Opening the Doors: Teenage Participation in Local Churches

Over recent decades, the involvement of young Australians in worship services has been declining. However, analysis of surveys of students in Catholic schools has shown that many young people who do not attend services of worship are involved in churches in other ways. The most common form of involvement is through sporting clubs, but others are involved in small groups, social welfare and social justice activities, in music and drama. This pattern reflects the individualistic and consumer-oriented way in which young people decide upon their involvements. It is a reminder to the churches that if they want to engage young people today, they need to open many doors to them, not just the door to worship.

Changing Patterns of Involvement

For many years, the decline of the involvement of young people in religious practices has been tracked. Dr Marcellin Flynn conducted four studies in Catholic schools over a period of twenty-six years. Among Year 12 students (in their final year of secondary schooling) who identified themselves as Catholic, he noted a significant decline in the proportions...
attending Mass monthly or more often between 1972 and 1998 as shown in Figure 1.

Between 2005 and 2007, the Christian Research Association conducted surveys in a number of Catholic schools in three dioceses in Australia. In one particular diocese, a number of these schools was surveyed again in 2011 using a very similar instrument. In terms of Year 12 students, the pattern of decline in Mass attendance observed by Flynn appeared to be continuing.

More broadly, across this diocese, it was found that between 2005 and 2011, the proportion of students of all year levels in secondary school attending a church service monthly or more often fell from 35 per cent to 27 per cent. However, the proportion of students who said they never attended also dropped from 34 per cent in 2005 to 30 per cent in 2011. There was an increase in the proportion who attended occasionally: from 31 per cent to 43 per cent.

These figures were indicative of a change not only in general levels of attendance, but in the patterns of involvement in church life. Rather than a pattern of regular attendance, every week for some, and two or three times a year. For others, attendance appears to be increasingly ad hoc. People attend from time to time, sometimes for festivals, other times for personal reasons.

In conducting interviews with students, we asked them whether they saw themselves involved in a church in the future. Many said they did. However, when we explored how that involvement might occur, it was often based on personal need or interest. Some young people said to us that they would attend if there was a particular personal reason.

The extent to which young people were involved in church activities apart from church services was explored in the survey of more than 4000 students in 29 Catholic schools across four dioceses and the major forms of involvement are shown in Figure 2.

As can be seen in Figure 2 and Table 1, more than half of those involved in youth groups, social justice groups and small discussion groups attend Mass or other church services monthly or more often. However, less than half of those who are involved in church-related community welfare activities, music and drama groups and sporting teams attend Mass monthly or more often.

When we look at the sample as a whole, we find that 25 per cent of these students in Catholic schools attended Mass or other services of worship monthly or more often. However, 31 per cent of the students were involved at least once a month in at least one or other of these activities and did not attend Mass monthly or more often. Indeed, 13 per cent of the total sample said they were involved in one or more of these other church activities but never attended Mass.

These figures indicate, then, that more students are involved in church-related activities apart from Mass or other services of worship than are involved in Mass. The connections between students and the

![Figure 1. Proportion of Year 12 Students in Catholic Schools Attending Mass Monthly or More Often](chart.png)


![Figure 2. Percentage of Students in Catholic Schools Involved in Various Local Church Activities Showing Proportion Who Also Attend Mass](chart2.png)

Source: CRA Putting Life Together Surveys Conducted in 29 Catholic Schools in 4 Dioceses with a Total Sample of 4160 Students
churches are not primarily through attendance at worship. The churches have more connections with students through these other activities than through Mass or attendance at forms of worship.

**The Demographics**

Are these additional activities simply keeping young people attached to a church for a while before they cease attending altogether? Of those who were not attending Mass at the time of the survey but were attending these other activities, 26 per cent indicated that they used to attend Mass when they were in primary school. Thus, they have decreased their attendance since that time, but are continuing to be involved in other activities in the church. However, 42 per cent said they attended Mass less than monthly while in primary school and 32 per cent said they never attended Mass when in primary school. Thus, the majority of these students who have these other forms of attachment, have not had a history of regular involvement in the church. These other activities have attracted them into the life of the church.

Parents have the greatest influence on the involvement of children and young people in services of worship. However, it does not appear that parents have as much influence on the involvement of young people in these other forms of involvement. Of the young people who did not go to worship, but were involved in the church in these other ways, 11 per cent said their mothers attended worship monthly or more often, and 7 per cent said their fathers attended worship monthly or more often. These young people appear to be much more influenced by their friends. 22 per cent of them indicated that they had close friends who attended Mass or other services of worship monthly or more often.

