

# Personal Spiritual Practices and Age among New Zealand Church Attenders

Barry McDonald<sup>1, 2</sup>

## Abstract

This article uses data from the New Zealand Church Life Survey to explore measures of personal spiritual practices among church attenders. Attention is focussed on the frequency of private devotions (and Bible reading in particular), frequency of attendance, percent of income given, and awareness of the presence of God in church, at work, in community and in nature. A particular interest is the changes in personal spiritual practice with age, as this has implications for the future of New Zealand Churches.

## Introduction

The main purpose of the Church Life Survey is to give church leaders immediate access to survey results for their own congregation. However it is hard to see trends without a broader context. This article uses composite data from across the whole survey to look for trends in the personal spiritual practices of New Zealand church attenders, and how they vary with age, for Catholics and Protestants.

Figure 1 gives an example of such a trend. It shows the percentage of attenders in each age group that performed some act of private devotions (e.g. prayer, meditation, reading the Bible or other spiritual literature etc.) every or most days (lower line) or at least a few times per week (upper line: percentage includes the previous one). A much smaller percentage of younger attenders have private devotions every/most days compared to older folk: the percentage is about halved, both for Protestants and Catholics.

It will be left to church leaders and other authors to consider the possible implications for churches, of a decline in the personal spiritual life of their attenders. This paper has the more limited role of attempting to explain the meaning of the survey results, and to consider other measures of personal spiritual practice and trends with age, as provided by the Church Life Survey. This cross-

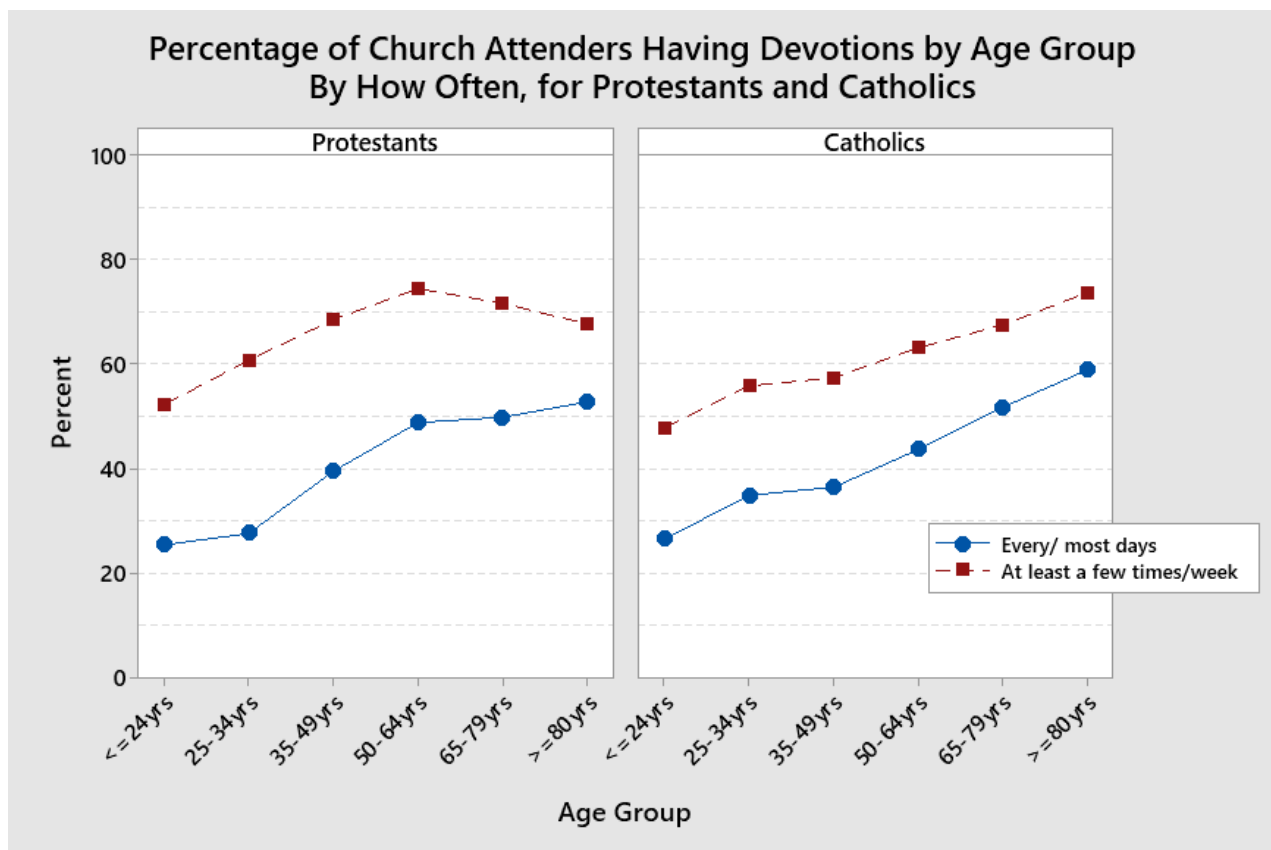
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<sup>1</sup> Church Life Survey New Zealand committee

<sup>2</sup> School of Mathematical and Computational Sciences, Massey University. Email b.mcdonald@massey.ac.nz

denominational analysis provides a context for church leaders to use in considering their own data. In particular, if their data shows a very different pattern to what they expect, then that may suggest areas for future focus.

**Figure 1**



Several researchers (e.g. Ward, 2013, Chapter 2) have argued that religion, in New Zealand and elsewhere, has become an increasingly private matter. Protestants have long advocated the importance of a personal faith and acts of personal spiritual practice (for example private prayer, Bible reading, regular church attendance, giving, a willingness to share one’s faith). Catholics have given somewhat more emphasis to corporate spirituality (attendance at Mass) and devotional readings, prayers and practices from church tradition. Another measure of personal spirituality is one’s reported level of awareness of God in different settings, from church to community, work and nature. For the sake of brevity, this paper just considers the scope and association of all these measures, and trends with age.

