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## Pupil attitudes toward Christianity: a study amongst 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils

THE STRUCTURE of the provision of primary education in the Republic of Ireland has featured strongly in public debate in recent times, as pressure for a reduction in the 96% dominance of church run primary schools<sup>1</sup> is vocalised from an increasingly diverse society. The most recent census figures show that 9.8% people state they have no religion - an increase of 73.6% since 2011. 28% of the general population are in the 20-39 year age group, yet 45% of those with no religion fall into this category.<sup>2</sup>

These are the parents, now and in the coming years, of primary school pupils. The predominantly denominational system of primary education has had to face the reality of demands for change, not just in the provision of religious education but also in relation to access and school enrolment policies, especially where patrons are under pressure to “divest some of their schools to accommodate the needs of those of minority or no faith backgrounds”.<sup>3</sup>

There are many stakeholders in the primary education system in the Republic of Ireland and it is crucially important that, during any debate about school patronage and structure all views are heard. Here, for the first time, the focus is on listening to the child from the Church of Ireland primary school.

This paper is based on a 2016 research project, conducted as the basis for an MA dissertation for the University of Warwick. By focussing on one Church of Ireland diocese with twenty primary schools under the patronage of the Church of Ireland bishop, my main aim was to gain an understanding of the attitudes toward Christianity of 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils. As pupils in C of I primary schools, these children attended religious education classes, school assemblies and services, although not all were members of the Church of Ireland. My second aim was to explore the factors and correlates which impacted on the children’s attitudes. The study was designed to add new data to the forty years of international research on children’s attitudes led by Professor Leslie Francis of the University of Warwick.

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Education and Skills. (2017). *Data on Individual Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/newsevents/documents/pressreleases/2017/prCensussummarypart1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Faas, D., Darmody, M. & Sokolowska, B. (2016). Religious diversity in primary schools: Reflections from the Republic of Ireland. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 38:1, 83-98.

It shows that the children surveyed have mostly a very positive attitude toward Christianity. Their attitudes toward God, Jesus, the Bible, church and prayer have been analysed and the factors that influence these attitudes reviewed. Questions about the child's church attendance and their parents' church attendance explore the relationship between going to church and attitudes toward Christianity. Children who pray when on their own are found to have a more positive attitude toward Christianity than those who don't. This raises questions about how church and school support this deep dimension of religiosity.

66% of children in the Church of Ireland schools surveyed say they are not members of the Church of Ireland, yet these schools, serving over 1,800 pupils, are chosen by parents for their children. How is the highly positive attitude toward Christianity demonstrated in this research project being supported and valued by schools, patrons, and the wider church community?

Through exploring the attitudes of 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class children toward Christianity, and the role of religious belief and practice in their lives, the research must ultimately ask questions about how all stakeholders value Church of Ireland primary schools.

#### The Context and Cohort

Cork county is almost geographically coterminous with Cork Diocese and the 2011 census showed that the percentage of Church of Ireland people in relation to the total population was higher in Cork than in any other county in Ireland.

The most recent Cork diocesan statistics show 1,825 children attending Church of Ireland primary schools in the diocese.<sup>4</sup> The 2011 Church of Ireland survey (Republic of Ireland) concluded that 38% of children enrolled in Church of Ireland schools were members of the C. of I.<sup>5</sup> The 2016 *Small Schools : Value for Learning* report indicated, as did the 2011 report, a diverse school population in terms of religious identity, thus posing the question to the patron as to “whether this is a school for Protestants or . . . a Protestant school for all ?”<sup>6</sup>

#### The Survey

Since the 1970s, the work of Leslie Francis has demonstrated the importance of children's attitudes in explaining individual differences in religiosity, showing that attitudes demonstrate how children deeply feel about religion. The extensive research by Francis in this field has included hundreds of surveys, replicated in many different

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<sup>4</sup> United Dioceses of Cork, Cloyne and Ross. (2017). *Diocesan Synod Reports*. Cork, p. 80

<sup>5</sup> Church of Ireland College of Education, Church of Ireland Board of Education & Church of Ireland Primary Schools Management Association. (2011). *Our School Community*, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> Lodge, A. & Tuohy, D. (2016). *Small Schools Value for Learning Summary Report*. Dublin, p. 3

contexts and with people of different ages. The combination of these different studies has enabled the development of a coherent model of religiosity.

