

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

'Feel-Good' News



What young people really think
about Christian beliefs.



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Christian beliefs.

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Forward

Young people are missing from the church and missed.

We cherish the children and young people we have, but we are painfully aware that many, if not most, young people are growing up with few encounters with Christian faith.

Jesus' challenge to his disciples in Matthew 16 was to read the signs of the times. To listen, to learn and better understand. And to understand in order to discern the missional environment.

In response to that challenge, The Youthscape Centre for Research, and Scripture Union, have partnered to listen to how young people across the UK respond to the Christian message in the

largest and most comprehensive work done in this field in this century.

What young people told us was extraordinary and enlightening. There is much to learn from them.

Our gratitude therefore goes not only to the brilliant research team who have carried out this work, but to the young people who participated with such honesty and insight.

In that context we present this research to those working with young people and the wider church. Our desire is that it would lead to debate and prayer, but ultimately to becoming better as a church at sharing our faith with this world.

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Contents

Part 1

Introduction 9

Five big stories in the data 10

Summary of findings 15

Part 2

The research 22

Five themes about God and faith 29

Who completed the survey? 31

Introducing our six groups 32

Part 3

Reactions to the five themes 41

Highlighting words 46

Most highlighted words 49

Love 50

Hope 58

Life 67

Community 76

Justice 85

Part 4

Which words/phrases were most attractive to each group? 95

How did they feel about Christianity by the end? 99

What did they overlook, and what might that tell us? 103

Part 5

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel? 106

The fork in the road 114

How we will respond 116

Appendices 119

Part 1

Introduction

Most people who come to faith do so in childhood or adolescence, and yet much of the Church has lost confidence when it comes to sharing the gospel with young people. So we at Scripture Union and Youthscape are passionate about helping young people encounter Jesus, and equipping the Church to help facilitate these encounters.

This report shares the findings of a survey of 1000 teenagers across the UK, capturing their responses to five gospel-based statements we wrote in an attempt to identify what might sound and feel like ‘good news’ to this generation. We hope this will help us all understand more about young people’s worldviews and inform our conversations with them about God and faith.

But, this is not an attempt to ‘focus group’ the gospel. The good news, which has been passed through the generations is not something that can be improved upon by marketing gurus. If it were, Jesus would never have entrusted this most precious message to such an apparently unreliable and unqualified group of people, most of whom were pretty young themselves.

And neither are we presuming to tell you how you ‘should’ share Jesus’ offer of life with young people. We know that being a witness of God’s work is dynamic, flowing out of your own relationship with Jesus, and in response to walking alongside young people who you know and love.

Instead, what we are offering here is the result of a listening exercise, and some analysis that we hope sharpens your vision. It’s very likely that what you read will not be wildly surprising, especially if you work with young people yourself. But sometimes our perception is a little fuzzy, and research can help us see clearly what it is we’ve been noticing out of the corner of our eye the whole time.

We are convinced that the gospel still has the power to satisfy the spiritually hungry, console the hurting and bring freedom to those who live in fear. In that sense it has always been and always will be ‘feel-good’ news. But we also know that it has the power to disturb us, drawing us into uncharted territory where a loving but often

unpredictable God is at work. Attempts to make God in our image and bend the Christian story to our own will or perspective limit our ability to encounter Him. And so we know the fullness of the gospel will always challenge us and the young people we support, and that we are offering young people the opportunity to go on an adventure in which life will not always ‘feel good’.

Read on, to find out whether young people heard any good news in what we shared with them, and what that might mean for ministry among teenagers in the UK.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

Five big stories in the data¹

1

We're dealing
with warm
apathy

1. There are other themes and stories in the data, so we're not claiming these are the only or the most important ones for you to pay attention to. But these are some we find particularly interesting.

Most young people were not very interested in our ideas about God and life, and not very curious about finding out more. While a small group of young people were clearly negative about the idea of God, a much larger group seemed either disinterested or benignly positive – displaying a kind of warm apathy. Where once our challenge was overcoming negative views of God and Christianity, we are now more likely to be engaging with a sense of disinterested positivity – ‘you do you’.

Five big stories in the data¹

2. Barna, Open Generation (2021) and Youth for Christ, The Z-A of Faith and Spirituality (2020)

2

The idea of
a loving God
appears to
have been
rehabilitated

Lots of young people in our survey accepted the idea that God was loving. They seemed most positive about God being a loving force 'out there', and this fits with other research that suggests they see God more positively than negatively.² Perhaps God has been culturally rehabilitated, to some degree, in the public imagination?

Five big stories in the data¹

3

An incarnate,
self-sacrificing,
resurrected,
and indwelling
God? Not so
much

However, the more specific the story gets, the more divisive, confusing, and interesting it gets. Many young people are ok with the idea of a loving God who created us and doesn't give up on us when we make mistakes. But for most, it doesn't follow that we need saving, that God would become human, or that death and resurrection are necessary for this. And the idea of God wanting a relationship with us, to transform us or be close to us is off-putting for some young people.

Five big stories in the data¹

4

There's more
desire for love
than for grace,
accountability
or change

Despite their reputation for judgement, accountability and cancelling, the young people in this survey were not particularly interested in personal or social accountability as being good news. They were more interested in just being loved. Perhaps the cultural mantras of accepting yourself and others, freedom to be who you are, and of uncovering an authentic self may underpin their lower interest in the need for growth, grace and transformation of the self.

Five big stories in the data¹

5

A powerful
God sounds
better than
a vulnerable
God

For a generation often identified with concerns about misuse of power, they seem surprisingly comfortable with the idea of a powerful God, and with powerful love. And they are not particularly drawn to the idea of a God who suffered and understands vulnerability. Perhaps they are simply expressing our collective need for a love that truly is powerful and is 'up to' the task of taking on the forces, within and beyond us, that enslave and burden.

Summary of findings

The research

- This report is a collaboration between Scripture Union and Youthscape and is part of a wider research project from the Youthscape Centre for Research, called 'Translating God'.
- A representative sample of 1000 12–17-year-olds from across the UK completed the online survey, and the data was analysed according to young people's 'faith orientation'.
- Six groups were identified within the overall sample including practising Christians (19.8%), nominal Christians (21.8%), God-negative 'nones' (17.8%), God-positive 'nones' (15.7%), Higher power-positive 'nones' (6.5%), and those practising another major religion (10.8%). For a full description of these groups, see **pages 34–39**.
- Five theological statements were written, that aimed to express something of the 'good news' of the gospel on the themes of love, life, community, hope and justice – drawing on findings from previous phases of the wider project. Young people completing the survey were asked to score, highlight, and comment on each of these five themes.

Scoring the five themes

- No theme stood out as being more strongly attractive to young people, but young people gave 'God and love' the highest scores, and 'God and justice' the lowest. In other words, general ideas about God being loving were most attractive, while specific ideas about this love as displayed through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection were least attractive.
- The more likely a young person was to identify with, and practise, a religion, the more likely they were to be positive about each of the ideas. Those who didn't practise a religion felt only mildly, or not at all, interested to find out more after reading these themes.
- Those who had no religion but were open to the idea of God (God – positive 'nones') found these ideas more attractive than nominal Christians.

Highlighting words

- When asked to highlight what they found more/less attractive, many young people displayed a kind of 'warm apathy' toward these ideas about Christianity.
- Almost half of those surveyed said they didn't find anything attractive in our five themes. But even more (around three quarters) said they didn't find anything unattractive either. Where they did choose to engage, young people were more likely to highlight words they found more attractive, than words they found less attractive.
- They also identified more words they found attractive in our statements about love, than in any other idea, and fewest in those about justice.

Summary of findings

Top 10 words young people highlighted as attractive

- The top ten words young people found most attractive overall were embedded in the following sentences.
 - God created and **loves** the whole world
 - You can feel **peace** in an anxious world
 - God’s love is **powerful** and can live within us, to help us experience a full and **amazing life**.
 - You can **always feel loved**
 - We’re moving toward a time when there will be **no** tears and no more **suffering**
- There was some commonality in the top 20 words highlighted by each of our six faith orientation groups (e.g. ‘amazing life’) but other words and phrases also reflected their distinct beliefs about God and the world.
- The more that young people believed in, or were open to God, the more they viewed God as a source of love, power and hope for the whole world.

Love

- The phrase ‘always feel loved’ was one of the most attractive, to all of our six groups. This reflected some young people’s real experience, while for others it was an aspiration.
- A sizeable minority were attracted to the idea of God loving the whole world – particularly but not exclusively those who said they practised a religion. And across all groups, young people were more drawn to the idea of God loving nature, than God loving people.
- In their comments, to love meant giving people the freedom to be themselves, not judging them, and accepting others no matter who they are, (though not necessarily no matter what they do).

Hope

- Young people were drawn to the idea of having hope for the future, and things becoming ‘better’. God-positive ‘nones’ were almost as likely to highlight the phrase ‘no more suffering’ as those practising a faith. Comments focused on the need for such a hope in the face of human grief and pain, though some found the idea of this future unrealistic.
- The phrase ‘God is powerful’ was highlighted positively, particularly but not exclusively among those who said they practised a religion.
- Some young people told us they felt good about themselves reading that their life has significance and purpose, though others said they didn’t need God to have hope, or to work with others toward a better world.

Summary of findings

Life

- Young people found the idea of having 'an amazing life' most attractive in this theme. They were more likely to highlight the phrase 'peace in an anxious world' positively, than 'joy when things are hard'.
- The words 'powerful' and 'love' were most popular across all groups, with many young people apparently quite comfortable with the idea of God being the source of this powerful love as well.
- While there was some acceptance of God being loving and powerful, some young people found the idea of God wanting to be close to them or live within them a bit 'creepy'.
- There was some agreement that mistakes are part of life and can even be used by God, but there was less interest in growing or changing.

Community

- Young people found attractive the idea of belonging to a group that is 'working together to make the world a better place', mirroring how they responded to the 'hope' theme.
- We had used the word 'family' to describe this community (or church) so in their comments young people affirmed the importance of their own families, and what it means to them, to feel that belonging.
- There were divided views on the idea of a 'story' that has been passed down through generations and is still being lived today. Some were intrigued and wanted to know what their part was in this story, while others interpreted this to mean the ideas were untrue.

Justice

- Young people in our survey tended to ignore ideas about Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection, to focus on the more general theme of God's love being powerful and generous, and God never giving up on us. However, they did highlight negatively the phrase 'they killed him' and their comments suggested they found this 'violent' and 'nasty'.
- There were also a surprisingly high number of comments (and not just from practising Christians) that used specifically the Christian language of 'salvation', 'rescue', 'repentance' and 'sacrifice' when reflecting on this theme.
- Few young people positively highlighted ideas around us being part of the problem, God holding people accountable, and God knowing what we go through.

Summary of findings

How did they feel about Christianity post-survey?

- Surprisingly, a third (32%) of the practising Christians were 'definitely' surprised to read that these ideas were Christian beliefs and almost two-thirds (65%) said they were more positive about their faith after reading these ideas.
- Nearly a quarter of God-positive 'nones' (24%) and a fifth (20%) of nominal Christians, felt more positive about Christianity after the survey.
- God-negative 'nones' and Higher Power + Nones were least surprised. Just over three-quarters of young people in both groups felt the same about Christianity post-survey and 11-12% felt more negative.

Some found these ideas unjust or simply confusing

- Young people were more likely to highlight words and phrases they found more attractive, than words they found less attractive. Nevertheless, when commenting on what they didn't like in these ideas, there were some familiar objections.
- This included a belief that it just isn't credible or realistic to believe in God and that these ideas are 'fairy tales'.
- Some young people consistently asserted that God could not be loving or just if he allowed suffering and forgives people who do awful things.
- For others, these ideas were confusing. God wanting to be close sounded 'creepy', God needing my help sounds a bit 'cultish', and why did God become a man rather than a woman?

What young people overlooked tells us something too

- As a whole group, young people in our survey tended to overlook some words and phrases. This included elements of the gospel relating to Jesus' life, death and resurrection (including his vulnerability), references to a 'story', the idea of God wanting to be close, and references to failure, accountability and personal change.
- This suggests nuances in their worldview that are worth paying attention to. For example:
 - They prefer abstract ideas about God's love to the concrete, historical expression of it, some of whom find it confusing and not relatable.
 - They like the idea of God being loving and powerful more than God being incarnate, and therefore knowing our vulnerability and suffering.
 - They want to feel loved, but are sometimes confused or concerned that God wants to be close to them.

Summary of findings

- They like the idea of having hope for the future but are less enthusiastic about there being no easy answers.
- They seem positive about feeling loved and their lives having significance but are less interested in thinking about personal change.
- They were less interested in thinking about their own weaknesses or failures, as well in God holding people accountable for their actions.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

The 'who'

- Analysing the data by faith orientation shows that the six groups might need quite different kinds of support or work, in their relationship to Christianity.
- For the 1 in 5 young people who say they are practising Christians, this could look like teaching and inviting them to be part of a Christian community. While for God-positive 'nones', there is scope to explore how their feelings about God are distinct from their feelings about church and Christianity.
- See **pages 106–107** for more reflections by group.

The 'how'

- The stories we tell, the relationships we create and the practices we do together all provide a vehicle for communicating the gospel.
- This involves paying attention to where God might already be present and at work in young people's lives, as well as helping them look beyond this, to a distinctly Christian way of seeing and living in the world.
- This could look like young people being around Christian communities that both speak their language and challenge their worldview, inviting them to participate in relationships and practices that are counter-cultural, and carry the good news about God's reconciling work in the world.

Summary of findings

The 'what'

When we want to communicate the good news about Jesus, what do we say and how do we say it? This survey has unveiled young people's reactions to five ideas about God, that we think capture some of the good news available to them. Their responses suggest we might want to consider some of the following.

Love: Help them understand what unconditional love means, and broaden their ideas about what love looks like in practice to include less familiar things like sacrificial service and forgiveness.

Hope: Get concrete when it comes to hope, and talk about the Christian vision of a future where true justice and healing are possible. Recognise the need for nuance in your language of hope, thinking about the relationship between suffering, slow change and hope.

Life: Help young people see the distinctly Christian character of words like 'life' and 'peace' – what is an 'amazing life' as a Christian, and how is it different to the amazing life being offered

by those they follow online? This could include having to make the case for our need to change (even 'die') as individuals in language that makes sense to them.

Community: Some young people liked the idea of 'sharing the load' because God is at work in the world and through communities working to make things better. How can we tell stories about this in a way that helps them experience less pressure, and more belonging?

Justice: We need to go slow when it comes to talking about the cross. We can't assume young people accept the idea of sin, accountability or the need for personal transformation. And although they are open to the idea of a 'powerful', 'never-giving-up' love, they need help to join the dots and understand why that love would come close to them.

Part 2

The research

Acts 17:22-23; 32

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you...' When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject.'

Translating God. Again.

In every generation, culture and sub-culture, there is a translation task to be done.

In Acts 17, we see the apostle Paul reading his Athenian audience. He uses their poetry, and his knowledge of their spiritual practices, to start a conversation linking their 'grave to an unknown God' with the God he knows. Just as Paul looked for some bridge to build between the Athenians' experience and the gospel of Jesus Christ, so we find ourselves part of the great translation task with young people today.

First there is the listening, the watching, the getting to know those we are alongside. How do we as adults in the Church pay attention to the lives of young people? The wonder of their worlds and the problems facing them. The language they use and the lenses they look through.

And when we are beginning to grasp how the world might look through their eyes, where do we start in introducing them to this faith, that we believe holds transformative possibilities and a radical, life-changing love?

The Translating God research project is an attempt to wrestle with this challenge – to help those in the church to see and understand the worlds teenagers inhabit, and reflect on how to translate the good news to this generation.

The research

The need

With each generation becoming more secular in its outlook, the Church can no longer rely on young people accessing some residual memory of the Christian faith when it comes to communicating its stories and sharing its practice.

In 2021 the percentage of parents identifying their children as Christian in the Census was 36.9%, a drop from 53.7% in 2011. Asking young people directly gives an even starker picture, with 45% of 10–15-year-olds identifying as Christian in 2010, and only 27% doing so in 2021. The percentage of those who have a more active or concrete faith is even smaller, with 12% of 13–17-year-olds in the UK calling themselves Christians and reporting that they have made a personal commitment to follow Jesus Christ.³

There is no regularly published data on the number of children and young people attending churches, but a report published in 2020 found that in 2011 the average weekly attendance of 0–16 year olds at a Church of England service (excluding school services) was 207,000. In 2021 it had reduced by almost two thirds to 75,000.⁴

The number of young people describing themselves as Christian may be falling, but beliefs, openness and practice are more complex and research suggests there are still plenty of young people who are open to faith and spirituality. Half (51%) of 11–18-year-olds in a Youth for Christ survey in January 2020 said they believed in a form of supernatural being or power greater than themselves, and of these, 63% said that being/power was God. Just under a third (31%) said they prayed, and of these 49% said they prayed at least once a day.

Many of these young people struggled to believe in God because of the suffering, death and illness they saw in the world, and yet when asked which words might describe God's character the top five were: powerful, kind, loving, caring and good. They were less positive about church. While 62% said they'd had contact with a church, only 8% viewed this contact positively. Contact was mostly through school visits and formal events, which were not seen as very engaging.⁵

More recently, Barna's 'Open Generation' research found that teenagers in the UK were more likely to hold positive beliefs about Jesus than negative ones, including that 'he offers hope to people' (34%) and 'he cares about people' (34%).

On the one hand, Christianity seems to be dying out among young people – with fewer and fewer calling themselves Christian or being part of a church. But on the other hand many remain open or even warm to God, Jesus and prayer.

How do we bridge this gap? How can we help young people understand the Christian faith more fully, have the chance to respond to it and find churches they want to be part of?

3. Open Generation, (2021) Barna

4. <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/2021-statistics-for-mission.pdf>

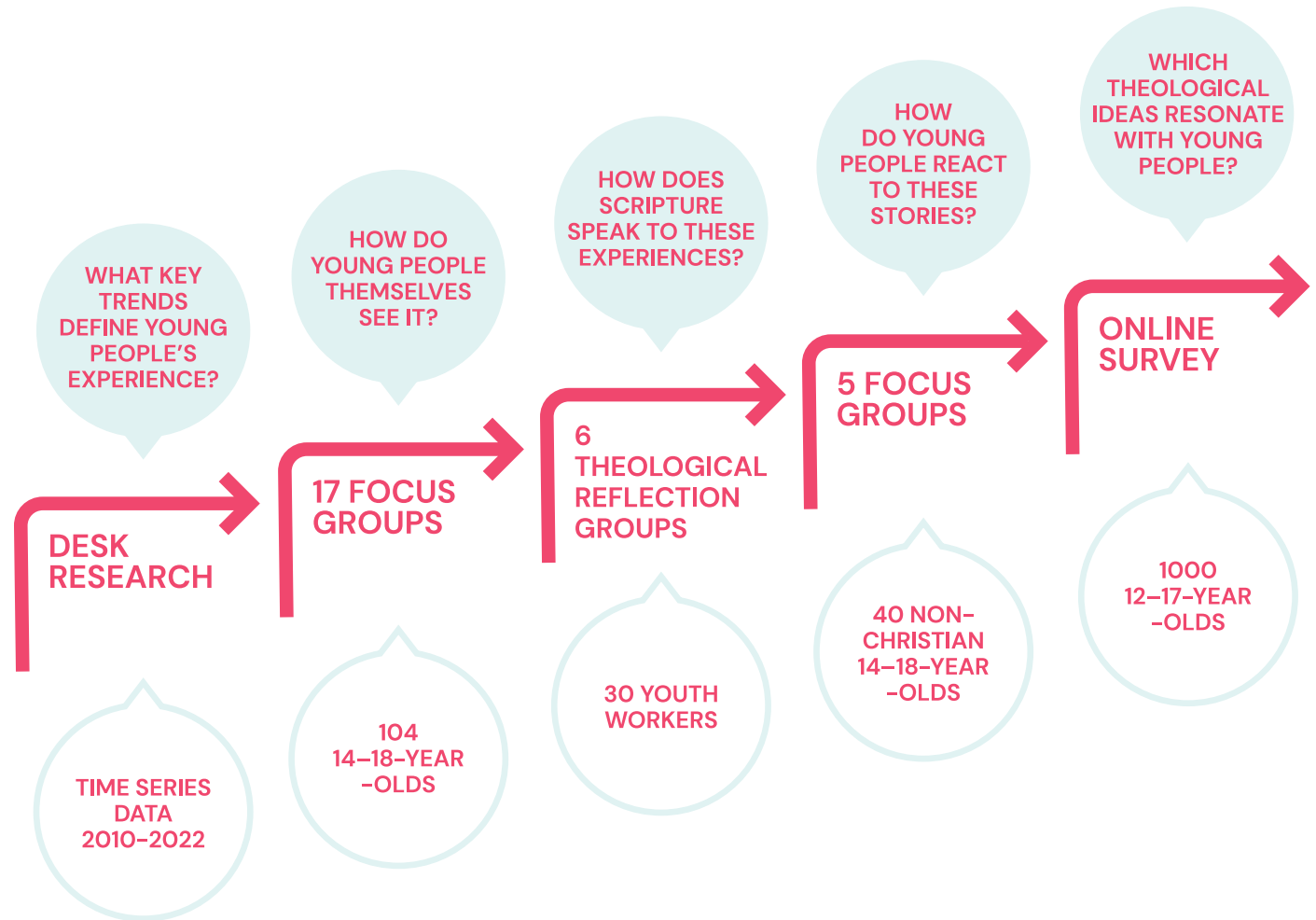
5. The Z-A of faith and spirituality (2020) Youth for Christ

The research

The research project

This survey is the final stage of a wider research project, led by the Youthscape Centre for Research, called 'Translating God'. Between 2020 and 2023, we collected a range of data, to explore with young people and youth workers what kinds of language and stories can help bridge the gap between young people and the gospel, so that we can more confidently help them encounter Jesus.

