

(DIS)INTEGRATION: DISCIPLED AWAY FROM CHRIST?

Across Europe, Christianity is in crisis. Reports from the Pew Research Centre and the World Economic Forum both show a steady decline in the number of people identifying themselves as Christian, and more alarmingly, the trend for large numbers of people aged between 18 and 29 to identify with no religion (see graphs below). Similarly, as far back as 2011, the Barna Group in the USA reported that 59% of teenage church attenders had dropped out of church, and even out of the Christian faith, by their mid-20s.

“The cultural pressures faced uniquely by millennials make holding on to Christian faith a difficult undertaking—if their faith is shallow, how can it survive?”

David Kinnaman

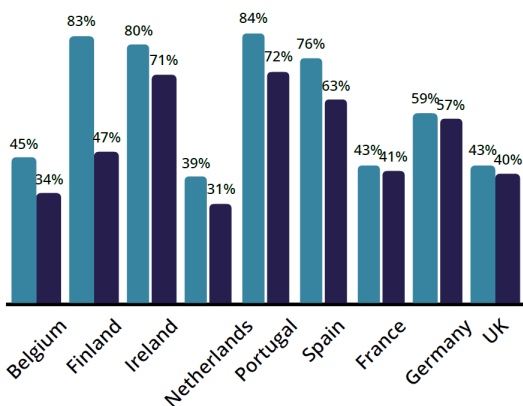
Transitions such as that from university to working life are regarded as “developmental crises” in which beliefs and worldview face fresh challenges from new circumstances and people. It is during such crucial transitions that people either reaffirm the validity of their prior beliefs or discard them. Young Christian adults beginning professional life often face an uphill struggle to bridge their faith and their working lives. Some turn away from Jesus while others live with an unsatisfactory dualism between private faith and professional life.

Since 2012 IFES Graduate Impact (a ministry of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students) has been running Cross-Current, a project specifically working with young Christian adults as they begin professional life. **Our express aim is to learn together how to integrate faith life and working life in order to flourish as Christian professionals, and so to become more effective ambassadors for Christ in our workplaces, professions, and societies.**

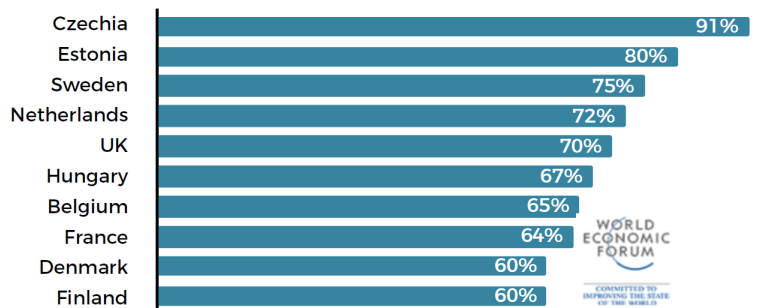
Cross-Current is a network of small learning communities helping young Christian adults (typically aged 23–33) to learn the significance of their work to Jesus, and of Jesus to their workplace. Cross-Current groups use a purpose-made curriculum, taught in six weekends spread over two or three years. **Starting with biblical worldview, we focus on the formation of Christ-like character – the virtues of love, service, integrity/honesty, generosity, humility, and beneficial purpose.** to learn how they can be transformed into habits by individuals in their workplace as a foundation for lives of integral Christian witness.

We are currently working with more than 600 young Christian professionals from 32 countries.

Percentage of population aligning with Christian belief 2002–2014 (Pew Research)



Percentage of population aged 18-29 who identify with no religion (World Economic Forum, 2018)



RESEARCH FINDINGS

As part of our work we have undertaken research amongst around 350 participants from 27 countries to help us better understand the difficulties young Christian professionals face integrating their faith and work, and to learn how Christian communities may better support them. Specifically we sought to find out:

1. *What hinders young Christian adults from practising the virtues associated with their faith in their professional life?*
2. *How would these Christian virtues, lived out in the public sphere through different professions, change the way participants behave in their workplaces?*
3. *What can we do to help a generation of young Christian adults overcome these hindrances, promoting a greater consistency between their private faith and public life, as they start their professional lives?*

1. INTEGRITY IS #1 – BUT IT’S SO FRAGILE

We asked,

“If you were to select one critical virtue to guide your behaviour in your work life, what would it be?”

The results show that **above all other virtues, the young Christian professionals we worked with value integrity / honesty as an essential and defining quality to both their personal and working life.** Although integrity is one of the most frequently mentioned virtues in professional life, often there is ambiguity as to its meaning.

