

**Finding Without Searching:  
A Theological Engagement with  
the Conversion Narratives of Young  
People in Canterbury, New Zealand**

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## Abstract

While academic projects investigating religious conversion are not uncommon, specifically New Zealand-based work on this subject is rare. Moreover, examinations of religious conversion come from a variety of academic disciplines. A discussion of conversion to Christianity from a theological perspective offers a lens through which individual experiences can be understood, thus deepening the body of knowledge that exists within Christian theologies of conversion. A focus on the conversion experiences of young people means that this project makes a meaningful contribution to current theologies of Christian youth ministry. Problematically, the absence of such knowledge in church settings can lead to discussions of conversion that are ill-informed and largely based on anecdotal evidence and conjecture. In my own experience as a former youth pastor in an evangelical church, I heard many Christians share their perspectives on how and why secular young people might decide to become followers of Jesus, and the discussion of these issues motivated the re-design and modification of the ministries of the local church. The present project aims to provide a greater body of data to aid both academic and ecclesial understanding of how and why secular young people are coming to faith in Christ in New Zealand today.

Three sub-questions are used in this project as a means of investigating facets of the conversion experiences of young people: how secular young people might best engage with a church or Christian youth group; how spiritual experiences function in conversion; and the question of the nature and duration of the conversion process. The primary body of data for this project comes from my interviews with thirty-two young adults in Canterbury, New Zealand, each of whom had converted to Christianity in their adolescent years. In every case, these participants' parents were not practising Christians at the time of their children's conversions. I used a process of inductive thematic analysis to analyse the interview data. The themes that emerged from the collected data shed light on all of the three sub-questions. In addition, an unexpected finding emerged in the data analysis process. I called it "the match," and this finding is discussed in a separate chapter.

Analysis of the interview data led to unique and valuable findings related to each of the three sub-questions. For those I interviewed, the church or youth groups were experienced as a place of connection, where key relationships and a supportive, warm environment were experienced as something deeply significant, and even counter-cultural. Spiritual experiences evoked a wide variety of personal consequences in the lives of those I interviewed, and some of these were not entirely positive or expected. I heard how many

participants struggled with the reactions of their parents, the various emotions they experienced during their conversion journeys, as well as the doubts and questions that accompanied this time for some. Also, most of those I interviewed experienced conversion as a process that took months or years to complete, although three participants described more punctiliar experiences.

The key unforeseen finding, “the match,” relates to the way that many participants described moments in their conversion journeys where they encountered an unexpected degree of congruity between one of their own emotional or practical needs and something that they encountered in the Christian world. Many participants were quite surprised by this congruity. In fact, analysis of the interviews indicates that they found what they were *not* looking for at church or youth group. This indicates something as to the relative social position of the church in New Zealand today, as well as how religion in general is perceived in this largely secular nation. Implications from this and other findings are offered at the end of this thesis. These implications can inform both the academy and the Christian world, in that they reveal key dynamics of the relationship between the church and society, between young people and local expressions of Christianity, and between God and those who are not explicitly embarking on a religious search.

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## Chapter One: The Foundations for this Research

This thesis explores the experiences of young people from secular homes in Canterbury, New Zealand, who converted to Christianity. I approach this question from the position of an interested practitioner.<sup>1</sup> For four years I was the Associate Pastor at a Baptist Church in Canterbury, at which my responsibilities included pastoral care and mission amongst young people. While I observed much in those four years, one thing that did not occur during my tenure was the conversion to Christianity of a young person from a secular home. I knew such conversions were a relatively rare occurrence in contemporary New Zealand, and certainly while there were secular young people who happily interacted with me and the ministry programmes our church facilitated, no conversions occurred. This piqued my curiosity: what does it take for young people from secular homes to choose to commit their lives to Jesus Christ, and to do so in a way that builds a foundation for life-long faith?

I realise now, although I am not sure I did at the time, that the ministry space I was inhabiting sat somewhat at a point of tension. American theologian Mark Cannister argues that historically, youth ministry in the U.S.A. has grappled with the twin tasks of education (of already churching young people) and evangelism (of secular young people.)<sup>2</sup> Cannister provides various examples of where different youth ministries over time have sat on this spectrum.<sup>3</sup> Australian theologian Ruth Lukabyo indicates a similar tension in her examination of the history of youth ministry in New South Wales, Australia.<sup>4</sup> In the Canterbury, New Zealand context, I suspect I too was feeling the pull of these two competing factors. I attended a monthly youth ministers' network meeting at which the conversion narratives of secular young people would be occasionally shared and celebrated as evidence of success in ministry. I worked in the local high school in my community as a 24-7 youth worker, a ministry whose aims include the increased connection of secular young people with local Christians and youth

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<sup>1</sup> British practical theologian Pete Ward states that “Christian believers and ministers come to the discipline [of practical theology] already formed as skilled and highly able practical theologians. Students and others who study the discipline, simply by being part of the ongoing life of the church, have absorbed and participated in sophisticated and effective ways of doing practical theology.” Ward later argues that writers who work within the discipline of practical theology need to consider the value of writing their own experiences into their work, as I have done above, suggesting that this “may not simply be desirable — it might be essential. After all, this study must matter to you or be of importance to you for some reason. Naming this is a fundamental part of theological reflection.” See *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 3, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Mark W. Cannister, “Youth Ministry’s Historical Context: The Education and Evangelism of Young People,” in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 77.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-90.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Lukabyo, “The History of Protestant Youth Ministry: A Review,” Paper presented at the 2019 Australasian Regional IASYM Conference, 11-13.

groups.<sup>5</sup> Alongside this, I ministered at a Baptist Church in New Zealand, which was largely evangelical in its theology and practice. One of the key principles of evangelicalism is “conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed.”<sup>6</sup> Yet I also established and managed a weekly youth group where most of the attendees were the children of church members. So while much of my time was spent ministering to and with the children already present at church, I was equally concerned with efforts that might attract and retain young people from secular homes.

Furthermore, my ministry experience left me wondering about some of the common themes that might occur as a feature of the conversion journey. Many of these thoughts came out of the discussions that I participated in with pastors, elders, and other church members, as we sought to engage with our neighbourhoods and present the gospel in meaningful ways. While these conversation partners were always well-intentioned, they were not necessarily well-informed. Much conjecture and anecdotal evidence was offered as a means of advancing an opinion on a particular aspect of conversion experience which then impacted the way that church would go about its mission. I wanted to be able to contribute to these conversations with something based on a greater body of evidence.<sup>7</sup>

The first common theme that I saw debated in various church meetings was the question of how to format the church activities (and particularly the worship service) so that interested inquirers might visit and choose to come back. Often a second assumption was then added, that all the church activities should be shaped to best appeal to young people, as they represented the future innovation and life of the church in the minds of those (often older) leaders.<sup>8</sup> As a youth pastor I was often encouraged (or commanded) to do my best to work to make our Sunday morning service more “youth-friendly,” a term which often carried a tacit set of assumptions around the style of music the band should be playing, the length of various service elements such as the sermon and the community notices, and even where church greeters should be positioned. This unenviable task was made all the more challenging by the fact that young people were relatively scarce in our morning service and often sat with their

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<sup>5</sup> However, these aims are worded in public/secular language, as 24-7 youth workers are not allowed to proselytise young people on the school site. Thus, their intent in setting out relationships with youth workers and connections to local youth groups is primarily to improve student wellbeing, although it does have the added effect of exposing secular young people to Christian messaging.

<sup>6</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2003), 16.

<sup>7</sup> The process of how practical theologians can share their insights with the church is discussed briefly by Ward in *Introducing Practical Theology*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> American theologian Andrew Root has argued that this assumption is rife within the Western church, that it has an “obsession with youthfulness” and has substituted careful attention to the work of God for the desperate pursuit of a church filled with the young. See *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), xviii-xxi.

parents, so any young person who did choose to attend on a whim would have struggled to find someone their own age to sit beside. I began to wonder, were there indeed particular factors that could have made the difference for the occasional young visitor? What, if anything, could that church have done to reinvent itself as a more palatable space for young inquirers? In Chapter Two, I discuss the research related to these questions, and in Chapter Six I present the interview data that relates to that research.

On a more immediate level, I observed the young people within my care experiencing God and spiritual reality in personal and tangible ways, often at camps and special events where time for such experiences was a planned aspect of the event. Some of these young people are still followers of Jesus today; others are not. Yet the fact that some young people could one day appear to be having meaningful spiritual experiences, and still decide not to commit themselves to a life of faith seemed strange to me: surely such an experience constitutes “evidence” of a sort, evidence that is hard to deny. Upon reflection and observation, I could see how for some young people, spiritual experiences were not as much of a watershed moment as I had assumed. Other factors, particularly social factors such as the behaviours and expectations of one’s friends, exerted their own form of influence that often seemed to trump any lasting effect a spiritual experience might have had.<sup>9</sup> So here too I wondered: Did spiritual experiences make any lasting difference in individual lives? What effect did they have? Considering that I was looking for converts from secular homes, did spiritual experiences provide any sort of buffer against the social pressure and norms that a nonreligious family could exert upon a young person? In Chapter Three, I present research that explores these questions, and in Chapter Seven the interview data related to these questions is presented.

Finally, as I considered the question of conversion, I recalled a debate that I had attended (before my time as a youth pastor) while I was an undergraduate student at Carey Baptist College. There, two lecturers discussed the question of whether an individual conversion was a process, or a moment in time. Such a dichotomy seemed to me then, as it still does now, an overwhelming simplification. Yet, at the same time, during the debate I recall myself disagreeing with some of what was being said by the lecturer who was arguing that conversion was *always* a process that took a significant amount of time. Such a perspective seemed to carry with it certain unacknowledged theological and psychological assumptions,

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<sup>9</sup> One young person I worked with, following her own spiritual experience, vowed to change her life then and there. However, when we met two weeks later to discuss the experience and how things were going for her since, she expressed no interest in pursuing faith and instead turned back to the lifestyle of regular partying and casual sex that she had been a part of prior to her experience.

and it raised questions about the punctiliar style conversions that I had heard described in various church contexts, and the pattern of conversion I had heard in sermons, modelled on the experience of the Apostle Paul. I found myself wondering, in real life in New Zealand, if any conversions are genuinely a “then-and-there” experience. Research exploring the question of timing and nature of the conversion process is presented in Chapter Four, and the parallel interview data is in Chapter Eight.

This project, then, seeks to answer one major question, although due to my own experiences hearing about conversion from various sources, there are three themes within the overall experience that I was particularly interested to learn more about. My main question is:

What are the experiences of young people converting to Christianity from secular homes in Canterbury, New Zealand?

Three sub-questions supplement this overall question:

1. What are the relevant or significant aspects of church life that matter to young inquirers?
2. How do spiritual experiences function in conversion?
3. How is conversion experienced as a process, and is there any evidence of conversions occurring as a punctiliar moment in time?

## **A Work of Practical Theology**

These questions will be examined through the discipline of practical theology. In fact, in one sense, it is my own “practical theology” that gave rise to their importance in the first place. American theologian Richard Osmer notes that “much of the time, congregational leaders carry out the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation ... through informal information gathering, careful listening, and looking more closely at patterns and relationships that are taken for granted.”<sup>10</sup> As noted above, this project really began while I was in a position of congregational leadership, observing the various dynamics that were occurring around me and asking questions about the patterns I was observing.<sup>11</sup> Practical theology is often closely related to Christian ministry, in that Christian ministry provides

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<sup>10</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Pete Ward notes that “because we are all formed as theologians by the communities of which we are a part, lived theology has a powerful influence on how we approach practical theology.” *Introducing Practical Theology*, 64.

many opportunities for theological investigation, but also can be corrected or affirmed by the discoveries of practical theologians.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the definition of the term “practical theology” is itself contested.<sup>13</sup> In certain parts of the world it is seen as synonymous with “pastoral theology,” whereas elsewhere the two terms are understood to be referring to distinct areas of investigation.<sup>14</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this introductory chapter to arbitrate between various definitions, a few foundational ideas shape the understanding of practical theology that undergirds this thesis. Firstly, practical theology is interested in human experience.<sup>15</sup> This is based on the assumption that “God is at work in people’s lives today.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the observation or examination of people and what they are experiencing in the world can provide valid information about God,<sup>17</sup> particularly in cases such as Christian conversion where individuals describe how they met and drew nearer to God.

Secondly, practical theology is interested in God. As much as it might seem as though this is a mere truism, some practical theology runs the risk of appearing to be so interested in human experience that a genuine, sustained reflection on the nature and actions of God is lost.<sup>18</sup> Theology is at heart a discipline which seeks to make statements about God’s acts and being. The addition of “practical” as a prefix to this term simply indicates the pathway the researcher takes on their way to making these statements, much in the same sense that “biblical” or “historical” theologies might start with the Bible or the actions of Christians long ago.<sup>19</sup> Whether the investigation begins with ministry in action, the Bible, or church history, all theological study (hopefully) ends up offering insights about God. Without an emphasis on God’s acts and being, practical theology cannot be differentiated from the social sciences.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 2nd Edition* (London: SCM Press, 2016), 7-10.

<sup>13</sup> Canadian scholar of religion Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore notes that in practical theology, “definitional issues remain alive and well.” See “The Hubris and Folly of Defining a Discipline: Reflections on the Evolution of The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 29:1 (2013): 152.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, “An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. Stephen Pattison and James Woodward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 1-3; Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings About Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16:1 (2012): 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Although some would argue that giving human experience this much credence as a genuine site of theological investigation is an overly liberal move that gives too much power to non-Biblical voices. *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> For example, as argued by Andrew Root, “Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology: On Critical Realism, Divine Action, and the Place of the Ministerial,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15 (2016): 59.

In addition, practical theology is interested in ministry practice. This is not always made clear, particularly as the term expands to cover a broad range of research topics. This expansion is in part a reaction to early definitions of practical theology which were limited to expounding upon skills a professional minister might need.<sup>21</sup> However, despite a broadening in recent years, practical theology still examines and informs Christian ministry, both within the church, and from the church to the world.<sup>22</sup> Osmer notes that the final question of practical theology is “How might we respond?” He terms this the “pragmatic task ... the task of forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable.”<sup>23</sup> This is the endpoint of a process which begins with a careful examination of a particular practice, and then compares the insights gleaned from that examination with relevant theological principles. Practical theologians end their work by offering a new vision *for* ministry practice in light of their discoveries. American theologian Andrew Root even goes so far as to argue that research in the field of practical theology is itself an act of ministry, for “inviting others to express their experience, and participating in their worship, is to be ministered to and ministering to others.... [This] takes both interviewer and interviewee ... into the very act and being of God.”<sup>24</sup> Even the research journey of a practical theologian participates in God’s ministry in the world.

New Zealand theologian Lynne Taylor incorporates these three principles into her understanding of practical theology. She declares her interest in human experience as the starting point for her investigation. She also states that “a key aim of my research is to discern the activity of God ... in the world today.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, Taylor asserts that “the aims of my project are to resource and encourage faithful participation in the activity of God.”<sup>26</sup> This is certainly broader than technical advice for clergy but is nonetheless directed toward enhancing Christian ministry on a more general level. Thus, I make no claims to originality in incorporating these three principles in my own practical theology. Given that Taylor’s research is also into conversion experiences it seems appropriate that the present project uses similar language in framing this investigation. One other foundational principle that Taylor uses is a careful establishing of the context of her research.

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<sup>21</sup> Miller-McLemore, “The Hubris and Folly of Defining a Discipline,” 148.

<sup>22</sup> For example, as outlined in Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 175-176.

<sup>24</sup> Root, “Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology,” 61-62. See also Root’s comments in *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 40.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

## A Picture of Religious Faith in New Zealand

In New Zealand, religious faith is declining. Australian research agency McCrindle Research published a report in 2018 that examined religious belief in New Zealand. Their executive summary noted that

New Zealand is becoming an increasingly secular nation.... This secularisation has been steadily increasing over the last decade or so. In the 2006 Census, half of New Zealand's population (49%) identified as Christian, and three in ten (31%) identified as non-religious. Seven years later, in the 2013 Census, the proportion of Christians had dropped to 43% whilst those identifying as non-religious had increased to almost two in five (38%).<sup>27</sup>

McCrindle Research then outlined the findings of their investigation in which they surveyed 1,007 New Zealanders. Only 33% of their sample identified as Christian, with 35% declaring no religion.<sup>28</sup>

However, the McCrindle report also indicated a wide variety of views on spirituality and religion amongst those they surveyed who stated that they were not Christians. Of those in the report's "spiritual but not religious" category, 41% believed in some sort of ultimate purpose or meaning to life,<sup>29</sup> and 34% of this cohort professed belief in a spiritual realm.<sup>30</sup> While most of the research sample indicated positive or neutral views regarding Christianity in New Zealand, the authors note that positive views were more common to older participants, with young participants "more likely to indicate they believe Christianity and churches should have religious freedoms, but they don't want to be involved."<sup>31</sup> Younger participants also knew the least about Jesus' life,<sup>32</sup> and saw the church's teaching on homosexuality as a "blocker" to engaging with Christianity.<sup>33</sup> Christian acquaintances were seen as being caring and kind, but also judgemental and hypocritical.<sup>34</sup> The report illuminated very few areas in which there was a unilateral view on an issue amongst participants and instead outlined the ways in which each question elicited a wide variety of responses.

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<sup>27</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief in New Zealand," May 2018, 7, <<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org>> (2 May, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. The "spiritual but not religious" category was selected by 20% of participants.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 41. The report seems to imply that all churches in New Zealand were perceived to be teaching the same thing about homosexuality, although it offers no clear description of what this might be. One would assume that it is the conservative perspective, that homosexual practice is sinful, that is the blocker here.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45.

Given the limitations of the McCrindle report (most notably its sample size and method)<sup>35</sup> the findings contained therein only provide some guidance as to the attitudes held toward religion in New Zealand at present. 2018 Census figures on religious affiliation differ slightly from the numbers reported by McCrindle Research, with an even higher proportion reporting no religious affiliation. In the 2018 Census, 48.2% of New Zealanders stated that they had no religion. A higher proportion of Census respondents stated an affiliation with Christianity: 38%, compared with the 33% of participants in the McCrindle study who selected this option.<sup>36</sup> While the Census may give a more accurate figure as to religious affiliation, the McCrindle report is valuable for its examination of some of the views held by people in each of the various categories often delineated in population studies. While religion is on the decline in New Zealand, this does not mean that the church is despised by all or that the place of religion and spirituality in New Zealand is deemed to be preposterous or irrelevant by a clearly sceptical majority. Rather, a variety of views prevail among those who participated in the McCrindle study, with the church and Christians seen by most of those who took part in the project to possess both positive and negative traits. Based on this evidence, it would seem possible that transition from a neutral or nonbelieving position to a Christian faith commitment (conversion) could occur.

### **Māori and the Christian Church**

While the McCrindle report is helpful in how it establishes a broad picture of levels of religious belief in New Zealand, one contentious issue that emerges within a New Zealand context is the social experience and location of New Zealand Māori in relation to Christianity in New Zealand. At various times the relationship between the church and the indigenous population in New Zealand has been a difficult one, particularly in the first years of colonisation. These historical issues could create potential issues for Māori who may well have experienced Jesus and then are considering committing to regular attendance at a church. On top of these historical challenges, there is the question of differing worldviews, particularly regarding the role of the spiritual and its interface with our daily lives. For a

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<sup>35</sup> While 1,007 New Zealanders took part in the online survey (which is itself a bias given that not all New Zealanders would have access to the internet or the level of literacy required to fill out such a survey), the researchers also organized three focus groups, with 26 participants who did not identify as Christians, in order to deepen their understanding of the attitudes in this group. This was the only sub-category of participants who took part in focus groups. Ibid., 4.

<sup>36</sup> Statistics New Zealand, “Losing Our Religion,” 3 October 2019, <<https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/losing-our-religion>> (3 Oct 2019); Harrison Christian, “Census 2018: New Zealand is More Secular Than Ever Before,” stuff.co.nz website, 25 September 2019, <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/116079393/census-2018-new-zealand-is-more-secular-than-ever-before>> (3 Oct 2019).

people who consider all things to have some spiritual component, dichotomies and separation may well constitute an entirely foreign epistemological construct.

New Zealand Māori theologian Simon Moetara notes that the traditional Māori understanding of spirituality

acknowledges that the natural world and the spirit world interact with and influence each other.... Marsden describes the Māori worldview as “at least a two-world system in which the material proceeds from the spiritual, and the spiritual (which is the higher order) interpenetrates the material physical world.” Māori generally consider the natural and spiritual realms to be integrated and supernatural forces to both direct and affect the affairs of people.<sup>37</sup>

Pre-colonial Māori spirituality accepted that interaction with spiritual forces and miraculous events such as faith healings occurred.<sup>38</sup> Thus, when European colonists arrived in New Zealand, bringing along with them various expressions of the Christian faith, the spiritual aspect of this new religion fit neatly with the worldviews of the indigenous people. Many Māori adopted the religion brought by the settlers in varying degrees, and in fact spread the Christian Gospel among themselves.<sup>39</sup>

However, while not the case across the board, many Christian denominations, upon establishing themselves in New Zealand, did a poor job at incorporating Māori belief and identity into their existing structures and philosophies.<sup>40</sup> For example, New Zealand theologian James Irwin describes the conditions under which the colonial church attempted to train indigenous ministers:

from the beginning Māori ministers were trained in the patterns and thought forms of Western theology, making them in a sense foreign to the young Māori church and unwilling to admit Māori forms of religious expression, such as song ...

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Moetara, “Māori and Pentecostal Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand,” in *Mana Māori and Christianity*, ed. Hugh Morrison, Lachy Peterson, Brett Knowles and Murray Rae (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2012), 77.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Although, as New Zealand pastor Caleb Haurua notes, there has been significant disagreement amongst historians as to the level of active participation by Māori in their own conversions during early colonial and missionary interactions. Some historians have suggested that Māori were simply converting to resolve the crises created by disease and war. Haurua argues that many historians inadvertently construct Māori as “subjects” of conversion and minimise any thought of Māori making independent, intelligent decisions about faith. See his Masters’ Thesis, “Korero Tuku Iho’ Mission to Merger: Exploring the Stories of Māori-Baptist Engagement in the Lower Waikato” (Master of Applied Theology Thesis, Carey Graduate School, 2017), 4-6.

<sup>40</sup> Moetara, “Māori and Pentecostal Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand,” 78-82. Hans Mol also suggested as much, arguing that this was less to do with any deliberately racist policies and ideas and more coming from a state where Pākehā were too comfortable with the status quo in their churches to ever feel like making any sustained effort to change things. He also saw this as a particular problem for New Zealand Protestant churches. See *Religion and Race in New Zealand: A Critical Review of the Policies and Practices of the Churches in New Zealand Relevant to Racial Integration*, (Christchurch: National Council of Churches, 1966), 48-50, 52, 56. See also Haurua, “Korero Tuku Iho,” 52, 59-60, for some evidence of this in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

movement, rhythm and ritual. Factors such as these prevented Christianity from becoming truly indigenous among the Māori people.<sup>41</sup>

Also, Māori observation of the hypocrisy of some Pākehā (white) missionaries, and the supposedly Christian British army (who, for example, would still fight on Sundays, unlike Māori)<sup>42</sup> led to a number of splinter groups, sects, and Māori prophetic leaders heading in a decidedly separatist direction.<sup>43</sup> Thus, historically in New Zealand there has been a divide between Pākehā and Māori when it comes to faith and spirituality.

Today, New Zealand Māori live in a nation that provides some token room for their spirituality but is itself largely secular.<sup>44</sup> While one indigenous expression of faith, the Rātana church, indicated a membership of around 37,000 in the 2013 census (in which the number of total Māori in New Zealand was recorded at 668,721),<sup>45</sup> Māori affiliation with some of the more prominent Protestant evangelical churches in 2013 was much weaker.<sup>46</sup> Moetara argues that many Māori feel as though they would have to become Pākehā to fit in at a Christian church.<sup>47</sup> Māori who do find a place in the church are often those for whom their ethnic identity is “notional or compromised” to begin with.<sup>48</sup> If, following their conversion, they later discover a greater sense of who they are as Māori, this often leads to a diminished

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<sup>41</sup> James Irwin, “Towards a Maori Theology,” *Colloquium* 1 (1983): 14-15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 57.

<sup>43</sup> New Zealand religious historian Bronwyn Elsmore notes that the areas of the North Island of New Zealand where new Māori religious movements were more heavily concentrated had two things in common: First, they were in areas where mission stations were first set up, and secondly, they were in regions which suffered greatly from the sale or confiscation of Māori land by Europeans. See *Like Them That Dream: The Maori and the Old Testament* (Auckland: Reed Publishing, 2000), 107.

<sup>44</sup> E.g. as argued in Helen Bradstock’s doctoral thesis, “‘Let’s Talk about Something Else’: Religion and Governmentality in New Zealand’s State Primary Schools” (PhD Thesis, University of Otago, 2016), 229-257. This is also a part of the argument made by Māori theologian Pā Henare Tate as he argues for an indigenous theology that is authentically Māori. See *He Pina Iti I te Ao Mārama: A Little Spring in the World of Light* (Auckland: Libro International, 2012), 13-23.

<sup>45</sup> Te Puni Kōkiri Website, “New Zealand Religion,” <<https://tpk.idnz.co.nz/tpk/religion>> (16 February 2020).

<sup>46</sup> In the 2013 NZ Census, 44,877 NZ European people selected “Baptist” as a religious affiliation. Yet only 4,059 Māori chose the same, a ratio of 11:1 in favour of European people (although this does not account for those who selected more than one ethnicity.) A similar ratio was found in the “Presbyterian, Congregational, and Reformed” grouping. Both “Anglican” and “Pentecostal” groupings, however, indicated much more conventional ethnic ratios that more closely matched the ethnic distribution of Māori and European people in New Zealand as a whole. Data obtained from Te Puni Kōkiri Website, “New Zealand Religion,”

<<https://tpk.idnz.co.nz/tpk/religion>> (16 February 2020), Statistics NZ Archive,

<[http://archive.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/ethnic-profiles.aspx?request\\_value=24652&tablename=Religion](http://archive.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/ethnic-profiles.aspx?request_value=24652&tablename=Religion)> (16 February 2020). My thanks to Lynne Taylor for

sharing the data she commissioned from Statistics NZ regarding religion in 2013. See also Keith Newman, *Ratana The Prophet* (North Shore: Raupo, 2009), 233.

<sup>47</sup> Moetara, “Māori and Pentecostal Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand,” 78. One church that has had a greater level of success than most in its relationship with Māori people and their practices is Destiny Church, although even that movement did take some time to fully realise the benefits of this relationship. See Peter Lineham, *Destiny: The Life and Times of a Self-Made Apostle* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2013), 171-176.

<sup>48</sup> Moetara, “Māori and Pentecostal Christianity in Aotearoa New Zealand,” 79.

relationship with the church with a “notional or compromised” level of attendance.<sup>49</sup> While it may seem as though any church could provide something of a haven for Māori spirituality amidst a largely secular New Zealand society, as has been noted above, there are strong historical and racial factors that can explain this lack of interaction. In turn, many Pākehā Christians have struggled with the task of relating their faith and their churches to Māori in appropriate ways.<sup>50</sup>

## **Understanding Conversion and Adolescence**

This thesis is about those who have converted to Christianity in their teenage years. Therefore, there are two further factors that will help introduce this thesis: namely, a definition of conversion, and a short review of some of the key theories pertaining to adolescence and religious faith. In the following section, these two areas will be explored. I will also extend the latter point to include a brief discussion of some of the social factors that may influence how conversion is experienced by young people in New Zealand.

### **Defining Conversion**

The term “conversion” has been defined in various ways in academic literature.<sup>51</sup> There is not enough space here to fully track and arbitrate between these various understandings, but two comments are pertinent at this point. The first is a matter of research method. In assessing individual conversion experiences, how does the researcher choose which variables to include or exclude? Clearly, some working definition of conversion is needed to know exactly what is being studied. However, this does not necessarily need to come from the researcher. Lynne Taylor notes that in her study of conversion, she “defined conversion pragmatically, seeking participants who had ‘begun considering themselves a Christian in the past two years.’”<sup>52</sup> Although I did not use such a timeframe in restricting inclusion in this project, I too allowed conversion to be primarily something that was identified by participants as having been

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>50</sup> For example, as described by Haurua in “Korero Tuku Iho,” 31-78; Jonathan Arthur, “Christianity in a Traditional Maori Framework: The Life and Impact of Wiremu Tamihana” (MTh Thesis, Laidlaw College, 2014), 91-92.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30:6 (December 1965): 862; and David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 168-174. For a more recent summary of the range of definitions of the term that have emerged in Western scholarship over the past century see Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 20-37.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 4.

achieved.<sup>53</sup> A pragmatic approach such as this means that the researcher needs to temporarily set aside any desire to let any personal ideas about what does or does not constitute a “conversion” influence individual participation in this project.<sup>54</sup> However, I do still have my own ideas about what exactly constitutes a conversion. While interacting with the insights of psychological and sociological researchers in this area and remaining aware of at least some of the ways in which their ideas hone and nuance the term, I hold to a basic Christian theological definition of conversion as a turning towards God as known in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup>

## Adolescent Development Theory and Conversion

German-American developmental psychologist Erik Erikson’s work on human development has been hugely influential in shaping modern understanding regarding life stages and psychological change.<sup>56</sup> Regarding adolescence, Erikson contends that the key task of this stage is the formation of a distinct identity.<sup>57</sup> Adolescents experience role confusion and as a result will test and try out various social roles during this stage in an attempt to reach an answer to the question “Who am I?”<sup>58</sup> Adolescents may be “foreclosed” to some roles, accepting from the start identities conferred upon them by parents or other adults and not choosing to test these during their teenage years. Family religion and ethnicity are two

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<sup>53</sup> British theologian Grace Milton notes that “problematically, there is no universally agreed definition of conversion. Conversion does not simply have to refer to a move from one religious group to another but can include more subtle changes in religious affiliation and commitment between denominations or even within the same faith community. As classical Pentecostalism teaches that every believer must be “born again” by faith alone and as there is no official way of “proving” this conversion, I allowed respondents of this study to share their testimonies in whatever terms they wished.” See “Understanding Pentecostal Conversion: An Empirical Study” (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), 9.

<sup>54</sup> See also Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 7; David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2014), 38.

<sup>55</sup> David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 31-33; Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 38. This turning, although in one sense “basic,” is often quite complex in the Bible. British Old Testament scholar Christopher J.H. Wright describes how conversion in the Bible involved a turning away from one set of ethics to another, one community to another, and also from a previously worshipped god or set of gods to the God of Israel. See “Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28:1 (January 2004): 14-19.

<sup>56</sup> Key texts that capture Erik Erikson’s theories are *Childhood and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Norton, 1963) and *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

<sup>57</sup> A cogent summary of this can be found in an online article by Saul McLeod, “Erik Erikson,” *Simply Psychology*, 2008/2017. <<https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>> (31 August 2017.)

<sup>58</sup> American theologian Katherine Turpin notes that during this time, “adolescents shift from a matter-of-fact curiosity about the world to the more charged task of staking a self-aware identity within the political and relational dynamics of ever-increasing social circles.” “Adolescence: Vocation in Performance, Passion, and Possibility,” in *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation Throughout Life’s Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 68.

examples of identities that adolescents often choose not to question, preferring instead to conform to established familial patterns.<sup>59</sup>

The ideal resolution of Erikson's "identity vs. role confusion" stage is the emergence of fidelity. This term is best understood as the "capacity to sustain loyalties" and it "provides the basis for adult virtues of love, care, and wisdom."<sup>60</sup> Mature teenagers have learned to stick to their commitments. Dutch-Canadian psychologist Harry Van Belle notes that "adolescents who have learned to take life on the chin and to revel in the challenges of such a commitment can be said to be adults."<sup>61</sup> The making of choices and commitments is a significant facet of adolescence.<sup>62</sup> These choices may be temporary and simply function as tests within the overall task of an individual's identity formation. Maturity comes when particular choices are followed up with long term commitment.

One major critique of Erikson's work has come from feminist scholars, who argue that it lacks nuance regarding the differences between male and female developmental trajectories.<sup>63</sup> American psychologist James Fowler engages several scholars whose insights regarding gender difference and adolescent development indicate where some of the differences can lie.<sup>64</sup> Fowler points out that "it does seem that girls emerge with empathy and capacities for

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<sup>59</sup> Carol Markstrom-Adams, Greta Hofstra, and Kirk Dougher, "The Ego-Virtue of Fidelity: A Case for the Study of Religion and Identity Formation in Adolescence," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 23:4 (1994): 465. In a more recent article, American researchers Carolyn McNamara Barry, Larry Nelson, Sahar Davarya, and Shirene Urry suggest that this adoption of parental religious beliefs is more likely to occur amongst children who recount close relationships with their parents with secure attachment bonds. These authors cite one study that found that young adults whose childhood experience of religion was strongly associated with coercive parenting were more inclined to abandon their faith. See "Religiosity and Spirituality During the Transition to Adulthood," *International Journal of Behavioural Development* 34:4 (2010): 314-315. In the context of this study, instances of foreclosure regarding religious affiliation will likely be low, given that participants were selected on the basis of their parents not being practising Christians. American psychologist Donald Capps points out that adolescence is a key developmental stage for precisely this reason, as "it is typical of the adolescent to question the assumed authority of those who are older, to view with scepticism the 'truths' that older adults appear to take for granted." Thus, instances of religious conversion are likely to be more frequent in this period of life. Donald J. Capps, "The Decades of Life: Relocating Erikson's Stages," *Pastoral Psychology* 53:1 (September 2004): 17.

<sup>60</sup> Adams et al., "The Ego-Virtue of Fidelity", 455.

<sup>61</sup> Harry A. Van Belle, "Adulthood and the Development of Lived Religion," in *Christian Perspectives on Human Development* ed. Leroy Aden, David G. Benner, and J. Harold Ellens (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 58.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Laura Craig-Bray, Gerald R. Adams, and William R. Dobson, "Identity Formation and Social Relations During Late Adolescence," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 17:2 (1988): 176; James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 206; Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 17-18.

<sup>64</sup> James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 42-45. However, Fowler has been critiqued for his overreliance on male scholarship in this area, which is problematic when discussing how females might develop differently. See Maria Harris, "Completion and Faith Development," in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1986), 122-127.

closeness to others more centrally built into their ways of being selves.”<sup>65</sup> Acknowledging that these assertions by no means apply in every instance, Fowler suggests that in general “females are likely, therefore, to find experiences of connectedness and solidarity more ‘natural’ for them and to find separations and conflict more problematic. Boys, on the other hand, tend to find competition less threatening and more enjoyable, while connectedness and intimacy can give them problems.”<sup>66</sup> Similarly, American psychologists Laura Craig-Bray, Gerald Adams, and William Dobson distinguish between “ideological” and “interpersonal” factors in identity formation, noting the prevalence of the latter amongst females.<sup>67</sup> Their research, which assessed over 300 American college students’ identity formation, also discovered that “for women, exploration in identity formation is associated with greater involvement with other women when ideological identity is being considered. . . . Further, these women may perceive heterosexual social interactions as interfering with their self-discovery.”<sup>68</sup> Similar results were reported for females when they were developing a deeper sense of interpersonal identity.<sup>69</sup> Men who wanted to explore their identities tended to want to do so alongside women, possibly due to the fact that “perhaps these . . . males are capable of more intimacy, and cannot find the openness and depth of quality they desire among male friends.”<sup>70</sup> The strength of female social bonds and interaction seems to exert a significant influence on development for both males and females, a point that is absent from Erikson’s original observations.

Building on Erikson’s ideas, Fowler developed a developmental model that examines faith.<sup>71</sup> While Fowler works from something of a Christendom mindset, where ideas about God and faith were assumed to be more common than they are today, his theories are still illustrative of the probable activity of the human imagination as it pertains to faith.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>65</sup> Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 44. Womens’ levels of empathy are also discussed in Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 149-151. There Slee examines empathy within the faith development of Christian women, and also suggests that there are some social causes for the greater levels of empathy that women exhibit.

<sup>66</sup> Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 44-45.

<sup>67</sup> Craig-Bray et al., “Identity Formation,” 176.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-182.

<sup>71</sup> The original model can be found in James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>72</sup> Turpin suggests that, even now, Fowler’s work “captures vividly the relationship between the cognitive achievement of mutual perspective taking and the impact it has on an adolescent sense of self.” “Adolescence,” 71-72. While some may argue that Fowler’s scheme comes out of a Christendom mindset, and applies most clearly to those raised in the church, Turpin’s perspective here indicates that there are certain cognitive tasks that the adolescent brain is capable of performing, and that this is what enables teenagers to reach the stage of synthetic-conventional faith. Thus it is likely that for those I interviewed, even though they were not raised in the church, their cognitive abilities at that point in their lives meant that their understanding of God and faith was at this same level.

participants I interviewed were most likely to have perceived of God in a similarly “adolescent” way during their conversion journeys, despite their limited exposure to Christianity as children. It is unlikely that their faith development would have advanced beyond this stage. Roughly mirroring the location and duration of Erikson’s “identity vs. role confusion” stage, Fowler identifies a stage of faith known as “synthetic-conventional faith.” Generally associated with adolescence, synthetic-conventional faith is a stage where individuals begin to think on a more abstract level and are able to assess their faith perspective in terms of its values and ideals.<sup>73</sup> No longer do they exhibit the “mythic-literal” faith that is more common to younger children.<sup>74</sup> Rather, they now “synthesize,” drawing together their “stories, values, and beliefs into a supportive and orienting unity.”<sup>75</sup>

The increased intellectual acuity of adolescents means that they are now able to understand the notion of a God who is both deep and mysterious and yet also able to know our own deep and mysterious selves.<sup>76</sup> God comes to be seen in much more relational terms, as adolescents’ self-concept during this period of their lives also becomes more deeply influenced by their significant relationships. Fowler comments on the implications of this for adolescent religious formation, observing that

much of the extensive literature about adolescent conversion can be illumined, I believe, by the recognition that the adolescent’s religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith. It is not surprising that so many of the images for transcendence that appeal to persons in [the synthetic-conventional stage] ... have the characteristics of a divinely personal significant other.<sup>77</sup>

God, for the adolescent, is a significant other who provides companionship, love, and authority.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 59-60.

<sup>74</sup> Fowler notes, in a chapter responding to critiques of his theory, that one of his participants, a woman in her twenties, appeared to have not even developed this far in her faith, and still exhibited a mythic-literal faith. He had initially failed to realise this and had graded her in the synthetic-conventional stage, before some critics questioned this and he re-evaluated his earlier assessment. See James W. Fowler, “Dialogue Toward A Future,” in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1986), 292.

<sup>75</sup> Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 60.

<sup>76</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-154.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-156. Similarly, Christian Smith notes that “the realisation of God’s total, constant, passionate, personal love for them as individuals can be for Christians an overwhelmingly moving, affirming, humbling experience. Movingly deep peace, gratitude, security, affirmation, and confidence often flow from even fleeting realisations that the God of wonders beyond all galaxies knows and cherishes us unconditionally as individuals, no matter who ever and whatever we have been or now are.” “Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account,” *Sociology of Religion* 68:2 (2007): 171.

Interestingly, Fowler indicates that this is as far as some faith communities go in their theological expression. Many adults never progress beyond this stage.<sup>79</sup> They remain “conventional,” that is, adapting the theological perspectives espoused within their faith communities and not asking critical questions of those perspectives.<sup>80</sup> This creates a feeling of solidarity with the community, enabling individuals to understand themselves as normal because they hold to a commonly shared set of values and live according to whatever conventional life pattern is modelled by that group.<sup>81</sup> Even adults who remain at this stage of faith highly value the communitarian aspects of what their faith provides.<sup>82</sup>

Each of the theorists cited above outlines various aspects of adolescent development and its pertinence to faith as they have observed these aspects in their own contexts. Much of this research was conducted in locations that are culturally similar to New Zealand. Yet many of the leading theories, particularly those of Erikson and Fowler, are now decades old. It is possible that differences have arisen as New Zealand youth culture has evolved. Yet it is also likely that many of these original observations, given their relative levels of success and longevity, will still hold much relevance for the present project. Erikson’s insights about adolescence as a period of identity formation, the variations that seem to occur between genders during this period, and Fowler’s description of synthetic-conventional faith, each “set the scene” for this research, with its focus on adolescents’ experiences of converting to Christianity in New Zealand.

## **Mentoring and Adolescent Faith Development**

A significant social-psychological factor in the faith development of adolescents is the presence of an older mentor, or “adult guarantor.”<sup>83</sup> American youth ministry theologians Jason Lanker and Klaus Issler point out that these relationships can be “natural” (that is, established without any institutional impetus) or “formal,” and can be between young people and any significant adult in their lives, usually one of the same gender.<sup>84</sup> Although this allows

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<sup>79</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 161-164.

<sup>80</sup> New Zealand pastor Alan Jamieson notes that, for those in the third stage of Fowler’s model, “while their beliefs are often deeply held they are typically not examined critically and are therefore tacitly held to. That is, they know what they know but are generally unable to tell you how they know something is true except by referring to an external authority outside of themselves. The most common example of this is ‘the Bible says so,’ or ‘my pastor teaches this.’” *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic Churches* (Wellington: Philip Garside, 2000), 125.

<sup>81</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 171.

<sup>82</sup> Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, 125.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>84</sup> Jason Lanker and Klaus Issler, “The Relationship Between Natural Mentoring and Spirituality in Christian Adolescents,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 9:1 (Fall, 2010): 93-94.

for the possibility of a parent being a significant spiritual mentor, the delimits of my study render such a relationship unlikely. Other factors that appear to increase the value of mentoring in a young person's faith development include the length of relationship with a mentor, and the number of important mentors that the young person can recall as significant, as Australian theologian Barry Gane's work indicates.<sup>85</sup> The mentoring relationship does not need to be defined by any sort of rigidity or formal plan; however, certain relational factors contribute to the beneficial nature of the relationship for the young person. Young people need to feel as though their mentor trusts, respects, and believes in them, as much as they trust and respect their mentor.<sup>86</sup> The mentoring relationship also appears to work best when it feels like "family;" that is, that the mentor cares for their mentee as a parent would for their child, and the young person trusts and feels as safe with their mentor as they would with a loving parent.<sup>87</sup> An effective mentor is also someone worth modelling; young people get the most benefit out of a mentoring relationship when their mentor is someone who they are inspired to imitate.<sup>88</sup>

The measurable outcomes of mentoring relationships on adolescent faith are positive and significant. Theologian Victor Counted notes that in his study of attachment tendencies amongst South African Christian young people, those young people who attended a church with a greater emphasis on communitarian relationships had relatively lower levels of attachment insecurity than Christian young people from other types of church.<sup>89</sup> Gane's study discovered benefits from mentoring relationships that included a higher faith maturity; lower rates of alcohol use, sexual intercourse, and self-harm; and a higher sense of self-worth and commitment to their faith.<sup>90</sup> Regarding spirituality, Lanker and Issler discovered that "those who had a natural mentor during their mid-adolescent years were significantly more likely to have higher levels of spirituality.... Those with natural mentors connected to God more through times of suffering ... more deeply experienced God's presence ... were secure in their relationship with God ... and felt realistically accepted by God."<sup>91</sup> While parents are

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<sup>85</sup> Barry Gane, "Adolescent Faith That Lasts," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 13:1 (Fall, 2014): 51; Lanker & Issler, "Relationship," 100.

<sup>86</sup> Andy Stirrup, "Growing Faith with the Help of Extended Family and Friends," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 13:1 (2014): 70.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Nathan Hussaini Chiroma, "The Role of Mentoring in Adolescents' Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14:1 (2015): 84.

<sup>89</sup> Victor Counted and Ahmed A. Moustafa, "Between God and Self: Exploring the Attachment to God and Authenticity/Inauthenticity Tendencies of South African Christian Youths," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 20:2 (2017): 122.

<sup>90</sup> Gane, "Adolescent Faith that Lasts," 50.

<sup>91</sup> Lanker & Issler, "Relationship," 100.

generally our most available and influential natural mentors, Gane also identified instances where young people from homes that practiced no or a different religion also developed what he calls “faith maturity.”<sup>92</sup> This is most likely (in the context of his study, which looked exclusively at students attending a Christian school) if the young person attends church and can identify more than four mentors.<sup>93</sup> A certain level of positive interaction over time with Christian mentors and environments over time seems to be the most effective “structuring cause” for a new faith to develop.<sup>94</sup> Yet a relationship with a mentor is far from the only social factor that can influence conversion.

## **Common Social Factors in Conversion**

Various social factors can be shown to have some influence over how religious conversion is experienced. My intention here is not to review each of these, but rather to focus on four that would seem to be particularly pertinent to young people, given what has been discussed above. These are: the relationship between childhood experiences of attachment and conversion; the effect that participation in religious groups and rituals has on conversion; some of the common ways in which the social environment can impact how someone converts; and the impact of public testimony on conversion. Each of these factors will be discussed below, as a final way of contextualising this project.

## **Attachment and Conversion**

One area in psychology that has been strongly linked with religious conversions, particularly those of a dramatic kind, is that of attachment. American psychologists Ralph Hood, Peter Hill, and Bernard Spilka point out that

insofar as sudden religious conversion is concerned, a meta-analysis based on almost 1,500 participants strongly supports an association with early parental insensitivity, consistent with the theory that God serves as a compensatory attachment figure.... Likewise, even dramatic increases in religious commitment

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<sup>92</sup> The term is outlined in detail in Barry Gane and Jimmy Kijai, “The Relationship Between Faith Maturity, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Orientations to Religion and Youth Ministry Involvement,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4:2 (Spring, 2006): 56.

<sup>93</sup> Gane, “Adolescent Faith that Lasts,” 48-51.

<sup>94</sup> American philosopher Fred Dretske makes a distinction between “structuring” and “triggering” causes of human behaviour. Structuring causes of behaviour constitute the underlying events and contextual factors that influence a human choice; triggering causes constitute the reasons for that choice being made at that specific moment. See Constantine Sandis, “Dretske on the Causation of Behaviour,” *Behaviour and Philosophy* 36 (2008): 71-85. American theologian Paul N. Markham suggests that interaction with the religious community is the structuring cause for conversion. See *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008), 186-187.

have been shown to be precipitated by emotional turmoil among individuals whose parents were judged to be insensitive.<sup>95</sup>

Similarly, Victor Counted draws a strong link between early experiences of childhood attachment and one's potential connection to God.<sup>96</sup> Counted describes several models posed by psychologists as to how this relationship can occur. The first, the "emotional compensation model," is based on research like that of Hood et al. Simply put, negative experiences of early caregivers can lead an individual to search for a better option; God thus becomes a compensatory replacement for the failed parent. Counted notes that in his own research, several stories conform to this model.<sup>97</sup> Yet this is not always the case. A second model, known as the "internal-working-model correspondence experience" has also been proposed and supported with relevant data. This model acts almost in opposition to the prior one, outlining a situation where

an individual's relationship orientation towards God is determined by their relationship with early caregivers (or other close others) on a correspondence level. Therefore, if youth A had a secure, stable, healthy relationship with his caregiver for example, youth A consequently will assume a similar orientation in his relationship with God. In contrast, having an insecure, inaccessible, or unhealthy human attachment may mirror in *vis-à-vis* with a person's relationship orientation with God.<sup>98</sup>

Counted also cites stories that correspond best to this model.<sup>99</sup> He then outlines a third model, similar to the second, with the added nuance that if the early attachment figure is also religious, this aids faith formation in children.

Finally, Counted cites a model developed by American psychologist Todd Hall that incorporates the "continuous, consistent mixed results that have emerged from studies on both the compensation and correspondence models."<sup>100</sup> Hall's model adds nuance to the perceived dichotomy that exists between compensation and correspondence theories as they pertain to human spirituality. Hall and his colleagues argue that it is better to speak of one's "implicit

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<sup>95</sup> Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2014), 215.

<sup>96</sup> Victor Counted, "The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation: A Care-Giving Faith?" *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15 (2016): 147-150. For a more general overview of how childhood attachment works and impacts later experiences, see Daniel J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 144-162.

<sup>97</sup> Counted, "The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation," 155-161.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-163.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

relational knowledge” as being largely shaped by childhood attachment experiences.<sup>101</sup> This knowledge is the set of sub- or pre-conscious responses and beliefs that humans have regarding relationships with others. Essentially, “individuals’ implicit, ‘gut-level’ knowledge of how to be with human attachment figures also governs their automatic appraisals, or implicit knowing, of God and spirituality.”<sup>102</sup> Hall et al. support this finding with data from their study of 483 American undergraduate students’ attachment and spirituality measures. They also note that the correspondence between individuals’ level of attachment and their sense of how to relate to God was consistent across levels of parental religiosity.<sup>103</sup>

This does not falsify the claim that children commonly follow in their parents’ religious footsteps, but it does indicate that on a psychological level, an individual’s way of relating to God and understanding him are not purely influenced by explicitly stated parental beliefs. The attachment formed with a parent or primary caregiver also has an impact on later faith outcomes. This is a good illustration of one way in which the social and the psychological can interact in influencing an individual’s behaviour. The same can be said of conversion itself: both internal and external factors play a part in influencing how conversion is experienced. The relationships between these internal and external factors are often complex and multi-faceted, which can partly explain why the simpler explanations, such as have been seen above, often fail to give a robust account across various sources of data.

## **Participation and Belief**

Recent discoveries in cognitive neuroscience have greatly assisted contemporary understandings of how humans learn and change. American theologian Paul Markham has explored the implications of these new understandings and how they pertain to religious conversion.<sup>104</sup> Markham discusses how humans are transformed in and through experiences and argues that religious conversion follows this pattern. Change is better consolidated through “performance,” that is, through an individual’s active repetition of a new learning, than it is through a simple shift in understanding.<sup>105</sup> Applying such understandings to Christian youth ministry, American theologian Brent Baskin argues that young people need to participate in “prosocial activity” in order to consolidate and best understand their faith.<sup>106</sup> By

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<sup>101</sup> Todd W. Hall, Annie Fujikawa, Sarah R. Halcrow, Peter C. Hill, and Harold Delaney, “Attachment to God and Implicit Spirituality: Clarifying Correspondence and Compensation Models,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37:4 (Winter, 2009): 231.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> See Markham, *Rewired*, 129-192, for his sustained treatment of this idea.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>106</sup> Brent Baskin, “Research Reviews,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 14:2 (Spring 2016): 85-88.

this, he means activities that are religious or civic in nature. Reviewing a recent study investigating meaning making in adolescence, Baskin discusses how the research indicates such prosocial activity has a strong link with adolescent meaning making — the more individuals are involved in activities of a spiritual or civic nature, the likelier they are to have a strong narrative of meaning within which they understand themselves. He argues that “a classroom Bible study will not suffice in creating experiences.... Serving others, not playing, may have a stronger impact on meaning making for adolescents and emerging adults.”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Lynne Taylor identifies a strong link between faith formation and active participation in spiritual practices. She writes that “those I interviewed demonstrated that engaging in spiritual practices was an important part of their becoming Christian, their becoming relationally authentic. This ‘behaving’ in terms of engaging in spiritual practices, generally preceded ‘belonging’ and ‘believing’. They demonstrated that *our doing becomes us*.”<sup>108</sup> The discovery is emerging that participation not only often precedes belief for many, it also has an active role in forming it.

Participation as an act that both precedes and potentially shapes belief occurs in a variety of ways. One way that individuals begin to participate in a group can be seen in their adoption of the language used by the faith community.<sup>109</sup> This may involve theological discussion, involvement in liturgical practices such as sung worship or prayer, and engagement with a text. As has been seen above, Baskin is sceptical that mere “classroom Bible study” alone is sufficient to inculcate a lasting, deeply held faith. However, language, texts, and speech are still facets of participation — we learn to “talk the talk,” as it were. While Markham does seem to suggest that language always comes first in our religious experience, one does not have to accept this potential overreach to appreciate the general principle.<sup>110</sup> A part of one’s growing participation in a faith involves the adoption of the new faith’s language. Not entirely separate from this, participation in the practices and actions of a faith community can precede and shape belief. Christian worship often weaves the two together; liturgical participation often involves both verbal and physical activity, and prayer does the same. Here the role of the community is essential, as individuals learn to take part by observing and joining the activities of those around them. Markham shows the emergence of research that draws a

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.: 88.

<sup>108</sup> Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 313, emphasis original.

<sup>109</sup> Markham, *Rewired*, 163-165.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 165.

strong link between community participation and neurological change.<sup>111</sup> As we join in with what others are doing, we change, and we grow.

### **Multiple Types of Conversion**

Some scholars have attempted to define the different ways in which someone might convert to a religion. For example, at a basic level, the distinction has been made between emotional/affective and cognitive/intellectual types of conversion.<sup>112</sup> Essentially, the former emphasises the relational and emotional factors that may have influenced a conversion, and includes those individuals who appear to have been more heavily swayed by these factors. The latter does something similar, albeit this time isolating those for whom conversion was much more about ideas and reason. However, a theory propounded by American social scientists John Lofland and Norman Skonovd in the early 1980s went a step further than this and identified six distinct conversion motifs.<sup>113</sup> These are; intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.

The strength of Lofland and Skonovd's model lies in its integration of both psychological and social factors, a valuable union of academic research on this subject.<sup>114</sup> Their experimental, revivalist, and coercive motifs most strongly emphasise the social influences on a convert, albeit at three differing levels of intensity. Regarding the experimental motif, Lofland and Skonovd identify it as involving "relatively low degrees of social pressure to participate since the recruit takes on a 'try-it-out' posture."<sup>115</sup> This process is not exclusive to religious change, as in many contexts people give something a go without ever feeling pressured to make an immediate decision, before their eventual acceptance and commitment regarding the new idea. In general, the social forces at work could best be described as interaction without pressure, enabling the inquirer to progress at their own pace and at a relatively high level of personal comfort.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 186-191.

<sup>112</sup> Hood et al., *The Psychology of Religion*, 214, 230. The authors also note that various religious groups can emphasise one over the other, citing one study that found a disproportionately high number of emotional conversions and noting that the groups studied by this particular researcher "cultivated intense, emotional experiences, perhaps biasing the sample toward an affective conversion motif." One wonders if they are being generous in including the "perhaps" in this assessment. See also David J. Zehnder, *A Theology of Religious Change: What the Social Science of Conversion Means for the Gospel* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2004), 21-37.

<sup>113</sup> John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:4 (December 1981): 375.

<sup>114</sup> Hood et al., *The Psychology of Religion*, 218.

<sup>115</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 378.

While the same social forces of participation and interaction are present within the revivalist and coercive motifs, what distinguishes them from the experimental is the high levels of emotional arousal and social pressure that the convert experiences. The revivalist motif in particular is defined by events of heightened group arousal; one researcher observing a revivalist group recounted practices such as

jumping up to sing tumultuous songs; running from place to place hand in hand with a buddy; and cheering, chanting, and clapping in unison with dozens of others [which] inevitably makes a deep impression on prospective members. Even the most reticent participant finds it difficult to resist being swept into this performance of continual consensus.<sup>116</sup>

There can be some social pressure exerted within the revivalist motif, but only for a brief duration. Conversely, the coercive motif involves sustained social pressure and persuasion to conform to a very specific set of beliefs and behaviours.

The affectional motif as defined by Lofland and Skonovd also contains a strongly social element, although it does place some emphasis on psychological factors in its focus on the emergence of positive feelings. These, however, are socially directed, for they define this motif as “personal attachments or strong liking for practicing believers ... [as being] central to the conversion process.”<sup>117</sup> While they are talking about emotion as a central tool in guiding conversion, Lofland and Skonovd do not appear to consider the possibility that this emotion can be directed specifically at God, instead locating it within the context of positive social bonds. Similarly, American sociologist Ines Jindra notes that, in such conversions, “social networks are key in getting people involved in religious groups, and once involved, the relationships to fellow believers contribute to the changes in their beliefs that we commonly call conversion.”<sup>118</sup> Of course, it is certainly likely that for some individuals, their feelings cannot be so easily delineated and may be positive regarding both God and their group of religious friends. One weakness of this model is that it does not allow much room for God at certain points.

The two other motifs outlined by Lofland and Skonovd are less socially influenced and instead occur in a much more “interior,” or independently psychological, fashion. Intellectual conversions involve a personal exploration of a new truth or idea, often relatively independent

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<sup>116</sup> David Taylor, “Social Organization of Recruitment in the Unification Church” (MA Thesis, University of Montana, 1978), 153-154.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>118</sup> This is a basic definition of network theory, which Jindra demonstrates as having had a significant influence on the sociology of religion and on how many understand religious conversion. See Ines W. Jindra, *A New Model of Religious Conversion: Beyond Network Theory and Social Constructivism* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 97.

of any groups that practice the faiths under investigation.<sup>119</sup> For example, Taylor recounts one of her participants' conversions in terms that appear to constitute a largely intellectual conversion:

Two years before our interview, Hamish noticed a flash of gold leaf in his bookcase, pulled out a Bible and started to read. This was the beginning of a six-month process that saw him move from being a “militant evangelical atheist” towards a deep relationship with Jesus.... Hamish used the internet as a resource, and it was progressive Christianity that he turned to initially. From this, he discovered that he would not need to throw out his intellect, or his understandings of philosophy and science, to be a Christian.... There is a sense that Hamish has always been seeking the truth and found, in Christianity, an objective truth. However, the truth he found has a complexity that Hamish was willing to embrace. Hamish is not afraid of investigating the context, the genre and the intent of Bible passages.<sup>120</sup>

Hamish's story describes a relatively independent process of truth-seeking that eventually led to a commitment. Yet, Taylor notes that for Hamish, as well as for some of her other participants, “while the rational was often present, the affective was primary.”<sup>121</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, writing in 1981, wondered if intellectual conversions would become increasingly common in the modern era, with the privatisation of faith and greater access to information independent from communal interaction.<sup>122</sup> Certainly, some of these suspicions are not without merit, given Hamish's experience, yet, as Taylor argues, it was interactions with other Christians that were ultimately of central importance in his conversion.

Similarly, although grounded in a much more tangible/experiential encounter, the mystical motif is also defined by a generally private path to faith. These two motifs are the only ones that place belief before participation in the community of faith. What distinguishes the mystical motif then is not a spiritual experience *per se*, but rather the emergence of the experience at a time and place largely distant from a faith community.

Lofland and Skonovd acknowledge that various motifs vary by context and over time, something that they attribute to shifting interpretations of experience and the ways in which information is communicated *en masse*.<sup>123</sup> It may also be that various faiths and denominations produce greater proportions of converts conforming to one or two of these motifs. For example, a study examining converts to Islam in Britain found a high proportion

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<sup>119</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 376.

<sup>120</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 100.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>122</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” 376-377.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*: 379.

of intellectual, experimental, and affectional conversion motifs in their interview data.<sup>124</sup> Mystical, revivalist, and coercive motifs were minimal or non-existent. Other studies of other faiths and denominations report similar results, where their findings also appear to be weighted toward a few conversion motifs rather than spread evenly across all six.<sup>125</sup> As noted above, adolescence is a time in which one's significant personal relationships come to hold a greater degree of meaning than may have been the case in childhood. One way of determining if this new focus has an impact on how conversion is experienced is via the conversion motifs outlined above. It would be reasonable to expect a disproportionate number of participants to have converted via the affectional, revivalist, and experimental motifs, given these motifs' focus on group interaction and social bonds.

### Testimony and Conversion

Testimony may also play a role in facilitating and defining religious conversion.<sup>126</sup> Obviously, on a simple level, testimony by other individuals functions as a valuable tool in helping an inquirer understand and hear about how faith can interact with an individual's everyday life.<sup>127</sup> However, as American historian Lauren Winner argues, this is not the only function that testimony has. It can also act as something of its own "genre," defining (often unintentionally) a certain prescribed path to faith and a certain mould for talking about it.<sup>128</sup> American literary scholar Alan Jacobs argues that testimonies have a shape and a form, and in a biographical note, admits that his own journey into faith does not fit the conventional picture of an American evangelical conversion.<sup>129</sup> He is concerned with the "rigidity that the testimony genre has come to assume."<sup>130</sup> This is significant not merely because of the fact that testimonies often exclude certain experiences, but also because the sharing of one's testimony serves "to ratify one's place in the community, to prove oneself a valid member of it."<sup>131</sup> Although several centuries have passed since the Puritan revolution, this particular aspect of

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<sup>124</sup> Hood et al., *The Psychology of Religion*, 229.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> For one argument that strongly endorses the idea that *how* one talks about one's conversion is a key factor in the experience of that very conversion, see Peter Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>127</sup> British theologian Grace Milton notes that "there is a belief for many that personal experience, recounted through testimony, is a way of knowing something of the nature of God. Crucially ... testimony says, 'this happened to me, and it can happen to you!'" See "All These Little Pushes and Nudges': Uncovering Ordinary Beliefs About God's Work in the Pre-Christian Life," *Practical Theology* 12:2 (2019): 125

<sup>128</sup> Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God: On The Path to a Spiritual Life* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2006), 7.

<sup>129</sup> Alan Jacobs, *Looking Before and After: Testimony and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 13-28.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

its life appears to still be a factor in contemporary evangelical Christianity. The role of testimonies in general, and communally shared conversion narratives in particular, in consolidating one's identity as a member of a religious group, while reassuring to some degree, is also potentially quite dangerous insofar as they can prescribe a certain kind of religious experience and path to conversion as valid. Those who do not fit the mould might (at least) question the validity of their experience, or (at worst) conclude that they do not belong. There can also be the pressure to re-shape one's story so that it fits the conventional testimony genre better.<sup>132</sup>

Gender may play a part in determining how one's story of faith is communicated. American social scientists David Knight, Robert Woods Jr., and Ines Jindra uncovered significant gender differences in their analysis of the conversion narratives of 40 undergraduate students.<sup>133</sup> They note that, consistent with some existing theory on the relationship between gender and narrative, their female participants tended to use language that described a more comforting or peaceful understanding of God and conversion. Female participants also were more likely to describe others as central characters in their own conversion narratives. In contrast to this, male participants described their conversion and religious experience using "such metaphors as playing sports, an amusement park ride, receiving gifts at a birthday or Christmas, getting high, an adventurous journey to an exotic place, and going in a boat down a river."<sup>134</sup> Men also tended to focus more exclusively on themselves in their conversion narratives. Knight et al. suggest some possible implications that arise from their findings, one of which is relevant to the present study:

If gender differences in *communicating* faith are possible, then it is also possible that gender differences in *coming to* the faith are just as real. In other words, there may be evidence that men and women actually have different kinds of conversions because these conversions are being communicated in systematically different, gender-based, ways. If we cannot meaningfully separate the accounts given of conversions from what really did or did not happen ... and if the accounts of the sexes differ, then their experiences likely differ significantly as well.<sup>135</sup>

Gender may well have a significant part to play in not only how faith is described, but how it is experienced by converts. Similarly, the particular "genre" of testimony emphasised by a

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<sup>132</sup> This is a form of biographical reconstruction. For more on this, see McKnight, *Turning to Jesus* 99; Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 21, f.n. 103; David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion" *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 173.

<sup>133</sup> David A. Knight, Robert H. Woods Jr. and Ines W. Jindra, "Gender Differences in the Communication of Christian Conversion Narratives," *Review of Religious Research* 47:2 (December 2005): 113-134.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, emphasis original.

faith community may also influence converts' understanding and experience of conversion. In my interview data, I looked carefully for where denominational and gender factors seemed to create differences.

## **A Note on Language**

This thesis is written from a New Zealand context, and at times throughout, the perspectives and language (Te Reo Māori) of New Zealand Māori are quoted. To indicate the equal status of Te Reo Māori in New Zealand alongside English as one of our national languages, I have chosen to not italicise Te Reo terms where cited.<sup>136</sup> Translations are bracketed alongside for readers who are not familiar with Te Reo. Also, at several points throughout this thesis I have used masculine pronouns when referring to God. I am aware that God is neither male or female, and that some writers now use exclusively gender-neutral language when referring to God, employing terms such as “Godself” to indicate the genderless nature of God. One benefit of still using gendered language when referring to God is that it better indicates God’s relational nature, and the intimate connections that humans can have with him. Given the context of the present project, I see the use of this language as appropriate.

As has been set out above, this project seeks to answer a set of questions about conversion (largely shaped by my own experience) in a New Zealand context. This research sits within the discipline of practical theology, which guides how the research was undertaken and presented. As also noted above, the key restrictions provided by practical theology are that this project must pay careful attention to *both* human experience and the activity and nature of God as it is revealed by those experiences. There are no specific rules within practical theology as to how this thesis must be organised. I have decided to let the three sub-questions that frame my research act as an overall structure for this thesis. These questions will be examined in turn on a theoretical level, as I examine relevant literature to seek to deepen and establish my understanding of each of these three topics. Then, I will briefly discuss the method and philosophy that shaped the qualitative research presented in the latter half of this thesis before presenting those findings. The three topics will again be used as a means of examining this data, although room has been allowed for significant discoveries that fall outside of this framework. One discovery in particular – which I call “the match” – is given substantial space in the findings section of this thesis. Although it does not directly relate to the three sub-questions that guided my research, it is a significant and unexpected finding that

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<sup>136</sup> A similar statement can be found in Caleb Haurua, “‘Korero Tuku Iho’ Mission to Merger: Exploring the Stories of Māori-Baptist Engagement in the Lower Waikato” (Master of Applied Theology Thesis, Carey Graduate School, 2017), ix.

speaks to both the conversion experience for young people, and also Christian theology, particularly any theology regarding God's ongoing action in the world.

## Chapter Two: Features of a “Conversion-Friendly” Church

Numerous Christian ministers and researchers have outlined features of Christian environments that are deemed to be helpful for facilitating newcomers’ journeys into faith. Such features tend to be described in works occupying two similar yet distinct fields of research. The first is what could be loosely termed “practical ecclesiology,” that is, works which are often written by the pastors of churches or those observing them, outlining the “how-tos” of congregational life and leadership. The second field of study that addresses environments conducive for journeys toward faith could best be termed “Christian conversion studies.” This body of literature describes the experiences of those converting to the Christian faith. These studies tend to be conducted by Christian ministry researchers interested in resourcing churches and better understanding the experiences of those affiliated to them. They examine the lived experiences of converts and the various factors that were a part of their faith journeys. Some works operate in both fields; most tend to major on one or the other. In this chapter, I will discuss four features of environments often considered to be conversion-friendly: the role of support and challenge; the nature of the message preached; the importance of connection and relationships; and the importance of a local church being involved in serving its community. These four factors were determined by their presence and significance across multiple sources within the literature. After presenting the four characteristics, I will turn to a brief look at some of the factors that are said *not* to be of significance in modern conversion journeys. The features discussed in this chapter shaped the questions I asked in my own interviews.

### High in Both Support and Challenge

In 2004, American researchers Gay Holcomb and Arthur Nonneman undertook “The Faithful Change Project,” a longitudinal study that aimed to “explore and assess the undergraduate faith and spiritual maturation that occurs during a typical student’s experience at Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) campuses.”<sup>1</sup> Holcomb and Nonneman randomly selected 240 students from six different campuses, conducting 600 interviews and asking students to complete a quantitative questionnaire in conjunction with each interview.

Participants were asked about their faith development, key relationships, and understanding of God. Holcomb and Nonneman note, regarding the environments in which faith has the best chance to develop, that a young person will have a “crisis of faith,” in which their ideas about

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<sup>1</sup> Gay L. Holcomb and Arthur J. Nonneman, “Faithful Change: Exploring and Assessing Faith Development in Christian Liberal Arts Graduates,” *New Directions for Institutional Research* 122 (Summer, 2004): 93.

God and faith are put under tension when they are exposed to a difficult or different experience, perspective, or person. However, not all young people who go through such a crisis respond in the same way. Reflecting on the reasons for this, Holcomb and Nonneman ask

what distinguishes those who grow through such an experience from those who do not? In essence, environments that foster the appropriate mix of challenge balanced with communal support are the type of environment most conducive to developing a higher level of cognitive, social, and spiritual functioning. Too much of either challenge or support effectively stunts development.<sup>2</sup>

This finding has some support in other discussions of conversion-friendly environments.<sup>3</sup> In each case, the objective is the same: finding ways to suitably manage environments so that successful spiritual development of the individuals in those environments is most likely to occur.<sup>4</sup>

A similar study to Holcomb and Nonneman's, undertaken by American youth ministry researchers Thomas E. Bergler and Dave Rahn, also collected faith stories via interviews, although their study focused more narrowly on conversion during the later teenage years.<sup>5</sup> They suggest the following ideas for youth ministry practitioners:

Those wishing to evangelize teenagers should make use of church camps, retreats, or conferences.

