

**Becoming a Christian: A report from the  
2011 National Church Life Survey for the  
Anglican Diocese of Sydney**

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Anglican Youthworks**

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## Executive Summary

This research report presents findings from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) about the influences upon people becoming Christians, in particular the impact of children's and youth programs in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. The report is based on data from a series of questions commissioned by Anglican Youthworks that were asked of a sub-sample of NCLS 2011 participants. The questions provide a valuable insight into the various influences on adult church attenders coming to faith in the Diocese.

**Age at which Sydney Anglicans become Christians:** In 2011, the majority of Sydney Anglicans (76%) reported that they had become Christians before the age of 20. Importantly, nearly half (44%) became Christians between the ages of 10-19 years.

**People who influence others to faith:** In terms of people who were influential on others becoming a Christian, family members influenced the largest number of attenders (67%), of which mothers were most prominent, influencing 50% of attenders. Fathers influenced 31% of the survey participants. Outside of familial relationships, church ministry has a widespread influence (51%), particularly ministers (23%), youth group leaders (18%) and Sunday school teachers (15%). Parental influences were much more important for those who became a Christian during childhood or adolescence. In contrast, those who became Christians as adults were more influenced by peers and church ministers.

**Activities that influence others to faith:** Church services (35%), Sunday school (27%) and church youth groups (23%) influenced the largest number of attenders. Apart from church services, the most influential activities on children and youth coming to faith were church youth groups and Sunday school. By contrast, adult Bible study groups and introductory studies were more influential upon people who became Christians as adults.

**The impact of parents:** While parents have been influential on many Sydney Anglicans becoming Christians, their influence declines as children become older. The children of Christian parents were more likely to become Christians during childhood or adolescence, whereas the children of non-Christian parents were more likely to be become Christians during adulthood. Interestingly, for people who became Christians during the ages of 15-19

years, the proportion of converts from non-Christian families (32%) was roughly similar to the proportion from families where both parents were committed Christians (25%). This indicates the pivotal role that youth ministry plays in bringing children from a range of family backgrounds to Christ. Nearly a third (31%) of 15-19 year olds who became Christians in the past 10 years were drawn from the wider community, a percentage which is far higher than the Diocesan average (9%).

**The impact of youth group style:** Respondents were also asked about the style of youth group they attended between the ages of 12-14 years. The most common style of youth group featured an equal balance of Bible study and games (accounting for 31% of respondents). Among those who had attended a youth group, this style of group was more commonly experienced by 15-19 year olds than older age groups. There is evidence that this style of youth group is also more strongly associated with the youth group having been influential upon attenders coming to faith.

**Extent to which new Christians are drawn from the wider community:** Nearly one third (31%) of 15-19 year olds who became Christians after the age of 10 years were also drawn from the wider community, a percentage which is far higher than the Diocesan average of 9 percent of newcomers to church life.

The research findings in this report highlight the continued need for strong children's and youth programs in local churches throughout the Diocese. Such programs have been shown to be effective at engaging with young people and retaining them into adult church life. The results also highlight the strategic priority of youth ministry being conducive to drawing young people from the surrounding community into the church.

## 1. Introduction

Anglican Youthworks is an agency of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney committed to presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ to children and young people so that they might respond to, and be nurtured in, the Christian faith. Youthworks fulfils this aim through partnerships with churches and schools as well as through the training of individuals, outdoors activities, the Youthworks' College and provision of resources (Youthworks, 2012). Youthworks has a history of involvement in research into children's and youth ministry, including the publication of *Growing Up Without God?* (AYED, 1997) and the commissioning of research based on the 2001 and 2006 National Church Life Surveys (Bellamy & Castle 2002; Sterland *et al*, 2008).

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is undertaken every five years amongst churchgoers in Australia. In 2011, approximately 260,000 church attenders from over 3,000 churches in 23 denominations took part in the NCLS. The large scale of this survey allows the running of multiple sample surveys along with the main survey form. Consequently, Christian organisations and church agencies had the opportunity to pursue their own research agendas through the sample surveys conducted as part of the broader NCLS research. The 2011 NCLS included a special sample survey designed by ANGLICARE Sydney which was distributed only to church attenders within the Sydney Diocese. This survey, known as Survey S2, was a random sample of 1225 Sydney Anglican church attenders aged 15 years and over. The survey contained a number of questions commissioned by a various agencies within the Diocese, including Anglican Youthworks.

The questions commissioned by Youthworks were included in the 'More About your Faith' section of the 2011 NCLS Survey S2 and are shown in Figure 1 below. These research questions enable Anglican Youthworks to identify and further explore the various influences on adult church attenders coming to faith in the Diocese.

**Figure 1: Questions Commissioned by Anglican Youthworks in NCLS 2011**

1. How old were you when you first became a Christian?
2. Which people were most significant in helping you come to the Christian faith?
3. Which activities, if any, would you say were most significant in helping you come to faith?
4. If you attended a church youth group at ages 12 to 14 years, what kind of program was usually run at the group?
5. Were your parents committed Christians at the time you first became a Christian?

### **1.1 Aim of this report**

The report aims to present results from the 2011 NCLS with particular focus on the questions commissioned by Anglican Youthworks. This report will:

- a) Present key influences on Sydney Anglican attenders coming to faith.
- b) Identify changes based on a comparison of 2011 results and results from previous iterations of the NCLS (2006 and 2001).
- c) Draw some conclusions regarding these influences and changes.

## 2. The Process of Becoming a Christian

From a Biblical viewpoint, becoming a Christian is bound up with the phenomenon of conversion. Conversion is grounded in the biblical concepts of 'turning' and 'repenting'.<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament, the concept of repentance refers to the nation of Israel turning away from false worship and towards the one true God of Israel, and is linked to the post-exilic hope for renewal.<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, the Jewish idea of returning is refocused around Jesus, as people are called to repent and trust in him.<sup>3</sup> The process of Christian conversion includes belief and trust in Jesus Christ; repentance; a transfer of allegiance; baptism; reception of the gift of the Spirit; and incorporation into congregational life.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1 Conversion and religious socialisation

At its heart, conversion is a simple moment when one goes from being alienated from God, to being joined to Christ, and made alive in him.<sup>5</sup> However, from a human perspective, this moment is often indistinguishable within the longer term process of religious socialisation, conversion and consolidation.

Religious socialisation is a process whereby an individual's religious outlook is nurtured from early childhood. Children don't begin with a set of religious beliefs, but rather they adopt religious beliefs as part of belonging to a church and Christian family. Children also learn to see themselves as part of wider communities, such as being part of a denominational or ethnic group. Through this process of religious socialisation, children acquire a sense of meaning, religious belonging and religious identity. Therefore, conversion is rarely a sudden change from unbelief to belief, but is usually a response of religious faith after a prior period of socialisation through family and church.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peace (2004) p8; Wright (2004); Houtepen (2006) p20-3.

<sup>2</sup> Houtepen (2006) p21-2.

<sup>3</sup> Houtepen (2006) p22; Peace (2004) p8.

<sup>4</sup> Smith (2001) p125.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:10-19; Colossians 1:21-23; 1 Peter 1:3.

<sup>6</sup> Broom and Selznick (1973) p404.

## 2.2 Consolidation after conversion

Following conversion, consolidation needs to take place, whereby a person develops an ongoing sense of commitment to the faith and to the church. Whilst a common picture of the convert is of one who is permanently changed at the point of conversion, the high rate of turnover amongst members of new religious movements undermines this notion. For this reason, Wesley instituted the ‘class’ system to ensure the commitment of new converts.<sup>7</sup> Successive Billy Graham Crusades in Australia were accompanied by improved systems for the follow-up of new converts, to ensure that new converts were linked into churches, to preserve these professions of faith.