The project had five phases, each building on the last, to become an interpreted conversation between culture, scripture, young people and youth workers. Each phase had a guiding question and a distinct methodology.



The research

What are the trends that capture how life has changed for young people since 2010?

We reviewed time-series data-sets between 2010 and 2022, looking for key trends in relation to young people's well-being, identities, worldview, behaviour, lifestyle, technology use, relationships, education and hopes for the future.

How do young people themselves see it?

We then ran 17 focus groups across different locations in the UK, with 104 young people aged 14–18.⁶ We asked them to tell us in their own words what life is like, for them and their friends, and captured their reactions to our findings from phase one. Six key themes were drawn from the focus groups' transcripts: pressure, judgement, anxiety, fear of the future, labelling and persecution.

How does scripture speak to these experiences?

Thirty youth workers spent a week online, in one of six groups, doing some theological reflection with key quotes and themes from the young people's focus groups. They identified a range of stories and scriptures that they felt would be 'good news' in response to young people's experiences.

How do young people react to these stories?

Forty non-Christian young people aged 14–18 then looked at five stories from scripture.⁷ Three of these groups were in person (two in a school and one in a drop-in) and two were online over the course of a week. The young people read the stories and discussed their meaning together.

Which theological ideas resonate with young people?

Drawing on all the research conducted in phases 1–4, we designed an online survey which was completed by 1000 12–17 year olds, representative by age, gender and ethnicity. This report shares the findings of this final phase of the project, and was undertaken as a partnership between Scripture Union and Youthscape.

6. The groups took place in all four nations, and eight of the nine regions in England. Seven were done online and the rest in person.

7. These were Jonah 1–4, Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well – John 4:4–30, Jesus calling Peter and Peter's betrayal and restoration – Luke 5:1–11, Luke 22: 32–34, Luke 22:54–62, Jesus meeting Zacchaeus – Luke 19:1–10, and the paralysed man who was lowered through the roof – Luke 5:17–26



'I want to believe that
the world will be a
better place with no
more suffering.'

The research

Designing the survey

Writing statements that might feel like 'good news'

We wrote 41 statements, drawing on the youth workers' theological reflection and our own analysis of phases one and two of the research. Each statement expressed a truth or experience that was a response to what we had learned about young people's lives to that point e.g. 'You can rest in God's love, stop and be still – you don't need to prove anything'.

Theological mapping

We then mapped these statements against the following theological themes: trinity, creation, sin, incarnation, Jesus' divinity, life, death and resurrection, salvation, holy spirit/pneumatology, the church and eschatology to see what aspects of Christian theology were missing.

Narrowing down

To keep young people engaged in an online survey it was important they wouldn't be overwhelmed by too much reading. So, we asked a team of ten youth workers to identify the statements they felt young people were most likely to hear as 'good news' and narrowed our statements down to about 20, ensuring that they covered core areas from the research to date.

Organizing

These statements were then organized into five thematic groups (love, community, hope, life and justice) and edited for clarity and flow.

Piloting

Finally, we piloted the statements with six young people aged 12–16, to check they understood the language and could follow what we were asking them to do.

The research

Limitations of the research

Some of the limitations of this exercise are the brevity of the survey, and that we don't know exactly how young people approached the task of highlighting words.

It's likely that some will have read words in their context and highlighted them based on their meaning in that sentence, while others will have quickly scanned the statements and just looked for words with a generally positive or negative meaning.⁸ Our respondents were aged 12–18, a significant age range that will include a variety of developmental capacities for reading, information processing, reflecting and communicating.

While this limits what we can learn, it also reflects some of the conditions in which we communicate with young people within youth work. We may not always have long to capture their attention, so it is still useful to understand what they pay attention to, and why – even in a short presentation.

Finally, we chose to analyze the data by faith orientation, so there are likely to be other patterns within the data that are not presented here (e.g., broken down by gender, age, or ethnicity). When reviewing the data according

to all these breakdowns it was clear that faith orientation revealed the most consistent and meaningful differences within the sample. However, further statistical analysis could well reveal additional important findings.

A word about the gospel, culture and translation

The process described above reveals a dialogue in the research methodology, between empirical research about young people's concerns and culture, youth worker's reflections from their experience of ministry, and formal theological categories and constructs that belong to the Christian gospel. This might raise questions about the relative ordering of 'youth culture' and the gospel. Are we wanting to understand young people's worldview, so we can squeeze Christianity into its mould, in an attempt to be 'relevant?'

No – God's work in creation has always been carried in, and interpreted within, culture, and language is fundamental to this embodiment. As we see so clearly at Pentecost, the Spirit empowers the Church to speak to people in a

language that makes sense to them, for the sake of the gospel. Every time stories or concepts about God are translated in this way, the gospel is being contextualised. But this is not a simple correlation between languages, because words carry ideas that are unique to each culture. As a result, the gospel will often question the worldview that shapes a particular language – including that of young people.

'True contextualization accords the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and speak within each culture, in its own speech and symbol, the word which is both No and Yes, both judgement and grace.'

Newbiggin 1989:152

Our five statements are a limited attempt at translation, and in exploring young people's reactions and the language they use, we are ultimately looking for 'the word which is both No and Yes'. Our hope is that this research helps you think more about where young people's worldview has resonance with the gospel, and where the gospel challenges it.

8. Young people spent an average of about 10.5 seconds highlighting words. They had already read the statements once, so were not reading them for the first time.

Five themes about God and faith

The goal of this research was to understand how young people hear and respond to Christian beliefs, so that we can better communicate the hope and love of God. We developed the following five statements, which we presented to young people in the survey in a random order each time, before asking for their reactions. The titles (e.g. 'God & love') were not used in the survey but are included here to help organize the data.

God & love

The idea

God created and loves the whole world, including nature and all people – loving them no matter who they are, what they think or how they behave.

What this means for you

You can always feel loved just as you are. We all make mistakes, but you don't have to live up to other people's expectations to be accepted. You also try to love other people in the same way, not judging them.

God & life

The idea

God's love is powerful and can live within us, to help us experience a full and amazing life.

What this means for you

You can feel peace in an anxious world, and joy even when things are hard. Rather than just love you from afar, God wants to be close, to encourage you and help you every day to grow and change. God even loves using our mistakes and failures to bring about positive things.

God & hope

The idea

God is powerful and working to make things better. We're moving toward a time when there will be no tears and no more suffering – when everything will feel right.

What this means for you

There is hope for your future and the future of the world but there are no quick fixes or easy answers, and you are part of the change. Your life is significant, you have a purpose – to help God make this world a more loving, whole, and beautiful place.

Five themes about God and faith

God & community

The idea

There is a story that has been passed down through generations, about God and the world. It makes sense of our lives and why we're here. The story is still being lived today.

What this means for you

You can be part of that story, belong to a family that is not perfect but are working together to make the world a better place. You know you can't do it alone, and it's not all down to you to fix things.

God & justice

The idea

God became a man to be with us. But his love was so generous and powerful some people were afraid of it, and they killed him. He came back to life and showed us that love wins in the end.

What this means for you

God suffered, so knows what we go through. God cares when people cause harm or abuse their power and will hold them responsible. But it is love that really changes people. So even when we're part of the problem, God stays close and doesn't give up on us.

Please read before continuing...

These statements are not an attempt to define the gospel, nor are they a comprehensive list of orthodox Christian theology. Instead, they are an answer to the question 'Where might we start?' and 'How can we express something of the Christian faith in a way that might resonate with young people?'

The ideas, and the way we have organised them, address specific issues emerging from the earlier phases of the Translating God research project, including anxiety, fear of the future, judgement, pressure and injustice/persecution. This is why we have titled them in ways that may not seem immediately obvious. For example, 'God and justice' responds to young people's concern about persecution, bullying, judgement and discrimination by focusing on how Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection relate to our human experiences of sin, suffering and our need for justice.

Our statements don't include theological language that young people wouldn't necessarily understand. So, you won't find words like grace, holy spirit, resurrection or redemption – though the concepts themselves are there. It will also be obvious that we have leaned toward some interpretations of theological concepts, and left out others, and that some aspects of Christian theology are excluded entirely, like heaven and hell.⁹

Sometimes the language belongs to young people themselves ('it's not all down to you to fix things') and other times we have used our own ('story' for scripture, and 'family' for church). Finally, there are times we use language close to or lifted from scripture, e.g. there will be a time when there will be 'no tears and no more suffering' inspired by Revelation 21.4.¹⁰

Finally, we moved from 'the idea' to 'what this means for you' to help young people feel a greater personal connection to what might otherwise seem a bit abstract.

9. Since designing the research the World Values Survey has revealed that 'Gen Z' are the age group most likely to believe in hell. So we may have got this one completely wrong.

10. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

Who completed the survey?

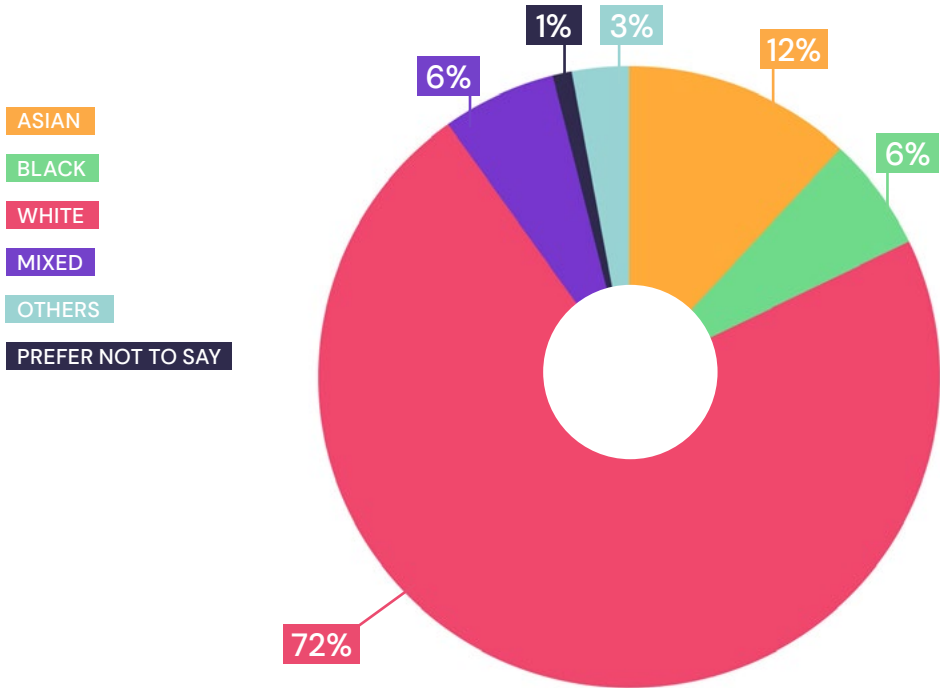
The research was completed by 1000 12–17-year-olds, and was representative by age, gender and ethnicity.¹¹

11. 96% consented to share their religion and ethnicity. Our sample includes 72% White young people, which reflects ethnicity data for the UK as far as it is available. It was not possible to achieve an accurate breakdown of young people of colour, and so Asian young people are over-represented here.

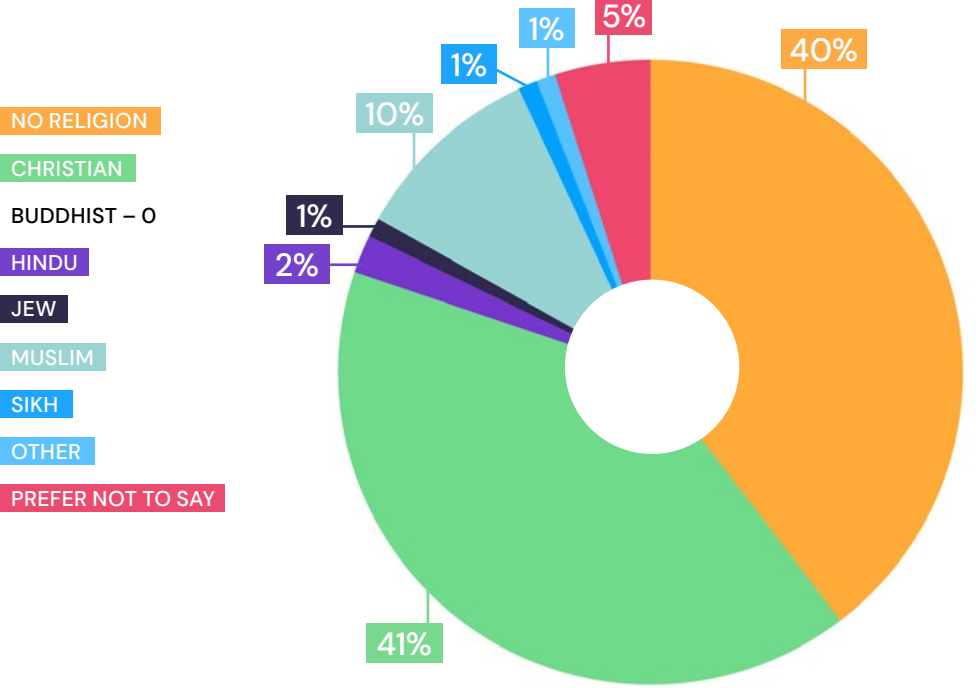
12. Parents identified the gender of their child before passing the survey on to them. This may explain the relatively low number of young people identified as non-binary in this survey

Male	51.2%	Girls 12-14	25.1%
Female	48.7%	Boys 12-14	26.7%
Non-binary ¹²	0.1%	Girls 15-17	23.6%
		Boys 15-17	24.5%

Ethnicity



Religion



Introducing our six groups

The survey results have been analysed and presented according to the young people's **faith orientation**.

What do we mean by faith orientation?

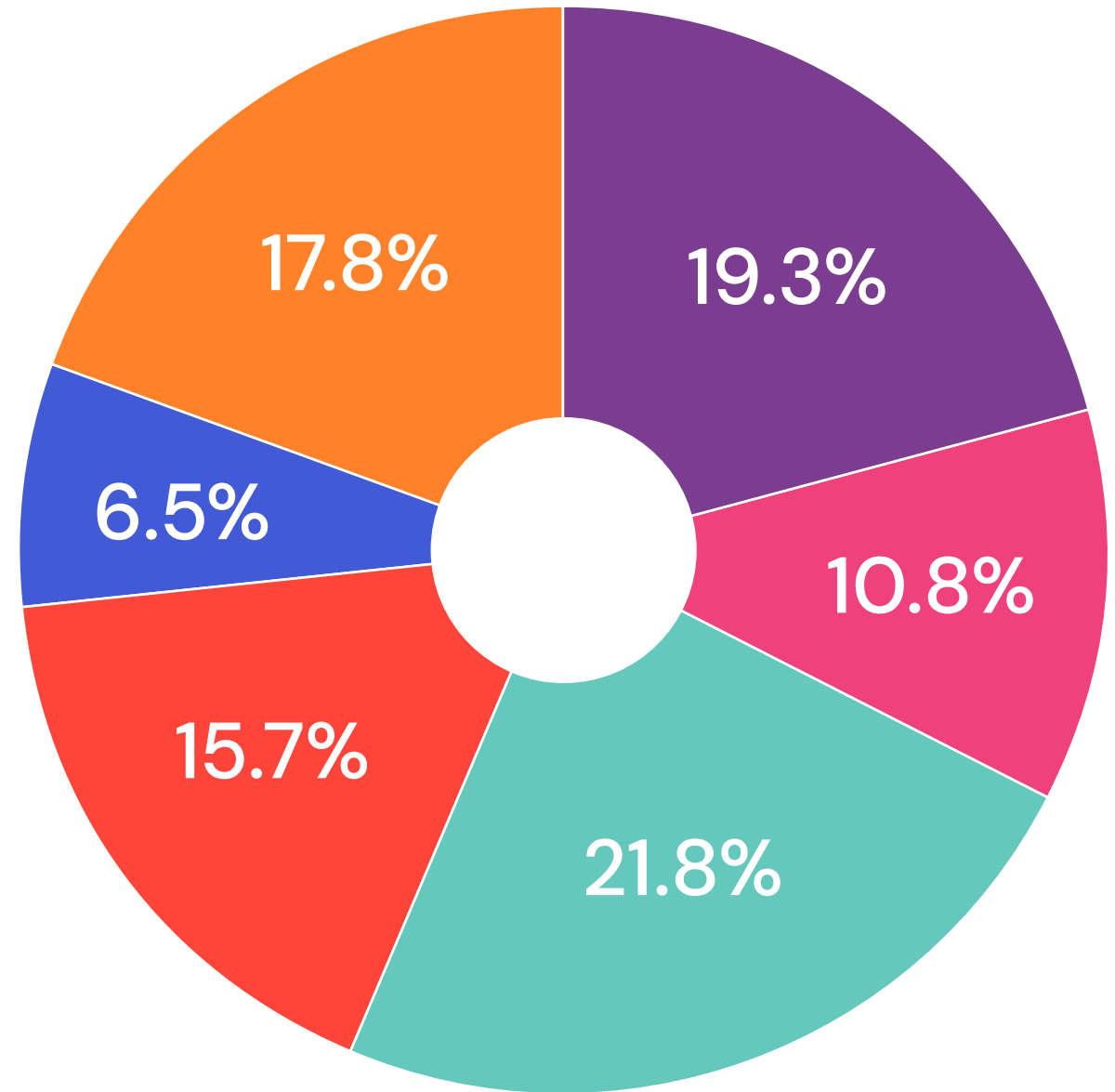
We collected four pieces of information about religion and spirituality.

- 1 Religious identity**
Do you identify with any particular religion?
- 2 Practice of religion**
If so, how seriously do you practise that religion?
- 3 Belief in God**
Do you believe there is a God/gods?
- 4 Belief in a Higher Power**
Do you believe there is a higher power or cosmic force?

From this information we constructed six key groups of young people. For a detailed explanation of these groups, see appendices.¹³

13. Anyone who was not part of one of these categories was counted as 'Other', including those who chose 'Other religion' or 'prefer not to say'. There were 81, which is 8.1% of the sample. When we present data broken down by faith group, these young people are excluded from the analysis.

Introducing our six groups



Six groups

- Practising Christians
- Nominal Christians
- Higher Power + None
- Practising other religion
- God + None
- God - None

Introducing our six groups

Practising Christians (19.3%)¹⁴

Identify as Christian +
believe there's a God/gods
+ practise faith

- Younger boys were over-represented in this group: 61% of practising Christians were male and they were more likely to be 12–14 (34%) than 15–17 (26%).
- Practising Christians were more likely to be black (19%) or of mixed heritage (11%) than other groups.
- They were significantly more likely to live in London (30%).

'God is the power for me'

'This is truth!'

14. The question said, 'By practise we mean things like prayer, reading religious books/texts, attending services, worship, meditation.'

Introducing our six groups

Practising other major religion (10.8%)¹⁵



Identify as either Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh + believe there is a God/gods + practise faith

- Younger girls were slightly over-represented: 31% of this group were 12–14-year-old girls.
- 79% of this group were Muslim, 11% Hindu, and the other 10% were Sikh, Jewish or Buddhist.
- 73% were Asian, and 70% of them were either Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi.
- These young people were much more likely to live in London than other groups (39%).

