

# **DRIFTING FROM CHURCH AT UNIVERSITY: UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO THE NARRATIVE OF CHRISTIAN STUDENTS**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY**

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July 2021

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis represents a heuristic empirical investigation into the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students which occurs on transition to university, arising from theological reflection on my experience and practice as a university chaplain and vicar of a student-facing church. The aim was to deepen understanding and enhance response to the context from a practical theological perspective.

Using mixed methods, including a student survey and interviews with students and church leaders, I studied the experiences of students in childhood, teenage years prior to university and after transition to university to listen to and understand their narratives and the factors which had influence those narratives. I engaged church leaders to understand current responses in practice.

The research shows that early faith is built on belonging and community. Strength of appropriation of personal faith is significant in whether faith thrives when belonging is removed on transition to university. Finding a sense of belonging is crucial to church attendance at university but students are not always aware what the elements critical to this belonging are until they find it or have the opportunity to reflect on what those elements are. Actions of church intended to attract students can skew student's perceptions of the broader picture of churches available to them. Students interact with the possibility of church attendance at university within a more general experience of overwhelming found in university transition.

Through exploring the findings further through the lenses of transition as multiple overwhelmings, churches' use of marketing, and the power of personal narrative, I conclude that the research points to three areas for fruitful development in practice. These areas are reconceptualising the problem as multiple overwhelmings, reflecting on the effects of church approaches to marketing, both positive and negative, and attentive listening to student faith narratives as well as helping students integrate their faith and experiences into their own narrative identity, both before and during transition to university.



## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the support, encouragement and inspiration I have received from so many people, personally and professionally, throughout my part-time doctoral programme of study which has culminated in this thesis. Some are identified below; others will have no idea how significant their words of encouragement, or friendship and support have been.

I am particularly grateful to my supervisors, Professor Stephen Pattison and Dr Amy Daughton, who have offered excellent, perceptive academic oversight and personal encouragement throughout. I would also like to thank everyone who has been part of the Doctorate in Practical Theology programme community at the University of Birmingham, as well as those from other centres who have participated in the summer schools, who have been faithful companions on a long journey and a rich source of suggestions and critical questions.

This research would not have been possible without: each student who has shared their story with me, whether formally as a research participant or not; colleagues in church leadership who dared to be vulnerable enough to participate; my encouraging chaplaincy colleagues; my long-suffering church family; Dr Jo Whitehead and Rev Canon Dr Nigel Rooms who originally inspired me to begin this journey; Rev Dr Sally Nash whose wisdom helped the survey questions; Rev Dr Richard Davey who provided a sounding board for my interpretation of the student interviews; and the gentle but persistent encouragement of Dr Alison Gardner.

A final thank you must go to Dr Lauren Wilson who kindly proof read this thesis for conventions of grammar, spelling and language.

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
WHY THE TOPIC IS MY CONCERN .....	1
WIDENING THE LENS .....	2
THE QUESTION IS OF CONCERN TO THE CHURCH .....	4
WHY THE QUESTION IS IMPORTANT TO UNIVERSITIES .....	5
RESPONDING WITH A RESEARCH QUESTION .....	6
<i>This is a theological issue .....</i>	7
<i>Why Practical Theology is the right discipline .....</i>	8
<b>CHAPTER 1: THE CONTEXT AND WHY MY RESEARCH IS RESPONSIVE TO IT .....</b>	<b>13</b>
1.1 A SIMPLE CONCEPTUAL MODEL .....	13
1.2 GENERATIONAL CULTURE .....	14
1.3 FAITH DEVELOPMENT .....	20
1.4 CHANGING FACE OF CHAPLAINCY .....	23
1.5 ECCLESIOLOGY .....	26
1.5.1 <i>The gap as an ecclesiological concern. ....</i>	26
1.5.2 <i>The scope of ecclesiological response .....</i>	30
1.6 IMAGINING THE GAP .....	36
<b>CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>40</b>
2.1 THE METHODOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY .....	40
2.2 DE-IDEALIZATION - MY JOURNEY .....	43
2.2.1 <i>Learning the ideal and removing myself.....</i>	44
2.2.2 <i>Making things fit.....</i>	46
2.2.3 <i>Realising it doesn't all fit.....</i>	47
2.2.4 <i>Finding my voice .....</i>	48
2.2.5 <i>The final pivot points.....</i>	49
2.2.6 <i>Alvesson's work.....</i>	52
2.3 THE EMERGENT COMMITMENTS OF MY RESEARCH .....	55
2.3.1 <i>Pragmatism.....</i>	55
2.3.2 <i>Problematization.....</i>	56
2.3.3 <i>The value of individual narrative .....</i>	57
2.3.4 <i>Data as a dialogue partner .....</i>	58
<b>CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....</b>	<b>59</b>
3.1 ONLINE SURVEY .....	59
3.1.1 <i>Development of the survey questions.....</i>	60
3.1.2 <i>Choice of platform.....</i>	62
3.1.3 <i>Survey Pilot.....</i>	62
3.1.4 <i>Distribution of the survey.....</i>	62
3.2 STUDENT INTERVIEWS .....	64
3.2.1 <i>Recruitment.....</i>	64
3.2.2 <i>Interview Structure .....</i>	65
3.2.3 <i>Practicalities.....</i>	66

3.2.4 Transcription .....	66
3.3 CHURCH LEADER INTERVIEWS .....	67
3.3.1 Invitation & selection .....	67
3.3.2 Interview process .....	68
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS .....	68
3.4.1 Survey.....	69
3.4.2 Student interviews .....	69
3.4.3 Church leader interviews.....	73
3.4.4 Bringing it all together - an iterative cycle of reflection .....	74
3.5 SUMMARY.....	74
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<i>Ordering of the data</i> .....	75
4.1 STUDENT INTERVIEWS.....	77
4.1.1 <i>Childhood and teenage experiences</i> .....	77
1. Belonging and community .....	77
2. Appropriation of faith & vagaries of encouragement .....	78
3. Service as belonging.....	80
4. Family influences and other adults.....	81
4.1.2 <i>Where they had got to prior to university transition?</i> .....	83
4.1.3 <i>Preparation for University</i> .....	85
4.2 THE MARKETPLACE OF CHURCHES – AN IMAGE OF THE INTERSECTION .....	86
4.2.1 <i>The front row stalls</i> .....	89
4.2.2 <i>Slightly to one side</i> .....	93
4.2.3 <i>The more hidden stalls</i> .....	98
4.2.4 <i>The rest of the marketplace</i> .....	104
4.3 THE EXPERIENCE OF THE STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY .....	104
4.4 STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF THE MARKETPLACE .....	113
4.5 SUMMARY OF THE INTERSECTION .....	116
4.6 HOW DO THE SURVEY RESPONSES AFFECT THE PICTURE? .....	118
4.6.1 <i>Observations</i> .....	118
4.6.2 <i>Statistical analysis</i> .....	120
4.6.3 <i>The Christian Union</i> .....	122
4.6.4 <i>Summary of survey findings</i> .....	124
4.7 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS .....	125
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>127</b>
5.1 TRANSITION AS MULTIPLE OVERWHELMINGS.....	127
5.1.1 <i>Overwhelmings in the data</i> .....	129
5.1.2 <i>The overwhelming of transition</i> .....	132
5.1.3 <i>The theological nature of multiple overwhelmings</i> .....	137
5.1.4 <i>Principles informing practice</i> .....	140
5.2 CHURCHES AND MARKETING .....	141
5.2.1 <i>The reasons behind the marketing</i> .....	142
5.2.2 <i>The interaction between church marketing and the multiple overwhelmings of transition</i> .....	144

5.2.3 A possible positive direction.....	150
5.3 THE POWER OF STORY .....	153
5.3.1 My narrative .....	154
5.3.2 Student D's narrative .....	156
5.3.3 The narratives of other participants .....	158
5.3.4 Reflecting further .....	159
5.3.5 Narrative identity.....	161
5.3.6 Faith development .....	167
5.3.7 Emergent principles that might inform practice.....	168
5.4 SUMMARY.....	171
<b>CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE .....</b>	<b>172</b>
6.1 RECONCEPTUALISING THE PROBLEM.....	172
6.2 REFLECTING ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMPETITION AND MARKETING.....	178
6.3 HARNESSING THE POWER OF NARRATIVE.....	184
6.4 SUMMARY.....	189
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>203</b>
APPENDIX A UNPUBLISHED REFLECTIVE PRACTICE PIECE SUBMITTED JULY 2016.....	204
APPENDIX B ONLINE SURVEY.....	220
APPENDIX C SCHEDULE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED STUDENT INTERVIEWS .....	238
APPENDIX D STUDENT INTERVIEW INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM.....	239
APPENDIX E INTERVIEW STRUCTURE: CHURCH LEADERS .....	242
APPENDIX F CHURCH LEADER INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM.....	244
APPENDIX G STATISTICAL REPORT .....	246
APPENDIX H STORYLINE DIAGRAMS .....	287

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: A simple conceptual model .....	13
Figure 2: Example of storyline flow diagram .....	70
Figure 3: Key to storyline diagrams .....	71
Figure 4: The intersection of student experience and church practice .....	76
Figure 5: A traditional marketplace .....	87
Figure 6: Survey structure .....	237

## TABLES

Table 1: Churches participating in the research.....	89
Table 2. Analysis of all storylines: influences at university towards students joining a church .....	113
Table 3: Factors correlated with Church attendance .....	121
Table 4: Correlations with regular non-Church Christian group attendance.....	122

## ABBREVIATIONS

CU	Christian Union
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others
MTh	Master of Theology
n.d.	no date
PCC	Parochial Church Council
PT	Practical Theology
SDF	Strategic Development Fund
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCCF	Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship
USP	Unique selling proposition
UK	United Kingdom

## **INTRODUCTION**

I would like to use this introduction to persuade the reader that the research question, “How should the abatement in church attendance when Christian students with a church background attend university be interpreted and responded to in a Practical Theological perspective?” is both coherent and important, that practical theology is right discipline within which to ask the question, and then to give an overview of the journey to explore it which will be followed in this thesis.

### **Why the topic is my concern**

My context as both a university chaplain and Anglican parish priest, have shaped the research you are about to read. I have a large parish with approximately 25 000 residents, 60-70% of whom are university students. It also contains both main campuses of the University of Nottingham. I am mindful that I am charged with concern for the spiritual welfare of all residents (‘cure of souls’), as well as leading the church which is of an evangelical tradition. The church is concerned how it may need to think differently in order to engage more students as, despite its vision for numerical growth (PCC of Lenton 2017), attendance numbers are relatively low and static. As a Christian university chaplain I have a responsibility to encourage and support Christian students to thrive in their faith whilst at university. I am continually struck by conversations with students in the parish and on the university campus who used to attend church prior to university, still identify themselves as Christians, but do not attend a church in Nottingham despite sometimes walking past the doors of my church every day. There is often a divergence between desire and reality in

student church attendance that does not primarily seem to result from lack of effort or intention (some have actively tried to find churches), with students expressing some sadness that they are missing something important to them. My understanding of the context of my ministry therefore began to concur with the headline statistic from Fusion UK that 73% of Christian students fail to connect with a church community whilst at university (Fusion n.d.).

There are numerous churches across a range of traditions and cultural styles in Nottingham actively concerned with welcoming students, so the root of the issue did not appear to lie in a lack of provision. This research was therefore prompted by my desire to understand this phenomenon better in order to develop my own practice and that of my church with a hope of improving the experience of students themselves who were showing a thirst for church connection.

### **Widening the lens**

It is helpful at this stage to widen the lens and contextualize and establish my professional insight within a broader picture. My concern which led to this research, described above, sits within a life experience which is common to a significant proportion of young adults in the United Kingdom - the transition to life as a student at university.

Having the lens at its widest, university education in the UK is no longer the relatively exclusive domain of a minority wealthy elite that it was at its inception. It now forms part of the developmental journey of an increasing number of people. Different methodologies lead to very different figures for the proportion of young adults entering higher education (from



27% to 49% (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2013; Ball 2013)) but they do concur that university entrance is a significant life event for a high proportion of young adults. The number of students enrolling for an undergraduate degree in the UK also continues to steadily rise year on year (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2019b). Of those entering Higher Education (HE) 81% move away from their family home in order to study (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2019a). So, a significant proportion of the UK population experience the combined transitional life events of studying at university and moving away from their parental home as young adults.

Slightly narrowing the lens, the subset of this population of students of interest to this research are those who choose to identify themselves as Christians. In a large survey of 3935 students from 101 institutions, 43.8% of students described themselves as Christians, 31.4% identified as 'no religion' and 9.1% as Muslim (Weller, Hooley, and Moore 2011). The research does not claim to be statistically representative, but I think it does robustly contribute to a picture of a significant number of university students identifying themselves as Christians. If the figure were representative, it shows a slightly smaller proportion of students identifying as Christian than the general population in the 2011 UK Census (59.5% Christian, 25.7% No Religion, 4.4% Muslim).

Contracting the field of view further, this high proportion of people identifying as Christian does not translate into church attendance. This is perhaps not surprising in a community where the term 'Christian' has long been associated with cultural identity rather than purely personal religious belief (Storm 2011). In 2013 it was estimated that 10.3% of the population

were church members (Faith Survey 2013). Various studies show that average weekly church attendance continues to decline in most age groups (Research and Statistics 2018). The proportion of attendees who are young adults also continues to fall, now accounting for about 2% of the church-going populations (Church of England 2007a). So, these statistics from multiple sources describe a picture of declining tendency of people to identify themselves as Christian, alongside a decline in active participation in a faith community, both of which are disproportionately magnified amongst young adults, and by extrapolation amongst university students.

### **The question is of concern to the Church**

This broader view illustrates why the question is also important within, and of concern to, the wider church. The magnitude of the Church's concern about the decline in church attendance amongst young adults is tangibly demonstrated by the focus of significant amounts of church resources in several recent initiatives. The Renewal and Reform agenda of Church of England was developed in response to 'a significant and continuing decline in and ageing of church attendance' (General Synod 2016, 20). The Strategic Development Fund (SDF), which is a key strand of this initiative, diverts central church funds to programs focused on engaging younger people. The 2020-2022 round of SDF funding will be focused on programmes which 'are targeted on promoting church growth within the largest urban areas; and one or both of younger generations and deprived communities' and 'involve numerical growth and growth in discipleship and social impact' (Church of England 2019). In 2015 the mission statement of the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham was changed to introduce a specific focus on young people, 'Growing Disciples: Wider, Younger, Deeper'. In

2016 the Diocese was granted £1.2million funding by the SDF for the 'Growing Disciples: reaching young people in Nottingham' project (Church of England 2019b).

### **Why the question is important to universities**

The suggestion that the research question is of concern to universities is perhaps less intuitive than the assertion that it is of concern to a Christian minister and the wider church. Whilst it is not directly articulated as an issue of concern by universities, I would argue that it is consistent with espoused institutional values and goals of universities. Three areas are particularly pertinent to this argument. First, most universities recognize that celebrating diverse religious practice is good for individual wellbeing and the university community as a whole. Whilst University College London remains proud of its heritage as the first secular university in the UK, it recognizes that religions and beliefs can often be of fundamental importance to the wellbeing of students. Whilst 'the secular values that UCL upholds are as relevant today as they were at its inception....it is this diversity and complexity [of cultural and religious backgrounds] that contributes to UCL being a world-class institution' (UCL n.d.). Whilst celebrating religious practice may be distinct from encouraging it, if any aspect of the transition to university, experience of university life, or prevailing culture makes students of faith less likely to choose to actively practice their faith at university, then some of the positive benefit described is inevitably lost. The second issue is similar. Religion or belief is one of the nine 'protected characteristics' under The Equality Act 2010. Unconscious bias within universities against some of these characteristics (such as gender and race) is well recognised (Advance HE n.d.). Again, the correlation between studying at university and decrease in practice of faith should at least make institutions want to ensure that

unconscious bias in institutional practices and culture is not having a causative effect. The third pertinent consideration is the nature of knowledge and objectives of education. There is clear evidence that students are interested in gaining a wider perspective on the world whilst at university, rather than just gaining academic knowledge in order to gain future employment (Forum for the Future and UCAS 2008). Calhoun (2015, 19) argues the need for religious engagement as a support to exploration of major issues and that its absence diminishes the advancing of public values within academic discourse.

This research is therefore addressing an important question both from my own perspective as a practitioner, that of the church, and is also consistent with the panorama of wider perspectives currently affecting the priorities of universities in their promotion of wellbeing, holistic education, and equality.

### **Responding with a research question**

In addition to my research being located within an important area of concern, I suggest the specific question, how the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students when attending university should be interpreted and responded to in a Practical Theological perspective, is also coherent. This coherence derives from the question being fundamentally theological, relating to a complex context which merits the breadth and depth of exploration afforded by the discipline of Practical Theology, and not being directly addressed by existing research. It is also coherent from a practical perspective as the limited resources available to ministry mean that practice, both for individuals and the church, will benefit from having evidence on which to be based.

*This is a theological issue*

Whilst practice of faith at university, or even more specifically church attendance, by Christian students could be researched sociologically, and has indeed has been (eg Sharma and Guest 2013), my concern which led to this research is primarily theological, and hence I have framed the question as such. This framing comes from my confidence in theology as a valid paradigm through which to interpret insights from other disciplines (Webster 2015) as an overarching perspective rather than one voice jostling to be heard amongst the others, and confidence that faith and discipleship matter in the postmodern world, rather than simply being instrumentalised for wellbeing. The research seeks to interpret culture and behaviours through a theological lens, rather than assume that patterns of faith practice are an inevitable consequence of contemporary culture.

This research is theological as it explores a space of interplay between the nature of God and God's work in people's lives, influences on individual faith development, the role of the church in the practice and development of faith, and the practice of Christian ministry. The Bible presents God as tenaciously desirous of a relationship with His people, concerned for their wellbeing as a parent is for their child. The gospels also present Jesus's declared intent to build His church (Matthew 16:18). This divine desire and intent is at least partially mediated within the world by the behaviours of church communities and is also moderated by other influences on human development, students' lives and behaviour. The question is ecclesiological as it considers questions of the nature of church in the current social context, its responsibility in individual faith development and practice, and the significance of church attendance. The question is also theological as it concerns how the practice of Christian

ministry in the context interacts with the relationship between God and His people.

### *Why Practical Theology is the right discipline*

I discuss the methodological commitments of Practical Theology (PT) in chapter two, however here I would highlight why, having established the coherence of the research as theological, the discipline of PT is the most cogent location for this research. Core reasons are that it is a discipline which allows enquiry to remain theological whilst drawing on insights from other academic disciplines, it values critical reflection on human experience (Pattison and Lynch 2012), and it gives space for my own integrity as a theologian and practitioner. In practice these are intertwined.

Definitions of PT are multiple, but the one that has emerged as most attractive to me is that of PT as a unique theological lens offering the development of 'thick description' of practices, assumptions and contexts on multiple levels and in multiple ways, engaging with tradition, strategy, thought and action (Couture 2012). The intention is expansion of understanding rather than unification, or reduction (Miller-McLemore 2012a). One layer of my context I experienced prior to undertaking this research was an abounding myth that the abatement in church attendance on transition to university is because the intellectual freedom and enlightenment that is afforded by the university experience leads to an active rejection of faith. However, both the statistics of students' self-identification as being of a particular religious faith and sociological research suggest this is not the case. Guest et al's landmark study 'Christianity and the University Experience', showed that 80% of students who previously attended church but no longer attended at university still describe

themselves as Christians and the majority of students felt that university has a neutral, rather than secularizing, influence on their religious identity (Guest et al. 2013).

Another significant layer was current and previous practice. When I moved into my current role I noticed varying responses from local churches and their leaders. These ranged from an entire refocusing of practice to no discernible changes in practice at all, but with none confident they had satisfactorily brought about their preferred outcome and most quite certain they had not. Many local churches found fewer and fewer students attended but were uncertain how to interpret this change. Some churches had shaped much of their worship styles and practice around attempts to connect with contemporary culture, particularly when trying to 'hook people in'. This approach seemed to be associated with a significant student attendance, but there was nothing to suggest the overall picture had changed. Others expressed a sense of helplessness and had made little discernible practical response, some suggesting that university chaplains should be able to fix the issue (by 'sending' students to them). Other churches were in the middle of this spectrum. The Christian Union was very clear that it hoped its members would join a church, but only advertised those churches that were willing to sign their Doctrinal Basis of Faith (which therefore precluded all but the most evangelical churches). Chaplains were struggling with their identity and remit as students no longer came to university with strong denominational loyalties which may previously had led them to seek out a particular chaplain or faith community (other than to an extent amongst Roman Catholics). Many HEI chaplains had come to focus on spirituality rather than religious faith, believing that may make them more accessible to students and also as a means of fitting in with perceived university agendas.

Many of these responses rely on implementing a normative past, in keeping with Burkhart's applied theology (1983). Others mirror the approach of pastoral theology, the antithesis of Burkhart, inviting non-theological disciplines to inform theological thinking and practice (Browning 1983a). These responses rely on sociological and psychological perspectives on human experience, such as engagement with contemporary worldview as a profitable avenue for student engagement (Sharma and Guest 2013). Both applicationism and pastoral theology approaches are largely unidirectional discourse. PT encourages a bidirectional dialogue, creating a space where theology benefits from holding multiple perspectives (Farley 1983, 74; Patton 2000, 54), even though some of these perspectives may appear to be in tension with each other. My initial experience of the context suggested that PT offers a space where the multiple layers of this context can be explored using this bidirectional dialogue.

I have experienced parallel journeys in both faith and research, described in chapter two, coming from a conservative evangelical tradition and practicing as a doctor trained in quantitative research methods. The emphasis in PT on reflective practice allows me to retain integrity around my own faith whilst being creatively challenged to deepen my understanding of it. It encourages me as a practitioner to deeply understand practice thus far and to shape future practice in a coherent and effective fashion, based on credible understanding of the present rather than being uncritically tethered to a normative past.

So, I would assert that the question 'how should the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students be understood and responded to from a Practical Theological



perspective?’ is both important and coherent, and can be profitably explored within PT. The remainder of this thesis presents the research journey I have undertaken to address that question.

Chapter one offers a simple conceptual model for understanding the location of the research question in its context and therefore how my research is responsive to it. I then situate the research within currently available research on generational culture, faith development, ecclesiology and the practice of university chaplaincy.

The second chapter turns to the methodological commitments of the research, particularly to the principles of pragmatism, problematization, and the value of individual narrative and the use of data as a dialogue partner. I do this through considering of the methodological commitments of practical theology before offering a reflective exploration of my own journey of de-idealization, in my faith, self-understanding and research practice. This leads into chapter three’s description of the actual research process.

The key research findings are presented in chapter four, along with the introduction of a metaphor that emerges from them that I find to be helpful in understanding something of how students experience churches when they transition to university, that of a traditional marketplace.

In chapter five I explore further key themes which emerge from the findings: the overwhelming nature of university transition, the impact of church marketing, and the

significance of personal narrative.

Finally in chapter six I consider how the research findings might positively influence practice through reconceptualisation of the problem, reflection on the unintended consequences of current practice, and working to harness the power of personal narrative, before a final conclusion is then offered.

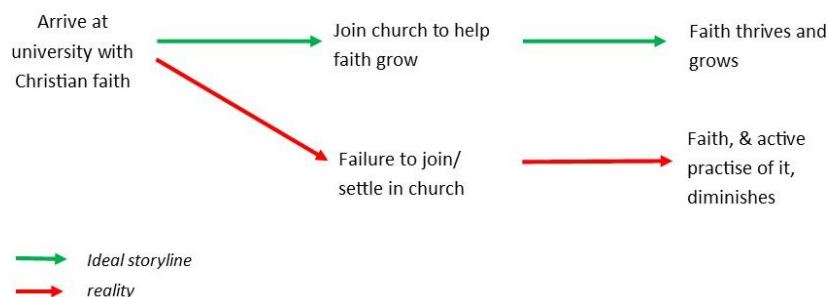
## Chapter 1

### THE CONTEXT AND WHY MY RESEARCH IS RESPONSIVE TO IT

Having introduced the context and argued the coherence of the research question, this chapter will explore the context in more depth. I first offer a simple conceptual model of how the research question is located in the context, beyond attention to statistics. I then go on to explore how some bodies of literature interact with the context but do not answer the question.

#### 1.1 A simple conceptual model

In the introduction I described how this research arose from the shocking statistics about the low proportion of Christian students joining churches at university, sadness at individual narratives I heard, prior to the research, which cumulatively form those statistics, and a lack of overall impact of current practices on this. This can be characterized as the nature or gap between two storylines of a Christian student's life: the ideal and the reality.



**Figure 1: A simple conceptual model**

The figure above reveals my assumption, which I will explore later in this chapter, that church attendance nourishes and grows faith, although it does not define it, and is therefore beneficial to the student as well as the church. It also shifts the focus away from numbers and towards interest in the trajectory of faith journeys. I understand part of my responsibility, both as a chaplain and parish priest, to entail responding to reality and finding opportunities to enable students to flourish in their faith. This research therefore aims to better understand the shift in direction both practically and theologically, in the hope of identifying those opportunities to develop practice.

No published literature has specifically looked at the nature and causes of this gap and appropriate response in practice to it, although Guest et al's (2013) work referred to in the introduction suggests it is not due to rejection of faith. However, some bodies of literature speak into some of the different facets of the complexity of the context and may therefore aid understanding of it. I explore ones particularly pertinent to this research question here, before reflecting on how they may connect in this context. These areas are: generational culture, as it relates to religious practice; faith development; the changing face of chaplaincy; and the ecclesiology.

## **1.2 Generational Culture**

I turn to consider generational culture because the abatement in church attendance on transition to university represents a change over time from previous student behaviour. Many churches can tell of times when student attendance was significantly higher, and

chaplaincy colleagues told me of thriving worship on campus in previous decades. In this section I introduce generational culture and its relevance to the research, then consider insights around the rise of consumerism and the nature of truth which may be especially pertinent.

Generational cohorts are a tool developed by researchers to analyse changes in views and behaviour over time and support understanding of how different formative experiences 'interact with the life-cycle and aging process to shape people's views of the world' (Dimmock 2018). Generational culture overlies overall cultural shifts in Western societies, often framed in terms of moves through modernity and postmodern perspectives (Lynch 2005; Coleman and Henry 1980). During the process of this research there has been a shift from most students belonging to Generation Y (or Millennials), born approximately 1981-1996, to Generation Z, born post 1996. A broad consensus has developed in descriptions of Generation Y, whilst analysis of Generation Z and the implications for adult life is still developing. Sociological research based on interviews with teenagers suggests the shift from Generation Y is dominated by Generation Z being born into the ubiquity of the smart phone and a much less economically certain world, with shrinking job prospects, widening inequality and an increasing variation in attitude depending on social circumstances and geographical location (Combi 2015, 1 & 100).

Exploring, as a theologian, the relationship between theology and popular culture, Lynch proposes that our understanding of popular culture is always shaped by our own background (Lynch 2005, x), whilst Orwell, critiquing historic literature, asserts that "each

generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it” (Orwell 1945). This is relevant to this research as church leaders of previous generations may therefore struggle to understand and engage with cultural change that has happened in a younger generation and tensions may exist within multigenerational churches. The gap between Generations Y and Z and their predecessors, and therefore between the current student generation and that of most church leaders, is understood in sociology of religion research into views on Christianity by current generations to be particularly large (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, 22).

Observations of contemporary culture conclude that consumption has become cultural language, a means by which people express their identity (Lynch 2005, 60). This will therefore have been Generation Y’s experience for most of life and all of life for Generation Z. Consumer advertising “aims to stimulate desire rather than satisfy need” and shopping is about acquiring identity (Spinks 2010, xv). The nature of this consumerism is evolving. Research seeking to understand the worldview of Millennials concludes they lived childhood in a period of economic boom, leading them to seek simplification of shopping rather than endless choice (Savage et al. 2006, 86). Their mindset was that everything would be put in front of them rather than having to seek things out, presented in an appealing way, and presumption of choice (though living in the aftermath of the ‘Great Recession’ at the end of the 2000s may have subsequently changed this). Generation Z grew up seeing their families under financial pressure and so tend to be shrewd consumers, carefully evaluating options before making decisions (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2021). In both forms, this turn to consumerism is significant for how people relate to religion and the church, with a

presumption of choice, expectation that churches will meet personal needs and preferences, and careful assessment of this provision before decision-making.

Affiliation to institutions, including denominational loyalty within the church, has also continued the decline seen in previous generations (Savage et al. 2006, 14). Despite this, exploring sociological aspects of religion, Davie (2007) describes the phenomenon of vicarious religion as increasingly people find security in traditional religious worship being practiced by others without actively taking part themselves. This could contribute to a mindset where students identify as Christians and yet do not choose to attend church.

In research reflecting on trends in worship styles, Spinks argues that postmodernity has seen a renewed openness to religion accompanied by an ethos that all beliefs are equally acceptable and also equally unprovable, contrasting with the absolute truth, doctrine, and identity in Christ of Christianity, and instead facilitating a focus on privatized spirituality (Spinks 2010, xxiii). Indeed, popular culture has been seen to itself take a religious or spiritual significance in its own right at times, for instance sports, or following fiction such as Star Trek (Savage et al. 2006, 25). Missiological reflections have observed that personal identity and narrative have also become factors in delineating truth, with subjective experience increasingly trusted as a reliable source (Hollinghurst 2018; Mohler 2005, 64). This sets up a milieu where maintaining particular religious practices, such as church attendance, becomes less crucial to maintaining integrity of belief. Young people have described a preference for spiritual practices, such as prayer, to be a private activity, rather than forming part of a communal experience (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, 45).

There is agreement across disciplines, including study of religion, sociologists and youth work, between researchers focused on youth culture, and those looking more widely at changing religious thoughts and practices that both Generations Y and Z are interested in spiritual ideas and believe in the transcendent, but these beliefs are not necessarily developed and expressed in the ways of previous generations (Howe and Strauss 2000, 234; Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, 6; White 2017, 123, Woodhead and Catto 2012, 7). Others found Generation Y young people believed they were well-enough informed to make their own religious or spiritual choices without the guidance that previous generations might have thought necessary (Savage et al. 2006, 23). Generation Z are said to believe they hold the solution, so tend not to be 'seekers' after truth as they are content with where they are, or indeed create truth 'despite the facts at hand', contrary to creedal religion (White 2014, 26 & 63). Generation Y are described as growing up with an optimistic outlook with little space for concepts of sin and moral transgression (Mann 2005). Similarly, Generation Z describe actions with negative consequences as mistakes, with most things being transformable into virtues (e.g. lust becomes sensuality, anger is 'being honest with emotions') (White 2014, 63). 'Benign Whateverism' and 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' (C. Smith et al. 2005, 13 & 162) are characterizations of the effects of this optimism on faith and religious belief observed in Generation Y youth. These are cultural trends in moral thinking which Generation Z are taking on as they develop and are beginning to be evidenced in early comparative studies noted above. It results in a nice God who wants people to be fair and have a nice life, gets involved only to resolve problems, and sends good people to heaven when they die. Religious beliefs and practices are of virtue if they make the individual feel



better. Collins-Mayo et al conclude that young people can often achieve their goals without having to rebel against their parents (2010, 104). This could be extrapolated to them not needing to actively rebel against their childhood faith because they can choose a personalized understanding of Christian identity, without feeling the need to adhere to institutional doctrines or demonstrate membership of a community of faith through church attendance.

Cultural changes therefore give some insights into the complexity of the divergence of the storylines at the heart of this research but do not fully explain it. They offer some possibilities for focused engagement of churches and chaplaincy responding to the abatement in church attendance by students, such as filling in the gaps when the worldview of happiness is challenged by pain, as well as directly challenging the fraud of the happy narrative (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, 164) but do not of themselves inspire a comprehensive response. Church attempts to engage with Generations Y and Z are often focused on communication or more sophisticated service delivery rather than tackling the fundamental epistemological questions beneath the failure of church attendance (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, 105) so are at best a partial response. Perhaps the most pertinent insight from descriptions of generational culture to this research is that young people, even those growing up within the church, are often growing up with a different concept of faith than that found in orthodox doctrine of the church. Subjectivization of belief squeezes out the need for a distinctive Christian narrative and hence colludes with, rather than challenges, the benign indifference of the culture. Students have already been formed by culture before they come to university, and have learned how their faith interacts with it and this must

form the starting point for a theological response. Generations Y and Z challenge the church to understand what really is fundamental to its distinctive story as the people of God and how that relates to personal narrative and identity across generations.

### **1.3 Faith development**

The transition of students to university usually coincides with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Literature on faith development, crossing the boundaries of theology and psychology, therefore offers another lens with potential for illuminating the divergence between the storylines of this research.

Fowler's 'Stages of Faith Development' (1981), with its six stages, is the most influential work in this field, with others focusing on validating, and more recently criticizing, his model. Criticism of his work is based around gender bias (Slee 2000) in his emphasis on cognition and moral reasoning, relying on Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg, without attention to emotional and psychodynamic issues, his insistence that faith development follows a logical, normative pattern without space for divine influence and incongruities with postmodern psychology (Smith 2014, 22). In Fowler's model, students would be transitioning from stage III to stage IV, where he argues that leaving home precipitates an examination of self and values, leading to the necessity of taking seriously their responsibility for their own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes (Fowler 1981, 172). This is based on Piaget's description of the developing ability to think about thinking, causing reality to become a subset of possibility, and Kohlberg's identification of a move away from home both physically and emotionally being significant in the development of principled moral

reasoning (Fowler 1981, 69 & 88). In this transition, issues of identity are seen as tensions arise between the desire for individuality and the need to be defined by a group and a primary concern for self-actualization and service to others. Using the paradigm of development of an ethic of care leads Gilligan (1982) to also focus on the development of a new understanding of the interconnectedness of self and others at this stage in life. This fits cogently with the finding that values important to Generation Y young adults include relationships and loyalty to friends, fair mindedness and diversity (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007, 22), all aspects of how the individual relates to others. Fowler proposes that the church community should respond by to these tensions by using the language of vocation and offering a counter-cultural alternative (Fowler 2000, 117), but offers no evidence for such a response being successful in encouraging the faith of young adults to flourish.

A limitation of Fowler's model for theological research is his contention that faith is not necessarily associated with religious belief but is about the ultimate concern of all human beings, and that religion is about how transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through the forms of the cumulative tradition (Fowler 1981, 4 & 8). In the next section I will discuss how some university chaplains view their practice as a non-religious pastoral presence, which resonates with this. However, Avery (1992) argues that whilst this definition may be fitting for social sciences, it is at odds with the Christian doctrine of justification by faith. All Fowler's original research subjects expressed a religious faith as Christians, his model has no space for religious experience, the divine, or radical conversion (Nelson 1992, 64 & 75), all of which are of potential interest in my context.

Whilst Fowler's stages have been reflected in a student population (Das and Harries 1996) criticisms of his work include the lack of longitudinal studies with the potential to show decline as well as development in faith (Nelson 1992), and no account is offered of the effect on faith development when childhood and adolescence have not been well negotiated (Daloz Parks 1992, 94). A further key critique is around Fowler's dependence on Kohlberg's assumption that moral reasoning inherently becomes ever more sophisticated and that behaviour is always consonant solely with moral reasoning, without accounting for other facets of daily life (Feldmeier 2007, 46). In an attempt to accommodate reversibility and postmodern thinking Fowler added 'faith types' to his model, but this has been criticized for simply trying to fit postmodernism into his structure of faith (Fowler 1996; Coyle 2011).

Despite the limitations of Fowler, no alternatives have been developed or critiqued to the same degree. Many doing newer work on alternative psychological approaches have still based them on Fowler (Streib 2001; Keller and Streib 2013; Leak, Louks, and Bowlin 1999). It has been argued that a new model is needed, especially in the light of postmodern culture (Heywood 2008), with Groeschel (1995, 99) arguing that this must involve a separation of spiritual development (dependent on divine grace) and psychological development (the natural adjustment to mature life). Regan's work describing three key phenomena influencing adolescent faith: the tension between longing to be included and longing to be separate, the experience of losing and recovering a sense of order, and the need to be recognized (2002, 39), resonates as a reasonable description of the developmental location of students moving to university which may helpfully contribute to the discourse around the research question. Its language of tension between competing psychological needs concurs

with the notion of the divergence of the storylines being related to the vector sum of the forces pulling them in different directions. It would suggest that all storylines of Christian students attending university are subject to such tensions but stops short of offering a model of faith development, or avenues for intervention.

So Fowler's definition does still provide the current context with a hermeneutical framework for discussing religious and interpersonal interaction and making links between theology and social science (Avery 1992) but is only part of the picture that is being explored and does not directly shape a response in practice. Regan's work contributes a dynamic of multiple tensions influencing individual nature of pathways of faith as students transition to university.

#### **1.4 Changing face of chaplaincy**

I briefly turn to literature on chaplaincy here because of my experience of leaders of some traditional churches perceiving that chaplains are responsible for directing students to them. Also, whereas I identify the divergence of storylines described at the start of this chapter to be of fundamental concern to my practice as a university chaplain, this is not a universal understanding of the role of chaplains. In my experience, newer churches tend to either not consider that chaplains may have a useful role in signposting students to them, relying instead on Christian Unions, or else see them purely as a line of communication via which their own publicity might be distributed.

The role of the Christian university chaplaincy sits amidst the relationships between

churches, chaplains, students and HEIs. Just as this research sits at a particular point in time on a continuum of change in generational culture, so it is located in a particular period on a changing trajectory of the identity of university chaplaincy where theological paradigms that would underpin an identity for Christian university chaplaincy are few and unsatisfactory (Smith 2015).

The notion that signposting students to traditional church is the responsibility of university chaplains is a legacy of universities evolving from Oxbridge colleges which were church foundations, mirroring small parishes with a chapel at their heart and the chaplain organizing services and giving spiritual and moral guidance to students. As 'civic' universities developed throughout the twentieth century churches, especially the Church of England, were keen to provide chaplains due to concern students would be beyond the reach of parish clergy (Robinson 2004, 217). From eight chaplaincies outside Oxbridge in 1952 a recent telephone survey of 99 universities found 378 paid HE chaplains in England and Wales (Aune, Guest, and Law 2019, 19). However, the wide plurality of institutional culture that has developed in HEIs is mirrored in diversity in chaplaincy practice and identity. Aune's research found that only 11% of Christian university chaplains saw their main purpose to be facilitating religious practice and understanding (Aune, Guest, and Law 2019, 41). The greatest emphasis was found to be on pastoral care and presence.

The resources invested by sponsoring faith communities, particularly the Church of England, could lead to an assumption that churches are clear about the role of chaplains; however, views of sponsoring churches are inconsistent (Baker and Robinson 2005) from the chaplain

being a non-religious pastoral presence to missional faith support. Consequently, the way chaplains go about their task therefore usually depends on individual theology (Legood 1999, 135) with many defining their own job description (Newitt 2011, 112).

There is little published literature exploring the perception of students on the role chaplains play in their faith development and decision-making at university. The 'Christianity and the University Experience' survey which reached across a range of universities found only 2.7% of Christian students had regular contact with the chaplaincy, although 8.7% agreed it was important to their university experience, though there is no further elucidation of what this means (Guest et al. 2013, 143–45). A survey of students linked to chaplaincies across five universities (representing institutional diversity but not proportionately representative of students across the country) found that students mainly saw chaplains as having a pastoral and relationship building role, with 13% seeing them as having a mainly religious function (Aune, Guest, and Law 2019, 44). This may reflect the role students observe chaplains playing rather than a view on what the role should be. In the same study Aune et al (2019, 76ff & 90) suggests that university managers value the religious role of chaplains, quoting one manager as identifying chaplaincies' core mission to include connecting students with places of worship and faith communities. Similarly, I understand active support of confessional faith to be congruent with the EDI agenda of my institution.

Whilst the changing face of university chaplaincy does not explain the gap between the storylines in this research it does illustrate the shift in landscape in which the abatement in student church attendance is situated and suggests that it is within the scope of legitimate

concern for chaplains.

## **1.5 Ecclesiology**

I argued in the introduction that this research question is primarily a theological one, partly by virtue of it being intrinsically ecclesiological. In saying this I understand the scope of ecclesiology to be wide, from the study of the nature of the church to its work and function (Kärkkäinen 2002, 161), but excluding previous use of the term to refer to church buildings and decoration. In this section I examine the divergence of the ideal and actual story lines from an ecclesiological perspective. First, I will look at whether the gap is of ecclesiological concern, through considering the interplay between church and faith development. Then I will turn to reflecting on how ecclesiology shapes the scope of responses by churches.

### *1.5.1 The gap as an ecclesiological concern.*

The first ecclesiological aspect of the study is the interrelationship between the church and individual faith, both existentially or for faith development. This research is concerned with students who retain their self-description as Christians whilst no longer attending church services, therefore implicitly making a statement that they do not view regular church attendance as imperative to practicing faith. This contrasts with the proposition underpinning this research, outlined in the introduction, that the gap is of concern. My personal perspective is that participation in the community of the church is vital to truly flourishing faith, particularly at a point of transition where questions are raised, peer-pressure and cultural influences can lead to uncertainties of identity, and the support networks from family and childhood church are diminishing in influence and availability. I



suggest that it is quite logical to presume that, for faith to healthily grow and develop, it needs to be placed in an appropriately nourishing environment and that the church is best placed to provide opportunities for that. I will return to where that position places me within the constellation of ecclesiological stances after I have scanned some of that constellation.

The Eastern Orthodox theology of Zizioulas uses a particular interpretation of the church as an icon of the Trinity as an ecclesiological motif. It is in the church, which is both Christological and pneumatological, that human beings are restored to their original role as co-creators with God. Zizioulas extrapolates the conception that as God the Father never exists alone, but only in communion with the Son and the Spirit, so the individual person only exists in community (1985, 44). Thus, humans may only become persons through community with the church, which is possible through baptism, and through this community and the Eucharist they gradually grow in sanctification and ultimately in deification. Faith has no role to play in soteriology or ecclesiology, as personhood can only be affirmed communally in the church whereas faith is a cognitive dimension of an individual act (Zizioulas 1985, 114). Thus, in this model the church is necessary to salvation and community within it is essential to spiritual growth.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholic ecclesiology has focused on the church as the pilgrim people of God, journeying to the heavenly city. Dulles terms this 'a union or communion of men (sic) with one another through the grace of Christ' (2002, 9). Justification is through faith, but this is ecclesially mediated through the Eucharist. Through baptism people become part of the Trinitarian communion and are therefore members of the church

and development of faith is a communal activity enhanced by receipt of the Eucharist. Thus, both in the sense of pilgrimaging together and the Eucharistic community active participation in the community of the church becomes central to faith development.

Dulles's description concords with many Protestant theologians in their understanding of the church as an interpersonal community where giving rather than demanding is key (Bonhoeffer 1963, 123) but the role of the institution of the Church becomes less and differences arise around notions of membership and communion. Ferguson argues that the church is the community of the Spirit and exists wherever two or more believers are gathered around the Lord Jesus (1996, 113). He describes modern Reformed theology holding the church to be the assembly of those who are called out, and membership is the end result but not the purpose of baptism, and remaining in Christ is conditional on ongoing faith (Ferguson 1996, 89). Salvation through individual faith leads to membership of the church (Ferguson 1996, 207). Church attendance facilitates discipleship and faithfulness in remaining in Christ.

The Anglican Church does not have a normative ecclesiology, following Hooker's tradition not to be tied to particular forms of dogma or discipline (Thomas 1998, 255). There is therefore a breadth of ecclesiology spanning much of the ecclesiological constellation from Roman Catholic to Free Church, though probably tending towards middle ground. The ethos of Anglicanism can be welcomed because it affords creative opportunities to engage with contemporary culture.

My own perspective now resonates more with the stance of Volf espoused in his exploration of the 'Church as the Image of the Trinity' (1998). This represents a change over time away from me concurring more with Ferguson's description of Free-church ecclesiology of church as the eschatological community gathered by God to be saved in the overthrow of the world at the End time meeting primarily on Sundays because of its participation in the events of Easter and Pentecost (1996, 69 & 237). The evangelical influence on my childhood faith taught me that the church had no necessary role in salvation but had a vital role to play in faith development through provision of correct teaching, pastoral support and encouragement, and accountability, alongside being a location for the corporate worship of God as part of the primary work of the Church. Church attendance was a visible demonstration of active engagement with discipleship. I would now add a bigger purpose in the Church of being a community directly part of the purposes of God in the world (Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 4:15), reflecting the nature of God, and of which individual believers are intrinsically members. Similarly, Volf's point of departure from reformed Protestant ecclesiology is concern that the notion of church as 'gathered community' tends towards an unhealthy individualism (Volf 1998, 2), whilst still rejecting 'old-style hierarchical holism' (Volf 1998, 3) which he sees in the Trinitarian models espoused by others such as Zizioulas (1985) and Ratzinger (Volf 1998, 42). My shift in thinking came through reflecting on experience of relationship and community within the church, rather than theological critique. Whilst working overseas I found healthy teaching in a local church focused on reformed theology but no sense of belonging. In contrast my faith was nurtured through then attending a church with more liberal theology than I would choose but who offered warm community despite acknowledged theological difference.

Across the whole constellation of ecclesiology therefore, active participation in and attendance at church in some form is implicitly a necessity for flourishing of faith, whether that is framed as directly soteriological or as the nourishment of personal faith.

### *1.5.2 The scope of ecclesiological response*

I now turn to whether ecclesiology and ecclesial practice should allow itself to be shaped in response to the divergence in storylines. The questions of what church congregations are called to be and do and the extent to which their practices should be influenced by contemporary culture are inevitably linked. The answer fundamentally shapes the purview and boundaries of the church's response to the research question beyond which it would no longer be faithful to its identity as true church, how much it should re-shape itself, its image and activities to better attract and retain members. Some churches, particularly 'fresh expressions', significantly shape themselves around their understanding of contemporary culture, whereas others show little if any alteration in practice, some vehemently arguing changes would be wrong or even counterproductive.

Those who advocate for changes in practice do so both theoretically and reflecting on their own experience. Taylor appeals to the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy that being human is about being separate not in common (Taylor 2005, 23) in suggesting that the church move from a traditional ecclesiological meta-narrative of community overarching individual identity to one of shared uniqueness. This would allow the community character of the church to be retained whilst relating more easily to the individualism of postmodernity.

Ward applies Bauman's (2000) theory of 'liquid modernity' to the church, by distinguishing between 'peg communities', with participation of disconnected spectators but no expectation of shared lives, and 'ethical communities' with shared commitment and values (Ward 2002, 16). Ward's argument is that Free Churches from the modern era are ethical communities, whereas in liquid modernity people are searching for pegs. I see this as preferring attendance over membership. They may also find a conflict between the relativism of postmodernism and a wholehearted devotion of one's self to a way of life that makes church possible (Healy 2000, 25) .

Such conflict emerges in the work of Riddell et al from the authors' own experiences of feeling alienated by the institutional church in a postmodern culture. They interpret their experience of inflexible power structures, boring confessions and doctrines, authority and control, musical style, priestly ministry and traditional buildings as church culture clashing with their own values. They identify these as the values of postmodernity: the virtue of diversity, relationality, participation, spirituality, holism, romanticism mixed with cynicism, immediacy and playful experimental investigation (Riddell, Pierson, and Kirkpatrick 2000, 25–26, 30). The key tenets of traditional churches: doctrine, authority, organization, ritual, duty and set-apart clerics, were experienced as anathema to what they framed as contemporary culture. They did recognize that not all have the same negative experience that they do, but demean those who experience traditional church positively as seeking to 'live their faith vicariously through their ministers' (2000, 55). The characteristics of institutional church are all to be dismissed if they are seen to impede consumer attractiveness of the church. They argue that the church must change to focus on

participation and be culturally relevant, eclectic, multimedia and provisional.

Percy (1998) distills the conflicts between postmodern culture and church to the issue of power and rightly identifies the issues being present, albeit in different guises, in many different forms of church, identifying imperialism in traditional institutional churches and theocracy and domination of charismatic leaders and management techniques in the non-established churches. This power imbalance and negative experience may not be the intention of the churches, whatever their tradition but if it is the experience of some who interact with the church then it is an ecclesiological reality. Imperialism might be identified in churches which assume chaplains will direct students to them; the dominance of charismatic leaders and management technique have touching points with the marketing responses of churches discussed in chapter five. Evidence that newer forms of church have overcome the power imbalance issues is lacking.

Many creative ideas for 'fresh expressions of church' have been experimented with and described, often established following claimed inspiration of the Spirit (Murray 2004, 98), appealing to an ecclesiology that defines the church as missionary, rather than mission being a task of the church (Newbigin 1953). Identifying mission as the primary character of the church means that all its actions should be fundamentally shaped by that purpose and so all practices must be open to change to enable that character to be realised.

I argue that the response of longer established churches is seen implicitly in practice as much as in systematic theologies. For the Orthodox Church, engaging any context means

faithfully teaching the tradition and offering liturgies as widely as possible. Davison and Milbank (2010, 82) articulate a similar approach in arguing that the response of the Anglican Church to postmodernity should be commitment to liturgical tradition and a parish-based Christendom model. They contend that choice is an unhelpful novelty of modern society which should be removed, and faithfulness to traditional church practices, whether popular or unpopular, is argued to be necessary for authentic ecclesiality, leaving individuals simply with the choice to seek and participate in what is offered or not. This argument does encompass the role of ritual in postmodern spirituality. It relies on a soteriological role for the church and assumed faith development needs to be sacramental within the protection of the parish and liturgical traditions. This is not a pervasive stance in the Anglican Church, as can be seen by its investment in fresh expressions of church and new worshipping communities.

Implicit theologies can also be seen in churches who respond to the abatement in attendance through their allocation of resources and the priority that is given to seeking numerical growth. Many churches, both directly and indirectly, through local church communities and para-church organizations such as Fusion, University and Colleges Christian Fellowship, and the Student Christian Movement, put significant resources into encouraging church attendance amongst students, trying to alter the statistics behind the research question. This suggests they take enough responsibility for the situation to focus some of their activities towards it. The effect of this prioritization on overall church life varies between churches. Ecclesiological motivations behind this response include both the essential role of church attendance in faith development, which is the focus of the

organisation Fusion, and also the wider implications of falling numbers for the wellbeing of the church itself. The church has a responsibility to self-perpetuate, and therefore has a vested interest in supporting individual faith development, as well as a responsibility to individuals. As described in the introduction, a growing number of Church of England initiatives are currently focused on achieving a numerical increase in church attendance.

My personal lens is both influenced and illustrated by me now being an Anglican priest. I share something of Davison and Milbank's (2010) high value on the institutional church primarily influenced by the parish model of the Church of England, meaning that it is there for everyone not just the gathered saints and therefore concerned with those who don't attend as much as those who do. However, I hold the traditions of the church and styles in worship to be good only to the extent they enable people to relate to God and grow in personal faith, but do not hold them as sources of doctrinal authority. So, I hold the Eucharist to be a valuable spiritual practice but not a necessity for the receipt of grace, and a practice which can be adapted to suit particular contexts. I value the description of the role of deacons in the Anglican ordinal, which includes actively seeking out those who need God's love, accompanying those searching for faith, and through nourishment by the study of scripture 'with God's people' to equip the whole church to 'live out the gospel in the world'. Priests are called to:

be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; they are to teach and to admonish, to feed and provide for his family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world's temptations, and to guide them through its confusions, that they may be saved through Christ for ever. Formed by the word, they are to call



their hearers to repentance and to declare in Christ's name the absolution and forgiveness of their sins. (Church of England 2007b)

The research question has therefore emerged from my calling as deacon and priest that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between individual faith development and the life of the church. Whilst ultimately individuals retain personal responsibility for their faith and its development, the church also has a responsibility to communicate the gospel in a way that individuals can assimilate into their own context and experience and to do whatever possible to help believers to grow in their faith in ways that are accessible in the culture within which people live. I think this should affect the approach of the church to engaging with those who are not wholeheartedly pursuing growth in faith themselves. To be effective in the context, practice should be adaptable and flexible but also theologically appropriate, not compromising doctrine nor wantonly dismissing tradition without good reason.

