



Analysis of interviews

FINAL REPORT

September 2023

Executive Summary—Overview of the findings

Introduction - this study explores the journeys to faith of 20 adults from different churches in and around Edinburgh, based on interviews undertaken by Hope City Church. Ten men and ten women representing age groups from 20s to 80s described their lives before faith, the factors involved in them becoming a Christian, how this experience had impacted on them and the people in their lives and their experience of church.

This report presents interview analysis undertaken by social research company The Lines Between and concludes with a comment on how the journeys to faith described reflect on the ministry values at Hope City Church.

Study participants represent a huge diversity of family backgrounds and life experiences, from those who have had relatively stable and settled lives to others who have faced trauma and significant challenges. There is also great variety in previous experience of Christian teaching and understanding within people's upbringing or education prior to their recent journey to faith. At most, this had given people a basic belief but not a personal faith.

The commonality for this diverse group is that nearly all experienced a turning point either as part of a slow process of acceptance and understanding, or as a sudden and significant moment of realisation, and become a Christian.

Precipitating factors and starting points – a range of precipitating factors were present for people. These provided a context or foundation on which their journey to faith was based. This included dissatisfaction with current life and focus, experiencing stress or mental ill health, life changes resulting from the pandemic lockdown, reaching rock bottom because of addiction or multiple traumatic issues, or for others, the quiet encouragement and example of Christian colleagues, friends or neighbours.

Beyond this context, there were triggers, actions or tangible events which acted as starting points for people's active journey to faith. These came in various forms including listening to or reading Christian resources, attending church services or Christian events, or being asked a question which reframed a personal situation. For those who were open to support and solutions or a different perspective, or in some cases, felt desperate for change, these became important milestones.

Key factors in the journey to faith – an essential component in most journeys to faith was contact, to varying degrees, with a Christian. This included one-off encounters with strangers which offered a catalytic moment of challenge, support or invitation, through to longer-term relationships with friends, colleagues or neighbours which provided trusted support, inspirational example or encouragement to attend an event.

Out of 20 interviews there were only three examples where there was no obviously strong influence from a Christian in the early stages of people's journey to faith. In contrast, nearly half of the participants had received invitations from friends to church or other events, and described Christians they had known as a positive example or influence. This contact was experienced as genuine, non-judgmental, kind and compassionate as well as offering a

helpful opportunity to discuss issues and answer questions honestly. Courses, online resources, Bible passages and worship songs had also been helpful components for many.

Experience of coming to faith – twelve of the twenty interviewees described experiencing a specific and significant moment of realisation or salvation in their journey to faith. Eight were experiencing a time of difficulty, while four reached this point after a time of searching. These moments included physical sensations, a voice, interventions by strangers, or a reading or song which touched people deeply. Even for those who described a more gradual process of finding their faith, there was generally a point of commitment where people described gaining a new sense of peace or excitement in finding an answer.

Those who had been baptised said this had been an important milestone in their journey to faith; a powerful expression of acceptance and obedience, an outward expression to others, and a way to deepen involvement in a community of believers. For some who had described the most challenging personal issues, there was a strong sense of an opportunity for a fresh start, and a sense of freedom and cleansing from the past. Reflecting on the new-found role of God in their lives, people described a new beginning in terms of their behaviour, attitudes and ability to cope with life's challenges, and having a sense of peace and of being forgiven.

Families and friends offered mixed responses for those who had made a Christian commitment. Reactions range from hostility, concern, respectful disagreement, curiosity to acceptance. Some described important family relationships or friendships as having changed significantly; initiated by themselves or in some cases by another's response to their faith.

It was difficult to draw conclusions about any impact of demographic factors on people's journey to faith, given the range of other variables in their lives. However, young people appear less likely to have had any foundational Christian input through home or school, more likely to use online resources and have the issue of facing concern from parents if they have made a life-changing faith decision.

The role of church - half of the interviewees had begun attending church after coming to faith in another setting. For others, attending church had been because they were actively spiritually searching or attending an event out of more general interest. Most of these people experienced a gradual journey to becoming a Christian, growing in knowledge and understanding through small groups, courses and church services and by being part of the church community.

