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# HOW AUSTRALIAN YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND AND EXPERIENCE GOD AND THE INFLUENCES ON THEIR THINKING

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**A Review of Secondary Research  
and Literature Study**

**June 2019**

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**This report was commissioned by Converge Australia as part of an ongoing research project exploring young peoples' understanding of God.**

We gratefully acknowledge financial support from Adventist Church Australia, Scripture Union NSW, Young Life Australia, and Youth Vision Australia.

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# **How Australian Young People Understand and Experience God and the Influences on Their Thinking: A Review of Secondary Research and Literature Study**

## **Introduction**

This literature and research review examines recent empirical studies that bear on Christian belief and practice among young Australians (14 to 18 years of age). Because culture is constantly changing, it is highly likely that the beliefs and practices of young people have changed over time. This literature review focusses on studies that have been conducted since 2000, and notes changes that have occurred since that time.

## **The Context**

According to the most recent Australian Census carried out in 2016, there were around 1.4 million young people aged 14 to 18. The growth between 2006 and 2016 for this age group (2.4%) was considerably slower than Australia's overall population growth of 23 per cent.

As Table 1 shows, just over half (52.2%) of all 14-18 year olds in Australia identified with a Christian denomination, while around seven per cent identified with a non-Christian religion. Almost one-third (32.8%) of all young people in this age group did not have a religion, and a further 7.8 per cent did not answer the optional question.

It is generally accepted that the religious identification of children and teenagers on the Census is very much dependent on the person completing the Census form, usually a parent or a guardian. It must also be noted that the Census provides no information about religious beliefs, attitudes or activities. There would be many people who have a sense of identity with a particular religious group who would have no regular involvement in religious activities (Hughes, 2017, p.4).

However, it is important, nonetheless, to understand the starting point at which young people connect with a religious faith, before exploring how they perceive and experience God. Such identification with a group is a connection point, no matter how tenuous that link may or may not be.

The number of 14-18 year olds identifying with a Christian denomination decreased by 14 per cent between 2006 and 2016, a decline of almost 119,000 young people. Nearly all of the Christian groups declined, with one significant exception: those young people who simply

identified as ‘Christian’, without identifying a particular denomination or group. Many younger Australians have little regard for traditional denominational divisions, and are no longer interested in the institutional structures (Hughes, 2019, p.3). This growth in ‘Christian, nfd’ has occurred through most age groups under 50, so many of the parents completing the Census form on behalf of their children are identifying their children the same way.

**Table 1. Religious Affiliation of Young People Aged 14-18, by Census Year (2006 & 2016)**

Religious Group / Denomination	2006		2016		2006-2016 change	
	N	%	N	%	% change	N change
Anglican	212,729	15.6	155,611	11.1	-26.9	-57,118
Baptist	22,577	1.7	21,871	1.6	-3.1	-706
Catholic	387,365	28.3	357,198	25.5	-7.8	-30,167
Churches of Christ	3,484	0.3	2,039	0.1	-41.5	-1,445
Eastern Orthodox	31,698	2.3	29,936	2.1	-5.6	-1,762
Lutheran	15,811	1.2	9,644	0.7	-39.0	-6,167
Oriental Orthodox	2,669	0.2	3,256	0.2	22.0	587
Other Protestant	6,567	0.5	7,320	0.5	11.5	753
Pentecostal	20,743	1.5	19,796	1.4	-4.6	-947
Presbyterian & Reformed	23,761	1.7	18,267	1.3	-23.1	-5,494
Salvation Army	4,366	0.3	2,324	0.2	-46.8	-2,042
Seventh-day Adventist	3,913	0.3	4,210	0.3	7.6	297
Uniting Church	73,332	5.4	43,422	3.1	-40.8	-29,910
Christian, not further defined	27,420	2.0	43,413	3.1	58.3	15,993
Other Christian	13,105	1.0	12,572	0.9	-4.1	-533
<b>Total Christian</b>	<b>849,540</b>	<b>62.1</b>	<b>730,879</b>	<b>52.2</b>	<b>-14.0</b>	<b>-118,661</b>
Buddhism	26,084	1.9	28,466	2.0	9.1	2,382
Hinduism	8,612	0.6	16,317	1.2	89.5	7,705
Islam	30,178	2.2	42,852	3.1	42.0	12,674
Judaism	5,461	0.4	4,643	0.3	-15.0	-818
Sikhism	1,771	0.1	3,352	0.2	89.3	1,581
Other Religious Groups	5,140	0.4	4,827	0.3	-6.1	-313
<b>Total Other religion</b>	<b>77,246</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>100,457</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>23,211</b>
No Religion	290,754	21.3	459,779	32.8	58.1	169,025
Not stated	149,756	11.0	109,567	7.8	-26.8	-40,189
<b>Total population</b>	<b>1,367,296</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,400,682</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>33,386</b>

Source: ABS Census of Population & Housing 2006 & 2016 (data extracted using TableBuilder Pro)

There has also been a significant increase in the number of people who did not identify with any religious group. ‘No religion’ does not necessarily mean that people reject God or faith, but rather means that they do not wish to identify with a particular group (Hughes 2017, p.5).

The increase in ‘no religion’ is a trend which has continued in most Censuses since the ‘no religion’ option was included on the Census form in 1971. The growth was exacerbated by a change in the design of the form for the 2016 Census, which saw the option move from the bottom of the list to the top of the list. The greatest change between 2006 and 2016, was among those aged 15-24 in 2006, and who were aged 25-34 in 2016. It would seem that as young people get older and have the autonomy to complete the Census form for themselves, such as when they move out of home, they are ticking the ‘no religion’ box, where previously a parent or another household member may have ticked one of the religious groups on their behalf (Hughes 2017, p.6). Similarly, it would be expected that at the next Census in 2021, some of those aged 14-18 in 2016 may very well cease to identify with a religious group.

While Census data provides some religious context of young people in Australia today, and assists in identifying those changes over time, it does not clearly provide much insight into how those young people perceive and experience God in their own lives. For that we must turn to other studies.

## Spirit of Generation Y Study

The only major national study of the religious and spiritual beliefs of young people has been *The Spirit of Generation Y* (Mason et al., 2006). The research for that study took place between 2003 and 2006 and was conducted by a team of researchers from Monash University, Australian Catholic University and the Christian Research Association. It focussed on young people between the ages of 13 and 29, thus covering the age group which is the focus of this literature review (14 to 18). It involved a national survey in which families were randomly phoned using listed and unlisted phone numbers from around Australia and were asked if there was anyone of the relevant age group in the household. Surveys were conducted by phone with 401 young people aged 13 to 15, and with 408 aged 16 to 18, giving a total sample of this age group of 809. Another 810 were aged between 19 and 29, giving a total sample of 1619 young people. Given this methodology, it can be expected that a relatively sound picture of young Australians was obtained.

In addition, more than 100 interviews were conducted with a wide variety of young people to obtain a more in-depth picture. Much of the research paralleled the work of Professor Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2005) in the US National Survey of Youth and Religion. This study noted that most American young people believed in God, and thought of God in a positive way as someone who cared for you and helped you out when you got into difficulty. At the same time, God was seen as setting the rules for moral behaviour. Smith and Denton summarised young people’s view of God as ‘moral therapeutic deism’.

The *Spirit of Generation Y* survey asked young people whether they believed in God. Among those 13 to 15 years of age, 50 per cent of them said they did, 34 per cent were unsure, and 16 per cent said they did not. Among those who were 16 to 17 years of age, there was a little less

affirmation. Forty-seven per cent said they did not believe in God, 33 per cent were unsure and 20 per cent said they did not believe (Mason et al., 2006, p.30).

The report discussed the reasons why one-third of young people indicated they were uncertain what they believed. Was this just part of the ‘tentativeness of adolescence’? The authors rejected this idea. That level of uncertainty continued into the twenties, and was also relatively high among control groups of people over 30 years of age. It has been replicated in other surveys such as the International Social Survey Program which has found many people say they believe in God *sometimes*, or they believe in God but have doubts about it. The report concluded that the uncertainty is a ‘period effect’ impacting those who have grown up in ‘late modernity’, since the early 1960s (Mason et al., 2006, p.31).

