

Understanding Young Adult Journeys to Faith in the Church of England

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Some plant, some water, but God is the source of all growth.

1 Corinthians 3 v6

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Executive Summary

This report explores new young adult journeys to the Church of England, drawing on the stories of thirty individuals aged 18–30 who began attending an Anglican church for the first time in the five years following the Covid-19 pandemic.

These journeys begin from a place of distance from Christianity, frequently including phases of New Atheism or alternative spiritualities. Online content commonly sparked initial curiosity, through social media, Christian influencers, podcasts, or passing references to the Bible. For many, this curiosity develops into a period of active exploration, marked by independent reading, research, and engagement with Christian ideas and scripture. For others, the move is more immediate, emerging through a sense of calling or in response to challenging personal circumstances.

In both cases, personal relationships play a decisive role. Teachers, university chaplains, partners, housemates, and others often provide the encouragement or invitation that leads individuals into church for the first time. Once there, young adults encounter a wide range of Anglican traditions - from High-Church / Anglo-Catholic to evangelical settings. Yet across these differences, there is a strikingly consistent appreciation for worship that carries “confidence”, “seriousness” and “authenticity”.

Social and political positions among participants remain diverse, although many describe becoming more “conservative” in the broad sense of valuing 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. Taken together, these accounts reveal the multiple, often non-linear ways in which Christian faith is being discovered in a postmodern, digital age – and how the Church of England has, at times, been able to receive and respond to this emerging openness.

Foreword

This research began with a simple question:
“what’s going on here?”

In recent years, anecdotal evidence has pointed to growing interest in faith and increased church participation among young adults. In 2025, the Bible Society’s *Quiet Revival* report claimed significant growth – though later withdrawn due to methodological errors - reactions ranged from excitement to caution. Yet the question “what’s going on here” was common ground despite differing views on scale.

The facts and figures around shifting attitudes to religion and patterns of attendance still need careful examination. This report does not attempt that. In *Don’t Forget We Are Here Forever*, Lamorna Ash offers a vivid account of the nascent, struggling, thriving, fragile, rugged, doubtful, hopeful faith of young adults across the country. Listening to these stories, Ash asks whether “Christianity is still a live wire, a lightning strike through the world”, suggesting that “we do not know how it will split next, what new expressions of faith might blaze through the skies.”¹ This research was commissioned to hear more stories of those struck by lightning - tracing the paths these forks have taken so far, and helping us prepare for where they may strike next.

That young adults are exploring and questioning faith demands serious attention. First, we need to better understand “what is going on here?” And then, more importantly, to ask, “how might we respond?” This requires listening to the faith journeys of young adults engaging with the Church of England and discerning how we might accompany them into new destinations. In Ash’s reflection on these contemporary lightning strikes she also identifies a challenge for the Church, that young adults themselves should have “some say in how the lightning goes”. Understanding their journeys is a first step. As a preliminary report, we are only beginning - but it is a journey the Church of England is committed to in its vision and strategy. So, let’s not only ponder, but plan for more lightning strikes.

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About the Author

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Like those interviewed for the report, Esmé came to Christianity in her early twenties having grown up in a secular household and spending her time at university exploring other religions and philosophical ideas. Her interest in Gen-Z’s rediscovery of faith comes partly from her own personal experience as well as her wider interests in belief, culture and society.

¹ Lamorna Ash, *Don’t Forget We Are Here Forever: A New Generations Search for Religion* (2025), Bloomsbury: London p.30

Questions for Reflection

The following questions may help guide your reflections as you engage with the stories and insights in this report. If you are involved in ministry, we encourage you to explore these with your teams and with the young adults you know. We would also welcome hearing your experiences and insights.

- What stories from young adults resonate with those in this report?
- What shifts in attitudes towards, and engagement with, faith are emerging?
- How might the Church respond more effectively to the forms of enquiry and engagement identified?
- What challenges arise in doing so?
- What is needed at parish, diocesan, and national levels to better equip lay and ordained ministers?



Introduction

Research Overview

In late 2025, Theos think tank was commissioned by the Church of England's Vision and Strategy team to investigate the faith journeys and needs of young adults who have recently come to faith in the Church of England. In light of anecdotal and statistical evidence from various sources suggesting that Gen Z may be more open to Christianity than older generations,² we sought to understand what spiritual, social and cultural factors could be behind a possible shift. What are the personal journeys leading young people to faith, and specifically to the Church of England? What were they looking for in church, and what did they find when they got there?

Theos held interviews with 30 individuals aged 18-30 who have started attending an Anglican church within the past five years. They were identified through an online survey shared with church leaders and networks across the country, which asked for basic demographic and religious information.

Over 100 people responded, 86 of whom were eligible for this research.³ Of those, 51 identified as Male, 29 Female and 5 as Other or preferring not to say. 76 were White and 9 were from other or mixed ethnic backgrounds. Notably, no respondents came from African or Caribbean backgrounds despite repeated and specific efforts to reach participants (for example, through directly contacting churches with higher proportions of these demographics). One potential reason for this may have been self-exclusion due to having previous church connections. However, this missing demographic is a weakness that merits correction in future research. For the interviews, Theos selected a range that would offer the greatest insight into the full variety of journeys experienced, contacting a mix of participants from different genders, ethnic backgrounds, regions, age groups and church traditions, with participants able to select as many as they liked from a range of adjectives describing different traditions.⁴

The final group included:

- 15 men, 14 women, and 1 non-binary participant;
- 26 people of White heritage, 2 of South Asian, 1 of Middle Eastern and 1 of mixed heritage;
- 15 who identified as "Anglo-Catholic" or "high church", 12 as "evangelical" or "low church", 4 who attended cathedrals, and 2 who did not attach themselves to any particular label;
- A mix of participants coming from different regions in England, including both urban and rural settings.

² A contributing factor to the commissioning of this research was the April 2025 Bible Society report *The Quiet Revival*, which while not claiming a substantial rise in Anglicanism specifically did point towards a large overall increase in church attendance, particularly among younger adults. Following YouGov's admission that much of the data underlying the report was fraudulent, Bible Society withdrew the report in March 2026. This present report is not dependent on the findings of *The Quiet Revival*, however, with anecdotal accounts from various lay people and church leaders of a new interest in the church from younger attendees – and a desire to understand this in greater depth – being the key factor. Crucially, being based in qualitative data means that this report cannot speak to the scale of any phenomena identified in the findings.

³ These numbers and ratios should not be taken as representative of any overall 'trend'.

⁴ Not all of those who were contacted proceeded to interview, leading to some demographic over/underrepresentation in the final selection.

Each interviewee joined a Theos researcher for a 45-60 minute conversation structured around six main themes. These were:

1. Their upbringing and encounters with religion growing up;
2. How they first started attending church;
3. Why they were drawn to their specific church and style of worship;
4. Whether they have become involved in any other groups or networks through church;
5. How going to church has impacted their life, personally, spiritually, and politically;
6. How Christianity and the Church are perceived among their non-church attending peers.

Following the completion of these interviews, Theos also held two focus groups at churches in the provinces of Canterbury and York, where we shared our early findings with Christian students and young adults. The purpose of these groups was to test our understanding and hear different perspectives on emerging trends, but these do not feature within the report itself.

This report brings together the accounts of all our interviewees, though all names of individuals have been changed and references to specific churches removed to protect anonymity.

Their stories can help to inform the Church as it looks to the future: how can the Church of England nurture new curiosity among young adults, as a national institution and network of parishes offering a Christian presence in every community?

Jake's Story

Aspiring entrepreneur, South East, 22

Since his early teens, Jake has suffered from severe health problems and social anxiety. Growing up in a small village with agnostic parents, religion was never something he had considered – until he started watching livestreamers on the video gaming platform Twitch who were Christian. Initially, **“I wasn't watching them because they were religious. I was watching them because I enjoyed their content”** – but hearing more about their faith and watching testimonies on other social media platforms inspired him to buy a Bible. Immediately, he felt that scripture spoke to him and the struggles he had been going through. Finding a church was a more gradual process. He tried the parish church in his village, but did not feel at home in its older congregation. Then, he came across the website of an evangelical Anglican church in the nearest city which he decided to attend alone one Sunday. Usually, he would feel anxious entering a new social setting, but there suddenly felt **“a sense of peace...a different kind of feeling”**, being greeted by other young people in the congregation and the pastor. Jake especially loves the contemporary worship music and free-flowing style of low church services, describing them as a place to express emotions in a society where he, said, many men feel they have to keep their feelings and struggles “bottled up”. Finding faith has given Jake a sense of calm to cope with his health and other personal issues:

“If something bad happens, I know it's part of the plan for me...it's meant to happen and there's going to be better things in the future for me”.

Setting the Scene: A Changing Landscape

The background to this research is a changing spiritual landscape. We live in a time where fewer than half of the British population identify as Christian,⁵ with it long being assumed that younger generations would continue the secularising trends of the past century. And yet, while Gen Z may statistically be one of the least religious generations, the full picture is proving more complex.

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

When it comes to Christianity, there are also reasons to believe that young people are growing more open and curious. Several denominations have reported an increase in young adults attending their churches.⁹ As of early 2026, SPCK has reported a 134% increase in Bible sales since 2019,¹⁰ attributing the rise to Gen Z.¹¹ Recent books like Lamorna Ash’s *Don’t Forget We’re Here Forever* shed light on new and emerging young Christian interest in Britain,¹² sparking public conversations and news stories like “On Finding God, the Gen Z Way” (though Ash herself is a millennial).¹³ Could it be that we are entering a post-secular age, in which Christianity exerts a significant cultural influence? If so, why might this be happening, and why now?

This report brings the stories of our 30 interviewees together through the chronological structure of our questions whilst acknowledging their uniqueness and diversity. As we conclude, any generational shift that is occurring may be best understood not as a single and predictable pattern, but as containing many explorations occurring sporadically and, sometimes, spontaneously.

⁵ “Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021”, Office for National Statistics, November 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>

⁶ Analysis of Pew Research Center’s 2024 Spring Global Attitudes Survey by Bible Society. *The Quiet Revival One Year On: What’s The Story?* p. 21-22.

⁷ IPSOS Global Advisor Survey Predictions 2023, IPSOS, December 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/en/ipsos-global-predictions-2023>, p.16.

⁸ “Belief, Faith and Religion: Shifting Attitudes in the UK”, The UK in The World Values Survey, King’s College London Policy Institute, May 2023, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/lost-faith-the-uk-s-changing-attitudes-to-religion.pdf>, pp. 8,12.

