

WHAT HELPS DISCIPLES GROW?

SIMON FOSTER

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St Peter's Saltley Trust is a Christian educational charity covering the West Midlands region. We work with churches, Christian educators and others using a 'funder-plus' model, giving grants and support to projects in:

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What helps disciples grow?

‘Learning to become a Christian is a rich and multi-faceted matter. Likewise, teaching others in Christian ways places serious and many-sided demands upon those who would undertake the task. Much to the chagrin of religious teachers within the church setting, learning does not always transpire, even given the appropriate instructional activities and the teacher’s best efforts. On the other hand, it is consoling to note that a very considerable amount of learning in young and old alike takes place when no explicit teaching is performed.’¹

This report captures the main findings for those in churches and denominations who have some responsibility for Christian learning discipleship. It’s written with an eye to what will be helpful for churches, denominations, Christian educators and researchers.

Adult discipleship is a current concern for many churches. Alongside careful thought and inquiry, major denominations including the Church of England have begun to explore seriously ideas of discipleship through their organisational strategies. A momentum is building which is the backdrop for our particular piece of research. Our contribution to the debate recognises that much current practice is informed by emerging theology and social science, but less so by the perspective of ‘ordinary’ Christians themselves.

Accordingly, in 2014 we embarked on a research project to explore how churchgoers in the West Midlands region viewed their own growth and formation. ‘What Helps Disciples Grow’ was a survey of 1,191 Christians from a diverse range of 30 churches from different denominations in our region. This report summarizes the learning so far.

The survey questionnaire we developed explores how people view their own calling, growth, and spirituality. It also asks what they feel has helped or hampered their Christian journey over the years. The survey took place during worship, to ensure a good range of responses.

We offer key findings, analysis, and questions for reflection.

This report is supported by:

- background, survey of literature, methodology
- supporting tables
- the questionnaire we used

These can be viewed at

www.saltleytrust.org.uk/whdg

Summary of findings

We believe our research paints a hopeful and even joyous picture of Christians committed to developing their own growth in faith; and a spiritual vibrancy in today's churches that can easily be overlooked. Most of the people who took part believe that God calls them personally in some way (p.5); and just over half felt they had experienced God's intervention in their own life.

The people we surveyed take charge of their own Christian development, though the most confident often believe that is a task they share with their church (p.6). They have generally tried many activities in their quest for growth.

Our respondents have been helped in their journeys of faith by a wide range of activities (p.8). These include aspects of worship; church initiatives; personal prayer, study and reflection; and activity beyond the church. Many of these activities are initiated by the individual themselves.

Further analysis carried out in partnership with the Rev'd Professor Leslie Francis and Professor David Lankshear on the data we gathered suggest that there are four distinct paths of discipleship (p.9). All four are important, but some paths are significant in particular ways.

We charted hazards, too. Today's Christians feel emphatically that their growth is their own responsibility. Most blame themselves, rather than their church or those around them, when their faith sputters or stalls (p.12). They tend to rate their church's ability to help them in their discipleship more highly than they rate their own practice (p.14). Confidence as much as competence is the challenge for today's Christians.

Our research indicates that a backbone of practical, relational spirituality still characterises much Christian faith, in a range of traditions (p.15). Many are more at home with practical and relational aspects of faith than cognitive ones. Other expressions of spirituality are strong in some churches, but rarely dominate.

On the following pages we look in more detail at some of these findings.

At the end of each section are questions for reflection. These questions can be asked of any Christian community that would like to work with our findings: an individual church, a cathedral chapter, a denominational office, a theological college.

We close with some wider reflections which we believe represent the main challenges for churches today (p.19).

1. The language of discipleship & learning

‘Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ **Genesis 11.7**

In our review of the literature, and in preparing to shape our questionnaire, we encountered confusion around the language of discipleship and learning.

Our English word disciple translates the New Testament Greek word **mathētēs** which means learner, student or apprentice. Yet Jesus’ explicit invitation was to follow him, rather than learn from him. So a tension exists, in the double meaning of the word, between following and learning.

In preliminary focus groups and in piloting the questionnaire with ‘ordinary’ Christians, we sought to clarify what people understood by the word ‘disciple’, but we could detect no clear sense of that, nor how far they were willing to regard themselves as ‘disciples’. The responses were so uncertain that we dropped questions about the meaning and identity of discipleship from our final questionnaire. Probably it is simply not something that most Christians have thought about that much.

Others have noted that similar uncertainty exists in the wider field of learning in the church. Jeff Astley observes:

‘The fact that the terms education, learning, formation and nurture, and others such as catechesis and indoctrination, are rarely defined when they are employed in general ecclesiastical debate leads many commentators astray.’²

Anyone who wants to speak about these matters should always define their terms. Otherwise they may find that their audience has heard the words they have spoken, but not at all the ideas they meant to convey.

In the spirit of such clarity, we use **disciple** to indicate anyone who learns as they practice their faith, and whose practice is affected by that learning. We use **learn** in its widest sense, to include planned, unplanned, and even unintentional learning (one may go to church with the intention of worshipping, yet find one has learnt whilst there). This learning may be about the world’s story, God’s story, or their own; it may be practical, emotional, spiritual or mental. We use **growth** and **journey** to indicate the slow, gradual, and organic process of conforming to something which is illustrated but not entirely defined. We do not presuppose that such growth is linear, or that it is marked by stages.

Where we use **education** we refer to programmes for learning provided by an institution, which may form or inform the learner. We use **form** and **formation** to indicate a process of learning which affects human skills, dispositions, hopes, and habits, as well as knowledge and understanding.

For us, to be a disciple always means to be a learner **and** a follower. Discipleship indicates experiential learning, achieved through experience, activity, reflection, theory and practice. What is notable from our research is that Christians feel they have grown from all kinds of activities in all kinds of places. As Astley puts it ‘everyone learns all the time.’ It is what we learn – in that wide sense of the word to which we are committed – that becomes important.