A further measure of personal spirituality includes engagement in social action (e.g. Taves, 2001). Attitudes to social action vary with the theological beliefs and priorities of church attenders. A

follow-on paper will consider the effect of denomination and theological belief (in terms of one's view of the Bible, and identification with various approaches to faith) on these measures of spiritual practice including social action.

Church Life Survey New Zealand have administered congregational surveys in 2001 (in association with NCLS in Australia), 2007, 2011, a 'lite' survey in 2018 and another NZ survey is planned for 2023. The present study looks at data insights from the 2007 (6368 attenders) and 2011 (20518 attenders) surveys. Although the data is over a decade old, it provides both useful insights and a baseline against which to compare the upcoming 2023 survey. Church attenders providing data in 2007 and 2011 were from Anglican (11.1%), Baptist (24.9%), Catholic (26.9%), Methodist (0.6%), Open Brethren (0.7%), Presbyterian (28.4%), Wesleyan Methodist (0.9%) and Union or Cooperating parishes (6.2%) in addition to individual congregations from Salvation Army, Congregational and Independent churches (total 0.3%).

## **Measures of Personal Spirituality**

### **1. Frequency of Private Devotions**

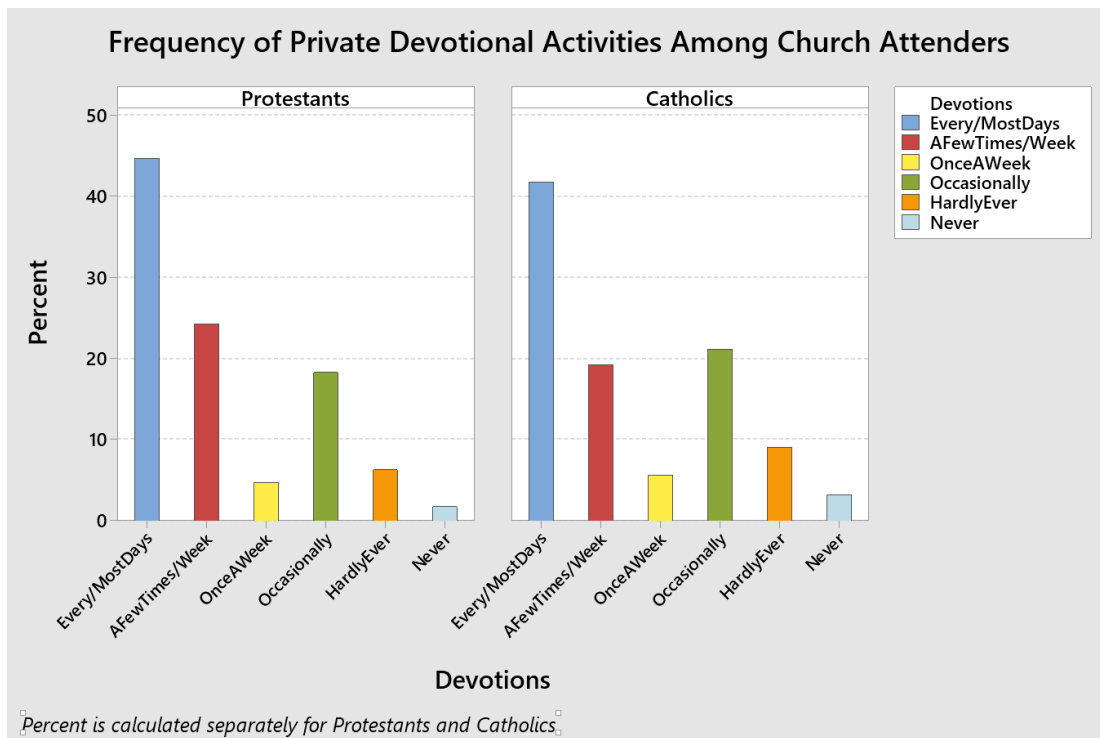
In the "You and your faith" section of the survey, attenders are asked the question C2: '**How often do you spend time in private devotional activities (e.g. prayer, meditation, reading the Bible alone)?**'. The answer options available, and percent of people choosing each option, are given in Table 1.

Figure 2 illustrates the answers separately for Protestant and Catholics. Putting the left two bars together, 69% of Protestants surveyed, and 61% of Catholics, spent time in private devotions at least a few times per week. The trends in Figure 1 are based on the first bar, and first two bars combined, divided across age.

