

Why Gen Y are Leaving Hillsong and Other Pentecostal Churches

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Abstract

Australian population censuses have shown the rates of growth in people identifying as Pentecostal have slowed since 2001, following rapid growth between 1976 and 1996. A survey of 343 people followed by interviews of 55 people shed light on the reasons many people have ceased to attend or identify with these churches. The major reason was the rejection of the beliefs and moral values espoused by the churches. Other reasons include bad experiences of churches and religious people, the sense of feeling judged and the lack of opportunity for dialogue within the churches. Many felt there was a lack of tolerance for diversity and they reacted to the exclusive and authoritarian approach taken by many churches. These findings reflect the theory of cultural change in the Western world described by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) in terms of people moving from externally imposed ways of seeing life to people believing it was important for each person to construct life for themselves in a way which authentically expressed their individuality. However, in contrast to Heelas and Woodhead (2005), this research shows it has not simply led to a replacement of religion by spirituality, but to a variety of ways of constructing life.

Introduction

Analysis of data from the Australian population censuses shows that identification with Pentecostal churches grew very strongly between 1976 and 1996 (Hughes, 2012,

p.52). One Pentecostal scholar, Barry Chant, predicted in 1984 that, based on this rate of growth, the Pentecostal churches would have a million attenders by 2001 (Chant, 1984, p.220).

It has been argued by many scholars (Bouma, 2006; Rose et al, 2014; Cox, 1995; Hughes, 1996) that a cultural revolution of the baby boomer generation led to more experiential and emotional forms of religion replacing the rational, hierarchical forms that dominated the mainstream churches. As result of these changes since the 70s and 80s, many people moved into Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches.

Then, according to the censuses, the rate of growth began to slow. Between 2006 and 2016, the growth rate was just above that of the Australian population as a whole and could be accounted for by the young age profile of the Pentecostals and the fact that many had children during that decade (Hughes, 2017, p. 4). There was anecdotal evidence of many young people, particularly members of Gen Y (born between 1982 and 1998), leaving the Pentecostal churches. The research question which this article addresses is what are the factors in some young people turning away from religious institutions and, in some cases, from the Christian faith altogether?

There has been a long debate about the decline of religion in the Western world. With the decline in church attendance in the 1960s the theory of secularisation came back into the conversation (Singleton, 2014, pp.34-47). This theory has had many forms, but fundamentally sees change as occurring over a long period of time: an evolutionary process in human thinking in which religious institutions become less influential and religious ways of thinking are superseded by scientific ways of thinking (Taylor, 2007, p.4). For example, Harvey Cox wrote *Secular City* explaining secularisation as freeing the world of religious and pseudo-religious ideas and worldviews along with stamping out the supernatural and sacred (Cox, 1965, p.2).

More specifically, studies of religiosity of Gen Y have highlighted a decline of interest in religiosity in some Western countries since the 1970s. In a major study of Gen Y in Australia, Mason et al. (2007, p.227) wrote:

Many young people in Australia are following an avowedly secular path in life – rejecting belief in God and declaring that there is little truth in any religion, while at the same time affirming human experience, human reason and scientific explanations. While some

Gen Ys might be angry or disenchanted with organised religion, many simply do not care or are not interested – it has never been on their 'radar'.

Mason et al list a number of reasons given by Gen Y for no longer believing in God. The major ones were that the explanations about life from science made belief in God impossible, and that there was no convincing evidence or proof of God's existence. The problem of how a good God could allow the suffering of innocent people was cited quite often. Others cited disillusionment with the churches (Mason et al., 2007, p.222). Mason et al also noted that for many young people, belief in God had simply faded as they grew older or as circumstances in life changed. They also noted that the reasons given for rejection may not be the causes of such change (Mason et al., 2007, p.223), but argue that underlying this is a general secular trend in Australia as in most English-speaking Western countries (Mason et al., 2007, p.319), and that trend is associated with a strong movement towards a high level of individualisation in which most young people see no reason to find their meaning in commitment to institutions or communities (Mason et al., 2007, p.329). In a parallel study drawing partly on the same data, Hughes (2007) argued similarly that, for most Gen Y people, belief in God was seen as peripheral to their view of the world. Belief in God was seen as a personal choice, and many young people simply did not see it as important to make the decision to believe (Hughes 2007, pp. 126-134).

