



**Finding
Jesus**

Finding Jesus

Supplemental findings for those aged 65 and above

evangelical alliance
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Introduction

We were interested to know how far the faith journeys of older people compared to those of younger generations. It is relatively unusual for people to come to faith in Jesus in later life, but of the 280 who completed the *Finding Jesus* survey, 25 were aged 65 or above (including five who were 75+). Although this is a fairly small number, it can still provide some useful insights into the priorities and experiences of those coming to faith at a more mature age.

This document is a supplement to the main *Finding Jesus* report. It won't repeat everything in that. Instead, it contains some of the variations that emerged from responses given by these older participants. It highlights some interesting patterns that those ministering to that age group might like to consider.

Initial reflections

1. It was encouraging to note that of the 25 responses, half were men.

As we've noted elsewhere, it's interesting that men of all ages appear to be bucking habitual patterns of religiosity and are coming to faith in Jesus. With more time on their hands as retirees and potentially widowers, there is an opportunity for older men to have time to consider things they may not have done previously.

2. The majority of participants of this age have some sort of Christian heritage or background.

67% described themselves as "cultural Christians" (compared to the average of 38%). Similarly, 63% had Christian parents, 50% had attended Sunday school as children and 46% had other family members who were Christian. Only three individuals had no Christian background at all. Culturally, older people are far more likely to have historic experience of Christianity than younger generations, something which can be both a help and a hindrance in their coming to a meaningful faith in Jesus. The fact that on average their journey to find Jesus was longer indicates that there is more to resolve or relearn for them. 42% took three or more years to do so, compared to the average of 23% across all age ranges.

What prompted their interest in Jesus?

We were fascinated to notice that the things which began an exploration of Christian faith for them were markedly different to younger groups. Rather than personal struggles or spiritual experiences, their responses fell into two clear categories.

What prompted your interest in Jesus?

(Select any that apply)



Firstly, the witness of Christians. 46% said “a Christian spoke to me about their faith”, 33% noted “the actions of a Christian towards me” and 29% said “seeing the impact of Christian faith on someone I know”. Rather than shying away from conversations about Jesus with older people, it would seem that people actively sharing their faith in both words and actions can have real impact. One commented, “My sister-in-law inspired me. Despite going through very difficult circumstances, she evidently had something that I did not possess.” Another said, “A friend I met through sports has introduced me to a small group of friends who are patiently helping me explore the next steps in my journey.”

Secondly, existential questioning was the next most significant set of responses: “I was looking for meaning” (29%), “I wanted to be a better person” (25%) and “intellectual curiosity” (25%). It’s understandable that as people reach older age, they ask these sorts of questions. Rather than a desire for help with practical difficulties – which was common with other age groups – between a quarter and a third were pondering deeper questions, which the gospel provided answers to.

It is easy to assume that older people have made up their minds about faith and are set in their worldviews, and this may lead to us not broaching the subject. However, these findings suggest that encouraging older believers to be upfront about their faith and proactive in speaking with their friends can be really significant. Likewise, inspiring younger Christians to serve family members and neighbours and talk openly about faith at least gives the opportunity for conversation to begin. Not everyone will be interested in Jesus, but some are clearly asking deep questions, and someone needs to instigate the conversation!

What was challenging about the journey to finding faith in Jesus?

Like most other groups, “challenging” (42%) and “encouraging” (33%) were common descriptions of their exploration of Christianity. However, “an adventure” was the response of one third, and “surprising” by a similar number. It seems that discovering who Jesus actually is and what faith in Him means was something of a revelation, potentially challenging what they had assumed, learned, or experienced as children.

The following chart highlights the top four challenges these participants gave, plus an interesting anomaly.

What were the challenges as you explored Christian faith?

