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Hemorrhaging Faith: An Australian Response in Exile

Darren Cronshaw, Rowan Lewis and Stacey Wilson¹

Abstract: Australia recently had the opportunity to consider the results of a Canadian research project *Hemorrhaging Faith* through a series of conferences in capital cities. The conferences sponsored a conversation between those who played an active role initiating the *Hemorrhaging Faith* research and a number of Australian researchers and practitioners who considered the research findings in the light of our context. This article offers an Australian critical review of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* report. It will consider whether Australian churches are also hemorrhaging young people in much the same way as Canadian research would suggest, or whether the situation may be conceived more accurately as one of exodus or exile. The article plots a course for the ongoing discussion we believe we need in Australia concerning the interpretation and implications of this story.

Key Words: Church trends, youth ministry, church leavers, sociology of religion

Twenty year old Mitch grew up in a family who have an active engaged faith. He lives at home, is studying at university and now attends church independently of his family, “more often than not.” When asked to describe the significant relationships, resources and practices that help him to grow in his faith or are the direct result of his faith, he listed off a variety of friendships, preachers, mentors, faith-based personalities (Christian—such as authors of Christian books and non-Christian—such as the Dalai Lama), university groups, past camp leaders, websites, pod casts and Christian agencies. The relationships identified by Mitch were diverse and included people both within and outside his church, people whom he sees regularly and those whom he mostly connects with through social media. Interestingly, his current church engagement appeared to be most derivative of his current relationships which he described as being the main reason he attended there. When asked what he would do if those people moved, Mitch indicated he would probably also leave.

¹ An earlier version of this was presented at IASYM Australasian Regional Colloquium Regional gathering of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry, Sydney, 8-10 July, 2015. Rowan Lewis drafted the evaluation sections, and drafted the background and context material drawing on “The State of Faith in Australian Youth: *Haemorrhaging, Exodus or Exile*” published in *Equip* (May 2015): 4–7, <https://nextmelbourne.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/lewis-ethos-equip-mag-may-15-state-of-faith-in-aus-youth.pdf> (see also Rowan Lewis, “Haemorrhaging Faith, Exiting the Church or Believers in Exile?”, NEXT Blog (July 13, 2015), <http://next.asn.au/2015/07/13/haemorrhaging-faith-exiting-the-church-or-believers-in-exile/>). Stacey Wilson drafted the review of the research design. Darren Cronshaw drafted the content summaries. The three contributors refined the paper together. We appreciate Angela Sawyer’s helpful comments as we refined the paper. The paper is part of a combined developing Baptist Union of Victoria / NEXT / Whitley College / Victorian Council of Christian Education faith formation research project. Research Ethical Clearance for data collection and interviews is approved through the Sydney College of Divinity Research Ethics Committee, clearance number REC 2015-01, March 2015.

Although his apparent engagement with a local congregation is regular-but-tenuous, he views his faith as an active, significant and integrated part of his life. Mitch is passionate about issues of social justice and is studying International Development and Law at university as a direct response to his faith. He regularly leads on ESA Christian camps and in the church youth group. When asked about which contexts are important to his development in faith, Mitch estimates that more than half of his faith formation takes place outside the church he attends. For Mitch, commitment to Christianity is not dependent on commitment to a particular local congregation. His *ecclesia* is broad and diverse, both local and international, albeit for this moment enhanced by the relationships found at a particular church.²

INTRODUCTION

For more than four decades, research generated from countries located within the industrialised West has documented an increasing degree of church disengagement among youth and young adult populations. Irrespective of denomination, socio-economic or cultural background, numerous qualitative research projects have observed teens and “twenty-somethings” leaving the church in droves and in many cases never returning.

In January 2010, a Canadian collective of youth-focused ministry organisations commenced a research project that sought to verify whether the same phenomenon was indeed taking place in their country. They hoped to find answers to two fundamental questions:

1. To what degree do young adults in Canada today stick with or drop their (Protestant or Catholic) faith? And
2. What keeps them in the faith, and what helps to usher them out?

The results of their research are emblazoned in the title of the report—*Hemorrhaging Faith*.³

Observing the close ties between Australian and Canadian post-Christendom Western contexts, the Baptist Union of Victoria sought to consider the results of the Canadian research through a series of conferences in capital cities. The conferences sponsored a conversation between those who played an active role initiating the *Hemorrhaging Faith* research and a number of Australian researchers and practitioners who considered the research findings in the light of our context. This review article seeks to continue that discussion by giving further consideration to the Canadian research. It does so by evaluating the research design and central conclusions of the project in the light of existing Australian-based research and our experience in Australia. The intent is to mine the insights and learnings of the Canadian research, critically engage with its method and interpretation of data, as well as to consider where we need to adapt and extend it for the Australia context.

² Mitch Wilkinson, Interview by Stacey Wilson, June 2015.

³ James Penner, Rachael Harder, Erika Anderson, Bruno Désorcy, and Rick Hiemstra, *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why & When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying & Returning to Church* (Research Document, Commissioned by The EFC Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, 2011). This report can be obtained from <http://hemorrhagingfaith.com/> [accessed 22 April 2016].

