

Esmé Partridge, *Understanding Young Adult Journeys to Faith in the Church of England* (Church of England and Theos, July 2026)

46pp - <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/news-and-press-releases/new-report-explores-young-adult-journeys-faith-church-england>

Contents page and summary – it is well worth reading the quotes from participants

The researcher spoke to thirty 18–30-year-olds who began attending an Anglican church in the last 5 years

18 – 30-year-olds who have found a home in the C of E show “a strikingly consistent appreciation for worship that carries “confidence”, “seriousness” and “authenticity””. (3) Many spoke of a growing valuing of tradition. “What is more consistent is the experience of church as a place of community, particularly in the context of loneliness and disconnection. Many describe relief from anxiety and other mental health struggles, alongside a renewed sense of purpose where they had previously felt lost. For a significant number, this amounts to a deeper personal transformation. Among the men interviewed in particular, church is often experienced as a refuge from the pressures and uncertainties of modern life. Looking beyond their own stories, most participants perceive their peers as increasingly open to spirituality, describing Gen Z as a more spiritually curious and receptive generation.” (3)

A new openness and curiosity – Gen Z as post-secular?

Lamorna Ash, *Don't Forget We Are Here Forever: A New Generations Search for Religion* (2025), Bloomsbury

Lamorna Ash, “Christianity No Longer Felt Like An Alien Concept, But Something I Might Want To Explore In My Own Life”: On Finding God, The Gen Z Way, *British Vogue*, 19 April 2025, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/finding-god-in-your-20s> (May issue 2025)

“Since the Covid-19 pandemic, evidence has grown to suggest that young people may in fact be more open to spiritual ideas than their parents and grandparents, even if they are not formally religious – indeed, recent analysis of data from Pew Research Center suggests that among adults who identify as having no religion in the UK, Gen Z are slightly more likely to believe in God, life after death, and something ‘spiritual’ than older generations – and are also more likely to view religion positively.⁶ The 2022 Ipsos Global Advisor survey likewise found belief in “God or a higher power” to be 11% higher among Gen Z than Baby Boomers,⁷ while the 2022 World Values Survey revealed that Gen Z are also more likely to believe in life after death and the existence of heaven and hell.”⁸

Lack of connection to church / knowledge of Christianity

Interviewees had “a near total lack of knowledge about Christianity, both from parents and their time at school – even where participants attended Church of England primaries. Jamilah, 25, described the teaching of religious studies as “very light touch”, while Abby, 24, recalled how her teachers “told stories from the Bible, but there wasn’t really an explanation of what they mean or how they apply to you and your life”. The result, some of our participants observed, is a generation almost completely unfamiliar with Christian teaching” (9)

Their “Gen X parents, ... received the countercultural forms of spirituality that emerged in the 1960s. These beliefs were often adopted in direct reaction to Christianity, creating an opposition between personal spirituality and organised religion – hence the notion of being “spiritual, not religious”” (10)

“At most, especially among those who grew up in rural areas, there might have been some awareness of the parish church through school or the local community” (10)

“Ryan, 28, said he associated Anglican churches with the “weak tea and awkward English conversations”” (10)

Church & horror films - as cold and scary! (10)

The “Teenage Atheist Phase” (11)

Alternative spiritualities

“Others, however, went through phases of alternative spirituality – the overwhelming majority of whom were women. Many described becoming interested in astrology, tarot cards, crystal healing and “manifestation”; a New Age-inspired practice of bringing personal desires into reality. These beliefs and practices have found a new lease of popularity among Gen Z and Millennials, with astrology apps like Co-Star reaching over 30 million global users and “manifestation” being called the buzzword of 2021.” (12)

However, despite believing that their experiments with these forms of spirituality were misguided in retrospect, several expressed that they had nonetheless been an important part of their journey to church. This is because they felt that these beliefs had opened them up to notions of a higher power and transcendent order, acting as a bridge between non-belief and faith (several had previously also been atheists). (12)

The importance of online / social media

It is striking that those who were “militant” atheists were typically men, and those who dabbled in alternative spirituality overwhelmingly women. But among both genders, even where they were non- or anti-religious, few said they had been indifferent towards the subject of religion growing up. Questions about God, faith and meaning tended to be something that had long interested them – in contrast with many of their parents, who “didn’t talk about that kind of thing”. (13)

Some of the young people had an interest sparked online and ordered a Bible then turned up at church

