

THE
YOUTHScape
CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH

Word

THE ROLE OF
PRACTICE IN
MISSIONAL
YOUTH MINISTRY

Contents

INTRODUCTION 4

SUMMARY 6

PART 1. BACKGROUND 10

Literature review

- Defining practice 12
- Dimensions of practice 14
- Practice as mission 15
- Practice for a secular age 16
- An opportunity 16
- Contextualised Christian youth work 17
- The practices of Christian youth work 17
- Practising 'The Way' 18
- 'Spiritual experiments' as an experiential apologetic 18
- In summary 19

Methodology

- Research aims 20
- The case studies 20
- The survey 21

PART 2. SURVEY OF YOUTH WORKERS 22

- Sample: who responded to the survey? 24
- The focus of youth ministry 25
- The practices of youth workers 27
- The practices youth workers teach about, or invite young people to experience 29
- Theory/practice gaps 34
- Practices for identity, faithfulness and mission 40
- Other key practices – in youth workers' own words 43
- Practice as mission 45
- Barriers to practising faith 48

PART 3. CASE STUDIES 52

- Journey 58
- Practices 66
- Design 72
- Context 78

PART 4. CONCLUSION 84

- Recommendations 86
- Comments 90
- References 94

Introduction

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Matthew 7:24

Youth workers know how to create an experience.

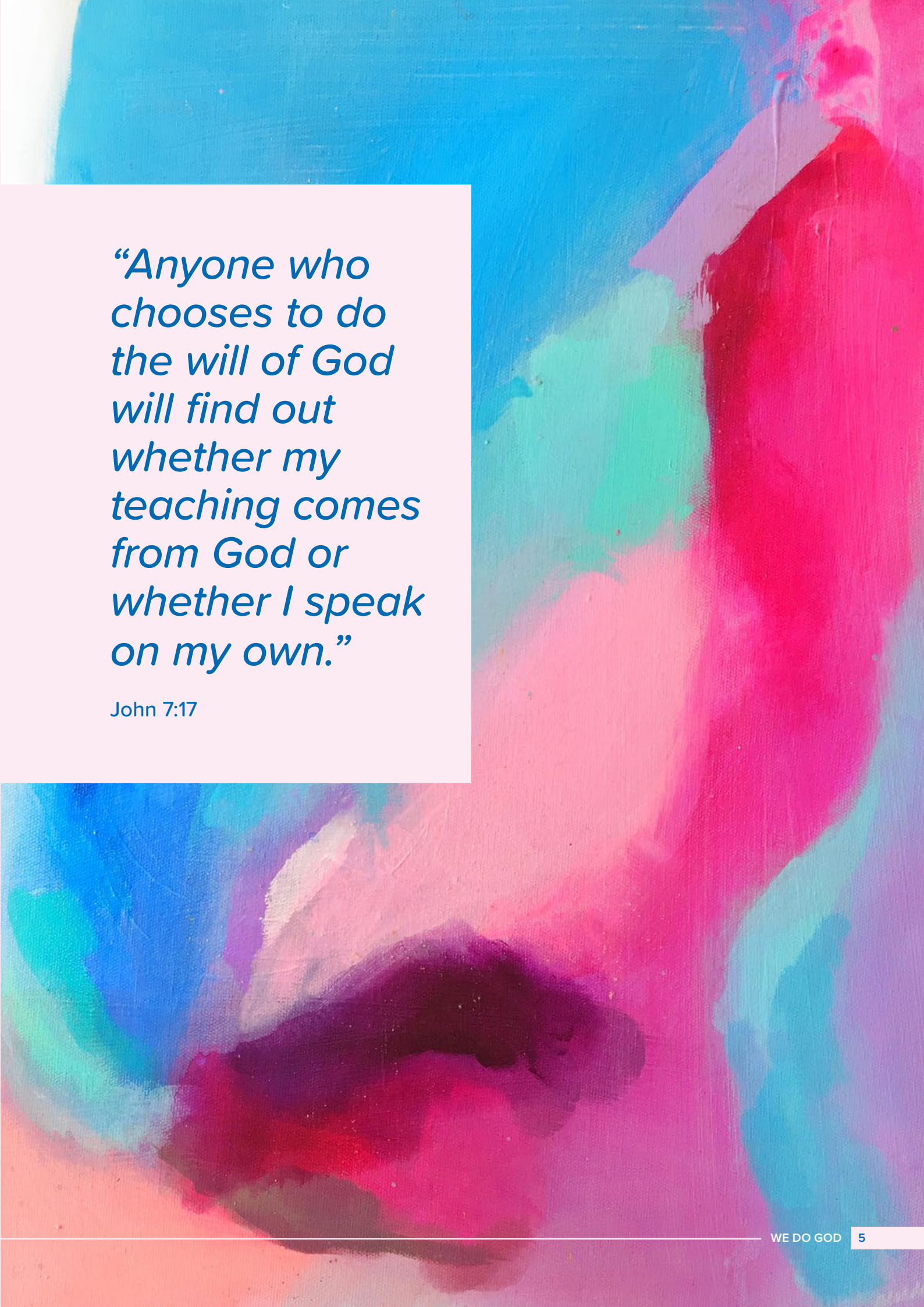
Whether it's choosing the right music, taking young people to new places or just creating an odd ritual that only your youth group will ever understand. But experience can also be overlooked within churches, where we do a lot of thinking and talking about faith.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in spiritual disciplines and Christian practices within evangelical churches. Often framed as 'ancient ways', they seem to offer a wisdom that is desperately needed, and a structure for living well. For a number of years, the Youthscape team here in Luton have been finding creative ways to shape and support young people's spiritual development through their direct experience – exploring what such practices offer youth ministry. Curiosity about this approach has led us here.

This report explores the way that Christian youth workers in the UK engage with Christian practices – reviewing existing literature, analysing case study interviews and survey data. We particularly highlight the experiences of those who invite young people beyond the Church to 'experiment' with faith.

Our hope is that 'We do God' will take you on a journey of reflection, considering the place of practice within contemporary youth ministry, and within your own life.

Dr Lucie Shuker



*“Anyone who
chooses to do
the will of God
will find out
whether my
teaching comes
from God or
whether I speak
on my own.”*

John 7:17

Summary

Prayer, rest, hospitality, baptism, forgiveness...

Practices are the things Christians do together over time in response to, and in the light, of God's active presence for the life of the world. They carry much of our theology, translating the Christian story and making God's goodness visible to the world. It is through our practices that we improvise our part in God's ongoing mission to reconcile all things – taking the traditions we inherit and bringing them into conversation with the needs, desires and culture of young people. Where the established Church sometimes struggles to engage with young people, perhaps the language of practices could provide a framework for its mission once again.

This report explores the role of practice within youth ministry through the experiences of youth workers. We conducted an online survey of 235 Christian youth workers across the UK, exploring their own practices and how they help young people experience Christian faith, both within and beyond the Church. This was followed by analysis of 13 case studies where youth workers were inviting young people who were not part of churches to try out Christian practice. Drawing on data from 21 adults and nine young people, we identify key themes that can help others draw more on experience and practice in their own work with young people.

Survey: key findings

Practice within mission

Youth workers saw the role of practice within mission as authenticating claims about God's love, through young people being able to see what Christian communities actually do. They told us that practices can help young people to directly participate in God's life, through prayer and worship and through 'making a difference'. Beyond the 21 practices we identified, youth workers told us they also engaged young people in practices centred around relationship-building, learning and growth, and well-being.

Missional practice was perceived to be both culturally relevant (e.g. healing, testimony and hospitality) and culturally radical (forgiveness, lament and rest). This suggests that some practices will be more immediately attractive to young people, while others will be more challenging. We asked about which practices youth workers see as most attractive to young people outside the Church, most powerful for forming Christian identity and most important in being faithful to the teachings of Jesus.

- **Serving/blessing others was the only practice seen as important in all three ways.**
- **Some of the practices considered most attractive to young people outside the Church (e.g. celebration and challenging injustice) were also considered least important for being faithful to the teachings of Jesus.**
- **Forgiveness and loving your enemy were seen as uniquely important if young people are to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus.**

- The practices seen as most powerful for helping young people form a sense of Christian identity were also those that youth workers were most likely to intentionally engage in themselves (prayer, worship, reading scripture, attending meetings, serving/blessing others).

Youth workers own practice: more to explore

On average, youth workers told us they were intentionally engaging in 13 of the 21 practices and a third (32%) reported having a 'rule of life'. However, there was a significant gap between the practices that they do and don't engage in, suggesting that there is lots of scope for youth workers to explore new practices. Those taking part in the survey were most likely to engage in the practices of worship, church attendance, prayer and Bible reading and least likely to engage in fasting or lament, with a small majority (54%) saying they did not intentionally practice fasting at all.

Practice with young people: teach first

In general, youth workers reported being more likely to teach about practices than help young people to experience them, whether those young people are in churches or not.¹ There are some examples where this theory/practice gap is particularly significant (loving your enemies, forgiveness, challenging injustice, resting, fasting). Youth workers also told us that they spent significantly less time helping young people to experience God than on other youth work aims (fostering community, helping young people live out their faith and exploring beliefs).

Forgiveness, serving, studying scripture and prayer are all in the top five practices youth workers have taught to young people who both are and aren't part of churches in the last two years, while fasting, resting, lament and living simply are the least taught practices for both groups.

Practice with young people: different experiences in and outside the Church

Youth workers in our survey were significantly less likely to engage young people outside of churches in practice than those within the Church (whether that's through teaching or experience). Likewise, mission to young people outside the Church was reported to be a significantly lower priority for these youth workers than meeting young people's social/emotional/practical needs or the discipleship of young people who attend church.

Youth workers were most likely to help young people outside churches experience celebration (53%), followed by being hospitable and prayer (both at 50%). In contrast, youth workers were most likely to help young people within churches experience worship/singing (84%) and prayer/meditation (83%).

Finally, there was a significant difference overall between the most and least taught practices and the most and least experienced practices. This was true for young people within and outside church communities, suggesting that young people are not encountering the breadth of practice available within the Christian tradition.

1. Though the gap between teaching and experience just falls short of being statistically significant

Case studies: key learning

Practice has a role to play at all stages of a journey of faith

- Experience of Christian practice can be powerful in opening up new spiritual possibilities for young people, whether they have a faith of their own or not.
- Even one-off experiences can be meaningful and stimulate curiosity about God, if young people are given space and support to reflect on them.
- Some young people will be willing to commit to ongoing 'experiments' or being part of practice-based groups, and these experiences of living or seeing differently can reveal the choices they have – making faith real and plausible.
- As well as meeting their needs in various ways, practices are a framework for inviting young people to participate in God's mission and bring their own contributions.
- A curriculum of practice can help young people who have grown up in Church understand what it means to follow Jesus and help them form habits for discipleship.
- Where practice is corporate and has some ritual or routine, it can renew the culture of Christian communities, and affect the wider environment as well.
- Some practices, like worship and prayer, particularly facilitate encounter with God and can be very significant for those who don't see themselves as Christians.
- Other practices invite young people into reflection on self, others or the wider world. While such experiences can be positive in themselves, young people are likely to need support to contextualise and make sense of them within a Christian framework.
- Where practice mobilises young people to engage with the wider world, it repositions them as givers, not just recipients. This can be particularly empowering for groups of young people who are not routinely invited to give, e.g. those with additional needs.

