YOUR STORY

Hearing the Faith Narratives of Young Australians

Research Report

November 2024

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Research Report: Hearing the Faith Narratives of Young Australians

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PREFACE

The Your Story project finds its origins in Converge Oceania, a community of individuals and organisations which formed in 2016. We exist to support the church to reach and disciple young people.

Early in Converge's existence, we explored the possibility of a national research project. Our vision for this project was to elevate the voice of young people, to better understand how we can nurture faith journeys in healthy and constructive ways.

So, in 2019, Converge commissioned Christian Research Australia to undertake a literature review to determine if any such research currently existed. They found that while some research on the spirituality of Australian young people existed, there was a need for more focused work, particularly on the spiritual worldviews of young people, and what influences their experiences and practices.

We decided to go ahead with the research, and in early 2020, Dr Graham Stanton and Dr Rowan Lewis took the lead on the project, which we named "Your Story". Their team began to pilot research questions with young people around Australia. Then COVID-19 hit, and everything was put on hold.

We emerged from lockdowns, and from early 2022, 439 young people across Australia completed the extensive survey, and from mid-2023 our team of researchers began to analyse the stories.

We are rapt with the results! Not only does this research help the church in Australia understand and identify the influences and spiritual narratives of young people, but it also provides fertile soil in which to grow evidence-based ministry approaches.

From the Converge Oceania Core Team:

Adrian Blenkinsop (Convener)
AJ Heijns
Glyn Henman
Mel Hanger
Naomi Swindon
Neville Bartley
Steve Forward

Converge Oceania is a community of youth-oriented individuals and agencies that exist to support and equip the church in Australia and New Zealand to continue to reach and disciple young people.

We do this through prayerfully and practically supporting each other's ministries, meeting regularly, and collaborating together on projects. Converge is led by a core team of experienced youth ministry practitioners.

For more information about Converge Oceania and the Your Story project, visit convergeoceania.com, or email hello@convergeoceania.com

Converge Oceania would like to thank and acknowledge our current funding partners.

We also want to thank our previous funding partners who enabled us to get to this stage of the project.

ATS
ACCESS THE STORY

AccessTheStory Incorporated is proud to be the host organisation for Converge Oceania. This project not only expresses our heart to 'release people into God's story through timely ministry responses', it also means we get to partner with friends doing amazing work in a variety of contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The Your Story project offers key insights to guide Christian individuals and organisations as they accompany Australian young people in their journeys of faith.

A key finding is that narrative is central to the faith journey of young people. With that in mind, let's get to know several young people, and where they are at in their journey of faith.

Meet Riley[1]

Riley is 18 and they are embracing their Christian faith. This is how they narrate their faith so far:

> I grew up in a Christian home with Christian parents. I didn't have a big moment of recognition but I committed my life to God with my mum's help when I was five. I was frightened in a thunderstorm and found peace in the knowledge I had a savior and protector.
>
> I then grew to understand in depth what being a Christian meant as my parents read missionary stories and the bible to my siblings and I when we were eating dinner.
>
> I lost my grandfather when I was 9 and struggled with no longer seeing him again. I didn't doubt God but I wondered what he was doing. I also knew that my grandad went to a better place and that I will see him again someday.
>
> I got baptised when I was 10, announcing my identity as a child of God and a follower of Christ. I wish to regularly commit life decisions to Christ and pray that his will will be done, [despite] what i might have to go through. I ultimately long for his return and for peace about the concept of eternity.

Riley

Meet Geoffrey

He's 17, lives in Sydney, and was raised an Anglican. Currently, Geoffrey is rejecting the Christianity of his childhood:

> I was baptised Anglican and christened in a Church. My grandparents are very religious, and set on me being raised Anglican, so I took separate scripture in public school before moving to an Anglican College.
>
> My father is overtly atheist and my mother is agnostic, so most of my spiritual guidance before losing my faith at 13 came from my grandparents and school. I have always doubted my faith, but sustained daily prayers until adolescence.
>
> I cannot reconcile the miracles of the Bible with the laws of nature, despite agreeing with the moral guidance that the Bible provides. Any spiritual experiences I have had have been limited to dreams. That being said, I still love the principles of Christianity save for the miraculous, and I strive to live by them to this day, hence why I still read the Bible.

Geoffrey

[1] Names are pseudonyms; gender, age, and other demographic details are original. Throughout the report verbatim quotations from young people are in callout boxes. The written responses of young people, including grammar and spelling, have been preserved except for instances where meaning was obscured.

Meet **Mei-Ling**

Mei-Ling is aged 16, she lives in South Australia, and she attends a Christian school. This is how Mei-Ling tells the story of her uncertain and conflicted faith:

> My family is Christian. I can't really think of a time where I became aware of spirituality/religion... I think I was always keen to learn more as a kid and the things church teaches is inspiring.

Mei-Ling

We asked Mei-Ling to identify when she took ownership of her faith —she wrote:

> I want to develop my faith IDK HEHE.

Mei-Ling

And when we asked about the difficulties she's faced, she wrote:

> Faith is difficult because idk what God feels like. And I've lived without thinking of 'God' for so long. Growing up in a Christian school had its upsides and downsides. But I think being too sheltered and forced to be in a 'Christian' environment has put off many of my peers from Christianity.
>
> And I would be lying if I said it hadn't negatively swayed me too...although I have doubts and question everything, for me there is no way that there isn't any God because for some reason the possibility of THAT doesn't make sense to me lol.
>
> I just don't know that God very well.

Mei-Ling

Three stories of faith from three Australian young people.

If you encountered Riley, Geoffrey, or Mei-Ling in their early teens they would each present as committed Christians—they read the Bible, they pray, they go to church, they live Christian lives. And yet their journeys are taking different trajectories: Riley is taking steps to grow in faith; Mei-Ling is holding on to her faith in the midst of serious questions; and Geoffrey is on his way out.

Three stories of faith that look similar in some ways, yet are moving in different directions, and each with quite different implications for those who want to disciple these young people.

Along with 436 other young people from around Australia, Riley, Geoffrey, and Mei-Ling completed a long online questionnaire.[2] They told us about the experiences they associated with faith, and the things they did to express their faith. We also asked them to recall their memories of these experiences and practices from childhood and early adolescence, and to reflect on what faith is like for them now.

In response, they gave us an indication of their spiritual worldview, and they told us where their story of faith began (or of no faith, or of losing faith). They identified the high-points and challenges, and gave us an inkling of where they think their story is headed.

This is their story.

[2] All the research participants were aged 16–20 years.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents 5 insights from our research, which will support the constructive discipleship of young people.

Your Story demonstrates **(1) the importance of NARRATIVE for understanding young people's expression and experience of faith**. We identify 8 distinctive journeys of faith that young people may be on. Constructive discipleship considers where young people have come from and where they may be heading.

The importance of narrative focusses our attention on how **(2) young people's story of faith is narrated within a RELATIONAL ECOSYSTEM.** This highlights that the relationships young people engage in meaningfully impact their faith, as much as what is going on inside them.

Disciplers of young people are not only observers of a young person's relational ecosystem—they are members of it. To have a positive influence on a young person's faith journey **(3) disciplers must be A.B.O.U.T. RELATIONSHIPS with young people.** That is, disciplers develop relationships that offer Acceptance, build Belonging, promote Ownership, foster Understanding, and are anchored in Trust.

Therefore **(4) DISCIPLING ACTION must be grounded in relational strength.** Before adult mentors focus on 'the right thing to do', they foster the right kind of relationship with the young people they serve. Christian organisations and individuals can serve young people well by providing faith–supporting actions grounded within positive relationships.

Young people whose faith is growing in commitment take increasing responsibility for their faith. They do this by becoming interdependent participants in their discipling ecosystem. Constructive discipleship **(5) empowers young people to ENGAGE THE RESOURCES available to them for growing faith.** Christian leaders can help young people recognise and make use of the resources that surround them, to support faith when they are confronted by challenges.

1. Faith has a narrative:

Faith is more about story than propositions.

2. Faith grows in a relational ecosystem:

Faith journeys are shaped as young people interact with a network of surrounding influences.

3. A.B.O.U.T. Relationships:

Constructive discipling relationships offer Acceptance, build Belonging, promote Ownership, develop Understanding, and are anchored in Trust.

4. Relationally grounded discipling action:

The effectiveness of discipling actions grows as relationships strengthen.

5. Engaging resources:

When young people face challenges to faith, disciplers help them activate resources present in their discipling ecology.

Thank you!

We want to say a big 'thank you' to all the young people who took the time to tell us their story. These young people endured a very long and somewhat repetitive survey.

Whether you enjoyed the experience as much as Koda (19f):[3]

> Phew! Well, that took a little effort, but I'm glad I did it. The survey asked me questions I've never thought about, and it helped me to see my faith journey in a completely different light. Thanks!

Koda (19f)

...or if you were less enthusiastic, like Jodie (18n):

> I hate this stupid test, bye!

Jodie (18n)

We are so grateful that you all shared your stories with us.

Thanks also to Converge Oceania for initiating and sponsoring this research, and for the funding partners who have made this work possible.

Research Team

The project was led by Dr Rowan Lewis, Australian College of Ministries, and Dr Graham D. Stanton, Ridley College/Australian College of Theology.

Citation

Lewis, Rowan D., and Graham D. Stanton, *Your Story Research Report: Hearing the Faith Narratives of Young Australians*, Adelaide, SA: Converge Oceania, 2024.

[3] Pseudonyms are followed by age in years and gender abbreviation: m=male, f=female, nb=non-binary, n=not stated.

KEY FINDINGS

PART

1

Key Finding #1

FAITH HAS A NARRATIVE

Faith is more about story than propositions

Constructive discipleship considers where people have come from and where they may be heading

Your Story explores the way in which the faith-related beliefs and practices of young people change over time. This is different from other research about youth spirituality, in which a snapshot is taken of a young person's beliefs and practices at one specific time. For example, the researcher might ask them how often they go to church, or whether they pray regularly.

However, a snapshot approach fails to discern the meaning and significance these religious practices and beliefs hold within a young person's life. The stories of Riley, Geoffrey and Mei-Ling highlight that it is very hard to tell what relationship a young person has to faith by simply asking about what beliefs they hold, or how often they read their Bible.

In fact, when we asked young people open-ended questions about their faith, they almost never responded by describing abstract ideas about God,

or telling us how often they go to church. Instead, they openly told stories of the experiences and relationships that they associate with spirituality.

Your Story attends to the story of young people's faith. We do this by focussing on what has gone on during childhood and early adolescence to influence their faith today, and we give insights into where that faith may be headed.

Eight Dynamic Faith Narratives

Your Story identified 8 distinct faith narratives among young people. While every young person's faith story is unique, there are broad similarities across experiences that distinguish these eight journeys.

To identify these 8 narratives, we took note of the changes that occurred over time in young people's belief, practice, experience, and religious identification. Narratives were also defined by the kinds of challenges to faith that young people experienced, and how they responded to these.
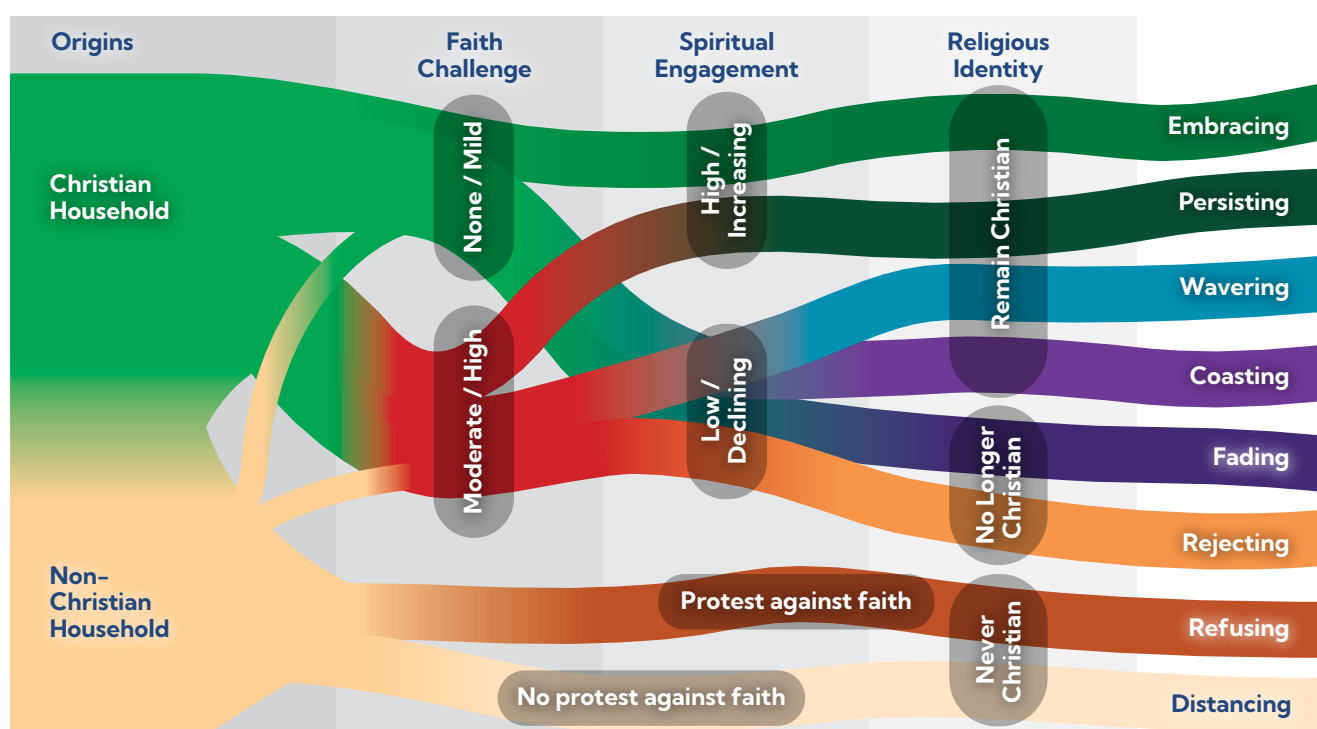
Figure 1: Faith Journeys

–ing vs –ed

You might have noticed that the names for each of these journeys are all "present continuous verbs".

For example, we say "young people who are **Embracing** Christian faith, rather than "young people who have **Embraced** Christian faith".

This sounds a little awkward, doesn't it? However, we've done this for a reason—to remind us of how young peoples' stories of faith always remain open to change.

Here are the eight journeys:

Current Identity	Posture towards Christianity	Faith Narrative	Description
CHRISTIAN	ENGAGING	**Embracing**	Consistent commitment to faith, with minor or no challenges to faith.
		Persisting	Increasing commitment to faith, with moderate or major challenges to faith.
	DISENGAGING	**Wavering**	Decreasing commitment to faith, with moderate or major challenges to faith.
		Coasting	Consistent low commitment to faith, with minor or no challenges to faith.
NOT CHRISTIAN	DISIDENTIFYING	**Fading**	No longer Christian, with minor or no challenges to faith.
		Rejecting	No longer Christian with moderate/major faith challenge
	IRRELIGIOUS	**Refusing**	Actively chose to remain non-Christian.
		Distancing	Consistent disinterest in Christian faith.

Table 1: Eight Dynamic Faith Journeys

Christian Journeys

Of the four Christian journeys, two are engaging positively with faith (Embracing and Persisting), and two are disengaging (Wavering and Coasting).

These narratives of faith are also defined by their experience of challenges. Young people who are Embracing and Coasting tell stories free of faith challenges, or challenges that were relatively minor.

For the Embracing, their faith is strong and growing, often supported by other firm believers.

I grew up with two Christian parents and four Christian grandparents so I have never not known that God is there. Every night we would pray as a family, every dinner we would say grace…

As an early teenager I became involved in confirmation classes [and] went to Christian youth camps which helped me connect with young people my age who shared my beliefs. I don't remember having any serious doubts about faith … the people in my life, my parents, sisters and grandparents have been very influential and supportive. [In the future] I will continue to be a firm believer in Christ and hope to start sharing that more with my friends.

Harper (18n–Embracing)

The Coasting are usually indifferent to faith, and are becoming increasingly disconnected from communities that could support their faith.

I don't have many memories of going to church outside of [my] christian primary school. My grandparents are very religious and go to church every Sunday and are active members of their churches activities which I have also helped out with when staying with my grandparents…

I neither strongly believe in God or don't believe in God at all so I have not had a specific moment of taking ownership of my faith, it has happened gradually as I have grown up. I don't believe that faith or spirituality will have a major or active role in my future however I hope that it will guide my decisions and help me to become a better person and someone who helps others whenever possible.

Adeline (17f–Coasting)

In contrast, young people who are Persisting or Wavering both tell stories that include a significant experience that has challenged their faith. However, these challenges saw the Persisting grow stronger in faith, but the faith commitment of the Wavering declined.

My dad has helped me to find my faith and to help me uncover my identity in Christ throughout my life. He helps me answer questions I cannot understand and comprehend…

My faith has been tested over the years with the passing of my sister… back in 2020 to brain cancer… I was able to understand more about Christianity and spirituality when I got a mentor back in late 2018, he helped me with my faith journey as I uncovered more about myself and what I could do to make myself a better Christian…

All I know what I want to do in the future is to help people and communities with their struggles and to let my faith in God help me with what I do next.

Charles (17m–Persisting)

My father does not believe, my mother is not overly involved in her faith although I believe she is Christian… I am still uncertain about my faith however, through learning at school and my own self reflection and thinking I have come to the belief that it is the right choice. It's been a lot of self–thinking and pondering.

I doubt and question a lot, a lot of things I struggle to grapple with and as a logic person I struggle with these. I will continue to grapple for answers and try to form my own belief further.

Chloe (18f–Wavering)

Non-Christian Journeys

Of the four non-Christian journeys, two are disidentifying from a previously held Christian identity (Fading and Rejecting). The other two have never been Christian (Refusing and Distancing).

The Rejecting tell stories of actively choosing to disown their Christian identity that include some experience of faith challenge.

> I got baptised when I was in year 9 as an attempt to get closer to god. Everyone in my life told me that being close to god was the most important thing but I never felt it. I went on two mission trips with school to try and jumpstart my faith. I could never find anything that worked...
>
> I deconstructed my faith as a desperate last attempt but it only made me see how I really don't believe in the god that I had been told to believe in all my life. I am no longer a Christian. I am happier, healthier, more confident, and more content than ever. Every part of my life apart from my relationship with my parents was benefitted when I walked away from the church. I will admit I still harbour bitterness towards the church but I try not to. It's simply not for me.

Sophie (20f-Rejecting)

In contrast to the Rejecting, the Fading do not mention any significant faith challenge. Their commitment simply declined over time until they abandoned their faith altogether.

> i think as i got older at a religious school, the focus on god and the focus on religion faded in my life, there was no specific point [of ownership]
>
> [Any difficulties] not really.
>
> people at school definitely suport religion but i dont hold a specific faith. i dont think i will practice any religion in the future, but i think i will remain spiritual maybe

Fiona (18f-Fading)

The Refusing tell stories of actively choosing to maintain a non–Christian identity despite having at least some level of interaction with Christian individuals, communities, or messages.

my grandma is catholic and my dad believes in god and my mum feels like theres something to believe in. I feel like theres a spiritual world out there and there is something further. [I am] still figuring out my faith and haven't understood or took ownership of it yet.

hearing peoples back ups on [arguments for] why god doesn't exist or people arguing it can sometimes make me doubt if god is a thing or not. I can't say [what the future holds] because I don't know and I guess I will find out along the way, I like to live in the present moment.

James (17m–Refusing)

The Distancing don't have particular reasons for why they are not Christian, and display an overall disinterest in faith.

after talking to many people who were and werent Christians, i decided i wasnt overly phased about religion, i had lived without it before and i found it interesting to learn about different ones but never felt the need to join... never really had faith, family is athiest, aside from school, grew up athiest.

Claire (17f–Distancing)

Faith Journeys by Gender

There are small differences in the number of young people following each journey narrative according to gender.

However, given the small number of cases, none of the differences are statistically significant. That is, it is not possible to say with confidence that the different proportions are anything more than the result of random variation.

ALL (256)	MALE (67)	FEMALE (108)	NON-BINARY (4)	NOT STATED (77)
15%	15%	17%	25%	14%
10%	15%	5%	25%	14%
10%	9%	12%		7%
9%	12%	5%	50%	10%
12%	15%	11%		12%
10%	5%	15%		7%
22%	19%	24%		21%
13%	10%	12%		16%

Legend:
- **Embracing**
- **Persisting**
- **Wavering**
- **Coasting**
- **Fading**
- **Rejecting**
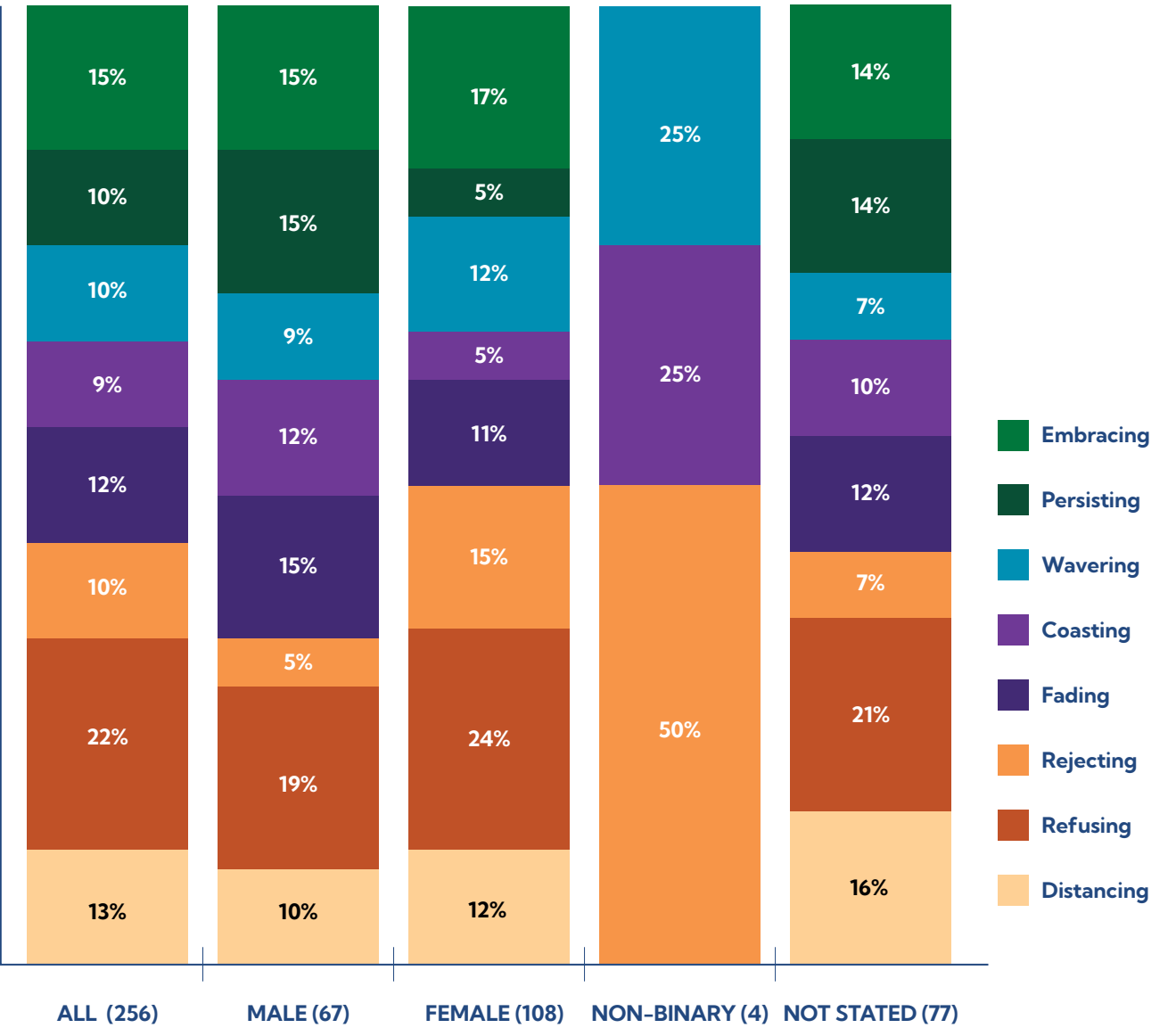- **Refusing**
- **Distancing**

Figure 2: Percentage of Faith Journey Narratives by Gender

Experiencing Challenges to Faith

The presence or absence of challenges to faith, and the intensity of those challenges, proved to be a significant distinguishing factor in young people's narratives of faith for all who currently identify as Christian or did so at some time in the past. 73% of faith narratives reported some kind of faith challenge, and 45% of these were of moderate or major significance.

But not all faith challenges are the same. Consider expressions of doubt:

> I doubted Christ during my early teens because I didn't like sticking to the strict life of faith. Today I realise how silly I was and have a steadfast faith…

Finn (16m–Embracing)

If experiences of doubt (like this one) were expressed with a casual tone, occurred infrequently, or were not remembered with much clarity, we classified them as minor experiences of faith challenge.

In contrast, significant doubt was expressed more often or with greater angst:

> Many times of doubt, of isolation, of feeling like I am a fraud, not actually thinking I can hear God's voice, convincing myself I had made it up, or was not authentic or having false pride.

Esther (18f–Embracing)

Disciplers of young people ought to pay special attention to how young people talk about the challenging aspects of their faith. It's not just the particular challenge (e.g. temptation) that is important, but how young people spoke of the significance of the challenge.

Experiences of challenge were often turning points in stories of faith, especially for the Embracing, Wavering, and Rejecting. Having a keen understanding the significance of challenges in a young person's story will greatly assist the discipling efforts of adults and organisations.

There's more going on here!

We have the privilege of entering the unfolding story of a young person's faith. As disciplers, we should consider the particular faith journey of each young person—where they have come from and where they may be heading.

What may happen when a young person who is Embracing Christian faith meets significant challenges? Will they face the challenge constructively and continue to Persist in faith, or will the challenge leave them Wavering, or even push them to a journey of Rejecting faith?

Or what if a Distancing young person is challenged to consider the reasons for their unbelief by a person they trust? Could a season of exploring faith entrench their unfaith as a journey of Refusing or launch them into Embracing faith?

Our challenge is to remember that there's more going on in a young person's life than what they're presenting to you right now. Constructive discipleship works to understand the significance of this present moment in the light of where a young person has come from, and where they might be headed.

> See Part 3 for further exploration of these eight narratives.

FAITH GROWS IN A RELATIONAL ECOSYSTEM

What is going on <u>around</u> a young person meaningfully impacts their faith as much as what is going on <u>inside</u> them.

Young people are not solo actors in their narratives of faith.

The faith narratives of Your Story participants are laced with all kinds of relationships, groups, circumstances and situations which have influenced a young person's spiritual story. Knowing the faith journey of a young person means understanding how their past experiences, choices and actions have interacted with the experiences, choices and actions of others.

Faith journeys are ecological. Consider how a tree grows as part of an interconnected system of soil, sun, wind, rain, other plants, and animal life. As well as benefiting from this system, the tree also is an active member of this system, and gives as much as it receives (e.g. through providing shelter for animals, or protection for smaller plants).

In the same way, every young person's faith narrative is the story of their choices and responses to spiritual realities as they interact with significant others negotiating everyday life together.

Your Story identified and categorised hundreds of factors that young people included in their faith narratives:

Internal factors

arose from within the thoughts, feelings, actions or choices of the young person.

External factors

arose from the relationships with individuals and groups, and the circumstances that are part of the young person's life.

Supportive factors

are those that young people narrate as upholding or reinforcing the young person's growth in Christian faith.

Contrary factors

are those that young people narrate as problematising or disrupting growth in Christian faith.

Consider the example of Eunice:

My parents are Christian and dedicated me to a Baptist church at birth. I was brought to church for as long as I can remember. I actively engaged in my churches kid group, where I was one of the oldest of a generation.

I believed in Christianity in the way of a child believing that people have been to the moon, simply a fact. As an early teenager, my faith reached a point where I wanted to decide to be a Christian. I had multiple experiences that I related to God.

However, it somewhat petered out as time passed. I simply stopped connecting with it so much. Nothing stood in my way, I just didn't feel like it was affecting me. I was questioning its relevance.

Eunice (17f–Embracing)

Her narrative begins by describing a series of **external** and **supportive** factors: Christian parents, childhood dedication, church attendance and involvement in children's ministry. The narrative then shifts to a series of **internal** and **supportive** factors: an innocent belief in Christianity, a desire to be a Christian followed by a decision, and multiple spiritual experiences.

Later though, the narrative takes a turn as Eunice narrates a series of **internal** and **contrary** factors: declining spiritual experience, declining connection to faith and a perceived lack of relevance.

Eunice's ecosystem is filled with factors that push and pull in different directions. While this excerpt hints toward Coasting or even Fading from faith, elsewhere we learn that Eunice remains actively engaged in her youth group, continues to independently engage in spiritual practices and is surrounded by Christian adults and youth leaders who have a very positive influence on her faith. Amidst questioning and uncertainty, Eunice tells a narrative of Embracing Christian faith.

Your Story demonstrates how faith is formed by the forces of influence in a young person's narrative. If supportive factors increased in frequency when compared to contrary factors, it was more likely that their faith journey was one of strengthening Christian faith. As contrary factors began to overwhelm the influence of supportive factors, their faith journey was more likely to be one of decline, abandonment, or complete disregard for Christian faith.

Figure 3 displays the average percentage of supportive and contrary factors narrated in each of the 8 faith narratives outlined in Key Finding #1. Notice that in the Embracing and Persisting narratives (on the left side) roughly 75% of the identified factors were supportive and only 25% contrary. On the other hand, narratives which did not identify as Christian told stories where the supportive factors dropped below 50%.
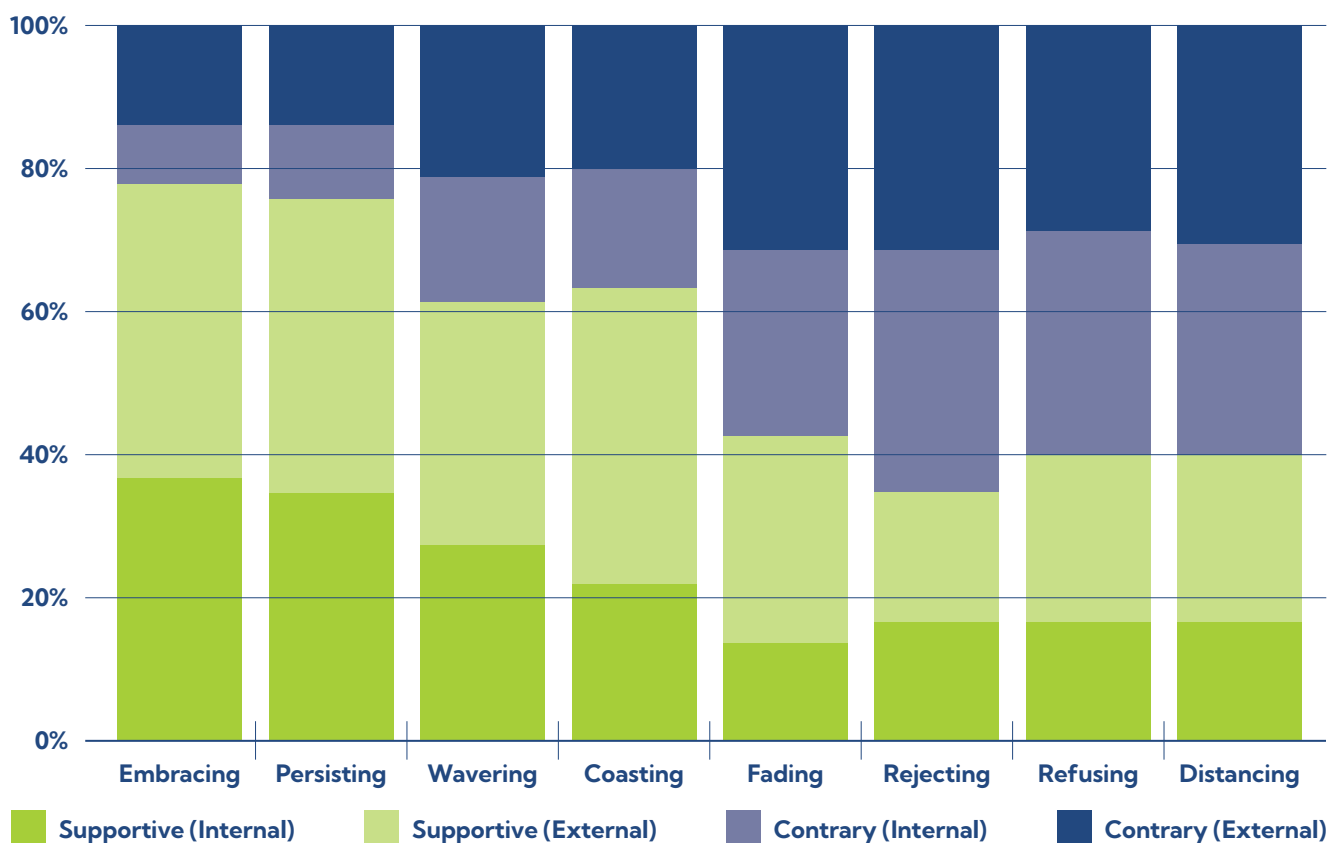

Figure 3: Internal and External Factors in each Faith Journey Narrative type (% of codes applied across all narratives of each type)

Understanding the ecological nature of faith offers three big ideas for constructive discipleship:

1. Build rich ecosystems of spiritual support

A young person's faith journey is filled with actors who surround them.[4] Whether they actively disciple young people or not, all are important characters in a young person's story. This includes explicitly religious actors such as churches, pastors and Christian teachers, but also includes sporting clubs, neighbours, friends, and admin staff.

Every actor is influential in each story in some way. The question is whether that influence is supportive or contrary to a young person's growth in Christian faith?

Many ministries focus solely on developing internal supportive factors—the personally held beliefs and practices of a young person. However, disciplers can make a tremendous contribution to the faith narratives of young people by also developing rich ecosystems loaded with supportive factors.

2. Don't rely on a silver bullet

Constructive discipleship does not rely on providing just one avenue of spiritual support to a young person. Factors such as growing up in a household with actively believing parents or having a teenage experience of commitment to faith were frequently present in committed narratives.

However, no single factor or group of factors proved to be decisive in determining long term commitment to faith.

Contrast the stories of Rebecca and Cody:

> I grew up in a Christian household where the only thing my parents required out of Christianity was to listen to Jesus' morals and values, and try to be kind, helpful and just a good person
>
> I remember getting confirmed to God during a youth session, at around 12 years old?? I don't remember what exactly happened, but I would just attend youth on a Friday night for the next 4 or so years.
>
> For about the last year that I considered myself Christian, I had struggled with doubt, questioning and other difficulties that all built up to my loss in the faith. A huge part of my loss of faith was due to the political views within the church that I did not agree with.

Rebecca (16f–Rejecting)

> I was born and raised in Christian family my whole life... Year 8 at Easter camp [I was] going thru anxiety. I had to give my life to him because I was being consumed so I surrendered putting my hand up saying I wanted to follow Jesus. Having anxiety for 3 years was very tough. Why didn't God take it away (often a thought I'd think). I've been surrounded by Christians my whole life really...Having one awesome youth leader hanging out with me in year 7/8 was seriously awesome!

Cody (19m–Persisting)

[4] An actor is any person, group or organisation in the young person's ecosystem.

Rebecca and Cody's stories start out sounding like narratives of commitment. Both have the support of believing parents, and both had a pre/early–teen experience of commitment to faith. But Rebecca's story becomes one of Fading from faith with no major challenge or crisis present in her narrative. In contrast, Cody's story is one of Persisting in faith through significant faith challenges.

It might be tempting to conclude that it was the nature of Cody's Christian community, or faithful parents, or his "awesome" youth leader that made the difference. But the presence of these factors in other stories did not guarantee committed faith.

Just like a natural ecosystem, it is the interaction of multiple factors that supports healthy growth. Effective discipling does not look for one solution but rather cultivates a rich ecosystem of faith in and around young people.

3. Don't fear a poison chalice

Not only does constructive discipleship of young people not rely on a single silver bullet, neither is it thrown off course by a single poison chalice. **There is no single obstacle or challenge that alone will spell the end of a young person's spiritual health.**

Listen to how Kathleen (17f) talks about her struggle with doubt:

> I worried that I wasn't making the right choice and was not convinced that everything the bible said was true… [but] Through conversations with older people in my community, I learned that this doubt was the whole idea of having faith in something. To believe even if was hard.

Kathleen (17f–Wavering)

Anxiety over personal choices and doubts regarding the reliability of the Bible are contrary factors in many stories of faith. While some young people were not able to overcome this particular faith challenge, this was not the case for Kathleen. Though her experience of doubt was difficult, Kathleen's relational ecosystem included the supportive factors of conversations with older believers, and this taught her how doubt can be integrated with faith.

From Kathleen, we learn that the presence of faith challenges can serve to strengthen faith when met with effective supports. Constructive discipleship helps young people bring their challenging experiences to the surface and does not leave them to face them on their own.

