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Assessing pathways and challenges to growth in discipleship: A study among members of the
Student Christian Movement in the UK

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Abstract

Drawing on data provided by 197 members of the Student Christian Movement under the age of thirty, this study examines the effect on two measures of growth in discipleship (depth of discipleship and strength of vocation) of four discipleship pathways (group activities, individual experience, church worship, and public engagement) and two contextual factors (church support and challenges to faith) after controlling for sex, age, and psychological type. The data highlighted the importance of the discipleship pathway styled individual experience in enhancing both depth of discipleship and strength of vocation. Personal experience focuses on ways of nurturing discipleship within the *ecclesia domestica*, involving personal prayer, bible study, quiet time, and reflection on life. Congregational activity alone is not adequate to nurture discipleship for this group of young people.

Keywords: Christian formation, discipleship learning, empirical theology, student ministry, *ecclesia domestica*

Introduction

Within the broader discussion of Christian spiritual formation, the language of ‘discipleship’ has become markedly more widespread since the mid-twentieth century, partly to reflect a growing sense that the Christian calling is distinct (although not always entirely different) from the norms and expectations of western society in an emerging post-Christendom context. Bonhoeffer’s *The cost of discipleship*, first published in 1937, is an early and influential example of this development (Bonhoeffer, 2024). Currently the term discipleship is used in a variety of ways. In North American evangelical Protestantism and its global sphere of influence, ‘discipleship’ discourse is often as much concerned with the practice of mentoring or enabling others to grow in Christian faith and practice, as being a ‘disciple’ oneself. Sometimes this is expressed in the language of ‘disciple-making’; other times simply as ‘discipleship’.

Some writers on discipleship are inclined to specify the content of discipleships, the stages and processes by which it develops, and what it means to be a disciple (Hall, 2006). Other writers confine discipleship to the growth of individual relationship with God and the development of personal spiritual disciplines (Warren, 2002). In a particularly distinctive use of the term ‘discipleship learning’ Astley (2015) employs the term to capture both the intellectual education and the personal life formation that characterises growth within the Christian tradition. Amid this diversity of usage, within the historic mainstream Christian denominations in Europe, discipleship most commonly refers to the intentional individual and collective practice of Christian faith and its outworking in daily life. Within England this usage is evidenced within the Methodist Church (Atkins, 2010) and within the Church of England (Archbishops’ Council, 2015; Worthen, 2014).

Also within the broader discussion of Christian spiritual formation, a range of empirical studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have attempted to tease out the factors

associated with joining, staying, and leaving churches across the age range. For example, Shepherd (2016), drawing on qualitative research among young people in Christian youth groups, highlighted factors associated with persevering with faith in the face of challenges posed by a secular age. These include the importance of relating faith to all aspects of life, experiencing God, and making sense of faith in both cognitive and affective terms, and resisting the temptation to partition experience into sacred and secular categories. Other studies have focused more specifically on the experience of students within higher education (see, for example, Weller & Hooley, 2011; Guest et al., 2013).

Responding to the increased interest in growing and nurturing disciples both within the Churches and within the academic literature, the St Peter's Saltley Trust launched a significant detailed survey designed to identify indicators of growth in Christian discipleship and to map the effectiveness of diverse pathways to such growth (Foster, 2016). Drawing on data provided by 1,123 churchgoers within the West Midlands region of England who completed this survey, Francis et al. (2019) began to explore and to document the science of growth in Christian discipleship, rooted within a branch of empirical theology concerned with individual differences that suggests different people may hear and respond to God's call to discipleship in different and distinctive ways. The initial study reported by Francis et al. (2019) was progressed through four main steps.

Step one: Operationalising growth in discipleship

The St Peter's Saltley trust survey contained a number of items intended to reflect perceived growth in discipleship. Exploratory analysis of these items identifies two sets of items that captured two different aspects of growth in discipleship. The first set of seven items created the Index of Depth of Discipleship. These seven items that achieved an alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) of .82 assessed the extent to which individuals felt that they were good at: praying deeply in a range of different ways; understanding how to see the world and our

times as God sees them; worshipping with mind, body and spirit; exploring the Bible; putting their faith into practice in daily life; nurturing and caring for others in church and community; speaking about their faith or personal journey.