A principle inherent in my research is that how young adults experience church is a legitimate starting point for ecclesiology. This mirrors Riddell et al (2000) reflecting on their experiences of church. Experience is not a traditional starting point for ecclesiology but it is a perspective opened up, and I would argue necessitated, by the bidirectional dialogue espoused by Practical Theology. This study could be described as an ecclesiological dialogue, both listening to the church and speaking into it the experience of Christian students. This aspect of ecclesiology will be attended to in chapters five and six.

My conclusion is that most traditions of the church at least implicitly accept that the church holds some responsibility for faith development of individuals. The aspects of ecclesial

practice which are seen as open to change in response to this vary significantly. I think there is scope for reflection on practice across the constellation of ecclesiologies as to whether there is scope to develop a more effective response to the divergence in storylines, so that churches are neither so assimilated into culture that they lose a richness of spiritual heritage that might connect with those in a postmodern society, nor stay so firmly entrenched in tradition that there are no points of connection with contemporary culture at all. The doctrine of the church has been said to have consistently grown out of controversy about it throughout its existence (McGrath 2007, 391), thereby offering the possibility that lived experience of students identified in the differing responses to my research question could lead to new insights into the nature and purpose of church rather than simply arbitrating pre-existent views.

### **1.6 Imagining the gap**

The elements of literature that have been explored in this chapter point towards the importance of church attendance in faith development. This supports my proposal of the 'ideal storyline' of Christian students joining a church at university and builds a backdrop to the divergence between that and reality storylines that can result from complex, intertwined, competing tensions which influence students even from before they transition to university. Whilst illuminating the gap, the areas of literature I have considered do not fully describe it nor answer the research question. In reflecting on what insights are brought to the research question there are two general observations I think are helpful to make here, along with four common themes that emerge.

The first general observation, which will be explored more fully in chapters five and six as the findings offer more insight into the issue, is the complexity of the context and whether this has really been appreciated in previous responses by the church and by practitioners. Initiatives to address falling church attendance tend to focus on one element that has been identified as potentially causal or remediable in the situation, such as engaging with consumerist marketing, or trying to engage with spirituality without considering how that leads to flourishing in faith. A complex situation is unlikely to be adequately remediated when only a single aspect is addressed.

The second general observation is that changes in contemporary culture are changing many aspects of society, as well as the current generation of university students. The responses of churches who are working from different ecclesiological positions to these changes is therefore a significant ecclesiological question which is much broader than how it affects students transitioning to university. It is beyond the scope of this research to try to address the broader picture.

Four common themes that I find emerging from the literature considered above are identity, the subjectivization of faith, uncertainty as to the best response to consumerism, and the lack of consonance between behaviour and reasoning.

Identity emerges as an important factor within consumerism, faith development, and university transition. Consumerist culture focusses on developing an identity through choices about all aspects of life and making choices to express that identity. Fowler (1981),

Gilligan (1982) and Regan (2002) all recognize identity as significant to faith development around the time of early adult life, with competing tensions between the desire to belong and the need to separate, and the search for a new understanding of the interconnectedness of self with others at this stage of life. Students experience competing psychological needs. The correlation observed by Guest et al (2013) between a strong identity in a faith community and church attendance at university reinforces the relevance of identity to the research question.

The trend in contemporary culture towards the subjectivization of faith and the shifting nature of truth, along with an increasing interest in spirituality rather than religious commitment inevitably clashes with ecclesiology that holds church attendance to be very important, if not imperative, to the flourishing of Christian faith. A conflict also arises with the doctrinally-based teaching of the church. This is again observed by Guest et al (2013) in the contrast between the abatement in church attendance at university and the declared retention of religious belief amongst students.

The consumerism in contemporary culture leads to an ecclesiological conundrum if the church is minded to respond. Should churches be offering more choice or less choice? Should they be changing practices in line with contemporary culture or providing a security of established tradition in the midst of the uncertainty of a changing world? Churches are divided in their answers to these questions. This has, in part, led to confusion in the purpose and identity of Christian university chaplaincy which has for the main part been put there by the Church as part of its desire to engage Christian students in the pursuance of faith.

Alongside all of these is the lack of consonance between behaviour and reasoning, highlighted above as a critique of Fowler (Feldmeier 2007). In that case, initiatives reliant on teaching and encouragement to respond to the abatement in church attendance may have limited success. It also raises questions as to the significance of how students have already found their own ways of integrating culture and faith before they transition to university, which may not follow the thinking that leaders in the church may expect. When a significant factor in this integration is removed, such as the attachment to the childhood or family church community where others have taken substantial responsibility for encouraging their faith, consequent behaviours may not follow predicted pathways.

Having explored some bodies of literature which give insights into, but do not fully explain, the complexity of the context and the nature and causes of the gap between the ideal and reality storylines of faith and church attendance at university, I will now outline the methodological approach I used to investigate and understand the gap in more detail.

## **Chapter 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The introduction and previous chapter situated this research within its context, both practically and in key areas of literature. The focus of this chapter is the methodological context within which the research was undertaken. By this I mean the multi-layered influences, commitments and choices behind both the choice and treatment of methods to investigate the research question. These layers include the discipline of Practical Theology (PT), myself as a researcher, methodological literature, and the constraints of the context being researched. By building this layered picture the chapter aims to show the methodological commitments which shaped the research and the sources of those commitment. To do this I will discuss methodological commitments inherent in the discipline of PT before offering a reflection on my journey as a researcher in parallel with aspects of my journey of faith. I will then turn to the principles of Alvesson's work which have particularly inspired my data analysis. Finally, I will explicitly identify my key methodological commitments of pragmatism, problematization, the value of personal narrative and data as a dialogue partner. This chapter is highly reflexive, locating myself within the field of qualitative research methods and reflecting on how that influences my interaction with research methods found in social sciences as a whole and practical theology in particular.

#### **2.1 The methodological commitments of practical theology**

I begin by laying out aspects of methodology within PT as a foundation with which I will

engage further in the reflections on my journey as a researcher.

PT is not a unified discipline (Swinton and Mowatt 2006, 12). This is exemplified by the multiplicity of definitions discussed in the introduction and is mirrored in the wide variety of methodological commitments and approaches advocated within the discipline. These commitments are neither static, nor isolated, with Pattison and Lynch locating PT within 'a wider academic movement which treats contemporary human experiences as worthy of sustained analysis and critical reflection' (2012, 408). Regional variation has also been observed, with German theologians sticking more closely to Schleiermacher's applicationist approach, other Europeans tending towards using social science methods to inform pastoral situations, and the UK veering to critique of world views, assumptions and behaviours (Lynch and Pattison 2005, 2). Despite this, there are shared characteristics which I suggest are core commitments. A 'turn to practice' and a 'turn to experience' have characterized PT in the UK over the past 30 years (Graham 2012), forming the two most embedded commitments of PT: the foregrounding of human experience and reflexivity. Together these tend to demand an inductive approach to research (Miller-McLemore 2012b, 24), beginning with experience rather than theory, and complexifying situations in order to understand them (Swinton and Mowatt 2006, 13). In this 'a sophisticated and critical attention to the positionality of the researcher forms a significant hermeneutical tool' (Graham 2012, 120). That the turn to human experience has been further focused as a turn to narrative as an epistemological value that narrative is a 'legitimate, rigorous and valid form of knowledge' (Swinton and Mowatt 2006, 38) has emerged both implicitly and explicitly in PT and qualitative research more widely.

Two common characteristics of PT methodology are particularly subject to ongoing debate. The first is acceptance of the validity of many data sources, also described as an open dialogue seeking truth (Pattison 1989 in Swinton and Mowatt 2006, 80) and a dialogue with human and social sciences (Lynch and Pattison 2005, 2). PT is often described as a bidirectional conversation (Stoddard 2014, xii), or even a three-way dialogue (Pattison 2000), suggesting an equality between the conversation partners or sources. However, some find a preference in PT for liberal or radical models of theology (Pattison and Lynch 2012), whilst others insist that theological tradition remains authoritative (Swinton and Mowatt 2006, 89), a stance that arouses strong criticism (Graham 2017, 177). Whilst diversity of methodological opinion may be inevitable (Beaudoin 2016, 174) I highlight this here as it speaks to my own incompletely resolved journey as a researcher in PT discussed in the following section regarding normativity of data sources.

The second characteristic is the relationship between PT and quantitative research. I have been explicitly informed during this research process that PT is a qualitative research discipline, essentially precluding quantitative methods and in the last six years no articles published in the journal “Practical Theology” have included quantitative work. I do not interpret this as indicating resolution of the question. Schilderman argues, that whilst qualitative research may be a good starting place, quantitative methods are needed if a context is to be ‘read’ fully and a truly inductive approach is to be made possible (2012, 123ff). The binary or categorical thinking that insists on choosing one over the other has been challenged by those outside PT advocating creativity in research as interest in mixed methods has grown (Kara 2015, 14). Espousing the exclusivity of qualitative methods may



reflect a concern that quantitative approaches could tend to overpower qualitative, even if not intentionally (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, 286) , but I concur with Denscombe's view that 'in the real world qualitative and quantitative research are not mutually exclusive' (1998, 173). So, I would argue that excluding quantitative methods would be to the detriment of PT and that they can helpfully be used within the commitments to reflexivity and the value of human experience.

## **2.2 De-idealization - my journey**

In light of PT's commitment to reflexivity and human experience as seen in narrative, this section is a reflection on the formation of my methodological commitments. My journey through the research process was one of both recognizing my antecedent methodological commitments and processing some of the tensions that arose working within the commitments of PT, particularly issues around normative sources of authority and the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods. This has mostly been a slow process of change, though latterly I will highlight three pivotal events that happened in close succession.

De-idealization has been described as the disappointing process of the recognition of reality. However I have found de-idealization to be liberating from the constraints of perfectionism. (M. Smith 2016b. Appendix A)

I have found the concept of de-idealization helpful in engaging with my tendency to perfectionism and understanding my changing perspectives on research.

To give background to this journey, after studying medicine I worked for 20 years as a doctor. During this time I studied for master's degrees in Applied Theology and Medical

Education and latterly was ordained, serving a part-time curacy. Soon after my subsequent move to full-time church ministry I joined the DPT programme. My journey as a researcher and of de-idealization, has been an iterative process, starting from exposure to research methods as a medical student and continuing throughout my studying for the DPT and writing this thesis. That journey has been one of slowly gaining the confidence to explore a much greater breadth and depth of reality and truth beyond statistical method and the authoritative dogma I encountered in conservative evangelical church teaching. I have identified four phases in that journey: learning the ideal (and removing myself), shoe-horning reality into the ideal, realising it will not fit, and finding my voice. As this process of de-idealization has enabled me to find a voice, academically, in personal faith, and ministerially, it has also increased my commitment to hearing the narrative of others. Here I will describe some essential characteristics of the strands of that journey as I experienced it.

### *2.2.1 Learning the ideal and removing myself*

The research training I received in medicine was embedded in post-enlightenment Western culture's tendency to solely rely on scientific method to determine what is factual and what is not (Swinton and Mowatt 2006, 38). This left me dogmatically affirming the primacy of quantitative research with its attendant statistical methods and preference for prospective interventional studies. A core principle was to eliminate 'researcher bias' through minimizing the effect of the researcher on the process. The precision connected well with my personal tendency to perfectionism. Sample size, study design and choice of statistical tests were everything as the goal was to make generalizable claims for the findings. A focus on the use of meta-analyses of pooled data from previous studies developed in an attempt to perfect

the imperfections, as in reality findings of research studies often varied, despite rigorous methods. One accepted exception to these approaches were 'N=1' studies which aimed to determine 'does this work for this particular individual at this particular time?' without making any claim of generalizability.

A second principle that I assimilated was that someone other than me had the authority to decide what methods were acceptable. Whilst the espoused authority was peer review, in practice this usually came from textbooks written by established gurus, who could argue their approach satisfied a holy trinity of validity, reliability and generalizability. New approaches could therefore only be introduced by an elite who could persuade a majority of peers that a new and better way had been found. A lack of self-confidence is often symbiotic with perfectionism and hence I quickly assimilated the notion that the prerogative to introduce new methods lay in people other than me.

Parallel to this was the culture of categorical theological assertions I experienced at the more conservative evangelical end of the ecclesiological spectrum. The notion that the Bible is the prime authority in matters of faith is still one I would adhere to, but I also encountered a form of authoritative hierarchical structure for learning. Authority in exposition and interpretation of the Bible lay in an undefined group of authors and preachers who would both determine and maintain the 'correct' exegesis and application. As with the authoritative voices behind quantitative research methods, this authority lay in people other than me. I was also warned of the 'danger' of allowing my own experience to influence my interpretation of the Bible as that might draw me away from correct understanding. As with quantitative research, I had to remove myself if I were to reach valid conclusions. In my initial theological studies, I found that approaches to Biblical interpretation such as literary

criticism clashed with more literal interpretations presented by the evangelical church, where I had also learned that daring to entertain an alternative interpretation was indicative of a perilous step towards abandonment of faith. Whilst it appeared that my faith and study of theology might be mutually incompatible, my rational brain and gut instincts refuted the inevitability of this dissonance. I tried to hold the two in tension, without resolving the contradictions, a move I had yet to make in research methodology.

### *2.2.2 Making things fit*

The next phase of my journey could be described as determined attempts to make research, theology and self-understanding fit within the mind-set described above. In the empirical research component of my MTh I tried to apply numerical methods to theological questions through surveying quasi-random sample of two communities then using descriptive statistics to make observations of commonality and difference. Survey questions invited very few free text answers to avoid potential ambiguity. Any findings which conflicted with my theological presuppositions and arguments constructed from the thoughts of others in published literature were noted as challenges which needed attending to if the conclusions of the research were to be properly applied. Some individual opinions were heard but only used to support conclusions from discussion of the literature. In hindsight, I find it interesting that it never occurred to me to question the research behind the models of community development I was referencing, given my commitment to quantitative methods, though I clearly recall feeling a tension as I read 'Let's Do Theology' (Green 1990). I was attracted to the empowerment of people in liberation theology but could not conceive that the voices of those Green championed could be an authoritative theological source.

Three years later, studying Medical Education introduced me further to qualitative methods. This jarred with my quantitative dogma because of its acceptance of the validity of seemingly imprecise data sources, such as focus groups, and the lack of emphasis on interventional studies (testing whether an intervention, such as a new drug or an educational programme, can be shown to have an effect, independent of any other circumstances which might influence the situation). Whilst the idea of different epistemologies was introduced, I felt reassured by quite clear guidance about correct choice and use of different methods in particular circumstances and the imperative of using of multiple data sources for 'triangulation' to achieve as much 'objectivity' as possible. I also found relief in an ongoing emphasis on statistics as qualitative data was to be converted to numbers via coding (De Vaus 2002, 1). I may well have filtered my assimilation of this introduction to qualitative methods through my quantitative lens. I shaped my research around complex comparative statistics, using a survey tool previously validated with a large cohort of participants. Interviews again provided anecdotes to add depth to the outcomes of the statistical analyses, but I paid scant attention to them as a primary data source. Creswell suggests this 'post positivist' stance is often taken by people with prior training in health sciences moving into qualitative research (2013, 24).

### *2.2.3 Realising it doesn't all fit*

During the period without formal academic study which followed, my sense of sources of normative authority was challenged as a researcher and theologically. My sense of calling, as a woman, to ordained ministry became a stronger source of authority than the conservative teaching of my past. As I began to exercise ordained ministry I increasingly

found conservative teaching to be disconnected from the complexities of human experience. Coincidentally with this I was forced to reflect on my perfectionism as I grappled with the professional pressures of being a senior clinician in an intensive care unit within the NHS. I had to learn to embrace the impossibility of perfection and the creative possibilities that arise from the imperfections of life. As a junior doctor, if I was unable to find a perfect answer to a problem, I would ask someone else who then took responsibility for their decision. As I became the final decision-maker I had to hold the lack of an ideal, confidently choose what seemed best, and work with the consequences. I began to appreciate more of the limitations of the quantitative research I had learned to esteem. Very specific research questions are fundamental to good clinical trials, but the context of my patients was much more complex; responses are less predictable from patient to patient in the extreme physiological stress of critical illness; whilst an intervention might not have been shown to have a statistically significant benefit across a cohort of patients, it might still significantly benefit a particular patient, even preventing their death. I found that I thrived in both following my sense of calling and learning to accept the limitations of medical science.

#### *2.2.4 Finding my voice*

I began studying Practical Theology soon after I moved from medicine into my current full-time ministry post, focused on university students. My motivation was mainly looking for a new ideal for practice as places I expected might be sources of authority, such as practice in larger churches and published literature, did not offer answers that addressed the complexities of the context.

I was confident in the research skills I brought to this research, wanting to advocate for the value, and even superiority, of quantitative methods in a discipline where only qualitative approaches seemed to be acceptable. My unarticulated assumption was that 'My thoughts and opinions were only of value to theology if I could show that they were really the thoughts and opinions of others, albeit critiqued and applied in context' (M. Smith 2016b). I presumed the originality of thought required for doctoral research would come purely from the new data I would collect and introducing insights from rigorous research from other disciplines. This thinking was initially strengthened as I learned more about qualitative research methods. It seemed to be a new dogma, or a collection of dogmas, sometimes backed by little more than being an approach an individual had devised and written a book about, without the theoretical foundations of quantitative methods.

I was also fearful that others might assume I had become liberal in my theology, as PT often does not defer to the Bible as a primary source of authority, rather having a 'preference for the radical' (Lynch and Pattison 2005, 410) and the 'living human document' (Graham 2020). Instead it appeared to embrace what has been described as the goal of postmodernism, of becoming one's own authority rather than deferring to any higher authority (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 4).

#### *2.2.5 The final pivot points*

Three significant pivot points then occurred: publishing an article in part 1 of the DPT, reading Kara's 'Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences' (2015) and the analysis of my research data.

As colleagues gave feedback on my published article, 'I began to realise that my perspective may be of significance, that I can challenge the work of others and that I can offer conclusions to the theological community that may not only be valid but also valuable' (M. Smith 2016b). This increased my confidence to also challenge the assumptions behind the approach taken to Biblical interpretation by some evangelical colleagues, whilst still holding firmly to my faith and the centrality of the Bible in it. I felt an increasing discordance with the lack of openness about underlying presuppositions, leading to me object not so much to the conclusions but to their methods.

My journey of de-idealization had led me not only to begin questioning the dogma of quantitative research, with its assumption that knowledge could be tested and proven through reproducible statistical method, but also to be wary of claims made for some of the qualitative methods espoused in PT as all starting points seemed equal and traditional religious knowledge was quickly discarded.

Several aspects of Kara's work (2015) resonated with me: the creativity of many methods she discusses were so far removed from methods I was familiar with that I could value them without making comparisons, and her open exploration of assumptions and commitments underpinning research methods. Notably, Kara espoused the value of quantitative within her overall ethos of creativity as simply representing another way of viewing the world (2015, 26). I had begun allowing myself to value the creativity in myself and realised quantitative epistemology alone left little or no space for this. Kara's approach gave me confidence that I could value my background in scientific method whilst also valuing creativity, both my own



and that of others, and build a richer view of the world through both, rather than having to choose one and reject the other. The discipline that led me to be able to de-idealize my preconceptions about the validity of research paradoxically, I found, also needed to be itself de-idealized. I therefore gained the confidence to challenge a discipline which excluded a research approach which I was part of my lived experience.

This movement in both my theological and research journeys could be understood as gaining confidence in the value of my own narrative and the validity of my voice in expressing that narrative.

The final pivot point came as I began data analysis for this project and built on the thought I found in Kara. I was not persuaded by the focus on coding words and phrases I was reading about in many qualitative methods texts (Denzin and Lincoln 2018; J. Creswell 2009; Kelle, Prein, and Bird 1995; Auerbach and Silverstein 2003; Bryman and Burgess 1994) as categorizing words and phrases from interviews seemed to devalue and disempower the personal narratives students had disclosed to me and lose the core purpose of their words, which was to paint a picture of themselves and their life experience. One interview particularly powerfully affected me. The student had contacted me after the interview to say that no one had ever asked her about her 'story of faith' before, that talking about it had caused her to reflect on it and asked for help in exploring her beliefs and faith further (this is explored further in chapter five). I therefore started to develop ways of looking at the data that I felt would help understand the stories more deeply and maintain their integrity whilst enabling them to contribute to a wider picture.

### *2.2.6 Alvesson's work*

Coincident to developing my approach to data analysis, my confidence in it and ability to articulate the values behind it was increased as I discovered the work of Mats Alvesson. I was attracted to his critique of assumptions behind research methodologies and his perspective on the data-theory relationship. This contrasted with me striving to gain perfection in a new discipline through 'correct' interpretation of my data. Instead, I was able to find a legitimate voice as part of a creative, exploratory process.

Prior to this, I understood the purpose of research to be 'map-and-fill-the-gap' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 23). Alvesson talks of white spots on the knowledge map; the picture in my mind being of a jigsaw puzzle. Research gathers evidence, and if found to be conclusive a piece of knowledge can be inserted in the jigsaw, or a white spot coloured in. This process may reveal new white spots, or that other jigsaw pieces no longer fit as well as previously thought, leading to a 'gap' necessitating further research. This assumes that knowledge exists objectively and can be found (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 24), that there is a robustness, and therefore authority, in previous studies, with a clear route from data to theory.

Alvesson challenges both the concept of being able to create 'true, objective knowledge' (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2017, 1) and the premise that research is about filling gaps in knowledge through carefully constructed questions and answered by data collection to answer them (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013). Instead he argues that research is much more interesting and informative if underlying assumptions are critiqued, something the discipline

of PT was challenged in its early days about doing inadequately (Browning 1983b, 15).

Alvesson propounds problematization, the consistent questioning of assumptions behind currently accepted 'knowledge', as a more fruitful enterprise than seeking to fill gaps in what is already known (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013, 2). 'Questions may open up, encourage reflection and intellectual activity; answers may lead to the opposite: to rest and closure' (2013, 1). Alvesson argues that the construction of knowledge is a creative and expansive goal of research, whereas verification of knowledge is a limiting goal of research (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 26ff). This follows the thinking of Foucault that problematization is an endeavour to know to what extent it might be possible to think differently, rather than legitimize what is already known (Foucault 2019, 9). Problematization is not only about challenging literature but the underlying assumptions behind it (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2017, 48).

Alvesson's notions resonated with my journey of de-idealization. In my reflective journal I had identified critiquing assumptions as a core thread in the increasing confidence that was at the heart of my theological journey, leading me to be able to 'think differently' about both my context and the methods I would choose to research it. Alvesson's work took my journey one step further still, questioning whether authority is the right way of thinking about what is epistemologically reliable and acknowledging that the researcher is significant in finding meaning in data, whether they have the confidence to claim and reflect on this or not. A further specific aspect of Alvesson's epistemology that resonated with my evolving methodological posture regards data analysis. He argues that in research where understanding is expanding, both the research question and methods will be iterative and

evolving (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2017, 22) with the collection and initial interpretation of data potentially leading to new questions. Rather than data being treated as a signpost to a particular direction of interpretation, as happens in nomothetic approaches, it is empirical material of which a variety of readings and directions for knowledge results are possible (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 5). Moreover, researchers' own pre-existent conceptualisations of what they want to study influence data interpretation. Recognition of these underlying influential paradigms should lead to data being treated as a critical dialogue partner (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 5). This is congruent with the enterprise of both reflexive and reflective practice and for me opened creative possibilities for interaction with the richness of my research data, without anxiety that I would 'get it wrong'.

The tenet I had encountered in qualitative methodology that data should be codified in order for its meaning to be understood had originally partly appealed to my quantitative instincts. However, it seemed to necessitate philosophical belief in meaning as fundamentally but subconsciously encoded in a variety of social actions, such as language and actions, which accurate coding would miraculously reveal. I have already mentioned the emergence of my concern that such codification would disempower narratives. Alvesson argues strongly that codification does not reveal truth but rather only provides a framework within which it might be understood (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 43).

I found Alvesson's contention that not having a fixed research design can be good (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 97) affirming of the conviction I developed as I started looking at my data that I needed to find a reasonable and theologically meaningful approach to

understanding it, rather than follow prescribed processes derived from the pre-judged methodologies of others (2011, 9). Rather than seeking reliability and validity in my interviews I could use them to open up new possibilities, or 'mysteries' (2011, 103) and use deviations from patterns as helpful insights as well as focusing on emerging patterns (2011, 42). It also allowed me to respect the integrity of the narratives, using a very loose form of coding as a tool to help me see emerging patterns from them without being restricted to coding to communicate meaning.

The journey I have described is one of increasing reflexivity as my understanding of both research and theology has been de-idealized. To be truly reflexive I need to acknowledge that that journey is still in progress and has not yet ended. It has led me both to question and also have renewed confidence in some of my background, whilst also unlocking the potential for new methodological commitments I have discovered such as the value of individual narrative.

### **2.3 The emergent commitments of my research**

Having considered the methodological commitments of PT and mapped my own reflexive journey, this next section will pull together the four key areas of methodological commitments which have consequently shaped this research. These sit alongside the prerequisite of a commitment to ethical practice.

#### ***2.3.1 Pragmatism***

The foundational ethos of the research is a reflective study in practice that is informed by

empirical yet heuristic investigation (M. Smith 2016a, 4). The heuristic nature of the study prescribed a goal of meaningful research within the constraints of the context (recognizing the nature of doctoral research within PT). This was possible only after journeying away from a mind-set that some form of perfection might be obtainable, or even required, for the research to be of value. My aim became to contribute to a dialogue, rather than search for a definitive answer. Decisions made were therefore reasonable and explicit (Denscombe 1998, 3) in a small scale project using limited resources. Also, the challenge of engaging in research on church attendance those who have chosen not to attend church, and may be disinterested or wary of critical questions, necessitated a methodological commitment to doing what is reasonable and pragmatic.

### *2.3.2 Problematization*

Valuing problematization arises from my journey, the question and the context. My experience of de-idealization challenged the reductionist approach to research questions I had encountered in quantitative research, with its consequent limitation on possible conclusions. In contrast to the importance of question specificity in quantitative research, my research question here is broad, seeking comprehension rather than to make definitive claims for solutions. In the introduction, I described the complexity of my research context as demanding the breadth and depth of exploration afforded by PT. Complexifying the context is not, however, synonymous with complex methods. Unnecessarily complicated research methods have potential to add confusion and obscure rather than reveal realities. Problematization can be embodied in the use of mixed methods, as they provided different lenses through which to view a context (Kara 2015, 26ff). Viewing an object through two or

more different lenses, or from different angles, may facilitate a more detailed understanding of the nature of the object than if it is viewed through a single lens.

### *2.3.3 The value of individual narrative*

Prior to this research I valued narrative from theological, practice and research perspectives. My understanding of faith journeys is that, within an orthodox understanding of Christian discipleship, thriving comes from unique individuals pursuing their relationship with God rather than conforming to institutionally defined patterns. Chaplaincy values supporting individuals in the direction they would choose, allowing their voice to emerge, rather than persuading them in a particular direction. Students' narration of their own experience is evidence of the social reality this research is investigating (Scheurich 1997, 63). Whilst institutional narratives of student behaviour incorporate some individual stories, not all individual stories are equal within them and the institutional sometimes shapes the individual disproportionately, without the same happening in reverse.

Within the research I became convinced that student narratives, whether they attend church or not, are a valuable ecclesiological source, extending the argument in chapter one that the experience young adults have of church is an ecclesiological question. They are also important sources for theological reflection and critical correlation (Walton 2014, xx).

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the priority of maintaining the integrity of narrative as data was handled and interpreted.

#### *2.3.4 Data as a dialogue partner*

My commitment to handling data creatively as a dialogue partner rather than seeking to establish a 'correct' way of using it reflects the conceptualisation of PT as a dialogue. It also enables deviations from patterns to be as useful as patterns themselves (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 42), mitigating against the danger of finding a lowest common denominator which is of no practical value (Evans 2002, 193). Whilst taking this approach I would note two cautions. This commitment to creativity and dialogue does not remove the imperative of consistency across the data set (Mason 2002, 147). Also, whilst I maintain the place for qualitative approaches within the creative dialogue, a tendency for quantitative approaches to overpower qualitative methods when mixed methods are used, has been observed, which would oppose the principle of valuing narrative (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, 268).

Having established these methodological commitments to pragmatism, problematization, data as a dialogue partner and the value of individual narrative, rooted in my changing perspective on epistemology and the nature of theological authority, the next chapter will describe the methods that emerged from them and were used in this research.



## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODS**

The previous chapter laid out the methodological commitments to pragmatism, problematization, data as a dialogue partner and narrative which underpin this research. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods developed and deployed in the light of those commitments to carry out the research.

As my purpose was to understand why a group of people have not, yet, chosen a particular path, and ‘what factors influence them which are open to intervention’ (M. Smith 2016a, 4), I adopted the principle from market research of studying both those who have already chosen to use that product or facility as well as those who have not. I chose to do this using an online survey and individual interviews. In order to contextualize my interpretation of student responses I also interviewed church leaders.

#### **3.1 Online survey**

I used an online survey as the most pragmatic tool to provide the desired breadth of insight into student experiences within the resources available (De Vaus 2014, 219). Surveys are less resource intense than face-to-face data collection methods and relatively easy to disseminate. Participation is less onerous than face-to-face methods and advice from current students was that it was their preferred medium, important considerations as the students I wanted to understand were those who had already chosen not to engage with church. The

purpose of the survey was to reach as broad a range of Christian students as possible, elicit something of each respondent's story in relation to faith and church attendance, to gain a picture of some of associations with that narrative (such as the influences of family and university groups), and to engage participants for the student interviews.

### *3.1.1 Development of the survey questions*

In developing the question, I focused on ease of participation, due to the anticipated challenges engaging non-church attending students, alongside meaningful data collection. I aimed for a limited set of questions which were not too time-consuming to complete, and diverted students away from questions that not relevant to them. I wanted to ensure questions were linked to the research objectives (Sue and Ritter 2013, 38) and, as far as possible, my interpretation of answers would be the same as the intention of participants, so that their narrative was being heard (De Vaus 2014, 96). Clear and unambiguous questions were important to both ease of completion and meaningful data collection (Sue and Ritter 2013, 38). My aim was to explore the behaviours of participants as well as how some specific efforts of practitioners such as chaplains and churches may have influenced their actions. Focusing on narrative, I shaped the survey around different time frames of life and potential influences I had gleaned from the stories I had heard through my practice. Whilst views on the behaviour of peers was not my primary interest, I felt enquiring about their understanding of abatement in church attendance amongst peers might produce useful material for reflection.

Questions therefore had five foci: basic demographics to understand the spread of students

who engaged and a curiosity as to differences amongst varying types of students, e.g. science versus arts students: Church attendance and spiritual practices prior to university; anticipatory discussions about faith at university; Church and faith group experience at university, along with other faith practices; and their views on causal influences on peers to attend church, or not.

Although ease of participation determined a preference for closed questions (Robson 2011, 247) opening up narrative favoured open, free-text questions. I made use of multi-option answers were as a compromise to this tension, with the final option frequently being an invitation to a free-text answer. A weakness of this approach is its reliance on anticipation of the most likely answers to word the options (De Vaus 2014, 99). However, this research is grounded in reflective practice, and I argue that my prior knowledge of the context allowed me to intelligently frame the wording. The inclusion of a free-text option mitigates the effects of any misassumptions in the wording of the questions.

The questionnaire was informally peer-reviewed within the DPT program, discussed with Dr Sally Nash, a researcher experienced in using surveys exploring personally sensitive issues and then also piloted before full distribution. Dr Nash suggested that using hypothetical questions on a subject prior to asking respondents to disclose their own experience can be less threatening. This led to me adding such statements as introduction to some questions, e.g.

*‘Some students have said each of the following have influenced them to join a church whilst at university. Select up to 3 that you think influence students to join a church’.*

Followed by:

*‘What about your own story? What has influenced you towards joining a church, or not, at uni?’*

### *3.1.2 Choice of platform*

The choice of online platform for the survey was influenced by university policy, price, ease of use and functionality. I chose Bristol Online Survey (now [onlinesurvey.ac.uk](https://onlinesurvey.ac.uk)) as it offered good functionality and met data security requirements.

### *3.1.3 Survey Pilot*

Six current university students, known to me via church and chaplaincy contacts, piloted the survey. Positive feedback included ease of use, navigation and overall construction, and the length of the survey time taken for completion. Concerns included the wording of one question and another question being mandatory even though it was quite difficult to answer. The difficult question was made optional and, after discussion with other respondents, the wording of the question one person felt was unclear was left unchanged. Pilot responses were included in the final data.

### *3.1.4 Distribution of the survey*

My aim was to disseminate the survey as widely as possible amongst students self-identifying as Christians. I chose a target of 50 survey responses as this seemed pragmatically achievable, would be enough to allow some basic comparative statistical observations between church attenders and non-attenders to inform reflection. 83

completed surveys were received over a period of 13 months. I relied on participants self-identifying as Christians, the first question on the survey, as the interest of the research is in students who understand themselves to be Christians as part of their personal narrative.

Current students advocated social media as their preferred form of contact for research surveys. I hoped that the natural snowball or cascading phenomenon at the heart of social media, strategic support from chaplaincy and Christian student group contacts would lead to widespread distribution of and participation in the survey (Sue and Ritter 2013, 90). This led to a good response from students who attended church but less from non-attenders, and so I depended on individual requests to some chaplaincy colleagues to specifically invite some non-attenders to participate. The survey was distributed on Facebook via three posts on my personal page, including a request to share the post as well as participate, and on the pages of three student Christian groups, the University of Nottingham Chaplaincy, and Nottingham Student Workers. It was also circulated by chaplaincy colleagues at five other universities, in the Church of England Higher Education bulletin email (received by most Higher Education chaplains in England) and via email to church youth workers nationally by the Church of England Children's Officer.

Reflecting on the snowball process not being as effective a form of recruitment as I had hope, I considered three main factors. Contacts became more enthusiastic about the research if they had face to face contact with me. Behavioural theory suggests that cognitive dissonance and self-perception as a 'helpful person' or a sense of involvement in the system being researched may be causal in this (Sue and Ritter 2013, 97). Most chaplains seem to

have quite limited student networks; and if students have not prioritized church attendance it may be unsurprising that neither do they prioritize engaging in research about it. Latterly in recruitment, I secured funding to offer an Amazon voucher to students who did the survey and participated in an interview. Whilst this offer led to engagement of more non-attending students, only one participant accepted the offer of a voucher at the end of the interview.

### **3.2 Student interviews**

Semi-structured interviews are a form of open enquiry which gives significant scope to participants to shape their responses and tell their story, whilst staying within the broad confines of the area of interest and maximizing the knowledge-producing potential of dialogue (Brinkmann 2018, 579). I chose them to allow deeper exploration of individual narratives and the influences on them than is possible in a survey, in keeping with the commitments discussed in chapter two. Whilst the interaction of focus groups might have sparked insightful reflections by participants on their own narrative as they heard the stories of others, they would have given less opportunity to attend in depth to individual experiences. I was also concerned that peer pressure within focus groups might deter participants from openly sharing their story.

#### ***3.2.1 Recruitment***

Invitations detailing the interview process, including an information sheet and consent form, were sent to all who volunteered on completion of the survey for one-to-one interview at a mutually convenient time, either in person or via Skype. Three people who expressed interest in an interview withdrew from the research, 2 due to difficulties finding a mutually

convenient time and 1 person when they realised a 40-60 minute interview was required, rather than a much briefer chat. I aimed for 6-10 interviews as practically feasible and providing enough material for the thick description of experiences I was seeking. 10 were undertaken, 1 by Skype and 9 in person. 4 interviewees were regular church attenders at university, 6 were not. It became apparent after the first few interviews that most volunteers were strongly committed to church attendance. Latterly I therefore skewed invitations towards volunteers not currently attending church to keep the research focus on abatement in church attendance.

### *3.2.2 Interview Structure*

The basic interview schedule is in appendix B. Essentially, I encouraged participants to tell their own story of faith, reflecting on influencing factors. I used a conversational style to elicit greater depth in the narrative than more structured questions would allow (Magnusson 2015, 47), using survey answers as prompts to open up different areas of narrative. Having explored the student's narrative, I steered them towards reflecting on the influences on faith and church attendance at university for themselves and their peers. I fed some of reflections on the survey data and initial interviews into the conversation to expand depths of exploration. As might be anticipated, engagement with the interviews varied, some settling into free-flowing narration and reflection more easily than others.

My interview style evolved as I progressed through the interviews. I developed a more fluid patter and began to simply ask people to tell me their story of their faith journey starting from their earliest memories, turning to the survey questions only as prompts if the flow of

narration stalled and to clarify any apparent discrepancies. The first interviewee seemed keen to give correct answers to questions rather than to reflect on personal experience. I reflected in field notes the correlation between this, and my experience of conservative evangelical churches, which was his background. However, I also noted that I felt a little uncertain of myself conducting the interview, despite eliciting narrative being a core part of my medical and pastoral experience. I concluded I simply needed to be more confident in the transferability of my skills to research. Despite this development in style, the depth of narrative elicited appears consistent across the spectrum of interviews, though the first interview was the longest.

### *3.2.3 Practicalities*

To help participants feel most comfortable freely telling their story I offered a choice of location for the interviews. 3 chose my parish study, 5 chaplaincy facilities and 1 a university seminar room. As part of the interview preliminaries, I obtained written consent (appendix C), and explained timings, format, right to withdraw and recording procedure. Interviews were recorded on 2 digital devices to mitigate against the risk of accidental data loss.

Although prepared to take notes I never did, feeling this might interrupt the free-flow of the conversation. Instead, I recorded brief field notes after the conclusion of interviews. Their main use was facilitating my reflections after the first interview, described above.

### *3.2.4 Transcription*

My aim was to ensure that all of the narrative revealed in the interviews became part of the data analysis, rather than my immediate interpretation of it. The whole of each interview,



barring the initial explanations, were transcribed verbatim either by me or by an online transcription service. After 3 transcripts, I realised inclusion of non-lexical utterances was not adding to the quality of data being recorded as might have been the case for a more emotional subject (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013, 214). Subsequently I omitted most minor speech disfluencies but retained those longer than two words, or which contributed to the meaning of the text, and noting particularly long pauses. I re-listened to all recordings at least once whilst proof-reading and correcting transcripts.

### **3.3 Church leader interviews**

I interviewed church leaders firstly to understand more broadly the context within which the student narratives were located, identifying differences between the perspectives of students and churches, part of problematization, and second because the research hopes to inform practice. I chose interviews over other methods, such as participant observation and ethnography, partly due to pragmatism and available resources but also to better understand the thinking behind observable behaviours of churches. Senior church leaders rather than frontline student workers were interviewed to help understand strategic thinking as well as practice. The interviews ran concurrently with the latter stages of the survey and student interviews.

#### *3.3.1 Invitation & selection*

A pragmatic place to find a broad cohort of church leaders was the University of Nottingham Chaplaincy's 'churches booklet', which contains basic details of known Christian churches within a 3km radius of the main campus of the University of Nottingham, which covers most

churches known to have their students attending. I wanted to cover a range of denominations, liturgical traditions, worship styles, sizes and numbers of students and so emailed all the leaders, except Roman Catholic and Orthodox, with an invitation to participate. I excluded the Orthodox due to the ecclesiological difference over the role of church attendance, and the Roman Catholics as I knew their context to be quite different, with a central weekly mass on campus led by the Catholic Chaplain and supported by the Catholic Society. All those who responded were interviewed, plus 2 Anglican Church leaders to whom I sent a second invitation as I wanted to add diversity of tradition to the interviewees. Interviewees were the overall church leader, or, in the 2 largest churches, a minister with an equivalent level of leadership and oversight of student ministry.

### *3.3.2 Interview process*

One interview was conducted in my study, 2 in the interviewee's home, and 4 on church premises. Recording and consent arrangements were as per the student interviews. A semi-structured format of questions was used (appendix D), along with supplementary questions to delve deeper into threads of the conversation that seemed informative. As with the student interview, I fed bits of initial data from the survey and student interviews into the conversations to stimulate reflection. Transcription followed the same process as the student interviews.

## **3.4 Data analysis**

Data analysis was an iterative process as I engaged with it as a 'dialogue partner'. This simply meant that I 'looked at the data', reflected on what I saw and then looked at it again,

continuing the cycle until further meaning ceased to emerge. This process overlapped with ongoing data collection in all three methods. I present them here in the order I started receiving and therefore reflecting on the data.

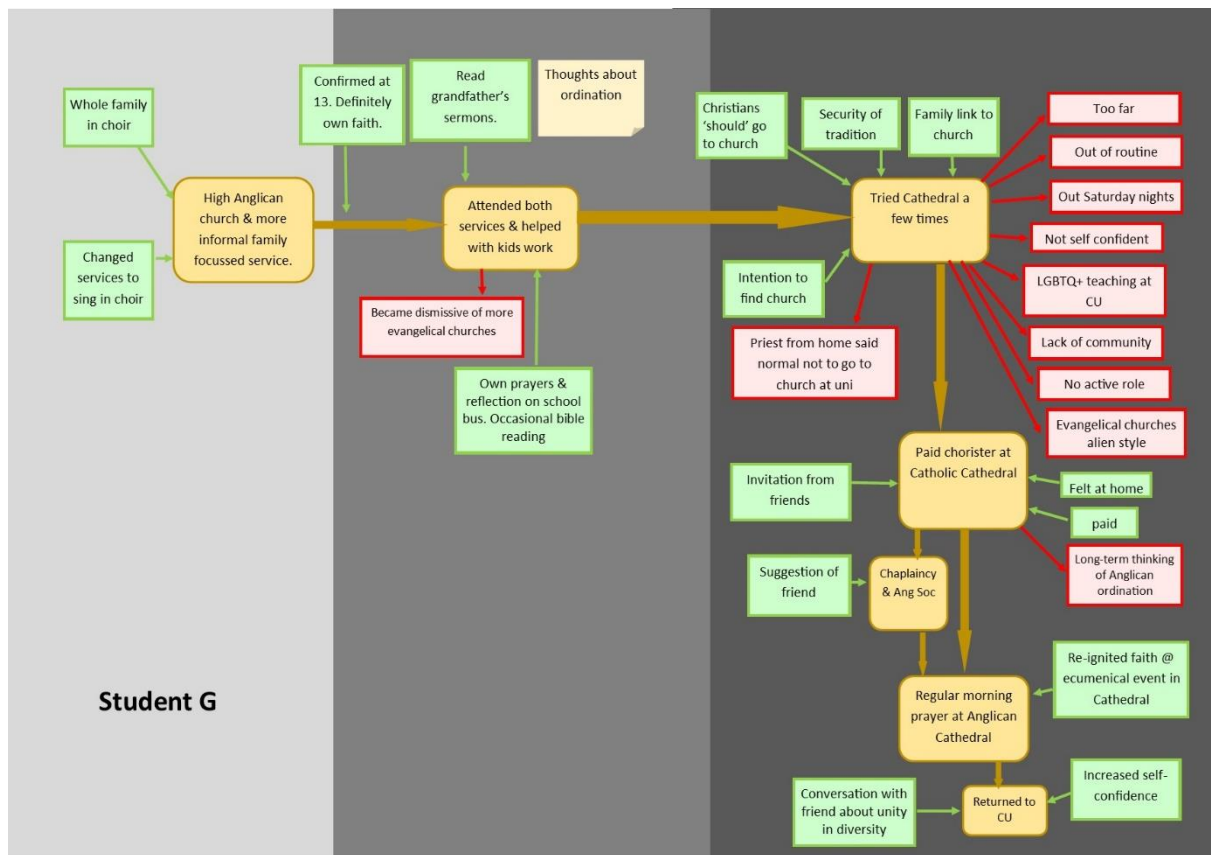
#### *3.4.1 Survey*

I initially thought that filtering data according to response to specified questions might help identify patterns within the data, providing interesting material for reflection. However, I realised I had no measure of whether patterns I saw held meaning or represented normal variation, e.g. 90% of respondents who had attended a large Christian festival prior to university attended church regularly at university, in contrast to 84% of non-festival attenders. It did demonstrate the survey results were unlikely to reveal a momentous answer, such as all those invited by another student to church joined one whereas those not invited did not. Instead, my reflections highlighted the uniqueness of individual stories and led me to focus more on the interviews. I commissioned a statistical report to look for correlations between church attendance at university and other variables for which data had been collected (Appendix F). Before sending the data to the statistician I adjusted formats and removed non-complete returns to simplify input into the statistical software without affecting the results. I used the remainder of the data to inform reflection on the interpretation of the findings that emerged from all data sources.

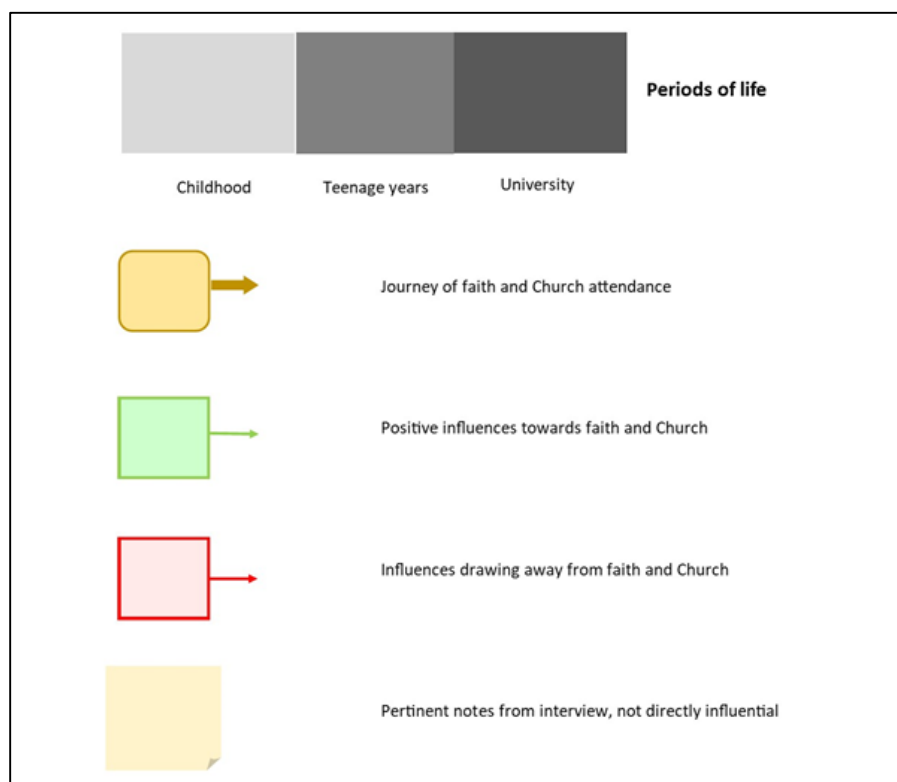
#### *3.4.2 Student interviews*

My initial abortive approach to interview analysis was to put the transcripts into NVivo software hoping that definitions of relevant nodes would emerge during the process. This

produced broad categorizations of the issues being discussed, allowing me to ‘look’ at the data again by theme, but I lost the threads of individual narratives and no particular insights emerged. This mirrors Sexton’s concern that moving too quickly to coding can decrease the attention that is paid to the whole of an individual narrative (2019, 47). Returning to the research question (Richards 2015, 15) I realised that I needed to focus on exploring influences, as well as events. I therefore developed ‘storylines’ for each interviewee (Appendix G).



**Figure 2: Example of storyline flow diagram**



**Figure 3: Key to storyline diagrams**

The storylines are flow diagrams of faith-related life events described in the interviews, with factors influencing towards or away from faith and church attendance at each point added as colour-coded ‘forces’. Inspiration to develop this approach came from a mixture of psychological theory I’d assimilated in medical and leadership training (Lewin 1943), vector diagrams in mechanical mathematics and my preference for visual thinking. The storylines are distinct from mind maps, as they portray real events not thoughts and show directionality of influence rather than simple correlations, and Ishikawa, or fishbone, diagrams (Ishikawa 1976) designed to look at causes of a particular event rather than influences around longitudinal narrative. Constructing the storylines gave me a way to understand what was happening in the student narratives. I see similarities between this approach and three of the four readings of Voice-Centred Relational Method (VCRM)

(Mauthner and Doucet 2021), the attention to main events of narrative, a focus on relationships and then how participants interact with external factors. However, my approach focusing distinctly on factors influential to the stream of the main events is more specific to my research question. Feedback from a Social and Public Policy researcher agreed that this was a useful way of looking at the data and something she might consider using in her work.

Whilst the storylines enabled me to understand individual narratives I also wanted to explore common themes amongst the influences. I therefore created a spreadsheet version of each diagram, with life events as a central column and positive and negative influencing forces in the chronologically appropriate row on either side. I then combined the influences from all interviewees on a further spreadsheet, separated into each of three life stages, childhood, teenage years, and university, before grouping very similar factors together. I then recoded the transcripts in NVivo using these influences as nodes. All of the transcript material, other than introductory and concluding remarks and occasional extraneous asides, was coded to at least one node, to enable deviations from patterns in data to be noticed (Alvesson and Kärreman 2011, 42). This produced emerging themes along with narrative evidence to reflect on in chapter five.

To ensure that individual narratives remained at the heart of the research I wrote summary biographies to use by way of introduction to each participant and also to help begin to see how the data may be generalizable to others who have elements of the narrative in common and enable them to be interpreted in a way that informs practice with a wider population of

Christian students (Moustakas 1990, 50).

A chaplaincy colleague from another university read anonymized copies of four of the interviews and fed back to me what themes he thought emerged from the transcripts, without knowing any of my data analysis and interpretation. His interpretation of the transcripts were congruent with my findings, providing a form of validity check on the data analysis.

#### *3.4.3 Church leader interviews*

I coded the transcripts in NVivo using the topics of the discussion as nodes. This allowed me to reflect on the combined responses on each theme alongside the narrative of the individual responses for a particular church, writing reflective notes for both. I developed the reflection to consider how it sat alongside the themes and individual narrative emerging from the student interviews, what further questions materialized and what overall themes for practice emerged.

Anonymizing the churches in the findings was not possible as unique characteristics make some of them inevitably recognizable to readers familiar with the church landscape in Nottingham. To obscure their identity, I gave them New Testament church names to maintain a sense of character, with no intention of resonance with the character of those churches in the documents of late antiquity. In working drafts I had allocated churches letters, and simply replaced these with church names beginning with the same letter.

#### *3.4.4 Bringing it all together - an iterative cycle of reflection*

This iterative process of dialogue with the data, within and between sources, continued through writing up the findings in chapter four. The metaphor of the marketplace that emerged is presented as part of that chapter, but the cyclical nature of reflective practice necessitated that the emergence of the metaphor further influenced my reflection, not only as I considered the fit between the data and the model but also leading to further understanding of it.

#### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter has detailed the methods used to gather, analyse and interpret data within this study in the light of the methodological commitments in chapter two. The next chapter will present the findings which were gathered.