However, this kind of discipling practice requires contrary factors to be held within a system of supports. The Wavering experience of challenge has the opposite effect to that of the Persisting. Where two Christian young people face challenges to their faith, one persists in faith and grows stronger, the other is conflicted about faith and grows less committed. Persisters grow through challenge when they make use of the supportive factors in their faith stories to counteract the difficulties. The Waverers' stories draw on too few supports to counteract the challenge.

Note that what is critical is not merely the presence of supports in a young person's life, but whether those supports have become part of the young persons' story.

More on this in Key Finding #5.

See Part 2 for more details.

A.B.O.U.T. RELATIONSHIPS

Effective discipling relationships offer Acceptance, build Belonging, promote Ownership, develop Understanding, and are anchored in Trust

Which factor has the greatest influence upon the faith journey of a young person, for better or worse? Your Story demonstrates that it is the quality of relationship they have with an adult.

Relationships were very significant in the faith journeys of young people. Often, a relationship was the only thing that they described as being the influential factor in their discipleship—whether for good or ill. However, it's important to note that it is not simply a relationship that is crucial, but a particular quality of relationship that becomes fertile ground for discipling

action—we call these A.B.O.U.T. Relationships: relationships characterised by Acceptance, Belonging, Ownership, Understanding, and Trust.

Your Story asked young people two open-ended questions about influential people in their faith journey:

What is important for us to understand about what this person/organisation was like?

If you were to write a letter to this person/ the people involved in this organisation what would you want them to know about their influence on your faith?

When this influence was **positive**, young people said these kinds of things to or about influential people in their faith journey:

Church Leader: You didn't give up on me, loved me.

Patrick (18m–Wavering)

Youth Ministry: They had a very positive influence on my faith ... I'd thank them for always showing love and compassion, even when I fell asleep during sermons

Maya (20f–Wavering)

Mother: [her] unconditional love has helped me through periods of trials and allowed me to become a more mature Christian

Jaxon (18m–Persisting)

When the influence was **negative**, young people said these kinds of things to or about influential people in their faith journey:

Church: Hey, Thanks for nothing. Oh except the transphobia, homophobia and unwillingness to listen to me or those in real need. Good luck finding a new pastor you jerks

Matt (17m–Rejecting)

School: They taught us about Christianity and its importance however they did not know us personally unless we decided to seek them out

Adeline (17f–Coasting)

Boyfriend: I walked away from God after coming out of a toxic relationship with a boyfriend. I believed I wasn't worthy of Gods love anymore. I didn't want to be around anything that reminded me of God

Monique (18f–Wavering)

Notice how none of these young people talk about explicit discipling activities. Instead, they focus entirely on the quality of the relationship that existed between themselves and the influential person or group.

Positive connections with young people are built through relationships of Acceptance, Belonging, Ownership, Understanding, and Trust.

These five terms summarise what young people think and feel about others (internal factors), the actions taken by others toward young people (external factors), and the general nature of the relational connection others have with the young person (internal and external factors).

These five qualities of positive relationships were valued by young people from across each of the different faith journeys.

Acceptance

Relationships of acceptance are ones where young people can be themselves without pretence and share anything without fear of rejection.

Young people described relationships of acceptance as being noticed, recognised, valued, and respected for who they are, without judgement and without the need to change. Acceptance flows from deliberately inclusive acts and gestures which allow young people to feel understood and valued, even in the face of disagreements or challenges:

> You have influenced me this year especially, in more ways than you know, teaching me it's ok to wrestle with my thoughts, it's ok not to have all the answers and it's ok to feel emotions sometimes because Jesus did too... You accept me as i am, questions, curiosities and all.

Julie (16f–Embracing)

When acceptance was not present, young people described experiences of judgment, criticism, and insecurity. They sensed pressure to change in order to attain approval:

> [My Christian friends] sometimes were too pressuring and that made me feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I felt like I couldn't be 100% honest/open about my feelings because I felt that they would judge me. It appeared to me as if they felt moral superiority due to their beliefs and strictly following their practices.

Amanthi (16f–Wavering)

Relationships that lacked acceptance were strained and tended to be unsustainable, nurturing feelings of inadequacy, rejection, and alienation.

Belonging

In relationships of belonging young people feel confident that they have a meaningful place within their relationships and communities.

Young people described relationships of belonging as establishing a sense togetherness that goes beyond mere inclusion. Young people described a sense of fitting in and being held together with bonds of shared interests, values, experiences, or goals. A young person experiencing belonging takes on a shared identity, often using "we" or "us" to talk about their relationships.

Despite Isabella's negative experiences of her church community, she still holds positive memories of belonging to a small group:

> Good small group intense bible study was wonderful. 6–8 girls over a long period. I look back now though and think it was not because of the bible or blood of Christ that we grew but because we came together as humans who cared about each other and supported each other with belonging and openness.

Isabella (19f–Rejecting)

When belonging is not present young people described feeling unnoticed, disconnected, and isolated. They perceive that they don't fit in and that their contribution is not valued:

> [What does the future of faith and spirituality look like for you?] I have no clue. It all really depends on if I can find a religious community where I really feel I belong and am accepted.

Leilani (19f–Wavering)

Acceptance without belonging keeps relationships superficial. Such relationships eventually fail as young people see themselves as outsiders to a group or relationship.

Ownership

A young person has ownership in a relationship when they exercise the freedom and responsibility to make their own decisions.

Young people described relationships that promote ownership as those where others recognised their ability to make choices, express needs and desires, and take responsibility for their actions. This ownership gave young people freedom to assert their identity, and make their own decisions regarding faith:

> As I've gotten older, mum has encouraged me not to just listen to everything she believes but to find answers for myself. This helped me know that my faith had become my own.

Zoë (19f–Embracing)

When a young person's agency is not respected, they described feeling powerless, controlled, diminished, or manipulated. Many were affronted by Christians acting in a manner that was perceived as coercive or pushy:

> I wish I hadn't let you brainwash me …. You cost me more than you could imagine and it was not worth it. I hurt people because I trusted you. Never again

Isabella (19f–Rejecting)

Without ownership, relationships become at best unbalanced, and at worst toxic, causing young people to feel trapped and devalued.

Understanding

In relationships of understanding, young people feel that others 'get me', or are at least attempting to.

Young people described relationships of being understood as ones where their thoughts, feelings, and experiences were being accurately perceived, and acknowledged. Understanding starts with listening well, and continues through empathy, and a genuine effort to grasp the meaning behind what is being shared:

> I don't have many close friends at the moment but one of my two closest friends is Christian... Thank you for always being there for me on my journey, for always being accepting of me and understanding when I struggled to connect to my spirituality.

Leilani (19f–Wavering)

When understanding is not present young people described strained relationships where communication was ineffective. Sometimes no effort was made to empathise with their world, or conflict arose when young peoples' actions were misinterpreted. Being misunderstood meant that young people would give up trying to express their questions of faith:

> [The youth minister was] slightly disconnected with the reality of being a teenager in this day and therefore didn't understand what they needed to do to direct these teens to the church effectively.... you need to identify what is stopping these kids from expanding their faith. Don't shun anyone, everyone's voice is valuable.

Alex (16n–Rejecting)

Trust

In relationships of trust young people have confidence that others have their best interests at heart.

When young people described relationships of trust, they expressed the firm belief that others were reliable and honest. Trust is built through consistency, integrity, and keeping confidences. It forms the foundation of emotional safety because it secures and protects the relationship:

> [The youth ministry] helped me grow so much... Thank you for being the one thing I was excited for the end of the week and creating a space to find my second family I could trust, love and rely on.

Sally (17f–Embracing)

When trust is not present young people described relationships in which they felt suspicious, anxious, or guarded. Without trust young people questioned the motivations and reliability of the individual or group. Mistrust often came from perceptions that Christians valued the purity of their religion more than the best interests of the young person. When this was present, young people viewed others' spirituality as empty ideology rather than living faith:

> [My father] Loves me but [is] very manipulative... and now I'm struggling to even trust him. He's broken my trust, but he can't see what his done.

Bonnie (16f–Embracing)

Sensitivity to Power and Agency

> See Part 4 for an extended discussion of power and agency.

Disciplers who develop A.B.O.U.T. Relationships never act coercively or push their beliefs on others. Actions described by young people as promoting Ownership included offering consistent yet gentle invitations, meeting individuals where they are while encouraging them to move forward, being curious, being open to new ideas, and empowering young people to explore and figure things out for themselves:

> [My father] is loving and caring and teaches me about Christianity and faith but does not force it upon me and leaves it up to me to choose what I will do with it

Victor (16m–Coasting)

> I made some really great friends here and met some really wonderful leaders. I brought some really big questions and felt that their gravity was honoured, so thanks.

Samantha (18f–Embracing)

Spiritual abuse is the antithesis of promoting ownership. Stories of the blatant misuse of power are heartbreaking:

> [The church] watched abuse and did nothing about it. They cast out the damaged and kept the perpetrators of abuse. When they finally saw what was true they made very poor efforts and making things right and repenting. They didn't accept responsibility.
>
> You damaged me and my family. You were more worried about your reputation than you were about doing what was right.

Oliver (18m–Wavering)

There are also more subtle forms of power. Judgmentalism and a lack of inclusivity fall into this category, as they use power as a form of exclusion. Pressuring young people toward a specific way of engaging with Christian faith was also viewed negatively. Additionally, young people's agency can be violated when influential people act dismissively or fail to take their perspectives and questions seriously:

> [The youth minister] wasn't open to new ideas at all and only wanted to force his beliefs on us. He didn't want us to think for ourselves and he was one of the main reasons I began the process of losing my faith.

Sophie (20f–Rejecting)

Coercion ultimately seeks compliance, rather than genuine agreement or personal growth.

Be Challenging, not Coercive

For the participants of Your Story, there is all the difference in the world between being challenging and being coercive. When young people trust that a discipler has their best interests at heart, a challenge can often be well received. Coercion never is.

Challenges that were welcomed included encouragement for young people to think critically, step outside their comfort zone, or grow by presenting new perspectives or difficult tasks.

Supportive challenges to faith respect young peoples' autonomy and invite them to engage voluntarily.

> I didn't feel pressured to be a Christian, but I was encouraged to take my faith more seriously than I was. It taught me how to connect with God, taught me how the Bible approached issues and equipped me to become a fully fledged independent Christian.

Jaxon (18m–Persisting)

A thoughtful challenge is empowering, because it offers support, and gives space for choice. It opens up possibilities rather than narrows the options. Relationships that promote ownership are focussed on helping young people to grow, rather than imposing an expectation to change.

In a Nutshell:

A Good Relationship with a Good Person Grows Faith

There is more to constructive discipling than cultivating a warm and supportive relationship with a young person. However, it's also true that if you can't do this, then discipleship will rarely be effective. Worse still, without this kind of relationship, then your well-intentioned and theologically-robust action could impede the faith journey of young people.

RELATIONALLY GROUNDED DISCIPLING ACTION

The effectiveness of discipling action grows in proportion to relational strength

Your Story identified hundreds of examples of discipling actions, such as praying for or with a young person, inviting a young person to youth group or church, engaging with a young person's questions and doubts, supporting young people through tough times, and delivering sermons.

Essentially, "discipling actions" are any activity undertaken with the intent to support a young person's growth in commitment to Christian faith.

However, not all discipling actions functioned as supportive factors. Sometimes the very same discipling action could be described by one person as being hugely positive, while for another it was enormously negative. For example, a youth minister may teach the Christian faith concisely and clearly, which was received as helpful by one young person, but received as unhelpful by others:

> I wish you had spoken more about contemporary society and the conversations happening about the Christian church and why, then I could have explored my beliefs for myself and heard different perspectives.

Jenny (20f–Persevering)

So, what made a particular discipling action helpful or harmful? The most significant factor was the **quality of the relationship between the young person and the discipler.**[5]

We need to be thoughtful about what kind of discipling actions we use. But without a positive relationship, these actions may have little effect, or may even act as a significant road block to a young person's journey of faith.

The Discipling Action Pyramid

The Discipling Action Pyramid (figure 4) is a helpful way of understanding the connection between discipling actions, and quality of relationship with a young person.

Your Story found that the discipling actions described in young people's stories of faith ranged from non–directive to confrontational. For example, a non–directive action may be the discipler simply modelling the Christian life. When a young person observes someone's Christian life, they may admire it, but there is very little sense that they "should" do something in response. At the confrontational end of the spectrum, the discipler may directly and personally insist that a young person change an aspect of their life for religious reasons. Here, there is a sense of being obligated to respond in a particular way.

These differing forms of discipling action have significant implications for a young person's sense of agency. How? Because the type of discipling action we choose affects the level of 'should' or 'ought' that the young person may experience. And, as we have seen above, young people are highly sensitive to power and force.

The Discipling Action Pyramid is a helpful way of distinguishing four levels of discipling action.

The bottom of the pyramid (e.g. "Inquire") shows discipling actions which have maximum freedom for how a young person could respond. As you ascend the pyramid, however, the discipling actions (e.g. "Confront") imply an increasing sense of expectation to respond in a certain way.

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[5] This can be described as an "extrinsic" quality rather than an "intrinsic" quality. That is, the reasons given by young people for whether a discipling action was effective or not, are not primarily determined by qualities of the action itself, but by something external to the action (ie. the relationship).
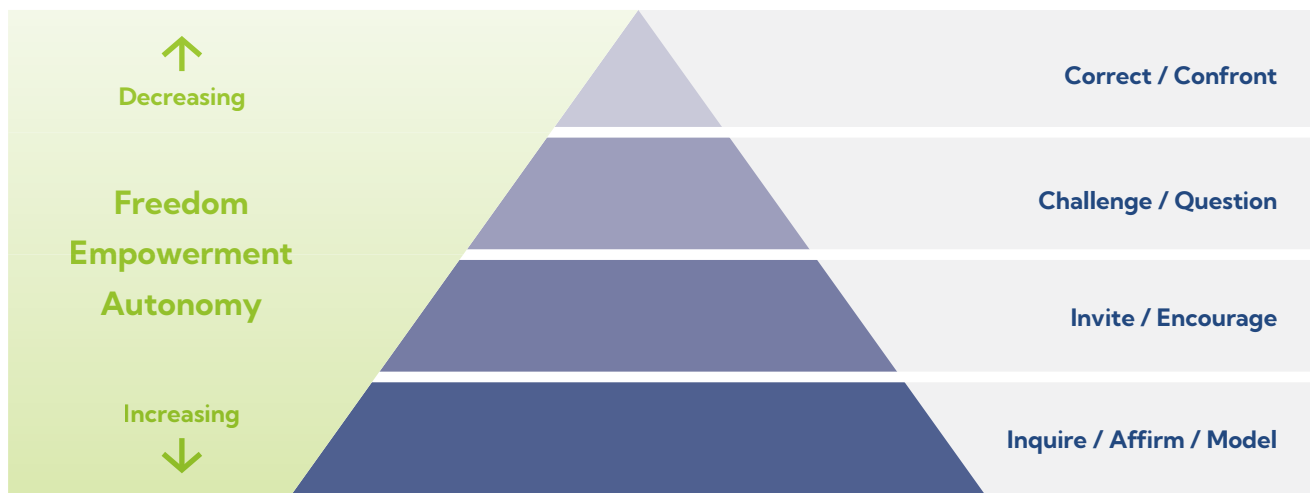
Figure 4: The Discipling Action Pyramid

Maya's story illustrates discipling actions at each level of the Discipling Action Pyramid:

When I was 13 or 14, at a youth service, at the end of the sermon, the preacher asked everyone to close their eyes and bow their heads, and then anyone who wanted to commit their lives to God should put up their hands.

I was pretty committed to God already, but had never done anything formally, so I put up my hand. Maybe a week or two later, after bible study, my leaders pulled me aside and gave me a card and a bible study guide aimed at teenage girls, and said they had seen me put up my hand and wanted to encourage me in my faith.

I was also confirmed maybe a year after that, but I think raising my hand and then having my leaders notice and support me was an even more important experience.

[When] I was maybe 16 or 17 ... I confided in [a different] youth leader about my uncertainties about my boyfriend, because he wasn't Christian, but I loved him.

The youth leader told me that if I couldn't make him Christian, then I should break up with him, because two people of different faiths aren't compatible. That stressed me out immensely, and I tried to make my boyfriend Christian and he didn't want to (due to the previous bad experiences), and it really tested my faith to feel like I had to choose between my boyfriend or God.

Maya (20f–Wavering)

Level 1: Inquire / Affirm / Model

The actions at level 1 are entirely non-directive. They place no requirements upon the young person. Actions of this type include asking questions out of sheer curiosity, affirming the present action of the young person, or modelling certain qualities.

Maya's small group leaders undertook an open and affirming action by telling her they had noticed her raise her hand and by sending an encouraging message. Maya remains free to respond (or not) in any way she chooses.

Level 2: Invite / Encourage

Level 2 actions invite young people to participate in a particular practice, or encourage them to respond in a certain way. The invitation is slightly more directive than level 1. However, the young person remains free to choose from a range of responses.

Maya's small group leaders took a more directive action by offering her a bible study guide. Offering a resource carries the implication that Maya could, or should, work through it.

Level 3: Challenge / Question

The actions at level 3 contain a strong implication that specific responses are expected, even if not required. The young person's ultimate autonomy is still respected, but the action contains a strong preference to respond in a particular way.

The invitation to make a public confession of faith in the ritual of confirmation requires Maya to take a stance of being 'in' or 'out of' (or at least 'not yet in') the Christian community.

Similarly, the preacher's call to young people to commit their lives to God and signify this by publicly raising their hands functions at level 3.

Level 4: Correct / Confront

The actions at level 4 contain a requirement for a particular action. Level 4 actions usually have an attached consequence if the young person fails to respond in the desired manner.

Young people are still being recognised as responsible agents in spiritual decision-making, but the available choices have narrowed. This is the realm of limited options where young people are being pushed to take a stance in response to the leaders' position.

The youth leader who confronted Maya's relationship with a non-Christian boyfriend gave her a very limited range of options: choose between her boyfriend or God.

Relational Bonds Ground Constructive Discipleship

In Maya's story of faith, she names the least directive actions as the most important: affirming, noticing, and supporting. However, those were not isolated actions. They came as part of a discipling ecosystem that included challenges to public commitment and confirmation. Each of these actions were powerful in Maya's faith journey narrative.

Like a physical pyramid, the actions at the bottom level of the discipling pyramid provide a strong base upon which higher levels can be built.

We found 3 rules that guide the effectiveness of discipling actions, and how they relate to the quality of relationship with a young person:

1. Lower levels on the pyramid are more likely to be received well by young people

Interactions at the bottom layer of the discipleship pyramid are more likely to be well received by young people. This reflects the relational quality of promoting young peoples' ownership of faith choices:

> I'm particularly thankful for my church community [who] modelled what it looks like to personally relate to him in prayer, and impressed on me the importance of growth in the Christian life as a response to God's goodness to us.

Jenny (20f–Persevering)

2. A negative relationship can make even lower levels of discipling action ineffective

A damaged relationship can turn even the most open and gentle discipling action into something that a young person will be dismissive of at best, or find offensive or destructive at worst:

> My father is extremely interested in believing all the right things. He studies theology at uni and preaches at church sometimes. I have always felt uncomfortable talking to him about my faith because he always seemed to relish the fact that he knew everything and I didn't.

Sophie (20f–Rejecting)

3. Higher levels on the pyramid are potentially effective for disciplers with whom young people have a strong relationship

Discipling actions at the top end of the pyramid are high–stakes interactions. Confrontation has a greater risk of being received negatively by young people:

> [To father] Sometimes forcing religion is the worst possible thing for you to do for your child, especially in their teens. You should never force them to be religious because it just pushes them further from it.

Leilani (19f–Wavering)

In the context of faith and spirituality, it is vital to honour relationships for their own sake, valuing the person rather than seeing them as a means to an end. A.B.O.U.T Relationships emphasize genuine connection over any agenda. When relationships are built primarily to influence someone's beliefs, they risk undermining trust and sincerity. The Discipling Action Pyramid serves as a guide to ensure that your actions are balanced with the quality of your relationship with a young person.

If your relationships with young people are positive, you can confidently use a wider range of discipling actions. Because of this, any constructive engagement in the faith narrative of a young person begins with establishing a relationship of acceptance, belonging, ownership, understanding and trust.

Sometimes, all that is needed is a quality relationship with a person of faith. Without any expectation of greater spiritual engagement on their part, the young person's commitment to Christian faith may grow.

However, there will be other moments when young people need more directive discipling actions from higher up the Discipling Pyramid. But before this, disciplers must first establish robust relational bonds to support these demanding discipling actions. **The more positive the relational connection, the more discipling actions are available for adults to engage with young people over the course of their faith journey.**

RESOURCING FAITH NARRATIVES

Constructive discipleship enables young people to draw on positive factors present in their faith ecology to support growing faith

A young person's faith journey does not flow simply or cleanly out of the supportive and contrary factors present in their experience. What is significant is how these supportive and contrary factors are incorporated within their stories of faith.

Like all human beings, young people have a limited perspective on everything that is going on around them. They are sometimes oblivious to the assistance they have received from others, while becoming consumed by relatively minor challenges to their faith.

This limited perspective has an intriguing consequence. The stories that young people tell of their faith will not be a comprehensive or even accurate reflection of the influences that have surrounded them. But these stories are their stories, and it's out of their stories that they are making sense of life and faith.

Consider Jaxon's story:

> I grew up in a Christian missionary family where we lived in South-East Asia for the first 10 years of my life... I would consider myself extremely head-strong in my faith combined with a not very strong heart faith.... I always knew about the spiritual side of Christianity but it was mostly foreign to me and to this day I haven't experienced a super significant spiritual moment.
>
> I lingered as what I would call a 'hypocritical' Christian during highschool. I was extremely head-strong but had next to no faith, meaning that I would live my life as a Christian at church but ignore it elsewhere.... I'm still learning about the spiritual side of faith and am currently looking for a second mentor to help guide me through the area...
>
> I feel like I only would approach the leaders of the church now that I'm an adult. Wouldn't have felt comfortable doing that as a teenager.

Jaxon (18m–Persisting)

Jaxon has a rich faith-ecosystem of supportive factors—a family who is active in faith and a clear set of beliefs about Christianity. From elsewhere in Jaxon's story we know that he has a positive engagement in youth group, and solid relationships with youth leaders, Christian friends, and relatives.

Alongside these supportive factors Jaxon's story recounts his ongoing struggle with the 'spiritual' or 'heart' side of Christian faith. His faith challenge is to grapple with knowledge of faith that is not matched by an experience of faith.

How did he use the supportive resources in his discipling ecosystem to resolve these challenges? When Jaxon was a younger teenager, the leaders of his church remained an unutilised resource for growing faith. As an adult he has grown more comfortable to approach them. Jaxon's narrative is becoming one of making use of the supports in his faith ecosystem, specifically a mentor, to deal with his faith challenges.

Jaxon is not only surrounded by positive supports to faith he has been able to utilise these supports to face challenges.

Faith Narratives of Significance, Meaning, and Ownership

Crafting a personal faith narrative helps grow faith by identifying significant spiritual experiences and relationships, imbuing them with meaning, and fostering a sense of ownership over one's faith journey.

Significance

A narrative does not simply repeat everything that happened. A narrative selects key events to include and others to exclude—it brings some experiences to the fore while others are left in the background.

How a young person narrates their faith reveals what they consider pivotal in their journey.

Meaning

When young people retell their story, they are joining the dots between their faith and the various circumstances, events, people, and places that have been a part of their life. Often they are doing this in real time. By narrating their journey of faith, they are also making sense of life. A young person's storytelling organises their experience to give it coherence and meaning.

Ownership

Relationships that promote ownership encourage young people to tell their own stories of faith. Disciplers often feel they know what is happening in a young person's faith ecology. Yet, it is the young person who must make sense of their own thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

Significance, meaning, and ownership are key dimensions of a young person's faith narrative. By listening carefully to a young person's faith narrative, we honour their ability to make sense of their experience. By inviting and encouraging young people to tell and retell their faith story, we help them reinforce the significance of events, people and circumstances that have influenced them.

This became very clear in Your Story when we asked young people to imagine themselves speaking directly to people who played a role, positively or negatively, in their faith journey.

Young people shifted from simply recounting events, to unpacking the significance of those events, and the part people played in them.

Listen to how Maya and Isabella are interpreting the actions of these significant others:

> My parents have been an extremely positive influence, consistently showing me God's love and never making me feel like I can't be Christian because of bad choices I've made or questions I've had. They've consistently supported me and loved me, and gently encouraged me to come back to my faith when I've strayed.

Maya (20f–Wavering)

> [To children's ministry leaders] Thanks for trying. I know you meant well but you primed me for just accepting anything if someone was in a position of authority. You primed me for being self–conscious about my body and clothing…You indoctrinated me well but did nothing to help me think.

Isabella (19f–Rejecting)

In similar ways, many responses to Your Story were epiphanies taking place in real time as they were writing down their responses. By inviting young people to tell and retell their stories, we help them to shape the meaning of their past experiences, and reinforce their significance.

Faith Narratives Leverage Existing Supports

Your Story demonstrates that, if we can empower young people to make use of existing supportive factors in their discipling ecosystem, they are more likely to grow in faith in the face of contrary circumstances.

It matters how a young person tells the story of their faith. If their narrative takes note of more supports than challenges, then their faith is likely to grow. But when the challenges in the story outnumber their recognition of the available supports, then it becomes likely that a young person's faith will struggle, or never spring to life in the first place.

For positive experiences and supportive contexts to be effective in growing faith, young people need to draw upon those supports in times of need. An ecosystem full of richly supportive factors lies dormant until the young person reaches out and utilises them.

Consider Jordan's story:

> i was born very premature (early) and i ended up getting baptized as catholic while in the hospital as a baby. they prayed to god alot hoping i would live because i was born dangerously early and not supposed to survive.
>
> my great grandma had her special rosary beads blessed on me as to help me survive. god answered their prayers and i did survive. my younger brother was lucky that he got to be baptised in a church. but i was lucky that my baptism helped he to live. i was grateful to live... when great gran died, i got to have her rosary beads. they were special.

Jordan (17nb–Wavering)

Through their parents and great-grandmother praying for them, there was already support in Jordan's faith narrative. That support is amplified by telling Jordan the circumstances of their birth, and the role that prayer and the blessing of the rosary beads played in their survival.

But that experience could remain inactive in Jordan's ongoing journey of faith if it were not included in the way Jordan tells their story. As it is, receiving their great-grandmother's rosary was more than inheriting an artefact—it was resourcing a story of faith.

Jordan's family did not just pray—they also told Jordan they prayed. Jordan does not simply know that their family prayed—Jordan also retells the account of answered prayer in their faith narrative. **Faith grows more powerfully when experiences become resources that are activated within a young person's faith narrative.**

THE DYNAMICS OF FAITH

Part 2 details several important dynamics that are present in any faith journey. Understanding these dynamics will help disciplers constructively engage with the faith narratives of young people.

The first section, **Trajectories of Spiritual Experience and Practice**, expands on Key Finding #1—emphasising the importance of narrative over propositions in understanding faith—by exploring how young people's spiritual experiences and practices evolve over time.

The second section, **Supportive and Contrary Factors**, expands on Key Finding #2— that faith journeys are shaped within a relational ecosystem— by identifying and classifying the factors that either support or hinder young peoples' journeys of faith.

The third section, **Faith Challenges and Their Resolution**, explores the disruption and upheaval in faith reported by many young people, and the strategies they use to seek resolution. Faith challenges emerged as a major theme in the responses to Your Story, playing a significant role in identifying and distinguishing the eight Faith Narratives.

The fourth section, **Engagement with Groups, Organisations, and Parents**, analyses the eight Your Story narratives in relation to young people's involvement in Christian groups and organisations, and their relationships with group leaders and their parents. By examining the various patterns of engagement this section deepens our understanding of the discipleship ecosystem. Recognising these differences helps disciplers identify the opportunities and challenges unique to each context.

These trajectories, factors, and group dynamics form the foundation for distinguishing the key features of each of the eight Your Story faith narratives that will be explored in in Part 3.

PART 2

TRAJECTORIES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

Your Story identified six distinct clusters of spiritual experience and practice among Australian young people, based on their patterns of engagement over time. These clusters reveal how young people have experienced spirituality, navigated doubt, and expressed their faith or spirituality. They offer key insights into the dynamics of each faith narrative.

How we identified the Clusters

Your Story asked young people how often they had encountered fourteen different experiences commonly associated with faith, spirituality, and religion. They were also asked to indicate how true fourteen statements about faith–related practices were for them. This resulted in 28 different variables of spiritual experience and practice.

For each of the spiritual experiences and practices, we distinguished different trajectories of engagement that young people had with them over the course of their life span. Rather than just taking a snapshot of what they experience or practice now, these questions enabled us to understand something of how their journey of faith had changed over time.

Young people were given five options to indicate how often they had experienced fourteen individual experiences associated with faith or spirituality, at each of three stages of their life:

e.g. Receiving an answer to prayer:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Unsure
Now	O	O	O	O	O
As an early teenager	O	O	O	O	O
As a child	O	O	O	O	O

Young people were given five options to indicate the extent to which a statement was true of them in relation to fourteen different practices associated with faith or spirituality, at each of three stages of their life:

e.g. I dedicate time to read or study the Bible (on my own, or with others):

	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Very true	Unsure
Now	O	O	O	O	O
As an early teenager	O	O	O	O	O
As a child	O	O	O	O	O

Asking about their practices and experiences in this way meant that each question had 64 possible combinations![1] All of the responses were summarised into six broad trajectories that reflected the most common patterns of engagement: High, Increasing, Early-teen peak, Decreasing, Low, and Never:

	Spiritual Experiences	Spiritual Practices
High	Consistently having these spiritual experiences frequently across the three life stages.	Consistently engaging in these spiritual practices frequently across the three life stages.
Increasing	Having these spiritual experiences more frequently as they grow older.	Engaging in these spiritual practices more frequently as they grow older.
Early-teen peak	The frequency of these spiritual experiences peaked in early teen years but have declined since.	The frequency of engaging in these spiritual practices peaked in early teen years but have declined since.
Decreasing	Having these spiritual experiences less frequently as they grow older.	Engaging in these spiritual practices less frequently as they grow older.
Low	Consistently having these spiritual experiences infrequently across the three life stages.	Consistently engaging in these spiritual practices infrequently across the three life stages.
Never	Never having these spiritual experiences at any stage of their life.	Never engaging in these spiritual practices at any stage of their life.

Table 2: Trajectories of Spiritual Experience and Spiritual Practice

The way young people engage in faith can be understood in relation to their patterns of engagement within each of these differing forms of spiritual experience and practice over time.

A statistical process of cluster analysis reduced the 28 variables of spiritual experience and practice into six distinct groups, enabling us to simplify the data and uncover more meaningful patterns.

Your Story identified four distinct clusters of how young people experienced spirituality or faith through the life stages, and two distinct clusters of the practices that young people have engaged in to express their faith or spirituality through the life stages.[2]

Spiritual Experience Clusters	Spiritual Practice Clusters
1. Traditional	1. Active
2. Resonant	2. Reflective
3. Supernatural	
4. Doubt	

[1] After removing those who selected 'unsure', four options over three time periods equates to 64 possibilities. That's four to the power of three for the mathematically minded.

[2] A statistical cluster indicates that respondents in a survey tended to answer the question grouped into that cluster in a similar way. That is, if they answer 'often' to one item, it would be highly likely that they would also answer 'often' to all the other items in the same cluster.

Four Clusters of Spiritual Experience

Traditional Spiritual Experience

Traditional experiences align with conventional and familiar experiences of the Christian faith.

The elements that make up the cluster of traditional spiritual experience are:

- A general awareness of God's presence with you
- Receiving an answer to prayer
- Receiving insight while reading the Bible
- Feeling very positive about faith while participating in a worship service
- Hearing God's voice or being overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence
- Feeling guilty, sinful, or ashamed
- Experiencing opposition, persecution or bullying for holding religious beliefs

Feeling Guilty is Traditional

It is significant to discover that feelings of guilt, sin, and shame tend to go hand–in–hand with other conventionally Christian spiritual experiences. In other words, those who regularly have traditional Christian experiences are also more likely to experience guilt and shame.

This was something of a surprise for us. We had originally expected that negative spiritual experiences would cluster together and potentially move inversely to positive practices. This proved not to be the case. Guilt and shame, instead, appear to be traditional experiences of Christian faith.

Resonant Spiritual Experience

Resonant experiences refer to encounters that young people still associate as being spiritual, yet do not have an explicit association with a personal God.

The elements that make up the cluster of resonant spiritual experience are:

- Having a spiritual experience of awe, wonder, inner peace while in nature
- Having a spiritual experience of feeling deeply connected to the people around you
- Having a spiritual experience through moments of beauty and/or creativity

Supernatural Spiritual Experience

Supernatural experiences refer to encounters and events that transcend natural explanation, often perceived as a direct intervention of divine power or presence.

The elements that make up the cluster of supernatural spiritual experience are:

- Witnessing a miracle, healing, or other event that cannot be explained by science
- Receiving special (prophetic) knowledge or insight about someone or something
- Experiencing/Witnessing a sense of oppression or demonic opposition

As with the traditional experiences, negative and positive supernatural experiences were strongly correlated. That is, supernatural experiences of blessing are often accompanied by supernatural experiences of evil.

Experiencing Doubt

The fourth cluster of spiritual experience contained just one question which formed its own category—having significant doubts in relation to faith.

Doubt does its own thing

It is intriguing that the patterns of how frequently young people experience doubt move independently of the other three clusters of spiritual experience. Contrary to what we may have expected, doubt is not specifically connected to traditional forms of experience, nor is doubt absent from those with supernatural or resonant experience.

Over three in five young people in our sample indicated that they experienced high or increasing levels of doubt in relation to faith. By contrast, only one in seven indicated that they had never experienced doubt. While the relative strength and presence of doubt varies across the 8 faith narratives, it is a common experience for most young people regardless of the trajectory of their faith (or no faith) commitment.

Faith for today's young person takes place in the context of doubt.

| 0% | 10% | 20% | 30% | 40% | 50% | 60% | 70% | 80% | 90% | 100% |

Never   Low   Decreasing   Early-teen Peak   Increasing   High
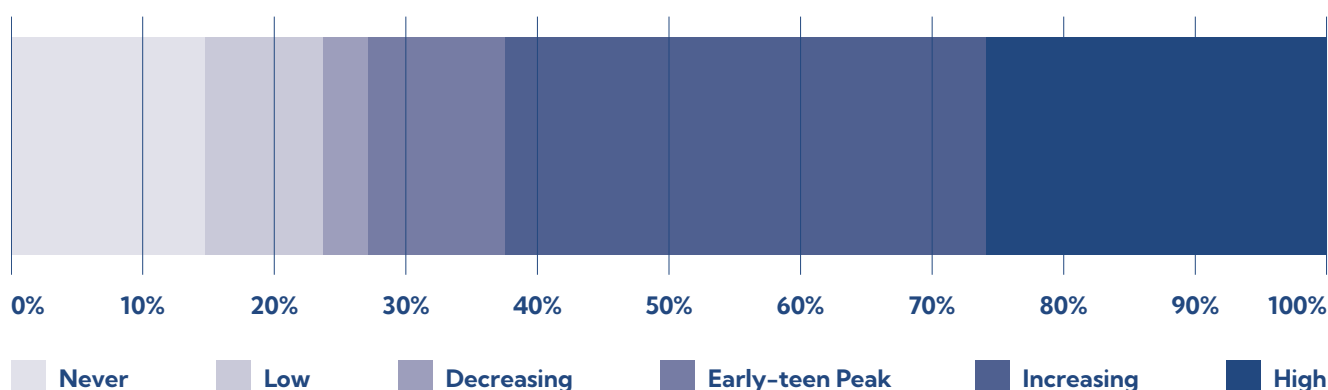
Figure 5: Six Trajectories of Young Peoples' Experience of Doubt

Two Clusters of Spiritual Practice

When we applied cluster analysis to the spiritual practice data, we anticipated that the resulting groups might reveal distinct styles of spiritual expression. For example, we considered the possibility of differentiating between practices centred on social engagement and activism versus more introspective ones. Similarly, one could imagine contrasting participatory practices (like attending worship) with those that require convictional action (such as dedicating time to study the bible). However, the analysis instead revealed just two statistically distinct categories: active and reflective practices.

Active Spiritual Practices

Active practices are generally expressive in nature and involve intentional spiritual actions, often in the company of others. This cluster encompasses most of the identified practices and reflects many well-known Christian spiritual disciplines.

The elements that make up the cluster of Active Spiritual Practices are:

- I dedicate time to read or study the Bible (on my own, or with others)
- I spend time learning about my faith (through reading, listening to podcasts, speaking with others, etc)
- I get actively involved in social causes because of my faith
- I give money to causes, groups or individuals because of my faith
- I like to offer practical help to others as an expression of my faith
- I go to a Christian youth group (or Sunday School, Kids' Club, etc)
- I participate in Christian worship services
- I have an active prayer life
- I listen to Christian music
- I meet with a personal mentor to help me grow in my faith
- I look for ways to share my faith with others

Reflective Spiritual Practices

Reflective practices are more contemplative in nature and emphasise connection with God or one's own sense of spirituality.

The elements that make up the cluster of reflective spiritual practices are:

- I want to live a morally responsible or religiously obedient life
- I seek opportunities for silence, practice meditation, and/or mindfulness to feel close to God
- I spend time away from everybody in nature to nurture my faith

Experiences, Practices and the Eight Faith Narratives

The analysis of experiences and practices produced important insights that shaped our understanding of young people's changing faith.