American research, such as the large study conducted by Smith and Denton (2005), has described the vagueness of belief among Gen Y. In a further study, Smith and Snell (2009) noted the variety of ways in which American Gen Y were heading. They found 14 per cent of young adults were 'committed traditionalists' and another 30 per cent were 'selective adherents' accepting some aspects of their tradition but rejecting or ignoring others. Another 15 per cent were not committed to religious faith but were 'spiritually open'. However, 25 per cent were religiously indifferent, 5 per cent just had no connection to religion, and 10 per cent were critical of religion. They noted that US young adults' choices about religion reflected the inclusivism, consumerism and materialism of contemporary US young adult culture.

Another major and more recent study by Kinnaman (2011) examined the wide-spread rejection of religious institutions by young people in the USA. He cited some similar reasons as noted by Mason et al (2007) but identified more issues with the churches,

seen as over-protective, shallow and boring, repressive of sexuality, exclusive in attitudes and giving no place for doubt or discussion, rather than a rejection of religion as such. The American situation has been shown to be quite different from Australia. In the USA, most Gen Y who left the churches continue to think of themselves as Christian, while most Australian Gen Y who left the churches also left the Christian faith (Hughes 2015). However, none of these studies dealt specifically with the phenomenon of Pentecostal growth and decline.

At a time when Cox (1965) and other scholars were raising the issue of secularisation due to declining numbers in the church, the Charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s influenced a reawakening of belief in the supernatural and experiential forms of faith (Hutchinson, 2017). The Charismatic movement brought about a new surge of growth in the Pentecostal movement within Australia and across the world (Hutchinson, 2017). What was different about the Pentecostal movement: that it flourished while most mainstream denominations were experiencing sharp decline towards the close of the 20th century, and then began to plateau in the 21st century?

An alternative account of the changes in the Western world has argued that cultural revolution in the 1960s and 1970s led to a more experiential approach to life and a change in how personal life is conceived. Rather than life being lived in 'conformity to external authorities', life was seen as living out one's unique subjectivity, 'becoming who I truly am'. This was argued by Heelas and Woodhead in their book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005). Heelas and Woodhead argued that this change had major ramifications for values. Conformity and duty gave way to creativity and the tolerance of a great variety of personal preferences. It fed into the feminist thinking which emerged in the 1970s, rejecting the ideas that women should find their primary role in child-rearing and looking after the home and that they were incapable of leadership in society. It also fed into the sexual revolutions which rejected the view of sex being only appropriate within a marriage as a life-long union of a man and a woman and which has led to an acceptance of many forms of sexual relationships including same-sex marriages. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argued that this change in how life was conceived was leading not to secularization, but to the traditions and authority structures of religion giving way to the openness of spirituality. Does this account, then, explain the growth and plateauing in Pentecostal churches?

Overall, the censuses have shown that there has been an increase in the rate of growth in people identifying themselves as 'no religion'. Between 2011 and 2016, the proportion of the population saying they had no religion grew 45 per cent compared with a growth rate of just 9.5 per cent of those who identified themselves as Pentecostal (Hughes, 2017, p.4), with a particularly strong growth among Gen Y. Were some Pentecostal young people rejecting all identity with religion, like many of their contemporaries, or were they rejecting denominational identity and describing themselves simply as 'Christian'? Overall, the numbers describing themselves as 'Christian' in the censuses grew by 30 per cent between 2011 and 2016. Why were people changing their religious identity in that way?