**Figure 2. Conversion as part of a process**



## 2.3 Social influences

### 2.3.1 Church and family

Both churches and families play a vital role in communicating the gospel and supporting people through the conversion process. As Smith purports, “the [Christian] community is the mediator of conversion”.<sup>8</sup> Yet the Christian community is not a collection of people who have gone through a similar conversion process and then gather together after the conversion is complete. It is more common that people *belong* first and then *believe*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Snow and Machalek (1983)

<sup>8</sup> Smith (2001) p34-5.

<sup>9</sup> Arn (2008) p342

### 2.3.2 Conversion and life stage

In the past, empirical studies of conversion have often focused on Protestants<sup>10</sup>. These studies support several conclusions about conversion, one of which is that the most common time for religious conversion to occur is during adolescence and young adulthood. Coincidentally, this is also the time in which many young people cease to attend church and/or move away from the faith.

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<sup>10</sup> Broom and Selznick, (1973), p404.

### 3. Survey Findings

The following analysis addresses issues such as the age at which people came to faith, their perceptions of the major influences on this process, and the influence of youth groups and parents. Generational differences are also considered in the context of coming to faith and the extent to which new Christians are being drawn from the wider community.

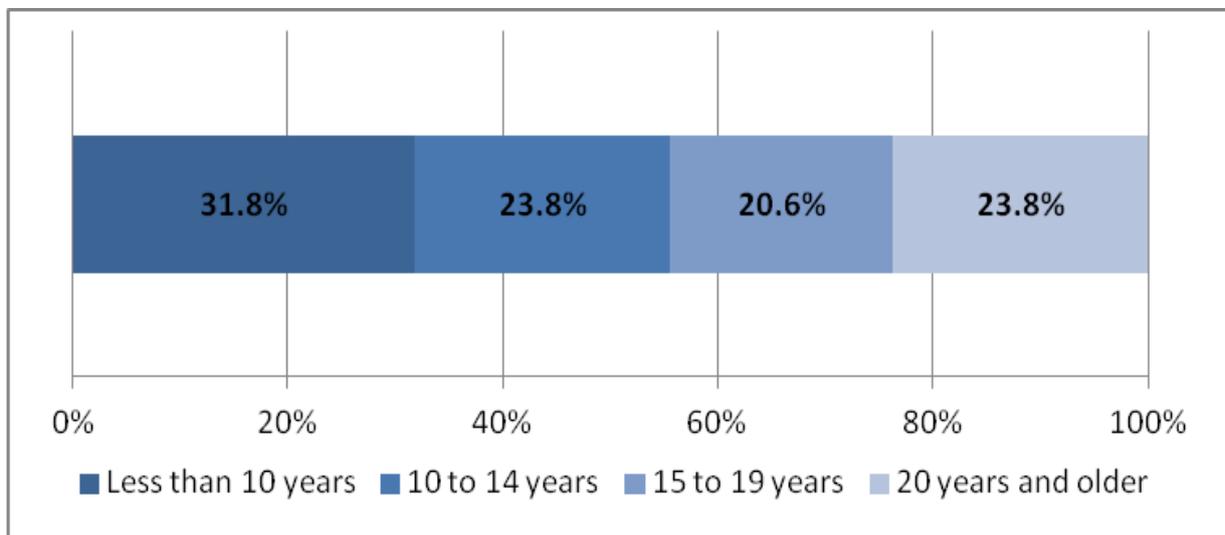
#### 3.1 When did most Sydney Anglicans become Christians?

Question 53 of the 2011 National Church Life Survey S2 asked church-goers about the age at which they first became a Christian.

Q53: "How old were you when you first became a Christian?"

In 2011, the majority of Sydney Anglicans (76%) reported becoming Christians prior to 20 years of age (see Figure 3). Importantly, the 10 year age band covering the teenage years (10-19 years) was the age in which nearly half (44%) of Sydney Anglicans reportedly became Christians. Nearly one in four Sydney Anglicans (24%) became a Christian after the age of 20 years. It should be noted that these statistics exclude another 5% of attenders who did not know at what stage they became a Christian.

**Figure 3: Age became a Christian, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**



Sydney Anglicans were more likely to report becoming a Christian in their teenage years (44% compared to 36% nationally), and less likely to report becoming a Christian prior to 10 years of age (32% compared to 41% nationally). These differences may reflect theological differences in the understanding of 'conversion' amongst different denominations. For example, the majority of attenders in the national sample who have a Catholic or Anglo-Catholic orientation reported becoming a Christian prior to the age of 10 years, compared with only a third of Evangelical/Reformed respondents.

### 3.1.1 Age of conversion – trends over time

About the same proportion of Sydney Anglicans reported that they became a Christian prior to the age of 20 years in the 2011 survey (76%), compared with the 2006 survey (79%) and the 2001 survey (76%).

## 3.2 Common influences on people becoming a Christian

It is reasonable to assume that particular people or church activities have had a more significant impact on fostering the beginnings of Christian faith than others. Question 54 and 55 of Survey S2 sought to identify the most common of these influences among Sydney Anglicans.

Q54: "Which of the following people were most significant in helping you come to the Christian faith?" (Multiple choice of up to three responses)

Q55: "Which of the following activities, if any, would you say were most significant in helping you come to faith?" (Multiple choice of up to two responses)

### 3.2.1 Important people who influence conversion

With regards to the people who were important influences on people coming to faith, survey respondents were provided with a list of twenty (20) possibilities. The people identified as

having the greatest influence on church attenders' coming to faith were those who typically have close connections to the respondent, such as parents, family, friends and local church ministries.

Figure 4 presents the responses across all twenty (20) influential people. Further, it groups the responses into six (6) categories, with percentages shown for each category:

- Parents and familial relationships
- Friends and neighbours
- Local church ministry
- School ministry
- Christian camps and conference speakers
- Public evangelists.

The most commonly cited people in Sydney Anglicans coming to the Christian faith were mothers (50%), followed by fathers (31%), local ministers (23%), peers or friends (21%) and youth group leaders (18%). It can be seen from Figure 4 that familial relationships appear to have influenced the largest number of attenders (67%), of which mothers were most prominent, influencing 50% of attenders. Fathers influenced 31% of the survey participants. Although it is not shown as a grouped figure in Figure 4, the authority figures of mothers, fathers and grandparents as a combined grouping were influential for 57% of attenders.

Outside of familial relationships, church ministry had a widespread influence (51%). This combined figure included local church ministers (23%); youth group leaders (18%); Sunday school teachers (15%); and other church attenders (6%). Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders have been very influential, since they particularly work with young people during their formative years. This finding provides evidence for the strategic importance of local churches having a dedicated children's and youth ministry.