A small number of people described an initial challenge of attending church - an intimidating environment with lots of strangers, while attending online services was described by some as an easier way to explore church. Having a sense of shame was a further emotional barrier for those who perceived that their past behaviour would be unacceptable within church. However, the majority were positive about early experiences of church finding a warm caring welcome. Those who had made a commitment of faith relished the opportunity to join a church and be in a community of believers. Courses accessed through church were described as helpful ways of having questions answered and for growth in faith.

Barriers to faith - the public perception and misconceptions of Christianity, along with lifestyles portrayed in the media which were seen to conflict with Christian values, were seen as barriers for adults coming to faith. While the study found examples of people whose faith journey had been supported largely by online resources, it was also recognised that people face the challenge of identifying trusted voices from the breadth of information available. The important role of churches in providing clarity, answers to common questions and an example of how to live was highlighted.

Learning for Hope City - the twenty interviewees' stories indicate key factors in their journeys to faith. The role of Christians has been important in answering questions, providing invitations and offering a kind, supportive approach. Churches offer places for those who are spiritually searching as well as those who have made a Christian commitment and are seeking a community of believers. People have valued the acceptance and welcome of church community as well as opportunities to learn and grow in faith.

The stories resonate with elements of Hope City's three ministry values of being friends, taking part and small steps for example with its emphasis on;

- church members focusing on deepening their supportive and invitational relationships with non-Christian friends;
- taking steps to make gatherings accessible, understandable and inclusive; and
- recognising that people's journeys to faith can take place through small steps supported by simple acts of faith-based love and friendship.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report presents the findings from an analysis of 20 interviews undertaken by Hope City Church with people who were interviewed on the basis that they had come to Christian faith as adults¹, within the last five years.
- 1.2. Ten women and ten men of a range of ages (from early 20s to early 80s) took part in the interviews. All were members of churches within Edinburgh or close to the city.
- 1.3. Most interviews were conducted by pairs of interviewers organised by Hope City Church. The interviews ranged in formality, for example, in some cases the interviewer and interviewee knew each other. However, an interview guide provided a basis for each conversation which **broadly covered the following topics:**
 - life before faith
 - journey to faith
 - reaction of family and friends to new-found faith
 - experience of faith and of being part of a community of believers
 - perceived barriers to adults coming to faith.

2. Findings

Life before faith

- 2.1. Interviewees' backgrounds and journeys to faith were diverse, spanning:
 - stable to very troubled childhoods;
 - strong family ties to estrangement;
 - a range of relationship situations and bereavements;
 - experience of addictions or other harmful behaviours (or none); and
 - those who had reached breaking point in life, to those who were simply 'going with the flow'.



"Before I became a Christian, I had quite a turbulent childhood, so then into being a young adult, I guess I was angry a lot of things."



"Maybe for the last 10 years it has been more about my mental health, finding belonging. And I guess it's been like, you know, jumping from one struggle to the next."

¹ Two interviewees said that they did not yet define themselves as Christian, saying they were a 'seeker' or that this was something they were still wrestling with whilst having a strong basis of belief in God.

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“I was definitely going with the flow, seeing work as fun tokens. I was just enjoying life I guess. I've been brought up from a Christian family....but as a teenager, I kind of rebelled ...I wasn't disrespectful to Christianity or people with faith or God. I was like, I think there's a God but you know, it wasn't in the forefront of my mind. I was like, yeah, that's for when I get old. I'll do that later.”

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“I would say my life was basically going to work, going to the gym, and then going out on the weekends drinking.”

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“University had been pitted as this thing - and I'm sure that for anyone, for most people, is that this is the place to be, where life is good, life is the ultimate... It's going to be a place where everything comes together and I just didn't feel that at all. I felt like I tasted the fruit and the fruit was sour and it was rubbish. And yeah, for me, it just wasn't satisfying.”

