

**Original citation:**

Francis, Leslie J., Penny, Gemma and Powell, Ruth. (2016) Assessing peer and parental influence on the religious attitudes and attendance of young churchgoers : exploring the Australian National Church Life Survey. Journal of Beliefs & Values .  
doi: 10.1080/13617672.2016.1209923

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Beliefs & Values on 8 August 2016, available online:  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13617672.2016.1209923>

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Assessing peer and parental influence on the religious attitudes and attendance of young  
churchgoers: Exploring the Australian National Church Life Survey

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on data from the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey, this study was designed to assess peer and parental influence on frequency of church attendance, attitude toward church, and attitude toward Christianity among a sample of 6,256 young churchgoers between the ages of 8 and 14 years, attending a range of denominations, including Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Pentecostal, and other Protestant Churches. The data indicated the power of parental example on frequency of church attendance. Frequent attendance among young churchgoers occurred when *both* parents attend as well. Parental influence worked differently on shaping attitude toward church. The most positive attitude was found among young churchgoers who had the opportunity to talk about God with their parents and who did not feel that their parents made them go to church. Young churchgoers responded to parental encouragement better than to parental pressure. Although peer influence within the church did not make much contribution to frequency of attendance, it made a contribution to shaping positive attitude toward church.

*Keywords:* tweenagers, church, peers, parents, Australia

## **Introduction**

The disappearance of young people from the Christian Churches has been well documented by scientific research, with data pointing to ageing church populations in many denominations, particularly in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, USA and Australia. The absence of young people has also been well debated within the Churches themselves. As well as the impact on broader institutional sustainability, the ability of churches to retain children may be close to the hearts of their church-attending parents. Yet, peers may also have an influential role in the experience of young people. In terms of religious attitudes and behaviours, do parents or peers hold the greatest influence? This study aims to assess both parental and peer influence on young churchgoers with regard to both their attitudes (the affective dimension of religion) and their behaviours (religious practices). The 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey provides the opportunity to test and extend findings of earlier studies.

### **Losing and retaining young churchgoers**

The documentation of the disappearance of young people from the Christian Churches in England and in Australia has followed two main trajectories. One trajectory has studied the age profile of church congregations through church-based studies. The other trajectory has studied reported church attendance patterns and church-related attitudes among young people through school-based surveys.

In terms of exploring the age profile of church congregations, Francis (1985) drew particular attention to the disappearance of young people from the rural church in one rural Anglican diocese. Francis and Lankshear (1991, 1995a, 1995b) reported on a much larger study involving over half of the mainland dioceses of the Church of England (Church of England, 1988). The data from 7,157 churches enabled a detailed profile to be constructed. Three main conclusions were generated by these data: the total proportion of the population

of children and young people reached by the Church of England through Sunday schools, clubs and church services was quite small; the age at which children began to leave church and church-related activities pre-dated the teenage years; and the proportion of boys in touch with the church was considerably smaller than the proportion of girls. The Research and Statistics unit of the Archbishops' Council publishes the average Sunday attendance for children and young people under 16-years of age on an annual basis. The published figures have fallen from 180,000 in 2000 to 158,000 in 2005, 139,000 in 2010 (Archbishops' Council, 2012, p. 14), and to 127,000 in 2012 (Archbishops' Council, 2014, p. 26).

In Australia, the five-yearly National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has been a source of information about the church attendance of children and young people as well as the age profile of church attenders (e.g. Powell, Bellamy, Sterland, Jacka, Pepper and Brady, 2012). Based on estimates provided by congregational leaders in the 1996 NCLS, it was calculated that some 20% of attenders at Anglican and Protestant churches were aged under 15 years. In addition, it was calculated that 27% of children at church activities were aged under five years, 39% were aged five to nine years and 34% were aged between 10 and 14 years. In almost every denomination, there were higher proportions of children aged between five and nine (Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Castle and Hughes, 1999). Previous research showed that retention rates for children at church begin to decline once children reach high school, particularly among attenders in mainstream denominations (Kaldor, Bellamy, Moore, Powell, Castle, and Correy, 1995).

In terms of exploring reported church attendance patterns and church-related attitudes among children and young people through school-based surveys in England, Francis (1989) and Kay and Francis (1996) reported on a sequence of cross-sectional studies. In 1974, the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity was administered throughout two East Anglian comprehensive schools, with the intention of returning to successive generations of pupils

occupying the same school desks at four year intervals. Francis (1989) published data from findings in 1974, 1978, 1982 and 1986. An indication of the way in which these young people perceived the church is provided by the item 'I think church services are boring'. This view was endorsed by 39% of the students in 1974, 49% in 1978, 53% in 1982, and 56% in 1986. Aggregated data for the period between 1974 and 1986 demonstrated how attitude toward church deteriorates progressively throughout the years of secondary schooling. The view that church services are boring was endorsed by 36% of students in year seven, 41% in year eight, 53% in year nine, 55% in year ten, and 61% in year eleven. Aggregated data for the period between 1974 and 1986 also demonstrated how males held a less positive attitude toward church in comparison with females. The view that church services are boring was endorsed by 57% of the males across all five years of the survey, compared with 42% of the females.