'Love how he makes life better for all'

'We need a powerful being'

15. The question said, 'By practise we mean things like prayer, reading religious books/texts, attending services, worship, meditation.'

Introducing our six groups

Nominal Christians (21.8%)

Identify as Christian +
believe in God/gods + don't
practise faith

- Young people in this group were slightly more likely to be male (53%).
- White young people were over-represented in this group (90%).
- They were also slightly more likely to live in the North-west than in other regions (16%).

*'Love wins, God
doesn't give up'*

*'It's good there is a
force that can help
people put things
right and make
everything better!'*

Introducing our six groups

God + None (15.7%)



No religion + believe there is a God/gods or not sure but would like to think so

- Young people in this group were slightly more likely to be older teenage girls: 29% were females aged 15–17.
- 86% were white.
- They were slightly more likely to live in the South-east (17%) or Yorkshire (16%) than other regions.

‘With everything going on in the world, it’s nice to think there is hope’

‘God will find good in all of us’

Introducing our six groups

Higher power + None (6.5%)

No religion + don't believe in, or not bothered about, God/gods + believe there is a higher power or not sure but would like to think so

- Girls were over-represented in this group (58%) and were also more likely to be older – 35% of this group were 15–17-year-old girls.
- They were more likely to be white (89%).

'I want to have peace and joy and for everyone to have that too'

'The world needs more love and less anger'

Introducing our six groups

God – None (17.8%)

No religion + don't believe in, or not bothered about, God/gods + don't believe in, or not bothered about a higher power

- 28% of this group were older boys aged 15–17.
- They were significantly more likely to be white (96%).
- Young people in this group were also more likely to live in the South-east (17%).

'God is a story'

'It would be amazing to think there would be no more suffering'

Part 3

Reactions to the five themes

General ideas about God being loving were **most attractive**, while specific ideas about this love as displayed through Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection were **least attractive**.

In most cases no idea stood out as being more strongly attractive to young people, but young people gave love the highest scores and justice the lowest.

Those who didn't practise a religion felt mildly, or not at all, interested to find out more after reading these themes.

Reactions to the five themes

Everyone completing the survey was shown all five themes in a random order and asked two questions.

1. How attractive does this sound to you?
2. How much does it make you want to find out more?

Young people were responding to both parts of each theme: the idea itself and 'what this means for you'. They could score a theme from - 5 (not at all attractive) to + 5 (very attractive).

When looking at all 1000 young people together, it seemed as if all five themes fell flat and received similarly low scores. The most attractive theme, 'God and love' only achieved an average score of 1.5 out of 5 and the least attractive theme 'God and justice' had an average score of 0.4.

But a different story emerged when we divided the young people according to their faith orientation. You may want to remind yourselves of the content of the themes by returning to **pages 29–30**.

Faith orientation

First, the more likely a young person was to identify with, and practise, a religion, the more likely they were to be positive about each of these themes. There was a significant difference between the mean scores given by those practising Christianity or another religion, and those given by young people who were of no religion and did not believe in God. Curiously, those who said they had no religion but were open to the idea of God (God + Nones) found these ideas more attractive than nominal Christians.

Love over justice

Second, charts 1 and 2 reveal a similar pattern. In most cases no idea stood out as being more strongly attractive to young people. However, regardless of their faith orientation, young people gave highest scores to our ideas about love, and lowest scores to our ideas about justice, suggesting that in this context young people prefer more general ideas about God's love than specific references to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and what this means for our experiences of injustice and suffering.

The profile of those practising other faiths was a little more distinct, where hope scored most highly and justice significantly lower. Almost 80% of this group were Muslim, and therefore it makes sense that our account of Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection would score very low.

Low curiosity

It appears that, overall, reading these statements did not leave young people wanting to find out more. The mean scores for curiosity trail just behind the mean scores for attractiveness. However attractive they found a theme they were even less likely to want to explore it further – by around half a point in most cases.

The only exception were the practising Christians, who gave a higher score for wanting to find out more about our justice theme, and those practising other religions who gave a higher score for wanting to find out more about our theme about God and hope. Where young people are already 'pro-God' in some way, they were more interested in ideas about faith, than the rest of their peers.

Reactions to the five themes

No questions asked

In 2018 the Youthscape Centre for Research published 'No Questions Asked'. The young people we spoke to in that qualitative study displayed little active curiosity about God or faith. For most, religion was just not on their radar, and it was the interview itself that provoked interest that seemed otherwise dormant. For these young people, accepting others meant not questioning them, and questions about God were interpreted as potentially being a sign of disrespect.

This research digs deeper and reveals that levels of curiosity are markedly different depending on a young person's orientation to faith. Building on what we learned in this previous research, this suggests adults need to learn how to provoke curiosity, create space for reflection and support young people to ask questions without fear of causing offence.¹⁶

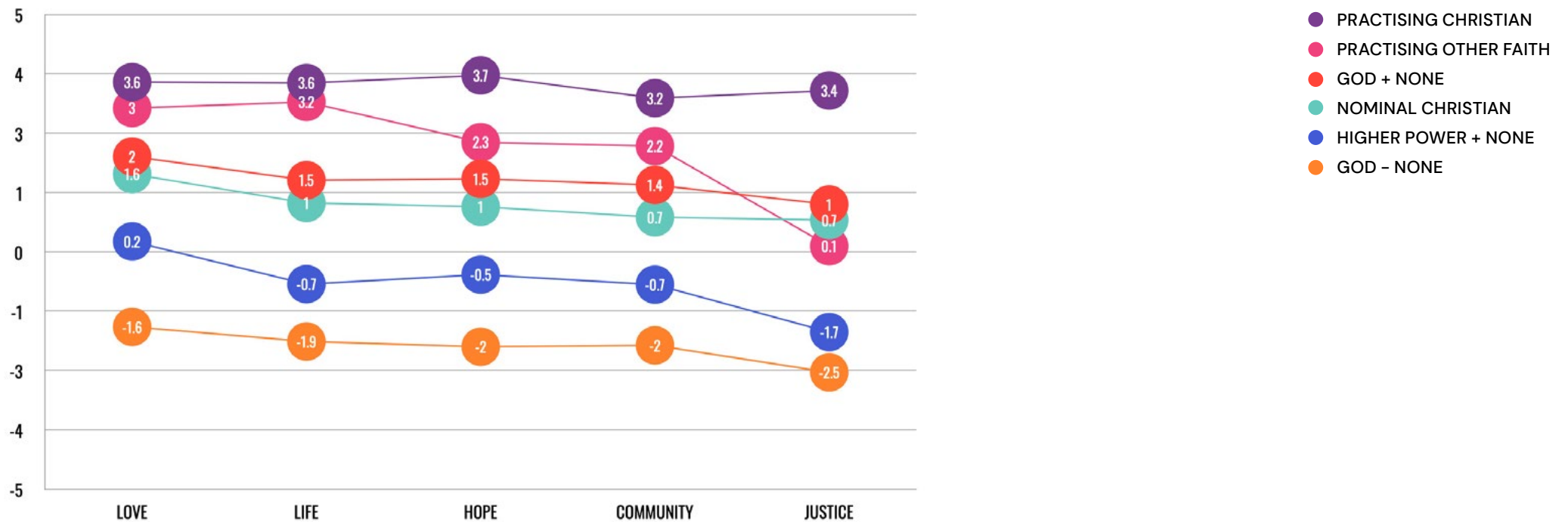
16. No Questions Asked (2018) Youthscape Centre for Research / 'I don't think I ask questions really': The Findings from a Qualitative Study of Religious and Spiritual Questioning Among 16-19 Year-olds. Hill, P (2019) Journal of Youth and Theology

Reactions to the five themes

CHART 1

How attractive does this sound to you?

Mean scores per group

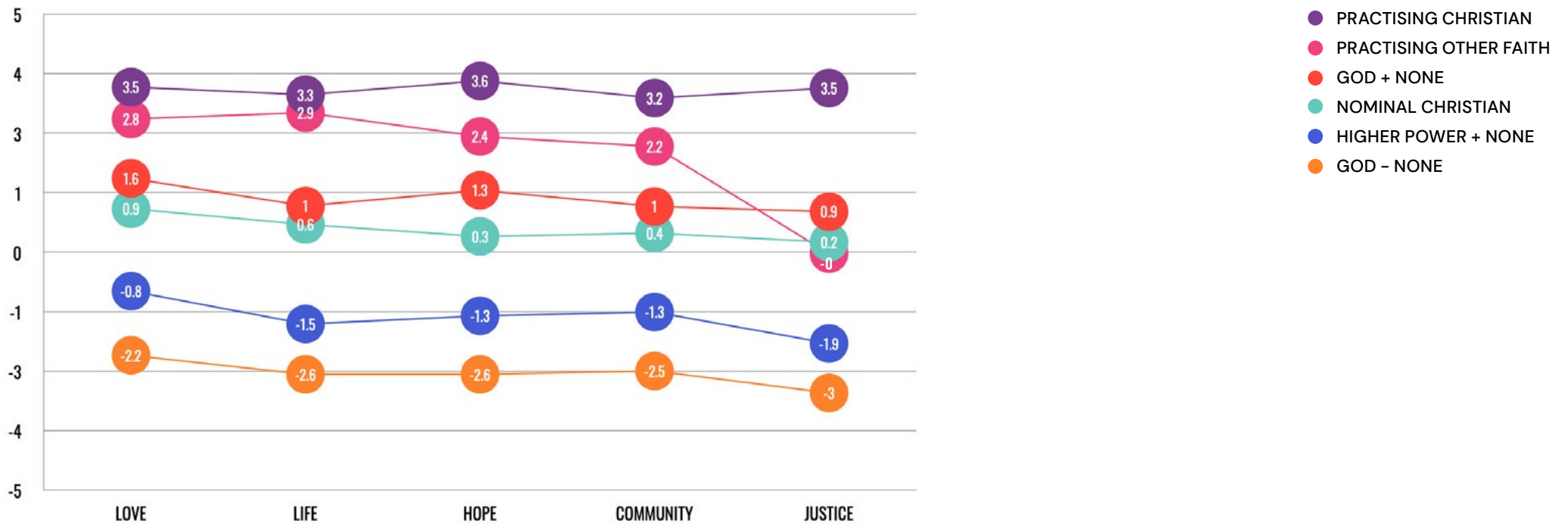


Reactions to the five themes

CHART 2

How much does this make you want to find out more?

Mean scores per group



Highlighting words

When asked to highlight what they found more/less attractive, many young people displayed a kind of ‘warm apathy’ toward these ideas about Christianity.

Almost half of those surveyed said they didn’t find anything attractive in our five themes. But even more (around three quarters) said they didn’t find anything unattractive either. Where they did choose to engage, young people were more likely to highlight words they found attractive, than words they found less attractive.

They also identified more words they found attractive in our statements about love, than in any other idea, and fewest in those about justice.

After reading each theme, the young people were asked to highlight any words or phrases they found more attractive in blue, and to tell us why. They could skip this question by ticking a box to say they didn’t find anything attractive.

They were then asked to look at the idea again, but this time to highlight any words or phrases they found less attractive in red, and to tell us why. Again, if they wanted to, they could skip over this by ticking a box to say they didn’t find anything unattractive.

As a group they highlighted significantly more words in blue than in red and were more likely to skip the question about what words they found less attractive.

However, it’s also the case that around half the young people chose not to highlight any words in blue. This may be because they wanted to move quickly through the survey, or because they genuinely didn’t find anything particularly attractive.

TABLE 1

Total number of words highlighted as more or less attractive

	Total words highlighted in blue (more attractive)	Total words highlighted in red (less attractive)
Love	7868	1442
Hope	6990	2068
Life	6051	1422
Community	5715	1680
Justice	5322	3167

TABLE 2

The percentage of young people who chose not to highlight any words/phrases

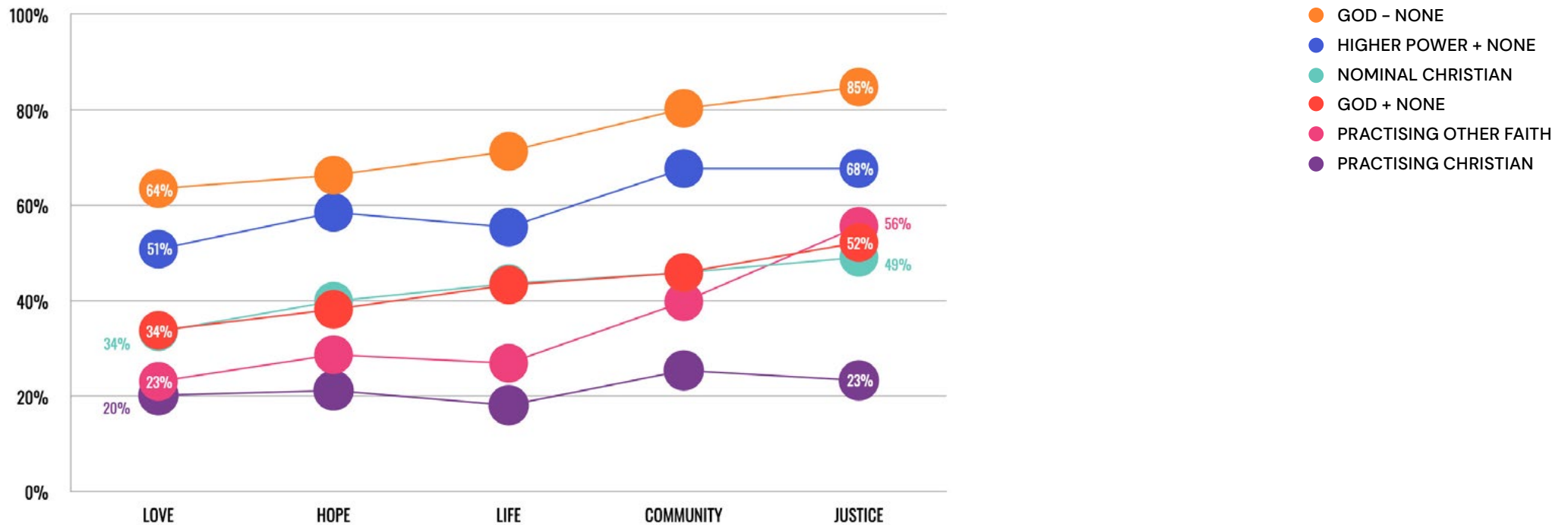
	Didn’t find anything attractive	Didn’t find anything unattractive
Love	42%	80%
Hope	50%	79%
Life	44%	79%
Community	42%	75%
Justice	54%	66%

Highlighting words

Ideas about God and love were clearly the most attractive, while ideas about God and justice were least attractive. But these figures mask a high degree of variety across the six groups. For example, 75% of the nominal Christians highlighted words in blue for the community theme, compared with 60% of practising Christians and 20% of God – Nones. Chart 3 shows that 85% of God – Nones found nothing attractive in the ideas about God and justice, while this was true for only 23% of practising Christians.

CHART 3

Percentage of young people in different groups who found nothing attractive in each idea.



Highlighting words

The following pages present the key words/phrases highlighted by different groups of young people, and what their comments tell us about why they chose these. In analysing the data, we colour-coded words according to the percentage of each group that highlighted them.¹⁷ So if a word was highlighted by 10–15% of young people, it is highlighted **like this**. We have used this approach to help you quickly get a sense of which words/phrases were most popular overall.

- 0–10%
- 10–15%
- 15–20%
- 20–25%
- 25–30%

A couple of things are worth bearing in mind as you read. First, the colour tells you the percentage band of **all 1000** young people that highlighted this word. The percentage of each of **our six faith groups** that liked a particular word was therefore often higher or lower, and this is mentioned in the comments.

Second, when we talk about young people ‘liking’ certain words or phrases, this is relative. In most cases it was small percentages of young people in most groups who highlighted any individual words. The word ‘powerful’ which got the highest score within any group was only highlighted by just over half i.e. 52.3% of practising Christians.

So when you are reading about what ideas young people were drawn to, please remember that around half didn’t highlight any words.

17. For ease of reading, we have rounded these up, but the upper limit of each band was .99 e.g. 10–14. 99% and 15–19.99%, to avoid double counting.

Most highlighted words

These are the ten individual words that were highlighted most frequently by the young people as a whole group.¹⁸ Some of these words were highlighted together (e.g. 'amazing' and 'life') so they have been presented in the context of the sentences they are part of.

Love is clearly the word and idea that takes centre stage. Love for the whole world. Love that is powerful. Love that you can experience.

Of everything else they read, they were most likely to be drawn to the idea of having an amazing life, experiencing peace and the possibility of a future with no more suffering.

God created and **loves** the whole world.

You can feel **peace** in an anxious world.

God's **love** is **powerful** and can live within us, to help us experience a full and **amazing life**.

You can always **feel loved**.

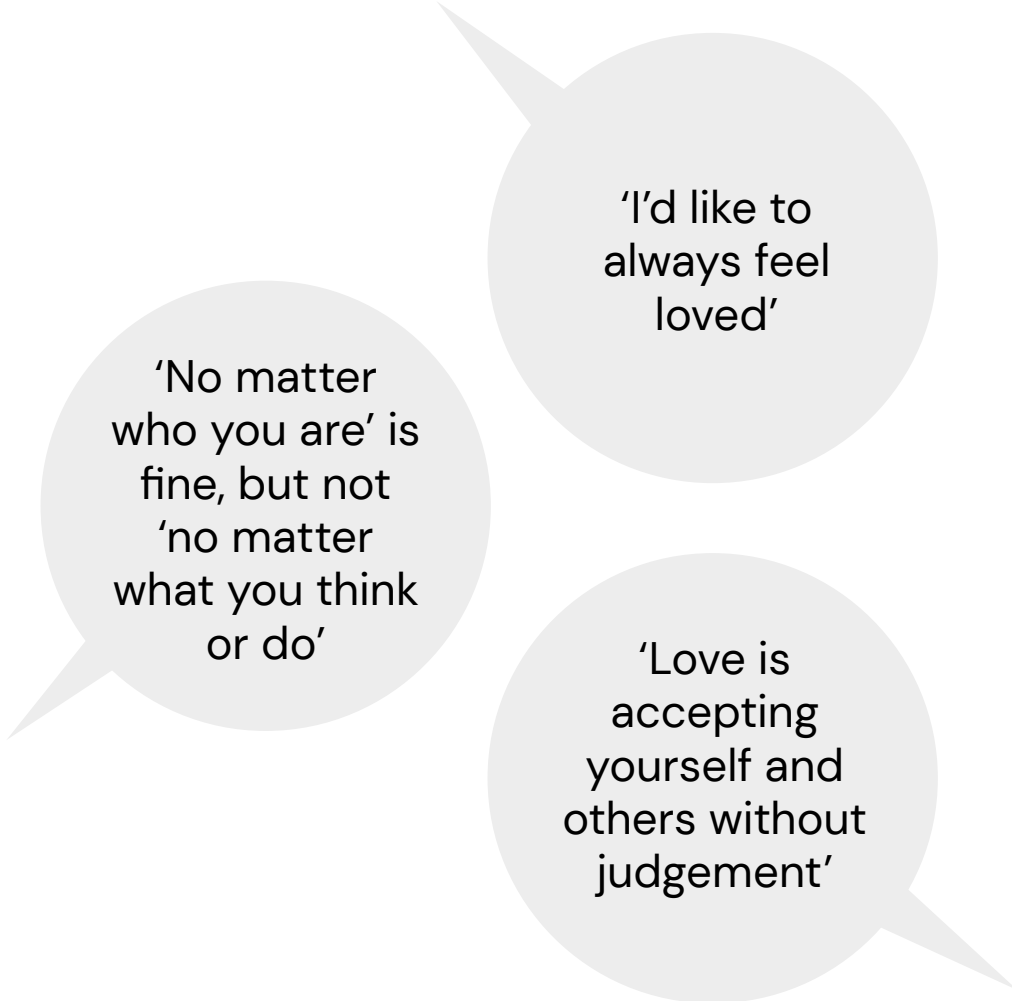
We're moving toward a time when there will be no tears and **no** more **suffering**.

¹⁸ See Appendices for figures

Love

How did
young people
respond to our
statements
about God
and love?¹⁹

19. These statements are not direct quotes from young people, but aim to capture some of the key themes from their survey responses.