(Select any that apply)



65+

Whole sample

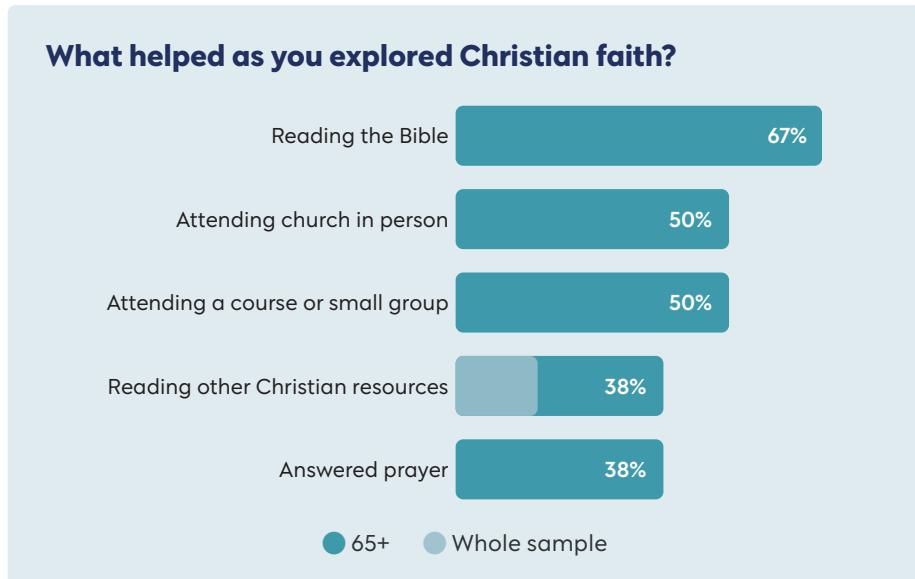


The things reported as challenging were similar to the sample as a whole: “understanding the Bible” (54%), “lifestyle changes” (42%), “challenging aspects of Christian belief, eg suffering, hell, other religions, sexual ethics etc” (38%) and “believing I could be forgiven” (38%). However, it’s important to notice the significance of the Bible. Given so many had a faith background it might be easy to assume that they were familiar with scripture. Clearly that’s not the case, or at least they are not comfortable with it. Bible study with older people is evidently important.

It’s also interesting to note that they were significantly more likely than other groups to struggle to understand the relevance of Jesus to their lives. This might be a response to their earlier experiences of church which ‘inoculated’ them against understanding the real significance of the gospel. Equally, having lived most of their adult life without Jesus, perhaps seeing the point in changing now is hard. It is well documented that people typically become more resistant to change as they age, and making the decision to follow Jesus is a dramatic shift which involves reconsidering their entire life. This might well impact the way we choose to communicate the gospel to older people. What does Jesus mean to, have for, and ask of them in this later life stage?

What helped as they explored Christian faith?

Invited to choose from multiple options, older participants reported the following, including an interesting anomaly.



“Reading the Bible” was chosen by a huge 67%. “Attending church in person” and “attending a course or small group” were both important to half. Having spent a whole life assuming you knew or ignoring the subject of Jesus, actually reading and understanding scripture was clearly impactful for a large majority. It’s also interesting how important courses exploring Christian basics were. Clearly there is a lot to process and talk about for older people on a faith journey.

A unique response they gave was the usefulness of reading other Christian resources (eg books, magazines etc). 38% said this had been helpful, significantly more than other groups (15% overall). We must be careful not to assume that older people don’t access online resources, but this finding shows that they are more likely to engage with printed literature in their explorations of faith than those who are younger. As well as putting energy into digital content, for those focusing on reaching older people with the gospel, finding or producing appropriate printed resources is something to consider.

Who helped most and what did they do?

When asked about who had most helped in their exploration of Christian faith, their top responses paralleled the sample as a whole: people they had met at church (48%), close friends (43%), and those they had been in small groups or on courses with (35%).

Who helped most in your faith journey?

(Select any that apply)

People from church (not leader) 48%

Close friend 43%

Small group of Christians 35%

Asked what they had done that was helpful, the answer was simple – talked. This adds further weight to the idea that it takes older people longer to explore, unpick, discover and make sense of the gospel, and that conversation in that processing is crucial. For example, one said they were most helped by, “a friend who gave me gentle support, encouragement and understanding. Their patience was impressive as I questioned everything.” Another cited, “a new church friend who was very supportive and encouraging, who was not judgemental, who was patient and tried to answer any questions I had as honestly as possible.”