In Australia, Mason, Singleton, and Webber (2007) reported on a mixed-method study conducted among 1,219 Generation Y young people aged between 13 and 24. Data from the survey found a low level of church attendance across the entire age range, with 22% attending once a month or more often, 44% attending less than once a month, and 32% never attending. Among those who did attend services a mixed view was presented in terms of church-related attitudes. On the one hand, the majority of young people (83%) felt that their church was usually a warm and welcoming place. Higher levels of attendance were found to enhance this sense of community. For example, 91% of young people who attended once a month or more endorsed the view that their church is usually a welcoming place, compared with 71% who attended less than once a month. Similar proportions of young Anglicans and Catholics shared this view (82% and 81% respectively). Exploring these data across three sub-groups related to age, Hughes (2007) reported only marginal differences. In this case,

83% of both 13- to 15-year-olds and 19- to 24-year-olds felt that their church was usually a warm and welcoming place, as did 82% of 16- to 18-year-olds.

On the other hand, over half (57%) of the young people who attended endorsed the view that services are usually (23%) or sometimes (34%) boring. More frequent attendance was associated with a lower level of perceived boredom during services. For example, those who attended church less than once a month were much more likely to take the view that this was usually the case (37%) than those who attended once a month or more (13%). Similar proportions of young Anglicans and Catholics were found to share the view that church services are usually boring (26% and 27% respectively). Exploring the data across the three sub-groups, Hughes (2007) reported that, while 22% of both 13- to 15-year-olds and 19- to 24-year-olds felt that church services are usually boring, this figure increased to 28% among 16- to 18-year-olds.

### **Listening to young churchgoers**

The idea of listening to young churchgoers themselves to explore why they attend and the nature of their attitudes toward the churches they attend seems to have occupied the concern of only a small number of published studies. This type of research is illustrated by Francis' (1984) study of 13- to 20-year-old churchgoers, by Brierley's (2002) study of 'tweenage' churchgoers, by Bellamy, Mou and Castle's (2005) study of 10- to 14-year-old churchgoers, and by Francis and Craig's (2006) study of 8- to 14-year-old churchgoers.

In his book, *Teenagers and the Church*, Francis (1984) reported on an enquiry sponsored by the British Council of Churches, in which 1,328 young people between the ages of 13 and 20 years who attended church on a given Sunday in ninety churches in the north west of England completed a questionnaire. The survey provided detailed information about: the young respondents' participation in and attitudes toward public worship; their religious beliefs; their moral attitudes; their views on politics and society; their views on work and

leisure; and their wellbeing and worries. The findings from this study drew attention to some significant differences between the experiences of the different denominations. For example, the likelihood of young teenage church attenders drifting away from the church during their later teenage years was much higher in the Church of England than in either the Roman Catholic or the Free Churches. Another major difference between the denominations concerned the extent to which the young people felt integrated as part of an all-age worshipping community. On this issue, it was the Roman Catholic Church which emerged as facing the greatest criticism.

In their report on the 2001 Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) of church attenders aged between 10 and 14 years, Bellamy, Mou, and Castle (2005) presented the views of young Anglican and Protestant attenders. Denominations participating in the 2001 NCLS were invited to take part in the optional survey of 10- to 14-year-old attenders. Around half of the denominations did so, representing a good spectrum, including Pentecostal churches, evangelical denominations such as the Baptist Church, and older mainstream denominations such as the Uniting, Lutheran and Anglican Churches (Catholic parishes did not take part). The final sample comprised 10,101 children, of whom 54% were girls and 46% were boys. Issues covered in this survey were children's patterns of involvement and attitudes toward church services, Sunday schools, kids clubs and youth groups. In addition, motivations for attendance and the faith of children were explored. The results showed that the majority (82%) of Australian children who participated in the survey 'always' or 'mostly' liked the church services that they attended and 88% 'always or mostly' liked the children's activities that they attended. The level of importance that children themselves placed on God, on Jesus and on their spiritual lives was positively related to the frequency with which they attended church, whether they liked going to church and the predisposition that they had towards dropping out of church. The report also showed that parents have a central role in the



development of faith. The authors concluded that the practice of family prayer times, the encouragement of a personal devotional life for children, and parents simply being prepared to talk with their children about faith are all aspects that are positively related to higher levels of belief and a more positive attitude toward and involvement in church life.

