



# Youth, the Faith and Vocational Discernment

The voice of young people from across the Archdiocese of Birmingham 2018

**KENELM  
YOUTH TRUST**



Vocations  
Office

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In response to the global conversation the Church is initiating for the upcoming Synod on youth, the faith and vocational discernment, the vocations office and the Kenelm Youth Trust, agencies of the Archdiocese of Birmingham, sought to hear the voice of young people in preparation for the Synod in the Autumn of 2018. This process began in March 2018 with a month of listening exercises and conversations taking place in our Catholic schools, parishes, Oxford University Chaplaincy and two open events at the seminary at Oscott. The age range of young people spoken to was largely school age - from Year 9 - 13. Our workshops in schools reaching this age group with larger numbers from Year 9, 10 and 12. The first event at Oscott consulted mainly young people in Year's 12 and 13, the second event included some who were in the 6th form, but also attracted a larger number of school leavers and university students. Most of whom were under the age of 25, but not exclusively. Over the course of a month 1000 young people and young adults had the opportunity to share their experiences and views on faith and vocational discernment in the context of their own circumstances and culture.

Experienced facilitators invited participants to join in an open conversation focused around the following questions:

### Part 1: Who am I?

1. What kind of person do you want to be?
2. Where do you feel a sense of belonging?
3. What makes life meaningful to you?
4. What are the important things in my life?
5. What are your hopes?
6. What gives your life significance?

### Part 2: Your views of the world

1. What are the strengths of modern day society?
2. What are the weaknesses of modern day society?
3. Who do you see as being marginalised?
4. Where do you notice they do not belong?
5. What contributes to someone being/feeling alienated?
6. What is your response to that?

### Part 3: My response to struggle and suffering

1. What gives you hope?
2. How do your beliefs motivate you?
3. In your experience what are the barriers to believing in God?
4. Does your community help you to become the person you want to be?
5. Does modern day society support your beliefs?
6. What do you need to become who you want to be?

**Definition of Synod:** an ecclesiastical governing or advisory council: such as  
**a** : an assembly of bishops in the Roman Catholic Church

# Who Am I?



# What kind of person do you want to be?

In response to this question young people articulately expressed a desire to grow into the fullness of their humanity, as a unique individual. To grow in virtue, skill and gifts. Young people rightly desire to be happy and content in their lives but also to be hopeful and bold as they step forward into their future. Young people desire to be fully themselves, content and fulfilled in their distinct and unique individuality. They express very clearly a yearning to be seen as an individual and valued as such. They wish to embody the following personal qualities; confidence, sometimes expressed as a desire to be self assured; To be humble, hardworking, independent, creative, strong minded and mature. Valuing also health and intelligence.

A good third of the responses to this question referred to qualities that would have a direct impact on relationships with other people, expressing a desire to live in good relationship and strong community with others. Young people described their future selves as helpful, caring, loving, kind, liked and loved, loyal, honest and generous. There was clear recognition of the positive impact that cultivating these virtues would have on their relationship with others and implicit acknowledgement that being a person who built strong relationships was important.

Many young people articulated their aspiration to be someone who was an inspiration or role model to others in the way that they lived their life or in their chosen career. They wish to inspire others, to be “someone who lifts others up” and to be an example.

Another clear and coherent theme to many of the responses to this question (and throughout the entire conversation) was a desire for life to mean something. This was expressed through the hope of leaving a legacy, to be “someone that leaves something behind that won’t be forgotten”. Young people desire to be of significance, to be important and remembered. One young person expressed this as a want to be a “revolutionary - to change the world!”

Many young people convey a yearning to make a difference to the lives of others, to make a valuable contribution to wider society, expressed most simply as a desire to help people. Some young people were specific about the way they hoped to make a difference; as a volunteer in a charity shop, an organ or blood donor, as a feminist, in “helping people with anger problems”, “to be brave enough to speak out”. One young person expressed a profound wish to “stop conflict”.

A significant number of young people wanted to be successful and to experience the dignity of work and the fruits of their industry, with some describing the kind of person they wanted to be as ambitious and successful. This was often communicated as a striving for success in order to fulfil personal potential. It was also sometimes referred to in the context of wealth, but not exclusively. Some were able to articulate success beyond the context of wealth, to be something more than monetary recompense. There seems to be a relationship between success and fulfilment expressed by one young person as an aspiration to be “someone who tries to challenge himself and tries his best at everything”. For some young people there was a definite connection between identity and a sense of personal value being tied to personal success. This was expressed by some young people in the connection they made between a particular career path and the kind of person they wanted to be.

The concept of identity came out in other responses also. Many young people expressed the desire to live in the freedom of our unique personal identity, not conforming to or following along with trends that are not an expression of who they are. This is explored further elsewhere in this report but the young people who were asked this question clearly articulated a wish to be known, and to be ‘seen’ as an individual, “loved for the person I am”, appreciated, longing “to be accepted”, recognising that this gave birth to a freedom to love and be loved.

In response to this question some young people considered the place of faith and religion. Some wanted to be “less religious” others “more religious”. Others wanted their future selves to be “prayerful” or “spiritual”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Where quotation marks are used the exact language recorded during the conversation is used.

# Where do you feel a sense of belonging?

Many young people named a specific place when describing where they felt a sense of belonging. Some of the places named were an expression of community such as school, the Chaplains office and a football stadium. Others were familiar and frequently visited places such as coffee shops and libraries. Some young people gave entire countries as the place they felt a sense of belonging such as America and Wales. A number of young people described the natural environment. One young person said they most felt a sense of belonging whilst “away - home is where I am”. For many, home or their room was the place they most felt like they belonged. Some young people described a place that coincided with an activity, typically this was either related to the arts or a sport. The art room, “(I am) Known, (I) know where I stand and where everything is”, music department, football field and cricket pitch were all specifically named. For many young people to be known and to “know what is expected of me” and to feel a “sense of ease and comfort” were underlying themes to the activities and groups to which they felt a strong sense of belonging.

Sports featured as a frequent response to this question, football, basket ball, netball, boxing, dance and cricket. A few named football stadiums such as Old Trafford and Vale Park, indicating a deep sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, of being united with other fans in support of their team. Often there was a deep family connection intertwined with support of a particular team, one young man felt a particular connection to his Grandad at the football stadium of the team his Grandad had played for in his youth. Another expressed how he felt he belonged on the football pitch “communicating with other people - in sync”. Another theme that emerged in the responses relating to sports in particular, was the experience of community they felt as members of teams and clubs. Other experienced this sense of belonging to smaller communities through activities such as cadets, the Polish community and University CathSoc. Another smaller community that was named specifically in various conversations and deserves specific mention is the “Pride” movement and LGBT community. One young person described it as “everyone is accepting and loving”.

Another kind of activity that featured as a significant place of belonging in many of the conversations was the arts. Dance, playing music, creating music, singing and creating art were all named specifically. Creativity offers young people a way to feel a sense of belonging, to participate in the life of their community and express themselves freely. The arts, like sports and other recreational activities that were given in response to this question, offer an opportunity to do something for the sheer joy of it's own sake. Many young people said they felt a sense of belonging when doing things they loved and enjoyed. For some this sense of belonging was enhanced when doing something they were also good at.

Naturally, it is in relationship that many young people most strongly feel a sense of belonging. With family where one is “unconditionally loved” and “always forgiven”. One young person phrased this beautifully as “in simplicity, with my family”, meaning, being in and enjoying each other's company without the need for activity, stimulation or entertainment. With friends who are “accepting of you”, have “similar ways of thinking” and are always there for you. One young person expressed feeling a sense of belonging “with the right people”. The quality of relationship matters, with young people expressing a sense of belonging “where I am listened to” and “wherever I feel safe or confident”. Another young person felt a sense of belonging when “talking to people online”, here there was a sense of anonymity given in the response rather than familiarity. A few young people felt a great sense of belonging when alone “by myself, but not lonely”. Others still felt a sense of belonging with animals or pets.

Although a number of young people did describe the Church as a place where they experienced belonging, a more significant number did not mention the Church at all. The majority of young people felt a sense of belonging in their family, with their friends, in smaller communities and in activities they loved and felt accomplished at. There was often overlap between the activities and smaller communities, perhaps implying that there is a definite connection between belonging, using our gifts and talents and a community that recognises, celebrates and develops our gifts and talents and is focused on a definite goal or purpose. Many young people feel a sense of belonging when participating meaningfully in smaller communities, where they are valued, where they feel they are “doing things I am good at” and using their gifts and talents, the Church needs to hear this.