- a. Such events are especially important for the conversions of teenagers with little or no religious background.
- b. Such events should include a "challenge to act," i.e., a pointed invitation to take steps to become a Christian.
- c. The "challenge to act" is especially important when trying to evangelize males.<sup>6</sup>

Camps, conferences and retreats are typically high-support environments, where friendships and available mentors are in abundant supply. Yet, as they suggest, the "challenge to act" is also a significant moment in the conversion process. This is a slightly narrower definition of a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2012), 76-83. Another author who uses a similar two-part schema and applies it to Christian discipleship is British pastor and scholar Mike Breen in his book *Building a Discipling Culture: How to Release a Missional Movement by Discipling People Like Jesus Did* (Pawleys Island: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> To that end, Holcomb and Nonneman note that "one goal of Christian liberal arts institutions [the context for their study] should be to discover how to create a suitable 'greenhouse' climate that provides the appropriate balance of support and challenge to individual students. Our campuses need to be perceived as 'safe' places in which to explore one's doubts and questions without being unduly judged as an infidel." "Faithful Change," 102.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas E. Bergler and Dave Rahn, "Results of a Collaborative Research Project in Gathering Evangelism Stories," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4:2 (Spring, 2006): 65-74.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 72

“challenge” than that offered elsewhere, tightly focused on the decision to convert. However, most of the literature surveyed in this thesis does not confine “challenge” to such specific terms. More often the term simply refers to some sort of provocative statement or practice that causes an individual to reflect on, and possibly redirect, their current way of life.<sup>7</sup>

### **Multiple Commitments in Adolescence**

American youth ministry theologian Steven Tighe’s research confirms the findings of the above study: camps, conferences, and “youth group events” are key locations within which young people make faith decisions. This context for decision-making sits at a marked distance from the faith decisions of younger children, for whom the family and parents exert a much greater level of influence over commitments to faith.<sup>8</sup> He also notes that in both his and in Bergler and Rahn’s studies, many young people “perceived the need for multiple commitment events.”<sup>9</sup> This, he suggests, is because for both children and adolescents, the idea of committing one’s entire life to something is still a relatively abstract and unquantifiable notion. Commitments made in early adolescence need to be consolidated and affirmed in later life. So, although camps, conferences and retreats are often moments of heightened support and challenge for enquiring nonbelievers, this same dynamic of support and challenge must also be present in the more regular, mundane experience of weekly church services and youth ministry settings. As Stanley noted above, this can create its own problems for pastors and youth leaders.

Yet simply waiting for camps to provide the evangelistic impetus needed to guide a young person into faith is unrealistic for several reasons. As Tighe points out, young people often appear to make multiple commitments over time, and the seasonal and occasional nature of camps can make regular attendance difficult. Young people may not be able to make it along to the next youth camp in the ministry calendar due to an already busy schedule. Also, not everybody attends camps, and not everybody attending those camps will respond in the expected fashion. Plus, camps typically occur as one expression of the community life of an already functioning group, such as a congregation or youth ministry. Clearly the dynamic of support and challenge needs to be experienced, at least to some degree, in regular congregational life.

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<sup>7</sup> Holcomb and Nonneman describe this dynamic, which they primarily refer to as “crisis,” as “anything that challenges people to examine what they believe and why.” “Faithful Change,” 100.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Tighe, “Born Again, Again: Conversion in Christian Families as a Process Punctuated by Grace,” *Christian Education Journal* 12:1 (Spring, 2015): 64.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

One critique that can be discussed at this juncture is the question of who actually benefits from the sorts of multiple commitments young people often express as a part of their journeys into faith. For example, American activist and theologian Shane Claiborne looks back on his own multiple expressions of commitment with both humour and cynicism:

In middle school, I had a sincere “conversion” experience. We took a trip to a large Christian festival with bands, speakers, and late-night pranks. One night a short, bald preacherman named Duffy Robbins gave an invitation to “accept Jesus,” and nearly our whole youth group went forward (a new concept for most of us), crying and snotting, hugging people we didn’t know. I was born again. The next year, we went to that same festival, and most of us went forward again (it was so good the first time) and got born again, again. In fact, we looked forward to it every year. I must have gotten born again six or eight times, and it was great every time. (I highly recommend it.) But then you start to think there must be more to Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Claiborne’s placing of the term “conversion” inside quotations seems to suggest that he does not view his experiences at the Christian festival as wholly constituting a genuine conversion. For Claiborne, “there must be more to Christianity;”<sup>11</sup> the annual ritual of an emotional expression of commitment at a camp is deemed to be inadequate. Yet, despite Claiborne’s assessment, multiple commitments to faith in the youth ministry years are a persisting and valued factor in young people’s religious expression.<sup>12</sup>

One factor that has undoubtedly influenced responses such as that of the young Shane Claiborne lies in the very way that the “challenge” of faith is presented in our context. Church historian Bill J. Leonard notes that

by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coming forward to the anxious bench or the enquiry room, or to shake the preacher’s hand, was an integral part of getting saved in America. It created what might be called the sacrament of walking the aisle, an outward and visible sign of an inward and evangelical grace.<sup>13</sup>

Setting aside for the time being the question of whether conversion is a process or a crisis or single decision, this desire for visible signs of commitment (or the “sacrament of walking the

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<sup>10</sup> Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 37-38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Tighe notes that his “20 respondents reported 37 commitment events.” He argues in favour of these multiple commitments, pointing out that “young people might feel the need to make such a commitment because they believe that their earlier commitment to Christ was incomplete or insufficient.” This does not necessarily explain an experience like Claiborne’s particularly well, although elsewhere in his article Tighe suggests that faith development theory can also explain the occurrence of multiple commitments in adolescence. See “Born Again, Again,” 75-76.

<sup>13</sup> Bill J. Leonard, “Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture,” *Review and Expositor* 82:1 (Winter, 1985): 121.

aisle” as Leonard cleverly puts it), and its emergence in the modern era is telling. While public professions of faith are of no small importance in the Christian tradition, such as the sacrament of believer’s baptism, it appears that modern evangelistic methods in the West have over the past two centuries added a strongly “public” aspect to the initial decision to commit to Christ. Leonard is careful to point out that he does not view this change as entirely bad, and quite comfortably discusses the emergence of the phenomenon in the public ministries of successful gospel preachers such as Charles Finney, D.L. Moody, and Billy Graham. Yet he does wonder if “these evangelists promoted methods which in the popular mind and the actions of less scrupulous preachers developed a salvific life of their own.”<sup>14</sup> Therein lies the problem: those “less scrupulous” than Finney, Moody, and Graham might well consider a large public response to an evangelistic message to be more meaningful than it actually is, both in their assessment of the intensity of young people’s faith at that point and also of their own ability as preachers.

Claiborne’s story illustrates the way modern Christian evangelism has been influenced by the idea that an individual’s choice to publicly respond to a preached message constitutes a conversion. There, the preacher kept the message simple enough that it was easy (and enjoyable) to accept the invitation, and the young people did not consider their multiple commitments to be in any way contradictory. It was only upon later reflection that the strangeness of this experience became apparent to Claiborne, and his subsequent investigation into the real “challenge” of the teaching of Jesus led him to embrace a lifestyle of simplicity, poverty, and social action through his participation in a missional community in a struggling urban environment. So, although the outcome for Claiborne was much more radical than is often the case, he was prompted to pursue a deeper expression of faith by the challenging teaching he encountered in his reading of the Gospels.

### **“Challenge” in Church Teaching**

American youth ministry researchers Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin’s 2016 study *Growing Young* has as its key focus churches that were successful in both attracting young people and develop their faith. The researchers interviewed 535 church leaders, young people, parents and youth ministry volunteers who were each a part of congregations with vibrant and effective youth engagement, seeking to discern the factors that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 123.

had led to such effectiveness.<sup>15</sup> In one section of the book, challenging teaching is mentioned as an attractive part of these environments:

During interviews, 40 percent of young people specifically mentioned “challenge” when they talked about why their church is so effective with their age group.... Contrary to popular thinking that young people today want it easy, many told us they love their church *because* their church inspires them to act.... In short, teenagers and emerging adults in churches growing young aren’t running from a gospel that requires hard things of them.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of challenge is supported by American pastor James Emery White, whose church claims to be comprised of 70% first-time believers. He argues that, based on current data, growing churches are those at “the far ends of the religious spectrum — the ones with fire in their belly.... Lukewarm religion holds little value in the midst of a settling secularism. What captivates a conscience is anything *gripping*.”<sup>17</sup> This argument is given the chapter heading “Grace and Truth” in White’s book; identical terminology to that found in Stanley’s book on the same subject and similar to that of Holcomb and Nonneman. Young people appear to be quite comfortable with the challenge that the gospel contains; numerous authors argue that what young people need is regular contact within supportive environments where this challenge can be processed and understood.<sup>18</sup>

Timothy Keller, pastor of a church in Manhattan known for its success in reaching out to unchurched young adults, is by no means afraid to preach Christian doctrines that may pose a potential challenge to the predominantly secular New York mindset.<sup>19</sup> Yet alongside his exhortation to lead with “the offense of the gospel,”<sup>20</sup> Keller argues for the importance of “safe venues” as a pastoral response to enquiring nonbelievers.<sup>21</sup> By this he means a variety of group and open-attendance events that occur at a variety of times and settings and cater for

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<sup>15</sup> Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 304-310.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 143, emphasis original. The study’s authors also mention in a footnote attached to this paragraph the importance of balancing support with challenge.

<sup>17</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 123, emphasis original.

<sup>18</sup> Powell et al. note this in the chapter that immediately follows their discussion on the role of challenging teaching; there they emphasise the importance of “warmth in community” as also being attractive to young people. See *Growing Young*, 163-195.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 308.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Keller’s understanding of what it means to preach the offense of the gospel appears to be expressed in how he does not shy away from including traditional tenets of Reformed theology in his preaching, even when these may seem to be unpalatable to modern hearers. Such tenets, according to Keller, include “the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, propitiation and penal substitution ... last-day judgement and the reality of hell, the reality of transcendent moral absolutes ... the sinfulness of any sex outside marriage, [and] the sovereignty of God over every circumstance, including trouble and suffering.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

inquirers in a safe and inoffensive fashion.<sup>22</sup> John Finney, a British researcher and Anglican bishop, argues similarly for the importance of what he terms “nurture groups” in providing an ideal space within which contemporary inquirers can be exposed to Christian ideas in a safe and appropriate way.<sup>23</sup> This is a much more private and intimate setting than that proposed by Keller, but both authors are essentially arguing for the same thing. They believe that inquirers are most likely to respond well to challenging church teaching if they are in an environment where they feel safe and supported. For Keller, this is a public event specifically tailored and formatted for such people. For Finney, it is a small, consistent, intimate group where individuals are nurtured, and their needs are heard and understood. In both spaces the aim is to make inquirers feel comfortable so that when difficult topics are explored, these individuals are more likely to remain connected to the faith community.

Some of the writers discussing the value of challenge in their preaching also note a difficulty that emerges when society’s idols are directly confronted in preaching. To use H. Richard Niebuhr’s oft-quoted schema, while these churches do not appear to simply inhabit a “Christ of Culture” paradigm, they also try to avoid the opposite problem of appearing to present “Christ against culture.”<sup>24</sup> Keller argues that “a missional church, if it is to have a missionary encounter with Western culture, will need to confront society’s idols.”<sup>25</sup> Yet he also notes that the presentation of classic Christian doctrines to a post-Christian culture will often result in “hearers ... viscerally offended or simply unable to understand”<sup>26</sup> that which is being presented. The solution is, for Keller, not to abandon the task of presenting such ideas, but rather skilful contextualization so that the “gospel presentations are compelling even to people who are not (yet) fully persuaded by them.”<sup>27</sup> Describing one such church that they encountered in their study, Powell et al. note:

They wisely maintain a delicate balance as they interact with our culture and world. On the one hand, they do not simply mimic the surrounding culture, indiscriminately patterning their lives and activities after what they see around

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 288-289.

<sup>23</sup> John Finney, *The Four Generations: Finding the Right Model for Mission* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008), 19-23. Finney is quite clear in pointing out the weaknesses in this approach alongside his endorsement; often such settings tend to attract a certain type of person, one who is already curious and has the available time to commit to such a group, as well as a certain personality type where this kind of informal social interaction and discussion is not considered to be threatening. He recognises that despite the church’s desire for “one silver bullet that would evangelize all people,” the model he is proposing will at best appeal to a majority, but never work perfectly in all cases.

<sup>24</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Torch Books, 1951), 40-115.

<sup>25</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 271.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

them. On the other hand, they are not so different or separate from the world that they lose their ability to relate.<sup>28</sup>

This is something that many of the pastors of the churches included in *Growing Young* described as one of their greatest challenges.<sup>29</sup> Even the congregants in many of these churches indicated that they thought their leaders still had some way to go in how they taught congregants to “interact with societal and cultural issues.”<sup>30</sup> Despite this, the attitudes to culture that these church leaders exhibited were viewed positively within these congregations. These leaders allowed for the fact that they did not have all the answers while still facing contemporary issues with directness and honesty. This means that there are fewer cultural gaps between the congregation and society, as issues are faced and discussed. Yet there is also less of a bunker mentality, as pastoral leaders discuss challenging issues in a way that acknowledges their own perspectives as simply that: perspectives.<sup>31</sup>

The writers cited above argue that environments that are best situated to help young people choose the Christian faith for themselves need to contain strong elements of both challenge and support. Much of the evidence for this argument comes from research based in North America, which indicates the significance of this research exploring the role of challenge and support in a New Zealand context. It is also important to consider the question of exactly what we are challenging young people to accept, and how we expect them to demonstrate their acceptance of the challenge of faith. Often evangelists’ reductions of the message of Jesus and the appropriate ways to respond to that message say more about them and their beliefs than they do about the young people to whom they are communicating. This is an idea that will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

## **A Message I Can Understand**

The writers cited above suggest that inquirers appreciate a message that is challenging. Not only this, seasoned preachers such as Keller and Stanley do not believe that challenging content will scare away potential converts. However, exactly how this message is formatted and understood requires further examination. Writing from a British context, Finney notes that in his own research, only 20% of those who had recently converted to Christian faith indicated the cross and forgiveness of sins as appealing features of the gospel that had

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<sup>28</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 236.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-170.

inspired them to make a commitment.<sup>32</sup> He also notes that 61% of these recent converts did not feel a sense of guilt about personal sin when they professed faith in Christ.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in her study of conversion in South Australia, Taylor concluded that “my research suggested that an awareness of sin is unlikely to be coherently present before conversion, although it may grow in the convert.”<sup>34</sup> Taylor also cites other authors who track “the decreasing talk of sin in popular [Western] language” across the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>35</sup>

These findings are not altogether surprising given that in the past few decades the burgeoning emphasis on the importance of building young people’s self-esteem combined with the modern West’s fascination with the self has led to a rapid change in how we view ourselves as individuals. As Jean Twenge notes:

In the early 1950s, only 12% of teens aged 14 to 16 agreed with the statement “I am an important person.” By the late 1980s, an incredible 80% — almost seven times as many — claimed they were important. Psychologist Harrison Gough found consistent increases on narcissism items among college students quizzed between the 1960s and the 1990s.... [S]tudents were more likely to agree that “I would be willing to describe myself as a pretty ‘strong’ personality” and “I have often met people who were supposed to be experts who were no better than I.”<sup>36</sup>

This rapid growth in positive self-regard to the point of narcissism amongst young people makes the concepts of sin and of inherently flawed (sinful) human persons even more foreign and inaccessible.

Yet, it is also pertinent to note that in Taylor’s work, some sense of personal “dysfunction,” with an accompanying desire to move away from this, was a key aspect of the conversion process for some of her research participants.<sup>37</sup> Taylor argues that “those I interviewed did articulate yearnings that could be understood as desires to move away from human sinfulness — particularly a sinfulness defined in terms of estrangement; or distorted relationality — towards God’s salvation.”<sup>38</sup> Both Taylor and Finney’s findings seem to indicate that the language of sin and sinfulness no longer resonates with people outside of the church, although Taylor argues well that this does not mean that the underlying concepts have completely

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<sup>32</sup> John Finney, *Emerging Evangelism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 90.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>34</sup> Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 292.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 292-293.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 69.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 292.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

disappeared. It is probably, therefore, that in communicating the gospel to modern hearers, some change in the language used when describing sin may be helpful.

Preachers who are keen to communicate relevant and understandable messages to their audiences might feel tempted to abandon or minimise the importance of the doctrine of sin. Twenge cites the example of Rick Warren, who appears to have fairly uncritically absorbed the modern self-esteem message into his gospel presentation.<sup>39</sup> American theologian Andrew Root notes that some of the titles of Warren's early messages were things like "'How to Handle Discouragement,' 'How to Survive Under Stress,' [and] 'How to Feel Good About Yourself.'"<sup>40</sup> Root goes on to point out that Warren still managed to include Jesus in these sermons, however his central argument was more to point out that Jesus was the best solution for these problems, amongst "the constellation of spiritual options."<sup>41</sup> Such a shift in emphasis certainly caused Warren's church to grow rapidly. Warren's ministry is a great example of one in which the pastor was able to preach a message that strongly resonated with its hearers and spoke to their concerns.<sup>42</sup> However, at what point does such a shift in emphasis become cause for concern? The aim to communicate a Christian message in a way that is culturally appropriate and meaningful is certainly valid. However, some theological guidelines would surely be helpful in ensuring that what is communicated is still genuinely Christian and not merely a capitulation to the desires of the surrounding culture.<sup>43</sup>

### **Enculturating the Message**

It seems fairly clear that the Christian message is likely to be better understood and received when it is formatted in an appropriate way for the audience — and this includes how and what theology is mentioned in that moment. One compelling Biblical example of this can be found in Acts 17, where the apostle Paul preaches to a group of educated Athenians. Summarising the content of Paul's speech, Finney notes that Paul

does not begin with any biblical text, but dwells on a particular New Age symbol. He not only quotes various New Age gurus, but agrees with them. He does not quote the Bible, he does not use the name of Jesus, and he gives no account of the

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<sup>39</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 57-58. Twenge also notes another example of this shift within American Christianity, namely "the popular Christian children's book *You Are Special* [which] promotes the same unconditional self-esteem emphasized in secular school programs." She sees these examples as evidence of a more widespread shift towards this view, particularly within what she terms "fundamentalist" Christianity in the U.S.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 146.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>43</sup> Which is what Root suggests Warren has done, albeit without realising. Ibid.

cross and the atonement. He adopts a sort of universalistic stance.... At the end of this feeble effort he asks them to respond. Rather surprisingly some do.<sup>44</sup>

Some of those converted were from the local social elite. While responses across the group were mixed, and certainly not unilaterally positive, New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener suggests that Paul's communication here is still very effective because it succinctly broaches the topic of resurrection to an audience that finds the notion preposterous. Keener points out: "That Paul has even a few converts from the Areopagus and its circle of hearers (17:34) appears remarkable. Even critics now *understand* resurrection."<sup>45</sup> Paul is able to communicate foreign, even distasteful, ideas in familiar language and prose, the evidence of his success displayed in the clear response of his hearers. At least one modern New Testament scholar believes this sort of approach is required in evangelising today's young people, suggesting, "This generation may need to be wooed to the castle door, the way Paul wooed the Athenians on the Areopagus, before they will hear the gospel."<sup>46</sup>

The latent tension contained with this approach, as within any enculturated presentation of the gospel, demonstrates the difficult relationship between culture and theology that communicators must manage. At what point does the cultural reflexivity and relevance of the message mutate into a cultural captivity that is effectively heterodox in nature? Many modern presentations of the gospel have emphasised therapeutic aspects of a relationship with God, which hold a strong appeal in today's culture.<sup>47</sup> Yet this emphasis seems to have led some to construct an image of God that is almost *entirely* therapeutic and inoffensive. The theological assumptions that have led to such an image are best defined as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Powell, Mulder, and Griffin provide a concise definition:

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<sup>44</sup> Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2675.

<sup>46</sup> Scot McKnight, "The Gospel for iGens," *Leadership* 30:3 (Summer, 2009): 23. This seems to imply that for McKnight, what Paul preached on that day was not "the gospel," but simply a primer of sorts. This raises the question as to what exactly McKnight thinks of the "conversions" Luke records at the end of this chapter. For McKnight's view of what the gospel contains, see *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 132-133, where he states that "the gospel is, first of all ... the narration of the saving story of Jesus — his life, his death, his resurrection, his exaltation, and his coming again — as the completion of the story of Israel. Second, the gospel centres on the lordship of *Jesus*.... Jesus is seen as suffering, saving, rising, and judging because he is the Messiah and the Lord and the Davidic Saviour. He is now exalted at the right hand of God. Third, gospeling involves *summoning people to respond*.... [It] lovingly and firmly summons those who hear the gospel to repentance, to faith in Jesus Christ, and to baptism. Fourth, the gospel *saves and redeems*. The apostolic gospel promises forgiveness, the gift of God's Holy Spirit, and justification." Emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 50, provides a brief but balanced assessment of this shift; Paul Hiebert is much more negative; see *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 236.

It is *moralistic*, meaning that religious young people equate faith with being a good, moral person (generally, being *nice*). It is *therapeutic*, so faith becomes a means of feeling better about themselves. And it is *deistic*, meaning God exists, but this God is not involved in human affairs with any regularity.<sup>48</sup>

Originating as a discussion point in the 2005 work of American sociologists Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, MTD was seen to be the prevailing view amongst the majority of American teenagers, whether religious or not.<sup>49</sup> As Smith and Denton note:

Our interviews with hundreds of teenagers around the United States reveal that such an instrumentalist view of religion has also been deeply and widely embraced by the vast majority of American adolescents.... What we heard from most teens is essentially that religion makes them feel good, that it helps them make good choices, that it helps resolve problems and troubles, that it serves their felt needs. What we hardly ever heard from teens was that religion is about significantly transforming people into, not what they feel like being, but what they are supposed to be, what God or their ethical tradition wants them to be.<sup>50</sup>

Powell, Mulder, and Griffin note that a part of the reason for the emergence of MTD lies in how young people appropriate the theology they are hearing: their teenage brains are much more attuned to concrete and self-focused ways of thinking than those of adults.<sup>51</sup> But this is not the only cause. As they note, “Teenagers... are not devising this tepid faith on their own.... Instead, they are mimicking a tame version of faith that permeates both their churches and their homes.”<sup>52</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean argues (in a chapter with the provocative title “Worshipping at the Church of Benign Whatever-ism”) that it is the devotion and passion, or lack thereof, of Christian adults that has allowed such a “theology” to emerge.<sup>53</sup> Smith and Denton wryly note that “adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modelling for and inculcating in its youth.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus, a way forward for Christian communicators needs to somehow avoid the twin dangers of cultural irrelevance on the one hand, and MTD (cultural captivity) on the other. The way

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<sup>48</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 130, emphasis original.

<sup>49</sup> Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120-150.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-149.

<sup>51</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. On a similar note, American theologian Michael D. Langford suggests that “perhaps adolescents have embraced this form of religiosity not only as a consequence of social or cultural or developmental influences, but also as a consequence of what the church believes about God. That is to say, the church’s theological identity, and therefore what the church has taught concerning God, has led youth ineluctably to a theological understanding that buttresses rather than battles moralistic therapeutic deism.” See “Spirit-Driven Discipleship: A Pneumatology of Youth Ministry,” *Theology Today* 71:3 (2014): 326.

<sup>53</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3-7.

<sup>54</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 166.

through this tension lies in communicators' ability to speak the language of culture but also be unafraid to challenge some of its assumptions and common misconceptions about faith. Returning to Paul's sermon in Acts 17, Luke records the offense of Paul's message alongside its impact in provoking conversion decisions. For, when Paul mentioned the notion of Christ's resurrection from the dead, Luke notes, "some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'" (Acts 17:32, NRSV.) Somehow, modern presentations of the gospel need to be formatted in culturally relevant ways yet also not be so compromised as to remove entirely its offense. Both Keller and Stanley, preachers known for their appealing and culturally relevant presentation styles, note that they often preach on content that they know is going to be offensive to secular Westerners.<sup>55</sup> Yet they also work hard to tailor their messages to be relevant and understandable for inquirers.<sup>56</sup>

One suggestion as to how to achieve this comes from Scot McKnight in a 2009 *Leadership* article in which he discusses "iGens" (his label for the then 18-30 age group in Western society) and some Biblical themes that will be of relevance to this group. "Just give them Jesus," he pleads. "Nothing in my experience mesmerizes iGens like the kingdom vision of Jesus."<sup>57</sup> The research of Powell, Mulder, and Griffin supports this. They note that in churches where young people can articulate a personal theology that transcends the overly enculturated "benign whatever-ism" of MTD, there is a strong focus on the redemptive narrative of Jesus and how that effects life here and now.<sup>58</sup> Not only this, but young people in these environments "appreciate challenging teaching in their church, even when it makes them feel uncomfortable and invites them to make changes based on Scripture's teachings."<sup>59</sup> Jesus both appeals to and deeply challenges the worldviews and faith assumptions of many young people today. As American theologian Michael Langford notes, Jesus also invites his followers to "be disciples ... empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring about the Kingdom of God as we join in the *missio dei*."<sup>60</sup> McKnight suggests that this starting point, where individuals are invited to participate in the extending of the kingdom of God, can eventually lead young people to embrace some of the theological categories that their culture's emphasis on the self and self-esteem has up until this point trained them to avoid:

Anyone who vividly sketches a community marked by justice, love, peace, and holiness has a message iGens want to hear. The self hidden behind the castle wall

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<sup>55</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 307-308, and Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 80, 222, 229-230.

<sup>56</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 303-306, and Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 237-241.

<sup>57</sup> McKnight, "The Gospel for iGens," 23-24.

<sup>58</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 135-143.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>60</sup> Langford, "Spirit-Driven Discipleship," 332.

is now interested. And I have found that the self-in-a-castle feels shame about systemic sin, and their sensitivity to things like AIDS, poverty, and racism leads inevitably to recognizing the sin in each person. At some point in this movement to the castle door, the iGen will realize that systemic sin is linked to personal sin. Suddenly he or she feels accountable to God.<sup>61</sup>

McKnight goes on to discuss how the *challenge* of Jesus' discipleship demands is also an intriguing, and "radically attractive" feature for many of the young people he works with. It too invites them to consider a "life that matters and a morality that exceeds what they have experienced."<sup>62</sup>

The story and teaching of Jesus can serve as a potential point of intrigue and challenge for young inquirers today, and insofar as this story is presented faithfully, a strong counterbalance to the warm, inoffensive god of MTD. Jesus is not a therapist, moralist, or deist, although in and through his work and teaching one can indeed find healing, a pattern for how to treat others, and a certain picture of God. Communicators may feel more inclined to focus on the more positive and affirming aspects of the teaching of Jesus in an attempt to connect with and comfort disinterested or nonbelieving audiences. Yet many would suggest that young people who are exploring faith want, or at least are not scared off by, the message of faith when it is challenging and upsetting — for if it is not challenging or upsetting, then it requires no significant commitment or change. Communicators require the skill of presenting this challenge in a format that engages with hearers' pre-existing ideas and notions and thus is comprehensible enough to evoke a response.

## **Connection and Relationship**

Another significant aspect of conversion-friendly environments is the presence of multiple friendships and points of connection for the inquiring newcomer. American researchers Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas' 1987 study *The Inviting Church* interviewed newcomers to six Episcopal congregations in Indiana and Maryland.<sup>63</sup> They found that relationships and friendships were the most important factors shaping an individual's decision as to whether they stay or leave a church group.<sup>64</sup> However, somewhat paradoxically, the same authors

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<sup>61</sup> McKnight, "The Gospel for iGens," 24.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1987), 1. Oswald and Leas' study did not delineate whether or not these newcomers had any previous affiliation to another congregation or Christianity in general.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 58.

point out that it appears that churches that try too hard to force the emergence of a welcoming culture in their congregations meet with little success. They note,

Based on the experience of the successful congregations we studied ... we believe that an all-out, frontal approach to recruiting members will generate more resistance than it will be worth in terms of effectiveness.... The most effective evangelism will come from unplanned, spontaneous enthusiasm members share (perhaps not even consciously) with friends and relatives.<sup>65</sup>

Stanley notes that a similar tension arose during his leadership of North Point Community Church: “You can create practical Bible teaching, but you can’t create a providential relationship.”<sup>66</sup> Stanley recounts how he and his leadership team quickly realised that there is simply no way to force friendships to emerge, and that attempting to do so is counterproductive, even though these friendships are a clear part of so many people’s testimonies. Instead, he tried to create contexts where friendships would naturally emerge over time, such as small groups. “At least 90 percent of the adults we baptize thank specific individuals in their small groups for the roles they played in their coming to faith,” Stanley notes.<sup>67</sup> It is not as though a pastor or church leader is powerless in creating a friendlier church, but rather that the best ways for them to achieve such an objective appear to be through more indirect means.<sup>68</sup>

### **Genuine, Authentic Friendship**

When individuals attempt to *use* friendships and relationships as a covert means to evangelise inquirers, the attempts often fail or are quickly perceived as manipulative and dishonest. Christian participants in the *Growing Young* project noted that aspects like honesty, listening, and authenticity were stronger indicators hallmarks of a positive, faith-building relationship than a more direct sharing of one’s perspective and beliefs.<sup>69</sup> Reflecting on these interviews, the authors note:

In the past, evangelism often was taught to young people almost like a game they were trying to win by scoring salvation goals. Sometimes even in what’s called “relational” evangelism, the relationship becomes reduced to the means through

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 48. A similar finding is reported by Lynne Taylor, who notes that “those I interviewed saw the connection between faith and everyday life, because their Christian friends shared openly with non-Christians.” Earlier in the thesis, Taylor quotes one participant who comments positively on the fact that “seeing how someone else sees their own relationship with God is sort of more convicting’ than being told of the likely benefits of a relationship with God.” See “Redeeming Authenticity,” 173, 330.

<sup>66</sup> Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 133.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 145.

which salvation is won, diminishing friends to notches in a young person's salvation belt. Rejecting this approach, the young people in our study share faith in a posture that communicates, "I get you, and I can walk with you as a witness of Christ without being intrusive or arrogant."<sup>70</sup>

Keller argues for a similarly genuine approach, noting that "mission for a contextualised believer is a matter of everyday life — of developing nonsuperficial relationships with their neighbours, colleagues, and others."<sup>71</sup> Further on in the same chapter he presents four possible ways that Christian people engage evangelistically with nonbelievers. Only the fourth of these, "share your faith," is explicit.<sup>72</sup> Greater emphasis is given to methods that encourage relationship, dialogue, and community.<sup>73</sup> American theologian Brian McLaren points out that many postmodern young people exploring Christianity are looking not only for the truth that faith may contain, but also its beauty and goodness. As he notes, they want to see if "Christianity is *good* as well as beautiful and true," and in the examples he provides, this always occurs through gentle, dialogical relationships. These are, McLaren believes, the right way forward for evangelism in the West, particularly in response to "the strident, pushy, sharp, damaging, coercive tone" of much of the church's evangelistic preaching in recent years, something he sees as overly indebted to the outdated epistemologies of modernity and the theological systems it has inspired.<sup>74</sup>

Genuine friendships are emerging in the research as a much more relevant and effective path to faith for inquirers than the simple apprehension of a theological message delivered by a stranger. Bergler and Rahn note that the "verbal" influence of friends (that is, the influence that came from a Christian friend speaking about their faith) was "a significant factor in the conversions of teenagers with little family religious involvement." They also acknowledge the struggle some Christian young people have in talking openly about their faith.<sup>75</sup> Oswald and Leas cite one study that found 79% of people first became aware of a local church through a friend or relative.<sup>76</sup> However, their own research indicates a much more modest finding in this regard, with 53% of their research participants joining a church without being specifically

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 283.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 286. The other three are: one-on-one informal interactions such as a casual conversation about religion; one-on-one intentional interactions such as setting aside time to read the Bible together; and providing an experience of Christian community such as a gathering of Christian friends or a more formally organised fellowship group.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 66, emphasis original. See also 52-58 for his more general epistemological critique.

<sup>75</sup> Bergler and Rahn, "Evangelism Stories," 71.

<sup>76</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 28.

invited to do so by either clergy or laity.<sup>77</sup> Regardless of the specific numbers involved, it is clear that for many inquirers both “attracting” and “recruiting”<sup>78</sup> occur through informal relational connections. However, the research cited earlier indicates that this is not so much something that pastoral leaders can design or manage. It is much more the work and attitudes of the laity that determine whether these connections occur or not.

White, himself a pastor of a growing church that emphasises evangelism, points out that “insiders” in his congregation have the power to either stifle or encourage a culture and attitude of openness to nonbelievers.<sup>79</sup> Many of the growing churches in Oswald and Leas’ study had a laity that *believed in* the value of inclusion and welcome: essentially, these were congregations that saw themselves as “friendly, open, [and] interested in newcomers.”<sup>80</sup> This was somewhat ironic given that these congregations tended not to be particularly organised or programmed in how they went about their welcoming.<sup>81</sup> Yet, Oswald and Leas suggest that the presence of this welcoming attitude, even when it was not organised or strategically directed, meant that “the newcomer, perhaps subliminally, gets the message, ‘We want you; we would like you to be part of our fellowship,’ even though there was no greeter or official body to come right out and say it.”<sup>82</sup> These were also churches with high levels of intra-congregational harmony and cooperation.<sup>83</sup> Thus, enjoyable and healthy relationships were already a reality within the congregation.

### **Multiple Connection Points**

Some researchers suggest that inquirers may need to experience relationship and warmth with Christians in a community setting, rather than just with one or two Christian friends, before they will convert. Finney notes that among his research subjects, 80% of new converts to Christianity indicated that a relationship was a significant factor in their decision; yet for three quarters of this group (or 60% of the whole sample) it was a relationship with a group of people rather than just with one individual.<sup>84</sup> One study suggests that if these multiple connections do not occur within the first six months of engagement with a congregation, a

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> These are the terms used by Oswald and Leas; Ibid., 38, 44.

<sup>79</sup> White, *The Rise of The Nones*, 82-84. In fact, later on in this same work, White lists five “keys to having an open front door” to inquirers; number one on the list is friendliness (151-164).

<sup>80</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 17-18.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 18. See also Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 2, where he argues that this is the right ordering of priorities, and that methods are not as important as the content and shape of the church community.

<sup>82</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>84</sup> Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 136.

person will most likely leave the church.<sup>85</sup> In fact, this “belonging” may occur before any significant “believing” takes place.<sup>86</sup> This is seen to be a necessary response to the postmodern shift in Western culture.<sup>87</sup> Rusaw and Swanson make the plausible, yet unsubstantiated, claim that it takes anywhere between 12 and 20 positive encounters with Christians before an inquirer will want to convert.<sup>88</sup> Whatever the exact number required, it is likely that for many inquirers, their sense of belonging to the group, and the connection and relationships that occur within that setting, are crucial components in their conversion journeys.

While connection with several members of the Christian group or congregation is an important aspect of conversion-friendly environments, some sources indicate the importance of the inquirer’s connection with one individual in particular: the pastor. This claim requires some modification, particularly in larger churches where it may simply be a logistical impossibility for the senior pastor or minister to have a meaningful relationship with every newcomer. In those environments, there may well be someone else who fills the space.

Oswald and Leas note:

Frequently in a church of this [larger] size ministers or leaders of departments function toward newcomers much like pastors in ... [smaller] churches.... The senior pastor is known by relatively few people in the church; he or she functions as a symbol of unity and stability in an otherwise complex and seemingly fragmented organization.<sup>89</sup>

Rainer’s research confirms this finding. He notes that the smaller churches in his study depended much more on their pastor’s connection with newcomers as a key tool in welcoming inquirers; larger churches established programmes and became much more managerial in their approaches.<sup>90</sup> This does not necessarily mean that there is less opportunity

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<sup>85</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 58.

<sup>86</sup> This is something of an overstated maxim in church growth literature today, see for example McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 84, or Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 5. A more complex articulation of the relationship between believing and belonging can be seen in the work of British sociologist Grace Davie, where, for example, she argues that the popularity of religious radio shows in Britain despite clear evidence of a decline in church attendance is an example of a certain portion of the population who persist in “believing” despite not “belonging” to any local congregation. See *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Blackwell: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105-114. Davie also pays greater attention to socio-economic and geographical factors than many church growth writers do.

<sup>87</sup> As noted above, McLaren sees this on epistemological grounds. Robert E. Webber argues along similar lines, although he also includes notions of loneliness and individualism as new cultural realities that the church as community can respond to. See *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 58-59, 62-65, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland: Group, 2004), 67.

<sup>89</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 85-86.

in a larger church for meaningful relationships to occur, even with leaders. Rather, as was the case for Stanley, it is likely that the various programmes and smaller ministries within those larger churches became significant sites of interpersonal connection and relationality.<sup>91</sup> Smith and Denton note that having a full-time youth minister employed at their churches is a big factor in strengthening young people's faith.<sup>92</sup> The *Growing Young* authors report a similar finding.<sup>93</sup> However it is experienced, the way the leader or leaders of a church community act toward inquiring newcomers is vitally important.

## Valuing People

In his short book *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix*, McLaren recounts an email conversation he had with a young woman, "Alice," who was interested in finding out more about Christianity and had come into contact with him, a pastor at one of the churches in her area. While there are many pastoral insights to be gained through observing McLaren's gentle manner as he answers Alice's varied questions, two things stand out as pertinent for this project. First, he is hesitant in offering "hard and fast" answers to Alice's questions, but generous in engaging her in dialogue, listening, and being able to point out when he is not sure how to directly answer her inquiries.<sup>94</sup> A similar attitude in working with inquiring young people is described in *Growing Young* as "an on-ramp to a deeper discussion about faith rather than a conversational dead end."<sup>95</sup> Patience and generosity are the necessary pastoral virtues on display here, rather than knowledge and certainty. Secondly, McLaren notes that he is perceived positively by Alice — she likes his style. Citing one of her emails, McLaren recalls Alice's effusive response to a recent service:

I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your message today. You are such a wonderful speaker, but on top of that, WHAT YOU SAY is just so incredible — and I'm not just talking about this Sunday.... I'm sure you know this already, but you have such a wonderful gift.<sup>96</sup>

Clearly a part of what drew Alice into further engagement with McLaren and his church was how she understood and appreciated his teaching.

It can be easy at this point to presume to know exactly what it is that young people will find impressive about their pastor, be it dress sense, cultural relevance, or whatever. Yet it is vital

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<sup>91</sup> Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 133-137.

<sup>92</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 114-115.

<sup>93</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 71.

<sup>94</sup> McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 77-82.

<sup>95</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 90.

<sup>96</sup> McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 92.

(and liberating) to note that such things are not seen to be overly important. In their “10 Qualities Your Church Doesn’t Need In Order To Grow Young,” the authors of *Growing Young* list “an off-the-charts cool quotient,” “a “contemporary worship service,” and “a watered-down teaching style” as factors that simply were not influential in whether or not young people choose to join and continue attending churches.<sup>97</sup> Much more important is the presence of empathy, and the pastor’s willingness to share responsibilities and leadership with young people.<sup>98</sup> *Growing Young* cites a number responses in support of this idea:

Congregation members were *even more likely* to attribute their church’s effectiveness to leadership. Over 77 percent highlighted leadership, using statements like: “I chose this church because of the leadership” (Jerome, age 21); “The biggest thing is our ministers. They are excellent and that has helped me more than anything” (Karen, parent).<sup>99</sup>

Specifically, regarding the young people surveyed in their study, Powell et al. note that “when young people were asked what made their church effective, 43 percent pointed to the relational nature of their leaders, specifically that they were caring, accepting, or enjoyable to be with.”<sup>100</sup> These researchers found that young inquirers want to see and hear something from church leaders that makes them feel heard and valued.<sup>101</sup> Stanley points out that one of the reasons unchurched people choose to come along to his church for a service is because in his preaching he constantly mentions them and how pleased he is that they came along to church. He is also careful to craft sermons that they will understand and find applicable.<sup>102</sup>

One challenge for pastors and youth leaders (and churches in general) is to ensure that relational environments are created for the right reasons. Theologians who take a more critical view of modern church growth philosophies note that sometimes the search for a perfect ministry model is grounded in nothing more than our own desire to be successful.<sup>103</sup> Not only this, but the desire to form relationships with inquirers as a means to an end (influence), rather than an end in itself (relational “place-sharing”), comes under a sustained attack in Root’s influential work *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*.<sup>104</sup> Root and writers who hold similar views are clearly reacting to a certain type of ministry that they have observed and found

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<sup>97</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 25-27.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 38ff., and also McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 38-42, 83.

<sup>99</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 56, emphasis original.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>102</sup> Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 237-256.

<sup>103</sup> One good example of this argument can be found in David F. Wells, *God the Evangelist: How the Holy Spirit Works to Bring Men and Women to Faith* (Carlisle: W.E.F., 1997), 93.

<sup>104</sup> Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

wanting. McLaren notes that “on the street, evangelism is equated with pressure.”<sup>105</sup> This is quickly perceived by many as being motivated by nothing more than the evangelist’s desire to quickly convert another individual, and is thus rejected as threatening and dehumanising. Although not as strong in his response to this issue as Root, McLaren challenges Christians, and pastors in particular, to connect with inquirers on a deeper and more genuine level. As theologian Alan Mann notes, the atonement itself comes to us as a story about relationships.<sup>106</sup> Mann engages with another theologian, Douglas John Hall, who “wonders how, with this [relational] narrative as our window into the reality that biblical faith expounds, Christianity could ever have ended up with an ontology of substances and quantities and moralities and not of relations.”<sup>107</sup> But this distortion of priorities has occurred in certain contexts, and the research indicates that evangelists and conversion-friendly churches must be honest in examining their own practices and motivations for connecting with inquirers.

## **Acts of Local Service**

The *Growing Young* project also discovered that for many young people today, an attractive church is one that is actively engaged in serving its local community. The authors note:

When interview participants in our study were asked what makes their church effective with young people, nearly 60 percent named service practices, missional practices, or generally being outward oriented. Further, when we asked leaders, “What is a practice in your congregation that indicates commitment from or growth in young people?” nearly 70 percent named young people serving in some way.<sup>108</sup>

These authors indicate that churches who actively seek to understand, appreciate, and improve their communities hold a high appeal in the minds of young people. These churches also acknowledge and appreciate the diversity present in their communities, and seek to equip and involve their young congregants in understanding and serving the people who inhabit their neighbourhoods.<sup>109</sup> Rusaw and Swanson note that they have seen conversions to Christianity occur once individuals witness the church serving in the community.<sup>110</sup> This may well be a

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<sup>105</sup> McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 12.

<sup>106</sup> Alan Mann, *Atonement for a “Sinless” Society: Engaging with an Emerging Culture* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005), 96.

<sup>107</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 104.

<sup>108</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 242.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-176.

<sup>110</sup> Rusaw and Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*, 103, 107-108.

growing theme within local church mission; Robert E. Webber argues that the church is the new apologetic in the post-Christian West.<sup>111</sup> For the authors cited in this section, a part of this “new apologetic” consists of the church doing visible good in its local neighbourhood.

### **The Indirect Influence of Social Action**

Although most authors indicate that a church’s involvement in serving its local community is an important factor in church growth, not all claim it has a directly causative effect on faith decisions. White argues that while *cause* (by which he means the social intent and action of a local church) is an attractive feature for inquirers, it is *community* that affirms and consolidates an individual’s decision to connect with a church.<sup>112</sup> Rainer’s research confirms White’s point: while growing, evangelistic churches often do have a strong focus on positively serving their local communities, these actions in and of themselves cannot be conclusively shown to directly influence conversion decisions.<sup>113</sup> Likewise, Oswald and Leas note “social action” as a key feature in church growth, but their research indicates the central significance of relationships and community as they key factors involved in conversion and continued participation.<sup>114</sup> So, while socially active churches appear more credible in the eyes of inquirers, and indeed credible enough to increase their chances of engaging with the church further, this alone is inadequate. If the strength and life of the congregation as a community is weak, inquirers are unlikely to persist in their engagement with the church.<sup>115</sup>

Of course, it is often social action that creates community, insofar as various community ministries provide opportunities for individuals to get involved and team up on different projects.<sup>116</sup> Powell et al. note that many of their interviewees mentioned the ways in which particular congregations give young people opportunities to serve.<sup>117</sup> These participants then

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<sup>111</sup> Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, 73.

<sup>112</sup> White, *The Rise of the Nones*, 100, 143.

<sup>113</sup> Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 136, 146. Rainer makes a much stronger association between a church’s “evangelistic effectiveness” (essentially, their level of success in facilitating conversions) and three particular ministries; preaching, prayer, and Sunday Schools. While there are clearly contextual factors at work here, Rainer’s discoveries are particularly useful in how they draw attention back to some of the more “direct” methods (such as preaching an evangelistic message) of facilitating conversions. This in turn supports the idea that an “indirect” influence such as community ministry is much harder to demonstrate empirically as influencing individual decisions to convert to Christianity. *Ibid.*, 14-17.

<sup>114</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 15-17, 39, 57-58.

<sup>115</sup> Note that Oswald and Leas list both “satisfaction with the church’s worship and program,” and “congregational unity” as factors for attracting and retaining newcomers in churches. *Ibid.*, 15-17.

<sup>116</sup> Lynne Taylor and Naomi Nash note in their discussion of church hospitality ministries that “active participation helps build a healthy sense of belonging.” See *Learning from Innovation: Sharing Learning from Innovative Projects Within the Uniting Church* (North Paramatta: Uniting Mission and Education, 2018), 30.

<sup>117</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 251-252.

reported high levels of ethnic and theological diversity in their churches.<sup>118</sup> Doctrine and race seem to be less likely to be dividing issues in churches where people are connecting for some other reason, such as social outreach. American theologian Carol E. Lytch noted in her study of three congregations with thriving youth groups that one significant factor that helped young people connect was the opportunity to “develop competence.”<sup>119</sup> Lytch points to one church which involves significant numbers of young people in the church choir, and another that promotes young people to leadership roles in its youth programme at fairly young ages.<sup>120</sup> While these ministries are less directly related to social justice, their ability to involve young people and get them working at a challenging task together (and thus develop competence) was a key factor in ensuring their continued attendance.

Active, community-minded churches are often more inclined to partner with other local organisations that are contributing positively to the life of their local communities.<sup>121</sup> Where an organisation does not currently exist to meet a felt social need, churches will create one if they have the capacity to do so. However, this is not simply a thinly disguised strategy at evangelistic infiltration, but a genuine desire to serve the community for its own sake. Powell et al. recount in detail the story of a young woman, “Alexis,” and her journey into a local church following her graduation from university and shift to Washington D.C. to start a new job. Early on in her time in Washington, Alexis stumbled across a local festival where community organisations were each “offering opportunities to make a difference.” Intrigued by a group whose stated aim was to home hundreds of currently displaced foster children in the city, Alexis signed up to indicate her commitment, and engaged the organisation’s volunteers in conversation. She soon found out “that these volunteers weren’t just part of a non-profit organization — they were part of a church.... The more Alexis asked about the activities and overall spirit of the church, the more she felt like this was a church she could imagine joining.”<sup>122</sup> Eventually Alexis joined this church, and a year later was heavily involved in its activities. When interviewed by researchers about her new church,

Alexis reiterated [the importance of] its involvement in the community. “I love that I met these people at a festival,” she said. “I didn’t need to be looking for Jesus or a church to find them. They were *out there* doing their thing as opposed to a lot of churches that try to get you to come to *their* events in the church

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 247-249.

<sup>119</sup> Carol E. Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 39-40.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 40-44.

<sup>121</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 181.

<sup>122</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 235.

building.” The church’s primary focus at the festival was not to promote its Sunday service but to make its city a better place.<sup>123</sup>

Significant for Alexis was the fact that the church had aims other than trying to lure her into attending a service at their building. They were also interested in contributing to the wellbeing of displaced foster children in the city, a cause that appealed to Alexis and prompted her to further inquiry.<sup>124</sup> It was clear to Alexis that this church’s engagement with the community was not simply an elaborate deception designed to boost its membership numbers. Alexis would probably not have joined this church if they had set up a stall at that festival inviting people to come along on Sunday. However, their commitment to their community was appealing to her, and this eventually led to her joining the congregation and getting involved.

## What Doesn't Matter

Several authors mention factors that they think do not contribute to a conversion-friendly environment. As noted above, *Growing Young* contains a list of ten such factors:

1. A Precise Size
2. A Trendy Location or Region
3. An Exact Age
4. A Popular Denomination... or Lack of Denomination
5. An Off-The-Charts Cool Quotient
6. A Big, Modern Building
7. A Big Budget
8. A “Contemporary” Worship Service
9. A Watered-Down Teaching Style
10. A Hyper-Entertaining Ministry Program<sup>125</sup>

Likewise, Rainer’s work revealed several unexpected findings related to various factors that do not directly contribute to church growth. First, he discovered that “event evangelism” does not seem to contribute to long-term growth. (By this, he is largely meaning one-off events held in local church buildings with an evangelistic thrust.) Also, similar to the above list, the age profile of the church congregation does not appear to have any effect on evangelism effectiveness. Location was not a factor in evangelistic growth; a vast multiplicity of

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., emphasis original.

<sup>124</sup> For a good example of the effects of church community engagement on a particular congregation, see British theologian Ann Morisy’s book *Journeying Out*. The book contains a story of a group of seven churches in the London borough of Hackney that collaborated to ensure that the local homeless always had somewhere warm to sleep at night; they did this by offering their church buildings. Morisy points out the various long-term effects this initiative had on these churches, including increased Sunday attendance. See *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (Morehouse: Harrisburg, 2004), 11-18.

<sup>125</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 25-27.

ministries and services on offer did not seem to change things drastically either.<sup>126</sup> Finney cites a British study that explicitly identifies factors that did not contribute to local churches' growth in his context, namely:

1. Cell Groups
2. A Link With a Church School
3. An Attractive Church Building<sup>127</sup>
4. Provision for Young People
5. More Eucharistic Services
6. Special Evangelistic Events
7. A Well-Educated Congregation
8. Church Planting<sup>128</sup>

These lists have some common components. First, it seems clear that one-off evangelistic events are not resulting in long-term conversions and church growth. This poses an interesting contrast to the earlier findings cited in this chapter as to the value of youth camps and conferences in young people's faith formation. Perhaps the presence of supportive relationships at those camps in conferences makes a discernible difference in whether an individual will decide to continue with church or not. One-off events may not have the same impact due to the absence of these supportive, pastoral relationships. People are also not awed into joining by stunning architecture or the contemporary, cool vibe of a local congregation or service. Strategic locations and church sizes also appear to not make that much of a difference, although a recently published Australian project offers a contrary finding in this regard.<sup>129</sup> A veritable "menu" of ministry options and times for attendees to choose between also has little effect on the numbers of those coming to faith and joining local churches.

The singularities that emerge in the above lists are also noteworthy. While each could be explored individually, and researched in some depth, the simple fact that some factors seem unique to each study is a useful caution in establishing any sort of universal rules about guaranteed church growth methods. Also, these lists need to be interpreted cautiously, as it is

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<sup>126</sup> Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 29-48.

<sup>127</sup> Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 123. Sadly, these points are not given much room for discussion in Finney's book. Finney is citing here a 2003 study commissioned in the U.K. by the Salvation Army, which unfortunately is no longer easily available. Given how some writers have discussed their efforts at making their buildings and worship spaces more comfortable, and the positive impact that this has had on attendance, further discussion of this point by Finney would have been useful. However, it may well suggest an important difference between *architecture* and *accommodation* insofar as the former simply implies the way a building looks and is laid out, whereas the latter speaks more to how spaces are set up, populated, and furnished. This may well be the more important of the two regarding attendance and positive impacts on inquirers.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. Finney does point out in a footnote that "no further statistics are given in the booklet...to substantiate these assertions, and they need to be treated cautiously until more facts are available."

<sup>129</sup> Taylor and Nash, *Learning from Innovation*, 44. It is interesting, however that even in this report, the authors note that church newcomers who were attracted to particular churches due to their "accessible and visible" locations then "encountered at the church a warm and friendly environment." Perhaps without this latter factor, for which I have found a lot of evidence, those newcomers would not have stayed.

unfair to blindly “rule out” each of the options presented above, or to consider them to be entirely unhelpful, simply because they did not emerge as central themes within a particular research project. Within the greater Western macroculture there are clearly localised microcultures, each with its own tastes, whims, and fancies. What can be clearly shown to work in one setting may be less meaningful (but still potentially of some small value) in another. Not only this, but given that the above authors saw fit to compose these lists and include them in their research, there is likely a common set of prevailing assumptions held by various thinkers regarding effective means of achieving church growth in their particular contexts. The fact that these things need to be explicitly named as not contributing to growth in churches strongly indicates that these authors have been privy to conversations and publications that confidently assert that they do. Church growth and effective evangelism strategies are, unsurprisingly, something of a hot topic in a Western culture where allegiance to the church is on the decline, and not every voice that seeks to contribute to the conversation on these matters is equally well-informed. It is also worth noting that the list provided above by Finney is not specifically related to either young people’s affiliation with churches or conversion-growth; it simply looks at congregational growth in general. Thus, the relative age and faith stage of the people his list relates to is much more diffuse than that the focus of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a brief overview of some of the claims made by contemporary writers – both ministers and researchers – as to how churches in the West might be able to better attract unchurched people. Works that describe how young people are engaging with church have been given particular attention, given the focus of this project. The purpose of outlining these claims is to then compare them with the lived experiences of recent converts to Christianity in Canterbury, New Zealand, and seek to assess how relevant these claims are to this context.

The ministers and researchers cited in this chapter generally agree that a conversion-friendly environment will be one that presents both a high level of challenge (or “truth”) and support (or “grace”) to inquirers. While these environments will be safe and supportive spaces for those who are not believers or committed Christians, they will also be environments where young people are challenged with the implications of the Christian gospel. Supportive leaders and environments such as camps and youth events will hold key significance in the faith journeys of many.

A second argument made by many of the writers cited in this chapter is that a conversion-friendly environment will be a place where the Christian message is carefully formatted to be as accessible as possible to those inhabiting the majority culture of the world around them. Often this may mean that the gospel is presented in new and creative ways, and emphasises aspects of God and Jesus that are appealing and significant to this group of inquirers. The life and message of Jesus may well be a significant feature of this presentation.

A third argument is that these environments will be places of high connection and relationship for inquirers. Relationships will occur with more than one person, and also with a pastor or key leader, depending on the size of the church. Inquirers will experience these relationships positively and will feel as though they are being befriended not in a subtle attempt to manipulate their conversion, but for the sake of friendship itself.

The fourth argument of this chapter is that conversion-friendly environments will often be places that are actively engaged in local community service projects. This may well be an initially attractive feature for many inquirers, although if they do not experience warmth and welcome in the church community they then begin to attend, continued affiliation is unlikely. I also examined the claims made by some authors about what are not significant features of conversion-friendly environments. Differing lists of these non-factors emerging from British and American contexts indicate the unique nature of local church settings. They also reveal the differing opinions of various researchers and pastors about what they believe other people think *does* matter when it comes to church growth, and these opinions are often informed by those writers' own experiences and impressions, rather than by their empirical research.

While consideration of the external, ecclesial factors involved in a young person's experience of conversion to Christianity is one significant factor being investigated in this thesis, it is also important that individuals' internal, spiritual experiences during conversion are considered. I take it as a basic assumption that conversion involves more than just a mere attraction to a church; it is as much, if not more so, a significantly spiritual, interior journey, where encounters with the divine act as hugely formative waypoints. Therefore, the next chapter of this thesis will consider the question of spiritual experiences and their consequences for the conversion journeys of individuals.



## Chapter Three: Spiritual Experience and Conversion

Many converts to Christianity describe significant experiences that contributed to the beginning of their faith journey, and numerous researchers from all over the world, who have analysed conversion narratives, have identified and discussed these experiences. This chapter will discuss Christian spiritual experience and its occurrence as a significant factor within conversion journeys. First, a brief definition of the term “spiritual experience” will be offered, before a short discussion on the sheer variety of experiences noted by converts to Christianity. The body of this chapter will survey the work of two significant researchers, both of whom have looked closely at the role of God and spiritual experiences within conversion journeys and discussed in some depth the consequences that these experiences had for the growing faith of those they researched. The chapter will then turn to a discussion of the notion of “knowing” and intuitive knowledge as they pertain to spiritual experience.

### Towards a Definition

The question of exactly which terms and understandings to use when discussing an individual’s experience of God is one that has by no means been universally settled within academic and popular discourse. Experiences are termed “mystical,” “religious,” and “spiritual” by various writers.<sup>1</sup> I use the term “spiritual” to qualify these experiences, hoping that it is the term most accessible to both participants and readers. “Mystical” is likely to be the least accessible, particularly given that church engagement for many of those I interviewed has been with Protestant churches, whose use of that term is generally minimal. “Religious,” while a valid term commonly used to denote these experiences both within the social sciences and theology, has taken on a connotation within popular theology that implies legalism and exclusivity. In some cases it has been taken up as a contrast to true spirituality by those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>2</sup> While this chapter will at times cite

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Jerome Gellman, “Mysticism and Religious Experience,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Online Reference Entry (11 September 2017); David Hay, “Experience, Religious,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 295-297.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72-73. Also, another project that has examined the spiritual lives of New Zealand young adults, albeit from a more psychological perspective, has made a similar observation, that participants tended to distinguish “spirituality” and “religion” as fairly distinct quantities, with the former being perceived as referring to the “experiential, individual and authentic” aspects of faith while the latter was “seen to involve the institutional, ritual aspects.” See Keren Donaldson, “The Faith Dimension: A Mixed Methods Study About Spirituality and Religion in New Zealand Young People” (MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2016), 133. Some authors also attempt to make a distinction between “mystical” and “religious” experiences, which, while valid, would simply add further confusion in the context of this research. See, for

authors who use other terms, here I will be using the term “spiritual experience.” Thus, it is important to define exactly what is meant by “spiritual experience.” Again, there is no universal agreement on the matter.<sup>3</sup> However, David Hay, former Director of the Religious Experience Research Unit at the University of Oxford, provides a concise and helpful comment when he notes that “the Judeo-Christian tradition has always recognized that there are special occasions when we become directly and vividly aware of the presence of God.”<sup>4</sup> This serves as a good operating definition, albeit one that must be supported by two theological caveats.

The first theological point to consider when evaluating Christian spiritual experience is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: God is understood by Christians to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, within any spiritual experiences, participants may notice God in a way that connects with one or more of these persons.<sup>5</sup> Not only this, but the intrinsically relational nature of the Trinity can mean that spiritual experiences draw individuals into a greater sense of relationality with the godhead, other Christians, humanity in general, or some combination of the three.<sup>6</sup> The second point that can be made here is that Christian spiritual experiences may not only cause the individual to become “directly and vividly aware of the presence of God,” they may also prompt a greater awareness of the glory and greatness of God.<sup>7</sup> While not exclusively referring to discrete spiritual experiences, the argument made by Paul in 2 Corinthians 2-4 supports this idea, particularly in 3:18 where he notes that “we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with *ever-increasing* glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Spiritual experiences help us to comprehend more of the glory of God.

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example, José C. Nieto, *Religious Experience and Mysticism: Otherness as Experience of Transcendence* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997), 110.

<sup>3</sup> Gellman, “Mysticism and Religious Experience,” provides a good assessment of this.

<sup>4</sup> Hay, “Experience, Religious,” 295.

<sup>5</sup> American philosopher Philip Wiebe notes in his own research some participants who are quite adamant they experienced a particular member of the Trinity. See *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters From the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41, 47.

<sup>6</sup> American theologian Fred Sanders writes about how experiential interaction with the different members of the Trinity can have different effects on individual self-concept by looking specifically at the story of Nicky Cruz. See *Embracing the Trinity: Life with God in the Gospel* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 27-33. British theologian Tom Smail writes on a more theoretical level about the different ways that the Trinity can influence and change human relational behaviour. See *Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imaged in our Humanity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 153-200.

<sup>7</sup> Linda D. Peacore, “Experience, Theology Of,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness & Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 305-307.

<sup>8</sup> NIV translation, emphasis mine. See also Edith M. Humphrey, *Ecstasy and Intimacy: When the Holy Spirit Meets the Human Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 96-97.

## Varieties of Spiritual Experience

The role and nature of spiritual experiences in conversion is a point of discussion in some recent projects. British theologian Grace Milton notes that in her research examining conversion in an English Pentecostal church, “all 30 respondents recorded some kind of [noticeable] divine-human encounter during their Christian life.”<sup>9</sup> However, Milton then goes on to point out that most of these encounters occurred after conversion. Her observation in response to this data considers the possibility that “experiences of God are increased at the turning point of conversion. This may be because a believer is more likely to put themselves in the position to experience God post-conversion.”<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Milton’s findings, New Zealand Presbyterian Minister Kevin Finlay’s project interviewing recent converts to Christianity in Auckland noted a high level of seemingly independent, pre-conversion divine activity and encounter amongst his participants. This finding took him by surprise:

Before beginning this research I considered suggesting that relational factors would be the major influence in drawing people to Christ.... But, while people were used, relationships were not the major influence. The sheer amount of direct and independent activity of God was outstanding. Regularly it was more of an internal process which God used than a social one. Some came to Christ almost without human help.<sup>11</sup>

Finlay’s finding here is significant, as it allows for the possibility of conversions within which social affiliation plays a backseat or absent role compared to the impact of direct spiritual encounter. While other researchers note the importance of personal relationships in their own studies of conversion,<sup>12</sup> the experiences noted by Finlay allude to a significant theological point. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes in *The Prophetic Imagination*: “Yahweh, the sovereign one who acts in his lordly freedom, is extrapolated from no social reality and is captive to no social perception but acts from his own person toward his own

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<sup>9</sup> Grace Milton, “Understanding Pentecostal Conversion: An Empirical Study” (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), 216.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Finlay, “Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Master of Ministry Thesis, University of Otago, 2012), 57-58. Finlay’s project, while shorter in length, is in many ways similar to my own. He restricts his sample to those who have come from ostensibly “unchurched” backgrounds, uses qualitative methods and thematic analysis, and is interested in conversion narratives and their relevance to church ministry. He also sought interviewees from a variety of local churches in his area, although he does not specify the exact number of churches he received referrals from. He interviewed ten participants in total. However, unlike the current project, Finlay’s is not restricted to a particular age group or focused more narrowly on influences and decisions made during adolescence.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Mike Fleischmann, “How Outsiders Find Faith,” *Leadership* (Summer 2012): 79-82; Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study on the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University of South Australia, 2017), 327-340; John Finney, *Emerging Evangelism* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2004), 136; Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1987), 39.

purposes.”<sup>13</sup> What Brueggemann is saying, in essence, is that God and his activity can never be confined to human institutions, or indeed to human minds. Brueggeman’s words are a corrective to those who assume that the activity of God is somehow contingent upon their own activity. Finlay’s findings reinforce this point as it pertains to how God might act in conversion.

Some theologians have developed the idea of God’s action in a person’s life prior to their conversion, and even prior to their awareness that God is at work in their reality, by discussing the possibility of prevenient grace.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, the doctrine of prevenient grace is one way of describing how God can be at work in human lives, preparing them for conversion.<sup>15</sup> While not without some possible pitfalls,<sup>16</sup> the doctrine of prevenient grace reinforces two concepts that are important for a theological discussion of conversion. The first is that God always makes the first move; it is God who prepares us to consider God, as it were.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the true beginning of an individual’s conversion involves neither their consent nor their awareness, but God’s action.<sup>18</sup> The second concept that is helpful here is the fact that at times, God appears to bring his grace to bear on the lives of individuals in particularly compelling or impacting ways. As Australian theologian Benjamin Myers notes, “God’s ‘peculiar grace’ specially singles out some individuals, but all the ‘rest’ of humanity [still] receive the divine ‘call’ to salvation.”<sup>19</sup> South African theologian David Field, in his discussion of prevenient grace in the work of John Wesley, suggests that “because the work of the Spirit is personal, free and unpredictable there is always the potential for dramatic and unexpected movements towards justice, mercy and truth.”<sup>20</sup> This is to affirm again the importance of God’s sovereignty and independence.<sup>21</sup> Alongside this, we are reminded that

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 6, emphasis original.

<sup>14</sup> Scottish Theologian Michael Purcell indicates that the concept of prevenient grace has a rich history in the Christian tradition, and cites evidence of its use at the Council of Orange in 529 C.E. See “Glimpsing Grace Phenomenologically: Prevenience and Posterity,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73:1-2 (2008): 78.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Myers, “Prevenient Grace and Conversion in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 40:1 (2006): 22.

<sup>16</sup> For example, American New Testament theologian Ben Witherington III argues that the exegetical foundations of the modern evangelical understanding of prevenient grace to be somewhat tenuous. See *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 207-209. Also, the doctrine of prevenient grace has become entangled in a common point of disputation between Reformed and Arminian theologians, over whether such grace is resistible or irresistible on the part of the human subject. The resolution of such questions is (thankfully!) outside of the scope of this thesis. See Myers, “Prevenient Grace and Conversion,” 23.

<sup>17</sup> Purcell, “Glimpsing Grace Phenomenologically,” 73; Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 24.

<sup>18</sup> Myers, “Prevenient Grace,” 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> David N. Field, “The Unrealised Ethical Potential of the Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71:1 (2015): 5.

<sup>21</sup> Field also suggests, following Wesley, that “because God respects human freedom, persistent negative responses can result in the withdrawal of the influence of God’s grace. God might in sovereign freedom and love

God's actions in the world are at times "dramatic and unexpected," and that this is entirely in keeping with his grace.

The variety of spiritual experiences reported by recent converts also testifies to a God who is both free to act as and how he might choose, and diverse and creative in the ways in which he acts and is experienced. Indian interdisciplinary scholar Joshua Iyadurai notes that for the converts he interviewed, "the religious experience in conversion varies from a very ordinary experience of a realization that dawned upon them...[to] a supernatural experience with sensory elements."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, New Zealand theologian Lynne Taylor records participants noting times when they experienced prayers being answered, tangible experiences of God's presence and reality, and hearing God's voice speaking directly to them during their conversion journey. Alongside these more sensational experiences, Taylor's participants spoke with equal confidence about such experiences as a growing sense of God's presence in their lives, a feeling of being spoken to through a section in the Bible, and a sense of closeness to God while listening to Christian music.<sup>23</sup> Cayman Islands scholar Betty Lou Hendrickson provides in her work a list of some 27 different manifestations of God's presence described by her study participants as they narrated their conversion stories to her. Out of these she creates eight categories of experience, which she calls "Formulated Meanings":

1. Words or thoughts heard in the mind that convey a message
2. Visual sensations such as a picture or vision
3. A sensation of pressure that comes with a sense of God's presence
4. The suspension of temporal and spatial senses
5. A sensation of stillness and a need to sit very still
6. The air feeling warm and soothing
7. A wind or breath seeming to move the air

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continue to engage human beings who respond negatively; when they react positively God intensifies God's presence and power." This seems to mitigate the force of God's influence somewhat; it is certainly not a strong case for a classically Reformed understanding of God's grace as completely irresistible. However, it is possible that Field would reject such a position, given his statement later in the same article that "the mystery of God ... cannot be reduced to neat theological schemes." Ibid., 4. Benjamin Myers notes that "For Reformed orthodoxy, then, prevenient grace is the grace which irresistibly converts the elect without any human cooperation. In contrast to this Reformed view, the Arminian concept of resistible grace (*gratia resistibilis*) affirmed that the beginning of conversion is effected by a cooperation between divine grace and the human will. The influence of prevenient grace enables the fallen will to cooperate with grace, and so to be converted. This prevenient grace is thus universally bestowed, but it "does not [always] obtain its effect"; fallen human beings retain "freedom of will, and a capability of resisting the Holy Spirit, of rejecting the proffered grace of God" (Arminius 2: 721-22). In short, for Arminianism, the initial influence of prevenient grace is only a *necessary* condition for conversion; while for Reformed orthodoxy, the initial influence of grace is a *sufficient* condition for conversion." Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 23, emphasis original.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Iyadurai, "The Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversions in India," *Pastoral Psychology* 60:4 (August 2011): 510.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 204-219. While Taylor is a New Zealander, her research subjects were Australians from an unchurched background.

8. A heightened awareness of the body's position in space<sup>24</sup>

What is significant across the writers who report on participants' spiritual experiences is the breadth and variety of moments that participants attribute to a clear encounter with God.

Reflecting on the work of Catholic philosopher Louis Dupré in this area, American theologian Gordon T. Smith contends that spiritual experiences can only be “properly interpreted by the person who has the experience.”<sup>25</sup> While this does seem to be open to the criticism that certain forms of mental illness could then be (mis)diagnosed as genuine spirituality,<sup>26</sup> Smith is not arguing for this level of openness. He contends that spiritual experiences cannot be interpreted and analysed by interpreters who reject the notion of a God who can be encountered in such a fashion. Instead, “religious experience ... cannot be analysed by someone who has not had a comparable experience. Experience of any kind can be understood and appreciated only from within, for in the words of Louis Dupré, ‘the philosopher deprived of empathy with religion is incapable of successfully analysing its acts, meanings, and symbols.’”<sup>27</sup> Such a claim, if taken seriously, requires those who seek to write about such experiences to be forthright with their own views.<sup>28</sup> In my own life I believe I have heard God speak both in my mind and through others; I have also had several experiences that sound somewhat similar to Hendrickson's “sensation of pressure that comes with a sense of God's presence.”<sup>29</sup> I have seen healings as a result of Christians praying and have had series of events occur which I have attributed to the miraculous timing of God. Thus, I can hear and interpret accounts of my own participants' spiritual experiences with empathy.