**Figure 4: Most significant people in your coming to the Christian faith<sup>11</sup>, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**

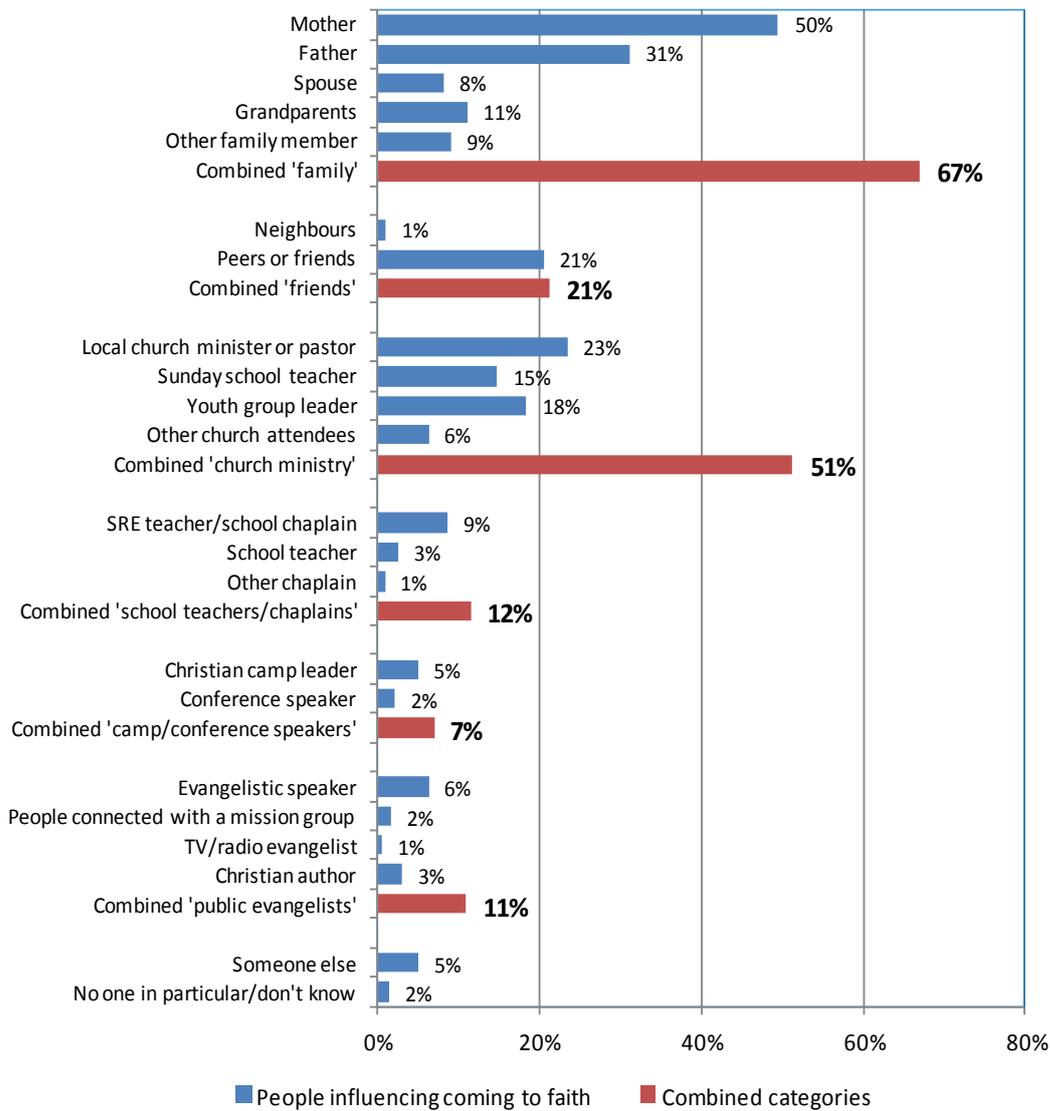


Figure 4 shows other influential people, including:

- Neighbours and peers/friends (21%)
- School teachers, SRE teachers or chaplains (12%)
- Public evangelists (11%)
- Camp leaders or conference speakers (7%).

<sup>11</sup> Respondents could choose up to 3 responses

An interesting finding is that, as a combined grouping, Christian authors, mission groups and evangelistic speakers were influential for 11% of attenders, exceeding 'other church attenders' (6%) in their scope of influence. This finding is a reminder of the need for a variety of gospel proclamation methods, including publication and the use of the media. Individuals learn about and are drawn to faith in multilayered and interwoven ways. This means that one method of evangelism is not necessarily 'better' than another – rather, the use of a variety of approaches is useful in drawing people from a diverse range of backgrounds and life stages.

For the purposes of this report, and in view of the interests of Anglican Youthworks, it is important to note that school-based ministry has been influential on around one in eight attenders in the Diocese, whilst Christian camps and conference speakers have been influential for one in fourteen attenders. Although not shown as a grouped figure in Figure 4, the combined grouping of children's and youth oriented ministries (Sunday school teacher, youth group leader, SRE teacher, school chaplain and school teacher) was influential for 42% of attenders.

### 3.2.2 Important people in conversion – trends over time

In terms of important people that influence the beginnings of faith, parental influence has remained strong and appears to have strengthened slightly. In 2011, 50 percent of Sydney Anglicans identified their mother as important in the beginnings of their faith, compared with 48 percent in 2006. Similarly, the influence of fathers has also strengthened from 27 percent in 2006 to 31 percent in 2011. In contrast, the influence of friends and neighbours has shifted from 24 percent in 2006 to 21 percent in 2011 and the influence of local church ministries has shifted from 54 percent in 2006 to 51 percent in 2011. While these shifts are small, they are consistent with the increasing retention of the children of church attenders in church life on the one hand and a decreasing inflow of newcomers from the wider community on the other hand, as outlined in a recent report on Diocesan mission

indicators<sup>12</sup>. It should also be noted that the same trends can be observed back to 2001, but that strict comparisons of these statistics with 2001 results are not safe due to changes in the wording of the stem of the question from 'showing you what faith was about' in 2001 to 'helping you come to faith' in 2006 and 2011.

### 3.2.3 Important activities that influence conversion

Survey participants were provided with a list of thirteen (13) influential activities, from which they were able to select up to two responses. Figure 5 presents the responses across all thirteen activities. Further, it groups the responses into four (4) categories, with percentages shown for each category:

- Combined 'church adult ministry'
- Combined 'church youth and children's ministry'
- Combined 'school activities'
- Combined 'evangelistic activities'.

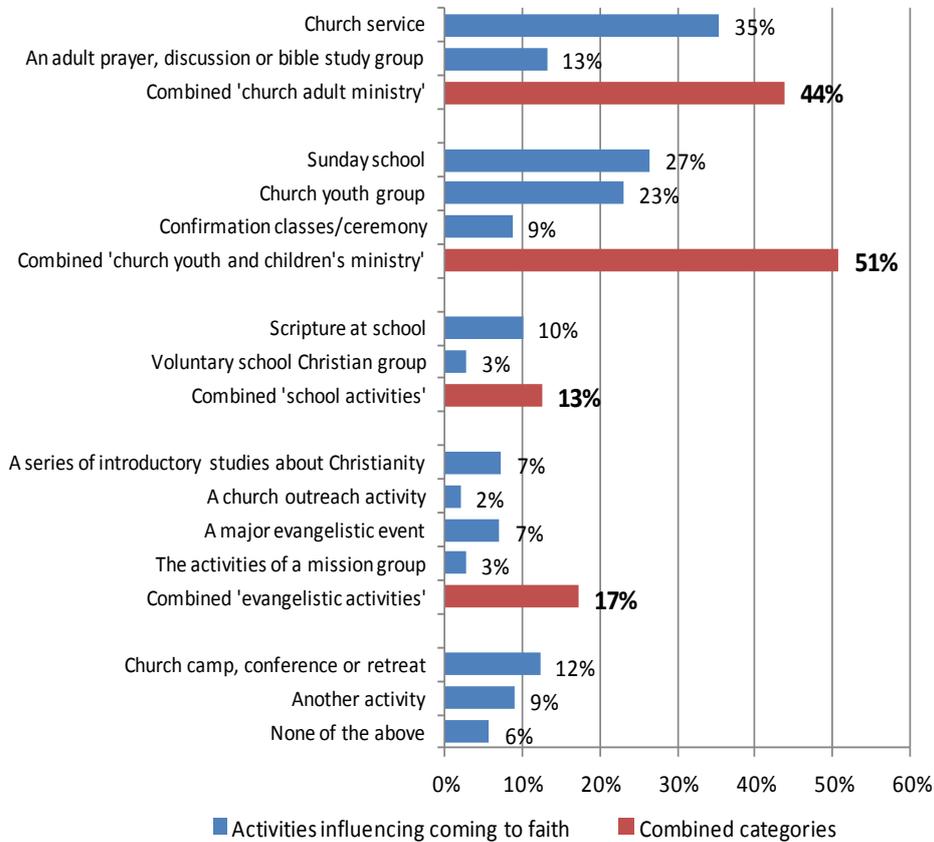
The most influential groups of activities were combined 'church youth and children's ministry' (51%), closely followed by 'church adult ministry' (44%). Local church-related ministries for adults and young people influenced between two and three times more people than either evangelistic activities or school related activities. Although not presented as a grouped figure in Figure 5, it should be noted that children's and youth oriented activities as a combined grouping (Sunday school, church youth group, confirmation class, scripture at school and voluntary school Christian group) were influential for 58% of attenders.

