



## **YOUR STORY**

# Hearing the faith narratives of young Australians

### **Key Findings**

November 2024



## **YOUR STORY**

# Hearing the faith narratives of young Australians

### Key Findings

Your Story: Hearing the faith narratives of young Australians is sponsored by Converge Oceania, C/- 72 Candy Road, Happy Valley SA 5159  
[www.convergeoceania.com](http://www.convergeoceania.com) [hello@convergeoceania.com](mailto:hello@convergeoceania.com)

Authors: Rowan D. Lewis and Graham D. Stanton  
Design: Burst Creative

Publication date: November 2024  
© Rowan D. Lewis and Graham D. Stanton

This report is copyright. Fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review is permitted under the Copyright Act. In addition, the authors grant permission to use images and content from this report for commercial and non-commercial purposes provided proper attribution is given.



# CONTENTS

Contents	1
Preface	2
Introduction	4
Executive summary	6
Key findings	
Key finding #1 Faith has a narrative	9
Key finding #2 Faith grows in a relational ecosystem	19
Key finding #3 A.B.O.U.T. Relationships	25
Key finding #4 Relationally grounded discipling action	33
Key finding #5 Resourcing faith narratives	39
Conclusion: For better discipling, first listen	44

A longer version of this research report is available from the Converge Oceania website [www.convergeoceania.com/yourstory](http://www.convergeoceania.com/yourstory)

# PREFACE

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

## From the Converge Oceania Core Team:

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



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

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

For more information about Converge Oceania and the Your Story project, visit [convergeoceania.com](http://convergeoceania.com), or email [hello@convergeoceania.com](mailto:hello@convergeoceania.com)

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



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

Baptist Financial Services

Christian Operation Trust

Grow Ministries

Veta Youth

Bible Society Australia

Christian Schools Australia

Scripture Union NSW



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

[www.accessthestory.com](http://www.accessthestory.com)

# INTRODUCTION

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

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

## Meet Riley<sup>1</sup>

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

I grew up in a Christian home with Christian parents. I didn't have a big moment of recognition but I committed my life to God with my mum's help when I was five. I was frightened in a thunderstorm and found peace in the knowledge I had a savior and protector.

I then grew to understand in depth what being a Christian meant as my parents read missionary stories and the bible to my siblings and I when we were eating dinner.

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

I got baptised when I was 10, announcing my identity as a child of God and a follower of Christ. I wish to regularly commit life decisions to Christ and pray that his will will be done, [despite] what i might have to go through. I ultimately long for his return and for peace about the concept of eternity.

Riley

## Meet Geoffrey

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

I was baptised Anglican and christened in a Church. My grandparents are very religious, and set on me being raised Anglican, so I took separate scripture in public school before moving to an Anglican College.

My father is overtly atheist and my mother is agnostic, so most of my spiritual guidance before losing my faith at 13 came from my grandparents and school. I have always doubted my faith, but sustained daily prayers until adolescence.

I cannot reconcile the miracles of the Bible with the laws of nature, despite agreeing with the moral guidance that the Bible provides. Any spiritual experiences I have had have been limited to dreams. That being said, I still love the principles of Christianity save for the miraculous, and I strive to live by them to this day, hence why I still read the Bible.

Geoffrey

<sup>1</sup> Names are pseudonyms; gender, age, and other demographic details are original. Throughout the report verbatim quotations from young people are in callout boxes.



## Meet Mei-Ling

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

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

**Mei-Ling**

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

I want to develop my faith IDK HEHE.

**Mei-Ling**

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

Faith is difficult because idk what God feels like. And I've lived without thinking of 'God' for so long. Growing up in a Christian school had its upsides and downsides. But I think being too sheltered and forced to be in a 'Christian' environment has put off many of my peers from Christianity.

And I would be lying if I said it hadn't negatively swayed me too...although I have doubts and question everything, for me there is no way that there isn't any God because for some reason the possibility of THAT doesn't make sense to me lol.

I just don't know that God very well.

**Mei-Ling**

## Three stories of faith from three Australian young people.

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

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

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

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

This is their story.

<sup>2</sup> All the research participants were aged 16–20 years.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 1. Faith has a narrative:

Faith is more about story than propositions.

## 2. Faith grows in a relational ecosystem:

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

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

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

## 4. Relationally grounded discipling action:

The effectiveness of discipling actions grows as relationships strengthen.