## Chapter 4

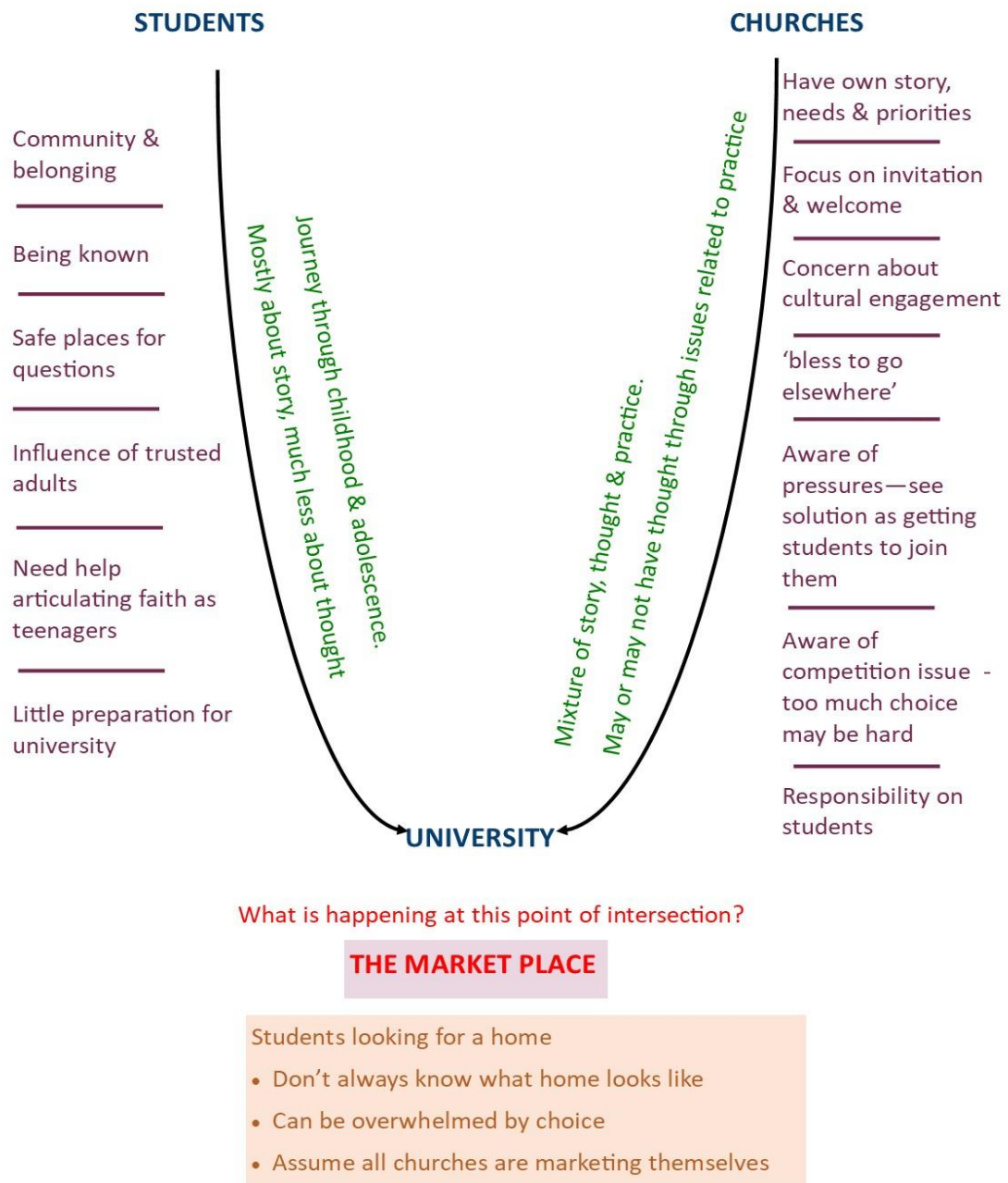
### RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter will present the data gathered using the methods previously described. The three aspects of the research - student survey, student interviews, and church leader interviews - are considered both separately and in dialogue with each other in order to enable the layers of the complex picture of the context to emerge and be interpreted.

#### *Ordering of the data*

The ordering of this chapter reflects the value I have come to place on personal narrative and my shift towards deeper appreciation of the significance of qualitative data described in chapter two. I originally envisaged following the pattern I have described of earlier research, using the survey results to identifying key issues before turning to the student interviews to add a greater depth of understanding and the church leader interviews to identify practical deficits between current practice and student experience, pointing towards useful practice development. Instead, I reversed the priority between the personal narratives in the student interviews and the survey as authoritative data sources, with the survey providing a useful secondary data source to locate the interviews into a broader perspective and population. The intersection between student narratives and the church leader perspectives became the central focus for understanding the whole research question, illustrated in the figure below. I have therefore presented the student interview pertaining to the period prior to university then focused on the intersection. I have done this by introducing a visual metaphor of a

traditional marketplace for how students encounter churches, then introducing the churches which are in it. After that I turn back to the student interviews relating to their experiences whilst at university and then finally discuss the survey.



**Figure 4: The intersection of student experience and church practice**

## 4.1 Student Interviews

This section presents and illustrates the key themes from the first two life stages identified from the storylines and then attends specifically to pre-university preparation as this is a focus of practice for some significant organizations.

### 4.1.1 *Childhood and teenage experiences*

The storyline diagrams highlighted the significance of the trajectory of faith development through childhood and teenage years to university transition and choices about faith and church attendance made there. Experience of church and what remained important about it through to adult life seemed to have its origins in early experiences.

Key features within early life that emerged were enjoyment of a warm sense of community, recognition of personal faith around 10-12 years, the vagaries of active encouragement for faith development through teenage years, and a sense of belonging generated through roles of service within the church.

#### 1. *Belonging and community*

Whilst attendance was naturally largely dictated by parental choices in early childhood, all but one interviewee spoke with warm positivity or was neutral about their childhood church experience and the sense of belonging to a community. Student I was 'bored'. The belonging came from being part of a wider family, a sense of being special, and feeling they were making a useful contribution.

*we were the children who used to run around in the aisles, and everyone used to*

*either love us or hate us, yeah. But we liked going there. (Student D)*

*you were supposed to be 7 [to sing in the choir], but the 1st service I sang at was 2 days before my 7th birthday. I still remember that. It was Pentecost. ... I remember exactly where we sat...-there's something about doing something you're not supposed to do (Student F)*

*Really good Sunday school (Student E)*

*Christmas we all go there, it was a fun thing to do, but it wasn't necessarily out of faith it was more fun going with everybody. (Student A)*

## *2. Appropriation of faith & vagaries of encouragement*

Most interviewees had either been confirmed or made their own baptism promises, depending on church tradition, by 10-13 years. For some, this was associated with a peer group taking the same step, but all described a sense that this action signified development of a personal faith. At a similar age, outside the tradition of confirmation, student B recalled first articulating her own faith after hearing of the concept of 'relationship with God' from a schoolteacher. Student E had a strong moment of personal faith-decision in later teenage years. Only student J actively rebuffed invitations to confirmation because, whilst still regularly attending church, she was unsure of her beliefs, and nobody seemed interested in them.

*they just like mentioned it in passing about being confirmed ... do you want to come*

*and, you know, just basically become like part of the church again and things and I think ... Because they never actually sat me down, I could never actually have the reverend actually sit down me and say like, "What are your feelings?" like "What are your thoughts?" (Student J)*

In teenage years, where more questioning and development of faith might be expected, experience became more divided. A split between churches who emphasized teaching and catechesis, was reflected in a divide between students who articulated a personal faith and some certainty about the place of church in their lives and those who simply expressed an ongoing warm attachment to church. Students B, C and E attended evangelical churches with faith focused youth groups and attended Christian festivals. Both students J and I felt strong enough connection to the church through helping with children's groups and a strong Roman Catholic tradition in society, respectively, to keep them at least on the edges of faith until they both encountered Roman Catholic priests who encouraged them to explore their beliefs, questions and faith. Those from more traditional Anglican backgrounds found little ongoing discussion of faith either in church activities or with their parents. Students H and F attended church youth groups, but these involved only social activities.

*It was never particularly explained to us, the faith side of things... We spent a lot of times rehearsing the music, and I still know all the words to the Magnificat, and I could tell you exactly the order of an evensong, and I know the liturgy for the Eucharist word for word basically, because I've sat through so many, but I was never really taught why we were doing any of this ...*

*We did some [confirmation] classes at the Deanery. I remember there were biscuits,*

*that's probably it to be honest. (Student D)*

It could be that this happened because of an assumption that teenagers find it awkward to talk about faith and prefer social events, but it missed opportunities to help these students understand their own faith narrative. Other possibilities include a misassumption that continued attendance beyond childhood demonstrates the development of personal faith or a tradition that values faithful attendance at public worship above articulation of personal faith.

I was surprised at the lack of influence of peers described in teenage years. The social focus of some church youth groups may have been enough to extend the sense of warm belonging and community experienced through church attendance beyond childhood. However, it potentially left these interviewees at a disadvantage in the transition to university when that community was inevitably be left behind.

### *3. Service as belonging*

Serving in the church was important to some students to maintain the warmth of belonging through teenage years. Students J, I, B and G assisted with children's activities, H and D acted as altar servers, G and F sang in choirs. Others had relationships within a peer group that they enjoyed.

*You could meet people. You knew everyone, everywhere...You don't struggle with anything because there's always people there that you know. So a really good sense of belonging to a community, And quite a big wide community. (Student C)*

It is unclear whether the opportunity for service led to the high level of commitment to church activities common to interviewees who had a positive teenage experience of church, or if it was simply that those committed enough to serve are the ones who stayed.

#### *4. Family influences and other adults*

Family commitment to faith and church attendance generally had a positive influence during their childhood and adolescence even though faith was an open topic of family conversation for only 2 interviewees (C and E). Only Student E described an overt display of personal faith within the family home (i.e. praying before meals and at bedtimes). His father also gave him CS Lewis book when he was trying to make sense of faith for himself. Student C attended Christian festivals (Soul Survivor) with her family, which was significant in personal faith development, even though as a teenager she chose to go to a different church to her parents on Sundays.

Student A was the only interviewee not taken to church by family as a child, being brought up by atheist grandparents. This seems to have had a neutral, rather than negative effect on her faith.

Uncertainty in parental faith, parents ceasing church attendance, stated faith despite lack of attendance, and confusion over theology had a negative influence. Student B was confused when her mother stopped attending church whilst she was a child; Student J was bewildered by having a Methodist father and Roman Catholic mother who did not attend Mass due to

previous divorce, although eventually this confusion positively influenced her towards exploring and understanding her own faith more.

Other significant adults such as grandparents and schoolteachers were important in faith development for the majority of the interviewees:

*from the age of about 10 onwards, I suppose, he [her grandfather] sometimes just talked about a sermon he gave, you know, or some random thing that just came up in conversation, and I remember quite often he'd send me kind of photocopies of his past sermons like in the post and we've have a chat about it, you know, what he wrote, you know 30 years ago, whatever. ...there was definitely a sense in which family and family members encouraged me to have conversations with them about faith things, but I would never, I never really engaged in organized kind of faith conversations I suppose. (Student G)*

*I think I started to become a Christian when I was maybe about nine and because I had this teacher in primary school who was probably the first person I met that kind of influenced me because she was a Christian and she used to do this thing called Bible club which I used to go along to, and that was the first point when I was like, "Oh, this person ... " She talked about having a relationship with God and stuff. (Student B)*

Students B and F were helped through discussions of faith with RE teachers. This may reflect a greater ease in broaching issues of significance with someone with a slightly less intense



relationship than parents.

Observed behaviour of adults within the church was a profoundly negative experience for student D as she saw the cathedral chapter very publicly fall out with each other whilst continuing to preach and lead services.

Of interest, by mid-teens most interviewees were clear about preferred worship style, and some of their own core values, such as the church's response to LGBTQ+ issues.

#### *4.1.2 Where they had got to prior to university transition?*

By the time they were preparing to go to university:

- 4 interviewees (E, I, B and C) clearly articulated a personal Christian faith that was central to their lives. For E and B this led to them taking gap years in Christian service prior to university. Student C owned her faith enough to choose to attend a church other than the one her parents attended. Student I was catechizing others and enjoying experiences at Taizé.
- 4 interviewees (H, G, D and F) regularly attended traditional Anglican churches, serving or singing in the choir. Attendance was heavily entwined with their roles in the church and a sense of community and belonging was still central to their faith.
- Student J was interested in exploring the Catholic faith but had decided to put that off until university.
- Student A continued in a highly unusual faith journey based on supernatural experiences, with church attendance having a secondary role.

They were all quite committed to church despite the cultural peer pressures that influence many teenagers away from their childhood faith and it might be surmised that this therefore played some part in their identity.

Positive childhood influences can be summarized as feeling part of the church, family and friends, and own spiritual experience. Experience of church and family could also be negative.

During teenage years positive influences focused on a sense of community and being involved in church life, family and other significant adults such as teachers, developing personal faith, peer group, habit and finding preferred worship style.

Negative influences during teenage years were: church experience, family, a lack of personal faith, theology, friends, and difficulties getting transport to church.

It is interesting to reflect on what happens to these influencing factors of teenage life during transition to university if a student moves away from the family home and geographical location. All except one of the positive influences are all removed or diminished, at least for a period of time until a student can establish themselves in a new church. The only positive influence from teenage years which a new student can be confident will accompany them through their transition to university is their personal faith and spiritual experiences. Some of the negative influencing factors of teenage life may also alter in transition to university, such as church experience, geographical challenges and particular issues of teaching in

church, but this would be depended on what new circumstances occur. It might therefore be inferred from that only those with a strong personal faith could be anticipated to thrive spiritually during transition to university. For all others new positive influences will be required for their faith to thrive.

#### *4.1.3 Preparation for University*

This issue that has already been identified as a potential opportunity to influence decisions made by students about practice of their faith when they attend university, with organizations such as Fusion focusing heavily on it.

Four interviewees had no discussions prior to university about finding a church or potential effects on their faith and student F only discussed choral scholarships with her Director of Music. Student H's vicar cautioned him that studying theology might challenge his faith, though suggested it may be a good idea in the long run, but made no suggestions as to how to safeguard against this and did not discuss church. Student G initiated a personal discussion about university life with her youth leader because of anxiety about the move, but the conversation only briefly skimmed over the subject of church.

Three students did have discussions about church. Student J resolved to explore the Catholic faith at university and her school chaplain gave notice of her arrival and intention to the university chaplain. The chaplain did not follow this up. Student E discussed faith at university with his youth leader and also his parents. He decided which church he would attend prior to moving to university. Student B participated in peer group discussions on

faith at university initiated by a youth leader and also heard much about the issue at Soul Survivor. She moved to university with the expressed plan and intention of joining a church.

So, whilst preparation prior to university life seems an obvious potential area for intervention, as local churches are the ones who have the relationship with pre-university teenagers and there has been an increased focus on this area in the last decade, it seems the opportunity is largely being missed.

Having painted a picture of the experience of interviewees prior to their transition to university, I now turn to the way they may encounter churches when they arrive.

#### **4.2 The marketplace of churches – an image of the intersection**

The research question is focused at the intersection of the stories and experiences of students attending university and the behaviours and beliefs of the churches in university towns and cities. I would like to introduce a visual metaphor of the traditional marketplace found in many towns in England to aid understanding and exploration of this intersection. I will then explore the findings from the church leader interviews by locating the churches within the marketplace image.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term marketplace and market stalls in this chapter purely to refer to this physical entity as a metaphor and not in relation to any other uses of the term 'market'



***Figure 5: A traditional marketplace***

The image of the marketplace emerged from my reflection on both the student and church leader interviews during data analysis and was not used in discussions with any participants. The metaphorical market square has one main entrance through which passers-by can see some, but not all, of the stalls and choose to enter or pass by. Other smaller entrances are to the sides and rear of the market square but are only used by people who know their location and specifically seek them out, or an unusual amalgamation of circumstances makes them happen upon them. Prime location stalls nearest the main entrance attract premium rents. Stalls vary wildly in appearance and in how stallholders try to engage people. Some pay lots of attention to the visible appearance of the stall and call out with a well-developed patter. Others, usually on the more distant stalls, offer very little visual attraction and simply wait for enquiries, although the stallholder is not always obvious to find.

Stallholders are the churches of different traditions found in most university towns and cities who say they would happily welcome students to join them. They locate and present themselves in different ways to students who investigate the marketplace.

The marketplace may be encountered in different guises. Churches meet in physical buildings with varying locations and visual appearances. Christian unions often invite selected evangelical churches to attend a 'churches fayre' near the start of the academic year. The majority of the churches, including all those interviewed, use websites and social media as an online shop front. Some have signed up to an umbrella 'Find a Church' app, which allows students to see details of local churches and also register their interest in finding a church. Churches are then encouraged to make personal contact and invite students to attend. In effect this is a mixture of the marketplace and direct marketing. Some chaplaincies also hold publicity produced by local churches.

I will locate the findings from the church leader interviews within the metaphor by grouping them according to stall location: front row, off to one side, and more hidden. All information about the activities of churches, their workers, how they understand the context, and their intent, rely wholly on the responses in the church leader interviews unless specified otherwise. The characterization of the place of churches' activities and understandings within the metaphor of the marketplace and their location amongst the stalls is mine. The description of how students experience the churches within the marketplace emerges from my reflections on the student interviews.

Table 1 provides a brief overview of the churches along with their allocated pseudonyms.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Overall Sunday attendance</b>	<b>Student attendance</b>
Antioch	Anglican (group of 3, choral tradition)	300	43
Berea	Independent Charismatic evangelical	600	80
Corinth	Anglican (open evangelical)	300	50
Derbe	Independent Evangelical	680-880	50-80
Ephesus	Methodist	25	2 or 3
Filippi	Independent evangelical	40-45	3
Galatia	Independent Charismatic evangelical	600-900	150-200
Hierapolis	Anglican (evangelical)	120	20

**Table 1. Churches participating in the research**

#### *4.2.1 The front row stalls*

Churches most visible from the main entrance have the resources both to secure the most prominent stalls and make best use of their advantage. These include Galatia and Berea churches. Stalls and the patter of staff are designed to attract the attention of students, hoping that their eyes might linger long enough for an invitation to be offered or a conversation started so the virtues of the church can be extolled. Invitations are designed to communicate welcome. My experience in my professional role of their publicity is that it has little detail of tradition or theology. Stall staff are mainly enthusiastic students or recent graduates currently attending the church.

Bags of candy-floss, bacon butties, chocolates and donuts being given out, along with invitations to a free barbeque and other events easily identify Galatia Church's stall. Galatia church is an independent charismatic evangelical church, meeting in a well-furnished and developed warehouse, with an attendance 600- 900 at Sunday services. They estimate 150-

200 students would say they attend Galatia Church, of which about 100 attend each Sunday evening. The atmosphere in services is reminiscent of summer Christian festivals. The church aims to make attendance feel 'culturally normal' with various strategies based around food and drink to 'grab people's attention'. There is a bar in the building, they own candy-floss and popcorn machines, serve mince pies and custard after services, and hold barbecues and student pizza evenings. They encourage students to join a student-specific midweek group and attend a student weekend away. A group hike is organized from the university campus to evening services for the first eight weeks of the academic year. I have had informal conversations with several students who attend who find the notion that it may not be the right place for everyone incomprehensible.

Galatia church recognizes some of the pressures students face settling into university life:

*September to December term is such an odd term for students because they're all trying to find their feet with 101 different things. Particularly, Freshers are trying to work out where are they, what are they doing.*

They attribute a post-Christmas surge in new attenders to renewed intention spurred by questioning from parents over Christmas and a lessening of other pressures, such as settling into accommodation. Most students who regularly attend the church start doing so in their first year.

Leaders recognize that their size and style could deter some but feel that without all their publicity and activities students would still find them but be less likely to stick. They believe



there is little they can do to help students who attend for a while but then decide the church is not for them due to large numbers. The abatement in church attendance on transition to university was hypothesized to reflect a general lack of intentionality amongst students, student life being a 'bubble', and competition and distrust amongst churches. They feel constrained in attempts to engage more students by university regulations limiting their access to campus.

Berea Church is another charismatic evangelical church, meeting in a converted administration building. About a fifth of its 600 members are students, with about 80 attending evening services and 30 in the morning. The church asks members to give reviews on Google to increase internet search ranking, hoping these will help them be noticed ahead of other stalls. Staff stand in front of the stall with clipboards trying to collect contact information from passing students, rather than trying to engage in deep conversation. They do this when students attend a church service as well. Personal emails and social media contact directly from church leaders are then sent with the hope that students will feel noticed and loved and be drawn further into relationship. They have always been intentional about attracting students, though feel more students find them anyway as they have become more established. A minibus collects students from campus on Sunday evenings during the autumn term, though this has recently been reduced from an all-year-round service because of cost and also hope that student commitment may increase if they have to get themselves to the church. 'Welcome Bags' containing a church calendar, magazine, chocolates and a handwritten letter from the pastor are given to all new attendees. A monthly 'Welcome Meal' is intended to help new attendees feel part of the church family.

Students are also encouraged to join a midweek home-group.

Services concentrate on contemporary musical worship led by a well-rehearsed band and expository preaching. There is a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, with regular calls for contributions of prayers, scripture, songs, supernatural tongues and prophecy. The church leadership has recently become conscious that their approach has been joining in with competition for students already proactively seeking a church to the neglect of others who may be less intentional. They have therefore introduced more explanations into services to demystify their practices for those not familiar with their worship tradition. Most students who attend do so with friends or in a group from the Christian Union.

In October student numbers are higher but many visit only once or twice. An estimated 20 students attend at least 3 or 4 times but then stop attending. Leaders assume they will have found another church but do not contact such students to check this or offer help to find one. The church leaders understood themselves to be accountable before God for their pastoring of long-term members of the church but were not sure about their responsibility for those leaving after a few weeks. This is a key consideration for them in determining whether they should be making efforts to respond.

Their thoughts about the abatement in church attendance on transition to university included the CU being seen as an alternative Christian community to church, the freedom of university opening students to temptation not to practice their faith, cultural pressure against there being absolute truth and standards, and church welcoming being so focused

on October that it can be hard for students who seek a church later in the academic year. They thought the plethora of Church choices available to students could actually be counterproductive:

*It's through having the choice that you think there is then a perfect church for you, because there's just a smorgasbord you can have this theology and this style of worship so there must be the perfect church for me I just need to keep looking and I'll find it.*

#### *4.2.2 Slightly to one side*

Slightly less visible than the front line market stalls, to one side, are what I would characterize as neatly presented stalls, including those occupied by Corinth, Derbe and Hierapolis churches. The stalls sparkle somewhat less brightly and offer fewer giveaways but smiling staff behind the stall are keen to tell any student who stops to listen about what the church offers, give details of service times and invitations to activities, and warmly offer a parting shot: 'you'd be very welcome to join us'.

Corinth Church has few visual attractions. Most students who find them do so via word of mouth from others who are part of the church. It is an Anglican church, describing itself as

*'Open evangelical, with a charismatic flavour and a strong emphasis on social engagement....we try to make discipleship at the heart of what we're about as community.'*

Around a sixth of its total congregation of 300 are students, most attending evening services. About 20 are first years, with more students joining in latter years looking for somewhere

smaller with more sense of belonging than the large independent churches they have previously attended. Services are light on liturgy with a contemporary style of musical worship. They believe feeling welcome is key to students staying with them. A 'student community' meets before evening services and there are twice-termly student lunches. The church employs a student worker because they feel it sends a signal that they are interested in this demographic as well as providing specific support to students.

*...students are essential to its long-term existence, really. If we don't have a flow through of students in a certain proportion who would then make their life in Nottingham and continue in the life of the church- Then ... Yeah. That's part of the lifeblood of the church.*

The church feels uncomfortable with the '*feeding frenzy that churches do around students*' at the start of the university year, as churches try to attract the same pool of students. Recently, however, they have decided to be more proactive in saying 'we'd love you to come here', rather than more neutrally encouraging students to join any church. Corinth Church would prefer smaller numbers of more committed students to high numbers with low commitment. The church supports the Christian Union but is concerned it promotes a lifestyle based on Christian relationships, whereas the church is keen to discourage being closeted in a Christian organization. There is no strategy for supporting students who decide the church is not for them, but they feel any student who leaves would be noticed.

Causes of the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students were thought to include a pleasure-seeking culture opening up cracks in faith through playing on personal

insecurities, lack of personal organization and students juggling priorities whilst finding their feet being deterred by some churches focusing on 'gold standard discipleship'. There was concern that churches can harm student faith through focus on church activity, diminishing women, and breeding laziness through playing to a consumerist culture.

Derbe Church is an independent evangelical church meeting in a purpose-built auditorium. Its neatly set out stall is staffed by its student ministry assistant and pastor-in-training. Their attempts to grab the attention of passing students are less energetic than some. Those who stop to chat are invited to be part of the wider church family with few student-specific activities. Students tend to hear about the church through their website, social media, Christian Union connections and recommendations from home churches, as well as through the prominence of their building.

500-700 people attend morning services but the 50-80 students attending usually opt for the evening service of around 180. Half of the students will be from overseas. The proportion of students in the church has decreased over recent years as the church has grown. Again, they tend to get more second and third year students who have tried more attractive churches in their first year but have decided they need somewhere different on an ongoing basis.

Worship is led by a well-practiced band but at a lower volume than in Galatia or Berea Churches, with a focus on biblical wording of songs rather than emotional experience. Systematic expository preaching is the main focus of each gathering. Occasional student lunches and 'host families' are offered, especially for overseas students, and a student meal,

bible study and prayer event happens before each evening service. The church feels they *'don't do masses of student stuff'* and believe students should not be mollycoddled.

Church attendance, as an environment for growth and development, is seen to be essential. They attribute Christian students not attending church to a surfeit of choice and a lack of teaching on the nature of Christian discipleship by home churches:

*It's a great blessing that Nottingham has many churches that have student ministries.*

*One of the downsides is therefore students can, even the ones that have minded to get to church every weekend, float around unhelpfully...*

A handful of students join them but leave again each year with little discussion as to why. Suggestions for addressing the issue in the drop-off in attendance included home churches making more positive links for students before they arrive, trying to pop the 'student bubble', and increasing communication between student-focused churches in the area.

Hierapolis Church stated that it is aware that it is not always noticed, especially by first year students, despite having a traditional building close to the university on a major road heavily frequented by students walking to campus. Their market stall is usually staffed by clergy with occasional students or recent graduates assisting. Leaflets detailing forthcoming sermon programmes and courses exploring the basics of the Christian faith are given to enquirers. The church's philosophy is to attract students by gentle invitation but without pressure, which they see as a contrast to churches who collect contact details or have more glamorous market stalls. They maintain a contemporary website and flier along the main road.

Although Anglican, Hierapolis Church feels its evangelical theological identity outweighs its denominational identity. Morning services are liturgical, evening services having a more free-church feel of musical worship followed by teaching. Students account for about 20 of the 120 Sunday congregants, mostly attending evening services. They are likely to be personally noticed on their first visit. Christian Union links are strong with student attendance being significantly affected by whether any CU leaders are church members at the time. Students tend to join the in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year when they have moved to live in the local community although a few are referred on transition by like-minded home churches.

The church favours integration of students into wider church life, rather than student work but usually invites new attendees to lunch at the Vicarage or with a group to a local pub and there are a few pizza evenings prior to CU meetings. Students are encouraged to join house groups, serve within the church and are often offered one-to-one mentoring. Most students who attend 2 or 3 times become wholeheartedly committed to the church. It is felt this is because they are a 'church of last resort', with students usually already having rejected other options before coming to them.

They were able to describe situations where they have assisted students in 'leaving well' and transitioning to another church and were concerned that some churches make it hard for students to leave, by pursuing them with emails and other forms of messaging. Reflecting on patterns of student church attendance they suggested that students are increasingly herd animals, following where others are going with an increasing trend towards larger churches

in the last 10 years related to the growth of Christian festivals and a decline in discipleship-focused summer youth camps. The variety of available churches is seen as good, but they think students can become too fussy about finding the ideal church and they wondered whether the CU should be willing to signpost to a wider variety of churches if students don't share its conservative evangelical tradition. Other thoughts about abatement in attendance included questioning whether such students really have their own Christian faith or not, the Saturday night party culture, and consumerism leading students expecting to find the perfect church for them rather than asking where they can best contribute to church life.

#### *4.2.3 The more hidden stalls*

Located down one of the aisles, out of initial line of sight of the market entrance, are stalls belonging to other churches who I would characterize as wanting to welcome students but who do not particularly focus on them. Careful exploration is needed to find the stalls, unless an inquisitive student happened to come upon them by chance whilst wandering in the depths of the marketplace. My experience in my professional role is that the stalls appear less professional, with invitations well-meant but with poorer quality design and production, often with a 'homemade' feel. The interviews showed that though some have warm-hearted, usually older, staff behind the stalls, they feel slightly despondent that students focus on the glitzy, more visible stalls. Other stalls are unmanned and simply have leaflets available detailing service times, possibly with a telephone number, should a student choose to come by. For a few more there is a complete scarcity of information.

Ephesus Church is unusual amongst these churches in that its stall is staffed by a recent



graduate who also has responsibilities within the University chaplaincy team. The stall has little decoration and no giveaways to attract students. The staff member is quietly welcoming to students who stop to enquire and keen to answer questions, and issue personal invitations to Sunday services.

Ephesus Church is prominently located in the heart of a residential area very popular with students, but many students walk by without consciously acknowledging its existence. Its tradition of student work covers several decades:

*Half the congregation are people who came as students and kept coming.*

The congregation attending the traditional Methodist services numbers about 25 adults, 2 or 3 of whom are current students, though previously they have been as high as 6. Their old building has a façade typical of many 100-year-old Methodist churches although the front doors have been modernized; there is a coffee area just inside, and the interior, which I would characterize as unremarkable, has a data projector and screen and movable chairs. There is some emphasis on social justice projects and a previous student worker led a student social action group. The church sees student engagement to be at its core but with the role of the wider church being simply to support the student worker who is paid from a restricted endowment.

No specific activities are undertaken to attract students and activities change with each student worker. Ephesus Church considers food to be important to welcoming students, but events often feel awkward and inadvertently unwelcoming. Some students visiting the church find the small numbers difficult as there is no chance of anonymity. Those who start

attending regularly tend to already be members of Methodist churches elsewhere and end up staying for some time. Nothing intentional is done to follow-up students who try the church but then leave. Church attendance is seen as good but not an essential for Christian students as it can be returned to later in life. Thoughts on the reasons for the abatement in church attendance on transition to university focused on a disconnect between church perceptions of students and the reality of their experience, the overwhelming choice of available churches, and faith not being well-developed through adolescence even if it is not lost.

Filippi Church's market stall contains leaflets with details of service times but only infrequently has a volunteer staffing it. Occasionally a student might find a volunteer giving out evangelistic invitations to passers-by of any background outside the church building itself, which is located near to some of the remoter student halls. Leaders have attended CU churches fayres in the past but have found them unfruitful.

Filippi Church is an independent church with roots in the Elim Pentecostal movement. Its building is reminiscent of its time and has seen better days, but the congregation don't have the funds to renovate it. 3 of the Sunday morning congregation of 40-45 are students, usually from overseas and living in the nearby halls of residence. Each year 3-10 more students will visit but not return.

*I don't know if we're invisible to white middle class students*

They have been thinking about how to do more to attract students but haven't actioned anything yet. Some of those who do stay have tried larger churches but feel they want

something more 'family-sized'.

Filippi Church feels they are a 'mature taste' as the building is basic and music heartfelt but lacking the professionalism of larger churches and there is a sociological mismatch between the congregation and students who live in the surrounding neighbourhood.

They've offered a couple of student suppers, fliered the student halls with invitations to film nights and done some street-based leaflet evangelism. Meeting people on the streets has been the only successful activity. A student focused house group was run previously but there are usually there is simply a general invitation into the life of the wider church. Church leaders are happy to point students towards other churches if they don't find Filippi Church to be right for them. They wondered if the issue of abatement in church attendance is mainly due to students coming from a strong parental Christian setting but without 'significant personal discipleship' leading to huge culture shock on transition to university. Festival culture was also as a factor, feeding the perception that very large worship events are 'a normal expression of congregational life', leading to disappointment when that is not the reality in most churches.

Antioch church encompasses 3 individual churches. Its historic choral tradition with formal liturgical worship makes it unique in the marketplace. Its market stall is largely invisible other than to students seeking a choral scholarship or who inadvertently notice one of its large, traditional buildings whilst exploring the city. The only attempts to recruit students are through musical connections recruiting choir members, as the musical contribution of

students is seen as vital to church life. A few other students attend with friends.

Student attendance is about 16 out of 120 at one church, 23 out of 150 at another and 4 amongst 30 at the third, with evensong being the service preferred by students on Sundays and midweek. Feedback suggests that students who attend particularly value the contemplative services and a more liberal theology. Students may easily come and go anonymously with no one speaking to them, although the clergy would like to engage them more if they were not tied up with other things. Opportunities for involvement are around music and other aspects of services. An intern at one of the churches tried to run a few student social events, but these attempts were quickly abandoned. There are few activities for anyone outside church services. Students involved in music tend to stay and become connected, but others come and go. Each year, a few students enquire about bible study groups and leave again on hearing there are none. Church attendance is seen as an essential part of Christian life, but it is suggested that the busyness of university life and the level of personal organization required to find a church may be factors in the low attendance figures. Peer pressure, academic rationality and the portrayal of the church in the media were other suggestions.

The churches in the marketplace are diverse in their worship tradition, size, activities and understanding of the question being researched. Galatia and Berea churches described specifically trying to make it easy for students to attend their services. They also believe in the need to shape their activities around contemporary culture. Corinth Church said they deliberately do not try to remove obstacles to students attending, hoping to encourage

spiritual growth and determination, although their practice is shifting towards that of Berea and Galatia churches. All except one of the churches describe deliberately trying to build community for students, with varying degrees of priority: four resource specific student communities, whereas two others prioritize integration into the wider church community. Ephesus church acknowledged its practical struggle to deliver on intentions of offering community. Only Antioch Church described no attempts to ensure students find community when they attend, but noted this seems to have happened unwittingly for those connected to their choirs. None of the churches sought to engage very actively with students who stopped attending, seeing it as sad but inevitable and rendering the students no longer their responsibility. The churches' understanding of the causes of the abatement in attendance amongst students had 5 main foci: lack of development of resilient faith prior to university, cultural pressures at university, the demands on time made by Christian Union membership and activities, too much choice being overwhelming and the rise of 'festival culture' within the church e.g. Soul Survivor and Word Alive. Most of the churches also expressed concern that some of the activities of other churches might have a negative impact on students including: the prominence of conservative churches near to the university, churches that are too liberal, street preaching with megaphones, too many low-quality events and talking about the gospel without careful attention to contemporary culture, gathering contact information at the CU churches fayre and churches making students feel guilty if they decide to leave. Other concerns included isolating students into specific student ministry, sexism and gender stereotyping, dogmatic teaching and competition between churches to attract students.

#### *4.2.4 The rest of the marketplace*

These are just a handful of the stalls in the big and crowded marketplace. A 2016 survey found students attend at least 52 different churches in Nottingham (Bentham, 2016). A booklet of details of 30 churches geographically closest to the main university campus identifying themselves as welcoming to students is produced by the University of Nottingham chaplaincy. Every year more churches ask to be included.

### **4.3 The experience of the students at university**

Christian students arrive at university and experience this marketplace of churches. In this section I precis key elements of some individual narratives of the interviewees to build a picture of their experience and summarize the analysis of influences from the storylines, before using these to develop the picture of how students experience the marketplace. I have omitted Students A and C because their unusual circumstances make their narratives less illustrative of more common student experiences.

Student B: moved to university intending to join a church and trying the Christian Union (CU), believing that

*It says in the bible the church is like the body of Christ and I think it's kind of what God's called us to be a part of I guess.*

She believes that being part of a church is an important part of Christian identity and also wanted a Christian family or network.

A family friend offered her a lift to their church and whilst she tried a few others with friends she felt at home in the first church. It shared the charismatic evangelical tradition and style she was used to. Whilst it was very large her teenage church experience had not involved her having a role and she found an intimacy similar to the community of her gap year in small groups.

*I just really liked it, even though it was really big and I'd never really been to a church like that before. Yeah, I just kind of felt at home when I walked in and everyone was being nice and welcoming. Even though they were at all the other churches. But I was just like, "Oh, this feels like the right church."*

*I think because on my gap year, I was part of such a close-knit group of Christians because we had a house church... I kind of wanted that when I came to uni. Even though [church X] is like one of the biggest churches in Nottingham. But I think my small group felt really close.*

*[So it's more about the welcome than the worship or the preaching?]*

*Not necessarily, because they were all welcoming. The worship was really good, and the preaching. And I knew quite a few other people that were going there, and they had a nice student small group, which I went to and made some friends there .... They had a big kind of student welcome area in the church. And so all the new Freshers were kind of standing around there and then someone said, "Oh, there's this small group." I think they gave me a number of someone that ran it*

She met another Christian student on the day she moved into her hall of residence who became and remained her best friend. They got involved in the CU hall group, having met the leaders 'hanging round' the reception area of the hall. She was invited to lead a CU hall group in her second year but decided against it.

Student D: it crossed her mind that she might go to church at university, but initially didn't make any friends who were going to church, found the experience of Week One overwhelming and was scared of being seen as someone interested in faith by new 'laddish lads' flat mates. She found CU members identifying themselves by T-shirts intimidating. Student D wanted to avoid high churches as she associated them with arguments amongst clergy she had found distressing at home, but also felt something more unfamiliar would be too intimidating. She reflected that life may have been different if she had bumped into different people in Week One. In her second year she was missing church and so attended an Advent Carols service at a nearby Anglican church similar to her home tradition. No-one spoke to her and she felt unwelcome, so she did not return. Later that year she attended her godfather's funeral at a more informal early childhood church and realised she felt at home there. The clerical situation at her home church had also begun to improve, along with her self-confidence.

*Someone asked me at that [the funeral] they were like, "Do you go to church at uni?" I was like, "Oh, no, no, no I don't." I was like that was odd, because I wanted to say to people yes, yes I do, I'm part of this congregation, I go at least twice a month, and I enjoy it. But I didn't, so I couldn't say I did*

Whilst staffing a society stall in the Welcome Fayre at the start of the next year she bumped



into a chaplain as she wanted a highlighter pen that was being given away. She was asked about her story, realised 'something was missing' from her life, and responded to the chaplain's invitation to church.

*I was very nervous on Sunday morning walking into [church B], and I really enjoyed it, and by end of lunch I was like I'm going to come back next Sunday.*

Student D's story illustrates desire for the familiar without really knowing what aspects of the familiar are important. It was only when several factors came together that she tried a church at university that led her to find warmth and welcome she was seeking.

Student E: had chosen a church prior to transition to university and immediately attended regularly along with his girlfriend. He received lunch invitations from families at the church and check-in texts from the student worker when he didn't attend for a few weeks. Despite this, he felt that the evening service he attended was too student-focused and lacked the sense of family he had been hoping for. When his attendance became more erratic due to illness, the student worker made efforts to keep in contact, but he felt more could have been done to stay in touch and make him feel he belonged. He also arrived at university intending to be involved in the CU, and also joined Navigators. He left the CU again after some time due to time pressures. He then changed church in his third year to one nearer his accommodation and also because he wanted to explore ministry in the Anglican church.

Student F: selected a church from a bell-ringing website, as she'd started ringing at home and wanted to learn properly. It was a medium-sized traditional Anglican church in a

residential suburb only a couple of miles away as the crow flies, but not on easy bus routes. She didn't like the bells that much, found the bus journey difficult and disliked being the only student. After missing a few Sundays whilst she focused on course work, she feared she might be judged for poor attendance and so didn't return. The CU advertisement in the Student's Union booklet and its members flyering for events made her feel it was not for her. None of her friends went to church. She felt the chaplaincy fulfilled her need for a secure, supportive space and so stopped seeking a church. In her third year she joined the bellringing society and after graduation started occasionally staying for services at that church as she missed the chaplaincy support. She considered attending another church too but the only traditional service was too early in the morning.

Student G: went to university with the intention of attending church. She tried the Anglican Cathedral because of a previous family connection but whilst the style was familiar she found no sense of community. She also found being part of the congregation, with no other role, strange. She became uncomfortable attending the CU as she was just beginning to identify as lesbian and the theme of the second meeting was sexual morality. She tried a couple of 'studenty' evangelical churches but felt unsafe because of her CU experience and developed a routine of going out on Saturday nights then using Sundays to catch up on work. At Christmas she told her home parish priest she was concerned about not attending church at university. His response was that it was perfectly normal and she should not worry. Eventually friends encouraged her to contact the chaplaincy through which she joined the Anglican Society. She also became a paid chorister at the Catholic cathedral, where she felt at home. At the end of her second year she stumbled upon an ecumenical

worship event at the Anglican cathedral which re-ignited her faith and persuaded her she could be comfortable with modern worship styles. By this stage her self-confidence and confidence in her identity had increased so she returned to the CU, developed personal spiritual practices and started regularly attending Morning Prayer at the Anglican cathedral, alongside her job as a chorister. She is beginning to explore a call to ordination.

Student H: thought proper churches should have choirs, but did not give thought to finding a church before moving to university. Busyness and identity were key factors against him finding a church in the first few weeks. He did not want being a Christian to become his primary identity in his hall of residence in case that might negatively skew friendships he was hoping to form.

*I felt very much like I didn't want to tell people that straight away. Because I wanted to be judged for me... rather than to be judged as, oh he's like, he's that guy that's a Christian, therefore he's a bit boring. Which of course is not the case but like, I felt very much like if I led with that, that would be ...almost like instant judgement. When you first move into University halls... there's a lot of people pretending not to be, or pretending to be certain things. And certainly one of the things I was pretending not to be for a while when I first came, as much as I identified two of the people who I knew to be Christian as Christian.*

He felt scared by the intensity of the faith of other Christians he met, all of whom had evangelical backgrounds, pressured by the CU and that CU activities did not reflect his faith. CU members invited him to their large evangelical churches, but none were Anglican, which

was important to him. He did not realise that churches of different traditions were available. Overall, he felt overwhelmed by the transition to university with so many choices. In his second year he began questioning his faith and wished he were part of a church where he could find support. By this stage he knew of more traditional churches but felt it would be 'rude' to start attending whilst unsure what he believed. Likewise, with no pre-existing relationship with any chaplains he felt unable to seek chaplaincy support. He continued to attend church when at home with his family but felt guilty about it. Finally in his third year his faith returned through support from his tutor, an ordained Anglican, and reading Aquinas, amongst others, for his dissertation. He returned to personal prayer and Bible reading, became more relaxed about how faith should be expressed and flavours of church he was willing to consider. Throughout his time at university he had continued to receive but rejected invitations to church from friends, largely because of tradition. He graduated with an intention to restart regular church attendance once or twice a month but remained clear he did not want to be defined solely by his faith.

Student I: sought out Mass times and chaplaincy details before moving to university where he immediately began regularly attendance at Mass on campus. A Catholic church was nearer to his residence but he wanted a 'student Mass'. Occasionally he also attended a large charismatic evangelical church with friends. He attributes his ongoing commitment to attendance at the Mass on campus to the familiar liturgy making it feel 'like home', being part of a community that feels like family, the presence of other young adults there and a good relationship with the priest. He believes church attendance and the sacraments to be essential and so would have attended Mass elsewhere if this one hadn't been available.

Student J: arrived at university with the intention of attending Mass and converting to Catholicism and had been referred by her school chaplain to the Catholic university chaplain for this purpose, but the chaplain did not contact her, nor she the chaplain. She attended Mass on campus very occasionally in her first year but didn't make any Catholic friends and had non-religious flat mates.

*if I even would have made a friend at Mass who then noticed I wasn't there for a bit who actually turned around to me and said, "Why are you not coming along anymore like, we've not seen you in a while?" I think that would have made a difference yeah I might have then come back a bit more.*

*I lived in a flat that ... weren't encouraging. They were always like, "Oh are you going to Mass this Sunday?" like being patronising like 'oh, X the Catholic' ... 'she won't do this, she won't do that' and just felt a bit like 'oh, that's not me' like I want to try to fit into a group. So I just kind of fell away for a number of reasons.*

*[I was just] doing what everybody else was doing because nobody else was like going to church around me.*

She was given a Churches booklet by the chaplaincy team in Fresher's Fayre and met Christians on her theology course, but they didn't invite her to church, she presumed because of her stated intention to become a Catholic. She joined the CU hall group but concluded that it was only for Protestants as she was the only Catholic there. The hall group did invite her to various large charismatic evangelical churches but none of other traditions.

Sunday mornings became a time for sleeping and television. She was inspired to re-engage with faith during the Easter vacation when she a friend at home was baptised. In her second year she therefore started attending Mass, attended a 'Faith in Action' course run by the Catholic chaplaincy and was confirmed. She joined Cathsoc and she found a sense of community there. Her subsequent regular Mass attendance was driven by belief in the importance of Communion and her appreciation of the breadth of the Bible readings and sermons. She enjoyed the different experience of visiting a large charismatic church with friends, but it was 'more like a gig' and was not how she related to God. On graduation she was still attending Mass regularly and was hoping to teach RE in a Catholic school.

Student K was not interviewed but shared her testimony at her baptism. Having been brought up going to church with her family she had a sense something was missing but no personal faith. She tried church at university but felt excluded as her faith wasn't making as much sense to her as it did to others.

*In my first year at university I went to another church a couple of times, and even did part of an Alpha course. But everyone else seemed to be progressing and understanding, and I wasn't, so I stopped. And then I discovered that I could get paid £15 an hour for working on a Sunday, which I thought was a much better option!*

Three years later, having given up the Sunday job, she picked up a booklet of church information she'd kept from Fresher's Fayre in her first year and Googled a few other churches. Finding one that looked least intimidating she tried it, and whilst wary, she felt safe enough to continue attending without getting too involved. A further three years later, having switched courses at university, she decided to work through what she really believed

and chose to be baptised as a declaration of her faith.

**Table 2. Analysis of all storylines: influences at university towards students joining a church**

<p>Most common positive influences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling at home, although defining home was difficult,</li> <li>• Finding community</li> <li>• Encouragement from family</li> <li>• Finding a familiar style, teaching and theology</li> <li>• Convenient service times.</li> </ul>
<p>Other positive factors included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An intention to finding a church, prior to transition, often accompanied by discussion with family or church leaders</li> <li>• Receiving information about local churches at university</li> <li>• Invitation from friends</li> <li>• A strong personal faith</li> <li>• The offer of pastoral support and a safe space for questions.</li> </ul>
<p>Negative influences included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not finding a sense of home and community in a church</li> <li>• Busy lifestyle</li> <li>• No thought about church at university prior to transition and a little ongoing encouragement from their home church</li> <li>• Lack of information about a breadth of churches beyond the big evangelical ones</li> <li>• Friends, personal identity and fear of rejection</li> <li>• Discomfort with the strong evangelical character of the Christian Union</li> <li>• Poor self-confidence</li> <li>• Not seeing the need for church attendance</li> </ul>

#### 4.4 Student experience of the marketplace

Having introduced the student narratives around transition, this section imagines them

within the metaphor of the marketplace, formed by reflection on the narratives heard in the interviews.

The majority of students pass by the marketplace entrance, barely noticing it. Those identifying as Christians are spread throughout the scene: more self-confident ones are found near the entrance, either inside or outside; others, like student D, glance furtively as they walk by, anxious their newly found friends are walking quickly on. Some enter the marketplace quickly and survey the whole scene, looking for something familiar and comfortable enough to give them the confidence to venture in further. Some find the familiarity they're seeking, but many scan the front row of stalls and find little that resonates with them. They, like student H, find the bright lights on the front stalls incongruent with their instincts about church and leave again as quickly as possible, feeling slightly sad at their experience.

Some students, especially those from evangelical (E) or Roman Catholic backgrounds (I) know which stall they're looking for and walk confidently up to it. Some others, such as Student B, are delighted by the refreshingly contemporary nature of some of the stalls and happily accept their invitations.

Some students are brought to the marketplace by friends who have already visited and are excited by the stalls they've found. They talk incessantly about the wonders of the church they've found but fail to notice growing bewilderment and discomfort on their friend's face.



Student F enters the marketplace via a rear entrance, having found her own map. With some effort she finds the stall she is looking for which seems recognizably comfortable. Over a few weeks of attendance she notices that despite the familiarity she does not feel at home there so drifts away again. Life becomes too busy for more trips into the marketplace to explore other stalls, and no friends mention the marketplace at all.

Student G knows she is unlikely to be impressed by the front-row stalls and so seeks out a niche unstaffed stall she has some personal ties with a few rows back. The worship style is familiar, but she is unused to not having a part to play and gets no sense of belonging to a community, so leaves again. Friends invite her to churches with front row stalls. She doesn't share the sense of homeliness her friends have, the worship style feels alien, and no one helps her understand her experience, so she doesn't return. Eventually she takes paid employment in Sunday services in a church she had never found in the marketplace.

Student A is bemused by the existence of the marketplace. She assumes all churches would offer services on multiple days of the week at differing times of the day and would happily attend any. Daytime services only seem to be offered on Sunday mornings, a time for which she has other plans, so despite her ardent faith, she gives up searching. There are similarities with the story of student C, who is also looking for worship services at times other than a Sunday, but only finds bible studies on offer. She is disappointed in different ways with all of the stalls, but she is determined to attend worship so starts attending services of Jehovah's Witnesses on Wednesdays. She knows this could be detrimental to the development of the faith that is currently foundational to her life.

#### **4.5 Summary of the intersection**

The heart of this research is the intersection where the narratives of Christian students and the beliefs and behaviours of churches in university cities intersect.

The findings show that some Christian students have a secure direction of travel, are likely to join a church at university regardless of how churches act, and experience the intersection as an interesting feature as they make their choices. For most the intersection determines whether they attend church or not.

Churches are acutely aware of the prevailing culture and busy lifestyles surrounding Christian students when they arrive at university and the challenge this can pose to them settling and becoming regular worshippers who grow in faith as they complete their journey into adulthood within a church community. Some churches passively accept the low chances of students choosing to join them and thus make little effort to ensure that they are fully accessible, homely or welcoming to those who might wish to. Others purposefully adapt their activities around aspects of prevailing culture and focus on devising ways to attract the attention of students (Galatia Church's solution to the whole issue was for them to be given more access to campus so that they had opportunity to market themselves to more students). These churches also develop themselves around the goal of enabling students to feel welcome and at home. Churches set up their stalls in the marketplace according to these reactions, both in terms of location and content.

Whilst the intention of most churches is to enable students to feel welcomed within the overwhelming setting of transition to university, students can actually experience the opposite. The variety of options of churches can itself be overwhelming, and as students are often unable to articulate what the important features of the 'home' they are looking for are, they struggle to respond to all the attempts at attraction from the churches. Reducing their choice by broad categories does not necessarily help, as Student D imagined they would want a traditional high church experience but found belonging in an informal evangelical church. Trying churches to see whether they are a comfortable fit or not becomes the only option. If not, further energy and determination has to be found to try alternative churches. Energy to do that may be in short supply as peer pressure is pulling in other directions. Conversely, students don't always realise the full extent of the marketplace and may assume no church is available where they would feel at home. Because churches publicize themselves individually it can be hard to find a source of overall information, even with online searching.

Another unintended consequence of the marketplace can be for students to expect they will be able to find the 'perfect church'. Inevitably, most do not and can end up attending nowhere. Overwhelming can also occur for those who do not associate church with attractional marketing and contemporary culture. Invitations to large churches with contemporary worship can feel alien and lead to the conclusion that the only safe option is to retreat and not join a church.

Some students who are able to re-engage with their faith as they grow in self-confidence as

their time at university progresses and go on to join a church having not done so in their initial years. Being more settled in their own identity allows them to rediscover the importance of faith in their lives, be more resistant to peer pressure and to have confidence to enter churches on their own. Some of the less ‘attractional’ churches attest that more students join them later in their university careers than in the first year. This doesn’t account for the majority of students though.

#### **4.6 How do the survey responses affect the picture?**

The survey responses are largely representative of students who have successfully negotiated the marketplace (88.5% attend church regularly at university, 94% attending at some point), but also give some insight into those who were less successful. This section initially offers some observations from descriptive statistics, free-text responses, questions which related to both narrative and opinion before then turning to notable findings from the statistical report (Appendix G). Separate attention will also be given to responses relating to Christian Unions as they featured in several of the interview narratives.

##### *4.6.1 Observations*

Two pertinent findings emerged for non-attenders. First, all except one cited not feeling welcome as the biggest single reason for not sticking with a church they had tried (the other one cited sexism). Second, all had experienced times when they wished they were part of a church: when struggling with depression or stress, during religious festivals or at other times when they would previously have attended church, feeling alone at university, or after returning to university having attended their home church during vacation.

Free-text answers to the question: 'what about your own story? What has influenced you towards joining a church, or not, at uni?' focused on wanting a place where they could grow in their faith (42%), church attendance being the right thing for Christians to do (28%) and wanting to be part of a supportive Christian community or family (26%). This is in keeping with the statistical report showing the most significant factor associated with regular church attendance at university is believing that church attendance is important to the practice of the Christian faith. Only one respondent who attended church did not think that it had contributed to their growth in faith in some way.

Regular church attenders had usually found a church they felt they could belong to quickly (52% tried 2 or fewer churches, 77% 3 or fewer). Those who hadn't settled in a church also gave up quickly: 2/3 only tried one or two churches, only 4% persisted tried 6 or more churches before abandoning their search.