Firstly, negative faith experiences do not cluster together. Guilt, shame and persecution are associated with Traditional experiences of faith, while oppression is associated with Supernatural experiences. Meanwhile, doubt maintains a unique pattern of spiritual experience unrelated to patterns of engagement with the other experiences and practices.

Negative experiences become differentiating factors among faith journeys primarily in relation to narrated experiences of faith challenges. As explored further below, the different ways in which individuals navigate these faith challenges significantly distinguish the various faith narratives.

Secondly, faith expression in the form of spiritual practices did not differentiate clusters of young people who were, say, more oriented toward social justice compared to more traditional participatory practices of attending church and youth group. Instead, it appears that activist practices do not take place at the expense of participatory practices, but rather they move together.

The trajectories of these clusters of Experiences and Practices help distinguish and clarify the unique faith expression within each of the Eight Faith Narratives.

The frequency of **traditional experience** remains high for the engaged narratives of Embracing and Persisting but drop quite markedly in the disengaging narratives of the Wavering and Coasting. Beyond these narratives, traditional experience barely occurs at all.
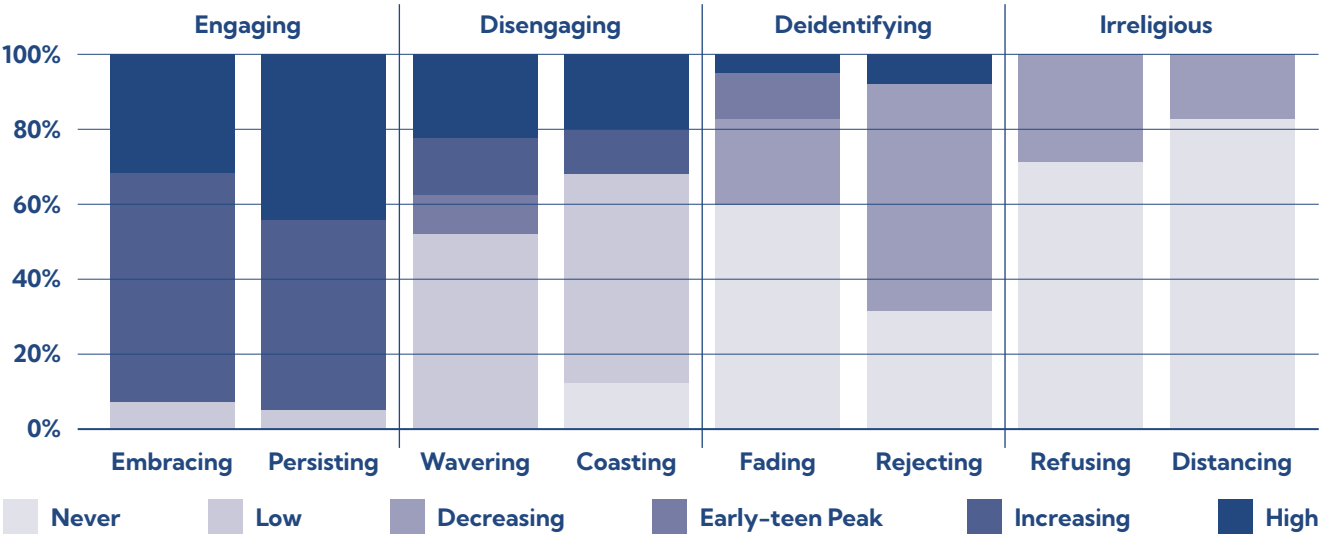
Figure 6: Trajectories of Traditional Spiritual Experience by Faith Journey Narrative

The same pattern can be observed in **active practices.** The engaged narratives indicate high degrees of practice, however this suddenly and rapidly declines into the disengaging narratives.
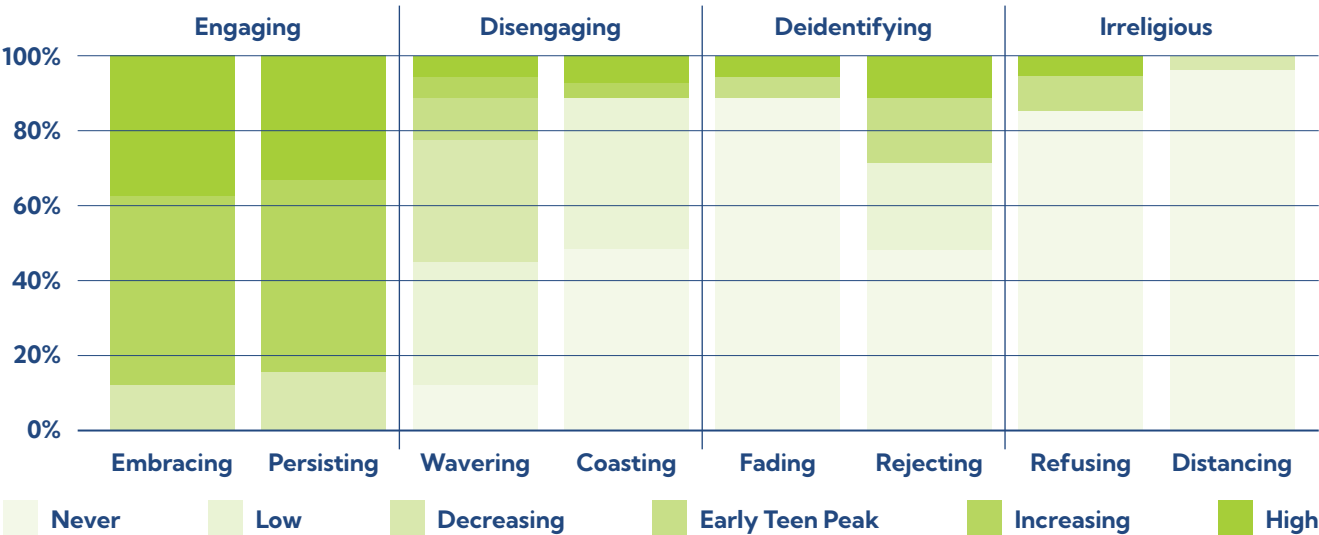
Figure 7: Trajectories of Active Spiritual Practice by Faith Journey Narrative

In contrast to these patterns of engagement with traditional experiences and active practices, **doubt** is experienced across all narratives. Doubt is particularly present amongst the Wavering and Rejecting, the two narratives where significant faith challenge has led to faith declining or being abandoned.
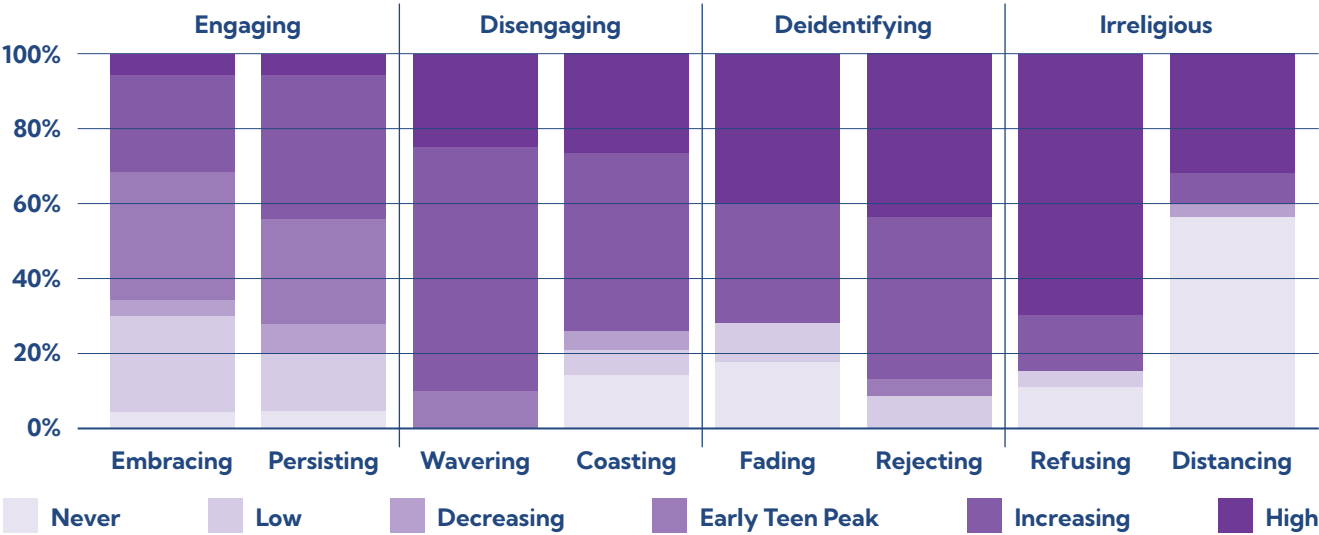
Figure 8: Trajectories of experience of Doubt by Faith Journey Narrative

These differing patterns of engagement contribute significantly to our understanding of each of the eight faith journey narratives and will be examined more fully in Part 3.

SUPPORTIVE AND CONTRARY FACTORS

Understanding the way supportive and contrary factors interact within a young person's relational ecosystem is vital for disciplers wishing to play a constructive role in the faith and life of young people.

Key Finding #2 introduced an ecological view of faith, emphasising that what is going on around a young person meaningfully impacts their faith as much as what is going on inside them. Faith Journey Narratives are not the story of a solitary young person, but the story of how they engage with the elements of their discipleship ecosystem through various life situations and experiences. Young people weave these interactions together, constructing meaning as they recount their narratives of faith.

Insight into the faith ecosystem was derived from young people's responses to open-ended questions about their experiences of faith. These qualitative responses were carefully analysed and coded to identify the elements young people described as influencing their faith, whether positively and negatively.

Multiple Interacting Factors of a Discipleship Ecosystem

A young person's faith ecosystem contains **supportive factors** that nurture and strengthen their Christian faith. In addition, the ecosystem will contain **contrary factors** that impede and hinder their journey of faith. These factors can be identified as arising from within their **internal** world or through their **external** interactions.

	Supportive	Contrary
Internal	Internal Supportive Factors	Internal Contrary Factors
External	External Supportive Factors	External Contrary Factors

Shifts and changes in the trajectory of a young person's faith journey arise from the dynamic interaction of supportive and contrary factors—both internally and externally—that make up their relational ecosystem:

- Exploring the interaction of internal and external factors reveals the way young people co-determine their faith narrative as they interact with those around them.
- Exploring the occurrence of supportive and contrary factors reveals the dynamic nature of faith journeys as they move through turning points and shifting trajectories over time.

Together, these interactions point to the way young people access resources in response to challenges influencing their faith journey.

Internal Factors

Internal factors are elements of a faith ecosystem present in young peoples' narratives that arise from within the thoughts, feelings, actions or choices of the young person.

Your Story analysed the internal factors in young peoples' faith narratives in relation to two themes—intrapersonal domains and relational spheres.

The Intrapersonal Domain grouped responses according to: 1) thinking and cognition; 2) feeling and emotions; 3) actions and practices; and 4) convictions and confidence. A fifth grouping relates to significant life experiences, whether peak/positive experiences for supportive factors, or adverse life experiences for contrary factors.

The Relational Spheres grouped responses in terms of their relational direction toward: 1) God; 2) other people; and 3) organisations or institutions.

Internal Supportive Factors	Intrapersonal Domains	Internal Contrary Factors
Able to ask questions; growing in understanding; learning about faith; integrating science and faith	**Thinking/Cognition**	Questioning; lack of evidence; don't understand; science vs faith
Belonging; experienced God; thankfulness; feeling close to God	**Feeling/Emotions**	No desire for; feeling distant; guilt; shame
Reading Bible; attending church; baptised; connecting with other Christians; leadership roles; praying	**Action/Practice**	Unanswered prayer; sin; lack of time; not reading Bible; prayerlessness
Decisions for faith; desire to grow in faith; owning faith; hopeful	**Conviction/Confidence**	Distracted; lack of faith; temptation
Conversion experience; connection with nature; supportive friends; experiencing God	**Positive/Adverse Experience**	Mental health; death of loved ones; bad things happening to me

Internal Supportive Factors	Relational Spheres	Internal Contrary Factors
Experiencing God; answered prayer; relying on God; feeling close to God	**God**	Afraid of judgement; unanswered prayer; God not present
Share faith with others; supportive friends; confiding in others	**People**	Lacking friends; persecution; conflict
Attending groups; confirmation; participation in programs	**Organisations**	Not involved; disconnected; negative perceptions of church

Table 3: Internal Supportive and Contrary Factors

External Factors

External factors are elements of a faith ecosystem that arise from the young person's relationships with individuals, groups, and the circumstances that are part of the young person's life.

While internal factors originate from within the young person, external factors arise from people, groups, and circumstances outside of the individual. They act upon and influence the faith journey of young people.

External factors, both supportive and contrary, coalesced around four major themes that described interactions that occur within two different domains.

The first domain relates to general relational interactions. When describing the influence of people and organisations on their faith journey, many young people focused solely on relational concerns. They emphasised character traits of individuals and groups or the quality of their relational connection. This observation underpins Key Finding #3: A.B.O.U.T Relationships.

The second domain relates to explicitly faith–oriented or discipleship–related interactions. Here, young people

attribute influences on their faith journey to factors such as the faith practiced by these people or organisations, or actions taken to directly engage with the young person's faith. This observation underpins Key Finding #4 and the Discipling Action Pyramid.

These influencing factors are grouped into five major themes—three are present in both domains:

1. **Who they are:** noting specific characteristics of influential others;

2. **What they do:** describing the actions or practices that others have done or modelled; and

3. **What we have done together:** describing shared experiences with the respondent.

The final two themes are each present in only one of the two domains:

4. **In the Faith/Discipleship domain:** the **Direct Actions** of others that encouraged, challenged, or confronted the faith of the young person; and

5. **In the General Relational domain:** the quality of relational connection that existed with the young person: **Who I am to them.**

External Supportive Factors		External Factor Theme	External Contrary Factors	
Faith/ Discipleship	**General Relational**		**General Relational**	**Faith/ Discipleship**
Passionate faith; Faith obviously important; Authentic Expression; Open / Honest about their faith	Authentic; Open / Honest; Present; Trustworthy	**Who they are / What they are like**	Malicious; Judgemental; Hypocrisy; Harsh	Exclusive; Immature; Judgemental; Closed minded / Inflexible
Regularly attend church; Pray for me; Living moral life	Affirmed; Celebrated; Encouraged	**What they do**	Controlled; Intimidated; Bullied; Manipulated	Hypocritical; Ridiculed; Labelling; Justify harm from Bible
Read Bible together; Taught me about faith; Baptised; Present during milestone moments	Got through hard times together; Happy memories; Witnessed my achievements	**What we have done together**	Divorce; Abusive Environment; Death of close relationship	Exposed me to negative stuff; Sheltered; Temptation; Boring
Helped to memorise Scripture; Debated faith topics; Involves me in social causes; Answers my questions		**Direct Action**		Used afterlife to scare me; Forcing beliefs; Bible bashing; Relationally uninvested
	Known; Belonging; Accepted; Understood	**Who I am to them**	Distant; Persecuted for my faith; Closed–off	

Table 4: External Supportive and Contrary Factors

Exploring Discipleship Ecosystems

Understanding how contrary and supportive factors interact within a young person's ecosystem can provide disciplers with deeper insights into the stories they hear. Recognising these categories and themes fosters greater attentiveness, which leads to deeper understanding—and ultimately paves the way for more constructive discipling.

Internal or External Factors

Disciplers can consider the degree to which a young person is narrating their faith journey as an individualised inner quest (full of internal factors, whether supportive or contrary), or as a communal activity that they are being carried along by. Healthy faith ecosystems draw on both internal and external factors:

External factors:

> [About school:] They teach faith well but focus too much on the formal ritualistic parts which is not as important as the lessons themselves.

Victor (16m–Coasting)

Internal factors:

> when I moved away from home last year I was lost and lonely and realised I hadn't had anything to do with God in weeks. I decided that I really needed God to help me, so I turned to him and made the effort to read my bible and pray, and here we are!

Sarah (19f–Persisting)

Constructive discipleship can help young people bring an individualised inner journey into relationship with others around them. Young people who speak frequently of their interactions with external others could be encouraged to reflect on and give words to their inner life.

Domains, Spheres, Modes, and Themes

Constructive discipling can draw on the individual categories of factors to identify the most prominent aspects of a young person's ecosystem. Do they speak of their inner life in ways that prioritise their own thinking, feeling, acting, or choosing? Are their thoughts, feelings, or desires directed towards God, others, or organisations? Do they describe others in general relational terms, or do they also reference specific aspects of faith and discipleship? Is their focus on character traits and perceptions of others, or do they also include being involved in specific actions?

By noticing what isn't emphasised, disciplers can help uncover supports or challenges in other domains, enabling young people to gain a deeper appreciation of what is going on around them. Just like building a well-stocked tool-kit, the more elements of their discipleship ecosystem that young people can identity, the more resources they have to make sense of their life and faith.

Supportive and Contrary Factors in the Eight Faith Narratives

The distribution and interaction of contrary and supportive factors help distinguish and clarify the unique faith expression within each of the Eight Faith Narratives.

As noted in Key Finding #2, there are more supportive factors in the Embracing and Persisting narratives—those who are engaging positively with Christian faith. The proportion of supportive factors tends to decline in narratives as young people are disengaging (Wavering and Coasting), disidentifying (Fading and Rejecting), and distant (Refusing and Distancing) from Christian faith. From the disidentifying narratives onward, the relative presence of supportive and contrary factors flips such that elements inhibiting Christian faith outweigh those that nurture it.
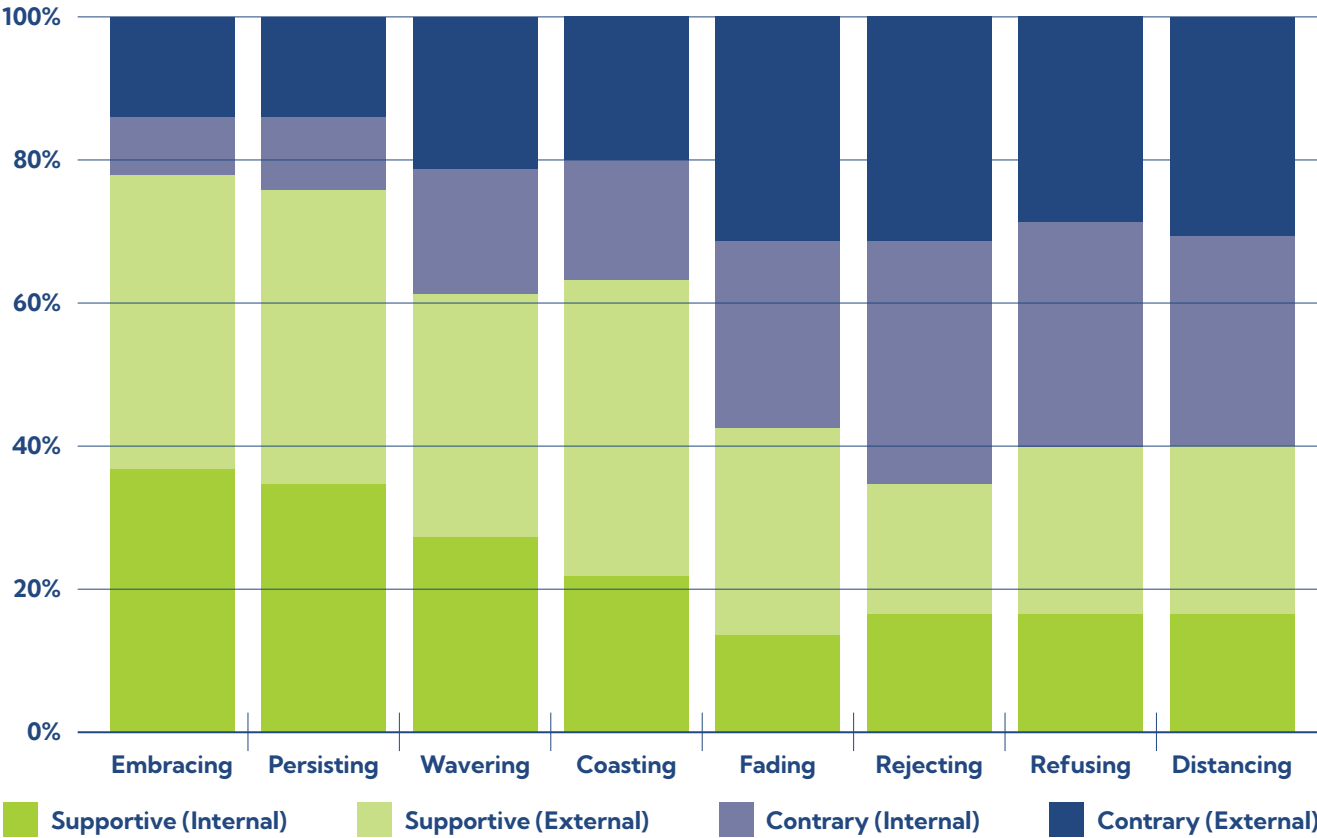
Figure 9: Internal and External Factors in each Faith Journey Narrative type (% of codes applied across all narratives of each type)

Drilling down into the relative presence of differing themes and modes of factors plays an important role distinguishing each narrative.

While the internal supportive factor of peak experience does not vary a great deal across the eight narratives, adverse life experiences (an internal contrary factor) are particularly present amongst the Rejecting and frequently represent a significant challenge influencing their faith journey.
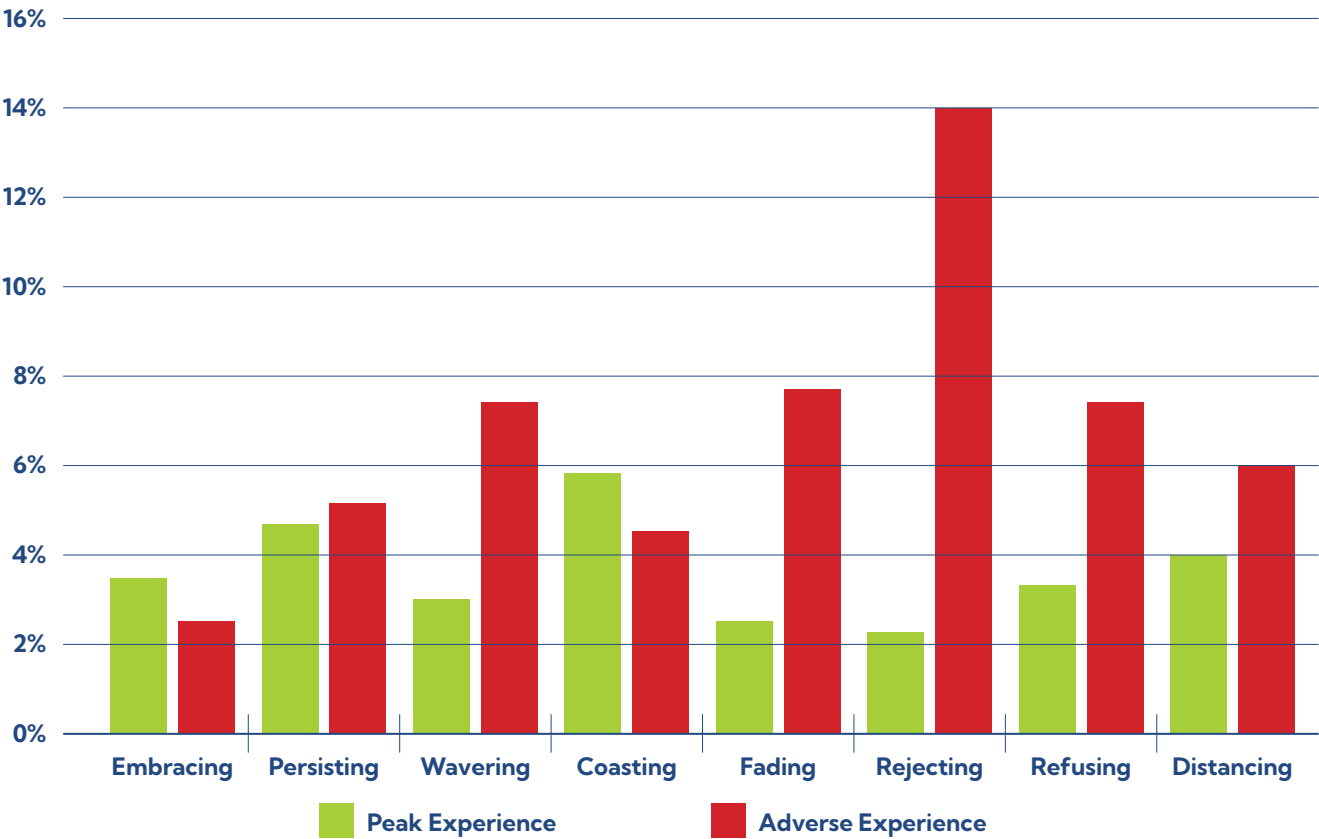
Figure 10: Peak or Adverse Experience by Narrative Type (% of total internal factor coding)

Positive Discipleship Interactions (an external supportive factor) are strongly present amongst both the Engaging and Disengaging narratives, but suddenly decline for the Disidentifying narratives. Negative Discipleship Interactions feature highly for the Rejecting.
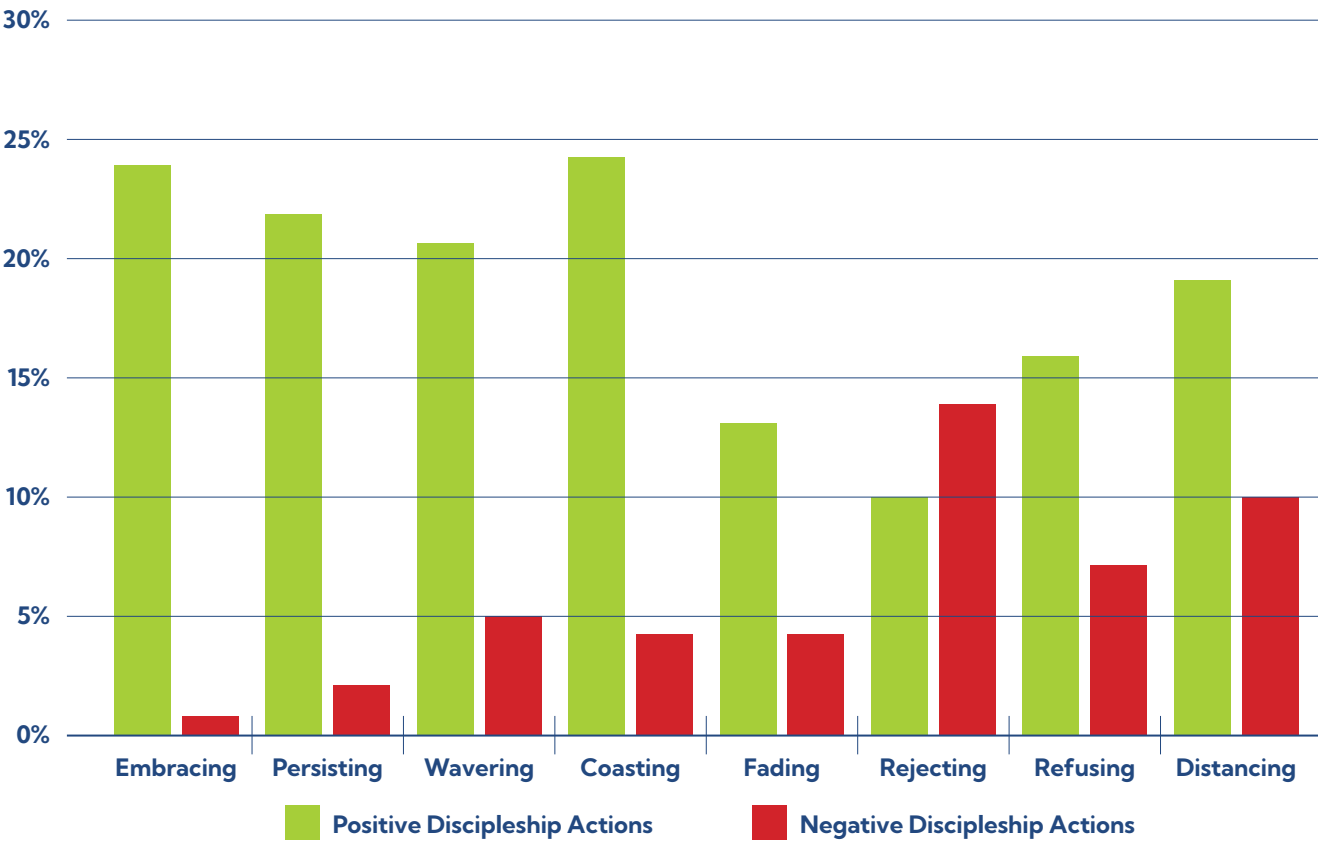
Figure 11: Positive and Negative Discipleship Actions by Narrative Type (% of total external factor coding)

Part 3 draws on these categories of supportive and contrary factors, both internal and external, to explore each of the eight faith journey narratives in greater detail.

FAITH CHALLENGES AND THEIR RESOLUTION

We observed in Key Finding #1 that the presence or absence of challenges to faith, and the intensity of those challenges, proved to be a significant distinguishing factor in young peoples' narratives of faith.

Faith Challenges Grow from Disruptive Circumstances

A faith challenge usually arose out of some kind of event, experience, or circumstance. These could be quite powerful events such as personal crises, mental health challenges, or experiences of loss and grief. Other situations included moral dilemmas, encountering oppositional ideas, or the felt absence of God.

More than just unwelcome occurrences, these negative circumstances became challenges to faith when they disrupted how young people made meaning of their life and faith. Whether in small or significant ways, these circumstances compelled young people to re-evaluate, adapt, or redefine their beliefs and practices, in order to find clarity or renewed conviction.

Notice the way these young people are connecting difficult circumstances with questions of faith and spirituality:

When my Dad had a mishap which lead to him turning away from his faith and to part from my Mum, I was shocked. Because at the same time my Grandma passed away from cancer. I could not help but to ask what is God's plan in all of this. Five years on I still ask the same question.

Rachael (19f-Persisting)

Specifically at school, remarks or small comments to have a dig at me would always be made towards my faith. This obviously made me question a lot about my faith.

Dianne (16f-Persisting)

The challenges for me are not having any proper experiences with god and never really felt gods presence.

Remi (16n-Wavering)

This internalised disruption tended to be described as having doubts or questions. Some expressed these doubts in quite intellectual terms:

I started to wonder if God was actually real at one point and then realised that he needed to be for anything to have a purpose.

Ocean (19n-Embracing)

I really started doubting religion. I worried that I wasn't making the right choice and was not convinced that everything the bible said was true.

Kathleen (17f-Wavering)

I have heard stories from people's lives and witnessed horrible events that have made me question why God would make these things happen.

Morgan (20n-Persisting)

Others described these moments as being more personal, experiential, or existential in nature. Challenges to faith are not just intellectual, but include feelings of being misunderstood, isolated from Christian community, or distant from God:

I've struggled with numerous traumas and life difficulties that have made my faith journey especially rocky...I've struggled through many seasons of doubt – doubting whether God could every truly have sacrificed His son for my sins too.

Lucy (18f-Persisting)

A lot of the time in primary and high school I didn't feel like I belonged because I felt really different as I was a Christian and the kids I knew definitely made me feel differently about myself. Sometimes I would try to pray to god for them to accept me but it would be like he wasn't listening.

Megan (18f–Wavering)

Struggles with trauma and childhood issues have led to me struggling to trust God and I am learning everyday how to more.

Janice (16f–Persisting)

Faith Challenges need to be Resolved

Young people described various ways of resolving their faith challenges. These resolution strategies involved actively seeking answers, re-evaluating beliefs, or finding new perspectives to reduce the tension they felt. Instead of remaining in uncertainty, they engaged with their doubts through exploration, reflection, dialogue, or spiritual practices, aiming to restore clarity or realign their faith.

Four broad categories of resolution strategies were identified:

1. Young people resolved their faith challenges through **internal processes** such as thinking things through, finding answers, or making personal choices. In these cases, they drew on internal supportive factors to overcome contrary influences:

> when I was 15–16 I was really questioning everything I believed, and felt like I didnt actually believe there was a God. This year I had decided to do research on whether there is evidence for Jesus and the bible or not. Through this I have decided to get back into following Jesus.

Remi (16n–Wavering)

2. Some young people reported having **divine experiences** that offered reassurance or clarity, motivating them to move forward:

> when I moved away from home last year (18yrs old) I was lost and lonely and realised I hadn't had anything to do with God in weeks. I decided that I really needed God to help me, so I turned to him and made the effort to read my bible and pray, and here we are!

Sarah (19f–Persisting)

3. Many young people sought **support from individuals within their relational ecosystem:**

> [To mentor] You have [taught] me it's ok to wrestle with my thoughts, it's ok not to have all the answers . . . You have really helped me challenge my faith and ask as many questions as i need to, to get my satisfied answer. You accept me as I am, questions, curiosities and all.

Julie (16f–Persisting)

4. **Participation in spiritual practices and communities,** which helped young people discover and live out their faith:

> [To youth ministry] I brought some really big questions and felt that their gravity was honoured, so thanks.

Samantha (18f–Persisting)

> When I was in high school I attended [summer] youth camp and on my second year I decided that I wanted to have a personal relationship with God and committed to giving over control of my life to Jesus.

Jenny (20f–Persisting)

Resolutions and the Faith Community

Young peoples' experiences with other Christians, and the broader community of faith, did not always help them respond constructively to challenge. The church was often not only an impediment to resolving faith challenges, but also the source of the challenge:

> I have had long-term struggles with mental health and past trauma... I have struggled with the stigma of mental health in the church. People have made me question if I trust God enough due to my anxiety and depression. Overall my faith has held strong but my relationship with other Christians has been impacted.

Kirrillee (18f–Persisting)

> The people who discourage me from faith the most are Christians. I feel the most comfortable in my faith and Christianity around people who aren't.

Leilani (19f–Wavering)

It may be that the church is significantly failing our young people and is complicit in many of their faith challenges. The actions of the church have contributed to doubt for many young people, and efforts to support them during faith challenges have often been unhelpful.

However, it may also be that these experiences are narrated in relation to the Christian community because these are the places where young people engage with their faith challenges. It is within Christian environments that young people seek resources, wrestle with doubts, confront uncertainties, and pursue a path toward resolution.

Challenges, Resolution Strategies, and Faith Narratives

The presence or absence of faith challenges, their relative intensity, and the way they are resolved, help to distinguish the Eight Faith Narratives identified by Your Story.

> The presence, absence, or intensity of faith challenges did not determine whether a young person's faith narrative was one of increasing, declining, or even losing faith.
>
> Your Story identified narratives without significant faith challenges that still showed varying levels of engagement: some were increasingly engaging with faith (the Embracing); others were disengaging (the Coasting); and some were disidentifying from faith (the Fading).
>
> Conversely, significant faith challenges were present across different narratives, including those of deeper engagement (the Persisting), disengagement (the Wavering), and disidentification (the Rejecting).
>
> More influential than the presence, absence, or intensity of faith challenge was the relative strength of the young person's faith ecosystem. Young people's faith narratives emerge from how they were supported, and how they utilised available resources within their relationships and faith communities to engage their challenges.

Young people in supportive faith ecosystems with A.B.O.U.T Relationships found dependable sources of support, and welcoming communities during times of struggle (Key Finding #3). Those who learned to tap into their ecosystem's resources and draw on their personal convictions, were able to take positive steps to address their challenges (Key Finding #5).