Modelling, listening, trust and commitment are key features of practice-based ministry

- To invite young people onto a pathway of practice, adults need to be on the road themselves: willing to model commitment, grace and vulnerability as co-disciples.
- Reflection is a key part of learning from 'doing faith', and young people need adults to listen, so they develop this skill and construct meaning from their experiences.
- Established, trusting relationships help young people accept an invitation to explore Christian practice, and support them on their journey as well.
- The form and content of an invitation to experience Christian practice can be responsive to young people's strengths, context, desire and particular needs.
- Developing a culture of practice takes time and commitment.
- The wider church should value, model and uphold a breadth of Christian practice to support young people on their journey of faith.

Practices facilitate encounter with God, reflection and engagement with the world

- Christian practice is often most powerful when it takes account of young people's lived experience, and because of its rich diversity it can engage young people with different preferences, personalities, backgrounds, needs and learning styles.

Young people's age, church experience and socio-economic background will affect how they engage in practice

- Younger teenagers need more direct support and structure with practices while they are developing their capacity for self-reflection, self-awareness and listening. It may be more realistic to facilitate meaningful experiences and group practice, rather than expect them to develop disciplined devotional habits.
- Whether young people have grown up in Church or not, they can all be invited to encounter Jesus. However, some young people within churches may need support to adjust to expectations that faith is embodied and practical.
- Young people's socio-economic context and family environment will affect their needs, the time they have for Christian practices and how supported they are.
- Where Church culture is alien to young people, practice should help overcome rather than reinforce that alienation.
- The physical environment can make a real difference to young people's experience of Christian practices, communicating welcome, disrupting the everyday or creating ownership.
- Young people need support from parents and peers, which they don't always have.
- Young people themselves sometimes lack the self-awareness, curiosity or confidence to participate in practices.

There are some barriers to overcome, in order to integrate practice more fully into youth ministry

- Churches can emphasise attendance or beliefs over making space for young people's participation and spirituality, and don't always model practice to young people.
- Our culture often values individualism, secularism, consumerism, domination and hyperactivity – all of which can prevent people exploring Christian practices.

Methodology

Research aims

We had three aims in undertaking this study.

- **To better understand the value and role of practice and ‘spiritual experimentation’ in missional youth ministry.**
- **To understand the key features of, and influences on, projects that invite young people to engage with Christian faith through practice.**
- **To identify learning that can support and equip churches and Christian organisations.**

The research is exploratory, looking for examples of a particular approach to youth ministry, in an attempt to better understand and learn from it. We hope, therefore, that it will stimulate some new thinking, conversation and action within the youth ministry community. The report is primarily a piece of social research but does draw in a limited way on theological sources to frame and interpret the data, which you can explore further in the bibliography. This study was conducted in two phases; first, interviews with individuals from projects that provided case study examples and second, a survey of youth workers from across the UK.

The case studies

We published a ‘call for case studies’ via email, social media and our website to try and identify individuals and organisations who were actively inviting young people who are not part of church communities to ‘try out’ Christian practices. Our goal was to identify contexts where there was both a commitment to inviting young people to practice, and a depth of experience to reflect on. In reality, people often pick up and put down different tools in response to changing circumstances, so not all of our interviewees had been emphasising practice exclusively or consistently. Although we provided a definition of what we meant by practice and spiritual experiments, we recognised that there would be diversity in how interviewees interpreted the project, and the meanings of these terms.

The sample was also self-selecting, which means our case studies are not representative of those working or volunteering in youth ministry, and they are not comprehensive. We will certainly have missed other examples where youth workers are taking this approach, and not everyone we approached was able to take part. Thirty people in total were involved in the case study phase: 21 adults and 9 young people aged between 12-19. There were 16 interviews, three focus groups and one observation across the 13 projects that were exploring invitational practice. In most cases, key people from each project were interviewed alone or in groups. A list of all those we interviewed is available on pages 55-56.

The interviews were focused on understanding the features, strengths and experiences of each case, and the ideas that have shaped them. We focused on identifying what projects were learning, rather than evaluating their impact or making judgements about their quality. We learned a huge amount about these projects and communities that was deeply inspiring and interesting, but which couldn't be included for the sake of brevity. We spoke to people working for churches and charities, in schools and on the streets, those working with private school students and on council estates. The ways they worked were diverse, but all were creating contexts for young people to experience Christian practice, who would not necessarily call themselves Christian.

The interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo 12, according to a series of pre-identified key themes and sub-themes, as well as any emerging themes that were identified during the course of the research. These themes were summarised and compared and analysed alongside memos that were written about the interviews. The design of the study was reviewed by the Youthscape Research Advisory Board, and an ethical protocol was approved by the Youthscape Centre for Research Ethics Committee. This provided a framework for how we conducted and report the research, including gaining informed consent (including from parents where young people were under 16), complying with data protection regulations, using pseudonyms for young people's names, and giving our interviewees a choice about whether to be anonymous in the final reporting.

The survey

After completing the interviews, a survey was designed and piloted that explored some of the issues raised in phase one. This included how far youth workers were incorporating practices in their ministry, what they were practising, the perceived impact of different practices in a missional context, and barriers to developing cultures of practice within youth ministry.

The survey was hosted on an online survey platform and distributed via Youthscape's networks through the National Youth Ministry Weekend, the Centre for Research and social media. It was completed by 235 people between November 16th and December 18th 2019. Respondents were anonymous and data were analysed using SPSS and Excel. You can read more about the specific statistical tests we used in the footnotes of Part 2.

Limitations

This was not a representative sample, so the findings can't be generalised to all Christian youth workers. The results will obscure differences in how people might approach practice on the basis of their context or denomination, and as noted elsewhere, people interpret what practices mean in a variety of ways. Finally, young people may well experience or hear about Christian practice from a range of other sources, so what youth workers say they do should not be conflated with what young people ultimately experience.

PART



Survey of youth workers

Section Overview

- Sample: who responded to the survey?
- The focus of youth ministry
- The practices of youth workers
- The practices youth workers teach about, or invite young people to experience
- Theory/practice gaps
- Discussion/summary

Sample: who responded to the survey?

Of the 235 respondents to our online survey, 79% were involved in youth ministry for a church in either a paid or voluntary capacity, 16% for a Christian charity and 5% for a combination of both (or another institution like a school or diocese). The majority (78%) were paid (17% of whom also volunteered) and 22% were solely volunteers. Of the 184 employed youth workers, 59% worked full-time and 41% worked part-time. The sample was skewed towards those in their 20s and 30s, which reflects the younger age of youth workers more generally. The largest group were those affiliated to the Anglican Church (40%).

Age	
18-29	39%
30-39	28%
40-49	20%
50-59	10%
60-69	2%
70+	1%

Which denomination are you part of right now?	
Anglican	40%
Baptist	18%
Pentecostal/charismatic	17%
Other	13%
Methodist	6%
None	3%
Presbyterian	2%
Catholic	1%

Where do you engage with young people*?	
Within the church	91%
School	59%
Other community spaces	46%
Other	10%

*Responses tally to more than 100 because multiple responses were possible.

The focus of youth ministry

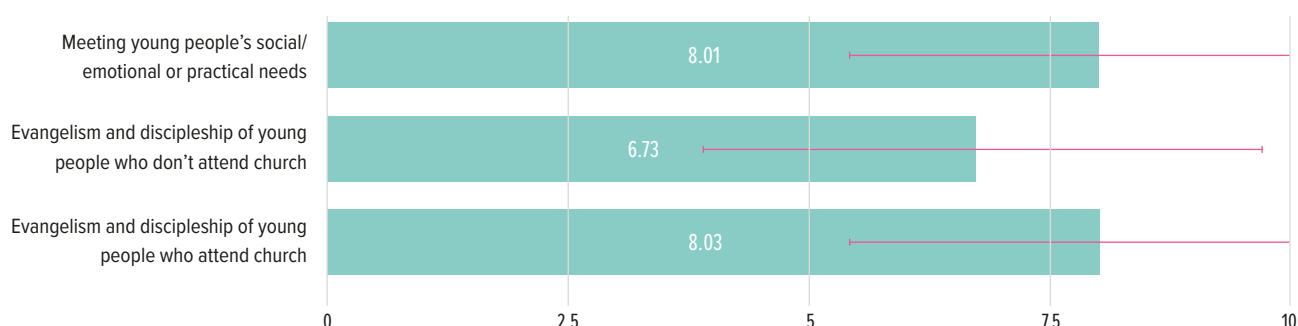
Finding 1. Mission to young people outside the Church was significantly less of a priority than other youth work aims.

The study is primarily interested in how young people outside Church communities are invited to experience Christian practice, so we asked youth workers to describe where their work was focused. Their answers demonstrate the high priority given to the evangelism and discipleship of young people who attend church, and to meeting young people's social/emotional or practical needs. Further analysis showed no statistical difference between these two youth ministry priorities, suggesting that they are similarly prioritised.¹⁶

In contrast, mission to young people outside the Church is the lowest priority for this group of youth workers. When comparing priorities, statistical analysis shows that 'Evangelism and discipleship of young people who don't attend church' is significantly lower than both 'Meeting young people's social/emotional or practical needs'¹⁷ and 'Evangelism and discipleship of young people who attend church'.¹⁸

Chart 1: The mean scores of youth workers' reported priorities.¹⁹

How much of a priority is each of these in your youth ministry?



16. To explore any differences between these priorities, three Wilcoxon signed rank tests were run. There was no statistically significant difference between the scores for "Evangelism and discipleship of young people who do attend church" and "Meeting young people's social/emotional or practical needs" ($Z = -0.30$, $p = .764$).

17. $Z = -6.68$, $p < .001$ 18. $Z = -6.17$, $p < .001$

19. The standard deviation for each was as follows: meeting needs (2.23), evangelism/discipleship of those who don't attend church (2.82) and evangelism/discipleship of those who do attend church (2.08)

Finding 2. Youth workers reported spending significantly less time helping young people to experience God than on other youth ministry aims.

We then presented four high-level aims of youth ministry, asking respondents to mark each out of 10, to reflect how much time they spend on each one (n=235). All four aims scored relatively highly overall, but tests showed that the difference between these aims was statistically significant.²⁰ This means that youth workers report spending:

- significantly more time fostering good relationships than they do helping young people live out faith, and
- significantly more time supporting young people to live out their faith than they do helping young people to directly encounter God.

The only exception was that the difference between supporting young people to live as disciples (Living out faith) and exploring the Bible and key Christian beliefs (Belief) was not statistically significant.²¹ An ongoing focus on relational youth-work in the UK might explain why youth workers report fostering community to be the most significant aspect of their work, and it is encouraging that they report spending similar amounts of time on exploring beliefs and living out those beliefs. However, this also suggests many youth workers are missing an opportunity to help facilitate the direct experience that is necessary for authenticating truth claims and making sense of the Christian faith.

