

The impact of World Youth Day on belief and behaviour

Andrew Singleton
Sociology, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

A paper presented at the
Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion
Denver CO, October 2009

Abstract

The experiences of youthful participants from the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Asia, New Zealand and Australia were studied before, during and after they took part in the Sydney World Youth Day (WYD08). This first of four papers from the study describes the aims and methods of the PP08 project: “before” and “after” interviews and surveys and participant observation at the event. The paper then examines those who reported changes to their faith as a consequence of attending WYD08 and explores some of the reasons why such changes took place for these youth.

Keywords: youth religion; religious change; faith development

The impact of World Youth Day on belief and behaviour

World Youth Day, an international youth-oriented Catholic celebration which has been held at intervals of two or three years since 1987, has become the largest recurring youth event in the world. The 10th international World Youth Day (WYD08) was held in Sydney, Australia. Thousands of registered pilgrims from 170 countries participated in a series of week-long events and activities, including catecheses, Masses, the Papal arrival in Sydney, a re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross staged as a journey across the Sydney CBD, Eucharistic adoration, theater, lectures, and seminars. The week culminated, on World Youth Day itself, with the Papal Mass, celebrated by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI and attended by an estimated 400,000 people. This series of four papers reports on findings from a large-scale, multi-stage WYD08 research project, “Pilgrims’ Progress 2008.”

WYD is an audacious initiative of globalized Catholic ministry to youth. Does it strengthen the faith and sense of Catholic identity of those who attend? This paper explores WYD outcomes and some of the reasons why such changes took place.¹ Younger, slightly less religious pilgrims were more likely to report that attending WYD gave them greater confidence in how they approach aspects of their faith. Another group, with stronger peer networks in the church, reported more demanding changes in their commitment. In both cases, it is found that the WYD event itself plays a significant role in these changes.

The Pilgrims Progress 2008 Project

I begin with a description of the aims and methods of the PP08 project. “Pilgrims’ Progress 2008” is a research project being conducted at Australian Catholic University and Monash University, with the support of World Youth Day Administration, focusing on the pilgrims who attended World Youth Day in Sydney in July. The project is studying the experiences of pilgrims before, during and after World Youth Day, seeking to discover “What WYD08 means for its youth participants,” to determine the personal outcomes of the WYD pilgrimage, and to explore the Christian-community-building effect of WYD.

The research team members are Michael Mason and Ruth Webber from Australian Catholic University and Andrew Singleton from Monash University, Australia.

The research has three stages. **Stage I** of the research, conducted prior to the event, involved 49 in-depth interviews and a survey in May 2008 of 12,275 English-speaking registered pilgrims. The survey sample is representative, matching the pilgrim registration file in gender, nationality, and age.

Stage II was conducted during the WYD08 week. The research team engaged in participant observation during the whole event. Shortly after our return, we attended group debriefing sessions and conducted a further 26 individual interviews and two focus groups with pilgrims.

Stage III of the project was another survey of English-speaking registered pilgrims, conducted in November-December 2008. The survey has 4,776 respondents, and 1449 of these respondents were able to be matched with responses to the pre WYD survey. This

¹ Cf. Rymarz’s (2008) suggestions for research that considers the impact of WYD

survey was conducted five months after WYD. The aim of this second survey was to better understand the impact WYD08 had on denominational identity, personal religiosity, and civic engagement.

Pilgrim types

In this paper, and the papers that follow, we make use of a set of four WYD08 “ideal types.” Pilgrims **aged 15-24**² are classified into different types based on level of their level of religious commitment and orthodoxy (measured by Mass attendance and personal prayer, commitment to Catholic teaching, strength of Catholic identity and commitment to religious exclusivism). We call these groups the Devoted, the Involved, the Open, and the Social. The names given to each of these groups describes not just their level of religious commitment but is also indicative of their overall orientation to WYD08, in terms of what they most enjoyed and found most beneficial.

Briefly, characteristics of these four types are as follows:

Devoted. These are highly religious Catholic youth who attend Mass in their parish every week (often more than once a week), pray every day, accept Church teachings and have a very strong sense of Catholic identity.

Involved. These youth have a regular involvement in their parish and pray very often, and while less fervent than the Devoted, have a strong faith nonetheless. Compared to the Devoted, they are somewhat less committed to Church teachings.

Open. These are youth who identify as Catholic, and the majority attend Mass regularly. Their Catholic identity is not as strong as the Involved and Devoted pilgrims. They are also less likely than the two more religious pilgrim types to agree with important church teachings.

