

A photograph of a large, hollowed-out log with a seal resting inside, looking out at a beach and ocean. The log is weathered and has a rough, textured interior. The seal is dark and is curled up inside the log. The background shows a bright, sunny day with a clear blue sky, a calm ocean, and a sandy beach with some driftwood.

*They're not all leaving...*

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**Perspectives  
from Recent  
Conversion  
Stories**

*Tim Stewart*

*April 6, 2025 @ 7:00PM*

*Parkdale Evangelical Free Church*

*Zoom Meeting ID: 881 5205 5567*

*Passcode: Gospel*

***— A Doctor of Ministry Project:  
Trinity Western Seminary***

***An Investigation into the Process of Conversion***

***of a Select Sample of New Christians***

***in the Greater Victoria Region***

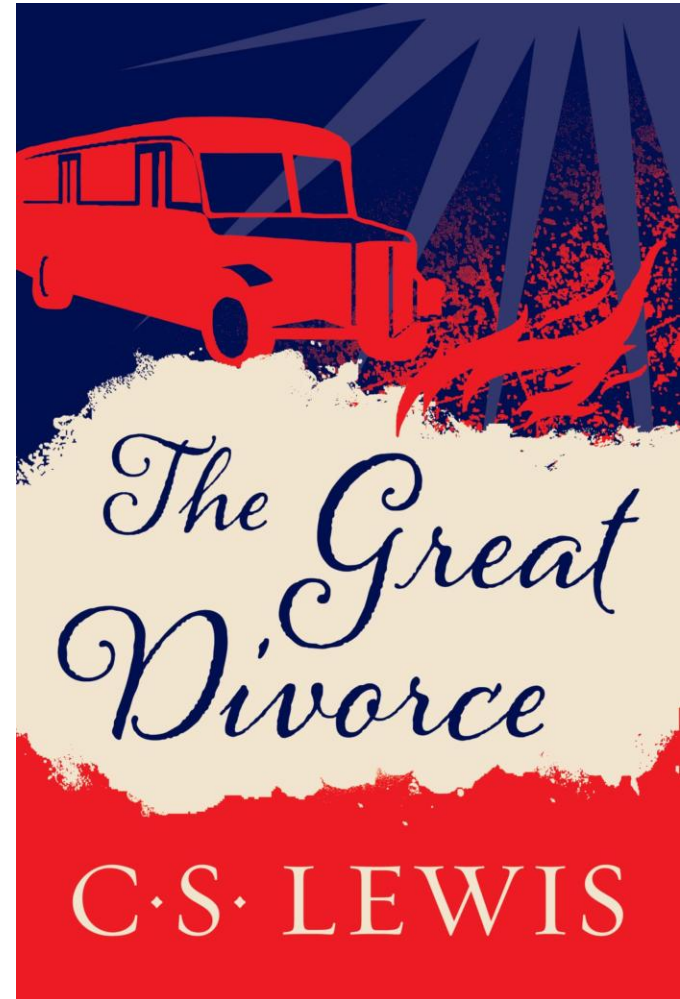
***during the period of 2017-2022***



# — “They’re Not all Leaving”

## *Have you noticed?*

- **Guder, *Missional Church*, 1998**
  - “It is now a truism to refer to N. America as a mission field”
- ***Are we measuring properly?***
- **Conversion:** Human response to God’s saving work



# — The Gospel & Conversion

- An “itch to scratch” – *why do people’s testimonies differ from evangelistic formulas?*
- Exploring these “**basic**” topics
  - *How are people actually coming to faith?*
  - *Why is the gospel good news for them?*
- The **Procedure**
  - **Broad** literature review, **deep** local engagement

# — Bible

- ***Where's the “gospel” in the Bible?***

- **Gospels** – “the kingdom is near” (**Mark 1:14-15**)
- **Paul** – the story of Jesus (**1 Corinthians 15:1-5**)
- **Acts** – varying messages to Jews / Gentiles
- **Keller, *Center Church*, 2012** – “Because the gospel is endlessly rich, *it can handle the burden of being the one ‘main thing’ of a church.*”



# — Theology

- **Death** – Romans 1-4
  - “bad news & good news”
- **Resurrection** – 1 Cor 15
  - participate in new creation (N.T. Wright)
- **Life** – call to discipleship (Dallas Willard)
- **Atonement** – metaphors



# — Missiology

- *Transmitting the gospel*
- **Michael Green** – apostles' contextualization
- **Buechner** – tragedy, comedy, fairy tale
- **Schaeffer** – tension point in worldview
- **Newbigin** – church must embody message





# — Sociology

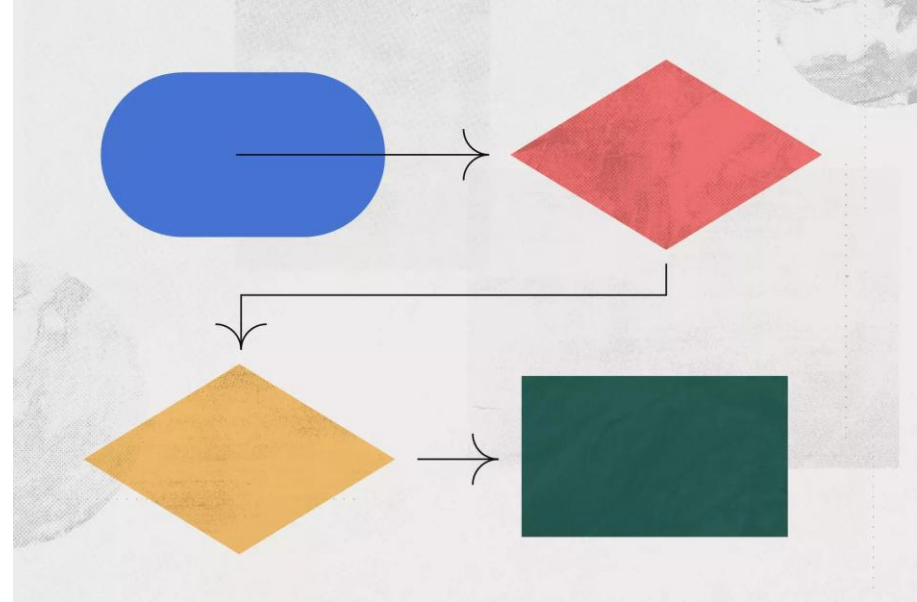


- **External factors**
- **Stark** – conversion is about **social networks**, not encountering attractive doctrine
  - Conversion by sword, nominal, pragmatic
- **Green** – 80% of evangelism by ordinary people
- **Smith** – church is “mediator” – of **message**
  - Context of conversion – *what about content?*



