



# RESPONDING TO GOD

## CHRISTIANS' PERSPECTIVES ON VOCATION AND CALLING



SALTLEY FAITH  
& LEARNING SERIES: 5



## **Report authors**

Ian Jones and Carlton Turner

With additional statistical analysis by Mingjie Lei

## **Acknowledgements**

Lindsey Hall, Mingjie Lei, Sally Myers, Ellie Clack, Matt Jermyn, Cath Hughes, Dave Blake, Nick Shepherd.

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# Introduction

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**Responding to God** is a research project seeking to understand the ways in which members of Anglican congregations understand questions of calling and vocation.

- Do people understand themselves to have a ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’? How far do they feel they understand that calling and are pursuing it?
- Does the language of ‘calling’ and ‘vocation’ resonate with churchgoing Anglicans? What do they think having a calling or vocation entails? What language do they themselves use to describe how God is drawing them into something new?
- What are the processes by which people hear and respond to God? Who or what are important in that process?

Seeking to understand these questions is a first step to strengthening the Church’s ability to support people in discerning and articulating their sense of calling / vocation as Christian disciples.

In the past few years there has been renewed emphasis on calling and vocation within the Church of England. This is in part related to a looming shortage of clergy, but also due to a growing recognition that the church has historically placed strong emphasis on calling to ordained and other licensed ministries, but not enough on the calling and vocation of all Christians. That there are now moves to redress this imbalance is demonstrated by a number of recent developments: for example in the publication of the Lay Leadership Task Group report **Setting God’s People Free** (2017) and work which has built upon that subsequently (for example the **Talk Calling campaign** and the **Everyday Faith resources**). Amongst ‘lay’ Anglicans consulted by the **Setting God’s People Free** task group, priorities for supporting front-line discipleship included ‘opportunities for discovering lay vocation and gifting’.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Church of England Renewal and Reform, **Setting God’s People Free: a Report from the Archbishops’ Council** (GS2056, Archbishop’s Council, London, 2017), p. 16.

At the same time, Saltley Trust's own **What Helps Disciples Grow?** research produced some tantalising findings on the question of calling: a significant majority of survey respondents were comfortable with the concept of individual calling: 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'God calls everyone to a particular place, role or task' and 25% felt that 'God's call is largely the same for everyone'. As Simon Foster observes in the report, calling is 'not just a hypothetical idea. It is very often an experience: 56% of those who took part in our survey rate experienced a "direct call or experience I believe was from God" as helpful to their journey of faith'.<sup>2</sup> The percentages suggest that whilst encouragement can be taken from the high proportion of respondents prepared to accept that God might call them (or had already done so), this left a significant minority of respondents for whom calling was in some way more problematic. Moreover, some significant demographic constituencies continue to be under-represented in the Church of England's formal vocational processes.

This research project has taken place with a range of different Anglican congregations in the Dioceses of Lichfield and Coventry, and the findings are based on the results of a questionnaire survey and a small number of interviews. As with much else in the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic seriously affected our original plans for the project. It prevented us recruiting more churches to participate in the questionnaire survey, and made it more difficult for us to secure participants for interview (although we did conduct a small number via video call). As a result, any conclusions reached in the report that follows should be considered preliminary and tentative.

Whilst recognising the limitations of our findings, we nevertheless felt it important to share the research we were able to undertake, as a contribution towards the Church's ongoing work of supporting Christians in discovering and living out God's calling.

We would welcome a conversation with anyone interested in testing out our initial findings through further questionnaire- and interview-based research.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Foster, **What Helps Disciples Grow?** (St Peter's Saltley Trust, Birmingham, 2016), p. 5.





# Research Overview

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Responding to God took place in partnership with two Church of England dioceses in the West Midlands: Lichfield, and Coventry. It took the form of:

- Consulting colleagues and existing research on calling/vocation;
- A pilot questionnaire, completed by 32 individuals at 6 churches (some outside Coventry and Lichfield dioceses);
- The main questionnaire survey, completed by 462 individuals at 18 churches;
- 4 interviews with self-selecting questionnaire respondents from participating churches.

The research was focused on adults, although some under-18s also took part in the questionnaire survey. We had two primary target groups:

- Black and Minority Ethnic Anglicans
- Anglicans with low levels of formal educational attainment

Both of these groups are under-represented within the Church's formal vocational processes, so we particularly wanted to understand how experiences of calling and vocation worked for them.

The original target for the research was 1000 questionnaire surveys from 30 churches, with 30 interviews drawn from a smaller selection of participating churches. That we fell some way short of this target was largely due to:

- Particular difficulty recruiting churches from one of the two dioceses;
- Covid-19 and national lockdown preventing a second round of recruitment;
- The need to conduct interviews via Zoom. Despite a good initial response to the invitation to interview, we only managed to set up 4 interviews – having to do the interview by video call may have been a factor.

Given that the experience of the pandemic may have had a profound effect on individuals' perceptions of their calling/vocation, it was decided, with some regret, to draw a line under the existing research, rather than try to add a further round of surveys/interviews once conditions allowed.

## Underlying Assumptions

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The research began from the following starting points:

First, we assume a **relatively broad understanding of vocation**: that God's calling is both to the whole Church and to individuals, and that it may relate to the whole of life as well as specifically to particular roles, ministries or jobs. Whilst our respondents may have more specific understandings, we wanted to set the outer limits of the conversation about vocation relatively wide. We certainly did not want to limit the conversation to 'vocation to ordained ministry', although we did not want to exclude this either.

Second, **churchgoing Anglicans' perspectives on their own calling and vocation matter**, and church leaders can learn much from hearing what their congregations say. Indeed, a rounded account of Christian vocation is incomplete without this.

Third, we noted that **certain demographic groups are under-represented within the Church of England's formal vocational processes**, and we decided to focus on two of these: Black and Minority Ethnic Anglicans, and Anglicans with low levels of formal educational attainment. These are two distinct constituencies, albeit partly overlapping.

Fourth, **we did not want to assume that the Church of England's predominant language of 'vocation' and 'calling' was the language which most resonated with our respondents/interviewees**. Therefore before introducing the words 'calling' and 'vocation' into the conversation, we wanted to give respondents the opportunity to construct their experience of responding to God in different ways.

## Survey Design

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The questionnaire survey contained 10 questions designed to explore different aspects of individuals' responses to a sense of God's calling, plus some additional demographic questions. The first part of the questionnaire asked a series of questions which might be relevant to 'calling' and 'vocation' but without using that language. For example, whether respondents:

- felt fulfilled in their Christian life
- felt God had any sort of purpose for them
- saw themselves as obedient to God
- felt they were struggling, thriving or getting by, or experienced any sense of purpose in their lives

None of these entirely encapsulated everything that might be expressed in the words 'calling' or 'vocation'; however, they may represent elements of what people might feel or understand calling/vocation to be. Only after these questions were asked did we ask more direct questions about 'calling' and 'vocation' which used these terms:

- Whether respondents felt they had a 'vocation'
- Whether respondents thought they had a 'calling' and the extent to which they understood and were pursuing this calling
- Which of a selection of definitions of 'calling' best matched their understanding

Although most survey questions were written expressly for this questionnaire, a set of six questions about 'calling' were taken from St Peter's Saltley Trust's earlier **What Helps Disciples Grow?** research. These have moderately good reliability and validity as an index of 'strength of vocation'.<sup>3</sup>

We also wanted to know something about the process by which individuals discerned their calling or vocation, or responded to God. As a result, the survey also asked:

- How respondents mostly came to know what God was asking them
- Who (if anyone) had ever asked the respondent about their own vocation, calling or purpose

The survey finished with a set of basic demographic questions to help us understand whether responses varied by gender, age, ethnic group, level of education and socio-economic status.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie J. Francis, Simon Foster, David W. Lankshear and Ian Jones, '[What helps Christians grow? An exploratory study distinguishing among four distinctive pathways](#)', *Pastoral Psychology* 68 (2019), pp. 379-392.

## Survey Sample

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Churches were selected from amongst the 'most deprived' parishes in each diocese (according to indices of multiple deprivation), and sorted into two groups: i) parishes with a significantly above average Black and Minority Ethnic population; ii) parishes with a majority White population. Of course, congregations never precisely mirror the demographics of the parish as a whole. However, in the absence of more detailed information on the ethnic profile of church congregations, this method provided some guide to identifying churches likely to be comprised of the two groups we most wanted to hear from: Black and Minority Ethnic Anglicans, and Anglicans with lower levels of formal educational attainment. The sample was checked by people with knowledge of the diocese.

These two groups were then stratified according to Usual Sunday Attendance, and a randomised sample selected from each segment. These samples were then checked to ensure a reasonable spread of contexts and church traditions.

Congregational questionnaires were usually completed during a worship service (sometimes in place of a sermon), facilitated by a church leader or (occasionally) one of the research team. Churches mostly introduced the questionnaire at their main Sunday service; some also used other services such as 8am and mid-week services. Responses were anonymous, although participants could leave their contact details if they were willing to be interviewed.

The usual adult Sunday attendance (USA) of participating churches ranged from 19 to 158. The number of responses per church ranged from 7 to 58. Although we do not have data on the number of people present when the surveys were conducted, calculating the number of responses as a proportion of USA provides a rough proxy for the response rate: this figure ranged from 9% to 82%, the median being 32%. The response rate as a % of USA in the parishes from the Diocese of Coventry was higher (44%) than for those in the Diocese of Lichfield (24%). Such response rates are not unusual for congregational surveys, but do nevertheless mean that generalisations about any particular congregation should only be made with caution. More information about the research method is provided in Appendix 1.

## Interviews

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The original aim was for a primarily qualitative piece of research with a supporting questionnaire survey to provide the depth. Sadly the pandemic intervened before it was possible to undertake any interviews, and an invitation to participate in Zoom interviews resulted in only four offers. Nevertheless, the interviews we conducted proved to be a rich source of reflection.

Interviews were conducted by Zoom by members of the research team, lasted up to an hour and were semi-structured. The interviews were then transcribed.

Rather than cover all the survey questions with interviewees, the interviews were an opportunity for individuals to tell their stories, starting with a brief life history, and then covering selected topics from the survey:

- 1.** Do you think that God ever made you for a purpose? If so tell me about it. If not, why not?
  - 1b.** Would you use the words 'calling' or 'vocation' to describe this?
- 2.** Do you have a process for asking God about who you should be/what you should do? If so tell me about it.
  - 2b.** How has that process worked out in practice for you?
- 3.** We're in the middle of the coronavirus crisis right now. How has your life been different as a result? How are you seeking to respond to the crisis, and to God, at this time?
  - 3b.** Would you tend to think of that as a 'calling' in any sense?
- 4.** Thinking about anything you've shared so far (either recent or longer ago), have you ever worked this through with anyone else – either within or outside your church? (either with a vicar, or another member of the congregation, friends or family)?
  - 4b.** What do you think a local church could do to help you explore how to respond to what God might be inviting us to do?
- 5.** Is there anything else you'd like to share which is relevant, but you haven't had a chance to say yet?

Interviews were kept short (maximum one hour) due to using Zoom; as a result, not all interviewees answered directly on Question 5.

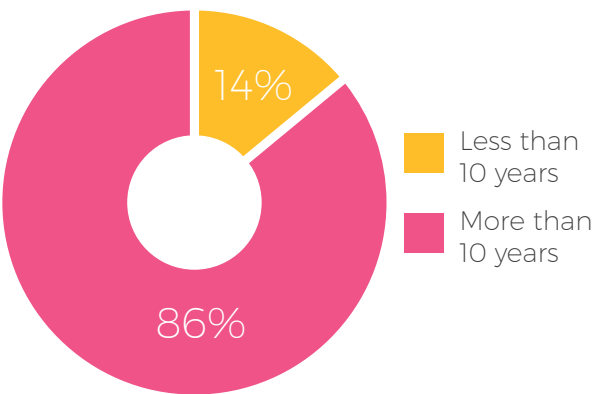
The interviews are presented as case studies at different points throughout the report. Some of these are primarily summaries of the themes emerging within a particular strand of discussion; others are more explicitly theologically reflective.