**Table 1**

Question	Response options and percentages						Spearman Correlation With Devotions
	1. Every or most days	2. A few times a week	3. Once a week	4. Occasionally	5. Hardly ever	6. Never	
<b>C2. How often do you spend time in private devotional activities (e.g. prayer, meditation, reading the Bible alone) ?</b>	43.9	22.9	4.9	19.1	7.0	2.1	<b>0.63</b>
<b>C3. How often do you read the Bible on your own?</b>	25.6	18.6	5.8	27.0	15.4	7.8	
<b>A4. How often do you go to church services at this church or somewhere else?</b> *Excludes Visitors %	1. >Once Week 11.6	2. Every Week 72.5	3. 2-3 Times A Month 12.4	4. Once A Month 2.2	5. <Once A Month 1.0	6. Hardly Ever 0.3	<b>0.24</b>
<b>E5: About how much do you give financially to this congregation? (2011 survey only)</b> %	1. I give 10% or more of net income regularly 18.7	2. I give about 5% to 9% of net income regularly 24.9	3. I give less than 5% of net income regularly 25.7	4. I give a small amount whenever I am able 23.5	5. I do not contribute financially here 7.3		<b>0.25</b>
<b>D2: Which of the following best describes your readiness to talk to others about your faith?</b> %	1. I feel at ease talking about my faith and look for opportunities to do so 16.2	2. I mostly feel at ease talking about my faith and do if it comes up 54.5	3. I find it hard to talk about my faith in ordinary language 19.5	4. I do not like to talk about my faith; my life and actions are sufficient 9.2	5. I do not have faith, so the question is not applicable 0.6		<b>0.27</b>
<b>B8: How often is the presence of God evident in our church services?</b>	1. Nearly Always 47.8	2. Usually 33.2	3. Sometimes 13.6	4. Occasionally 4.47	5. Hardly Ever 1.0		<b>0.11</b>
<b>C6: I am aware of the presence of God in my work place</b>	26.6	28.1	25.2	12.8	7.3		<b>0.34</b>
<b>C7: I am aware of the presence of God in my community (eg sports club, shops, school)</b>	18.5	23.9	29.2	18.7	9.8		<b>0.28</b>
<b>C8: I am aware of the presence of God in nature (eg parks, sunsets, animals, plants)</b>	48.3	30.5	14.5	5.2	1.6		<b>0.28</b>
<b>Age group</b> %	Under 25 years 8.8	25 – 34 years 7.0	35 – 49 years 20.5	50 – 64 years 24.6	65 – 79 years 27.6	80 years or more 11.6	<b>-0.14</b>

**Figure 2**



## 2. Frequency of Bible Reading

Survey Question C3 was similar: **‘How often do you read the Bible on your own?’** In the past, ordinary Catholics were not encouraged to read the Bible for themselves, while Protestants were encouraged to do so. Despite more encouragement in recent decades, private reading of the Bible remains uncommon among Catholics (23% at least a few times per week as compared to 52% for Protestants surveyed.) Forty-three percent of Catholics would never or hardly ever read it (as compared to 16% of Protestants). It will be interesting to know if this remains the same in 2023.

Figure 3 splits the frequency of devotions by how often Bible reading is included (colour of bar). Sixty-five percent of those Protestants who have devotions every/most days include Bible reading every/most days, while the figure for Catholics is 26%. (The graph shows a few people claim to read the Bible on their own more frequently than they have private devotions: part of this inconsistency may be because they read it in a congregational setting, or they simply re-estimated how often they read it but did not change their answer to the previous question.) Since devotions often include Bible reading these variables are highly correlated.

**Figure 3**

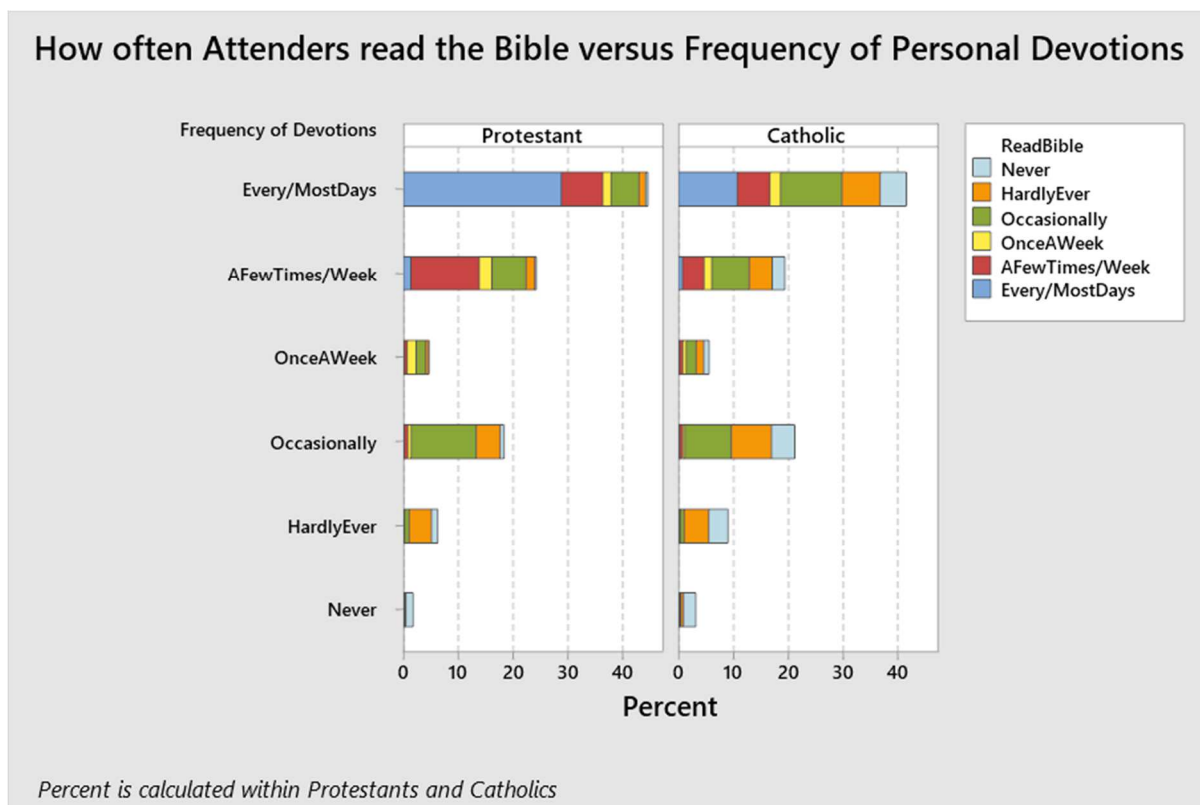
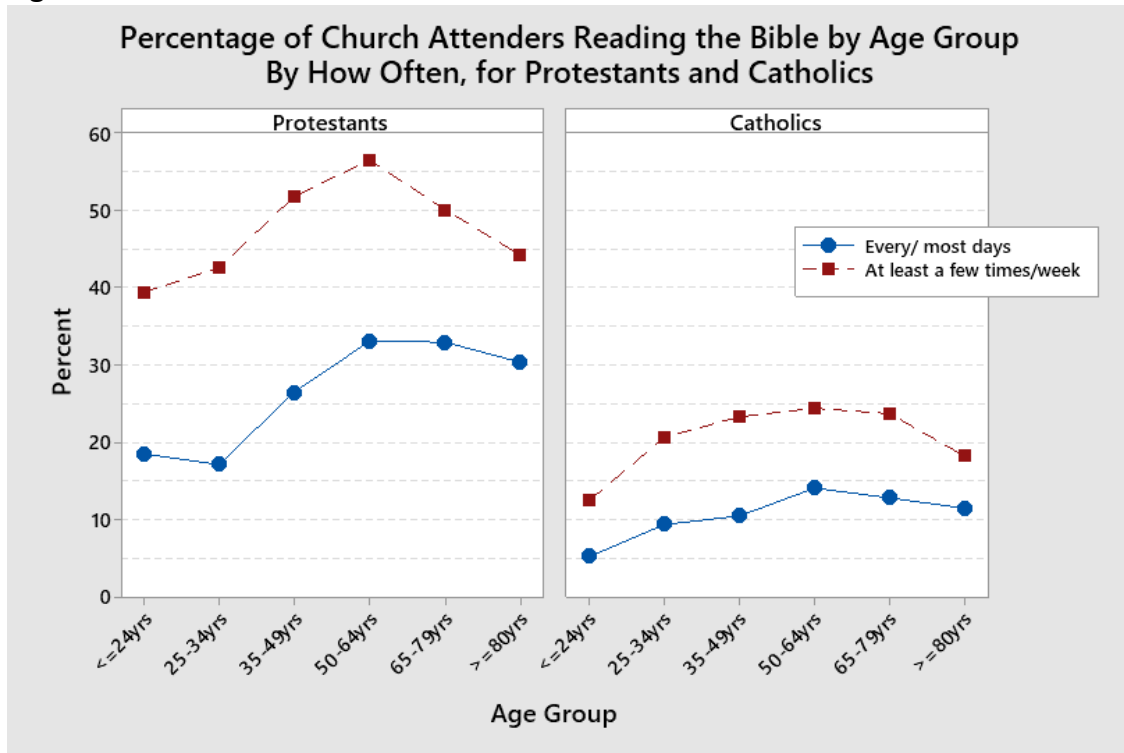


