THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
EDUCATION OFFICE

Rooted in the Church

Summary Report

November 2016

rbd
Research by Design

ROOTED in the CHURCH

Contents

Foreword

by **Stephen Conway**, Chair of the National Society Council

In 2015, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York set out their vision for Renewal and Reform to address some of the deep-rooted missional challenges facing the Church of England. One of its strands, Evangelism and Witness, seeks to encourage churches towards a sense of urgency of sharing Christ with others. Another addresses the issues of Discipleship and Christian growth.

Once the seeds of faith have germinated, they need churches and congregations in which they can flourish and grow. With this in mind, in the Spring of 2016 I wrote to churches across the country inviting them to participate in research to help answer the question:

What helps root young people in the worshipping life of the Church of England so that they continue to engage with the Church as a place of spiritual nurture and growth into their adult years?

Anecdote to Evidence showed us that research helps us see the way towards change and action. We therefore commissioned Research by Design to undertake this research for us, and I am pleased to commend their findings to you. Here we have a snapshot of what has helped the seeds of faith root and flourish in young people. Here we have stories of good things happening, alongside signposts for improving the soil of the church so that it becomes more fertile for the growth and flourishing of young Christians. Here we have lessons for the Church to learn which are not hard to put in place, and which are rooted in relationship and welcome.

The findings of *Rooted in the Church* will be used in my Diocese as we develop our strategic plan in the light of Renewal and Reform's programme to root and grow the church amongst this generation.

My hope and prayer is that parishes and Dioceses will not just read these findings, but will turn them into action for the rooting and flourishing of young people in their Christian faith.

Rt Revd Stephen Conway
Bishop of Ely

1. Executive Summary

The Church of England's Education Office commissioned Research by Design to explore the relationship between the Church of England and young people in order to better understand what helps young people stay rooted in their faith and church lives.

1.1.   Key findings

The key findings of this research are:

- Overall, the majority of people in our survey said that, in their opinion, the most important attribute of a church should be that it is "friendly" and "non-judgemental". Inclusion is an important issue for young people: they seek welcome and acceptance, even after periods of absence from church.

- The importance placed by young people on inclusion within "the whole church family" is reflected in their preferred style of worship: while they value age-specific leadership and activities, they do not want to always be artificially separated from the main church.

- Young people seek to be treated as equal members of the Church. They want to have meaningful roles, not tokenism. This includes leadership roles and serving opportunities, including intergenerational ministry. They also seek a greater "voice and vote" on decision-making bodies such as PCCs and Synods.

- Many of our respondents and experts in the field emphasise the importance of intergenerational relationships in the Church: "bridge people" who work through mentor schemes and small groups to include young people within the wider Church community. This model contrasts with one which separates young people and youth leaders from the wider church.

- Youth workers are the ideal "bridge people", and yet their work is often not sufficiently resourced or supported. Greater vision training and funding needs to be in place to ensure that youth workers are sufficiently resourced and supported. A culture of youth work is heavily reliant on the efforts of individual churches and dioceses. Many respondents feel that they do not have a strong overall sense of the national Church's vision for youth work and young people.

- The majority of our parent and young adult respondents indicated that they believed the linking of Communion to Confirmation creates an artificial divide between generations in the Church.

- Young people's engagement with faith is not a binary question of attendance - being "in" church or "out". There are types and stages of disengagement which have been labelled by experts as nomads, exiles, prodigals, switchers, reverters and unbelievers.

- The issue of youth attendance and affiliation is not confined to churches alone. Similar patterns of disengagement can be found in declining levels of participation in other types of membership groups, including sports and voluntary clubs.

- Our survey found that young adults who state that Christianity is "important in their daily lives" demonstrate higher levels of participation in other types of voluntary club and membership group than those who do not state that Christianity is important in their daily lives.

1.2.   Key conclusions

Following this research, the evidence suggests that:

- Churches should aim to build a culture of intergenerational relationships

- Churches should be inclusive of all ages in both leadership and worship

- Churches should recognise young people and young adults as equal members of the Body of Christ

- Churches should be encouraged to explore the possibility of admitting baptised children to Communion before Confirmation

- Churches should become unconditionally welcoming places for young people

- Churches need to do more to support their youth workers and leaders

1.3. Methodology

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, we identify some of the key themes and challenges facing the Church with regard to youth rootedness and participation. In particular, we examine:

- Feelings about the Church among young people, in terms of worship, teaching and inclusion

- The role of faith in daily life

- Stories of rootedness and of leaving the Church

- Questions of participation and leadership

- The role of youth workers and youth services

Our quantitative research is represented by two surveys: one completed by young adults aged 16 to 30 and the other by parents of young people aged 11 to 30. In total, 641 young adults completed their survey. Of these, 60% were young women. The average age was 24 years, with 75% confirmed in the Church of England. 878 parents completed their survey, with an average age of 44 years and an average number of 2.4 children. The average age of their children was 19 years.

Our survey suggests that the average age of church "drop-outs" among young people is 14.5 years, with peaks at 13, 16 and 18 - ages which broadly correspond to the beginning of secondary school, the end of Key Stage 4 (GCSEs) and the end of Key Stage 5 (A-levels or equivalent).

Our qualitative research was represented by telephone interviews of 30 individuals selected from the surveys: 14 young adults and 16 parents.

Throughout this report we refer to three categories of person: "young people", "young adults" and "parents". Young people makes reference to those aged 11-18; within the research we asked young adults (16-30 years) to reflect back to their experiences of church as young people. Parents were also asked to reflect back on the experiences of their children as young people.

2. Context

This section of the report provides the context to the research, including an explanation of our methodology and a review of the main expert literature.

2.1   Research objectives

2.1.1.   Secularisation, non-affiliation and young people

How can we make sense of the relationship between the Church and young people?

There is a common perception that the relationship is not a good one. Polls suggest that religiously "unaffiliated" young people and young adults are on the rise (see, for example, surveys by YouGov in the UK and the Pew Research Center in the USA). Media outlets such as CNN describe a generation of "millennials leaving the Church in droves" (Burke: 2014). And journalists like Andrew Brown ask whether the lack of religious affiliation amongst the under-40s signals the end of Christianity in Britain.

Drawing on data provided by YouGov and Professor Linda Woodhead of the University of Lancaster, Brown argues that 95% of children of "non-religion" parents are likely to remain non-religious themselves, while 40% of children of Christian parents will probably stop labelling themselves as Christian (Brown: 2016). These millennials are often called "Nones": when asked to describe their faith from a list on a survey, they answer "none of the above".

If these media reports and surveys make uncomfortable reading for the Church, academic literature offers little comfort. The trend of religious "unaffiliation" is considered to reflect a wider pattern of what experts call a secularisation of society over the past 50 years. According to these scholars, religious belief and practice tends to halve over generations: if both parents attend church at least monthly, there is a 46% chance that their child will do so. When just one parent attends church, the likelihood is halved to 23%. In the words of David Voas, institutional religion in the UK has a "half-life of one generation, to borrow the terminology of radioactive decay. The generation now in middle age has produced children who are half as likely to attend church" (Voas, 2005).

> ## "The generation now in middle age has produced children who are half as likely to attend church."
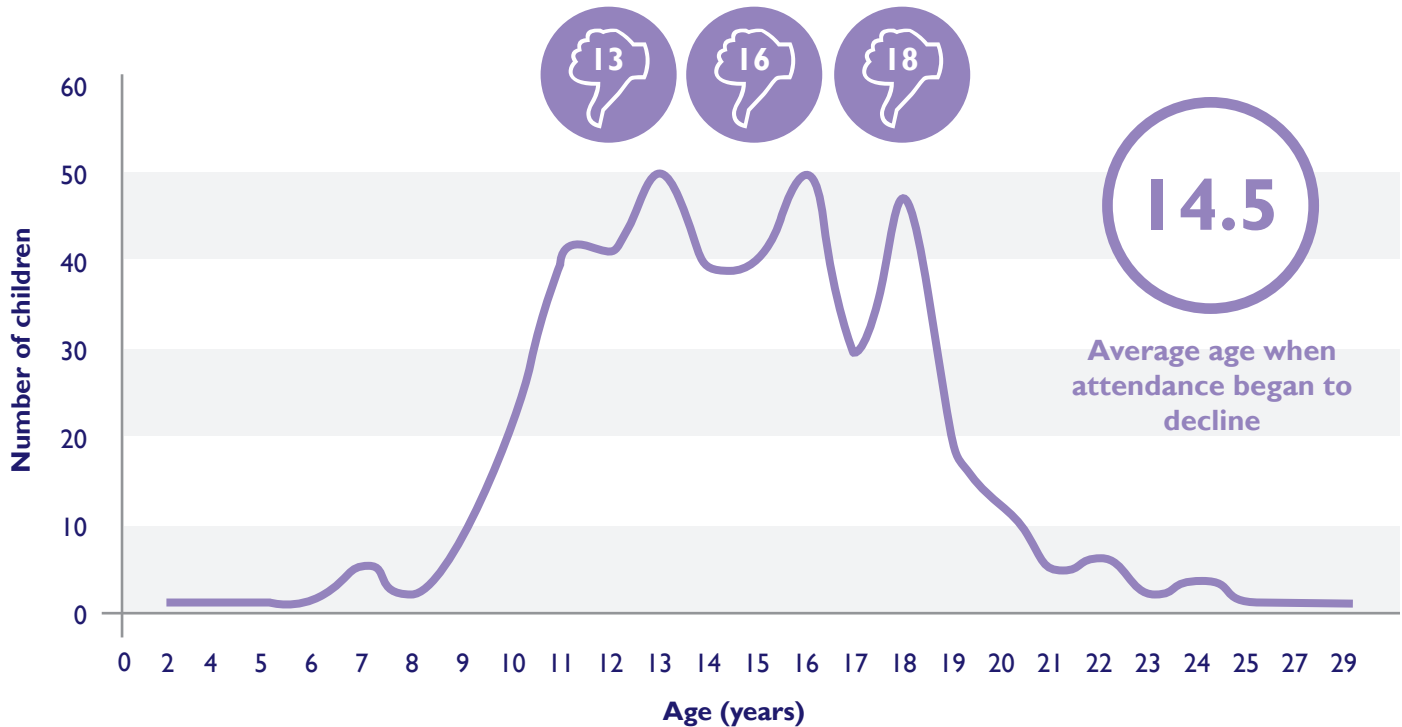>
> Professor David Voas, UCL

Voas led one of the research teams of the recent Church Growth Research Programme. The Programme's summary report, published in 2014 as *From Anecdote to Evidence*, found that "the reason for decline in affiliation and attendance is the failure to replace older generations of churchgoers. The problem is not adults leaving the Church: it is that half of the children of churchgoing parents do not attend when they reach adulthood".

From Anecdote to Evidence also argues that, among those young adults who remain church-goers, it is possible to identify an age of retention: "the evidence suggests that on average people experience little change in their religious beliefs and practices once they reach their early 20s … 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" (Church Growth Research Programme: 2014).

Our research echoes these findings. In our survey of congregations, parents of young people were asked to say at what age their children started to attend church less often. The average response was 14.5 years old, with peaks of dropping-out at age 13, 16 and 18 - ages which broadly correspond to the beginning of secondary school, the end of Key Stage 4 (GCSEs) and the end of Key Stage 5 (A-levels or the equivalent).

Figure 1: Age at which church attendance began to decline

Sample size: (n = 490)

The research of *From Anecdote to Evidence* notes that context and environment are key factors in determining the decline of youth church affiliation, arguing that "what secularisation does is to change the environment in which children are raised and the likelihood of effective religious upbringing. Each generation comes to be less religious than the one before". This is echoed by the ministers and leaders of its case study churches, who observe "changes in society which mean that some folk are committed Christians but no longer attend church every week. There are so many calls on people's time and church is getting pushed out."

In the following pages, we build on the premise of *From Anecdote to Evidence* to examine why some young people become "rooted" in the church while others do not. Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, we identify some of the key themes and challenges which churches need to consider with regard to rooting the faith of young people.

In particular, we draw on the Church Growth Research Programme's claim that "there is no single recipe for growth … Growth depends on the context, and what works in one place may not work in another. There are no strong connections between growth and worship style, theological tradition, and so on. Growth is a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment". From this statement emerge the key terms which shape our own research: namely, a study of how young adults' church affiliation relates to issues of worship style, leadership structure and the wider context of a congregation's environment.

2.1.2.   Wider patterns of youth disengagement

A key environmental factor which became apparent during the course of our research is that the issue of youth attendance and affiliation is not confined to churches. Evidence shows that other types of membership clubs, sports organisations and voluntary associations also struggle to retain young people beyond the age of 16 - a trend which is linked to a drop in "social-connectedness" (Young People Social Attitudes Survey: 2003-2012). According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "virtually all leisure activities that involve doing something with someone else, from playing volleyball to playing chamber music, are declining", as well as a decline in the sense of trust in other people and in institutions (Joseph Rowntree Foundation: 2000).

Of course, the Church is not just a membership group. It is also a body of fellowship and faith. Nevertheless, we believe that the debate over the so-called "secularisation thesis"

cannot be separated from questions over decreasing levels of youth participation in activities such as group sports and clubs. We therefore approach the issue of religious affiliation from the context of broader patterns of declining membership and participation.