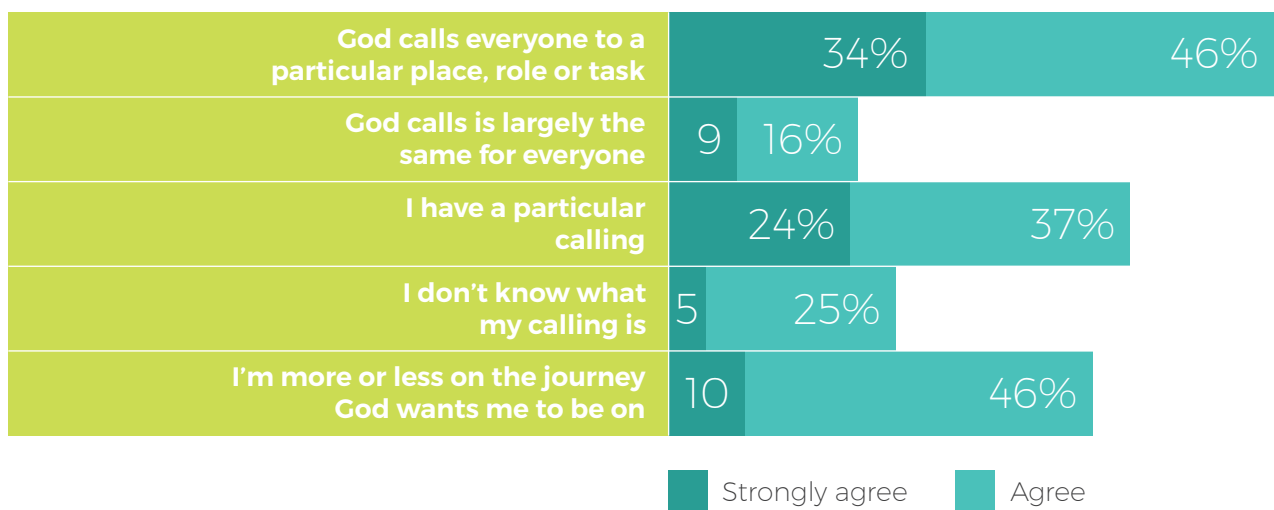
2. A personal call

‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ **Mark 1.17**

For at least some of the disciples, in each of the Gospels, discipleship begins with a call: ‘follow me.’ The call comes from outside, from beyond. The initiative is not with the disciple, but with Jesus.

Our respondents testify to God’s call, with 80% agreeing that ‘God calls everyone to a particular place role or task’.

Chart 1: God’s Call



In a separate question, 61% of people agreed that ‘I have a particular calling’ (with 27% uncertain). 56% agreed with the statement ‘I’m more or less on the journey God wants me to be on.’

Today’s Christians appear confident with language of God’s call. (If they think of calling to ordained ministry, then they don’t do so exclusively; ordination is one call among many possible.) The language of ‘calling’ can be used readily as part of a church’s general preaching, conversation and discernment.

The idea of a personal call is not, however, universal. Men and older people are somewhat less likely to have assented to it. Older people are also notably less likely to see themselves as having a particular calling, even though they are more likely to agree that: ‘I am more or less on the journey God wants me to be on.’

Those who do not agree that ‘God calls everyone to a particular place, role or task’ are less likely to rate any of the 31 specific activities shown on page 8 as helpful to their journey of faith. In particular they relatively

rarely say they find Christian courses or literature; retreats; and spiritual direction helpful – some of the more intensive aspects of Christian self-development.

This question introduced God’s call as a hypothetical idea, but it is very often an experience. 56% of those who took part in our survey rate ‘a direct call or experience I believe was from God’ as helpful to their journey of faith (see p.17).

For reflection:

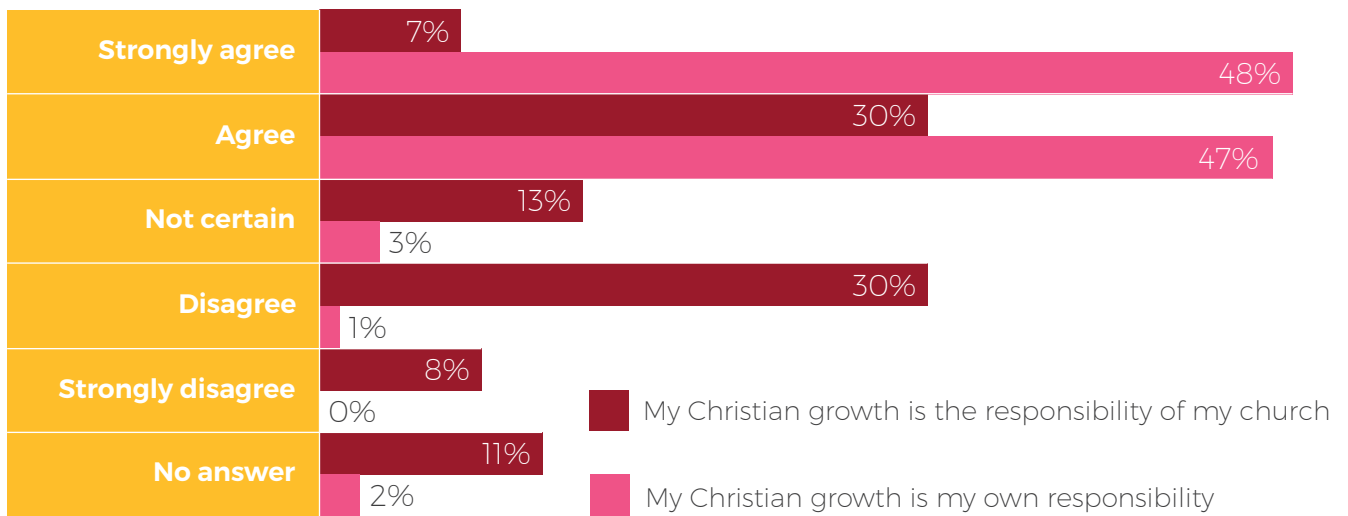
- Do we as churches hear people speaking of God’s call or intervention in their lives?
- How far should we help people with discerning God’s call?
- Where and how does our church help with such discernment?

3. Committed disciples

'Stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.' **Philippians 4.1**

Almost all respondents felt that their Christian growth was their own responsibility. 37% felt they shared responsibility with their church. Only a tiny handful considered the church to have prime responsibility for their growth.

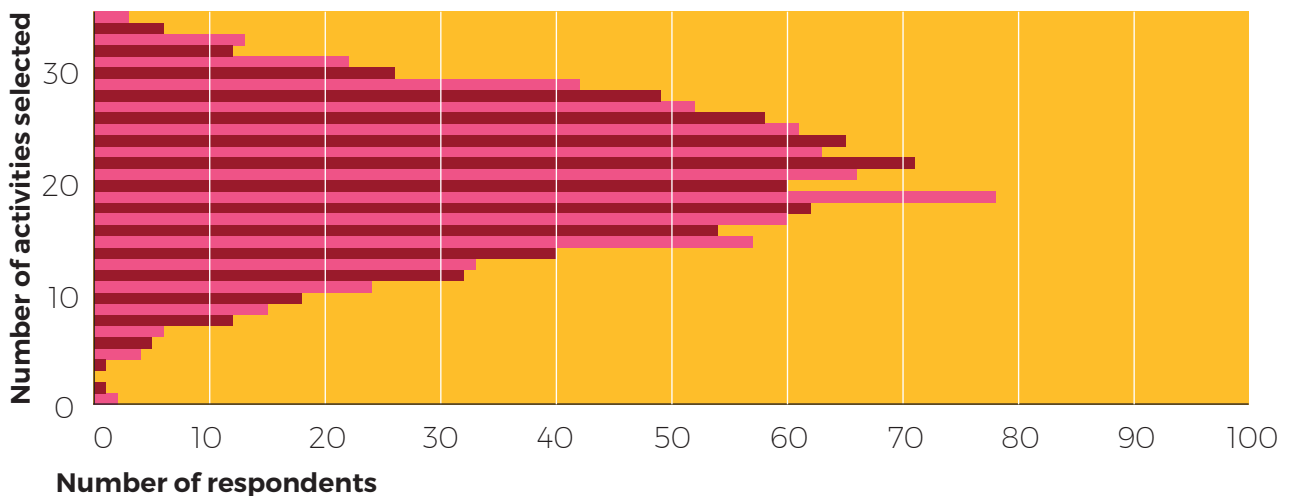
Chart 2: Whose responsibility is my growth?