With regards to individual activities, church services (35%) followed by Sunday school (27%) and church youth groups (23%) were the most influential single activities upon the beginnings of faith. Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents were introduced to Christianity in ways that are not noted within Figure 5 above (9% of survey respondents identified 'another activity', and 6% selected 'none of the above').

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<sup>12</sup> Bellamy (2013)

**Figure 5: Most important activities in your coming to the Christian faith<sup>13</sup>, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**



It is notable that just over half of Sydney Anglican respondents (51%) were influenced by church youth and children’s ministry. This is not a surprising finding given that 76% of Sydney Anglicans report having become a Christian prior to the age of 20 years. Indeed, a majority of this group would have had the experience of attending Sunday school and/or a church youth group. This finding highlights the influence of ministries targeting young people, and in particular, the importance of these activities in affecting a person’s engagement with Christianity.

<sup>13</sup> Respondents could choose up to two responses.

### 3.2.4 Important activities in conversion – trends over time

In general, the important activities leading to conversion in the Sydney Diocese have remained relatively constant over the past decade. During 2001-11, the most common activity associated with becoming a Christian was attendance at church services, followed by attendance at Sunday school and youth groups.

### 3.3 How do pathways to faith vary by the age of conversion?

The analysis in Section 3.1 identified that the majority of church attenders in the Sydney Anglican Diocese became a Christian as a child or teenager (76%), whilst only 24% became a Christian as an adult. It would be expected that the significant people and activities would vary depending upon the age at which a person became a Christian. This section identifies these variations.

Figure 6 shows that parents and church ministries have the widest influence on people who became a Christian as a child or teenager. More specifically, the significant persons for people who became Christians as children or teenagers are ranked in the following order:

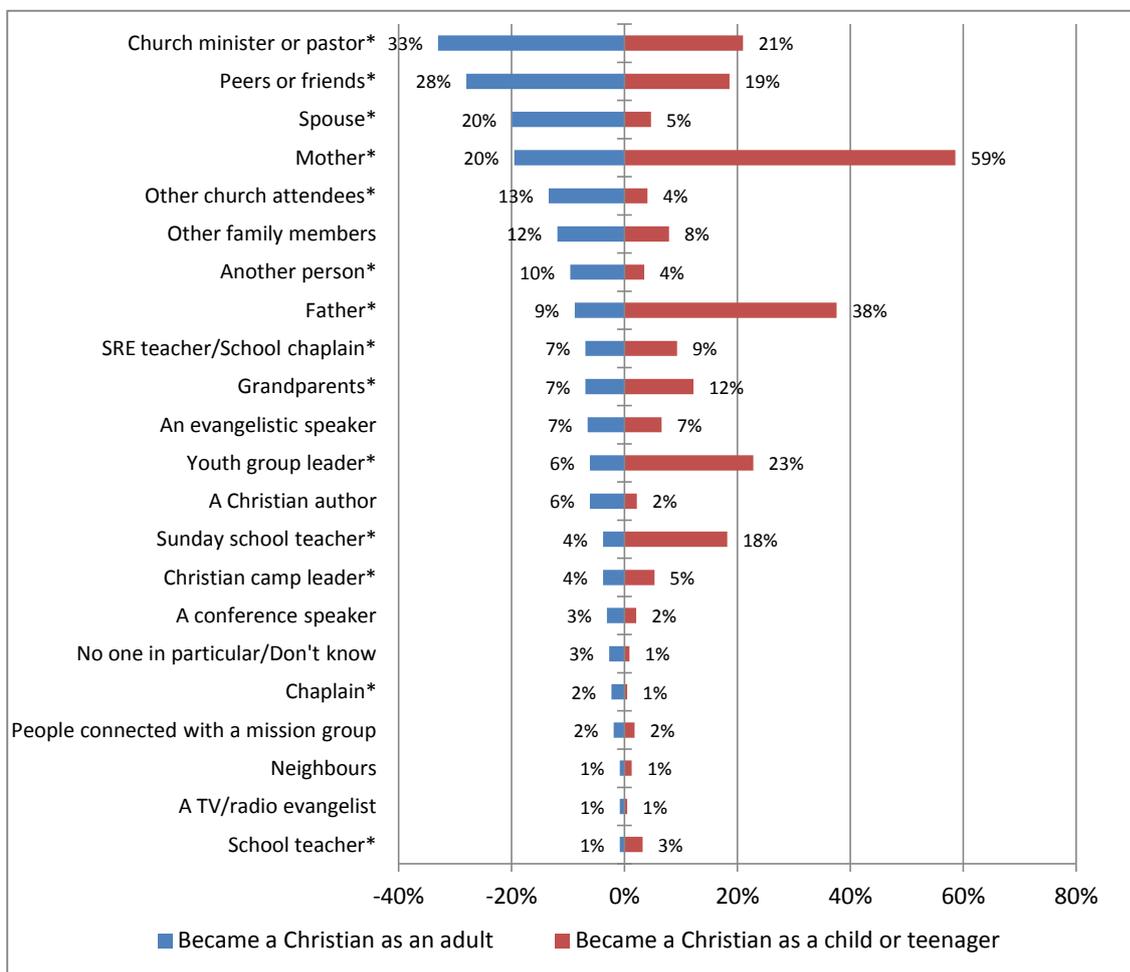
- Mothers; 59%
- Fathers; 38%
- Youth group leaders; 23%
- Church ministers; 21%
- Peers or friends; 19%
- Sunday school teachers; 18%.

For children, critical life lessons and beliefs are principally informed by parents and other important figures of authority. As individuals age, parental influence increasingly gives way to the stimulus of peers and the social environment. Consequently, persons cited as having the most influence upon adult converts form a more diverse group. Childhood influences such as Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders held less significance for adult converts.

The most influential individuals for adult converts included:

- Church ministers; 33%
- Peers or friends; 28%
- Spouses; 20%
- Mothers; 20%
- Other church attenders; 13%.