## 5. Engaging resources:

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



## Thank you!

---

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

Whether you enjoyed the experience as much as Koda (19f):<sup>3</sup>

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

**Koda (19f)**

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

I hate this stupid test, bye!

**Jodie (18n)**

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

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

## Research Team

---

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

Analysis of qualitative data was completed in Atlas.ti by research assistants Mel Hanger, John Marion, James Gallagher, Fr Michael Salib, Elijah Lewis, and Lilly Barnes. Statistical analysis was provided by Dr Sandy Errey, University of Melbourne Statistical Consulting Centre. Advice and additional statistical analysis was provided by Prof. Andrew Singleton, Deakin University School of Humanities and Social Sciences. AI analysis was provided by Senior Data Scientist, Matthew Boyens. We are grateful to One Hope for their generous support and guidance. Thanks also to Dr Dave Fagg for editorial work to make cumbersome academic writing far more concise and readable.

Ethical approval for this project was provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian College of Theology (reference number EC00327).

## Citation

---

Lewis, Rowan D., and Graham D. Stanton. *Your Story: Hearing the faith journeys of young Australians*. Adelaide, SA: Converge Oceania, 2024.

A longer version of this research report is available from the Converge Oceania website  
<https://www.convergeoceania.com/yourstory>

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



## Key Finding #1

# FAITH HAS A NARRATIVE

Faith is more about story  
than propositions

**Key Finding #1: Faith has a narrative**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Eight Dynamic Faith Narratives**