# What makes life meaningful to you?

A small group of young people described faith and the Church as making life meaningful to them. It was articulated by one young person specifically as a “personal relationship” with Jesus and another described faith as being able to “help you become more courageous”.

Many young people described relationships and time with friends and family and girlfriends/ boyfriends as making life meaningful to them. Family and the unconditional love given by parents, grandparents and siblings as well as the desire to “give back to family” and a sense of responsibility towards family were answers given in response to this question. Some young people found meaning in their desire for a family of their own, “to me children are very important”. Other young people described “having fun with friends” and “finding joy in friends” as offering meaning to their lives. One young person described relationships as environments that “allow us to grow and build trust”, another described the feeling of being respected and another referred to love and how being loved gave their life meaning. Underlying many conversations around the meaning that relationships give our lives was a sense that the love received in families especially, fostered the desire to return the unconditional love of family. The love of the family provides a stronghold from which to go out into the world and love others.

A common response to this question were personal hopes and aspirations for the future. For some young people their hope lies in their earning potential, financial security, “being comfortable” or simply “money”. For some it is the “thought of a future family”. Young people described “goals and dreams”, “having ambition”, “the person I want to be” and “making people proud” as giving them hope. For some young people it was a sense of possibility, of the world being wide open, full of “opportunities” and “choices and decisions” lying in their hands. One young person put this as “knowing there is lots to learn and I have something to look forward to”. In many of the conversations around this question there was a definite sense of the hope and meaningfulness that comes with choices and decisions, a sense that life is not closed off, predetermined or decided, we are free agents to craft our own future.

Connected to the idea of a big open world of possibilities some young people expressed the world, travel and exploration, the natural environment, “God’s creation” and animals, as well as the experience of the present moment as bringing meaning to their lives.

Many young people articulated a sense of purpose as being what makes life meaningful. For some this was in a more secular sense; “knowing there is a goal”. For many others it was expressed in direct connection to a sense of a God given vocation and the meaningfulness that comes when living into the fulness of our vocation. “The fact we are made for a purpose, that we have to fulfil that purpose (is) very important and keeps me moving forward”. For some young people there was some connection made between vocation, identity and self esteem.

Some young people found meaning in seeking the greater good, making a difference to the lives of others by “making others lives easier”, “being able to help people” and “making others happy”. For some this was expressed as “feeling like you are contributing to something” personally and more broadly for others “human advancement”.

Hobbies and recreation bring meaning to the lives of many. One young person stated “the weekend” as bringing meaning to her life, another books, others sports and bikes, another the six nations and for another it was their youth group. Connected to this were pastimes that enabled the development of talents and passions such as music, drama, dance, football and even online games. The arts featured highly here as being of significance in giving life meaning. Education was also referred to as being the key to “your future”.

Many responses could be grouped under the description of “the gift of life”. Articulated in responses such as “one life, do it well”, “the gift of each new day”, “breathing fresh air”, and “it’s a gift from God”. Simply “being alive” was an incredibly common response to this question.

# What are the important things in my life?

Young people consider relationships to be of great importance in their lives. Love, family, friends and having connections through shared interests were all described in response to this question.

Faith, religion, God and the Bible were articulated as being important things in the lives of the young people we spoke to. Slightly more young people responded with such answers to this question about the important things in my life than the previous question about what makes life meaningful. This is a subtle but important thing to note; faith is important but perhaps not enriching and imbuing young lives with meaning in the way a lived relationship with God can and should.

Many young people placed great importance on learning and success. Teachers, education and school were also common responses. As was leaving school with good grades and achieving success. Some young people went further to describe “passing on knowledge as important in their life. One young person described work and the ability to earn “my own money” as being important.

This was balanced by recreation, hobbies and leisure activities described, with much enthusiasm, as important by many young people. Sleep and relaxation were given priority by many. Hobbies and sports such as football, cricket, basketball, boxing and sea cadets were named specifically. Some simply stated that fun, games and laughter held a place of great importance in their lives. In addition to activities like those listed above young people also placed importance on books, comic books, music, Fortnite and Youtube.

A significant number of young people looked within themselves to describe the important things in their life, some valuing qualities like honesty and “being a good person - at peace with my conscience”. Many young people cited happiness as being important, others satisfaction. Some considered self belief, self acceptance and personal growth as being of considerable importance.

Essential material needs like food and water were described by some as being important in their lives. As was home and mobile phones, these were described by two different young people as making them feel safe. Material possessions, money, Netflix, Wifi and data also made the list. The underlying theme to many of these responses was a recognition that a sense of security in our basic human needs was crucial to happiness, as were the devices and technology that connected us to one another.

A number of responses to this question fell under the theme of fulness of life. A general sense of “living life”, alongside the importance of photographs - in reference to making memories and a sense of the importance of time (“you can’t get it back”), all explored this theme of fulness of life. Health, both physical and mental was described many times, with the word “wellbeing” being used frequently. For a few young people it was the senses, such as sight and sound, through which we experience the world that were important to them.

A number of young people described “adventure” and exploration as important to them, with “travel” and “seeing the world” being a frequent conversation point. Another aspect that was important to some was music and culture. One young person described “heritage” as important to them.

# What are your hopes?

Many young people hope for fullness of life. Some articulated this as a long life, “to die happily at a good age, peacefully”. For others it was expressed as doing the things I have wanted to do and “I won’t have any regrets when I die”. Some expressed a hope to “live a happy life, “to be genuinely happy”. Young people gave expression to a deep understanding of the precious nature of life and it’s depths.

Many young people expressed hopes of a philanthropic nature. The poor, the environment and loneliness were of particular concern. Conversations reflected an understanding that the wellbeing of the entire person was important, one young person in reference to helping the poor communicated it as “practical help, resulting in entire wellbeing”. One young person hoped to “discover something to potentially help others” and another expressed a simple hope to “make people’s lives easier”. Some young people hoped to tackle wider societal issues such as racism. Some hoped for peace enabling others to live a safer life. Others who hoped for peace were perhaps expressing an anxiety about world issues for example “no nukes”. At the time these conversations were taking place there was a lot of media coverage about North Korea.

Many young people communicated a hope for significant relationships, with finding love being a major hope for many. This was articulated as; “to be in love”, “to be loved”, “that I get to find true love”. There were some differences in the language used to express the form these relationships took, which ranged from “to be in a committed relationship”, “to be somebody to someone” and marriage. Many hoped for children, and even grandchildren. Sometimes this hope was expressed alone, others made a clear connection with marriage and children. It is unclear as to whether this was deliberate, but worth noting that having a family was more frequently referred to on it’s own rather than in the context of marriage. It may be implicit in the response but not necessarily. One young person shared a hope that she would find “a God fearing husband”. Also connected to some discussions around family and relationships were hopes for a stable and secure future, expressed specifically as; “make sure my family are stable” and “give my family a good life”. Following on from this a number of young people expressed a hope for a house, money and health in their future.

Many responses could be grouped under the theme of success and fulfilment. For some this was linked with reaching personal potential expressed as “to be the best I can be” and sometimes connected to the common good; “to find my place in society”. For some this was specific to education and work with common responses being; “to do well at school”, “Good GCSE’s” and specific careers such as teaching, physics, acting and journalism getting a specific mention. Many young people articulated a hope to find employment they found enjoyable and fulfilling and looked forward to opportunities to help people and do something they “want to do” in the future. Some articulated their hope as a desire to “follow your heart” and “to have a successful but not a cliché life”.

In a similar vein were hopes for personal growth, development and fulfilment. Young people clearly articulated a hope to grow into the fulness of their unique personhood; “to be the best version of myself”, “grow as a person” and “keep learning”. Some hoped to be the kind of person able to grow and “learn from mistakes” and “to learn form my past”. Others hoped to overcome fear, find the respect of others and make good decisions. Some young people articulated a desire for life to have meaning and for their life to leave a lasting mark on the world. This was expressed as a hope to be remembered, to be missed, leave a legacy and “to be named for a good thing”.

A number of young people hope for adventure and significant experiences. Moving country, experiencing such things as travelling, and seeing Ed Sheeran were some of the examples given. Some expressed this as “having stories to tell”.

Some young people communicated their hopes for the Church: “for more young people to come to Church”, “to reach people on the streets - that they may come to know God”. Other young people expressed a personal hope to have a stronger relationship with God and others expressed a sense of vocation in their hopes of “living life by God’s plan, “to have eternal life” and “to fulfil my calling”. A sense of vocation was a consistent theme across the many settings these conversations were held.