Figure 12 below displays the resolution strategies evidenced in each of the faith narratives. While the Embracing and Persisting experience quite different levels of faith challenge, both have sought resolution using faith–based activities, close relationships, personal commitments, and

experiences with God. The Wavering, who have been left with a more conflicted faith as a result of faith challenges, are struggling to engage in faith–based activities and report no resolutions through an experience of God. The increasing isolation of the Rejecting and Refusing narratives is evident in the absence of resolution through supportive relationships, instead reaching a conclusion through personal understanding and commitment. The Distancing report very few resolutions to faith challenge because they report very few faith challenges at all.
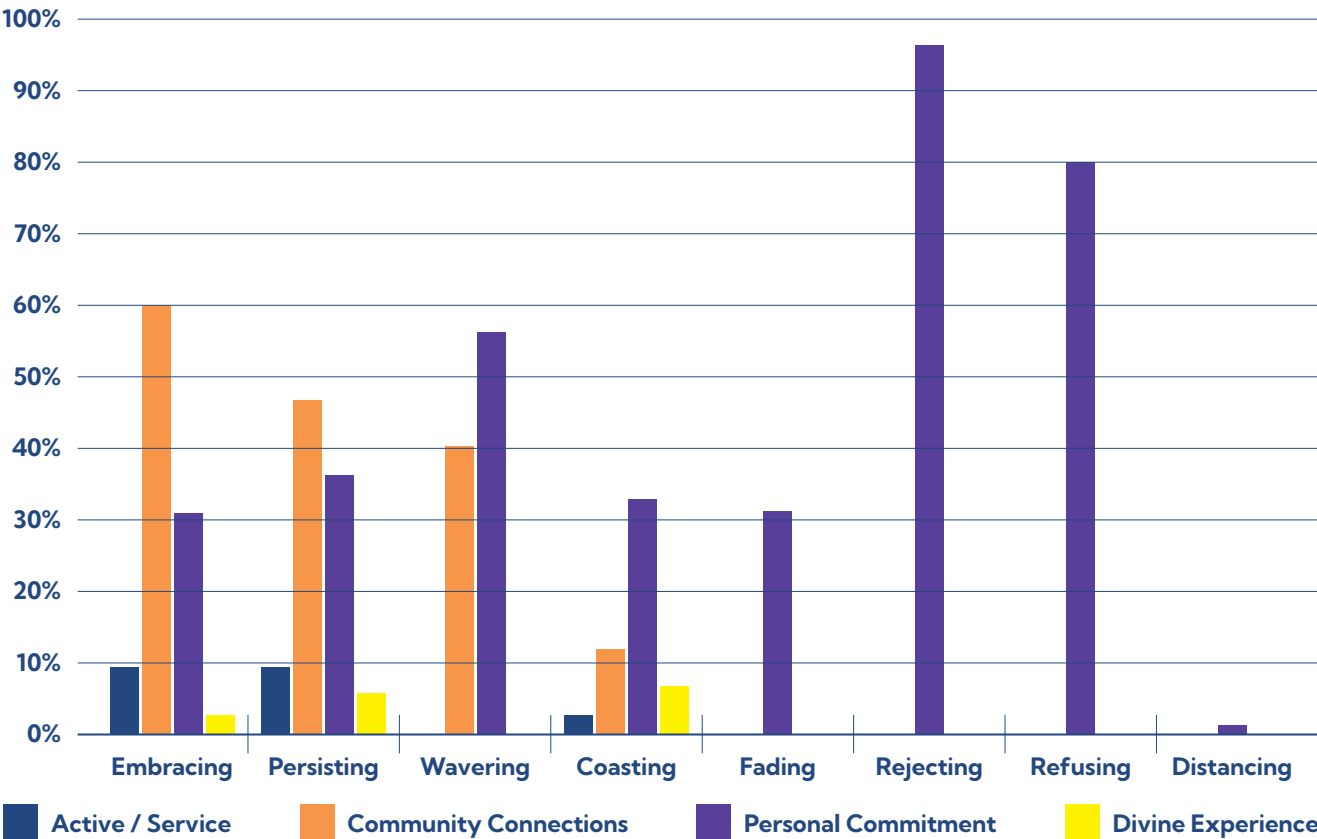
Figure 12: Faith Challenge Resolution Strategies by Narrative (% of narratives of each type)

Part 3 draws from these dynamics of faith challenge and resolution strategies to explore each of the eight faith journey narratives in greater detail.

ENGAGEMENT WITH GROUPS, ORGANISATIONS, AND PARENTS

Each of the eight Faith Narratives identified by Your Story reveal distinct patterns of engagement and interaction with the groups and relationships that make up their faith ecosystem.

Your Story gathered qualitative and quantitative data on specific relationships and groups within young people's faith ecosystem.

This data provided insights into the level of participation and engagement in these relationships and groups, as well as the nature of their influence—whether positive and negative—on the young person's faith.

The following graph shows the percentage of group members within each Faith Narrative. Reading across the rows, the diversity within each group's population becomes apparent.
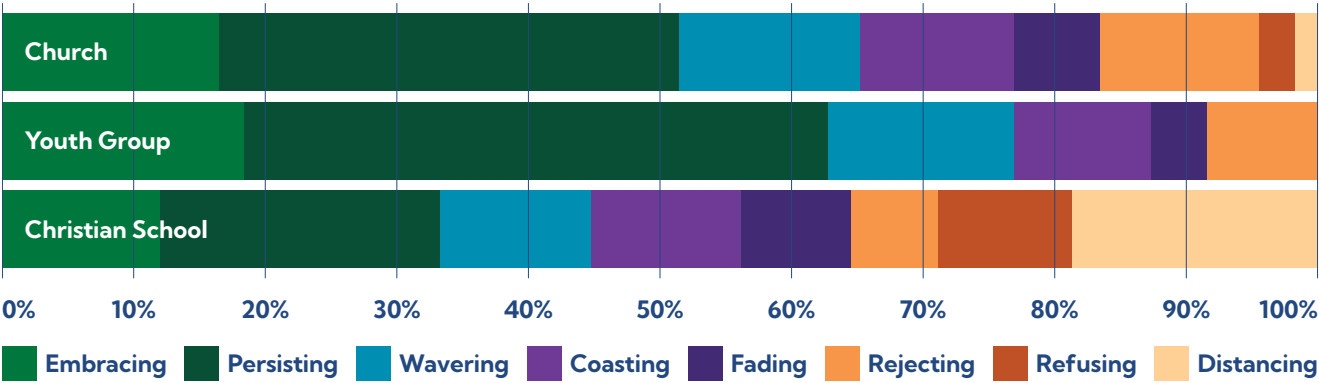
Figure 13: Faith Journey Narratives represented at Church, Youth Group, and Christian School

Of the young people maintaining a connection to church, 33% are Persisting and 14% are Wavering. This means that almost half (47%) of the young people connected to a church have or are experiencing a significant faith challenge. Furthermore, 19% of church attenders have rejected their Christian faith. They may be present in body, but their hearts are elsewhere. A further 4% have never identified as Christian, made up of the Refusing (3%) who are articulating their objections to faith, and the Distancing (1%) who are not. Their words and outward demeanour may belie other unspoken reasons for being present.

Christian schools have the most diverse populations with broad representation occurring across all categories. The Distancing make up the second largest group in the school community. How to empower ownership for these young people (see Key Finding #3 A.B.O.U.T. relationships) in a context of compulsory Christian engagement is a key challenge for Christian schools.

Youth ministry has a slightly more homogenous population than churches or schools. Every young person in Your Story who reported a connection with a youth ministry identified as Christian or did so in the past. Neither the Refusing or Distancing— irreligious young people who have never identified as Christians—report being connected to a youth ministry. 12% have made the choice to leave their childhood faith behind (3% Fading, 9% Rejecting), and the faith commitment of a further 25% is in decline (14% Wavering, 11% Coasting). Combining the Persisting (44%), Wavering (14%), and Rejecting (9%), means that the majority of young people in youth ministries (68% of the population) have or are experiencing significant faith challenges.

Measures of Group Engagement

Participation

Your Story asked young people whether they had ever participated in Christian groups (church, children's ministry, youth ministry, youth mission agency, Christian school), and if so, how frequently they participated in each.

Figure 14: Participation in Christian Groups
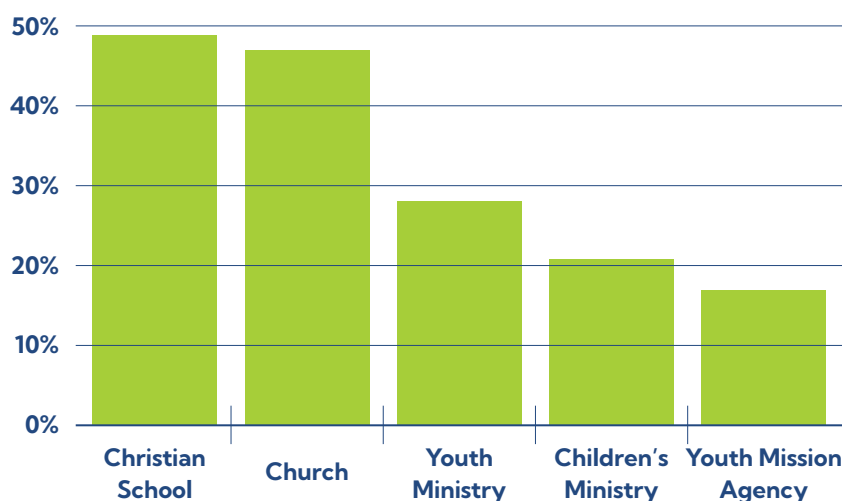
Frequency of participation appears to be quite strong across the board. Of those who are connected to church, 45% attend every week while almost two thirds (64%) attend at least monthly. Youth ministry participation appears to be much more frequent with over half engaged weekly (55%) and almost 82% participating at least monthly or more. Lower levels of participation in youth mission agencies is partly attributable to a number of these being camping ministries that are less frequent in nature.

Figure 15: Frequency of Participation in Christian Groups (% of those who attend at all)

Connection and Influence

Your Story also asked young people to indicate their sense of connection to the Christian groups they participated in, the degree of alignment they felt with the spiritual priorities of the group, and what k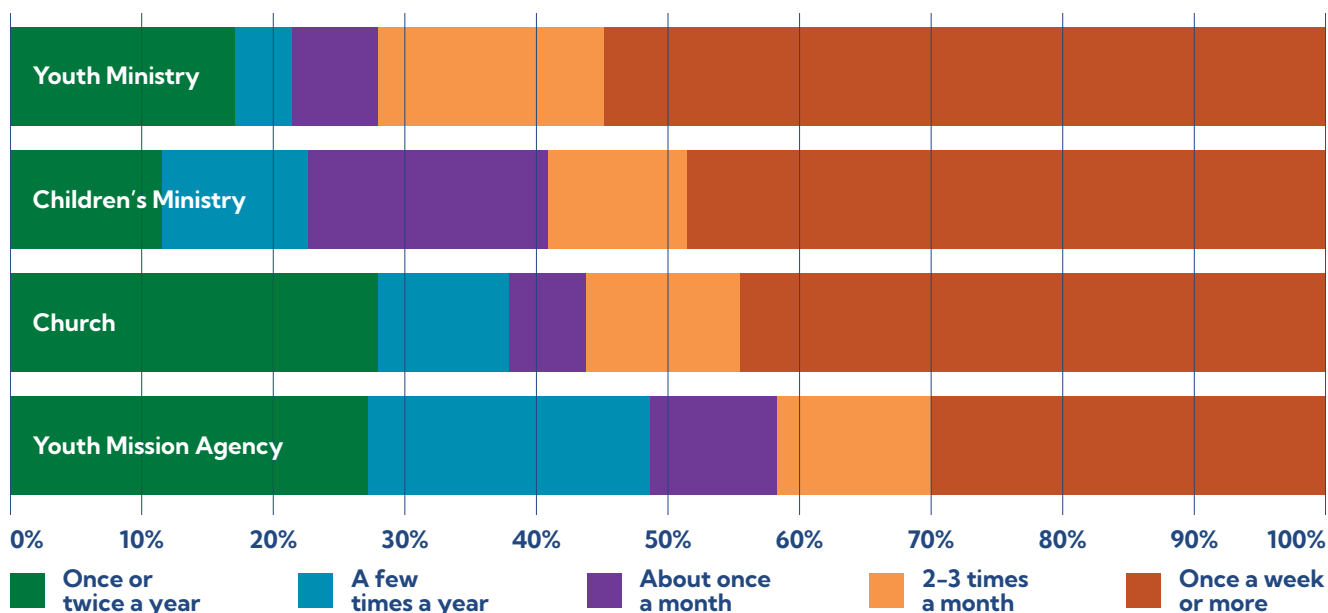ind of influence the group had upon their faith. We also asked about young peoples' relationship with the leaders of the groups they participated in. These questions asked young people to indicate their assessment of how approachable these people are, how close they feel to them, and what influence they have had upon the young person's faith.

The indexes of connection, approachability, and closeness are on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is the least positive (lowest connection, least approachable, not close) and 4 is the most positive.

Topic	Survey Question	Scale			
		1	2	3	4
Connection	How connected did you feel to this group?	I felt no sense of connection	I felt some sense of connection	I felt a moderate sense of connection	I felt a strong sense of connection
Approachability	How true is the following statement for you: "I could approach the leader(s) [of this group] for help in my spiritual journey"	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Very true
Alignment	… "I affirmed and expressed a similar faith to [this group/person]"	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Very true
Being Known	… "I felt like the leader(s) [of this group] knew me reasonably well"	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Very true
Importance to faith	… "The leaders [of this group] played a very important role in my growth in faith"	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Very true
Closeness	… "I feel very close to [this person]"	Not at all true	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Very true

Table 5: Scales of connection, approachability, alignment, being known, importance to faith, and closeness

The index of faith influence is on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 and 2 are degrees of negative influence, 4 and 5 are degrees of positive influence, and 3 is neutral.

Survey Question	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
What kind of influence did [this group/person] have upon your faith?	Very negative	Somewhat negative	Neither negative nor positive	Somewhat positive	Very positive

Table 6: Scale of influence upon faith

Summary measures of connection and influence were generated by calculating an index as a weighted average of young peoples' responses to each question.

The positive or negative influence exerted by each group upon the faith of each narrative is indicated in Table 7 below. The influence of church is very positive for engaging narratives but then progressively declines toward neutral and somewhat negative influence for those with declining or rejecting faith. In contrast, the influence of Christian schools appears to be consistently less positive across the board while community groups and mission agencies maintain their consistently positive influence.

	Embracing	Persisting	Wavering	Coasting	Fading	Rejecting	Refusing	Distancing
Church	4.7	4.6	3.6	3.8	2.7	2.8	2.4	3
Youth	4.7	4.6	4.2	4.4	3.3	2.7	—	—
School	3.5	3.8	3.1	3.2	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.6
ChildMin	4.3	4.3	4.2	4.2	3.7	3.2	—	—
CommGrp	4.3	4.7	3.8	4.3	5	3.4	—	—

Table 7: Weighted average of influence upon faith of each group, by narrative.

Patterns of engagement and influence from Christian groups and leaders will be explored for each faith journey narrative in Part 3 of this report.

Young People and Parents

The same five-point scale used for the influence of groups and Christian leaders was used in relation to young peoples' parents. The nature of parental influence on faith varies across the eight faith journey narratives.
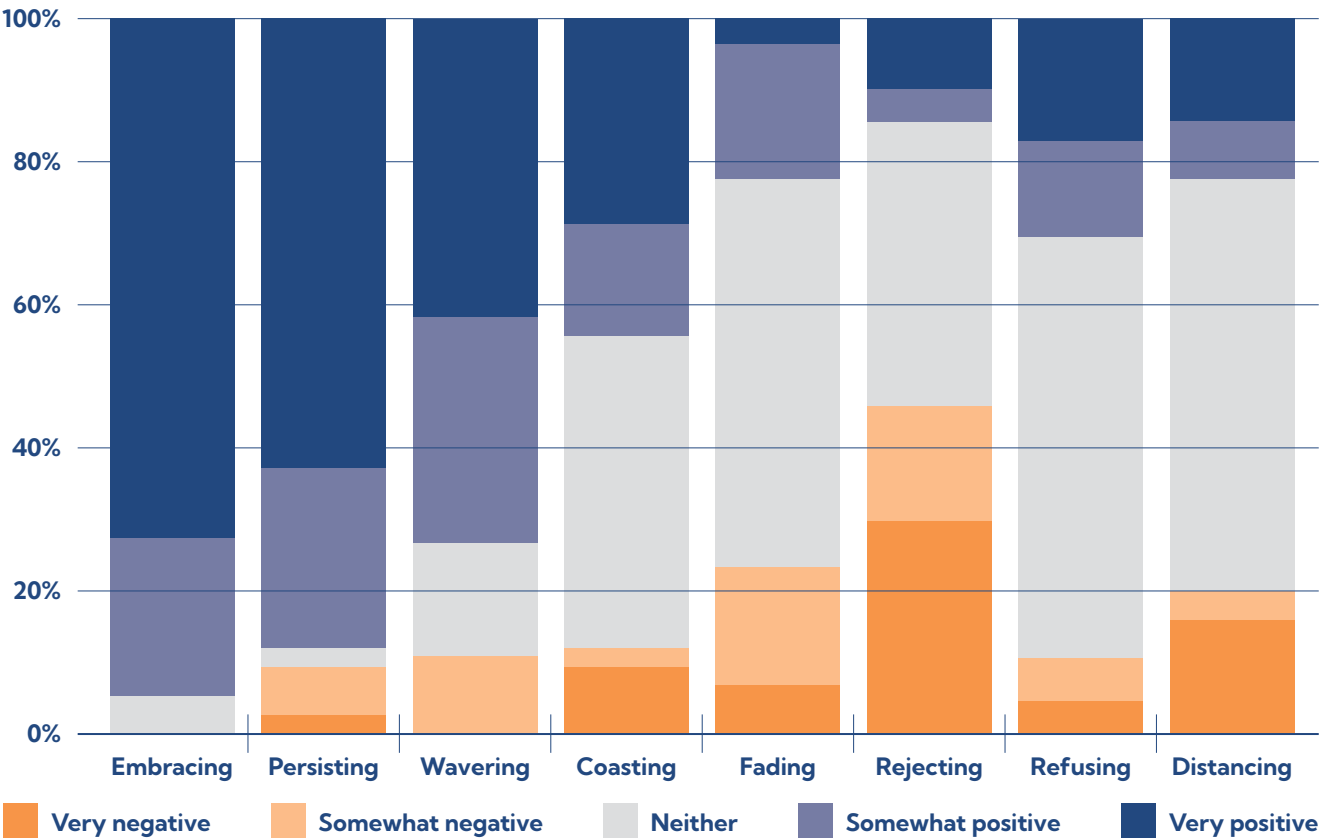
Figure 16: Father's Influence on faith by Faith Journey Narrative
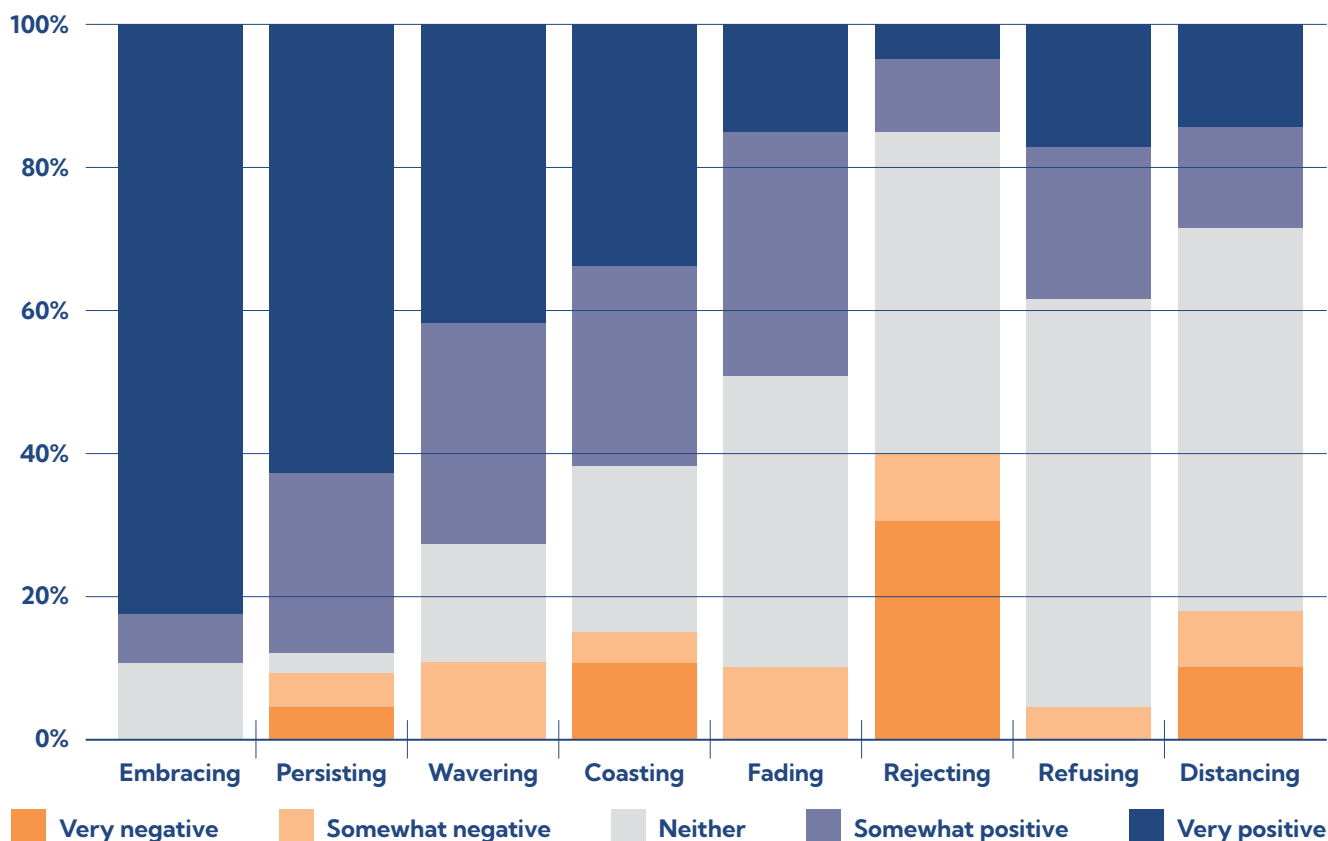
Figure 17: Mother's Influence on faith by Faith Journey Narrative

Nine in ten of the Embracing and Persisting narratives report the positive influence of both parents, which then declines across the other narratives. As positive influence wanes, it tends to be replaced with neutral influence. The exception here is the Rejecting who report the most conflicted influence. The Rejecting indicate the strongest levels of negative influence with three in ten reporting 'Very Negative' experiences with parents.

Part 3 will explore young peoples' engagement with parents for each of the eight faith journey narratives.

EIGHT DYNAMIC FAITH NARRATIVES

Part 3 explores the eight distinctive faith journey narratives of Your Story participants.

For each narrative, we've provided a description of the faith journey, an exemplar narrative, key observations, and a discussion of the implications for discipling practice.

While we have included many quotations from young people, the "exemplar narrative" is a bit different. Instead of selecting one young person to represent the rest, we used an Artificial Intelligence large language model (LLM) that analysed all the responses of young people on that particular faith journey and generated a representative profile.

The structure of these exemplar narratives follows the sections of the survey given to young people in the Your Story questionnaire:

- Where did your story of faith **begin**?
- When did faith become real to you (**Ownership**)?
- Have there been things that have made faith **difficult**?

- Were there any **high points** along the way?
- Now looking forward: What does the **future** of faith and spirituality look like for you?
- Finally, is there **anything else** you want to tell us?

Lastly, we wrap up each narrative with suggestions regarding effective discipling responses. While these recommendations emerge out of our research findings, we acknowledge that they are interpretive in nature and limited by our own experience. How might our suggestions spur your own reflection on how best to respond to what you have heard from young people, as you seek to support them in their ongoing journeys of faith?

Our overall goal is to underline one basic point—that **each faith narrative requires different discipling responses.** Our hope is that these findings stimulate your own creative ideas for constructive discipling engagement with young people.

THE EMBRACING

The Embracing narrative describes young people who maintain steadfast devotion to their Christian faith which has, thus far, largely remained untested. This is due in part to the strong ecosystem of supportive factors they engage with on a regular basis.

The faith journey of these young Christians often begins within the family, and that nascent faith is nurtured by peers and Christian community. Minor challenges include low-level doubts, peer pressure and periods of feeling distant from God. However, involvement in youth group, camps, schools, or church activities, foster a deep sense of belonging and personal commitment to their beliefs. These young people frequently feel a strong sense of purpose rooted in their faith, which they aim to carry forward into future relationships, leadership, and community engagement. Their journey is marked by intentionality, warm relationships within a strong faith ecosystem, and a desire to live out their faith meaningfully.

Patterns of Engagement

84% of the Embracing grew up in Christian households, attending church from a young age. This early exposure provided a foundation for their faith that became more meaningful as they moved from inherited beliefs to a more internalised commitment:

At a Lutheran Youth Camp, we had a service where we had to write down some of our sins and nail them to a cross. This was quite overwhelming for me as this was where I fully believed that Jesus died for me and that my faith was my own. This was the moment where my religious environment in which I was raised became my own religion and I took everything on for myself.

Kelley (20f)

The remaining 16% converted to Christianity and have grown strongly since. Almost all are very serious about their faith, with more than nine in ten of them describing their faith as very or extremely important in their everyday life.
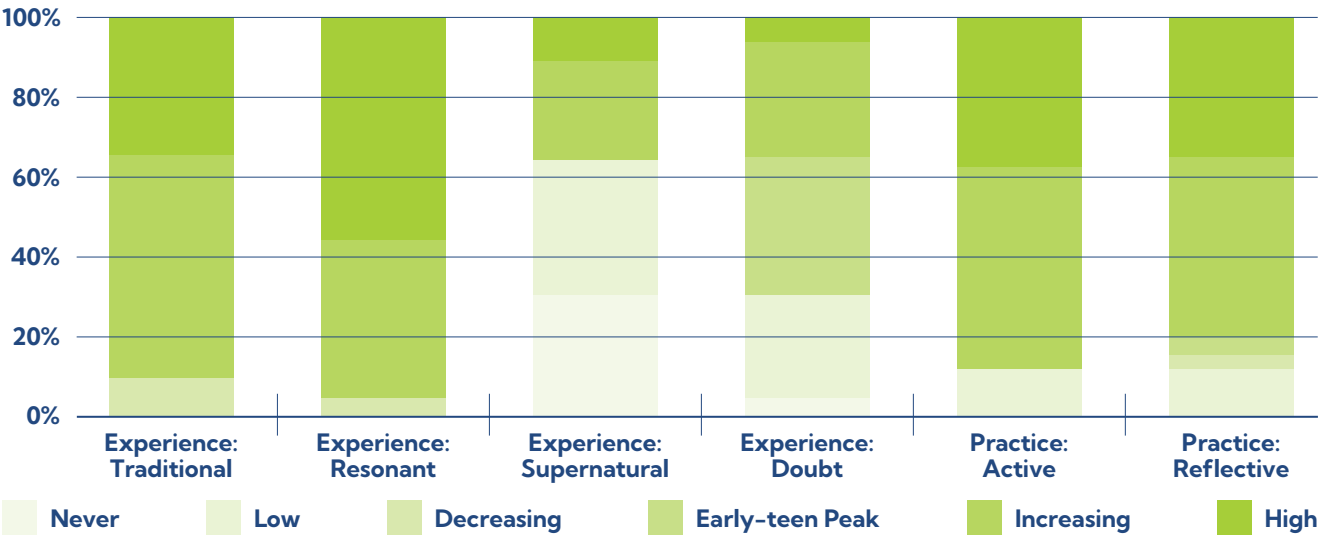

Figure 18: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Embracing

Exemplar Narrative[3]

Beginning: I grew up in a Christian family, attending church regularly from a young age. My parents were active in the church community, and we'd have family devotions and prayer times at home. I have early memories of Sunday school, singing songs about Jesus, and learning Bible stories. I can't pinpoint exactly when I became aware of spirituality, but it was always a part of my life. I remember feeling curious about God and asking my parents lots of questions about faith as a child.

Ownership: It wasn't until high school that I really started to make my faith my own. In Year 10, I went on a Christian youth camp that had a big impact on me. During one of the worship sessions, I felt God's presence in a way I never had before. I remember crying and feeling overwhelmed by His love. After that camp, I started reading my Bible more regularly and praying on my own, not just because my parents told me to. I got baptised the following year, which was a significant step in owning my faith.

Difficulties: There have definitely been challenges along the way. In my late teens, I went through a period of doubt where I questioned everything I believed. It was hard to reconcile some of the things I was learning in science class with what I'd been taught in church. I also struggled with feeling like an outsider at school, where most of my friends weren't Christian. Sometimes it was tempting to just fit in and not talk about my faith. The biggest obstacle has probably been my own sin and inconsistency – there are times when I don't live up to what I believe, which can be discouraging.

High Points: My youth group has been a huge source of encouragement and support. The leaders there have mentored me and helped me grow in my faith. I've made close Christian friends who I can be real with about my struggles and who keep me accountable. Going on short-term mission trips has also been really impactful – seeing God at work in other cultures and serving alongside other believers has strengthened my faith. Worship nights at church, where I've experienced God's presence, have been spiritual high points for me.

Future: Looking ahead, I want to continue growing deeper in my relationship with God. I hope to find a good church community when I go to university next year and get involved in serving there. I'd like to go on more mission trips and find ways to share my faith with others. Ultimately, I want my whole life to be centred around following Jesus and living out His teachings. I know there will be challenges, but I'm excited to see how God will work in and through me in the future.

Anything else: I'm grateful for the foundation my parents gave me, but I'm also glad I've been able to make my faith my own. It's a journey and I'm still learning and growing every day.

---

[3] Exemplar narratives were generated using Claude 3.5 Sonnet LLM from the prompt: 'Using the following survey responses: {surveys}\n create an example survey response that comprehensively captures the content, style, and length of the narratives found in the example responses\n Length of the response must be as close as possible to the median survey length: {median_survey_length}. Feel free to leave sections blank if that is characteristic of the surveys provided. Generated Example Survey:" Output from Claude 3.5 Sonnet was compared with output from ChatGPT Turbo and ChatGPT 4o and found to more consistently reflect the relative length of survey data and the thematic differences between each of the journey types. We are indebted to Matthew Boyens for his work in providing this analysis.

The Embracers have a pronounced sense of God and spirituality. Almost all of them have consistently high or increasing traditional and resonant spiritual experiences. Among the eight narrative types they report the highest levels of engagement in active practices of faith and the second highest levels of personally reflective practices. Supernatural experiences are more mixed. Half have had low levels of supernatural spiritual experience, and about one in ten had such experiences more frequently in their early teens compared to now. The others are equally divided between those who have had high or increasing levels of these kinds of experiences.

Experiences of doubt among the Embracing are consistent with their narrative not containing any challenge to faith of much significance. They are significantly less likely to report consistently frequent experiences of doubt compared to other respondents. While just over a quarter of them have experienced doubt more frequently as they have grown older, this is a smaller proportion compared to the Persisting (39%) and the Wavering (67%). The Embracing also report the highest levels of declining doubt since a peak during the teen years. These experiences of doubt suggest that the Embracing may be adept at making use of the supports in their faith ecosystem to counter challenges.

The Embracing draw upon a wide variety of resolution strategies in response to mild faith challenges, however they reported drawing on their individual understanding or cognition very infrequently. These young people may prefer disciplers to answer their questions rather than helping them to explore and discover answers for themselves. Alternatively, they may simply have not faced the need to wrestle with intellectual challenges to faith.

Discipleship Ecology

| 0% | 10% | 20% | 30% | 40% | 50% | 60% | 70% | 80% | 90% | 100% |

■ Supportive (Internal)   ■ Supportive (External)   ■ Contrary (Internal)   ■ Contrary (External)
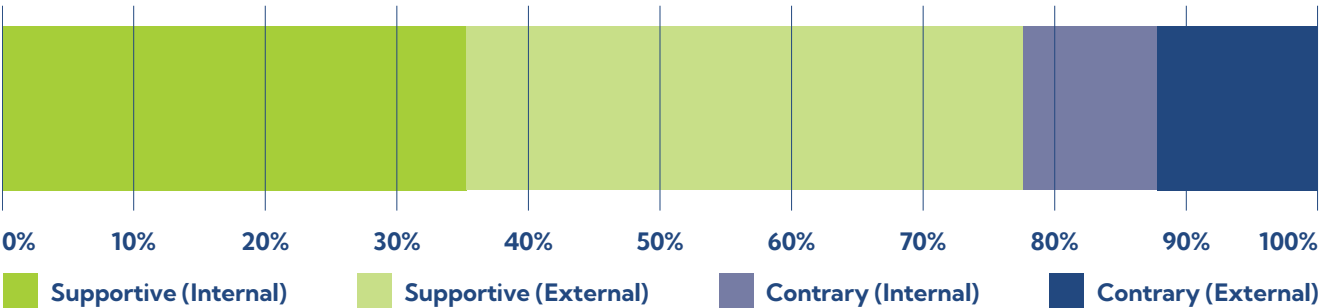
Figure 19: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Embracing narratives)

The strong support system nurturing the faith formation of the Embracing is clear from the many supportive factors described in these stories. Overall, there were almost three-and-a-half times as many supportive factor codes applied to their faith-journey narratives compared to contrary factors.

Internal Factors

Adverse Experience	2%
Contrary Conviction	4%
Contrary Action	6%
Contrary Feeling	6%
Contrary Thinking	6%
Peak Experience	3%
Supportive Conviction	21%
Supportive Action	32%
Supportive Feeling	8%
Supportive Thinking	10%

Figure 20: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Embracing narratives)

Of the internal factors, Embracers most frequently name positive actions or practices that have supported their faith stories:

> I started to be involved more in service activities and I found this really important as a way of sharing and experiencing God's love. For me, that practical step really helped me understand things beyond a purely theological level.
>
> **Kylie (18f)**

The Embracing are amongst the most frequent participants of church and youth group. More than two thirds (68%) attend church weekly and almost three quarters (74%) are at youth group fortnightly or more. Only the Persisting exhibit higher rates of participation (83% church and 90% youth group).

Positive expressions of inner conviction or confidence are also a significant factor in the faith life of the Embracing. They frequently speak confidently of their faith and of a desire to see it grow:

> I will continue to be a firm believer in Christ and hope to start sharing that more with my friends. I hope to continue leading on Christian youth camps and joining in with my church. I plan on discovering how different denominations beliefs differ because it's important to understand others.
>
> **Ashley (18n)**

External Factors

Supportive

Discipleship Action	23.8%
Faith Experiences	11.3%
Character Traits	10.7%

Contrary

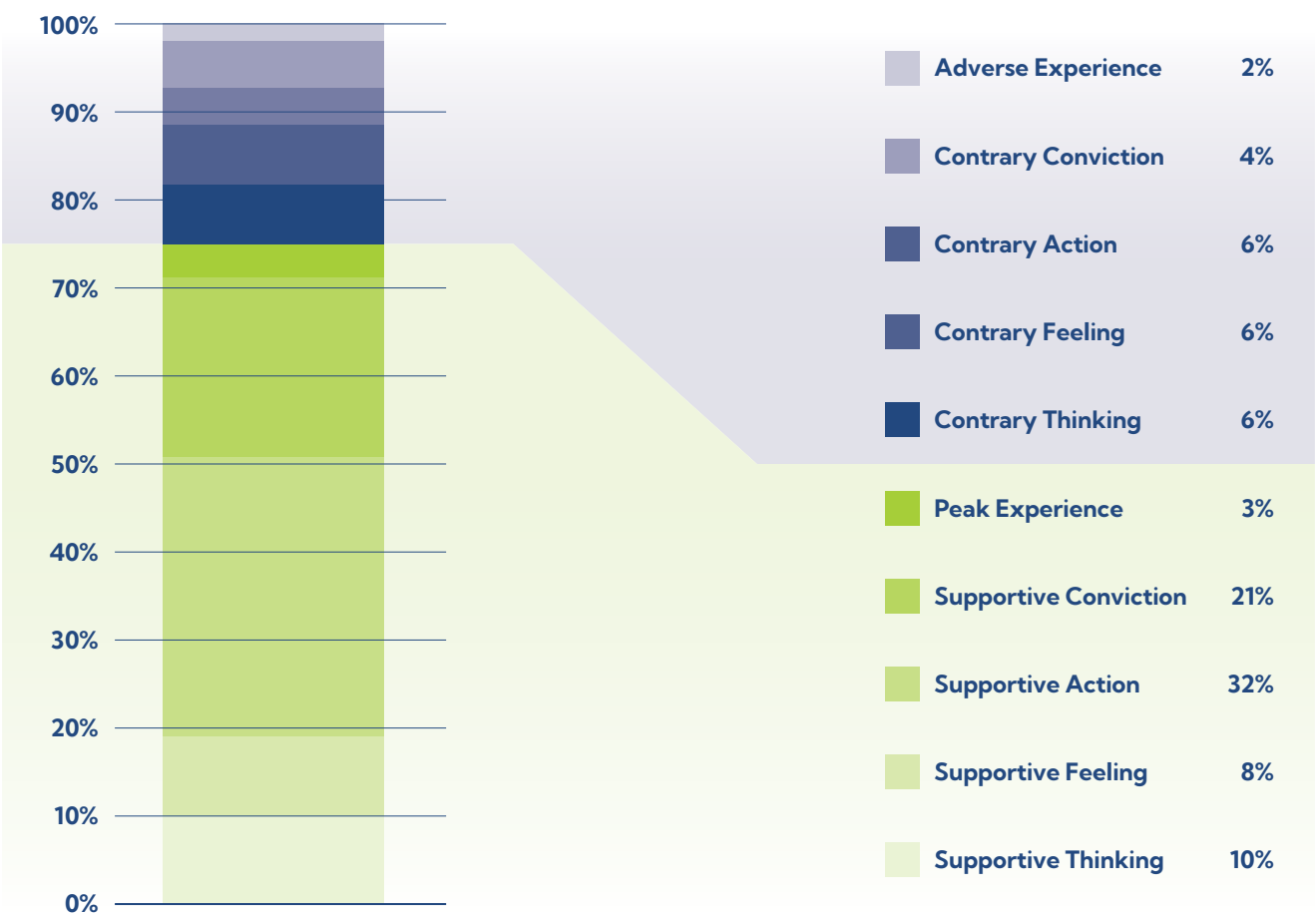|	
Faith Experiences	6.7%
Faith Action (Practices)	2.7%
Faith Character Traits	2.4%

Table 8: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Embracing narratives)

The positive discipleship action of others is frequently mentioned as a supportive external factor in their faith ecosystem:

> My parents and siblings have probably been some of the most supporting and encouraging people in terms of my faith. They all believed in Jesus and were confident in his death and resurrection... We would have family bible studies, or my parents would pray with me about things that weren't going well...[C]amps not only helped me make connections with other christians and build strong relationships with them so we could all encourage each other, but help grow my faith and help me feel closer to God.
>
> **Belinda (18f)**

> [My mentor] has a very bubbly personality and always ready to learn more and teach me. She has shown me what having the love of God in you is like and how to treat others with love and respect.