Methodology

In order to explore religious changes among Gen Y, the researcher conducted a survey completed by 293 participants and then interviewed 55 young adults in various locations around Australia. Thus the research involved both quantitative and qualitative methods, exploring people's experiences of their churches and of their changes in religious identity. The survey included some open-ended questions where people could explain changes in their religious identity. Overall, a positivistic approach, based on scientific methods of empirical research, was used in order to move the research away from the bias and beliefs of the researcher and look objectively at the data. A limitation of the research was that it was 'cross sectional', focused on people's situations at a particular point in time, rather than longitudinal studies that would follow the same people over a period of time. However, participants were also invited to tell their stories of change. In this regard, recognition was given to the participants' social construction of the events and the development of their stories at the time.

The research was conducted between 2016 and 2018. The project was given ethical approval and consent forms were collected from all interview participants which allowed data to be used in publications (Bohr 2020).

A mixture of surveys and interviews was used to get a wide range of responses to better understand the reasons Gen Y were giving concerning changes in their religious identity and in their involvement in churches.

It was not possible to obtain a random survey of Gen Y across Australia, and this research did not attempt to draw a picture that could be generalised across the nation. The purpose of the research was to obtain as wide a range of responses among Gen Y as possible so as to hear a wide range of attitudes among Gen Y. The researcher put a paid advertisement on Facebook and produced a flyer to invite people between 18 to 34 years old who had attended church when raised and had dropped off from attending, to participate in the survey. The researcher was looking for a range of people from different backgrounds, living in different states of Australia, both male and female. The researcher was dependent on those who responded to the advertisement and completed the survey. The researcher also handed out 1,000 business cards in Melbourne and in Sydney to invite people to do the survey and asked colleagues working in different contexts to send out the invitations to do the survey to their own contacts. More than 1,500 people visited the survey on the internet, although many did not attempt the survey or did not complete it. From those who responded to the survey, 343 participants were identified (Bohr 2020).

The survey which will be referred to in this article as the Gen Y survey included twenty items which explored how people responded to the various reasons suggested by the literature for dropping out of church and changing one's religious identity. It asked questions about the factors noted in Bellamy et al (2002) *Why People Don't Go To Church* including whether people could no longer accept religious beliefs, morals, or attitudes to sexuality, or whether they had lost confidence in religious institutions. It explored whether there was simply a change in priorities and use of time or whether people had had bad experiences of one kind or another in religious contexts. It also included factors which had been included in the International Social Survey Program including the beliefs that extreme religion leads to violence and that religious thinking is contrary to scientific thinking (Hughes, 2012). Factor analysis was used to identify the patterns in those responses and these patterns are reported in the findings.

The survey also invited people to indicate if they would be prepared to be interviewed. Fifty-five participants agreed and the researcher contacted some of these for interviews. He also interviewed others through personal contacts, through parents, pastors, church leaders and friends.

While a range of young adults responded to the survey, this article focusses on the 75 participants who were raised as Pentecostal, of whom 14 were from Hillsong Church.

Changes among Gen Y who grew up in Pentecostal/Hillsong churches

While the results of the small survey cannot be generalised to the Australian scene as a whole, among those who responded to the survey more young adults identified with Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches at the time of the survey, than the numbers who indicated they had been raised in those churches. In other words, the survey suggested that while some people are leaving Pentecostal and Hillsong churches, there are also many from mainstream and Evangelical denominations who are joining them.

Hillsong Church was originally part of the Australian Christian Churches, the major Pentecostal denomination in Australia. In September 2018 Brian Houston announced that Hillsong Church would break away from that denomination and stand alone. Two-thirds of those who attended Hillsong globally were from countries outside Australia and that was one of the key factors behind the decision (Houston, 2018). As the research for this article took place between 2016 and 2018 it is important to separate the data as a result of that announcement and to look at both Hillsong and Pentecostal churches separately. As Hillsong Church is still a Pentecostal church, it sits in the group of Pentecostal churches, but individual stories and data have been explored separately where needed to highlight this change.

Among the 14 people who had been raised in Hillsong, half had rejected identification with it at the time of the interview. Among the participants in the survey and the interviews, two of them said they no longer knew how to identify themselves, two had moved to other Pentecostal churches, one to Presbyterian/Reformed Churches, one to no religion and one person identified simply as 'Christian'.