We also found that **work culture plays a powerful role in shaping the perspectives of participants.** Certain aspects of prevailing workplace culture militate against them living out Christian virtues. Specifically:

- The demand or pressure to conform to workplace standards (high or low).
- A desire to be counter-cultural versus a professional expectation to be neutral.
- A private and public divide between what is okay to talk about at work and what is not (i.e. faith).
- The work culture and lifestyle, including high pressure, anxiety and burnout.
- The sheer volume of time given over and consumed by work.

The clash between the stated desire for integrity and a dominating workplace culture means **there is often a virtue gap between aspiration and lived reality, with integrity being both highly desired and also fragile.** Many participants say they struggle to maintain their own standard of integrity in working life.

2. WORK IS BOTH CAREER AND CALLING

We have sought to understand how the integration of personal faith with professional work can benefit and contribute to both individual flourishing and corporate wellbeing. Two themes emerged:

1. **RELATIONSHIPS / COLLEAGUES:** Relationships are front and centre for participants, in work and outside. Only a small proportion of respondents (36%) agreed that work is where they find meaning to life. However, many (76%) agreed that they “love to be liked by people [they] work with”. This suggests that even if work is not the most significant shaper of life-philosophy for participants, relationships formed at work play a significant role in shaping their understanding of identity and their place in the world.

We asked participants how they respond to Jesus’ command to “*Love your neighbour as yourself*”, when ‘your neighbour’ is a difficult colleague, a superior, or a competitor. The

dominant observation was that this simple biblical command requires a mind-shift for thinking about working life. **Participants have to learn to reframe colleagues as neighbours, with work an activity of service and love**, restoring 'neighbourliness' to their work context, a sense of inter-personal affiliation that goes beyond the mere instrumentality of work.

2. **CONSISTENT CHARACTER:** Integrating personal belief and public life remains high on the agenda of respondents. Participants note that **consistency between faith and work requires distinctive living, following a counter-cultural calling in the workplace whilst also working to high professional standards**. Rather than viewing work as a job (with a means-end goal of paying bills, etc.), work is seen as both a career and calling (with an inherent sense of meaning). The gospel way espoused by participants embraces relational values as of primordial importance, and places creativity, service and community ahead of consumption, careerism, and individualism.

Many experience the tension of being part of the Christian minority (their faith often restricted to the private sphere), while also being in a demanding professional career (with its pressures for cultural compliance). **Cross-Current participants honestly noted the potential for negative side effects associated with such a counter-cultural calling, such as marginalisation, bullying, or unemployment**. Sadly, 'Christian' opinions are often dismissed as a 'radical' voice.

By the nature of their faith and professions, young Christian professionals are living in a liminal space being at the intersection of faith communities and professional communities. They understand their vocational calling as a space where their distinctive lives and words as professionals 'signpost' those around them to their faith in Jesus. **They are uniquely placed, requiring dedicated support to bridge the gap and bring an insightful and competent contribution to society.**

3. DISCIPLESHIP IN A DISTRACTED AGE

Our research into discipleship — the formation of a Jesus-following lifestyle — for the workplace also found that training for long-term virtue in the workplace needs to be multi-faceted. Three significant factors stand out:

1. **RELEVANCE:** Given the complexities faced in professional life, which may seem remote from church teaching, **young professionals need contextualised biblical teaching and profession-targeted training**, committed to sector-specific issues. The Cross-Current curriculum builds on concepts associated with Christian worldview and the character of God, employing personal reflection tools and case studies to further thought on work-related experiences. Many participants find these exercises to be of material benefit, imagining decision-making in a fast-moving or tight-cornered environment. One participant wrote, *"I liked how we explored the original vision of work and ways to apply it in our everyday life. I really identified in some of the case studies we analysed and realised what I was doing wrong or not completely right"*.
2. **CONTINUITY:** *Cross-Current* fosters communities of like-minded people, where **continuity helps build long-term integration between participants' personal faith and public lives when starting out in their careers**. The strength of these long-term relationships is a critical factor in character formation and the transformation of virtues into lifestyle. Regular *Cross-Current* meetings and interactions help build a 'fabric of faithfulness' for the participants, weaving together mentors, friendships and worldview, with a view to long-term change.
3. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** Another factor **crucial to the long-term transformation of virtues into a lifestyle is the opportunity for participants to share with, and learn from, each other through:**

- **Peer to peer mentoring** – Guided by active listening and a framework for open questions, this helps keep young professionals accountable to one another, and provides ongoing encouragement.
- **Role model mentoring** – Led by an older, experienced professional in the same field who follows the biblical discipling process of asking questions and telling stories (rather than by giving straight answers).