This report will proceed by examining each of the major sections of the report in turn commencing with a discussion of the background to the report and the project's design and methodology. The findings, interpretations and conclusions of each section will be briefly summarised and then engaged with critically. Finally, the article will conclude with comments that relate to the project as a whole and suggest some pathways that may take this research forward in an Australian context.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND, DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The Hemorrhaging of Young Adults from the Church

Research emerging from the United States across the last decade or so identifies that between 40% and 84% of those once active in faith during their teen years are now “spiritually disengaged” in their twenties. The wide variation depends in part, on the research methodology used, as well as how being “previously active” and now “disengaged” was defined. One of the key cross-sectional studies in this regard was initiated by the Barna Research Group, and published in *You Lost Me*. After interviewing more than 22,103 adults and 2,124 teenagers from across the United States, this study found that around two thirds of its sample were no longer active in their church involvement and had failed to carry their faith into early adulthood.⁴ The connection of *You Lost Me* between these two elements—lost faith and lost church engagement—is significant. Canada has made its own contribution to this research through David Sawler's 2009 work *Goodbye Generation*⁵ and for many years through the sociological perspective of Reginald Bibby.

The *Hemorrhaging Faith* research project locates itself within this dialogue. At the time it observed that while research such as identified above were developing a mounting pile of data, Canada was yet to benefit from a broad-ranging, pan-denominational, qualitative and quantitative research effort seeking to both quantify the extent of disengagement as well as uncover the dynamics that may seek to redress this problem.

Research design and methodology

The *Hemorrhaging Faith* project was commissioned by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) in conjunction with the Young Adults Ministry Roundtable to examine extensively the spiritual lives of young adults in Canada, particularly those with some a faith background in church. Other sponsoring organisations were The Great Commission Foundation, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of Canada, Stronger Together 2011 and

⁴ David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). Other examples of research efforts include Barna Group, “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years” (Barna Group, September 11, 2006), <https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>; Kara E Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith into Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Scott McConnell, “Lifeway Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church.” (2007): <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church> (accessed 1 May, 2012); and Steve Wright, with Chris Graves, *Rethink: Decide for Yourself, is Student Ministry Working?* (Wake Forest, NC: InQuest, 2007).

⁵ David Sawler, *Goodbye Generation: A Conversation About Why Youth and Young Adults Leave the Church* (Winnipeg: Ponder, 2009).

Youth for Christ Canada (all evangelical organisations). Researchers Rick Hiemstra from the EFC and James Penner of the James Penner and Associates group were brought in to design and conduct the study.⁶

The researchers used mixed methods to collect data: literature review; semi-structured interviews (qualitative); and two online surveys (quantitative). The literature review was completed first which allowed the researchers to observe a variety of sensitising concepts across the literature that fed into the design of the qualitative engagement. Hiemstra and Penner et al completed this second stage of the project, conducting 72 semi-structured interviews, across what they describe as a representative sample of Canadian regional, linguistic, ethnic, immigrant and religious affiliation profiles. Based on this data and through consultation with ministry practitioners and young adults, they then developed the online survey.

The Angus Reid Forum, an ongoing online research panel, was used to recruit participants for the online survey. To meet the selection criteria subjects needed to be either raised as Christians or now identify as Christian. The focus was Christians or people with a Christian/church background, not an exploration of young adult's spirituality in general. An initial survey was used to identify people who met the selection criterion. These 2886 individuals were sent the final survey, which in a sense functioned as a request for "exit interviews." Some 2049 completed the 84-item survey, a response rate of 71%. The gender split of the final sample group (typical in Canada of this kind of survey) was not representative of the Canadian population, with females making up 65% and males 35%.⁷

The significant challenge to this kind of research is the intent to determine change over time while using a cross sectional instead of longitudinal design. Effectively, the researchers are relying on the memory of respondents to accurately recount their spiritual autobiography, a method that is prone to outcome bias. The researchers comment:

Outcome bias tends to exaggerate confidence in our current position. For a survey such as this one, outcome bias cuts both ways. It suggests both an over-confidence in positive evaluations of Christian upbringings, and an over-confidence in the negative evaluation of Christian upbringings. ... If a respondent ultimately arrives at a negative evaluation of her Christian experience, there still may have been a time when that Christian experience was quite positive. In many cases, young adults come to turning points in their lives that alter their perceptions of what came before. In this report we have tried to identify some of these common turning points and what these might mean for their journey of faith.⁸

Outcome bias is largely unavoidable though can be mitigated by both the nature of inquiry (carefully framed questions) and data interpretation. The step of recognising and acknowledging this bias informs and strengthens the conclusions of the research.

We hold two main concerns regarding design and methodology that we will discuss in greater depth in later parts of the article. Firstly is a concern relating to the conflation of

⁶ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 7–10, 116.

⁷ Ibid. 116–119. The report goes on to comment that the variation within each gender sample was quite consistent and so considered the disproportionate representation not to be problematic.

⁸ Ibid. 117.

faith and church engagement that seems to run right through the research project. If we pause to carefully inspect the two questions that drove this research project (1. To what degree do young adults in Canada today stick with or drop their [Protestant or Catholic] faith? 2. What keeps them in the faith, and what helps to usher them out?) we note that both questions explicitly locate the focus as being upon faith. However, the attempt at quantification found in Part II of the report—the section that forms the essential response to the first question—is framed in terms of disengagement from church. Equally, the language throughout the report uses “disengagement from church” and “losing faith” in almost synonymous ways. For example:

We sought in our semi-structured interviews to identify the faith drivers and faith barriers that respectively either lead emerging adults toward the church or drive them away from it. Faith drivers are the conditions that positively correlate with church participation.⁹

While we note that at other points in the report the authors seek to maintain something of a distinction between church engagement and faith,¹⁰ the two issues are frequently conflated. Further still, the report never offers a definition or clarification of what it means by faith, and so one is left to assume that “drop[ping] their faith” occurs as they disengage from church-related practices and community life. The report would more appropriately be labelled “Hemorrhaging Church” since that is its primary interest, rather than “*Hemorrhaging Faith.*”

While such an observation may be considered to be the academic splitting of hairs, we would argue that such a conflation significantly undermines the ability of research efforts such as this to comment on the faith journeys of young people with subtlety and nuance. The recognition of a variety of (Christian) faith stances that include “spiritual-but-not-religious”, “post-church” or “exilic” demand a robust delineation of terms and specifically the careful distinction between church participation a faith development (or devolution).

