Leaders who empower people join them on their journey, but also allow them to join the leader's journey, which requires the humility of demonstrated vulnerability.

In summary, Australian NCLS data provides strong support for theoretical predictions that inspiring and empowering leadership contributes to organisational vitality. This article drew on analysis of 2011 NCLS survey data of Victorian Baptists, and four follow-up interviews with leaders of churches who felt they were empowering and inspiring. The article discussed areas where Victorian Baptist churches and leaders are doing well in inspiring and empowering people: inspiring the involvement of the whole people of God; giving permission for innovation; inviting participation through identifying and supporting people's gifts; welcoming contributions from people of different cultures and abilities; and fostering transformation in line with the Kingdom of God. Victorian Baptists, like other streams of the Australian church, have room for improvement in all these areas. However, two groups for whom Victorian Baptists especially have room for improvement are in encouraging the gifts and contributions of attenders who are younger and attenders who are newcomers. The ministry of the whole people of God is a distinctive of Baptist beliefs. Yet Victorian Baptist churches and leaders need more thinking and action in moving beyond an apparent preference of encouraging the contributions of members who are older in age and older in their experience of faith and church. This is important because overall where leadership that inspires to action and empowers and

mobilises people's gifts is present, churches are more likely to show health and vitality in a range of areas.

APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. When has your church and leadership been at its best at empowering all believers for ministry?
2. What are some of the obstacles to empowering all believers for ministry and when has your church been at its best at overcoming them?
3. In what ways can churches and leaders encourage innovation and creative thinking and when have you been at your best at that?
4. When has your church and leadership been at its best at taking people's ideas into account?
5. When has your church and leadership been at its best in helping people identify and use their gifts and skills?
6. When has your church and leadership been at its best in helping people build on their strengths?
7. When has your church and leadership been at its best in providing sources of inspiration through
 - a. Focus on directions for the future?
 - b. Preaching?
 - c. Focus on the wider community?
 - d. Involving different groups within the congregation to use their gifts and skills?
8. When has your church and leadership been at its best in communicating clearly and openly?
9. What helps you and your people best express courageous leadership?

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