The second set of five items created the Index of Strength of Vocation. These five items that achieved an alpha coefficient of .70 assessed the extent to which individuals felt that the first three items were true for them, and the final two statements were not true for them: I have a particular calling; I am more or less on the journey God wants me to be on; I have been helped in my journey of faith by a direct call or experience I believe was from God; I don't know what my calling is; I am resisting or ignoring my call.

Step two: Operationalising pathways to growth

The St Peter's Saltley Trust survey contained a number of items assessing ways in which the participants had 'been helped in their journey of faith'. Factor analysis, employing principal component and varimax rotation, identified a clear four-factor structure. These four factors drew together items that reflected distinctive pathways to growth.

The first factor drew together seven items concerned with group activities: being part of a small group/Bible study group; being part of my church's social life/fellowship; taking part in my church's outreach; a Christian course offered by a local church; leading others in worship, small group activity, or prayer; going on retreat; Christian conferences, festivals, events, or pilgrimage. These seven items comprised the Index of Discipleship through Group Activity, with an alpha coefficient of .82.

The second factor drew together ten items concerned with individual experience: listening to sermons; praying by myself; reading/studying the Bible by myself; a spiritual director, mentor, soul friend, or prayer guide; listening to Christian teaching, discussion, or talks on tape, etc.; reading Christian, spiritual, or theological books; my closest friendships or relationships; a particular person (e.g. missionary or teacher); trying to put my faith into

practice in daily life; a direct call or experience I believe was from God. These ten items comprised the Index of Discipleship through Individual Experience, with an alpha coefficient of .82.

The third factor drew together six items concerned with church worship: attending church/worship regularly; music in church worship; liturgy in church worship; participating in communion, etc.; a familiar pattern of worship; seasons and shape of the Christian year. These six items comprised the Index of Discipleship through Church Worship, with an alpha coefficient of .74.

The fourth factor drew together seven items concerned with public engagement: taking part in online discussion or conversation; taking part in a social justice/campaigning activity beyond my church; taking part in a practical Christian service or mission project not connected with my church; Christian education provided by college, university, or denomination; experiencing different churches/Christian spiritualities; conversation with others whose faith or beliefs are different from mine; hobbies, leisure, or cultural activities not connected with church. These seven items comprised the Index of Discipleship through Public Engagement, with an alpha coefficient of .74.

Step three: Operationalising support for and challenges to growth

The St Peter's Saltley Trust survey contained two further sets of items. The first of these two sets of items invited participants to assess the extent to which the church that they attended was good at helping people to: pray deeply in a range of different ways; understand how to see the world and our times as God sees them; worship with mind, body, and spirit; explore and understand the Bible; put faith into practice in daily life; nurture and care for each other in the church community; speak about faith or personal journeys. These seven items comprised the Index of Church Support, with an alpha coefficient of .84.

The second of these two sets of items invited participants to assess how much their Christian journey had been hampered by the following phenomena: the beliefs and attitudes of people close to me; having no-one to share my journey with; lack of opportunity to learn and grow; fear that Christianity is not true or makes no sense; understanding my faith differently from those around me; the quality of my church/worship community; the words of the creed or other articles of faith. These seven items comprised the Index of Challenges to Faith, with an alpha coefficient of .73.

Step four: Building statistical models

Having created these three sets of variables (concerning growth in discipleship, pathways to growth, and support and challenges to growth), Francis et al. (2019) employed multiple regression models to explore how much personal factors (age and sex), contextual factors (church support and challenges to faith), and discipleship pathways (group activity, individual experience, church worship, and public engagement) predicted individual differences in the Index of Depth of Discipleship and the Index of Strength of Vocation. These regression analyses indicated that, taking into account individual differences in sex, age, church support, and hampers to faith, for this particular sample of churchgoers, growth through individual experience emerged as the most important factor in helping Christians to grow, both in terms of depth of discipleship and in terms of strength of vocation, while public engagement added weight to depth of discipleship and group activities added weight to strength of vocation.