Feeling at home and welcome was the most common reason cited in free-text answers for choosing to stick with a church (48%). This rose to 58% if a familiar worship style is interpreted to mean something similar to 'feeling at home'. The next most frequent reason was 'good teaching' (19%). This contrasts to the rankings given by respondents to the most important features of a church, a question of opinion rather than narrative. Good Bible teaching was ranked most highly (ranked 1<sup>st</sup> by 42%), followed by 'welcomes you as part of the family' (ranked 1<sup>st</sup> by 31%). The two equalized on combining 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> rankings, but that is still at variance with the reported low priority of good teaching in influences on personal

choices. This apparent discrepancy between cognitive opinion and lived experience is congruent with the interview finding of students not necessarily being aware of what is most important to them in a church. This may underlie some students experiencing the marketplace as overwhelming on transition.

There was, however, congruity between experience and opinion over the lack of importance of geographical location of the church, the presence of other students or student-focused activity and the need for a good worship band. This contrasts with two of the most visible churches in the marketplace (Galatia and Berea) investing heavily in offering a good worship band and with Corinth and Derbe churches also devoting significant resources to student-specific activities.

A sizeable minority (38%) ranked sacramental worship within the top 3 most important features of a church, whilst 13% gave this priority to traditional church music. These are mainly offered by churches with stalls some way back in the marketplace and therefore less likely to be found.

#### *4.6.2 Statistical analysis*

The statistical report sought to identify factors which correlated positively or negatively with church attendance. The significant findings are shown in the table 2.

**Table 3: Factors correlated with Church attendance**

<p>Respondents were more likely to attend church regularly at university if they</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• see church attendance as essential for practice of the Christian faith</li> <li>• previously attended regularly at home.</li> <li>• read the Bible or prayed regularly or attended a youth group or midweek home group prior to university</li> <li>• read the Bible or prayed regularly or attended a student Christian group whilst at university</li> <li>• are younger (17-19 year olds)</li> </ul>
<p>There was a trend towards regular church attendance at university, which didn't quite reach statistical significance, if students were given information about local churches at university</p>
<p>Respondents were less likely to attend a church regularly at university if they</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• answered 'none of the above' when asked whether they read the Bible, prayed or attended a youth or home group before starting university</li> </ul>
<p>Church attendance at university was not found to be significantly influenced by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• family church attendance</li> <li>• clergy, friends, youth workers or family talking beforehand to the student about being a Christian at university</li> <li>• invitations from friends</li> <li>• contact with the university chaplaincy</li> <li>• direct contact from churches</li> <li>• denomination</li> <li>• subject being studied</li> <li>• the length of time spent at university</li> </ul>

Respondents attending a non-church student Christian group at university were almost entirely a subset of the church attenders. This counters the conjecture of some of the church leaders that involvement in the Christian Union was a significant cause of lack of church attendance. Whilst my experience in practice is that for some students this is a factor, the survey data would not support the hypothesis that it is of significance in the overall picture.

There were some interesting differences in analysis between respondents who regularly attended a different Christian group, many but not all of whom also attended a church, and the wider group of regular church attenders.

**Table 4: Correlations with regular non-Church Christian group attendance**

Regular attendance at a Christian group was positively related to
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clergy speak to them about being a Christian at university prior to transition</li> <li>• Having had contact with the university chaplaincy</li> <li>• Receiving information about local churches</li> </ul>
Regular attendance at a Christian group was also significantly less likely if
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No one had spoken to them about being a Christian at university before they got there</li> </ul>
Other findings were similar, of note invitation by friends was again not related to the likelihood of Christian group attendance.

These findings could suggest that whilst pre-university conversations about churches, chaplaincy contact and general church information were not identified in the survey as statistically significant influences towards church attendance, they probably are overall positive influences towards the active engagement in the practice of faith at university.

#### 4.6.3 The Christian Union

The survey did not ask about experience of other Christian groups beyond attendance as the focus was on church attendance. The final question of the survey, however, was an open one: ‘is there anything else you think it would be helpful for us to know about your experience of faith and church at uni?’ Of the 32 responses to this question, 9 made reference to the Christian Union. 3 were positive, 6 negative, with the negative comments



being particularly focused on its evangelical focus.

*'The Christian Union is not always the best place for Christians. Often it can be disjointed or flatly opposed to each other.'*

*'Evangelical basis of Christian Union has made me hesitant to engage with CU on occasion, due to the fact that I am not from an evangelical background and am gay'*

*'Have found it hard to fit into the CU as they don't seem to do anything apart from keep to themselves and don't even count the Salvation Army as a church you can go to. Makes me feel like I don't belong with them which is hard when we are supposed to be brothers and sisters in Christ'*

*'Christian Unions seem to have a monopoly on the students who identify as Christian. Non-CU affiliated churches are often difficult for students to find, so if you're not evangelical, you may struggle to find a church.'*

*'In my experience, churches of a non-evangelical tradition are largely underrepresented in the CU.'*

*'I felt pressured by CU culture to be very deeply conservative and evangelical and knew I was gossiped about when I left the evangelical church they expected me to attend. This made it impossible for me to return to the church I had first visited, even on occasion, or attend CU.'*

This theme is noteworthy and will be discussed further in chapter five as it also emerges from the student interviews and has a bearing on student experience of the marketplace. Evangelical churches occupy the most prominent positions in the marketplace and non-evangelical churches have a propensity to occupy less accessible stalls. This is magnified by the CU usually being the most visible face of Christianity on campus and usually signposting relatively exclusively to larger evangelical churches, both through its policy and organized events and the actions of members.

#### *4.6.4 Summary of survey findings*

The survey responses reinforce the picture that began to be painted by the interviews. It suggests that students tend to relatively quickly either find a church or give up looking.

The most significant reason for persisting with a church is feeling welcome and at home. A lack of these feelings, either purely in anticipation or in actual experience, is the main feature associated with students not joining a church. The survey findings also support the notion that students don't necessarily really know what they're looking for in a homely church until they find it.

There appear to be a sizeable minority of students whose priorities in a church are not to be found in the frontline market stalls, i.e. a more sacramental style of worship and traditional music. Combined with the tendency of students to try only a few churches this may lead to that sub-group of students being even less likely to find a church that suits them.

Pre-existent motivation to church attendance formed before transition to university founded on a substantial view of the place of church attendance in the practice of the Christian faith is the most significant correlate with actual regular church attendance at university. This is mirrored in pre-existent spiritual habits of prayer, Bible study and youth group or small group attendance. This would support the hypothesis that the biggest potential for positively addressing the abatement in church attendance on transition to university lies with home churches attended during teenage years. A one-off chat about faith at university is likely to be of limited impact if it is not accompanied by guiding teenagers towards a deeper understanding of their personal faith within their own narrative and an increased appreciation of the role that church attendance has in that.

Once at university, the availability of information about churches may have an important role.

#### **4.7 Summary of findings**

This chapter has described the findings of the three strands of empirical data behind this research, building a picture around the intersection of students' narratives and church behaviour and beliefs.

The findings have shown stories of faith in childhood and teenage years initially built on belonging and community. Personal appropriation of faith was common in teenage years, but the strength of this appropriation seems significant in whether that faith thrives when

the source of belonging is removed on transition to university. This suggests there is an opportunity open to churches teenagers are attending to positively influence the experience of transition.

Regardless of strength of faith narrative, finding a sense of belonging in a church community is crucial to continued attendance at university, but an awareness of the elements critical to that belonging is often absent until the belonging is found. The potential for students finding a church that feels like 'home' can be influenced both positively and negatively by the actions of churches.

I have suggested that the metaphor of a traditional marketplace is helpful in picturing how students experience encounters with churches at university, as some thrive and others to feel overwhelmed. The relative behaviours of churches, whether they actively engage with how they are perceived within the marketplace or not, can skew students' perceptions of the breadth of traditions available.

Students interact with the possibility of church attendance at university within a more general experience of overwhelming found in transition. They are more likely to attend if they are intentional about finding a church and have a strong personal ecclesiology.

There are therefore also opportunities for church leaders and chaplains to influence the abatement in church attendance whilst they are at university as well as prior to transition.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

This chapter will explore further three key themes which have emerged from the further insights given by the findings in the previous chapter into the question of how the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students on transition to university can be understood and responded to from a practical theological perspective. These themes are transition as multiple overwhelmings, the effects of churches engaging with a marketing culture, and the power of individual narratives. The purpose is to engage in a dialogue between the findings and published literature, along with further reflection, building on the exploratory work of chapter one, enabling principles for response in practice to be developed.

#### 5.1 Transition as multiple overwhelmings

*‘Starting university can be a wonderful and exciting experience, but it can also bring its own unique challenges. It’s natural to feel nervous or overwhelmed about the change, and it can be a while before you feel like you’ve found your feet at university.’*

(Student Minds n.d.)

In this section I will consider how the findings of the research can be understood as a subset of students experiencing multiple overwhelmings in the transition to university as a whole, how this might be understood theologically, and ways this understanding might inform a positive response in practice. First I will introduce the term ‘multiple overwhelmings’ and demonstrate how this emerged from and is supported by the findings. Then I will consider

how this fits into understandings of the broader picture of university transition before turning to the theological nature of overwhelmings, most notably discussed in the writings of Ford and Slee, paying particular attention to the potential for multiple overwhelmings to be experienced positively. I will then reflect on how insights from both these bodies of literature might enabling students to move more positively through the overwhelmings, forming a basis for reflection on response of churches and chaplains in practice in chapter six.

### *Multiple overwhelmings*

I use this term to describe the coincidental occurrence of different circumstances which are each of themselves experienced as being overwhelming. Overwhelming is consistent with the description of the tension in adolescent faith between the multiple psychological needs of 'longing to be included and longing to be separate, the experience of losing and recovering a sense of order, and the need to be recognised' (Regan 2002, 39) described in chapter one.

The theme of overwhelmings emerged as I reflected on the student narratives and imagined the experiences they were describing. This sense which grew from the data analysis was formative in the choice of the marketplace as a metaphor, discussed in chapter four. A sense of overwhelming is present in the metaphor as students near the entrance are aware of church attendance having been significant in their lives but now are amongst new friends who quickly walk on by, anxious not to get out of step with the flow of their new environment. Even for those who tentatively enter the marketplace, the unfamiliarity of

how churches present themselves in front row stalls, the array of choice, or not being able to spot more familiar stalls can all be overwhelming. Others are overwhelmed by concerns about what they may be missing, having momentarily stepped out of the flow of the crowd. During this reflection it struck me that the term ‘multiple overwhelmings’, originally used by Ford (2012), a theologian reflecting on normative human experience, but more recently by Slee (2017) as a spiritual metaphor for lived experience, might be of particular relevance to this context. Slee (2017, 21) suggests that ‘overwhelming can be terrifying, life-threatening, a force for destruction; but it can also be marvellous, wonderful, uplifting and transformative’.

#### *5.1.1 Overwhelmings in the data*

‘Overwhelmings’ occurred to me as an appropriate description as I reflected on the transcripts of the student interviews. The specific word ‘overwhelming’ was only used in three of the research responses: twice fairly negatively to describe the experience of Freshers’ Week and once very positively to describe the experience of encountering God in the Eucharist. They also used alternative terms, such as ‘intimidating’ or ‘uncomfortable’. I will return to this two-sided potential of overwhelming when discussing its theological nature, but at this point will focus on the overwhelmings described by research participants, which were almost universally experienced negatively.

Student H did one of the earliest interviews:

*I was like, "Wow, everything's happening." So much things, so many things are happening.... you're just kind of like, wow ... I got overwhelmed very quickly.*

The survey results suggested that students who regularly attended a church at university

settled into this practice quickly, suggesting they either didn't experience the overwhelming in the same way as others or had found a way to experience it positively.

Chapter four has described how up to teenage years participants associated faith with the opposite of overwhelming, with comfort and belonging, being a normal thing to do within a community. The exception to this was Student C who felt overwhelmed by attempts by church members to provide her with pastoral support.

*They prayed constantly for healing... I'd feel almost guilty that I hadn't been, because they kept asking so much, and praying so much for me...so, I ended up leaving there just because I felt a little bit uncomfortable and almost intimidated by it.*

The lack of overwhelming in this period of belonging experienced by most can be seen in the resilience of actively attending church prior to transition to university. However, all the positive influences identified as maintaining this resilience during teenage necessarily dissipate on transition to university, except personal faith and spiritual practices.

On transition to university both general experiences of university transition and faith issues more specifically were perceived as overwhelming. The overwhelmingness of faith options included the anticipation of attending a church that might not feel like home and the potential vulnerability of walking into a church building where they were not known, as well as actual experiences. The overwhelming of walking over the threshold of a church building was a multiplication of not knowing whether physical layout would be familiar, how people would respond to their presence, what the style of service would be, what the normative expectations on attendees were and how departure might be experienced at the end.

*making that step into walking into something that's different is quite intimidating*



(Student D)

Data presented in chapter four illustrates how this was extended to a fear of judgement if the person were to re-attend after missing a few weeks. The enthusiasm of Christian Union members both to encourage others to join in activities on campus and also to join particular churches was felt to be a pressurized overwhelming. The overwhelming in terms of the marketplace of churches was experienced both in the breadth of options available, a seeming incongruence in the attractational activities, the inability to immediately identify preferred options and the myth that they would be able to find the 'perfect church' for them.

On a broader scale the overwhelmings were around options for activities, use of time, and how to establish identity and relationships amongst unknown peers at university. This was particularly seen in Student H's concern that he would be judged against some unknown assumptions held by others if he allowed others to know he was a Christian. He linked this to students being overwhelmed by immersion in a social context where they were not yet known and so pretending to be or not to be particular things in order to have some sort of control over how others react to them and how they might establish their preferred identity within the setting. Student J just longed to fit into a group:

*they were always like, "Oh are you going to mass this Sunday?" like being patronising like ... and just felt a bit like 'oh, that's not me like I want to try to fit into a group' so I just kind of fell away for a number of reasons*

The overwhelmingness of choice of activities was epitomized in the microcosm of Freshers Fayre, where some felt so overwhelmed they physically needed to leave the building.

*Freshers Fayre is just so overwhelming. Completely overwhelming.* (Student D)

This correlates with the discussion in chapter one around consumer choice. Whilst choice is synonymous with contemporary culture, Generation Y were noted to be looking for simplification. Generation Z expend effort on making their choices, which may add to senses of overwhelming.

### *5.1.2 The overwhelming of transition*

The multiple overwhelmings of the need to belong, choice and time pressures and the intensity of the first few weeks of university found in my research are similar to the overwhelmings identified in literature on university transition more widely. In reflections on stories of education transition from around the world the move to Higher Education has been described as ‘consisting of multiple, concurrent transitions in both context and relationships’ (Jindal-Snape 2020). In this section, my ambition is to draw links between the overwhelmings narrated by my research participants and key themes that emerge from literature on university transition. To do this, I consider the breadth of scope of the literature, the concerns which lead to it being a topic of interest, key elements of transition that are reported as overwhelming, and models that have been suggested for understanding transition.

Literature on university transition comes from educational, psychological, sociological and organizational perspectives with varied foci of interest. Most work is concerned with academic issues, but social influences within institutions, student perceptions and mental health perspectives have more recently come to the fore. From an organizational behaviour

perspective, Nicholson (1990) has tried to frame stages of transition, other work tries to identify pre-university causal factors and evaluates intervention programmes. This breadth demonstrates the issue is of wide concern and yet a normative framework for understanding has yet to develop. Core to all, however, is the recognition that university transition is often overwhelming, and that what some students experience positively others may experience negatively. The overwhelmings of transition are therefore complex.

Efforts to understand the challenges of university transition have largely been driven by institutional concerns about retention rates amongst students, which have been slowly falling since 2012 (Office for Students 2017). Because of this, most literature is focused on how institutions influence transition, rather than external factors such as family, peers or other communities. Whilst it is understandable that institutions focus on things which are directly under their influence, this may also limit the scope of their enquiry, missing other important factors and drawing an incomplete or skewed picture. Tinto (2017), a sociologist, has been a seminal researcher of transition and has more recently reflected on the relationship between institutional interest in student retention and concern of students to persist (gain their degree), rather than be retained, and the implications of this on motivation. This disparity has the potential for rendering interventions ineffective or even increasing the overwhelming of transition. There may be similar disparities between the concerns of churches to encourage church attendance as a means to discipleship and Christian students understanding their own narrative as they move to university, which will be discussed in later in this chapter. More optimistically, this difference may be a gateway to intervention, if motivation is seen to be malleable (Tinto 2017).

Despite the limited focus of most research into the overwhelms of transition, three common themes still strongly emerge which can be seen to map to my research findings. The predominant theme is the need for a sense of belonging (e.g. in empiric research amongst first year students by Gibney et al. 2011), which similar research found comes from feeling at home, fitting in, being a member of one or more communities (Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods 2007), key findings in chapter four. Experimental work in social psychology suggests there seems to be a symbiotic relationship between finding a sense of belonging in a setting and motivation to engage with others and making friends (Walton and Cohen 2007). The community that is sought is inclusive of, though wider than, peer relationships (Tinto 2017) with students wanting to find a safe place where they can discover their 'new identity' as university students. The strength of the impact of this new social context is highlighted by students describing it as their 'new family' (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005) giving it the potential to have devastating consequences if the experience of it is not positive. Fear of isolation and intense anxiety about finding this belonging is a recurrent theme of student experience (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005; Maunder et al. 2013). Several researchers describe this desired sense of belonging being shaped by complex perceptual frameworks and expectations which students bring with them (Tinto 2017). Some student-led research suggests that students have a picture of what a 'normal student' is, seeing anyone else as 'other' and evaluate their own experience against this pre-conceived normality (Maunder et al. 2013). In this research, students D, H and J all described wanting to appear normal amongst peers.

Further themes of overwhelming resonant with my research include the intensity of the initial period at university and competing demands and opportunities. There is a huge burden of information on students arriving at university aimed at helping students settle in as quickly as possible, but which adds to the intensity of first few weeks (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012, 8; Brooman and Darwent 2014) thus potentially increasing rather than decreasing the overwhelming. Research exploring students' self-understanding suggests the relatively unstructured style of both study and social life, contrasting with previous life experience, adds to competing demands of study and personal commitments feeling overwhelming, resulting in a decline in health and wellbeing (Richardson et al. 2012).

Conceptual models of transition are significant as they underpin differing ideas as to how to support transitions in practice (Ecclestone, Biesta, and Hughes 2010, 5), as views about abatement in church attendance can be seen to shape responses of churches in this research. I find the overview of work of educationalists Gale and Parker (2014) particularly helpful in reviewing them. They identify three groupings of the concepts which underpin published models of transition: *induction* (from one institution to the next), *development* (with qualitatively distinct stages of maturation in identity) and *becoming* (perpetual small fragments of movement within the overall fluctuations of life). Gale and Parker critique induction and development as too fixed on one moment of change and overly linear, not recognizing the asynchronicity of young people's learning (building on the work of Quinn (2010)). They present the concept of becoming as a challenge to the notion of transition at all, identifying it much more closely with Bauman's description of 'liquid modernity'.

Transition as becoming, they argue, emphasises the complexity of life and interdependence

of institutional changes and personal challenges, offering more than a simple recognition that transitions are not neat and linear, and rejecting the notion that university transition is always a time of crisis bracketed by periods of stability. This is similarly seen in the complexity of the narratives and storyline diagrams in this research. I find Gale and Parker's work persuasive in arguing that, because most transition literature and modelling starts from an institutional perspective, it feeds the normative and deviant understanding of student difference, frustrating transition and increasing the sense of overwhelming. Instead, transition as becoming facilitates the accommodation of difference.

The multiple overwhelmings of the need to belong, choice and time pressures and the intensity of the first few weeks of university found in my research are therefore congruent with the overwhelmings identified in transition to university overall. I suggest it may also explain something of the unintentional divergence of ideal and reality storylines described in chapter one experienced by some students. Also, the multiple overwhelmings of transition to university add to the critique in chapter one of Fowler's model of faith development which appears to presume that behaviour is consonant with moral reasoning. Students experiencing overwhelmings negatively could cause divergence between the two. Whilst the concept of transition is understood in different ways in the literature, I find the challenges to 'induction' and 'development' illuminating in trying to understand why attempts by churches to respond to the abatement in church attendance by students have not been as effective as hoped for. Transition as 'becoming' resonates with me as a helpful understanding on which to base reflection on practice.

### *5.1.3 The theological nature of multiple overwhelmings*

The term 'multiple overwhelmings' has been used as a spiritual metaphor, originally by Ford (Ford 2012) but more recently by Slee (2017). Ford (2012, xv) argues that multiple overwhelmings are associated with complexity and possibility and are an essential component of human life, as well as forming a central component of Christian tradition in the Bible, predominantly as positive experiences for those open to God. In the story of Noah, evil, blessings and beauty are all overwhelming; Jesus embodies multiple overwhelmings; God's love is overwhelming in the prayer of Ephesians 3: and the metaphor of overwhelming darkness met by overwhelming light (Ford 2012, xxi, 20, 22, 41). He suggests that the gospel itself is an invitation to multiple overwhelmings, where 'abundance of life and immersion in death are inseparable' (2012, 41). God responds to people feeling or being negatively overwhelmed by overwhelming them and the evil behind negative circumstances with love and goodness. Slee develops this further to suggest overwhelming is fundamental to the perichoretic divine life, the relationships within the Trinity and of God with creation (2017, 31). This contrasts markedly with Fowler's linear and largely cognitive understanding of faith development discussed in chapter one. Ford proposes that the spiritual practices and disciplines of the Christian faith are a way of responding to overwhelmings, overwhelming one form of excess with another such that the soul is positively shaped by them (2012, 93 & 78ff). There may be an interesting correlation here with my survey finding that students who practiced personal spiritual disciplines were more likely to attend a church whilst at university. Some of the church responses in my data could be framed as attempts to offer positive overwhelming in contrast to the negative overwhelmings of transition, but some students experienced them as increasing the negative overwhelmings.

Another notion of Ford's that resonates with student transition is that desires are a form of multiple overwhelming and that we are shaped by them before we become conscious of them (2012, 24ff). He presents faith as being about desire for God, and God's desire for us. For students in transition, this desire necessarily coexists with the desire to belong and feel at home already described, thus potentially increasing the multiplicity of overwhelmings. This may underlie the finding that research participants who had not settled into a church experienced times of sadness wishing that they had. The desire was still present. Ford further postulates that our ability to cope with overwhelming is hampered by a culture of distraction because this prevents us from living within normal rhythms of life. Distraction is certainly a major consequence of the current online digital culture in which students live. Building on Ford's assertion that multiple overwhelmings are an intrinsic part of human life, Slee (2017) adds autoethnographic examples from personal, professional, political, socio-cultural and ecological perspectives. This supports the notion that multiple overwhelmings will be a de facto experience for students transitioning to university and therefore also of Christian students transitioning to a new context in which to practice their faith.

Both Ford and Slee go on to propose responses to overwhelmings that are necessary to shape them into a positive experience. Ford's three imperatives are 'name it', 'describe it' and attend to the 'shape of living', stretching minds and imagination (2012, xv). Naming the experience is an invitation to narration, a process repeatedly articulated throughout the Bible and one which emerged from my research which I explore later in this chapter. Attending to the shape of living mirrors the conceptualisation of transition as 'becoming'



discussed in the previous section. Central to implementing these imperatives is to refrain from trying to either avoid or control the overwhelming, as resistance closes off the possibility of positive outcomes and receipt of God's love and blessing (Ford 2012, xxvii&15). If 'worship is a habit which copes with being overwhelmed by God' (Ford 2012, xxvii) then church attendance by Christian students becomes a vital component of ensuring that inevitable overwhelmings are experienced as positively rather than negatively.

Slee (2017, 25) also considers 'inadequate, but common responses' to overwhelming some of which resonate strongly with behaviours observed in the research data. 'Denial via masking, faking and smiling' (Slee 2017, 24) reflects students D, F, H and J concerned to portray an image of themselves which they believed would help them fit in socially;. 'Escapism via addictions' is commonly seen amongst students whilst some respond with 'omnicompetence', trying to expand their capacity and do absolutely everything that is on offer (Slee 2017, 26). Student E became unwell after committing enthusiastically to church life and leadership in both Christian student groups available. Slee's 'reductionism', attempting to reduce the complexity of an overwhelming context holding multiple tensions by providing simple solutions is seen in Christian Unions only advertising a narrow theological spectrum of churches and some more conservative churches encouraging students to attend church as a way of protecting themselves from other influences at university.

The more helpful responses offered by Slee complement those of Ford and can be seen in students who thrive, including those who attend church. 'Immersion' involves accepting

overwhelming as an invitation, leading to the joy expressed by Student B about the breadth of choice of churches available to her and seen in the students who thrive on finding the marketplace of churches. 'Holding the tension' is a spiritually mature response seen in the students D and H, who found their way back to church in the latter part of their time at university, having felt negatively overwhelmed in their initial years there. Slee's final helpful response of 'attention', which she acknowledges may look deceptively like reductionism, echoes the focus on narrative that I have been beginning to draw out from my research findings. The response of attention involves discerning 'what needs to be resisted and left to one side (if only temporarily) in order to focus on the essential' (Slee 2017, 29). To do this requires trusting God with the rest.

#### *5.1.4 Principles informing practice*

The findings of this research fit into a framework of understanding of transition as multiple overwhelmings and multiple overwhelmings as an inevitable part of life which can be experienced positively or negatively. Spiritually multiple overwhelmings may even be an integral part of the work and nature of God. There are approaches which can help overwhelmings be positive experiences, and responses which are not so helpful. Churches and chaplains have opportunities to engage creatively with conceptualising transition as becoming, welcoming rather than trying to reduce the possibilities of the complexity of transition. They have the possibility of helping give students the skills they need to make helpful responses to overwhelming and reflecting on their own practices to ensure they are not perpetuating negative experiences of the overwhelmings.

Data from church leader interviews suggests that some churches, such as Antioch and Ephesus, feel overwhelmed themselves when faced with students transitioning to university. Others try to stop students being overwhelmed, such as by helping them choose a church by referrals from home churches, or offering church as an attractive way to find belonging thereby increasing the overwhelming of time pressure. These fit with Slee's inadequate responses. The next chapter will consider how church might offer more helpful responses in line with Slee's immersion, holding tension and attention, particularly through engaging with narrative.

## **5.2 Churches and marketing**

“The church cannot engage in marketing. The church cannot put itself on a pedestal, create itself, praise itself ... One cannot serve God while at the same time covering oneself by serving the devil and the world.” (Barth, in Stolz and Usunier 2018, 16)

Despite this famous assertion from Karl Barth, the reality is that church marketing has been increasing in the western world over at least the last few decades. By marketing, I mean taking actions to bring themselves and their activities to the attention of others with the hope of attracting people to attend, as well as taking attractiveness to others into account in forming the activities they undertake. The metaphor of the marketplace introduced in the chapter four emerged from reflection on the data on how churches present or market themselves to encourage students to interact with and attend their services and how this is experienced by Christian students. In this section I consider why churches market themselves before then looking at the interplay between the marketing and the

overwhelming of student transition and then suggesting a potential positive direction.

### *5.2.1 The reasons behind the marketing*

Churches marketing themselves is not a new phenomenon. One marketing expert suggests it has always gone on, but it is just done differently now, and we have different language for it (Hodder 2016, 111), with some theological research seeing an increased acceptance and use of religious marketing and branding since the 1950s (Stolz and Usunier 2018, 12). The marketization has been shown to have shaped contemporary Christian worship music since the 1960s (Ward 2005, 23) and Drane (2000, 47) bemoaned the ‘McDonaldization of the Church’.

Churches exist within the culture of the society around them. Chapter one discussed some aspects of contemporary culture, with consumption having become cultural language (Lynch 2005, 60; Spinks 2010, xv). Despite recent economic pressures there is generally a presumption of choice and an assumption that options will be put in front of people. Generation Z had been described as being particularly discerning in how it makes those consumer choices (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2021). There is also an associated decline in affiliation to institutions and denominational loyalty. Church marketing can broadly be understood as churches trying to find new ways to survive and thrive within the cultural milieu surrounding them. This involves both attracting and retaining members. Stolz and Usunier (2014) bring together different disciplines around marketing and the church to build a picture of marketing as an adaptive response of religions to the emergence of consumer society. Societal changes have led from churches being ‘powerful societal institutions to

voluntary associations in which individual membership is optional.’ (Stolz and Usunier 2018, 4). This mirrors changes in chaplaincy within Higher Education Institutions described in chapter one; where chapel and chaplains were once at the core of the life of the institution, they now provide an optional benefit for students which most do not engage with.

Like all other voluntary associations, religious organizations now have to compete for memberships and for their members’ time, donations, and energy. And like all other voluntary associations, they are therefore forced to engage in some form of marketing and branding. (Usunier and Stolz 2014, 13)

Individualism, choice and increasing secularization means that cultural consumerism affects matters of faith in a way it wouldn’t have done in previous generations. As modernization has led to increased individual freedom to choose, including religious identity, practice and belief, individuals behave like consumers (Lynch 2005, 60), causing religious groups to act as if they are marketing and selling products.

Churches market as they want to thrive within this consumer economy, and usually understand thriving as growth. Coming from the discipline of media and marketing Einstein (2008) portrays this as a response to secular competition in the ‘spiritual marketplace’, with churches having to compete for individual interest, time and money amongst those already open to church membership. Denominations are no longer treated as brands attracting loyalty in the same way as they once were, adding to the way churches are now in competition with each other (Einstein 2011, 334). Churches need to constantly identify new members, as membership is not static.

Part of the adaptive response of churches marketing is to consumer society's expectation that products, including the behaviour of religious organizations, are attuned to individual needs (Stolz and Usunier 2018, 6). Expectations have been described of 'high quality' religious services (Santos and Mathews 2001), and entertainment (Einstein 2008, 8) ensuring individuals 'have a good time'. My pastoral experience is that this is true for some people, and a degree of it was seen in the data from Student C, but overall this was not the finding of this research. I do see resonances, however, with the desire for good experiences of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (C. Smith et al. 2005, 13 & 162) discussed in chapter one.

The rise of megachurches shows that marketing can be associated with numerical growth (Einstein 2008). Economic and marketing research has shown churches who use marketing ideas such as freebies or ice-cream trucks grow more than those who do not (Vokurka, Mcdaniel, and Cooper 2002). Sociologically, Ellingson (2009, 21) posits that one explanation of this growth is the ability of churches 'to provide religious products that articulate with the religious interests and tastes of religious consumers'. I will discuss below how this may be a crucial insight into the thriving of some large student churches coexisting with the overall abatement in attendance.

### *5.2.2 The interaction between church marketing and the multiple overwhelms of transition*

I will now focus on how aspects of church marketing have potential to fuel a more negative experience of the multiple overwhelms that characterize the transition to university, which I considered earlier in this chapter, before looking at more positive possibilities which

might be helpful to shape future practice. I have grouped the issues being considered into those that have more practical and those that have existential outworking.

From a theological perspective, Scotland (2000, 154) posits that a practical effect of free-market economies, including amongst churches, is that they inevitably lead to winners and losers. As larger churches draw people away from smaller ones, some of the smaller churches will not survive. This will shift the variety of churches available to students. Whilst some of my research has suggested that too much choice can be overwhelming, the variety rather than simply the quantity of that choice may be significant. Scotland (2000, 153) suggests that styles of church focused on spiritual experience are easier to market in the current culture of satisfying desires for individual experiences. Students seeking churches that have similarities to their previous experience have often come from smaller churches in more traditional denominations. Their overwhelming may be increased if market forces have led to the spread of churches available to, or within the angle of vision of, students being skewed towards large charismatic churches leading them to be unable to see a familiar church. Actions by churches to market themselves naturally increase competition with other churches, meaning the environment in which students are encountering churches is not designed to help them find the best church in which they can feel at home. As this research showed importance to students of feeling at home, it can be imagined how this environment would add to the overwhelmings of transition. The focus on numbers behind marketing and branding can lead to a lack of focus on people (Drane 2000, 40). So, whilst church marketing may lead to an increase in numbers in some churches, it is not inconceivable that it may contribute to the overall picture of the abatement in church attendance at university.

Another practical concern from a consumer policy perspective is that marketing has been shown to benefit privileged consumers, those who have the resources to make good use of the choices offered, but seldom poorer ones (Ger 1992). This is similar to the reflections of social theorist Hans Joas on the increase in 'individual action options' in contemporary society. He argues that a social inequality is caused by some having the capacity to see options as opportunities whilst others perceive them as 'dangerous or as difficult to cope with' (Joas 2014, 73). Increased action options may be 'experienced as a form of redemptive liberation, but also as a burdensome requirement to make decisions' (Joas 2014, 74). I suggest a parallel might be seen in the differing experiences between students who are confident in their faith when they come to university and so have the resources to engage positively with church marketing, and those who have not had the same pre-university experiences.

The value of personal relationships to conversion and religious adherence is well recognized in the Christian church but is also the key to recruitment and retention in cultic religious groups, such as the Unification church, demonstrating that relationships can be used for manipulation (Stark and Finke 2000, in Hodder 2016, 85). Coming from a social science perspective, Stark and Finke place this within the framework of people making religious choices in order to preserve or build social capital. Building relationships was a goal of the marketing of Berea and Galatia churches in my research and the retention strategy of all but one. Wrenn identified increasing public criticism of organizations seen to be trying to 'manipulate' people through marketing (1994, in Stolz and Usunier 2018, 13). Some



students, especially those who have not previously experienced a culture of marketing within the church, may experience attempts by churches to build relationships as unhealthy manipulation. Whilst this was not explicitly said in students' interviews, it was a concern raised by one church leader in my research reflecting on the 'relationship building' activities of another.

There are also more existential concerns about church marketing that have potential to detrimentally add to the overwhelmings of transition: the influence of marketing on the message of the church, and the effects on the self-understanding of members (or at least, the recipients of the marketing). The quote from Barth at the start of this section illustrates that thinking of the church as something to market is divisive, and has been for a long time. Barth contends that the attention drawn to itself by the church through marketing is in conflict with its calling to point to God. Clearly churches engaged in marketing do not agree, instead seeing marketing a primary step to enable them to then point people to God once they are engaged. My focus here is not that debate itself, but the ways in which there is potential for it to add to the overwhelmings of students. Even if marketing is not in conflict with the fundamental calling of the church, there is a real issue that this may be how it is perceived. If church marketing does not represent what a student understands church to be, rather than help them find a church, it may confuse them as it did for students F and H as it suggests that the fundamental nature of church is different from their understanding of it.

Some other issues are quite tightly intertwined and might helpfully be drawn together by the concept of the unique selling proposition (USP) of the church. Stolz and Usunier (2018,

17) refer to this as the 'blurring of genres', the religious and secular. Churches focus on a USP to try to make themselves more attractive but this can lead to difficulty 'identifying the product'. The purpose of marketing is bidirectional as products are changed to fit consumer requirements. This can lead to students trying church and finding not only a difference in style to their previous experience but also a different emphasis in message. The quest for increased audience has been seen by marketing experts to tend to change religion from what people need to what people want (Einstein 2008, 139), leading to fears in the church that church marketing gives a reductionist account of the Christian faith (Hodder 2016, 111). Whilst arguing that church marketing is necessary, Einstein (2008, 12) suggests that 'in a society overrun by commercial clutter, religion has become yet another product sold in the consumer marketplace' and that religion's USP, its ability to rise above the market, is put at risk. This may be important to some students without them having consciously recognized it, so paradoxically they need churches to meet them in the marketplace whilst simultaneously rising above the market and demonstrating a contrast between church and consumer society. Student A wanted churches to make themselves available at convenient times whilst maintaining traditional worship. D, F and H disliked churches engaging in the culture of flyering on campus but also wanted to have information put in front of them about churches with traditional styles of worship.

Alongside these concerns about the effects of churches marketing themselves on students already feeling overwhelmed, I now turn to three potential effects of church marketing on students' self-understanding that I suggest are pertinent: the behaviours required of participants, the expectations of faith that are communicated, and the role church members

are expected to play.

Researching the permeation of the discourse and techniques of marketing into megachurches in Singapore and Australia, Yip and Ainsworth (2016) describe how a marketing culture encourages church members remodel themselves 'around the institution of the market', as people are encouraged to think about themselves certain ways and adopt behaviours and particular ways of being. Whilst reflective of how generally new community members grow into increasing identity with a community this has particular repercussions in the current context. In my research, some Christian students, especially in CUs, were enthusiastically, even zealously, inviting others along to large churches with them, having picked up their marketing ethos. Whilst these students themselves seemed to be experiencing these adopted behaviours positively, student H saw it as demonstrating that the only possibility for actively practicing Christian faith at university and joining a church would be to also adopt those behaviours, which he did not want to and so he concluded that church at university was not for him.

Marketing also influences expectations of church and faith. I have previously noted that experiential spirituality is easier to market than some other styles of church. Marketing and branding have been shown to heighten people's expectation of being entertained when they do choose to go to church, with people wanting a more personal connection to God and experiences of his presence (Einstein 2008, 8). Einstein raises two challenges that arise from this: the dissonance that can occur between the 'music and happy faces' of church and the reality of everyday life, and the fact that churches are not fully in control of delivering on

what they promise. The issue of the dissonance in experience has been related in consumer research to Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a lot of church marketing is aimed at making people feel warm and loved (the middle of the hierarchy) but does not meet the needs of the upper levels (Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The inability of churches to deliver on their promises is due to the nature of religion: 'They can't deliver bonuses – all they can really do is encourage people to ask for them. They can't deliver peace – but they give people a feel-good moment while rhapsodizing about it' (Einstein 2008, 208). For students whose expectations are raised this can lead to disappointment with faith, a scenario I often encounter in pastoral conversations as a chaplain.

Finally, marketing requires a certain role of church members, mainly that of consumer. This gives the individual a 'subject position' with limits on what is thinkable or possible (Yip and Ainsworth 2013). This has been seen in one megachurch, Hillsong, drawing people in through music and then encouraging ongoing dependence on the church, as that is the only place that exact style of musical worship is offered. So members are not just expected to consume but are formed by the church into religious consumers (Yip and Ainsworth 2013, 115). This may contrast with students' previous experiences where they have found belonging through serving in certain ways or had opportunities for leadership and influence. The potential for overwhelming is apparent if this conflicts with a student's sense of who they want to be within a church.

### *5.2.3 A possible positive direction*

In the previous section I discussed how church marketing can negatively impact the multiple

overwhelmings of student transition through skewing the visibility of available churches, privileging the confident in faith, pushing boundaries of where manipulation becomes unhealthy, confusing the message of the church, disappointing expectations and constraining members to remain consumers. I now finally turn to positive effects of church marketing and a potential opportunity for an understanding that will increase its positive outcomes within the context of this research.

As stated in chapter one, students live in a consumer culture and will have done for the whole of their lives. Megachurches have been said to work from a sociological perspective because they appeal to a familiar institution – the shopping mall or the cinema, and have familiar (contemporary pop rock) music (Ellingson 2009, 23). As students are concerned to find a sense of belonging, attending a church which embraces consumer culture could feel much less likely to set them apart from peers and therefore be less overwhelming than a church which does not. Whilst not addressed by the research findings, it is imaginable that students who have struggled with a conflict between consumer culture and their experience of church prior to university might be very positively overwhelmed by the church marketing they encounter on transition.

In my research, marketing played no overt part in the experience of student interviewees who joined a church in their first year. However, student B welcomed the choice she found available in the larger churches who do market themselves. Reising (in Mautner 2010, 105), a church consultant, argues that all churches market themselves – some do it well, some do it badly, and Hodder's work (2016) appears to show that, on balance, faith brands and

marketing are more beneficial than harmful if there is appropriate sensitivity to the context and the implications of the branding on the message. I therefore posit that the pertinent issue for my research is not whether churches should market themselves but how they market themselves. Having suggested that church marketing skews the visibility of which churches are available to students, if the other churches paid more attention to marketing themselves then the view might be more balanced.

Einstein (2008, 18) proposes a symbiotic relationship between religion and marketing; not at war, nor mutually exclusive, but rather a challenging balancing act to enable churches to be relevant in contemporary culture whilst remaining true to their faith. This concurs with Ford's 'name it, describe it, attend to it' approach to overwhelming: the consumer culture and marketing is not going to disappear, describe the negative as well as positive impact it has, and attend to ways to turn the balance to the positive. An approach that may help in achieving this is 'niche marketing'. This is about identifying groups of people with 'distinctive tastes and values'. 'Niche marketing widens the appeal of a particular product to a greater number of people by repackaging it in distinctive styles for varying contexts' (Scotland 2000, 149). For churches who are not very actively involved in marketing, this would require them to consider how best to speak of their USP into consumer culture. Enabling a balance in the marketing which comes to the attention of students, without more marketing simply becoming another overwhelming would be a challenge though. The competition engendered between churches by the marketing culture would need to be named and owned by churches. The 'attending' required may be for churches to want to market 'church' as a whole, not just their bit of it. Resources and support for more niche churches would be

needed to help market well. Non-marketing churches may need to work through their objections to marketing.

How the effects of church marketing might inform practice are discussed in chapter six. I do not think the question is a binary one of marketing or not, but about the complexity of interests and narratives, the breadth of impact of marketing, and the unknowns of all of those. I think it is imperative that churches engage with contemporary culture as that is the context in which students find themselves when they make decisions about church attendance. However, I think this engagement could helpfully be more nuanced, taking into account student's stories. Some churches could helpfully reflect on the negative impact of their strategies; others need to move beyond fear of the culture that surrounds them. Particular attention could helpfully be paid to the incongruence at play in the way some of the attractional work is obscuring what is on offer.

### **5.3 The power of story**

This final section of discussion returns to the value of narrative, which I introduced as ecclesiological issue in chapter one and a methodological commitment in chapter two.

Whilst the whole process of this research has been a rich source for personal and professional reflection, my encounter with Student D had a particular impact on both her and me, which focused my reflection on the power of narrative. This section is a reflection on that encounter, leading into consideration of how the concept of narrative identity, in the field of psychology, speaks to this research. To build a picture of why I was particularly affected by the impact on Student D I will bracket a precis of their narrative between

reflections on my broader experiences undertaking the research and some pertinent contrasts with my encounters with the other interview narratives. I will then link the issues of narrative identity which emerge into the metaphor of multiple overwhelmings and wider insights from the field of narrative psychology, proposing that offers a helpful lens for considering and responding to the overwhelmings of transition experienced by Christian students.

### *5.3.1 My narrative*

I précised the context of both my current practice and research in the introduction. As a church leader in an area densely populated by students I saw the marketing of larger churches and felt invisible and disadvantaged by the huge discrepancy in resources between my church and the larger ones. I did not want to compete but rather to help students who might feel at home with us to find us. Initially I presumed improved marketing was required but, as described earlier, this research grew out of me questioning whether a more nuanced understanding of the context and therefore approach in practice was needed.

The practice of attentive listening and asking critical questions to help more fully understand a person's story was very familiar to me as it is fundamental to good medical diagnosis, my previous career, as well as being the foundation of pastoral care. Perhaps surprisingly, I had not contemplated the impact it might have on students outside the context of pastoral care. All the student interviews for this research were warm and pleasant encounters in which I enjoyed listening to participants' stories. I offered participants Amazon vouchers in appreciation of their time and participation, but all bar one declined the offer, citing their



enjoyment of sharing their story. I had no prior pastoral relationship with any participants, although two (I & J) I had interacted with socially when they had visited the university chaplaincy to see another chaplain or spend time in the hospitality space. Following the research I had no further contact with six of the participants (A, C, F, G, H, J), three (B, E & I) I continued to occasionally encounter through university connections. Student D, however, engaged in exactly the same research process and found it a powerful and transformative experience which led to her becoming an active member of my church for her final two years at university. She developed regular habits of Bible reading and prayer and completed the Alpha Course. When asked what had prompted this renewed engagement with her faith she replied:

*‘No-one has ever asked me my story before’* (Student D, in later conversation)

I was surprised by this statement and the transformative impact of the interview as I had assumed the effect on participants would be neutral, other than it potentially providing a platform for them to air any grievances they had. A practical theologian working on understanding religious life through ‘holy listening’ to stories, Sexton (2019, 46) describes ‘a sense of something else happening on a level deeper than simple conversation or information gathering’ during research interviews, but for me this realization only came through later conversation with student D. This left a lasting impression on me and raised questions about how this should be interpreted when thinking about future practice, as well as the commitment to maintaining integrity of narrative in data analysis that I discussed in chapter two.

### *5.3.2 Student D's narrative*

Elements of D's story has been described in chapter four. To better appreciate her narrative I will precis it here, paying particular attention to parts pertinent to the impact of participation in this research and then offer some reflections as to how this may inform the research question.

D had regularly attended church since childhood, mostly with her family, though they talked little about faith. D recalled running around and having a sense of acceptance and belonging at an early childhood church. From the age of 10 her church experience became much more formal as a Cathedral chorister, attending residential choir school. During this time she was confirmed, along with most others her age in the choir, her only recollection of preparation classes being the biscuits. Leaving the choir school aged 13, she continued on the Cathedral serving rota as by then her family had moved to the city. D's main recollection of the Cathedral as a teenager is significant interpersonal conflict amongst the clergy. She found this distressing and later made her hesitant to join a church of a similar tradition at university. In her interview D reflected on the anonymity afforded by a more formal church which she hadn't particularly noticed at the time but with hindsight wished she had been part of a smaller parish with 'a community of people that know you,... and actually care how you are, and you care how they are'. She enjoyed serving because she felt a sense of community amongst the servers. A Cathedral youth group attended by D, since disbanded, mainly did social activities with occasional reflections on 'hopes for the New Year' or similar topics, 'but nothing very serious'. D feels her faith was fairly strong aged 15/16, but less so by 17/18.

D assumed she would need formal worship and traditional choral music to feel comfortable in a church at university. Her motivation to find a church was hampered by concerns about the reactions of her flat mates. On the odd occasion she attended one of the more traditional churches she found that she didn't feel at home, something she related to her previous distress observing the cathedral clergy conflict. One Advent Sunday, D felt homesick after chatting to her family who had just been to a carol service. She therefore found an Advent Carol Service at a nearby church but felt disappointed, partly because no one spoke to her, so she didn't return.

In the summer after her second year at university two significant things happened. Firstly, D attended her godfather's funeral at the church of her early childhood. Someone there remembered her and asked if she was attending church at university. D discovered she really wanted to say 'yes' and be able to describe her church, even though she had to say 'no'. Second, when D returned home for the summer the warring clergy had left the cathedral and a retired bishop was acting as interim Dean. Unlike the previous clergy he quickly learned her name and asked if he could give her a hug goodbye when the time came for her to return to university, leading her to feel part of a community again.

Back at university for her third year D happened to bump into me on the chaplaincy stall at the Fresher's Fayre where I invited her to take part in this research.

Whilst there were other significant steps in D's faith story the episode of attentive listening

in the research interview enabled her to begin to understand her 'narrative identity' – how the elements of her faith story fitted together and who they had formed her to be. This led her to realise the importance of faith in her life even though she had not articulated it before, and the aspects of church that were essential to her finding belonging. Rather than traditions which might have seemed obvious, she realised the sense of family she had experienced in her early childhood church was fundamentally most important to her and that she was most likely to find this in a more informal church where she could know people and be known.

### *5.3.3 The narratives of other participants*

As none of the other participants appear to have experienced the interview process as transformative, I think it is important to consider whether the significance of attentive listening was unique to D or if it can be seen in any of the other narratives.

For the students who quickly and confidently found a church at university and were articulate in their faith story I think it is unsurprising that rehearsing their story in the research had little impact. Student F was least confident in her faith. She had previously spent lots of time being attentively listened to by chaplains, which had helped her wellbeing. I therefore again think it unsurprising that another episode of attentive listening to her narrative might not have a significant impact. Students G, H, and J all told of other episodes of attentive listening (2 at university, 1 at Sixth Form College) which had already been transformative in their faith narrative.

Several participants told of opportunities for attentive listening, noted in chapter 4, being missed. Both students G and H had actively sought advice about faith at university from ministers at their home churches but felt misunderstood. J's college chaplain had specifically asked a university chaplain to support her in her exploration of faith at university, but no such conversation was offered.

The research interviews did not focus on previous experiences of attentive listening to participants' faith narratives prior to university but several episodes were reported of the impact of others listening having been significant in the development of their faith narrative. So, although Student D is unique in this research process, I would argue that she illustrates something broader about the potential positive impact of attentive listening to a person's understanding of their own faith narrative, which is congruent with the experiences other participants recounted.

#### *5.3.4 Reflecting further*

One of my reflections on D's story is the number of experiences throughout her life which were formative in her faith but which she had not been conscious of their significance to her. These include her happy memories of childhood church, knowing the cathedral liturgy but not why she said it week by week, wanting to be confirmed rather than continue receiving blessings at communion, regularly attending with her family but rarely discussing faith, enjoying serving at the cathedral without realising it was community and belonging which made this positive for her, and the distress felt at the clergy conflict.

Transitioning to university, D's Christian faith was real but she had not integrated these previous formative experiences, or made meaning from them, to understand the faith identity which had been formed in her. When she experienced the overwhelmings commonly described in university transition: wanting to fit in, concern about the opinions of flat mates, the expanse of Fresher's Fayre, meeting other Christians who expressed their faith differently to her and imagining how her faith fitted into her overall identity at university, these added to the overwhelmings. Her response to try to reduce the sense of overwhelming was not attending to her faith. However, the reality of her faith identity meant her need to connect with church remained. D's assumption that a high church tradition would allow her to feel at home arose as she had not yet realised the meaning to her of the community in the cathedral serving team.

D's response to the research interview suggests that being asked to narrate her faith journey in detail enabled her to recognize the meaning of some of her formative experiences which helped her much more fully understand her faith identity. This self-understanding facilitated her renewed engagement with her faith.

Likewise, Student H, also describing the general overwhelmings of transition, described the additional overwhelmings of meeting Christian students who expressed their faith differently to him and being concerned how his faith might fit into his overall identity at university. He again responded by not attending to his faith. His theological studies led to questioning of his personal faith, causing distressing further uncertainty about his identity. He then realised how valuable a community of faith support the church had previously been

to him. Ford (2012) and Slee (2017) would recognize this as a missed opportunity to make sense of the overwhelmings by way of Christian identity.

### *5.3.5 Narrative identity*

The universe is made up of stories, not of atoms. —Muriel Rukeyser (1968)

Having suggested an interpretation of D's narrative as her needing to appropriate and make meaning from previous formative experiences in order to understand the Christian identity which had been formed in her, I will now turn to psychological literature on 'narrative identity' to further inform this reflection. This is particularly pertinent to my research because of the stage of personal development many students are at, grappling with a longing to be included and yet be separate, the experience of losing and recovering a sense of order, and the need to be recognized (Regan 2002, 39), as well as the complexity of university transition and the prominence of identity within generational culture discussed in chapter one. I suggest it also opens a useful framework to inform practice as it contrasts with the marketing approach of many churches. 'Narrative psychology' is an emerging field across psychological disciplines, but the insights here are mainly from developmental and social psychology, particularly the work of Loseke.

First, I will relate my use of the term 'narrative identity' to the increasing use of the term in psychological research. I started loosely using the term during my process of reflection in the data analysis process as both personal narrative and identity arose as themes. A 'narrative turn' has been recognized across several social science disciplines and humanities over the last four decades (Loseke 2007), based around the notion that humans are essentially 'storytelling animals' and that storytelling may be the most important way humans make

sense of their own lives and those of others (MacIntyre 1984:216, in Loseke 2007). Use of the term 'narrative identity' varies between and within disciplines. My use is akin to that which has emerged in the field of personality and other empirical psychology (Singer 2004; McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals 2007). One prominent psychology research team suggest 'narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose' (McAdams and McLean 2013). An alternative term is 'integrative story' (Singer 2004). This is something a person constructs and appropriates, evolving from episodes in their autobiographical memory. The meaning derived from these various episodes is at the heart of narrative identity, leading to how the person understands themselves as a unique individual and also within society which defines people in multiple ways such as gender, ethnicity, life stage, class and culture (Singer 2004). Singer suggests that 'to understand the identity formation process is to understand how individuals craft narratives from experiences, tell these stories internally and to others, and ultimately apply these stories to knowledge of self, other and the world in general' (2004, 238). This succinctly describes something of what I learned from encountering student D, albeit focused specifically on faith identity.