Karen (17f)

The positive influence of parents upon their faith journey is the highest of any narrative. None of the Embracing reported negative influence from either parent, and at least three quarters reported parental influence as being very positive. They have a strong and increasing sense of closeness to both parents however only occasionally seek them out for spiritual support. Similarly, they find church leaders approachable but consider them to be only mildly important in their faith journey compared to youth leaders who know them well, are approachable, and have played a very important role in their journey.

The Embracing experience a strong sense of connection to church and youth group and are the most positive about the influence these groups have had on their faith. While their sense of connection to school is not strong it is second only to the Persisting. The influence of school upon their faith was most often described as neutral to mildly positive, yet this was also the second highest result.

Overall, the Engaging narratives describe a wide variety of external supports—both groups and relationships—which interact positively with their internal desires to continue growing in faith and service.

Key Observations:

- The Embracing are serious about their faith and consider it a very important part of their life.
- Most received strong foundations for faith from Christian families from which they made personally owned faith commitments, while others are converts who have continued to grow in faith.
- The Embracing are often immersed in a rich ecosystem of Christian adults, peers, and leaders, which fuels fruitful discipling encounters.
- They actively engage in a wide variety of Christian practices, participate in numerous faith-based groups, and have a keen sense of the presence of God.
- For the Embracing, challenges to faith are largely transitional, and ultimately serve to strengthen their faith.
- Many of the Embracing express a desire to continue growing in their faith, serving in ministry, and sharing their beliefs with others.

Discipling Young People Embracing Christian Faith

The Embracing should be encouraged as they continue to grow in Christian faith. Given their immersion in faith–based groups, however, it is also important to ensure these young people are not overly dependent on others in their ecosystem. Constructive discipleship could help empower their internal sense of agency and nurture growth in interdependent faith.

Though they have not faced significant challenges to their faith journey, this does not guarantee future stability. Disciplers should be alert to challenges that arise and help these young people draw on the supports available to them.

Should a faith challenge arise that is significant, the Embracing may find themselves migrating into a Persisting or Wavering narrative. You will need to reassure the young person of your commitment to them, through maintaining bonds of acceptance and trust. Be ready to reassure them that challenges to faith are normal. You may need to adjust your discipling response to be relevant to their new faith narrative.

THE PERSISTING

Young people with this faith journey narrative maintain a strong or increasing commitment to Christian faith despite facing some kind of challenging experience that had a moderate or major impact on their journey of faith.

Many of the Persisting received a strong foundation for faith from growing up in Christian families, even if their later experiences may have led them through periods of questioning of their childhood faith. Challenges to faith commonly include significant doubts, peer pressure, traumatic experiences, mental health struggles, and difficulty reconciling secular worldviews with Christian faith.

Yet despite these challenges, the Persisting continue to seek out the support of Christian communities (including mentors and youth groups), as well as the encouragement of family members. Some described powerful spiritual experiences that transformed their beliefs. Faith ultimately provides the Persisting comfort, purpose, and a moral framework. Difficulties have led to strengthening commitment, and a more personally engaged faith.

Patterns of Engagement

Persisting Christians are amongst the most active and engaged young people who hold strongly to their faith. Almost all of the Persisting (91%) have always identified with the Christian faith, and the remainder (9%) converted to become a Christian.

Extended periods of doubt, traumatic experiences, and struggling to reconcile their faith with secular worldviews all feature strongly:

> Since the start of high school, I have struggled with chronic depression and have experienced chronic anxiety throughout my whole life...This often leads to me heavily doubting my faith and or feeling fraudulent in my complacent actions surrounding my religious practices.

Dina (20f)

In various ways the Persisting display the strongest expressions of committed faith. 83% of the Persisting attend church at least once a week (compared to only 68% of the Embracing). 90% attend youth group at least 2–3 times a month, and 69% go every week.

Young people with this narrative are the most likely of all the groups to consider their religious identity to be very important to them (75%). Almost all (96%) describe their faith to be very or extremely important in their everyday life:

> I grew up in a Christian family, where we would go to church every Sunday. My parents were actively involved in our church and we would read the Bible as a family and pray everyday... I hope that I'll continue to serve and lead at my church, and be an active member at my campus bible study. I hope that I'll be able to be a mentor and role model for girls younger than me and be able to encourage other girls in the way that my leaders supported me.

Rebecca (18f)

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I grew up in a Christian family. We went to church every Sunday and I attended Sunday school from a young age. My parents were both active in the church, with my dad helping lead worship and my mum teaching Sunday school. I don't remember a specific moment when I first became aware of God or spirituality – it was just always part of my life and upbringing. Some of my earliest memories are singing songs in Sunday school, hearing Bible stories, and praying before meals as a family. I enjoyed church and the community there as a child, but I wouldn't say I had a deep personal faith at that point. It was more just following along with what my family did.

Ownership: I started to take more ownership of my faith in my early teens, around 13-14 years old. There wasn't one dramatic moment, but more of a gradual process. I remember starting to engage more with the sermons at church and actually wanting to read my Bible on my own, not just when my parents suggested it. I joined the youth group at church and started forming friendships with other Christian teens. That was really influential in helping me develop my own faith. When I was 15, I decided to get baptised. That felt like a significant step in declaring my personal commitment to following Jesus. It wasn't just my parents' faith anymore, but something I was choosing for myself.

Difficulties: High school brought some challenges to my faith. I went to a public school where most of my friends and classmates weren't Christians. There was a lot of pressure to fit in and do what everyone else was doing. I struggled with feeling judged or left out when I didn't participate in parties or other activities that went against my beliefs. There were times I doubted and questioned what I believed, especially when facing difficult questions from non-Christian friends. Why would a loving God allow suffering? How do we know Christianity is true and other religions aren't? I didn't always have good answers. I also went through a period of anxiety and depression in my later teen years. That really tested my faith. I prayed for healing but didn't seem to get better right away. I questioned why God would allow me to suffer like that if He loved me. Looking back, I can see how God was with me through that time, but in the midst of it I definitely had doubts.

High Points: Despite the challenges, there have been many high points in my faith journey too. The community at my church youth group was a huge blessing during my teen years. I formed deep friendships there and had mentors who encouraged me in my faith. Going on short-term mission trips in high school was really impactful. Seeing God at work in other cultures and serving alongside other believers strengthened my faith. I've had some powerful experiences at Christian camps and conferences too. There have been moments of worship where I've felt God's presence so strongly. I remember one night at a youth conference where I really felt God speak to me about His love and purpose for my life. That was a turning point in deepening my relationship with Him. My parents and youth leaders have been great spiritual influences. They've modelled what it looks like to follow Jesus faithfully and have always been there to talk through my questions and doubts. Having Christian friends to walk alongside has been crucial too.

Future: Looking ahead, I want to continue growing deeper in my relationship with God. I hope to be more consistent in spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study. I want my faith to impact every area of my life – my career choices, relationships, how I use my time and resources. I'd like to find ways to serve and use my gifts in the church and wider community. I'm not sure exactly what God has planned for my future, but I want to be open to His leading. I hope to eventually get married and raise a family with a strong foundation of faith. I also feel drawn to some kind of ministry or non-profit work where I can make a difference for God's kingdom. Whatever I end up doing, I want my life to point others to Jesus.

Anything else: One thing I've learned is that faith isn't always about feeling. There are seasons where I feel really close to God and others where He seems distant. But I'm learning to trust His unchanging character and promises regardless of my emotions. I'm grateful for the solid foundation of faith I was given growing up, even if I had to go through a process of making it my own. I know I'll continue to have questions and doubts at times, but I'm committed to following Jesus for the long haul.
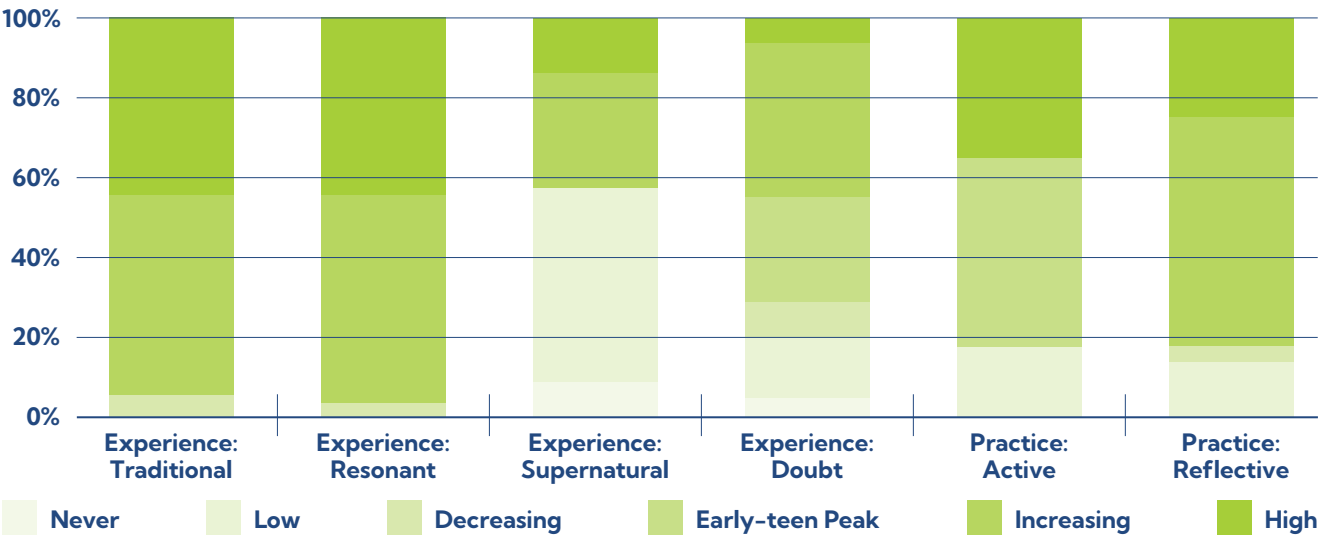
Figure 21: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Persisting

The Persisting have a similar faith experience and practice profile as the Embracing, with almost all having consistently high or increasing traditional and resonant spiritual experiences. They report the second highest levels of engagement in active practices of faith and the highest levels of personally reflective practices. The Persisting are split when it comes to supernatural experiences. Most have had low levels of supernatural spiritual experience, while the remainder have had high or increasing levels of these kinds of experiences—there was no middle ground.

45% of the Persisting report high or increasing levels of doubt while 28% reported that their doubts had peaked during the teen years but had now lessened. This experience of doubt places them squarely between the Embracing (whose experience of doubt is comparatively lower) and the Wavering (whose experience of doubt is much higher). The engaged faith of the Persisting indicates they have been more able to resolve their faith challenges compared to the Wavering who remain in the midst of challenge:

> I lost my grandfather when I was 9 and struggled with no longer seeing him again. I didn't doubt God but I wondered what he was doing. I also knew that my grandad went to a better place and that I will see him again someday.

Riley (18n)

The Persisting most frequently resolve their faith challenges by drawing upon their connection with church or Christian community, and least frequently resolve these challenges through their independent thinking or cognition. They also reported that faith leaders and youth ministries regularly played an important role in their faith, and that they experience a high degree of alignment with Christian groups—much higher than that of the Wavering.

This positive connection with their discipleship ecosystem plays a significant role differentiating the Persisting from more conflicted journeys such as the Wavering. Having resolved faith challenges with the support of those around them, they now feel like they have a place of belonging with which they feel highly aligned:

> I've doubted and questioned even if God still loved me because I was so unhappy here. Doing my certificate 3 in Christian ministry and Theology this year has definitely been a big help and support with a peer group meeting every week and supporting each other, part of that program is having to have a mentor...Just having someone else to encourage you in your faith who is older than you and has a lot of wisdom to share.

Julie (16f)

Discipleship Ecology
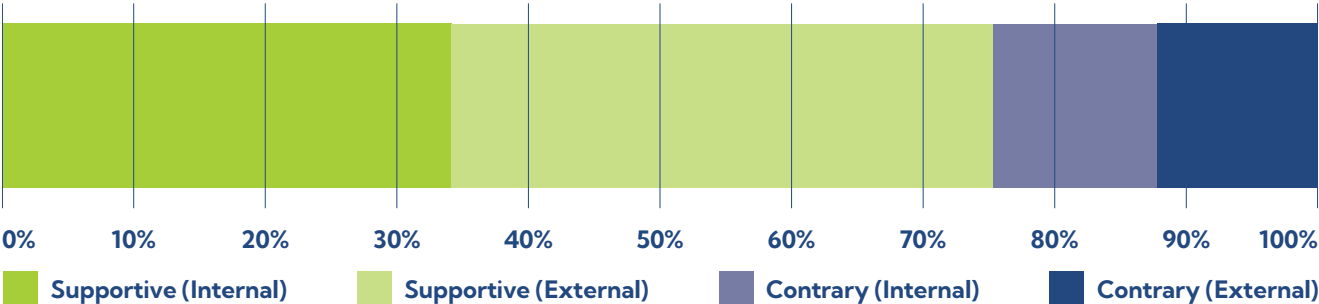
Figure 22: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Persisting narratives)

Reflecting the greater presence of faith challenges in the narratives of those who are Persisting in faith, contrary factors turn up in every one of these stories and in greater number than the Embracing. However, despite the clear presence of challenges to faith, the greater number and proportion of supportive factors results in strengthening faith for these young people. There are three times as many supportive factors compared to contrary factors in the Persisting faith narratives.

Internal Factors

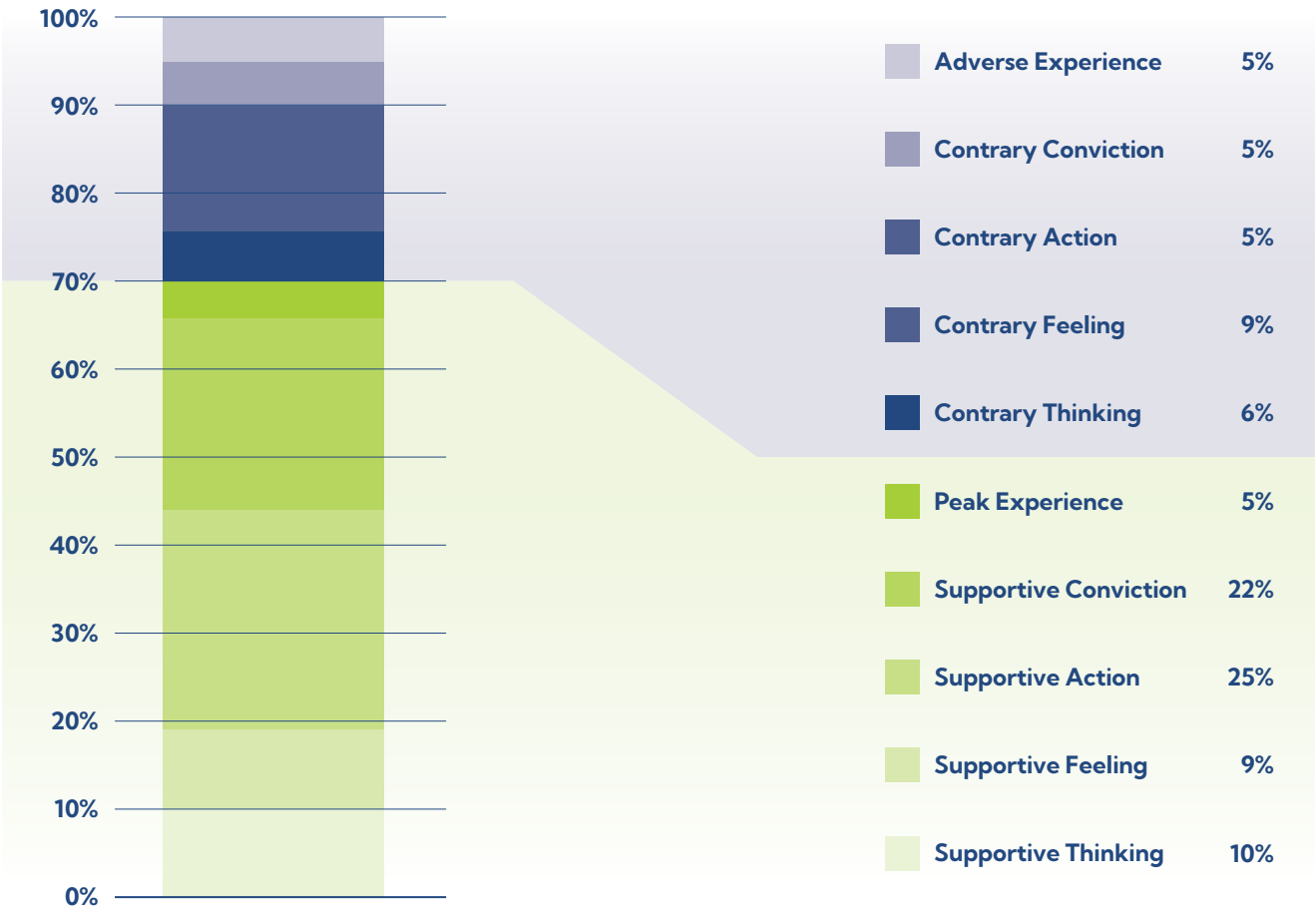|	
Adverse Experience	5%
Contrary Conviction	5%
Contrary Action	5%
Contrary Feeling	9%
Contrary Thinking	6%
Peak Experience	5%
Supportive Conviction	22%
Supportive Action	25%
Supportive Feeling	9%
Supportive Thinking	10%

Figure 23: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Persisting narratives)

The most prevalent internal supportive factors were related to action and conviction, highlighting the proactive response the Persisting make to faith challenging circumstances.

Conviction:

My family being non Christian have always stood in the way and made me struggle but it is worth the fight for it. Struggles with trauma and childhood issues have led to me struggling to trust God and I am learning everyday how to more. I hope to be getting further into serving God in all ways possible and mission trips are something I am extremely passionate about.

Janice (16f)

I definitely want to grow closer to God as I go forward and do more to reach out to others and serve them. I want to learn more to be quiet and to hear God's voice and to be disciplined in prayer and solitude.

Drew (17n)

Action:

Prayer became very real for me during lockdowns, and it coincided with the largest faith growth spurt I've had. Having the time to be still and silent and get up early and practice sabbath and sit alone in my room and walk for hours were all extremely formative and unforeseen blessings of the pandemic.

Samantha (18f)

I was 11 years old when I began to take ownership of my faith. I remember sitting through a Sunday service but unlike other times, I was starting to follow along with the liturgy and not reading other books.

Anthony (20m)

The Persisting are the most actively engaged in church and youth ministry of all the narrative types. They also have warm memories of their engagement in children's ministry in the past. They feel very connected within these faith communities, especially with youth ministry. They report high levels of feeling known by their youth leaders, being able to approach them, and that youth leaders have played a very important role in their faith journey. Compared to young people with other narratives, the Persisting feel the strongest sense of connection with their Christian school and are the most positive about their school's impact on their faith.

External Factors

Supportive

Discipleship Action	21.5%
Character Traits	14.2%
Action	10.3%

Contrary

Faith Experiences	7.0%
Faith Character Traits	2.7%
Faith Action (Practices)	2.3%

Table 9: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Persisting narratives)

Amongst the external supportive factors, it was the positive discipling actions of others that were most prominent:

> [To mother:] Watching you pray early every morning was what has inspired me to start an active prayer life, being a stay at home mum i think has made you that way, spending time with God in your own time has shaped the way I view my own space i make for God.
>
> This year has definitely been easier with the comfort and support of a mentor. Just having someone else to encourage you in your faith who is older than you and has a lot of wisdom to share.
>
> **Julie (16f)**

61% of Persisting narratives contained negative faith experiences in which other people were involved or implicated. However, the frequency of these experiences was outweighed by positive supportive factors:

> Friends either no longer believing or our friendships ending has hurt my relationship with God as I felt like the community that I used to have was no longer there. And I was discouraged from going to church. [But] witnessing healing, coming to terms with some of my struggles and having people around me who have supported me as a young teenager has helped my faith to be as strong as it is today.
>
> **Isla (19f)**

The influence of parents remains strong and positive for the majority of the Persisting, though less than the Embracing. The pressure that faith challenges can place on their relational ecosystem is reflected in the 5% who report negative parental influence in their faith. Yet, closeness to both parents remains high, albeit with a dip during the teen years, when faith challenges were the highest. Once again, however, the Persisting will only occasionally go to their mother or father for spiritual assistance. More likely they will go to their youth leader, mentor or draw on their robust relationships with Christian peers who all feature frequently in narratives as important supports during key times of challenge:

> I'd say that I've been profoundly influenced by the unspoken testimony of mum's life and character. Her service and kindness and generosity are big signposts to Jesus for me. Generally, I'm retrospectively grateful for her insistence on the importance of 'family time' (usually after dinner bible reading etc) even though I kind of didn't love it at the time. I hope that as I mature, this awkwardness around sharing faith together dissipates.
>
> **Sam (18f)**

Overall, the Persisting describe a strong relational ecosystem of individuals and groups who tend to share a common spiritual worldview and have been strongly supportive through faith challenges. These challenges appear to have consolidated these relationships as well as strengthened their engagement in Christian groups.

Key Observations

- The majority of the Persisting established faith foundations in a Christian home, while some are later converts.
- They are the most active of the eight faith narratives in church and youth group participation.
- The Persisting engage in a wide variety of Christian practices, actively participate in numerous faith–based groups, and have a keen sense of the presence of God.
- They frequently experience significant challenges to their faith.
- However, the Persisting resolve challenges with the support of others, which strengthens their sense of belonging in Christian community.
- They exhibit strong conviction, and desire deepening faith and Christian service in the future.

Discipling Young People Persisting in Christian Faith

The Persisting are a model of faith under fire. They have experienced high or increasing levels of doubt, yet for these young people, this should not be cause for alarm. Their commitment has grown stronger in response to challenge, due to their engagement with a highly effective discipling ecosystem.

The strong role of the faith community does not indicate dependence. The Persisting show strength of inner conviction and a willingness to actively engage in their faith. Their narrative is one of growing and interdependent faith.

Disciplers should remain watchful, alert to the fact that challenges left unresolved over time can compound, leading to a Wavering narrative. Doubt held in isolation tend to grow. Disciplers should nurture A.B.O.U.T. relational bonds that sponsor open conversations, and encourage the Persisting to remain active in their expressions of faith and connections with others.

As young people who have grown through adversity, the Persisting are more familiar with the terrain. If disciplers can help them reflect on these experiences, the Persisting can support their own journey, and the journey of others who encounter challenges for the first time.

THE WAVERING

Wavering Christians tell a story of consistently low or decreasing commitment alongside significant challenges that have weakened their faith journey. While they identify as Christian, they are conflicted and disengaging from active participation.

The narratives of Wavering Christians often fall into one of two categories. Those in the first are experiencing an unresolved faith challenge. These conflicted young people exhibit some commitment to faith however they are riddled with uncertainty. For this group, their current faith engagement is on a low ebb and their long-term trajectory is yet to be determined.

The second category of the Wavering report some degree of resolution to a significant faith challenge, combined with fading conviction. The challenge to their faith has left them with waning desire to remain within the Christian faith. Here the trajectory is clearer—it is low and/or declining.

Patterns of Engagement

Wavering Christians often exhibit a highly conflicted and ambiguous faith. 89% have always identified as Christian, and the remaining 11% are converts who are close to deconverting. They have only a mildly positive commitment to their religious identity with none saying that it is very important. For two thirds of Wavering young people their faith is only somewhat important to their daily lives.
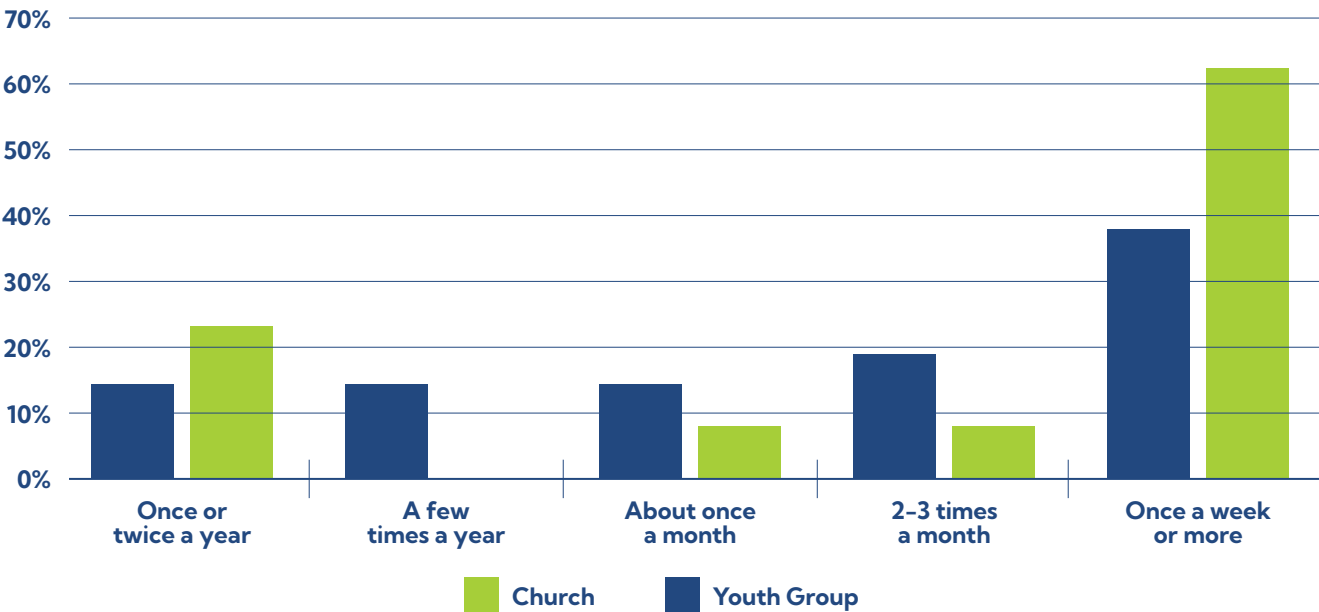
Figure 24: Attendance at Church and Youth Group: % of young people with Wavering narrative

While only 38% of the Wavering attend church services once a week, the majority are regular weekly attenders at youth group, the second highest proportion among the eight narratives (second to the Persisting at 69%). However, of the rest of the Wavering, the largest group are of those who only attend youth group once or twice a year (23%). While the Wavering seem to gradually withdraw from church, they fall away from youth group more decisively, attending irregularly or not at all.

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I grew up in a Christian family. We attended church every Sunday and I went to Sunday school from a young age. My parents were involved in the church community, and my dad was a deacon. I remember singing hymns and learning Bible stories as a child. I don't recall a specific moment when I became aware of spirituality, it was just always a part of my life. One of my earliest memories is praying with my mom before bed each night.

Ownership: When I was about 14, I went on a youth retreat with my church. During one of the evening sessions, I felt a strong connection to God and decided to fully commit my life to Christ. I was baptised a few months later, which felt like a significant step in taking ownership of my faith. It was no longer just my parents' beliefs, but something I chose for myself.

Difficulties: In high school, I started to have doubts about my faith. I struggled with reconciling scientific theories with what I had been taught in church. I also had a hard time understanding why God would allow suffering in the world. When my grandmother passed away after a long battle with cancer, I felt angry at God and questioned His existence. Additionally, seeing some Christians act in ways that seemed hypocritical or judgmental made me question if I wanted to be associated with the faith.

High Points: Despite the challenges, I've had some really positive experiences that have strengthened my faith. Attending a Christian camp for several years was always a spiritual high point. The sense of community and shared beliefs was encouraging. I've also had some incredible mentors through my church youth group who have helped guide me and answer my questions. Volunteering at a local homeless shelter with my church group has shown me how faith can be put into action to help others.

Future: Looking ahead, I'm interested in exploring different denominations to better understand various Christian perspectives. At the same time, I want to maintain an open mind and respect for other belief systems.[4]

Anything else: Sometimes I worry about how to balance my faith with the increasingly secular world around me. I want to stay true to my beliefs without alienating non-Christian friends or coming across as judgmental. I'm also still working through some questions about certain aspects of Christian doctrine, but I'm trying to be patient and trust that understanding will come with time and study.

[4] The AI generated narrative has been edited to better reflect the less optimistic view of future faith prospects evident in the Wavering narratives. The following lines were deleted from the generated output: 'I hope to continue growing in my faith and developing a deeper relationship with God. I want to find a church community where I feel I belong when I go to college next year... I hope my faith will guide my career choices and how I interact with others in my daily life.'
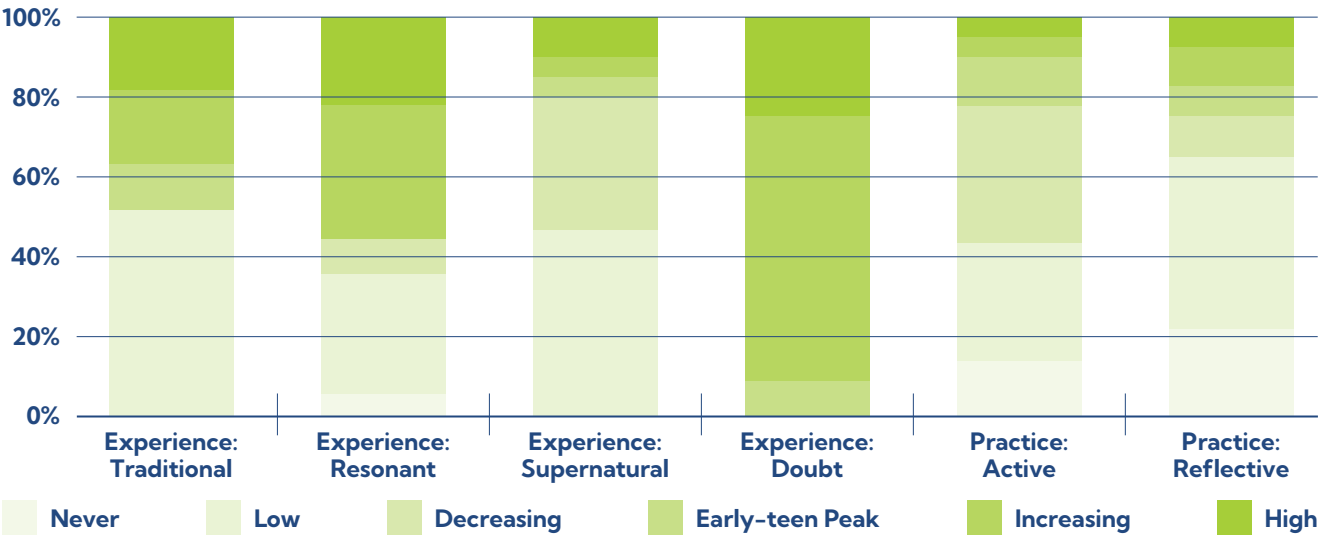
Figure 25: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Wavering

The Wavering have the highest prevalence of experiences of doubt—92% report experiences of doubt that have increased up to the present or remained consistently high. The remaining 8% experienced higher levels of doubt in their early teens but this has declined in more recent years. None reported having never had experiences of doubt, nor doubt that was consistently low or declining:

> I grew up going to church with my family. when i was 15–16 i was really questioning everything i believed and felt like i didnt actually believe there was a god. This year i had decided to do research on whether there is evidence for jesus and the bible or not. Through this i have decided to get back into following Jesus.

Remi (16n)

The Wavering have very low levels of participation in spiritual practices. This is particularly stark in contrast to the Persisting. In the face of challenges, disengaging from spiritual practice is related with weakening faith.

Unlike the Persevering, the Wavering are much less likely to make use of their faith community, church or family in response to challenges. They instead pursue a more internalised resolution process. Over half reported tackling a faith challenge through personal choice or understanding, and none reported engaging in a faith related activity or service:

> Christian Primary school, my father does not believe, my mother is not overly involved in her faith although I believe she is Christian... I doubt and question a lot. A lot of things I struggle to grapple with and as a logic person I struggle with these... I am still uncertain about my faith however, through learning at school and my own self reflection and thinking I have come to the belief that it is the right choice. It's been a lot of self–thinking and pondering.

Chloe (18f)

Discipleship Ecology

Supportive (Internal)	Supportive (External)	Contrary (Internal)	Contrary (External)
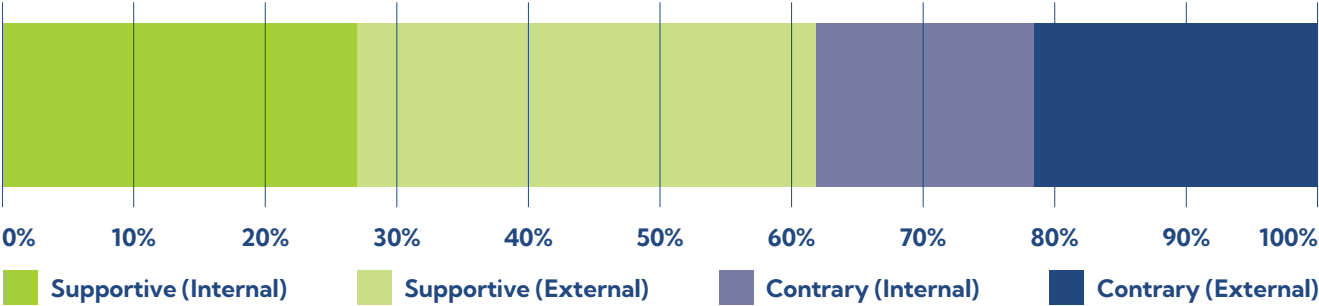
Figure 26: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Wavering narratives)

The weakening ecosystem of the Wavering narrative is evident in both an increasing prevalence of contrary factors and a declining prevalence of supportive factors. Comparing the Embracing and Persisting to the Wavering narratives, the proportion of contrary factors increases steadily from 22% to 25% to 39%. Supportive factors still outweigh the contrary in both number and proportion, and so the Wavering continue to hold on to their Christian identity, even if the patterns of disengagement are growing.

Internal Factors

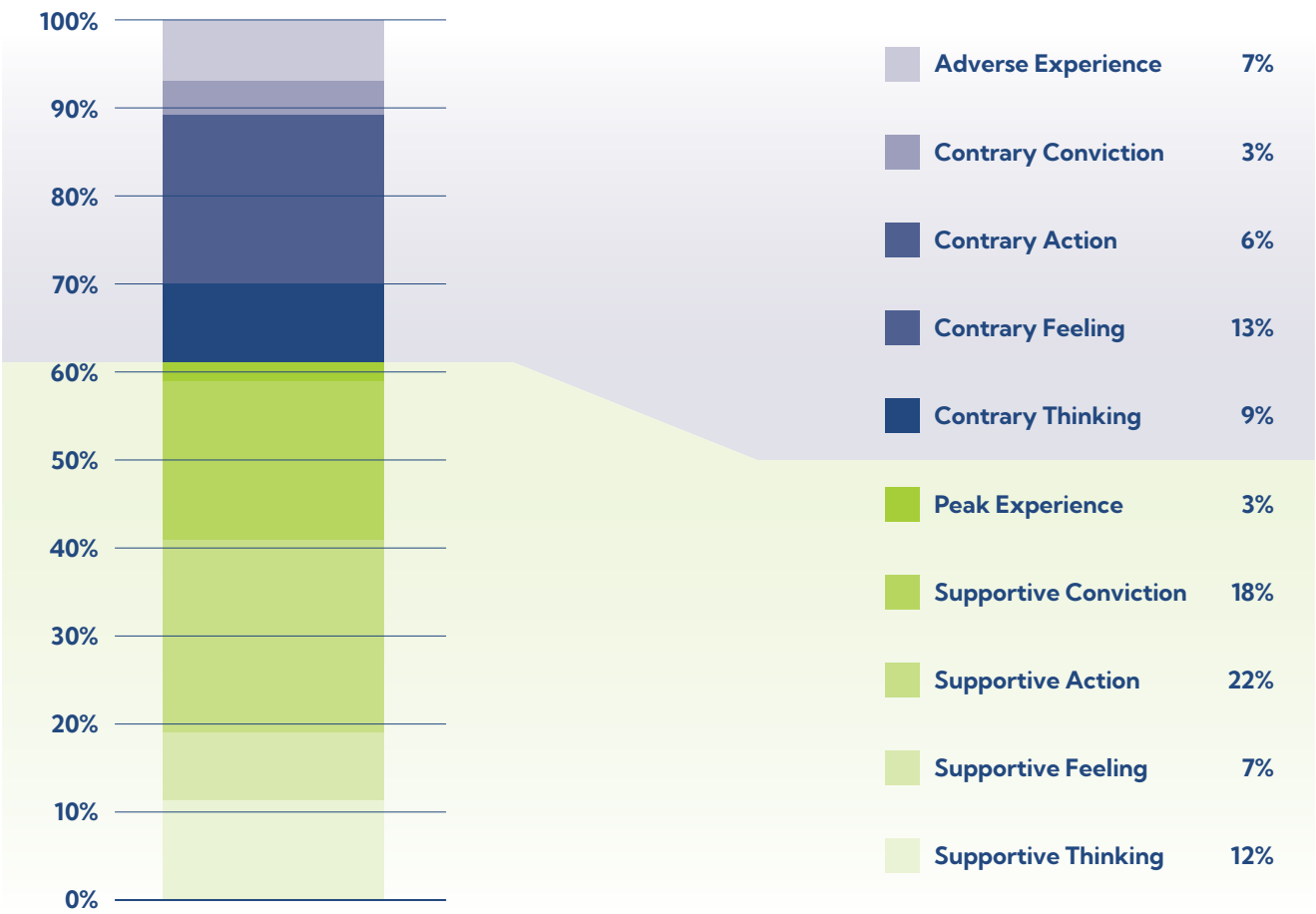|	
Adverse Experience	7%
Contrary Conviction	3%
Contrary Action	6%
Contrary Feeling	13%
Contrary Thinking	9%
Peak Experience	3%
Supportive Conviction	18%
Supportive Action	22%
Supportive Feeling	7%
Supportive Thinking	12%

Figure 27: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Wavering narratives)

The Wavering have a similar profile of internal supports compared to the Persisting, reflecting their shared experience of conflict. Personal action and inner conviction are the most prominent supportive factors in these narratives:

> I use social media to search up Christian songs and use the bible [app] to look up bible verses in church.
>
> **Megan (18f)**

> Without Bible Study or Youth Group constantly being a part of my life, I feel like I could have fallen off the rails a lot earlier and more often. I think events like SU's 'Bike Camp' and KCC's 'KYCK' [Christian youth conference] also helped to remind me I am part of a larger community.
>
> **Pete (16n)**

However, three quarters have low or declining engagement in faith practices and some report not engaging at all. Six out of ten describe having negative feelings, both in terms of their own mental health and in relation to faith. Many experience guilt and shame which further contributes to their isolation:

> poor mental health has led me down the dark path believing that no one cares for me and why did God put me on this earth. it was better for me to end my life.
>
> **Patrick (18m)**

> i really hope that i can disconnect from my faith a bit to start to feel okay again. i feel so much guilt and shame everyday because of gods judgment and him watching my every move.
>
> **Bridget (14f)**

External Factors

Supportive

Discipleship Action	20.5%
Faith Experiences	11.1%
Character Traits	10.4%

Contrary

Faith Character Traits	6.6%
Character Traits	5.7%
Faith Action (Practices)	5.4%

Table 10: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Wavering narratives)

The movement out of Engaging narratives into Disengaging narratives marks a decline in connection, alignment and influence of faith communities, along with commensurate drops in their perceptions of leadership. This decline is, however, more strongly evident in churches than youth ministries:

> I don't want to go to church anymore as the experience has been horrendous – but I know that not going means I will probably slowly slip away from faith. I want a genuine faith community experience but I am very very wary now.
>
> **Oliver (18m)**

Relationships show similar dynamics. Feelings of closeness with parents noticeably decline from childhood to present day, and a quarter describe the influence of parents as either neutral or negative. Christian peers and mentors are less present in narratives. Compared to the Embracing and Persisting, the Wavering are becoming more isolated from Christian community.