Francis suggests that attitudes tend to reflect a state which changes over time but whose depth and consistency may not be as influenced by external factors as the cognitive or behavioural dimensions of religion. He explains that “the affective dimension is less likely than the behavioural dimension (for example church attendance) to be subject to social constraints”,<sup>7</sup> citing the examples of parental and peer pressure resulting in the attendance or non-attendance of a child at church. He also states that “the affective dimension is less likely than the cognitive dimension...to be conditioned by social learning and by denominational teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity consists of 24 statements, some of them phrased positively and some negatively. When looked at as a whole it can be seen that the statements focus on five elements of Christian faith which are common across different denominations and should be relevant for children and adults alike, namely: God, Jesus, the Bible, church and prayer. Respondents read a phrase and opt for one of five points on a scale to demonstrate the level of their agreement with the statement.

As replication of a scale is a proven method for establishing its reliability across different contexts, this has been an opportunity to replicate the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland for the first time, adapting a survey instrument created by Francis, Fisher, Lankshear and Townsend for church schools in Wales<sup>9</sup>.

#### Administration of the survey

Surveys were analysed from 468 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils in eighteen Church of Ireland primary schools in the diocese of Cork. All the schools were co-educational. In some schools the pupils surveyed were in single class groups, but in most, they were in multi-class groupings. With urban and rural schools, large and small schools, the cohort, whilst unique to one county and diocese in Ireland, might be considered representative of the Church of Ireland school structure in 2016. The limited geographical area also provided local positivity for the research project and teachers were keen to take part. Table 1 shows the 468 pupils, divided by gender and school class.

Table 1

#### *Irish Primary Attitude Survey cohort*

<sup>7</sup> Francis, L.J. & Burton, L. (2007). The relationship between psychological health and attitudes toward Christianity among 11- to 15- year old pupils in England. *Journal of research in Christian Education*, 16, 83-102, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Francis, L. J., Fisher, J., Lankshear, D. & Townsend, R (2014). *Primary Schools Attitude Survey*. St Mary's Centre, Wales.

	4 <sup>th</sup> class	5 <sup>th</sup> class	6 <sup>th</sup> class	totals
	N	N	N	N
boys	83	66	82	231
girls	87	94	56	237
total	170	160	138	468

*N- number of pupils*

All the children received denominational religious education and attended school assemblies. Parish - school links were encouraged in the diocese and there was an annual diocesan schools' service. As a result, it may be said that there was an inherent positivity within school communities towards Christianity and the Church of Ireland.

### Research Findings and Conclusions

After the survey results were analysed, it was concluded that 4<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> class children in Church of Ireland schools in the diocese of Cork have remarkably positive attitudes toward Christianity, more positive than findings from similar research projects in other contexts.<sup>10</sup> There was a wide range of attitudes discovered, with some students wholly positive and a small number wholly negative, as would be expected. As there has been no similar research in primary schools in Ireland in earlier decades, it is not possible to say whether levels of positivity are declining or remaining static.

### Personal Questions

To investigate the factors which contribute to the children's attitudes, some personal questions were asked relating to children's church attendance and their perceptions of their parents' church attendance. They were also asked about whether they prayed when on their own. International research on children's attitudes over the past forty years has shown that these practices, as well as the child's sex and age, have some measurable effect on their attitudes.

Table 3 shows the child's own church and Sunday School attendance, with less than one third of 10-13 year olds attending church once a month or more frequently. One quarter of children surveyed never attend church (of any faith or denomination).