'No matter
who you are' is
fine, but not
'no matter
what you think
or do'

'I'd like to
always feel
loved'

'Love is
accepting
yourself and
others without
judgement'

Love

Words/phrases young people found **more** attractive.

41.8% said they didn't find anything attractive. The remaining 58.2% highlighted the following...

The idea

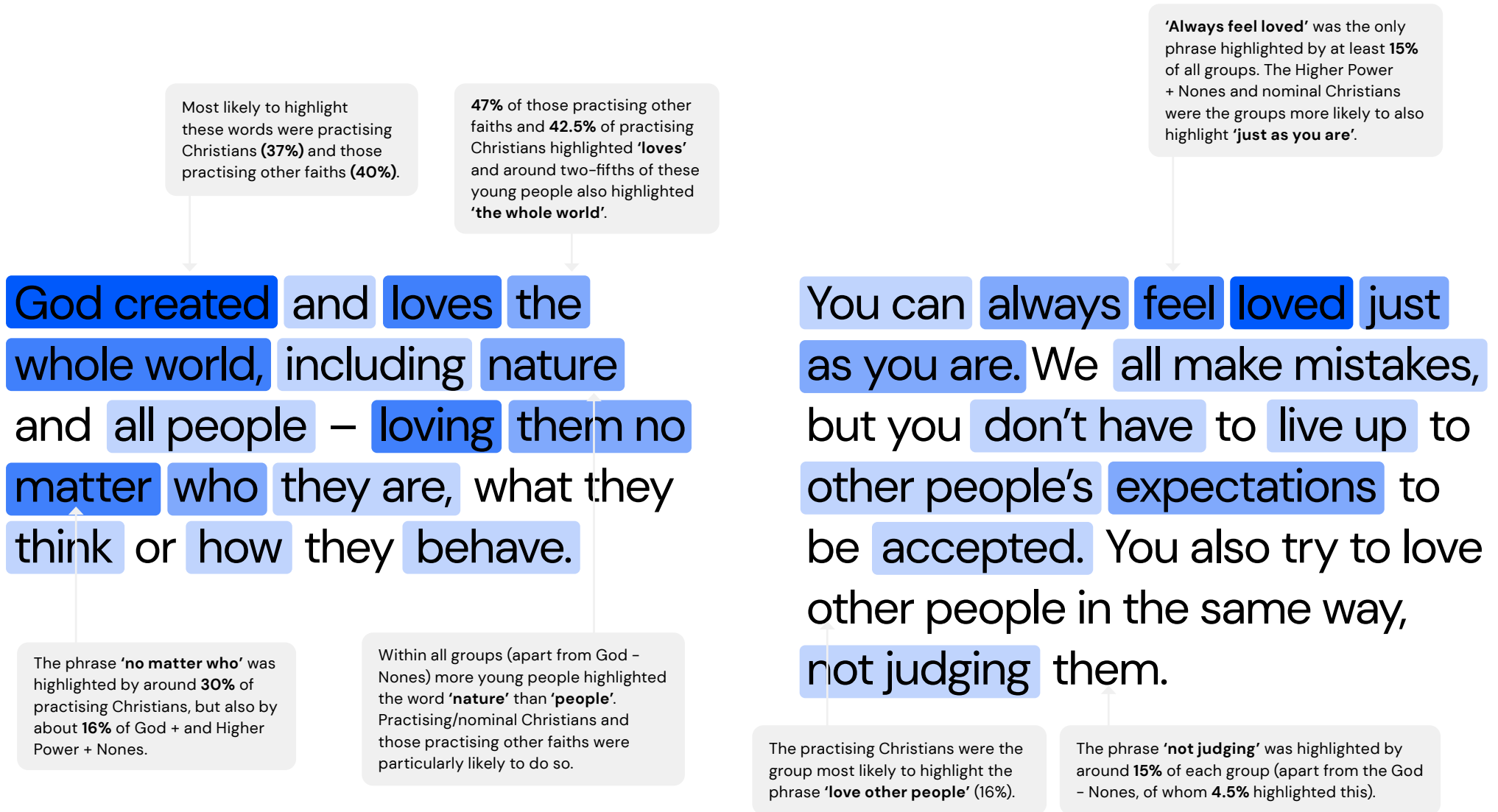
God created and loves the whole world, including nature and all people – loving them no matter who they are, what they think or how they behave.

What this means for you

You can always feel loved just as you are. We all make mistakes, but you don't have to live up to other people's expectations to be accepted. You also try to love other people in the same way, not judging them.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Love



% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Love

Words/phrases young people found **less** attractive.

79.7% said they didn't find anything unattractive. The remaining 20.3% highlighted the following...

The idea

God created and **loves the whole world,** including nature and all people – loving them no matter who they are, what they think or **how they behave.**

What this means for you

You can always feel loved just as you are. We all make mistakes, but you don't have to live up to other people's expectations to be accepted. You also try to love other people in the same way, not judging them.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Love

8% highlighted 'God created'. This was primarily the Higher power + Nones and God - Nones. 25% of the latter selected these words.

5-6% of the whole group highlighted 'loves the whole world', including 18% of God - Nones.

God created and loves the whole world, including nature and all people – loving them no matter who they are, what they think or how they behave.

5-6% highlighted 'how they behave'.

You can always feel loved just as you are. We all make mistakes, but you don't have to live up to other people's expectations to be accepted. You also try to love other people in the same way, not judging them.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0-5% ● 5-10% ● 10-15%

Young people's worldview: God and love

We asked young people to tell us why they had highlighted certain words positively or negatively, and their answers tell us something about how they see the world.²⁰

20. Remember though, that around half of those surveyed didn't complete this question because they found nothing attractive, or unattractive.

For those with faith, God is the source of love...

Those who identified as having a religion (whether nominal or practising) highlighted large parts of the first section 'The idea' which explicitly mentions God. Between 40–50% of young people practising Christianity or other religions highlighted 'God created and loves', identifying God as the source of love, and when asked to explain their choices, 40% of practising Christians named God explicitly. They framed their reasons as personal beliefs or theological statements, for example 'God loves everybody even the bad people and people that are not Christians', 'God is the power for me' and 'This is truth! This is my God'.

...and that love is for the whole world

Those with faith were also most likely to choose the 'whole world' as the object of God's love, and

practising Christians were most likely to highlight 'no matter who', suggesting that it is these young people who are most comfortable with the generous inclusivity of God's love. More broadly it was surprising to find only three young people who questioned whether God could be loving if the church was 'against gay people', suggesting that there is a broader acceptance of this love than we might think.

God loving nature is even more attractive than God loving people

Across all groups, around 5% more young people highlighted the idea of God loving 'nature', over God loving 'people'. Young people are coming of age in a moment where there is growing concern and awareness about climate injustice, and although only a small difference, this suggests the need to include the environment when talking about God's love and work.

Young people's worldview: God and love

The only consensus across all groups was a desire to always feel loved

Across all six groups, 15–30% of young people found the phrase 'always feel loved' attractive. This is the aspect of unconditional love there was most agreement on – a desire to experience it.

Love no matter who you are, rather than love no matter what you think or do

The phrase 'no matter who they are' was more popular than the subsequent 'what they think, or how they behave'. This suggests that love that includes all identities is more acceptable to young people than love that doesn't discriminate based on ideology or behaviour (you are loved, regardless of who you are, but not regardless of what you think or what you do).

To love others is not to judge them

We had included a line about not judging others and not having to live up to others' expectations to be accepted. Young people had talked a lot about this in our focus groups, suggesting a real need and desire for deep acceptance. Sure enough, it was the case that all groups were more likely to highlight the words 'not judging' than the more general 'try to love other people in the same way'. It was the practising Christians who were most likely to highlight the latter phrase, perhaps a reflection of the Christian emphasis on loving others.

To love people is to give them freedom to be themselves

While Christian young people wrote about God in many of their comments, others read the statements in light of what seemed

to be their existing commitments to authenticity (being yourself) and acceptance (allowing others to be themselves). So, when they read 'You can always feel loved just as you are' they responded with comments like 'Be who you are no matter what and never judge people' or 'Because people can be what they want to be and should be allowed to be'. Some affirmed the importance of acceptance e.g. 'Not judging others is very important to me' while others ignored the idea of God altogether in their convictions about individual freedom – 'We have nobody to live up to other than our own thoughts and morals'. In some cases young people commented on the importance of allowing themselves and others to make mistakes, ('Loving ourselves is good and it's ok to make mistakes') while other comments suggest there is a limit to this acceptance when it comes to 'bad' people.

For some, these ideas of unconditional love feel aspirational

The further away young people were from identifying with faith, the more likely they were to see these as aspirational ideas. Many expressed that this is what everyone wants, while others were more specific e.g. 'It would be great if nobody judged each other, especially on looks'. These ideas were described as 'so inspiring and comforting', 'a good way to think about life' and even 'It would be a perfect world.'

Some young people seemed to be particularly impacted by what they read, with multiple references to warmth or safety e.g. 'It gives me a warm feeling' and 'It just made me feel wanted and safe to be who I am and want to be without worrying'. Others had highlighted particular words because they seemed to lack this kind of love in their life: 'I want

Young people’s worldview: God and love

to be accepted even though I may be different to others’, ‘I never feel loved’, ‘I’d like my mistakes to be forgot’.

One young person simply wrote ‘This is how I want to live.’

What young people found less attractive

Far fewer young people highlighted words they found less attractive, but it was those of no religion and who don’t believe in God who were most likely to. In their comments they mainly rejected the idea that there is a God at all, and that the world was created by this God.

‘Because God didn’t create the whole world, he doesn’t exist’ and ‘Because he’s not real’.

But across nearly all groups young people also rejected some elements of this idea on the basis that a loving God would not allow

suffering ‘If god loved people so much he wouldn’t let bad thing happen to nice people’ and that some people deserve punishment and should not be loved or accepted.

‘So murderers are counted the same as me that’s not right at all’

‘Some people are really horrible and need to be punished not loved’

For these young people, the logical conclusion of unconditional love means it’s not just in-credible, but morally wrong.

What might this mean for how we talk about God and love, and what we do?

1. Grounded ways to experience God’s love.

Young people want to feel loved and know they are accepted. They may well encounter various tools

of self-care online or in school, but are there tools we can offer as Christians that help them to experience and be grounded in the knowledge that they are always loved by God? How can such tools take account of learning to trust when you don’t always feel this love?

2. Help them understand unconditional love.

Young people’s worldview leans toward being inclusive and holistic, so they are likely to be warm toward God’s love being inclusive of the whole of creation. But we need to invite them to consider that God’s unconditional love is more radical than they might be comfortable with. This includes those that they might reject: those with offensive views, the cancelled, ‘enemies’.

3. Broaden what love looks like.

Authenticity, acceptance, and equality are some of the hallmarks of ‘good’ relationships, not just for


young people but more generally in our culture. We can hold up a mirror to this worldview and help them consider other aspects of love that they might be less familiar or comfortable with, including sacrificial service, patience, and forgiveness. As above, this would include the possibility that we can love others even when we disagree with them.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Hope

How did
young people
respond to our
statements
about God
and hope?²¹

21. These statements are not direct quotes from young people, but aim to capture some of the key themes from their survey responses.



'A better
world sounds
wonderful'

'You feel like
your life is worth
something'

'It's comforting
to know we are
partnering with
God'

Hope

Words/phrases young people found **more** attractive.

41.8% said they didn't find anything attractive. The remaining 58.2% highlighted the following...

The idea

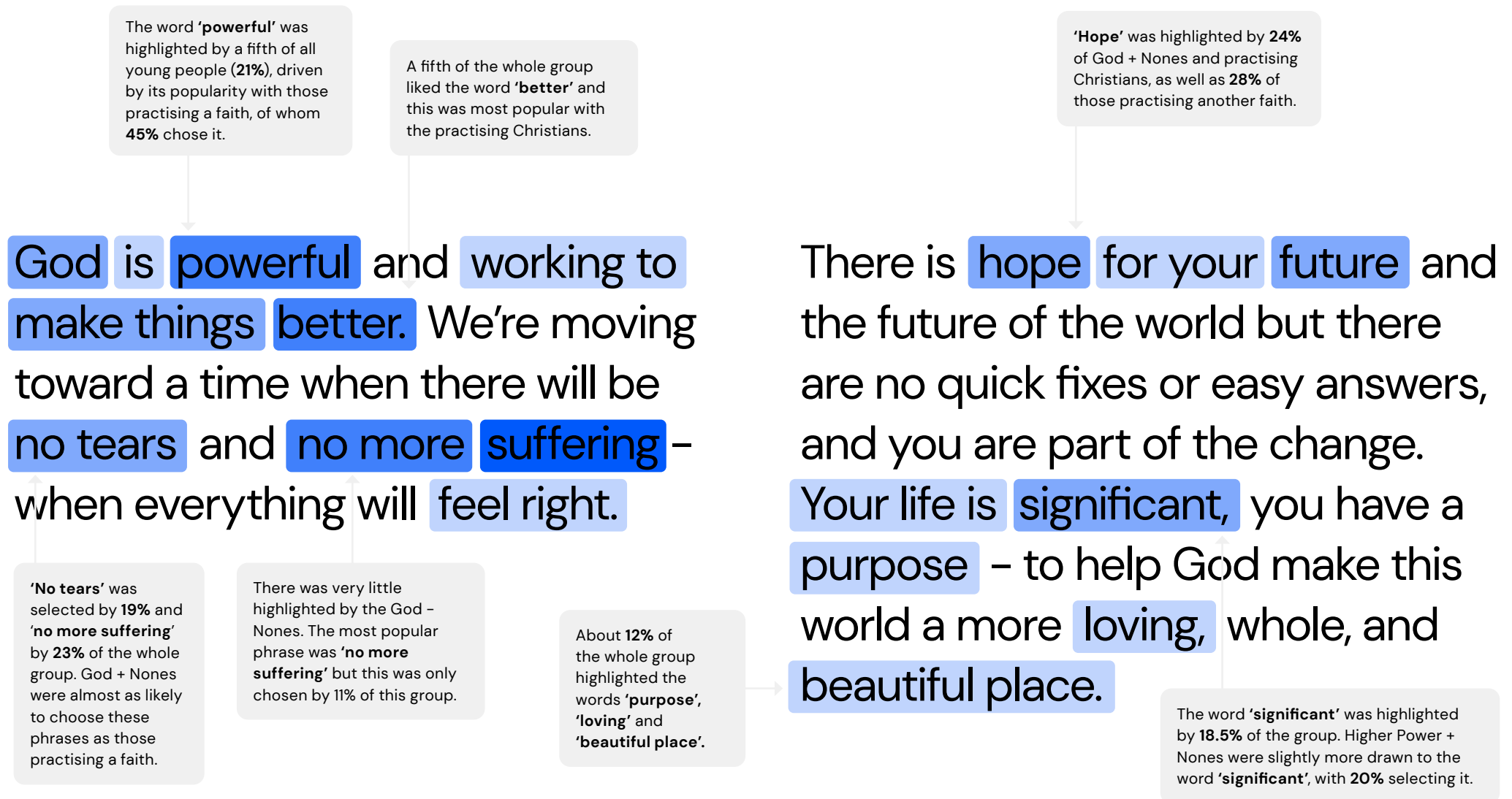
God is **powerful** and **working to make things better**. We're moving toward a time when there will be **no tears** and **no more suffering** – when everything will **feel right**.

What this means for you

There is **hope** for your **future** and the future of the world but there are no quick fixes or easy answers, and you are part of the change. Your life is **significant**, you have a **purpose** – to help God make this world a more **loving**, whole, and **beautiful place**.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Hope



% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Hope

Words/phrases young people found **less** attractive.

74.9% said they didn't find anything unattractive. The remaining 25.1% highlighted the following...

The idea

God is powerful and working to make things better. We're moving toward a time when there will be no tears and no more suffering – when everything will feel right.

What this means for you

There is hope for your future and the future of the world but there are no quick fixes or easy answers, and you are part of the change. Your life is significant, you have a purpose – to help God make this world a more loving, whole, and beautiful place.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Hope

10% of the group found the word 'God' unattractive, and a further 9% the word 'powerful'. 31% of God - Nones highlighted 'God' and 26% 'powerful' – a much higher proportion than any other group.

God is powerful and working to make things better. We're moving toward a time when there will be no tears and no more suffering – when everything will feel right.

6% did not like the idea that God is 'working to make things better'. 14% of the God - Nones highlighted these words.

5-7% of the whole group highlighted 'tears' and 'no more suffering', including 11% of the God - Nones.

There is hope for your future and the future of the world but there are no quick fixes or easy answers, and you are part of the change. Your life is significant, you have a purpose – to help God make this world a more loving, whole, and beautiful place.

11% and 15% of God - Nones didn't like the words 'help God'.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Young people's worldview: God and hope

We asked young people to tell us why they had highlighted certain words positively or negatively, and their answers tell us something about how they see the world.

A better world sounds wonderful

On a simple level being told that there is hope for their future and the future of the world made young people across all six groups feel... hopeful! They were attracted by the idea of 'better' – 'I like that things could be better for everyone'. Many of the nominal Christians wrote comments like 'I want to believe that the world will be a better place with no more suffering' and 'It's nice to imagine the beauty of this'. Some of the God – Nones shared the view that these were positive ideas but focused particularly on the possibility of relieving pain or living in peace: 'To end suffering would be amazing', 'To live in peace. I wish the world was a more beautiful place'.

It's a nice idea, but not very realistic

Some young people described this vision as 'utopian', 'perfect' or 'ideal'

so that – while 'this all just sounds positive', they also seemed to believe such a world was essentially out of reach. These young people conveyed a sense of disbelief, commenting that it might be 'a nice idea but it's never going to happen' or 'Well wouldn't we all wish it was true?'

God is powerful, and gives us hope

Those who were practising Christians and those practising other faiths shared the feeling that it was generally hopeful to think the world was going to become better. But they located that hope in God and God's power: 'God can help anyone and anything' and 'God loves everyone and can help us through difficult times'. For some of those with religious faith, these ideas about hope reflected their existing worldview or as one young person put it – 'It sums everything up'.

Young people's worldview: God and hope

It's comforting to know we are partnering with God

Unlike other groups, practising Christians and those practising other faiths found this idea attractive because they have some confidence that it is true. These groups attributed agency to themselves and to God, expressing a sense of relief that there is partnership between God and humans – 'Knowing I can help bring about change' and 'That God is willing to help us effect the change even if it takes a longer time'. Here, young people used phrases like 'God works through us'. Those practising other faiths also named God, highlighting the idea of God having 'a higher plan' that humans have collective responsibility for, and even the role of prayer – 'When we suffer or when we desire something, if we ask Allah for it, it will surely be granted'.

I like the sound of this but I'm not sure about the God part

Amongst the nominal Christians, comments about God were mixed, with some expressing faith and others doubt about the idea of God working to make things better. For example, 'These are things I wish could happen but I don't believe 100% in God or God being able to control anything' and 'It touches my heart but I'm unsure if I believe.' One young person who believed in a Higher Power wrote 'I like the idea of someone trying to make a better world and create solutions'. Meanwhile, young people who didn't believe or weren't bothered about God were more likely to emphasise the human foundations of a better world, or wanted to communicate that their hope had nothing to do with faith.

'Purpose is important but don't have to believe in god'.

'It's not about god. I have no interest in god'.

This makes me feel safe and at ease – like positive affirmations

These ideas about hope provided comfort for quite a few young people who wrote things like 'It makes me feel at ease knowing' and 'It makes me feel safe'. A few described what they had read as 'positive affirmations', suggesting these ideas were not so much 'true' but could be at home amongst other generally uplifting notions about self and the world.

You feel as if your life is worth something

In some comments it was a sense of optimism about self and others that was most encouraging. Here, young people wrote that this idea made them feel 'part of the world', 'like my life is worth something', 'good about myself', and 'better about yourself and others'. This sense of connection and self-

worth was particularly highlighted by those who were drawn to the phrase 'Your life is significant'. Some already believed this, writing: 'I agree, everyone is important and has a purpose in life', 'My life is significant' and 'Life matters'. And then there were a few for whom this idea was aspirational – 'I want to feel significant'.

We can make a difference

In a few cases, a hopeful future was linked imaginatively to their own actions, as for the young people who wrote 'When I get older I would like to have a job that can change things for the better', 'I like to think that I personally make a difference to my own life and the lives of those around me' and 'We can make things better if we try'.

Young people's worldview: God and hope

I need this hope

Then there were young people who found aspects of this theme attractive because they personally lacked a sense of hope.