Many of these people said they had believed in God, at least sometimes in the past. Almost two-thirds of them said they did believe in some kind of higher-being or life-force. Those who said they believed in a higher-being or life-force were then asked if this ‘higher-being or life-force’ cared about them. The idea was to seek to distinguish the deist ‘clock-maker’ image of God from a personal higher being who might intervene in the world. The second image of a higher-being which cared for people predominated. Indeed, 80 per cent of those who believed in a higher-being aged between 13 and 15 said that this higher-being cared for them, and only 20 per cent said that the higher-being did not care. The proportion saying the higher-being cared dropped to around 60 per cent of those aged 16 and over (Mason et al., 2006, p.33).

Those who affirmed belief in God were asked if they believed God related to people in a personal way. Unfortunately, the results were not presented clearly at this point as they were combined with people who were not asked the question. While only a few rejected the idea that God related to people in a personal way, it would seem that many people were uncertain about the answer also to this question (Mason et al., 2006, p.34).

Those who said they believed in God were also asked about how close they felt to God on a scale of one to five. Of those who believed in God, a little under half of them said they felt close to God most of the time (scoring 4 or 5 on the scale) (Mason et al., 2006, p.35).

Some questions were asked of those who identified as Christian whether they believed that Jesus was truly God and rose from the dead. Just over half (55%) of all the respondents said they definitely believed this, with 27 per cent saying ‘maybe’ and 18 per cent rejecting the idea.

Questions about prayer were also included in the survey but were not asked of those who said they did not believe or were uncertain about God. Of all young people aged 13 to 15, 16 per cent indicated they prayed daily or more often, and an additional 20 per cent said they prayed at least once a month. Those aged 16 to 17, prayed a little less frequently, but those older prayed a little more often.

Christian young people were also asked about the reading of Scripture. Of those who were asked (approximately half the total sample), around 20 per cent said they read the Bible by themselves weekly or more often, another 30 per cent read it occasionally, and 50 per cent never read it. Again, the frequency of Bible reading was a little higher among those aged 13 to 15, than amongst those aged 16 to 17.

The authors of this report concluded that ‘Gen Y believers are hardly different at all from the believers among their parents’ (Mason et al., 2006, p.55). However, the differences were quite substantially different from previous generations, which was evident when the results of this survey were compared with those of Hans Mol’s study of Australian religion conducted in 1966.

In other words, there have been substantial historical changes. If one went back to the 1970s and 1980s, it is likely that one would find quite substantial differences between the beliefs of children and their parents. However, this study suggested that those differences are no longer strongly found. Many children draw on their parents in relation to their religious beliefs. The authors of the study concluded that ‘the analysis had shown the overwhelming power of family support in influencing the spirituality of religiously committed and active young people’ (Mason et al., 2006, p.83). While they suggested that the school might confirm that influence, the type of school attended did not statistically add anything to predict whether young people became committed or active religiously (Mason et al., 2006, p.85).

The study found that there were quite a few teenagers who were moving between alternative patterns of belief. It concluded:

Most of this movement appears to be away from traditional spirituality, either towards eclectic blends of traditional and alternative spiritualities, or more frequently in the direction of secular indifference (Mason et al., 2006, p.95).

On the other hand, the study also noted that some young people had moved away from their parents’ traditions. The researchers suggested that these young people were probably influenced by the general economic and cultural movements of Western society and ‘rocked by the rising cyclone of universal flux’ (Mason et al., 2006, p.96).

## Putting Life Together

Arising from the Spirit of Generation Y study, the Christian Research Association began conducting surveys of young people in Catholic and independent schools around Australia. These surveys, known as the *Putting Life Together* surveys, provide greater information about those young people who attend such schools, but because they do not include children who attend government schools, their findings cannot be generalised to the whole population. In 2012, a total of 33 per cent of all Australian students at both primary and secondary level were attending a school with a Christian affiliation. The percentage is higher at secondary level



than primary level with 40 per cent attending a non-government school. It was estimated that 37 per cent of all Australians attended a Christian affiliated school sometime in their primary or secondary education (Hughes and Fraser 2014, p.25).

This does not mean that most children attending a government school come from non-religious homes. There are many reasons why many religious parents send their children to government schools including the expense of non-government schools and availability of appropriate schools for their children. However, one might expect a higher proportion of children from religious homes in private schools.

The *Putting Life Together* surveys were conducted in 59 schools between 2011 and 2018. The result is a total sample of 12,161 students almost all of whom at the time were in secondary schools and thus between the ages of 13 and 18. Schools in all parts of Australia except Northern Territory have been included in these surveys. Of these schools 30 were Catholic, 20 were Anglican, 5 were low-fee Christian schools, and the remaining 4 schools were Lutheran, Baptist and Uniting Church schools. It should be noted that while there was a common core of questions in all these surveys, there were some questions customised for particular schools, and some language was changed (e.g. from priest to minister or pastor) according to the religious tradition of the school.

The *Putting Life Together* surveys give a comprehensive picture of the beliefs of many Australian young people who have some association with a Christian context through school or church as well as many young people who have no religious background at home.

## Belief in God

Of the more than 12,000 students who responded to the *Putting Life Together* surveys,

- 41 per cent said there is a God who is a personal being involved in the lives of people today,
- Four per cent said there is a God who created the world but is not involved in the world now,
- 17 per cent said there is some sort of spirit or life-force,
- 22 per cent said they don't know what to think,
- 12 per cent said they don't think there is any sort of spirit, God or life-force, and,
- Four per cent did not answer the question.

The results are roughly parallel to the *Spirit of Gen Y* sample, although with additional clarification of their thinking about 'some sort of spirit or life-force'. In other words, around 40 per cent affirmed a traditional idea of a God who is personally involved in the lives of people today. The remaining 60 per cent can be divided into three groups: those who think there is some kind of higher being, spirit, or life-force (around 20%), those who really don't know what to think (around 25% including those who did not answer the question), and 12 per who reject the idea of any spirit, God or life-force.

The responses to other questions about faith show similar sorts of patterns, but also show that of those who affirm Christian responses, there is quite a proportion who have doubts, saying, for example ‘it is probably true’ that Jesus is God as shown in the following figures:

- 27 per cent said that it is definitely true that Jesus is truly God,
- 15 per cent said it is probably true,
- 27 per cent were not sure or did not know,
- 11 per cent said it is probably not true, and,
- 20 per cent said it is definitely not true.

The responses to the sentence ‘Jesus was fully human’ are similar:

- 22 per cent said it is definitely true that Jesus was fully human,
- 19 per cent said it is probably true,
- 32 per cent said they were not sure or did not know,
- ten per cent said it is probably not true, and,
- 17 per cent said it is definitely not true.

There is more rejection of the idea of miracles as shown in these responses to the statement ‘All the miracle stories in the Bible really happened’:

- 19 per cent said it is definitely true,
- 14 per cent said it is probably true,
- 27 per cent said they were not sure or did not know,
- 16 per cent said it is probably not true, and,
- 24 per cent said it is definitely not true.

Rounding off these figures, in terms of the general patterns, there is a group of around 20 per cent who affirmed quite definitely what they considered to be traditional Christian teachings. Another group of up to 20 per cent, with varying levels of doubt, tended to agree with them. Thus, a little under half of the students in church-related schools accepted the traditions of the Christian faith. There was a strong sense among almost all young people that belief in God and in miracles were decisions the individual makes and no one should tell another person what to believe. In some of the interviews with young people as part of the *Generation Y* study, young people protested indignantly at teachers at school who told them they had to believe in God! (Hughes 2007, p.127)

There was a group of around 30 per cent of students who were not at all sure what to believe or who simply said they did not know. Another 30 per cent, with varying degrees of certainty, rejected the faith. Indeed, the decision about believing in God was not seen as something static, either by those who believed or by those who did not. Some students interviewed talked about coming to answers in the future (Hughes 2007, p.127). In general, they also saw

it as appropriate to pick and choose what they believed, many feeling that it was fine to draw on different religious sources. *Putting Life Together* reported from earlier data gathered in 2005 and 2006 that 40 per cent of students said it was fine to pick and choose, another 43 per cent were not sure, and just 17 per cent rejected the idea (Hughes 2007, p.128). Some students spoke about having beliefs that they had ‘pieced together’ from Christianity, Buddhism, rational thinking and other sources. Many of the students who had firm religious beliefs and who believed it was not right to draw on different sources for one’s beliefs came from overseas cultures where belief is something owned by the community rather than the individual (Hughes, 2007, p.132).