⁹ Aili Winstanley Channer, “Adult baptisms hit 10-year high in 2024, new data shows”, The Tablet, 14 November 2025, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/adult-baptisms-hit-10-year-high-in-2024-new-data-shows/>

¹⁰ Laura Barry, “UK Bible Sales Are Up 134% Since 2019”, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 13 January 2026, <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/blog/why-people-are-turning-back-to-the-bible.html>

¹¹ Laura Barry, “Bible Sales Surge Among Gen Z: SPCK’s Role in the Growing Demand”, Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 20 March 2025, <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/blog/bible-sales-surge-among-gen-z-spck-s-role-in-the-growing-demand.html>

¹² Lamorna Ash, *Don’t Forget We’re Here Forever*, Bloomsbury, 2025.

¹³ 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>

Findings

Background

Upbringing

This research targeted young adults who have only started attending Anglican church services regularly – at least monthly – for the first time within the past five years, meaning none grew up attending Church of England churches. Questions about upbringing therefore tended to reveal perceptions about Christianity and the Church that they were exposed to in secular contexts, particularly the dominant attitudes of parents, teachers and other adults in the early 2000s-2010s when they were growing up.

Generally, there were two attitudes towards Christianity which interviewees described within their immediate families. The first was disinterest, where parents tended to be neutral or slightly negative in their view of Christianity and indifferent towards its value and contemporary relevance. These were families where “we didn’t talk about that kind of thing”, as Jamie, 27, described.

The second (less common) attitude was more active hostility towards Christianity – and typically all forms of organised religion. Some of those who grew up in these families described their parents as having rebelled against their own religious upbringing:

“I grew up believing [Christianity is] Bible bashing, it’s a cult. [My family were] very, very against it.... I’d never read a Bible, I’d never sung a hymn, nothing.” Becky, 25

Common to both groups was 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:

“There are people in our generation who don’t know any Bible stories at all. They know that Jesus was a person and probably that he was crucified, but they can’t really tell you anything else...sometimes even their parents don’t know Bible stories. We’re at a weird point where we’ve had almost three generations of people who haven’t gone to church.” Dom, 24

That is not to say, however, that all interviewees grew up without any belief at all. As should be expected in multicultural modern Britain, several participants grew up in other religions, including Islam and Hinduism. Others said that their parents practised or had some affinity with alternative forms of spirituality. Zachary, 27, described that, while his mother had “fallen away” from religious belief entirely, his father followed Buddhist and New Age spiritual ideas. Others said that their mothers and older sisters practised meditation or trusted in “the universe”, among other beliefs of a New Age flavour:

“I wasn’t really raised around religion. I grew up with my mum talking about spirituality, but in the more like New Age context of believing in the universe [...] I remember my mum used to say “I’m spiritual, not religious.” Marina, 25

“My mum and my sister were those kind of typically spiritual people who believed in meditation that was very centred around wellbeing and things...it was very spiritual, like Mindfulness.” Millie, 20

This reflects a broader trend among Gen X parents, who 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” voiced by one of the participant’s parents. The result is that some members of Gen Z are more familiar with New Age spiritual ideas than traditional religious ones, marking a clear departure from a time in which Christianity was still culturally normative.

This is also true of the Church of England, which – although some had grandparents who still attended – was out of the picture of most people’s childhoods. 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:

“I suppose I just existed in my community not having any connection to the church. I always saw it as our church. Like I always called it “our church”, but I never went.” Nina, 25

Generally, the Church did not have a significant presence in people’s lives. Many of the impressions of the Church that people did have were formed through the media, sometimes creating negative perceptions. Ryan, 28, said he associated Anglican churches with the “weak tea and awkward English conversations” portrayed in comedies like *the Vicar of Dibley*, while others associated them with horror films. For some, churches even carried connotations of fear or ominousness:

“When you’re younger, churches are really big and really scary and really cold. And that’s kind of your impression as a little kid...that they’re cold and they’re scary.” Bradley, 18

Overall, the experience of our interviewees was one of disconnection from the Church of England and a lack of knowledge about Christianity. As we will see, this void creates interesting conditions for the discovery of faith later in life because so many young people are beginning with a “blank slate”, as it were. Before they came to Christianity, though, many said they had phases of other strong beliefs, particularly in their teenage years.

The “Teenage Atheist Phase”

A third of our interviewees said they had gone through what was described as a “teenage atheist phase”. Among those who had grown up in another faith, such as Islam or Hinduism, this tended to be part of a wider reaction against the traditional culture of their upbringing. However, for some, it was also positively influenced by New Atheism; the anti-religious movement associated with figures such as *The God Delusion* author Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. Especially among the older (26-30) participants, their entry into secondary school coincided with its peak, with atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, as well as popular scientists like Neil deGrasse Tyson and Brian Cox, proving influential.

The influence was not limited to high profile figures, but was also seen more locally. Dom, 24, said that “pretty much all” of his secondary school teachers were atheists, while others said that anti-religious sentiments seeped into RE lessons. Christianity was associated with extreme conservative sects like the Westboro Baptist Church – the subject of a popular Louis Theroux documentary released at the time – who were used to portray Christians, along with fundamentalist Muslims, as backward and intolerant. Jamie, 27, said of his secondary school that:

“You could never have a conversation about terror attacks without someone going, yes, but what about Westboro Baptist Church?...So that painted the religion in a bad light because of events going on [i.e., 9/11] that we believed were motivated by religion.” Jamie, 27

But it was online that most “teenage atheist phases” were nurtured. Many, especially men, said that they were active on forums like R/atheism on the online discussion platform Reddit, where they encountered atheist ideas and developed strongly negative views about Christianity. Several described being “militant” or “ragingly” atheist around this time, attributing it to the influence of popular authors and YouTubers:

“I became quite an atheist. I started reading things like Richard Dawkins, Chris[topher] Hitchens. There is this guy on YouTube called Alex O'Connor [the Cosmic Sceptic].... These guys hard launched my atheism in my teens.” Farid, 20



Alternative Spiritual Explorations

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 users¹⁴ and “manifestation” being called the buzzword of 2021.¹⁵ Reflecting this trend, Joanna, 22, described how:

“There has been this increase in spirituality in general. New Age spirituality for a lot of younger people. Which I think probably made me more open to any type of spirituality, regardless of what it was.”
Joanna, 22

Looking back, several people said that their interest in alternative spirituality was motivated by a desire for self-actualisation; to bring about material change in their lives rather than experience any real personal or spiritual transformation:

“When I was about 16 or 15, I got quite into astrology. I believed in “the universe” and that, but I really didn’t like being a good person and being kind to others.” Marina, 25

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).

Notably, interest in alternative spirituality was typically also sparked online. Since around 2020 onwards, New Age and neopagan content has been highly popular on social media and especially TikTok, where the hashtag WitchTok – used by people sharing witchcraft and other occult practices on the platform – has over 60 billion views. Several participants spoke of these trends and how they have entered popular discourse:

“Online spirituality became really popular over that period [the pandemic]. I had some friends who called themselves very spiritual who believed in horoscopes. I guess it was a general interest in like... there must be something out there; there’s something more to life than just what meets the eye.” Lizzie, 19

¹⁴ Statista, *Number of registered Co-Star users worldwide from October 2019 to July 2023*, February 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1451873/costar-registered-users/>

¹⁵ Helen Rumbelow, “‘Manifesting’: it’s the buzzword of 2021”, *The Times*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.thetimes.com/business/technology/article/manifesting-its-the-buzzword-of-2021-90gtqpzv5?msockid=32059e066037631f0aa1889561e56252>

“[In lockdown] a lot of people were posting manifestation videos...I thought, oh well, everybody’s doing that and I believe that there’s a higher power. So maybe that’s what it is...New Age, tarot cards, and manifestation were coming up a lot on my “for you” page on TikTok on my Instagram. A lot of my friends were saying, oh, you need to manifest and all this. I just remember seeing different spells and [thinking], I can control my reality...what I put out in the universe will come back to me, karma, cycles, all the silly stuff. Oh, I’m going to read tarot cards. I’m putting my trust in the universe rather than God because that was just accessible to me at that time. So that’s what I believed in. Crystals were a massive thing as well. I’d just carry crystals around all the time and be like, oh, well, this one’s got energy for money and I need some money.” Abby, 24

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”.

Marina’s Story

Nursery teacher, South West, 25

Marina felt lost as a teenager living abroad in the pandemic, unsure of her direction in life. Growing up, her mother had followed alternative, New Age spiritual beliefs like astrology – beliefs Marina also became interested in through social media. She believed in “the universe”, but had never thought of becoming Christian, seeing the Bible “just as an old book” – until one of the alternative spiritual influencers she had been following on Instagram suddenly posted a Christian testimony. Seeing the influencer renounce her previous occult beliefs **“sparked my curiosity but also scared me, because I’d only ever believed in good. I just never really considered that they were opposing [spiritual] forces”**. This revelation led Marina to order a Bible and start reading it while she was working as a seafarer on a ship abroad. One night, when she had been reading it, she felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and decided to find a church upon returning to England. It was partly thanks to meeting some young people from the congregation at the bus stop after a service that she went back to an evangelical Anglican church she tried, and has now been going there for over a year. Marina particularly enjoys the monthly young people’s prayer nights they hold. She says her mental health has been transformed and that in her Christian faith she has found everything she was searching for but never found in alternative spirituality:

“I was always looking for somewhere else to live or be or do, and now I’m not searching, because I know [God]’s got a plan”.

Routes to Church

The routes by which participants eventually came to attend church were remarkably diverse. They also varied in duration: while some spent years exploring Christianity before deciding to attend a service, others did so almost immediately, or indeed embraced it *after* attending. But linking these journeys were some common factors, though the significance attributed to them differed from person to person.

Social Media

One was social media. Most of those who had adopted New Atheism or alternative spirituality through the internet also said that online Christian content had played some role in their journey. Rarely was this instrumental – for most people, social media was just one of several influences – but it often exposed them to faith in the way it had previously exposed them to other ideas and beliefs. Notably, it was during the Covid-19 pandemic that several reported first seeing such content – a time when they described feeling directionless and actively searching for answers. For others, however, the pandemic did not play a role, with their journeys to faith beginning more recently.