# What gives your life significance?

Many young people responded to this question with life itself. One young person expressed it simply as “the fact I have a life”. Others referred to the way life is lived, making the most of opportunities and “leaving a mark on the world”. Many young people expressed a want to be known and remembered, for life to have mattered. It is important to acknowledge here that not every young person feels that their life has significance. One young person blithely stated “Its not (significant). Everyone dies in the end, everything’s short lived, it doesn’t matter”.

Many of the conversations reflected that significance can be found in a deep sense of connection and community. Through family and family history. Through friends and “meeting people you will know your whole life”. Young people also articulated a clear understanding that it was love that gave their lives significance, expressed as “being loved”, “knowing you are loved” and “knowing people care for and respect me”. A number of young people shared how their life finds significance in helping others and “making the future better”.

In the majority the young people we spoke to are not afraid of hard work or setting the bar high in their aspirations. Stating that they find meaning in their accomplishments and success, aspiration and “winning”. One young person put it as “achieving the highest standard in most things”. Another thread was learning and knowledge, practicing and rehearsing (in reference to dance and theatre) a sense that hard work and dedication to passions and talents gave significance to life.

For some young people their life found significance in opportunities and their aspirations. One thread here was the sense of possibility and the greatness of the world, sometimes expressed as “there is so much to see and do” and “making new memories with the people you love”.

Another common theme was an understanding of our unique identity. Young people found significance in; “knowing you are different” and “there won’t be another you”.

Some young people articulated that their faith gives their life significance, expressed as “faith” and “belief”, as well as “(I) know that faith will always be there” and “living the way God wants me to”.

Further responses reflect the myriad of facets our human lives have. Young people find meaning in fun and humour advising: “don’t be too serious”. Kindness brings meaning to some. Culture, art and science and money to others still.

There were generally fewer responses to this question which could signify the time constraints that were a part of the process or it may be that it is a more challenging question, one which for the most part in our daily lives many people rarely contemplate.

# Your views of the world



# What are the strengths of modern day society?

One of strengths of modern society, most highly regarded by the young people we spoke to, is undoubtedly freedom, in all its various expressions. Choice and freedom is recognised by young people as an ultimate goodness. In the context of this question it was not explicitly recognised in the light of faith and as a gift given to us by God. This offers an opportunity for evangelisation and formation, to give young people a deeper narrative to the gift of freedom they value so highly. Freedom was referred to in the context of religious freedom, personal moral freedom, racial freedom, sexual freedom and freedom of speech. Often sexual freedom was mentioned in the same breath as freedom of speech and religious freedom. When discussing religious freedom as a strength of modern society it was often the ability to reject faith that was considered a “good” rather than the ability to make a positive choice to choose religion or faith. Many conversations referred to people who identify as LGBT, in the context of freedom, as a strength of modern society. This is a huge concern for young people today, on the whole they regard the steps made by the UK government to give greater rights to people from the LGBT community as a good in society. They do not see this reflected in the Church. Young people also considered the “freedom to think what you want and have an opinion” as a strength of modern society. As well as the ability to “decide who you want to be” and the freedom to “be who I want”. There is an underlying connection here between freedom and personal identity.

Another strong theme emerging from conversations was equality as a strength of modern society. Feminism and women rights were mentioned consistently, the women’s march movement was described as one specific expression of this equality. Equality, like freedom, is another ultimate good in the mind of many of today’s young people. What young people see of the Church in the way she is organised and operates does not always reflect what she teaches about women and their value. This can be a real barrier for many young women and young men. There is an opportunity here for the Church to give new expression to the equal and precious place women are given by God and His Church in creation.

Young people considered fair government, democracy and their fruits as a strength of modern society. Despite concerns that emerged in later conversations young people still considered the UK Government to be a good in modern society. They were generally positive and optimistic about the strengths of government. Also considered to be strengths of modern society were the fruits of modern government and democracy; economic growth, the justice system, personal safety, material comforts and the welfare system. Many young people placed a high value on education and schools as a strength of modern society, there was a sense that their personal experience of education was hugely appreciated. Also deserving specific mention, due to the many conversations that centred around it, is health care. The NHS and emergency services in this country were especially valued as were medicine and “improved medical care” on a more broad global scale. Young people especially valued a society that cares for the weak and the vulnerable. Community itself was regarded as a strength of modern society, expressed as “people create community”, unity and dependance on each other.

Other strengths of modern society drawn together under the broad theme of the values of society and individuals, are the following; a communal desire for change, “we all want change”; a sense of increased respect, compassion, genuine tolerance and a society that is accepting “to a point”. One young person expressed “liberalism - to a point” as being a strength of modern society. Some young people considered a strength of modern society to be kindness, others co-operation, another “sanctity of life”. Others expressed the ability to have fun at places like Alton Towers and parks to be a strength of modern society. Another young person considered family to be a strength of modern society. The young people who engaged in these conversations were able to express the tension between the now and the not yet, be comfortable in the apparent contradictions and hopeful because of the progress they see in the development of modern society.

Many young people recognised the achievements and developments of modern society as being amongst its greatest strengths. Technology and innovation, space exploration, entertainment, hygiene and transport were given specific mention. The development of social media is considered by a great many young people as a strength of modern society. Described specifically was social media’s ability to “connect us to the wider world”. Young people recognised that they

have “a different mode of communication”, where “everyones voice is heard”. The media in general was also described as a strength of modern society.

Some young people described the ability of ordinary people to bring about change as a strength of modern society as well as a general sense of “a real desire to improve people’s quality of life”. Others described global co-operation in the face of a crisis as a strength of modern society; “cultures working together to fix a catastrophe” and the ability “to look forward amid destruction”. Many young people considered charities and aid work as a strength of modern society. Specific mention was given to help for the homeless, those with disabilities and those with financial troubles. Many young people consider greater care for the environment as a strength of modern society. Young people have a great concern for the environment, it’s resources and the natural world we live in.

A few young people described the Church or God as a strength of modern society. One young person specifically described the unity of community found in the Church.

The theme of role models and inspirational people emerged again quite strongly in this question. Young people felt that “inspiring role models” were very much a strength of modern society.

Emerging also as being treasured by young people was a sense of the hope and possibility found in the world and the opportunities available to them. Responses like “opportunities”, “curiosity”, “inspiration”, “the world is beautiful” and “adventure” were all expressions of this. All conversations during this process were permeated by a deeply rooted sense of hope for the future.

# What are the Weaknesses of modern day society?

When read alongside the previous question the responses to this question make clear the extremely complex world our young people occupy. This world is not black and white, 'this' or 'that', it is every shade of grey, with 'this' sat alongside 'that'. They are aware of these tensions and hold them beside one another, often not feeling the need to make a choice between one world view and another but existing in the complex tension of the broad spectrum of society they inhabit.

Answers to this question unearthed the underbelly of many of the strengths of modern society. Often the responses given to this question were deeply personal, from a lived experience. A major theme emerging from the responses to this question was one of image and identity and a lack of freedom to be the person they were created to be. This was reflected in everything from their experience of school, to their use of social media. One young person expressed this as "at school we are treated like robots" this partially communicated the pressure they feel to perform but also the reduction of their ability to express themselves and make life choices that reflect their unique humanity, and gifts. This is a real challenge for our schools to consider how to authentically nurture and develop the individual, in the results driven, inspection focused education system that exists in the UK. This brings an enormous amount of good but a tension does exist here. Beyond the education system young people still feel a great pressure "to be perfect" or to conform to societies ideals and norms. Young people feel this pressure from their peers, through social media, and the the media as a whole. It has an often debilitating impact on some young people. Many young people feel pressure to look or act a certain way; feeling "pressure on appearance from social media", "girls have to look a certain way", "pressure to be skinny". They feel that the media and social media can "encourage constant comparison with others" and cause them to "focus on what the media wants us to be". The word "perfect" was referred to many times; "need to be perfect", "pressure to be perfect", "perfection society" with many young people feeling that "people are not themselves, (they are) trying to be someone they're not".

The focus on the inescapable norms dictated by social media and the media as a whole, reduces young people's sense of personal freedom. They worry about judgment from others and can be utterly paralysed and debilitated by the worry of what others might think of them. More broadly young people feel there is a reduction or lack of freedom in the patriarchy, in white supremacism and a "spread of toxicity (through) bigotry". Many young people have a very keen sense of discrimination and injustice and are concerned about injustice, racism and un-equal rights or inequality in modern society.

Another deeply personal concern of many young people is the pressure they feel in modern society. They feel there is a huge "pressure on young people in school" to ultimately gain good GCSE grades, for some this concern extends to their future work prospects and a worry about competition for "less jobs".