The Wavering narratives were often laced with hurt and demonstrated a pronounced sensitivity to the use of power. These young people offer important insight into the way discipling actions and A.B.O.U.T Relationships interact with experiences of conflicted faith:

> Bullying by church leaders and guilt trips for not being more involved. Judgement not encouragement. Very negative experience.

Oliver (18m)

> [My Christian friends] sometimes were too pressuring and that made me feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I felt like I couldn't be 100% honest/open about my feelings because I felt that they would judge me. It appeared to me as if they felt moral superiority due to their beliefs and strictly following their practice…
>
> I have questioned God because some Christians have not acted in ways that I thought God wanted/intended (e.g. not loving behaviour, pressuring others, acting selfishly, not accepting certain people – people with mental health conditions, LGBTQ people, individuals with disabilities and excluding these people, etc).

Amanthi (16f)

> I found during Covid that the wacky and huge number of Christians telling me I was selling my soul to the devil for being vaccinated actually made me unfollow a lot of Christian groups. Christians have lost their way in being known for love and kindness, and instead are known for being angry and opinionated on matters outside of the main Christian message. I'm ashamed of being a Christian in this season.

Oliver (18m)

Yet, there were some positive descriptions of discipling actions, from disciplers who appeared to be sensitive to matters of power:

> In my church, the leaders are there to guide us and it is important for us to remember they are just ordinary people who are growing and facing challenges themselves. I would want them to know that they helped me feel more comfortable with my beliefs and the opportunities they gave me to share my faith with people of the same age and like mind helped me grow into the person I am today.

Kathleen (17f)

> I'm very grateful that the leaders on camp were never forcing me to hold their views on christianity, but more so sharing their experiences sand encouraging me to explore my spirituality and relationship with God. The quiet time we had after worship and small group was especially influential in me being able to understand my spirituality as it allowed time for me to think about God and explore the bible without feeling the pressure I usually did when in other situations where I was expected to have the right answers and interpretations of verses.

Leilani (19f)

See Part 4 for further exploration of Power and Agency

There is a marked decline in young peoples' experiences with Christian groups from those with Committed Christian narratives (Embracing and Persisting) to the Disengaging narratives (Wavering and Coasting). This distancing from Christian engagement is evident in a pronounced wariness of leaders, whom they find to be largely unapproachable.

On the other hand, Wavering Christians appear to maintain fond memories of children's ministry, reporting reasonably positive experiences that are similar to those of the Embracing and Persisting.

Key Observations

- The Wavering are mostly from Christian families, or more recent converts, but all experience a highly conflicted faith.
- All have struggled with doubt at some time through their teenage years, and for most this remains high or increasing.

- The Wavering experience other faith challenges resulting from negative feelings related to mental health, guilt and shame, and from experiences of leaders' misuse of power.
- The Wavering tend to become isolated from Christian community, have declining levels of engagement with faith practices, and are introspective in responding to challenges.
- There is ambivalence about the future of their faith as conviction declines.

Discipling Young People Wavering in Christian Faith

The Wavering can be quite wary of heightened faith contexts. They narrate frequent experiences of hurt at the hands of Christians, leading to heightened sensitivity to being shamed and the use of coercive power. Consequently, they frequently seek to resolve their faith challenges in isolation from the Christian community, and therefore, will often rely on their negative feelings about faith as a measure of their security in Christ.

Wavering Christians may be conspicuous by their absence. Their attendance declines, and it is easy to interpret this as a simple lack of commitment. However, this change in participation is more likely a way to manage negative feelings of guilt and shame. Disciplers do well to reaffirm their acceptance of the young person first, before gently encouraging re-engagement.

Wavering Christians appear to benefit from faith contexts that allow them to voice their questions and doubts without fear of judgement. Disciplers can offer the Wavering a tremendous gift through being a non-judgemental presence who is careful to avoid using coercion. These young people say that when disciplers invite them into discipling practices, this has a positive impact on their faith, as long as there is a warm relationship of acceptance, belonging, understanding, and trust.

THE COASTING

The Coasting narrative is one of indifference to faith, while retaining a vague identification with Christianity. Young people who are Coasting portray a consistently low concern with faith, coupled with the absence of any significant faith challenge.

Many grew up in nominal religious contexts, and faith appears not to have taken root. Those who did grow up in more actively religious contexts maintain positive memories of these experiences:

> My parents were not very religious however they went to church before I was born and while I was a baby. I don't have many memories of going to church outside of school (I went to a christian primary school). My grandparents are very religious and go to church every Sunday ...I don't believe that faith or spirituality will have a major or active role in my future however I hope that it will guide my decisions and help me to become a better person and someone who helps others whenever possible.
>
> **Adeline (17f)**

Most have always been Christian (85%), with the remainder being converts. All maintain a largely neutral stance toward their religious identity:

> My parents always took me to church as a child. I believe in god but don't like to admit it around my friends and often say I don't believe in him when with them... I think I will continue to believe but won't talk about it with others.
>
> **Seth (16m)**

Patterns of Engagement

The Coasting have a diverse range of spiritual worldviews and are willing to experiment more broadly, reflecting their declining commitment to the Christian tradition. One thing that unites them is a largely neutral stance toward their religious identity. 78% regard their faith as no more than somewhat important to daily life.
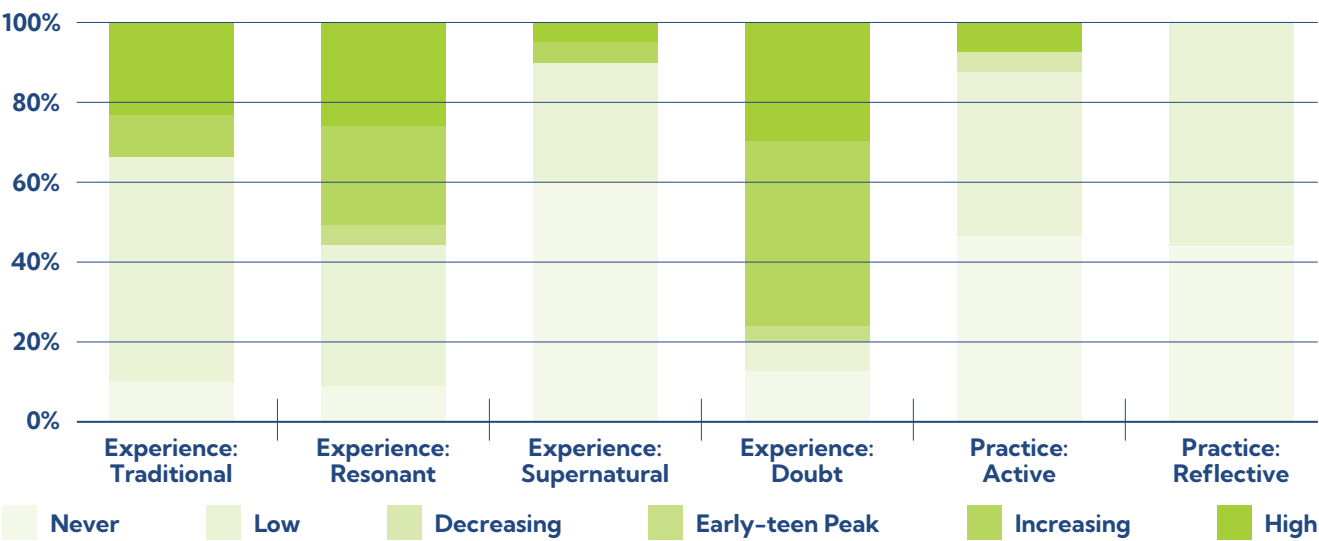
Figure 28: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Coasting

Most of the Coasting have persistent or increasing levels of doubt. However, there is a significant minority (just over one in five) for whom doubt has been low or absent. This is quite different from the Wavering where none reported no or low experience of doubt. Given the declining trajectory of faith and absence of significant faith challenge, the experience of low and absent doubt is more likely a sign of indifference, rather than confidence.
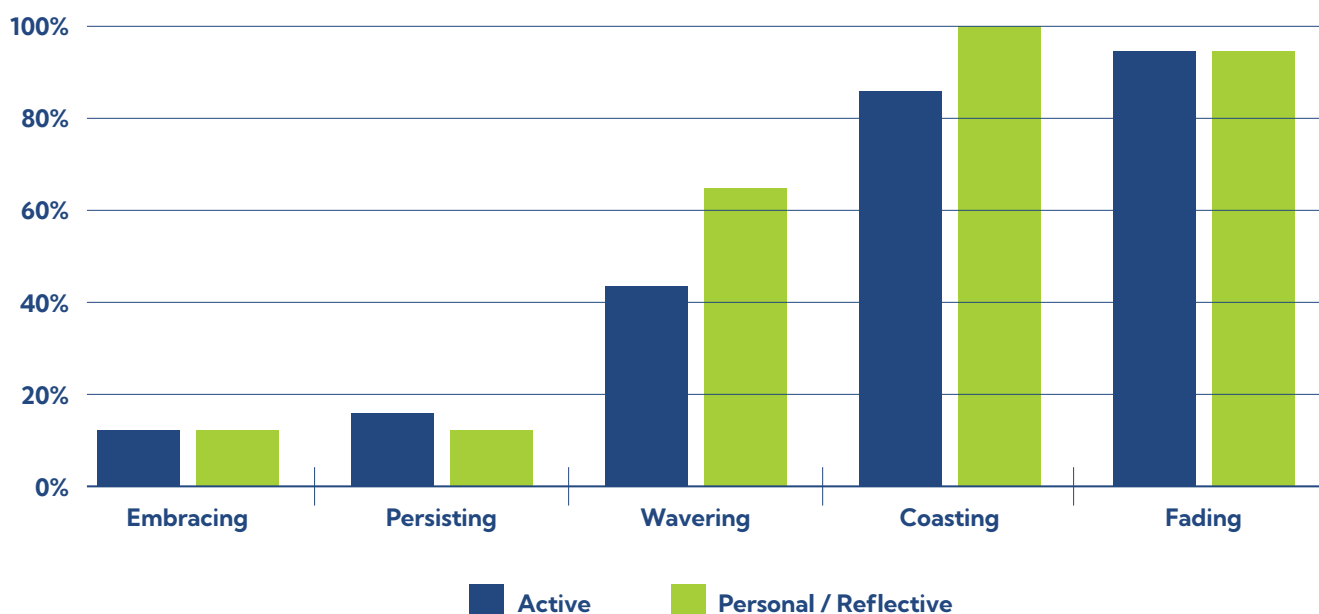
Figure 29: Never or Low involvement in Spiritual Practice: % of each Narrative group

Beginning with the Engaging and Persisting narratives, through the Wavering and Coasting, and on to the Fading, there is a marked increase in the proportion of young people who have never engaged in spiritual practices, or had only low levels of engagement. Among the Coasting, active practice is absent, low, or declining for nine out of ten young people, and self-reflective practice is absent, low, or declining for all of them. Spiritual experiences of all kinds are also lower for this narrative than for the Engaging, Persisting, or Wavering.

Discipleship Ecology
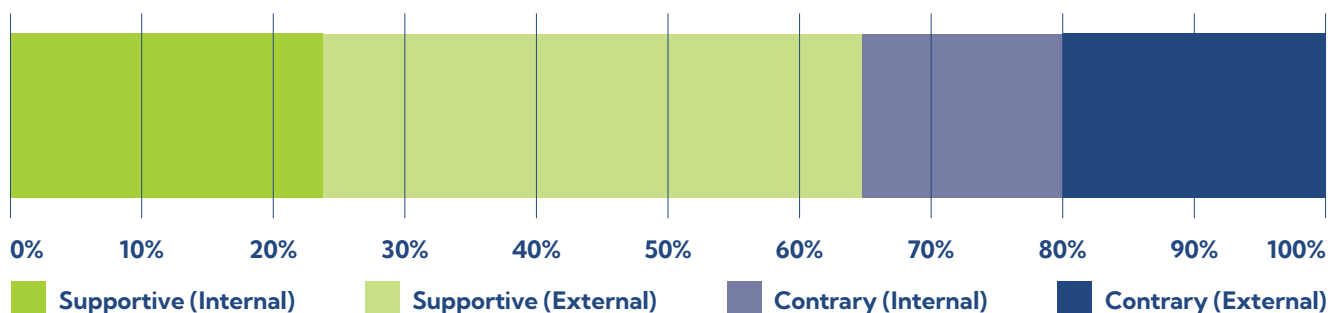
Figure 30: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Coasting narratives)

Supportive factors within the ecosystem of the Coasting remain more prevalent than contrary (with 65% of all coding being for supportive factors), but this is to a lesser extent than the previous narratives such as Embracing, Persisting and Wavering. While the Coasting continue to identify as Christians, their hold on Christian identity is fragile.

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I grew up in a somewhat religious family. We went to church occasionally, mainly on holidays like Christmas and Easter. I attended a Christian primary school where we had chapel services and learned about the Bible. My grandparents were more devout and would sometimes take me to Sunday school when I stayed with them.

Ownership: I didn't really have a specific moment where I took ownership of my faith. It was more of a gradual process as I got older. In high school, I started thinking about religion more seriously and questioning what I actually believed.

Difficulties: Sometimes I struggle with doubts, especially when bad things happen in the world. It's hard to reconcile that with the idea of a loving God. Also, as I've gotten busier with school and other activities, I find it challenging to make time for religious practices.

High Points: I've had some good experiences at youth camps where I felt connected to God and made friends with other Christian teens. There have been times when I prayed about something and felt like my prayers were answered, which strengthened my faith.

Future: I'm not sure exactly what role religion will play in my future. I think I'll always believe in God to some extent, but I don't know if I'll be very actively involved in church or anything. I hope my faith will help guide my morals and decisions as I get older.

Anything else: No.

Internal Factors

Adverse Experience	5%
Contrary Conviction	6%
Contrary Action	11%
Contrary Feeling	14%
Contrary Thinking	6%
Peak Experience	6%
Supportive Conviction	17%
Supportive Action	23%
Supportive Feeling	3%
Supportive Thinking	10%
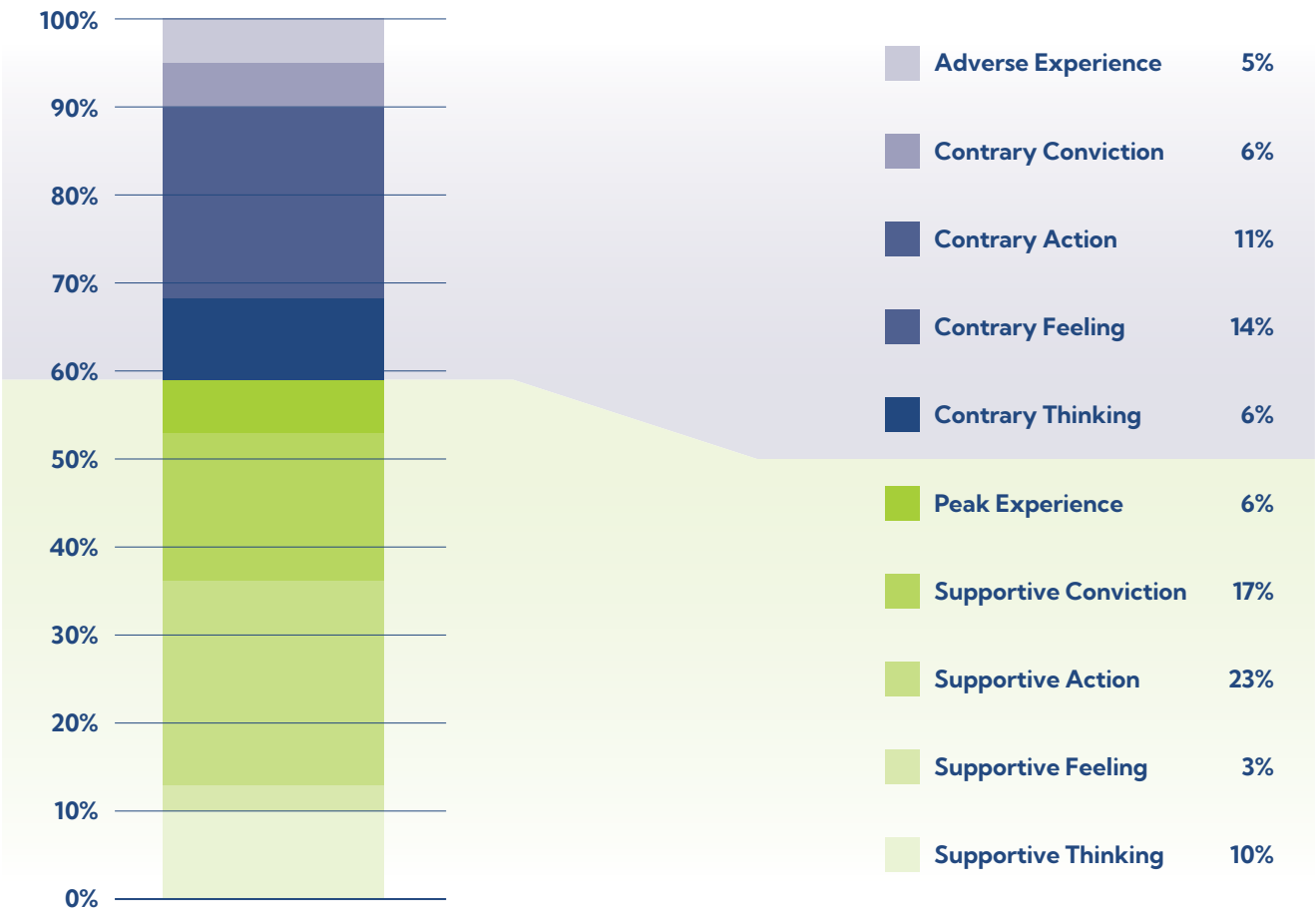
Figure 31: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Coasting narratives)

As much as the Coasting state that their faith is only somewhat important to their everyday life, personally chosen action and individual conviction remain the most prominent of the internal supportive factors. However, both occur in lower proportions than the other more engaged narratives:

> Honestly, I don't know if religion will be a focus but [I will] definitely still be connected to ideas of spirituality e.g. the potential for higher beings or us being connected by energies etc. I hope that while I don't want full focus on this that it will be with me, especially in times of grief and other hardships.

Penny (17f)

Personal conviction is often tied to maintaining a moral code only loosely connected with Christianity:

> i have not really been religous in the first place but i still pursue the values... i grew up in a house going to a small church ... full of old people. i decided to care about my religious views more after i learnt of my heritage (Polish/Catholic). although im not catholic i do agree with many of its values and follow them.

Michael (17m)

The Coasting have a similar pattern of engagement with church as the Wavering. Over half (53%) of the Coasting attend church at least fortnightly, compared to 57% of the Wavering. Yet unlike the Wavering, most of whom remain engaged with youth ministry, the Coasting are far less likely to do so. Only 54% of the Coasting are involved in youth ministry at least fortnightly, compared to 70% of the Wavering. Participation in youth ministry is an 'all–or–nothing' affair for the Coasting, as it is for the Fading and Rejecting. Only 54% of the Coasting attend youth ministry fortnightly, and 41% attend no more than a few times a year.

External Factors

Supportive

Discipleship Action	24.4%
Character Traits	11.9%
Action	11.1%

Contrary

Faith Experiences	7.4%
Faith Action (Practices)	5.2%
Discipleship Action	3.7%

Table 11: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Coasting narratives)

Positively received discipleship actions from others is most prominent among the external factors:

The leaders on CLW [Lutheran Youth Camp] when I was a camper helped me alot, and even now that I'm a leader myself I'm still learning from the more experienced leaders. They had a very big impact on my faith because they were very nice to me and I could go to them if I had any questions at all about what was discussed in small groups and in general.

Frida (18f)

The Coasting remain open to the discipling actions of others, unlike the Wavering who are more wary. The Coasting appreciate the authentic expression of faith in others, even if they don't share it:

I didn't grow up in a religious family but when i was 12/13 i was invited to a youthgroup by a friend and started going weekly. i fell out of that friendship and stopped going but when i made a new friendship i was reintroduced to church and went every few weeks i moved again and lost my faith but was invited to another youth group went weekly became a leader at kids youth group and started going to church.

Aisha (17f)

Many of the of the positive discipleship actions described in Coasting narratives relate to their early childhood years when parents took an active role engaging them in faith practices:

[To father] Thankyou for always providing a solid foundation for my faith. I know that no matter how my life turns, I can go to you when I need it. Thankyou for showing me your faith and allowing me to make my own decisions. You are my role model in faith.

Henry (16m)

There is however a marked difference in the influence of mothers compared to their fathers.

More than half of the Coasting are neutral or negative about the influence of their father on their faith—a marked decline from the positive impact of fathers reported by the Embracing or Persisting. Mothers fare better, with just over a third having a neutral or negative influence on faith. While the Coasting rarely turn to their parents for spiritual support, they are slightly more likely to consult their mother instead of their father.

As Coasting Christians grow older, the incidence of discipleship actions begins to wane. This is unlike Embracing narratives, where the incidence of discipleship action remains more consistent into the teen and present years.

While the Coasting are generally less connected with Christian ministry groups than young people from the more engaged narrative types, they seem to retain a high regard for leaders in youth mission agencies[5]. The Coasting rate agency group leaders highly in relation to how well they are known by those leaders, the leaders' approachability, and the leaders' importance for their discipleship. Mission agency group leaders are regarded more positively by the Coasting than leaders in any other groups (church, youth groups, schools, or children's ministry).

Key Observations

- The Coasting come mostly from nominally religious Christian families, along with some converts.
- They are indifferent to faith and religious identity.
- The Coasting display diverse spiritual worldviews, with an eclectic approach to spirituality.
- Almost all of the Coasting have very low levels of engagement in spiritual practice.
- They retain high regard for Christian leaders who engage in positive discipleship actions, especially among youth mission agencies.
- The Coasting are uncertain about the future role of faith in their lives, with some hoping to strengthen their beliefs, and others expecting minimal involvement.

Discipling Young People Coasting in Christian Faith

For the Coasting, the key questions are: What will happen to your faith over time? What will happen when challenges arise?

The Coasting are very positive about the engaged faith of others—it appears to inspire them, rather than repel. Their story of faith includes many positive responses to discipling actions such as an invitation to a youth group, a church, a bible study or church. This combination of modelling an authentic faith, alongside discipling invitations, appears to be effective for Coasting young people.

Disciplers could invite Coasters to imagine what would challenge their willingness to identify as Christians, and how they could respond. While young people remain connected with the Christian community, there remains the opportunity for adult mentors to help them realise the significance of faith for everyday life.

The Coasting could be encouraged to give greater attention to their own agency in making commitments to faith and spirituality. Though they are not practiced in personal-reflective practices, enabling them to reflect on where they've come from and where they're headed would be beneficial.

[5] "Youth mission agencies" refer to not-for-profit organisations who are motivated by their faith to work alongside local churches and community groups to assist young people. Examples of these organisations mentioned by Your Story participants include Scripture Union, Young Life, Veta Youth, KYCK Youth Conference, Youth Alive, and Christian Youth Camps.

Journeys of Conversion

Young people who have converted into Christian faith are a small subset of the Your Story data. Only nineteen (4.3%) of the 439 responses indicated a change in Christian identity between childhood and the present.

Insider vs. Outsider Conversion

Of the 19 young people who converted, 7 of these described growing up in Christian homes in their faith narrative.

This creates two sub-categories of conversion narratives:

Outsider Conversion:
12 stories describe a conversion outside of a family or social context that largely had no engagement with the Christian faith.

Insider Conversion:
7 stories describe a conversion experience where the young person grew up in a Christian context, then consciously committed themselves to Christian faith. In their narrative, this was the moment when they 'became a Christian'.

Faith Narratives & Faith Activity:

Stories of conversion can be found across all four Christian-identifying faith narratives. This suggests that conversion itself does not necessarily result in maintaining a high or increasing faith commitment.
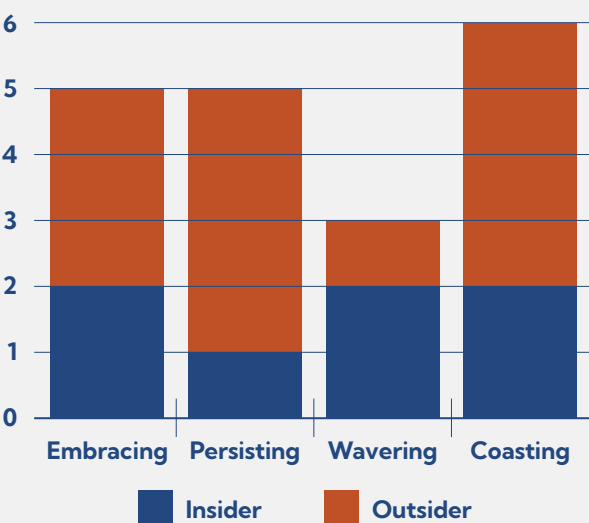

Figure 32: Insider and Outsider Conversion Narratives (number)

Outsider Conversion Narratives:

Outsider Conversion narratives have the following characteristics:

Pre-Conversion Encounters with Christian Faith:
Prior to their conversion, half of these young people (6 individuals) had encountered the Christian faith/ community through a Christian school. Another five were connected through a youth group or church.

Invitation to Participation:
Almost all these conversion narratives contain an invitation from another Christian to join them in participating in some kind of Christian gathering. For example, one young person from a broken home describes their neighbour inviting them to church, while another was invited to youth group by her Christian boyfriend. The remaining narratives began by interacting with Christianity following a challenging life event, such as the death of a relative:

> grew up in a very quiet family, did not attend church. following my uncles passing, I turned to God. from there have rapidly grew my faith, attended church for the first time via online stream in 2020. once church services were held live after the pandemic, went with a close friend and her family to church. began attending regular services and youth group. offered the faith captain role at school, have shared my belief across the college. still growing my faith to this very day.

Olivia (18f-Embracing)

Turning Point:
Five narratives describe a moment of conversion taking place in the context of a worship service or youth rally. Two spoke of the significance of a Christian camp, and another two of spiritual conversations held over time with Christians at school and church.

Post-Conversion:

Those who report narratives of strengthening faith described a deepening of engagement in Christian community and practice. Three reported being baptised, two described the importance of mentors, another two identified their small group Bible study, and four reported becoming increasingly involved in leadership. For several young people, the highlight of their faith narrative was members of their family also committing to Christian faith:

> I didn't grow up in a church. But I started to go to church in year 7 (12 years old) with my neighbors. The first experience with God was exciting and overwhelming. It was the day my family got baptized. This made me feel closer to Jesus and the holy spirits. Getting baptized made me aware of faith that God has given me. I also found faith by going to a bible study group.

Harper (18n–Coasting)

Discipling Ecology

Conversion narratives, whether insiders or outsiders, have three times as many supportive factors as contrary ones. External supports are reported almost twice as often as internal supports.

These stories point to conversion being the result of a significant number of positive external influences that come together to support a change in religious identity. None of the conversion narratives described a solitary individual making a decision on their own. **Conversion for these young people was a process of becoming increasingly embedded within Christian community.**

These converts spoke about appealing traits of individual believers and Christian groups, such as trustworthiness and acceptance. This was the context for specific invitations to participate in Christian activities such as youth group, church services, or camps. Over time, as the reality of Christian faith or the positive contribution of the Christian community became apparent, the young people made new commitments to Christianity:

> I didn't grow up in a religious family but when i was 12/13 i was invited to a youthgroup by a friend and started going weekly. i fell out of that friendship and stopped going but when i made a new friendship i was reintroduced to church and went every few weeks i moved again and lost my faith but was invited to another youth group went weekly became a leader at kids youth group and started going to church. At a christian camp called KYCK i put my faith in jesus with other kids who wanted to do the same.

Aisha (17f–Coasting)

THE FADING

The Fading narrative belongs to those young people who no longer identify as Christian, but whose stories do not contain any discernible or significant faith challenge. Theirs is a story of gradual disengagement leading to rejecting or disowning earlier commitments of faith.

The Fading often have mixed recollections of childhood faith. While some feel like religion was pushed on them, others describe nostalgic memories of a faith that has subsequently lost meaning. While some maintain a vaguely spiritual worldview, many have deliberately left faith behind:

i think as i got older at a religious school, the focus on god and the focus on religion faded in my life, there was no specific point. i dont think i will practice any religion in the future, but i think i will remain spiritual maybe.

Fiona (18f)

Patterns of Engagement

The Fading narrative is one of consistently low or decreasing commitment until finally the young person abandons their Christian identity. For most of these young people their religious identity is not at all important to them (86%), and their faith is not at all important to their daily life (68%). Two thirds of the Fading maintain some sense of a spiritual worldview while a third dismiss spiritual realities entirely.
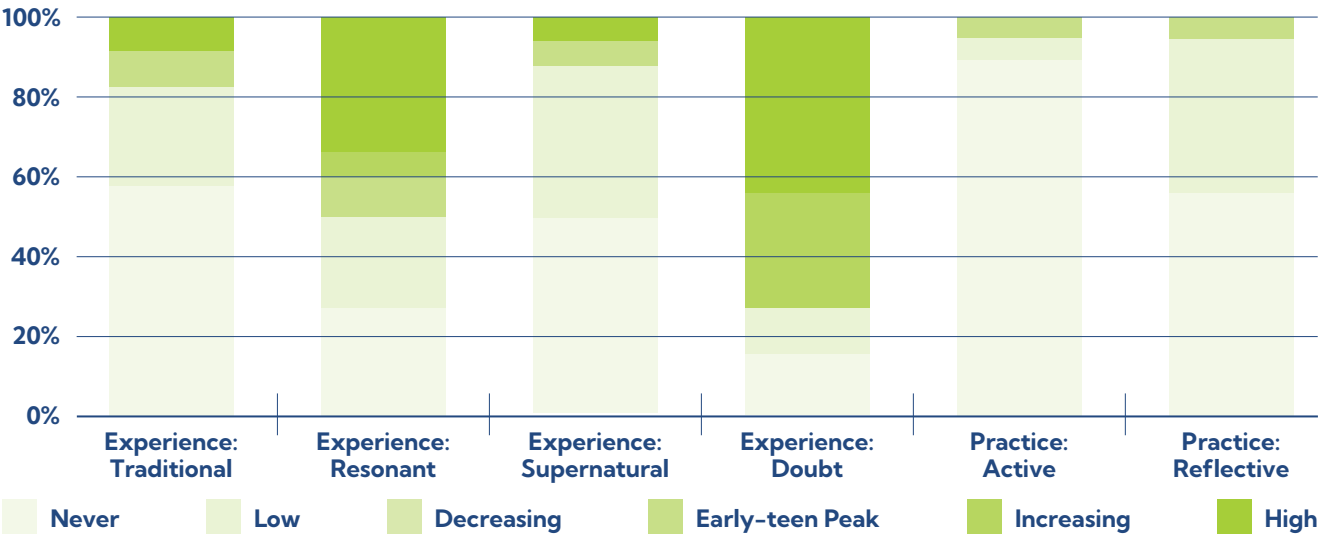

Figure 33: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Fading

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I grew up in a somewhat religious family. We went to church occasionally, maybe once a month or on holidays. I attended a Christian primary school where we had daily devotions and learned Bible stories. My grandparents were more devout and would sometimes take me to Sunday school when I visited.

Ownership: As I got older, around high school age, I started to question my beliefs more. I didn't really feel a strong connection to religion and gradually stopped going to church. I wouldn't say there was a specific moment, it just kind of faded away over time.

Difficulties: I struggled with some of the concepts, like why bad things happen to good people if God is all-powerful and loving. It was hard to reconcile that. I also found it difficult to believe in things I couldn't see or prove.

High Points: I enjoyed some of the community aspects of church when I was younger, like the social events and camps. The morals and values I learned were positive, even if I don't practice the religion now.

Future: I'm not sure what role religion or spirituality will play in my future. I don't think I'll return to organized religion, but I'm open to exploring different spiritual ideas. For now, I'm content being non-religious.

Anything else: No, that covers most of it.

The Fading have very low levels of either traditional or supernatural spiritual experience. Slightly higher levels of resonant faith experience reflects their willingness to retain a spiritual worldview.

Experiences of doubt in the Fading narrative have interesting similarities and differences with the Coasting. There is a similar proportion of those who have had little or no experience of doubt—a marker of indifference rather than confidence. Yet among the Fading, almost twice as many have experienced high levels of doubt (42% compared to 23% of the Coasting). The higher level of doubt is likely connected with why these young people no longer identify with Christian faith, while the Coasting are content to remain.

The Fading report the second lowest levels of spiritual practice. Only the Distancing have a greater proportion of young people who have never engaged in either activist or reflective faith practices.

Given that the Fading narrative is experienced by those who have not faced challenges to a faith story of any significance, most (64%) on this journey reported no resolution strategy. Notable of the remainder is that the response chosen is entirely internal (18% choice or commitment; 18% understanding or cognition).