In the case of Marina, 25 [see Marina's Story on page 13], there was a direct link between the alternative spiritual accounts she had been following and discovering Christian content. It makes sense that, algorithmically, those engaging with astrology or manifestation might stumble across Christians also posting about spirituality, albeit of a different kind. But there were also people, curiously, who said they had started seeing Christian content appearing on their social media feeds seemingly at random, having never engaged with any kind of spiritual content before:

"I kept just seeing videos of testimonies, these people talking about how God's helped their life, changed their mental health and changed their view on life. So I just thought, why not give it a go?" Jake, 22

"Suddenly my phone started showing me loads of TikToks and Facebook posts, all to do with Christianity. So I thought, OK, I'll watch a few and I just found so much peace and joy and the stuff that they were saying I was like, yeah, that actually makes sense to be honest. And then I'll find I'll click on another one and then you end up down this rabbit hole of sermons and speeches and stuff like that." Becky, 25

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).

Some women also encountered similar content, coming across Christian accounts promoting traditional femininity – the so-called "tradwife" lifestyle – causing them to question their belief in

feminism. But for others, the Christian content they first saw had nothing to do with politics, taking subtler forms such as art or passing references to the Bible:

“One thing that inspired me was an artist I followed, who began posting some drawings they’d done of Jesus because they were Christian.” Carmen, 20

“I saw this thing on Instagram, it was like someone’s saying, “oh, we need like a handbook for life”, and then someone just said, “Bible”.” Harry, 20

For both Carmen and Harry, these images and comments were a subtle but significant factor in igniting their curiosity at a time where they were already searching for meaning. They opened up the possibility of Christianity through an everyday medium, where they might not otherwise have been prompted to explore it. How and why this is happening is unclear – whether Christian content is being sponsored or promoted so that it reaches a wider audience, or simply by accident. Yet some felt that their encounters on social media were providential – that is, from God – speaking in terms of the Holy Spirit moving through the algorithm:

“Sermons would just pop up [on my social media feed], or Bible verses, and I was thinking, where is this coming from? Like, this isn’t my phone? I found it was a way of Jesus communicating with me.” Becky, 25

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.

Looking back, several commented that the Church of England could do more to make itself more visible on social media, so that more young people exploring Christianity might discover it earlier on. Alex, 20, spoke of the need for Anglican “influencers” to offer online ministry and public theology alongside Catholic, Orthodox and other Protestant figures:

“[The Church of England] needs figureheads online to talk about Anglicanism and spread it that way [that they] go viral.” Alex, 20

Autodidacts: A Self-taught Generation?

Over half of our interviewees said that social media had influenced them in one way or another. But for many, it was only the starting point of a much deeper intellectual exploration, involving podcasts,

long-form essays and books. What might have begun as a passive exposure to online content became a very active search for knowledge. “The more and more you would read [on social media]”, said Ryan, 28, “the more you would want to explore”.

Notably, this applied to interviewees across all different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, ranging from those who had attended university or were pursuing higher degrees to those who entered vocational training or work after finishing school. Owen, 28, who had not been to university or formally studied religion, described how during some personally difficult circumstances he suddenly became interested in the Catholicism of J. R. R. Tolkien, having been a lifelong fan of Lord of the Rings:

“I’ve got a full Lord of the Rings tattoo sleeve, you know, I’m obsessed. And, you know, when I was reading up about Tolkien, he was a devout Christian. I was reading some of his letters, and then I was watching some of his videos where he’d mention it. And then I’d go into the comments of that video and I would start looking through them. And, you know, it really did pique my interest. And then suddenly it would start coming up every couple of videos. And then I’d click into them videos and watch a few on that page. And then it was like pretty much nonstop.” Owen, 28

Others had been studying related fields such as Literature or History at university, but went beyond the reading list in exploring Christian theologians and poets. Dylan, 21, was surprised by how they seemed to defy the negative stereotypes of Christianity he had grown up with, speaking to his “rebellious instinct” that had previously attracted him to atheism:

“I kept encountering poets who did Christianity in very unorthodox ways. Chiefly Dante and John Donne. And I just thought to myself, there’s kind of a model for this sort of thing. I don’t actually need to fall into line in that way. I can keep that kind of slightly rebellious instinct and also do this at the same time.” Dylan, 21

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.

Meanwhile, some intellectual explorations began not with Christianity but with other religious and philosophical systems altogether. Two people mentioned becoming interested in Perennialism – the philosophy that all religions are expressions of a universal truth – while others came to Christianity after studying Eastern belief systems and Islam. While Dom, 24, described writing “pages and pages” of spiritual reflection inspired by listening to Alan Watts’ lectures on Buddhism and Hinduism, Nik, 28, said that studying Islamic history and theology at university “opened up my mind to what God was as an idea”.

This is perhaps to be expected of a postmodern, digital age. Despite growing up in a historically Christian country and having Christians in their extended families, it was only after exploring these Eastern religions through the internet that people like Dom, 24, eventually came to the Church – typical of the “spiritual supernova” described by Charles Taylor. Today, Christianity is only one of many possible routes for spiritual exploration, as the ubiquity of alternative spiritual beliefs online would also indicate.

Sometimes, intellectual explorations began somewhere other than religion altogether, such as literature. For Nik, 28, it was reading the Russian novelist Dostoevsky that first convinced him of “moral realism” – that good and evil are real forces present in the universe – challenging the relativist views he had held during his “teenage atheist phase”. Such explorations served as a philosophical primer to faith:

“I started reading a lot of works by religious thinkers...Dostoevsky was a really big one. Dostoevsky, and particularly Crime and Punishment and then The Brothers Karamazov, shook a lot of my assumptions about the world and made morality feel like something that was very real to me, which didn’t really fit into the picture of the world that I had. It made me think about the moral consequences of actions on individuals and the way that moral actions and moral decisions affect the way people are can’t really be explained in an atheistic, materialistic worldview.” Nik, 28

When asked why Christianity appealed to them as an area of exploration – and, ultimately, a faith by which to live – many spoke of a similar disillusionment with modern relativism. For Aditya, 23, [see Aditya’s Story on page 41], arriving at university and seeing 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.

Overall, many participants described being self-taught, choosing to learn about complex and intellectually demanding subjects in their spare time. While this may not be representative of younger adults as a whole, it does present an interesting counter-narrative to the claim that social media has diminished youth attention spans and literacy. It may be, as James Marriott has argued,¹⁶ 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 – this certainly appeared to be a factor in our participants’ journeys to faith.

Indeed, 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. Others, however, placed less emphasis on this dimension. Rather than being drawn initially to history or theology, they described taking a more direct pathway to faith through scripture, identifying their initial encounters with the Bible as the most formative moment in their journeys.

¹⁶ 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?msocid=32059e066037631f0aa1889561e56252>

Discovering Scripture

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.

While some decided to read the Bible as part of wider intellectual explorations, for others it was an “impulse purchase” prompted by something they overheard or saw on social media. It was seeing the Bible described as a “book for life” on Instagram, for example, that first prompted Jacob to buy one. Becky, 25, said she had long felt a “calling” to read scripture, but one day felt suddenly moved to act upon it:

“I’ve always felt like this calling, this pulling like Jesus saying come and come and see me. But I’m always been like, Oh no, no, no. And then in the past year, I think it was last year I finally thought you know what? OK, I’ll follow that and then I suddenly bought a Bible. I can’t answer why I suddenly had. He seeks me so lovingly. And I thought, OK, we’re going to do it. So my story is I actually bought a pink Bible because I thought, I said to Jesus, if we’re going to do it, we’re going to do it my way, I’m afraid. Just because, I’m nervous. So I bought a pink Bible and I rocked up to church and I said I don’t know what I’m doing here. I don’t even know how to read it. And it all began there, basically.” Becky, 25

Farid, 20, who had been a teenage atheist having turned away from the Islam of his upbringing, borrowed a Bible from his school one Easter holiday during a time when he was struggling with mental health. Reading it turned out to be a transformative experience, causing him to rethink the anti-religious arguments he had previously defended:

“I took a Bible from school. I started reading it, but I was still kind of attacking Christianity in a sense. It was like, oh, let me find the things that are wrong with it. So anyways, Easter, I go home and it was just this one night and I was like, okay, let me just open this. I’ve tried everything like, let me just open this, see how it goes. And I open it and I open it to the Psalms, and I can’t remember which exact song I read, but I’m just reading these psalms and I’m just find myself bawling my eyes out. All of a sudden. I’m like, hold on...these are really like, wow. I really enjoyed the Psalms. I really enjoyed reading them. And I was like... my heart was kind of softened to Christianity, whereas before it had been a very intellectual battle. My heart was suddenly softened. I was still somewhat sceptical... but I also couldn’t deny what was happening. So I was like okay, even if, as an experiment, let me just try right to take it a bit more seriously.” Farid, 20

Others also said that they had encountered the Bible in an academic setting – such as Religious Studies or History lessons at school – but similarly came across passages that resonated with them, leading them to engage with it more personally. Carmen, 20, who came to the Bible through this route [see Carmen’s Story on page 28], said that reading it was a “solace” that inspired her to start praying and, eventually, to attend a service at her local church.

Providence and Spiritual Encounter

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. The significance of these experiences lies not in whether they can be independently verified, but in *how* they were understood by participants, who consistently described them as being decisive in their movement towards faith.

Most encounters of this kind occurred amid difficult personal circumstances. Owen, 28, was expecting a child with his partner who experienced complications during the pregnancy when, seemingly out of nowhere, he felt the urge to pray. At the time, he “was not religious at all” – but in that moment, the meaning of prayer suddenly “clicked”. Abby, 24, had a similar experience when struggling with debt [see Abby’s Story on page 31] – although she had not yet begun exploring Christianity, she suddenly felt an urge to ask God for help. Zachary, 27, felt compelled to become Christian after ending up in hospital on the same day that he planned to go to church after watching testimonies online, taking his injury to be a message from God [see Zachary’s Story on page 45]:

“I’d said to myself, I’ll go to church on my birthday on Wednesday. But I didn’t - I stayed home smoking and drinking all day. And I bent over to pick up a TV remote off the floor and I twisted my back, and I was in so much agony. I had to be hospitalised. They were putting me on morphine, and for four weeks straight, I was bedbound. And I was just looking up Christianity. I was looking more into it. And I genuinely feel God like maybe touched my back and broke me because I went against something that I said I wanted to do...it was in those moments that I gave my life to Jesus.” Zachary, 27

Bradley, 18, had been struggling with mental health and substance use when he went on a dog walk one day and passed the parish church of his childhood. Suddenly, he described feeling a “little call” saying “why don’t you go in next Sunday?”. He followed this voice and is now, one year on, working as a ministry assistant in a cathedral and considering ordination.