- 2.2. Despite this variety, all interviewees had been on a journey to faith, and all had experienced a turning point. For just under half, this was a slow process of acceptance and understanding across many years; the others experienced more sudden realisation and belief at specific significant moments, prompted by active searching or by a challenging situation.
- 2.3. Most interviewees had some experience of Christian teaching or at least minimal church attendance in childhood, for example, because of their family upbringing or through RE or assemblies in school. Typically, this had not impacted on them at the time in any significant way. Some reflected that this early engagement had been ‘more head than heart’ compared to their recent experience. One person had made a faith commitment when younger which was subsequently not nourished or sustained, and others mentioned having a sense of God – but no-one described a strong ongoing faith or relationship with God until their adult experience.
- 2.4. A small number of interviewees reflected that some aspects of Christian teaching they had heard as children or young people had been negative; creating fear or perceiving their teacher as a poor role model.

Precipitating factors (Life Circumstances)

- 2.5. Everyone described precipitating factors manifesting in their life, which provided a context and a foundation for their journey to faith. Interviewees included those describing one strong precipitating factor, and others who experienced more than one. The factors were:
- **trauma** (childhood or adult), addiction issues, family breakdown, suicidal thoughts, described by some as taking them to ‘rock bottom’;

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“I had my will done, paid for my funeral and I was going to commit suicide. I couldn't cope with it anymore.”

- **challenges** such as stress at work, mental ill-health, social isolation, pandemic lockdown, including for some a perception that being self-reliant was not sufficient to cope, leading to an openness or desire to seek change for the better;
- **dissatisfaction** with life's current focus and priorities, feeling unfulfilled, questioning alternative ways of living, a time of spiritual exploring or searching for meaning;

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"I became more aware of what was wrong around me. ... I don't know, it was something deep, not something that I searched for, but all of a sudden I had this... Where do I belong? Where do I fit into the world? What is this? Why am I here?"

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"During COVID those three things basically stopped - seeing friends, going to work, going to the gym is like over now. So I've got a lot of time to think well, what was the point of those things? I was crying... I was like, you know, here's the thing that worries me, is that I worry that we don't come out of this lockdown. And I don't want to go back to the things that I had before it. Because I realise how little value they were actually giving me in any lasting sense."

- **relationships with Christians**, including having a relationship with a Christian which motivated them to look into what was important for their partner, or being alongside Christians who provided sufficient example for people to be curious about Christianity.

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"And we got to the point where we were like, you know, this is probably not going to work because we come from different places and you know, you're a Christian, I'm not. I said, you know what, I'll come to church with you, I'll try it, see what it's all about. So I did, I started going to church."

Starting points in the journey to faith

- 2.6. For those who could specify the starting point of their journey to faith, it was most commonly when they were in one of the following situations:
- actively questioning life's meaning and seek answers;
 - being open to spiritual exploring (including across other religions);
 - experiencing personal difficulty or challenge (differing in severity), sometimes finding themselves in a vulnerable state, and being open to support or solutions;
 - being alongside Christians and responding to their example of a positive way of living.
- 2.7. Some interviewees felt that their journey to faith had been in God's time. They reflected that sometimes prolonged difficult times in their life had ultimately been important experiences. For that reason the start of their journey was hard to define, as these times might be considered part of the journey, even though the person wasn't actively spiritually searching.
- 2.8. In some cases, the starting point was a sudden significant moment of realisation which led to a time of deeper exploration. Others began their journey to faith in a more gradual way.

Supporting factors – contact with Christians

- 2.9. The presence of Christians at some point in their journey to faith was an essential element for most people. These included:
- one-off encounters with strangers which offered catalytic moments, where searching questions were posed, prayer was spontaneously offered, or an invitation to an event was made or
 - a longer-term basis, such as spending time with Christian colleagues or neighbours, or having friendships or relationships with Christians, or entering into a supportive mentoring relationship with a Christian specifically to explore aspects of faith.
- 2.10. These engagements with Christians had provided:
- Invitations – an invitation to a Christian event, course or church service, a welcome, an offer of hospitality;
 - Opportunity – to have questions answered, issues discussed or a chance to engage in debate;
 - Example – colleagues, neighbours, friends living in a way that was perceived to be good or desirable;
 - Trust – the experience of loyal friendship and support over time including ongoing prayer support, so that people turned to Christian contacts at a time of need; or
 - Support – practical and prayer support.