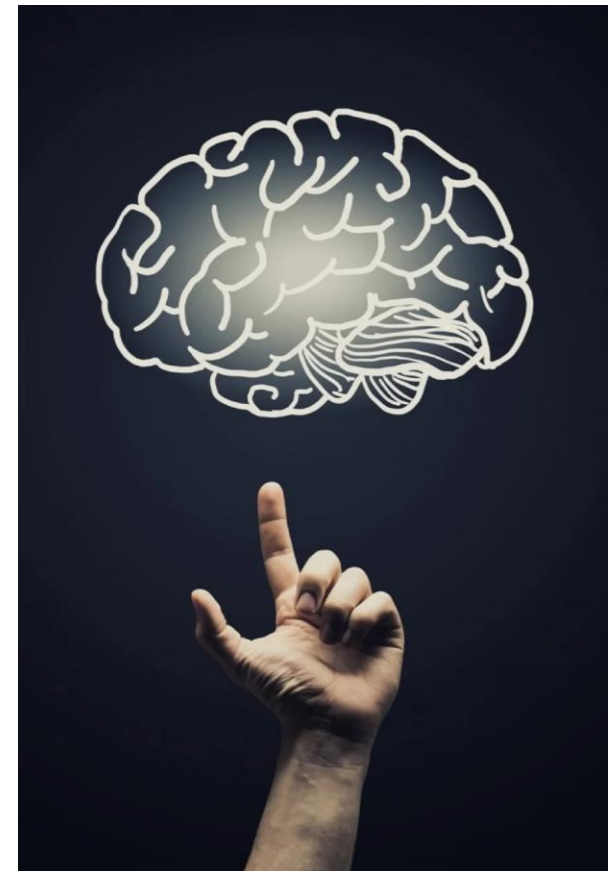
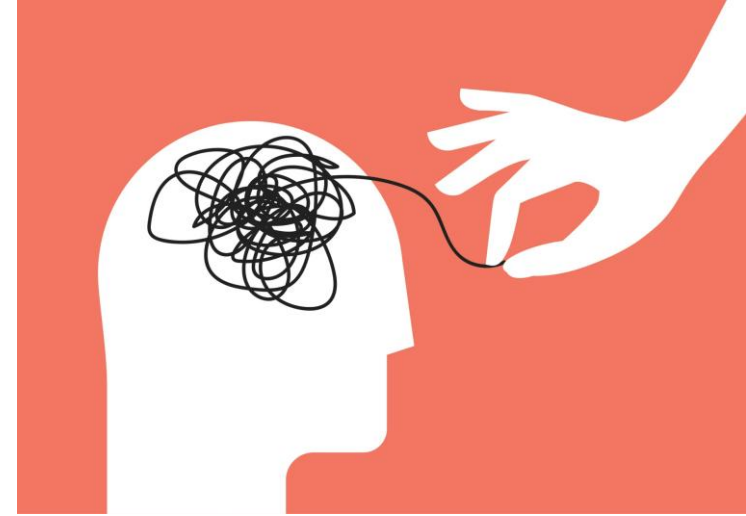
# — Process

- **Longitudinal studies**
  - spread over time
- **Jesus's disciples** – *when was the moment?*
- **Observing groups** – **points & processes**
- **Rambo** – context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences



# — Psychology

- **Internal factors**
- **Smith** – resolution of problem, fulfill deepest longings
- **Smith, Stewart** – “A multifaceted and dynamic process of cognitive transition mediated by structural and contextual forces”
- **Fowler** – stages of development



# — History

- Taking personal accounts seriously
- **Stark** – conversion of Vikings
  - social ties in group begin to outweigh
- **Green** – martyrs – social **cost** of conversion
- **Hindmarsh** – Wesley's **customized** messages
- **Kreider** – accounts of early church fathers
  - belief, behavior, belonging



# — Narrative

- William James –  
“The Varieties of Religious Experience” (1902)
- ***Read any biographies?***
  - Dufault-Hunter – “**rewriting** one’s life story in a religious light, assigning new meaning to that story, and embodying the story in one’s practices, character and community”