In his book *Reaching and keeping tweenagers*, Brierley (2002) reported on an enquiry that drew together questionnaire responses from three sources: 549 young people attending 123 churches; 327 young people attending various Christian youth organisations; and 1,296 young people attending secondary schools. The number of schools approached is variously described as just over 100 (p. 4) and 77 (p. 206), with two-thirds being willing to help (p. 4 and p. 206). All three datasets were analysed together, making interpretation somewhat problematic. From the combined dataset, 36% of the sample reported that they went to church regularly (although regularity was not defined), 18% said that they went occasionally, 22% said that they used to attend but had now lapsed, and 24% said that they had never attended church. Almost a quarter of the questions in the survey concerned tweenagers' experiences of and attitudes toward church. The analysis discussed the following issues: reasons why tweenagers do not go to church; reasons why tweenagers who used to attend church ceased to do so; what tweenagers like about the church; and why some tweenagers prefer not to let their friends know that they are churchgoers.

Brierley (2002, pp. 134-135) drew the following main conclusions about tweenagers' experience of the church. Not only parents, but also grandparents exercised a large influence on tweenagers. Those with highest school grades were more likely to be regular attenders. Churchgoing tweenagers enjoyed their church because of the people they met there. Tweenagers were not generally against the Christian faith, but they found difficulty in relating to the church. Many tweenagers stopped attending church at the time when they transferred to secondary school, feeling by that stage they 'had grown out of it'. Those not

going to church stayed away 'because they think it is boring, not cool, and frankly, can't be bothered'. Subsidiary reasons for tweenagers not going to church included not being able to get up early enough and lack of parental encouragement.

In their paper *Tweenagers in the church*, Francis and Craig (2006) reported on a survey among churchgoers under 15 years of age conducted alongside the Church Life Profile Study designed for use primarily in England (Churches Information for Mission, 2001). In this study they drew on information provided by 10,153 participants between the ages of 8 and 14 years. Of these participants 60% were girls and 40% were boys. In their analyses of these data, Francis and Craig (2006) placed core attention on the attitudinal dimension both for the retention of children and young people in the church and for their disengagement from church life. They argued that positive attitudes are associated with churchgoing and negative attitudes are associated with church-leaving and with non-participation in church life. In order to access the attitudinal dimension they proposed a new seven-item Scale of Attitude toward Church (SAAtC). Respondents were asked to respond either 'yes' or 'no' to the following items. When you go to church services, do you feel: God is there; you are learning more about God; bored; happy; interested; you belong there; safe. On the basis of responses to this Scale of Attitude toward Church, Francis and Craig (2006) drew six main conclusions:

First, the majority of tweenagers who continued to attend church felt positively about church. They felt that they belonged in their local church. They felt safe and they felt happy there. At the same time, one in four (26%) of the tweenagers who attended church were bored by their experience of churchgoing. Second, looking closely at the shifts across the age range from 8 to 14 years two main observations emerged. After the age of 10 there was significant decline in the numbers of tweenagers attending church. For every five 10-year-old tweenagers in church, there remained only two 14-year-old tweenagers. Moreover, even

among the tweenagers who remained churchgoers, attitude toward church became progressively less positive between the ages of 8 and 14 years. In other words, 14-year-old churchgoers held a less positive attitude toward church than was the case among 8-year-old churchgoers.

Third, throughout this age range, girls held a more positive attitude toward church than was the case among boys. In one sense this is not surprising, since a great deal of empirical data concerned with Christian belief and practice internationally indicates that women tend to be more religious than men (Francis, 1997; Francis & Penny, 2013). From a sociological perspective, it has been argued that the Christian churches have become increasingly a highly feminised environment from which men feel alienated (Brown, 2001). From a psychological perspective, it has been argued that the male leadership in many denominations currently model a feminine personality profile (Francis, Jones, Jackson, & Robbins, 2001; Robbins, Francis, Haley, & Kay, 2001).

Fourth, Francis and Craig's analyses set out to identify the features of worship services most clearly associated with the development and maintenance of a positive attitude toward church during the tweenage years. Three key features emerged from the data as being of particular significance. It is important for tweenage churchgoers to like the music, to like the leaders, and to feel part of the group.