Figure 4 shows the frequency of Bible reading, by age group. Protestant may be concerned that less than 20% of under-35s read the Bible every/most days, and the similar decline in those reading it at least a few times per week. Biblical illiteracy, even among church attenders, brings susceptibility to extra-Biblical teaching. The peak age group for Bible reading (56% at least a few times per week) was the 50-64 year olds, who at the time of the survey were mostly Baby Boomers. Some of the lesser Bible reading in older age groups may be due to denominational factors and theological position. (The companion paper will show that older attenders in some churches are more likely to be theologically liberal, whereas younger church attenders are more likely to have a theologically conservative view of the Bible). Catholics are much less likely to read the Bible, but especially so among the young.

**Figure 4**



### 3. Frequency of church attendance

As shown in Table 1, question A4, 72.5% of survey respondents attend Church once a week. People who attend at least weekly had a much higher chance of being included in the survey, so this number greatly overstates the frequency of church attendance. Data from the New Zealand Election Study in 2011 indicates that 10.5% of adult New Zealanders attended religious services at least weekly, and a further 6.1% at least monthly (McDonald, 2017, Table 2). Nevertheless we can use the data to explore the relationships between church attendance, age, and frequency of devotions, among parishioners who happen to be in church any given week.

The multicoloured bars in Figure 5 show the percentage of people having private devotions with each given frequency, with separate bars according to how often they attend church, for Catholics and Protestants. For example out of Protestants who attend every week (second bar from the left), 47% had private devotions every / most day (lowest segment). The equivalent figure for Catholics was 39%. The graphs show a trend for decreasing attendance to accompany decreasing levels of private devotions.

It is helpful to have a rough number to measure the strength of association between ordered categories like the five levels of Devotions or the six levels of Attendance. Table 1 reports one such

number, the Spearman rank correlation, which here is a modest, but statistically significant, 0.24. Statistical significance means there is a definite trend that can't be just explained by chance. Although correlation is not the same thing as causation, it is a reasonable hypothesis that encouraging attenders to cultivate their spiritual life outside of church, would also increase their frequency of attendance.

