



Cultural Differences between Australian Denominations on Coming to Faith.

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Abstract

In 2001 and 2006 church attendees in many denominations across Australia were surveyed about various aspects of coming to faith. Many substantial similarities and differences were found, such as the importance of various factors in bringing them to faith and the ages at which they came to faith. The results indicate that there are important cultural differences in the way coming to faith is understood and acted on in the various denominations. In this paper the empirical evidence from two national surveys will be considered, highlighting what the various denominations can learn from each other.

Introduction

What are the cultural differences between Australian churches and denominations in the process of coming to faith? What did they find helpful for coming to faith? These are the questions this paper seeks to address on the basis of empirical evidence from two national surveys. An exploration of these questions may lead the Christian community in Australia, and beyond, to reconsider how we do evangelism, church practice and the religious education of young people.

So what is culture? In what sense is this term being used in this paper? According to the Macquarie Dictionary (2009) the sociological meaning of culture is 'the sum of total ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another' (p. 414). In this sense this term fits the purpose of this discussion. What we shall be examining here are the ways of living and behaving that

churches and denominations have built up over time, and which they pass to new generations, with regard to coming to Christian faith. That is, how do they view the process of coming to faith? How do they provide means and mechanisms to assist people to come to faith in their congregations?

The national surveys discussed in this paper are the National Church Life Surveys (<http://www.ncls.org.au>), which are regularly conducted across most denominations in Australia in the same years as the Australian Census. The NCLS surveys commenced in 1991 and have been conducted every five years since then. This study draws on specific limited versions of the 2001 and 2006 *Attender* surveys. The NCLS survey process also includes surveys of the church leaders, but the *Leaders* surveys were not considered in this study. The *Leaders* surveys would form a useful comparison with respect to what the leaders think they are doing, or what are their perceptions, and how do they match or disagree with the attendees' views elicited in these attendee surveys.

In this study specialised smaller surveys are examined, rather than the large scale NCLS attendee surveys. These limited surveys asked more specific questions about coming to faith than the overall large common attendee surveys. Thus the information unearthed by these surveys is particularly pertinent to the questions posed for this study. The number of people responding to these surveys were 5,162 in 2001 (NCLS Survey C), and 6,913 in 2006 (NCLS Survey I) across Australia.

The denominations were grouped together as part of the NCLS survey methodology and the only single denomination that can be identified individually was the Catholic Church as shown below:

Denomination Group	Denomination Names	Frequency 2001	Frequency 2006
Catholic	Catholic	1014	3157
Mainstream Protestant A	Anglican Uniting Church	2513	1956
Mainstream Protestant B	Lutheran Presbyterian	289	333
Large Protestant	Baptist Churches of Christ	885	770
Other Protestant	Reformed Congregational Vineyard Fellowship Christian and Missionary Alliance Nazarene Brethren Seventh Day Adventist Independent	145	201
Pentecostal A	Christian City Church Apostolic Assemblies of God Christian Revival Crusade	309	503
Pentecostal B	Christian Life Churches Four Square Gospel Bethesda Other Pentecostal	7	4
Total		5162	6924

Because of the low numbers of respondents in the Pentecostal B group, all Pentecostal respondents (Groups A and B) were grouped together in the following analysis and discussion.

Age of Coming to Faith

Survey C, 2001	Age when first became a Christian								
	Under 5 years of age	5-9 years old	10-12 years old	15-19 years old	20-29 years old	30-39 years old	40-59 years old	60 years or over	Don't know/can't remember
Catholic	85.9%	5.5%	2.6%	1.0%	1.3%	1.4%	0.9%	0.7%	0.8%
Mainstream Protestant A	23.6%	15.3%	19.6%	16.6%	8.8%	5.4%	3.4%	1.1%	6.2%
Mainstream Protestant B	50.9%	9.0%	10.8%	10.4%	7.9%	3.2%	2.9%	1.4%	3.6%
Large Protestant	9.1%	18.9%	23.6%	20.8%	11.1%	6.8%	5.4%	1.1%	3.3%
Other Protestant	25.4%	10.4%	14.9%	18.7%	14.2%	5.2%	2.2%	0.7%	8.2%
Pentecostal	11.9%	17.5%	13.9%	15.9%	21.5%	9.6%	7.3%	0.3%	2.0%
Total	33.7%	13.7%	16.1%	14.0%	8.7%	5.0%	3.5%	1.0%	4.3%

At what age did people surveyed consider they came to faith? The vast majority of the Catholics (85.8%–85.6%) and Mainstream Protestant B (50.0%–50.9%) people became Christian before the age of 5 according to both surveys. This was also the age period when the largest number of Mainstream Protestant A people became Christians (26.9% & 23.6%) and Other Protestants in 2001 survey C (25.4%). Large percentages of people in the other three denominational groups also became Christians before 5, but larger percentages became Christians after this time period, up until the age beyond 19, when the coming to faith tapers off, except for a lower rate of tapering off for Pentecostals and to a lesser extent the Large Protestants.