Following on from the previous two points is a big concern about mental health. Young people are more aware of mental health issues, partially due to recent campaigns in the media, but equally likely, because for young people today problems with mental health are a far more common occurrence than in the previous generation. Young people themselves recognise this as being a challenge for "this generation" and they feel "media influences" have a part to play in the cause.

Another concern of this generation of young people is how they are viewed in the eyes of older people. This was a frequent topic of conversation in response to this question about the weaknesses of modern society. Many young people feel that the "older generation (are) sceptical of youth", "Old people don't like young people in some cases". This is an expression of a lack of equality amongst the generations in modern society. Many young people feel voiceless and powerless because of older people making decisions that effect their future.

Looking again more broadly at the concerns of young people with regards to modern society, some young people feel a weakness of modern society is government and politics, with "neglect of the weak and vulnerable" being of particular concern. Some young people articulated a sense of powerlessness and voicelessness in the context of politics and government. Some young people feel especially frustrated by the the speed at which change happens in politics, "the



government are slow to get the job done". They criticise leaders abusing their powers, institutional racism in the police force and the wealth gap. One young person poignantly articulated a lived frustration that "small town people's voices are not heard". One group of young people, clearly deeply engaged in politics, criticised negative populism, "censorship politics - unwillingness to agree" (and an unwillingness to understand) and were wary of "rights without basis, instead of natural law" and "liberalism in the west".

Following on from politics and looking at it's fruits in society. Young people were critical of crime rates and were especially concerned about paedophilia, stalking, sexual assault and hackers. Young people from across the diocese were concerned about unequal distribution of wealth, greed and global poverty.

On a global scale many young people were concerned about war and violence and it's effects. Internationally there was particular concern about Palestine, Gaza and Syria. Nuclear warfare was raised by many as being a weakness of modern society, as was terrorism and extremist behaviour. Closer to home young people expressed disquiet about gang culture, the individuals effected by it; "the men, stuck in gangs, commit crimes, as a way to protect each other and have brotherhood", and the resultant crime and killings. Some young people described "guns at school", over which there has been intense media coverage of this issue in the U.S., as being a weakness of modern society. Even closer to home cyber bullying and bullying was an issue young people felt was a weakness of modern society, with many having been personally affected either directly or indirectly.

Young people expressed an acute awareness of the underside of social media and the media in general. Many were unsettled by unsuitable content available on television, YouTube and social media platforms. Not just this but also the high level's of exposure many young people experience of such content. They felt that the media preys on "vulnerability" and social media encourages people to live "fake lives online". One young person said "We have become aesthetically obese" meaning that the constant barrage of information and images has overwhelmed us and left us in a poorer rather than richer state. Referring to technology more generally young people feel that we have become "lost in our technology" and that technology "causes people to be antisocial". Some young people felt that whilst technology was a good in modern society, there was very much a "digital divide" and a "lack of distribution of technology".

The environment and the natural world are of high value to young people, who express neglect for the environment, litter, pollution and technology destroying nature as being weaknesses of modern society. For some young people this extended to animals with "harming animals" and "captivity of animals" being mentioned specifically. Young people desire change but feel frustrated that the change necessary is slow to happen; "we say that we help, but we never do".

Some responses to the question about the weaknesses of modern society were reflections on faith and religion in society as a whole. In one conversation in particular there was a feeling that society had adopted nihilism, the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless. This was articulately expressed by one young person in particular but more broadly throughout the conversations there was a sense that this was not the only young person who perceived this to be true. Some young people had a less positive view of the impact of religion on society and felt that some people used God as an excuse for their behaviour. Some young people went further to describe religion in general as a weakness of modern society. For some this was qualified with "too many religions" or the misunderstandings that having faith led to with other people. In contrast to this were the young people coming from a standpoint of personal belief who stated "we are not able to defend our beliefs" as a weakness of modern society.

There were many other criticisms of modern society ranging from the prohibitive cost of living and the burden of student loans to discrimination, arrogance and political correctness. In their personal relationships young people described "not being able to trust everybody" and rumour and gossip as weaknesses of modern society. Young people communicated the value they place on life itself in response to this question by sharing their concerns about the rise in assisted suicide and a general "lack of respect for human life". Again young people expressed a concern for the weak and vulnerable in society with homelessness described by many as a weakness of modern society. Family dynamics were also a cause of disquiet; "unstable family" and

“abandonment” were described specifically. More generally in reference to attitudes in society young people described “apathy against the things that matter” and a “lack of determination” as weaknesses of modern society.

Young people are naturally sceptical, questioning the status quo and driving forward progress and development, as they discover and conquer the world for themselves. In their search for truth, our faith offers a credible alternative to the ideals the world holds up. One which allows each individual to grow into the complete fullness of who they were made to be. This is not how many see the teaching of the Church, or the reality of a relationship with Jesus. The Church needs to change her posture towards her young people, listening to the reality of their lives and finding new ways to speak eternal truths into the lives and hearts of young people, so that they can hear the Gospel and encounter the person of Jesus.

# Who do you see as being marginalised?

Many of the young people we spoke to had a very keen sense of who is marginalised in modern society, in communities, in schools and even in friendship groups. In this conversation many young people expressed a desire to bring about change, to stand up to those who marginalised others. However they also expressed that in certain groups and situations they felt hopeless and powerless to bring about the change they desired. Whether it be because the problems were at a societal level or because they feared the repercussions of standing up to others. Afraid of being marginalised themselves, the necessary action to bring about change is paralysed. Perhaps a part of this paralysis is due to the fact that young people feel that they themselves are marginalised. Young people articulated their experience of “adults (are) less accepting of the younger”. Many young people felt that young people themselves had a “bad name” and that children were “not heard and not valued”. Under 18’s were named specifically, it is no co-incidence that this is the voting age. Many young people in the UK today feel politically marginalised and like they “have no voice”.

The young people we spoke to identified marginalisation in the Church in obvious and less obvious dynamics. They value gender equality and do not see that being lived out in the Church through the roles women play in their local Church and the Church as a whole. For some young people, though by no means all, the specific issue was a lack of “women priests”. The marginalisation of women was also raised in the context of the pay gap, female doctors and women in the East. Young people also identified “preachers, pastors and Bishops” as being marginalised because they are “not allowed to make mistakes”. Young people more broadly identified “certain religions” and even Catholics as being marginalised in modern society.

Specific groups of people such as the poor or “less economically blessed”, “homeless people - you don’t always know their story”, those with a mental illness, the sick, obese people, those with learning disabilities, the elderly; those who identified as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender; immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers were all identified as being marginalised by society. Also mentioned were “certain ethnic groups - some races are targeted” and “people of colour”. Young people also described “people who cannot help but be different” as being marginalised, meaning anyone who chooses to look different, to act differently or is not in the majority. For some young people this was clearly coming from a lived experience of their school life. Examples given were “whether you are smart in school or not, (you are) treated differently”, also specifically in school “poor people”, “gay people” and “body shaming” were all described as instances of marginalisation. Appearance, difference from the social norms of a specific group or community, “usefulness” to society, inferring some sense of the value society place upon individuals and “otherness”, were all threads that connected the different groups and individuals young people saw as being marginalised. Another thread that ran through many of the conversations about marginalisation was “people brave enough to speak the truth”, or “people who have a voice” or “opinion” and another still was “people who have made mistakes”.

Subsequent conversations with facilitators regarding this question revealed a sense that many of the young people we spoke to could not see the marginalised. Some regurgitated what they had seen in the media or heard at school, this was most often those in more affluent areas with little exposure to the marginalised beyond their own school community. It was clear when young people were speaking from personal experience. In this case it was often those in inner city or more rural areas, speaking from a personal experience of either being marginalised or witnessing marginalisation. For these young people there was a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment. Many not believing they could bring about any meaningful change.

# Where do you notice they do not belong?

The answers given in response to this question were broad, indicating the astute eye of young people in recognising injustice, exclusion and marginalisation in all its many guises.

Young people notice that the marginalised do not belong in all levels of society, from Government to police stations and prisons. In hospitals and care homes. In certain jobs or the workforce more generally. Some young people feel that the marginalised do not belong in society as a whole. They see them erased from “background and history” and not reflected in statistics or welcome “in the public eye”. Specific places young people described as the places where they notice the marginalised do not belong include clubs and parties, large groups, the streets, public places, sports and even homes. Put bluntly by one young person “everywhere they go”.

Many young people recognised that people who identify as being LGBT do not belong in the Catholic Church or within marriage. More generally young people observed that the marginalised do not belong to certain religious groups. These were the only references to the Church and religion, but are important to note, especially the observation about people who identify as LGBT. This misconception is commonly held, even by many adults in the Church. This indicates that the Church is not effectively communicating the Gospel message into this deeply held concern of many young people. They see discrimination and marginalisation, a reduction of freedom and life, not, a greater, more holy desire for all people to experience the fullness of life as God intends.