**Figure 5**

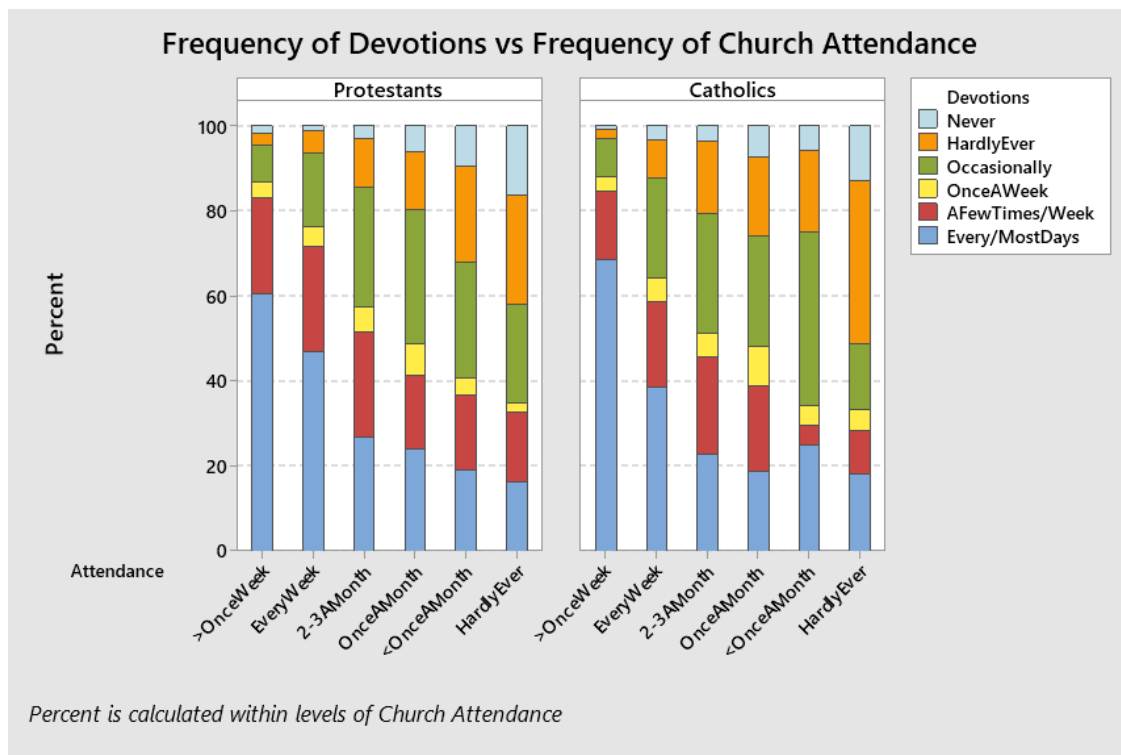
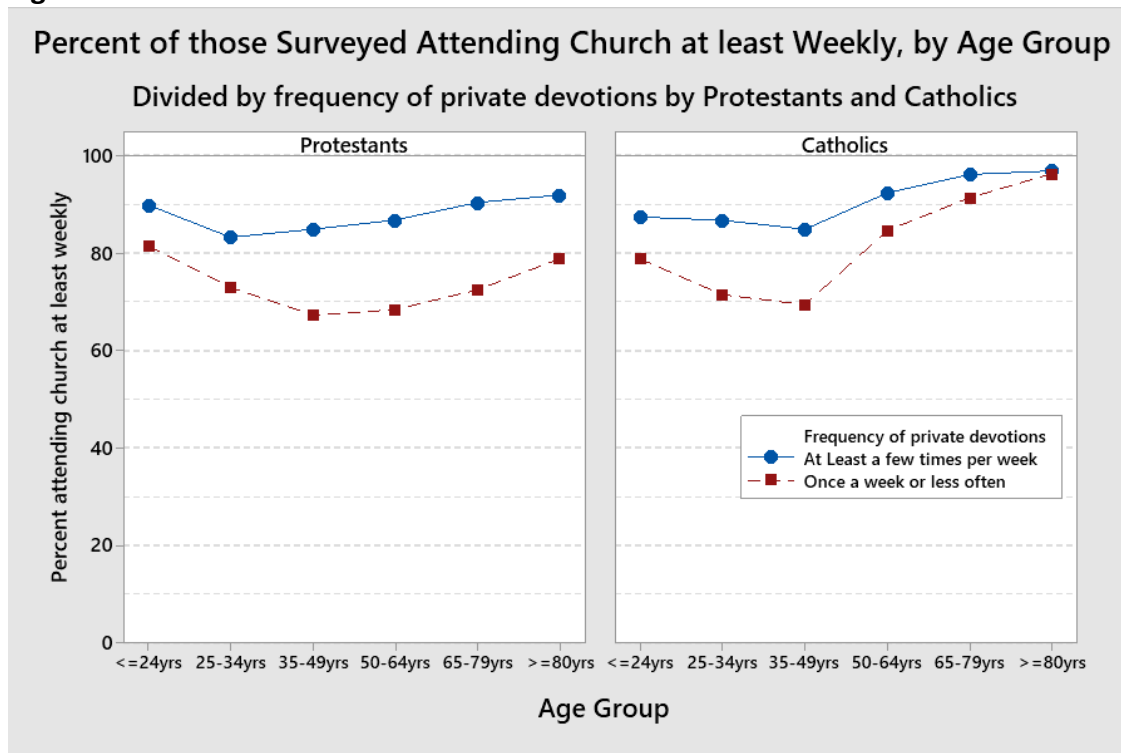


Figure 6 looks specifically at the percentage of those surveyed that attended church at least weekly. The data are divided by Catholic and Protestant, by age group of the person surveyed (horizontal axis) and by whether the person has private devotions at least a few times per week (top curve) or not (bottom curve). For example, for those surveyed in the 35 to 49 year age group, if the person had private devotions at least a few times per week then 85% of such respondents were at least weekly attenders (same for Protestant and Catholics). However if they only had devotions once a week or less, then the percent of weekly attenders dropped by more than 15% (to 67% for Protestants and 69% for Catholics). This is among attenders who were actually in church on the day of the survey. Older survey respondents were more likely to be at least weekly church attenders, especially for Catholics. The youngest survey respondents (24 years or less) were also more likely to be weekly church attenders, which may be family influence or personal enthusiasm. However this youngest age group comprised only 9% of the sample.