The importance of mental health / well being

Feeling directionless, searching for answers

“Apologetics and debates – for example, between different Christian denominations or Christianity versus Islam – were mentioned by several as something that initially sparked their curiosity. Political content was also a common “gateway”. In some cases, people came across priests or pastors offering thought-provoking commentary on current affairs; in others, it was more overtly ideological influencers who first exposed them to Christian views, including the Canadian psychology professor and author Jordan Peterson and the late American conservative activist Charlie Kirk. Men in particular described seeing right-wing, so-called “redpill” content which blended Christian ideas with models of conservative masculinity, defined as wanting “five kids and my wife to stay at home” (Owen, 28).” (14)

“Notably, the Christian content that people first encountered online was not typically Anglican or connected to the Church of England. The only exception mentioned was The Way UK, the youth-led Christian YouTube channel and podcast series produced in collaboration with the Church of England. More commonly, the content people saw came from other denominations such as Catholicism or Orthodoxy – with public theologians like the Catholic Bishop Robert Barron and the Orthodox icon carver Jonathan Pageau proving especially influential – or not visibly linked to any denomination. As such, no one came directly from social media to the Anglican faith, discovering the Church at a later point in their journey.” (15)

Tolkien, Dante, Donne, “Other popular Christian thinkers included the authors C.S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton and the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. Many said they were attracted to the intellectual depth of these thinkers both as theologians and commentators on modern society which they had felt to be lacking in answers to life’s questions.” (16)

Alan Watts’ lectures on Buddhism and Hinduism

Dostoevsky ... “moral realism” – that good and evil are real forces present in the universe... disillusionment with modern relativism (17)

“the “anything goes” mentality – that “every idea is as good as the other” – caused him to feel that such a worldview was deceptive and ultimately self-destructive. Several also spoke of intuitively feeling a “wrongness” or emptiness in the culture around them, but did not know how to articulate it – until discovering Christian writers. It was this search for objective morality, often in conscious reaction to modern secular society, that drove the initial curiosity in several cases.” (17)

“It may be, as James Marriott has argued, that it is precisely in reaction to the shallow and passive nature of short-form social media content that some young people are actively searching for something deeper” (17)

“when reflecting on how the Church of England might better engage young people, several encouraged a more public embrace of its intellectual side. Ryan, 28, suggested that attempts to attract younger audiences through shallow or overly simplified versions of faith are less likely to appeal to a generation seeking depth and substance. He and others shared Alex’s view that the Church would benefit from having Anglican “influencers” offering intellectual and theological rigour.” (17)

James Marriott, “Full-fat faith: the young Christian converts filling our churches”, The Times, 15 August 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/full-fat-faith-the-young-christian-converts-filling-our-churches-x69pd289k?msockid=32059e066037631f0aa1889561e56252>

The importance of direct encounter with the Bible in faith journeys

“Many of our participants said they had started reading the Bible independently before they attended church; perhaps surprisingly, given the lack of familiarity with scripture during their upbringings. Yet if anything, it was precisely this unfamiliarity – combined with its historical and cultural ubiquity – that made the Bible a source of intrigue and discovery.” (18)

“Almost all of our interviewees described having periods of exploration and independent study like those described. But there were also some whose decision to try church came about following unexpected or even uncanny encounters which they interpreted as spiritual and providential.... Most encounters of this kind occurred amid difficult personal circumstances.” (19)

Personal witness

“The prevalence of these factors – social media, intellectual exploration, and personal spiritual experiences – might give the impression that young people are coming to church in a way that is independent rather than interpersonal. However, in many cases, it was thanks to a relationship with a specific individual that they first came to attend a service. Several mentioned someone who played this mediating role in their journey, not only teaching them about Christianity but providing a living example of faith that they found personally inspiring.” (21)

P21 – she had a sense of love and peace and she was there for me ... And I was like, one, I guess these are nice people and it’s nice to spend time with them. And also just like, it feels like there’s something going on here, there’s some kind of pattern

“Strikingly, across these relationships, it was not so much individuals’ attempts to persuade people of the truth of Christianity that moved people, but rather the qualities of love, joy, generosity, and kindness that they embodied.” (22)

“Of those who had tried a different denomination to begin with, their reasons for moving on varied. Some found the worship of traditional Catholic or Orthodox churches to be inaccessible or culturally unfamiliar, while those who tried other Protestant churches commented that they found them too big and sometimes “overwhelming”. Generally, people moved because they felt they could not personally relate to the service style (though it should be noted that several also had this experience with churches different to their own within the Church of England).” (23)