# A Local Theology



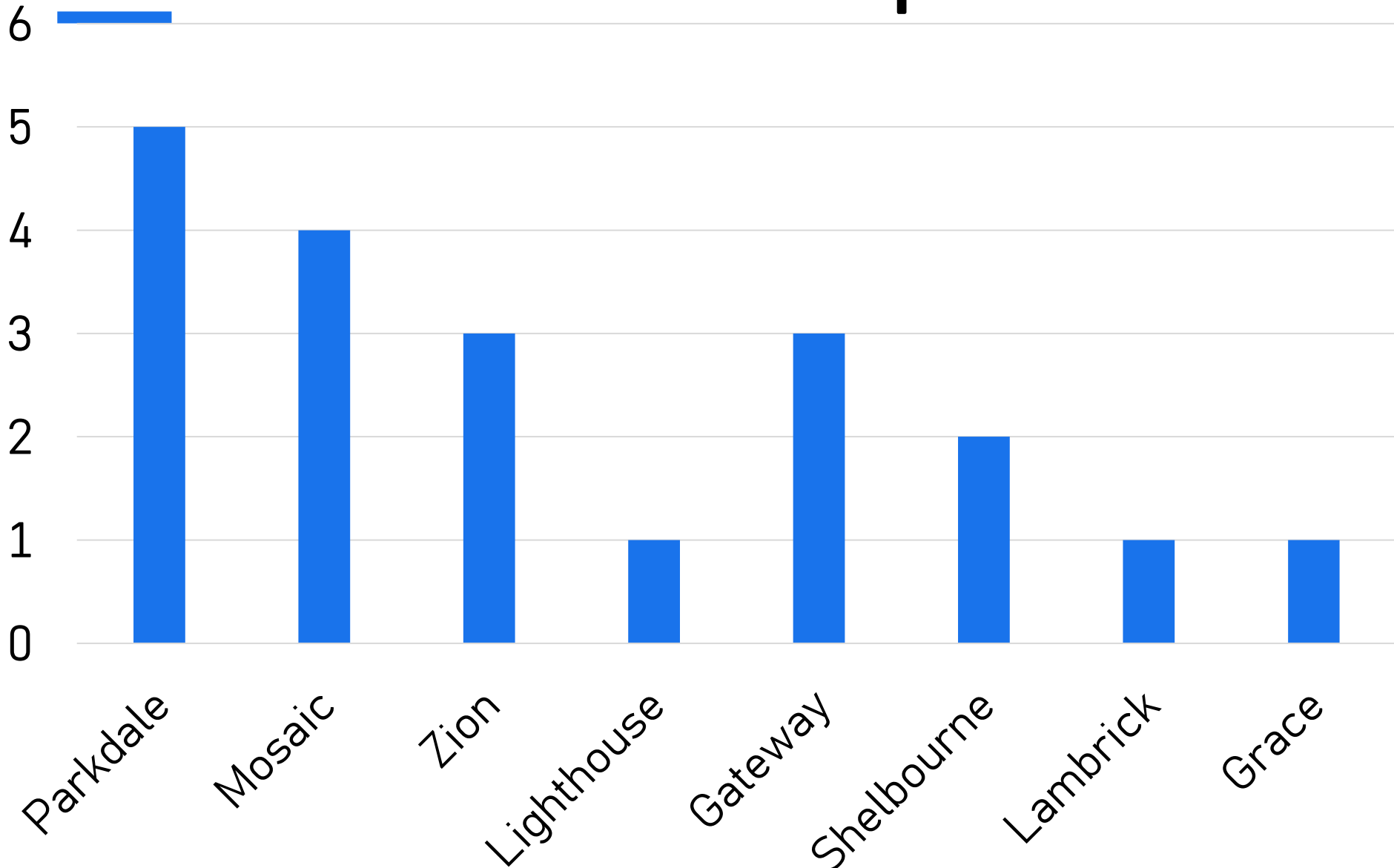
- **An Investigation into the Process of Conversion of a Select Sample of New Christians in the Greater Victoria Region during the period of 2017-2022**
- **Delimitations** – narrowing the scope
  - **Converts** – baptism as an objective measure
  - **5-year span** – a lot can change over time!
  - **In Evangelical Churches in Victoria**

# — Research Design: Interviews



- Letting people speak for themselves – inductive, open-ended
- Limits – subjective, small, preliminary
- **Interviews** – Nov 2022 – Feb 2023
  - 90 minutes, 3-part format
  - 20 from 8 churches

# Church of Baptism



# — Data

## Collection:

- 190,000 words of transcript

- Notes & keywords – quality & quantity

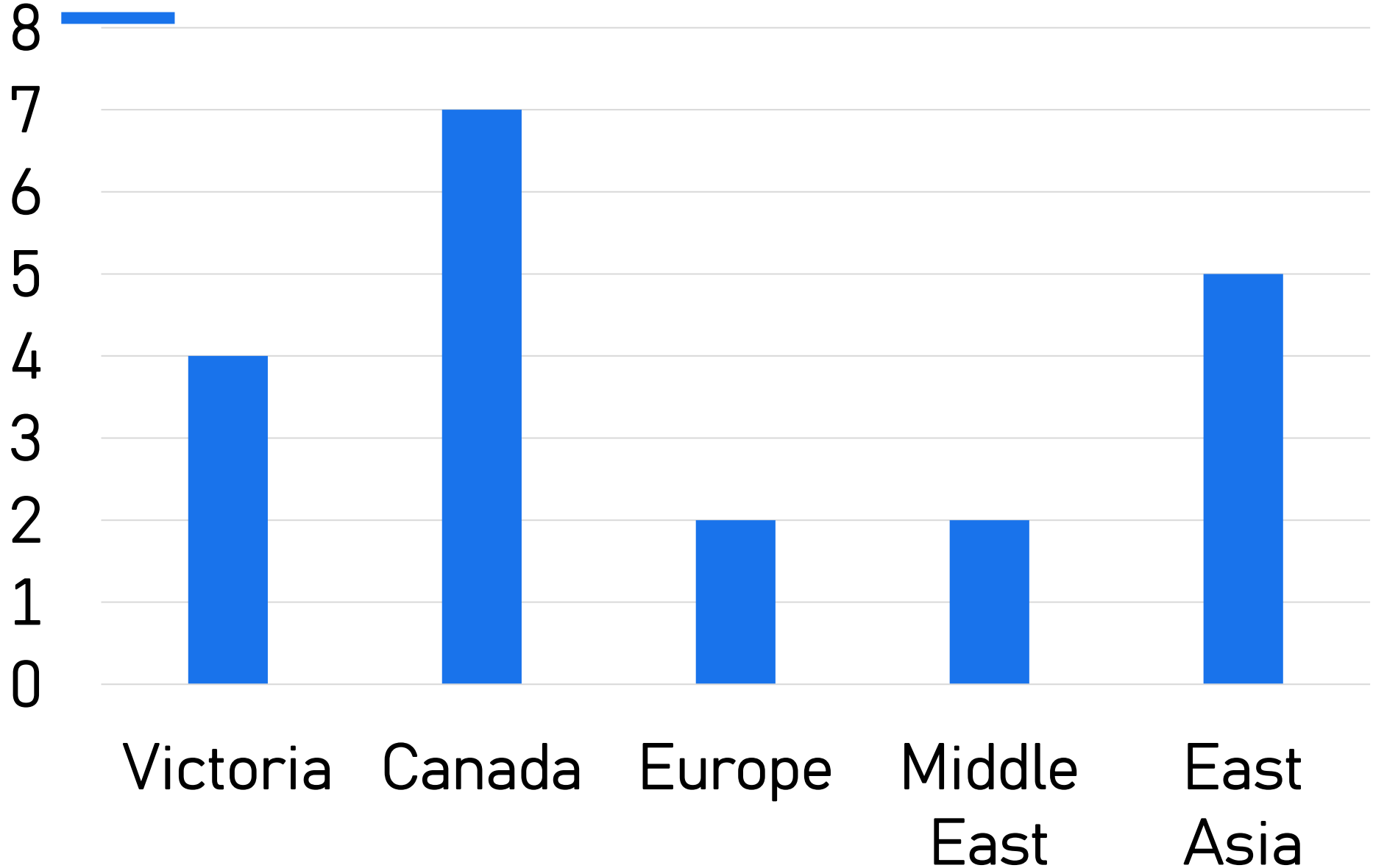
## Coding:

- 1 year, 4300 labels – cluster into themes
- 12 Demographic categories

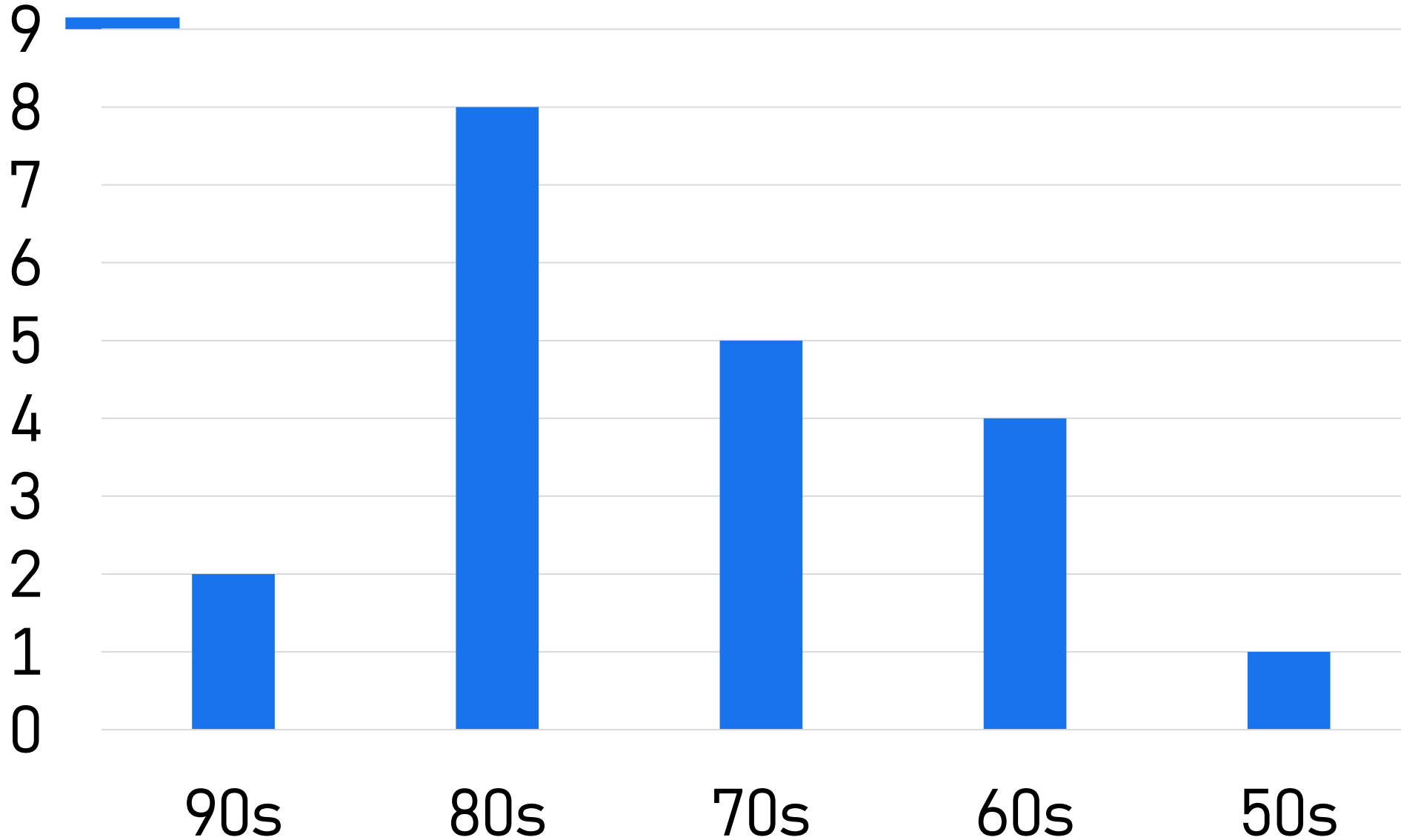