The media and popular culture was once again a part of the conversation. Young people describe the marginalised as not belonging on social media or social media comments. They do not see the marginalised in the music industry, in films, TV or advertising. They are excluded from the news and the internet.

Young people see the marginalised excluded from certain aspects of school life for instance “school trips that cost money, people who cannot afford to go are left out”. Young people also witness the marginalised being “bullied for being different” and excluded from friendship groups.

A number of young people identified attitudes that exclude people such as “where people don’t think you are good enough”. The idea of “judgement” emerged here again, with young people suggesting that the marginalised did not belong where “people have strong (or) harsh opinions”. More broadly one young person described the forgotten nature of the marginalised; “they do not belong in people’s minds”.

# What contributes to someone being/feeling alienated?

Young people responded to this question with a broad variety of answers. Many of which were clearly drawn from their own lived experience and observations from their own relationships. This is seen most clearly in their descriptions of their own social dynamics. Many young people described the ways in which the different social “cliques” or groups could lead to young people feeling alienated. They described the impact of jokes and “banter”, “being left out of a friendship group” and the comments people make as having the effect of alienating people. Young people’s experience and witness of loneliness was evident here too, expressed as “not having people to talk to” and “being left out”. More subtly evident in some conversations was a sense that a lack of true friendship had an alienating effect. Some young people felt that trust and genuine connection were absent from many so called friendships leading to alienation. One young person articulated alienation as arising when “(you) feel you cannot speak to certain people in certain ways” and another where there is “a lack of a sense of belonging”. Young people also identified bullying, and specifically cyber bullies, verbal abuse and domestic abuse as factors that led to alienation.

Some conversations centred around the individual experiencing the alienation. Young people felt that the self-esteem or self confidence of a person was a contributing factor to them feeling alienated, perhaps suggesting that those with a greater sense of self worth were more resilient to external factors resulting in a person feeling alienated. Some young people described anxiety, depression and sadness as leading a person to experience alienation. As did “fear”, “past experiences” and “upbringing”. A good number of conversations identified a person’s gender or sexuality as being a factor that could lead to alienation.

Many young people perceive alienation to come from the judgement of others when people act, think or express a view or opinion. This comes in the form of differing views or opinions, “as beliefs (or) opinions grow, people push apart” and also in the form of peer pressure and “stereotypes of normal”. It comes through disagreement “when they disagree they are treated as inferior”. Throughout many of the conversations the idea of judgemental people, judgement and being judged was clearly something that had a great personal effect on the young people we spoke to. Many expressed the paralysis that fear of judgement held over them and their peers, effected by “what people say”, hearing “(you are) not good enough” and feeling they “have to act in a certain way”. Emerging from many of the conversations was a sense of the erosion of individuality that came as a consequence of the fear of judgment and potential alienation. This was expressed by one young person as being “raised to blend in”. Connected to the concept of “judgement” many young people identified physical or behavioural characteristics that might lead to people being alienated for example person’s looks, “how big or small someone is”. Race and religion were also described as factors that could lead to alienation.

Social media and the media in general were described as a cause of alienation by many young people. Social media “only showing the good”, fails to reflect the reality of life in all of its complex and messy beauty. This can lead to young people feeling isolated when their reality does not match what they see of their peers and role models through social media. Advertisements, movies and the culture of celebrity influencers, as well as the loud voice of current media perceptions can lead young people and others to not see themselves or their lives reflected in the culture. Leading to increased isolation, and loneliness. Young people see this in action, are critical of it and yet it is still deeply pervasive in their lives, affecting their sense of worth and eroding their hope.

At a structural level young people identified the law, technology, poverty and wealth, inability and unequal distribution of resources as all leading to people potentially feeling or being alienated.



# What is your response to that?

Young people's response to the marginalised and alienated falls broadly into one of four areas. A very small minority feel it is not really any of their business deferring responsibility to others; voiced as "sometimes (I) feel it's someone else's responsibility or it's not that important". The next most common response was an emotive response where the young people expressed their dismay and sadness, but this did not necessarily give rise to action in their expression. The young people who expressed an emotive response used language like; "unfair", "hurtful" and "feel bad". Some young people used expressions like "#timesup" and "stop" in describing their response to alienation and marginalisation.

The next most common response was from young people who felt empowered to bring about change "I want to change things". For some this translated into the action of supporting organisations like charities who respond to the needs of the marginalised and alienated. This response was always given in connection to "giving" and "donation". Many young people considered their reaction to personal encounters where people are marginalised or alienated and gave examples of how they would respond to such individuals, expressed through responses such as "be polite", "inviting", "treat everyone equally" and "try not to judge others". Some expressed the importance of giving voice to the marginalised and others of the need to accept all people and lead by example and to "try not to let this be a factor in my life". Some young people voiced a strong sense of empowerment and made a direct connection to their faith for example "God gave me a voice". Some young people referred to the importance of prayer as way of responding to the marginalised and alienated, both as a response for individuals and communities. For others still there was a confidence in the impact their actions would have; "Doing good deeds for (the) marginalised will help people and inspire change" and "you can make a change, it may seem small but to the victim it will be a big change". For many young people there was a sense that even though their action was small it still mattered; "every little helps". Other young people communicated a confidence that they could effect change but that their contribution was small and there were many issues that required the response of wider society to make bigger, lasting change to structures and society itself. This was voiced as "You can help small groups but not the world", "(you) need collective groups to change big issues like immigration and jobs", and you "can start change individually but some issues are tough" Many young people felt that in their school community they were empowered especially in "pupil leadership". Some young people referred to their right to vote as an instrument of change.

By a majority young people felt powerless to respond to the marginalised and alienated. It is important to note that young people specifically used the word "powerless" in describing their response. For some the sense of powerlessness came as a consequence of their age, "no-body cares about children", "(I) feel that we could do more but don't because - we wouldn't be listened to, (we are) too young". Many young people described feeling voiceless; "hard to have your voice heard", "don't even get a vote", "(I feel) powerless - other people are trying to help but our voice isn't loud enough". One young person went further "feeling nobody will care about what you say" even if they did speak out. For some young people their sense of powerlessness was rooted in negative previous experiences and reflected a sense of hopelessness; "(I feel) powerless - we know the outcome so (there is) no point trying", also poignantly articulated by one young person as "(I feel) powerless, we are from a poor area, we can't do anything, we are ignored, nobody listens to our hopes, feelings, passions." For some young people their sense of powerlessness came from not knowing how to bring about change; "(I feel) powerless - I don't know how to help". For others their sense of powerlessness came from a fear that they might be the next to be alienated or marginalised; "(I) worry if I help that I may be picked on too", "scared of other people's reactions", "at times you feel disempowered, (you) want to help but don't want to take sides". This was also expressed as feeling that to speak out would make you a minority and leave you isolated.

# My response to struggle and suffering



# What gives you hope?

For many young people hope comes from their relationships with friends and family and their connection with other people. The people “who motivate you” and on whom you can rely. For some this comes in the form of significant others like family or teachers having a “belief in you”.

Many young people identified seeing “others do good” and “seeing others achieve” as being significant experiences that bring hope. The importance of strong role model’s emerged again here, described as “people in the field of work you want to be in”, “inspirational people”, or even celebrities. Many young people found hope in their own experiences of achievement and service to others; “when you achieve something and help others to achieve”, “little successes give you hope for the future” and “keep trying, your efforts matter”. For some seeing “people who succeed who are not as privileged” and experiencing “negatives turning into positives” gave a great sense of hope. Many young people identified the importance of “knowing you can help others” and “being needed” as bringing them hope. Young people need to be given the space and opportunity to achieve something real. In the context of the Church, this means being open to the possibility of messiness and even failure. It also requires others to step aside so young people can step forward. It demands an openness to new expressions and ways of doing things, as well as the completely new, dynamic, and as yet unimagined.