Similarly, 43 per cent of the 61 participants who been raised in other Pentecostal churches had ceased identifying with them. The movement away from the Pentecostal churches included 12 people who were identified themselves as having no religion at the time of the survey, four simply described themselves as Christian, three said they did not know how to describe themselves, four as Hillsong Church and one person each associated themselves with the Uniting Church, Baptist/Evangelical Churches and other religions. Thus, the survey results suggested that Pentecostal/Hillsong churches were not retaining those Gen Y participants who are raised in the church even though they were drawing in Gen Y from other churches and welcoming some who had no

previous connection with Christian faith. The increase in those churches would have been much greater if they were retaining those who were raised in them.

These patterns have been confirmed by other data. The SEIROS survey conducted by the Christian Research Association in 2016 with a national sample of 7,700 adult Australians found that, of those who were raised in Pentecostal churches, 23 per cent were no longer attending any church at the time of the survey, another 23 per cent had changed to a different, non-Pentecostal, denomination, and 55 per cent were continuing to attend a Pentecostal church. While most (86%) of those raised in Pentecostal churches when young attended church frequently at that time, just 56 per cent were attending any church frequently at the time of the survey (unpublished data provided by the Christian Research Association).

The SEIROS survey did not give people an opportunity to identify themselves simply as 'Christian' as occurred in the Gen Y survey. However, that identification was made in several interviews. Interview 52 (32-year-old male) who dropped out of attendance from Hillsong said:

I put Christianity as my religion. I didn't actually do the census as I was overseas. I have done it and I definitely would have put Christian. To put it in perspective, for my work, being a police officer, when I go to court to give evidence, for example, you either have to take an oath or an affirmation. An oath is to God and affirmation is for someone who is not religious. When I'm at work I take an oath.

This interviewee pointed to what he saw as 'fakeness' at Hillsong Church. He indicated that he had not left the Christian faith, but had left Hillsong because of what he saw as a lack of authenticity, a focus on money and rigid forms of theology.

Survey participant 200 (28-year-old female) was raised Pentecostal and at the time of the survey identified herself simply as Christian. She said about her confidence in churches:

It depends on what it is in reference to. If it is about what we should believe; little to somewhat. If it is about what they do for

the community then I believe they do a wonderful job. True Christianity has all the keys to living a great life in every aspect of life.

While she had a positive experience with what her church did in the community, she struggled with the belief system of the church and as a result left the Pentecostal church to take on the generic label of 'Christian'. Interviewee 6 (27-year-old female) also put 'Christian' as her current identity as this participant left a Pentecostal church due to their rigid belief system and ethnocentric attitudes towards other cultures and people groups. This participant attended an emerging church that identified itself simply as Christian at the time of the interview. In general, those participants in the research who identified as Christian (not further defined) in the interviews struggled with the belief systems and cultural norms of the churches they previously attended. Among the research participants, 16 per cent of all those who had begun to describe themselves simply as 'Christian' were from Hillsong or other Pentecostal churches, a similar proportion to those who had come to describe themselves as having no religion.

Another significant group among those who had grown up in Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches were those who said they did not know how to describe their religious identity. Could these people be in transition from church identification to no religion and from no religion to exploring other identifications? Could it be that the 'don't knows' are a pathway to no religion as Gen Y struggle with the religious values and beliefs in which they were raised, yet were unsure about the new values and beliefs they were exploring outside the church? It seems that some Gen Y participants raised in these churches had changed their identity but were unsure as to what identity to take on after they left the church. This would mean that these Gen Y participants may have been in transition.

While the literature has focused on people leaving the church and identifying as no religion, this researcher found a mixed picture. There was a lot of movement around the churches, into Pentecostal churches and out of them, reflecting the fluid ways in which Gen Y construct their lives.

Part of this movement has been away from mainstream and Evangelical churches which was seen as a movement from narrow and dogmatic belief systems that Gen Y no longer saw as viable. It seems very likely that identifying oneself as 'spiritual but

not religious', or 'as having no religion but being agnostic about God', or simply as 'Christian' or saying one does not know how to describe one's religious identity, all indicate a movement away from the binary patterns of dualistic ideologies in which one is either 'in' or 'out'. For many Gen Y participants, openness and vulnerability were found outside the churches in ways they were not found within them.