Discipleship Ecology

The narratives of the Fading mark a tipping point where the presence of contrary factors begins to outweigh supportive ones. On average, supportive factors made up only 44% of codes compared to 56% for contrary factors. This reversal indicates that the Fading develop ecosystems that are less conducive to committed Christian faith.

| 0% | 10% | 20% | 30% | 40% | 50% | 60% | 70% | 80% | 90% | 100% |

■ Supportive (Internal)　■ Supportive (External)　■ Contrary (Internal)　■ Contrary (External)
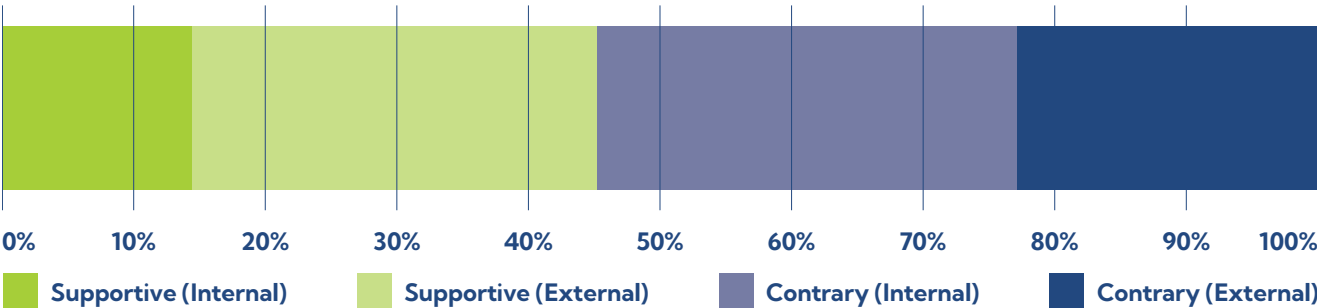
Figure 34: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Fading narratives)

Internal Factors

Adverse Experience	8%
Contrary Conviction	28%
Contrary Action	3%
Contrary Feeling	21%
Contrary Thinking	10%
Peak Experience	3%
Supportive Conviction	8%
Supportive Action	15%
Supportive Feeling	0%
Supportive Thinking	5%
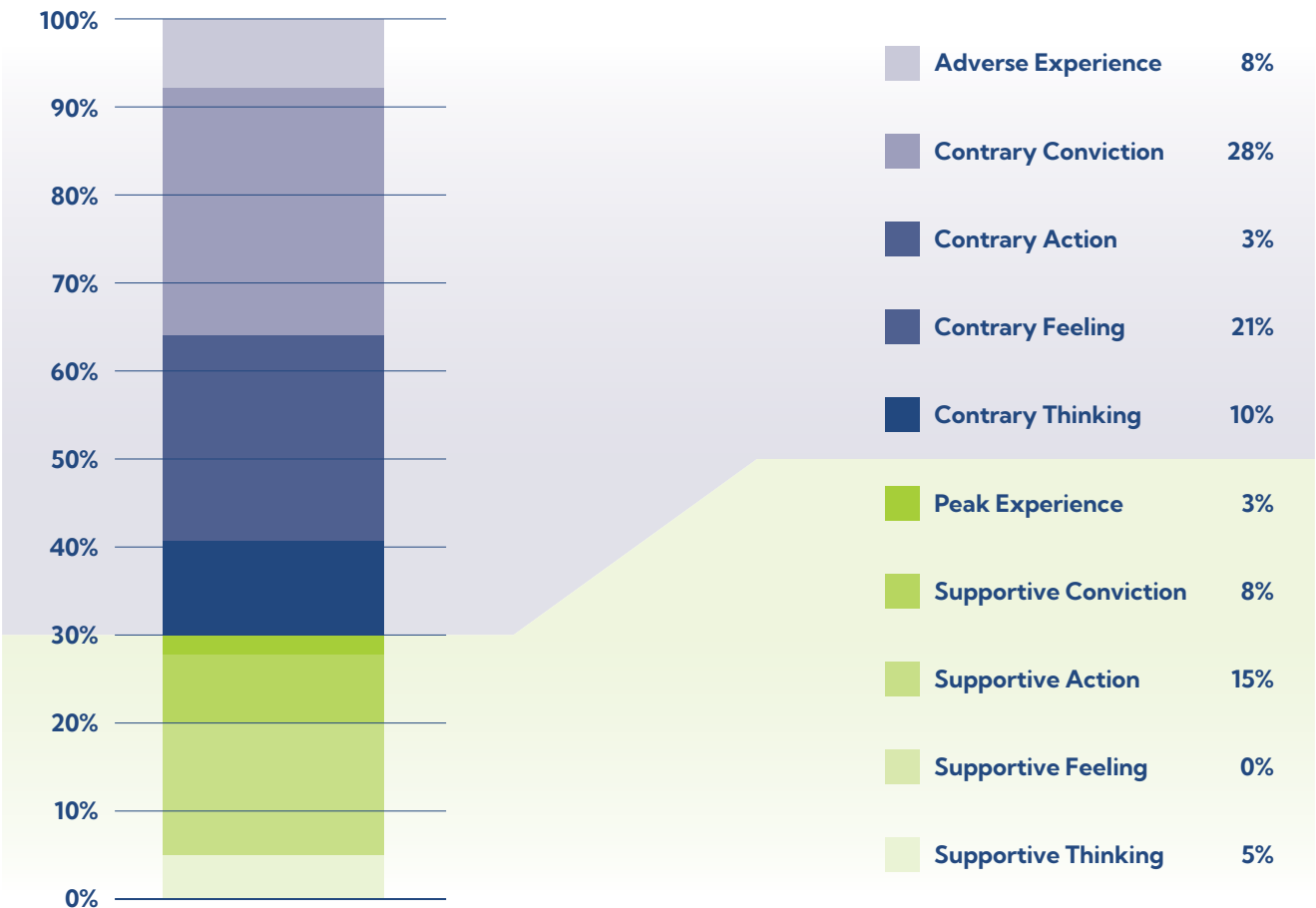
Figure 35: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Fading narratives)

Several young people on a Fading journey continue to participate in faith–based groups despite no longer believing. However, the positive impact of these supportive actions is outweighed by negative feelings or emotions regarding faith and their inner conviction against faith:

I struggle to understand that God is real when you cannot see him.

Maria (18f)

I went to church as a kid, but have fallen away due to lack of interest.

Connor (18m)

i grew up in a very religious household. both parents are christian... all i remember is the constant dread of attending church every sunday ... enrolling into youth groups when i hit year 7 and my mum's extended family being very involved with christianity. i decided to take ownership of my faith when i started to realise i didnt have a personal connection with god and have no desire to gain one. i do believe that there is a spirtiual side of life but i dont want to live my life by the teachings of jesus.

Avery (16nb)

grew up very religious going to a religious school, everyone was Christian. i was baptised, had communion and was confirmed. but since then I'm not religious. I just found I didnt believe in Christianity it just seems too happy and far fetched. [There were] no big obstacles, just growing up and realising i don't necessary believe.

Ethan (18m)

While 20% of the Fading report still attend church weekly, 50% participate only a few times a year or less. Youth ministry engagement is higher with two thirds still in regular attendance. However, the Fading report a significant drop in the sense of connection and alignment of faith compared to narratives that still identify as Christian. Their sense of feeling connected with Christian groups and schools is mild to none–at–all, influence is neutral and the sense of holding to a similar view of things is mild to not–at–all. However, engagement with youth mission agencies is relatively stronger, matched with a positive perception of the influence of these groups. The Fading particularly comment that leaders in these agencies take the time to know them and are approachable.

External Factors

Supportive

Character Traits	18.2%
Discipleship Action	12.7%
Action	9.1%

Contrary

Faith Character Traits	10.9%
Faith Experiences	9.1%
Faith Action (Practices)	7.3%

Table 12: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Fading narratives)

Despite their disidentification with Christianity, 1 in 5 young people with a Fading narrative continue to speak positively about the character traits and discipleship actions of others. Like the Coasting narratives, the Fading narratives carry a level of nostalgia that is often related to the early childhood years:

[About children's ministry] It was inclusive and the leaders were very supportive. As a child I was very influenced but after I stopped attending my faith became weaker.

[About youth leader] They were there to teach, yet they were kind and open. They helped keep me faithful when I was younger.

Harvey (16m)

Like the Coasting, the mothers and fathers of the Fading have quite different influences upon their faith. Three quarters of fathers compared to just half of mothers are reported as having neutral or negative influence. The Fading appear to struggle the most with fathers during the teen years where there is a significant drop in connection and closeness from childhood before a mild improvement into the present day. Equally, while both parents are rarely turned to for spiritual support, fathers are decreasingly sought out from childhood through to the present day.

Overall, a young person Fading from faith is a progressively disconnected individual who gives less and less time and effort to matters of faith. Religious groups and individuals no longer play a significant role in their faith ecology except for youth mission agencies who appear to maintain a positive connection.

Key Observations

- The Fading are characterised by consistently low or decreasing commitment before abandoning Christian identity.
- Two thirds of the Fading maintain some spiritual worldview, whilst the other third dismiss spiritual realities entirely.
- They report frequent negative feelings or emotions regarding faith.
- The Fading are occasionally positive about the character traits and discipling actions of others, often with nostalgia related to the early childhood years.
- They maintain largely positive engagement with youth ministry mission agencies.
- The Fading hold little future intention to change their engagement with faith.

Discipling Young People Fading from Christian Faith

Disciplers of the Fading should do all they can to build warm relationships that demonstrate they have the best interests of these young people at heart. Negative relational experiences with Christians will only entrench the reasons why these young people have walked away from faith.

Perhaps apathy is the greatest challenge for disciplers. The Fading don't have an axe to grind with faith. Rather, they are simply disinterested. Christian faith is not so much problematic as irrelevant, despite lingering nostalgia. For faith to revive, a new sense of significance, meaning and purpose must be stirred.

The Fading may be open to spiritual concerns through experiences in nature. Adult mentors could encourage these young people to reflect on these experiences. By gently inviting them to engage in a spiritual quest, these young people could find greater significance to spiritual things in their lives.

If the Fading are offered trusting relationships and find a sense of belonging within a Christian community, they may be more open to receiving help in processing life and faith.

THE REJECTING

The Rejecting have often grown up in active Christian contexts but have chosen to reject a Christian identity. Like the Wavering, the Rejecting have faced significant challenges to faith.

Where the Wavering have continued to identify as Christian, the Rejecting have turned away:

> My mum and her side of the family were religious: Christians. My dad is atheist ....
> I remember when i learned more about science and the actions of the church I felt less inclined and almost ashamed to be a part of such a community associated with horrific experiences. Around 11–12 I decided to research religion and science, and decided non–religious was best for me.

Vanessa (17f)

Their stories are filled with negative feelings toward the Christian community, particularly for the way they were treated through the process of deconversion. While it is common for the Rejecting to remain somewhat open to spirituality in general, many report feeling much happier, freer and more authentic after leaving institutional Christianity:

> I am no longer a Christian. I am happier, healthier, more confident, and more content than ever. Every part of my life apart from my relationship with my parents was benefitted when I walked away from the church. I will admit I still harbour bitterness towards the church but I try not to. It's simply not for me.

Sophie (20f)

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I grew up in a Christian household. My parents took us to church every Sunday and we said grace before meals. I have early memories of Sunday school and singing songs about Jesus. I didn't really question it as a kid – it was just normal life for me. I became more aware of different beliefs as I got older and started public school, realizing not everyone believed the same things.

Ownership: In my early teens, around 13–14, I started to seriously question my faith. I wasn't sure if I actually believed or if I was just going along with what my parents taught me. I tried praying more and reading the Bible to strengthen my faith, but I kept having doubts. By 16, I decided I couldn't honestly call myself a Christian anymore.

Difficulties: The main challenge was reconciling what I learned in science class with what the Bible said. Things like evolution and the age of the Earth didn't match up. I also struggled with the idea of hell and how a loving God could send people there. The more I thought about it critically, the less it made sense to me. It was hard to let go of my childhood beliefs though.

High Points: There were some good experiences, like youth group camps where I made friends. I enjoyed the sense of community at church. My youth pastor was supportive when I shared my doubts, even if he couldn't fully address them. Overall though, losing my faith was ultimately freeing for me.

Future: At this point, I no longer consider myself a Christian. I consider myself agnostic. I'm open to spiritual experiences but I don't adhere to any organized religion. I try to live ethically and be a good person without needing the promise of heaven or threat of hell. Maybe I'll explore other belief systems in the future, but for now I'm comfortable not knowing all the answers.

Anything else: I sometimes miss the certainty and comfort of believing in God, but I can't force myself to believe something I don't think is true. I respect that faith is important to many people, even if it's not for me anymore.

Patterns of Engagement

As with those whose faith is Fading, most who are Rejecting Christian faith regard their religious identity to be not at all important (60%), and their faith to be not at all important to daily life (60%).
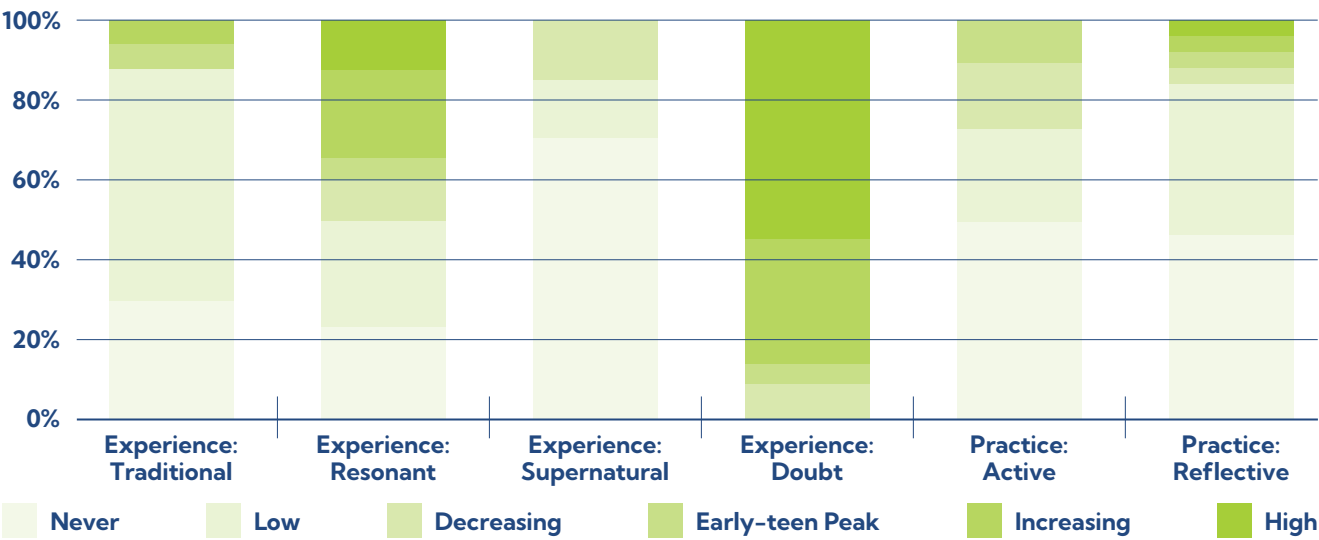

Figure 36: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Rejecting

Though they have left Christianity, a number of the Rejecting maintain a generalised openness to spirituality and find connection in nature and beauty:

> I think/hope in the future I will try to be more devoted to my spirituality by connecting with nature more and trying to find my inner peace, because I find this makes me feel more at ease and happy with myself/the world.
>
> **Miles (16n)**

88% of the Rejecting report consistently high or increasing experiences of doubt. More than twice as many young people in a Rejecting narrative have experienced high levels of doubt (52%) compared to those in a Wavering narrative (25%). An additional 36% report doubt increasing since their childhood and early teen years. The Rejecting have the highest levels of doubt across all eight narratives (88%); the next closest are the Refusing where 86% report high or increasing doubt. Wrestling with doubt was often expressed as a last-ditch effort to maintain faith:

> My first experience with religion was when I was very young. Being born in the UK to a somewhat religious family, I was christened by a vicar in a protestant church. It was after my year 11 camp (mid 2022) when I personally decided to start immersing myself and seriously questioning the existence of a god(s) and which faith/religious is the "mostest truest". I constantly question religious and always felt as if all presented religions have holes in their logic or story that don't allow me to fully immerse myself and 100% believe in them.
>
> **Curt (17m)**

More young people with the Rejecting narrative have previously engaged in active faith practices compared to the Fading. 40% of these young people report low or declining levels of active faith practice, compared to only 10% of the Fading. This suggests that the Rejecting may either have been once active in their Christian faith, or may have made an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to hold onto faith amidst challenges.

As with the Fading, the resolution strategies to faith challenges adopted by the Rejecting are entirely internal: 40% respond through personal choice or individual commitment, and 56% respond through their understanding or cognition. This internalised response is evident also among the Refusing, underscoring the importance of finding ways to keep young people connected with Christian community as they face challenges to faith.

Discipleship Ecology
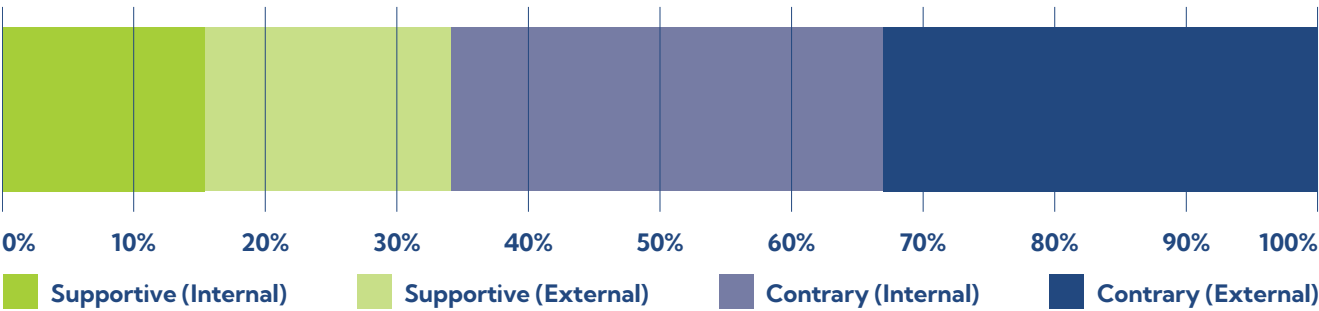
Figure 37: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Rejecting narratives)

The narratives of those who are Rejecting Christian faith contain twice as many contrary factors as supportive ones. Contrary factors are evenly split between internal and external, reflecting both a breakdown of the external faith ecosystem as well as internal distancing and dislocation of faith–related matters.

Internal Factors

Adverse Experience	14%
Contrary Conviction	9%
Contrary Action	7%
Contrary Feeling	21%
Contrary Thinking	22%
Peak Experience	2%
Supportive Conviction	9%
Supportive Action	8%
Supportive Feeling	3%
Supportive Thinking	3%

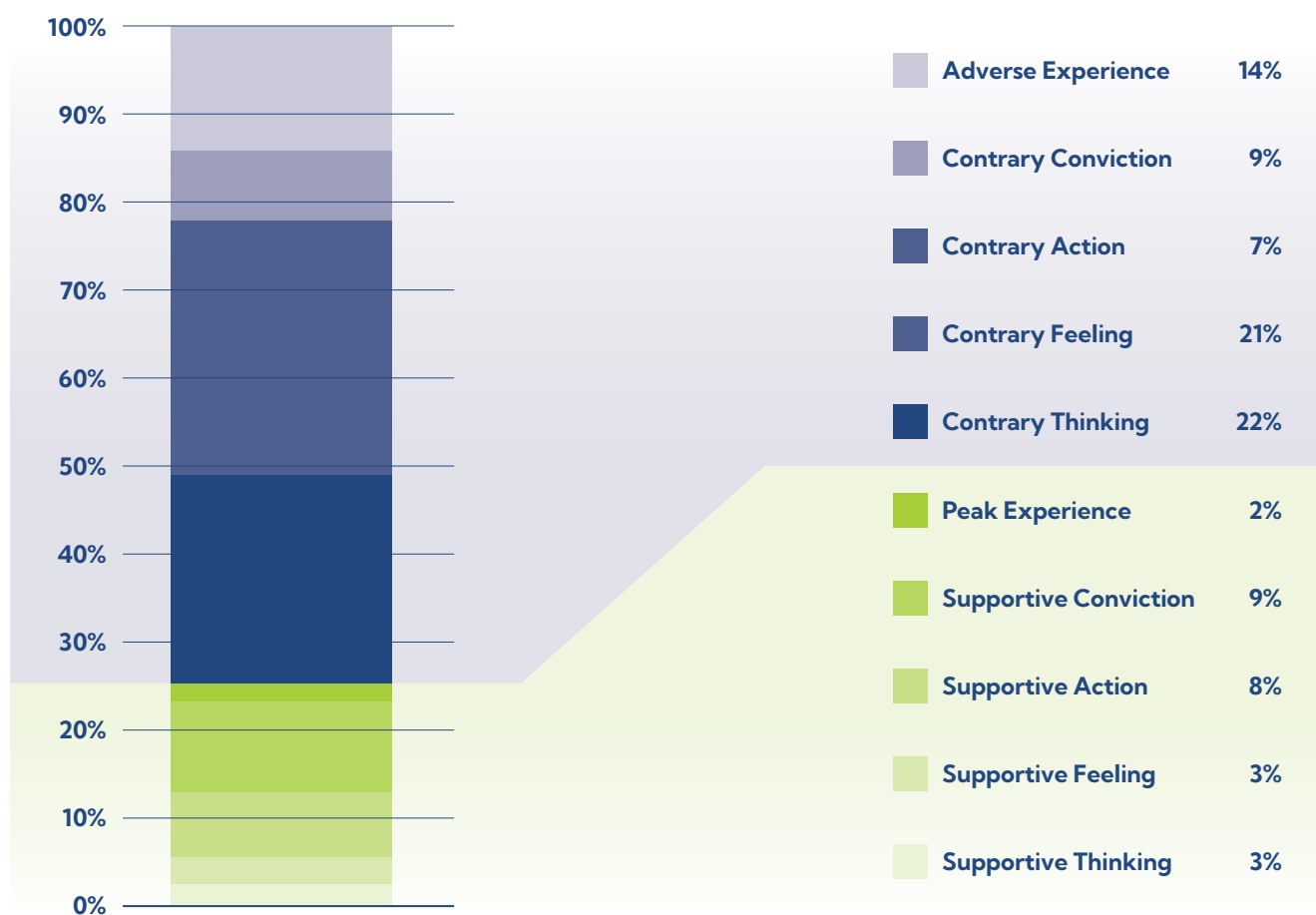Figure 38: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Rejecting narratives)

Negative thinking and feeling about matters of faith and Christianity is strongly present in the narratives of the Rejecting. Some narratives describe experiencing very positive feelings once they had relinquished their faith:

> sometimes I think that sin and guilt about sin was what turned me away. Things that were sins, and didn't hurt others, just felt so good that I couldn't not sin and I purposefully did that and eventually I just broke and said that what was the point of following a religion if I wasn't going to stick to the rules, so I made my own rules and I now lead a personal faith journey instead of one dictated by others... The Church has made me realise that I don't need the Church. I can be a fully functioning adult without a higher power.

Alex (16n)

The narratives of those who are Rejecting Christian faith contain the highest proportion of references to adverse life experiences.[6] It is not difficult to imagine how adverse life experiences combined with a compromised faith ecosystem would contribute to a decision to reject faith:

> I have no idea what the future brings for me. I'm literally drunk while taking this survey. I'm a drunkard, party obsessed nicotine addict with no faith. Maybe one day I'll have that God moment revelation that everyone who has an interesting testimony had but who knows.

Casey (20n)

> I don't have a faith. lMAO I think god's a jerk. I mean it's great if other people have hope bc of him but he's never been there for me or my friends and the world sucks so Yeah my mental health started declining and I realised god basically hated me lmao so I decided to leave faith behind.

Matt (17m)

> Oh yeah, and when found out that someone key to my salvation was actually a pedophile who ruined so many lives, that did not help either.

Isabella (19f)

External Factors

Supportive

Character Traits	16.8%
Discipleship Action	15.9%
Faith Character Traits	9.5%

Contrary

Faith Experiences	12.1%
Discipleship Action	7.5%
Faith Character Traits	6.5%

Table 13: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Rejecting narratives)

[6] While adverse life experiences are evident in slightly more Persisting narratives (occurring in 55% of narratives; compared to only 48% of the Rejecting), they make up a smaller proportion of each narrative (mentioned 0.7 times on average, and make up only 5% of internal codes applied in the Persisting, compared to 1.2 times and 14% of the Rejecting).

The Rejecting narrative is particularly influenced by negative experiences of Christians including compromised relationships, perceptions of inauthentic faith, and unwelcome discipling efforts:

> grew up in a christian family in the church as a kid. Went to church all the time… I used to love worship. I used to feel a presence when I worshipped that would make my week. People supporting me on my faith was helpful… [When] I was 19 and the senior pastor singled me out and kicked me out of youth leadership over something that should have been an adult conversation and was later admitted to not be my fault. I've never felt welcomed back since and i've lost all faith since.

Casey (20n)

The lack of supportive factors present in the faith ecology of those Rejecting faith is also observable in the very low or negative engagement with faith–based groups. There is almost no current sense of connection or influence on their faith journey. Neither is there any sense of connection with leaders of these groups. There are some small indications of positive engagement with leaders of youth ministry and children's ministry, but these are low and are largely referred to as fond memories of the past.

The Rejecting have the most conflicted relationship with parents. 40% report their parents having a negative influence on their faith. Where connection and closeness during childhood was equivalent to other narratives, there is a marked decline into the teen years which only moderately recovers into the present:

> My mother … didn't have much influence on my faith really. When I left the church she took it as a personal offense and completely ignored me for some time. She didn't even look at me. It was extremely hurtful for me and it still hurts to this day. I never wanted to hurt her, and my leaving the church was not at all personal. I didn't want to tell her because I knew how she would react. The discussions I had with my parents after leaving the church made me certain I had made the right choice. The cognitive dissonance coming from the two people who were supposed to guide me and know best was the final nail in the coffin.

Sophie (20f)

Key Observations

- The Rejecting have frequently grown up in strong Christian environments, and maintained an active spiritual life before rejecting their faith.
- Their faith ecosystems have twice as many contrary factors than supportive ones.
- The Rejecting experience the highest levels of doubt of the eight narrative types, suggesting attempts made to hold onto faith amidst challenge.
- Their reasons for rejecting faith include negative experiences with church leadership, scientific education conflicting with religious teachings, and a lack of satisfying answers to questions.[7]
- Rejecting faith is sometimes reinforced by experiencing positive feelings after leaving the church.
- The Rejecting commonly direct angst toward the Christian community and the way they tried to enforce faith.
- They frequently report adverse life experiences.
- The Rejecting often remaining open to spirituality, but express disinterest in organised expressions of Christian faith.

Discipling Young People Rejecting Christian Faith

Disciplers must tread carefully with those who are Rejecting Christian faith. On top of a high incidence of adverse life experiences, many of their stories contain negative encounters with Christian individuals and groups.

Given the hurt and pain that many of these young people express, a constructive discipling action may entail simply listening to their story without seeking to minimise or defend the actions of Christians. Bonds of acceptance need to be re–established, that do not seek to change the Rejecting Christian.

There may be avenues for connection through experiences in nature that these young people associate with spirituality and/or God. There may be echoes of faith practices that these young people could be offered as ways for them to process their experiences. Be alert, however, for spiritual practices and contexts that are associated with hurt.

Finally, the strongest reasons for rejecting Christian faith are levelled by these young people at the particular expression of Christian faith they once experienced. Therefore, if disciplers seek to bring the Rejecting young person back to their old places, forms and expression of faith, they will likely be met with resistance. Instead, it will be important to respect the Rejecting young person's agency by helping them explore faith and spirituality again on their own terms, and be willing to remain their companion no matter where it leads.

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[7] Other reasons included: personal hardships that challenged belief in a benevolent God; LGBTQ+ identities and/or issues were sometimes a source of conflict with religious upbringings; and several expressed frustration with perceived close–mindedness in religious communities.

THE REFUSING

The Refusing have had some experience with Christianity but never identified with the Christian faith and have reinforced this non-religious identity through a conscious choice. The Refusing range from being forthright in their rejection of anything to do with spirituality, through to those who may admire Christian values but view faith as unnecessary.

The stories of the Refusing frequently feature a limited religious upbringing, with ongoing scepticism and doubt regarding faith. Often their grandparents are actively engaged in faith but their parents have disengaged. Further exposure comes through religious education in public schools or being enrolled in a Christian school. Their exposure to the Christian community and message has not overcome these challenges, but an openness and even respect for people of faith, both Christian and otherwise, remains:

my grandma was christian, i never went to church with her. when i was in primary school i was unsure of what i believed. when i was a young teenager i resented religion. now as an older teenager i can recognise that faith brings peace and happiness to a lot of people and that if it was something that i prescribed to, it would likely have a more positive influence on my life than negative.

TJ (17n)

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I grew up in a Christian household. My parents took us to church every Sunday and we said grace before meals. I have early memories of Sunday school and singing songs about Jesus. I didn't really question it as a kid – it was just normal life for me. I became more aware of different beliefs as I got older and started public school, realizing not everyone believed the same things.

Ownership: In my early teens, around 13–14, I started to seriously question my faith. I wasn't sure if I actually believed or if I was just going along with what my parents taught me. I tried praying more and reading the Bible to strengthen my faith, but I kept having doubts. By 16, I decided I couldn't honestly call myself a Christian anymore.

Difficulties: The main challenge was reconciling what I learned in science class with what the Bible said. Things like evolution and the age of the Earth didn't match up. I also struggled with the idea of hell and how a loving God could send people there. The more I thought about it critically, the less it made sense to me. It was hard to let go of my childhood beliefs though.

High Points: There were some good experiences, like youth group camps where I made friends. I enjoyed the sense of community at church. My youth pastor was supportive when I shared my doubts, even if he couldn't fully address them. Overall though, losing my faith was ultimately freeing for me.

Patterns of Engagement

Most of the Refusing see little importance in their religious identity. More than half regard faith as not at all important to daily life, and another 22% regard it as only somewhat important.

Refusing young people have never identified with Christian faith and therefore unsurprisingly have all had no or very low experience of traditional spirituality. However, almost half (46%) report high or increasing levels of resonant spiritual experience. This is particularly so for the young people in this narrative who are developing a spiritually open worldview. This offers a potential point of connection with Christian faith.
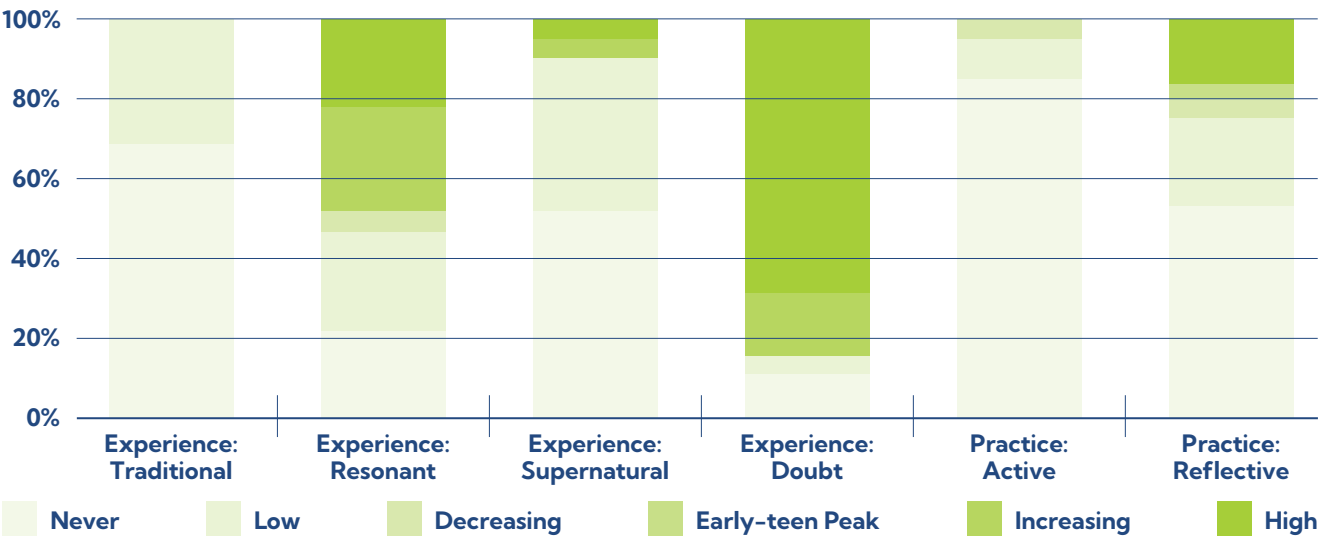
Figure 39: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Refusing

Exemplar Narrative (continued)

Future: At this point, I no longer consider myself a Christian. I consider myself agnostic. I'm open to spiritual experiences but I don't adhere to any organized religion. I try to live ethically and be a good person without needing the promise of heaven or threat of hell. Maybe I'll explore other belief systems in the future, but for now I'm comfortable not knowing all the answers.

Anything else: I sometimes miss the certainty and comfort of believing in God, but I can't force myself to believe something I don't think is true. I respect that faith is important to many people, even if it's not for me anymore.

The Refusing narrative contains the largest proportion of young people who report having consistently high levels of doubt (72%). Given that the Refusing have never identified with Christian faith, this doubt reflects both those who maintain a sceptical orientation to matters of faith as well as those who find their own unbelief 'fragilised'[8]:

> I have grown up morally not believing in the idea of God, but also worried about him not or actually existing. I feel like there is not enough evidence. But at the same time, often fall back on the idea in times of hardship no matter how realitvely difficult they may be compared to others. Often when I am alone.
>
> **Jasper (17m)**

The Refusing demonstrate the same internalised response to faith challenge as the Rejecting—48% draw on their understanding or cognition, and 41% refer to their personal choice or commitment. One young person with this narrative describes a resolution to faith challenge through connection with God. For them, an enduring sense of divine presence reflects their spiritually open worldview—but they are not looking to pursue that quest within the Christian community:

> I am genuinely really unsure of where my faith is headed. I still feel a pretty big disconnect from the Christian religion, but do value the influence God has made on me in my youth. I'm comfortable in moving forward spiritually on my own, and with the influence of the close people around me.I think, just in summary, God was definitely a part of my life in my youth, and I do think he still is in some capacity, but I often feel disconnected from him – not in a bad way, just factually. I'm open–minded and am happy to move forward spiritually.
>
> **Taylor (17n)**

Discipleship Ecology

Supportive (Internal)   **Supportive (External)**   **Contrary (Internal)**   **Contrary (External)**
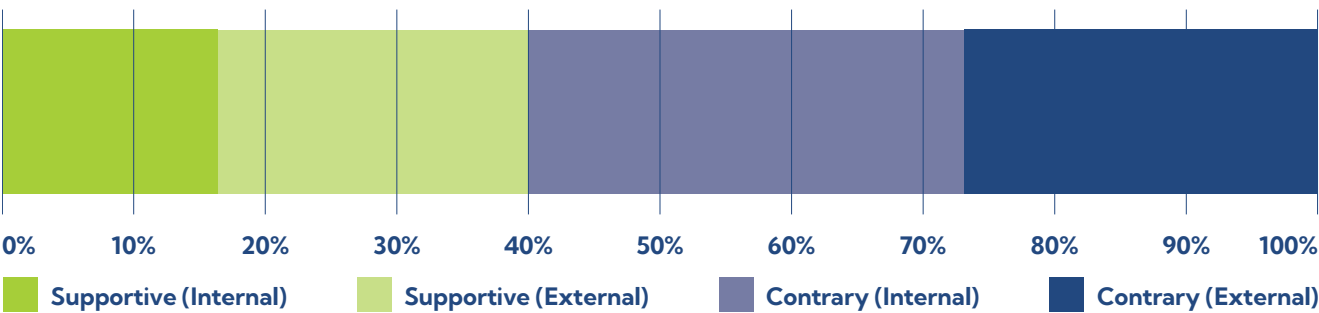
Figure 40: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Refusing narratives)

The Refusing narratives have more contrary than supportive factors, though the relative proportions are less weighted toward contrary factors than the Rejecting. Though young people with Rejecting and Refusing narratives have faced challenges to faith of some significance, it takes more reason to abandon a faith once held, than to refuse a faith never owned.

[8] Taylor's notion of the "fragilization" of unbelief captures how, in a pluralistic and secular context, even non–religious perspectives are destabilized by the presence of competing beliefs. See Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 595.