Perhaps the most prominent expert in this field, Robert Putnam, argues that the decline of club membership in recent decades both reflects and precipitates a wider decline of engagement in civic society. He makes a clear connection between membership of clubs - including churches - and wider social capital, arguing that "the declines are equally visible in non-political community life: membership and activity in all sorts of local clubs and civic and religious organisations have been falling at an accelerating pace" (Putnam: 2000). Putnam's thesis describes the situation as he sees it in America, but his ideas have become increasingly influential among policy-makers in the UK.

> **"Social capital refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."**
>
> Professor Robert D. Putnam, University of Harvard

Interestingly, our survey found that young adults who state that Christianity is "important in their daily lives" tend to show higher levels of participation in other types of voluntary club and membership group than those who do not.

Table A: Youth participation in other activities by importance of Christianity in daily life

	Importance of Christianity in daily life		
	Overall	Important	Not important
Musical, cultural or other hobbies	63%	68%	55%
Uniformed groups (e.g. Scouts/Guiding)	53%	49%	60%
Youth club	42%	47%	36%
Sports club	40%	39%	42%
School Council/ Student Union	30%	34%	25%
Social action organised by church (e.g. Street Pastors, Food Banks)	18%	25%	8%
Environmental/animal welfare, world development	10%	12%	7%
First Aid (e.g. St John's Ambulance)	6%	7%	4%
Political group	4%	5%	2%
Sample size	509	315	194

Note: The green and red boxes denote statistically significant differences in findings

2.1.3.   Key themes

These broad themes of secularisation, youth disengagement and membership affiliation underpin the research context of our report. They inform our understanding of what roots young people in the Church and helps them continue to engage (or not) with their church as a place of spiritual nurture, fellowship and community into their adult years.

From these themes, three main points of interest emerge:

● **First:** we are interested in understanding the stages of disengagement. What are these? How do they evolve? How do we categorise disengagement and/or rootedness?

Based on a quantitative study of around 1,200 young churchgoers, Kinnaman (2011) summarises three main types of church "dropout": what he labels the "prodigals", the "nomads" and the "exiles". According to his data (collected in the USA and carried out by the Barna Group), "prodigals" are the 10% of young people who grow up with a Christian background but lose their faith in Christianity. "Exiles" are the 20% who feel lost between "church culture" and society. Often feeling that "I want to be a Christian without separating myself from the world around me", they struggle to participate in church. More common are those 40% of "nomad" young Christians who leave the institutional church and have become "lost" to church participation but who still call themselves Christians.

As such, Kinnaman argues that "the reality of the dropout problem is not about a huge exodus of young people from the Christian faith. In fact, it is about the various ways that young people become disconnected in their spiritual journey. Church leaders and parents cannot effectively help the next generation in their spiritual development without understanding these three primary patterns". From the research, he concludes that "most young people with a Christian background are dropping out of conventional church involvement, not losing their faith". We ask: how do such categories help us understand the young Christians interviewed in our survey?

● **Second:** we are interested in the roles of young people and young adults, their structures of leadership, and how these structures define their relationship to the Church. Much of the literature assessed in the course of our research, and many of the respondents of our survey express how the Church struggles to overcome a problem of communication with youth. In particular, there is a call for the Church to listen more, especially with regards to how young people view both the Church and their lived environment. How does that problem of communication

affect engagement? And how does it affect the structures of Church leadership? What are the opportunities for young people and young adults to be rooted?

● **Third:** we are interested in types of church participation among young people and young adults. The secularisation thesis tends to use figures of church attendance on a Sunday morning to define its narrative of decline. But what about alternative forms of participation and worship? Responding to the findings of a major recent survey of youth in Britain, Catto (2014) argues that "the study of religion and youth is found to be more than a question of successful transmission from parent to child or not: either a religious or secular outcome. ... The future is going to be a dynamic relationship between the religious and the secular with varying patterns in context rather than the former inevitably, inexorably giving way to the latter. It challenges notions of what religion is and where it can be found". We ask: how does this notion of a "dynamic relationship" inform our thinking in terms of understanding and measuring alternative or "Fresh" expressions of worship among young people and young adults?

2.2.   Research methodology

2.2.1.   Measurement and reliability

Projects of religious investigation face significant methodological challenges. Voas notes that survey questions tend not to "yield valid or reliable data. Measurement problems abound: it is not always clear what it means to have a religion or to be religious. There are multiple indicators of religiosity, and responses show high sensitivity to question wording and context" (Voas: 2015). This advice was at the forefront of our minds as we designed our own survey questions. We wanted our questions - both in terms of content and language - to reflect the actual concerns of young adults rather than impose a predetermined structure of knowledge on them. Before launching our survey, therefore, we tested our draft questions on groups of young adults. Draft research instruments, including questionnaires and explanatory materials, were presented to a User Testing Group, a pool of young volunteers recruited in May 2015 through the national network of Diocesan Youth Officers. This provided a useful critique of the optimal language, length and format of our proposed survey before we launched the final version.

Experts in the study of religion have noted that individuals are often prone to over-state their religious affiliation. Self-reported data on church attendance can therefore be unreliable (Hadaway: 1993, 2006). This problem exists in other types of surveys, and market research into membership

dynamics has shown that over-statement or "social desirability bias" is a widespread phenomenon. People asked about their behaviour will often "inflate" their responses to a researcher, for a range of reasons (Neeley and Cronley, 2004).

We remained conscious of this risk of inflated self-reported data when crafting our own survey. Our aim was to achieve as close an objective view as possible of the relationship between young people and the Church: comparing independent data about young people (through attendance figures and academic literature) to reported data about young people (through their parents) and self-reported narrative from young adults themselves. To achieve this, we constructed two surveys - one for completion by young adults, and one for the parents of young people. These quantitative surveys provided terms of reference which we then explored through qualitative interviews. Finally, we compared our research findings to the literature in this field.

2.2.2. Quantitative stage

Our principal research methodology was a quantitative survey of young adults (aged 16 to 30 who were reflecting back on their church experience as young people) and parents of young people aged 11 to 30 who either attended at the time of the survey or previously attended a Church of England church. The achieved samples were "independent", in the sense that the young adults who participated were not necessarily related to the parents who responded (although many were family members due to the sampling approach that was taken).

To help us determine the optimal age at which to start our young adults' survey, we drew on the findings of *From Anecdote to Evidence* and recent research conducted by Voas. Voas argues that religious affiliation declines over generations. Within generational groups, he writes, "there is remarkable stability over the adult life course". He suggests that this "stability" tends to become established at age 16: the importance of religion at this age is "a reasonably good predictor" of who will retain or not retain an affiliation into adulthood (Voas, 2015). In other words, if a young person is going to church at age 16, he or she is likely to continue to do so in the future. If drop-out occurs by the age of 16, this can mark a lasting separation between the individual and the Church.

Reflecting this logic, we decided to begin our survey of young adults at 16 years of age. This had the added advantage that 16-year old respondents could tell us about their experiences of church life when they were 14.5 years old – the average age of drop-out, according to our survey.

2.2.3. Pilot

The survey was pilot-tested among a small pool of churches in June 2015, namely Holy Trinity, Norwich; Christ Church, Ipsley, Worcestershire; St Matthew, Cheltenham; St Mary, Long Sutton, Lincolnshire.

The pilot provided us with some useful feedback and lessons. Chiefly, we found that the draft survey was too long when conducted face-to-face. The average completion time was 20 to 30 minutes, and attention levels were felt to dip after around 10 minutes. We also found that the face-to-face interviews naturally caused a waiting time for individuals; having to wait 10 minutes for one respondent to complete a survey resulted in other members of the congregation drifting away. As a result, the survey was shortened.

Also, while speaking to young adults during the pilot stage, we established that self-completed surveys conducted online at home were preferred by many (on the premise that this self-completion was encouraged by their church leaders). Consequently, for the main fieldwork, we proposed a range of different survey approaches from which church leaders could choose for their congregation, namely:

- Direct face to face completion;
- Assisted completion;
- Online self-completion;
- Paper self-completion.

In order to assist the promotion of our research, a range of posters, postcards and information leaflets were also developed for distribution. These have been reproduced online in Appendix B, available at:

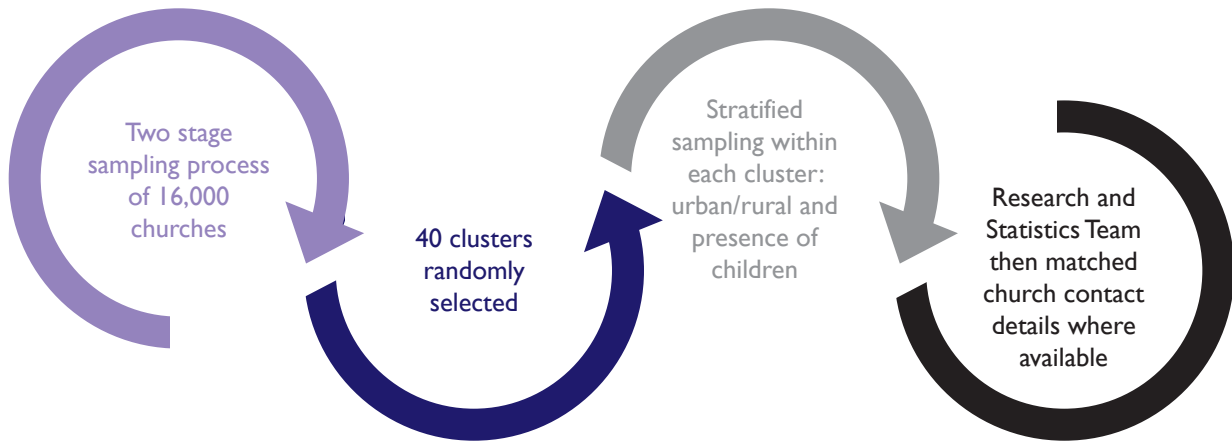https://www.churchofengland.org/education/publications.aspx

2.2.4. Main fieldwork

Fieldwork for the quantitative stage of this project was conducted between September 2015 and February 2016.
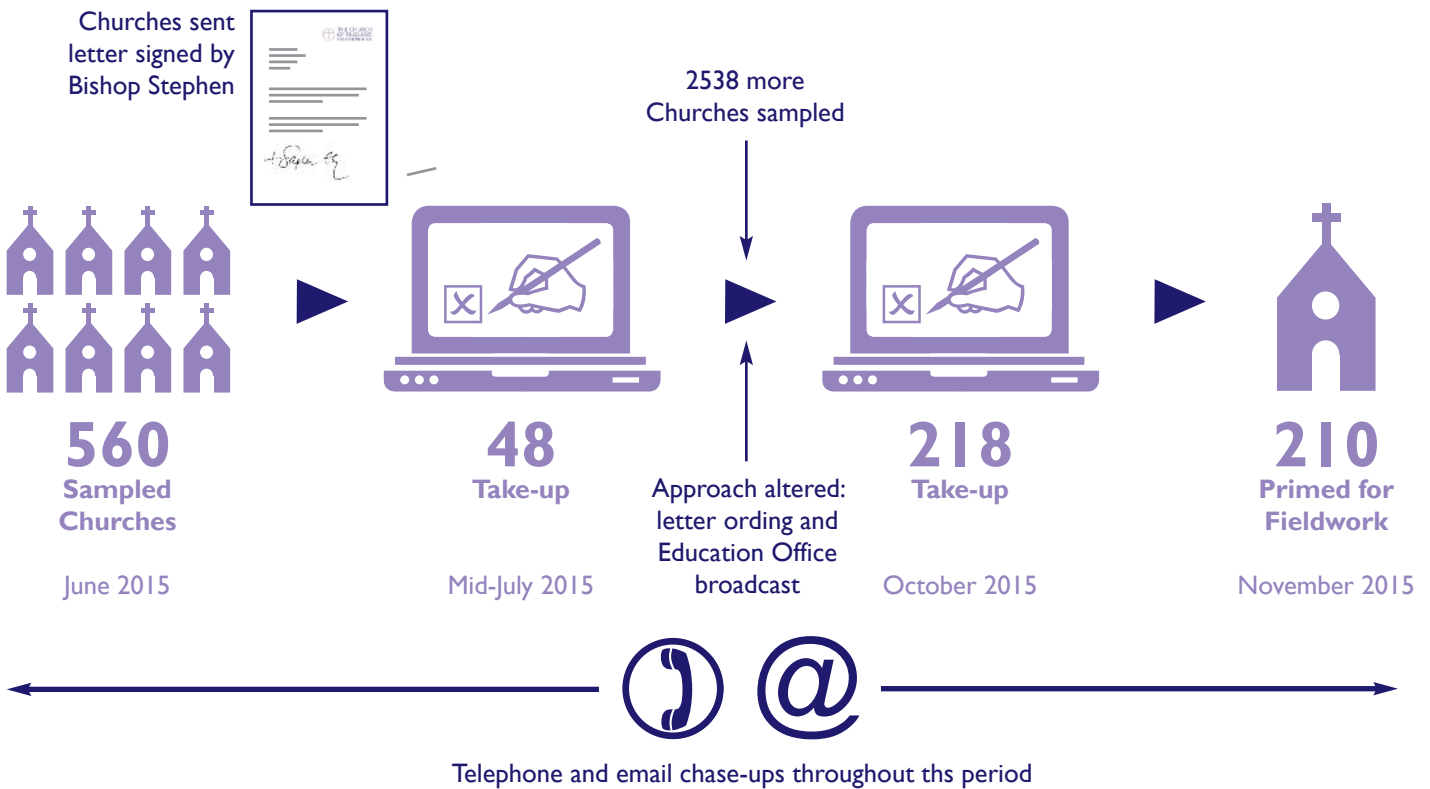
Sampling was based on archdeaconries. 40 geographical clusters were randomly selected and, in total, 3,098 churches were selected from a stratified list of 16,000.