**Figure 6**



#### 4. Giving

Another aspect of personal spiritual practice is Giving. It is acknowledged this is a sensitive issue that respondents may choose not to answer. The Church Life Survey asks only about the percentage of the attender’s income given (so does not discriminate between rich and poor) and only in broad categories. The survey does not cover charitable giving outside the specific congregation or parish, nor does it include support that may be given in kind or in labour to benefit other members of the community. The definition of income is also left deliberately vague, and left to the attender to decide. (Ignored are such issues as whether it is percent of net or gross income, or how to regard benefits, capital gains, etc.) Despite this vagueness, the results are informative. The precise wording of the question and options is shown in Table 1 (question E5), along with the percentage of attenders choosing each option. Figure 7 shows the percentage choosing each option (height of each bar) differs considerably between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants most frequently gave 5-9% of their income to the church (29% of Protestants) while Catholics most frequently gave a small amount whenever they were able (38% of Catholics). The colours on the bars represent frequency of devotions, with the lowest bar representing devotions every or most days. For Protestants, the 63% of the first bar is in the lowest segment, i.e. 63% of those giving 10% or more of their income had private devotions every or most days, as compared to 48%

every/most days for those giving 5-9%, and a constant 32% for the other three giving categories. For Catholics, 56% of those giving 10% or more had private devotions every/most days, dropping to 49% for those giving 5-9%, 41% for those giving less than 5% regularly, 36% for those giving a small amount when they could, and 31% for those not giving at that congregation. The rank correlation between devotions and giving is 0.25, practically the same as between devotions and church attendance: in other words the strength of connection between devotions and giving is about the same as between devotions and attendance.

**Figure 7**

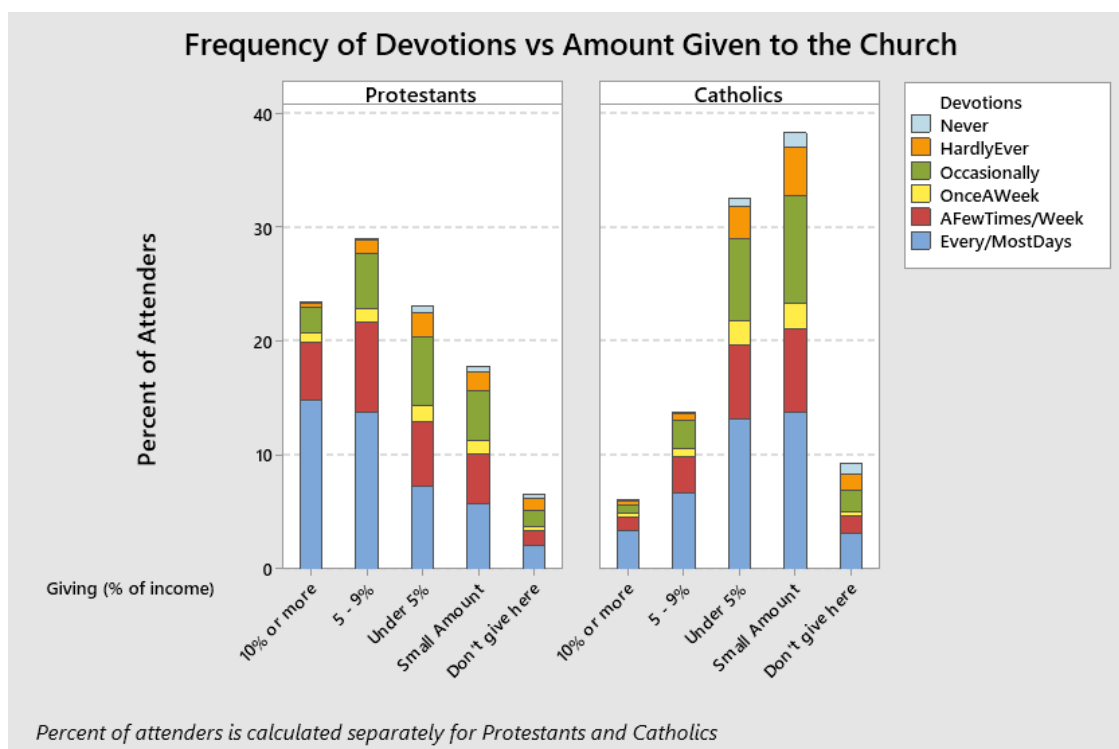
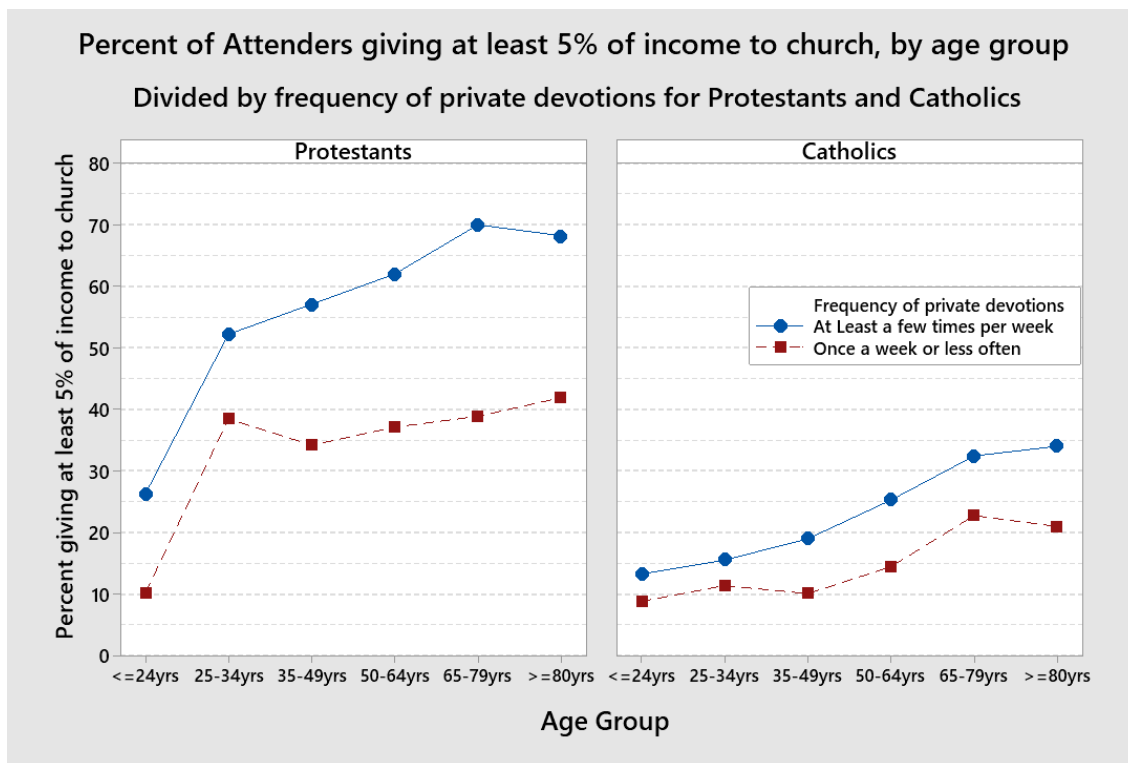