The major point of this chapter, however, is not to argue that spiritual experiences occur. Neither is it to demonstrate their varying natures as a central point in and of itself. Rather, it is the question of how these experiences function in conversion that is under consideration here. The functional value of such encounters is often not made immediately apparent as a feature of the experiences. Also, not all spiritual experiences lead to immediate conversions, a point

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<sup>24</sup> Betty Lou Hendrickson, “Discerning God in the Essence of Conversion: A Phenomenological Study” (MA Thesis, St Stephen's College Edmonton, 2000), 39-41.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>26</sup> However, even such a dichotomy, that pits “genuine” spirituality and mental illness against one another, is problematic, as British practical theologian John Swinton argues. See his *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a “Forgotten” Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 145-152.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Beginning Well*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> American philosopher Phillip Wiebe suggests that, in regard to his own work on spiritual experiences, “in recounting the experiences of others, without divulging my own, I feel as though I am feigning objectivity on a topic where a dispassionate disposition cannot be consistently maintained.” See *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Hendrickson, “Discerning God,” 39-41.

not lost on many youth pastors who lament at the lack of commitment shown by young people even after powerful experiences of God's presence have occurred at camps or prayer meetings.<sup>30</sup> One way of locating the various elements in play here is by forming a brief schema:

### **Spiritual Experiences and Their Consequences:**

1. Divine Action
2. Motives of the Actor (God)<sup>31</sup>
3. Experience of the Recipient
4. Consequences for the Recipient

This schema bears some similarity to one Taylor adopted, drawing on the work of British philosopher Roy Bhaskar.<sup>32</sup> There Taylor differentiates between the real, actual, and empirical as they pertain to God and his action, arguing that while there is a distinction between God (the real), God's actions (the actual), and our experiences of God (the empirical), it is the empirical that is observable. This can also provide insight as to how and why God is at work. By adding a fourth point, my intention is to more clearly illustrate both the focus of my research and its causal factors.<sup>33</sup> Actions often have both immediate and longer-term consequences, and both forms of consequence can be a part of the reason behind the action being offered. God may well speak to me today, and I will feel an immediate sense of peace and love that comes from the closeness of God's presence. Yet the words God shares with me may have consequences that last beyond the immediate: I may have to quit my job, forgive a family member, or move somewhere new in obedience to God's commands. The original action is still the genesis of this later behaviour.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lynne Taylor also recounts a section of one of her interviews where a participant recalled tangible spiritual experiences that occurred some 20 years before this participant eventually converted. See Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 208, 214, 220. See also Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., "Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity," *Philippine Studies* 54:4 (2006): 598.

<sup>31</sup> These first two points constitute in one sense "theology proper," wherein they refer primarily to God and his action. However, they are also somewhat concealed from human investigation. Practical theology, while it does attend particularly the third and fourth points on this list, acknowledges that it is only ever possible to have a partial, and imperfect, view through human experience as to what God might be doing and intending.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 30-32.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor does something similar, adding a fourth (interpretation of experience) and fifth (response to experience) step to the list she cites. My identification of consequences as a fourth step is in many ways similar to Taylor's fifth step, where she discusses the ways those she interviewed responded to what they had seen or experienced of God. "Redeeming Authenticity," 192-193.

<sup>34</sup> American theologian Andrew Root even goes as far as to argue that without "cause" (that is, what I am calling "consequences" above) experiences have very little impact on individuals. He states: "Cause makes an experience a revelatory experience of reality. If something happens that leaves no cause on me (like pumping gas), it may still be a fleeting generic 'experience.' It might be real enough, but I quickly forget it because it lacks the revelatory power of epistemologically shifting, even in just a degree, my conception of reality.... The

Various authors offer different suggestions as to exactly what the long-term results of tangible spiritual experiences can be; this chapter will consider two of these in turn. First, Lynne Taylor's contribution will be explored, then Joshua Iyadurai's work, based in an Indian context, will be discussed at some length.

## Lynne Taylor

Taylor offers a unique contribution to the question of spiritual experiences and their consequences in her 2017 doctoral thesis. A significant discovery for Taylor as she analysed the interview data of nine recent converts to Christianity in Adelaide, South Australia was the central and overarching role of authenticity in their stories. In her own words, Taylor realised, "It's all about authenticity!"<sup>35</sup> Taylor discovered that in converting to Christianity, each of her participants was driven by a desire for greater relational authenticity. She notes that "this transformation saw new converts *becoming* the people they were created to be: unique persons who saw their worth and their responsibilities in the light of their relationships with God and others."<sup>36</sup> Conversion to Christianity was the right step in a journey of becoming more authentically oneself, both on an individual and relational level.

Within this schema, Taylor then discusses how various actors in the conversion process promote the growth of relational authenticity. She includes God within this discussion, claiming that "God enables relational authenticity to develop and flourish."<sup>37</sup> Participants in Taylor's research experienced six "affects" in their journey to faith, essentially subliminal realisations and desires that act as key markers on their paths to greater relational authenticity. The six affects are:

1. A sense of yearning/wanting more
2. A desire to live better/become who they are
3. A sense that faith relates to everyday life
4. A feeling of welcome/warmth/belonging/sense of home-coming
5. A sense of resonance/knowing/feeling right/making sense
6. Seeing things differently<sup>38</sup>

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very experiences that become transformative to my person are those that have cause that forces me to see reality differently — they are experiences of the real." *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 201.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 240.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 242, emphasis original.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

In terms of how these affects might relate to spiritual experiences, Taylor notes that “two of the affects experienced by those I interviewed — a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right or making sense; and seeing differently — are particularly related to the agency of God.”<sup>39</sup>

Some of Taylor’s participants came away from their experiences with a deeper sense of the “rightness” and reality of God.<sup>40</sup> Others described how their spiritual experiences developed their sense of knowing who God was and that he was present. For example, Taylor describes how one participant, “Mary,” reported having dreams of “interactions with Jesus”<sup>41</sup> at various points in her life. These dreams increased in frequency “in the months just before her conversion. In more recent dreams, she experienced God being physically close to her, ‘holding her hand,’ and ‘pressing up against her.’”<sup>42</sup> Mary also “heard God speak directly in dreams.”<sup>43</sup> This left Mary with a strong intuitive knowing of who God was; as Taylor notes, “‘before Mary read the Bible she knew ... things’ about God that she later read in the Bible.”<sup>44</sup> Experiences such as this also prompted Taylor’s participants to pursue further engagement with Christian spiritual practices such as Bible reading and the singing of hymns. In turn, engagement with these practices consolidated and created new opportunities for meaningful spiritual experiences.<sup>45</sup>

Taylor also describes how her participants’ experience of God caused them to see things differently over time (the sixth affect.) She notes that “this occurred in three interrelated ways. The first related to how they saw *other* things; the second related to how they saw *themselves*; the third, to their noticing *God*.”<sup>46</sup> One of her participants noticed this change in himself as he consistently read the Bible over time. A former atheist, he attributed this change not only to the biblical text but also to the work of God in drawing him into reading it.<sup>47</sup> Taylor notes that “God changed how [this participant] viewed the world,”<sup>48</sup> mainly through this participant’s “reading the Bible in new ways and seeing how powerful it was ... [as well as] recognising God’s love in others. He spoke of seeing things through a ‘different lens’ as he came to embrace Christianity.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 312-313.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 313-315.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 321, emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 210-211, 321.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 219-220.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 226.

Generally, this change in understanding was the result of subtle encounters with God rather than through anything singular and dramatic.<sup>50</sup> One participant described a dramatic experience while having dinner with friends, yet it did not result in an immediate conversion decision. While the experience prompted a new way of thinking about God and the world for this participant, the dramatic and overwhelming nature of it led to the participant feeling reluctant about engaging more with God. Her eventual conversion happened 20 years after this experience occurred.<sup>51</sup> For the most part, Taylor's participants appear to have realised only in retrospect that their views had changed over time and that this must have been due to their experiences of God.<sup>52</sup>

Taylor also points out that the growth in these affects did not mean that her participants required absolute certainty to be a component of their new faith. While they lived with this new sense of the "rightness" of the Christian faith and the new way of seeing things that was emerging in their minds, they also lived with an acceptance of the fact that not everything about their new faith made immediate sense to them at that point in time.<sup>53</sup> Taylor describes how one of her participants, Olivia,

was reassured that Christians had doubts, and that she did not need to fully understand Christianity before she could embrace it. Others similarly appreciated the room for doubts, complexity and variety in Christian understandings. While they experienced a sense of resonance or "knowing," they did not expect all matters of faith to be completely resolved.<sup>54</sup>

While experiences of God caused a growing sense of the rightness of faith and a new way of seeing things for Taylor's participants, they did not lead to a belief that faith requires all questions to be answered and all uncertainties to be immediately resolved. Taylor views this as positive, an important ingredient for those engaging in "the process of moving towards relational authenticity."<sup>55</sup> It allows new converts to be honest about their progress while still confident in what they have attained as a result of their encounters with God. Also, as Taylor notes, it affirms the important theological point that "despite our best efforts, we are unable to fully understand God. We only have partial knowledge, but any doubts do not need to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 208, 214, 220.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 323-324.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 318.

diminish faith. Rather, as we acknowledge our own limitations, frailty and inability to fully understand, ‘God’s glory may appear larger and more mysterious.’”<sup>56</sup>

Taylor’s insights as to the functional value of spiritual experiences are significant for this study for two reasons. First, the relative similarities that exist between Australian and New Zealand cultures may well mean that the affects experienced by her participants in South Australia are also present in Canterbury. In my interview data, I looked closely for where these similarities appeared. Secondly, the way God was seen to be prompting of a sense of the “rightness” of the Christian faith and a new way of seeing things in the minds of converts is one of the ways that Taylor’s project offers a unique perspective on this question. The flourishing of “relational authenticity” through the growth of these affects was something I paid careful attention to in my own data. For Taylor, the functional value of spiritual experiences largely resides in how much these experiences prompt individuals to progress on the journey of becoming more authentically “themselves,” in relationship to God, others, and internally.

## **Joshua Iyadurai**

Joshua Iyadurai is an Indian scholar who researches from an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating insights from psychology, theology, and social science. His 2015 monograph *Transformative Religious Experience* provides a sustained look at the spiritual experiences of converts to Christianity in India.<sup>57</sup> Iyadurai’s data comes from a variety of sources: focus group interviews, individual interviews, questionnaires, and non-technical literature. In total, Iyadurai collected and analysed 165 individual stories.<sup>58</sup> Significant for the purposes of this chapter are three important theories that Iyadurai develops. The first is his notion of “the Spark,” a term he uses to denote a spiritual experience that radically transforms the direction and understanding of the convert.<sup>59</sup> Iyadurai includes the Spark as a stage in his conversion model and is critical of other authors who fail to fully account for spiritual experience as a factor in the conversion journey. The second relevant aspect of Iyadurai’s work is his sustained discussion of the consequences of religious experience, both in how they further conversion and in how they substantively change the lived experiences of converts. I will

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 320. Taylor’s quotation finishes with her quoting Frances S. Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism: Christian Witness in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 62.

<sup>57</sup> Joshua Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Joshua Iyadurai, “The Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversions in India,” *Pastoral Psychology* 60 (2011): 507.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 510.

discuss these aspects at length and then look briefly at a third significant area of Iyadurai's work, the words he uses to describe the nature of these experiences.

## The Spark

In his review of other conversion models developed in modern scholarship, Iyadurai expresses his disappointment at the lack of consideration given to spiritual experiences and their effect on conversion journeys.<sup>60</sup> In light of his own findings, he views this absence as a serious problem, and develops a model that better incorporates the role and place of spiritual experiences within conversion. Iyadurai proposes the idea of the "Spark," which denotes an initial, significant experience that occurs in the early stages of the conversion journey. While this Spark can occur at several points early on in the conversion process, significant change tends to follow its emergence. Iyadurai observes that for some of his participants, the Spark occurred during a particular phase of the journey that he terms "Pursuit and Test."<sup>61</sup> This phase "involves a passion to explore the new religious option and a desire to test its claims."<sup>62</sup> Some of Iyadurai's participants prayed to Jesus, and read the Bible, and in so doing encountered the Spirit of God in some tangible way.<sup>63</sup> However, not all were specifically exploring Christianity at the time that their Spark occurred. Iyadurai points out that for some,

to find answers to their ultimate questions, converts approached the divine. When their deeply held beliefs were shaken, they called on the divine without using any name or symbols.... Their prayers addressed to a generic God were answered by Jesus. Converts were surprised ... to have their prayers answered by Jesus because it was contrary to their expectation. However, when they received the answer they accepted Jesus as the true God. This triggered a quest to know more about Christianity and eventually led them to follow Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

Iyadurai's argument throughout this work is that a transformative religious experience leaves converts with a new "vantage point" from which they evaluate the world differently.<sup>65</sup> This then means that they will undertake the necessary tasks involved with transferring their allegiance to Jesus, even in the face of the hostile attitudes and actions of their families and communities.<sup>66</sup> Without this new grounding there is little reason for the convert to change, particularly in the Indian context where such a change can result in individuals being

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<sup>60</sup> Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*, 236-238.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-241.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-118.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-229.

estranged from family and limited in their access to shared wealth, marriage partners, and social mobility.<sup>67</sup>

### **The Effects of Religious Experience**

Central to Iyadurai's project is his discussion of the various effects that a spiritual experience can have on an individual. His examination is both broad and precise, detailing how various spiritual experiences impacted individuals' behaviour, thinking, theology, and social situation. Iyadurai is careful in pointing out the various spheres of human life that can be (and in fact are) affected when an individual has a significant spiritual experience, and he uses compelling examples and quotes to support his theories.

Iyadurai begins by considering the spiritual effects described by his participants following their encounters with the divine. As a result of their encounters, converts learned that intimacy with God through Jesus was possible.<sup>68</sup> Many noted that although they had previously not viewed themselves as sinners in need of forgiveness, their spiritual experiences prompted a new view of self that included this concept. "Many who had never felt sinful earlier did feel sinful at the divine-human encounter. Some former habits were considered normal and acceptable, but after the divine-human encounter they consider them as sins."<sup>69</sup> There is some correlation here with the experiences recorded by Taylor and Finlay in their respective projects, where participants also did not mention awareness of their own sin as a pre-existing element in their psyche.<sup>70</sup> However, in those cases, the growth in this awareness following encounters with God was much less notable than in Iyadurai's work.<sup>71</sup>

Some of Iyadurai's participants also expressed a desire to get further involved in Christian ministry, particularly evangelism. Their spiritual experiences prompted "an interest for active evangelism. They feel that what they have experienced ought to be spread to others. They are excited and filled with zeal to share their conversion experience so that others might have a similar experience."<sup>72</sup> A strong sense of joy, hope, and truth fuelled the excitement and

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<sup>67</sup> These are just some of the secondary consequences that occurred for converts who chose to pursue Jesus as a result of their spiritual experiences.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>70</sup> Finlay, "Coming to Christian Faith," 43, 51, 68-70; Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 230.

<sup>71</sup> This may indicate some contextual variation. Mann, in *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society*, 15-16, 53, would suggest that this is the case. It is also possible that the shorter length of time between their participants' conversion experiences and the interviews about these meant that Taylor and Finlay's interviewees simply had not had as much time to learn and think about sin as a relevant concept.

<sup>72</sup> Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*, 183. See also Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 150-151 for another example of this.

impetus that these converts felt to communicate their experience of Jesus with others in the hope that they too will be able to participate in this new reality.

### **Psychological Effects**

Iyadurai's participants noted strong feelings of joy, peace, and happiness as a result of their encounters with God. One participant, Vinitha, described an experience with a friend: "We were kneeling down and started praying. Suddenly, I felt a kind of peace engulfed me. I was crying for no reason. I did not have any particular reason to cry at that moment. I was crying because of joy."<sup>73</sup> Participants often noted the way in which these feelings come along together, as was the case for Vinitha, experiencing joy and peace together in the same encounter. Other major psychological effects noted by participants are a new sense of hope and confidence — essentially, a greater resilience that comes about as a result of spiritual experiences:

Old or young, converts feel that they are not alone and that Jesus is in control of their lives, so they feel bold and courageous.... Their conversion experience changes their perception of reality. When converts face crises, they display hope, whereas they despaired before the divine-human encounter.<sup>74</sup>

In the face of difficult circumstances, converts display a new level of hope and confidence even when those crises did not immediately resolve or improve. Alongside these effects, Iyadurai notes a number of other psychological results in lesser detail, including the absence of fear, a positive self-image, a sense of being fortunate or blessed, a new identity, self-control, a new talent or insight, and a new understanding and experience of success.<sup>75</sup> These effects are reported on positively by participants, and instances are provided of how such internal changes led to various consequences in the ways they behave socially.

### **Behavioural, Physical, Social, and Economical Effects**

Distinct from the psychological effects of spiritual experiences, Iyadurai notes that "*behavioural effects* of conversion include transformation of attitudes, interests, and behaviours."<sup>76</sup> Some participants described how their addiction to alcohol and cigarettes was removed following their encounters with God. As for the physical effects of spiritual

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 185, 186.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 188-190.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 191, emphasis original.

experience recounted by converts, here Iyadurai is speaking mainly of physical healings.<sup>77</sup> Iyadurai points out that these experiences were often central to the Spark that consolidated and provoked faith: “Converts consider such change of situations as proofs that Jesus is real and continues to work miracles.”<sup>78</sup> One participant who had been baptised into the church some time before only began to take his faith seriously following his own healing from tuberculosis.<sup>79</sup> The social effects of spiritual experiences noted by Iyadurai include a new ability to love others and be more accepting, and a feeling of inspiration that led to taking a stand against social injustice and a desire to become involved in philanthropy.<sup>80</sup> Finally, economic effects include both the miraculous provision of money and the loss of any desire to consolidate wealth. Generosity came more naturally to some as a result of their reflection upon their own blessings.<sup>81</sup> Iyadurai also mentions the emergence of hostilities and opposition that occurred after his participants’ families found out about this change of faith. What gave converts the strength to continue in their new faith, Iyadurai argues, was the enduring effect of spiritual experiences on the perspectives and resilience of those who were experiencing opposition.<sup>82</sup> One result of spiritual experience for some of Iyadurai’s participants was a new level of trust and resilience that enabled converts to endure amidst the various hostilities that were being directed at them by members of their families and communities.<sup>83</sup>

### **Iyadurai’s Addition to James’ Ideas**

Iyadurai also describes the ways his research builds upon the theories offered by American psychologist William James’ influential 1902 monograph *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>84</sup> Spiritual experience, James suggests, has four characteristics. First, it is ineffable, meaning that the experience is difficult to describe in words.<sup>85</sup> Secondly, it is noetic, meaning it is grounded in experiential knowledge.<sup>86</sup> Thirdly, it is transient, meaning it is an experience that passes after a period of time.<sup>87</sup> Finally, James declares, spiritual

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 212-213.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>84</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 1902/2004).

<sup>85</sup> Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*, 163.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 164.

experience is passive, meaning that the convert does not feel as though they are in control of the experience.<sup>88</sup>

Iyadurai noticed each of these characteristics in his own participants' reports, and added three of his own: revelatory, conversational, and intimate. Iyadurai observed that some of his participants claimed to have definitively identified the divine with Jesus, despite their previously held beliefs. Iyadurai notes that this revelatory characteristic flies in the face of some contemporary scholarship, which holds or stresses

the view that religious experience is mediated by previously held religious beliefs.... [In contrast,] converts in my study were shocked and perplexed in experiencing Jesus at the divine-human encounter, as it was contrary to their religious belief. Though converts come from different religious traditions, all of them identify the divine in the religious experience with Jesus, and they are certain that the figure who encounters them is Jesus. The revelatory feature of the divine-human encounter in conversion to Christianity destabilizes the claim that Hindus or Muslims cannot have a vision of Jesus.<sup>89</sup>

Secondly, Iyadurai discovered that “*conversation* between the divine and human is another feature of the divine-human encounter in conversion to Christianity.”<sup>90</sup> Not only is it a feature, “this conversation at the divine-human encounter is informal; the divine sets the tone of informality in the discourse by calling the person by name or addressing him or her as daughter or son.”<sup>91</sup> Converts speak to God and hear God speaking to them in their spiritual experiences. Finally, Iyadurai saw intimacy as a feature of his participants' spiritual experiences. The experience of being personally loved was an experience recounted by many, even by those who came from homes where they had never felt unloved or ignored. The love of God was experienced as even better than the best human love.<sup>92</sup>

Iyadurai's research addresses the question of the consequences of spiritual experience in several important ways. First, it indicates that an initial, significant spiritual experience (which he terms the Spark) can act as a catalyst that prompts individuals to pursue and test Christianity for themselves. However, this is not always the case, as for some their experiences occur during their “Pursuit and Test.” In any case, Iyadurai notes, spiritual experience serves to promote transformation and propel the convert forward into a wholehearted engagement with Jesus. Alongside this, his participants noted a wide variety of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 159, emphasis original.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 165-166.

other consequences that arose from their spiritual experiences. Hostilities can arise when an individual declares their commitment to Christ to friends and family. However, one consequence of the spiritual experiences noted by Iyadurai's participants is the resilience to endure such hostilities and maintain one's new faith in Jesus.<sup>93</sup> The value of Iyadurai's research lies in his validation of four elements to Christian spiritual experience based on the pioneering work of James: spiritual experiences are ineffable, noetic, transient, and passive. In addition, Iyadurai found that these experiences are revelatory, conversational, and intimate. In my interviews I looked closely for where such themes emerged and where the insights of Iyadurai shed light upon what my own participants were describing.

### **Knowledge of God**

Some participants in studies of conversion narratives mention experiences or moments in their faith journeys that seemed to accelerate or at least consolidate their knowledge of God. These experiences did not appear to be primarily comprised of rational deduction or being convinced because of verbal reasoning; rather, these were profoundly personal, spiritual encounters that had the effect of radically shifting an individual's epistemological foundations.<sup>94</sup> For example, Finlay notes that one of his participants "came to a point of surrender" after about five weeks at church. The woman recounted:

I got to the point: I don't understand it, my brain can't understand it, but I'm in the presence of God and God you've got me and there's nothing I can do. It was an experience that was so powerful. It was a knowing: a truth. There wasn't even any thought, it was like being at the edge of the Grand Canyon and going, "oh my god," I am so tiny and you are massive ... I felt like I almost disappeared in the presence of this unbelievable grandeur. So it would have been the definition of insanity to argue: I cannot argue with this. It's too big.<sup>95</sup>

This experience fits with what Filipino social scientist Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr. calls "the swept," in which converts' knowledge of God is shifted in a process within which the convert is largely passive. Aguilar Jr. notes that converts can shift quickly from being disparaging towards the ideas of being spiritually overcome or experiencing miracles to a moment where "all resistance evaporates" and the convert knows and accepts God and Jesus as saving

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<sup>93</sup> Although it is likely that there were some individuals for whom the experience of hostilities meant that they never reached a point where they were willing to publicly declare themselves to be Christians. Such people would then have never participated in a project such as Iyadurai's. So, while the point about hostility is valid, it does not (and cannot accurately) consider the number of potential Indian converts who remained silent about faith, or abandoned it, in the face of hostilities.

<sup>94</sup> This is what Joshua Iyadurai calls "The Spark" in his conversion model. See Iyadurai, "The Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences": 510-511.

<sup>95</sup> Finlay, "Coming to Christian Faith in New Zealand," 45.

realities.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, but with less emphasis on a particular experience being the cause of such a shift, Taylor identifies as one of her six affects experienced by her participants “a sense of resonance, knowing, feeling right, or making sense.”<sup>97</sup> Taylor notes that:

Respondents spoke of an intangible sense of right-ness that can be best understood as the work of God in their lives. When Grace said that faith “just feels right” and she “just know[s],” and Jean said: “It just feels really right,” this seemed indicative of a deep work that was attributable to God.... Similarly, Grace, Jean and Mary all experienced a sense of church “feeling right,” which was part of their sense of knowing.<sup>98</sup>

Taylor’s participants described a knowing that sat at a deeper level than mere propositional truth, which she labels affect. While not all these affects were directly attributable to significant spiritual experiences, in some cases growth in affect was a consequence of profound encounters with God.

While the effect of the presence of God on this “knowing” is clearly noted by both participants and researchers, it is also important to carefully consider the “knowing” itself. Spiritual experiences can clearly impact an individual’s logical and conceptual frameworks in a sudden and dramatic way.<sup>99</sup> Canadian theologian John Stackhouse argues that our “knowing” of God cannot be reached apart from some sort of spiritual encounter.<sup>100</sup> This encounter, he contends, is then the basis upon which this new knowledge is built. Our belief that the experience we have just had is with the person of God, Stackhouse suggests, is one that is built on an innate *sensus divinitatis* (a term originally coined by John Calvin) that, in effect, tells the conscious mind that “this is God.”<sup>101</sup> While the idea of intuition is somewhat vulnerable to the criticism that the unconscious mind is easily manipulated and misled, it is still one way of grounding this “knowing” philosophically.<sup>102</sup>

However, this can imply that logic and rationality serve no purpose in furnishing this new kind of “knowing.” American philosopher Esther Lightcap Meek offers valuable insights here. She argues that while one can “agree wholeheartedly that there are aspects of human

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<sup>96</sup> Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence,” 605-606.

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 161.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>99</sup> American philosopher Phillip Wiebe notes that “an *argument* for the existence of a powerful Presence does not appear to be nearly as impressive as an *experience* of a Presence.” *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 81.

<sup>100</sup> John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Need to Know: Vocation as the Heart of Christian Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 99, and see also Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 30-36. Here Plantinga develops this concept, which he derives from John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, although he uses it in his own distinct ways.

<sup>102</sup> Stackhouse, *Need to Know*, 129.

knowing that cannot be put into words ... it has been a dangerous, damaging mistake to postulate that there is a kind of nonrational knowing by means of which we access God.”<sup>103</sup> Meek suggests that instead, we reach this kind of knowing through a task known as “integration,” a process within which various “clues” are reconciled under the most likely theoretical framework.<sup>104</sup> Spiritual experiences, then, while certainly experiences that can blow our existing rational categories wide open, can also shape and guide the formation of newer, broader conceptual frameworks.<sup>105</sup> Thus, for Meek, “the act of integration ... is not irrational but transrational. In it our sense of what is rational is transformed, not violated.... When the knower arrives at the integrative coherence, she finds herself already embracing a rationality which is shaped by the reality that she has come to know.”<sup>106</sup> While the experiences of converts, then, can be justly described as something they just *knew*, they do not then by inference need to be deemed irrational. Rather they exist as pieces of a new puzzle that, while beyond full human comprehension, become the basis for a transformed rationality that the convert eventually comes to embrace.

One conversion narrative that illustrates Meek’s philosophy well is recorded by New Zealand researcher Ken Edgecombe. He recounts the story of “John,” who as a boy of ten experienced an immediate healing from a variety of debilitating dietary complaints. Impressed by the healing and also encouraged by his mother’s strong faith, John “came to know that God was alive and real. ‘I knew, from then on, that God was active. I didn’t need anyone to convince me.’”<sup>107</sup> Edgecombe notes that for John this deepened his understanding of the things he was being taught in religious education and at his church’s children’s programme: “[A]s a result of the healing of his allergies through the priest’s prayers, these facts transformed into events and the [biblical] history began to become significant to him.”<sup>108</sup> John’s integration of the realities of his healing and his mother’s faith had resulted in a new paradigm within which the

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<sup>103</sup> Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 43.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>105</sup> American theologian Richard V. Peace summarises this process: “The pattern by which insight comes, then, is this. There is an encountering set of assumptions — about God and about oneself. The encounter with Christ reveals these to be faulty, wrong, and inadequate — out of touch with reality. As a result of that confrontation with reality, the old assumptions are shattered — they no longer can contain reality. One exits with a new set of assumptions — a new framework that better contains reality.” See *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 53-54.

<sup>106</sup> Meek, *Longing to Know*, 77.

<sup>107</sup> Ken Edgecombe, *Will They or Won’t They? 14 True Stories of Adolescents Finding Faith* (Lidcombe: Scripture Union, 2000), 144. While in some ways similar to the current project, Edgecombe’s work does not take any particular analytical stance and simply stands as a collection of stories. His analysis takes up only six pages out of 156 total pages in the book. Participants’ ages also vary greatly (some are recounting stories that happened decades earlier) and their contexts are not limited to New Zealand, although this is the location where Edgecombe met most of them.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

stories of the Bible could easily be accepted as historical and personally significant. This new paradigm also meant that when it was time for John to be confirmed in a Catholic service, he understood it as a serious spiritual step, whereas some of his Catholic friends seemed to take confirmation less seriously.<sup>109</sup>

Aguilar Jr. notes, “Belief ... is unreflective, but faith results from a conscious process based on the evidence of experience.”<sup>110</sup> This comports well with the philosophy of Meek. While there may or may not be an inherent *sensus divinitatis* that assists human creatures in classifying religious experiences,<sup>111</sup> there certainly are religious experiences that we cannot adequately describe or understand, yet still we “know.” The real power of these experiences (dramatic or subtle, singular or cumulative) lies in their ability to drive us to the task of integration, within which we attempt to build a new rational paradigm that incorporates them. Sometimes this integration happens rather rapidly, as the result of a single, dramatic, experience that leads the convert to conclude “I just *knew* that God made sense, loved me, was real, etc.!” However, it also happens over time, as Taylor’s work indicates. God somehow triggers the integrative task for converts, the conclusion of which is a new kind of knowing within which God and Jesus can be experienced and enjoyed.<sup>112</sup>

## Conclusion

The literature on the nature and the functional value of spiritual experiences within conversion journeys is broad and diverse. While context plays an important part in creating this diversity, it also testifies to a God who cannot be easily held captive by either human speech or thought, who acts how and where God chooses to act. In surveying two key authors who comment on spiritual experience within Christianity and conversion, I have attempted to demonstrate this diversity of experience, while also noting where common themes seem to emerge across contexts. Also, the consequences of God’s revelation to participants do seem to have some common themes: resilience, peace, joy, and confidence, to name but a few. While spiritual

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>110</sup> Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence,” 610.

<sup>111</sup> Wiebe notes that “the existence of this unique form of perception has been contested ... the conflict between those who advance the experience of ‘a sense of presence’ and their detractors appears to be incapable of easy resolution.” *Intuitive Knowing*, 81.

<sup>112</sup> Wiebe argues that while “the Church must address the question of the historical authenticity of its claims in order to ensure that what it teaches has basic credibility ... an individual’s search for spiritual truth, while often embracing what the Church teaches about the origins of its faith, might go beyond the mere probabilities that the search for historical authenticity inevitably turns up. This conviction, in my view, is something that only God can provide, and when it occurs it is intuitive knowing.” Ibid., 149.

experiences are difficult to apprehend cognitively, they do result in a deeper level of trust and of “knowing” God in the minds of converts.

This chapter has discussed spiritual experiences and their consequences for conversion to Christianity, thus providing a theoretical overview for the second sub-question that frames this project. In the next chapter, I consider the question of the temporal nature of conversion, discussing whether there is any genuine case that can be made for conversions that are genuinely punctiliar in nature, as well as looking closely at one theorist’s work describing the conversion process.



## Chapter Four: Conversion: Punctiliar or Process?

The discussion of whether Christian conversion happens at one moment or over a period of time has arisen at multiple junctures across the history of the church. Perspectives on this question range widely among evangelists as well as researchers. The purpose of this chapter is to survey some of the current opinions being offered in this debate. This question matters for two important reasons. First, as already mentioned, the assumptions we hold about the temporal nature of conversion have a bearing on how the gospel is presented and how the church goes about its missionary activity. Church historian Bill J. Leonard argues that contemporary Protestant traditions are in “crisis” due to their lack of consensus on this question, which has such a direct bearing on how they go about their mission.<sup>1</sup> Yet also, this debate exposes a pastoral question. The assumptions about what is going on in an individual’s mind at any point in time, and how we can best care for that person, are directly impacted by one’s answer to this question: Is it appropriate to push for a momentary decision in the heated confines of a late-night youth camp meeting? Is the decision that then occurs (hopefully not under duress) wholly constitutive of that individual’s conversion? As discussed in this chapter, even if the answer is usually “no” to the first question, some individuals do still identify a punctiliar moment as constituting their conversion. If we decide that such an experience cannot in any way be genuine, we risk trampling that individual’s perspective because it does not fit with our own. Yet it is also possible that an individual could simply be experiencing a significant moment within a longer process of conversion.<sup>2</sup> In such an instance, it is potentially damaging to focus too heavily on the moment and ignore any relevant preceding or ensuing conversion process. For both missional and pastoral reasons, then, this question is significant.

This chapter begins by surveying the notion of conversion as it emerges in the Bible. Significant for this discussion is the conversion of Paul in Acts, particularly its interpretation as a normative, punctiliar conversion moment. While this event as normative has been called into question, I argue that Paul’s conversion can be understood as punctiliar. However, the biblical authors never make the case that this is the only way one can come to faith. Following on from this section, I will briefly sketch the growth in emphasis on punctiliar conversions in

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<sup>1</sup> Bill J. Leonard, “Dull Habit or Acute Fever? William James and the Protestant Conversion Crisis,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 43:3-4 (Summer/Autumn 2015).

<https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2015/dull-habit-or-acute-fever>, (14 Aug 2017).

<sup>2</sup> As was the case for some of Lynne Taylor’s research participants. See “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 235-237.

the history of the church, particularly tracing its roots in English and American Puritanism through to contemporary revivalism and evangelism strategies. Here the various factors that led to the rise of such an assumption and the various tensions it has produced will be outlined in detail. Later in the chapter the insights of Lewis Rambo, an influential scholar in the field of conversion studies, are described. His work, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, outlines a conversion process that integrates many of the insights of previous scholarly works in this area.<sup>3</sup> I then engage with American anthropologist Paul Hiebert's concept of set theory, which provides a different perspective on the question of the temporal nature of conversion and offers a valuable critique to some of the assertions made by Rambo. The final section of this chapter will take a brief look at the pastoral concerns raised by contemporary writers over the perceived damage they see being done by those who assume that conversion involves a single momentary decision in time.

## **Biblical Definitions of Conversion**

Both the Old and New Testaments describe conversion as a turning around to head in a new direction. In the Old Testament, the term *shuv*,<sup>4</sup> which is used to denote repentance or conversion, has this meaning. Old Testament scholars J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens note that *shuv* “functions in a physical sense (a person makes an about turn); it also functions in a religious sense (people turn away from or to Yahweh).”<sup>5</sup> American pastor Tim Buechsel notes the importance of remorse related to repentance in Old Testament, pointing out that “when God calls Israel to repent, this action entails a turning back to him with one’s entire personhood, will, emotions, and reason.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the New Testament, two terms are used to indicate “turning” as an act of conversion.<sup>7</sup> *Metanoēō* and *epistrephō* are Greek terms

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<sup>3</sup> Dutch anthropologist Henri Gooren writes, “Rambo’s open-ended process model synthesizes and weaves together in seven stages generations of conversion research,” although he later notes that, at least as of 2010, it had only been tested empirically once. There are more recent projects, however, that utilise Rambo’s model, some of which will be engaged with below. See Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Alternate spellings in English include *shub*, *shubh*, *sub*, and *šwb*. I have chosen *shuv* simply on the basis of readability.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens, “šwb I,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 55-59.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Buechsel, “One Size Fits All? Uncovering Multiple Conversion Avenues for Effective Evangelism” (DMin Thesis, George Fox University, 2013), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 346.

used to mean a change, with both terms used in the New Testament at various points to indicate a turning to faith.<sup>8</sup> Buechsel notes that while

*epistrepheo* indicates two sides of repentance, “turning from” and “turning to,” *metaneo* emphasizes especially the “turning from” aspect of conversion. This can be seen in John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ call, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ... Their call to repentance stands in continuity with the Old Testament prophets calling the nation of Israel to repent.<sup>9</sup>

There is one exception to this general rule: that of the Greek term *metamelomai*, which speaks of a feeling of regret, as illustrated in the following parable:

A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind (*metamelomai*) and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go (Matt 21:28-32 NRSV).

While the son in the above example clearly experiences some sort of conversion, or turning around experience, it is worth noting that at the end of Judas’ life he too experiences *metamelomai* after betraying Jesus, yet the Gospel writers do not appear to view it as a genuine act of repentance.<sup>10</sup> However, the other words used in both Testaments are much more tightly used to indicate a turning around, a change of one’s direction.<sup>11</sup>

## The Conversion of Paul

While useful to understand, the isolation of these words’ meaning does not reveal whether the Biblical writers saw this turning around as punctiliar, gradual, or both. American sociologist James T. Richardson argues that Luke’s depiction of the apostle Paul’s conversion in Acts is often seen as a warrant for the strength of the punctiliar experience.<sup>12</sup> Yet other New

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<sup>8</sup> Moisés Silva, (Ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), vol. 3, 290-293, and vol. 4, 385-389. See Acts 3:19, James 5:19-20, 1 Thess. 1:9 for examples of where *epistrepheō* is used. For *metaneoō*, see Matt. 3:2, 4:17, and Mark 1:15.

<sup>9</sup> Buechsel, “One Size Fits All,” 20.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Laubach, “Metamelomai,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 356.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Laubach, “Epistrepheō,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 353-355; J. Goetzmann, “Metanoia,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 357-359; David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 31-33; Wells notes that the Old Testament only ever used the term to encourage lapsed believers back into full faith commitment.

<sup>12</sup> James T. Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24:2 (June, 1985): 164-165.

Testament characters, such as Jesus' disciples, appear to have "converted" over time.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is best to understand the New Testament as presenting a range of pictures of the conversion experience. I would contend that this includes Paul's experience as a picture of a more punctiliar conversion.

However, the suggestion that Paul's conversion was genuinely punctiliar is contested. Some writers, such as American theologian David F. Wells, argue that it is wrong to consider Paul's Damascus Road experience as a truly punctiliar conversion. First, in many ways Paul was already an "insider," familiar with Old Testament Scripture and Jewish monotheism, which were also held to by those in the new Christian sect.<sup>14</sup> Also, how Paul later interpreted this experience is significant:

What, then, are we to make of Paul's experience with Christ on the Damascus road? Is it normative? The answer from Paul's writings is that it is normative theologically but not experientially. In Galatians 1 and Philippians 3, when Paul spoke of the transformation of his life, he did not draw attention to the blinding light or to his ecstatic experience. The encounter and its drama and crisis are not important.<sup>15</sup>

Wells' view appears to be that Paul saw his conversion as more of a process than some later interpreters may have thought.<sup>16</sup> It is helpful to remember that both Paul and the Gospel authors serve as important interpreters of Christian conversion, because their writings exist as our first physical records of such events, as well as being canonical literature that provides a normative framework for Christian thought and practice.

Somewhat contrary to Wells, former Anglican bishop John Finney contends:

In the New Testament there are two symbolic roads. Travellers to Damascus experience something unpredictable, sudden, almost irresistible. Those who go to Emmaus encounter the Stranger without a name, and explore, question, listen, take their time.... Because of his own personal experience it is not surprising that Paul stresses that conversion is an event.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 280-281. For a closer examination of the conversion of the disciple Peter, see Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 170-172. While it is contestable if the Bible's account of Peter's growth in faith be so easily dissected into the modern categories of "conversion" and "discipleship," McKnight argues that Peter's conversion is visible, and paradigmatic.

<sup>14</sup> David F. Wells, *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 36-39, 49-52, 60.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Wells certainly views conversion as a process, although he bases this assumption largely on psychological theory rather than any available Biblical sources. *Ibid.*, 75-77.

<sup>17</sup> John Finney, *Emerging Evangelism* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2004), 20.

However, Finney continues, in John's Gospel individuals are portrayed much more as travellers on a journey, participants in a process that involves questioning, transition, and caution.<sup>18</sup> Thus, he argues, it is best to allow both depictions (Pauline and Johannine) to exist alongside each other in Biblical interpretation and Christian experience. Here it appears that both Finney and Wells' hermeneutical structures are influenced by the surrounding data that they have been exposed to. Finney's own research has found that a significant number of converts still identify a punctiliar moment as their definitive point of conversion; Wells' reading of contemporary psychological writers predisposes him to favour interpretations that favour a process of conversion. Likewise, Scot McKnight argues that there always is a process going on, however short it may be.<sup>19</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully survey the Biblical data and the various readings emerging from its conversion narratives, this range of interpretations and their probable causes indicate that there is some divergence amongst modern interpreters of the New Testament over the exact interpretation of the conversions reported there.

Paul's Damascus Road experience also raises the question of whether what occurred in that moment was a bona fide "conversion," or simply a call to a new kind of ministry.<sup>20</sup> Here as elsewhere one's definition of conversion has a strong influence on how the data is interpreted.<sup>21</sup> American Mennonite scholar Harold J. Dyck points out: "In a narrower sense, *metanoia* (repentance or conversion) refers to an about-turn of a comprehensive and fundamental character and describes a set of effects as much as it does an experience."<sup>22</sup> Dyck then argues that the use of *metanoia* in Acts 2 can be appropriately applied to Paul's experience. He advises caution for those who attempt to reduce the Damascus Road experience to the point where it is only a call and not in any sense a conversion, arguing that "it is exegetically and theologically risky to specify too carefully what, other than the opening of one's self to God at the point of confrontation by his Spirit, constitutes a conversion."<sup>23</sup> Like Finney, Dyck pushes back against interpretations of the New Testament accounts that seem to *a priori* eliminate punctiliar conversion experiences. Such interpretations say more about the definitions and assumptions that modern readers bring to the text than they do about any sort of unilateral message that the Biblical authors may be propounding. Paul's Damascus

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<sup>18</sup> Richard V. Peace makes a similar point about Mark's Gospel. See *Conversion in the New Testament*, 279-280.

<sup>19</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 12-13. McKnight's primary dialogue partner for the first half of his study is Lewis Rambo, who also argues strongly that all conversions are process-based.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 45-46.

<sup>21</sup> Harold J. Dyck, "The Conversion of Paul: A Model?" *Direction* 9:4 (October 1980): 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Road experience can be interpreted as a conversion, and a punctiliar one at that, insofar as this experience was a moment in time where Paul's turning to Jesus clearly began.

Conversion in the New Testament appears across a varied set of experiences and contexts and is not always presented as the result of a prolonged process. The present debate surrounding punctiliar and process conversion is not one that is replicated in Scripture. However, its roots have come from somewhere, and the next section of this chapter will look back at the last few centuries of Protestant church history in order to properly situate the emergence of this conflict of ideas within contemporary Christian theology.

## Church History

Conversion to Christianity was not always in crisis about crisis, as it were. This perceived overemphasis on punctiliar decisions constituting effective conversion moments is a theme that various writers have attempted to track historically. One of the historical roots of this theology begins with English and American Puritanism and their subsequent movements. As Puritan theology developed in both English and American contexts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the perceived faults of the Church of England, emphasis on the importance of individual conversions and their recounting slowly grew. Puritan historian Susan Hardman Moore notes that in the early American context,

the most striking innovation of all was the decision to ask people who wanted to join the church to give a testimony of religious experience.... First in private to the church elders, then in public to the congregation, people were invited to give a personal history of God's work in their soul.<sup>24</sup>

Eventually this shift emerged back in England.<sup>25</sup> Alongside this emphasis on the importance of recounting one's conversion, Puritan thinkers developed a greater focus on the experience of conversion, particularly as they interpreted the famously "experiential" conversions of figures such as Augustine and the apostle Paul.<sup>26</sup> American theologian Gordon T. Smith points out that the Puritans believed "personal radical conversion" to be "a benchmark of authentic religious experience."<sup>27</sup> American theologian Jerald Brauer notes that "the nature of the Puritan conversion experience can be expressed rather simply. It is a profound,

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 41-42.

<sup>25</sup> Bill J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82:1 (Winter, 1985): 114.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 69.

overwhelming, totally transforming experience in which a person believes that he has experienced death and rebirth through the powerful working of the Spirit of God.”<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, in practice, the actual individual experience of recounting such an encounter before a congregation was often difficult, particularly when individuals did not feel as though they had such a vivid experience to draw upon.<sup>29</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, American revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards wrote about conversion as he observed it occurring during a period of revival in his church in Massachusetts. Edwards’ description of the conversion experience was strongly Puritan in its tone, noting a sharp transition from feelings of distress over personal sin to relief and joy in response to God’s grace.<sup>30</sup> For Edwards, “conversion is a great and glorious Work of God’s Power, at once changing the Heart, and infusing Life into the dead Soul.”<sup>31</sup> Yet Edwards was still very conscious of the fact that conversions can occur either rapidly or over a prolonged period, noting that “many continue a long time in a course of gracious exercises and experiences, and don’t think themselves to be converted.”<sup>32</sup> He acknowledges that the evidence of God’s transforming grace in various individuals’ lives emerges at different rates and intensities. The initial moment of conversion is also highly personal and individual:

But as to fixing on the *precise Time* when they put forth the very first Act of Grace, there is a great deal of difference in different Persons; in some it seems to be very discernible when the very Time of this was; but others are more at a loss.<sup>33</sup>

Commenting on Edwards’ influence, Leonard notes that his work “was a significant force in further defining the nature of conversion in America. His morphology of conversion soon became normative ... [and] sinners who could not conform to that procedure were declared to be unconverted.”<sup>34</sup> Leonard points out how even as Edwards warned against anyone assuming that all genuine conversions were of a dramatic and punctiliar nature, “such an enduring

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<sup>28</sup> Jerald C. Brauer, “Conversion: From Puritanism to Revivalism,” *The Journal of Religion*, 58:3 (July 1978): 230.

<sup>29</sup> Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighbouring Towns and Villages of New-Hampshire in New-England* (London, 1736), 63.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 65, emphasis original.

<sup>34</sup> Leonard, “Getting Saved in America,” 117.

experience was not to Edwards' liking," and his descriptions of what a powerful experience of the Spirit could do in a convert's heart and mind were incredibly popular and well-received.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the stage was set for subsequent followers of Edwards to begin glorifying more instant, punctiliar conversion experiences and denouncing any critical disagreements with this position as Arminian (and thus, essentially, heretical).<sup>36</sup> A similar shift was occurring in Great Britain. British historian D. Bruce Hindmarsh, in describing the Methodist revival, notes that "in the eighteenth century — and particularly in the early phase of the Revival — the momentous conversion experiences of the early leaders were soon seen as exemplary, the great desideratum of the awakened sinner."<sup>37</sup> The widely-read journals of Whitefield and Wesley and the conversion experiences described within were hugely influential works in 18<sup>th</sup> century England,<sup>38</sup> bequeathing a similar theological legacy as had Edwards' work in America.

The themes of punctiliar conversion and dramatic experience intensified and expanded in much Protestant thought throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. American Baptist historian William Loyd Allen notes that common descriptions of conversion experiences at the time were "experiences of brief duration ... [occurring] in the context of a high degree of social pressure, and ... [they created] a high level of emotional arousal."<sup>39</sup> Allen tracks the growth of this revivalist form of conversion in American Protestantism, beginning with the high-intensity camp meeting and culminating in mass revivalism. He notes that "business efficiency applied to revivalism gradually shortened the conversion process ... from years to potentially the twenty-minute wait at a bus stop."<sup>40</sup> Leonard notes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the famous preacher Charles Grandison Finney "denied that conversion required 'a season of protracted conviction,' a lengthy process.... Finney's philosophy of and morphology for salvation was a major factor in turning mass evangelism from the extended period of conviction and preparation to conversion as an immediately apprehended event."<sup>41</sup> Contextual causes for this shift are varied, including increasing themes of dissent and pluralism emerging in American religion, the rise of sects and the various pressures these created, and the nature

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>39</sup> William Loyd Allen, "Being Born Again — and Again, and Again: Conversion, Revivalism, and Baptist Spirituality," *Baptist History and Heritage* 45:3 (Summer/Fall, 2010): 30. Note here Allen's use of the terminology of Lofland and Skonovd, which he uses quite intentionally in this part of his article, where he discusses the growth of the revivalist conversion motif in American Baptist history.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>41</sup> Leonard, "Getting Saved in America," 119.

of the American frontier as being both geographically, and increasingly, culturally, distant from any centres of power and tradition.<sup>42</sup> These changes created the space for an expansion of more diverse and individualised expressions of Christianity in America, which often emphasised ideas of illumination and experience. The Second Great Awakening was also occurring, where a strong emphasis on religious experience and encounters with the Holy Spirit led to a new interest in Christianity, and new emphasis within Christian preaching.<sup>43</sup> This also marked the beginning of a certain kind of evangelism that clearly and confidently made punctiliar conversion experiences central, possibly even normative, in importance.<sup>44</sup>

Mass evangelism efforts and the emphasis on significant conversion experiences has continued in more recent times, most notably through the ministries of travelling evangelists such as Billy Graham, although it cannot be restricted to such individuals. Writing in 1985, Leonard notes another shift in conversion experience that occurred through these ministries:

Some time in this century — and my research is not clear on precisely when — the invitation to immediate conversion was increasingly associated with a specific prayer for and by the sinner which completed the act of salvation. We find it clearly in the approach of Billy Graham.... [I do not mean] to question the sincerity of Finney, Moody, or Graham. It does suggest that these evangelists promoted methods which in the popular mind and the actions of less scrupulous preachers developed a salvific life of their own.<sup>45</sup>

Modern forms of mass evangelism, almost by technical necessity, developed response methods which were fast, immediate, and corporate in nature. Brauer, observing this shift, notes that “when conversion becomes instrumental to reach thousands, both its nature and its consequences will change.... To mass-produce one must standardize and recycle, both of which happened to conversion in the context of Revivalism.”<sup>46</sup>

Identifying “Revivalism” as a new form of evangelical Christianity that grew out of Puritanism, Brauer identifies conversion as one area that grew in importance and centrality across this period of the Western church’s history. He notes, “Puritan preachers were always interested in the conversion of individuals within the covenantal community, but they never felt responsible for a mass revival that sought thousands of believers.”<sup>47</sup> This new feeling of responsibility amongst modern evangelists has led to a radical change in the culture of the church, even to the point of some individuals feeling as though they need to make multiple

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>43</sup> Allen, “Being Born Again,” 30-31.

<sup>44</sup> Even though this was still occurring in the context of a largely Christianised society!

<sup>45</sup> Leonard, “Getting Saved in America,” 122-123. See also McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 176-180.

<sup>46</sup> Brauer, “Conversion,” 243.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

conversion decisions, and some preachers feeling as though they need to offer these. Although this kind of thinking has its roots in the work of the travelling evangelist, the pervasive need many contemporary writers feel to refute such a strongly punctiliar model of conversion indicates just how significant and widespread this shift has been. British-Canadian theologian J. I. Packer, writing about conversion, notes:

Some decisions that occur within the structural pattern of revivalist evangelism are preceded by very little of this kind of soul-travail, but then, as we also know, many of these decisions prove hollow, and if ten per cent of the professed converts in a crusade are still standing after a year we think we are doing well. It is surely healthier, at least among adults, when much thought and care about specific decisions go into the making of the umbrella-decision, as we may call it, whereby one comes to rely utterly on Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Packer allows for the possibility of a momentary, punctiliar decision to commit one's life to Christ. However, he is sceptical of such decisions when they are not preceded by any form of thought or consideration of the challenge and consequences of the Christian faith. Leonard considers the "burgeoning consumer philosophy of church growth based on statistical increases and numerical success" as a key factor in driving up emphasis on the immediacy of decision making.<sup>49</sup> Such pressures changed the way the gospel is presented not just in the travelling evangelist's tent, but also within local denominations and churches.<sup>50</sup> As I will shortly demonstrate, these pressures are still alive and well today, and they are not just restricted to the English and American contexts out of which they initially grew. However, first I will consider the insights of a key theorist in conversion research, Lewis Rambo, and his work on common experiences within the conversion process.

## **Conversion as Process: Lewis Rambo and Scot McKnight**

Some contemporary researchers and ministry practitioners have raised key points related to the nature of conversion to Christianity as it occurs over time. Initially, this section will survey the work of one of the more influential writers in this field, Lewis Rambo, and his conversion process model. I will examine each of the seven stages of Rambo's model as they appear in his seminal work, *Understanding Religious Conversion*,<sup>51</sup> and as the seven stages are further developed in New Testament theologian Scot McKnight's monograph *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels*. Following this, a few brief comments and

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<sup>48</sup> J. I. Packer "The Means of Conversion," *Cruce* 25:4 (December, 1989): 18-19.

<sup>49</sup> Leonard, "Getting Saved in America," 123.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124.

<sup>51</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

critiques regarding Rambo's model will be offered. Significant to this section is the notion of set theory as propounded by anthropologist Paul Hiebert. It provides an alternative way of looking at the question that challenges traditional Western notions of defining group membership, and creates room for incorporating biblical insights.

Rambo's book *Understanding Religious Conversion* is a widely respected monograph that describes a process of religious conversion. Rambo was Professor of Psychology and Religion at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and his book integrates insights from contemporary psychology, sociology, and anthropology in his formation of a seven-part schema of conversion stages.<sup>52</sup> Rambo notes that "a stage model is appropriate in that conversion is a process of change over time, generally exhibiting a sequence of processes, although there is sometimes a spiralling effect — a going back and forth between stages."<sup>53</sup> Rambo's broad definition of what conversion encompasses sets him up well for describing and defending his model.<sup>54</sup> Rambo sees conversion as involving a change, and more accurately a series of interrelated changes. These can include changes to level of faith commitment, perspective on life, theological views, intensity of social concern, and more. Thus, "conversion," as Rambo defines it, covers a number of particular experiences. Rambo argues that such a broad definition is necessary, given that

varied use of the word [conversion] by many people in many situations leads one to believe that it means just what a given individual or group wants it to mean.... This built-in ambiguity makes it hazardous indeed for anyone to undertake a survey of the subject, to try applying an interconnected model that might define patterns and reveal relationships among the various scattered bits of material, pieces of research, shards of anecdotal evidence, slivers of theory, and crumbs of ... commentary available to the researcher.<sup>55</sup>

Not only this, but adherents of different religions each have their own ideas about exactly what constitutes conversion. A work that attempts to bridge such divides will be of necessity broad, Rambo believes.

Rambo's work is cited in a number of subsequent projects that analyse conversion narratives. The work of Scot McKnight in his 2002 monograph *Turning to Jesus* develops this schema in depth and applies it to the conversion narratives of some of his undergraduate students.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 16-17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 22-25; for other projects that engage with this schema, see Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); Milton, "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion"; Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity."

McKnight then goes on in the latter half of the book to use Rambo's schema to assess conversions that occur in the New Testament. Although a work that is largely sympathetic to Rambo's original schema, McKnight builds and elaborates on Rambo's ideas by applying them to two distinct contexts. As such, his work stands as a useful litmus test of the original theory. Therefore, the next section of this chapter will take a closer look at Rambo's seven stages, citing the original for the most part but also engaging closely with McKnight's insights where pertinent.

## Context

The first of Rambo's stages is entitled "context," within which Rambo discusses the effects of cultural and social forces on an individual's decision to change their religious beliefs.

"Macrocontexts," meaning larger cultural and societal environments, have their influence on conversion, particularly on the ways in which a faith system is both understood and explained.<sup>57</sup> "Microcontexts," which constitute "the more immediate world of a person's family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighbourhood,"<sup>58</sup> also make an impact. Context plays its part in the conversion process through its effect on an individual's psychological wellbeing, the experience of consonance and dissonance that exists between a macrocontext and the microcontext of a local religious community, and the relative strength and shape of a religion in a particular point in history.<sup>59</sup> Converts transition between, affiliate with, intensify within, and defect from particular religious contexts; each of these changes constitutes a conversion of sorts.<sup>60</sup> McKnight provides the following example of how this can occur, providing a fictitious example of a divorced woman from an estranged family:

Thus, a potential convert to an American evangelical, nondenominational church has a macrocontext (e.g., American, white, Midwestern, female) as well as a microcontext (e.g., recently divorced, unemployed, estranged from family, generally unhappy, questing for resolutions). A theory of conversion that remains "generic," that is, describing the context as simply "human" or "ancient Jewish" or "modern" or "American," will not satisfy all the important dimensions of the experience of converts.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, "context" in this example incorporates both social and psychological factors, as McKnight's fictitious woman looks for a group that behaves in a way that will enable her to feel more at ease amongst them.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 21-22, and also McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 59-60.

<sup>58</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 23-38.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>61</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 59.

## Crisis

McKnight defines a crisis as an experience of “the tension between expectation and reality.”<sup>62</sup> For Rambo, this experience can greatly vary in intensity and type.<sup>63</sup> He notes that “someone could well argue that merely hearing children’s voices say ‘Take up and read’ is trivial, but for Augustine those words were the culmination of a process that had enormous significance for his religious journey.”<sup>64</sup> What matters then is not the nature or the intensity of the crisis; rather, what unites various experiences under the banner of crisis appears to be the presence of stress or tension which needs to be resolved.<sup>65</sup> McKnight notes that there are some researchers who suggest that more “major crisis-type conversions” wherein the convert experiences a deeply traumatic crisis “derive from a specific sort of personal history or psychological health.”<sup>66</sup> Commenting on the various forces that can influence a crisis, McKnight goes on to point out:

Not all conversions are rooted in an intentional quest for religious meaning even if the result of an experience leads to religious conversion. Other factors — like illness and a need for healing, or interpersonal needs for a social group into which one can fit and find acceptance, or personal decisions to join a particular social vision — these factors sometimes drive a person to conversion.<sup>67</sup>

A crisis, then, according to McKnight and Rambo, is simply an experience of tension that generally precedes an action to resolve that tension.

Rambo identifies multiple “catalysts for crisis” that can occur prior to religious conversion, including:

1. A mystical experience
2. A near-death experience
3. An illness and a need for healing
4. A general dissatisfaction with life
5. A desire for transcendence
6. The experience of an altered state
7. An awareness of “protean selfhood”<sup>68</sup>
8. A pathological condition
9. Apostasy from another tradition

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<sup>62</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 46-55.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>68</sup> A term originally derived from the notion of the Greek god Proteus, who was able to change his shape to adapt to any form. Rambo understands this notion in the context of a crisis as regarding an individual who is unhappy with their essentially transitory, “shapeless” life. See *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 51.

## 10. External factors such as a major international event<sup>69</sup>

Rambo and others have suggested that all religious conversions involve a crisis of some sort occurring at some point,<sup>70</sup> although some others dispute this claim.<sup>71</sup> Most converts then embark on a “Quest” in order to resolve this new sense of crisis.

### Quest

For Rambo,

the notion of quest begins with the assumption that people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency. Under abnormal or crisis conditions this search becomes compelling; people actively look for resources that offer growth and development to “fill the void,” solve the problem, or enrich life.<sup>72</sup>

The quest a convert undertakes is shaped and constrained by several differing availabilities occurring in and around them. Structural, emotional, intellectual, and religious availability all influence the quest. In each case, availability is the relative compatibility between a convert’s existing world and the various religious worlds being considered. For example, a potential convert may find a particular theological system to be more appealing to them due to its consonance with their cultural heritage; this is a form of intellectual availability wherein the closeness of two intellectual frameworks makes engagement easier. Similarly, an individual may reject a particular faith or sect because it requires communal living and a high level of attendance, which clashes with their existing commitments to family and work.<sup>73</sup> The faith or sect in question is deemed to be not structurally appropriate to provide a satisfactory resolution to the quest.

An individual’s quest can be motivated by various factors. According to Rambo, converts may search for:

1. Pleasure (or the absence of pain)
2. An intellectually satisfying conceptual system
3. Self-esteem

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<sup>69</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 48-55. See also Zehnder, *A Theology of Religious Change*, 56-57, for another list of suggested crises that precipitate conversion.

<sup>70</sup> See also McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 68, and Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*, 240-241.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr., “Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity” *Philippine Studies* 54:4 (2006): 599; Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2014), 214; Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 252-253.

<sup>72</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 56.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-63.

4. Lasting and satisfying relationships with others
5. The experience, enhancement, or establishment of power
6. Meaningful transcendence<sup>74</sup>

Individuals may be motivated by some or all of these, and their relative prioritisation by converts will change over time. Rambo also notes that various religious traditions' emphases on these six points will also appeal to different people, depending on the motivating factors underlying their own quests.<sup>75</sup> Although for a time the view prevailed amongst many academics that converts were relatively passive actors in their conversion experiences, more recent writers argue for "active agency," noting that for many the quest is something they are aware and in control of.<sup>76</sup> Rambo concurs, suggesting that "many, if not most conversions" involve an active quest.<sup>77</sup> McKnight argues that the idea that "active" and "passive" quests are locked into a dichotomy is too simplistic, and instead points out that "studies show that a convert can be placed on a 'quest spectrum' that moves from passive to apathetic to rejecting to receptive to active.... Whether consciously or not, the potential convert is seeking what will become the benefits of conversion."<sup>78</sup> The quest is best understood as a matter of degrees: degrees of availability, degrees of motivation, and finally, the degree of conscious activism involved in converts' efforts to resolve their crisis.

## Encounter

At some point in the process, a convert "encounters" a new religious option. This encounter is typically facilitated by an "advocate." Advocates do not necessarily have to be individual people or specifically designated evangelists.<sup>79</sup> Rather, they simply need to be a representative of the new religious option, and generally a representative that "correlate[s] substantially with the convert and his or her world."<sup>80</sup> Advocates need not even be other people; a religious text that is easily read and understood can act in this way.<sup>81</sup> However, advocates are most often fellow humans whom the convert comes into regular contact with. Rambo notes that "a

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 63-64. Similarly, Richard Peace notes that an individual's quest can be either intellectual or experiential. *Conversion in the New Testament*, 311-312.

<sup>75</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 63.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert," 163-179. Richardson notes that readings of the apostle Paul's conversion on the Damascus road have in many ways shaped this understanding and assume that normatively, conversions will be as passive and as sudden as Paul's was.

<sup>77</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 58.

<sup>78</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 75.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., and see also Lamin Sanneh, "Bible Translation, Culture, and Religion," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity* ed. Lamin Sanneh and Michael J. McClymond (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 263-281, for some descriptions of how Bible translation into the vernacular affected the theology and practice of converts in Africa.

crucial and dynamic interplay exists between the advocate and the potential convert. Both sides maneuver, strategize, and engage in various tactics during the encounter stage.”<sup>82</sup>

Although the default position in much conversion scholarship is to examine the ways in which the encounter transforms the convert, Rambo notes that the advocate too is undergoing change in the encounter, something he terms “missionary adaptation.”<sup>83</sup> The difference, of course, lies in the intent of advocates: their hope is (generally) that converts will choose to adopt the new faith as their own.

Rambo argues that however unintentional or authentic they may believe their behaviour is, advocates adopt a “strategy” when encountering potential converts. Rambo argues that this strategy is formed by the advocate’s answers to the following questions:

1. To what degree should our faith seek to proselytize?
2. Should I adopt a diffuse (communal) or concentrated (personal) style?
3. What should my modes of contact with people be?
4. How do I portray the benefits of conversion?<sup>84</sup>

Even when all of these things are done in their best possible ways, it by no means guarantees that conversion is a likely outcome. Rambo points out that

an interesting finding rarely mentioned in conversion studies is that the majority of target populations reject new religious options. In researching many reports of conversion, I found it striking that a scholar or missionary might enthusiastically report hundreds or even thousands of converts, then in one throwaway sentence note that the *percentage* of converts was less than 10 percent.... Trajectories of potential converts and available advocates do not often meet in such a way that the conversion process can germinate, take root, and flourish.<sup>85</sup>

Encounters that result in conversions involve a rare and complex combination of factors that often belie simple description or codification.

Rambo’s depiction of the advocate’s style and intention has been critiqued by Lynne Taylor, who notes that Rambo “implies that advocates are professional or at least very intentional missionaries, generally working within a cross-cultural context, having a primary aim of converting others to their faith.”<sup>86</sup> However, in her own work, Taylor discovered that those who acted as advocates for her participants promoted the Christian faith “primarily in

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<sup>82</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 66.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-99.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-86. Rambo suggests that the “benefits” of conversion indicated by the fourth point above can fall into five basic categories. These are: a system of meaning; emotional gratifications; techniques for living; a charismatic leader; and power.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, emphasis original.

<sup>86</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 250.

the ways that they embrace and exhibit relational authenticity in their personal, social, and spiritual lives.”<sup>87</sup> Taylor also found that Rambo’s “emphasis on proclamation” did not “resonate with my own data, where faith-sharing happens naturally as friends enjoy one another’s company and openly share stories of joys and struggles and where non-Christians observe the difference that God has made in the everyday lives of their Christian friends.”<sup>88</sup> Taylor’s observations extend the concept of how an advocate can influence a potential convert, including much gentler, more natural forms of relational interaction that can clearly also act to convince an individual that a new religious option is worth considering.

## Interaction

Rambo notes that “for people who continue with a new religious option after the initial encounter, their interaction with their adopted religious group intensifies.”<sup>89</sup> Interaction, as distinct from encounter and quest, involves a more focused and prolonged investigation and interaction with one specific religious group. Also, interaction often occurs within a process known as “encapsulation,” when an individual is exposed “to a self-contained world of constructed religious meaning to facilitate conversion.”<sup>90</sup> Encapsulation can be physical, social, or ideological in nature. It exposes potential converts to a new and contained set of relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles that together provide a plausible alternative to existing ways of life.<sup>91</sup> McKnight notes that “encapsulation, in the process of conversion, is the formation of a select number of friends ... and these friends permit a new meaning of life to establish itself.”<sup>92</sup>

Alongside these specific relationships, potential converts engage in rituals that exist as a part of the religious group’s collective action. Some writers suggest this performance of ritual often predates the intellectual acceptance of a group’s theology and beliefs.<sup>93</sup> Rhetoric, a tradition’s specific theological lexicon, also influences and becomes a part of a convert’s religious change. Rambo notes that “we are all changed linguistically as we interact with a new group, but the language process is highlighted in religious conversion because words are so important in religious groups. Religion itself, after all, is a system for explaining the world

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>89</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 102.

<sup>90</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 92.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 93, and also Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 107-123.

<sup>92</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 98.

<sup>93</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 114.

as it is and one's place in it."<sup>94</sup> Encapsulation provides converts with a new way of describing and interpreting reality.

In addition, the expectations around and performance of roles within the group differ from that of conventional society and invite the convert into a new way of doing. Here too this new set of actions is said to often predate formal intellectual assent to the new set of ideas.<sup>95</sup>

Although at times scholars can be unduly negative in their assessments of encapsulation and its role in conversion, McKnight notes that "all relationships isolate to some degree,"<sup>96</sup> and only "some isolation is forced and manipulative."<sup>97</sup> For example, a school classroom is a form of encapsulation that most would deem positive in nature.<sup>98</sup> What determines whether a form of religious encapsulation is negative or not is the degree of manipulation exerted in the new environment.<sup>99</sup> If the level of manipulation is low, encapsulation becomes simply a new relational environment in which interaction between converts and their new religious option is made easier. The interaction stage for many converts involves some degree of encapsulation, and this can be understood in both positive and negative ways.<sup>100</sup>

## **Commitment**

Interaction generally results in potential converts being faced with a choice as to whether they would like to commit to this new religious option or not. Levels of public announcement and ritual associated with commitment vary between different traditions, however these can serve a significant social and psychological function. Once an internal decision to commit has been made, a public ritual such as Christian baptism, or the putting on of a new garment to signify one's acceptance of the tenets of Hare Krishna, can have a strong consolidatory effect in the minds of both converts and observers.<sup>101</sup> Such actions also heighten the difference between "insiders" and those who are not a part of the religious tradition.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>96</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 93.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 104.

<sup>99</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 96-97.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 93-97; McKnight does a good job of relaying this aspect of his participants' conversion experiences, noting that in one instance, a participant "quite self-consciously, describes her encapsulation as divinely willed and just what she needed in order for her conversion to take place." McKnight's participants were taught about Rambo's seven stages before they were asked to provide their own conversion narratives, and thus often interpret their experiences through this schema.

<sup>101</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 127-130.

Psychologically, commitment is often experienced as a feeling of surrender, which, while often quite cathartic, can be a difficult state of mind to sustain over a longer period.<sup>102</sup> Rambo notes:

The human reality seems to be that the power of the conversion experience will eventually dissipate for most people, and thus maintenance procedures become important to protect a person either from severe depression or from abandoning the new religious commitment altogether. Some religious traditions recognize the problem and prepare people to surrender and commit afresh in response to each new struggle, [and] to have more patience with themselves.... Other traditions ... appear less well equipped to deal with this postconversion phenomenon, resulting in many converts dropping out a few months after their conversion experience, or sinking into a slough of dissatisfaction in which their conversion seems to avail little.<sup>103</sup>

Religious traditions that provide post-conversion rituals and language to deal with this post-commitment experience appear to be better equipped to care pastorally for these new believers.<sup>104</sup> McKnight notes that “surrender to Jesus is not a one-time act; instead, it is a routine relationship finding expression in the give-and-take of normal life.”<sup>105</sup>

Finally, commitment can be expressed through the form of a public testimony, or “narrative witness.” Often these accounts contain a level of biographical reconstruction, where the individuals’ experiences are described in starkly “before” and “after” terms regarding their conversion.<sup>106</sup> They also adopt language and forms typical to the specific religious tradition they have converted into.<sup>107</sup> While this description may seem to imply something like a public speech or written record, McKnight points out that witness can “take place with friends, or in a private room, or in a generalized change of behaviour.... It may be nothing more than joining in the singing of some song.”<sup>108</sup> Witness and testimony can appear in a variety of forms and intensities appropriate to the individual and the new religious tradition.

## Consequences

Finally, the consequences of conversion play their part in the overall process. First, there are the expected behaviours conferred upon the convert by their new religious tradition, and

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 132-137, and also McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 99.

<sup>103</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 136-137.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 99.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 137-139.