The differences may be attributable to the different cultural meanings attached to the sense of “becoming Christian” in different sections of the Christian church. It might be that in the Catholic Church and the other denominations that registered large numbers of becoming Christians before the age of 5 (Mainstream Protestant B: Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, Mainstream Protestant A: Anglican and Uniting churches) the sense is identified with infant baptism. In contrast it may be that in the other churches that recorded a lower percentage of people becoming Christian before the age of 5 the sense of becoming Christian is understood more in the sense of a personal decision for Christ (Griffiths, 2009, pp. 154-155; Kling, 2014, pp. 599-602; Devenish, 2002, 169-170) whether at an early age or later in life. However, in either case it is apparent that, as Devenish (2002, p. 60) describes it, there is an entry into a Christian world-view which is characterised by ‘Christ-centeredness, its call for an exclusive commitment, and its rejection of a self and world-centred concern in matters of morality and personal self-gratification, in favour of a life which is pleasing to God.’

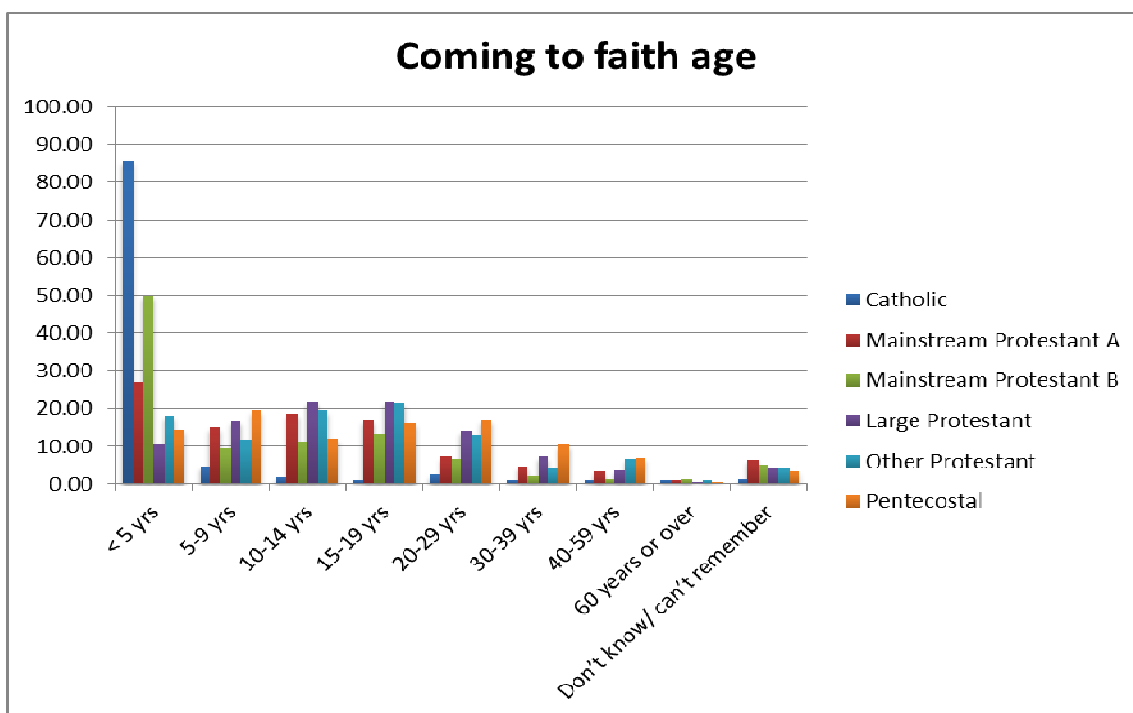
According to a survey of evangelical college students in UK from Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist, Anglican, New Church, Pentecostal and Presbyterian churches the overwhelming sense of coming to faith in Christ was that it was a ‘process that deepens and matures as time passes’ (Tidball, 2006, p. 88). 85% of these students had come to faith before the age of 25, but some of them indicated that they could not pinpoint their time of coming to faith and that they had faith as long as they could

remember (Tidball, 2006, pp. 88-89). Some similar patterns with regard to coming to faith could be expected to be seen in Australia, but at the same time because of the small size of the UK study and because it was conducted in a different country within a different denominational context it can only be expected to be weakly indicative of the Australian experience.