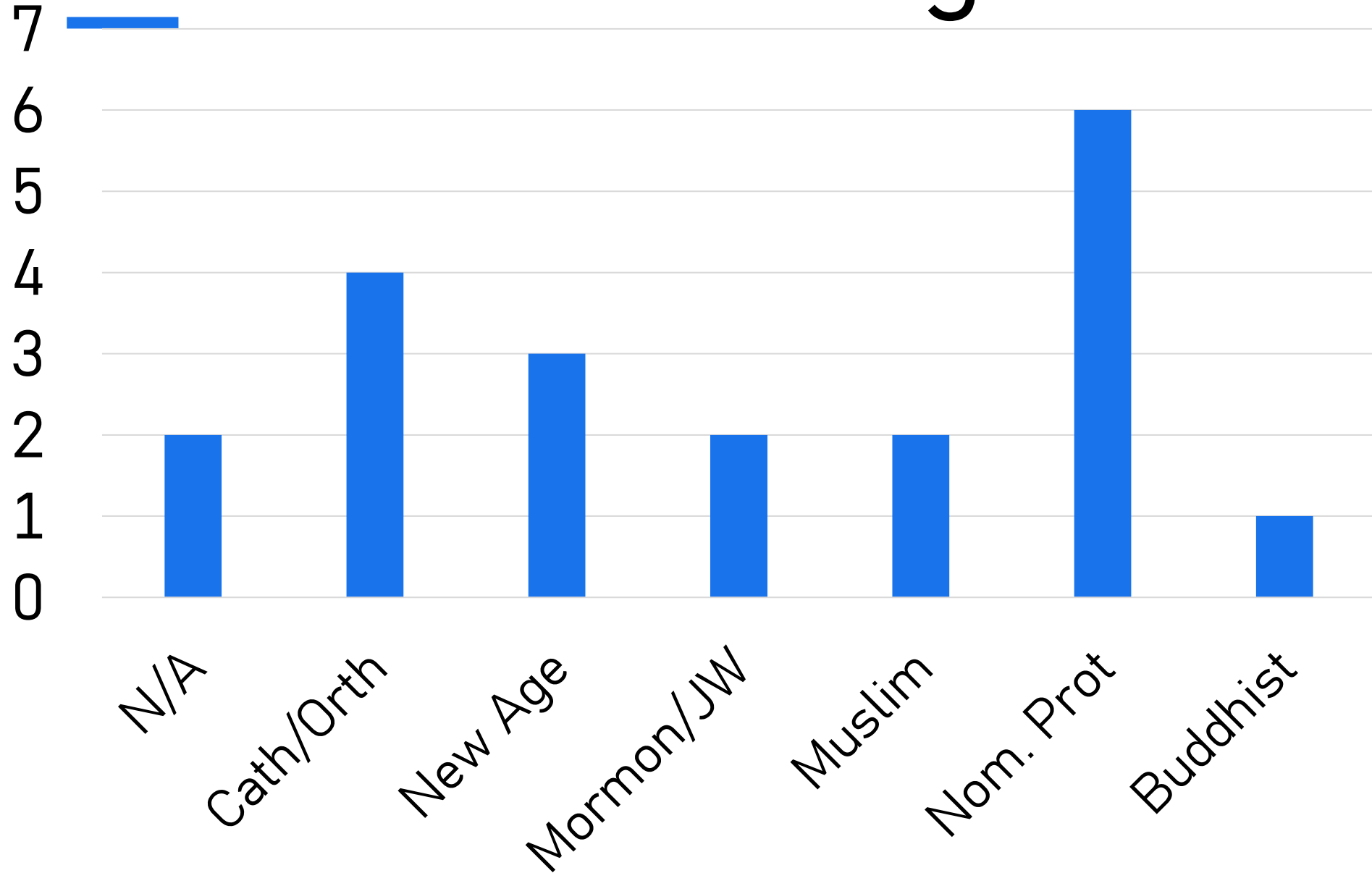
# Place of Birth



# Decade of Birth



# Previous Religion



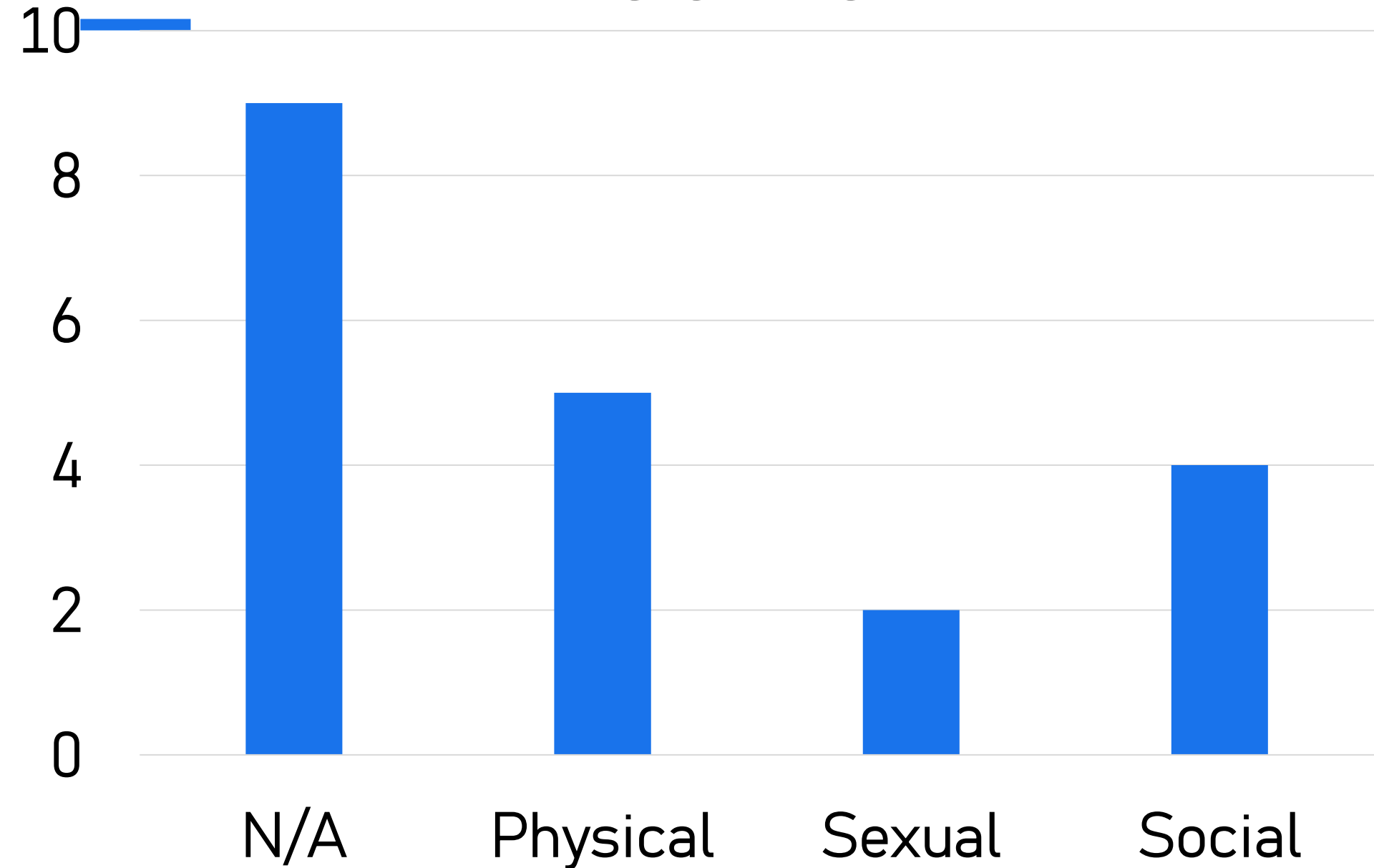
# — Who?