In some cases, this feeling of being “called” to church occurred in visions and dreams. Jamilah, 25, had been thinking about Christianity for some time, but was anxious to attend church because of negative views towards religion she had developed growing up in a conservative Muslim family [see Jamilah’s Story on page 22]. But then, she had a dream involving a figure of light telling her to read the Gospel of Matthew, which happened to be the reading at a Bible group she had been invited to the next day:

“A figure of pure light just walks into a room and illuminates the entire room. I do believe that was Jesus telling me something. He basically told me to just keep trying with the book of Matthew...I had that dream on Sunday night and then Monday was like, the launch of that Bible study... we sat in the Bible study room, with these girls who I still kind of still chat to and stuff. And she just says, open your Bible to Matthew. And I’m just there, jaw on the floor. Because obviously at this point I hadn’t told her about it. And like, that’s exactly what I was told to do in that dream. So at that point I was just like, right. I was like, right, you can’t make this up. You cannot make this up.” Jamilah, 25

For Jamilah, this was one in a series of providential encounters in her journey which she calls “Ebenezer moments”, inspired by the story of the stone of help called Ebenezer given by Samuel in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 7:12). Hers was not the only story involving dreams. Travis, 19, said that he was also moved to church by seeing the cross in a dream, and also being told by a friend that she had had a vision of him going to church despite her having never been herself.

In two cases, sudden realisations occurred in the wake of drug use. For Dom, 24, it was having a traumatic experience on LSD – which he had taken to induce an altered state of consciousness, inspired by the Eastern spiritual ideas he had been researching – that convinced him of Christ. Of those who had such experiences, most had already been thinking about Christianity through social media, intellectual explorations or real-life conversations. However, it was because of these unexpected and personally significant encounters that they moved from curiosity to conviction and, soon after, to church.



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.

For Jamilah, 25, it was the relationship with the pastoral support officer at her university, who was also a church outreach officer, which first opened up the possibility of going to church. For Becky, 25, it was her son's childminder, who happened to be the local vicar's wife:

"My son started going to a childminder with the vicar's wife. I got a bit curious, because I saw the love and peace that she projected and I thought, what's wrong with you? What? What? What are you doing? Like, do you know what I mean? So that kind of gave me the first little bit of exposure...even though she was child minding my son, I felt like she was there for me, too. I feel like she really bridged that gap and brought me to Jesus." Becky, 25

University tended to be a place where people had formative encounters with Christians, sometimes for the very first time. The kindness and hospitality of students from her university's Christian Union were particularly striking for Millie, 20, who grew up in an alternative spiritual family and had never given any thought to Christianity before:

"One of the things that really did stand out to me was that people that I'd met at uni that were Christians that always seemed to be very kind people. That's something that I distinctively noticed. I was like, every time, I speak to this girl or we have conversations and we bump into each other, they're kind, they're being kind to me, they're being kind to other people, and always have a smile on their face and always, and obviously that's a big generalisation, but for me that is just something that did stand out. 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." Millie, 20

For Owen, 28, it was the local parish priest who invited him to church after he had spent some time exploring and researching Christianity. He now attends that church every week, and was preparing to get baptised there when we spoke in late 2025:

"Everyone knows everyone in this town. So every time we [the parish priest and I] saw each other, you know, we'd chat for a few minutes. I know where his house is, I walk the dog, and sometimes he'd be doing stuff in his garden or something. We'd have a quick exchange again. And then he invited me around to speak with him, and he gave me a couple of books to read. This was before I started coming to church." Owen, 28

These were just a few examples of the significant individuals who played a decisive role in guiding people to church. Others included teachers, university chaplains, partners, and housemates. 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.

This highlights an important distinction between social media "influencers" and real-life relationships. While online figures often served as an initial catalyst – by sparking curiosity, challenging assumptions, or introducing Christian ideas in an accessible way – it was often personal encounters that physically moved people to church through offering sustained care, understanding and trust.

Among those who came to Christianity through a primarily intellectual route, though, most started attending church without a connection to or guidance from a particular individual. For them, Church of England churches tended to be one among several options they considered, making the process of finding a spiritual home one of exploration and experimentation.

Jamilah's Story

Medical postgraduate student, South West, 25

Jamilah grew up in a Muslim family near Birmingham. As a teenager, she distanced herself from Islam and became secretly atheist. However, while studying mental health nursing at university, she was inspired by one of her lecturers who talked about the relationship between spirituality and mental health. **"In that moment, something in my brain just switched – I went from atheism to agnostic because I just felt something inside me shift"**. While experiencing her own mental health struggles, Jamilah started seeing her university's pastoral support officer, Ally, who was also a local church outreach officer; they became close and had long conversations about faith. One day, Ally invited Jamilah to church, but she felt unsure because of negative associations with religion growing up. However, she then experienced what she called "Ebenezer moments" – signs of God helping her, such as answering her prayers to find a flat when she was worried about where she would live. She also had two dreams where she heard a voice and then a figure of light telling her to read passages from the Bible – in one case, a passage which just happened to be the reading at Ally's Bible study group the next day.

"Since then, I had a couple of Ebenezer moments that were just like, that couldn't be coincidence. That was God".

These providential moments moved Jamilah to finally attend Ally's church, where she met a girl in the congregation who she described as making her feel welcome and inspired. **"She just started talking to me, and we just got on a house on fire. You can literally just see God shining through her. That's the only way I can describe it. I respect her so much"**. Having found a community there, Jamilah continues to attend that evangelical church, and is now thinking about baptism.

Finding a Spiritual Home

Why the Church of England?

Having not grown up in churchgoing households, few were familiar with what Christian or Anglican worship involved, making it by no means the default option. Among new churchgoers, what did their (re)discovery of the Church of England look like, and what influenced their decision to join a specific congregation?

Since many of the expressions of Christianity that people encountered online or through research came from other denominations, several interviewees tried these either before or alongside the Church of England. When Farid, 20, moved to a new city for university, he attended an Orthodox church on a Sunday and Catholic church during the week; a phase of interdenominational exploration that was not uncommon among those living or studying in urban areas. Others had initially tried other forms of Protestantism, such as free evangelical or Pentecostal churches, commenting that these were particularly active in their youth outreach through university Christian Unions or online.

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).

A third category of people came to the Church of England first – not exploring other denominations – for reasons other than a direct personal connection. One was physical proximity. Mike, 20, and Tanya, 21, for example, had always lived near a cathedral but rarely visited, deciding to start attending after events in their personal lives moved them towards faith. 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.

Some explicitly articulated this in terms of the parish system. Having gotten to know the priest of his rural village, Zachary, 27, felt drawn to the friendly and familiar nature of parish churches, viewing them as an important part of local and national belonging:

“One reason I gravitated towards it, being English, is that the Church of England is split into parishes, so there’s always going to be a church wherever I am in this country that I’ll be able to walk into, someone I’ll be able to have a good friendly conversation with.” Zachary, 27

Others also said that they had embraced the Church of England because of its connection to the local community. 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

Others developed an active interest in church history and how it relates to place. Carmen, 20, who attends a cathedral but regularly visits parish churches, described being fascinated by how “you can often get so much context about what has happened in that specific village or town just from the churches there”, mentioning churches in farming areas that have fields depicted in their stained glass windows and other reflections of locality in ecclesial architecture. She and others spoke of the value of Anglican churches in terms of heritage, and the importance of supporting them “not just as religious buildings but as cultural, community, and historical buildings”.

For those who did have some cultural familiarity with the Church – particularly with Anglican music and liturgy – this was also a significant factor. Both Lorna, 30, and Riley, 20, were singers and musicians who initially came to the Church through music. Whilst at university, Lorna became involved with her college chapel, finding evensong to be a refuge from the mental health difficulties she was experiencing at the time. Though she was not religious then, evensong became a “calm place with nice music” that helped her “get through the days”. It was partly this familiarity with evensong that eventually led Lorna to attend a Church of England church after leaving university. Exposure to Anglican services and traditions in other institutional settings, such as school, was also a factor for some interviewees who had sentimental associations with them.

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. For Dylan, 21, his journey to church attendance began after he was struck by the beauty of a medieval parish church which he visited for his studies [see Dylan’s Story on page 38]:

“During my second year at university, we went on a trip to a medieval church in York, which is now my parish. I just went in there and the light was streaming through the windows and casting rainbows everywhere. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I just found it absolutely fascinating. I didn’t quite know what to do with the feeling. So I kept going to churches, kind of out of an academic curiosity. And I kept going back to that church...there’s just, there’s something quite enchanting about the liturgy there and I don’t know what it is, but even though I have it every week, several times a week, I just never ever get bored of it. I don’t quite know what it is, but it just scratches my brain in a particular way.” Dylan, 21

Findings

For Ryan, 28, it was partly the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (BCP) that drew him to the high Anglican church he now attends. Ryan is not the only young person on whom the BCP has made a strong impression, with some church leaders claiming it has had a resurgence among some young people.¹⁷ As well as describing the BCP as “unique” and having a “beauty and a flow to it”, Ryan also spoke of the liturgy as a shared language across generations:

“The Book of Common Prayer, it’s a language. You have a connection to something that, you know, however many generations of your ancestors would recognise and understand, the same liturgy that you’re reading. It was immensely powerful. And then in terms of just the home, of the community you get from that, it’s just, it was always going to, I think, in terms of the people that you then moved through it.” Ryan, 28

For others, it was the combination of tradition and modernity that the Church offers which they found appealing. Several remarked that they felt particularly drawn to the flexibility of Anglican worship, including Margo, 20, who grew up in Europe from a Catholic background. She described how the Church of England offers a theological latitude which she personally preferred to the Catholicism she had at one point explored:

“I was surprised that Anglicans had really good liturgy. Like, sincerely surprised, because this was just not the story I’ve been sold. I was genuinely surprised that the liturgy was excellent. I started going to a few low masses, speaking to the clergy, and the impression I got was, well, this is how you do it here, and this is the theology you’re going to get here, but also if you disagree on any of it, you’re kind of free to do so, and it’s not putting you outside the bounds of communion like it does in Roman Catholicism...I have more freedom to do things and to borrow from different traditions, which is weirdly one of our traditions’ greatest strengths. And feeling like I wasn’t confined to exactly what my Roman Catholic parish priest told me to do. I could just do other things. And I just felt a great freedom, which is amazing.” Margo, 20

Alex, 20, also commented on the diversity of thought within the Church as something that attracted her to it:

“Within Anglicanism, there’s not like a clear-cut catechism like the Catholics have or like as much of one; there probably is dogma but it’s not as rigid. My priest said that she quite likes the fuzzy edges. And I was like, actually, yeah, I do too. And I really took that on board.” Alex, 20

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.