Our second concern is closely related and identifies a necessary sociological distinction between disengagement (or dissociation) and disidentification (or sometimes “deidentification”). Sociologically speaking, “disengagement” and “dissociation” refer to a change being made in one’s affiliations, bonds and attachments within organisational and social contexts. As such, a young person ceasing attendance at church, withdrawing from youth group and no longer participating in ebb and flow of church community life can be understood to be disengaging (sociologically speaking). The question of whether this young person is at the same time, or in the same way actively rejecting their Christian faith (or even that church community) is quite different. Such a process is more closely approximated by the sociological notion of de/disidentification.

Keeping this distinction between disengagement and disidentification is something that has been more firmly a part of Australian based research work. For example, one of the first Australian studies exploring “dissociation” from the church took place in the

⁹ Ibid. 40.

¹⁰ For example, “Their answers reveal to what extent each factor bears on whether or not young people engage in faith and/or church.” Ibid. 42.

1970s. It will be discussed further later in this article, however, one of its important conclusions was:

What we found among many is that their removal from active church involvement has not followed a calculated decision to reject anything—but has been simply a gradual process of “drift.” In fact, some have been rather hurt at the suggestion that they are church “drop-outs.” It is not uncommon to hear “I haven’t left the Church; it’s just that I haven’t been for three years!”¹¹

Our discussion will pick up these themes again when we review Part II of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* report that delineates the “Four Spiritual Types.”

PART I – THE WORLD OF CANADIAN YOUNG ADULTS: LITERATURE REVIEW

The *Hemorrhaging Faith* research project commenced with a literature review that explored the demographic and cultural context of 18–34 year-old Canadians. The focus of the review was the cultural impact of Postmodernism and the changing nature of emerging adulthood. Issues such as autonomy, identity formation, consumerism, the changing role of the church and economic realities were identified and examined. This is an excellent eight pages of cultural analysis regarding emerging adulthood and synthesises many of the incumbent pressures and transitions, interspersed with some preliminary quotes of young adults the researchers interviewed.

Assessing this literature review, we would affirm many of its conclusions and claims as being equally at work in Australia because much of the phenomena described are dimensions of Western post-industrial societies of which Australia is a part. Harry Blatterer of Macquarie University, for example, has written extensively about the changing nature of the youth experience in Australia and ties this directly to macro socio-cultural pressures associated with Western post Industrial societies.¹²

We were however a little cautious about the authors’ suggestion that just as missionaries need to undertake cross-cultural study to ensure their message is communicated clearly, so too does the church; “we need to do our own cross-cultural anthropology work of youth.”¹³ On the one hand, we would affirm in general that taking an anthropological stance in relation to young people is a helpful stance as it is a posture of curiosity and non-judgemental inquiry. However, we were a little less enthusiastic about depicting young people as a strange and unknown being from a foreign land. A sociological perspective would argue that the culture in which a society’s younger generation is formed is created by the generations that have gone before. As Christian Smith’s research points out, for example, the reason our young people are expressing an orientation to religious and spiritual life that he describes as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” is because this is the kind of orientation impressed upon them by their adult generation.¹⁴

¹¹ John Bodycomb, *Here Today and Gone Tomorrow: A Report on Why Some Young Adults Dissociate From the Church* (Adelaide, SA: REPLAN Books for Joint Advisory Council of South Australia, Division of Research and Planning, 1976) 28.

¹² Harry Blatterer, “The Changing Semantics of Youth and Adulthood,” *Cultural Sociology* 4/1 (2010): 63–79.

¹³ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 19.

¹⁴ Christian Smith, “On ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ as US Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith,” in *Religion and Youth*, ed. Sylvia Collins-Mayo, and Pink Dandelion (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) 41–46; see also

Thirdly, we note that a significant finding of their quantitative study is that church disengagement is also happening in generations younger than the late teens and emerging adults. Virtually all of the literature they cite focuses upon late adolescence and emerging adulthood (18–34 year olds) and the remainder of the report remains somewhat blindsided to the issues and dynamics at play in younger generations. The report notes that children and early teens often disengage from church as they transition from primary school to high school, but does not offer analysis of this trend nor suggested ministry implications for children and families' ministries. We want to explore this further in another future article.

Finally, while we acknowledge that the *Hemorrhaging Faith* report was not intended for an academic audience, we also note that the literature reviewed did not expressly address the need for such research to be completed nor did it examine the extensive existing body of work or identify current gaps in knowledge beyond the need for Canadian data. There is reference to the growing range of literature on young adults leaving the church in the Introduction.¹⁵ We would have liked to have seen a more extensive review of the different studies of church disengagement and how they differ or complement one another.

PART II – WHY AND WHEN CANADIAN YOUNG ADULTS ARE LEAVING

Quantifying Disengagement

The second part of the report focuses on the qualitative data relating to who is leaving, when and why.

One of the present authors (Rowan) can recall the collective shudder that passed through a number of his Canadian colleagues upon the release of this report. Significantly it concluded that Canada's experience of young adults disengaging from church was worse than that of the United States. Seven out of 10 young people were found to be disengaging from church, a figure which worsened to nine out of 10 for Catholic and Mainline denominations. Only one in five Catholic and Mainline Protestant children who attended church at least weekly in the 1980s and 90s still attends at least weekly as an adult, or one in two for Evangelicals.¹⁶

Furthermore, this report added two new important observations. Firstly, it identified the process of active disengagement was not just happening in the post high-school years but was also significantly present in the younger teen years. For example, in mainline churches 54% of respondents said they attended weekly or more as children, declining to 19% as teenagers and 12% as young adults. The decline was significantly greater from childhood to the teenage years than from teens to young adults. Similarly, in evangelical churches 70% of respondents said they attended weekly or more as children, declining not as sharply but still alarmingly to 52% as teenagers and 39% as young

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010).