Those who felt that their growth was their church’s responsibility as well as their own were more likely to think they had been helped by any of the 31 growth activities listed on page 8. They were also more likely to think they were good at any discipleship practice (p.13); more likely to see themselves as having a formal role in church; and less likely to have a mainly practical or relational spirituality (p.15).

How far did our respondents put this perceived responsibility into practice? We asked people to say how helpful they'd found a range of different growth activities (p.8). Twenty-four of the activities were rated helpful by over half of respondents.

Chart 3: Number of growth activities selected



On average, people had found twenty of these activities helpful: typically, six were aspects of church worship and fourteen were activities outside worship.

95% of respondents said they had been helped by five or more activities which would have taken some initiative on their part (e.g. going on a course, praying alone).

This is an encouraging picture of today's churchgoers positively trying to shape their own discipleship. Using a measure of confidence in discipleship practice (p.13) we found a strong positive correlation between the number of growth activities valued, and confidence in discipleship practice.

The first disciples' formation was a kaleidoscopic range of learning experiences, and it appears to be no different for today's disciples, who, in following Jesus, enter into a wide range of activity and experience.

For reflection:

- **Collectively, disciples portray themselves as working hard and making active choices: do their churches recognise, celebrate and facilitate this?**
- **What are the risks for disciples who believe their growth is primarily their responsibility?**
- **Why might half of church-goers be unwilling to say that they share responsibility for their own growth with the church? What does it mean that their confidence in discipleship practice is lower?**

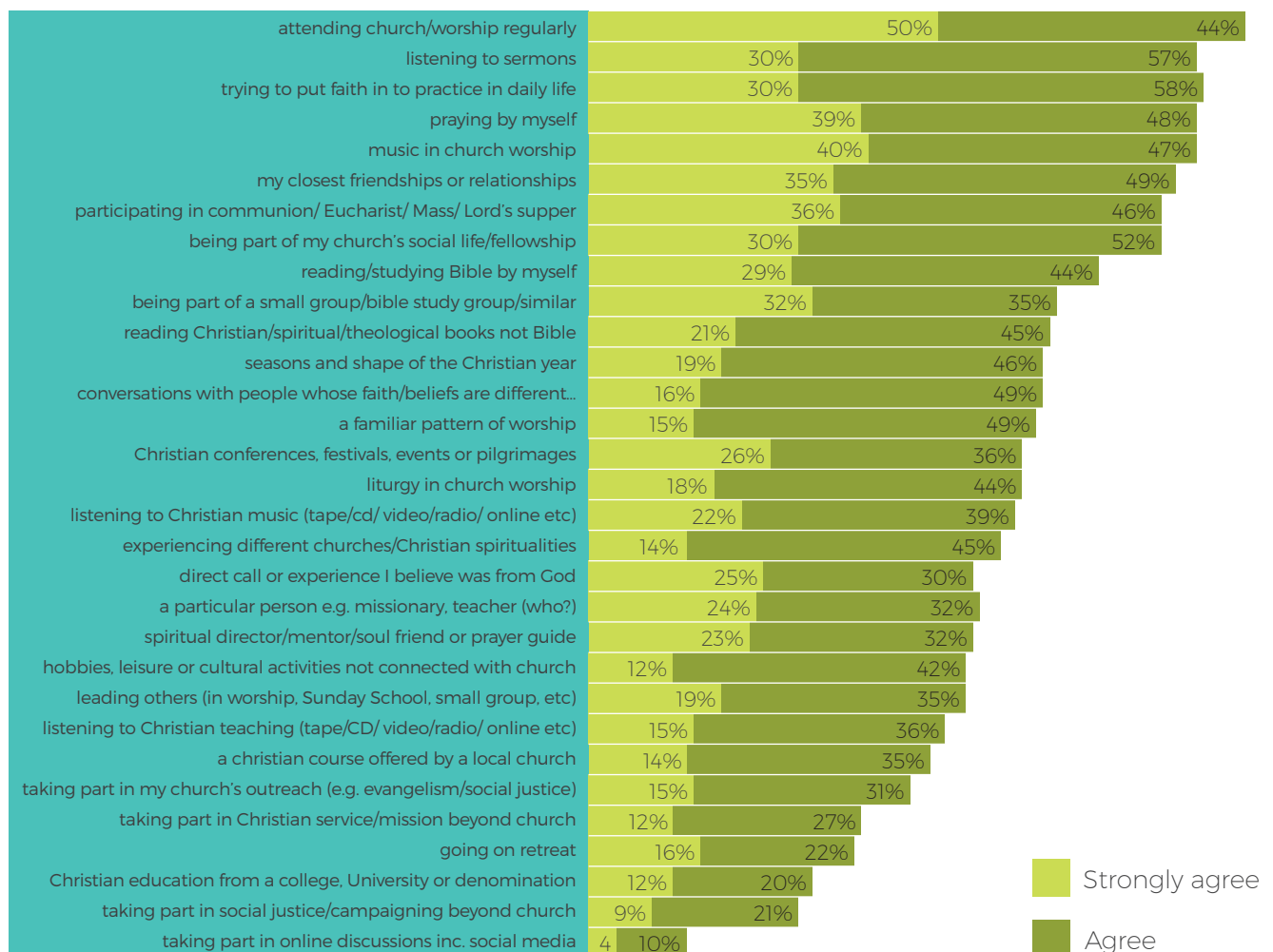
4. Growth activities

‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ The gardener replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ **Luke 13.7-9**

No-one can make the tree grow, or fruit, but we can provide the best conditions. Luke’s parable invites us to ask, what is the ‘manure’ that might help disciples

grow? One of the largest questions in our survey attempted to find out what Christians themselves think helps them to grow.

Chart 5: I have been helped in my journey of faith by...



This is a picture of Christians working hard at exploring their faith in a broad range of ways. Some of these are activities that require initiative (reading the Bible alone) or effort (going on retreat); others call for attention (listening to sermons) reflection (hobbies, leisure or cultural experiences not connected with church) or long-term commitment (seasons and shape of the Christian year) before the journey of faith can be shaped by them. They are a diversity of activities and modes of learning and formation.

Yet perhaps it's not the picture we expect to see. Many of us feel we are not doing terribly well as churches and ministers; and sometimes we look out over our communities and think we see our own shortcomings reflected back at us. Across the denominations we're deeply concerned about church growth, or the lack of it, and this can also lead us into anxiety. In a world of self-confident atheism and suspicion of authority and institutions, we seem to be sailing against the wind. However, any gloom or lack of faith appears not to be reflected in the determination of many of our churchgoers to participate in forming themselves into Christians. Perhaps, whether we see it or not, it is they who are bringing the energy and the hope.

A range of activities this wide can be difficult to get into focus. We can either study the details, or take a step back and try to comprehend a wider picture. On pages 17-19 we look at some of the individual items in more depth. Here, we ask whether there are underlying factors which unite the many growth activities we enquired about.