Replication and extension

Building on the initial study reported by Francis et al. (2019), Francis et al. (2021) contributed to the emerging science of Christian discipleship learning in three ways. First, they revisited each of the eight measures (two indices of growth in discipleship, four indices of pathways to growth, and two indices of support and challenges to growth) and proposed

ways in which the scales could be developed and strengthened. Second, they introduced to the survey an additional measure concerning individual differences in personality. Third, they tested the expanded survey among a sample of 299 12- to 18-year-old students who were participating in a week-long summer youth programme sponsored by the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada in eastern Canada in 2017.

This replication and extension study proved to be important for four reasons. First it confirmed that the four discipleship pathways identified in the earlier study made sense in this new context. Second, it demonstrated that, although personality factors predicted individual differences in preferred discipleship pathway choices, they did not play a highly significant role in determining the connection between pathway choices and impact on growth in discipleship. Third, it found that, compared with the original study conducted among adult churchgoers, different pathways were significant among adolescent Baptists. These new data indicated that the discipleship pathway of group activities is central to growing young Christians within the Baptist tradition, and that depth of discipleship is further enhanced by the pathway of individual experience, while strength of vocation is further enhanced by the pathway of church worship. Fourth, it confirmed the finding of the original study conducted among adult churchgoers, that among this group of adolescent Baptists perceived church support is important for growing both depth of discipleship and strength of vocation.

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to build on the two earlier studies reported by Francis et al. (2019) and Francis et al. (2021), employing the same conceptual framework and the same range of measures to address the same research question among a further distinctive constituency. The opportunity for this further study arose from

collaboration with the Student Christian Movement (SCM). According to their website, the vision of SCM is to be:

a generous community, experiencing lived faith in Jesus Christ where social action meets prayerful devotion. We seek to be both a radical voice for equality and justice, and a safe home for progressive Christian students.

The aim of the present study is to assess pathways to growth, alongside support for and challenges to growth, in discipleship among this distinctive population of young people.

Method

Procedure

The Student Discipleship Survey was used in a variety of settings during 2017, in meetings and events organised by SCM. Participation was voluntary. Participants were informed that their answers were anonymous and would be treated in confidence, and that the findings would be published. A total of 267 surveys were submitted, among which 197 were from people under the age of thirty who had provided full data required for the present analyses.

Participants

Thoroughly completed surveys were submitted by 197 participants among whom 68 were male and 129 female; 42 were under the age of 20, 66 aged 20-21, 44 aged 22-23, 27 aged 24-25, and 18 aged 26-29. The majority of the participants were engaged in undergraduate programmes (65%), with 24% engaged in postgraduate programmes, and 11% not currently engaged in a university programme. The majority of participants were weekly churchgoers (75%), with a further 18% attending at least once a month. The three most strongly represented denominations were Anglican (35%), Methodist (19%), and Roman Catholic (12%). The majority of participants were white British (75%), with a further 11% classifying themselves as white Irish or white other.

Measures

Psychological type was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005; Francis et al., 2017). This 40-item instrument comprises four sets of ten forced-choice items related to each of the four components of psychological type theory: orientation (extraversion or introversion), perceiving process (sensing or intuition), judging process (thinking or feeling), and attitude toward the outer world (judging or perceiving). Francis et al. (2008) reported alpha coefficients of .83 for the extraversion and introversion scales, .76 for the sensing and intuition scales, .73 for the thinking and feeling scales, and .79 for the judging and perceiving scales.

Aspects of discipleship were assessed by two measures concerning growth in discipleship, 12-item Index of Depth of Discipleship, and 8-item Index of Strength of Vocation; four measures concerning discipleship pathways, 13-item Index of Discipleship through Group Activities, 14-item Index of Discipleship through Individual Experience, 9-item Index of Discipleship through Church Worship, and 15-item Index of Discipleship through Public Engagement; and two measures concerning external influences, 12-item Index of Church Support, and 18-item Index of Challenges to Faith. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale: disagree strongly (1), disagree (2), not certain (3), agree (4), and agree strongly (5).

Analysis

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

Results and discussion

Assessing growth in discipleship

- insert tables 1 and 2 about here -

The first step in data analysis explored the two measures of growth in discipleship. Table 1 demonstrates that the Index of Depth of Discipleship achieved an alpha coefficient of .86.