¹⁵ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 9.

¹⁶ Statistics drawing on Ibid. 5.

adults.¹⁷ The decline was still greater from child to teen attendance than from teens to young adults—a factor we shall discuss subsequently.

Secondly, the data confirmed that this movement away from active church engagement is not just a stage-of-life phenomenon. That is to say, this is not just about young adults needing to test things out for a while, but then eventually coming back when they are married with children. Instead, the report found that less than 5% return in subsequent years and in some denominations the figure drops to less than 1%. They do not largely join another denomination or religion; most who leave, according to the interpretation of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* team, become atheist, agnostic, spiritual or no religion. This is a surprising finding, or assumption, and does not correlate with research by New Zealand sociologist Alan Jamieson who suggests people who leave church often do not give up on their faith.¹⁸ Nevertheless, they helpfully observe that zones of disengagement tend to hover around periods of life that are socio-cultural transition points, such as the transition from primary to secondary school, graduation from high school, or the shift from University to first career.¹⁹

Quantifying Disengagement in Australia

A central question for us as a research team is to what extent are the same trends occurring in Australia? While we cannot point to any equivalent study in Australia, there is a variety of evidence that would suggest disengagement, from church at least, is equally prevalent here. We are interested, however, in identifying how much and why young adults are disengaging from church in Australia, and to what extent they are leaving their faith behind, and to what extent these two issues overlap, or not.

One of the first research efforts investigating “dissociation” from the church by young people took place as early as the 1970s. With similar refrains to the Canadian research, the report *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?* was the product of a collective of denominations coordinated by the Joint Advisory Council of South Australia.²⁰ The report found that marked declines in church involvement commenced from the age of 19 onwards, and that these declines were, in many cases, the result of a largely subconscious drift rather than a conscious decision.

A decade later, Peter Kaldor heralded the next warning using data from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS), which surveys approximately 7000 churches and 300,000 churchgoers every five years.²¹ A further decade later and the NCLS again highlighted the fact that late teens and twenties were found to be increasingly underrepresented in the demographic profile of the church.²² Importantly, the NCLS also sought an answer to the suggestion that this underrepresentation was simply an indication of life-stage factors

¹⁷ Ibid. 22.

¹⁸ For example, Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journey Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002).

¹⁹ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 81.

²⁰ John Bodycomb, *Here Today and Gone Tomorrow: A Report on Why Some Young Adults Dissociate from the Church* (Adelaide: Replan Books for Joint Advisory Council of South Australia, Division of Research and Planning, 1976).

²¹ Peter Kaldor, *Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care?* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1987).

²² Reported subsequently again in John Bellamy and Peter Kaldor, *National Church Life Survey Initial Impressions* (Adelaide, SA: Openbook, 2002).

whereby young people exercising their newfound autonomy were leaving the church only to return later once they were married and with children. The report found that this interpretation was erroneous. Investigating four decades of data, the report found progressive increases in the decline of young people attending church over successive decades and concludes:

Forty years later, there is a large gap between the age profile of the Australian community and church attenders. It was the young who first started to leave the churches in the 1960s and 1970s—and they have not returned. They defected in large numbers from the churches, and most did not return. Now, younger generations are absent from the churches in greater numbers. Many churches missed that moment, and have never caught up.²³

In 2005 the largest study of youth and spirituality in Australia was commenced. It produced two books offering a depiction of the nature of spiritual engagement and expression in young people, though did not specifically seek to measure disengagement or dissociation. This trend however was quite apparent to the researchers:

[Our research] reveals quite dramatic losses of young members from [various] churches ... while the large increases in “No-Religious Identification” leaves little doubt about the main destination of this exodus.²⁴

More recently, Hughes has identified that, of young Australians who had been identified with a Christian denomination in the 2001 Census, 500,000 decided to describe themselves as having “no religion” in the 2011 Census. In other words, every year 50,000 young people are drifting away from the Christian faith. For many of these young people, ticking the “no religion” box was the first time they had filled out a census form, having now become independent of their family.²⁵ Hughes has also been able to offer an overall percentage figure of young people’s disengagement using data from the International Social Survey Program. This data suggests that 72% of Australians aged 15-29 dissociate from church life—a figure reminiscent of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* report.²⁶

Finally, in similar refrains to *Hemorrhaging Faith’s* observation regarding disengagement in the younger years, David Goodwin’s research also observed that Australia is not just witnessing a departure of young adults from the church, but is also witnessing a major exodus (from church) in the transition from childhood to youth.²⁷

Thus, it would appear that a warning relating to young people and the church has been resounding within Australia for some four decades now. At the level of dissociation, disengagement or disaffiliation, Australia seems to be mirroring closely the Canadian experience and reflecting the U.S. experience but with significant differences. Yet many

²³ Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka, NCLS Occasional Paper #10: “Moving Beyond Forty Years of Missing Generations” (NCLS Research, 2008) <http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=6269>.

²⁴ Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People’s Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Victoria: John Garratt, 2007); see also Philip Hughes, *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (Fairfield Press, 2007).

²⁵ Philip Hughes, Margaret Fraser, and Stephen Reid, *Australia’s Religious Communities: Facts and Figures* (Melbourne: Christian Research Association, 2013).

²⁶ Philip Hughes, “Why Young People are Leaving the Church”, *Pointers*, Christian Research Association 25(1), 2015.