Social. These youth have a looser affiliation with the Catholic Church and lower levels of religious practice – few pray daily. A majority disagree with some Catholic teachings. The majority of them agree with the statement that it is “OK to pick and choose your religious beliefs without having to accept the basic teachings of your religion as a whole.”

The type of pilgrim a person was also informed their WYD experience. For example, the Social pilgrims had an orientation to WYD that was mainly about “being there” and the “buzz” associated with a large gathering (crowds at the major events were around 150,000). Indeed, the top three things the Social group most liked about the atmosphere were: “Community: that special kind of friendliness and openness – you could talk to anyone,” “Faith: being with so many people my age who share the same faith,” and “Friends: a fun time with old and new.” In contrast, the top three things the Devoted pilgrims liked about the WYD atmosphere were: “Church: pride in being Catholic,” “Holy Spirit: the sense that God was present,” and “Faith: being with so many people my age who share the same faith.”

WYD Outcomes

We asked in the post survey questions about change including: “Did your WYD experience change how you approach your faith?” “Did your WYD experience change your

² The survey has a larger age range but analysis in this paper is confined to teens and emerging adults.

understanding/feeling about God/ Jesus/ Holy Spirit?” and “Probably most people would like to be a better person. But could you honestly say your WYD experience has made you really be determined to be different in the following ways?” These were followed by a list of statements and respondents could choose as many as applied. We have identified in our analysis two kinds of change in response to these items, what we term “commitment” changes and “cognitive” changes. These are described below.

Cognitive changes. “Cognitive” change is about those who have greater confidence in their faith. Those reporting cognitive change indicated agreement with one or more of these statements:

- “I’m not embarrassed now to let others see that I am a believer”
- “I’m more interested now in learning about my Catholic faith”
- “Up till WYD I was just going along with my family’s religion, but now it’s more because of **my** decision that I believe and want to be involved”
- “I feel more confident in my belief in God – that God is real”

Each of these statements represents a positive, “cognitive” decision about how they will approach their faith. Cognitive change is arguably about taking “small steps” forward: those with a lower starting point of religiosity might report these kinds of outcomes, a greater confidence overall after WYD.

Commitment changes. A stronger, more decisive indicator of stronger commitment is what we describe as “commitment” change. Those reporting this kind of change indicated agreement with one or more of these statements:

- “To be a follower of Christ, and live as he wants me to”
- “To accept Jesus as Lord of my life”
- “Now I want to live as a disciple of Jesus, a witness to Him”

Each of these statements represents a demanding change. Those making such changes will perhaps have a stronger religious starting point, and WYD served as a catalyst for them to want to make an even more decisive commitment. Notably, those reporting commitment change were much more likely to than those not reporting such changes to rate WYD as a “life-changing experience.”

Which pilgrims reported such change? The next table shows the percent of each pilgrim type who reported either cognitive or commitment change as a result of WYD.

Table 1: WYD Pilgrims (aged 15-24): Pilgrim types reporting “commitment” & “cognitive” WYD changes

Type of change	Pilgrim Types				All
	Devoted	Involved	Open	Social	
Cognitive Changes	67%	82%	86%	80%	80%
Commitment Changes	62%	66%	54%	41%	56%

The pilgrim types most likely to report cognitive changes are the Open and Involved pilgrims, followed by the Social group, with Devoted pilgrims the least likely to report such changes. In

contrast, the most religious types – Involved pilgrims and Devoted – were much more likely to report commitment changes as a result of their WYD experience.

Relationship to other post WYD outcomes. These types of change in faith are also related to changes in religious practice. Those people reporting commitment or cognitive change are more likely than those not reporting such changes to say that they will attend Mass, pray more and go to reconciliation more after WYD. This is particularly true among those whose previous level of these things is not high.

Commitment change is also associated with a host of positive life and faith outcomes. Those reporting such change were much more likely than those not reporting such changes to:

- Feel that post WYD, they have a “much more positive” view of themselves, their lives, and futures;
- Talk about religion and faith with family members who did not go to WYD; and
- Agree that as a result of WYD “your religious faith will have more influence on what they do in daily life.”

Further relationships between commitment change and outcomes are discussed in the papers by Michael Mason and Ruth Webber.

What factors are associated with WYD outcomes?

What predicts rapid religious change? In their research on rapid religious change among US adolescents, Regnerus and Uecker (2006:217) found that “only religious contexts were consistent predictors of ... change.” These religious contexts include things such as parental religiosity and peer religiosity. Our research adds a further, important religious context: attendance at a large religious event, one which has the potential to serve as a direct catalyst for change. In the remainder of this paper, we explore how various background religious and demographic factors are related to cognitive and commitment changes. Consideration is then given to various WYD influences. Finally, the combined effect of these variables is tested in multivariate analysis.