¹⁷ Marcus Walker, “Gen-Z are turning to the Book of Common Prayer”, *The Spectator*, 4 April 2026, https://spectator.com/article/gen-z-are-turning-to-the-book-of-common-prayer/?set_edition=en

Worship Style

For this research, we spoke to Anglican churchgoers from a range of church traditions, from Anglo-Catholic to charismatic evangelical. Across the board, though, 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. When it came to these differences, however, people expressed strong views, with some statements contrasting sharply with others.

Among those who described their church as “high church” or “Anglo-Catholic”, many said that they preferred this style of worship because they found it “quiet” and “reflective”, with these qualities most resonating with their personal sense of spirituality. Aditya, 23, who initially tried a large evangelical church, decided to settle in a small Anglo-Catholic one because:

“The solemnity of the traditional Catholic Church, being super quiet and prayerful...that’s what I was really drawn to”. Aditya, 23

This was also true of those who attended cathedrals, who said they found solace in the “structured” and “set-out” nature of services which offered continuity amid their busy lives. Carmen, who is autistic [see Carmen’s Story on page 28], described feeling especially comforted by this aspect of cathedral worship. Tanya, 21, spoke of “going through the motions” at church not pejoratively, but in the deeper liturgical sense of repetition, habit, and memorisation – something she personally found contemplative.

Especially among those who identified as Anglo-Catholic, several said that sacraments – in particular, the Eucharist and Confession – were at the very heart of their faith. Tanya, Dylan, and others described feeling an overwhelming warmth when they first went to the altar to receive communion or a blessing. Others found Confession spiritually rejuvenating, regularly taking the sacrament of reconciliation. For Dom, 24, it was these traditionally Catholic elements of the Church that “directly converted him”, with the Eucharist especially offering a profoundly spiritual and even “mystical” experience.

Others, however, were drawn to very different styles of worship; churches that placed less emphasis on sacraments and set liturgy, but were typically more relaxed, spontaneous and energetic. Among those who attended evangelical churches, several cited modern worship music as something they found personally moving. They also described the services as more relatable and accessible, which in turn made them feel more receptive to the Holy Spirit:

“It’s just really modernised...the songs were like, they’re singing pop songs. So it’s just a really different vibe to what I would have imagined, and it sounds quite bad, but I was looking around and I would see kind of normal people. In my mind, when you’re atheist, you’re just thinking like church people, weird. I’ll see normal people which look like me.” Jake, 22

“It was normal in a way where people were dressed the same and there weren’t any barriers between people. I think the music was the first thing I noticed, even just the lyrics, they’re so you can relate to them so much. And I think that’s what touched me a lot; the words I was singing were the things I needed. And that’s where I would release the most and cry the most and feel the most.” Joanna, 22

Findings

Some of these individuals had tried high church services, but felt that they were too unfamiliar, inaccessible or alien – this perhaps being a distraction from the content of the worship. Amy, 26, who tried a traditional service before joining her current evangelical church, described feeling disconcerted because she didn't know any hymns and felt "you've got to know the stuff" to be part of the congregation. Interestingly, those who attended high churches also ascribed a certain unfamiliarity or "weirdness" to them, but they 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.

There were some who attended more "middle of the road" churches – as many Anglican churches are – or went to different styles of service throughout the week, either because they had not yet made a decision on their preference or found that both resonated in different ways. These included Lizzie, 19, who attends a large urban church which offers both a "free flowing and informal" service on Sunday evenings and a formal one on Thursdays. Riley, 20, who attends a similar church, commented that the breadth of services there also attracts a breadth of different people, this being something they particularly like about it:

"In terms of comfort and familiarity, I prefer the 9am, but with the sort of more traditional style, but in terms of, I guess in terms of worshiping and engaging more closely with God, I feel more drawn to the more contemporary service. I just feel like there is much more energy and much more passion and it feels much easier to engage with everything...[The church] has an excellent spread of attendees, you can see the different age groups moving through the church through the different services" Riley, 20

Although people expressed contrasting preferences in terms of the form their worship took, people across all church traditions described having spiritual experiences the first time they attended that were, qualitatively, not so different to one another. For example, while Dylan, 21, described his sacramental, Anglo-Catholic church as follows:

"I went up for communion and kind of went for a blessing instead. And I just had the priest blessing me look at me, and I just felt this overwhelming love. And I didn't really know why, I just went back in my pew and was just shaking and I just felt, I don't really know what it was. It was because I didn't really know anyone there because now I mean, I actually do love them now, but not in that kind of intense, sort of direct way. It was just really, really strange." Dylan, 21

Millie, 20, spoke of a similar spiritual intensity in the context of an evangelical church:

“I just remember walking in, everyone’s worshipping, and I just uncontrollably sobbed for like an hour straight. I just couldn’t control myself...feeling safe to be vulnerable in this new place with these new people felt like crazy to me...Everyone just singing together. Everyone just like literally pouring their hearts out. And I think just the, like, it was people, it was the vulnerability of it, I think. And it was the safety, like just this atmosphere of safety, people being so vulnerable. And then people on the other hand, like dancing and just so joyful and just, it was just an environment that I had never experienced before.” Millie, 20

Overall, people described being deeply moved by worship across all kinds of church settings. They described encounters with truth, be it through the presence of Christ in the eucharist or hearing scripture; beauty, through medieval stained-glass windows or contemporary worship music; and goodness, through the solace of liturgy or the emotional intimacy of the congregation. All these “transcendentals” were experienced, despite the diversity of their outward forms.

This may also point to the fact that the Church of England, being a “broad church”, has a particular advantage in the postmodern context where the forms of Christianity that people encounter, especially online, are themselves diverse and varied. While some people were drawn to the aesthetics and history of high church liturgy to begin with, others came to faith through evangelical podcasters and sermons. In this sense, Anglicanism is well-positioned to receive and nurture a generation whose first encounters with Christianity are themselves varied, being mediated through multiple cultural channels.

Carmen’s Story

Gap year student, West Midlands, 20

Currently living at home on a gap year, Carmen grew up in a loosely Christian / agnostic household and began her journey to faith while studying for her A-Levels. She read excerpts of the Bible as part of her Classics course, initially being interested in the history of the ancient world but eventually relating to it personally and thinking **“I actually do see myself reflected in these pages, and I can see my faith growing with this”**. Living near a cathedral, she decided to attend a service and felt instantly at home there. Carmen is disabled and met someone else with a disability in the congregation, making her feel especially welcome. Being autistic, she also finds the structure and familiarity of high church liturgy to be particularly comforting. Since joining the congregation, she has grown her faith by praying daily, going on contemplative “nature walks”, and creating a personal altar in her bedroom with icons and pictures of saints. She is also passionate about English parish churches, visiting them so she can connect with local history. Having long suffered from anxiety due to her disabilities, going to church has given her the confidence and practical support to apply for university:

“It’s really helped encourage me to leave the house more and interact more with people”.

Community

Also transcending differences in worship style was the sense of community that people found in church. Although some people said they had initially tried churches where they did not receive the warmest welcome, many were surprised – and even overwhelmed – by the kindness of congregations and clergy when they first arrived. Carmen described being “shocked by the environment and the way that it made me feel...just how welcoming everyone was and how kind everyone was”. Experiences like these tended to be a major factor in individuals’ returning and eventually settling in a particular congregation.

For a generation that is said to be suffering from a “loneliness epidemic”, the appeal of church as a place of community is not surprising. Although, notably, nobody said that the search for community was the *primary* reason that they went to church, people such as Travis, 19, said that they “couldn’t have taken this step into faith without it”. Once again, real-life human connections were vital.

Several explicitly contrasted the sense of community they had found in church with the loneliness of modern life as a young person. Ryan, 28, came to Christianity after being invited to church by a friend and reading the Bible independently. However, finding community of young people was one of the main reasons that he stayed at his specific church:

“Being a young professional in London is fairly miserable. You’re often living in a HMO (House in Multiple Occupation) with people that you don’t know in a city that is not as welcoming as you ever thought it would be...you’re not earning very much. The prospect of ever owning a house [or] having children is an immensely disparate kind of idea. And I think your sense of either home or identity is so limited in terms of what it is now. And then the church very clearly gave me that in terms of a home, an identity, a community, an ability to think about issues on a deeper level than I had before.” Ryan, 28

Others described receiving a care from people at church that they had never experienced before. Riley, 20, mentioned people in her congregation checking that she had gotten home safely after a long drive, while Carmen, 20, said people from her church had helped her with her university application. Though some people said that they were not generally lonely and already belonged to other communities, they noted that the type of community they found in church was qualitatively different:

“I’m part of lots of communities, but that’s not actually what community is and what it’s supposed to be...this feeling and these people that actually all really care and want to help each other grow is something that isn’t there in so many communities...I genuinely don’t even think is anywhere else in society anymore” Millie, 20

Findings

Several participants said that one aspect of church attendance they especially valued was its intergenerational and diverse character, which provided opportunities to connect with people they might not otherwise meet. Lorna, 30, for example, described feeling anxious about turning 30, but finding reassurance in relationships with older members of her congregation who could offer perspective drawn from their own life experience. Becky, 25, and Owen, 28, who both have young children, also noted that the intergenerational nature of their churches had been helpful in raising their families, and that it fostered a sense of belonging to a wider “church family.”

At the same time, participants also highlighted the value of smaller, more specific groups – typically age or gender exclusive – within or connected to their churches. These included student nights, prayer meetings, women-only Bible study circles and informal “lads’ groups”. Those who participated in these groups often said they enabled closer personal relationships and a stronger sense of mutual understanding, which in turn deepened their faith and discipleship.

The importance of community and belonging, many said, was something that the Church of England should prioritise in its youth outreach. Many stressed the importance of making young people feel as welcome as possible by personally approaching newcomers; inviting them to events; and better involving them in decision-making and governance. Several suggested appointing more student and youth representatives at deanery and general synod meetings, so that young people may be more visibly represented and engaged in the running of the church.