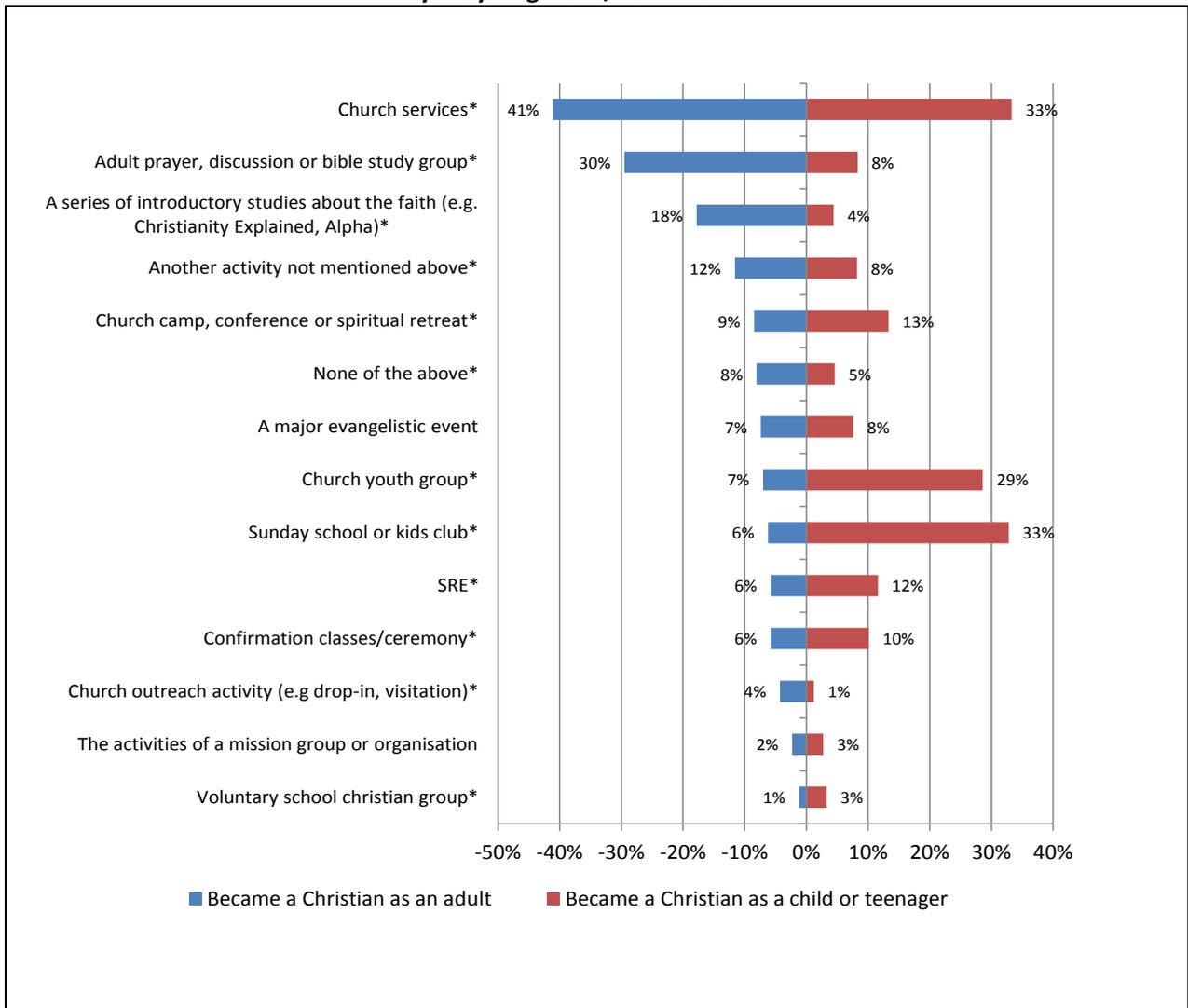
**Figure 6: Most significant people in your coming to the Christian faith by age of conversion, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**



\* Differences are significant at p < 0.05

The variations in the influence of people according to the age that the person became a Christian can also be seen in the relative influence of different activities. Figure 7 shows that church attenders who became a Christian as a child or teenager were more often influenced by activities that were centred on children and youth. They also tended to be activities that would be, at least initially, introduced or encouraged by their parents.

**Figure 7: Most influential activities in your coming to the Christian faith by age of conversion, Sydney Anglicans, 2011 NCLS**



\* Differences are significant at p < 0.05

The key activities affecting engagement with Christianity for young people included:

- Church services; 33%
- Sunday school or kids club; 33%
- Youth group; 29%

- Church camps and conferences; 13%
- School-based religious education (SRE); 12%.

Activities that were most influential for adults coming to faith varied from those of children and youth. Church services were one of the most influential activities for both those who became Christians as adults (41%) and as children or teenagers (33%). However, there were a number of differences between these two groups, reflecting the impact of age-specific ministries. While influential activities for children and youth were Sunday school, youth group, and school-based religious education, the influential activities among people who became Christians as adults were adult prayer and Bible study groups and introductory courses to Christianity. Both age groups reported that church camps and conferences were influential; 13% for those converted as children and youth and 9% for those converted as adults.

Overall, adult converts rated the following activities as being most influential on their coming to faith (see Figure 7):

- Church services; 41%
- Adult prayer, discussion or Bible study groups; 30%
- Introductory courses to explain Christianity; 18%
- Church camps and conferences; 9%.

### **3.4 Exploring the influence of church youth groups**

Question 56 of Survey S2 asked church attenders about the style of the youth group program they attended, if they had attended any such programs.

Q56: "If you attended a church youth group at ages 12 to 14 years, what kind of program was usually run at the group?"

It is important to identify what kind of programs within youth activities may have the greatest influence in encouraging young people to become Christians and to grow in the faith. Bible study is seen commonly as having a primary role in this process along with the

teaching of the word. However does there also need to be a balance between time spent in the Bible and time spent in ‘fun’ activities such as quizzes, games and sporting activities? Survey question 56 explored this issue.

**Figure 8: Style of youth group experienced at ages 12-14 years, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**

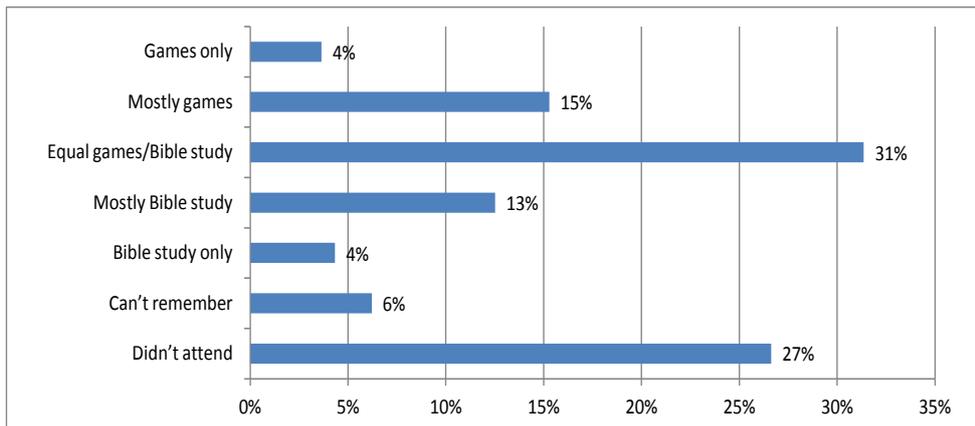


Figure 8 reveals a mixed response by Sydney Anglican church attenders regarding the types of youth group programs they had attended in their early teens. Some 19% of church attenders identified attending a youth group with mostly or only games whilst 17% attended a youth group that held mostly or only Bible studies. About a third of respondents (31%) indicated that the youth group they attended contained an equal balance of Bible study and games. It is important to note that although Figure 8 reveals that the ‘equal games/Bible study’ format was the most prevalent style, such information alone cannot deem it as the most effective format. Additionally, 33% of church attenders indicated that they did not attend a youth group or that they could not remember the format of the group.