## Diversity

- **Church, ethnic, age**
- **Gender – equal**
- **Marriage, family & work:**
  - 5 married, employed, non-protestant immigrants
  - 5 divorced nominally religious Canadians
  - 5 never-married Canadians on disability
  - 5 others



# Trauma



# — Who?

## 2 Types

- **10 Canadians with both trauma & addiction**
  - Older, more male, unemployed, unmarried
- **7 Immigrants with neither**
  - Younger, more female, employed, married
- **3 exceptions – crossover, unique, silence**
  - **95%** – Immigration, trauma, and/or addiction

# — Why: Motivation

## Context: Background



- Original state, previous trajectory
- 1819 References, into 4 main categories
- **Dislocation** – **16** moved, 5 unaware
- **Pressures** – **19**, majority in 5 categories
- **Attitudes** – **18** individuals, 217 mentions
- **Behaviors** – **13** – crime, addiction, idols

# — Why – Motivation

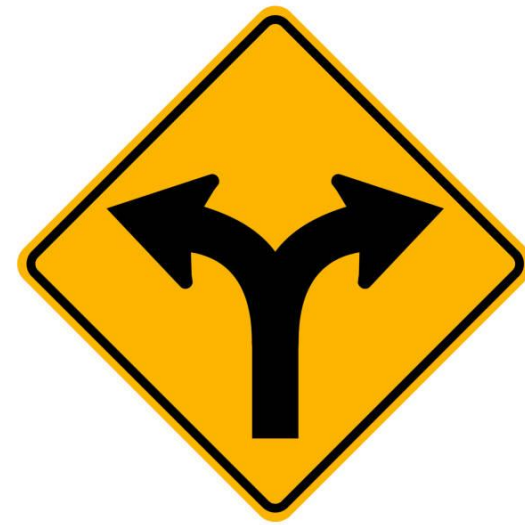


## Quest: Pursuits

- **Needs** – 17 x 100 – practical, unmet longings
- **Questions** – 17 x 100 – specific & generic
- **Learning** – Bible, religions, before church
- **Encounters** – all 20; 15 **church** – mixed, but more positive later; 13 **spiritual**

**3 Aspects:** Social, Conceptual, Experiential

## — How – Means



- 1030 references to time when they began to **consciously identify** as a Christian
- **Turning Points** – 18 x 221 references
  - Rock-bottom or resolution
- **Influences** – 19 mentioned Christians
  - **Inputs** – 13 pastors, 11 church, 13 Bible, 9 direct from God

# — How – Modes

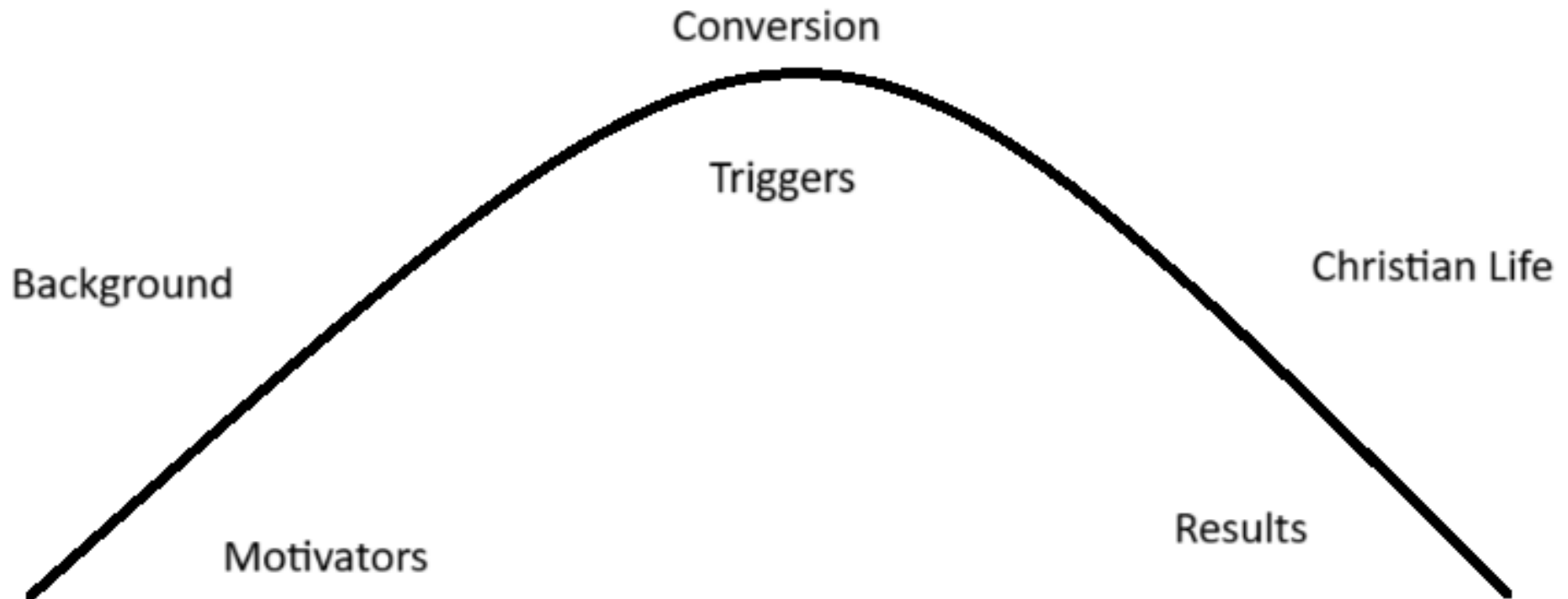
- **The crossover to Christianity**
- All 20 mentioned, 200x
- 16 x 149 realizations of **truth**
  - Bible, God, Jesus, humbled, guilt, love
- Calling to **community** (4); Describe **feelings** (12)
- **Spiritual experience** (15) – cleansed, meet God
- **Receptive** (12) & **responsive** (15)
- **Momentary & process** – return, ambiguous,
- **Baptism** – social triggers, effects, expressions





# — Hilltop Analogy

- Three **stages** of the interview / life story
- Hill representing **momentum** in the process