Thus it is not surprising that in the denominations that have a culture of emphasising both personal decisions with respect to salvation and subsequent baptism after such a conscious choice, e.g. Large Protestant grouping consisting of the Baptist and Church of Christ, and the Pentecostal churches, a lower number of “becoming Christian” events are attributed to the pre-5 year old age group. However, this conclusion needs some refinement, as for example Kay (2006, p. 117) found that the Pentecostal ministers in UK came to faith in two main ways. Those who were brought up in the same faith community churches as where they ministered now had come to faith gradually, whereas those who came from outside those church groups, had come to faith in a much shorter time, often through more dramatic conversions.

The main conclusion we can draw from this analysis is that in all the non-Catholic churches, the years before the age of 29 are critical in terms of people accepting the Christian faith, especially in terms of conscious personal conversions. The number becoming Christians beyond the age of 29 varies from 9.6% for the Mainstream Protestant churches to 20.8% for the Pentecostals. Thus, the vast majority of effective evangelism happens during the younger period of people’s lives.

Figure 1 Age when became Christian in correlation to Denominations (Survey I, 2006)



Comparative Importance of Church Activities (evangelistic and educational) in Coming to Faith

What church activities have been found to be most important for coming to faith? The most important one was church services or mass (28.2% in survey C, and 36.9% in survey I), but three of the four most important coming to faith activities in the 2001 survey C were activities for children or youth, and of these the most important one was the Sunday school/Sabbath school or kid’s club. 1208 of the 5162 attendees in 2001 indicated this as one of the two most important activities leading them to faith. This was 14.9% of all the responses to this question. Thus in terms of continuation of faith, the Sunday school is only second to the main church services as the means for developing living faith. In the 2006 survey I, the percentages of Sunday school and religious education (scripture at school) have changed positions, but are very similar in effect (11.9% vs. 13.1%). This again affirms the importance of both of these activities in developing youth spirituality and faith.

If we look at these figures a little more closely, we can see that more people came to faith through the children’s and youth activities (35.4%) than due to church services themselves (28.2%) according to the 2001 survey C. In the 2006 survey I the youth activities (32.9%) did not surpass the church services (36.9%) but again the combined youth activities were demonstrably important for evangelism and church education. These observations suggest that we should invest at least as much, or perhaps even more effort, resources and time into children’s and youth evangelistic, pastoral and educational work as we do into regular church services and adult evangelism.

Figure 2 Most important activities that led to faith (question 47, 2001 Survey C)