'Meaning making' is another phrase often associated with narrative identity with variable definition. I use it here referring to how a person interprets the episodes of their story to understand who that story has formed them to be.

I found Loseke's work (2007) on narrative creating identity at all levels of human life



particularly insightful as it engages with the interaction between institutional narrative and the development of personal narrative identity, which accommodates the complexity of the context of university transition. Loseke argues that narratives are formed at different levels (cultural, institution, organization, and individual) and, whilst many scholars focus on just one level, studying the reflexive relationship between them would lead to a better understanding of how narratives work. That strongly resonates with the approach to data analysis and interpretation I have taken in this research. I think this is a more nuanced and helpful approach than the narrative turn discussed in chapter two which has shaped practical theology. The layers Loseke identifies which have particular resonated with my reflection which I will now consider are cultural, institutional, and personal narrative identities.

Cultural narrative identities are social classifications around 'disembodied actors' (Loseke 2007, 994). This includes categories associated with gender, age, religion, and families. Cultural narrative identities create 'formula stories' which lead to normative expectations of people. This arose in my discussion on university transition, as students grapple with expectations of the 'normal student', 'normal Christian', and then the 'normal Christian student'. It correlates with the concern of students to be accepted amongst their new community and be seen to fit in. The dissonance between the outlook of students from traditional backgrounds and those wearing the CU T-shirts could be understood as a conflict of normative expectations of Christian behaviour. Jarring between formula stories a student has internalized prior to university, those they presume will be predominate and those they actually encounter at university could offer an understanding of the foundations of some of

the overwhelmings of transition.

Loseke observes that in creating formula stories within a culture 'many stories are told, yet only some are evaluated as believable and important' (2007, 665). This mirrors understandings of the perpetuation of some harmful cultural practices by some behavioural ethicists (Bicchieri 2014). Loseke's thought led me to reflect on the assertion of three church leaders that students who fail to join a church at university might not actually be Christians, despite them identifying themselves as such. Whilst this may have been intended to convey differences in theological definitions of the title 'Christian', in narrative terms it could be interpreted as the stories leading to non-church-attenders describing themselves as Christian being judged as being of less value and ignored. This can also be seen in church marketing. The binary of ideal and reality storylines for student Christian faith I introduced in chapter one also fits this understanding of formula stories. However, I use that model as the ecclesiological perspective I discussed in chapter two holds church attendance to offer something which is genuinely of value to faith, with no intention of implying a judgment on the faith of non-attenders. Differing formula stories drive the varied marketing approaches of churches as they make assumptions about how students are experiencing university and what will attract them to church, and also have a normative view on the principles of what it means to live as a Christian at university. More broadly than that though, whatever the formula story behind the marketing, it is the one chosen by the church. It is possible from this to see how church marketing can increase students' confusion over their faith identity, rather than help them engage with a church.

The next layer Loseke describes is institutional narrative identities. In the context of this research this would be the narrative identity of churches (or the CU). The key issues are which stories are heard and therefore inform institutional behaviour, and how institutional narratives and identity are used to categorize all people as those who are and those who are not. I suggest churches tend to listen to the stories of those who attend, who have found they fit in with the culture of the church. If these are the only stories churches are hearing then their marketing and other activities will inevitably be focused on similar students, thereby potentially precluding those with differing stories. The categorization of people pushes them to choose whether they are in or out. Whilst the hope of churches is that people will choose to be in, I wonder if this can contribute to an anxiety about not belonging for those who need longer to decide where they feel comfortable, and therefore tend to push them away. Conversely, a mantra of everyone belonging, often heard in the Church of England, does not offer a strong institutional identity and could make students less likely to feel they fully belong as there is no in-out delineation.

The final layer I will reflect on here is that of personal narrative identity, a coherent sense of self-hood, which has been widely suggested to be difficult for individuals to construct in post-industrial societies (Loseke 2007, 672; Calhoun 1994; McAdams 1996, 297). Loseke follows the arguments of Polkinghorne (1991, 136) and McAdams (1996, 298) to suggest that this coherence can only be achieved by constructing connections between life events. However, she goes on to suggest that cultural formula stories can act as a filter on perceptions, as people are concerned that, if their story is too different, it won't be evaluated as credible. The relationship between personal and cultural narratives of identity

is complex, as a person may make use of cultural formula stories to make sense of themselves, positively or negatively. Formula stories change over time and are usually simplified, in contrast to real life experience. Loseke concludes that personal narrative identities are far harder to construct than cultural and institutional identity narratives as authors of formula stories can choose which stories to include and where to begin and end. Characters in personal narratives 'are not always freely chosen' and cannot be simply written out if 'they disturb a preferred plotline'; human experience does not have a clear beginning and end; and each individual 'drama' constrains and is constrained by the 'drama of others' (Loseke 2007, 675). All the church leaders in my research recognized, in different ways, the pressure of generational narrative identities as a factor in Christian students not attending church. This influenced some to pursue marketing in the hope of showing commonality between the institutional narrative of the church and generational identity, but left others feeling impotent and overwhelmed as they saw a gap between the institutional and generational narratives which, sadly but inevitably, they felt impotent to bridge. Supporting students through personal narrative construction could however be an avenue for engagement with students that fits relatively comfortably within the capacity of the more hesitant churches.

This hard task of constructing a personal narrative identity which includes their faith is the one Christian students have to negotiate if they are to pursue practice of their faith at university. Whilst not practicing their faith may be a seemingly easier option, this would leave them unable to construct the coherent personal identity that most people desire as their experiences so far have formed faith into their identity. If attentive listening to Student

D's story helped her with the difficult task of understanding more of her experiences and constructing more of her personal narrative identity, it could explain why it had the powerful impact that it did. I simply asked her to tell me her story of church and faith from the beginning, asking questions of clarification and prompts for more detail or to reflect on links between different elements of the narrative, with no agenda of where the story should lead.

#### *5.3.6 Faith development*

Loseke's work on the layers of narrative identity has provided a lens for understanding the complexity of student transition. Another point of connection between work on narrative identity and my research is faith development. In chapter one I critiqued Fowler's focus on linking moral reasoning and faith development (Feldmeier 2007, 46), with its lack of room for experience (Nelson 1992, 64 & 75). McAdams (1985) built on Erikson's psychosocial development work to argue that narrative identity emerges around the age of most university students, late-adolescent and early adult years, formulating it as part of the work required to answer Erikson's questions of 'who am I? How did I come to be? Where is my life going?' (McAdams and McLean 2013). Other developmental psychology researchers expanded this to propose that it is not until this time that people are able to construct coherent narrative identities (Habermas and de Silveira 2008). McAdams & MacLean argue that learning to share stories within particular cultural groups and cultural parameters is essential to developing narrative identity. This correlates with some of the narratives in this research of Christian students transitioning to university without a confident and fully integrated faith identity. Their life at university is also the prime time for them to undertake the difficult task of constructing that identity but maybe especially difficult through the

overwhelmings. They may also not have not previously needed to narrate their faith identity as it has always been a usual part of their lives. It is possible that students who have a confident faith and settle quickly into a church have already done the work of narrative construction at an earlier point in adolescence. This may have been aided for some by being part of a church tradition which promotes moments of personal 'commitment' regardless of childhood faith and also the articulation of personal testimony, especially when articulation of real and varied faith narratives is encouraged, rather than conformity to a standard faith narrative. It is also possible that these students are postponing the constructive work, choosing not to fully engage with or be challenged by the generational narrative identity surrounding them. The institutional identity of the churches they join may be similar enough to those of their home churches that this carries them through the questioning and anxieties that others face. Whether the constructive work has been circumvented, achieved in another way, or simply postponed to a point in the future after university is beyond the scope of this research.

#### *5.3.7 Emergent principles that might inform practice*

As the purpose of this reflection is to inform practice, I propose three areas emerging from the intersection of this discussion of narrative which may helpfully speak into practice.

The first is the approach to church marketing I have drawn attention to earlier. Church marketing may be more helpful to students less confident in their faith identity if it engages positively with, rather than conflicts with, previous experiences. Briefly switching to marketing language in the field of consumer psychology, consumers 'try to map incoming

narrative and information on to their stories in memory, they compare the ad story to their own personal experiences, searching for stories with similar goals, actions, and outcomes' (Edson Escalas 2004). A first step with this would be understanding the different types of faith experience and narratives that students bring and also how different types of narrative identity influence each other in the student context (Loseke 2007, 677). This might include acknowledging that some are not looking for a big evangelical church and including information in marketing that will offer connection to people's narratives beyond the word 'church'.

The second relates to the first, which is the value of attentive listening to students as theological response to what I have established above through psychology material. Listening has been described theologically as a form of welcome and hospitality (Frambach 2011) which would help build the sense of belonging that churches are seeking to offer before a student actually attends. This correlates with the developing promotion of listening as a core element in evangelism, reflecting the approach of Jesus in the gospels (Sumpter 2011). Attentive and responsive listening has also been shown to cause people to narrate more personal and elaborated stories, promoting the development of narrative identity (McAdams and McLean 2013), as I found with student D. I suggest it also connects to the culture of privatized spirituality prominent in postmodernity discussed in chapter one (Spinks 2010, xxiii). As well as listening needing to be attentive, it is also important whose stories are heard. The earlier discussion on institutional narrative identity highlighted the tendency for the stories of those who already fit into the institution to be heard above those who are not yet part of it. For churches, this means listening to those who do not attend, or

try attendance but then leave, as well as those who choose to stay and belong.

The final area is helping adolescents and young adults to learn to share their story in the different cultural settings in which they find themselves (amongst family, sympathetic friends, unsympathetic friends, colleagues etc.). This aids the development of narrative identity (McAdams and McLean 2013) as well as helping people grow through attending to their own narrative (Singer 2004, 445). This may happen more naturally in churches whose theological tradition emphasizes the place of personal testimony but need separate attention in those which don't, or if testimonies have become restricted to standard patterns which do not fit some people's experiences. In chapter one I suggested that Generations Y and Z challenge the church to understand its own distinctive story as the people of God and how it relates to personal narrative and identity across generations. There may also be a challenge to more traditional churches to develop their confidence in their own narrative within the prevailing generational culture. To churches who focus on articulating doctrine, I see a similar challenge in connecting that doctrine to students making sense of the world through narrative. Giving opportunities to hear others narrating their story can be a resource which may represent alternatives to those available through culture to help students narrate their own life. Student D's experience, along with that of other non-attending research participants, describes clear missed opportunities for church leaders to narrate their story, either personally, or that of the church, such as in confirmation classes or youth groups, modelling the development of an integrated personal faith narrative to adolescents. If church leaders do not demonstrate that they have done this work of integration, then younger church members will have no example to follow.



## **5.4 Summary**

In this chapter I have explored three lenses offering helpful insights to inform understanding of the context and research data. Choices about church attendance at university occur within the overall experience of university transition which can be framed as a period of multiple overwhelmings. Overwhelmings can be welcomed creatively, even attended to as part of the nature of God, leading them to be experienced positively, or experienced negatively through responses which try to control them.

Church engagement with marketing is complex. It is a pragmatic response to consumer culture and explains one aspect of current church practice, both for those who actively market and those who feel disempowered within the context. The complexity of the context means that both active engagement and non-engagement may have unwanted as well as intended effects.

The power of narrative is a known phenomenon. Harnessing this power through attentive listening may have a particular role in helping students navigate overwhelmings, make sense of their own story, and do the necessary work of constructing narrative identity. The next chapter will consider the implications of these insights for practice.

## **Chapter 6**

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

In this chapter I return to my original research question: “How should the abatement in church attendance when Christian students with a church background attend university be interpreted and responded to in a Practical Theological perspective?”, with the purpose of teasing out possible implications for practice of the research. I will focus on reframing the period of transition to university, and how churches and chaplains see themselves within that transition, through three main principles which have emerged from the research: reconceptualising the problem, reflecting on the consequences of current practice, and harnessing the power of narrative. I will offer some illustrative examples of potential responses in practice, but I cannot say in detail what practice should be, as each context is different. Further, this work is relevant to people in different kinds of roles whose tasks, as well as contexts, are different. For example, the task of parish priests, leaders of large independent churches, chaplains and those in mixed roles all differ.

#### **6.1 Reconceptualising the problem**

This research was motivated firstly by my conviction that the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students at university represents something that is not ideal for the majority of them. I illustrated this at the beginning of chapter one as the divergence between an ideal storyline and reality. My second motivating conviction was that to effectively respond in practice I needed to understand more clearly the causes of the gap between storylines, rather than simply follow the practices of others. In the introduction I

discussed some of my uncertainty as to how to conceptualise this gap. Consciously or unconsciously, the practical responses of practitioners to the gap will be significantly influenced by how they conceptualise it. In chapter five I argued that understanding university as transition as a period of multiple overwhelmings is a compelling way of framing the experience of students that emerged in my research. This section will explore how the churches in my research were conceptualising the gap, how practice informed by these understandings may produce unintended negative consequences, and suggest that reframing the problem as multiple overwhelmings may offer a stronger foundation for future practice.

Churches' current conceptualisation of the gap may be surmised from their actions as well as their espoused understandings of it. The two most common responses of church leaders when asked about their understanding of the abatement in church attendance were issues of personal faith and too much choice/competition between churches. I will return to the issue of choice and competition in the next section.

Turning to the issue of personal faith, two evangelical church leaders suggested that some Christian students who do not attend church at university might not really be Christians. Others, across traditions, talked of faith not being strong enough to cause a student to prioritize church. Some described this within the context of cultural pressure not to practice faith, or at least causing a temptation to drift away from faith, or simply moving away from the family home giving a freedom to choose not to attend church. In interview, Corinth church described

*the influence of a pleasure-seeking culture playing on personal insecurities and opening up cracks in faith*

whilst Hierapolis church cited a 'Saturday night party culture'. This mindset of inadequate faith can also be seen when students invite non-attending Christian friends to evangelistic activities at their churches, rather than simply inviting them to church.

Other potential framings of the gap were suggested by church leaders. Competing pressures on students' time and general busyness was the next most common, suggested across traditions. Leaders of two larger churches suggested this time pressure was made worse for those wanting to actively practice their faith by the multiple activities of the Christian Union on campus. Galatia church raised perception of the church within contemporary culture as a significant factor. Similar to the arguments of Riddell et al (2000) noted in chapter one, Galatia church saw a clash between church culture and the values of postmodernity and so opened a bar and a coffee shop within the church building in an effort to make church 'feel like a culturally normal activity'. They also thought students were put off by activities of other churches which were not so 'culturally appropriate'. Filippi Church felt a growing 'festival culture' in some streams of the church has increased a tendency for young adults to see very large worship events as 'a normal expression of congregational life', leading to disappointment with the reality of most local churches. The final espoused cause of the gap was the general outlook of students, that they live in a bubble, and are often unintentional and disorganized about many areas of life.

Several of these understandings of the gap between ideal storylines and reality integrate

with the framing of student experience of university transition as multiple overwhelmings discussed in the previous chapter. However, each by themselves only attend to limited aspects of those overwhelmings. If practice is based on these individual components of the complex context, without appreciation of the broader, overarching, framework of the multiple overwhelmings, then difficulties could inadvertently be caused elsewhere.

Responding to students who understand themselves to be Christians but do not attend church by inviting them to activities designed for those who are not Christians and asking them to respond with a commitment to faith may be helpful, but may also increase the disorientation of those who have faith but are working out how that fits within their identity at university. By all means invite them, but the next step needs to be listening to their story, not pitching faith to them. The findings of this research consistently showed a gap between belief and reasoning and behaviour. Non-attending interview participants still felt their faith was important and only one expressed indifference about church attendance. There was also a difference between what survey respondents who attended church said were important factors in choosing church and the reasons they chose the church they did. Two conservative evangelical churches suggested home churches should make more direct connections for students with a suitable church in their university context as a way of protecting the students in a time of vulnerability. This correlates with a reductionist approach, described in chapter five, of trying to control and reduce overwhelmings rather than seeing transition as a process of becoming and discovering, setting students free to thrive in the overwhelmings. It could become counter-productive and add to overwhelmings if the church chosen for connection does not feel like home to the student despite being told

by their home church that it should do. If students are used to traditional styles of worship they may be disconcerted by a church offering a bar and a candy-floss machine. Derbe church suggested its concern about students living in a bubble might be addressed by 'home churches' making more positive church links for students before arrival, but students will still have to negotiate finding themselves surrounded by the 'bubble' of student living.

Reconceptualising the causes of the gap between the ideal storyline and reality as multiple overwhelmings might enable churches to tailor their responses to individual elements of concern in a more nuanced way, with fewer unintended consequences either through taking steps to mitigate against those unintended consequences, or even enable students to experience the overwhelming positively. Churches might avoid equating lack of attendance with dereliction, or original absence, of faith and develop ways to understand and respond to the disparity between belief and behaviour, rather than trying to evangelize non-attending students. This could be done within Ford's framework of naming, describing and expanding mind and imagination to positively embrace overwhelmings (2012, xv). Berea Church had recognized the value of this in introducing more explanations of its practices in some of its services, acknowledging that those not used to them may find them quite different to their usual experiences of church and suggesting ways people could experience them more comfortably. This mirrors a reflection by Student C that she might have found it helpful if, when she attended a large 'studenty' evangelical church one Sunday evening, they had acknowledged from the front that the worship style might be different from people's previous experiences if they had attended more traditional churches.

Returning to the marketplace metaphor of chapter four, I believe that the reconceptualising of the gap I have described could give confidence to churches whose stalls are to the rear, who find it difficult to connect with students in a context dominated by churches with the front row stalls to feel they have a valuable and active role to play in responding to the gap. They might re-frame the unique elements of what they offer in ways that would resonate with students seeking to find a church that feels like home and a familiar anchor point in the midst of the overwhelmings of transition. An example would be simply producing publicity which highlights the type of liturgy the use, the musical tradition, whether there is a choir, if there are opportunities to serve and whether there are any regular social activities.

Reconceptualising the gap as multiple overwhelmings may give university chaplains more confidence that helping Christian students engage with local churches is an area for them to directly engage with. Whilst I see it as a significant part of my chaplaincy role, I know colleagues in other universities, particularly those where chaplaincy is firmly embedded in a wellbeing agenda (Smith 2015), are concerned that such activity is too specifically faith-orientated. Supporting students to experience overwhelmings positively is a legitimate way of encouraging wellbeing. This might follow the suggestions of Slee (2017) and Ford (2012) discussed in chapter five: enabling students to narrate their experience, identify and pay attention to the essential (leaving to one side what is not immediately essential), and turning to their faith and worship to seek the positive overwhelming of God (Ford 2012, xxviii). To do this, chaplains would need to enter into conversations with Christian students with a mindset recognizing the nature of overwhelmings, encouraging self-narration, and

sensitively helping students to reframe their perceptions of the overwhelmings. Churches would need to seek to be spaces where students could find overwhelming by God before being encouraged into activities which showed commitment to the church. In my own practice as a chaplain I might helpfully shift conversations with students from 'how to find a church' to exploration about of how they feel about the possibility of finding a church in the midst of the rest of their student experience. Attentive listening has been cited in youth work literature as a means to enable young people to 'think critically about the sociocultural dynamics at work in their communities and empower them' (Wright and Moore 2008, 228). For a youth minister this reconceptualization might translate into conversation prior to university, with attentive listening, focused on drawing out from the student the other pressures in their life, or what they might need in moments of overwhelming at university, rather than focusing on emphasizing the need to find a church as a priority at university to them.

## **6.2 Reflecting on the consequences of competition and marketing**

In chapter five I explored some of the reasons why some churches actively use marketing techniques, how that may interact with the overwhelmings of transition, and how a more nuanced approach, recognizing different groups of students, may mitigate against marketing being experienced negatively by some students as this research has shown. The church leaders interviewed for this research articulated reasoning behind their approach to marketing, based on what they believed to be effective. If practice is to change I suggest that a necessary pre-requisite is for individual churches to reflect on the negative, if unintended,



effects of their approaches to marketing, as well as positive outcomes, and consider whether practice could be altered to minimize these.

Some negative unintended consequences are already widely recognized by church leaders, particularly around issues of competition and choice. Six of the eight church leaders interviewed posited that a surfeit of choice and competition amongst churches is a significant contributory issue the abatement in church attendance at university. Galatia church said students distrusted some churches and that competition amongst them could contribute to the abatement in attendance. Ephesus church described the numbers of available churches within the city as presenting an overwhelming choice, with students often not knowing where to begin. Derbe church suggested too much choice was unhelpful, with Hierapolis church proffering that a surfeit of choice feeds a consumerist approach to church, encouraging students to want to find the perfect church for them, rather than considering where they may be called to serve or simply could faithfully attend public worship. Berea church went further to suggest

*It's through having the choice that you think there is then a perfect church for you, because there's just a smorgasbord you can have this theology and this style of worship so there must be the perfect church for me I just need to keep looking and I'll find it.*

Despite this recognition, there was no sense in the interviews that any churches felt they had responsibility in changing this situation. One church suggested others should publicize themselves less, at the same time wishing they would be permitted more prominent access

to attract the attention of students on campus. Another church said that whilst they recognized competition as a problem they were intending to increase their activities to attract students. Whilst it is unlikely that individual churches would want to literally reduce the available choice by closing themselves, how that choice is managed and portrayed, and therefore experienced by students could be open to change.

There are three areas I think churches could particularly usefully reflect on to enhance good practice. First, the content of marketing and publicity materials. Several of the churches described promotional materials and activities designed to attract students to them, rather than to inform students what the church is like and what they will experience if they do attend. This may follow a principle that if they can persuade students to attend an activity or service then there will be a fuller opportunity to explain what it is like and for students to experience it firsthand. However, this requires students to invest time and vulnerability in exploratory attendance, whereas simple information might enable them to start navigating the available choice in an easier environment. My experience of editing the University of Nottingham Churches booklet is that churches have been reluctant to describe their style of worship, claiming that descriptions may put people off who would appreciate it if they experienced it. An example is Berea Church's entry which says

*We want everyone to feel like they belong to a family and get the opportunity to truly discover their purpose. Students play a huge role in all we do and we'd love you to visit on a Sunday*

This could be said by many churches. If students are feeling overwhelmed by choice as well as time pressures, easy to access and clearly informative publicity materials would seem to

be preferable. An alternative wording based on their self-description in the church leader interviews might be

‘We are a large charismatic evangelical church. Our services concentrate on contemporary musical worship and bible teaching, with a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit’.

Marketing designed to attract a student to church X with no substantial information is implicitly trying to persuade them to go there in preference to other churches, for no substantial theological reason, thus potentially increasing a sense of competition.

Second, the effects for students of some churches doing little to communicate their presence and character. In the previous two chapters I described students feeling overwhelmed by encountering the ‘stalls’ at front of the marketplace offering something which does not resonate with what is familiar to them about church. Another facet to this is that churches which would offer familiarity cannot be seen, their apparent absence adding to the overwhelming. Even if students do not associate church with marketing, a key feature of generations Y and Z described in chapter one is the assumption that information will be readily available to them with very little effort required on their part to find it. Student H concluded that only large evangelical churches were available, which were not his church tradition, as those were the only ones he heard about from CU members in his hall of residence, even though with hindsight he reflected that it was inevitable that more traditional churches would be available locally as well. Student F found a church of her preferred style in an inconvenient location, a factor which led to her not continuing attendance. It was only after graduation that she discovered a much more convenient

church which also suited her preferred style. The styles of some churches may inevitably make them more visible in the marketplace than others, but those who are less naturally visible could attend to making information about themselves more easily available to students and finding ways to put up signposting within the marketplace to provide direction to students who would like to find them. In my context, this could involve them improving their social media and internet presence, for instance. This could easily be done ensuring regular social media reminders of services and that webpages are up-to-date with clear service times and contact information frame in language that conveys that contact would be positively welcomed. Phrases such as 'we'd love to hear from you if you'd like to know more about us' could replace 'if you need to contact us'. Historically, such churches have relied on chaplains to do this signposting for them, and my experience is that some still see this to be the role of university chaplains. Whilst I have argued in the previous section that a signposting role to all stalls within the marketplace fits within the role of chaplains, it would be helpful for such churches to see this as their own responsibility. A very pragmatic reason for this is that many Christian students do not naturally come across the chaplains. Also, chaplains may not have firsthand experience of a particular church so relying on chaplains as a source of signposting builds in an extra layer of complexity to communication.

The third area for reflection is how churches can build non-competitive relationships with each other. Whilst none of the church leaders I interviewed described themselves as being in competition with other churches, several recognized that the reality was that they can appear to be to students. The CU churches fayre was described as a 'feeding frenzy' by Corinth Church. My perception is that the appearance of competition is partly reflective of a

reality of competition between churches as they depend on students as a source of their longer-term membership. Several churches described how a significant portion of their congregations were people who had attended as students and then continued after graduation. Also, students can be a source of vibrancy in the present-day congregations. Competition may also be an inadvertent consequence of efforts by churches to connect with students. Derbe church felt that increasing communication between student-focused churches in the area to help students find a church in which they felt at home could help address the abatement in church attendance. None of the churches whose leaders were interviewed actively tried to help students find another church if they did not feel at home with them. Increased communication could strengthen a sense of common purpose to encourage more Christian students to attend church and better enable mutual working to achieve this through appreciation of the different characteristics and strengths of individual churches. A spirit of cooperation rather than competition between churches could create a culture change which would influence the actions of CU members in halls, helping new students explore the broad range of churches available rather than just inviting them along to the one of which they are a member. Such a cultural shift may also help churches pay more attention to students who try their churches and then decide not to continue, deliberately taking responsibility for trying to enable them to find another church in which they might feel at home. Chaplaincy has been said to be a space that 'has come to transcend specific religions' (Pattison 2015, 19). This principle could be developed to understand Christian chaplaincy as a space which transcends differences between individual churches. Pattison also characterizes chaplaincy as valuing being 'non-judgmental and respectful of individual's decisions and wishes' (2015, 20). Chaplains may therefore be well-placed to

facilitate building relationships with a range of churches and bringing them together in a network, as well as being trusted advisors of students seeking a church.

One of the key purposes of youth work has been described as ‘building the capacity for young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions, and take control’ (Youth Scotland 2022). Home churches might usefully use the marketplace metaphor developed in chapter four to help students understand how they might experience encounters with churches at university, within their overall experience of transition. This could involve youth workers using student stories, such as those that have informed this research, as a basis for reflective discussion on the range of ways a new student might find churches do or do not try to interact them and what strategies might help them experience and respond to this in a way that is positive for them. This may enable them to engage with the choice they encounter in a way that leads them to making decisions which are best for them and their well-being rather than feeling overwhelmed.

### **6.3 Harnessing the power of narrative**

In chapter five I reflected on the transformative effect on student D of attentive listening to her story and how student H rued the missed opportunity to make sense of overwhelmings by way of his Christian identity as he was not part of a church community. I set this within the context of the psychological task of narrative integration and meaning making that forms part of faith development for young adults. I proposed three areas in which this might particularly speak into practice, which I will develop further here: offering connection to narrative in church marketing, attentive and responsive listening, and helping students

narrate their own story. Also, I referred in the introduction to resource limitations faced by many churches and the extensive efforts some already put into student engagement without seeing a change in the overall abatement in church attendance. As well as being effective in practice, attending to and harnessing the power of narrative may also prove to be less resource intense than some other approaches.

Several of the stories of non-attending students illustrated how they found the marketing and invitational culture of some churches negatively overwhelming, at least partly because they did not know how to integrate what they were experiencing into their own narrative. They were also encountering normative and institutional narratives which were different from their own, increasing their sense of overwhelming. I have already advocated for reflection on unintended effects of church practice, especially marketing, but I suggest that the potential transformative power of narrative is also an opportunity which churches could embrace in their student engagement activities, focusing them primarily on listening to student narratives, rather than, or at least prior to, informing and inviting, or searching for novel ways to attract students. An example might be a social event designed around multiple 'conversation starter' questions in small groups which start on a social level before gradually leading into questions around experience of church and faith. This type of engagement has the potential not only to build connections and trusting relationships with students but also be a step in faith development itself. It is also likely to be within the sphere of confidence of most churches, whatever their size, tradition or interaction with marketing and consumer culture, can easily be cross-generational and does not require specialist skills or knowledge. This is in keeping with the concept of 'narrative discipleship'

described in youth ministry research, where speaking of life experiences allows emerging adults to begin to 'connect the dots' of their life and faith experiences (Byrd 2011, 246)

A key facet of harnessing the power of narrative that I am suggesting is for churches to understand more of the nuances of the sense of belonging which students are looking for and institutional identity discussed in chapter five. Recognition that students want to feel at home in a church has led to some of the larger churches encouraging a sub-culture amongst students who attend, encouraging students to assimilate into a normative identity of the 'Berea' or 'Galatia Church student'. However, looking at this through the lens of Loseke's (2007) work on layers of narrative identity discussed in chapter five I suggest this may increase a sense of confusion and internal conflict, rather than help students integrate their experiences of the church into their personal narrative identity. A sequela of this occurs when students enjoy belonging to a church, find its institutional identity sits well with their personal narrative identity and then well-meaningly and enthusiastically invite other students along assuming they will have the same experience but they do not. This was seen clearly in the story of student H and something I heard recurrently in the student stories which motivated this research. If neither the inviting student nor the invitee have a framework for responding well to this conflict, rather than coalescence of experiences the invitee may try to avert further overwhelmings by avoiding contact with other churches or Christian students. Churches might help their attending students to appreciate the power of narrative and encourage them to develop a more listening approach to other students they meet. This could be done through simple interactive workshops within existing student small-groups where students are helped to reflect on their own story and learn to ask



questions of others which draw out their story. Churches could also develop creative and flexible ways for students to engage with them rather than encouraging everyone towards one model, such as participation in a student-specific small-group. Instead, students could be encouraged to find which aspects of church life are helpful to them in their work of identity construction, rather than them feeling they have to assimilate a new identity. An example would be acknowledgment that people find differing aspects of church life most beneficial to them and inviting students to reflect on what might be most helpful to them, along with an invitation to explore different ways of involvement before settling on what they might be committed to.

My proposition that this may be less resource intense may seem out of keeping with the amount of time needed to listen attentively to narrative. I base my argument on efficacy of approach, that if a narrative culture is developed then the pool of resources to do the listening, i.e. people, will multiply and fewer resources will be wasted on experimental activities undertaken in the hope of finding one that proves attractive to students. Practical examples of culture change could be started through social events based around listening to other's stories, or training for existing members on good listening. Also, in chapter one I discussed that the cultural gap between Generation X and Generations Y and Z is bigger than that between other generations. Listening to narrative is an easy cross-generational activity which I suggest is likely to be something more church members feel is within their capability than some assisting with some other student-focused activities.

Harnessing the power of narrative could potentially be most profitably attended to by

'home' churches before students transition to university. Once students have moved to university, identifying Christian students in order to encourage them to engage with church will always be a challenge, particularly those more hesitant to self-identify, whatever the practice of churches and chaplains. In the research survey, discussion about faith at university with a church leader or family member prior to transition was not shown to significantly affect church attendance, although there was a correlation with attendance at a Christian group. However, the survey did not enquire about the nature of those conversations. In interview, students G and H both described conversations with church leaders prior to university which they felt missed the opportunity to help them embrace the effects of their experiences at university on their faith. Home churches, by definition, have connection with Christian students who will transition to university. Helping them to articulate their personal narrative and within that their faith narrative, prior to transition, may be a key opportunity for influencing experience of the overwhelmings of university. This correlates with Byrd's assertion that 'narrative discipleship appears to assist emerging adults to identify themes in their journey of faith in order to establish a foundation for transformative learning to occur' (Byrd 2011, 246). This could be done as a group exercise within youth ministry. I noted in the previous chapter that the articulation of faith narrative is a more natural part of some church cultures than others. However, the articulation of narrative that I am suggesting challenges both traditions who focus on the participation in prayer and worship, rather than articulation of faith, and also churches who encourage the sharing of testimony as they tend to have a preferred normative faith narrative. My conjecture is that students should be encouraged to articulate a narrative which is self-aware and honest, even if that does not conform to an ideal or preferred narrative. This

might best be set within developing a culture within the whole church so that this honest owning of personal stories becomes the norm amongst all church members, not just student groups. Students could then arrive at university aware of the place of their faith in their personal narrative identity so far, and thus be better equipped to integrate the new experiences of university and their encounters with churches.

#### **6.4 Summary**

In both this and the previous chapter I have suggested that the metaphor of multiple overwhelmings provides a helpful perspective for understanding the abatement in church attendance amongst Christian students from a practical theological perspective. I have also submitted that some aspects of current church practice may be experienced as adding to those overwhelmings by some students and that attention to narrative may be both a practical and significant footing on which to shape a response. In this chapter I have suggested that in order to make this response, a helpful starting point for churches, chaplains and other practitioners might be to reframe their conceptualisation of the issue to one that recognizes the multiple overwhelmings, to reflect on how their current responses (both active and passive) interact with those overwhelmings and how attention to narrative might be harnessed as a useful approach to shape future practice. Whilst I have offered some illustrative suggestions of practice changes, the detailed implication of these reframings must be worked out in each individual context and role.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have used reflective study in practice and heuristic empirical investigation to attend to the question “How should the abatement in church attendance when Christian students with a church background attend university be interpreted and responded to in a Practical Theological perspective?” The threads of understanding university transition as multiple overwhelms, the effects of church engagement with a marketing culture and the power of attending to personal narratives emerged as significant themes which may offer opportunities for helpful developments in practice.

In the introduction I located this question as of concern to me, as a vicar and university chaplain, as well as to the wider church and universities themselves. Churches tangibly demonstrate their concern through committing significant resources to attempts to increase young adult attendance. The question also speaks to university priorities promoting wellbeing, holistic education and equality. I argued that this is fundamentally a theological and ecclesiological question as it concerns divine desire and intent which is partially mediated by behaviours of church communities and how these intersect with individual experiences of them.

In chapter one I then characterized the research question as understanding the nature and causes of the gap which emerges when ideal and actual storylines of a Christian student at university diverge. Ideally, faith thrives and grows at university, but the reality for many is not joining a church and practice of faith diminishing. I used the chapter to explore some of the complex, intertwined and competing tensions recognized in literature on generational

culture and faith development that have already started influencing students prior to university transition and form a backdrop to the storyline divergence. I demonstrated the importance of development of personal identity and narrative, recognizing that these, alongside experience, have become more reliable source of truth than fact for young adults in current generational culture. Current students have therefore often grown up with a different concept of faith and the role church attendance in maintaining integrity of belief than is traditionally understood within the church. I asserted that Regan's (2002) view that faith development as influenced by multiple dynamic tensions on individual pathways is therefore more helpful in this context than the Fowler's 'Stages of Faith Development' (1981) focused on cognition and moral reasoning. This led me to posit that many church initiatives aimed at addressing the decline in attendance have not fully engaged with the complexity of the situation, as they usually focus on a single potentially remediable element, such as consumerist marketing, or current experiences of spirituality, without looking at the overall impact on flourishing in faith. I also articulated that churches are grappling with an ecclesiological conundrum as they understand themselves and their practices within a changing society and consumer culture: whether churches would be offering more or less choice, whether their prime task is to provide security of established tradition in the uncertainty of a changing world or changing practice in line with culture.

Having established the centrality of the interaction between individual story and ecclesial practice to the research question I moved to the methodological discussion of chapter two. There I located the research at the intersection between my own journey of faith, experience of ecclesial practice and development as a researcher, culminating in this present

piece of research with core commitments to pragmatism, problematization, the value of individual narrative and data being treated as a dialogue partner. These commitments led to development of the research methods I described in chapter three. I introduced a new approach I developed during the research to analyzing the narratives from the student interviews. This used storyline diagrams to try to listen to details of narrative both individually and corporately without losing the integrity of the personal experiences. I hope this might offer a helpful contribution to research methods within other areas of Practical Theology.

I presented the findings of the three strands of empiric research data in chapter four, building a picture around the intersection of student narratives and church beliefs and behaviours, using the metaphor of the traditional marketplace to aid visualization. These findings suggested that faith narrative as an element of personal identity, the multiple overwhelmings that are experienced during university transition and church engagement with a marketing culture — both churches embracing the culture and churches feeling powerless in the face of it— were significant influences on the thoughts and actions of students around church attendance at university. Students were looking for a sense of belonging in a church community, but often without an understanding of what components of church experience were necessary to provide this. The data suggested the strength of appropriation of faith in teenage years, and therefore integration of faith narrative and personal identity, was significant in whether faith thrives on transition to university, suggesting significant potential for churches attended prior to university to influence the divergence of storylines.

I used these emergent themes in chapter five as lenses through which to explore the context and research data. I showed that multiple overwhelmings are inherent the experience of university transition, and can be welcomed creatively or experienced negatively, particularly through attempts to control them. Then, I probed some of the complexity of Church engagement with marketing within a consumer culture, suggesting that both active engagement and non-engagement can have unwanted as well as intended consequences. Finally, I argued that attentive listening may have a particular role in helping students navigate overwhelmings and successfully negotiate the complex task of constructing their own narrative identity and the place of faith within it.

In chapter six I returned to the purpose of this research: to inform practice. I argued that churches and chaplains might reframe their practice around three key principles: reconceptualising the problem as multiple overwhelmings, reflection on the consequences of current practice, particularly in relation to a marketing culture, and harnessing the power of narrative. However, I asserted that it was not prudent to go further in defining practice as the research is applicable to multiple contexts and roles with different tasks.

Reconceptualising the divergence of the storylines as part of the multiple overwhelmings of university transition may give chaplains whose role is embedded within the wellbeing agenda of the university more confidence that supporting Christian students to engage with a local church is appropriate part of their task. For churches, it may ensure that actions do not add to overwhelmings and also make them accessible to a broader range of students through adopting a more nuanced approach, rather than focusing on individual components

of the context, such as culture or church style. Reflecting on the consequences of current practice may encourage churches to consider how their actions influence students who do not join them as well as those who do. I advocated active marketing being adjusted to provide more information about a church rather than simply trying to attract the attention of students and persuade initial attendance. I contended that Churches who don't actively engage in marketing are still perceived by students through the lens of a marketing culture and so might consider how they could make themselves more visible and welcoming to students without losing the uniqueness of their tradition.

My final suggestion for developing practice was an increasing focus on attentive listening to narrative, both pre- and post- university transition, as a means to help students navigate multiple overwhelmings, in contrast to simply giving advice and encouragement as to preferred courses of action. I posit that this will enable churches to better understand students, leading to further positive influences on practice, and also assist students in doing the work of narrative integration that is required to integrate their identity and faith at university.

There is no indication that accelerated cultural change, nor the multiple overwhelmings experienced by students, will lessen in the future. A version of the divergence in ideal and reality storylines is likely to continue to challenge the practice of churches, chaplains and others concerned for the faith development of students. In this research I have developed a new methodological approach which may be of use in further study in this and similar areas. I hope that the reframing I have advocated of the period of university transition will



encourage churches to be confident that they can positively respond to the abatement in church attendance through attention to narrative, whatever the cultural context.

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## **APPENDICES**

- A    Unpublished reflective practice piece submitted July  
2016
- B    Online survey
- C    Interview schedule
- D    Student interview consent form
- E    Church leader consent form
- F    Statistical report
- G    Storyline diagrams
- H    Statistical report

**Views of an elephant:  
finding confidence to practice with integration and integrity**

*'I've gone from feeling as if I'm a fraud in the field of theology to feeling as if I have something to offer and I belong here.'*

(Reflective Journal October 2015)

**Introduction**

This work is a critical review of key elements of my development as a reflective practitioner whilst I have been working on the Doctorate in Practical Theology (DPT) programme. It will explore the nature of reflective practice as I have come to understand it, and then proceed to critically analyse the reflection that has been fundamental to development of my practice and self understanding. I have kept a reflective journal as part of the DPT process which I reviewed to identify emergent themes for this piece. I then reflected further on these themes in relation to the narratives from my journal, illustrated by journal excerpts. Confidence is the common theme which will most strongly emerge. I then conclude by endeavouring to discern an account of myself in the light of these reflections as a researching practitioner as I approach the transition into Part 2 of the DPT.

To give context to these reflections, I have been vicar of a large parish and a university chaplain for a little more than four years, and have been on the DPT programme for the last three. Prior to this I worked as a doctor for 18 years, specializing in Paediatric Intensive Care Medicine.

Whilst this piece inevitably adheres to academic convention as it will be assessed, the style of writing is also reflective of my natural style of reflection.

**Reflective practice**

The expanding field of reflective practice has been criticized by its own leaders for lack of clearly defined terminology (Moon 1999, 46). As well as reflecting the diversity and ambiguity of terms used before 'reflective practice' became common parlance, 'reasoning', 'thinking', 'inquiry', 'critical reflection', 'problem solving' (Kitchener 1983), it also correlates

with the multiple backbone philosophies from which reflective practice has developed: the detailed analysis of Dewey, the experiential learning cycle of Kolb, 'reflective judgment' as a more advanced form of thinking, the political emancipation and empowerment unleashed by different forms of knowledge envisioned by Habermas, followed by Schon's rejection of the notion that espoused theory can guide practice in preference for advocacy of 'reflecting in' rather than 'reflecting on' situations. Over time definitions of reflective practice have tended to get broader and richer, rather more focussed and clear. Therefore rather than engaging in the hefty task of honing my own definition of reflective practice I shall outline here what I perceive to be the key characteristics of it which have shaped my approach to its use both during my work on the DPT and more specifically in writing this piece.

First, reflective practice involves viewing experience and context through multiple lenses in order to frame searching questions to deepen reflexivity. The correct viewpoint for the reflective practitioner is disputed: the wide angle of the film-maker (or 'helicopter vision') (Wright 2005, 514), or from within the fog of the 'swampy lowlands' of reality (Schön 1983). My slant on reflective practice is that a diversity of lenses or viewpoints leads to a truer picture of the whole. A simultaneous distancing and proximity to both emotions, thoughts, experiences and theory provides the possibility of integration at the intersection of theory and practice (Bolton 2014, 117). As well as critical consideration of the multiple perspectives, examination of the lenses themselves adds further depth. It is this examination of the lenses that can enable reflective practice to become theological and lead to Christian maturity (Killen and De Beer 1994, 15). The more complex and uncertain the context of practice, the more vital multi-focal reflective and reflexive practice becomes to both professional and personal development.

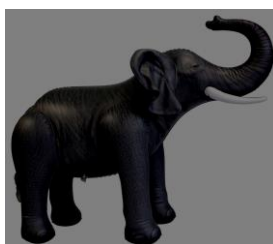
Second, reflective practice must be dynamic, leading to change or action, with a bidirectional relationship between practice and theory. My purpose in undertaking the DPT programme is to be in a different place by its completion and reflective practice has been described as the 'pearl grit in the oyster of practice and education' (Bolton 2014, 1). Whilst this metaphor may be somewhat un-nuanced, particularly lacking the key ingredient of intentionality, it provides a reasonably authentic picture. Later in this piece I will describe my journey from the linear approach of Applied Theology to the more heuristic and cyclical intention of Practical Theology (Ballard and Pritchard 2006, 90 & 129). Both the desired bidirectional discourse and the change resulting from it are facilitated by a slowing and critique of habitual thinking (Killen and De Beer 1994, 4). Through reflection, theory and practice have a symbiotic relationship (Moon 1999, 6).

Third, reflective practice is creative and expansive, rather than solution focussed, making a strong use of metaphor. Such creativity is stifled by 'slavish adherence' to particular pre-established theology (Ballard and Pritchard 2006, 87). Freedom to believe this and the validity of different forms of knowledge has been key to integrating experience and theory in my journey of reflection. Western theology as a whole, and even more so conservative theology, has tended to be anchored in analysis and conceptual thought and hence is challenged by the artistic nature of theological reflection and reflective practice (Ballard and Pritchard 2006, 140).

Finally, reflective practice must be both deliberate and critical. There is a current societal trend towards egocentric narration of life within the postmodern axiom 'being true to oneself' (Giddens 1991, 75–80). Left unquestioned this can lead to a subjective turn in theology and practice, encouraged by a sense of one's own authority (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 4). 'Attention to life experience in a spiritual frame may bring us close to the heart of the Christian mystery – but it can also be a problematic process that owes as much to the questionable forms of idealism that are part of the romantic movement as it does to prayerful devotion or curious theological activity' (Walton 2014, xvi). Rather than being rumination, reflective practice is intentional, rational discourse (Bolton 2014, 16), combining narrative with active, persistent and careful consideration (Moon 1999, 12).

This understanding of reflective practice has both shaped and been shaped by my journey through the DPT and more widely as a reflective practitioner and informs the reflections on that journey which follow. Rather than seeing reflective practice trying to perceive things from perspectives different from our own, I see it as trying to understand what has shaped my practice, how that shaping has occurred and what dynamic processes are continuing to shape my journey as it moves forward.

## **The Elephant in the Room**



*Introducing the elephant*

Presenting a picture of my inflatable elephant in this piece is a decision which has surprised me. However, both my desire to include it and the object itself offer an interesting commentary on myself, my context, and my journey in Practical Theology (PT).

The elephant, purchased as a sermon illustration for Catholic Mass in the week of Christian Unity, introduces the conflict I have found underlying many of the entries in my reflective journal around the issue of confidence. Whilst confidence often emerges as a bi-product of the development of competence, I experience a disjunction between feedback that I am perceived as a competent and confident church leader and a lack of inner confidence in my authority to lead.

Introducing the elephant is an act of creativity and yet until recently I have had little confidence in my own creativity. I cannot draw and have never particularly appreciated art (a photograph is the only way to get an image of the elephant on this page without presenting a very childish drawing). I see beauty in diagrams that bring order out of chaos and provide secure boundaries to a problem and yet the elephant is creatively expansive, multi-faceted and its interpretation not neatly boundaried, mirroring a growing liberation and confidence of creativity in both theology and practice that is forming part of my PT journey. The image of the elephant risks interpretations that are not neatly controlled and may lead down unanticipated paths.

### *The art of diagnosis*

Reflecting on my experience as a confident senior doctor may provide some insight into this move towards creativity. A good intensive care doctor needs to be confident in analysing a situation and bringing order out of chaos. There is anxious activity, emotions are high, a child's health is deteriorating fast and other doctors have reached the limits of their expertise. My role is to step in, make rapid assessment and diagnosis, and confidently pursue a strategy to regain order, even if ultimately without success. I do this by unconsciously drawing pathways and diagrams in my mind, rapidly considering hypotheses and rejecting or accepting them. There are similarities with my chaotic and fast changing context of ministry – new students quickly become graduates, contemporary culture moves on at a pace, the parish population turns over rapidly. Despite these similarities, my reflective practice journal is full of instances when the context that is changing so quickly seems too big and complex for me to draw the diagram in which to contain it, leading to personal stress and frustration. This inability to find a satisfactory containing diagram leads to loss of confidence. My motivation for research began with the desire of my problem-solving nature to sharpen the focus and create diagnostic diagrams. Part of my reflective journey has been realising that

this is a futile ambition, and that multiple lenses and creative exploration is a more productive pathway.

Whilst portraying the process of diagnosis and clinical management as hypothesis testing has validity and mirrors teaching in medical schools, it is incomplete without inclusion of professional artistry (a term that sits uncomfortably in the era of 'evidence based medicine'). Beyond a cognisant analytical process I would often have an intuitive sense of what was wrong and then perform diagnostic tests to confirm or refute my hypothesis. Such intuition is neither mysterious nor magical but derives from prior knowledge, both theoretical and experiential, learned to a level of mastery not requiring conscious processes for recall, which is then integrated with an assessment of the current situation. However there is also a level at which this enters the realm of artistry, when conventional diagnostic thinking fails, or the intuition is inexplicable in terms of logical reasoning. My reflective journey has similarly led me from viewing PT as quasi-scientific evidential problem-solving, to instead being a rich artistry integrating mastered and experiential knowledge with careful understanding of context, requiring the practitioner to think both creatively and analytically.

Using a picture of an object combines my desire to bring material order whilst keeping the richness afforded by art.

#### *Why an elephant?*

The elephant is awkward, both literally and metaphorically. Alongside the metaphor of 'the elephant in the room' suggesting the awkward presence of something unspoken or unacknowledged, elephants themselves are formidable and inelegant. The whole elephant cannot be appreciated from a single viewpoint and will look quite different from varying angles and perspectives.

This awkwardness is easily seen in my reflections on ministry and as a theologian. I know that I am seen as a confident leader with a fairly academic background, strongly evangelical though compassionately responsive to pastoral realities, yet I often experience an anxious lack of self-confidence. The tension between my personal reality of finding enrichment and development in contextual exploration of theology and a sense that in doing this I risk taking leave of traditional evangelicalism is awkward. In contrast to my confidence as a medical diagnostician (supported by feedback from colleagues) I feel less confident that I might make a valuable contribution to PT, despite 25 years of involvement in church leadership, a master's degree in theology, and being placed in a position of significant leadership responsibility as an ordained priest.

As well as being awkward, the elephant is also a unitary object. The threads of confidence and sources of authority run through my reflective journal, linking together my evangelical background with the correlation between correct doctrine and personal discipleship, a context where my gender casts doubt on my credibility as an appropriate church leader, and my sometimes paralysing tendency towards perfectionism.

So with the elephant established in the room I will explore the nature of theological knowledge (and therefore research) and whether I can confidently contribute to it. I do this from the perspectives of authority, de-idealisation and perfectionism using examples from my reflective journal and practice, reflecting on how the elephant is changing, or possibly diminishing, through the process of the DPT.

## **Sources of Authority**

### ***What are acceptable sources for theology?***

*“Not sure whether I’ve gone somewhere I don’t want to go, signing up to do Practical Theology degree.*

*Conservative Evangelical churches do seem to be solid and to grow (or at least - the ones I look at do).*

*They focus everything firmly on a particular interpretation of the bible (sic). It grates with me as it seems to preclude my personality, but many people in those churches are really happy. It seems so simple - just conform everything to the bible. Someone else tells you how to interpret the bible and will probably give you detailed guidance if you’re not sure how you should apply it in everyday life.”*

(Reflective journal 2013)

Confidence in sources of authority reveals a paradox at the start of my reflective journey which, when pushed to its limit, precludes reflective practice. These issues of authority divide into place and person: what constitutes authoritative sources for theology and who has the right to define and interpret them? Is anything other than the Bible a valid theological source, including my own reflections, and do I, as a fallible human being, and particularly as a woman, have the authority to decide or interpret them?

My initial approach to PT as the locus for my doctoral study was hesitant as whilst it appeared to be the only discipline that would enable me to explore the questions I am

asking, I was worried that it would preclude giving adequate weight to evangelical doctrine and lure me away from 'sound' theological answers into liberal speculation – a place that might seem warm and inviting but I had learned was fundamentally wrong. The evangelical emphasis on the primacy of the Bible sits comfortably with Applied Theology as it can be held as the principal source against which other sources are judged to assist with application or not. This hierarchical approach enforces the submission of other voices such as personal experience, context and academia to the authority of the Bible. I assumed that I could adapt this approach in PT, exploring other academic disciplines and even non-evangelical theologians, but still legitimately argue the precedence of established evangelical teaching in drawing conclusions as the evangelical church is an intrinsic part of my context. In essence everything would be filtered through a unidirectional lens of traditional scriptural interpretation. As I have journeyed the lens being bidirectional has become not only acceptable but essential.

*“Where have I got to with the place of the Bible and how we interpret it?:*

*I still believe that nothing contrary to the bible (sic) can be true.*

*I've learned a lot from people like Paul Gooder on the fallibility of biblical interpretation based on fallible translations. There is so much that changes in language. It is really difficult to argue from nuances of language 2000 years later - at the very least we have to learn an awful lot about the cultural context of the time and take that into account.*

*Whilst the bible is a gift from God I really don't believe that there is anything to say that this book in itself is a primary intended outcome of Jesus ministry. There is nothing to suggest that either Jesus or Paul assumed that there would be a written body of material that dominated faith. Everything was about relating to a person. The law was directly given by God, and so arguably should be more used in churches than the NT!!”*

(Reflective journal December 2015)

I still argue the primacy of the Bible as the 'Word of God', and the appropriateness of submission to it. More complex is conservative evangelical rhetoric suggesting that submission to particular interpretations and interpreters of the Bible is an imperative for true discipleship. Questioning the application of the Word is tantamount to rejecting the authority of God, which is a sin. My heart and experience told me that this stance was inadequate but I was nervous of finding myself in a place where others might think I was downplaying Biblical authority when I felt I was remaining faithful to it.