### 3.4.1 Style of youth group – trends over time

Attenders answered this question in much the same way in 2006 and 2011, with the most prevalent style being ‘equal games and Bible study’ in both surveys (31%).

### 3.4.2 Identifying influential styles of youth group

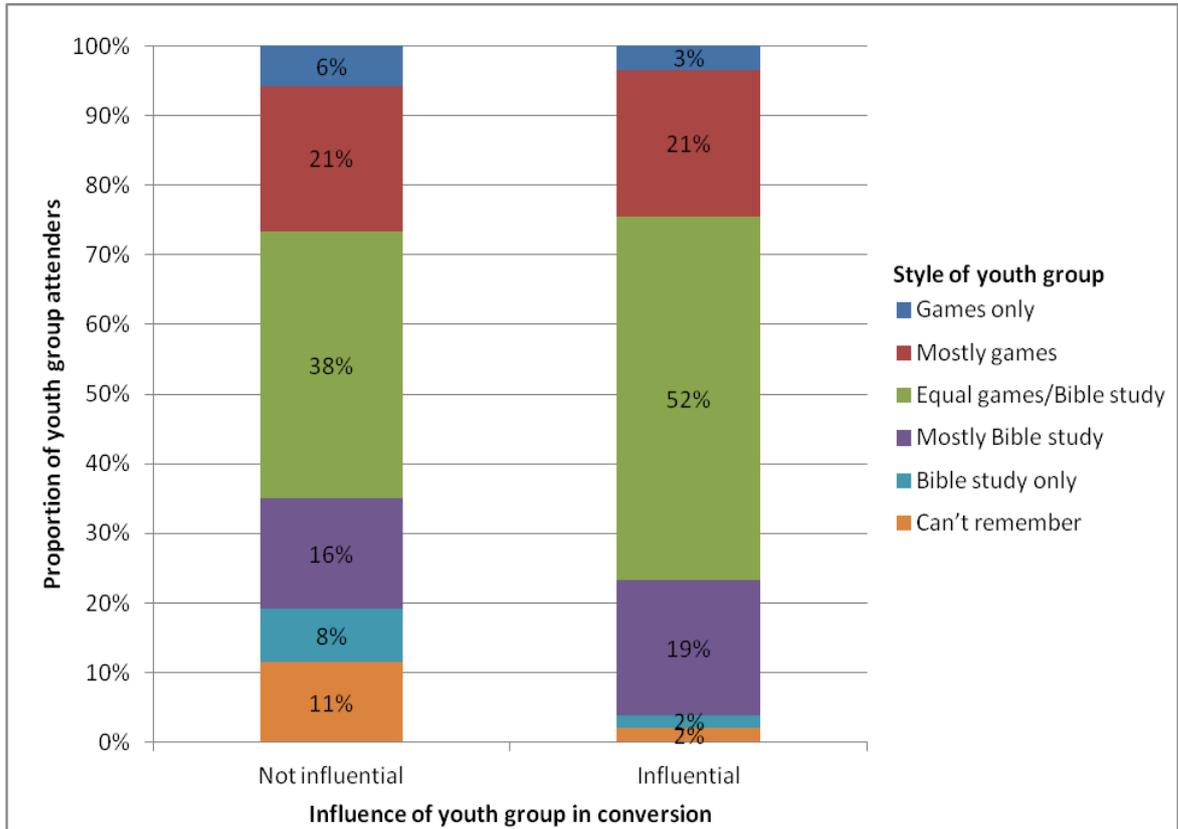
It is evident from NCLS data that not all people who attended a youth group at ages 12-14 considered the youth group to have been influential in their coming to faith. In fact, only a third of people who attended a youth group during this stage of life identified 'youth group' as being influential in the beginnings of their faith.

Figure 9 compares those who considered that the youth group was influential in their coming to faith with those who did not, by the style of youth group they attended at ages 12-14 years. Youth groups featuring an equal mix of games and Bible study were more likely to be attended by people who were influenced by their youth group (52%) compared with those who were not (38%). In contrast, youth groups that featured either games only or Bible study only were more likely to have been attended by those not influenced by a youth group involvement (6% and 8% respectively). Not surprisingly those who did not identify youth group as being influential were also less likely to remember the style of youth group they attended (11%).

These findings suggest that groups which have been more balanced in their programs have had the greater influence on young people coming to faith. It could be hypothesised that both study and social aspects are important in keeping young people engaged within their youth groups. It could also be hypothesised that the process of religious socialisation leading to conversion has social dimensions which also need to be understood.

However youth group programs consisting solely or mostly of games were more influential among males than females (30% compared to 20%) and were particularly important among those who later attained a Trade Certificate or Diploma (45%) compared to a Bachelors Degree (17%) or Postgraduate Degree (22%).

**Figure 9: Influence of youth group by style of group experienced at ages 12-14 years, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011\***



\* Limited to those attenders who once attended a youth group

### 3.5 Exploring the influence of parents

In addition to the style of youth group program they attended, church attenders in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney were asked about their parents' commitment to Christianity at the time of their own conversion.

Q57: "Were your parents committed Christians at the time you first became a Christian?"

Figure 10 shows that 39% of Sydney Anglicans identified both their parents as being committed Christians when they first became a Christian. A further 2% responded to having solely a Christian father and 17% solely a Christian mother, a total of 58%. Another 19% of Sydney Anglican attenders identified either one or both of their parents as being nominal Christians at the time they first became a Christian. These results demonstrate that, contrary to what may have been expected, only about 6 out of 10 church attenders had at least one parent who was a committed Christian at the time of their conversion.

**Figure 10: Parents’ commitment to Christianity at the time of respondents’ conversion, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**