This pattern of some belief and much doubt was reflected also in statements about the influence of the Christian faith. Two statements were used in the surveys to seek responses to that: ‘Knowing Jesus helps make me a better person’, and ‘religious faith helps shape how I live my life’.

The student responses to those two statements are shown in the following table.

**Table 2. Secondary Students’ Responses to ‘Knowing Jesus helps make me a better person’ and ‘Religious faith helps shape how I live my life’**

	Knowing Jesus helps make me a better person	Religious faith helps shape how I live my life
Definitely true	23%	15%
Probably true	20%	13%
Not sure, don’t know	24%	21%
Probably not true	11%	18%
Definitely not true	22%	33%

*Source: Putting Life Together Surveys, 2011-2018.*

The first statement was seen as a more general statement of the influence of faith. Forty-three per cent of students affirmed that they were influenced in some small way by ‘knowing Jesus’. But many of these students were not ready to go so far as to say that religious faith actually helped to shape their lives, which was affirmed by only 28 per cent.

## Religious Practices

Something more of the significance of religious faith can be seen from the responses to the questions about prayer and reading the Bible by themselves, along with the question about church attendance.

**Table 3. Frequency of Prayer, Bible Reading and Church Attendance as Reported by Secondary Students'**

	<b>Prayer</b>	<b>Reading Bible by Self</b>	<b>Church Attendance</b>
Often	29%	8%	17%
Sometimes	18%	9%	10%
Occasionally	20%	17%	27%
Never	33%	66%	45%

*Source: Putting Life Together Surveys, 2011-2018.*

It is quite likely that since these surveys were undertaken in church-related schools that there is a tendency to overstate the frequency of church attendance. There is a 'social desirability' factor which should be taken into account. After assessing the evidence from the variety of sources, Hughes came to the conclusion that around ten per cent of all Australian young people in secondary school attended a church monthly or more often (Hughes 2013, pp.7-8). This does not include a small percentage (probably around 2 or 3 per cent) who would be attending religious services of other religions including Islam, Jewish, Buddhism and Hinduism.

In 2010 and 2011 a group of organisations including Scripture Union, Youthworks, the Lutheran Church, The Salvation Army (Southern Territory) and the Bible Society commissioned a study on how young people engage personally with the Bible. Interviews with young people were held in youth groups, churches and schools around Australia. The studies took place across a wide range of Protestant denominations. In total, 333 people participated in these conversations.

Three major disincentives to personal Bible reading were identified:

1. Lack of encouragement to read the Bible by the churches the young people attended. There is often more emphasis on the personal experience of God in their lives than in reading the Bible.
2. Many young people find reading a chore and do little of it outside of what they have to do for school or their studies.
3. Many young people find it difficult to identify what is relevant to them in the Bible (Hughes 2013, pp.10-12).

Factors which promoted personal engagement with the Bible included the following:

1. Group practice of reading the Bible, such as through involvement in small groups or Bible study groups.
2. Finding relevance through similar experiences and applications (Hughes 2013, pp.13-16).

Some contextual factors in Australian culture which have an impact on personal Bible reading were noted, including the following.

1. Individualism and post-traditionalism mean that the focus is on finding what is relevant and meaningful for each individual, rather than seeking to understand the heritage and developing structured daily activities.
2. Consumerism has meant that everything is evaluated in terms of its costs and benefits. This leads young people to expect to find something in the Bible which is directly beneficial to them, such as ways in which God will provide blessings or solve their problems. If the benefits are not identified, then reading the Bible is not seen as worthwhile.
3. Communities are constructed by the individual rather than the individual participating in pre-existing communities and heritages. This opens up the individual to peer pressures from the constructed community – which can be positive or negative in relation to faith.
4. Each person creates their own narrative of life, and will look with great interest at the stories of those close to them.
5. There is an information overload which can lead to a scepticism about everything. Alternatively, it can sometimes lead to young people jumping at the offer of ‘certainty’. (Hughes 2013, pp.13-21).

## **General Conclusions about the Nature of Religious Belief**

In *Putting Life Together* (2007), based on the earlier national survey of the Spirit of Gen Y and surveys in the schools, it was concluded,

Religious faith is important in two primary ways for most young people. It is important in terms of values: providing a justification of care and being considerate of others. Secondly, for many young people it is also important as a resource on which they can call – Someone they can depend on (Hughes 2007, p.160).

It was noted then that this had some parallels with the ‘moral therapeutic deism’ that was seen as typical of American young people by Smith and Denton (2005) in their book *Soul Searching*. They concluded that most US teenagers were not rebellious toward religion, but it was there for many of them in the background, providing some basis for moral values and providing them with a source of help.

There are a number of differences between the US and Australia, however, which were explored in an article in the Christian Research Association’s quarterly bulletin *Pointers* in 2006. Most obviously, there is a very different level of belief in God. Smith and Denton reported that 84 per cent of American young people believed in God, with 12 per cent not sure and 3 per cent rejecting the idea. This compared, at that time, with 49 per cent believing, 34 per cent not sure and 17 rejecting the idea of God in Australia (Hughes, 2006, p.2).

It is also apparent that, among those who do believe in God, both in the US and Australia, there is a sense of a powerful, benign fatherly figure who helps you out when things go wrong. The article in *Pointers* in 2006 reported the following.

When asked to describe what they thought God was like, common responses were that God was loving, nice, friendly, forgiving, or caring. 'Someone who is always there to listen to you and help you' said one student. 'Will forgive you for anything' said another. 'God is like a second Dad, He loves us so much' said a student. 'The kindest person', said another student, 'with lots of acceptance of others' (Hughes, 2006, p.4).

This is what Smith and Denton describe as 'therapeutic deism': a God who is there to help you out when needed. However, Smith and Denton also found that there was a moral element to this. God expects you to be 'good'. There was a hint of this in some of the interviews in Australia, but the general conclusion is that this is relatively weak. There is a stronger sense that God loves you whatever you do, although God likes you to do the right thing.

## **Changes in Belief and Practice**

Since that data was collected between 2003 and 2006, it would seem that the proportion of Australian young people believing in God has diminished somewhat. Religion has faded more into the background for some. Others have become more strongly opposed to religion. There are a number of reasons for the change. Part of it is the continuing process of change since the 1960s and 1970s watershed, as Mason et al. (2006) have identified. Part of it may be an increasing concern that extreme forms of religion are linked to terrorism and violence. This has been an increasing theme in some interviews since 2001. Another part of it may be the increased media attention to the abuse of children in churches and church-related contexts, and the undertaking and the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Certainly, there has been a measurable decline of confidence in the churches over recent decades. While we do not have the evidence for this decline among young people, it is highly likely that the decline in confidence in their parents is contributing to their own decline in confidence and disregard for religious institutions (Hughes and Fraser, 2014, p.116).

The extent of decline was examined closely by looking at matched groups of students in 30 Catholic schools in four dioceses around 2005 and then again in 2011 (Reid, 2012). The students ranged from Year 5 to Year 12, and schools arranged for the surveys to be completed anonymously via the Internet. It was noted that there had been an increase in the number of first and second generation Australians from 33 to 41 per cent. This may have had some impact on the results.