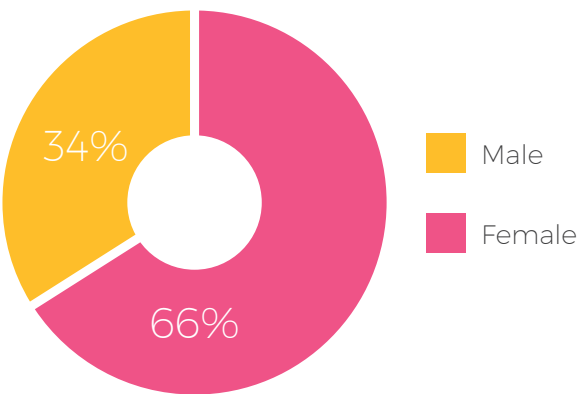
# Survey results

## Our respondents at a glance

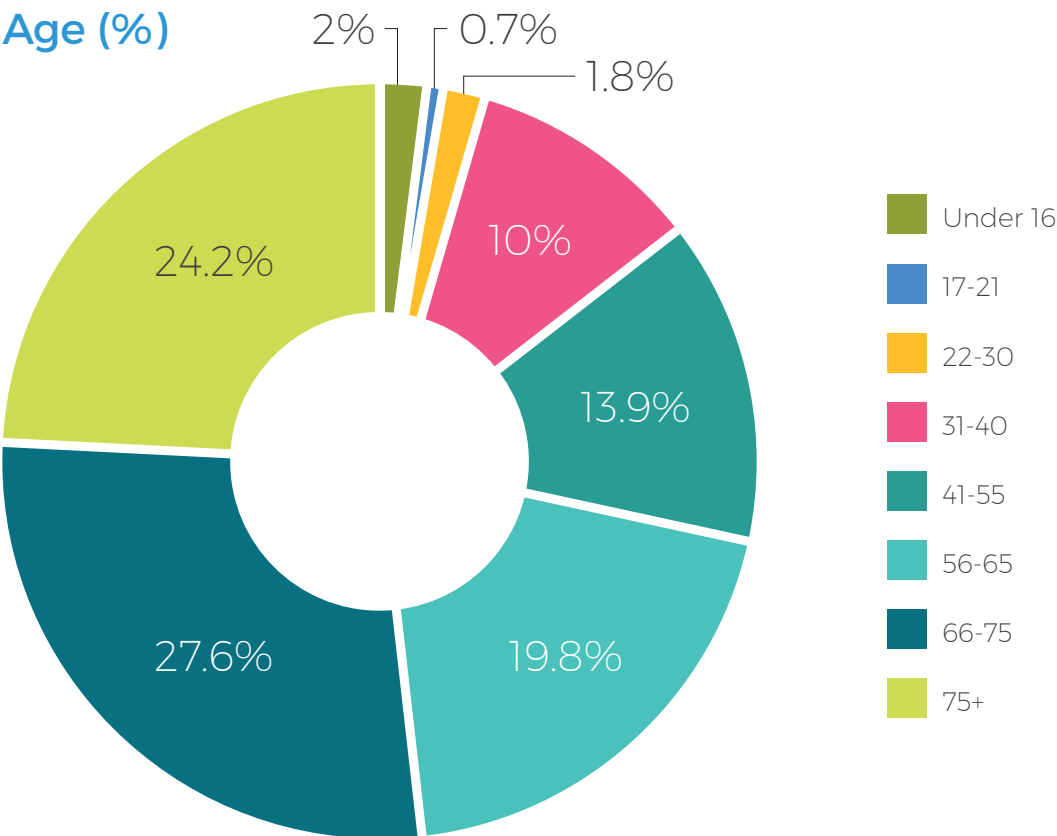
How long would you say you have been a Christian? (%)



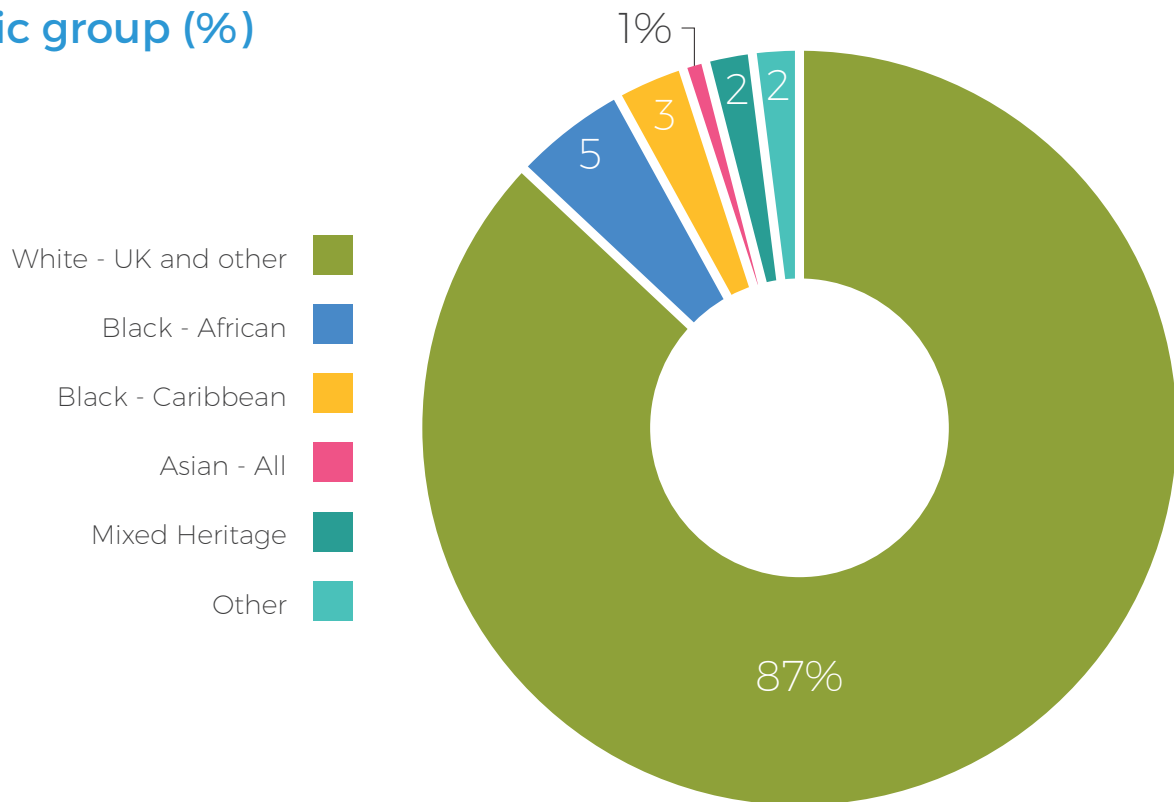
Gender (%)



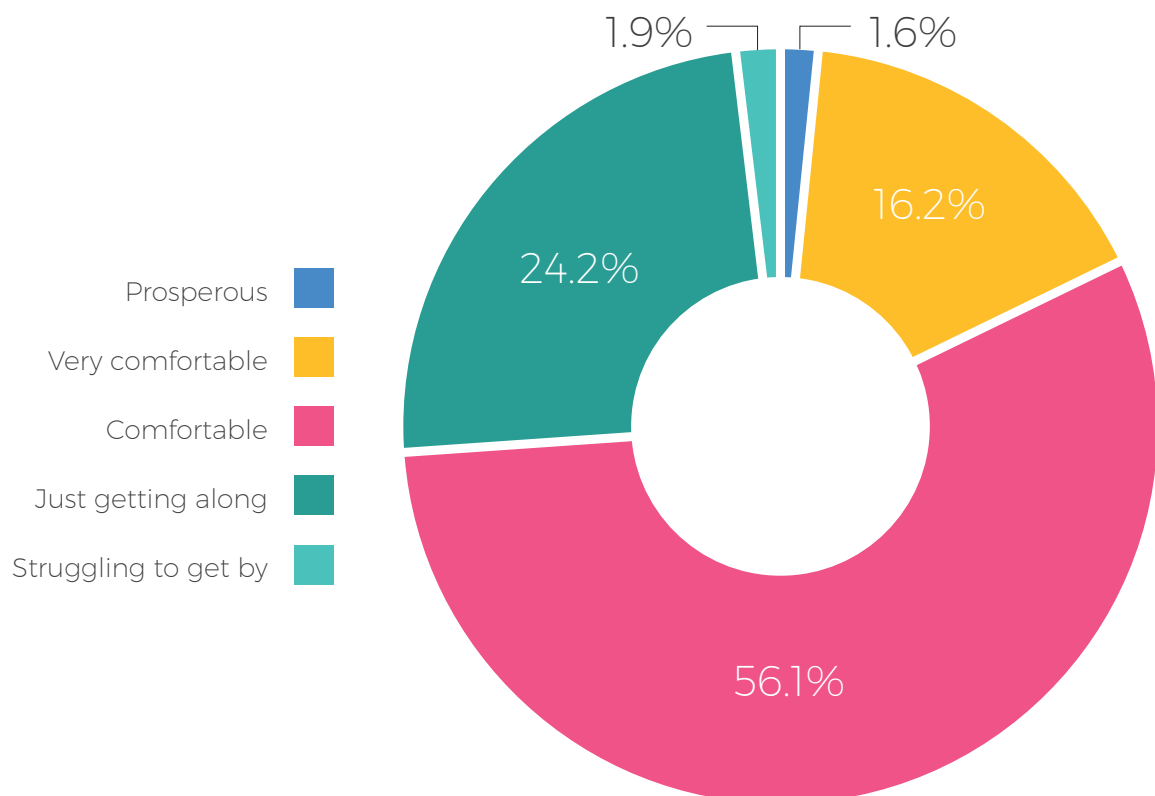
Age (%)