Fifth, Francis and Craig's analyses set out to identify the types of worship services most clearly associated with the development and maintenance of a positive attitude toward church during tweenage years. Two key features emerged from the data as being of particular significance. The first feature is that tweenagers do not like being separated out from the rest of the local church to be catered for by services designed especially or exclusively for young people. A more positive attitude toward church is maintained by being part of 'all-age' or 'whole family' forms of service. The second feature is that tweenagers do not like being kept

exclusively within the context of the adult-orientated service. The needs of the tweenagers seem best served by services designed for all-age worship but which also make special provision for some age-related activities for the tweenage members. Sixth, Francis and Craig's analyses set out to evaluate the influence of peers and of parents on the development and maintenance of a positive attitude toward church during tweenage years. Two important points are highlighted by the data. The first point is that having friends attending the same church is really important to tweenagers, but that it makes no difference whether or not their parents attend *that* church. This finding has important strategy implications for churches wishing to develop a strong ministry among tweenagers. The important clue seems to be to nurture strong peer groups. Nurturing such groups requires skilled and committed leaders trained for working among this age-group. The second point is that parents play a crucial role through what they do and what they model outside their pattern of church attendance. The maintenance of a positive attitude toward church during the tweenage years is associated with having parents who support the faith in conversation and example at home. Churches who are seeking ways of retaining their tweenage members may wish to begin by working with parents and by helping parents to take a proper and informed role in the faith development of their tweenage children.

### **Research agenda**

A major strength of the study reported by Francis and Craig (2006) is that it placed the affective dimension of religion (the attitudinal dimension) at the heart of the exploration of research into the experience of young churchgoers. There are, however, two limitations with the data available to this study. The first weakness concerns the lack of information about the highly specific nature of the attitude scale employed by the study. It was created specifically for that study. The second weakness concerns the lack of information about the frequency of church attendance and consequently the impossibility of comparing the

predictors of individual differences in attitude with the predictors of individual differences in practice. The importance of comparing the predictors of the attitudinal and the behavioural dimensions of religiosity among young people was well documented by Francis and Gibson (1993) who noted that their:

findings also demonstrated that parents exerted a much clearer and more direct influence over their children's public and more overt religious practice than over their private and more covert religious attitude. (Francis & Gibson, 1993, p. 242)

The children's survey included in the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey provides an opportunity to address these two weaknesses, since this survey included both a measure of frequency of attendance and the well-established Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (as well as a scale of attitude toward church derived from the measure employed by the Church Life Profile in England in 2001). Inclusion of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity, first reported by Francis (1978a), allows this study conducted among young churchgoers in Australia to be contextualized within a long-standing and well-documented body of research concerned with establishing the correlates, consequences and antecedents of individual differences in the affective dimension of religion during childhood, adolescence and adulthood. While originally established for use among English-speaking communities, research using this instrument has now been facilitated within other linguistic communities, including translations into Arabic (Munayer, 2000), Czech (Francis, Quesnell, & Lewis, 2010), Chinese (Tiliopulous & Francis, 2013), Dutch (Francis & Hermans, 2000), Estonian (Elken, Francis, & Robbins, 2010), French (Lewis & Francis, 2003), German (Francis & Kwiran, 1999), Greek (Youtika, Joseph, & Diduca, 1999), Italian (Crea, Baioco, Ioverno, Buzzi, & Francis, 2014), Norwegian (Francis & Enger, 2002), Portugese (Ferreira & Neto, 2002), Romanian (Francis, Ispas, Robbins, Ilie, & Iliescu, 2009), Serbian (Flere, Francis, & Robbins 2011), Slovenian (Flere, Klanjsek, Francis, & Robbins, 2008), Spanish

(Campo-Arias, Oviedo, Dtaz, & Cogollo, 2006), Swedish (Eek, 2001), and Welsh (Evans & Francis, 1996). Francis (1978b), in the foundation paper introducing the measure of attitude toward Christianity, invited other researchers to collaborate in building up a body of interrelated studies based on common instrumentation. By the mid 1990s, Kay and Francis (1996) summarised about 100 studies that had begun to realise this vision and the number continues to grow. The 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey is now among them.

Against this background the aim of the present study is to assess peer and parental influence among young Australian churchgoers on three dependent measures, two attitudinal measures (attitude toward Christianity and attitude toward church) and one behavioural measure (frequency of attendance). Two hypotheses are being tested. First, following Francis and Gibson (1993), it is hypothesised that parental influence will be stronger on young people's behaviour than on their attitudes. Second, following Francis and Craig (2006), it is hypothesised that peer influence will be stronger than parental influence on young people's attitudes.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

The Australian National Church Life Survey is now a well-established instrument for assessing congregational opinions and attitudes across a wide range of Christian denominations. Surveys have been conducted in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2011, and the findings have been widely disseminated (Kaldor, Bellamy, Correy, & Powell, 1992; Kaldor, Bellamy, Moore, Powell, Castle, & Correy, 1995; Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Hughes, & Castle, 1997; Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell, Castle, & Hughes, 1999; Kaldor, Dixon, Powell, Bellamy, Hughes, Moore, & Dalziel, 1999; Bellamy, Cussen, Sterland, Castle, Powell, & Kaldor, 2006; Kaldor & McLean, 2009; Powell, Bellamy, Sterland, Jacka, Pepper and Brady, 2012). In 2011, 3,100 local churches from 23 denominations took part in the National Church

Life Survey, which represents 25% of the estimated number of local churches in Australia (not including Orthodox, independent and house churches). The 2011 National Church Life Survey included the option of a special questionnaire styled 'Children's survey for 8 to 14 year olds'. Participating congregations were invited to distribute these questionnaires among young people within the target age group attending either 'church groups for children and youth' or 'church worship services or mass'. Young participants were assured of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. They were instructed not to write their name on the questionnaire.