Figure 2: *Quantitative sampling, engagement and recruitment of churches*

Quantitative sampling

Two stage sampling process of 16,000 churches

40 clusters randomly selected

Stratified sampling within each cluster: urban/rural and presence of children

Research and Statistics Team then matched church contact details where available

Engagement process

Churches sent letter signed by Bishop Stephen

2538 more Churches sampled

560
Sampled Churches

June 2015

48
Take-up

Mid-July 2015

Approach altered: letter ording and Education Office broadcast

218
Take-up

October 2015

210
Primed for Fieldwork

November 2015

Telephone and email chase-ups throughout ths period

This sample was stratified according to an urban-rural indicator and the average weekly attendance of young adults. Using lists provided to us by the Research and Statistics Team at the Archbishops Council, we initially wrote to 560 churches in May 2015 inviting them to participate in the two surveys: the one for young adults aged 16 to 30 and the other for parents with children aged 11 to 30. In response, 48 churches expressed interest in the study. This level of take-up was far less than we had predicted, resulting in us writing to a further 2,538 churches and following up with email and telephone correspondence. The second wave of correspondence resulted in a further 170 churches responding positively. Of the 218 churches expressing willingness to take part, 210 actively participated in the fieldwork.

Figure 3: Method of participation

Online self-completion	71% / 67%
Paper self-completion	17% / 21%
Online self-completion following church visit	7% / 6%
Face to face	6% / 5%

Young adults (n = 641)   Parents (n = 878)

As the pilot stage suggested, only a few of the 210 churches preferred face-to-face interviews. Many church leaders felt the exercise would be disruptive for them and their congregation. They argued that congregations come together to worship and exchange fellowship rather than answer questionnaires. As a result, access to churches often proved to be a challenge.

Supporting the recruitment of young adults and parents to the survey, the Church of England Twitter account was also used to promote and signpost people to the questionnaires.

Table B: Quantitative responses

	Young adults	Parents	Total
Face to face responses	37	46	83
Self-completion responses following researcher visit	42	55	97
Self-completion responses	562	777	1339
Total responses	641	878	1519

In total, 641 young adults completed a questionnaire. Of these, 60% were young women. The average age was 24 years, 75% had been confirmed and 30% had lived in the same neighbourhood all their lives.

878 parents completed their questionnaire. Their average age was 44 years and their average number of children was 2.4. The average age of their children was 19 years.

Figure 4: Quantitative sample summary

641 Responses	**878** Responses
38% 61%	44 yrs **Average age of parent**
24 yrs **Average age**	2.4 **Average number of children**
75% **Confirmed**	19.2 yrs **Average age of child** core age range
31% **Have lived in the same neighbourhood all their lives**	55% **Child's attendance lower nowadays**

The full demographic breakdown of the sample is provided in Appendix A and the final survey instruments are reproduced in Appendix B, both available at:

https://www.churchofengland.org/education/publications.aspx

2.2.5.   Qualitative Stage

The quantitative surveys were followed by telephone interviews, for further qualitative insights. In total, 30 individuals were selected from the surveys for in-depth interviews: 14 young adults and 16 parents. The discussion guide which structured these interviews (given in Appendix C, available at:

https://www.churchofengland.org/education/publications.aspx)

... was designed to facilitate a fluid conversation, and was used to explore the most interesting answers captured in the quantitative questionnaire. The primary focus was on the following areas:

- The role of faith in daily life

- Early church life

- Early role models

- The role of youth workers and youth services

- Feelings about the Church

- Stories of rootedness and/or leaving the Church

- Roles and leadership

Figure 5: *Qualitative sample summary*

641 young adults and 878 parents

Deep dive with 16 young adults and 14 parents

Virtual group

Findings used to inform the design of the qualitative stage

Focus group with young adults (case study)

Fieldwork for this qualitative stage was conducted between March and April 2016. It was supplemented with a focus group of young adults at a church in Brighton following their Sunday Service. This group environment allowed young adults to share their views among peers and develop their own discussion of the topics based on the findings of the quantitative survey. A "spotlight" case study of this focus group and church can be found online in Appendix D https://www.churchofengland.org/education/publications.aspx .

Finally, we invited a cluster of young adults to join a virtual forum using the WhatsApp mobile messaging service. This forum ran from April to June 2016, and allowed volunteers to record their thoughts about attendance and transition through everyday life while also interacting regularly with people of the same age group. As mobile technology is such an important component of most young adult's lives, using WhatsApp allowed us to reach out to our target audience in a way that feels completely natural to them.

2.3.   Literature review

In addition to the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the research, a literature review of key texts on the question of young people has also been conducted.

Most of the texts have been drawn from English sources, though a few are American, due to their significant denominational and social similarities. The texts are primarily peer-reviewed academic articles and books. In addition to these, some church reports, journalism and material from conferences and the Internet have also been included.

The texts capture key learnings about the Anglican experience, the importance of intergenerational relationships within the church, issues of accessibility, mentoring and leadership, and changing forms of worship such as "Fresh Expressions" and the role of the Internet in young people's fellowship. This work enabled us to refine our research hypothesis and inform the building of our survey.

The material of the literature review has been integrated throughout this report. In particular, the secularisation debate dominates many of the texts and provides a context for questions over why some young people remain rooted in the Church of England while others do not. While it is not necessary in this section to rehearse the familiar secularisation debate, certain terms emerge from the literature which prove useful to our study and which require highlighting.

Responding to the secularisation narrative of scholars like Voas and Bruce, Davie (2002) distinguishes institutional or public religion from private belief: she suggests that "the marked fall-off in religious attendance has not resulted, yet, in a parallel abdication of religious belief" - a phenomenon she describes as "believing without belonging" (Davie: 1994) which is more accurately understood in terms of an "unchurched" rather than a "secular" society. However, Bruce (2011) states that contrasting institutional and popular religion in order to rebut the secularisation thesis has no basis in sociological fact. He argues that popular religion does not endure institutional decline but rather is "doubly vulnerable" to secularisation: it is eroded by both secularising forces and by the decline of the Church. "Without an institutional core", Bruce argues, "a popular religious culture cannot be sustained".

Bruce's thesis is supported by some of the evidence in the literature on the increasing popularity of biblically- and socially-conservative, Sunday service-focussed churches among Evangelical and migrant congregations. Voas concurs, writing that "the future of religion in Britain is black and brown" (Voas: 2015). The Evangelical Alliance has recently published a report (2015) on "Building tomorrow's Church Today", including an online survey involving 1,700 respondents aged 18 to 37 living in the UK who describe themselves as Christians. Almost all are active churchgoers who attend a

> **"Experimental forms of Christian community are greatly affected by the level of support and connection with the wider church, particularly during times of transition … Young adults attending these types of churches may struggle to make the leap to more traditional forms of church as they get older."**
>
> Beth Keith, University of Durham

specific church at least once a month, with 89% attending weekly. A substantial 84% are serving in their church in activities that benefit the congregation, 70% have a mentor in church, and 80% have leadership responsibilities of some kind. This leads the Evangelical Alliance to conclude that "the millennial Christians we surveyed are committed church attenders".

These findings among young British Evangelicals present a challenge to those denominations (notably Anglicans and Methodists) which explore alternative forms of worship, some of which include "Fresh Expressions" as a way of enabling young people and young adults to participate in the life of the Church outside the formal structures of congregational attendance on a Sunday. As with rising Catholic congregations, the Evangelical report highlights the commitment of young people within the structure of Sunday congregational membership and conservative theology. Some Fresh Expressions amongst young people and young adults have flourished reaching the unchurched. Both Sorted in Bradford and Regeneration Church in Romford have retained conservative theology and modern worship within a wider framework of culturally relevant outreach and engagement.

Echoing this debate taking place in England, some American scholars like Johnson et al (1993) similarly use the popularity of Evangelical churches to argue that the secularisation thesis is not a "credible" explanation for the declining popularity of the "mainline" churches (chiefly, Anglicanism and Methodism) among young people. Instead, they suggest, "to explain the decay of the mainline denominations, one must look instead for special factors at work within these churches themselves or in the lives of their constituents", notably "the tendency of many adolescents who had been confirmed in these denominations from the early 1960s on to drop out of church and not return". They refer to Kelley's hypothesis (1972) that "strong religions provide clear-cut, compelling answers to questions concerning the meaning of life, mobilise their members' energies for shared purposes, require a distinctive code of conduct, and discipline their members for failure to live up to it. Weak religions allow a diversity of theological viewpoints, do not and cannot command much of their members' time or effort, promote few if any distinctive rules of conduct, and discipline no one for violating them". They conclude that the "weakness" of a "mainline" church like Methodism and Anglicanism stems from the top: a "weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life. Somehow, in the course of the past century, these churches lost the will or the ability to teach the Christian faith".

Many Anglicans would disagree with the provocative tone of Johnson et al's hypothesis. Nevertheless, it raises serious questions for the study of young people and the Church of England. When shaping our survey, we drew on this debate to consider the extent to which young people within the Church of England value "clear-cut" and/or conservative forms of church over alternative, "fresh" expressions which permit greater degrees of diversity in teaching, worship and fellowship.

Finally, it is important to note that Bruce's criticism of Anglicanism's "institutional core" can be applied to other denominations. In particular, Methodists have seen similar declines of youth participation, and some of the literature examines the shared challenges facing both the Church of England and Methodism. Figures released in 2014 show that over the past decade total membership and attendance in the Methodist Church has fallen by a third, and the number of children has fallen by 58%. The Church is seen as a "greying" community (Hahn: 2015): 18% of members are over 81 and 51% are between 66 and 80. This reflects a pattern where the Church now celebrates more than twice as many funerals as it does baptisms (Gledhill: 2014).

In 2007, the Methodist Conference provided research on the decline of youth participation which concluded that "the traditional model of a group that meets alongside Sunday worship is no longer the main vehicle for children's or young people's ministry in the British Methodist Church", and encouraged the "Fresh Expressions" of non-standard manifestations of Church in homes and other settings. Similarly, in language that goes directly against those scholars who suggest that "mainline" denominations are in decline because they are not "clear-cut" or institutional enough, Medcalfe and Sharp (2012) provide a study of American Methodists which argues that young people "leaving" the Church cannot be seen in binary terms of either being "in" or "out". Instead, "members are considered 'leavers' because they have left one level of commitment for another", and new forms of categorisation need to be established for people who are "switchers", "reverters", "unbelievers" and "inactive".

In this mould, a British observer like Smith (2003) states that Methodism needs to rediscover its historical focus on youth work. He argues that "recent work around the significance of clubs, groups and other associational activities - in particular the contributions of Robert Putnam around social capital - has highlighted the sort of work that Methodist workers have pioneered" - namely, promoting democratic participation in youth groups and society as a whole, and viewing youth work as Christian service to improve the wellbeing of local communities.

> **"The overriding challenge is to renew our evangelism, social mission and advocacy amongst and for children and young people.**
>
> **"The challenges facing us today are every bit as great as those that inspired the pioneers of the Sunday School movement in the 18th & 19th centuries."**
>
> Methodist Conference 2007

Certain key themes emerge in the literature review, namely:

- What is the role of church teaching and its impact on young people and youth participation?

- What is the relationship between church teaching and church leadership?

- How do young people and young adults respond to different types and forms of worship, whether "conventional" or "alternative", in "mainline" services or "fresh" expressions?

- How does a church serve as an "institution" in the life of a young person and young adult?

- How important is institutionalism to youth?

- What can the Church of England learn from other denominations, namely the Methodists?

We drew on these themes in our research, first by using them to shape our quantitative survey for both young adults and parents, and second by exploring them in our qualitative research during one-on-one interviews. The following section outlines the key findings of that research.

3. Key Findings

During the course of our research, respondents (both young adults and parents) were asked questions on the importance of faith in their daily lives; their early role models and church life; their current roles and leadership in church; and their preferred types of church and worship. We then examined these questions further in our qualitative interviews, in particular their feelings about the Church and their stories of rootedness and/or leaving the Church.