The levels of involvement vary considerably by year level as shown in Figure 3. The general trend is that the various forms of participation apart from worship occurred more in the middle school than in senior school levels. It would appear that, with the additional pressures that mount in the final two years of schooling, the involvement in these additional activities diminishes.

As well, the patterns of involvement vary according to the nature of the activity. In terms of music, sport and youth groups, the level of activity drops after Year 9. The level of involvement appears to be maintained a little longer, through Year 10, in welfare activities. A number of Year 11 and 12 students continued their involvement in small discussion groups and social justice groups through Years 11 and 12.

The data shows that 35 per cent of students born overseas attended Mass or other forms of worship, compared with 23 per cent of Australian-born students. However, 30 per cent of Australian students were involved just in these additional activities compared with 25 per cent of overseas-born students. These differences were statistically significant.

The attraction of Australian-born young people to these activities reflects the different ways in which Australian-born young people approach the church. They are more influenced than are recent immigrants in their forms of involvement by personal interests and ‘consumer’ attitudes. Mostly, they attend worship if they find it personally meaningful, or if it gives them a sense of belonging or fulfilment. Similarly, they will be attracted to these other sorts of activities if the activities give them a sense of meaning, purpose or belonging. Overseas-born students are more likely to be motivated in their church involvement out of a sense of duty born out of tradition.

Most of these activities occur in relatively small groups where the young people will be personally known and where they will have an opportunity to make a contribution, whether that be through their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church-Related Activity</th>
<th>Never Attend Worship</th>
<th>Occasionally Attend Worship</th>
<th>Attend Worship Monthly or More Often</th>
<th>Total Numbers Attending the Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small group for discussion or study</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social justice group</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting team</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth group</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music or drama group</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community welfare group</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: CRA, *Putting Life Together* surveys of 4,161 students in 29 Catholic School in 2011
sporting or musical abilities, or their passion for social justice, or their interest in discussing issues associated with faith. It is most likely, then, that these activities attract people in ways that church services often do not: through providing specific ways in which they can contribute and offering them a place where they can belong.

Conclusions

The focus of most churches has been in encouraging attendance at worship. However, as young people evaluate what they do from consumer type perspectives, there are many who are not interested in attending worship but are interested in other church-related activities such as sport, music and drama groups, small discussion groups, youth groups, and social action and welfare activities.

These surveys show that these activities can engage some young people who have not in the past attended church and whose families are not involved. They can also help to maintain a link with young people who did attend worship in the past, but who have ceased to attend worship.

In a consumer-oriented society, churches need to open many doors to young people. They cannot rely on all young people coming first to worship. Additional activities such as youth groups, sporting groups, discussion groups, music and drama and social justice and welfare activities will be attractive and will provide an opportunity for the expression of Christian values and the building of Christian community for young people who are not attracted by services of worship. Given the fact that many young people are finding their way into church-related activities apart from through worship suggests that there is great potential there to make and develop church connections. These other activities can contribute to the growth of faith, as well as to personal and social growth.

Philip Hughes

References:
CRA data from surveys conducted in 2011 in 29 Catholic schools in 4 Dioceses. Sample of 4,160 Catholic school students.

Lausanne Researchers’ International Network

The next Lausanne Researchers’ International Conference has been moved both in time and location.

It will now be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 25th to 29th May 2015.

This is instead of the previously advertised date of next January in Chiang Mai.

More information will be available next year.
Growing Youth Spirituality Conference

On Friday 19th and Saturday 20th July 2013, more than 80 people gathered at Tabor College in Melbourne for the ‘Growing Youth Spirituality’ conference. Those who attended came from around Australia and from a broad range of denominations. Many were working as teachers or chaplains in schools. Others were youth workers and some were working in local churches. A couple of priests and a bishop joined the conference. Other participants were working in educational or denominational offices developing programs and activities for youth ministry.

The Challenge of Growing Youth Spirituality

The conference began by noting that, materially, young people in Australia are doing very well. Most are beneficiaries of a wealthy, prosperous culture where there is high quality education and healthcare and where the leisure options are endless. However, many young Australians are not feeling good about life. They are finding it hard to make sense of it and to find a place and a purpose. Associated with this is the fact that most young Australians find that religious traditions and commitments do not connect well with them.

Philip Hughes (Christian Research Association) and Rowan Lewis (Tabor College, Melbourne) explored sociological and psychological accounts of why Australian young people are not connecting easily with religious traditions or finding a sense of place and purpose in life. Philip Hughes noted that most young people have been raised to work through the meaning of life experiences from individualistic perspectives which seek meaning in their own subjectivity and experience rather than through reason and duty. Rowan Lewis spoke of young people’s need to belong, but at the same time they go through the processes of individuation through which they find their personal identity.