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

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

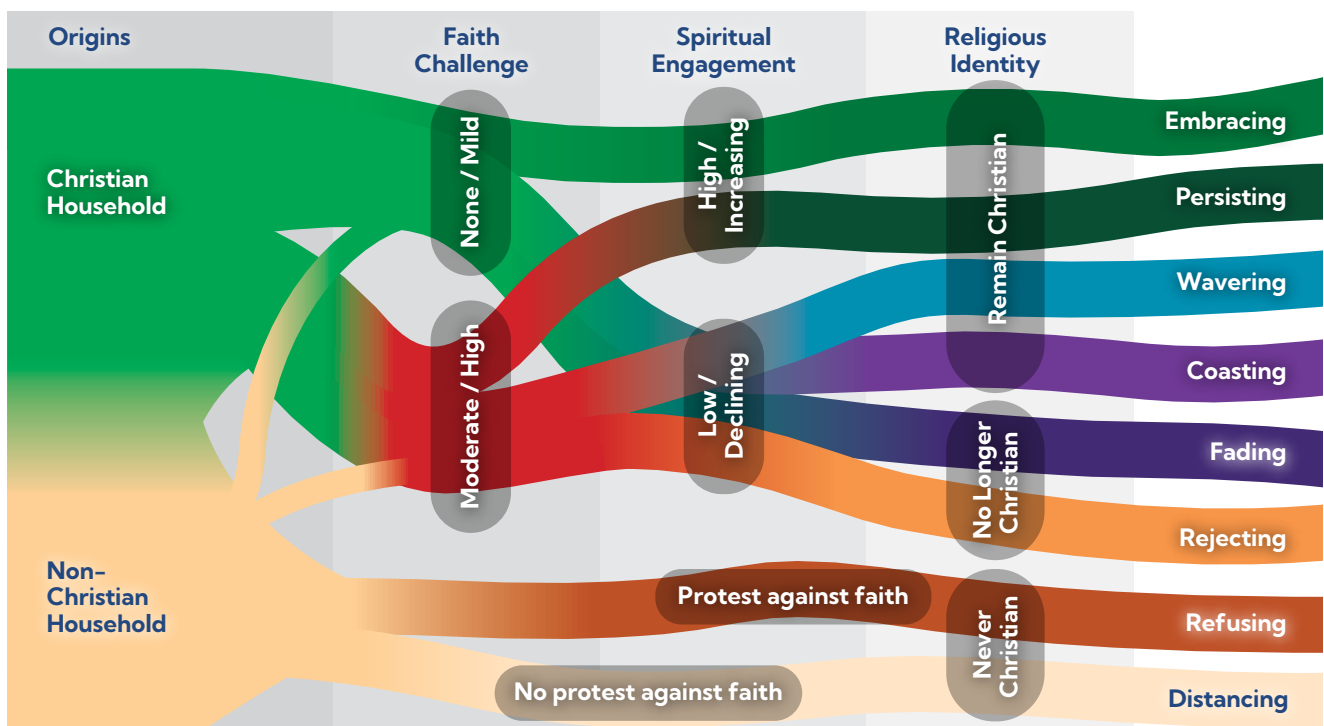


Figure 1: Faith Journeys



### -ing vs -ed

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

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

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

### Here are the eight journeys:

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

Table 1: Eight Dynamic Faith Journeys

## Christian Journeys

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

---

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

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



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

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

**Harper (18n-Embracing)**

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



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

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

**Adeline (17f-Coasting)**



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



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

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

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

**Charles (17m-Persisting)**



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

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

**Chloe (18f-Wavering)**

## Non-Christian Journeys

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

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



I got baptised when I was in year 9 as an attempt to get closer to god. Everyone in my life told me that being close to god was the most important thing but I never felt it. I went on two mission trips with school to try and jumpstart my faith. I could never find anything that worked...

I deconstructed my faith as a desperate last attempt but it only made me see how I really don't believe in the god that I had been told to believe in all my life. I am no longer a Christian. I am happier, healthier, more confident, and more content than ever. Every part of my life apart from my relationship with my parents was benefitted when I walked away from the church. I will admit I still harbour bitterness towards the church but I try not to. It's simply not for me.

**Sophie (20f-Rejecting)**

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



i think as i got older at a religious school, the focus on god and the focus on religion faded in my life, there was no specific point [of ownership]

[Any difficulties] not really.

people at school definitely suport religion but i dont hold a specific faith. i dont think i will practice any religion in the future, but i think i will remain spiritual maybe