The 12 items in this index followed the stem, 'I feel that I am able to...'. In descending order of endorsement, at least two-thirds of the participants felt that they were able to care for others in God's name (76%), that they could put their faith into practice in their daily life (74%), that they could put their faith into practice at home (74%), speak to others about their faith (69%), and encourage others in their faith (68%). At least half of the participants were able to explore the Bible in a meaningful way (66%), put their faith into practice at school, college, or work (63%), pray deeply (59%), and worship with their whole heart (57%). The proportions fell to 46% who felt that they were able to see people as God sees them, to 44% who could worship with their whole mind, and 34% who could see the world as God sees it.

Table 2 demonstrates that the Index of Strength of Vocation achieved an alpha coefficient of .90. The 8 items in this index followed the stem, 'I feel that...'. In descending order of endorsement, at least two-thirds of the participants felt that they are part of God's plan (85%), that God has a purpose for them (84%), that God has shaped their whole life so far (84%), that God is their guide (80%), that God is shaping their future (78%), and that God is shaping their daily life (67%). The proportions fell to 62% who felt that God was calling them for a particular purpose, and to 55% who felt that they were on the journey God wants them to be on.

Assessing pathways to growth

- insert tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 about here -

The second step in data analysis explored the four measures of pathways to growth in discipleship. Table 3 demonstrates that the Index of Discipleship through Group Activities achieved an alpha coefficient of .84. The 13 items in this index followed the stem, 'I have been helped in my journey of faith by...'. In descending order of endorsement, two items were endorsed by four-fifths of the participants: 83% had been helped by taking part in a small group, and 83% had been helped by attending Christian events. At least half of the

participants had been helped by taking part in a church social (or youth) group (68%), by taking part in a fellowship group (65%), by attending Christian retreats (62%), by taking part in a Bible study group (59%), or by attending Christian conferences (50%). The proportions fell to 49% who had been helped by taking part in a prayer group, to 40% by taking part in a Christian course offered by a church, to 35% by taking part in a worship leadership team, to 33% by taking part in a church outreach group, to 31% by taking part in a Christian service project, and to 27% by leading others in a prayer group.

Table 4 demonstrates that the Index of Discipleship through Individual Experience achieved an alpha coefficient of .78. The items in this index followed the stem, 'I have been helped in my journey of faith by...'. In descending order of endorsement, four items were endorsed by at least four-fifths of the participants: 84% had been helped by talking with their close friends, 82% by listening to sermons, 81% by making time to reflect on their life, and 80% by praying by themselves. At least half of the participants had been helped by having a regular quiet time (72%), being with an inspirational leader (66%), listening to Christian music by themselves (66%), reading the Bible by themselves (66%), reading Christian books (56%), and visiting Christian websites or blogs (51%). The proportions fell to 40% who had been helped by working with a spiritual director or soul friend, to 40% by listening to Christian talks or podcasts, to 20% by listening to Christian broadcasts on the radio, and to 10% by watching Christian TV.

Table 5 demonstrates that the Index of Discipleship through Church Worship achieved an alpha coefficient of .79. The nine items in this index followed the stem, 'I have been helped in my journey of faith by...'. In descending order of endorsement, four items were endorsed by at least four-fifths of the participants: 89% had been helped by attending church services, 82% by experiencing church services at Easter, 80% by hearing music in church services, and 80% by singing worship songs in church services. At least two-thirds of

the participants had been helped by experiencing church services at Christmas (78%), by hearing God's forgiveness in church services (73%), by participating in communion services (71%), and by listening with others to preaching in church services (69%). The proportion fell to 54% who had been helped in their journey of faith by following familiar patterns in church services.

Table 6 demonstrates that the Index of Discipleship through Public Engagement achieved an alpha coefficient of .84. The 15 items in this index followed the stem, 'I have been helped in my journey of faith by...'. In descending order of endorsement, four items were endorsed by at least two-thirds of the participants: 78% had been helped by talking with people whose beliefs were different from theirs, 73% by experiencing different kinds of churches, 72% by meeting people who belong to a different faith from theirs, and 69% by engaging with activities not connected with the church. At least half of the participants had been helped by taking part in practical Christian service activities (65%), by working to right wrongs in the world (64%), by working for social justice (58%), by giving Christian service to help the poor (54%), and by working to save the environment (52%). The proportions fell to 42% who had been helped by working for world development, to 42% by giving Christian service to help the homeless, to 34% by taking part in mission outreach activity, to 31% by taking Christian education courses provided by their denomination, and to 26% by Christian service to clean their neighbourhood, and to 25% by taking Christian education courses provided by college or university.