Figure 8 looks specifically at the proportion of those surveyed who give at least 5% of their income to the church. The data are divided by Catholic and Protestant, by age group, and by whether the person has private devotions at least a few times per week (top curve) or not (bottom curve). For example, for those surveyed in the 50 to 64 year age group, if the person had private devotions at least a few times per week then 62% of Protestant attenders regularly gave 5% of their income to the church, compared to 37% of those who had devotions once a week or less. For Catholic attenders the figures were 25% and 14% respectively, depending on their frequency of private devotions.

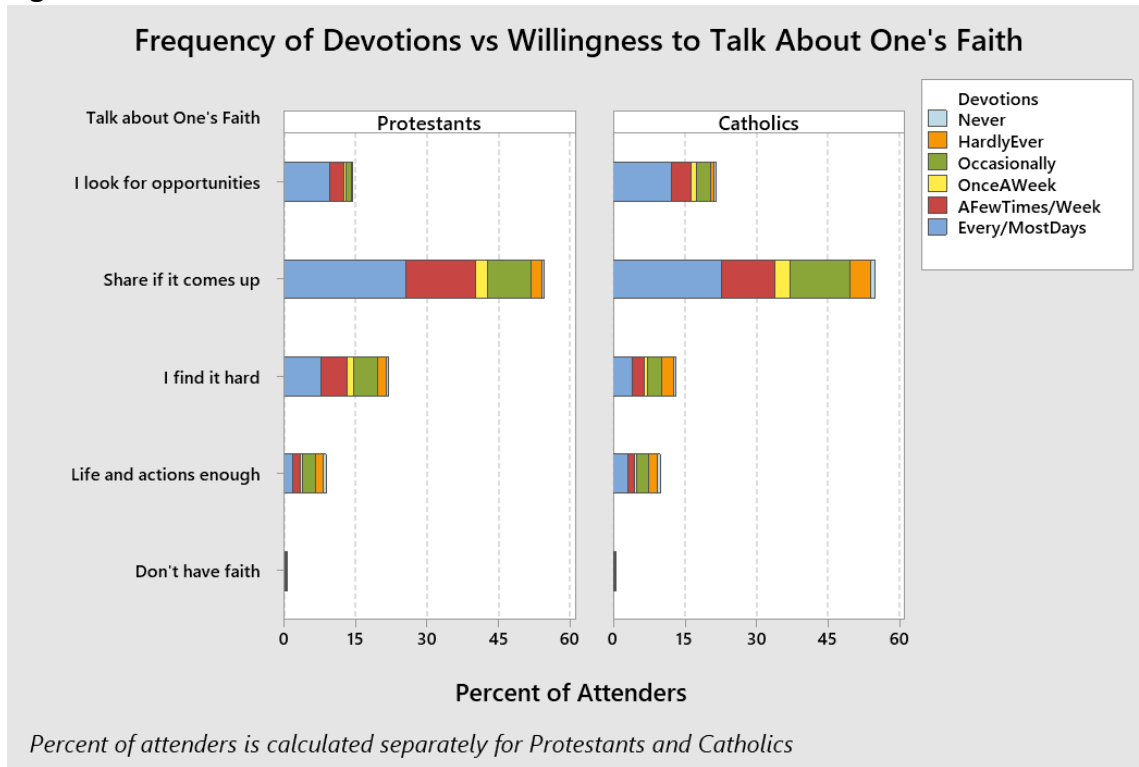
**Figure 8**



### 5. Willingness to talk about one’s faith

Figure 9 shows the percentage of Protestant and Catholic attenders having different levels of willingness to talk about their faith (length of bars) and divided by frequency of private devotions. For both, the most common choice was “I mostly feel at ease talking about my faith and do if it comes up”. Fourteen percent of Protestants and 22% of Catholics chose “I feel at ease talking about my faith and look for opportunities to do so”. Conversely 22% of Protestants but only 13% of Catholics felt “I find it hard to talk about my faith in ordinary language”. Of those who looked for an opportunity to share their faith, 67% of Protestants and 57% of Catholics had private devotions every/most days, with the frequency of devotions decreasing for the other levels of willingness to talk. The rank correlation between devotions and willingness to talk was a slightly higher 0.27: in other words a similar (or slightly higher) degree of connection between devotions and willing to talk about one’s faith as between devotions and attendance.