A significant number of responses to this question referred to the hope found in faith and the Church. Perhaps more than any of the other questions. This hope came in the form of personal belief and practice, from prayer, in receiving “strength from God”, through the Bible and knowledge of “the fact God knows what I can handle and doesn’t give me more”. Many young people referred to “aspiring of heaven”, the “afterlife”, and “eternal soul” as a source of hope. Some young people did not use the language of the Church to express a belief in something more than this life, but it was still a thread that was articulated in many conversations. Other young people referred to the lives of the Saints as an example and source of hope. Some young people described the importance of the community of believers and shared beliefs. Many young people found hope in Pope Francis and the process of listening ahead of the Synod. They were deeply moved by the fact “he wants to hear us” and felt it gave them an opportunity to “listen, speak and be heard”. This posture of genuine listening has been a significant and positive experience of the Church for many young people and thought needs to be given to how this posture can be adopted in the structures and practice of the Church once the Synod draws to a close. Some of the many other ways young people described finding hope in the Church included; “conversion”, “orthodox catholicism”, “humility”, “doctrinal clarity”, “Cardinal Sarah”, “dedicated and well formed young people within the Church, without fear or shame”, “the Ordinariate (married clergy)”, “<sup>2</sup>”.

Many young people found hope in a sense of opportunity, openness and possibility in the world. This was communicated as “the future”, “change the world”, “knowing anything is possible” and “even “the fact I wake up each day”. This was also expressed in the form of “being given opportunities”, “the beauty of the world”, travel and the opportunity to see the world. Some expressed the hope they found in better care being taken of the environment and others in new technologies and possibilities. Some young people found hope in the arts and culture such as music, good literature and television. Whilst others found hope in “scientific innovation and discovery” and others still, in a “hunger for truth”.

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<sup>2</sup> Many of these comments came from one setting in particular

# How do your beliefs motivate you?

In response to this question many young people once again described their desire to grow into the fullness of their humanity with a real desire to grow in virtue, as motivated by their beliefs. Young people want to love well, recognising that to love and “accept every person for who they are (means) you can have people accepting you for who you are”. This was also communicated as “love thy neighbour” and giving loving guidance to others. Young people wish to inspire and be a role model to others. Their beliefs inspire kindness, empathy, gentleness, honesty and morality. Their beliefs affect their relationship with family and the wider world as they aspire to “honour” their families, make people laugh, “treat others as you want to be treated” and “be somebody people can turn to”. Young people are inspired to become the best person they can be and they assert that their beliefs can bring about this reality and inspire self belief and self confidence.

Many young people desire to do good, help others and “try & change the world (because) helping others makes you feel good about yourself”. Young people recognise that belief and “passion makes you want to change things”. Love, is again a thread that ran through these responses “love as a motivation, you can know what is right”.

A number of responses to this question referred directly to Catholic beliefs such as belief in heaven and life after death. A good number of young people identify belief in heaven as motivating their actions here on earth, articulated in responses such as; “live life on earth with afterlife in mind”, and “following God, life after death and heaven motivates (me)”. A number of young people referred to their relationship with God, referencing answers to prayer, “God’s plan for me”, repentance and forgiveness and “the image of Christianity - carrying the cross... gives you perspective”.

Many of the conversations with young people voiced a sense of the value of life and way this motivated certain actions or attitudes. The beliefs of individual young people motivate them “to be happy”, they “force me to wake up and live life”, “to share my views with others”, hope in “a possibility of a better tomorrow”, uncover a sense of purpose, recognise “beauty”, explore the world, “work harder to become successful”.

Some of the responses to this question were imbued with a sense of ‘this is my belief’ even though many of the responses were held in common. The facilitators commented that young people seem to be moving away from relativism but in reflecting on all of the responses to this question there is not an emerging sense of shared belief, this question was interpreted by the young people with an emphasis on “**your** beliefs”.

# In your experience what are the barriers to believing in God?

The young people we spoke to could name some of the traditional philosophical proofs or arguments for the existence of God and the barriers to belief in God they represent. The language they used to describe these barriers indicates that perhaps their experiences of them comes from their education. There was a very definite sense that although the young people can articulate these barriers for belief in God, there is not much evidence that they engage with them on a personal level. Consistent in conversations across the diocese young people described things like science and the Big Bang theory, causation, unanswered prayers and the problem of evil and suffering as barriers to belief in God. There was, as a consequence also a sense that they could not defend belief in God against these arguments, even if they wanted to. For some young people this question was answered from a more personal experience, with responses like; “when things don’t go right”, “death of loved ones”, “bad people exist” and “(there is) no proof, we want to see him”.

Many young people described the opinions or beliefs of others to be a barrier to belief in God. For some young people peer pressure and the “people I am with” affected their belief in God. Whilst others referred to friends and family who have a different belief, as exerting an external pressure on their own personal belief in God. One young person astutely recognised “the only barriers are the ones that people put in your head”. Once again the idea of “judgement” arose in this conversation. Young people identified the opinions, judgements and expectations of others as a barrier to belief in God, specifically fearful of people’s expectations “to be perfect” if you publicly identify as having faith in God, and of “being scared of being different”. These comments in particular reflect both a fear of failure or hypocrisy as well as the desire to fit in and belong. The Church has much to offer young people in response to these barriers to belief in God. A place and community to belong to and an encounter with the merciful love of God, present in the Gospel message and the Sacraments. Some young people fear that “strong beliefs may cause arguments and feuds” and fear damaging relationships if they share objective truths. This generation of young people seem less caught up in relativism than the previous generation, but they still fear the impact that explicitly sharing the truth will have on their relationships and are unwilling to create discord. Some responses could be drawn together by the thread of the influence of secular society; belief in God is influenced by “people who have turned against faith”, fear of “being made fun of”, the idea that “faith doesn’t fit into society”, faith in God is “not cool” and society “telling me I am wrong”. These factors are at play in wider society but to an extent they are also mirrored in our Catholic schools.

A number of responses to this question about barriers to belief in God could be drawn together under the heading of the interior life. Many young people identified the barriers to developing their interior prayer life and therefore nurturing belief in God. They referred to “a lack of silence”, technology, television, and mobile phones as well as having a “busy life” and “no time”. The pervasive culture of busy, where busy-ness is valued as a virtue, has even taken hold of our young people. Some young people described the struggle of “managing spiritual life with real life” and “the barrier between your religious life and social life”, indicating that these aspects of life for many young people, who are seeking a mature faith, are not integrated. A few young people described the kind of spiritual warfare that attacks those who are trying to live faithful lives, referring to being tested and the subtlety of the devil.

One particular group of young people articulated barriers to belief in God that were deeply human and affected the individual. Challenges to the spiritual life such as pride, “spiritual sloth”, “gluttony for pleasure”, wounded-ness and rigidity fell into this category. In a similar vein, but perhaps referring to a form of idolatry, were answers such as individualism, relationships, and “comfort - you are not made for comfort”.

Some young people described negative experiences of the Church or religion as barrier to belief in God. A few young people described Church as boring, or referred to being “forced to go to Church”. A small proportion of young people described influence from teachers or R.E. lessons as obstacles to belief in God. For the more engaged barriers to belief came in the form of “unclear teaching from Church authorities” and “limited access to places of worship”. Some young people described corruption and the failings of the Church as an institution and those individuals who represent her, describing how religion can be “used for personal gain and needs”. Some



conversations also centred around recent scandals and allegations against priests, many young people who raised this issue felt this was “hypocritical”. A few young people were critical of obstacles to hearing the Gospel message stating; “priests aren’t good preachers”. There was an overwhelming sense throughout all conversations during this process that young people desired to be told the truth and given a chance to either accept or reject it. Many young people were unable to articulate the Gospel, much less the life changing impact that a lived relationship with Jesus entails. This came through in responses that referred to the teaching of the Church as “a list of rules” which “restrict you from believing what you want”.

Many responses to this question came from a posture of engagement and curiosity. There was a sense that the young people we spoke to were uniquely open to hearing the Gospel. They do not seem to have the same scepticism about the faith as their parents and grandparents, this voice still came through in the conversations but there was a greater openness. Naturally not all young people felt the same and some described a “lack of belief” or “blindly following” as a barrier to belief in God. Some young people felt faith was a “waste of time”. The challenge for the Church to reflect on here is how well does She accompany her young people in exploring their questions about faith. Young people are curious and searching for answers to their own unique circumstances and concerns, that are different to any generation that has gone before. The Church holds a truth that stands up to scrutiny and intellectual wrestling, a truth that our young people yearn to hear. In order to hear it, the posture of the Church towards young people needs to adapt, the language She uses to speak the truth into the reality and circumstances of their lives needs to adapt, so that the young Church can truly hear and experience the depths of God’s love for them.

# Does your community help you to become the person you want to be?

Responses to this question were divided fairly evenly between yes and no. For many young people, although by no means all, it was not a black and white response either. Some felt supported in some aspects by their community, and not in others. Some young people felt “inspired in all areas - home, Church, school”.

Young people who felt their community helped them to become the person they wanted to be felt that support at all levels of community, from government down to the smaller more intimate community of family and friends. At an institutional level school communities were considered key to helping young people achieve their goals and ambitions through the opportunities they offered. Most especially appreciated were the teachers who “guided” and “(gave) up time to help us after school”.