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At the flat I viewed was a girl who goes to [NAME OF CHURCH]. And we sat down and had a cup of coffee to view this flat. And we just got on really, really well and stuff. And I didn't end up moving...But, you know, six months later ...I was living on my own...and stuff was still really, really bad. And then I just was like, out of desperation, how about I just call that girl that I knew from the spare room? So I called her and just went, 'Oh, you know, do you remember me? Like, do you mind if I come to church?' She was obviously like, 'Yeah, sure, that's fine'... she's made an impression on me when I met her you know.”

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“My mum's been my biggest supporter through life...there's a group of her friends that have been through the years. And I just think it's amazing. Like they've all been so strong they've done so much for me. Like through my bad times. They were always praying in the background. I called them my diamond geezers - honestly they're powerful people.”

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[in a conversation with a stranger] “She asked me direct, ‘How is your faith?’

And I was 'Faith? I have no faith in this'. You know pretty much I cannot answer that. I have none to give you, and she said 'Can I pray for you?'.... Whatever she prayed made me feel better."



"They [neighbours] were so friendly. But at the same time, they didn't speak about God to us at that time. It was just the friendliness the way they lived."

2.11. Out of the 20 interviews, there were:

- 4 examples of catalytic moments with strangers (3 involving invitations, 2 involving questions, 1 involving an offer of prayer) which had been key in a journey to faith;
- 9 examples of invitations from friends, to church (6), Christian events (2) or to volunteer at a church-based volunteer activity (1);
- 8 examples of people being influenced recently by, or having strong positive memories of Christians as role models;
- 4 examples of people contacting others they knew to be Christian when they were at a point of personal crisis or in need of support about new-found faith.
- Only 3 examples where there was no obviously strong influence from a Christian in the early stages of people's journey to faith.

2.12. The nature of this engagement was important, as people described their contact with Christians as having offered a warm welcome, showing a genuine interest in them and their situation, sharing kindness and compassion in times of difficulty, being non-judgmental, an opportunity to discuss issues and answer questions honestly from a Christian perspective, without being pushy or overbearing.

Supporting factors – encounters with Christian teaching

2.13. Experiences of receiving Christian teaching or attending church in their youth had generally given interviewees a perspective on God but no personal faith. Their perception of this time ranged from those who had a general belief in God's existence, to those who felt no impact. Two talked of experiences of Christian teaching as children which had made them fearful, for example of death.

2.14. As adults, interviewees described encountering Christian teaching in a range of ways; through reading, watching presentations, speaking to people and Christian music. Examples included:

- seeking answers to questions (online talks, reading Christian literature, or having questions answered in-person through courses with resources, or in individual conversation);
- the Bible, which was described as a basis for questions and challenge, as a route to belief, as a reassurance in troubling times, and as a way of gaining understanding of meaning;
- worship songs which resonated with interviewees' experiences (thereby touching them personally and emotionally);

- visiting different churches and experiencing teaching, worship and community.

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“He [mentor] never gave me a perfect answer to any of my questions. He didn't. What he did say was ‘Listen, this is what I believe, this is my faith,’ and he gave me, a general overall hope amongst the idea in my head that I was just a bunch of cells and nothing's there. He gave me a hope that Jesus is giving me a worth.”

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“I was learning quite a lot quite quickly considering I've never opened a Bible in my life ... I'd say AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) had given me quite an open-minded mindset... I was completely willing to be like, yeah, let's see what this is about kind of thing. And again, like stories, like, you know, with Jesus at the well, and all of those stories, the words meant something to me personally.”

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“Eventually I stay up one night and Frank Turek is a Christian apologist. He's doing a video giving evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and I just turned it off, but it left me with a 'what if' question of, well, if there's evidence for a guy coming back from the dead, that's kind of strange. How does that make sense? So that sort of started the process of like serious questioning of Christianity. And then after like two months of that, I was like, this is true.”

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“Mum passed away. And that was in the very early hours of Friday morning. Friday lunchtime. I had this overwhelming feeling ‘open your Bible’. I opened my Bible and I started reading Second Corinthians. And bang, there it is ‘I'm with you’. God is with me, even though I'm going through so much pain. God is with me. And I just read that and I thought you really are talking to me, aren't you?”