<sup>108</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 100.

secondly there is the actual behaviour and experience of the individual.<sup>109</sup> In his discussion of the consequences of conversion, Rambo engages closely with the work of Jesuit theologian Donald J. Gelpi. In his work on conversion, Gelpi notes that there are five key areas in which these changes can be noted: religious conversion, emotional/affective conversion, intellectual conversion, moral conversion, and socio-political conversion.<sup>110</sup> The first of these, “religious conversion,” involves the convert adapting to their new faith system and experiencing a new way of life within that system. Reflecting on this, Gelpi notes that

those who encounter Christ out of an experience of unbelief seem to sense more of a sea-change in their lives. They talk less about continuity with the past and more about being engulfed in the living water of God. They speak about their complete rebirth and introduction into a new creation.<sup>111</sup>

The next three ways in which Gelpi sees converts taking new levels of responsibility also involve transformation of the individual. He notes:

We cultivate emotional responsibility by developing healthy affective attitudes and by trying to develop balanced esthetic sensibilities. We cultivate intellectual responsibility when in our search for truth we submit to the constraints of sound logic. We cultivate moral responsibility when we conform our decisions to ethically sound principles and cultivate a virtuous character.<sup>112</sup>

However, most valuable in Gelpi’s discussion is his identification of a fifth consequence of conversion, which he terms “socio-political conversion.” Reflecting on this aspect of Gelpi’s schema, Rambo argues:

Genuine conversion requires that the person move and grow beyond mere personal conversion. Engaging the social institutions and systems of the wider world requires yet another level of conversion, and entails acknowledging accountability and taking responsibility, to the fullest degree possible, for the quality of life produced by these institutions.... For Christian converts, then, challenging institutions to live according to the ethics of Jesus Christ would be a consistent, logical goal.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>110</sup> Although this is something that develops in Gelpi’s work over time. In an early monograph, he only has a four-part schema, with the fifth part, socio-political conversion, added in a later article. See Donald J. Gelpi, *Charism and Sacrament* (London: SPCK, 1976), 20; and also “The Converting Jesuit,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 18:1 (1986): 37-38.

<sup>111</sup> Gelpi, “The Converting Jesuit,” 9.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>113</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 147. McKnight notes that at least one scholar has developed this fifth idea even further, arguing that the sheer act of converting to a new religion is in and of itself socio-politically consequential, and can serve as an act of protest against prevailing ideas and systems. See *Turning to Jesus*, 111-114.

Gelpi argues that the consequences of one's conversion would grow to encompass all five of the above themes to some degree.<sup>114</sup>

These themes seem to place particular emphasis on new behaviours and attitudes as they may be displayed in the life of a convert. Rambo also notes that converts often feel a new sense of theological connection following their conversions. Relationship with God, relief from the guilt of sin, an important part to play in the mission and community of faith, and a new way of viewing themselves and the world all were noted in varying degrees by those Rambo interviewed in his own research.<sup>115</sup> Converts often also feel a strong sense of peace.<sup>116</sup> Alongside these more theological and psychological consequences, Rambo places the sociocultural and historical consequences of conversion. These can involve large-scale shifts in social practice such as the rejection of a pagan ritual or traditional worldview, or the rejection and isolation of converts by those whose views have remained constant.<sup>117</sup> These factors change depending on the number of individuals in any given context who already associate with the new religious option. Rambo mentions one study where over 50% of a town's occupants converted to Christianity; large-scale social changes occurred as a result.<sup>118</sup> However in a minority-faith context, the social consequences of conversion may well appear in markedly different ways and may be experienced more negatively in the life of the convert.<sup>119</sup>

Rambo's model has many positive features and insights. It is broad enough to encompass the experiences of many who convert. McKnight's project makes this explicit as he applies Rambo's schema to both the experiences of his students and to the Gospel narratives.<sup>120</sup> Rambo's model also incorporates insights from a variety of academic fields and allows the definition of the term "conversion" to not be so narrowly constrained by any one train of academic thought. However, in one sense this breadth gives Rambo's project a sense of circularity. When Rambo describes conversion, he is thinking about a process that begins right back at "context" and concludes with consideration of "consequences." Such a broad and wide-ranging definition would seem to almost inevitably be describing a process that

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<sup>114</sup> Gelpi, "The Converting Jesuit," 5-6.

<sup>115</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 161-162.

<sup>116</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 106.

<sup>117</sup> Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 89, 148-150.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Christie Chui-San Chow, "Guanxi and Gospel: Conversion to Seventh-Day Adventism in Contemporary China," *Social Sciences and Missions* 26:2-3 (2013): 167-198; Timothy C. Morgan, "A Tale of China's Two Churches," *Christianity Today* 42:8 (July, 1998): 30-39.

<sup>120</sup> McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, 22-25. See also Dong Young Kim's 2011 thesis, in which he uses Rambo's schema to analyse the conversion narrative of St Augustine: "Rambo's Interdisciplinary Approach to Religious Conversion: The Case of St. Augustine" (ThD, Boston University, 2011), 369-492.

takes some time to achieve. Other definitions of conversion may allow more room for a short, momentary experience. Not only this, but the way one thinks about decision-making and human change is a significant factor in how such definitions are formed. Set theory is one way to consider the factors that may influence how one comes to understand the term.

## Set Theory

While the discussion about conversion as a process has undoubtedly been enriched by the insights of Rambo, his definition of the term strongly limits the possibility of a momentary, punctiliar experience ever constituting a genuine “conversion.” An alternative way of thinking about this issue is provided by Paul Hiebert. He notes that often, perspectives regarding conversion and change are dependent on one’s “set theory.” According to Hiebert, a set theory is a common means of categorising information. Digital or “well-formed” sets are those which define objects as existing exclusively in either one category or another. Analogical or “fuzzy” sets, however, allow for an infinite number of variations to exist between two points. Hiebert illustrates this point by comparing two cultures’ approach to music:

Classical Western music is based on seven notes and five half notes, and singers pride themselves on a clearly articulated scale when they sing. In Indian classical music, based on fuzzy sets, there are sixty-four steps between *sa* (do) and *ri* (re), and sixty-four between *ri* (re) and *ga* (mi). If a player needs more, he can subdivide these microsteps further.<sup>121</sup>

Hiebert also highlights the difference between intrinsic and relational sets. An intrinsic set is a group of things that are defined by a common trait. For example, I am a “man,” because I belong to the group, “men,” who are intrinsically identifiable because of our shared “masculinity.” However, in a relational set, objects are defined by their connection to other objects.<sup>122</sup> Here, I am a “husband,” because I am a married man, and in this instance, it is the extrinsic existence of my spouse that gives me my definition.

Applying set theory to the idea of conversion to Christianity, Hiebert begins by posing the following problem:

Imagine, for a moment, Papayya, an Indian peasant, returning to his village after a hard day’s work in the fields.... He notices a stranger surrounded by a few curiosity seekers. Tired and hungry, he sits down to hear what the man is saying. For an hour he listens to a message of a new god, and something he hears moves him deeply. Later he asks the stranger about the new way, and then, almost as if

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<sup>121</sup> Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 33.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

by impulse, he bows his head and prays to this god who is said to have appeared to humans in the form of Jesus. He doesn't quite understand it all ... [he] knows many of the other 330 million Hindu gods. But this stranger says there is only one God, and this God has appeared among humans only once. Moreover, the stranger says that this Jesus is the Son of God, but he says nothing about God's wife. It is all confusing to him.<sup>123</sup>

Hiebert discusses the various problems Papayya will face in accommodating this new faith into his existing worldview and community. Papayya's Hindu context, illiteracy, lack of social mobility, and limited access to resources provide a formidable set of barriers that sit between him and Christian maturity. Despite this, Hiebert is adamant: "Can Papayya become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once? Our answer can only be yes. If a person must be educated, have extensive knowledge of the Bible, or live a good life, the good news is only for a few."<sup>124</sup>

Later in this work, Hiebert develops this claim. He notes that Papayya's theological ideas are far from orthodox, and his behaviour has yet to show a radical break from past practices. However,

These problems disappear, in part, if we turn to a Hebraic [extrinsic] approach to category formation. Conversion then is a point — a turning around. This turning may involve a minimal amount of information regarding Christ, but it does involve a change of relationship to him — a commitment to follow him.... But conversion is also a process — a series of decisions that grow out of this initial turning. Viewed this way, Papayya can become a Christian after hearing the gospel once, but those who lead him to Christ have a great responsibility to disciple him.... [Papayya] remains a Christian as long as he seeks to follow Christ.<sup>125</sup>

Here Hiebert uses analogical, relational set theory as his basis for understanding what it means to be a Christian. Relationally, Papayya is a Christian because of his connection to Christ. Analogically, he may not be that far along in his theological knowledge and Christian maturity, but he is somewhere on the path. Set theory as it is deployed by Hiebert also allows room for one to consider both a punctiliar decision as a conversion, and still acknowledge conversion as a process of change. Modern Western societies' logic is often strongly influenced by more digital, intrinsic set theories.<sup>126</sup> This is partly the reason for the problem that many have in accepting the possibility of a punctiliar decision as being in any real way a "conversion." Surely, they say, humans change over time, not in an instant.<sup>127</sup> As has been

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 311-312.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 33-38.

<sup>127</sup> McKnight discusses this in relation to conversion in *Turning to Jesus*, 12-13.

seen above, scholars such as Rambo have done a stellar job in tracking exactly that sort of change. However, were one to consider affiliation to Christianity as defined in more relational, analogical terms, it appears there would be greater breadth within which one can acknowledge the value and significance of a decision at a single moment in time. As Hiebert alludes to in the above quotation, this may also have the value of fitting better with Biblical views of conversion. However, pastoral factors also have a bearing on how one assesses this issue. The frustrations some ministers feel towards what they perceive as the modern Western church's overemphasis on punctiliar conversions has led them to some strong conclusions.

### **Pastoral Concerns about Process and Crisis**

Ministers, evangelists, and pastoral theologians writing about evangelism discuss various factors that influence one's perspective on the temporal nature of conversion. At one extreme, the desire for evangelistic preachers to obtain precise numbers as a measure of their own effectiveness is pointed out as a clear (and corrupting) drive in forming a more punctiliar view.<sup>128</sup> This is not the only problem associated with a strong focus on conversions as punctiliar experiences. For example, Brian McLaren is honest in describing how "'crossing the line' was a preoccupation of my boyhood mind, conscience, and imagination."<sup>129</sup> This, he notes, is largely caused by the theological tradition in which he was raised. However, he writes that in his teenage years, "I had several profound and powerful spiritual experiences that were so transforming that I wondered if any of my childhood prayers had 'counted' at all. When was I saved? God knows. I don't."<sup>130</sup> In his pastoral work, McLaren notes that almost always those who converted over time seemed to endure in their faith, whereas those who were pushed to make a punctiliar decision would often disappear immediately after.<sup>131</sup> However, he also records the instance of a friend who had a much more punctiliar conversion experience and remained a Christian.<sup>132</sup> Despite this, he is largely disdainful of forms of Christian evangelism that view a single decision as crucial.

New Zealand theologian Michael Duncan is similarly damning of church practice that isolates and glorifies an initial decision to turn towards Christ. Realising that many in the churches he

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<sup>128</sup> This is pointed out as a potential problem by Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 5-6; See also Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 19.

<sup>129</sup> McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize*, 104.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

had pastored were still glaringly deficient in their practice of social justice and Christian behaviour, he came to the following conclusion:

Let us be clear. To have an emotional crisis or spiritual experience (awakening) does not make you a Christian. To be on a journey of faith (searching) or even accepting that you are flawed by sin (awareness) is still some distance from becoming a Christian.... Too often today, when someone experiences an awakening, a self-awareness episode or even a revelation of Christ, they are declared to have become a Christian.<sup>133</sup>

Duncan allows for the role of decisions as an important factor in the conversion journey, but he expresses his frustration in just how commonly churches and pastors have overemphasised decisions and under-appreciated the length and breadth of the process of salvation.<sup>134</sup> While, earlier in the chapter, I discussed the growth of this theme within recent American and English church history, Duncan's reaction is one indication of the fact that the same ideas have taken root in the New Zealand context. Disappointed at a church he sees as overfilled with "anaemic, nominal half-lights who have made superficial decisions," Duncan calls for a new pastoral approach to conversion that abandons (temporarily, at least) altar calls and "one person telling another that they are now a Christian" in favour of patience, process, and journeying.<sup>135</sup>

McKnight notes that there is little correlation between a single decision to follow Jesus and a lifelong of faith following on from that decision. While at some point in their youth as many as 60 percent of Americans will make some sort of decision for faith, only 6 percent of Americans go on to live the sort of Christian life the Barna Group defines as constituting genuine discipleship.<sup>136</sup> McKnight argues:

At the most conservative of estimates, *we lose at least 50 percent of those who make decisions*. We cannot help but conclude that making a decision is not the vital element that leads to a life of discipleship.... Our focus on getting young

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<sup>133</sup> Michael Duncan, "Lost in Salvation: Implications for Mission: Inklings and Meldings from a Kiwi Minor-Prophet," 2010 Tinsley Annual Lecture, Morling College, MacQuarie Park, (May 24, 2010), 15, 20. My thanks to Andrew Hill for providing me with a copy of this document.

<sup>134</sup> American theologian Philip R. Meadows notes how the overemphasis on punctiliar conversions "runs the risk of anthropocentrism in so far as the goal of conversion can become exclusively identified with datable moments of decision-making or certain patterns of emotional experience. The danger is that anthropocentric goals can be obtained with or without the cooperation of God, or made available for consumption with or without the summons to costly discipleship." "The Journey of Evangelism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 414.

<sup>135</sup> Duncan, "Lost in Salvation," 22.

<sup>136</sup> The Barna Group's definition does not need to be accepted as normative for this statistic to still be telling, however it is worth noting that their discipleship measures include "revolutionary faith," a "biblical worldview," and a faith that is the highest priority in one's life. Barna's research is cited in Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 19-20.

people to make decisions — that is, “accepting Jesus into our hearts” — appears to distort spiritual formation.<sup>137</sup>

McKnight, although a New Testament scholar by profession, grounds many of his pastoral observations in conversations with his students, particularly when the discussion turns to evangelism and conversion in his context. Duncan is motivated by social justice concerns: others, such as McKnight, may also be motivated by pastoral concerns as they react to the perceived overemphasis on punctiliar conversions that they see as prevalent in the Western evangelical church.

Other writers allow room for both punctiliar and gradual conversion experiences. One reason for this balance is to allow individuals’ interpretations of their own conversion journeys not to be too overshadowed by the presuppositions of others. John Finney notes that in his own research, “69 per cent of adults experienced their coming to faith as a gradual process while 31 per cent could give a date on which they experienced conversion.”<sup>138</sup> Of course, those 31 per cent who provided a date of decision could certainly include a proportion of people who took some time to convert leading up to that point. Yet, for Finney, these first-hand accounts are enough to persuade him that both punctiliar and process-based conversions can and do occur, a conclusion which he then allows to shape his theological understanding.

Another reason used to support the idea that conversion can be either punctiliar or a process is the different ways people respond to differing forms of communication. James Emery White argues that “the church must view evangelism as both a process *and* an event,” because contemporary culture has shifted further from its Christian roots and now many people need more of the theological basics explained to them before they can fully apprehend the gospel.<sup>139</sup> A similar cultural assessment from the British context confirms this view.<sup>140</sup> White links this change in communication style and response to a generational shift rather than to individual personalities, suggesting that particularly for the cohort he terms “Generation Z,” very few if any of these people will respond to a single gospel message with no prior Christian understanding. Thus, although White allows for both views of evangelism, he sees

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 20, emphasis original.

<sup>138</sup> Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 20.

<sup>139</sup> James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 109-112, emphasis original. White describes Generation Z as those born between 1995 and 2010.

<sup>140</sup> Mark Ireland, “The Local Church Perspective,” in *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age*, ed. Steven J.L. Croft (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 77, argues for a shift “from asking for a decision to accompanying on a journey.” See also Rupen Das, “Becoming a Follower of Christ: Exploring Conversion Through Historical and Missiological Lenses,” *Perichoresis* 16:1 (2018): 21-40.

the future of the Western church's evangelistic mission as in major need of a shift more towards explanatory, process-centred methods.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, American pastor Mark Mittelberg notes:

For most people today the movement toward Christ will be a *process*. Contrast this to ... earlier forms of evangelism, which were largely designed to be an *event* that reminded semireligious people of what they already knew and then challenged them to commit to it right there on the spot. Rather, the process approach deepens the trust and understanding of secular people over time and, along the way, urges them to put their faith in Christ.<sup>142</sup>

Timothy Keller concurs with this assessment, noting that conversions as a process are more likely to be the case in post-Christian contexts such as are common in the Western world.<sup>143</sup> Slightly softer in their tone than Duncan and McLaren, these ministers allow for the possibility of punctiliar conversions occurring occasionally in Western contexts.

In Taylor's research, where she interviewed nine recent converts to Christianity in South Australia, there was no evidence of "any sort of dramatic conversion 'event.'"<sup>144</sup> Taylor notes that, for those she interviewed, "the actual [moment of] 'becoming' a Christian was generally a super/natural next step in a long process. The moment they attributed to conversion is more likely to be a moment of recognition that something has occurred rather than a dramatic decision. Such moments, while profound, were almost anti-climactic."<sup>145</sup> This supports the suggestions made by the writers cited above, that sudden conversions are likely to be rare in modern Western contexts. Keller, White, and Mittelberg each argue persuasively that the Western church is doomed to fail if it continues to structure its missionary and evangelistic efforts around the assumption that such conversions are in any way the norm. Rather, the church must focus its efforts on nurture, explanation, journeying, and relationships as the new means of grace imparted over time in the hearts of inquirers.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 112-117.

<sup>142</sup> Mark Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way we View and Do Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 60.

<sup>143</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 281.

<sup>144</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 235.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Taylor suggests that the church would best serve potential converts by being "authentic communities of faith: filled with people sharing their lives and their own developing faith with each other. In so doing, [the church will] create communities of belonging characterised by reciprocity, mutuality, and equality." "Redeeming Authenticity," 352.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed some perspectives on the relationship between Christian conversion and time. Biblical perspectives and interpretations indicate that the conversions of some of the first Christians contained examples of both process and punctiliar change. However, following the Puritan revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a greater emphasis on punctiliar conversions emerged among some evangelical preachers. This shift in perspective eventually led to a new means of evangelising that emphasised the importance of momentary decisions and clear, obvious points of change. This new emphasis has in turn produced some negative reactions from writers who express their pastoral concerns over some of the potential issues such an overly punctiliar focus can create.

Other writers, such as Rambo, discover in their research a large body of evidence supporting the ubiquity of process conversions. In closely examining Rambo's work, I have laid out his description of the intricacies of the process of religious conversion. The majority view of process conversion among theologians and researchers has been noted. I have taken a critical view of the assumption that all conversions are processes over time, particularly when one considers the insights of set theory, and also the ways in which Rambo's definition has implicitly shaped his conclusions. Thus, I have argued in this chapter is that while many do hold the position that conversion must be a process, there is enough strength in the arguments of others to at least keep the door open in this project for the possibility of a punctiliar decision constituting a genuine experience of conversion.

In the opening chapters of this thesis, I have laid out research about conversion as it pertains to the three sub-questions identified in Chapter One. Those questions were:

1. What are the relevant or significant aspects of church life that matter to young inquirers?
2. How do spiritual experiences function in conversion?
3. How is conversion experienced as a process, and is there any evidence of conversions occurring as a punctiliar moment in time?

Each of these topics has been examined at length in the above chapters. In Chapter Two, five significant areas of church life as it pertains to young inquirers were identified, drawing from a variety of research projects and pastoral perspectives. Chapter Three discussed the consequences of spiritual experiences in conversion, particularly Joshua Iyadurai's discussion of this issue. In Chapter Four, I engaged with the question of the temporal nature of conversion, arguing that despite a historical overemphasis on punctiliar conversions in the Western church (and a subsequent pastoral and academic reaction against this), we must

always allow for the possibility of genuine punctiliar conversion experiences, however rare they might be.

The next chapter of this thesis discusses the methodological framework that undergirds the data presented in the latter half of this thesis. It also focuses on how I chose my interviewees, and how then I analysed and interpreted the gathered interview data.



## Chapter Five: Research Methods

My engagement with the data generated in this research project is undergirded by the frameworks of critical realism and interpretative phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> These frameworks allow the lived and described experience of research participants to take centre stage in how the data is analysed and presented, but they also give the researcher room to interpret those experiences within their participants' broader social contexts. Scottish practical theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat note that “the aim of phenomenology is to determine what an experience means to a person quite apart from any theoretical overlay that might be put on it by the researcher, and to provide a comprehensive and rich description of it.”<sup>2</sup> They note a growing use of this framework within practical theology.<sup>3</sup> In phenomenology, the meaning and felt value of an experience as described by participants is carefully attended to and reported.<sup>4</sup> Descriptions of spiritual experiences (such as in this project) are well served by this framework. Swinton and Mowat warn the researcher against interpreting such descriptions before careful description and analysis has occurred. However, interpretations do still occur within this framework, hence the addition of the adjective “interpretative” to phenomenology.<sup>5</sup>

It is important, Swinton and Mowat note, that narrative is accepted as a grounded and legitimate type of data. Modern Western minds are often more inclined to view findings generated in the natural sciences as a higher form of truth than those produced by the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> While there is not the space here to deal with this issue in a sustained form, it is pertinent to note that qualitative research in general, and this project in particular, has a different set of aspirations than those often held in the hard sciences. Qualitative researchers do not seek so much to fully explain phenomena as they do to describe its occurrence in one unique context. Also, their findings, while certainly able to evoke identification and resonance

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<sup>1</sup> Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2013), 15-17.

<sup>2</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 102.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Donna M. Mertens, *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2015), 247.

<sup>5</sup> Swinton and Mowat use a very similar approach, which they call hermeneutic phenomenology. They note that “as a method, hermeneutic phenomenology displays both descriptive and interpretive elements. It is *descriptive* (phenomenological) ... because it wants to be attentive to how things appear ... [and it is] *interpretive* (hermeneutic) ... because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena.” This is essentially the same as what I have done here, although hermeneutic phenomenology seems to place slightly more emphasis on the particular perspectives, biases, and preconceptions that the researcher might be bringing to the research task. Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 104-105.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

across contexts, anticipate only a limited level of generalisability.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while the themes generated by my analysis of the experiences of young converts to Christianity in Canterbury, New Zealand may well prove relevant and stimulating in contexts across the world, there is no certainty that this will be directly applicable in those other contexts.

I am not the first researcher to identify phenomenology as a useful tool in analysing conversion narratives.<sup>8</sup> American social scientists Lewis Rambo and Lawrence Reh have identified six elements of a phenomenological approach to conversion, namely:

1. Observation
2. Description
3. Empathy
4. Understanding
5. Interpretation
6. Explanation<sup>9</sup>

It is significant in the above list that only the final two steps involve any injection of the researcher's own critical perspectives. Swinton and Mowat argue that interpretation is an essentially unavoidable action, and what is required of researchers is honesty, self-awareness, humility and empathy as they engage with the experience of another.<sup>10</sup> British psychologist Carla Willig notes that interpretative phenomenology, while being careful not to minimise or overlook described experience, "seeks to understand the meaning of an account of experience by stepping outside of the account and reflecting upon its status as an account and its wider (social, cultural, psychological) meanings."<sup>11</sup> To this I would add "theological" as another potential field of meaning within which individual experiences can be interpreted. But at this point it is pertinent to introduce the notion of critical realism to the discussion.

American theologian Andrew Root argues that in much of contemporary practical theology, empirical, qualitative data has become the central focal point. This, he contends, is at best an irony, given that practical *theology* is the discipline here and as such it must always be

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 43-45.

<sup>8</sup> Indian theologian Joshua Iyadurai is one such scholar who uses phenomenology as a basis for his own research into conversion experiences. See *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 4. American missiologist David Garrison uses phenomenology in his study of Muslim conversions to Christ, noting that "a descriptive phenomenological approach is particularly important 'when we want to appraise terrain ... that we previously have not seen and thus are likely to misunderstand.'" Conversion research, particularly that which crosses cultures, lends itself well to this cautious and story-centred approach. See *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2014), 33.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis R. Rambo and Lawrence A. Reh, "The Phenomenology of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Maloney and Samuel Southard (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1992), 229-258.

<sup>10</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 108-109.

<sup>11</sup> Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 17.

concerned with both the person and the action of God in the world. An excessive focus on human experience has diluted this.<sup>12</sup> However, practical theologians generally start with an examination of a concrete situation. Critical realism offers a bridge from experience to any relevant discussion as to the person and action of God. It asserts, first and foremost, that a reality does exist that is independent of human experience and knowledge. However, humans can experience and interpret this reality to some degree, albeit always via their own subjective means.<sup>13</sup> Thus, human experience is a valid source of information about the nature of reality, although experience is never elevated to a point of being entirely incontestable. Root summarises the relevance for theology:

Such a postfoundational realism that claims ontology over epistemology allows, from the start, for divine action and transcendent experiences to be *possible*. We are freed from the heavy straightjacket of naturalism and materialism to actually hear people's experience.... We find our way into the depth of reality not through a foundation (either through a positivist science, or a biblicalism) but through our personal experience, to follow Michael Polanyi. We indwell reality and therefore have personal experiences of reality (even higher layers of reality), and these personal experiences may indeed correlate to the ontological shape of reality OR they may *not*.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, participants' descriptions of their experiences of God and conversion to Christianity can be understood as valid in two complementary ways. First, using phenomenology, their descriptions can be accepted and analysed as valid narratives of personal experience. While these experiences occur within various contexts, and those contextual factors do need to be accounted for, the narratives themselves do not need to be construed as fantasy or falsehood. Not only this, but, via critical realism, God and spiritual experience as they are described in the narratives can also be assumed to be realities that genuinely exist, even as they come to us mediated by human persons.<sup>15</sup> While this thesis takes it as a starting assumption that God does exist and has most fully revealed himself in Christ, it also can be acknowledged, following Root, that not every experience necessarily reveals God more fully. There are always human factors involved in both our interpretation and our description of the realities we encounter,

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Root, "Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology: On Critical Realism, Divine Action, and the Place of the Ministerial," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15 (2016): 46-47.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 56; see also Lynne Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians" (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Root, "Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology": 56-57, emphasis original.

<sup>15</sup> Although these are never beyond doubt: as Root notes, "*any* reality in the independent objective layer can be doubted because fallible human epistemology cannot possess it." This is saying that there is a layer of reality that exists independently of what the human mind can conceive or contain, yet because reality as it comes to humanity always comes through various human minds there must be some admission of the fallibility of interpretation and the possibility that we are seeing things wrongly, yet at the same time trying our best to accurately report the facts. See *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 213.

and a critical *theological* stance can be taken when examining claims about the Christian God without diminishing the reality of those experiences.

## Research Method – Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a process that is centred around the coding, comparing, and reporting of “themes” as they appear in the data. Social psychologists Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun, and Nikki Hayfield, in their chapter on thematic analysis in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, admit the high level of subjectivity such a process involves, but suggest that rather than interpret this as a problem to be managed, this subjectivity is something that can be embraced. They are dismissive of others’ attempts to increase the “accuracy” of qualitative analysis through the use of predetermined coding frames and multiple researchers. Instead, they view the researcher’s unique view of the data as something that informs (rather than “corrupts”) how the data is presented, and suggest that researchers’ views will shift and evolve as they examine their findings.<sup>16</sup> The type of thematic analysis I primarily engaged with in this project is known as inductive thematic analysis. This is simply a process where the themes identified are provided by the data set itself, rather than constructed prior.<sup>17</sup> My primary research question is “experiential” in nature; that is, it seeks to gather and understand the lived experiences of those converting to Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Clarke et al. provide practical guidelines for researchers working within the thematic analysis method. They suggest that a project such as this, which seeks to use interviews to examine a sole data source, would generally involve at least 30 participants.<sup>19</sup> They also suggest the identification of no more than six major themes in the data, given that moving beyond this number would often mean the researcher has moved (unwittingly) beyond the most common and compelling themes.<sup>20</sup> Both of these guidelines were adhered to in the current project. I also followed their “six phases of thematic analysis”:

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<sup>16</sup> Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun, and Nikki Hayfield, “Thematic Analysis,” in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, ed. Jonathan A. Smith (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 223-224, emphasis original.

<sup>17</sup> One example of where a more “deductive” approach is used can be found in Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). McKnight uses themes identified by Lewis Rambo to interpret and analyse his own data, and he reports on his data in a format that largely matches Rambo’s schema. One obvious critique of such an approach is if there were, potentially, any participants in McKnight’s sample that described experiences that contradicted or falsified Rambo’s schema, McKnight would be potentially less likely to see or report such descriptions.

<sup>18</sup> Clarke et al., “Thematic Analysis,” 228.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

1. Familiarisation
2. Coding
3. Searching for Themes
4. Reviewing Themes
5. Defining and Naming Themes
6. Writing the Report<sup>21</sup>

As the list indicates, considerable care is taken in the thematic process. Themes are carefully identified, checked, honed, and supported by appropriate data before being included in the findings section.

In the present project, I familiarised myself with the data by transcribing each interview personally, and then in turn reading each transcript over again before beginning the coding process. I also wrote a brief summary of each interview immediately after the interview was completed. I used NVivo software to help with the coding process, and began by coding individual sentences and phrases, before eventually grouping these under common headings. These headings were in turn examined and grouped, which became the basis for the early identification of themes. For example, in one of the first interviews I transcribed, the participant described how when she first went along to church, the people there “came up and said hello and talked to me.” This sentence, initially coded almost exactly as the participant described it, was eventually associated with other participants’ descriptions of the ways people at their churches were active in trying to welcome and include them. This was one piece of evidence I used to define the theme of the church as a “warm community,” which in turn became one of several themes that formed the basis of my argument in Chapter Six that churches, for those I interviewed, were “places of connection.”

Thematic analysis is a strong choice of method for the present project for three reasons. First, it aims to identify and elucidate any common themes that have emerged from the data set. This allows the researcher and the reader to consider what these themes say about the context within which these experiences have occurred. For example, a high proportion of participants mentioned the significance of the annual Easter Camp as a feature of their conversion journeys. This was then coded and identified as a leading theme. In turn, within this theme, four secondary themes were identified — the four common reasons *why* participants described this camp as significant. These secondary themes can then be elaborated on, and observations made about the overall theme, the significance of the camp (and of the potential influence of Christian camps on the religious formation of young people) as a whole.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 230.

Secondly, inductive thematic analysis allows for the identification of new themes as they emerge in the data rather than a deductive approach which works from a predetermined set.<sup>22</sup> While I had specific sub-questions in mind as I examined the subject of religious conversion, thematic analysis meant that there was room for discoveries to emerge that fell outside of the scope of my sub-questions. This occurred in the present project, with this unexpected finding described in Chapter Nine. This is a strength of inductive thematic analysis, in that it allows for new discoveries about a phenomenon to emerge. Given the highly contextual and multifactorial nature of religious conversion, inductive thematic analysis is a good option for data examination as it allows the data to essentially speak for itself. This can provide new insights as to how religious conversion is experienced. Finally, thematic analysis fits with the methodologies identified in the previous section, those of interpretative phenomenology and critical realism.<sup>23</sup> Thus, participants' descriptions are not subjected to an overly suspicious hermeneutic; rather, the aim is first and foremost to discover and present themes from the data, which dignifies participants' understandings while still providing a valid academic lens through which they can be examined.

## **Finding Participants**

Initially, my approach in sourcing participants for this study was via the local youth pastors' network in Christchurch. I had been involved in this group when I was an associate pastor. As a former member of this network I had a high level of familiarity and rapport with the attendees, which made it easier to directly approach individuals with whom I was already familiar. At one of their monthly meetings I was given a good amount of time to address the group and describe the project and what I was looking for. I handed around a clipboard with a referral sheet attached (see Appendix A). Youth pastors then indicated on the sheet the number of young people that they personally knew of as conforming to my research criteria:

1. Be currently (or, at the time of the interview) aged between 18 and 28.
2. Have converted to Christianity at some point in their adolescent years (ages 13 to 19).
3. At the time of their conversion, neither of their primary caregivers / parents was a practising Christian.

Youth pastors also provided their contact details on the sheet. This process is generally known as "referral sampling," or "network sampling," where participants are sourced through a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

known intermediary.<sup>24</sup> Such a sampling method is also a type of convenience sampling, in that it does not aim to interview every representative within a given sample;<sup>25</sup> rather, my aim was simply to interview the 30 or so participants who were able to meet with me within the given timeframe. This process also meant that participants were approached first not by me, a stranger, but rather by their present or former youth pastor, when ascertaining their interest in participating in this project. Youth pastors were encouraged to offer the opportunity to be interviewed about their conversion as something the participant could decline if they felt uncomfortable. I know of three cases where this occurred, as youth pastors later told me the individuals they had in mind for my interviews had declined the request. When they gave a positive response, the youth pastors then provided me with their direct contact details, and a suitable interview time and location was arranged. This sampling method provided almost all the participants for this study. However, in three instances where I personally knew of potential participants (as they were members of the church I attend), I approached these individuals directly and asked them if they would be willing to be interviewed. When I met with interviewees, I discussed the ethics process with them and made it clear that they could withdraw at any time, during or after the interview. I also had one participant refer his wife to me as a potential participant in the study, and another referral came through a family member who knew a colleague at his workplace who met my criteria.

Participants were sourced entirely from within the Canterbury region. While most came to faith locally, two participants came from another province (three to four hours away). The Canterbury region, as the context for this research, is significant for three reasons. The first of these is the ubiquity of high school-based Christian youth work in the area. The national youth work network “24-7 Youthwork” had its beginnings in Christchurch and is now present in almost every state secondary school in the Canterbury region.<sup>26</sup> This model of youth work places Christian youth workers in local secondary schools for, usually, ten hours a week. While they are not allowed to proselytise or otherwise directly advertise the Christian faith, these roles could potentially serve as a positive influence on young people’s perceptions of Christians. My own work has indicated that this is the case to some degree.<sup>27</sup> I assumed, prior to gathering interview data for my PhD, that some participants would make mention of youth

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas E. Bergler and Dave Rahn followed a similar sampling process in their work, contacting local ministry leaders in order to elicit referrals of recently converted young adults. See “Results of a Collaborative Research Project in Gathering Evangelism Stories,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4:2 (Spring, 2006): 66.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Hibberts, R. Burke Johnson, and Kenneth Hudson, “Common Survey Sampling Techniques,” in *Handbook of Survey Methodology for the Social Sciences*, ed. Lior Gideon (Springer: New York, 2012), 66-68.

<sup>26</sup> <[www.24-7youthwork.org.nz](http://www.24-7youthwork.org.nz)> (8 November, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> David Bosma, “The Role of the 24-7 Youth Worker in the Pre-Conversion Faith Formation of Young People in High Schools,” Honours Dissertation, University of Otago, 2016.

workers in their schools, and was interested to find out exactly how these youth workers were perceived and whether or not this had any association with their own faith journeys.<sup>28</sup>

A second important thing to note regarding the significance of the geographical area selected for this project, is the existence of the annual Easter Camp held at Spencer Park, a large campground on the northern fringe of Christchurch.<sup>29</sup> In recent years as many as 4,500 young people have spent Easter at a camp that includes regular preaching, worship, and opportunities for prayer and discussion. The popularity of the event prompted my own reflection as to how much impact this may have had on young people's conversion journeys. Again, there is also a personal aspect to this factor; as a former youth pastor and current volunteer leader at a local youth group, I have seen many young people significantly impacted by this event. However, I have not always seen this impact last much longer than the length of the Easter weekend. Here I assumed some correlation between Easter Camp and conversion to Christianity in my data set, but I also looked closely for other helping factors, given that I have not seen much evidence for Easter Camp as a stand-alone event providing everything that a young person needs to make such a significant decision. Certainly, the organisers of the camp do not expect it to do this.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, it is important to mention the occurrence of a series of earthquakes that shook the region from September 2010 onwards. The earthquakes, particularly the February 2011 quake that claimed 185 lives and caused untold damage to local infrastructure, were a hugely disruptive event for most of the Canterbury population during this period. While there is a theory that significant events such as this can cause an increase in religious commitment in local populations, the long-term effect on faith is usually minimal.<sup>31</sup> So, I did not expect to hear much mention of these events in my interviews. However, the earthquakes are still a unique and significant event in the recent history of the Canterbury region (and also undoubtedly for many participants), so I was aware that this could be mentioned.

One other more unintentional feature of the sample interviewed in this project is the affiliation of most interviewees with Protestant churches. This is due mainly to the makeup of the youth

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<sup>28</sup> This is something of a personal matter for me given that I have worked as a 24-7 youth worker in two local schools myself in recent years.

<sup>29</sup> <[www.eastercamp.org.nz](http://www.eastercamp.org.nz)> (8 November, 2017.)

<sup>30</sup> This is something that is often made clear in their statements to youth pastors and leaders; the organisers of the camp see their role as supporting youth ministries by providing a fun and inspiring event, rather than effecting conversions entirely independent of any local faith communities. On the organisers' webpage, they state that Easter Camp is one of their events that is "designed to grow local youth communities through a lot of fun, relational time together." <<http://www.cys.org.nz/who-we-are>> (10 February, 2020.)

<sup>31</sup> Chris G. Sibley, Joseph Bulbulia, "Faith after an Earthquake: A Longitudinal Study of Religion and Perceived Health before and after the 2011 Christchurch New Zealand Earthquake," *PLoS ONE* 7:12 (December 2012): 1, <<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0049648>> (8 November, 2017).

pastors who attend the local network meetings. Local Catholic and Protestant expressions of youth work, more by accident than design, do not appear to regularly interact in Canterbury. Catholic schools prefer to host Catholic youth workers rather than affiliating with the 24-7 network. Thus, due to my choice of recruitment method, those I interviewed were largely the product of Protestant expressions of both church and local mission. While this project is not explicitly targeted at Protestant Christianity, this unintentional restriction may mean that the findings are more relevant to this stream of the church.

While the only explicit control applied to participant selection was age (participants were sought between the ages of 18 and 28, in order to keep the range of experiences relatively recent), I hoped that there would be a representative balance of genders and also ethnicities. Canterbury as a region reports a much lower rate of ethnic diversity than New Zealand in general, with a population that was 82.4% European in the 2018 Census.<sup>32</sup> Still, I assumed that in a sample of 32 participants, at least two would be non-European. The table below shows how this bore out in practice. There was also no explicit attempt made to control the denominations from which these participants came. However, here also some diversity emerged, although, as noted above, this was restricted to Protestant denominations.

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<sup>32</sup> Statistics New Zealand, "Ethnic Group (Detailed Total Response - Level 3) by Age and Sex, for the Census Usually Resident Population Count, 2006, 2013, and 2018 Censuses," <<http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLECODE8321#>> (4 January 2020).

**Table 1. Participant Demographic Data<sup>33</sup>**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age at interview</b>	<b>Age at conversion</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Marie	22	18	Anglican	F	NZ European
Lincoln	27	15	Anglican	M	NZ European
Danielle	19	17	Anglican/Independent	F	NZ European
Kylie	20	15	Baptist	F	NZ European
Nathan	20	15	Baptist	M	NZ European
Carla	20	13	Baptist	F	NZ European
Erica	27	17	Baptist	F	NZ European
Helen	22	14	Baptist	F	NZ European
Isaac	23	17	Baptist	M	NZ European
Colin	20	14	Baptist	M	NZ European
Hope	20	15	Independent	F	NZ European
Astrid	20	18	Independent	F	Finnish
Simon	21	17	Independent	M	NZ European
Greta	18	13	Independent	F	NZ European
Maia	21	15	Independent	F	NZ Māori
Michelle	27	18	Pentecostal	F	NZ European
Martin	23	15	Pentecostal	M	NZ European
Sheree	19	16	Pentecostal	F	Melanesian/European
Joel	19	15	Pentecostal	M	NZ European
Jeremy	19	15	Pentecostal	M	NZ European
Wade	23	16	Pentecostal	M	NZ European
Anaru	28	16/18	Pentecostal	M	NZ Māori
Rewai	27	18	Pentecostal	M	NZ Māori
Kahu	24	18	Pentecostal	M	NZ Māori
Ihaia	22	18	Pentecostal	M	NZ Māori
Ripeka	28	18	Pentecostal	F	NZ Māori
Clarke	22	17	Presbyterian	M	NZ European
Matiu	22	19	Presbyterian	M	NZ Māori
Caitlin	21	17	Presbyterian	F	NZ European
Anna	18	13	Presbyterian	F	NZ European
Georgia	23	15	Presbyterian	F	NZ European
Ryan	22	17	Presbyterian	M	NZ European

<sup>33</sup> All of the participants' names in this chart are pseudonyms.

Demographically, my sample was close, but not entirely consonant with the ethnic makeup of the Canterbury region. NZ European and other Caucasian participants made up 78% of my sample, which is close to the 82.4% European figure recorded for Christchurch in the 2018 census. However, I was unable to locate any Pacific Island or Asian participants for my project, despite their relative numbers in the Canterbury region.<sup>34</sup> I did speak with one Pacific Island man who had converted out of a non-Christian family, however, he was too old to take part in my project. One explanation for the absence of Pacific Island voices in this research may lie in the fact that many Pacific Island families have strong Christian roots and an active, churchgoing faith.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, New Zealand Māori are overrepresented in my sample. They make up only 8.5% of the population of Christchurch yet comprise 21% of my sample. The reason for this discrepancy is most likely related to my sampling method. One of the youth directors who found participants for me serves a church with a large number of Māori members. As for Asian New Zealanders, the overall absence is a little harder to explain. This could simply be due to the ethnicities of those youth pastors attending the local network meeting, and in turn, the ethnicities of the young people they are most commonly ministering to. Only one of the youth pastors present at the meeting I attended was an Asian New Zealander, and the church he was employed by was largely NZ European in makeup. Thus, an unfortunate by-product of my choice of sampling method was an omission of Asian voices within the project.

## **Interview Particulars**

Each participant was given an information document and consent form to review and sign before their interview began (see Appendix C). Central to the ethics process was the decision to only interview adults.<sup>36</sup> One downside of this decision is that there is a greater chance for a certain degree of biographical reconstruction to occur given that some participants were asked to discuss events and experiences that happened up to 12 years prior to the interview. This is something that could not be entirely avoided. Yet given the one-on-one nature of this type of research, and the risks associated with interviewing those under 18 about what is a significant and sensitive issue (especially when their parents may not themselves be Christians), I

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<sup>34</sup> As of 2018, Christchurch reported a population containing 11.1% Asian and 3.1% Pacific Island individuals. Statistics New Zealand, "Ethnic Group (Detailed Total Response - Level 3) by Age and Sex, for the Census Usually Resident Population Count, 2006, 2013, and 2018 Censuses," <<http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLECODE8321#>> (4 January 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Social Development, "The Profile of Pacific Peoples in New Zealand," Pasefika Proud Website (September 2016), 6, <[pasefikaproud.co.nz/assets/resources-for-download/pasefikaproudresource-pacific-peoples-paper.pdf](http://pasefikaproud.co.nz/assets/resources-for-download/pasefikaproudresource-pacific-peoples-paper.pdf)> (Mar 28, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Ethics approval was sought and granted by the University of Otago Ethics Committee in December 2016.

decided this age-based delimit was necessary. The young adults I interviewed reflected on experiences that happened between two and 12 years earlier. They were able to give in-depth, reflective answers and maintain a level of maturity and independence that their age and life stage afforded them.

One other consequence of the decision to interview young adults about their conversion experiences in adolescence was that I ended up interviewing two participants who had left the church after their initial conversions and had only recently returned. In both cases these participants had been away from church for approximately two years. Also, in both cases, prior to their decisions to depart, these two described significant spiritual experiences, and also moments in their teenage years where they had clearly committed to their churches and to the Christian faith with enthusiasm. Thus, I include them in the present project as examples of conversions that occurred during adolescence, even if these commitments were put under pressure at a later point in time, to an extent that they felt they could no longer attend church services. In both cases also, these participants returned to church at least in part because they wanted to get their lives back in order, and they saw church as a key element in helping that overall process. Thus, even during their absence from church, there is at least some evidence that their experiences in adolescence had left a lasting impact on these participants' perspectives regarding the Christian faith.

Participants were also verbally informed about how long the interview data would be kept, the use of pseudonyms in the write-up of any findings from their interviews, and their right to request an amendment or removal of their data from the project. Interviews took place at a variety of locations; some were held at local cafes, several at quiet study spaces on the University of Canterbury and Laidlaw College campuses, and some at participants' houses or workplaces.<sup>37</sup> Interviews ranged in length from 12 to 53 minutes. This is somewhat shorter than might be considered a standard-length interview for a qualitative project.<sup>38</sup> However, the explanation for the lengths of these interviews is largely due to the fact that participants were only there to answer one overarching question. Shorter interviews were particularly common

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<sup>37</sup> No interviews took place at my own home, in an effort to minimise any discomfort or unintentional power dynamics that such a location may have created for participants.

<sup>38</sup> For example, in Grace Milton's doctoral thesis, she had one-on-one interviews with 30 participants, and ended up with 35 to 40 hours of audio recordings, suggesting that, on average, each interview lasted for just over an hour. Not one of my interviews took that long. See "Understanding Pentecostal Conversion: An Empirical Study" (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2013), 196-201. British psychologists Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn note that "semi-structured interviews generally last for a considerable time (usually an hour or more) and can become intense and involved, depending on the particular topic." See "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, ed. Jonathan A. Smith (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 35.

amongst participants who identified a fairly punctiliar conversion experience. Details and elaboration were simply not as abundant when conversion experiences were so short.

The interview style used in this project is that of a semi-structured interview. This is an interviewing method where only a small number of open-ended interview questions are asked by the researcher.<sup>39</sup> In my case, I asked only one major question, the answers to which generally provided me with the bulk of the data I was after.<sup>40</sup> My interview sheet also contained a list of follow-up questions which I could ask if participants had not already provided enough detail about particular matters in their initial narratives. (See Appendix B for a list of interview questions.) I generally ended up using some of these follow-up questions in each interview. However, it was important in the interview that I did not interrupt too often with questions or comments of my own and thus unduly bias the direction of individual narrative accounts.<sup>41</sup> The benefit of such an interview style lies mainly in its ability to provide answers that are flexible and elaborate.<sup>42</sup> This is also a common interview style in practical theology,<sup>43</sup> and it fits well with the methodology of this project. A semi-structured interview also provides a different level of access to data than that of a questionnaire or simple written biographical account. Interviews were recorded on my phone and backed up using Google Drive. Brief notes were also taken during the interviews. At a later date, interviews were transcribed with the assistance of online transcription software.<sup>44</sup> The primary type of data gathered in my interviews is narrative. This is common for qualitative researchers.<sup>45</sup> People tend to relay their experiences in narrative form, and a good qualitative researcher views these stories as rich seams of data and lets them emerge as naturally as they can within the restrictions of the interview.

Once the themes within the data set were identified, these were compared with relevant ideas outlined in the earlier literature chapters in this thesis. This the stage of “explanation,” and, as noted above, it constitutes the final step of a phenomenological examination. Chapter Ten of this thesis is where this explanation occurs. Explanation involves discussing data as it relates to existing theoretical perspectives. This stage has a bearing on the way one goes about conducting qualitative research: as has been mentioned in previous chapters, as a researcher I

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<sup>39</sup> Geoff Payne and Judy Payne, *Key Concepts in Social Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 132.

<sup>40</sup> Similarly, British theologian Grace Milton notes that in her own study of conversion in a Pentecostal congregation in Birmingham, she would let participants begin by sharing their story uninterrupted. Once they had finished, she then asked follow-up questions. I used a similar approach in my own interviews. See “Understanding Pentecostal Conversion,” 52-53.

<sup>41</sup> Payne and Payne, *Key Concepts*, 131.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Milton, “Understanding Pentecostal Conversion,” 194-195; Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 61-62.

<sup>44</sup> <<https://transcribe.wreally.com/>> (November 8, 2017.)

<sup>45</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 37.

listened carefully for any evidence of data that related to the themes identified in my theoretical overview. However, at the same time, in coding and analysing the data, I was careful to let the themes take their own shape rather than being shaped by the opinions and theories of other writers. Thus, while I identified similarities between my data and other theories, often the language and the specifics differed.

The next four chapters present the findings from my interviews. Where individuals are quoted, pseudonyms have been used for participant names, as well as the names of any friends, pastors, churches or schools identified in the interview data. The first three findings chapters are structured in such a way as to directly address the sub-questions that frame this project. These chapters directly examine the significance of those three topics as they were revealed in the participants' conversion narratives. Many of the themes that emerged in the interviews naturally fit somewhere beneath these three headings, which supported my assumption that these three topics were relevant to the conversion experiences of young people in Canterbury. However, a fourth chapter was also added, in order to elucidate a key finding that fell outside of these initial questions yet was clearly relevant to many participants. Following this, in Chapter Ten I discuss the implications of these findings as they pertain to both the extant literature and to Christian ministry practice.

## **Chapter Six: Experiences of Church: A Place of Connection**

As noted in Chapter One, one of the three sub-questions that is explored in this thesis is the question of what the relevant or significant aspects of church life that matter to young inquirers might be. In Chapter Two, I presented the opinions of church leaders and the conclusions of researchers about how a church can be a place that young people want to join and remain a part of. In this chapter, I describe what I heard from participants about the churches they attended. These findings thus constitute a second body of data that sits alongside the literature in Chapter Two.

Churches had provided those I interviewed with an opportunity to interact with Christian people and concepts. Thus, church was a place of “connection” as participants developed relationships with friends, youth leaders, and pastors, and developed their understanding of the Christian faith and of God. Youth leaders were admired by participants for their positive traits, and the time these leaders took to intentionally build relationships with participants was noted and appreciated. Friends were key companions on the journey of faith. Much of the teaching of the church that participants absorbed occurred in a relational context such as a small group or via conversation with friends and leaders. Easter Camp, for those participants who mentioned it, intensified these points of connection, as participants spent five days camping with their youth group and hearing Christian teaching twice a day.

### **Connecting with a Warm Community**

The most common social value reported by participants upon attending church or youth group for the first time was the relational warmth and inclusion of those groups. Many participants told stories of how, when they first came along to church, this was something that stood out to them. For example, the relational warmth of Kylie’s church community was particularly apparent to her as she witnessed her small group leader’s baptism, and the support this leader was shown by those present. Upon returning to church after a difficult period in his life, Wade noticed that “the care that they have for a broken person is just amazing.” Clarke described how youth group, even during the years he attended as an avowed atheist, “was a place of belonging, where I felt loved and cared about, because I wasn’t really getting that at home.... It was just a place to belong to, and sit in and be like, ‘There are people here who actually care about me.’” Similarly, Astrid noted that the most appealing aspect of her church and youth group was “the community vibe of it.... Everyone kind of welcomed everyone, so whenever there was a new person, it was something to celebrate. Everyone is welcome and

everyone is loved.” This aspect of unconditional care was mentioned specifically by almost half of those I interviewed and alluded to by several others in their descriptions of church and youth group. Two dynamics were commonly observed by participants as they drew this conclusion. The first was the way in which the leaders or pastors responsible for their faith community welcomed newcomers and spoke to people. Often this was observed in how they showed a genuine interest in the needs and wellbeing of others, went out of their way to welcome newcomers, and appeared to show no preference for particular people. Sometimes it was also noted that these leaders did not appear to show any less care towards those who were poorly behaved or less socially competent. The second dynamic was the mutual support and kindness participants observed between those present.

Two significant types of people were mentioned by participants as playing key roles both in their conversion stories in general, and their interactions with church in particular. One commonly mentioned group of people was pastors and leaders, who were significant for a variety of reasons in how they assisted young people in their conversion journeys. The other group was those close friends who accompanied participants to church events or played a key role in helping them engage with what was going on. Sometimes these relationships extended to include the families of these friends.

### **Pastoral Leaders**

Twenty participants described pastors or other volunteer youth leaders as being key people in their conversion journeys. Often these were leaders appointed to oversee both the programming and the pastoral care aspects of a local church’s youth ministry. Participants described a variety of traits that they saw these leaders exhibiting which they deemed to be helping factors in their own conversion journeys. Key here is that these leaders were perceived to be both admirable and available to participants.

One key factor was that these leaders were often somebody whom the participant deeply admired. For example, Greta noted that when she first attended youth group, she felt personally included and cared for by the leaders there. Over time, she noticed that this care was extended to all newcomers, regardless of their social standing:

I feel like ... there<sup>1</sup> were a lot of, like, people on the outskirts, and they just, like, brought them all in, didn’t care how they were, whether they fit some sort of mould or not, they just kind of ... took them in, and ... treated them like anyone

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<sup>1</sup> In quotations from participants, an ellipsis (three dots) is used to indicate that material has been dropped from what they said. If a participant made a significant pause, I note that within square brackets using the word “pause.”

else, and really, like, showed affection. Like, not just through words, but actions as well.

Greta noted that this admiration of her leaders was a key factor in why she stayed at that church, and also why she eventually left it and moved elsewhere, after the leaders she had admired so much moved on. In addition to the caring, inclusive nature of their leaders, participants also spoke about their leaders' authentic personalities, forgiving natures, teaching skills and ability to discuss ideas, and consistency as traits that they personally admired in their youth leaders and youth pastors.

Pastoral leaders were also mentioned by participants as people who made themselves available, both emotionally and practically, to the young people within their care. Georgia spoke in some detail about both the nature and the impact of her youth leader's availability on her own life. Georgia said her youth leader would

invite me round to her house, and we'd hang out, or we'd go op shopping....<sup>2</sup> I guess it makes me feel included and valued. I think that would be the big thing, is valuing me as an individual and as a person, because, you know, they were willing to sacrifice of themselves, of their comfort or their time, to give to me.

Other participants also described how their leaders made themselves available on a relational level, by showing interest in young people and sharing their time and resources with them. These efforts helped these participants feel more included in a Christian community. Joel mentioned one example of how this had occurred for him:

We had this thing called homies night, this is where you go to one of your youth leaders' homes, and you have youth group there instead.... And we talked about Jesus a little bit, we were boys, we messed around, we played games, and [ate] this giant cookie, that was the size of an oven pan, it was incredible, and it was moments like that and people like that that really kept me in my journey. People that just really cared.... They wanted to know about what was happening in your life. How's your day been, how's your life going, are you OK? Stuff like that. And it was really that, a lot, that kept me going.

This youth leader was obviously comfortable inviting a group of teenage boys over to his house to socialise and spend time together. Alongside this practical step, Joel noted that his small group leaders exhibited genuine care and concern for his wellbeing, and this emotional availability was a key aspect of his continued attendance at youth group.

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<sup>2</sup> In New Zealand, "op shop" is a slang term, a shortened version of "opportunity shop," referring to a place that sells used clothing and other goods.

Similar to Georgia's experience, Joel's example indicates the way in which his youth leaders were both emotionally and practically available to him. In another instance, Ihaia mentioned how both the availability and then the absence of his youth leader were important steps in the formation of this faith. Ihaia, who had built up a strong and trusting relationship with a youth worker over a six-year period, noted that when this youth worker left town, it forced him to think through the implications of this on his own:

It was pretty gutting when he left. I actually learnt a valuable lesson, and that was just around, I'd probably become a bit dependent or, like, relied on him a bit. And he probably didn't even know.... And it was good and bad, I mean, it was bad because, I kind of freaked out, like, "Ah, man, who am I going to have to keep me accountable?" It was a new way of life, I guess.... It actually got me to engage with God a bit more, and for that to be my foundation ... [I realised that] I'd put heaps on a person, who at the end of the day was still a person, you know, was a human. And so that was probably the coolest bit, is that God, like, intervened there, and went, like, "Oh, yeah, [your youth worker's] a pretty cool dude, but I'm not bad either," you know.

Ihaia recognised that his youth worker's consistency and availability, while greatly helping him in his own faith journey, had potentially become something he relied upon too much. The departure of this youth worker led to a deepening of Ihaia's faith, where he began to seriously consider the question of "if God's going to be my foundation, what does that look like?"

Georgia, Joel, and Ihaia have all gone on to volunteer their own time working with children and young people at their respective churches. In fact, nine of the 20 participants who described youth leaders or pastors as significant in their conversion narratives reported volunteering at some kind of Christian children's or youth programme. Three participants who did not describe youth leaders as a key influence also reported volunteering at such programmes, so the presence of an admirable youth leader is clearly not the only factor involved in this decision. However, some participants did make this connection clear. For example, Isaac described how one of the key leaders at Easter Camp, a man Isaac deeply admired, had spoken about his own vow to live a life committed to youth ministry. This had a significant impact on Isaac's own plans for the future:

Basically, I made a promise to myself, the same sort of promise I heard [the camp speaker] make to himself. [It] was that, "God if you're real, and you look after me tonight and show yourself, I'll give my life to young people." And that's what I've done, and that's the promise I've made, and that's the promise I plan to keep.

Ihaia made a similar commitment to working with youth as he reflected on the kindness shown to him by his youth leader:

He would go out of his way for me, he'd pick me up and take me to youth group, and stuff, when I was a young fella.... I guess I'd never really had anyone go the extra mile [before], or it didn't feel like it. Yeah, I mean that's partly why I became a youth worker; it's because I was like, "If I could do something close to that, that'd be awesome, I'd be stoked."

The admiration these participants felt for their youth leaders and the kind of lives they led was a significant influence on their own future plans. This admiration was the result of the deep and significant relationships that some participants formed with youth leaders. This in turn motivated some participants to want to build the same quality of relationships with younger people in their church communities, as Ihaia's words make clear. He wanted to help others as he had been helped.

### **Companions**

Twenty-three participants mentioned individual friends who had played key roles in their conversion journeys. By far the most common role that these friends played was one of accompaniment. By this, I mean that these friends gave participants someone their own age, and usually the same gender, with whom to attend church or youth group, sit alongside, participate in activities, and sometimes discuss the content covered afterwards. While most of these friends were Christians, this was not always so; and, even when this was the case, their primary role in participants' narratives was not that of an evangelist. For example, Caitlin was profoundly impacted by the care and friendship shown to her by a non-Christian boy from school, particularly when she was living at home alone for a period:

So he kept popping in and going, "Hey! Come to youth group!" or "Hey, do this," and I kept rebuking him for a while until I'd finally gone, "I'm really sick of you asking me to come to youth group, I'm just going to come." ... [My friend] had been going to the youth group since it started, which was three years prior.... He knew quite a few people that went to the youth group, so it was like, "Come and meet my friends, meet some people you'll probably like them."

In this example, Caitlin's friend was not a Christian, yet he nonetheless provided Caitlin with an incentive to attend youth group, as well as friend to sit alongside. During her conversion journey, he was a positive support, and although he did briefly show some desire to follow Christ for himself, Caitlin told me that he was not currently a Christian. Yet this did not crush Caitlin's own faith, as her friend's role in her own journey was never as an icon of faith, but rather as one who would accompany her as she encountered church, and eventually Jesus, for herself.

Isaac was another participant who described how friends at church were important companions for him in his conversion journey. His initial engagement with church, like so many participants, was in response to an invitation offered by a friend. In joining youth group, he made new friendships, some of which lasted for years. Isaac greatly valued the loyalty of his Christian friends. For example, he mentioned a conflict that occurred between two of his friends, and the impact that this had on him:

Me and Chris weren't friends [at the time], and basically Chris said to Regan, "You choose him or me." And Regan chose me, over someone he's known his whole life. And I still can't thank him [enough] for that. Like, I still can't get over that he actually saw potential in me and actually gave up on one of his potential best friends to see me come to faith.<sup>3</sup>

Isaac was impacted by what he felt was a selfless act on his friend Regan's behalf, refusing to be manipulated by Chris and instead choosing to continue his friendship with Isaac. Isaac was one of two participants who also mentioned the positive impact his friends' families had on his faith journey: specifically, how both Regan's and Chris' parents provided encouragement and mentoring for him.

## **Connecting with Christian Teaching**

While most participants spoke in some detail about how the teaching of the church made an impact on them, there was a breadth of reasons why this was the case. For seven participants, it was hearing about the ways in which faith could make a practical difference in one's life in ways that were particularly important. For example, Georgia, who had grown up attending a Christian school despite her parents' lack of Christian faith, particularly appreciated the way her youth group leaders taught about faith's practical implications, something she saw as absent from her lessons at school:

Hearing about who Jesus was and what he did that we can apply and find in our own lives.... Belonging, identity, relationship, that sort of thing.... Growing up I always thought like, Christianity, you know, you learn about the Ten Commandments, that kind of stuff, and you kind of think, "Oh, it's just a bunch of rules," ... until it was started to apply to my own life.

Other participants also spoke about various insights they gathered from the teaching at church and youth group. However, almost every participant had a slightly different story to tell about which insight mattered most to them. Four participants were encouraged to learn that God

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<sup>3</sup> The names of Isaac's friends in this quotation have also been changed.

could be related to on a personal level. Sheree described why this was important for her, and a particular technique she discovered to help her connect with God:

I was struggling back then as well, like, “How do I connect with this person that isn’t around, like, is like the wind? How do you connect with someone like that?” And at the time for me it was writing. So, I would just write to him, and it wouldn’t be until, like, the next day or the next week, maybe even a month until, I would keep writing the same thing until I would finally get an answer or just something that would provide me with what I needed, if that makes sense.

Another three participants felt inspired to hear that Jesus could provide freedom and healing from past hurts and dysfunctional behaviours. Two participants were found it encouraging to hear personally relevant mental health topics discussed at youth group. Other theological insights that participants mentioned as significant in their early experiences of Christian teaching include understanding the suffering that Jesus experienced, learning about life after death, exploring the concept of God as a Father, and understanding that the gospel was the action of a God who wanted an intimate relationship with people.

Six participants mentioned their initial inability to connect with the teaching provided at church and youth group. For some, this was because they actively chose to ignore what was being shared. Jeremy was one of four participants who recalled a period where this was the case:

I didn’t pay any attention to [the teaching]. I was the kid who sort of just sat in the back during worship, didn’t sing along, and I can’t honestly even remember engaging with any of the sermons. I’d sort of just chat during them, be a bit of a nuisance.

Danielle, Erica, and Simon also described periods where they actively ignored the teaching at youth group, with Erica describing how, when she first began attending youth group, “I didn’t really appreciate at first ... the study side of things, I ... rolled my eyes, and it wasn’t a big deal [to me].” Other participants also mentioned their negative responses to what was being taught, but more from the basis of their own inability to understand. Martin found it hard to recall much of what was said at church in his first few months there:

Maybe I had some sort of learning disability or something, I don’t know. But I always remember struggling to listen, struggling to get something out of ... what the preacher was saying. Not that he wouldn’t have been preaching well, because I think he was quite a good preacher once I actually [began to understand], it was kind of like I had to learn how to do church.

Martin was not the only participant who associated a need to “learn how to do church” with his initial inability to sit and listening to a sermon. Kylie noted that she was only able to connect with what was preached at her church after she attended an introductory course run by her youth pastor. Before this, she “followed along as much as [she] could, but at the same time it was kind of confusing.” While only a minority of participants made these kinds of comments, where they openly admitted their inability to comprehend the content of the church service (whether it be the preaching or something else), I suspect that this was a more common experience, particularly among those participants such as Martin and Kylie for whom most elements of a Christian worship service were relatively foreign to begin with. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, many of those I interviewed commented on aspects of Christian practice that they found strange and unfamiliar. It stands to reason, therefore, that these participants had to then become familiar with these practices (i.e., “learn how to do church”) before they could engage with them fully. This is important because it indicates an experience that is common to previously unchurched newcomers, in that they had to slowly learn how to engage with Christian practices before they could fully apprehend their content and purpose.

### **Learning to Hope**

While several relevant topics were mentioned by participants as they discussed the things taught at church and youth group and the meaning they took from those, one theme that unites some of these insights is the way in which they provided hope for participants. This hope is not necessarily eschatological in nature (as is the case in a traditionally theological sense of the word), rather it is the more general sense that positive things lie ahead. At the very least it is a sense of inspiration that results from an insight. For example, after Astrid learned that God loved her and was interested in a personal relationship with her, she was open to hearing from her youth leaders and friends about how she could begin to practise faith in her own life. Astrid was only in New Zealand on a student visa at the time and was worrying about whether she should try and stay a while longer or return to her home country. She describes how a message at Easter Camp provided reassurance:

[The preacher said,] “There are so many people that don’t know God. And they’ve never known him. But he has always loved you, he knows you, and he’s always walked with you.” And it just made a lot of sense in my situation. And they went into specific things as well ... [such as] anxiety ... fears about the future, because it was Year 13<sup>4</sup> and I was so scared about what I was going to do, was I going to

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<sup>4</sup> Year 13 is the last year of High School in New Zealand.

go back [home], was I going to stay here, what I was going to do. So that ... really spoke to me in that situation.

Astrid was encouraged to hear about God's love and personal interest in her life, and this message changed her perspective regarding her future choices. The message provided hope by helping Astrid realise that God "loved ... [knew] ... and walked with" her, quelling her fears about the immediate future.

Matiu and Wade both found hope in the belief that they were good enough to become Christians. Wade noted that, due to his struggles with anger as a teenager, he believed that "I can't become a Christian, I'm just an angry kid. I'm just an angry boy who, [when] something goes wrong ... I'm just going to nut out, I can't be a Christian." Yet a message on anger, and the testimony of one of the pastors who himself had grown up in a secular home, helped Wade change his mind. For Wade, the thought that he could become a Christian provided hope, particularly via the testimonies of particular leaders, which helped Wade realise that "man, with what I'm doing at this age, and this [speaker] was doing [the same things] at this age, but look at him now, he's doing amazing. Like ... you know, you can change." Hope for Wade was the realisation that he could change and that the Christian faith could include him and assist him in that change. Similarly, after Matiu learned that he could have Jesus in his heart and responded to an altar call, he felt that for him this was "beginning the process of believing the impossible." During his adolescence, Matiu described how he "struggled a lot with identity, who I was, where I was going, that type of stuff. And it really got to the point where I was quite heavily depressed, I had no confidence." While a more positive mindset took longer to develop, the content of the message and his response to it was an indication of the hope that he had begun to feel: that Jesus could offer him a way out of his distress. Two other participants also described how Christian teaching provided them hope, and in a similar way to Matiu, Wade, and Astrid, it was a hope that Jesus could do something that would alleviate their present mental distress, and that they could find a future where their present problems were no longer an issue.

### **Those Doing the Teaching**

Experiences of Christian teaching, and its effectiveness or otherwise, were sometimes closely associated with whoever was delivering the content. In some cases, participants spoke about the ways their youth leaders provided good, practical teaching and advice about spiritual practices. While this person may not have been the one they had their closest relationship with, the presence of someone who explained things in a practical, relatable way was valued.

For example, after mentioning a leader who gave her significant emotional support, Carla spoke about the help she received from the pastors who led her youth group:

I probably didn't tell them a lot of the personal stuff that was going on, but I think they were really instrumental in my journey because I learnt a lot from them about how I could continue my relationship with God. So, learning about ... how to read the Bible, how to pray, and all of that kind of spiritual stuff.

Other participants also mentioned the teaching they received from their youth pastors. While this person may have not been a primary support as these young people explored the Christian faith, the content and style of the youth pastors' teaching were appreciated. Conversely, in two cases, participants spoke about how they disagreed with the direction their key leader was taking with either the structure of a youth group or its teaching. Because, for whatever reason, they were not particularly enamoured by their youth leader at that point in time, their response when that individual stood up to deliver a message was more negative than it otherwise might have been.

Some participants appreciated their Christian friends because of the knowledge they had of the faith and its various aspects. Nathan mentioned the benefits he gained from being a part of a small group where most of the other members had grown up in the church and were comfortable talking about faith. Hearing his friends' experiences and perspectives enhanced Nathan's learning and prompted his own desire to encounter God for himself. Others found their Christian friends' knowledge about the Bible helpful, particularly when they contrasted it with their own assumptions and lack of knowledge about God. Isaac, when describing the Christian friends whose support he had appreciated, mentioned that he valued one of his friends for helping him "with the theological side of things, and ... always challenging me on stuff, and helping me understand context in the Bible." Isaac had other Christian friends who offered more relational and empathetic forms of support; he valued this friend for the opposite reason, in that here was someone "very intellectual ... but he was one of the best people to actually grow me" in how he helped Isaac think about his faith.

### **Christian Teaching Made More Accessible**

A few participants described church activities that created a social space for them to meet new people, engage in fun activities, and then encounter faith on a level that did not feel too threatening or strange. Others spoke about enjoying a worship service where the music was in a modern style, which made it easier for them to engage with. Caitlin and Greta both described periods earlier in their childhood where they had briefly attended older, more

traditional churches and struggled to enjoy the service format and content. Yet, in both cases, these women recalled their surprise and delight when they attended more modern, contemporary expressions of Christian worship where it was much clearer to them what everything was all about, and they felt as though the services had been formatted with their needs in mind. Greta noted that “it wasn’t until I actually started going to ... [a] more modern church, that I actually started really getting into it.” Caitlin was surprised by how accessible her new church was, compared to what she remembered from the church she had briefly been taken to as a child:

I first found it a bit strange just going off what I could remember from childhood, [which was] more ... sombre and quiet. [My new church] was a bit different from what I could remember. So, having it more targeted towards me was quite interesting and I found it something different but also something that everyone could engage with well in the discussions.

Caitlin felt as though things at this second church were better designed to appeal to her as a teenager, increasing her desire to engage further with what was on offer there. Four other participants made similar points, talking about how the culture of their churches helped make youth group and church a more casual and accessible space for them and thus aided their ability to comprehend and consider the taught content.

One church activity that was mentioned as helpful by eight of those I interviewed was the existence of a discussion group, or “small group,” that gave individuals the chance to explore faith in a smaller, more intimate setting. For those participants who mentioned the value of these groups, the primary reason seemed to be that it was a space where their questions could be asked, and practical and relevant ideas could be discussed. For example, Anna noted that the discussion group she was a part of “was cool because ... I learnt more in depth.... We were talking through some of the stories in [the Bible] ... because I tried to read it myself and some of the stories just confused me.... [My youth pastor] was really good at talking things through.” Attending this group for several years helped Anna understand the Christian faith. Discussion groups also provided opportunity for relationships with friends to deepen and often became a catalyst for social gatherings outside of scheduled youth group times. Small groups, when they were mentioned, were seen as a positive activity that created a regular opportunity for social interaction and an introduction to some of the basic aspects of the Christian faith. This combination of social connection and a basic introduction to Christianity also occurred for participants who attended Easter Camp, albeit on a more intensive level.