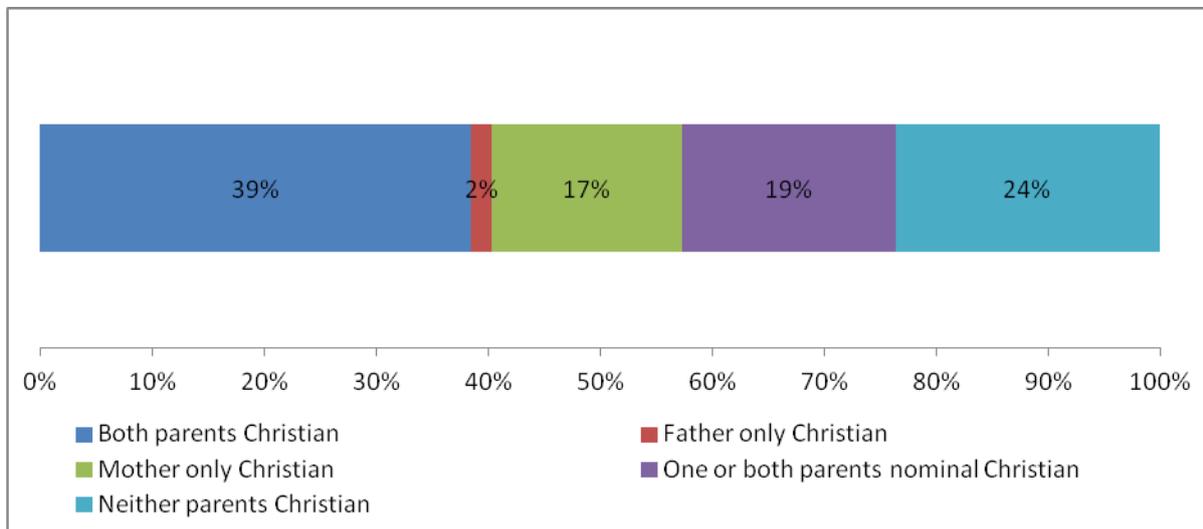
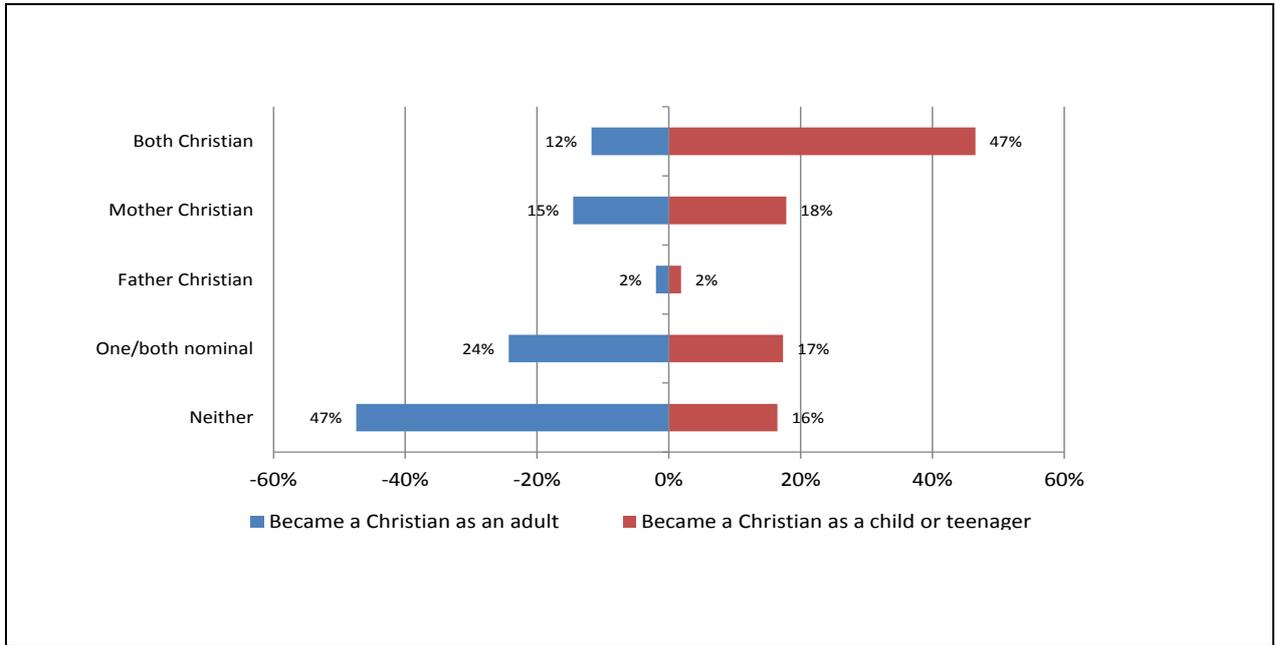


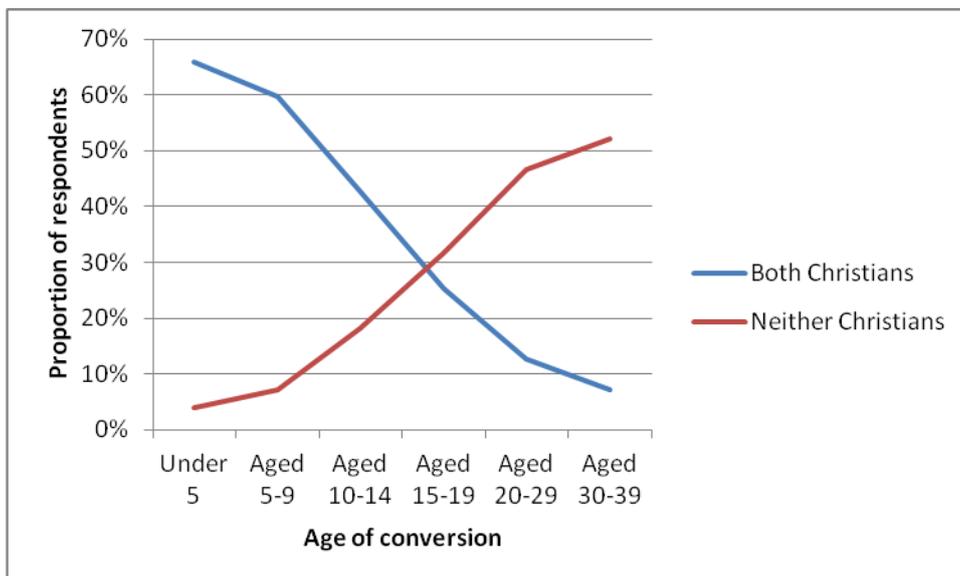
Figure 4 showed the widespread influence of mothers (50%) and fathers (31%) in people coming to faith. Figure 11 supports such findings with 47% of respondents who became a Christian during their childhood or adolescence reporting that both of their parents were Christians at the time. Inversely, the same proportion of adult converts (47%) identified that neither of their parents were Christians at the time they became a Christian.

**Figure 11: Parents' commitment at time of conversion by age of conversion, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**



These differences suggest that the children of Christian parents are much more likely to become Christians during childhood or adolescence, whereas the children of non-Christian parents are more likely to be converted during adulthood. Figure 12 casts further light on this relationship, which changes in a linear way with increasing age at which respondents became a Christian.

**Figure 12: Christian commitment of parents by age of conversion, Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**



Those who became Christians at less than 5 years of age were most likely to have parents who were both Christians (66% of this age group). In contrast, those who became Christians between the ages of 30 and 39 years were the least likely to have both parents who were Christians (7% of this age group). Interestingly, for people who became Christians during the ages of 15-19 years, the proportion of converts from non-Christian families (32%) was roughly similar to the proportion from families where both parents were committed Christians (25%). This suggests that youth ministry could – and should - play a pivotal role in bringing children from a range of family backgrounds to Christ.

### **3.6 Do pathways to faith vary for different generations?**

In order to understand whether there were any generational differences in the pathways to faith, attenders were split into two cohorts of equal size: those aged 20-49 years and those aged 50 years and older. The former category roughly covers Generations 'X' and 'Y', while the latter category covers most of the 'Baby Boomer' generation and all of the pre-WW2 'Builder' generation.

A comparison of influential people by generation revealed only a few significant differences. Being helped towards faith by family members, church ministers, and church attenders was just as common among attenders aged 20-49 years as those aged 50 years or over.

Atenders aged 50 years or over were more likely to have been helped towards their Christian faith by grandparents (11%) compared with attenders aged 20-49 years (6%), which is perhaps a reflection of changing family structures over the generations. They were also a little more likely to have been influenced by Sunday school teachers (21% of over 50's compared with 16% of 20-49 year olds), but less likely to have been influenced by a youth group leader (9% of over 50's compared with 22% of 20-49 year olds). This reflects the changing structure of children's and youth work over the years.

Atenders aged 20-49 years were more likely to have been influenced by friends (27%) than attenders aged over 50 (15%). Younger attenders were also more likely to have been

influenced by a church camp, conference or spiritual retreat (14%) than attenders aged over 50 years (7%)<sup>14</sup>. This difference may be a reflection of the growth of Christian conferences such as the Katoomba Youth Convention.