Table 2 below explores various background factors and whether these increase or decrease the probability of reporting the two kinds of change.

Table 2: WYD Pilgrims (15-24): Influence of religious background, demographic factors on religious change

Influences:	Reporting “cognitive” Change	Reporting “commitment” Change
Personal religiosity pre WYD:		
<i>Mass</i>		
Attends Mass weekly/daily	79%	60%
Attends Mass infrequently	77%	38%
<i>Prayer</i>		
Prays by self daily	77%	61%
Rarely prays by self	66%	32%
<i>Peers</i>		
Most friends attend Church	77%	65%
Most friends don't attend	82%	49%
<i>Catholic groups</i>		
Involved	77%	62%
Not involved	81%	51%
Demographic:		
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	82%	56%
Male	77%	60%

How to read this table: Columns show the % of people with attribute listed in row (e.g. female, prays weekly) reporting either commitment or cognitive change i.e. 82% of females reported experiencing cognitive change, 77% of males.

Cognitive change. This table shows that of the religious factors, only regular prayer increases the likelihood that a WYD pilgrim will report experiencing cognitive change (77% of those who pray by self daily reported cognitive change, compared to 66% of those who rarely pray by themselves). Other factors which indicate stronger religious commitment – such as friends attending church or involvement in a Catholic group – decrease somewhat the likelihood that a person will report cognitive changes. Higher levels of parental religiosity are not particularly associated with reporting cognitive change and are not reported here or included in the multivariate analysis discussed below.

It appears that being female increases the probability that a person will experience such changes as a result of their WYD experience. Further analysis reveals that the gender effect is actually a disguised age effect – the majority of teens attending WYD were female. Male teens are no more likely than male emerging adults to report cognitive changes. Female teens are significantly more likely than female emerging adults to report cognitive changes. Not shown in this table, but those who are younger are more likely than those who are older to report cognitive change.

Commitment change. As shown in the table above, all of the religious variables are strongly related to commitment change. For example, those attending Mass weekly were much more likely than those who attend mass rarely to report commitment change. Experiencing commitment changes is much more the preserve of the highly religious. Not shown in this

table, but those who are younger are more likely than those who are older to report cognitive change.

What parts of WYD08 were conducive to change?

We know that the WYD experience is the catalyst for the changes described above. But what aspects of the WYD week led to this change? Was it the theme of the Catecheses? Seeing the Pope? Being with other religious youth?

The WYD week was structured around five major religious events, starting with the Opening Mass on the Tuesday. The next major event was the Papal arrival on the Thursday, followed the Stations of the Cross on Friday, then a Pilgrim march, vigil and Papal Mass on the weekend. The three Masses were characterized by large crowds, beautiful scenery, homilies, music, and on two occasions, the presence of the Pope. In between pilgrims were scheduled to attend daily Mass and Catecheses.

We asked pilgrims how helpful each of these was for their spiritual development. The Stations, Vigil and Papal Mass were considered to be the most spiritually helpful of the main events. Of the other events, the Catecheses and Pilgrim march were rated as the most helpful in assisting spiritual development.

Another element of WYD that made an impression on pilgrims was the atmosphere. Even the most casual observers recognised the good cheer, friendliness, enthusiasm and sincerity of WYD08 pilgrims. But the “good atmosphere” also had deeper levels: the experience of communing with others who shared the same faith, and the experience of the presence of God.

Table 3 below explores WYD factors, including major events and the atmosphere, and whether the experience of these increases or decrease the probability of reporting the two kinds of change.

Table 3: WYD Pilgrims (15-24): Influence WYD events on religious change

Influences:	Reporting “cognitive” Change	Reporting “commitment” Change
Major WYD Events:		
<i>Stations of the Cross</i>		
Not helpful	68%	49%
Very spiritually helpful	84%	64%
<i>Vigil</i>		
Not helpful	55%	30%
Very spiritually helpful	83%	62%
<i>Papal Mass</i>		
Not helpful	65%	27%
Very spiritually helpful	84%	64%
Other events:		
<i>Catecheses</i>		
Not helpful	70%	38%
Very spiritually helpful	84%	66%
Other WYD factors:		
<i>WYD atmosphere: Holy Spirit: sense God was present</i>		
Not helpful	79%	49%
Very spiritually helpful	82%	74%
<i>WYD atmosphere: Faith: Being with others who share same faith</i>		
Not helpful	77%	53%
Very spiritually helpful	85%	61%
<i>Friends in attendance</i>		
No friends	82%	53%
2+ friends	79%	62%
<i>Previous WYD attendance</i>		
Attended a previous WYD	64%	54%
Not attended previous WYD	82%	57%

How to read this table: Columns show the % of people with attribute listed in row (e.g. female, prays weekly) reporting either commitment or cognitive change i.e. 84% of those who reported finding the Papal Mass very “spiritually helpful” experienced cognitive change, 65% of those who “found it not helpful” reported cognitive change.