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“My worship music speaks to me, like Goodness of God or Back to Life or Canvas and Clay... you know I'm that clay and he builds you back up and no matter what I've been through do you know God will use that to help other people. ... If I'm feeling fear or scared one day, my worship music picks me back up - it doesn't matter what comes child, I've got you. I've got you.”

Supporting factors - key moments

- 2.15.** Twelve interviewees described a specific and significant moment of realisation or salvation in their journey to faith. These experiences included:
- an experience of physical healing, after prayer;
 - a physical sensation at a point of crisis, and with that, receiving certainty of God's presence;
 - an internal voice offering a choice, which in one case averted suicide and led to an individual contacting a Christian friend instead;
 - a question from a stranger, an invitation to a Christian event which subsequently led to a time of personal challenge and change;

- a worship song (in person or online) or Bible passage that resonated in a profound and life-changing way;
- a moment of commitment, which immediately resolved a time of difficulty or an addictive behaviour.

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“I was broken praying just ‘Lord if you know my cry and you know me you'll give me a sign’ and I was standing praying and a hand on my shoulder, and I got a fright - I looked round there was nobody behind me...I know myself if I hadn't have had that physical touch I wouldn't be following the Lord...That's the turning point for me...that physical touch, that's what made me look and follow...”

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[Describes going to an evangelistic evening event and being given a Gospel booklet to take away] “The next morning in my flat I was sitting reading the Gospel of John and I was like, it hit me. I was just like, oh my goodness, I just need to come to Christ.”

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*And throughout all of that she [friend] was always sort of on the sideline - we stayed friends...she had tried over a period of five years to try and get me to be in the Christian faith. And I've just... I've made a big joke on Christianity because I just didn't believe anything...
So when it came to the time for me to commit suicide, just suddenly this voice from nowhere said ‘No, you are not ready to leave. You have to stay.’
And it was just so overwhelming that I thought now I'm hearing voices but it just kept going....
I approached her [friend]. I sent her an email and I said, I need to speak to you. I'm getting this really loud voice saying I have to change.”*

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“I found my way to Jesus... I think I was surprised excited and scared that I had finally found the truth. I don't think I'd really expected such a miracle when you're born again. I do remember coming outside my room and I see my flatmate ... He said to me ‘There's something different about you’ and I said Yeah I feel different I don't know what's happened”.

- 2.16.** Even for those who described a more gradual process of finding their faith, there was generally a point of commitment - a ‘this is it’ moment and sense of 'no going back'. At this point people described gaining a new sense of peace.

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“I guess it's this year, has just been where everything's kind of gotten stronger and more cemented, and more peace.”

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“It was a part of spiritual awakening for me... My heart was starting to thaw you know, the frost was going away from it because it just felt like I could be vulnerable.”

- 2.17.** Motivations for getting baptised or considering baptism were:

- a perception that it was an important step of spiritual growth;

- an act of admission and acceptance, of Christian belief and obedience;
- an opportunity to deepen involvement in a community of believers;
- a practical, visible, symbolic step - offering themselves and what they have;
- an opportunity for freedom, cleansing from the past a fresh, a peace-filled new start.

2.18. Baptism was often described as an important moment in itself but also an onward step in a journey to faith. No-one talked of going backwards since being baptised.



"I didn't fully understand it, but I knew that Jesus commands us to be baptised. And so I went right well, I need to be baptised then."



"It was just a declaration for me. I'm serious about this."



"To wash my sins away. To have my past washed away. Cos I've been through a lot and to start over I knew I wanted that washed away because to start a new fresh life in the Lord... it feels like it has. It's been all washed away. But I knew I still lived that [former life] if you know what I mean – it's weird. And you know when I got baptised everything started falling into place."



"It was one of the things [baptism] that we both wanted to do. We just felt by doing that we were not committing ourselves, but admitting to ourselves who God was to us and what God meant to us."