Interviewee 46 (28-year-old male), who was raised in a Pentecostal Church and at the time of the interview identified as spiritual (no religion), shared his narrative:

After leaving church and going down a more destructive path and lifestyle choices, I slowly started to make changes from those more destructive lifestyle patterns. That was facilitated mostly through fitness and martial arts as a means of making healthier lifestyle choices and better self-discipline and moving away from social groups that were participating in such destructive behaviour like alcohol and drugs. Then the radical change for me was six years ago when I went to India and basically everything about my life turned upside-down. Every belief system I had on what's real, what's not real, what's possible and what's not possible, what's right and wrong, everything changed and I discovered the ability to have my own spiritual journey that was one, far more connected to nature and far more open-minded in the ability to explore myself, the world around me and the concept of spirituality without feeling like it was restricted to one specific way or one specific belief system.

This movement is about Gen Y moving away from labels that identify them collectively under a specific belief system and moving to a more fluid form of identify. Many Gen Y who had come out of controlling religious institutions shared their confusion about heavy-laden belief systems and the uncertainty they had after removing the constraints and finding a way forward. As they broke away from those churches, they had taken on other identities which hid old loyalties or expressed a neutral place which those Gen Y see as transient, progressive and refreshing.

Reasons for change

The research used factor analysis in identifying the patterns in the survey responses, which assisted in the identification of the interpretable and translatable factors given in the surveys (Bohr 2020). Factor analysis identified six major factors derived from the twenty survey items of reasons for changing religious identity. These factors were also identified as being significant for people who were interviewed. In order of their importance, they were:

1. Rejection of Christian beliefs and morals;
2. Bad experiences of church and religious organisations;
3. Narrowness and inauthenticity of religious people;
4. Feeling judged by people in religious organisations;
5. Incompatibility of the critical inquiry experienced in education with church communications; and
6. Various personal experiences of life leading to change in church participation.

1. Rejection of Christian beliefs and morals

The main reason for Gen Y to change their identity was that they could no longer accept the churches' account of Christian belief and moral values, and were particularly concerned by the churches' attitude that they had exclusive truth in their beliefs and morals. Survey participant 142 (female 21 years old) was raised a Pentecostal and at the time of the survey described herself as having no religion. She wrote: *'For several years, I still believed in the Christian God, but could not understand how it was possible to love Him when there was the ultimatum (love me or go to hell)'*. The rigidity of views concerning the issue of judgement was an issue for a number of Gen Y who placed great emphasis on inclusiveness, tolerance and non-judgemental ideas.

Those Gen Y who left the church and identified with no religion or other identities did so to move away from the value system of the churches. The areas of values that were most frequently cited by Gen Y were same-sex relationships and the lack of tolerance around different views and different lifestyles. Gen Y's experiences have suggested that they have experienced more freedom, liberty and space to be themselves,

without restriction or judgement, outside the churches. They have appreciated the freedom of not having to conform to a certain belief system or lifestyle imposed by others.

Interviewee 46 (29-year-old male) shared his experience and his views of when he was raised in a Pentecostal Church. At the time of the interview, he identified as no religion but spiritual.

I have a lot of appreciation for the moral and ethical conduct that I've learnt and received through my Christian upbringing. I very much struggle with my feelings of a narrow belief system that Christian idealism holds and feel that the way it's presented is in a form of indoctrination and control rather than discovery and exploration.

Many of the Gen Y participants in the research indicated they had found greater tolerance and openness in their workplaces, amongst friends, family and other social groups which had given them the support to be themselves. They experienced the churches as places of intolerance and judgemental attitudes and, as a result, those Gen Y participants felt restricted and uncomfortable in church environments.

Another major issue was around science and the new atheism that has been propagated online. This area of science and belief is also a part of the issue of inclusion. Those who changed their beliefs during their developing years would have enjoyed staying in a community such as the church if that community had been more tolerant of different views. Once those Gen Y started to become vocal about their differences, many of them said they had no choice but to leave due to a lack of acceptance. Those Gen Y found the Church's belief system rigid and inflexible but also intolerant of further dialogue on contentious issues.