**Fiona (18f-Fading)**





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



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

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

**James (17m-Refusing)**

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



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

**Claire (17f-Distancing)**

## Faith Journeys by Gender

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

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

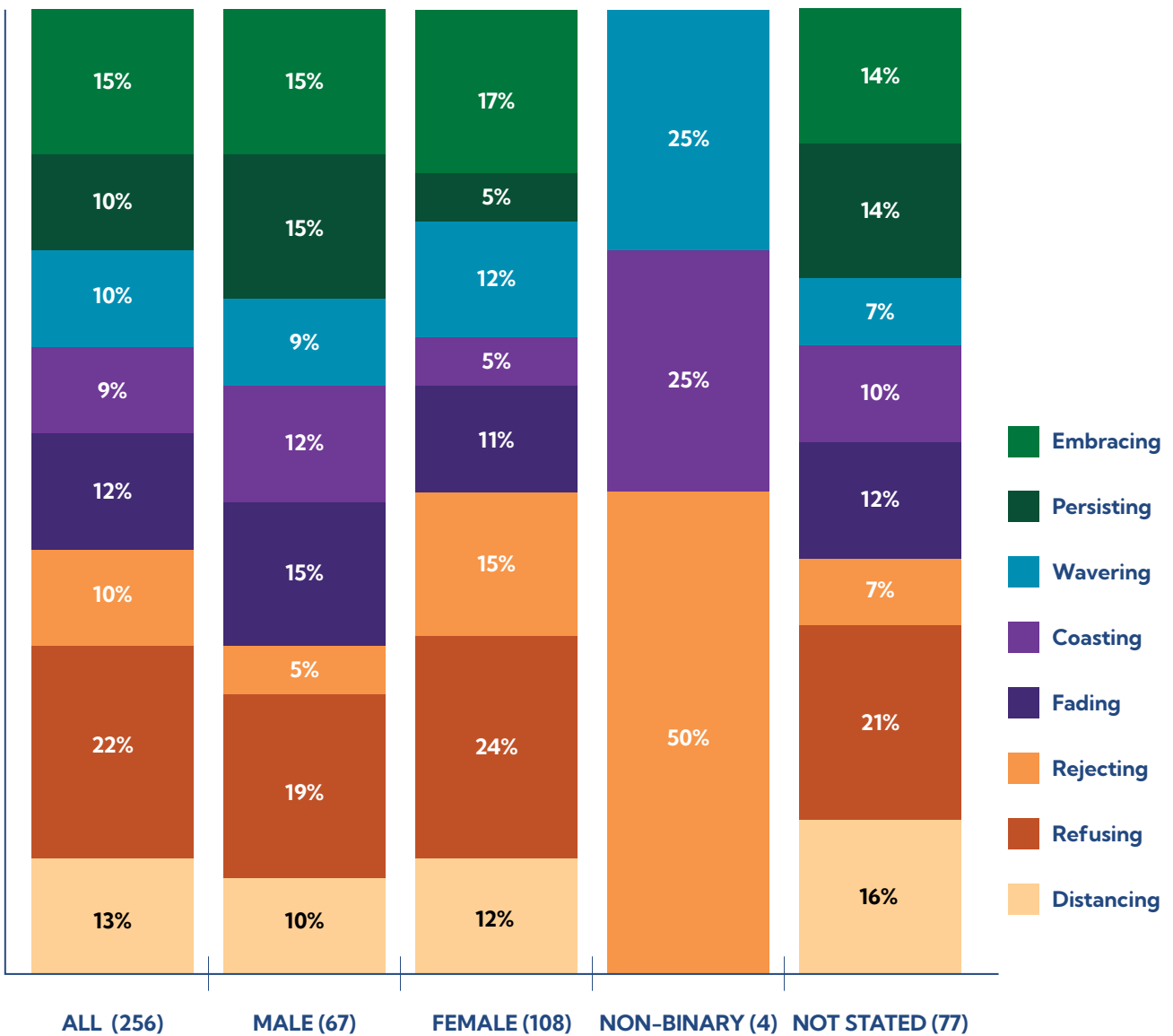


Figure 2: Percentage of Faith Journey Narratives by Gender



## Experiencing Challenges to Faith

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

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

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

**Finn (16m-Embracing)**

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

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

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

**Esther (18f-Embracing)**

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

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

## There's more going on here!

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

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

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

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

See Part 3 of the full research report for further exploration of these 8 narratives

## Key Finding #2

# FAITH GROWS IN A RELATIONAL ECOSYSTEM

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

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

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

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

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

### Internal factors

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

### External factors

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

### Supportive factors

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

### Contrary factors

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

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

**In the same way, a young person's faith narrative is the story of their responses to spiritual realities as they interact with significant influences in their ecology.**

Consider the example of Eunice:

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

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

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

**Eunice (17f-Embracing)**

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

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

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

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

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

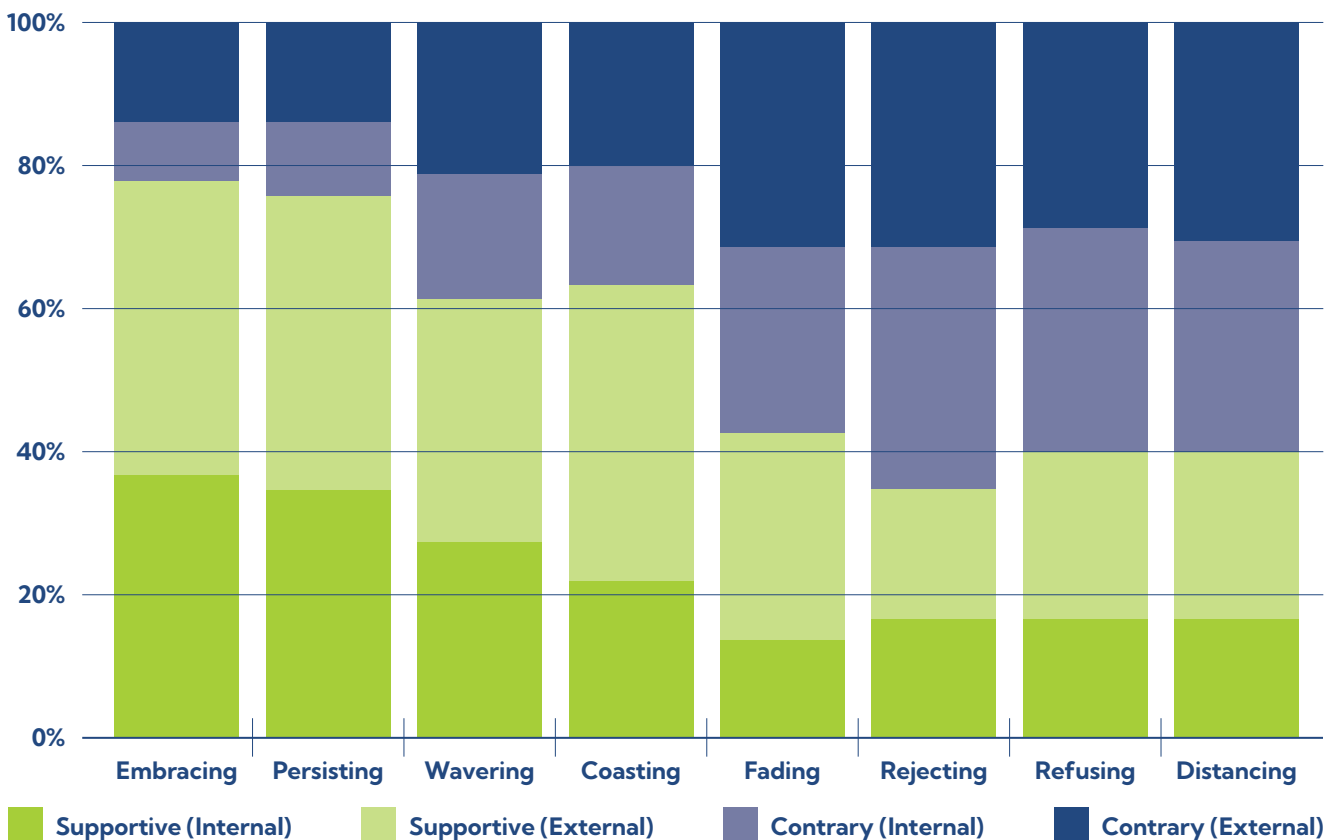


Figure 3: Internal and External Factors in each Faith Journey Narrative type (% of codes applied across all narratives of each type)

## Key Finding #2: Faith grows in a relational ecosystem

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

### 1. Build Rich Ecosystems of Spiritual Support

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

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

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

### 2. Don't rely on a Silver Bullet

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

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

Contrast the stories of Rebecca and Cody:

I grew up in a Christian household where the only thing my parents required out of Christianity was to listen to Jesus' morals and values, and try to be kind, helpful and just a good person

I remember getting confirmed to God during a youth session, at around 12 years old?? I don't remember what exactly happened, but I would just attend youth on a Friday night for the next 4 or so years.

For about the last year that I considered myself Christian, I had struggled with doubt, questioning and other difficulties that all built up to my loss in the faith. A huge part of my loss of faith was due to the political views within the church that I did not agree with.

**Rebecca (16f)**

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

**Cody (19m)**

<sup>4</sup> An actor is any person, group or organisation in the young person's ecosystem.





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

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

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

### 3. Don't fear a poison chalice

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

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

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

**Kathleen (17f)**

## Key Finding #2: Faith grows in a relational ecosystem

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

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

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

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

More on this in Key Finding #5.

See Part 2 of the full research report for more details of contrary and supportive factors.

## Key Finding #3

# A.B.O.U.T. RELATIONSHIPS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Patrick (18m-Wavering)**

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

**Maya (20f-Wavering)**

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

**Jaxon (18m-Persisting)**

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

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

**Matt (17m-Rejecting)**

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

**Adeline (17f-Coasting)**

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

**Monique (18f-Wavering)**

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

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

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

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

## Acceptance

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

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

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

**Julie (16f-Embracing)**

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

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

**Amanthi (16f-Wavering)**

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

## Belonging

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

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

### Key Finding #3: A.B.O.U.T. Relationships

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

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

**Isabella (19f-Rejecting)**

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

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

**Leilani (19f-Wavering)**

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

## Ownership

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

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

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

**Zoë (19f-Embracing)**

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

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

**Isabella (19f-Rejecting)**

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

## Understanding

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

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

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

**Leilani (19f-Wavering)**

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

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

**Alex (16n-Rejecting)**

## Trust

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

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

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

**Sally (17f-Embracing)**

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

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

**Bonnie (16f-Embracing)**

## Sensitivity to Power and Agency

See Part 4 of the full report for an extended discussion of power and agency.

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

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

**Victor (16m-Coasting)**

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

**Samantha (18f-Embracing)**

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

[The Church] watched abuse and did nothing about it. They cast out the damaged and kept the perpetrators of abuse. When they finally saw what was true they made very poor efforts and making things right and repenting. They didn't accept responsibility.

You damaged me and my family. You were more worried about your reputation than you were about doing what was right.