Supporting factors – other themes described from people's journeys

2.19. Other elements of journeys to faith were also described by interviewees, such as a desire to learn and be part of community, gaining in confidence in faith, and changes in behaviour and attitude. For example:

- experiencing a growth in interest and hunger for more knowledge about Christianity;
- recognising intellectual acceptance of belief being separate from emotional acceptance/faith in daily living;
- increasingly craving meeting with other Christians in order to meet like-minded people and feel part of community;
- attending Christian courses, workshops or groups;
- finding illustrations from images or life experiences to be helpful reminders;
- having questions patiently answered including those about self-doubt and shame about past;
- experiencing changes in their behaviour or attitudes after continued exposure to Bible, perceived by people as being by the work of the Holy Spirit;
- increasing involvement in learning and volunteering opportunities e.g. at church, giving a stronger foundation for faith;

- feeling more able to cope with life's challenges than they had previously done.

Responses from family and friends

- 2.20. Interviewees experienced a diverse range of responses from family members and friends on their journey to faith. This depended on each friend or family member's own attitudes to Christianity, and their willingness to accept a sometimes significant and sudden change in their loved one's life. Reactions ranged from hostility, concern, respectful disagreement, curiosity and acceptance.
- 2.21. Themes across responses can be summarised as follows:
- family members or friends who thought that interviewees had been brainwashed or joined a cult, or that they had become a different person, leading to concern for their welfare, or to relationship breakdown on a temporary or permanent basis;
 - initial suspicion or negative responses from family members or friends, who ultimately reached a level of acceptance, for example attending the interviewee's baptism;
 - some interviewees had taken the initiative to change some friendships which they now saw as negative, for example if they were predominantly based on behaviours such as drinking alcohol, which they no longer wanted to continue with;
 - comments from friends that the interviewee appeared more relaxed or at peace, or in one case there was a visible difference immediately after a conversion experience;
 - some interviewees expressed a desire to speak out and tell family, friends and others about their new-found faith because of their perception that people needed to be saved. There was some recognition of the need for this to be done sensitively and with humility;
 - interviewees who were parents often expressed a desire that their children would come to faith.

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“My parents were like ‘What on earth is this?...’....My family were number one for so long in my life like and then I made the switch and yeah, I never felt happier but also felt tough and hurt.”

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“My eldest daughter, she said that she's thankful for Jesus because He healed my mental health .. she could see that..... My sister's been up since I came to faith, and she's like, ‘You're relaxed now.’”

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“It's tougher with my friends because all they would do is go out and drink in order to see each other - that was the extent of their activities. I don't want to go and do that anymore. So are we going to see each other outside of that? I think there was a period of time where I just went, right, I don't want to do that. I would just sort of stop seeing them. And now I'm realising that that's not good and I'd like to start seeing them more one-on-one and so I've started doing that slowly, and it'd be good to get

back in touch with them individually. But as a group, it's tough because they just go out and drink."

The role of God in people's lives

- 2.22. Interviewees reflected on the role of God in their lives since making a commitment to Christian faith. For most this meant a new beginning in behaviour, attitudes and ability to cope with life's challenges summarised as:
- Behaving differently – changed ways of thinking, doing and being. Making different lifestyle choices which reduced damage to self and others.
 - Viewing things differently - changed attitudes to other people, for example, feeling able to forgive, and to be open and truthful in conversation. Having a different attitude to money, for example, tithing.
 - Being forgiven – feeling free from shame of past behaviours;
 - Released into a new life – feeling able to live differently and having openness and confidence to explore and take on new opportunities; and
 - Finding peace – recognising and accepting life's ups and downs but feeling supported in challenging times with a removal of anxiety.

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“He [God] says we are forgiven, everything in the past is gone now. That just makes me so excited. Life is great... I mean, we still have our struggles but God is there.”

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“He's [God] totally totally changed me as a person, like my way of thinking, the way I do things. People have done really bad things to me over my life and I've forgiven them all. He's just done wonders to my life.”

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“The second I became a Christian, I stopped being addicted to porn. Literally the moment I became a Christian, which is something that I tried to quit so many times before that, and I was getting to a point where I couldn't. I knew it was wrong...”

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“There was always dread - what if something bad was going to happen to me that day - always every day I woke up that's how I felt. Until the day I knew he was with me and its gone now. I never get it now. I NEVER get it now.”