### **3.7 To what extent are new Christians drawn from the wider community?**

In addition to the Youthworks' commissioned NCLS questions, the National Church Life Survey asked questions regarding church attendance history. From these questions it is possible to identify those respondents who began attending their church over the past five years, but were not attending a church prior to this time. These attenders are termed 'newcomers' to church life.

According to the 2011 NCLS, over the past five years, approximately 9% of people attending Anglican churches in Sydney can be considered newcomers to church life. These newcomers can be further subdivided into two groups: those who have no background in attendance – termed 'first-timers' – and those who are returning to church life after an absence of years – termed 'returnees'. Returnees account for most newcomers, or 5% of attenders in the Diocese, while first-timers make up 4% of attenders. The proportion of newcomer inflows into church life (relative to other inflows) provides some indication of the level of community penetration by congregations at any given point in time.

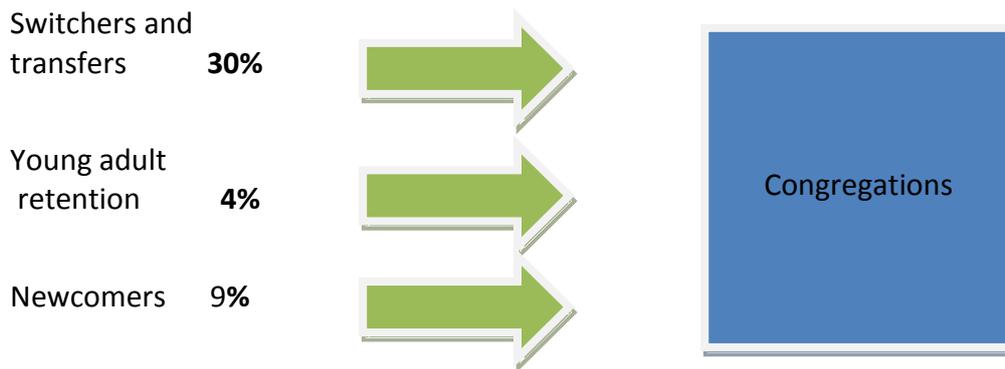
Further inflows that can be calculated from the NCLS are the levels of people moving between local churches (denominational 'switchers and transfers') as well as an estimate of the number of young adolescents who have transitioned into the adult congregation. Figure 13 demonstrates these inflows.

Figure 13 shows that switchers and transfers comprise the largest inflow into churches; people who have switched or transferred in the last 5 years comprised 30% of the total 2011 attendance. The other inflows were newcomers and young people aged 15-19 years who were long-term attenders (4%).

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<sup>14</sup> Difference is significant at  $p < 0.001$

**Figure 13: Inflows into congregations, Anglican Diocese of Sydney**



It is also possible to identify respondents who have recently become Christians or within several years of their current age. These respondents have been termed ‘fresh converts’ and comprise about a sixth of all attenders in the Diocese aged over 15 years. Some of these fresh converts became a Christian as a teenager and the remainder in their adult years.

Fresh converts have been divided into five groups: those aged 15-19 years, 20-29 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years and 50-59 years. Table 1 demonstrates the extent to which these four groups are drawn from the wider community, by identifying those who are also newcomers to church life in the past 5 years.

What is immediately apparent in Table 1 is that nearly one third (31%) of teenaged fresh converts have been drawn from the wider community, a percentage which is far higher than the Diocesan average (9%). This highlights the strategic priority of youth ministry being conducive to drawing people from the surrounding community into the church. In addition, about a quarter of fresh converts aged 20-29 years (26%) and 30-49 years (22%) have also been drawn from the wider community.

**Table 1: Fresh converts in age bands by newcomer status,  
Sydney Anglicans, NCLS 2011**

Fresh convert categories	Sample size	Newcomers to church life	All other attenders	Total
Aged 15-19 yrs; became Christians at age 10-19 years	48	31%	69%	100%
Aged 20-29 yrs; became Christians at age 15-29 yrs	58	26%	74%	100%
Aged 30-39 yrs; became Christians at age 20-39 yrs	32	22%	78%	100%
Aged 40-49 yrs; became Christians at age 30-49 yrs	27	22%	78%	100%
Age 50-59 yrs; became Christians at age 40-59 yrs	16	12%	88%	100%
Not a fresh convert	950	7%	93%	100%

It should be noted that some of the remaining attenders who do not have a current newcomer status may in fact have a newcomer *heritage*. This is because attenders who have been in their current congregation for more than five years are designated as 'long-term attenders' in the NCLS database. Similarly, they instead acquire the status of 'switcher' or 'transfer' once they change churches. Therefore, the actual percentages drawn from the community among fresh converts would be higher than shown in Table 1.

Nevertheless, it is possible to conclude from Table 1 that high proportions of the most recent converts are being drawn in from the wider community, in particular, among teenagers and young adults. However, this data does not show whether a newcomer was converted before or after joining their current church. It also needs to be remembered that many newcomers are returnees to church life, meaning that their conversion may have occurred at a church with which they had previous involvement.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This report has used data from the National Church Life Survey to examine the key influences leading people in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney to come to faith. This research has a number of implications for conducting ministry, specifically with young people, within the Diocese.

The 2011 NCLS revealed that 44% of respondents were between the ages of 10 and 19 years when they first became Christian. By contrast, only 24% of respondents identified coming to faith after the age of 20 years. The broadest pathways to faith are one's family of origin and the local church. This may be in the form of a person (e.g. mother, father or minister) or being part of a related activity (e.g. church service, Sunday school, church camp). The influence of parents in the beginnings of faith has strengthened slightly between 2006 and 2011, while the influence of friends, neighbours and church ministers has decreased slightly.

Regarding familial influence, mothers tended to have the strongest presence in their children's coming to faith, followed by fathers. As a result, the children of Christian parents were more likely to become Christians during childhood or adolescence, whereas the children of non-Christian parents were more likely to have been adult converts. An implication of this finding is the need to support and equip church-attending parents for the important role of nurturing their children's faith.

The local church as a vehicle for the beginnings of faith varied depending upon the age at which people became Christians. Local church ministers (33%), peers or friends (28%), and spouses (20%) were more influential for people who became Christians as adults. By contrast, mothers (59%), fathers (38%), youth group leaders (23%) and Sunday school teachers (18%) were more influential for people who became Christians as children and teenagers. The importance of the family and local church are consistent with sociological understandings of conversion which locate conversion as part of a process that commences with religious socialisation beginning in childhood. It is also consistent with the fact that most Sydney Anglicans claim to have become Christians prior to the age of 20 years.

One obvious implication of these findings is the need for strong children's and youth programs in local churches. Such programs have been shown to be effective at engaging with young people and retaining them in church life. More importantly, children's and youth ministries play an important role in facilitating conversion and consolidation of faith. The evidence of this report is that children's and youth activities have a central importance in the children of church attenders becoming Christians apart from the role that these activities have in nurturing the faith of people who are already committed. In addition the research demonstrates that youth groups in particular sit at a crossroads where they are also able to assist those from non-Christian homes who may also be looking to explore the faith.

In terms of the style of youth group attended between the ages of 12-14 years, the most common group style featured an equal balance of Bible study and games (accounting for 31 percent of respondents). Youth groups featuring an equal mix of games and Bible study were also more likely to be attended by people who were influenced by their youth group (52%) compared to those who were not (38%). This suggests that groups which have been more balanced in their programs have had the greater influence on young people coming to faith.

Evangelists and evangelistic activities have played a significant role in some attenders becoming Christians, though at much lower levels than the influence of family and the local church. Some forms of evangelism do appear to play a more important role among people converted as adults, particularly introductory Bible studies, church outreach activities and Christian authors.

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