The article reported that there was a greater confidence in what students believed about life in 2011 compared with 2005. This was accompanied by a slight decline in belief in God to 38 per cent, from 40 per cent in 2005. Just looking at students who were born of Australian parents, belief in God dropped from 37 to 34 per cent over those years (Reid, 2012, p.10). There was a similar small drop in belief that the Biblical miracle stories really happened, from about 25 per cent in 2005 to 22 per cent in 2011 (Reid, 2012, p.10).

The change was greater in relation to belief that Jesus Christ was truly God: declining from 49 per cent to 35 per cent. There was a similar significant decline in the proportion indicating that they tried to base their lives on the teachings and example of Jesus, from 39 per cent of students in 2005 to 29 per cent in 2011 (Reid, 2012, p.10).

In 2011, fewer students (25%) said they were attending church services monthly or more often, compared to students in 2005 (30%). However, there was also a decline in the proportion of students who never attended: from 41 per cent in 2005 to 37 per cent in 2011. The increase has been in occasional attendance: 39 per cent in 2011, compared with 29 per cent in 2005. It was noted that more students were crossing the Catholic/Protestant divide and attending churches of more than one denomination (Reid, 2012, p.11).

Prayer had also decreased. Twenty-three per cent of students said they prayed 'often' in 2011, compared with 28 per cent in 2005. The decline was larger among students born of Australian-born parents. The proportion of students likely to turn to prayer when problems arose in life, also decreased from 38 to 29 per cent (Reid, 2012, p.11).

Few students engaged in other spiritual practices. In 2005 and 2011 similar proportions of students indicated that they practised yoga or meditation, with five per cent saying they did so often. In both rounds of surveys, just three or four per cent of students said they read the Scriptures or other Christian books often (Reid, 2012, p.11).

Overall, there is strong evidence here that within the space of five years, among students from the same areas of Australia and same socio-economic backgrounds, there was a significant decline in religious activity and belief.

In this period of time, some significant historical events took place which may have influenced the decline. There was major media attention to a number of terrorist activities associated with religion. There was also increasing attention to the abuse of children by church priests and other employees. It may well be that these events influenced families and the students. It is also possible that this is an extension of long term declines in these forms of religiosity.

The increase in people indicating 'no religion' in the Australian Census over these years has been significant. The proportion went from 18.8 per cent of the population in 2006 to 22.5 per cent in 2011. This reflects the sorts of changes seen in the students noted above. In 2016, the proportion saying they had 'no religion' went up to 30.1 per cent, albeit exacerbated by a

change in the design of the Census form which saw the ‘no religion’ option move from the bottom of the list of religions to the top. Nonetheless, the increases indicate that this trend away from identity with a religion or Christian denomination has continued. It is likely that this would be reflected in further changes in the levels of belief in the Christian faith among students.

## **What are the Major Influences on Young People in Their Thinking about Life?**

There are a lot of popular materials on what influences young people. It is readily assumed that young people are influenced greatly by social media. Most of them spend a lot of time on their mobile phones and computers. Many are influenced by the gaming culture. They are also influenced by popular music and many other aspects of popular culture. However, it is very hard to measure those influences. When we have asked young people about their levels of trust in social media, they have generally indicated that they approach social media with a healthy scepticism (Reid, 2011). They see themselves as proactive, using social media to communicate personal matters, rather than being influenced by social media. Indeed, young people often see themselves as the agent as they negotiate the world and create their personal biographies and community, rather than as people being shaped by the world.

Nevertheless, young people are aware of many influences on them, and it is easy enough to ask young people about such influences, as has occurred in *Putting Life Together* surveys. Right through the surveys between 2011 and 2016, students were presented with a number of influences and asked to rate each of these on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of the extent they thought it influenced them in their thinking about life. This material was published in *Educating for Purposeful Living in a Post-Traditional Age* (Hughes 2017).

**Table 4. Mean Scores on a Scale of 1 to 10 of Students’ Rating of Various Influences on their Thinking about Life, and Percentage Scoring the Influence Strongly (a score of 8 or more about of 10)**

<b>Influence</b>	<b>Mean Rating on a Scale of 1 to 10</b>	<b>Percentage Indicating They are Strongly Influenced</b>
Family	8.5	78%
Friends	8.3	76%
What is learnt at school	7.2	53%
Reading books	6.4	39%
School camps and retreats	5.9	33%
Teachers	5.8	28%
Leadership programs and opportunities	5.5	30%
Community and social justice programs	4.8	21%
Religious education	4.8	22%
Church	4.4	23%
School liturgies & services of worship	4.2	16%

*Source: Putting Life Together Surveys, 2011-2018.*



In the table above, the mean rating of all students has been included along with the percentage scoring the item 8 or more out of 10, suggesting a strong influence. It should be noted that, in relation to some items, such as in relation to the influence of the church, there is a wide variety in the scores with 16 per cent scoring it high, but many scoring it as having no influence at all. In contrast, with items such as the influence of reading books and teachers, most students score the item as moderately important, and the influence is not as great.

Family and friends are seen as having the greatest influence on their thinking about life. There is a tendency for younger students to score the influence of family as much greater, while more senior students tend to rate the importance of friends more highly.

It has been possible to measure the influence of family more directly on some measures of behaviour. As reported by Hughes (2016), it has been calculated that 60 per cent of the variance in Mass attendance among Catholic school students can be attributed directly to the practices of the family. Around 20 per cent of the variance can be accounted for by friends, and less than that by the influence of the school. The remaining variance is probably due to personal factors such as specific experiences or more general personality, and personal ways of thinking about the church.

There has been a long history of research on the relationships between parents and children and how this affects the religious socialisation and choices of their children. The American sociologist, Darren Sherkat, has noted how studies have shown that children are most likely to adopt the religious choices of their parents when there is harmony among the parents in their own religious values and affiliations, a lack of general discord in the home, and when the children feel close to their parents (Sherkat, 2003, p.157). He also noted that people tend to choose friends with similar value preferences which then reinforce those values. He reported that siblings and other family members beyond the nuclear family may have some influence, although this has not been examined through longitudinal studies (Sherkat, 2003, p.158).

It is likely that these findings about the influence of family apply approximately to many general values in life, such as the extent to which people become involved in social justice or social welfare, or in their attitudes to the environment. It is likely that many of their beliefs about God and the Christian faith are influenced in this way. It was evident that many young people whose family regularly attended a church had quite different beliefs about the Christian faith and attitudes to religious education, compared with students who did not attend a church. Thus, the ways that students approach religious education and other religious aspects of the life of the school depends to a great deal on their home background and the attitudes they bring to the school. It is not easy to get past the family.

## The Role of Churches

We have been interested in the fact that church and the Christian faith is not something many young people talk about with their friends. Quite often, individuals are not aware of where their friends stand and what their religious practices are. It is commonly seen as a personal and family matter, and not something to share with friends unless they have specific knowledge that their friends have similar practices and beliefs.

The process whereby children develop a particular view of the world and develop the habits of the public and private practice of Christian faith is socialisation. While the family and parents have a very significant role in this, socialisation is a product of the engagement of the child in the various dimensions of society. Churches have a significant role to play in providing a general atmosphere in which the influence of the parents can be supported and in which children and young people find a peer group who also support those values and perspectives on life.

What is not well represented in the material above is the influence of culture. In a study of young people moving out of the church, from the Barna group, David Kinnaman argues that the contemporary culture of young people is fluid, diverse, complex and uncertain. He noted the role of the Internet and mobile devices providing unlimited access to other people and their ideas and worldviews. Kinnaman suggested that digital media ‘generates extraordinary distractions and invites [young people] to be less linear and logical in their thought processes’ (Kinnaman, 2011, loc.579). On the other hand, Kinnaman suggests that many teens and young adults feel alienated from family, community and institutions and suggests that one significant factor is that many American children are born to parents who are not married (Kinnaman, 2011, loc.633), and many family types are non-traditional and blended. A further factor is that the path to adulthood and full responsibility is now much longer than it was a generation ago, with many young adults 30 years of age not settled either in terms of home, work or family (Kinnaman, 2011, loc.643).