### **Participants**

The present analyses were conducted on data provided by the young people who attended church worship services or mass. Of the 6,256 participants, 3,296 were attending Catholic churches, 835 Anglican churches, 777 Baptist or Churches of Christ churches, 604 Uniting Church churches, 189 Lutheran churches, 169 Pentecostal churches, and 320 other Protestant churches, with the remaining 66 attending unspecified congregations. In terms of sex, 2,954 participants were male, 3,265 were female, and 37 did not disclose their sex. In terms of age, 809 were 8 years old, 909 were 9 years old, 990 were 10 years old, 1,023 were 11 years old, 985 were 12 years old, 796 were 13 years old, 668 were 14 years old, and 76 did not disclose their age.

### **Instrument**

In addition to denomination, sex and age, the following data from the questionnaire are employed in the analyses.

*Attitude toward church* was assessed by a modified form of the instrument proposed by Francis and Craig (2006). This revised Scale of Attitude toward Church (SAAtC) invited participants to respond on a three-point scale (often, sometimes, never) to the following six

items. When you go to church services or mass do you: feel God is there; feel bored; feel you are learning more about God; feel you belong; feel happy; feel safe?

*Attitude toward Christianity* was assessed by a modified form of the short-form of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (FSAC) as documented by Francis, Greer, and Gibson (1991) and Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Lester and Brown (1995). This instrument invited participants to respond on a five-point scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree strongly) to seven items: I know that Jesus helps me; I think going to church is a waste of my time; God helps me to lead a better life; God means a lot to me; prayer helps me a lot; I know that Jesus is very close to me; I think the Bible is helpful to my life.

*Church attendance frequency* was assessed on a four-point scale (every week, most weeks, some weeks, hardly ever/never).

*Parental influence* was assessed by three questions: Parental religious practice was assessed by the question, 'Do your parents come to church a lot?', rated by the following four responses: yes, mum and dad both come a lot; yes, only mum does; yes, only dad does; no. Parental encouragement was assessed by the question, 'Do you ever talk to your family about God?', rated on a four-point scale: often, sometimes, hardly ever, never. Parental pressure was assessed by the question, 'Do you go to church because your parents want you to go?', rated on a three-point scale: yes, mostly; yes, partly; no.

*Peer influence* was assessed by two questions. The first question asked, 'Do you have any close friends here at church?', rated on a four-point scale: yes, lots, more than 10; yes, between 3 and 10 friends; yes, one or two; no, none at all. The second question asked, 'Do you go to church because you want to be with your friends?', rated on a three-point scale: yes, mostly; yes, partly; no.

### **Data analysis**



The data were analysed by the SPSS package, using the frequency, reliability, correlation and regression routines.

### **Results and discussion**

The first step of data analysis was descriptive and examined the frequencies of the main variables. In terms of frequency of attendance, the majority of young churchgoers attended service every week (51%) or most weeks (32%), with 17% attending some weeks. In terms of parental church attendance, 87% of young churchgoers said mum comes a lot, 70% said dad comes a lot, and 8% said neither parent did. Another way of presenting these data highlights that for 66% of young churchgoers both parents attend a lot, for 22% just mother attended a lot and for 5% just attended father a lot. In terms of parental encouragement, 31% of young churchgoers talked to their family about God often, while 55% did so sometimes, 11% did so hardly ever, and 2% never did. In terms of parental pressure, 29% of young churchgoers said that they *mostly* go to church because their parents want them to do so, 37% said that was *partly* the case and 33% said that was not their reason for attendance. In terms of peer influence, 15% of young churchgoers said that they have no close friends at church, 33% have one or two close friends at church, 36% have between three and ten close friends at church, and 16% have more than ten close friends at church. At the same time, 9% of young churchgoers said that they *mostly* go to church because they want to be with their friends, 31% said that was *partly* the case and 60% said that was not their reason for attendance.