Masculinity

Given aspects of the Changing Landscape previously discussed, the perspectives of men deserve particular attention in light of concerns that new Christian conversions may be connected to right-wing politics online. Some of our interviewees (both men and women) did describe first encountering Christian ideas within these spaces. However, such political content typically functioned only as an initial “hook” from which most later distanced themselves. In reality, the appeal of churchgoing among the men we spoke to – in their own words – had less to do with ideology than with a deeper search for purpose and belonging that they felt to be lacking in a secular context.

Ryan, 28, described how, unless you are actively involved in something like sport, there is “no way for you to make a community as a young man” today. Several also referred to men feeling “lost”, such as Mike, 20, who started attending a cathedral after feeling uncertain of his identity and career direction after university. He linked this to a wider confusion and uncertainty around expectations for men:

“Men are a bit lost these days. There’s more blurred lines in terms of what’s expected of being a man, where traditionally the man’s the provider, the man works, a wife will stay at home. And obviously, that’s changed pretty dramatically. So there’s that loss of identity. And I think that religion really helps find purpose and find, not find yourself, but find where you can go and what you can achieve.” Mike, 20

Abby’s Story

Student and former nurse, East Midlands, 24

Growing up with grandparents who attended church, Abby was never averse to Christianity and always believed in a “higher power”. But it was in alternative spirituality that she first expressed this belief, stumbling across New Age content on TikTok during the pandemic. **“I thought, oh well, everybody’s doing that and I believe that there’s a higher power. So maybe that’s what it is. So I got into the New Age, tarot cards, manifestation”**. At the time, she was working as a dental nurse alongside Muslim colleagues, whose devotion to their faith intrigued her. But it was a providential encounter that led her to start taking religion seriously. Abby was struggling with debt and received a parking ticket she couldn’t afford to pay. Anxious about her finances, she turned to healing crystals and tried to “manifest” the money she needed, but neither worked. Then, one day out of the blue, she decided to pray to God. Days later, a letter from HMRC came through the post notifying her she would receive a tax rebate – enough to repay all of her debts. Taking this as a sign, Abby started exploring Christianity through podcasts, and became intrigued by how Christian influencers challenged the individualism of modern society, casual sex and drinking. For a year, she livestreamed Pentecostal church services but decided they weren’t for her. It was through reconnecting with a Christian friend that Abby discovered the evangelical Anglican church she now attends near Liverpool. She especially likes how her congregation prays for the community, and being part of a church that:

“Has a big focus on evangelism and doing God’s work...that’s something I definitely am drawn to”.

Some men also spoke about church as a unique place, or indeed the only place, where they felt they could honestly express their emotions. Sam, 19, suffers from health issues which have long caused him anxiety and depression. He noted that men are socially “programmed” not to cry which, from his experience, worsens their mental health. Similarly, Bradley, 18, attributed the modern “crisis of masculinity” to the fact that “men are really taught nowadays to keep their emotions bottled”, along with being told to place happiness in material success and physical self-improvement; that if you “just get muscly, then you’ll be happy”.

Church, some of the men we interviewed said, offered a refuge not only as a safe place for them to show emotion, but also for them to *sublimate* it into something spiritually meaningful. Dylan, 21, recalled the emotional intensity of praying the stations of the cross on Good Friday, where, in kneeling to kiss the cross, “you get to see sides of people that you don’t normally get to see in public”. Church, he said, is “an acceptable place in which to do emotion and devotion” – providing a welcome contrast to a culture “that can often feel driven by money and trying to get as far as you can, as fast as you can”.

For others, it was as simple as male-only church groups providing a space to talk openly and fearlessly with one another about their personal struggles. Zachary, 27, described of his church’s men’s group as:

“Like a communion between lads, ‘cause sometimes when there’s lasses about, you can’t get things off your chest. You feel like you’ve got to have this image as a masculine man, but when you’re amongst other men, you can just let whatever’s on your mind out, or whatever’s stressing you, be free, and talk to them about it, and lots of lads always can, you know, come up with good answers back, so maybe discuss if they’ve been through similar situations and whatnot. I think the testimony part of that is really helpful because they get normally different lads giving different testimonies. And if they had their wife and kids with them, I don’t think it’d be the same. I don’t think they could tell that same story without, because men sometimes just can’t get things off their chest, especially when they’re trying to be this masculine man. But amongst other lads, you don’t have to feel that way. You can open up and hopefully let people hear the truth.” Zachary, 27

Several women also described churchgoing in terms of emotional openness and vulnerability; this theme was by no means exclusive to men. However, it appears to be a particularly strong draw for men who feel uniquely disadvantaged by modern society and its expectations.

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.

Personal Faith

Almost everyone said that, since attending church, they had started reading the Bible more regularly if not every day. Bradley, 18, said that doing so had been “transformational”:

“I made it a habit of, ‘I’m going to read my Bible at least once a day. I’m going to pray in the morning. I’m going to read my Bible when I wake up’. That’s it. And that was transformational for me, because that helped me start the day off properly and actually feel like God’s in my day.” Bradley, 18

The majority also said that they try to pray every day – or, in the case of Owen, 28, “constantly on a loop throughout the day” – with many developing their own personal and sometimes eclectic practices. Those who attended evangelical or low churches tended to pray more informally and spontaneously, while some of those who attended Anglo-Catholic or high churches said they had created their own daily offices, drawing on a variety of traditions:

“I made my own daily office, which is a Book of Common Prayer, but with the rosary in it, basically. I think Thomas Cranmer would have a fit, but he’s dead, so...I do that in the morning quite often. I’ll quite often read a medieval mystic or something like that. I like that sort of tradition. And I think to begin with, I’d sort of gone, oh, it’s best that I either have to do this totally right or not at all...being able to kind of make my own set of prayers up has been quite useful.” Dylan, 21

Once again, this speaks to the flexibility of Anglican spirituality; something that many participants embraced, and perhaps unsurprisingly given that their journeys to faith were typically also creative, experimental and eclectic. Several people also said they had developed other personal spiritual habits, such as listening to worship music while walking to work (Marina) or going on “nature walks” to contemplate creation (Carmen), among other ways of deepening their faith outside as well as within church.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Numerous studies have shown the positive impact of church attendance on mental health.¹⁸ 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:

“Five months ago, I was in the worst, darkest possible [point in my] whole life. I didn’t want to wake up the next day. That’s because I just came out of mental illness, and came out of a relationship because of that. I just wasn’t well. I’ve been on a lot of antidepressants. So it’s hard to decipher whether the time has just healed me, but I would say it’s given me go to church, start praising Jesus, and that’s giving me a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, a sense of peace. It’s changed a lot of the negativity in my head and replaced it with positivity, whether it’s something from the Bible or maybe just a bit of hope that I never had before...I’ve always got hope [now] and if something bad happens, I know it’s okay, that’s part of like the plan for me, it’s meant to happen and there’s going to be better things in the future for me.” Jake, 22

In general, participants described feeling “a lot less depressed”, (Owen), “a lot more at peace” (Carmen), “emotionally more settled” (Jamilah), more “appreciative” and able to “recognise the good things” (Tanya), and “a lot better at handling emotions” (Nina) since attending church. Marina and others described her faith as a “firm foundation” that gives stability to withstand life’s challenges:

“[Since becoming Christian] I feel like I actually have something to stand on. Before, I was just going here and there, but now I feel like I actually have something solid...I went through a lot of depressive states before and now I just feel like there’s so much stability in my life and groundedness and presentness.” Marina, 25

Once again, the mental health improvements that people described were strongly linked not only to the attitudes they had gained through faith, but also through the communities and sense of belonging they had found in church – the interpersonal and relational dimension was crucial.

In light of this, several spoke of the Church’s potential to address the mental health crisis affecting young people. “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.” She suggested that the Church could be more confident in articulating its vision of human flourishing at a time when many are turning instead to superficial forms of self-improvement. Jake, 22, warned that men especially look for escape in pursuits like bodybuilding, money and sex, sometimes turning to the online “manosphere”. He and others argued that the Church could respond more proactively to this, offering an alternative grounded in a deeper sense of community and purpose [see Jake’s Story on page 7].

¹⁸ Nick Spencer, Gillian Madden, Clare Purtil & Joseph Ewing, *Religion and Well-being: Assessing the Evidence*, Theos Think Tank, 2016.

Personal Transformation

Many described experiencing transformations that were not only internal, but also reflected in their outward personality. Alex, 20, linked the shifts in her character to attending church as opposed to merely identifying as Christian, as she had done in her exploration phase:

"It's made me a better person because before I was attending church, I was a Christian by name, but not truly. Going to church always inspires me to be better." Alex, 20

Owen said that, in overcoming anxieties and addictions through faith, he has "been able to shine more". Going to church has given him a sense of purpose, drive and direction in life:

"I was a slob and a sloth, I was up to no good, and now I'm happier and I'm feeling healthier. And I'm using my purpose accordingly, you know? Before I wasn't, I was just letting time pass, letting things waste away. But now, with this 180 in my life, what I've turned around in is that I'm accountable. I recognize I want to look after myself and I want to be the best possible version of myself I can be." Owen, 28

Others also spoke of "looking after themselves" more, be that by stopping drinking and taking drugs or developing healthier routines. They also described being more intentional in their behaviour around others, through carrying out random acts of kindness, including donating more to charity, and being generally more empathetic and conscientious towards those around them:

"I used to hold a lot of hate in my heart and now I have a lot of love. You know, I had a heart of stone and now I've got a heart of flesh." Zachary, 27

Bradley, 18, described feeling "a lot more negative about the world and about people" before coming to church, while Marina, 25, said "I have a heart for people now more than I did before". Others described becoming more sympathetic and "socially conscious", especially towards the less fortunate in society. Dom, 24, described the feeling of responsibility of caring for people around him not just as a moral obligation, but part of his calling as a Christian:

"I strongly believe that if we embody Christ to one another, [we should] love people to the best of our ability...just the people in front of us, our direct neighbours, and the little things that we are called to do. You know, you think of "what are you called to do?" and you think of grand things, but actually, most of the time you're just called to, like play with your dog or, like, ask your dad how his day was or offer to wash up after church, these small things." Dom, 24

Political Shifts

These personal shifts often, though not always, led to broader political shifts – some of these beginning before they started attending church.