## Ethnic group (%)

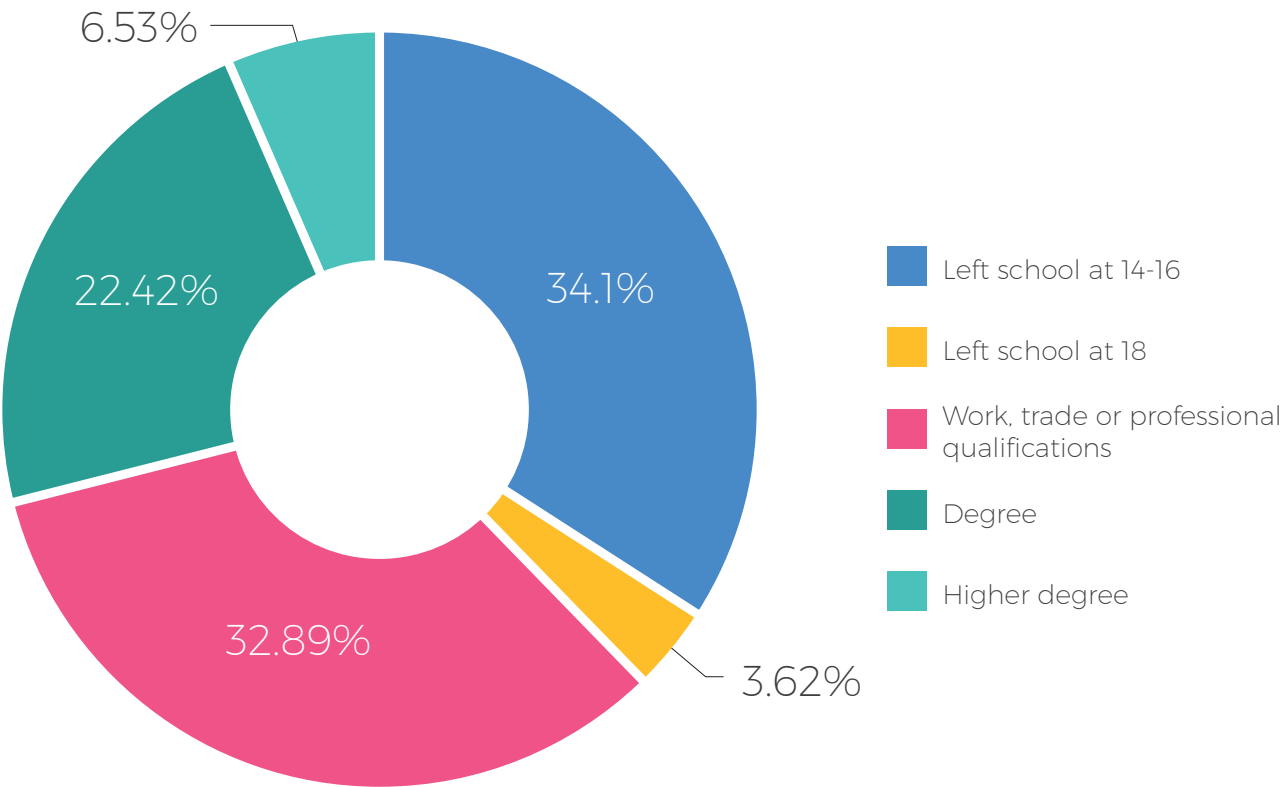


## Given your current needs and financial responsibilities, would you say that you/your family are... (%)





# What is your highest level of formal education? (%)



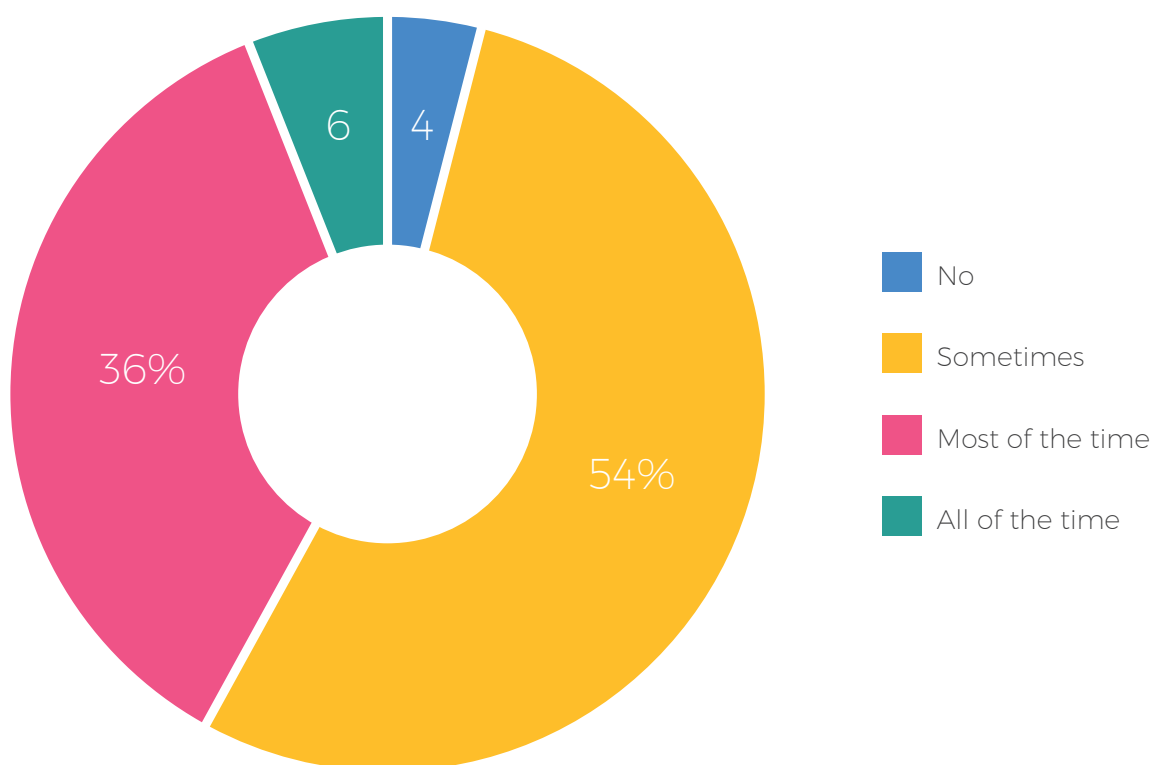
In these respects, our sampling strategy was successful at identifying churches where the majority of the congregation were non-graduates, with no qualifications or with school or work/trade qualifications. However, despite our best efforts, the proportion of respondents of Black/Minority Ethnic identity was smaller than we hoped (although probably not untypical for the two Dioceses as a whole). We would also have liked to have recruited a broader spread of ages, although a disproportionately middle aged and elderly demographic is by no means unusual for Anglican congregations.

# Are you fulfilled in your Christian life?

‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’  
(John 10:10)

A sense of fulfilment in one's life with God is not the same as a sense of vocation or calling, and sometimes a sense of fulfilment may even be a red herring. However, it may equally offer (or be taken to offer) confirmation of a life lived in response to God's call. We asked respondents whether they felt fulfilled in their Christian life. Respondents were asked to choose between four possible options: 'no, but I don't know why', 'no, I think there is something more', 'yes, some of the time' and 'yes, most of the time'. In the pie chart below, numbers answering negatively were small, so the more negative options were combined into one 'no' segment. A small number of respondents ticked 'other', and all of these indicated their fulfilment was greater than 'most of the time', and so these are represented in the 'all of the time' segment.

Fig. 1: Are you fulfilled in your Christian life?



The predominant picture was of a sense of partial fulfilment. This is neither unexpected nor unrealistic, given the degree to which Christian spiritual classics portray the Christian life as one of both desert and mountain top.

There were some variations within the sample: in three churches, 100% of respondents answered either 'yes, some of the time' or 'yes, most of the time'. In one church, less than three quarters responded similarly.

Controlling for other variables, women tended to be more likely to regard themselves as fulfilled in their Christian lives than men. However, the relationship between respondents' answers to this question and to other questions in the survey were more ambiguous. There was some indication that those who said they had a particular calling and a vocation, who felt that God called everyone to a particular place, role or task, and felt faith gave meaning and purpose in life, were more likely to answer positively to this question.

However, those who regarded themselves as fulfilled some or most of the time were not necessarily likely to answer all of those other questions in positive terms. In other words, feeling a sense of fulfilment in the Christian life did not necessarily lead to a strong sense of purpose, a particular calling from God, or a sense of 'vocation'.

## Questions for reflection:

- When Jesus says 'I come that you may have life – life in all its fullness' what did he mean?
- What might a 'fulfilled' Christian life look like?
- Can God work through you in/through times of emptiness as much as in times of fulfilment?
- Do you think there are any societal or cultural reasons why the women surveyed were more likely to regard themselves as fulfilled in their Christian life than the men surveyed?
- In what ways does your church community help people to discover a fulfilled Christian life?

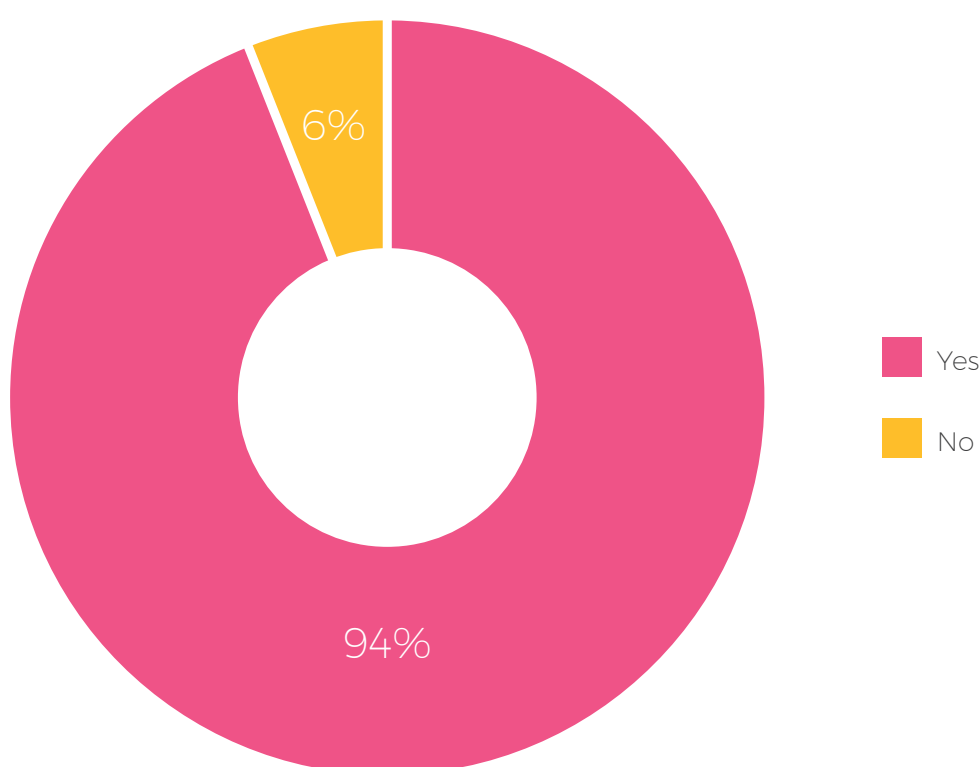
# Does God have any sort of purpose for you?

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‘In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.’ (James 1.18)

Here we asked a straightforward yes / no question. There are of course various ways in which an open-ended answer might have clarified or qualified respondents’ answers. However, we made this a closed answer yes/no question so that we could gauge the proportion of respondents who, if forced to choose, would tend to answer positively or negatively.

**Fig. 2: Do you believe that God has any sort of purpose for you?**



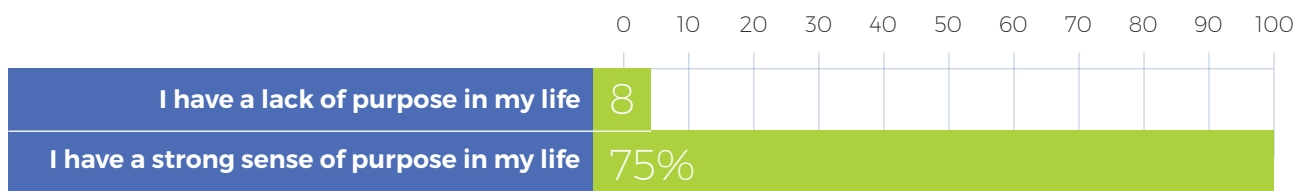
In 8 churches, 100% of respondents believed that God had a purpose for them. In only 3 churches did the percentage saying 'yes' drop below 90%. The strong emphasis on purpose in these responses perhaps reflects the strong salience of the concept within wider church culture. The overwhelmingly positive response to this question contrasts with the more ambivalent attitude towards Christian obedience, below.

Those who believed God had some sort of purpose for them also tended to believe that they had a calling and vocation, and saw faith as giving meaning and purpose in life. Conversely, those participants who answered 'no' to this question also tended to say that they did not know what God asked of them, did not have a particular calling and did not feel that faith gave meaning or purpose in life.

Although respondents were overwhelmingly positive on this question, there was a slight tendency for those who had been a Christian for more than ten years, and who were socio-economically 'getting by' to answer negatively, whilst the small number of newer Christians surveyed were possibly more likely to answer positively, particularly if they were also socio-economically comfortable or prosperous. Respondents' answers to this question largely mirrored their answers to Question 7, below (on whether they believed they had a 'vocation').

A further question asked how far (in general) respondents felt a strong sense of purpose, or lack of purpose, in their lives.

**Figure 3: Sense of purpose (% strongly agree/agree)**



Most of those who expressed a strong sense of purpose in life also believed that God had a purpose for them. However, how far and in what ways these two senses of purpose are related requires further exploration.

### Questions for reflection:

- Do you think of God's purpose for you (and others) as general or specific?
- Do you ever feel that God's purpose for you competes with your own hopes or plans? If so, how do you navigate that tension?
- Do you think your sense of purpose has changed over the time you have been a Christian? How/why?
- Who or what has helped (or hindered) your exploration of God's purpose for you? How?
- In what ways does your church community help people to discover God's purpose for them?
- If, as our findings suggest, those who are more socio-economically 'comfortable' are more likely to feel God had a purpose for them, what challenges and difficulties does this raise, theologically?

# Interview theme:

## Calling is shaped by cultural context and upbringing

One of the astonishing aspects of the interviews was the interconnections of interviewees' faith and life journeys as they play out on the much broader field of British colonial and imperial history. All interview participants have their cultural origins in formerly colonised contexts of the Non-Western world and have, through one way or another, come to make a home in England. All of them share multiple cultural, linguistic, and even religious heritages, and for most of them, English is not their first language. Their association with concepts of church and especially notions of 'calling' cannot be separated from cultural upbringing in other places. What must be understood, though, is that upbringing is tied the very complex relationship between Missionary Christianity and the countries and cultural heritages that interviewees come from. 'AB' speaks of leaving his native country and claiming asylum seeker status, with all its many restrictions. His link has been the Methodist Church which has been significant in his life both back home and here in the UK.