- insert tables 1 and 2 about here -

The second step of data analysis was concerned to examine the psychometric properties of the two attitude scales. Table 1 presents the scale properties of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity for male and female young churchgoers separately, in terms of the item endorsement (as the sum of the agree strongly and agree responses) and in terms of the correlation between each individual item and the sum of the remaining items, together

with the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). These data demonstrate highly satisfactory alpha coefficients for both males and females together with a high level of positive item endorsement. Table 2 presents the scale properties of the Scale of Attitude toward Church for male and female young churchgoers separately, in terms of the correlation between each individual item and the sum of the remaining five items, together with the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). These data demonstrate satisfactory alpha coefficients for both males and females, well in excess of DeVellis' (2003) proposed threshold of .65, together with quite a high level of positive item endorsement.

- insert table 3 about here -

The third step of data analysis was concerned to examine the bivariate correlations between age and sex and the variables concerned with church attendance, religious attitudes, parental influence and peer influence. In the interpretation of these correlations it is important to keep in mind the fact that the sample comprises young churchgoers rather than young people in general. These are the young people who continue with church attendance, with the consequence that in this sample there are more girls than boys and more young children (8 year olds) than older children (14 year olds). Five main points emerge from the correlation matrix presented in table 3. First, while sex is not a predictor of frequency of attendance in this sample, it is a significant predictor of religious attitude with female young churchgoers recording significantly higher scores on the measures of both attitude toward Christianity and attitude toward church. Female young churchgoers are more likely to talk to their family about God and less likely to attend church for external reasons, either because their parents want them to do so, or because they want to be with their friends.

Second, age operates in different directions in relation to religious practice and religious attitudes. Although the older young people who stick with church tend to attend *more* frequently, they also tend to hold *less* favourable attitudes both toward Christianity and

toward church. As young churchgoers mature they are less likely to attend church for external reasons, either because their parents want them to do so, or because they want to be with their friends.

Third, parental church attendance is a stronger predictor of the frequency of child church attendance than of religious attitudes, either in terms of attitude toward Christianity or in terms of attitude toward church. On the other hand, having close friends at church is a stronger predictor of child religious attitudes (both attitude toward Christianity and attitude toward church) than of religious practice (child frequency of attendance).

Fourth, young people who go to church mostly because their parents want them to go have a slightly lower rate of attendance ( $r = .05$ ) but a much less positive attitude toward Christianity ( $r = .27$ ) and a much less positive attitude toward church ( $r = .28$ ). Moreover young people who go to church mostly because their parents want them to go also have fewer close friends at church and are less likely to talk to their family about God.

Fifth, the connections between the two measures of religious attitudes and the one measure of religious practice are also revealing. The two attitude measures (attitude toward Christianity and attitude toward church) are highly correlated ( $r = .66$ ), supporting the view that both measures access highly similar domains (the affective dimension of religion). At the same time the correlation is not so high that it makes one of the measures redundant. The correlations between frequency of attendance and the two attitude measures are relatively low ( $r = .16$  in both cases), supporting the view that these two dimensions of religiosity are related but largely distinct.

- insert table 4 about here -

The fourth step in data analysis completes the picture by employing multiple regression to examine the simultaneous and cumulative influence of sex, age, parental influence and peer influence on frequency of young churchgoers' church attendance, and on

young churchgoers' attitude toward Christianity and attitude toward church. In establishing these regression models, fixed order entry was employed, entering personal factors first (sex and age), parental factors second (father's church attendance, mother's church attendance, attending church to meet parental expectation, and talking to their family about God), and peer factors third (having close friends at church and attending church to be with their friends). These data are presented in table 4. Three main points emerge from these data.

First, in terms of frequency of attendance, parental influence emerges as the stronger factor. More frequent attendance is associated with mother attending church ( $\beta = .21$ ) and with father attending church ( $\beta = .18$ ). These two factors operate cumulatively, with the stronger influence being when both parents attend church. Parental encouragement as reflected in talking with family about God offers additional influence ( $\beta = .13$ ). So in this sense, most frequent attendance is found among young churchgoers whose mother and father both attend church and who talk about God with their family. On the other hand, parental pressure is slightly counterproductive. Young people who attend church *mostly* because their parents want them to go end up attending a little less frequently ( $\beta = -.04$ ).

Second, in terms of attitude toward church, parental church attendance fades into insignificance, with neither mother's attendance ( $\beta = .01$ ) nor father's attendance ( $\beta = .02$ ) being statistically significant. What becomes much more influential, however, are parental encouragement (in a positive direction) and parental pressure (in a negative direction). Young churchgoers who talk with their family about God hold a significantly more positive attitude toward church ( $\beta = .24$ ). Young churchgoers who attend *mostly* because their parents want them to do so hold a significantly less positive attitude toward church ( $\beta = -.24$ ). Peer influence also has a part to play in shaping young churchgoers' attitudes toward church in a way that was not evident in shaping their frequency of attendance. Young churchgoers who have close friends at church hold a significantly more positive attitude toward church ( $\beta =$

.17). On the other hand attending church to be with friends as a key motive for attendance has a small but significant negative influence on attitude toward church ( $\beta = -.06$ ). Among young churchgoers age and sex are also significant predictors of attitude toward church in ways that they are not significant predictors of patterns of attendance. Girls hold a more positive attitude toward church than boys ( $\beta = .07$ ) and younger participants hold a more positive attitude toward church than older participants ( $\beta = -.12$ ). These two findings are consistent with a large body of research concerning sex differences in religiosity (Francis, 1997; Francis & Penny, 2013) and with age trends in religiosity during childhood and adolescence (Kay & Francis, 1996).