²⁷ David Goodwin, *Lost in Transition—or Not: Addressing the Problem of Children Leaving the Church as They Make the Transition From Childhood to Youth* (North Richmond, NSW: Kidsreach, 2013).

questions still remain relating to the interpretation of this data and the possible implications for ministry. In particular we note once again the difference between disengagement and disidentification and observe that much of the above research relates to disengagement. What is occurring at the level of identification is still yet to be determined.

The Four “Spiritual” Types

One of the significant offerings of *Hemorrhaging Faith* report is the delineation within the data of four categories or differing degrees of proximity to or from the church. These so called “Four Spiritual Types” were identified using cluster analysis of the quantitative data and were interpreted in the following manner:

1. Engagers, who made up 23% of the sample;
2. Fence sitters, 36%;
3. Wanderers, 26%;
4. Rejecters, 15%.²⁸

The report explains that the order of these spiritual types is indicative of their orientation to the church and Christianity. It boldly stated that: “An identifiable continuum exists from Engagers to Rejecters, where the openness and disposition to the church and faith deteriorates.”²⁹ They also found that Engagers and Fence sitters are more likely to be women, whereas Rejecters are proportionately more commonly men.³⁰ These data clusters were then used to examine the impact variations in responses to various childhood “faith” (or church) experiences and resulting adult “faith” (or church) circumstances.³¹

Engagers were defined as active participants in Christian traditions and faith communities. This group reports high levels of experiential connections with their faith and are more likely to attend church regularly. They view the church as a good source of emotional support and healing. Interestingly only 50% of them read their bible at least “about weekly” or pray daily.³² Some 75% of Engagers reported a retrospective impression that their parent’s had high levels of participation in spiritual disciplines, including bible reading, prayer and church attendance.³³

Fence Sitters still identify a Christian religious affiliation but are less likely to have a connection with a particular faith community. They have identified personal experience of God’s love (67%) and answer to prayers (68%).³⁴ But they are much less likely to experienced emotional healing through help received from a church (22%).³⁵ Fence Sitters are much more likely to see the church as out of touch (76%) with unrealistic lifestyle demands (66%) and think that church attendance is pointless (50%).³⁶ Yet the majority

²⁸ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 25, 28.

²⁹ Ibid. 30.

³⁰ Ibid. 30.

³¹ We remind the reader of our objection to the conflation of church and faith that occurs throughout the report.

³² Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 83.

³³ Ibid. 76.

³⁴ Ibid. 32.

³⁵ Ibid. 33.

³⁶ Ibid. 35–36.

still believe that the church makes a difference in the community (54%) and 32% state that they pray at least weekly.³⁷ We find this category interesting. So-called “Fence-sitters” express a number of features of spiritual life, except not necessarily church attendance. Thus categorisation as Fence-sitters, with negative connotations of indecisiveness and lack of commitment, reflects a stance towards active engagement with church rather than other spiritual practices or particular perspectives on faith.

Wanderers and Rejecters no longer identify themselves as Christian; the main difference between the two groups is how they have come to leave the church and how they feel about it as an organisation. Wanderers have usually drifted away gradually. They do not necessarily have any strong negative feelings about church seeing it as part of their childhood that is no longer relevant today, with 94% of Wanderers thinking the church is out of touch and 82% thinking going to church is pointless.³⁸ Some 82% of this group are not reading the bible and 56% do not pray.³⁹ In contrast to Fence-sitters, Wanderers and Rejecters not only do not engage with church but also do not engage in other Christian devotional practices as much.

Rejecters often identified a significant “scarring experience” which, in their mind, left them no option but to leave.⁴⁰ They have strong, negative feelings and hold the church responsible for their pain. They are hurt and very angry. It should be noted that often these feelings are justified, as this group includes many people who have suffered abuse within the church context that was not addressed appropriately. For others in this group, the wound has occurred by a perceived failure of the church or their faith to protect them from or help them in the midst of a significant life event. Rejecters are the least likely to report that they have personally experienced God’s love, answers to prayers or emotional healing through the church.⁴¹ As you would expect Rejecters have overwhelmingly negative views of the relevance, effectiveness and legitimacy of the church, and minimal participation in private spiritual practices. This perhaps reflects their understanding of these spiritual practices as being constructed in and for the “church” experience they have rejected. It would be interesting to investigate what other spiritual practices they have adopted, or how they would say they practice spirituality in other ways.

Evaluating the Four Spiritual Types

We firstly would affirm the delineation of the Four Types as being a recognised statistical process, routinely employed by researchers to analyse data in projects such as this. The researchers used the categories to good analytical effect not only in the quantitative sections of the report, but also carried it through the more qualitatively oriented sections applying it to, for example, family background and transitional experiences.⁴² The consistency of this application across the report gave great power and insight to their analysis and as a result, the typology became one of the most discussed and promulgated findings of the report.⁴³ This sort of categorisation is seen consistently through the

³⁷ Ibid. 36, 83.

³⁸ Ibid. 36.

³⁹ Ibid. 83.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 29.

⁴¹ Ibid. 32-33.

⁴² See for example Ibid. 81, 98.

⁴³ See for example Stiller, Karen. “Hemorrhaging Faith: Why They’re Leaving,” *Faith Today* (Sept–Oct 2012): 18-26.

research of church leavers including Kinnaman's *You Lost Me* and Jamieson's *A Churchless Faith* as a helpful way to handle the data.