Table 3

#### *Church and Sunday School attendance*

	% CA	% SS A
Never	25.9	60.0

<sup>10</sup> Results showed a mean score of 91.6 (where wholly positive scores would have totalled 120 and wholly negative would have totalled 24). Kay, W.K. & Francis, L.J. (1996). *Drift from the Churches: Attitudes toward Christianity during childhood and adolescence*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Once or twice a year	16.5	6.6
Sometimes	26.7	12.2
At least once a month	13.9	8.5
Weekly	17.1	12.6

*%CA= % Church Attendance. % SSA= %Sunday School Attendance*

Table 4 presents data on the type of church attended by respondents who stated they attend church. These data show that most church-attending pupils at Church of Ireland schools, attend the Church of Ireland church.

Table 4

*Type of church attended by respondents (who attend church)*

<b>Church</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>C of I</b>	228	65.7
<b>Roman Catholic</b>	73	21.0
<b>Baptist</b>	18	5.2
<b>Methodist</b>	10	2.9
<b>Pentecostal</b>	7	2.0
<b>Mosque</b>	1	0.3
<b>Other</b>	10	2.9

*N= number of children*

Table 5 presents the data from questions where the child opines on the church attendance of their parents. It is noted in the question that this answer is meant to focus on those who attend apart from special occasions. It is concluded that mothers attend church marginally more frequently than fathers – (22% mothers and 17% fathers attending nearly weekly). Total non-attendance, as calculated from the children’s opinions, is relatively high (20% mothers and 24.2% fathers) as are “don’t knows” which account for approximately one fifth of the responses (17.5% mothers and 21.5% fathers).

Table 5

*Parental church attendance*

<b>Attendance</b>	<b>MA</b>	<b>FA</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Nearly every week	22.0	17.0
Less than weekly	40.5	37.3
Never	20.0	24.2
Don’t know	17.5	21.5

*MA= Mother Attends FA= Father Attends*

### The factors of sex and age

Research using the Francis Scale has consistently shown that girls have higher positive attitudes toward Christianity than boys and that there is a decline in positivity as children get older.<sup>11</sup> The Cork research found that girls had a consistently and significantly higher level of positivity than boys for all three class groups and that there was a general decline of positivity across the three years surveyed. That said, 6<sup>th</sup> class girls did show a marginal rise in positivity, but with such small survey numbers this may not hold much significance.

Table 6  
*Mean attitude scores analysed by sex and class (age)*

	Mean
<i>by sex</i>	
Boy	87.6
Girl	93.4
<i>by class</i>	
4 <sup>th</sup> class	95.0
5 <sup>th</sup> class	92.6
6 <sup>th</sup> class	86.0

For any teacher, the task of engaging her/his pupils in the curriculum content is a daily challenge. In the light of this research it becomes important to find fresh strategies to engage children, especially boys, in religious education at senior primary school level.

There is a challenge too for those involved in education in a church setting. As international research, backed up by this project, shows a linear decline in attitudes toward Christianity as children get older, it is important to recognise that senior classes in primary school are a stage when positivity levels toward Christianity are relatively high. Not alone is it recommended that school-based religious education curricula demonstrate awareness of this research on children's attitudes toward Christianity, it is also worth considering children's attitudes in parish-based educational programmes, including confirmation preparation.

Table 7 shows the calculated correlations between the respondents' total attitude to Christianity and the factors of personal prayer, personal church attendance

<sup>11</sup>Swindells, T., Francis, L.J. & Robbins, M. (2010). Shaping attitudes toward Christianity among year seven pupils: the influence of sex, church, home and primary school. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 31:3, 343-348.

and parental church attendance, where the higher the figure, the greater the link between the factors. Personal prayer has the highest calculated correlation with the child's attitude to Christianity. The child's personal church attendance has also a strong relationship with his/her attitude to Christianity.

Table 7

*Correlation between personal prayer, church attendance and parental church attendance on the child's attitude to Christianity.*

	Attitude to Christianity
Personal prayer	.66***
Personal church attendance (PA)	.50***
Mother's church attendance (MA)	.21***
Father's church attendance (FA)	.21***

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### The influence of church attendance

In the research of Francis and others, it has been concluded that personal church attendance has a significant and positive influence on the child's attitude toward Christianity.<sup>12</sup> In this 2016 research in Cork it has been found to be so and is marginally stronger for boys than for girls.