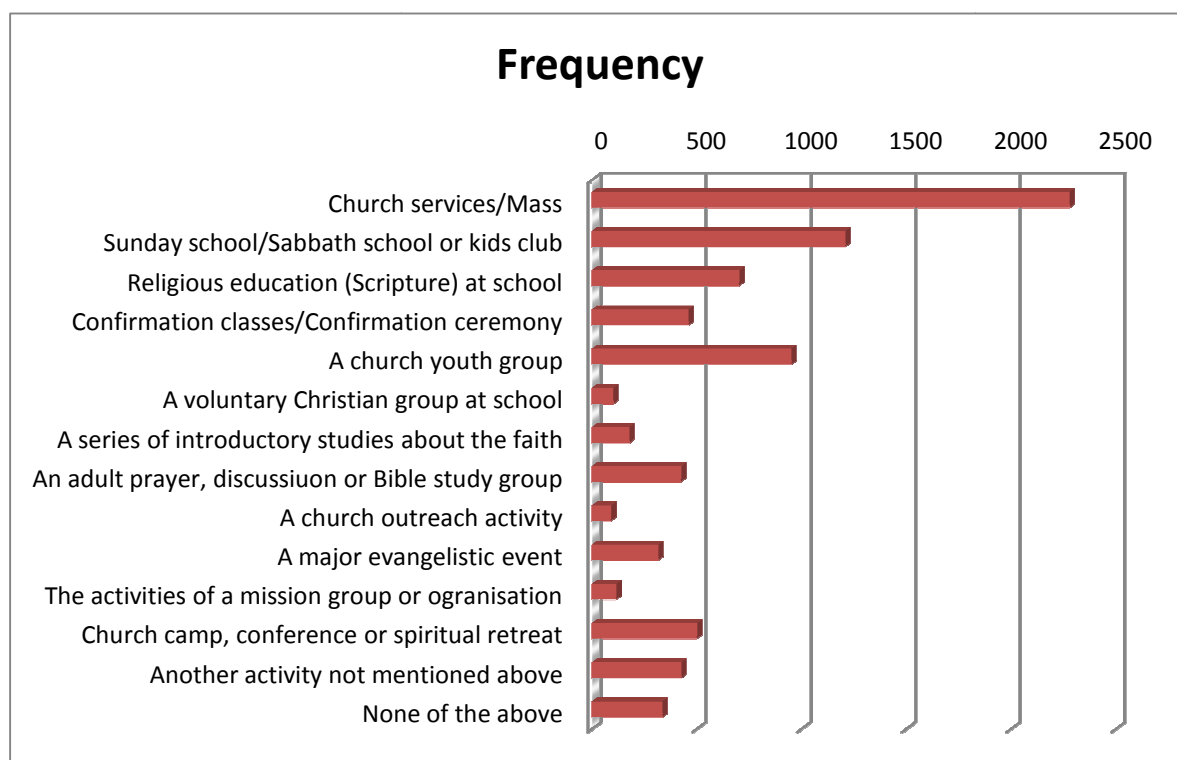
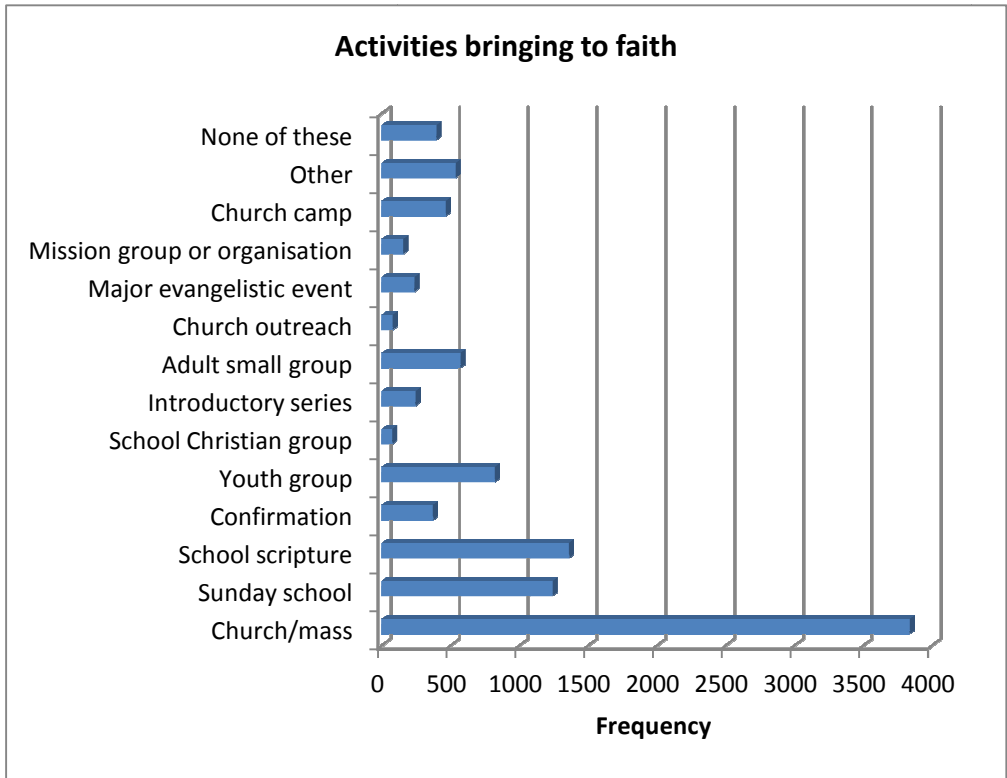


Figure 3 Most important activities that led to faith (question 42, 2006 Survey I)