Third, in terms of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity, these data add to a growing body of knowledge concerning the correlates, antecedents and consequences of individual differences in religious affect. Among young people between the ages of 8 and 14 years who have maintained the practice of church attendance, the most significant predictor of also retaining a positive attitude toward Christianity is being able to talk about God at home ( $\beta = .31$ ). Compared with talking about God at home, father's church attendance ( $\beta = .03$ ) and mother's church attendance ( $\beta = .06$ ) exert only weak influence. The second strongest positive influence is having friends at church ( $\beta = .12$ ). At the same time, the regression model draws attention to two strong negative influences. Even among the young people who continue to attend church increasing age accompanies deterioration of attitude toward Christianity ( $\beta = -.21$ ). It is here too that parental pressure to attend church is significantly counterproductive. Young people who attend church mostly because their parents want them to do so record a significantly less positive attitude toward Christianity ( $\beta = -.24$ ).

### **Conclusion**

The present study was established within the context of previous empirical research

focusing on the experiences, attitudes and beliefs of young churchgoers. Building on previous evidence, the present study distinguished between two aspects of young churchgoers' religiosity, the behavioural dimension (accessed through frequency of attendance) and the affective dimension (accessed through attitude toward church and attitude toward Christianity), and two sources of influence that may help to shape these dimensions of religiosity (parents and peers). In the light of previous research two hypotheses were advanced: that parental influence will be stronger on young people's behaviour than on their attitudes; and that peer influence will be stronger than parental influence on young people's attitudes than on their behaviour. Data provided by the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey allowed these broad hypotheses to be nuanced by distinguishing between three kinds of parental influence (attendance, encouragement and pressure) and two kinds of peer influence (having friends at church and going to church primarily to be with friends). Using these nuanced indicators within regression models both offers perspective on the hypotheses advanced from the earlier literature and offers sharper hypotheses for further research.

In a sense the basic correlation matrices support both of the original hypotheses, the correlations between parental attendance and frequency of their children's attendance were stronger than the correlations between parental attendance and their children's attitudes. At the same time, the correlations between having close friends at church and attitudes were stronger than the correlation between having close friends at church and frequency of attendance. The correlation matrix, however, suggests that matters are more complex than this and this complexity is clarified by the regression models.

What these new data have shown is that parental influence needs to be conceptualised more widely than simply through indicators of frequency of practice. The introduction of measures of parental encouragement and parental pressure sharpens the research perspective considerably. The regression model predicting frequency of attendance confirms the primary

importance of parental attendance, but indicates that the influence of their attendance is enhanced by encouragement as reflected in opportunities for parents and children to talk about God. There is also some warning that perceived parental pressure to attend church may be counterproductive and reduce child frequency of attendance. At the same time, there is a small indication that having close friends at church can be important too.

The new data are, however, particularly helpful in illuminating the factors involved in shaping the religious attitudes of young churchgoers. On this account, parental practice is a matter overshadowed by parental approaches to nurturing the faith of their children. Parental encouragement, in the sense of offering opportunities to talk about God, is the key positive factor influencing positive attitudes. Parental pressure, in the sense of having children go to church not because they themselves want to go but because their parents want them to go, is the key negative factor influencing negative attitudes. Having friends at church also exerts a greater influence on promoting positive attitudes than it does on promoting frequent attendance. These findings have both practical implications for the way in which churches view ministry with young people and for the way in which future surveys among young churchgoers may be shaped.

In terms of church practice, churches would be advised to give closer attention to listening to the underlying attitudes of young churchgoers rather than resting content with observing their outer practice and participation. Taking the religious attitudes of young churchgoers seriously would lead to developing two practical strategies informed by these data. The first strategy involves investing in parents as the primary Christian educators of their children. Parents need help in initiating and responding to conversations with their children about God. Parents who can do that seem to help their children develop more positive attitudes toward church and toward Christianity. The second strategy involves recognising the importance of peer friendship networks within the church for young people.

For churches where there are a number of young people, their strategy may involve maximising opportunities for young people to develop peer friendship networks within the church. For churches where there are very few young people, this strategy may involve exploring collaboration between churches in this area of ministry.