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“No matter what I'm going through I can make sense of it a bit more. I can understand why it's happening - like my suffering and trials and pain is way worse now than it was before I was a Christian but I have a much better tolerance to those things and you know I have a saviour - I have somebody who protects me from that. I didn't have that before. It was like I had to deal with all my problems on my own.”

Experience of church

- 2.23. Each of the 20 interviewees talked about the timing of their initial engagement with a church during their journey to faith;
- 5 attended because they were open to doing so, though they were not specifically spiritually searching. For example, they were attending with a partner or family member out of companionship or curiosity, or because they were volunteering at a church-based event;
 - 5 were actively spiritually searching and going to church was a step in that journey before any definite commitment to faith had happened;
 - 10 had attended a church after experiencing an “awakening” or conversion in another setting.

- 2.24. The majority of those who began attending church before coming to faith, experienced a gradual journey to becoming a Christian, as they grew in knowledge and understanding through small groups, courses and church services and through being part of the church community. Some found a sense of familiarity from previous experience of church in their upbringing.



“The first time I came, I remember the songs and also that familiarity of like, ‘Oh this is what it felt like going to the Christingles’. Like, you know, singing the songs and stuff, like you get that especially from the psalm singing ... that evoked a feeling, a sense of security that I'd had as a child. A sense of familiarity.”

- 2.25. Experience of church, once interviewees became involved as part of their faith journey, was largely strongly positive. They described finding acceptance, community, a place to connect with God and an opportunity to think, discuss and have questions answered. Only two people described difficulties at this early stage. For one they had encountered judgmental or hypocritical behaviour when exploring different churches, while the other found some behaviour within a charismatic church to be overwhelming and off-putting.



“As soon as I walked in it was warm. It's an absolutely beautiful place and everyone was just so warm and welcoming. You could actually feel the sound of it – cheesy – but you could actually feel the love.”

- 2.26. A quarter of interviewees described courses they had accessed through church, for example, Alpha, Journey into Healing and Christianity Explored. These were not generally named as the deciding factor in a journey to faith but were described as being helpful steps along the way, which answered questions and strengthened a foundation of faith.
- 2.27. Even where church was described positively, the initial experience of attending was described as being intimidating by some. Reasons for this were described as:
- attending church in-person being a more challenging experience than attending online;
 - having a sense of shame for their past life leading to a feeling of not being worthy, and a perception that they could not be accepted in a church because of this;

- being uncertain or anxious about the church environment – feeling like an outsider coming in and not knowing who they will meet, knowing what to wear, say or do;
- perceiving church as being family-focused when they were single.

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“Church can be a lonely place if you don't fit.”

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“I tried more churches online as well. Obviously it was a lot less intimidating to do that, you know, I didn't have to walk in anywhere and especially when I didn't have [name] to come with me to go. So probably if lockdown hadn't happened I don't know whether I would have carried on trying new places. I don't know if I would have had the confidence to do that on my own.”

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“We moved away from Zoom, and I went to church, it was so intimidating. At first because I think there's a real realisation of I haven't been living so good. I don't know if maybe that's only something for me. I realised that when I walked into the church, that I haven't been making good choices...It didn't matter. It didn't matter that we'd never been. Everybody was so welcoming.”

2.28. Other potential barriers for people engaging with church included confusion about the differences between different Christian denominations and a concern that a church's values might not match the individual's personal values, for example around same-sex marriage or the role of women.

2.29. Factors which had helped people to deal with these issues included:

- attending with a friend;
- receiving a genuine, kind, accepting, interested, but non-intrusive welcome;
- the pastor taking time to meet them;
- online service – as an easy way to observe more anonymously;
- being involved in an easy practical task early on;
- familiarity, for example with music from previous experience of church.

