

Learnings on... young adult faith

Young Adult Journeys to Faith: A conversation and reflection on the new realities of meeting and ministering to young adults

with Rachel Drury, Rev'd Rich Miles and Phoebe Turner

See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? Isaiah 48v19

This verse has become something of a touchstone for those working with young adults. Not because the Church has suddenly discovered a new strategy, but because many practitioners are finding themselves confronted by stories that do not fit established assumptions about evangelism, discipleship or church growth.

In the spirit of curiosity—and not wanting to miss the new ways God may be reaching younger generations—the Vision & Strategy team commissioned Theos to produce [*The Young Adult Journeys to Faith in the Church of England*](#). The report explores the diverse experiences of young adults coming to faith and the cultural shifts shaping those journeys.

To reflect on these findings, Nick Shepherd, Head of Insights and Engagement for Vision & Strategy, brought together three practitioners working at the forefront of young adult ministry: Rachel Drury, Alban Way Project Lead; Revd Rich Miles, Missional Priest for Youth and Young Adults in Bath and Wells; and Phoebe Turner, Young Adult Mission Enabler in Durham. Together they explored what has changed, what young adults are looking for, and what the Church might be learning from these emerging journeys of faith

What has changed?

One of the recurring themes in the conversation was the sense that the pathways by which young adults arrive at church have fundamentally changed. Participants reflected on a growing openness to spirituality, supported by unprecedented access to ideas and beliefs online.

Rich Miles sees this shift as rooted in a growing dissatisfaction with secular culture:

Rich Miles: It's creating openness. Many aren't running towards Christianity because it's culturally powerful, but they are questioning whether modern secular narratives are enough. Young adults aren't finding Christianity because it's fashionable, but because other stories aren't delivering what's been promised in the secular narrative.

For Miles, this has significantly altered the spiritual landscape.

Rich Miles: Atheism was the default alternative. Now, many are travelling through spirituality before Christianity - astrology, manifestation, meditation, New Age spirituality.

This in turn has changed the pathway to finding Christian faith.

Rich Miles: It used to be the church, then faith formation. But now it's online curiosity, independent exploration, and then it equals them arriving at church. It's no longer the Billy Graham sort of model that's overshadowed much of the church for the last 40 years. I think it really has switched to young adults meeting Jesus in their bedrooms or waking up in the middle of the night thinking they need to read their Bible or just thinking they need something different in their life - and they're exploring what that could possibly be. And then eventually, they end up in our churches. That's a big shift.

Another big shift, he notes is that they're 'self-taught before arriving in our congregations.'

Rich Miles: Many of them have bought bibles before they've attended. They're reading scripture independently, consuming Christian content online like listening to podcasts on apologetics. They're exploring faith for months, sometimes years, before they're visiting our churches. So, I'm wondering, is church no longer the starting point for faith formation?

He concludes with the striking observation that 'many young adults ultimately aren't spiritual consumers. I think they're spiritual researchers.'

Rachel Drury agrees that she is seeing people "coming to faith through social media and doing their own research first." Though that has its drawbacks, she explains:

Rachel Drury: [Self research] is probably some of the challenge. Some of the stuff that people are seeing on social media, like Christian nationalism, is something that we've had to work hard to work out how we navigate this situation.

Phoebe Turner, who has been working on research with Dr Edward David on [The Gen Z Role Models Project](#), says that speaking with agnostic young adults about exploring spirituality online, they reported it can be a "minefield," with concerns about discerning extremist and cult views.

Phoebe Turner: I think for me, the social media piece is something that's still really confusing. I know a young adult who had started a journey of faith after she'd tried praying and had an experience of God. She had started to think about baptism, but looking at faith content online nearly derailed the whole thing because she started wondering 'is that what Christianity looks like?' I think that it's quite a confusing space.

Rachel Drury: I totally appreciate Phoebe's point, but there's also the idea that if we're not there, if the more moderate views aren't there, then the only thing they're seeing [is extreme views] and your algorithm ends up down a rabbit hole. I definitely think there's some research to be done into whether that is the right space and, if it is, how is it done well? How does the Church of England inhabit that space in a productive way?

What are young adults looking for?

Belonging and community

While culturally there has been a shift in views about spirituality, community remains a big draw for those joining a church. Drury saw this reflected in both the report and in her work with the Alban Way:

Rachel Drury: Part of what we create with the Alban Way is a community of young adults, but we're not taking them out of their own context. Many of them talk about the older people in their congregations and the important relationships they have. People finding others who love them in a Christian context - that's definitely something that we've encountered as well.

Turner says that the Models Project research echoed findings in our young adults research on the importance of personal connection and community building:

Phoebe Turner: One of [Edward David's recommendations] is making space for community, for in-person community, for making spaces where young adults in our parishes know who their parish priest is.

Visibility of churches in communities is important, Miles says, as is being a place of welcome, and not being afraid to go deep.

Rich Miles: Community is what turns curiosity into commitment. That's what I took from the report is that most of the journeys of the young people have involved a friend, a housemate, a partner, a chaplain, and a welcoming congregation. People may discover Jesus online, but they usually stay because they find belonging.