## Easter Camp: Intensive Connection

Sixteen participants mentioned Canterbury Youth Services' annual Easter Camp in their conversion narratives.<sup>5</sup> Easter Camp provided an environment that often served to demonstrate the legitimacy of Christian faith and also gave participants an extended opportunity to positively interact with their youth groups and youth leaders. In some cases, this dual effect of legitimating environment and extended interaction was a major catalyst for the growth of a young person's faith. Hope explained why the Camp helped with the development of her faith:

Easter Camp's just such a big event ... and it's really cool having just so many ... Christians there with the same purpose. Like, the Big Top meetings are always awesome, you've got these massive speakers, and the worship's always really good.... I think possibly even just ... seeing the amount of people that were really dedicated to it made quite a difference.

Key aspects of the Camp's impact on participants' conversion journeys appear to be its:

1. Intensity. Matters of faith and spiritual experience were explored intensively and frequently across the long weekend.
2. Focus. Camp often reminded participants about their faith decisions and challenged them to continue pursuing faith.
3. Relationships. Length and quality of time spent with youth group friends and leaders created more opportunities for participants to relate and be vulnerable and honest.
4. Altar Calls. Camp speakers often finished their messages with an opportunity for young people to publicly commit to faith or indicate their desire to be prayed for, an offer which was taken up by some of those I interviewed.

Various participants commented positively on these aspects.

Regarding the intensity of Easter Camp, participants described how the camp provided multiple opportunities for spiritual experiences, group prayer, and prolonged worship. This then created an experience of spiritual intensity that was tangible and profound:

It was really awesome, like I had some really cool encounters with God.... I've never really had any words or visions or anything like that, but I could kind of just tell that there was the presence and like, we had a couple of nights where, classic Easter Camp, they were like, "Just sit there and experience the Holy Spirit," and just that kind of stuff. —Danielle.

So it was during one of the big meetings. It had just come to the end of it, and ... everyone was all praying for each other, and [I] just felt this, like, crazy presence,

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<sup>5</sup> I did not ask participants about Easter Camp in the interviews other than to pose follow-up questions if they mentioned it in their initial narratives. So, it is possible that more participants also attended the camp, but did not deem it to have played a significant role in their conversion journeys. The fact that half of those I interviewed did mention the camp as significant suggests it still plays an important role in the regular life of youth ministries in Canterbury.

and just, like, burst into tears, and there was a whole group of us just in a circle basically just crying. —Jeremy.

Thirteen participants gave similar accounts, describing Easter Camp as a place of spiritual intensity, particularly within the context of the twice-daily worship meetings. There, heightened spiritual experiences occurred for the first time for several of those I interviewed. I will discuss this in greater depth in Chapters Seven and Nine.

Ten participants appreciated how Easter Camp provided a place where the Christian faith was focused on exclusively and intensively. This was contrasted by some with their daily lives outside of camp, and they appreciated camp for the way it gave them the opportunity to consider faith in such an in-depth way. Danielle noted:

I love Easter Camp, it's the best time ... because I had five days away from ... my boyfriend at the time, I was kind of like, "OK, this is what my life could have been like if I'd kind of stayed along what I thought I should have." And it was, like, a bit of a reality shock, but then of course, [I] went back after Easter Camp and everything fell back into routine.

Danielle's "routine" outside of camp consisted of a much lower level of engagement with Christian things, including a boyfriend who wasn't a Christian. Other participants described how the messages at camp eventually got through to them, even if they had not paid much attention at first. Anna noted how, for her,

[During] the first couple of nights, I was just like "Yeah, here to hang out with my friends," not really taking in ... any of the stories.... [On a later night] I was kind of like, "Wait, these sound pretty awesome. This sounds like a pretty cool person, this God person."

Similarly, Isaac noted that he spent most of his first camp "hanging out on the fringe" with a friend who was also relatively uninterested in the Christian faith. Yet, on the final night of the weekend, he recalled thinking: "I'm missing something. There's something here that I can't capture. What is it?" In response to this thought, Isaac stood alongside a Christian friend and participated more actively in the sung worship. He noted that at the time "I was like, 'I feel something. I feel something different.'" However, he felt as though it was "too late" at this point in the camp for him to respond to any altar call, although he was unable to provide a clear reason for why he felt this way. Isaac expressed regret that he had spent so much of the first part of the camp "messing around." At the end of that year's camp, Isaac resolved to return the following year with a more focused attitude, which he did end up doing.

Easter Camp also provided space for more intensive and intentional times of social connection. Five participants described how their relationships with other youth group members and youth leaders deepened during the weekend. Jeremy was able to be honest with friends and leaders about his past mistakes. Kylie built stronger connections with her youth leaders and valued the time spent in discussion with them. Astrid's youth leaders took the time to help her understand what her commitment meant, as well as describing to her ways that she could pray. Danielle noted how the time away from her boyfriend gave her the freedom to build stronger friendships with other young people and leaders, which in turn increased her self-confidence. Danielle described how a friend at the camp commented on this change positively: "she said to me that she could see that I ... totally came out of my shell [at Easter Camp]." Wade noted how he had initially felt a sense of inferiority when he compared himself with some of the young people in his youth group who had come from more privileged backgrounds. Yet his attitude changed across the course of the weekend, particularly after his own spiritual experiences. He became a lot friendlier and joined in on group activities, realising that he did not need to feel inferior.

Altar calls, where participants were given an opportunity to publicly signal their desire to commit to faith or receive prayer, were mentioned by six participants as an important aspect of the Easter Camp experience. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, while these responses were not always indicative of a first, once-and-for-all decision, they were still commented on positively by participants and viewed as important aspects of their conversion journey. For example, Matiu recalled how at age sixteen he responded to an altar call at Easter Camp. He recounted that the preacher said,

"If there's anyone out there that wants to invite Jesus into their heart, stay behind and a youth leader will come and pray with you," and that's what I did. So I stayed behind and a youth leader came and prayed, and I do remember feeling at that moment like, I felt loved at that moment. I felt calm and I felt like, it almost felt like ... for me to have at that time accepted Jesus into my heart was me beginning the process of believing the impossible.

This was only the beginning of Matiu's conversion journey, and it was not for another two years before he was completely committed to faith. In fact, each of the six participants who described responding to altar calls at Easter Camp took some time after this moment before they were willing to describe themselves as Christians.

Five participants also commented on the numerical size of Easter Camp. However, this was only perceived positively by some. For example, Sheree appreciated the fact that during one of her first spiritual experiences, there were so many others around her "doing the same thing

in their own way.” This was during one of the worship meetings at Easter Camp. However, for Caitlin, the size of Easter Camp was off-putting for her, and this perception was reinforced when she got herself lost and separated from her youth group during the first evening meeting. Kylie questioned, after her first Easter Camp, whether her spiritual experiences during the worship sessions there were in fact the product of an encounter with God, or “was I just involved in the moment of there being so many people?” These participants identified some of the limitations due to the size of this religious event.

For many participants who mentioned Easter Camp, they contextualized or nuanced its impact by commenting on other factors important in their conversion journeys. For example, although Ihaia made a conversion decision at Easter Camp and had a profound spiritual experience there, he started his narrative by talking about an important youth worker in his life, and also the significant impact his local youth group had on him. Similarly, Sheree, who recounted a significant spiritual encounter and growth of faith at Easter Camp, only mentioned this in detail after first talking about a church programme she attended as a child, being prayed for by her youth pastor, and her consistent attendance at youth group in the months prior to Easter. As they reflected back on it, many participants were well aware of Easter Camp’s limitations for furthering faith even as they spoke of its benefits. They were also able to identify other helping factors outside of the camp environment.

Easter Camp was not the only Christian camp mentioned by participants, although it was by far the most commonly referred to. Other camps were also noted, and these often had similar effects as Easter Camp on participants’ conversion journeys, namely that they provided significant time and space for faith to be explored and expressed. In addition, these events actively consolidated participants’ relationships within their churches and youth groups. Sometimes a camp acted as the first opportunity a young person had to deepen their relationships with friends, leaders, or God. This was commonly the case for those participants who had not spent a lot of time engaging with a Christian community prior to attending camp. But whether it was one of their first experiences of Christian community or not, the general effect of a camp on participants’ conversion journeys overall was one of intensity. The prolonged exposure to Christian people and content over a period of a few days enabled a much more rapid and in-depth engagement with the faith.

## **Conclusion**

For those I interviewed, church, and the youth groups sponsored by churches, became places where relationships with Christians deepened, understanding of Christian concepts was

extended, and opportunities to engage in more intensive spiritual experience were provided. In this threefold way church and youth group were places of connection and interaction for those on the conversion journey. Yet this focus on church is only a part of the story, and a part that pays particular attention to the interactions that occur between people in this context. Yet those I interviewed also interacted with God. Participants described significant spiritual experiences, moments where they became aware of God's presence and action in their reality. As noted above, Easter Camp was one environment where a number of those I interviewed experienced God in meaningful ways. Spiritual experiences also provided a means of advancing the conversion process, as well as having other longer-term consequences, and the next chapter will examine this dynamic at length.

## Chapter Seven: Findings on Spiritual Experience and Conversion

This chapter will report on participants' accounts of significant spiritual experiences that happened during the conversion process. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the nature of these experiences, before turning to the primary focus of the chapter, namely the consequences of these experiences in the lives of those who reported them. This addresses the second sub-question that frames this project, the consideration of the consequences of spiritual experiences in conversion. As outlined in Chapter Three, I am using David Hay's definition of spiritual experiences as "special occasions where we become directly and vividly aware of the presence of God."<sup>1</sup> In order to elicit the data relevant to this topic, I asked participants when they first became aware of the presence of God, rather than directly referring to "spiritual experiences." Answers to this question form most of the data presented in this chapter, although in some cases participants said much about their spiritual encounters when they initially narrated their conversion experiences. While this chapter is the primary place where spiritual experiences are discussed, Chapter Nine contains a section on how "finding evidence of the miraculous" (which is itself an example of a spiritual experience) was a significant catalyst in some conversion journeys.

### The Nature of Spiritual Experiences

While the body of this chapter will explore the consequences of spiritual experiences for participants, a brief look at the variety of experiences reported is useful for contextualising these consequences. These experiences often contained multiple dimensions. In total, there were four common aspects of spiritual experience:

1. A tangible sensation of some sort, either:
  - a. During sung worship
  - b. During prayer, preaching, or some other spiritual practice
2. An unexpected emotion or emotional response such as crying
3. An experience of healing, coincidence, or specific answer to prayer
4. An experience of intimate communication with God

Almost all participants described spiritual experiences that were a feature of their conversion journeys.

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<sup>1</sup> David Hay, "Experience, Religious," *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 295.

## Tangible Sensation

Fourteen participants described having some sort of tangible sensation during a spiritual experience. For example, Clarke recalled a moment in sung worship where he became aware of an unfamiliar new sensation:

The experience I had felt like being in a shower, but the shower was love rather than water. It's probably the best way to describe it. I can't remember what was being said, but it was almost like the words of the song were beyond ... generic words that someone had written someday because they liked the sound of them, but [were instead] God speaking directly to me.

Clarke recounted a sensation, and an experience of intimate communication with God, that occurred in the context of sung worship. Here there can be seen a combination of common elements of spiritual experience. Seven participants (including Clarke) spoke about experiencing God during sung worship.<sup>2</sup> For Greta, this began happening early in her journey, within the first few weeks of her attending youth group. Greta described the sensations she continues to feel when she senses God's presence in sung worship: "Usually just my heart rate skyrockets, and I just shiver, and I feel really intense, and it's hard to explain.... It's not very methodical, it just happens."

Kylie described how she found herself crying as she sensed God's nearness in sung worship: "I think because I'm such a music person, hearing the worship, I remember just standing there crying, like, not knowing why I was crying." This combination of experiences, where individuals cried as they sensed the presence of God during sung worship, was also present in Martin and Maia's experiences, and like Kylie, these two participants were not entirely aware of exactly why they were crying. Martin noted that, regarding his experience of crying during sung worship, "I just didn't know what to make of it." Maia made a similar assessment when, during her first worship service, she "burst out crying ... [and] I didn't even know why."

Other participants experienced tangible sensations in spiritual experiences that occurred outside of the context of sung worship. However, these generally occurred in the context of

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<sup>2</sup> Quite a few participants simply used the term "worship" when referring more specifically to praise songs. This collapsing of the term is relatively common amongst evangelical churches and youth groups in New Zealand where live contemporary praise music comprises the vast majority of the time in congregational worship services, and thus exercises a fairly strong influence over individuals' imaginations when they begin to think or talk about "worship." Ihaia's quote below is one example of this. For a sustained treatment of the subject of worship in one large New Zealand evangelical denomination, with a chapter devoted to the role of music and singing within this overall experience, see Dale Campbell, "Gathering in Aotearoa: Understanding the Collective Spirituality of Baptists in New Zealand" (Master of Applied Theology Thesis, Carey Graduate School, 2017), 16-22, 52-61.

spiritual practice; very rarely did these things happen at other times. For example, Marie, while being prayed for by an Anglican bishop, described how it made her feel:

The bishop comes and, puts her hands on your head or something. And [my brother] had his hand on my shoulder, and, I just felt this profound ... it just felt like with the laying of hands on me it was just like the Holy Spirit was coming on in. And my heart was beating a million miles a minute.... I was kind of like, "Ooh, what is this feeling? I don't really know what this is!" And it was kind of in tune with the fact that I was being prayed for at the time.

Descriptions of sensation as a spiritual experience were common and wide-ranging amongst participants. A variety of terms were employed to describe these sensations, such as tingles, a stirring in one's heart, or a sense that someone was nearby. Two participants struggled to find words to describe their sensation.

### **Unexpected Emotional Response**

Sixteen participants recounted unexpected emotions or emotional responses during spiritual experiences. One had begun to spontaneously laugh midway through the response time at a camp meeting; another described a strong sense of peace that accompanied her conversion decision. Ten participants described crying in response to God's presence. This crying often took participants by complete surprise and was not preceded by any obvious experience of grief, sadness, or any other usual emotion that might drive one to tears. Carla described such an experience:

At the start I didn't really feel like I was crying for a particular reason. It just felt like, in a way, like it was just a response that my body was having to something that wasn't really part of my control. And then I think later on I started, I kind of kept crying because I was like, realising what Jesus had done for me and it just kept sinking into me, that God wanted a relationship with me.... That's probably why I kept on crying, but at the start it was really just a reaction that my body was having rather than me crying for a reason or feeling anything in particular.

Carla's spiritual experience appears to have initially been an unexpected emotional response (crying) but eventually it led to a theological reflection. Carla felt as though initially the tears were "a response ... to something that wasn't really part of [her] control." Only after a time did she begin to think about God's desire to have a relationship with her, which evoked even more tears. While Carla had heard about God's desire for relationship with her earlier in the night during a preached message, it took some time for the idea of this to impact her emotionally. In some ways, her realisation is both a new experience (theological revelation),

and a consequence of spiritual experience (crying), as it was the latter experience that somehow allowed this new truth to reach Carla on an emotional level.

### **Healing, Coincidence, or Answer to Prayer**

Experiences of healing, coincidence, or a specific answer to prayer capture a diverse set of spiritual experiences described by participants. Five conversion narratives contained some experience of healing. For Joel, he associated his spiritual experience closely with being healed:

I was ... introduced with God, and I was still fairly familiarised with him, but I was just kind of sketchy and getting used to it all. And so this [youth leader] kind of sat me down and said, "Hey, I notice that your ankle's looking real rough, I saw you roll it, is it OK if I pray for you?" And I was like, "Yeah, all right." And so, he ended up praying for my ankle, and about half way through his prayer my ankle gave, like, three clicks, and I was like, "Whoah, dude, stop." And he was like "What?" And I was like, "It feels better. Honestly, it feels, I feel no pain at all there." And I challenged him to a running race, and we ran. I won, it was good.

Another five participants described observing a specific answer to prayer other than a healing, as was the case for Nathan:

My youth leader, I told him I was praying about something, someone very close to me was locked up in prison, and I told him that I was praying for him to get out early. And he pretty much told me, "Oh, prayer doesn't really work like that," but a week later I found out he was getting released for good behaviour. So that for me was the wakeup call, like, "Oh, there's actually something a lot bigger going on here maybe."

Nathan, like Joel, began to trust in God on a deeper level following his experience of seeing his prayer answered — and this despite his youth leader's cautionary comment. Similarly, for the three participants who mentioned surprising coincidences as examples of meaningful spiritual experiences (such as opening the Bible to read a particularly relevant verse in a time of distress or a key person appearing at a critical moment), a consequence of their experiences was increased trust in God. This set of experiences seemed to deepen faith and provide participants with a way of putting some tangible experience and reality behind the vague or unsubstantiated ideas about God that they had held previously.

### **Intimate Communication with God**

Another broad category of spiritual experiences within my sample comprises those moments where participants experienced some sort of intimate communication with God. Isaac

experienced this type of situation when he received a vision of Christ on the cross at Easter Camp:

I couldn't talk to anyone for, like, 40 minutes, I just had these random visions and pictures in my head, and words. And the sentence came through my head, "Why have you forsaken me?" This vision, this picture of this hilltop with the cross and Jesus hanging down with his head down, and it was, like, cloudy behind him.... Then all of a sudden Jesus threw his head up and this light just burst through the clouds, and it's like the Spirit came up, and [I realised] that he did die for us, and there was a light, and we are that light.

This is another example of a spiritual experience that was multi-faceted. The major element of this encounter occurred as Isaac saw a vision of Christ on the cross. This is a form of intimate communication with God, in which the recipient receives a personal message that is significant for them. However, this was precipitated by an unexpected emotional response, in which Isaac was "on the ground in tears." This was all a part of the same event for Isaac yet contained the two phases or dimensions that were common amongst those I interviewed.

Other participants experienced communication with God on a more intuitive level. Kahu noted that when he first attended church, "I felt like, even though there was heaps of people around, it was still just me there." Ripeka recounted an almost identical situation: "When I first went, it was like, he was talking to me. Like, I felt like there was no-one else in the room, and I just felt like he was just directly talking to me, and it was like, real like, powerful." In these examples, as well as several others, communication with God was described as an intimate experience. This sense of intimacy often came out of the experience of one's own vulnerabilities and weaknesses being exposed before God. For example, when Wade's youth worker complimented Wade on his tender care for family members, Wade was undone partly by his realisation that his youth worker's words indicated that God knew and cared about his inner torment and worries about his grandfather. Others also spoke about this aspect of intimacy. Alongside feeling God's love, the experience of God knowing and caring about one's pain, weaknesses, and inadequacies (particularly if these were things that the individual was reticent about sharing with others) was an important spiritual intimacy experienced by some participants.

## **The Consequences of Spiritual Experience**

I have divided the consequences of these various spiritual experiences for participants into three categories: social/practical, spiritual/theological, and emotional/psychological. Each will be examined in turn. However, it is important to note that the consequences of spiritual

experiences, like the spiritual experiences themselves, frequently fall into more than one category. Thus, in some cases below, singular consequences (such as choosing to forgive one's father) were assigned to multiple categories (as such a choice impacted both the emotional and the practical realities of the participants who made this choice.) Also, similar experiences can have markedly different effects on different people. However, despite these limitations in classifying the consequences of spiritual experience, the categories are helpful because they show the range of responses by participants in this study.

### **Social and Practical Consequences of Spiritual Experience**

The most commonly reported social consequence of a spiritual experience was that, from that point on, they increased their involvement in their local church or youth group.<sup>3</sup> For most, they had already been attending to some degree, yet, as Clarke recounted, he chose to take part in more Christian events after his encounter with God: "After the experience in Year 13, I started going to [another youth group], started going to night church, kept going to [my church's youth group] ... and started youth leading the intermediates." Eleven participants described increased involvement in church and youth group as a practical consequence of their spiritual experiences. Generally this was a simple increase in participation within a group to which they already belonged. Sometimes this increase in group participation was accompanied by an increase in private spiritual practices. For example, after Carla had a significant spiritual experience at Easter Camp, she engaged regularly with the various events her church offered, as well as increasing her personal Bible reading and prayer:

So after camp I went to youth group every single week, I went to the night services that they were having, and I kept having ... similar experiences where I would be, like, worshipping and then I would feel, I would cry or I would feel really happy or, like, I kept having, and not just at church as well ... [but also] when I was at home reading my Bible, like, I was having times where, like, I felt like God was speaking directly to me about a situation through Scripture or when I was praying, like, I felt a real sense of peace, or a sense of joy.... I just kept going to church, kept on going to youth group, and really kept on reading my Bible and praying as well.

The enthusiasm Carla felt after her experience meant that she was willing to take on a number of new practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to this, in Chapter Nine I discuss how various experiences (broader than purely "spiritual" experiences) caused participants to then increase their "pursuit" of the Christian faith (broader than simply increased group attendance, but nonetheless containing this). Thus, this section is kept intentionally short as much of the data that supports this finding can be found in Chapter Nine.

Significant relational change occurred for five participants. Caitlin actively worked to restore a broken relationship with her father following her spiritual experience, in which she heard God telling her to do just that. Anaru also worked to restore broken relationships following his experience of healing. So too did Rewai, which he recounted in some detail:

I rang my father, too, not long after that.... And I told him I forgive him.... I said, "I'm sorry Dad, I'm sorry Dad for holding unforgiveness towards you." And he's on the other side of the phone like, "What are you on about, son?" I said, "I love you, Dad, and I know we haven't spoken in years, I love you and I forgive you and I hope you can forgive me." And he gave me a couple of sniffs. So, I think he was crying.... And I said, "I forgive you Dad, and I love you." I said, "I hope you can forgive me." And he said, "No-one's ever said that to me before, son."

Rewai's childhood memories of his father were deeply traumatic, and his ability to forgive the hurt he had suffered at his father's hands was a significant outcome of his early encounters with God.<sup>4</sup>

Participants also described various practical changes that resulted from their spiritual experiences. Rewai described how, following his experiences, he stopped indulging in a series of negative social behaviours: "Drinking dropped off me, sleeping with other girls dropped off me, going clubbing, that all dropped off." Yet for some reason Rewai found it much more difficult to stop smoking marijuana; this was not a behaviour that simply "dropped off" following his encounter with God. Rewai was aware that a part of the reason why it was harder for him to stop smoking marijuana was the fact that he was living in a "drug house" where the drug was regularly smoked. The resolution to his struggle came via another spiritual experience, one where Rewai experienced an answer to prayer:

So I said to the Lord, "I can't [quit smoking marijuana] here Lord, temptation is too big, can you open a door?" ... I started fasting and praying, and out of nowhere this guy came up to me at church and said, "I feel like the Lord's told me to come talk to you, he's saying for you to move in with us."

Rewai ended up moving in with this family from his church in order to isolate himself from the temptation to smoke marijuana, and he intentionally committed more of his time to his new church community in order to expose himself to a different set of principles and behaviours.

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<sup>4</sup> Kahu and Matiu also spoke of how they had to work hard to forgive those who had hurt them in the past — they knew forgiveness was something God required of them, and they wanted to do it for themselves, but time and effort were required in order to work this new virtue out. However, their aspirations to forgive were not so much the direct result of a spiritual experience as they were a longer-term consequence of their overall conversion journeys, which each included spiritual experiences in the beginning stages.

Rewai was the only participant who said that negative habits simply “dropped off” following a spiritual experience, although some others discussed ways in which their mental and behavioural patterns appeared to change with relatively little effort exerted on their part. Like Rewai, these participants still chose, following these events, to engage more regularly in church and in Christian practices, which then reinforced and furthered the impact of these initial experiences. Others also mentioned how their new lifestyles and ideals required effort to pursue.

### **Spiritual and Theological Consequences of Spiritual Experience**

One spiritual consequence of spiritual experience for participants was an increased level of faith in God.<sup>5</sup> As already noted, this was at times a movement from no faith to a confidence that God was real and active. One participant who clearly recounted this consequence was Jeremy. He first had a tangible spiritual experience during an Easter Camp meeting:

I went to Easter Camp and actually, like, experienced God for the first time, and, yeah, sort of thought, “OK, maybe this is real,” and, you know, had a big encounter with him, and I thought, “OK, we’ll give it a go.” And, um, so yeah, I basically sort of half gave my heart to Jesus in Year 10<sup>6</sup> and was like, “OK, God’s real,” and I started praying and all that.

Jeremy’s experience, like so many participants’ experiences, resulted not only in a new faith but also in his first foray into spiritual practices such as prayer. These things were a natural consequence of a faith that had previously not existed in any meaningful form.

For other participants, their spiritual experiences led to a deepening or changing of their beliefs and theology. Sometime after his first encounter with God, Anaru’s fledgling faith was put to the test when he and a group of his friends from church began to pray for his mother, whose health was deteriorating. While enthused by his own healing through interaction with God and a church, Anaru was still unsure about how praying for someone might cause a change in their wellbeing. However, a significant personal experience of his prayers being answered, along with a strong sense of peace that came as he prayed, deepened Anaru’s level of faith in God:

I went into this empty room in the hospital complex, I closed the door, I didn’t care if a nurse or someone would find me, and you know, [pause] I was on my knees, and I remember praying, I said, “God, you know, I don’t know too much about you or what this is all about, but I’m hearing these things, that you walked

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am using the term “faith” in a broader sense, not just referring to mere belief, but also encompassing a certain level of trust and confidence in God.

<sup>6</sup> Year 10 is the second year of High School in New Zealand, with students usually 14-15 years old.

on water, that your son Jesus came and healed, that actually these things can still happen today. If that's true with what you're doing in my life, can you make my Mum walk? Can you make her walk?" And it felt like a peace in that room. I mean I don't know, I wish I could see, I don't know, there could have been angels in that room next to me, but it was just such a beautiful experience in that room as I was praying for my Mum.

Anaru did not describe any direct consequences that followed this "beautiful" experience of peace as he prayed. However, not long after this experience, he shared his mother's health needs with his small group, and the group prayed together for her healing. I suspect this initial experience gave Anaru a greater confidence in the power of prayer, which meant he was willing to share a personal need with his small group in the hope that their prayers would effect some change in his mother's circumstances.

Anaru was impressed by how "bold" his small group members were as they prayed for his mother's recovery, that "they had this confidence" that God could heal her. He too began to pray in the same fashion. Over time, Anaru witnessed a shift in his mother's physical and mental state:

I go to pick up Mum, and I hadn't seen her for about two and a half weeks. And you know, she was on the road to physiotherapy, but I thought, you know, with the out trips she'd probably still need to be in a wheelchair. So I go to pick her up, and actually, she's there in her hospital bed — bang, she stands up. She sort of toddles over, shaking a little bit, and I was like, "Are you OK?" "Yeah, yeah." She slips on ... her slippers, grabs her bag, and she goes, "I'm ready to go, son." It was like, "Awesome, I thought you forgot," you know? I just couldn't believe what I was seeing, she was standing.

Anaru's faith was deepened as he saw his mother's surprising recovery, which had defied the earlier predictions given to him by the doctors at her hospital. He described how this experience taught him that "God answers prayer. When we're consistent and believe ... of course it's his will to see people healed. We just don't know or want to tap into that realm." While he had been taught these concepts during his time attending a church small group, it was his experience witnessing his mother's healing that helped Anaru apprehend such ideas on a more personal level.

A second spiritual consequence of spiritual experience amongst those I interviewed was a heightened desire for more tangible experiences of God's presence and action. Simon described how, once he learned what these new sensations he was experiencing were, he "kept trying to find that again in different places and different ways." Ryan described his growth in desire as "sort of like, 'When you experience that, how can you not want that further?' Or, 'How can you live without it?'" This desire often then led to further spiritual

experiences, as participants' enthusiasm naturally led them to be more inclined to ask God for these experiences in various situations. Sheree, following her first spiritual experience, began praying more on her own for God to move, particularly regarding her struggles with chronic pain:

I have ... [a congenital condition that causes a lot of pain], and, like, I couldn't sleep because of it. And sometimes my legs go numb, and, like, it's really, really bad.... I remember praying to God ... I was crying, I was like, "Man, I could really use some healing right now, I could really use your peace," and all this sort of stuff. And ... it just stopped completely, out of nowhere. Like, I shared it at church, I was like, "This is the first experience that I've had with myself, without anyone else praying for me and all that sort of stuff." And it was ... the final thing for me that, you know, "Man, God is real," like, "God is helping me when I ask him to help."

Sheree's level of understanding as to how God could work was strengthened by this experience, as she witnessed his action independent of any other human mediator for the first time. Yet her desire to pray for this healing on her own had been prompted by her earlier experiences in church and camp contexts.

In contrast to Sheree's experience, Martin described how, following his early experiences of the Spirit, it seemed as though further spiritual experiences were not really occurring for him. He noted that this "was quite a struggle," as he observed Christian friends describing their own encounters yet was unable to contribute any recent stories of his own experience. While attending a Christian event and hearing those around him claim to have a tangible sense of God, Martin felt as though he had missed out on this:

I remember this specific time [at a Christian event] ... it might have been the first night even, and everyone was coming out of the meeting and being like, "Oh, did you guys feel that? It was like a wind or something! Oh man, it was so amazing!" and I was just like, "No." And from then on, I got real cynical ... about feeling God and that kind of stuff.

Later in his faith journey Martin learned more about spiritual gifts and the various ways that people can connect with God, and he became more comfortable with these differences.

However, initially, while Martin remained committed to his newfound faith, his apparent lack of shared experience with his Christian friends led Martin to wonder if "maybe not everyone gets to experience God that way," and also caused a level of cynicism about the possibility of "feeling God." This cynicism lasted for some time, only ending when Martin began to participate more actively in particular spiritual practices: "It was not until I got into actually giving things a go, like prophecy and all that kind of stuff, that I actually started to be like,

‘Oh, I can actually hear from God! God gives us gifts that we can use, we can communicate with God.’” Martin found these new experiences “amazing,” and noted that this led to an end to the “frustration” that he had previously felt whenever he thought about spiritual experiences. Martin experienced this frustration because he wanted more spiritual experiences after his first meaningful encounters with God and felt as though he was not having any. This is a contrast to others I interviewed who described how their increased desire for more of God was accompanied by subsequent spiritual experiences that confirmed and maintained this desire.

While no other participants had quite the same experience as Martin, some described how they saw their spiritual experiences as less sensational than those they had observed occurring to others around them. However, despite this apparently negative comparison, these participants did not see their experiences as less valid because they seemed more modest. Ihaia, describing one of his first tangible encounters with God, noted that while this was “not some real noticeable [change] ... I appreciate the internal change more than something like, having this big moment on the outside, like shaking or sweaty palms or whatever.” Ihaia was able to assess his spiritual experience as positive on the basis of the long-term impact that it had on him, rather than feeling disappointed due to a lack of any immediate outward effect.

A third spiritual consequence of spiritual experience for participants was a new level of commitment to following God. After their spiritual experiences, participants often made a determined attempt to engage more regularly in spiritual practices. For example, following her surprising answer to prayer while in hospital, Maia began to instigate a new series of behaviours: “I just started reading my Bible again. And then ... [I] was trying to find a church, and found [my church]. And then just never left.” Carla also described how her Bible reading and prayer increased following her spiritual experience. As a consequence of particular spiritual experiences during their conversion journeys, participants talked about giving their lives to God, wanting to live a life inside God’s love, and wanting to have more of God in their lives. These are primarily “spiritual” descriptors, although they did have practical implications attached to them, such as a more intentional engagement with the Bible or church. For example, Matiu described how after a key experience, he “absolutely was on fire for God.” This newfound desire motivated him to ask the minister at his church about baptism, and upon receiving the reading material the minister provided him, Matiu “studied these [texts] intensively for eight weeks.” Similarly, after her first spiritual experience, Sheree was surprised at how her desire to have God in her life had grown. She recalls thinking that “I wouldn’t have ever thought ... that I would ever feel this type of way over a relationship with

God.” She then began attending church regularly and sharing her own experiences of God during times in the services where congregants were invited to do so.

As noted above, theological revelation was a spiritual experience recounted by some participants — Isaac, for example, saw a vision of Christ on the cross and gained a new insight into what that meant for his own life in the world. Rewai was another participant who experienced a theological revelation following a spiritual experience. As a young man, Rewai had decided that all religions must have been talking about the same thing, and thus the best bits of each could be taken and cobbled together into some sort of belief system. While this meant that Rewai developed “a good understanding of religion,” it failed to deal in any meaningful way with the hurts that he had been carrying from his childhood. In response to a preacher’s invitation, Rewai prayed and asked God to reveal himself. Some months later, he received an answer to this prayer:

It wasn’t until months later when he actually revealed himself to me inside of [a nightclub] ... But, [God] revealed himself to me. Long story short, the next day, at Sunday church I was hung over, and the pastor ... said, “I feel like there’s somebody out there that has said, that has asked God to make himself real, and he made himself real to you last night ... and he’s also said to you last night that ‘if that’s the life you want to live, then you can live that life. But if you want life to the full and you want change, now’s the time.’” And that’s what God said to me the night before when I was in the club.... I felt hot, my body was, like, heating up, and I went to the front, responded, and I just bawled my eyes out. And in that moment I remember closing my eyes, and seeing ... the Father’s arms wide open for me. Like, “I love you, my son.” ... It was sort of like a cheeky moment for me, like, “You asked, now I’m here. You asked me to make myself real, now I’m making myself real, right here, right now.” And in that moment I just cried even more.

Alongside receiving healing from his hurts, in this experience Rewai’s theology changed drastically. His picture of God shifted from being something that he himself had assembled through engagement with a wide variety of religious perspectives to a more personal image of God as a loving Father with his “arms wide open for me.” This also led to Rewai re-interpreting his earlier theological picture as “the devil working around me,” and realising that his early forays into “Tarot cards ... readings ... and Ouija board stuff” had failed to deal with his deeper emotional issues.

### **Emotional and Psychological Consequences of Spiritual Experiences**

A wide variety of emotional and psychological responses to spiritual experience were described by those I interviewed. In order to bring these various experiences together, I have categorised them into the following three areas:

1. Positive feelings and experiences
2. Confusing feelings and experiences
3. Dramatic feelings and experiences

The first of these, positive feelings and experiences, was the most common emotional consequence that followed a spiritual encounter. Eight participants felt happiness after their experiences. Greta describing her mood following her encounter as “just really whole, really like, happy, and like I wasn’t alone in anything that I did.” Kahu noted that after his experience of both converting and experiencing God’s presence at church, he “went home that night and just, happy, you know, I felt so free, it was out of it, I was just buzzing.... [I] went home [and] just started thanking God hard out. Didn’t even know God but just started thanking him.” Other participants described feelings of freedom, affirmation, and peace that resulted from their experiences. Marie, who committed her life to God while out on a park bench by herself, noted that, when she had finished praying her prayer of commitment, “I felt like I was a feather, I felt so much lighter, I felt like nothing could hold me down.” These feelings were particularly significant for Marie as she was struggling with feelings of loneliness as a first-year university student living away from friends and family. She described how this experience, and the events that preceded it, led her to conclude “that actually ... without wanting to sound cheesy ... Jesus is the thing that I need in this life, it’s not friends.” This gave her a greater resilience and the ability to care less about her lack of engagement with the prevailing student culture in her city, which in her experience was centred around alcohol and parties.

Some of the emotional and psychological effects of a spiritual experience were less positive, and instead left participants feeling confused or overwhelmed. For example, while Erica described her spiritual experiences as exciting, she was

also very overwhelmed and confused. Because I didn’t really know, like, the “where to from here” stuff. Like, I don’t know, no-one gives you a manual, which is, like, “You’re going to do this, and then this is going to happen, and then this is what you need to do.”

Erica’s spiritual experiences did not leave her with a clear sense of what to do next, and she struggled for some time after this with questions and doubts around what she was meant to do.

Another participant, Martin, described his first time attending a church service. He noted how he began to cry during the second song of the worship service, an experience that took him by surprise and left him feeling decidedly strange:

I was a bit like, “Oh, this is weird.” ... I think the best way to describe it would probably be, it just felt not natural and kind of uncomfortable, I suppose.... Out of my control, I suppose you’d say. I remember ... not knowing what to make of it really. The person next to me as well was in tears at the same time, which was also quite strange.

Participants such as Martin and Erica found these experiences less positive in part because they were not expecting them, and the church contexts they were in had not at that point provided them with an adequate language for understanding and labelling the sensations they were experiencing. Erica had only been involved in youth group for a short time before her experience, and while Martin had attended various church-run activities at points throughout his childhood, he does not recall ever being taught about the possibility of faith being “this actual personal thing that you have between you and God” at those various activities. However, Martin’s uncertainty did not last long, as immediately after this experience, the pastor at his church sat with Martin and provided a cogent explanation of what had happened and the implications of this for Martin. Erica, despite also having a supportive leader nearby who was able to help her understand her experience, struggled with questions and doubts about her experience for a much longer period after the event.

Some participants described unfamiliar spiritual experiences that prompted feelings of curiosity, such as Colin, who noted that “the first time that I remember was seeing the Spirit of God just manifest just a week after I became a Christian, which you’d think would kind of freak me out a little bit, but I was kind of more interested in it than anything.” A similar sense of curiosity arose for Anaru as a result of his time being a part of a church where various charismatic expressions were commonplace, including his own experience of being told he would be reunited with his brothers: “Speaking in tongues, fivefold ministry<sup>7</sup> being practiced ... I think all of that was intriguing to me, ‘cause it was different, it was new, it was ‘What is that?’” Anaru’s curiosity was piqued by what he was seeing occur at church. Neither Anaru nor Colin described finding these experiences shocking or confusing. However, it is worth noting that by this point Colin had been attending youth group for a year, so had likely been exposed to others who claimed spiritual experience and described it in particular ways.

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of fivefold ministry is based on the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11 where he states that Christ has gifted various members of the church so that “that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” (NRSV) South African theologian Peter White notes that “When Pentecostals talk about the Fivefold Ministry, they are referring to the Apostle, Evangelist, Prophet, Pastor and Teacher. In their view, the Fivefold Ministry is the five leadership or governmental offices given to the church by Jesus Christ for the edification of the church and for the purpose of church administration and decisions on doctrinal and spiritual issues of the church.” See “A Missional Study of Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches’ Leadership and Leadership Formation,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71:3 (June 2015): 2.

Martin, Erica, and others who had spent less time in church circles prior to their spiritual experiences, tended to interpret their encounters with more shock and confusion.

Finally, I include four emotional and psychological consequences of spiritual experiences under the category of “dramatic feelings and experiences.” While these were also largely positive in nature, they tend to stand out as distinct because of their intensity, and often their more profound impact on a participant’s life. The most compelling examples of this are Caitlin and Rewai’s stories, where both participants sensed that God was asking them to forgive their fathers. In each case, these participants had difficult and damaging experiences of growing up with their fathers and had subsequently maintained a level of distance from these men. Yet the call from God evoked dramatic emotional responses in both. Rewai described how this happened for him:

[I was] praying in my bedroom, and I said, “Lord ... what is it that you want me to do next, how do I move?” The Lord comes in the room: “You need to forgive your father.” I’m on my face, crying my eyes out. And he just said, “Speak it out like he’s here.” And I said, “Dad, I forgive you, I’m so sorry, can you forgive me,” and I cried even more.... When I started to say forgiveness toward my father, it was like this black cloud of ... locusts came out, and I was choking and screaming out. And after that happened ... I remember getting up and ... [it] being like a weight had lifted, and I’d been freed.

Caitlin also described a response to God’s call to forgive her father which involved a dramatic emotional reaction. In both cases, these participants’ first response to the action of God was fairly negative, as well as leading to a strong physical response. However, as Rewai’s quote above indicates, the end result was a complete change of feeling, and a new willingness to reach out to a father who had caused his child to experience a significant amount of pain.

Helen also experienced a dramatic emotional consequence. She came to youth group grieving both the recent suicide of a close friend and the painful memories that this suicide had brought back for her of her own father’s decision to end his life seven years earlier. Her participation in the prayer and worship of her local youth group resulted in a slow healing of these hurts. This was largely due to the fact that Helen would find herself crying in response to the tangible sensation she was feeling during worship: “I’m an ugly crier.... [At] the worship night on the Friday night, that’s where I spent the six months just crying during worship. No idea what’s going on, why am I crying in front of a whole group of strangers?” Over time, Helen notes that something about this process led to a positive change in her state of mind:

I didn’t feel like I was in that dark place where I was six months ago.... There was something that just changed in how I felt and how I saw the world around me I think, and that was kind of encased in that love, and forgiveness as well

actually... I think I blamed myself for a lot of things that have gone on in my family.

Shedding these tears helped Helen slowly grieve the losses she had experienced, although she was not aware at the time that this was happening, noting that “it wasn’t until [I was able to use] that retrospective thinking, going, ‘Oh, that was actually God moving in me, not just me using God as a sounding board, he was [also at work] changing my life.’” Helen’s spiritual experiences led her to a place where she was able to forgive herself, process her pain and grief, and feel “encased” in God’s love. As was the case for Caitlin, these were lasting changes that Helen still lives out today.

Coming from a more positive frame, Ihaia described how his spiritual experiences created in him a hope and optimism that he did not recall having prior to that time:

All of a sudden, I could actually think to, like, to the next day, to the next week. Before that [experience] I was so worried about the present, it was like, “How am I going to get through today?” or, “How’s today going to go?” I was so worried about today, today, today. And I didn’t have anxiety because I just wouldn’t even think about the next day, I would just be so focused on “How’s today going to go?” And the effect, like, the mental effect that had on me, is ... I realised, “Man, I might have a purpose for my existence, I’m not just this thing that floats through life.”

These sorts of consequences, and several others recounted by participants, are notable for their lasting and substantial impact on participants’ mindsets and behaviours. Often, the experiences helped resolve emotional and psychological problems that these participants had been grappling with for some time. Thus, while others did not report such intense psychological watershed events, this may be because they were not dealing with such a heightened level of distress or pain when they first encountered God.

### **Associations Between Various Experiences and their Consequences**

For the most part, participants’ spiritual experiences led to a wide variety of consequences that they associated with those experiences. In many cases there was no clear correlation between one type of experience and one particular consequence. Yet there were two experiences that, while still producing a diverse set of consequences amongst interviewees, did result in a more commonly experienced consequence. These experiences were the feeling of a tangible sensation or healing, and an increased level of faith in God. Isaac made this association clear: “God just appeared ... it was like this overwhelming warm tingling sensation in my body, where I couldn’t speak to anyone, but I knew God was speaking to me.

That was the confirmation for me that God is real, that he is here.” Six participants described how their faith in God increased following an experience that included a tangible sensation. The experience of a tangible sensation also led many participants to then increase their involvement at church.

Another four of those I interviewed described how their faith grew following a healing. Anaru recounted how, following his own healing from a collection of mental disorders, he was asked to explain to a group of medical professionals why he had stopped taking his medication. Anaru’s response indicates where he believed the source of this change lay:

I said, “Look, this probably doesn’t make any sense, I’m still trying to make sense of it myself: I’ve been to a youth group, and I think it’s doing me good. I’m learning about this God, and what he’s about, and that he can heal and restore and set free.”

While Anaru did not experience healing as a dramatic, singular event, he nonetheless was slowly healed of his illnesses as he attended and engaged with his youth group. This in turn formed a strong faith in Anaru that God could heal others, and particularly his mother, from their own mental distress, giving him the confidence to offer to pray with her, so that she might experience her own healing.

These are the only two examples where it was possible to draw some association between specific spiritual experiences and particular consequences. In every other case, the diversity of participants’ individual stories and personalities meant that similar experience led to radically different consequences.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the lasting consequences of spiritual experiences for participants: social and practical consequences, emotional and psychological consequences, and spiritual and theological consequences. The complexity of how experiences and consequences interrelate has also been reinforced at several points throughout. Two participants felt God calling them to forgive their fathers; yet their responses to this call differed significantly. Ten of those I interviewed reported that they cried in God’s presence; I noted five distinct consequences that followed such moments. Some participants did not find their spiritual experiences to be particularly pleasant, despite others who had similar experiences describing strong feelings of happiness. Each person experienced God differently, and the consequences of their experiences differed.

Chapter Eight explores the relevant data related to the third of my secondary questions, regarding the nature of conversion over time and the possibility of immediate, punctiliar conversion experiences. Like some of the findings in this chapter, these experiences are influenced by a variety of factors including the social and organisational natures of the church groups that participants interact with. Yet they also point to the nature and action of God and the ways in which individuals in their various contexts come to an awareness of him.

## **Chapter Eight: The Conversion Process**

This chapter will address data relating to the third sub-question that frames this project. Here I consider common ways in which the conversion process was experienced by those I interviewed, as well as acknowledging that conversion was, for some, a punctiliar experience. In Chapter Four I outlined a variety of academic perspectives on the conversion process from researchers and people in ministry, with a particular focus on the conversion schema of Lewis Rambo. In this chapter I will review the common waypoints that participants described in their conversion narratives. I have grouped these waypoints into six categories: accepting an invitation, interacting, deciding, tests of faith, completion of the journey, and faith in action. While these do bear some similarity and consonance to process models developed elsewhere, they are original thematic constructs based on my data analysis. Also, while these often occur in the order set out below, this is not a strictly chronological process. Rather, it is an attempt to describe the common waypoints that those I interviewed described as key aspects of their conversion journeys. Some participants experienced conversion in a slightly different order. For example, one participant reported making a key decision about following Jesus before much (or any) serious interaction with a church group had occurred.

### **Relevant Life Experiences Prior to Adolescence**

Before describing the conversion process as experienced by participants, I will discuss four contextual factors that are relevant to the discussion of this point. The first of these examines any significant exposure to Christian practices or people that participants reported experiencing during their childhood years. Seventeen participants described some exposure to Christianity that occurred for them at some point prior to their teens. Fifteen did not. This difference in exposure correlated in part to a difference in experience, with participants who had no exposure to Christianity prior to their interaction with it as adolescents more likely to describe feelings of surprise, confusion, or discomfort as they discovered more about the faith.

Some of those I interviewed described other childhood experiences that impacted their experience of Christian conversion. Twenty-five participants mentioned their prior perspectives on the existence and relevance of God, with eleven describing how they held some kind of latent belief in God before conversion, with the other fourteen requiring some kind of proof to convince them. Nine participants described the negative emotional states that they were in before they began engaging with the church and Christianity. In some cases,

these negative thought patterns were the result of difficult upbringings. Thirteen participants reported serious distresses or difficulties that they had experienced as children, often finding some kind of resolution or help for these things in their conversion to Christianity.

### **Some Childhood Exposure to Christianity**

For some, such as Matiu, childhood exposure to Christianity occurred at school:

They had Bible in Schools, so that was really the first introduction I had to the Lord. And the first Scripture I remember ever learning was John 3:16: “For God loved the world so much he gave his one and only son, for whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.” That made a huge mark on my life, pretty much from that point. From when I heard that, I kind of always would remind myself of it, and as Bible in Schools kind of progressed throughout the years, we were finding out more stories about miracles that God performed through people, like Noah and Abraham and Jesus ... the miracles that Jesus performed.... That always grabbed my attention. You know, how did Jesus do these things?

These questions remained with him as he entered adolescence and afforded him a level of basic trust and belief in Christ when he began attending youth groups and camps. Three participants had attended Christian primary schools, which their parents had approved of although not being Christians themselves. These individuals acknowledged the learning that their Christian school supplied regarding Jesus and the Bible, but each regarded that as inadequate for any sort of meaningful expression of faith. Jeremy, who attended Christian schools right up until he graduated from high school, reflected that he “didn’t have any connection with God or anything and ... sort of just learnt about him in Christian studies.” Similarly, Georgia, who also attended Christian schools all the way through, noted that in primary school, “I kind of had some sort of knowledge through my school of Christianity, we sang songs, and that kind of stuff. But I had no idea how it applied, like I just thought it was just something that people did at school.” It was only upon attending a youth group that faith was described as committing one’s entire life to Jesus.

Other participants mentioned church-based programmes that they had attended as children.

Rewai described one such programme that he attended as a boy:

When I was probably nine, ten, until about twelve, there was this lady, a church lady within my neighbourhood.... She would pick us up ... and take us out for youth stuff. But she would never force Jesus on us.... She would just hang out with us ... she would talk to our parents, we’d pay like two bucks, and we would go get fish and chips and just hang out. And all of our neighbourhood kids would go, all of them, “Bro, we’re going to [youth group] tonight,” and it was this cool thing. And we didn’t know [youth group] was a church thing until we went to this

one event at [the local] church, where they done this big drama, and I was, like, “Oh, this is cool.” And they talked about the love of Jesus. And I was like, “Oh, cool!”

Rewai was one of several participants who described their childhood exposure in these terms; they enjoyed attending a church-run event with low-key, non-confrontational content.

Kylie was another participant that attended a church-run programme (Girls’ Brigade)<sup>1</sup> as a child. However, she described how her father actively encouraged her to ignore the short devotional messages that were given at this programme:

My Dad was always like, “Oh, nah, you just go for fun, right? You ignore everything else.” And I kind of always just listened to him. My parents always had a view that, like, quite a strong, I guess, kind of not anti, but, like, almost against Christianity view. So when it came to Girls’ Brigade they were always quite strict and, like, “You’re not listening to what they’re saying, what they’re saying isn’t true,” and just actually kind of, like, “You’re just going to play games and meet people.”

Only in her teenage years, as she became more independent and developed her own perspectives, did Kylie begin to question her family’s views on religion. In contrast to this, Ripeka, who did not mention any specific anti-religious bias in her home growing up, was quite open as a child to Christian spirituality, having witnessed her sister’s healing at a church event when she was just eight years old.<sup>2</sup> While her commitment to a fully Christian life only happened ten years later, the significance of this early exposure to a practical consequence of Christian spirituality was hugely formative. Although the examples of Ripeka and Kylie’s early exposure to Christianity may seem to sit at odds to one another, they both speak to the basic level of trust that these two girls assigned to the adults who held some authority in their lives. Kylie naturally trusted her father and believed that his view on religion must be the right one. Ripeka trusted the preacher and encouraged her sister to go forward to receive prayer for healing. However, in both cases these views matured and shifted as the girls grew older and began to establish a more independent sense of self.

Family members other than parents were a source of childhood exposure to Christianity for some participants. For example, Maia recounted how as a young girl she had once asked her grandmother about her belief in Jesus:

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<sup>1</sup> Girls’ Brigade New Zealand is a Christian organisation that offers a weekly programme, as well as various weekend events, with a focus on empowering girls and developing a Christian faith in them. The programme also provides girls with regular opportunities to participate in camps and outdoor/wilderness adventures.

<sup>2</sup> This story is told in more detail in Chapter Ten.

We said to Nan, “Nan, how is Jesus even real, you know, he can’t be real, because there are bad things in this, in the world. So, if Jesus was real and he was so good like people say he is, then why is there all this bad stuff that happens in the world?” And she said, “God puts bad things in the world for challenges.” And we were only really young, like only 8 or 9, and we just thought that was the most funniest thing.... But I never really thought about it other than the fact, to take the mickey<sup>3</sup> out of my Nana.... Later on in life I found out that she was actually a [Christian], and she does [some community ministry] now and she’s just the most incredible lady of faith that I’ve met.

Maia’s exposure to faith through her grandmother served as little more than a source of humour for her and her cousin. Yet Maia would stay with her grandmother during the school holidays, and notes that her grandmother “always raised us with real Christian values, without saying ‘these are Christian values.’” Isaac, Carla, Marie, Lincoln, and Wade also spoke about the faith of their grandparents, and the influence it had on them. Georgia commented on the positive influence of her cousins, who were Christians. They were a factor that led her to choose to attend the Christian school that her cousins were enrolled at. Hope noted that, in her case, “Our entire extended family are all Christians, so got a bit of influence through there but didn’t really follow it ourselves.”

### **No Childhood Exposure to Christianity**

While seventeen participants described some sort of exposure to Christianity during their childhood, the other fifteen did not. Many of these, upon encountering church and Christian things for the first time, felt as though they were ignorant, or at least found the religious nature of church and youth group environments unsettling and took their time coming to grips with it. Some participants commented that, when they first attended a church or youth group event, they were struck by how weird church life seemed. There were a variety of things that participants found weird. For some, it was seeing Christians involved in worship:

You’d start off every youth group each week with worship, which was almost terrifying for me because, like, “Wow, these guys sing about Jesus as well!”  
—Joel

I found it weird that they were raising their hands and doing stuff like that. Like, I was confused as to why that was happening. —Carla

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<sup>3</sup> To “take the mickey” is a slang term, common to Britain and Australasia, that means “to tease” or “to poke fun at.” See John Ayto and Ian Crofton, “Take the Mickey out of Someone,” *Brewer’s Dictionary of Modern Phrase & Fable*, ed. John Ayto and Ian Crofton, (London: Chambers Harrap, 2009), <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199916108.001.0001/acref-9780199916108-e-7799>>. See also <<https://grammarist.com/usage/take-the-mickey-out-of-someone/>>.

Two participants mentioned Biblical texts that they found odd. Danielle heard a message on Jesus' teaching about the narrow path and the wide path and was confused as to why Jesus would have taught his disciples that the narrow path was the one that leads to life when it was clearly a much more difficult journey to make. Maia attended a service where the pastor, having just preached on the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, then proceeded to invite some of the children up onto the stage so he could wash their feet as an example. Maia was taken aback by this, as it was entirely outside of her experience up until that point.

Other participants did not mention a specific aspect of church life that they found disconcerting, but instead found the overall experience peculiar. This was the case even when these participants had Christian friends alongside them and were attending events designed not to be too off-putting to newcomers. Erica described how participating in a youth group game in which she had to eat pizza with her hands tied together confirmed her suspicions that Christians were weird. While it is likely that the game that Erica took part in that night was designed with the aim of making youth group a fun and enjoyable space for teenagers, along with teaching the importance of cooperation and teamwork, for Erica it was such a foreign and odd experience that it reinforced her stereotype of Christians.

Yet Erica continued to attend this church, and described how, at a later point in her conversion journey, she again found herself reacting to a strange Christian practice. This time, she was sitting in a service hearing a group of members from her church talk about an upcoming short-term mission trip. Erica also found the notion of a short-term mission trip to be a strange idea, describing her inner response as "I don't get it. I actually don't get why you would do that." Yet, the strangeness became a source of curiosity for her, as she continued to wonder why these people would want to spend their own money to head overseas and share the gospel with others. Other participants also mentioned moments where they became more curious after encountering Christian behaviour that they perceived as strange. Ihaia described how, as he witnessed the volunteer leaders at the group worshipping and treating others with kindness, he wondered what was motivating such behaviour. Ihaia had never seen anything quite like what he saw at youth group, and as this strange novelty piqued his curiosity he began to ask the questions that eventually led to his conversion.

While this initial sense of strangeness was common to many of those I interviewed, it was not entirely restricted to those participants who could not recount any childhood exposure to Christianity. Some participants recounted church programmes or services that they had attended as children, and then later spoke of their discomfort or confusion as teenagers when they encountered aspects of Christian religious practice that they found strange or unfamiliar.

While childhood exposure to Christianity seemed to in some cases lead to a greater level of ease a participant may have felt around churches and the Christian faith, this was not guaranteed. While Sheree and Kylie had both attended church-run children's programmes prior to joining local youth groups, Kylie described being prayed for at youth group as "very foreign," and Sheree noted that the experience left her feeling "weirded out." These more active spiritual practices seemed more likely to produce shock or confusion even in those who had spent time in and around church activities in the past.

In sum, those I interviewed mentioned the following aspects of church as things they found weird on first encounter:

1. A Youth Group game where young people were tied together all night
2. Seeing Christians raise their hands in worship
3. Seeing Christians sing about Jesus
4. People crying during a time of response
5. Being prayed for
6. Discussing the concept of God in a group setting
7. The format of a church service
8. A pastor washing people's feet after a sermon on Jesus washing the disciples' feet
9. Jesus' teaching on the wide and the narrow path

Aside, perhaps, from the first item on this list, many of the experiences mentioned here are common aspects of Christian corporate worship. While the experience of church and youth group for converts is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, as it pertains to the conversion process, it may just be a fact of life that a part of the process for nonreligious people coming to faith involves experiencing the church as a distinctly odd entity.

### **The Precondition of Belief**

When it came to the question of how much belief in God participants had prior to their conversion, answers varied greatly. At one end, some participants, such as Greta, expressed sentiments like, "I've always had like a belief in God, I just never really had a relationship with him before." Eleven participants mentioned, in some shape or form, this kind of latent belief in God's existence and relevance prior to their conversions. These eleven participants came from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and described a range of encounters with the church prior to their teenage years, right from none whatsoever, to Christian grandparents and attendance at church-run children's programmes. The only general observation that can be made about this group is that more of them were female. In some cases, participants were able to associate their latent faith with something, such as their parents' views, or an experience in childhood. Ripeka, who witnessed her sister's healing at a

church meeting when she was just a young girl, noted, “No matter what I did in life, even when I was drinking alcohol or whatever, I always just knew that he was real.” Other participants in this group were not as able as Ripeka to associate their latent belief with anything that had occurred in their life up until that point, and just saw this kind of faith as a logical consequence of their own reasoning about the universe and other such things. For example, Michelle noted, “I had always had this thought that ‘there needs to be a God. If this is life without God, I don’t want this, there must be something better than this.’” Erica had reasoned that “there was obviously something that has made everything,” although she was not sure as to whether this something could be easily defined or contained within one religion. Other participants described coming to Christ from a decidedly agnostic or atheistic starting point. These participants often seemed to need a more profound and overt experience of God’s reality in order to spark a faith that, prior to this experience, was decidedly non-existent. For example, Joel described the meaning that he took from an experience at a camp where he received prayer and an injured ankle was healed: “That was my defining moment of when I first . . . encountered the presence of God. That was when I knew that it wasn’t so much a hoax, it was like, ‘Hey, this guy actually heals. This guy can do what he promises.’” Fourteen participants described some sort of need for proof of God’s existence, nine of whom needed this as an antidote to their own atheistic or agnostic perspectives before they could wholeheartedly embrace faith.

### **Negative Mental States**

Alongside the various beliefs that participants held as they began their conversion journeys, another factor that preceded this period for some was the negative mental state they found themselves in leading up to their decision. Nine participants described negative mindsets that accompanied and sometimes precipitated their conversion experiences. For example, Maia was in a depressed and almost suicidal state when she cried out to God and asked him to end her life or send her a sign. Similarly, Martin’s first serious encounter with God occurred when he was in his room alone, feeling depressed after a break-up:

I felt like a hand on my shoulder and then just, like, the words, “Everything’s going to be all right,” just sort of flashing in the mind’s eye. How do you describe when God speaks to you, you sort of see the words I guess, for me. . . . I sort of felt those words, “Everything’s going to be all right.”

For Martin the negative feelings following his break-up were compounded by his own strong sense of loneliness, caused largely by a childhood where his family moved towns every few

years. For the nine participants who described acute psychological and emotional struggles during their conversion journeys (such as the prolonged periods of depression, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of loneliness mentioned above), the feelings they described were outcomes of serious life events that were often deeply traumatic. These events generally involved the actions of family members, such as their parents' divorce, or the sudden death of a loved relative. The emotional impact of such circumstances was often intense and prolonged. For example, while Helen's father committed suicide when she was only seven years old, she experienced "this massive re-trigger of the trauma" at age 14, when a friend took their own life. After her parents' separation, Caitlin "cut off all contact" with her father and spent the next three years feeling "a lot of resentment and hate." Other participants described similar dynamics, where the actions of their parents in childhood caused them negative feelings that they then held on to throughout adolescence, which in turn affected the way these participants experienced conversion.

### **Impacts Associated with Difficult Upbringings**

Thirteen participants described upbringings that involved significant personal distress and difficulty. In many cases, these participants were also able to describe how the conversion process had helped them address some of the hurts that had occurred for them during childhood. Nine of these participants were raised in situations where their parents were no longer together, which in some cases was a significant causal factor for their distress. For example, Matiu recounted how being sent to live for a while with his father was a deeply traumatic and abusive experience:

We were put in his care because my mother was associated with gang members, and so she had to prove to the government that she was not associated with them for a period of time before we could go back to her. But at that time, we were put in our father's care, and he had a strong distaste for us because ... his current wife ... hated the fact that he had kids to another woman. And so, she pretty much put a lot of thoughts in his head that made him also have a really strong distaste for us, and that came to life in the actions that he performed. He was very physical, so he'd hit us with any objects.

This was a difficult experience for Matiu to reflect on, and he noted later in the interview that he is still learning to forgive his father for these events. Yet, he was also able to draw a link between his own conversion and some sense of healing from these hurts, describing his encounter with God as involving some of the hurt and resentment he felt toward his father "being lifted off my shoulders."

Other participants were also able to draw a link between the difficulties they associated with the family structure in which they were raised, and a sense of healing or relief they found in their conversion. Anaru noted, “I never met my father, Mum was in and out of the gangs, drugs, street life, prostitution.... Me and my brothers were born out of that. We all have different fathers.” Later in the interview Anaru quoted Bible verses that he clearly connected to this childhood experience: “Growing up without a father, I’ve discovered beautiful Scriptures, passages where it says, ‘Father to the fatherless, defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. He places the lonely in families.’ It’s Scriptures like that that are core Scriptures for me, that just hold me.” Another participant, Carla, described a childhood in which “the house was pretty messy, we didn’t really go to school a lot, we didn’t eat a lot of healthy food.... It was ... not a good living situation for kids.” This was during a time when Carla and her sister were living under their mother’s care, while she was using “party pills ... marijuana and she drunk a lot as well. So she would kind of go on ... three day benders and stuff like that.” In her conversion journey, Carla was amazed that God wanted a relationship with her, and when asked why she thinks she found this so amazing, mentioned that at the time of this realisation, “I really didn’t like myself, I really felt quite unloved ... I had a lot of abandonment issues.” The discovery of the fact that “actually someone does love me” provided a sense of relief to the pain Carla was experiencing because of a childhood in which she did not feel that love from her mother.

Four other participants, who grew up with both biological parents at home, described unhappiness or difficulty in their childhoods and a subsequent comfort found in God. For example, Martin struggled with the experience of moving towns every few years throughout his childhood. Although both of his parents were around, he experienced strong feelings of loneliness and isolation, which led to a lasting battle with depression:

We’d moved so many times before, and where we’d just moved from ... I’d made some good friends and I was quite heartbroken about moving. And then we get to [a different city] and I think one of the first things I noticed was just how rugged the people were ... it was all the culture of smoking weed and drinking and ... the way you’d sort of interact with your mates was dissing them and all that kind of stuff.... I think throughout the high school years that was a bit tough ... not having someone as close to relate to and sort of be around. So I think that, I reckon that a lot of that would have been that. Just a lot of insecurity and ... waking up ... not happy all the time. And not being able to put it down to anything, not being able to be like, “Oh, this is why I feel this way.” It was just this constant sort of unhappiness.

Martin did not describe an overly difficult, distant, or combative relationship with his parents. Rather, the unhappiness he experienced as a child was due to moving so often. In contrast to this, Clarke described his relationship with his parents as distant:

We all live together but we're not particularly close with one another. Like, we're here because those two gave birth to us, and that's about it. We're all quite an individual family, we all like to do stuff by ourselves. Like, my relationship with my parents wasn't awful, but it wasn't great, it wasn't anything special. My Dad was harsh towards me, but I just assume that's him being, like, "You need to toughen up, you're a boy."

Clarke's assessment of this relationship is mixed, in that he assumes that his parents had good intentions but also evaluates his own experience as solitary and inadequate. Both Clarke and Martin described experiences in which they heard God speak words of encouragement to them amidst periods of despair. In both cases, these events were significant turning points in the conversion journeys of these participants, as God provided something that ministered to them at a point of need.

## **Common Waypoints in the Conversion Process**

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, I identified six common waypoints in the conversion process that participants described as they narrated their experiences. While these waypoints were not always experienced in the same order, and some participants did not refer to all six, the order presented here provides a general sense of what happened for most of those I interviewed:

1. Accepting an Invitation
2. Interacting With a Christian Community
3. Deciding to Become a Christian
4. Tests of Faith
5. Completion of the Journey
6. Faith in Action

Each of these will be discussed in turn below.

### **Accepting an Invitation**

One key stage that occurred in the conversion journey for participants was when they first attended a Christian gathering.<sup>4</sup> The major factor that began each participant's conversion journey was an invitation to a church or youth group. Only two participants provided no

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<sup>4</sup> Most participants remained a part of the churches and youth groups they first joined, although a few moved elsewhere.

indication as to how or if this occurred. This theme illuminates two important contextual factors present in these conversion narratives: the presence of a Christian friend, youth worker, or family member who was able to offer the invitation, and also the presence of a church or youth group that ran regular events and was open to newcomers (and possibly encouraged their congregants to invite others along). These two factors were described by almost all research participants, and sometimes closely associated with one another:

I have a very good friend, who I'm still friends with, who went to [church]. And she invited me along to her youth group.... And so I started going along to that.  
—Greta

This youth worker [at my school] ... was running a film school over the holidays where we just hung out for three days and played with cameras, did some editing and stuff ... we got to the end of that and he was, like, "You guys should come to youth group." And so I started going to youth group. —Clarke

It was rare for participants to describe their introduction to the church apart from describing the person who invited them, as for the most part church was not something they would have considered going to without this prompt. Generally, these invitations came from friends, family members, or a trusted adult such as a youth worker or a social worker. Only one participant, Ripeka, described a scenario where she responded to an invitation from a stranger.<sup>5</sup>

A second factor relating to these invitations is that many of the churches and youth groups attended by those I interviewed were open to newcomers, and often made a positive effort to format their events and train their leaders in ways that encouraged newcomers to attend. Caitlin experienced this when she first visited the church at which she came to faith:

Instead of going straight into youth group they start with ... a service targeted for more young adults, teenagers, and young families. So, we were going along to that and meeting some of the parents at the church and also other people at the church who were involved in that, and really just the thing of just how welcoming they were.... Everyone came over and introduced themselves and made themselves known and who they were and who they were related to if they had family there, or what they do with the helping out as well.

Caitlin describes a church context that was specifically geared towards welcoming young newcomers. Another participant, Greta, described how the nature of the leaders at her youth group made her feel welcome:

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<sup>5</sup> This is discussed in Chapter Nine.

Everyone was just really friendly ... all the leaders were just really nice, I felt really comfortable there ... I felt like I could have a conversation and actually be listened to. Everyone was really nice there, and I felt like I kind of connected with God a bit more than I had ever done before.

Greta makes a clear link between her feeling of being welcomed and her ability to connect with God. She also described her new youth group as a place where the youth leaders took genuine interest and cared for the young people who attended regardless of their religious or social standing. These factors were particularly meaningful for Greta when she first began attending this youth group.

The primary reasons many participants first ended up engaging with Christianity were quite mundane. Often, their reason for accepting an invitation was simply that they were being invited to something that sounded fun, and they had nothing better to do:

There was a time where I didn't really have a whole lot to do ... after school, so on Wednesday nights my youth pastor ... ran youth group over at a church on the corner of T Street. And I'd go there every Wednesday, and that was very regular. —Joel.

My mates introduced me to youth group in Year 7. Kind of just went along for the fun of it really, just things to do with mates, didn't really pay too much attention about God or any of that kind of thing. —Nathan.

One participant, Anaru, described an early conversation that indicated a relatively high level of independent inquiry into spiritual things, given that his initial encounter with the church occurred after he had asked his social worker about God:

I'd ask, "Do you think there's a God, mate? Why would he let someone like me go through what I'm going through?" ... I'd just come out of the psychiatric ward, diagnosed with bipolar, depression, psychosis, heavy mental illnesses, very suicidal.... And so, I'm on a visit with my social worker, and we are having a chat: "Do you think there's a God?" ... He couldn't answer the question, [so] I think he went out of his way, and ... heard about this youth group. So, he took me along. And I'm at the back, you know, mocking, cussing, the rest of it, and he said, "This could do, you might find this alright or you might not."

Of all the participants, Anaru described the strongest level of seeking, yet even in his case, Anaru's introduction to a youth group was facilitated by another person.

## **Interacting**

Another common aspect of the conversion process for those I interviewed was their steadily increasing involvement in the activities and community of their local church. For most

participants, this occurred before a key point of decision or change, although some only began regularly engaging with Christian activities after they had decided to take the possibility of following Jesus seriously. Also, this interaction usually constituted an increased involvement in the activities of the church group, such as a weekly youth meeting, or volunteering as a leader at a junior programme. It also often involved a greater participation in more overtly religious activities, such as corporate worship, prayer, or Bible study. For instance, Anna increased her involvement following her initial conversion decision, by attending a Bible discussion group at her youth pastor's house:

I started going to Bible study at [my youth pastor's] house, not long after my first Easter Camp. So I went there for, like, three years or something. It was cool because I learnt more in depth ... 'cause I'd never even seen a Bible before.... It was cool 'cause within the group there was different levels of Christians. Like, some of them had grown up Christian, some of us hadn't, and some of us had, like, grown up never knowing who Christ was, so it was quite cool to hear the different viewpoints on it.

For Anna, this increased interaction with the church followed on from her experience of God's presence and her decision to follow Jesus. In contrast to this, Kylie was well involved in the activities of the church before she fully committed her life to Christ:

I kind of just started to more participate and go to church and actually actively listen to what they were saying. More so the biggest thing for me has always been worship, because I think that's where I get ... an overwhelming sense of God.... So I think I was getting quite moved by the worship team, and then ... just kept wanting to come back.

Kylie's increased participation in church and her sense of God's presence during worship occurred as a part of her conversion journey but started well before a final decision was made. This is because Kylie, due to her parents' negative views regarding religion, held off making a decision in a hurry for fear of the response this would elicit.