# So, What – Meaning

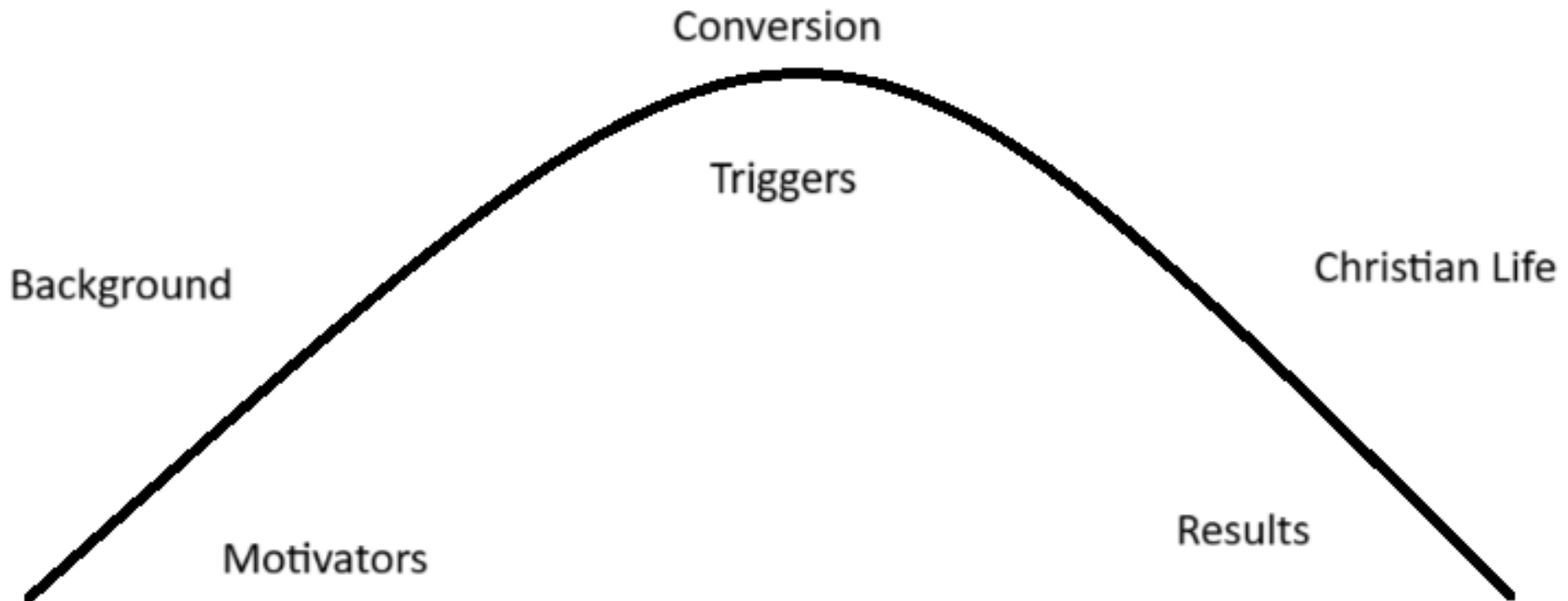


results

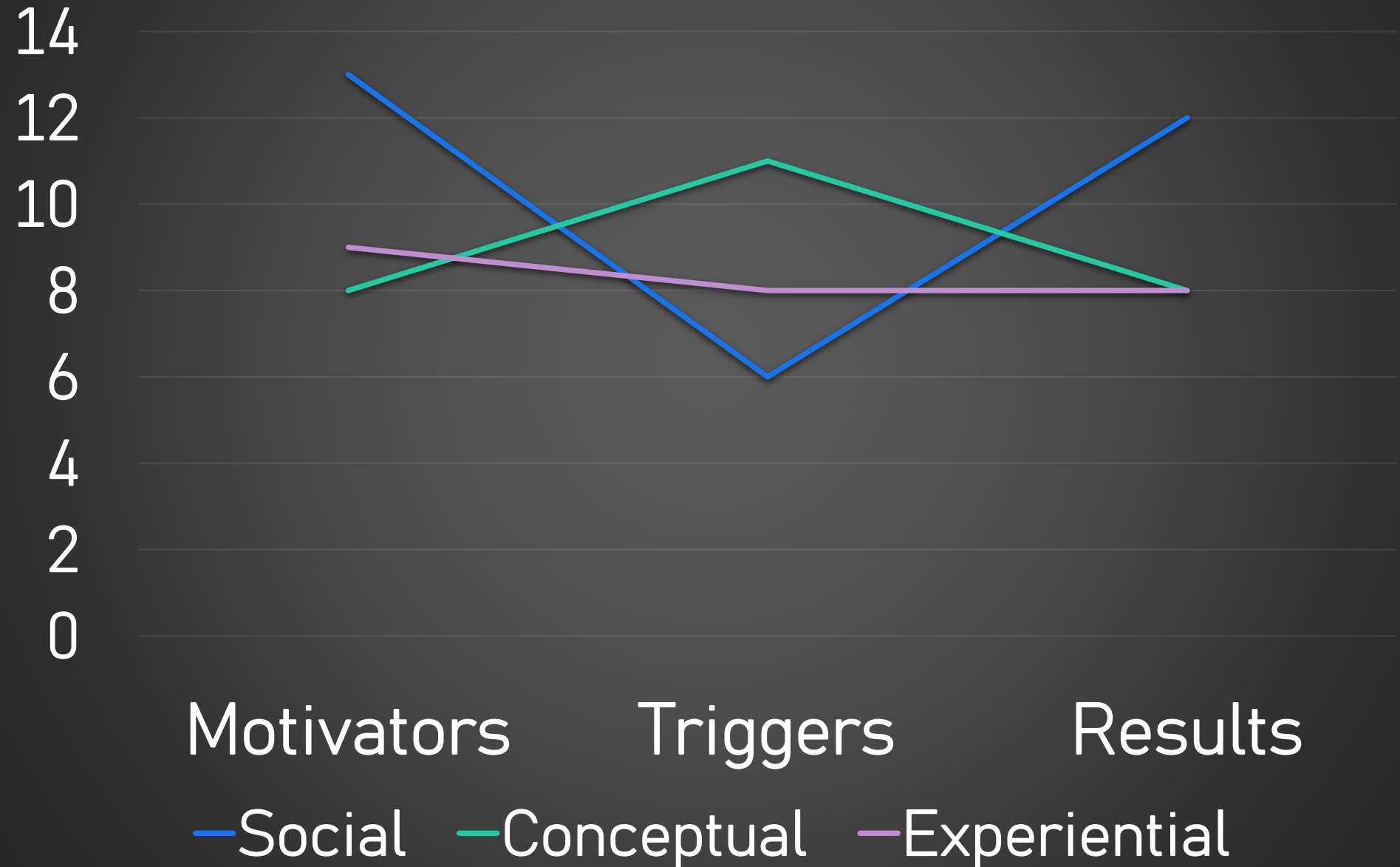
- **Ongoing challenges** – social (11), intellectual (5), experiential (16),
- **Positive Social change** – relationships (16), behavior (13), fellowship (17)
- **Intellectual** aspects (17)
- **Experiential** (20) – joy, peace, freedom, heal
- **Spiritual** (18) – guidance, help, growth