A major study of the role local church congregations play in promoting a ‘vital Christian faith’ was conducted in the United States and reported in 2010 in a project entitled ‘Exemplary Youth Ministry’. The study involved surveys and interviews of 2250 youth, 1670 parents and 1600 youth workers and pastors in 131 churches covering most denominations from Catholic to Baptist.

The major finding of the study was that effective youth ministry which led to young people showing a range of signs of strong Christian faith in their behaviour and attitudes did not depend on particular programs or activities, nor on having youth leaders with particular forms of training. Rather, it had to do with congregational culture. The researchers concluded:

It is the communal awareness of participation in God’s presence and action that permeates the values, relationships, and activities of these congregations, giving rise to an atmosphere, a

culture of the Spirit focussed on mission and transformation of life that seems to make them so influential in the lives and faith of young people (Martinson et al, 2010, p.53)

Four characteristics of these effective congregations were noted:

1. Basic ministries were thoroughly intergenerational.
2. Developed age-level youth ministries were marked by trusted relationships and custom-designed ministry practices and activities within a caring atmosphere of high expectation.
3. These congregations educated parents in the faith and equipped them for at-home caring conversations, prayer, ritual, Bible reading and service.
4. The leadership shown by the pastor, youth minister and adult leaders was competent and 'faith-filled' (Martinson et al, 2010, p.54).

The churches themselves had effective Christian education about what it meant to be a Christian and helped young people to apply that knowledge. They had an emphasis on mission and on community service and provided young people with the opportunities to exercise that. The youth reported that these churches were both warm and challenging. They felt that they were respected and supported by the community of the church. They were encouraged to think and ask questions and those questions were taken seriously. The quality of the intergenerational relationships they formed in those communities had a strong impact. These churches were good at involving young people in all aspects of the church life and gave them positive experiences in worship and other activities.

The ethos of the youth ministry was more important than the specific content of programs. Again, what was critical for the positive socialisation was the caring environment in which youth felt respected and developed a sense of belonging, and the authentic relationships that were developed among the youth and with the leaders. Most young people who scored high on the measure of 'vital faith' reported that they belonged to at least one group where people would pray with them and talk about spiritual issues and personal problems. Parents were often involved in youth ministry and there was consistency between the influences of home, youth ministry and the wider church. The leaders of these churches provided good examples of the practice of faith as well as relating with the young people in a genuine way and providing support for youth ministry.

Many of these findings were echoed in the research that was conducted by the Christian Research Association in 2014 and 2015 with case-studies in 21 churches of various denominations. The researchers argued that the following characteristics were important for effective youth ministry:

1. building an atmosphere in which there was care for the youth, and the building of trust and appropriate relationships;
2. a strong and positive faith among the youth leaders while being open to questions and to the application of faith;

3. strong bridges between the youth, the church community and the parents, as formed, for example, in intergenerational activities, such as music and mission groups; and,
4. leaders who were flexible, multi-skilled and well organised (Hughes, Reid and Fraser, 2010, pp.19-24).

In the process of developing a strong socialisation process, many Christian parents try to keep their children from contrary influences by ensuring their children are only involved with other children who have similar values and beliefs. By home-schooling or sending their children to Christian schools, and by ensuring they build strong peer groups at the local church, they try to develop a rounded Christian environment for their children.

This works for some children, but not for others. In studies of the alumni of Christian schools, the Christian Research Association work found that 55 per cent of young people who attend low-fee Christian schools, and 71 per cent who attended Catholic schools who had attended a church when growing up had ceased attending as adults (Hughes, 2017, p.72). Many young people spoke of having broken out of the ‘Christian bubble’ when they went to university or when they went out to work.

Kinnaman’s study of young people in Australia refers to two related factors in young people leaving churches. The first one is ‘helicopter parenting’ which is over-protective and demonises everything outside the church (Kinnaman, 2011, loc. 1441). The second one is a shallow church culture which does not engage with the realities of the world and the actual experiences young people have. Furthermore, he suggested that church cultures are often experienced as being repressive morally and in relation to genuine questions and doubts about faith, and exclusive in relation to those who do not live by its standards (Kinnaman, 2011, loc. 2969).

Within Australia, it is hardly possible to keep children and young people isolated from the pluralism of society, although some sects, such as the Exclusive Brethren, come close to doing this, at least for a while. It is probably better, in the long run, to bring young people up aware of the pluralistic environment but ready to make their own wise decisions about what to believe and how to live within that context. The overall culture of Australia is one which emphasises individual responsibility in making decisions for oneself, and most young people are adamant that they must make up their own minds about what they believe. Unlike most societies in human history, in most contemporary Western societies, and certainly in Australia, religious faith has become a matter of personal choice and most young people are well aware of that and are critical of those adults who try to tell them what to believe (Hughes, 2007, p.127).

## **Special experiences**

Apart from the general atmosphere in which young people are socialised, special experiences do have a significant influence on young people. In 2012, a group of students 16 to 18 years

of age who went to Catholic World Youth Day in Madrid in 2011 were interviewed. Most of them came from Mass-attending Catholic families. However, it was noteworthy that all the students indicated that they wanted to know whether they could affirm the faith for themselves. This in itself was indicative of the fact that faith is seen as something highly personal, and that each person must decide for themselves. In fact, the experience of World Youth Day did confirm their faith for many of the students, although a number of them reported that it was hard for them to relate their experience of World Youth Day back to the context of the local Catholic parish life (Hughes, 2017, pp.138ff).

There have also been other studies of World Youth Day which have noted the significance of the experience. One of the most recent was the doctoral thesis of Anthony Cleary. In an article that he wrote about it he noted the 'collective effervescence' of the students and the impact of such experiences (Cleary 2013, p.10).

The importance of such experiences has been noted in other contexts. It is noted above that students regard camps and retreats as often having great significance for how they think about life, more than religious education or social justice programs. In interviews, students have often spoke about how they appreciate getting out of the daily stream of activities, and how such occasions allow them to think more clearly and in a more focussed way about the issues of life.

Graham Rossiter (2016) did a substantial study on retreats and camps among Catholic school students. He found that many students, but certainly not all, found such occasions very beneficial to their thinking about life.

The research that the Christian Research Association conducted on youth groups in 2015 came to similar conclusions. They noted a number of occasions when young people reported that they felt particularly close to God (Hughes, Reid and Fraser, 2015, p.39). The most common was in retreats and camps when they had the opportunity to focus on worship and were in a context with others focussed on their faith. However, they also spoke of feeling close to God when they were going through hard times, or when they felt they needed God's help. Other young people noted they felt close to God at times when prayers were answered. Some spoke of the importance of getting out in the natural environment and of having quiet times. (Hughes, 2016).

## **Spiritual Development**

While all young people are socialised into particular views of the world and certain patterns of behaviour, and are influenced by special experiences, they respond differently to the influences around them. Socialisation is not an all-encompassing process which always produces the same outcomes. Some young people respond very negatively to what are very positive experiences for other young people.

There are several reasons for the variety of responses. One that has been mentioned is the pluralistic nature of the social influences on young people today. Another is that all young people are born with different predispositions and respond differently to similar situations. One particular example of this is the interactions that have been noted between psychological temperament and religious faith (Francis, Powell and Village, 2016).

Another part of the puzzle are the ways in which cognitive, emotional and spiritual development take place. James Fowler has been one of the leaders in the field, taking Piaget's theories of cognitive development and developing a notion of how the cognitive aspects of faith develop (Fowler, 2006). He has identified the following stages.

1. Primal faith (infancy to age 2), in which the first human attachments are made and in which trust and mistrust are developed.
2. Intuitive-projective faith (age 2 to early childhood), in which language is developed and imagination flows, but in which there is limited ability to distinguish between what is make-believe and what is real.
3. Mythic-literal faith (middle childhood and beyond), in which children make more stable and conscious interpretations of the universe in which religious symbols and concepts are seen largely in concrete and literal terms.
4. Synthetic-Conventional faith (adolescence and beyond), in which formal reason is developed but in which most youth develop beliefs, values and elements of personal style in relation to those of significant others, such as family members and friends.
5. Individuative-reflective faith, in which people develop the ability to critically reflect on their beliefs, values and commitments.
6. Conjunctive faith, in which adult thinkers recognise that truth can be approached from a range of perspectives and tensions must be held between those diverse perspectives.
7. Universalising faith in which people move beyond the concern about self and different traditions, and develop a universal regard for all life.