Chart 2: The mean scores of time youth workers perceive spending on different aspects of youth ministry.

Score each out of 10 to reflect the time you spend on each of these aspects of youth ministry.



²⁰ When a difference is reported to be statistically significant it means that there is at 5% or less chance that the difference occurred randomly. This means that this is a reliable finding, that may well hold up if we continued to survey more youth workers.

²¹ A non-parametric repeated measures Friedman's Test was run, which showed a significant main effect between each of the categories ($\chi^2(3) = 98.42$, $p < .001$). The Wilcoxon Signed Rank test found highly significant differences ($p < .001$) between all of the factors, except for between 'Living out faith – supporting young people to live as disciples' and 'Belief – exploring the Bible and key Christian beliefs' ($Z = -.465$, $p = .642$).

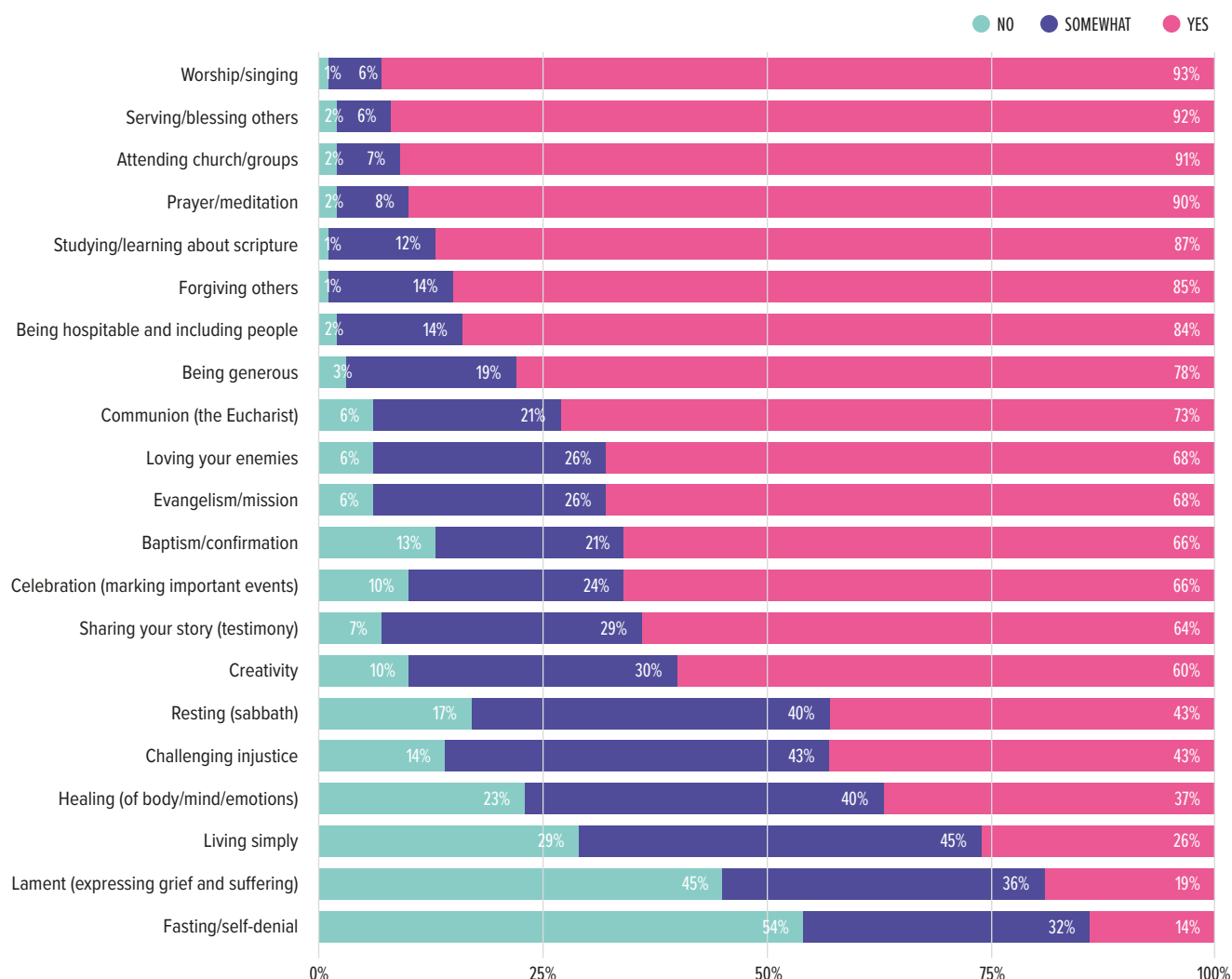
The practices of youth workers

One of the key themes of this report is the role of youth workers in modelling Christian practice, therefore we wanted to explore what youth workers are doing, in more or less intentional ways. The survey presented a list of 21 practices, and asked respondents to drag and drop them into one of three boxes, according to the degree that they engaged in each.²² One of the obvious limits here is that we did not define what we meant by each of these practices, and we can only report what youth workers told us they are doing. With no agreed definition of what it means to ‘actively’ and

‘regularly’ practice fasting, for example, we should be cautious about over-interpreting the results.

Nevertheless, on the basis of what this sample told us, the youth work community is a practising community. On average, each person ‘intentionally’ practiced 13.4 activities, ‘somewhat’ practised five, and did not engage in 2.5 practices – as part of their faith.²³ It is clear from looking at **Chart 3** that youth workers are more likely to report that they are practising any of these activities than that they are not. It is also evident that the highest ranked practices in the ‘Yes’ category tend to reflect the lowest ranked practices in the ‘No’ category, although they do not mirror each other perfectly.

Chart 3: The practices of Christian youth workers. ‘Which of these are you intentionally practicing?’



²² These 21 practices were compiled from various existing lists, and are not exhaustive. For example, we realised after launching the survey, that we had left out ‘confession’ which is a common Christian practice. ²³ The wording of this question was ‘Which of these are you intentionally practicing? By ‘intentionally’ practicing, we mean that you are actively doing this, whether regularly or semi-regularly. Feel free to put ‘one-off’ practices like baptism into the ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ box.’ Response options were ‘No. This is not something I am practicing as part of my faith’, ‘Yes. this is something I am intentionally practicing as part of my faith’ and ‘Somewhat. I am practising this in a limited way as part of my faith’. 3161 practices were dropped into the ‘yes’ column (average of 13.4 ‘yes’ per person), 1175 into the ‘somewhat’ column (average of 5 ‘somewhat’ per person), and 598 into the ‘no’ column (average of 2.5 ‘no’ per person).

Finding 3. Youth workers were most likely to engage in the ecclesial practices of worship, church attendance, prayer and Bible reading, and least likely to engage in fasting or lament.

There was very high consensus in the sample around a set of practices that nearly everyone intentionally engaged in. Four of these top five are regularly expressed through and in attending services, which may explain why there is such a high level of engagement. These ‘ecclesial practices’ are worship/singing – 93%, attending church/groups – 91%, prayer/meditation – 90% and studying/learning about scripture – 87%. The second most frequently reported practice was serving/blessing others, with 92% relating that this is something they intentionally practice.

A little over half of the group (54%) identified fasting/self-denial as a practice they did not intentionally engage in, followed by lament (45%), living simply (29%), healing of body/mind/emotions (23%) and resting/sabbath (17%). Fasting stands apart in this list as the only practice that the majority of respondents told us they don’t engage in. The other four practices show up in both the top five ‘least’ and ‘somewhat’ practised – suggesting that, while few youth workers intentionally practice these, there is some engagement with them overall.

When the five most and least reported practices were compared, we found that the difference between the two was statistically significant.²⁴ In other words, there is a significant gap between the practices that youth workers report intentionally engaging in, and those that they don’t. This suggests that the youth work community represented by this sample have scope to intentionally explore a greater breadth of Christian practice.

Finding 4. A third of youth workers reported having a ‘rule of life’.

A rule of life is an articulation of what faith looks like on a day-to-day basis. While the term is inspired by the ‘rules’ of different monastic communities, it is used by many Christians as a framework for an intentional rhythm of spiritual disciplines or practices. In light of our focus on practices, we asked whether youth workers had a rule of life themselves, but did not offer a definition, or explain why we were asking. Of the 235 respondents, 40% told us ‘I don’t know what that is’, 32% said ‘Yes’ and 28% said ‘No’. We don’t know how individuals understand the term, or what it means to them to have a rule of life, but it is interesting that almost a third of this group reported that they did have some kind of rule of life.

²⁴. An independent t-test was run to compare the two groups, and a statistical difference between the two groups was found ($t(8)=11.55, p < .01$)

The practices youth workers teach about, or invite young people to experience

After enquiring about their own practice, we asked youth workers which of the 21 practices they had either taught young people about or invited them to experience – both within and beyond the Church.²⁵

Finding 5. There is a significant difference between the most and least taught practices and the most experienced and least experienced practices.

Chart 4 shows the large gap between the practices at the top and bottom of each list, and analysis reveals that this gap is statistically significant.²⁶ For example, while 84% of youth workers told us they had helped young people within church experience worship/singing in the last two years, only 12% had helped these young people experience fasting. And while 54% of youth workers in our sample said they had taught young people outside the Church about forgiving others, only 17% said they had taught this group about resting. This gap between the most and least taught/experienced practices was statistically significant for young people both within and outside church communities, and suggests we are not exploring the breadth of Christian practice available within our tradition with either group, whether through teaching or practice.

Finding 6. Youth workers are significantly more likely to engage young people within churches in Christian practice than those outside the church (whether that's being taught about or experiencing practices).

Taking the example of prayer, a large majority of youth workers said they had taught about prayer, or invited young people to experience prayer within a church context (83% for each), while half said they had invited young people outside church communities to actually pray (50%) or had taught about it (48%). This statistical difference is not, in itself, surprising.²⁷ By its very nature the Church is a practising community and 79% of our respondents were engaged in church-based ministry. Furthermore, the survey also suggested that the evangelism and discipleship of young people within Churches is a greater priority than mission to those outside the Church. However, it does also emphasise the very real opportunity facing the youth ministry community, to invite young people from beyond the Church to practically explore Christian practice to a greater extent.

²⁵. The question was 'In the last two years, which of the following practices have you either taught young people about or helped them experience: with young people who are primarily not part of a church/with young people who have primarily grown up in church'. This question carries a dualism between theory and practice. When we contrast teaching with the facilitation of new experience, we limit the concept of teaching to abstract ideas which in practice it is not. We know that as a word it carries a range of activities depending on the context, including modelling. Nevertheless, for this purpose it was a useful way to distinguish between ideas and concrete experience.

²⁶. The five most reported practices and the five least reported practices were extracted, and an independent t-test run to compare the two groups. A statistical difference between the two groups was found ($t(8)=11.55$, $p < .01$)

²⁷. A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run in which the two within-subjects factors were Church (Churched, Unchurched) and Experience (Taught, Experienced). There was a significant main effect in relation to whether the young people were within churches or not, $F(1, 20) = 88.91$, $p > .001$, but not of the mode of encountering the practices, $F(1, 20) = 3.27$, $p = .086$.