The primary goal of these mentoring relationships within the program is to help participants define their personal ‘agenda for change’ in response to *Cross-Current* training. We found that good mentoring relationships are built on commitment, intentionality, respect, authenticity, trust, vulnerability and a commitment to prayer. Further, we have found that **intergenerational role models and mentors provide a bedrock of advice and support in the difficult transitions for young Christian professionals**. Often the most highly motivated participants actively sought out mentors to help steer and guide them through their sense of direction in work.

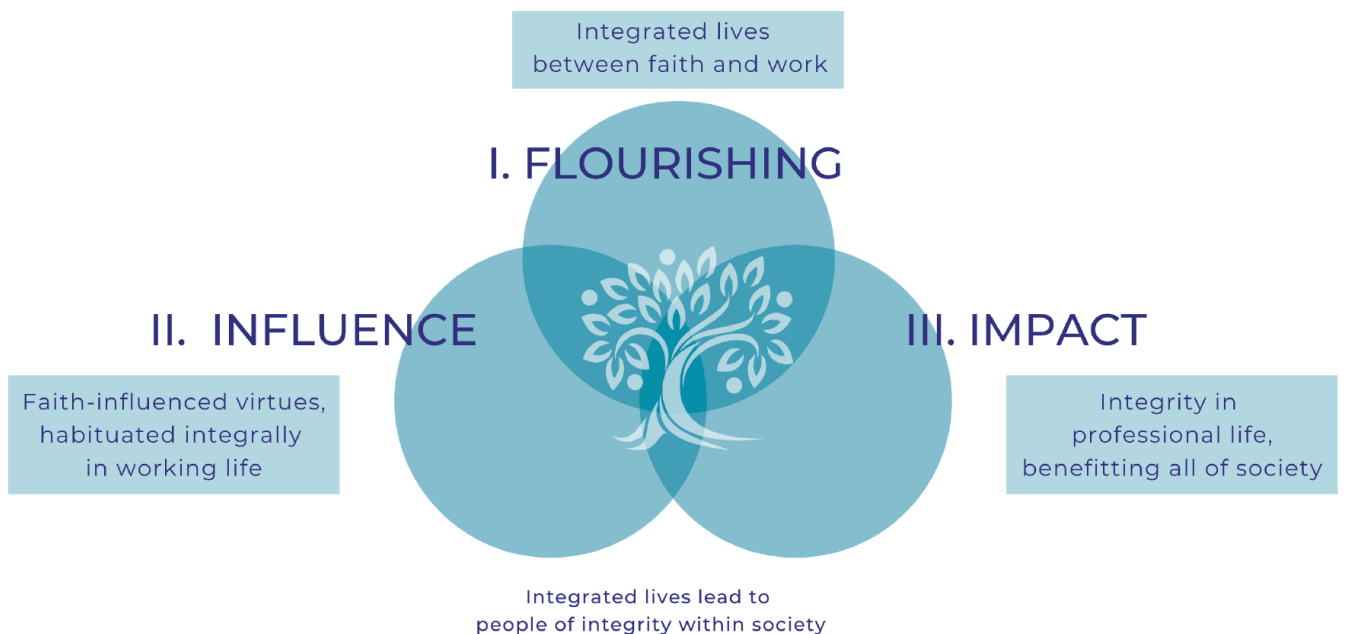
INTEGRATED CHRISTIAN LIVES

“You cannot blame meat for going rotten, that is just what meat does, but you can blame the salt for not being there.”

Rev Dr John Stott

We have identified that young Christian professionals frequently experience a disconnect between their faith identity and their work identity. For some, this disintegration can be an impediment to a continued life with Jesus. For others this dualism limits their personal flourishing, inhibits their opportunity to bring a Christian influence into their workplace, and diminishes their potential for societal impact.

Integrating faith and working life promotes individual flourishing, helping Christians see how Jesus is Lord over all of their lives. It brings a positive influence into the workplace, through Christian character and integral witness. It lays the foundations for a life of seeking God’s glory, impacting society through their professional roles.



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Young Christian adults entering into working life are the future face of Christianity in our world. Before them is a lifetime of opportunity to bring the ‘salt and light’ of Christ’s kingdom into relationships, workplaces, and professional spheres, which would all suffer acutely without their presence. Disciple-making, focused on character, and contextualised to their workplaces, is vital for them become the people that Jesus intends them to be, and that our world needs them to be.