**...we came along with three children and we were able to serve in the Methodist church for six years until we decided to claim Asylum which has been granted to us and now 17 years since we came from Cuba and never return, and still living in this country a blessed nation where the Lord has brought us over and we continue to serve him in various capacities.**

The influence of cultural heritage on the religious outlook and worldview of interviewees was also significant in the way they navigated life, sought jobs, raised children, cared for family, and generally

how they lived their everyday lives in British society. 'GH' was born in a former British colonial territory, but raised in England. Yet, her birthplace became a strong focus for her desires, passions, and career choices. In fact, she is presently engaged in a charity that helps with her native land, even though she is now at retirement age. She credits much of her values to her cultural upbringing, and her connection to her present church is due to some of those cultural values. Speaking of parental and cultural values that she still holds, she states:

**...so you know I think that, that foundation of, of the way they were you know kind of instilled and also I suppose because of my own heritage been born in Pakistan, growing up I always thought you know when you see things on the TV and the films and that, you know I always thought well everyone you know should have a chance in life and it just because of where you're born and who you're born to shouldn't really make that difference for you and so I suppose I had this sort of instilment of social justice grow ... being sort of growing in me from a very young age and as a result of that then I remember you know when it came to me finishing my A levels and you, you know I kind of remembered not quite sure knowing what to do all I knew was I did want to go work overseas and in Pakistan I, my, my vision was then to, to work in Pakistan...**

### Questions for reflection:

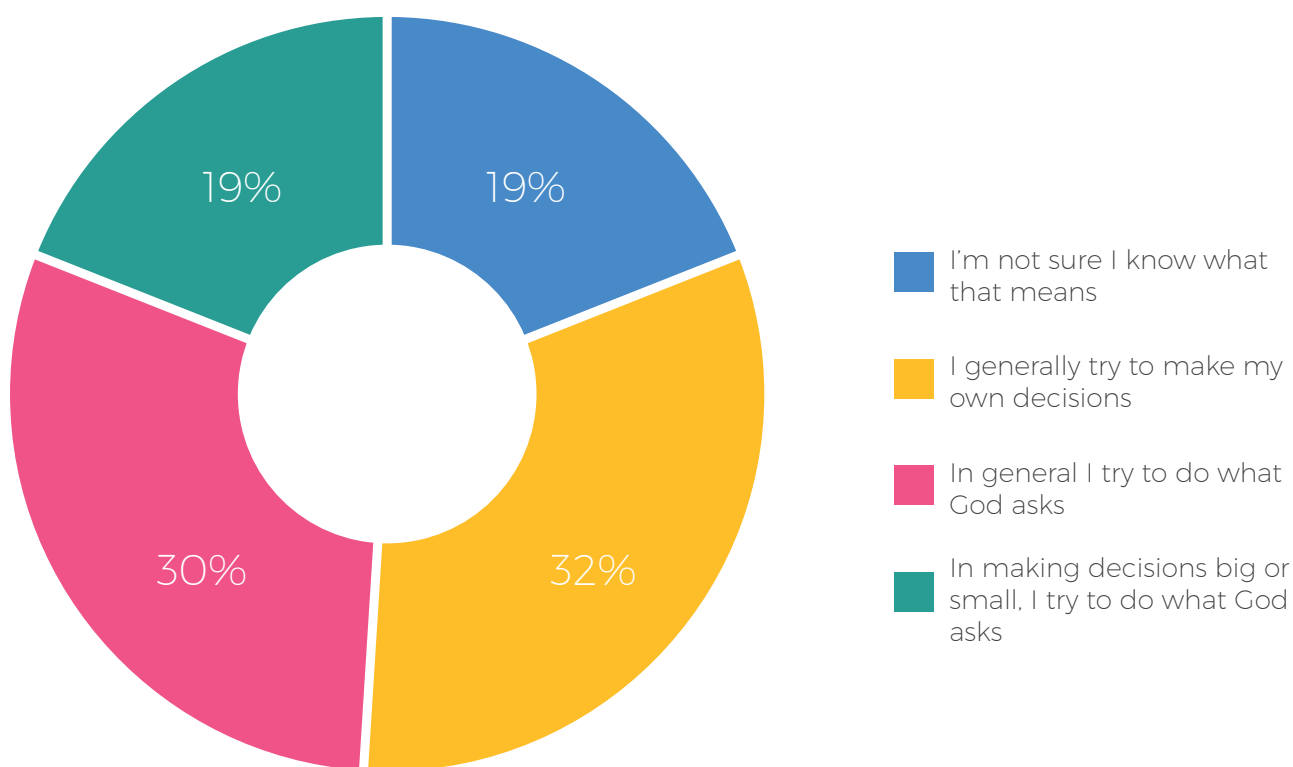
- **To what degree does cultural upbringing, especially Non-British, affect a sense of calling?**
- **Are there times when exploring vocation that we do not factor in childhood and ethnic influences? Why might that (not) be?**

# Would you think of yourself as obedient to God?

‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’  
(John 14.15)

Whilst in recent times Christian vocation has often been spoken of as a personal journey, obedience is arguably central to biblical understandings of what it means to respond to God. Although obedience may not encapsulate everything we understand about calling or vocation, it is practically impossible to imagine authentic Christian vocation without some intention to obedience.

So did survey respondents consider themselves as obedient to God? Here respondents were asked to choose one of four answers provided, with options ranging from less to more obedient.



Significantly, only 49% of respondents felt able to answer that they tried to do what God asked to some degree, or in matters large and small. This is a striking figure given the centrality of obedience in historic Christian thought, and begs further exploration. Did this reflect ambivalence towards the idea of obedience to God per se? Or did it rather reflect the complexity of seeking to discern God's leading in the everyday as well as the big decisions of life? Or simply a degree of humility?

Here, patterns of response could vary widely from church to church, albeit that the relatively small numbers of respondents per church meant that only a handful of individuals could significantly change the overall results for that congregation. For example in one church, 25% of respondents answered 'I am not sure I know what that means', but this represented only 4 individuals. By contrast, in 6 of the participating churches, no one gave this answer.

Respondents were more somewhat more likely to answer that they were to some extent obedient to God if they also indicated that they believed their faith gave them meaning and purpose in life, if they felt they had a particular calling, and if they felt themselves to be on the journey that God wanted for them. They were also somewhat more likely to say they were obedient to God if they did not consider themselves to be 'struggling'.

### Questions for reflection:

- **What does it mean to you to be obedient to God? Is the idea of obedience helpful to you in your life of discipleship?**
- **What do you think the Bible teaches about obedience to God? How is obedience related to fulfilment or reward?**
- **About half of survey respondents felt they were obedient to God to at least some degree. Does this answer surprise you? Why (not)? What factors might have influenced how people answered this question?**
- **To what extent is obedience to God explored in your church's teaching? Are there other words or concepts used which are similar to obedience?**



# Interview theme:

## Calling has God at the centre

It might seem like stating the obvious, but God was central to our interviewees' stories of calling. Whilst in the West, many of the prevailing cultural assumptions about vocation or calling place inner fulfilment or happiness centre-stage,<sup>4</sup> historic Christian perspectives on calling and vocation tend to see happiness and fulfilment as the fruit or confirmation of calling, rather than its primary end goal. Our interviewees also described joy and fulfilment in calling, but frequently sought to place God at the centre of the story. This was evident both in the big picture of their life's calling (which may only have become clear over time), and in God's action in particular circumstances. Regarding the former, one interviewee related:

**'..the Lord present us with so many opportunities so we can say "Lord I think this is the country where you allowed me the vision when I was 12..." [...] and I saw I saw the... British flag and I find myself praying from this country over my country [...] where I come from and now I say at age 35... when my [family] arrive in this country that vision of a 12-year old... was materialize and continue to be confirm that God brought us to this land to serve his purposes and only him, to God be the Glory, my brother...**

Whilst for this interviewee, attributing glory to God may partly have been natural modesty or cultural-theological convention, it also appeared to have been a source of genuine delight.

A further important dimension of calling for our interviewees was a sense of God's direction in the everyday. Interviewees gave examples of unexpected encounters with people in need, conversations which opened up new opportunities, or simply a posture of being attentive and responsive to what God might be asking, moment by moment. In different ways, each of our interviewees described how their calling by God involved a certain loss of control. As one commented,

**you lose control, you don't know what to do and anyway you don't know what to think of but you just ask him, I just leave everything to his hand to show me what to do, yeah because to ask him I just let him because he know what I want for me... [CT: yeah] ... He know what is good for me, yeah I just say God I believe in before I say he knows, he knows already because I just believe him**

Whilst one interviewee described their outlook as 'fatalistic' and suggested that this might partly have reflected their South Asian cultural upbringing, this loss of control was in no way a passive process. For one thing, as above, it demanded an active commitment to seeking God's will. Second, our interviewees connected this yielding to God to an increased attentiveness to the needs of others or opportunities to share the Good News. In this sense, interviewees seemed to display the kind of 'de-centring of self' which spiritual writers throughout history have tended to see as a crucial ingredient of the fruitful Christian life.

### Questions for reflection:

- **How easy is it to think of calling as being about God first, and personal fulfilment as a fruit that may come later?**
- **What might help you to think about God-centred calling?**

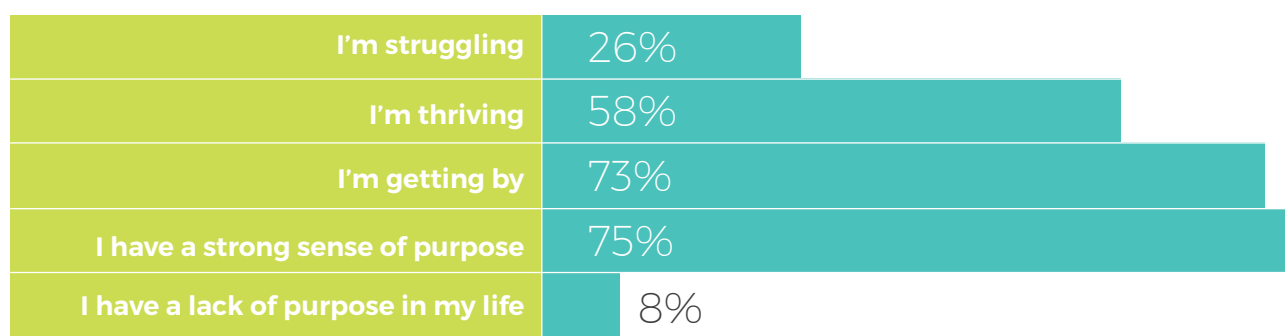
<sup>4</sup> Ryan D. Duffy and Bryan J. Dik, 'Research on calling: what have we learned and where are we going?', *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 83 (2013), pp. 428-36 at p. 429.

# Struggling? Thriving? Getting by?

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11.28)

We asked participants to rate themselves on a five-point scale as to whether they regarded themselves as struggling, thriving or getting by, whether they had a strong sense of purpose or a lack of purpose in their lives. We asked this question in part to explore the possibility that one’s overall sense of stability and purpose in life might in some way relate to questions of calling or vocation.

**Figure 5: Struggling, thriving, getting by and sense of purpose (% strongly agree/agree)**



As can be seen from the figures, many respondents felt able to agree/strongly agree with more than one statement. Three quarters of respondents felt they were ‘getting by’ and over half felt able to make the more positive statement ‘I’m thriving’.

Those who indicated that they were ‘struggling’ were perhaps understandably less likely to say that they were also ‘thriving’. However, they were no more or less likely to say that they were also ‘getting by’. There were no significant variations in response to the statement ‘I am struggling’ by gender or ethnicity. However, those ticking ‘I’m struggling’ were more likely to be found amongst respondents aged between 21 and 65, and who indicated that they were ‘struggling’ or ‘getting along’ financially. Curiously however, the minority of respondents with a higher degree were also more likely to say they were ‘struggling’ compared to those whose highest level of education qualification was work, trade or professional qualifications.

Comparing the responses church by church, there were wide variations: in one church, 46% of respondents said they were ‘struggling’, whilst in one other church, no one ticked this option. Amongst respondents overall, those who indicated that they were thriving and had a strong sense of purpose also tended to report a greater sense of fulfilment in their Christian life.