'Sometimes bad things happen and u wonder if anything good will ever come so u don't feel so sad and alone.'

'I don't want to feel sad all the time.'

They wanted to believe that their life means something, or for 'bad things' to stop. For one young person, this was painfully specific – 'In this world my mum might not have cancer.'

What young people found less attractive

Although fewer young people highlighted words they found less attractive, there were still practising

and nominal Christians who found these ideas unrealistic or not credible. In some cases, young people didn't like the sense that change would come too slowly, and in others because God's involvement in their lives implied that they as individuals lacked some level of personal control.

Across all groups, young people who found some parts of this less attractive felt there was little evidence of God having made things better in the world so far (or, in some cases, in their lives), and some young people identified religion as the cause of such suffering.

Some of those with no religion viewed suffering as inevitable, and any other belief as unrealistic and not credible. The God – Nones tended to reject the idea that there is a God completely, because a powerful benevolent God would not allow such suffering. For them,

the only way to make the world better is for (many) people to do it. In some cases, the idea of needing to help God (or Christians) make the world better was viewed with genuine suspicion.

What might this mean for how we talk about God and hope, and what we do?

1. Talk about heaven

Beyond a general sense that the world could become 'better', there is a group of young people who are drawn to the possibility that one day there could be 'no more suffering'. Although heaven may seem unrealistic to some, the Christian vision of a time of ultimate justice and healing may be quite resonant for others. Perhaps we need to be more confident in talking about the 'new heavens and the new earth' and what that hope means.

2. Be nuanced about hope

There is evidence here of strong desire for a better world amongst some of the young people we surveyed, but also a sense of realism about what it means to live with suffering, slow change and the balance between God's work and our own. We therefore need to take account of these nuances, and be thoughtful when talking to young people about the realities of holding hope as Christians. This could include wrestling with the idea that working toward the realization of a shared hope for others sometimes means allowing our individual goals to be transformed, or even sacrificed.

3. Translate personal significance into practical action

There was some appeal to the idea of your life being significant and having purpose, whether young people already believe this, or would like to. There was slightly less interest in being 'part of the

Young people's worldview: God and hope


change'. Perhaps young people need to be invited to move beyond embracing their intrinsic value, and into actively participating in the messy business of creating positive change. How can you practically help them find their place in a community that takes practical action in bringing God's kingdom?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Life

How did
young people
respond to
some Christian
ideas about
life with God?²²

22. These statements are not direct quotes from young people, but aim to capture some of the key themes from their survey responses.



'We need
peace more
than joy'

'God wanting to
be close to me
is a bit creepy'

'We all make
mistakes, but
you don't have
to 'change'

Life

Words/phrases young people
found **more** attractive.

43.5% said they didn't
find anything attractive.
The remaining 56.5%
highlighted the following...

The idea

God's **love** is **powerful** and
can live within us, to **help** us
experience a **full** and **amazing** life.

What this means for you

You can **feel** **peace** in an anxious
world, and **joy** even when things
are hard. Rather than just love
you from afar, God wants to be
close, to **encourage** you and
help you every day to grow and
change. God even **loves** using
our mistakes and failures to bring
about **positive** things.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Life

23% highlighted **'love'** and 27% **'powerful'**. This was the pattern across all groups, with love and powerful being the most popular words. 52% of practising Christians and 50% of young people practising other faiths highlighted **'powerful'** for example. **'God'** was most popular with the practising Christians (47%).

God's love is powerful and can live within us, to help us experience a full and amazing life.

A love that can **'live within us'** was highlighted by 33% of practising Christians, and 16% of those practising other faiths – but overlooked by other groups.

24% of young people selected **'amazing life'**. This ranged from 13% of God – Nones, to 30% of practising Christians.

Overall, 12% chose **'joy'**, and again it was practising Christians who highlighted this the most (18%).

24% highlighted **'peace'** and 13–14% **'in an anxious world'**. Those practising a faith were most likely of any group to highlight **'peace'**.

You can feel peace in an anxious world, and joy even when things are hard. Rather than just love you from afar, God wants to be close, to encourage you and help you every day to grow and change. God even loves using our mistakes and failures to bring about positive things.

10% highlighted **'encourage'**, 11% highlighted **'loves'** and 13% **'positive'**. It was those practising other faiths who were most likely to highlight **'encourage'** (20%).

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Life

Words/phrases young people found **less** attractive.

79.2% said they didn't find anything unattractive. The remaining 20.8% highlighted the following...

The idea

God's love is **powerful** and can live within us, to help us experience a full and amazing life.

What this means for you

You can feel peace in an anxious world, and joy even when things are hard. Rather than just love you from afar, God wants to be close, to encourage you and help you every day to grow and change. God even loves using our mistakes and **failures** to bring about positive things.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Life

7% chose 'God's' and 5% / 6% chose 'love' and 'powerful'. This mostly reflects the choices of God - Nones, of whom 23% highlighted 'God's' as unattractive, and 15% 'love is powerful'.

God's love is powerful and can live within us, to help us experience a full and amazing life.

11% of God - Nones highlighted the phrase 'live within us' as unattractive.

'Failures' was highlighted by 5% of the whole group. Nominal Christians and God - Nones were most likely to choose this word.

10% of Higher Power + Nones didn't like the phrase 'God wants to be close' - more than the number of God - Nones.

You can feel peace in an anxious world, and joy even when things are hard. Rather than just love you from afar, God wants to be close, to encourage you and help you every day to grow and change. God even loves using our mistakes and failures to bring about positive things.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0-5% ● 5-10% ● 10-15%

Young people's worldview: God and life

We asked young people to tell us why they had highlighted certain words positively or negatively, and their answers tell us something about how they see the world.

An amazing life? Yes please.

For lots of young people, words were highlighted because 'these are positive ideas' with lots of 'Sounds good' or 'I like the words'. What they read made them feel 'happy', 'hopeful' or 'reassured' and they found these thoughts 'encouraging' and 'calming'. In one case a young person went a little further to write 'It made me feel positivity & empowered with love'. It's hard to know what young people imagined when they read the words 'amazing life'. We chose this phrase along with 'full' to give a sense that life with God is rich and real and many were drawn to it with comments like 'its how I want my life to be', 'I want to be the best version of me' and 'I want to have a full life'.

Wouldn't it be nice

For lots of these young people, reading this idea elicited a response of 'It would be nice to think this

is true'. Sometimes because 'Everyone wants those things', 'it's what we would all want to be' and at other times because they personally would like to believe this was possible: 'It would be nice not to worry all the time and feel like someone is with you all the time'.

We need peace more than joy

Twice as many young people highlighted the word 'peace' than 'joy' and the comments reflected this. One young person wrote 'it is so important to feel JOY in life even when things aren't going well'. But such mentions of joy were few and far between. Far more young people wrote about a desire for themselves or others to feel peaceful, and this was often in the context of anxiety specifically.

'I'm always anxious and would love to feel less like this and not worried all the time'.

'I am anxious a lot – I have learning difficulties, sensory issues etc.'

There were lots of references to God in the comments, and even young people who weren't religious (or weren't practising) echoed back a belief that God was loving, powerful, and gracious – or expressed a hope this might be true. Such comments included: 'God will find good in all of us', 'I like the idea of God being close' and 'I like that God is a source of serenity and calm in an anxious world.'

It's what I believe and it's
what I've experienced

Among practising Christians, responses mentioned God with even more conviction. Lots of their comments started with 'God is...' followed by statements of belief like 'father of peace', 'creator', 'source of purity and wisdom', 'ever close', 'love', 'powerful', 'there'. Many wrote 'God loves us' or 'I believe in God'. For this group, there appears to be genuine comfort in believing God is loving and can bring peace and joy. Rather than expressing a wish, many of these young people report this is their experience – 'Those statements are really true' and 'Helped me to keep a peaceful mind in my life'. When asked to explain their highlighting, one young person simply wrote 'Because I love God and believe that He cares for us'. A very similar pattern emerged from those practising other faiths, with comments like 'My belief is straightforward and strong' and

You can have the good
without the God

For others, the idea of an amazing and peaceful life was very attractive but was reframed to fit within a more secular outlook, in which the self was centred in a pursuit of the good life. So one young person wrote 'Positive message, that you can overcome adversity' while another who believed in a higher power but not God said: 'No matter how low things get in life you will have that happiness there and it will help lift you up.' For another, this idea felt less religious than the others, and this was positive: 'It's less preachy and more about how individuals feel personally'.

We all make mistakes but do we have to change?

The final sentence of this idea reads ‘God even loves using our mistakes and failures to bring about positive things’. Young people seemed to be reassured by this, with plenty of affirmations that mistakes are part of life and how we learn: ‘It’s ok to make mistakes’ and ‘I like the idea that we all make mistakes and there is no need to hold it against us’. Many comments also referred to God offering this grace or forgiveness: ‘You can make mistakes but God will always love you’.

But while they were comfortable with recovering from mistakes, fewer young people were drawn to the idea of God helping us grow and change. Only 6% of the whole group highlighted the word 'change' positively and two-thirds of these practised a faith. Young people repeated words like 'peace', 'love' and 'hope' in their explanatory

Young people's worldview: God and life

comments a great deal, but only one young person used the word 'change', writing simply 'Change is good'. In contrast there were more comments viewing the word negatively, even perhaps an affront to the idea of 'being yourself'.

'Change can be upsetting at times'

'I don't want to change.'

'Again no one should change'

What young people found less attractive

Some young people highlighted words, somewhat without context, simply because they read them as negative, including anxiety, mistakes and failures. As one young person wrote, straightforwardly – 'I don't like to think of failures and mistakes'. In a few cases, there were more specific reasons: 'If god even loves using our mistakes and failures to bring about positive

things if I keep behaving badly I can't see why I can't go home to my family?'

Young people who rejected the idea of God, highlighted this word in red, asserting that they don't believe God exists: 'As before there is no powerful presence I believe in'. Others resisted the idea of God being powerful and good, based on the suffering they have experienced or witnessed.

For a few young people, the idea that God is involved in their life feels akin to 'Telling me I have no control over the future', as one practising Christian put it. There was also rejection of the suggestion that God is necessary to bring about change, or to experience a full and amazing life, and that this is possible through self-effort and with the support of family, friends and others.

'We are working for our life and people around us helping us not god'

'It is all unattractive to me, God is not necessary for happiness, peace or success. Boundaries, family, friends and a strong moral compass are what matter'

Creepy

One word showed up repeatedly in comments where young people shared what they found less attractive around the idea that God might be close, within you or involved in your life.

'Sounds creepy. I can live a satisfying life by sorting myself out'

'The idea of God being close to me is a bit creepy'

'Something is a bit creepy about it being inside you or wanting to be close to you.'

'It sounds creepy. I wouldn't want someone spying on me and checking up on what I'm doing'

While this was mostly from those who felt more negative about God generally, there were similar comments from those in other groups, including practising Christians. For one young person of a different religion, this 'Sounds strange to me, how can God exist within me?' while for others this idea was simply unwelcome: 'I don't want god to be near me'. The idea of God's love being powerful and God being close sounded 'weird' and 'scary' or made them feel 'uneasy'.

It is hard to speculate, but given wider cultural conversations about power, consent, safety and bodily autonomy, it is not hard to see why these ideas could feel intrusive to some. Many young people are sensitive to potential misuses of power, as suggested by the comment 'Why do we need to say he is powerful?' As another young person concluded, 'The words does not make you feel safe'.

Young people's worldview: God and life

What might this mean for how we talk about God and life, and what we do?

1. Help them understand the unique character of God's life and peace.

Young people are drawn to the idea of having an amazing life, and particularly to the possibility of experiencing peace. But in the kingdom of God, this life and this peace have distinct qualities that we can help them understand. For example, the idea of losing our life to gain it, or peace that surpasses all understanding.

2. Make the case for our need to change.

In this survey it seems that most young people didn't want to think about their mistakes and failures, even if the message was 'You're loved', 'God doesn't give up' or 'He can use your mistakes'. Neither was the word 'change' highlighted positively – perhaps because of

our wider cultural emphasis on self-acceptance and authenticity. We could think about ways to talk about personal transformation in discipleship that make sense to young people e.g. 'taking ownership of who you want to be' as well as less familiar theological concepts, like 'dying to self'.

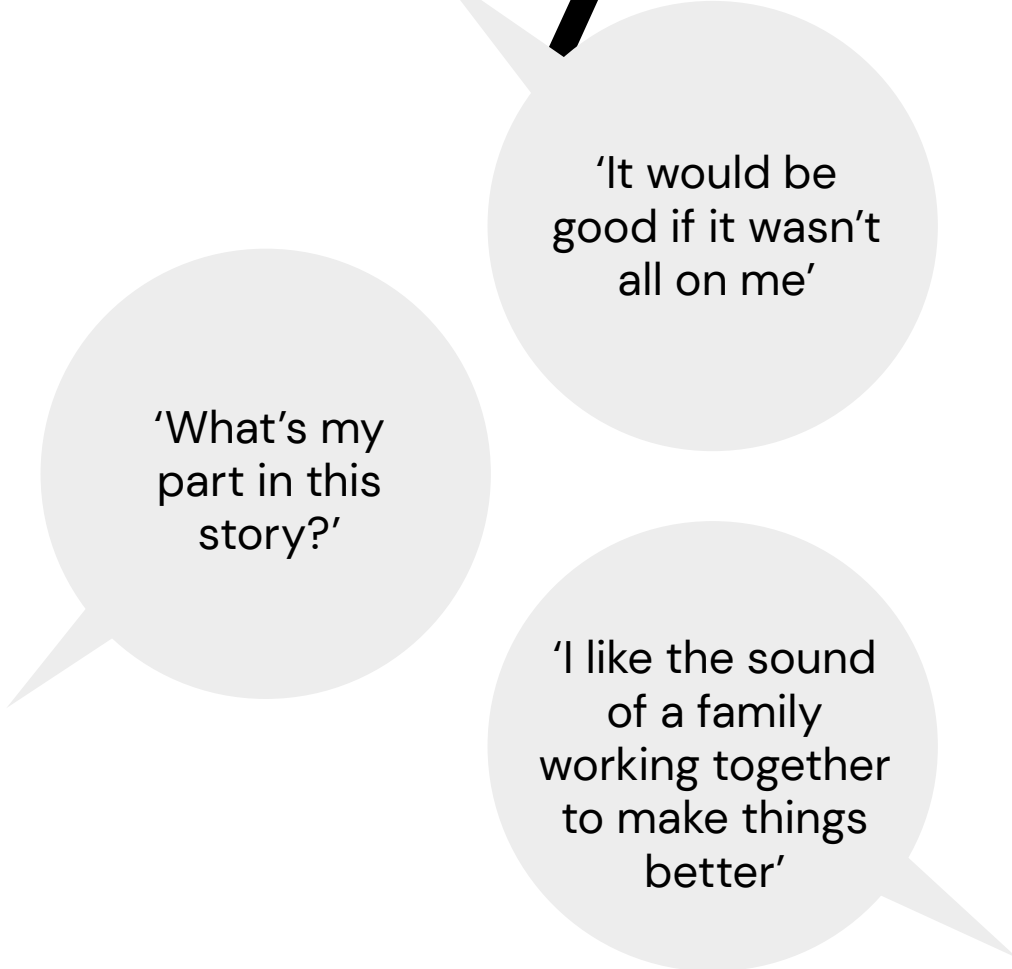
3. Acknowledge that not all young people want God to be close.

We have always emphasised God wanting a 'personal relationship' with young people, but there's some evidence here to suggest some (though not all) find the idea of God wanting to be close to them or within them, creepy or weird. While they do want to be loved, we need to bear this in mind. This could mean taking time to explain it well, emphasising that God doesn't force or control us, and treading a little more carefully with these young people.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Community

How did young people respond to some Christian ideas about community and church?²³



'What's my part in this story?'

'It would be good if it wasn't all on me'

'I like the sound of a family working together to make things better'

23. These statements are not direct quotes from young people, but aim to capture some of the key themes from their survey responses.

Community

Words/phrases young people found **more** attractive.

50% said they didn't find anything attractive. The remaining 50% highlighted the following...

The idea

There is a story that has been passed down through **generations**, about God and the world. It makes sense of our lives and why we're here. The story is still being lived today.

What this means for you

You can be part of that story, **belong to** a **family** that is **not perfect** but are **working together** to **make the world** a **better place**. You know you can't do it alone, and it's not all down to you to fix things.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Community

All the words in this first section were highlighted by between **10%** and **23%** of the practising Christians, while other groups largely ignored it. **21%** of practising Christians highlighted that the story is **'still being lived today'**. They were also the only group to highlight **'You can be part of that story'**.

There is a story that has been passed down through generations, about God and the world. It makes sense of our lives and why we're here. The story is still being lived today.

12% chose **'generations'** a word which was more liked by those practising a faith, nominal Christians and God + Nones.

14% chose **'belong'**, 18% **'family'**, and 11% and 14% **'not perfect'**. The word **'family'** was highlighted by 21% of Nominal Christians, 22% of God+ Nones and 27% of practising Christians.

You can be part of that story, belong to a family that is not perfect but are working together to make the world a better place. You know you can't do it alone, and it's not all down to you to fix things.

18% chose **'working together'**, and those most likely to highlight this phrase were the God + Nones (22%) and the practising Christians (23%).

19 and 20% chose **'better place'**. This included 28% of practising Christians and 23% of God+ Nones.

About 11% of Nominal Christians were drawn to this phrase, the highest proportion of any group.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0-10% ● 10-15% ● 15-20% ● 20-25% ● 25-30%

Community

Words/phrases young people found **less** attractive.

78.8% said they didn't find anything unattractive. The remaining 21.2% highlighted the following...

The idea

There is a **story** that has been passed down through generations, about **God** and the world. It makes sense of our lives and why we're here. The story is still being lived today.

What this means for you

You can be part of that story, belong to a family that is not perfect but are working together to make the world a better place. You know you can't do it alone, and it's not all down to you to fix things.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Community

Highlighted by 6% overall, but driven mostly by the 10% of those practising other faiths who highlighted the phrase 'There is a story'.

There is a **story** that has been passed down through generations, about **God** and the world. It makes sense of our lives and why we're here. The story is still being lived today.

Highlighted by 6% of the whole group but 20% of God – Nones.

You can be part of that story, belong to a family that is not perfect but are working together to make the world a better place. You know you can't do it alone, and it's not all down to you to fix things.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Young people's worldview: God and community

We asked young people to tell us why they had highlighted certain words positively or negatively, and their answers tell us something about how they see the world.

Making the world a better place

As with the ideas around hope, references to 'making the world a better place' were what young people were most drawn to in this theme. In some cases, this seemed to be purely because 'better' was desirable, and in others because people would work together to help achieve this.

Belonging to an actual family that works together

We used the word family here in place of the words 'church' or 'community'. However, this didn't translate for most young people, who interpreted it as literal and biological family e.g. 'I am quite lucky to have a big family and it is always nice to have them to go to with any problems I have or even just for company'.

'I feel I'm part of my small family'

'My family is my world.'

Some young people appreciated the idea that families aren't perfect but tended to be most positive about the concepts of 'belonging' and 'working together', which they saw as attractive in the context of a nuclear or extended family. Quite a few young people related this to the idea of 'teamwork' and interpreted this as mutual support and help. Those of no religion who don't believe in God were also drawn to the idea of a family working together, some because they already have supportive families and others because they do not. Either way, some young people wanted to be clear that this didn't mean they accepted religious elements of the idea.

'I already have a family that support each other, help each other and share their problems so no one person in my family has to shoulder the family/personal problems. My family isn't make believe.'

Young people's worldview: God and community

Feeling part of something bigger

Most practising Christians shared this interpretation of family as literal: 'Being together as a family to overcome any issue and feeling you are not alone it is a lovely feeling'. However, there were a few who saw the idea of family more broadly, even if they never used the word 'church'.²⁴

'I am attracted to the fact that I can belong to a group that will always support me'

'I like the sound of being part of people who are kind and want to do good'

'I feel part of a larger group'

Even though church was not recognizable in this idea, some young people did see this family as historical, global or collective: 'Only together will we all be participants in this history'. The possibility of

belonging to a group with a bigger purpose made some feel a greater sense of self-esteem or agency, with one young person writing 'I feel as though I'm making an impact'. Others said they felt 'included', 'valued' 'part of something' or 'not alone' when reading these ideas.

This idea takes the pressure off me

The final two sentences included 'you know you can't do it alone and it's not all down to you to fix things'. This provided a sense of relief to those who liked the idea that they didn't have to shoulder responsibility alone.