Elements of the “WYD atmosphere” were clearly important. For example, those who found it spiritually helpful to be with so many others sharing the same faith were more likely than those not finding this helpful to report commitment and cognitive change.

This table shows another clear pattern: those people who rated the each of these major events highly – the Stations, the Vigil, the Papal Mass – were far more likely than those not rating these events highly to report cognitive and commitment changes. The Catecheses also played an important role in facilitating change. Later I discuss what it was about these events that had appeal, a theme developed further in the next paper. Prior to this, it is valuable to assess via multivariate analysis how each of these various factors are related to one another.

Multivariate analysis (1): Cognitive change. A binary logistic regression analysis, controlling for the effects of a person's age, sex, pre-WYD religiosity, and the WYD experience reveals the following factors to be significantly related to experiencing "cognitive change" (full details of the various models used, and odds ratios, are included in appendix 1):

- Finding the Vigil and Catecheses very helpful for spiritual development
- Rating as "most helpful for spiritual journey" either or both these aspects of the WYD "atmosphere": "Faith: Being with so many people my age who share the same faith"; "Church: Pride in being Catholic, being part of something greater than ourselves – worldwide and long-lasting"
- First time attendance at a WYD
- Most friends *not* attending church
- Semi-regular praying by self

Of the religious variables (pre-WYD religiosity, parental religiosity), only prayer contributes to cognitive change in the final model, once various WYD variables are added.³ Interestingly, pilgrims whose friends mostly don't attend church were more likely than those whose friends do attend to report cognitive change. Perhaps the small steps that this type of change involves, like "I'm not embarrassed now to let others see that I am a believer" is more within the realm of what is acceptable for those whose friends don't also go to church.

The Catecheses proved important for those experiencing cognitive change. Among those reporting cognitive change, the aspects of the Catecheses that helped it to be a positive experience were the theme of the Holy Spirit "It was about our lives, and how the Holy Spirit works through us" and the fact that "The bishops talked to us, not at us / did not talk down to us." The next paper explores in greater depth the particular features of the WYD atmosphere.

Multivariate analysis (2): Commitment change. A binary logistic regression analysis, controlling for the effects of a person's age, sex, pre-WYD religiosity, and the WYD experience reveals the following factors to be significantly related to experiencing "commitment change" (full details of the various models used, and odds ratios, are included in appendix 2):

- Finding the Papal Mass, Vigil and Catecheses very helpful for spiritual development
- Rating as "most helpful for spiritual journey" either or all these aspects of the WYD "atmosphere": "Faith: Being with so many people my age who share the same faith"; "Holy Spirit: The sense that God was present" and "Church: Pride in being Catholic, being part of something greater than ourselves – worldwide and long-lasting"
- Being younger
- Most friends attending church
- Being a member of a Catholic organization

Those with stronger peer support for their religion – membership in a Catholic organization, most friends attending church – were more likely to report commitment changes. Other

³ Other studies of youth religion reveal that prayer is not only an important indicator of strong religious commitment, but is strongly linked to other life outcomes, such as the continued salience of religious commitment, and participation in society (see Smith 2002, 2009; Mason, Singleton & Webber 2007).

religious variables did not retain significance once various WYD variables were added.

Of the WYD events, the Stations were not instrumental in facilitating commitment change, but the Papal Mass, Vigil and Catecheses were. Among those reporting commitment change, the aspects of the Papal Mass that were considered helpful included: “The sense that God was present” and “Seeing the Pope, listening to him, being at his Mass”, “The message of his Homily.” Those aspects of the Catecheses that proved helpful were the same as for the cognitive group.

It remains to be seen whether these changes are a short-term or constitute a longer-term effect. Rymarz (2007) conducted “before” and “after” research with 63 teen Australian pilgrims who went to Cologne WYD. He found that 12 months after attending that WYD, 70% claimed to pray more often than before WYD05, 60% discussed religion with their friends more than before, and 41% went to Mass more than before.