While none of our participants described being ideologically motivated, several said that they had been exposed to right-wing Christian content online at some point in their journey. Some had initially been attracted to the ideas of traditional masculinity and femininity that they saw through influencers like Charlie Kirk, which caused them to question the socially liberal views they had previously held. Abby, 24, for example, described how:

“I was a lot more liberal before... I was a lot more into “woke” stuff and like, I really believed that being left wing was the right kind of way, feminism, things like that. Whereas now, I see feminism as a bit of an issue to society, and it takes away from the nuclear family and God’s design for everybody...and it’s affecting how men are treating women and it’s pushing men and women apart. People aren’t having children anymore. People aren’t getting married, there’s no reason to be getting married... I think a lot of the issues in society are coming from that... I think [my view] now comes from more of a scriptural standpoint. Scripture has definitely influenced the way that I think about how I think, everything just comes back to God’s design. God has designed it this way, God has got more knowledge than we could ever have. So why would I not want to follow God’s design?” Abby, 24

Around the time that Zachary, 27, was first exploring Christianity, he identified as a nationalist having been influenced by “red-pill” content. Initially, he tried to “synchronise” nationalism with faith. But once he had started attending church, he decided to abandon the label:

“I was a little bit of a nationalist between maybe 18, 19, 20...I synchronised that with my Christianity when I was younger, thinking like, yeah, we’re a Christian country, we should be for the love of England and be Christian. Now, obviously, in this new life, I’ve realised that I shouldn’t synchronise anything with my Christianity and I shouldn’t have any other labels. I should just be Christian. In fact, it would be harmful to myself to try and say that I’m a nationalist Christian. In fact, I should just be Christian. And if I’ve got love for England, then I’ve got love for my country.” Zachary, 27

In cases like Zachary’s, online political content was part of people’s journeys, but one they ultimately moved beyond – notably, once they had settled into a pattern of regular church attendance. Alex, 20, spoke of seeing this phenomenon in her own congregation and among other Christian students, describing the role of right-wing politics as a “hook”:

“The politics is a hook...that’s what gets them to first hear about Christianity. Let’s use the example of a young man scrolling TikTok or Instagram - this is loads of guys in my generation. It’ll be like a guy and he’ll be talking about like, oh, get the immigrants out. They’re stealing our jobs. Get them out. Like, I don’t, I don’t want them there. And then he might agree with that. And then the guy on his phone will go, and Jesus said, this, this, this, this and this, and they’re not doing what Jesus said. And then it sort of forms like in his mind that like his political view is sort of justified by the guy on his phone and that religion, because these guys will use religion as a justification for their political beliefs. So I think the guy will originally have political beliefs and then use faith to justify it. I’m not saying that’s all, not even most, but definitely a chunk of men coming into Christianity, I think a lot of them will be due to related to politics....politics is like a hook for these online Christian influencers, but going to church, it stops being so divisive and angry or not angry. It stops being so political when you’re in church in person, even when online Christianity and those within it can be quite political.” Alex, 20

This could suggest that physically attending church – rather than merely identifying as Christian – has the effect of challenging the more ideological versions of Christianity seen online. One factor in this may be the humanising nature of in-person experience: attitudes shaped by exclusionary or negative sentiments may be tested by encounters with the lived reality of worshipping communities.

Overall, a slight majority of participants said that they had become more “conservative” since becoming Christian, particularly when it came to the issues of assisted dying and abortion. However, they described these positions as being informed by scripture rather than politics *per se*. Many of those who used the term conservative did so in a way that was broad and even apolitical – as broad as the urge to “conserve things that are good”, as Margo, 20, put it. Others similarly qualified that they were conservative “not as in the political party, but conservative as in traditional”. For them and others, words like “conservative” and “traditional” referred to Christianity as an ancient belief and institution, though naturally there were some overlaps with “small-c conservative” (as opposed to liberal) moral stances:

“The deeper I’ve gotten into my faith, the more conservative I’ve gotten, actually. And I think that’s quite a common thing among people my age going into Christianity...there’s been an uptick in more conservative viewpoints and standards and people are going into church to seek that because it’s more traditional. And I think, “conservative” is such a buzzword nowadays, but church is somewhere where social media isn’t something you have to worry about. You don’t have to worry about the stresses and all the nonsense of today. You can go and participate in something that people were doing 100, 200, 1000 years ago, it’s sort of a return to tradition, [a way to] get away from the modern world.” Alex, 20

There were others, however, who did not identify with the term, saying instead that they leaned more towards the 'Left' – a descriptor they used in the sense of being “justice-oriented” and valuing “sharing and people looking out for each other”:

“[Becoming Christian] made me more passionate about social issues, particularly with Jesus’ messages in the New Testament about looking after one another, feeding the hungry, clothing [the poor], healing the sick. I was always someone who generally had more left-leaning social policies in my beliefs, but that solidified my views and made me more passionate about those issues” Carmen, 20

This could be the case even for participants whose underlying political instincts were not left-leaning:

“Being Christian has made me much more socially conscious than I was before in a way that would traditionally be seen as left-wing, although I’d put a big star next to that – naturally, I’m quite a Burkean conservative person... but actually, being Christian has made me think much more about how we take care of the weakest people in society and how we create a society that is in Christ’s image. So I would say that socially it’s sort of actually pulled me, I don’t really like the term, but...to the left.” Nik, 28

Dylan’s Story

Recent English Literature Graduate, North East, 21

As a teenager growing up in the North East, Dylan had been a “militant atheist” – but something changed at university. In his first year, he lived with a Muslim and a Christian housemate, who challenged some of his negative assumptions about religion through the long conversations they had together. At the same time, he also became increasingly interested in the intellectual side of Christianity through studying Medieval literature and poets like Dante and John Donne, who **“did Christianity in very unorthodox ways”** and so spoke to his **“rebellious instinct”**.

As part of his studies, Dylan visited a medieval church where he was suddenly struck by the beauty of light beaming through the stained glass windows. This experience marked a shift from a purely intellectual interest in Christianity to a personal and spiritual one. A few weeks later, he returned to that church for a service where he fell in love with its Anglo-Catholic liturgy, describing the “warmth” of the community there and how the solemnity of high church worship makes it a place to “do emotion and devotion” – something he says that young men especially feel unable to do in the modern world. Dylan was baptised there three months after he started attending, and now also sings in the choir.

Nik was among several participants who expressed concerns about divisive culture wars and polarisation, fearing the co-opting of Christianity by right-wing actors who “abuse and twist [Christianity] to fit their narrative”. They described feeling that Christian ethics were not authentically represented anywhere in British politics, rendering them “politically homeless”:

“It’s not about being on the wrong or right side of history. It’s about being on the Jesus side of history. So everyone’s arguing about immigration, or they’re arguing about taxes, and they’re arguing about things that are polarizing...I just want to see things that we’ve all got more in common than what divides us. And politics, I do struggle with it because we don’t have a political party that’s like, we’re the Christian party, we’re the Jesus party, we’ll, we don’t have that...there aren’t any that align exactly with where I am at. So that is something that I do struggle with.” Nina, 25

Evidently, while many participants suggested that their faith had made them more “conservative” in some sense, this did not translate into a consistent political alignment, with many expressing a reluctance to politicise their beliefs. Nor was there any clear correlation between worship style and political leaning: some who attended “traditional” Anglo-Catholic churches held more socially liberal views, while some in more modern, evangelical settings expressed more socially conservative positions, and vice versa. On specific issues – such as same-sex marriage and immigration – there was even greater divergence, with participants interpreting their faith in sometimes opposing ways, in this sense reflecting the wider variances within the Anglican communion.



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. There were some points of convergence – be those authors or online influencers encountered through similar algorithms – but guiding them were often highly personal and providential circumstances, like walking past a church on a dog walk or having the vicar's wife for a childminder. The forms of worship that people were led to were also diverse and shaped by subjective preferences, so much so that what attracted some individuals to certain worship styles was off-putting to others and vice versa. As such, new churchgoing patterns among young adults cannot be fully explained by any one trend, movement or subculture. There were, however, some recurring themes – many surrounding the spiritual climate in which they find themselves.

Spirituality for a Struggling Generation

One was the feeling, expressed by almost everyone, that Gen Z is a “spiritually curious” generation – even if that curiosity is not always explored within Christianity. This was evident not only in people's own stories, but also in how they described their peers. Many said that their non-religious friends and colleagues had responded positively to being invited to church; very few reacted negatively. They also commented that their non-Christian friends were less likely to identify as outright atheists, and more likely to show an interest in some form of spirituality:

“There's just more of a longing for truth, particularly in young people.”

Travis, 19

“I would say that there's more curiosity as to what's going on.” Amy, 26

“I think it's getting better. I think it's getting more open-minded.” Dylan, 21

“Compared to Gen X, [Gen Z] are much more open from what I can tell – at least they're more open to having conversations.” Aditya, 23

Our respondents are not alone in perceiving their peers as more spiritually open than their parents' generation, with some suggesting that openness to Christianity among Gen Z may be explained by how the reaction against religion led by the Baby Boomer generation has itself become culturally outdated.¹⁹ While many of the parents and grandparents of Gen Z rebelled against Christianity because it was socially dominant in their lifetime, this is no longer the case – secular liberalism is now the default for most young people in Britain. In this sense, the theory goes, 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.

We saw earlier how for many of these young adults their new-found faith had brought them mental stability following periods of trouble, and many spoke of the impact of Christianity as a response to feelings of general emptiness and dissatisfaction with modern society. As Joanna put it:

¹⁹ Bijan Omrani, “Why Gen-Z turned back to Christianity”, The Spectator, 30 March 2026, https://spectator.com/article/why-gen-z-turned-back-to-christianity/?set_edition=en

“We’re realising the dissatisfaction that comes with the world, particularly a secular world.” Joanna, 22

Some spoke of this dissatisfaction in relation to high rates of divorce and family breakdown. Those who grew up in broken homes, such as Abby, reflected on how faith offers a welcome contrast in the form of structure and stability:

“I think people generally see it as the world is going so terribly wrong and these people have got something going right that their lives changing in a positive way and how can I get that? How can I have that kind of structure in my life? And I think a lot of people have grown up having sort of, you know, most people my age. I don’t really know anybody who’s Mum and Dad are together or anything like that. They haven’t got that kind of stability that God can give them. So I think people are sort of moving towards that as society is moving away from it.” Abby, 24

And this was more than just generic spirituality, but rather Christianity in particular. Dylan, 21, spoke of how Christianity offers “something which is doctrinal in a world which can feel really confusing”, unlike alternative spiritualities, which tend to implicitly reflect the relativism and individualism of modern culture. Those who had previously followed alternative spiritual ideas themselves expressed this: that, while these beliefs affirm essentially consumerist, self-centred attitudes (such as “manifesting” your personal desires), Christianity offers genuine personal transformation through self-sacrifice. In this sense, traditional religion may now be the truly countercultural option.