Our research findings centred around four key themes:

- Inclusion
- Equality
- Leadership
- Space

> **"There has to be some way of getting young people and us to be part of a whole family where everybody always has a place within it, and sees a role and value."**
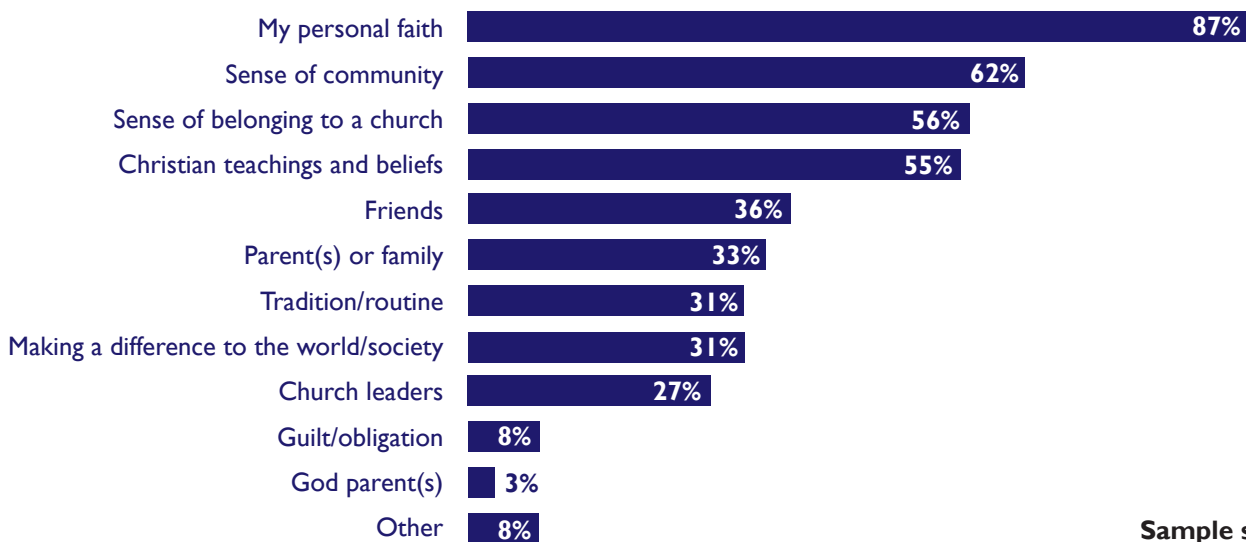>
> Parent, South Yorkshire

3.1. Inclusion

3.1.1. While young people value age-specific leadership and activities, they do not want to be artificially separated from the main church

Many of our interviewees talked about the danger of "separating" youth from the "whole church". While appreciating that it is important to accommodate potentially different needs and preferred methods of worship, many argued that these are ideally satisfied within the main family of the church.

This feeling was described by the young adults as "inclusion", and by the parents as "integration" and "broad churchmanship". Many talked about the importance of bringing the whole church together on a Sunday morning. In the words of one parent, coming together "shouldn't be called a family service, just a service".

These views were echoed in our surveys of both young adults and parents. When asked the question, "which of the following most influences your choice about whether you attend church nowadays?", most young adults pointed to their personal faith, after which they talked about the importance of "belonging" to a church and a "sense of community".

Figure 6: *Main influencers on young adults' church attendance*

Influencer	Percentage
My personal faith	87%
Sense of community	62%
Sense of belonging to a church	56%
Christian teachings and beliefs	55%
Friends	36%
Parent(s) or family	33%
Tradition/routine	31%
Making a difference to the world/society	31%
Church leaders	27%
Guilt/obligation	8%
God parent(s)	3%
Other	8%

Sample size: n = 627

The importance placed by young adults on belonging to a community is reflected in the survey by their description of the "perfect church": when asked this question, the two most important attributes they described were "friendly" and "non-judgemental". This view was also held by parents, who described their perfect church as "friendly", "non-judgemental" and one which "encourages participation".

Interestingly, this desire for community and belonging is mirrored in the young adults' description of their preferred style of church worship. The majority prefer a "modern style" service (62%). However, when asked whether they want services to be "youth-focussed", only 21% agree.
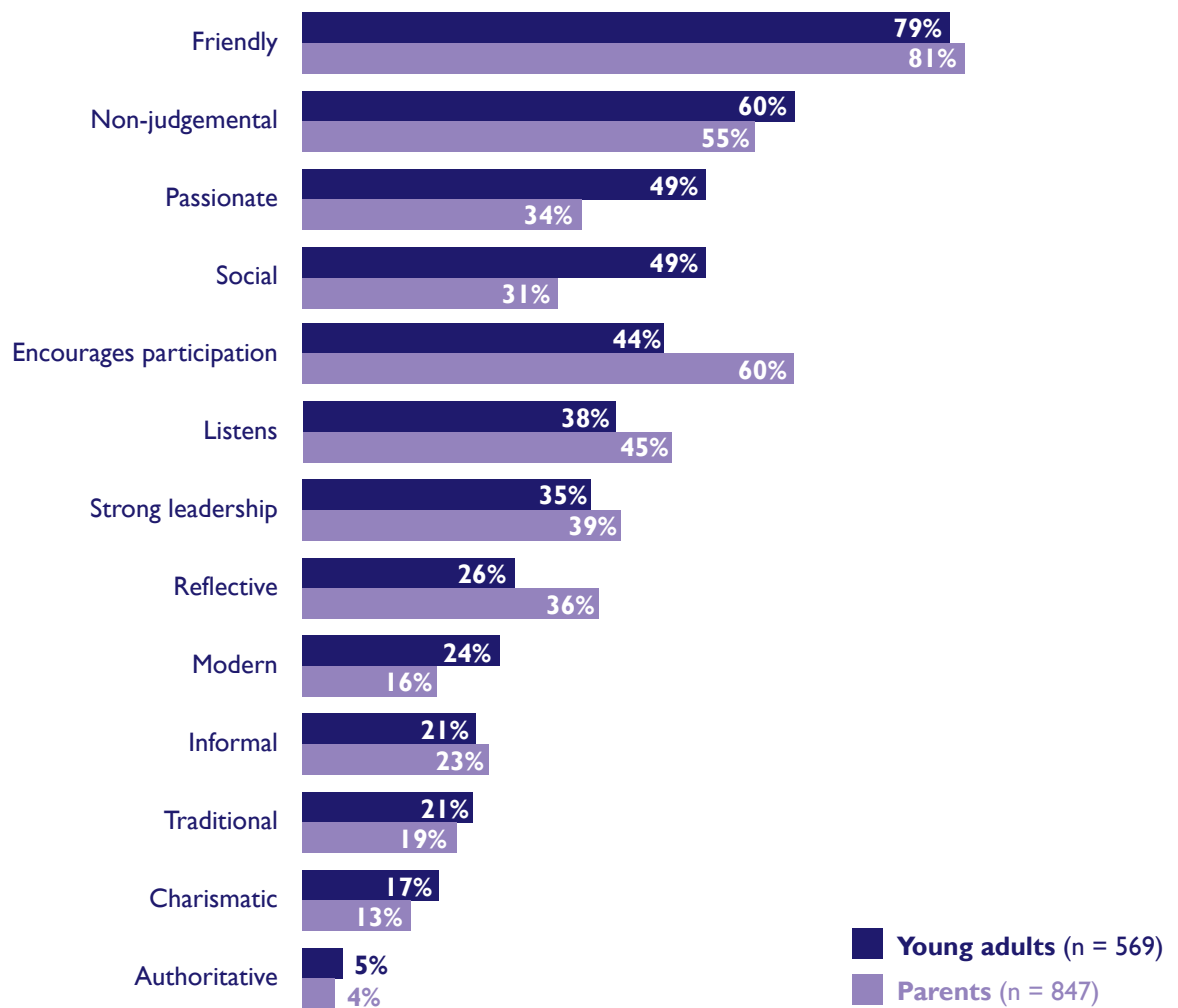
Figure 7: "Perfect church" descriptors

Young adults (n = 569)
Parents (n = 847)

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Figure 8: Preferred method of worship

	Young adults (n = 627)	Parents (n = 783)
Modern style Service	66%	40%
Traditional Service	44%	27%
Family Service for all ages	37%	31%
Alternative worship and spaces	34%	18%
Youth focused Services	21%	25%
Youth groups in the week	20%	15%
Other	6%	6%

When looking at the age of these respondents, the data suggest a pattern: as young people progress through their teens into their early and late 20s, proportionally fewer prefer youth-focussed services and youth groups and more favour modern and/or traditional services.

Table C: Preferred method of worship by age

	Age		
	16-1-9 years	20-25 years	26-30 years
Modern style Service	54%	64%	67%
Traditional Service	34%	44%	53%
Family Service for all ages	36%	36%	38%
Alternative worship and spaces	32%	35%	36%
Youth focused Services	37%	16%	12%
Youth groups in the week	41%	12%	9%
Other	5%	13%	0%
Sample size	200	200	224

Note: The green and red boxes denote statistically significant differences in findings

These figures are reflected in the academic literature, much of which looks at how youth-focussed church services operate as distinct entities from congregations, and asks whether these services foster a sense of separation from the wider Church.

One challenge highlighted by the literature is that, while these separate services can give young people a sense of identity during their teens, they risk creating problems at the point when adolescents leave their youth service community and their families to go to university, college or a job. Sharma and Guest (2012) note that only a minority of young adults feel that their faith is strengthened when they leave their home church experience for university. They find that they are often not equipped to integrate into other congregations partly because there has been little preparation or overlap between their previous experience and the next stage.

In these cases, "youth worship" has been put into a kind of "silo". Kinnaman builds on this idea, arguing that because most young Christians "lack adult mentors or meaningful friendships with older Christians who can guide them", "the university setting does not usually cause the disconnect; it exposes the shallow-faith problem of many young disciples". Rendle (2002) concurs, highlighting the lack of meaningful contact between generations. He describes many congregations as "bi-modal", with "radically different groups operating within them" and "very few 'bridge people' to navigate between their differences".

Clearly, these views pose a challenge to some thinking on alternative spaces and worship formats for young people. They also highlight the importance of leadership in achieving inclusion within a congregation. In our interviews, respondents talked about the "crucial" importance of a vicar's leadership vision in balancing this need to maintain the inclusivity of the "whole church" family (to use the words of one parent) while also catering to the different needs of age groups. This is reflected to some degree in our surveys, where "strong leadership" is an important factor for over a third of both young adults and parents when describing their perfect church.

Most of the literature highlights the importance of an "intergenerational" approach to church congregations and leadership. One Pentecostal minister states that "churches with one dominant generation are at risk, no matter which generation claims that role. While many churches are multigenerational and seemingly care for all generations, in reality the generations function more like cars passing each other on a highway, near each other, but rarely with meaningful contact" (McCrary: 2014). He argues that intergenerational ministry is the dynamic relationship between two or more generations. Most congregations are

multigenerational in that they have more than one generation engaged in worship and ministry activities. However, intergenerational congregations "empower the various generations to communicate in meaningful ways, interact on a regular basis, and serve together regularly". He proposes five ways to achieve this:

● Partnering with parents

● Strategic mentoring

● Blended services

● Faith-building stories

● Serving opportunities

On the question of achieving inclusion through serving opportunities, it is useful to note the Evangelical Alliance report cited in our literature review. In this report, 89% of young adults surveyed stated that they attend church weekly, with 84% saying that they "serve their church in activities that benefit the congregation".

> **"The lack of significant relationships between the generations must be addressed if churches intend to thrive from one generation to the next."**
>
> Pastor Mike McCrary, Pentecostal Central Assembly

Finally, some of the literature argues that an intergenerational approach to congregational leadership and worship enables not only inclusion within churches but also a wider culture of "reconciliation" between parents and young people. Seibel (2003) argues that many young people have felt cut off by the careerism and materialism of their parents' generation: "while the adults around them remained preoccupied with their own pursuits, many of these 'latchkey kids' were essentially ignored. As they reached their teen years, they were dubbed 'slackers' and viewed with suspicion. Even as the members of this generation have advanced into full adulthood, many continue to perceive that they are misunderstood and ignored, and that their full inclusion within social structures, including the church, is resisted." Seibel describes intergenerational ministry using post-Apartheid vocabulary: he calls it a way of achieving "reconciliation and justice".
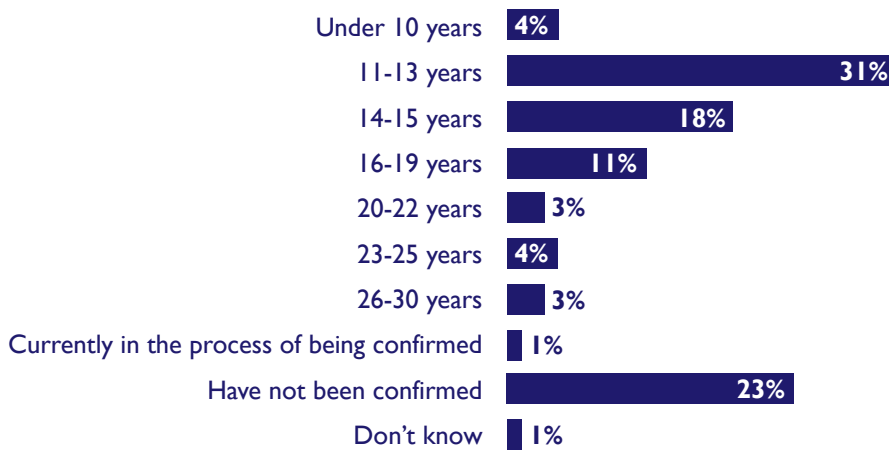
3.2.   Equality

3.2.1.   Young adults have an equal faith – so why aren't they treated as equal members of the Church?

Inclusion is achieved through equality. Many of our interviewees, both young adults and parents, pointed to examples where this is not always being achieved.

3.2.1.1.   What does "Communion" mean, if non-confirmed young people are excluded from it?

The most notable example of where our respondents felt that barriers exist between young people and others in the Church was in the age barrier and the significance of Confirmation and Communion in the Church.