The issue of gender equality for Gen Y was highlighted but remained a minor factor. It was evident in this research, that the gender issue was seen in the context of the lack of equality in the churches. The gender equality issue was considered in a similar way to that of same-sex relationships. These issues suggest that many Gen Y operate from a framework of intersectionality in which there is fairness and equality for all people. Gen Y moved away from the church culture because they saw it discriminating people based on gender as well as sexual preferences.

2. Bad experiences of church and religious organisations

The second factor in leaving the churches was bad experiences and lack of confidence in religious organisations. The issue of personal experience and being judged was also a factor. The interviews and surveys picked up this same lack of confidence in the churches as a result of the sexual abuse cases, and the ongoing justice issues the church is facing in relation to the cover up and lack of acknowledgement by many church leaders.

A factor highlighted in the survey responses was the dogmatism of many church leaders. This was an issue for Gen Y which contributed to their loss of confidence. The interviews also highlighted areas of concern around dogmatic leadership and leaders not being open to dialogue.

Interviewee 28 (24-year-old female) decided to be honest about her doubts in the Pentecostal church she attended and as a result was kicked out of home. This participant found the openness and vulnerability in a spiritual community outside the church:

I don't know if you do this or all Christians do this, but my upbringing was that if it's not Christian, it's wrong. What in it is wrong? What in it resonates with your spirituality? There needs to be a little more openness. Just because you think that something about another thing isn't that bad, it doesn't make you any less Christian or any less a faithful servant to God. You're acknowledging it and the history of this earth, which is creation. That's respectful. You're acknowledging the story. That's respectful.

Many Gen Y participants who dropped out of church felt that the churches gave higher priority to the reputation of the institution rather than protecting and serving people. Church programs were given priority above the lives of church members: the institution being placed above people. This also reflects the intersectionality previously noted, adding to the argument that Gen Y are leaving the church due to the discrimination of marginalised groups by the church.

These people demonstrated a different value system from that of their churches. They were moving from a collectivist culture in which conformity to moral views was

important and a person's individual thoughts were secondary. Their new value system was about openness and vulnerability, as well as inclusiveness and tolerance.

3. Narrowness and inauthenticity of religious people

Many of the interviewees shared their disappointment with church leaders as well as the people in the churches. For example, interviewee 33 (32-year-old female) struggled with a female Pentecostal Pastor and her views:

"I don't want to be like you. I don't want to be that person. I'm open-minded". She's not okay with Muslims. She's not okay with gay people. I just find her very narrow-minded, and I was like, "Okay, I want to be the opposite of that and I want to be accepting of everyone and I want everyone to be able to have their own beliefs".

Some research participants shared experiences of church people being judgemental. Some spoke of people in the church, reacting superficially to differences and failing to seek to understand at depth the opinions of others. Although some interviewees mentioned having positive experiences of church people, those who were dropping out of attendance and changing their religious identity mostly felt negatively about the people they had met in the churches.

Reference to 'fakeness' was made a number of times in the interviews and surveys with Pentecostal/Hillsong churches. Fakeness for Gen Y was about saying that people in the churches were doing things that looked good, but only doing them to impress the leadership of the church or for the purpose of increasing status. For example, interviewee 18 (28-year-old female) attended Hillsong when raised and said: *'I just thought people were fake and I didn't have a good personal experience. I didn't want to be part of it'*. Interviewee 52 (30-year-old male) who attended Hillsong when raised said: *'it felt a bit artificial and it felt to me that it was fake and put on. To me it didn't seem genuine'*.

There was also mention of extreme religion leading to violence and the issues that this had on their developing years when all they heard about religion was the negative side from media coverage of terrorism attacks. This was a contributing factor in the

interviews and one that has been used by the new atheists to direct young people away from religion.