Given access to our data, Rev'd Professor Leslie J. Francis and Professor David Lankshear sought to reduce the detail shown in chart 5 in order to clarify the picture. In a joint paper with us, now seeking publication, they demonstrate that most of the activities we asked could be gathered using statistical analysis into four underlying variables, or factors.³ If people believe they've grown through one activity, they are more likely believe they've grown from another in the same factor, too (Table 1, below).

This underlying pattern was robustly supported by the statistical analysis carried out, and suggests that many Christians may have a tendency to learn their faith through one, or more, distinct paths of discipleship.

Table 1: Four paths of discipleship

Discipleship through:

<p>GROUP ACTIVITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being part of a small group/Bible study • being part of my church's social life/ fellowship • taking part in my church's outreach • a Christian course offered by local church • leading others in worship / small group / prayer • going on retreat • Christian conferences, festivals, events, pilgrimage 	<p>INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening to sermons • praying by myself • reading/studying the Bible by myself • a spiritual director, mentor, soul friend • listening to Christian teaching, discussion, talks on tape etc • reading Christian/spiritual/ theological books • my closest friendships or relationships • a particular person (e.g. missionary or teacher) • trying to put my faith into practice in daily life • a direct call or experience I believe was from God
<p>PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taking part in online discussion or conversations • taking part in a social justice/ campaigning activity beyond my church • taking part in a practical Christian service or mission project not connected with my church • Christian education provided by college, university, denomination • experiencing different churches/Christian spiritualities • conversation with others whose faith or beliefs are different from mine • hobbies, leisure or cultural activities not connected with church 	<p>CHURCH WORSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attending church/worship regularly • music in church worship • liturgy in church worship • participating in communion / Eucharist/ mass/ Lord's supper • a familiar pattern of worship • seasons and shape of the Christian year

The four factors are not independent: they all have a role, as complementary parts of a whole, rather than alternatives. However, some appear to be especially significant. In our separate paper we develop an 'index of discipleship' and an 'index of strength of vocation' and observe that some factors correlate particularly strongly to these. Notably, public engagement appears to add to depth of discipleship, and group activity adds to strength of vocation. However, one path, discipleship through individual experience, is particularly significant, giving the strongest correlation with both sense of vocation and depth of discipleship.

Discipleship through individual experience

To foster a strong sense of vocation and deep discipleship confidence it will be important to encourage and enable people to be nurtured by some of the individual experiences listed: praying alone, reading the Bible and other theology, listening to Christian teaching either in sermons or on broadcast/recorded media, close relationships that permit speaking about God, trying to put faith into practice in daily life etc.

Of course, there is a challenge here. While churches can certainly offer regular public worship, and may structure group activities, church leaders' influence over individual experience is limited. The very activities that appear to make most difference are mostly those which we can only enable and encourage, not provide.

As a way in, we may note that these are largely activities that provide space for reflection. Other writers have noted the profound importance of reflection in Christian growth⁴ and theological education.⁵ Reflection is an early action in a learning cycle which steps back from constant activity to make space for the

individual to review and alter habits. In the Christian context, theological reflection makes space for disciples to bring God's story into the activity of daily life.

Discipleship through public engagement

This factor comprises activities that take place apart from the local church. Most are self-initiated. Individual activities in this factor are less often selected in our survey, but the factor is associated with a greater depth of discipleship. Activities in this factor (see p.9) are quite broad, and include organised outreach and service, and informal examples of exploration (experiencing different Christian spiritualities), encounter (conversations with people with different faith/beliefs) and evangelism (online discussions). Many mission activities fall into this category, though others fall into 'discipleship through group activities'. We may think of mission as the church's outreach, but these findings suggest that mission activities represent unique opportunities to learn the craft of one's faith, as well as spreading and enacting the good news: they grow the individual, as well, hopefully, as those around.

For reflection:

- **Looking at Table One, into which of the four paths of discipleship does our church put most of its efforts?**
- **Which paths, if any, are neglected?**
- **How well equipped are we to support discipleship learning beyond the church?**

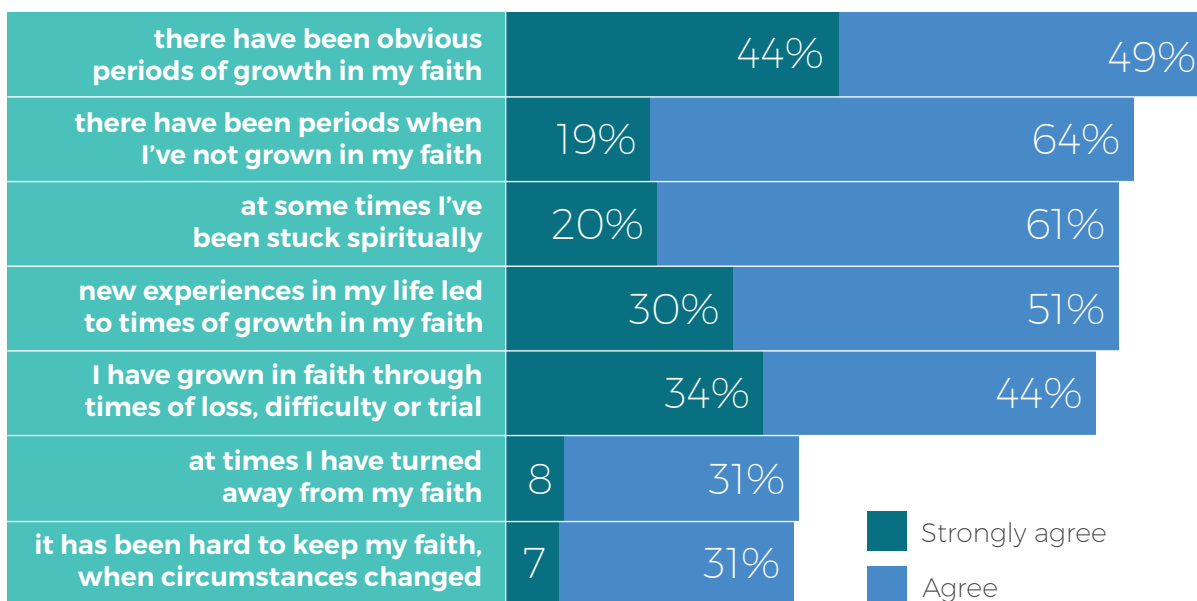
5. Complex journey: confident disciples?

‘...let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...’ Hebrews 12.1

Our survey respondents speak readily of growth in their own life. Almost all believe they have had obvious periods of growth, and many strongly agree with this statement. However, few feel it’s a straightforward

journey: most also identified times of non-growth, and times of being stuck spiritually, and the majority found they’d grown through new experiences and times of difficulty or loss.