## Questions for reflection:

- What does thriving mean to you?
- If you reflect on times of challenge and times of comfort in your life, did your relationship with God change in these different phases?
- When in your life did you feel most purposeful? Why do you think that was?
- In what ways does your church community seek to help people thrive?

# Interview theme:

## Calling emerges through life events and struggles

In listening to the stories of the interviewees, the idea of calling could not be separated from the multiple events within one's life, particularly those that were more challenging. The experience of calling and of God's presence proved to be a sustaining force amidst childhood traumas. More importantly, this sustaining and shaping experience of calling persisted through the wider shaping forces of migration and having to settle into new cultural and linguistic contexts such as inner-city life in England. Regarding childhood trauma, 'CD' referenced abuse by a pastor in childhood, and life experiences that included divorce, ill-health, and deep feelings of isolation. Yet, she indicated:

**I'm thankful, I'm thankful to God for all the trials because throughout all these trials and difficulties you understand and value more where God is in your life.**

Similarly, in the context of religious persecution in 'AB's' native country, there was a vision of a life serving God from the age of twelve. This vision of serving God in another country was confirmed more than twenty years later when coming to the United Kingdom as a missionary. However, this sense of struggle persisted throughout.

Interviewees also suggest that over time the sense of calling first sensed in childhood materialised in different ways at different stages of life. This sense of being called to trust God with life's decisions

remains a significant feature of their lives and self-understanding. For example, 'EF' has always felt that doing good and helping people was her life's purpose. Her sense of trust in God remains deep, even though did not regard herself as overly religious. Like other interviewees, this sense of trust and hopefulness is being evoked during the current COVID-19 pandemic, but it is important to state that this trust in God has been present since childhood.

On the other hand, 'GH' had an explicit childhood desire to serve God as a nun or serve others as a police officer. While neither of these actually materialised, she has spent a long career in healthcare trusting God through serving traumatised communities in other parts of the world. She connects this with that earlier call to service. She states:

**I think that everything is for a purpose as I've said to you before but I also think that there are things that I've learnt through the whole process that I'm using for other things. So, for example, even when I wasn't involved in overseas work, the skills around delegation, management, bringing people together, you know, making things happen, you know, just the whole, all the skills that you know one picks up along the way, you know, were transferable to working in the communities you know my nursing, I didn't think I'd be there helping somebody, you know, in later age, you know and I find I do that bit more now...**

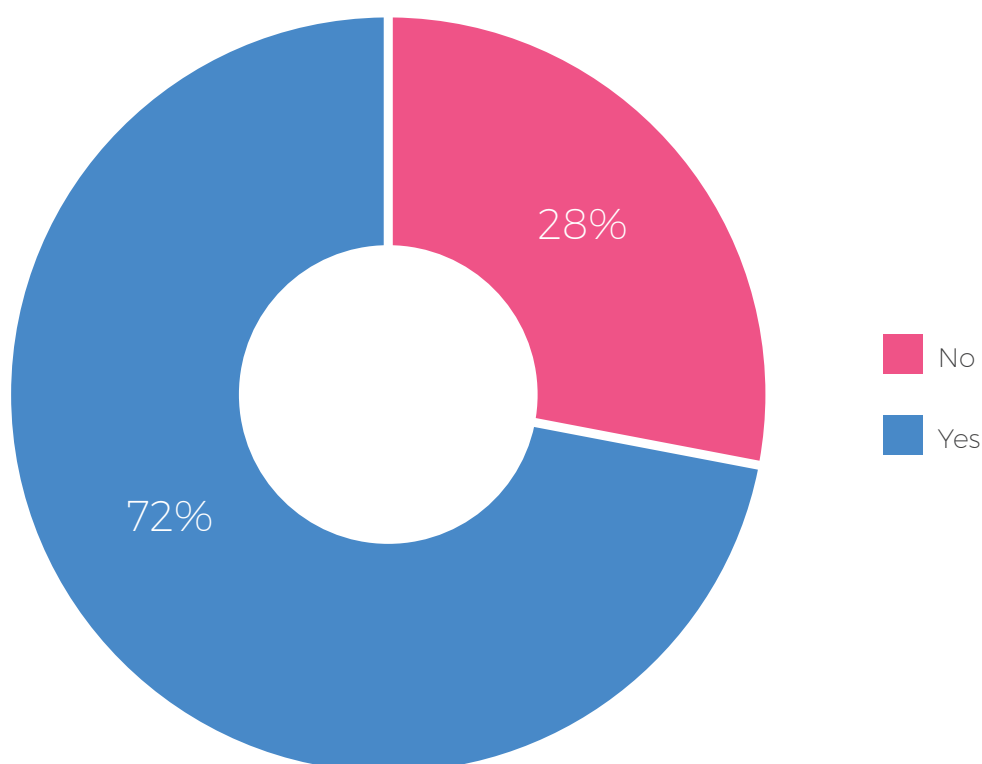
### Questions for reflection:

- **At what point in your life were you most aware of God's presence or guidance? What did that mean to you at the time, or as you have reflected on it since?**
- **Do you think God speaks differently to you in times of struggle than in times of calm?**

# Do you have a vocation?

‘I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called’ (Ephesians 4.1)

Having answered questions about their sense of fulfilment, life purpose and obedience to God, respondents were then asked the direct question: ‘do you believe you have a “vocation”’?



Having begun this research wondering whether churchgoing Anglicans would express their sense of calling in terms of the language of ‘vocation’, it was notable that almost three quarters of interviewees were willing to identify with this vocabulary. When responses were analysed according to demographic group, men were somewhat more likely to say they had a vocation than women, and Black and Minority Ethnic respondents were somewhat more likely to identify with the language of vocation than White respondents (although numbers of Black and Minority Ethnic respondents were relatively small, so caution is needed before placing too much weight on this point). See Appendix 1 for more detail.

That said, it was more difficult to judge what this identification with the language of vocation actually meant for respondents. Mingjie Lei’s analysis of the **Responding to God** data found that, unlike virtually every other question, there was no obvious variable that determined whether respondents said they had a vocation or not. In some cases, such as the question of fulfilment, the results if anything pointed slightly in the other direction (the more a respondent expressed a sense of fulfilment, the less they expressed a sense of vocation).

What might be going on here? One possibility is that 'vocation' may be a kind of umbrella concept, within which more specific questions about life purpose, obedience or degree of fulfilment are entangled. Alternatively, it may be that many Christians who believe they have a sense of calling and life purpose do not necessarily believe that this thereby constitutes a 'vocation'. All of this requires further research and reflection.

### Questions for reflection:

- **Do you think vocation is a helpful word to describe the calling or purpose of all people?**
- **How would you describe your own sense of vocation?**
- **What do you think would be good ways of exploring a sense of vocation?**
- **In what ways does your church community encourage a sense of vocation, both communally (as a church) as well as in individuals?**
- **A quarter of survey respondents answered that they did not have a vocation. Why might they think this? How might you help this group of people explore what God is drawing them into?**

# Interview theme:

## Understanding calling can take time and discernment

It was striking that for each of the four interviewees, following God's leading required an active response and (at times) some struggle. Early and formative experience could be critical in shaping a life lived with God. One interviewee who placed strong emphasis on God's leading from moment to moment nevertheless felt that

**I think that, that foundation of, of the way [my parents] were you know kind of instilled and also I suppose because of my own heritage been born in [a South Asian context] growing up I always thought you know when you see things on the TV and the films and that, you know I always thought well everyone you know should have a chance in life... [...] and so I suppose I had this sort of instilment of social justice grow...**

Yet in another sense, calling did not always come with a clear end goal. As young adults, none of the interviewees would have been able to articulate a precise sense of what God's call would entail, even where they received a specific calling at an early age. Indeed, those who received such an early, specific calling appear to have struggled more with the challenges of working out calling in practice, than those who did not. One of these reflected:

**... afterwards see how the Lord works. Sometime we say in [my country] like the mamey - is a fruit, people plant a fruit tree and... it grow. Don't want to cut it down but 22 years after that, that tree start to bear fruit, at 22, but my vision started to bear fruit at 23 when it was confirmed that an invitation from the [...] church in Britain...**

Several interviewees recognised that unresolved questions about life would not necessarily receive immediate answers. One commented, 'you can ask now, maybe in two years be think that you won't comes out - is not because you asked now it going to come

now, no, you give time, you keep on do the right thing'.

Two interviewees wrestled with the relationship between their own sense of God's call, and how this fitted within the roles and expectations of the Church as an institution, and all four to some extent reflected on the impact that migration to the UK had had on their sense of God's purpose for them. One, who was previously ordained overseas, found themselves in a time of waiting to start exercising their calling in practice through local church leadership, but was currently prevented from doing so by immigration rules. Another felt that dominant cultural expectations could also be a barrier:

**I feel that being a woman from an Asian background I... I find that I have some kind of find myself in a weak spot to be to do something in the church. Maybe, maybe I worry too much about it I don't know...**

Echoing the results of the questionnaire, this interviewee also felt that local church leaders could either help or hinder in discovering what God wanted them to do:

**...he or she needs to know the members and like vet [sic.] a questionnaire to understand what or how they want to serve, what are their... what is God telling them to do in the community [...] ... and because I believe that as a church we are all members of one body and we have different qualities and skills and gifts that we can bring together to the table to benefit the community and the parish...**

However, not everyone felt that calling was a struggle. One interviewee reflected, 'I tended to just you know always just observe and... just see what happened really. I, I can't really say that you know I work hard at achieving anything or doing... things just seem to happen around me to be honest with you'.

### Questions for reflection:

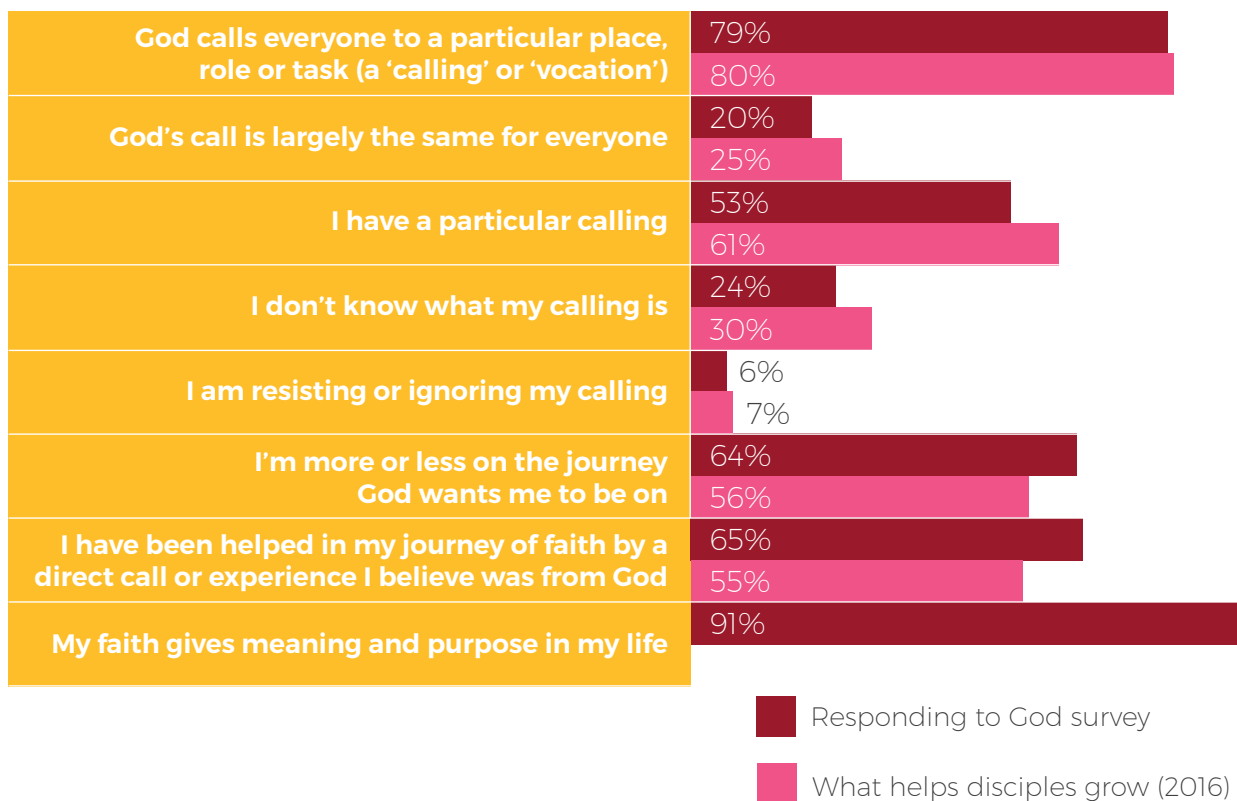
- Have you ever thought God was calling you to something, and then it didn't work out? What impact did that experience have on you?
- What might you say to someone who wanted to understand their calling but felt it was taking too long to become clear?