'It highlights that I don't need to carry the burden in my own. I have people in my life that can help'

'Because it takes the pressure off me'

'I liked the bit about it not being all down to me to fix things because it made me breathe easier'

God is the one who is going to do this

Very few young people highlighted anything from the first section of this idea as attractive, unless they were practising Christianity or another religion. For the latter, one young person wrote 'It's close to what Muslims believe and what we practice'. Some highlighted the word 'God', writing 'God is perfect', 'God is real' or 'God will help us'. Others expressed a personal connection with these ideas, with comments like 'It is a very true feature of our real life' and 'Those statements are really true'. While lots of young people were drawn toward the idea of working with others to make the world a better place, those with faith emphasised God's role in this:

'Being part of God's plan sounds exciting'

'I think this idea makes me think about all that God has done over the years'

What is this story, and what's my part?

Not many young people found the word 'story' attractive. But those who did liked the idea of a 'great story' 'passed down for all that time' and expressed curiosity about what the story was, and what their part in it might be.

'Want to know what the story is and how I might fit into it'

24. There was only one reference to church in response to this idea, which was from a God + None, who wrote 'People can connect at church with god'.

Young people's worldview: God and community

'It's a story about why we were created and why we are placed on earth it's intriguing'

'It made me want to hear the story and appeals to me'

Practising Christians tended to feel that this idea reflects what they already believe, with comments like 'You can be part of that story with God it is inclusive' and 'I think we are all part of a story, and the end is up to us.' Some of the Muslim young people in particular wrote positively about the value of 'generations' and 'traditions', and that 'Story keeps god in our hearts'.

What young people found less attractive

Not many young people found words in this idea unattractive, but a small percentage from all groups objected to the word 'story'. For some the word suggests that ideas about God are fictional, and this

undermines their faith, like the practising Christian who said 'It is not a story. It is a fact and true' or the Muslim young person who wrote 'Story sounds like a myth'. For others the association with fairy tales or myths reinforced their belief that God isn't real and that none of this is true: 'Stories change over the years, like Chinese whispers. How do we know what's the truth?' Or as another wrote: 'I don't need a story to make sense of my life.'

And as with other themes, there were young people who resisted the idea of having to rely on or work with others. Interestingly, some of these were practising Christians who said 'I disagree with not being able to do it alone. Nothing is impossible' 'and 'sometimes all u need is yourself'. For young people who felt this way, the idea that they 'can't do it alone' made them feel disempowered – 'It gives you less confidence'. In these instances, independence and self-reliance

trumped mutual support and working together.

Then there was the group of young people who reject the idea of there being a God, and challenge the idea that God is powerful and loving in light of human suffering: 'if wars why god not helping'. And finally a couple of young people were honest enough to say that they didn't like the idea 'because it sounds like I'm having to do school work' and because 'I don't want to be in a family with most people'.

What might this mean for how we talk about God and community, and what we do?

1. Affirm and build on young people's positive perception of family.

We know family is important to young people, even when it's complicated or painful. How can we link young people's experience of

and desire for family, with a vision for church that includes genuine belonging, unconditional love, and active participation? Can we help young people see that everyone in their family is significant to God, and can be part of this wider community too?

2. Name the pressure points and share the load.

Some young people liked the idea of feeling less pressure, both because God is at work in the world, and because there are other communities working to make things better. Can we develop ways to name the pressure they feel, and use scripture and prayer to help them release some of these burdens, and share the load?

Young people's worldview: God and community

3. Explain why and how you use the word 'story'.

Story has become a popular way to frame nearly all communication, from the images we string together in social media posts, to the narratives used by advertisers.

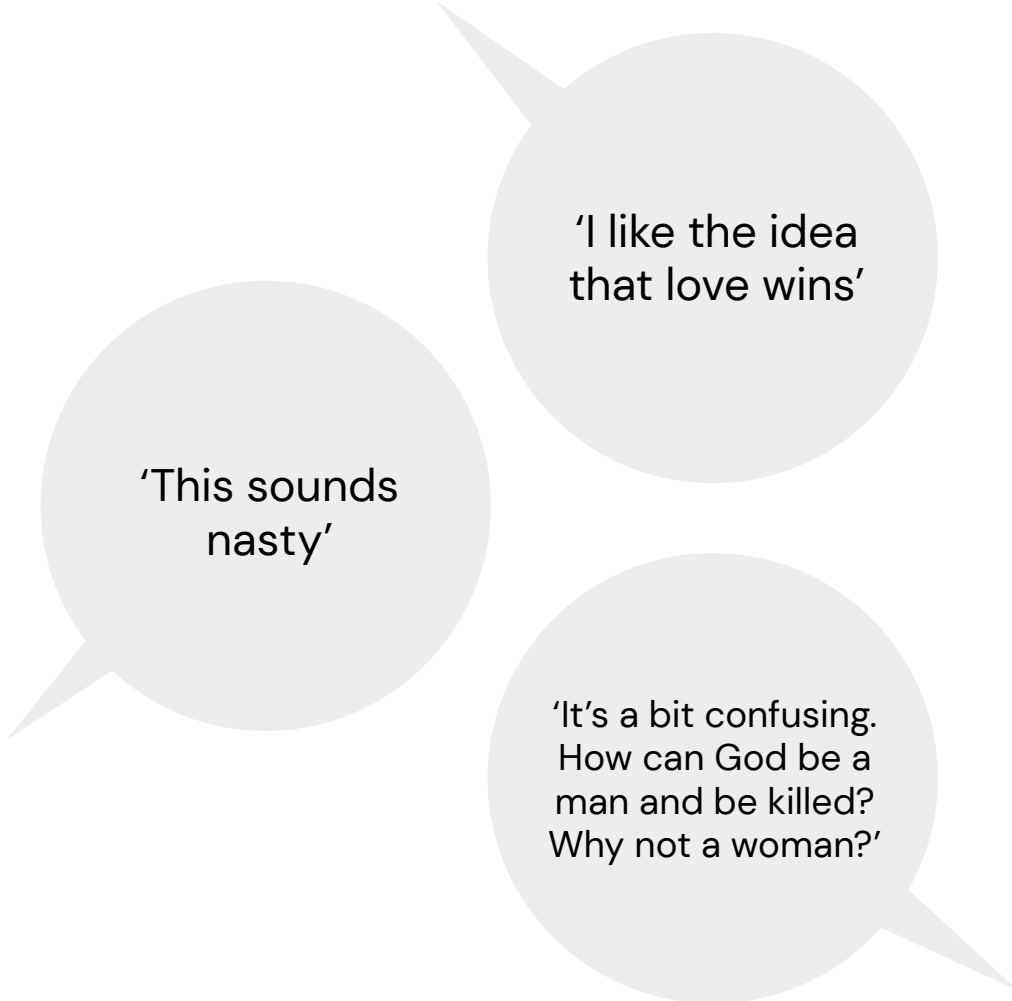
Young people's responses to this survey remind us that for some, the word creates curiosity while others it simply means 'untrue'. Let's be aware of this, and engage with various concepts of truth when we talk about the 'story of God'.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Justice

How did young people respond to some Christian ideas about justice?²⁵

25. These statements are not direct quotes from young people, but aim to capture some of the key themes from their survey responses.



'This sounds nasty'

'I like the idea that love wins'

'It's a bit confusing. How can God be a man and be killed? Why not a woman?'

Justice

Words/phrases young people found **more** attractive.

54.2% said they didn't find anything attractive. The remaining 45.8% highlighted the following...

The idea

God became a man to be with us. But his **love** was so **generous** and **powerful** some people were afraid of it, and they killed him. He came back to life and showed us that **love wins** in the end.

What this means for us

God suffered, so knows what we go through. God cares when people cause harm or abuse their power and will hold them responsible. But it is **love** that really **changes** **people**. So even when we're part of the problem, God **stays close** and **doesn't give up** on us.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Justice

Although it wasn't enough to affect the overall analysis, **26%** of practising Christians highlighted '**God became**' and **21%** '**to be with us**'.

19% of Nominal Christians and **20%** of those practising other faiths also chose '**generous**'.

10–12% chose '**love**' and '**changes people**'. Practising and Nominal Christians were most likely to highlight these words.

God became a man to be with us. But his **love** was so **generous** and **powerful** some people were afraid of it, and they killed him. He came back to life and showed us that **love wins** in the end.

16% and **15%** chose '**love wins**', driven by the **28%** and **29%** of practising Christians who chose these words.

11% highlighted '**love**', **17%** highlighted '**generous**' and **12%** highlighted '**powerful**'. This was driven largely by the practising Christians of whom **30%** chose '**generous**' and **23%** '**powerful**'.

God suffered, so knows what we go through. God cares when people cause harm or abuse their power and will hold them responsible. But it is **love** that really **changes people**. So even when we're part of the problem, God **stays close** and **doesn't give up** on us.

10–11% chose this phrase. It was the practising Christians who primarily highlighted '**God stays close**' and the practising and Nominal Christians who highlighted '**doesn't give up**'.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–10% ● 10–15% ● 15–20% ● 20–25% ● 25–30%

Justice

Words/phrases young people found **less** attractive.

66% said they didn't find anything unattractive. The remaining 34% highlighted the following...

The idea

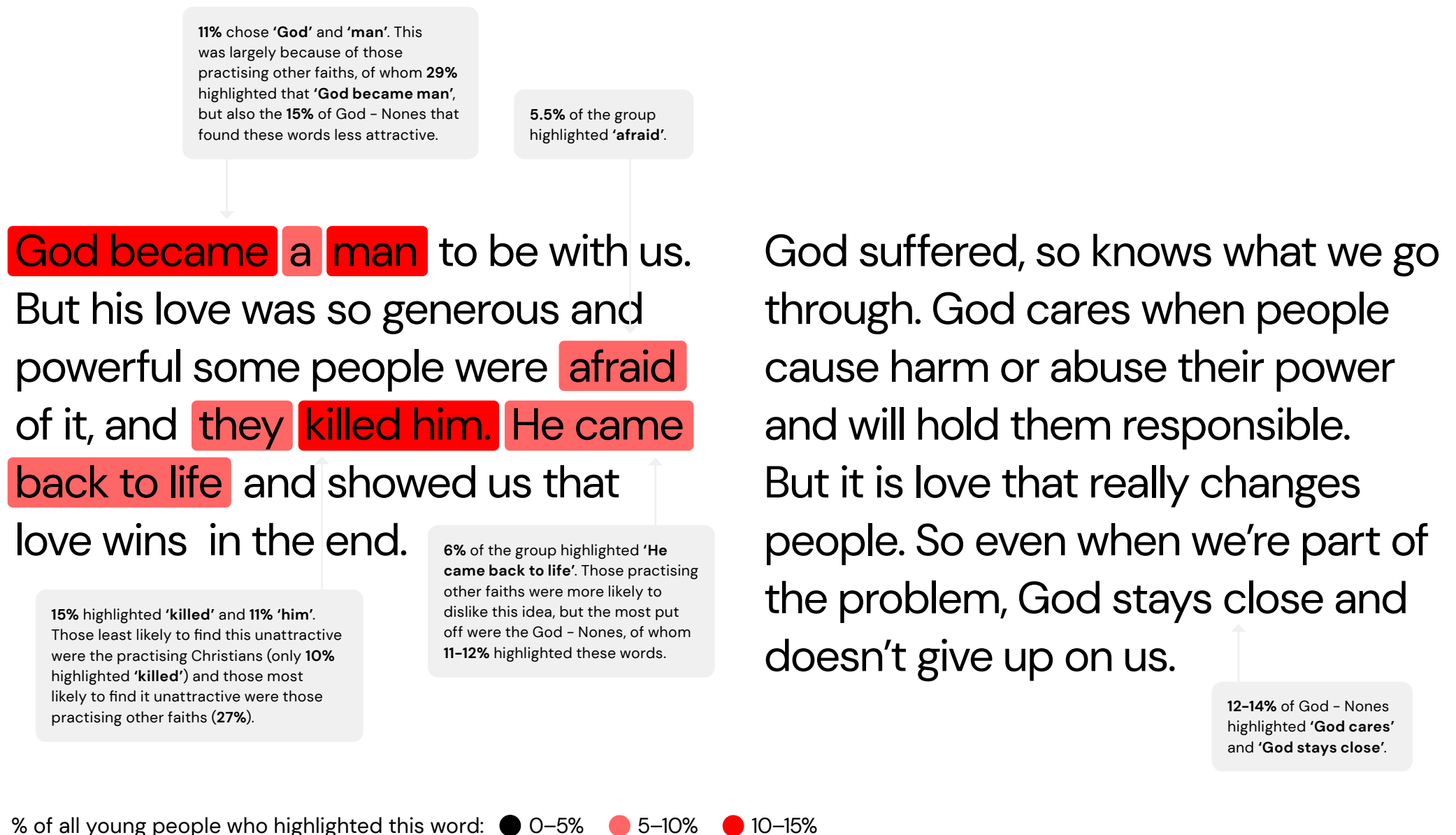
God became a man to be with us. But his love was so generous and powerful some people were **afraid** of it, and **they killed him.** He came **back to life** and showed us that love wins in the end.

What this means for us

God suffered, so knows what we go through. God cares when people cause harm or abuse their power and will hold them responsible. But it is love that really changes people. So even when we're part of the problem, God stays close and doesn't give up on us.

% of all young people who highlighted this word: ● 0–5% ● 5–10% ● 10–15%

Justice



Ideas about God and Justice: What's going on?

We asked young people to tell us why they had highlighted certain words positively or negatively, and their answers tell us something about how they see the world.

Young people found our ideas about God and justice least attractive of all the ideas, and their blue highlighting reflects this, with fewer words chosen by all groups. This theme has many of the most recognisable elements of the Christian gospel in it, including references to Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection.

I like the idea that love wins

The word 'love' was highlighted positively in three different places: God's love being generous and powerful; love winning in the end; and love changing people. Many comments were simply warm about the word love: for example, love is 'positive', 'powerful', 'important' 'vital', 'has no barriers' and that we all 'want to be loved and to love'. Beyond this general sense that love is fundamentally good, some young people were drawn to the idea that God's love has a certain magnitude e.g. 'I like the idea of an all-encompassing love'.

The phrase 'love wins' was highlighted positively by young people across all groups, including those of no religion who believed in God or a Higher Power. Sometimes this was in relation to God e.g. 'That he came back to life to show love wins' and sometimes not – 'The idea of love winning in the end is really nice'. We gave no detail about what we meant by this phrase, and it would have been fascinating to understand more about young people's reactions to specific theologies of judgement, salvation, eternal life and the future of creation. Unfortunately, that was beyond the scope of this research.

God is always there and never gives up on us

Although 'God' was not the most popular word in this theme, there were positive comments from almost all groups, naming God as a source of love, care and kindness. The nominal Christians and God

Ideas about God and Justice: What's going on?

+ Nones wrote about God who 'is always there', 'always has your back' 'doesn't give up on us', 'understands what we go through', and 'cares'. One of these young people wrote 'I like the idea of having someone near.' Similar words were used by practising Christians who wrote that God is 'everywhere,' 'generous', 'great', 'there for you', 'powerful', 'never gives up', 'can relate to my struggles', and 'always cares'. Many of the God – Nones were not keen on the idea of God but saw how the idea of a God who doesn't give up on you offers hope. Some also expressed belief in the power of love to make a difference, even if they were not sure about God.

He gave his only son

Practising Christians wrote about God extensively in their comments. There were one or two whose comments suggested they didn't overly identify with their faith, for

example 'I remember this story from school', but the majority were enthusiastic. For this group this idea resonated 'because it's true' or as another wrote, 'Describes my thoughts on this perfectly'. Although our statements avoided formal theological or 'Christian' language, this group did employ this language in their responses. They wrote about God giving 'his only son to save our lives' and becoming man 'to save us because of his love for all of us'. One young person even wrote 'I like that you can repent and be a better person'. But as well as responses that sounded a little like RE homework, some comments from practising Christians were highly personal, and even emotional in their tone.²⁶

'It's very touching and painful in same because no one want to see somebody suffering or in pain even our worst enemy, GOD been thru all this because he care for us and love us'

'Because I really love Jesus Christ and I think he's very cool and cares about all of us everywhere and every single moment'

Translating it back into familiar religious language

What is perhaps more interesting is that some nominal Christians used quite orthodox theological language in their comments, for example, that God came 'in the form of man to die and show his love', 'sacrificed himself', and 'gave up everything for us to live'. One response simply read 'Saviour'. It is as if some of these young people took our formation and translated it back into the more traditional language of 'rescue', 'saving' and 'forgiveness'. Perhaps they felt more comfortable making sense of this idea in the form they originally encountered it – whether that was at church or school.

'I find this attractive because of his great love for human being he came down and rescue man'

'Loving us, leaving his glory in heaven to come save is really something'

'That even when we do wrong we can be forgiven and understood. That by loving we can achieve great things. That we have nothing to fear and need to accept and love'

And though more unusual, this kind of comment was also found among those who said they had no religion, e.g. 'God sacrificed his own life for us'.

26. RE stands for Religious Education, a subject all pupils learn about in UK schools.

Ideas about God and Justice: What’s going on?

Heartwarming

This theme included ideas that many young people found strange and hard to relate to, and yet some commented that it was full of ‘very positive encouraging words’. They used phrases like ‘It makes me feel there is still hope’, ‘It is comforting and makes me feel better’ and ‘makes me feel safe’. One young person even wrote: ‘I find the message very heartwarming’.

Justice and accountability were marginal themes

Although we didn’t use the word ‘justice’ anywhere in the survey, it was a key concept, because earlier phases of the research had shown that ideas of accountability, mercy and judgement were important to young people. So, it was interesting that very few were drawn to the elements of this theme that focused on justice. The few who did

highlight words from this section positively came from a range of our six groups and tended to write about ‘bad people’ who should be ‘accountable’ or held ‘responsible for bad deeds’ or ‘causing harm’. These young people were pleased that ‘This god doesn’t let bad people off for there sins’. In one case because ‘I want the people who have hurt me to be punished’.

Less attractive

Young people highlighted more words/phrases in red for this theme, than any other, and had a range of reasons, which have been highlighted here. For some, ideas about God and resurrection were simply not credible, believable or ‘relatable’, and they found it difficult to connect to them in any way. This was expressed in statements like ‘It just doesn’t seem realistic’ and ‘This is a myth’.

For others, references to God being killed were just unpleasant. For most of these young people it wasn’t that they had any theological or philosophical grounds for rejecting this idea – it was simply that the thought of ‘killing’, ‘suffering’, ‘death’, ‘pain’ and ‘violence’ was – in their own words – ‘nasty’, ‘scary’, ‘horrid’, ‘messed up’, ‘awful’, ‘graphic’, ‘worrying’, ‘negative’ and ‘brutal’. In one young person’s words:

‘This sounds really depressing to me. I hope it’s not true.’

Some of the practising Christians didn’t like to think of Christ’s suffering because ‘The word killed him made me feel guilty’. Another young person agreed: ‘I feel bad what god had to go through but he done it for us.’

These ideas were confusing for some. How could God create people then became a person?

How could God be killed? Was it Jesus or God who died? How could God forgive and hold people accountable? For a handful of young people, there were also questions about God and gender e.g. ‘Why does he have to be a man why can’t he be a woman?’

For those of other faiths, the idea of God becoming human and being killed was problematic and conflicted with their own beliefs. Their comments tended to express disbelief ‘that God was ever a man’, and that ‘Jesus was crucified and rose’. For these, mostly Muslim, young people, ‘God is a supreme power. He is creator of everything, not the creature. He can’t be a human.’

Finally, there were reasons that will be familiar from our previous themes, including a disbelief in God, believing that God ignores injustice, and rejection of a God who would forgive people who do

Ideas about God and Justice: What's going on?

awful things. Some didn't want God to have become a man, come back to life or stay close and found these ideas 'creepy'. One young person described this idea as 'emotional blackmail', while another felt it depicted God as 'vengeful and spiteful'.

Reflections

Accounts of Jesus' incarnation, life, death and resurrection are full of complexity, and we are under no illusions about the limits of what we presented to young people in a few sentences in this survey. Even so, their responses were revealing. In light of the decline of church attendance and Christian belief, it is interesting that a surprising number of young people were familiar enough with these ideas to use theological language in their comments – whether they identified as Christians or not. When asked what they found attractive, key phrases were 'God

doesn't give up on us' and 'love wins'. In fact, they were more drawn to the idea that God's love is powerful, than to the idea that God suffered and knows what we go through. Most of them ignored the detail of incarnation and resurrection, but responded, quite naturally, with distaste to the violence of Jesus' death. And despite young people's reputation for being deeply concerned with justice and accountability, they weren't particularly interested in God holding people responsible for the things they have done.