We were, however, somewhat curious as to how the four labels were derived from the cluster analysis. That is to say, while we understand the dynamics of the statistical clustering process, it is the subsequent interpretive perspective of the researcher who then labels each cluster—and it is this process that is relatively undocumented. What we do know is that of the 84 questions that were asked of the quantitative respondents, the cluster analysis was performed on a subset of 15 questions:

1. I believe God answers my prayers.
2. I have experienced God's love personally.
3. I have experienced emotional healing through help received from a church.
4. What is right and wrong is a matter of personal opinion.
5. There exists a place of reward in the afterlife sometimes called heaven.
6. There exists a place of reward in the afterlife sometimes called hell.
7. Churches should solemnize gay and lesbian marriages just as they solemnize heterosexual marriages.
8. I think the lifestyle demands that churches make are totally unrealistic choices for me.
9. Attending church would be hypocritical for me.
10. I think going to church is pointless.
11. The church is out of touch with what is important in our society.
12. The church makes a difference in my community.
13. I think it is extremely important for churches to have programs geared toward teens.
14. I think it is extremely important for churches to have programs geared toward young adults.
15. Those in church leadership are able to help me explore my toughest questions.

What is not made clear is how the responses to each of these questions clustered in order to delineate the four types.⁴⁴ Examination of the data made available in the report does show a marked contrast between engagers and the other three types. Many of the charts (and accompanying discussion) set out on pages 31 through to 36 graphically portray “engagers” as safely stowed insiders to the Church and Christian faith, while the remaining three types are quite markedly (and often uniformly) distinct. Thus while the four clusters may themselves be statistically significant (although no data is presented within the report to this extent), there appears to be a number of dynamics which could also be analysed using two clusters.

Inasmuch as these types are identified by the report as reflecting a “relative orientation to Christianity and the church”⁴⁵ their interpretation may be highly reflective of the researcher's own orientation to Christianity and the church. Suffice to say that there

⁴⁴ See Jamieson's discussion of the “stages” of church leavers which he describes in correspondence to James Fowler's faith stages. Each category is clearly identified with particular criteria, and he refines his typology further in his follow up work. Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*; Alan Jamieson, Jenny McIntosh and Adrienne Thompson, *Church Leavers: Faith Journeys Five Years On* (London: SPCK/Sheldon, 2006).

⁴⁵ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 27.

is an extreme diversity of opinion amongst those who self-identify as Christian concerning the nature and existence of hell, marriage equality, and the relevance of church in society. Exactly what should constitute a Wanderer or Rejecter is not immediately clear and requires some justification. We would maintain that belief in heaven and hell and disagreeing with marriage equality represent a particular interpretation of Christianity rather than “relative orientation to Christianity and the church.” A young adult with an active and involved faith, who expresses doubt about hell and the relevance of the contemporary church, may be classified as a fence-sitter or wanderer by the project’s classification, even though they may see themselves as a positive engager.

A second concern we held relating to these four types is their establishment as something of a continuum of relative proximity. That is to say, the Engager is depicted as the closest to the Church and Christian faith while the Rejecter is the furthest. What is curious about this notional continuum is the anecdotal contrary evidence that has arisen from within the *Hemorrhaging Faith* project partners themselves. For example, a Canadian Young Adults minister became a key spokesperson for the report, speaking around the country and on Canadian national Christian Television. In these contexts she narrated how six years previously she would have been categorised by this report as a rejecter, yet now finds herself ministering in a Christian context and promoting this research. Equally, during the Australian *Hemorrhaging Faith* conference, Canadian keynote speaker Dave Overholt stated that in experience this was not uncommon. He observed that in fact many young people who fell into the category of Rejecter, if given the opportunity to express and work through their objections in a supportive environment were much more open to Christianity than Fence Sitters or Wanderers.⁴⁶

We suggest that the report’s “Four Spiritual Types” may well be beholden to a particular evangelical determination of “relative orientation[s] to Christianity and the church”, one that is more reflective of dualism of insiders and outsiders, saved and unsaved. While we acknowledge that the report refrains from using such dualistic terminology and in a number of cases communicates a much greater subtlety (such as the discussion of turning points in Chapter 13), there yet remains a variety of unresolved tensions regarding the delineation and interpretation of these Four Spiritual Types.

PART III & IV— IN THEIR OWN VOICES & KEY TRENDS

Part III and IV of the report shift to document the qualitative findings of the research and bring these into conversation with quantitative trends identified in the data. These parts are immensely valuable for describing what young adults look for in leadership and church, and tell us what they say and feel in their own words. It also functions as a grab bag of topics that became salient within the research and were worthy of reporting. An interesting dynamic that plays out across these two sections is the interplay of the stated desires of survey respondents and the quantitative data which may or may not bear out their desires as significant or indeed constructive for ongoing engagement. For example, some young adults aspire to more organic expressions of church, stating that:

It doesn’t necessarily have to be a church in a building. It could be just a group you meet up with, it doesn’t have to be a set time, I just think they need to be involved in some sort of

⁴⁶ Dave Overholt, Keynote Address, Hemorrhaging Faith. Melbourne, Australia. 2–3 March 2015.

activity in which they're with fellow believers, just to challenge them and to grow and to have support and community.⁴⁷

This was a common sentiment—there seems to be something about inherited church and its expectations that turn some young adults off, and something about non-institutional and more organic forms that are attractive to a more spontaneous generation. Yet missional church writers have commented that the sustainability of organic or emergent church structures rely on a degree of intentionality to be church for one another. Frost and Hirsch, for example, assert that church must include intentionality about communion with worship and Bible engagement, community for formation and fellowship, and commission to serve the needy and share the gospel.⁴⁸ The *Hemorrhaging Faith* report bears this out, indicating that those respondents who did disengage from institutional forms of church displayed radically lower forms of (Evangelical) religious engagement and spiritual expression. Thus while the report observed the most common justifications for disengagement being that “church is pointless”, “I’m too busy” or “I can do faith alone”, the reality appears to be that without some form of deliberate engagement with faith community, many forms of religious practice and spiritual expression wain.