Fowler suggested that many people never develop beyond stage 4 of synthetic-conventional faith.

There have been criticisms of Fowler as there have been of Piaget. The stages are not always experienced in a linear way. Children develop at different rates and move backwards and forwards in complex ways. It has also been suggested that this theory does not easily apply to non-Western contexts.

One Australian psychologist, Glenn Cupit, has built on some of the cognitive and other notions of development of Piaget, Fowler, Erikson and others, but has suggested a more dynamic systems theory in which spiritual development is seen as a dynamic and interactive process rather than the simple consequence of biological development. In ways similar to Fowler, Cupit identified a 'trust phase' and then a 'pre-critical symbolic beliefs stage'. He has then suggested that often during the teenage years children move from a 'dependent critical / symbolic phase' to an 'independent constrained' phase (Cupit 2001) as they deal with the

variety of influences around them and the various pressures of their communities towards compliance.

The Christian Research Association has noted in its research with young people that there is a high level of doubt about what life is all about. Many young people express that they found it hard to know what to believe about life and the world. In other words, the 'Synthetic-Conventional' faith is breaking down even before the Individuative-Reflective stage develops. This may be due to the pluralism of contemporary society and to the individualistic perspectives on faith that go with it, perhaps alongside the growth of suspicion of institutions and traditions. It may also be due to the fact that religious faith is often pushed to the periphery and is something that many young people feel does not need resolution. They can live life comfortably without having to solve the problem of whether God exists or not (Hughes 2008, p. 11).

Peter Benson, a researcher at the Search Institute in the United States, argues that there are eight essential 'girders' which need to be included in a full theory of the development of religious faith and spirituality. These include:

1. myths, narratives and interpretative frameworks from which people develop a sense of the world in which they live;
2. the nature of the person who engages these interpretative frameworks;
3. the bi-directional nature of the influences in which people construct their worlds, rejecting some ideas while selecting others;
4. time – the various age-related development tasks of forming one's attachments and identity;
5. significant life experiences which can break into a person's life at different points;
6. cultural context which influences the nature of consciousness;
7. social context which both constrain and inform spiritual development; and,
8. the pull of inner human motivation, towards the creation of meaning, purpose, obligation and contribution (Benson 2006).

In other words, there are multiple influences on the development of faith. While children may be introduced to Christian interpretative frameworks and narratives from an early age, they will engage with them personally, influenced by their own life-experiences, and their cultural and social contexts, and personal motivations. Drawing on American research which has emphasised choice in religious socialisation, Darren Sherkat noted how human beings find explanations for the meaning of life valuable, and are willing to exchange time, money and other resources for these explanations. However, these explanations are 'only valuable if they are also taken to be true by trusted others' (Sherkat, 2003, p.152).

Sherkat identified three types of social influences on religious choices apart from the rewards of the meaning system itself.

1. Sympathy/antipathy. Some people participate in religious groups out of sympathy for others, such as children wanting to do what their parents desire, despite experiencing little benefit from the experiences. On the other hand, some children will deliberately antagonise their families by making religious choices that are contrary to what their family's desire, such as becoming involved in satanic cults, relishing the impact of their 'blasphemy'.
2. Example-setting. Some people are motivated to participate in religion in order to set an example to others, such as public officials who want to be seen as 'pious'.
3. Sanctions. As with many behaviours, people may participate or not participate in religious groups because of the sanctions or rewards arising from friendship networks, social status, and so on. (Sherkat, 2003, p.154).

However, Sherkat has argued that there is a lack of good longitudinal studies of the processes of socialisation and how it takes place in different denominational settings. He noted that there have been some studies of socialisation into new religious movements, but little longitudinal work on how young people are variously influenced by family and peers in different social and denominational contexts (Sherkat, 2003, p.163). In its studies in schools, the Christian Research Association has noted the decline of religious belief from the secondary year 7, reaching lows in years 9 and 10, and with some increases in years 11 and 12. Exactly why these changes are occurring and how the social maturation processes are influencing these trends is not clear. This could well be an important area for future research.

There have been some major longitudinal studies in Australia. In particular, the Australian Temperament Project has followed a large group of children born in Victoria from birth to the age of 30 years. It was the combined effort of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Royal Children's Hospital, the University of Melbourne and Deakin University. It has looked at three generations: young people, their parents, and, most recently, the young people's own children. A major report of the study was released in 2013: *The Australian Temperament Project: the first 30 years* (Vassallo and Sanson, 2013). The study focussed on the temperament of children, and behavioural and emotional adjustments, learning problems, mental health, and antisocial behaviour. It found that, in general, strong relationships with family and friends, a high level of control over emotions, and an interest in becoming involved in the community helped young people to flourish as adults. However, regrettably, there was no mention in this report of religion or spirituality nor discussion of the impact of other community involvements.

Another major longitudinal study has been the *Growing Up in Australia* project, a longitudinal study of 10,000 children, again, led by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and still on-going. This study has used seven waves of surveys to collect data and interviews have been conducted every two years. This study has focussed particularly on social disadvantage and its impact on children, and the importance of safe and supportive family environments. It has looked at the impact of living in regional and remote parts of Australia, at different levels of family income, and the working practices of parents, but, again, has not focussed on the development of religious faith.



## Other Studies of Australian Youth

### Mission Australia Study

One of the other major studies of Australian youth is the large-scale survey of young people conducted annually by Mission Australia. More than 28,000 young people aged 15 to 19 completed the survey in 2018. The survey provides some detailed insight into the issues young people see as important and where they go for assistance. However, it should be noted that the survey is open for all young people to complete, and thus the sample of young people who do complete it self-select to do so. In general, young people who are highly motivated and literate complete the survey, and are not representative of Australian young people as a whole. This is evident, for example, in the fact that 67 per cent of those surveyed said they planned to go to university following the completion of their schooling.

The 2018 survey asked no questions relating to religious faith, church involvement or religious practices. It did ask questions about personal concerns. The most frequently cited problems were:

- 43% coping with stress;
- 34% school or study problems;
- 31% mental health; and
- 30% body image.

Asked where they would go for help, they indicated that they would mostly likely go to friends, parents or guardians, or family friends or relatives. A little more than half of them said they would go to a GP or health professional and just under half said they would look for information on the internet. About 38 per cent said they would go to a teacher for support (Carlisle et al. 2018, p.4).

These findings draw attention to the importance of strong and supportive family relationships. More than 60 per cent of young people said that their family was functionally very well, while 12 per cent said it was fair, and seven per cent said poor (Carlisle et al. 2018, p.4).

The major issues in Australia identified by the young people who completed the survey were:

- 43% mental health;
- 29% alcohol and drugs; and
- 23% equity and discrimination.

The report noted that since 2016, bullying had been noted as a significant problem (Carlisle et al. 2018, p.4). In relation to mental health, some of the concern was focussed on their own ability to cope with pressures, particularly in relation to school and their studies, but also in relation to body image (Carlisle et al, p.10). For others, it was the concerns they had regarding

the mental health of their friends. In relation to alcohol and drugs, it seems that some people were concerned about the misuse of drugs and alcohol among their friends. It seems likely that others felt that they needed more assistance in avoiding or dealing with dependence (Carlisle et al, p.11). In terms of equity and discrimination, young people wanted a 'fair go'. This appeared to be related to concerns about finding a home and work, and the possibilities of homelessness and unemployment. It was also related to bullying (Carlisle et al., p.11.)

Reflecting on the report, it is evident that the experiences young people have of and in their various environments, such as the family, friendship networks, school and tertiary institutions, and work-place, have a large influence on how they see the world and what the issues are that concern them. If they have positive relationships with others in these arenas and cope with the stresses and strains in these contexts, then they will see life positively. This report also noted the influence of the Internet, but did not explore it at great depth.

