



## Summary of Research November 2018

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# Introduction

## God with us

God's presence in our lives underpins all that we are loving us from the very beginning to the very end, whether we choose to acknowledge that presence and love or not.

Faith journeys tell the stories of how people become aware of God's presence, are attracted to it, respond to it and are ultimately transformed by it. These transformed individuals are followers of Jesus Christ, sharing the love of God to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, thereby transforming the world.

The mission of the Church of England is to nurture those faith journeys.

## About me and the research

I started my research career in 1980, working for one of the world's largest market research agencies. After that I had roles managing the research for Weetabix and Granada. Following a career break (where I travelled the length of Africa in a truck) I set up my own research consultancy in 1987.

My passion has been to understand people: how they think, what matters, what motivates, why they do (or don't do) what they do. Through the insights gained, I've guided many organisations with decision making on strategies, communications, designs, new product development, staff management and motivation, and so on. These organisations included Barclays Bank, British Airways, Argos, the NHS, Woburn Abbey and Safari Park, various government departments, Hilton Hotels, Moto service stations and the Marine Stewardship Council.

In my early 40s, I had a profound experience which pointed me towards God. My passion led me to wanting to know: how Christians think, what matters to them, what motivates them, why do they do (or don't do) what they do, and so on. Although my business was very successful, I gave it up to run the charity 'Christian Research', which became part of Bible Society. At Christian research we conducted work for many organisations, including Westminster City Council, Alpha, Evangelical Alliance, Tearfund as well Bible Society and Christian Research projects. The most significant of these was a project called 'Faith Journeys' which explored how, why and when people became Christians as well as what motivated them in their journeys or held them back.

After four years with Christian Research I returned to research consultancy, with the focus almost exclusively on Christian research. I have worked for many organisations including various parts of the Church of England, Church Urban Fund, Scripture Union International, Care for the Family and individual churches or groups of churches.

In thinking about Faith Journeys, I have reflected upon all the research I have conducted to date, including all the secular research. I have studied in particular all the relevant Christian based research I've been involved with

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as well as relevant research conducted by others, including that undertaken by psychologist and sociologists studying religious conversion.

## Summary and thoughts

This is a summary of some of the key points made in a seminar with the Church of England on 20th November 2018, together with some of my thoughts.

### The Faith Journey

Each faith journey is unique and usually complex, with multiple influences, motivations and barriers.

The psychologist Lewis R Rambo stated that conversion takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations:

- It is a process over time, not a single event
- It is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations
- Factors in the transformation process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative.

Rowan Williams said:

*It takes time to be a Christian. There are things that instantly make sense and make a difference and there are things that slowly, and sometimes rather painfully, find their way into your mind and heart.*

### Defining a Christian

When asked what proportion of the population is Christian the answer can be anywhere between 1 or 2% and 50% depending on the definition. This is one of the main issues in conducting and analysing research relating to faith journeys. For his research published in 'Finding Faith Today' (1992), John Finney focussed on the point where someone made a public profession of faith. In the faith journeys research conducted by Christian Research we focussed on the motivations and barriers to **be** a Christian, as well as focusing on the time that someone first considered themselves to be a Christian (self-defined). Other research focusses on what people believe, what they profess or how they practice. This is complicated by the many Christian denominations and styles of churchmanship, which each have variations on what it is to be a Christian or how to practice being a Christian. A further complication is that people may not be able to perceive far beyond where they are on their faith journey, so they may feel they have reached their destination but in reality have only reached one of the peaks.

This research summary focusses on the whole Christian faith journey from the first moments to the point where someone can be described as Christlike, recognising that very few people reach this stage since it is impossible to be as perfect as Christ.

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## Faith Journey Stages

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Although it is understood that Faith Journeys are unique and complex, there are some common stages that can be perceived:

1. Context – awareness, experiences, relationships
2. Catalyst
3. Initial engagement
4. Ongoing engagement
5. Belief, Commitment, Belonging
6. Transformation

Here are a few important points about these stages:

- Each stage is not (or should not be) a stopping point on the journey, more a recognisable part of the continuum. It is more the case that each stage provides the foundation for the next. The context is ever present, ever changing and ever influencing the faith journey.
- The greatest number of people are at the context stage, and the number reduces at each stage towards transformation
- People can step forward as well as backward, even after reaching transformation
- Although these stages describe a more usual journey, they can be transposed or omitted completely.