A second example is the interplay between the desire for a community of peers against the apparent benefit of parental socialisation and the presence of an elderring community. A major theme that develops across Parts III and IV of the report is the socialising strength of parents and family. The report highlighted from both qualitative and quantitative data that young people who grow up in the context of engaged parents who authentically express and apply their faith in everyday life are far more likely to remain engaged into adulthood. Ominously, the opposite was also true. The socialisation of low parental involvement and inauthentic expression of faith was equally strong, and parents not engaged with church as an expression of faith tended to be associated with their children having higher levels of disengagement with church (and therefore faith the report argues) when they became young adults. Equally, the research highlighted importance of churches comprised of genuine intergenerational relationships, where young and old are united by social bonds and their common engagement in tasks perceived as purposeful and empowering.⁴⁹ Against this backdrop, numerous respondents expressed a strong desire to be a part of an (age segregated) community of peers, wanting to become independent or move beyond family belief structures and disdaining anything that looks like traditional forms of (adult) church. As one respondent commented, “I think I was maybe 17 at the time and everybody else was considerably older and I just kind of felt out of place and not able to relate.”⁵⁰ This is an important area for further research—

⁴⁷ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 41.

⁴⁸ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003); see also Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006) 144–156; George Lings, “Unravelling the DNA of Church: How Can We Know That What Is Emerging Is ‘Church’?”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6/1 (March 2006): 104-116; discussed in Darren Cronshaw, *The Shaping of Things Now: Emerging Church Mission and Innovation in 21st Century Melbourne* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2009) 59–61.

⁴⁹ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 43-46, 52-61. We note that both these dimensions (socialisation of family and intergenerational bonds) are identified as immensely important by multiple other research efforts. See for example R Martinson, W Black, and John Roberto, *Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Exemplary Youth Ministry Project* (St Paul, MN: EYM, 2010); Kara E Powell, Brad M Griffin and Cheryl A Crawford, *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

⁵⁰ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 57.

to identify what young people really want, and identify what really helps them with engaging faith and church—whether this is communities for young people or intergenerational community or some combination.

Amongst the “grab bag” of salient emerging issues, the report explores experiential engagement with God. It devotes an entire chapter to emerging adult’s own comments and discussion gleaned from the qualitative research phase (pp.47–51) as well as subsequent discussion derived from the quantitative data relating to summer camps and mission trips. Numerous respondents expressed a keen desire for tangible experiences of God in the form of answered prayer, feeling God’s presence and being used by God. They equally expressed bitter disappointment when such experiences were absent from their faith journey or church experience.⁵¹ The report observed that young adults who registered as having higher forms of church engagement also reported having higher rates of close personal experience(s) of God for themselves. Equally, the association found between engaged respondents and having “my faith come alive” on camps and mission trips was notably high.⁵²

We offer two observations relating to this dimension of divine experience. Firstly, the Australian camping context is very different to the culture of North American summer camps. Australia has nothing like the culture, infrastructure and demarcated summer period that supports the North American summer camping dynamic. While there are a number of Christian organisations and campsites that offer summer and Easter programs, the vast majority of Christian camp experiences originate out of the church or youth group (although the number of camping programs in Australia is fewer). This being said, McCrindle research highlights that camps are escalating in their impact upon young people in Australia. For young Australian Christians aged between 15 and 29, camps are the third most influential activity that helped their faith come alive, being significant for 28.7% of young people. This compared to camps being significant to only 8.7% of 50+ year olds, and 9.7% of 30–49 year olds. Of those who have attended a camp, nearly half rate that experience as being an important part of their faith journey (47%).⁵³

The second observation relates to the issue of outcome bias. As noted earlier, the presence of outcome bias would likely be evidenced by overly confident portrayals of negative evaluations of Christian upbringings (and vice versa). If outcome bias is present, then we would expect the groupings that have negative evaluations of their Christian engagement (Wanderers and Rejecters) to have over-confidence in their assessment of the presence or absence of experiential encounters with God. In other words, because respondents tend to view their autobiography from the perspective which they now hold, there is a higher likelihood that disengaged or dis-identified respondents might no longer remember real and personal encounters with God during childhood, or may reinterpret these experiences as being made up or vacuous.⁵⁴ The opposite is also true of positive

⁵¹ Ibid. 47–51.

⁵² Engagers whose faith came alive on Mission Trips = 71%, Fence Sitters 31%, Wanderers 4%, Rejecters 0%. Engagers whose faith came alive on Camps = 52%, Fence Sitters 24%, Wanderers 12%, Rejecters 9%.

⁵³ McCrindle Research, “Social Change, Spiritual Trends—Christianity in Australia Today.” available at <http://www.christianvenues.org.au/impact/> (accessed June, 2015).

⁵⁴ George Valiant longitudinal research was able to illustrate outcome bias through asking a respondent to recall the same incident/circumstance each time they were surveyed. Comparing these recollections, Valiant observed the pronounced tendency to reinterpret such memories to conform to their current perspective. See George Vaillant, *Adaption to Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1977).

evaluations. The possible presence of outcome bias together with our differing context indicates that careful consideration of camps and mission trips will be important for our Australian context as they may not be as powerful an influence as this data may indicate.