Connecting to a community of believers

2.30. Interviewees described bonds of connection in a community of believers. This included feeling at home, sharing beliefs, gaining support from community and learning and growing in faith alongside others. The main themes emerging from this topic were:

- a place of sanctuary – feeling at home and unburdened;
- attitudes / behaviour - feeling welcomed and able to 'be myself';
- shared community of belief – feeling part of the same family believing in Jesus - a community of fellow believers to love, be loved by and be challenged by;
- shared community of support - strength in community through ups and downs – a feeling of instant reconnection at church even if times have been hard;

- practical involvement – volunteering roles were described as enabling people to cement a connection with a community of believers, or support them to realise and have confidence in gifts they have (for example, music) or issues they are concerned about (for example, homelessness);
- learning opportunities – attending small groups, prayer groups, courses;



“Literally when we sang like the first song I just broke down in tears because just standing with all these people I just felt such a connection that we're all in the same sphere and like we're all here thanks to God and it was just so beautiful that I just knew that I was in the right place and I wasn't worried about those questions anymore. To be honest, they kind of went away at that point.”

- 2.31. Potential barriers to connecting with a community (as noted in the previous section) included people feeling excluded depending on the demographic of a congregation and how welcoming it was, for example a single person feeling lonely in a family-oriented environment. One older person found modern music less accessible than familiar hymns and was less willing to go out at night which could potentially exclude them from some meetings.

Barriers to faith

- 2.32. Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the barriers to adults coming to Christian faith. The responses often focused on how Christianity was perceived and how its messages are overshadowed within modern day culture, and that good quality well-led churches were part of the solution to addressing this.
- 2.33. Some of the main points raised were:
- people having a narrow view of, or misconceptions about Christianity, for example being influenced by scandals within the church, and not understanding the concept of a relationship with God;
 - negative media portrayals of people of faith;
 - media messages / modern culture offering examples of ways of life which interviewees perceived as conflicting with Christian values (some felt this indicated that there were negative spiritual forces at work);
 - identifying / discerning a trusted source of information – a recognition that the internet offers wildly diverse opinions and sometimes the most extreme voices are the most prevalent but are not necessarily balanced or accurate;
 - the need for society's big questions to be answered clearly from a Christian perspective, but in an exploratory way rather than an overbearing style;
 - a conflict between society's view that people should be allowed to do what they want vs people needing to be saved and be in relationship with God;
 - people not understanding that a starting point can be small – exercising curiosity and asking questions;

- people being fearful of being judged - feeling ashamed of what they've done;
- the need for good quality churches supporting people to come to faith, and to grow in faith through strong leadership, clear teaching, calling out sin in a way which will be listened to, and providing a loving accepting and non-judgmental community.

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Media for a start. Outside influences mostly. I don't think the media portrays anybody that's religious, whether it's Islam or Christian, in a good light. And that's because I think we live in a very materialistic world, which is imploding as we speak, because it's not answering people's values as they thought it might do. It's hard being a Christian, there's no doubt about it.”

“

It's trust. If you can trust the people that you're around and they're loving you no matter what. Maybe then, you know, for me, you walk away and you think that they believe this, so maybe then people come to have their own relationships with Jesus.”

“

The same questions come up. So some of the biggest questions that will come up for Christians is the problem of evil, same sex marriage, abortion. Those are the three that come up. And none of those are barriers to the Holy Spirit. We should be able to answer them lovingly and provide answers to them.”

“

I think the biggest challenge right now is that the fundamental Christian belief is that people are flawed and sinful. And the current Western mindset is people are inherently good and improving every day. And so I think that these are diametrically opposed beliefs.”

Linking demographics to journey to faith

- 2.34. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions on connections between the demographics of the interview sample and their journey to faith, as there are numerous other variables at play in people's life experience.
- 2.35. Some emerging themes appear to be;
- younger people have less experience of Christian-specific RE education within schools and less experience of attending church with family members than older people. Young people referred more to their grandparents going to church rather than parents. One further issue relating to this is that young people have to deal with parents' (who are non-Christian) reaction to their new-found Christian faith;
 - younger people having used online material as part of their spiritual searching. This may have been increased by journeys to faith taking place during lockdown however seems to be a natural 'first place to look' for younger people;
 - younger people being at a changeable and formative stage of life in terms of moving away from home, developing friendships, relationships and careers;

- older people sometimes had more settled stories, but for some the extra years of life had encompassed decades of trauma or challenge – this experience was now something they were keen to use in their support of others;
- there were more examples of men immersing themselves more in reading, questioning and entering a deep intellectual challenge as part of their journey to faith.