There has been much research and discussion about sudden vs gradual conversion, and among psychologists about classic/old paradigms of conversion vs contemporary paradigms. However, being transformed into an active follower of Jesus Christ, and becoming Christlike, usually takes many years and involves all the stages.

It is very rare indeed for someone have a sudden Paul-like experience, going straight from context to transformation (and would probably need significant divine intervention). Even in these circumstances, the individual would usually then fill in some of the gaps of their journey after transformation.

Some people perceive that they became a Christian suddenly because they moved quickly from one of the early stages to stage 5 (belief, commitment, belonging). This is usually followed by stage 4 (engagement) before stage 6 (transformation) can be reached. Sudden movements in a faith journey are uncommon and believed to be increasingly uncommon. Typical characteristics of a sudden movement are:

- The person is fairly passive, an external influence is causing the change
  - It is more emotional than rational
  - There is a dramatic change in the person
  - Behaviour change follows belief change
  - The impact of the change is profound, so the change is more likely to be permanent
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Once people are on an active faith journey, they will usually experience differently levels of intensity, but will not experience a dramatic or profound movement from the early stages to the later stages. These are typical characteristics of those people on a gradual faith journey:

- The person is usually actively seeking
- It is more rational than emotional
- Belief change follows behaviour change
- Periods of doubt are common, even after reaching stage 5 (belief, commitment and belonging)
- The journey often starts in adolescence and takes many years

The Church of England needs to help people understand that sudden transformation is surprisingly rare. People should not be made to feel they are less of a Christian because they have not had a profound experience.

The expectation needs to be set that the journey will be unique for each individual. Transformation takes time and will involve ups and downs – it is common to step backward between stepping forward.

The Church of England needs to walk beside people as they journey, discipling and encouraging, as well as supporting and reassuring during any setbacks.

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## 1. Context - awareness, experiences, relationships

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As people journey through life their worldview is shaped by their context. This context will be continually changing, particularly in the early years of life. The context of someone's life will include:

- Their history
- Families, friends, communities and other people they come into contact with
- Their homes and local environment
- Activities they are involved in
- Media they are exposed to and consume

In the context of their lives, people tend to be driven by hopes and fears. They are sustained by love.

The church and the Christian faith are usually present somewhere in the context of people's lives, to a greater or lesser extent, and will influence their worldview. However, in today's society, the public face of the church is often focussed on worship/churchgoing and this influences perceptions of what it is to be a Christian. Most people, particularly the young, will define themselves as having 'no religion' as they do not, and have no desire to, participate in worship.

At the same time we know that most people pray and many are looking for more meaning in their lives. We also know that people are attracted to and transformed by experiencing God's love for the world, through the actions of churches and Christians.

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At the first stage, the church needs to be present in people's lives. All research on faith journeys shows that it is most important to be present in the lives of children and adolescents since this is when worldviews of church and faith tend to be formed. These views are then carried through their lives, unless the context changes. If a young person develops a strong personal faith, it is likely to be a foundation throughout their lives.

As well as having a presence in people's lives, the church should actively optimise every opportunity to make that presence a positive influence and generate positive memories. This will involve being welcoming, offering generous hospitality, helping to give people hope and helping to allaying fears. It should also be intentional about nurturing faith journeys. Above all, it needs to be incarnate so that people might have the chance to experience the love of God.

## 2. Catalyst

There is often a catalyst that stimulates someone to re-shape their worldview, which triggers faith journey progress. These triggers could be anything but common catalysts are:

- Crisis (personal, community or the wider world)
- Transition points in people's lives, including life events
- Encounters with other people
- Encounters with church
- Seasonal events

The church needs to be aware of these catalytic moments and recognise the potential in every opportunity to nurture faith journeys.

## 3. Initial engagement

At some point, an individual may take a more active interest in the Christian faith. This initial engagement could take many forms, depending on the person's context, any particular catalyst and the styles of engagement that are relevant/accessible/available. The main styles of engagement are mentioned in the next section.