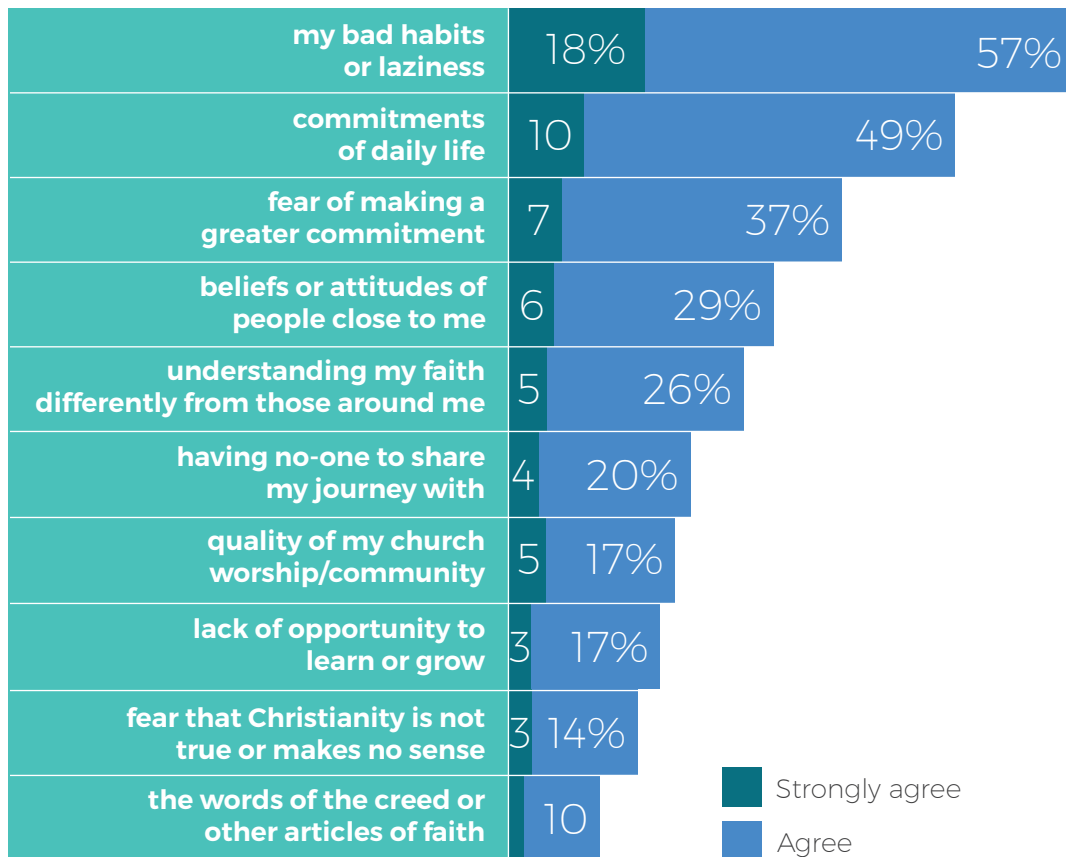
Chart 6: Times of growth



What are the challenges? Most said they’d been hampered by their ‘own bad habits or laziness’ (74%), followed by ‘the commitments of daily life’ (59%). The third highest factor was ‘fear of making a greater

commitment’ (44%). These are factors that reflect on one’s own journey through life, rather than the church or the community around.

Chart 7: My Christian journey has been hampered by...



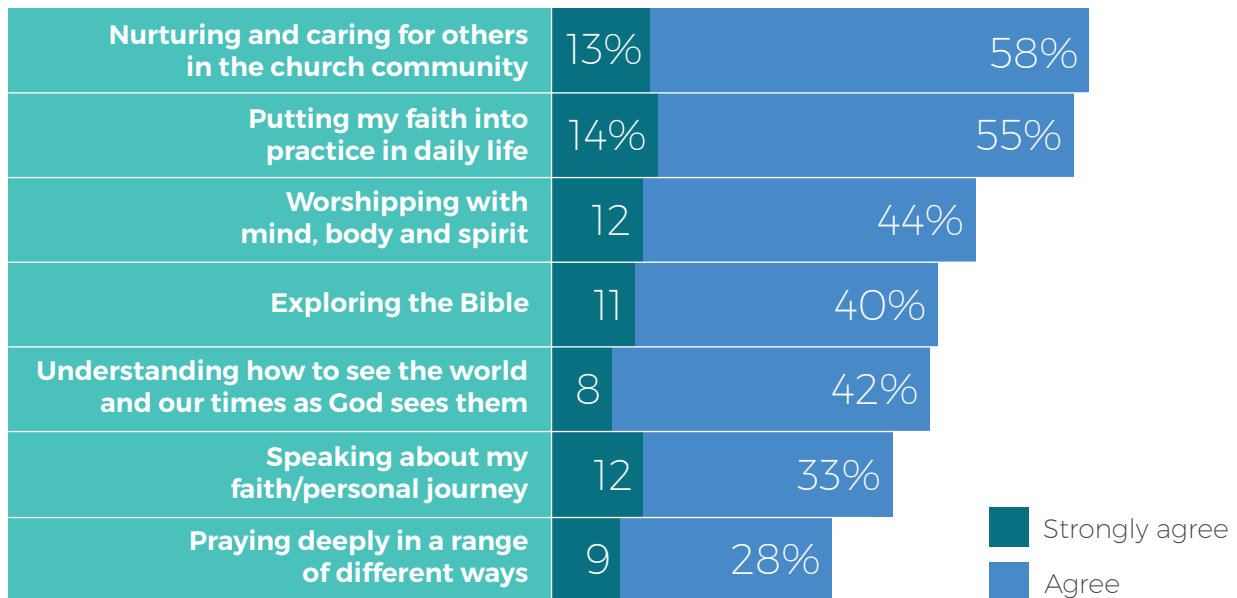
Women are more likely to say they've been hampered by 'the beliefs or attitudes of people close to me' (women: 38%; men: 28%), or by 'having no-one to share my journey with' (women: 26%; men: 20%).

Those who said they had been hampered by 'understanding their faith differently from those around me' had more often turned from their faith. They found all growth activities (p.8) less helpful than their counterparts, apart from online conversations.⁶