Assessing support for and challenges to growth

- insert tables 7 and 8 about here -

The third step in data analysis explored the two measures concerned with support for and challenges to growth. Table 7 demonstrates that the Index of Church Support achieved an alpha coefficient of .88. The 12 items in this index followed the stem, 'My church is good at

helping people to ...'. In descending order of endorsement, two items were endorsed by four-fifths of the participants: 87% rated their church as good at helping people to care for others in God's name, and 84% rated their church as good at helping people to encourage others in their faith. At least two-thirds of the participants rated their church as good at helping people to put faith into practice in daily life (77%), to see people as God sees them (75%), to worship with their whole heart (72%), to explore the Bible in a meaningful way (71%), to put faith into practice at home (70%), to see the world as God sees it (69%), and to pray deeply (68%). The remaining three items were endorsed by more than half of the participants who considered their church good at helping people to worship with their whole mind (66%), to put faith into practice at school, college, or work (65%), or to speak about faith to others (58%).

Table 8 demonstrates that the Index of Challenges to Faith achieved an alpha coefficient of .84. The 18 items in this index followed the stem, 'For me faith is made difficult by ...'. In descending order of endorsement, at least half the participants recognised challenges to their faith in the attitudes of older Christians (75%), in churches refusing to accept change (62%), in the disagreement among the churches (60%), in church teaching on LGBTQ issues (58%), in the suffering they see in the world (55%), and in the problems religions cause in the world (54%). At least one-third of the participants recognised challenges to their faith in the attitudes of their friends (45%), in church teaching on sex (45%), in natural disasters like earthquakes (37%), and in the attitudes of others at school, college, or work (34%). At least one in five of the participants recognised challenges to their faith in the attitudes of their family members (29%), in having to accept the authority of the Bible (29%), in the attitudes of their school teachers, lecturers, or tutors (24%), in the demands made by their church on their time (24%), and in having to believe things that don't make sense (24%). A smaller proportion of participants faced challenges in their church not

wanting to listen to them (17%), in church teaching on alcohol (17%), and in listening to the claims of science (14%).

Piecing the components together

- insert tables 9 and 10 about here -

The fourth step in data analysis was designed to piece the component parts of the puzzle together in order to address the core research objective of the paper: 'Assessing pathways to growth, alongside support for and challenges to growth, in discipleship among members of the Student Christian Movement'. This strategy involves correlational analysis and regression analysis using the eight scales concerning aspects of discipleship and the four scales operationalising psychological constructs. The scale properties of all 12 instruments are summarised in table 9.

Table 10 displays the bivariate correlations between the eight measures concerned with growth in discipleship (depth of discipleship, and strength of vocation), discipleship pathways (group activities, individual experience, public engagement, and church services), and contextual factors (church support and challenges to faith). These data display good variability in the strength of the associations.

- insert table 11 about here -

Finally, table 11 examines the collective contribution made by personal factors, psychological factors, contextual factors, and discipleship pathways to the two indices of growth in discipleship, the Index of Depth of Discipleship and the Index of Strength of Vocation. In constructing the two regression models (one on depth of discipleship and the other on strength of vocation) the four sets of predictor variables were entered in the fixed order of personal factors (sex and age), psychological factors (introversion, sensing, feeling, and judging), contextual factors (church support and challenges to faith), and discipleship pathways (group activities, individual experience, church worship, and public engagement).

Five main conclusions emerge from the beta weights presented in table 11. In order to clarify interpretation of the multiple associations expressed in this table the probability level has been set at the one per cent level.

The first conclusion is that the two dependent variables (measuring depth of discipleship and strength of vocation) access somewhat different aspects of growth in discipleship, as reflected by the ways in which the predictor variables do not follow a consistent pattern in predicting these two dependent variables. Growth in discipleship is itself a complex concept that may be best accessed by multiple measures.