Church Activities Leading to Faith and Denominations

Church Services and coming to faith

Church Services	Survey C, 2001	Survey, I, 2006
Catholic	77.2%	77.5%
Mainstream Protestant A	41.7%	44.6%
Mainstream Protestant B	47.6%	50.2%
Large Protestant	37.0%	39.2%
Other Protestant	48.9%	42.8%
Pentecostal	39.3%	49.3%

How did the various church activities compare among the different denominations in terms of bringing people to faith? The church services/mass activities were most important for the Catholic respondents, i.e. 77.2% (survey C) and 77.5% (survey I) vs. 48.9% and 47.6% (in survey C) for the next highest denominational groups (Other Protestant and Mainstream Protestant B) and 50.2% and 49.3% (Mainstream Protestant B and Pentecostal in survey I). There is not as much difference between the non-Catholic groups (about 12% difference between the largest and the smallest in survey C and 1% in survey I) as between the Catholics and the highest Protestant group (about 28% - 27%).

Sunday Schools and Denominations

Sunday Schools	Survey C, 2001	Survey I, 2006
Catholic	6.0%	6.0%
Mainstream Protestant A	30.5%	31.3%
Mainstream Protestant B	33.1%	31.4%
Large Protestant	29.8%	30.9%
Other Protestant	28.6%	23.7%
Pentecostal	19.0%	22.9%

In the case of Sunday schools, the situation with respect to church services is reversed. Sunday schools have been of significantly less value for Catholics to come to faith (6%) compared to non-Pentecostal Protestants, where 28.6% – 33.1% (survey C) and 23.7% - 31.4% (survey I) found Sunday School helpful in leading them to faith, i.e. a third or just under Protestants found Sunday schools helpful in coming to faith. The Mainstream Protestant A and B groups and Large Protestant groups found the Sunday schools of the greatest value in coming to faith compared Other Protestant groups, and of the Pentecostals only 19% (survey C) to 22.9% (survey I) found Sunday school an important factor leading them to faith.

Youth Groups and Denominations

Church youth groups	Survey C, 2001	Survey I, 2006
Catholic	7.2%	4.8%
Mainstream Protestant A	22.2%	19.0%
Mainstream Protestant B	18.5%	14.0%
Large Protestant	26.6%	20.9%
Other Protestant	27.1%	16.0%
Pentecostal	18.3%	20.7%

The comparison of youth groups and denominations shows a similar pattern to the Sunday school vs. denomination comparison. For the Catholic population youth groups were significantly less important in coming to faith as for the Protestants (including the Pentecostal group). That is 7.2% (survey C) and 4.8% (survey I) for the Catholics, compared to 18.5 – 27.1% (survey C) and 14.0% to 20.9% (survey I) for the Protestants found them important. According to survey C the Mainstream Protestant A, Large Protestant and Other Protestant groups gained a significantly better value from youth groups than the rest. However, according to survey C the three largest beneficiaries from youth groups were the Large Protestant, Pentecostal and the Mainstream Protestant A groups.

Religious Education at School vs. Denominations

Religious Education at School	Survey C, 2001	Survey I, 2006
Catholic	42.8%	37.2%
Mainstream Protestant A	9.8%	9.4%
Mainstream Protestant B	8.7%	11.1%
Large Protestant	5.7%	5.8%
Other Protestant	6.0%	5.7%
Pentecostal	5.1%	4.9%

The results of the denominational analysis of the value of religious education in schools shows that a much larger number of the Catholic respondents found it helpful in bringing them to faith than the Protestant respondents, who found it helpful in mostly less than 10% of the cases. There was a small amount of variation among the Protestant denominations as far as the value of religious education in schools was concerned, but overall most of them found it of significantly less value compared to the Catholics.