Yet a growing confidence in myself theologically has led me to find cracks in the veneration of the Bible by some evangelicals. Alongside the downplaying of issues of translation, evolution of language, cultural context, and imminent expectation of the Second Coming increasingly lacking integrity, there is the lack of suggestion in New Testament writings that either Jesus or the apostles ever envisaged an authoritative book among the intended outcomes of their ministries.

This may seem to be a somewhat basic and simple level of argument, but it has taken me many years of Christian faith and church leadership to realise that it may be the conclusion with most integrity. Some of the arguments are seen in my journal entry, and others are explored in the next section of this piece looking at who should have a voice as a theologian.

### *Other sources*

*“interestingly I also feel that I’m becoming less dogmatic about evangelical theology / place of bible (sic) in theology (or not it’s place, but how it fits alongside other inputs to theology)”*

(Reflective journal October 2014)

If other sources such as non-theological academic work and personal experience and reflections do carry authority, do I have the authority to choose to designate that authority? With hindsight the response of my vicar when I first announced my intention to study theology was prophetic: 'but what if it challenges your faith?' I responded that I couldn't believe God asks us to hang up the brains he has given us when it comes to belief in him and that if my faith didn't have enough substance to stand up to intellectual enquiry then it really should be called into question. On reflection this was the beginning of my understanding of the assertion of PT, that the lens of interpretation must be bidirectional. My traditional evangelical dependence on a system of apologetics to justify the validity of a standpoint with the potential for creating further unsatisfactory dogma is brought into awkward tension with my inclination to scientific enquiry. My growth in confidence as a theologian has been synchronous with my confidence in the assertion that intellectual rigour requires theology to submit to a wider sphere of evidence other than its own.

Reflective practice presumes the authority of experience as a source of evidence and is something I've used over many years as part of my medical professional development. However I have not been as confident in considering my reflections or thoughts to hold

theological validity rather than simply contribute to personal reflexivity. What is the place in 'obedience to the inerrant word of God' for reflections on experience of 'the world' which is corrupt and sinful? Conclusions apart from standard evangelical teaching risk unfaithfulness to the word of God and slipping into error (which is not simply about differences in intellectual or academic thought, but is linked to personal faith, holiness and ultimately to salvation). The longevity of the journey that has recently led me to conclude that incorporating reflection into theology is not only acceptable, but actually leads to better theology and is essential to rigorous Biblical hermeneutics exposes the strength of my evangelical roots. Without it theology risks error as a result of an undue emphasis on tradition and magisterium of 'the Church', rather than faithfully proclaiming afresh the living word of God to this generation.

The authority of reflective practice is also in conflict with my internal dogma about, and confidence in, scientific method. Opinion not directly backed up by evidence from a methodologically credible source may be interesting but carries no weight. However, more recently I have come to consider that robust reflective theological practice makes a significant move from the realm of unsubstantiated opinion towards valid data interpretation where the data source is experience of reality. During Summer School 2015 I reflected that I had performed my own 'apologetics' when I first learned about social science research methods, performing mental gymnastics to slot qualitative research in as a branch of quantitative research (to inspire or understand it). Analogous to the applicationism of my theological background, this eradicated the opportunity for depth of understanding afforded by qualitative investigation. This shift in thinking from both faith and academic perspectives have opened up the possibility of having confidence to both explore and contribute to theological understanding.

### **Who?**

*"Slowly dawning on me that what is wanted in the Literature Review isn't what a medical literature review asks for.*

*There is very much about comprehensively saying what has been published on the subject and by whom, offer a critique of how they got there, before then drawing it all together in some way.*

*This seems to want more of an overview of the salient points in the subject with more input of my views on what people have written. Difficult to do that when there aren't stats/methods involved to critique.*

*The model I have always learned is that I shouldn't feature at all as author - objectivity is key.*

*Apparently this is the opposite of what is needed in PT!!!*

*Not sure what I make of this....."*

(Reflective journal April 2014)

Whatever the sources of authority, the question of who has authority to espouse theology remains. Whilst doing the DPT I have realised the extent to which I have believed that some people, usually evangelical men, are more inherently correct in their interpretation and application of the Bible than others, and therefore have theological authority. Others, such as me, can only express opinions shared by those with an authoritative theological voice. Those with a right to speak may intermingle the authority of a teacher with that of the Bible, asserting that anyone questioning their standpoint has dubious commitment to the Christian faith. I therefore become trapped in a circular argument as questioning this approach would demonstrate my failure as a disciple of Christ, proving I had no right to offer a theological opinion in the first place. I therefore cannot be a questioning theologian and remain true to my personal faith.

This reveals a clear disparity between what I believe for others and what I have confidence to believe for myself. With my first forays during my MTh into Liberation Theology and Green's *Let's Do Theology* my response was 'of course, that is obvious – why the need for a book?' Yet for myself theologians are people who speak in theological language, know Greek and Hebrew, and easily verbalize complex theological and philosophical arguments (all of which exclude me). As I began to understand what style of writing was needed for the first module of the DPT, the disconnect in my thinking began to dawn. Whilst agreeing whole-heartedly with Green's assertion that the marginalized and oppressed have a valid theological voice, I was one of the privileged who had the opportunity for academic study, and so different rules 'obviously' applied. My thoughts and opinions were only of value to theology if I could show that they were really the thoughts and opinions of others, albeit critiqued and applied in context. Reflexivity required awareness of the influence of my own presumptions on this process, but that was the limit of the contribution I as a person had any right to make. My initial Literature Review drafts were stilted and rambling as I struggled to understand why my approach wasn't producing the preferred output.

It was in writing and receiving feedback from colleagues on the publishable article (DPT year 2) that I began to realise that my perspective may be of significance, that I can challenge the

work of others and that I can offer conclusions to the theological community that may not only be valid but also valuable.

### ***Feminism***

I have realised that it is deeply engrained within me that women can be confident in everything except theology. Throughout the DPT I have experienced a growing conviction that this is untrue, partly through a developing openness to feminist thinking but also through reflection on my emotional responses in my journal. My rejection of conservative teaching precluding women's ordination happened in response to my experience working some years ago with perpetrators of child sexual abuse who believed their attitudes to women were supported by teaching on male authority over women in the church. That coincided with writing my first ever theological essay titled 'The anointing at Bethany and its implications for the role of women', concluding that Jesus made a woman the ultimate prophet and priest. I discovered that the gap between my experience of life (that women can be extremely gifted and effective leaders) and Biblical teaching might not be so large after all.

Despite this, feminist theology featuring as a core thread to my journey of increasing confidence as a theologian has surprised me. My instinct remained that feminist theology is wrong due to its evolution starting points other than the Bible. The lack of a delineated understanding of God, whether this was Biblical or not, I found when reading feminist practical theologians during year 1 of the DPT frustrated me and caused me to question whether it was actually theology at all.

Listening to Nicola Slee at year 2 Summer School catapulted me into reflecting that the boundary line between true Biblical liberation of women and radical feminist theologians might not fall as near to the conservative evangelical end of the spectrum as I had imagined. Exploring the concept of a feminine Christ, or 'Christa', felt somewhat heretical. Yet the poetry and story reminded me of the strength of priority of my belief that my understanding of God has to allow me to be the person I am, a woman. Jesus was not a woman, but the reflection on how history and theology would have been different if he was became valid. Doctrinally, Jesus was male because of the incarnational necessity to inhabit a gendered form, not to indicate the gender of God. Considering the consequences had God been incarnated in a female form is completely compatible with this doctrine. What would have deeply shocked me two years ago is no longer uncomfortable and I would confidently argue with male conservative colleagues that the question can be asked with the priority of the

Bible still intact.

After the 2012 General Synod vote against the ordination of women to the episcopate I again wondered whether the conservatives were right and that men are more suited to leadership (although I sensed it was a missional disaster as the rest of the world did not understand the limitations on the role of women). My journaling considered a correlation between this acceptance a limit on the authority of women in the church and a sense of uncertainty over whether I had a valid voice in writing theology. However with the 2014 vote in favour of women bishops my journal illustrates significantly changed thinking. A colleague told me that he would seek alternative episcopal oversight should the diocese ever have a female bishop and wanted to know I would not be upset or offended by his position. He also suggested that I would now be fighting to ensure that the episcopal vacancy in the diocese was filled by a woman. My strong emotional response reflected my sense of him dismissing my entire identity as a Christian woman, and I realised I was no longer prepared to entertain an interpretation of the Bible which precluded my sense of call to ministry, even to the episcopate.

I had a voice and dared to express it.

### **De-idealization & Perfectionism**

*“Whilst planning the reflective practice piece I suddenly felt liberated when I realized I could be creative about it and could come up with an illustration on which to base it.*

*This links to the idea of my being free to write / think theologically - without the need to get everything right, but rather to enjoy it and see where the process takes me.”*

(Reflective Journal December 2015)

Perfectionism and lack of self-confidence are symbiotic. At school I loved maths as correct answers were undeniably right and others were wrong. Similarly in conservative evangelicalism there is correct doctrine, Biblical interpretation and application, and there is false and erroneous teaching that is to be avoided. I have struggled to be confident in expressing opinions and ideas in case they are either judged or proved to be wrong. The process of writing is paralysing as I prefer to write nothing than risk being wrong. Growing in confidence has required de-idealization, accepting that in a messy world ambiguity and uncertainty are inevitable and celebrating creativity is an appropriate response.

Idealization is necessary to scientific modelling to allow for accurate predictions (assuming negligible forces are zero, or that objects are perfectly spherical). De-idealization accounts for observed differences between theory and reality. Perfectionism believes the ideal is not just a model but can always be achieved. De-idealization has been described as the disappointing process of the recognition of reality. However I have found de-idealization to be liberating from the constraints of perfectionism.

The DPT has challenged my previously unarticulated supposition that theology, the study of God, is similar to A-level maths with unarguably correct and incorrect answers. I had never questioned what might give theologians their credentials or even divine infallibility, or who would be arbiter of this truth. Fed by both my scientific background and evangelical roots I initially saw the study of PT as a process of information gathering from valid sources to find correct solutions for the context. My role was to analyse the evidence to produce an infallible answer. Two things have made me reflect on the flaws of logic in my thinking and consider that I may bring more to the platform:

- enjoying putting forward an impassioned argument in the publishable article
- experience of the iterative process of writing the article and realising I'm not expected to have had the last word.

Perfectly inerrant theology is a tautology if God is fundamentally beyond full human knowing. Theology can only be an imperfect attempt to describe an obscured image of God allowing the possibility of differing perspectives holding equal validity. It therefore becomes possible that expressing my interpretation of my experience and my opinions, so long as they are well argued, is valid theology.

Applied theology is open to idealization, PT is not because its bidirectional conversation partner is a complex and messy world. Idealized theology requires the chaotic world to become ordered by conforming to an absolute standard; de-idealization recognizes that theology must respond to the Christian doctrine that this world will always be messy. An example from my recent practice is the remarriage of divorcees. Whilst allowing divorce, Biblical narrative tends to preclude remarriage. The first divorcees who asked me to marry them had both been divorced for 40 years and were the victims of adultery and abandonment by their original spouses. They felt the way to live out their retirements together that would be most honouring to God was to marry. The second couple involved a man whose first wife had kicked him out so that her lesbian partner could move in, and in the third couple the woman's first marriage had ended many years before after escaping domestic violence. I tried to

imagine saying 'no' to each of them due to theological purity, but knew that in doing so I would be committing an act of extreme violence against them. I struggled to believe that Jesus' words in the gospels about adultery precluded the hope of marriage for the couples in front of me in preference to the principles of grace, forgiveness and love. I have had the confidence to follow my conscience over the niggling from my conservative heritage that I have been washed away with the tide of the values of the world and have compromised Biblical teaching

Particularly significant to the context of my research is my need to de-idealize church and church leadership. My relaxed confidence in my practice of leadership disappears when I am tired and stressed as I entertain thoughts that 'real church leaders' would be doing things much better than me, leading to emotional drain and downwards spiralling self-confidence. I began the DPT with a desire to uncover definitive answers. I now realise that success will be sign-posting avenues of hopeful possibility.

### **Conclusion: So who am I and who am I becoming as a researching practitioner in Practical Theology?**

The process of writing this reflective piece has brought unexpected illumination of some aspects of the elephant and therefore has been successful as a method for deepening my reflexivity as a researcher and practitioner. Reviewing the contents of my reflective journal for emergent themes and then re-evaluating the journal narrative in the light of those themes has enabled me to explore in more depth cohesive threads that run through the core of my self-understanding and practice.

My reflective journey through PT has involved me unexpectedly uncovering the particularly personal elephant of my own confidence. The presence of struggles with confidence was not unexpected, but rather the process brought an emergent new understanding of the impact, centrality and origins of the issue. I have come to realise that I can only be a theological researcher if I am confident that I have a valid contribution to make to theory. To achieve this my relationship to evangelical dogma will need to continue to change as I persist in reflecting on its deep influence on my understanding of faith, theology and myself.

Inextricably linked to this self confidence is a confidence in the creativity, ambiguity and step-by-step nature of knowledge and research which is incompatible with perfectionism and idealization. My original assumption was that I would undertake largely quantitative research in my area of interest and add that to my experience as a practitioner to suggest potential

changes in practice that might address the elephant of the huge drop off in church attendance when Christian students move to university despite attempts at culturally appropriate engagement by churches. The elephant that emerged, unified by terms such as confidence and creativity, directs me instead towards research which aids direction rather than providing definitive answers, and seeks creative depth rather than statistical significance. This may even mean that even the understanding of what is a 'successful student church' needs to be challenged. My research will need to reflect and engage with the messiness of the context, not just in finding ways to understand it but using research methods that explore it without demanding order from it.

I fundamentally remain someone who names elephants, explores why they are there, unveils them and considers how acknowledging their presence can add positively to the fruitfulness of life. The process of writing this piece has stimulated me to ensure I give enough attention to examining the elephant from different viewpoints with enough depth that core formational strands might emerge.

Despite the facets of the elephant that have been illuminated by this journey into the origins and effects of my evangelical roots on my understanding of the nature of theological knowledge and the authority of sources and practitioners, a haziness remains about it. The lens may need adjusting to bring even greater clarity to facets that have been explored here, whilst exploration of different slants may be necessary to complete the image. This will demand continued reflexivity as I progress through part 2 of the DPT programme.



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## What influences students to join a Church at uni?

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### Welcome

**Thank you for clicking on the questionnaire link.**

**It is part of my doctoral research into engagement of students from a Christian background with churches whilst at university.**

**It should take about 5-10 mins to complete.**

If you click on 'next' you're consenting to you answers being used anonymously in the research project. You have the right to withdraw at any stage if you wish to - simply close the webpage if you don't want to continue.

I would really like to understand both the positives and negatives of people's experience, so please do give honest answers.

Alongside this survey, I'd like to be able to get some more in-depth information on the same topic by interviewing a few students one-to-one, either by Skype/Facetime or in person. If this is something you'd like to volunteer for you'll be asked to enter your email address at the end.

**If you've got any questions or would like further information about the study, please feel free to email me:**



**Thank you so much for your time and interest.**

**Megan**

5

10

## introduction

Are you currently an undergraduate student at a UK university? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Would you describe yourself as a Christian, or someone with a Christian or church background? *(it's up to you how you define those terms)*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

If answer to above question = 'no'

Thank you

Thank you for your interest.

**This survey is only exploring the experiences of current UK university students who describe themselves as Christians, or as having a Christian background.**

## A bit of background

are you aged: \* *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).

- ☐ 17-19
- ☐ 20-24
- ☐ 25 or over

Which university are you studying at? \* *Required*

What is your course? \* *Required*

Have you moved away from home to go to university? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes ☐ no

How long have you been at university? \* *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).

- ☐ in 1st year
- ☐ in 2nd year
- ☐ in 3rd year
- ☐ longer than 3 years

## Life before university

Did you attend a church prior to starting university? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes ☐ no

How often did you go to church on a Sunday? \* *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).

- ☐ most weeks ☐ once or twice a month ☐ less than once a month

Did your family attend church with you prior you coming to university?

- ☐ yes  
☐ no

What sort of church denomination best describes the church you attended at home? \* *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).

- ☐ Roman Catholic  
☐ Church of England  
☐ Methodist  
☐ Baptist  
☐ Pentecostal  
☐ big independent evangelical/charismatic  
☐ small independent evangelical/charismatic  
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

## just a bit more about life before uni

Did you regularly do any of the following before starting uni... \* *Required*

- ☐ attend church meetings other than on a Sunday
- ☐ read the Bible on your own
- ☐ pray on your own
- ☐ attend a church youth group or home group
- ☐ no - I didn't do any of those

Did anyone at home talk to you about being a Christian at uni?  
(tick all that apply) \* *Required*

Please select at least 1 answer(s).

- ☐ vicar / minister / priest
- ☐ youth worker
- ☐ family
- ☐ other Christian friends
- ☐ no one
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

Have you been to any big Christian conferences/ joined any Christian networks: \* *Required*

Please select at least 1 answer(s).

- ☐ Spring Harvest
- ☐ Momentum
- ☐ Word Alive
- ☐ New Wine
- ☐ Soul Survivor
- ☐ No - I haven't been to any
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

now some stuff about your time at uni

Do you attend a student Christian group? \* *Required*

if yes, or occasionally, which ones?

Please select at least 1 answer(s).

- ☐ Christian Union
- ☐ CathSoc
- ☐ Navs
- ☐ Radical Youth
- ☐ Student life
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

## Church?

Have you ever attended a church at uni? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Do you now attend a church regularly? \* Required

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

if yes, which one?

## Great that you've found a church

How many churches did you try before settling on this one? \* Required

What was the biggest single reason for choosing to stick with the church you're at? \* Required



## help us understand a bit more?

How many churches have you tried? \* *Required*

What is the most number of Sundays you've tried a particular church for (approximately)? \* *Required*

Please enter a whole number (integer).

The number should be 1 or greater.

Your answer should be no more than 2 characters long.

What is the biggest single reason for NOT sticking with a church you tried? \* *Required*

did you consider joining one of the churches you tried? \* *Required*

☐ yes

☐ no

if yes, could you say more about what attracted you to it, and why you didn't choose to stick with it in the end?

## What info have you had about local churches?

Have you been given any information about local churches at uni? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Have any of your friends invited you along to church with them? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Have you had contact with the university Chaplaincy team? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Have any churches contacted you directly inviting you to attend? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

are there any times where you wish you had been part of a church? \* *Required*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

if yes, please briefly explain

## How did you hear about local churches?

Were you given any information about local churches at uni? \* Required

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Did friends invited you along to church with them? \* Required

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Have you had contact with the university Chaplaincy team? \* Required

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Did any churches contacted you directly inviting you to attend? \* Required

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Do you still go to church when you're back home? \* Required

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

## Student Churches

Some students have said each of the following have influenced them to join a church whilst at uni.

Select up to 3 that you think influence students to join a church: \* *Required*

Please select no more than 3 answer(s).

- ☐ Friends at uni go to church
- ☐ family and friends back home expect them to
- ☐ it's important to their identity as a Christian
- ☐ it's an important way they will grow in their faith
- ☐ they want to be part of a Christian family / network
- ☐ worshipping God on a Sunday is important for a Christian
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

What about your own story? What has influenced you towards joining a church, or not, at uni?

Christian students who haven't joined a church at uni have said the following have been factors... Select up to 3 that you agree have an influence on students: \* *Required*

Please select no more than 3 answer(s).

- ☐ Friends don't go to church
- ☐ too much studying to do
- ☐ Saturday is usually a late night socializing
- ☐ can't find a church that suits their preferred style
- ☐ tried a few churches and given up looking
- ☐ just not a priority
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

Please rank what you think are the most important features of a church? (start at 1 for the most important; leave blank any you don't think are important at all) \* *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 6 answer(s).

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) in any single column.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Good Bible teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
welcomes you as part of the family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
integrated community of all ages	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
lots of other students attend	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
offers activities specifically for students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
food	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
sacramental worship (communion services)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
traditional church music	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
midweek groups / activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
within 10 minutes walk of where you live	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
great worship band	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How would you define a Christian? (select the one that best fits what you believe, or add your own at the end) \* Required

If you selected Other, please specify:

## a bit more about you

Which of the following do you do regularly (once a week or more)? \* *Required*

- ☐ Read the Bible
- ☐ Pray
- ☐ practice meditation
- ☐ practice mindfulness
- ☐ none of the above

Where and when do you feel closest to God? *Optional*

In what other ways are you spiritually nurtured?

How important do you think church attendance is for a Christian? \* *Required*

In what ways has church helped you grow in your Christian faith?

Who inspires you as a Christian role model? (living or dead!)

is there anything else you think it would be helpful for us to know about your experience of faith and church at uni?

### One last thing.....

The next stage of this research is for me to have individual conversations with some students to understand more of the issues that influence whether students from a Christian background join a church or not whilst at university.

If you are interested in taking part in one of these conversations (or at least learning more about them), please provide an email address below:

First name

Last name:

Email address:

Please enter a valid email address.



Thank You!

You've reached the end of the survey. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this and sharing your experience and help with my research.

If you've got any more questions, or would like to receive a copy of the research results, please drop me an email

[Redacted]

If thinking through these questions has raised any issues for you which you would like to talk to a chaplain about, please do contact Andrew Cole on [Redacted] He will be happy to either chat to you personally or put you in contact with another appropriate person.

If you prefer to speak to someone with no particular religious affiliation, you can contact Prof Harish Vyas on [Redacted]

If you have any complaints about the research please contact Prof Stephen Pattison: [Redacted]

---

## Key for selection options

**15 - Do you attend a student Christian group?**

No - never  
have done occasionally  
yes, regularly

**18 - How many churches did you try before settling on this one?**

1 (just this one)  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
more than 6

**19 - How many churches have you tried?**

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
more than 6

**34 - How would you define a Christian? (select the one that best fits what you believe, or add your own at the end)**

someone who attends church fairly regularly  
someone who has been baptised  
someone who has made a personal decision to believe and trust in Jesus & to repent of sin  
someone whose family have brought them up attending church  
someone who makes following Jesus the most important thing in their life  
a UK citizen who hasn't got any other specific faith (or chosen to be an atheist)  
someone who is concerned about the needs of others and lives their life by Christian principles

Other

**38 - How important do you think church attendance is for a Christian?**

Essential  
good to go occasionally  
doesn't matter

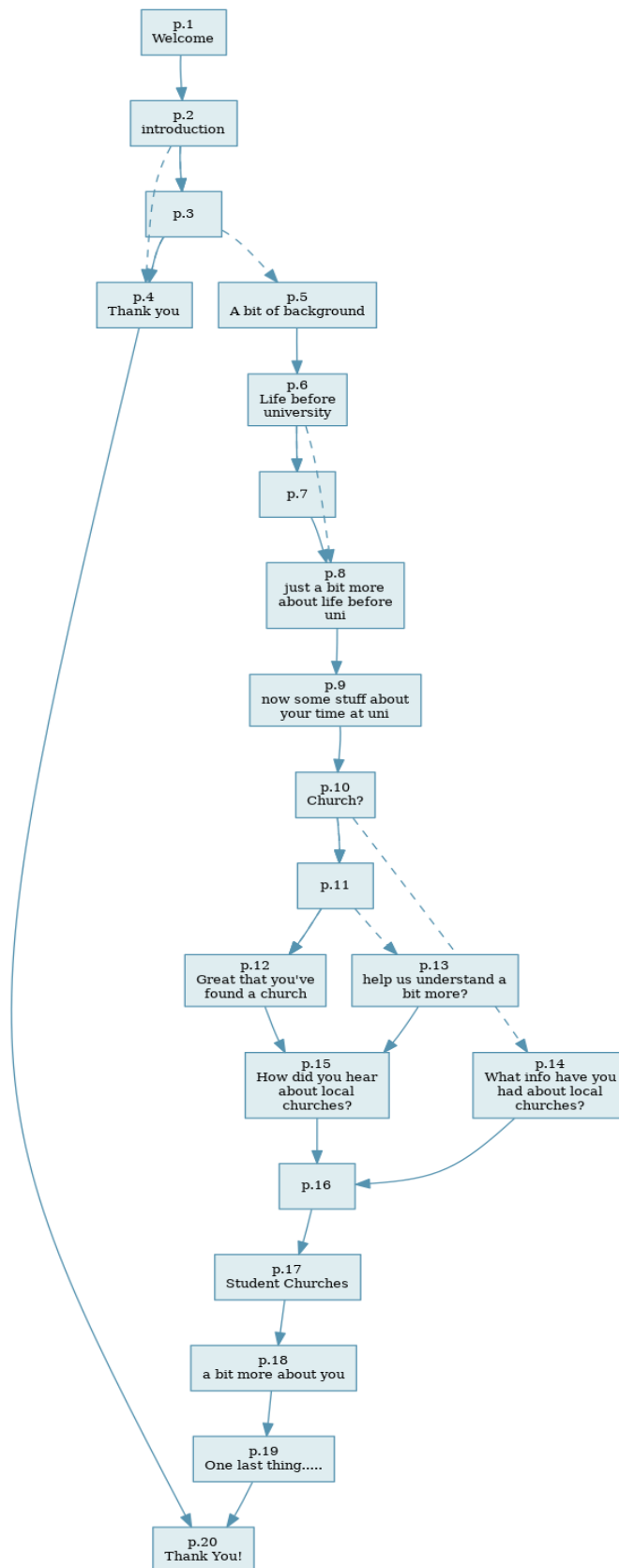


Figure 6: Survey structure

**Introduction**

The purpose of the introduction is to ensure that the participant understands the nature of the research project they are taking part in, and with their consent to participation.

65 The introduction will therefore cover:

- brief summary of purpose of the project
- explanation of the format of the semi-structured interview
- confidentiality including use of data, issues of identification and anonymity in both the written thesis and subsequent dissemination of findings
- 70 • right to not answer questions or terminate the interview
- right to withdraw from the research project in the future
- recording of the interview and note taking
- right to request to see a copy of the interview transcript
- any questions the participant may wish to raise.

75

**Background information questions:**

If a student has volunteered to participate in an interview by providing their email address at the end of the online survey, the answers they gave to background questions will be confirmed with them.

80 If this is not the case (e.g., a student has made contact at a later date to offer their participation, and therefore their survey responses cannot be identified), the background questions from the survey will be asked.

**Core content:**

85 The interview will then follow the basic structure of the survey questions, asking the students to give more detail of their own story, what they have seen of the experience of other students around them, and their opinions on what answers might be generalizable to a wider student population.

Questions will then be developed to explore the student's faith story at university, whether  
90 they feel it has grown or declined and what factors have influenced this.

**Closure:**

The purpose of the closure is threefold:

- to ensure the participant has been able to say all that they would like to
- 95 • to give further opportunity for any questions the participant may have about the research project
- to thank the participant for their time and contribution

## 100      **Appendix D                      Student Interview Information and Consent Form**

### **Research into engagement of Christian students with churches whilst at university**

Thank you for completing the online survey and indicating your interest in participating in a one-to-one interview. You will know by now that this is part of research I am undertaking  
105      towards a Doctorate in Practical Theology with the University of Birmingham trying to understand more of how students who identify themselves as Christians end up attending church, or not, whilst at university. The 3 components of the research project are the online survey amongst students, in-depth interviews with students, and interviews with church leaders who are working to engage with students.

110      The interview with you can take place at a time convenient to both of us, and can either be on Skype/FaceTime, or in person. I intend to use a semi-structured interview format, which means I've got some starter questions, to give focus and direction to our conversation, but it is quite flexible. I will send you some sample questions beforehand.

115      In essence I'd really like to hear your story and your reflections on how you've got to the place you are at, and also to understand what your thoughts are about Christian faith in the transition to university life and what influences what students do. I need to digitally record the interview, as well as me making some notes. You are welcome to receive a copy of both  
120      the audio transcript and my notes should you wish to. Everything will be fully anonymized before it is used, and all transcripts /notes will be securely stored until no longer needed for the research, and then destroyed.

The research has received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham. You have the  
125      right to withdraw at any stage if you wish to. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, please do contact Professor Stephen Pattison, my research supervisor  
( [REDACTED] )

I hope that you will enjoy being part of this research and reflecting on your life at uni. I also

130 hope it will be of benefit to students in the future by helping churches and chaplains learn more of how they can best support students in their faith whilst at university.

If you would like to know the findings of the research I would be very happy to share them with you once the project is completed.

135 If you are happy to go ahead with the interview I need to get formal consent from you, so if you are happy to go ahead please complete and return the attached form to me and I'll then be in touch to arranged a good time for the interview.

Megan Smith

140

145      **Research project:**      **Engagement of Christian students with churches whilst at university**  
         **Researcher:**              Megan Smith  
         **Organization:**              University of Birmingham

**Name of participant:**

**Contact email address / phone number:**

150

You should have received an information sheet with this form. Please read it before completing the form below. If you would like more information at any point please contact me on [REDACTED]

- 155
  - I have read and understood the information sheet provided
  - I have been given opportunity to ask further questions if I wish
  - I understand I can withdraw my involvement at any point
  - I understand that the interview will be recorded and notes taken
  - I would like to receive a copy of the transcript of my interview
- 160
  - I would like to be informed of the findings of the research
  - I agree to take part in the research, as specified.

Participant's signature:

165      Researcher's signature:

## Appendix E                      Interview Structure: Church Leaders

The interviews will be semi-structured and therefore the questions below are for use as a flexible guideline only.

### Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to ensure that the participant understands the nature of the research project they are taking part in, and are happy to give their consent to participation.

The introduction will therefore cover:

- brief summary of purpose of the project
- explanation of the format of the semi-structured interview
- confidentiality including use of data, issues of identification and anonymity in both the written thesis and subsequent dissemination of findings
- right to not answer questions or terminate the interview
- right to withdraw from the research project in the future.
- right to request to see a copy of the interview transcript
- any questions the participant may wish to raise.

### Background information questions:

These questions are to set a context in which the student-focused questions can be understood.

- What is your role within the church?
- How long have you been in this role / in leadership at this church?
- how would you describe the denomination / tradition of your church?
- How many students currently attend your church? (as a proportion of total attendance)

### Student-focused questions:

These hope to understand how the church is currently engaging with students and why.

- In what ways does your church engage, or try to engage, students?
- Is there a specific strategy / plan behind this, and how/why has this developed?
- What is your sense of the pattern of student engagement with your church?

(e.g., do they arrive at the start of their time as students, or join later on during their time at university?)

- Do students come in response to your active efforts to engage them, or do they find their own way to you?
- what proportion of students attend initially and then drop out?
- What is the split between students are simply attend activities and those who are



whole-heartedly committed to the church?

- Do students come alone or with groups of friends?
- Do students tend to be members of the Christian Union / other student Christian group, or not?

210

#### **Reflections on issues surrounding church engagement with university students.**

- What is your reaction to the statistics about church attendance by Christian students at university?
- Why do you think so many Christian students don't join a church at university?
- 215 • How important is it that students find a church whilst at university?
- What do Christian students most need from a church?
- Does it matter which church a student attends?
- Are there ways in which you think churches can improved their engagement with students?
- 220 • Can attempts by churches to engage students be harmful in any way? If so, how?
- Is there anything else you think churches / chaplaincy need to consider when trying to engage Christian students?

#### **Youth work focused questions**

- 225 • Does your church do any specific preparation with young people before they go to university?

#### **Closure**

The purpose of the closure is threefold:

- 230 • to ensure the participant has been able to say all that they would like to
- to give further opportunity for any questions the participant may have about the research project
- to thank the participant for their time and contribution.

235

## **Appendix F                      Church leader information and consent form**

### **Research into engagement of Christian students with churches whilst at university**

240      Thank you for your interest in participating in the research I am undertaking towards a  
Doctorate in Practical Theology with the University of Birmingham. The research aims to  
bring both a practical and theological understanding of how students who attended church  
prior to university and identify themselves as Christians make decisions to attend church, or  
not whilst at university, and the influence of local church practices on this.


245      The research strategy is based around qualitative methods used within market research.  
Whilst I do not think that church engagement with students is primarily about marketing to  
consumers, market research methods are designed to understand how people make  
decisions and the factors which influence them. There are 3 components to the research  
project: a survey amongst students, in-depth interviews with students, and interviews with

250      church leaders who are working to engage with students to try to correlate the perspectives  
of students and those of churches.

The interview with you can take place at a time and location convenient to you. I intend to  
use a semi-structured interview format to give focus and direction to our conversation, but it

255      is quite flexible. I will send you some sample questions beforehand. The interview will be  
digitally recorded, as well as me making some notes. You are welcome to receive a copy of  
both the audio transcript and my notes should you wish to.

The research has received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham. You have the

260      right to withdraw at any stage if you wish to. If you have any concerns about the conduct of  
the project, please do contact Professor Stephen Pattison, my research supervisor  
()

I hope that the findings of this research will be of benefit to all churches who are trying to

265      support students in their faith whilst at university, and I will be very happy to share the  
findings with you once the project is completed.

Best wishes  
Megan Smith

270

**Research project:** Engagement of Christian students with churches whilst at university  
**Researcher:** Megan Smith  
**Organization:** University of Birmingham

275 **Name of participant:**

**Contact email address / phone number:**

You should have received an information sheet with this form. Please read it before completing the form below. If you would like more information at any point please contact

280 me on 

- I have read and understood the information sheet provided
- I have been given opportunity to ask further questions if I wish
- I understand I can withdraw my involvement at any point
- 285 • I understand that the interview will be recorded and notes taken
- I would like to receive a copy of the transcript of my interview
- I would like to be informed of the findings of the research
- I agree to take part in the research, as specified.

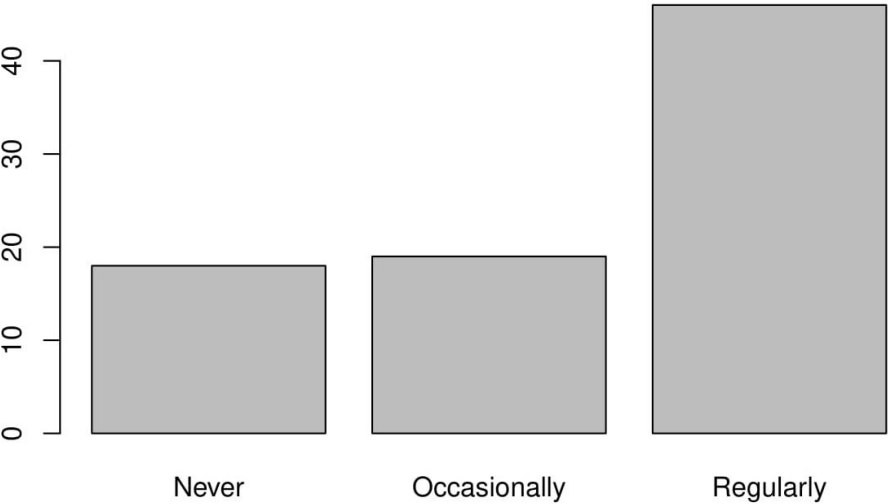
290 Participant's signature:

Researcher's signature:

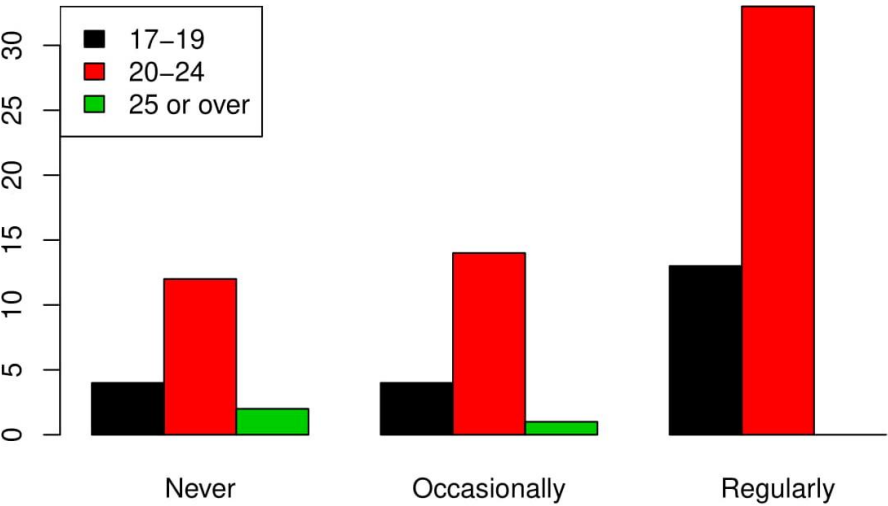
Church Survey

Attend church group

Overall response (Q15)

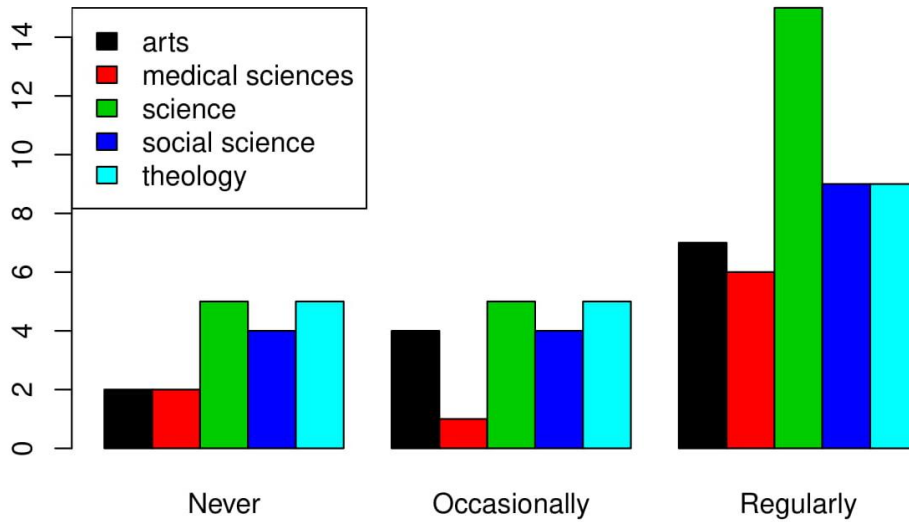


Does it depend on age (Q3)?



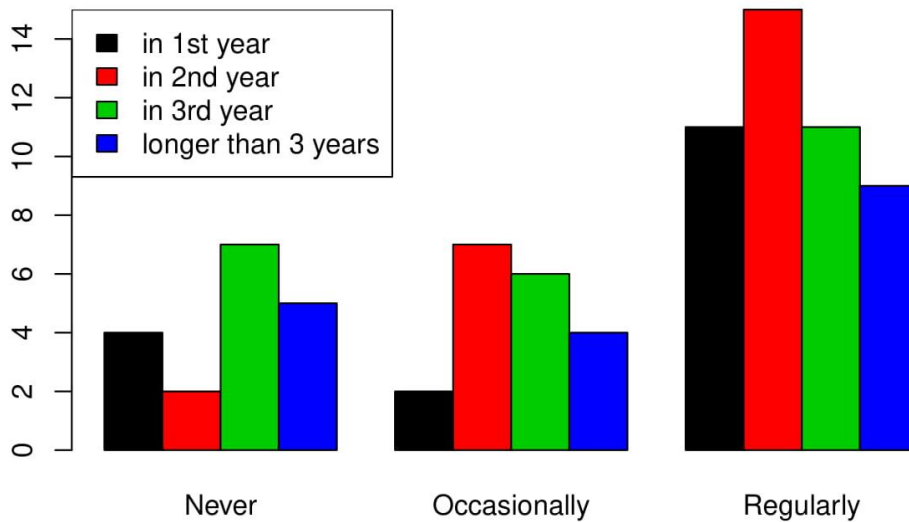
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 5.0368, df = 4, p-value = 0.2835
```

Does it depend on subject (Q5b)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 2.123, df = 8, p-value = 0.977
```

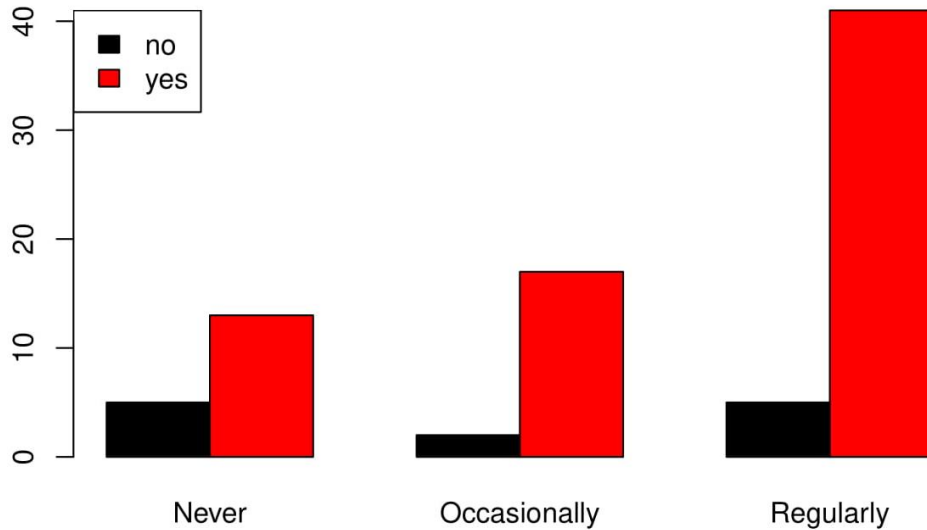
Does it depend on time at university (Q7)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 5.2844, df = 6, p-value = 0.5079
```

Does it depend on previously attending church (Q8)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
```

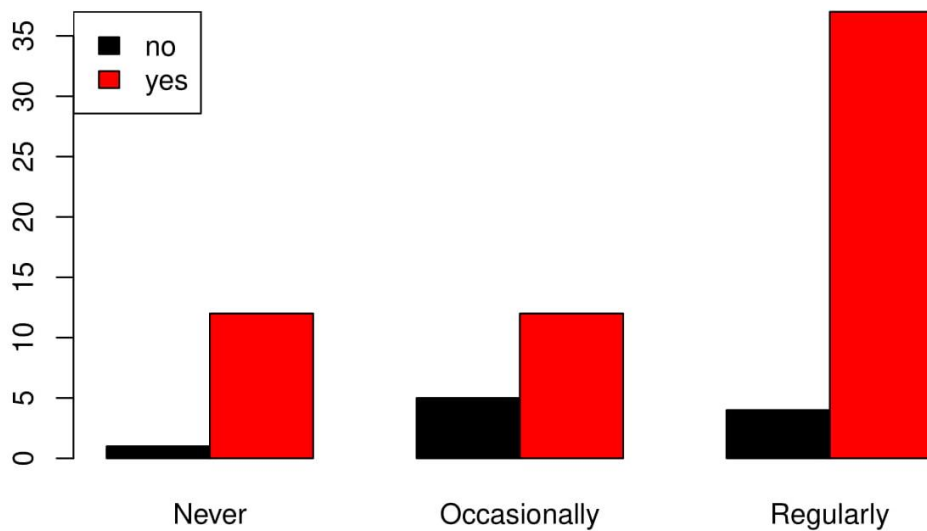
```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

```
##
```

```
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 3.2986, df = 2, p-value = 0.1922
```

Does it depend on family attending church (Q10)?



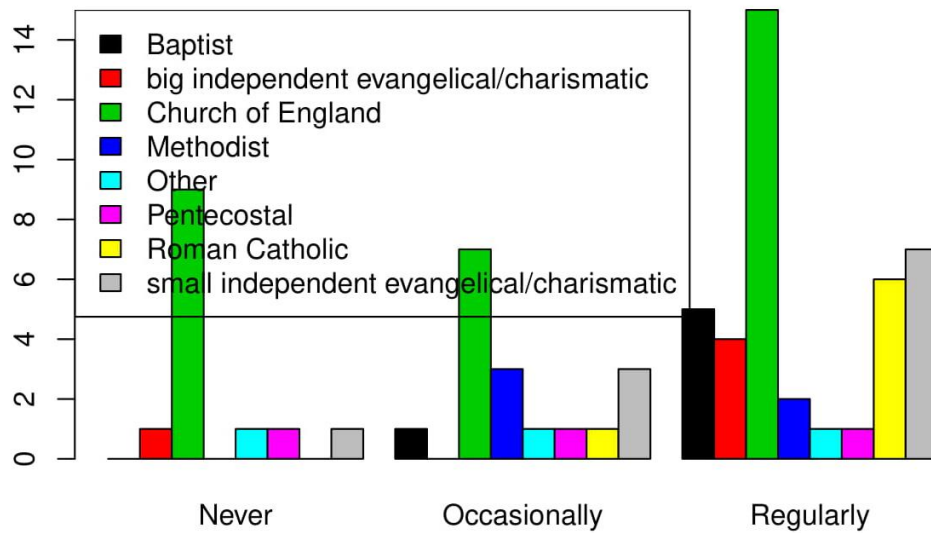
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
```

```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

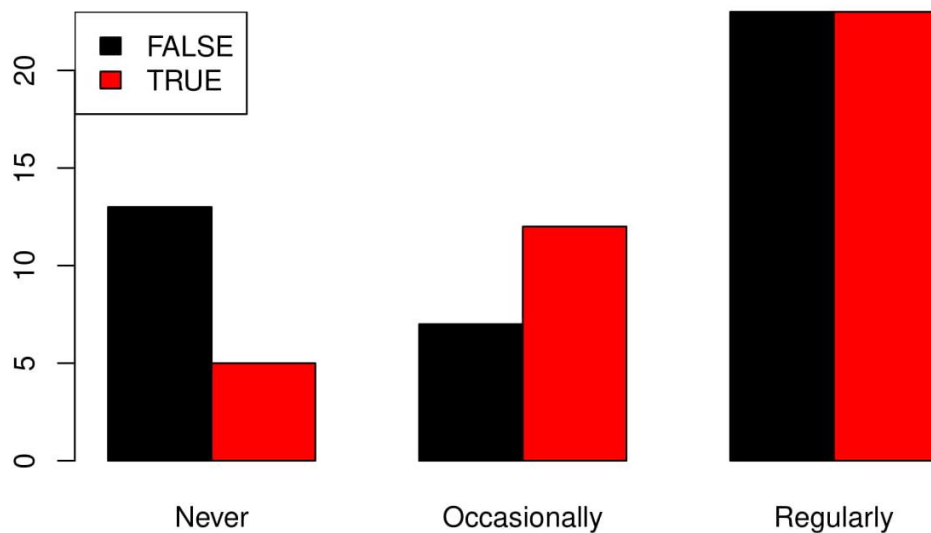
```
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 4.3741, df = 2, p-value = 0.1122
```

Does it depend on denomination (Q11)?



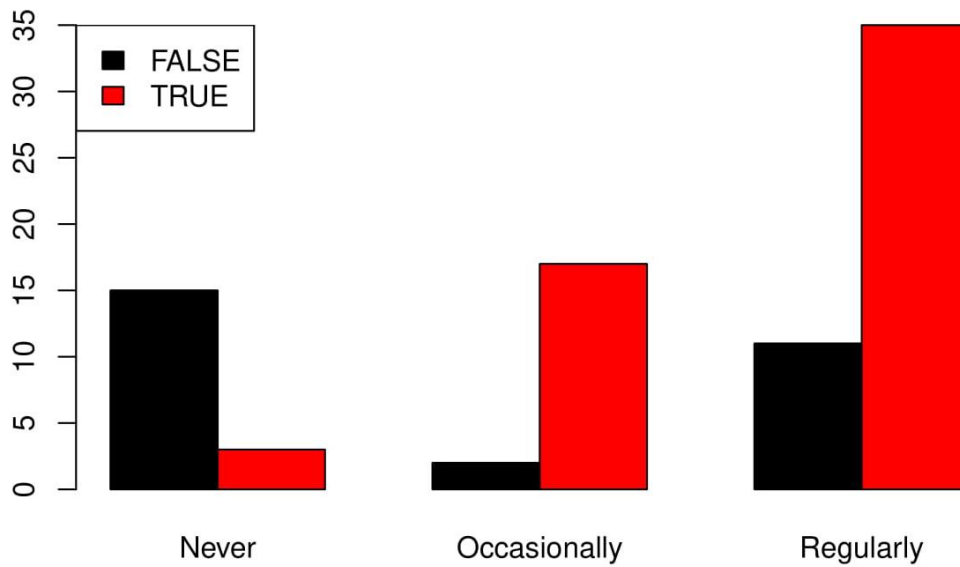
Does it depend on activity (Q12)?

### Attend meetings



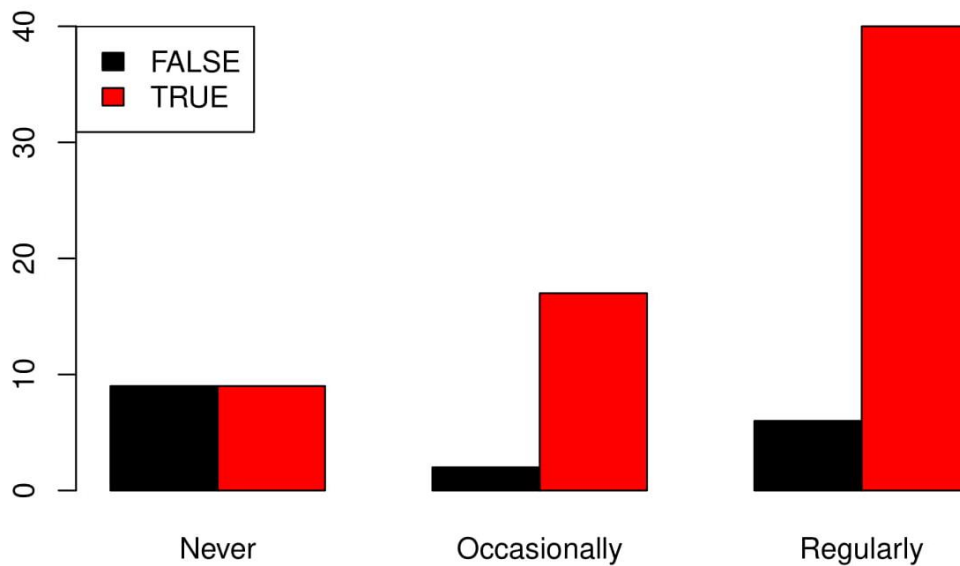
```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 4.7691, df = 2, p-value = 0.09213
```

## Read Bible



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 26.371, df = 2, p-value = 1.877e-06
```

## Pray

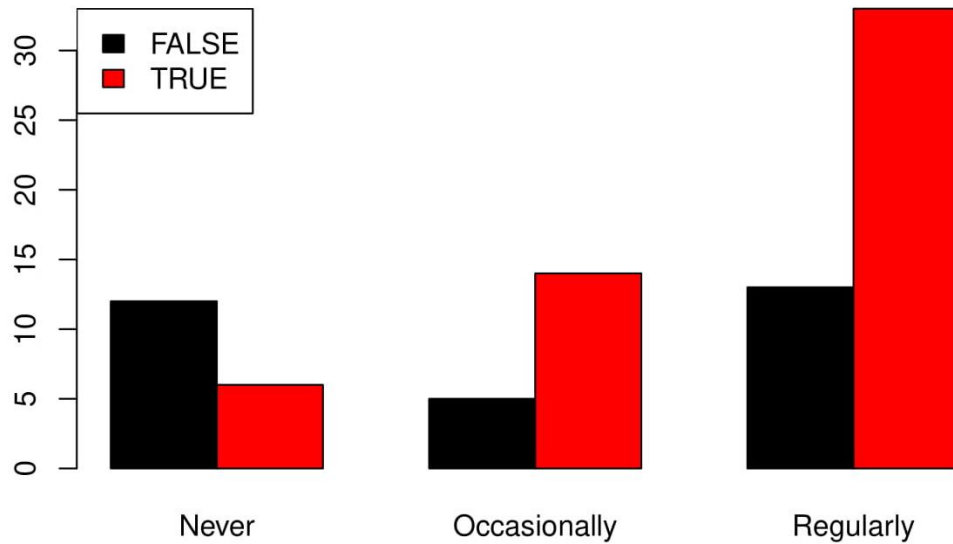


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
```



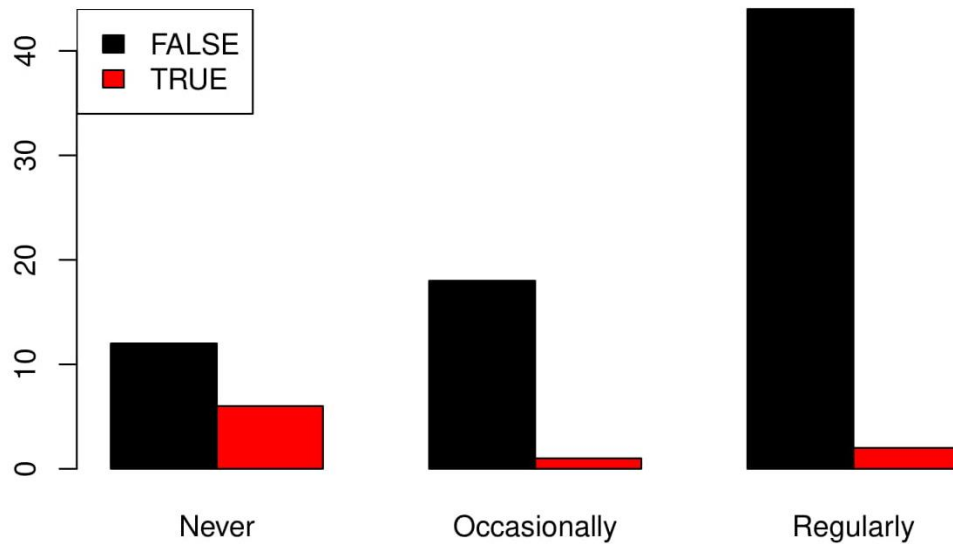
```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 12.349, df = 2, p-value = 0.002082
```

### Attend youth/home group



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 9.2994, df = 2, p-value = 0.009564
```