Personal connection to a church / congregation

Physical proximity

“This is an advantage of the Church of England’s cathedral and parish system that offers a “Christian presence in every community”: often, the Anglican church is the only (or at least the only visible) Christian presence in a community, leading people to gravitate towards it even when they have not been before.” (23)

“Nina, 25, came to Christianity after experimenting with alternative spirituality at university and returning to her parents’ village where she felt moved by a Christingle service she attended with a younger sibling. Despite being the only young person in an elderly congregation, she chose to worship at her local church – where she also volunteers as PCC secretary – because she felt it important to protect the parish for future generations at a time when so many are closing: “I don’t want to see [my local church] go. I don’t want to see it shut down. And I think because we’ve had one of our churches shut down in the parish, I think, that could be ours next.” Nina, 25” (24)

Heritage, culture, community, history, local church building, liturgy and music, college chapel, evensong, calm, peace

“Overall, many people expressed feeling particularly drawn to the aesthetics, history, liturgy and worship found in the Church of England as distinct from other denominations. struck by the beauty of a medieval parish church” (24)

BCP – generations of ancestors

Flexibility / latitude / freedom / fuzzy edges

“Most people, however, had a clear preference when it came to the style of worship they personally practised, tending to express strong views in favour of either high or low church traditions.” (25)

“Across the board... many described being drawn to their particular church because of its apparent confidence, consistency and depth. To this effect, “authenticity” and “seriousness” were terms that recurred, regardless of whether they referred to more sacramental or charismatic expressions.” (26)

Quiet, solemnity, reflection, structure, continuity – ““going through the motions” at church not pejoratively, but in the deeper liturgical sense of repetition, habit, and memorisation – something she personally found contemplative.” (26)

Some people liked modern accessible pop songs / normal! (26)

“unfamiliarity or “weirdness”... associated this with otherworldliness in a transcendent sense, making it part of their very appeal. Some aspects of church that were off-putting to some people, then, were precisely what made them attractive to others.” (26)

Comfort, familiarity / energy / passion (26)

Community, kindness, warmth of welcome esp. important in people returning (29) – loneliness epidemic – real life human connection essential – care, home, identity, people want to help each other grow

intergenerational and diverse (30)

The value of small groups including male only or female only / related to age / stage e.g. students (30)

Belonging

A space to be open about emotions

Effects of church attendance

“For all participants, the decision to attend church came as a major life change – in many ways, a radical one that set them apart from their non-Christian families and friends. Many described other developments that had occurred in their lives since, not only in terms of their personal spirituality but also their mental health and wider outlook on life and society.” (33)

“Almost everyone said that, since attending church, they had started reading the Bible more regularly if not every day.”; “The majority also said that they try to pray every day” – “transformational” (33)

“Numerous studies have shown the positive impact of church attendance on mental health. This was reflected in our research, with every single participant describing improvements to their wellbeing. As with community, nobody said they came to church in search of a solution to emotional difficulties; rather, it came as a welcome “side effect”. Those who had been experiencing anxiety or depression beforehand, however, described the shift as transformative” (34) – more emotionally settled, peace, appreciative, recognising the good, less anxious / depressed, stability, something solid, foundations – relationships, community, purpose - “Looking at the people around me,” Amy, 26, observed, “people don’t feel okay – and they’re not sure why, because they haven’t been taught things.” (34)

Politics / conservatism / tradition (36f) cf. social justice / conscience

Emotion and devotion (38)

Conclusion: Is Christianity Becoming Plausible Again?

“From first discovering Christianity and choosing a church to deepening their discipleship, no two young adults’ journeys were the same.” – algorithms, providence and personal contact! (40)

Gen Z are often spiritually curious, open and struggling! (40)

“religion may appeal precisely because it offers an alternative to modern society; a society with which many have become disillusioned, facing economic insecurity, graduate unemployment, the housing crisis, and anxiety about climate change and global conflicts.” (40) – emptiness of and dissatisfaction with modern society – doctrinal truth in a confused / confusing world (41)

Divorce, family breakdown – the appeal of structure and stability (41)

New atheism outdated cringe (42)

Multicultural / plural spiritual context (43)

Confident / bold / authentic / clear full fat faith (44) – “Whether they came from high or low church traditions, or identified as conservative, liberal or apolitical, this was a view that the majority of our interviewees shared. Now more than ever, they felt, the Church could be more assured in its identity, recognising its heritage and traditions as something to be valued, preserved, and shared.” (45)