The second conclusion is that, when the other factors are taken into account, neither sex nor age function as significant predictors of individual differences in scores recorded on the measures of depth of discipleship and strength of vocation. Among this constituency of young Christians there is a level playing field for males and for females and no significant changes with age in respect of the way in which depth of discipleship and strength of vocation have been measured.

The third conclusion is that the psychological factors do not matter among this constituency in predicting individual differences in scores recorded on the two indices of depth of discipleship and strength of vocation. In other words, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of these two assessments of growth in discipleship have not been contaminated by specific biases in favour of distinctive psychological types.

The fourth conclusion is that among this constituency contextual factors do matter, but these contextual factors impact the two outcome measures of depth of discipleship and strength of vocation in different ways. This is evidence that the two measures access different aspects of growth in discipleship. Depth of discipleship is significantly impacted by confidence in the supportive nature of the local church, but not significantly vulnerable to external challenges to faith. Strength of vocation is independent of confidence in the

supportive nature of the local church, but significantly vulnerable to perceived challenges to faith.

The fifth conclusion is that among this constituency of members of the Student Christian Movement, the key pathway to growth in discipleship resides in individual experience. The data demonstrate that individual experience is a key predictor of higher scores in terms of both depth of discipleship and strength of vocation. At the same time, the pathway concerned with public engagement adds additional predictive power to depth of discipleship, but not to strength of vocation. This finding offers further evidence that the two measures access different aspects of growth in discipleship.

Conclusion

The present paper was located within the emerging science of growth in Christian discipleship as stimulated and shaped by the St Peter's Saltley Trust and documented in an initial study reported by Francis et al. (2019). That initial study had proposed two indices of growth in discipleship (depth of discipleship and strength of vocation), indices of four distinctive discipleship pathways (group activities, individual experience, church worship, and public engagement), together with two indices of contextual factors (church support and challenges to faith). A subsequent study reported by Francis et al. (2021) had refined and developed these eight measures and nested them within an individual differences approach to discipleship learning that included a measure of psychological type. The aim of the present study was to test the robustness of this approach by employing these measures among a different constituency, namely members of the Student Christian Movement. Now data provided by 197 members of this movement under the age of thirty allow the following conclusions to be drawn.

The first conclusion is that the two measures of growth in discipleship (depth of discipleship and strength of vocation) display good levels of internal consistency reliability

and construct validity in relation to the other variables within the regression model. The different associations with contextual factors (church support and challenges to faith) and with discipleship pathways (especially public engagement) demonstrate that these two measures access different but complementary aspects of growth in discipleship. The absence of associations with psychological type demonstrate that these measures avoid contamination with specific psychological type preferences. In other words, there is no bias in favouring introverts or extraverts, sensing types or intuitive types, thinking types or feeling types, judging types or perceiving types. These two outcome measures may be commended for further application.

The second conclusion is that the four measures of discipleship pathways (group activities, individual experience, church worship, and public engagement) all displayed good levels of internal consistency reliability and face validity. The bivariate correlations between these four pathways confirmed variability of the strength of associations among them. Then the regression models clarified where the main effects emerged. These four pathway measures may be commended for further application.

The third conclusion is that the two contextual measures (church support and challenges to faith) displayed good levels of internal consistency reliability and face validity. The bivariate correlations demonstrated that perceived church support was significant for all four discipleship pathways. Challenges to faith had a significant negative association with the individual experience pathway but not with the other three pathways. Both contextual measures added significant predictive power to growth in discipleship but worked differently in relation to the two outcome measures. Church support had a significant positive effect on depth of discipleship but was not related to strength of vocation. Challenges to faith had a significant negative effect on strength of vocation but was not related to depth of discipleship. These data confirm the value of including these measures in future research.

The fourth conclusion concerns the identification of the pathway most important for promoting growth in discipleship among this specific population of members of the Student Christian Movement. Personal experience was shown to be associated with higher scores of depth of discipleship and with higher scores of strength of vocation. This finding among members of the Student Christian Movement is consistent with the finding reported by Francis et al. (2019) among adult churchgoers. The present study and the earlier study among churchgoers also drew attention to the public engagement pathway contributing positively to depth of discipleship, but not to strength of vocation. The coincidence of these findings in two disparate studies makes an important contribution to building a scientific basis for research in discipleship growth. Among the younger participants (aged 12 to 18 years) in the study reported by Francis et al. (2021), a different pattern emerged, whereby the pathway associated with higher scores of depth of discipleship and with higher scores of strength of vocation was the group activity pathway. Further studies are now needed among school students and among university students to check the stability of this age-related finding.