4. Feeling judged by people in religious organisations

Many interviewees felt judged in some way about their own personal belief system and experience. Interviewee 55 (29-year-old male) was raised in a Pentecostal church and attended several times a week when growing up. The participant said that he left the church at 26 years old and, as a result, felt the church thought he was a backslider. He struggled with the judgemental attitude of people in the church when he attended. This participant believed in God and saw himself as a Christian but did not attend church. At the time of the survey, he said he found his sense of community in his workplace and felt much better about himself than when he was at church.

Rather than moving away from Christianity completely, some of them had moved to simply identifying themselves as 'Christian', interpreting it in their own way without feeling they had to answer to church leaders.

Some of the participants had issues with the ways the churches handled situations such as same-sex marriage, which led to them feeling judged even if the churches had not explicitly taken up the issue with them. As these participants who dropped out did not want to identify with those churches due to such issues and beliefs, but still believed in Jesus and the Bible at the time of the interview, they identified themselves simply as 'Christian'.

5. The incompatibility of critical inquiry experienced in education with church communications

Gen Y struggled with the lack of critical analysis and critical inquiry that they were used to in educational settings and the lack of openness and dialogue that they were accustomed to through education, social media and other forms of communication. Gen Y also expressed concerns about the hierarchical nature of the church and the fact that those in leadership were often seen as above others in their understanding of and in their ability to determine the mind of God.

Many of the Gen Y who participated in the research had high levels of education and an explorative nature, often desiring to understand faith and spirituality beyond what was communicated by their churches. The desire for further education among Gen Y

was mostly for their own personal educational journey, but often resulted in a rejection of the narrow views the church communicated. Many of those who dropped out of church explored different perspectives before making changes. The changes for Gen Y had been to challenge different ideas that were communicated by the church and to realign their thinking towards openness to dialogue. Survey 155 was raised a Pentecostal and at the time of the survey, identified as 'don't know'. He said;

I believe that there are too many rules that restrict people from entering the faith or relating to the people of faith, mostly of people with uninformed opinions or secluded views on life.

Gen Y struggled with the ideas of one person communicating God's word and then the church responding in the affirmative without questioning those views. Gen Y wanted to engage in the conversation and believed that this form of education around dialogue was a better way of learning.

6. Various personal experiences of life leading to changes in church participation

Another reason for ceasing to attend church was Gen Y's parents who either left the church or stopped regularly attending. This affected the sample because of the strong influence family and friends had on Gen Y during and after their developing years. Some of the participants who did not have strong views also stopped attending. A compounding factor for these participants, along with others who willingly left when they had finished school, was the social connections that they had formed outside the church. Due to the churches' social connections not being as strong, those Gen Y ended up leaving the church.

Discussion and Conclusions

While this research has been based on a relatively small sample of people, it has shown that there are continuing movements within denominations. Some young adults have been moving from the mainstream and Evangelical churches into Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches. At the same time, however, the rates of growth in Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches has slowed because some people raised in those churches have been moving out of them.

There were some parallels to the stated reasons for not attending church identified by Bellamy et al. (2002, p.14), although also some significant differences. Certainly, the rejection of Christian beliefs and morals is common to this research and the research reported by Bellamy et al., as is bad experiences of church people. However, boring and unfulfilling church services, which Bellamy et al. found to be the major stated reason for not attending, was not a significant issue for the Gen Y who participated in this research.

While there are some parallels in the findings with Mason et al (2007) and Smith and Snell (2009), the reasons given in this research had greater similarity with those identified by Kinnaman (2011) in his study of young people exiting the churches: the exclusivism and lack of opportunity for debate and doubt, the repressive attitudes to sexuality and a sense of shallowness in church relationships. This research has added the personal sense of being judged and of being not accepted. It should also be noted that this study was examining people ten years or more older than the Gen Y teenagers studied by Mason et al and Hughes. Hence, adult issues of the acceptance of diverse forms of sexual expression arose here in ways not identified by Mason et al or Hughes. Indeed, the issue of feeling judged and excluded was more poignant given the adulthood of the Gen Y in this study.