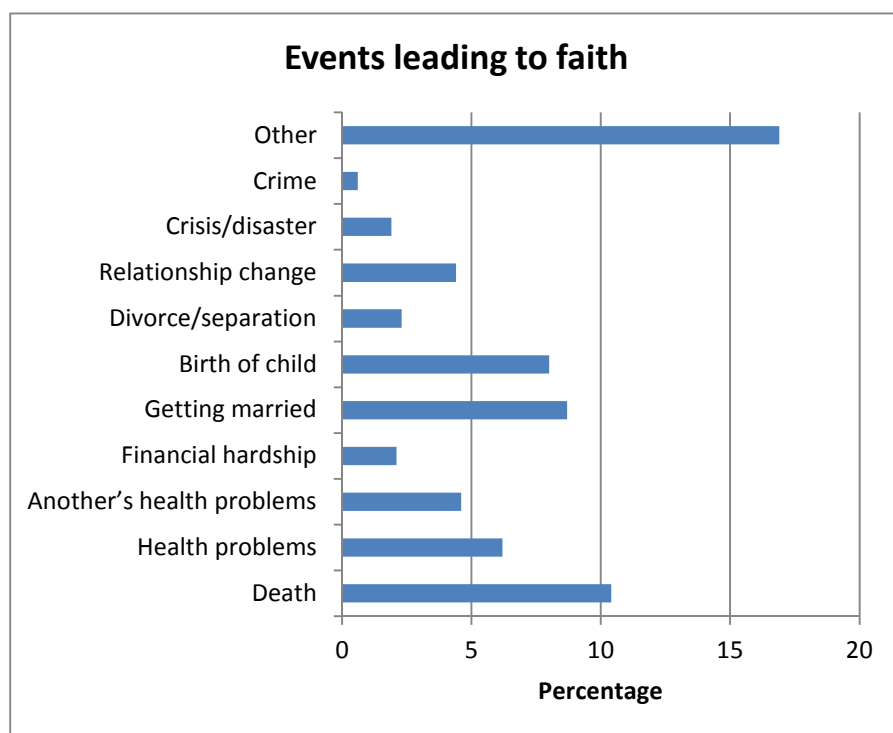
So in summary, the Catholic respondents found church services or mass, and religious education in schools most useful in bringing them to faith, 77.% (survey C), 77.5% (survey I) and 42.8% (survey C) 37.2% (survey I), whereas the Protestants on the average found church services useful about 43% (survey C) to 45% (survey I) of the time and religious education in schools 7% (survey C and I) of the time in bringing them to faith. Sunday schools and youth groups had low value for Catholic respondents in bringing them to faith, 6% (survey C and I) and 7.2% (survey C) to 4.8% (survey I), but for the Protestants (including the Pentecostals) on average Sunday schools were helpful for 28% (survey C) to 23% (survey I) and youth groups were helpful in bringing to faith about 22% (survey C) to 18% (survey I) of the people. The substantial benefit of religious education in school for Catholics may indicate the value of church-based schooling proportionately more Catholics have accessed than Protestants.

Comparative Importance of Significant Events for Coming to Faith

Question 43 in 2006 survey I explores the significance of particular events for coming to faith. The results for this question are presented below (responses came from 5977 people).

It appears that particular specific events in people’s lives only led them to faith up to about 10% of the time maximum. The most important event is *death* with

Figure 4 Most important events that led to faith (question 43, 2006 Survey I)



significance for 10.4% of the people. The next most important events are happy events, *getting married* at 8.7% and the *birth of a child* at 8.0%. *Health problems* are next most important, both *one's own* at 6.2% and *others' health problems* at 4.6%. A *relationship change* is approximately as important as *others' health problems* at 4.4%. The final identified issues are *crisis/disaster* at 1.9% and *crime* at 0.6%.

Events Leading to Faith and Denominations

The four most important events leading to faith in survey I were death, getting married, birth of a child and health problems. Examining these along denominational lines gives us useful information.

Denomination	Death	Health problems	Getting married	Birth of child
Catholic	13.3%	6.9%	12.0%	11.6%
Mainstream Protestant A	9.3%	6.7%	7.4%	7.7%
Mainstream Protestant B	11.2%	3.8%	9.1%	6.3%
Large Protestant	5.4%	4.0%	3.4%	2.4%
Other Protestant	4.3%	6.4%	5.3%	1.6%
Pentecostal	7.9%	4.8%	4.4%	1.9%
Total	10.4%	6.2%	8.7%	8.0%

A very similar pattern was maintained for all the denominations, with death being the most important factor in coming to faith for all but Other Protestants (4.3%) where health problems (6.4%) and getting married (5.3%) were rated more important. The Catholics experienced the greatest effect due to events leading them to faith among all the denominations, i.e. 13.3% for death, 6.9% for health problems, 12.0% for getting married and 11.6% for the birth of a child. The next largest effect due to death was on Mainstream Protestant B population (11.2%) and the weakest effect of death was on Other Protestant at 4.3%. The next largest effect to Catholics for health problems was Mainstream Protestant A (6.7%) and weakest was Mainstream Protestant B at 3.8%. The next strongest effect of getting married was on Mainstream Protestant B (9.1%) and the weakest was on Large Protestants (3.4%). The next strongest effect of birth of a child after Catholics was on Mainstream Protestant A (7.7%) and the weakest effect was on Other Protestants (1.6%).