Finally, the research revealed young adults are often turned away from church and faith by what they perceive as unrealistic expectations in church teaching about sex, judgmental approaches to homosexuality, demeaning gender roles and exclusion of women from leadership, and uncritical assertions of ultimate truth. They want to be able to ask and explore questions and grapple with difficult issues, not just be told what to believe and how to behave.⁵⁵ The researchers commented “They’re not interested in maintaining the status quo. They’d rather take the risk of being in over their heads than settle for comfort and being stagnant.”⁵⁶ This was in response to survey responses such as from “Don” who asked for depth and challenge:

They’ll just give them this wishy-washy Jesus loves you rainbows sunshine puppy dogs glitter version of the gospel to win them over. But it’s not about winning people over for popularity points and brownie points with team Jesus. ... There’s no stretching. There’s no real encouragement to do better. It’s just trying to make people feel all warm and fuzzy inside and hoping they’ll turn out for the best. But what happens when that warm and fuzziness wears out? ‘Cause it will. ‘Cause it’s not real.⁵⁷

The research suggests young people will respond more honestly and openly to church teaching that is dialogical in style rather than dogmatic. The report warns leaders to avoid superficial understandings and presentations of the gospel. This is important since some leaders seem to think that the appropriate response to young adults leaving is to simply retell the “simple gospel” again and again. We are convinced that what young adults need is churches who invite them to explore the breadth and depth of why the gospel is good news for people in different situations.

PART V – WHERE NEXT?

In introducing the report, John Wilkinson acknowledges the challenge of young adults leaving the church but also challenges the church to work with young adults who remain in church to help them develop faith with more mature and deeper roots, and to seriously reorient church to help those who are leaving:

For the larger number of youth who no longer are involved in church, this research asks how we can move the church to be more youth-friendly, more welcoming of their faith journey and more willing to engage in an authentic dialogue about faith and life issues, a dialogue that in many ways will require us in church leadership to understand a mindset quite different from our own. If we are to take young adults seriously, there will be a price to pay.⁵⁸

The statistics are alarming for anyone who is concerned about people leaving church. Yet the report writers remind us that faith is God-breathed, and can be God-resurrected.⁵⁹ From another perspective, we suggest that the hemorrhaging of young

⁵⁵ Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith* 66–73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 68.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 6.

adults from church does not always reflect a hemorrhaging of faith. The report is misnamed and assumed that leaving church equates to leaving faith behind. Faith can be God-resurrected, but it can also be found in surprising places and may not be as dead as reports such as *Hemorrhaging Faith* imply. From the church perspective, however, churches can learn from the report if they are interested in retaining young adults as participants. They may also go a step further and ask the big question about how they can help young adults with faith and spirituality even if the young adults are not engaging in church.

Overall, we would affirm the broad lines of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* research project and consider it to contain numerous insights and conclusion that reflect aspects of the Australian context. While some might dispute whether disengagement from church and faith is a new or worsening phenomenon, we would argue that the Australian church is not just failing to “reach” the next generation, they are failing to “keep” the current one. However, identifying with church is one expression of faith, but it is not the only one. Many active young adults, including many who still self-identify as Christian and whose lives are guided by a strong faith, do not strongly identify with church. Of those who still identify with church, there are many who may not utilise church as the main or only support system for their faith. This is where Jamieson’s work is informative, and an indication that longitudinal studies are necessary.⁶⁰

This reality became apparent to Rowan Lewis (inadvertently) when he introduced a reflective exercise at a number of retreats with young adults. He invited young adults to diagrammatically map out the relationships and resources that are important to their faith and to indicate how they engage with these relationships and resources. For many young adults, their faith leads them to engage in a diverse range of service opportunities and nurturing contexts. They list friendship groups, people, literature, podcasts, Facebook, retreats, events and camps, as well as (often but not always) a local church, churches or youth groups. What is startling is when asked to indicate with a symbol those relationships or resources that are specifically attached to their local church, the majority of young adults indicated as few as 10%. This is the new ecclesia for many of the emerging generation. And this is the crucial question—what is this new ecclesia? And this is where Frost’s work is particularly useful.⁶¹ It is a rag tag network of Facebook friends, downloaded podcasts, mentoring conversations occurring over Skype, regional events hosted by interdenominational groups. “Church” is no longer conceived of as being limited to one local church. Yet our churches, still indebted to an attractional and established Christendom Model, continue to focus our youth ministry energy on organising youth group programs and—if large enough—employing a youth pastor to help youth and young adults with their faith in church.⁶² And in so doing, they miss interacting with new ecclesia as it is inhabited by emerging generations. Equally so, it may be that the *Hemorrhaging Faith* research project employed paradigms and survey instruments that were similarly indebted to this redundant Christendom model and in so doing may have missed the nuanced and subtle nature of faith in the contemporary era.

⁶⁰ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*.

⁶¹ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*; Frost, *Exiles*.

⁶² For a good general description of Christendom as an outdated model for church and mission and the necessary paradigm shift for today’s Western context see: Stuart Murray Williams, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

We see this circumstance precisely in the life of Mitch as described at the opening of this article. While Mitch has never undertaken the *Hemorrhaging Faith* survey, our estimation of his responses (based on our qualitative engagement with him) may have rendered him somewhere between a fence sitter and wanderer simply because of his loose connection to the local church while maintaining a broad, inclusive, active though unorthodox approach to Christian faith and church engagement. His diverse network of involvements does not easily fit into Christendom models of church and his practices of faith do not neatly fit into quantitative measures of prayer regularity and bible reading.

We are curious about the relationship of church and faith, but see this as just one albeit significant indicator of faith engagement. Unfortunately, we feel, most studies use metrics about engagement with church—whether youth and young adults attend or not, with assumptions regarding faith. People who leave church go lower on religiosity, but not necessarily lower on spirituality.⁶³ It may well be that the people we find engaged in church are those who respond well to Christendom models or organised church, while those who find themselves sitting on the fence, wandering or rejecting church are choosing a path which is likely to lead them toward disidentification (statistically), exactly what such young people are disidentifying with requires greater understanding and clarity.

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⁶³ Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*.