Aditya’s Story

Physics graduate and teacher, London, 23

Aditya grew up in a Hindu family in London and, while never becoming an atheist, distanced himself from religion as a teenager. But at university, he began to gravitate towards Christianity after having an “existential meaning crisis” – both intellectually, provoked by studying Physics and questioning materialist theories about the universe, but also personally having become disillusioned with secular liberalism and the “culture of openness” among his peers. Aditya decided that he **“didn’t believe in moral relativism”** partly after watching the Canadian psychology professor Jordan Peterson, whose ideas of objective morality intrigued him. In his second year of university, he went to a discussion event on science and religion which turned out to be run by the Christian Union; there, he became friends with one of the members who had long discussions with him about the Gospels and took him to an evangelical Anglican church. Aditya attended this church for some time whilst continuing to explore Christianity through podcasts and theological YouTube channels, such as *Pints with Aquinas*, as well as reading Christian authors like C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. Eventually, Aditya discovered a small Anglo-Catholic church and found himself drawn to its **“quiet and prayerful atmosphere”**; he was baptised there and, having left university, now attends a similar church where he has found a strong community of other young people.

Beyond 'New Atheism'

While many of our participants – particularly men – had been through a “teenage atheist phase”, they often reflected that this seems to have just been a phase not only for themselves, but for wider culture – with Farid, 20, describing how the atheist “memes” of the 2010s are themselves now seen as outdated or even “cringe”. As public hostility towards religion has waned, then, spiritual and supernatural ideas may be regaining social and intellectual legitimacy.

Again, our respondents are not unique in this idea, with Christian commentators such as Justin Brierley²⁰ linking the “surprising rebirth” of belief to the decline of New Atheism. While highly popular between around 2005 and 2010, New Atheism, it is argued, has since fallen out of fashion, perhaps because hostility towards religion has proved incompatible with demands for tolerance and pluralism in a multicultural society.

In the perspectives of our participants at least, it is now New Atheism, not Christianity, which younger people tend to view as narrow-minded and bigoted:

“I’d say generally the view is that it’s more plausible and it’s more respectable to be a Christian. I think that even 10 years ago, 10-15 years ago, when New Atheism was really popping off and you had Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, all these characters...nowadays that kind of atheism is seen as Reddit atheism. You know, it’s kind of frowned upon. It’s made fun of, you know, “oh, this guy’s a Redditor”.”
Farid, 20

This decline of New Atheism, Nik, 28, said, had seen a shift from a climate of “real active hostility” towards Christianity towards one in which Christianity is “taken quite seriously as a way of looking at the world”. He was not alone in this view. Jamilah, 25, also described how:

“I’ve had friends who were ragingly atheist with me during those years who kind of turned around and be like, “actually, I’m more agnostic now”. And like that’s quite nice to know because it’s like there’s room there for revival.” Jamilah, 25

The absence of atheism, she and others said, has created *space* for exploring Christianity where before it may not have felt socially or intellectually acceptable. In this sense, any rediscovery of faith among young people today may be less clearly attributable to specific, positive factors than to the *absence* of negative prejudices and barriers. Indeed, it is not that our participant’s paths are uniquely contemporary (with the exception of social media). Most of them – intellectual exploration, personal relationships, providential encounters – have always existed. The difference, perhaps, is that they are no longer culturally closed off in the way they might have been a decade ago. That our participants did not have any inherited religion to rebel against, having grown up in mostly secular environments, is likely to have contributed to this.

²⁰ Justin Brierley, “New atheism has collapsed. The tide is turning on belief in God”, Premier Christianity, 26 September 2023, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/new-atheism-has-collapsed-the-tide-is-turning-on-belief-in-god/16350.article>

Multi-culturalism and the ‘Spiritual Supernova’

Along with the apparent decline of New Atheism has come a rise in multiculturalism, and we can see the effect of this on some of our participants. Among those who had initially come to Christianity through politicised online content, ideas about reviving England’s Christian culture in response to Muslim immigration were sometimes present (though they typically later distanced themselves from such views). At the same time, others suggested that the visibility of different religions had exerted a more positive influence, helping to normalise religious expression in the public square. Notably, two participants who worked in predominantly Muslim environments said that seeing colleagues openly practising their faith had strengthened, and in some cases partly inspired, their own:

“[As a dental nurse] I worked with a lot of Muslims at the time...and I remember thinking, wow, these people are very focused on their God. They’re doing all these things to serve their God. Their focus on the rules. They’ve got such a great sense of community and I think I just looked at that and I was like, that’s what [alternative] spirituality is missing.” Abby, 24

The experience of our participants growing up is not only of secularism, but of experiencing a range of lived expressions of religion and – particularly through online spaces – of alternative spiritualities. The sociologist Charles Taylor, in his *A Secular Age*, noted that secularisation does not necessarily mean the *absence* of belief, but rather the explosion of many *different* beliefs from which individuals are free to choose. Taylor called this the “spiritual supernova”, describing how the positing of alternatives to traditional religion in the 18th and 19th centuries “set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral and spiritual options....a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane”.²¹ Such a “supernova” was apparent in our research, where Christianity was just one of many spiritual options that young people encountered online and elsewhere. It was not uncommon for individuals to come to church only after having first explored other religions like Islam and Buddhism, or alternative spiritual ideas like astrology. This public prominence and acceptability of other faiths, it has been argued,²² has opened opportunities for Christianity, rather than a threat.

All of this would seem to support the idea that there are now fewer taboos surrounding religion in contemporary culture. In fact, several observed that Christianity is now often presented positively in the media, pointing to musicians, artists, and sports figures who have publicly displayed their faith. While some were directly influenced by such figures, perhaps more significant is the broader cultural climate they seem to reflect: one in which Christianity is once again a viable option for spiritual exploration, with fewer cultural barriers standing in the way.

For the Church of England, this can and should inspire confidence. As many of our interviewees expressed, the waning of negative preconceptions towards Christianity leaves an opportunity for the Church. While the post-secular age may not automatically spell a return to Christianity – Taylor’s “spiritual supernova” seems more likely – in a climate of spiritual pluralism there is potential. Our participants suggested – both implicitly and explicitly – that the current cohort of young people may be more open than their immediate forebears to new ideas, reconsidering inherited assumptions, and engaging with questions of meaning and belief.

21 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 299-300.

22 <https://www.thetimes.com/comment/columnists/article/our-multifaith-society-revive-church-christianity-rm2nvf6px>

“Full Fat Faith”

The Church, many urged, can speak to this – not by reinventing itself, but by standing firmly in its identity and traditions. “Authenticity” was a value which came up repeatedly, along with depth, sincerity and “seriousness”. In this way, people spoke of faith as offering a radical and or even countercultural alternative to modern society. They described how Christianity can provide moral certainty in an age of relativism; a sense of unity amid growing polarisation; community in the face of loneliness; and a sense of the inherent dignity and value of all human beings in a society that all too often defines us by our material worth.

Over the past year, a number of commentators have observed that those young people turning to religion are not interested in watered-down versions of Christianity, but seek “full-fat faith”. This phrase, which did not come up in our interviews but has been used by various media outlets,²³ can denote both a clear and uncompromising focus on the Gospel as well as traditional styles of worship. In the Anglican context specifically, it can be used on both the evangelical and high church ends of the spectrum – forms of worship which are either charismatic and focused on scripture, or those which emphasise the sacraments and traditional liturgy. While “full-fat faith” can be interpreted in such different ways, the implication is clear: the more unapologetic the expression of faith, the greater its appeal. This resonates with our findings.

Far from shying away from this, our interviewees felt the Church should more confidently embrace its potential to tell a different story.

“The thing that is bringing most [young] people to religion is that existential sense of confusion...[Christianity] makes sense, and it is true and beautiful as a way of living your life...that needs to be the hook line.” Nik, 28

“Conviction and growth – having that as a central focus point is something that young people definitely go for” Abby, 24

“The best thing that the church can do is stay open and be there doing what it’s always been doing...keeping its liturgies alive....people will come when they’re ready and the church just needs to be there.” Dom, 24

“[The Church could] just be a bit bolder...and be a bit more out there.” Benjamin, 24

“Churchgoing can be such a wonderful and special thing. Especially for young people in a world that sometimes seems like it’s not built for us. Therefore I think that the church should continue to be welcoming and caring and be a positive place, as it should be.” Carmen, 20

²³ See, for example, 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>

“My advice to the Church of England would be to actually just lean into [the fact that] we are the national church of this country, we will celebrate the Christian faith...the Church of England has so much to offer the young people of this country.” Margo, 20

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.

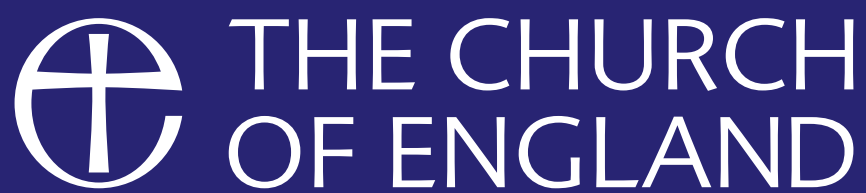
Zachary's Story

Warehouse worker, North East, 27

Having grown up with an atheist mother and a father interested in New Age and Buddhist spirituality, Zachary's journey to Christianity started online. On TikTok and YouTube, he stumbled across testimonies and videos by the American activist Charlie Kirk, which promoted faith alongside conservative models of masculinity. He felt drawn to their message of self-improvement at a time when he was feeling lost in life, heavily drinking and taking drugs. It was after ending up in hospital following an injury caused by drinking that Zachary decided to try church, taking the accident as a sign to change his life: **“it was in those moments [in hospital] that I gave my life to Jesus”**. A year later, Zachary now worships at a cathedral and is also part of a Christian men's group, where he feels he can “get things off his chest” in a healthy way. His political views have also evolved: whereas before, he tried to “synchronise” Christianity with nationalism and right-wing politics, he has now decided that **“I shouldn't synchronise anything with my Christianity and I shouldn't have any other labels”**. Through deepening his faith and forming friendships through the Christian men's group, Zachary says he has been transformed:

**“I used to hold a lot of hate in my heart and now I have a lot of love...
I had a heart of stone and now I've got a heart of flesh.”**





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