Comparative Importance of Significant Experiences for Coming to Faith

What was the comparative importance of significant experiences on coming to faith? Question 44 in 2006 survey I explores the significance of particular experiences for coming to faith. The results for this question are presented here (responses came from 6390 people). The most important experiences that led to Christian faith were:

Family devotions	43.3%
Example of Christian life	37.1%
Sacraments	27.2%
Personal faith discussion	25.6%

The weakest identified experiences were movies (2.6%) and books (9.1%). The other experiences were of mid-range importance, i.e. Bible reading/ reflection (19.5%), Personal invitation (17.4%), befriending attender (17.1%) and preaching/ teaching (16.8%). Most, but not all, of the important experiences were *relational* rather than *formal* church activities (sacraments and preaching/teaching) or *impersonal* ways of communicating the faith (Bible reading/reflection, books and movies). This observation echoes the message of Devenish in his paper to the 2013 Harvest Research Conference called "The Evocation of Saints: believers in a post-Christian age," where he argued that the most important aspect of evangelism is the godly quality of the lives of Christians (Devenish, 2013).

Figure 5 Most important experiences that led to faith (question 44, 2006 Survey I)



Church Activities Leading to Faith and Denominations

How does the importance of the church related activities that led people to faith vary among the denominations? The family devotions were clearly most beneficial for the Catholics (58.8%), with the Mainstream Protestant B group gaining the next amount of benefit from them (41.9%) but then the value of the devotions reduced to around 30% for the remaining denominational groups.

Personal invitations were most beneficial among the Pentecostal denominations (30.0%), followed very closely by the Other Protestant groups (27.9%) and Large Protestants (25.7%). For the Mainstream Protestant groups A and B there was even less benefit from these experiences in coming to faith (21.5% and 18.1%). Finally the Catholics had the least benefit (9.6%) in coming to faith due to personal invitations.

The personal faith discussions were most beneficial for the Other Protestants and Pentecostals (43.1% and 42.9%). The group that gained the next greatest benefit from personal discussions was the Large Protestant group (36.5%), followed by the Mainstream Protestants A and B (29.5% and 25.2%). However, just as for personal invitation experiences, the Catholics benefitted the least from personal faith discussions in terms of coming to faith (16.0%).

Denominational group	Family devotions	Personal invitation	Personal faith discussion
Catholic	58.8%	9.6%	16.0%
Mainstream Protestant A	29.2%	21.5%	29.5%
Mainstream Protestant B	41.9%	18.1%	25.2%
Large Protestant	29.8%	25.7%	36.5%
Other Protestant	32.5%	27.9%	43.1%
Pentecostal	32.4%	30.0%	42.9%

The example of Christian life was fairly evenly important in all the non-Catholic denominations, with the greatest effect being in the Large Protestant denominations (47.4%), whereas the rest of these denominational groups clustered close to 43%. However, the example of Christian life was of least benefit in the Catholic church (28.2%). In terms of importance of sacraments for coming to faith it is clear they were most important for the Catholics (45.6%) and the next most important for the Mainstream Protestant B and A denominations (21.3% and 16.9%). The importance for rest of the denominations clustered around the 5-6%.

Denominational group	Example of Christian life	Sacraments	Preaching/teaching
Catholic	28.2%	45.6%	8.2%
Mainstream Protestant A	43.7%	16.9%	21.8%
Mainstream Protestant B	42.9%	21.3%	28.1%
Large Protestant	47.4%	5.0%	27.8%
Other Protestant	42.6%	5.6%	22.3%
Pentecostal	42.7%	5.7%	21.5%

Preaching and teaching was most beneficial for the Mainstream Protestant B and Large Protestant groups (28.1% and 27.8%). The next groups who gained nearly the same level of benefit from preaching and teaching were the Other Protestants, Mainstream Protestant A group and the Pentecostals at approximately 22% level. The Catholics gained the least benefit from preaching and teaching for coming to faith (8.2%).

There was a range of responses to the value on Bible reading and reflection of ranging from a high of 31.3% for the Mainstream Protestant B group to a low of 11.5% for the Catholics. For more than 22% of all non-Catholics Bible reading and reflection was helpful for coming to faith, which was more than 10% above the value of this experience for the Catholics (11.5%).