In terms of future surveys among young churchgoers, these findings draw attention to the benefit of fuller conceptualisation and operationalisation of indicators of parental influence and of peer influence. A future survey of young churchgoers that included fuller and balanced measures of encouragement and pressure in respect of both peers and parents could contribute significantly to the science of Christian nurture and the development of religious attitudes.



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Table 1

*Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity: scale properties*

Scale item	male		female	
	<i>r</i>	%	<i>r</i>	%
I know that Jesus helps me	.72	90	.72	93
I think going to church is a waste of time*	.48	9	.45	5
God helps me to lead a better life	.74	89	.74	92
God means a lot to me	.79	89	.77	92
Prayer helps me a lot	.74	89	.71	84
I know that Jesus is very close to me	.78	78	.76	89
I think the Bible is helpful to my life	.73	84	.71	79
Alpha coefficient	.89		.89	

Note. \*this negative item was reverse coded to compute *r*

% = sum of agree strongly and agree responses

*r* = correlation between individual item and sum of the other items

Table 2

*Scale of Attitude toward Church: scale properties*

	male		female	
	<i>r</i>	%	<i>r</i>	%
When you go to church services or mass do you...?				
Feel God is there	.54	63	.48	66
Feel bored*	.43	23	.41	30
Feel you are learning about God	.59	68	.53	72
Feel you belong	.61	66	.56	72
Feel happy	.65	68	.59	77
Feel safe	.48	84	.43	90
Alpha coefficient	.79		.75	

Note. \*this negative item was reverse coded to compute *r*

% = often

*r* = correlation between individual item and sum of the other items



Table 3

*Correlation matrix*

	church attendance	attitude Christianity	attitude church	attendance for friends	close friends at church	talk to family about God	attendance for parents	father attendance	mother attendance	age
sex	-.01	.09***	.11***	-.04**	.03*	.05***	-.09***	-.04***	-.01	.01
age	.11***	-.18***	-.08***	-.06***	.03*	-.03*	-.14***	.03**	.02	
mother attendance	.27***	.11***	.07***	.01	.08***	.21***	.05***	.30***		
father attendance	.29***	.12***	.06***	.02	.05***	.19***	.03**			
attendance for parents	-.05***	-.27***	-.28***	.12***	-.12***	-.13***				
talk to family about God	.21***	.38***	.31***	-.01	.16***					
close friends at church	.08***	.18***	.22***	.27***						
attendance for friends	-.01	-.02*	-.04**							
attitude church	.16***	.66***								
attitude Christianity	.16***									

\*p &lt; .05; \*\*p &lt; .01; \*\*\*p &lt; .001

Table 4

*Regression*

dependent variables	predictor variables	R <sup>2</sup>	Increase			Beta	t	p<
			R <sup>2</sup>	F	p<			
church attendance	sex	.000	.000	1.02	NS	-.01	-1.17	NS
	age	.012	.012	75.72	.001	.09	8.08	.001
	father attendance	.085	.073	490.45	.001	.18	14.41	.001
	mother attendance	.134	.049	345.53	.001	.21	17.15	.001
	attendance for parents	.138	.004	26.57	.001	-.04	-3.03	.01
	talk to family about God	.154	.017	120.30	.001	.13	10.55	.001
	close friends at church	.155	.001	4.28	.05	.03	2.43	.05
	attendance for friends	.155	.000	2.35	NS	-.02	-1.53	NS
attitude toward church	sex	.011	.011	67.73	.001	.07	5.81	.001
	age	.019	.008	46.04	.001	-.12	-10.44	.001
	father attendance	.024	.006	34.28	.001	.02	1.60	NS
	mother attendance	.026	.002	12.77	.001	.01	1.19	NS
	attendance for parents	.114	.087	589.59	.001	-.24	-19.65	.001
	talk to family about God	.177	.063	458.23	.001	.24	19.69	.001
	close friends at church	.199	.022	166.81	.001	.17	13.83	.001
	attendance for friends	.203	.003	24.46	.001	-.06	-4.95	.001
attitude toward Christianity	sex	.008	.008	48.83	.001	.05	4.75	.001
	age	.041	.033	210.44	.001	-.21	-19.31	.001
	father attendance	.053	.012	80.72	.001	.03	2.82	.01
	mother attendance	.063	.010	63.41	.001	.06	5.30	.001
	attendance for parents	.153	.090	655.01	.001	-.24	-21.05	.001
	talk to family about God	.250	.096	789.14	.001	.31	26.72	.001
	close friends at church	.260	.010	85.25	.001	.12	9.89	.001
	attendance for friends	.262	.002	12.92	.001	-.04	-3.59	.001