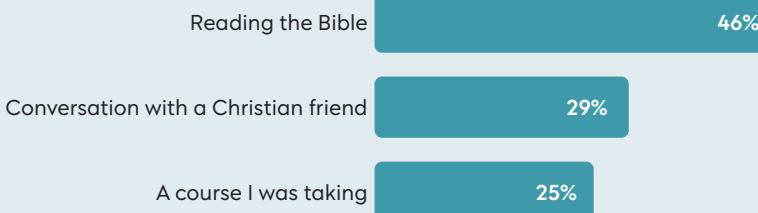
Again, this is a wonderful opportunity for older people in our churches to witness to, discuss with, and disciple their peers. Gently adapting social activities like coffee mornings to include bigger topics and ‘God talk’ provides a way to initiate that. Courses for seniors, hosted by seniors, would also be a wonderful way to help people with the processing they need to do to make sense of faith. Literature and resources not dependant on technology are more accessible for many, and hospitality, genuine interest, time for conversation about meaningful matters, and prayer are all things that churches could encourage to reach this older generation.

What finally prompted them to make the decision to follow Jesus?

Participants were invited to select up to three factors that had finally caused them to decide to follow Jesus. In line with what had been helpful on the journey, the top answers they gave were:

What finally prompted you to decide to follow Jesus?

(Choose up to three)



“Reading the Bible” was by far the most frequent answer (46%). “A conversation with a Christian friend” (29%) and “a course I was taking” (25%) were the next most common. Although a few cited direct spiritual experiences or answered prayer, Jesus is clearly meeting many older people in and through scripture. Likewise, just as conversation with believing friends instigated the interest of many, so those conversations are what ultimately led people to a point of decision, and related to learning and discussion, courses were a catalyst for the conversion of a quarter.

When asked what one or two things most drew them to Jesus, it was striking to note that only six of the 25 individuals selected “I no longer need to fear death and judgement”. Instead they were most drawn to:

- Jesus loves me. (54%)
- The gospel is true, profound and beautiful. (46%)
- I could have hope and a purpose for my life and beyond. (42%)

Clearly, the desire to be loved transcends all ages and life stages, as does the desire for hope and purpose. Given the wider attitude of society to older people, it is easy to imagine that individuals can wonder about the purpose of this later chapter of their life. Since questions around meaning were a trigger for many to begin this faith journey, it makes sense that it is good news that Jesus offers them hope and purpose.

Similarly, given the considerable thinking, reading and processing demonstrated in their answers, reaching a point where they decide the gospel is true and identify its profound beauty also makes sense. Interestingly, they have this response in common with the very youngest participants (aged 18–24). Perhaps there is a way for churches to draw these very different and yet mutually truth-seeking generations together.

Since coming to faith

The experiences of these older respondents about their life and faith since deciding to become followers of Jesus broadly match the wider sample.

What one or two things have been most challenging since coming to faith in Jesus?



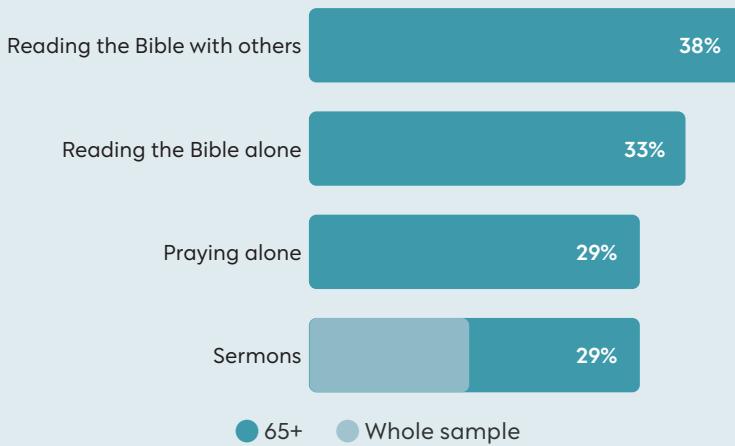
Encouraged to select any factor that was a challenge, 54% of older participants reported an ongoing wrestle with understanding the Bible, and 38% included changes in lifestyle. But asked what had been most challenging, as shown above, learning to pray had been hardest for a third.