The Church was also described as being a community that helped young people to become the person they wanted to be. The only specific description offered as to how She did this was one from one young person who cited “Bible study”.

Friends and family, specifically parents were considered to be of great support in helping young people to become who they wanted to be. Family and friends “motivated”, supported decisions and offered guidance.

More generally referring to the communities that supported them, young people described them as supporting self-development, offering a “huge amount of support”, encouraging, supporting beliefs, guiding “your path” and offering positivity.

On the other side of the spectrum there was an entirely different picture offered. At a structural level many young people felt that “not having enough money or power to achieve your goals” was limiting their potential. Some young people felt that the perception that society has of young people in general is detrimental to their flourishing; “People don’t believe in us. Our generation has a bad reputation. (There is) more desperation than hope.” Another articulated this as “nobody thinks we can amount to anything or contribute to society - they don’t have hope for themselves, they don’t try, live off benefits and project that fate onto us”. If young people are the world’s hope and hope is crushed, this is a clear warning to society and an opportunity for the Church to bring healing and restoration.

Amongst their peers young people feel peer pressure to a stifling degree. This is more broadly felt as “judgement” and even “paranoia”. Manifesting itself as being “scared to be who you are”. With “stereotypes” having an extremely negative connotation in the minds of young people. Often seen as putting them in boxes, limiting individuality and self expression, forcing young people “to be a certain way”. As well as coming from their peers and the expectations of society as a whole, this pressure also comes from their teachers and schools to perform well in exams and more generally throughout their school career. This kind of immense pressure was expressed again and again throughout this entire process. Although education is valued and well regarded by young people, the pressure they feel as a consequence of the way the educational system in this country works is of great concern to young people themselves. Some young people also expressed this pressure to come from family, especially in regard to their achievements in school and in life more generally. There were some young people who expressed the tension that exists in the way that family support and encourage you to do well, but through high expectations comes a pressure and fear of failure.

In describing the lack of support they felt from their communities in becoming the person they wanted to be young people described a “lack of support”, some even felt actively discouraged. Some described society as having “different priorities (we are) not on the same page”. Friendship groups were also acknowledged as being environments where support may or may not exist dependent on friendship groups. Social media was also described as giving an “unreal picture of life” and as such being unsupportive in helping them become the person they wanted to be.

# Does modern day society support your beliefs?

There were surprisingly few responses to this question and virtually no affirmation that modern day society supports the beliefs of the young people we spoke to. Some young people responded with a tentative “maybe”. Answers that fell into this category tended to refer to a specific group of people within society, rather than society as a whole, such as “atheists support my beliefs” or “more people are religious”. Some young people inferred that it depends what you believe as to whether society supports your beliefs.

The majority of responses to this question were a resounding “no”. Some young people discussed how influential the media is and the “forever changing expectations” it purveys. The theme of differing opinions and the challenge that brings to this generation emerged again here, expressed as “you can’t be in the middle” and “some people can’t stand other people’s beliefs”. In apparent contrast another young person described society as “one minded”. There was a sense to the conversations here and elsewhere that having a belief that is different from the accepted social norm is controversial and invites a judgement from society and peers that all too often paralyzes young people. In one particular conversation young people suggested that being in a pluralist society was in reality less than tolerant and supportive of their beliefs and subsequent life style choices and ways of living in the world.

Another clear theme emerging here was an awareness of the contrast between the norms and expectations of society versus those of the Christian faith. This was articulated as “no, modern society tell me to do things only to please myself - I want to do things to please God” and “we are not on the same page as society, they have different priorities”.

Perhaps the reason for so few responses to this question was because the question itself refers directly to belief and required the young people we spoke to, to some extent, to be able to articulate their belief. The majority of responses that were given demonstrated this ability to articulate and engage with a language of faith on a personal level.

# What do you need to become who you want to be?

The young people we spoke to identified a wide range of things that they need to become the person they want to become. A primary response was the love and support of friends and family. For some this was very much emotional and practical support such as help with finances in the here and now, others looked forward to the support of their own future spouse.

Many young people described a need for support from teachers and mentors, articulated by one young person as “advice and guidelines from experienced others”. Young people recognised the need for education and qualifications in becoming the person they want to become as well as positive feedback. Some young people made a plea for “more career advice” and the example of “more influential people”. Some young people recognised that there needed to be a culture of support for young people that began at the level of Government. Financial support was raised in various contexts as being important for young people’s flourishing.

In their responses to this question young people made direct requests of the Church for their development and thriving. Young people expressed a need for “people who build you up spiritually”, “more spiritual guides” and for the Church to be “more active and involved”. Many young people expressed a need to be listened to, not patronised but taken seriously by the Church. One young person put this as; “more of this, these Synod talks, where we are free to speak and are actually listened to”. More general answers related to faith and the Church described a need for “a support of my beliefs”, “faith” and “God on earth” as what was necessary for young people to become the person they wanted to be.

More broadly young people described a need for “a plan”, “motivation” and “an end goal to work towards”. As well as courage, determination and dedication, they expressed a desire “to be brave and take risks”, alongside a need for encouragement and “a push so we don’t become complacent”. In many of these conversations there was a sense of young people’s desire for their life to matter and mean something. They are not afraid of doing hard things, but many are waiting for permission.

There was also a less optimistic and hopeful element to many of the conversations. Once again fear of judgment was the undercurrent to many responses to this question. Young people described a need for “openness - because we are fearful of being judged”, a “more accepting society” and an absence of judgement, as being essential for them to become the person they want to be.

Young people also expressed some of their current frustrations, they felt that often their voice did not matter and was not heard. One young person voiced a tension that was inherent in many other conversations; “we only say what teachers want us to - we can’t really be honest”. They described a need for an “opportunity to talk, voice our concerns and beliefs”, and “to be trusted”. Some young people were able to articulate some of the factors that held them back from being agents of change in the here and now rather than in the future. A lack of trust of adults in young people was at the heart of comments like; “we are the wisest - we see everything” and “we need to know the truth, it is hidden from us and we are the ones who can change it”. In some conversations a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness was voiced in comments like “(we need) hope - the media is toxic - we are made to feel life is not worth living” and “youth are being reckless because there is nothing else to do”.

One young person used the word ‘strongholds’ to describe what they needed to become the person they wanted to become. Imbued in this word is security and surety of the place from which they launch and return. It seems a perfect description of what a young person needs to live into the fulness of life for which they were made. It is what good families should be, it is what good Catholic schools should be and what the Church should be for her young people also.

# Broad themes emerging

## Listen to us

The very act of listening to our young people was a powerful and really important way of connecting with and engaging the young Church. The young Church needs to know that her concerns and views are valid, that they matter and that the redeeming love of the Father reaches the furthest depths of their lives too. In the majority young people feel marginalised and disregarded by society as a whole. Their voice is not heard, it does not count in the political sphere until they are 18 and even then, it is a very under-represented voice. Young people were delighted, surprised even, that the Church wanted to hear what they had to say.

## See me

Young people want to be seen, known and recognised as individuals. One of the ways this is evident, is in their view of 'stereotypes' and the negative connotations they have of them, clearly expressing a desire to be seen as a unique individual, not a category or stereotype. Many young people expressed a yearning to be recognised in their uniqueness and were concerned about an erosion of their individuality. In our culture being 'seen' and 'uniqueness' are often expressed through celebrity status and the goal of seeking such a level of public recognition. Social media echoes the celebrity culture, making it seem both possible and the only way to be seen, known and recognised. The paradox here is that through the very same social media our young people feel a great pressure to conform to the social norms of their peer groups and wider society, perhaps more strongly than in a previous generation due to the inescapable, pervasive nature of social media.

## Judgement - standing out

Being a person of faith means standing out and being different. In the culture our young people inhabit, this is incredibly difficult. Fear of "judgement" stifles young people in their growth in all aspects of what it means to be human. Fear of judgement can be debilitating and paralysing for many and it can be a barrier to many young people taking ownership of their faith, as it feels unsafe to publicly express such definitive statements.

Fear of judgement was expressed by many young people in relationship to school. Perhaps due to the impact of such stringent testing and constant assessment. Judgement in the context of school, exams, University courses and future career prospects was an expression and cause of the stress young people feel in these areas. This stress was articulated in every setting we met young people in. Young people described feeling they could only give responses that they know their teacher want to hear when questioned. It makes them feel unable to think or speak for themselves.