### **Australian Catholic Youth Survey**

The Office for Youth of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has, for many years, intentionally kept research into young people on its radar. It has taken part in ecumenical research projects, it has run numerous research seminars for youth practitioners and academics, and it has been involved in a number of research projects about young people in the Catholic setting.

One such national project involved a survey of over 15,000 young people aged 16 to 29. The idea for the survey was put forth in early 2017 after notification from the Vatican that there would be a Synod of Bishops which would discuss the topic of Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment in Rome the following year.

In mid-2017, young people in the target age group were invited to share their views, attitudes and suggestions by participating in the survey. The survey sought to understand the interactions between young people, the Church and society, to examine the practices and Church involvement of young people, and to seek ideas on how the Church might more effectively engage with young people (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.1). So, while the survey questions did not explicitly ask how young people understood or experienced God, the inclusion of ten open-ended questions provided a forum in which respondents could express their views and attitudes more broadly than envisaged.

The results of the survey highlighted a number of concerns which young people held, particularly such issues as mental health, questions around identity, loneliness, relationships and friendships, the direction of society, and living out their faith in a secular world (Dantis and Reid, 2018, pp.viii-ix).

Much of the analysis of the data focused on three distinct age groups:

1. Those aged 16-18 (81 per cent of all respondents, or just over 12,000 respondents) who were secondary school aged students, primarily attending Catholic schools,
2. University aged young people (those aged 19-22), and,
3. Young adults (those aged 23-29).

While the survey was not a representative sample of young people, the number of respondents and the overwhelming amount of data nonetheless provides some insight into young people connected with a church or church-run school.

Of those respondents aged 16-18,

- 16 per cent were Catholic and regularly attended Mass and other faith activities,
- 26 per cent considered themselves Catholic or Christian and attended church activities sometimes,
- 25 per cent came from Catholic or Christian families, but did not practice or get involved with anything themselves,
- Six per cent were not sure what to think about the Catholic or Christian faith,
- Five per cent followed another religion or belief,
- 16 per cent did not identify with any religion, and,
- Five per cent described themselves in other ways (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.12).

In summary, around 45 per cent of students aged 16-18 in Catholic schools attended church at least sometimes, while a further five per cent followed a non-Christian religion or belief. The other half of students were not involved in church activities at all, although some came from religious families.

According to respondents aged 16-18, family had, by far, been the greatest influence on their lives, with just over three quarters (77%) saying their family had influenced them a lot. Forty-four per cent said that friends had influenced them a lot, and 20 per cent said school or teachers had influenced them a lot. Around ten to eleven per cent of the students said that Parish/church communities and church/religious leaders had influenced them 'a lot' (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.28).

Of all the Catholic groups, organisations and events the young people had experienced, respondents aged 16-18 listed youth groups, mission and outreach activities, and Mass and liturgical gatherings as the top three positive activities (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.14). However, it is important to note that the findings were in response to an open-ended question which asked for 'positive' experiences.

Some other important findings arising out of the survey for young people aged 16-18 were:

- Respondents valued talking with people who truly listened to their story, and wanted to share their thoughts and opinions without being judged or ridiculed (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.31).
- Respondents shared of negative experiences of close-minded or biases attitudes of some people in the Church, particularly in the area of sexuality, marriage and the role of women in the church (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.37).
- Respondents considered the top four issues facing young people in Australia today were school/study (62 per cent indicated it was an issue), mental health (59%), drugs/alcohol (57%) and body image (55%) (Dantis and Reid, 2018, p.39).

While many of the young people had a loose affiliation with the Church, mainly through the school they attended, there were many who did not attend church services nor connected with a church in any way. Of those who did attend services, many valued the Catholic traditions, such as sharing in the Eucharist, or the structure of the Mass or other liturgies. For other young people though, the structures and traditions were seen as too strict or conservative.

Many young people valued the church-related service activities, or participating in social justice activities. Such activities were an opportunity to experience new things while helping or serving others in the process

Although some young people chose not to respond to some of the open-ended questions, many others had their own opinions about the Church - many of which were in contrast to traditional Catholic Church teachings. However, the young people wanted to be taken seriously: they did not want their views on issues to be ignored or debased.

The 2017 Catholic Youth Survey provided a unique opportunity for Church leaders to engage with young people, many of whom had only a tenuous connection to a local parish or church. Overall, the findings from the survey provide some context for how young people aged 16-18 - Catholic young people in particular - experience God.

## **National Church Life Survey**

According to the most recent National Church Life Survey (NCLS), conducted in 2016, around 13 per cent of church attenders (aged 15 and over) in Australia were aged 15-29 (Powell, et al., 2018, p.6). Pentecostal churches had the highest proportion of younger attenders, with 23 per cent aged 15-29. Other denominations with above average proportions of young attenders included Christian Reformed churches (22%), Baptist churches (18%) and Presbyterian churches (16%). NCLS Research estimated that just over four per cent of attenders (15 and over) were aged 15-19 (Powell, et al, 2018, p.6). (Note, although the NCLS does have a separate children's questionnaire, most reporting is for attenders aged 15 and over.)

In a brief summary of comparisons of the various generations of attenders, NCLS Research found that Generation Z (those aged 15 to 21 years, and who were born in 1995-2001 at the

time of the survey) spent less time in private devotional activities than other generations, valued contemporary styles of worship music more (Powell, et al., 2018, pp.16). Around 31 per cent of all Generation Z attenders said they wanted to be more involved at their local church, while nearly half said they could play, sing or write music (Powell, et al., 2018, p.17).

The NCLS attender data specifically for young people aged 15-16 is particularly limited in regards to understanding how young people understand and experience God in their life.

## Australia's Generation Z Study

An Australian Research Council funded research project, conducted by academics from Australian National University, Deakin University and Monash University, investigated how Generation Z teenagers aged 13-18 made sense of the world around them by exploring their experiences and understandings of religious, spiritual, gender and sexual diversity (Singleton, et al., 2018). Whilst the outcomes of the study focussed on informing educational policy-making in regards to the Australian school curriculum, the findings provide a significant backdrop for gaining insight and understanding of the worldview of Australian young people.

The study comprised of 11 focus groups in three states with Year 9 and 10 students aged 15-16, a nationally representative telephone survey of teenagers aged 13-18, and 30 follow-up in-depth interviews with the survey participants.

The research identified that just over half of Australia's teens (52%) do not identify with a religion, lower than the 2016 Census figure of 59 per cent for those aged 14-18. It was noted that this is most likely due to the fact that in the Gen Z study, religious identification was self-selected by the participant, whereas it is most common for a young person's parent to complete the Census question on their behalf (Singleton, et al., 2018, p.2).

In regards to attendance at services of worship, the study found that just 12 per cent of teenagers attend weekly or more often, whilst 58 per cent never attend (Singleton, et al., 2018, p.2). The figures include those who attend Christian services as well as services of other religious groups.

Although many teenagers never attend worship services, just over two-thirds (67%) believe in God, a higher being or life force. Twenty-four per cent have no belief in God, higher being or life force, while nine per cent are unsure (Singleton, et al., 2018, p.3).

The research team utilised various statistical techniques with the survey data, then confirmed with interview data, to identify six different spirituality 'types' which "move beyond conventional understandings of religious or nonreligious identity" (Singleton, et al., 2018, pp.4-6).

1. **This worldly.** This group of young people, making up 23 per cent of Australian teenagers, have no space in their worldview for anything religious, spiritual or non-

material. They do not identify with a religious group, nor do they attend worship services. Their thinking is entirely worldly. However, not all of them identify as atheist, humanist or secularist.