Parental church attendance was analysed, as reported by the child in the survey. It was found that parental attendance was marginally more influential on the child's attitude to Christianity than on the child's attendance. Without qualitative research the reasons for this are not clear, but these results would all fall under the umbrella of the influence of the home. Differences between the mother and father in terms of the correlations showed stronger links between the father and son and negative links between the father and daughter.

The clear link between personal church attendance and positive attitudes toward Christianity necessitates consideration of experiences of church for the young child. This is again both important for the church school and for the parish church. Kay and Francis note that ". . . church attendance, whether by the child or the parents, helps a positive attitude toward Christianity to be formed". They imply that it is

<sup>12</sup> Robbins, M., Babington, P. & Francis, L.J. (2004). Correlations between attitude toward Christianity, prayer and church attendance among 9- to 11- year olds. *Psychological Reports, 94*, 305-306.

through attending church that “by mechanisms that are not well understood” beliefs are internalised by the child.<sup>13</sup>

When reviewing answers to statements in the survey it is noted that less than half the children agreed that “church is important” and a quarter of children agreed that “church is boring”. In the parish school, regular occasions to visit the church; as part of the religious education programme, for assemblies and for church services at key points of the year; are all recommended. Increasing resources for these opportunities and enhancing positive church–school links would be beneficial.

It also would be important that clergy and parish communities reflect on the connections between personal church attendance and positive attitudes toward Christianity in their welcome and provision for children in the parish community.

#### Personal prayer practices

It was found in this study, again in line with the research of Francis and others, that the correlation of personal prayer has a significant and very strong link to a positive attitude toward Christianity in children.<sup>14</sup>

The research project has limitations in the understanding of children’s experiences of prayer, primarily due to its quantitative structure. Some interesting responses to aspects of the survey showed that most children agreed that “praying is a good thing” and that “God listens to prayers”. It is recommended that prayer be a key topic of consideration in both church and school’s ministry with and to children, since its personal practice appears to have an impact on the child’s religiosity and positive attitudes to Christianity.

Within the church school context, it is possible to introduce teaching about prayer in religious education lessons and to provide opportunities for prayer within the school day, including in assembly and in religious education lessons. The strength of the relationship between prayer and attitudes toward Christianity highlighted in this research would indicate that resourcing schools and families could be an opportunity for Boards of Education and parishes.

#### Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity is a valid and reliable instrument for analysing the attitudes of children in Irish primary schools. As the first recorded research of its kind in Church of Ireland primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, it has added to the international data

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<sup>13</sup> Kay, W.K. & Francis, L.J. (1996). *Drift from the Churches: Attitudes toward Christianity during childhood and adolescence*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Robbins, M., Babington, P. & Francis, L.J. (2004). Correlations between attitude toward Christianity, prayer and church attendance among 9- to 11- year olds. *Psychological Reports, 94*, 305-306.

commenced by Francis in the 1970s and paves the way for further research to be carried out in Ireland;

Irish children from Church of Ireland schools in Cork diocese have a remarkably positive attitude toward Christianity. It was not possible, within this research project, to assess the church school's direct influence on these findings. Kay and Francis concluded that "church schools can influence young people positively toward adopting a more positive attitude toward Christianity, in addition to any influence exerted by home and by church".<sup>15</sup> Although the cohort for this research project was small and limited to church schools, with such high levels of positivity, it appears that the influence of these schools is strong and merits further discussion. The role of the denominational religious education programme may also be seen as having some influence on positivity levels, though this is not quantifiable.

With 175 primary schools in the Republic under Church of Ireland patronage, the results of this research may serve as a reminder to the Church to consider the value it places on its schools, its religious education curriculum, the relationship between parish churches and their schools, and to help schools to play their part in influencing positivity toward Christianity.

The long running debate about school patronage, religious education in schools and the role of the church school has now a fresh voice, that of the 468 children from Church of Ireland primary schools in the diocese of Cork.

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<sup>15</sup> Kay, W.K. & Francis, L.J. (1996). *Drift from the Churches: Attitudes toward Christianity during childhood and adolescence*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p. 57