# Assessing ‘strength of vocation’

‘Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening”.’ (1 Samuel 3.10)

How strongly did our respondents identify with a sense of calling? In the **What Helps Disciples Grow?** project, six questions on the subject of ‘calling’ were brought together to form an ‘index of strength of vocation’. We re-used these questions in the **Responding to God** survey, along with asking respondents to rate an additional statement: ‘my faith gives meaning and purpose in my life’ (which has featured in numerous questionnaires on religiosity over some decades). This statement was not used in **What Helps Disciples Grow?**

**Figure 7: How far do you agree with the following?  
(% Strongly Agree/Agree)**



The results from the **Responding to God** survey suggest that most respondents are willing to conceive that God calls everyone to a particular place, role or task, yet considerably fewer are prepared to say that they themselves have a particular calling, or that they are on the journey God wants them to be on.

Only a small number of people agreed both that God calls individuals to particular places, roles or tasks and also that God’s call is largely the same for everyone. This suggests that ‘calling’ is primarily understood in individual rather than collective terms –which is a significant challenge to those who would want to insist that

the Church also possesses a collective calling. (However it is possible that some respondents understood these two statements as if they were intended to be mutually exclusive).

Significantly, patterns of response were roughly in line with those in 2016's **What Helps Disciples Grow?**, suggesting that despite the latter's different sampling method, the results were not unreflective of the opinions of churchgoers in the region. In particular, it suggests that between a quarter and a third of Christians may not feel they know what their calling is.

Respondents who answered positively on calling in this set of questions were also somewhat more likely to say that they were obedient to God, to be thriving and to have a strong sense of purpose (although intriguingly, they were also somewhat less likely to say that God had a purpose for them).

There were no significant variations in patterns of response to these statements by gender, age, ethnicity, educational level or socio-economic group.

## Questions for reflection:

- **Do you tend to see calling in individual terms, or as a general calling to the whole church, or a bit of both? How might these weave together?**
- **Have you experienced a direct call from God in some way? What was it like? What did you do as a result?**
- **Between a quarter and a third of respondents told us that they do not know what their calling is. How can churches best help people to discover their calling?**
- **Do we as churches hear people speaking of God's call or intervention in their lives?**
- **How can churches celebrate and continue to support those who feel that they are largely on the journey which God wants for them?**



# Interview theme:

## Calling is complex and multi-faceted

There are several aspects to calling, which comes to individuals and communities, and can be both general and specific. Our interviewees seemed to recognise both general and specific calling; as individuals and as part of the body of Christ. One participant, reflecting on this, said: 'I believe that God has a design for the body of Christ'.

This sense of belonging to something bigger and being called as part of a community is about more than having supportive people on the journey. It is a recognition that one calling cannot be shaped in isolation from the calling of all those around us, and the way they fit together in our shared calling. Another interviewee put it like this:

**... if I had to liken you know our roles and our purposes to anything, to me we're like a jigsaw, we're all moving pieces of a jigsaw that are all working our way round to see how do we fit and ... you know come together and there will come a time when that jigsaw becomes complete and I, I you know I, I, I look forward to that time.**

When we are all in the right space, living out our calling and purpose, then the jigsaw falls into place. We sometimes talk about a person's vocation or calling as though it is one, static thing but calling is dynamic and multi-faceted and connects with the calling of our brothers and sisters.

All Christians share a general call; the call to discipleship, to be followers of Jesus. Jesus calls each of the disciples to 'follow' him, and as they journey with him, their calling develops further, and often into a specific calling unique to the person. For example, Peter is called first to follow, and then to be the rock on which the church is built (Matthew 16:18). These specific callings may be to a specific job, role, place or cause. Even where these callings look the same each is unique. Two people both called to nursing, for example, don't have exactly the

same call; for each of them it will be a call to inhabit the vocation of a nurse in a unique way, shaped by their gifts, interests, abilities and opportunities. This interviewee describes both the general sense of calling to witness to God, as well as her specific sense of calling to teach people about the faith:

**...when we are chosen by God we are called to be witnesses of God but I believe that for me it's, it's a vocation, that is what I want to be... I am not interested in anything else but to be teaching people about the word of God... (CD)**

Several of the participants found that discerning and sharing their specific calling was more difficult than sharing in the general calling to be disciples. For some, they felt their calling had been named but that it was difficult to develop it. There were a range of reasons for this, including residency status and other external factors, but also a sense that the church perhaps didn't quite know how to work with them. This was experienced by CD and her call to teach, and by AB:

**the church is aware of what we want to do. It not to seek but to give glory to God ... in using us in the capacity he wants us ...within and beyond the confinements of the church walls and that's my joy, they already know ... that I want to go back to ministry, that's what I feel called to ... and to be part of a team (AB)**

One of the challenges here for formal processes of discernment in the church is how space is made for those whose life experience, culture, and ways of expressing themselves might be very different from those of the majority of people who pass through the system. How, for example, can we expect the same level of consistency and stability from someone who lives at the mercy of the Home Office, as for those who never have to give a moment's thought to their right to build a life in a certain place?

### Questions for reflection:

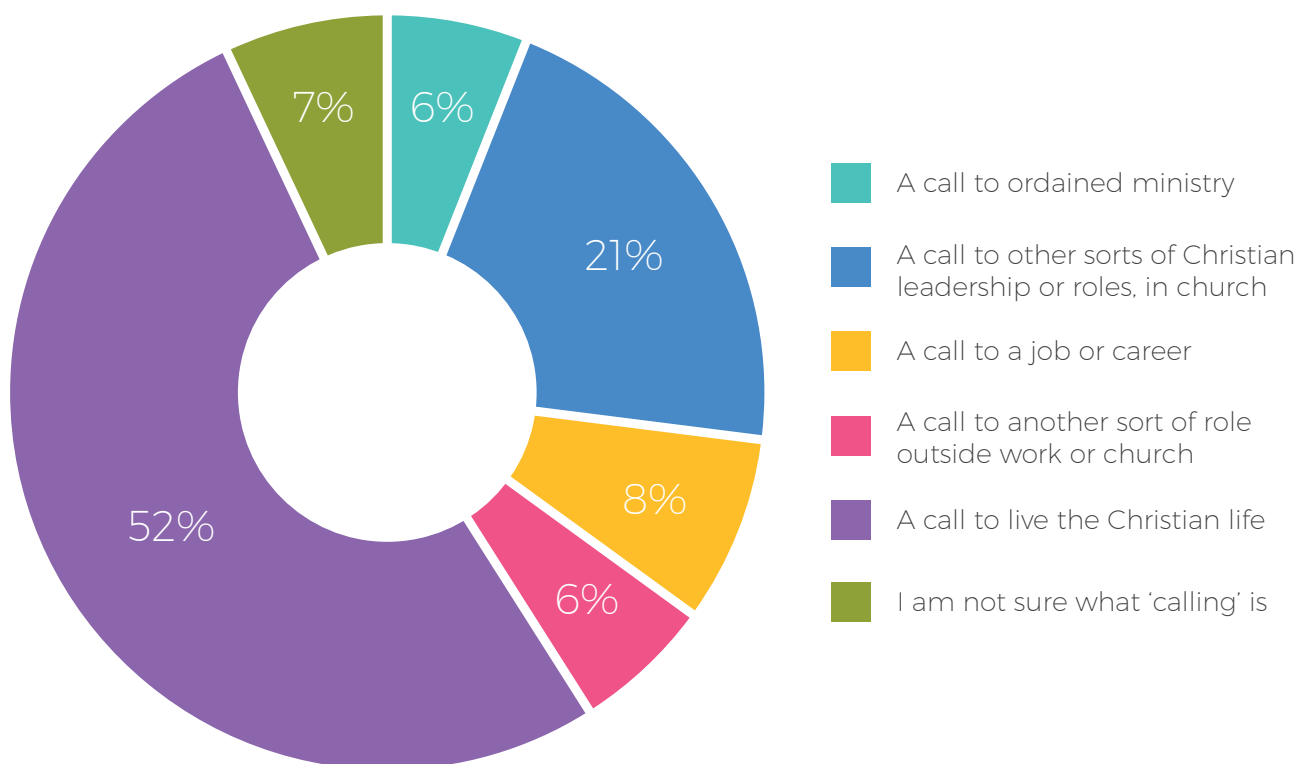
- **What behaviours and circumstances may get in the way of the wider Christian community recognising and responding to an individual's specific call?**
- **How can we make space for people to use different language and imagery around their sense of calling?**

# What does 'calling' mean?

'He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message.' (Mark 3: 13-14)

Having asked about respondents' sense of calling in general, it felt important to explore what respondents actually meant by the word. Participants could tick one of six options.

**Figure 8: Which of these definitions of 'calling' best matches your understanding?**



Having been curious to explore how far ordained ministry or church-based roles dominated conceptions of calling, it was striking that by far the most common response was that calling related to the Christian life as a whole. Indeed, given the options, only 6% of respondents saw calling primarily in terms of ordained ministry, although just over a quarter of the total saw calling primarily in relation to roles or jobs within the Church.

Interestingly, there seemed to be no meaningful pattern to the responses to this question, either in terms of respondents' demographic profile or their answers to other questions. Nor did there seem any particularly

strong tendency for respondents from churches in the Catholic tradition to be more likely to identify 'vocation' with 'ordained ministry' (as might traditionally have been considered the case given its higher theology of priesthood).

However, there was one significant pattern: those who saw vocation primarily in clerical or ecclesiastical terms were also significantly more likely to say that they did not believe they had a vocation. This group were also less likely to think themselves obedient to God, less likely to agree that 'God calls everyone to a particular place, role or task', and less likely to agree that they themselves had a calling. This group were also – intriguingly – somewhat more likely to have discussed their calling with their vicar. Disentangling which of these convictions led to the others is very difficult if not impossible. However, it does suggest that for a minority of Anglicans, the language of 'calling' (for whatever reason) has little personal resonance.

## Questions for reflection:

- How would you define 'calling'?
- Are all callings as important as each other?
- What do we lose when we think of calling and vocation only in terms of ordained ministry or other forms of church leadership? How can churches begin to take practical steps to speak more broadly about Christian vocation?
- Do you think the church helps all people with their calling?

# Interview theme:

## Calling is to a whole person, in the whole of life

The sense of receiving a calling can be a gradual one, and for some it takes a while to realise the extent and scope of that calling. It may initially be understood as about undertaking a particular task or role, but is increasingly understood also as an invitation to be the person God has created. Calling comes to the whole person, not just to the 'church part', or the 'family part', or 'work part', even though the calling may be to one of those spheres. As participants reflected on the experience of being called, they often noticed that calling was not always, or even usually, from or to church life. God's call is shaped and worked out through working life, community engagement, family, and especially through the challenges of travel, migration and forming identity in new places.

A calling can be the prompt to recognise God at work in the whole person, and sometimes hearing a call means reintegrating the different spheres of life. One interviewee told us:

**I consciously all my life have kept my faith and my work separate but ...God has a habit of always looking after me and interlinking them but not in an obvious way (GH)**

This sense of calling drawing different aspects of life together was also reflected in the way that some participants felt that they were called to make the most of life; to receive it as gift and to do something with it. As the same interviewee put it, 'we must cherish and appreciate and that every moment that we have is... one that we are privileged to have'.

Receiving life as gift also acted as a prompt to explore calling for some; to wonder what it is that one has to contribute to the world. One participant described her desire to serve, not in a specific way, but as the longing to do something! As one interviewee put it, 'I want to serve God I want to... be doing something for ... my community' (CD).

Relishing life as a gift also helped some people to notice the integration of calling across different spheres of life: God is not just interested in some aspects of them, but the whole person and the whole of life.