**Oliver (18m-Wavering)**

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

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

**Sophie (20f-Rejecting)**

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





## Be Challenging, not Coercive

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

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

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

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

**Jaxon (18m-Persisting)**

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

## In a Nutshell:

### A Good Relationship with a Good Person Grows Faith

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



## Key Finding #4

# RELATIONALLY GROUNDED DISCIPLING ACTION

The effectiveness of discipling action  
grows in proportion to relational strength

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

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

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

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

**Jenny (20f-Persevering)**

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

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

<sup>5</sup> This can be described as an "extrinsic" quality rather than an "intrinsic" quality. That is, the reasons given by young people for whether a discipling action was effective or not, are not primarily determined by qualities of the action itself, but by something external to the action (ie. the relationship).

## The Discipling Action Pyramid

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

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

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

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

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

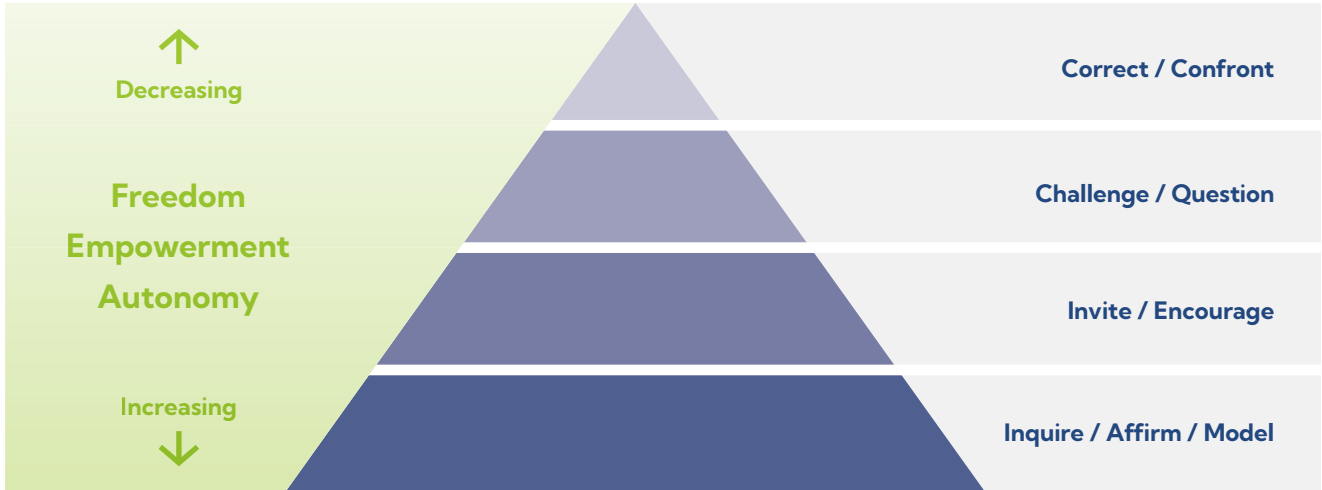


Figure 4: The Discipling Action Pyramid

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

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

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

I was also confirmed maybe a year after that, but I think raising my hand and then having my

leaders notice and support me was an even more important experience.

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

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

**Maya (20f-Wavering)**

## Key Finding #4: Relationally Grounded Discipling Action

### Level 1: Inquire / Affirm / Model

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

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

### Level 2: Invite / Encourage

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

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

### Level 3: Challenge / Question

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

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

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

### Level 4: Correct / Confront

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

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

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

## Relational Bonds Ground Constructive Discipling

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

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

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



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

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

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

**Jenny (20f-Persevering)**

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

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

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

**Sophie (20f-Rejecting)**

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

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

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

**Leilani (19f-Wavering)**

#### Key Finding #4: Relationally Grounded Discipling Action

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

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

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

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



## Key Finding #5

# RESOURCING FAITH NARRATIVES

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

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

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

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

Consider Jaxon's story:

I grew up in a Christian missionary family where we lived in South-East Asia for the first 10 years of my life... I would consider myself extremely head-strong in my faith combined with a not very strong heart faith.... I always knew about the spiritual side of Christianity but it was mostly foreign to me and to this day I haven't experienced a super significant spiritual moment.

I lingered as what I would call a 'hypocritical' Christian during highschool. I was extremely head-strong but had next to no faith, meaning that I would live my life as a Christian at church but ignore it elsewhere.... I'm still learning about the spiritual side of faith and am currently looking for a second mentor to help guide me through the area...

I feel like I only would approach the leaders of the church now that I'm an adult. Wouldn't have felt comfortable doing that as a teenager.