Other participants also recalled an increased interaction with Christian practices and programmes in a way that directly related to their conversion decision, as their increased commitment to Christ led to an increased interaction with church-based activities. Hope described how, as her enthusiasm for the faith increased, she "kind of threw myself in there. Any time youth group would run stuff I'd just kind of help out." Similarly, Rewai, after he had encountered God in a meaningful way, was keen to involve himself in the various programmes and opportunities available at his church:

They were connecting me in, because they were running things like cell groups and life groups weekly. So they would have cell groups on Wednesday, and they had Friday youth. Before Friday youth too sometimes they would have like catch-up, with my cell leader, a guy who I was connected with. We had [services on] Sundays ... and it was, like, "This is cool, new routines," and that's what I was trying to practice. I was trying to get new habits, but first, I hadn't encountered God yet. It wasn't until I encountered God that that's when it really started to happen.

Rewai notes that, while he knew that the church was offering him a positive opportunity to establish a new routine, this was not something he fully connected with until after his own spiritual experience and the subsequent decision this led him to make.

Another group of participants steadily increased their involvement in Christian activities such as youth groups and camps, with less of a clear relationship between that and any noted increase in belief or intensity of faith. Clarke, who for much of his high school years did not believe that God existed, nonetheless connected increasingly with his youth group and the opportunities it provided him. Alongside the weekly youth meeting, Clarke attended another discussion group for young people exploring faith (although still himself an ardent atheist) and became more involved at a leadership level:

Around Year 11,<sup>6</sup> [my youth leader] started a group where he basically got youth to run events for youth group. And so, I started doing that. So here I am, not a Christian, getting more and more involved with youth group, walking a very dangerous line. So, I started doing stuff with that, and part of youth group is, you go to stuff and there's always Bible reading, or Scripture or someone will say something, and I was going on lots of camps and hearing lots of things, which was ... I don't know what that was doing to my head at the time, probably driving me a bit crazy.

What this meant in Clarke's case was that when he did experience God for himself and decide to follow Jesus, he was already deeply embedded in a supportive faith community. As he notes, this involvement over time also had the added effect of familiarising him with the Bible and its interpretation, although he did not appreciate the value of this before his conversion. It is hard to know exactly what drove this increased involvement for participants, particularly those who were not interested in talking or thinking about God much, although it certainly gave them positive opportunities to have something to do and participate in a fun, social environment. Simon noted that he "was going to church for quite a while and I was quite involved before I even considered myself to be a Christian. I was just kind of there to help out."

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<sup>6</sup> Year 11 is the third year of High School in New Zealand, with students usually 15-16 years old.

Jeremy described how an overseas mission trip helped intensify and consolidate his faith:

I went on this missions trip ... still a bit iffy on where I was with God, and I'd been going to the youth group now, for ... four or five years, and had gotten a really tight group of mates who were all Christians, but, yeah I guess it was still just a real personal thing for me because I didn't really have anyone to share it with apart from them.... Went on this missions trip, had a great time, a great experience with God, just massive, massive faith builder.

Jeremy's experience on this trip is a good example of how a more engaging environment can give young people the opportunity to express and explore their faith on a meaningful, practical level. Prior to going on the mission trip, Jeremy was still somewhat tentative as to what role a Christian faith might play in his life. Although he was a regular attendee at youth group, he spent his weekends partying, and was engaged in a "pretty physical and not good" relationship with his girlfriend. Jeremy notes that in this time, he let himself "be dominated by what other people thought of me and how cool I thought I could be." The missions trip gave him the opportunity to spend a significant amount of time amongst a group of people with a radically different set of practices. The trip also provided an extended period of time in which Jeremy could express his faith through service to others. Other participants described their development in faith as they led younger children at church programmes, or as they increased their attendance and involvement at church.

For some participants, their interaction and experimentation with Christian practices was helped by an increase in their curiosity regarding the Christian faith. Those I interviewed who described how their curiosity grew reported how observing a particular Christian behaviour or use of language then caused them to wonder more about that thing. For example, Helen described her curiosity after sitting through a few sermons at youth group and watching her Christian friends responding verbally to what was being said. She noted, "When you've got your mates who are like, 'Yes, yeah, preach it, amen,' and you go, 'Why?' You're curious, you're like, 'Why do you respond in that way, and why do you say these things?'" Similarly, Colin described his initial response to seeing Christians worship: "Listening to the music and wondering why they're raising their hands in the air, why we're singing to somebody that I'd never met before, it was quite intriguing for me, so I wanted to know more." These participants did not report feeling unsafe or disturbed in such settings, and instead spoke of a feeling that bordered on inspiration, where their curiosity meant that they were more open to experimenting with various spiritual practices and corporate expressions of worship. At the very least this curiosity led to new questions, which were then answered either by a friend or

mentor, or simply resolved over time as the individual continued to observe Christian behaviour and deduce the motives and values that lay behind it.

## **Deciding**

The question of how and when participants decided to become followers of Jesus yields a variety of answers. As discussed in Chapter Four, it has become something of a commonly held assumption that punctiliar conversions are rare to non-existent today. I argued there that while it may be true that most conversions in New Zealand and elsewhere today do occur over a longer period, the decision to rule out punctiliar conversions entirely may be a poor one. My data set largely indicates a high prevalence of process conversions, although three participants described conversions that occurred within a short space of time and could be called “punctiliar.” A good example of this can be seen in Kahu’s story.

At age 18, Kahu found himself on the receiving end of a difficult break-up. Feeling despondent, when a friend invited him along to a church service, he accepted the invitation. Two friends accompanied Kahu to church and sat with him during the service. As the music started, Kahu had a strange sense, as if the only two people in the room were him and God. He felt something going on inside him, although he did not know what this was. When the preacher got up to speak, Kahu found himself identifying with much of what was being said. This message was the man’s personal testimony, and he shared struggles that matched those that Kahu was going through — only this man claimed he had found a resolution for those struggles in Jesus. Kahu also liked the fact that this man was Māori, the same as himself. When an invitation was offered at the conclusion of this testimony, Kahu walked to the front of the church, cried heavily, and decided to become a follower of Jesus there and then. Although he had Christian friends whom he respected, and one whom he admired for how he had turned his life around, prior to his first church visit Kahu had never thought that God was real or worth considering, nor had he ever thought to attend Christian activities. He had attended state school growing up and did not name any close family members who were Christians. Yet somehow the combination of personal crisis, meaningful spiritual experience, and strong connecting factors at a church service caused Kahu to make a commitment to Christ straight away and remain committed thereafter.

Three elements in Kahu’s story – personal crisis, meaningful spiritual experience, and strong connections – can be seen, in differing degrees, in the other two accounts of punctiliar conversion experiences within my data. Michelle, whose story is told in greater detail in Chapter Nine, emphasised more strongly the immediate sense of connection she experienced

at the church; however, while she was feeling some loneliness in everyday life, a sense of crisis as a catalyst for change was a minor factor for her. Rewai's story, told in Chapter Seven, focused more heavily on a meaningful spiritual experience, although personal crisis and connection with church were also significant factors in his decision. It is noteworthy that all three of these punctiliar experiences occurred at the same church. I interviewed four individuals in total who came to faith at this church. The fact that three of the four recount punctiliar conversion experiences, and these are the only three in my sample that do so, points to the strong influence that churches have upon how individuals understand conversion, and faith in general. It may also indicate something about spiritual experiences, and how these experiences are understood within various congregational or denominational frameworks. The small size of my sample, and the fact that I recruited interviewees by word of mouth, means that further research would be required in order to draw any strong conclusions about the significance or characteristics of that one church.

### **Opportunities to Respond**

Kahu, Rewai, and Michelle all accepted formal invitations given by a preacher to respond to the message and to any sense that they might have of God's Spirit at work in their hearts. In their context (all three came from the same church), this involved walking to the front of the church and receiving prayer from a pastor or another church leader. In Chapter Four, I discussed this dynamic of church life and some of the critiques it has received. Yet the three participants who converted immediately were not the only ones to mention altar calls or other formal opportunities to respond as features within their conversion narratives. Others, although their conversions occurred over a longer period, still recount these formal opportunities to respond as high points within the overall conversion experience. For example, Ihaia recalled the time he first chose to respond when invited in a camp session to do so, and the mixed motives he knew were driving him:

I had this idea that other people around me would probably be stoked if I got up and responded, because I'm this kid from [a low-income area in Christchurch], who they'd be like, "Oh, that guy!" I knew that, like, as a young guy, actually knew that. And I've always been a people pleaser. And so, I think I more did it out of that heart. So, I got up and I responded, and I got prayed for, and it was great. But even though I did it out of, probably the wrong intentions, God was still in it, you know. He still used that experience; he still planted a seed and it stayed there.

Ihaia talked further about the experience he had at this camp and the impact it had on his perspective of himself and of God. Yet, he still took an additional two years to fully commit himself to a Christian faith.

Ihaia was one of several participants who recounted responses to invitations given in formal settings such as church services or camp worship meetings, which they did not describe as the end of the conversion journey but more as a significant waypoint along it. Often this was a moment where choosing to be vulnerable in a public setting represented significant personal risk. It also required a level of boldness, and often resulted in a stronger sense of commitment to the journey. These responses were often accompanied by various spiritual experiences and changes of perspective. For example, when Ihaia stood up in the camp session, he recalled feeling “peace ... [and that] the judgement of others, or what others [think] about me, like it didn’t matter as much. I just felt more secure, I felt like I was loved, I was acknowledged, like God knew about me.” Similarly, Matiu also reported standing in response during a camp session and feeling “loved at that moment. I felt calm and I felt like ... for me to have at that time accepted Jesus into my heart was me beginning the process of believing the impossible.” These moments were not the end of the conversion process for either Matiu or Ihaia, but they were significant points on their conversion journeys, particularly for what they taught these participants about God and about themselves.

Seven participants described responses or commitment opportunities that were given in more informal circumstances. Helen made a commitment to follow Jesus while sitting on the floor of her church kitchen alongside a friend. Helen’s friend “just asked me, ‘Are you going to give your life [to Christ]? You’ve been coming along [to youth group] for six months and you’ve made this much progress, and this is what has changed ... what’s it going to be?’” The friends then prayed together, and Helen noted that she had “been at church ever since.” Similar to this, Martin’s commitment occurred during a post-service chat with his pastor, where he was asked if he wanted to commit his life to Jesus. After he responded affirmatively to this question, Martin described how he and his pastor “ended up praying the prayer [of commitment]” quietly together. This also signalled the beginning of Martin’s more intentional engagement with church, although he had been attending youth group for some time prior to this commitment.

### **Conversions with No Moment of Public Response**

Nine participants did not describe a moment of response or decision as an aspect of their conversion narrative. For example, Simon pointed out:

I always, like, hear people say, “Oh, on this day, such and such years ago, I decided.” I’m like, I don’t have that. It was ... a big prolonged process and I was going to church for quite a while and I was quite involved before I even considered myself to be a Christian.

Simon’s words point to an interesting dynamic that occurred for some participants. These participants had been involved in evangelical churches and attended events that emphasised one-off, punctiliar conversions, and on occasion themselves had stood in response to invitations to commit, yet they still saw their conversions as happening over a longer period. Simon, and several others, when they described the way their conversions occurred, saw this as something that was quite different to what they had heard or been taught. Ryan, another participant whose conversion happened over a longer period, indicated that his conversion narrative doesn’t fit a pattern he has heard in churches: “There was never really a definitive point, I guess. There’s no, you know, ‘I was in my rock bottom,’ or anything like that. I guess it was more of a gradual thing, and I probably can’t look back and see when it happened, but, it did, I guess.” Ryan pointed out that his narrative did not contain a “rock bottom” moment. This may be because he assumes that the absence of such a moment in his story may make it less interesting to hearers, or perhaps he has heard many testimonies in various public worship settings that emphasize a specific moment of conversion.

Finally, there were some participants who made decisions to commit their lives to Christ when they were alone, in either private or public settings. Anna was one participant who made a private decision in a public setting: having walked to the back of the meeting tent at Easter Camp to get some personal space away from the rest of her youth group, she prayed and experienced God at work. Similarly, Lincoln had wandered away from a group he was staying with at a marae (Māori meeting place) and gone for a walk around the grounds when he experienced God:

[I] went outside the marae grounds for a walk, and just went for a wander round until I was looking up at this big tree just by this bridge with this stream running across it. And I felt God very tangibly say, “I will be your path, I will guide you along it. I’ll be ... your tree, and my roots will give you strength. And I will be the stream which will take your tears away.”

Lincoln noted that this experience drove him into exploring faith: “After the marae I was like, ‘Oh this is really significant, I need to figure this thing out.’” Yet it was only upon removing himself from the group and going for a walk that this experience, and the subsequent commitment, occurred. These participants’ decisions, as well as the spiritual experiences that

preceded them, were notable for the fact that they happened privately, out of the sight of the groups of which they were a part.

### **Personal Crisis as a Factor in Conversion Decisions**

For Lincoln, a crisis, namely the tension between the behaviour of his friends at the marae and his own ideals, was a significant element of his conversion narrative.<sup>7</sup> Many other participants also experienced some level of personal crisis prior to or during their conversion journeys. While the nature of this experience varied greatly, and was by no means always clearly present, some compelling examples emerged. Caitlin experienced a significant crisis during her conversion process, when she felt as though God was calling her to forgive her father. For Caitlin, the resolution to her crisis was in accepting God's will for her life, which she also associated with the idea of becoming more authentic. This was the essence of her conversion, although it took her a few more months and several conversations with her youth pastor before she felt as though she understood what it meant.

Other participants also experienced crises as a part of their conversion journeys. For some, like Caitlin, this was a crisis of authenticity, where they realised that becoming a Christian was something that they really wanted and was a truer expression of their beliefs and desires. Often this expression had been blocked by their own choices: whether to indulge in partying and alcohol, or to become involved in a romantic relationship where faith was not important. Others made a simpler transition as they realised that the moral and ethical teaching of the church was very similar to their own values, as Kylie discovered:

I think I just couldn't let go of church, and I think more so what drew me in as well was the values of the church were very strongly linked to the values I already had ... as a person. And I kind of just, almost ... clicked, in a way.

Situations such as this make the label "crisis" difficult to apply in all circumstances. Of course, Kylie did have to decide that she wanted to become a Christian, and for her this was a distressing time because of her father's negative views on religion. Her father's response certainly caused a crisis for Kylie. Yet much of Kylie's conversion experience involved her

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, in this instance, Lincoln's actions were a marked contrast to those of the group he was staying with at the marae, who had violated *tikanga* (protocol) by choosing to eat in the *wharenui* (meeting house). It was his disgust at this action that drove Lincoln away from the group and saw him walking around the grounds of the marae at night. While Lincoln himself is not Māori, he knew enough about Māori practices and protocol to realise that his companions' choice to buy Burger King and eat it in the *wharenui* was a gross offence that disrespected the values and hospitality of the marae.

discovering a compatibility between the church's views and her own, a process that was relatively free of any obvious crisis.

Some participants, like Astrid, had to let go of stereotypes about the church that they had been taught by their families as they encountered a different, more positive experience of church than they had expected. However, even this was experienced more as a gentle realisation rather than a disturbing rupture. Four participants did not even go through this transition and appeared to experience little to no crisis of any kind as they slowly converted. Rather, these individuals tended to experience conversion as a pleasant process whereby their participation in church and youth group events slowly led to an adoption of Christian beliefs and practices with no sudden leaps or ruptures occurring. For example, Ryan noted that over the years of listening and discussing the teaching at youth group, he realised that Christian faith would add value to his life:

I guess it was ... talking about stuff, and then I'd figure out, "Hey, what I actually believe, my morals and stuff, actually are ... pretty much the same as these people." Not like, "Oh, that must mean I'm a Christian," but ... I guess at youth group and stuff you could sort of see that being a Christian, if nothing else, actually just makes you a good person.

Ryan experienced conversion as a slow, gradual journey, the waypoints of which were a series of realisations that his own held values were largely Christian to begin with. This was a similar experience to that which had happened to Kylie, as discussed above. However, Ryan had a much higher level of exposure to Christianity as a child, through both his schooling and some family members. For him, this meant that his conversion journey had almost no definitive beginning and endpoint and did not involve an experience of intense crisis or tension.

Another type of crisis that was experienced by some of participants could be termed a "crisis of despair." A good example of this is found in Clarke's story, where the sudden separation of his parents drove Clarke into a highly depressed state of mind. This experience of despair led to strange series of events:

[My parents' separation] was quite a hard experience, and so then ... life sort of fell apart. But the two things in my life that were sort of keeping me together essentially, were school and youth group.... I was on the verge, and I was, like, "Well, I'm going to kill myself, there's nothing worth living for, life's fallen apart." And I was, like, "All right God, if you're real, show me," and he knocked, sort of, the door flew open and a Bible tract fell off and opened on Joshua 1:9, which says, "Be strong because I have told you to do so." Which I took as, like, "God must be real." Don't know why, just did. And then that flicked, almost overnight, just flicked radically.

Clarke, who up until this point had rejected the idea of God's existence, was in his despair driven to reconsider the question as something of a last resort. Others also experienced God in moments or seasons of despair or were prompted to cry out to him because of the difficulties they were facing. Eight participants described crises of despair as a part of their overall conversion narratives. Generally, as was the case for Clarke, this was done in the hope that God would appear and provide some sort of solution or comfort in the midst of his personal despair.

Five participants experienced what I have termed a "crisis of spiritual reality." This was a situation where an experience of something spiritual was itself the grounds for a crisis that prompted a change. These participants generally started from a more sceptical perspective, and it was a tangible spiritual encounter that created the crisis that caused them to shift.<sup>8</sup> Those who experienced a crisis of spiritual reality were not necessarily despairing, but rather were wondering if it was all true. Anna described such a crisis:

And there was like, all these stories about this amazing God, and, like, everything he's done, and everything he continues to do, and ... I'm a very sceptical person, so I was kind of, like, "Is this really true?" And then I just saw all of these really amazing encounters at Easter Camp and I was like, "I can't deny that that's true." And I had an encounter of my own.... So, I was, like, "God, if you're real, like show me, I need proof," and then I felt ... this weird pressure on my shoulders like somebody had their hands on my shoulders. So ... sceptical me, [I] shot around to see who was touching me and nobody was there, so I kind of, like, got a little bit, like, "God, if that was you, like, I need a hug," and he sent one person that I'd, like, never spoken to at youth group before, [they] came over [and hugged me].... Just from that I knew that I could never deny that God was real.

Anna took time working through the implications of her crisis of spiritual reality. She described the 12 months following this experience as "quite an experiment year ... it had its ups and downs where I was struggling with God." While not always coming from a position of hard atheism, participants who described a crisis of spiritual reality were certainly shocked when they saw or felt God act. Their previously held beliefs had not included the idea of a God who could be experienced in such a way, so the crisis was created when these beliefs were put into question by their newfound experiences.

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<sup>8</sup> While it could be said that Clarke's experience also falls into this category, I included him in the "crisis of despair" group because ultimately it was despair that *prompted* his change.

## Tests of Faith

Some participants, as their faith grew and developed, described environments, individuals, or situations that put their newfound faith to the test. For some, these tests came from the ways in which peers or family members responded to their change of faith. Also common amongst those I interviewed were periods of doubt and questioning as they worked through the issues and implications of becoming a Christian. Māori participants experienced a different set of tests, as they negotiated their change of faith in the face of challenging behaviour and questions from both Pākehā (white) Christians and other Māori.

## Discouraging Peers

When she was fourteen, Danielle decided to become a Christian at a camp meeting. However, not long after this, she started a new relationship with a boyfriend, who over time became quite disparaging and discouraging of her faith. Alongside this, the intermediate-aged youth group where she was a volunteer leader ended. Danielle described how these two factors led to her faith slowly cooling down over a two-year period. Her boyfriend

would always make offhand comments and stuff, but he was the kind of guy that always said that about everything. And so, for ages it was fine, and then another thing was that my youth group didn't have the resources to put into the younger youth group.... I still kept leading the whole way through Year 11 but then in Year 12<sup>9</sup> it kind of stopped, so I was like, "Well, there's nowhere for me to lead." ... I guess as it got to more trivial topics and stuff like that [my boyfriend] was, like, "Well, why do you believe that? This is stupid, why do you follow these rules in this book, it's stupid," and stuff like that.... Over time because I wanted to make him happy, I started not talking about, not relying on the Bible and stuff like that.

For Danielle, who enjoyed contributing as a volunteer leader at her church's junior youth group, the removal of this opportunity to lead, combined with her relationship with a disbelieving boyfriend, led to her slowly becoming more isolated from her faith. Although she continued to attend senior youth group throughout this time, Danielle admitted that up until the relationship with her boyfriend ended, she was mainly there to see friends, and had become dismissive of the religious content being taught. Only once this relationship ended was she able to reconnect with church and with God in a more meaningful way.

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<sup>9</sup> Year 11 is the third year of High School in New Zealand, with students usually 15-16 years old. Year 12 is the fourth year, with students generally 16-17 years of age.

Rewai noted how his newfound enthusiasm for Christ evoked a strong response in some of his friends. His friends told him, “You’ve gone all straight, gone all weird.” I asked him how he felt about that:

Yeah, hurt bro. Really hurt, even today they’re still standoffish, they’re, like, “Bro that’s not going to last.” In 2009, it’s 2018, you know, 9 years for the Lord, it still hasn’t changed for me. Those guys were, like, “It’s just a phase, bro, you know, just keep coming and partying with us and doing this.” So those relationships changed. My real mates, they stayed around, they’re still in the world, they’re not Christians, but they are still my friends and they still appreciate where I’m at and I still appreciate where they’re at in their lives too. Obviously, I want them to be saved, but I don’t force that on them. I get cheeky and say, “Youse need Jesus, baby!” But they have told me God will knock on their heart when he’s ready.

As a new Christian, Rewai’s expression of faith meant that he no longer went out partying or living the same way as he had before. While this was a relatively easy transition for him, the responses of his friends clearly hurt, and their dismissal of his intent was dismaying. Rewai was not the only participant who recounted some resistance to a conversion decision.

### **Parental Responses to Conversion Decisions**

Participants described a variety of responses from their family members to their conversion decisions. They also noted the effect that family members’ responses had on their own emotional states. Kylie described how her father held a negative view towards Christianity and religion. He also enjoyed watching YouTube videos featuring prominent contemporary atheists. This led to Kylie feeling anxious and afraid to broach the subject of her new faith at home. Her family also appeared to oppose her decision in a more passive way, by organising outings at a time where she would normally attend a church service:

I remember times of them being, like, “Oh, we’re going to the movies on a Sunday night,” and I’d be, like, “Well no, I’ve got church, you know this.” And they’d always try and book family things on the Sunday nights, and I remember that ongoing battle for quite a long time of like, them almost just being, like, “You’re picking church over us, this is our family time.”

This tension resolved as Kylie’s family came to accept her decision. Yet during the time when her family were most resistant to the changes Kylie was making, she experienced significant distress and anxiety.

Kylie dealt with the conflict with her family by remaining quiet about her faith at home, whereas others who experienced points of tension with their families found themselves arguing with parents or other family members. Colin recounted that his father is

more into family, and he thinks that family's the most important thing, instead of anything else. We view family in very different ways. Like, I think of family as a relationship, like I consider my close friends at this church my brothers.... He'll say to me that they're just my friends, they're not anything more than that. That family's our blood, and stuff. So that's a big time where we clash, 'cause you, I think one of the key things that our faith teaches us is that we're all brothers and sisters. When a fundamental thing like that clashes ... we kind of butt heads every now and then.

Colin was comfortable with his parents learning about his newfound faith and felt no need to hide it from them. When he realised that this meant a diversion from the social values held by his father, it led to some conflict. However, Colin did not note any negative effect of these arguments upon his own emotional health. This was rare, as for the most part, those participants who noted negative reactions from their parents also described how this led to their own heightened experiences of stress or anxiety.

Kylie, Carla, Isaac, and Anne each recounted times where they felt as though their beliefs were being aggressively probed and questioned by family members, which they found difficult to endure. Yet they maintained their faith throughout, which for the most part was attributed to the strong levels of support they received at church and youth group:

I almost don't think I would have got through [the time where my parents were challenging my faith] without the people around me being so supportive at church. Like, [my youth workers] ... who knew what I was going through, I don't think I would have got through it without people like that actually being there on the other side. I think it would have been so much easier to just resort back to my parents' way of thinking and actually just forget about it and leave it aside.  
—Kylie

One youth leader that I really ... connected with ... lived just down the road from me. So, if I was really struggling at home, sometimes I would go down to her house, and just talk to her about what was going on, and she would pray with me. And I think having my youth pastors as well, I ... probably didn't tell them a lot of the personal stuff that was going on but I think they were really instrumental in my journey because I learnt a lot from them about how I could continue my relationship with God. —Carla

While many participants were able to describe the support they received at church and the youth leaders they particularly liked, there does seem to be some level of association between the depth of connection with supportive people at church and the individual's ability to negotiate parental pressure and stress successfully.

In total, ten participants noted a clearly negative reaction from their parents toward their change of faith. These reactions were generally experienced as negative because they

involved a significant degree of confrontation, where participants felt as though parents were actively questioning and challenging their children's choices. Five other participants described parental responses that, while not wholly negative, seemed to have some negative effect upon their children. For example, Nathan noted how his mother's behaviour changed when he first came to faith: "One thing that kind of annoyed me would be, when I first became a Christian ... I'd hit my brother, yell at my brother, and then I'd just get, 'Nathan, that's not very Christian of you,' the old typical line that kind of got to me." Similarly, Simon described how, early on in his faith journey, his mother "would actually kind of make fun of it sometimes, like she'd pick me up from church, and she'd be like, 'Oh, did you sing your hallelujahs this morning?' And I'm like, 'OK, like, if that's what you're going to be, I'm just not going to talk to you.'" Participants like Simon and Nathan, whose parents' responses were tepid at best, described the irritation this caused them as they sought to take their new faith seriously. The ways in which parents appeared to be using passive-aggressive techniques to subtly demean the value of their child's Christian faith resulted in the experience of some negative emotions, such as feeling of frustration and anxiety. While this did not appear to be as distressing as the more directly confrontational episodes described by some other participants, it was still interpreted negatively.

Some parents responded neutrally when they learned of their children's new commitment to Jesus. Here there seemed to be two distinct expressions occurring amongst parents. The first involved a deflection, a response that dismissed (albeit politely) the topic and thus insulated the parent from engaging with it at a more substantive level. For example, Sheree described her parents' response in this way:

They're OK with it. They don't have any issues with it, Mum's more or less just like, "Oh, you know, that's good, good for you," my Dad's the same, he's just like, "All right, do your thing," like, I'm 19, I can do what I want. They don't really get into the concept of God too much with me, which is OK ... I don't really talk to them about it.

Here, Sheree describes a parental response that is both neutral and dismissive, in that her parents accept the fact of her faith but make no attempt to engage with the content of it. She mentioned that she was comfortable with this — it protected her from any awkward conversations or arguments with her parents about religion — but later in the interview she spoke more about how hard she found it living in a home where faith is never discussed. This kind of neutral response, which occurred in a few cases in addition to Sheree's, could perhaps be interpreted as something of a protective strategy deployed by these parents, where they want to be supportive of their children, and in some cases can see how their Christian faith is

changing them for the better, but are nonetheless uneasy with the subject and do not engage with it in any depth. Some participants, such as Sheree, clearly identified the emotional impact of such a parental approach. Others appeared unaffected by this kind of deflection. Greta did not recall her parents ever taking much of an interest in her faith, yet noted that in this regard, “the support that [I] lacked from my parents, I got from other people, so it didn’t really bother me that much.”

Another example of a parental response that quickly deflected away from the subject of a young person’s faith occurred in Marie’s experience. She described how, while her parents “thought it was important to say grace” at the dinner table, they were “not particularly supportive of experiences of God.” Marie provided an example of a conversation with her parents where they blatantly skirted the subject of her Christian convictions:

So, we were going to Perth to start a Christian movement on a university campus. And I remember trying to explain that to Mum and Dad over Skype. And I was like, pouring my heart out, and I was, like, “I’ve become a Christian, I’ve heard the gospel, and I’m taking this with me which is why I want to go to Perth. And I really want to tell other people about this, because it’s life-changing news.” And they were both, like, “Oh, yeah! I mean, Perth sounds like a nice place to go for a holiday! It’s only a week, you could really enjoy it over there, it will be lovely and warm!” Like, they totally ignored the purpose.

Here Marie described feeling frustrated by her parents and their response. This frustration for participants whose parents appeared to intentionally avoid any discussion of Christian things was largely rooted in their need to have their new faith taken seriously by those close to them. Because they took it seriously (after all, they had gone against the established beliefs of close family in taking on this new faith), they wanted others to affirm that level of sincerity.

The more subtly negative responses of the parents of Simon, Nathan, and Marie, as well as a few other participants, are not as aggressive as the reactions of the parents of Kylie, Colin and eight other participants, but these responses indicate an unwillingness of parents to engage with this sincerity of faith, and instead distance themselves from it by either deflection or passive-aggressive techniques. This then leaves the young person believing that their sincerity of faith is not something the parent really wants to engage with, compounding the sense of isolation that they are already experiencing, having chosen to go against the grain by committing to Christ.

Two participants described parents who were happy to engage with Christian ideas in a positive way. This was by far the rarest response, although another participant mentioned that

her grandmother was interested in discussing faith with her. Wade noted that his mother, herself not a churchgoer, encouraged him in his faith:

She's just really happy, she's really supportive, and happy that I'm actually doing something that I love. She's happy that I'm actually doing something. And then, you know, she said to me one day, "You know, granddad would be really proud of you. He's up there, he's so proud of you." She was just really supportive, my Mum's really supportive of what I do.

Thirteen participants spoke specifically about the hope that they held for their parents, that one day they too would come to accept Christ. In some cases, this hope was despite some initial negativity from parents. Ten participants described how over time their parents had become more accepting of their child's new faith and had begun to engage with it in less antagonistic or passive-aggressive ways, and instead involved a greater level of mutual respect and earnest questioning. Carla described this change in her mother's attitude. At first, her mother was suspicious as to the motives behind Carla's conversion, worried that her church would eventually begin controlling her life and turning her into a more judgemental and narrow-minded person. When she saw positive changes in Carla, her attitude changed:

My Mum's actually got to the point now where she ... started actually really listening to the stories that I was telling her. Like, I would go to night service and stuff like that, and would come back and be like, "Oh my gosh, this person got healed," or like, "This person got this word for me tonight," or, like, "This is what the person talked about tonight," or just tell her stories about it. And then ... last year she actually told me that she actually believes in God again. And she's been kind of like on a very, very slow journey of, like, coming back to God I think. Because she's been coming to church with me and stuff like that.

Key to Carla's hope for her parents was her belief that her own example would effect a change in their perspectives, as they saw how her conversion to Christ was less about joining some sort of controlling, cult-like group and more a growth in positive traits and a relationship with a dynamic, active God. Other participants held similar hopes, in that they saw their lives as a tool that could potentially reverse some of the negative stereotypes of Christianity held by their family members. Participants were realistic about this process, holding their hope alongside an honest recognition as to some of the potential barriers that could slow or block this change in perspective. Jeremy was another participant who gave a good assessment of this as it pertained to changes he had observed in his mother:

My Mum has sort of opened up to Christianity a little bit recently.... It's a real hard thing to talk to her about because she hasn't had the best past with it, in terms of her upbringing stuff. My grandma, so her Mum, was a very, I'd say orthodox Christian ... sort of very controlling in a sort of way, I don't want to say that

because she's a lovely person, but, yeah, the church just wasn't a healthy place for [my Mum] when she was growing up, so she doesn't really ever want to talk about it.... But ... I have had conversations with her, and, yeah, she's told me she's praying every now and again and stuff, which is really awesome to hear.

Jeremy was one of seven participants who reported having a parent or parents that had been raised in the church as children but had left as adults.

### **Doubt and Questioning**

Ten participants reported periods of doubt and significant questioning as they navigated their way through Christian conversion. These constituted a mixture of perspectives, with participants wondering why God felt absent, questioning the validity of their own spiritual experiences, and wondering about God's existence. One participant, Wade, had an experience that led him to reject the notion of a good God entirely for a significant period of time:

When I was 17, my brother passed away as well [as my grandfather]. My brother got found in New Brighton huffing butane. So that was quite like, within the year [they both died], and ... literally that there is what made me fall off God. I was like, "Bro, that's my family. That's my granddad gone, and my brother. My brother's like twelve, bro, and he's gone, he didn't even live a life, like, that's nothing."

Wade had been attending a local youth group and had made some commitments to Christian faith before the events described in this quotation occurred. However, the trauma of experiencing the deaths of his brother and his grandfather meant that he lost any desire to trust God or believe in God's goodness. Wade then spent some years away from church and faith before eventually returning as a young adult.

Six of the ten participants who described experiencing doubt and questions about their faith then went on to discuss how these struggles were resolved. For example, Erica described such an inner struggle, which occurred after her initial conversion decision:

I had this real period of time where I was just, like, "Man, is this actually worth it? Is this actually anything, or is this all in my head?" Yeah. "Is this God, or is this me making up something and claiming it to be God in my life?" ... And I remember going to, I think it was the morning service, which I didn't go to super often, and kind of walking in and being like, "I need some answers, like, I've got nothing at this point, and this is just pointless." And I remember in my head, sitting down the back and just being like, "OK, I need something this morning." ... I remember they had an opportunity for people to be prayed for, and people to come forward, and so I was like, "All right then." And so, I went forward to the front, and I remember in my head being, like, "OK God, if you're actually legit, I need some answers right now, or I'm walking out and I'm not coming back."

Erica is grateful that the opportunity to walk to the front of the church and receive prayer was provided, because it resulted in a significant spiritual experience for her that morning which confirmed her faith and encouraged her to continue. The tension and doubt that she felt had resulted in her unabashedly offering God an ultimatum.

However, four participants did not draw a clear line between their questions about God and some sort of clear resolution to these questions. Wade is one example of this. While his experiences, as recounted above, prompted questions about God's goodness, his return to church was more to do with accepting the support of God and his church family. Wade realised that he was a "broken person," and that "the Holy Spirit [was] using others ... to show that he is there for me." Similarly, Ihaia's doubts were not directly resolved. He described how even at the time of our interview he had "a lot of unanswered questions ... [such as] if God is real, then why this [situation]?" Yet Ihaia also held to the belief that while "I've never actually received answers, but for some reason just in my spirit, I'm so convinced that God is with me, that God is real. So I actually didn't need the answers." These participants, who did not have their questions directly addressed, nonetheless were able to point to ways in which their experiences of God had helped them think differently about their doubts.

### **Tensions Unique to Māori Participants**

While many of these pressures were most keenly felt when they occurred in close relationships, it is important to note at this point that for Māori participants, a source of stress was the gaps they observed between the culture of their churches and the culture of their ethnicity. This occurred in two ways. Some Māori participants experienced tensions with Pākehā (white) Christians, as they began engaging with churches and expressing faith from within their own worldviews. Also common were experiences of tension between Māori Christians and other Māori, who saw their conversions as a capitulation to a colonial, Western worldview.

The first of these, tensions between Pākehā and Māori Christians, was a source of some discomfort for several participants:

I have definitely noticed that there is such a thing as white privilege, even here in New Zealand. And I can just see that in the way that the church operates. Being a Māori that goes to church having not always been a Christian, one thing I noticed when I came in was that there were already a lot of established friendships, and that it was really hard to get in.... And so for me to have come in by myself, as a Māori, and have a different worldview, it definitely ... has caused issues, but I

don't think the issues are really to do with them ... having a bad idea of me or anything like that. I don't think that's the problem, I think it's more to do with, it's hard to understand each other because they don't understand my cultural background and my worldview and my experiences as to why I am the way I am.  
—Matiu

A lot of Christians are like, "You've got to give up your Māoridom, bro. You can't believe in that stuff anymore. You shouldn't even speak it anymore, you're a Christian now." And so for me, I shun stuff like that, like, "Bro, you don't know revelation. God's given me revelation." —Rewai

Māori participants who discussed this idea were aware that tension existed on both sides: while they, in some cases, found it hard to adapt to particular Pākehā ideas and practices within the church context, they were gracious in acknowledging the times where they could see Pākehā struggling to understand their views.

Maia, who initially left the church after hearing a sermon in which she felt as though her worldview as a Māori was being deemed incompatible with Christianity, eventually returned to faith and church, now aware that her views might make some people uncomfortable, but confident in her position nonetheless:

I now am not afraid to say Ranginui and Papatūānuku [Māori gods], but I know that can make people feel really uncomfortable. But ... I'm OK with that, because at the end of the day I know that the Lord is the most highest, because, you can give things over to the cross, you know, and he's got so much grace, and he's just beautiful, and the whole salvation, you know, that he could do that for us, is incredible.... So, I'm not intimidated, I don't feel uneasy at the fact that I can say Ranginui and Papatūānuku and acknowledge [pause] whatever, because, he is still king of all kings.... I definitely do sense some people, when I speak about my identity, they see that ... I'm such a proactive Māori, that they can feel a little bit intimidated, 'cause they feel like, I don't know, maybe that there's a fine line between [pause] worshipping something where it's not Jesus, or not. I don't actually really know what they feel, but I'm totally OK with that.

Maia, alongside other Māori participants, was confident that there was a way in which Māori perspectives and Christian faith could coexist. All seven Māori interviewees described moments when they were confronted with Pākehā perspectives on faith that were unwittingly racist. This was generally the case when Pākehā Christians perceived a tension to exist between the Māori worldview and the Christian faith. The only solutions they were able to offer for this tension, however, involved Māori suppressing or modifying their own worldviews, rather than these Christians allowing Māori understandings to impact their own Pākehā worldviews.

Following their conversion to Christianity, some tensions occurred for Māori participants between them and other members of their own culture. Two participants recounted

experiences of acknowledging Jesus while speaking formally on a marae,<sup>10</sup> and the various responses this evoked from others in attendance. For example, Rewai described how after praying “in front of all these Māori” on his marae, some approached him and asked, “Bro, why do you say thank you to God for?” Rewai notes that this is because some Māori “still have bitterness about what happened with the early missionaries, and how slavery came, and all of that killing and taking of land.” Others, like Maia, described the various Māori worldviews regarding spirituality and how they now understand these in light of their Christian faith. For the most part, this entailed them retaining careful respect of Māori tikanga (processes) and kaupapa (principles) while also being proud of their newfound life in Christ. Anaru explained why and how he does this:

Whenever I stand on my marae, whenever there’s an opportunity to speak, ... I acknowledge the Lord, him alone.... I’ll tell you why. When I was calling out, when I was suicidal in the psychiatric ward, no offense to our culture, but actually, none of those things that claimed to be gods came to my aid. They didn’t, they just didn’t. And maybe ... they could be forces that are real, but what I like about Ihu Karaiti [Jesus Christ] that sets himself apart from every spiritual force is that actually he’s there for the individual. He’s there for us. And no power oversees him, you know what I mean.... When I was in desperate need, I look back, I know that it was God who came to my aid. And that’s what he’s ... there for, he does what he does best still, you know.... My mind has heaps of Scriptures right now, you know, “He heals the wounds of the broken hearted.” You’ll never discover anything about Tāne Mahuta, the god of the forest, healing the wounds of the broken hearted.... And so, when I’m on the marae, there’s a mutual respect that I have ... I love our Māori culture ... a lot of our core values actually line up with Christian values.

Anaru, like most Māori participants, was comfortable acknowledging and respecting traditional Māori spirituality and processes, while also confident that Jesus was the God who had made a meaningful difference in his life and to whom he had pledged his allegiance.

Significant from a contextual standpoint is the fact that four of the seven Māori participants (Kahu, Anaru, Rewai, and Ripeka) all came from the same church. This church is known for its much higher level of Polynesian and Māori attendance and cultural integration, and such a context likely made the process of working out what it can mean to be a Māori Christian that much easier for these participants. The four who came from the same congregation did seem to have a slightly more positive view on these issues. However, it is hard to make any definitive claims about this because of my small sample. Also, while these four were more

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<sup>10</sup> The term “marae” in Māori language can refer, broadly speaking, to a complex of buildings and land that function as a meeting place for the members of a particular tribe; it can also refer more specifically to a courtyard that is present within this facility and is located in front of the main meeting house. In this chapter, both I and the Māori participants are using the term in its broader sense.

positive about their church experiences, they had also experienced tensions and racial difficulties.

### **Completion of the Journey**

There were two common ways that participants were able to identify the point at which they believed their conversion had been completed. In some cases, this was in response to a direct question being posed to them during the interview. In other instances, it was apparent in their descriptions of moments where they looked back at recent experiences and realised that God had been at work in their lives. These realisations then helped these participants see how far God had brought them over that period of time.

### **The Duration of the Conversion Process**

I often asked those I interviewed how long they thought their conversion journey had taken.<sup>11</sup> This question yielded a variety of answers, but for those who saw their conversions as happening over a longer period of time, there were some common themes. Ten participants identified the end of their conversion process by describing certain level of belief or practice that they had attained, which they associated with being a fully committed Christian. For example, Astrid, as she reflected on her journey, realised that although she had started her faith journey at a camp meeting where she was invited to respond, her actual conversion took a little longer than that:

Now reflecting on it, I would say [it took] quite a while. Then, I probably would have said that one night, but obviously it wasn't just the one night, it took a long time of learning and it probably wasn't the actual night, it was the time afterwards as well. So, probably like, six months.

Similarly, Caitlin, although she too had made a decision at a camp meeting, notes how her conversion journey took the better part of a year, as “the process of understanding what Christianity was and what it meant to actually follow took quite a while.”

Six other participants described the end of their conversion process as when they reached a point of full commitment or passion towards Jesus and their faith. Nathan described how his conversion took a significant amount of time, and measured its end by talking about his own increased desire to commit to church and to one day become a volunteer leader at youth group. When I asked him how long he would say it took for him to become a Christian, he

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<sup>11</sup> Some told me without needing to be asked.

responded, “I’d say at least a couple of years, like dedicating to going to church, to going to youth group. But mainly when I started to feel like I needed to do more for God.” Others measured the end of the process by describing the point at which they were confident that becoming a Christian was something they wanted. This was a particularly important point for some participants whose parents were outspoken against Christian faith and showed some resistance to their children’s increased involvement at youth group and church.

Other participants simply answered the question as to how long their conversion took by providing an estimated period of time, with no elaboration. However, these participants also often concluded their conversion narratives by talking about either a stable level of Christian practice and belief, or a firm and passionate commitment to Jesus. Even the three more punctiliar conversion narratives were followed by periods of learning and discussion, although these participants would have associated this part of their faith journey more with discipleship than necessarily as a part of their conversion experience. Michelle noted that, after the initial church service in which she made her commitment, she stayed behind afterwards, and she and a few people from the church “just kind of hung [around] ... [and] got a sense of ‘this is what it means to be Christian.’” While Michelle mentioned how it took her a few months to learn what it meant to be a Christian, she associated her conversion with a strong sense of commitment, which was something she had attained by the end of the first church service she attended.

### **Seeing God at Work in Conversion**

Some participants also spoke of how, during their conversion journeys, they believed that the presence of God was in some way involved in their conversion process, in some sort of background way. This is not meant to imply that these participants are inserting new events into old experiences, but rather that their post-conversion theological understanding then shapes how they understand and relay their conversion journey. This is a widely accepted point within conversion studies,<sup>12</sup> and here I simply present some examples within my own research that confirm this idea. Helen noted how her own reflection on the events leading up to her conversion influenced her final decision, in that she had begun to realise how the Spirit of God may have been at work in her:

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<sup>12</sup> Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 99; Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study on the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 21, f.n. 103; David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 173.

So, I think for a 14 year old to be crying in front of a group of guys, that they're best friends with, was kind of a very weird kind of thing, but it just happened. And then it wasn't until the end I think, where I went, "OK, I've developed an understanding of who God is, and the Holy Spirit, and I can see that in the last six months this is what God's been doing."

Helen realised that, over a six-month period of attending youth group, she had spent a lot of time crying in worship and in response to what was going on in the youth services. She then surmised that this was something she would have normally held back from doing, for fear of looking silly in front of some of the boys who were there. She then interpreted her ability to cry regardless of this potential shame as evidence of God's Spirit at work in her life. For Helen, this reflection occurred prior to her final decision to commit her life to Christ. Other participants also factored this sort of interpretation of experiences into their conversion journeys, wondering what could have possibly possessed them to do or think a certain thing, and surmising that it must have been a spiritual agent at work within them. Yet there were also some who only made this association well after they had committed themselves to Christ. For example, Sheree described how she now sees her decision to start attending youth group as evidence of God's work in her life prior to her conversion:

You know when you don't know God's, like, pushing you into something, and like, he wants the best for you and that sort of stuff, that was what he was doing for me the first time I went to youth group, when they first prayed for me.... He was pushing me to do that without me even knowing.

Sheree only developed this understanding (that God could be at work in the background, influencing decisions and events) once she had become a Christian, which then in turn transformed her perception of her own conversion journey. Ten participants described conversion experiences where they later concluded that particular events or sensations were evidence of the work of God. In five of these cases, these conclusions were made during the conversion process, and they aided individuals in their decision making. In the other five examples, theological insights developed after conversion were then used in ways that shaped the telling of the narrative.

### **Faith in Action**

For some participants, accepting new opportunities to contribute at church or youth group in a voluntary capacity was mentioned as a natural result of their conversion experience. While many of those I interviewed described increased involvement in Christian ministries over time, for some this occurred before, and even during, their conversion processes. These

participants' experiences fit more readily into the "interacting" theme in this chapter. What is being explored here, however, are instances where participants described how, towards the end of their conversion journeys, they chose to engage more in Christian activities, describing this choice as a consequence of something that had impacted them while they were on the journey into faith.

For example, Lincoln described how as a young convert, he took the first chance he was given to express his faith in an evangelistic context:

One of the interesting experiences I had through [church] was, there was a guy called Greg Laurie came to town... So [our youth pastor] got me and another one of the other new ones out like, doing the street evangelising with their teams, six months into being a Christian maybe. And then going along to the event and leading people in prayer and everything. I was very young. And very, like, I didn't know what I was doing, but I was happy to do what I was told.

Although Lincoln was still working out some of the implications of his new faith, he was keen to be involved in supporting the Greg Laurie crusade and follow his youth pastor's direction.

Michelle spoke about how important it was for her, when she first attended church, to be greeted and to have the greeter politely inquire as to how she was doing. Some years after this, she herself decided to join the church greeting team. Michelle reflected on this link:

It's funny to me because for the last two or three years I've served on the team of people who greet people at the door. And it has totally been my heart because I remember. Someone talked to me the very first day, my first night at [church], so I know how important that is. It's been cool to kind of, be like, "I do remember that person coming to say hello to me." And I remember totally shutting them down, like, "Don't talk to me." But it softly stuck, in terms of feeling connection and that kind of thing.

Michelle spent several years serving as a volunteer in her church greeting team, only stepping down recently to pursue service in different areas.

Similarly, a big factor in Ihaia's decision to become a youth worker was his own high school youth worker's involvement in Ihaia's life and conversion to Christianity. Several other participants also mentioned that the reason they are volunteer youth leaders at their churches now is due to the important roles their own youth leaders played in helping them come to faith. For example, Nathan described how, towards the end of his conversion journey, "I started striving to become a youth leader at the youth group, so when I graduated from being a

youth, then maybe I'd get the opportunity to become a leader and be one of those role models that [my youth pastor] was for me.”

Other participants mentioned or were involved in various ministries, although they did not make any strong link between their reasons for being involved in these ministries and their own conversion experiences. However, Ryan did point out how one of the big factors that has helped him consolidate and continue in his faith has been his involvement with other Christians in various settings during the week. He attends a Bible study, is a volunteer leader at his youth group, and works alongside Christian colleagues at his job. He recalled some friends who had shown some interest in Christianity during their high school years, but then dropped out when youth group ended. Ryan assumed that those friends had decided to “turn to another peer group to get that community feel,” while he had consciously chosen to remain a part of his church community even after outgrowing the youth group. Although this thesis does not explore in any depth the factors that consolidate a young faith and cause it to endure, ministry involvement appears to be an important factor for many converts as they seek to express and understand their faith.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the common waypoints participants described as they narrated their conversion journeys. While these things often occurred in a similar order, this process is not intended to be a strictly chronological one, as individual experiences varied, and some participants experienced the latter waypoints before they had completed or seriously engaged with those which I have placed earlier in the chapter. Within each waypoint, there was some variation, particularly when it came to how participants described their points of decision. For some, this was in response to a clear invitation, while others could not recount any clear moment of public decision and were not entirely sure exactly when they had decided to become Christians. Other common factors, such as potentially relevant life experiences prior to adolescence, and the tests of faith a new convert might face, also occurred differently for each participant. Some had no exposure to Christian things in their childhood years, while others reported positive engagement with Christians and church programmes. Māori participants faced their own challenges converting to Christianity, and this on top of the various tests of faith that were common across the ethnicities represented in my sample.

This and the previous two chapters have outlined the findings that relate to the sub-questions regarding participants' interaction with the church, the consequences of their spiritual experiences, and their conversion processes. Much of what I found in the interview transcripts

fit naturally within each of these categories and provided a rich amount of context with which I could examine those sub-questions. However, there was a fourth category of experience which also emerged from the data, one with significant theological and practical implications. The final chapter of this findings section will outline and discuss this discovery.

## Chapter Nine: The Match

I went into this research wanting to investigate three major areas of the conversion journeys of those I interviewed: any relevant or significant aspects of church that mattered to participants, the consequences of any spiritual experiences that they deemed significant, and the duration and nature of their conversion process. In Chapters Two through Four, I laid out some of the existing research in each of these areas. I also noted, in both Chapters One and Five, that the research methodology for this project allows for new and significant findings that fall outside of these four categories. This is firstly because my primary research question was about the conversion experience in general: I wanted to know, what are the experiences of young people converting to Christianity from secular homes in Canterbury, New Zealand? The inductive thematic analysis I used as I grouped the data into various themes naturally created data sets that, for the most part, fit easily into the three major themes I reported on above. However, what is outlined below is a significant theme that did not naturally fit anywhere in Chapters Six through Eight.

A significant occurrence for many participants during their conversion journeys was an unexpected degree of congruity between one of their own emotional or practical needs and something that they encountered in the Christian world. I have termed this “the match,” because it refers to a high level of synchronicity between personal need and present experience — essentially, the experience resolved the need. Moreover, this match was often something that the individual was not looking for or expecting to find in their engagement with Christian things. Of my 32 participants, 26 described situations that could be categorised as involving a certain level of match between their need and something they experienced, usually at church or youth group. These experiences generally occurred within the following set of conditions:

1. Participants’ initial reasons for engaging with Christianity were quite mundane, usually just in response to an invitation from a friend to attend an event
2. Therefore, participants were not expecting much from Christianity, and most were not on any kind of intentional spiritual search
3. Thus, when something personally meaningful occurred in this context, it was often either
  - a. a *surprise* to the participant, in that what was occurring to them was unexpected, or
  - b. a *contrast* with their current life experience, in that what they observed happening was a pleasant difference to daily life
4. What occurred for each participant in this category was usually something deeply meaningful that clearly spoke to a closely held personal issue or concern

As can be seen in the above list, participants, for the most part, were simply not expecting much of the church.

As noted in Chapter Eight, most of those I interviewed ended up at a Christian event because somebody invited them, and they reasoned that whatever event they were being invited to sounded like fun. Two participants in this group, Anaru and Ripeka, do stand out, as they began attending Christian events with a slightly higher level of intent. Anaru went along to a youth group clearly interested in discussing spiritual questions. However, in his case, Anaru did not believe that there was any merit to the notion of God's existence. He was more interested in disconfirming the existence of God, therefore when he did have his own experience of a match, it still came as a shock. For Ripeka, when she was eighteen, she decided to pray and explore the possibility of faith:

When I was about 18, I actually prayed to God and said, "Lord, I don't know if I'm doing this right or whatever, but I really want to get to know you more." That's all I said, and then two weeks later this guy at the bus exchange in town ... invited me along to church, to a youth group.... At that time when he said that, I just knew straight away that that was [God] answering that prayer, so I was, like, "Whoah, this is cool."

Ripeka's needs were met in a way that was both meaningful and surprising, and for those reasons I have included her in this group. However, it is also apparent from the above quote that she, like Anaru, had at least some level of clear interest in the question of God and his relevance to her life. For almost all the other participants, their reasons for attending Christian events were much mundane than Anaru and Ripeka's. These almost random decisions to attend church, youth group, or a Christian conference set the backdrop for the ideas of surprise and contrast described in this chapter. Like Anaru and Ripeka, when these participants encountered something that was deeply meaningful to them, it came as a surprise.

This sense of match between a young person's experience and an aspect of a church ministry varied from person to person, but three common categories of experience emerged from the data:

1. An aspect of the Christian community matched the young person's felt needs or desire for community
2. A spiritual experience matched a deep emotional need in the young person
3. The relevance or authenticity of faith witnessed in others matched the desire for this same kind of virtue in the young person

The immediate outcomes of these moments varied greatly between participants, but as a general rule, the experiences of match increased both the attraction to faith and the pursuit of it for the young people involved.

### **Finding Community**

The Christian community, whether a youth group or church congregation, provided several key moments of match for many participants. Their new experience of Christian community felt or functioned like a family, a place where they could build close relationships of mutual care and support. The youth group or church also provided de facto parental figures (for example, in the form of a youth pastor or youth worker) to those who had lacked such care in their biological families. Others described a community of inclusivity, warmth, and sanctuary.

### **Finding Family**

Helen is one of six children in her blended family. Her father passed away due to suicide when she was young, and her mother remarried. She described feeling different to her siblings, noting that she felt like the “nerdy overachiever in a family of ... very thin, very makeup-clad beauty therapists.” Church provided a new sense of family for Helen. Early spiritual experiences developed into a deeply intimate relationship with God as Father. A key group of peers at church, both male and female, grew to care for and understand Helen. She notes that this combination of connection to God and these friends “has absolutely been key in solidifying my faith.” Yet Helen did not go to church looking for a family. She was almost there by accident, invited along by her friend following a funeral that had been held in the church auditorium that afternoon.

Six other participants – Anna, Anaru, Carla, Nathan, Clarke, and Caitlin – told similar stories, describing the ways in which their relationships at church deepened and provided a new feeling of family. Key for many of these participants was the *contrast* they noticed between their biological families and their church family. Anna loved how youth group was a place with a strong family feel, within which people were welcoming, loving, and accepting of difference. This was a contrast to her experience of family, which she described as being “not that supportive [while I was] growing up.” Similarly, Clarke described how, during a period when family life was particularly difficult, his youth group became “a place of belonging, where I felt loved and cared about, because I wasn’t really getting that at home.”

### ***Finding a Caring Parental Figure***

Helen, Anna, Matiu, Rewai, Anaru, and Carla described how the notion of God as a father was significant for them. Helen observed that “having a father figure [God] who was willing to listen in that time of trouble is a really appealing thing.” This was a contrast to her present experience, where her biological father had passed away seven years earlier, and her relationship with her stepfather was fractious. God’s nature as a loving father was a theological truth that some participants found deeply comforting as they compared it to their own experiences of being parented as children. Anna was another participant who made this comparison, although she described how when she first began hearing about how God was a loving father, she found this difficult to understand. Anna notes that this was because “growing up, my father was quite abusive and not a very nice man to me, so, the idea of having a loving father was kind of weird.” God’s nature as a loving father was a key point of match for some of those I interviewed. Often these participants’ fathers, like those of Helen and Anna, were absent or abusive.

Some participants found the need for a caring parental figure met in a more concrete form. Nathan described how he viewed his youth pastor as a father figure. When asked why he thought his youth group was a place where he “felt at home,” Nathan said that “because I didn’t really have a father figure ... my youth pastor, he pretty much became my father figure.” Nathan’s own father had left when he was younger, and he grew to deeply admire his youth pastor and appreciate his care. A similar match can be seen in Caitlin and Ihaia’s stories, although they did not directly label their youth leaders as parental figures in the same way that Nathan had. Caitlin, whose father had left when she was younger, described how her youth pastor “has a really big heart for people, and has a way of engaging people and wanting to get to know the person based on mutual interests or getting to know you on a personal level, not just as another face in the crowd.” Caitlin, the oldest child of six, felt a certain sense of isolation within her own family, and the care and interest she received from her youth pastor seemed to meet this isolation head on with a genuine level of interest in Caitlin as an individual. This was a contrast from her experience at home, given her father’s absence and her mother’s choice to delegate tasks and responsibilities to her oldest daughter, with Caitlin feeling as though she was often “stuck playing the older sibling that had to be the parent.”

### ***Finding a Caring Community***

Some participants drew a contrast between the sort of mutual care they observed occurring at church, and their experiences of other social environments, generally at school, where there

was less concern for the wellbeing of others. Kylie described how when she first attended an evening church service, she was impressed by the level of mutual support and love that she saw. This sense of mutual care and community was one of the things she admired most about church when she first began attending:

At school I think I was seeing people ... always like, friends one minute, then they were talking behind each other's backs. [Yet at church] ... I saw people who were just genuine and actually just all cared about each other and if someone was going through something, they might not even have known them, but they'd go and talk to them and either pray for them or help them. I think I saw that and was, like, "I want to be like that, I want to actually be able to just care for people I don't even know and be able to talk to people I don't know and actually be able to help someone one day." ... I think that was just the biggest thing, seeing a whole room of people who ... were just loving everybody.

Kylie had come to church not really knowing what to expect, but soon she was able to draw a clear contrast between the type of community she observed there and that which she was experiencing at school. This was an experience of match for Kylie: she had not initially gone along to church or youth group looking for a new kind of community. However, when she discovered this at church, it was both a surprise and a contrast, and also something meaningful in that it provided the kind of community that Kylie realised she really wanted to be a part of.

Similarly, when Colin first began attending youth group, he noticed the kind and accepting way in which the people there treated him. Colin described how youth group gave him

that overwhelming feeling of just being accepted, which is what I really wanted at that time. I went through primary school and ... the first part of high school being quite bullied and wanting to have a space where I was accepted. So, coming along to this group of people and having them not call me names or something like that was really different to me.

For Colin, being included and not bullied at youth group and church was both a contrast and a surprise. It also met Colin's need to feel accepted, even though this was not the reason he had initially ended up attending youth group.

Most participants had generally assumed before first attending church and youth group that it would be something fun to do and as such provide a positive break. In many cases, as demonstrated above, what they encountered at church exceeded these expectations. However, for Maia, her first church service was an unexpected and shocking contrast from her life at home:

I remember standing in these rows, and thinking, “What on earth is going on here? These people are crazy!” ... And the reason why I thought they were crazy is because, why is everyone singing and clapping on Sunday, because Sunday is not a good day! Sunday is when Mum goes to the pub, gets drunk, comes home, and yells the house down, and then you haven’t got your homework done, so you’re all stressed.... I looked over and there was this family: this Mum, Dad, and children.... And they looked at me and smiled, and then the husband held the wife’s hand, and they, like, cuddled into their children. You know, just a solid family unit.... I wasn’t even thinking, “Oh, I like this church.” I was just amazed with, “Whoah, there’s a Mum and a Dad that are married, that are holding hands, they’re happy on Sunday, and they have their children, and they’re a tight family unit.” ... I was just almost perplexed over the situation.

Maia noted that if her mother drank rum on Sunday, “she would ... pick an argument with someone and then just be arguing.... I remember sometimes she would just walk past somewhere and then she would just be shouting at us.... Sunday would always end up with me crying, because it was always an unhappy day.” While she was not explicitly searching for a space in which she could have some respite from these events, this was what church provided for Maia. Both here and later in her conversion journey, following her exit from an abusive relationship, church was a place of sanctuary and stability. This was a matching experience for Maia, as her experience of church provided something that addressed issues of deep personal concern.

Ihaia also contrasted his experiences as a child with the sort of life he observed at youth group, most notably in his youth leader. Ihaia found in his youth leader the consistency he lacked in his home life:

Growing up, it was just super inconsistent people in my life, like even my own mother.... So initially, being, like, “Oh, man, this is someone who is just around all the time,” was like, cool. And then ... [my youth leader] was just super vibrant, you know, like he was just stoked off life.... The guy loved God.... He had a pretty sturdy faith and life.... He had structure to his life, or so it seemed, you know, and structure was also something that was not always around when I was a kid.... He’d go out of his way for me, he’d pick me up and take me to youth group ... he’d go the extra mile, and I guess I’d never really had anyone go the extra mile, or it didn’t feel like it.

Significantly, in Ihaia’s case, when he first began interacting with his youth leader, he was also experiencing a greater level of stability at home, as he had moved in with his father, who was able to provide him a better level of care and attention. Yet, Ihaia notes how when he was being raised by his mother, he was largely bereft of a caring adult who demonstrated any consistency or structure. He was impressed by these traits in his youth leader, and over time began to observe the same in other youth leaders at his church. This was a matching

experience for Ihaia, in that as he observed the consistency of his youth leader and also of the other leaders at youth group, it met his need for a place where there were people who would act consistently and kindly toward him, which was a contrast with his home life as a child.

In various ways, then, the Christian community provided participants with an alternative picture of how a community could function, which was often a surprise to them. Some of those I interviewed drew contrasts between their experiences at home and school, and the care they saw occurring at church. Some of those who grew up in difficult family environments were delighted to discover a new level of family and of fatherhood at church. While the experience of fatherhood was in some cases associated with a youth leader or other caring adult, it was sometimes directly attributed to God by participants. As well as help participants feel more “at home” at church, this introduction of an alternative father figure also provided a sense of emotional stability. For other participants, the ways in which their experiences of a match met them at a point of emotional need were even more apparent.

### **Finding a New Way of Feeling**

For some participants, their experiences of a match involved a significant change in how they felt about themselves, or others, or a personal situation that they were facing. Often these experiences were deeply surprising, particularly for those individuals who may not have seriously entertained the thought of God’s existence or relevance prior to the events taking place. These experiences addressed many deep-seated emotional issues such as a lack of self-worth, emotional wounds, and unforgiveness.

For some participants, their experiences of a match constituted moments where they discovered a new sense of self-worth or personal affirmation via their encounters with God. This was often a contrast to currently held beliefs about their own value. For example, Joel slowly began to accept that “you can press into Jesus.... He will forgive you.... You are forgiven no matter what you’ve done.” Joel felt as though there was “all this crud” in his life and was amazed to slowly learn that he no longer needed to be so hard on himself for past decisions made. Similarly, Carla described how an early message and spiritual experience at Easter Camp changed her self-concept. She was blown away by the notion that God would want to have a relationship with her. This idea was both a surprise and a contrast with the deep sense of feeling unloved that Carla held at that time. Intrigued by this idea, Carla responded to a message where the personal love of God was the main theme. Yet, it really sunk in the following night at camp, when she cried at length in response to a tangible sense of God’s Spirit.

Just the act of crying for that amount of time was quite healing because afterwards I remember just feeling ... emptied out. Like, I'd just gotten out a lot of that hurt.... The fact that God loved me and wanted a relationship with me ... that was such a life-changing revelation that I'd had, and that in itself had healed a lot in me because I'd realised, "Actually, someone does love me."

The idea that she was loved by God was a deeply healing discovery that addressed Carla's negative self-concept head-on. This issue of deep concern was addressed through both a preached message and a spiritual experience, each of which communicated to Carla a new truth about God's love for her.

A similar outcome occurred for Rewai, although over a longer period. He too struggled to hold a positive view of himself, noting that before his conversion he acted like a "dickhead," and was deeply insecure. Abuse suffered as a child had also left a lasting negative impact. Yet in Rewai's early spiritual experiences, he discovered the love of God on a deeply personal and moving level. Rewai reflected on how this early revelation slowly changed his self-concept:

There is a God that really does care ... that cares so much that he'd reach out his arms for someone like me who was raised around Mongrel Mob, whose Dad was a patch member,<sup>1</sup> whose family had a real bad name. A person who was addicted, bound, like, unforgiving, playboy, a dickhead, really. That there's a God who loves someone like me, that would choose someone like me, to do his works, just blows my mind. So, there's hope for people that have come from backgrounds like me.... If I was to speak to someone that was fatherless right now, or bound in chains of iniquity or whatever, or bound in whatever sort of way, I'd let them know that the weight that they're carrying isn't theirs, that the weight that's on their shoulders isn't theirs to carry, the burden of things that have been poured on you and spoken over you. I was always told I was a dreamer by my father: "Dream, 'I'll be nothing.' You're nothing, you're going to be nothing, you're useless." That weight, those words that have been spoken over you are not yours to carry, so give them over to Jesus.

Rewai was able to move past the negative words and events of his childhood, into a more positive and sophisticated sense of self in which he can sit at some distance from those experiences. This is the result of both a new level of self-worth that he had found in Christ, and also some significant emotional healing that occurred throughout this process.

Similar to this, some participants felt as though their need for personal affirmation was met by Jesus. Matiu described how, throughout his teenage years, he "struggled a lot with identity,

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<sup>1</sup> In New Zealand gang culture, a "patch member" is generally a senior member of a gang who has earned enough respect and status within the gang to be awarded a large, fabric patch which is then sewn to the back of a leather jacket and worn proudly. Often these members have had to undergo various initiation rituals and show a significant level of commitment to the gang before the patch is awarded. See Anthony Hubbard, "What the Gang Patch Means," *Sunday Star Times*, Sep 7, 2009, <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/2838209/What-the-gang-patch-means>> (29 May, 2018).

who I was, where I was going, that type of stuff.” This led to depression and drug use as Matiu found it difficult to feel any sense of confidence or motivation. Traumatic experiences as a child, some of which he had suppressed, had impacted Matiu negatively, particularly those involving his father, who had been distant and abusive. However, amidst a particularly troubling flashback, Matiu heard God speak:

I started having real vivid memories and flashbacks of stuff that my father had actually done. And I remember at that moment feeling like a terrified kid, like feeling like I was helpless and hopeless and terrified.... It kind of took over my body. I cried emotionally, very emotionally for about five or ten minutes. And then I just felt an absolute calming presence, the Spirit of God, and him saying to me, “Matiu, I love you. Get baptised.”

For Matiu, these words motivated him to re-engage with his local church and eventually be baptised by the minister there. Yet, over a longer period, his confidence improved, and he slowly reached a point where he felt differently about his father, noting that “I really want it to get to the point where we can restore our relationship.” Reflecting on this change, Matiu notes,

[My father] made us work really hard in the garden, and it’s quite profound for me to know that that used to be a symbol of terror for me which is now also a symbol of salvation because ... [now] I actually know a lot about gardens, and it’s quite funny how the Lord’s used that weakness and turned it to a strength.

Matiu was able to reframe his past which helped him attribute his changed circumstances and confidence to God’s intervention in his life at a difficult moment.

Three other participants also described experiences in which their need for personal affirmation was met. In each case, these were tangible encounters with God, similar to that described by Matiu. Ihaia recounted a spiritual experience in which he too felt as though God gave him the confidence he had been lacking. I have already described how Lincoln heard God speak and give him a personal message that was deeply encouraging at a point where Lincoln had chosen to isolate himself from a group that were acting disrespectfully on a marae. In the message, Lincoln heard God say that he would be Lincoln’s “strength,” and “take [Lincoln’s] tears away.” Lincoln described how he found this experience “affirming.... It was like [God was saying] ‘I’ve got you. You’re all right. It’s all good, it’s going to be fine.’” Wade felt affirmed as he was told that God saw, and loved, the integrity and courage he was showing in the face of his grandfather’s declining health. For Wade, this was not only deeply affirming, it also provided some healing for the emotional pain he had been

experiencing. Wade was not the only participant whose emotional pain was met with healing at church.

Participants also described moments where their experiences of a match left them feeling as though difficult emotional issues had been resolved. In some cases, these were issues of depressive thoughts and self-blame that had reached heightened levels. For example, in Kahu's story, recounted in Chapter Eight, the testimony of the speaker at Kahu's first ever church service connected deeply with Kahu's own emotional needs at that time. At the end of the sermon, Kahu responded to an invitation to come to the front of the church to receive prayer, which was itself a significant moment emotionally for him. Yet it also led to further emotional healing. Kahu notes that in this moment,

I just felt so much ... raru [difficulty, problems] fall off me, all this bondage, and just, stuff that I was carrying, like depression and suicidal thoughts and stuff like that that ... I had torment in my mind for ages. They just fell off, they were just gone, you know, that night.

This was a total surprise for Kahu given his previous assumptions as to the relevance and reality of the Christian faith.

Helen also described her early experiences of church as involving a lot of "ugly crying" as she slowly processed some of her own suppressed grief. Wade described how his emotional state worsened during the last days of his grandfather's life. Wade had been particularly close with his grandfather and was feeling afraid of the impending loss, as well as blaming himself for not doing more to support his grandfather during this time. He was able to process some of these feelings through an experience at Easter Camp:

We were in this circle, and ... everyone's praying. And then one of the youth workers is just like, "You know, I just feel like something's broken in your family.... I just feel like that's taking a big toll on you, but, you know, you don't have to take it all on, and ... take it and blame yourself for this.... Don't put the blame on yourself, just look to God.... God's saying that ... you've got such a courageous heart, and you're such a powerful heart.... God's so proud of you." And I just bawled my eyes out, I was, like, "What the heck, dude, you don't even know ... what's going though, like, how did you know this?"

Wade was clearly surprised by these words, which met him at a deeply emotional level. Other participants also had strong reactions to surprising spiritual experiences, to the point where they were able to forgive themselves and others for past hurts.