# — Hilltop Analogy

- **Telling the story:** *Which aspect(s) were most prominent in each stage of your journey?*



# Conversion Process



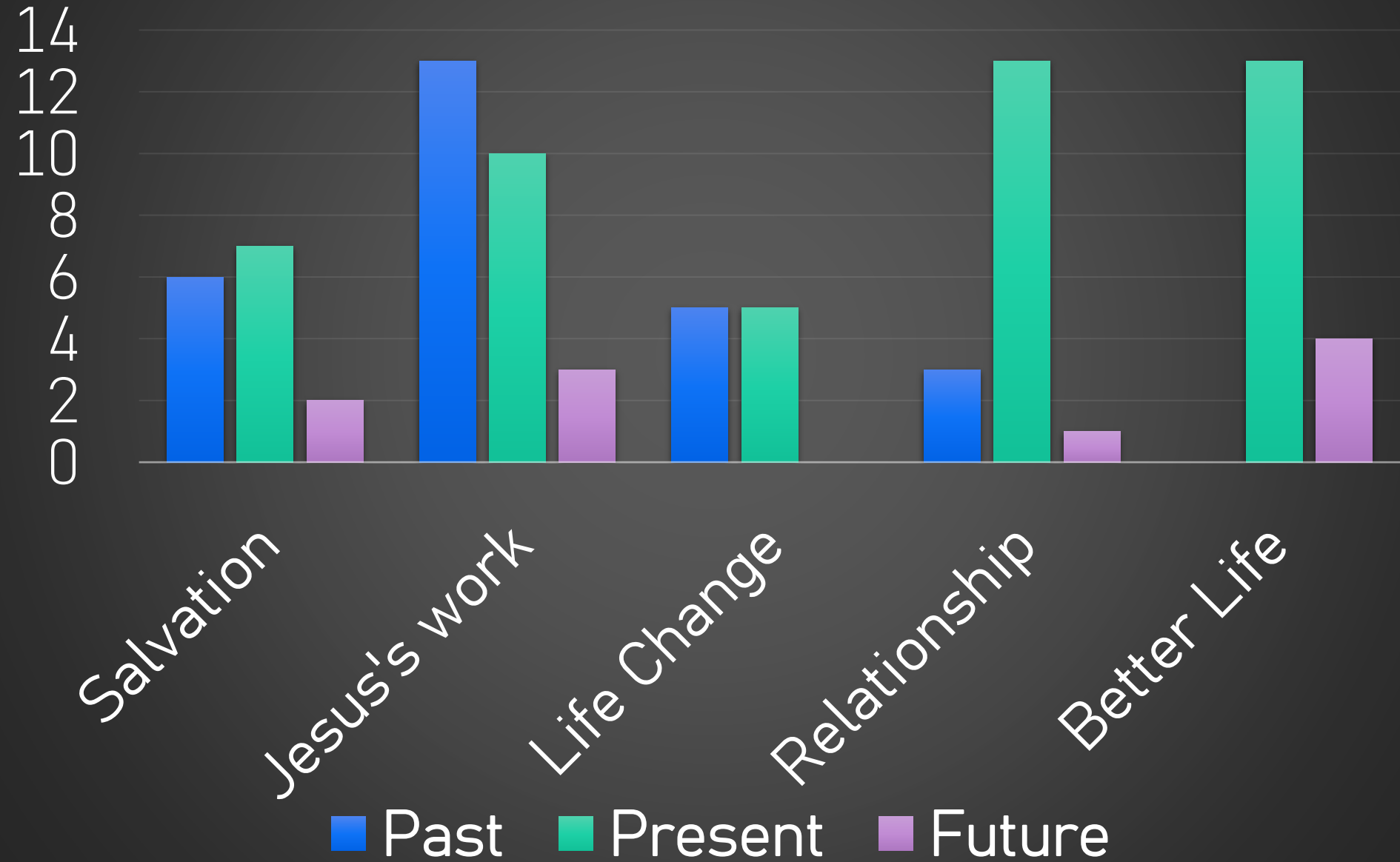
# So, What?

## — – Message



- Letting them **summarize**
- Process of change (15), direction/purpose (11), perspective (9), relationship with God (9)
- **God** – good (11), great (8), present (8)
- **Bible** – 7 characters, 10 principles, 10 promises
- **Gospel** – salvation (11), Jesus (17), change (10), relationship with God (14)

# Gospel Orientation





# — Limitations

- **Study** – 20 interviewed locally;  
14 had some connection to this place
- **Trends** – immigrants, addiction/trauma,  
middle-age – that's just who came
- **Categories** – social, conceptual, experiential



# Conclusions

## 1. **Diversity** of new believers

- *Mid-life conversion – **delayed** by immigration, personal challenges*

## 2. Common **aspects**, different **processes**

- *Motivations, triggers, results*

## 3. The **Richness** of the **Gospel**

- *Past, present, future, Bible...*

# — Applications

## 1. Receiving people well

- *Meeting people at turning points*
- *Unity in the right things*

## 2. Being **patient** with the **process**

- *Anxious for decision vs. humble contribution*

## 3. The **value** of **story**

- *Time to listen, hear from their side*

# — Recommendations

## 1. More interviews!

- *Explore other contexts*

## 2. Gospel fluency

3. Other: biographies, histories, *Beginning*

*Well* by Gordon Smith

JONATHAN K. DODSON

the  
unbelievable  
gospel

SAY SOMETHING WORTH BELIEVING



# — Questions & Discussion