Internal Factors

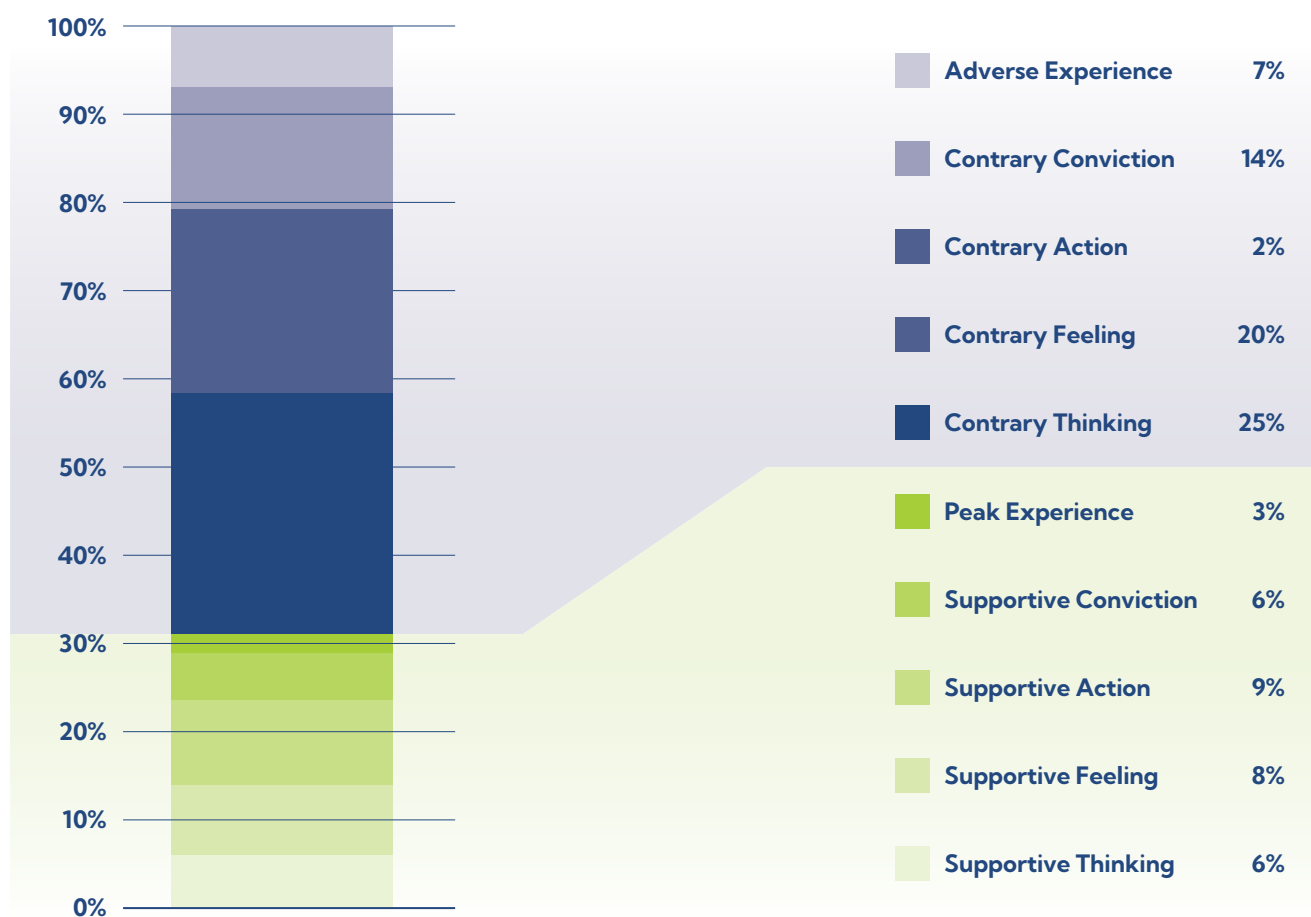|	
Adverse Experience	7%
Contrary Conviction	14%
Contrary Action	2%
Contrary Feeling	20%
Contrary Thinking	25%
Peak Experience	3%
Supportive Conviction	6%
Supportive Action	9%
Supportive Feeling	8%
Supportive Thinking	6%

Figure 41: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Refusing narratives)

The internal contrary factors related to thinking and feeling are most prominent for the Refusing, a similar pattern evident in the Rejecting narrative. The Refusing frequently describe themselves reaching cognitive conclusions or developing an emotional response to Christianity that reinforces their non–faith identity:

> In my early teenager years, I was really on a journey of figuring out who I was and felt that a religious lifestyle was not the best way of doing that. I questioned how God could let negative things happen in my life, particularly during experiences with mental illness. I doubted his presence … I'm comfortable in moving forward spiritually on my own, and with the influence of the close people around me.

Taylor (17n)

External Factors

Supportive

Character Traits	16.8%
Discipleship Action	15.9%
Faith Experiences	9.3%

Contrary

Faith Experiences	12.1%
Discipleship Action	7.5%
Faith Character Traits	6.5%

Table 14: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Refusing narratives)

Attractive character traits and discipleship actions from others have had a positive influence on the faith narratives of the Refusing:

> [About youth mission agency] [they were] kind and easy–going. Learning about god is also learning about yourself and [can] be fun and relaxing.

Abigail (17f)

Many of the Refusing maintained a generalised positive regard for Christian values but simply didn't see the reality of or the necessity for the accompanying Christian spiritual worldview:

> i feel that i model a lot of my behaviour on the messages of the christian faith as i feel many of my own morals align with the overall values but i still don't actively believe in a higher power.

JP (17n)

Key Observations

- The Refusing had limited exposure to Christianity at home, but received some engagement with faith through grandparents, religious education in public schools, or being enrolled in a Christian school.
- They maintain a non–Christian and/or non–faith identity by consciously rejecting Christianity.
- The Refusing experience very high levels of doubt reflecting scepticism and 'fragilised' belief.
- They have a desire for evidence that is both cognitive and experiential.
- Many retain a vague openness to spirituality especially in relation to nature, beauty and relationships.
- The Refusing often hold a generalised respect for faith, and are positive toward actions of trustworthy Christian people and organisations.

Discipling Young People Refusing Christian Faith

As with the Rejecting, disciplers are encouraged to focus on building warm A.B.O.U.T. Relationships with the Refusing. The Refusing still hold positive regard for people of faith who display attractive character traits, and involve young people in positive ways toward actions associated with faith and spirituality. This should encourage disciplers to patiently invest in relationships with these young people.

The Refusing experience high levels of doubt, and process challenges entirely internally. Given this, disciplers could aid the Refusing by helping them to process their questions and concerns. Drawing the Refusing out of their own heads may present opportunities to offer them the resources of Christian community—provided that community meets them with relationships of integrity and openness.

Broadening the Refusers' experiences of Christian action beyond traditional expressions of gathered worship and religious instruction may also be helpful. Many Refusing young people have had a narrow experience of Christianity such as only having a religious grandparent, attending a Christian school, or impressions from social media. Disciplers could provide exposure to other Christian expressions, particularly those who engage in meaningful social action that embody similar values to the young person, but from a Christian worldview.

As with the Fading and Rejecting, there may be avenues for connection through experiences in nature that these young people associate with spirituality and/or God.

THE DISTANCING

Indifference is the hallmark of the Distancing. They have never identified with the Christian faith and maintain an overall disinterest in spirituality and religion. Having lived detached from faith in general, the Distancing have not actively rejected Christian faith—they simply don't care.

Many young people with a Distancing narrative grew up in non-religious households and had little formal religious upbringing. Those who experienced religious education found it disconnected from their lives.

Some had brief encounters with religion, like attending a Christian school, but this did not lead to lasting engagement. The trajectory of their faith journey is one of distancing from organised religion, in favour of secular or humanist worldviews.

The Your Story narratives of the Distancing are characterised by their brevity. Many did not complete the survey in full and they frequently did not volunteer much about what was going on for them.

Patterns of Engagement

Religious identity has no importance for 85% of the Distancing, and for 64%, faith or spirituality is not at all important for day-to-day life. For the remainder the alternative is not religious engagement but ambivalence. The Distancing had the more frequent response of 'Don't Know' in relation to the importance of faith for day-to-day life (19%):

> after talking to many people who were and werent Christians, i decided i wasnt overly phased about religion, i had lived without it before and i found it interesting to learn about different ones but never felt the need to join.

Claire (17f)

Exemplar Narrative

Beginning: I didn't grow up in a religious family. First encountered faith at school through RE classes and assemblies. Didn't really think much about it as a kid.

Ownership: Never really took ownership of faith. Decided it wasn't for me after learning about different religions.

Difficulties: No real obstacles since I don't have faith.

High Points: Not applicable as I don't believe.

Future: Don't see myself becoming religious. Will continue to respect others' beliefs but remain atheist/agnostic.

Anything else: No.

Many of the Distancing uphold a scientific worldview and cite their preference for empirical, logical or scientific explanations—consistent with the predominance of am empirically oriented, irreligious worldview. Science is mostly viewed as being incompatible with faith:

> I dont think i can believe in God, due to the lack of evidence and how it compromises science.

Zahra (17f)

> I wasn't raised in a religious environment and thought most of it was very unrealistic and that arguments about religious beliefs is what caused many wars and that science is just more logical ... I think my beliefs will not change and I almost want to become an physicist to prove the big bang real.
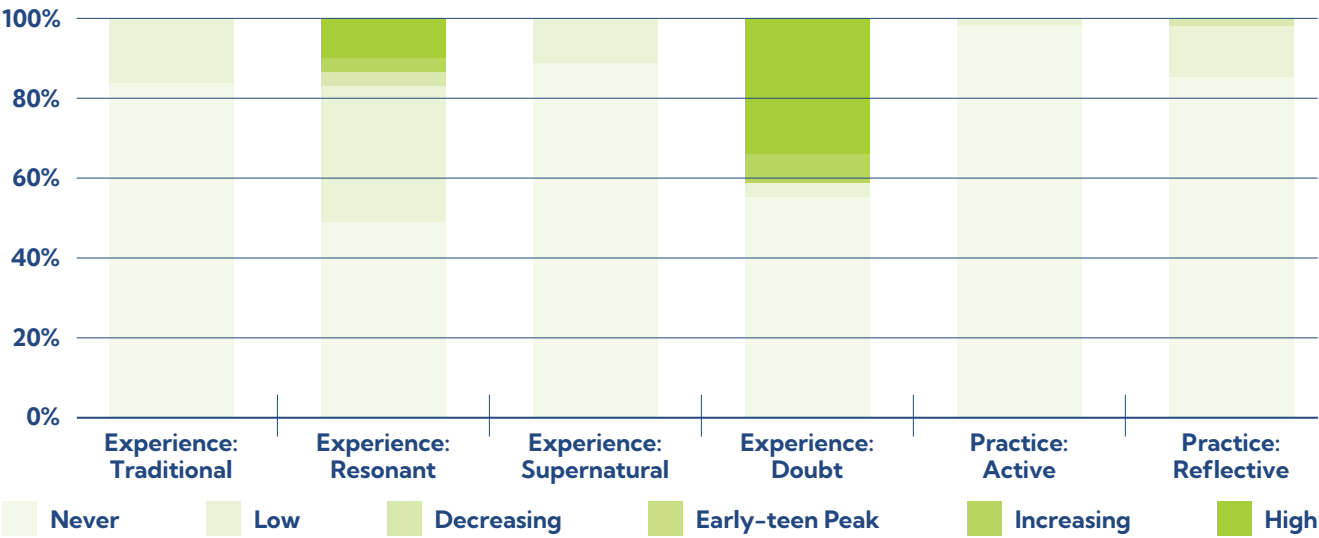
Emily (16f)

Figure 42: Experience and Practice Trajectories: Distancing

As would be expected, the Distancing narrative has the highest proportion of young people who have never had any kind of experience they relate to faith or spirituality, and have never participated in any kind of practice related to faith or spirituality.

However, though the proportion is small (and significantly lower than in other narratives), there

are some young people with high (11%) or increasing (8%) experiences of resonant spirituality. Equally, uncertainty is still present amongst the Distancing, with 43% reporting high or increasing experiences of doubt. As with the Rejecting, this is likely to express general scepticism toward religion or spirituality, as well as fragilised personal beliefs.
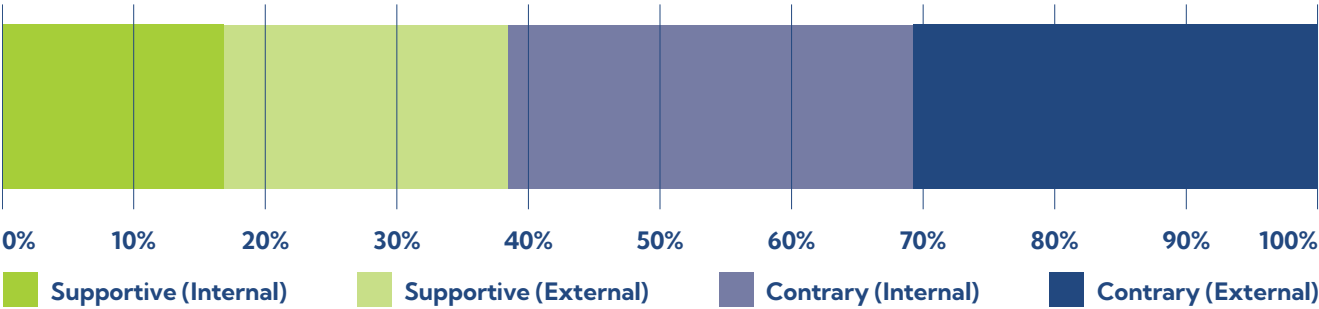
Discipleship Ecology

Figure 43: Internal and External Supportive and Contrary Factors (% of coding across all Distancing narratives)

The narratives of the Distancing are characterised by their brevity, and they did not volunteer much about what was going on for them. They are largely a closed and disinterested book. Contrary factors outweigh supportive factors, consistent with each of the other non–Christian narratives. Yet the higher proportion of supportive factors does not result in a positive faith story because much of what is significant appears to be left unsaid.

Internal Factors

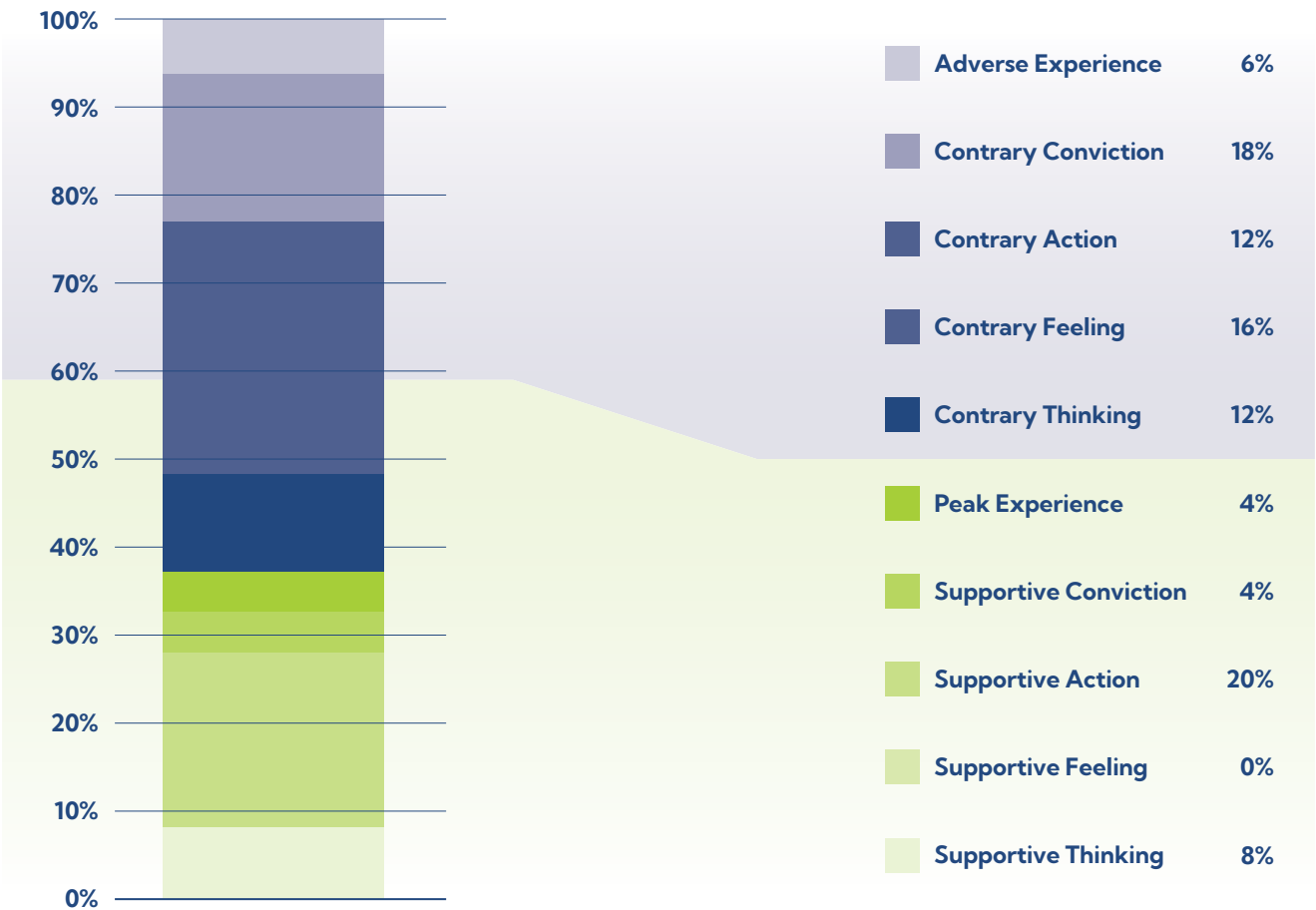|	
Adverse Experience	6%
Contrary Conviction	18%
Contrary Action	12%
Contrary Feeling	16%
Contrary Thinking	12%
Peak Experience	4%
Supportive Conviction	4%
Supportive Action	20%
Supportive Feeling	0%
Supportive Thinking	8%

Figure 44: Internal Contrary and Supportive Factors (% of coding across all Distancing narratives)

The negative influence of feelings and convictions were prominent among the internal factors named in the narratives of the Distancing narrative, though they occur only sporadically:

> [The church] are not open to other views. I couldn't talk about my atheist beliefs as i would fear that i wouldn't be accepted or i would be negatively targeted... i feel they are taking an unrealistic approach.

Zahra (17f)

> I have rejected the potential influences of my school and have formed my own opinion.

Jo (18n)

External Factors

Supportive

Discipleship Action	19.0%
Character Traits	16.7%
Faith Character Traits	9.5%

Contrary

Faith Experiences	11.9%
Faith Character Traits	9.5%
Discipleship Action	9.5%

Table 15: 3 most frequently occurring external supportive and contrary factors (% of coding across all Distancing narratives)

Positive and negative external factors are spread thinly across the narratives of those Distancing from faith. There is some indication of young people in this narrative looking favourably on discipleship actions from others and their positive character traits:

> [About youth mission agency] went bc my friends went and there were games, food and friends. although i didnt believe in it, it was interesting to learn about and cool to see more modern views of christians.
>
> [About school] certain leaders have certain views, those who are respectful of non–christians and dont try and force it on them have more effect on students. seeing how they are good people with the same ideas and values as non–christians and showing no judgement is important.

Claire (17f)

Negative faith experiences with others, negative faith character traits of others, and negative discipleship actions make up the largest category of contrary external factor codes applied. However, these occur in only small numbers of narratives.

Key Observations

- Many of the Distancing grew up in non–religious or atheist households, with little to no exposure to faith or spirituality.

- For the Distancing, matters of faith, spirituality and religion in general have little relevance in their lives and occupies very little of their attention, if at all.

- Most describe their exposure to Christianity in neutral or negative terms.

- The Distancing view science as mostly incompatible with faith.

- However, some experience spirituality in nature, beauty and relationships.

- Some of the Distancing mention respecting others' beliefs while not personally adhering to any faith.

- The majority don't foresee adopting religious beliefs, though some leave the possibility open for future spiritual exploration or growth.

Discipling Young People who are Distancing from Christian Faith

Disciplers will have a difficult time engaging those who are Distancing from faith. In contrast to the Refusing narrative, those who are Distancing are largely indifferent and disinterested in matters of faith.

The perceived oppositional relationship between faith and science provides some opportunity for engagement. Equally, there may be some opening for engaging with the small but not insignificant proportion who have experiences of spirituality in nature or beauty.

POWER AND AGENCY

Throughout Your Story, young people highlighted the importance of how disciplers use power in matters of faith and spirituality. We discussed this first in Key Finding #3, particularly in relation to promoting Ownership within A.B.O.U.T. Relationships. Power and agency also played a central role in Key Finding #4, where we urged disciplers to exercise power cautiously, especially at the higher levels of the Discipling Action Pyramid, where young people's agency is more limited.

Rather than constituting a sixth key finding, this focussed discussion of power and agency is offered as an overarching plea from young people. **As disciplers consider the key findings of Your Story and formulate appropriate responses for Christian ministry and mission among young people, listening to these young people requires paying close attention to the use of power and the promotion of agency.**

We heard concerns about power and agency from young people in all eight of the faith journey narratives. Christian organisations cannot dismiss challenges regarding misuse of power as merely the complaints of the disaffected; they are also the concerns of the faithful. Using power wisely is both a requirement for missional engagement with those outside the church, and an imperative for constructive discipling of young people seeking to grow in faith.

We also heard concerns from young people about the way power was used and misused by the church, by youth leaders, by Christian schools, by parents, and even by their friends. That is, awareness of issues of power and agency are important for anyone in relationship with a young person, not just for institutions or those with formal positions of authority.

At some points in what follows, we highlight things that young people were particularly saying to the church, or to schools, or to parents. However, it would be a mistake to read these comments as relating only to the specific audience being addressed. The young people in Your Story may have said these things about one set of authority figures in their ecosystem, but the issues are pertinent for all.

Drawing from the voices of young people, we want to highlight how they feel about power, and the language they use to talk about power, both when it's used well, and when it's not. Paying attention to these voices reveals more than a simplistic demand for autonomy. These young people tell a story about why agency is important to them, and offer insights about how those in authority can use their power for good.

PART 4

DON'T FORCE ME!

It is impossible to read the responses from young people in Your Story and not be struck by their aversion to the use of force in matters of faith and spirituality.

Young people don't want religion to be forced on them:

> There has been very few positive moments [in my faith journey] purely because religion has always been pushed onto me throughout my youth.

Maria (18f–Fading)

Young people don't want the church to force religion on them:

> [To church] i understand that the intentions are good, but church as a whole has many underlying faults that need to be addressed ... sometimes faith feels forceful.

Suzie (17f–Rejecting)

Young people don't want their Christian school to force religion on them:

> [To school] By forcing religion on people all you do is drive us away.

Noah (17n–Rejecting)

> My school claims to be multi–faith and open, and they used to be but now we are borderline being fed propaganda and faith is being forced... in the earlier days at the school, it was much better at educating on faith and being open to other faiths and self–expression while still being a christian school, now it feels like the school is forcing its beliefs onto its students, ... Faith will be better recieved when its not being forced.

Liam (18m–Rejecting)

Young people don't want their parents to force religion on them:

> [My mother] Wants me to do all Christian stuff ... [Addressed to Mother:] Let me choose what church activities I go to because you're ruining my faith journey.

Seth (16m–Coasting)

Aversion to the use of force in matters of faith and spirituality does not just come from those who are antagonistic to Christianity. Gretchen is persisting in faith amidst challenge and kindly asks that her school not force students into religious practice:

> Hi school, forcing people to participate in practices and bible bashing to an extent is only turning them off from Christianity. That's all, thank you.

Gretchen (17f–Persisting)

Some young people even lamented the fact that they had themselves become forceful in their expression of faith:

> [To my non-christian friends] I'm sorry I was an arsehole and preoccupied with matters of faith and making sure you didn't go to hell. I am sorry our friendships could not go deeper because of that. I'm sorry for what we both missed out on because I was so indoctrinated. I hope we get another chance. Did you know I was in an abusive relationship with Christ? I just could not see straight. I am sorry. You are okay. You were always okay.

Isabella (19f–Rejecting).

Where trying to use force is received negatively, choosing not to use force is received positively:

> I have one main friend who is a very strongly christian. She is very open about her religion and speaks about it regularly however she does not try to force this on us and is accepting of everyone's individual beliefs.

Adeline (17f–Coasting)

> Certain leaders have certain views, those who are respectful of non–christians and don't try and force it on them have more effect on students. seeing how they are good people with the same ideas and values as non–christians and showing no judgement is important.

Claire (17f–Distancing)

Abuse in the Church

Overall, comments that specifically mention power or reflect power dynamics in relation to the church are less frequent than those referring to parents and schools. However, some of the strongest language and most confronting instances of abuse relate to congregational settings.

Sadly, several young people reported historic experiences of abuse, or environments that they reflect on as being manipulative to the point of abuse. For some, this was the turning point that ended their identification with Christian faith. For others, it represented a significant ongoing faith challenge:

> When I was around 10–11 I was SA [sexually/ spiritually abused?] at a church night service. That traumatised me and gave me PTSD, which I still suffer from…. This whole event questioned me, it still does from time to time, like why did it have to happen to me? This was by far the biggest challenge I am overcoming.

Leilani (19f–Wavering)

The experiences narrated by Leilani and others highlighted the way that abusive relationships and circumstances can deeply wound a person's sense of self, faith, and trust, distorting their experience of God and community. Christian institutions must not ignore the legacy of failures to protect children, teenagers, and other vulnerable people from the evil of sexual and spiritual abuse.

Listening to these responses of young people emphasises the seriousness of abuses of power in the church, and reveals how imposing faith on others erodes trust and contradicts the character of God.

The lens of power is so dominant in how young people assess relationships that it also shapes their understanding of God:

> God gave us free will …. God is not a dictator, he does not want to force us into a relationship, but every time we choose differently, he weeps for us and all of humanity.

Shania (18f–Embracing)

Further still, the young people in Your Story expect Christian leaders to do more than avoid abuse. Being attuned to matters of power also includes a desire to see people and organisations of faith advocate for the vulnerable, and protect and help those who have been harmed by misused power:

> I distinctly remember one time when a guy was just overtly mean to me for seemingly no reason, and the youth leaders defended me in front of him; that was a powerful expression of their care for me.

Samantha (18f–Persisting)

> [To youth ministry:] I wish you cared more about the abuse i was facing as a young person rather than the way i was forming as a socially aware 'lefty.' I wish you cared more about the way my father treated me, than if i was questioning my sexuality.

Caitlin (19f–Wavering)

For Caitlin, standing against abuse and supporting those who have been harmed is more important than doctrinal orthodoxy. Once again, the litmus test of righteousness for these young people is the way one engages with and responds to the use of power.

THE PATHWAY TO OWNERSHIP

In place of force-fed religion, the young people in Your Story seek relationships around faith and spirituality that foster freedom of choice, offer a clear presentation of options, encourage exploration, facilitate learning, and promote a sense of personal ownership.

Freedom to Choose

Young people's objections to the use of force were often expressed in terms of being deprived of their ability to exercise personal choice or to give consent to their participation.

Removing a young person's freedom to choose was particularly referred to in relationship with their parents. Young people protested against parenting that became oriented toward seeking compliance, rather than genuine agreement or personal engagement in faith:

[About father] Especially when I was younger, [he was] very focused on me doing the right thing and following all the rules. Had to go to church, [and] when I started refusing to go to church in my teens some days he would drag me out of bed to force me to go. He seems to have a very clear cut vision of what my life should/will look like.

[To father] Sometimes forcing religion is the worst possible thing for you to do for your child, especially in their teens. You should never force them to be religious because it just pushes them further from it. It's better to just leave the door open for them to come to you and to encourage them to be independent on their journey while providing support and love. That is what shows them about Christianity. It should be something they actively choose not something they feel forced to do.

Leilani (19f–Wavering)

Parents who are portrayed in a positive light do not contravene a young person's agency. They are willing to come alongside the young person. Parents who respect agency help the young person respond to challenges, questions, and doubts, but they do not relieve them of responsibility by fixing the problem or providing answers to questions:

[My mother] is loving and caring and teaches me about Christianity and faith but does not force it upon me and leaves it up to me to choose what I will do with it. She demonstrated love and kindness that Christianity is about.

Victor (16m–Coasting)

[To father] Thankyou for always providing a solid foundation for my faith. I know that no matter how my life turns, I can go to you when I need it. Thankyou for showing me your faith and allowing me to make my own decisions. You are my role model in faith.

Henry (16m–Coasting)

Open to New Ideas

Freedom to choose requires options to choose from. Young people valued relationships that were open to new ideas and did not limit the acceptable topics for discussion.

Young people were particularly conscious of the way churches and youth groups engaged in gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is the form of control exercised by leaders that influences who is welcome in the faith community, and what beliefs, behaviours, and identities are acceptable.

Young people referenced the act of gatekeeping using the language of 'openness'. Being open was viewed positively and being closed was not:

[About youth minister] His attitude towards us was frankly unhelpful and damaging. He wasn't open to new ideas at all and only wanted to force his beliefs on us.

Sophie (20f–Rejecting)

[My Christian friends] sometimes were too pressuring and that made me feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I felt like I couldn't be 100% honest/open about my feelings because I felt that they would judge me. It appeared to me as if they felt moral superiority due to their beliefs and strictly following their practices.

Amanthi (16f–Wavering)

My Non–Christian friends have almost been more influential than my Christian friends because they are more interested in asking questions and more open to hearing different views. There have been several occasions where my friends have just randomly asked questions about purpose, heaven, what I believe and then they are fascinated and when I ask the questions in return, they actually think about it and answer honestly which is awesome.

Kelly (20f–Embracing)

Gatekeeping was particularly raised by young people in relation to the church, and not just from those who weren't interested in being Christian. Tyree is embracing Christianity, but credits their ability to defend the faith to what they learnt from YouTube, rather than the church:

> I think that YouTube has taught me a lot about the other side; the side that they don't tell you about in Church. I seriously value being able to understand both perspectives, in order that I might be able to argue better my spiritual standpoint.

Tyree (17n–Embracing)

The negative perception of gatekeeping in the church was often accompanied by feelings of judgement, guilt, and shame:

> [About church] I never felt safe to go to them as I was afraid of judgement… I felt pressure and shame and guilt constantly.

Sophie (20f–Rejecting)

> Bullying by church leaders and guilt trips for not being more involved. Judgement not encouragement. Very negative experience.

Oliver (18m–Wavering)

The negative impact of gatekeeping was particularly evident for young people grappling with questions of sexuality and gender:

> One of the biggest challenges was being a queer person and trying to work out my identity and still be accepted in the church. It took a lot to love myself again after the church told me i was unlovable and evil just for being myself.

Caitlin (19f–Wavering)

Alex's suggestion is well worth considering, not only for youth ministers but for anyone seeking to engage constructively with young people in conversations about faith:

> [To youth ministry] You need to create a space with acceptance and honesty, and you need to identify what is stopping these kids from expanding their faith. Don't shun anyone, everyone's voice is valuable.

Alex (16n–Rejecting)

Fostering Exploration

Freedom, with options, enables exploration. Young people valued the discipling actions of others that enabled them to explore matters of faith and spirituality.

Sophie explains that her youth minister's lack of openness led to young people not being encouraged to think through issues for themselves:

> He didn't want us to think for ourselves and he was one of the main reasons I began the process of losing my faith.

Sophie (20f–Rejecting)

The desire to explore faith for themselves is also shared by those holding on to Christian faith:

> [To church] You supported me to live a life that glorified God, but I wish you had given me more of an opportunity to explore and interpret the Bible and my faith for myself rather than telling me what to believe.

Jenny (20f–Persisting)

> [About youth ministry] The leaders are all very supporting and encouraging and have helped me explore my purpose and my faith journey... They give me confidence in who I am and help me express my faith.

Eunice (17f–Embracing)

> [To school] I would thank them for how they explored faith and helped me to grow and understand it.

Chloe (18f–Wavering)

Exploration Promotes Learning

Young people recognised that having freedom to explore multiple perspectives is valuable for promoting learning. This theme was particularly present when young people spoke about their Christian school:

> the leaders (teachers & principal) were (mostly) incredibly kind and compassionate and always willing to help with any problems and questions (spiritual or otherwise) we might have.

Maya (20f–Wavering)

> [About school] they were caring and supported us, they helped learn about our own morals and beliefs and didn't force them onto us.

James(17m–Refusing)

> Teachers – you were amazing. You saw me, celebrated me, allowed me the chance to uncover my gifts and talents. You gave me opportunities to understand God and learn to love him. You were a safe place for me.

Oliver (18m–Wavering)

Faith will be better received when its not being forced. I used to enjoy christian studies and chapels because i like discussing faith and discussing and learning, now there's less of that.

Liam (18m–Rejecting)

Isabella challenged her school to recognise the contradiction of being an institution of learning while not enabling the kind of exploration that promotes learning:

They sold one thing and delivered another... They said they welcomed questions but they actually didn't. Felt hypocritical.

Isabella (19f–Rejecting)

Promoting Ownership

Ultimately, when young people wrote about the value of being given agency in matters of spirituality and religion, they affirmed their ability to own the decisions they were making, whether for or against faith:

would thank her [my mother] for being so open and letting me come to my own decision while also being open to talk about challenging ideas, I would thank her very much for being so loving to me.

Chloe (18f–Wavering)

As I've gotten older, mum has encouraged me not to just listen to everything she believes but to find answers for myself. This helped me know that my faith had become my own.

Zoë (19f–Persisting)

[To children's ministry] I know you meant well but you primed me for just accepting anything if someone was in a position of authority ... You indoctrinated me well but did nothing to help me think.

Isabella (19f–Rejecting)

AGENCY WITH CONVICTION

Promoting agency in young people does not require adults to abandon conviction. As presented in Key Finding #4, the higher levels of the Discipling Pyramid are available, provided disciplers have first invested in A.B.O.U.T. Relationships with a young person.

Parents, schools, and Christian leaders may well feel justified in exerting their authority and identity. A Christian school has, for example, made its faith–based identity explicit, and thus maintaining this identity through Christian practice can be expected of all enrolled students. The same can be said of a church community that makes no secret of their religious goals, or of parents seeking to uphold a Christian household.

Young people valued the combination of being in a community or household of strong Christian conviction, which modelled an authentic personal faith, but also upheld young people's right to explore and test these convictions:

> I grew up in a religious family. Although i hold the same beliefs as my mum and family, it was never forced as a kid, the journey to finding your own faith was completely up to you. We were educated on other religions and the option of not holding any beliefs at all. Being able to go on this path with not pressure and people to fall back on is a huge factor as to why my faith is so strong now

Tobi (17n–Embracing)

> My father is strict when he needs to be and also understanding and soft in other times. He is supportive of the decisions I make most of the time and also likes to express his opinion

Chris (18n–Persisting)

Although Liam rejects the Christian faith, he understands that attending a Christian school involves participating in activities like chapel and prayer. While he accepts that schools have the authority to involve students in religious practices, they also bear the responsibility to ensure that this authority is exercised thoughtfully, without being coercive or 'converty':

> It's okay to have chapels and prayers and what not, but when it becomes converty and forceful it's no longer enjoyable.... Faith will be better received when it's not being forced.

Liam (18m–Rejecting)

Key Findings #3 and #4 pointed out that the factor that was most determinative of whether discipleship action was going to be received as supportive or contrary was the degree of relational connection. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing schools is that almost three quarters (73%) of students stated that they felt little or no sense of connection with their school. Lack of connection is an expression of compromised relationship:

> They taught us about Christianity and its importance however they did not know us personally unless we decided to seek them out.

Adeline (17f–Coasting)

How can disciplers engage student's faith journeys without turning them off or causing them to feel like religion is being forced upon them? The dynamic of relational connection matched with respecting student agency offers a way forward.

Honouring Agency through Respectful Influence

The way young people narrate experiences of power in relation to faith highlights its profound impact on their spiritual journeys. Whether through overt coercion, subtle gatekeeping, or the absence of consent, the misuse of power can cause deep wounds, erode trust, and drive individuals away from faith communities.

Alternatively, when disciplers and leaders use their influence to empower, respect agency, and provide space for exploration, young people say they are more likely to internalize and own their faith. As Christian communities seek to accompany young people on their spiritual journey, they must be mindful of how power is wielded, ensuring that it nurtures rather than stifles, protects rather than harms.

CONCLUSION

For better discipling, first listen

The goal of Your Story has been to listen well to young people and find more effective ways of accompanying young people in their journeys of faith.

In the light of the key findings given in this report, here are five main recommendations:

1. **Pay attention to where a young person's faith experience has come from and where it is going.** Give special attention to how young people talk about the challenges that they are facing in their journey of faith—not just what those challenges are, but the significance or weight of the challenge in the young person's experience.

2. **Build rich ecosystems of spiritual support,** not relying on just one favoured avenue of support, and not being overly concerned by the threat of one particular challenge.

3. **A good relationship with a good person grows faith.** Be very careful to exercise power sensitively, doing all you can to promote agency

4. **The better the relationship with young people, the wider range of discipling actions are available.** Build a strong base so you can ascend the discipling pyramid with care.

5. **Help young people to make use of their ecosystem of faith when they are confronted by challenges.**

A common experience in surveying young people about spirituality is that they often don't have much to say. Researchers have suggested that the inarticulacy of teenagers concerning religious beliefs is either because teenagers just aren't interested in religion, or (more probably) that they're not getting help from the church to learn how to narrate their faith.[9]

To have a better conversation we need to ask better questions.

We've noticed that a significant point of value of Your Story is simply in the questions we've asked. Returning to Koda's reflection that we shared in the introduction:

> Phew! Well, that took a little effort, but I'm glad I did it. The survey asked me questions I've never thought about, and it helped me to see my faith journey in a completely different light. Thanks!

Koda (19f)

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[9] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers* (New York, NY: OUP, 2005).

Connected with the value of a well-put question is the recognition that young people are asking for the kind of discipleship that is ready to accompany them through a complex journey of faith.

If we listen to these young people, we'll hear their plea for adults to join them with a posture of companioning, listening, and clarifying, rather than one of telling, directing, or confronting.

Our primary aim in this project was to listen well. The church has spent a lot of time talking about young people and talking to young people. In Your Story, we wanted to shift the balance and give time to hearing from young people.

But like any good conversation, we listen carefully so that we can understand, and then respond with care—thoughtfully, faithfully, and with the best interests of the young person at heart.

Young people, created in the image of God, have voices that must be heard.

Do you remember the story of Rhoda, the servant girl in Acts 12?

Peter has been arrested and imprisoned, and the church has gathered to pray. Peter is miraculously released and when he knocks at the door, the servant girl Rhoda comes to open it. The passage reads: 'When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"'

When the adult members of the church insist that there's no way that Peter could have escaped from Herod, Rhoda insists back, and is vindicated. Rhoda was right!

Our young people have stories of faith that too often are dismissed without giving due consideration to what they're saying.

We honour young people by hearing their stories, and as we do so, we honour the God who made them and who calls them to himself.

YOUR STORY

What experiences and practices do Australian young people associate with faith, spirituality, and religion? How do they understand God? What shapes their spiritual journey?

The Your Story research project delves into how young Australians have come to the faith they hold today, exploring both the internal and external factors that have influenced their beliefs over time.

Drawing insights from 439 young people across Australia, this report captures the experiences that define their faith journeys—childhood memories, early adolescence encounters, and their current expressions of faith.

This is their story.

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