Practise and encounter

Places of community allow for both deepening of spiritual practices and a safe space to bring hard questions and doubts. While Drury says that 'the biggest draw' for the Alban Way ministry is the 'community element,' it is the connection through practices which help deepen their sense of community as well as their individual faith:

Rachel Drury: It's how people are looking to connect. That practise part is something that we've really seen coming through in St Albans.

Pilgrimage, in particular, has proved transformative:

Rachel Drury: And we've had people say afterwards 'my life has been changed'... And I think that is what our young adults are looking for, is that real experiential, like this is the journey that they're going on.

Rich Miles: What I see in young adults is they're hungry for holiness. They're fasting, they're praying, they're having agape love feasts. This wasn't much mentioned in the report from that perspective. But I see that in my local context of young adults desperately going after holiness.

Reflecting theologically on the report, Turner was reminded of Mark 5 and the different ways people come to Jesus:

Phoebe Turner: In Mark 5 you get different people falling at Jesus's feet in very different ways. I think that's what the report was embracing - that there are experiences simultaneously going on that are very different, but have a common theme of encounter.

Rich Miles: That whole thing of encounter is huge. I think a lot of churches feel like, well, we've got to do this in order to get this result for God to show up. And I think that's just not the case - we just sort of got them there and the Holy Spirit did the rest. Looking through the stories in the research, they're experiencing the Holy Spirit when prayer is offered. Their ultimate, ultimate encounter with God is through prayer.

The importance of prayer is helping create encounter was also emphasised by Turner:

Phoebe Turner: Encounter and prayer - everything that I've seen with young adults coming to faith recently has been a move of the Holy Spirit or a young adult encountering the Holy Spirit for the first time.

Running through the discussion was a sense that young adults are not merely looking for spiritual experiences but for practises, disciplines, and communities capable of sustaining their faith. Turner noted that even the agnostic young adults advised churches to "fully own" what they believe and practise. Similarly, Miles and Drury also found the desire for a deep and "full-fat faith" in their interactions with young adults.

Rich Miles: They want a rule of life, but they want it to be quite simple in how they are remembering it, but they want it to be hugely deep.

Rachel Drury: They're looking for things that are real. They don't want kind of a nicely packaged Christianity, but they want something that is real and people talking about those real moments and leading from that kind of posture.

Far from seeking a more accessible Christianity, our practitioners emphasised that young adults are searching for a faith that is rich, authentic, and deeply rooted in practise.

What is the Church being invited to learn?

While the report and conversation help us understand the changing landscape of young adult faith journeys, there was also recognition that every story is different. Ultimately, it is God who encounters the individual and draws them to himself. Yet there remains an important role for the Church to play.

Shepherd's final challenge to the practitioners was to reflect on what it means, in Miles' words, to ask: "How can we join in?"

Leadership and authenticity

One area where young adults may be underserved in churches, our practitioners worry, is in discipleship and leadership opportunities. Turner acknowledges there can be opposing messages in discipling this age demographic:

Phoebe Turner: I think there's a lot of that [tension] in the way that people are talking about young adult ministry. Sometimes it's embracing the fact that they are a transient, they're trying things out. If they come to a church once and then disappear, be ready for that. But on the other hand, they want to step into leadership. So sometimes the messaging is conflicting, but that makes sense given the stories that we're seeing.

Drury wonders how churches move beyond welcome to genuinely make space for young adults and their gifts:

Rachel Drury: We massively promote within the Alban Way allowing young adults to do leadership in whatever way it is that they want to be involved in. We're not thinking of them as leaders of the future, they're the leaders of now. How do we do that well and how do we disciple our current church to do that well?

Phoebe Turner: There is evidence that we had which showed that by teaching people to pray, they naturally want to share those experiences with others. There is something in that - rather

than teaching people how to share the gospel - is it about teaching people how to build that relationship with God? So they're filled with the fire of wanting to share it.

Miles agrees that faith formation and discipleship is 'really around living and telling the story of Jesus' and less about programmes and techniques.

Rich Miles: Don't try and be a sage. Don't try and be the person who has all the answers when a young adult asks you a question. Because if you really don't know the answer and you fake it, it breaks the authenticity and trust that they have in you. The best thing you can say is, "I don't know, but why don't we go on the journey of finding out together?" Because then that automatically creates a means for discipleship to start.

Young adults want to be treated as the adults they are: challenged, trusted and discipled through real and authentic relationships. Even though their journeys often begin alone and online, it is the gift of community that can nurture curiosity into belonging and lead towards a life-changing encounter with God. The Church still has an important part to play in these journeys. So the question remains: if God is doing a new thing, will the Church be ready to join in?

Key takeaways

- Young adults are arriving differently: Many begin with personal spiritual exploration, online research and independent faith-seeking before ever attending a church.
- Community and encounter remain central: While the route to faith may have changed, belonging still matters. Community often turns curiosity into commitment, creating spaces where young adults can encounter God through prayer, worship, pilgrimage and shared practices.
- Young adults are seeking depth: Many are looking for spiritual practices, authenticity and a faith capable of shaping their lives, rather than a simplified or consumer-friendly Christianity.
- Discipleship is relational and authentic: Young adults are looking for leaders who are willing to journey alongside them, creating space for prayer, encounter and honest questions rather than offering easy answers.
- Young adults are not just leaders of the future: Churches are being invited to create meaningful opportunities for young adults to contribute, lead and belong now.