



Summary of research carried out for SU by Research by Design*

The report is based on individual conversations with young people aged between 16 and 23, from across England and Wales, who were brought up in unchurched households but now identify as 'followers of Jesus'.

We have aligned the key findings of this research to the research objectives:

Explore the journey of faith formation and the different routes people take through it.

The journey of faith formation amongst unchurched youth was surprisingly similar for many of those who participated in the research. It is a process that begins with a sense of **belonging**, grows with **belief** and is established by **becoming** a Christian. 'Belong, believe, become' defines the faith formation journey. Whilst each journey has its differences, these three facets are always present.

BELONG



Welcome, warmth, absence of judgement = defining pull factors engendering a sense of inclusion.

Belonging for some is sought, and for others is unexpected, but for many it starts with an invitation to a new social environment. It is the welcome, the warm community and the absence of judgement that engenders a sense of belonging in these environments. Regardless of how these young people are first exposed to faith, finding faith is never the intention.

BELIEVE



Committing to and acknowledging the presence of God is a choice to further develop personal faith.

Believing is the consequence. Engaging with the Christian community encourages these young people first to listen, and in time learn about faith. During this process of development, many witness miraculous experiences that could only be explained as God's work. These verify belief. This combination of learning and experiencing faith is confirmed for most with baptism. Baptism signifies a commitment to God. It is understood as a public expression of the love held for and appreciation felt of God.

BECOME



Thoughts turn to how to share God's love with others, signifying a move from receiving to giving.

Becoming is the point at which unchurched youth start to live as a follower of faith. It is acknowledged as a time to give back, having only received so far on the journey. This can be via the sharing of faith, by serving those less fortunate, and leading other children and young people to share similar life experiences.

Explore what faith offers to young people from a range of different backgrounds.

The bedrock of faith formation is choice. Faith offers young people the opportunity to choose. The young people who participated in the research had all experienced difficult times of some description including homelessness, substance abuse, bereavement, family break-up, anxiety and exhaustion. For some, faith acted as a support mechanism during and after this period. For others, faith provided a coping mechanism. Having faced these challenges, which are often out of their hands, all embrace the opportunity to establish a sense of control over their life by choosing to engage and, with time, commit to God.

Retrospectively, all acknowledge that immersing themselves in this environment and feeling part of a supportive community is transformative. They re-characterise their former selves using descriptors that are recognised as positive and/or selfless human qualities. They adopt a rational view of life and view challenges as God's way of giving purpose. This transformative process to which choice is fundamental, offers a level of confidence and maturity that was before unknown to these individuals, and often remains unknown to peers who have not found faith.

CHOICE IS ESSENTIAL TO ESTABLISHING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH FAITH



'God does give you this freewill which is what makes the Christian faith stand out. He isn't trapping you, you can walk towards or away from him.'

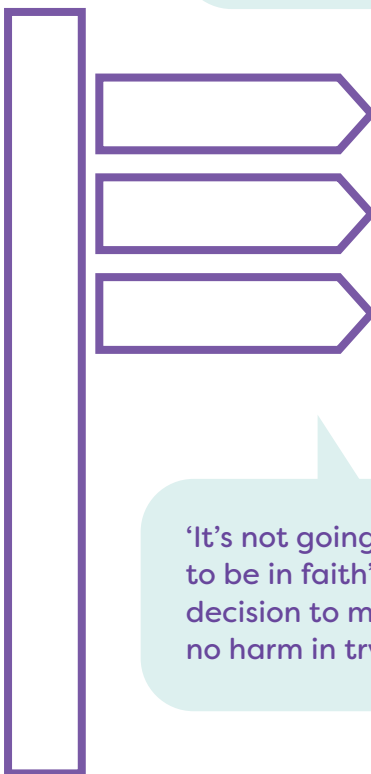
'We're not going to force you into faith. It would be your choice to walk into church, and your choice to walk back out, if you wanted to.'

'It wasn't forced on me, I just went along for fun.'

'It had been a part of my life for a long time which kept me going. I knew it was my choice.'

'We don't force anything down people's throats, we just want everyone to be loved.'

'It's not going to be "you have to be in faith" as that's your decision to make, but there's no harm in trying.'



Identify the influences that shape the faith formation journey and examine the role the Church and religious organisations play on this journey.



Trusted relationships are essential to the faith formation of unchurched youth. They provide young people with a means to explore the Christian faith without receiving judgment, and in so doing nurture development. Youth leaders and friends lie at the heart of this development. Youth leaders are seen to wear numerous hats; they understand, they listen, and they motivate. Friends that first introduce these young people to faith receive thanks, and so too do other peers in the Christian community that have been present during their journey. These people inspire unchurched youth. Youth leaders are regarded as role models, friends are fellows, and whilst not trusted, many can relate to the words of speakers in schools and on residential.

Church rarely plays a part in the initial 'Belong' stage of the faith formation journey. With finding faith never the intention, it is understandable for this to be the case. Church can educate and it can be a place to witness and receive gifts from God. It can be a place to 'believe', and it can be a place for Christians to communicate with God and 'become'. It can only be this place if the youth feel

comfortable, which is not true of all churches. Contemporary churches and community churches – that are defined as the body of people rather than the place – are environments where young people feel most comfortable, with no pressure to conform and every encouragement to discuss faith and issues of the modern day. Traditional church represents the other side of the coin. It is an unfamiliar environment where rules are felt to be in place. For many it is an environment that stunts growth, rather than stimulates.

Residential have a strong influence on the faith formation and development of young people. They replicate fellowship on a monumental scale and team this with parallels to the contemporary church to create an experience that is felt to be magnificent amongst young people. It is here that many witness miracles, which can only be explained as God's work. Consequently, it is here that many acknowledge God's presence, and it is here that some of these young people choose to get baptised.

Understand how relationships are made with those who do not have a background of faith.

Different stages of the faith-formation journey require different engagement methods. The welcome, the warm community and the absence of judgment that represent 'belong' are components that rely on face-to-face interaction. From the initial invitation to the deeper conversation that ensues, feeling part of this community is result of an experience defined by wholehearted engagement. Everyone is present, influencers become known and fellowship is experienced. Relationship building with youth leaders and peers is of great value here and is best attained face to face.

Believing is where online engagement and personal study are introduced. Having chosen to engage with faith, young people begin to explore sources of information other than their influencers. That is not to say youth leaders and friends no longer play a part – face-to-face engagement remains of primary

importance. The support received from face-to-face sources verifies faith and encourages discussion.

Taking ownership of personal faith and becoming a Christian sees a more balanced engagement. Face-to-face interaction, online engagement and personal study are recognised as of equal importance. Engagement with the Christian community can be via social media or in person. Development can be via apps and online sources, or during discussions at youth or home group. Connecting with God can be reading the Bible or en masse at residential.

Face-to-face engagement facilitates the building of relationships with unchurched youth. Online engagement facilitates unchurched youth in building a relationship with God and the self.