Figure 9: *Young person/adult age of confirmation*

Under 10 years	4%
11-13 years	31%
14-15 years	18%
16-19 years	11%
20-22 years	3%
23-25 years	4%
26-30 years	3%
Currently in the process of being confirmed	1%
Have not been confirmed	23%
Don't know	1%

46% 'allowed to take communion before confirmation'

14.5

Average age when attendance began to decline

Sample size: n = 585

Since 2006, the Church of England Regulations made under Paragraph 1(c) of Canon B15A have allowed parishes to admit baptised children to Communion before Confirmation. About 20% of all parishes have taken advantage of this. The question of Confirmation was mentioned by almost all of our interviewees during our qualitative research as a source of frustration. If taking Communion is made age-specific and linked to Confirmation, they ask, then how does that impact on the sense of belonging among non-confirmed young people, and the meaning of Confirmation itself? One parent respondent described the "ritual" of Confirmation aged 12 or 13 years as "like a passing-out parade". The irony is, she said, that young people tend to "get the badge" and are admitted to Communion just before the time when, statistically, they drop out of Church attendance at age 14-15.

The vast majority of our respondents were in favour of breaking the link between Communion and Confirmation, encouraging all to share in the Eucharist with the whole Church, and delaying the process of Confirmation until a time when the individual is ready to make a public declaration of witness.

> **"My friends would drop out: they have grown up in the Church, gone through being confirmed, being in the choir, then they get to the end of the conveyer belt and don't know where to go with it."**
>
> Young adult, Central London

3.2.1.2.   How are young people encouraged to participate equally in the workings of the Church?

Several of our young adults mentioned the lack of youth representation on functional bodies of the Church as another example of inequality. Parochial Church Councils (PCCs) and Synod were both discussed. While some parents expressed reservations that PCCs would be the most appropriate place for this kind of participation, there is a broad consensus that young people are not truly encouraged to be part of the Church's vision and strategy.

One young woman said that this issue goes to the heart of what leadership means in the Church. She argued that the vision and the mission of a church does not always come from the church leader but can come from a "common thread" in the congregation. This "creates belonging", she said, but "too often, young people don't feel part of the common thread", and mentioned the PCC as one way in which she feels the Church places barriers in front of young adults: "I have no idea who is on the PCC, how you get on the PCC… This is about diversity and inclusion. If I knew what my PCC looked like, I would know how inclusive my church is".

In the same way, two of our parent respondents talked about General Synod, and the fact that while young people are invited to observe and participate in the debates, they are not able to vote. This was described as a question of empowerment, about "having a voice and a vote".

> **"Too often, young people don't feel part of the common thread of a congregation. I actually have no idea of how decisions are made in my church… This is about diversity and inclusion. If I knew what my PCC looked like, I would know how inclusive my church is."**
>
> Young adult, Outer London

Figure 10: *Young people want active roles in their churches*

"If you give children jobs to do then they **will be there** and do them to the best of their ability. **And often they will do it better than the adults.**"

"We used to have kid's Sunday, where the kids would do everything. We would lead the songs, do the readings, do the announcements, the notices (and) the giving, (it was) all led by the kids."

"I was given lots of chances to be involved and was treated treally maturely really early. They really valued me as a person, not just as the 'token youth'."

"I think it's (being part of the PCC and organising youth services) helped a lot. It made me feel more a **core, improtant part of the church** and if I hadn't had those **opportunities to have responsibilities** like that I might not be still going to the church."
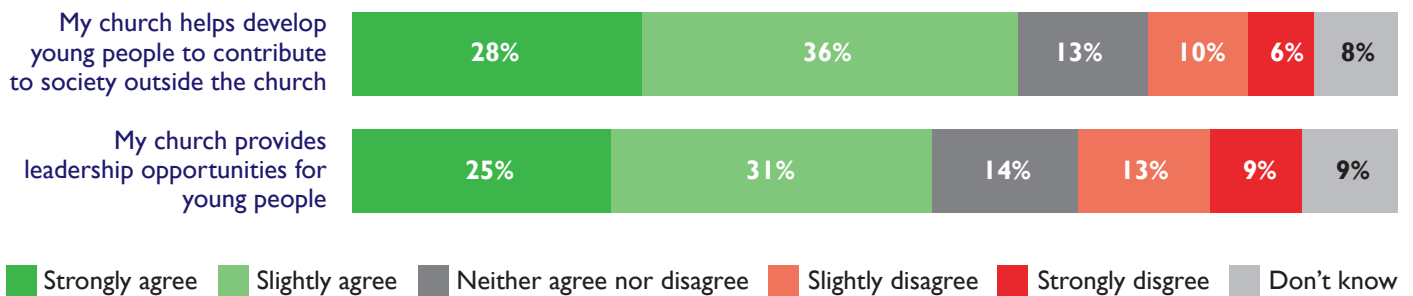
These views present a challenge to the Church. If church leaders feel that PCCs are not necessarily the right vehicle to express an inclusive vision, then what other organisational structures exist to encourage young adults in this way? Where can young adults participate as equal members in guiding the Church forward? During the course of our research, we have discussed the idea of implementing a culture of affirmative action in the same way that the Church approached the questions of including women and ethnic minorities. Is there a case for affirmative action for young people and young adults, guaranteeing them a "voice and a vote" in the Church's strategic and administrative vision?

This is a key challenge not only for individual congregations but for the whole Church.

3.2.2. Young adults want real roles, not tokenism

Our surveys showed that most respondents believe the Church offers opportunities for young adults to lead in their congregations and helps develop them to contribute to society as a whole.

Figure 11: *The role of the church in developing young adults*

My church helps develop young people to contribute to society outside the church	28%	36%	13%	10%	6%	8%
My church provides leadership opportunities for young people	25%	31%	14%	13%	9%	9%

Strongly agree   Slightly agree   Neither agree nor disagree   Slightly disagree   Strongly disgree   Don't know

Sample size: n = 598-599

More young adults aged 20 and over strongly agree that the Church helps develop young people to contribute to society outside of church, while more of those aged under 20 years strongly agree that the Church provides leadership opportunities for young people.
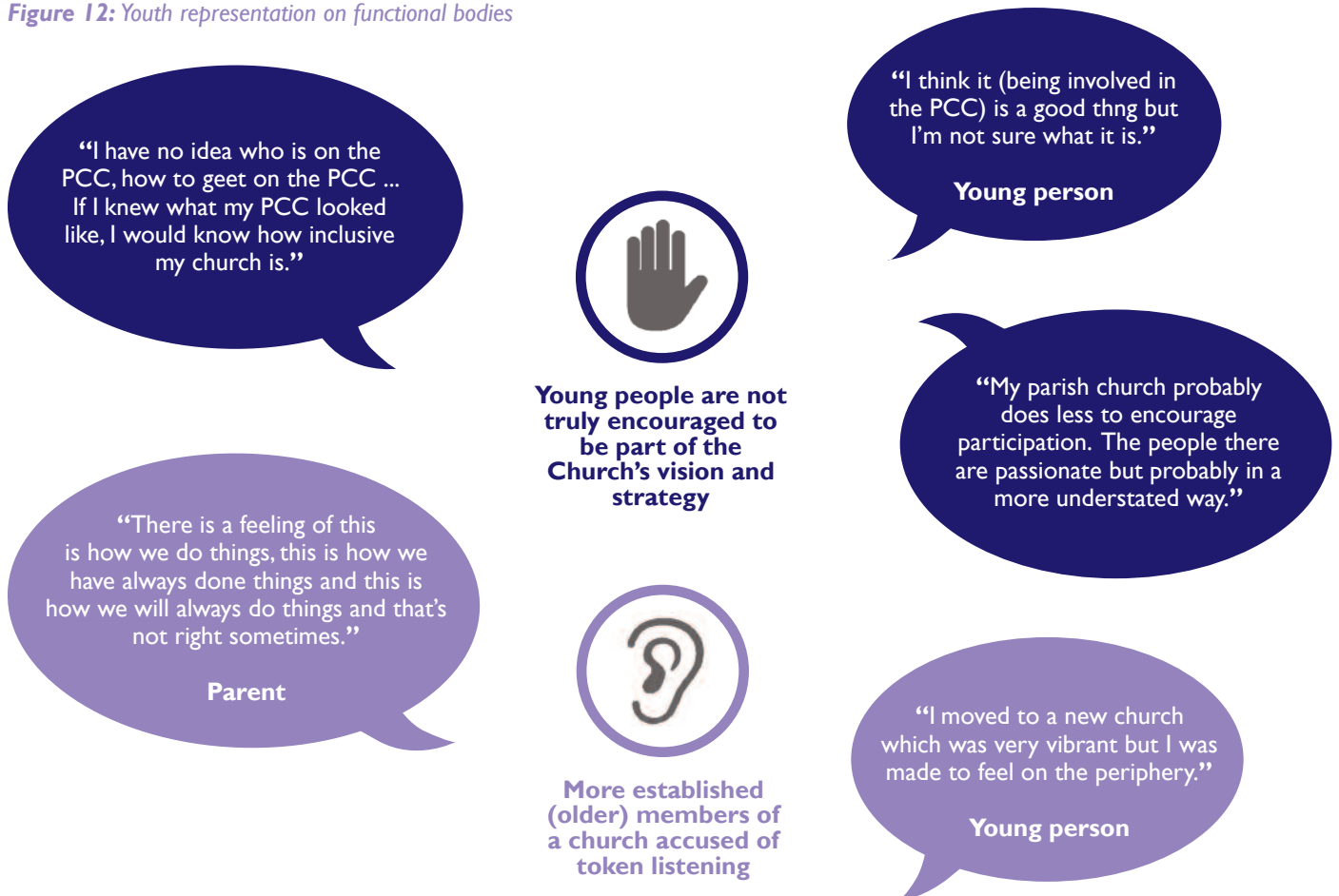
Table D: *The supporting role of the Church*

	Age		
	16-1-9 years	20-25 years	26-30 years
The Church helps young people to contribute to Society outside of the church			
Strongly agree	21%	33%	27%
Slightly agree	36%	35%	36%
The Church provides leadership opportunities for young people			
Strongly agree	31%	27%	19%
Slightly agree	25%	32%	37%
Sample size	195-197	192-193	207

Note: The green and red boxes denote statistically significant differences in findings

However, most of our interviewees, both young adults and parents, mentioned the risk of tokenism when giving roles to young people and young adults. In the words of a minister in Coventry, "something the church gets very wrong is that it looks at the problem in terms of 'we need to get hold of young people' … it is almost vampiric, because it is almost like the Church needs young blood to feed on … this constant feeling of 'we want families, we want families', but what they really want is for them to fill the back pews up".

Figure 12: Youth representation on functional bodies

"I have no idea who is on the PCC, how to geet on the PCC … If I knew what my PCC looked like, I would know how inclusive my church is."

"I think it (being involved in the PCC) is a good thng but I'm not sure what it is."
Young person

Young people are not truly encouraged to be part of the Church's vision and strategy

"My parish church probably does less to encourage participation. The people there are passionate but probably in a more understated way."

"There is a feeling of this is how we do things, this is how we have always done things and this is how we will always do things and that's not right sometimes."
Parent

More established (older) members of a church accused of token listening

"I moved to a new church which was very vibrant but I was made to feel on the periphery."
Young person

Many parents stressed that this kind of tokenism can be off-putting for young people, particularly when there is no real culture of welcome in a church. The question of welcome was raised by many respondents - that is, how young people are welcomed into a congregation, and then included in meaningful roles within a church.

Our survey found that young adults who said that Christianity is an important part of their daily lives also demonstrate high levels of volunteering in the outside world, from music and cultural groups to sports and youth clubs. This would seem to reflect the connections made in Robert Putnam's thesis that types of membership participation and engagement tend to go hand-in-hand.
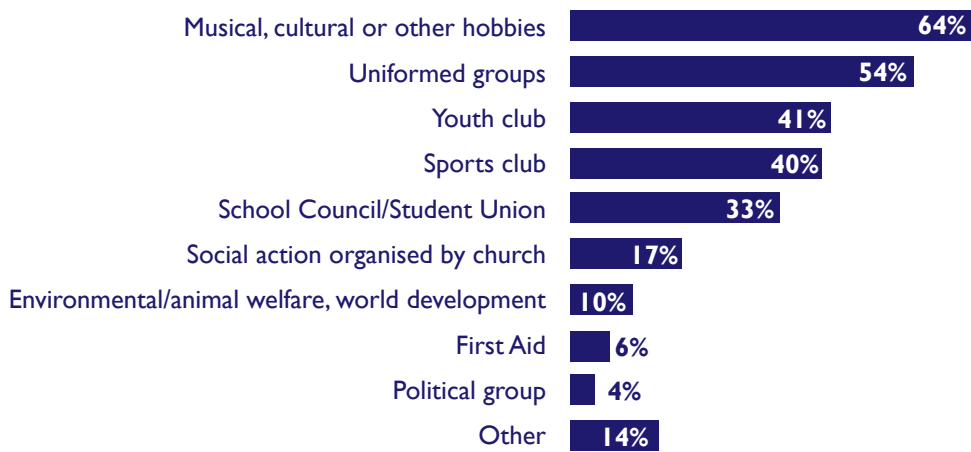
> **"Adults are not taking young people seriously as fellow equal members of the church. They are not listening to young people, or when they do it is token listening. They say 'tell us what you'd like us to do', but it never goes any further. It's like we have done the listening, we 'know' what they want."**
>
> Parent, North Yorkshire

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> **"In churches that include young people in responsibilities, those people are much more likely to feel they belong, have a role and stay."**
>
> Parent, North Yorkshire