**Jaxon (18m-Persisting)**

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

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

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

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

## **Faith Narratives of Significance, Meaning, and Ownership**

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

### **Significance**

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



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

## Meaning

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

## Ownership

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Maya (20f-Wavering)**

(to Children's Ministry leaders) Thanks for trying. I know you meant well but you primed me for just accepting anything if someone was in a position of authority. You primed me for being self-conscious about my body and clothing...You indoctrinated me well but did nothing to help me think.

**Isabella (19f-Rejecting)**

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

## Faith Narratives Leverage Existing Supports

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

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

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

Consider Jordan's story:

i was born very premature (early) and i ended up getting baptized as catholic while in the hospital as a baby. they prayed to god alot hoping i would live because i was born dangerously early and not supposed to survive.

my great grandma had her special rosary beads blessed on me as to help me survive. god answered their prayers and i did survive. my younger brother was lucky that he got to be baptised in a church. but i was lucky that my baptism helped he to live. i was grateful to live... when great gran died, i got to have her rosary beads. they were special.

**Jordan (17nb-Wavering)**

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

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

Jordan's family did not just pray—they also told Jordan they prayed. Jordan does not simply know that their family prayed—Jordan also retells the account of answered prayer in their faith narrative.

**Faith grows more powerfully when experiences become resources that are activated within a young person's faith narrative.**

# CONCLUSION

For better discipling, first listen

## The goal of Your Story has been to listen well to young people and find more effective ways of accompanying young people in their journeys of faith.

---

In the light of the key findings given in this report, here are five main recommendations:

1. **Pay attention to where a young person's faith experience has come from and where it is going.** Give special attention to how young people talk about the challenges that they are facing in their journey of faith—not just what those challenges are, but the significance or weight of the challenge in the young person's experience.
2. **Build rich ecosystems of spiritual support,** not relying on just one favoured avenue of support, and not being overly concerned by the threat of one particular challenge.
3. **A good relationship with a good person grows faith.** Be very careful to exercise power sensitively, doing all you can to promote agency
4. **The better the relationship with young people, the wider range of discipling actions are available.** Build a strong base so you can ascend the discipling pyramid with care.
5. **Help young people to make use of their ecosystem of faith when they are confronted by challenges.**

A common experience in surveying young people about spirituality is that they often don't have much to say. Researchers have suggested that the inarticulacy of teenagers concerning religious beliefs is either because teenagers just aren't interested in religion, or (more probably) that they're not getting help from the church to learn how to narrate their faith.<sup>6</sup>

To have a better conversation we need to ask better questions.

We've noticed that a significant point of value of Your Story is simply in the questions we've asked. Returning to Koda's reflection that we shared in the introduction:

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

**Koda (19f)**

Connected with the value of a well-put question is the recognition that young people are asking for the kind of discipleship that is ready to accompany them through a complex journey of faith.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, 2005.



If we listen to these young people, we'll hear their plea for adults to join them with a posture of companioning, listening, and clarifying, rather than one of telling, directing, or confronting.

Our primary aim in this project was to listen well. The church has spent a lot of time talking about young people and talking to young people. In *Your Story*, we wanted to shift the balance and give time to hearing from young people.

But like any good conversation, we listen carefully so that we can understand, and then respond with care—thoughtfully, faithfully, and with the best interests of the young person at heart.

Young people, created in the image of God, have voices that must be heard.

Do you remember the story of Rhoda, the servant girl in Acts 12?

Peter has been arrested and imprisoned, and the church has gathered to pray. Peter is miraculously released and when he knocks at the door, the servant girl Rhoda comes to open it. The passage reads: 'When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"'

When the adult members of the church insist that there's no way that Peter could have escaped from Herod, Rhoda insists back, and is vindicated. Rhoda was right!

Our young people have stories of faith that too often are dismissed without giving due consideration to what they're saying.

We honour young people by hearing their stories, and as we do so, we honour the God who made them and who calls them to himself.

## YOUR STORY

What experiences and practices do Australian young people associate with faith, spirituality, and religion? How do they understand God? What shapes their spiritual journey?

The Your Story research project delves into how young Australians have come to the faith they hold today, exploring both the internal and external factors that have influenced their beliefs over time.

Drawing insights from 439 young people across Australia, this report captures the experiences that define their faith journeys—childhood memories, early adolescence encounters, and their current expressions of faith.

This is their story.

**Get more information and download the full report at [convergeoceania.com/yourstory](https://convergeoceania.com/yourstory)**