Finding 7. Most of the least/most taught practices are the same, whether young people are in church communities or not – with prayer and service at the top and fasting and resting at the bottom.

Studying/learning about scripture, forgiving others, serving/blessing others and prayer/meditation all show up in the top five ‘most taught’ lists for young people within and beyond the Church. What is distinct is that evangelism is a top taught practice for young people within churches, while loving your enemies and challenging injustice are top taught practices for young people outside churches. There is also a lot of similarity at the bottom of the tables, where fasting, resting, lament and living simply are the least taught practices with young people both within and outside church communities.

Finding 8. Celebration, hospitality and creativity are in the top five practices youth workers help young people outside the church experience, while they help those within churches experience worship, reading scripture and service.

There were some practices that were more distinct when it came to what youth workers helped young people to experience within and outside church communities. Celebration (53%) being hospitable/ including others (50%) and creativity (43%) were in the top five ‘most experienced’ for young people outside church communities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, hospitality and creativity also show up in the top five practices youth workers think are most attractive to young people outside the Church (see page 41). Meanwhile worship/singing (84%), studying/learning about scripture (79%) and serving/blessing others (73%) were within the top five practices facilitated for those within the Church. These three are also in the top five practices youth workers see as significant for forming Christian identity (see page 40).

Table 1: Percentage of youth workers who report having taught church-based young people about this practice within the last two years.

↑ Most taught practices	
Studying/learning about scripture	83%
Prayer/meditation	83%
Forgiving others	79%
Evangelism/mission	73%
Serving/blessing others	73%
↓ Least taught practices	
Creativity	46%
Resting/sabbath	40%
Lament	34%
Living simply	34%
Fasting/self-denial	33%

Table 2: Percentage of youth workers who report having helped church-based young people experience this practice within the last two years.

↑ Most experienced practices	
Worship/singing	84%
Prayer/meditation	83%
Attending church/groups	79%
Studying/learning about scripture	79%
Serving/blessing others	73%
↓ Least experienced practices	
Loving your enemies	38%
Lament	26%
Resting (sabbath)	20%
Living simply	20%
Fasting/self-denial	12%

Chart 4: Proportion of practices that youth workers taught or helped church-based young people experience over the last two years.

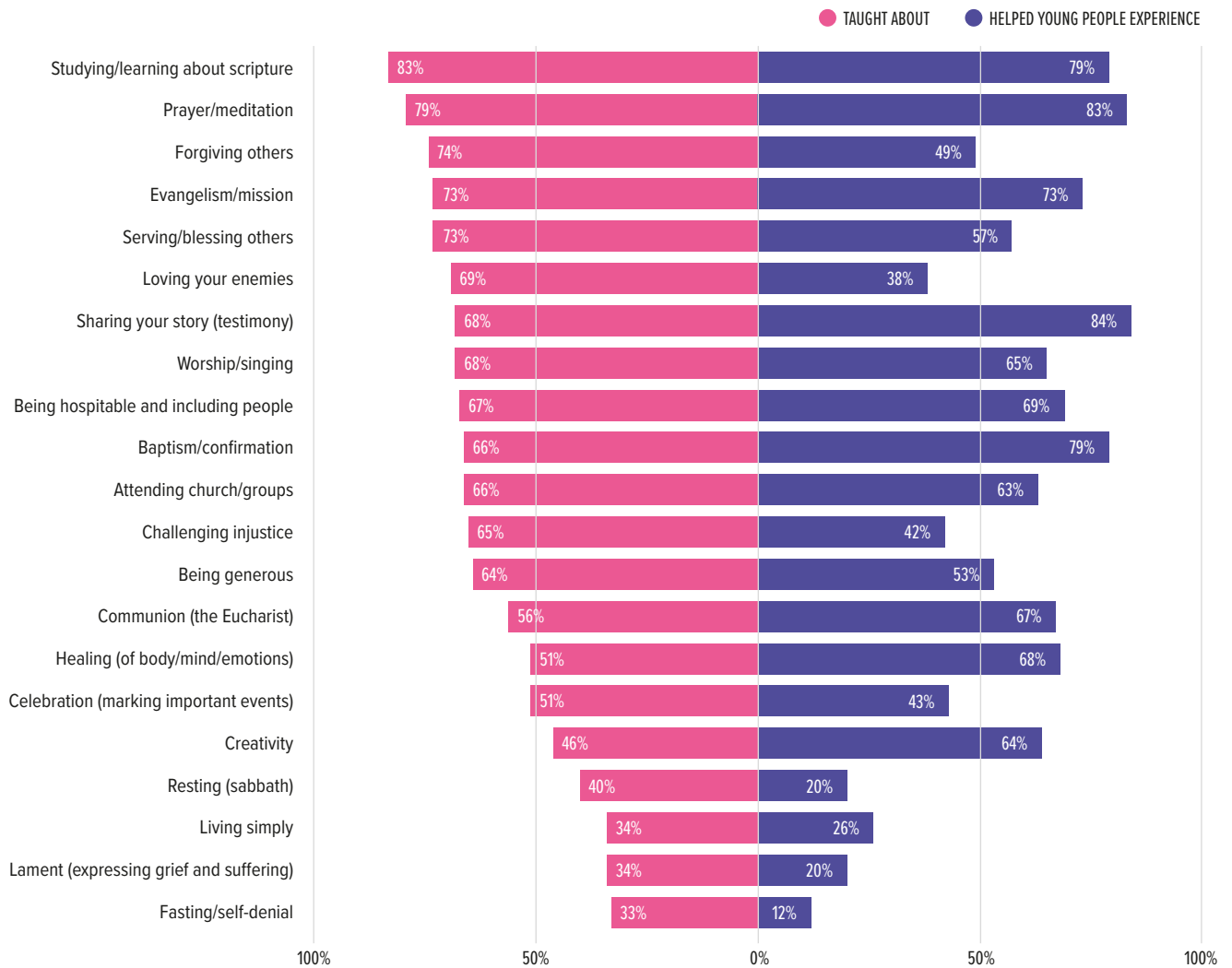


Chart 5: Proportion of practices that youth workers taught or helped non church-based young people experience over the last two years.

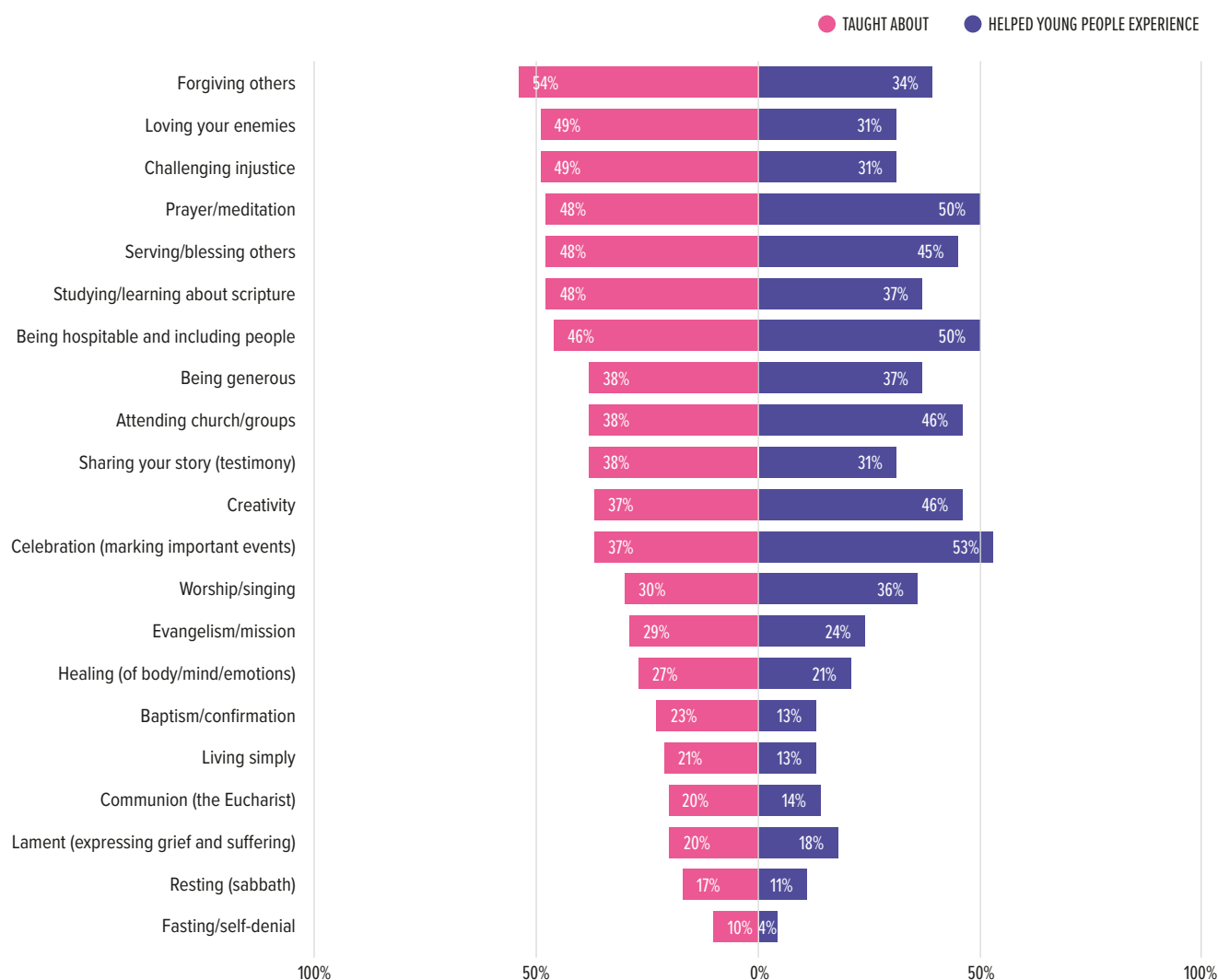


Table 3: Percentage of youth workers who report having taught non church-based young people about this practice within the last two years.

↑ Most taught practices	
Forgiving others	54%
Loving your enemies	49%
Challenging injustice	49%
Serving/blessing others	48%
Studying/learning about scripture	48%
Prayer/meditation	48%
↓ Least taught practices	
Living simply	21%
Communion (the Eucharist)	20%
Lament	20%
Resting (sabbath)	17%
Fasting/self-denial	10%

Table 4: Percentage of youth workers who report having helped non church-based young people experience this practice within the last two years.

↑ Most experienced practices	
Celebration	53%
Being hospitable and including people	50%
Prayer/meditation	50%
Creativity	46%
Attending church/groups	46%
↓ Least experienced practices	
Communion (the Eucharist)	14%
Living simply	13%
Baptism/confirmation	13%
Resting (sabbath)	11%
Fasting/self-denial	4%

Theory/practice gaps

We reviewed [Charts 4 and 5](#), running a series of statistical tests to identify the practices that youth workers told us that they:

- a. taught about significantly more than they helped young people experience and
- b. helped young people experience significantly more than they taught about.