2. **Religiously Committed.** For this group, faith is a big part of shaping how they live their lives. Making up 17 per cent of teenagers, they attend services regularly, believe in an afterlife and regularly report having religious experiences.
3. **Seekers.** Eight per cent of Australian teenagers are exploring and actively seeking out a spiritual truth for their lives. Most in this group identify as ‘spiritual’ but also as religious, expressed in belief of an afterlife and a presence or higher power beyond themselves.
4. **Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR).** Comprising 18 per cent of teenagers, this group is open to spiritual possibilities, but God, faith and religion are not important, and they are not actively seeking.
5. **Indifferent.** This group, representing 15 per cent of Australian teenagers, is mostly impartial or undecided about religion, spirituality or atheism.
6. **Nominally Religious.** Making up 15 per cent of teenagers, this group is mostly culturally religious, following the identity of their parents. They may identify with a religious group, and may attend services of worship occasionally, but faith is not that important in their daily lives.

In general, the research identified much diversity among Australian teenagers in matters of faith, spirituality and religion. A book and further publications on the Gen Z research will be coming out in the second half of 2019.

## Other International Studies

In 2016 and 2017, American research organisation the Barna Group, in partnership with the Impact 360 Institute, undertook research into American teenagers in order to examine the societal and cultural trends which were shaping their lives, and how such trends formed their worldview.

The research team conducted two nationally representative surveys of US teenagers aged 13-19, as well as four focus groups of teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17. Further interviews were conducted with Christian youth pastors, in addition to surveys with ‘engaged’ Christian parents. A number of relevant key themes emerged from the findings (Barna, 2018).

- **Morality.** American Gen Z’s have very different views about morality than other generations before them. They see themselves as ‘moral arbiters’; that is, what is right or wrong depends on the beliefs of the individual. Almost one quarter of American Gen Z teenagers believe that morality changes over time based on societal norms (Barna, 2018, pp.3-4).

- **Views of Christian and non-Christian teenagers.** There were three significant barriers to faith for non-believers identified in the research. These included the problem of evil, science refuting too much of the Bible, and the lack of importance of church attendance. Science was also a factor for Christian teenagers, who said that “church seem to reject much of what science tells us about the word” (Barna, 2018, p.4).
- **De-prioritising of family.** For American Gen Z’s, personal achievement, whether educational or professional, and hobbies and pastimes were identified as being more central to identity than family background or upbringing (Barna, 2018, p.5).

Whilst the Barna research revealed that American engaged Christian teenagers may or may not consider church important (Barna, 2018, p.4), another research project conducted by Saint Mary’s Press, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), focussed on the disaffiliation of young US Catholics from their Church.

Conducted in 2015 and 2016, the study sought to understand more fully why young people leave the Catholic Church. It specifically focused on young people who had once self-identified as Catholic, but who no longer did so. The publishers intentionally utilise the verb ‘disaffiliate’ rather than ‘dis-identify’, although it seems the latter is more appropriate for such discussion. The research resulted in a very condensed publication, aptly titled *Going, Going, Gone* (Saint Mary’s Press & CARA, 2017).

Overall, the research found that, for US young people, disaffiliation from the Catholic Church was mostly an intentional, thoughtful and dynamic process in a society where faith and religious practice – like many Western countries – is but one of many options available to them (Saint Mary’s Press & CARA, 2017, p.11). Around 35 per cent of young people who had disaffiliated from the Catholic Church (given the title of “Nones”) did not continue with any other religious identification. Yet disaffiliation did not necessarily lead to non-belief, with many of the young people believing in “something bigger and beyond themselves, perhaps even God” (Saint Mary’s Press & CARA, 2017, p.11). A further 14 per cent of US young people lost any faith in religious beliefs or God, unable to reconcile the irrational and unobservable aspects of faith with the rational and reasonable understanding of the world (Saint Mary’s Press & CARA, 2017, p.11). An additional 46 per cent of young people identified with alternative faith expressions which more closely suited their desires and beliefs (Saint Mary’s Press & CARA, 2017, p.11).

The researchers rightly note that the disaffiliation process for young people is complex and multi-faceted. However, such categories, they argue, need to be developed in order to understand the broad-stroke reasons for disaffiliation. As such they arrived at six common “dynamics of disaffiliation” of US young people (Saint Mary’s Press & CARA, 2017, p.25-31).

1. A particular event triggers the start of questioning or doubt.
2. The rationale for disaffiliating is consistent with the secularisation of culture where faith is one of many options.
3. The young person has a sense of liberty or relief by their disaffiliation decision.
4. The young person argues that religious practice should be a free choice, and contrary to their own upbringing, do not wish to impose faith on their own children.
5. The young person commits to nonetheless living a moral life but without religion.
6. The young person is open to belief or faith, if a rational argument can be presented to them.

Although the publication of the research is light-weight and unsophisticated in its approach, the authors leave room for much discussion about the findings by presenting a number of basic pastoral discussion points for youth leaders which are helpful (Saint Mary's Press & CARA, 2017, pp. 34-36).



## Recommendations for Future Research

As has been documented above, the most recent studies, such as the Putting Life Together surveys undertaken by the CRA, suggest that about 40 per cent of young Australians entertain the idea that there is a God who is involved in the lives of people. Among them, many are uncertain. Around twenty per cent affirm traditional Christian teachings, and probably about half of that group are actively involved in a church.

Most of the 60 per cent who do not believe in God have never thought about it to any real degree. They may have heard it mentioned at school, but it has never been on their agenda. There is a vague awareness that some people believe in God, but without families that take an interest in the issue or friends who talk about their faith, it is not something they think about. Even many of those students who attend religious education classes at school, let the teaching go over their heads, or approach such classes with apathy or, for some, resistance. If their families are not interested, then they will not take the teaching seriously. Between 10 and 15 per cent of students in church-related schools react quite negatively to attempts to raise religious issues with them. Hence, when asked about God, they often say they do not know what to think, or they give some vague response about belief in some sort of higher power out there, or simply just reject any notion whatsoever.

What gives Australian young people a sense of purpose is the relationships they have with their families and their friends. They seek a life of happiness and wellbeing and most of them see being successful in their studies at school as a way to achieve that. For those who do entertain the idea of there being a God, it is usually in the form of ‘Someone who may help’ you out if you get into difficulties.

It has been well-documented that many Australian young people who grow up in Christian contexts, with church-attending families and in church-related schools, drift away from churches during their adolescent years. While the strength of family relationships and the homogeneity of Christian influence in the home, strong peer relationships which support a Christian orientation to life, and affirmation from the wider intergenerational Christian community inhibit this drift, they do not stem it entirely. It is very clear from research that most Australian young people see themselves as having to take the responsibility for their own beliefs, and it seems likely that observation of the pluralistic environment contributes to many young people feeling uncertain about Christian faith and the existence of God.

However, the process of making decisions about retaining or moving away from faith during the adolescent years among Australian young people is still not well understood. The sorts of experiences which influence the making of decisions needs to be better understood so that churches and youth leaders can be more pro-active in addressing the issues.

As a result, we recommend that some longitudinal studies be conducted with students from the time when they enter secondary school to the time when they leave. During this six year period, we recommend that interviews be undertaken in alternative years, and surveys used on

the other years. The study would focus on the changes of faith over the six year period. It would seek to identify special experiences that had an impact on the students, but would also document the nature of their relationships with the family and with friends, and what influences were occurring through them. It would look at the school environment and seek to evaluate what impact school activities were having. It would also seek to document involvements in church and faith-related activities, and attitudes to these. It would document the changing ability to reflect on life and the changing attitudes to personal responsibility in faith.

Apart from a longitudinal study, the most useful type of study would probably be one which looked at various attempts to engage young people in thinking about God. There have been various programs run by Scripture Union, Youth Alive and other youth oriented organisations in schools and in the wider community. It would be worth doing a qualitative study of those people who make decisions for Christ through those programs who have come from families which have given them no support, and examining what factors in the program or in their context brought about the change. Our suspicion is that, in some cases, major changes occur when life has become unbearable for those young people and they seek a significant turn-around. The issue, however, is whether the indication of a desire for a turn-around by making 'a decision for Christ' leads to long-term changes and what influences the success of such change in the longer term. This is an area in which there is much anecdotal material, but little solid research, and this might be another way of looking at factors which lead to positive changes.

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