Much youth ministry is built on the premise and possibility of long-term relationships, in which young people grow to trust adults enough to go on a journey of faith development. When it comes to helping them understand the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith, time and trust may be more important and necessary now, than they ever have been before.

What might this mean for how we talk about God and justice, and what we do?

1. Go slow when it comes to talking about the cross.

For most young people it's not at all obvious that Jesus' death was a necessary or transformative act of love. Some are open to the idea that there is a God, who loves us and whose love is powerful. But incarnation, death and resurrection are not the logical consequence of this love for them.

2. Question the idea that 'powerful', 'never-giving-up' love keeps its distance.

If the cross is not the logical consequence of God's love, then we need to take young people on a journey – exploring what it means for God to love, and making the case for his intervention in human history 2000 years ago. Is God's love a fuzzy abstract truth, or does it mean he might actually get involved with our lives? And if

he did/does get involved, how and why?

3. Don't assume young people accept the idea of sin, accountability or the need for personal transformation.

Gospel presentations often invite people to acknowledge a state of fallenness, but for many young people this is not a given. We may need to open conversations that critique ideas like 'I don't need to change for anyone', as well as telling personal stories about the power of, and need for, forgiveness.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Part 4

Which words/phrases were most attractive to each group?

Top 20 words by group

Looking at the top 20 words each group found **most attractive** reveals some of the common themes, and distinct features of each. In some cases, these words were part of a wider phrase, and at other times stood alone.²⁷

God – None

For some young people in this group, the word 'God' is a trigger. They have strong convictions about Christian ideas being cruel, unjust or not credible and very few words were viewed positively. Where they did highlight words in blue, the most popular phrase was 'always feel loved', though this was only chosen by 18%. After this, a similar number (10–12%) highlighted the words and phrases 'amazing life', 'no more suffering/tears', 'peace', 'hope for [the] future', 'just as you are' and 'significant'.

If anything resonated, it was themes of hope and love, but these were detached from any idea of God.

Higher Power + Nones

'Always feel loved just as you are' was the most attractive phrase for young people who are open to a Higher Power, followed by 'peace', 'amazing life' and 'significant'. These words were chosen by 20–28% of this group. A further 15–18% highlighted 'no more suffering', 'better place' and 'anxious', perhaps suggesting that anxiety is a more 'live' concern for some of these young people, than those in other groups.

Much like the God – Nones, love and hope were the most resonant themes, though they were less likely to highlight references to community, or people working together.

27. It's important to put this into the wider context, which is that, for each of our five ideas, between 40–55% of young people told us they didn't find anything attractive.

Which words/phrases were most attractive to each group?

God + None

'No more suffering' was the phrase these young people found most attractive, followed by 'always feel loved', 'peace', 'hope for future', 'amazing life', 'family working together' and 'better world'. It was still a minority (between 20-30%) who highlighted these words.

For those who are open to God but not religious, it is ideas of hope, relief from pain and being part of a community working for a better world that were most attractive.

Nominal Christians

For nominal Christians, 'no more suffering/tears' was marginally most attractive, but followed closely by 'feel loved', 'loving, no matter' and 'amazing life'. After this in their top 20 words/phrases were 'peace', '[God is] powerful', '[God] loves', 'world better', 'significant', and 'family'. Between 21% and 28% chose these words.

This group were most likely to highlight words from our ideas around love and hope. But even as 'nominal' Christians, ideas about God being loving and powerful show up in their top 20 words.

Practising Christians

Half of this group (51%) highlighted the phrase 'God's love is powerful', with a further 40% highlighting 'God is powerful' and 'God created [and] loves [the] whole world'. 31-37% also highlighted 'things better', 'within', 'suffering', 'amazing life', 'loving', nature' and 'matter'.

This group highlighted far more words than the others and were most likely to be drawn to phrases about God's love and power. In their top 20 were references to nature and the whole world, suggesting their faith gives them a more global perspective of love.

Practising Other Faith

45% of those practising other faiths chose 'God's love is powerful', 45% highlighted 'God created and loves the whole world' and 39% 'God is powerful'. A further 27-31% chose the words 'peace', 'amazing life', 'hope [for the] future', 'loving people' and 'loved'.

As with the practising Christians, it was references to God as a creative source of love and power that were most attractive, as well as words that described the life God wants us to have.

Which words/phrases were most attractive to each group?

Pulling it all together...

Those who had no religion and didn't believe in God (God – Nones and Higher power + Nones) identified words and phrases that emphasised the kind of life they wanted personally ('loved as you are', 'amazing life', 'hope for your future', 'significance', 'peace') and their hopes for the wider world ('no suffering', 'a better place').

The God + Nones who believed in, or who were open to God also chose these words, but added 'family working together', suggesting they are more open to a communal experience.

Nominal Christians were similarly drawn to ideas about love, life, and the relief of suffering, but also choose the words 'love' and 'power' in relation to God.

Finally, practising Christians and those practising other religions were distinct in choosing to highlight that 'God created and loves the whole world'. Practising Christians added 'nature' and 'within' suggesting a comfort with the idea of God's indwelling through the Holy Spirit. Those practising other religions also highlighted 'loving people', revealing a spirituality that turns toward others.

Overall, these distinct preferences seem to suggest that the more that young people identify with, or are open to God, the more they centre God as a source of love, power and hope for the whole world.



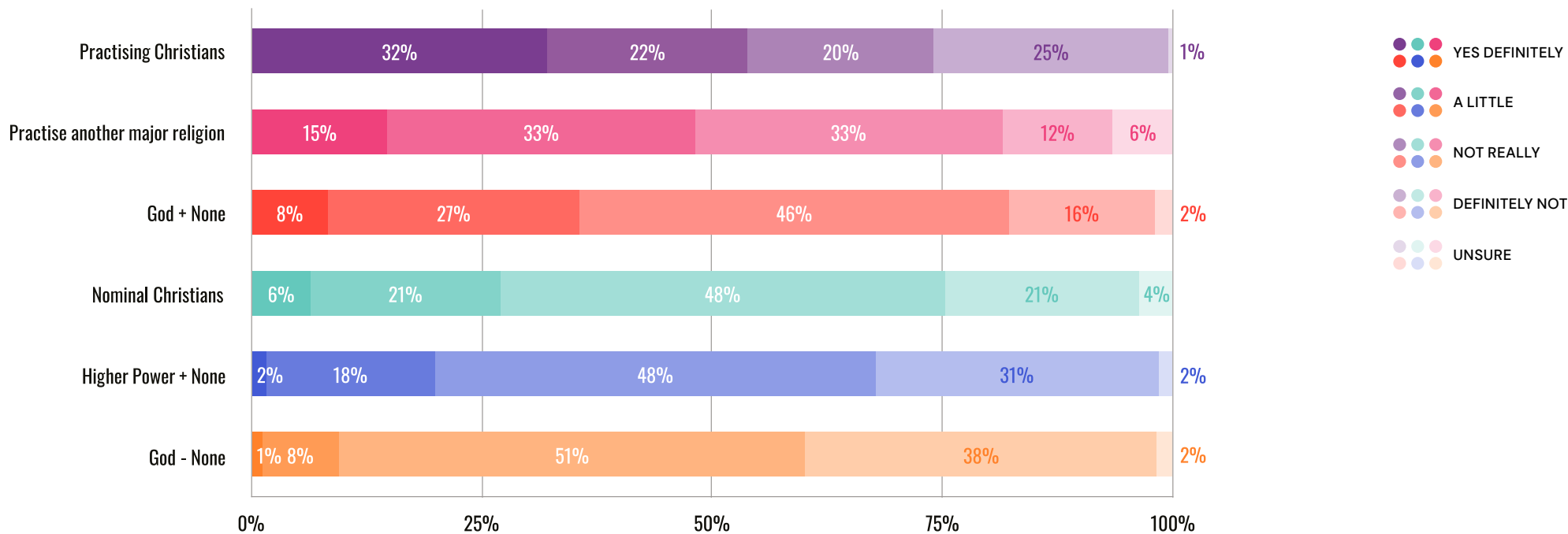
'It touches my heart but I'm unsure if I believe.'

How did they feel about Christianity by the end?

At the end of the survey we asked, ‘The ideas you have been reading are Christian beliefs. Did this surprise you?’ At one extreme were the practising Christians, who were left feeling more positive about their faith after reading these ideas and at the other, the God – Nones, who were more likely to be unsurprised and unmoved. Nevertheless, in every group there was some movement, which is encouraging!

CHART 4

The ideas you have been reading are Christian beliefs. Did this surprise you?



How did they feel about Christianity by the end?



Practising Christians: surprised and positive

It was the practising Christians who were most surprised, with nearly a third (32%) saying 'Yes definitely'. Almost two-thirds (65%) said they were more positive about their faith after reading these ideas.



Practising other faiths: surprised but less moved

A third (33%) felt 'a little' surprised and 15% 'definitely' surprised to hear these were Christian ideas. As a result, just under a quarter (24%) felt more positive about Christianity having read these ideas.



God + Nones, and Nominals: somewhere in the middle

Young people in these groups sat somewhere between the two poles, but God + Nones expressed greater surprise and more positivity than nominal Christians. In total, 35% of God + Nones and 27% of nominals were in some way surprised that these were Christian ideas. Nearly a quarter of God + Nones (24%) and a fifth (20%) of nominal Christians, were more positive after the survey.



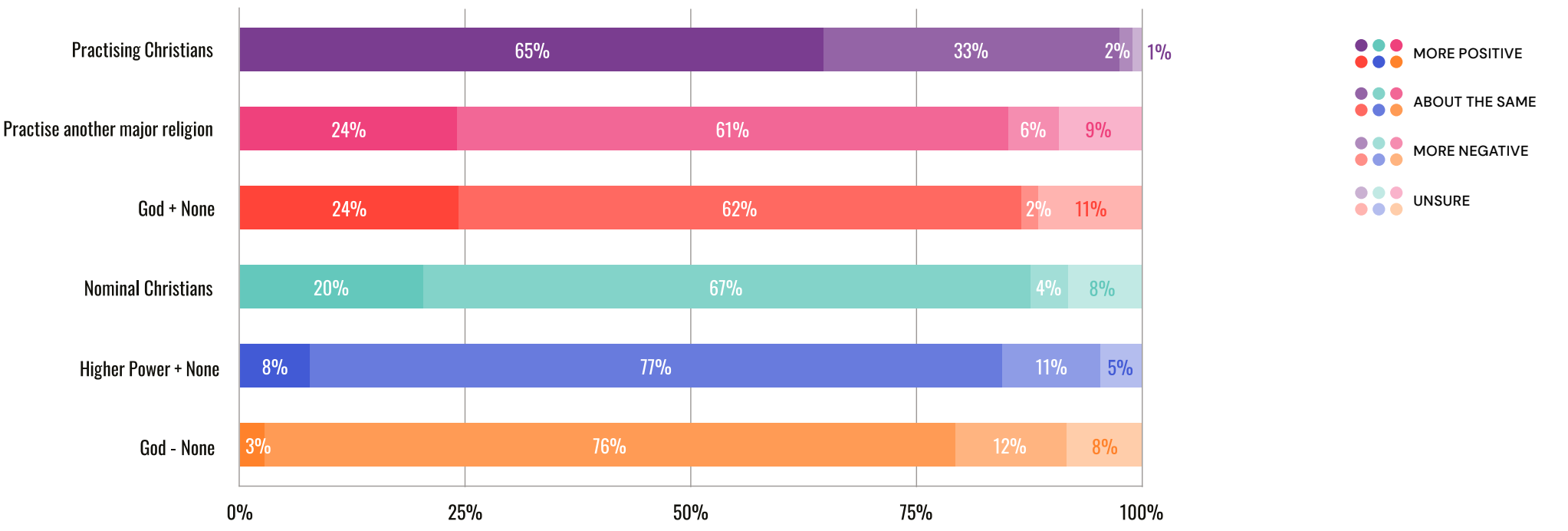
God - Nones and Higher Power + Nones: unmoved and unsurprised

Those least surprised were those least likely to believe in God. Only 9% of the God - Nones expressed any surprise, though this rose to 20% of the Higher Power + Nones, reflecting slightly more openness. Just over three-quarters of young people in both groups felt the same about Christianity post-survey and 11-12% felt more negative.

How did they feel about Christianity by the end?

CHART 5

After reading these ideas, do you feel differently about the Christian faith?



How did they feel about Christianity by the end?

Reflection

Perhaps the most surprising thing here is seeing how much more positive the practising Christians were about their faith after reading these ideas than any other group. This is a group of young people who identify with the Christian faith and who, in their comments, seem quite comfortable using the language of God and faith. We might find it hard to believe that 19.8% of young people are practising Christians as we would define this. But there is quite a lot of consistency between the way they scored ideas, highlighted words, and explained why – all of which suggest their religious identity is not superficial.

It may be that many of these young people are not part of church communities, or perhaps that they have never heard Christian ideas expressed in more informal

language. Whatever the reason, they are a group who are open and warm to these ideas, and for whom adapting the language we use may help engage them further.

Young people in the God – None group were more likely to feel unmoved or even more negative after reading these ideas. Their convictions and beliefs about religion appear strong, considered, and unlikely to be affected by a short online survey. Consequently, they might be more open to engaging with more traditional apologetics. Even so, nearly one in 10 felt more positive about Christianity after reading these ideas.

Then there were the God + Nones and those practising other faiths, a quarter of whom were left

surprised and more positive about Christianity after the survey, a higher proportion than the nominal Christians. It has sometimes been suggested that nominalism might prevent people from being genuinely open and curious to faith, because people think they already know what a faith is about. If this is the case, it could make sense of why those who don't see themselves as Christian, even nominally, were at times more open to these ideas about God.

What did they overlook, and what might that tell us?

We asked what young people found more, and less, attractive, but there were lots of words, phrases and sentences they tended to just ignore. Arguably, these are just as important for telling us something about the way young people see the world, and how they respond to ideas about the Christian faith. Below are the sentences and phrases that, looking back over the previous sections, have no, or almost no words highlighted.

As a whole group, young people tended to overlook the following.²⁸

Elements of the Christian gospel relating to Jesus' life, death and resurrection – including his vulnerability

- 'God became a man to be with us.'
- 'Some people were afraid of [God's love], and they killed him.'
- 'He came back to life.'
- 'God suffered, so knows what we go through.'

References to a 'story'

- 'There is a story that has been passed down through generations, about God and the world.'
- 'It makes sense of our lives and why we're here.'
- 'The story is still being lived today.'

The idea of God wanting to be close

- 'Rather than just love you from afar, God wants to be close.'

Encouragements about how the world will become 'better'

- 'There are no quick fixes or easy answers.'
- 'You know you can't do it alone, and it's not all down to you to fix things.'

References to failure, accountability, and personal change

- 'God cares when people cause harm or abuse their power and will hold them responsible.'
- 'You are part of the change.'
- 'You also try to love other people in the same way.'
- 'To help you every day to grow and change.'
- 'God even loves using our mistakes and failures.'
- 'So even when we're part of the problem.'

28. The previous sections revealed some important distinctions between the groups when it came to their responses to these ideas, so this summary should be read in the context of that wider analysis.

What did they overlook, and what might that tell us?²⁹

From what we have learned so far, many of these young people:

1

Prefer abstract ideas about God's love, to the concrete, historical expression of it; some find it confusing and not 'relatable'.

4

Like the idea of a better world and having hope for their future but are less enthusiastic about there being no easy answers, or about being part of the change.

2

Like the idea of God being loving and powerful more than God becoming human, and therefore knowing our vulnerability and suffering.

5

Are positive about feeling loved and their lives having significance, but less interested in thinking about personal change.

3

Want to feel loved but can be concerned or confused about God wanting to be close to them.

6

Would rather think about love than about their own weakness, mistakes, or failures and about God holding people accountable for their actions.

29. These 'overlooked' phrases, alongside young people's ratings, and comments on all five ideas, help us begin to understand some of the nuances in their views and perspectives. We have summarised some of these in the list below, though they are most likely to be true of those who don't see themselves as practising Christians. They are supported by the evidence in the survey, but it would be very valuable for future research to explore and test these ideas further.

Part 5

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

The 'who'

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time survey research with teenagers has analysed their views according to these types of faith orientations. Separating out those of 'no religion' by their feelings about God and/or a Higher Power has revealed some meaningful distinctions that suggest we should adapt what we say according to who is listening. You may want to use the questions we asked to do a quick survey of young people in your area, school year or group, so that you can see what percentage would fit into each faith orientation.

Practising Christians

Find them, teach them, invite them to be part of a community.

Nearly one in five of our representative sample said they practised Christianity – much higher than the number who are part of a church community. These are the young people who told us they were most surprised by the ideas we presented, and who felt most positively about them. This suggests there are young people you already engage with who are largely positive about Christian faith but could do with learning more about it. There may be specific reasons they aren't part of a Christian community, and it would be worth asking them about it to see if you can overcome these barriers and make your church or group a more hospitable place for them.

Nominal Christians

Help them find accurate language for their faith orientation.

This group describe themselves as Christians, but don't necessarily believe in God or practise their religion. The comments suggest that some of them are familiar with Christian language and ideas, but they were less drawn to, and less curious about, our five themes than young people who said they have no religion, but were open to the idea of God. For nominals holding onto some Christian identity that doesn't hold much personal meaning might make them less open to the faith. Perhaps encouraging young people to find more accurate language for their faith orientation is an important step in a potential journey toward faith – even if it means shedding the label of 'Christian'!

God + None

Explore their feelings about God compared with Christianity.

This group made up 15.7% of our sample and were more positive and interested in our five ideas, than those who were nominally Christian. They were also more likely to be surprised to hear these were Christian ideas, and more likely to want to find out more. These young people may be the ones who are most open to invitations to learn more about Christian faith, or to take part in events. Because they are open to the idea of God, it may be possible to talk more directly about their ideas and feelings about God, as distinct from their ideas and feelings about the Christian faith. Understanding why they would not call themselves Christians may be a good question to explore.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

Higher Power + Nones

Recognise shared desires and commitments.

This is a group of young people who don't believe in, or aren't bothered about the idea of God, but are open to the possibility of a Higher Power. This distinction was important within the data, where we saw this group giving nearly all five ideas average scores below zero (compared with God + Nones whose scores were all above zero). Nevertheless, a fifth of them were surprised to hear that these were Christian ideas and 8% felt more positive about Christianity as a result of the survey. These young people were drawn to the idea of being loved as you are, being at peace, having an amazing life, a sense of significance and hope for the future. Along with the God – Nones, they also found attractive

the idea of a future in which there was no more suffering. For young people in this group, conversation about shared desires may be a good place to start, rather than ideas about God or faith.

God – None

Build positive relationships and offer apologetics.

17.8% of our sample reported having no religion, and not believing in, or not being bothered by, God. For some this may be general disinterest, but others clearly had significant intellectual and/or emotional objections to Christian faith. These were the young people most likely to highlight the word 'God' as unattractive. The strong negative feelings about God held by some young people in this group suggest a need for both sensitivity and trust-building. But they share other young people's desire for love, hope, peace and a future with 'no more tears'. Within this, it may be that having a clear idea of what you disagree with or dislike (e.g. God allowing suffering or forgiving evil) creates the possibility of engaging in more direct apologetics.