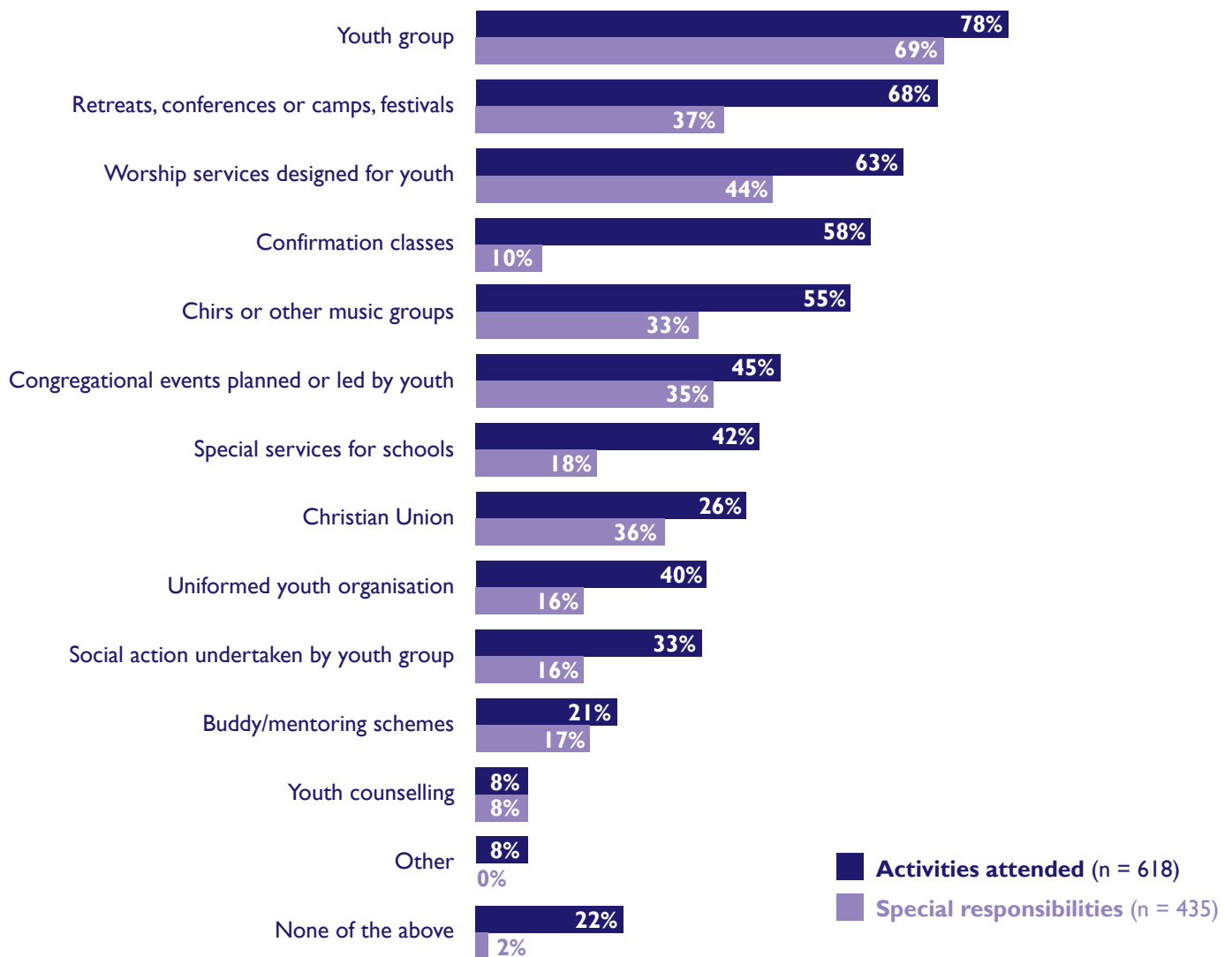**Figure 13:** *Participation of young Christians in society*

Activity	Percentage
Musical, cultural or other hobbies	64%
Uniformed groups	54%
Youth club	41%
Sports club	40%
School Council/Student Union	33%
Social action organised by church	17%
Environmental/animal welfare, world development	10%
First Aid	6%
Political group	4%
Other	14%

92%
volunteered in at least one club or group

Sample size: n = 779

Over three-quarters of young adults we interviewed had attended some kind of youth club in the past, with seven in ten having special responsibilities.

Figure 14: *Attendance of young adults at church activities*

Activity	Activities attended	Special responsibilities
Youth group	78%	69%
Retreats, conferences or camps, festivals	68%	37%
Worship services designed for youth	63%	44%
Confirmation classes	58%	10%
Chirs or other music groups	55%	33%
Congregational events planned or led by youth	45%	35%
Special services for schools	42%	18%
Christian Union	26%	36%
Uniformed youth organisation	40%	16%
Social action undertaken by youth group	33%	16%
Buddy/mentoring schemes	21%	17%
Youth counselling	8%	8%
Other	8%	0%
None of the above	22%	2%

Activities attended (n = 618)
Special responsibilities (n = 435)

With this level of commitment, the question raised by some of our respondents was how the Church can translate willing participation into meaningful roles. Some respondents advocated encouraging young people to lead services from time to time, instead of separating them from the main service and letting them lead themselves.

One young adult mentioned how, when she was a child, her church (in Nigeria) "used to have Kid's Sunday, where the kids would do everything, basically, we would lead the songs, do the readings, do the announcements, the notices, the giving, all led by the kids". Several respondents felt this model could be applied to young people, so they are encouraged every couple of months to lead the main service. In the words of one parent, "there has to be some way of getting them (and us) to be part of a whole family, where everybody always has a place within it, and sees a role and value. It's no use just giving things to people. People like the opportunity to do what they do. My own youth are happiest when they are doing stuff, what they like the least is being taught things".

One young adult who had switched from being a Baptist as a child to an Anglican as a teenager mentioned how in Baptist churches "there is more onus on people in the congregation to contribute and preach, less expectation on the Anglican model of vicars and ministry teams doing everything, where you just turn up and they provide". She said that the Baptist Church is more "democratic", and that this model can be attractive to young people who need to feel they have a stake in their community.

Key to this is the vision of the church leader. Respondents recognised that young people don't always want (or are capable of having) demanding leadership roles, but argued that the opportunity and encouragement should be there. On the importance of including these roles in the main church, and not solely in separate youth activities, one parent stressed that "there needs to be shared values and shared goals" between youth leader and vicar, otherwise the "youth can

become a church in their own right". In this way, equality in a church becomes a way to achieve inclusion for young people and young adults.
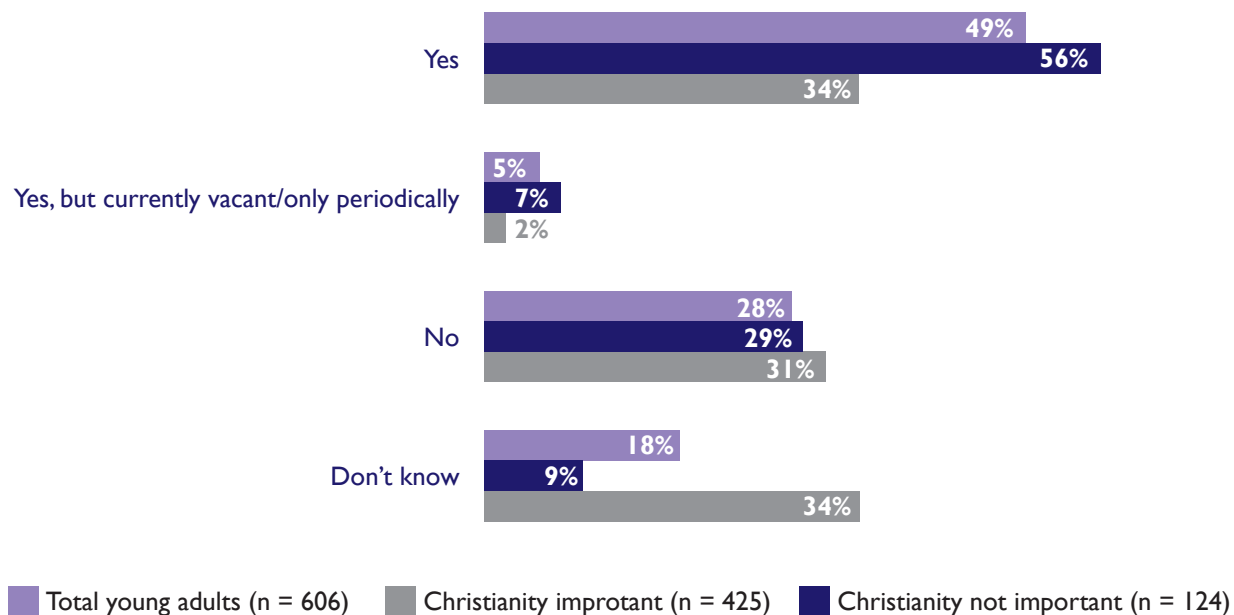
3.3. Leadership

3.3.1. The role of the youth leader is vital – but there needs to be more training, relevance and support for this role

One of the particular points of discussion among our respondents was the role of youth leaders and the things that could be done to support this role.
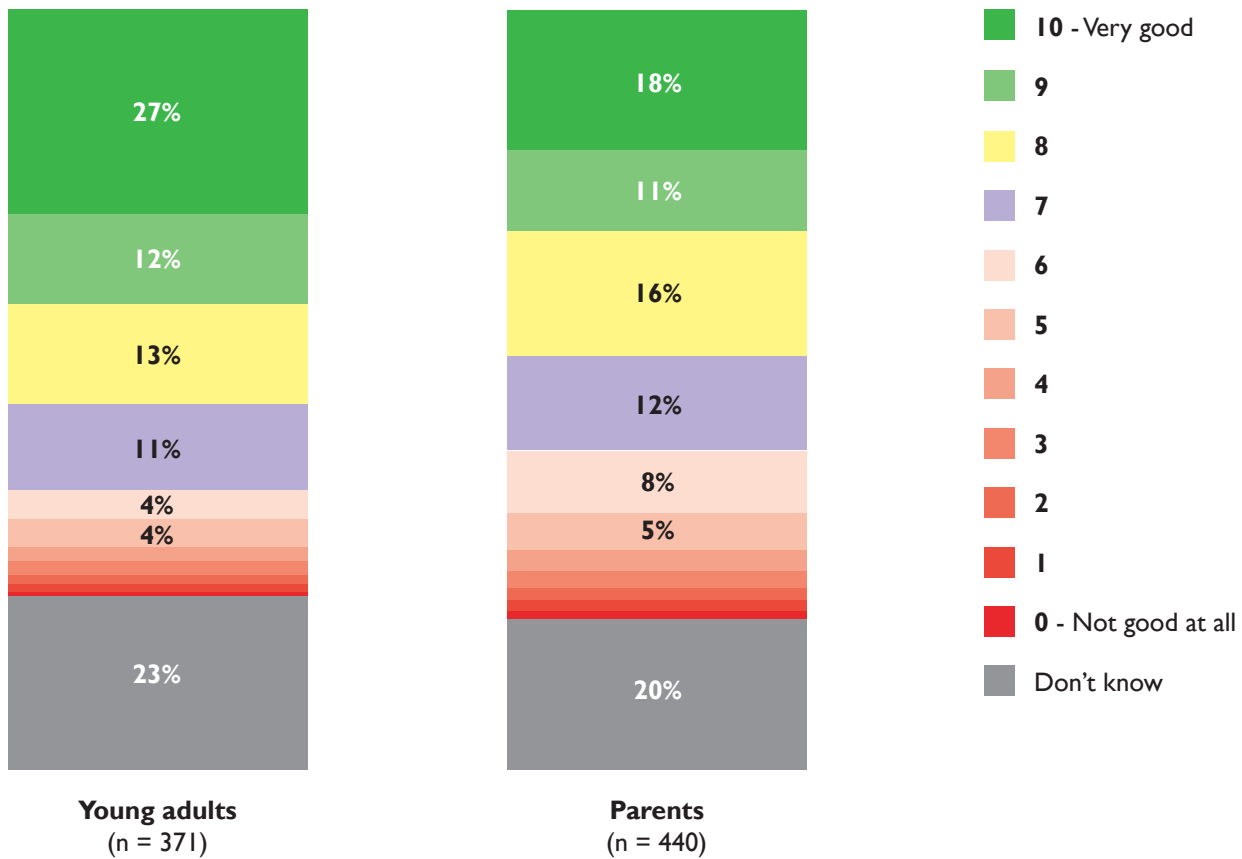
Almost half of young adults completing the survey reported that their church has a children's/ youth worker. However, these statistics do not quite match parents' claims, 38% of whom claimed their church has a youth worker.

Figure 15: *Youth worker presence*

Amongst those for whom Christianity is not an important part of their daily life, only a third indicated that their church has a youth worker. A similar proportion were unsure about their presence.

Figure 16: *Youth worker ability to inspire young*

Legend:
- 10 - Very good
- 9
- 8
- 7
- 6
- 5
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1
- 0 - Not good at all
- Don't know

Young adults (n = 371)

Parents (n = 440)

Responses to these youth leaders was on the whole positive. Around half of young adults claimed their leaders' work to be good or very good.