### Questions for reflection:

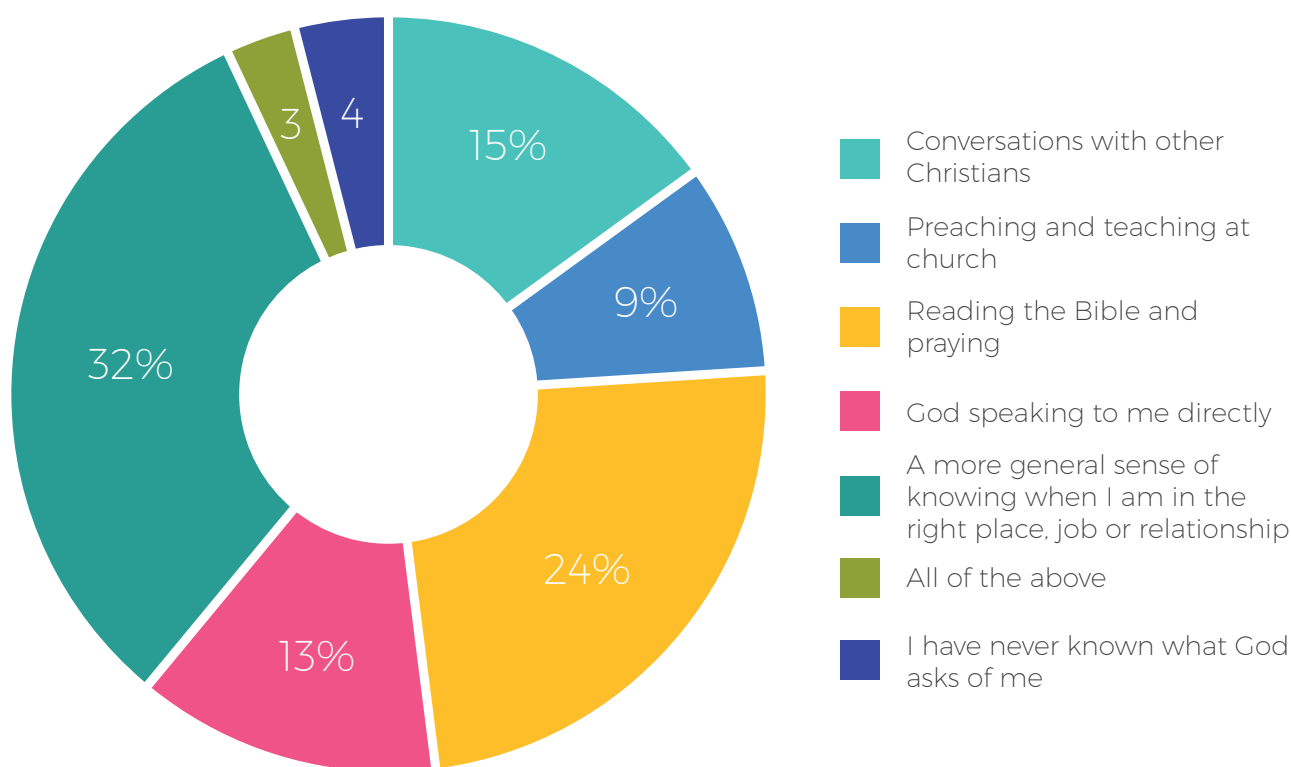
- **How does the church enable those who desire to serve the community, even if they don't know in what capacity?**
- **In what ways can church communities help people to explore their 'whole life' calling, rather than just roles in the church?**

# The process of discerning vocation and calling

‘I am your servant; give me understanding, so that I may know your decrees.’ (Psalm 119.125)

The survey also included two questions about the process by which respondents heard from God. First, we asked how, in the past, respondents had mostly come to know what God asks of them. Respondents could tick one from a set of options, or choose to specify an ‘other’. ‘All of the above’ was not offered as an option, although the majority of respondents who ticked ‘other’ commented that some or all of the above were relevant – hence this was added as a segment to the pie chart below.

**Figure 9: In the past, how have you mostly come to know what God asks of you?**



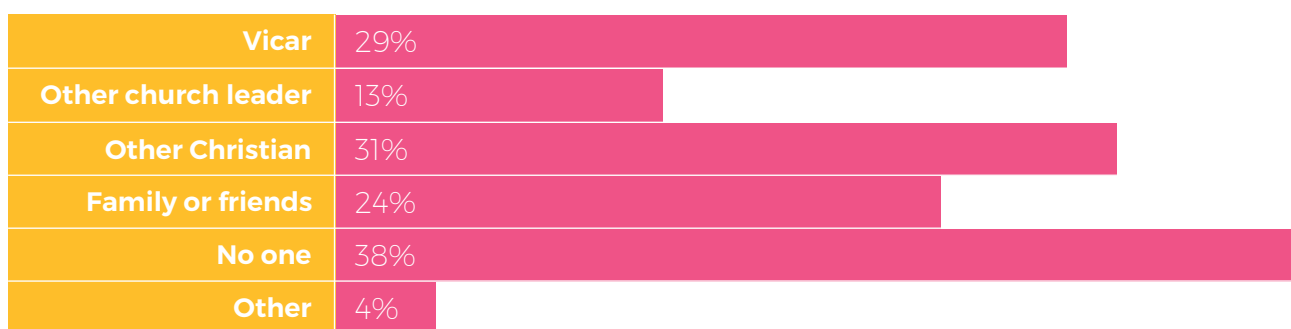
The most common single answer was ‘a more general sense of knowing when I am in the right place, job or relationship’, chosen by more than a third of respondents. This was particularly likely to be ticked by participants who also said (in Question 8) that they were on the journey that God wanted for them. This may suggest that a settled sense of vocation is derived as much intuitively as by any more detached process of reflection, or it may simply reflect greater life experience (older adults were slightly more likely to choose ‘a general sense of

knowing when I am in the right place, job or relationship’ more than younger respondents). The second most popular answer to this question was that God’s leading was discerned through prayer and Bible study. This option was chosen by around a quarter of respondents.

The second question asked who (if anyone) had ever asked respondents about their vocation, calling or purpose. Admittedly, the wording ‘who has ever asked you’ may possibly have under-estimated the degree to which people may proactively have raised the question with another person, rather than waiting to be asked.

However, taking the results at face value, it was striking that over a third of respondents had never been asked about their calling, vocation or purpose by anyone else. If a fair reflection of reality, this suggests that conversation about calling is not widespread within the Church of England. However, this may depend on the culture of the local congregation. In one of the participating churches, only 13% of respondents said they had never been asked about calling by anyone else. At the other end of the spectrum, in one church 57% of respondents said the same.

## Figure 10: Who has ever asked you about your own vocation, calling or purpose? (% ticking)



Conversations about calling/vocation with clergy and with other Christians appear to be the most common sources of discussion. More detailed statistical analysis by Mingjie Lei suggested that the vicar’s role may be particularly important in facilitating a culture of conversation about calling. Respondents who had not had a conversation about vocation with their vicar were also markedly less likely to have discussed it with anyone else. Conversely, those who had discussed calling with their vicar were more likely also to have discussed it with others. Of course, what the results cannot tell us is whether the conversation with a vicar then sparked discussions with others, or whether the vicar was simply one amongst many people discussing calling with those who were on a serious journey of vocational exploration. Whichever is the case, a local vicar may nevertheless play a critically important role in initiating conversations about vocation, calling or purpose.

### Questions for reflection:

- What are some of the ways in which God speaks to people?
- How might you know when a calling is from God?
- How much responsibility does the Christian community have for testing calling?
- What might prevent you from asking other people about their calling? Is there anything that might help you overcome these obstacles?
- The research suggests that the vicar is particularly important in these conversations, how might you respond to that finding in your church?

# Interview theme:

## Hearing and responding to God – how does it happen?

Each of our four interviewees drew upon multiple sources of guidance – although each interviewee placed more emphasis on some than others. Clustering their reflections into themes, several key sources of discernment were evident. Whilst in the contemporary West we often think about ‘calling’ in terms of a unique, individual life vocation, our four interviewees (who were all born overseas) exhibited a more sophisticated blending of individual life response with God’s general call to all Christians.

### 1. Attending to what God might be doing, and joining in

Interviewees often expressed a sense that God was always at work, and that discernment in part consisted of keeping one’s eyes and ears open, responding where opportunities arose. One commented: ‘there’s these influences around us all the time that are trying to guide us into the path that we should all walk’. For another, ‘the Lord presents us with so many opportunities’. In this sense, the only real denial of calling was to ignore these opportunities. As one interviewee, who had a career in the health sector, commented: ‘how can you say no when you know the people are you know dying of, of something that you could you could help save them from?’ Openness and attentiveness were key qualities for discerning God’s call; several recalled circumstances which had seemingly diverted them from their existing life trajectory, only to find that they presented new opportunities to apply their calling in unexpected ways. (Although interviewees did not tend to draw the analogy themselves, such stories powerfully echoed Jesus’ willingness to be interrupted to minister to individuals in need). However, interviewees sometimes also gave more specific examples of inner stirrings of the Holy Spirit which led them in specific directions (one described their calling in terms of having received a vision). One commented: ‘we felt like the Lord was telling us something we... were like kind of stirred within the Spirit that’s the place you should come join in’.

### 2. Learning from the person I am

In discerning the way that they should serve God, several interviewees spoke of the significance of their own personal experience, skills or gifting. One interviewee felt that her basic life trajectory had been significantly shaped for good by her parents’ values of prayer, hard work, sacrifice and cherishing the gifts and opportunities one had been given. Another interviewee drew upon more adverse early life experiences, commenting: ‘I’m thankful to God for all the trials because throughout all these trials and difficulties you understand and value more where God is in your life’. Several interviewees referred to the importance of gut feeling – either as a prompt in specific circumstances, or in the more general sense of listening to one’s heart. Reflecting on her current life focus, one commented: ‘what I doing already is beautiful... yeah, just keep on doing with your heart makes you know what God wants you to do’. Two felt that God’s direction had come to them through a persistent ‘tug’ towards a new ministry. One said, ‘I say “Glory be to you who is calling me, now and I want to serve you healthily, I want you to get rid of these scratch, itchiness that I feel”...’ Another described how ‘it has become a... a burden in my, in me, to show people the beauty of the Word and I don’t have any interest in anything else’.

In some way, all our interviewees drew directly upon their identity in Christ – either as an individual or as part of a church called to be or do certain things. One explained how for her, ‘the joy of having a connection with the Lord can really overcome these extraordinary and challenging times’. For another, ‘we are all called when we are born again when we are chosen by God we are called to be witnesses of God but I believe that for me it’s, it’s a vocation, that is what I want to be’.

### 3. Putting into practice what all Christians are called to be and do

Most interviewees felt that in many ways they were not doing anything more than all Christians were called to be and to do. One interviewee traced her current sense of vocation back to a decision to re-dedicate her life to God. The sense that a Christ-centred life would inevitably be fruitful regardless of more specific calling was evident for another interviewee, who summed up her approach to God's purpose for her thus:

**I don't need to know everything all I need to know is what I need to do and what my role in it is and what my purpose is in it so you know for me the most important thing is that I travel that journey and I, I, I you know whatever comes, falls out from that journey then you know I need to be able to stand in front of my creator and say you know "I did the best I, I had, I did the best I could with what I had" kind of thing**

As noted elsewhere (p. 19), the corollary of a Christ-centred life was a de-centring of self. Several interviewees talked about the importance of letting go and handing control to God, accepting whatever circumstances arose as the context for living out faith. However, several interviewees indicated that confirmation of being on the right track was seen in the good fruit which resulted from faithfulness. One reflected: '[God]'s always performing mysterious to wonders for those who really love him and will love him'.

In one important sense, none of us know the full picture, but all of us know enough about Jesus' life, teaching and example to live the fruitful life to which God calls us, regardless of whether we feel any more unique, specific call or vocation in our lives.