Confidence in discipleship practice

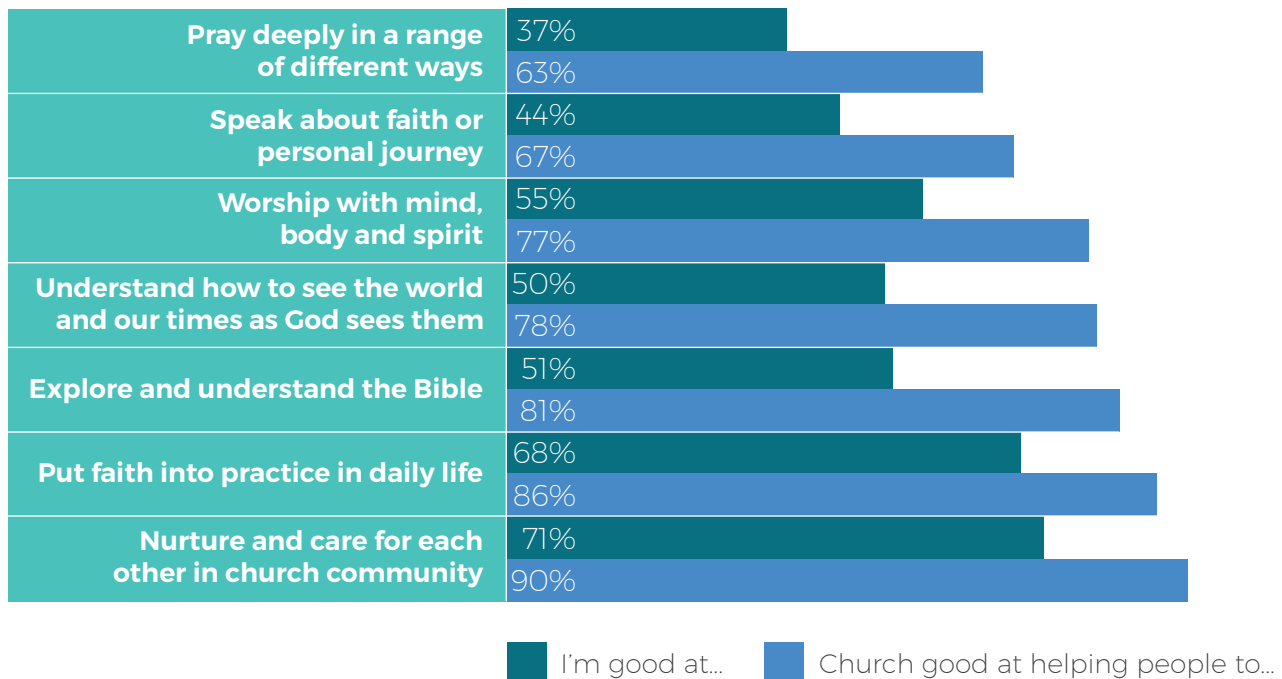
A further question asked people to rate how confident they felt in seven areas of discipleship practice. These questions together can be used to create an index of depth of discipleship.

Chart 8: I feel I am good at...



There was little variation in the 'strongly agree' responses, but a much wider range in the 'agree' responses. Putting faith into practice in daily life, and nurturing and caring for others are responses that are widely assented to. This reflects the results on spiritual preferences (p.15).

Chart 9: Discipleship and the church



We used the same range of items to ask how helpful respondents found their current church in developing discipleship practice. People tended to rate their church more highly than themselves in every aspect of discipleship practice.

In summary, the great majority of respondents in our survey:

- believe that God has a personal call on their lives (p.5)
- say their growth is their own responsibility (p.6)
- say they've been hampered by their own habits or commitments (p.12)
- take action and initiative in their own growth in faith (p.7)

Taken together, this suggests most Christians see their journey as primarily their own responsibility, with church and denomination in a supporting role. This pattern reflects a post-modern context where people often navigate a complex life-course and career. There are positives in this. Regarding their Christian growth as something that happens outside church, as well as within it, may encourage people to intertwine their faith with all aspects of their life. And it suggests that people won't necessarily get stuck if their church can't provide them with all they need.

But there are risks, too. A personal faith, motivated and directed by the individual, can be drowned out: 60% said they had been hampered by the commitments of daily life. For those who chart their own path, discernment is incredibly important: yet it's usually best done in company with other Christians. And it's tempting for people to do what they want and ignore what they find hard: 80% have been hampered by their own bad habits and laziness.

For reflection:

- **What does it mean that both churchgoers and church leaders seem to feel the responsibility for Christian growth?**
- **Do churchgoers and church leaders talk to each other about journeys of Christian learning and growth?**
- **Where is God's grace in this anxiety?**

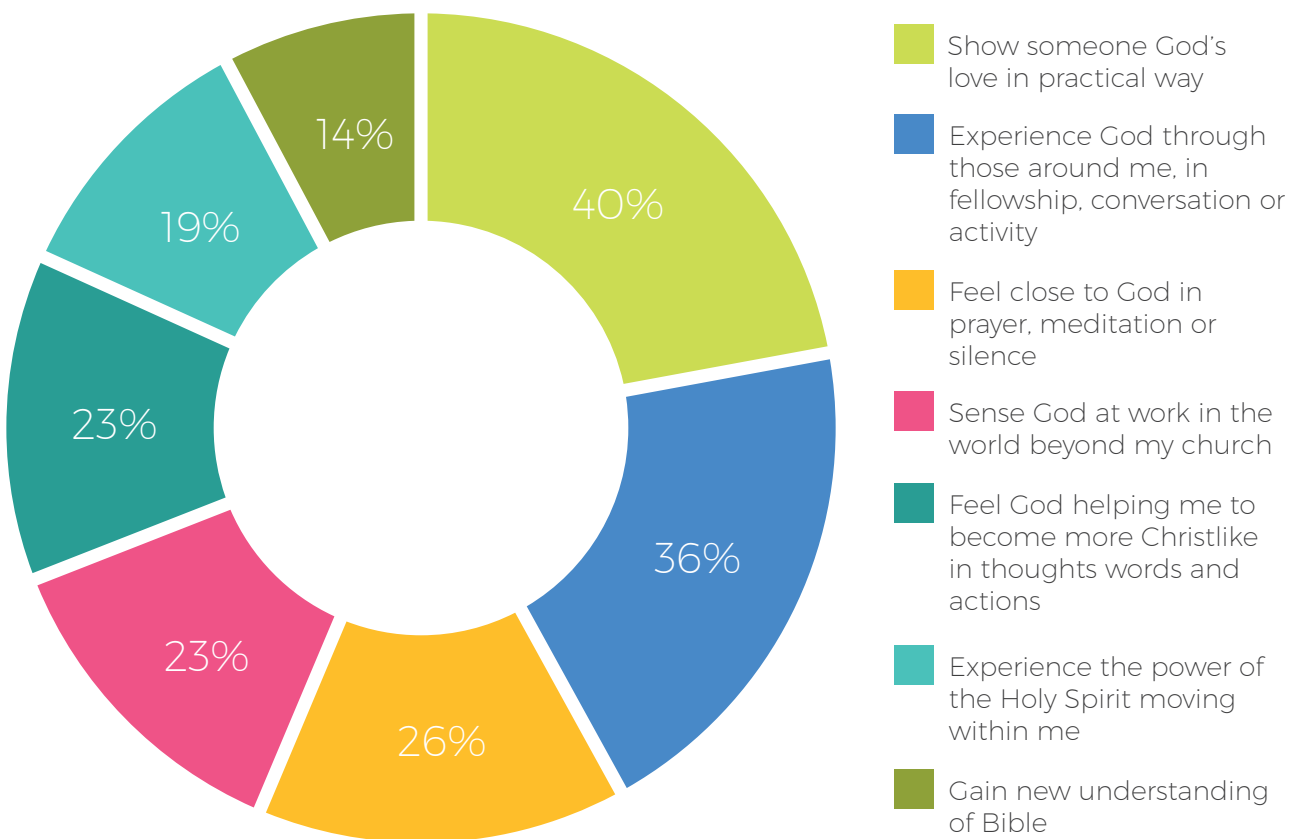
6. The character of our faith

‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.’ **John 13.34**

We asked a question designed to identify people’s spiritual preferences. This question is based on Richard Foster’s Renovare model of a ‘balanced vision’ of Christian spirituality⁷ which outlines six

long-standing spiritual traditions. Respondents expressed their spirituality in diverse ways, but overall the predominant character of that spirituality is a practical and relational.