Finding 9. These youth workers were more likely to teach about practice than invite young people to experience it, whether young people were part of churches or not.

Whether part of a church or not, the responses from this group of youth workers suggests that they would be more likely to teach young people about Christian practice, than invite them to experience it. This tendency toward theory over practice is demonstrated in [Tables 5 and 6](#), particularly for young people in churches. Overall the distinction fell just short of being statistically significant,²⁸ but we know that experience is a powerful form of learning so teaching about/ experiencing Christian practice should ideally be in step with each other.

Finding 10. There were a number of practices that youth workers were significantly more likely to teach young people within churches about, than help them to experience, including forgiveness, challenging injustice, evangelism and resting.

The large number of practices shown in [Chart 6](#) reveal a preference for teaching over the facilitation of experience, where youth workers are engaging young people on these topics. Youth workers told us that practice can be powerful for responding to young people's needs or desires, can authenticate Christian claims about God's love and facilitate participation in the life of God. But they also told us about barriers to practising, and these results suggest that these may need to be addressed to reduce the gap between theory and practice.

Finding 11. Youth workers reported being significantly more likely to help young people within churches experience worship, attending church, celebration, creativity and communion, than they were to teach about these practices.

Worship/singing and attending church/groups were two of the top five practices perceived by youth workers to be important for forming Christian identity, so it is interesting that young people are potentially less likely to be taught about these. Meanwhile, celebration, creativity and attending church were in the bottom five practices perceived to be important for being faithful to the teachings of Jesus, so it is perhaps less surprising that they might feature less as a subject of teaching.

[Table 5 \(See over\):](#) Theory/practice gaps in engaging young people within churches.

²⁸. A two-way repeated measures ANOVA was run in which the two within-subjects factors were Church (Churched, Unchurched) and Experience (Taught, Experienced). There was a significant main effect in relation to whether the young people were within churches or not, $F(1, 20) = 88.91, p > .001$, but not of the mode of encountering the practices, $F(1, 20) = 3.27, p = .086$.

²⁹. McNemar repeated measures test (for nominal variables) * - statistical significance at <0.05 , ** - statistical significance at <0.01 , *** - statistical significance at <0.001

Young people within the Church

Taught significantly more than experienced	Experienced significantly more than taught	No significant difference
Fasting/self-denial*** ²⁹	Worship/singing***	Serving/blessing others
Forgiving***	Attending church/groups***	Prayer/meditation
Loving your enemies***	Celebration (marking important events)***	Sharing your story (testimony)
Living simply***		Baptism/confirmation
Evangelism/mission***	Creativity***	Reading scripture
Challenging injustice***	Communion (the Eucharist)**	Hospitality
Resting (sabbath)***		
Being generous**		
Healing (of body/mind/emotions)*		
Lament (expressing grief and suffering)*		

Chart 6: The practices that youth workers teach about significantly more than they help young people within churches experience.²⁹

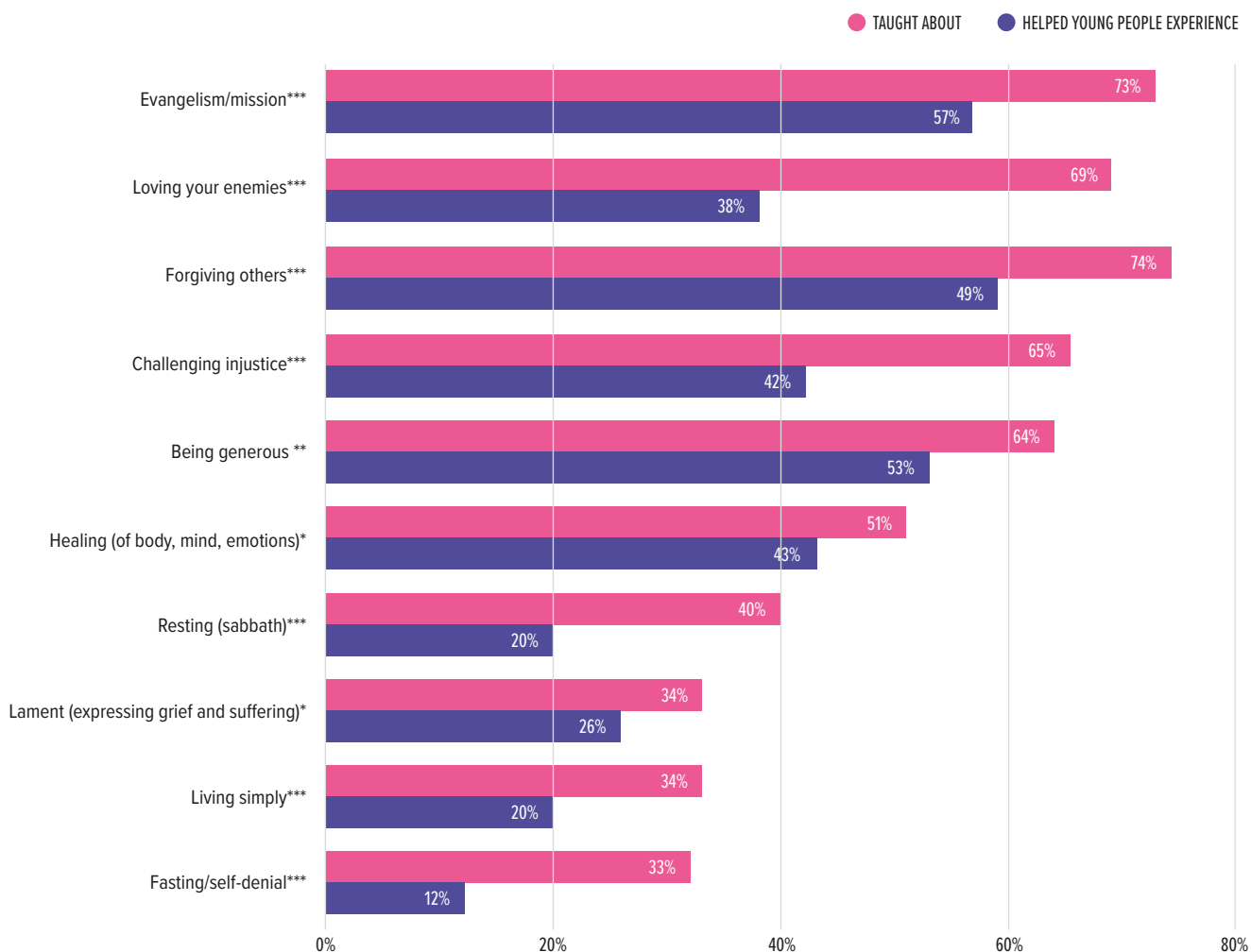
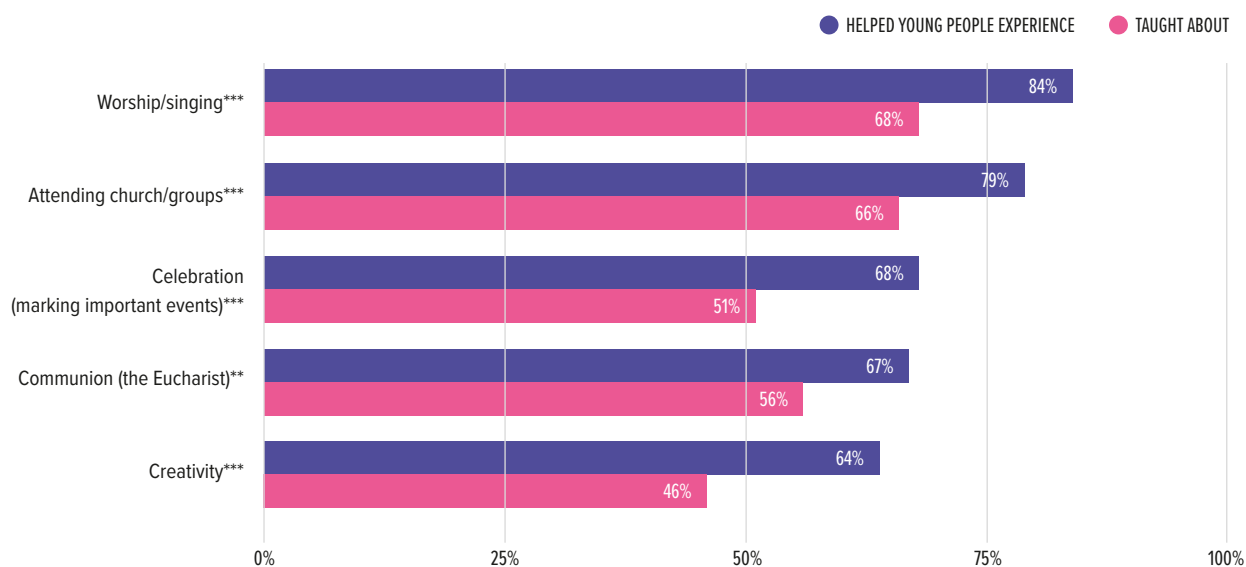


Chart 7: The practices that youth workers help young people within churches experience significantly more than they teach about.



Finding 12. Youth workers were significantly more likely to teach young people outside churches about forgiveness, loving your enemies, challenging injustice and baptism than they were to help these young people experience these practices.

Finding 13. Youth workers reported being significantly more likely to help young people outside churches to experience celebration, church attendance and creativity than they were to teach about these practices.

We found a similar pattern (more teaching than experiencing) when it came how youth workers told us they engaged young people outside churches. Many of these practices were similar for both groups, with forgiveness, loving your enemies and living simply taught more than they were experienced, and celebration, creativity and attending church/groups experienced more than they are taught.

Table 6. Theory/practice gaps in engaging young people outside churches.

Young people outside the Church

Taught significantly more than experienced	Experienced significantly more than taught	No significant difference
Fasting/self-denial*	Attending church*	Worship/singing
Forgiving others***	Celebration (marking important events)***	Lament
Loving your enemies***		Serving/blessing others
Living simply**	Creativity *	Evangelism/mission
Challenging injustice***		Prayer/meditation
Baptism/confirmation***		Testimony (sharing your story)
Studying/learning about scripture**		Being generous
Communion/The Eucharist		Healing (of body/mind/spirit)
		Hospitality
		Sabbath

Chart 8: The practices that youth workers teach about significantly more than they help young people outside churches experience.