### 4. Using a variety of tools and approaches to discern God's more specific direction for the individual

Having said this, all four interviewees described specific ways in which they had sought God's guidance or direction in particular circumstances, or for life as a whole. Prayer was central to each interviewee's experience. One summed up his approach thus:

**Moses said to the Lord "If your Presence doesn't go with me, I won't go" so everything I try to do I try to perform every invitation every task I'm provided with, before responding I will bring it before the Lord so the Lord is connected to all the areas of my life, in everything and I'm so happy that I will never hesitate to come before the Lord and even to pray in front of Godless people for a decision that need to be done...**

Another described what they called 'little chats with God', for example in relation to a job application: 'Well Lord if it's really meant for me to do this then I'm going to put it in but you know if, it's all up to you now again'. The Bible was also a key source of guidance. One interviewee described how they had received confirmation about a particular calling through reading Isaiah 53 one morning. For other interviewees, the Bible's role in calling was less specific but no less important, in that rootedness in the Word provided an overall orientation to life and the clarification of God's desires for the world.

For all four interviewees, God's guidance had come in part through other people. Sometimes, an interviewee had specifically sought out guidance from others. For two people, that had been a local church leader; for another it was an uncle with a firm faith in God; for the fourth, friends had frequently been a source of guidance or a sounding-board for a life decision. To some degree this was about the simple value of being heard and of hearing other people's perspectives. However, several interviewees specifically felt that God had used or spoken through others to guide them in specific ways. One remembered how 'I've seen how God has brought people who are totally... total strangers came to help me and... that's when I started looking into the word and wanted to understand where I went wrong'. Another felt that both her Bible reading and the input of friends had begun to point in the same direction in relation to one life decision: 'it was almost like consistently all these messages saying "[name], just take the leap of faith and just do it"...' Sometimes the



call or endorsement of a church institution or church leader was a significant sign (although as discussed elsewhere, some interviewees' sense of their own purpose or direction did not always fit comfortably or neatly with institutional expectations). Most interviewees felt that a time of waiting or refinement had been part of their vocational journeys. In some cases, this period had lasted for years.

All of this highlights how the discernment of calling is at once simple and sophisticated, involving a posture of openness to God but also employing a variety of spiritual tools and disciplines. It is at once personal and a general call to the whole of God's people. It both emerges from who we are, and takes us beyond who we think we are. It is lifelong, but also changing, and earthed/expressed in everyday circumstances.

# Concluding reflections and recommendations

**Our research findings offer a mixture of encouragement and challenge. On one hand, our results suggest that some of the thinking about vocation and calling was more clearly defined than we hypothesised before the research was carried out. Almost everyone surveyed felt that God had a purpose for them and felt that their faith gave meaning and purpose in their lives. About two thirds of our respondents felt that they were more or less on the journey God wanted them to be on, and a similar proportion felt that they had been helped in their journey of faith by a direct call they believed was from God.**

A majority appeared at least willing to own the language of calling and vocation for themselves (even if it was not their preferred terminology) and more people identified the language of 'calling' with the whole Christian life, rather than a more specific calling to ordained ministry or church leadership. In both cases, this was a higher percentage than we had expected at the outset (although we cannot rule out the possibility that some respondents were telling us what they thought we wanted to hear).

It seems that a local church leader can play a key role in individuals' explorations of calling. Although we cannot tell which conversation comes first, those who had been asked about their calling by a vicar or minister were also likely to have discussed it with others too. So how might church leaders be enabled to help the minority who have not yet experienced any sense of calling that they recognise as such?

That said, a significant minority appear to find the concept and language of calling and vocation more challenging. A quarter did not believe they had a 'vocation' (these people were disproportionately likely to see vocation as something which related to other people, particularly clergy). Only just over half were willing to say that 'I have a particular calling'. More than a third of respondents had never been asked about their calling by anyone else. A similar number could not say that they were more or less on the journey God wanted for them, and a quarter said that they did not know what their calling was.

Some of these findings also reflect the pattern of results in the earlier **What Helps Disciples Grow?** research, suggesting that there might well be a significant minority of Anglicans who find either the language or the concept of calling/vocation problematic. Not everyone uses or understands the church's traditional language of 'vocation' or 'calling' and this may be a very early barrier to exploration of them.

Even amongst those who do believe they have a calling, this was not necessarily strongly correlated with seeing themselves as obedient (a significant proportion of participants felt unable to describe themselves as obedient to God). It would be worth exploring what is behind this. Did it reflect a shift away from an emphasis on obedience in understandings of calling/vocation? Did it reflect dislike of the language of obedience (even if people seek to be obedient in actual fact)? Were respondents reluctant to claim too much about themselves when Christians should exhibit humility? Or did the results simply reflect the practical challenges of living a life of obedience and the degree to which none of us are perfect?

It was also striking that in the survey results, a majority see calling in personal rather than collective terms. Yet amongst our interviewees, calling was more likely to be seen as a complex matter, including both the general call of discipleship and specific callings addressed to individuals – both often intertwined. How can we enable people to discover a healthy relationship between their own sense of calling and God's general call to the Church? And how can we help more people understand the variety of ways through which authentic calling may be discerned?

The shape of this research project differs from what we had first hoped, particularly in terms of the number of interviews we were able to carry out. This was a combination of the limitations resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the difficulty in accessing people from our target group. However, the project still yielded some good insights and we have framed them as far as possible in terms of observations and questions, and with the suggestion that some follow up work in this area would be valuable.

Some possible recommendations...

## For local church leaders:

- Set the tone by talking about calling on a regular basis; but make sure to vary the language so that people do not get stuck on the church's traditional language of vocation if they find that alienating.
- Frame Christian calling in multiple ways, recognising that it is both general and personal, about the whole of life and about specific roles or ministries. Try to avoid implicitly reinforcing a hierarchy of callings which puts ordained ministry at the top.
- Proactively create opportunities for people to explore what God might be calling them into – there are various useful tools and resources available.
- Try to identify the significant minority in each congregation who believe that they don't have a particular calling. Try to understand what is going on for them.

## For the wider church/church institutions

- We have pathways to enable people to discern calling to ordained or licensed ministry. Why not for other kinds of life and work? What would it look like to create them?
- Language is again important. Words such as 'calling' or 'vocation' do not resonate with a significant minority of people, so ensure that the language used in denominational resources and campaigns covers a variety of terms.
- Some of our interviewees perceived (or experienced) barriers to pursuing vocation because of their cultural background or ethnic identity. How can the church create processes for discerning vocation which are not unconsciously biased? In the Church of England, there has been some useful recent work in this area; how can this be developed?

## For individuals

A number of questions for individual reflection can be found at the end of each section of the report. In addition, you might want to reflect on the following:

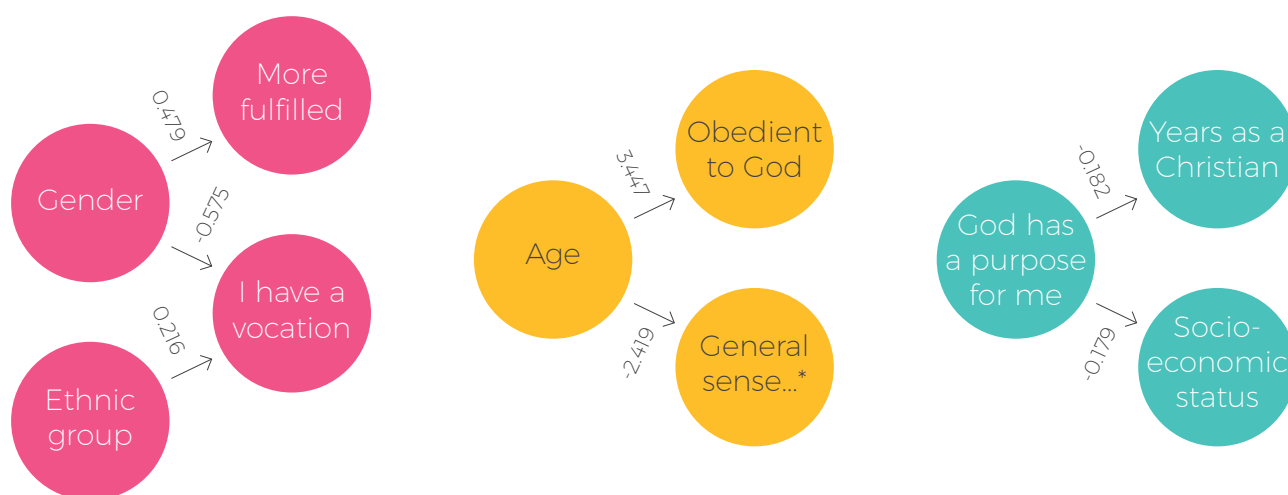
- How would you want to answer the questions we asked our interviewees? (see page 10).
- For all of our interviewees, openness to God's prompting was an important dimension of their discipleship. How could you cultivate an attitude of openness to God in the midst of your daily life? What would help with that?
- Conversation with others often seemed to be a key ingredient for discerning God's call. Depending on your personality, sharing your dreams and visions with others can be very easy or rather scary. Can you find places (for example, a church small group) where members have an opportunity to share what God might be leading them into? It can be encouraging to hear others' stories.
- How might we come to see 'calling' as relating to small things as well as big things, and to what we do as a church, as well as our individual lives?

# Appendix: Survey Analysis

Undertaken by Mingjie Lei

Ian Jones did some basic statistical analysis of the data, mainly at the level of percentages and average response. Mingjie Lei, formerly a postgraduate research student in Psychology at the University of Birmingham, then undertook more complex statistical analysis, testing the validity and reliability of the results, and performing different kinds of regression analysis and factor analysis. The main approach taken was logistic regression, which gave some insight into the degree to which one variable might in theory impact upon another. Questions containing only yes/no options were analysed using binomial logistic regression. Questions using a likert-type scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree were analysed using ordinal logistic regression. Questions with no linked answers were analysed using multinomial logistic regression. Where relevant, reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha; validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis; and in Questions 2, 4 and 6 Kendall's W Test was used to explore convergence amongst respondents' answers.

Responses were compared by demographic group. The following patterns emerged as significant:



\*...of knowing when I'm in the right job, place etc.

Women were more likely than men to feel fulfilled, but less likely to say they had a 'vocation'. Black and Minority Ethnic groups were more likely to say they have a vocation than White respondents. Older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to say that they were obedient to God, but also more likely to discern God's calling through a general sense of knowing they were in the right job, place or relationship. Those who believed that God had a purpose for them were more likely to have been a newer Christian and to place themselves in a higher socio-economic group.

Kendall's W Test was used to explore how far there was a correlation between respondents' answers to this question and answers to Questions 2 (fulfilment), 4 (obedience) and 6 (thriving, struggling, etc.). Kendall's W = 0.475, indicating no very strong correlation between answers (a score of 0 would equal no agreement, and 1 would equal complete agreement).

Chi Square was used to compare answers to Question 3 (do you believe God has any sort of purpose for you?) and Question 7 (do you believe you have a vocation). The significance level was  $0.368 > 0.05$ , meaning that the null hypothesis (i.e., the possibility of a random distribution) cannot be rejected, but nevertheless there does appear to be some similarity between the answers to the two questions.

The validity of Questions 6 (struggling, thriving, etc.) and Question 8 (index of strength of vocation) were checked using exploratory factor analysis. ('Validity' here means that that in each case, the questions are measuring the construct they are designed to measure).

## Exploratory factor analysis in question 6

Component	1
Struggling	.847
Thriving	.828
Getting by	.254

As one might expect, those who felt they were 'struggling' were less likely to say they were 'thriving', and vice versa.

## Exploratory factor analysis in question 8

Component	1	2
God calls everyone	.635	.186
Call same for everyone	.124	-.612
Have particular calling	.577	.490
Don't know my calling	.490	.638
Resisting or ignoring	.073	.676
On Journey God wants	.812	.062
Have been helped by direct call	.788	.146
Faith gives meaning and purpose	.632	.178

The table above suggests some meaningful relationship between several of the items: belief that God calls everyone to a particular place, role or task; that the respondent feels they have a particular calling; that the respondent is on the journey God wants for them; that they have been helped by a direct call from God; that faith gives meaning and purpose in life. All of these seem to be meaningful ways of measuring the same thing (albeit to a modest extent). Likewise there appears to be some relationship between believing that God's call to everyone is largely the same (inversely correlated), not knowing or ignoring one's calling, and resisting or ignoring one's calling. However, the overall reliability for Question 8 was .663 – moderately but not excessively strong.







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St Peter's Saltley Trust,  
Grays Court, 3 Nursery Rd,  
Edgbaston,  
Birmingham B15 3JX  
Tel: (0121) 427 6800

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