All but the Mainstream Protestant B group of the non-Catholics found that in over 20% of the cases when someone attending a church made friends with them, it led them to faith. These beneficial experiences occurred in a narrow band between a high of 24.3% (Pentecostals) to 21.3% (Other Protestant). The Catholic attenders had benefitted in terms of coming to faith from someone attending a church making friends with them only to the extent of 9.6% and in the Mainstream Protestant B group only 18.1% benefitted from attenders befriending them.

Out of all the experience categories identified as being beneficial for coming to faith movies had the least impact. However, the Pentecostals (4.3%) and Catholics (3.5%) experienced the greatest benefit. Everyone else apart from Other Protestant (2.5%) gained less than 2% benefit from movies in terms of bringing them to faith.

Denominational group	Bible reading/reflection	Befriending attender	Movie
Catholic	11.5%	9.6%	3.5%
Mainstream Protestant A	24.7%	23.6%	1.4%
Mainstream Protestant B	31.3%	18.1%	1.9%
Large Protestant	27.8%	23.3%	1.6%
Other Protestant	28.4%	21.3%	2.5%
Pentecostal	22.5%	24.3%	4.3%

Two denominational groups gained the most in terms of coming to faith from books, Pentecostals (11.5%) and Mainstream Protestant A (11.3%). All the rest of denominations were somewhere in between a high of 9.1% (Other Protestant) and a low of 6.5% (Mainstream Protestant B).

Denominational group	Book
Catholic	7.6%
Mainstream Protestant A	11.3%
Mainstream Protestant B	6.5%
Large Protestant	8.9%
Other Protestant	9.1%
Pentecostal	11.5%

Conclusion

It appears that the meaning of coming to faith varied among the different denominations. Some appeared to view it as synonymous with infant baptism, whereas others regarded it more as an evangelical conversion experience which would take place at an older age when people could make deliberate choices for themselves (Tidball, 2006, pp. 92-9; Kling, 2014, pp. 602-604). It would appear that there are major cultural differences in these perspectives, which are also associated with distinctive rites and celebratory characteristics in the different denominations, and also tensions which have required various forms of accommodation, such as the availability of 'believer's baptism' for those who came to personal faith after infant baptism (Kling, 2014, p. 603). However, the inescapable observation emerges in this context that *most people come to faith at an early age*. This underscores the importance of providing Christian evangelism to the young, as well as the vital importance of Christian nurture and education which include deliberate and explicit evangelistic dimensions.

This is also underscored by the findings on the most important activities that led people to faith. A significant proportion of them were aimed at the youth, such as *Sunday school, religious education and church youth groups*. However, the one church provided activity that was of the most benefit for all ages in coming to faith was the *church service or mass*. It was far more important than all the camps, missions, evangelistic events, small group events, etc.

It was evident from the results that life events had fairly minimal effect of people coming to faith. *Death* seemed to be the most important event that caused some people to come to faith. This was also noted by Tidball (2006, pp. 88, 97-98) for a small number in his sample in the UK.

The value of various experiences in bringing people to faith varied markedly between different denominations, i.e. in other words there are cultural differences in the way different churches provide and focus on different activities for faith formation, and their effects vary between the churches. It would appear that those denominations who do not receive much benefit from particular experiences for faith formation might reconsider *how* they deploy particular experiences to people whom they wish to encourage to come to faith. For example, all the non-Catholics might reconsider the value of *family devotions and sacraments*, and what is the cultural value and cultural approach to these activities in their church communities. On the other hand the Catholics might learn from the Protestants about their culture of emphasis on value of *personal invitations, personal faith discussions, the examples of Christian lives, preaching*

and teaching, Bible reading and reflection, and making opportunities for those outside the faith to befriend church attenders.

Movies and books appear to provide very little significant influence on people to assist them to come to faith, but the movie materials and methods used by Pentecostals and Catholics are a little more effective than the other denominations. Similarly the books and methods of their use by Pentecostals and Mainstream Protestant A church groups are more successful than the other denominations, and could help the others to learn from these examples of best practice.

So in summation, there are empirically identifiable cultural differences in the way churches approach evangelism, spiritual education and faith formation in their communities. Some of these characteristics have been identified in this paper, suggesting improvements all churches could adopt from the cultural practices of others.¹

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