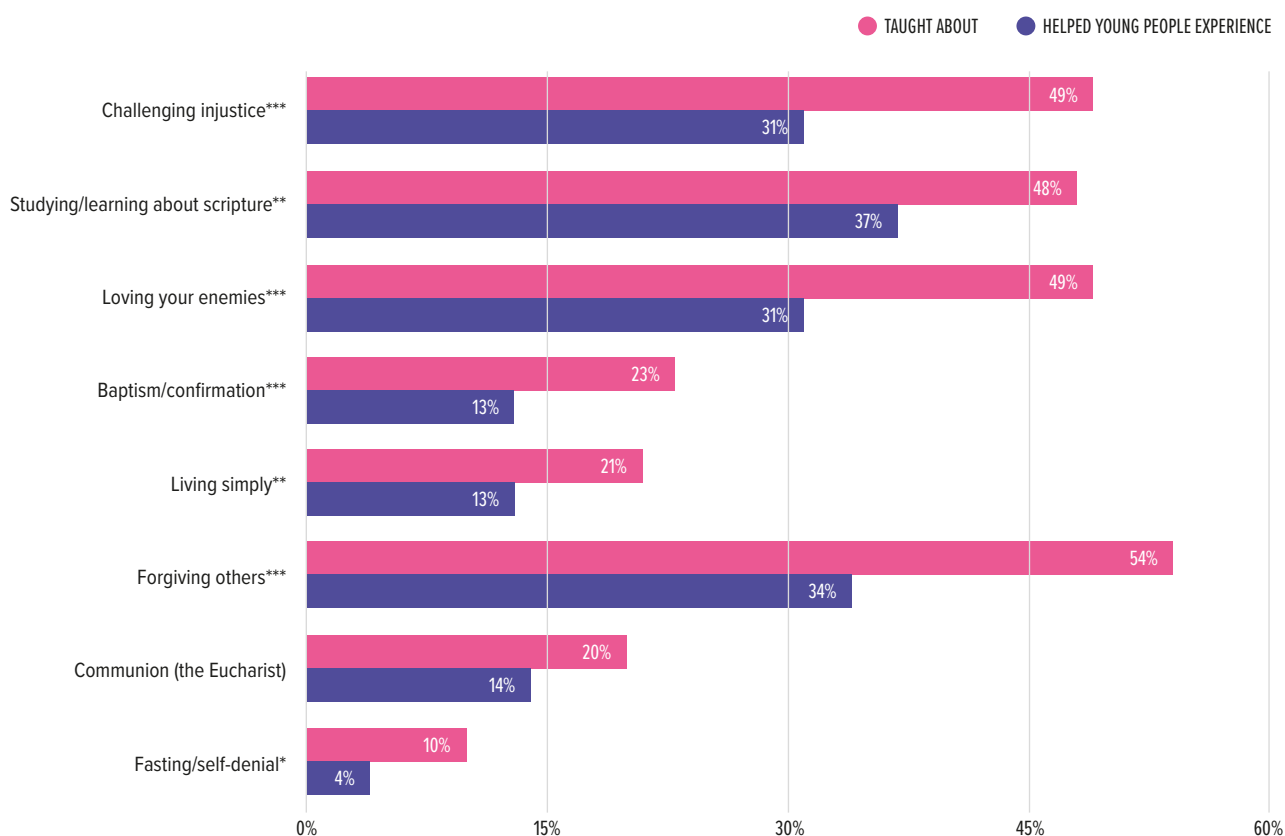
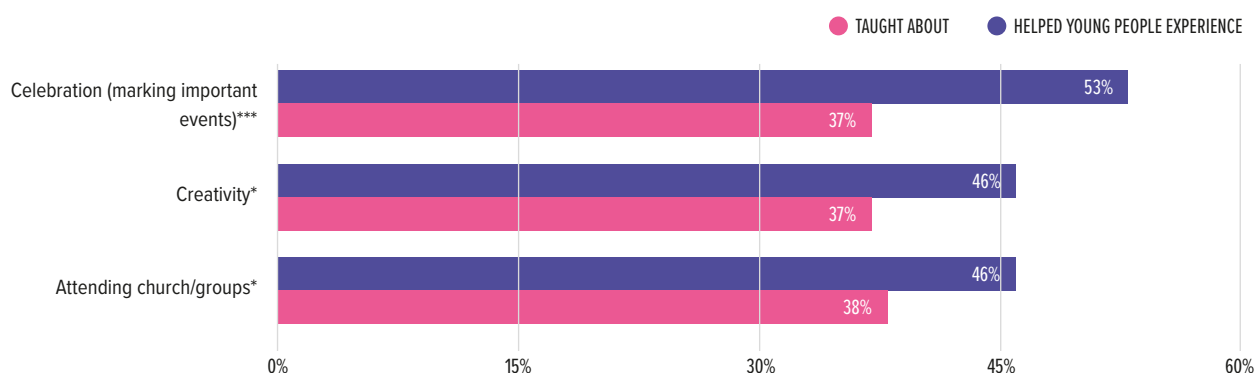


Chart 9: The practices that youth workers help young people outside churches experience significantly more than they teach about.





Practices for identity, faithfulness and mission

Our case study interviews suggest that practices can take you in different directions and be engaged with for different reasons (see pg 58). We wanted to explore this further, so asked youth workers which five practices they thought were:

A

most powerful for helping young people form a sense of Christian identity

B

most important if we are to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus

C

most attractive to young people outside the Church³⁰

Finding 14. The practices youth workers are most likely to engage in are also the practices they see as being most powerful for helping young people form a sense of Christian identity.

Table 7 shows the top five and bottom five practices perceived by youth workers to be most powerful for helping young people form a sense of Christian identity. The five ‘most powerful’ identity practices are the same five practices youth workers are most likely to engage in. The reverse is also true, with four of the five practices at the bottom of the list being the least practiced by the youth workers themselves i.e. lament, rest, living simply and fasting (see Chart 3).

Table 7: Percentage of youth workers who chose these as one of their top five most powerful practices for forming Christian identity.

↑ Top five

Studying/learning about scripture	70%
Prayer/meditation	67%
Worship/singing	54%
Serving/blessing others	50%
Attending church/groups	41%

↓ Bottom five

Being generous	9%
Lament (expressing grief and suffering)	5%
Resting (sabbath)	4%
Living simply	2%
Fasting/self-denial	1%

30. Our question was ‘Practices can be more or less helpful when it comes to achieving particular youth ministry goals. Please choose the five practices that you think are most powerful for a) helping young people form a sense of Christian identity b) are most important if we are to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus and c) that are, or would be, most attractive to young people outside the church.’

Finding 15: Forgiveness and loving your enemy were seen as distinct practices to engage in if young people are to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus.

Prayer, service and studying scripture were perceived to be important for forming Christian identity and being faithful to Jesus teaching – appearing in the top five of both lists. The addition of forgiveness and loving your enemies in this list highlight the distinct ethical teaching of Jesus in relation to how we treat others. Curiously, while 41% of youth workers said that attending church/groups was one of their top five practices for forming Christian identity, only 5% said it was one of their top five practices when it came to faithfulness to Jesus’ teaching. Though the contrast is stark, it makes sense if attendance is a mediating practice i.e if attending Christian groups helps people put Jesus’ teachings into practice. Shepherd (2016) describes attendance as a ‘reliability’ practice – something that helps to generate faith over time, though we can’t assume this is the case for everybody.

Table 8: Percentage of youth workers who chose these as one of their top five most important practices for being faithful to Jesus’ teachings.

↑ Top five

Prayer/meditation	60%
Forgiving others	51%
Loving your enemies	46%
Serving/blessing others	46%
Studying/learning about scripture	44%

↓ Bottom five

Attending church/groups	5%
Fasting/self-denial	4%
Celebration (marking important events)	3%
Lament (expressing grief and suffering)	2%
Creativity	2%

Finding 16: Some of the practices considered most attractive to young people outside the Church were also considered least important for being faithful to the teachings of Jesus.

Four of the top five practices that are viewed as being attractive to young people don’t feature at all at the top of the other two lists. In fact, celebration and creativity are two of the three practices considered least important in being faithful to Jesus. It is not difficult to see how practices on either side of this table could be related. Challenging injustice (most attractive) can often involve practices of self-denial (least attractive) for example, where people choose to limit their diets for the sake of environmental issues. The usefulness of what is ‘attractive’ is discussed further on page 46.

Table 9: Percentage of youth workers who chose these as one of their top five most attractive practices to young people outside the Church.

↑ Top five

Challenging injustice	65%
Being hospitable and including people	58%
Creativity	56%
Celebration (marking important events)	46%
Serving/blessing others	37%

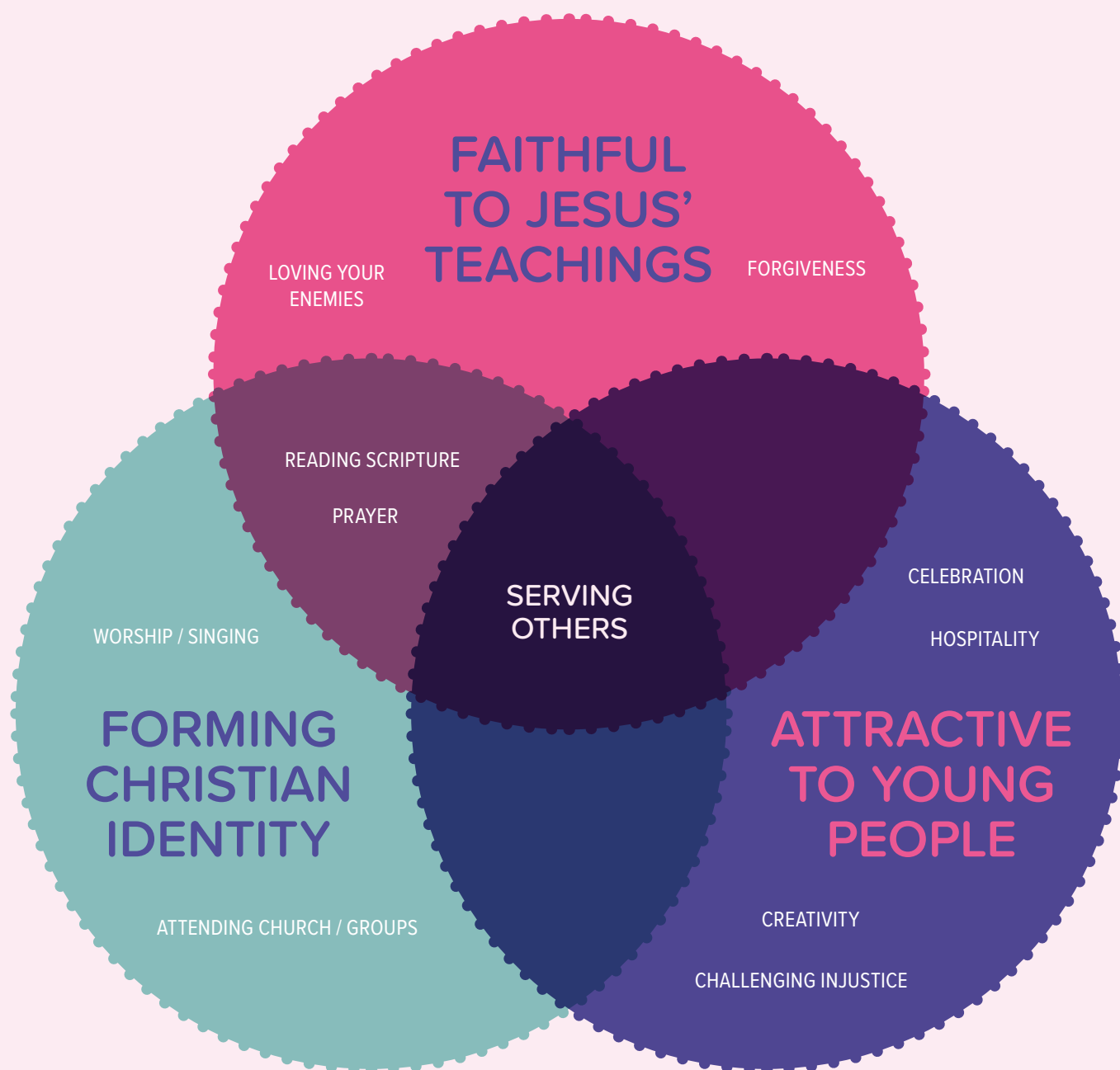
↓ Bottom five

Resting (sabbath) and Studying/learning about scripture	8%
Evangelism/mission	6%
Baptism/confirmation	1%
Communion (the Eucharist)	1%
Fasting/self-denial	0%

Finding 17: Serving/blessing others was the only practice that was seen as important for forming Christian identity, being faithful to Jesus' teachings and attractive to young people outside the Church.