Caitlin's story illustrates the kind of emotional healing that involves forgiveness. On the third evening of Caitlin's first Easter Camp, she was deeply impacted by a message on forgiveness

and felt that a major emotional issue she had been struggling with was laid bare. She felt a strong sense that God was calling her to forgive past hurts. As noted in Chapter Eight, Caitlin felt as though God was calling her to forgive her father, who had left some years ago, and had caused significant damage to Caitlin and her family. Initially driven to tears by this, when she had finished crying Caitlin sensed that God wanted her to call her Dad, to whom she had not spoken for over three years, right then and there and reconcile with him. Caitlin acted on this immediately and went outside the tent to call her father. She described this experience as feeling “uplifting ... like a big rock that I’d been holding onto and carrying around with me had just dropped or evaporated and smashed ... there was [still] little pieces, but there was not enough to weigh me down and stop me from moving forward and going on with life.” Caitlin did not say if she found this spiritual experience surprising. Yet in discussing her motives for attending Easter Camp that year, she notes that she was quite nervous about attending, and was not sure what to expect. It seems unlikely that she expected to find a resolution for her resentment towards her father. Like Caitlin, Rewai felt God calling him to forgive his father and let go of the resentment that he was holding onto.

Three other participants also discussed the notion of finding the power to forgive through God yet felt as though the primary person they needed to forgive was themselves. For example, as mentioned in the discussion on finding self-worth, Joel felt as though he had accumulated “all this crud,” essentially, memories and guilt associated with regrettable actions. Through his increased engagement with the teaching and spiritual practices at church, Joel learned to forgive himself for his past decisions.

In Caitlin’s experience, the call to forgive her father was not just about finding the power to forgive. It also forced her to consider the contrast between the person she was at the time and the person that she felt God wanted her to be. When the hurt and resentment she held towards her father was confronted, both by a message on forgiveness and with a sense that this was God’s will for her at that moment, Caitlin notes that this

wasn’t me wanting to become someone else, it was me wanting to be a better version of myself. So it was me realising that it’s not me becoming someone else, it’s me just letting go of things that were holding me back from being who I’m actually meant to be and who I am inside.

Other participants mentioned similar moments, where they felt as though they were being invited to pursue a more real, relevant, and authentic life by following Jesus. This was not necessarily something that participants had associated with the church and was often a contrast to their previously held beliefs about what a Christian life would look like.

## **Finding Real Faith**

Some participants were attracted to Christian faith when they discovered just how relatable, relevant, and authentic it was for them. Often this was a contrast to previously held assumptions about Christianity, a faith perceived to be boring and irrelevant. Participants were surprised to discover ways in which Christianity could make a significant, positive difference in their lives. In some cases, these insights came quite a long time after participants' initial engagements with the church. In addition, for some participants these experiences provided evidence that the Christian faith was based on something substantive. I have termed this collection of experiences "finding real faith," as they each gave participants a glimpse of how the Christian faith contained something real. I use this term not in a starkly scientific sense (as an antonym to "untrue," for example) but more to describe the way in which something can begin to feel more personally relevant. The experiences outlined below indicate such moments, points in time where particular "facts" of the Christian faith were key factors in convincing individuals that following Jesus was valid and was something they could imagine themselves doing. These were the moments where faith became *personally* real for the first time.

## **Finding Authenticity**

Six participants – Kylie, Jeremy, Caitlin, Lincoln, Ihaia, and Matiu – either alluded to or directly described how the concept of authenticity was an important discovery for them as they explored the Christian faith. In some cases, participants made it clear that their decision to take faith seriously only occurred once they gained some sort of vision or understanding as to how following Jesus might enable them to be a more authentic version of themselves. For example, Jeremy, who had attended Christian schools right throughout his education, described how his realisation that he could live an authentic, Christian life only occurred in the more intense environments of Easter Camp, and later that same year on a church mission trip. He recalled how at the camp, he began having

really good honest chats with our leaders in that camp, and basically ever since then I've just been shameless in talking to people. Like, just basically told everyone everything, everything I'd ever done, really just opened up to my close group of friends and ... God really set me free of a lot of things.

Describing the mission trip later that year, Jeremy noted how the things he was required to do as a part of the team gave him a greater exposure to an authentic Christian life:

Openly discussing Biblical stuff, and having the chance just to ... [see] what it looks like to actually live a Christian life I guess, to take steps out in faith. I think that's what this trip was for me, was a massive step up in faith.... I guess a large part of that was just living in Christian community for two weeks.... Having to talk to people [I didn't know] about Jesus ... was a really big thing as well.

For Jeremy, his Christian schooling was inadequate to provide him with the kind of vision of faith he needed, and as such, in his early teens he did not profess to follow Jesus or live according to a Christian morality. Yet the intensity and duration of Easter Camp and the church mission trip gave Jeremy the space and time to see how participating in Christian community could enable him to be more honest and more faithful.

Others within this group of six participants were less clear in associating their experiences with the notion of authenticity, although it still seems as though this concept is what they encountered as a point of match. For example, Lincoln described how attending a Church School inadvertently triggered a search for a different kind of faith:

I ... reacted really strongly against the Christianity [at my school] ... It was mostly around chapel and rules and regulations, and you go to detention or you got singled out if you didn't satisfy the rules. Like, if you talked or laughed or wore the wrong clothes. And something in that really felt very wrong, and I remember feeling quite angry, like, "This isn't right, this isn't what it should be about." On reflection I think that probably pushed me towards [less formal expressions of] Christianity ... by accident, by reaction.

Lincoln's response to the culture at school was not something that occurred on a conscious level. Rather, his "gut" response to this overly formal and strict expression of faith created an attraction to a certain kind of church: "Unsurprisingly, the churches I've been part of since are fairly ... low-key, bands in the service ... playing 70s rock music, and chilling out, and you can just cruise along in bare feet or jandals<sup>2</sup> or do whatever." Lincoln associates this kind of casual church culture with a more authentic expression of faith that is stripped of the pretence and cold formality he associates with the chapel services at school. This clear contrast is an important factor in Lincoln's experience of finding a match. Also, while Lincoln was reacting against something at his school, he was not, initially, on an active search for an alternative. His introduction to the "low-key" churches only occurred after a friend he met at confirmation class brought him along to her youth group. Lincoln admits he was only in confirmation class "to become a prefect.<sup>3</sup> Or to meet girls." Yet he noticed that worship in his friend's church

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<sup>2</sup> "Jandal" is the New Zealand word for what are called "flip flops" or "thongs" in other countries. The word is a contraction of "Japanese sandals."

<sup>3</sup> A prefect is a senior student who is given a leadership role within a school, often including the authority to enforce rules.

“just felt quite natural.... [Low-key worship] seemed like a more inclusive thing, so there were far fewer barriers. That was the crux of it for me. It wasn’t ... [restricted to those who were] wearing shoes or a suit.” This kind of worship matched Lincoln’s desire for a more inclusive, authentic expression of faith, although he wasn’t actively searching for this kind of expression.

### **Finding Evidence of the Miraculous**

Four participants described moments in which evidence of the miraculous met their deeply felt needs, in ways which were often highly surprising. As recounted earlier in this chapter, Anaru was one participant in clear search of answers to his spiritual questions, although he believed he would find nothing of any merit at church. At the same time, he was going through a difficult period, having been separated from his brothers and admitted to a mental healthcare facility for full-time care. Anaru in no way thought that church would help him on this front, yet, a spiritual experience at a local youth group left him feeling stunned:

I [had] lost contact with my brothers. And I was on this mission trying to find them, I couldn’t find them. And this boy who didn’t even know me or my background was praying, and saying that, “You’re going to,” he said, “I just, I get the word ‘brothers,’ have you got brothers?” I said, “I do.” He goes, “Yeah, that’s right. God’s wanting you to know that you’re going to connect and you’re going to find your brothers again.” Like, how do you explain that? How the heck do you explain that? And I’m freaking out.

Through the words of someone Anaru barely knew, he received assurance that God cared for him and his search for his brothers. His surprise at hearing the words from this boy are evident in the “freaking out” he felt right after. Two other participants — Clarke and Wade — also found a sense of reassurance when they encountered their own evidence of the miraculous. For Clarke it provided him with “some reason to keep living” at a time when he was “very heavily depressed” due to the separation of his parents. For Wade, he felt reassured that his grandfather who had recently passed away “was safe ... he’s happy.” Prior to his first spiritual experience, in which he received this reassurance, Wade did not believe in God, thinking that there was “no proof of anything.”

Joel was another participant whose experience of a match had to do with finding evidence of the miraculous. He had been attending youth group for some time and had not expressed any strong sentiment either for or against the notion of God’s existence. Joel noted that for the most part he was there to have fun with his friends, and he displayed a level of polite openness towards what was taught, which meant he slowly became familiar with the stories

and concepts present in the Bible. However, he was shocked when his ankle was healed after a prayer. This indicates a level of surprise about the moment when Jesus tangibly entered his reality. Joel needed Jesus to be more than just a concept before he would embrace faith on a deeper level. Once this was case, Joel's faith gradually deepened, and he was able to deal with some of the more complex issues in his own emotional life, such as a finding a healthier level of self-worth.

### **Finding Relevance**

Seven participants – Caitlin, Kylie, Ryan, Sheree, Jeremy, Astrid, and Wade – described their surprise at discovering just how relevant the Christian faith could be. Often this was a contrast to their previously held stereotypes of Christianity, generally assumed to be something boring or unnecessary. Kylie described how such a view was challenged when she started attending evening services at her church:

As a kid growing up I always thought church was ... a really strict kind of place ... elderly people who were all just sitting there, facing the front, listening to someone who's really boring, and just kind of just zoning out for a whole two hours or whatever it was. And that was always my perspective of church, that it's just somewhere that people get forced to go because their families go, and they're bored, and it's just not a good time. And then I remember going and actually being ... surprised at how ... everyone was actually really just enjoying the music, listening to the sermon.... [There was a] feeling of everyone just coming together and actually ... being normal, not what I expected. I think that's what I found probably the most powerful thing.... It completely changed my perspective of church.

For Kylie, witnessing people her own age, whom she admired, enjoying and participating in the church service was a key driver in convincing her that the Christian faith could be something relevant to her as a young person. This was a contrast to her previously held perspective on church, and it provided Kylie with a picture of a faith that seemed “normal.” While Kylie did not directly associate this discovery with an issue of personal concern, she described how the kind of communal interaction she observed at one of the first services she attended, where her youth leader was being baptised, caused her to say to herself, “I want that! I want to know why that happened and how that happens and how you get amongst that!” The discovery of the relevance of the Christian faith was a match for Kylie, I suspect, in that it gave her a reason to continue connecting with people at church and youth group. The kind of community spirit she encountered there was not only a contrast to her previously held beliefs about churches, it was also a much kinder and more loving space than what she was experiencing at school. Similarly, Caitlin described how the preached message she heard the

first time she attended an evening service immediately connected with her own interests: “The topic ... [was] ‘Finding God in Secular Music.’ ... Actually, the night I went [the theme] was screamo music,<sup>4</sup> so, that was really engaging to me at that point ‘cause that was the ... genre of music I listened to when I was going through my pain and hurt.” Caitlin’s level of interest in the Christian faith was stimulated by a message that she could easily relate to.

Like Caitlin, other participants were surprised and encouraged when they realised that the Christian faith addressed an issue that was pertinent to them. While there were some assumptions, like Kylie’s, that Christianity was dull and boring, for most it was simply a lack of understanding that faith could be so wide-reaching. Sheree was surprised that the teaching topic at youth group the first week she attended was depression and that youth leaders were offering to pray for people who were struggling with the illness. Ryan was encouraged when he realised that his moral values and those taught at youth group were so similar. Wade believed that he was too angry to fit in at church or youth group and was encouraged when his youth leaders addressed the topic of anger in a message and provided a Christian understanding of the issue. These participants often contrasted their previous assumptions about the church with the new insights about Christianity that they had learned through their engagements with church and youth group. Similarly, some participants described how hearing another person’s testimony helped them understand Christianity better. This is the next example of a match that will be explored in this chapter.

### **Finding a Relatable Testimony**

Some participants described a match between their own situation and something they heard in a testimony at church or youth group. This allowed these participants to better imagine the way faith might relate to their own lives. For example, Astrid mentioned growing up in a family where faith was not spoken about, and when it was, it was always constructed as a negative thing. Having grown up in a different country than New Zealand, Astrid does not recall observing many Christians in her context practising their faith publicly. Upon migrating to New Zealand, she began attending a youth group in Christchurch. Astrid recalled appreciating the stories of how her youth leaders were expressing their faith in practical ways:

Back then, the leaders used to tell their own stories, or how they’ve changed or what they’ve learned or what God has done in their life, and I think those stories were really cool. Not only of, like, the very cool miracles and things that have

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<sup>4</sup> Screamo music is a sub-genre of punk-rock music that includes a certain level of screamed vocals and other dissonant sounds. See, for example, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screamo>> (21 June 2020).

happened but, like, the small things. I can't remember any specific stories, but they were, the specific examples that the leaders gave were really cool. I guess it gave a context to put things into.

The leaders at Astrid's youth group, most of whom were only a few years older than she, provided stories and a relatable example that gave Astrid the space to imagine what faith could be like.

Similarly, Kahu recalled the first time he attended church and the impact the preacher's testimony had on him:

So the guy who was preaching, sharing his testimony, he was sharing it about a broken relationship and the feelings that happened afterwards, you know, feeling depressed, being suicidal, suicidal thoughts, and, you know, even trying to attempt and stuff like that. I think, even, feeling isolated a lot of the time, having to wear a mask around other people. Yeah, for me that was just everything I was going through at the time.

Again, here there is an obvious match between Kahu's experiences and the preacher's story. For Kahu this meant that when the preacher began to talk about how a relationship with God had resolved these issues, Kahu was open to hearing about this and giving it a go for himself. Testimonies, while only mentioned specifically as key teaching highlights by six participants, provided quite clear and obvious examples of a match, as participants were easily able to relate to the stories told and often locate themselves within the narratives.

In one example, testimonies provided a match for a participant even while she listened with a high degree of scepticism and resistance. Danielle, who had spent the latter part of her High school years dating a non-Christian boyfriend and slowly reducing the role that faith had in her life, described her response to a testimony series given at a youth group:

I remember we did our No Regrets series, which was pretty much all the leaders getting up the front and saying some of their biggest regrets in terms of faith and Christianity and stuff. And some of that, you're sitting there and you're like, "Hmm. Maybe, hmm." And I was, like, listening to some of the stuff, I know it's quite relevant, but at the same time I was, like, "Yeah, whatever, it's fine, I'll just ignore it."

Danielle had experienced some regret in her journey, particularly when she would attend Easter Camp and wonder how life might have been if she had remained fully committed to her faith throughout high school. Thus, the testimony series at youth group evoked a level of discomfort in her, which she dealt with by trying to ignore the content of the messages.

## Leaving and Returning to Faith

While the match often provided a significant level of support for the plausibility of Christian faith in an individual's life, two participants left the church for a time, even after their experiences of a match had occurred. The events that were crucial in drawing these participants back into the fold could be considered a second experience of a match. As described above, Maia's first visit to a church service was deeply surprising for her, as she witnessed people in stable families, happily praising God on a Sunday morning. This was a clear contrast to Maia's usual Sunday morning, which involved her reading a book at the local pub while her family played pool, and trying to stay out of the way of any conflict or drunken behaviour that might occur as the day progressed. Church provided a more stable and functional experience on a Sunday morning, and this was one factor that prompted Maia's continued engagement. Yet, two years later, she attended a different church, and felt quickly disillusioned by something a preacher said in a sermon there:

[The preacher] was just really passionate about the fact that you can't worship anything else other than the Lord Jesus Christ. But the way he put it, and 'cause I was so young and didn't have anyone to speak through that with ... I kind of interpreted that as, "If you have worshipped anyone else, or if you have thought of someone else, like Ranginui or Papatūānuku [Māori gods], that means that you can't be a person of faith." And so, I went, "Whoa, there's no way I could ever, ever give up being Māori.... I will never ever give up my Māoritanga [Māori way of life] for anything." ... [So, I concluded] "I have to stop going to church ... obviously this was just a phase, I can't be in there, sweet." And so, I just didn't go back.

Feeling as though she was being asked to choose between her culture and her faith, Maia walked away from the church, although she maintained her belief in God to some degree.

Later, personal crises led Maia to the point of crying out to God from a place of extreme despair. Having had to undergo an invasive and traumatic surgical procedure, she prayed aloud from her hospital bed:

I said, "So Lord, if you are real, take me. Like, if you're real, show me that you're real. I've lost all this blood, I feel like I'm dying anyway, so just take me now. Like, if you're real, this is what you would do, this is your way to support me. Take me." And I just sat there. And I said this in front of a doctor, and my partner, and he wasn't a man of faith. But I was just saying, "Take me Lord, come on. Like, do it, I'm ready, I'm totally 100% OK to die right now." ... I was waiting for ages, and I was getting really upset that he wasn't.

Yet Maia continued to stay alive and in her hospital bed, and eventually her prayers changed:

I said, “OK, Lord, well, if you are real, like they say you are real, I’m going to need a sign. Like, I’m going to need a sign from you to say, ‘I’m here and with you.’ And, if you give me a sign, I will commit my life to you, and I just come with all my sin and I say I’m really sorry for everything I’ve done and the way I’ve acted, and I’ve turned away from you. But I need you to give me something.” ... And, I just went like this, and just lay back, and then, a distant relative leaned over me. And she said, “Maia, honey, are you OK?” ... And while she was leaning over, she had on a St. Christopher, but I thought it was St. Jude, which is ... the saint of lost causes and difficult situations.... And that was the sign that I needed.

This is an experience of a match, as Maia’s need for some evidence of spiritual reality was met. Although she was much more active this second time around in looking for an answer to this question, Maia did note that when this sign eventually appeared right before her eyes she responded in stunned surprise. Overall, this experience prompted Maia to begin the process of returning to church and recommitting her life to Christ.

Wade was the other participant who left church for a time after his initial experience of a match. Significant for Wade was the fact that both events were associated strongly with his deep love for his grandfather. He received some emotional healing when someone praying for him at Easter Camp encouraged him with a message of God’s love and support, right when he was experiencing intense feelings of guilt over his perceived failure to support his terminally ill grandfather. Yet, when his grandfather eventually passed away, Wade was so undone by this event that his life took a turn for the worse:

I think it was the passing ... of my granddad where everything just turned. Like, I literally just went away from it, like I was questioning ... “Why would you take my granddad if that was something that was my rock?” And then, after that, I just got into typical teenage stuff: smoking, drinking, [drugs].... And then got into fights and that at school. I got excluded from school as well throughout this time.

Wade also did not lose faith in God’s existence throughout this time, although he clearly questioned God’s goodness in the aftermath of his grandfather’s death.

Wade’s return to faith occurred when he realised that the life he had been living for the two years following his grandfather’s death was gradually worsening. Reconnecting with his best friend helped Wade see what life could have been like had he stayed at church:

My best mate was a Christian, still a Christian from that same time, he carried on going where I turned back. And he just invited me to church.... It was good to see actually how well he was doing. You know, he kept that faith and is still going and following God, and just what he was doing, I was, like, “Man, that’s so epic.”

This too constitutes a second experience of a match, in which Wade was able to see through a relatable role model (his best friend) what life could be like if it were lived “still going and following God.” Wade also described how church became a place in which he could openly cry, grieving the difficulties he had faced during his years away from the church while simultaneously appreciating the support of God and the congregation around him.

In both Maia and Wade’s stories, their initial experiences of a match left them with new beliefs that were not entirely removed by the later events that caused them to leave church. Maia knew that the church was a place of stability and peace a contrast to her Sunday mornings with her family. Interpreting a preacher’s words as anti-Māori caused Maia to conclude that church was “just a phase,” but she still retained her belief in God and the church as inherently peaceful, turning again to these things at another turbulent point in her life. Wade still believed that God was real and was personally aware of him but felt hurt that God had not prevented his grandfather from dying. Wade also was impressed by the changes he could see in his friend who had remained at church and asked this friend to “please help me out” when he decided that he wanted to make some changes in his life.

While the match was common amongst my sample, it was not evident in every story. Six participants described different conversion experiences, which often took a lot longer and involved a more positive initial predisposition towards the Christian faith. This meant that, for these participants, the idea of living a Christian life was one that they were already more comfortable considering for themselves. While some of the twenty-six participants who were included in the “match” category also had some positive feeling about the church and the Christian faith before their conversion experiences, others felt neutral or even negative about these things to begin with.

### **Participants Who Did Not Describe a Match: A More Positive Predisposition**

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, many participants who described a situation in which they found a “match” for their needs also indicated that their initial reasons for engaging with Christianity were fairly mundane. In some circumstances, participants’ assumptions about the church and Christians were quite negative. As noted earlier, Erica described how she had a “thought around Christians being really weird.” Kahu recalls his belief prior to attending church being that Christians were crazy: “I just thought everyone was crazy, everyone was brainwashed, and that, yeah, I just thought it was weird.... I just didn’t know how people could say there was a God and stuff like that, knowing that all this bad stuff happens all the time.” While these assumptions were not common across my sample, what

stands out is the low level of desire amongst many to engage with Christianity as a genuinely spiritual, life-changing reality. Most participants attended church or youth group simply for something to do and were not particularly predisposed towards positive views of Christianity. This provides some context for the common themes of surprise and contrast reported by participants who experienced a match. These events simply did not fit with their expectations. However, this was not a universal experience. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, there was some evidence of a match occurring in twenty-six participants' stories. The other six participants did not describe events in ways that conformed to this idea, and I now turn to examination of their stories.

### **Surprised by the Gospel**

Two participants described how they were not presented with the gospel story in a way that they could understand until a long time after their initial engagements with the Christian faith. In both cases, these participants had quite happily engaged with churches and Christian groups for years without feeling as though they were missing out on something more. Marie, who had volunteered as a children's leader at her local Anglican church from age thirteen onwards, realised that she needed to respond to Jesus on a personal level when she moved to another city for university study. She noted:

I'd kind of been through church and Sunday school for, like, five years but never heard the whole gospel and never known that I needed to respond to it. Like, I just had no idea that that was a component. I kind of thought Christianity was a nice cultural thing that you do, and Jesus is a great teacher but, like, not really sure past that. So, heard the gospel, didn't respond to it, kind of just heard it and was a little bit, like, "Oh, OK, didn't know that that was a thing."

Martin expressed a similar level of surprise when, at age fifteen, a pastor sat with him and explained the concept of committing one's life to Jesus. Both Marie and Martin made commitments within a short space of time after hearing this message.

These experiences do not conform to my notion of the match, for neither Martin nor Marie described these experiences as meeting a deeply felt need in their own lives. Also, following their responses, engagement with church and faith continued on a similar level, rather than rapidly increasing as was the case for many other participants. However, it is interesting to note that on a more theologically analytical level, a need was still met, even if these participants were less emotionally connected to that need. Marie and Martin needed to hear the gospel and respond to Jesus, and despite years engaging with Christians and Christian events, neither could recall ever being presented with such an appeal. A church leader taking

the time to sit and talk with them about these things provided the point at which a need was met, particularly given the absence of such a conversation at church in the years that preceded it.

In addition to Martin and Marie, four participants did not provide any clear evidence of a match occurring. One common theme that links these four stories is a much higher level of positive feeling towards the church and the Christian faith prior to their conversion. While most participants were not negatively predisposed toward Christianity, the more common feeling was more one of neutrality or polite ignorance. For these other four participants, however, their experiences of Christianity and Christians prior to adolescence had left them with a more positive perspective on the faith. This also meant that these participants were much more predisposed to want to become Christians before they began seriously engaging with the church and the things of faith. I assume this means that they probably had less need of a matching experience. In some ways, Martin and Marie could also be included in this group. They quite happily engaged with Christian things for years, and when they were eventually presented with the gospel, they accepted it and made commitments.

### **Positive Impressions of Christianity Formed in Childhood**

For the four participants, other than Martin and Marie, who did not describe any clear moment of match in their conversion experiences, one common factor linking their experiences was that these four each had a significant experience of Christianity or Christians in their childhood years that they recalled positively. Of course, such an experience is not limited to these four participants; seventeen of those I interviewed described some exposure to Christianity in their childhood years, and almost all had something positive to say about this. The difference appears to be in how highly these things were valued. As can be seen below, these four participants each held Christianity and Christians in high esteem even during the times where they themselves were not yet converted.

Michelle described how in her early teens, she attended several Christian-run events at her school and wanted to respond when invitations to commit were given. Michelle had always believed that God existed, and she was interested in knowing more. Yet, she did not want to create a conflict with her mother and believed that any clear decision to become a Christian would do this. This tension was resolved when Michelle moved out of home:

When I was eighteen, I was flatting, I was away from my house, away from my family, I kind of felt like I had the freedom to do that. So, at the end of the service they did an altar call and said, "If you want to know God, come up to the front,"

and I was kind of up there before I had a chance to think about it, to talk myself out of it. I was up there, and I was, like, “Oh, this is actually what my heart wants, not what my head is thinking about.”

Michelle’s conversion was both relatively sudden, and the result of a slow build-up that had lasted for years. Michelle did not report any experiences in her conversion narrative that could be classified as a match. However, one way of understanding why this might be lies in Michelle’s high level of desire to convert, where she realised, at her first service, that becoming a Christian was “what my heart wants.” This also presumes that Michelle believed that Christianity was a valid and viable means of engaging with God. These conditions are rare within my sample and are vastly different to those described at the beginning of this chapter as being the typical perspectives held by participants who did report experiences of a match. It almost seems as though they needed God to get their attention, whereas Michelle was already interested.

For the three other participants who I also included in this non-match group, family members played a large part in creating the space for a positive level of desire to emerge. Two participants, Hope and Georgia, came from families in which their parents were the only members of an extended family group who were not Christians. These young women had close, loving connections with Christians, often including cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, who embodied faith for them. Similarly, Isaac noted that although his grandfather was the only Christian in his family, he was supportive of Isaac’s early engagements with faith: “So at the time I wasn’t in faith ... [but] I was pretty much living a Christian [life]. And [my grandfather] was ... supportive and ... encouraging to me. A role model in faith, and the way that he had lived his whole life.” Isaac recounted some dramatic moments in his conversion journey, most notably when he observed his Christian friends: “I cried out, because I’d seen all my friends had come from Christian homes, and church, and I was the one that had come from nowhere. And I sat there, and I was like, ‘Man, I want this experience. What they’re having, that I don’t have.’” A high level of desire can be seen here, in the way that Isaac longed for a similar kind of life to that which he observed in his Christian friends. These participants were already positively predisposed towards Christianity, and they did not describe a matching experience to catalyse their engagement and pursuit of the Christian faith. It is possible that this was not needed in these cases, as the positive perspectives these participants already held regarding faith created the same sense of openness and willingness to explore that many of the other twenty-six participants only described as occurring after their matching experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Experiences of match amongst those I interviewed constitute a broad set of events, unique to each individual. However, some common themes are also apparent. Participants were often surprised by what they were discovering, or, were able to make a direct contrast between their discovery and something that they had thought or experienced previously. Matching experiences often resulted in an individual pursuing faith more avidly, or at least feeling more positively inclined toward it. In two cases, this was not enough to prevent a later dropping away from faith, and a second experience of a match played a role in bringing these individuals back into church and relationship with God.

This has been the final chapter documenting the findings of this thesis. As noted above, this topic's appearance in this project was unanticipated, although the evidence supporting this idea warrants its inclusion here. In the next chapter I will discuss some of the implications of these findings as they pertain to Christian ministry and various fields of academic discourse.

## Chapter Ten: Implications of this Research

In this final chapter, I will discuss some of the implications of this research, both in light of the literature outlined in Chapters Two through Five, and also regarding ministry practice in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> This body of this chapter will be structured in much the same way as the thesis as a whole, examining each of the three sub-questions in the same order:

1. What are the relevant or significant aspects of church life that matter to young inquirers?
2. How do spiritual experiences function in conversion?
3. How is conversion experienced as a process, and is there any evidence of conversions occurring as a punctiliar moment in time?

However, before these topics are discussed, I will refer to some of the relevant contextual factors discussed in Chapter One in light of what was discovered in the interviews. Finally, a discussion of the implications of my unexpected finding, “the match,” will conclude this chapter. Some discussion points could have easily fit under several headings, particularly regarding what my findings mean for the practice of Christian ministry in New Zealand.

### Accounting for Adolescence in Young People’s Conversion Narratives

As noted in Chapter One, the making of choices and commitments is a significant feature of adolescence, as it reflects the new level of cognitive ability reached by most teenagers during this time.<sup>2</sup> Given this, adolescence is often identified by researchers as a key stage of life within which many religious conversions occur.<sup>3</sup> There are two aspects of this process that the present project illuminates. The first is the way in which some participants spoke of their early engagements with faith in experimental terms, saying things such as, “OK, we’ll give it a go.”<sup>4</sup> This is not entirely unexpected, as it is a common discovery in conversion research that individuals test out religious roles and spiritual practices before fully committing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reflection on ministry practice is a key part of the task of practical theology. See Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 175-176.

<sup>2</sup> Harry A. Van Belle, “Adulthood and the Development of Lived Religion,” in *Christian Perspectives on Human Development*, ed. Leroy Aden, David G. Benner, and J. Harold Ellens (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Tighe, “Born Again, Again: Conversion in Christian Families as a Process Punctuated by Grace,” *Christian Education Journal* 12:1 (Spring, 2015): 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremy said this after his first meaningful spiritual experience, recounted in Chapter Seven.

<sup>5</sup> For example, as stated in *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 91; Lynne Taylor, “Our Doing Becomes Us: Performativity, Spiritual Practices, and Becoming Christian,” *Practical Theology* 12:3 (April 2019): 332-342.

In addition, adolescents commonly test out various social roles in the task of identity formation.<sup>6</sup> This could be one reason why many religious conversions occur in the adolescent years. While it is true that adolescents can assess abstract systems such as a religious ideology,<sup>7</sup> this does not mean that their faith is formed via the intellectual assimilation of such systems.<sup>8</sup> For so many participants, their faith grew and developed as they joined in with the activities of whatever church or youth group they were a part of. While some participants described a pre-existing belief in God that they held prior to any serious engagement with church, this alone did not compel them to any kind of solitary, independent spiritual practices or search. Rather, it was their participation in the practices and language of a religious group that provided opportunities for individuals to try out spiritual practices and thus be slowly formed by those same activities. Of course, this point is true of many converts who are older; it is not just teenagers whose faith is formed through active participation. However, the fact that adolescence is a time where young people are naturally more inclined to want to test out new practices and identities,<sup>9</sup> and the fact that conversion is often a process where “our doing becomes us,”<sup>10</sup> together provide a strong explanation for the fact that many religious conversions occur during this stage of life.

I can also offer some support for the theory that males might be more inclined to wrestle with “ideological” factors in identity formation.<sup>11</sup> In my discussion of “the precondition of belief” in Chapter Eight, I noted that a slight majority of those I interviewed who claimed to have some belief in God before joining a youth group or church were female. There was a similar bias in the opposite direction, with a greater proportion of male participants describing atheistic or agnostic perspectives prior to their engagement with faith, and a more obvious need for proof of God’s existence.<sup>12</sup> While there is some existing research on gender and conversion narrative, the complexity of gender and its relationship to social context means that this will always be a field in need of further research.<sup>13</sup> In the current sample, it does

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<sup>6</sup> For example, as summarised in Saul McLeod, “Erik Erikson,” *Simply Psychology*, 2008/2017. <<https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>> (31 August 2017.)

<sup>7</sup> James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor notes that “one reason why Christians fail to notice the potential of spiritual practices to form faith in non-Christians is the Western, post-reformation emphasis on propositional belief systems.” “Our Doing Becomes Us,” 339.

<sup>9</sup> See Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 7-16; Turpin, “Adolescence,” 68; Donald J. Capps, “The Decades of Life: Relocating Erikson’s Stages,” *Pastoral Psychology* 53:1 (September 2004): 17.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, “Our Doing Becomes Us,” 339.

<sup>11</sup> Craig-Bray et al., “Identity Formation,” 176.

<sup>12</sup> I discuss this in greater detail in a journal article that focuses more specifically on gender and conversion. See David Bosma, “Gender and Conversion Narrative in a New Zealand Context,” *Journal of Sociology and Christianity* 9:1 (2019): 6-26.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, David A. Knight, Robert H. Woods Jr., and Ines W. Jindra, “Gender Differences in the Communication of Christian Conversion Narratives,” *Review of Religious Research* 47:2 (2005): 113-134; Ines

seem that male participants were more likely to want to test ideas as a feature of their conversion journeys.<sup>14</sup> This too was undoubtedly influenced by group participation, yet this does also enable us to see how an assessment of the various truth claims made by religious groups can be an important feature for some individuals as they test and trial a religious option.

In Chapter One, I also cited some researchers who argue that early relationships with parents have a significant impact on one's later interactions with God. While the exact dynamics of how this can occur are contested, social and behavioural scientist Victor Counted observes that

when a child grows up experiencing abusive relationships with their human or parental attachments, the child might seek out new relationships with a substitute attachment partner later on in life.... When God ... is perceived as a substitute attachment figure, he functions as an affect-regulation tool ... compensating for an unavailable or inaccessible human attachment figure.<sup>15</sup>

While it is not always the case that a convert who experienced a difficult or distant relationship with parents or caregivers must by necessity perceive God as a resolution to this problem, this is a path that some do follow.<sup>16</sup> Thirteen of those I interviewed described childhoods that involved significant distress and difficulty, often a result of parental absence or abuse. Among these participants, seven described moments in their conversion journeys where they experienced God as engaging with them on the level of a vulnerable kind of intimacy. This supports Counted's point to an extent, although five other participants described similar experiences and yet had much more stable upbringings. It is possible that a larger sample size would enable a more definitive statement to be made on this point.

## **The Role of the Church in Young People's Conversion Narratives**

In Chapter Two, I identified four factors of church life from the literature that discussed young people's attraction to church. These were: relational warmth, a high level of support

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W. Jindra, Robert H. Woods, Diane M. Badzinski, and Jenell Paris, "Gender, Religiosity, and the Telling of Christian Conversion Narratives," *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* 2:1 (2012): 1-23.

<sup>14</sup> British theologian Anne Phillips notes that, in two recent research projects on the subject of gender and faith, "both found girls had a more aesthetic view of God, often domestic, even docile, oriented towards intimacy, while boys favoured performance and power, rationality and activity." *The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood* (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 104.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Counted, "The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation: A Care-Giving Faith?" *Journal of Youth and Theology* 15 (2016): 148-149.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

and challenge, church involvement in the local community, and an understandable message. My own findings support some, but not all, of these factors. The significance of relational warmth is one of my key findings. The important role of friends and leaders is also supported here, and there is some indication that “challenge”<sup>17</sup> (or at least points where participants’ current perspectives on issues were confronted) occurred in various contexts, particularly Easter Camp. The preaching of the church was also an important factor in the conversion journeys of some participants, for various reasons.

To slightly amend the phrase of Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, “Warmth is [Still] the New Cool.”<sup>18</sup> In their discussion of the importance of relational warmth as a factor in young people’s continued religious attendance, these authors set relational warmth as a key factor over and against such other commonly assumed positive factors as a precise size, a trendy pastor or message, and a ministry programme that is always hyper-entertaining.<sup>19</sup> My findings support these claims. Participants talked at length about the people who cared for them, the sense of community they found at church, and the friends and leaders who demonstrated consistency and care as they embarked on a journey of faith. While some appreciated the various activities and forms of worship within their churches such as the style of the music, or the games and activities at youth group that helped them build connections while they were still newcomers, these things alone would have been inadequate without the strong relationships that participants built with friends and leaders in the group.<sup>20</sup> This experience of warmth and inclusion was central in helping those I interviewed both encounter Christ and maintain their pursuit of God in the context of a church community. Even the clear significance of Easter Camp in the narratives of half of my sample is nuanced by this point: so many of these participants acknowledged the key influence of friends, leaders, and a positive experience of community at church as factors in their conversion journeys alongside the clear impact that the camp had on them.

The value of a Christian camp in helping participants deepen their relationships with Christian friends and mentors is possibly even more important given participants’ family backgrounds. In a larger study in the United States, researchers were able to make some important

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<sup>17</sup> Holcomb and Nonneman, “Faithful Change,” 102; Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 163. Their chapter is entitled “Relational Warmth is the New Cool.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-27.

<sup>20</sup> A similar argument is made in *Growing Young*, where the authors state that “while 6 out of 10 interviewees mentioned group practices like small groups, youth group, and retreats when they talked about why their church is thriving, what seems important about those practices is that they create space for people to be together and nurture relationships.” *Ibid.*, 166.

distinctions between the experiences of converts who were raised in nonreligious or anti-religious homes and those who were raised in different environments. They discovered that “our converts who were raised in anti-religious families and those who had no memorable religious experiences as children especially needed the intense relational environment provided by a church camp or retreat.”<sup>21</sup> This supports the claims of other researchers about the importance of removing oneself from one’s “normal” environment and relationships for a period of time “because of the social stigma attached to membership and the likely opposition from friends and family members.”<sup>22</sup> Yet for many of those I interviewed, the relationships that mattered lasted long after the camp was over. Camp was simply a more intense period that allowed positive relationships to grow rapidly. Perhaps also because of the nonreligious backgrounds of participants, these relationships needed to continue after Easter weekend was over. Participants needed continuing reminders, in the form of these ongoing connections, that there was a new “normal” that they could pursue, a new community to which they could choose to belong.

In Chapter Two, I cited Christian ministry authors who argue that inquirers need to feel a sense of both support and challenge as they engage with church and faith.<sup>23</sup> For many of those I interviewed, one major support factor was the presence of a friend, or friends, who accompanied the young person as he or she engaged with church and faith for the first time. These friends were often the same age and gender, and while most were Christians, their primary role in accompanying participants was not as evangelists, but rather as trusted companions on the journey of faith.<sup>24</sup> On a basic level, this finding mirrors much of the existing literature that points to relationships and friendships as key in determining the level and duration of an individual’s engagement with a faith community.<sup>25</sup> Yet also, on a theological level, my observation here supports the arguments made by both Andrew Root, and Powell, Mulder, and Griffin. These writers are fundamentally opposed to the notion that relationships exist as a tool or an end towards some other outcome. This, they argue, is a

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas E. Bergler and Dave Rahn, “Results of a Collaborative Research Project in Gathering Evangelism Stories,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 4:2 (Spring, 2006): 71.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, see also John Lofland and Rodney Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective,” *American Sociological Review* 30:6 (December, 1965): 862-875; Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 92.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Gay L. Holcomb and Arthur J. Nonneman, “Faithful Change: Exploring and Assessing Faith Development in Christian Liberal Arts Graduates,” *New Directions for Institutional Research* 122 (Summer, 2004): 102; Bergler and Rahn, “Evangelism Stories,” 65-74.

<sup>24</sup> As was also the case in Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 145.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, John Finney, *Emerging Evangelism* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2004), 136; Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, *The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1987), 58.

defunct ministry strategy that is theologically and culturally inappropriate.<sup>26</sup> A better approach is to see friends as able to provide presence, empathy, and companionship, and to see these values as ends in and of themselves.<sup>27</sup> While some participants described theological conversations that they had with these friends, these were usually facets of a much broader relationship, rather than the primary reason of the friendship's existence.

As noted in Chapter Six, participants connected with Christian teaching at a range of different points. Some were inspired to learn about how faith could make a difference in their lives; others recounted specific theological insights that were new to them. Six of those I interviewed initially struggled to connect with the teaching at church. However, as noted above and in Chapter Two, it has been suggested by some authors that providing a challenge in a Christian message can be a helpful way to facilitate faith formation among young people. If there is any evidence of this in the present thesis, it is most likely found in the stories of those participants who described how an insight shared by a preacher helped them learn to hope. This is a challenge to the sense of despair, anxiety, or hopelessness that these individuals were feeling at the time. Essentially, these were moments when participants were provided with an alternative perspective on their immediate futures, one that contradicted their own, largely negative, set of beliefs about what was soon to occur. This can rightly be understood as a kind of challenge, even if it is different to the way it was originally understood by those authors who developed this concept elsewhere.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this is the kind of challenge some young people in New Zealand need at this time, particularly those who have had little contact with the church growing up.

Participants spoke very little about their churches' community and social action. This is not definitive proof against the value of community ministries, as it has been observed elsewhere that such work can go unnoticed by converts or others who are supposed to be the primary

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<sup>26</sup> For the argument as to this strategy's theological weaknesses, see Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence To a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007); for an argument as to why this does not fit culturally, see Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 89-83.

<sup>27</sup> Lynne Taylor notes that in her research "as other Christians engaged in reciprocal, mutual and equal relationships with their friends, including non-Christians, those I interviewed experienced a sense of welcome and warmth that was significant for their journeys to faith." She later discusses two clear instances of this in her sample, where her participants' Christian friends shared life with them on a deep level, "not to achieve a specific goal, but simply to share" in their lives. See "Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study on the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians," PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017, 329-331.

<sup>28</sup> For example, in *Growing Young*, their discussion of how to challenge young people with the gospel has a greater emphasis on themes like providing young people with something to do, helping them conceive of evangelism differently, and the importance of reading the Bible from a stronger theological base. Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 137-159.

beneficiaries of these initiatives.<sup>29</sup> This was discussed in Chapter Two. Also in that chapter I presented two lists of factors that particular ministry writers thought did not matter when it came to church growth. While the present project is more narrowly focused on conversion than purely on church growth, many of the factors identified there, particularly those provided by the authors of *Growing Young*,<sup>30</sup> were also not significant features in my own interview data.

However, my findings differ from some of the assertions made by John Finney, particularly when he claims that “cell groups ... provision for young people ... [and] special evangelistic events” do not contribute to long-term growth.<sup>31</sup> Finney admits that the list he provides could do with a greater level of statistical support<sup>32</sup> (although he still chooses to publish it in a book about evangelism), and I was unable to access a copy of the original study he cites in support of his list. Yet it must be said that for half of those I interviewed, a special evangelistic event aimed at young people (namely, Easter Camp) was a significant aspect of their conversion experience. While there is more to be said here, in terms of what the camp provided participants, I cannot, based on my data, unilaterally reject such youth-focused events as entirely unimportant regarding conversion. The same must be said regarding “provision for young people.” So many of those I interviewed would never have ended up at a church were it not for some “provision” for them, whether it be via a special ministry such as a youth group, or through a specially appointed person like a youth pastor or leader. Finally, cell groups were mentioned as important by eight participants, a quarter of the total sample. While this may seem surprisingly small, it is important to note that a much higher proportion of participants mentioned how important being a part of a warm community was as a feature of their conversion journeys. Cell groups are simply one vehicle by which individuals can begin to

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<sup>29</sup> Participants were given an opportunity in the interviews to potentially identify such factors, as one of the supplementary questions was, “What (if anything) did you find appealing or admirable about your church?” This was one question that I usually did ask, just to give participants another opportunity to discuss their churches, as sometimes in their initial narratives these details were not provided. Yet, even here, factors that could be associated with churches’ community and social action were rarely mentioned. Powell et al. noted some response from the young people who took part in their research in this area, but a greater response came from the pastors they interviewed. See *Growing Young*, 241-246. See also James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 100, 143; Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works and What Doesn’t* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 136, 146; Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 15-17, 39, 57-58.

<sup>30</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 25-27.

<sup>31</sup> Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, 123. In total, Finney lists eight factors that are not associated with church growth by the authors of the study he is citing. These are; Cell Groups; A Link With a Church School; An Attractive Church Building; Provision for Young People; More Eucharistic Services; Special Evangelistic Events; A Well-Educated Congregation; and Church Planting. Many of these can neither be supported or opposed by the data presented in this thesis, however, I am isolating three that I think I *can* oppose, based on the narratives collected here.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

more deeply connect with one another. If these connections are happening in other ministry settings (such as youth group events, church services, and informal hang-outs) then the relative importance of a cell group is decreased.

## Ministry Implications

In light of my findings regarding the role of the church in young people's conversion narratives, I suggest two implications for those working with young people and hoping to see them come to faith. The first implication is that, wherever possible, pastors and youth leaders need to work to ensure that positive friendships are occurring and growing within their ministries; and this *for their own sake*, rather than towards a more explicitly evangelistic end.<sup>33</sup> Evangelistically focused friendships will likely be perceived as dishonest and pushy.<sup>34</sup> The second implication, coming out of some of the literature cited in Chapter Two, is that such genuinely relational ministries are difficult to create.<sup>35</sup> Friendships cannot simply be programmed or mandated into existence, and they are not something that can be managed by any leader or well-meaning adult.<sup>36</sup> The temptation for leaders to try and achieve such relationality directly alludes to the fundamental problem of a ministry that focuses overmuch on numerical outcomes — quantities rather than qualities<sup>37</sup> — and thus diminishes the likelihood of this “friendship outcome” occurring on its own. Of course, numerical growth is not the only reason that leaders might want to encourage deeper and more meaningful relationships in their churches. There can be many good and righteous motivations for wanting to deepen interpersonal connections in a group context.<sup>38</sup> The difficulty for leaders is that their power to effect change in this area is (rightly) limited; while relational environments can be fostered, there is no guarantee that friendships will evolve as a result.

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<sup>33</sup> This is argued at length by Andrew Root in both *The Relational Pastor* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 115-121; and *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 70-77, 82-103.

<sup>34</sup> This argument finds substantial support in the work of American researchers David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. See *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), iBooks Edition, 53-55.

<sup>35</sup> Oswald and Leas, *The Inviting Church*, 58; see also Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2012), 133.

<sup>36</sup> Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 133-137.

<sup>37</sup> See the comment on this in Alan Mann, *Atonement for a “Sinless” Society: Engaging with an Emerging Culture* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005), 96.

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Keller argues that a healthy Christian community is the best environment within which spiritual growth can be fostered, noting that “most often, growth happens through deep relationships and in communities where the implications of the gospel are worked out cognitively and worked in practically.” Later, he acknowledges that “building community is no longer natural or easy under our present cultural conditions. It requires an intentionality greater than that required of our ancestors, and it is uncomfortable for most of us.” Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 311, 318.

One thing pastors and leaders can do, however, is work on making themselves available to young people who are exploring faith. This, too, is a significant support factor identified by those I interviewed. Yet, even in this area pastors and leaders are challenged, for those leaders who were identified by participants as being particularly significant were described as admirable, relatable, and available. While it is in some ways outside of any individual's control exactly what a young person might see in them as admirable or relatable, there must exist certain qualities which are more likely to elicit the respect and admiration of others, and particularly of young people on a journey of faith.<sup>39</sup> Within my sample, participants admired their leaders for being caring, inclusive, authentic, forgiving, consistent, and informative. They also felt encouraged at points where they saw their leader as someone they could relate to and who could relate to them and their world.<sup>40</sup> These are not traits that can simply be engineered or manufactured. Powell et al. confirm the important role a pastor or leader plays in a young person's faith development and discuss the fact that this often has a lot to do with their empathy and openness to young people.<sup>41</sup>

Although the theme of admiration is not particularly present in much of the ministry literature I reviewed in Chapter Two, Tim Keller briefly discusses admiration in *Center Church*.<sup>42</sup> Although using different language, Katherine Turpin appears to be discussing a similar dynamic to that identified here, describing how “the commitment and passions embodied by the elders around [young people]”<sup>43</sup> contribute to their later vocational choices. Nathan Chiroma also briefly mentions admiration in his discussion of the importance of positive role modelling in mentoring relationships.<sup>44</sup> Yet other research that discusses mentoring and Christian young people tends to focus more on the material benefits it provides for those

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<sup>39</sup> American theologian Katherine Turpin notes that “the availability of heroic role models is critical to invoking vocation in young people.” See “Adolescence: Vocation in Performance, Passion, and Possibility,” in *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation Throughout Life's Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 82

<sup>40</sup> See Daniel J. Siegel *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 95-97; Andy Stirrup, “Growing Faith with the Help of Extended Family and Friends,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 13:1 (2014): 69-73, for some discussion of how adults choosing to relate to teenagers can be beneficial to both parties.

<sup>41</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 50-73.

<sup>42</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, 283-284. Keller does not actually refer to admiration directed at Christian leaders, restricting his focus to the role of the “Christian friend” in this regard. He also seems to be working from a definition of admiration that has more to do with some kind of social credibility that Christians might earn through being people of high integrity in their communities, rather than specifically zeroing in on the ways a personal mentor or ministry leader might be admired for their demonstration of particular traits.

<sup>43</sup> Turpin, “Adolescence,” 82.

<sup>44</sup> Nathan Hussaini Chiroma, “The Role of Mentoring in Adolescents' Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14:1 (2015): 84.

young people, such as an improved level of self-esteem, or a more robust and mature faith.<sup>45</sup> The stories of those I interviewed point to an important factor that is potentially being overlooked in such studies. How important is it that the young person admire their mentor? Does the absence of such a feeling limit the effectiveness of the relationship? Further work is required to examine these questions, yet I can say based on the data presented in this thesis that the *presence* of a sense of admiration in adolescent mentoring relationships is an important factor in the conversion process.<sup>46</sup> This has so little to do with what can be managed and programmed, and so much more to do with the inner life and virtues of Christian leaders.

### **Excursus: Conversions as Social Experiences**

In Chapter Six, I described some of key social connections, such as those with friends and pastoral leaders, that those I interviewed identified as being particularly significant factors in their conversion experiences. Many participants described how these close friends, youth leaders or pastors helped facilitate their connections to God and to the church. As a whole, the prevalence of social connections mentioned in the conversion narratives in this project is substantial. Yet, a part of the reason for this prevalence may be due to my recruitment process. I sourced participants through youth ministers at churches, biasing the sample toward participants who are reasonably well connected to congregations. Those motifs of conversion experience that are not so socially influenced are much rarer within my sample, which could be influenced by my recruitment process.

Twenty-eight participants described experiences which conform to the more social conversion motifs. Here I am referring to the schema developed by John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, which was examined in detail in Chapter Three of this thesis.<sup>47</sup> There, six conversion motifs were identified, namely:

1. Coercive: An individual is subjected to a high degree of social pressure which leads to their conversion.

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<sup>45</sup> For example, Barry Gane, "Adolescent Faith That Lasts," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 13:1 (Fall, 2014): 42-61; Jason Lanker and Klaus Issler, "The Relationship Between Natural Mentoring and Spirituality in Christian Adolescents," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 9:1 (Fall, 2010): 93-109.

<sup>46</sup> *Growing Young* also shows some data that may indicate of the importance of admiration in adolescent faith formation, although it is not one of their major claims. Rather, at various points in the book where research participants are quoted, this dynamic appears. See, for example, Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 107, 120.

<sup>47</sup> Lynne Taylor notes that "while Lofland and Skonovd's paper is cited by many, very few scholars have empirically tested these motifs." "Redeeming Authenticity," 131. In the present project, my purpose in using this particular framework is primarily to illustrate the highly social nature of many of the conversion narratives that were collected here. Yet, secondarily at least, it also adds to the small number of projects that have used the framework to analyse a particular research sample. See also Peter Halama, "Empirical Approach to Typology of Religious Conversion," *Pastoral Psychology* 64:2 (April 2015): 187.

2. Mystical: Under little or no social pressure, an individual has some sort of solitary spiritual encounter which acts as a catalyst for their search for God.
3. Intellectual: Conversion is the result of a process of sustained, independent thinking and investigation of spiritual things, with little or no interaction with a religious group.
4. Affective: Conversion is largely due to an individual's increased interaction with and affection for a group of religious friends.
5. Revivalist: Some sort of intense group environment such as a camp or revival meeting acts as the site of heightened spiritual arousal and thus provokes a conversion decision.
6. Experimental: An individual joins a religious group and takes their time trying faith out, participating in religious activities without necessarily believing wholeheartedly in them.<sup>48</sup>

Most of the time it was easy to situate participants' experiences within one conversion motif, although I found no evidence of coercion within my sample. Participants were clear that conversion was their choice, and while in some instances they had friends or leaders offering persuasive arguments as to why they should commit, there was never any sense that these settings led to the individual feeling as they had little choice but to conform to another person's will. I also found no clear instances of conversion experiences that are situated around the independent, intellectual wrestling with faith and its questions.<sup>49</sup> While several participants were certainly intellectual personalities who had thought through their faith robustly, their conversion stories were still largely connected to social events wherein they explored their questions in relational settings.

As for the other four conversion motifs, distribution across three of these categories was relatively even. Eight participants described conversions that corresponded best with the "experimental" motif, where they spent a long amount of time participating in religious practices before any commitment was made. Nine participants described conversions of a clearly "revivalist" motif, where experiences at camps and in church worship services were significant, and often conversions were in response to a formal invitation or time of collective prayer. Given the significance of Easter Camp amongst those I interviewed (which is an event that uses many "revivalist" methods), this is not particularly surprising. Most of those who I categorised here made their conversion decisions at this camp. Finally, ten conversions could be best described as "affective," as these were stories where friends and leaders played the most significant roles and aided individuals as they came to understand more about God and

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<sup>48</sup> John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:4 (December 1981): 375.

<sup>49</sup> This can be contrasted with one study in the U.K. where amongst a group of British converts to Islam, the researchers were able to identify intellectual conversions as one of the most common conversion motifs. See Ali Köse and Kate Miriam Loewenthal, "Conversion Motifs Among British Converts to Islam," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10:2 (2000): 109

the Christian faith. For all three of these conversion motifs there is ample evidence in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight of this thesis.

One common theme of the three conversion motifs that are well supported by the present project is their social nature. Obviously, the affectional motif has socialisation as a primary theme, as it focuses on the ways one's connections to a religious group help facilitate their conversion. Yet, both the revivalist and experimental motifs, albeit in different ways, involve the individual joining in with group gatherings and activities. These collective experiences then become the context through which conversion is experienced. Much of what occurred here for those I interviewed involved social environments, as they facilitated the process of coming to faith and provided opportunities for friendship. These new friendships in turn provided participants with a set of companions with which they could participate in collective spiritual practices such as corporate worship, listening to a sermon, and studying the Bible in a small group. Yet in examining adolescents, who are themselves highly sensitive to social realities and their place within the social order,<sup>50</sup> it is possible that I have selected a time of life where conversions are more likely to be social simply because they involve adolescents, who are more alert to such things.<sup>51</sup> Only four participants reported experiencing any sort of mystical event prior to their engagement in a religious group.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore, it seems as though Lofland and Skonovd's typology is still a helpful schema with which one can understand various experiences of religious conversion. I found no clear evidence of the coercive motif here, which is not that surprising, given that Lofland and Skonovd note that this motif "takes place only in extremely rare and special circumstances."<sup>53</sup> Here these writers are referring to research that examined conversions to religious cults, a

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<sup>50</sup> Turpin, "Adolescence," 68.

<sup>51</sup> Chana Ullman notes that "the increasing preoccupation with and allegiance to the peer group is a well-recognized characteristic of adolescence." *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 120.

<sup>52</sup> The following four participants described spiritual experiences that occurred outside of the context of a church, and in some cases preceded any serious engagement with any religious institution. These conversions began as fairly solitary affairs, although the latter two were slightly more social:

1. Lincoln: Hearing God speak while alone observing a stream on the grounds of a marae (Described in Chapter Eight)
2. Rewai: Hearing God speak while dancing at a nightclub (Described in Chapter Seven)
3. Maia: Experiencing an answer to prayer through seeing a relative's St Christopher necklace (Described in Chapter Nine)
4. Matiu: Hearing God speak while sitting at the dining table talking with a family member (Described in Chapter Seven)

These are four good examples of genuinely "mystical" conversion experiences, in that these four conversion journeys were triggered by a spiritual experience which occurred quite independently of any organised, Christian context.

<sup>53</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 381.

field of investigation that produced several influential studies at the time.<sup>54</sup> Given the present study's focus on conversions to more mainstream iterations of Christianity, particularly its Protestant arm in New Zealand, the absence of coercive conversions is not particularly surprising.<sup>55</sup>

Theologically, the conversion motifs are of value, although there are some points of concern. On the positive side, Lofland and Skonovd's motifs provide a good picture of the various ways an individual might encounter God, even if the authors themselves do not construct it as such. For example, the three motifs within which I was able to categorise most of those I interviewed each had a relational component. Christians understand relationships as a genuine site of God's presence, as Root notes:

Christ is present in the spirit of relationships that hold the [Christian] community together as they love one another through the sharing of the sacraments and submission to the Word of God. It is in persons meeting persons, in relationships, that the concrete presence of Christ is experienced.... When someone is invited into [the church's] life, he or she is not only sharing in the community but also sharing in the person of Christ.<sup>56</sup>

The assertion that social environments play a significant part in the conversion experiences of individuals need not be an obstacle to thinking theologically about conversion.

However, Lofland and Skonovd's limited ability to account for God at various points in their schema can be problematic. For example, their description of what occurs in revivalist conversions has no spiritual referent, as they state that this motif is based on the argument that "crowds can be brought to ecstatic arousals having a critically transforming effect on some people. The 'social pressure' and 'contagion' — albeit brief — can produce fear, guilt, and joy of such intensity that individuals may obediently go through the outward and inward methodology of a fundamentalist or evangelical conversion."<sup>57</sup> This seems to be asserting that in a revivalist conversion, the transforming effect is entirely the result of the social environment — no action of the Spirit necessary here. Similarly, their descriptions of what

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<sup>54</sup> For example, as cited by Bergler and Rahn, "Evangelism Stories," 70.

<sup>55</sup> Lynne Taylor points to another study, in which "theologian and sociologist, Derek Tidball, analysed the conversion accounts provided in the application materials of prospective Bible College students, classifying the clear majority of accounts as 'affectional.'" Given that both the study Taylor is referencing, and the present project, occur in evangelical contexts, this could indicate a conversion motif that is more common amongst this particular strand of Christianity. "Redeeming Authenticity," 91. The cited study is Derek J. Tidball, "The Social Construction of Evangelical Conversion: A Sideways Glance," in *Finding and Losing Faith: Studies in Conversion* ed. Christopher Partridge and Helen Reid, Studies in Culture and Religion Series (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 84-102.

<sup>56</sup> Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 108-109.

<sup>57</sup> Lofland and Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," 381.

occurs in the affectional and experimental motifs seems to downplay the spiritual nature of the practices being engaged with.<sup>58</sup> Lynne Taylor notes that Lofland and Skonovd's model "remains helpful as a heuristic device."<sup>59</sup> Indeed, in the present project, the motif has been helpful insofar as it has provided some categories from which various theological and ministerial observations can be made. However, the authors themselves do not make these, and at times come across as reductionistic in their descriptions of the causal factors that may lie behind each motif.

## **Characteristics and Consequences of Spiritual Experience in Young People's Conversions**

As can be seen in Chapter Seven, I was able to identify a variety of consequences that followed on from the spiritual experiences reported by those I interviewed. For the most part, the different headings I used to categorise these consequences were similar to those used by Joshua Iyadurai in *Transformative Religious Experience*. Yet this is not the only point where my findings and Iyadurai's are similar. Below, I discuss how my interview data offers some support for Iyadurai's additions to William James' original theories about the nature of spiritual experiences. I also reiterate the point made in Chapter Seven that there were very few clear associations between particular spiritual experiences and the consequences that followed them.

### **Support for Joshua Iyadurai's Additions to William James' Ideas**

As noted in Chapter Three, Iyadurai developed three new ideas about the nature of spiritual experience. Iyadurai was also able to confirm some of the observations about spiritual experience made by American psychologist William James in 1902. James' original schema attributed the following characteristics to spiritual experience:

1. Ineffable – difficult to describe in words
2. Noetic – grounded in experiential knowledge
3. Transient – an experience that passes after a period of time
4. Passive – outside of the participant's control<sup>60</sup>

Each of these traits found support in Iyadurai's data set, and there is also support for them in the present project. The fact that James' theories about spiritual experience still continue to be cited a century after their publication, as well as their relevance to many of the experiences

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 378-380.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 91.

<sup>60</sup> Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*, 161-164.

reported by those I interviewed, means that I am content to accept these propositions and not attempt to challenge or extend them here. However, Iyadurai does seek to extend James by adding his own points to the list, namely, that spiritual experience is also:

5. Revelatory – experiences teach us something about the divine
6. Conversational – divine and human communication is informal and verbal
7. Intimate – a close, meaningful connection occurs<sup>61</sup>

Each of these latter points also find some support in this thesis.

The first of Iyadurai's additions (number 5 on the list above), that spiritual experiences are revelatory, receives some support here. Some participants recounted how theological revelation occurred as both an experience and a consequence of spiritual experience. Participants gained a new understanding of how they could follow God (such as by forgiving a family member), a realisation that they were loved and wanted by God, and an understanding that God could heal someone gradually and it still be miraculous, amongst other things. These were lessons that participants learned not so much from the Bible or the teaching of the church but rather through their own experiences of God working in their lives and the conclusions they drew from that. As described in Chapter Seven, Nathan learned something about God through a spiritual experience that contradicted his pastor's ideas about prayer. But he held fast to his new theological insight because of what he had observed.

Participants' experiences also provide some support for the idea that spiritual experiences can be conversational in nature, reinforcing Iyadurai's second finding (number 6 on the list above). Matiu's turning point, described in Chapter Nine, occurred when he heard God address him by name and say to him, "I love you, get baptised."<sup>62</sup> Rewai recounted an experience, described in Chapter Seven, in which he saw a vision of God extending his arms toward him in love and saying, "You asked me to reveal myself to you; well, here I am!" These experiences, alongside others, depict not just a God who speaks, but one who does so in ways that are personal, sometimes informal, and deeply caring. Iyadurai notes that this aspect of spiritual experience "makes the encounter personal, not generic."<sup>63</sup> For some participants, one impact of such a conversational encounter with God was the dawning of a

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>62</sup> This is an intriguing statement that Matiu attributes to God, in that the form it follows is one that can be seen elsewhere. Andrew Root provides three examples of moments where God spoke to individuals using a similar form, "a personal address...followed by the naming of a decisive impingement of nothingness...leading to a promise of saving through participation in God's being through the act of ministry." Matiu's experience is particularly akin to that of Hagar (as discussed by Root) in that God redeems him from a place of desperation and isolation, and his opportunity to participate in God's being through ministry comes in the form of a command. See *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 248.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 242.

personal, intimate faith. While this cannot be purely attributed to the conversational aspect of their experiences, it does create a positive association between the two: if God is personal enough to come and speak to me in a personal manner, God must be interested in my personal life!

The third of Iyadurai's points (point number 7 on the list above), that spiritual experiences are intimate, is supported by my findings, but on a broader level than the way it was described in Iyadurai's work. Iyadurai mostly focuses on the experience of feeling loved by God in an intimate way.<sup>64</sup> Iyadurai describes how this experience of feeling God's love was often preceded by an awareness of one's sinfulness before God, which up until this point many of his participants had not thought of.<sup>65</sup> However, research participants in this project, much like those in Taylor's work,<sup>66</sup> did not speak so much about suddenly becoming aware of their sinfulness when they described their own sense of exposure before God. Rather, common descriptions of intimacy with God amongst those I interviewed tended to centre on either the sense of a "just me and God" moment, or a strong sense that God saw, cared about, and understood them in their emotionally broken states. Intimacy, for some participants, had more to do with the experience of one's vulnerabilities and weaknesses being seen and known by God than it did with the sense of being loved despite one's inherent sinfulness.

While these experiences of intimacy are not exclusive to my project, they are a strong theme amongst those I interviewed. This is most likely the case because I restricted my sample to those who converted to Christianity during adolescence, and as a developmental stage, adolescence has intimacy as one of its key foci.<sup>67</sup> James Fowler's perspective on this, quoted in Chapter Four, is an excellent summary of how this focus has significant spiritual implications:

The adolescent's religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith. It is not surprising that so many of the images for transcendence that appeal to persons in [the synthetic-conventional stage] ... have the characteristics of a divinely personal significant other.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience*, 165.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 227-230.

<sup>67</sup> For example, Turpin, "Adolescence," 71-73; Laura Craig-Bray, Gerald R. Adams, and William R. Dobson, "Identity Formation and Social Relations During Late Adolescence," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 17:2 (1988): 174-186.

<sup>68</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 153-154.

As noted above, the nature of the intimacy that participants described experiencing with God often involved a sense of one's brokenness and vulnerabilities being known and loved. Fowler's assessment, that adolescents "hunger for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply" fits well with this finding, in that it demonstrates a common way that young people may want to interact with God and find God to be personally meaningful. Certainly it was common in the present project.

### **A Variety of Consequences to a Variety of Experiences**

For those I interviewed, spiritual experiences often contained multiple elements such as surprising coincidences, sensations, and intimate communication with God. Similarly, the consequences of these experiences were also often multi-faceted and complex. While I was able to identify some association between two particular spiritual experiences (a tangible sensation, and a healing) and one consequence (an increased level of faith in God), for the most part there was no obvious chain of cause and effect followed by participants where one particular type of experience led to one particular consequence. For example, Rewai and Caitlin recounted experiences (described in Chapter Seven) where they felt God directing them to forgive their fathers. Yet there were significant differences in how this direction impacted these participants' lives, with different practical, emotional, and relational consequences occurring for both individuals. Context, personalities, and the different ways in which the Spirit can work<sup>69</sup> all create a rich tapestry of spiritual experiences that defies easy generalisation or association.

As another example of this point, ten participants mentioned moments when they cried in God's presence. For some, this was clearly an outpouring of grief or a similarly intense

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<sup>69</sup> David F. Wells argues that "in the Western, secularised societies where so many people struggle with anonymity and meaninglessness, the reality of the Holy Spirit is indispensable to the presentation of the Christian faith. He, the eternal, distinct, equal third member of the Godhead, is also *personal*.... He illumines our minds, regenerates our hearts, bends our wills, applies the benefits of Christ's death to us, transforms us, fills us, empowers us, and leads us to love and worship Christ, by whom alone we are saved. He can do all of these things because he is personal, and it is his work to keep our relationship to the Father and the Son central in our consciousness." *God the Evangelist: How the Holy Spirit Works to Bring Men and Women to Faith* (Carlisle: W.E.F., 1997), 14. This reminds us of some of the tasks that the Spirit can perform in human lives. Michael Langford indicates that "to understand God as Holy Spirit is to understand God as sovereign, expressed in divine acts characterised by their freedom and love ... in the work of the Holy Spirit we see that God is rather notoriously unpredictable in the divine economy. The Holy Spirit is the acting out in our existence of the free and loving will of God, and the logic of the Spirit is not captive to the logic of humanity." "Spirit-Driven Discipleship: A Pneumatology of Youth Ministry," *Theology Today* 71:3 (2014): 330. Here we are reminded that the tasks of the Spirit are not bound by human agendas or understandings but are instead entirely directed and designed by God.

emotion, whereas others had no idea why they were crying. The various consequences reported by these ten were also diverse, including:

1. A new level of intensity of faith
2. Confusion, or more questions
3. Immediate conversion
4. Emotional healing
5. Increased involvement in youth group and spiritual practices

This is a useful list for pastors and other people involved in ministry leadership. When we see individuals crying in response to God's presence, we would do well to tread with caution. It is hard to know exactly what may be behind the tears,<sup>70</sup> let alone try to work out what sort of outcomes such an experience may produce. The same can be said of other common spiritual experiences; they simply do not produce the same results every time. However, attention to the above list does elicit the following pastoral observation: each of those experiences, but particularly those from "confusion" onwards on my list, left these individuals in a position of needing caring, positive support from local church leaders and friends in the faith. Thus, while not all individuals will be able to describe what caused their experiences, let alone what those experiences have prompted, they are likely to be assisted if there is a caring and supportive person alongside them throughout these experiences, able to respond to whatever needs or questions emerge.

It is worth noting again the variety of emotional and psychological consequences experienced by participants, particularly given the fact that not all of these were entirely positive in nature. For some of those I interviewed, the weirdness of spiritual experience left them feeling shocked, confused, or surprised. One factor that appeared to contribute to these reactions for some was a lack of prior exposure to the notion of Christian spiritual experience. This was often due to their own lack of engagement with Christian churches and contexts. Other participants had engaged extensively with church for some time prior to their first spiritual experiences but had not been taught about such things in their churches. Yet another group of participants described encounters with God where particularly painful memories were brought up and slowly dealt with, and it was these experiences that evoked negative emotional reactions. While the long-term outcome of such experiences was positive, the more immediate effects were often perceived to be negative, such as Helen's "ugly crying," described in

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<sup>70</sup> It is entirely possible that adolescence as a distinct cognitive stage could itself make these experiences feel more intense, or at least increase the likelihood of a tearful response. See Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 10, 106-107. Yet see also Christian Smith's discussion of some of the possible emotional impacts of realising and experiencing God's love in a tangible way: "Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account," *Sociology of Religion* 68:2 (2007): 171.

Chapter Nine. Thus, although these participants clearly associated these moments with an encounter with the Spirit of God, it was not always an immediately joyful or pleasant process, as these participants experienced feelings of grief, pain, and confusion.