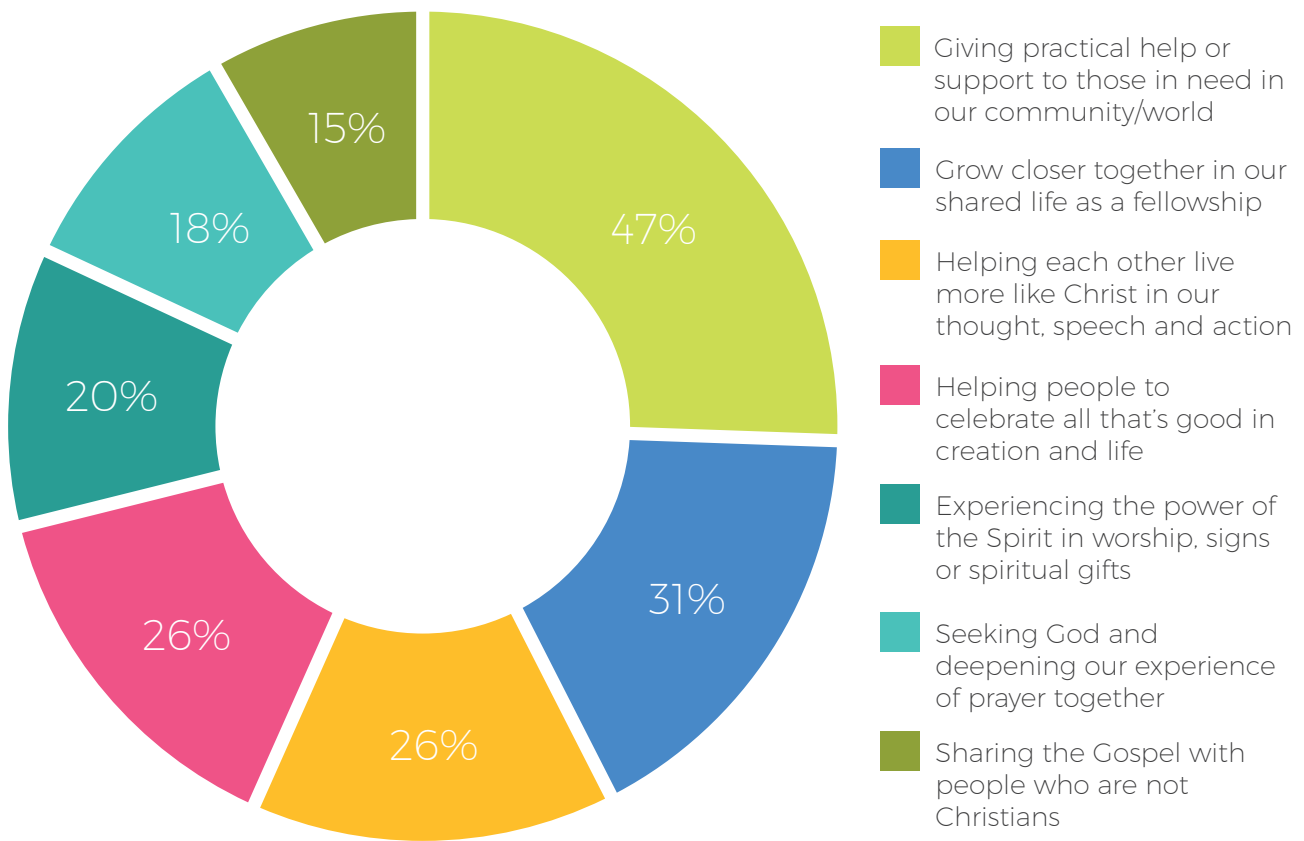
Chart 10: I feel most alive as a Christian when...



We asked people to select exactly two responses. (Most did: hence the total of nearly 200%).

56% of all respondents selected one of the two most popular: ‘show someone God’s love in a practical way’ or ‘experience God through those around me.’ 14% ticked both: the most frequent single combination. Only 30% ticked neither.

Chart 11: Church community most alive when...



We asked a similar question: 'I felt a church community I belonged to was most alive when we were...'. Here too, responses based on practical compassion and fellowship dominated. These responses reflect the emphasis in chart 8 (p.13), which indicated a generally high confidence in carrying out practical and relational activities.

Practical and relational spiritual preferences were preferred by all adult age groups, but were somewhat less dominant for younger adults.

Women were considerably more likely than men to select 'Show someone God's love in a practical way.' Men were more likely than women to select 'Gain new understanding of the Bible' and perhaps

surprisingly they were considerably more likely to select 'Experience God through those around me, in fellowship, conversation or activity'.

For reflection:

- Do we recognise each of these spiritualities in our church community?
- Is it easy to overlook the spirituality that exists, in a search for deeper faith?
- How easy is it to make space for a range of spiritualities in a church?

7. Specific aspects of discipleship

We saw in chart 5 (p.8) the wide range of activities which many Christians undertook in seeking to deepen their faith. We saw how four factors could be identified to give a broader perspective on the routes people might

take in discipleship. However, the individual activities are also meaningful. Some growth activities, such as 'praying alone' and 'a direct call or experience I believe was from God', deserve further exploration.

Prayer

Three questions in our survey referred to prayer. Most people had found prayer helpful, but were less likely to feel they were good at it.

87% of respondents agreed that praying alone had helped them in their journey of faith. 39% strongly agreed (one of the highest 'strongly agree' scores). The 13% who did not agree were considerably less likely to feel they were on the journey God wanted them to be on. They were much less confident in most areas of discipleship practice.

While it was regarded as important and helpful, prayer was generally the area in which people felt least confident. 'I feel I am good at praying deeply in a range of different ways' was ranked lowest or second lowest at 24 out of 29 churches.

37% said of survey respondents that they felt they were good at praying deeply in a range of different ways. 63% felt their church was good at helping them to pray deeply in a range of different ways, although it was the area churches were thought to be weakest at.

In response to our question on spiritual preferences (p.15) 26% of all respondents said they felt most alive

as a Christian when close to God in prayer, meditation or silence. This dropped to 18% for the corresponding church factor: 'I felt a church community... was most alive when seeking God and deepening our experience of prayer together'.

'Praying by myself' is one of the growth activities that made up the path of personal experience: the factor that had the most dramatic impact on discipleship confidence (p.13). Those who did not find praying alone helpful were far less likely to have been helped by reading the Bible alone, or direct call or experience they felt was from God.

For reflection:

- Given that most people found personal prayer helpful, but far fewer felt they were good at it, how can we give people confidence in their prayer life?
- How do we talk to each other about this core aspect of Christian life?

'A direct call or experience I felt was from God'

This aspect of Christian experience is beyond the control of disciples or churches. Yet it seems to happen often and to great effect.

56% of all respondents in our survey said they had been helped in their journey of faith by 'a direct call or experience I felt was from God.'

There was almost no difference between women and men in responding to this question. Younger adults (age 21-50) were more likely to agree (63%) than mature adults (58%) or older adults (52%)

We analysed this question by church. Over 90% agreed with this statement in the two Black-majority churches we surveyed. The only churches where less

than one-third agreed were in fairly or very rural areas.