We were struck by their accounts of relational complications. Nearly a third reported that people had responded negatively to their conversion. Whether this is younger family, spouses or friends is unclear but significant. Similarly, they were twice as likely as other groups to report struggles with the attitude of other Christians. Again, we don't know who or why, but a fifth said this had been particularly difficult for them.

In terms of what they had found helpful, like other age groups, praying and reading the Bible came out as most significant. The following chart shows the three most commonly selected factors, plus an anomaly.

What helped most in your faith journey?

(Select one or two)



For these older people, reading the Bible with others was one of the two most important factors for nearly 40%. For example, “A friend introduced us to *The Word One to One* John’s Gospel. Then Acts, Romans. He is continuing to help us read and study the Bible. We are a group of four.”

While older participants were only half as likely as younger participants to say worship had been helpful, they were twice as likely to report sermons as particularly helpful. Again, learning about the Bible and faith in a cognitive manner seems to have been the priority for a significant number, particularly in community. Learning with and from others appears to be really important.

Final reflections

It is wonderful that in retirement, people are finding a new life as disciples of Jesus. While 25 people is not a huge number to develop a solid theory from, their answers still provide food for thought about how to reach and disciple people in later life. The Bible is clearly a key factor. Discussion – whether with friends, leaders, or in small groups and on courses – is also significant for many. Some of those over 65 appear to be looking for meaning in this season of their lives and are willing to engage with things they had probably dismissed long ago. One lady summed it up like this: “My maternal grandmother took me to church and looked after me every holiday when I was little. After I turned away from my faith as a child, she always believed I would return to my faith but never put any pressure on me.”

It seems to us that encouraging Christians to take the initiative with older friends and relatives is key. Some will have more time to explore, read and discuss now. Bible study and courses can be significant and fruitful, but it takes time and patience to allow older people to work thorough their questions and reservations in order to meet Jesus in a meaningful and life-giving way.

Next steps

Join the Evangelical Alliance

The Evangelical Alliance is made up of hundreds of organisations, thousands of churches and tens of thousands of individuals, joined together for the sake of the gospel. Representing our members since 1846, the Evangelical Alliance is the oldest and largest evangelical unity movement in the UK.

United in mission and voice, we exist to serve and strengthen the work of the church in our communities and throughout society. Highlighting the significant opportunities and challenges facing the church today, we work together to resource Christians so that they are able to act upon their faith in Jesus and to speak up for the gospel, justice and freedom in their areas of influence.

Working across the UK, with offices in London, Cardiff, Stockport, Glasgow and Belfast, our members come together from across denominations, locations, age groups and ethnicities, all sharing a passion to know Jesus and make Him known.



As a membership organisation, the strength of our voice in government depends on how many individual members we have. Join us today and help us speak up on the issues that matter.

eauk.org/joinus

Good News People

Good News People is a project from the Evangelical Alliance to help us live as people of hope and stand firm on biblical truth.

Packed with astonishing and encouraging stories of God on the move, this suite of resources aims to encourage us with what God is doing and ask how we live in light of the rapidly changing world around us.

The cultural sands are shifting faster than ever before. What are the postures we need to hold as Christians in the days ahead? What will a thriving, growing church look like in the years to come?

We are good news people in a bad news world.

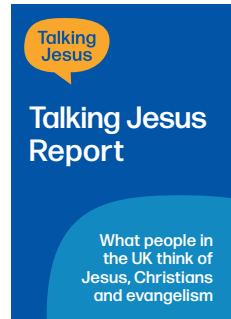
To find out more about this initiative, get hold of the book, listen to the podcast and access the resources, visit goodnewspeople.church

More research from the Evangelical Alliance

We believe good research gives us helpful insight into where God is at work and informs and inspires best practice in His church. *Finding Jesus* is one of a number of studies that we are engaged in to better understand the ever-changing landscape. For further insight see:

Talking Jesus

A research piece born out of a six-way partnership mapping the state of faith across the UK. Studies of thousands of UK adults, which ask them about their perceptions of Jesus, the church and Christians, as well as practising Christians' experiences of sharing their faith. talkingjesus.org



Changing Church

A regular survey of the membership of evangelical churches that studies discipleship, evangelism, attendance and giving habits amongst leaders and everyday Christians. eauk.org/changing-church

To keep up to date with these regular research pieces and more visit eauk.org/great-commission

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