It is important for this initial engagement to be positive and nurturing. A negative experience, or even an experience which fails to nurture, can take people back to the context stage, sometimes delaying active engagement for many years or even a lifetime.

## 4. Ongoing, active engagement

At some point after a positive initial engagement with the Christian faith, there is usually a period of intentional activity which involves behavioural change. These individuals are often searching for meaning and purpose and are particularly attracted by seeing the love of God in practice.

Research has shown that there are three main styles of engagement:

- Relational
- Experiential
- Intellectual/rational

Whilst most people will have a preference for style of engagement, they will often experience all styles of engagement.

### Relational

This style of engagement has a female bias. It involves building relationships with other Christians, opening the opportunity to be disciplined by others.

### Experiential

This style of engagement involves practicing being a Christian – going to church, prayer, Bible engagement, small group activity - whatever is relevant in the individual's context.

### Intellectual/rational

This style of engagement has a male bias. It is often self-motivated and done largely in isolation with minimal direct influence from the church or other Christians.

The Church of England needs to be active and intentional in inviting engagement, but these different styles of engagement have implications for discipleship. The church needs to offer a range of ways to engage, nurturing faith in different styles. This will allow individuals to explore faith in ways that will lead them to find purpose and meaning, in ways that are most likely to lead to commitment and transformation.

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## 5. Belief, Belonging, Commitment

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Following a period of active engagement, an individual may come to the stage where they are confident with their faith and feel they belong to a Christian community, or want to more actively belong to a community. Depending on the context, there is often a public declaration of faith at this stage. The individual should also feel confident in talking to others about their faith.

It is important to remember at this stage that a change in context can change the worldview. Research shows that this stage is often reached with adolescents and young adults. It is almost inevitable that their context will be changing dramatically during this period. If the belonging and commitment is largely based on a strong relationship with a local church then the faith journey could be damaged if that local church moves outside their

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usual context. Belonging needs to be to **The** church, as well as **A** church. There needs to be a strong personal relationship with the living God, that can be sustained without the relationship with the local church.

It is important to continue nurturing and discipling people beyond this stage.

## 6. Transformation

The transformed individual becomes an active follower of Jesus Christ and works constantly for God's kingdom to come on earth, thereby helping to transforming the world. Those fully transformed can be described as Christlike. It is recognised that very few people reach this stage since it is impossible to be as perfect as Christ.

According to psychological research, there are three layers of personality, and is each impacted differently by transformation (or conversion):

1. The most dramatic change is usually seen in someone's identity and life meaning
2. Major change is also expected with mid-level personality associated with goals, attitudes, feelings and behaviour
3. Little change is expected with the 'elemental' personality traits of extraversion, openness to experience, agreeability, neuroticism and conscientiousness

When a person has been transformed there is usually a strong desire to be Christlike, but they may not know how. There is a continuing need to disciple, nurture and release these transformed individuals in order that their God-given talents are discerned and used well. However, there is also a need to ensure that these individuals have a well-rounded faith – in both belief and practice.

Research has shown that as the desire to be active is strong, if they are not nurtured and used well in their local context they may become disillusioned and either step backwards or move elsewhere.

## Faith Journey Influences

There are both positive and negative influences on faith journeys. These are usually a mix of gradual, ongoing, 'background' factors punctuated by more dramatic short term influences.

Although discussed at the seminar on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2018, a separate section on influences is not included in this summary. However, the faith journey research conducted by Christian Research (with Christians) found the following.

People and relationships have a great deal of influence on faith journeys. Young children are most likely to be influenced positively by their parents and grandparents. As they get older there is the opportunity for children's workers (or equivalent) to influence, and then youth leaders and Christian friends as they move into

adolescence. However, parents, non-Christian friends and siblings can also be a constant negative influence on a young person's faith journey.

The strongest positive short term influences on young people are from attending Christian festivals or events.

As adults, the strongest encouragements to a faith journey are found in other people – Christian friends, church communities and families. However, the strongest discouragements to a faith journeys are also found in other people – parents, spouses, church communities and friends.