The finding that the individual experience pathway is central to growth in discipleship (in the sense of depth of discipleship and strength of vocation) carries implications for growing disciples within local congregations and within bodies like the Student Christian Movement. The 14 items within the Index of Discipleship through Individual Experience emphasised traditional Christian practices like praying by myself, reading the Bible by myself, reading Christian books, listening to Christian music, having a regular quiet time, making time to reflect on my life. In other words, the emphasis is on resourcing the Christian way of life away from (as well as in) the church congregation, and on valuing the *ecclesia domestica* (see further Francis, 2024; McKenna & Francis, 2024).

The limitation with the present study is that it was based on responses from only 197 members of the Student Christian Movement. Further research among members of the

Student Christian Movement would be helpful to check the findings from this initial study. A comparative study among students associated with the Christian Union could offer further insight into pathways into growth in discipleship among students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was given for this analysis by the Research Ethics Committee of the St Mary's Centre (code: SMC16ECC012).

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Table 1

Index of Depth of Discipleship

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>I feel that I am able to:</i>		
pray deeply	59	.48
explore the Bible in a meaningful way	66	.44
see the world as God sees it	34	.50
see people as God sees them	46	.42
worship with my whole mind	44	.57
worship with my whole heart	57	.66
put my faith into practice in my daily life	74	.65
put my faith into practice at home	74	.65
put my faith into practice at school/college/work	63	.60
care for others in God's name	76	.54
encourage others in their faith	68	.54
speak to others about my faith	69	.45
Alpha		.86

Table 2

Index of Strength of Vocation

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>I feel that:</i>		
God has a purpose for me	84	.69
God is calling me for a particular purpose	62	.60
I am on the journey God wants me to be on	55	.59
God is shaping my daily life	67	.72
God is shaping my future	78	.75
I am part of God's plan	85	.74
God has shaped my life so far	84	.76
God is my guide	80	.70
Alpha		.90

Table 3

Index of Discipleship through Group Activity

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>I have been helped in my journey of faith by:</i>		
taking part in a small group	83	.39
taking part in a Bible study group	59	.49
taking part in a church social (or youth) group	68	.43
taking part in a fellowship group	65	.49
taking part in a church outreach group	33	.54
taking part in a Christian service project	31	.49
taking part in a Christian course offered by a church	40	.56
taking part in a prayer group	49	.59
taking part in a worship leadership team	35	.40
leading others in a prayer group	27	.56
attending Christian events	83	.46
attending Christian conferences	50	.45
attending Christian retreats	62	.43
Alpha		.84

Table 4

Index of Discipleship through Individual Experience

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>I have been helped in my journey of faith by:</i>		
listening to sermons	82	.37
praying by myself	80	.53
reading the Bible by myself	66	.48
reading Christian books	56	.58
working with a spiritual director or soul friend	40	.34
listening to Christian broadcasts on the radio	20	.50
watching Christian TV	10	.36
listening to Christian recorded talks or podcasts	40	.46
visiting Christian websites or blogs	57	.45
listening to Christian music by myself	66	.32
talking with my close friends	84	.23
being with an inspirational leader	66	.29
having a regular quiet time	72	.34
making time to reflect on my life	81	.25
Alpha		.85

Table 5

Index of Discipleship through Church Worship

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>I have been helped in my journey of faith by:</i>		
attending church services	89	.47
hearing music in church services	80	.46
listening with others to preaching in church services	69	.41
following familiar patterns in church services	54	.45
participating in communion services	71	.55
experiencing church services at Christmas	78	.50
experiencing church services at Easter	82	.58
singing worship songs in church services	80	.39
hearing God's forgiveness in church services	73	.50
Alpha		.79