The diagram below indicates the top five practices youth workers identified as being significant in various categories, including those that appeared in more than one category. The only practice appearing in all three lists was serving/blessing others, suggesting that this might be a practice that is significant in both mission and on-going discipleship.

Diagram 1: Youth workers' top five practices in three different categories.



Other key practices – in youth workers' own words

Finding 18: Other key practices that youth workers engaged young people in centred around relationship-building, learning and growth, and well-being.

Fifty people answered the question: 'Are there other key practices you do with young people?' Though not generalisable to all youth workers, their responses do reflect much of what is already known about the shape and focus of youth ministry in the UK. The four key themes for these practices were:

- Building relationships
- Learning and growth
- Prayer and worship
- Well-being

There were 23 references to building relationships. These covered socio-theological practices like listening to and caring for one another, suspending judgement and references to the quality of relationships (honest, caring, compassionate). An associated practice was eating together, which was explicitly mentioned six times, and there were a few references to fun as a youth ministry practice as well. While relationship building is implicit in many of the practices presented in the list of 21, it is not surprising that some youth workers looked for this to have a clearer presence in the study.

"Being community and belonging are really key principles to me in youth ministry and it wasn't easy to fit these in with the options given."

After building relationship, there were 22 references to practices that clustered around the theme of learning and growth. Seven were references to forms of discipleship and mentoring, five to habits for learning (discussion, curiosity, debate), and two were specifically about helping young people read scripture. An additional eight people described practices related to leadership development, where young people were supported to lead their peers: for example, *"Training in leadership and providing safe opportunities for them to discover, use and grow in their gifts"*. The quote below demonstrates the limits of using single words like 'service' to capture a potentially wide range of practice that is not fully defined.

"There's very little in here about helping young people discover their gifts and then mentoring towards using them (perhaps it comes under serving). Young people can and should be active members of a church community. They have gifts that can bless those inside the church and outside."

Sixteen people described specific forms of prayer and worship, though these were on the list provided. Some of these were contemplative practices (silence, the examen, meditation, Godly Play, labyrinths) while others were forms of fasting (digital detox) or the practice of spiritual gifts and postures (gratitude). There were nine references to different practices aimed at supporting young people's emotional or physical well-being e.g. mindfulness, self-reflection, building self-esteem and self-care. Finally, there were a few references to acts of justice and advocacy, going away on residential and camps, and being creative – and single references to equipping young people for mission and giving.

Diagram 2: Word cloud for 'other key practices'



Practice as mission

We had 89 responses to an open question inviting youth workers to tell us more about which practices they think are, or would be, most attractive to young people outside the Church. People were enthusiastic about the ways that Christian practice could help young people experience God and be acts of witness, and answers reflected three main ways of thinking about practice missionally, which have clear resonance with much of what we learned through our case studies as well.

- Practices respond to young people's needs or desires
- Practices authenticate Christian claims about God's love
- Practices facilitate direct experience of participating in the life of God and God's community

These are not mutually exclusive, and this section explores the ways that they were woven together in survey responses.

Finding 19: Missional practice was perceived to be both culturally relevant (healing, testimony and hospitality) and culturally radical (forgiveness, lament and rest).

Practices can be an embodied expression of a belief in a world that is both fallen and being redeemed, alienated and being reconciled. Here, respondents described practices as being attractive because they are responsive to young people's needs and desires – a key theme of our case study learning as well (see page 60). The practices that were highlighted as particularly engaging with felt needs were healing, testimony

and being hospitable.³¹ On the subject of healing, some comments suggested that helping young people understand and manage their emotions and mental health was particularly prescient in contemporary society.

“Expressing that the world – and our experience in it – is not how we want it to be is a great place to find common ground with young people outside the church. Healing of mind/body/emotions/spirit is also a great starting point that every young person can relate to. And by caring for young people in these ways and equipping them to understand and care for their own mental/physical/emotional health, it meets a real felt need.”

Telling stories and testimony was also highlighted as a powerful way to deepen a secure sense of self-identity, both in terms of the value of ‘story’ in general, as well as our common desire to make sense of our lives, be heard and understood. Finally, ‘Being hospitable and including people’ was perceived as having resonance with a wider culture that places a high value on equality and inclusivity.

“Young people want to ensure that everyone is seen as equal, have rights and are included. Groups needs to be as open as possible to anyone coming, no matter what, and discussions offer open dialogue – especially around biblical controversial topics.”

31. Of these, only hospitality was one of the top five practices that the whole group of 235 respondents felt would be most attractive to young people outside the church, so these additional answers may not reflect the thoughts of the wider group.

In contrast, some answers highlighted the counter-cultural nature of practices. For example, *“My non-Christian students are most interested in what they see as beautiful and not available in their current world view. So, practices like challenging injustice and lament are attractive to them.”* Others made the similar point that it is the radical nature of some practices that means they have the most impact, and *“demand attention”* e.g. *“being generous in a selfish world”, “servant leadership”* and *“accepting forgiveness for very difficult things”*.

What is counter-cultural, what meets young people’s needs, and what is attractive are clearly not the same thing. Practices may draw interest or resistance and may require resources that are not available to everyone. As one person reflected: *“Forgiveness, lament and healing are difficult practices sometimes outside a Christian context. I see a thirst for them in the secular world”*. Another participant commented that young people wouldn’t *“...necessarily ask immediately for rest but need to be shown that they need down-time in an increasingly busy world.”*

The tension between what is attractive and what is needed is illustrated in the quote below, about prayer, lament and celebration.

“I think young people like to be excited by something. If I’m inviting young people in, I’m always hyping what we’re doing. If we’re praying, I’ll hype it by saying we’ve got interactive prayer stations including water-play, drawing, writing and clay. The ones I’ve picked, I think, sound exciting or can be hyped. ‘Celebration’ sounds more exciting than lament.”

The language and tone of how activities are introduced is clearly important, but there is a risk here that excitement is seen as the only emotional pathway into experiences of Christian practice. Interestingly, while lament isn’t one of the top five practices seen as attractive, it was highlighted in the comments. One person described the practice of lament as a way to help young people explore their emotions and self-esteem, while another expressed that *“Young people can be comforted by people sharing in their emotions and lamenting with them, so that’s what we try and do.”*

Finding 20: Practice was viewed as helping to authenticate claims about God’s love through observation of Christian communities and what they do.

A common response to the idea that practice might be attractive to young people was that they want to see churches that are engaged with the world and its needs e.g. a campaigning church is serious about challenging injustice, and a loving community demonstrates God’s character and welcome towards young people. This perhaps reflects the place of serving/blessing others as a key practice across all categories, as already discussed. In terms of authenticating claims about God’s love, a number of youth workers described their own practice and the culture and activities of their youth group – reflecting on why these practices are important missionally. Much of this reflected what was shared on page 43 about the practices of youth ministry more generally: building relationships, prayer, having fun, learning and developing, engaging with issues of social justice.

“We use our church building... as a warm, safe and youth-only space so the young people can experience ‘home’ in a place so rich in the presence of God.”

The over-arching practice of relationship-building in youth ministry was a clear theme here, whether those relationships were the end goal in themselves or became the context for wider conversations and authenticating faith claims (Root, 2007). These two ideas are closely related of course. Observing a practising Christian community may well authenticate claims about the goodness of God, and personal experience of those practices provides direct evidence of what it is like to participate in Christian community in some way. Perhaps the difference is just how far young people are invited to participate themselves, and then given space to reflect on what that experience means for their own relationship to God. This is the journey from 'tourist' to 'pilgrim', in the words of Diana Butler Bass (2006).

"In general, young people we encounter who are non-Christian want to see the church care and offer solutions and action. But they also want to know God is real for themselves. We have young people who have a prayer journal and come to worship sessions and they will say very clearly they aren't Christian, yet they want to experience Him."

Finding 21: Practices were seen to facilitate direct experience of participating in God's community through prayer/worship and God's mission through making a difference .

When considering the possibility of direct experience of God, prayer and worship were particularly highlighted as distinct for facilitating encounter, dialogue and relationship with God. For example, prayer allows "young people who don't have faith to explore if they think God could respond to them directly."

"Worship and singing in larger groups can allow young people to experience a sense of God being 'bigger' and 'other' than us. As young people experience this, we can help them interpret it."

On this theme, one person reflected on the difference between mission as something we do to young people, versus creating the conditions where they can be attentive to a God who is already present. One person linked this with the significance of resting (Sabbath) as a practice, a "game changer" in their own words when it comes to young people's capacity to become aware of God. Another identified the significance of prayer/worship because "they involve young people being able to contribute on a more equal level, in meditation and prayer and worship, they can discover more about God not from a place of knowing nothing, but from a place of experiencing."

It was interesting to read that prayer and worship were seen positively by a number of youth workers in this sub-group of respondents, given that they did not appear in the top five practices viewed as being attractive to young people outside the Church, and that the more sacramental (communion, baptism,) and ecclesial (reading scripture, evangelism, fasting) were in the bottom five. Perhaps this view is expressed in the comment below.

"Young people who have no experience of Christianity will not understand or appreciate many Christian practices such as Worship/Communion/Baptism/Fasting/Prayer/Bible study. Young people know when we're being genuine and authentic in practices such as being generous, serving others, being hospitable, loving our enemies, forgiving others etc. If they can see that we live our lives very differently to the culture around them then this will attract them."

While some of these practices are devotional in nature (prayer, worship etc.) others that invite young people's participation are oriented toward the social world, and here a common response to the question of why certain practices are attractive was that young people want to 'make a difference'.

"Mission feels most effective when you see a drive that a young person has (such as challenging injustice) and demonstrate that Christianity has a channel for it."

"For me, young people outside of the church respond much better to being able to practice and experience something that is 'real' in terms of faith expression. And 'allowing' them or creating space for them to 'try it out' has been risky but has worked for us."

A number of examples were given where young people were invited to join in with serving the local community including serving the elderly and the homeless, supporting food banks and addressing issues of injustice.