### None of the above



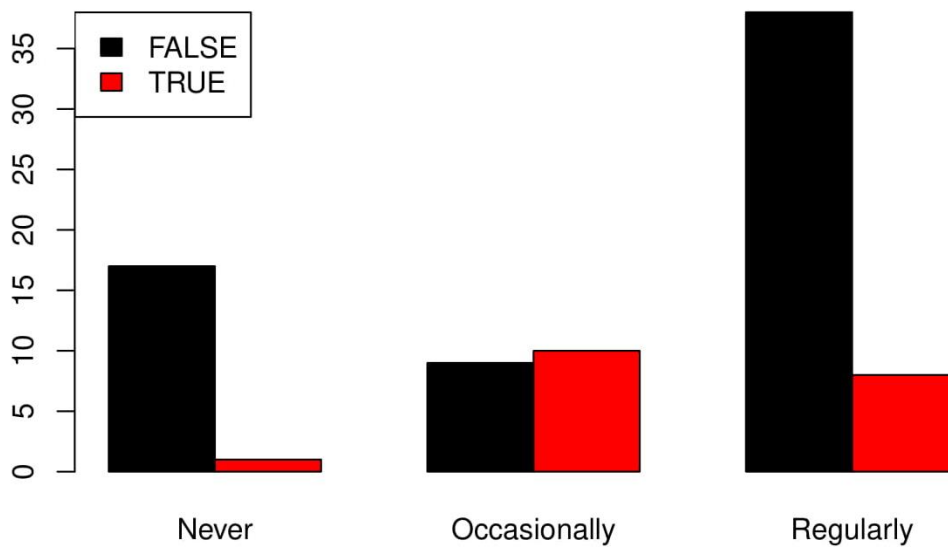
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 12.037, df = 2, p-value = 0.002433
```

Those who read the Bible, pray or attend a youth/home group are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly. Those who do “None of the above” are less likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

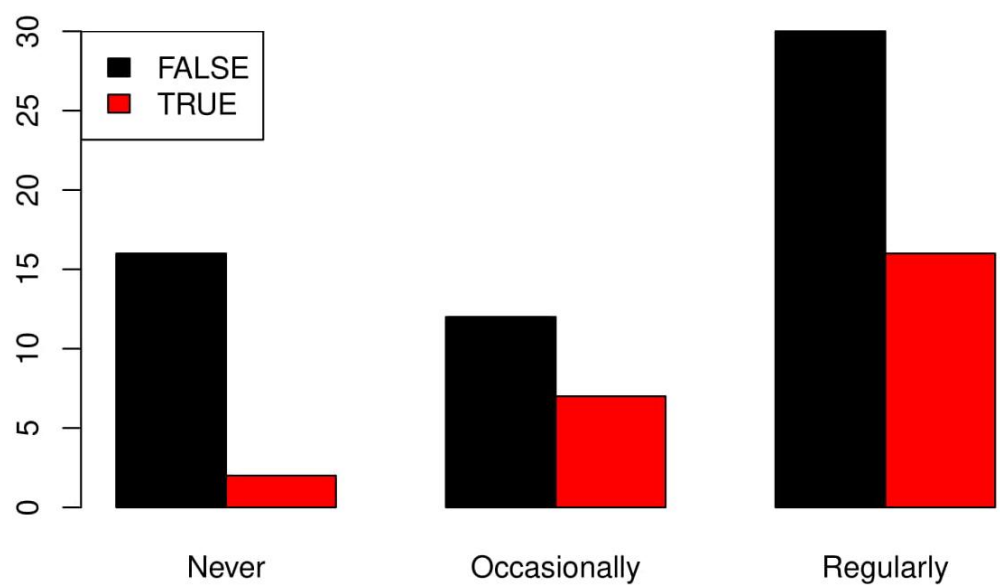
Does it depend on talking with someone (Q13)?

### Talk by vicar/minister



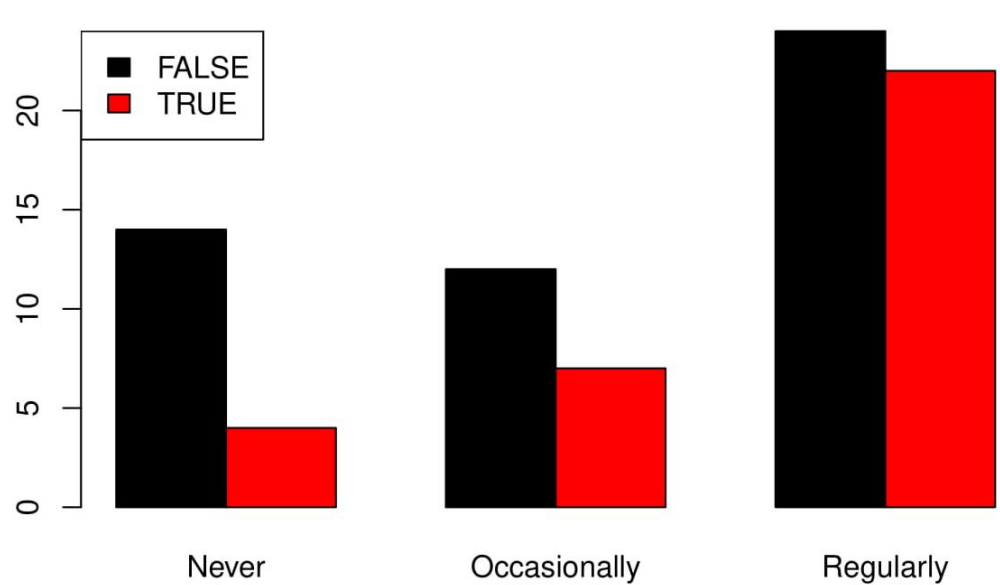
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 13.374, df = 2, p-value = 0.001247
```

Talk by youth worker



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.9731, df = 2, p-value = 0.1372
```

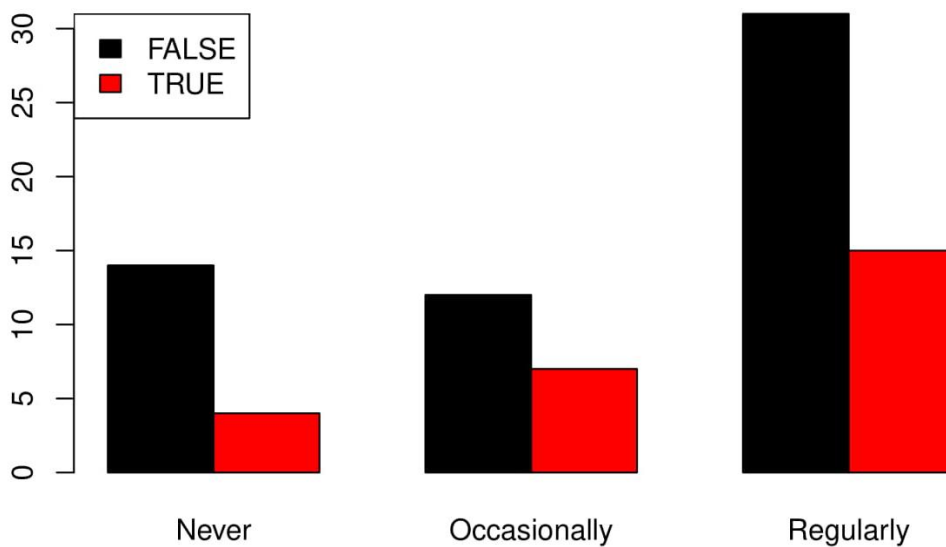
Talk by family



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
```

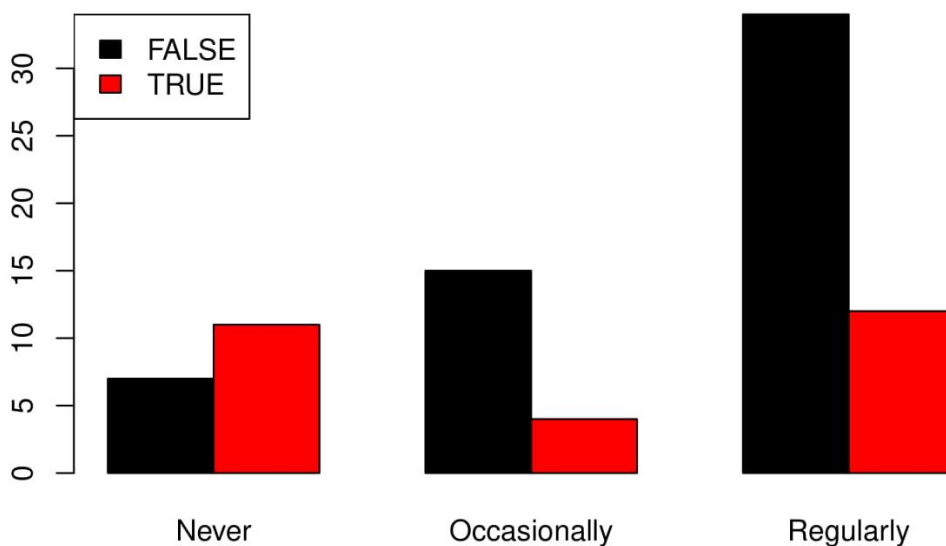
```
## X-squared = 3.6286, df = 2, p-value = 0.163
```

### Talk by Christian friends



```
##  
## Pearson's Chi-squared test  
##  
## data: counts  
## X-squared = 0.99738, df = 2, p-value = 0.6073
```

### Talk by no one

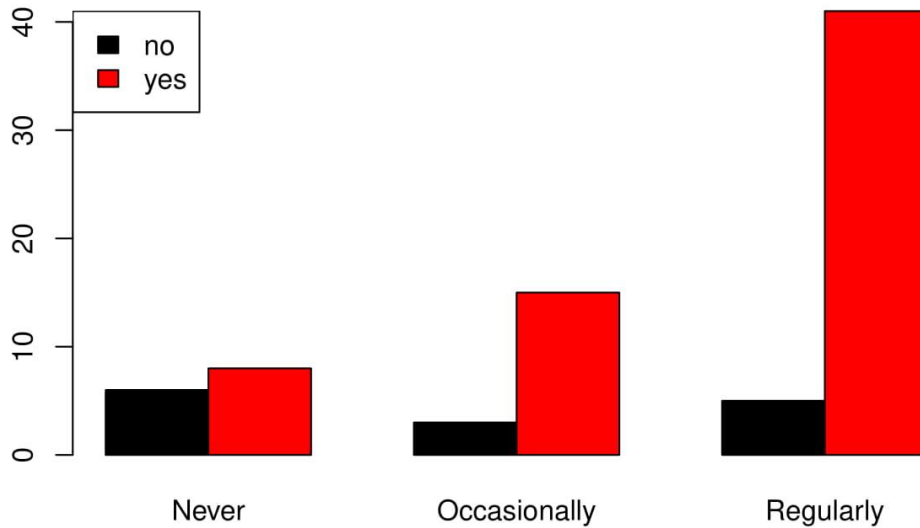


```
##  
## Pearson's Chi-squared test  
##
```

```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 8.7098, df = 2, p-value = 0.01284
```

Those who are not spoken to by anyone are less likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

Does it depend on information on local churches (Q25)?



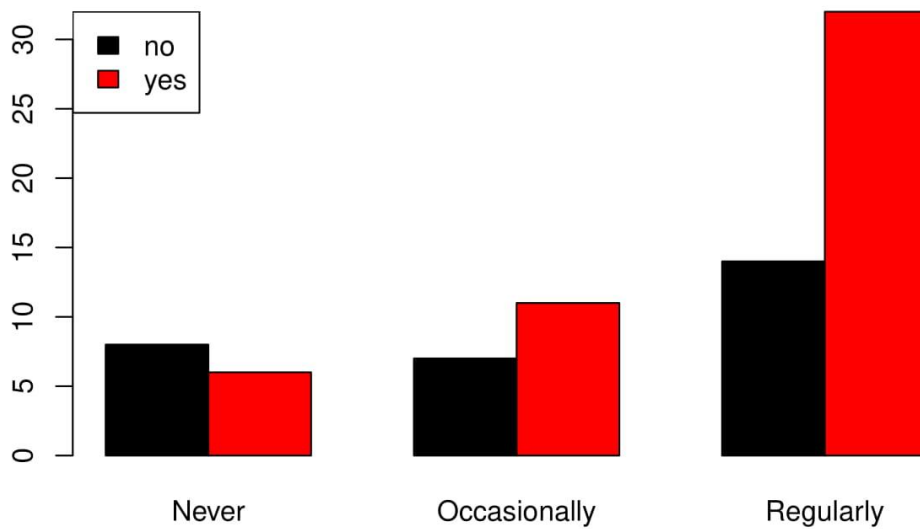
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
```

```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 7.4834, df = 2, p-value = 0.02371
```

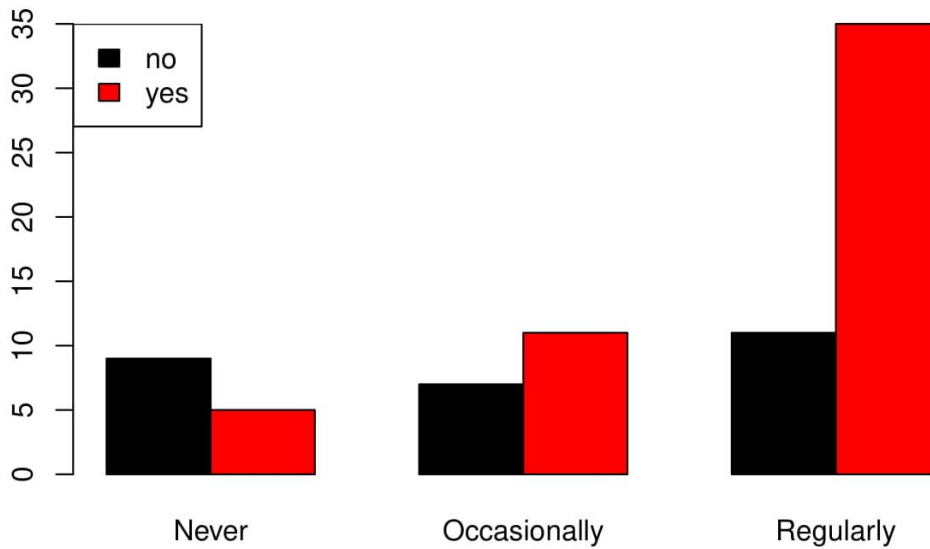
Those who receive information on local churches are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

Does it depend on invitation from friends (Q26)?



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.3073, df = 2, p-value = 0.1913
```

Does it depend on contact from chaplaincy (Q27)?

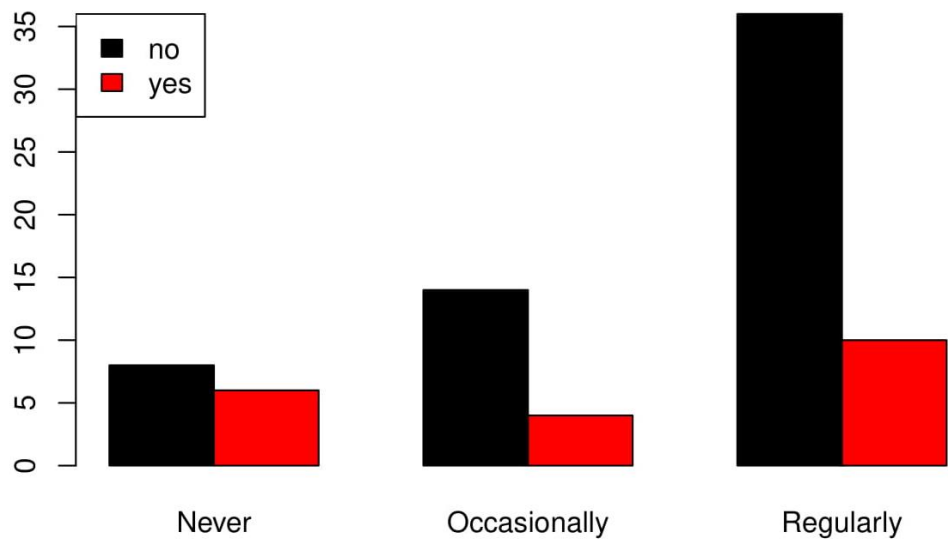


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 7.9186, df = 2, p-value = 0.01908
```

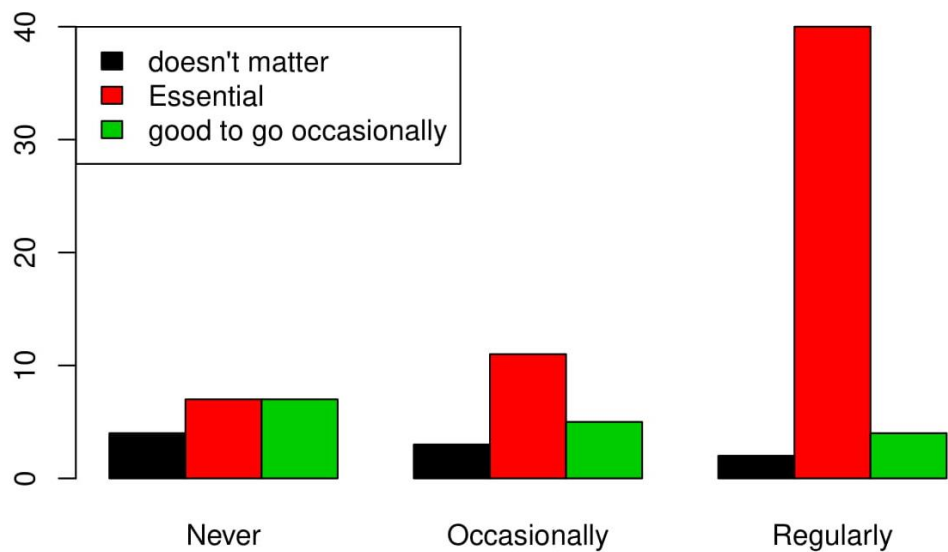
Those who have contact with the chaplaincy are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

Does it depend on contact from churches (Q28)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 2.654, df = 2, p-value = 0.2653
```

Does it depend on the importance of church attendance (Q38)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 15.904, df = 4, p-value = 0.003151
```

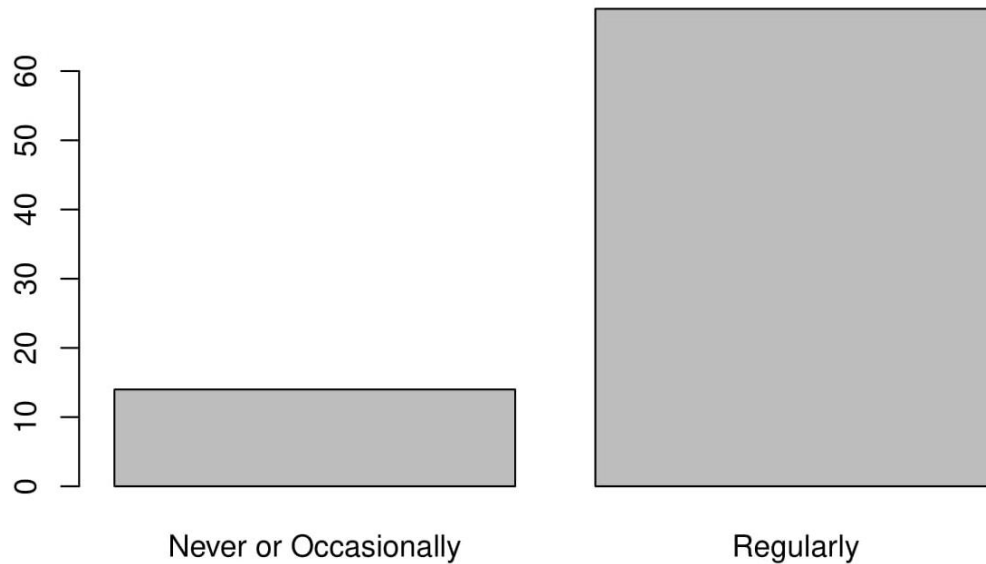
Those who think attending church is essential are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly.



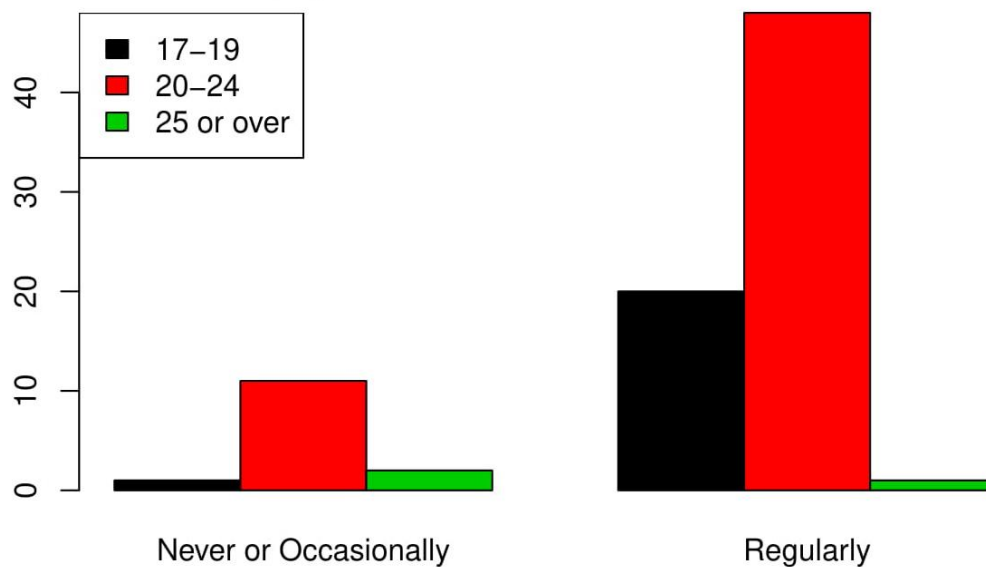
## Church Survey - Attend Church

Overall response (Q16 & Q17)

```
## readxl works best with a newer version of the tibble package.  
## You currently have tibble v1.4.2.  
## Falling back to column name repair from tibble <= v1.4.2.  
## Message displays once per session.
```



Does it depend on age (Q3)?

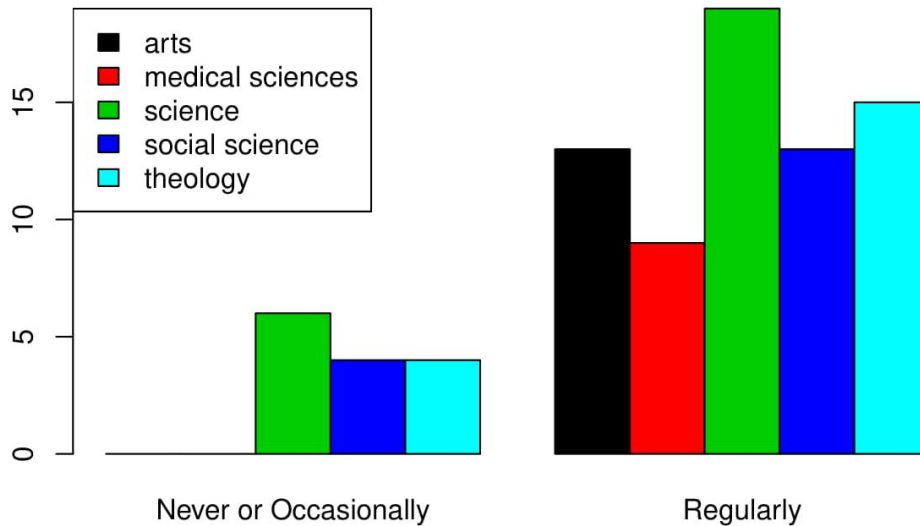


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect  
##  
## Pearson's Chi-squared test  
##
```

```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 7.6332, df = 2, p-value = 0.022
```

Those aged 17-19 are more likely to attend church regularly. (95% of 17-19 attend church regularly compared to 81% of 20-24.)

Does it depend on subject (Q5b)?

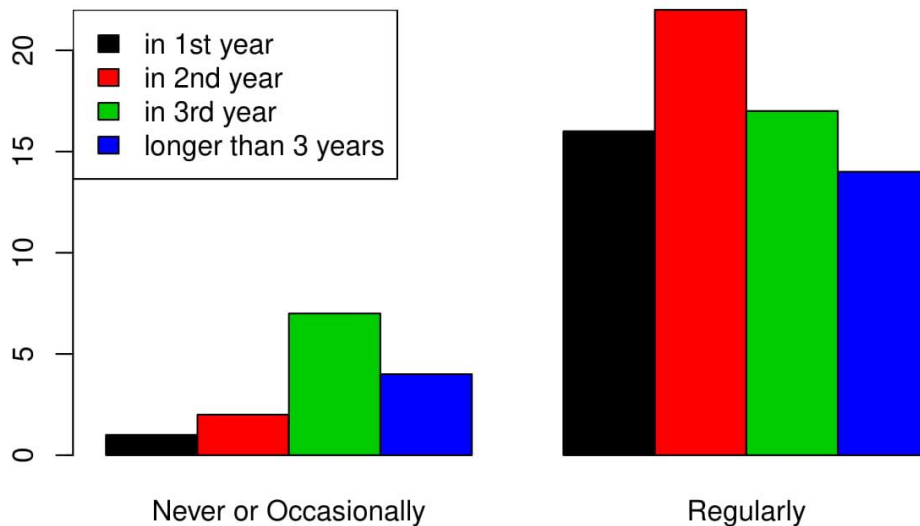


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
```

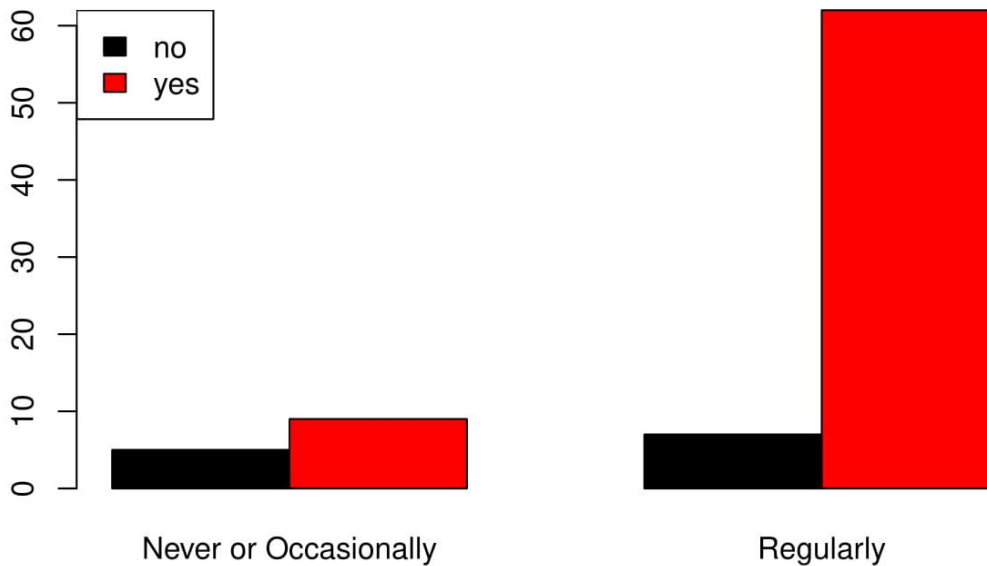
```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 6.1462, df = 4, p-value = 0.1885
```

Does it depend on time at university (Q7)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 5.6667, df = 3, p-value = 0.129
```

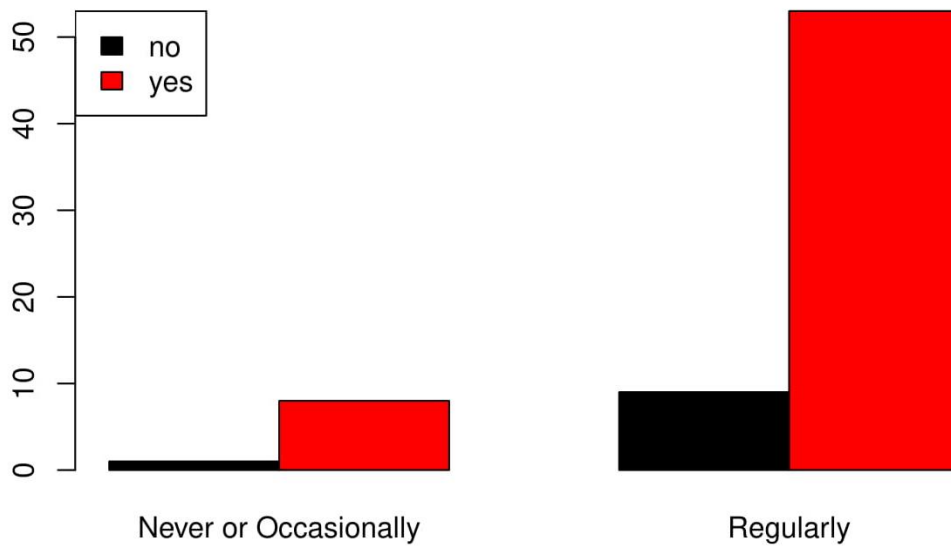
Does it depend on previously attending church (Q8)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 4.2588, df = 1, p-value = 0.03905
```

Those who previously attended church are more likely to attend church regularly.

Does it depend on family attending church (Q10)?



## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect

##

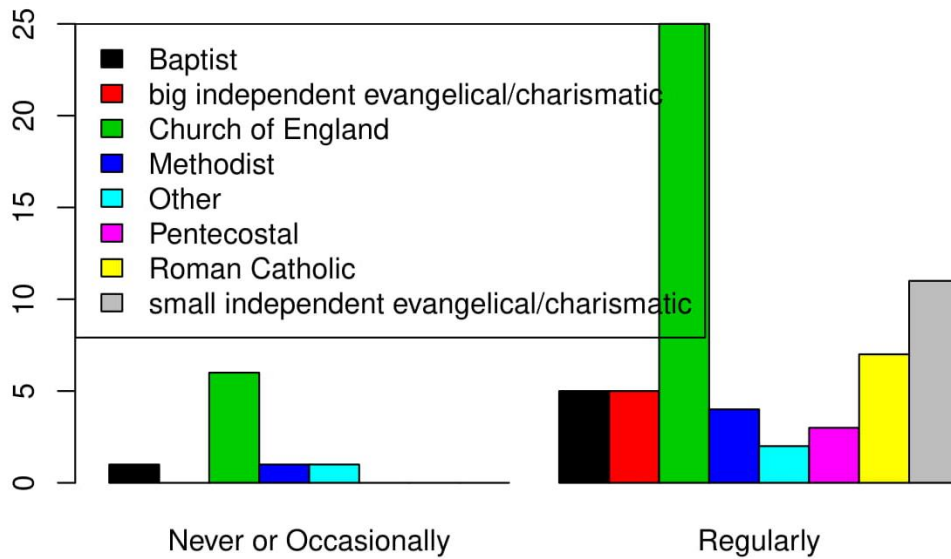
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction

##

## data: counts

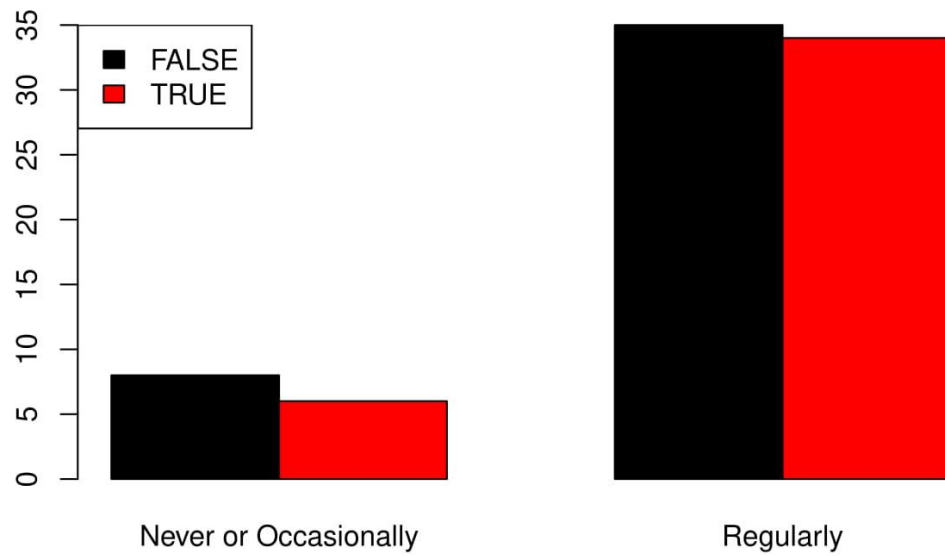
## X-squared = 7.2434e-31, df = 1, p-value = 1

Does it depend on denomination (Q11)?



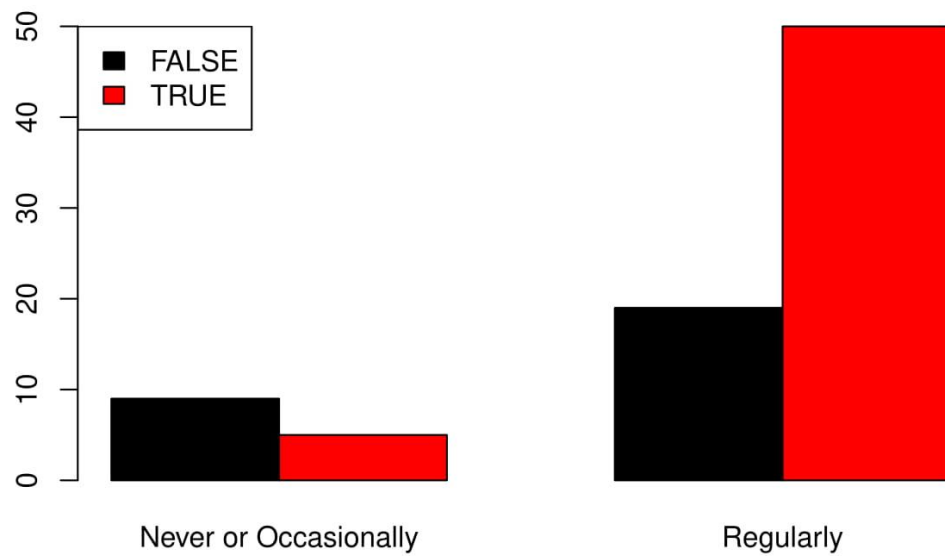
Does it depend on activity (Q12)?

### Attend meetings



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 0.020993, df = 1, p-value = 0.8848
```

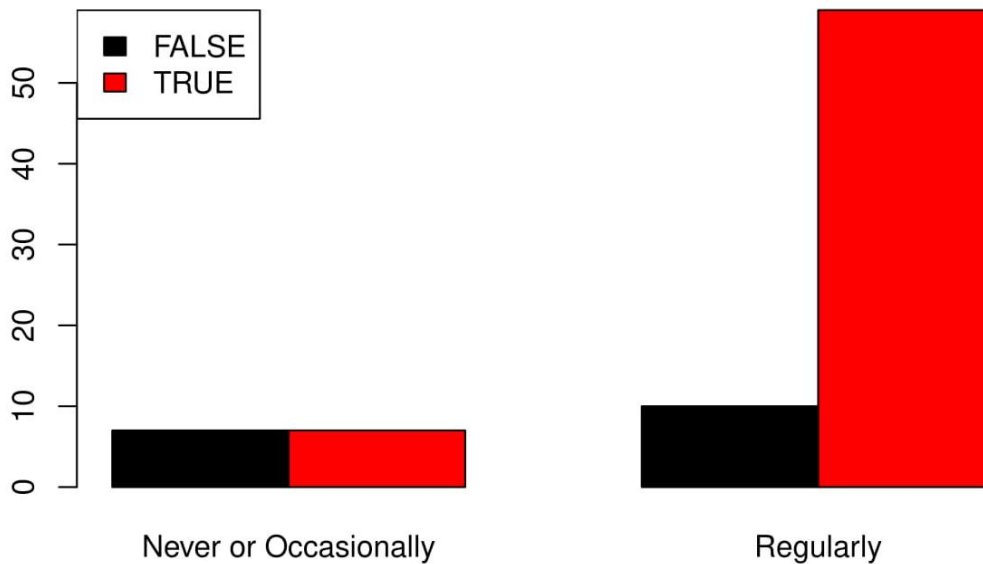
### Read Bible



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
```

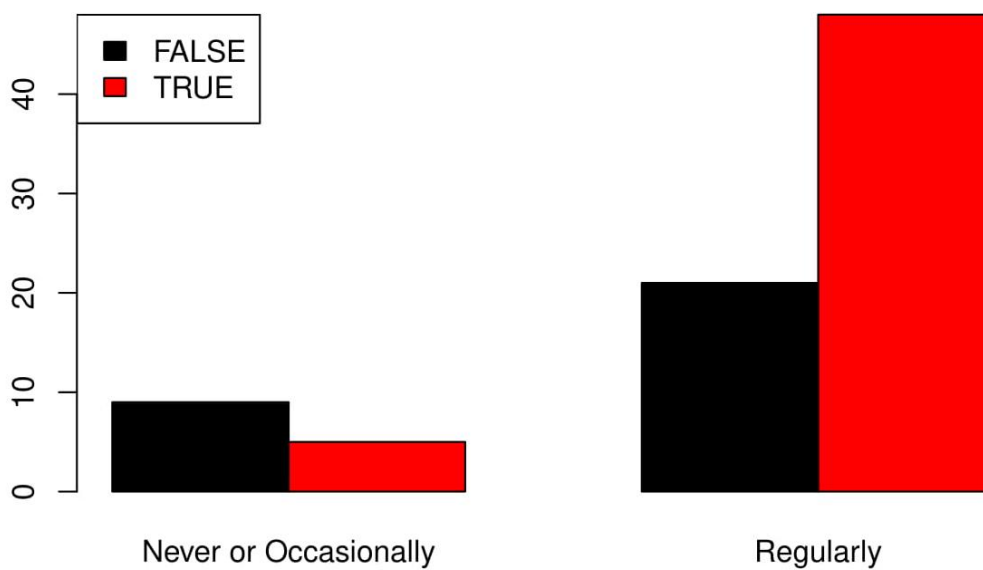
```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 5.4835, df = 1, p-value = 0.0192
```

### Pray



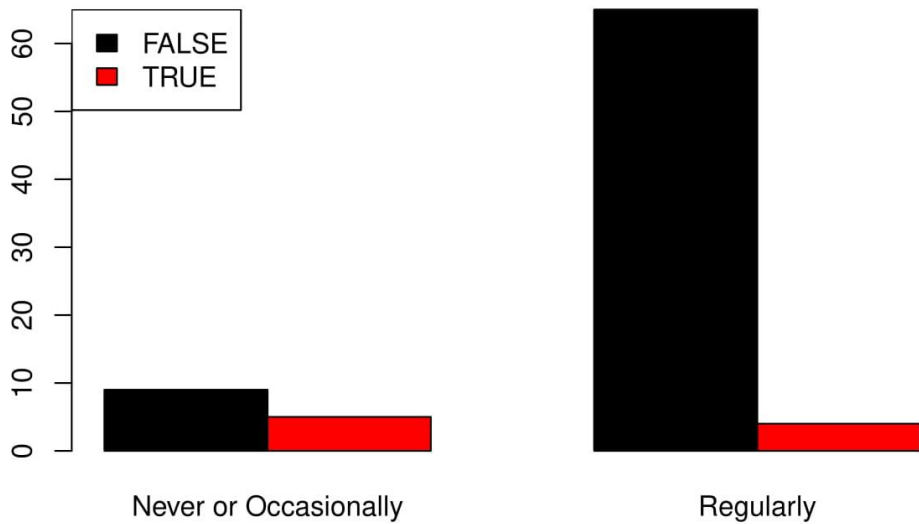
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 6.9612, df = 1, p-value = 0.00833
```

### Attend youth/home group



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 4.4047, df = 1, p-value = 0.03584
```

### None of the above

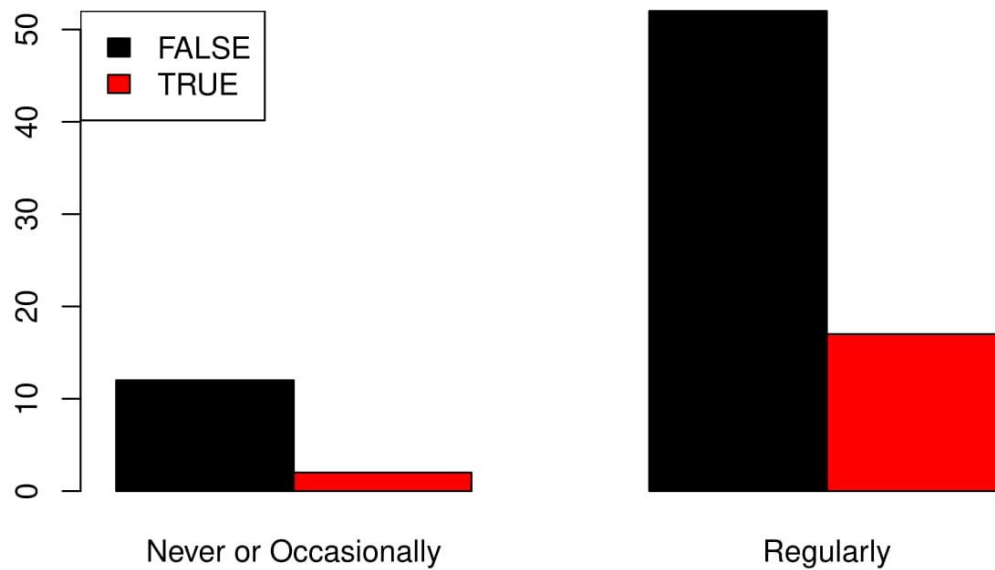


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 7.9027, df = 1, p-value = 0.004936
```

Those who read the Bible, pray or attend a youth/home group are more likely to attend a church regularly. Those who do “None of the above” are less likely to attend a church regularly.

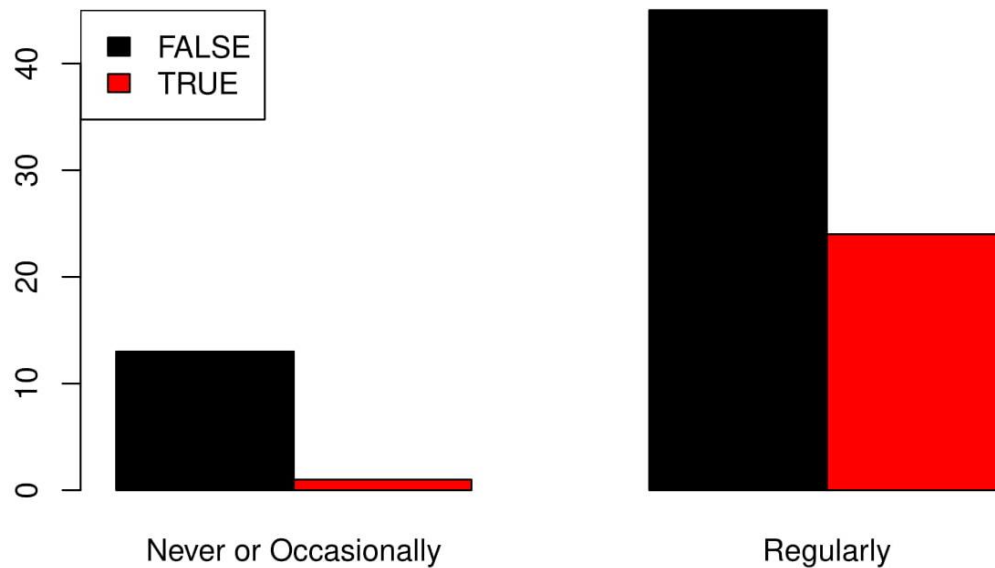
Does it depend on talking with someone (Q13)?

### Talk by vicar/minister



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 0.24181, df = 1, p-value = 0.6229
```

### Talk by youth worker

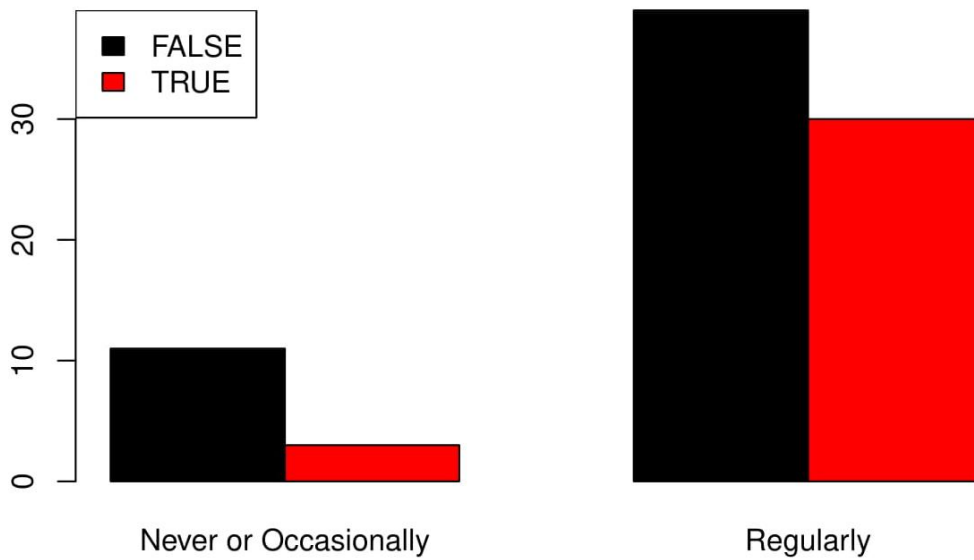


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
```



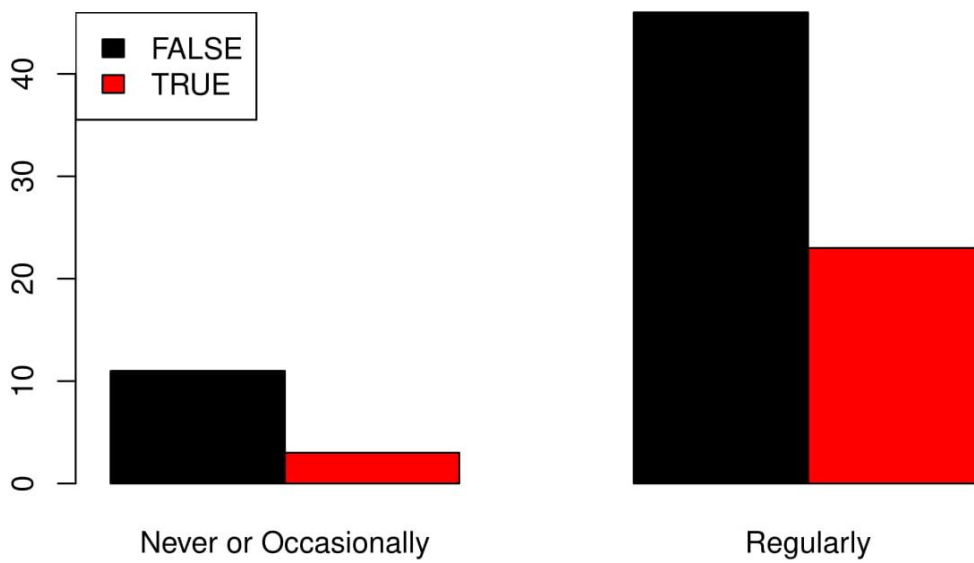
```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.0132, df = 1, p-value = 0.08259
```

### Talk by family



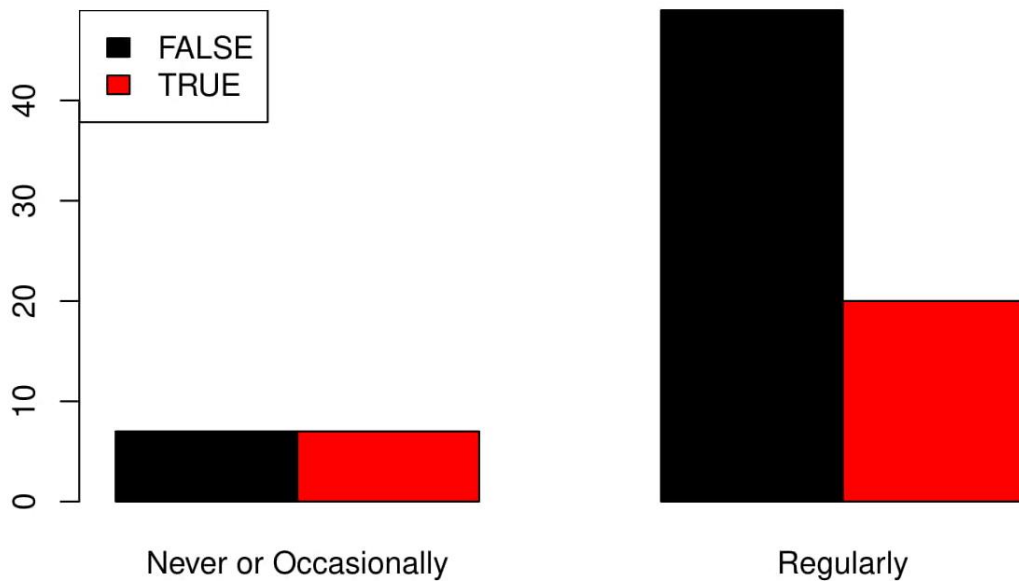
```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 1.5316, df = 1, p-value = 0.2159
```

### Talk by Christian friends



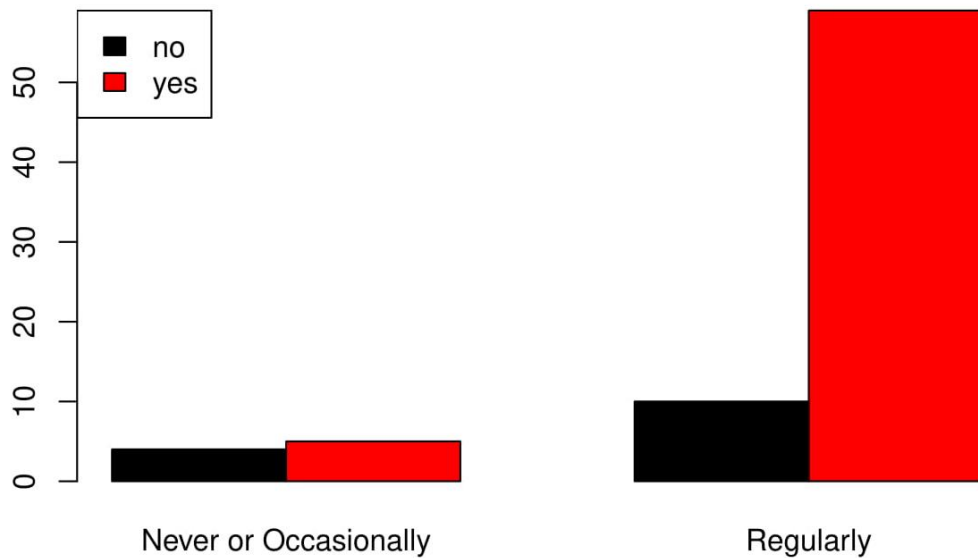
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 0.3132, df = 1, p-value = 0.5757
```

### Talk by no one

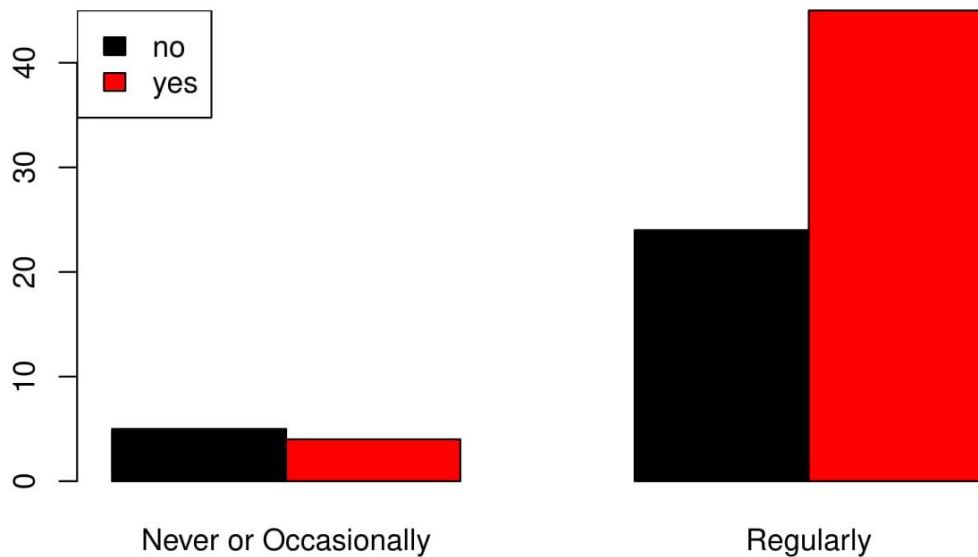


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 1.4822, df = 1, p-value = 0.2234
```

Does it depend on information on local churches (Q25)?