The only large-scale, longitudinal research on youth religion is the three-wave US National Study of Youth Religion, which featured a five to six year gap between first and third waves (see Smith 2009). Smith (2009:214) reports that more than half of the most religious teens in Wave 1 became less religious by Wave 3. Importantly, Smith (2009: 217-219) identifies several factors which sustain levels of religious commitment from teen years into young adulthood, including parental modeling, internalization of religious significance, and personal practice (most notably prayer). So, while WYD might be an important catalyst for change, it is reasonable to argue that without these important support structures and mechanisms, such change may not be sustained in the longer term.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the short-term religious outcomes for pilgrims who attended WYD08, and identified some of the factors that were catalysts for change. Several of the big WYD events, along with the Catecheses, proved to be spiritually helpful for many pilgrims and a high proportion of pilgrims reported some kind of faith change. While these results suggest that mass rallies can result in short-term, real gains, retaining these youth in the Catholic Church will prove the greatest challenge, an issue explored at length in the next paper.

References

- Mason, M, Singleton A & Webber, R 2007, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*, Garrett Publishing, Melbourne.
- Regnerus, M & Uecker, J 2006, “Finding faith, losing faith: The prevalence and context of religious transformations during adolescence”, *Review of Religious Research*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 217-237.
- Rymarz, R 2007, “The Impact of World Youth Day: A Twelve Month Follow-up of Under 18 Australian WYD 2005 Participants”, *Australasian Catholic Record*, vol. 84, no. 4, pp. 387-400.
- Rymarz, R 2008, “Who Goes to World Youth Day? Some Data on Young Adult Australian Pilgrims”, *Australian Religious Studies Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 127-144.
- Smith, C with Denton, ML 2005, *Soul Searching: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Teenagers*, Oxford UP, New York.
- Smith, C with Snell, P 2009, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, Oxford UP, New York.

APPENDIX 1.

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Models predicting cognitive change among WYD pilgrims (age 15-24)

EFFECT	MODEL 1	MODEL 2
Demographic		
AGE	.809***	.919+
FEMALE	1.230	1.199
ABOVE AVE standard of living	.980	.922
Personal religiosity		
PRAYS SEMI-REGULAR (ref cat: doesn't pray)	2.455**	2.260*
NOT MEMBER OF CATHOLIC ORG	1.149	1.398
ATTENDS MASS WEEKLY+	1.225	.764
MOST FRIENDS DON'T ATTEND CHURCH	1.246+	1.755**
WYD factors		
2-3 FRIENDS AT WYD		.816
NEVER BEEN TO A WYD		2.039**
FOUND STATION OF CROSS very helpful		1.513+
FOUND PAPAL MASS very helpful		1.196
FOUND VIGIL very helpful		2.550**
FOUND CATECHESSES very helpful		1.635*
FOUND 'HOLY SPIRIT: SENSE GOD WAS PRESENT' very helpful		1.027
FOUND 'FAITH: BEING WITH OTHERS SHARING SAME FAITH' very helpful		1.588**
FOUND 'CHURCH: PRIDE in being Catholic' very helpful		1.674**
Model fit		
-2 Log Likelihood	1582.9	1146.08
Nagelkerke R-square	0.56	0.137
N		1287

Key for significance levels: + $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

APPENDIX 2.

Table 5. Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Models predicting commitment change among WYD pilgrims (age 15-24)

EFFECT	MODEL 1	MODEL 2
Demographic		
AGE	.934**	.910**
FEMALE	.879	.976
ABOVE AVE standard of living	1.219	1.060
Personal religiosity		
PRAYS DAILY	2.494***	1.617
MEMBER OF CATHOLIC ORG	1.347**	1.316*
ATTENDS MASS WEEKLY+	1.557*	1.099
MOST FRIENDS DO ATTEND CHURCH	1.548***	1.287+
WYD factors		
2-3 FRIENDS AT WYD		1.194
NEVER BEEN TO A WYD		1.103
FOUND STATION OF CROSS very helpful		.868
FOUND PAPAL MASS very helpful		2.381**
FOUND VIGIL very helpful		1.952*
FOUND CATECHESSES very helpful		1.802**
FOUND 'HOLY SPIRIT: SENSE GOD WAS PRESENT' very helpful		2.744***
FOUND 'FAITH: BEING WITH OTHERS SHARING SAME FAITH' very helpful		1.444**
FOUND 'CHURCH: PRIDE in being Catholic' very helpful		1.373*
Model fit		
-2 Log Likelihood	2124.5	1543.8
Nagelkerke R-square	0.75	0.194
N		1287

Key for significance levels: + $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.