On Friday evening, Naomi Swindon from Scripture Union earthed the conference through stories of young people who had not found it easy to find a place in society. She told of how projects such as developing a BMX track, or encouraging people to care for trees affected by drought, or mentoring had led to a concern for others beyond themselves and giving young people a sense of place and identity. She spoke of how there is gold in every person, sometimes covered by dirt, but how ‘growing spirituality’ involves finding that gold.

On Saturday morning, Rachael Kohn, the presenter of ‘The Spirit of Things’ on ABC Radio National, reminded us that part of growing spiritually means accepting contradictions and vulnerability. She noted that many young people want to be in control and to have answers. However, as Archbishop Rowan Williams has said, people who work among the suffering live with the big questions unanswered. She suggested that, as a response to this, in growing youth spirituality, our focus should be more on how we live and what we do, rather than what we believe.

How Youth Spirituality Is Being Grown

Three presenters spoke of different ways and different contexts in which Australians are trying to ‘grow youth spirituality’. Kath Engebretson (Australian Catholic University) spoke of the lack of understanding of the Christian tradition among students in Catholic schools and the need for a special effort to pick up again the ‘chain of memory’ which constitutes the Christian tradition.

Stephen Chatelier (former teacher at Donvale Christian College and currently a Ph.D. student at Melbourne University) spoke of the Christian school context. He said that some of the students see the emphasis on faith at school as ‘overload’ in the way it complements home and church and see its demands as embarrassing among their peers. Some react to being ‘Bible bashed’ while others say they have faith and don’t want to think more about it. Stephen Chatelier suggested some Christian schools are too focussed on thinking and conception rather than the affective domain and practice. He suggested that the emphasis on spirituality needed to be ‘normalised’ in the students’ experiences as a whole ethos, rather than as something extra that is forced on them. He argued that Christian
schools needed to invite, not demand, the journey into the spiritual and there needed to be an openness to diverse responses to the divine rather than the formation of cloistered communities.

Peter Mangold, a chaplain at a government school in Victoria, began by noting that in his context most young people found it very strange to think about religion or spirituality. He suggested that, in Government schools among young people with little or no religious background, it was often most helpful to think of helping young people to develop a framework of meaning and to support them in making sense of the experiences of life. In so doing, he said, one must help them re-shape unhelpful beliefs and assist in the integration of experiences into their lives, assisting them in making explicit their values and perspectives. He argued that the role of the chaplain is journeying with people in a relational way, mentoring relationships and helping young people to engage with the ‘largeness of life’. He spoke of ways in which he was doing this through ‘Changing Perspectives’ camps and through teaching psychology and personal health.

Four other speakers briefly outlined specific programs through which they were addressing the growth of spirituality among young people. Karen Dymke (a teacher and consultant) spoke about the Rite Journey, developing positive rites of passage through processes of challenge and celebration as young people move into adulthood. Rohan Waters (a former teacher and chaplain) spoke of his program, Veta, which offers Christian learning pathways for young people. Angela Sawyer (Victorian Council for Christian Education) spoke of the need to develop contextual Bible study which would be transformative of the lives of young people. Stephen Reid (Christian Research Association) noted the dominance of sport in the lives of most Australians and asked if sport could be incorporated into the vision of youth ministry. He noted briefly the research he was doing on sports chaplaincy as a way of engaging with young people.

In the afternoon, the morning’s speakers had the opportunity to take participants deeper through workshops, providing more information about the various resources and contexts for growing youth spirituality.

**Reflections on the conference**

Thus, the conference stimulated the participants by opening up the challenges of growing youth ministry and by suggesting a variety of methods and resources through which one might respond to the challenges. Several of the break-out groups which had met three times through the conference noted that there were no easy answers; no solutions were appropriate in all circumstances. Indeed, the very nature of spirituality cannot be simply defined or contained within a program or set of procedures. Nevertheless, the conference stimulated those who attended to reflect on their own situation, and perhaps to refine what they were doing or to try new ways of ‘searching for the gold’ that exists in every person whom God has created.

*Philip Hughes*

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**Now Available from the CRA:**

**The Values and Benefits of Sports Chaplaincy in Australia**

by Stephen Reid and Philip Hughes

CRA explores this rapidly growing form of ministry in its latest research paper based on three case-studies of sports chaplaincy. Available for download on the Internet or as a hardcopy from the CRA office.