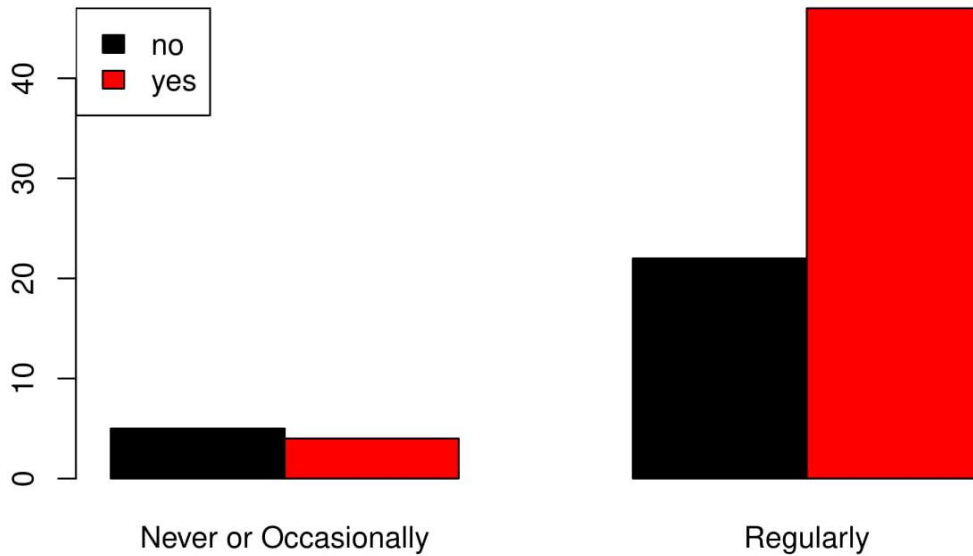


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.0292, df = 1, p-value = 0.08178
Does it depend on invitation from friends (Q26)?
```



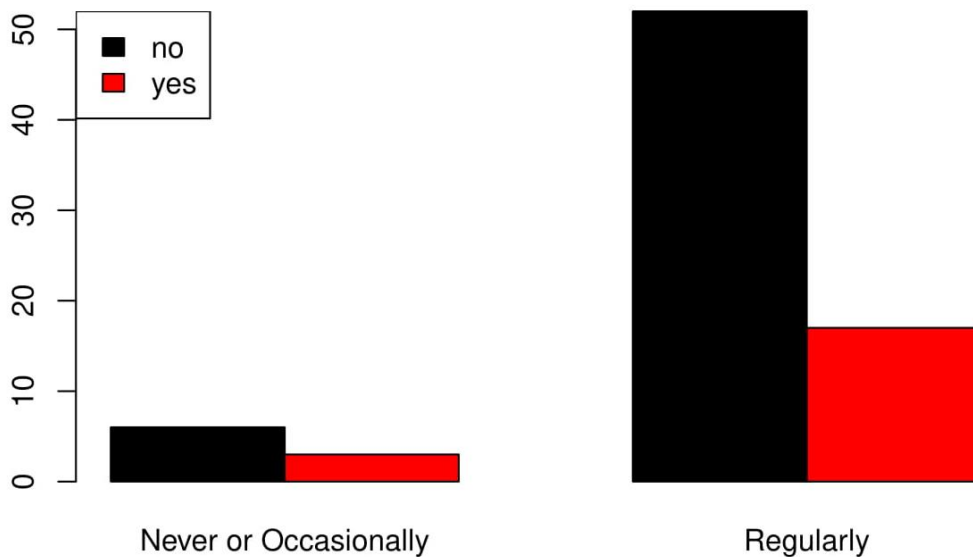
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 0.71597, df = 1, p-value = 0.3975
```

Does it depend on contact from chaplaincy (Q27)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 1.0639, df = 1, p-value = 0.3023
```

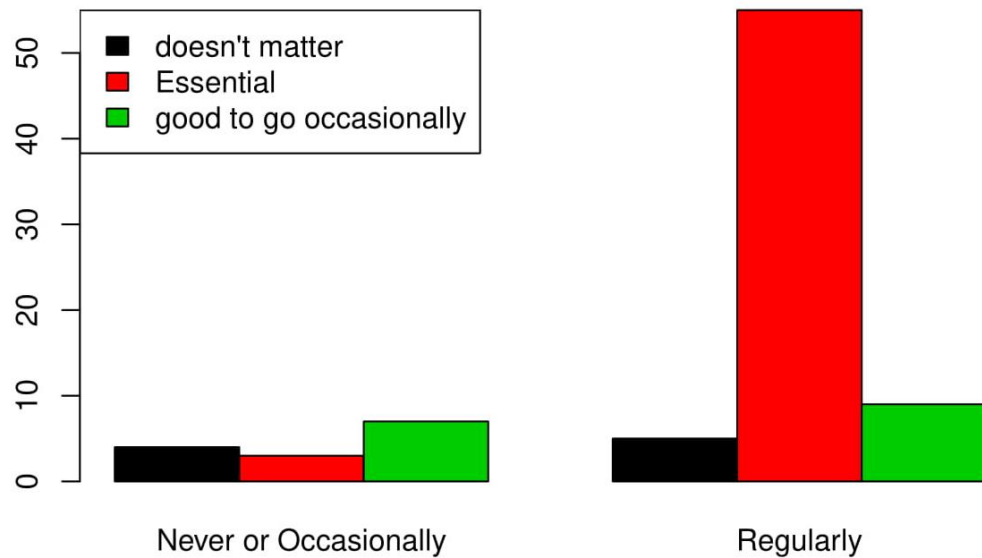
Does it depend on contact from churches (Q28)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction
##
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 0.024363, df = 1, p-value = 0.876
```

Does it depend on the importance of church attendance (Q38)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
```

```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

```
##
```

```
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 18.784, df = 2, p-value = 8.338e-05
```

Those who think attending church is essential are more likely to attend church regularly.

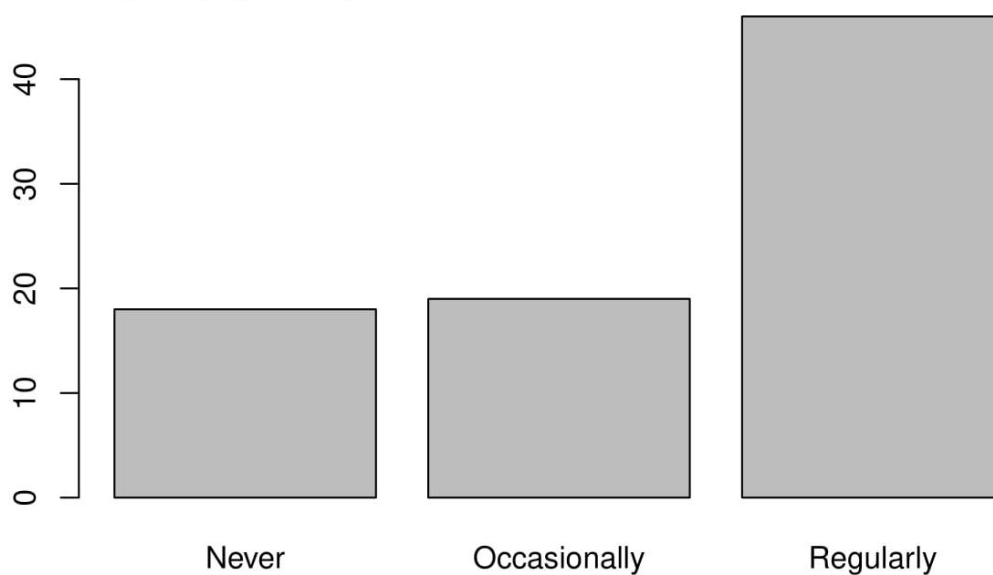


# Church Survey - Attend Group

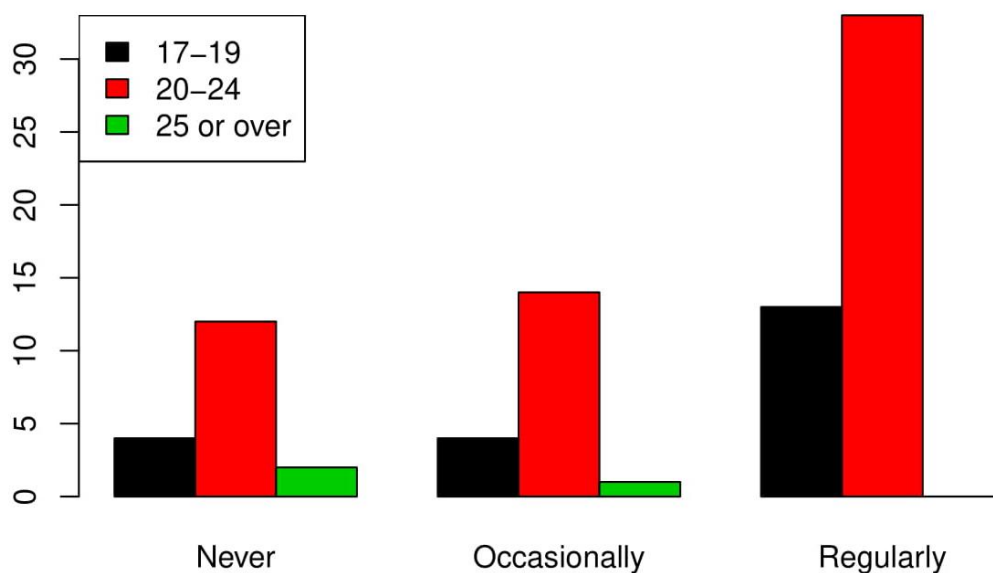
## Attend church group

Overall response (Q15)

```
## readxl works best with a newer version of the tibble package.  
## You currently have tibble v1.4.2.  
## Falling back to column name repair from tibble <= v1.4.2.  
## Message displays once per session.
```

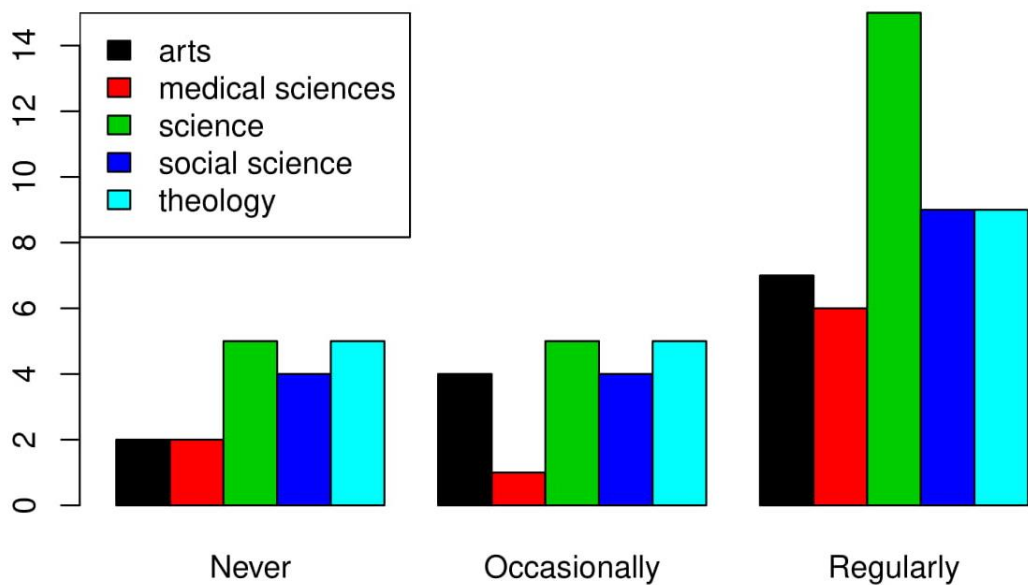


Does it depend on age (Q3)?

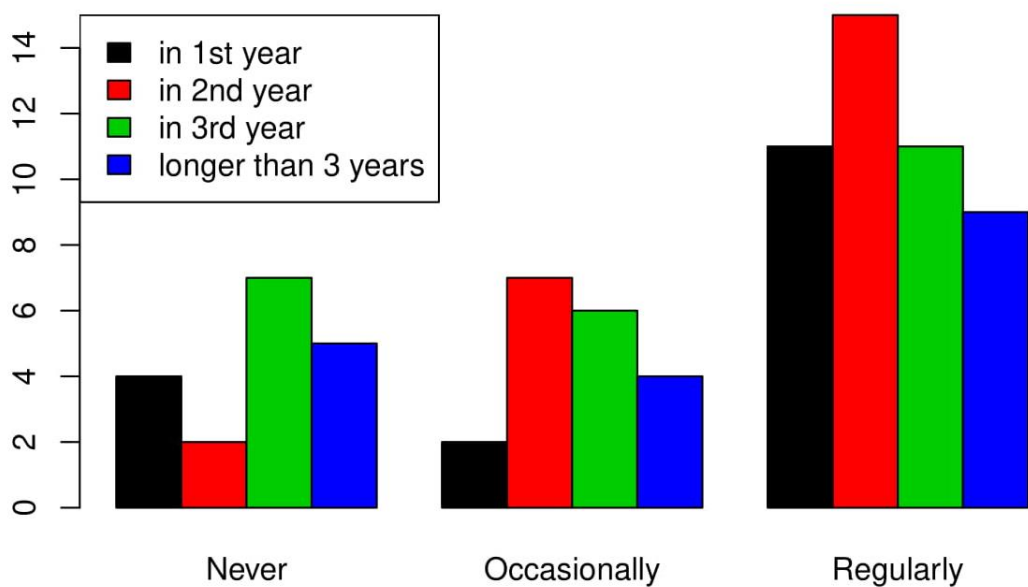


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 5.0368, df = 4, p-value = 0.2835
Does it depend on subject (Q5b)?
```



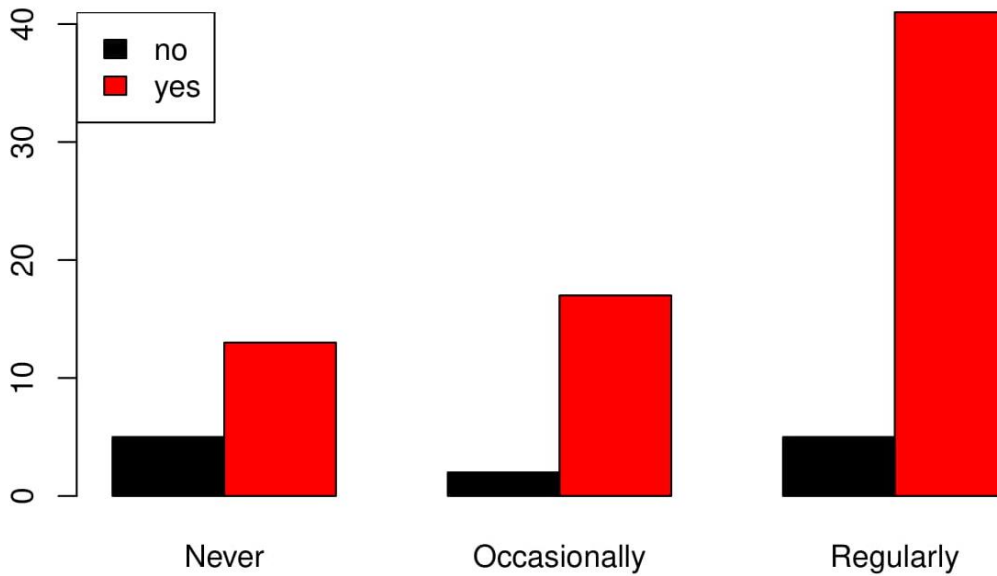
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 2.123, df = 8, p-value = 0.977
Does it depend on time at university (Q7)?
```





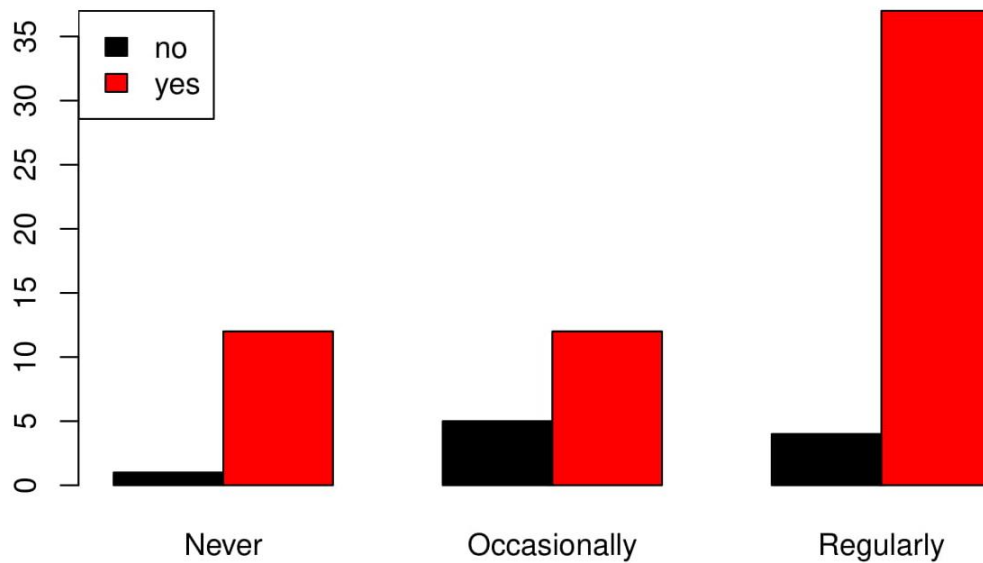
```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 5.2844, df = 6, p-value = 0.5079
```

Does it depend on previously attending church (Q8)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.2986, df = 2, p-value = 0.1922
```

Does it depend on family attending church (Q10)?



## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect

##

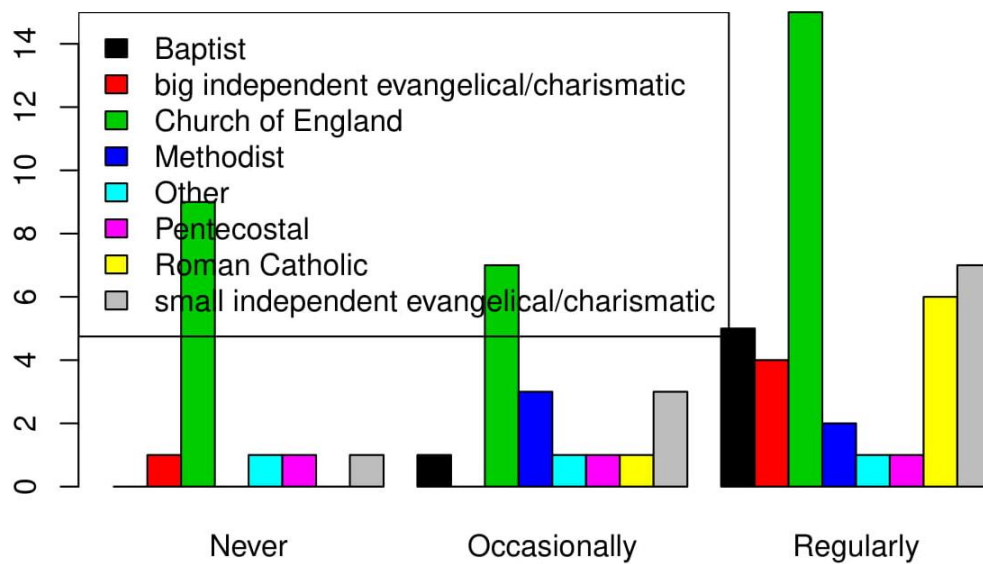
## Pearson's Chi-squared test

##

## data: counts

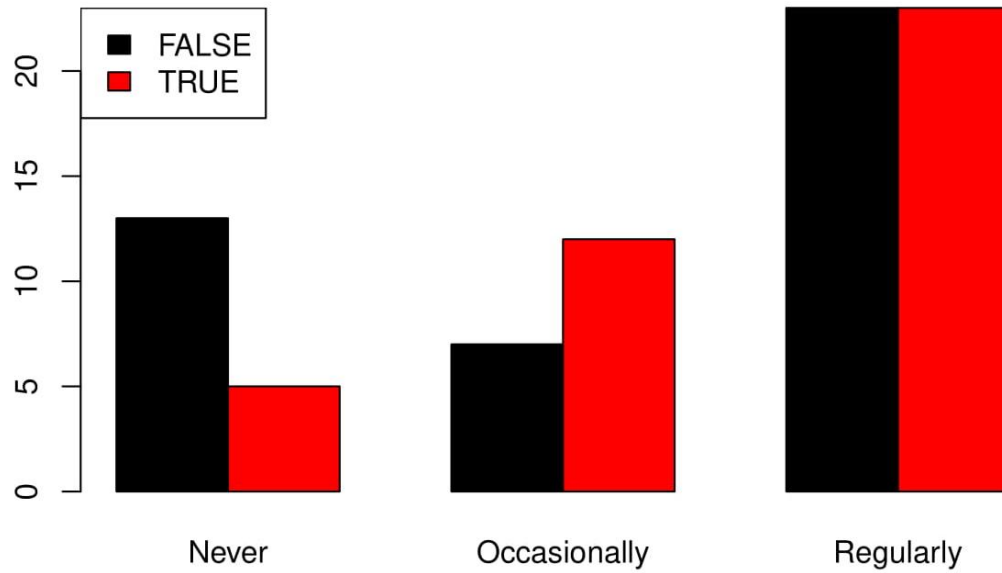
## X-squared = 4.3741, df = 2, p-value = 0.1122

Does it depend on denomination (Q11)?



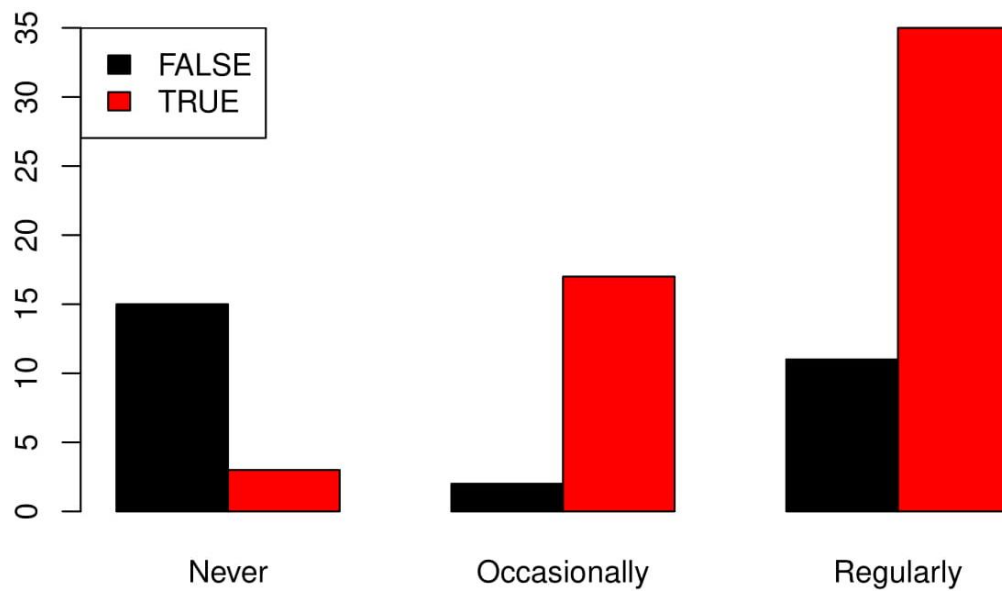
Does it depend on activity (Q12)?

### Attend meetings



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 4.7691, df = 2, p-value = 0.09213
```

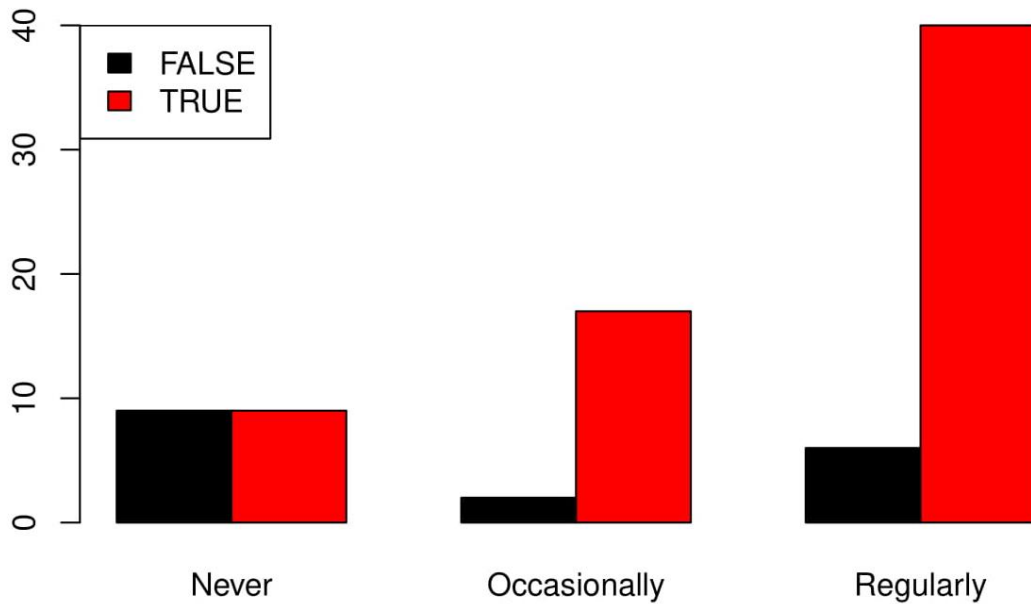
### Read Bible



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 26.371, df = 2, p-value = 1.877e-06
```

### Pray



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
```

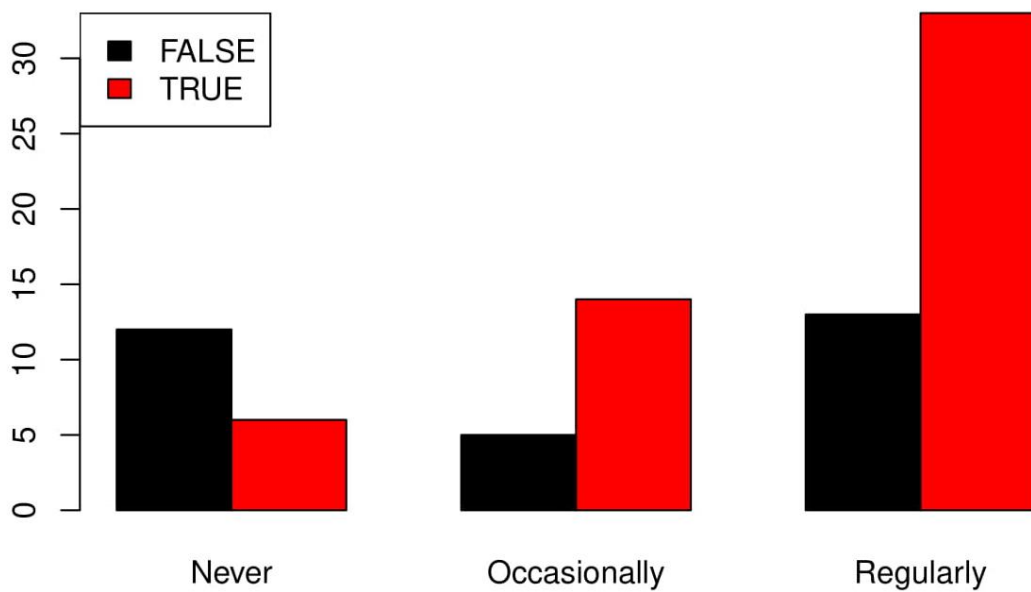
```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

```
##
```

```
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 12.349, df = 2, p-value = 0.002082
```

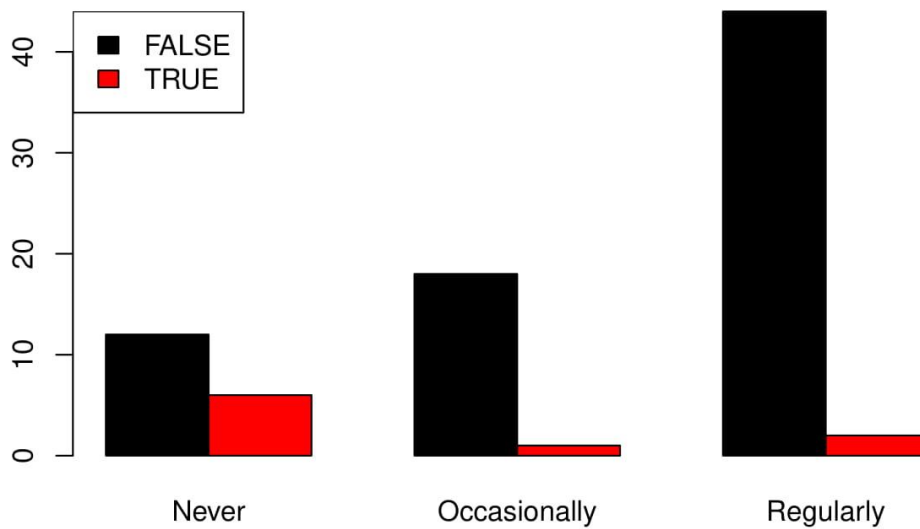
### Attend youth/home group



```
##
```

```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 9.2994, df = 2, p-value = 0.009564
```

### None of the above

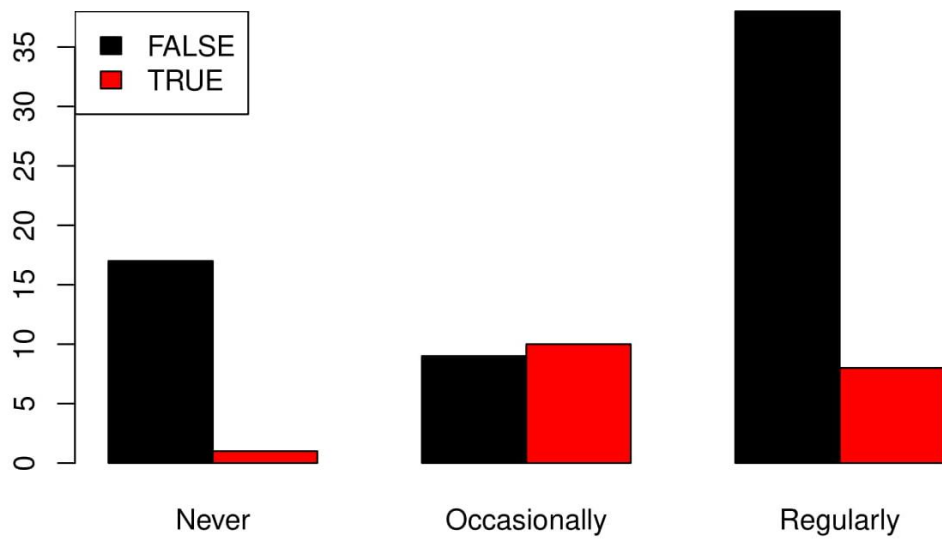


```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 12.037, df = 2, p-value = 0.002433
```

Those who read the Bible, pray or attend a youth/home group are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly. Those who do “None of the above” are less likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

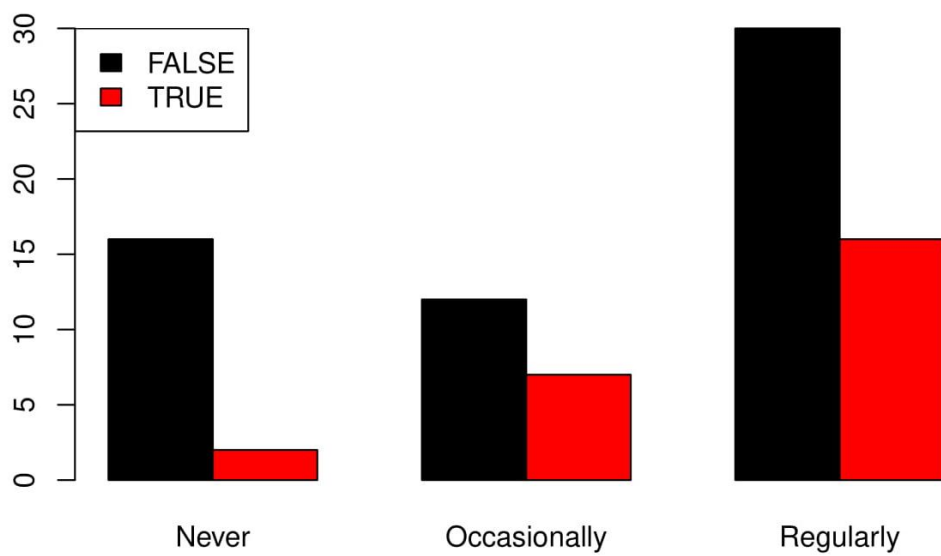
Does it depend on talking with someone (Q13)?

### Talk by vicar/minister



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 13.374, df = 2, p-value = 0.001247
```

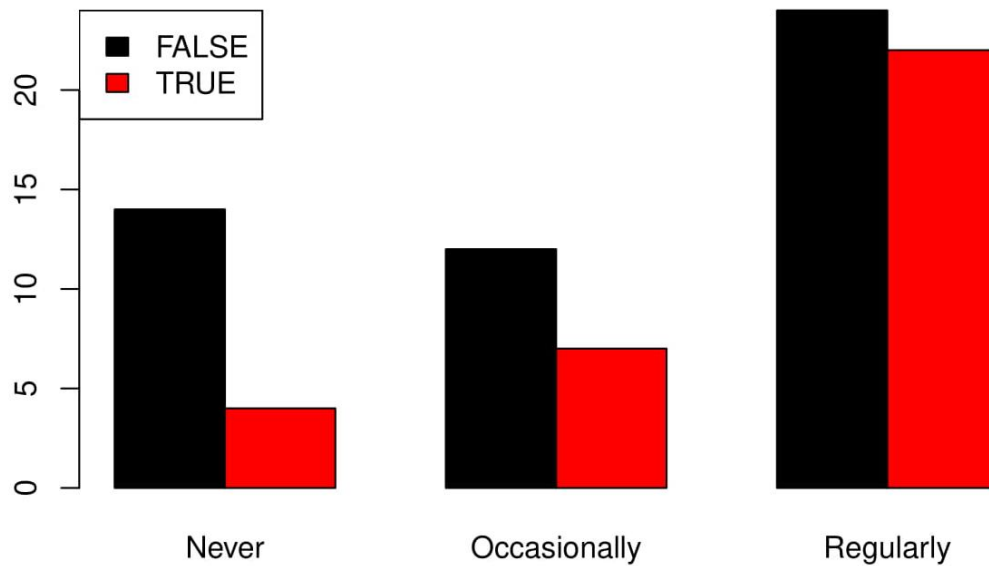
### Talk by youth worker



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
```

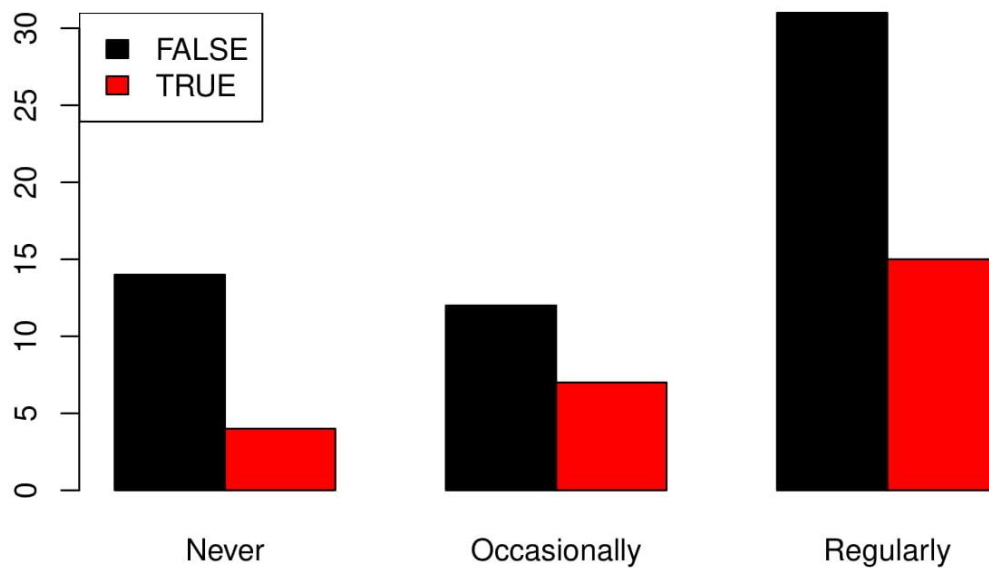
```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.9731, df = 2, p-value = 0.1372
```

### Talk by family



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 3.6286, df = 2, p-value = 0.163
```

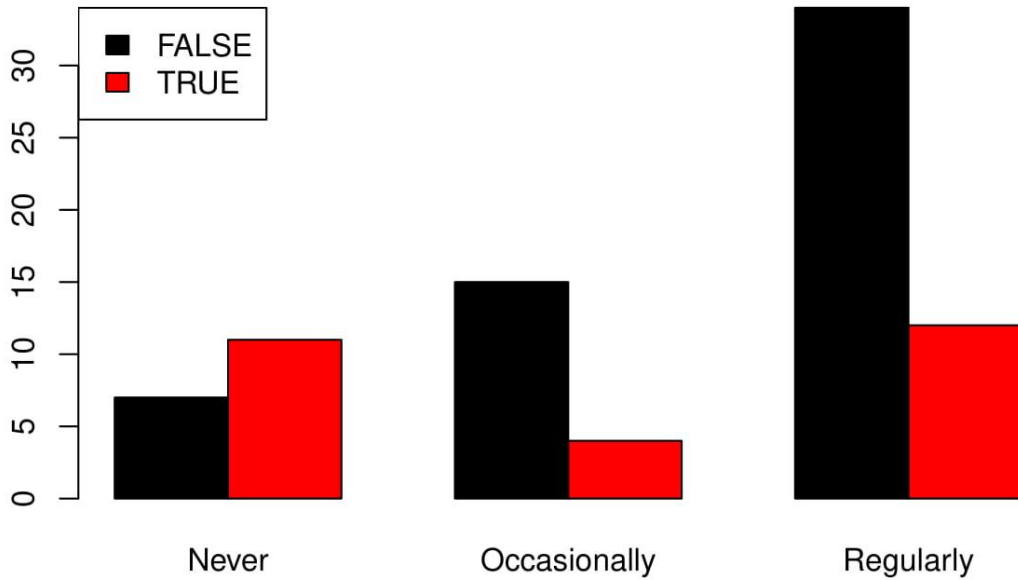
### Talk by Christian friends



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

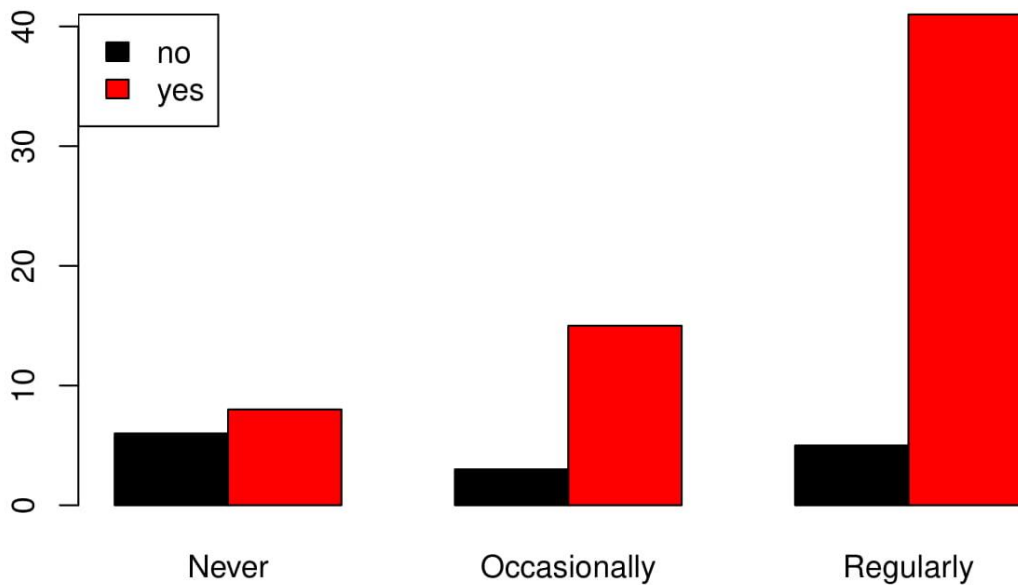
```
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 0.99738, df = 2, p-value = 0.6073
```

### Talk by no one



```
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 8.7098, df = 2, p-value = 0.01284
```

Those who are not spoken to by anyone are less likely to attend a Christian group regularly.  
Does it depend on information on local churches (Q25)?





```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
```

```
##
```

```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

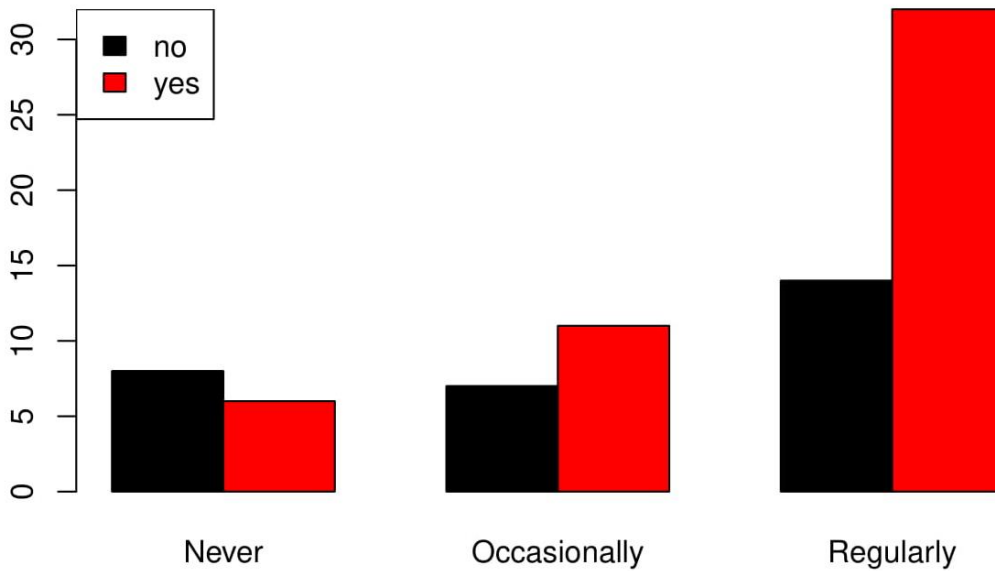
```
##
```

```
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 7.4834, df = 2, p-value = 0.02371
```

Those who receive information on local churches are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly

Does it depend on invitation from friends (Q26)?



```
##
```

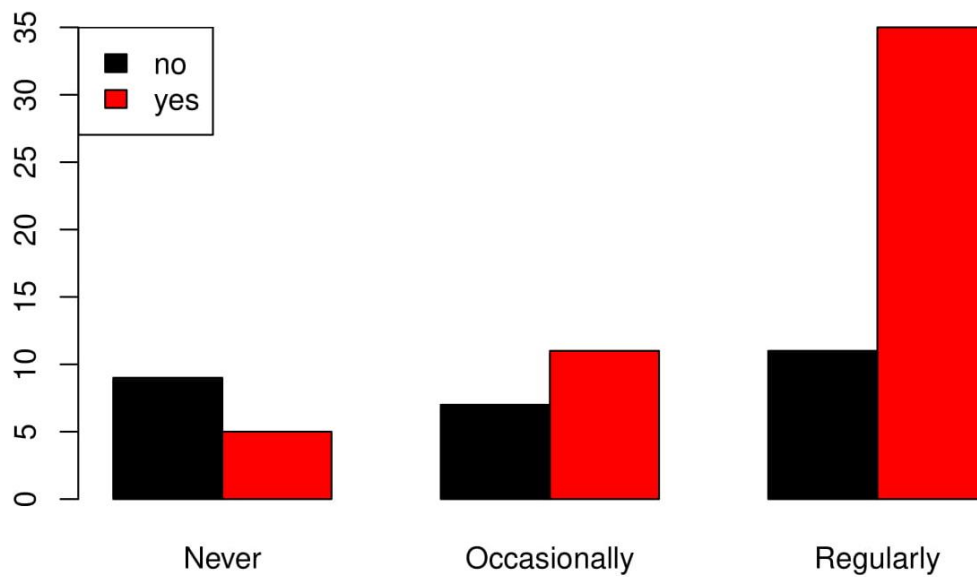
```
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
```

```
##
```

```
## data: counts
```

```
## X-squared = 3.3073, df = 2, p-value = 0.1913
```

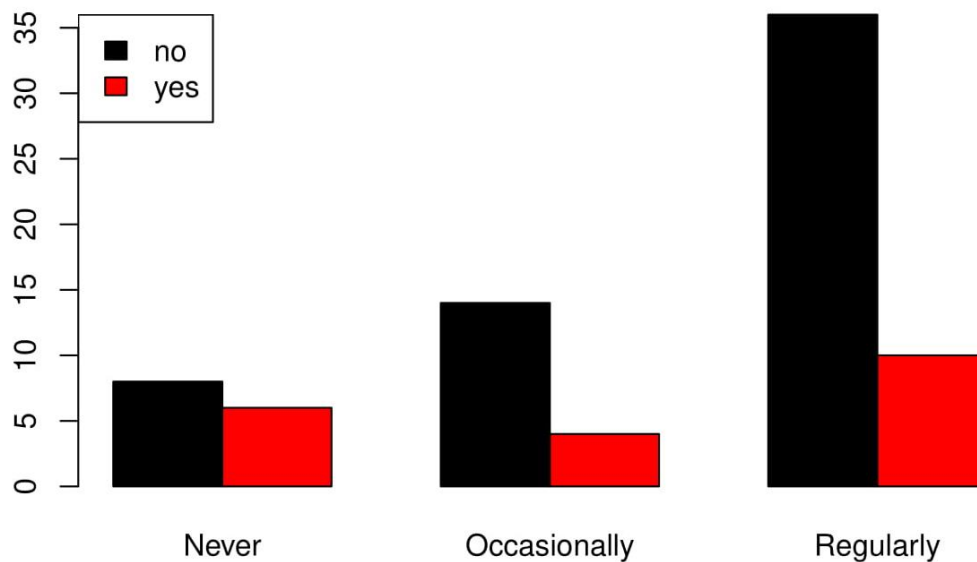
Does it depend on contact from chaplaincy (Q27)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 7.9186, df = 2, p-value = 0.01908
```

Those who have contact with the chaplaincy are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

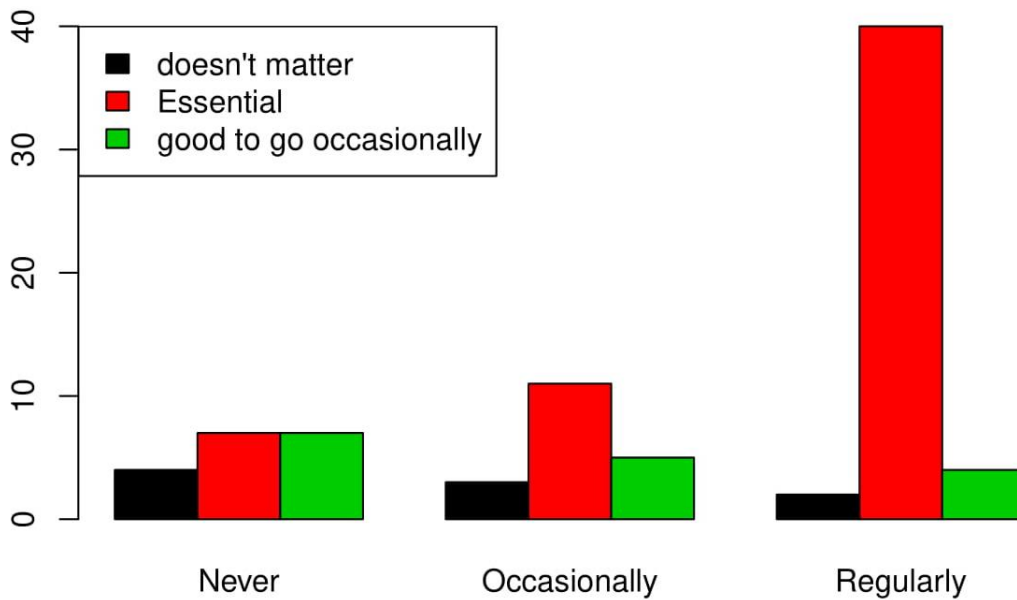
Does it depend on contact from churches (Q28)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
```

```
## data: counts
## X-squared = 2.654, df = 2, p-value = 0.2653
```

Does it depend on the importance of church attendance (Q38)?



```
## Warning in chisq.test(counts): Chi-squared approximation may be incorrect
##
## Pearson's Chi-squared test
##
## data: counts
## X-squared = 15.904, df = 4, p-value = 0.003151
```

Those who think attending church is essential are more likely to attend a Christian group regularly.

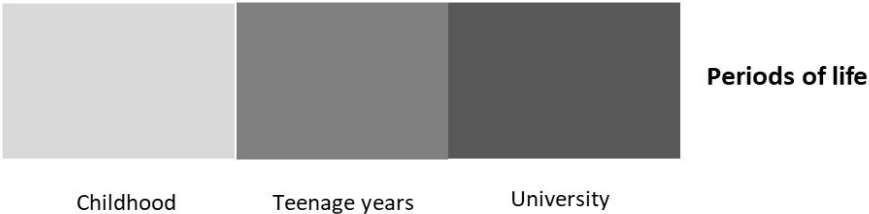


Appendix H

Storyline Diagrams

340

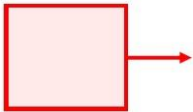
KEY:



Journey of faith and Church attendance



Positive influences towards faith and Church



Influences drawing away from faith and Church



Pertinent notes from interview, not directly influential