However, questions arose during our in-depth interviews over the role played by youth leaders. Some parents said that youth leaders should be less preoccupied with leading separate "youth worship" and more focussed on developing relationships with young people and creating a "social network" within the church, in particular through giving meaningful responsibilities to young people so they feel a greater sense of belonging when moments of transition occur in their lives. In other words, youth workers should be encouraged to act as a bridge between young people and the wider church.

Crucially, most of our young adults, as they reflected back, argued that youth leaders need to be of a similar peer group as the young people themselves, ideally (in the words of one young woman from London) "someone who is a little bit older than the youth, but not too old. Something like 21, 22, 23". They stressed the importance of relevance and

"The problem is that young people feel they are making all the commitment and the Church is not making a commitment to them. Whereas if the Church is actively listening to them and giving them a sense of purpose within the Church, then it becomes a two-way commitment."

Young adult, Kent

communication: young people need to know that they are being listened to by someone who understands their lives. One parent mentioned the Diocese of Portsmouth's project, "Zombies v Aliens": the zombies being the parents in the eyes of the young people, and the young people being the aliens in the eyes of the parents. The project sought to explore the gap

between the generations by listening directly to the voice of 16 -30 year olds.

On the subject of communication, several parents pointed out how difficult it is for the older generation to understand the dynamism and digital character of youth culture today - a culture of Snapchat, of "The Web of Things", and of "Game of Thrones" on Netflix and iCloud, adding that the Church needs to understand real youth culture, particularly in terms of its digital reality and access to knowledge.

Likewise, young adults talked about the importance of relevant and positive role models. Bullying remains an issue for young Christians at school (even in a climate where young Muslims or Sikhs can wear outward symbols of their faith). Some of our young adults said that having a Premier League footballer like Daniel Sturridge who is a committed Christian or a TV personality like "Rev Kate" on Gogglebox helps young people get over the "uncool" hurdle, and they asked how the Church can encourage more of these role models. However, these interviewees also made it clear that role models must not "force" being cool. Most mentioned how having an artificially "hip" youth leader from the older generation can often be a turnoff.

> **"Hiring hip and cool people to run youth group is a gimmick and is not effective as it is very superficial in most cases … Young people don't want to be targeted but rather want a genuine, meaningful experience."**
>
> Young adult, Brighton

Another point of concern is the support and training given to youth leaders. Some parents talked about examples of burn-out among youth leaders in their church. They asked: what are the structures of training and support? Are they national, are they dependent on the willingness of the diocese, or are they entirely local? Who funds them? Is there a clear model of full-time youth leadership training in each diocese?

One respondent talked about the dangers of successful but under-resourced youth work: in her town, youth work operated as outreach and mission, through "fresh expressions" like drop-in centres. But as it got bigger, and without the right level of support, this group experienced a logistic problem: who deals with all the young people? Where is the space and resources for them? It simply got too much for one person to handle and, in this case, the youth worker sadly burned out.

It is interesting to note that these experiences are shared by some Methodists. The 2007 Methodist Conference noted that those who work with young people often have limited experience and little or no formal training. As such, "the quality of youth work is variable and workers frequently feel isolated and overstretched". This has a negative knock-on effect. According to the conference, "poor quality work with children and young people can be more damaging than no work. When children and young people leave Sunday School or youth clubs they often leave the Church as well, and are unlikely ever to return… Negative experiences of Church are leading many young people to reject religion and God".

> **"Poor quality work with children and young people can be more damaging than no work."**
>
> Methodist Conference, 2007

Crucially, the studies surveyed in our literature review show that youth pastors and workers are most beneficial when they work in a structured, paid context. This mirrors the *From Anecdote to Evidence* report's "positive association" between church growth and paid youth workers, finding that those churches which employ a youth worker are only half as likely to experience participation decline as those which do not.

3.3.2.   Mentoring and groups

Echoing these thoughts, the literature review stresses the importance and the rewards of having full-time, trained, supported youth leaders - in particular, working through mentoring schemes and groups. Much of this literature is from American churches and scholars, and we believe that English churches could learn from these examples.

Mentoring programmes can be informal schemes like "prayer partners" between members of a congregation, or more formal schemes like youth pastors. For the latter, Chang-Ho and Tevita's (2011) empirical study demonstrates that "hiring a youth pastor or worker is an effective way to develop and maintain quality programs in the church, which in turn induce youth to remain faithful to the denomination". It also "confirms a positive link between caring pastorship and youths' attitudes toward the church". This echoes Canales' (2006, 2014) eight "paradigms" of youth ministry: the models of friendship, spiritual awareness; servant leadership; liberation; biblical hermeneutic; liturgical-initiation; social justice; and Christian discipleship. The central concern of the "friendship" model is "to create and sustain quality relationships in a church".

Furthermore, Chango-Ho and Tevita have found that "youth affiliated with a church with youth pastors often take a leading role in the worship services and other activities and perceive their programs as "more" interesting and cognitively stimulating than do those in the churches without youth pastors. This notion is in line with the report that churches with youth pastors generate increased leadership opportunities in church activities for youth" - and that youth pastors themselves consider maintained and sustained youth engagement as an essential part of their ministry. They conclude that "in churches in which youth pastors succeed in developing a caring relationship with the youth, adolescents are more likely to remain satisfied with and faithful to the church and denomination that they currently attend".

> **"The way the Church is set up disadvantages young people who move around. You don't get them sitting on PCCs or going to Synod or anything like that, so for that reason you won't get the empowerment the Church is looking for because there isn't continuity."**
>
> Young adult, Cumbria

In the same way, Corrie (2014) argues that intergenerational mediation can be achieved by giving young adults leadership roles within churches. Probasco writes that the congregations considered to represent best practice in this area - congregations which "get it" - all "include young adults in visible leadership roles within the church. Those roles involve varying degrees of commitment - from serving as occasional readers, musicians, and worship planners to chairing committees or serving as clergy". She cites a study which compares Christian congregations to an Islamic example, where a large mosque serving 10,000 Sunni Muslims in Washington D.C. "deliberately seeks young adult leadership to ensure it will thrive in the long term; in the mid-2000s, its Sunday School director was 25, and all four executive officers were in their 30s".

Canales argues that this culture of leadership extends beyond the church, writing that "authentic Christian leadership for youth ministry is much more than teaching young people about pastoral skills, but requires a lifestyle that empowers adolescents to become responsible and genuine leaders in their schools, churches, neighbourhoods, and communities". This has been supported by our own survey of young adults,

which found (as referred earlier) those who state that Christianity plays an important part in their daily lives also tend to be engaged in other types of voluntary activity in the wider community (see Table A).

During the course of our qualitative research, several respondents talked about the importance of mentoring schemes as a way of providing both relevant role models and achieving an intergenerational church. In the words of one interviewee, "there need to be mentors who are the same age as the young people who can partner them during the difficult adolescent stage". Another interviewee suggested that as the world changes so fast for young people, these mentors need to be continually renewed.

Respondents emphasised that these relationships need to be spontaneous. One parent told us, "it would be lovely if young mentors, call them what you will, felt able to befriend young people in that way. But it isn't going to happen. It has to be structured, but not take the spontaneity out of the relationship. It is the spontaneity of the relationship which is so important and which supports people". The Church should work to "facilitate" and encourage these moments of connection: "different people are drawn to different people and it is helping those relationships form which are supportive that is so important". This requires the Church providing the right kind of "space" for young people - and, again, depends on the right levels of training and support provided by dioceses and churches.

On a practical level, many respondents talked of the value of small groups. While most believed that youth should not be separated from the main body of the church, they agreed that young people need to have some kind of targeted provision. To this end, some young adults talked about the value of small groups during the week, and how these can act as a gateway (not an alternative) to the main church service for both young people and young adults.

> **"I went from being part of a small group of young people to leading a small group of young people. It happened organically and thanks to the support of the vicar it is now blossoming."**
>
> Young adult, Oxford

The feeling among these respondents was that groups can create a sort of mentoring chain within a church. Small groups can be led by a youth leader who is just a little older than the group. In turn, this leader can be mentored by a slightly older person in the church, and so on - creating the kind of chain of intergenerational relationships advocated by many scholars in our literature review. However, as one respondent pointed out, "this requires no gaps in the chain of age groups for it to work".

3.4. Space

3.4.1. Churches should give young people safe space in which to ask questions

Many of the parents expressed how natural it is for teenagers to ask questions, challenge, withdraw and sometimes drift away. There was a consensus that too many people (and scholars in the literature review) interpret these fluid patterns of behaviour in binary terms of either "in" or "out". Young people might feel both "in" and "out" at the same time, without these challenges needing to be labelled in terms of affiliation and attendance.

Parents warned against giving labels to young people; instead, they recommended that the Church does all it can to prepare them for these natural moments of transition, and to maintain an unconditional space for young people during what is often a difficult time. Several young adults pointed out that pushing young people too hard can lead to rebellion; in the words of one 20-year old respondent, young people "should be encouraged to go to church, and have set for them a good example of what it means to live a Christian faith, but they should also be given room to ask questions. Young people should be reassured that it's OK to ask questions, it's fine, and that not everyone has the answers to questions".

This view was echoed by the mother of a girl who "had to come away from church in order to work things out … she is trying to work out how things sit with her. It's a very important process. In some respects, I think the best way to help them is to allow them to withdraw and allow them that space and time, but be prepared when they ask questions to have that discussion, and not expect to have all the answers. We don't have all the answers".

Most parents suggest that as moments of transition and "growing pains" are natural for young people, the churches should "create a safe space" for them during this time. The churches should have the confidence that these moments of transition and rebellion are inevitable, but often transitory; the

> **"These things are transitory. All young people need to know is that they are not on their own. They need to know that there is a raft of love which they can float on until they reach a shore."**
>
> Parent, Isle of Wight

challenge is how to guide young people through these times of transition in a positive, affirming, non-alienating way. In the words of one parent, "all young people need to know is that they are not on their own. They need to know that there is a raft of love which they can float on until they reach a shore", adding that the key thing is to let them know that they are not alone on their journey, wherever that journey might lead.

Much of this emphasis on "safe space" is linked to the issue of forgiveness, judgement and guilt - echoing our findings about the importance of non-judgemental churches in our survey. One parent reflected, "churches need to learn to let people go which allows people to come back without carrying huge baggage about it… When young people leave church, it is quite a big step to come back… one of our challenges it to ensure that we can make that transition back as easy as possible". On guilt and forgiveness, he added, "we all too easily, without realising it, put guilt on people … all this talk about forgiveness implies that there is something to forgive".

3.4.2. Churches need to prepare themselves for young people's transitions: drifting, leaving and returning

On a practical level, this twin emphasis on a) positively preparing young people for moments of transition and b) accepting their journeys and return without judgement or talk of forgiveness, would benefit from a national vision of what that journey means. At the moment, there is a sense that one church might "lose" a young person while another "gains". In fact, as many respondents pointed out, the whole Church gains, and local churches need to be better prepared for "setting the tone" for young people to feel confident to move to another church when they find themselves in a new place in their lives. In this way, the issue of Church "preparedness" requires the same sense of vision and cohesion as the issue of training youth leaders. What is the vision of the Church as a whole? What is the structure and support? How to avoid leaving these things to sometimes isolated and over-stretched individual churches?

One parent suggested that this requires "preparing young people as close as possible to being 'mature Christians' in advance of the transitional upheavals that they will inevitably go through. So Christianity doesn't become something the Church is trying to do to them but becomes part of who they are, and is a resource to them". On this level, respondents stressed the importance of a church's welcome in this process.
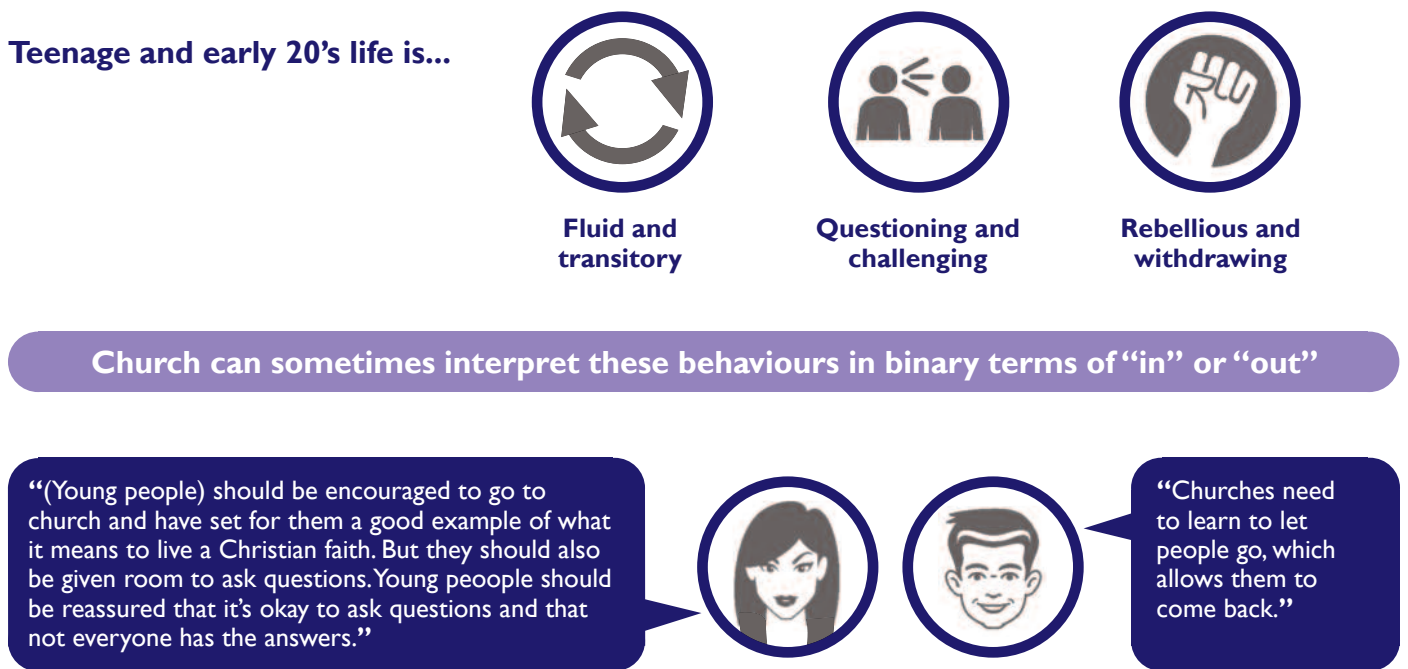
In our literature review, this question of welcome and accessibility has been applied to other faiths. In the Jewish context, Belzer and Miller (2007) state that accessible congregations "meet young adults where they are" in terms of religious knowledge and commitment. Across Christian denominations, Probasco notes that commitment is a barrier for many young people - both in terms of the church and also in personal matters like relationships and jobs. For too many churches, she adds, "typical ways congregations build community with newcomers - joining small groups, serving on

committees, making financial pledges - assume some basic knowledge and routine time commitments that prove to be barriers for younger adults".