Practising Other Faith

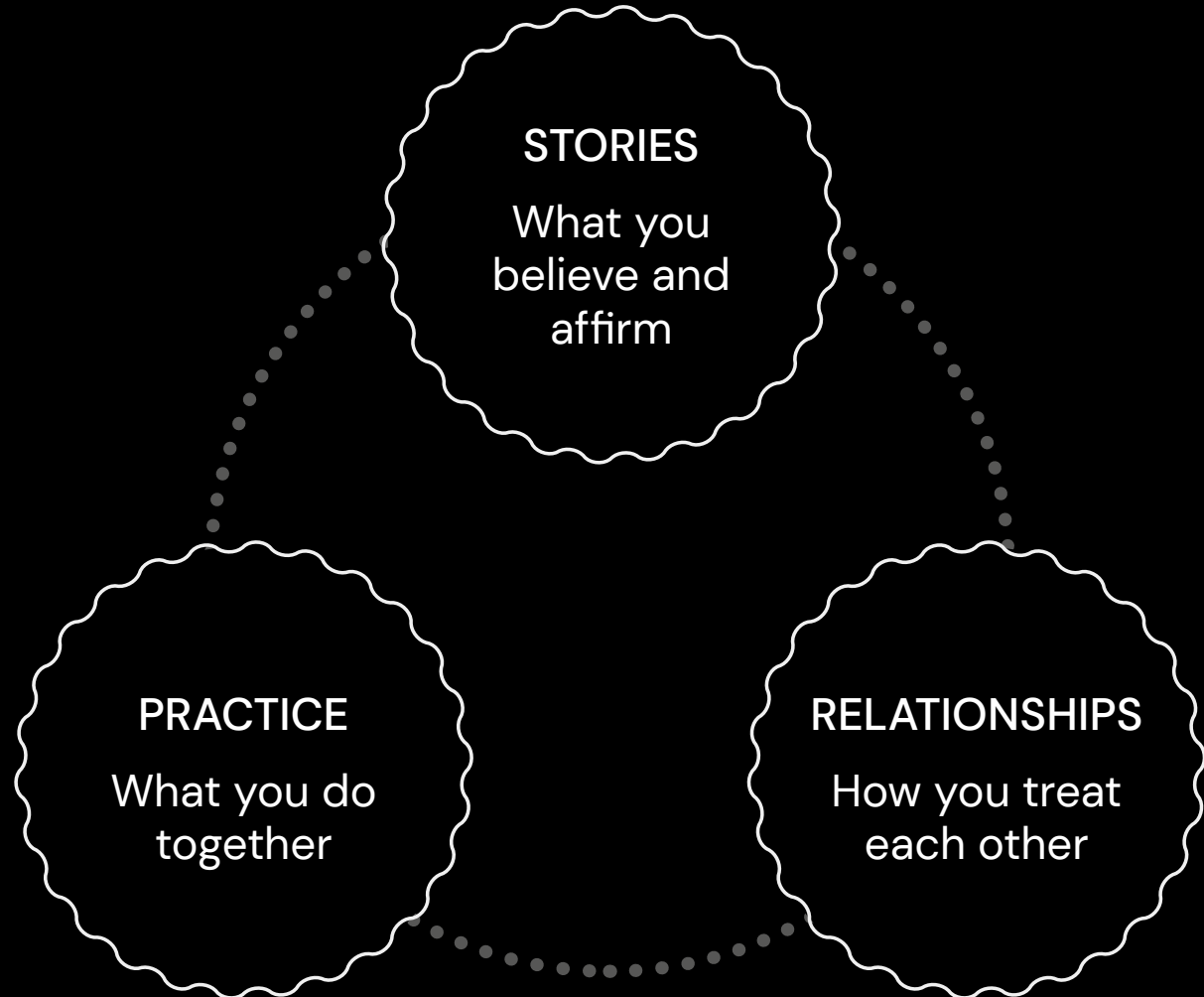
Acknowledge differences and connections.

Young people who told us they practised another major religion were just over 10% of our sample, and primarily Muslim. Of all the groups, they were closest to the practising Christians, when it came to their worldview and survey responses, particularly around God's love, power and the significance of community. Nearly a quarter (24%) felt more positive about Christianity after completing the survey, and these young people were almost as curious about the ideas of love and life presented to them, as practising Christians were. Recognising these common perspectives could be the basis of growing relationship with these young people, while being aware of and sensitive to incompatible beliefs.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

The 'how'

There are three parts to the 'how'. The first is the stories or ideas you share with young people. Scripture is the foundation of the 'stories' we tell about God and the world, but this also includes testimony and various kinds of teaching resources. The second is the relational culture you create in your community, whether that's a youth group or the wider church. The third is your practices – what do you actually do when you're together? All three of these can 'carry' the gospel message, helping young people see and experience the good news in a myriad of ways.



What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

In all three of these, we can help young people to notice God at work in what they already know and experience. We can value and validate aspects of their lives, relationships and culture that matter to them, and through which they already experience love, hope, joy or any other aspect of the goodness of God's kingdom. But we can also help them to see what is beyond, and what is distinctly Christian in who we are, which means making small or big choices toward Christian faith both possible, and more plausible. This could look like any of the following.

Stories

1. Share ideas that are both culturally resonant and culturally radical. It's a good idea to use words and ideas that translate easily into young people's existing worldview (e.g. God will 'always be there for you'). But let's also use stories and concepts that might challenge and surprise (e.g. God will also allow you to suffer). Some of the most transformative ideas are the most disruptive.

2. Ask young people 'What else does this make you think of?' or 'Does this remind you of anything in your life?' to help them make connections between scripture, and the places in their lives or culture where something similar may be going on. This can be more powerful than assuming we know how to 'apply' the learning point of a particular passage.

3. Create contexts for extended discussion, where you don't always have a point (or three) you are trying to make, but where learning emerges. In environments where we're facilitating but not forcing conclusions, it's much easier for young people to share their honest thoughts, and for us to see where the links are between their everyday lives and what God might be up to.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

Relationships

1. In all of this, we have taken for granted something which should be stated explicitly. That ministry for and with young people, means coming alongside them with practical demonstrations of unconditional love and commitment. If the way we treat young people doesn't embody something of God's love for them, then what we say will carry very little weight.

2. There are ways of relating to one another that are particularly Christian, and sometimes quite counter-cultural. Being reflective and intentional about these, will help us to create communities in which young people directly experience what it means to have faith. This could include a commitment to being open about getting things wrong, keeping short accounts, or proactively including the vulnerable or otherwise socially excluded.

3. As well as communicating the gospel in the way we treat each other, it's important to be able and willing to talk with young people about how this might conflict with the norms of their social groups, and what they see online. So when you create a new, and alternative social norm in your group, name it, and talk about why it matters.

Practices

1. Developing a 'rule of life' doesn't just have to be for adults. You can invite young people to experiment with different Christian practices that will bring home to them what it means to be a disciple. Often the best way to do this, is by really getting to know what's going on for young people, so that the practices you invite them to experience connect with their real needs and desires.

2. One of the best ways for young people to see the practical difference Christianity makes, is to see communities of Christians who practise what they hear preached. But this can be much broader than worship, reading the Bible and attending church. Take a look at our research report 'We do God' for ideas of how to develop corporate rhythms or habits around rest, justice, hospitality and worship.

3. Finally, do make explicit links between the stories you tell from scripture, and the practices young people participate in. This includes some of the things Christian youth groups just tend to 'do' but which they may not always see as being a Christian practice – like 'welcoming' or 'celebration'. Again, we discuss this in the 'We do God' report, which identifies the places where the 'theory' and 'practice' of Christian youth work are out of step.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

The 'what'

Earlier in the report we made suggestions about what the research might mean for how we talk about these aspects of the gospel. Here we have gathered them in one place, to highlight how the content of what we communicate could be affected by what we learned in this survey.

Love

Help them understand unconditional love.

Young people's worldview leans toward being inclusive and holistic, so they are likely to be warm toward God's love being inclusive of the whole of creation. But we need to invite them to consider that God's unconditional love is more radical than they might be comfortable with. This includes those they might reject: those with offensive views, the cancelled, 'enemies'.

Broaden what love looks like.

Authenticity, acceptance, and equality are some of the hallmarks of 'good' relationships, not just for young people but more generally in our culture. We can hold up a mirror to this worldview and help them consider other aspects of

love that they might be less familiar or comfortable with, including sacrificial service, patience, and forgiveness. As above, this would include the possibility that we can love others even when we disagree with them.

Hope

Talk about heaven.

Beyond a general sense that the world could become 'better', there is a group of young people who are drawn to the possibility that one day there could be 'no more suffering'. Although heaven may seem unrealistic to some, the Christian vision of a time of ultimate justice and healing may be quite resonant for others. Perhaps we need to be more confident in talking about the 'new heavens and the new earth' and what that hope means.

Be nuanced about hope.

There is evidence here of a strong desire for a better world amongst some of the young people we surveyed, but also a sense of realism about what it means to live with suffering, slow change and the balance between God's work and our own. We therefore need to take account of these nuances, and be thoughtful when talking to young people about the realities of holding hope as Christians. This could include wrestling with the idea that working toward the realization of a shared hope for others sometimes means allowing our individual goals to be transformed, or even sacrificed.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

Life

Help them understand the unique character of God's life and peace.

Young people are drawn to the idea of having an amazing life, and particularly to the possibility of experiencing peace. But in the kingdom of God, this life and this peace have distinct qualities that we can help them understand. For example, the idea of losing our life to gain it, or peace that surpasses all understanding.

Make the case for our need to change.

In this survey it seems that most young people didn't want to think about their mistakes and failures, even if the message was 'You're loved', 'God doesn't give up' or 'He can use your mistakes'. Neither was the word 'change' highlighted positively – perhaps because of our wider cultural emphasis on self-acceptance and authenticity.

We could think about ways to talk about personal transformation in discipleship that make sense to young people e.g. 'taking ownership of who you want to be' as well as less familiar theological concepts, like 'dying to self'.

Acknowledge that not all young people want God to be close.

We have always emphasised God wanting a 'personal relationship' with young people, but there's some evidence here to suggest some (though not all) find the idea of God wanting to be close to them or within them, creepy or weird. While they do want to be loved, we need to bear this in mind. This could mean taking time to explain it well, emphasising that God doesn't force or control us, and treading a little more carefully with these young people.

Community

Where possible, affirm and work with young people's families.

We know family is important to young people, even when it's complicated or painful. How can we link young people's experience of and desire for family, with a vision for church that includes genuine belonging, unconditional love, and active participation? Can we help young people see that everyone in their family is significant to God, and can be part of this wider community too?

Name the pressure points and share the load.

Some young people liked the idea of feeling less pressure, both because God is at work in the world, and because there are other communities working to make things better. Can we develop ways to name the pressure they feel, and use scripture and prayer to help them

release some of these burdens, and share the load?

Explain why and how you use the word 'story'.

Story has become a popular way to frame nearly all communication, from the images we string together in social media posts, to the narratives used by advertisers. Young people's responses to this survey remind us that for some, the word creates curiosity while others it simply means 'untrue'. Let's be aware of this, and engage with various concepts of truth when we talk about the 'story of God'.

What does all this mean for how we share the gospel?

Justice

Go slow when it comes to talking about the cross.

For most young people it's not at all obvious that Jesus' death was a necessary or transformative act of love. Some are open to the idea that there is a God, who loves us and whose love is powerful. But incarnation, death and resurrection are not the logical consequence of this love for them.

Question the idea that 'powerful', 'never-giving-up' love keeps its distance.

If the cross is not the logical consequence of God's love, then we need to take young people on a journey – exploring what it means for God to love, and making the case for his intervention in human history 2000 years ago. Is God's love a fuzzy abstract truth, or does it mean he might actually

get involved with our lives? And if he did/does get involved, how and why?

Don't assume young people accept the idea of sin, accountability or the need for personal transformation.

Gospel presentations often invite people to acknowledge a state of fallenness, but for many young people this is not a given. We may need to open conversations that critique ideas like 'I don't need to change for anyone', as well as telling personal stories about the power of, and need for, forgiveness.

The fork in the road

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked.

'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

John 11:33-37

Travelling together

One way to make sense of all this, is to think about our work with young people as walking along a road together. This research suggests there is a good distance we can travel together, side by side. It's likely we have a mutual desire for unconditional love, for a less judgemental culture, for inclusivity, for creation to be cared for, for a sense of significance, and for being part of a family that makes the world a better place.

On this first part of the journey, we can hopefully see where young people already experience many of the things we want to share with them, in some way. We can ask about their experiences of love, friendship, grace, and hope – and affirm both their desires and their experiences.

God is present on this leg of the journey. Maybe as an occasional sense that there is a loving force 'out there'. Perhaps in relationships they have with believing family members. Some will have their own direct experiences with faith or God in some way. Whatever the individual story, we believe God is present in young people's everyday lives.

The fork in the road

A fork appears

But then there is a fork in the road, and the path of a Christian worldview begins to take young people beyond what is culturally familiar, or comfortable.

In this territory, they are loved, but it is within a growing acceptance that they are imperfect. In this landscape, change is not a dirty word and we're taught to forgive 70 × 7 times. On this part of the journey love is not distant and God is not an unconditionally kind but benign force. Here, love has no gender, and yet God became male. In this world, a loving God suffered, allows suffering and transforms suffering.

This fork in the road appears in different ways. It can be through understanding; where young people are presented with ideas that are

new, challenging, disturbing and maybe even exciting. It can also be in relationships, where young people see Christians deal with the world differently.

Plausibility shelters are spaces where it begins to make sense to have faith. These can be created by counter-cultural communities or relationships. For example, where a youth group is hospitable, or an adult keeps forgiving you, or a church stands up against injustice. This alternative reality creates a fork in the road, the possibility of choosing to move beyond a fuzzy, benign force and toward a God with real form and character.

If there is no fork, God remains nice and far away, and love never becomes concrete.

What kind of love is this?

Jesus has always divided the crowd, as the passage from John 11 reminds us. There is no making the gospel popular.

But we can, by listening, try to help those who have ears to hear. We can remove some of the obstacles, so that they can see and understand what is being offered. We can walk alongside them in their desire for love, hope, peace and justice. And we can also begin to show them what Christian expressions of these look like, and how these are distinct.

And then we can say

'Would you like to know more about **this** kind of justice?
This kind of peace?
This kind of hope?
This kind of love?'

And some will, we pray, keep walking with us.

How we will respond – Scripture Union

The late John Stott introduced the concept of ‘double listening’ – that essential task of listening carefully to the ever-changing world as we look to help the youngest generation who swim in that world to explore the unchanging Word of God and be transformed by the saviour they find there.

We at Scripture Union are excited to be working with Youthscape on this most recent exercise of careful listening and we eagerly anticipate future results from the *Translating God* series. For over 150 years SU has been listening to a world changing at an ever-faster pace until, as we see in this research, it is no longer relevant to think of a whole generation with common attitudes.

As we reflect together on this study, like Stott we might find what we hear challenging or even painful: young people for whom the church is at best rather irrelevant and at worst judged hostile to their deeply held cultural principles; who are attracted by an all-loving God but resist the idea of a self-giving Jesus; and who welcome a God of power who will make things right, but shrink from a relational God who might desire their personal transformation.

However, I am convinced that if we listen carefully to these young voices we also hear a huge gospel opportunity. For, this youngest generation might see organised Christianity as a turnoff but they are more open to spiritual matters than many previous generations; a position of authority may be suspect, but an authentic fellow-traveller is greatly valued; the challenges they throw at the Bible may not be ours but their response to the Bible story is genuine and visceral.

To build on this gospel opportunity, in the last few years Scripture Union has been working with likeminded missional organisations and local churches to reshape our collective approach to reaching the 95% of the youngest generation who have no real contact with the church or the gospel. As brought into stark focus by this study, we found this meant being willing to be vulnerable and authentic as we connect with the young people where they are; being humble, recognising there is no quick single answer and being ready for a long term journey with the young people as they explore spiritual matters; and being willing to support the young people themselves as they

work out what a worshipping Christian community means in their unique context. The result was SU’s *Revealing Jesus* mission framework for faith journeying with the 95.

However, in an ever-changing world we too must be ever-changing and so, a few years after launching *Revealing Jesus*, we recently entered another listening exercise leading to the launch of our *Mission Support* package. So we are excited to begin to digest this study, allow it to open our eyes to the radically different response by young people to the unchanging truth of God’s Good News, and influence all we do through our holidays, missions, resources and local mission support. Why not join us on this journey!

MYLES MACBEAN
NATIONAL DIRECTOR
SCRIPTURE UNION ENGLAND AND WALES

How we will respond – Youthscape

Research is interesting, but it's irrelevant unless we let it change us and respond. That's what we are committed to doing at Youthscape. Over the coming months we'll be reviewing the resources we create, the programmes we offer and the events we run. All will need to be shaped by the voices of young people in this report.

Some have written off this generation in terms of the Christian faith. Others have suggested that young people are much more interested and open than expected. The truth in this report is much more nuanced and complex. That means we have more work to do to apply it, there is no quick-fix. We plan to come back to this report again and again and to listen hard to the voices of young people in it.

Finding young people so apathetic to Christian faith is a hard truth to hear. I fear the church has some responsibility for where we find ourselves. So the response isn't about repackaging ourselves in the clothes of today's culture. It's not just a 'comms' exercise for a missionary marketing team. Young people are telling us something deeper about how they see us. Perhaps they are apathetic for good reason. Young people have a gift for

seeing through the bulls**t and spotting reality. But it's not without hope. The fact that their apathy is warm is a positive indication there's still a conversation to be had, providing it's one that's more honest about the moments we fail as well as when we do good. An authentic gospel needs an authentic church.

The second action for us, reading this report, is finding ways to tell the stories of Jesus to young people in even more vivid and relevant ways. The research tells us young people are much more interested in the thought of a distant yet loving God, keeping politely out of the way. Less so, the gritty reality of a vulnerable, broken Saviour.

I'm taking that as a challenge rather than yielding. Youthscape will be working hard to find imaginative ways to draw young people back to the gospel stories. I think that's where the conversation with young people could really get interesting. The radical, sometimes shocking, words and actions of Jesus seem to me to be the best starting place to reacquaint young people with the Christian faith. We have to figure out more imaginative ways of doing that and we'll be working hard on this.

Thirdly, Youthscape has to understand young people in a deeper more nuanced way – the six different types identified in this report may be attending the same school and taking the same GCSE's, but they have important differences in how they view faith and it's relevance to their world. Our resources and training will need to help youth workers become more responsive to each of those types, better understanding their views and acknowledging where they're coming from. As we create new materials for youth groups, we'll be coming back again and again to those six types and asking ourselves whether we've recognised them in our content.

There is much more of Translating God still to come, and we'll be publishing further reports later this year. But this is quite a lot to digest for now! As an organisation we want to let the voices in this report echo around our prayers and worship, our strategy discussions and our planning and day-to-day work. We are listening – and learning.

CHRIS CURTIS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
YOUTHSCAPE

Appendices

Ethnicity of survey participants³⁰

English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British	71%
Irish	1%
Any other White background	1%
Indian	4%
Pakistani	5%
Bangladeshi	2%
Any other Asian background	1%
African	4%
Caribbean	2%
Any other Black / African / Caribbean background	1%
Arab	1%
Mixed / multiple ethnicities	6%
Prefer not to say	3%

Regional breakdown of survey participants

North East	6%
North West	12%
Yorkshire	9%
East Midlands	8%
West Midlands	10%
East of England	7%
South East	13%
South West	6%
London	16%
Scotland	6%
Wales	5%
Northern Ireland	2%

30. Figures have been rounded up and therefore do not add up to 100%.

Appendices

Survey questions used to construct the six groups

	RELIGIOUS IDENTITY Which of the following best describes you?	BELIEF IN GOD Do you believe there is a God or Gods?	BELIEF IN HIGHER POWER Do you believe there is some sort of higher power or cosmic force?	PRACTICE OF RELIGION Which of these best describes how seriously you practice as a X? (When we say practice we mean things like prayer, reading religious books/texts, attending services, worship, meditation)
Practising Christians n=193	Christian	Yes	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so Not sure, not bothered No	Very seriously Quite seriously
Nominal Christians n=218	Christian	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so Not sure, not bothered No	Not very seriously Not at all seriously Prefer not to say
Everyone who identified as Christian but was not in the Practising Christian category.	Christian	Not sure, not bothered No	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so Not sure, not bothered No	Very seriously Quite seriously Not very seriously Not at all seriously Prefer not to say
Practising other major religion n=108	Buddhist, Hindu, Jew Muslim, Sikh	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so Not sure, not bothered No	Very seriously Quite seriously
God + None n=157	I don't belong to any religion	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so Not sure, not bothered No	Not asked
Higher Power + None n=65	I don't belong to any religion	Not sure, not bothered No	Yes Not sure, I'd like to think so	Not asked
God – None n=178	I don't belong to any religion	Not sure, not bothered No	Not sure, not bothered No	Not asked

Appendices

Top ten words highlighted as 'more attractive' by young people as a whole group.

RANK	IDEA	WORD	NO. YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HIGHLIGHTED IT
1	Life	Powerful	267
2	Love	Loved	256
3	Hope	Suffering	250
4	Life	Amazing	248
5	Love	Loves	247
6	Life	Peace	235
7	Life	Love	230
8	Life	Life	223
9	Hope	No	219
10	Love	Feel	215



Read more about this research and download resources at: translating-god.com