Barriers to practising faith

Just over half our sample (n=123) responded to a question about what barriers exist to engaging young people with Christian practices, highlighting issues related to the Church, the nature of practices themselves, the influence of parents/peers and young people's capacity and curiosity. Themes are presented in the order of how frequently they were reported.

Finding 22: Practice-based work with young people was perceived to be challenging where churches emphasise attendance or beliefs over making space for young people's participation and spirituality, and where churches do not model practice.

Many of the barriers identified by youth workers were where churches seemed to lack a clear vision for discipleship, or perhaps emphasised some activities at the expense of others. For example, one reported barrier was congregational focus on running programs and monitoring Sunday attendance. Practices are often longer-term and less well-defined than short-term programs, and don't always translate into attendance on Sundays.³² Some respondents highlighted that churches lack the depth of vision required to support young people in following the ways of Jesus or require certain kinds of behaviour or belief to be established before young people are able to participate in church life. This can mean churches under-estimate young people's capacity to experience God, and then fail to create the space for such encounters or take them seriously.

"I think that this underestimation often leads to young people feeling that their experience of God is not valid enough. This can create a barrier to them wanting to learn about how to build on their relationship with God."

³². This is despite some form of group attendance being one of the most frequently reported forms of practice amongst youth workers (see page 27).

For others, it was the Church's commitment to established patterns and the resultant lack of permission to try new things, that restricted opportunities to invite young people to experience Christian practices. One youth worker highlighted this caution within their own team, explaining that *"Some of my volunteers are wary of doing some of these things because they are afraid of 'putting people off.'"* This might contextualise the need, identified by four people, for resources that would support youth workers to engage young people with Christian practice.

Another reported barrier was the issue of church communities (including youth workers in some cases) not modelling Christian practices. At best, this was framed by youth workers as a missed opportunity to learn from role models, and at worst, hypocrisy that deters young people from taking Christianity seriously. One person described this as *"Church not being a community that witnesses these values, yet expecting young people to live them."* Alongside hypocrisy, youth workers mentioned other negative perceptions held by young people that limited their engagement, whether that was a generalised suspicion of Christian ethics as being non-inclusive, or specific scandals that affect the reputation of the whole Church.

Finding 23: Practices often run counter to the prevailing wisdom of our culture. Individualism, secularism, independence, self-centredness, consumerism, power and domination, hyperactivity and busyness were all named as barriers to the exploration of Christian practices.

The most significant cultural barrier to practising faith identified by youth workers was busyness. This challenge operated in two directions. First, we were told that young people have multiple competing demands on their time, which limits the time churches have to spend with them.

As one person said, *"It's hard to show young people how to live out the life when we only see them twice a week. It's not enough to just tell them."* Second, youth workers are aware of the need to keep young people's attention, so anything which requires a longer-term investment is harder to do.

"We live in a "microwave" society where everyone wants everything fast and now. This makes anything which requires time, discipline, and consistency more difficult to accomplish."

Some practices may appear inaccessible at first while others are just undeniably hard. One person explicitly mentioned fasting, giving and living simply in this context: a point borne out by our analysis showing that these are the least practised, taught and experienced practices among this cohort of youth workers. Forgiveness was also identified as something that is particularly challenging in a school context, for example, where young people can regularly feel wounded by their peers.

"It's hard to love your enemies and forgive those who hurt you without the help of the Holy Spirit, so difficult to practice that in school!!! But it can be explored in the right context."

Finally, practices may be counter-cultural in very specific ways that need to be considered. For example, where young people struggle to read or are not familiar with particular kinds of religious language or concepts, then the practice of reading scripture can be alienating and should be adapted to their context and needs.

Finding 24: A lack of support from parents or peers can prevent young people engaging with Christian practice.

The perception that parents' attitudes or behaviour could act as a barrier was mostly where they were not supportive of their children exploring spirituality, and ranged from a lack of encouragement, to *"outright obstruction"*. For some families affiliated with the Church, the low priority given to discipleship affected how willing parents were to give lifts or make time in their weekly schedules for youth ministry activities.

Peers were also seen to be very influential at a time of life when young people are highly sensitive to social acceptance, and often fear being different or excluded from a peer group. Some youth workers highlighted the perception that if an activity was perceived to be uncool or weird it would trigger judgement from significant peers and young people would not engage with it. One person specifically mentioned 'toxic masculinity' as a form of gender-based peer pressure, an important prompt to consider how practices might relate to gender in different ways.

Finding 25: Young people themselves can lack the self-awareness, curiosity or confidence to participate in practices.

A couple of respondents reflected that where young people's faith was not very strong or secure, this might limit their capacity to engage in practices like serving or leading others – though they recognised that these experiences could also be faith-generating. Another comment suggested that, when inviting young people to be active, it may be important to address feelings of powerlessness: *"...sometimes the enormity of a task can lead to a lack of movement in doing something about it."* Finally, one person suggested that experience of God creates the desire to seek more, itself an important motivation for engaging in practice.

"Getting them excited about this, I find, is tricky. I really think you've got to want to experience God... I think so many young people are growing up without seeing healings, without the holy spirit really touching them or their friends, not experiencing the gifts of the spirit, and so don't know how good it tastes, and so don't want it that much. Then, these practices flow from it."

Once again, this leads us to consider which practices might help young people encounter and experience God, and how this forms curiosity and the possibility of commitment.



Recommendations

For faith to grow and flourish, young people need to hear about God, be shown what God is like and be invited into a real, world-transforming experience of His love in action, in everyday life. A number of studies have shown that God is just not on most young people's radar – but they are looking for ways to make meaning of their lives and to experience well-being and positive relationships. And of course, they're facing a world that needs reconciliation on all fronts, whether that's in the realms of mental health, racism or the climate. So perhaps our approach to apologetics needs to broaden, incorporating a breadth of reconciling practices, alongside intellectual defences of the Christian faith.

The life and community of youth ministry is already alive with

practice, and youth workers know the value of experience. Those who completed the survey told us about practice in their own (rather than our) terms, and why it's important for helping young people authenticate claims about God's love and make sense of faith. These youth workers show clear sensitivity to their contexts, tailoring their practices to young people who are and are not part of churches and describing the role practice plays at different stages of a faith journey.

We can interpret the findings in a range of ways, but we see three invitations to the youth ministry community and wider Church.

- 1 **Broaden our practice**
- 2 **Practice what we preach**
- 3 **Bring practice into the heart of mission**

1

Broaden our practice

The majority of youth workers we surveyed engaged in a range of Christian practice, but there was a significant gap between what was at the top and bottom of that range. Perhaps unsurprisingly, worship, service, church attendance, prayer and reading scripture are at the top, reflecting the priority that some practices will always have within the life of the Church.⁴² In contrast, the majority told us they were not intentionally engaging in fasting, lament, living simply, healing, resting or challenging injustice.

It would be easy to interpret this catalogue of practices as some holy ‘to-do’ list – a reminder of all the things we are unable to get right in life and ministry. But instead, we could close our eyes and imagine the Christian life as a long table, beautifully laid with all kinds of wonderful food. The practices of the Christian faith are like a rich and varied diet, that together keep the body of Christ healthy. This research suggests that there is an invitation for some of us, to explore what is at the other end of the table. Undoubtedly there are practices that are core to our spiritual diet: Conner, for example, describes worship as ‘the practice of the entire Christian life’ (2011, p.61). But there are others, like rest, that are both theologically and practically significant for youth ministry.⁴³

One of the issues with engaging less in some of these practices is that we tend to reproduce what we do. Our case studies emphasised the

importance of modelling, co-discipleship and the example set by the wider Church, suggesting that young people are unlikely to venture far beyond the limits of the spirituality they witness. Let’s be clear – this can’t all be on youth workers. The culture of our churches is hugely significant and does not always support youth workers or young people to engage in these broad practices. More specifically, it was interesting that parents were not mentioned very much by participants, despite research showing that home is the primary context shaping children and young people’s faith (Mark, 2016). What would it mean to see our homes, youth groups and churches as communities of practices?

For reflection

- Are there any practices that you have not engaged with, but are curious about?
- What practices are young people you know learning in their homes, in youth ministry and in church?
- Is there anything they are not experiencing or practising that you could explore with them?

⁴². Although we have not distinguished practices from sacraments, the distinction is theologically significant for many people, shaping how certain activities are viewed.

⁴³. See Stucky (2019) *Wrestling with Rest: Inviting Youth to Discover the Gift of Sabbath*

2

Practice what we preach

There were many practices that youth workers were significantly more likely to teach about than help young people to experience, whether those young people were in churches or not. Teaching particularly out-paced experience when it came to the practices of loving your enemies, forgiveness, challenging injustice, resting, fasting, evangelism and living simply. There were also some examples where the tables were turned, and teaching significantly lagged behind practice i.e. celebration, worship, church attendance and creativity.

Time is limited, so this is not a recipe for endless new things to do. Instead, it is a reminder of the need to hold these things together; ideas and experience, belief and practice. At its simplest, it means that when we teach about something, we should explore ways for young people to experience it, and when we create an experience, we should explain what we're doing and how it fits within the Christian story. Finally, of course, it is reflection that helps young people make the vital links between these two. We know from our previous research that it is really important to create spaces where questions are encouraged and we don't rush young people to the 'right answers' (Hill, 2019).

For reflection

- Are there any key practices or routines in your work with young people that you have never explained, or anchored in the wider Christian story?
- Are there activities you teach about, but don't really help young people experience?
- Where do young people have the space to reflect on their experience and ask questions about it?

3

Bring practice into the heart of mission

Overall, youth workers were much more likely to help young people who are part of churches experience Christian practice, than those who are not. We also found that mission to young people was significantly less prioritised amongst these youth workers, than meeting young people's needs and the discipleship of those already within churches. Perhaps this is not surprising given that 79% were based in churches. Nevertheless, there is a missional opportunity here – particularly with practices that are culturally resonant and address young people's needs in different ways.

Challenging injustice, hospitality and creativity are all practices that could build a bridge between young people's culture and the story of God. The good news is that these are the practices youth workers told us they were most likely to help young people, who are not part of churches, experience. Serving/blessing others could also be seen as a core missional practice – something that is attractive to young people and faithful to the Christian story, particularly where it is framed as being more than just 'random acts of kindness'. And even worship and prayer, which might feel like practices that should be reserved for Christians, can powerfully impact those who not part of churches.

For reflection

- What are the main needs/desires of young people in your context, and what practices are most likely to build a bridge between their world and the Christian story?
- How can you involve young people in discerning what practices might be life giving?

Finally...

This report is called '**We do God**', an attempt to capture the profound impact that faith in Jesus can have when it is put into practice in our lives. But of course, it is God's 'doing' that we are responding to, and which is the source of the grace that generates and sustains our own practice. We can encourage practices that help young people inhabit and understand faith, but it is ultimately the work of the Spirit to grow that faith (Whitehead, 2014). These 'trail signs', left by previous generations point the way to the cross (Dean 2004). They may help us experience and encounter God's grace, but ultimately it is that grace that transforms us.