**Figure 9**



## 6. Awareness of God

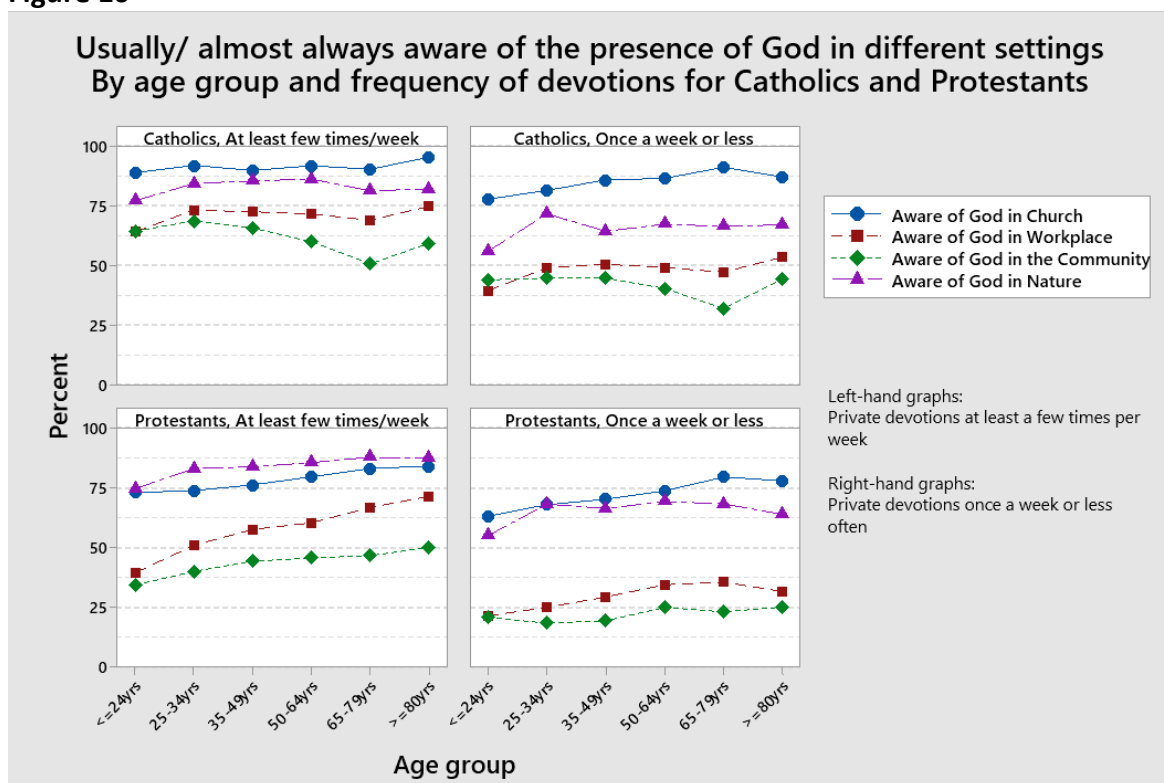
Attenders were asked about their awareness of God in different settings. Question B8 asked “**How often is the presence of God evident in our church services?**”, while questions C6-C8 asked about awareness of the presence of God at work, in the community and in nature. Of course these beg the question what the presence of God is, and what constitutes awareness and evidence of it? But although the answers are necessarily subjective, what is plain is that if someone has chosen an option then it meant *something to them*. And whatever it meant is connected to the individuals’ sense of satisfaction as a spiritual person. Therefore, despite the imprecision of the questions we will analyse the data at face value to see what insight can be gained.

The available options for awareness were Nearly Always, Usually, Sometimes, Occasionally, and Hardly Ever. The percentage of people choosing each option are shown in Table 1. The question most strongly associated with frequency of private devotions is awareness of God in the workplace (correlation 0.33).

Figure 10 looks at what percentage of people feel Usually (or Almost Always) aware of the presence of God, by age group, for Catholics and Protestants, and for those who have private

devotions at least a few times per week versus those who do not. The first thing to note is that, on the whole, church attenders were most likely to be usually aware of God’s presence in Church, then in Nature, then in the Workplace, and least of all the Community. (Curiously, Protestants who had frequent devotions more often claimed usual awareness of God in Nature than in Church.) Secondly, those who had frequent private devotions were more likely to be aware of the presence of God in every setting (including in Nature: this gives an interesting pushback against the argument that one does not need religion to feel close to God). Thirdly there is a slight trend to greater awareness of God’s presence by the elderly compared to the youngest age group. Finally, Catholics are more likely to claim awareness of the presence of God than Protestants in the church services, in the workplace, and in the community. Only in Nature were Protestants and Catholics similar in their claimed awareness of God.

**Figure 10**



This brings us back to the questions: what do different people mean by the Presence of God? And what does it mean to be aware of it? The answers will be shaped by the attenders’ denomination and their theological position (for example, their view of the Bible, or whether or not they identify as charismatic, traditional, liberal, etc.). These and other influences will be considered in a subsequent paper.

## Conclusion

The data showed a marked decline in frequency of private devotional activity among younger church attenders, along with a decline in Bible reading, compared to older church attenders. This has implications for Biblical literacy and susceptibility to new beliefs and teachings. Reduced frequency of devotions was also associated with less frequent church attendance, less giving, less willingness to talk about one's faith, and less awareness of the presence of God in all settings. These trends are likely to continue over the years, and the 2023 survey will be vital for understanding the state of the churches in the 2020s. In brief, the results suggest it is very important for the future of church congregations for leaders to encourage attenders to cultivate their spiritual life outside of the weekly church services.

## References

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