## Ministry Implications

It can be easy for Christians to assume that, following a spiritual encounter, an individual usually feels excited and uplifted. Spiritual experience can lead to feelings of shock, confusion, or surprise, and all of these emotions can feel overwhelming. Thus, ministers must set aside their own emotional reactions to the events that they are witnessing and remain open to the unique and sometimes unexpected experiences of individuals. This is described by Root as “place sharing,” in which the minister’s role is not to fix or solve issues, but to stand with and for the other throughout the overwhelming and disconcerting experience.<sup>71</sup> Place sharing invites ministers to practise empathy, listening, and patience. Root’s theory is heavily influenced by his reaction against “relationalism”:

People in churches...[are] encouraged to reach out to neighbours and coworkers, not for the sake of the other person but for the purpose of getting the other person to come to Jesus or come to church. This is why I call it *relationalistic*, because in so many ways these engagements took the shape of relationships...but in the end the point was not the relationship itself but how the relationship won leverage to get the individual to decide to do something.<sup>72</sup>

Root sees such a strategy as both theologically and culturally defunct.<sup>73</sup> In its place, following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Root argues that ministry needs to be primarily centred around relationships that exist for their own sake, and mirror the incarnate nature of Christ insofar as they persevere and endure even amidst intense suffering and pain.<sup>74</sup> In those times, Root argues, the minister’s role is not to fix or solve, but to stand with and for the other throughout the experience.<sup>75</sup>

The vulnerable feeling of one’s pain, failings, and humanity being exposed before God is a kind of intimacy with God that is a distinct theme within my sample. Those I interviewed did not speak so much about suddenly becoming aware of their sinfulness when they described their own sense of exposure before God.<sup>76</sup> Rather, common descriptions of intimacy with God

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<sup>71</sup> Root, *The Relational Pastor*, 161-162; *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 126-136. Root does not discuss particular pastoral issues, such as responding to spiritual experiences, but rather is outlining a more general and broad theory of ministry, which I believe can be appropriately applied in this context.

<sup>72</sup> Root, *The Relational Pastor*, 41.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-44, and see also *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 78-80.

<sup>74</sup> Root, *The Relational Pastor*, 115-121; *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 82-103.

<sup>75</sup> Root, *The Relational Pastor*, 161-162; *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 126-136.

<sup>76</sup> This was also the case for Lynne Taylor. See “Redeeming Authenticity,” 227-230.

amongst my participants tended to centre on either the sense of a “just me and God” moment, or a strong sense that God saw, cared about, and understood individuals’ emotionally broken states. This may well shed some light on what it means to be a young person in New Zealand at the present time, and the sort of intimacy that young people are searching for, and, in some cases, finding in God. This is also a valuable insight for ministers to keep in mind. If this is the point at which God is meeting young people in New Zealand today, then this is the point at which place-sharers must learn to live.

### **Excursus: Hard Lessons for Pākehā Christians**

Listening to the stories of conversions to Christianity of Māori in Canterbury was immensely valuable and challenging to me. As the interviewer, and a Pākehā interviewer at that, I was privileged to listen to these individuals as they relayed their hopes and struggles coming to terms with what their new allegiance to Jesus would mean for them as a Māori. Many were grateful to be even asked the question, which is telling. My own cultural ignorance was exposed on several occasions, when participants used Māori language phrases and terms that I did not know and had to ask them to define for me. Their stories of difficult and abusive upbringings and experiences were saddening, and a symptom of the systemic racism in New Zealand which has resulted in so many Māori left at the bottom of the social ladder. Equally saddening to hear about were the experiences of church where Māori culture and Christian practice were set at odds, or not even considered.

While a greater movement towards bicultural understandings and expressions of church consistent with Māori culture would be a valuable goal for all New Zealand expressions of Christianity, the pastoral needs of new Māori converts present specific concerns. As discussed in Chapter Eight, tension often occurs for Māori Christians within their own culture. This was a primary source of tension for the new believers in this study, including four participants who attended a church that was relatively supportive of Polynesian and Māori spiritual and religious expression. Some examples of this kind of tension for the participants who were Māori included returning to their marae and speaking about Jesus; having conversations with family members who saw their conversions as a capitulation to a colonial, Western worldview; or having to think through the historic grievances that Māori hold against early missionaries to New Zealand and what that might mean for their faith. Pastors, church leaders, and friends of Māori Christians in New Zealand need an awareness and an empathy that these are strongly felt issues and are not easily resolved with a glib statement or quick fix. Alongside this, it seemed from my interviews that the opportunity to simply speak about faith

from their own perspective and share one's story is perhaps a privilege too rarely offered to Māori Christians, who are often negotiating complex tensions afresh each time they return to whānau (family), iwi (tribe), and marae.<sup>77</sup>

## Common Waypoints in the Conversion Process

I have made no attempt in this thesis to attempt to design a comprehensive process model of conversion based on my data set. However, as noted in Chapter Eight, I was able to identify six common waypoints that those I interviewed described in their conversion narratives.

These waypoints each signify a common experience in the conversion journey. As is the case in some other conversion models,<sup>78</sup> these events do not necessarily occur in this order, although they are arranged in such a way as to indicate a more typical path:

1. Accepting (an invitation)
2. Interacting (regularly with a Christian group)
3. Deciding (that I want to become a Christian)
4. Tests of Faith (from others and from within)
5. Completion of the Journey (now I believe I am fully a Christian)
6. Faith in Action (a new motivation for ministry)

Although I do not intend for this list to be a comprehensive model of conversion, the waypoints identified above do lend themselves to some implications for the study of conversion, as well as the church's ministry of evangelism and communication of the gospel.

Firstly, the notion of accepting an invitation reinforces the fact that for many people, engagement with a new religious option will only occur if somebody asks them along (and probably accompanies them) to an event. This idea is developed further below, in my discussion of some of the implications of my theory of the match. I am certainly not the first researcher to suggest invitation and accompaniment as common themes describing the way many people first encounter a religious group.<sup>79</sup> Is it noteworthy that thirty out of my thirty-two interviewees provided a clear description of a time in their conversion journey where someone invited them to come along to a Christian event. While I cannot say categorically that these thirty participants would never have attended any Christian event were it not for these invitations, this was clearly a significant factor in the experiences of many. As noted in

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<sup>77</sup> See footnote 10 in Chapter Eight for a definition of this term.

<sup>78</sup> For example, Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 51; Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 109; John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30:6 (December 1965): 863.

<sup>79</sup> For example, Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 183-185; Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 84-90; Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 134.

Chapter Eight, key here is the presence of both a friend or acquaintance to offer the invitation, and an appropriate event or group for the individual to be invited to. Certainly, all of the churches that referred participants to me had some kind of service or event that was formatted in such a way that newcomers would feel welcome and included. Also, so many of these invitations were given in informal, friendly settings. Only one participant was invited to church by a person specifically tasked with doing so. As for the rest of those I interviewed, their experiences were similar to that of Taylor’s participants, for whom “their inviters were generally people with whom the participants had a positive relationship: people they were prepared to trust; and people they wanted to spend time with.”<sup>80</sup>

Interaction with a religious group is a common theme in conversion research.<sup>81</sup> Amongst my sample, most initial interactions with Christian communities came via engagement with inclusive, fun youth groups, although some participants did report attending regular Sunday Services as their first interaction with the church. In some cases, these ministries never overtly pushed young people into considering conversion or placed them in a situation where they must decide what they believe or want. This provided the young people with a certain amount of time and space within which they were able to slowly increase their engagement and interest with the group. It also made sense given the participants’ initial reasons for attending these events, with many coming along simply for something fun to do. As a waypoint, then, interaction is basically a given within conversion research (unless an individual is able to convert to a faith without ever encountering a group), however the nature of that interaction changes across contexts. In the present project, most participants’ interactions with Christian groups were about having fun, they involved a fairly low level of pressure to convert, and any increase in interaction usually happened slowly.

Decision-making is one of the waypoints identified in this project that occurred at a range of different points within participants’ conversion processes. While some participants began attending more church activities so that they might learn more about the Christian faith, others only increased their interaction with Christian groups after having decided to commit themselves to the Christian faith. Also, some participants could not recount a clear moment in which they made any sort of volitional decision to become a follower of Jesus. In the present

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 128.

<sup>81</sup> Lewis Rambo’s work provides useful detail here, both in how he identifies common experiences that might precede group interaction and in his elaboration on exactly what that interaction might constitute. For the former, Rambo identified the presence of “crisis” and “quest” as conditions that might predispose an individual to explore a religious option more seriously. Rambo is also aware of how the context in which conversion occurs can influence individual interactions with religious groups. See *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 23-39, 46-63.

project, I identified nine participants who were not able to describe a clear moment of response or decision as an aspect of their conversion narrative. While this is a significant proportion of the overall sample, I suspect that the particular nature of Protestant youth ministry in New Zealand, particularly at events such as Easter Camp, itself creates the environment within which such decisions can more naturally and regularly occur.<sup>82</sup> The fact that many of those I interviewed who described such moments of decision at Easter Camp then went on to nuance this point by describing other aspects of their conversion journey, and were quite clear that they saw the whole experience as taking some time to resolve, indicates that these moments of decision were not necessarily interpreted by these young people as full and final.

One aspect of the decision making process that was common to many of those I interviewed was the presence of a crisis at this point during the conversion journey. In Chapter Eight, I identified three common experiences of crisis within my sample: authenticity, despair, and spiritual reality. The first of these correlates well with the work of Taylor, who identified authenticity as the central theme of her participants' conversion narratives.<sup>83</sup> The second and third fit well with the work of Lewis Rambo, who identified both despair and spiritual reality as two of his ten "catalysts for crisis."<sup>84</sup> Thus, in each of these three cases, the crises identified support and are supported by other good data.

My findings raise a further question, relating to the nature of crises as a feature within conversion narratives. As noted in Chapter Eight, there were some participants for whom crisis was a benign or even non-existent experience within their conversion narratives. Both Rambo and McKnight acknowledge this reality; crises do not have to be intense. Crisis is simply a factor within any human change, and as conversion is a change, it must by definition contain a crisis of some sort, where an individual experiences a tension between life as they are currently experiencing it, and life as it could be if the new option were to be taken. For those participants whose conversions happened over a longer period, with no noted high points of tension or decision, the presence of crisis is particularly hard to identify.<sup>85</sup> It is far

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<sup>82</sup> Steven Tighe indicates a similar dynamic in a North American context. See "Born Again, Again," 64-75; see also Bill J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82:1 (Winter, 1985), 121-123.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 240-242.

<sup>84</sup> See *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 48-55.

<sup>85</sup> Filomeno Aguilar Jr. suggests that crisis as a feature of conversion narrative is not universally true, but simply a common experience that has become something of a given assumption within academia. See "Experiencing Transcendence: Filipino Conversion Narratives and the Localization of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity" *Philippine Studies* 54:4 (2006): 598-599. The problem with having such a broad definition of the term is that scholars who analyse conversion narratives can almost always find evidence of crisis somewhere, if that is what they are looking for. Henri Gooren notes that "many other authors ... present highly convincing data questioning

better, in these instances, to use language such as that of Taylor, who talks about a “trigger or catalyst for ... spiritual exploration.” This trigger or catalyst can include positive experiences which provoke individuals to further investigation.<sup>86</sup> Taylor notes that “had I insisted on looking for painful crises that needed resolving, I may have missed some of the depths of [one participant’s] narrative.”<sup>87</sup> This takes into account an experience described by Kylie, whose own spiritual search was not catalysed in any clear way by a sense of crisis or tension, but rather by a much more positive journey of discovery that began after she attended a baptism service. Kylie was one of several participants who did not mention any obvious experience of tension or crisis as they narrated their faith journeys.<sup>88</sup>

Participants also reported their faith being tested in various ways as they explored Christian conversion. One test of faith that was common to many of those I interviewed came via parental responses. For most participants, their parents’ responses can be loosely categorised into two types: confrontation and deflection. Parents who confronted their children’s conversions did so either by openly opposing and challenging their decision, or, in two cases, by praising it and speaking admirably about the content of Christian faith. In each case, these parents were willing to discuss Christian ideas and practices, which gave the decisions of their children an amount of dignity and respect by taking them seriously. Parents such as this, who were willing to confront and discuss Christianity with their children, even if they primarily wanted to do so in order to question and challenge it, seemed to evoke less frustration in their children than those parents whose responses were more akin to deflection. When using deflection, parents were either vaguely positive, or passive-aggressive in their responses to their children. They would poke fun at their children’s faith, or make vague comments such as “you’ve got to do this Jesus thing for you and that’s cool,” which Erica reported hearing her parents say after she announced her desire to head on a church missions trip. Yet, for Erica and many other participants, there were either very few or no moments where they recalled their parents showing any intention to discuss the substantive components of Christianity.

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the importance of stress and crisis. They were often able to do so by using a control group of nonconverted adolescents, which suffered from very similar stress and tensions as the converts.... Stress and tensions may certainly contribute to people looking for a conversion experience, but they are not necessary conditions for a change in religious affiliation.” “Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46:3 (2007): 347.

<sup>86</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 247.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> This is particularly relevant given the natural propensity of the adolescent brain to be more prone to less rational, more emotionally weighted decisions. Katherine Turpin notes that “during [adolescent] brain restructuring, emotional processing shifts to the amygdala and consequently the full martialling of the brain’s frontal cortex that coordinates cognition suffers during adolescence. Because frontal-lobe functioning is transitioning, primal fight-or-flight emotional responses are more dominant in everyday interactions, creating what we commonly call ‘drama’ in adolescent social life.” “Adolescence,” 72.

Deflection commonly led to frustration amongst participants, who wanted to talk about their new faith and to explain to their parents what they had come to believe and love in finding Jesus. Only two of those I interviewed described how they were able to find this kind of support through the parents of Christian friends.

Another test of faith that often impacted participants emotionally was the doubt and questioning that accompanied conversion for some. For those who described experiencing doubt or difficult questions during their conversion journey, common themes in their descriptions involved wondering why God felt absent, questioning the validity of their own spiritual experiences, and wondering about God's existence. While six of those who described doubt and questions in their conversion journeys then went on to discuss how those particular issues were eventually resolved, four others indicated that they still felt some ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the questions that had emerged during their conversions. Interestingly here there was little talk of how the church had supported these participants as they wrestled with doubts and questions. Much of what was shared on this subject by participants involved an inner struggle, with little reference made to supportive Christian friends or communities. This is, sadly, somewhat supported by the recent research of Powell et al., who note that

According to our Sticky Faith research, 7 out of 10 [Christian] high school students harbour significant doubts about God and faith. Yet less than half of those students talk with either ministry leaders or peers about their struggles. One of the factors that determines whether young people's doubts positively or negatively impact their faith development is if they have opportunities to express and explore doubts. When they do have those experiences, doubt is actually correlated with greater faith maturity.<sup>89</sup>

Similarly, Taylor notes that for her participants, "it was important ... that other Christians allowed room for doubts or complexity in faith.... The Christian faith did not need to have all the loose ends tied up before it was embraced by these participants."<sup>90</sup> While those participants who described their struggles with doubt may have been helped by supportive communities where these things could be discussed, if so, it was not something they chose to mention in the interview. In contrast to this, one participant, Marie, also mentioned doubts, but then described a supportive church context within which she was able to voice her questions, where her vicar and her brother were "prepared to actually sit down and answer lots of questions and have a good discussion." Marie spent a lot less time focusing on this aspect of her conversion journey than other participants who also mentioned their doubts.

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<sup>89</sup> Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 157.

<sup>90</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 178. See also Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 157-158.

I allowed participants to identify for themselves when they thought the completion of the conversion journey had occurred. Amongst those I interviewed, three people — Kahu, Michelle, and Rewai — described a conversion that happened over the course of only a few hours. Yet whether participants understood their conversions as process or punctiliar conversions depended somewhat on if they saw conversion as primarily about learning (that is, reaching a certain level of knowledge or practice of faith) or passion (that is, wholeheartedly wanting to live for Jesus). This is, essentially, an illustration of Paul Hiebert's set theory in practice. Some participants who made punctiliar decisions to follow Jesus still made it clear that they saw their conversion as taking some months or even years to complete. These participants were defining Christian conversion using digital, intrinsic set theory.<sup>91</sup> They were essentially saying that they could not be a Christian until they had learned or mastered enough of its basic principles. Conversely, those who described their conversions as entirely punctiliar or instant were talking more about a sudden shift in passion or commitment. They were saying: Now I want to follow Jesus, and although I have plenty to learn about that, I know that I want it. This understanding of conversion fits more with a relational, analogical set theory that constructs conversion as beginning when one commits to following Christ.<sup>92</sup> For the three participants who made it clear to me that they saw their conversions as punctiliar, this appeared to be their way of thinking. While they each acknowledged that they still had plenty to learn following their decisions, they saw those decisions as their point of conversion, as they had turned in that moment towards Jesus, whereas before that moment they had held no real interest in the idea.

As noted in Chapter Eight, the three participants who described punctiliar conversions all came to faith at the same church. Considering again Hiebert's set theory, this contextual factor causes us to wonder: did this church describe the gospel or conversion in a way that was different to that of the other churches represented in my sample, and did this difference in communication lead to a difference in experience? Ripeka, another participant from this church (although not one of the three who described punctiliar experiences) spoke about how she was "sold out from the first time" she attended a service there. This is a phrase designed to communicate a high level of passionate commitment: one who is "sold out," in this instance, is someone "completely committed, devoted, invested, and engaged to a cause."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 33-38.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-312.

<sup>93</sup> Justin Martyr, "Sold Out," Urban Dictionary, 22 Nov, 2011, <<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Sold%20Out>> (11 Oct, 2019.)

Perhaps this is a church where such language is commonplace, and used regularly in their understanding of salvation and the gospel.

Lebanese theologian Rupen Das explores the way various social contexts might influence the prevalence of punctiliar and process conversions. Das discusses Hiebert's set theory and makes the following observation about how this pertains to Christian conversion across the globe: "Usually in a context of cultural Christianity providing some recognition of Jesus Christ and an awareness of the Bible, conversion tends to be an event. These are insider conversions. In non-Christian cultures, conversion tends to be a process, not least because of the changes in the converts' worldview."<sup>94</sup> While Das is clearly generalising here, the overall argument may be true in the present context: most of the conversions described in this thesis were a process over some time. This assumes that New Zealand is now a largely secular, post-Christian nation, and thus falls outside of Das's parameters for a context that may be more prone to punctiliar conversions.<sup>95</sup> However it could also be the case that, as suggested above, individual congregations also have an impact on the prevalence of these two conversion experiences. Das also notes that "the Hebrew worldview was a centred [relational] set, as they knew God 'in relational terms as Creator, Judge, and Lord', and entered into a covenant relationship with God.... In contrast, the Greek worldview saw God as supernatural, omnipotent and omnipresent; God was distant and faith was defined by creeds."<sup>96</sup> It is possible that the church that Ripeka, Kahu, Rewai, and Michelle are a part of communicates the gospel from a different worldview than that of most churches in Canterbury. The ethnic mix of this congregation is different from that which is typical across churches in the region, with a higher proportion of Polynesian and Māori members. Perhaps this different set of cultural perspectives informs the communication of the gospel in this context. In turn, it seems as though this impacts the human experience of conversion in that church, which is not entirely surprising. The fact that this may also influence the ways that God works to bring people to faith (e.g., in curating the specific events that led to Kahu's conversion) points to the presence and nature of divine grace.

Faith in action is another waypoint that can easily appear at different points in the progression of an individual's conversion. Some participants involved themselves in various spiritual practices and began to talk more about the Christian faith at home well before they had

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<sup>94</sup> Rupen Das, "Becoming a Follower of Christ: Exploring Conversion Through Historical and Missiological Lenses," *Perichoresis* 16:1 (2018): 35.

<sup>95</sup> McCrindle Research, "Faith and Belief in New Zealand," (May, 2018), 7-9, <<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org>> (2 May, 2019).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

decided to commit to Christ. Others, having made their decisions, saw actions such as baptism, involvement in outreach, and attendance at Sunday services as natural consequences of their choice to commit. As noted above, some participants, once they began to express their faith more openly, experienced a greater level of resistance and questioning from family members. This was then interpreted as a test of faith,<sup>97</sup> a test that they were able to endure due to the support received from their new church community. Yet, the very act of expressing faith was a key factor in consolidating the newfound faith of many of those I interviewed.<sup>98</sup> Faith is, after all, an embodied practice, and the simple act of deciding to affiliate oneself with a particular religious option appears more likely to last if the individual is then provided with meaningful tasks or roles that help them express this faith.<sup>99</sup> In the present context, for many participants this needed to be something greater than just Sunday service attendance. Participants often volunteered at church and youth ministry events and joined in midweek ministries.

## Ministry Implications

While a slight majority of research participants recalled experiences of exposure to Christianity during their childhood years, this did not necessarily provide the sort of knowledge that allowed them to understand faith or conversion in the way that they do now. Participants discussed the ways their childhood exposure may have taught them some of the basic content of the Bible, or made them more comfortable with a Christian subculture, yet when they heard the gospel message at youth groups and churches, it seemed to them to be new information. The notion that faith required personal response and active obedience, and even that this faith was centred around Jesus' action on the cross, were not ideas that these participants recall hearing taught in the various children's programmes they visited or were briefly involved in. This may not reflect ineffective children's programmes, given that these notions are in some sense relatively "adult." What it does instead show is some of the real limitations of church programmes that seek to welcome unchurched children and give them a

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<sup>97</sup> This new way of interpreting events is one indicator that conversion has occurred. See David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 173-174; Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, 44; David J. Zehnder, *A Theology of Religious Change: What the Social Science of Conversion Means for the Gospel* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2004), 32-33.

<sup>98</sup> American scholar Peter Stromberg, who writes about the way in which the telling of one's conversion narrative influences the individual perception and experience of conversion, argues that "while the conversion is often effective in transforming the believer's life ... this effect is not due to a one-time transformation of the self.... A gradual transformation of identity may take place as a believer learns over time to construe herself and her life in terms of the canonical language." *Language and Self-Transformation*, 15-16. To apply the same concept to the idea of action, I note Lynne Taylor's pithy summary of one of her key findings: "*our doing becomes us.*" See "Redeeming Authenticity," 313-318.

<sup>99</sup> For example, as suggested in Brent Baskin, "Research Reviews," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 14:2 (Spring 2016): 85-88; Paul N. Markham, *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008), 129-192.

gentle exposure to Christianity. These programmes may be a good way of providing some enculturation and familiarity with the church space and with basic Christian content. However, they do not appear to provide children with a solid understanding of the gospel message. This could, of course, be an intentional choice on the part of the leaders of these programmes, as they determine, perhaps for theological or pedagogical reasons, what they deem to be an appropriate level of messaging. Given the findings reported above, we are now all the more aware of the fact that some of the messages children pick up through their engagement in church-run programmes do not necessarily prepare them that well for the concepts they are then presented with when they begin attending local youth groups or Sunday church services.

It is also significant that for about half of those I interviewed, church as an experience was decidedly weird and foreign anyway — even for some who had recalled some exposure to Christianity as children. Sometimes the theology took them by surprise, other times particular religious practices or aspects of Christian subculture seemed to be mystifying or strange. This occurred even in contexts where churches were trying their best to design programmes and train leaders in ways that were most welcoming to outsiders. In this regard, church leaders may need to accept that church worship services and activities are often foreign, and even unsettling, for many nonreligious people, irrespective of how they are designed. Thus, while best efforts can be made to not be overly obtuse, the goal of a perfectly palatable church may well be unachievable. Some participants found common collective spiritual practices such as Bible reading, congregational singing, and small group discussion to be weird and uncomfortable experiences. These are things that most churches would be reluctant to part with completely, given their centrality in the regular life of many congregations' spiritual practices. Much more helpful here would be for churches and church leaders to consider ways in which they can include newcomers in these things and provide helpful ways of explaining to those newcomers the reasons why each practice is considered an important part of church life.

Levels of involvement in Christian activities prior to conversion differed markedly amongst those I interviewed. Some participants spent months or even years happily involving themselves in the activities — both social and spiritual — of their youth groups and churches without any clear decision to convert to Christianity occurring. Other participants only increased their involvement following a conversion decision. As a basic premise, then, youth ministers and church leaders would do well to consider the benefit that regular, meaningful involvement in Christian activities has on young people's faith, both prior to and following

conversion.<sup>100</sup> Some participants made particular mention of how their conversion experiences informed their later ministry commitments; for example, wanting to join a church welcoming team because their own experience of being welcomed at church was a significant experience. Others spoke of their “giving faith a go,” which confirms the observation made by some sociologists of religion that converts will often participate before they are fully committed to a faith or its doctrines.<sup>101</sup>

There is also a unique relationship between faith and action within my sample, given that these are the stories of young people who came from nonreligious homes. The lack of any encouragement from parents, and in some cases parental resistance, had a significant bearing on both faith and action. Some participants found the context of a youth group a safe place to slowly give faith a go, and appreciated the various programmes and opportunities the church provided. Given that there was little or no religious interaction at home, participants in some cases seemed to require a more heightened level of interaction for faith to flourish. This was often directly stated as a significant factor in the conversion process, as the home was not a place where faith could grow or receive much stimulation. Again here, pastors and church leaders would do well to consider the value of church involvement for young people coming from nonreligious homes, and be aware that these young people may require a greater level of interaction than their peers who have grown up in church families if their own faith is to have a reasonable chance of developing.

In Chapter Eight, I described how some participants used recently learnt theological terminology to interpret or understand past events differently. For some participants this occurred post-conversion, which is unsurprising, as a change in language is often identified as one indicator of a change in religious perspective.<sup>102</sup> However, significant within my sample are five participants who appeared to be doing this while still navigating their own conversion journeys. That is, the realisation that some of their recent experiences and behaviours could be

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<sup>100</sup> This is one of Taylor’s central arguments. In her thesis, Taylor argues that “experiencing a sense of warmth, welcome and belonging helped those I interviewed move towards relational authenticity” (and thus towards Christ.) See “Redeeming Authenticity,” 331-334. See also Taylor, “Our Doing Becomes Us,” 337-340. This also points to David Zehnder’s theory of “life together,” which discusses how faith can be formed in individuals simply via their participation amidst a group of religious people. See Zehnder, *A Theology of Religious Change*, 131. See also Lofland and Stark, “Becoming a World-Saver,” 871; Chaeyoon Lim and Robert D. Putnam, “Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction,” *American Sociological Review* 75:6 (December 2010): 927-929.

<sup>101</sup> Paul N. Markham, *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008), 163-165; Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 315; Zehnder, *A Theology of Religious Change*, 110-113; Yang and Abel, “Sociology of Religious Conversion,” 144.

<sup>102</sup> For example, as described by Peter Stromberg in *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

described as evidence of the subtle, unnoticed work of the Spirit of God in their lives itself acted as a converting influence.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, this suggests that a change in language does not necessarily mean that a conversion has fully taken place. Given adolescents' propensity for testing new social roles, it is possible that some young people may quite happily engage in religious discussion and talk about God and his work while still being not entirely committed to faith themselves. It is important, then, that in Christian ministry, space is provided to allow individuals to talk about God, and to do so without it then being assumed that they are entirely committed to a Christian faith. Talking about God is itself a formative activity which may contribute to an individual's spiritual journey, and this includes their *pre-conversion* spiritual journey.<sup>104</sup>

The difficult emotional journey that many of those I interviewed underwent as a part of their overall conversion experience must also be highlighted. Some were struggling with various mental stresses; others found that parental responses left them feeling isolated and misunderstood. Adolescence, as a stage in which emotions are often very strongly felt,<sup>105</sup> likely added to the intensity of these experiences. Of course, many youth workers are well educated as to the various needs of young people struggling with mental distress and generally refer the more extreme cases to counsellors and doctors. Yet not all cases meet this threshold. As noted above, those I interviewed appreciated their youth leaders because they were caring, inclusive, authentic, forgiving, consistent, and informative. It is not hard to see how some of these traits may have helped ease the distress of various participants. For those whose struggles are not so severe that professional help is required, the care of the Christian community, and particularly the care that comes from pastoral leaders, can be of real assistance.

Regarding the sense of isolation from family felt by some participants, a sensitive pastoral response to this requires delicacy and wisdom. It could be easy to see this isolation as an advantage and work to replace a convert's wavering familial ties with stronger bonds at church. Certainly there is a need for empathy and listening here, but the attempt to secure an

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<sup>103</sup> This is similar to Taylor's sixth affect, "seeing things differently." She notes that "Those I interviewed were very new to the Christian faith. But while their spiritual journeys were just beginning, they had already begun to see themselves in new ways. Their reality was becoming defined in terms of their relationship with God. Companionship and relationship with Jesus, and with the community of faith, led them to new understandings. They saw themselves anew in the light of Christ.... Conversion begins, and becomes the process of the convert embracing a new way of seeing their own past, present and future." "Redeeming Authenticity," 321-322.

<sup>104</sup> Taylor notes that "theologians ... are generally more attentive to the faith formation of those who are already Christians.... While a Christendom context may have legitimated limiting the potential impact of engaging in spiritual practices to the faith development of believers, today's secularised and secularising context required consideration of how God is at work beyond the church." "Our Doing Becomes Us," 338.

<sup>105</sup> See Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 27-30.

individual's loyalty runs counter to the true heart of ministry, as Root points out: "Our relationships in ministry are for encountering persons, not to win loyalty to objects (whether church, program, or religious perspective); they are the invitation to *share* in the other's place, to dwell with another."<sup>106</sup> Ministering to a young convert whose family members are unwilling to discuss their change of faith means entering with them into the profound sense of isolation that they are experiencing. It also means creating spaces at church where they *can* talk about how things are changing for them, but this is the easier task. Much more difficult perhaps is the decision to set aside any desire to leverage such a situation for one's own advantage and instead be content to commit time and emotional energy to the simple task of being present and listening without any covert agenda.

### **The Match: An Unexpected Factor in Young People's Conversion Narratives**

One of the key findings described in Chapter Nine is that many of the young people interviewed for this project "found what they were *not* looking for" at church and within the Christian faith. For these participants, the meaningful experiences that occurred during their conversion journeys had very little to do with their initial reasons for engaging with Christian groups. Rather, their experiences generally occurred under the following conditions:

1. Participants' initial reasons for engaging with Christianity were quite mundane, usually just in response to an invitation from a friend to attend an event
2. Therefore, participants were not expecting much from Christianity, and most were not on any kind of intentional spiritual search
3. Thus, when something personally meaningful occurred in this context, it was often either
  - a. a *surprise* to the participant, in that what was occurring to them was unexpected, or
  - b. a *contrast* with their current life experience, in that what they observed happening was a pleasant difference to daily life
4. What occurred for each participant in this category was usually something deeply meaningful that clearly spoke to a closely held personal issue or concern

The personally meaningful experiences that did then occur for participants who fit these criteria are what I have termed experiences of a match.<sup>107</sup> By this I mean that there was a high level of synchronicity between a personal need and a particular experience. Moreover, these were not things that the participants in this group came to church looking to resolve. Thus, the real architect of these matching experiences was God.

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<sup>106</sup> Root, *The Relational Pastor*, 54, emphasis original.

<sup>107</sup> I termed this dynamic a "match," in part because I was unable to locate a similar dynamic in any of the conversion research I accessed (and thus needed to devise a new name for what I was observing.)

This finding also indicates that these young people were either not aware of their own spiritual nature or journey, or that they were aware but did not see any value in the church assisting them with spiritual things. Rather, their expectations of the church were low or non-existent and were often restricted to the perception of youth group as a positive opportunity for socialising. This finding may be the biggest contribution of this project, given its rarity across current conversion literature.

### **Perception of the Church and the Christian Religion**

In Chapters One through Five, I did not set out to specifically address the question of how young people might *perceive* the church in New Zealand or Western society today.<sup>108</sup> This is one area in which further research might reveal valuable insights. However, there are some points at which I made some assumptions about what this perception might entail. In Chapter Two, I used the language of young “inquirers” a lot, which implied that secular young people who come along to church and youth group do so with at least some readiness to investigate the relevance of the Christian faith and church. I no longer hold such an assumption, for very few participants first crossed the threshold of the church building ready to actively investigate the faith. For almost all participants, the church was not perceived as a site of spiritual investigation or renewal.

In Chapter One, I cited the McCrindle report, which documents current perspectives on the church and Christianity in New Zealand society.<sup>109</sup> I noted that this report provides a mixed account of the public perception of the church and the Christian religion in New Zealand, with both negative and positive characteristics mentioned by the study participants. Much of this variety in responses emerges in the report’s assessment of how the Christian religion is perceived as a socio-political reality, with answers given that identified New Zealanders’ perceptions of how the church has handled homosexuality, or how they felt about Christian friends and workmates.<sup>110</sup> When it came to local congregations and their impact, the study findings are less positive for churches:

Kiwis know ... less when it comes to their local church, with more than one in two (56%) suggesting they don’t know their local church well at all. Therefore

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<sup>108</sup> One recent project that discusses perceptions of the church in New Zealand amongst a group of non-churchgoers is Mike Crudge’s Doctoral Thesis, “The Disconnected Church: A Critical Examination of the Communication of the Christian Church in New Zealand” (PhD Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2013), 148-174.

<sup>109</sup> McCrindle Research, “Faith and Belief in New Zealand,” (May, 2018), <<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org>> (2 May, 2019).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8.

unsurprisingly, many Kiwis (51%) take a neutral stance regarding the impact of the church in their local area, suggesting it has neither a positive or negative influence in their community.<sup>111</sup>

Later, the authors point out that “younger Kiwis know the least about the church in New Zealand.”<sup>112</sup> My data supports this claim. Not only do younger Kiwis appear to know very little about the church in New Zealand in general, but they also know very little about its message, its resources, and its spiritual practices. They might know that the local church runs a Wednesday night youth programme, but even this is not clearly associated with spiritual development, or indeed with any clear understanding of the mission of the local church to its community.

McCrindle did ask the study participants how open they might be to “exploring religion and spirituality.” They note that “given the right circumstances and evidence, just over one in ten Kiwis (12%) would be very open ... to changing their religious views. A further two in five (42%) suggest they are somewhat or slightly open to exploring other religious views.”<sup>113</sup> But crucial here is what follows this statement:

Kiwis are most likely to be attracted to exploring religion and spirituality further by seeing first hand people who live out a genuine faith. Three in five (59%) suggest this would either somewhat or strongly attract them to investigating religion and spirituality further. For many Kiwis, conversations with people (27%) have been the main catalyst for thinking about spiritual, religious or metaphysical things.<sup>114</sup>

This suggests that for many New Zealanders, a relational connection is a crucial component in furthering any spiritual change. It also indicates that much of what might cause change in individuals is to do with what they observe in others.<sup>115</sup> Evidence in support of this assertion is scattered throughout this thesis: for example, in Kylie’s experience, watching members of her church care for one another; in Astrid’s experience, hearing her youth leaders describe how faith makes a difference in their own lives; and in Jeremy’s experience, joining a team on a short-term mission trip and taking part in daily spiritual practices alongside Christian friends and mentors.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> This theme is explored at length in Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 167-185.

## God as the Curator of Conversion Experiences

While I can also tentatively support the claim that relationships and the actions of Christian friends are helpful in how they can cause spiritual change, such responses from secular New Zealanders naturally exclude a key element of the conversion process, namely, the action of God.<sup>116</sup> Here I affirm Taylor's insight as she reflected on God's activity amongst her participants: "Each participant's conversion story was unique. It seems that God started with their current reality and, aware of each personality, curated a conversion experience that allowed them to be, and become, who they were."<sup>117</sup> While I place slightly less emphasis on the ideas of becoming and authenticity than Taylor does, I support the claim that God curates a personal conversion experience for each individual. In some cases, the stories really stand out: Kahu hearing his first ever Christian sermon preached by a man much like himself on the topic he had been brooding over since his girlfriend broke up with him; and Wade, troubled by his grandfather's declining health, hearing a word that addressed his inner turmoil even though he had not shared it with his youth leaders. These examples illustrate some of the key features of my concept of the match: a closely held personal issue or concern being addressed, the unexpected and surprising nature of the event, and the strong degree of consonance between the individual's need and what was occurring in the Christian context. Yet also, many experiences of match occurred in simpler circumstances where a need for family, or a relevant or authentic faith, was met in and through the ordinary actions of local churches and local Christians. The broad range of experiences outlined in this thesis point to both the diverse set of human experiences that are encapsulated within the term "conversion," as well as the gracious nature of a God who knows each individual and is able to act in accordance with this uniqueness.

Taylor notes that "most empirical research on conversion ignores the agency of God, focusing instead on the psychological or sociological processes around conversion."<sup>118</sup> The findings that I have gathered and called examples of a match point to an active and caring God who knew and responded to the needs of each individual. Rightly, many writers are reluctant to attribute too much of what goes on in conversion to outside agents such as God, worried that such an emphasis will downplay or conceal the ways in which converts are active participants

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<sup>116</sup> Of course, this is not to say that God is never active in facilitating relationships between people, but rather that when secular New Zealanders are asked about what factors might help them seriously consider a religious option, they do not mention God and his action.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 202.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

in the process.<sup>119</sup> While I agree with the need for balance here, I would still argue that God *was* an active agent in the conversion process for participants, and more to the point God was active even before many participants were actively searching for him.<sup>120</sup> Christian theology must not give away too much ground on this point, as Taylor rightly argues.<sup>121</sup> Social and psychological factors do not obliterate the theological: neither does the (relative) activity of the convert obliterate the original and ongoing activity of God in the conversion process.

As noted in Chapter Three, the doctrine of prevenient grace reminds us of some important principles here, most notably the fact that it is God who always makes the first move in conversion, and that at times, in his grace, God appears to act in individual lives in particularly compelling or impacting ways.<sup>122</sup> My concept of the match provides support for both these assertions. Of course, the doctrine of prevenient grace as a whole is much broader than this,<sup>123</sup> and there are certain perspectives regarding God's grace that the present project does not illuminate.<sup>124</sup> However, recalling again the experiences of Maia and Wade, who for a time following their first experiences of a match left the church and chose not to interact with God, some facets of a theology of grace find particular support here. Benjamin Myers notes that "in the words of Arminius, all fallen human beings are 'excited, impelled, drawn and assisted by grace,' but their liberty of indifference means that 'in the very moment in which they actually assent [to grace], they possess the capability of not assenting.'"<sup>125</sup> I would contend that this is a fair understanding of what occurred for Maia and Wade, in that they consciously rejected God's work in their lives for a period of time. In effect, it was not they that persevered in faith, but God, for he graciously drew them back through the situations and relationships that they found themselves in. As David Field notes, describing Wesley's attempt to understand this dynamic of God's grace:

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<sup>119</sup> James T. Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24:2 (June, 1985): 163-179.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Root suggests that "ministry in a secular age is 'seeker sensitive,' but the kind of seeker sensitive that perceives divine action. *It proclaims God, not us, as the seeker.*" *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 227, emphasis original.

<sup>121</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 245.

<sup>122</sup> As noted in Chapter Three, the doctrine of prevenient grace reminds us of some important principles here, most notably the fact that it is God who always makes the first move in conversion, and that at times, in his grace, God appears to act in individual lives in particularly compelling or impacting ways. See, for example, Benjamin Myers, "Prevenient Grace and Conversion in Paradise Lost," *Milton Quarterly* 40:1 (2006): 20-36.

<sup>123</sup> For example, see David N. Field, "The Unrealised Ethical Potential of the Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace," *HTS Theological Studies* 71:1 (2015): 1-8.

<sup>124</sup> Such as whether this grace is resistable or not: of course, I only interviewed those who eventually "gave in" to God's grace. But I am aware that such a question is a dividing line amongst some theologians. See Myers, "Prevenient Grace," 23.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Whilst God in love and grace is persistent in seeking to draw people to Godself ... because God respects human freedom, persistent negative responses can result in the withdrawal of the influence of God's grace. God might in sovereign freedom and love continue to engage human beings who respond negatively; when they react positively God intensifies God's presence and power. Wesley's theology is here not entirely coherent in this respect – he attempts to bring together the affirmation of the reality of human liberty, God's persistent love, the reciprocal character of the relationship between grace and humanity and, at the same time, to hold up the possibility of God acting in surprising, new and unprecedented ways to respond even to the most resistant sinner. In the end he is confronted with the mystery of God which cannot be reduced to neat theological schemes.<sup>126</sup>

How and why God chose to act in this regard toward Maia and Wade is something that can and should not be reduced to a neat theological scheme. Rather, it is best understood as a picture of grace that inspires gratitude and worship.

Careful readers may have noted some similarity between my concept of the match, and Iyadurai's concept of "the Spark," which I discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>127</sup> Certainly there is some crossover here, most clearly seen in the ways these moments function as turning points, and how they indicate the personal nature of God's action in individual lives. Also, Iyadurai notes that "the Spark triggers the step of Pursuit and Test instantly."<sup>128</sup> While I cannot make as definitive a claim in this thesis, for many of those I interviewed, the match was followed by an increased pursuit of and attraction to the Christian faith. However, there are also some differences between the two concepts. Many of Iyadurai's participants were on something of an active spiritual search prior to their experiences of the Spark. Also, the Spark as a concept is more tightly focused on spiritual experiences, whereas matching experiences are defined by the occurrence of any kind of unexpected moment of consonance between an individual's situation and something in the Christian world. This, I believe, provides a broader picture of how God can and does act to curate conversion experiences for individuals, in that it points to a set of significant experiences that are not necessarily all spiritually sensational, but are nonetheless deeply meaningful. The match, as a concept, is not restricted to spiritual experiences, but rather is broad enough to include any moment of synchronicity between personal need and present experience that occurred in the conversion process. Where the match is more tightly defined is in regard to the level of religious seeking that individuals were exhibiting prior to these experiences occurring. I restricted this concept to include only those who were not on any kind of intentional spiritual search, in order to highlight the factors

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<sup>126</sup> Field, "Methodist Theology of Prevenient Grace," 4.

<sup>127</sup> And outlined in Joshua Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 239-243.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

of surprise and contrast that often accompanied these moments for those who experienced them.

### **Ministry Implications**

While there are many possible discussion points that my concept of the match could evoke amongst Christian ministers, I wish to draw attention to two that point specifically to the nature of the spiritual path of research participants, before speaking briefly about the value of prayer. Firstly, while the vast majority of those I interviewed were not on an active spiritual search, particular things were nonetheless “found” by these participants as they engaged with the Christian faith. Specifically, three common discoveries were made by those who recounted experiences of a match: they found community, spiritual and emotional health, and real faith. Thus, at the very least, these three common discoveries give some indication as to what the spiritual needs of contemporary secular young people in New Zealand society might be. Joy in discovering community is particularly relevant for those young people who experience difficulties at home or school and feel a pressing need to find a space where they feel included and loved. Sometimes this might come in the form of a father/parental figure such as a youth leader or even God. Yet the experience of an inclusive, familial community can also work as a counterpoint to some the struggles young people in New Zealand may be facing in their daily lives.

The young people in this project described the development of their spiritual and emotional health as well as the discovery of community as gifts that came to them through the Christian faith, as solutions to something that was missing. Both the development of spiritual and emotional health, and the discovery of community, involve the meeting of an inner need, such as a sense of loneliness, isolation from family, lack of self-esteem, or a significant emotional wound. As discussed in Chapter Four, social concerns such as the search for a group, for affirmation, and feelings of loneliness, are identified by scholars as being more acutely felt during adolescence.<sup>129</sup> Equally, psychological factors influence the individual’s relationship with God, including childhood experience of attachment. While the dynamics of how these experiences influence future spiritual interactions are still contested,<sup>130</sup> it is possible that for some participants, their experiences of parental figures and family background “primed” them to be more receptive to the ministries they encountered at church and youth group. In turn, this implies that Christian ministries have an important role to play in offering healthier

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<sup>129</sup> Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit*, 219; Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153-154; Powell et al., *Growing Young*, 95; Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 72-73.

<sup>130</sup> Counted, “The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation,” 147-150.

versions of family, community, and emotional stability to those young people who did not encounter such things in the home.

Secondly, the discovery of “real faith” (a term I am using to encompass four related concepts)<sup>131</sup> indicates the value some participants placed on finding a belief system that worked, made sense, and felt personally relevant.<sup>132</sup> Here I find the largest body of evidence in support of Taylor’s assertion that authenticity plays a key role in the conversion process.

Taylor argues that

religious conversion is fuelled by a desire for relational authenticity.... My research revealed that the desire for authenticity that leads to conversion was experienced in four specific ways. First, there was a yearning towards God: towards an authentic spirituality. Secondly, there was a desire to be a better person: a more authentic version of themselves. A third type of longing was expressed when remedial help was required to achieve desired authenticity. This was expressed as a yearning away from dysfunction. Fourthly, there was sometimes a further element to the desire for relational authenticity as existing intellectual frameworks were unable to fully explain one’s experiences.<sup>133</sup>

Although I was unable to find significant evidence of a “yearning away from dysfunction” in the interview data I collected, there is still much in the above quotation that is reflected in this project. My own categories of authenticity, evidence of the miraculous, and relevance mirror closely Taylor’s identification of the desire to be a better person, the search for better intellectual frameworks to explain experience, and the yearning towards an authentic spirituality. Many of those I interviewed provide examples in contemporary experiences of Christian conversion that closely align with Taylor’s central theme, that conversion can be characterised as a search for relational authenticity.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, Andrew Root asserts that “pulling us like a current underneath the steady lapping waves of Western history has been the movement toward authenticity.”<sup>135</sup>

Root demonstrates at significant length, in his *Ministry in a Secular Age* series,<sup>136</sup> the growth and implications of this movement toward authenticity, particularly as it pertains to the Christian faith. Root notes, as he both critiques and affirms this movement, that “what must

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<sup>131</sup> These four concepts are: authenticity, evidence of the miraculous, relevance, and relatability. This idea is outlined in Chapter Nine, as one type of evidence supporting my theory of the match.

<sup>132</sup> Andrew Root notes that “the very experiences that become transformative to my person are those that have cause that forces me to see reality differently — they are experiences of the real.” *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 201.

<sup>133</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 278.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>135</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 5.

<sup>136</sup> Currently, Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age; The Pastor in a Secular Age*.

be affirmed is authenticity's attention to experience.... Authenticity, actually, encourages us to follow our experience, to seek the real and true in and through the experiential."<sup>137</sup> The discoveries outlined in Chapter Ten, which describes the match, are inescapably "experiential" in nature. They were initiated and nurtured via encounter with God and his people. This does not mean that rationality or reason were set aside during the conversion journey,<sup>138</sup> but that, as Root asserts, the path to faith (and to perceiving faith as "real and true") came via personal experience. Root also describes how this search for experience has exposed a weakness in some expressions of church:

The church has not always created space for the depth of experience itself.... With an unwillingness to speak of divine action as a real experience, the church (especially in the mainline) has too often ignored or downgraded experience itself. Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity have fared much better in the age of authenticity because ... at their best they create space for experience — most powerfully, experiences of transcendence.<sup>139</sup>

I am unable to provide categorical support for Root's assertion here, as some participants who came from Mainline churches also reported clear, and highly experiential, moments where a match occurred. However, it could simply be the case that these individuals came from Mainline congregations that had allowed room for genuine talk of experience and its relevance to faith development. It is also possible that these congregations may have considered themselves to be Charismatic Mainline churches. This is not an uncommon thing in New Zealand, where churches from a variety of denominational backgrounds welcome charismatic experience and talk of God's action. In any case, this research indicates that church leaders need to evaluate their practices in the light of the growth of authenticity as a key theme in the Western worldview, with its accompanying commitment to experience as a genuine means of discerning value and truth.

There are some potential risks associated with the pursuit of authenticity and experience in the church. Both Taylor and Root note that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (discussed in this thesis in Chapter Two) can be an issue, particularly if "faith formation and church participation are about [nothing more than] cultural participation that can support ... individual cultural pursuits for happiness and success."<sup>140</sup> Taylor implores her readers to "please hear the 'relational'"<sup>141</sup> in her conception of authenticity, as to read her as glorifying individualism

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<sup>137</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 115.

<sup>138</sup> This is discussed at length in Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 253-258.

<sup>139</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 8-9.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>141</sup> Taylor, "Redeeming Authenticity," 343.

would be a mistake. Root also points to some churches that have reduced the content of the gospel to the idea of “getting high on the idea of Jesus,”<sup>142</sup> or, even more individualistically, “self-help tactics and therapeutic language.”<sup>143</sup> To quote Taylor, “thus, we need a relational definition of authenticity” to remind us of the fact that Christian faith is about living in right “relationship with God and others.”<sup>144</sup> This is this kind of authenticity that church leaders can faithfully pursue.

A second implication for Christian ministry is in the special role that storytelling played in helping some participants understand faith. When I first presented the findings in this chapter to a group, I was asked about what practical things the church could do to better enable the occurrence of a process like the match. Of course, there is much here that Christian people cannot simply “do” to make something like this happen. However, in responding to the question, which I had not really thought about until it was posed to me, I recalled some of the examples in which participants described how hearing a relatable testimony was a point at which they experienced a match. I suspect that hearing a story from “someone like me,” however individuals may define that, is of significant value in facilitating faith development.<sup>145</sup> While this is a minority experience (only six participants clearly identified hearing a relatable testimony as a point of match), it points to an important dynamic in church life, namely who is permitted to speak from the front during a worship meeting. I noted in Chapter Four some of the critiques that Christian testimony has attracted, particularly when church communities begin to assume a generic “plot” or narrative shape that the testimony must follow in order to be deemed acceptable.<sup>146</sup> Such attempts to control or determine the shape of publicly shared conversion narratives run the risk of excluding individuals whose own experiences fall outside of the commonly shared format. Conversely, given the appearance in this project of matching experiences during times of testimony, churches that endeavour to increase and broaden the range and frequency of shared faith stories during

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<sup>142</sup> Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 86. Root notes that some church leaders “made faith formation about commitment to the idea of Jesus, stripping formation, ironically, of its transcendent encounter with divine action, making conversion an epistemological shift rather than an ontological encounter.” *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>144</sup> Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity,” 277.

<sup>145</sup> British theologian Grace Milton makes the case for this in a journal article that discusses some of the implications of her doctoral research. There, she notes that “for Pentecostals especially, testimony is the primary location of their ordinary theology of conversion...there is a belief for many that personal experience, recounted through testimony, is a way of knowing something of the nature of God. Crucially for this study, Pentecostal testimony says, ‘this happened to me, and it can happen to you!’” See “‘All These Little Pushes and Nudges’: Uncovering Ordinary Beliefs About God’s Work in the Pre-Christian Life,” *Practical Theology* 12:2 (2019): 125.

<sup>146</sup> For example, Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God: On The Path to a Spiritual Life* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2006), 7.

church meetings will likely increase and broaden the range of people in their congregations who can meaningfully connect with such stories.<sup>147</sup>

Of course, as Root rightly notes, when it comes to any conversation about Christian ministry,

the temptation is to ask for a program, a bullet-pointed-to-do-list, a new model, or a direct script for how to operationalise this reality in your church. The temptation is again to push divine action to the background and attend to only immanent realities of a profession, wanting the pragmatic — what works! — over encounters with divine being itself.<sup>148</sup>

Instead, Root proposes that Christians in the West prioritise prayer as a central practice in this secular age. Prayer, he argues, has the power to reorient Western Christians, reminding them that God is a minister (and thus diminishing their own overemphasis on the “immanent realities” of Christian ministry).<sup>149</sup> This thesis sheds some light on *God’s* ministry to a group of secular young people. He curates their conversion experiences, reaching out even before they are fully aware of him. Yes, the immanent realities are there too: churches, and Christians, and particular social conditions that help predispose individuals to be more inclined towards converting all play their part. But it is God’s role in the conversion process that is easily overlooked in a secular age. Prayer is one tool that Christians possess that can help remind them of the centrality of God’s action in ministry. Christians must pray, and pray often, that they would see God at work curating conversion experiences in their neighbourhoods. Here too, it is easy to reduce our prayers to petition, to again serve our own interests by simply requesting that God add more bodies to our congregations.<sup>150</sup> Yet prayer encompasses a much broader frame of reference than simple petition, and even in its petitionary mode is best served by careful attention to what God might be doing or saying.<sup>151</sup> If Christians truly want to join God in ministry to the world around them, they must attend to God’s action, and this, primarily, has its beginning in the regular practice of prayer.

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<sup>147</sup> They are also deepening their involvement in a valuable communal spiritual practice. Root also advocates for the value of storytelling in the church, arguing that storytelling is an act of prayer that invites others to connect with us and testifies to the ways that God has acted in the midst of our experience. Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 278-279.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-273.

<sup>150</sup> Here Root notes that “prayer has been wrongly seen as a way to continue to focus on the immanent acts of counting dollars, possessions, and followers while insuring yourself against bad luck. This is not really prayer but wishful thinking cased in religious language.” *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 273-279.

## Conclusion: Conversion Research and Christian Action

In the first chapter of this thesis, I noted that the first sub-question that framed this project was about how young converts might experience their local church. This then led me to examine some of the sources that claimed to provide solutions for local congregations that wanted to become more appealing spaces for young people, particularly those with no prior connection to a church. One source I engaged with as I addressed this question, *Growing Young*, was dismissive of what those authors saw as some of the common suggestions offered as answers to this question, such as a modern building, an “off-the-charts cool quotient,” and a “contemporary” worship service.<sup>1</sup> They, and others, while still suggesting some structural aspects of church life that could be helpful, were much more adamant that the strong relational life of a congregation and its interaction with newcomers was of central significance in attracting and retaining young people. My own findings support these authors’ argument, and further downplay some of the other factors often suggested as helping in this area. Relational warmth, both that directed toward participants and that observed occurring between Christians in local churches, was a hugely significant factor in attracting and retaining the young people I interviewed. While preaching was perceived as important, and large-scale events like Easter Camp were mentioned by many, both were of lesser individual importance than the relationships that welcomed and nurtured these young people. This was where the church was perceived to be a counter-cultural community. Church youth groups as well as worship services involving adults, youth, and children provided those I interviewed with companions on their journey of faith, as well as youth leaders and pastors to act as supportive and admirable figures.

My second sub-question was to do with the consequences of spiritual experience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when participants spoke about their spiritual experiences, no obvious common path emerged. Both the experiences and the consequences thereof varied greatly from person to person. However, my own prior work as a youth pastor had led me to wonder how someone could have a seemingly “irrefutable” encounter with God and yet still choose to walk away from faith. This project does not directly answer this concern, although one factor that has emerged in my research is the presence of feelings of shock, bewilderment, confusion, and even pain after spiritual experiences have occurred. While experiences such as this were only mentioned by a minority of those I interviewed, there were still several key

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<sup>1</sup> Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 25-27.

stories of young people whose first spiritual experiences left them with some negative or mixed feelings. What was then needed was the faith community, or further experiences, or helpful teaching, or indeed anything that helped them process their experiences safely. Thus, what I can say about this topic and its role in the conversion process is that not all individuals feel great, or even good, after their first spiritual experiences. The presence of negative feelings can be mitigated by the presence of other factors such as supportive people or teaching, but if these things are not forthcoming, or are rejected by the individual in question, it does stand to reason that some young people might choose to leave church or youth group even after a spiritual experience has occurred, because that very experience left them feeling less comfortable in the Christian environment. As for those who do stay, spiritual experiences can be of immense help in confirming and developing a young person's faith. However, these things are but one part of the tapestry of faith that is being slowly woven and must not be assumed to carry more weight on their own than is actually the case.

I also examined the question of conversion and time. In the theoretical overview of this question in Chapter Four, I explored the possibility of conversions that occur in a moment — “punctiliar” conversions — from several angles, and looked critically at some of the reactions to this idea that have occurred in recent discussion of the subject. Based on the research presented here, I believe that punctiliar conversions are always a possibility, however rare, and some discussions of common conversion processes exclude this possibility. In my findings on this question, I found some evidence of punctiliar conversions occurring amongst those I interviewed, although only in three cases. What is most interesting here is the fact that all three of these participants came from the same congregation. This is a congregation that has a strong focus on evangelistic messages and altar call responses, suggesting that the church environment exerts its own level of influence on the likelihood of punctiliar conversions occurring.

I also was immensely privileged to be able to hear the stories of seven Māori participants, and to be able to ask them to articulate some of what it was like to come to faith as a Māori. Given my own position as a male, Pākehā New Zealander, with the social privilege that this entails, I was incredibly humbled by the answers I was given to this question, and even more humbled on the occasions when I was thanked by Māori participants for asking them about conversion from their perspective. Of course, my interpretation is not without bias, and my description of these answers is shaped not just by what I heard but by how I heard it from my position. Even with these factors in mind, I cannot help but think of the significant value there must be in more Christians asking their Māori brethren these kinds of questions and being willing to

listen to the answers given. Recently, while giving a presentation on some of my research findings, I was asked by a Pākehā woman in the audience if any participants took offense to me asking them about coming to faith as a Māori, or indeed if I or they perceived the question as racist or overly rude. I answered by saying that, as far as I was aware, this had not been the case in the interviews, and rather the question had been taken up with enthusiasm and detailed answers provided. Of course, it is entirely possible that I missed something here, either on a personal or a structural level. Yet assuming that this is not the case, I have learned the value of asking such a question and carefully listening to the answer as an exercise in which *my* faith was strengthened. I was challenged to think about the level of hope I hold for God's continued work in New Zealand and particularly amongst Māori. I was embarrassed to hear about the tension that some of these participants experience at church with Pākehā Christians. And I was saddened to learn that for some, returning to their marae and discussing their change of faith with friends and family was a difficult experience, particularly given the history of the church in New Zealand and its complicity in the colonisation of this land and the damage done by such initiatives.

The question of how God works in concert with human persons and structures extends beyond the issue of conversion and time and is revealed most compellingly in this thesis in the concept of the match. This was not something that I was specifically looking for, although its emergence across a range of different experiences meant that the match quickly became one of the central findings of this thesis, albeit one that fell outside of the categories I had initially set out to investigate. The match points to a God who meets people where they are and is even willing to meet them there when they are not necessarily looking for a meeting. Participants' stories about their match experiences point to a secular culture in New Zealand that expects very little of the church and the Christian faith when it comes to answering the deep cries of the human heart. Their stories reveal participants' surprise when they discover just how personally relevant God and the church can be for them. Overall the match stories from those I interviewed point to a God who is both sovereign and gracious, for these experiences had so much to do with God arranging things in such a way and reaching out to young people in their confusion and distance. While certain human factors such as the sharing of testimonies and the importance of deep relationships helped facilitate these matching moments, so much of what occurred here for participants simply fell outside of human control.

## The Final Question of Practical Theology

I noted in Chapter One that, according to American theologian Richard Osmer, the final question of a practical theology project is, “How might we respond?”<sup>2</sup> One possible weakness of Osmer’s definition of this stage in the research journey is his overly pragmatic language, where he emphasises the value of new “strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable.”<sup>3</sup> I prefer Lynne Taylor’s broader turn of phrase, where she states one of the aims of her project as being “to resource and encourage faithful participation in the activity of God.”<sup>4</sup> Such participation will undoubtedly include direct action and strategic decisions about how time and resources are utilised, but is broad enough to contain themes such as increased empathy and awareness, which also emerge as practical implications of my research. In concluding this thesis, I wish to offer one final picture of how researching Christian conversion, both in general and in this specific context, can influence faithful participation in the activity of God. While various suggestions as to the practical implications of my work are scattered throughout the thesis (particularly at the end of each findings chapter), here I offer a Biblical motif as one way of summarising these implications and providing a Christian framework within which many of my suggestions can comfortably sit. This motif is the Old Testament notion of making special provisions for the resident alien.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the treatment of the resident alien in Israel, several key texts outline an ethic that I see as critically important for my purposes here. Deuteronomy 24:17-18 is one such passage: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this” (NRSV). A similar ethic is invoked by some of the later prophets. In describing the Hebrew word *gēr*, translated as

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<sup>2</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 175-176. Later in this chapter Osmer’s approach does broaden slightly to include questions of spirituality and emotional competence, but his focus at the beginning and throughout most of the chapter is on how congregational leaders might operate more effectively, which is a fairly concrete and pragmatic outcome.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Lynne Taylor, “Redeeming Authenticity: An Empirical Study of the Conversion to Christianity of Previously Unchurched Australians” (PhD Thesis, Flinders University, 2017), 9. Another broader perspective on the task of practical theology comes from the work of Don Browning, summarised here by British practical theologian Pete Ward: “Practical theology is concerned first to understand and describe ... aspects of the ethical life of the church and then to offer critical and corrective frameworks to help communities change and renew their praxis.” See *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 79. In what follows below, I offer my own “critical and corrective framework” to help the church change and renew its praxis regarding how it considers the position of new converts.

<sup>5</sup> This is a one common way of translating the Hebrew term *gēr*, although others use different words such as “sojourner,” “immigrant,” or “stranger.” See, for example, Mark Glanville, “The *Gēr* (Stranger) in Deuteronomy: Family for the Displaced,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137:3 (2018): 601-603 for some discussion of the uses of this term.

resident alien, immigrant, sojourner or stranger, British theologian H.G.M. Williamson notes: “The word is associated a number of times in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel with the fact that those in exile were regarded as ‘aliens’ in Babylon, so that from their experience they should know to treat others in the same situation with compassion.”<sup>6</sup> Although there is some indication in various biblical texts that Israel still carried a nationalist impulse where local people were accorded various privileges and rights,<sup>7</sup> the extent of Israel’s generosity towards the resident alien is a distinct part of their culture.<sup>8</sup> Key to the language justifying this virtue is a theology of sameness, which indicates how the Israelite and the stranger are the same in that they both carry the experience of displacement and struggle in a foreign land.<sup>9</sup> Yet both are (ideally, at least) recipients of generosity. Israel the recipient of Yahweh’s generosity, and now the resident alien is to become the recipient of the generosity of the inhabitants of their new home.<sup>10</sup> Not only this, but as Canadian pastor Mark Glanville notes, “Deuteronomy’s vision for the *gēr* is that that person ultimately would become grafted into the household, the clan, and the nation as kinsfolk.”<sup>11</sup>

This reciprocal ethic is the basis for my own point about how conversion research can impact the action of the church. While the virtue of generosity toward the resident alien can be interpreted in a political sense, in that it still might provide some guidance as to how modern nation-states treat immigrants,<sup>12</sup> I want to interpret in a more general way, seeing here a model as to how the covenant community treats newcomers who have decided to stay. Christians preach a gospel of redemption in which all members of the church claim their belonging to the community on the basis of a redeeming act of God’s love for them.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the individual who has been a part of their congregation for years, or even for life, is in this sense no different to the newcomer who is still coming to terms with their new faith and all

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<sup>6</sup> H.G.M. Williamson, *He Has Shown You What is Good: Old Testament Justice Then and Now* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>7</sup> For example, as pointed out by Christiana Van Houten in *Alien in Israelite Law: A Study of the Changing Legal Status of Strangers in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 163.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, and also Williamson, *He Has Shown You*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Léon Epsztein in *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 116, states this clearly.

<sup>10</sup> Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 296.

<sup>11</sup> Glanville, “The *Gēr* (Stranger) in Deuteronomy,” 616.

<sup>12</sup> This may be suggested by Gane in *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 296, although it is only a passing comment and not developed further.

<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Scot McKnight argues that “atonement, if we read the Bible with its own emphases, is about creating communities of faith wherein God’s will is done and lived out. From Genesis 12 to Revelation 22, the focus of God’s redemptive work, the atoning work of God, is about the community of faith.” (28). Later he develops this idea and argues that just as all who call themselves Christians are recipients of the reconciliation of God so to should they withhold reconciliation and forgiveness from no-one. See *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 28-31.

that this entails. Both are recipients of the saving grace of God (even if people in either category cannot recall the precise moment that they first became aware of this grace in their own life) and both are the better for this grace, in that without it, they are spiritually “displaced.” Even years after the Exodus had ended, Israelite laws regarding right treatment of the resident alien still used this reference to the past as a motivating factor.<sup>14</sup> Although I myself was raised in the church, I can be certain that at some point in my family history, there was a conversion. Equally, at some point in my psychological history, I became aware of God’s grace. Thus, there is no excuse on my part for claiming that this past act of redemption can have no influence on my present conduct.

All Christians, therefore, benefit from engagement with conversion narratives and conversion research. In a theological sense, these stories remind us of ourselves. They also provide a human face for the principles we hope to embody. Have I ever preached a message that may have inadvertently upset a Christian from another culture which then caused them to leave, as was the case in Maia’s story? Will anyone say of me, as Caitlin said of her youth leader, that I have “a really big heart for people ... a way of engaging people and wanting to get to know the person based on mutual interests or getting to know you on a personal level, not just as another face in the crowd?” If Kylie were at my church, stressed out by her family’s negative response to her increasing engagement with Christianity, would I have the capacity to journey with her in a supportive and empowering way? Many more examples abound in the stories I have chronicled in this thesis. I invite Christians who read this work to recognise the message that it contains for them. We need only change a few words in these ancient verses to make their relevance clear:

You shall not deprive a new Christian of support; you shall not treat their story, their confusion, or their pain glibly. Remember that you were once unaware of God’s grace in your own life, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to treat the new Christian with empathy.<sup>15</sup>

All stories, in a sense, invite the reader to empathise with the protagonist, even if they are not aware that they are doing so. Such is the power of story.<sup>16</sup> The sharing of Christian conversion narratives, I believe, has the power to motivate Christian hearers to aspire to new levels of empathy and support of their new brothers and sisters in the faith. All too often conversion narratives are shared simply to encourage Christians, and Christian ministers, that their

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<sup>14</sup> Van Houten, *Alien in Israelite Law*, 167-170.

<sup>15</sup> This is my paraphrase of Deuteronomy 24:17-18.

<sup>16</sup> For example, as discussed by British educational researcher Rebecca Hibbin, “The Psychosocial Benefits of Oral Storytelling in School: Developing Identity and Empathy Through Narrative,” *Pastoral Education* 36:4 (2016): 218-231.

ministry strategies are working. Such a focus is not entirely wrong, but it does run the risk of instrumentalising individual stories and restricting their value to the purpose they serve in justifying various approaches to evangelism. I would argue that there is much more that these conversion narratives can provide, and in light of the Biblical motif I have explored above, one key way in which these stories can move Christians is in the direction of greater empathy. Such has been the case for me in my own research journey. I too was mostly motivated by a desire to strengthen Christian ministry strategies as I embarked on this project. I still am motivated by this desire, to a point. In addition, I believe these stories have deepened my empathy, particularly for those coming to faith from secular backgrounds, and now, much more than before, I see this as an end in and of itself. If my research can encourage congregational leaders and members to hold greater empathy for new converts and enquirers, that would be a valuable and justifiable outcome of this exploration of a practical theology of conversion. In fact, I hope that this research may at times slow our desire to tinker with ministries and church strategy and invest more of ourselves in the pastoral work of being *with* and *for* the other.



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## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

### **Demographic Data:**

Age (now):

Gender:

Age converted:

Church:

### **Could you start by telling me, in your own words, how you became a follower of Jesus?**

- What was your experience like at (your church) during this time?
- What (if anything) did you find appealing or admirable about (your church)?
- What was your interaction like with people at the church? (Leaders, friends, pastors.)
- How did you find the preaching and spoken messages at church?
- How long would you say it took for you to decide to become a Christian?
- Can you describe this?
- What was the relationship like with your parents during this time?
- When did you first become aware of the presence of God?
- How did you experience God during your journey into faith?
- Were there any specific moments where God became particularly real to you, or did something powerful in your life?
- Who did you imagine God to be at that age?
- Just as we wrap up, is there anything else you have thought about during our interview that you would like to mention?

### **Notes:**



## Appendix C: Information and Consent Form for Participants

Reference Number: 17/252

16 September 2017



### **A Practical-Theological Reflection on the Conversion Narratives of Young People in Canterbury**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

The aim of this project is to reflect theologically on the conversion narratives of young people in Canterbury. This project is being undertaken as a part of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy program at the University of Otago.

#### **What Types of Participants are being sought?**

This project is looking for young adults who converted to Christianity at some point between the ages of 10 and 18. Participants must also **not** have had a parent or primary caregiver during this time who was a practising Christian, although this could have changed since. Participants must be over 18 years of age now, and ideally no older than 26, to ensure that the data is relatively current.

Participants will be sourced through the local youth pastors' network, and contacted directly about their involvement in the project. This project will interview between 30 and 50 participants, in locations that are convenient to both the participant and the researcher. Participants will not be compensated for their involvement in this project. Both individual interview transcripts and the finished thesis will be made available to participants upon request.

#### **What will Participants be asked to do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to take part in a 45 to 90-minute long interview. This interview will be about your conversion to Christianity and the story of how that happened. The interview will be transcribed, and if you would like, you may request a copy of your interview transcript be emailed to you. A copy of the final thesis will also be made available to you.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself.

### **What Data or Information will be collected and what use will be made of it?**

Interviews will be recorded, with the recordings stored in a secure location and not made publicly available at any time. Audio recordings will be transcribed, with the transcripts also being kept securely and not made public. However, these transcripts will be directly cited in the thesis.

Personal information collected by the researcher will include:

- The name and consent of the participant
- Age, ethnicity, and church denomination

Participant names will be changed in the thesis to ensure the safety and privacy of participants. Any names of individuals, schools, or churches used by participants in their interviews will be changed to ensure the privacy and safety of those parties.

The primary purpose of this data is for comparison with existing literature on church growth and conversion to Christianity. The data and discussion sections of the thesis will make the most use of the collected data and will cite it where relevant to the above purpose.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned below will be able to gain access to it. Data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for at least 5 years in secure storage. Any personal information held on the participants will be destroyed at the completion of the research even though the data derived from the research will, in most cases, be kept for much longer or possibly indefinitely.

The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity. If you should wish to have your data removed from the project, you may do so. If you would like a copy of your interview transcript emailed to you, this can be made available upon request. Likewise, a copy of the finished thesis can be emailed to you if you would like one.

This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes questions about the story of your conversion to Christianity, any churches or other Christians you engaged with during this period, and how you encountered and understood God and his activity during this time. The precise nature of the questions that will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the Department of Theology is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s).

### **Can Participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

*David Bosma*

and

*Lynne Baab*

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This study has been approved by the Department stated above. However, if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479-8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.



**A Practical-Theological Reflection on the Conversion Narratives  
of Young People in Canterbury**

***CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS***

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes questions about the story of your conversion to Christianity, any churches or other Christians you engaged with during this period, and how you encountered and understood God and his activity during this time. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)

.....  
(Printed Name)