Young people also fear the effect of judging others for their life choices or opinions and have a desire to be inclusive of all people. This was expressed in the way they spoke about gender and sexuality, perceived sexism in the Church and even people who have strong opinions or beliefs. It was considered a negative thing to have strong opinions or beliefs by many. In reference to the causes of marginalisation some young people described difference of opinion or belief and the wide reaching social/relational consequences of this. This may go some way to explaining some young people's reluctance to stick their head above the parapet and buck the social norms of their peer group. Being different risks social marginalisation. Our young people live in a difficult tension. They desire to to be known, loved, to be seen as an individual and also to belong but many believe that they cannot be themselves or be different because that would result in being judged. This is what paralyses our young people.



# Identity and achievement

Personal achievement and success came up as a natural aspect of many of the conversations. Young people, in general, feel an enormous amount of pressure to succeed and do well. This pressure comes from family and the education system<sup>3</sup>. This is expressed by a desire to make family proud, or conversely not let them down, and also the anxiety that comes from feeling pressure to conform to a particular path in life. For some young people, more notable in more affluent areas, the pressure to succeed is felt very strongly. It is often cited as a negative rather than a positive.

Overwhelmingly young people make a direct connection between their personal identity and their achievements. The vast majority are focused on self-actualisation, bringing about their hopes and dreams through their own merit and industry (“I can be anything I want”). Man is at the centre. Genuine happiness is found when we place God at the centre and devote our attentions to self-realisation, discerning (realising) God’s will and thus becoming who we were created to be in the fullest sense. We believe a lie when we form our identity and value in our achievements, apart from God. A misplaced sense of identity can also be found in views on gender and sexuality. Many young people conform to the view of popular culture that a person’s sexuality is fundamental to their identity.

# Impact on the world

Young people have a particularly deep care for the environment and helping others. They wanted to be agents of change but there was mixed response regarding their ability to bring about the kind of change and impact on the world that they desired. In the majority young people felt powerless to bring about meaningful change. Often this was due to their age or social circumstances, with those in disadvantaged areas feeling this most strongly. Some young people felt empowered. Often this response was rooted in faith or favourable social circumstances. For many young people faith helps to open up horizons and foster a belief that more is possible.

# We want our lives to matter

Connected to a desire to be agents of change was an overwhelming sense that young people wanted their lives to be of consequence. They want their lives to matter. For many this was expressed as a desire to leave a lasting mark on the world, to be remembered and to achieve great things in life. For the majority, the mark they wished to leave was not necessarily of eternal consequence but most certainly expressed a yearning for heaven. For those young people who clearly articulated a belief in heaven there was often a disconnect between our heavenly and our earthly lives. For many, belief in heaven was not hinged upon a living relationship with God in the here and now. As a consequence pain, suffering and change were not viewed through the lens of faith, as fruitful through Christ and the cross, and were frequent barriers to personal belief in God.

# Role models

Our young people are looking for credible role models. This theme emerged throughout conversations across the diocese. They hunger for real, authentic, good and holy people to walk alongside them, guiding and supporting them through the challenges and realities of their lives. Young people feel this need in themselves so acutely that they desire to be role models for others in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that education and learning were overwhelmingly valued a good and as a key component in bringing about the realisation of their hopes for the future.

# What next?

This is a living document, an expression of the dynamic, vibrant and sometimes unpredictable work of youth ministry. The strategies, concrete projects and areas for development are in motion, fluid and responsive in nature as we continue to review the fruitfulness of our response to what the young people of our diocese have told us. The five areas that are emerging from the Synod on youth, faith and vocational discernment, and are forming our initial response are:

- Accompaniment
- Authentic roles and mission
- Relationships and sexuality
- Technology
- Barriers to belief in God

## Accompaniment

Accompaniment is the essence of relational youth ministry, which has been a primary feature of our approach to youth ministry and training for many years. In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit* we are affirmed in this, but we also receive a clear challenge to find new and authentic ways to walk alongside our young people over the long term and in critical life moments, discerning vocation, relationships, career paths and life choices. In this way we have also recognised that extending the reach of our ministry beyond the age of 18 is an important way of accompanying young adults in the way that they seek to be supported by the Church. Alongside CYMFed we are continuing to explore the research in order to unpack what it means to safely and authentically accompany young people. During World Youth Day @home we offered listening hubs to young adults with religious. This was well received and we are exploring the development of a model that could be used in parishes to support young people in the discernment of vocation and other significant decisions, in such a way that young people may naturally come to seek the advice and support of Mother Church.

## Authentic roles and mission

Our research has highlighted young people's desire for meaning and purpose in their lives, expressed in a yearning for meaningful roles in the Church and opportunities to make a difference in the wider world. Recent research *Complex Catholicism* indicated that young people want to get involved in social action, but unless supported by structures the desire is not translated into a concrete response and can result in frustration and a sense of disempowerment. Mission projects such as Mission Brazil, Mission Uganda and Mission @Home and schemes such as the *John Paul II Award* and the *Faith in Action Award* have been some of the initiatives through which young adults and young people have been given the structured opportunity to respond to the need they see in the world. We wish to find other ways to offer the support and structures necessary to allow young people and young adults to animate their desires to live and engage with Catholic social teaching. Nurturing and developing partnerships with agencies like the Columbans supports this aim.

We believe a key to supporting young people and young adults to take on authentic roles in the Church, their parishes and the world is helping them to discern how God is calling them and the gifts he equips them with, for the mission that is unique to them in this world. Giving young people accessible language and expression to explore their calling and their giftedness is an important way of helping them to understand that through their baptism they are given very real spiritual gifts to be used in finding their mission in the Church and their mission in the world. We are beginning to explore how we can support young people and young adults in discerning their gifts and unique calling. To such end we intend to pilot a method of discerning the gifts in a day we are calling Church Ablaze for young adults, this coming January.

## Relationships and sexuality

There are several key projects in this area that have already begun. In particular is the formation of our volunteers and staff in understanding the Theology of the Body. In July, a group of staff and

volunteers from Kenelm attended 6 days of training in Walsingham on the Theology of the Body. This August, our volunteer mission team in Alton received a 3 day retreat delivered by the Humanum Institute also on the Theology of the Body as a part of their induction training and initial formation. The intention of this investment in the formation of people is that it will enable us to both develop and deliver our response to young people's concerns and questions around relationships and sexuality.

In the coming year we are planning a series of training opportunities for those who accompany young people which will seek to begin the process of forming and equipping them in this area. We are developing our residential retreats at Soli to include programmes which address relationships and sexuality in an age appropriate context. We recognise that for many young people issues around gender and same sex attraction are significant, either as a barrier to belief in God or an area in which Church teaching needs to be shared in a way that is accessible to them. We are also at the beginning of the journey exploring our pastoral response to young people and young adults who experience same sex attraction.

## Technology

Kenelm are exploring positive ways of using technology to reach and communicate with young people who are digital natives. We are seeking to expand our use of social media to be salt and light in the digital spaces our young people inhabit. One particular project in this area we are exploring is a young adults communication group to more effectively communicate the gospel message to young people and the use of Youtube for the New Evangelisation.

## Barriers to belief in God

Science, suffering and gender and sexuality emerged as barriers to belief in God for many of the young people to whom we spoke. Formation has long been a priority for Kenelm and the findings of our research for the Synod has given a sharp focus to our immediate work in this area. Kenelm have committed to regular teaching and formation around these specific topics for youth ministers, young people and young adults. Some of the concrete ways that this formation will be delivered is through the workshops that will be offered at both our day for Clergy and our Youth Ministry Conference on the Synod. In addition to this, with support from Fr Jonathan Veasey, we will be exploring issues around gender in education with Kenelm staff who work directly with young people in our retreat centres and parishes, the outcome of which we hope will support our pastoral response in this area. We have established links with the Humanum Institute to support us as we seek to form and equip those who accompany young people. In the areas of suffering and science, we are actively discerning the best ways to equip ourselves to respond to the issues that offer a barrier to belief in God for many of the young people we work with.

## Continuing to listen

The young people we spoke to had an overwhelmingly positive response to very fact the Church was interested to hear about their experience of life, faith and the dynamics of the distinctive cultures they inhabit. Many were genuinely surprised to be consulted and even more surprised when we returned to share with them our findings and the way in which we intended to respond. As a consequence of this experience we will be extending this initiative through a series of Think Tanks in schools and parishes during March next year to continue to shape and refine our ministry.

We think it is important to note that these areas of focus have emerged from young people themselves, the same young people one might meet in one of our Catholic schools, or for the more engaged, at a parish youth group, or at youth event. We are not wishing to replace or supersede the good ministry that is happening in these places, more to equip, complement and infuse it with a response to the issues that really matter to young people.

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