Some churches may not cultivate a habit of talking about God's action in their lives – and may indeed be nervous or embarrassed about the idea – but it appears to be a real experience for the majority of Christians. The skills they have developed in church and beyond may help people identify God's action: people who agreed with this statement were much more likely to feel confident about discernment ('seeing the world and our times as God sees them'); exploring the Bible; and prayer.

The question of a 'direct call' falls into the category of 'individual experience' (p.9-10) which is closely connected with depth of discipleship. Those who felt they had received 'a direct call or experience' were far

more likely to have grown through times of difficulty, and were much more confident in most areas of discipleship practice.

A holistic religious education engages both thoughts and feeling/experiences, including religious experience: a call from God is perhaps the religious experience par excellence. While churches and church leaders can't make that happen, we can make it possible. Openness to the Spirit's presence, a reflection on biblical calling stories, and a collective habit of discerning God's action in our lives may all help to open hearts and minds to the possibility of God's calling us directly.

Activities related to worship

Aspects of church worship are amongst the most highly rated of growth activities, even though they might not be intended as times of learning and formation.

The single activity which had most widely been thought to have helped people in their journey of faith was 'regular church attendance' (we emphasised regularity in the question). Since the survey was carried out during church worship, some caution is needed, but we note that it was also the growth activity that scored most highly for 'strongly agree' (50%).

Many of us, worshippers and worship leaders, probably do not think of worship as being deliberately formative, even though we probably think of sermons as being deliberately instructional. Those who do regard worship as formative may see the formative nature of worship as permanent and unchanging, rather than responsive to the community and the context⁸. Yet if regular church attendance is as significant in growth and learning as our research suggests, there are implications. This gives churches the opportunity to be intentional about forming Christians through worship. Church worship is worth doing, and worth doing well, as an act which forms people as one of the ways in which it offers praise to God. In this view, worship requires an understanding of the particular people who gather, as well as the given pattern of worship, in order that our praise of God may shape the present community, rather than a collection of ideal worshippers. Perhaps, too, it invites collective reflection and shaping of worship as a way of training disciples to think about how their faith is expressed.

Music in church worship is also a notable item in our research (87% agreed, with 40% agreeing strongly, that it had helped them in their journey of faith). Some theoretical work on how congregational music is formational has been done, but more exploration is

For reflection:

- **Is an expectation of God's intervention part of our church's preaching and teaching?**
- **How can we speak of a direct call or experience in a way that encourages those who do not perceive such a thing?**
- **Do the practices of testimony and witness have a place in today's churches?**

needed. How worship music is chosen, in a context of self-motivated disciples who expect to be formed by music, is a question that invites careful reflection from any church.

In the detailed statistical analysis of our data referred to on page 10, every aspect of church worship apart from 'listening to sermons' correlated into one factor, discipleship through church worship. All four factors were important, but two appeared to add particular weight to depth of discipleship: public engagement, and individual experience. With the exception of 'listening to sermons' none of the activities that made up those two significant discipleship factors takes place during church worship.

That leaves much of Christian formation to be done outside worship. We will probably always need to help our worshippers engage in other paths of discipleship elsewhere (and we have seen on page 9 their appetite to do that), but there may be ways of bringing discipleship learning into our worship, perhaps especially to encourage reflection (p.10) or train in prayer. Such considerations will be especially important to those churches unable to readily engage their congregation outside of Sunday worship.

For reflection:

- **How is the regular worship of our churches formative?**
- **Is music in worship chosen and understood as formative?**
- **Are there ways in which our worship gatherings can engage with formation through 'individual experience', 'group activity', and 'public engagement'?**

8. Conclusion and reflection

‘Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ **2 Corinthians 12:8-9**

For church leaders, this report may be at once encouraging and unnerving. Their role in the growth of disciples is a paradox. They are essential, yet peripheral. Some activities, such as those in the path of church worship (p.9) plainly demand their presence. Others, such as group activity, invite it. Those in ‘individual experience’ can only occasionally be directly supported by ministers. And usually, activities in the ‘public engagement’ path will happen at one remove from the life of the congregation. The disciples they care about are very much like children, sometimes near, sometimes far away. Disciples learn profoundly from their churches and ministers, yet learn in their own way. Just as every child makes their unique way in life, so every disciple discerns their own call in a way that is impossible to imagine until we have seen it unfold. Their learning, growth and discernment never stop; and if we are wise, we learn from watching and nurturing them.

Nobody in this world needs any more recommendations. Here, in a different spirit, are what we perceive as the greatest challenges that emerge from our research, which we look forward to exploring with any church or denomination:

1. How can churches and ministers come to see their communities as groups of disciples, as well as groups of worshippers, with the potential to learn their faith through all that they do?
2. How can churches and ministers acknowledge and support learning through all four paths of discipleship: church worship; group activity; individual experience; and public engagement? (p.9)
3. How can churches and ministers curate worship as a space for growth and worship together? (p.18)
4. How can Christians enable one another to reflect on and speak to one another about the spiritual aspects of their lives, which may be strong but hidden (‘A direct call...’ p.17)
5. How can churches and ministers begin to see missional activities as opportunities for discipleship learning, as much as outworkings of our faith? (‘Public Engagement’ p.10)

There are opportunities for denominations and theological colleges to consider how far:

1. Ministerial training prepares future ministers to be people who facilitate and enable discipleship
2. Ministerial training prepares future ministers to curate worship in a way that facilitates and enables discipleship learning as part of the worship of God

To some extent all of these challenges thirst for a change in the culture of the church. As we see more clearly that Christians learn from the many people, resources and experiences around them, so we see too that anyone may have a role in nurturing discipleship. Increasingly, Christians need to work collectively towards a culture where we can learn and reflect together on the important task of supporting one another’s discipleship learning and practice. Especially in the UK today, where our Christian faith is less and less the norm, we may need to do so with more clarity of speech, and less reliance on a prevailing wind which is faltering and may soon turn.

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- Rev'd Liz Howlett
- Rev'd Andrew Roberts

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Notes

¹ Dean M Martin 'Learning to become a Christian' in Astley and Francis **Critical Perspectives on Christian Education** (Gracewing, 1994, Leominster) p.184.

² Jeff Astley, 'Forming Disciples: Some Educational and Biblical Reflections' in **Rural Theology** Vol 13 No 1, 2015, p.6.

³ Of the 31 activities we listed, only 'listening to Christian music on tape, CD, TV...' did not correlate to any of the factors.

⁴ Roger Walton, **The Reflective Disciple**, London, SCM Press, 2012, gives a useful account in chapter 5.

⁵ David Heywood, 'Learning how to Learn: Theological Reflection at Cuddesdon'. **Journal of Adult Theological Education**, Vol 6 No 2, 2009, p.164-175.

⁶ Differences of 3% or less are ignored.

⁷ www.renovare.org/formation/a-balanced-vision (retrieved 22.1.16). At the advice of our Reference Group, we added in an extra category for a spirituality rooted in fellowship.

⁸ Sam Wells' **God's Companions** (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2006) explores the formational structure of the Eucharistic liturgy and extends the study with practical examples of individuals and communities responding.

Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).



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