Table 6

Index of Discipleship through Public Engagement

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>I have been helped in my journey of faith by:</i>		
taking part in mission outreach activity	34	.25
taking part in practical Christian service activities	65	.38
working for social justice	58	.59
working to right wrongs in the world	64	.61
working for world development	42	.70
working to save the environment	52	.48
taking Christian education courses provided by college/university	25	.43
taking Christian education courses provided by my denomination	31	.36
experiencing different kinds of churches	73	.30
meeting people who belong to a different faith from mine	72	.49
talking with people whose beliefs are different from mine	78	.41
engaging with activities not connected with church	69	.41
giving Christian service to help the poor	54	.57
giving Christian service to help the homeless	42	.58
giving Christian service to clean the neighbourhood	26	.54
Alpha		.84

Table 7

Index of Church Support

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>My church is good at helping people to:</i>		
pray deeply	68	.55
explore the Bible in a meaningful way	71	.51
put faith into practice in daily life	77	.63
put faith into practice at home	70	.60
put faith into practice at school/college/work	65	.58
speak about faith to others	58	.45
see the world as God sees it	69	.58
see people as God sees them	75	.58
worship with their whole mind	66	.64
worship with their whole heart	72	.67
care for others in God's name	87	.52
encourage others in their faith	84	.55
Alpha		.88

Table 8

Index of Challenges to Faith

	Yes %	<i>r</i>
<i>For me faith is made difficult by:</i>		
the attitudes of my friends	45	.32
the attitudes of my school teachers/lecturers/tutors	24	.32
the attitudes of my family members	29	.25
churches refusing to accept change	62	.51
having to accept the authority of the Bible	29	.48
listening to the claims of science	14	.30
the problems religions cause in the world	54	.46
the disagreement among the churches	60	.49
church teaching on sex	45	.53
church teaching on LGBTQ issues (sex and gender identity)	58	.53
church teaching on alcohol	17	.51
the demands made by church on my time	24	.36
having to believe things that don't make sense	24	.50
my church not wanting to listen to me	17	.38
the suffering I see in the world	55	.52
natural disasters like earthquakes	37	.49
the attitudes of older Christians	75	.54
the attitude of others at school/college/work	34	.42
Alpha		.84

Table 9

Summary of Scale Properties

	N items	Alpha	Mean	SD
Index of Depth of Discipleship	12	.86	42.6	7.3
Index of Strength of Vocation	8	.90	32.1	5.4
Index of Discipleship through Group Activities	13	.84	44.0	8.0
Index of Discipleship through Individual Experience	14	.78	48.3	7.4
Index of Discipleship through Church Worship	9	.79	35.1	5.5
Index of Discipleship through Public Engagement	15	.84	51.4	8.6
Index of Church Support	12	.88	46.5	6.6
Index of Challenges to Faith	18	.84	52.7	11.2
Orientation (high scoring = Introversion)	10	.83	6.1	3.0
Perceiving (high scoring = Sensing)	10	.67	4.9	2.4
Judging (high scoring = Feeling)	10	.72	5.6	2.6
Attitude (high scoring = Judging)	10	.80	6.8	2.7

Table 10

Correlation matrix

	CW	PE	IE	GA	CF	CJ	SV
Depth of Discipleship (DD)	.39***	.52***	.59***	.54***	-.22**	.40***	.58***
Strength of Vocation (SV)	.34***	.22**	.48***	.31***	-.29***	.24***	
Church Support (CS)	.27***	.23***	.24***	.30***	.23***		
Challenges to Faith (CF)	-.08	.04	-.23***	-.11			
Group Activities (GA)	.50***	.56***	.63***				
Individual Experience (IE)	.46***	.48***					
Public Engagement (PE)	.31***						

Note: CW; Church Worship

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 11

Regression model on discipleship growth

	Depth of Discipleship	Strength of Vocation
<i>Personal factors</i>		
Sex	.04	.13
Age	.06	.03
<i>Psychological factors</i>		
Introversion	-.01	-.10
Sensing	-.02	-.06
Feeling	.03	.02
Judging	.04	.07
<i>Contextual factors</i>		
Church support	.21***	.09
Challenges to faith	-.13	-.22***
<i>Discipleship pathways</i>		
Group activity	.11	-.08
Individual experience	.29***	.36***
Church worship	.05	.15
Public engagement	.27***	-.00
total r^2	.50	.32

Note: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$