The specific reasons given for changing religious identity demonstrate underlying social changes. What is evident is a strong movement towards what Mason et al described as 'individualisation' in which meaning in life is seen as a personal choice and a pre-eminent value is that of 'authenticity' in which the individual's choice is recognised and respected. As Hughes (2007) suggested, life becomes a personal construction in this context. While some people had moved to identify themselves as having 'no religion', many others continued to describe themselves as 'Christian', but did not wish to associate themselves with a particular denomination or tradition. To that extent, the movement cannot be identified simply as a process of secularisation. People are not necessarily giving up all that is spiritual. Many still regarded the Christian faith as providing some important keys to morality and to life. Nevertheless, most Gen Y approached morals and systems of belief from an individualistic point of view. They felt they had to make up their own minds about life and faith, and they expected that process to be respected. In essence, belief has become a personal construction rather than the result of adherence to a collective mindset.

This finding of belief seen as a personal construction accords well with the underlying theory of cultural change described by Heelas and Woodhead (2005): duty to roles and institutions has been replaced by living out one's unique subjectivity. However, in contrast to their research, it is not necessarily revealed in religion being replaced by spirituality. Rather, some people develop their own constructions of Christian faith, some people reject religion altogether, and only some of them take a non-religious but spiritual approach to life. As Mason et al (2007, p. 302) and Hughes (2007, p.128) have noted, Gen Y are constructing life in a variety of ways 'picking and choosing' beliefs and values in a way which makes sense to themselves. This results in a variety of religious, spiritual and secular paths of life as demonstrated by Smith and Snell (2009).

However, for many young people the major issue with the churches were the patterns of communication. They felt that the churches had not listened to them and did not respect their personal discourse. Many felt that they were judged either because the churches had explicitly rejected what they had said, or because the churches had been so dogmatically opposed to matters which they felt should at least be discussed. Instead of dialogue, they experienced authoritarian statements from leaders which led them to feeling excluded.

While the lack of growth in Hillsong and other Pentecostal churches cannot be explained largely in terms of general patterns of secularisation, what was evident was the way in which faith was seen as a personal construction, owned by the individual rather than owned by the churches as institutions. As Rose et al (2014) has argued, Pentecostals, and the charismatic movement generally, have attracted people since the 1970s because of the emphasis on the experiential dimension of faith, and there was evidence in this research that this attraction has continued for people in mainstream and Evangelical denominations. The Pentecostals have provided a major 'post-traditional' expression of faith since the cultural change of the 1970s, with their emphasis on experience rather than belief, and their adoption of popular music and popular culture in their worship (Hughes, 2016, p.35). However, for some growing up within Hillsong and the Pentecostal churches, the experiential dimension has been limited by an authoritarian approach to faith and the sense, in some places, that the institution has been given precedence over the personal construction of faith and life and the wellbeing of the individual.

What then are the implications for the churches' ministry, particularly to Gen Y? The major recommendation of this research is that the churches need to change their ways of communicating. It means that they must develop ways of listening and must engage positively and constructively with those who express different opinions. The focus of engaging with Gen Y is about respecting individuality regardless of whether one agrees or not with what the other person is saying. In order to fully engage with Gen Y, the churches must give them a safe place to communicate without judging, preaching or trying to win them over to a particular set of beliefs. Rather than focusing on the details of belief, the emphasis should be placed on the value of the person communicating their experiences. If the church is seen as constantly challenging individual beliefs, it is also seen by Gen Y as not respecting or valuing them as individuals.

The churches have previously confronted differences and as a result of those confrontations have lost the confidence of Gen Y. The church needs to contextualise its communication, so as to win back the confidence of Gen Y. This involves stepping back and observing people before jumping to conclusions and immediately communicating words that are not appropriate. The practice of listening and building credibility rather than making authoritarian statements is paramount for reconnecting with Gen Y.

This might mean developing some rather different structures. It might mean more emphasis, for example, on small groups for dialogue, rather than on large groups with dogmatic speakers. It might mean placing greater emphasis on exploring personal sacred narratives, rather than focusing on the traditions of faith. Is there a sense in which this could take Pentecostals back to their origins: to reliance on the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual?

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