Belzer and Miller argue that congregations which "get it" offer multiple points of entry into the life of the congregation. These include offering services at various times during the week, providing adult education programs, and enabling a range of social gatherings and opportunities to volunteer. They also avoid "guilt trips" or shame about young adults' "sometimes-inconsistent attendance", adding that "in a community, there has to be room for asymmetric exchanges of support".

In this way, the question of space is linked to acceptance on the part of a congregation and leadership on the part of a minister – two attributes which enhance a relationship of inclusion and equality between young people and the Church.

Figure 17: Young people require space to ask questions and form their own faith

Teenage and early 20's life is...

Fluid and transitory

Questioning and challenging

Rebellious and withdrawing

Church can sometimes interpret these behaviours in binary terms of "in" or "out"

"(Young people) should be encouraged to go to church and have set for them a good example of what it means to live a Christian faith. But they should also be given room to ask questions. Young peoople should be reassured that it's okay to ask questions and that not everyone has the answers."

"Churches need to learn to let people go, which allows them to come back."

4. Conclusions and learnings

In this report, we have explored why some young people become "rooted" in the Church while others do not. Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, we have identified some of the key themes and challenges which churches need to consider with regard to rooting young people in the Christian faith. In particular, we have focussed on feelings about the Church among young people, in terms of worship, teaching and inclusion; on questions of participation and leadership for young people in churches; and on the role of youth workers and youth services. We will summarise how the evidence we have gathered might lead to a change in practice amongst churches.

4.1   Conclusions

1.   Churches should aim to build a culture of intergenerational relationships.

Many of our respondents, as well as experts in the field, emphasise the importance of intergenerational relationships in the church: in particular, "bridge people" who work through mentor schemes and small groups to include young people within the wider church community. This intergenerational model is different from one which separates young people and youth leaders from the wider church by putting them into the "youth silo".

Our findings suggest that churches should focus on encouraging an intergenerational culture, in particular through building and supporting mentoring schemes.

2.   Churches should be inclusive of all ages in both leadership and worship.

The importance placed by young adults on inclusion within "the whole church family" is reflected in their preferred style of worship as young people: whilst they valued age-specific leadership and activities, their reflection was that as young people they did not want to be artificially separated from the main church. Their preference was for modern worship, but not always separate youth services. Churches need to pay more attention to this inclusion. Alongside youth services, a culture of "blended services" in which the whole congregation regularly comes together for fellowship should be encouraged.

3.   Churches should recognise young people and young adults as equal members of the Body of Christ.

Young adults told us that as young people they wanted to have meaningful roles in their churches, and not be the targets of tokenism. This included leadership roles and serving opportunities within a culture of intergenerational ministry.

Young adults also reflected that as young people they sought a greater "voice and vote" on decision-making bodies such as PCCs and Synods. Churches need to consider creative ways of including young people as part of their strategic vision and decision-making process. The evidence suggests that, when done appropriately, such affirmative action can benefit young people.

4.   Churches should be encouraged to consider the possibility of admitting baptised children to Communion before Confirmation.

Our research found that the majority of respondents feel the linking of Communion to Confirmation creates an artificial divide between generations in the Church. The vast majority of our interviewees were in favour of breaking this link, encouraging all young people to share in the Eucharist with the whole Church, and then delaying the process of Confirmation until a time when an individual is ready to make their own public declaration of witness.

We appreciate that this can be a difficult issue for parishes theologically and pastorally and that there is no easy answer. Nevertheless, we suggest that parishes address the issue in an open way, including the voice of young people and young adults in their deliberations.

5.   Churches should become unconditionally welcoming places for young people.

Our research findings have shown that "dropping out" is not a binary question of "in" Church or "out". Churches need to understand more about, and focus on, types of disengagement – from "nomads" and "exiles" to "prodigals". Key to this is providing a friendly, non-judgemental space for young people to see as constant and unconditional parts of their lives.

Many of our respondents urge church leaders to learn to "let go". This does not mean churches walking away from young

people who are drifting, but rather allowing them the space and time to explore faith during the inevitable moments of transition in their lives. Churches need to learn how to accommodate "dropping out" and how to welcome back drifters. This necessitates a culture of inclusion, acceptance and welcome.

In the same way, churches need to see transition in a more unified way: one individual church's "loss" might be another individual church's "gain". This process should be viewed through a national vision of preparedness for such transition.

6. Churches need to do more to support their youth workers and leaders.

Youth workers are ideally placed to be "bridge people" between the generations, yet their work is often insufficiently resourced or supported. Without sufficient vision, funding and training there is the risk of despondency and burnout among youth workers. Many of our respondents felt that a culture of youth work depends too much on the efforts of individual churches and dioceses and they did not have a strong or unified sense of the national Church's vision for youth work.

We recommend that Diocesan strategic planning should include a clear vision for supporting youth ministry including access to adequate funding and training.

In addition, there should be active encouragement and support for young people themselves to take leadership at some point in the near future.

4.2. Learnings for the Church

● **The Church needs to be clear about the best approach when conducting surveys.**

From our interaction with church leaders it was clear that many feel a sense of survey fatigue. Sunday mornings are a difficult time to encourage members of a congregation to answer questionnaires when they might otherwise be enjoying fellowship. There tends to be a small window of time after services when people are free and mingling. However, it is hard to retain a group's attention while interviewing individuals in this context.

Furthermore, access to congregations on a Sunday can be difficult, as it depends on the good will of individual church ministers. Many of our speculative approaches to church leaders were ignored.

We found that members of a congregation prefer self-completing questionnaires in their own time typically online. However, for this to be effective it requires the

encouragement of the church leader. We found that the most effective approach is for a church leader to announce the survey during the service, to allow the congregation to take the questionnaire or a web link to the online survey home, and then for the leader to follow this up with encouragement and reminders in later services.

● **The Church needs to share its experiences of young people with other denominations and groups.**

Our research showed shared challenges facing both the Church of England and Methodism, especially in terms of their approach to "Fresh Expressions". The Church needs to engage in more dialogue with other denominations and faith groups to share research and learning around the rooting of young people in their faith.

Furthermore, the issue of youth attendance and affiliation is not confined to churches alone. Similar patterns of disengagement can be found in declining levels of participation in other types of membership groups, including sports and voluntary clubs. Our survey findings show that young adults who state Christianity is "important in their daily lives" demonstrate higher levels of participation in other types of voluntary clubs and membership groups than those who state that Christianity is not important in their daily lives. The Church should encourage this wider culture of participation in society among young people.

4.3. Afterword

We know what it takes to turn seeds into thriving plants: good soil, deep enough to let them take root and with things that strangle growth, like thorns and stones, removed. And we have probably listened to enough sermons on the parable of the sower to picture how that applies to the life of faith.

So what does it actually take to make sure that the seeds of faith in young people can grow and flourish? *Rooted in the Church* identifies six of the most important things which encourage young people's faith to be deeply rooted in the good soil of relationships within the church. Our research shows that this isn't dependant on huge amounts of money or that it can only work in large congregations – that's really encouraging. What's needed is a willingness to re-examine ministry with and by young people, a willingness to be challenged about how we tackle this work and the willingness to make a long-term commitment that engages young people and adults together, not going for some short-term fix.

In September 2016, in Premier Youthwork's editorial, Archbishop Justin wrote of the characteristics he wants to see in Christian youth work – young people being disciples of Jesus, being witnesses to Jesus and being servants of the kingdom. In other words, young people who are rooted in their faith and flourishing in its growth.

I'm very grateful to *Research by Design* for the work that has gone into this Report: we now have solid evidence about what in practice helps root the faith of young people. But evidence alone is not enough to bring about change. It's action by the church that turns useful and interesting reports into genuine change, that deepens the faith and commitment of young people and enables the whole church to grow. And that happens at grass-roots level, in the parish.

My hope and prayer is that *Rooted in the Church* will be a practical contribution to the Renewal and Reform programme, contributing to Diocesan strategic planning and enabling congregations to nurture the faith of young people so that they grow in discipleship, become confident in their witness and continue to serve the Kingdom of God in this and coming generations.

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Online Resources

- British Religion in Numbers

- The Association of Religious Data Archives (USA)

- Fresh Expressions Young Adults Round Table on YouTube (2013), "Young adult conferences: what would you like to say to the wider Church?"

- Fresh Expressions Young Adults Hub ThreadsUK (Evangelical Alliance)
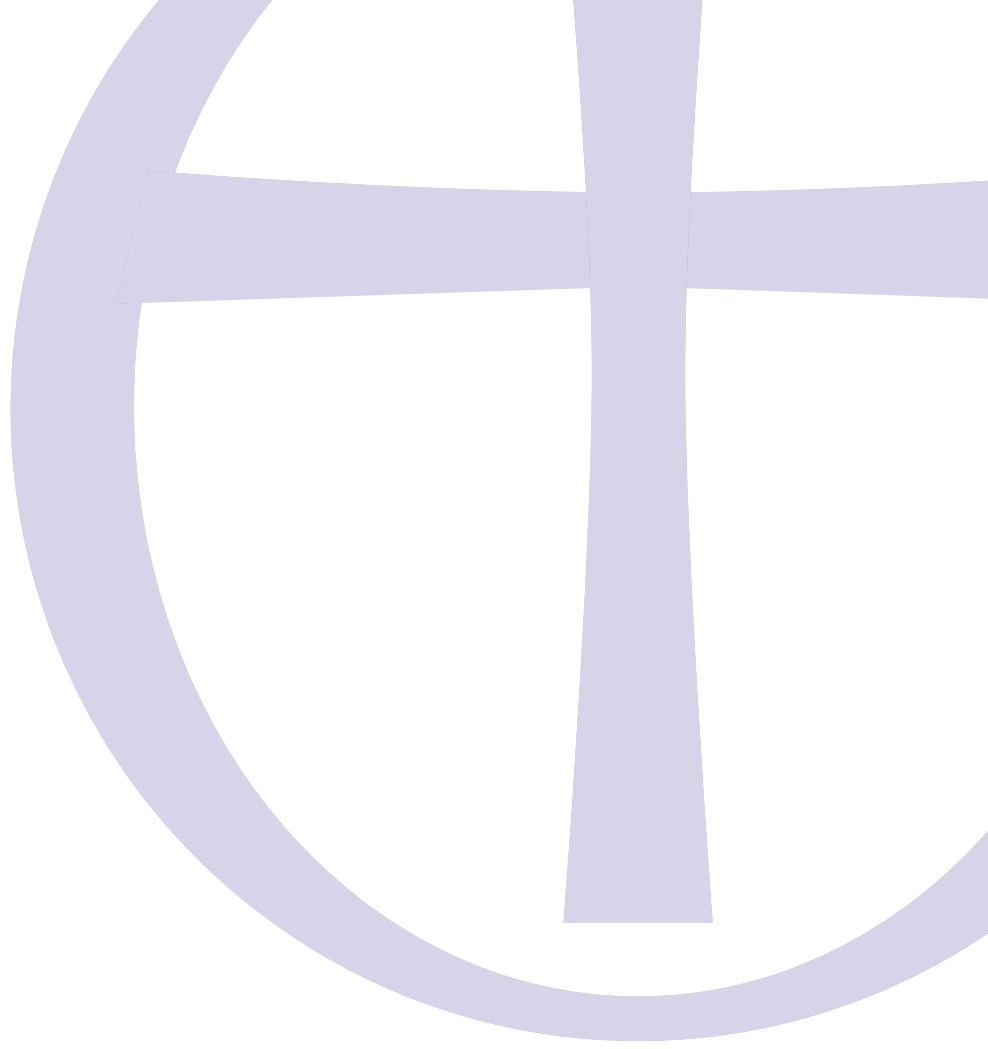
- Young People Social Attitudes Survey (2012)

A copy of this report and its appendices can be downloaded from:

https://www.churchofengland.org/education/publications.aspx

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